



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 20 July - 26 July 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Armed clashes continued between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces, GoS-backed militias and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other. A Turkish-Russian joint patrol reached Ain al Hawr for the first time. More military buildup was reported in northeastern Syria. COVID-19 cases continued to spread around the region. Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) clashed with former opposition fighters in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | The Israeli air force attacked GoS armed forces and Iranian-backed militias in the region. A US fighter jet flew close to an Iranian passenger plane over Syrian airspace. Attacks on GoS armed forces and former opposition fighters continued across Dara'a Governorate. Tensions resurfaced between President Bashar Assad and Rami Makhlouf. COVID-19 cases increased in GoS-controlled territory.
- **NORTHEAST** | ISIS attacks continued across northeast Syria. A US soldier died in a road accident in Al-Hassakah Governorate. New COVID-19 cases were reported. The predominantly Kurdish-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) faced criticism over its conduct. Unidentified armed groups and Turkish armed forces continued to attack the SDF.

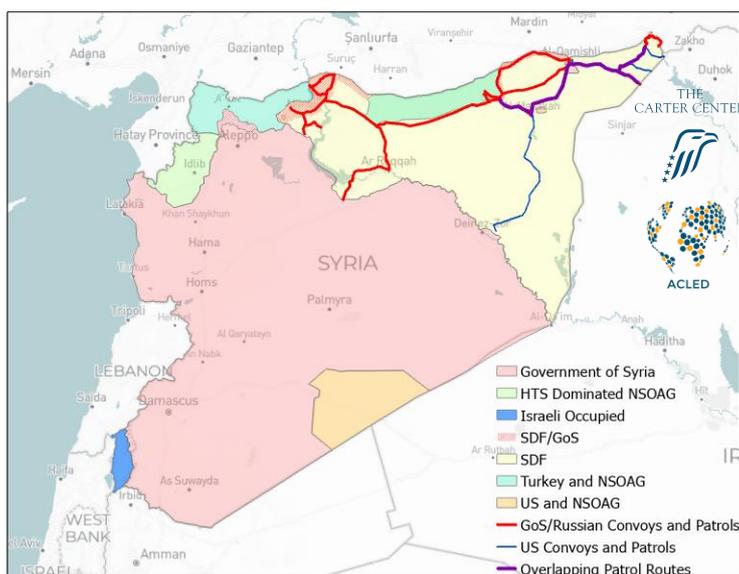


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 26 July 2020.-NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see the footnote on page 2.

The Carter Center’s areas of control map depicts territorial control in Syria by the main sides of the conflict. While ‘control’ is difficult to determine in a complex, dynamic conflict, the Syria team defines territorial control as an entity having power over use of force as well as civil/administrative functions in an area. The areas depicted in the map generally meet this definition. 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 US and Russian forces regularly have patrolled 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.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

Clashes between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces, GoS-backed militias,² and the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other continued this week. On 20 July, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with Turkish-backed armed opposition groups on the Kafr Amma and Tadil frontlines in Aleppo Governorate. The clashes were accompanied by a shelling exchange between the two sides. On 21 July, the YPG clashed with Turkish-backed armed opposition groups on the Maraanaz frontline, Aleppo Governorate. On 22 July, Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) repelled a GoS armed forces attack in Kafr Nobol, Idlib Governorate. The next day, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with armed opposition groups on the Ankawi front in northern Hama Governorate. On 26 July, GoS armed forces clashed with the opposition Fatah al-Mubin Operations Room³ on the Kafr Battikh frontline in southern Idlib Governorate. During the clashes, armed opposition fighters reportedly destroyed a GoS tank.⁴

During the reporting week, GoS armed forces, Turkish armed forces, and armed opposition groups sent reinforcements to the frontlines in northwest Syria. Between 20 and 24 July, Turkish armed forces convoys entered Syria through the Kafr Lusin border crossing, northern Idleb Governorate, to reinforce their positions across the region. On 23 July, GoS armed forces were deployed to the frontline areas near Jabal al-Zawiya, Idlib Governorate,⁵ including units from the elite Tiger Forces as well as the Russian-backed 5th Corps.⁶ On 24 July, HTS and

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 [ACLEED](#).

² Pro-GoS or 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 A coalition of armed opposition groups, including Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Turkish-backed opposition National Liberation Front, and Jaysh al-Izza.

⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/403928>

⁵ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/massive-column-of-syrian-army-reinforcements-head-to-idlib-for-new-offensive-video/>

⁶ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-armys-elite-25th-division-deploys-to-southern-idlib-with-heavy-weapons/>

Ahrar al-Sham brought military reinforcements to the frontlines in southern Idlib Governorate. The same day, GoS armed forces sent reinforcements to the frontline areas in the Al-Ghab plain in northern Hama Governorate. The various armed parties in the region have reinforced their positions along the frontlines in recent weeks as they fear a new military operation is imminent in Idlib Governorate.⁷

For the first time, the joint Turkish and Russian armed forces patrol covered the full agreed upon length of the M4 highway in Idlib Governorate. On 22 July, the joint patrol began in Turnabah in eastern Idlib Governorate and reached Ain al Hawr (see figure 2).⁸ The joint patrol involved both land vehicles as well as aircraft from both parties. Prior to the patrol, Turkish armed forces reportedly disarmed two improvised explosive devices (IEDs) near the entrance of Ariha city. The Turkish-Russian joint patrols were mandated by the 5 March ceasefire agreement.

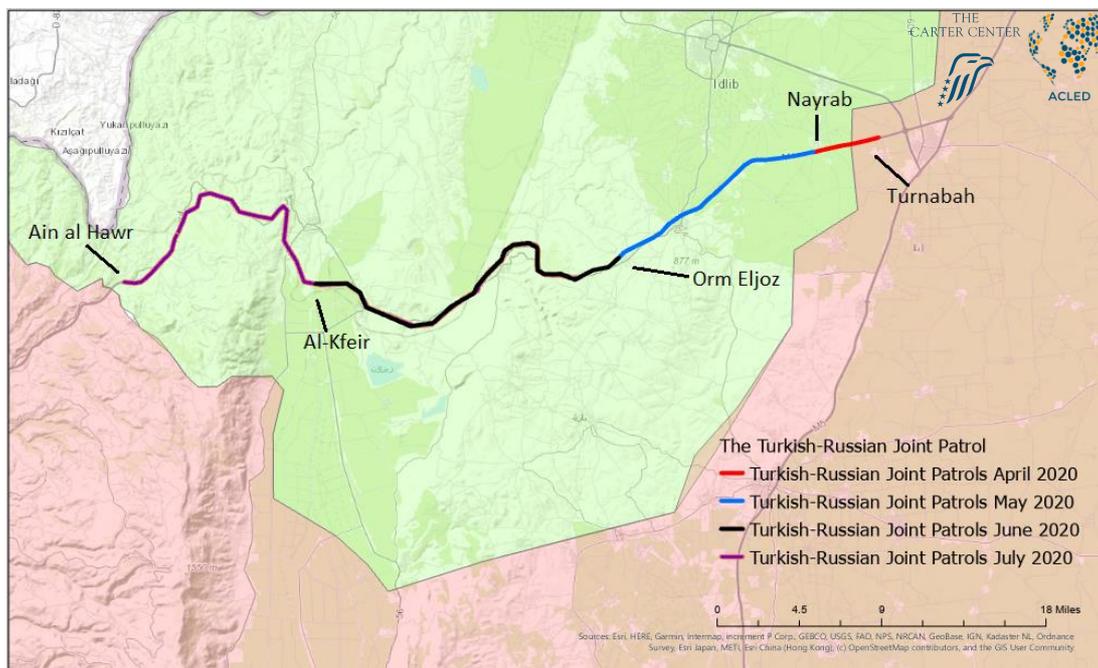


Figure 2: The Turkish-Russian Joint Patrol on the M4 Highway in Idlib Governorate. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

COVID-19 cases continued to spread around the region. On 25 July, the HTS-led Salvation Government closed the town of Sarmin in Idlib Governorate following an increase of COVID-19 cases in the town.⁹ The same day, the national hospital in A'zaz, Aleppo Governorate, reopened after confirming that all of its COVID-19 patients had recovered.¹⁰ On 26 July, crossings between Aleppo Governorate and Idlib Governorate were reopened for civilian use.¹¹ The crossings were closed on 17 July to stop the spread of COVID-19. As of 26 July, there were 29 reported COVID-19 cases in northwest Syria.¹² Despite all measures to stop the spread of

