

The Carter Center

Conflict in Southern Syria

August 2018 – July 2019

August 2019

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the year since the government of Syria (GoS) takeover of southern Syria in August 2018, a steady growth in low-level conflict has been recorded, with at least 249 violent incidents against GoS and aligned personnel, former opposition members, and civilians. Just over 60% of these incidents have been recorded since March 2019, an average of seven per week.

Over half of the total number of recorded attacks in southern Syria occurred in the following 10 locations: As Sweida City (35), Daraa City (21), As Sanamayn (17), Tafas (15), Da’el (13), Mzeireb (13), Nawa (8), Bistr Elharir, (7), Hrak (7), and Yadudeh (7).

Since August 2018, conflict has gradually migrated to the south and southeast of the region, especially in a belt between Daraa and As Sweida cities.

Over 55% of the recorded incidents involved small arms or heavy machine-gun attacks. Landmine detonations, improvised explosive device (IED) activity, and various criminal events also made up sizeable proportion of activity. Over a third of the attacks targeted moving vehicles (36), fortified locations (28), or checkpoints (25), actions that require considerable experience to execute successfully and have been frequent in the past month.

The range of locations, the types of weapons used, and the nature of the victims suggest that multiple conflict actors are present in southern Syria. At least 18 different GoS (12) and former non-state organised armed groups (NSOAGs) (6), including ISIS and Hayyat Tahrir Ash Sham (HTS), were involved.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since January 2019, there has been a steady growth in low-level conflict targeting the government of Syria (GoS) and aligned personnel as well as former opposition members and civilians in southern Syria. This activity comes over a year after the GoS, with the assistance of Russia, used a mix of military and political negotiation tactics to retake large parts of Daraa and Quneitra governorates from various non-state organised armed groups (NSOAGs).¹ While conflict in southern Syria constitutes a small percentage of overall conflict in Syria, the dynamics of ongoing incidents are nonetheless significant.



Figure 1: Recorded attacks in southern Syria since August 2018.

By reviewing conflict data collected by the Carter Center’s Syria Conflict Mapping Project and publicly

¹ Including Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS) and the local ISIS affiliate Jaish Khalid Ibn Walid, itself an umbrella of Liwa Shuhada al Yarmouk, Jaish al Jihad, and Harikat al Muthanna al Islamiyah.

available data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED)² from Aug. 1, 2018, to July 31, 2019,³ this report aims to document the current conflict dynamics present in southern Syria. It is important to note that while the Carter Center and ACLED strive to record all available conflict-related information, given the restrictive reporting environment in Syria and limitations of data collection, some incidents may not have been recorded. In addition, what is publicly documented does not account for what goes undocumented. Therefore, figures presented in this report should be viewed as a representation of the situation rather than an exact depiction of events.

2 | FREQUENCY OF ATTACKS

Since August 2018, at least 249 violent incidents were recorded against GoS-aligned personnel, former opposition group members, and civilians in southern Syria. After an initial decline in the three months following the GoS offensive that reclaimed southern Syria, conflict activity there has steadily grown since the start of 2019 (Figure 1). Over 60% of the attacks have occurred since March 2019.

3 | GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF ATTACKS

The vast majority of documented attacks in the past 12 months have occurred in Daraa Governorate, with As Sweida (62) and Quneitra (4) governorates together recording nearly 27% of the remaining activity. Exploring the data further, 10 locations have recorded nearly 60% of the total number of attacks in the south: As Sweida City (35), Daraa City (21), As Sanamayn (17), Tafas (15), Da'el (13), Mzeireb (13), Nawa (8), Bistr Elharir, (7), Hrak (7), and Yadudeh (7). The remaining 40% of activity was split among 66 other locations (Figure 2).

² ACLED. (2019). "Data Export Tool." acleddata.com/data.

