

Syria Situation Report: January 30 - February 18, 2021

1 Jan. 30 – Feb. 18: The value of the Syrian Pound drops precipitously, exacerbating economic hardship in regime-held areas. The black market value of the Syrian pound dropped from 3040 Syrian pounds per US dollar on January 30 to 3370 Syrian pounds per dollar on February 18; official exchange rates remain fixed at 1256 Syrian pounds per dollar. This depreciation has prompted some retailers to accept only foreign currency, rendering their wares unavailable to most Syrians. It has also

2 Jan. 30 – Feb. 16: Spate of likely-PKK perpetrated IED attacks results in dozens of casualties in Turkish-held Aleppo and Hasakah provinces. Nine improvised explosive devices (IEDs) detonated between January 30 and February 16 in Afrin, Azaz, Bza'a, al-Bab, Ras al-Ayn, al-Rai, and Jandires, killing at least 26. The IEDs targeted Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) infrastructure and civilian sites. The PKK is the most likely perpetrator, but ISIS may also be responsible for some of the attacks.

3 Jan. 31 – Feb. 15: Newly formed and reactivated al Qaeda affiliates carry out attacks on Turkish and Russian forces.

Ansar Abu Bakr Brigade fighters shot at and wounded two Turkish soldiers at a checkpoint along the M4 highway near Mhambel, Idlib Province on January 31. Ansar al-Tawhid militants attacked a Russian headquarters near Kafr Nabl, Idlib Province killing a Russian Captain and 10 SAA soldiers on February 7. Tanzim At-Talee'ah al-Mujahidah claimed a landmine attack on a Turkish patrol of the M4 highway that did not result in any casualties. Both the Ansar Abu Bakr Brigade and Tanzim At-Talee'ah al-Mujahidah are new organizations; they are likely ad hoc formations of Hurras al-Din members and other hardliners. Ansar al-Tawhid is nominally aligned with the more-moderate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) but likely went rogue in carrying out a provocative attack against Russian forces while HTS attempts to preserve the Idlib ceasefire.

4 Feb. 2 – 15: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) uses assassinations and arrests to target hardliners and members of competing Salafi-jihadist groups. A Turkish jihadist was targeted in a failed car bomb assassination on February 2 and ultimately killed in a separate IED attack on February 7 near Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib Province. An Uzbek former member of Hurras al-Din was also killed by an IED near Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib Province, on February 8. HTS is likely responsible for all three attacks, intending to defuse the threat to Turkish or Russian forces in Idlib and thus to the Idlib ceasefire. HTS arrested Abu Abdul Rahman Al-Urduni, a leader of Hurras al-Din, in Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib Province, on February 11. HTS also arrested the son, Abu Hourrera, of a senior religious advisor to Hurras al-Din, Abu Zar al-Masri, near Ma'rat Misrin, Idlib Province; al-Masri was killed in a US drone strike in October 2020. These arrests may prompt a new round of fighting between HTS and Hurras al-Din.

5 Feb. 2 – 5: Russian and regime forces strike al Qaeda affiliates. Russian airstrikes destroyed several Hurras al-Din headquarters throughout Idlib Province on February 2. A regime missile attack targeted a bus carrying members of the Turkestan Islamic Party, killing eight, near Khirbet al-Naqus, Hama Province on February 5. Russia has not carried out strikes on Hurras al-Din since September 2020.

6 Feb. 2 – 15: Iran prepares for possible escalation against Israel from Syria. Lebanese Hezbollah cells reinforced regime military positions near Quneitra City and Hamidiya, Quneitra Province, adjacent to the Golan Heights over the course of several weeks, the Syrian press revealed on February 2; Hezbollah purportedly co-located its positions with regime forces to conceal its presence and deter Israeli strikes. Israeli forces carried out strikes against three Lebanese Hezbollah positions in Quneitra Province on February 3. The IDF reportedly assessed in early-February that Hezbollah is willing to engage in limited escalation against Israel, then observed an expansion of Iranian infrastructure in eastern Syrian and possible Iranian willingness to deploy missiles targeting Israel to Iraq in mid-February.

