

NORTHWEST SYRIA

On 3 December, Government of Syria (GoS) forces re-captured Ajaz, Istablat, Ras al Ward, and Suruj villages from the opposition’s National Liberation Front (NLF)² after a surprise and brief take-over of these areas by the NLF in late November. GoS also advanced in western areas of Um al Tinah a day later (Figure 2). No further advances were recorded for the remainder of the reporting period.

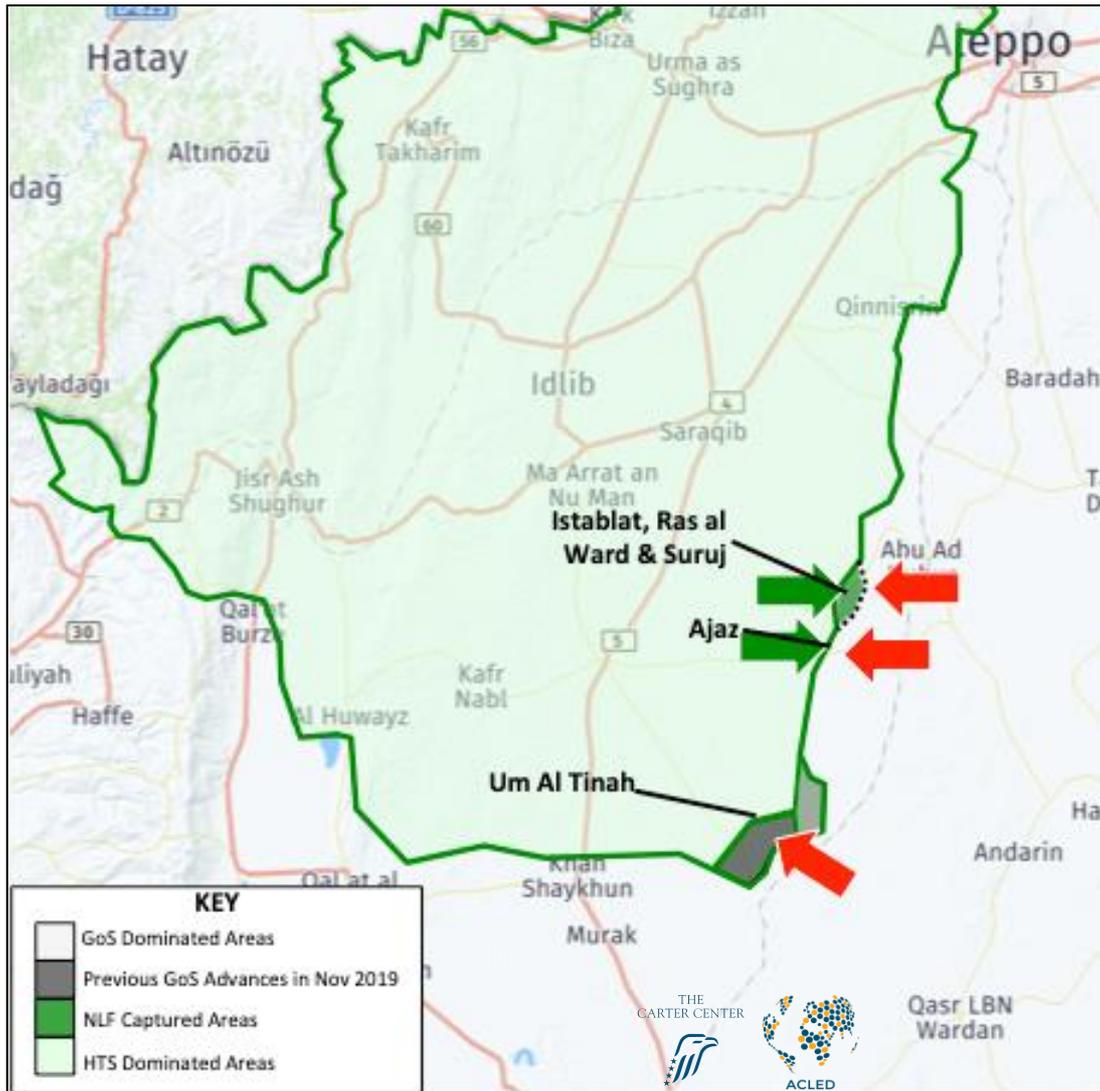


Figure 2: GoS advances in Idlib this week. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

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 Syrian government control. The US continues to have a presence in the SDF-controlled east of the country. The area along the 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.

