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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 1 - 8 SEPTEMBER 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Government of Syria (GoS) momentum slowed in Idleb this week, with no advances recorded. Further civilian protests denouncing Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS) took place in the northwest, in addition to pro-HTS and pro-Hurras al Din demonstrations. HTS and Jaish al Izza also launched a recruitment drive in the northwest.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Attacks against GoS-aligned personnel and former opposition members continued in southern Syria, including two unusual attacks claimed by ISIS. GoS forces evicted civilians and appropriated several hundred houses in Eastern Ghouta.
- **NORTHEAST** | The first joint US/Turkish ground patrol took place in Tal Abiad this week as part of an ongoing implementation of the “safe zone” in northern Syria. Low-level attacks against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and SDF arrest operations of alleged ISIS members continued. Two airstrikes targeting Hezbollah and Iranian troops occurred in Abu Kamal.

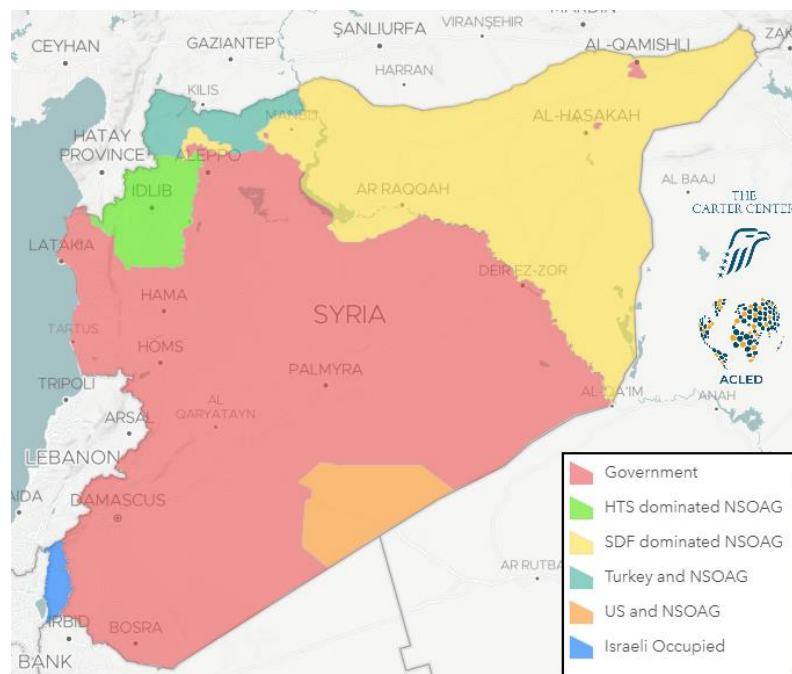


Figure 1: Dominant Actors' Area of Control and Influence in Syria as of 8 September 2019. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. For more explanation on our mapping, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

GoS momentum in southern Idleb Governorate slowed this week, with no advances recorded. This comes a week after Damascus announced a ceasefire for the northwest on 31 August that saw a significant reduction in aerial activity, with no events recorded in September so far. However, GoS shelling continued impacting the Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)-dominated enclave, with at least 26 communities² affected (Figure 2). Pro-government [sources](#) reported that the shelling was in response to HTS ground assaults during the week.

