



Politics

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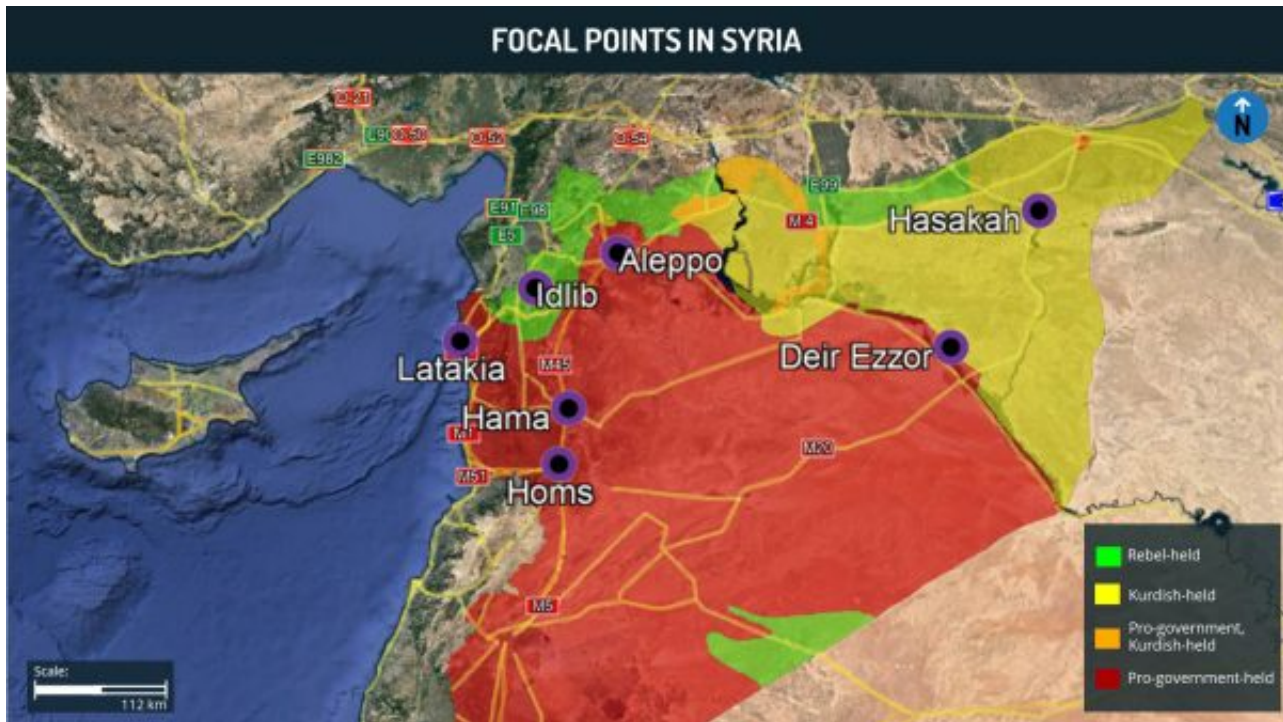
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Syria SITUATION UPDATE: Russia brokers prisoner swap between Israel, Syria, per February 18 reports; highly notable given rarity, highlights willingness of both states to negotiate over humanitarian issues

Executive Summary:

- According to reports from February 18, Israel and Syria reportedly agreed to a Russia-brokered prisoner swap. This development is highly notable as the two countries have been in a “state of war” for several decades and do not share diplomatic relations. It highlights the willingness of both states to somewhat negotiate over humanitarian issues.
- On February 21, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) reportedly arrested a prominent Hurras al-Din member in Idlib Province’s Salqin. He is reportedly the son of a then al-Qaeda-affiliated HTS senior leader that was killed in a US-led Coalition airstrike in April 2016. This is likely aimed at disrupting Hurras al-Din’s command-and-control structures and demoralizing the latter’s fighters.
- On February 19, A Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) officer was reportedly killed in a suicide bombing, which occurred outside an SNA camp near Aleppo Province’s al-Rai. While there has been a recent uptick in asymmetric attacks in SNA-controlled areas, this incident is notable due to the overall rarity of suicide bombings in the region.
- Overall, the security situation in Syria is likely to remain volatile over the coming weeks as rival forces in the northwestern and northeastern parts of the country continue to vie for influence and territorial control. Militant groups, such as the Islamic State (IS), will take advantage of this contention for control to launch asymmetric attacks across these regions.



