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European Asylum Support Office

# Syria

## Security situation

Country of Origin Information Report



November 2019

SUPPORT IS OUR MISSION





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# Acknowledgements

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Due to significant developments to the security situation taking place during the finalisation of the report (October 2019), EASO drafted Chapter 6 of the report documenting these changes. Chapter 6 has not been reviewed by the departments and organisations acknowledged below.

The following departments and organisations have reviewed the report together with EASO:

Denmark, Danish Immigration Service (DIS)

ACCORD, the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation

It must be noted that the review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report, but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of EASO.

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# Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019). The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources used are referenced.

The information contained in this report has been researched, evaluated and analysed with utmost care within a limited timeframe. However, this document does not claim to be exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Any event taking place after the finalisation of this report is not included. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the introduction.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular application for international protection. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

'Refugee', 'risk' and similar terminology are used as generic terminology and not in the legal sense as applied in the EU Asylum Acquis, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

Neither EASO nor any person acting on its behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this report.

# Glossary and Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
INSO	International NGO Safety Organization
IS	The Islamic State (IS); also known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or Daesh.
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
NDF	National Defence Forces
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Kurdish)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SCSR	Syrian Center for Statistics and Research
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VDC	Violations Documentation Center in Syria
YPG	Kurdish People's Protection Units

# Introduction

This report was drafted by Country of Origin Information (COI) specialists from the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre, Landinfo, as listed under the [Acknowledgements](#) section.

This report is produced in line with the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019)<sup>1</sup> and the EASO COI Writing and Referencing Style Guide (2019).<sup>2</sup>

## Methodology

This report analyses the security situation in Syria, focusing in particular on the situation for the civilian population. The reference period is 2018 and the first half of 2019. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process until 18 September 2019.

After finalisation of the content of the report by Landinfo, during the editing phase, significant developments to the security situation occurred, which did not follow recent trends in the conflict. Because of the significant nature of these developments, having an impact on the content of this report, EASO agreed with Landinfo to include a separate chapter ([Chapter 6, New developments](#)), with a short overview of information up until 23 October 2019. Because of the early stage and volatile nature of such developments in the conflict, information on this will have to be updated on short notice. EASO plans such update by spring 2020.

## Sources

The report is based on information from UN reports, reports from human rights organisations, academic publications and news articles, that in different ways describe the security situation in Syria.

This COI report also draws heavily on the December 2018 report by Syria analyst, Aron Lund, titled *Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?*, published by the Swedish Defence Research Agency. Mr. Lund is a researcher focusing on Middle Eastern and North African politics and a fellow with The Century Foundation of New York, and with the Centre for Syrian Studies of St. Andrew's University. He has published widely on Syria, including three books, and is a frequent columnist on the country's developments. He has written two Swedish-language books on Syrian politics, *Drömmen om Damaskus* (Stockholm, 2010) and *Syrien brinner* (Stockholm, 2014), as well as the book *Divided They Stand* (Brussels, 2012), in English.

In addition, statistics on the number of violent incidents and conflict-related deaths are used, despite variations in these figures (this is elaborated in Chapter 3), as an *indication* of the security situation in different parts of the country at different times. The different organisations' data collection methods are discussed in more detail in [Chapter 3](#).

## Quality control

In order to ensure that the report respects the EASO COI Report Methodology, a review was carried out by COI specialists from the countries and organisations listed as reviewers in the [Acknowledgements](#) section. [Chapter 6](#) was developed after this quality control phase. Because of

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<sup>1</sup> EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2</sup> EASO, Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, June 2019, [url](#)

the occurrence of these developments after finalisation and shortly before publication of this report, the added information in chapter 6 was not reviewed by the departments and organisations mentioned in the Acknowledgements section but was internally reviewed by EASO.

## Structure and use of the report

The report starts with a brief introduction to the background to the civil war, the belligerents in the conflict and who controls which parts of the country. It goes on to describe the security situation in different parts of Syria. To illustrate this, the report presents estimates of the number of people killed and the number of conflict-related violent incidents. A description is also provided of how the war has been fought, what types of weapons and war tactics the warring parties have used, and how this has affected the civilian population. The report does not address how the government or other belligerents treat specific ethnic, political or social groups.

Following significant changes to the security situation occurring during the quality control phase of the report (beginning of October 2019) it has been decided to include a limited chapter documenting the new developments. These developments are discussed in [Chapter 6](#). A full update of the information will be published in first quarter of 2020.

In this report, the term *security* is used to mean freedom from violence. *Violence* is the intentional use of, or threat of, physical force against another person. The term *civilian* is used in contrast to military and refers to persons who are neither members of armed groups nor participate in combat.



# 1. Background

## 1.1 Syria before the civil war

Syria is a republic in which all real power rests with President Bashar al-Assad. He took over the presidency in 2000 after his father Hafez al-Assad, who came to power in 1970. Assad is the leader of the ruling Baath Party and commander-in-chief of the Syrian Armed Forces. The president is elected for a seven-year term, in tightly controlled elections without any genuine opposing candidates. A set of formal state institutions, such as the parliament and government, exist under the president, but, according to Syria analyst Aron Lund, in practice, they lack independent power and are overshadowed by an informal network closely linked to the president, consisting of the heads of the various security services and a small group of politicians and wealthy businessmen.<sup>4</sup>

Central parts of the country consist of sparsely populated desert areas. Most of the population live along a north-south axis in the western part of the country, where cities like Damascus and Aleppo are located. The Euphrates Valley and the north-eastern corner of the country are home to some of Syria's most fertile agricultural land. Almost 90 % of the population are Arabs, while about 10 % are Kurds. The majority are Sunni Muslims (approximately 70–80 %). The rest are Christians belonging to different denominations, as well as Alawites, Druze and Shia Muslims (Ismailis and Twelvers).<sup>5</sup>

The president's family and large parts of the informal power structure around him are Alawites. Formally, the government has promoted secularism, and discussions of sectarian problems have been banned. However, sectarianism has been a major structural feature of the current conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Before the uprising and the ensuing civil war in 2011, the Syrian government controlled all Syrian territory, except the Golan Heights, which were occupied by Israel in 1967. In general, there was little violent crime such as robberies, kidnappings and murders, largely due to a strongly repressive state with an omnipresent security service. An Islamic uprising centred in Hama was brutally crushed in 1982. After that, anti-government groups were marginalised, and there was no armed insurrection in the country between 1982 and 2011.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.2 The civil war: background and development

A series of protests against the government began in March 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring protests. The government tried to stop the protests, partly by introducing reforms intended to concede the protesters' demands and partly through the use of force.<sup>8</sup> Their attempts to stop the uprising failed, and a general breakdown in state control was felt in some rural regions and dense outer-city slums. The main thrust of the uprising came from within the Sunni Muslim majority

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<sup>4</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 40

<sup>5</sup> Based on the Landinfo readings of the following maps: Izady, M., Syria: Ethnic composition in 2010. Atlas of the Islamic world and vicinity, Colombia University, 2010, [url](#); Izady, M., Syria: Population density and demography, in 2012. Atlas of the Islamic world and vicinity, Colombia University, 2012, [url](#); Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>6</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 41-43

<sup>7</sup> Lund, A., Syrien brinner. Hur revolutionen mot Assad blev ett inbördeskrig, SILC Förlag, 2014; Seale, P., Asad. The struggle for the Middle East, University of California Press, 1989; Wieland C., Syria. A decade of lost chances. Repression and revolution from Damascus spring to Arab spring, Cune, 2012

<sup>8</sup> US, CRS, Issues for the 112th Congress and Background on U.S. Sanctions, 28 April 2011, [url](#), pp. 4-5

population, with a rural and religiously conservative bent. A fragmented set of armed rebel groups gradually emerged in the same areas, confronting the Army and the security forces.<sup>9</sup>

The groups consisted almost exclusively of Sunni Muslims, thereby also adding a sectarian dimension to the conflict. Foreign states meddled in the conflict at an early stage, forming alliances that largely coincided with the sectarian divisions in Syria. Sunni majority states such as Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia started arming the Sunni-dominated rebels, while Shia forces in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon supported the Syrian government. In line with Cold War dividing lines, the US, UK and France sided with and assisted the rebels, while Russia and China backed the Syrian government. Israel has bombed military installations in Syria on several occasions, allegedly to damage the military capacity of Hezbollah.<sup>10</sup>

Since then, the civil war has gone through several phases:

- During 2012, rebel groups took control of large rural areas, several suburbs of Damascus and the eastern half of Aleppo. In 2013, the rebels captured the city of Raqqa, but the government remained in control of the other provincial capitals and the supply lines between most of the cities.<sup>11</sup>
- In mid-2012, the Syrian Army withdrew from the Kurd-dominated areas in the north of the country, leaving control to the Kurdish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-affiliated Democratic Union Party/Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (hereinafter referred to as PYD) and its armed wing the People's Protection Units/Yekineyen Parastina Gel (hereinafter referred to as YPG). The PYD was neither allied with the rebels nor with the Syrian government, and it has been working towards Kurdish autonomy in the areas under its control. Since 2015, the YPG militia has been part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition together with local Arab and Assyrian militias, receiving military support from the US as part of the efforts to defeat the Islamic State, also called ISIL or Daesh (hereinafter IS).<sup>12</sup>
- In January 2014, a new line of conflict arose between IS, on the one hand, and other rebel groups on the other. During 2014, IS succeeded in gaining full control of large areas in the eastern part of the country along the Euphrates Valley and further into Iraq, while the other rebel groups kept control of parts of Idlib and Aleppo provinces in the north-east, some rural areas in the south-west and several suburbs around Damascus.<sup>13</sup>
- The Syrian Army gradually lost further terrain, and, in March 2015, a coalition of rebel groups led by the al-Qaeda-allied group, al-Nusra Front, took control of Idlib.<sup>14</sup>
- In September 2015, Russia's military intervention in the war began, at the request of the authorities in Damascus. Russia began a sustained campaign of air strikes in support of the

<sup>9</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>10</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 17–18, 22

<sup>11</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria rebels capture northern Raqqa city, 5 March 2013, [url](#); Holliday J., Syria's maturing insurgency, Institute for the Study of War, June 2012, [url](#); Holliday J., The Assad regime. From counterinsurgency to civil war, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, [url](#); Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>12</sup> Casagrande, G., The road to ar-Raqqah: Background on the Syrian Democratic Forces, Institute for the Study of War, 22 November 2016, [url](#), p. 1; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 18, 20, 59-60

<sup>13</sup> Lister, C., The Syrian Jihad. Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the evolution of an insurgency, Hurst & Company, 2015, pp. 185-186, 221-222

<sup>14</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 20; Washington Post (The), Syrian rebels take strategic town of Idlib, 28 March 2015, [url](#)

Syrian government forces, which thereby gradually managed to reclaim areas from the rebel groups, including the eastern districts of Aleppo in December 2016.<sup>15</sup>

- Government forces backed by Russia and the SDF coalition, backed by US special forces, gradually succeeded in defeating IS. Some areas in the northern part of Aleppo province that had previously been under IS control were occupied by Turkish troops and Syrian rebel militias allied with Turkey.<sup>16</sup>
- In April 2018, following a massive military operation, the government regained control of Eastern Ghouta outside Damascus. The rebel stronghold in Homs fell shortly afterwards through a negotiated surrender. In June and July 2018, southern areas in Daraa and Qunaitra held by rebel forces were subsequently surrendered through a series of local agreements.<sup>17</sup>
- In spring 2018, Afrin, the Kurdish enclave under PYD control, was occupied by Turkey.<sup>18</sup>
- In April 2019, the Syrian Army started a new offensive against Idlib, with military support from Russia. The offensive continued through the summer of 2019, but did not result in any material changes in territorial control until August, when the army seized the city of Khan Shaykhun, among others.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 21-22

<sup>16</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 21-22

<sup>17</sup> International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 22