² The NLF is part of the newly formed Syrian National Army, a Turkish-backed entity made up of hundreds of non-aligned or formerly HTS aligned-armed opposition groups and currently under the control of the opposition Syrian Interim Government.

Civilians demonstrated against HTS rule in Idleb City, Maraat al Numan, and Saraqeb on 29 November and 6 December. Friday protests against HTS and its civilian body, the Salvation Government, have been increasingly common in the latter half of 2019. They are often held in areas with a strong history of civil society activity.

Coinciding with the protests, HTS conducted a number of security operations throughout the reporting period. In Maraat al Numan, the group detained one of its local commanders for their involvement in a recent increase in taxes and fuel prices. In Athmeh and Darkosh towns, HTS arrested a local sheikh and civil society activist. The group also executed three civilians accused of witchcraft in Anjara and a woman accused of adultery in Idleb city. The group has regularly detained or executed individuals it perceives as a threat to its dominance, especially following periods of anti-HTS demonstrations in the northwest.

In the Tal Rifaat area,³ conflict between the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Turkish forces and Turkish-aligned opposition armed groups increased this reporting period. Shelling affected 16 areas⁴ and there were armed clashes in seven frontline areas.⁵ Although temporary increases in conflict activity are common in the area, the previous two months saw the highest monthly counts of conflict events in the pocket in 2019 to date (Figure 3).

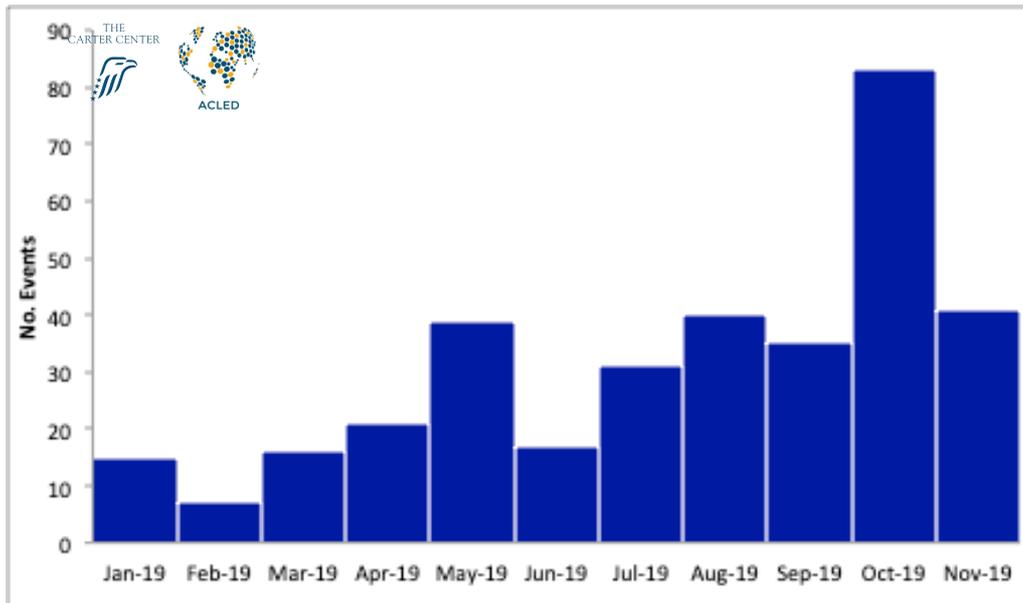


Figure 3: Conflict levels in the Tal Rifaat pocket in 2019. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

In the Turkish-occupied areas of Aleppo Governorate⁶, improvised explosive

³ The Tal Rifaat area is under joint control of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and GoS forces since late 2016. Russian forces also maintain a presence and conduct regular patrols.

⁴ Ain Daqneh, Alqamiyyeh, Azzaz (x6), Barad, Kafr Antoun, Kafr Kalbein, Kafr Khasher, Malikiyeh (x2), Maraanaz (x2), Mare’, Menagh Airbase, Sad al Shahba, Sharan, Shawarighat al Arz (x2), Tal Madeeq, and Tal Rifaat.

