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Syria Conflict Update
April 25-May 30, 2018

Note to reader: From now on, The Carter Center will no longer provide weekly conflict summaries. Instead, we will focus on monthly conflict summaries, and more frequent, focused reports on conflict developments. Structured data on areas of control or map files will still be shared regularly with those who request it.

Countrywide Developments April 25-May 30

- Syrian government forces secured evacuation deals for the remaining opposition pockets in southern Damascus and northern Homs governorate. These surrender deals led to a gradual reduction in violence for much of these two areas over the past month.
- Frontlines between Syrian government and opposition forces in northern Hama governorate have remained intense. With the reduction in violence in Homs and Damascus, Hama and Idleb governorates now account for nearly half of all reported conflict incidents.
- By May 21, government forces succeeded in clearing all remaining ISIS forces from the southern Damascus districts of Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad.
- With both Damascus and Northern Homs cleared, government military resources have begun deploying to southern Syria, leading the US to warn against violations of the de-escalation agreement in the area. Of concern is the potential for additional confrontations between Israel and Iran and groups it backs in Syria.
- Turkey established two more “observation posts” in northwestern Syria. The posts, which were established on May 14 and 15, are located near frontlines north of Hama and near the border between Idleb and Latakia governorates. Turkey now has twelve observation posts, stationed at regular intervals along government-opposition front lines in northwestern Syria. Russia has also established observation posts in adjacent areas of government control.
- A new opposition coalition of 11 armed groups was formed in northwestern Syria. Calling itself the “National Liberation Front,” the coalition is led by Faylaq al-Sham commander Fadil Allah al-Hajji.

Quantitative Updates

The level of reported conflict in the Damascus suburbs and northern Homs dropped throughout the reporting period following the government's capture of the areas. As conflict in these areas trended downward, however, violence in Daraa and Hama governorates have both been on the rise, with new government troop deployments reported in Daraa. Hama governorate accounted for nearly one third of all reported conflict during the reporting period – primarily consisting of artillery, rocket, and aerial bombardment along frontlines in northern Hama.

Estimated Total Conflict Events Per Day by Governorate					
Governorate	April 25-May 1	May 2-May 8	May 9-15	May 16-22	May 23-26
Aleppo	2.57	3.57	4.57	3.00	6.00
Damascus	4.86	3.14	3.00	1.86	0.25
Daraa	4.43	2.71	2.86	2.86	4.75
Deir Ezzor	2.00	3.00	2.86	2.43	3.00
Hama	18.71	8.71	6.71	6.14	11.00
Hasakah	0.71	1.14	1.00	1.00	2.00
Homs	6.71	1.43	0.71	0.43	0.25
Idleb	9.57	7.86	7.29	3.43	5.50
Lattakia	1.00	0.29	1.00	0.43	1.50
Quneitra	2.00	0.43	0.86	0.29	0.00
Raqqa	0.00	0.00	0.29	0.14	0.00
Rural Damascus	2.14	1.43	1.86	0.71	0.25
Suweida	0.00	0.29	0.00	0.14	0.00
Tartous	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Source: ACLED. Conflict events include instances of remote violence (shelling, aerial bombardment), clashes, location captures, and violence against civilians. Color scales based on relative intensity (green = less conflict, red = more). For more information on ACLED data sources and methods, visit <https://www.acleddata.com/about-acled/>

Territorial Changes

Opposition forces lost significant territory throughout the reporting period, with government forces continuing a 20-month streak of territorial gains. The graph below shows control of “communities” (population centers, districts of major cities, and some major military installations) for the past three years. Territorial control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) remained relatively static during the reporting period.

