



**Atlas
Assistance**

Syria Monthly Report

January 2024



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Key takeaways

Political developments

- 📍 On December 13th Syrian president Assad reshuffled his cabinet by appointing Lamia Shakkour as new minister of local administration and environment instead of Assad's cousin Hussein Makhoulf who was demoted to minister of water resources instead of Tammam Raad who was sacked.
- 📍 The cabinet reshuffle and the conversion of the ministry of presidential affairs into the general-secretariat of the presidency seem to serve the leadership faction tied to the president's spouse.
- 📍 Assad also adjusted his diplomatic corps, tapping deputy minister of foreign affairs Ayman Soussan as the new ambassador to Riyadh and replacing him with former envoy to the UN Bassam Sabbagh.

Economic developments

- 📍 On December 1st Danish shipping firm Maersk halted its Syria operations because navigating the complex sanctions regime was becoming too costly and difficult, the latest in a series of examples of sanctions overcompliance exacerbating the impact of the sanctions beyond their letter and intent.

Humanitarian developments

- 📍 Severe funding cuts have forced the World Food Programme to suspend its main food assistance programme in Syria as of January, cutting 3.3 million Syrians off from food aid and regrettably poised to hike rates of food insecurity, negative coping mechanisms, crime, drug smuggling and emigration.

Security developments

- 📍 2023 saw a steep rise in rebel combat drone operations, especially homemade 'kamikaze' models that are becoming more sophisticated and deadly, as seen in the Homs military academy attack.

Local developments

- 📍 Damascus city remains stable while the countryside suffered another wave of Israeli airstrikes that killed three Iranian generals and at least two Hezbollah fighters in the Set Zainab suburb.
- 📍 Deraa governorate remains mired in daily asymmetric attacks with 35 incidents seen over the past month, including the assassination of Mustafa 'al-Kism' Masalmeh's cousin Mohammed.
- 📍 Quneitra saw another string of rocket attacks by Iran-backed groups against the occupied Golan and Israeli retaliations, including a drone strike that killed three Hezbollah fighters in al-Baath City.
- 📍 Suwayda witnessed the most intense violence between Syrian smugglers and Jordanian forces in years, including several deadly ground clashes and Jordanian airstrikes against Syrian drug lords.
- 📍 Central Syria continues to witness frequent Iran-backed drone attacks on the Tanf garrison, rebel drone attacks at Syrian army positions in Hama and Russian airstrikes on IS cells in the desert.
- 📍 In and around Idlib frontline hostilities continue at the usual relatively low levels, while also seeing another wave of arrests of HTS members suspected of spying or plotting against the group's leader.
- 📍 Aleppo city continues to see regular but inefficient rebel drone attacks, while the northern countryside was rattled by high tensions and sporadic clashes between allies and adversaries of HTS.
- 📍 North-east Syria suffered a wave of Turkish drone strikes targeting critical civilian infrastructure across rural Hassakeh around Christmas but the calm status quo ante has since been restored.
- 📍 Deir al-Zour suffers regular violent exchanges between Iran-backed militias and US forces but the impact remains limited while the anti-SDF insurgency now appears to get support from Turkey.

Future developments

- 📍 There will be no progress on Syria diplomacy in January and likely not in the first quarter of 2024.
- 📍 Neither pro-government forces nor Turkey are expected to launch an escalation in north Syria while exchanges between Iran-backed groups and Israeli and US forces will stay limited in intensity.



Political developments

President Assad reshuffles his cabinet

Syrian president Bashar al-Assad enacted a minor yet significant reshuffle to his council of ministers. One step consisted of dismissing Tammam Raad, the minister of water resources since Hussein Arnous became prime minister in 2020. It is unclear if Raad had done anything to deserve being sacked and he may have been randomly selected simply “to make room” for someone else. Raad was replaced by Hussein Makhlouf, who until that day had served as minister of local administration and environment. A cousin of president Assad, Makhlouf had held the ministerial portfolio since 2016. Despite its rather dull name, the ministry is a very important one. By Syrian law, the minister of local administration grants approval for reconstruction projects designed, financed and implemented by local administrations such as the governorates or the municipalities. The minister’s approval can be issued or withheld on partisan or nepotistic grounds with a high degree of discretion and thus allows him/her to extract political or economic rent. In addition, the minister of local administration also interfaces with many international agencies like INGOs. The power and importance of the ministry of local administration explains why it has been controlled by one of the president’s maternal cousins since 2016. And this is why Makhlouf’s transfer to the ministry of water resources of a country that is mostly desert and is suffering droughts is so notable. Atlas Assistance sources familiar with the administrative dynamics confirm the view that Makhlouf was de facto demoted. He was likely relegated to the ministry of water resources specifically because he headed its directorate of water resources from 2006-2011. In that capacity he chaired joint committees with Lebanese and Turkish officials on the management of shared water resources.

It is still unclear why Makhlouf was sacked as minister of local administration and environment. Like his predecessor as minister of water resources Tammam Raad, there is no clear sign that Makhlouf did anything to deserve being demoted. Makhlouf was replaced by Lamia Shakkour, daughter of the late Syrian army general Youssef Shakkour who served as the SAA chief of staff during the 1973 war under then-president Hafez al-Assad. Continuing her father’s legacy of government service, Lamia Shakkour became a career diplomat who served as Syria’s ambassador to France until bilateral diplomatic relations were severed in 2011. She later became Syria’s envoy to UNESCO. A quasi-cosmopolitan fluent in English and French, Shakkour allegedly has many good international connections and gives off a more modern, pragmatic and reformist image than Makhlouf. President Assad has good reason to promote someone with Shakkour’s image at this time of grave diplomatic isolation for his government. On a broader level, Makhlouf’s replacement by Shakkour reflects a wider recalibration of power between the various factions making up president Assad’s inner circle. Whereas the Makhloufs are alawites from Latakia married into the Assad family, the Shakkours are christians from the Homs area. Whereas the Makhloufs have been more associated with president Assad’s brother Maher, Lamia Shakkour is reputedly tied to president Assad’s wife Asma, whose family also hails from Homs and who also has a more cosmopolitan profile than the typical Syrian official. And whereas the Maher/Makhlouf tandem is understood to regard Iran as the superior ally of Syria, Asma is associated with those who prefer good relations with the arab states. As such, Hussein Makhlouf’s replacement with Shakkour also reflects a managed shift in power from the “pro-Iranian faction” to the “pro-arab faction” in the Syrian leadership.

The same day Shakkour replaced Makhlouf, president Assad additionally dissolved the ministry of presidential affairs and replaced it with ‘the general-secretariat of the presidency’. All the staff, including minister Mansour Azzam, were transferred to the secretariat with minor changes in titles. There is no official reason for the administrative re-arrangement but the continuity in staff and function suggest that the motive may have been to facilitate the ministry-turned-secretariat’s work by freeing it of oversight from the council of ministers and thus enable informal access to the presidential administration for those with access to the palace, such as the president’s spouse and other advisors.



President Assad reshuffles his diplomatic corps

Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is also reshuffling his diplomatic corps, both in view of the natural need for rotations and promotions among diplomats but also to account for the recent developments in Syria's foreign relations. The most important appointment came on December 6th when president Assad appointed 1st deputy minister of foreign affairs Ayman Soussan as Syria's new ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Syro-Saudi diplomatic relations had been severed for more than a decade until the huge February 2023 earthquake provided an opportunity for Riyadh and other arab capitals to explore a détente with Damascus. This culminated in Syria's return to the Arab League in May 2023 but the expected restoration of Damascus' bilateral diplomatic ties with Riyadh dragged on. Syria and Saudi Arabia said in May that they would rehabilitate their respective embassies ahead of their reopening while in June their ministers of foreign affairs convened in Riyadh to pave the way for fully restoring diplomatic relations. In September the Syrian counsellor to the embassy, Ihsan Rumman, arrived in Riyadh. But only this December – seven months after the Arab League summit and almost a year since the earthquake – did president Assad appoint a new ambassador to Riyadh. This coincided with the announcement that the Syrian embassy there would resume consular services on December 17th. The Saudi authorities have not yet appointed an ambassador to Damascus nor announced the reopening of the embassy, but this is expected within weeks. The delays in exchanging ambassadors and reopening embassies seem to owe primarily to the Syrian government's failure to live up to commitments to the Arab League.

The choice of Ayman Soussan specifically for the post of Syrian ambassador to Saudi Arabia likely reflects a desire to smooth out the issues that delayed the exchanges of diplomats for so long. As stated in our November 2022 report when Assad last reshuffled his diplomatic corps, Soussan is a protégé of former Syrian minister of foreign affairs Walid Muallem and similarly viewed in arab and western circles as a moderate by Syrian Baathist standards. Before the conflict began in 2011, he was ambassador to the EU and Belgium. Soussan was promoted to 1st deputy minister of foreign affairs in 2014. In this post he played a key role in the 2018 Sochi Conference that birthed the doomed Syrian Constitutional Committee. He was also instrumental in the fruitless multilateral talks over a Syro-Turkish normalisation that began in mid-2022 and continued until mid-2023. The failure of both tracks is likely regarded as a success in Damascus and an achievement for Soussan. He also accompanied president Assad in the Syrian delegation to the Arab League summit in Jeddah in May that paved the way for a restoration of bilateral ties now entailing his own dispatchment to Riyadh. While a transfer from a deputy ministerial post to an ambassadorial position seems like a demotion, it should be regarded as a promotion given the importance Damascus attaches to its détente with Saudi Arabia. It is, however, very unlikely that Soussan can iron out the issues with Riyadh unless decision-makers in Damascus start taking meaningful action to fulfil Syria's commitments to Saudi Arabia specifically and the Arab League generally.

President Assad has not yet appointed Soussan's successor as 1st deputy minister of foreign affairs. It may take a while. A new 2nd deputy minister was only appointed 2½ months ago, a year after the post fell vacant when former office-holder Bashar Jaafari was appointed ambassador to Russia. President Assad ended the one-year vacancy in October when he chose as Jaafari's successor Bassam Sabbagh. He was previously Syria's ambassador to the United Nations, coincidentally a post he inherited from Jaafari. Unlike Jaafari though, Sabbagh is considered a moderate of the same sort as Soussan. Sabbagh will now fill the gap left by Soussan until a new 1st deputy minister of foreign affairs is chosen, which could take months given the glacial pace of Syrian administration and diplomacy. Sabbagh is being succeeded as Syria's ambassador to the UN by his former deputy Qusay al-Dahhak, who was promoted to the prestigious position by president Assad on December 20th. As Syrian deputy ambassador to the UN, Dahhak made a name for himself by defending Damascus against persistent accusations of chemical weapons use. The final part of the diplomatic corps reshuffling consisted of president Assad promoting Maher Baddour from chargé d'affaires at the Syrian embassy in Abu Dhabi to be ambassador to Algeria.



Economic developments

Sanctions over-compliance expands

Companies around the world continue to over-comply with the Syria sanctions regime, exacerbating their economic and humanitarian impact beyond the letter and spirit of the sanctions. On December 1st Danish shipping firm A.P Møller Maersk formally discontinued operations in Syria, becoming the latest on a long list of companies to do so. A press statement issued ten days earlier clearly hinted that the decision owed to sanctions rendering it unfeasible for Maersk to continue legitimate business in Syria: 'With Syrian being a highly sanctioned country, business activity has already been very restricted, and Maersk has therefore conducted limited operations in Syria in full compliance with international sanctions. This has recently become even more challenging logistically, and we have therefore made the decision to close our [Syria] operations down completely'. Maersk was shipping food, medicines and non-military equipment to (government-controlled) ports under a contract with a non-sanctioned private Syrian firm. The suspension of Maersk's services in Syria inevitably had ripple effect on both Syrian firms and the few international companies still willing to do business in Syria. On December 5th government official Wael al-Taweel confirmed rumours that a group of Dutch companies has stopped exporting potato seeds to Syria due to 'problems with shipping, the Caesar Act, and so on'. Taweel tried to assuage fears of a potato shortage in Syria and wider food insecurity by assuring that there are still firms willing to export potato seeds to Syria, although he did/could not explain which ones.

The recent decisions to halt operations in Syria for sanctions (over)compliance reasons epitomize trends observed across sectors for years. Reports by Human Rights Watch, the Carter Centre, NRC, War on the Rocks and a UN special rapporteur have all pointed out that that firms across sectors from banking and insurance to manufacturing are over-complying with the sanctions regime by either partially or totally suspending permitted operations in Syria. It comes down to a business rationale that the risks outweigh the benefits. The gains of doing legitimate business in Syria continue to shrink due to the collapsing value of the Syrian pound, Damascus' dwindling dollar reserves and the poor prospects of reconstruction anytime soon. The many risks are driven by a potent mix of corruption, security instability and especially sanctions. Sanctions risk is uniquely deterring because the penalties of secondary sanctions under the Caesar Act can practically destroy any company or NGO based in the Americas or Europe. And the risk cannot easily be navigated because the sanctions are too complicated in terms of sanctioned individuals, organisations, industries and dual-use items as well as waivers for most companies to understand. In other words, legal business in Syria offers few benefits but faces massive and poorly understood risks. As a result, most international banks, insurance firms, shipping companies etc. err on the side of safety and voluntarily opt on an individual basis to over-comply with the sanctions, often by suspending business with/to/in Syria partially or, increasingly often, entirely.

