

Syria Situation Report: December 2 - December 15, 2020

1 Dec. 2 - 15: Turkey Begins Kinetic Escalations against the SDF Following a Russian Withdrawal from Ayn Issa. Russia likely sought to gain leverage over the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in negotiations by withdrawing Military Police units from Ayn Issa, Raqqa Province, on December 2. The SDF rejected a proposal from Russian forces to establish a regime "security square" in Ayn Issa on December 3. The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and its proxy the Syrian National Army (SNA) seized upon this opportunity and began shelling Ayn Issa, killing 17 SDF fighters on December 4. Russian forces and the SDF reached an agreement for the redeployment of Military Police units and the establishment of three Russian observation posts near Ayn Issa on December 8. The TSK and SNA have since continued heavy artillery strikes and launched ground assaults against SDF positions on December 11, 13, and 14.

2 Dec. 2 - 13: Pro-Regime Clearing Operations Fail to Rein in ISIS in the Central Syrian Desert. ISIS forces killed at least 29 and injured 25 pro-regime fighters and killed a mayor across Deir ez-Zour, Homs, and Hama provinces between December 2 and 13. Russian forces launched over 170 airstrikes in coordination with regime forces conducting anti-ISIS clearing operations on the ground in the Central Syrian Desert. These operations have reportedly killed 37 ISIS members and resulted in the deaths of 19 pro-regime fighters. However, ISIS continues to carry out sophisticated and effective attacks, indicating its capabilities have not been significantly degraded.

3 Dec. 4 - 6: Israeli Airstrikes Target IRGC in Northeastern Syria. Likely Israeli airstrikes targeted Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) sites causing unknown casualties and damage in Ma'dan, Raqqa Province, on December 4. Israeli airstrikes killed three and injured several IRGC members in Abu Kamal, Deir ez-Zour Province, on December 6.

4 Dec. 4 - 10: ISIS and the PKK are Likely Conducting Separate VBIED Campaigns in Northern Syria. Unknown actors detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) in Jenderes, Aleppo Province, killing four, including a member of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Police, on December 5. Suspected ISIS militants killed four members of the Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) 5th Corps with a VBIED in Raqqa City on December 7. Unknown actors killed between four and 12 people, including an SNA commander, with a VBIED attack on an SNA checkpoint in Ras al-Ayn, Hasakah Province, on December 10. None of these attacks have been claimed, but ISIS or the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) are likely responsible given their presence in northern Syria.

5 Dec. 7 - 8: Iranian Forces Reinforce Positions following Repeated Israeli Airstrikes in Deir ez-Zour Province. The IRGC established a new air-defense base at Hamdan Military Airport near Abu Kamal. The base is equipped with surface-to-air missiles, Shilka anti-aircraft vehicles, 23-gauge surface-to-air anti-aircraft guns, and flight detection radar. The Iranian proxy Fatemiyoun Brigade redistributed its fighters and fortified positions to minimize the risk of taking high casualties from airstrikes in Abu Kamal.