⁷ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/massive-column-of-syrian-army-reinforcements-head-to-idlib-for-new-offensive-video/>

⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/402857>

⁹ https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/amp/news/2020/7/26/hts-affiliated-government-seals-off-syrian-town-due-to-coronavirus?_twitter_impression=true

¹⁰ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21502>

¹¹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21503>

¹² <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21515>

COVID-19, analysts are concerned that smuggling by armed opposition groups in the region will exacerbate the spread of the virus.¹³

On 25 July, HTS clashed with former Hurras al-Din (HD) gunmen in Dana and Tal 'Adah, Idlib Governorate, and Atareb, Aleppo Governorate. According to HTS, the clashes were part of an operation to attack a large organized criminal gang in the region. Local accounts report that the operation arrested former HD leader, Abu Yahya al-Jazayri, who was previously reported dead in a US drone strike in June 2019.¹⁴ During the fighting, HTS arrested some fighters,¹⁵ and 2 civilians were killed in the crossfire.¹⁶ In recent weeks, HTS has attacked or arrested rivals and leaders in hardline armed opposition groups to consolidate its control of Idlib Governorate.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

The Israeli air force attacked again GoS armed forces and Iranian-backed¹⁷ militias in the region. On 20 July, Israel conducted multiple air strikes against GoS armed forces and Iranian-backed militias in Damascus, killing 5 militia gunmen, including a Hezbollah fighter.¹⁸ The previous attack in which Israel had killed a Hezbollah fighter in Syria was in August 2019. On 24 July, Israeli helicopters attacked GoS armed forces positions in Quneitra Governorate.¹⁹ The airstrike occurred after an alleged Hezbollah mortar attack into Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.²⁰

On 23 July, US fighter jets intercepted an Iranian passenger plane flying over the al-Tanf area in southern Syria, en route from Tehran to Beirut. According to Iranian reports, the civilian plane tried to avoid the US jets, resulting in injuries to some passengers.²¹ On 24 July, Iran submitted a formal complaint to the International Civil Aviation Organization.²² US forces stated they were investigating the plane to make sure it did not pose a threat to the US base in the al-Tanf region.²³

Attacks on GoS armed forces and former opposition fighters continued across Dara'a Governorate. On 21 July, a suicide bomber attacked a former opposition commander's residence in Dara'a city.²⁴ The attack reportedly killed 2 GoS

¹³ <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/05/smuggling-breaks-coronavirus-preventive-measures-in-northern-syria/?so=related>

¹⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/403895>

¹⁵ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21495>

¹⁶ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21507>

¹⁷ Pro-Iranian or Iranian-backed militias refers to armed groups that are supported by Iran, like Hezbollah, and include militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan.

¹⁸ <https://in.reuters.com/article/syria-security-hezbollah/hezbollah-fighter-killed-in-israeli-strike-near-damascus-death-notice-idINKCN24N0YC?il=0>

¹⁹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21478>

²⁰ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/israeli-helicopters-strike-syrian-army-posts-in-quneitra/>

²¹ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/scary-moment-us-warplane-intercepts-iranian-passenger-aircraft-in-syria-video/>

²² <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/iran-slams-us-interception-of-airliner-as-act-of-terrorism/>

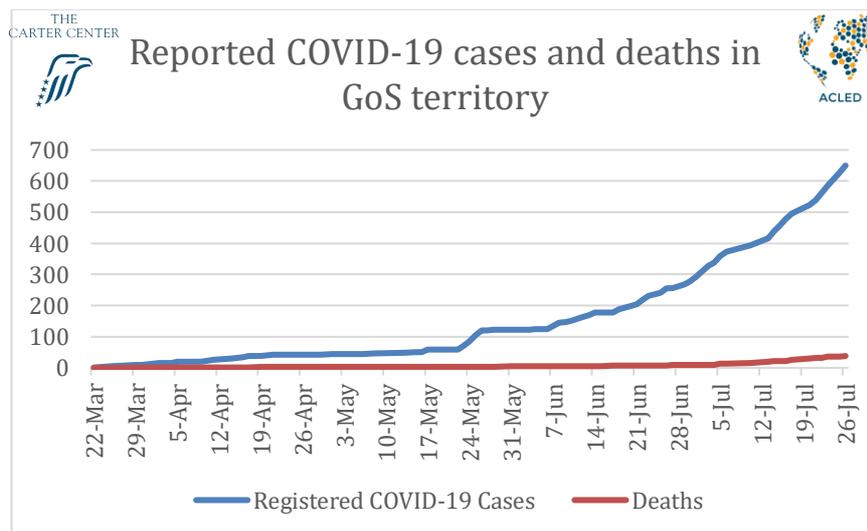
²³ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21470>

²⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/403000>

military intelligence officers. The same day, unidentified gunmen attacked a GoS military intelligence checkpoint in Dara'a city, killing 3 military intelligence officers. On 22 July, unidentified gunmen attacked a Russian-backed 5th Corps fighter and former opposition fighter in Jasim, Dara'a Governorate. The same day, an IED planted by an unidentified armed group targeted a GoS armed forces vehicle near Jasim. On 23 July, unidentified gunmen attacked a GoS air force intelligence position near the 52nd Armored Brigade in Dara'a Governorate. On 24 July, unidentified gunmen killed a GoS military intelligence officer in Dara'a city. The same day, unidentified gunmen killed a former opposition fighter in Tafas, Dara'a Governorate.

Tensions between President Bashar Assad and Rami Makhlouf continued this week. On 20 July, GoS intelligence services arrested 40 army and intelligence officers allegedly loyal to Rami Makhlouf.²⁵ On 26 July, Sham Holding Company's assets were confiscated following a GoS judicial court order, citing tax evasion as the reason. The Sham Holding Company is one of the largest companies owned by the Makhlouf family.²⁶ Following the judicial order, Rami Makhlouf released a social media post claiming that the role of Sham Holding and other companies was to evade US sanctions.²⁷ The public dispute between Rami Makhlouf and President Assad has been ongoing since May.

The largest one week increase in COVID-19 cases was reported in GoS-controlled territory, with 522 reported cases on 20 July. By 26 July, there were 650 COVID-19 cases. As of 26 July, there were 38 reported deaths due to COVID-19 in GoS-controlled territory, but reports allege that the number of cases is higher than reported.²⁸ The rate of COVID-19 spread has increased in recent weeks (see figure 3).



²⁵ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21403>

²⁶ <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2020/07/26/syria-sham-holding-another-company-of-rami-makhlouf-placed-under-judicial-custody/>

²⁷ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/7/27/syrian-tycoon-says-targeted-companies-were-evading-us-sanctions>

²⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/coronavirus-syria-cases-assad/2020/07/18/732573ec-c14a-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0_story.html

Figure 3: Reported COVID-19 cases and deaths in GoS-controlled territory since 22 March 2020. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

ISIS attacks continued across northeast Syria during the reporting period. On 20 July, two ISIS fighters killed a fighter from the predominantly Kurdish-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Hajin town, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 23 July, an ISIS planted landmine killed a civilian in Baghuz, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 24 July, ISIS fighters ambushed GoS-backed National Defense Forces (NDF) and Quds Brigade militia fighters in the Bishri Mountain area, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. A Quds Brigade commander was reportedly killed during the clashes.²⁹ There have been 96 ISIS attacks since 1 January 2020 in northeastern Syria, predominately focused around Deir-ez-Zor Governorate (see figure 4).

