



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 13 July - 19 July 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | There was a decrease in armed clashes between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces and Kurdish armed forces on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other. Russia conducted airstrikes in the region after an attack on the Turkish-Russian joint patrol in Idlib Governorate. Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham clashed with ISIS in Idlib Governorate. New measures were implemented in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates to stop the spread of COVID-19.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Reported COVID-19 cases continued to rise across GoS-controlled territory. GoS armed forces and the Russian air force clashed with ISIS in Homs Governorate. Attacks against GoS officials and former opposition fighters continued this week. Reports of violence against civilians decreased across the region. On 19 July, Syria held parliamentary elections in GoS-controlled territory.
- **NORTHEAST** | The Syrian Democratic Forces and US forces announced a new campaign against ISIS in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The number of protests in the region declined. The use of remote-controlled explosives by unidentified gunmen increased this week. Turkish and Russian armed forces increased their military presence in the region.

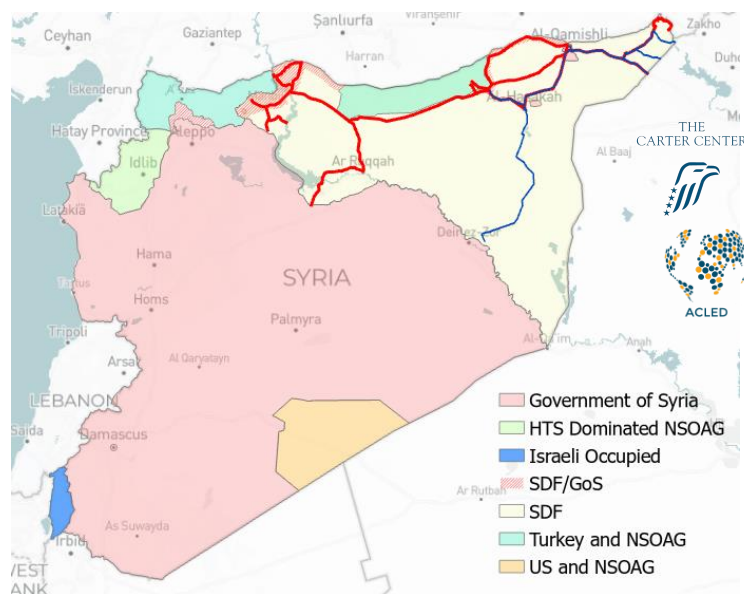


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 19 July 2020. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

There was a decrease in recorded armed clashes between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces, GoS-backed militias,² and Kurdish armed groups on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other. On 15 July, Turkish-backed armed opposition groups clashed with the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-affiliated Menbij Military Council in Tokhar al-Kabeer, Aleppo Governorate. On 18 July, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with armed opposition groups on the Al-Sirmaniyah frontline in Hama Governorate. This is the lowest level of armed clashes, only 2, between GoS armed forces and Kurdish armed forces on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other since the last week of May.

Russian armed forces conducted airstrikes in the region after the Turkish-Russian joint patrol was attacked in Idlib Governorate. On 14 July, an improvised explosive device (IED) hit the joint Russian and Turkish patrol, reportedly injuring three Russian soldiers and some Turkish soldiers.³ The explosion occurred on the M4 highway near Ariha in Idlib Governorate.⁴ A previously unknown Chechen armed opposition group, the Khattab al-Shishani Brigades, claimed responsibility for the attack.⁵ After the attack, Russia and GoS carried out air strikes and artillery bombardment in opposition-controlled areas in Latakia and Idlib Governorate,⁶ including strikes in Jabal al-Zawiyah, Idlib Governorate, the first Russian airstrikes in the area since the start of the 5 March ceasefire.⁷ Following the bombardment, civilians fled the affected areas of Jabal al-Zawiya. GoS artillery bombardment along with Russian air strikes continued to target across the region, with 79 recorded conflict events, the highest level since the 5 March ceasefire. Since 5 March, there have been 700 recorded artillery or air strikes by the GoS and Russia in the region (see figure 2).

