

Video: Drone Wars Open New Phase of Conflict in Syria

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Early on July 20, positions of the Syrian Army came under shelling by militants in the villages of Furu, Bahsa and Beit Hassno in the southern part of the Idlib de-escalation zone. In response, government forces struck positions of Hayat Tahrir al-Sam near Kansafra and surrounding areas.

Local tensions increased just a few days after a key infrastructure object of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib became the target of a drone attack. On July 18, three suicide drones hit facilities of the Watad Petroleum Company in the town of Saramada. This company is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda) and has a monopoly on the fuel market in Greater Idlib. It is deeply involved in oil trafficking with nearby Turkish-occupied areas in northern Aleppo and responsible for the illegal import of fuel from Turkey. A notable part of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's revenue is generated by Watad.

The HTS news agency Iba'a confirmed that the drones struck the headquarters of the company as well as its fuel market. However, the agency claimed that the strikes didn't result in any human or material losses.

A photo of one of the drones made before the attack shows an X-shaped wing design similar to that of the Hero family of loitering munitions produced by Israel's UVision. Syrian sources speculate that this drone may be a Russian, Syrian or Iranian reverse-engineered copy of the Israeli munition. At the same time, it is likely that the strike was conducted by Turkey itself, which is silently working to undermine the dominance of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in the region.

https://southfront.org/wp-content/uploads/video/IMR_20_07_20.mp4

Earlier in July, Idlib militants attacked a joint Turkish-Russian patrol on the M4 highway with a detonated car driven by a suicide bomber. It is hard to believe that such an attack could be possible without the coordination with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham that controls the frontline in that area. So, Ankara may opt to employ some additional measures to demonstrate its dissatisfaction with such actions of its al-Qaeda partners, that Turkish state media like to call 'moderate rebels'.

On July 19, an improvised explosive device (IED) exploded in the Turkish-occupied town of Afrin in northern Aleppo. The IED targeted a vehicle of the Sham Corps militant group wounding at least 3 of its members, including a field commander. On the same day, a car bomb attack in the town of Sajjo reportedly killed 5 people and injured dozens of others.

Turkish sources often blamed Kurdish rebels for these attacks. However, ISIS cells are also quite active in the Turkish-controlled part of Syria.

On July 16, a quadcopter armed with an explosive charge targeted a group of Russian and Syrian service members in the vicinity of the town of al-Darbasiyah in northeastern Syria. Three service members of the Russian Military Police and three Syrian personnel were injured. According to reports, the attack took place during a meeting at a local coordination post, which was initiated due to the increase of ceasefire violations by Turkish-led forces on the contact line in northeastern Syria.

Even if this attack was not initiated by Turkish forces themselves, but was a local initiative of Turkish proxies, such incidents do not contribute to the stability in Syria's northeast. The regular ceasefire violations and attacks create an explosive situation on the frontline, which runs the risk of turning into an open military confrontation between the Syrian Army and Turkish forces. The areas with a strong Turkish military presence and the US-controlled zone of al-Tanf remain the main sources of tensions and instability in Syria.

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