³ Note that the following incident types from ACLED's data collection have not been included in this study: agreements, assaults/brawls, change to armed group, demonstrations, government arrests/detentions, headquarters established, mass graves discovered, movement of forces, non-violent transfer of territory / government regain territory, population displacement, property destruction/looting, protests, riots, security operations/measures, and unexploded ordnance events. Also, Israeli activity has not been included because Israel's specific intervention in Syria is a separate dynamic.

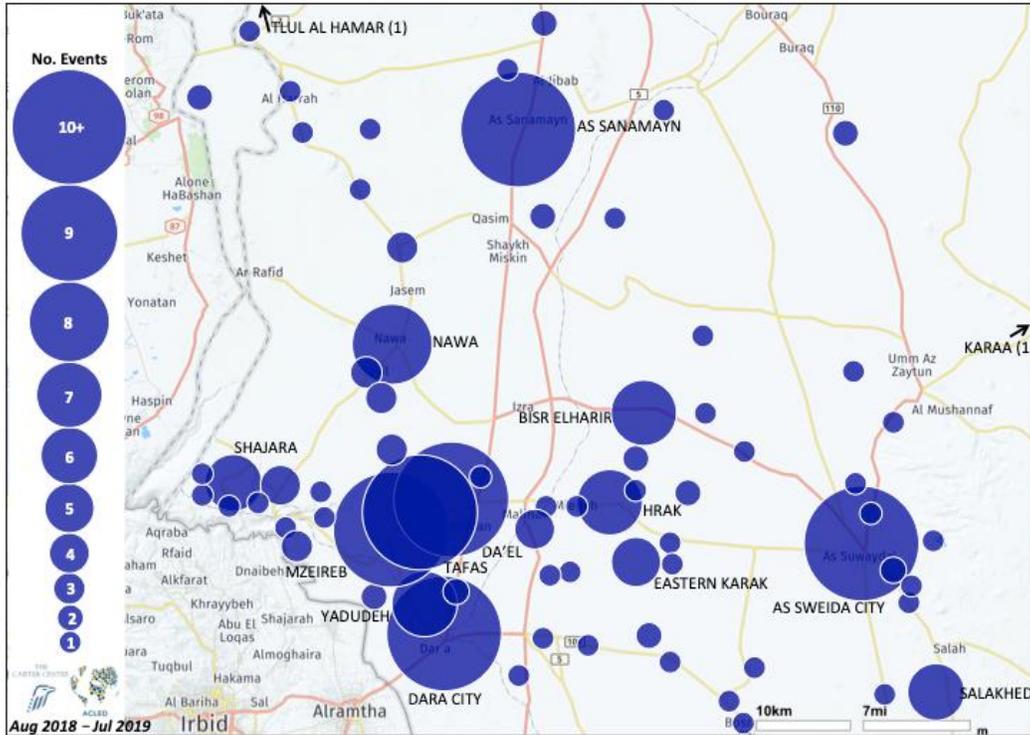


Figure 2. Locations of recorded attacks in southern Syria, August 2018 – July 2019.

Many of the attacks were against former opposition command and logistic hubs, such as Daraa City, Mzeireb, Tafas,⁴ and Nawa⁵. In the case of As Sweida and As-Sanamayn towns, the targets have been traditionally associated with various organized crime economies, such as smuggling or kidnap and ransom. Notably, relatively few attacks (22) have occurred in former ISIS-dominated⁶ areas in the southwest and northeast of Daraa Governorate.