Please be advised:

Across the country, the following incidents have been reported:

Aleppo Province

Map #	Date	District/City	Brief Description
	February 18	Unspecified	Syria's official news agency citing a statement by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) indicated that "the al-Nusra Front terrorist organization" conducted three attacks in the de-escalation zone. The Jabhat al-Nusra Front is the Syrian chapter of al-Qaeda, which rebranded itself as a Syrian opposition group in 2017.
1	February 19	al-Rai environs	A Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) officer was reportedly killed in a suicide bombing, which occurred outside an SNA camp. No group has claimed

responsibility for the attack. The officer who was killed reportedly belonged to the SNA's Sultan Murad division.

Deir Ezzor Province

Map #	Date	District/City	Brief Description
2	February 17	Hajin	A civilian guard of the city's autonomous administration of North and Eastern Syria (NES) building was killed by unidentified gunmen. The Internal Security Forces (Asayish) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reportedly imposed a security cordon at the entrance of the city.
3	February 20	Busayrah	A vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) attack was reported near a popular market. At least two civilians were killed and ten others were wounded.
4	February 20	al-Ashjarah	Islamic State (IS) reportedly killed four Iran-backed militiamen in an armed attack.

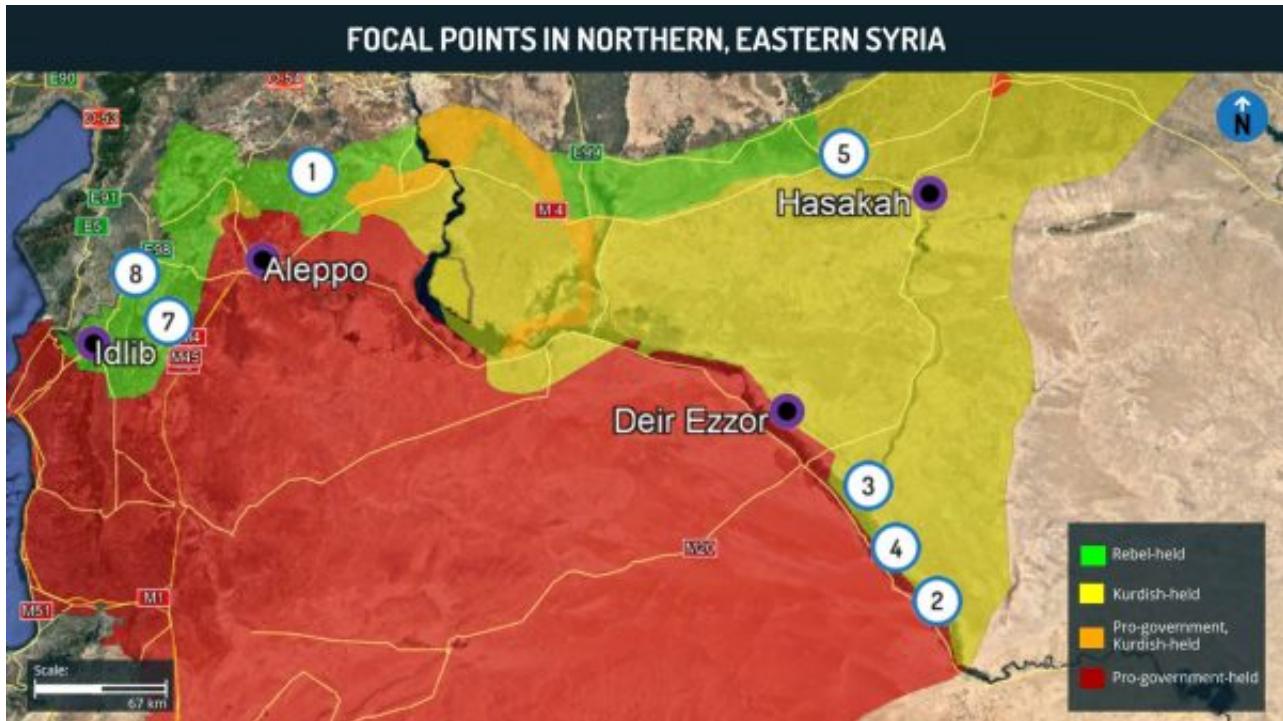
Hama Province

Date	District/City	Brief Description
February 18	Unspecified	Syria's official news agency citing a statement by the Russian MoD indicated that "the al-Nusra Front terrorist organization" conducted four attacks in the de-escalation zone.

Hasakah Province

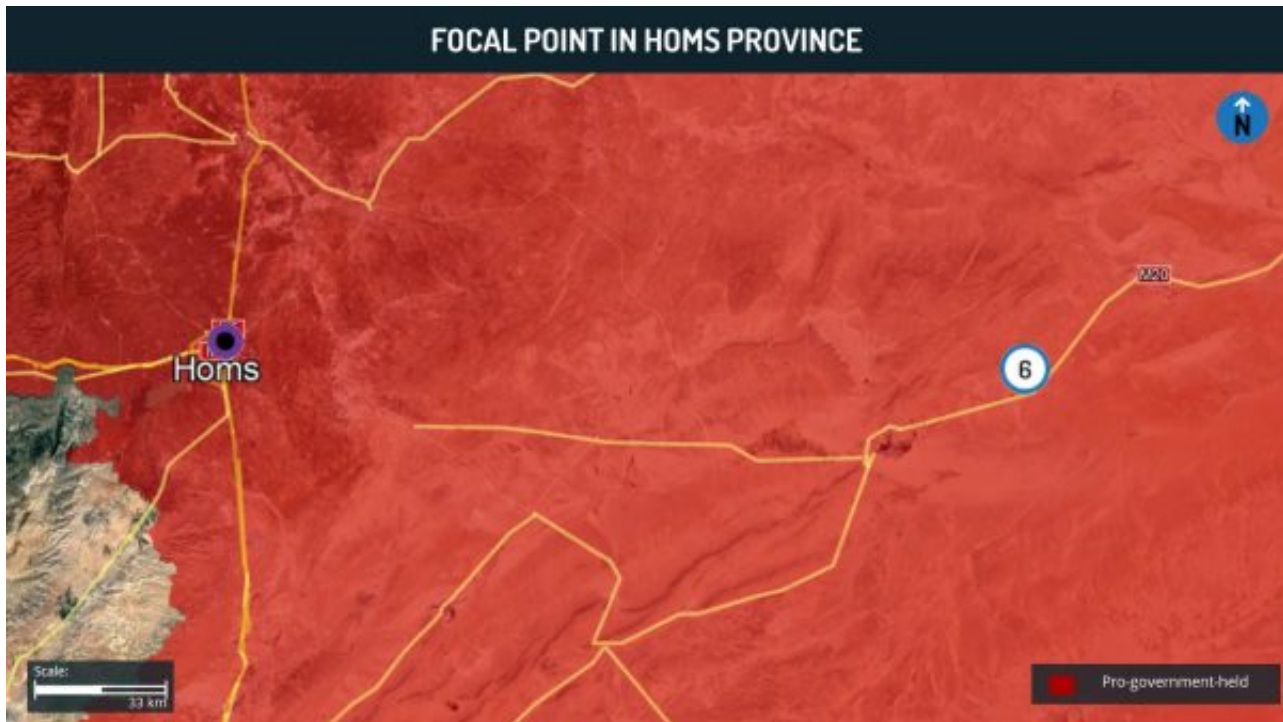
Map #	Date	District/City	Brief Description
5	February 20	Tal Tamr	According to

unconfirmed reports, four SNA Hamza Division fighters were killed when a landmine detonated on their vehicle.