6 Dec. 8 - 15: Arab Tribal Members Protest Poor Living Conditions and Corruption under the SDF in Eastern Syria.

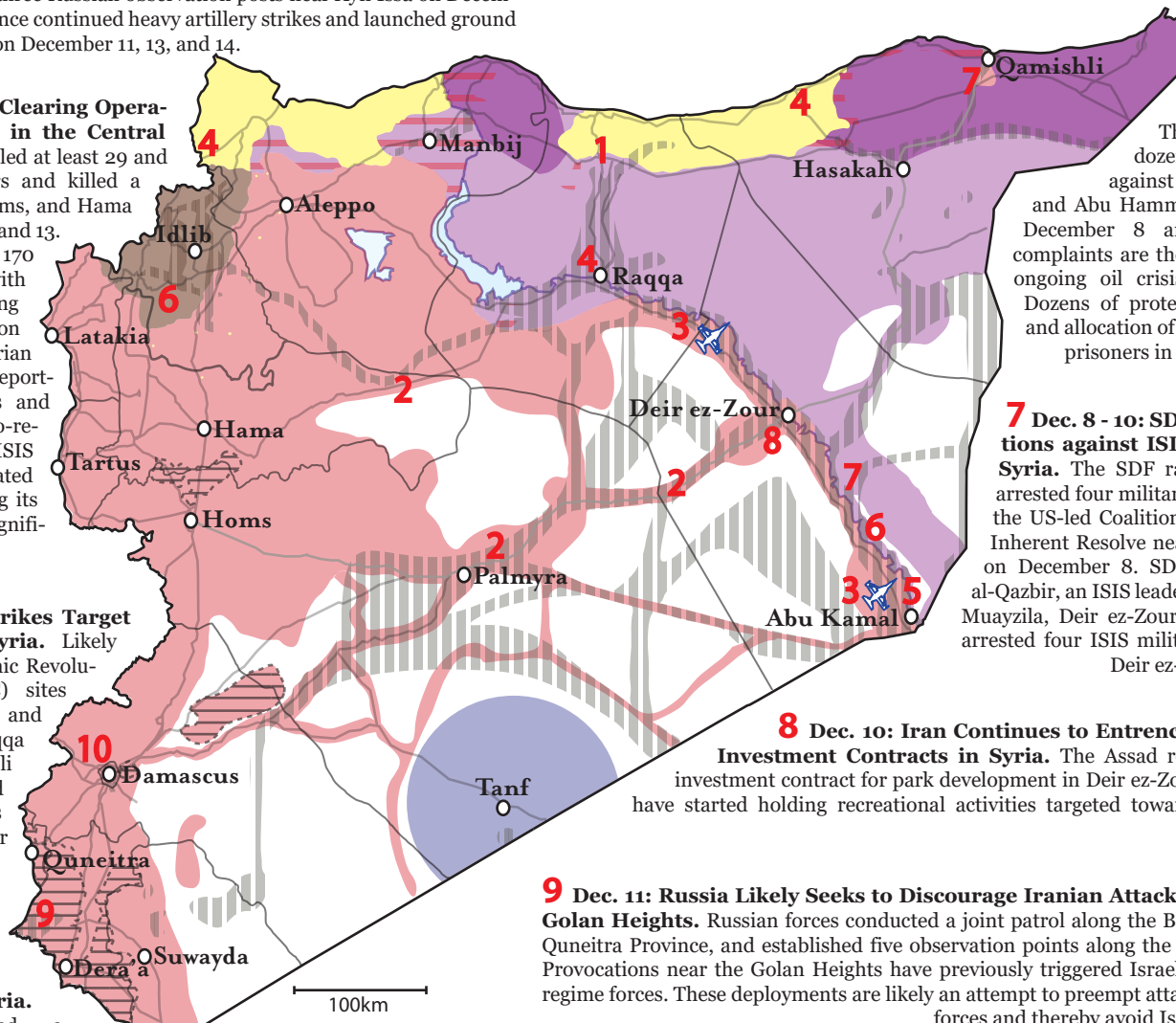
The Shaitat tribe organized dozens of residents in protests against the SDF in Jazrat Milaj, Kasra, and Abu Hammam, Deir ez-Zour Province, on December 8 and 9. The protesters' main complaints are the SDF's inability to address the ongoing oil crisis and poor living conditions. Dozens of protesters demanded better pricing and allocation of fuel and the release of SDF-held prisoners in Abu Hammam on December 15.

7 Dec. 8 - 10: SDF Conducts Security Operations against ISIS in Northern and Eastern Syria. The SDF raided an ISIS sleeper cell and arrested four militants with helicopter support from the US-led Coalition Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve near Qamishli, Hasakah Province, on December 8. SDF fighters killed Abu al-Baraa al-Qazbir, an ISIS leader, during a security operation in Muayzila, Deir ez-Zour Province on December 9 and arrested four ISIS militants during a raid in Tayyana, Deir ez-Zour Province on December 10.

8 Dec. 10: Iran Continues to Entrench Itself through Long-term Investment Contracts in Syria. The Assad regime granted Iran a 100-year investment contract for park development in Deir ez-Zour City. Iranian-backed militias have started holding recreational activities targeted toward children to expose them to Iranian culture and Shi'ism.

9 Dec. 11: Russia Likely Seeks to Discourage Iranian Attacks by Increasing Presence in Golan Heights. Russian forces conducted a joint patrol along the Bravo Line in the Golan Heights, Quneitra Province, and established five observation points along the disengagement line with Israel. Provocations near the Golan Heights have previously triggered Israeli attacks on Iranian forces and regime forces. These deployments are likely an attempt to preempt attacks on Israel by Iranian-aligned forces and thereby avoid Israeli airstrikes on regime assets.

10 Dec. 11: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad Continues to Appoint Family Members to Key Regime Economic Positions. President Assad appointed his cousin Alia al-Assad to head the General Insurance Corporation, one of the regime's largest financial institutions. This appointment follows the recent signing of a contract for the General Insurance Corporation to provide medical insurance to the SAA's fighters.



- Pro-Regime
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- Turkey-Opposition
- ISIS Support Zones
- SDF-Dominated, Regime Presence
- Core SDF-Held Kurdish Terrain
- Al Qaeda-Dominated*
- Former Opposition Terrain (Reconciled)
- ✈ Israeli Airstrikes
- ✈ US and Partner Forces

*AL QAEDA-LINKED GROUPS CONTROL NEARLY ALL GOVERNANCE AND MILITARY STRUCTURES IN GREATER IDLIB PROVINCE. VARIOUS LOCAL ACTORS ASSERT LIMITED CONTROL OVER ISOLATED AREAS OF GREATER IDLIB.

Control of Terrain Accurate as of December 1, 2020

Key Takeaway: The Turkish military and its proxy forces are likely preparing an offensive against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to capture Ayn Issa. Turkey likely capitalized on the Russian withdrawal from Ayn Issa to increase its bombardment of SDF positions ahead of an intended ground assault. Escalations have continued despite the redeployment of Russian forces to Ayn Issa. Turkey appears to want to avoid direct confrontation with Russia and will likely attempt to attack SDF positions and take control of the city without firing upon nearby Russian forces. The capture of Ayn Issa would grant Turkey control of a portion of the M4 highway, interrupting SDF ground lines of communication from the areas it governs in western Syria to those in eastern Syria.



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