



Quarterly Review | October-December 2021

Prepared by Hari Prasad, Jennifer Hudson, and Hampton Stall

SYRIA SUMMARY

The war in Syria remains frozen this quarter, with little to no attempts by any of the belligerents to take new territory. Despite this freeze, Syria was a far cry from peaceful this quarter, especially as each territory endured instability through their share of internal conflict.

- **NORTHWEST** | Conflict activity decreased in northwest Syria as tensions deescalated between Turkey and Kurdish armed groups. Conflict continued between the Government of Syria (GoS) and its allies against armed opposition groups in northwest Syria. The hardline Hayat Tahrir al-Sham cracked down on rival groups in Lattakia Governorate. Relatedly, the Turkish-backed opposition in Syria's northwest also underwent a series of mergers to integrate its forces. Conflict between Turkish armed forces and Kurdish armed groups continued in northern Syria.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | During the final quarter of 2021, conflict activity decreased following the conclusion of the siege of Dara'a al-Balad and conflict between the former opposition and GoS armed forces. However, GoS armed forces used the opportunity to weaken the power of the former opposition in Dara'a Governorate. Tensions continued in As-Sweida Governorate as Druze militias confronted GoS forces.
- **NORTHEAST** | There was a slight increase in conflict activity in the final quarter of 2021, partially due to the rise of reported ISIS attacks against the GoS and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The GoS began new settlement deals in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate targeting civilians living in (SDF)-controlled territory.

Conflict Events in Syria (Q4 vs Q3 2021)			
Region	2021 Q4	2021 Q3	Change (%)
Northwest	992	1309	-317 (-24%)
South	252	375	-123 (-33%)
Central	89	75	+14 (+19%)
Northeast	895	828	+67 (+8%)
Syria Overall	2139	2511	-372 (-17%)

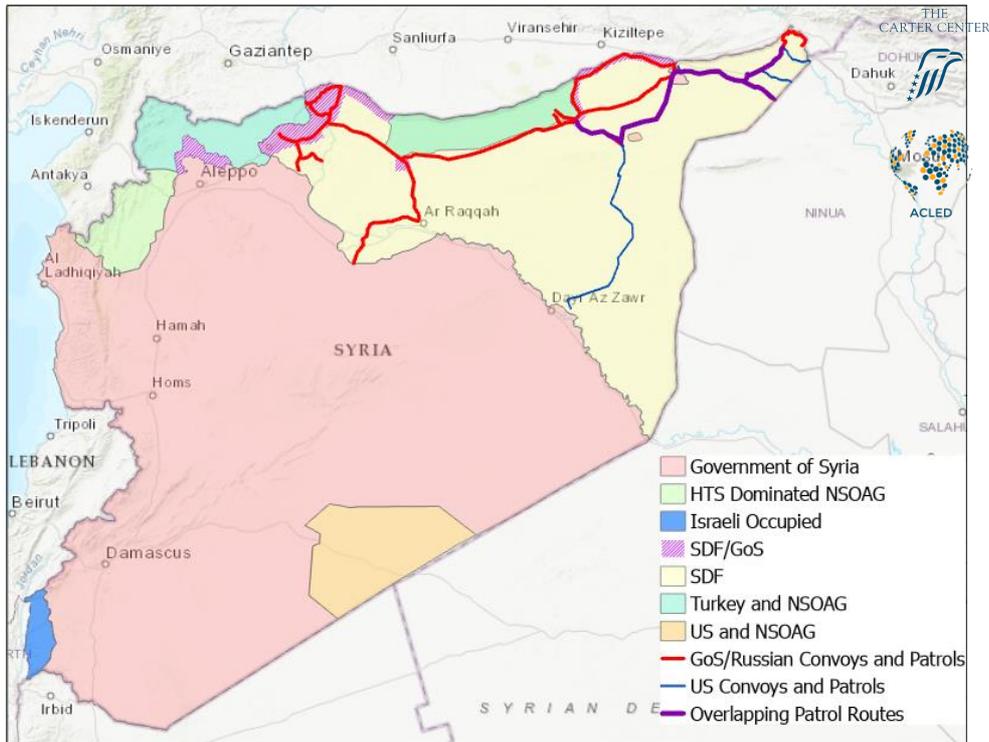


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 31 December 2021. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1.