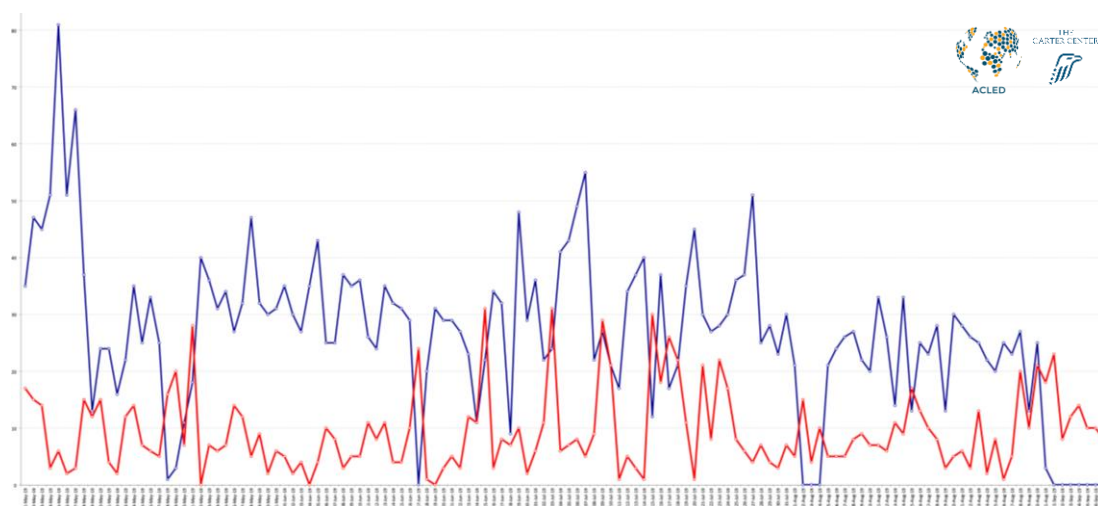


Figure 2: GoS Aerial Activity (Blue) and Shelling (Red) in Northwest Syria Since May 2019.

Reports of opposition shelling, including by HTS, onto GoS-controlled areas around the Idleb pocket decreased this week, affecting just seven communities: Tal Al Sayyed, Huweiz, Nahshabba, Shalaf, Has, Zarbah, and Zmar. Pro-government [sources](#) also reported that the GoS forces downed two HTS weaponized drones in the al Gharb Plane. Russian air-defenses downed two other home-made armed drones near the Hmeimim Airbase in northern Latakia Governorate during the week. On 4 September, The Russian Reconciliation Center for Conflicting Sides [reported](#) that HTS and opposition shelling impacted 20 communities, but did not specify which areas were affected. No events of opposition / HTS shelling were recorded after 5 September (Figure 3).

¹ Figure 1 denotes dominant actors' control and influence. Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and Iraqi militias maintain a presence in Syrian ment-dominated territory. Non-state organized armed groups (NSOAG), including the Kurdish dominated, US backed SDF and a variety of other groups operate in areas not under Syrian government control. The NSOAG labeled area along the border with Iraq and Jordan is a 55km de-confliction zone, established by the US-led coalition that also includes a number of aligned local armed groups. Data collected is by the publicly available project ACLED.

² The communities affected by government shelling this week included; Arnaba (1 event), Badama (2), Othmaniya Kabira (1), Deir Sharqi (2), Heish (5), Jazraya (2), Jbala (1), Kabani (3), Kafr Nobel (3), Kafr Sajna (6), Marrat an Numan (1), Marrat Tayrah (6), Marrat Harma (3), Maasaran (1), Nqeir (2), Rif al Mohandessin (1), Shiekh Mustafa (2), Suth al Deir (1), Tabish (1) Tah (5), Tal Hawah (1), Tal al Nar (1), Talamnas (1), Termala (1), Um Jalal (1), and Zmar (2).

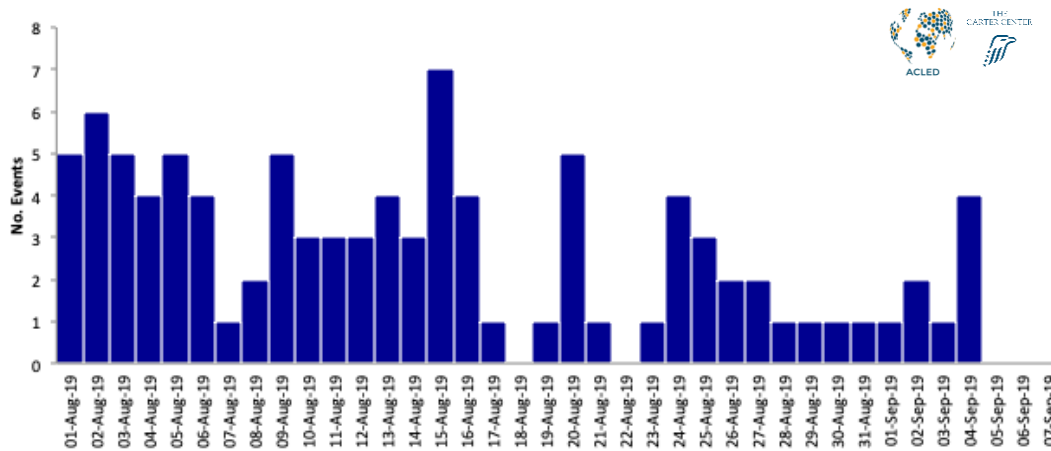


Figure 3: HTS and Other Groups Shelling of GoS-Dominated Areas in Northwest Syria in the Previous Month.