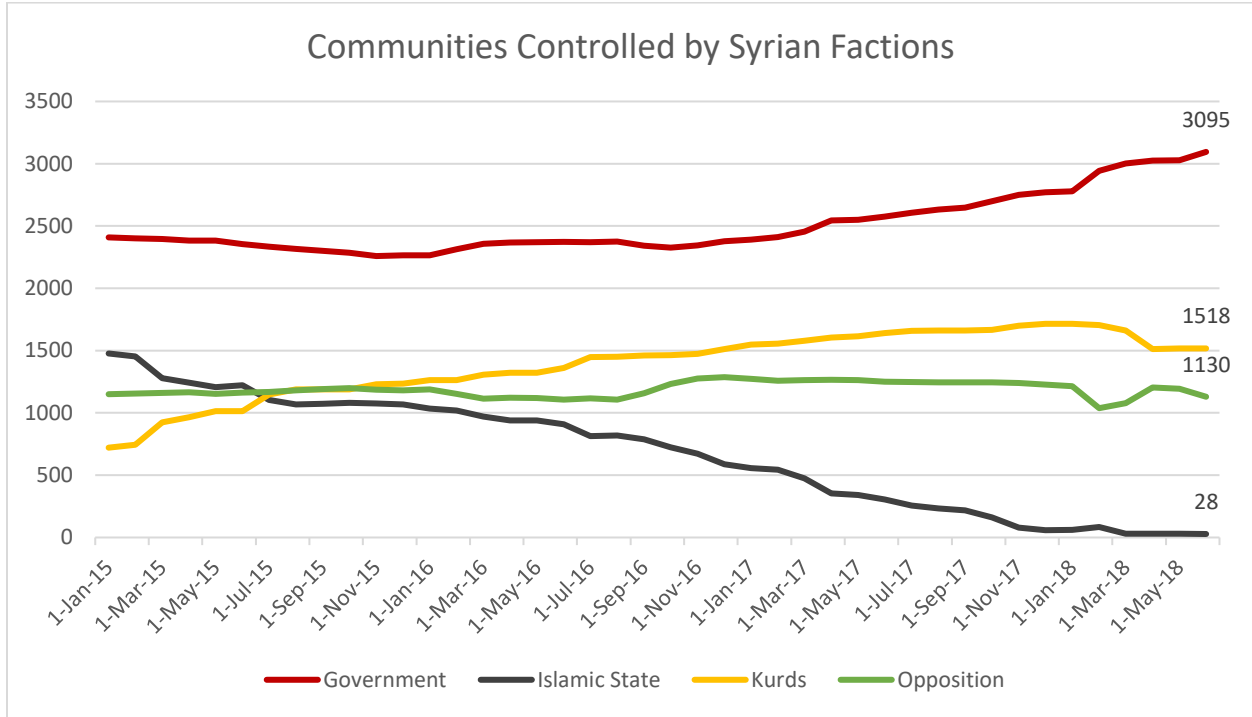


Figure 1: "Communities" include 5,771 towns, villages, cities, or districts of larger cities, as well as a handful of major military installations. Full data spreadsheets are available upon request. Source: The Carter Center

