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## **Quarterly Review of Syrian Political and Military Dynamics July-September 2022**

### **Acknowledgments**

This report was authored by Hari Prasad, program associate; Penelope Abellera and John P Reppeto, Carter Center interns for fall 2022; Kirsten Butner, and Evan Leendertse, data analyst of the Carter Center’s Conflict Resolution Program. In addition, the report was made possible thanks to the comments and feedback of Carter Center Staff.

### **SYRIA SUMMARY**

This quarter, tensions between the Government of Syria (GoS) and former opposition armed groups led to two GoS-initiated sieges in Dara’a Governorate. In addition, local As-Sweida militias mobilized to dismantle two GoS-backed militias in the Governorate. There was a significant increase in conflict-related activity reported in northwest Syria: GoS armed forces increased the use of artillery shelling. The already dire humanitarian situation worsened as a major cholera outbreak was recorded throughout Syria. International isolation and sectoral sanctions are exacerbating the deterioration of vital infrastructure and decreasing the ability to respond to health crises. Further, punitive measures are a contributing factor to the crowding out of legitimate economic activity and shoring up an increasingly illicit economy and narco-trade, benefiting those in power. Further, civilians, especially children, continued to be impacted by the high volume of unexploded ordnance in Syria. At least seven children were killed by explosive remnants in one week in just one region of Syria alone.

From a security perspective:

- This quarter saw a significant reduction in Russian airstrikes on NW Syria. Despite Turkish rhetoric of a possible new invasion, the overall level of conflict between Turkey and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) decreased as Turkey relied on its drones to eliminate SDF figures.
- The SDF undertook a new operation in the Al-Hol camp to clear out ISIS cells. However, ISIS continues to threaten nearly all parties in Syria. Tensions between the various factions in the conflict have allowed ISIS to persist and move across multiple areas of control.
- GoS armed forces besieged the towns of Tafas and Jasim in Dara’a Governorate, demonstrating the continued instability in the South.

As security developments in Syria continue to threaten regional stability, the international community should focus on furthering the prospects for sustainable peace in Syria. As international attention is shifting toward other high-profile crises, continued violence and the extensive destruction and deterioration of vital infrastructure are putting the Syrian people under huge strain. Given the sustained political deadlock, it is essential to keep attention on Syria and adopt policies aimed at laying the ground for a long-term solution while reducing the suffering of the Syrian people, avoiding new outflows of refugees and disease outbreaks, and combatting violent extremism. The U.S. and European policies need to evolve beyond the current impasse to help prevent future crises, human suffering, partition, and destabilization of the region. Additionally, it is crucial to consider the need for early recovery interventions across Syria. This is vital for combatting the cholera outbreak and other crises that will inevitably emerge. Emergency aid cannot keep up with the damage and degeneration of vital infrastructure.

<b>Conflict Events in Syria (Q2 2022 vs Q3 2022)</b>			
<b>Region</b>	<b>2022 Q3</b>	<b>2022 Q2</b>	<b>Change (%)</b>
<b>Northwest</b>	<b>1932</b>	<b>1132</b>	<b>+ 800 (+70.67%)</b>
Aleppo Governorate	992	691	+301 (+43.56%)
Idlib Governorate	686	296	+390 (+131.76%)
Hama Governorate	165	110	+55 (+50%)
Lattakia Governorate	85	35	+ 50 (+142.86%)
Tartous Governorate	4	0	+4 (+400%)
<b>South &amp; Central</b>	<b>339</b>	<b>352</b>	<b>-13 (-3.69%)</b>
Homs Governorate	41	68	-27 (-39.70%)
Rural Damascus Governorate	58	57	+1 (+1.75%)
Damascus	11	5	+6 (+120%)
Quneitra Governorate	9	11	-2 (-18.18%)
Dara'a Governorate	202	194	+8 (+4.12%)
As-Sweida Governorate	18	17	+1 (+5.88%)
<b>Northeast</b>	<b>970</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>-10 (-1.02%)</b>
Al-Hassakah Governorate	448	375	+73 (+19.47%)
Ar-Raqqa Governorate	269	397	-128 (-32.49%)
Deir-ez-Zor Governorate	253	208	+45 (+21.63%)
<b>Syria Overall</b>	<b>3241</b>	<b>2464</b>	<b>+777 (+31.53%)</b>