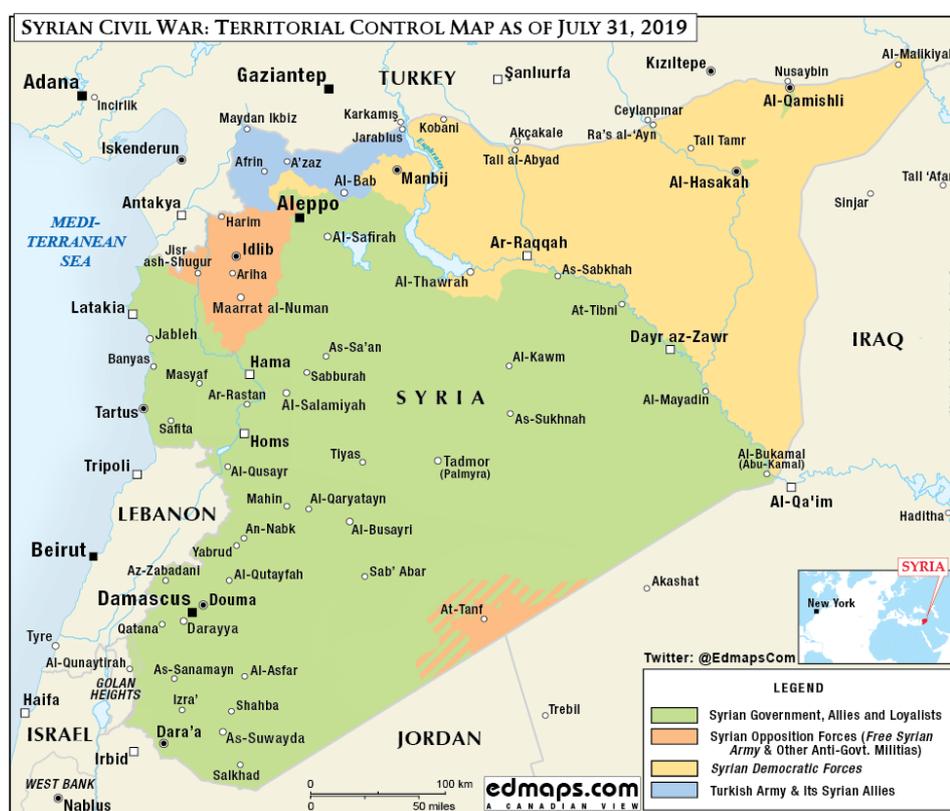
<sup>18</sup> International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 7; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 22

<sup>19</sup> Syria Direct, Khan Sheikhoun exposes the limitations of the Turkish guarantor role, 21 August 2019, [url](#)

## 2. Territorial control

As reported in July 2019, the government appeared to have largely consolidated its control of large parts of the country, retaining a relatively secure hold on power. The rebels have been defeated in most places, but still controlled Idlib province and neighbouring areas in the provinces of Aleppo and Hama. An area to the north-west along the Turkish border, from Afrin to Jarabulus, was under military control by Syrian rebel groups allied with Turkey. The Kurdish-dominated SDF coalition controlled the north-eastern parts of the country, while US forces and an allied local rebel militia controlled an area around Tanf, in the western part of the desert bordering Iraq, Jordan and Syria. The rest of the country was under the control of the Syrian government and allied militias as of July 2019.<sup>20</sup>

*Territorial control in Syria as of 31 July 2019*



Map 2: Territorial control in Syria as of 31 July 2019<sup>21</sup>

For updated information on territorial control developments as of 21 October 2019, see the additional [Chapter 6](#).

The principal belligerents are described below, with emphasis on how they exercise control in the respective areas. A brief description of IS is also provided, even though the organisation no longer has territorial control of populated areas of Syria, as described in [Section 2.6](#).

<sup>20</sup> Summary by drafter of the report, NO-Landinfo. See Liveuamap, Syria, 31 July 2019, [url](#)

For an overview of the military control situation in Syria over time, see Liveuamap: <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>.

<sup>21</sup> Edmaps.com 2019, [url](#)

## 2.1 Areas controlled by the government

As of August 2019, the government controlled most of the country, including the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, and nearly all the provincial capitals. The government also regained control of the entire border with Lebanon, restored limited land access to Iraq, gained control of the southern provinces and reopened a border crossing to Jordan for commercial traffic in October 2018.<sup>22</sup>

For updated information on areas controlled by the Syrian government as of 21 October 2019, see [Chapter 6](#).

As a result of the war, the regular economy collapsed, and a ‘violence-related’ economy has risen instead. According to the Syrian Center for Policy Research, 50 % of economic activity was related to smuggling, kidnapping, and arms sales; 12 million Syrians were without an income, and 90 % lived in poverty in 2018.<sup>23</sup> Aron Lund reported in December 2018 that important central government functions and services had nonetheless been maintained to a certain degree. Public schools and hospitals were operating, albeit with strongly reduced capacity. Other services and functions, such as the civil registry and salary payments to state employees, continued to operate in government-controlled areas, and partly also in SDF-held areas in the north-east.<sup>24</sup>

### 2.1.1 Actors that maintain security and control on behalf of the government

Security and control are maintained by the police, the intelligence organisations, the Army and pro-government militias:

- The police are responsible for law enforcement together with the courts.
- The intelligence services concentrate on monitoring for opposition against the government. The intelligence apparatus in Syria consists of four main intelligence organisations with overlapping areas of responsibility, all reporting directly to President Assad. Each organisation is subdivided into a number of regional specialised branches and departments, which, among other things, run their own detention centres and prison units.<sup>25</sup>
- The Syrian Army is comprised of professional officers and conscripts. Almost all Syrian males, with some exceptions, have to undergo 18 months of military service. The service period significantly increased during the course of the civil war.<sup>26</sup>
- After the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, a number of pro-government militias were established. These militias perform security enforcement services in areas loyal to the government and take part in the fighting against anti-government groups near the front lines. Governments of states allied with Assad contributed to the establishment of these militias. Officers from the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) trained local militias, especially those affiliated to the National Defence Forces (NDF), an umbrella made up of various pro-government militias, and also helped staff Shia militias with foreign personnel, including from Iraq and Afghanistan. Members of the Lebanese Shia militia, Hezbollah, also participated in the war in support of the government and also trained soldiers from other

<sup>22</sup> Liveuamap, Map of Syrian civil war, 31 July 2019, [url](#); Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 39

<sup>23</sup> Australian National University, The socio-economic impact of the crisis in Syria, 14 June 2018, [url](#)

<sup>24</sup> Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 39

<sup>25</sup> EIP, Refugee return in Syria: Dangers, security risks and information scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 7–8; Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 43–45; Sweden, LIFOS, Syriens säkerhetsapparat, 10 November 2016, [url](#), pp. 7-8, 17-18

<sup>26</sup> Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Militærtjeneste – innrullering, utsettelse og fritak, 14 November 2017, [url](#), p. 7

militias. After Russia joined the war in 2015, it took the initiative to reorganise many of the militias under what is known as the 5th Corps, which was formally a branch of the Syrian Army, but included many civilians and former militia members.<sup>27</sup>

### 2.1.2 Recaptured areas and reconciliation agreements

The government's recapturing of areas held by anti-government groups largely took place through local agreements between the warring parties. These agreements meant that the rebels, their families and others who had worked for the opposition were given an opportunity to evacuate to Idlib. Siege Watch referred to this process as a forced transfer, as these agreements were forced on the communities, giving rebels little choice but to evacuate.<sup>28</sup> Civilians were allowed to stay or were forcibly moved to dedicated collection centres established by the government on government-controlled territory. Some members of the rebel militias were also given the choice of staying. They had to undergo a clearance process known colloquially as *taswiat al-wad'a* (to legalise one's status). They then had to agree to enlisting in the Army or a pro-government militia.<sup>29</sup>

In practice, the government's victories on the battlefield and control of the suburbs of Damascus, Homs and southern provinces in spring and summer 2018 led to a considerable reduction in warfare and violence in government-controlled parts of the country by autumn 2018.<sup>30</sup> Data from organisations that count the number of conflict-related incidents and fatalities also confirm the reduction in violence from autumn 2018 (see Chapter 3–5).

### 2.1.3 Conflicts between pro-government militias

Many Syria observers reported that pro-government militias are a potentially destabilising element that could undermine security and government control. The militia leaders have become powerful figures in the political landscape, and cannot just be removed.<sup>31</sup> Many of the militias have been deeply involved in criminal activity, including kidnapping for ransom, looting and informal taxation of trade by demanding 'protection money' at checkpoints.<sup>32</sup>

There were also armed clashes between militia groups fighting for control over this lucrative business. For example, the militias prevented the stabilisation of Aleppo after the government recaptured parts of the city held by the opposition in December 2016. In the ensuing period, local pro-government militias were involved in kidnappings and street fighting among themselves. The

<sup>27</sup> Khaddour, K., Strength in Weakness: The Syrian army's accidental resilience, Carnegie Middle East Center, 16 March 2016, [url](#), p. 6; Khaddour, K., Syria's Troublesome Militias, Carnegie Middle East Center, 5 November 2018, [url](#); Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Regimeløjale militser, 2 November 2017, [url](#); Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 47-49; Al-Masri, A., Analysis: The fifth Corps and the state of the Syrian Army, Syria Deeply, 11 January 2017, [url](#)

<sup>28</sup> Siege Watch, Final Report. Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Aftermath of Syria's Sieges, May 2018, [url](#), p. 20

<sup>29</sup> Adleh, F. and Favier, A., "Local reconciliation agreements" in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, 1 June 2017, [url](#), pp. 1–6; Daily Beast (The), Syria's cruel 'reconciliations', 9 December 2017, [url](#); Al-Jabassini, A., From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria, Middle East Directions, European University Institute, 14 May 2019, [url](#), pp. 11–13; International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 10–11

<sup>30</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), para. 4

<sup>31</sup> Jenkins, B. M., (2014), The dynamics of Syria's civil war, Rand Corporation, 2014, [url](#), p. 6; Khaddour, K., Syria's Troublesome Militias, Carnegie Middle East Center, 5 November 2018, [url](#); Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 49

<sup>32</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 49-50

president eventually sent the head of one of the intelligence services to Aleppo to resolve the situation, which reduced the problem without making it disappear completely.<sup>33</sup>

Militias in the city are still accused of informal ‘taxation’ of trade and industry according to an August 2019 article from the Syria Observer.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, desert areas further east that the government recaptured from IS in 2017 were plagued by checkpoint extortion and clashes between militias.<sup>35</sup> In some places in Homs, Hama and Aleppo provinces, clashes between militias escalated into exchanges of machine gun fire and the use of RPG rocket launchers, resulting in civilian casualties.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, the fact that the closest allies of the government, Russia and Iran, have conflicting agendas and interests in Syria, had a destabilising effect on the situation. Iran exerted great influence on some of the militias, especially those affiliated to the National Defence Forces (NDF) and was working to ensure that these militias remained relatively independent of the government and tied to Iran. Russia, however, is primarily interested in stability and ensuring that the government has a monopoly of violence, and made efforts to incorporate the militia groups in formal branches of the Syrian Army. This rivalry led on several occasions to armed confrontations between army branches and militias loyal to Iran and Russia, respectively.<sup>37</sup>

The government’s preferred strategy has been to attempt to absorb militia groups into the Army, while also keeping control by pitting different militia leaders against each other.<sup>38</sup> The government made active efforts to keep the militias under control and keep them dependent on the Army’s central command and supply lines. According to Syria analyst Aron Lund:

‘As effective as they may be on the battlefield, they depend on the official military and other institutions, or on figures in Assad’s entourage, for access to salaries, ammunition, security clearances, air support, heavy weapons, hospital care, veterans’ benefits, etcetera; in addition, their civilian lives and families remain embedded in the prevailing order.’<sup>39</sup>

## 2.2 The north-east – Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

Since 2012, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing the People’s Protection Units (YPG) were in control of several areas in the north of Syria, along the Turkish border. PYD and YPG were closely affiliated with the Turkish-Kurdish PKK guerrillas, and pursue a socialist, secularist and feminist agenda based on the ideas of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan, who was in prison in Turkey. PYD’s system of governance was described by Syria analyst Aron Lund as authoritarian, and public criticism was suppressed. PYD did not seek secession from Syria but worked toward self-rule and federalism.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 49-50

<sup>34</sup> Syrian Observer (The), Aleppo: Tension between Russia and Iran escalates in the markets, 7 August 2019, [url](#)

<sup>35</sup> Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 50

<sup>36</sup> Denmark, DIS, DRC, Syria. Security Situation in Damascus. Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>37</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria, Middle East Directions, European University Institute, 14 May 2019, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>38</sup> Khaddour, K., Syria’s Troublesome Militias, Carnegie Middle East Center, 5 November 2018, [url](#)

<sup>39</sup> Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 50

<sup>40</sup> Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 59-60

Since 2015, the YPG militia was reported to be part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) together with local Arab and Assyrian militia groups. SDF was dominated by PYD and YPG. SDF was neither in alliance with the Syrian opposition nor the government, but it was nevertheless largely dependent on the Syrian government, which funded certain state institutions in the area and paid salaries to state employees. The government also maintained control over parts of the city of Qamishli in the north-east, including the airport outside the city, and a limited security presence in the city of Hasaka.<sup>41</sup> According to reports from September 2018, the airport had regular flights to and from Damascus.<sup>42</sup>

PYD originally had control over three different enclaves with a Kurdish majority population: Afrin in the north-west, and Kobane and Jazira (Hasakah province) in the north-east.<sup>43</sup> Between 2014 and 2017, IS took control of large parts of these areas, but was eventually pushed out by SDF, helped by the US-led Global Coalition Against Daesh. The coalition contributed in the form of aerial support, in addition to deploying US soldiers to the area.<sup>44</sup> As of 31 July 2019, SDF controlled nearly all territory north-east of the Euphrates River, including Hasakah province and parts of the Deir ez-Zor, Raqqqa and Aleppo governorates, as well as the areas around Manbij and Tabqa south-west of the Euphrates.<sup>45</sup>

The SDF previously also controlled Afrin in the north-west, but almost all of this area was occupied by Turkey and allied Syrian militias in March 2018 (see [section 3.3](#)). The US backing of SDF was a difficult political balancing act, as Turkey, a NATO ally, regarded SDF as the extended arm of its arch enemy, the PKK.<sup>46</sup> Turkey wanted to remove SDF from its southern border and repeatedly threatened to intervene in north-east Syria. On several occasions, Turkey also launched missiles across the border and bombed targets in SDF-held areas. The US opposed a Turkish intervention but was brokering a 'security zone' along the border with Turkey at that time. Moreover, President Trump has repeatedly announced that US forces will withdraw from SDF-held areas.<sup>47</sup> On this point, for information on US withdrawal developments regarding the 'security zone' on the border that occurred in October 2019, see [Chapter 6](#).

