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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 17 August - 23 August 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | The joint Russian-Turkish armed forces patrol confronted another attack in Idlib Governorate. Government of Syria (GoS) appointed new intelligence leaders in the northwest. The first COVID-19 death was recorded in Idlib Governorate. GoS armed forces and Kurdish armed groups clashed with armed opposition groups.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Attacks against GoS officials and former opposition fighters increased in southern Syria. GoS armed forces raided the town of Umm Walid, Dara'a Governorate. COVID-19 cases continued to increase in GoS-controlled territories. The US imposed new sanctions on GoS officials and officers.
- **NORTHEAST** | US and GoS armed forces clashed in Al-Hassakah Governorate. An improvised explosive device (IED) planted by ISIS killed a Russian general in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Tensions continued between the predominantly Kurdish-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Arab tribes in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Turkish armed forces were accused of withholding water supply to Al-Hassakah Governorate. COVID-19 cases continued to rise in northeast Syria.

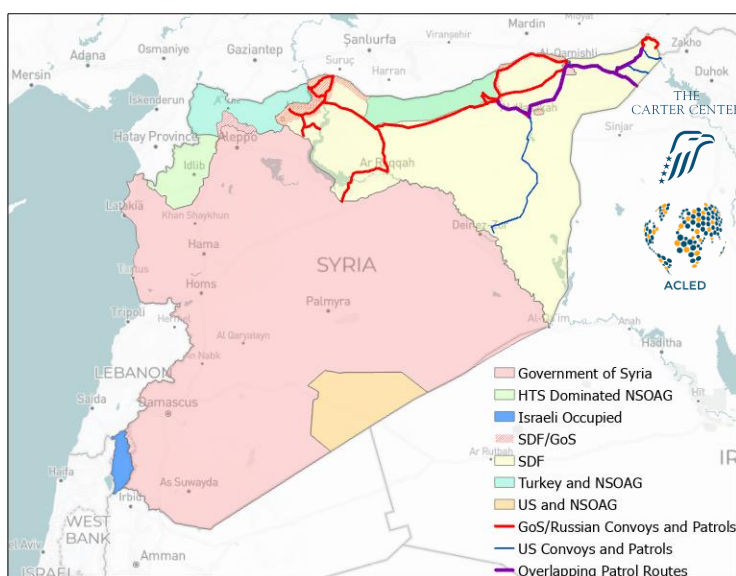


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 23 August 2020. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1 on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

On 17 August, an improvised explosive device (IED) struck a Turkish-Russian joint patrol on the M4 highway in Ariha city, Idlib Governorate, damaging a Turkish armed forces vehicle.² The Khattab al-Shishani (Chechen) Brigades claimed responsibility for the attack. While previous patrols began in Turnabah, this patrol started in Ain al-Hawr (see figure 2).³ This was the second attack by the group, having previously targeted the joint patrol on 14 July.⁴ On 18 August, the Russian air force attacked armed opposition groups allegedly responsible for the attack on the joint patrol in Idlib Governorate. This was the first time in August that Russia conducted airstrikes in Idlib Governorate.⁵

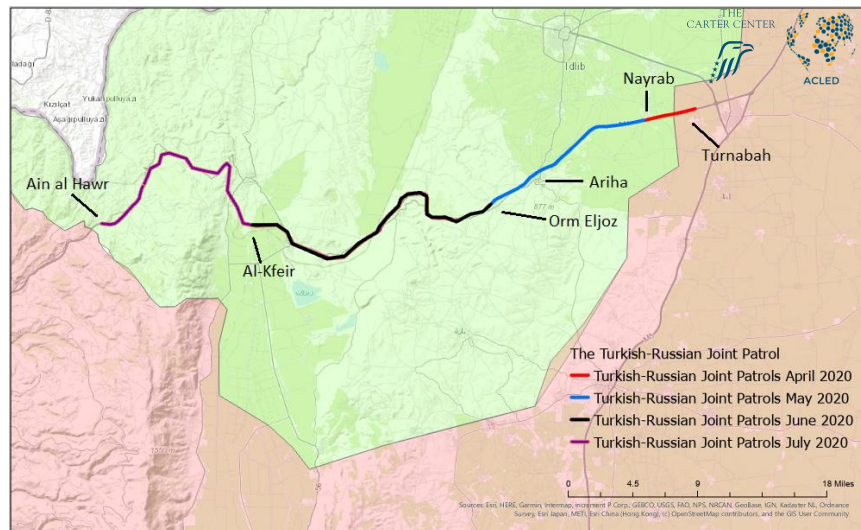


Figure 2: The Turkish-Russian joint patrol on the M4 highway in Idlib Governorate. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