⁵ Barad, Kafr Kalbein (x2), Kafr Khasher (x2), Kaljbrin, Harbel, Mare’, and Tal Malid frontlines.

⁶ Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch Areas.

device (IED) attacks against Turkish-backed groups increased this period. Devices detonated against a Jaish al Sharqiya vehicle in Jarablus City, against Sham Corps vehicles in the Ahsrafiyeh area of Afrin city and Azaz town, and against the opposition's Syrian National Army vehicles in Al Bab and Toqil. Three vehicle-borne IEDs also detonated in Afrin (x2) and Jarablus. The attack in Jarablus targeted a Turkish military convoy en route to the nearby Baldaq base. There were just four IED attacks in the previous two-week period.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

For the second consecutive week, civilians demonstrated against Iranian presence in southern Syria. On 30 November, two protests were held at funerals of former opposition members, who had been killed that week in Daraa Al Balad and Tafas. During the protests, demonstrators denounced Iran and Hezbollah's presence in the two towns. In the following week, there were similar protests against Iran in Nasib, Hit, Khanaker, and Karak towns. In the last case, demonstrators also chanted anti-Russian slogans. This is the first anti-Russian protest recorded in Southern Syria in the ACLED dataset.

Small arms fire attacks against GoS-aligned personal continued in southern Syria.⁷ Three IED attacks struck GoS forces along the Hit–Saham al Golan Road, in Daraa City, and Jasim. Violence also affected civilians in southern Syria, where on November 24 the body of a civilian was found between Western Ghariyeh and Kherbet Ghazalah. The body was later identified as a Syrian national, who had been kidnapped a few days earlier and had been visiting from Saudi Arabia. It is the second time a Syrian civilian living in Saudi Arabia has been found killed in the area after a similar [attack](#) in September. Since the summer of 2019, there has been an increased number of attacks against GoS targets, former opposition groups, and civilians in southern Syria (Figure 4).

ISIS activity against GoS forces continued in central areas of the country. On 24 November, an IED detonated on the Wa'er Dam road as a GoS military bus passed. Two days later, a National Defence Force (NDF) vehicle struck a landmine in the Saalu desert. In early December, ISIS fighters captured two GoS soldiers during an ambush against a GoS patrol near Sokhneh town. On 5 December, ISIS also clashed with the GoS-aligned Palestinian Quds Brigade east of Deir Ez Zor City.

Pro-government sources also reported that ISIS ambushed GoS patrols near the [Arwad Dam](#), [T3 Pumping Station](#), [T2 Pumping Station](#), and [Sokhneh](#). GoS forces were forced to call in airstrikes and artillery support at the T2 Pumping Station and in Sokhneh. The attacks follow recent GoS and Iraqi military attempts to curb ISIS activity in the border areas between the two countries the previous month.

⁷ Attacks included; against a former opposition member in Daraa al Balad, against a former GoS reconciliation committee member in Eastern Ghariyeh, against a GoS soldier in Mzeireb, against a Police Station, military checkpoint and a military intelligence officer in As-Sanamayn, against a 5th Corps checkpoint in Kherba town, against a checkpoint near Um al Zaytoun village along the Damascus – As Sweida Highway, against a GoS captain in Ankhel, against a 5th Corps member in Jizeh, and against a 18th Division member in the Al Saad area of Daraa City.