Territorial Holdings in Syria by Faction 1 January 2022

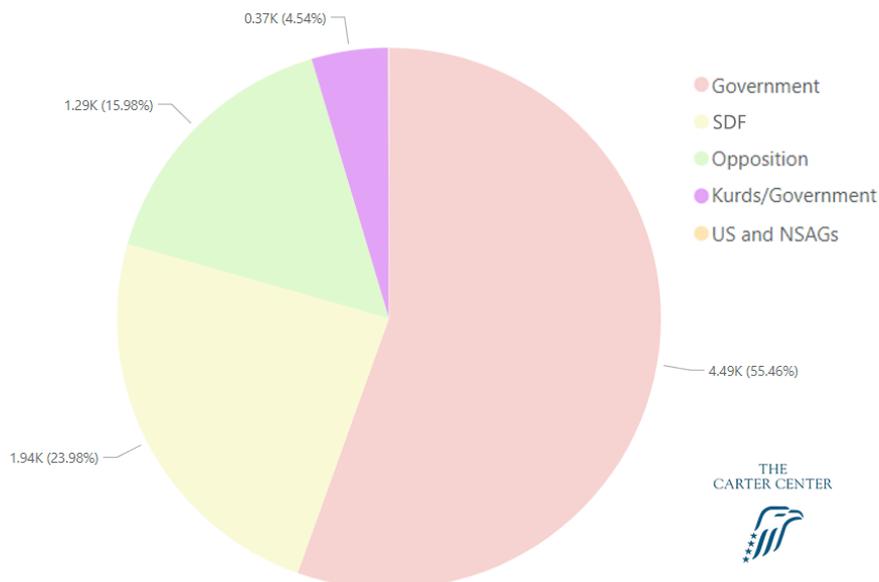


Figure 2: Breakdown of territorial holdings by party as of 1 January 2022.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

During the last quarter of 2021, 1,038 conflict events were recorded in northwest Syria, a slight decrease from the previous quarter (1,322). Conflict event counts for the fourth quarter of 2021 (2021 Q4) and third quarter of 2021 (2021 Q3) are collected in the table below:

Conflict Events in Northwest Syria (Q4 2021 and Changes)		
Governorate	2021 Q4	Change from Q3 (%)
Aleppo	396	-172 (-30%)
Idlib	408	+38 (+8%)
Hama	164	-92 (-36%)
Latakia	23	-15 (-39%)
Tartous	1	No Change
Northwest Overall	992	-317 (-24%)

Over 80 percent of conflict activity occurred between Aleppo and Idlib governorates. More than 80 percent of conflict activity in Idlib consisted of pro-government shelling and aerial bombardment in predominantly southern Idlib, consistent with the previous quarter, in contrast with the majority (>60%) of shelling and aerial bombardment in Aleppo Governorate conducted by Turkish forces.

As with the previous quarter, combat continued between Government of Syria (GoS) and armed opposition groups with the number of armed clashes between two sides in Idlib Governorate being predominantly higher in November 2021. Like 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](#).

The Government of Syria Against the Armed Opposition Conflict

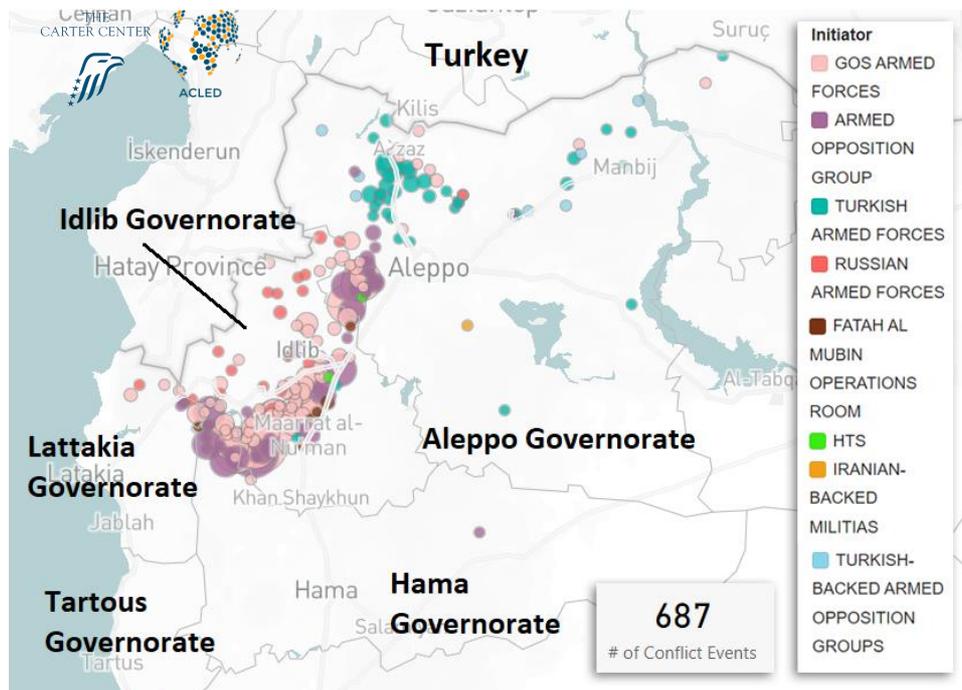


Figure 3: Conflict between GoS armed forces and armed opposition groups in northwest Syria from October to December 2021. Largest bubble represents 32 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the last quarter of 2021, there were 687 conflict events recorded between GoS armed forces and their allies on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other. This was comprised of clashes, shelling, and aerial bombardments. The highest level of activity was recorded in October and November, with 254 and 247 conflict events respectively. This was followed by 186 conflict events in December. Most of these events – 170 in October, 130 in November, and 108 in December – consisted of shelling and aerial bombardment by GoS and Russia in the Aleppo, Hama, and Idlib Governorates. Notably, armed clashes between GoS armed forces and their allies on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other more than doubled from 20 to 50 between October and November. This was possibly due to the movement of military forces by the GoS towards the frontlines.