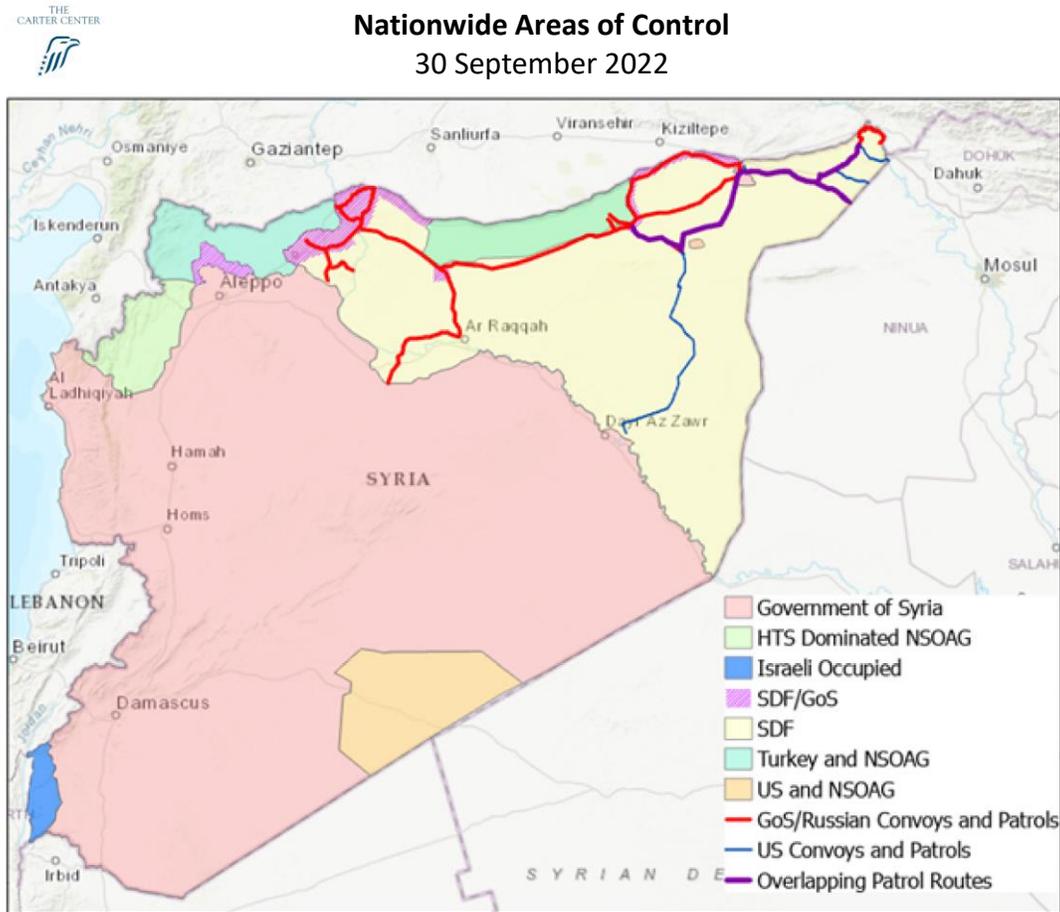


Figure 1: Dominant actors’ area of control and influence in Syria as of 30 September 2022. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1 on page 4.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 depicts areas of the dominant actors’ control and influence. While “control” is a relative term in a complex, dynamic conflict, territorial control is defined as an entity having power over use of force as well as civil/administrative functions in an area. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah maintain a presence in Syrian government-controlled territory. Non-state organized armed groups (NSOAG), including the Kurdish-dominated SDF and Turkish-backed opposition groups operate in areas not under GoS control. The area along the junction of the Syrian border with Iraq and Jordan is a 55km de-confliction zone, established by the U.S.-led coalition that also includes a number of aligned local armed groups. Patrols are also depicted in the map to show the presence of actors that may have influence in an area. This is particularly relevant as U.S. and Russian forces regularly patrol towns and routes in the northeast. While they do not control local administration or local forces, there is an assumption of a high degree of coordination with local de facto authorities. Data collected is by the publicly available project [ACLED](#).

## Territorial Holdings in Syria by Faction 30 September 2022

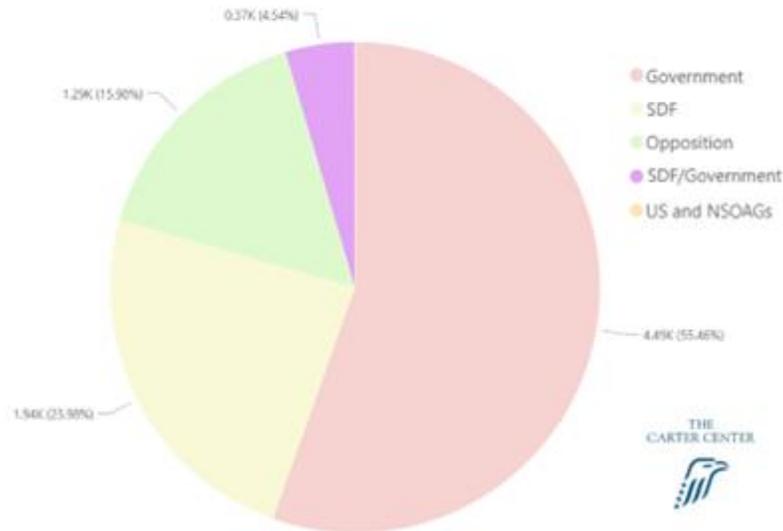


Figure 2: Breakdown of territorial holdings by party as of 30 September 2022. Note: US and NSOAGs control .037% of Syrian territory, represented as a slight sliver in the graph according to The Carter Center’s [Areas of Control Point Data](#).

## Political Developments

### Russian Losses in Ukraine Prompt Reshuffle in Syria

The Russian war effort in Ukraine has begun to impact Russia’s military and diplomatic posture in Syria tangibly. Russia seeks to strengthen its hand in Europe by quietly reducing its footprint and commitments in Syria. In the months since the start of its invasion, Russian armed forces have sustained considerable attrition in personnel and material. Reports have emerged this quarter suggesting the departure of Russian military assets for Ukraine and efforts to shape conditions for further redeployments. Open-source intelligence reportedly discovered the withdrawal of an S-300 air defense battery to Russia in August, while Ukrainian armed forces stated in September that they believed a Russian paratrooper regiment previously based in Syria was also transferred back to Russia.<sup>2</sup> As Russia has pulled out its combat troops, it has reportedly partially replaced these soldiers with Russian Military Police.<sup>3</sup>

Russia’s efforts to reduce its presence in Syria have also spurred diplomatic maneuvering with Iran and Turkey. Iran has taken advantage of the vacuum to expand its presence in

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-ships-s-300-air-defence-missiles-out-syria-satellite-images-2022-08-29/>, <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-pulling-paratroopers-syria-replenish-ranks-ukraine-1744673>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/19/world/middleeast/russia-syria-israel-ukraine.html>

eastern Syria.<sup>4</sup> Some reports suggest that Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and their Hezbollah allies may have taken up residence in vacated Russian bases.<sup>5</sup> The Iranian buildup of forces and infrastructure could solidify its leverage in Syria on the eve of a possible Turkish-Syrian rapprochement cultivated by Russia.

### **Negotiations between GoS and Turkey**

At Russian urging, top officials from the GoS and Turkey signaled their willingness to begin a dialogue and held unofficial meetings to facilitate the process. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu have repeatedly stated that Ankara has no preconditions for dialogue and believe it beneficial for the GoS and opposition to reconcile.<sup>6</sup> Erdogan has voiced his desire to meet with Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. However, no such rendezvous is scheduled yet.<sup>7</sup> Several back-channel meetings between the two countries' officials have taken place. Most recently, the intelligence chiefs of both countries held a series of meetings in Damascus in August and September. Key discussions reportedly included the safe return of Syrian refugees and building a road map for further meetings.<sup>8</sup> The diplomatic efforts have been encouraged by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who urged Erdogan to restore ties with the GoS on the sidelines of an August meeting in Sochi.<sup>9</sup> Russian officials have also offered support to high-level meetings between GoS and Turkey.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, the outreach to the GoS coincides with growing Turkish public desire to see the return of Syrian refugees,<sup>11</sup> as well as calls by Turkish officials who believe reconciliation can put pressure on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>12</sup>

