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SYRIA

Security situation in Aleppo Governorate



Ministry of Immigration
and Integration

The Danish
Immigration Service

This brief report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects or the issues addressed in the report. It should thus be weighed against 1) other country of origin information available on the topic.

The brief report at hand does not include any policy recommendations or analysis. The information in the report does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service.

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Introduction

As of summer 2020, western Aleppo Governorate was, together with Idlib, northwestern Hama and northern Latakia, one of the last remaining areas in Syria beyond the control of the Government of Syria (GoS).¹ The overall security situation in this northwestern part of Syria remained concerning, according to the United Nations (UN), also in areas away from the frontlines, as escalations in tensions and clashes between non-state armed groups continued to be reported in both northern Aleppo Governorate and the Idlib area.²

The overall security situation in northern Aleppo Governorate has reportedly deteriorated, and there were reports of increased hostilities, including shelling, airstrikes, improvised explosive device (IED) incidents and tensions between armed groups in July, August and September 2020.³

The aim of this brief report is to provide an overview of the current security situation in Aleppo Governorate, focusing on the period from June to October 2020; this period will be referred to as the reporting period.

The report is based on written sources and was written in accordance with the EASO COI Report Methodology.⁴

Attention should be called to the volatile situation in Syria and the fact that the information provided may quickly become outdated. Therefore, the issues addressed in this brief report should be monitored periodically and brought up to date accordingly.

The research and editing of this brief report was finalised on 23 November 2020. The report can be accessed from the website of DIS, www.newtodenmark.dk, and is thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

¹ UN CoI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/44/61)*, 2 July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

² UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 18*, 25 July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

³ UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 16*, 26 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2; UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 18*, 25 July 2020, [url](#), p. 1; UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 19*, 21 August 2020, [url](#), p. 1; UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 20*, 9 September 2020, [url](#), p. 1

⁴ EASO, *EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology*, June 2019, [url](#)

1. The security situation in Aleppo Governorate

Aleppo Governorate is situated in northern Syria and borders the governorates of Idlib, Hama and Raqqa. Aleppo Governorate also shares a border with Turkey to the north. The governorate consists of the following eight districts: Afrin, A'zaz, al-Bab, Jarablus, Manbij, Ain al-Arab [Kobane], al-Safira, and Jebel Saman.

Aleppo city, which is the largest city in the governorate, and which was ranked as the largest city in Syria before the war, is located in Jebel Saman district. Before the war, Aleppo city was the industrial and commercial capital of the country and had an estimated population of between 2.35 and 2.5 million. In 2019, an estimated 1.6 million people were living in Aleppo city.⁵

1.1. Background

Throughout the conflict, control over different parts of Aleppo Governorate has shifted between the Government of Syria (GoS) and armed opposition groups, with international actors likewise playing a key role. Between 2012 and 2016, Aleppo city remained divided between the GoS-controlled west and the opposition-controlled eastern areas. In December 2016, after a prolonged siege, and with Russian military support, eastern Aleppo city was recaptured by the GoS.

In the northern part of Aleppo Governorate, Kurds took control of the districts of Ain al-Arab [Kobane] and Afrin in early 2014. After the advances of the Islamic State (IS) in the governorate, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)⁶ and the GoS, supported by the US and Russia respectively, jointly managed to retake some of the area.⁷ Other previously IS-held areas in northern Aleppo Governorate were seized by Turkey and Turkey-supported groups, following two military offensives in 2016 and 2018.⁸

1.2. Territorial control

In 2020, Aleppo Governorate continued to be controlled by different actors, as illustrated on the map below. The southern part of the governorate, including Aleppo City, was under the control of pro-GoS forces. The Kurdish-led SDF controlled the areas around the cities of Manbij and Ain al-Arab [Kobane] and also the Tal Rifaat area. However, some sources indicated that Tal Rifaat was under joint control with the GoS. Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)⁹ and local opposition groups controlled the western parts of the governorate. Finally, Turkish-backed SNA factions controlled an area between the cities of Afrin, A'zaz, al-Bab and Jarablus in northern Aleppo Governorate.¹⁰

⁵ EASO, *Syria - Security situation*, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 68-69

⁶ The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are a Kurdish-led multi-ethnic force, consisting of Kurds, Arabs and other ethnic groups, that were created in 2015 to support the US-led coalition in the war against [IS]. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) is the dominating faction within the SDF. EASO, *Syria - Security situation*, May 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁷ EASO, *Country Guidance: Syria*, September 2020, [url](#), pp. 119-120

⁸ EASO, *Country Guidance: Syria*, September 2020, [url](#), p. 120

⁹ HTS was previously known as the Nusra Front, which formally split from al-Qaeda in 2016 and renamed itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham; however, the UN and a number of countries continue to view HTS as an al-Qaeda affiliate. HTS was founded in 2017 when Jabhat Fatah al-Sham merged with other factions. BBC News, *Syria group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda legacy*, 22 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰ EASO, *Syria - Security situation*, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 17-18, 71