Following the GoS's new settlement agreements in Dara'a Governorate (see below), news emerged about a potential military operation by government forces to take control of the M4 highway in Idlib Governorate.² This was accompanied by GoS armed forces mobilization in southern Idlib Governorate.² In response, Turkey sent military reinforcements to Aleppo and Idlib Governorates.³ The additional mobilization occurred as violence in northwest Syria escalated, and in

² <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/10/is-idlib-at-the-threshold-of-military-confrontation-or-a-turkish-russian-land-swap-deal/>

³ <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/10/is-idlib-at-the-threshold-of-military-confrontation-or-a-turkish-russian-land-swap-deal/>
<https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/10/is-idlib-at-the-threshold-of-military-confrontation-or-a-turkish-russian-land-swap-deal/>

the aftermath of Russia conducting airstrikes on Turkish-held territory at the end of September.⁴ The escalating violence and ongoing negotiations between Russia and Turkey led some analysts to suspect that a land swap was being considered by the two parties. This did not come to pass and violence declined in the final months of 2021.

Infighting and conflict within opposition-controlled territory

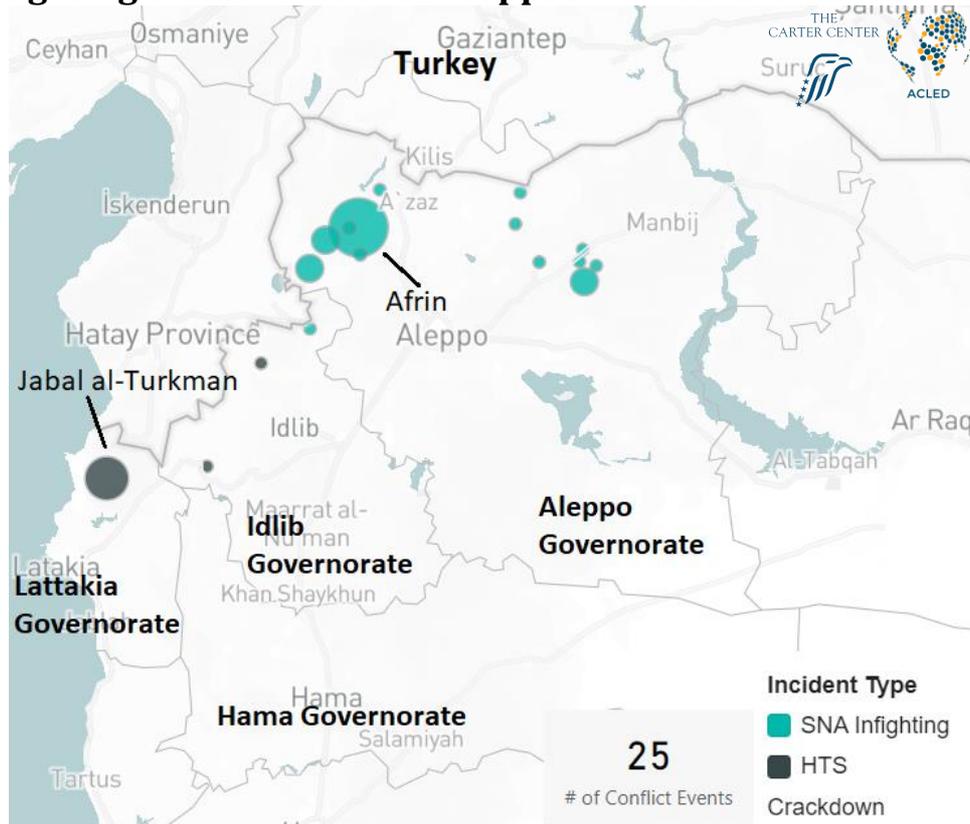


Figure 4: Incidents of infighting and crackdowns among the various opposition groups in northwest Syria between October-December 2021. Largest bubble represents 4 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continued its efforts to crackdown on rival groups, which one analyst attributes to efforts to secure its sovereignty in the region and corresponds with the GoS's and Russia's efforts to neutralize violent extremist groups there.⁵ In October, HTS conducted a military operation against two of its rivals, Junud al-sham and Jundallah, in northern Latakia Governorate.⁶ This resulted in a conditional settlement on October 28th with Junud al-Sham agreeing to withdraw from confrontation areas and HTS fighters returning to the frontlines with the government.⁷ This follows a general trend by HTS to crackdown on any groups it views challenging its rule in northwest Syria, as well as silencing any critics.

⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/russia-bombs-turkeys-allies-syria-ahead-putin-erdogan-summit>

⁵ <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/11/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-driving-out-foreign-factions-why/>

⁶ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/757f4c040ee5484593ecaa264ac7d59a>

⁷ <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/11/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-driving-out-foreign-factions-why/>

HTS is staring down a likely financial crisis in the coming year.⁸ Although implementing the Turkish lira as the de-facto currency in Idlib helped it to circumvent the direst effects of the economic collapse in government-controlled areas, the currency crisis in Turkey is taking a toll. HTS’s attempt to shift over to the US dollar is a highly unstable and temporary options that will not help HTS prevent financial strains from having an effect. Furthermore, increasing economic strains in conjunction with limited resources will likely lead to an increase in infighting among intra-jihadist groups over territorial control.⁹

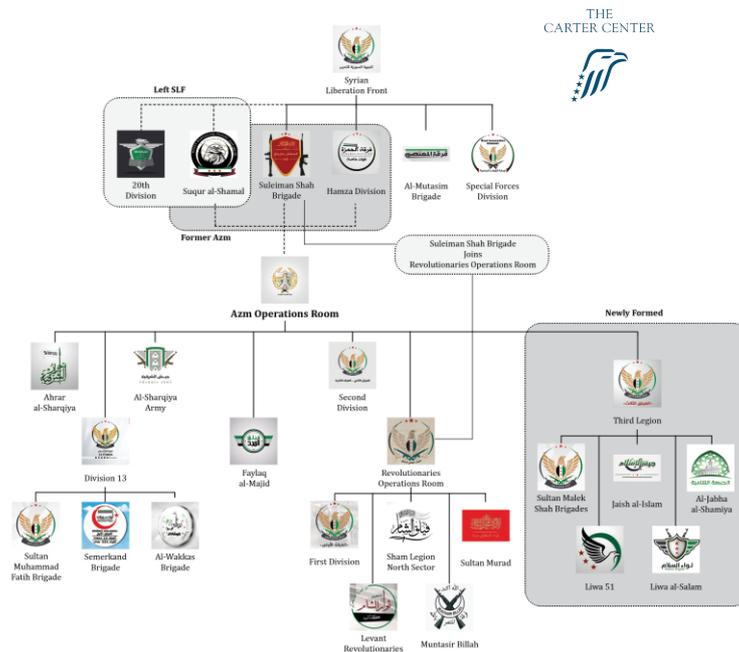


Figure 5: The composition of the Azm Operations Room and Syrian Liberation Front of the Turkish-backed opposition’s Syrian National Army as of 31 December 2021. Data from The Carter Center.

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) continued to see infighting and attempts to unify its member groups. During the previous quarter, two new SNA subgroups were created: the Azm Operations Room and Syrian Liberation Front (SLF). Although both claimed to have no issues with one another, clashes between their member groups continued.

In October 2021, Azm created two new subgroups: the Revolutionaries and the Third Legion. As Azm consolidated its members, the SLF began to disintegrate. The same month, Suqour al-Shamal and 20th Division both left the SLF, with the former instead returning to join Azm. In November, the Suleiman Shah Brigade left the SLF and was incorporated into the Revolutionaries subgroup of Azm. By the end of 2021, Azm had emerged victorious in its rivalry against the SLF.

⁸ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/syria-2022-deadlock-violence-and-possible-famine>

⁹ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/syria-2022-deadlock-violence-and-possible-famine>

Despite this consolidation, there are few indications that either Azm nor the rest of the SNA have managed to unify its member groups. Indeed, the absorption of groups like Suleiman Shah Brigade has led to additional trouble. The commander of the Suleiman Shah Brigade had made some comments favorable to HTS, compounding longstanding concerns about HTS's interference in SNA matters. An investigation into criminal allegations by the commander could potentially upend parts of Azm, or lead to a new round of infighting.

The Carter Center has released a report on the developments within the Syrian National Army, which can be viewed in [StoryMaps](#) here or in [PDF](#) form here.