Three of the main objectives behind the sanctions on Syria is to coerce the government to give political concessions, deny the Syrian army access to material supplies, and hamper the state's reconstruction campaign. The sanctions have failed on the first point, partially achieved the second aim, and met total success on the third goal. Officials of the US and other sanctioning states often argue that the sanctions neither worsen the economic nor humanitarian crises in Syria nor complicate aid operations. This self-serving notion is parroted by pundits employed by think tanks in the sanctioning countries and who rub shoulders with the same government officials. Outside this policy ivory tower, there is hardly a business or humanitarian practitioner with experience from Syria who does not think that sanctions worsen the economic and humanitarian crises and complicate aid operations. They do so even beyond the letter of the sanctions laws due to overcompliance. And in further contrast to the intent of the sanctioning states, international firm also engage in systematic sanctions overcompliance in relation to transactions pertaining to the Syrian opposition, its ensemble of NGOs or territory under its control.



Humanitarian developments

WFP Syria ends core assistance programme

The humanitarian crisis in Syria and its destabilising political and security effects will get much worse in 2024 after the World Food Programme (WFP) was forced to end its primary assistance programme. On December 4th WFP Syria announced that its 'general food programme' would end in January due to a lack of funding, meaning that around 3.2 million Syrians are now being cut off from food aid. WFP Syria had warned of this scenario since early 2023 but donors have seemingly been unable or unwilling to avoid this situation. In June, funding cuts compelled WFP to cut by 40% the number of beneficiaries of its general food programme in Syria from around 5.5 million to 3.3 million people. This was necessary to prevent a complete halt to the programme by October and buy a few additional months of time to try to secure critically needed funding. This was ultimately in vain. In August WFP had to suspend food aid for nearly 100,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan and Iraq and this January a near-worst-case scenario will materialise when the general food programme is suspended completely. WFP operations in Syria will henceforth be limited to a range of smaller activities including nutrition programmes for children, school students, pregnant women and lactating mothers as well as livelihood programmes that rehabilitate irrigation systems and bakeries. The importance of such smaller programmes notwithstanding, the halt to the general food programme will have disastrous consequences for Syria and all its neighbours.

The halt to the general food programmes comes on the backdrop of a doubling in SYP-denominated food prices in 2022 and another 100%+ surge in 2023. In total, the average price of the WFP minimum food basket in Syria has increased more than ten-fold since 2020. This has made food unaffordable to a large majority of Syrians and left an ever-increasing number of people in need of food aid. According to the latest Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview, 15.4 million Syrians will need food in 2024, an increase of almost 1 million from the last overview from late 2022. In other words, just one year ago, the WFP general food programme was covering one-third of Syrians in need of food aid. Then, over the subsequent 12 months, funding cuts gradually forced WFP to slash the number of beneficiaries of the general food programme from around 5.5 million to zero. Those kept on the programme for the longest time were obviously those in the biggest need. Cutting the last 3.3 million off the programme will be nothing short of disastrous for the Syrians in question and will put them at immense risk of malnutrition and starvation. This will exacerbate the negative coping mechanisms that Syrians in need already resort to. In 2022 63% of Syrian households lowered the number of daily meals while close to half reduced the size of meals served. Moreover, 58% borrowed money to afford food on the short-term at the expense of accumulating long-term debt they will struggle to repay given the economic situation in Syria. 15% of households withdrew their children from school and 48% of families with children aged 6-17 reported their child was withdrawn from school to find work. This overwhelmingly concerns boys, who are more often put to work than girls who, in turn, are more likely to be married away. Child labour, child marriage and child recruitment into militias exacerbate the protection crisis in Syria. All these figures from 2022 will rise significantly in 2024 as a result of the general food programme halt.

The many negative consequences are certain, as it seems no combination of government, opposition, autonomous administration authorities or other aid actors, local or foreign, have resources, logistics, technical expertise or manpower to fill the gap in unmet food needs left by the WFP general food programme halt. But the halt to the WFP general food programme will also have other serious side-effects. It will certainly inflate rates of crimes like extortion, theft, robbery, burglary and ransom kidnapping across all of Syria and encourage more predation by armed factions against the civilian population. But such negative consequence will not be restricted to Syrian territory. A surge in unmet humanitarian needs and social desperation will also encourage more narcotics trafficking beyond Syria's borders and destabilise the country's neighbours and the wider region even more than the trade already is.



The total halt to the WFP general food programme will likely also affect migration patterns to and from Syria by slowing down the flow of refugees returning home and increasing the flow of Syrians fleeing to regional countries or Europe. In the 'Eight regional survey on Syrian refugees' perceptions & intentions on return to Syria' issued in May 2023, UNHCR found that socio-economic factors are primary reasons refugees in regional countries do not want to return to Syria. In the survey, lack of livelihoods, lack of basic services and lack of adequate housing were, respectively, the most, third-most and fourth-most cited reasons by respondents who did not plan to return to Syria within the next 12 months. Military conscription and detention/harassment by the state – often cited by rights' groups as the main deterrents – were only the fifth- and sixth-most cited reasons why refugees did not want to return home. In other words, fear of physical harm is less of a deterrent to returning than socio-economic conditions.

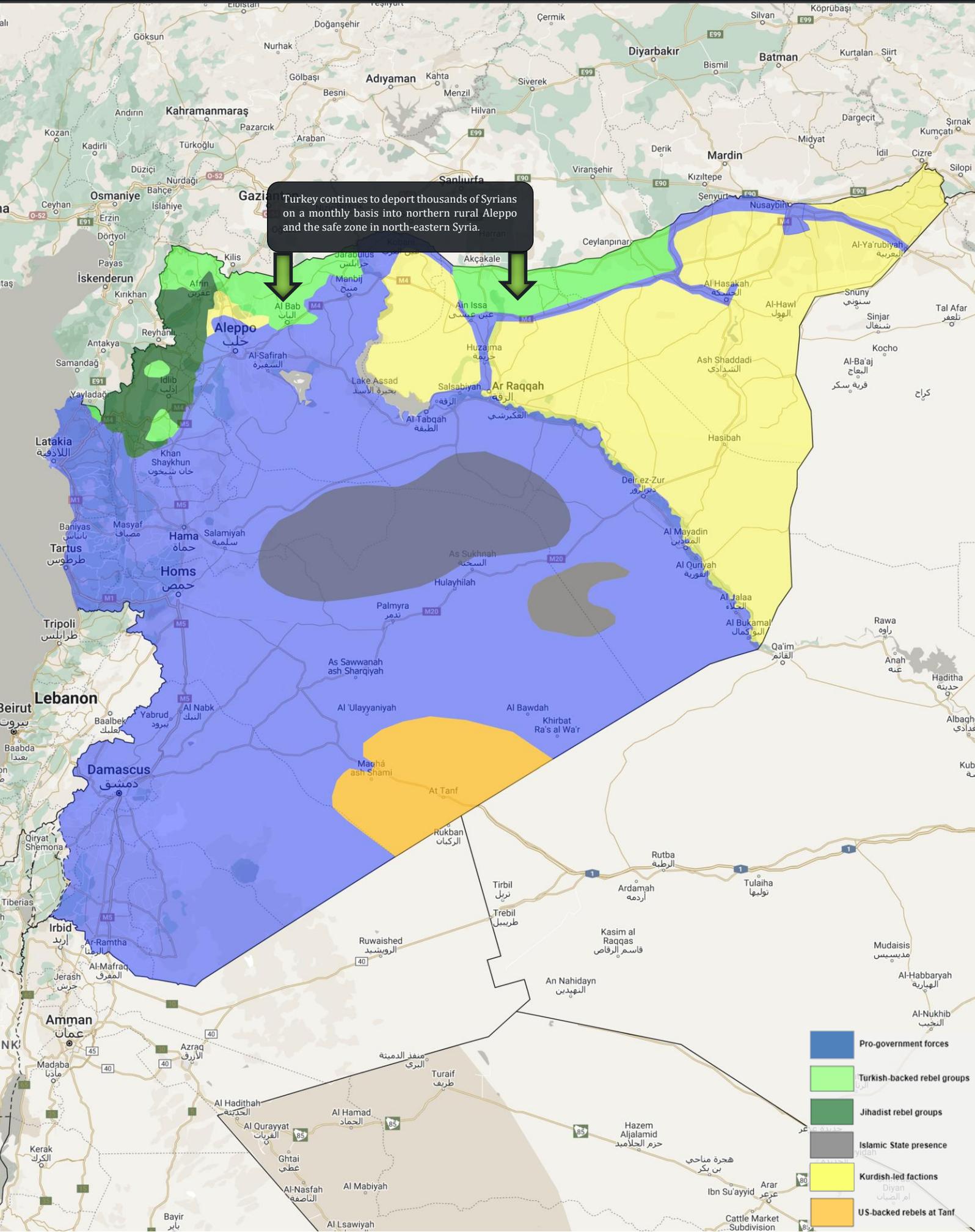
The socio-economic drivers of repatriations are also displayed in the fact that the numbers of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan returning home increased some 400% from 12,500 in 2016 to more than 50,000 in 2019 when the Syrian economy improved in the wake of the end to conventional hostilities in Damascus, Aleppo city, Deraa, northern rural Homs, Raqqa city and Deir al-Zour city. While covid-19 pandemic-related border closures artificially suppressed refugee repatriations in 2020 and 2021, the effects of the Syrian economic crisis that began in late 2019 and deepened after the Caesar Act sanctions took effect in mid-2020 were made clear when borders reopened in 2022. In 2022, only 13,700 refugees from Lebanon and Jordan returned home even though the Syrian government enacted policies to encourage repatriations like amnestying draft evaders and cancelling import fees on material wealth refugees brought home. The steep drop in repatriations from Lebanon is especially stunning considering the unprecedented deterioration in living conditions due to that country's own economic crisis, which has affected Syrian refugees as much as local host communities. Atlas Assistance sources in UNHCR confirm that the primary reason Syrians in Lebanon do not sign up for the Lebanese government's voluntary refugee repatriation is not fear of the Syrian state but rather that the socio-economic crisis and the lack of humanitarian aid in Syria is even worse than what they experience in Lebanon.

Deepening socio-economic hardship and humanitarian misery not only curb repatriations to but also accelerate flight from Syria. It is no secret that the vast majority of Syrians aspire to leave the country, and this especially so after the February 6th earthquake which affected millions. Some officials in the border region of neighbouring Lebanon shortly after claimed that the quake indeed reignited the inflow. A similar risk of triggering a significant net outflow of refugees to neighbouring countries is surely to be expected from the vast number of Syrians who will be affected by looming humanitarian funding cuts. In Lebanon and Turkey, humanitarian funding already falls short of existing needs and would thus be unable to cover an expansion of the refugee population. Moreover, in both Lebanon and Turkey, deep domestic economic crises have brought refugees to the top of the political agenda and nurtured an intensifying climate in the host communities of political hostility toward refugees.

Socio-economic crisis, humanitarian funding gaps and politically facilitated host community hostility also drive many refugees in regional countries to attempt to reach Europe. Per UN data, the number of people attempting to sail by boat from Lebanon to Europe tripled from 2019 to 2020, doubled from 2020 to 2021 and more than doubled from 2021 to 2022. As numbers go up, so does the share of total migrants who are Syrian refugees, which rose from 59% in 2020 to 72% in early 2022. In other words, the surge in migrant boat departures from Lebanon mainly consists of Syrians, not only refugees residing in Lebanon but also Syrian residents who are smuggled into Lebanon to attempt the journey. In sum, access to humanitarian aid and socio-economic conditions in general are the primary drivers of inbound and outbound migration to and from Syria as well as the neighbouring countries. The clear implication is that cutting millions of Syrians off from WFP food aid in 2024 may trigger a mass exodus of refugees from Syria to neighbouring countries where similar humanitarian funding gaps, economic crisis and brewing host community hostility push a growing number of them to attempt to reach Europe.