Parts of SDF-held areas, especially the southern part along the Euphrates, are predominantly inhabited by Arab tribes, and support for the Kurdish PYD has not traditionally been widespread there. SDF attempted to rule with support from local tribal leaders, but problems have still occurred. Many people in the tribal areas held SDF responsible for the lack of services and reconstruction, and for arbitrary arrests in connection with the fight against IS. The conflict caused some tribal leaders to seek alternative alliances with the government or even IS. IS carried out a number of attacks in the area with the help of underground cells, including two relatively large

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<sup>41</sup> International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 13-14; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 59-60

<sup>42</sup> SANA, Awda tashghil ar-rahlat al-jawiya bayn matari Dimashq wal-qamishli bad inhisar al-asifa al-ghbariya [Flights between Damascus and Qamishli resumed after the passing of the sand storm], 14 September 2018, [url](#)

<sup>43</sup> HRW, Under Kurdish rule. Abuses in PYD-run enclaves of Syria, June 2014, [url](#), p. 1. The YPG militia is also present in Shaykh Maqsud suburb in Aleppo city, where the majority population is Kurdish. It also holds the area around Tel Rifaat north-west of the city. In both places, security is coordinated with the Syrian Army. Tel Rifaat was the only part of the YPG's autonomous Afrin canton that was not occupied by the Turkish-allied militias in 2018. See: International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 14; Reuters, Aleppo district shows Assad's delicate dance with Kurds, 27 July 2017, [url](#)

<sup>44</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 59

<sup>45</sup> NO-Landinfo reading of Liveuamap, Map of Syrian civil war, 31 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>46</sup> International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 59-60

<sup>47</sup> International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 2, 4-11

attacks in Manbij in January 2019. The two latter attacks, a bomb explosion and an armed attack, killed several dozen people, including SDF soldiers and four US servicemen (see also [section 6.3](#)).<sup>48</sup>

For updated information on the security situation and territorial control in Kurdish controlled north-east Syria as of 23 October 2019, see [Chapter 6](#).

## 2.3 Turkish-occupied areas

Local Syrian militia groups allied with Turkey were reported to control an area in the north of Syria on the Turkish border between the cities of Al-Bab, Jarabulus and Azaz. Turkey intervened in Syria in 2016 in an operation called ‘Euphrates Shield’, occupying previously IS-held areas, in cooperation with rebel militias that had controlled the area around Azaz north of Aleppo for a prolonged period. In March 2018, Turkey and the local militias attacked Afrin, west of the Euphrates Shield area. Up until then, Afrin had been held by PYD. Around half the population, primarily Kurds, fled to areas controlled by SDF or the government.<sup>49</sup> Tens of thousands are reported to have returned, but many of them found that their homes had either been looted or taken over by Syrian rebel militias and their families.<sup>50</sup> SDF’s leadership vowed to reclaim areas and launched an armed revolt in Afrin after the Turkish occupation.<sup>51</sup>

Turkey appeared to be planning a permanent occupation of the area. Turkish authorities helped local Syrian partners to set up local councils affiliated to the Syrian Interim Government, based in Gaziantep, in Turkey. Salaries for rebel soldiers, local police forces and public servants were funded by Turkey. In the Euphrates Shield area, Turkish was taught in schools and new ID cards were linked to Turkey’s population registry. The ID cards were in both Turkish and Arabic.<sup>52</sup>

The local Syrian militias were in opposition to both the government in Damascus and to SDF but are banned by Turkey from attacking targets outside the Turkish-occupied zone. The militias are described as problematic allies for Turkey, as they demonstrated poor discipline and are constantly clashing with each other.<sup>53</sup> Arbitrary arrests, kidnapping for ransom and pillaging were reported to be widespread. The lack of a centralised judicial system made it difficult for the civilian population to address conflicts that arose. Local armed militias fought amongst themselves for control, and the area saw a series of car bombings. The agricultural land in Afrin was littered with landmines and explosive remnants.<sup>54</sup>

## 2.4 Idlib

Idlib is described by sources as the last rebel stronghold in Syria.<sup>55</sup> In this report, the area is referred to as Idlib for the sake of simplicity, but it also includes neighbouring areas in the

<sup>48</sup> International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 16–20

<sup>49</sup> Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 53

<sup>50</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), para. 89

<sup>51</sup> Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 53

<sup>52</sup> Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Sivilregistrering i Idlib, 22 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 8, 11; Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 53-54

<sup>53</sup> Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 53-54

<sup>54</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), paragraphs 7, 35

<sup>55</sup> International Crisis Group, The Best Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Hinnebusch, R. and Imady, O., Syria’s Reconciliation Agreements, University of St Andrews, 2017, [url](#), p. 9

provinces of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia. Idlib borders on Turkey and Turkish-occupied Afrin in the north and is otherwise surrounded by areas controlled by the government.<sup>56</sup>

The area has an estimated population of 2.5 million people.<sup>57</sup> As of March 2019, more than 1.1 million were internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>58</sup> For years, Idlib has been a refuge for Syrians fleeing the government. From and including 2014, the other rebel-held areas surrendered one after another. Rebel soldiers who refused to accept the government, or who were considered unacceptable for reconciliation by the Syrian security services, were shipped by bus to Idlib together with their spouses and children.<sup>59</sup> The UN described Idlib as 'extremely vulnerable', with two-thirds of the population in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>60</sup>

According to Lund's report from December 2018, Idlib was controlled by a number of different militias, but the dominant group was the jihadist organisation, Hay'a Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as the al-Nusra Front. The al-Nusra Front was part of the international al-Qaeda network. HTS officially denied being part of al-Qaeda but was nonetheless classified as a terrorist organisation by the UN, the US, EU and Turkey, among others. HTS controlled strategically important areas such as the city of Idlib and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing to Turkey, the most important supply line into the area.<sup>61</sup>

The other militias in Idlib can be categorised in two groups. One group consists of militias allied with Turkey, grouped together in the National Liberation Front. The other consists of jihadist organisations, including Hurras ad-Din, which pledged loyalty to al-Qaeda, and Ansar at-Tawhid, which has allegedly tried to recruit IS members from areas formerly held by IS.<sup>62</sup>

HTS refused to cooperate with the civilian Syrian opposition, in other words the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government, and has instead set up its own administration called the Syrian Salvation Government. Turkey has continued to push for the dissolution of HTS, arguing that it is the only way to avoid an attack by the government, but HTS has resisted so far. At the same time, HTS has established a pragmatic relationship with Turkey, hoping that limited Turkish influence over Idlib will help to prevent attacks by the government and its allies, Russia and Iran.<sup>63</sup>

After a series of trilateral meetings between Russia, Turkey and Iran in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, Idlib was declared a 'de-escalation zone' in May 2017. Between October 2017 and May 2018, Turkey established twelve military observation posts along the front line between Idlib and the government-controlled areas. This was part of the de-escalation agreement and in agreement with HTS. In September 2018, the 'Astana countries' agreed on a demilitarised buffer zone around Idlib, to be patrolled by Turkish soldiers on the Idlib side and Russian soldiers on the government side. The agreement was backed by the Syrian government and Iran. Turkish-allied

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<sup>56</sup> Liveuamap, Map of Syrian civil war, 31 July 2019, [url](#); Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 54

<sup>57</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 52

<sup>58</sup> UNOCHA, 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 31

<sup>59</sup> International Crisis Group, The Best Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Hinnebusch, R. and Imady, O., Syria's Reconciliation Agreements, University of St Andrews, 2017, [url](#), p. 9; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 54-55

<sup>60</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 54-55

<sup>61</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 55-56

<sup>62</sup> International Crisis Group, The Best Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 21; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 55-56

<sup>63</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 56-58

militias in Idlib also backed the agreement, while HTS maintained an ambivalent position. It was unwilling to officially endorse the agreement, but did not oppose the Turkish military deployment either.<sup>64</sup>

The Sochi agreement of September 2018 calmed the situation along the front line with the government-controlled areas for a period. The situation in the border areas between Idlib and the government-controlled areas was nonetheless unstable throughout the winter of 2018/2019, with several clashes in the buffer zone and air raids carried out by the government on civilian areas in Idlib.<sup>65</sup>

In early May 2019, the government launched a large-scale attack against the southern parts of Idlib and northern Hama. Intensive fighting, including artillery fire and air strikes by Syrian and Russian fighter planes, persisted throughout the summer, but did not result in any material changes in territorial control until August, when the government seized the city of Khan Shaykhun, among others.<sup>66</sup> By mid-July, approximately 450 000 people had fled the affected areas and headed north as a result of the warfare, and at least 450 civilians had been reported killed as of 26 July 2019.<sup>67</sup>

## 2.5 Tanf

The Tanf border crossing is in the desert in the eastern part of Syria, on the main road between Damascus and Baghdad, close to the tri-border area between Syria, Iraq and Jordan. US and allied forces from the Global Coalition Against Daesh have controlled the area since 2016.<sup>68</sup>

As of December 2018 the coalition reportedly patrolled a 55-km-wide buffer zone around the border station together with the rebel militia Maghawir al-Thawra. Sporadic attacks by pro-government forces have been repelled by coalition air strikes and artillery fire. For the US, the occupation of Tanf was originally part of the war against IS. However, the government forces and their allies gradually started to take control of the remaining parts of the desert and the inhabited areas further north along the Euphrates River. Tanf and the buffer zone thus became surrounded by government forces and thereby lost their importance in the fight against IS. US officials described the occupation of the area as a way of preventing the reopening of the Baghdad-Damascus road, in order to thwart Iranian access to Syria and Lebanon.<sup>69</sup>

The Tanf border crossing and the surrounding areas are in a desolate desert area and contain no ordinary settlements except the nearby Rukban refugee camp. The camp houses internally displaced Syrians who have been denied entry to Jordan. Rukban is on the border between Syria and Jordan within the 55-km-wide buffer zone, but the coalition forces have steered clear of the

<sup>64</sup> International Crisis Group, The Best Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5; Al-Monitor, Turkish army's Idlib action 'riskiest cross-border operation' to date, 22 May 2018, [url](#)

<sup>65</sup> International Crisis Group, The Best Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), paragraphs 24-29; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), paragraphs 39-42

<sup>66</sup> Syria Direct, Khan Sheikhoun exposes the limitations of the Turkish guarantor role, 21 August 2019, [url](#)

<sup>67</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Recent developments in Northwestern Syria. Situation Report no. 8 – as of 26 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2

<sup>68</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 51

<sup>69</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 51-52

camp, which is dominated by rebel militias, including Mughawir al-Thawra, and armed clans. As of April 2018, between 30 000 and 50 000 people were confined in the camp.<sup>70</sup>

Sources reported that the delivery of humanitarian supplies to the camp has been difficult at times, and a lack of food and fuel supplies has been reported.<sup>71</sup> In spring 2019, Russia established humanitarian corridors that enabled some of the camp's residents to be evacuated to government-controlled areas.<sup>72</sup> According to UN reporting from 21 July 2019, more than 17 000 people had left Rukban.<sup>73</sup>

## 2.6 Islamic State

In 2017 and 2018, IS lost almost all its territory in Iraq and Syria, but maintained control over a small area called Baghuz near Albu Kamal in the eastern part of Deir ez-Zor province.<sup>74</sup> In April 2019, SDF managed to seize this last IS stronghold. Fighting in the months leading up to the takeover meant that several tens of thousands of people were displaced and confined in makeshift camps without sufficient access to health services, food and clean water.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, air strikes by the US-led coalition to support SDF forces on the ground reportedly led to an increase in the number of civilian casualties in the same period (winter 2018/19).<sup>76</sup>

IS has subsequently carried out several 'hit-and-run' attacks and bombings from a network of underground cells in SDF-held areas in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Manbij (Aleppo governorate) during the first months of 2019.<sup>77</sup> In addition, IS carried out a string of coordinated attacks on several Druze villages in Sweida in southern Syria on 25 July 2018. IS members went door to door, killing civilian men, women and children; then they went to the city of Sweida and carried out a suicide attack that killed at least 200 civilians. In the aftermath, the government launched a counter-offensive to drive IS out of the al-Safa plateau in the eastern Badia desert. The offensive officially ended on 19 November 2018.<sup>78</sup> However, locals claim that the Islamic State has returned to the area. Local Druze factions in eastern Sweida encountered Islamic State fighters while scouting the area in March 2019.<sup>79</sup>

Although IS has lost all its territories in Syria, the organisation is still considered a threat because of its extensive experience as an underground movement and its capacity to continue launching attacks. Moreover, political instability in both Syria and Iraq can provide fertile ground for a new flourishing of the terrorist organisation.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 52

<sup>71</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), paragraphs 84-86

<sup>72</sup> Syria Direct, Hundreds of Rukban camp residents leaving US-administered desert zone board Syrian government buses, 10 April 2019, [url](#)

<sup>73</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian update, Syrian Arab Republic, Issue 04, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>74</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 60-61

<sup>75</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), paragraph 13

<sup>76</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), paragraph 46

<sup>77</sup> International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 16-17

<sup>78</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), paragraphs 38-43

<sup>79</sup> Hunaidi, S., ISIS has not been defeated. It's alive and well in Southern Syria, Foreign Policy, 3 April 2019, [url](#)

<sup>80</sup> Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 61; Heller, S., A glimpse into the Islamic State's external operations, post-caliphate, War on the Rocks, 29 May

In Deir ez-Zor the majority of the population are organised in tribes and SDF has entered into reconciliation agreements with tribes allowing imprisoned former IS members to be granted amnesty and released. However, some tribes have felt threatened by IS to strike deals allowing IS to operate more or less freely in their tribal area in exchange for a guarantee that tribe members will not be attacked.<sup>81</sup>

Updated information on ISIL activity following the October 2019 Turkish offensive into north-east Syria is available in [Chapter 6](#).