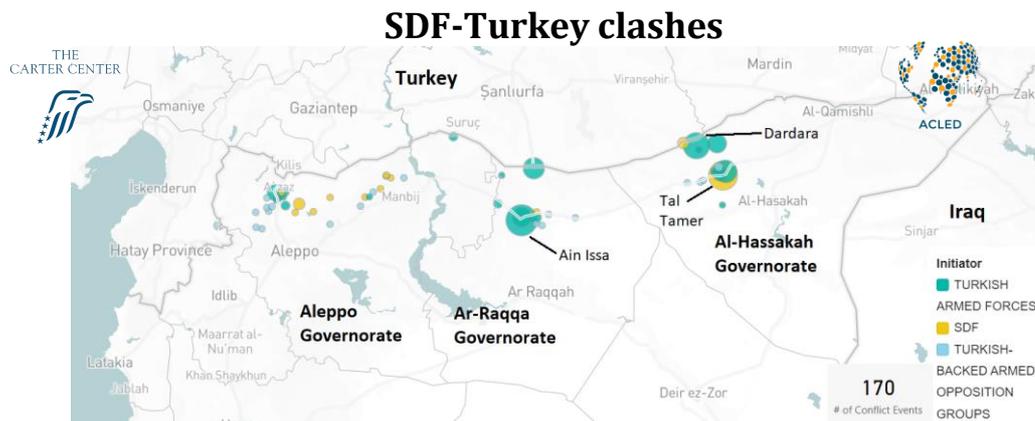


Figure 6: Conflict between Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups on the one side and the SDF on the other between October and December 2021. Largest bubble represents 27 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the reporting period, conflict between various Kurdish armed groups and Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups decreased slightly compared to conflict activity in the third quarter. In the fourth quarter, 170 conflict events were recorded, consisting of shelling, aerial bombardment, and clashes (69 in October, 38 in November, and 63 in December). Clashes between groups comprised 55 of the conflict events, with much of the activity centered in Tal Tamer, Ras al Ain, Afrin, Azaz, and Ain Issa subdistricts. Greater than 95% of aerial bombardments and shelling activity (115 events) was perpetrated by the Turkish side targeting QSD-YPG positions, 12 of which were Turkish drone attacks.

On October 11th, President Erdogan warned of potentially initiating military action.¹⁰ In mid-October, Turkish aircraft dropped leaflets on Tel Rifaat urging civilians for 'cooperation' with Turkish forces as it prepared to commence unspecified military activity in the city at an unknown time.¹¹ In response to this, GoS armed forces sent reinforcements into Tel Rifaat to back up Kurdish People's

¹⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/syrian-government-forces-deploy-response-turkish-threat>

¹¹ <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/10/is-idlib-at-the-threshold-of-military-confrontation-or-a-turkish-russian-land-swap-deal/>, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/syrian-government-forces-deploy-response-turkish-threat>

Protection Units (YPG) which has control there.¹² In November, Turkish officials announced it was readying for a new fourth military operation in Syria, focusing on the Aleppo countryside, Ar-Raqqa, and al-Hassakah Governorates, to protect its southern border and create a 30-km wide buffer zone spanning northern Syria.¹³ However, the planned invasion was staved off and violence decreased as U.S. and Russian diplomacy de-escalated the situation. Although an invasion is currently out of the picture, Turkey has placed increasing emphasis on its drone air campaign against the north of Syria,¹⁴ striking Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES)-held territory 11 times this quarter. The potential for escalation and further Turkish incursion still remains a key concern across northern Syria.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

During the last quarter of 2021, like in the Northwest, conflict activity decreased in southern and central Syria as compared to the previous quarter. A total of 276 conflict events were recorded, down from 414 conflict events recorded in the previous quarter. Dara'a Governorate remained the most active governorate in the region, accounting for 131 conflict events and over 50% of all conflict activity. Although this was a substantial decrease from the recorded 280 conflict events in the previous quarter during the siege of Dara'a al-Balad.

Conflict Events in South & Central Syria (Q4 2021 and Changes)		
Governorate	2021 Q4	Change from Q3 (%)
Dara'a	131	-149 (-53%)
As-Sweida	24	+11 (+85%)
Quneitra	8	+1 (+14%)
South Overall	163	-137 (-46%)
Homs	51	+14 (+38%)
Damascus	5	-1 (-17%)
Rural Damascus	33	+1 (+4%)
Central Overall	89	+14 (+19%)
South and Central Overall	252	-123 (-33%)

Settlements in Dara'a Governorate

¹² <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/syrian-government-forces-deploy-response-turkish-threat>

¹³ <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/11/sdf-look-to-russia-for-support-against-turkey/>

¹⁴ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/syria-2022-deadlock-violence-and-possible-famine>

The settlement agreements of 2018 occurred alongside GoS, Russian, and Iranian efforts to retake Dara'a Governorate. The Russian-mediated settlement agreements between the GoS and the armed opposition allowed some opposition groups to maintain some of their weapons and defer military conscription as long as they registered and reconciled with the government. However, rivalries among the different opposition leaders, GoS armed forces divisions, and attempts to undercut the settlement agreements had led to a slowly escalating cycle of violence, occasionally leading to sieges of cities and towns. Most of the sieges were resolved relatively peacefully with Russia and its former opposition allies often serving as mediators to prevent violence from escalating further.