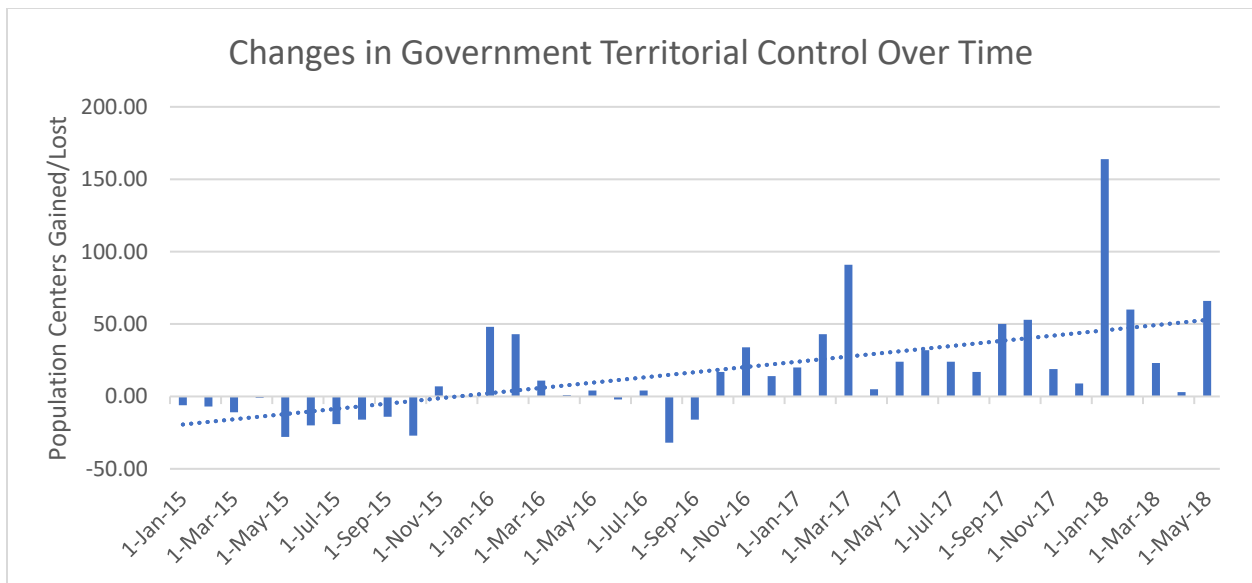


Figure 2: Government territorial gains and losses per month. Source: The Carter Center