¹ Figure 1 denotes dominant actors' control and influence. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah maintain a presence in Syrian government-controlled territory. Non-state organized armed groups (NSOAG), including the Kurdish dominated SDF and a variety of other groups operate in areas not under GoS control. The US continues to have a presence in the SDF-controlled east of the country. The area along the junction of the Syrian border with Iraq and Jordan is a 55km de-confliction zone, established by the US-led coalition that also includes a number of aligned local armed groups. Data collected is by the publicly available project [ACLED](https://www.acled.org/).

² 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.

³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/400943>

⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/401224>

⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/vykdz8mu>

⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/400943>

⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/401023>

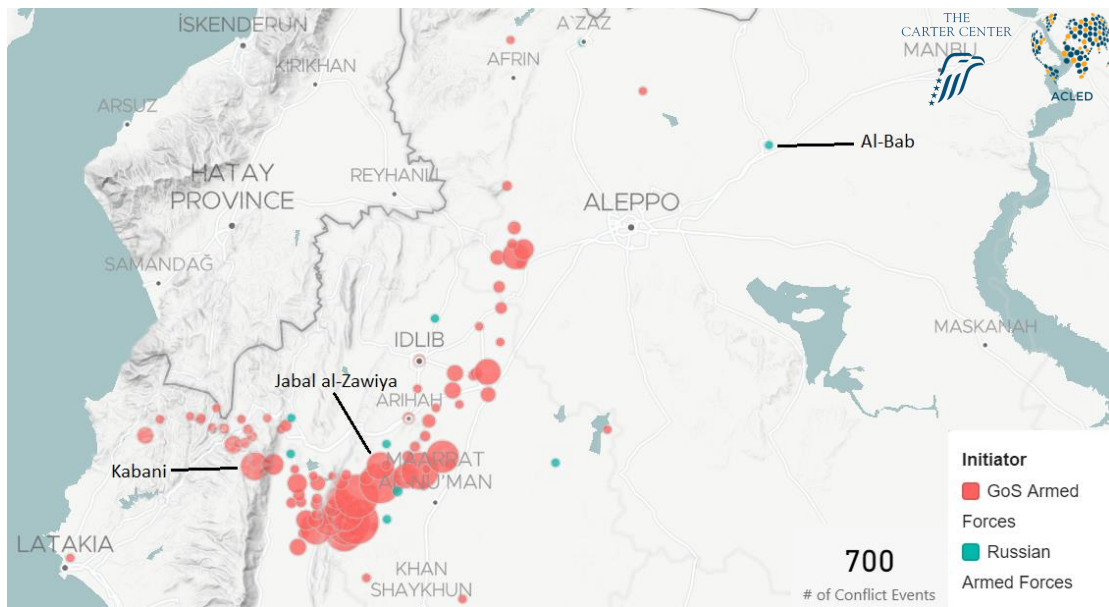


Figure 2: GoS and Russian artillery bombardments and air strikes in northeast Syria since 5 March 2020. Largest bubble equals 61 conflict events. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

On 13 July, HTS raided an ISIS cell in Sarmin, Idlib Governorate. During the raid, HTS killed a prominent ISIS commander and arrested some ISIS fighters.⁸ On 15 July, HTS carried out additional raids on ISIS cells in Sarmin and Sarmada in Idlib Governorate. In recent weeks, HTS has attacked or arrested rivals and leaders in hardline armed opposition groups to consolidate its control of Idlib Governorate.

New measures were implemented in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates to stop the spread of COVID-19. On 13 July, the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey announced that it would remain closed for travelers until 21 July. Commercial and humanitarian goods were exempt from this closure.⁹ On 18 July, the HTS-dominated Salvation Government prohibited all public gatherings.¹⁰ As of 19 July, there were 18 reported cases in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates.¹¹

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Reported COVID-19 cases continued to rise across GoS-controlled territory. On 14 July, a religious leader died from the virus in Damascus city.¹² The death of multiple religious scholars in Damascus this week has fueled speculation of COVID-19 spread within mosques under GoS-controlled territory.¹³ However, GoS officials have not confirmed that these were COVID-related deaths.¹⁴ As of 17 July, official statistics reported that there were 496 COVID-19 cases and 25 deaths.¹⁵

Attacks against GoS officials and former opposition fighters continued this week. On 13 July, unidentified gunmen killed a former GoS soldier in Um Walad, Dara'a