The 2021 siege of the Dara'a al-Balad neighborhood of Dara'a city represented a break from past sieges. The July-September siege of Dara'a al-Balad between some former opposition fighters and GoS armed forces was the largest and deadliest confrontation in the governorate since the 2018 takeover. The siege (and corresponding violence throughout Dara'a Governorate) ended after a final agreement was reached on 5 September 2021.¹⁵ The high levels of conflict in Dara'a al-Balad and interpreted Russian support for the escalation provided an opportunity for the GoS to implement new settlement agreements across the Governorate.

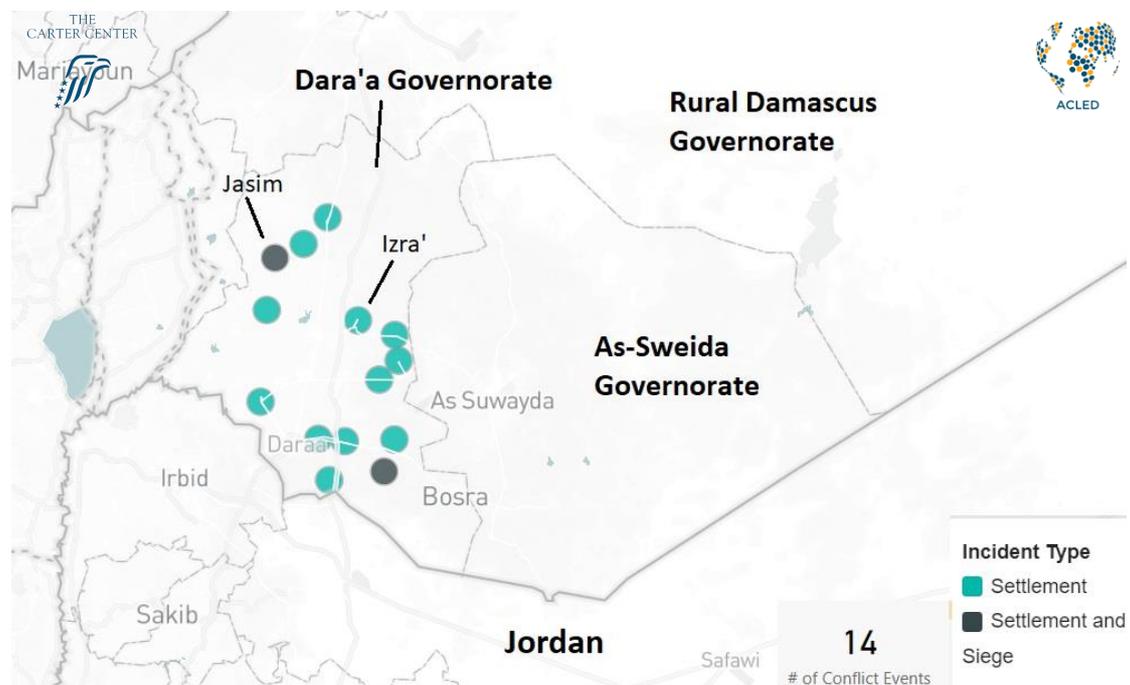


Figure 7: New settlement agreements and sieges in Dara'a Governorate between 1-31 October 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

After the siege of Dara'a al-Balad, GoS armed forces, most notably the 4th Division led by Maher al-Assad, pushed for new settlement agreements across Dara'a Governorate. The new settlement agreements reportedly required additional men to register for possible military conscription, surrender more weapons, and increase the number of GoS armed forces checkpoints in the cities. This effectively increased the presence and power of GoS armed forces in governorate and

¹⁵ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9001a6b8a5254bdc9d32db642add3511>

severely curtailed the power of former opposition groups. Although the new settlement agreements largely avoided eastern Dara'a Governorate, stronghold of the Russian-backed 8th Brigade of the 5th Corps, it seems that the power equation in Dara'a Governorate has shifted. Similar settlement agreements were later implemented in GoS-controlled territory in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate (see below). Despite the new settlement agreements, attacks targeting GoS soldiers or former opposition fighters has not decreased.

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



Figure 8: Attacks against former opposition fighters and GoS armed forces in Dara'a Governorate in 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the reporting period, unidentified armed groups attacked former opposition fighters and GoS soldiers in southern Syria on at least 82 instances. Although the attacks are by unidentified actors, GoS officials and former opposition representatives blame each other for the attacks. This is a continuing problem for both actors, returning after a slight dip to 73 similar attacks last quarter during a drop in activity as all forces concentrated on the siege of Dara'a al-Balad.

Despite new settlement deals in Dara'a Governorate, reported attacks continued to rise during the last quarter of 2021. Dara'a Governorate accounted for 72 of the reported attacks. Notably, the reported attacks against former opposition fighters doubled from the 3rd quarter, with a total of 20 attacks. Among those who have been assassinated included prominent former opposition leader who had regularly come into conflict with GoS armed forces.¹⁶ In the past, attacks by unidentified actors have led to sieges and high tensions between the former opposition and GoS armed forces. Early indications point to the failure of the new settlement to stem violence.

