



SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Violence continued between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces and armed opposition groups in northwest Syria. The Turkish-backed opposition's Syrian National Army (SNA) faced internal splits. Conflict between Turkish armed forces and Kurdish armed groups escalated in northern Syria.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Fighting between the former opposition and GoS armed forces escalated with the siege of Dara'a al-Balad. A new political party in As-Sweida Governorate caused tensions with GoS.
- **NORTHEAST** | GoS armed forces and the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued operations against ISIS.

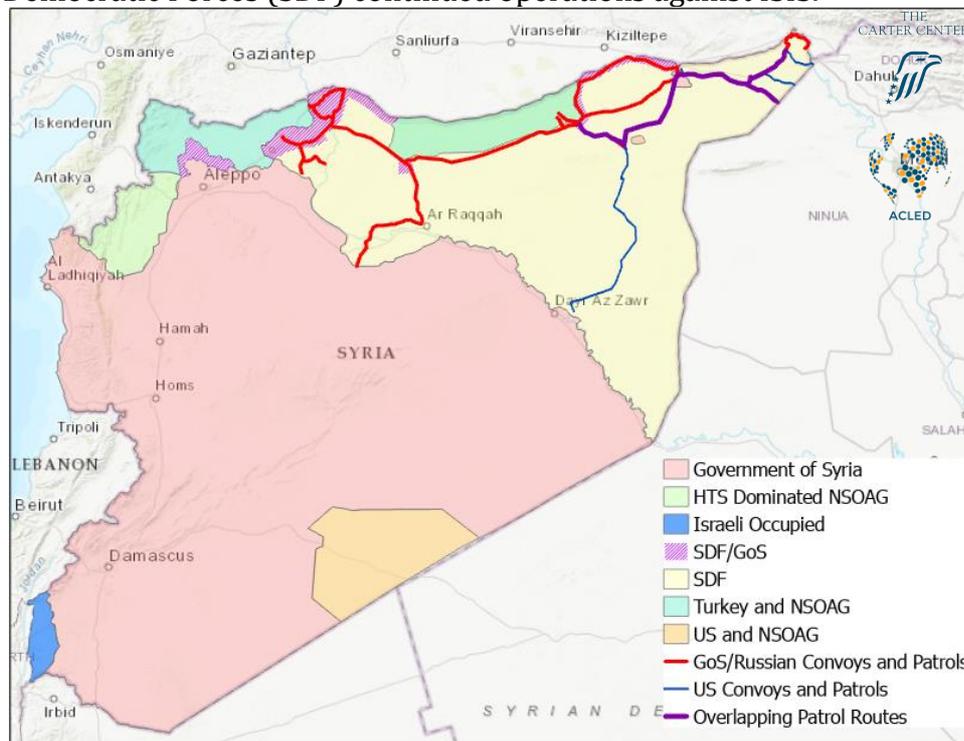


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 30 September 2021.-NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1.

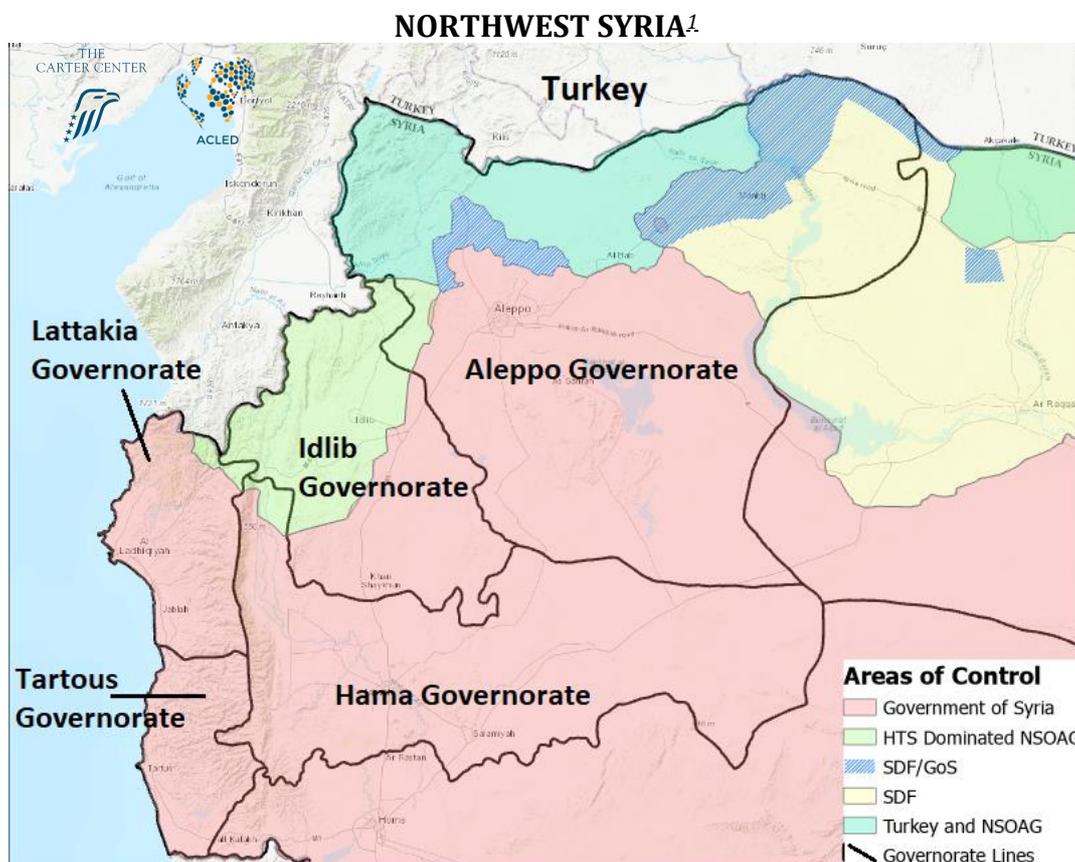


Figure 2: Areas of control in northwest Syria. Data from The Carter Center and [ACLEd](#).