Despite Russian efforts, a complete thaw between the two neighbors faces several obstacles. Turkey continues to support its Syrian National Army (SNA) partners in northern Syria. Foreign Minister Cavusoglu recently met with Syrian opposition leaders to reassure them of Turkey's commitment to UNSC Resolution 2254.<sup>13</sup> A Syrian MP who heads the parliament's international affairs committee said that withdrawing Turkish troops and their allies is a precondition for normalizing relations.<sup>14</sup> There is also the issue of the Syrian Democratic

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/carpet-weaving-east-euphrates-iranian-proxy-groups-expand-their-influence-syrias>

<sup>5</sup> <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2022-september-28/>,

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-does-not-have-preconditions-dialogue-with-syria-foreign-minister-2022-08-23/> ; <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/erdogan-says-can-never-rule-out-dialogue-syria-regime>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-wanted-meet-syrias-assad-turkish-media-2022-09-16/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/turkey-and-syria-step-contact-sign-russian-push>

<sup>9</sup> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/turkey-cusp-restoring-ties-syrias-assad>,  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-with-russian-nudge-turkey-syria-step-up-contacts-2022-09-15/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/605325>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-erdogan-eyes-reset-with-syria/6712988.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/turkey-grapples-policy-change-syria>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/in-syria-cutting-and-running-is-not-on-the-cards-for-turkey/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://iz.ru/1393944/2022-09-12/siriia-vyrazila-gotovnost-vosstanovit-otnosheniia-s-turtciei>

Forces, which Turkey views as a part of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which cooperates alongside GoS troops along likely lines of a potential Turkish incursion. With next year's Turkish presidential elections looming and his AKP party in need of foreign policy successes, Erdogan may face a choice of whether to pursue further diplomacy with Damascus or potentially launch a new military operation into the country.

## Cholera

A growing cholera outbreak threatens to engulf all of Syria and spread to the region. Initially declared on 10 September, the outbreak originating in the country's north has reached over 39,000 suspected cases and killed 60 people, according to an October 9<sup>th</sup> report by WHO.<sup>15</sup> Public health officials confirmed the presence of cholera in 13 of Syria's 14 governorates and recorded cases in Lebanon. The outbreak comes during a severe water crisis due to drought and the water infrastructure's destruction over years of conflict and international isolation.<sup>16</sup> According to UNICEF, 47% of the country now relies on "alternative or unsafe water sources."<sup>17</sup> The International Rescue Committee points to groups selling untreated water from the Euphrates River—contaminated with raw sewage and now the cholera bacteria—to water-impooverished communities as a principal driver of the disease's recent spread.<sup>18</sup>

Public health officials worry that cases could surge and devastate Syria's already fragile humanitarian situation. Most recorded cases occurred in the Aleppo, Deir-*ez-Zor*, and Ar-Raqqa Governorates but have spread rapidly throughout the country over the past month.<sup>19</sup> While the harsh conditions in Syria make it susceptible to outbreaks, NGOs also highlighted the particular vulnerability of the country's dense internally displaced person camps, where disease can spread rapidly.<sup>20</sup> Similar conditions exist in neighboring Lebanon, which is suffering its own economic collapse and humanitarian issues. The national healthcare systems of Syria and Lebanon are already weak, and an explosion of cases would only produce further strain, risking a collapse.

From this perspective, reconsidering the need for early recovery interventions across Syria is vital for combatting the cholera outbreak and other such crises in the future. International NGOs such as WHO and UNICEF are monitoring the spread of cholera and filling gaps in

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<sup>15</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/whole-syria-cholera-outbreak-situation-report-no2-issued-08-october-2022>

<sup>16</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-cholera-outbreak-emergency-plan-action-epoa-dref-operation-ndeg-mdrsy008>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/07/syria-lebanon-cholera-outbreak-water/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/dirty-water-scram-linked-syrias-deadly-cholera-outbreak/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/whole-syria-cholera-outbreak-situation-report-no2-issued-08-october-2022>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/cholera-syria-lebanon-outbreak-healthcare-b2200548.html>

logistics, training, and treatment capacity, but emergency aid cannot keep up with the damage and degeneration of vital water infrastructure.<sup>21</sup>

## Captagon Trade Surges

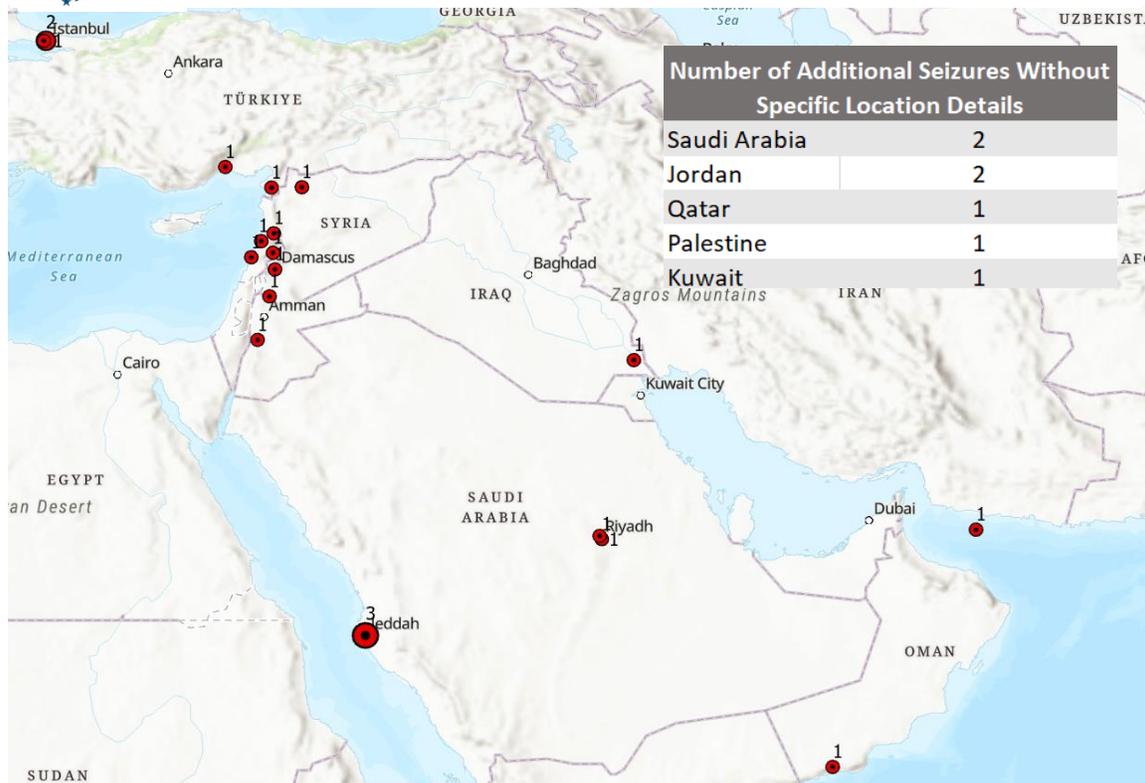
The production and trafficking of captagon (an amphetamine valued for its battlefield applications and a recreational drug) have emerged as an important dynamic in Syria and the region, thanks in part to new scholarship on the trade and surging reports of large busts in the Middle East and elsewhere. The captagon trade is now estimated to be worth several billion USD and is heavily linked to elements of the GoS, armed forces, and criminal organizations.<sup>22</sup> Syria’s illicit drug exports now outpace its entire legal economy, allowing it to skirt sanctions and acquire foreign currency.<sup>23</sup> Data also suggests that trade is rapidly growing.<sup>24</sup>