Confrontations in As-Sweida

¹⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/534679>

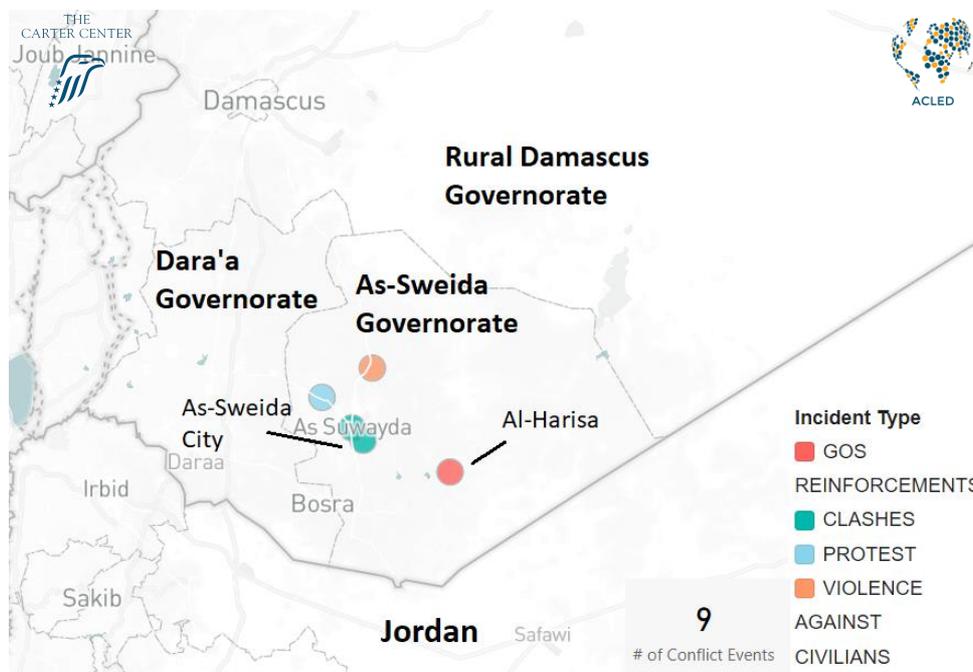


Figure 9: Incidents between local As-Sweida militias against GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias between October-December 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Since its formation in July 2021, the Liwa Party and its armed formation, “The Counter-Terrorism Force” (CTF) has regularly confronted GoS armed forces, especially the GoS-backed National Defense Forces (NDF). In the previous quarter, tensions between the NDF and CTF led to standoffs and clashes between the two groups, particularly in Al-Raha and Al-Harisa in As-Sweida Governorate. During the final quarter of 2021, the CTF and NDF would clash multiple times in Al-Raha and Al-Harissa.¹⁷ Particularly in Al-Raha, the deteriorating security situation led local members of the CTF and Men of Dignity armed group to form the “Al-Raha Youth Movement” to take over the security responsibilities in the town.¹⁸

In November 2021, tensions escalated after the NDF and local militias clashed over the latter cutting trees near a GoS checkpoint on the outskirts of As-Sweida city. The NDF would try to arrest the wounded militia fighters at a hospital in As-Sweida city, leading to multiple clashes as local militias fought back. The NDF and the CTF accused the other of instigating tensions and violence in As-Sweida city and nearby villages.¹⁹ Another round of violence flared up in December 2021 as GoS armed forces mobilized around As-Sweida city. Local militia groups clashed with GoS armed forces after the latter reportedly shot at protestors.²⁰ Although conflict in As-Sweida is significantly lower than neighboring Dara’a Governorate or most of the regions in northwest or northeast Syria, the last two quarters have seen a notable increase in tensions between local armed groups and GoS armed forces. Despite avoiding significant violence throughout much of the Syrian conflict, anger and dissatisfaction at the GoS has increased in recent years.

¹⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/524535>

¹⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/517533>

¹⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/527504>

²⁰ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/533812>,
<https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/533629>

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Unlike the two other regions covered above, conflict intensity rose in northeast Syria during the final quarter of 2021. Recorded conflict events rose from 828 last quarter to 895 in the final quarter of 2021. The increase in conflict activity was partially due to the increased reports of ISIS-related conflict events. A breakdown of these events is collected the table below:

Conflict Events in Northeast Syria (Q4 2021 and Changes)		
Governorate	2021 Q4	Change from Q3 (%)
Deir-ez-Zor	282	+49 (+21%)
Ar-Raqqah	261	+10 (+4%)
Al-Hassakah	352	+8 (+2%)
Northeast Overall	895	+67 (+8%)