During the third quarter of 2021, 1,322 conflict events were recorded in northwest Syria, a slight increase from the previous quarter (1,264). However, the number of conflict events reported in Idlib Governorate decreased, accounting for 461 reported conflict events compared to 540 during the previous quarter. At the same time, violence levels increased in Aleppo Governorate, where 581 conflict events were observed compared to 438 during the previous quarter. New this quarter was an escalation in combat between armed opposition groups and the Government of Syria (GoS).

As with previous quarters, Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups continued to battle against the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Aleppo Governorate.

¹ 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](#).

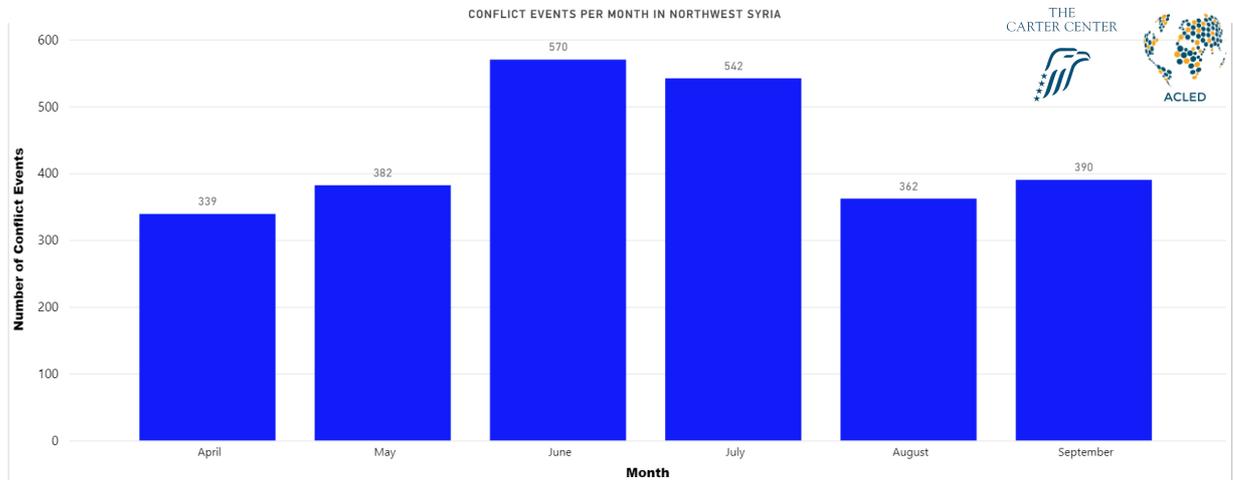


Figure 3: Comparison of conflict events in northwest Syria between 1 April to 30 September 2021. Data from The Carter Center and [ACLED](#).

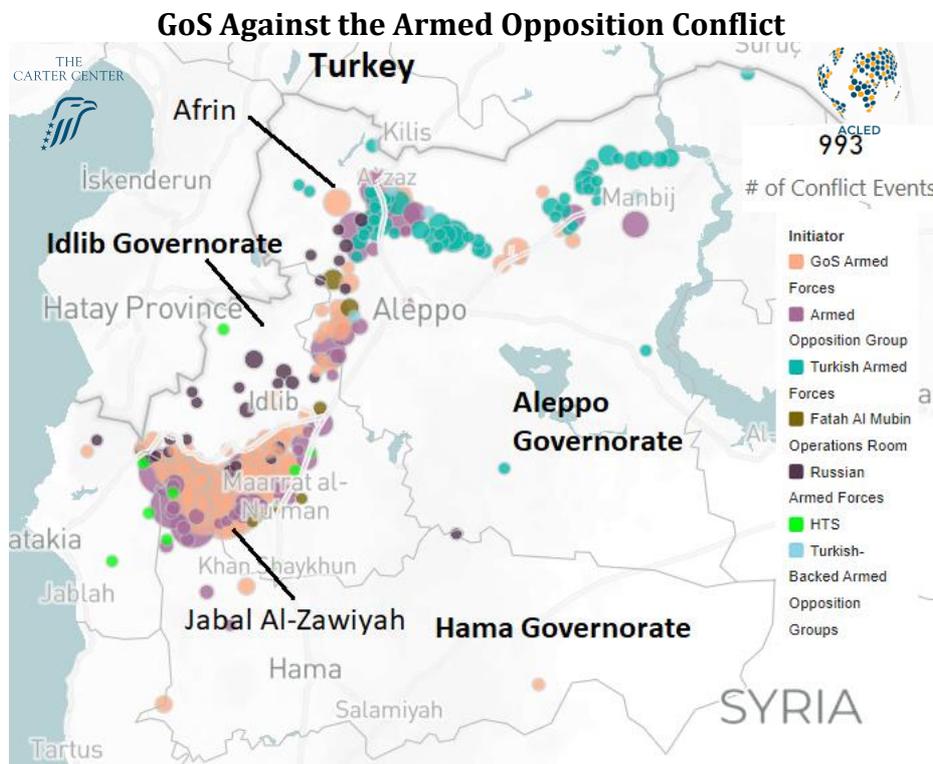


Figure 4: Conflict between GoS armed forces and armed opposition groups in northwest Syria from July to September 2021. Data from The Carter Center and [ACLED](#).