Inside the Idleb enclave, civilian demonstrations against HTS control took place on 2 September. Protesters denounced HTS in Marrat al Numan, Kafr Takharim, Ariha, and in Atareb, where they threw stones at a HTS checkpoint before HTS dispersed the crowd with live fire. The protests built on the previous reporting period's anti-HTS demonstrations in Bab al Hawa and Atmeh, which were some of the first demonstrations against the group since their takeover of northwest Syria in early 2019.

On 6 September, civilians also protested against GoS attacks in the northwest in Ariha, Marrat al Numan, Idleb City, and Sarmada towns. Demonstrations in support of HTS and the Al Qaeda aligned Hurras al Din were also reported in [Salqin](#), [Anjara](#) and [Killi](#).

HTS and Jaish al Izza launched a recruitment drive this week using posters and online advertisements leading some commentators to [report](#) the drive as the largest recruitment attempt by the two groups this year. Both groups have been heavily involved in resisting the GoS offensive in the northwest since May of this year and have suffered a high number of casualties.

Government re-enforcements also arrived in the northwest this week, in the [areas](#) south of Kabani town and [to](#) the Tal Rifaat pocket³, where conflict between the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Turkish-backed opposition armed groups continued this week, with at least six incidents of shelling, two ground clashes and a downing of a weaponized drone.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

In the south of the country, attacks against GoS-aligned personnel and former opposition members continued, as has been common in 2019. In Um Batna (Quneitra Governorate), unidentified gunmen shot and killed a former opposition member who had surrendered last year to the GoS. In Zayzun, an

³ The Tal Rifaat area is under joint control of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and GoS forces since late 2016. Russian forces also conducts joint patrols with Turkish troops in the area since 14 February 2019, and with YPG forces between 26 March 2019 and 10 April 2019.

improvised explosive device (IED) detonated against a 4th Division patrol. In Nawa, an armed group shot and wounded a former ISIS member who was allegedly collaborating with the Airforce Intelligence.

Pro-government sources also [reported](#) that ISIS claimed an ambush against a Syrian Army patrol on the Hrak – Izra road on 2 September 2019. Two days later, the group [announced](#) it had also executed an Airforce Intelligence member in an undisclosed location in Daraa. The group has only claimed two attacks in Daraa Governorate in the preceding 12 months.⁴ Similar to these previously claimed attacks, this week's event also occurred outside of their former areas of dominance (Figure 4).

For more on conflict dynamics on southern Syria, see our "[Special Report: Conflict in Southern Syria | August 2018 – July 2019.](#)"