On 18 August, Government of Syria (GoS) changed the leadership for its military intelligence for frontline areas of northwest Syria.⁶ Wafiq Nasser was appointed to lead the Military Intelligence in Aleppo Governorate. Wafiq Nasser played an integral role in GoS military operations in As-Sweida and Dara'a Governorates

¹ Figure 1, the Carter Center's areas of control map, depicts areas of the dominant actors' control and influence. While "control" is difficult to determine in a complex, dynamic conflict, territorial control is defined as an entity having power over use of force as well as civil/administrative functions in an area. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah maintain a presence in Syrian government-controlled territory. Non-state organized armed groups (NSOAG), including the Kurdish-dominated SDF and Turkish-backed opposition groups operate in areas not under GoS control. The area along the junction of the Syrian border with Iraq and Jordan is a 55km de-confliction zone, established by the US-led coalition that also includes a number of aligned local armed groups. Patrols are also depicted in the map to show the presence of actors that may have influence in an area. This is particularly relevant as US and Russian forces regularly have patrolled towns and routes in the northeast. While they do not control local administration or local forces, there is an assumption of a high degree of coordination with local de facto authorities. Data collected is by the publicly available project [ACLED](#).

² <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/408898>

³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/408829>

⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/408857>

⁵ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-air-force-launches-first-attack-this-month-over-northwestern-syria/>

⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/409316>

before his transfer to Hama Governorate in 2018.⁷ Human rights groups have criticized his conduct in the south, accusing him of torture and assassinations.⁸

On 18 August, the first COVID-19 related death was reported in Idlib Governorate.⁹ Prior to this, there were three days without new cases of COVID-19 in the northwest.¹⁰ As of 21 August, there were in total 59 cases in northwest Syria.¹¹ On 21 August, GoS-backed Palestinian militias¹² in the Neirab refugee camp of Aleppo Governorate asked for help from UNWRA to combat COVID-19 outbreaks.¹³ At the same time, medicine prices in Idlib Governorate have increased 70% in the course of a month.¹⁴

Clashes between GoS armed forces, GoS-backed militias, and Kurdish armed groups on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other continued this week. On 17 August, armed opposition groups clashed with GoS armed forces on the frontlines in Jabal al-Akrad, Latakia Governorate.¹⁵ The same day, the Turkish-backed opposition National Liberation Front clashed with GoS-backed militias near Ma'arat al-Na'asan, Idlib Governorate.¹⁶ On 18 August, Turkish-backed armed opposition groups clashed with the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) affiliated Manbij Military Council in al-Yaashili village near Manbij, Aleppo Governorate.¹⁷ On 19 August, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other armed opposition groups on the frontlines in Jabal al-Zawiyah, Idlib Governorate.¹⁸ On 23 August, the opposition's Fatah al-Mubin Operations Room¹⁹ used a guided missile to kill a GoS armed forces officer and five GoS-backed militia fighters in Hazarin, southern Idlib Governorate.²⁰

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Attacks against GoS officials and former opposition fighters increased during the reporting period. On 17 August, an IED planted by an unidentified armed group killed a former opposition commander and his wife²¹ in Zubaydah, Quneitra Governorate. This was the first recorded assassination of a former opposition fighter in Quneitra Governorate.²² The same day, unidentified gunmen injured a

⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/201984>

⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/yvrwcdxr>

⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/409418>

¹⁰ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21849>

¹¹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21913>

¹² Pro-GoS or GoS-backed militias refer to armed groups that are funded or in some way supported by GoS and coordinate with or fight alongside GoS armed forces, but are not part of the state-run military.

¹³ <https://tinyurl.com/y34vk62e>

¹⁴ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180395/>

¹⁵ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180056/>

¹⁶ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180094/>, <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21851>

¹⁷ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180256/>

¹⁸ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180271/>

¹⁹ A coalition of armed opposition groups, including Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Turkish-backed opposition National Liberation Front, and Jaysh al-Izza.

²⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/y2qd62kb>

²¹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21854>

²² <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/409431>

former opposition fighter in Mzerib, Dara’a Governorate.²³ On 18 August, unidentified gunmen planted an IED near an air force intelligence checkpoint in Karak al-Sharqi, Dara’a Governorate.²⁴ The same day, unidentified gunmen killed an alleged Hezbollah collaborator near Busra al-Harir, Dara’a Governorate.²⁵ On 20 August, unidentified gunmen attacked a GoS State Security detachment and seized their weapons in Jaba, Quneitra Governorate.²⁶ On 20 August, unidentified gunmen attacked a GoS 4th Division checkpoint in Saham al-Golan, western Dara’a Governorate.²⁷ On 21 August, unidentified gunmen killed a former HTS fighter in Dara’a city, Dara’a Governorate.²⁸ On 23 August, unidentified gunmen attacked a GoS air force intelligence checkpoint near Rakham, eastern Dara’a Governorate.²⁹

On 19 August, GoS armed forces and former opposition fighters working with GoS Military Security raided the town of Umm Walad, eastern Dara’a Governorate in response to earlier assassinations and other tensions.³⁰ The GoS armed forces arrested former opposition fighters in the town, along with a 5th Corps fighter.³¹ The next day, clashes broke out between GoS armed forces and GoS Military Security on the one side and local militias and local former opposition fighters on the other. The same day, GoS armed forces sent additional reinforcements to the town as clashes continued. Clashes continued until Russian-backed 5th corps intervened and dispersed the fighting.³²

On 20 August, GoS-controlled territory surpassed the 2,000 case mark.³³ On 19 August, Jordan extended the closure of the border due to COVID.³⁴ As of 23 August, there were 2,217 reported COVID-19 cases and 89 deaths in GoS-controlled territory (see figure 3 below).³⁵

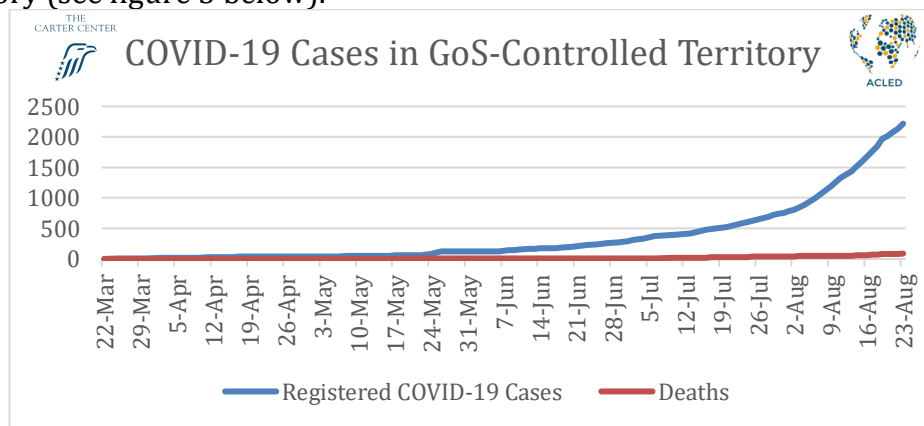


Figure 3: Reported COVID-19 cases in GoS-controlled territory. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

²³ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/179969/>

²⁴ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180085/>

²⁵ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180262/>

²⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/yyz5p6yo>

²⁷ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180526/>

²⁸ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180565/>

²⁹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21931>

³⁰ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21921>

³¹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21889>

³² <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/409921>

³³ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=200595>

³⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/y53rpddq>

³⁵ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=200863>

The US imposed new sanctions on GoS officials and officers under the Caesar Act. On 20 August, the US treasury imposed new sanctions on six individuals³⁶ affiliated with the Ba'ath party, GoS armed forces, and GoS-backed militias. On 28 July, the US had imposed Caesar Act sanctions on 14 individuals and entities providing support to GoS.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

On 17 August, US armed forces clashed with GoS armed forces in Tal al-Dahab³⁷ near Qamishli city, Al-Hassakah Governorate.³⁸ A US armed forces patrol encountered a GoS armed forces checkpoint, where tensions escalated, leading to a clash between the two sides. One GoS soldier was killed in the clashes. GoS armed forces accused US armed forces of using helicopters to destroy the checkpoint, a charge that US forces deny.³⁹ On 18 August, two demonstrations against US armed forces was held in Tal al-Dahab and Qamishli, Al-Hassakah Governorate.⁴⁰ The same day, an unidentified armed group shelled a US military base in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.⁴¹ Pro-GoS sources attributed the incident to tensions between Arab tribes and the SDF.⁴² But opposition sources attributed the incident to the previous day's confrontation between US and GoS armed forces.⁴³ On 22 August, another demonstration was held in Al-Bajariyah village, Al-Hassakah Governorate, demanding the withdrawal of US armed forces.⁴⁴