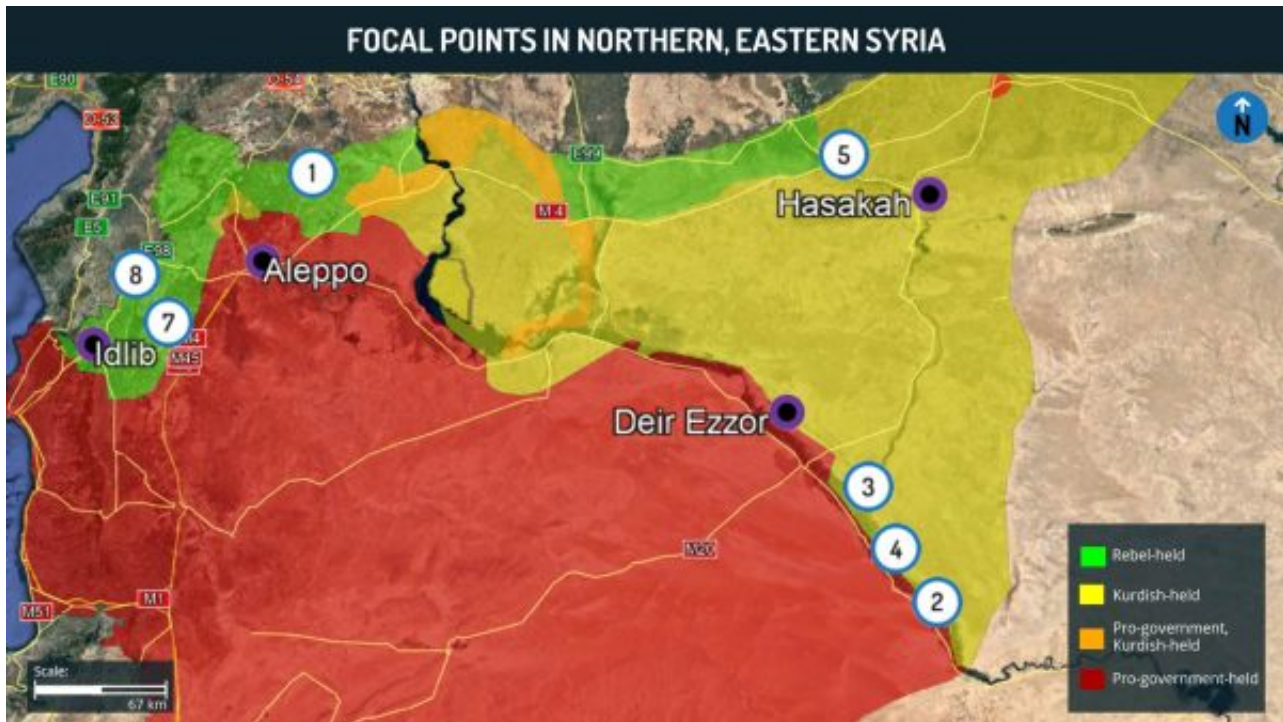
Homs Province

Map #	Date	District/City	Brief Description
6	February 21	Arak oil field	IS reportedly attacked Iran-backed militiamen near the Arak oil field.



Idlib Province

Map #	Date	District/City	Brief Description
	February 18	Unspecified	Syria's official news agency citing a statement by the Russian MoD indicated that "the al-Nusra Front terrorist organization" conducted 15 attacks in the de-escalation zone.
7	February 19	Idlib City	Hundreds of residents reportedly staged an anti-government demonstration under the slogan, "No legitimacy for Assad and his elections".
8	February 21	Salqin	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) forces reportedly arrested a prominent Hurras al-Din member. He is reportedly the son of a then al-Qaeda-affiliated HTS senior leader who was killed in a US-led Coalition airstrike in April 2016.



Latakia Province

Date
February 18

District/City
Unspecified

Brief Description
Syria’s official news agency citing a statement by the Russian MoD indicated that “the al-Nusra Front terrorist organization” conducted ten attacks in the de-escalation zone.