⁸ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21328>

⁹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21301>

¹⁰ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21375>

¹¹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21394>

¹² <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/402144>

¹³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/402144>

¹⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/y66eo6db>

¹⁵ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=197452>

Governorate. The same day, GoS armed forces clashed with unidentified gunmen near a GoS post in Sahm El Golan, western Dara'a Governorate. On 14 July, unidentified gunmen stormed a shop and killed 2 people in Jasim, Dara'a Governorate. The 2 killed were alleged collaborators with GoS armed forces. The same day, a GoS military intelligence unit clashed with unidentified gunmen after the gunmen attacked a checkpoint in Kanaker, Rural Damascus Governorate. Three GoS military intelligence officers were wounded during the clashes. On 15 July, unidentified gunmen killed a former opposition fighter near Mzeireb in Dara'a Governorate. The same day, IEDs planted by unidentified gunmen targeted GoS soldiers and intelligence officials in Um Elmayathen and Sa'sa, Dara'a Governorate and Rural Damascus Governorate respectively. On 16 July, unidentified gunmen used IEDs to attack a GoS armed forces checkpoint in western Dara'a, and a GoS air force intelligence checkpoint in Quneitra Governorate. On 17 July, a former opposition fighter killed a GoS armed forces officer at a checkpoint near Talbiseh city in Homs Governorate. Following this incident, GoS intelligence forces arrested five individuals related to the former opposition fighter. On 18 July, an unidentified armed group killed a GoS General Intelligence officer and injured another in the Nahr Aysha area of Damascus city. The attack was claimed by the armed opposition group Saraya Qasiyon. The same day, unidentified gunmen attacked a GoS police station in Jasim, Dara'a Governorate. The attack injured several police officers. On 19 July, unidentified gunmen ambushed a GoS armed forces officer near Al-Harak in Dara'a Governorate.¹⁶

GoS armed forces and the Russian air force clashes with ISIS continued near Sokneh in Homs Governorate. On 13 July, GoS armed forces clashed with ISIS fighters by the Badia desert near Sokhneh town in Homs Governorate. The clashes were accompanied by Russian airstrikes on ISIS positions. Additional clashes and airstrikes were reported on 18 July.

Levels of violence against civilians decreased during the reporting period. On 13 July, unidentified gunmen abducted a teenage girl in Saqba, Rural Damascus Governorate. On 14 July, a landmine planted by an unidentified armed group exploded in Sheikh Meskine in northern Dara'a Governorate. The explosion killed 4 civilians, including 2 children. On 17 July, unidentified gunmen killed a civilian in a shop in Um Elmayathen, Dara'a Governorate. Since 1 January 2020, there have been 216 recorded events of violence against civilians in southern and central Syria. Most of these attacks were conducted by unidentified armed groups (see figure 3).