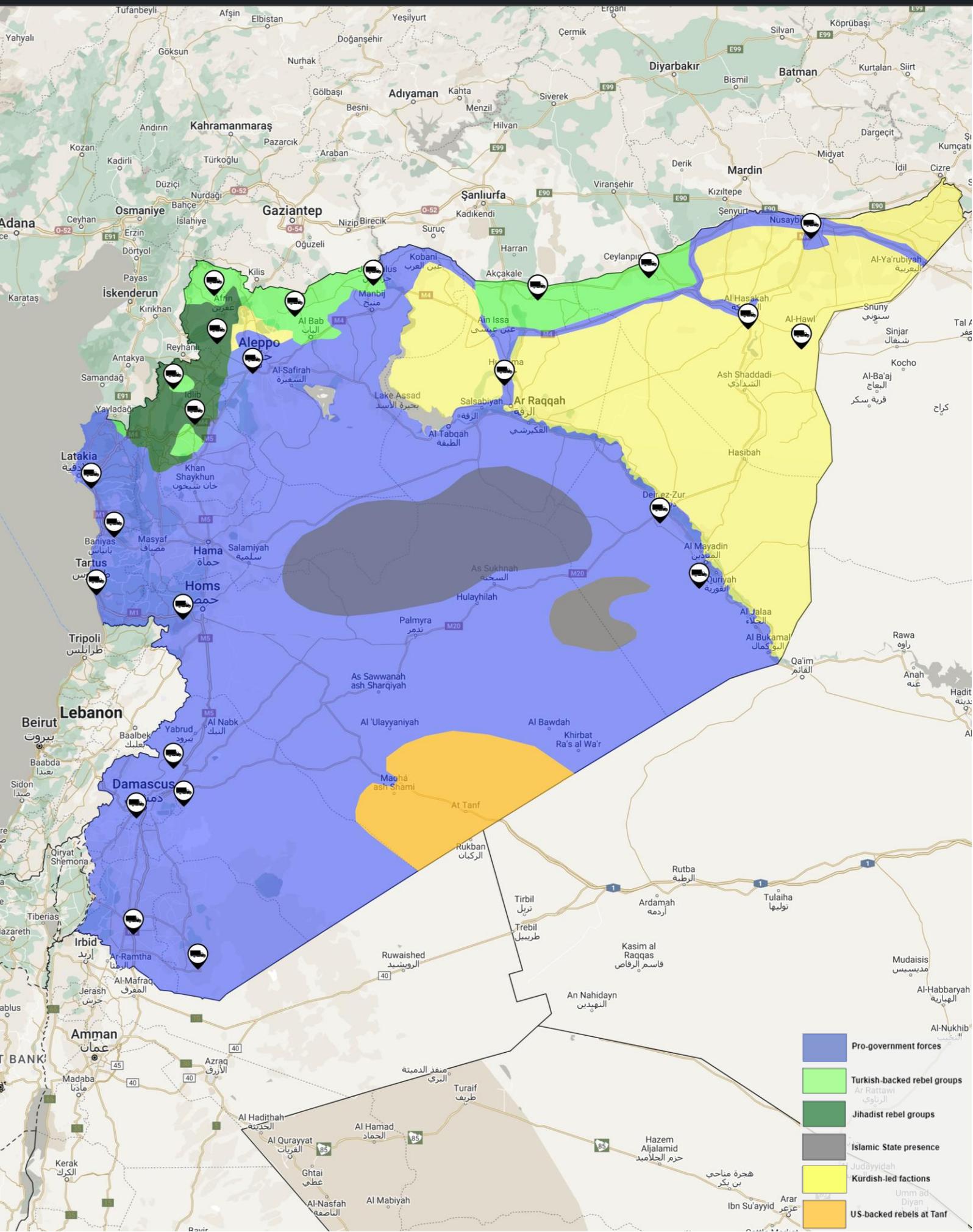
Map of IDP and refugee flows



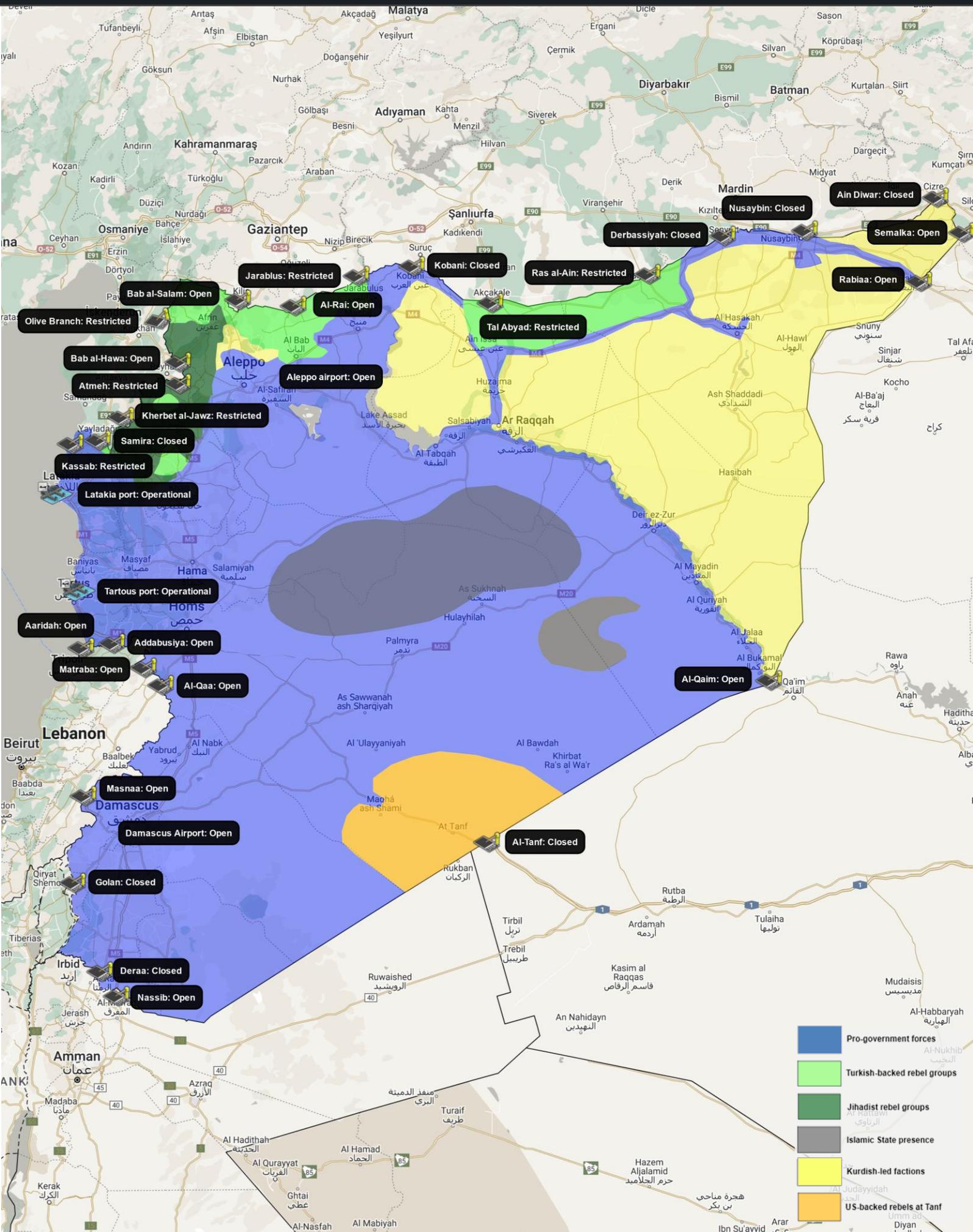
Turkey continues to deport thousands of Syrians on a monthly basis into northern rural Aleppo and the safe zone in north-eastern Syria.

- Pro-government forces
- Turkish-backed rebel groups
- Jihadist rebel groups
- Islamic State presence
- Kurdish-led factions
- US-backed rebels at Tanf

Map of aid deliveries



Map of access routes



Security developments

Rebel drone operations expand

Over the course of 2023 there was a remarkable increase in rebel drone operations. Syrian rebels of various ideological leanings and the Islamic State have used combat drones for a decade, but their use has proliferated since early 2023. Drones were once overwhelmingly employed by Idlib-based jihadists like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Ansar al-Tawhid, the Turkestan Islamic Party and Ahrar al-Sham. But over the past year they have also become available to and commonly used by the Turkish-backed mainstream rebels in rural Aleppo against SDF as well as the Syrian army. Rebel drone use is also evolving in terms of development and application of new and increasingly advanced models. The proliferation of drones among a growing number of factions and the deployment of more advanced models have moreover enabled the rebels to expand their geographical use of these weapons. The adoption of drones by more and more rebels, their growing technological sophistication and the expansion of the area of their use was demonstrated most clearly in the last quarter of 2023. The intensification of rebel drone use over the past three months began with the October 5th attack on the Syrian army's military academy in Homs that left hundreds of casualties. Over the following weeks, rebels carried out a wave of less effective drone attacks on Aleppo city, rural Hama and rural Homs, targeting Syrian army positions and civilian population centres. The many attacks were directed at targets on or close to the frontlines as well as more distant ones dozens or scores of kilometres from the lines of contact.

The combat drones used by Syrian rebels over the past year and researched by Atlas Assistance can be categorised into two types. One is commercially available civilian drones modified by rebel engineers into rudimentary 'bombers'. The most popular commercial drone brand is the Chinese DJI, with the Phantom 3 and the DJI Mini 2 being the most common models. They can be easily ordered online and sent to Turkey. Once imported to Aleppo or Idlib, the civilian drones are then transformed into crude bombers by fitting them with improvised devices enabling them to carry and air-drop explosives. The simplest mechanism is to fit the drone with a hook carrying a normal hand grenade. A string tied from the drone body to the grenade safety pin will pull the pin once the hook drops the grenade, causing it to explode a few seconds later. To avoid the grenade detonating mid-air, the drone has to fly at a relatively low altitude. That this exposes it to Syrian army fire has been displayed in a large number of cases where SAA air-defence units and even infantry using assault rifles have downed such rebel drones, especially in the western outskirts of Aleppo city. To avoid this problem, a related but more advanced technique by rebels is to arm a civilian drone with a grenade where the safety pin and lever have been removed to expose the so-called 'striker' causing the detonation. With the safety device removed, the grenade will detonate upon hitting a hard surface after being dropped from the air using the same release mechanism as for a normal grenade. This means the drone can fly at much higher altitude during its mission. The light weight and small size of a hand grenade means it can be carried by relatively small and cheap civilian drones. Medium and bigger drones are sometimes used to carry mortar shells that are dropped from the air using a similar hook-based release mechanism as for hand grenades. There is no need to modify the mortar shells because they (mostly) explode when the warhead hits a hard surface.

The affordability of Chinese drones on the internet and grenades or mortar shells in Syria mean that weaponised commercial drones can be produced at costs as low as 300 USD. This makes them entirely affordable to most rebel factions. Due to financial concerns and the risk of the drone being shot down, rebels do however mostly prefer to keep them limited to the cheapest and simplest versions. Some more affluent rebel factions do however occasionally fit the 'bomber' drones with expensive add-ons like night vision or thermal cameras to allow them to fly missions at night. Refining a drone with such expensive gear will inflate its costs to several thousands of US dollars, even as high as 5,000 USD depending on the quantity and quality of the additional equipment added to the modified drone.



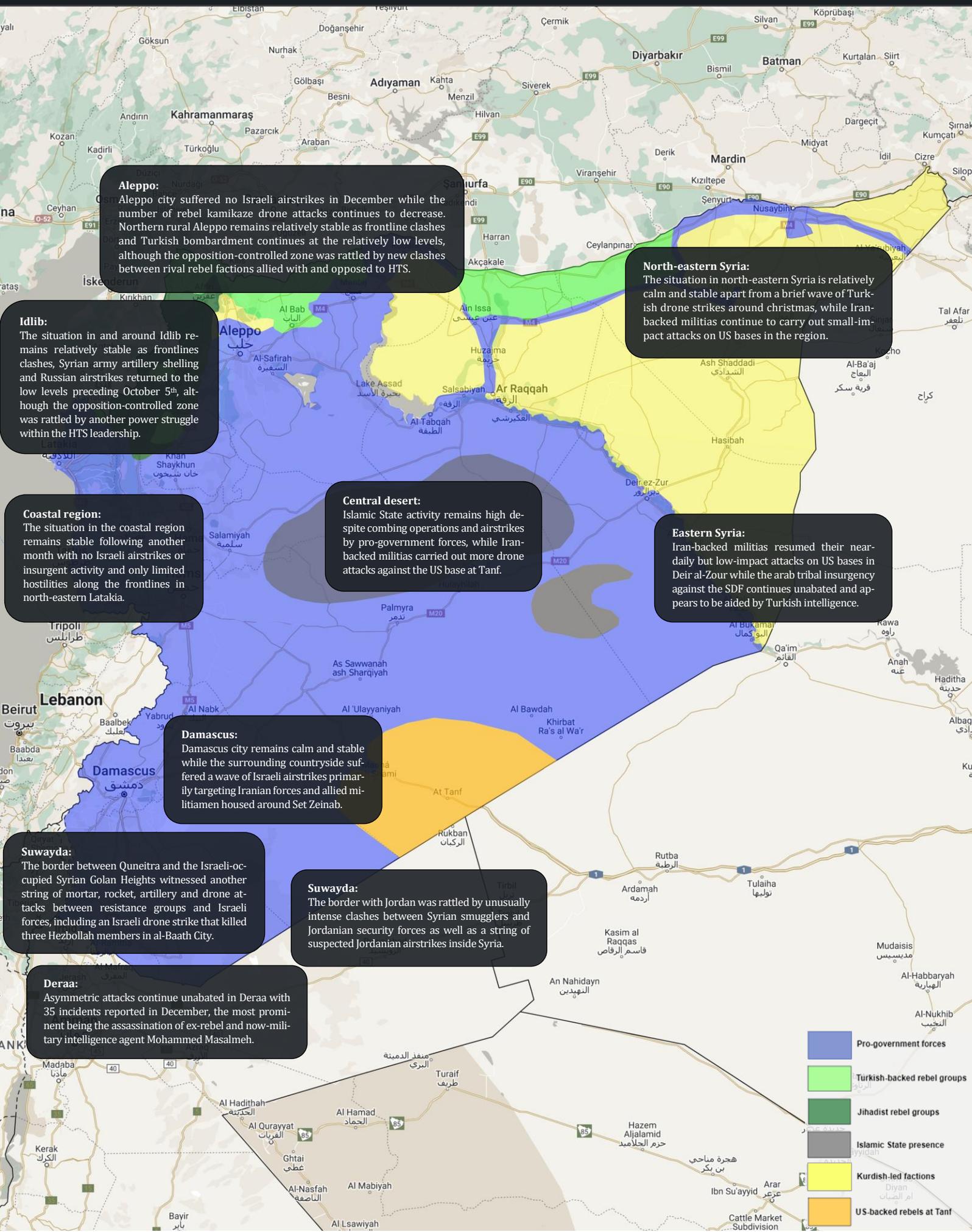
The second main type of drone employed by Syrian rebels are homemade kamikaze models. Unlike the 'bombers' mentioned above, kamikaze drones – as the name implies – are designed to crash into their target and explode. They thus function in the same way as modern loitering munitions used by advanced state militaries. But because Syrian rebels cannot easily procure advanced combat drones or loitering munitions on international arms markets, kamikaze models are almost exclusively manufactured locally. They are overwhelmingly based on an airplane design with a rounded rectangular body with a long pair of wings over the middle and a tailfin occasionally fitted with a rudder to enhance manoeuvring. The body of the drone consists of an explosive mechanism that detonates upon impact. This can be a normal mortar or artillery shell installed inside the body and set to trigger as the target is hit. The blast mechanism can also be improvised and consist of the body being stuffed with explosives and metal ball bearings or shrapnel. At some point, Syrian rebels augmented this design by fitting the wings of kamikaze drones with hand grenades or mortar shells using the same drop mechanism described above. This allows the kamikaze drone to operate like a 'bomber' by airdropping grenades or shells on targets along the way until it reaches its final destination and crashes into its primary target kamikaze-style. The kamikaze drones are guided to their target with a commercially available GPS guidance systems procured on the international market from providers like Chinese company 'Readytosky'.