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2019, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), paragraph 36

<sup>81</sup> International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 20

## 3. Intensity and distribution of violence

This chapter presents data from organisations that endeavour to document and quantify violent incidents of different types and the number of casualties as a result of conflict-related violence in Syria. The number of violent incidents and casualties are deemed to be important indicators of the intensity of the violence.

No complete overview is available of the number of violent incidents or conflict-related deaths, but several local organisations and some international academic institutions are endeavouring to register and count the number of incidents. The figures presented by the different organisations vary due to a range of factors. Mainly, this is related to the fact that they use slightly different methods and because the organisations' presence and access to information in different parts of Syria vary. It can also be difficult to distinguish civilian casualties from military ones or to know exactly who is responsible for the different violent incidents.<sup>82</sup>

Landinfo's review of the findings from the different organisations nonetheless shows that the figures are relatively consistent in the sense that they show the same geographical differences and the same tendencies over time. Despite shortcomings in the data, they nevertheless give a good indication of the security situation in different parts of the country and how it has changed over time.

The figures presented show two main trends. Firstly, they show a downward trend in the level of violence in the country as a whole. The number of violent incidents and conflict-related deaths was far lower in 2018 than earlier in the conflict. The downward trend continued in 2019. Secondly, the data show great variation between different areas. There were relatively few acts of violence in parts of the government-controlled areas, including the capital of Damascus, the southern provinces and the coastal areas north of Lebanon, in the first half of 2019, and a marked decrease from the year before. This can largely be explained by the government recapturing areas around Damascus and in the south, thereby ending the military campaign in this part of the country.

In other parts of the country, the situation is the opposite. Areas near the active front lines around Idlib saw many violent incidents and ongoing warfare in 2019. The number of violent incidents were also high internally in Idlib, in Turkish-occupied areas and in SDF-held areas, relative to central areas controlled by the government.

### 3.1 Number of violent incidents

Landinfo assessed that available statistics show a steady decrease in the number of violent incidents per month for the country seen as a whole.<sup>83</sup> Figures from the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), an organisation dedicated to maintaining the safety of aid workers in conflict areas, show, for example, a marked decrease in violent incidents in 2018. The total number of security incidents registered by INSO in 2018 was 31 579.<sup>84</sup> Graphing incidents across the year

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<sup>82</sup> Slemrod, A., Counting under fire: the untold story of Syria's casualty data, New Humanitarian (the), 27 October 2015, [url](#)

<sup>83</sup> NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

<sup>84</sup> INSO's definition of security incidents includes both crime-related and conflict-related incidents. INSO registers both major incidents, such as bomb explosions, and less serious incidents, such as demonstrations. INSO, Syrian Arab Republic. Context Analysis, n.d., [url](#)

2018 started with around 4 000 incidents per month in January, February and March, after which the figure gradually decreased to around 1 500 incidents from August to December.<sup>85</sup>

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) collects data on violent incidents in Syria, coding each incident with the time and place, type of violent incident, the parties involved and the number of fatalities. The information is collected in a database that is openly accessible, searchable and kept continuously up to date. ACLED has data on Syria going back to 1 January 2017. The data primarily come from secondary sources such as media reports. In addition, since April 2019, ACLED has incorporated data from the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Airwars and an additional undisclosed local partner.<sup>86</sup>

Figures from ACLED show a reduction in the number of violent incidents through 2018, followed by an increase in summer 2019. ACLED classifies violent incidents in the following categories ('event types'):

- battles
- violence against civilians
- explosions/remote violence
- riots
- protests
- strategic developments<sup>87</sup>

When comparing available data on the ACLED dashboard for Syria, it appears that 'explosions/remote violence,' which includes artillery fire and air strikes, is the category with the highest number of individual incidents by far. The figure varied from month to month, but remained relatively high through 2017, with two peaks of 1 800 individual incidents in January 2017 and almost 1 900 in January 2018. The figure gradually decreased to 450 in October 2018 and then increased again to between 1 250 and 1 350 per month in the period May–July 2019. Almost all the incidents in May and July 2019 took place in Hama and Idlib provinces and can thereby be linked to the ongoing government offensive in the area (see [Section 3.3](#)).

'Battles (armed clashes)' is the category with the second most registered incidents. Here, the figure decreased from 900 in January 2017 to fewer than 200 in August 2018. The monthly figure has since fluctuated between 100 and 400.<sup>88</sup>

## 3.2 Number of conflict-related deaths

Looking at the number of conflict-related deaths, Landinfo assessed that the situation is largely the same as with violent incidents. Available statistics show a steady decrease in the number of fatalities per month for the country as a whole.<sup>89</sup>

Many international monitoring groups have given up on providing detailed estimates of the number of fatalities because of the complexity of the situation and lack of access to first-hand information.<sup>90</sup> The UN stopped publishing statistics on conflict-related deaths in 2014, stating that it was no longer possible to arrive at accurate figures. The final estimate from 2016, partly based on UN's own statistics from 2014, was 400 000. Today, most international experts state that the

<sup>85</sup> INSO, Syrian Arab Republic. Context Analysis, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>86</sup> ACLED, Methodology overview, 10 April 2019, [url](#); ACLED, Press Release: ACLED integrates new partner data on the war in Syria, 5 April 2019, [url](#)

<sup>87</sup> ACLED, ACLED Event Definitions, October 2017, [url](#)

<sup>88</sup> Based on information available from ACLED, Dashboard, nd, [url](#)

<sup>89</sup> NO-Landinfo assessment

<sup>90</sup> New York Times (The), How Syria's death toll is lost in the fog of war, 13 April 2018, [url](#)

number of fatalities in Syria since the war broke out in 2011 until the present is somewhere around 500 000 or higher, but indicate that these are very rough estimates.<sup>91</sup>

There are several Syrian organisations that still attempt to keep count, however, the figures vary between organisations. As mentioned above, this is related to the fact that these organisations have varying methods, ground presence, and access to information.<sup>92</sup>

One of the organisations still attempting to document and count the number of conflict-related deaths is the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC). The VDC was started by Syrian human rights activists in 2011, shortly after the insurgency broke out.<sup>93</sup> The centre's figures are presented here because Landinfo considers them to be relatively reliable due to their rigorous methodology, and because their numbers are conservative compared with other organisations.<sup>94</sup>

Another reason for using VDC is that their database contains a lot of information about each deceased person, including where and when they died, status as a civilian or non-civilian, cause of death and alleged responsible party. The VDC's data are available online in a searchable format. This makes it possible to extract data for specific provinces and periods of time. At the time of writing, the database contains data up until 31 May 2019.<sup>95</sup>

The VDC has registered approximately 166 000 fatalities from the time the conflict started in 2011 until May 2019. As mentioned, these are deaths that the VDC has been able to document with a fair amount of certainty. The actual figure is far higher, as mentioned. Of 166 000 registered fatalities, approximately 118 000 of the victims were defined as civilians and 48 000 as military combatants. The number of deaths increased from just under 5 000 in 2011 to 38 500 in 2012, peaking at more than 40 000 in 2013. The number has subsequently decreased year by year, with 27 000 fatalities in 2014, 18 000 in 2015, 17 500 in 2016, 11 000 in 2017 and 7 500 in 2018. For the first five months of 2019, the registered number of fatalities was 1 030. Examining civilian casualties in isolation, the number peaked already in 2012, at 30 000. The number has subsequently decreased year by year.<sup>96</sup>

ACLED has registered approximately 80 000 conflict-related deaths in Syria between January 2017 and February 2019, 26 000 of whom were civilians. The number of fatalities was almost halved from 2017 to 2018 and continued to decrease in the first two months of 2019.<sup>97</sup> ACLED notes that its data only 'includes civilians killed as a result of direct civilian targeting' and 'does not include collateral civilian fatalities,' representing an 'underestimate'.<sup>98</sup> Also, ACLED's methodology attributes a count of '10' deaths to events where a report states that 'several', 'many', 'few', plural, or an unknown number of deaths are reported.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>91</sup> SOHR, More than 570 thousand people were killed on the Syrian territory within 8 years of revolution demanding freedom, democracy, justice, and equality, 15 March 2019, [url](#); New York Times (The), How Syria's death toll is lost in the fog of war, 13 April 2018, [url](#)

<sup>92</sup> New Humanitarian (The), Counting under fire: the untold story of Syria's casualty data, 27 October 2015, [url](#)

<sup>93</sup> New Humanitarian (The), Counting under fire: the untold story of Syria's casualty data, 27 October 2015, [url](#); VDC, Our methodology, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>94</sup> The VDC has recruited a network of human rights activists and media activists who collect information about conflict-related deaths. It also collects information from hospitals, funeral homes, the victims' families and some local media institutions. The data are then compared with and cross-checked against available video recordings and images from conflict events before being entered in the VDC database. The data are verified further and updated as new information becomes available. VDC, Our methodology, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>95</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>96</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>97</sup> ACLED, Press release: Even as overall violence drops, civilians face record threats in Syria, 22 March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>98</sup> ACLED, Press release: Even as overall violence drops, civilians face record threats in Syria, 22 March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>99</sup> ACLED's methodology states that 'If source reports differ or a vague estimate is provided, the lowest number of fatalities is reported unless a more reliable or corroborated estimate has become available. If reports mention "several", "many", "few" or plural fatalities, yet the exact number is unknown, "10" is recorded as the total. If a report mentions "dozens", this is recorded as "12" fatalities. If a report mentions "hundreds", this is recorded as "100" fatalities. If a note

Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) at Uppsala University has registered 347 000 conflict-related deaths in Syria since the conflict started in 2011. The peak years were 2013 and 2014, with more than 70 000 fatalities per year, followed by a gradual decrease to under 20 000 fatalities in 2018. The UCDP collects data on conflict events resulting in deaths through automatic searches in a variety of news media.<sup>100</sup>

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reports a total of 570 000 fatalities since the conflict started but does not present statistics that allow figures for individual months or years to be extracted. According to SOHR, the total figure includes 112 000 civilians, of whom 21 000 were children, 64 000 were members of anti-government and Kurdish militias, 65 000 were government soldiers and members of pro-government militias, and 65 000 were members of Islamist militias. SOHR states that 88 000 people have been killed in the government's prisons and other places of detention. They also estimate a further 100 000 casualties that they have been unable to document.<sup>101</sup>

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has registered a total of 223 000 civilian fatalities up until March 2019. The highest number was registered in 2012, with more than 60 000 civilian deaths, followed by a gradual decrease to 30 000 in 2014 and less than 10 000 in 2018. Most were killed by Syrian government forces.<sup>102</sup>

The Syrian Center for Statistics and Research (SCSR) has registered a total of 169 000 fatalities, of whom 166 000 were civilians. SCSR registered the highest number in August 2012, with just under 5 000 fatalities in one month, followed by a gradual reduction. For the first five months of 2019, the average number of registered fatalities was about 300 per month. Landinfo assesses that their data collection method is not well explained, however, and information is lacking about where in Syria each person was killed.<sup>103</sup>

### 3.3 Which areas were most affected by violence in 2018 and 2019?

Landinfo assessed that the figures presented under [Section 3.2](#) give the impression that the security situation has improved, given that the number of violent incidents and conflict-related deaths has decreased considerably. However, this conceals the fact that there are great variations between different parts of the country.<sup>104</sup>

In the VDC database, it is possible to search for deaths in specific provinces. The searches done by Landinfo for this report reveal great variations between the provinces. The highest number of conflict-related deaths in 2018 was registered in Rif Dimashq province, with a total of more than 2 800 fatalities. Rif Dimashq completely surrounds the city of Damascus, which is a separate province.<sup>105</sup>