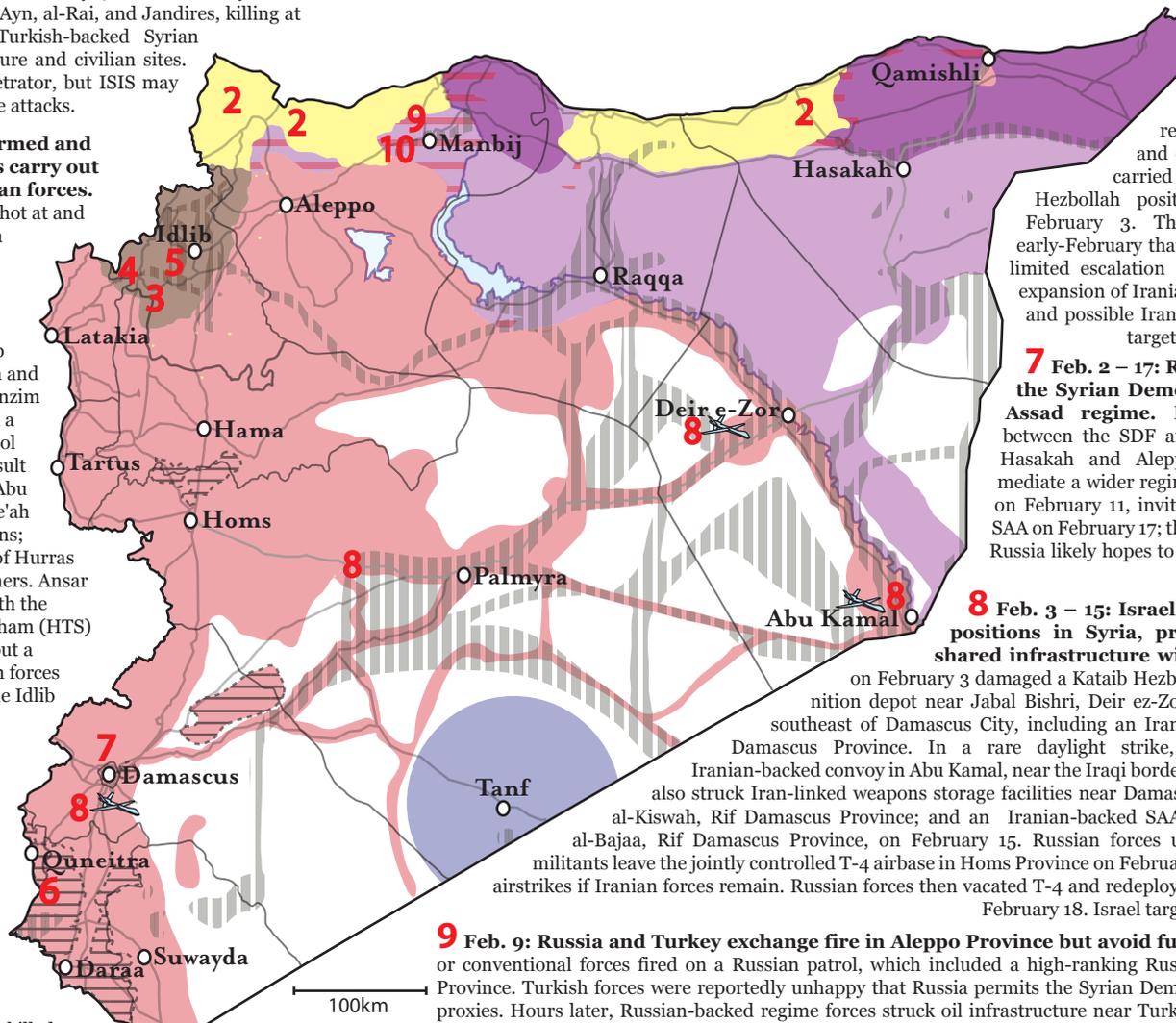
7 Feb. 2 – 17: Russia mediates talks between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Assad regime. Russia brokered an agreement between the SDF and the regime to end clashes in Hasakah and Aleppo provinces. Russia began to mediate a wider regime-Kurdish dialogue in Damascus on February 11, inviting the SDF to integrate into the SAA on February 17; the SDF promptly rejected the offer. Russia likely hopes to install itself as a broker for future negotiations.