As kamikaze drones are one-use only, rebel engineers use the cheapest technically viable materials. The most rudimentary models seen in Syria have been built with plywood held together with duct tape. Plastics and various types of rubbers have also been used regularly along with scrap metal parts sourced from conventional munitions or civilian infrastructure like water pipes. Over the past year, however, the Syrian rebels have increasingly begun using more sturdy metal frames for their kamikaze drones for improved manoeuvrability, durability and range. Cheap materials like wood, plastic or aluminium have the advantage of making the kamikaze drones much harder to detected on radars. This radar detection avoidance property is enhanced by the fact that the GPS guidance systems used on kamikaze drones often emit signals that are so weak they can hardly be detected by SAA air-defence radars. The rebel kamikaze drones are rendered even harder to detect by the Syrian army because they often fly below the minimum altitude at which SAA air-defence radars can detect hostile aircraft, mostly 200 metres.

Consisting of improvised bodies and wings, the rebel kamikaze drones also rely mostly on homemade engines. Rebel engineers often install small 12V battery-powered motors allowing a kamikaze drone to fly 20-40 km depending on the payload. The motors are sourced from abroad: they are ordered online, shipped to Turkey and imported to Syria. Just like civilian drones converted into combat models mostly procured from China, the motors used for homemade kamikaze drones are also sourced mainly from Chinese companies. Products like the X3520 motor from Chinese owned US-based firm SunnySky were found in several Syrian rebel kamikaze drones in 2023. The past year has however also seen one of the biggest qualitative leaps in kamikaze drone engine technology. In early November Syrian army air-defence units in north-western rural Hama downed a rebel kamikaze drone of unprecedented size and lethality. Its 6-metre wingspan with a body of similar length and ~50 cm in diameter was carrying some 100 kg of explosives. This even equals twice the length and four times the payload of a normal Grad rocket. In civilian terms, the drone was slightly bigger than a canoe (with wings) and stuffed with explosives. Even more remarkably, the engine of this enormous kamikaze drone was not based on a small battery-powered 12V motor but rather a fuel-powered one with a rocket booster, yielding a maximum range exceeding 100 km. The Syrian army and intelligence services firmly believe that this type of drone downed in rural Hama in November was also exactly the model used to devastating effect at the Homs military academy in October. According to Atlas Assistance sources, the increasing sophistication of rebel kamikaze drones is leading Damascus' intelligence services to strongly suspect that the Idlib-based jihadists that often use such models, like the Turkestan Islamic Party and Ansar al-Tawhid, are receiving vital covert technical support from experts abroad and could become even more daring in 2024.



Map of security developments



Aleppo:
Aleppo city suffered no Israeli airstrikes in December while the number of rebel kamikaze drone attacks continues to decrease. Northern rural Aleppo remains relatively stable as frontline clashes and Turkish bombardment continues at the relatively low levels, although the opposition-controlled zone was rattled by new clashes between rival rebel factions allied with and opposed to HTS.

North-eastern Syria:
The situation in north-eastern Syria is relatively calm and stable apart from a brief wave of Turkish drone strikes around Christmas, while Iran-backed militias continue to carry out small-impact attacks on US bases in the region.

Idlib:
The situation in and around Idlib remains relatively stable as frontlines clashes, Syrian army artillery shelling and Russian airstrikes returned to the low levels preceding October 5th, although the opposition-controlled zone was rattled by another power struggle within the HTS leadership.

Coastal region:
The situation in the coastal region remains stable following another month with no Israeli airstrikes or insurgent activity and only limited hostilities along the frontlines in north-eastern Latakia.

Central desert:
Islamic State activity remains high despite combing operations and airstrikes by pro-government forces, while Iran-backed militias carried out more drone attacks against the US base at Tanf.

Eastern Syria:
Iran-backed militias resumed their near-daily but low-impact attacks on US bases in Deir al-Zour while the arab tribal insurgency against the SDF continues unabated and appears to be aided by Turkish intelligence.

Damascus:
Damascus city remains calm and stable while the surrounding countryside suffered a wave of Israeli airstrikes primarily targeting Iranian forces and allied militiamen housed around Set Zeinab.

Suwayda:
The border between Quneitra and the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights witnessed another string of mortar, rocket, artillery and drone attacks between resistance groups and Israeli forces, including an Israeli drone strike that killed three Hezbollah members in al-Baath City.

Suwayda:
The border with Jordan was rattled by unusually intense clashes between Syrian smugglers and Jordanian security forces as well as a string of suspected Jordanian airstrikes inside Syria.

Deraa:
Asymmetric attacks continue unabated in Deraa with 35 incidents reported in December, the most prominent being the assassination of ex-rebel and now-military intelligence agent Mohammed Masalmeh.

- Pro-government forces
- Turkish-backed rebel groups
- Jihadist rebel groups
- Islamic State presence
- Kurdish-led factions
- US-backed rebels at Tanf

Damascus and southern Syria

Developments in Damascus

Going into January 2024 the security situation in Damascus city remains unchanged and stable after yet another month without Israeli airstrikes or insurgent activity. The suburbs and the surrounding countryside are, however, exposed to these threats, especially the former. Rural Damascus witnessed a wave of spectacular Israeli airstrikes over the past month, mostly around Set Zainab and Aqrabah south-east of the capital, an area known for a strong presence of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the militias it backs. The first attack took place on December 2nd when Israeli aircraft bombed a building in Set Zainab. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) claimed that the strike had indeed targeted a 'Hezbollah gathering' and killed two 'Syrian elements working with Hezbollah'. It later revised its death count to four, including two Syrians and two non-Syrians. The reality turned out to be that the airstrike had in fact targeted an IRGC location when the IRGC announced that two brigadier generals Panah Taghizadeh and Mohammed-Ali Ataei had been killed in the strike. There has however been no evidence of Syrian deaths or a Hezbollah presence at that particular site. The IRGC vowed to avenge their deaths but has so far not claimed publicly any action to that effect.

Undeterred by the Iranian threats, Israel carried out another airstrike in the Set Zainab area and the outskirts of Damascus international airport on December 10th. Atlas Assistance sources say the raid also targeted the Syrian army air-defence battalion in Kiswah south of Damascus and that anti-aircraft batteries were very likely the targets in the strike near the airport. The raid targeted a farmhouse used to house Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and killed at least two. According to opposition pundit Navvar Saaban, they had arrived to Damascus one day earlier along with four others that were injured in the raid. The Israeli air force carried out its third raid in rural Damascus over the past month one week later on December 17th and targeted another building in the Set Zainab area. But the Israeli air force also bombed the airfield at Dimas north-west of Damascus that has been targeted regularly over the past two years and reportedly hosts a clandestine IRGC presence and drone programme. Also bombed was a school complex near the airfield likely used as a housing complex or a warehouse for the personnel and materiel active at the airfield. The raid left two Syrian soldiers dead – most likely at Dimas – but apparently caused no other casualties as neither the IRGC nor Hezbollah announced any dead.

The most spectacular Israeli airstrike took place on December 25th when a raid targeting yet another inconspicuous house in the Set Zainab area killed IRGC Brigadier General Razi Mousavi (alternatively spelled 'Radi Mousawi'). He was seemingly the top IRGC officer in Syria and had been a companion of the late Qassem Suleimani, the (in)famous commander of the IRGC Qods Force killed in January 2020. Just as with the dual killing of Taghizadeh and Ataei on December 2nd, the christmas day assassination of Mousavi was strongly condemned by Iran and its allies around the region who threatened retaliation against Israel. If/when the promised Iranian revenge takes place, it is unlikely to be launched at Israel from south-western Syria but will likely be organised from elsewhere or, less likely, target US forces in eastern Syria. The December raids show that the IRGC and Hezbollah rarely hide casualties of Israeli attack but instead proudly announce them. This gives ample reason to doubt claims by media or self-anointed experts that specific Israeli raids cause any Lebanese or Iranian casualties if there is no confirmation from Hezbollah or the IRGC. More importantly, the December raids had the arguably highest impact of any Israeli and/or American airstrike in the region since the killing of Suleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in Iraq four years ago. This suggests that Israeli intelligence had/has spies on the ground in Set Zainab to identify and pinpoint at the exact right time and at the exact right location generals Mousavi, Taghizadeh and Ataei as well as the group of Hezbollah fighters. With such sources of information and the war in Gaza dragging on, more similar Israeli airstrikes are expected in 2024.



Developments in southern Syria

Just as the southern suburbs of Damascus, the countryside of south-western Syria is also experiencing a rise in Israeli attacks against Iran and its allies. On December 3rd Israeli artillery responded to yet another unclaimed rocket attack against the occupied Golan Heights by shelling the Rafid area in southern rural Quneitra as well as the outskirts of Bit Jinn town on the administrative border with rural Damascus. Four days later Israeli artillery responded to yet another rocket attack on the Golan by shelling the outskirts of Hader town in northern rural Quneitra on the southern slopes of Jabal al-Sheikh/Mount Hermon. The most spectacular Israeli attack came on December 8th when an Israeli drone bombed a car in al-Baath City, the provincial capital of Quneitra governorate also known as Quneitra city. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) claimed that its supposed sources on the ground had informed that it was a rental car. Pictures of the wreckage however made clear that it was in fact one of the famous yellow SAMA taxis. As this colour is reserved for taxis, there are no yellow rental cars in Syria. The Israeli drone strike killed all four passengers of the vehicle. The only Syrian victim was Mohammed al-Tamer born into a family displaced from the Golan Heights in 1967 to the Sbeineh refugee camp in rural Damascus for Golani and Palestinian refugees. He was a commander in the Arab Nationalist Guard, a secular arabist militia established in 2013 and espousing a most eclectic ideology embracing both Bashar al-Assad, Gamal Abdelnasser, Saddam Hussein and Hugo Chavez. The militia has mainly operated in rural Damascus and adjacent areas as an auxiliary to the Syrian army and also Hezbollah. Driven by a desire to avenge his family's displacement from the Golan Heights, Tamer was known to operate especially closely with Hezbollah on the Golan front in particular. Indeed, his three companions were all Lebanese Hezbollah fighters: Hassan Ali Daqdouq, Ali Salman and Hussein Taha.

Hassan Ali Daqdouq is the son of none other than Ali Daqdouq, a legendary Hezbollah commander who was instrumental in building up ideologically kindred Iran-backed shiite militias in Iraq from the mid-2000s onward. Daqdouq Sr. was detained by US forces and faced charges of terrorism for organizing attacks on American personnel. Upon the main US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, Daqdouq was handed over to the Iraqi authorities. They acquitted him on all charges and released him in 2012. He was later added to the US list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists and Washington is offering a 10 million USD reward for information leading to his capture. American officials claim that Daqdouq Sr. shortly after his return to Lebanon travelled to Syria to found Hezbollah's Golan Unit, a special force formation based on the eastern flank of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Given that Daqdouq Jr. was killed in this particular area, it stands to reason that he was part of the elite unit founded by his father. He and his companions had probably been involved in the many sporadic rocket and mortar attacks on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights in recent years and especially since the middle of October 2023. That Israel was able to assassinate Daqdouq Jr. and his companions even though they were driving an anonymous low-profile vehicle in the form of a regular taxi strongly suggests that Israeli intelligence had spies on the ground to identify the vehicle, at least at the departure point where the passengers got in and quite possibly along the route. Similar suspicion of on-the-ground intelligence gathering pertained to a wave of Israeli airstrikes that targeted Hezbollah and Iranian generals near Damascus (see more above).