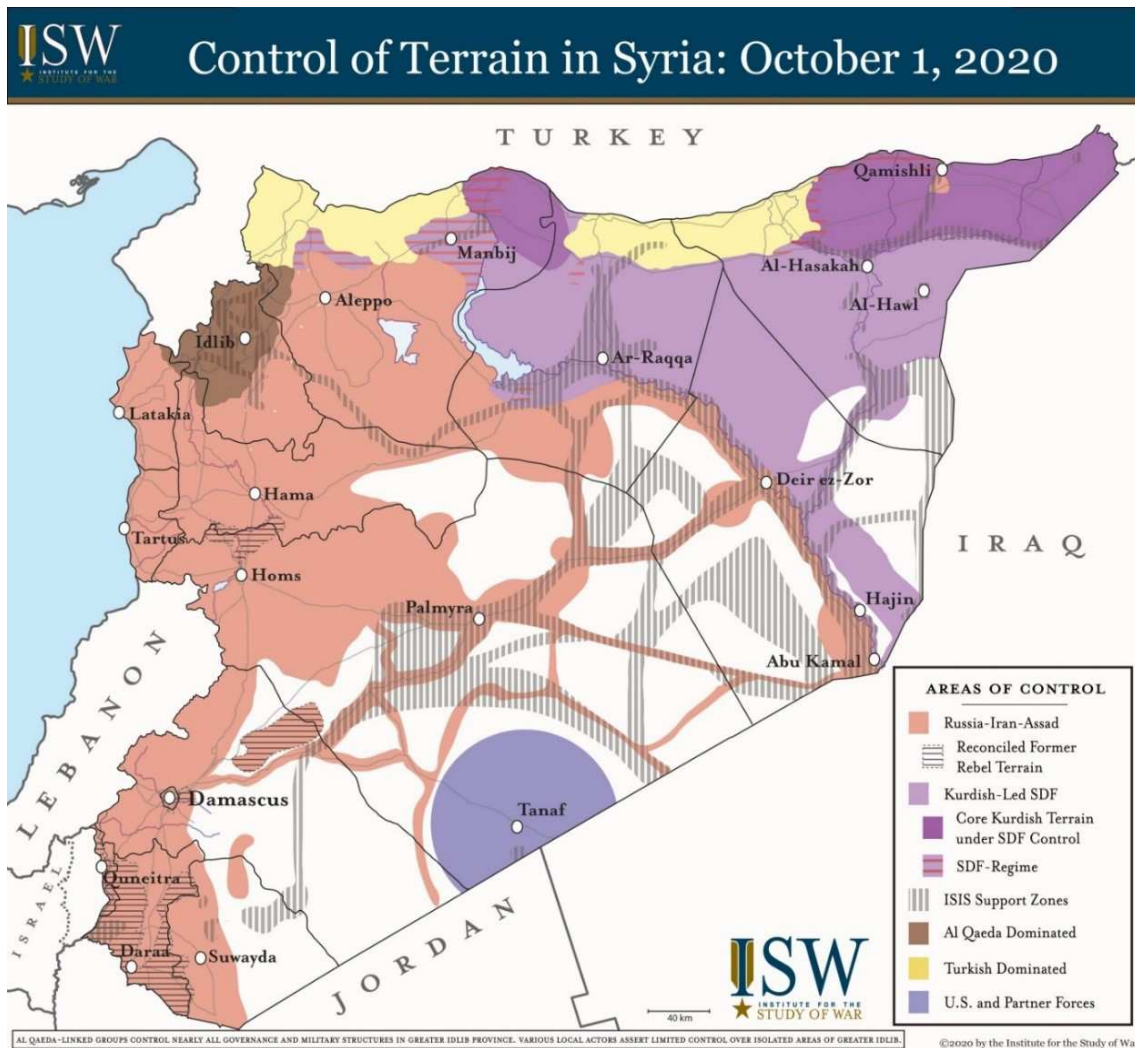


Figure 1: Control of terrain in Syria, as of 1 October 2020¹¹

In Afrin and other areas controlled by Turkish-backed forces, a campaign of suppression, confiscation and expulsion of the Kurdish population has led to an insurgency against Turkey's presence by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), with IED attacks, roadside ambushes, kidnappings and executions. The use of vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) attacks, machine gun fire and mortars by armed groups in the area was also recorded. Moreover, internal clashes and asymmetric attacks between different factions of the Turkish-backed anti-GoS group the Syrian National Army (SNA) have been regularly reported. Civilians were frequently caught in this type of crossfire or in insurgent activity, with casualties recorded.¹²