Due to the the 5 March 2020 ceasefire between Russia and Turkey, frontlines between the GoS armed forces and their allies on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other have remained stable. Despite the absence of military offensives, conflict between the two sides continued, with violence primarily concentrated in the Jabal al-Zawiyah region, Idlib Governorate. During the reporting period, there were three distinct trends in the fighting between the GoS armed forces and armed opposition groups. First, violence decreased during August 2021, with the month accounting for 267 reported conflict events within a total of 997 events for the quarter. The decrease in violence in August was possibly due to GoS armed forces redeploying to Syria’s south following an escalation in Dara’a Governorate (see south & central Syria). Second, Russia had an increased

role in shelling exchanges during September and airstrikes against Turkish-backed armed opposition groups as well as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).² Third, violence escalated around the frontlines in Aleppo Governorate mostly between the Turkish-backed armed opposition and the primarily Kurdish SDF – the latter shares territory with GoS armed forces.

The escalation of Russian airstrikes in Turkish-held territory in Aleppo Governorate mostly occurred in September, in the leadup to the 29 September summit between Turkish President Erdogan and Russian President Putin.³ The escalation of violence led to renewed concerns that a new GoS-led military offensive would be launched to secure the strategic M4 highway in Idlib Governorate.⁴ The escalation of violence, concerns over a possible new military offensive, and attacks against refugee camps in Aleppo and Idlib Governorates led to a new wave of civilian displacement in northwest Syria.⁵

Internal Dynamics of the Turkish-backed Armed Opposition

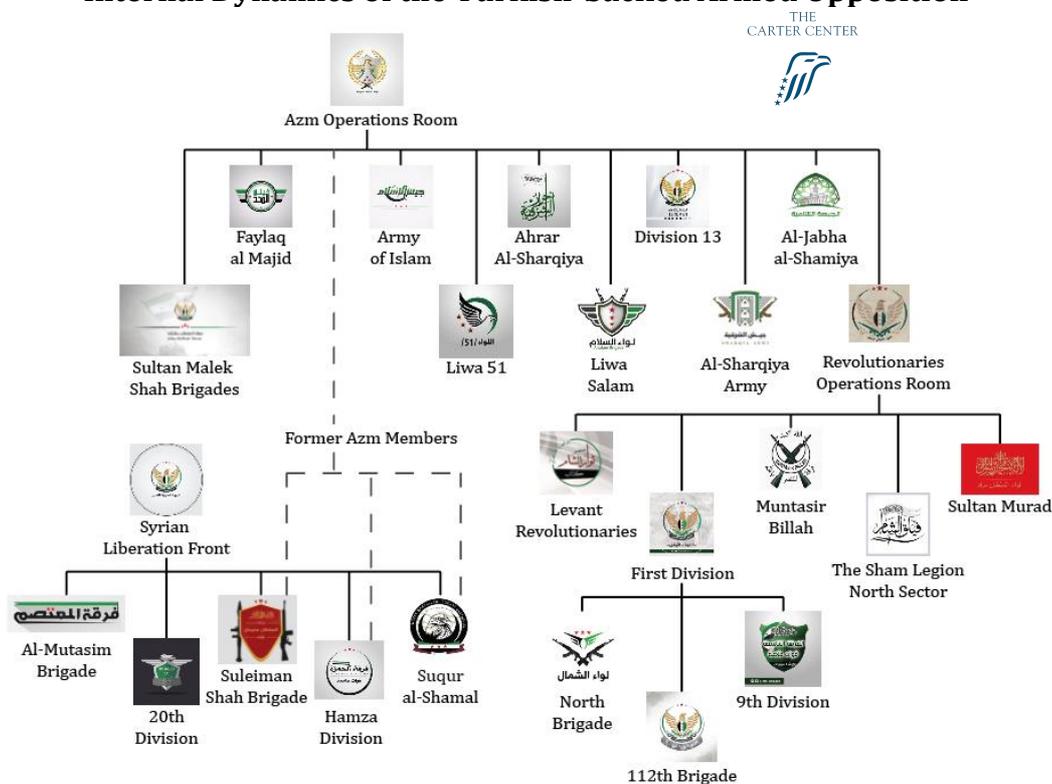


Figure 5: The composition of the Azm Operations Room and Syrian Liberation Front of the Turkish-backed opposition's Syrian National Army as of 30 September 2021. Data from The Carter Center.

In Turkish-held territory in northern Syria, infighting among components of the Turkish-backed opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) is common. Despite

² <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/russia-bombs-turkeys-allies-syria-ahead-putin-erdogan-summit>

³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/russia-intensifies-idlib-attacks-ahead-summit-turkey-iran-syria>

⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/syrian-government-eyes-control-key-highway-northwest>

⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/massive-displacement-wave-amid-fears-renewed-battles-idlib>

efforts to mediate, disputes between the armed groups occasionally escalate. Analysts have argued that the weak SNA institutions lack proper hierarchy and clear structure to stop the infighting.⁶ In July 2021, a new alliance of Turkish-backed groups in the SNA formed the “Azm-United Operations Room”⁷ to integrate the armed groups and stabilize Turkish-held Aleppo Governorate.

The Azm Operations Room has rapidly expanded since its formation. Five additional SNA factions joined the operations room in August.⁸ However, Azm also faced its own internal issues and disputes after three armed groups left its ranks, criticizing the coalition for its failure to have equitable representation.⁹ To avoid violence and fragmentation, Azm and the three armed groups agreed to SNA-led mediation.¹⁰ However, the three dissenting armed groups formed a new SNA coalition.

On 9 September, a new SNA alliance called the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) was formed. The SLF claimed that the five SNA groups had merged into a single group in an effort to stop factional fighting and violence in Turkish-held territories.¹¹ Shortly after the formation of the SLF, Azm announced a new sub-group called “Revolutionaries”.¹² Azm justified this new sub-group as an effort to integrate its fighters.¹³ Despite the formation of Azm and the SLF, it remains to be seen whether the SNA can integrate and end the infighting among SNA member groups.