The assassination of Tamer, Daqdouq and their companions did unsurprisingly not deter either side from continuing the covert conflict on the Golan front. On December 10th and 12th unknown resistance fighters again launched rockets into the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights without causing human or material losses while IDF artillery again retaliated by shelling the northern and southern countryside of Quneitra. Two similar exchanges took place on December 20th and 26th where the Israeli shelling was coupled with airstrikes and extended to the outskirts of Erneh town located north-east of Hader in the westernmost corner of rural Damascus. There were, however, no casualties in any of the exchanges since the December 8th assassinations in Baath City and the low-intensity conflict on the Golan front is still showing no signs of escalating into a full-scale war anytime soon.



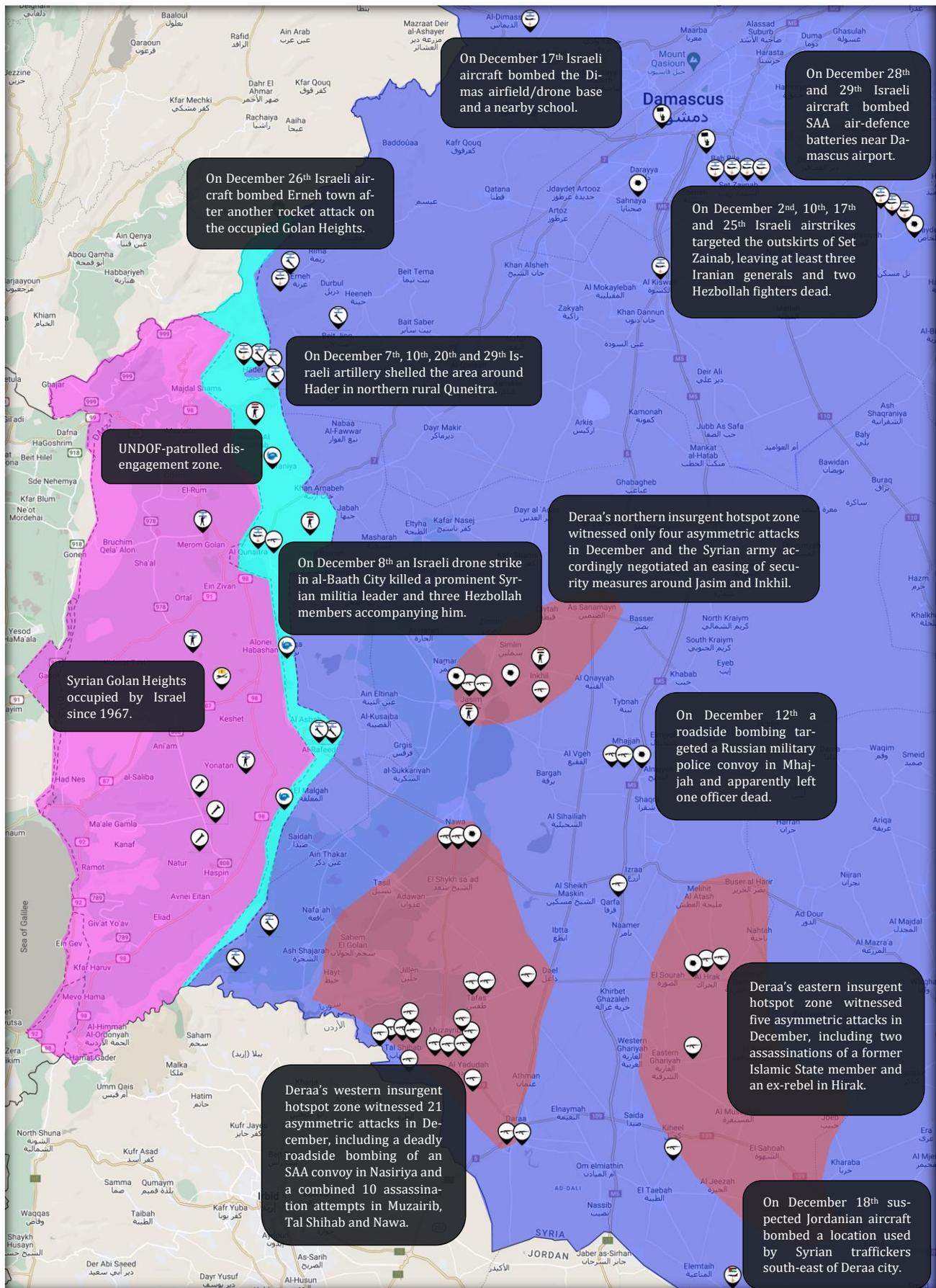
Cross-border hostilities are also intensifying on the border between Suwayda governorate and Jordan, albeit for entirely different reasons. Whereas the increasingly regular hostilities between Iran-backed groups and Israel on the Golan front are largely fuelled by the war in Gaza and its spill-over effects across the region, the instability on the border between Suwayda and Jordan is mostly driven by trafficking. The first in a series of deadly clashes erupted on December 12th when Jordanian border forces clashed with Syrian smugglers somewhere along the frontier with Suwayda, leaving one Jordanian officer and several traffickers dead. A far more serious incident took place six days later when Jordanian border units engaged a bigger and more ominous group of Syrian smugglers in clashes that lasted several hours. Several Jordanian officers were injured while an unclear number of smugglers were killed or wounded and nine were arrested. Worryingly, they were caught trying not only to smuggle some 5 million captagon pills into Jordan but also a large quantity of weapons including assault rifles, assorted explosives, rockets and anti-tank guided missiles. There have been suspicions that the weapons were destined for transshipment to Palestinian resistance factions in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The December 18th ground clashes on the border between Suwayda and Jordan also spread to the skies. In the afternoon, a suspected Jordanian plane bombed a building in al-Metaiyeh (also spelled 'Elemtaih') in southern Deraa, seemingly without causing any casualties. That was not the case later in the day when Jordanian aircraft also bombed at least five different locations in Suwayda governorate around Salkhad, Dibbin, Um al-Rumman, Um Shama and Ghariyah. The Salkhad airstrike targeted a barn owned by Faisal Saadi but used by his son, local gangster Nasser. As detailed in our September 2022 report, Nasser Saadi used to lead a militia in Salkhad affiliated with Syrian military intelligence until it was dismantled in August 2022 by the rival Rijal al-Karama militia, which also became the dominant group in Suwayda. While Saadi's militia was dissolved, he was allowed to keep producing and smuggling drugs by Rijal al-Karama, whose leader Leith Balous paradoxically used the pretext of combating captagon trafficking to eliminate a handful of his local rivals also including Raji Falhout, Kifah Hamoud and Salim Hamid. Nasser Saadi was however not at his Salkhad narcotics warehouse at the time of the Jordanian airstrike. The presumed drug dealers targeted in the other four airstrikes at Dibbin, Um al-Rumman, Um Shama and Ghariyah were seemingly not around either as local media reported that the only victims were five innocent civilians, including two women and one child. Nonetheless, the Syrian government did not comment on the deadly airstrikes, just as it had similarly opted for silence back on May 6th 2023 when the Jordanian air force killed Syrian drug lord Merhei al-Ramthan and his family in Shaab in eastern rural Suwayda. The May airstrike came in the context of the Syro-arab diplomatic détente and the nascent Syro-Jordanian cooperation to combat captagon trafficking. Eight months later, the diplomacy is frozen, signs of any cooperation on the captagon file have vanished and narcotics trafficking continues to rise as the socio-economic crisis in Syria worsens. Clashes and airstrikes of the sort seen in December will likely get even more common in 2024 as the conditions in Syria are poised to reach new lows.

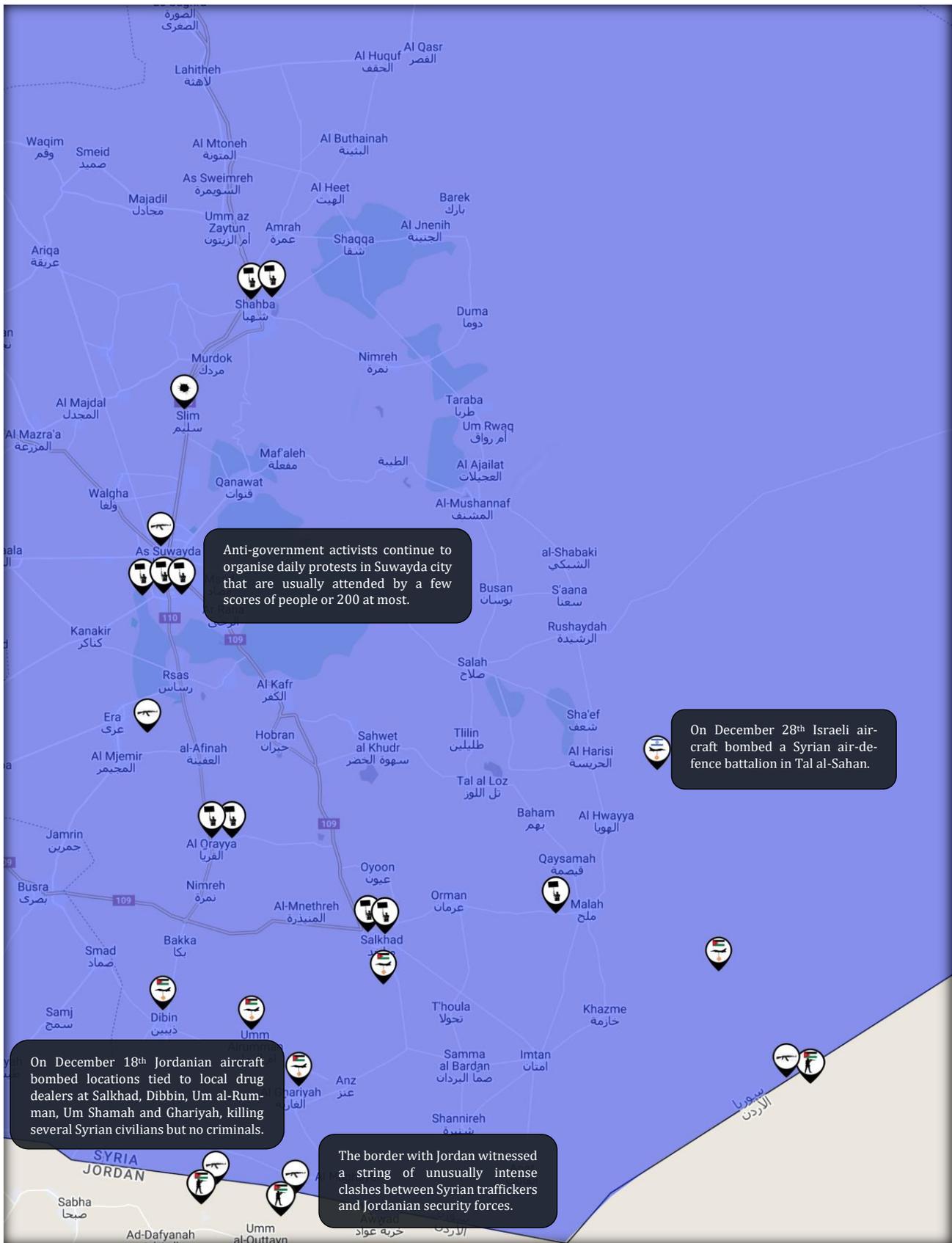
The security situation also remains precarious in Deraa, although there is nothing new about that. The rate of insurgent operations and other asymmetric attacks remains high with more than 35 incidents seen over the past month, reversing a minor and seemingly random drop witnessed in November. Syrian military intelligence and the opposition continue their covert assassination campaign against one another. On December 5th gunmen assassinated an SAA officer in Mhajjah while two roadside bombings hit Syrian army and intelligence service convoys at Nasiriyah and Jasim, and caused more casualties. On December 10th and 12th roadside bombings hit SAA and Russian military convoys at Namer and Mhajjah, respectively, and left at least five more casualties. On December 23rd suspected opposition insurgents shot dead Mohammed Mukhl al-Masalmeh in Deraa city. He was the cousin of Mustafa 'al-Kism Masalmeh' (who was assassinated in August) and also headed a group of ex-rebels that worked as a death squad for Syrian military intelligence in Deraa. In return, suspected government agents assassinated prominent opposition activist and former rebel leader Radi 'al-Hashish' near Nahj on December 18th and his fellow oppositionist Mohammed Barhouni in Muzairib two days later.



Map of developments in Damascus and southern Syria



Map of developments in Suwayda



Central and coastal Syria

Developments in central Syria

Going into 2024 the security situation in central Syria remains unchanged albeit with local variations in level of risk. The Homs-Hama corridor remains largely free of insurgent activity but continues to be afflicted with high rates of lawlessness, crime and random violence. On December 6th a feud between the Wakiah and Dameiri clans escalated into two days of clashes in the notoriously unstable Talbiseh area. As detailed in our January 2023 report, the Dameiris are implicated in drug trafficking, ransom kidnapping and racketeering. Struggle for control of these industries leads to regular clashes between the Dameiris and other clans. On December 7th men from the shiite Hanash and Aabdeh clans abducted two members of the sunni Ashqar family in nearby San al-Aswad town. The shiite gunmen sought and successfully managed to conduct a prisoner swap for two relatives arrested by opposition security forces in rural Aleppo and who faced a (politicised) death sentence for drug trafficking.