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## Captagon Seizures

1 July- 30 September 2022



<sup>21</sup>

[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/wos\\_cholera\\_outbreak\\_situation\\_report\\_no.4.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/wos_cholera_outbreak_situation_report_no.4.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/world/middleeast/syria-drugs-captagon-assad.html>

<sup>23</sup> [On Syria’s Ruins, a Drug Empire Flourishes - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/world/middleeast/syria-drugs-captagon-assad.html)

<sup>24</sup> <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-captagon-problem-in-saudi-arabia-and-other-gulf-states/>

*Figure 3: Map of significant captagon seizures in the Middle East between July-September 2022. The largest bubble represents three seizures. Data might not be exhaustive. Data from The Carter Center.*

Captagon in Syria predates the conflict, but the conflict and unilateral punitive measures against Syria resulted in a boom as state and non-state actors seized upon it as an alternative income source in the face of shrinking legitimate markets. While early expansion has been linked to the drug's use on the frontlines to keep fighters alert, the industrial production and trafficking now primarily target recreational users in the Levant and Gulf states.<sup>25</sup> Massive busts valued in the millions of USD occur almost weekly, revealing increasingly novel smuggling methods.<sup>26</sup> Maritime shipments have been traced back to regime-controlled ports such as Latakia, but as import restrictions tightened in transit countries such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, captagon shipments have been rerouted to Europe and Southeast Asia to obscure their Syrian origins.<sup>27</sup> In southern Syria, a loosely linked cartel of ex-rebels, regime military and intelligence units, and Iranian-linked groups dominate the land-based smuggling routes into Jordan.<sup>28</sup>

## Military Dynamics

### Conflict Between the Government of Syria and the Armed Opposition

Violent incidents between GoS armed forces and their allies against armed opposition groups escalated dramatically this quarter, especially in the form of shelling and clashes. In the third quarter of 2022, ACLED recorded 1,412 conflict events between these actors. This is a major increase (+225%) from the 434 conflicts recorded in Q2. Russian-initiated events, all aerial bombardments, decreased from 25 last quarter to 9 this quarter – all at the end of September.

<sup>25</sup> <https://newlinesinstitute.org/power-vacuums-program/special-captagon-trade-project/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/6/syria-seizes-hummus-bowls-made-out-of-captagon>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/world/middleeast/syria-drugs-captagon-assad.html> , <https://newlinesinstitute.org/terrorism/the-captagon-threat-a-profile-of-illicit-trade-consumption-and-regional-realities/> <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/syrian-drug-smuggling-the-assad-regime-would-not-survive-loss-of-captagon-revenues-a-b4302356-e562-4088-95a1-45d557a3952a>

<sup>28</sup> <https://coar-global.org/2022/07/30/smugglers-and-security-agents-fragmentation-and-decentralisation-in-southern-syrias-captagon-networks/>