In July, there were reports of increased clashes along the frontlines of Aleppo and Idlib governorates, involving GoS forces, GoS-supported militias and the YPG on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other.¹³ Additionally, more frequent instances of shelling were reported along the frontlines in western Aleppo Governorate.¹⁴

¹¹ ISW, *Control of Terrain in Syria: October 1, 2020*, October 2020, provided to DIS by e-mail from Cafarella, J. (ISW) on 28 October 2020

¹² EASO, *Country Guidance: Syria*, September 2020, [url](#), p. 120

¹³ Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 6 July – 12 July 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 3

¹⁴ UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 18*, 25 July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

In August, an increased number of airstrikes, of which some resulted in civilian casualties, were observed in northwestern Syria, and there were reports of ground-based strikes and shelling exchanges between pro-GoS forces and non-state armed groups, including in western rural Aleppo Governorate.¹⁵ Sporadic hostilities continued to be reported in September in northern Aleppo Governorate. Shelling incidents resulted in civilian casualties, unexploded explosive hazards continued to constitute a risk for civilians, and tensions involving non-state armed groups were continuously reported.¹⁶

In October, there were reports of clashes between non-state armed groups as well as targeted attacks on civilians and humanitarian workers in northwestern Syria in areas such as Afrin, A'zaz and Jarablus, Aleppo.¹⁷ Many security incidents in Aleppo in 2020 occurred in the so-called 'conflict hotspots'¹⁸ Afrin and al-Bab in northern Aleppo Governorate, as illustrated later on.



Figure 2: Northern Aleppo Governorate¹⁹

1.3. Armed groups currently operating in Aleppo Governorate

1.3.1. Clashes involving Turkish-backed groups and Kurdish-led groups

In the reporting period, there were reports of several attacks on Turkish-supported opposition groups and Turkish armed forces by Kurdish-led armed groups against the Turkish presence in opposition-held territory in northwestern Syria, including in Afrin and near al-Bab city.²⁰

¹⁵ UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 19*, 21 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 12-13

¹⁶ UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 20*, 9 September 2020, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁷ UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 21*, 20 October 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁸ Jennifer Cafarella (ISW), labeled Afrin and al-Bab 'conflict hotspots', underlining at the same time, however, that the overall level of violence in Syria is low, on the scale of the Syrian conflict, and that the exchange of fire is limited: SDF-affiliated elements are lobbing shells and conducting artillery strikes against Afrin, deliberately imposing costs on the Turkish occupation; and the Turks and their proxies are responding with counter-fire or are initiating fire, in some cases, against these SDF positions north of Aleppo city. Cafarella, J. (ISW), *Overview of the security situation in Syria*, EASO, Syria Specialist Network Webinar, 27 October 2020

¹⁹ Google maps, [url](#)

²⁰ Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 15 June – 21 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2; Political Geography Now, *Syria Control Map & Report: Frontlines Stable - July 2020*, 31 July 2020, [url](#); Carter Center (The), *Syria Weekly Conflict Summary for 14-20 September 2020*, 24 September 2020, [url](#)

Various clashes and fighting between Kurdish-dominated groups against Turkey and their proxies was also reported. The Kurdish-led groups were in some cases supported by GoS forces. The clashes primarily, though not solely, took place in northern Aleppo Governorate, e.g. Afrin.²¹

Main armed actors in Aleppo Governorate:

- **GoS-forces**
(Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups, including militias)
- **Kurdish-led armed groups**
(e.g. the SDF, including the YPG)
- **Turkish-backed armed opposition groups**
(e.g. the SNA)
- **Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**
and other local predominantly Islamist opposition groups
- **Islamic State (IS)**

In addition to these clashes between Turkish-backed groups and Kurdish-dominated groups, a destabilising infighting was persisting within Turkish-held zones in the northern part of the governorate. The worst situation was in Afrin, where there was infighting between Turkish-backed SNA elements.²²

1.3.2. Clashes between GoS forces and armed opposition groups

There were also reports of clashes between GoS forces and armed opposition groups, including HTS and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups. The clashes took place in the western part of the governorate. Additionally, clashes were reported between HTS and former opposition fighters.²³

1.3.3. Islamic State

The Islamic State (IS) had a presence in Aleppo Governorate and operations against IS were ongoing in the governorate.²⁴ During the reporting period, fighting took place between IS militants and GoS forces in the central Syrian desert between the governorates of Aleppo, Hama and Raqqqa.²⁵ Furthermore, IS members were killed by unidentified drone strikes in northern Aleppo Governorate.²⁶

1.4. Airstrikes

During the reporting period, airstrikes resumed in northwestern Syria, including in Aleppo Governorate.²⁷ In July 2020, at least two airstrikes were conducted in al-Bab, presumably by Russian aircraft, resulting in the killing of at least one civilian and the wounding of multiple others.²⁸ In September 2020, Israel conducted