Regional Developments

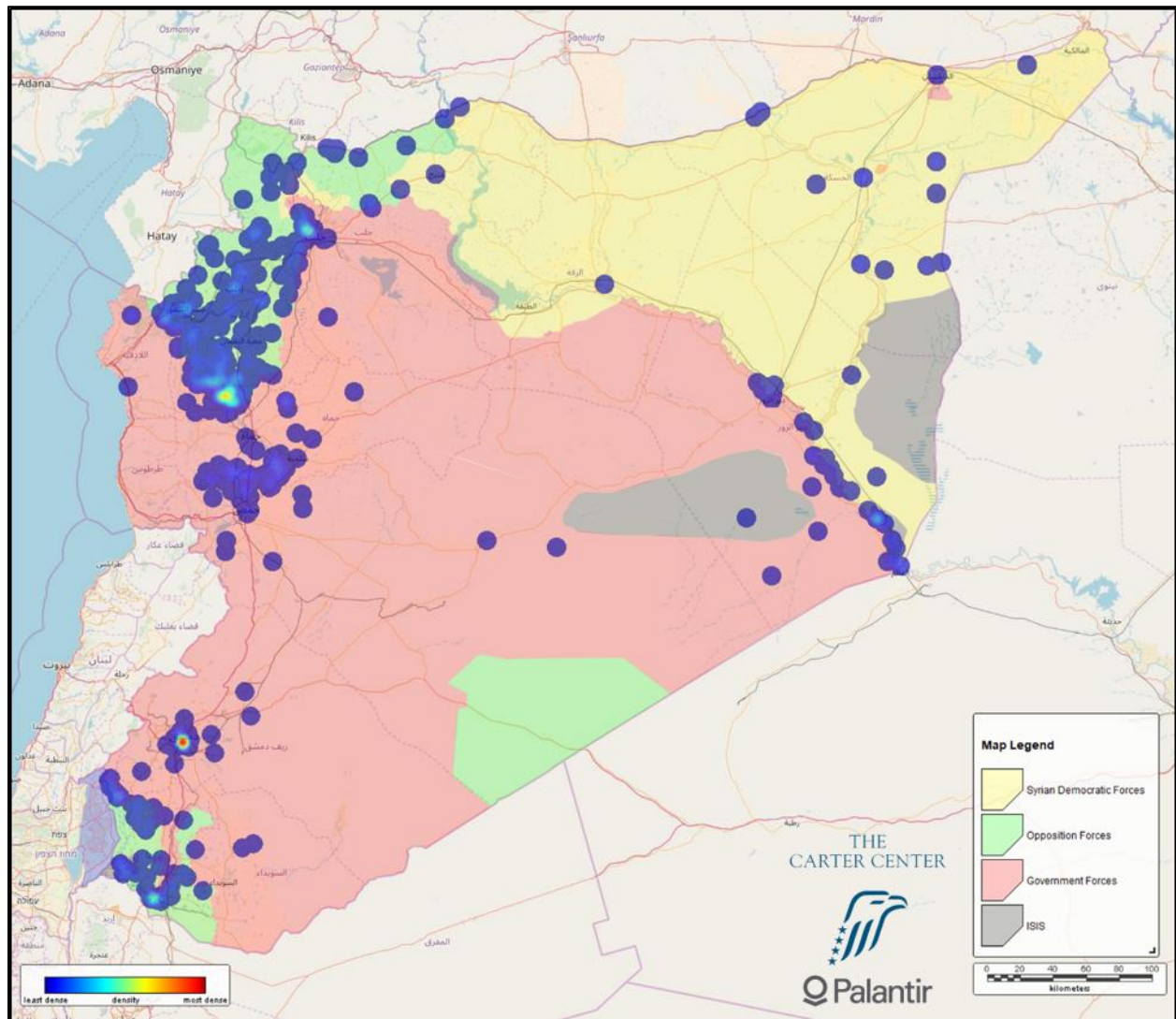


Figure 3: Heatmap showing the distribution of reported conflict from April 25 - May 30, 2018. Data source: ACLED

Damascus:

Pro-government forces cleared the districts of Yarmouk Camp and Hajar al-Aswad of both opposition and ISIS forces during the reporting period. The evacuation deals reached with opposition forces in the area not only allowed the safe passage of opposition fighters and their families to areas in northwestern Syria, but also included an evacuation of civilians from the besieged pro-government enclaves of Fo'ah and Kefraya near Idlib city. As with many prior evacuation deals, the Syrian government agreed to not forcibly recruit residents of the evacuated opposition areas for six months.

Southern Syria:

There have been continuous troop deployments to southern Syria following the government's capture of rural Damascus and northern Homs governorate. This has led to a gradual escalation of conflict in the area and growing fear among many that yet another major confrontation is imminent. The presence of Iranian-backed armed groups in southern Syria has led to an increase in Israeli attacks on targets within

Syria, and warnings from the US not to violate the de-escalation agreement that is technically still in place for the region. Towards the end of May some Iranian-backed group were reported to have departed the area, and Russia has expressed interest in ensuring that only the Syrian military operates in the area.

Northern Homs:

The northern Homs or “Rastan” pocket of opposition control agreed to an evacuation deal during this reporting period. Most civilians in the area have remained in place, with armed units evacuating north to Idlib governorate.

Eastern Syria:

On April 29, pro-government forces took the SDF-held town of Junaynah, adjacent to Deir Ezzor city. The next day, the SDF and its allies took back the area. The primary force involved was the National Defense Force, a pro-government militia. The US-led International Coalition was involved in the counterattack and destroyed the military bridge used to storm the area.

After a US statement about a renewed fight against ISIS, the SDF announced a resumption of its anti-ISIS campaign in eastern Syria. The renewed campaign will focus on the lower Euphrates river valley, near the Iraqi border. This offensive has seen some success, with the destruction of ISIS positions, and has involved SDF, US, and French forces. Some Iraqi airstrikes were also conducted against ISIS positions in eastern Syria.

Opposition developments:

A new opposition coalition was formed in Idlib governorate on May 28. Calling themselves the “National Liberation Front,” this new coalition is comprised of relatively moderate groups – many of which had been previously supported by western countries. Though not the largest coalition in Idlib, the new unit is nevertheless significant and could prove influential should infighting erupt again between Hai’yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) and rivals. Infighting has been relatively low for the past month, but flare-ups have been occurring regularly throughout 2018.



Figure 4: Members of the newly-formed National Liberation Front.