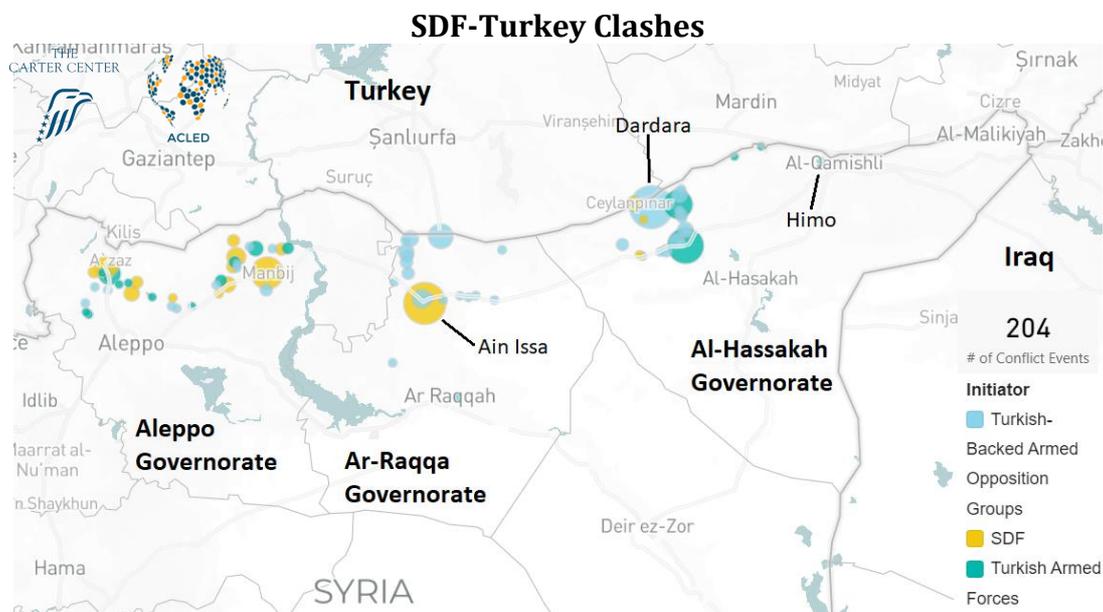


Figure 6: Conflict between Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups on the one side and the SDF on the other between 1 July and 30 September 2021. Largest bubble represents 22 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and [ACLED](#).

⁶ <https://syrianobserver.com/features/63871/security-chaos-faction-infighting-in-northern-aleppo.html>

⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/504455>

⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/506686>

⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/507722>

¹⁰ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/507722>

¹¹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/turkey-backed-syrian-opposition-groups-merge-under-new-banner>

¹² <https://tinyurl.com/nnbkdbut>

¹³ <https://tinyurl.com/yhppsvezd>

Turkey's presence in northern Syria often has been condemned by GoS and the Kurdish Autonomous Administration (KAA). After three military campaigns between 2016-2019, Turkey controls most of northern Aleppo Governorate and parts of Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hassakah Governorates often referred to as Operation Peace Spring (OPS) areas. Turkey justifies its control of territory in northern Syria as a secure zone along the border to prevent alleged threats from armed Kurdish groups.¹⁴ During the reporting period, conflict increased between Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups on the one side and various Kurdish armed groups on the other. In the third quarter, 203 conflict events were reported encompassing shelling, clashes, and aerial bombardment, compared to 191 conflict events in the previous quarter.

The increase of conflict events were reported primarily in the Manbij region in Aleppo Governorate, Tell Abiad in Ar-Raqqa Governorate, and Dardara in Al-Hassakah Governorate. Clashes accounted for 111 of the recorded conflict events and were concentrated along the frontlines. In contrast to the previous quarter, Turkish forces used drone strikes to attack locations away from the frontlines. On 22 August, a Turkish drone strike killed a SDF commander near Qamishli, Al-Hassakah Governorate.¹⁵

This escalation of violence in northeastern Syria has added to the difficulties the U.S. faces in Syria. SDF commanders have called upon the U.S. to condemn the attacks, arguing that silence will only enable additional attacks.¹⁶ It is likely that Turkish President Erdogan discussed the situation in northeast Syria during his meeting with Russian President Putin on 29 September.¹⁷ The increase in violence threatens to unravel an already fragile status quo, leading to a possible new military operation by Turkey in northern Syria.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

There was a significant increase in conflict in southern Syria in the third quarter of 2021. A total of 412 conflict events were recorded between July and September. This is a 24% increase from the 333 conflict events recorded during the previous quarter. Between July and September, Dara'a Governorate overall accounted for 310 conflict events, with the rest of south and central Syria accounting for 103 conflict events. The increase in violence was caused primarily by conflict associated with the siege of Dara'a al-Balad, a neighborhood of Dara'a city. Tensions with GoS armed forces also led to military standoffs in northern Homs Governorate.

¹⁴ <https://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/ap-explains-turkeys-operation-olive-branch-afrin-syria>

¹⁵ <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/25345-Turkish-drone-targets-vehicle-near-northern-Syrian-town-of-Qamishlo:-Source>

¹⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/syrian-kurdish-parties-feel-abandoned-us-wake-turkish-backed-attack>

¹⁷ <https://syrianobserver.com/news/70124/erdogan-reveals-details-of-meeting-with-putin-on-syria.html>