On 18 August, a Russian general and a GoS-backed National Defense Forces (NDF) commander was killed in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.⁴⁵ On 20 August, ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.⁴⁶ On 19 August, Russia sent 5th Corps fighters to Deir-ez-Zor Governorate to participate in cleanup operations against ISIS.⁴⁷ On 22 August, the Russian air force conducted airstrikes against ISIS positions in the Badia desert of Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.⁴⁸ On 23 August, the Iranian-backed⁴⁹ Pakistani Zainabiyoun armed group confirmed that it had lost contact with its fighters near AlBukamal, eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. They were suspected to have been killed in an ISIS attack.⁵⁰ ISIS has been active in the Badia desert

³⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/409872>

³⁷ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/new-photos-show-aftermath-of-us-attack-on-syrian-army-post/>

³⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/408864>

³⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/408993>

⁴⁰ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/protests-held-against-us-forces-for-killing-syrian-soldier/>

⁴¹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180364/>

⁴² <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/largest-us-base-in-eastern-syria-targeted-in-attack-amid-increased-tension-with-arab-tribes/>

⁴³ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21867>

⁴⁴ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/demonstration-held-against-us-forces-in-northeast-syria/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/409407>

⁴⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/410158>

⁴⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/y43cp5vw>

⁴⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/y5mfkz3t>

⁴⁹ Pro-Iranian or Iranian-backed militias refers to armed groups that are supported by Iran, like Hezbollah, and include militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan.

⁵⁰ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21940>

region of Syria, often attacking GoS armed forces in Homs and Deir-ez-Zor Governorates.⁵¹

Tensions continued between the SDF and Arab tribes in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 17 August, the Al-Baggara tribe refused to hand over weapons to US armed forces, after the tribe forced out the SDF from multiple towns in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.⁵² On 19 August, the SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi met with tribal leaders to defuse tensions and discuss ongoing differences.⁵³ On 20 August, pro-GoS tribes gathered in Aleppo city and declared their loyalty to the GoS and solidarity with tribes in the Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.⁵⁴

The Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups stopped the water supply to Al-Hassakah city and its surrounding areas at the Alouk pumping station near Ras al-Ain, Al-Hassakah Governorate.⁵⁵ At least one million people were affected. On 22 August, the GoS criticized Turkey for the water cutoff.⁵⁶ The same day, an agreement was reached to restore the water supply in exchange for the GoS supplying additional electricity to Turkish-held areas.⁵⁷ This incident was the 8th reported time that Turkish armed forces had stopped the water supply to SDF-controlled areas in northeast Syria.⁵⁸

COVID-19 cases continued to rise during the reporting period. On 17 August, the International Rescue Committee reported a 60% increase in COVID-19 cases in northeast Syria and highlighted the threat to healthcare workers in the region.⁵⁹ On 23 August, 27 new infections were reported, for a total of 354 infections and 7 deaths.⁶⁰ SDF-controlled areas have reported a shortage of oxygen supplies due to the spread of COVID-19.⁶¹

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⁵¹ <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/strengthening-and-expanding-isis-central-syria-campaign/>

⁵² <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-tribe-refuses-to-handover-weapons-to-us-forces-in-deir-ezzor/>

⁵³ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/190820201>

⁵⁴ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/over-50-syrian-tribes-announce-unconditional-support-for-uprising-against-us-coalition/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/turkey-starves-water-syria-northeast-coronavirus-hasakeh.html>

⁵⁶ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syria-calls-for-intervention-to-stop-turkish-crime-against-1-million-syrians/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/water-to-return-to-1-million-people-in-ne-syria-after-turkish-backed-forces-cutoff-supply/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/turkey-starves-water-syria-northeast-coronavirus-hasakeh.html>

⁵⁹ <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/ne-syria-60-increase-covid-19-cases-past-week-irc-calls-increased-health-capacity>

⁶⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/yxezkg2a>

⁶¹ <https://tinyurl.com/yxz9szlz>