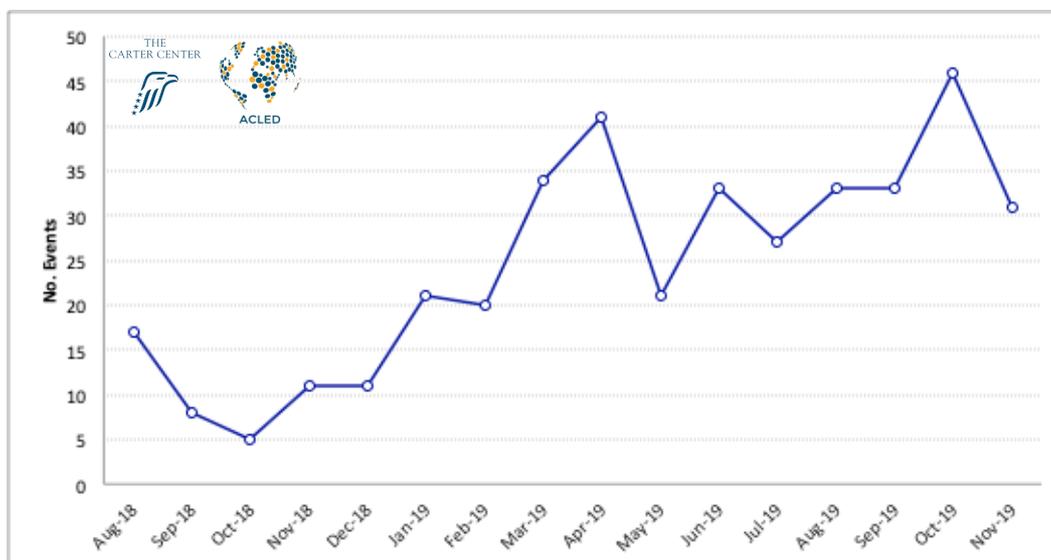


Figure 4: Conflict levels in southern Syria in 2019. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

A new GoS militia formed in Moadamiyah al Sham. The “Capital Shields” group will be under the command of the 4th Armoured Division, and is made up of former opposition members from the town that had previously surrendered to GoS when the area was re-taken in 2016. The group will conduct joint patrols with GoS in the area.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

There were no territorial changes in the northeast this period. However, the Turkish-backed, opposition-aligned Syrian National Army (SNA)⁸ and the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued to clash in 11 areas.⁹ The SNA also shelled SDF positions in Ain al Arab, Arab Serra, Khafat Salem, Mustariha, Qazali, Zunnar, and Zur Maghar.

Behind frontlines, there were signs of resistance to Operation Peace Spring with several attacks against the SNA. During the reporting period, car bombs detonated against SNA personnel in Ain al Arun, Hamam al Turkman, Ras al Ain, and Tal Hallaf. In SNA controlled Tal Abiad and Kherbet El Roz, the SNA also discovered and disarmed two car bombs.

On 30 November and 7 December, Russia and Turkey conducted further joint patrols. Convoys travelled between Qamlishli City and Malikiyyeh in Hassakeh Governorate and along the M4 highway from Laylan to Ghibish.¹⁰ On 2 and 4 December, the Russian military also conducted patrols in the Ain al Arab and Ein Issa area. The first of these patrols was struck by an IED. This is the first time a

⁸ The Syrian National Army is a Turkish-backed entity made up of several hundred Syrian armed groups currently under the control of the opposition’s Syrian Interim Government. For more details on these groups, see our [“Special Report: Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria Sep 2018 to Aug 2019”](#).

⁹ Abdi Koy, Birkat, Ein Issa, Dibsi, Hoshan, Qasemiyeh, Qazali, Rihaniyah, Saida, Tal Abiad, Tal Tamr countryside and Um al Kayf

¹⁰ After patrols on the 1st (x2 patrols), 11th, 14th, 20th and 23rd November in the Darbasiyah area, on the 5th, 12th, 13th and 18th November in Ain Al Arab countryside and on the 16th November in the Ma’btali countryside.

Russian patrol has been targeted by an IED attack in the northeast since Operation Peace Spring began. There have been only two previous cases of attacks target Russian personnel during joint patrols with the Turkish military on 13 and 18 November (involving stones and a Molotov cocktail).

In the past two weeks Russia established military positions in Amuda and Dikeh villages in Hassakeh Governorate, as well as deployed helicopters and equipment to Ain Al Arab on 25 November. They also conducted a humanitarian operation in Raqqa City, distributing 2000 food kits and deployed medical teams to the city.¹¹ These deployments and actions add to Russia's growing presence in the northeast.