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

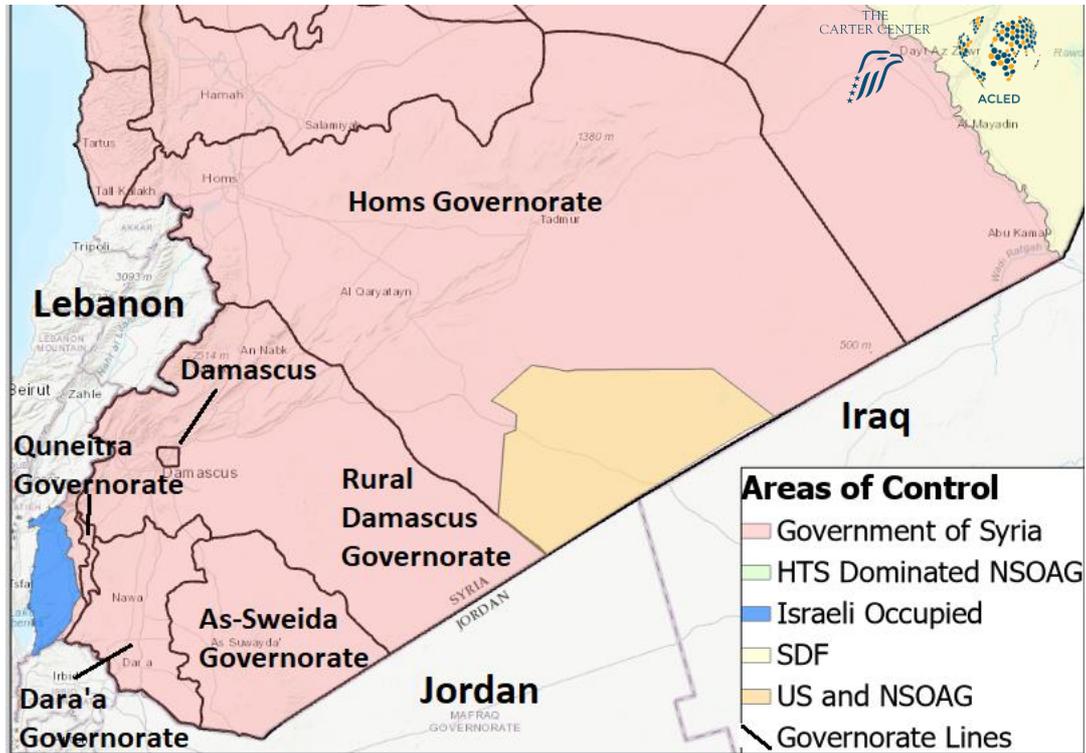


Figure 7: Areas of control in south and central Syria. Data from The Carter Center and [ACLED](#).

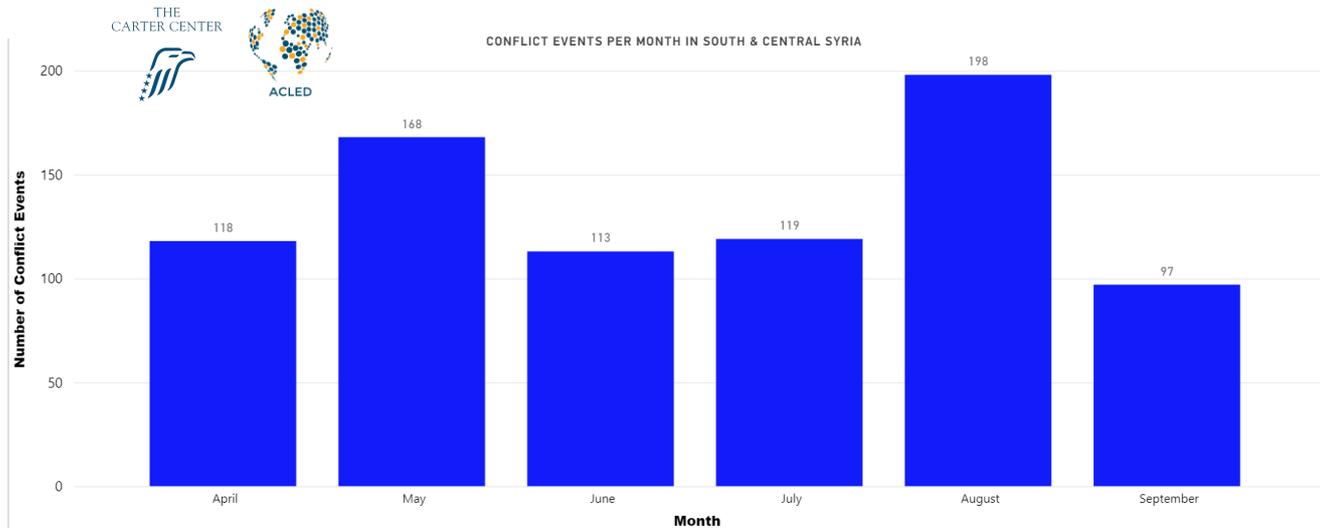


Figure 8: Comparison of conflict events in south & central Syria between 1 April and 30 September 2021. Data from The Carter Center and [ACLED](#).

Since 24 June, GoS and Russian armed forces have besieged Dara’a al-Balad, a neighborhood of Dara’a city. On 24 July, the Central Committee of Dara’a, a group composed of former opposition fighters, reached an agreement with GoS negotiators to end the siege of Dara’a al-Balad. The agreement stipulated that the Central Committee would register the individuals wanted for deferring their military draft into a new process temporarily deferring military conscription, and

they would surrender some of their weapons.¹⁸ In return, the siege would be lifted and GoS Military Security would establish new checkpoints within the neighborhood.¹⁹ However on 27 July, the agreement broke down and resulted in GoS Fourth Division shelling Dara'a al-Balad.²⁰