Political Developments

Date
February 18

Brief Description
The US Embassy in Syria announced that Aimee Cutrona was appointed as the acting special representative for Syria engagement.
The 15th trilateral summit on Syria occurred in Sochi, Russia between February 16-17. The foreign ministers from the three guarantor states of the Astana Peace Process, namely Russia, Turkey, and Iran, reportedly issued a statement reaffirming their commitment to promote an inclusive inter-Syrian dialogue between the warring factions, to cooperate to eliminate “separatist agendas that pose threat to the political unity and territorial integrity of Syria”, and to uphold the March 5, 2020 Turkey-Russia ceasefire agreement implemented in northwestern Syria.

February 18

February 18

The SDF rejected the statement issued by the

February 18

three guarantor states, namely Russia, Iran, and Turkey, after the 15th trilateral summit in Russia's Sochi, calling it "not consistent with the aspirations of the Syrian people".

Israel and Syria reportedly agreed to a Russia-brokered prisoner swap. An Israeli woman who crossed the border into Syria was released in exchange for two Syrian shepherds. Meanwhile, two other Syrian individuals currently imprisoned in Israel refused to be transferred to Syria as part of the prisoner swap deal. One of the individuals was imprisoned for incitement and the other for plotting an IED attack on a shopping mall on behalf of the Lebanon-based Hezbollah.

February 20

Israeli Prime Minister (PM), Benjamin Netanyahu, denied reports claiming that Israeli COVID-19 vaccines had been transferred to Syria as part of the aforementioned prisoner exchange deal. However, reports indicate that Israel purchased "Sputnik V" COVID-19 vaccines from Russia, according to an unconfirmed report, paying up to 1.2 million USD, which will thereafter be transferred to Syria.

Assessments & Forecast:

1. The prisoner swap agreement between Israel and Syria that took place on February 18 is highly notable as the two countries have been in a "state of war" for several decades and do not share diplomatic relations. While the Syrian prisoners in Israel refused to be transferred back to Syria, the signing of the deal itself highlights the willingness of both states to somewhat negotiate over humanitarian issues regarding their respective citizens and potentially indicates their willingness to cooperate through other avenues. With regards to the February 20 reports that Israel agreed to transfer COVID-19 vaccines to Syria as part of the deal, given that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu only indicated that "no Israeli vaccines are going to Syria" rather than denying the purchase of vaccines from Russia for Syria, it is possible that these reports are credible. Should these reports be confirmed, it would further render the prisoner exchange agreement highly notable. It would indicate the Syrian government's willingness and ability to capitalize on diplomatic points of contention with rival states in order to gain supplies of COVID-19 vaccines. This is particularly because the government lacks the economic infrastructure to independently acquire these doses for its population.
2. **FORECAST:** Regardless of whether these reports are confirmed, the speculation surrounding the agreement may inspire additional states to use their access to COVID-19 vaccines to gain concessions from the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad-led government. This is particularly with regards to states such as the US, which aims to bolster its own political influence in Syria vis-a-vis its regional rivals, namely Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Therefore, given the current pressures on Syria's economy and health infrastructure as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, further agreements involving the diplomatic use of COVID-19 vaccines may be recorded over the coming months.
3. The arrest of the prominent al-Qaeda-affiliated Hurras al-Din member in Idlib's Salqin on February 20 comes amid the HTS's long-standing efforts to cement its authority in Idlib Province and diminish the influence of rival groups. In this context, [on February 10](#), HTS reportedly arrested another Hurras al-Din militant in Idlib's Jisr al-Shughour. However, the recent arrest is notable due to the individual's reported prominent role within Hurras al-Din and the fact that he is the son of an individual who was reportedly a senior leader within HTS, then Jabhat al-Nusra, when the group

was affiliated with al-Qaeda. In this context, the latest arrest is likely aimed at disrupting Hurras al-Din's command-and-control structures and demoralizing the latter's fighters in order to further weaken its influence in the region. This is particularly given that Hurras al-Din has recently indicated its willingness and ability to broaden the scope of its operations in northeastern Syria and bolster its ideological influence in the region. This is evidenced by its [January 1](#) claim of an attack on a Russian base in Raqqa Province under the title of the "Battle of Asra". **FORECAST:** However, HTS's crackdown on Hurras al-Din's senior members has the potential to significantly elevate tensions between the jihadist factions. Given precedent, this may prompt localized clashes between the groups, the erection of checkpoints in the respective group's areas of influence, and mutual arrest raids over the coming weeks.