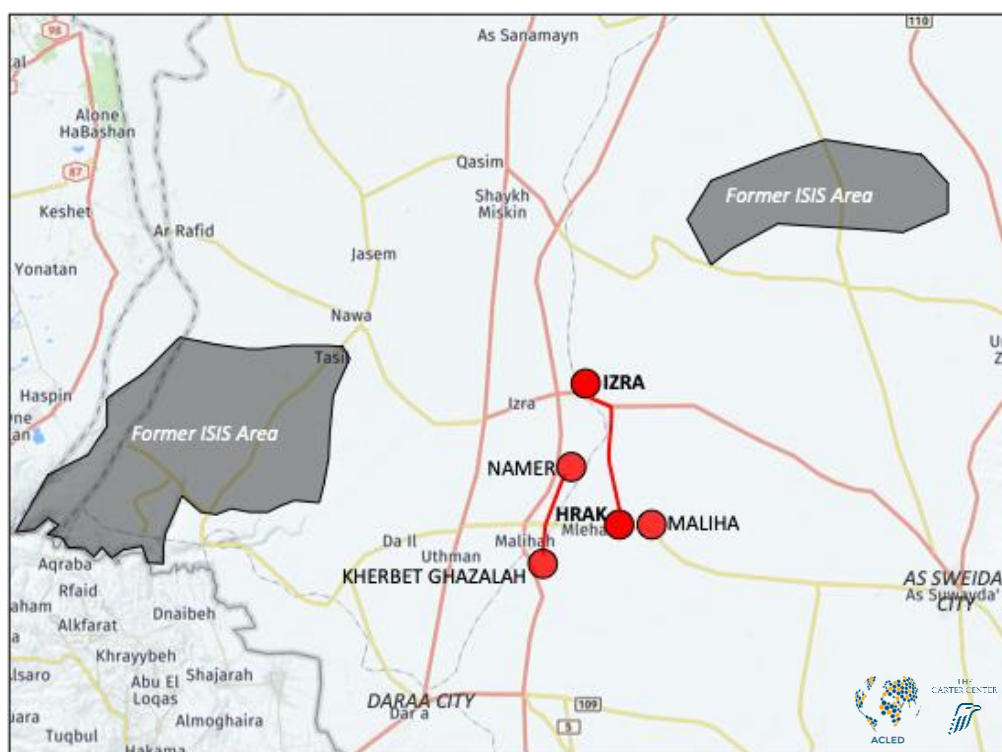


Figure 4: ISIS Claimed Activity in Southern Syria Since August 2018, With Former ISIS Areas of Control Prior to the GoS Takeover in mid 2018 Highlighted (black).

In the formerly opposition held enclave of Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus, GoS forces evicted several hundred families living in Arbin, Deir Elasafir, Ein Terma, Harasta, Jisreen, Maliha, Nashabiyah, Zamalika and Hamouriyah. In Kafr Batna, Saqba, and Otayba towns, GoS forces also appropriated several hundred vacant properties.

The evictions were conducted under the pretext that the properties being linked to former opposition groups, a practise that is covered by state counter-terrorism legislation.⁵ According to data from ACLED, families were required to

⁴ Since GoS forces took over southern Syria after an offensive in mid 2018.

⁵ As previously reported on by the UN [here](#) (Page 16, Paragraph 80 & 81)

make a payment of between 500,000 and 4 million Syrian pounds (\$970 - \$7776 USD) in order to return to their homes.

GoS forces recaptured the former Jaish al Islam-dominated area in March 2018, where Faylaq al Rahman, Fajr al Umma, HTS, and Ahrar ash Sham were also present. Since then, consistent [reports](#) of property seizures and evictions have been reported in Eastern Ghouta, most recently, in July, in Kafr Batna, Hezzeh, Beit Sawa, Ein Terma, Hamouriya, and Saqb towns.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

The US and Turkish militaries conducted a joint ground patrol in the vicinity of Tal Abiad town on 8 September. The ground patrol, which was [supported](#) with helicopters and drones, took place around the Turkish/Syrian border and areas [south](#) of Tal Abiad town, checking for the removal of defensive berms and trenches around four Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [bases](#).

This was the first joint US-Turkish ground patrol in northeast Syria since the 22 August agreement on the first phase of a “safe zone”. This first patrol followed the withdrawal of YPG and SDF forces from the area and the [establishment of](#) a joint operations center. The Turkish Defense Ministry [stated](#) that joint land and aerial patrols with the US were expected to continue in the coming weeks.

The SDF conducted further security operations against suspected ISIS members along the Euphrates River valley in Thiban, Shiheil, and in Western Jaabar, where Global Coalition against Daesh jets supported the raids. As previously [reported](#), such activity has not decreased levels of attacks against SDF in the northeast, which continued during this reporting week. At least three small arms fire attacks occurred in Shiheil, Danarj and Maskhekh villages, while IED detonations against SDF patrols occurred in Basira, Sajar, and on the Kharafi road in the southern Shuhada district of Hassakeh Governorate.

Two unusual airstrikes took place in GoS-held Abu Kamal City in the southeast of Deir Ez Zor Governorate this week. On 3 and 8 September, strikes targeted a Hezbollah site and an Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) location in the city. Pro-government sources [reported](#) the events as drone strikes, while other media [reported](#) the events as airstrikes.

At least three other airstrikes targeting Hezbollah or Iran have occurred in the Abu Kamal in 2019. None of the attacks have been attributed to a particular actor. However, Israel is one of the only entities in the Syrian conflict to consistently use airstrikes to target Hezbollah and Iranian. At least 55 airstrikes against the two actors, targeting 37 locations in Syria, have been linked to Israel in 2018 and 2019. The latest strikes coincided with [reports](#) that a new Iranian base is being constructed near Abu Kamal.

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