The Siege of Dara'a al-Balad

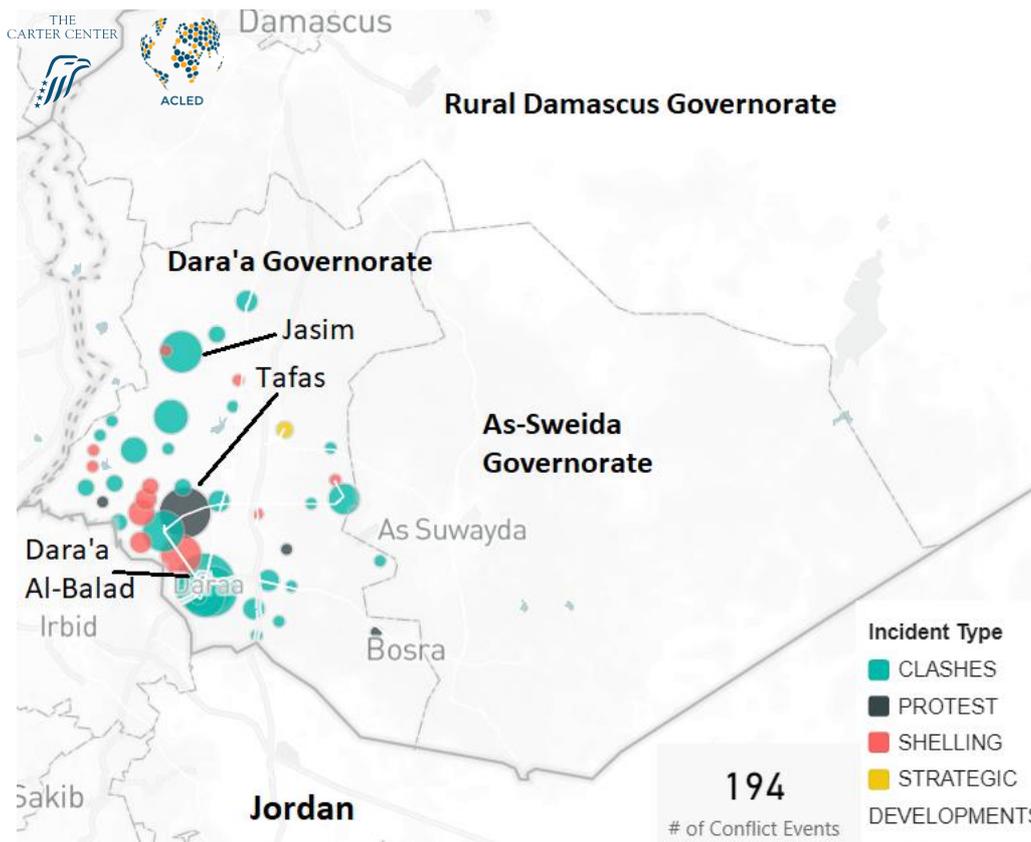


Figure 9: Conflict events related to the siege of Dara'a Al-Balad between 1 July and 5 September 2021. Largest bubble represents 42 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and [ACLED](#).

As the siege of Dara'a al-Balad continued, former opposition fighters across the governorate attacked GoS armed forces, resulting in multiple sieges throughout the governorate with most of the violence concentrated in Dara'a al-Balad, Jasim, and Tafas. Multiple attempts to broker a ceasefire failed. During the fighting, some former opposition fighters and commanders left for opposition-controlled territory in northern Syria in an attempt to help quell tensions.²¹

On 5 September, a final agreement over the siege of Dara'a al-Balad was reached.²² In return for lifting the siege and allowing humanitarian supplies to be delivered,

¹⁸ <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/10/daraa-returns-to-syrian-regimes-control-by-forced-settlement-agreements/>

¹⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/494611>

²⁰ <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/A-Timeline-of-the-Siege-of-Daraa-al-Balad.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/503197>, <https://tinyurl.com/uy9fzaph>

²² <https://observers.france24.com/en/middle-east/20210913-syria-daraa-bombing-blockade-truce-assad-russia>

individuals wanted by the GoS registered for military conscription and surrendered weapons.²³ In addition, GoS armed forces established military checkpoints within the neighborhood.²⁴ The end of fighting in Dara'a al-Balad allowed for nearly 35,000 people to return to their homes.²⁵ After the cessation of hostilities, GoS armed forces imposed similar agreements in other but not all cities within Dara'a Governorate.²⁶ The conflict over Dara'a al-Balad was the deadliest incidence of violence seen since the 2018 reconciliation deals. The deals are part of the GoS reasserting its authority over the governorate. However, the low turnover of weapons suggests that violence could return.

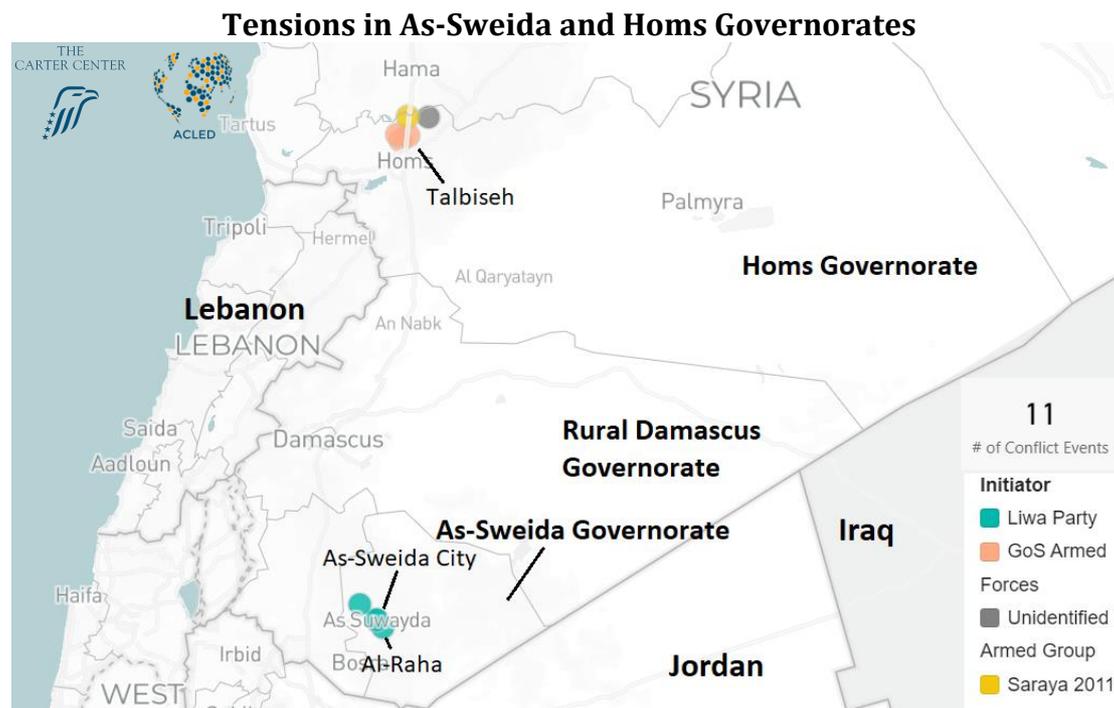


Figure 10: Conflict events related to tensions between local armed groups and GoS in As-Sweida and Homs Governorates. Data from The Carter Center and [ACLEd](#).