## Conflict between GoS and Opposition

1 July- 30 September 2022

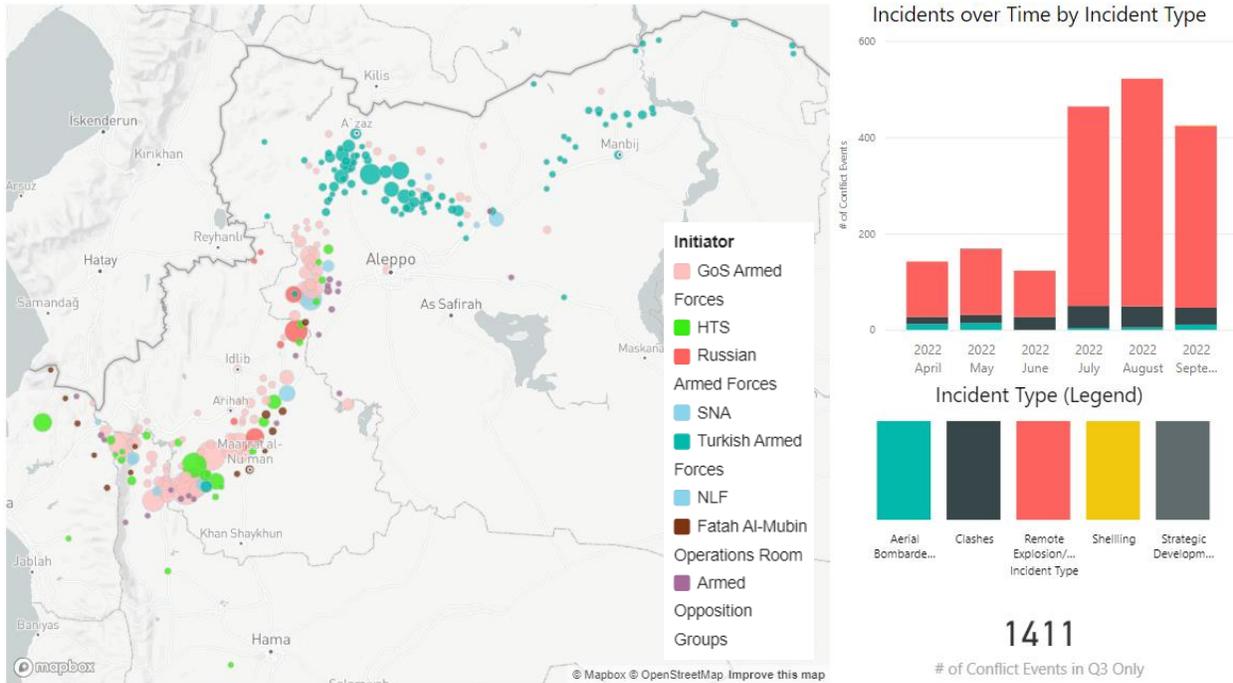


Figure 4: Conflict between GoS armed forces and armed opposition groups in northwest Syria from July through September 2022. The largest bubble represents 58 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Despite the major increase in recorded conflict events, there were no new attempts to launch a major military operation or changing of territory. Most of the recorded conflict events involved artillery shelling, with the GoS armed forces being involved in a total of 708 out of 1265 shelling events. Despite this massive increase, there is little indication that the underlying dynamics between the GoS and the opposition have changed. Instead, the shelling seems to account for the lack of military action and to wear down their opponents on the frontlines.

### SDF-Turkey Clashes

ACLED recorded 270 conflict events this quarter between various Kurdish armed groups and Turkish armed forces or Turkish-backed opposition groups. This is a decrease of 30% compared to last quarter. The decrease occurred despite rhetoric and concerns about a new Turkish incursion into northern Syria. Notably, the number of Turkish drone strikes stayed largely the same (28 events in Q2 and 29 in Q3). This suggests that while a new military

operation is unlikely, Turkey is increasingly leaning toward using drones to accomplish its tactical objectives.

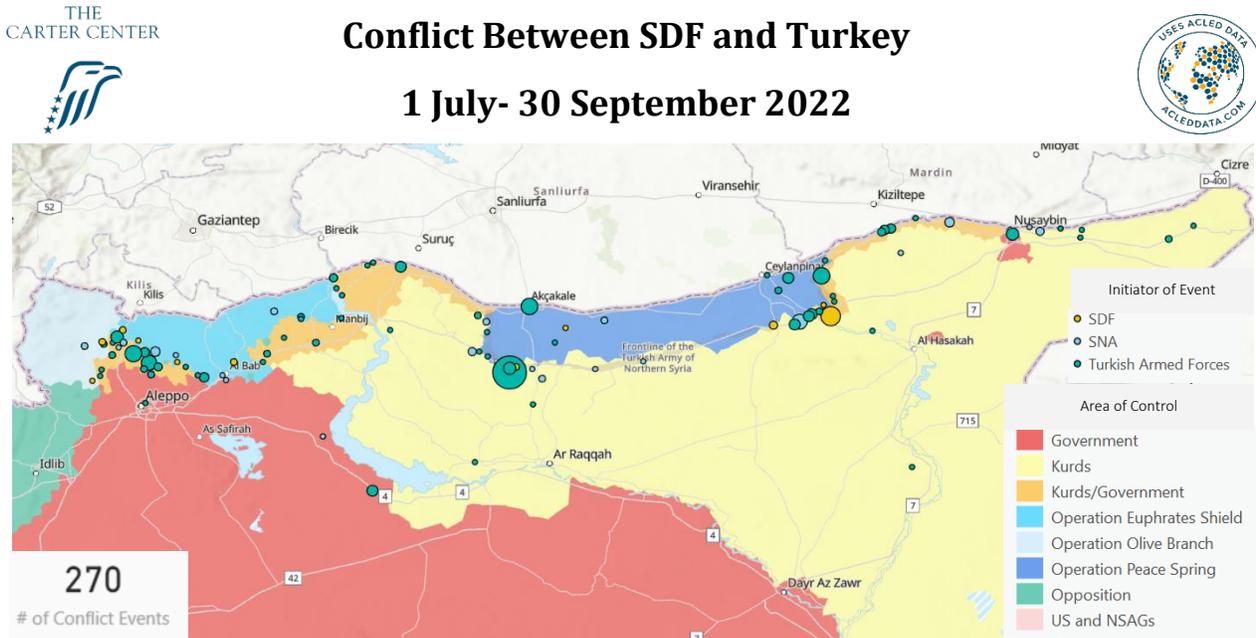


Figure 5: Conflict between Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups, the SDF, and the SNA from July through September 2022. The largest bubble represents 21 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Since May, Turkey regularly threatened additional ground operations against SDF-controlled areas in Tal-Rifaat, Kobani, and Manbij but instead expanded its drone campaign.<sup>29</sup> Ankara’s focus on air operations allows it to maintain pressure on the SDF (a major priority in domestic Turkish politics) while avoiding the consequences of a conventional ground assault.

However, strikes were no longer confined to the frontlines where the vast majority of clashes and shelling events occur; in July and August, Turkish drones struck targets in the major urban hubs controlled by the SDF, killing opponents (and civilians) in Manbij, Kobani, Tell Abyad, Ar-Raqqa, Qamishli, Tell Tamer, and Al-Hassakah.<sup>30</sup> Notably, victims of the strikes included officials of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which the SDF and its dominant People’s Defense Units (YPG) militia have sought to distance themselves from, but Turkey insists they are the same.

<sup>29</sup> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/drone-strikes-increase-syria-turkey-invasion-looms>

<sup>30</sup> [Turkey hunts SDF forces in ‘indirect war’ ahead of anticipated military operation - Syria Direct](#)

## Attacks against Former Opposition Fighters and GoS Armed Forces in Dara’a Governorate

In 2018, the GoS armed forces and its allies launched Operation Basalt, which ended with the GoS reconquering Dara’a Governorate and the rest of southern Syria. As part of the operation, the GoS and Russia allowed some opposition fighters to reconcile, deferring their military conscription in exchange for turning over their heavy weapons. As a result, thousands of fighters formerly associated with the armed opposition were allowed to remain active, albeit theoretically accepting GoS rule over the governorate. However, tensions between the former opposition and the GoS armed forces persist, leading to a wide range of assassinations by unidentified actors. Although the perpetrators are unknown, GoS officials and the former opposition representatives blame each other for the attacks. During the reporting period, there was a sharp increase of unidentified attackers targeting former opposition fighters and GoS soldiers in southern Syria in at least 119 incidents. One hundred three attacks (86%) took place in Dara’a Governorate. In the past, this has led to prolonged violence and sieges of cities by GoS armed forces, particularly in Dara’a Governorate.