Landinfo assessed that the high numbers in Rif Dimashq can be explained by the fact that, in spring 2018, the government launched the offensive that led to the recapture of the suburbs east of Damascus, in Rif Dimashq. In June 2018, the government had regained control and the fighting

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mentions "massacres", a default number of 100 fatalities is recorded. If there is no reference made to fatalities in the report, or if it is unclear whether fatalities occurred at all (for example, when "casualties" are mentioned, which, by definition, means 'injuries and/or fatalities'), "0" fatalities are recorded.' For more information on the fatalities methodology used by ACLED, see: ACLED, ACLED Codebook (2019), 10 April 2019, [url](#), p. 31

<sup>100</sup> UCDP, Syria, Uppsala University, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>101</sup> SOHR, More than 570 thousand people were killed on the Syrian territory within 8 years of revolution demanding freedom, democracy, justice, and equality, 15 March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>102</sup> SNHR, Toll of civilian victims killed in Syria from March 2011 to January 2019, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>103</sup> SCSR, Syria – Since march 2011, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>104</sup> NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

<sup>105</sup> English-language sources often refer to Rif Dimashq as *Damascus suburbs*. VDC, Killed, n.d, [url](#)

ceased. This is reflected in the VDC statistics.<sup>106</sup> For example, of the 2 800 fatalities registered in Rif Dimashq in 2018, almost all died in the first six months of the year. Only 174 deaths were registered in the province in the second half of the year.<sup>107</sup> INSO also links the marked fall in the number of conflict events in 2018 to the government regaining control of the entire Damascus area and the southern provinces.<sup>108</sup>

According to VDC, Idlib had the second highest figure in 2018, with more than 1 000 fatalities. Idlib province has also seen ongoing warfare, including Syrian and Russian air raids in 2018. Of the 1 057 registered fatalities in Idlib in 2018, the cause of death was registered as ‘warplane shelling’ for as many as 466. The rebel-held areas in Idlib also include parts of Hama, Aleppo and Latakia provinces. In these provinces, 429 (Hama), 723 (Aleppo) and 54 (Latakia) conflict-related deaths were registered in 2018.<sup>109</sup> Landinfo assessed that based on this information, at least some of the deaths registered in these provinces were individuals who were in rebel-held areas or near the front lines.<sup>110</sup>

For this report, Landinfo looked at the figures for the first five months of 2019, finding great variations between the provinces; however Idlib now comes out on top, while the figures for Rif Dimashq are far lower than the year before.<sup>111</sup> The VDC only registered 14 conflict-related deaths in Rif Dimashq and 13 in the city of Damascus between 1 January and 31 May 2019. There were no registered conflict-related deaths in Tartus or Sweida in the same period, only three in Quneitra, three in Latakia and 18 in Daraa.<sup>112</sup> By then, the government had regained control of the suburbs around Damascus and the southern parts of the country, and the fighting had ceased. Tartus has been controlled by the government throughout the civil war and has been spared from direct warfare in recent years.<sup>113</sup> Only 61 conflict-related deaths in total were registered by VDC in the province during the period 2015–2018.<sup>114</sup>

In the period January–May 2019, 209 deaths were registered in Idlib, 111 in Aleppo and 248 in Hama.<sup>115</sup> This must be seen in conjunction with the unrest along the front lines with the rebel-held area in Idlib and neighbouring areas in Hama.<sup>116</sup> In Deir ez-Zor, 140 deaths were registered in the same period.<sup>117</sup> This area had active IS cells that were responsible for several attacks on government forces.<sup>118</sup>

The figures presented by ACLED show a corresponding trend.<sup>119</sup> In Rif Dimashq, the number of registered violent incidents decreased from more than 500 in February 2018 to 67 in May 2018. Again, the government’s offensive against the suburbs of Damascus can explain the dramatic decrease. The southern provinces show the same decreasing trend in the number of violent incidents after the government regained control of these provinces in spring and summer 2018. Daraa had 450 registered incidents in June 2018, while the figure from September 2018 to April 2019 has been between 10 and 30 per month. A corresponding trend and strong reduction are also found in Quneitra, the city of Damascus and Homs after the spring of 2018.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>106</sup> NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

<sup>107</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>108</sup> INSO, Syrian Arab Republic. Context Analysis, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>109</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>110</sup> NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

<sup>111</sup> NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

<sup>112</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>113</sup> NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

<sup>114</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>115</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>116</sup> NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

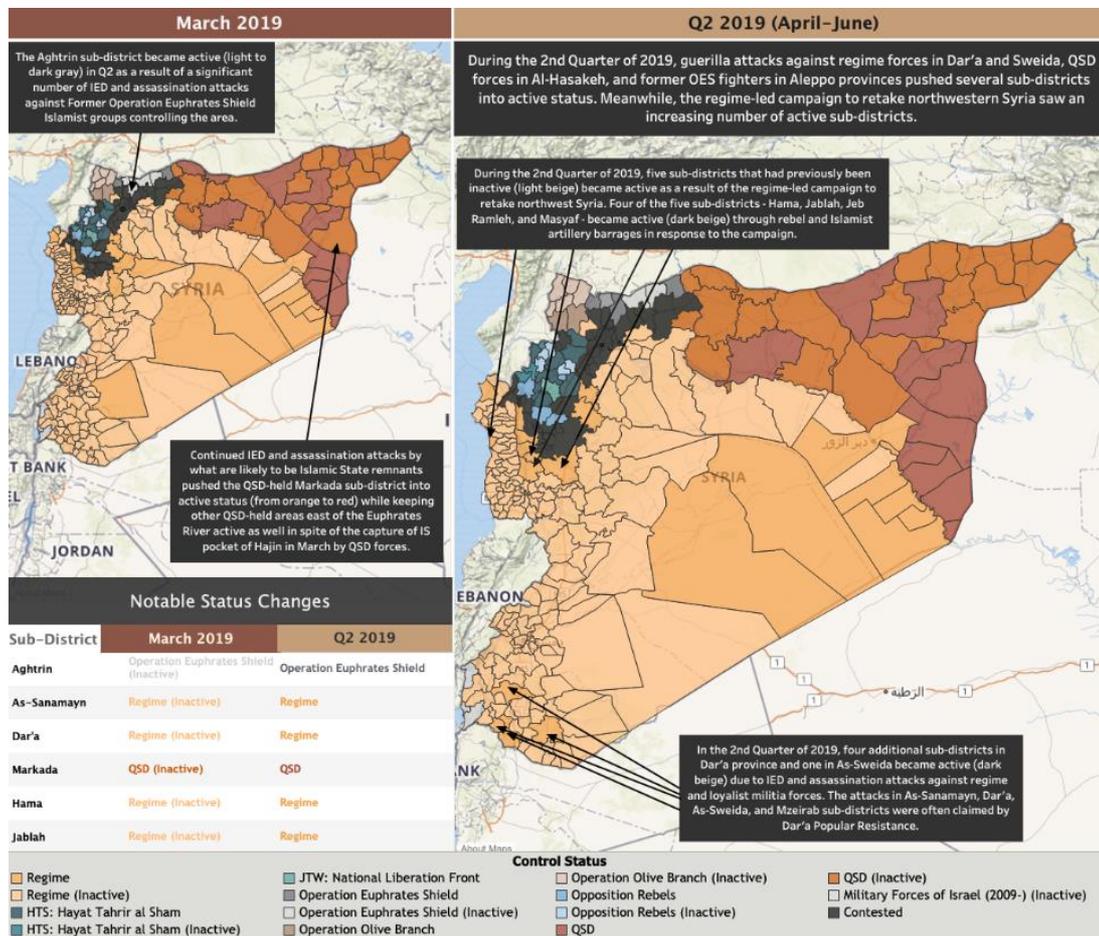
<sup>117</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>118</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly conflict summary. 15 – 21 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6

<sup>119</sup> NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

<sup>120</sup> NO-Landinfo drafter assessment based on ACLED, Dashboard, n.d., [url](#)

ACLED also produces maps of Syria that show territorial control. The most recent map reflects the situation during the period April–June 2019.<sup>121</sup> The maps are based on data collected by ACLED on violent incidents broken down by sub-districts.<sup>122</sup> On the maps, each sub-district has been assigned a colour code to show which party is in control.<sup>123</sup> Some sub-districts are coded as disputed (coloured black). These are areas in which none of the belligerents has full control.<sup>124</sup>



Map 3: 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter of 2019 (April-June) control map of Syria, © ACLED<sup>125</sup>

For each group, the colour codes also indicate whether the sub-district is coded as 'active' (more than ten violent incidents registered in the past six months) or inactive (fewer than ten violent

<sup>121</sup> The map can be retrieved here [url](#)

<sup>122</sup> For administrative purposes, Syria is divided into fourteen provinces or governorates (*muhafaza*, pl. *muhafazat*), sixty districts (*mintaqa*, pl. *manatiq*) and more than two hundred sub-districts (*nahiya*, pl. *nawahi*).

<sup>123</sup> A specific group is deemed to have territorial control in a specific sub-district if 1) collected data on violent incidents show that it has taken control of most of the populated areas in the sub-district, 2) if it is the dominant group in the sub-district based on its activities (registered violent incidents), or 3) if a specific group has had military control of the sub-district for a prolonged period and has not been actively challenged. ACLED, Mapping Territorial Control, Contestation, and Activity in Syria, March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>124</sup> In contested sub-districts, none of the three criteria for classifying a sub-province as being under the control of a specific group are met. ACLED, Mapping Territorial Control, Contestation, and Activity in Syria, March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>125</sup> Muaz, A. and Grinstead, N., The State of Syria April June 2019, ACLED, © 2019 ACLED All rights reserved. Used with permission from ACLED, n.d., [url](#)

incidents registered in the past six months).<sup>126</sup> This means that the maps also gives an indication of which areas are suffering most violence.<sup>127</sup>

On ACLED's map for the period April–June 2019, most of the sub-districts in the government-controlled parts of Syria are classified as 'inactive,' meaning that fewer than ten violent incidents have been registered in the past six months. This includes the southern provinces Daraa and Sweida, Damascus and the surrounding areas (Rif Dimashq), most of Hama and Homs and the coastal areas north of Lebanon.<sup>128</sup>

Active sub-districts in government-controlled parts of the country are found in the desert areas in the east (Homs province) and along the Euphrates Valley (Deir ez-Zor province).<sup>129</sup> There were active IS cells in this area that were responsible for several attacks on government forces.<sup>130</sup> The sub-districts along the front lines near Idlib are also marked as 'active'. This is because the areas have been bombarded by artillery and missiles from rebel-held parts of Idlib in response to the government's offensive. Moreover, some sub-districts in Daraa in the south changed status from 'inactive' in March 2019 to 'active' in the period April–June 2019. This can be explained by an increasing number of bombing raids and attacks targeting members of the Syrian Army and the security forces.<sup>131</sup>

Large parts of Idlib and the Turkish-occupied areas in the north are classified as either contested or active. Large parts of the Kurdish-controlled areas in the north-east and the government-controlled areas in Deir ez-Zor province are also classified as active.<sup>132</sup>

In summary, Landinfo assesses that the figures show great variation and thus indicate considerable differences in the security situation in different parts of the country. Government-controlled areas in and around Damascus, southern Syria and the coastal areas north of Lebanon had relatively few conflict events and conflict-related deaths since summer of 2018 and up to present. At the same time as the areas in and around Idlib were dominated by armed conflict and saw relatively many fatalities in the same period.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> ACLED, Mapping Territorial Control, Contestation, and Activity in Syria, March 2019, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>127</sup> NO-drafter assessment

<sup>128</sup> ACLED, The State of Syria. April-June 2019, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>129</sup> ACLED, The State of Syria. April-June 2019, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>130</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly conflict summary. 15-21 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>131</sup> ACLED, The state of Syria. March 2019, 8 April 2019, [url](#); ACLED, The State of Syria. April-June 2019, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>132</sup> ACLED, The state of Syria. March 2019, 8 April 2019, [url](#); ACLED, The State of Syria. April-June 2019, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>133</sup> NO-drafter assessment

## 4. How does the conflict affect the civilian population?

This chapter describes how the war has been fought, the type of weapons that have been most used and the belligerents' war tactics. The purpose is to explain how the warfare and violence affect the security of the civilian population.