¹⁶ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21390>

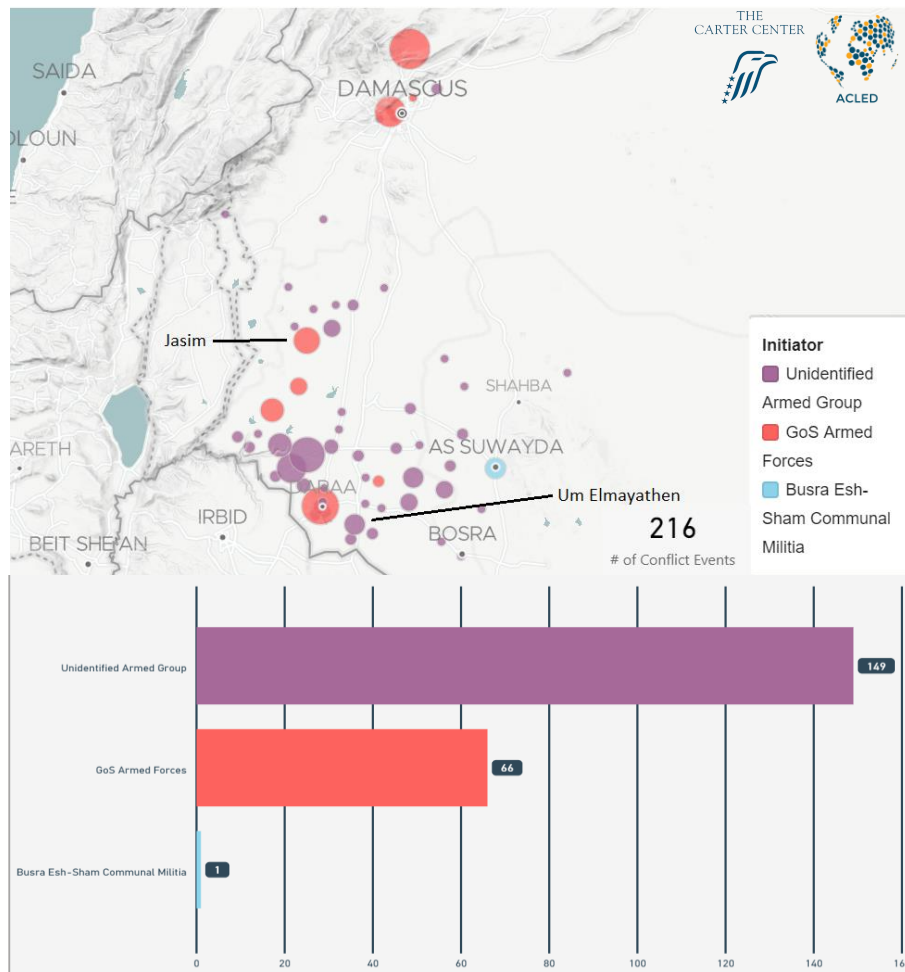


Figure 3: Violence against civilians since 1 January 2020. Largest bubble equals 50 conflict events. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

On 19 July, the third Syrian election since the start of the civil war was held in GoS-controlled territory. The parliamentary elections were originally scheduled to be held on 13 April but was postponed twice due to COVID-19 concerns.¹⁷ Syrian opposition groups¹⁸ and international critics characterized the elections neither free nor fair.¹⁹ A variety of candidates competed for the 250 seats in the Syrian Parliament. This included prominent businessmen, religious clerics, tribal leaders, militia commanders, and artists.²⁰ Voter turnout was estimated at 33%, compared to a 57% turnout rate for 2016's election.²¹

NORTHEAST SYRIA

ISIS activity continued during the reporting period, as the SDF and US forces announced a new campaign against the group. On 13 July, SDF fighters and US forces arrested a former ISIS fighter in Al-Burtoqala in northern Deir-ez-Zor

¹⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/syria-launches-parliamentary-elections-war-economic-woes-200718174903833.html>

¹⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/y6fzbppl>

¹⁹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/where-democracy-here-defiant-assad-holds-parliamentary-elections-syria-n1234286>

²⁰ <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/war-profiteers-in-syria-enter-politics/>

²¹ <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/ruling-baath-party-wins-syria-parliamentary-elections-38296>

Governorate. On 17 July, an ISIS planted landmine exploded in Kishiyeh, southeastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, injuring a child. The same day, the SDF and US forces announced another anti-ISIS campaign, this time focusing on ISIS cells operating in SDF-controlled areas in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate adjacent to GoS-controlled territory.²² The SDF and US armed forces conducted searches in Basira, Zir, and other areas across the governorate. On 18 July, an old landmine planted by ISIS detonated in Mansura town in Ar-Raqqa Governorate, killing 2 civilians. As of 19 July, the SDF announced that it had arrested 28 suspected ISIS fighters during its raids in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.²³ The SDF had previously finished its first anti-ISIS campaign on 10 June.

The number of protests in the region declined during the reporting period. On 15 July, members of the Shaitat tribe demonstrated in Abu Hamam, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, against the SDF's new educational curriculum, alleging that it was contradictory to local customs. The same day, GoS supporters held a silent demonstration against Turkish and US presence in Syria in Quamishli city, Al-Hassakah Governorate. On 16 July, GoS supporters protested against the Turkish and US presence in Syria in Abu Thweel town to the south of Quamishli, Al-Hassakah Governorate. On 17 July, locals in Al-Jurdi al-Gharbi, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, demonstrated against the SDF's education curriculum. The SDF intervened, reportedly arresting one protester. The same day, locals in Al-Azba, northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, called for the toppling of GoS. On 18 July, GoS supporters Tal Farfara near Quamishli, Al-Hassakah Governorate, protested against Turkish and US forces in the country.