The security situation is however worse in the central desert as the wave of Russian airstrikes against Islamic State (IS) in November failed to curb the group's activity in December. Rather, the scattered IS cells continue to launch regular and spectacular attacks on pro-government ground troops. On December 1st IS ambushed a Liwa al-Quds convoy west of Resafa while three days later an IED planted by jihadists struck an SAA patrol nearby and killed two soldiers. On the 13th Syrian army infantry on a combing operation clashed with jihadist in the Bishri mountains in western Deir al-Zour while on the 20th an IS roadside bombing struck an SAA convoy at the T3 pumping station near Palmyra in southern rural Homs, leaving at least seven soldiers dead and ten wounded. As explained in our last two reports, the high level of IS activity in the desert is in part a seasonal phenomenon as winter weather favours the jihadists. For example, fog often keeps visibility to less than 50 metres and denies pro-government forces the tactical advantage of surveillance drones and warplanes. With this type of weather poised to continue in January, the current level of IS activity will likely be sustained in the coming month.

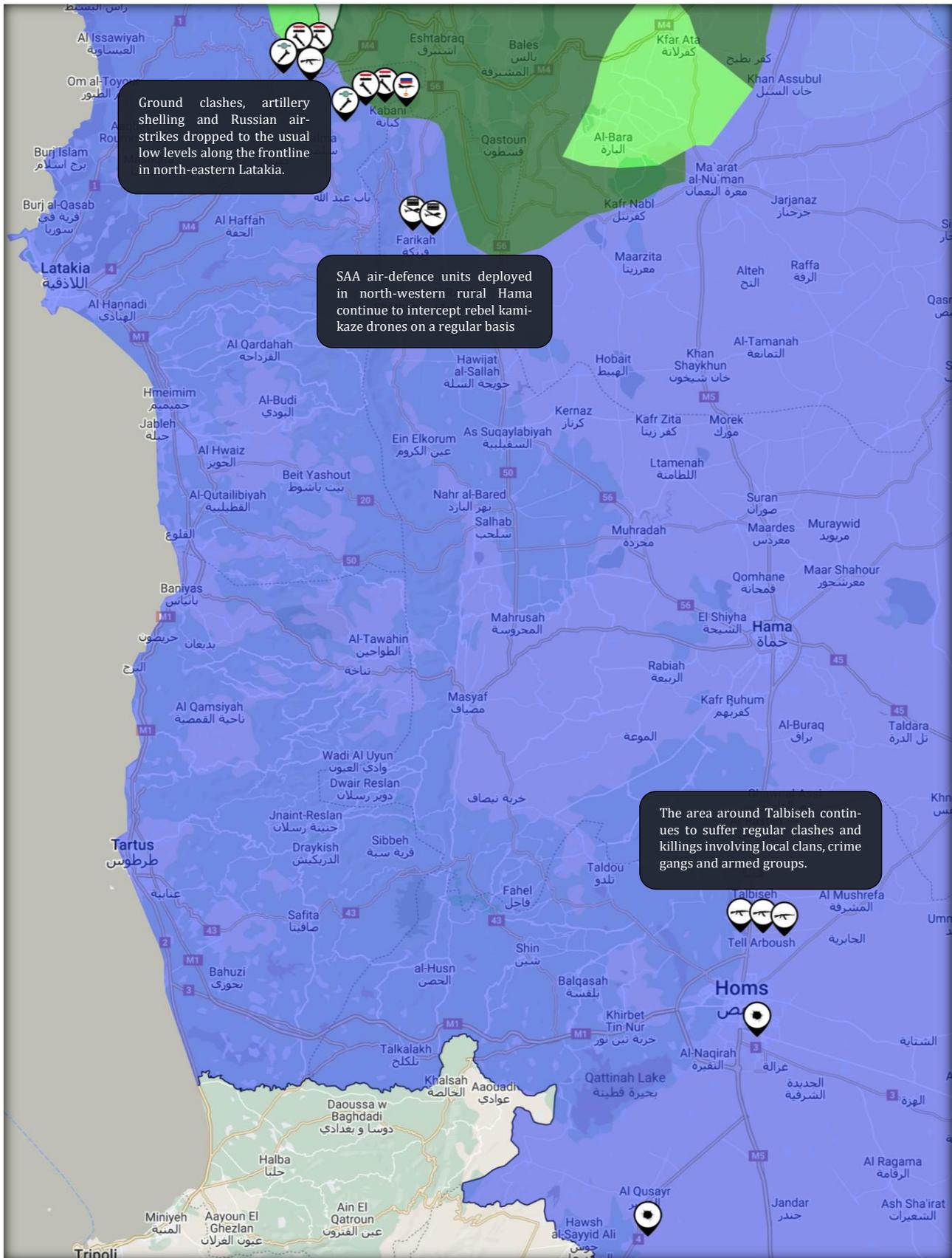
The security situation has nevertheless improved on the southern edge of the desert following a drop in drone attacks by Iran-backed militias against coalition forces at the Tanf Garrison. While the expiry of the Gaza truce on December 1st expectedly led to a resumption of attacks by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI) on American forces in Syria, they were heavily concentrated in Deir al-Zour and Hassakeh (see more below). Indeed, after striking coalition forces on a weekly basis in October and November, IRI launched just one attack on the Tanf garrison throughout all of December. It is not immediately clear what is behind this shift in IRI targeting patterns but it does corroborate our analysis that the risk of a major escalation between American and Iranian proxies in Syria so far remains limited.

Developments in coastal Syria

Going into January the military and security situation in the coastal region remains relatively stable as adverse weather conditions complicate military operations in the mountainous terrain. There were no Russian airstrikes seen over the past month, while Syrian army artillery shelling of rebel positions was limited to a few brief barrages per week. Moreover, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other rebels have largely ceased the spectacular infiltration attacks they carried out behind SAA lines with deadly effect earlier this year. Fringe jihadist group Ansar al-Islam carried out such an operation on December 17th and had some tactical success by apparently killing two Syrian army soldiers. HTS attempted to replicate the feat five days later at Tallat al-Malek but it seemingly ended in dismal failure as the Syrian army detected the would-be infiltrators and fent them off with small arms fire and artillery. Having bungled the operation, HTS claimed that it was in fact SAA that had attacked but had been repelled by vigilant rebels. Such flareups are however the exception as most days see no hostilities on the frontlines in north-eastern Latakia. This will likely remain the case throughout January due to the weather.



Map of developments in central and coastal Syria



North-western Syria

Developments in Idlib

Going into January 2024 the military and security situation in and around Idlib remains unchanged and relatively stable. The comparatively calm status quo that prevailed prior to the October 5th rebel drone attack on the Syrian army's military academy in Homs has been firmly re-established in Idlib. Russian airstrikes, Syrian army artillery shelling and ground clashes are currently as rare as they were in summer. For example, the suspension of Russian airstrikes on November 11th was sustained until December 18th, a stunning five-week break. When the Russian air force resumed operations, it carried out just four raids at the western outskirts of Idlib city, at Sheikh Youssef town and Qunaytirah town on December 18th-19th before being grounded again. Syrian army artillery shelling also continues at remarkably low levels. In fact, there was no SAA shelling in Idlib on December 13th-14th, the first 48-hour break since the February 2023 earthquake. While the Syrian army does occasionally fire missiles indiscriminately into the eastern suburbs of Idlib city and causes many civilian casualties, such strikes are rare and do not ruin the overall fact that the number of artillery barrages is relatively low. The intensity of ground hostilities is also unusually low, with no serious ground attacks reported over the past month and frontline clashes limited to sporadic skirmishes and kinetic anti-tank missile strikes.

The low level of hostilities in Idlib is in part a result of the weather. Heavy rains and strong winds often ground the Russian forces and impair the accuracy of artillery and missile strikes to an extent where such attacks become almost unfeasible. Moreover, the muddy terrain makes it even more impractical to launch ground offensives against deeply entrenched enemy positions established in the past four years that the frontlines have remain frozen. But the low level of violence is also a product of political decisions. As explained in our last two monthly reports, pro-government forces have no appetite for a major escalation in Idlib while they are busy managing intense Israeli activity in south-western Syria, a seasonal surge in Islamic State insurgency in the central desert, and unusually high hostilities between Iran-backed militias and American forces in eastern Syria. This preference for calm is shared with the main rebel faction in Idlib, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which not only derives legitimacy and revenue as the proto-state guaranteeing calm in Idlib but also because it once again faces internal turmoil.

In early December HTS internal security and counterintelligence agents launched another wave of arrests of the group's members, officially on charges of spying on behalf of the US-led international coalition. This marked a resumption of the arrest campaign detailed in our July and August reports that culminated in the detention of HTS top leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani's former right-hand Abu Maria Qahtani. As in summer, the latest arrests were suspected of having less to do with spying than with internal power struggles within the HTS leadership. Indeed, the controversial arrest of Qahtani bred/exacerbated tensions between Jolani and another of his lieutenants named Jihad Issa al-Sheikh, aka Abu Ahmad Zakkour. Attempts to reconcile them back in November failed and the differences between the two became unbridgeable after HTS attempted to arrest two of Zakkour's loyalist in late November who managed to flee to Aleppo. HTS did manage to arrest many of Zakkour's men in early December, but this only worsened the brewing crisis. On the 14th Zakkour himself announced his defection from HTS and officially cited differences over policy toward the other/mainstream rebel factions. Known to support amicable co-existence and negotiated mergers, Zakkour strongly criticised Jolani's course of confronting the other rebels, sometimes forcefully absorbing them and/or seizing their turf. Zakkour's defection and flight to rural Aleppo escalated into violent clashes and a tense showdown between his clansmen, mainstream rebels, HTS security forces and the Turkish army (see more below). Opposition media openly speculate that the latest blatant power struggle within HTS could erode Jolani's control over certain areas, smaller allied rebel factions and/or specific clans in parts of north-western Syria.



Developments in Aleppo

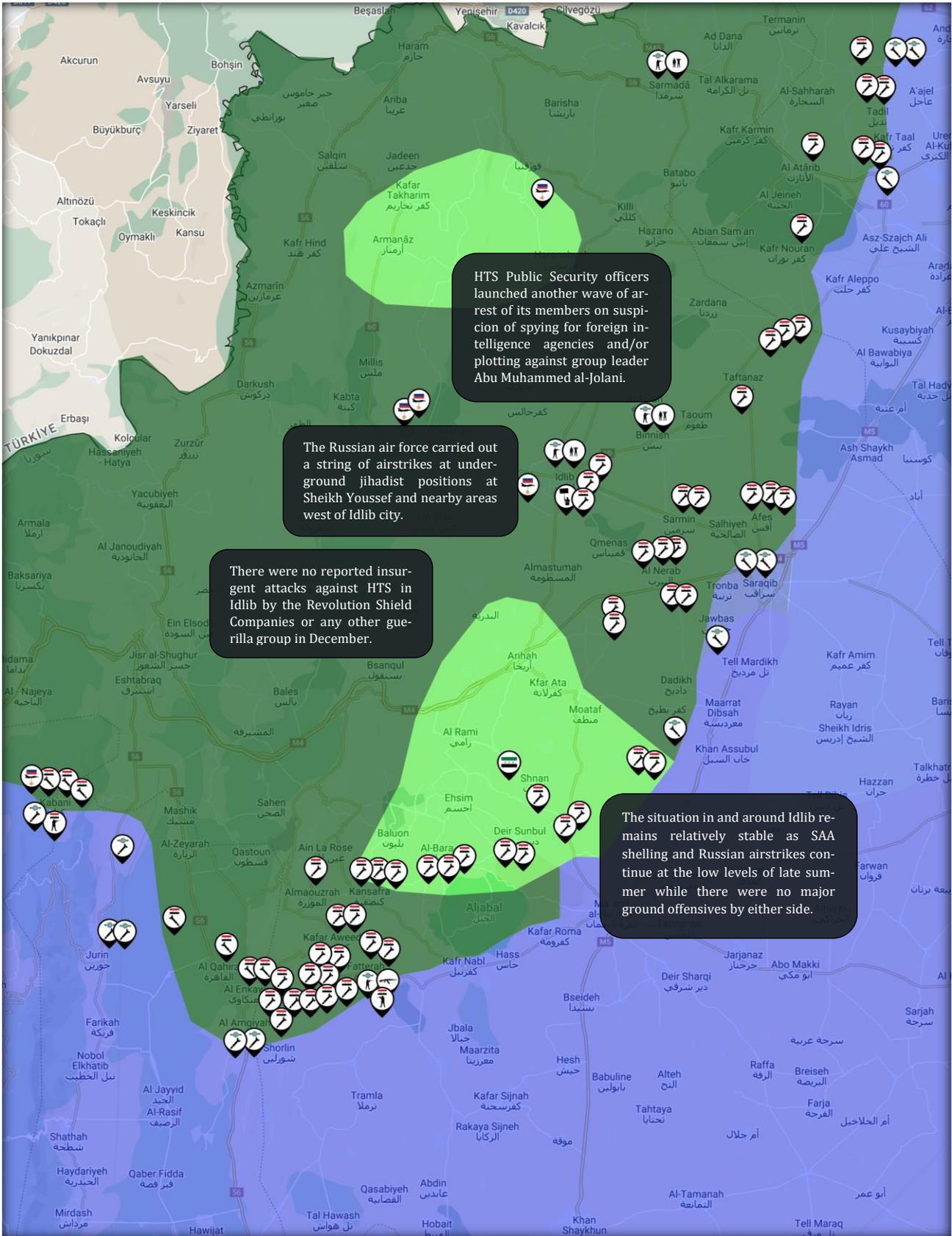
Meanwhile, the power struggle between HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani and his lieutenant Abu Ahmad Zakkour (see more above) inevitably spread into rural Aleppo. Zakkour hails from Nairab east of Aleppo city and has extensive relations across the wider countryside. He belongs to the large Baqir clan from the area and was in charge of HTS relations with the Aleppo-based mainstream factions for years. Zakkour was behind the Shahba Gathering announced on February 2nd 2023 as a coalition of smaller mainstream factions based in rural Aleppo and allied with HTS. They included the Ahrar al-Sham East Sector, the 50th Division, the remnants of Harakat Nouredine al-Zinki and some smaller brigades that defected from al-Jabha al-Shamiya, a main rival of HTS. The gathering was created as a quasi-front to enable HTS to extend its military, security, economic and political influence deep into rural Aleppo. Given Zakkour's close relations and deep knowledge of the factional landscape, it was no wonder that he fled to Azaz following his December 14th defection from HTS. That did however not protect him.