### 4.1 Sieges, air strikes and artillery fire

As mentioned above, different armed rebel groups started taking control of parts of the rural areas and some suburbs in 2012. Many of these areas gradually became the scene of intense combat. The government adopted a 'kneel and starve' strategy whereby it besieged rebel-held areas and then launched a campaign of air strikes from planes and helicopters.<sup>134</sup>

A large number of neighbourhoods controlled by armed rebel groups were besieged. This meant that access to workplaces, money, food, water, health services, electricity and gas was restricted or cut off completely. In several places, the siege tactics led to food shortages and starvation, but no overview is available of how many people died as a result. The besieged areas were then bombed in order to force the population to surrender.<sup>135</sup>

The government was responsible for most of the sieges and was the only side to impose sieges in a widespread, systematic manner across the country.<sup>136</sup> However, the tactic was also used by anti-government militias. IS, for example, besieged government-controlled parts of the city of Deir-ze-Zor between 2014 and 2017.<sup>137</sup> Government-controlled Shia Muslim villages in Idlib were also besieged by rebel groups for extended periods.<sup>138</sup> In spring 2018, the last sieges came to an end as the government took control of all rebel-held neighbourhoods and villages in Damascus and southern Syria. As of May 2018, no areas in Syria was under siege any more.<sup>139</sup>

The bombings have destroyed civilian buildings and infrastructure and, in some cases, not distinguished between combatants and civilians. The result has been extensive destruction of buildings and entire neighbourhoods, resulting in high civilian losses. In autumn 2018 alone, before the last offensive against Idlib was launched, dozens of civilians were killed in air raids on towns and villages in the rebel-held Idlib enclave. According to the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, the Syrian government forces launched dozens of air raids on civilian areas on at least three occasions in autumn 2018, without specific military targets, which is tantamount to a war crime.<sup>140</sup>

The government has also been accused of deliberately attacking hospitals and field clinics in rebel-held areas. The organisation Physicians for Human Rights documented 583 separate bomb attacks

<sup>134</sup> Global Rights Compliance, World Peace Foundation, Accountability for Starvation Crimes: Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 2; Holliday, J., Syria's maturing insurgency, Institute for the Study of War, June 2012, [url](#), pp. 7-8; Holliday, J., The Assad regime. From counterinsurgency to civil war, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, [url](#), p. 19; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>135</sup> Global Rights Compliance, World Peace Foundation, Accountability for Starvation Crimes: Syria, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-4; Siege Watch, Final Report. Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Aftermath of Syria's Sieges, May 2018, [url](#), pp. 9-12

<sup>136</sup> Siege Watch, Final Report. Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Aftermath of Syria's Sieges, May 2018, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>137</sup> Global Rights Compliance, World Peace Foundation, Accountability for Starvation Crimes: Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>138</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria: Buses arrive to evacuate two rebel-besieged Shia towns, 18 July 2018, [url](#)

<sup>139</sup> Siege Watch, Final Report. Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Aftermath of Syria's Sieges, May 2018, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>140</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), paragraph 30

on 350 different hospitals and health clinics between March 2011 and June 2019, in which 912 healthcare workers were killed. According to the organisation, 90 % of these attacks can be traced back to the Syrian government and its Russian allies.<sup>141</sup>

Amnesty International and the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria have also documented air raids on health facilities in rebel-held parts of Syria. The frequency of these attacks is said to have markedly increased from October 2015, after Russia became involved in the war and began an air campaign in support of the Syrian government. This led to clinics in rebel-held areas being established in basements and caves to escape the bombings. UN's Commission of Inquiry has also documented air attacks on schools and markets in densely populated neighbourhoods in rebel-held areas.<sup>142</sup>

In spring and summer 2019, it was primarily the southern part of Idlib and the northern part of Hama that experienced air raids and artillery fire as a result of the government's ongoing offensive. As mentioned above, by mid-July, approximately 450 000 people had fled the affected areas and gone north as a result of this warfare, and at least 450 civilians had been killed by 26 July 2019.<sup>143</sup>

## 4.2 Terrorist attacks and bombings

The Global Terrorism Index defines terrorism as '[...] the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation'.<sup>144</sup> Violence committed by a state actor falls outside the definition. This means that attacks carried out by the Syrian government are not included in the GTI statistics.<sup>145</sup>

Bombings and other forms of terrorist attacks have occurred frequently during the conflict, but the number has decreased in the last few years.<sup>146</sup> The Global Terrorism Index, which analyses trends in terrorist attacks around the world, registered a total of 2 110 fatalities from terrorist attacks in Syria in 2016, and 1 096 in 2017, which is a reduction of almost 50 %. The figures do not distinguish between military and civilian victims.<sup>147</sup>

In 2017, Syria was ranked fifth in the world in terms of deaths resulting from terrorist attacks, after Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria and Somalia.<sup>148</sup> Figures for 2018 have not yet been published. IS was responsible for 63 % of the registered deaths from terrorist attacks in Syria in 2017. Approximately three-quarters of all attacks that year took place in four provinces: Aleppo, Damascus, Deir ez-Zor and Homs.<sup>149</sup>

<sup>141</sup> PHR, Physicians for Human Rights' findings of attacks on health care in Syria, 2019, [url](#)

<sup>142</sup> AI, Syrian and Russian forces targeting hospitals as a strategy of war, 3 March 2016, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 1 February 2018, [url](#), paragraphs 72-76; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), paragraph 23

<sup>143</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Recent developments in Northwestern Syria. Situation Report no. 8 – as of 26 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2

<sup>144</sup> IEP, Global Terrorism Index 2018. Measuring the impact of terrorism, November 2018, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>145</sup> IEP states that: 'In order to be included as an incident in the GTD, the act has to be 'an intentional act of violence or threat of violence by a non-state actor.' This means an incident has to meet three criteria in order for it to be counted as a terrorist act: 1. The incident must be intentional - the result of a conscious calculation on the part of a perpetrator; 2. The incident must entail some level of violence or threat of violence - including property damage as well as violence against people; 3. The perpetrators of the incidents must be sub-national actors. This database does not include acts of state terrorism. IEP, Global Terrorism Index 2018. Measuring the impact of terrorism, November 2018, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>146</sup> NO-drafter assessment

<sup>147</sup> IEP, Global Terrorism Index 2018. Measuring the impact of terrorism, November 2018, [url](#), pp. 12, 22

<sup>148</sup> IEP, Global Terrorism Index 2018. Measuring the impact of terrorism, November 2018, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>149</sup> IEP, Global Terrorism Index 2018. Measuring the impact of terrorism, November 2018, [url](#), p. 22

As mentioned earlier, the number of conflict-related deaths decreased dramatically after the government regained control of former rebel-held areas, including around Damascus and in the south.<sup>150</sup> Attacks of different kinds have nonetheless been carried out in the area also after the change of control. For example, the Carter Center states that six bombings and attacks using explosives were carried out south of Damascus and in the southern provinces between 15 and 21 July 2019. The attacks targeted members of the government's armed forces. No information has been provided about possible civilian victims. In total, the Carter Center has registered more than 30 bomb attacks in the three southernmost provinces Daraa, Quneitra and Sweida from August 2018 to July 2019.<sup>151</sup>

IS cells were reportedly active in the desert east of Homs province and along the Euphrates River in the provinces of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa. In total, IS carried out more than one hundred attacks in these areas in the first half of 2019. The number of attacks increased up until April 2019, followed by a decrease. IS has also attacked SDF personnel in SDF-held areas in the north-east, with 36 attacks in July alone. The city of Hasakah has been especially hard-hit, with more than 40 bombings from July 2018 to July 2019, mostly in the southern part of the city.<sup>152</sup>

In Turkish-occupied areas in the north of Syria, the conflict between the many Turkish-allied armed rebel groups has led to frequent confrontations, armed clashes and bombings, including the use of car bombs. Most of the attacks have taken place in the densely populated areas around the cities of Afrin and Azaz. Dozens of civilians are reported to have been killed or injured in such attacks in the second half of 2018.<sup>153</sup>

### 4.3 Arrests, detentions and abductions

The government's security forces, the police, the Army, pro-government militias and the different branches of the intelligence service carried out extensive arrest campaigns during the first years of the civil war. Already in 2012, it was estimated that tens of thousands of people had been arrested on the grounds of alleged affiliation to or support for anti-government groups. Those who were arrested were subjected to systematic torture in one of the intelligence services' many detention centres. They were detained for days or months, often without being brought before a judge and without being told what they were accused of. In most cases, the detainees' families were not informed of their whereabouts. Detainees were held in crowded cells and without sufficient food.<sup>154</sup>

Many are assumed to have died while in detention as a result of torture, starvation or lack of adequate medical assistance. In January 2014, more than 50 000 photos of dead people were smuggled out of Syria by a person using the code name 'Caesar,' who claimed to be a forensic photographer for the military police. Among other things, the photos showed between six and seven thousand individuals said to have died in the government's custody. It has subsequently been verified that some of the victims were persons detained by the government's security forces.<sup>155</sup> In the first half of 2018, information about tens of thousands of people who had died in

<sup>150</sup> ACLED, Dashboard, n.d., [url](#); VDC, Killed, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>151</sup> The Carter Center also has a dedicated team that has been collecting data on conflict events in Syria since 2012. The organisation publishes weekly updates on security incidents in the country. Carter Center (the), Weekly conflict summary. 15-21 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-6

<sup>152</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly conflict summary. 15-21 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-6

<sup>153</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), para. 35

<sup>154</sup> EIP, Refugee return in Syria: Dangers, security risks and information scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 10–11; HRW, Torture archipelago. Arbitrary arrests, torture, and enforced disappearances in Syria's underground prisons since March 2011, July 2012, [url](#), pp. 12–14

<sup>155</sup> EIP, Refugee return in Syria: Dangers, security risks and information scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 14-15; HRW, If the dead could speak. Mass deaths and torture in Syria's detention facilities, December 2015, [url](#), pp. 1–7

detention was communicated to the civil registries, which subsequently registered them as deceased and informed their families.<sup>156</sup>

According to reports in 2019, the government has continued its practice of arresting alleged members and supporters of anti-government groups until the present, including in areas that the government has reclaimed from rebel groups. Activists, persons who have recently returned from rebel-held areas, and deserters, among others, have been arrested by the government.<sup>157</sup>

According to UN reporting from January 2019, a large number of armed rebel groups and criminal networks have reportedly been responsible for abductions and deprivation of liberty. In Idlib, police forces working under Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's 'Salvation Government' arrested many civilians critical of the organisation or who break with its narrow interpretation of Islamic law (*sharia*). Those arrested were reported to be subjected to torture and abuse in detention as a matter of routine. The UN reported that courts organised under the Salvation Government did not operate in accordance with international standards of law. Moreover, in both Idlib and the Turkish-occupied Afrin, there were many examples of civilians being abducted by armed groups demanding a ransom from the victims' families.<sup>158</sup>

## 4.4 Landmines and explosive remnants of war

Landmines, roadside bombs (or IEDs/improvised explosive devices) and explosive remnants of war are widespread in Syria. According to the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), the following groups are particularly vulnerable to the threat of such explosives: children who pick up dangerous items from the ground, agricultural workers who plough the land and internally displaced persons who may enter areas without knowing the local risks. In the provinces of Aleppo, Daraa, Rif Dimashq (Rural Damascus), Idlib, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, landmines, explosives and IEDs have caused injuries and deaths. According to UNMAS, more than ten million Syrians live in communities reporting either landmines, explosive remnants or IEDs. In the city of Raqqa alone, several hundred people were killed by explosives shortly after returning to the city in 2018.<sup>159</sup>

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has stated that children were as much at risk in Syria in 2018 as earlier in the conflict. In 2018, 1 106 children were killed as a result of the armed conflict. That is the highest number of conflict-related child deaths in one year since the conflict started. Landmines, IEDs and explosive remnants were the number one cause by far of conflict-related child deaths. They are reported to have killed 434 children in total in 2018.<sup>160</sup>

## 4.5 Humanitarian conditions

The armed conflict has led to extensive, complex humanitarian challenges. According to the UN's estimates, 11.7 million people, more than half the population of Syria, are in need of one or more forms of humanitarian aid. This is a reduction since the peak year 2017, when the number was estimated to be 13.5 million. People in this category lack basic necessities such as health services, shelter, food, education or water and sanitary services. In 2015, it was estimated that 83 % of the

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<sup>156</sup> EIP, Refugee return in Syria: Dangers, security risks and information scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 14–15, 23; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), para. 75

<sup>157</sup> EIP, Refugee return in Syria: Dangers, security risks and information scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 14–15, 23; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), para. 73

<sup>158</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), paragraphs 51, 64–66

<sup>159</sup> UNMAS, Syria. Explosive Hazard Contamination, March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>160</sup> UNICEF, 2018 deadliest year yet for children in Syria as war enters 9th year, 10 March 2019, [url](#)

population lived in poverty, and the situation is reported to have further deteriorated in recent years. According to the UN's 2019 humanitarian needs overview, one-third of the population are estimated to experience food insecurity, and in some areas, there are local communities where people suffer from acute malnutrition. Almost half the country's health facilities have been either partly or completely destroyed. More than one in three schools are damaged or destroyed.<sup>161</sup>

## 4.6 Refugees and internally displaced persons

The conflict has also triggered a large-scale refugee crisis. While about 5.6 million have fled to neighbouring countries, most of them between 2013 and 2016; 6.2 million people are internally displaced, some more than once, according to 2019 sources. In 2018 alone, 1.6 million people were displaced, most of them during the first six months of the year as a result of increasing violence in Idlib and northern parts of Hama as well as in Eastern Ghouta outside Damascus. Far fewer fled in the second half of 2018, despite fighting in the southern provinces. A total of 1.4 million internally displaced persons returned to their homes in 2018.<sup>162</sup>