Reports of remotely controlled explosives use by unidentified gunmen increased this week. On 13 July, an IED planted by an unidentified armed group exploded near a SDF vehicle in eastern Ar-Raqqa city, Ar-Raqqa Governorate. On 14 July, 4 IEDs planted by an unidentified armed group exploded in Ar-Raqqa city. There were no reported fatalities or casualties. On 16 July, an IED planted by an unidentified armed group exploded near Markada town in Al-Hassakah Governorate. The next day, unidentified fighters used an IED to attack a SDF military vehicle near Amuda city, Al-Hassakah Governorate. On 18 July, an old landmine planted by an unidentified armed group killed 2 children in Hunaida, eastern Ar-Raqqa Governorate. On 18 July, a landmine near Abu Hamam in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate injured a child. The same day, an IED planted by an unidentified armed group killed a GoS armed forces officer near Mahkan in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Since 1 January 2020, there have been 276 recorded instances of remote controlled explosive use in northeastern Syria (see figure 4).

²² <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/401897>

²³ <https://hawarnews.com/ar/haber/rda-alirhab-tstmr-waatqal-akthr-mn-28-mrtzq-wmshtbh-bh-h36689.html>

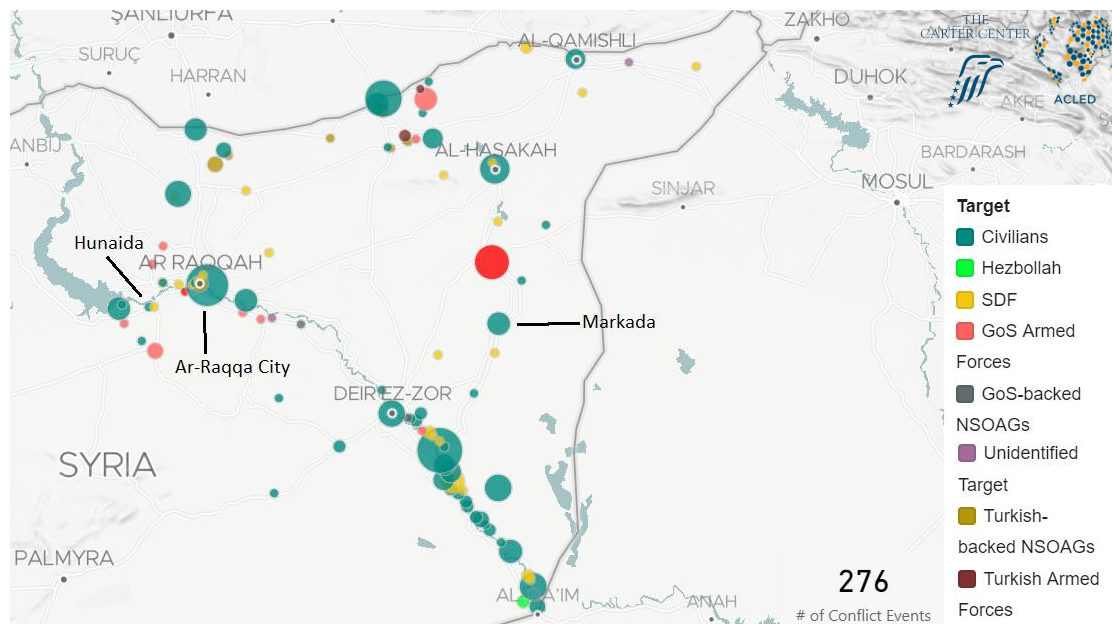


Figure 4: Remote explosive and IED use in northeast Syria since 1 January 2020. Largest bubble equals 19 conflict events. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

Turkish and Russian armed forces increased their military presence in the region. On 16 July, Russian armed forces established a new base near the border with Turkey in Al-Malikeyyeh, Al-Hassakah Governorate. Russian armed forces previously built a new base in the region on 28 May in Qasir Diab, Al-Hassakah Governorate. However, opposition from locals and US armed forces compelled the Russians to withdraw from the base. On 17 July, Turkish armed forces establish a new base in the western countryside of Tell Abiad in Ar-Raqqa Governorate.

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