4. The killing of the Turkish-backed SNA officer in a reported suicide bombing near Aleppo's al-Rai on February 19 comes amid an overall uptick in asymmetric militant attacks in SNA-controlled territories in Aleppo Province over recent weeks. In this context, three VBIED attacks were recorded in Aleppo Province's Turkish-controlled territories between [January 28-31](#). However, the latest incident is notable due to the overall rarity of suicide bombings in Aleppo Province. The majority of asymmetric attacks targeting Turkish-backed forces in Aleppo Province are conducted by Kurdish militant groups, such as the Afrin Liberation Front (ALF), as they aim to compel the withdrawal of the former from the region. That said, suicide bombings are primarily conducted by IS militants. This is because they are willing to inflict casualties among civilians as part of their operations. Moreover, IS has periodically claimed attacks against Turkish-backed forces in their held-territories. **FORECAST:** Regardless of the perpetrator, this development highlights the persistent instability in Aleppo's Turkish-held territories and ability of local militants to carry out somewhat more sophisticated attacks. Given the interest of both Kurdish and IS militants in undermining the authority of the Turkish-backed forces in the region by promoting insecurity, further such asymmetric attacks targeting the latter are likely to be recorded in Aleppo Province's Turkish-held territories over the coming days and weeks.

Recommendations:

1. Avoid nonessential travel to Damascus at this time while maintaining heightened vigilance and adhering to standard security precautions regarding the threat of militant attacks and potential airstrikes. In addition, it is advised to avoid all travel to the vicinity of military installations due to the potential for Israeli Air Force (IAF) airstrikes.
2. Avoid all travel to outlying areas and cities including Homs, Hama, and Idlib due to persistent fighting and heightened risk of kidnapping targeting foreigners, particularly in combat zones and rebel-held areas.
3. Avoid all travel to the border area with Israel given the persistent risk of Israeli Air Force (IAF) and Israel Defense Forces (IDF) strikes targeting positions in the region.
4. Avoid all travel to the Kurdish-controlled areas in northern and eastern Syria, including Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, in light of the persistence of near-daily acts of militancy by jihadist militant operatives in these regions.
5. Those seeking to enter Syria are advised to confirm the status of their crossing points and final destinations, remaining aware of recent kidnapping incidents and the nature of military forces deployed in those areas.
6. Those remaining in Aleppo should minimize movement within the city and avoid all travel to the cities western and northwestern districts given the persistence of indiscriminate mutual artillery shelling between militant groups and government forces. An escalation of armed conflict remains possible.
7. Those continuing to operate in Damascus and Aleppo should ensure that contingency and emergency evacuation plans are updated due to the remaining potential for a deterioration of the security situation.
8. Avoid non-essential travel to government-controlled areas, including Latakia and Tartus, given the prevalence of significant anti-western sentiments, as well as a latent threat of militant attacks.
9. In case overland travel between Damascus and Latakia cannot be avoided, we currently

recommend crossing out of Syria via the Damascus-Beirut Highway and crossing back via the Coastal Road.

10. In the event that a security checkpoint is encountered, act respectfully and patiently, while cooperating fully with security personnel. Refrain from photographing security personnel or documenting events.
11. As a general rule, nationals from North America and Europe are advised to maintain a low profile throughout Syria given increased negative sentiment against various foreign governments among broad segments of the populace. In government-controlled areas, strictly refrain from discussing politically sensitive topics or making comments critical of government and political institutions, as this may lead to prosecution or arrest.