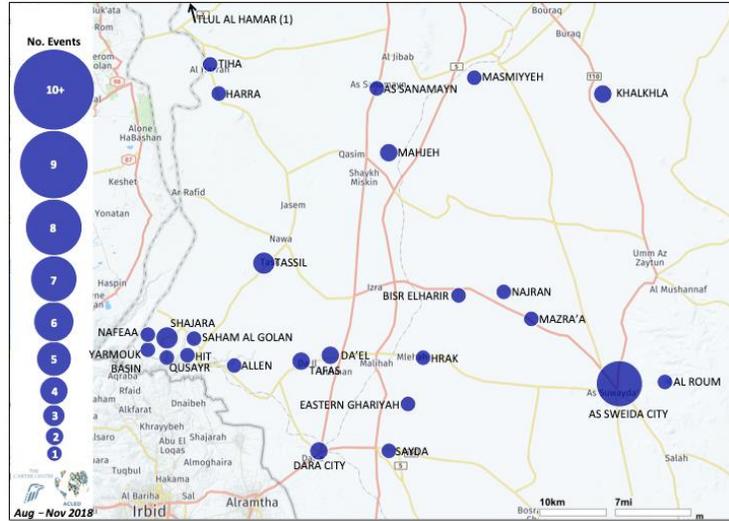
Over the past year, data shows that conflict has generally migrated to the south and southeast of Daraa Governorate – in a belt between Daraa and As Sweida cities – and has become more concentrated (Figure 3).

⁴Formerly home to Al Karama Brigade, Furqat al Haq, Jaish al Moutaz Billah, Fajr al Islam, and Qouwat Shabab al Sunna.

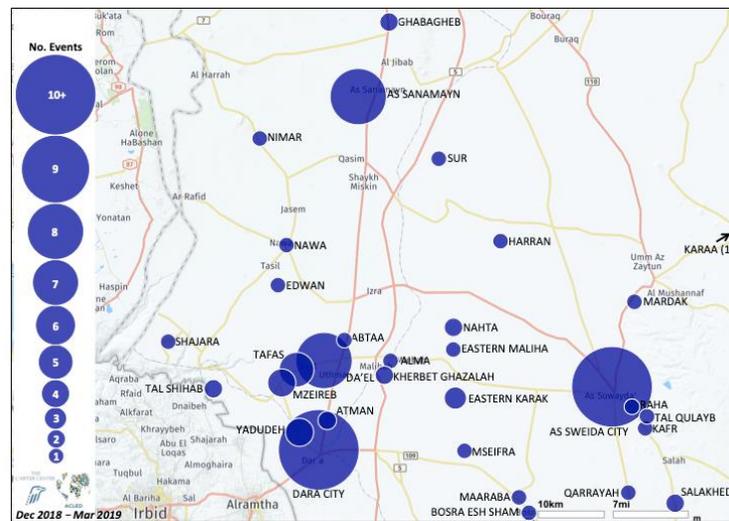
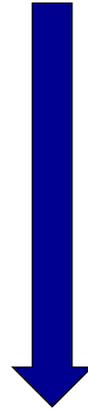
⁵ Formerly home to Ahrar Ash Sham, Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham, Ahrar Nawa, Al Shaheed Jamil Abu Ez Zayn, Imam al Nawawi Battalion.

⁶ A local ISIS affiliate operated in southern Syria named the Khalid Bin Walid Army, a coalition of Jaish al Jihad, Liwa Shuhdada al Yarmouk, and Harikat al Muthanna al Islamiyah.

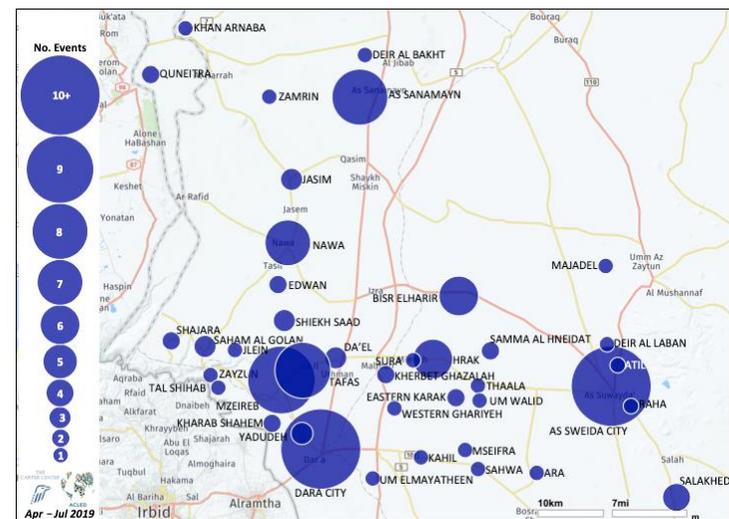
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AUG. – NOV. 2018



DEC. 2018 – MARCH 2019



APRIL - JULY 2019



Figure 3. Comparison of attack locations from August 2018 – July 2019.