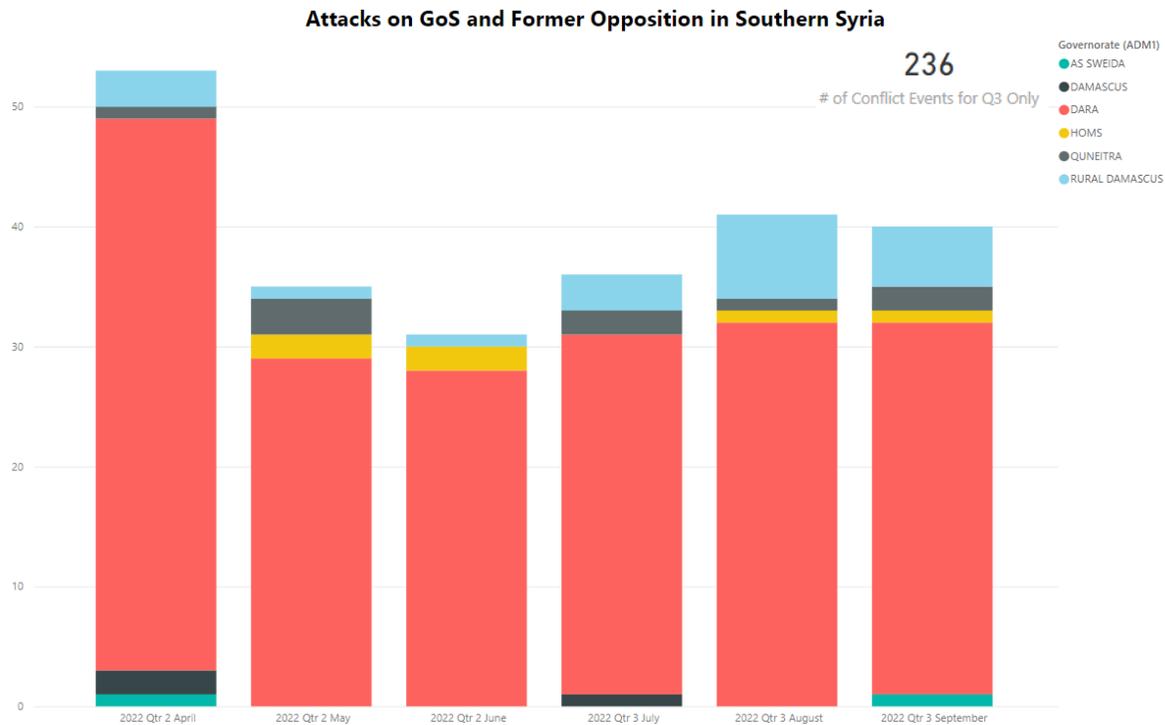


Figure 6: Attacks against former opposition fighters and GoS armed forces in southern Syria between April -September 2022. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

GoS armed forces besieged the city of Tafas in Dara’a Governorate. This was the first extended siege of a city since the 2021 siege of the Dara’a Al-Balad neighborhood in Dara’a

city, which lasted for months and saw GoS regain additional power over the former opposition. The blockade of Tafas began on 27 July, when the GoS demanded the expulsion of several prominent former opposition figures. GoS armed forces and local fighters occasionally clashed during the siege, with GoS also shelling the city.<sup>31</sup> On 13 August, local representatives from Tafas and the GoS Military Security head came to an agreement in which the wanted individuals would be expelled, and the GoS would conduct some limited raids into parts of the city. In return, GoS armed forces ended the siege of Tafas.<sup>32</sup>

However, tensions erupted in the town of Jasim over the high number of killings in the area. On 31 August, GoS armed forces moved into the outskirts of Jasim city on the pretext of wanting to remove ISIS cells in the city.<sup>33</sup> During this time, farmers from Jasim were prevented from accessing their agricultural fields.<sup>34</sup> Negotiations to end the siege largely failed.<sup>35</sup> On 23 September, GoS armed forces conducted limited raids into the city and clashed with local forces.<sup>36</sup> As of 30 September, the blockade remains in place and represents a familiar pattern of escalation in Dara'a Governorate.

### **Confrontations in As-Sweida**

GoS and Iranian-backed militias have often been accused of kidnapping local civilians for extortion. The problem remains a significant source of tension within As-Sweida Governorate, which at times has led to major clashes inside the Governorate. Several GoS-backed militias are accused of regularly kidnapping individuals and playing a major role in the illicit economy.

At the end of July, the GoS Military Security-backed militia, the Falhout Group, kidnapped a civilian from the town of Shahba, As-Sweida Governorate.<sup>37</sup> The kidnapping led residents to demonstrate and block the Damascus-As-Sweida road for three days.<sup>38</sup> The fallout prompted the Falhout Group to return the citizen temporarily but then recaptured him and several students from the town.<sup>39</sup> Following this event, prominent As-Sweida militias attacked Falhout-held checkpoints in the Shabha and besieged their headquarters in Attil.<sup>40</sup> These clashes effectively eliminated most of the Falhout Group fighters and led to several kidnapped victims being freed.<sup>41</sup> At the time of writing, the leader of the Falhout Group remains at large.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/597958>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/598258>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/601998>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/601998>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.horanfree.com/?p=12426>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.horanfree.com/?p=12521>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/592705>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/592899>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/593367>

<sup>40</sup> <https://suwayda24.com/?p=19611>, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/593387>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/593616>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/593856>

These attacks on GoS Military Security militias continued. Between 11-12 August, many local As-Sweida militias targeted the Fahd Forces in Qanawat.<sup>43</sup> The siege on Qanawat ended with the leader of the Fahd Forces fleeing and the militia being disbanded. Additional reports of local As-Sweida militias forcibly disbanding GoS-backed groups in the towns of Mazraa and Salkhad.<sup>44</sup> Russian officials have met with As-Sweida representatives to try and quell tensions, with the representatives demanding the expulsion of Iranian-backed groups, ending conscription, releasing prisoners, and several other stipulations.<sup>45</sup> This is yet another dynamic that is far from being solved.