The US-led Global Coalition against Daesh also conducted two patrols in the northeast during the reporting period. On 28 November, a UK military convoy conducted a patrol from Tal Tamr southwards to the Omar Oil Fields. A day later, a US convoy conducted a joint patrol with the SDF in Malikiyyeh. This brings the total number of US patrols in the northeast for November to 14.¹²

Routine small arms fire and IED attacks against SDF patrols continued along the Euphrates River Valley.¹³ Four attacks also affected civilians in Thiban (x2 events), Tayanna, and in Hawijat Kat, where a teacher was assassinated. Since July, civilians have been increasingly affected by violence in SDF-dominated areas of Deir Ez Zor Governorate, with November recording the highest number of attacks against civilians in 2019 to date (Figure 5).

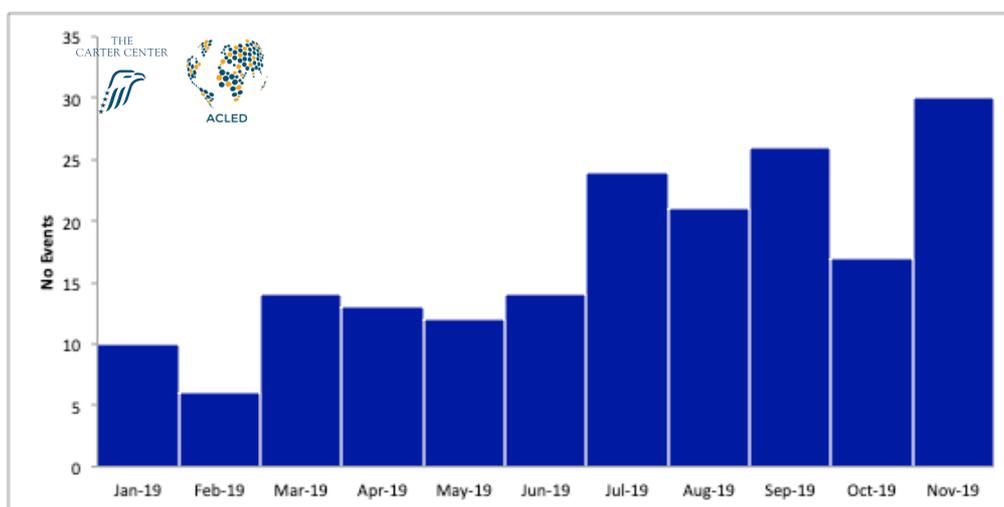


Figure 5: Attacks impacting civilians in SDF-dominated Deir Ez Zor Governorate. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center

After a two-month hiatus, suspected Israeli airstrikes targeted Iranian Islamic

¹¹ For more details on Russia's humanitarian actions in Syria see ["Exploring Russia's Humanitarian Intervention in Syria"](#) from the Washington Institute's Fikra Forum.

¹² After patrols on the 2, 9 and 24 November in the vicinity of Qamlishli City, on 1, 6, 7 and 20 November in the Rmailan area, on 12 November in the Jaroudiyeh area, on 11 November in Malikiyyeh, on 2 and 10 November in the Darbasiyeh area, and on 3 November in the Qahtaniyyeh area.

¹³ Small arms fire attacks targeted SDF-aligned personnel in Abu Harboub, Darnaj, Elhisan, Hajin, Jazaret Elbuhmeid, Madash, and Thiban (x2) villages. IEDs struck SDF patrols in Bousayi, Jinna, the Omar Oil Field, Raqqa City (x3), and Shiheil.

Republican Guard Corps (IRGC)-linked sites near Al Bukamal town on 4 and 7 December. These are the eighth and ninth airstrikes against Iranian targets in Al Bukamal since early September.

On 4 December, GoS forces and the Iranian-aligned Liwa al Baqir clashed in Salhiyyah town. It is unclear the reason behind the brief armed clashes, with such conflicts uncommon for the area. Just three previous cases of clashes between Iranian-aligned groups and GoS forces have been recorded in ACLED data in Deir Ez Zor Governorate since January 2018.¹⁴

Please note, that weekly conflict summaries will pause for the remainder of 2019 and resume in 2020.

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¹⁴ With previous cases of clashes between the groups recorded by ACLED on 1 June 2019, in Al Bukamal, between the Iranian linked 47th Battalion and GoS Airforce Intelligence, on 30 January 2019, in Sbeikhan, between a pro GoS group and Iranian IRGC members, and on 25 January, in Al Bukamal, between GoS soldiers and Iranian IRGC members.