On December 19th Zakkour's partners from the 50th Division allowed HTS forces to move into Azaz in pursuit of Zakkour. The perceived invasion immediately triggered clashes with medium and heavy weapons between HTS and Zakkour's loyalists in the mainstream factions and locals. The details of the events are unclear but it appears that Zakkour and his brother Qutaiba were detained by HTS and transported towards Idlib but then intercepted and freed by Turkish military police and brought to a Turkish base near Azaz for house arrest and further interrogation. Turkey had deployed massive reinforcements to control the unfolding mess in Azaz, and probably to serve a range of motives. First of all, Turkey has no interest in violent clashes so close to the border. Secondly, Ankara clearly opposed another power grab by HTS vis-à-vis the mainstream elements more closely aligned with and controlled by the Turkish authorities. Thirdly, the personal feud between Jolani and Zakkour also had potential to draw in senior Turkish officials. While Zakkour initially framed his defection from HTS mainly in terms of a feud of policy, he also spilled the beans on other issues. For example, he accused Jolani's loyalists of being responsible for a car bombing in rural Idlib in 2016 that killed dozens of mainstream rebels and civilians as well as a wave of assassinations in 2017 targeting leaders of Harakat Nouredin al-Zinki, then a very powerful group and rival of Jolani's. Zakkour also claims that Jolani is an informant for US and British intelligence to keep himself and his close allies out of the counterterrorism spotlight of western states. But Zakkour himself is not free of allegations of foul play. According to the pro-Jolani faction, Zakkour had obtained sensitive information about the HTS leader's personal investments and business ventures in Idlib and Turkey. Effectively conceding that the details would incriminate Jolani, his loyalists accuse Zakkour of successfully blackmailing Jolani with this information. The former was reportedly paid a large sum to avoid leaking the information about the latter's personal finances.

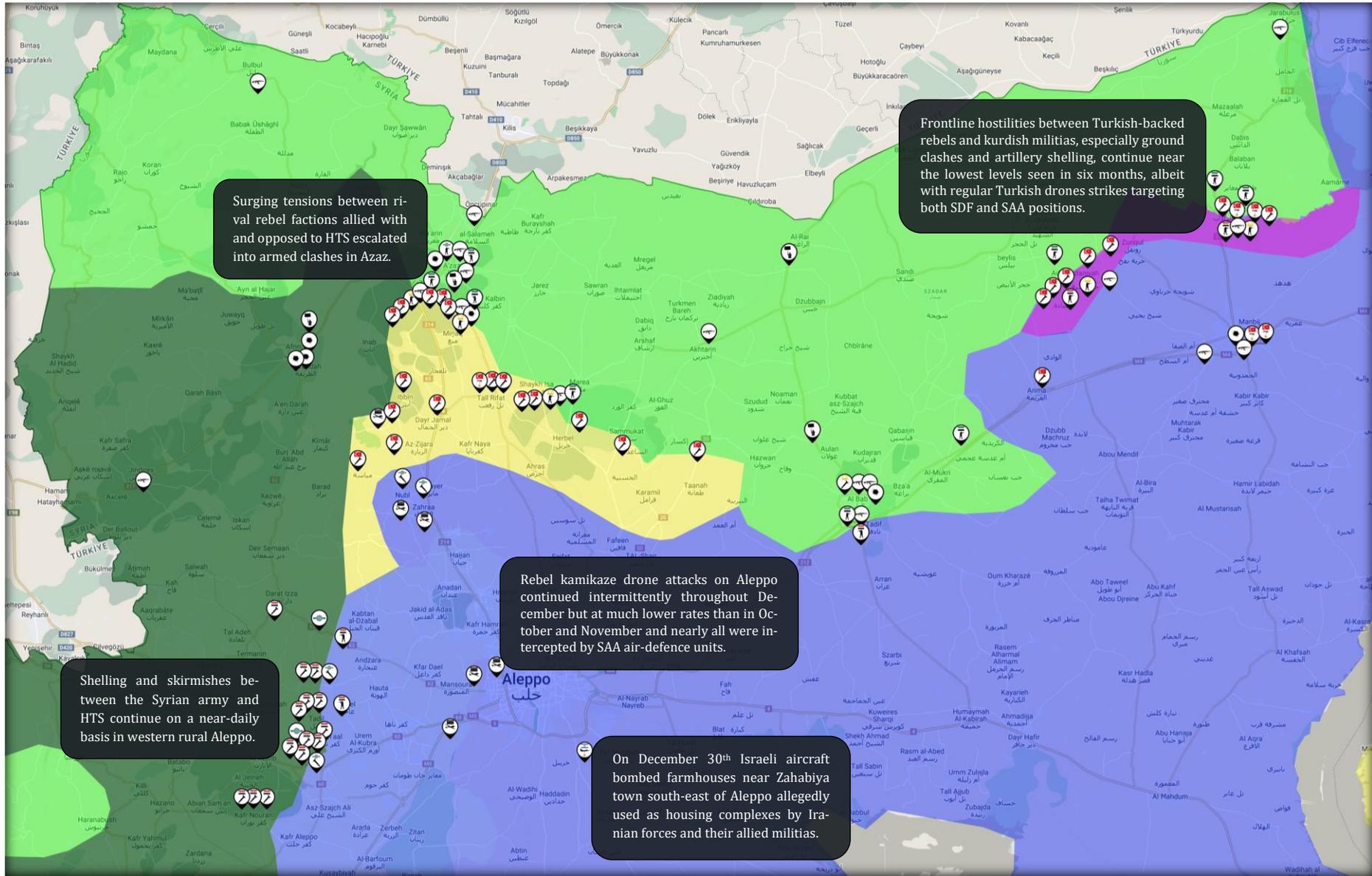
When Zakkour fled to Azaz anyway after his relations with HTS broke down, he brought with him 25 million USD, according to the pro-government Athr Press. It is unclear if this was the sum derived from the blackmail or if he had also embezzled from HTS coffers. Zakkour was also the top manager of many of the group's revenue-generating operations like management of gas stations and restaurants as well as levying of commercial taxes and fees on border-crossing and checkpoints. Suspicion that Zakkour had embezzled HTS funds was amplified on December 22nd when Abdelrahim Atoun, the highest judicial figure in HTS and a diehard Jolani loyalist, publicly said Zakkour was indeed implicated in various corruption schemes along with Abu Maria Qahtani, Zakkour's close ally who was detained in August. Evidently self-serving, these allegations failed to convince Zakkour's many loyalists in rural Aleppo. When HTS later in December arrested several members of his clan, the Baqir, it was not only his kin that erupted in protest but also other clans, arab and kurdish. With Zakkour still in Aleppo, seemingly under Turkish protection and anti-HTS sentiment lingering among mainstream rebels, local clans and the general population, it is too early to say if Jolani's formal ouster of Zakkour has consolidated the former's control over HTS and its allies, or if his grip is losing as a result of creating too many enemies.



Map of developments in Idlib



Map of developments in Aleppo



North-eastern Syria

Developments in north-eastern Syria

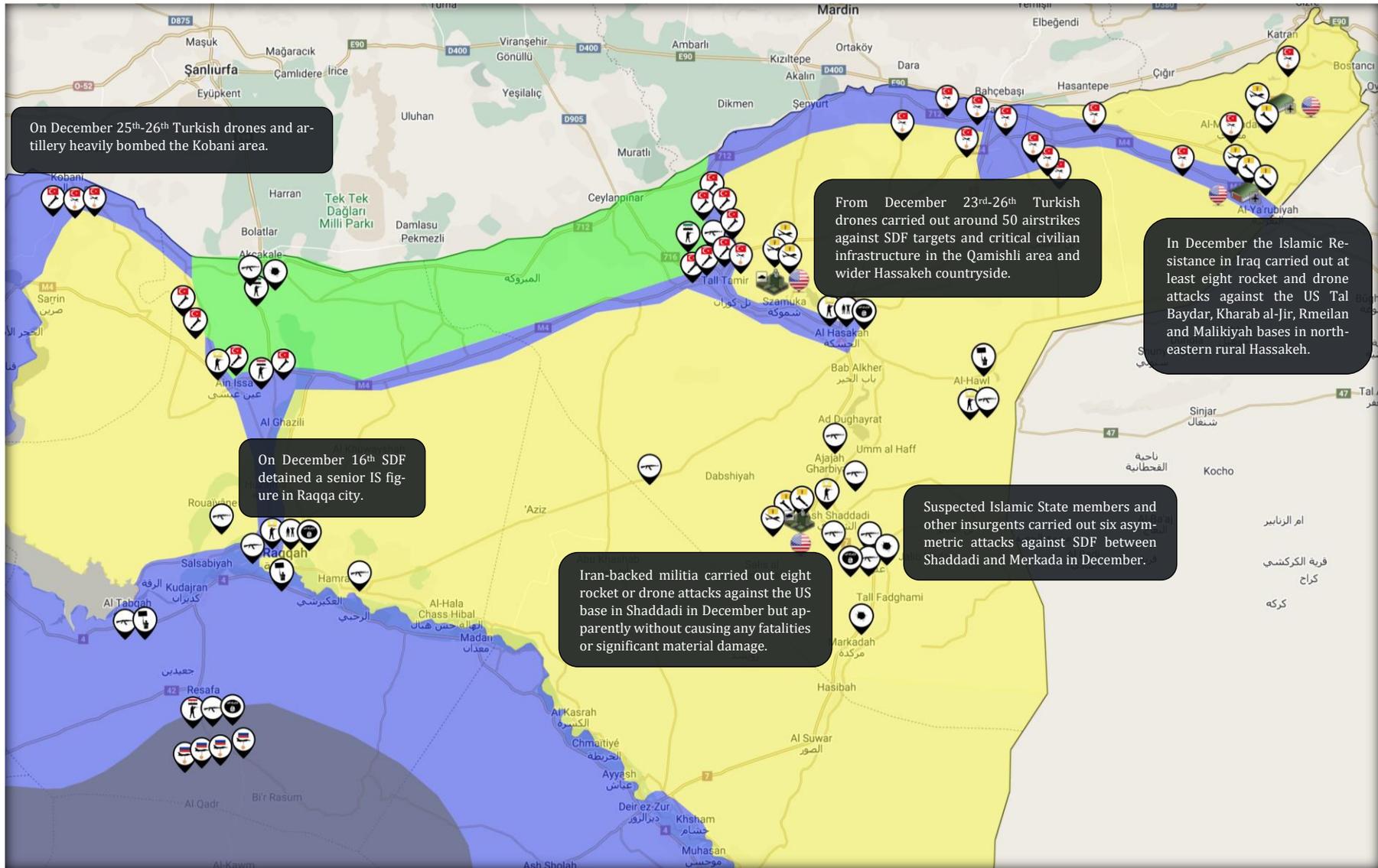
Going into January 2024 the military and security situation in north-eastern Syria remains unchanged and relatively stable after a brief surge in violence around Christmas. After more than three weeks of virtually no hostilities, from December 23rd-26th Turkish intelligence carried out a wave of dozens of drone strikes across northern Hassakeh. Dozens of combatants and civilians were killed or wounded while the material losses included destruction or damages to a power plant, a train station, a printing press, a wedding venue and several factories producing foods and animal feeds. The ferocious Turkish drone strike wave was seemingly triggered by deadly attacks by the PKK against Turkish occupation forces in northern Iraq. Just like after the October alleged terrorist attack in Ankara, Turkey again responded by bombing critical infrastructure in north-eastern Syria. This time, the novel systematic bombing of food and animal feed factories coincides with rapidly growing concerns of food insecurity in Syria (see more above). The wave of Turkish drone strikes ebbed out again on the 27th and the relative calm that had prevailed throughout November and in the first three weeks of December leading up to Christmas was restored and is poised to continue long into 2024, at least until Ankara again decides to punish SDF-controlled north-eastern Syria for something done by other Kurdish factions elsewhere.