4 | WEAPON TYPES

Over half of the recorded incidents in southern Syria involved small arms fire or heavy machine guns. Landmine detonations (28), improvised explosive device (IED) activity (24), and criminal activities⁷ (24) also made up a sizeable number of activities (Figure 4).

Of concern is the increasing use of IEDs in 2019, a weapon that requires significant expertise to construct, prepare, and successfully deploy (Figure 5).

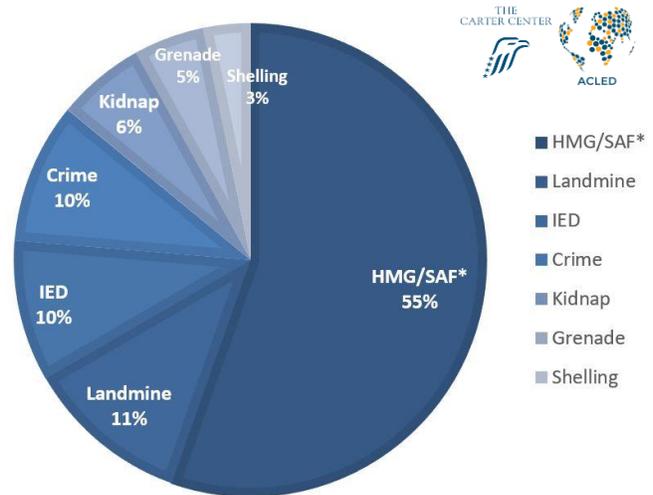


Figure 4: Breakdown of incident types in southern Syria since August 2018, with a focus on the type of weapon involved. *HMG/SAF stands for heavy machine gun / small arms fire. Shelling refers to an incident involving a RPG, rocket, or mortar.

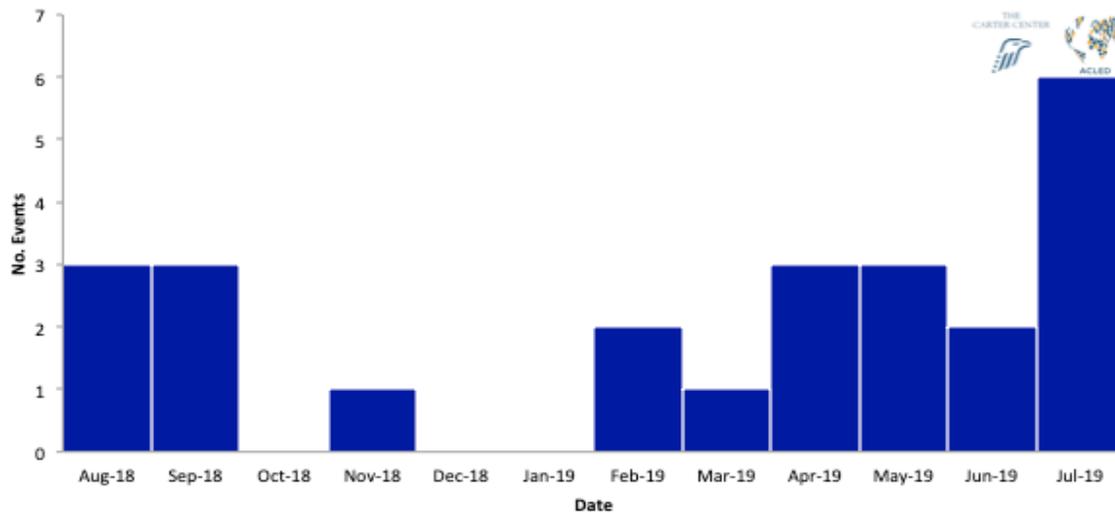


Figure 5: Frequency of documented IED attacks per month in southern Syria August 2018 – July 2019.