Intense fighting in southern Idlib and northern Hama since April 2019 gave rise to new large waves of displacement. The UN stated that more than 450 000 people were displaced from the area between mid-May and mid-July 2019 as a result of the conflict. Most moved further north in Idlib and to Turkish-occupied areas.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> UNOCHA, 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-12

<sup>162</sup> NRC, 8 facts after 8 years of conflict in Syria, 15 March 2019, [url](#); UN OCHA, 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 5, 14; UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response, Syria Regional Refugee Response, [url](#)

<sup>163</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Recent developments in Northwestern Syria. Situation Report no. 8 – as of 26 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2

## 5. Concluding remarks on the security situation

### 5.1 Ongoing warfare in Idlib

The southern parts of Idlib province and northern parts of Hama were most severely affected by violence in summer 2019. The government's offensive against rebel groups in this area consisted, among other things, of a prolonged air campaign that also impacted the civilian population and infrastructure. Some of the deadliest bombings occurred on 16 July 2019, when a market in Maar Shurin in Idlib was bombed, killing 12 people, and on 22 July, when a market in Maarat an-Numan in Idlib was bombed, killing 39 people, including eight women and five children. In total, 59 civilians are reported to have been killed that day, and more than 100 injured. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has, as of 26 July, registered at least 450 deaths as a result of the offensive that started in May.<sup>164</sup>

The VDC documented a total of 1 032 conflict-related deaths in Syria in the first five months of 2019. Of these deaths, nearly half occurred in the provinces of Idlib (209, of whom 189 were civilians) and Hama (248, of whom 169 were civilians). Most of those who died were killed by the Syrian Army and the cause of death registered as 'shelling', 'explosion' or 'shooting'.<sup>165</sup>

The government-controlled side of the front line in Idlib and Hama was also affected by attacks with missiles and artillery grenades fired by anti-government militias. Dozens of attacks are reported to have taken place in the second quarter of 2019.<sup>166</sup>

### 5.2 Decrease in violent incidents in government-controlled areas

Large parts of the government-controlled areas saw relatively few violent incidents in the first half of 2019. In the city of Damascus and Rif Dimashq (Damascus suburbs), the VDC registered 13 (of whom 11 civilians) and 14 (of whom 10 civilians) conflict-related deaths in the first five months of 2019. As mentioned, this is a marked decrease from the year before.<sup>167</sup> Violent incidents still occur in Damascus, however. On 22 July 2019, for example, explosives were attached to a car that subsequently exploded in the Qadam district in the southern part of Damascus. A local leader of a pro-government militia and his driver were allegedly killed. IS has claimed responsibility, but it is still uncertain who was actually behind the attack. It was the eighth IED attack in the capital so far in 2019. This type of activity has increased since April 2019.<sup>168</sup>

The number of fatalities was also low in other government-controlled provinces in the first half of 2019: 0 in Tartus, 3 in Latakia, 0 in Sweida and 3 in Quneitra.<sup>169</sup> ACLED's conflict map for the period April–June 2019 also shows that nearly all the sub-districts in these government-controlled provinces were coded as 'inactive,' with fewer than ten conflict events per month.<sup>170</sup>

<sup>164</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Recent developments in Northwestern Syria. Situation Report no. 8 – as of 26 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>165</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d, [url](#)

<sup>166</sup> ACLED, The State of Syria. April-June 2019, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>167</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d, [url](#)

<sup>168</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly conflict summary. 22 – 28 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), p. 4; ISW, Syria situation report: July 10 – 23, 2019, 25 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>169</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d, [url](#)

<sup>170</sup> ACLED, The State of Syria. April-June 2019, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

Three separate areas within the government-controlled area had sub-districts classified as ‘active’ on ACLED’s conflict map from July 2019. Firstly, the sub-districts near the front lines in Idlib were classified as ‘active’ as a result of rebel groups from Idlib bombarding the area with missiles and artillery in response to the government offensive. Secondly, several sub-districts in the desert areas in the eastern part of Homs and neighbouring areas in the southern part of Deir ez-Zor were classified as ‘active’.<sup>171</sup> There were active IS cells in this area that were responsible for several attacks on government forces.<sup>172</sup> The VDC registered 91 conflict-related deaths in Homs in the first five months of 2019, 65 of whom were civilians; and 140 in Deir ez-Zor, 96 of whom were civilians.<sup>173</sup> It is impossible to say for certain where in the provinces these deaths occurred, however.<sup>174</sup>

Thirdly, several sub-districts in Daraa and one in Sweida were classified as ‘active’ on ACLED’s map for the period April–June 2019. This represents a change from the first quarter of 2019, when these areas were classified as inactive. The change in status is due to IED attacks and assassinations of members of the Syrian Army and pro-government militias.<sup>175</sup> In July 2019, a total of 38 attacks were documented in southern Syria in July 2019, killing 16 and injuring 11, an increase from previous months.<sup>176</sup> The VDC registered 18 conflict-related deaths in Daraa in the first half of 2019 and none in Sweida.<sup>177</sup>

### 5.3 Internal violent conflicts in the Turkish-occupied zone

Local armed militias allied with Turkey have fought among themselves for control, and the area has seen a series of bombings in the past year. On average, ten different IED attacks have taken place per month in the first six months of 2019. Extrajudicial arrests, kidnapping for ransom, pillaging and confiscation of property are also widespread, according to two sources from 2019. The lack of a centralised judicial system made it difficult for the civilian population to address conflicts that arose. The agricultural land in Afrin was reported to be littered with landmines and explosive remnants that have caused civilian casualties.<sup>178</sup>

### 5.4 Attacks in SDF-held areas in the north-east

Since IS lost the last of its territory in March 2019, the organisation changed its strategy and become more active as an underground movement. The number of IS attacks on SDF personnel increased in the first half of 2019.<sup>179</sup> Between 10 and 25 IED attacks targeting SDF personnel were carried out per month between January and June 2019, increasing to more than 40 attacks in July.<sup>180</sup> IS carried out two relatively large attacks in Manbij in January 2019, a bomb explosion and an armed attack, killing several dozens, including SDF soldiers and four US servicemen.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>171</sup> ACLED, The State of Syria. April-June 2019, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>172</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly conflict summary. 15 – 21 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>173</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d, [url](#)

<sup>174</sup> NO-drafter assessment

<sup>175</sup> ACLED, The State of Syria. April-June 2019, 12 July 2019, [url](#); Carter Center (The), Weekly conflict summary. 22 – 28 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

<sup>176</sup> Haid, H., Syria war: Who is behind the anti-regime attacks in Daraa?. Middle East Eye, 5 August 2019, [url](#)

<sup>177</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d, [url](#)

<sup>178</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly conflict summary. 22 – 28 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), p. 3; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), paragraphs 6, 35

<sup>179</sup> International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>180</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly conflict summary. 22 – 28 July 2019, 2019, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>181</sup> International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 16-20

As of August 2019 SDF controlled the city of Hasakah and parts of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Aleppo provinces. In Hasakah, the VDC registered 78 conflict-related deaths in the first five months of 2019, 16 of whom were civilians. In the other provinces, 140 deaths were registered in Deir ez-Zor (96 civilians), 43 in Raqqa (34 civilians) and 111 in Aleppo (95 civilians), but it is not possible to ascertain whether or not these deaths occurred in SDF-held areas.<sup>182</sup> ACLED's conflict map for the period April–June 2019 showed that about one third of the administrative sub-districts in the SDF-held areas were 'active' at that time, with more than ten security incidents registered in each of these sub-districts in the past six months. This was also the case for the north-eastern parts of Deir ez-Zor province and the south-western parts of Hasakah, as well as the sub-district of Raqqa, which includes the city of Raqqa.<sup>183</sup>

For more information on security developments in SDF-held areas see [Chapter 6](#).

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<sup>182</sup> VDC, Killed, n.d, [url](#)

<sup>183</sup> ACLED, The State of Syria. April-June 2019, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

## 6. New developments to the security situation (October 2019)

### 6.1 Turkish offensive in north-east Syria

In the beginning of October 2019, after a phonecall between US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, US troops began to withdraw from Syria's northern border with Turkey, giving way to an announced Turkish military offensive into northern Syria against the Kurdish-controlled SDF.<sup>184</sup> Official representatives of the US announced the development, stating that 'the United States Armed Forces will not support or be involved in the [Turkish] operation, and United States forces, having defeated the Isis territorial "Caliphate"', will no longer be in the immediate area'.<sup>185</sup>

On 9 October 2019, Turkey together with affiliated armed groups, launched a military offensive into Kurdish-held territory in northeastern Syria following the withdrawal of US troops from the region.<sup>186</sup> The stated objective of the Turkish offensive was to remove Kurdish-led forces from along the border area and establish a 'safe zone' 32-kilometre wide and 480-kilometre long in northern Syria, where Turkey intends to relocate up to two million Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey.<sup>187</sup>

In the first week of the offensive, Turkish and affiliated forces captured the towns of Tell Abiad in Raqqa and Ras al-Ain in Hasaka governorates, as well as part of the M4 international highway linking the Kurdish troops between the two governorates.<sup>188</sup> In mid-October 2019, Kurdish-led SDF forces, who were in control of northeast Syria, announced an agreement with the Syrian government forces, who entered the region to deter Turkey from attacking.<sup>189</sup>

On 17 October 2019, a five-day ceasefire was reached following negotiations between Turkish President Erdogan and US Vice President Mike Pence. Turkey agreed to pause its offensive to allow Kurdish forces to pull 30 kilometres back from the Turkey-Syria border where Turkey aims to establish the 'safe zone'.<sup>190</sup> Accusations of violating the ceasefire were voiced by both sides and fighting continued to be reported including in the towns of Lazqa, Marikiz, Bab al-Khair and Qabr Sheikh Hussein in Ras Al Ain, according to sources reporting in late October 2019.<sup>191</sup>

On 20 October 2019, a senior official of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced the withdrawal of Kurdish forces and evacuation of civilians from the besieged border town of Ras al-Ain. The forces were reportedly expected to initially move back 30 kilometres from the border with a subsequent retreat from a 120km area between the towns of Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad to

<sup>184</sup> Washington Post (The), Trump administration pulls troops from northern Syria as Turkey readies offensive, 07 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>185</sup> BBC, Trump makes way for Turkey operation against Kurds in Syria, 7 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>186</sup> Al Jazeera, Turkey's military operation in Syria: All the latest updates, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>187</sup> International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), p. 22; BBC, Turkey-Syria offensive: Kurds reach deal with Syrian army, 14 October 2019, [url](#); HRW, Turkey's 'Safe Zone' Would Be Anything But, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

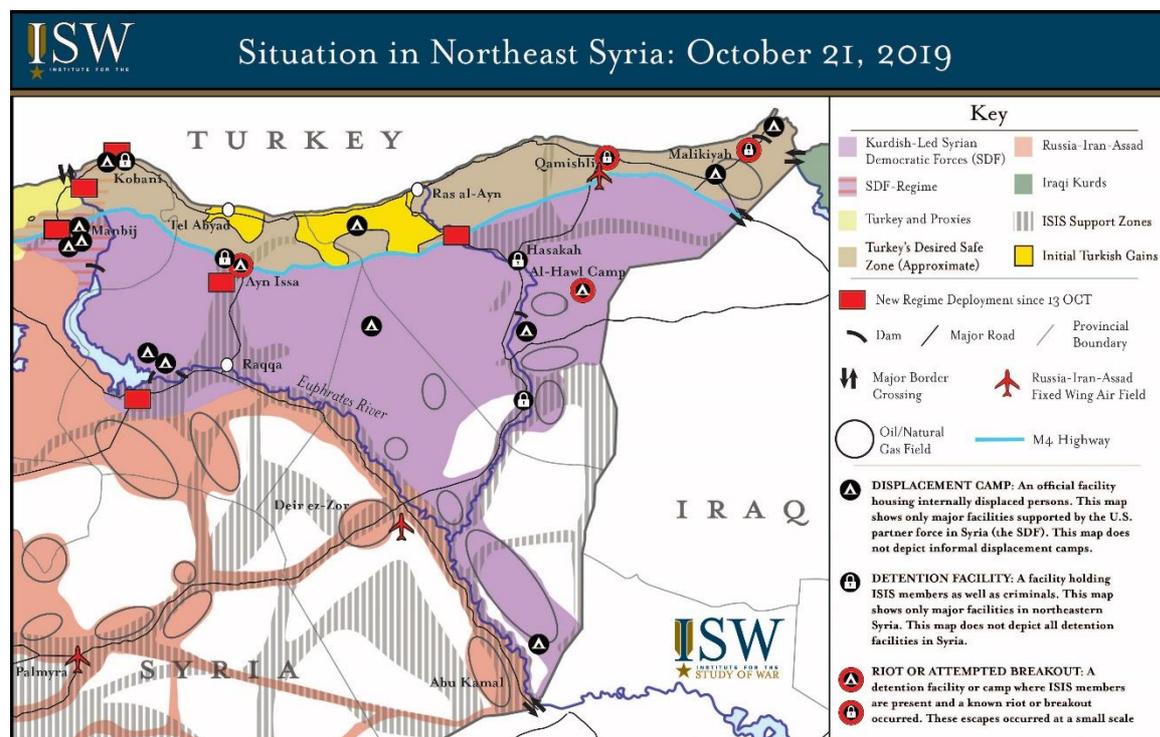
<sup>188</sup> ACLED, Regional Overview – Middle East (6-12 October 2019), 15 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>189</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria's army to deploy along Turkey border as Kurds strike deal, 14 October 2019, [url](#); New York Times (The), Abandoned by U.S. in Syria, Kurds Find New Ally in American Foe, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>190</sup> Al Jazeera, US, Turkey agree on Turkish ceasefire with Syrian Kurds, 17 October 2019, [url](#); Guardian (The), Erdogan says Turkey to resume Syria offensive if truce deal falters, 19 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>191</sup> UNOCHA, Syria | Flash Update #7, Humanitarian impact of the military operation in northeastern Syria, 16-18 October 2019, 18 October 2019, [url](#), p. 2; Al Jazeera, Turkey, Kurds trade accusations as Syria truce largely holds, 19 October 2019, [url](#)

follow.<sup>192</sup> On 21 October 2019 SDF announced that all of the Kurdish fighters belonging to the group evacuated the town of Ras al-Ain.<sup>193</sup>