On 7 July, a new predominantly Druze political party was formed in As-Sweida Governorate, the Syrian Al-Liwa party, which seeks to promote the interests of Druze in the governorate.²⁷ The party has its own armed group, “The Counter-Terrorism Force”, formed to protect As-Sweida citizens against kidnapping gangs allegedly affiliated with the GoS or Iran.²⁸ Some journalists have argued that the Al-Liwa party itself is composed of gang members,²⁹ and its hostility towards the GoS intelligence services has brought it into confrontation with pro-government

²³ <https://syrianobserver.com/news/69539/regime-forces-enter-daraa-al-balad-and-begin-inspection.html>

²⁴ <https://www.horanfree.com/?p=9807>

²⁵ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/residents-return-daraa-al-balad-siege-lifted>

²⁶ <https://www.horanfree.com/?p=9834>

²⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/new-druze-political-party-military-faction-take-shape-suwayda>

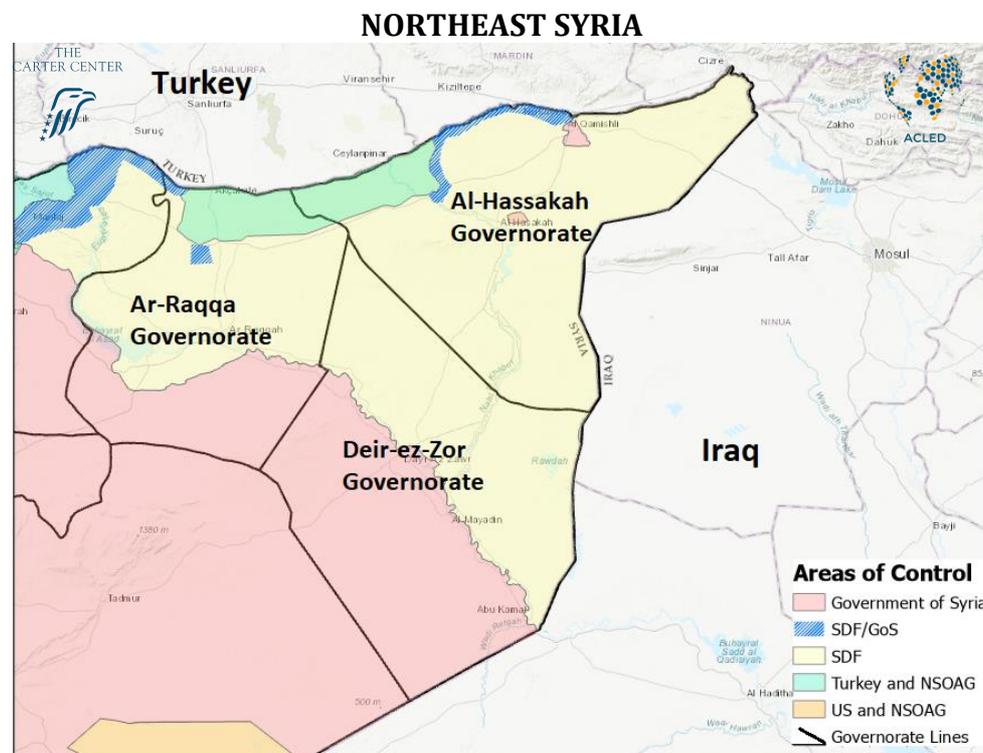
²⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/494512>

²⁹ <https://suwayda24.com/?p=17167>

militias and the GoS-backed³⁰ National Defense Forces (NDF) in As-Sweida Governorate.

At times, public pressure has been effective to force the Al-Liwa Party and the NDF to deescalate. On 10 August, residents of Al-Raha forced both armed groups to withdraw from the town in southern As-Sweida Governorate.³¹ However, on 4 September, renewed clashes between the two groups led to the establishment of new GoS checkpoints around Al-Harisa, As-Sweida Governorate.³²

Similar tensions emerged in northern Homs Governorate. In May 2018, GoS armed forces took back Homs Governorate and implemented a reconciliation deal. Since September 2019, there have been sporadic attacks against GoS armed forces and officials by new anti-government groups. In the third quarter of 2021, an anti-government armed group called “Saraya 2011” claimed responsibility for killing 2 GoS armed forces officers.³³ Due to these assassinations, GoS General Intelligence officials threatened to initiate a new military operation in Talbiseh, Homs Governorate.³⁴ In late August, the GoS armed forces mobilized reinforcements negotiations were underway with local representatives in Talbiseh.³⁵ As of 30 September, negotiations were inconclusive.³⁶



³⁰ GoS-backed militias refer to armed groups that are funded or in some way supported by GoS and coordinate with or fight alongside GoS armed forces, but are not part of the state-run military.