⁷ Criminal activity includes physical assault, carjacking, discovery of bodies, and home break-ins, with the acknowledgement that these could be motivated by political reasons rather than just criminal ones.

5 | IMPACT OF CONFLICT

While it is not always possible to ascertain the intended target of each incident, at least nine potential target categories can be identified from the attacks between 2018 and 2019.

The largest group targeted by conflict activity was the GoS and aligned actors, representing 47% of documented incidents. Of this category, the GoS military was most affected (93 events), followed by GoS personnel and sites (18), including local mayors, reconciliation council members, and Baath party members. Iran and Hezbollah personnel were also targeted three times in the past 12 months, as were GoS police forces.

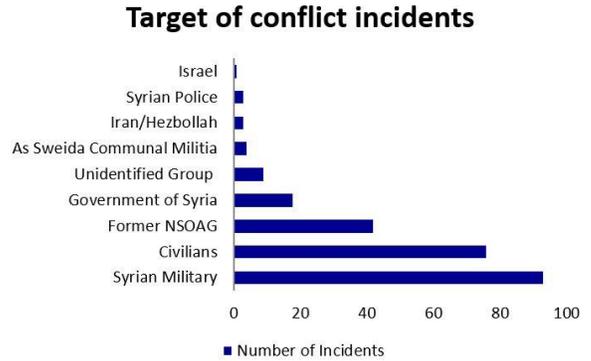


Figure 6: Graph of target categories documented in southern Syria.

Civilians were the next-largest targeted group, accounting for 31% of incidents. These incidents either took place in crowded areas where civilians often gather or in areas away from military installations. Former opposition/NSOAG members were the third-largest set (42 incidents) to be targeted, accounting for 17% of conflict activity. Of this, 24 incidents involved individuals who had been reintegrated into the GoS military after they surrendered in August 2018 (Figure 6).⁸

While most attacks targeted individual people, at least 89 incidents targeted moving vehicles or convoys, fortified locations (buildings), or checkpoints, attacks that require skill and determination. These types of attacks have increased significantly since February 2019 (Figure 7). The remaining 50 events could not be categorized.

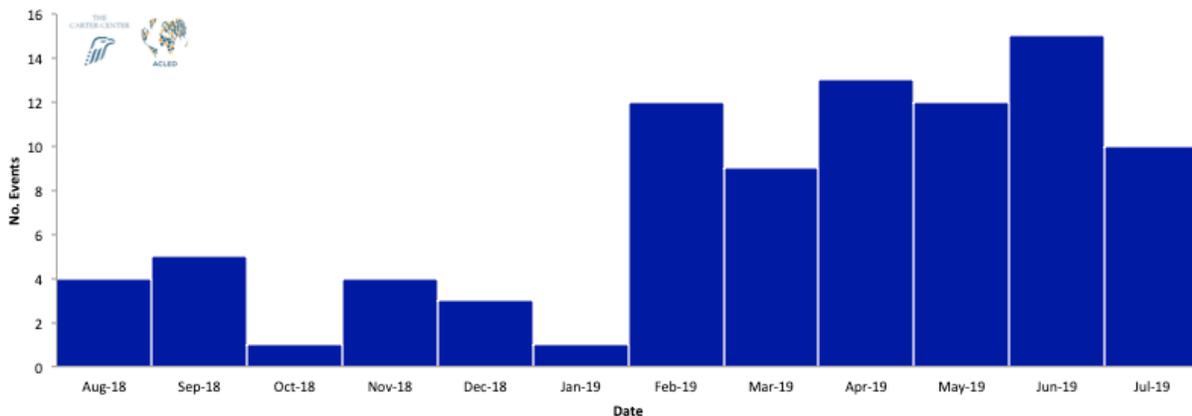


Figure 7: Attacks against moving traffic, fortified locations, and checkpoints in southern Syria since August 2018.