Map 4, Situation in Northeast Syria: 21 October 2019, ©ISW

On 23 October 2019, Turkey and Russia signed an agreement to remove YPG fighters from the envisaged Turkish 'safe zone'. The removal of YPG forces was reportedly to be overseen by Russian and Syrian government forces after which Russian and Turkish forces would run joint patrols around the area.<sup>194</sup> According to the deal, Turkey 'will control a 32km-wide (20 miles) area between the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, which covers 120km (75 miles) of the Turkish-Syrian border'. The area around the predominantly Kurdish city of Qamishli is not included in the deal and no further details were given.<sup>195</sup> According to the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), an independent social enterprise, 'the YPG will also be forced to withdraw from Tel Rifaat and Manbij, which will presumably come under Government of Syria control'.<sup>196</sup> Following the agreement, Turkey announced that it would not resume its offensive.<sup>197</sup> Further details on the developments of this agreement could not be found within the time constraints.

As of 20 October 2019, at least 176 400 people, including an estimated 74 000 children have been displaced from Aleppo, Hasaka and Raqqa governorates following the offensive. 18 500 people were reported to have returned, primarily to Tel Abiad in Raqqa governorate and Qamishli in Hasaka governorate according to a UNOCHA update from 20 October 2019.<sup>198</sup>

<sup>192</sup> Al Jazeera, Kurdish forces agree to withdraw from Turkey-Syria border, 20 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>193</sup> CNN, US troops leave Syria and cross into Iraq where some will stay, 21 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>194</sup> Al Jazeera, Turkey, Russia reach deal for YPG move out of Syria border area, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>195</sup> BBC, Turkey Syria offensive: Erdogan and Putin strike deal over Kurds, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>196</sup> COAR, Syria Update: 16-22 October 2019, 23 October 2019, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>197</sup> New York Times (The), Turkey Halts Syrian Incursion, Hours After Deal with Russia, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>198</sup> UNOCHA, Syria | Flash Update #7, Humanitarian impact of the military operation in northeastern Syria, 19-20 October 2019, [url](#), p. 1

According to the SOHR, as of 19 October 2019, there were 86 civilian fatalities recorded, including 21 children, while Kurdish authorities claimed that 218 civilians, including 18 children, were killed during the first week of the offensive.<sup>199</sup>

## 6.2 Syrian government gains

Following the start of Turkey's offensive against the Kurdish controlled northeast Syria in the beginning of October 2019, the Syrian government and the Kurdish-controlled SDF announced an agreement to allow the Syrian government's troops to be deployed along the border with Turkey to assist Kurdish forces in repelling the Turkish offensive. The agreement also envisaged that Turkish occupied areas in Syria such as Afrin are to be reconquered.<sup>200</sup>

At the end of September 2019, the Syrian army and affiliated armed groups were reported to have taken positions on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River near the towns of Salihyah, Hatlah, Husseiniyah and Tabiyah, located close to Deir Ez Zor city.<sup>201</sup> As of 14 October 2019, the Syrian government's forces were reported to be deployed to Ain Issa, Raqqa governorate in northern Syria.<sup>202</sup> On 15 October, the Syrian government forces were also reported to have entered the previously Kurdish-controlled city of Manbij, in northern Aleppo governorate. Russian state media quoted the Russian Defence Ministry claim that the Syrian government forces had 'full control' of the city.<sup>203</sup> On 16 October, Syrian government forces entered the city of Kobane, Aleppo governorate, which has been a stronghold of the SDF.<sup>204</sup> Russian troops reportedly accompanied the Syrian government forces in regaining control of the Kurdish-controlled territories.<sup>205</sup>

<sup>199</sup> SOHR, 10 days of Operation "Peace Spring": Turkey controls an area equivalent to a quarter of the size of Lebanon. Turkish-backed factions continue its violations and breach the "ceasefire", and the death toll among the "SDF", the regime, Turkish forces and factions loyal to it rises to 449, 19 October 2019, [url](#); Reuters, Kurdish-led health authority in northeast Syria says 218 civilians killed in Turkish offensive, 17 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>200</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria's army to deploy along Turkey border as Kurds strike deal, 14 October 2019, [url](#); New York Times (The), Abandoned by U.S. in Syria, Kurds Find New Ally in American Foe, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

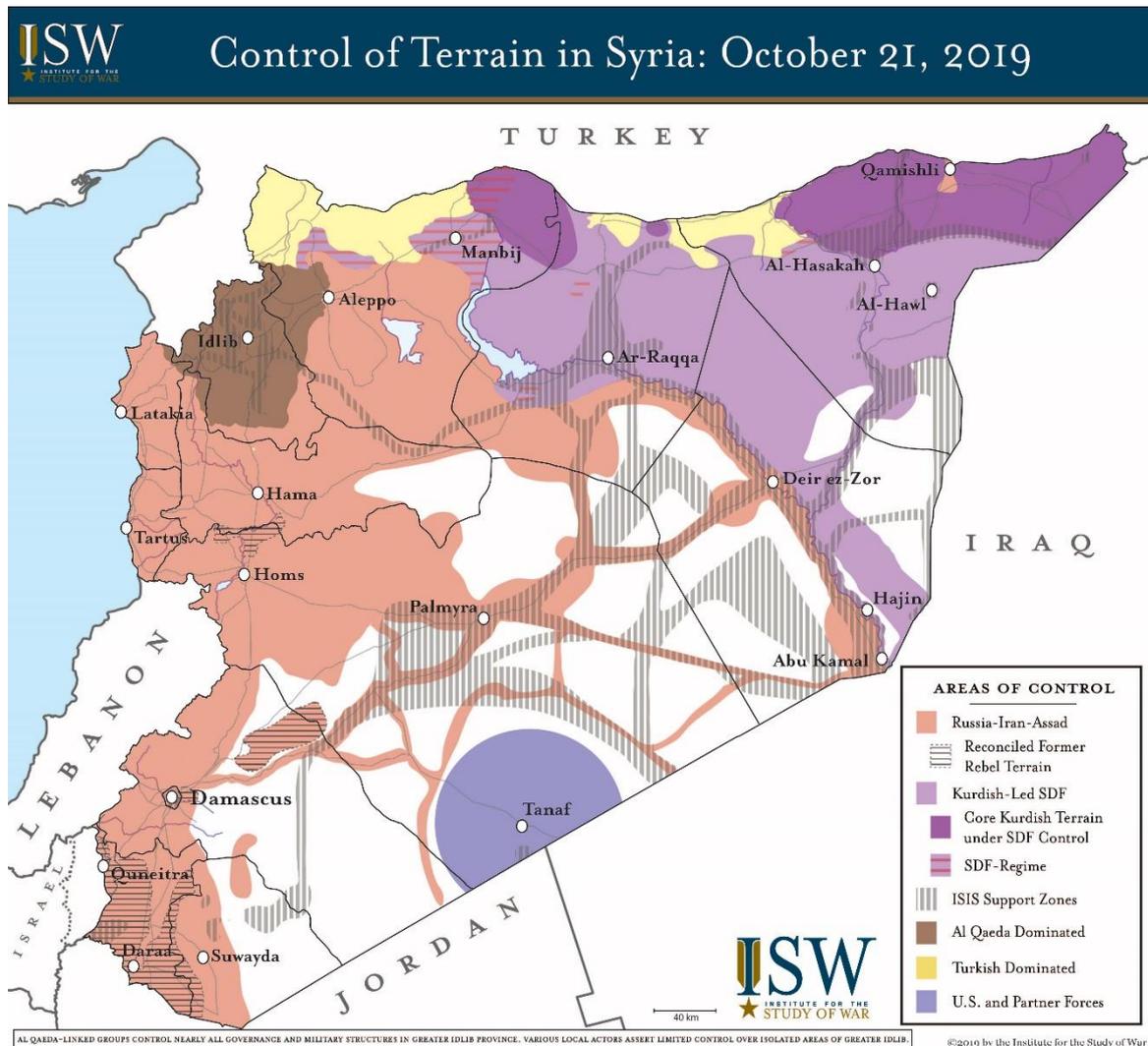
<sup>201</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 25 – October 10 2019, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>202</sup> Al Jazeera, Turkey's military operation in Syria: All the latest updates, 14 October 2019, [url](#); Reuters, Syrian Observatory: government forces deploy to Ain Issa in northern Syria, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>203</sup> DW, Russia-backed Syrian forces enter key city Manbij in northern Syria, 15 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>204</sup> Defense Post (The), Syrian army troops enter symbolic Kurdish city of Kobani, 16 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>205</sup> New Yorker (The), Turkey, Syria, the Kurds, and Trump's Abandonment of Foreign Policy, 20 October 2019, [url](#); Defense Post (The), Syrian army troops enter symbolic Kurdish city of Kobani, 16 October 2019, [url](#)



Map 5: Control of Terrain in Syria: 21 October 2019, ©ISW

## 6.3 US withdrawal

After the launch of the Turkish offensive on Kurdish controlled areas in north east Syria at the beginning of October 2019, the US took the decision to withdraw almost 1 000 troops from northern Syria, although no information on the timeframe for the withdrawal or where the troops will be redeployed was given.<sup>206</sup> On 20 October 2019, the New York Times, citing a senior US official, reported that President Trump is leaning towards keeping a contingent of about 200 troops in eastern Syria to fight ISIL and block the Syrian government's forces and Russian allies from taking the region's oil fields.<sup>207</sup> As of 21 October 2019, US officials announced that American troops from north east Syria will be redeployed in western Iraq leaving behind a small force to protect the oil fields in the region from ISIL attacks.<sup>208</sup> As of 22 October 2019, the forces of the US-led coalition had reportedly withdrawn from 'nearly all of its bases in Raqqa and Aleppo provinces'.<sup>209</sup>

<sup>206</sup> BBC, Turkey-Syria offensive: US to evacuate 1,000 troops as Turkey advances, 13 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>207</sup> New York Times (The), Trump Said to Favor Leaving a Few Hundred Troops in Eastern Syria, 20 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>208</sup> CNN, US troops leave Syria and cross into Iraq where some will stay, 21 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>209</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: October 10 – 22 2019, 24 October 2019, [url](#)

## 6.4 Impact of the offensive on IS

Prior to the Turkish offensive into northern Syria SDF leaders stated that their first priority will be to defend their territories rather than securing IS prisoners held in the region.<sup>210</sup> Following the start of Turkey's offensive into Kurdish-controlled areas in northeast Syria in October 2019, there have been reports of detainees affiliated with IS escaping from displacement camps. An estimated 750 to 850 women and children linked to IS were reported to having escaped from the Ain Issa camp, in Raqqa governorate following Turkish bombardments in the area. There were also reports of IS cells carrying out attacks from within the camp and riots prior to the escape.<sup>211</sup> According to Kurdish forces' information cited in the Guardian in mid-October 2019, ISIL sleeper cells and suicide bombers were reported to be active in the region, attempting to liberate its former fighters from the prisons.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#); Guardian (The), Kurdish forces in Syria will no longer prioritise guarding Isis prisons, 12 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>211</sup> Guardian (The), At least 750 Isis affiliates escape Syria camp after Turkish shelling, 13 October 2019, [url](#); Defense Post (The), ISIS families escape Ain Issa camp in northeast Syria after Turkish bombardment, 13 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>212</sup> Guardian (The), Kurdish forces in Syria will no longer prioritise guarding Isis prisons, 12 October 2019, [url](#)

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## Terms of Reference

- Who are in control over the different parts of the country?
- What groups provide security in government controlled areas, i.e. army, police, security services, militias?
- In which parts of the country are there ongoing military clashes?
- In what areas are civilians killed or injured due to violence, and how has this changed over time?
- What kinds of security threats are civilians faced with, i.e. bombings, sieges, IEDs/terror attacks, unexploded ordinance, arrest/kidnappings, food insecurity/lack of medical treatment/other humanitarian issues?





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