Meanwhile the conflict between Iran-backed militias and US forces also resumed. As predicted last month, the expiration of the Gaza ceasefire on December 1st led to a resumption of attacks against US forces in north-east Syria by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI) profiled in our December report. The resumption was, however, slow to begin. The first IRI operations in December were only carried out some 72 hours after the Gaza truce unravelled when the mysterious alliance carried out another rocket attack against the US Abu Hajjar/Kharab al-Jir airbase in eastern rural Hassakeh. Then four days went by without any IRI operations in Syria at all followed by just one on the 8th. The group then unleashed a wave of operations on December 9th, the true scope of which is hard to determine. Russia Today Arabic and pro-Iranian media like Mayadeen and the Cradle said that IRI carried out a total of 11 attacks on US bases in Syria and Iraq that day, apparently including two rocket strikes on the Abu Hajjar/Kharab al-Jir airfield and one against the Malikiyah base. An IRI press statement indicated that 11 US bases in Syria and Iraq had been hit but it did not specify which ones or with what munitions, leaving the scope and nature of the attacks unclear. IRI operations continued inconsistently with no attacks over the next two days. The US Shaddadi base was then hit on the 11th and 14th while the Malikiyah airbase was targeted by drones on the 16th. Although total numbers are unclear, there is no doubt that the IRI attacks still have little impact. There have been no reports of US fatalities or significant material losses in any of the IRI operations in north-eastern Syria in December. In fact, many of them were reportedly foiled by US air-defence systems recently deployed to the bases in anticipation of more IRI operations.

Finally, on December 12th the general assembly of the Autonomous Administration in Northern and Eastern Syria amended the 'social pact' passed in 2014 as the de facto constitution for its governance in north-east Syria. The pact was criticised for failing to guarantee basic human rights like protection from arbitrary arrest, right to a fair trial as well as the equality of non-Kurdish groups. The committee tasked with amending the pact was first formed in June 2021 but it took 30 months to finalise the team and complete the amendments approved by the assembly this December. The system was renamed the Democratic Autonomous Administration in Northern and Eastern Syria (DAANES), as a largely symbolic concession. Its administration divisions were reorganised from three cantons to seven provinces while Arab and Syriac are now recognised as official language. The new pact was derided as illegitimate, not only by the Syrian government but also by mainstream opposition groups like the Kurdish National Council, the Syrian Islamic Council and the protesters in Suwayda. It thus seems unlikely that the new DAANE pact will do much to prop up its ailing legitimacy, especially among non-Kurds outside Hassakeh.



Map of developments in north-eastern Syria



Eastern Syria

Developments in Deir al-Zour

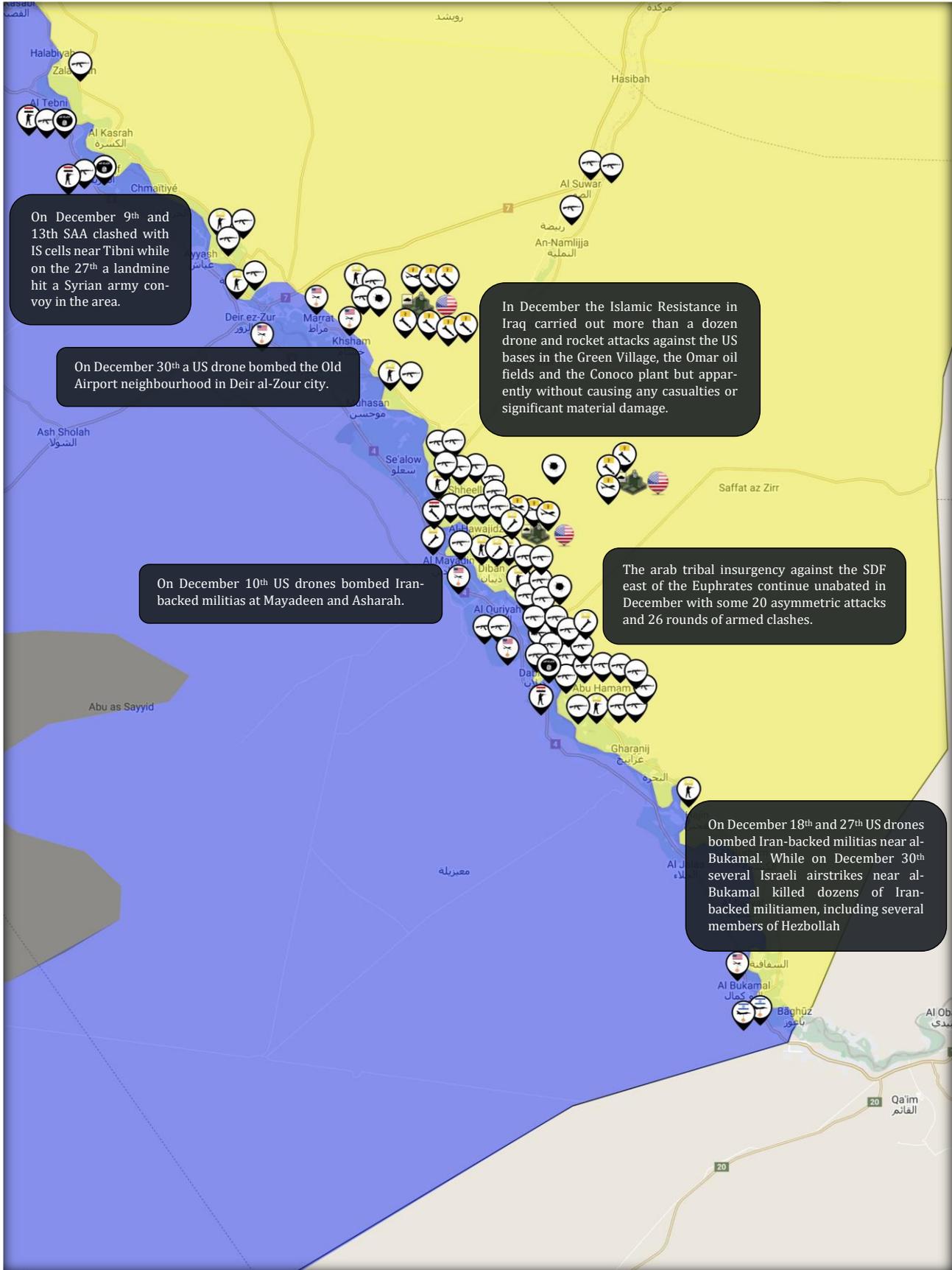
Going into 2024 the situation in Deir al-Zour remains unstable due to continued hostilities between Iran-backed militias and US forces as well as resolute insurgency against the SDF. The end of the Gaza truce on December 1st expectedly led to a resumption of attacks by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI) against US forces in Deir al-Zour. After a slow start with one attack in the first week of December against the Omar oil field outpost, the IRI campaign gained pace. On December 8th it struck both the Green Village base and the Conoco base as part of a wave of 11 total attacks in Syria and Iraq. The Conoco base and the Omar oil field outpost were struck again on the 12th and 16th but similarly caused no US fatalities or major material damage. Several attacks were foiled by newly deployed C-RAM air-defence systems. Due to their minimal impact, the IRI operations warranted no more than a modest response. US drones bombed Iran-backed militias at al-Bukamal on December 2nd, Mayadeen and Asharah on the 10th and again at al-Bukamal on the 18th. The impact of these American strikes also appears to have been minimal in terms of human and material losses, in stark contrast to the deadly retaliations against Iran-backed Iraqi militias in Iraq over the past month. Unlike in Iraq, it is still completely unclear what specific Iran-backed factions are behind the attacks on US forces in Syria. It has however become clear that many or most attacks are carried out from Syrian soil. On December 15th SDF seized a truck with a multiple rocket launch system (MRLS) hidden inside the body and likely destined for local IRI operatives launching missiles at US bases in Deir al-Zour. Four days earlier SDF discovered empty rocket launchers in the outskirts of Shaddadi in southern rural Hassakeh close to a US base regular subject to IRI rocket attacks in additional proof of our analysis that IRI agents operate within SDF areas of control.

Meanwhile, the arab tribal insurgency against the SDF also continues unabated. Over the past month, arab tribal insurgents were involved in at least 16 asymmetric attacks against and 20 rounds of armed clashes with SDF. The high rate of insurgency in part reflects SDF missteps. For example, on November 30th SDF killed two innocent locals in Kasrah and four days later it killed a woman and wounded her child in Abu Hammam, two incidents that galvanised arab tribal anger. The most spectacular insurgent attack against SDF took place on December 6th when an IED blast near the US base in the Omar oil fields killed Sherwan Hassan, aka. Ronnie Walat. He was a member of SDF's supreme military council and the Deir al-Zour Military Council. He was apparently the highest ranked SDF officer in Deir al-Zour and the spearhead of the suppression in August and September of the armed rebellion by local arab tribesmen loyal to ex-DMC head Ahmed 'Abu Khawla' al-Khabil. As such, Ronnie Walat more than anyone else personified the kurdish SDF leadership's suppression of the rebellious arab tribes and one can hardly imagine a more symbolically and militarily significant assassination among SDF ranks in Deir al-Zour.

It was therefore even more remarkable when Turkish intelligence one week later claimed responsibility for the killing of Ronnie Walat. While spectacular and somewhat farfetched, the claim gains credibility from the fact that neither SDF nor the tribes have refuted the Turkish assertion as well as the fact that Walat was killed while driving an armoured military vehicle, which indicates that the assassins were professionals operating at a technical level of sophistication usually above that of the local tribes. That Turkish intelligence apparently assassinated the tribes' main enemy on the doorstep of a US base more than 225 km from the Turkish border is strong indicator of convergence between Turkey and the tribes. It would also defy the baseless notions by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and pundits like Nicholas Heras that the tribes sympathise with and are supported by Damascus' intelligence agencies. Rather, it would validate our assertions made since summer that the tribes waging insurgency against the SDF in Deir al-Zour mainly sympathise with the mainstream opposition and its Turkish patron. The assassination of Walat, however, would be the first major sign of material operational synergies. This ominous development for the SDF has so far been overlooked/ignored by pro-SDF media and pundits.



Map of developments in Deir al-Zour



Future developments



Political developments

It remains very unlikely that there will be a comprehensive political solution to the conflict in Syria in 2024. The prospects of any kind of substantial progress in the first half of the new year are extremely dim. It is even doubtful if the Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) conceived and widely recognised as *the* diplomatic track to achieve a comprehensive solution can reconvene in the first quarter of the year. There are several rationales behind this pessimistic prognosis. The SCC negotiations made little tangible progress on any vital matters in the roughly 30 months they were held from late 2019 until mid-2022. The Syrian government delegation refused to give meaningful concessions on anything of importance while the opposition pressed too maximalist demands contradicting the actual balance of power. The negotiations were suspended in mid-2022 when the Syrian government at Moscow's request boycotted the talks and insisted on an alternative venue to Geneva. 18 months later there is little or no hard evidence that UN envoy Geir Pedersen or the Syrian opposition have agreed to relocate the talks or that any politically viable state has volunteered to host the futile negotiations.

The February 2023 earthquake offered a unique opportunity to end the years-long stalemate in Syria diplomacy. Some arab states executed long-mulled bilateral *détentes* with Damascus, which in return gave some important symbolic concessions. The process culminated in Syria agreeing to the May 1st Amman Declaration as a condition for its full return to the Arab League that same month. The Syrian government did fulfil some of its pledges, especially concerning humanitarian access to opposition-held areas in the north-west. However, on virtually all other points Damascus has failed to deliver. Commitments to curb captagon trafficking, hold war criminals and human rights violators to account, limit the influence of Iran inside Syria and ease repression of the opposition have not been fulfilled. The Syrian government has thus broken its promises to the Arab League and badly frustrated the states that lobbied for the pragmatic course of reintegrating Damascus, like Saudi Arabia and Jordan. It is a matter of speculation why the Syrian government would waste such an opportunity to rehabilitate itself diplomatically and secure critically needed recovery/reconstruction funding when the Arab League's demands are far less painful than the content of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. As detailed in our October 2023 report, the Syrian government probably took the arab states for granted on the baseless assumption that they need Syria more than it needs them. Damascus perhaps realised this later and thus carried out some more concessions, such as the abolition of the military field courts and another general amnesty. But by then it was too late for Damascus to undo the consequences of its previous procrastination. On the 7th of October the Syrian conflict was overshadowed and overtaken in importance by the Gaza war, which has become the top priority for virtually all states in the region and most across the world. The Gaza war will stay the focus of regional diplomacy for many months into 2024 with Syria in the distant background, if not off the radar. The crux is that the Syrian conflict is very difficult to solve politically but also sufficiently contained territorially so most states in the world can afford to leave it unsolved, or 'frozen'. Syria diplomacy is therefore bound to stay in limbo for the foreseeable future and even if, or when, the SCC talks resume whenever a venue is found, there are few prospects of real progress.



Security developments

The current military and security status quo in Syria will likely persist into 2024. The Syrian army and Russian air force clearly have no interest in escalation in Idlib amid tensions on the Golan "front", rising IS activity in the desert and adverse weather. Turkey may continue to launch waves of drone strikes on SDF-controlled areas in Hassakeh but another ground invasion/offensive with Ankara's rebel allies seem unconceivable. Hostilities between Iran-backed groups and Israel in south-western Syria and US forces in eastern Syria will likely remain as controlled and limited in impact as they have been so far.



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About us

Atlas Assistance is a small dedicated company supporting a long range of humanitarian, developmental and diplomatic actors across the Middle East from our office in Beirut.

We are specialised in delivering analytical and security solutions based on a deep understanding of local contexts and what actually works on the ground.

For more information about our work, please visit our website:

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