## Israel-Iran Rivalry in Syria

To combat Iran's presence and prevent the transfer of weaponry to Hezbollah, Israel has often conducted airstrikes against GoS and Iranian-backed militias across Syria.<sup>46</sup> In 2021, the pace of Israeli airstrikes increased, with at least 56 conflict events recorded in 2021 alone. Generally, Israel has refrained from commenting on its operations in Syria, although it has confirmed that it has conducted hundreds of airstrikes in the country.<sup>47</sup> Israel has sometimes cooperated with the United States in carrying out the airstrikes.<sup>48</sup> Even Russia, which has criticized Israel's airstrikes, has largely allowed Israel to conduct them without interference.<sup>49</sup>

However, Israel's increased airstrikes have coincided with the increased Iranian-US conflict in Syria in 2022. Since January 2021, there have been at least 43 reported conflict events involving pro-Iranian militias or US armed forces attacking each other. Thirty-one of these conflict events occurred in 2022, with 19 occurring during the third quarter of 2022. Some reports indicated that Iran and its allies began to strike US armed forces in Syria in response to Israeli airstrikes.<sup>50</sup> In the past, the US and Iran have tried to avoid a wider escalation involving their forces or allies across the Middle East. However, with increasing Israeli-Iranian tensions, widespread protests in Iran, and continued instability in the Middle East, tensions could lead to further destabilization in Syria.

## The Battle Against ISIS

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/597934>, <https://suwayda24.com/?p=19710>

<sup>44</sup> <https://suwayda24.com/?p=19723>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/596810>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/26/analysis-increased-israel-iran-confrontations-risk-war>

<sup>47</sup> <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2022/09/19/Israeli-troops-cross-into-Syria-wounding-one-of-four-suspects->

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-war-us-secretly-reviews-israel-air-strikes-against-iran-targets>, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-secretly-reviews-israels-plans-for-strikes-against-iranian-targets-in-syria-11655405162>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/lavrov-condemns-dangerous-israeli-strikes-in-syria-as-relations-with-russia-sour/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/26/world/middleeast/iran-backed-syria-united-states.html>

During the third quarter of 2022, there was a reduction in overall conflict events involving the Islamic State, as recorded by ACLED. There were 144 ISIS-related conflict events compared to 179 in the last quarter. This is the second consecutive quarter where ISIS-related conflict events decreased, following the ISIS prison break attempt in Al-Hassakah city in January 2022. However, 61 ISIS-related conflict events were reported in September, compared to 34 in July, suggesting that ISIS activity could continue to rise if left unchecked. Analysts have argued that without continual military action against ISIS, the group will regroup.<sup>51</sup>

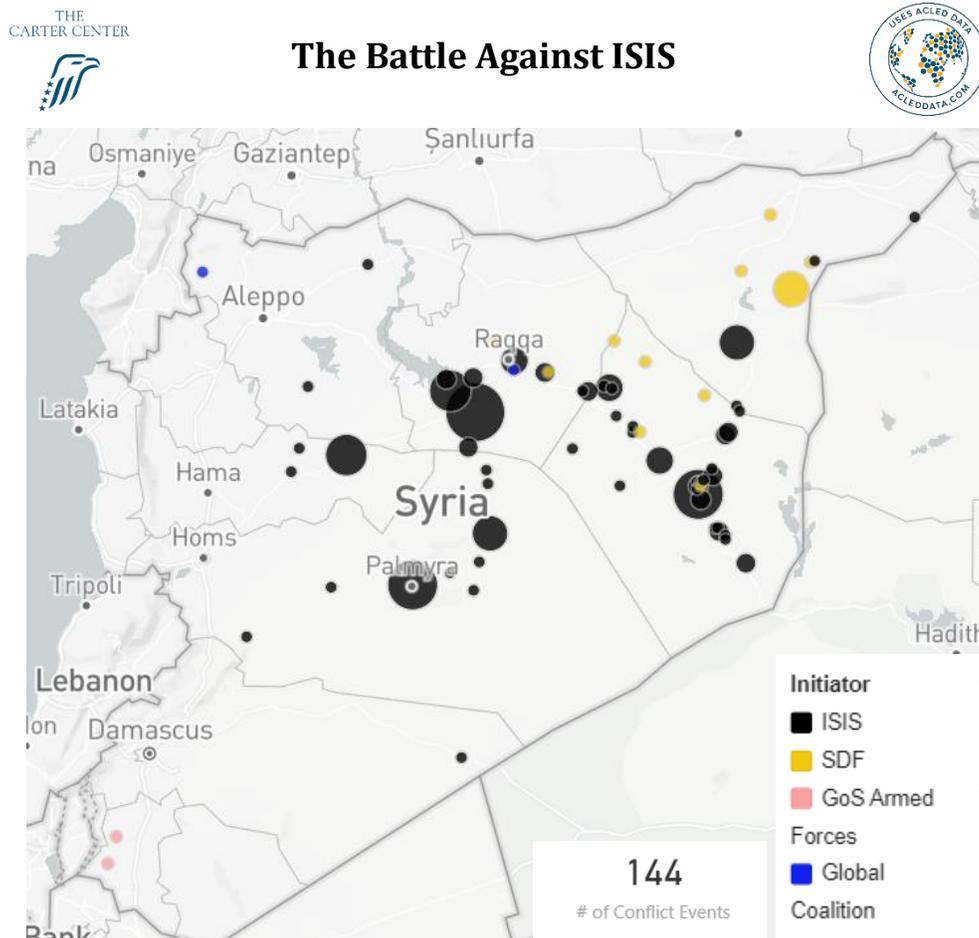


Figure 7: Incidents involving ISIS between July-September 2022. The largest bubble represents 25 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Despite the relative lull of large-scale ISIS attacks during the reporting period, ISIS still presents a long-term challenge to all parties. The SDF launched a new anti-ISIS campaign in August 2022 in the Al-Hol camp following increased violence. This was the second such