²¹ Cafarella, J. (ISW), *Overview of the security situation in Syria*, EASO, Syria Specialist Network Webinar, 27 October 2020; UN Col, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/45/31*, 14 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3; Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 22 June – 28 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3; Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 20 July – 26 July 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2, 4; Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 27 July – 2 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 2, 3; Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 3 August – 9 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 2; Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 17 August – 23 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 3

²² Cafarella, J. (ISW), *Overview of the security situation in Syria*, EASO, Syria Specialist Network Webinar, 27 October 2020

²³ Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 24 August – 30 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 2; Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 20 July – 26 July 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2, 4; Carter Center (The), *Weekly conflict summary*, 31 August - 6 September 2020, [url](#), p. 2

²⁴ Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 3 August – 9 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 2; ISW and Syria Direct, *Syria Situation Report: September 30 – October 13, 2020*, 16 October 2020, [url](#); EASO, *Country Guidance: Syria*, September 2020, [url](#), p. 120

²⁵ Political Geography Now, *Syria Control Map & Report: Frontlines Stable - July 2020*, 31 July 2020, [url](#); ISW and Syria Direct, *Syria Situation Report: September 16 – 29, 2020*, 2 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁶ ISW and Syria Direct, *Syria Situation Report: July 7 – 21, 2020*, 23 July 2020, [url](#); ISW and Syria Direct, *Syria Situation Report: June 10 – 23, 2020*, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁷ UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 18*, 25 July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

²⁸ ISW and Syria Direct, *Syria Situation Report: July 7 – 21, 2020*, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

airstrikes in Aleppo Governorate, severely damaging the al-Safira military complex.²⁹ In October 2020, the number of airstrikes in Aleppo Governorate had been reduced.³⁰

1.5. Explosive hazards

In the reporting period, civilians have been killed by indiscriminate attacks conducted with various types of IEDs, and explosive remnants of war have injured and killed civilians in northern Aleppo Governorate.³¹ In October 2020, IED incidents reportedly increased.³²

An ongoing insurgency was reported in Afrin and al-Bab, with VBIED attacks having occurred regularly in both areas, some of which were linked to the YPG.³³ For example, on 6 October 2020, a VBIED exploded in the SNA-controlled al-Bab, killing 21 people and injuring at least 80 others.³⁴

Al-Bab was seized by opposition fighters and Turkish forces from IS in 2017³⁵ and has been described as ‘an area of frequent conflict, with at least 120 reported events since 1 January 2020.’³⁶

Regarding Afrin, the nongovernmental organisation The Carter Center stated that ‘[s]ince taking control of Afrin in 24 March 2018, there have been at least 215 recorded attacks on Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups.’³⁷

1.6. Violence by the SNA against civilians

Besides shelling and VBIED incidents, there were reports from the Afrin region of civilians being subjugated to widespread arbitrary deprivation of liberty by the SNA. In addition, systematic looting and property appropriation was reported, resulting in SNA fighters occupying civilian houses, ultimately coercing residents to flee their homes through threats, extortion, murder, abduction, torture and detention.³⁸

²⁹ The al-Safira military complex is known for the production and storage of ballistic missiles and chemical weapons; the missiles are reportedly supplied to Hezbollah by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. ISW and Syria Direct, *Syria Situation Report: September 2 – 15, 2020*, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

³⁰ UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 21*, 20 October 2020, [url](#), p. 2

³¹ UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 16*, 26 June 2020, [url](#), p. 12; UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 18*, 25 July 2020, [url](#), p. 2; UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 19*, 21 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 2, 13; UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 21*, 20 October 2020, [url](#), pp. 4-5; Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 15 June – 21 June 2020, [url](#), p. 3; Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 29 June – 5 July 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³² UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 21*, 20 October 2020, [url](#), p. 2

³³ Cafarella, J. (ISW), *Overview of the security situation in Syria*, EASO, Syria Specialist Network Webinar, 27 October 2020

³⁴ ISW and Syria Direct, *Syria Situation Report: September 30 – October 13, 2020*, 16 October 2020, [url](#); UN OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 21*, 20 October 2020, [url](#), p. 2; BBC News, *Syria war: Car bomb kills 19 civilians in rebel-held town*, 6 October 2020, [url](#); SHRC, *An explosion in the city of Al-Bab leaves deaths and injuries*, 6 October 2020, [url](#)

³⁵ BBC News, *Syria war: Car bomb kills 19 civilians in rebel-held town*, 6 October 2020, [url](#)

³⁶ Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 27 July – 2 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 2, 3

³⁷ Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 29 June – 5 July 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³⁸ UN Col, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/45/31*, 14 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 10-11; Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 24 August – 30 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2

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