⁸ From the recorded events, at least nine NSOAGs could be identified as having been targeted in the south after August 2018: Mutaaz Billah Army (6), Jaish Khalid Ibn Walid (2), Ahrar Nawa (1), Ahrar Ash Sham (1), Amud Hauran (1), Hayyat Tahrir Ash Sham (1), Jaish al Yarmouk (1), Liwa Karama (1), and Maghra al Thawra (1).

6 | RESPONSIBILITY

Similar to the target of attacks, determining who is responsible for the conflict incidents in southern Syria isn't always possible. However, given the range of locations, the types of weapons used, and the nature of the targets, it is likely that a multitude of conflict actors are responsible for the incidents.

Since the GoS recaptured the area in August 2018, at least four new NSOAGs have emerged: the Daraa Popular Resistance⁹, the Southern Companies,¹⁰ the Special Task Companies,¹¹ and the Freeman of the Kanaker Area.¹² Since August 2018, none of the NSOAGs that were part of the Southern Front have claimed to operate in southern Syria. In the recorded data, 33 events were linked to the Daraa Popular Resistance and one to Southern Companies. Only three attacks have been claimed by ISIS or Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS), both of which have been present in southern Syria for several years,¹³ and these occurred in areas outside of the groups' previous areas of dominance (Figure 8). These differ from attacks in which ISIS is the suspected initiator, the majority of which were legacy landmines and IEDs planted by the ISIS-affiliated Khalid Bin Walid Army (KBW) in the southwest corner of Daraa Governorate, an area KBW once controlled.

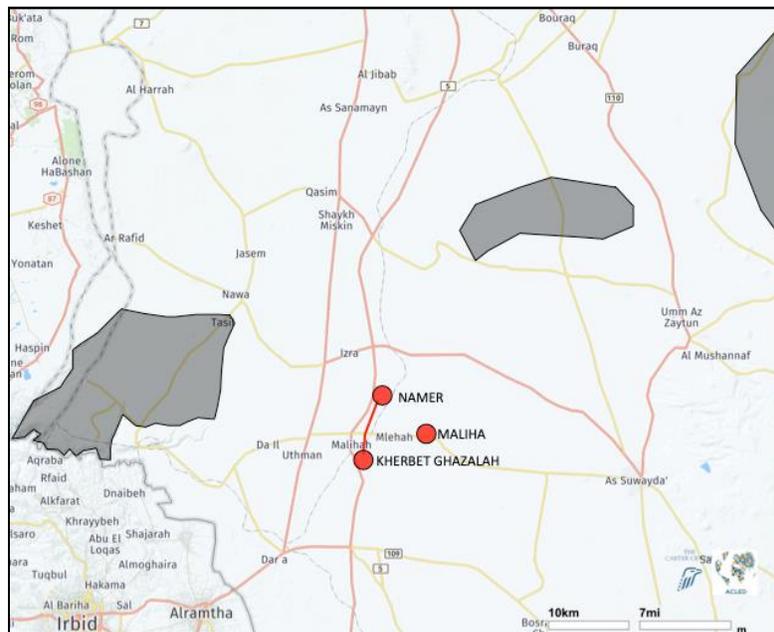


Figure 8: Locations of ISIS-claimed attacks since August 2018 and their former areas of dominance (in black).

⁹ The Daraa Popular Resistance (Al Maqaoma al Shaabia Daraa) first appeared online in November 2018.

¹⁰ The Southern Companies (Siraya Janoubiya) first appeared online in February 2019.

¹¹ The Special Task Companies (Liwa al Muhim al Siraya) first appeared online in March 2019.

¹² The Freeman of Kanaker (Ahrar Bilada Kanaker) first appeared online in April 2019.

¹³ On Dec. 31, 2018, a senior HTS member was killed by smugglers in northeast As Sweida Governorate while travelling to southern Syria. On June 5, 2019, ISIS claimed an attack against an IRGC vehicle on the Namr-Kherbet Ghazalah Road. On July 27, ISIS claimed a suicide attack against a Syrian military checkpoint on the Hrak-Maliha Road.