³¹ <https://suwayda24.com/?p=17330>

³² <https://suwayda24.com/?p=17514>

³³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/506802>

³⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/507234>

³⁵ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/507234>

³⁶ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-northern-countryside-of-homs-in-syria-is-facing-a-similar-fate-as-daraa/>

During the third quarter of 2021, there was an increase in violence to 916 recorded conflict events compared to 857 in the second quarter. The number of ISIS-related conflict events reportedly fell, with analysts warning that ISIS has been less active because it is recuperating in the Badia desert region of central and northeast Syria.³⁷

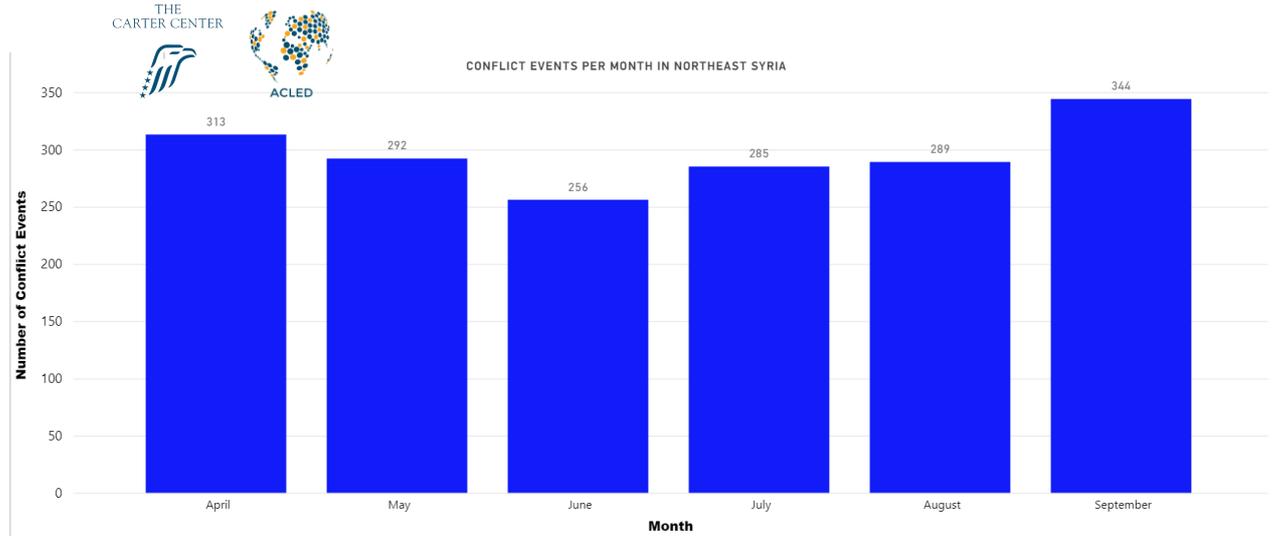


Figure 12: Comparison of conflict events in northeast Syria between 1 April and 30 September 2021. Data from The Carter Center and [ACLED](#).

The Battle Against ISIS

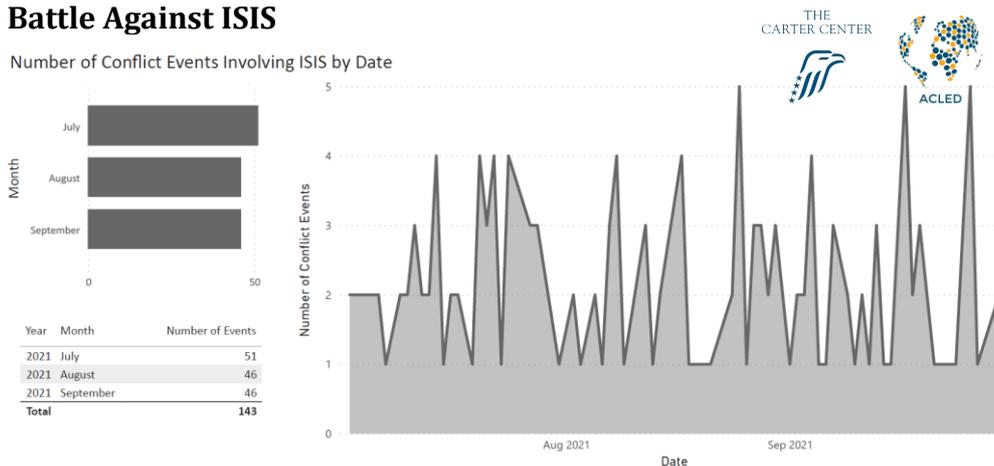


Figure 13: ISIS-related conflict events between 1 July and 30 September 2021. Data from The Carter Center and [ACLED](#).

During the third quarter of 2021, ISIS-related conflict events decreased across Syria compared to the previous quarter. Analysts believe that the decrease is due to ISIS rebuilding its strength in central Syria.³⁸

³⁷ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamic-state-under-reporting-central-syria-misdirection-misinformation-or#pt12>

³⁸ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamic-state-under-reporting-central-syria-misdirection-misinformation-or#pt12>

Within the ACLED/TCC dataset, at least 132 reported conflict events during the quarter are carried out by unidentified actors in the Badia desert region. Some of these events likely were carried out by ISIS affiliates, but were not claimed by the group. Other datasets point to similar discrepancies between attacks claimed by ISIS compared to reported conflict events.³⁹ Underreporting of attacks by ISIS partially may be due to the group's desire to hide its capabilities as it rebuilds its strength as well as difficult communications between ISIS cells and ISIS central.⁴⁰

Fighting between ISIS and GoS armed forces accounted for 88 of the 143 conflict events involving ISIS. ISIS-related events are still primarily concentrated in the Badia desert region, encompassing parts of Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo Governorates. Notably, ISIS attacked a gas pipeline and disabled two powerplants in southeast Rural Damascus Governorate.⁴¹ The attack led to blackouts in Damascus city and nearby areas.

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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³⁹ <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/isis-redux-central-syria-insurgency-september-2021>

⁴⁰ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamic-state-under-reporting-central-syria-misdirection-misinformation-or#pt12>

⁴¹ <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-claims-syria-gas-pipeline-attack-/6234229.html>