

Syria Situation Report: September 30 - October 13, 2020

1 Sept. 30 - Oct. 1: The SNA is Likely Attempting to Demonstrate it can Control Terrorist Elements in Greater Idlib Province. The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) arrested six alleged ISIS members in Azaz, Aleppo Province. The identities of the arrestees and charges against them were not announced. Turkey is likely directing the SNA to conduct anti-ISIS operations to prevent the Syrian regime from launching an offensive under the pretext of fighting terrorism in greater Idlib Province. Alternatively, the SNA may be attempting exert further control over the Syrian opposition or remove rival armed groups ahead of a deal with pro-regime actors.

2 Oct. 1: ISIS is Likely Seeking to Improve Supply Routes Between Raqqa and Hama Provinces. ISIS militants attacked pro-Assad forces at a checkpoint near Resafa, Raqqa Province. ISIS also attacked pro-regime forces near Qaryatayn, Homs Province. The clashes resulted in eleven regime casualties and seven ISIS casualties. ISIS likely remains determined to better link cells between the central Syrian desert and Hama Province.

3 Oct. 4 - 6: Successive Attacks in Aleppo Province Highlight the SNA's Inability to Provide Security. An explosion killed two and injured seven civilians at a checkpoint in SNA-controlled al-Bab, Aleppo Province, on October 4. A vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) killed at least 14 and injured 50 civilians in al-Bab on October 6. No group claimed responsibility for the attacks, but the SNA accused ISIS and the Kurdish People's Protection Units/Kurdistan Workers' Party (YPG/PKK) of carrying out the bombings.

4 October 4 - 13: AANES Decision to Release Remaining Syrians from al-Hol Camp May Have Been Influenced by Tribal Negotiations. The Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES) announced it intends to release all remaining Syrian nationals, and eventually Iraqi nationals, from al-Hol internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Hasakah province. Syrians who face serious accusations will remain in al-Hol and face trial before an AANES court. Foreign nationals will remain inside al-Hol until they are repatriated by their country of origin. An AANES official announced that residents from Raqqa and Deir e-Zor will be among the first to be released. The release of detainees from IDP camps is a major demand of Arab tribes in eastern Syria. The SDF released the first group of detainees was on October 12. The SDF arrested 39 likely ISIS militants and affiliates in Hasakah and Deir e-Zor provinces October 11-13. The arrests are likely intended to prevent ISIS recruitment or brutalizing of recently released detainees.

5 Oct. 5: HTS Escalates Crackdown and Arrest Campaign against HaD in Idlib Province. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) forces arrested Hurras al-Din (HaD) Shura Council Member Abu Abdul Rahman al-Makki in Idlib City. HTS forces also arrested two unknown members of HaD in Salqin, Idlib Province. No charges were announced for any of the arrests. HTS and HaD are rival Salafi-jihadist organizations operating in greater Idlib Province.