8 Feb. 3 – 15: Israel continues strikes on Iranian positions in Syria, prompting Russian fears that shared infrastructure will be targeted. Israeli airstrikes on February 3 damaged a Kataib Hezbollah headquarters and an ammunition depot near Jabal Bishri, Deir ez-Zour Province, and sites south and southeast of Damascus City, including an Iranian warehouse in Al-Kiswah, Rif Damascus Province. In a rare daylight strike, an Israeli drone targeted an Iranian-backed convoy in Abu Kamal, near the Iraqi border, on February 10, killing 12. Israel also struck Iran-linked weapons storage facilities near Damascus; SAA 1st Division forces near al-Kiswah, Rif Damascus Province; and an Iranian-backed SAA 4th Division headquarters near al-Bajaa, Rif Damascus Province, on February 15. Russian forces unsuccessfully demanded Iranian militants leave the jointly controlled T-4 airbase in Homs Province on February 4, citing the likelihood of Israeli airstrikes if Iranian forces remain. Russian forces then vacated T-4 and redeployed forces to a nearby gas plant on February 18. Israel targeted T-4 in 2018, 2019, and 2020.

9 Feb. 9: Russia and Turkey exchange fire in Aleppo Province but avoid further escalation. Turkish proxy or conventional forces fired on a Russian patrol, which included a high-ranking Russian officer, near Manbij, Aleppo Province. Turkish forces were reportedly unhappy that Russia permits the Syrian Democratic Forces shelling of Turkish proxies. Hours later, Russian-backed regime forces struck oil infrastructure near Turkish-held al-Bab, Aleppo Province, with missiles, causing intense fires.

10 Feb. 16: Large contingent of Russian-backed regime forces redeploy from Idlib front lines to Manbij, Aleppo Province, for unknown reasons. Approximately 1200 personnel, including members of the elite Russian-backed SAA 25th Special Tasks Division (aka. Tiger Forces), participated in the redeployment. The columns of 300 vehicles included tanks, field guns, armored vehicles, Grad rocket launchers, and trucks fitted with machine guns. The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army was not alerted to the movement. Unsubstantiated reports indicate the deployment is part of a deal with the SDF, the contours of which are unclear.

11 Feb. 16 – 17: Astana Process meeting takes place in Sochi, Russia. Representatives from Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Syrian regime, and the Syrian opposition and observers from Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and the UN participated in talks. This is the first official Astana round since December 2019 following delays owing to COVID-19, though the convening members of the Astana Process (Russia, Iran, and Turkey) have held regular calls in the interim. The United States refused to attend the talks. Readouts from the sessions do not indicate any meaningful developments.



- Pro-Regime
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- Core SDF-Held Kurdish Terrain
- ISIS Support Zones
- SDF-Dominated, Regime Presence
- U.S. and Partner Forces
- HTS-Dominated, Turkish Presence
- Turkey-Opposition
- Former Opposition Terrain (Reconciled)
- Israeli Strike

Key Takeaway: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is struggling to manage a deteriorating security situation in opposition-held Idlib Province as provocative attacks by more extreme al Qaeda affiliates threaten the March 5, 2020, Idlib ceasefire. HTS aligned itself more closely with Turkey in May 2020 in a bid to preserve the ceasefire, angering hardline Salafi-jihadist groups. Newly formed and reactivated fighter cells linked to Hurras al-Din and other al Qaeda affiliates are attacking Turkish and Russian forces. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has assassinated hardliners and arrested senior Hurras al-Din members in a likely attempt to forestall further attacks. These HTS 'security operations' could lead to direct conflict between HTS and Hurras al-Din or other al Qaeda-linked groups, as occurred in July 2020. Russian and regime forces demonstrated their displeasure at the mounting attacks by carrying out rare strikes on al Qaeda affiliates in Idlib Province. Attacks on Russian forces could create the pretext for a renewed regime offensive on Idlib, while an HTS failure to contain hardliners may push Turkey to negotiate away a portion of the province.



Contributors: Isabel Ivanescu
©2021 by the Institute for the Study of War
Control of Terrain Accurate as of February 18, 2021