At least 12 GoS military units are known to be operating in southern Syria since August 2018. This includes the Tiger Forces, the Republican Guard, the 4th Armoured Division, the 5th Corps, the 15th Special Forces Division, 112th Brigade of the 5th Division, Air Force Intelligence, Political Intelligence, State Security, the Baath Battalions, National Defence Forces (NDF), and Syrian Police Forces. In addition, GoS-allied Russian Military Police, Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC), and Lebanese Hezbollah are present in the region.

Of note, five armed clashes *between* various Syrian government entities have been documented. They occurred: 1) Nov. 2, 2018, at a checkpoint in Hit town between 4th Armoured Division members; 2) on Jan. 21, 2019, in Busra Esh Sham between 5th Corps members, who were formerly Youth of Sunna Forces members; 3) on March 30, 2019, at a checkpoint in Sur town between the 5th Corps and State Security members; 4) on April 11, 2019, in Kharab Shaham town between 4th Division personnel, who were formerly opposition members, and Syrian Military Intelligence; 5) and on June 6, 2019, at a checkpoint in the Al Anquod Roundabout in As Sweida City between a local government militia and the Syrian military.

7 | CONCLUSION

It is clear from the range of locations, weapon types, and targets that a variety of conflict actors are present in southern Syria, each with their own aims and capacity. What is common among almost all incidents against GoS-aligned personnel, former opposition groups, and civilians is that those responsible are not aiming to hold territory – as they did prior to August 2018. The attacks appear to be designed to disrupt rather than to establish control and are often isolated incidents (e.g. IEDs or individual assassinations).

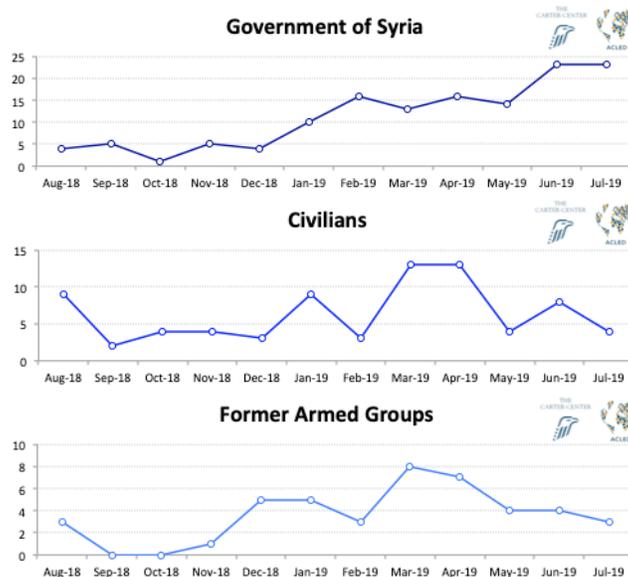


Figure 9: Attacks against different actors August 2018 – July 2019.

While there is a clear and growing focus on attacking the government of Syria and its allies, the steady level of violence impacting civilians is also of concern. Added to this, the increasing level of attacks against former opposition members also hints that a longer-term, unresolved dynamic is present in southern Syria (Figure 9).

Looking forward, two notable concerns are the growing use of IEDs and the increase in attacks against relatively sophisticated targets, such as moving vehicles and convoys, fortified locations, and checkpoints. Both dynamics not only highlight a clear change in the capacity of those responsible, but also have the potential to significantly impact the security environment in the long term.

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For queries or comments about this report, please contact syriamapping@cartercenter.org

SYRIA CONFLICT MAPPING

Since 2012, the Carter Center’s Conflict Resolution Program has endeavored to analyze open-source information related to the Syrian conflict, with the goal of assisting conflict responders with up-to-date, detailed analysis of developments in the country.

Using publicly available sources, as well as information gleaned from regular consultations with stakeholders, the Center has documented and mapped 122,000 conflict events in Syria as well as the ever-changing relations between armed groups. For more information, visit our website at www.cartercenter.org.

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