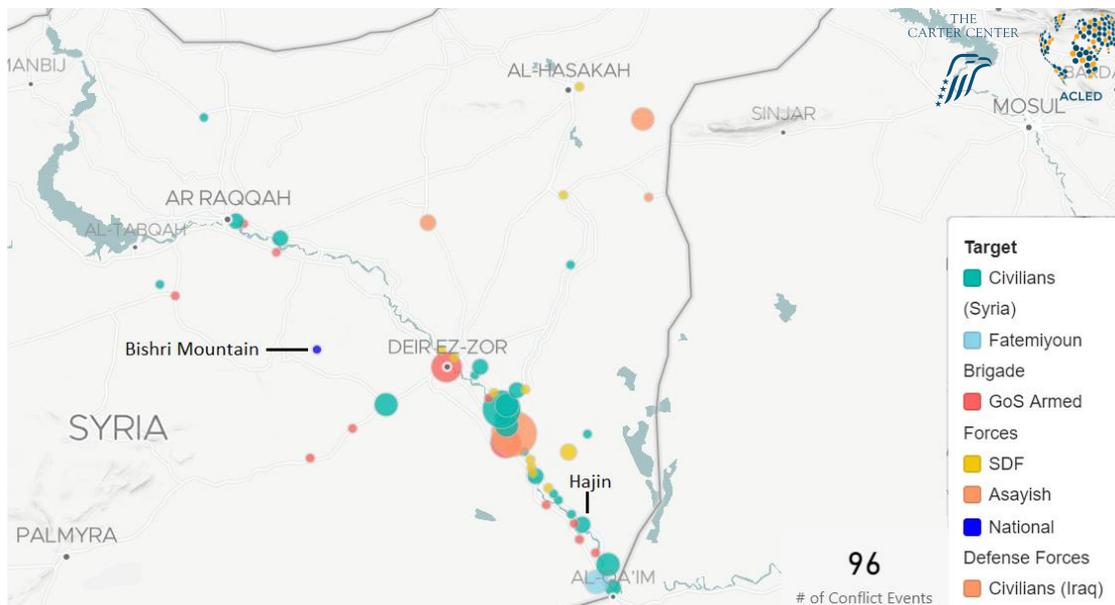


Figure 4: ISIS attacks in northeast Syrian since 1 January 2020. Largest bubble represents 9 conflict events. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

On 21 July, during a patrol in northern Al-Hassakah Governorate, a US military vehicle overturned, killing a US soldier inside.³⁰ This was the first reported death of a US soldier in Syria since 5 April.

New COVID-19 cases were reported in the region. On 23 July, the Kurdish-run Autonomous Administration announced 4 new COVID-19 cases in Al-Hassakah Governorate.³¹ These were the first reported COVID-19 cases in the region since April.³² On 26 July, a suspected COVID-19 case was found in the al-Hol camp in eastern Al-Hassakah Governorate.³³ If confirmed, this would be the first COVID-19 case in the crowded camp.

²⁹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21492>

³⁰ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/402922>

³¹ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/230720202>

³² <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/3077065b-7fc0-4ef8-b689-09d05ddb9ce6>

³³ <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/dc40deb9-6d03-45ad-bc77-5fed8406d57a>

The SDF faced criticism over its conduct. On 20 July, villagers in Al-Shahail, al-Busayrah, Dhiban, Merkada, and other towns in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate criticized the SDF for looting property during the previous week's anti-ISIS campaign.³⁴ The same day, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Coalition issued a statement criticizing the conduct of the SDF during its recent anti-ISIS campaign.³⁵ On 22 July, 140 Arab fighters in Al-Shahail reportedly left the SDF in protest for perceived discrimination against them.³⁶ Arab tribes in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate formed a political body on 12 July to pressure the SDF regarding Arab interests.³⁷ The SDF has often faced internal criticism over the perceived discrimination against Arabs.³⁸

Attacks by unidentified armed groups and Turkish armed forces against the SDF continued during the reporting period. On 20 July, Turkish armed forces used rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) to attack the Roj agricultural center in Qamashli city, Al-Hassakah Governorate. The attack injured two SDF-affiliated Asayish guards. On 21 July, an IED planted by an unidentified armed group killed 2 SDF fighters and a French mine expert in Al-Tabqa, Ar-Raqqa Governorate. On 23 July, unidentified gunmen killed a SDF fighter in Sabka, central Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The same day, Turkish armed forces attacked another agricultural center in Qamashli city, wounding 2 more Asayish guards. On 23 July, unidentified fighters attacked a SDF military position in Ar-Raqqa city, killing 1 SDF fighter. On 24 July, Turkish drones targeted a SDF checkpoint near Dardara in Al-Hassakah Governorate. The same day, an unidentified armed group attacked a SDF checkpoint in Sweidan Jazira, eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 25 July, unidentified gunmen attacked a SDF military vehicle in Jaabar, western Ar-Raqqa Governorate. In 2020, there have been 344 recorded attacks against the SDF in northeastern Syria.

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³⁴ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21404>

³⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/yyhj69ee>

³⁶ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21442>

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<https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/125557><https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/125557>

³⁸ <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/what-behind-protests-against-us-backed-forces-eastern-syria>