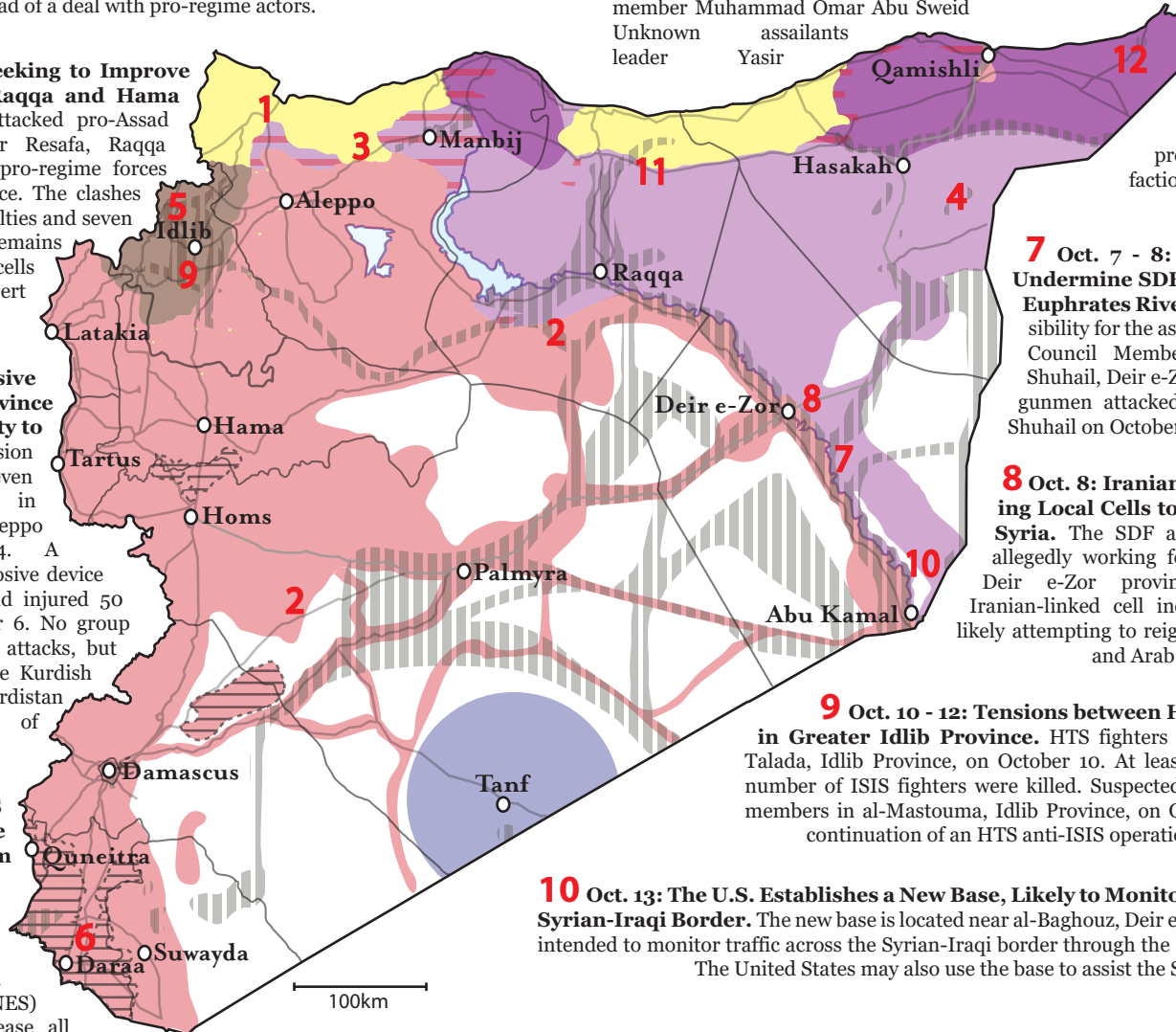
6 Oct. 7: Recent Assassinations Target Reconciled Opposition Members in Daraa Province. Unknown gunmen killed a Syrian Arab Army 4th Division Commander Yusef Ahmed Issa al-Masalmeh in Nassib, Daraa Province, and Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) member Muhammad Omar Abu Sweid in Nawa, Daraa Province. Unknown assailants planted an IED in SMI al-Hariri's vehicle and shot SMI member Mustafa Qasim al-Masalmeh in Daraa City. All four men were previously members of opposition factions that reconciled with the Syrian regime.

7 Oct. 7 - 8: ISIS Continues Efforts to Undermine SDF Governance in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. ISIS claimed responsibility for the assassination of SDF-backed Civil Council Member Amleh Muheisen Aziz in Shuhail, Deir e-Zor Province, on October 7. ISIS gunmen attacked three SDF military posts in Shuhail on October 8. No casualties were reported.

8 Oct. 8: Iranian Forces are Likely Employing Local Cells to Foment Unrest in Eastern Syria. The SDF arrested a 25-member cell for allegedly working for Iranian proxies in Dhiban, Deir e-Zor province. The presence of an Iranian-linked cell indicates pro-regime actors are likely attempting to reignite tensions between the SDF and Arab tribes through covert activities.

9 Oct. 10 - 12: Tensions between HTS and ISIS are Escalating in Greater Idlib Province. HTS fighters clashed with ISIS militants in Talada, Idlib Province, on October 10. At least three HTS and an unknown number of ISIS fighters were killed. Suspected ISIS gunmen killed two HTS members in al-Mastouma, Idlib Province, on October 12. These attacks are a continuation of an HTS anti-ISIS operation that began on September 25.

10 Oct. 13: The U.S. Establishes a New Base, Likely to Monitor Iranian Activity along the Syrian-Iraqi Border. The new base is located near al-Baghouz, Deir e-Zor Province. The base is likely intended to monitor traffic across the Syrian-Iraqi border through the Iran-dominated Qaim crossing. The United States may also use the base to assist the SDF in counter-ISIS operations.



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

*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 September 29, 2020



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Key Takeaway: Increasing attacks by Salafi-jihadist groups threaten to destabilize greater Idlib Province and could be exploited by pro-regime actors to conduct a ground offensive. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Syrian National Army (SNA) will likely face increased attacks from Salafi-jihadist groups in greater Idlib Province. HTS and the SNA have seemingly sought to solidify their control of the Syrian opposition by conducting various operations against HaD and ISIS from September 30 to October 10. Successive attacks in Aleppo Province and an assassination of two HTS fighters in Idlib Province likely indicate increasing fractures between anti-regime groups.