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/isis-redux-central-syria-insurgency-september-2022>

campaign in two years, but it has largely failed to solve the issue of violence in the camp.<sup>52</sup> ISIS movement has increased in the Badia desert region of Syria, with experts believing that the insurgency could increase there or lead to additional ISIS attacks in northeast Syria.<sup>53</sup> ISIS continues to threaten nearly all parties in Syria, but tensions between the various factions in the Syrian conflict have allowed ISIS to fester and move across the multiple areas of control.<sup>54</sup>

## Unexploded Ordnance in Syria

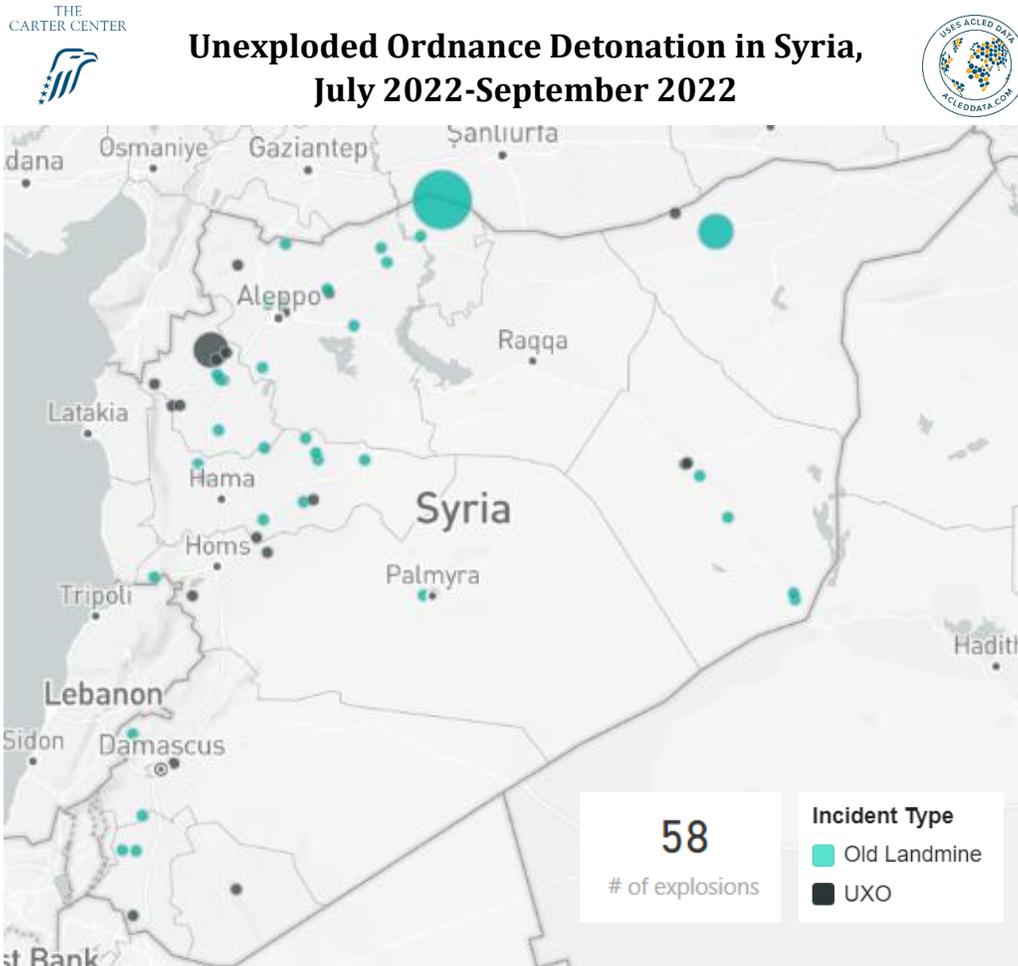


Figure 8: Detonations of old landmines and unexploded ordnance in Syria since July-September 2022. The largest bubble represents 3 detonation events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

<sup>52</sup> <https://asiatimes.com/2022/10/women-are-fueling-isis-comeback/>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/isis-redux-central-syria-insurgency-september-2022>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/containing-resilient-isis-central-and-north>

Unexploded ordnance (UXO) remains an important issue in Syria. The impact of UXO and leftover landmines continue to impact the day-to-day lives of civilians. This quarter, there were 58 reported incidents of civilians or others being killed by old landmines and other UXO. Children, in particular, have been vulnerable to UXOs and landmines. In the first week of September 2022, seven children in northwest Syria were killed due to UXO explosions.<sup>55</sup> While mine action groups have continued to remove old landmines and UXOs, this is complicated by the ongoing conflict in Syria and the sanction regime, which leads to de-risking and over-compliance, whereby key equipment for demining is held up at international ports. Despite the conflict being largely frozen, Syria still records the world's second-highest use of explosive munitions, only beaten by the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>56</sup> Explosive munition use killed an estimated 157 civilians in Syria in July 2022. The continued use inevitably leaves more UXO behind, compounding an already dire problem. This impact will only continue as UXOs build up from the high explosive weapon usage.

*The Carter Center released a report mapping unexploded ordnance in Syria between December 2012 – May 2021, which can be viewed in [StoryMaps](#) here or in [PDF](#) form here.*

## Conclusion

The third quarter of 2022 demonstrates the continuing lethality of the Syrian conflict. The sieges and instability of southern Syria, the continuous bombardment of northwest Syria, and Turkish-SDF tensions continue to pose a deadly threat to Syria's civilians. Importantly, the destruction of Syria and continuing conflict have allowed serious criminal and health issues to fester and grow. Captagon trade spread to large parts of the Middle East, causing a spike in addiction in some countries. The destruction of Syria's healthcare system and public infrastructure has allowed cholera to spread and has already begun to affect neighboring countries. ISIS continues to be active in central and northeast Syria, challenging the stabilization and recovery efforts in territories formerly under their control. Finally, unexploded ordnance plays a deadly role in the conflict, with children being especially vulnerable. The last quarter continues to demonstrate the urgency of the crisis and that failure to address pressing needs and a political solution in Syria has regional and international impact. Thus, a political process remains of utmost importance as the international community should grapple with ending the Syrian war.

For earlier conflict summaries, please click [here](#). For an interactive map of historical areas of control in Syria, please click [here](#).

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<sup>55</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-seven-children-killed-landmines-two-days>

<sup>56</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/1576b779-c155-4854-99ed-6efd1d9c24ab/EWM%20Monthly%20Bulletin%20web%20July%202022%20v2.pdf>