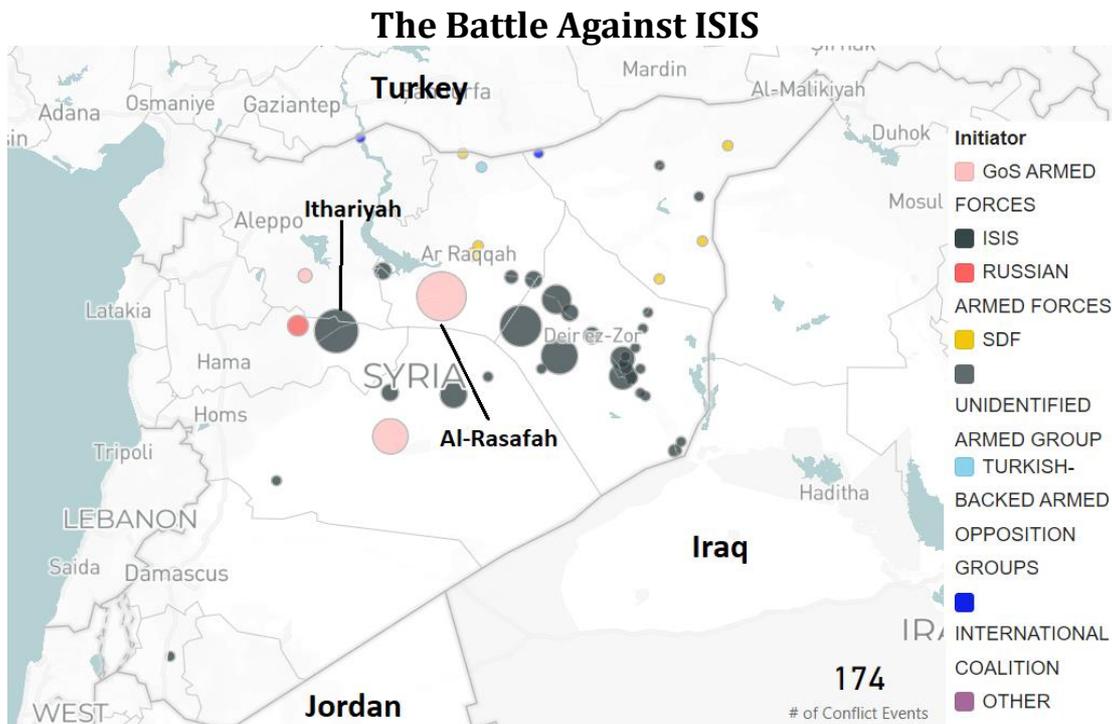


Figure 10: Incidents involving ISIS between October-December 2021. Largest bubble represents 37 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the last quarter of 2021, ISIS-related conflict events increased across Syria, reverting from the downward trend evident in the previous quarter. As noted in the third quarter report, analysts believe that the previous downward trend was

due to ISIS focusing on rebuilding its strength in central Syria.²¹ Within the ACLED/TCC dataset, there were 174 ISIS-related events, comprised of clashes, shelling, and aerial bombardment. Fifty-six of these conflict events, primarily in the form of armed clashes with pro-government forces, as well as Kurdish groups, were initiated on the side of ISIS. One hundred and five of this quarter's conflict events were initiated by the GoS and Russia, predominantly in the form of shelling and aerial bombardments against ISIS. ISIS activity remains predominantly concentrated in the Badia desert region, encompassing parts of Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo Governorates.

Settlements in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate

Following the conclusion of settlements in Dara'a Governorate (see above), the Baath party branch in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate called for a similar process to be enacted. Similar to Dara'a settlement deals, individuals were allowed to register with the GoS to defer military conscription and be allowed to move without fear of arrest.²² Between 14 November till the end of 2021, the GoS began settlement deals in Deir-ez-Zor city, Al-Mayadin, and Al-Bukamal within GoS-controlled territory. Unlike the settlement deals in Dara'a Governorate which were aimed at reducing the power of the former opposition, the settlement deals were reportedly focused towards individuals living within the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) territory. Some Deir-ez-Zor residents reportedly considered registering themselves for settlement as a contingency in case future conflict or negotiations results in a GoS takeover.²³

The SDF and its Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES) condemned the settlement process. In addition, AANES warned its employees that any employee found conducting a settlement with the GoS would be fired and prevented from any future work with any AANES institution.²⁴ In response, the SDF temporarily closed its river crossings with the GoS-controlled territory.²⁵ The SDF commander-in-general Mazloum Abdi sought to alleviate concerns by reassuring Deir-ez-Zor residents that they would be included in all negotiations with GoS.²⁶

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

###

²¹ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamic-state-under-reporting-central-syria-misdirection-misinformation-or#pt12>

²² <https://tinyurl.com/ytp65sfw>, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=254404>

²³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/533478>

²⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/526820>

²⁵ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/529897>

²⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/533478>