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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 22 - 28 March 2021

SYRIA SUMMARY

- Protests were held against a Russian proposal to reopen internal crossings in northwest Syria.
- Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces sent reinforcements as tensions continued in Dara'a Governorate.
- Opposition parties announced the creation of a new political coalition in Damascus.
- The predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) began a security campaign to arrest ISIS operatives in Al-Hol Camp, Al-Hassakah Governorate.

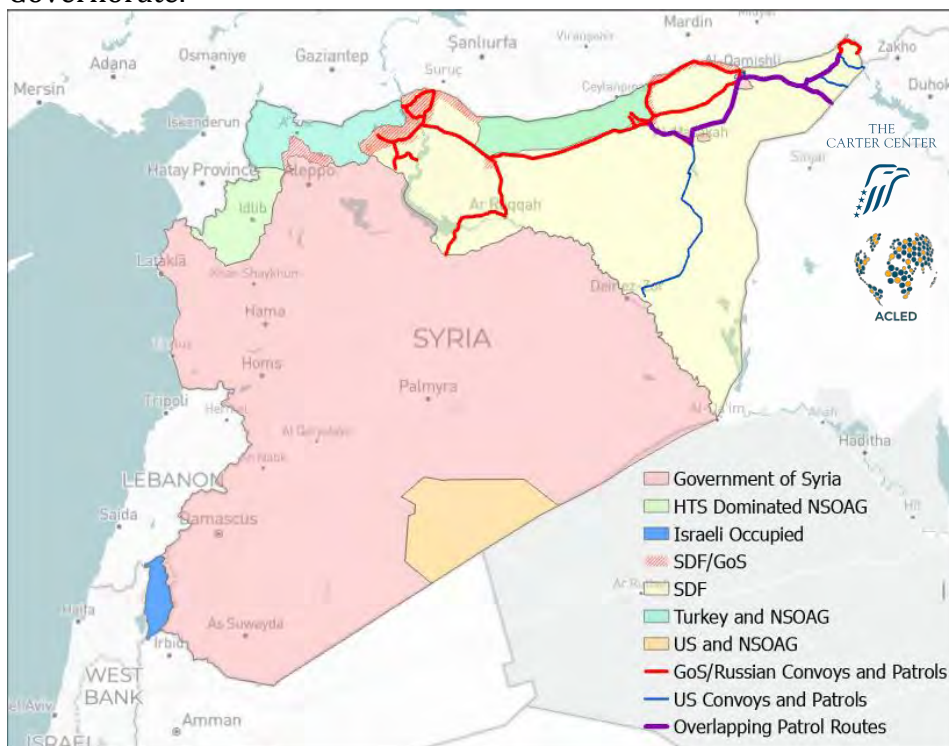


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 28 March 2021. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1.

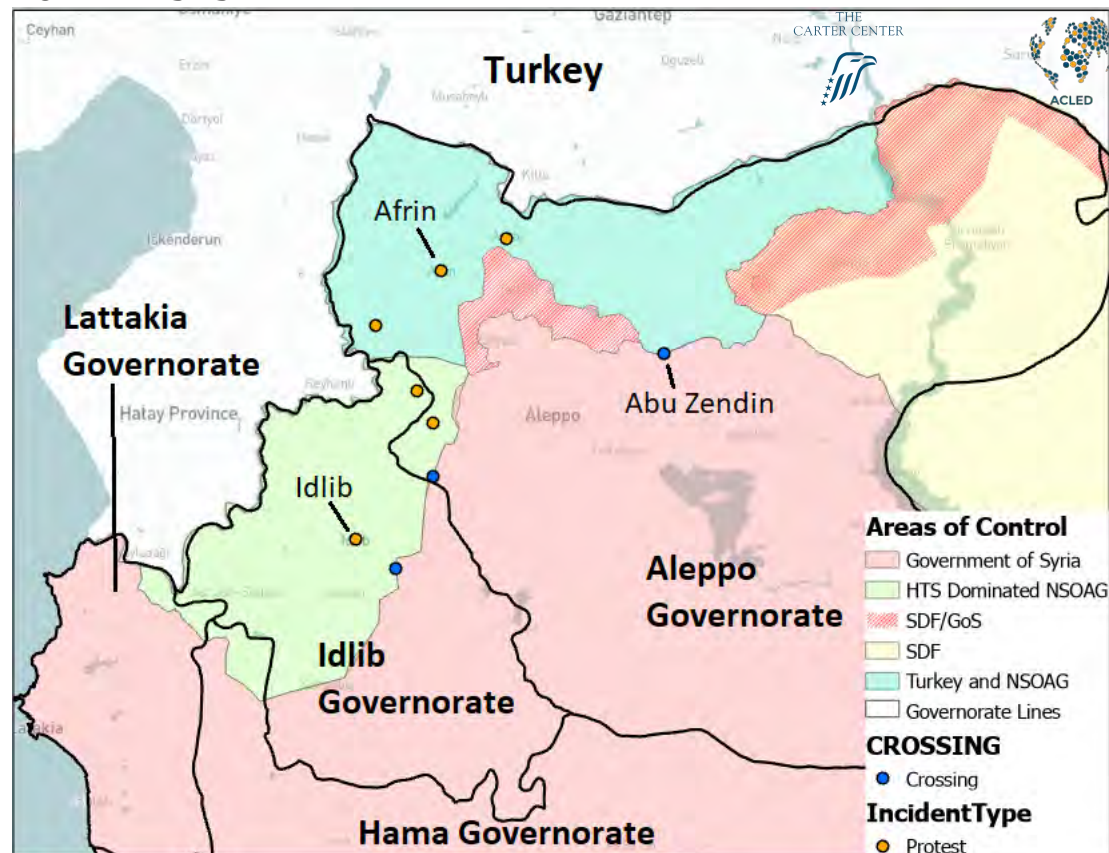
NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

Figure 2: The internal crossings and Protests against the opening of crossings in northwest Syria between 22-28 March 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Internal Crossings in Northwest Syria

The use of internal crossings between territories controlled by the Government of Syria (GoS) and the opposition in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates remains a contentious issue. Past attempts by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to re-open the internal crossings with GoS led to widespread protests and criticism.² In recent weeks, GoS and Russia have escalated tensions in northwest Syria by launching multiple

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.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-27aprilto3may2020.pdf

attacks on opposition-held positions.³ Following the attacks, Russia proposed re-opening internal crossings in northwest Syria due to the deteriorating humanitarian situation.^{4 5}

On 24 March, Russia announced that it had reached an agreement with Turkey to re-open three internal crossings in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates.⁶ Russian officials stated that this would help improve the “social situation and relieve tension”.⁷

On 25 March, demonstrations against the re-opening of internal crossings were held in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates.⁸ The opposition Syrian National Coalition condemned the news, accusing the GoS of besieging civilians and accusing Russia of trying to circumvent international sanctions.⁹ Turkish armed forces and the Turkish-backed opposition Syrian interim government denied¹⁰ that Turkey had accepted the Russian proposal to re-open the crossings.¹¹ The controversy over internal crossings comes as the United Nations Security Council gathers to discuss renewing cross-border aid.¹²

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

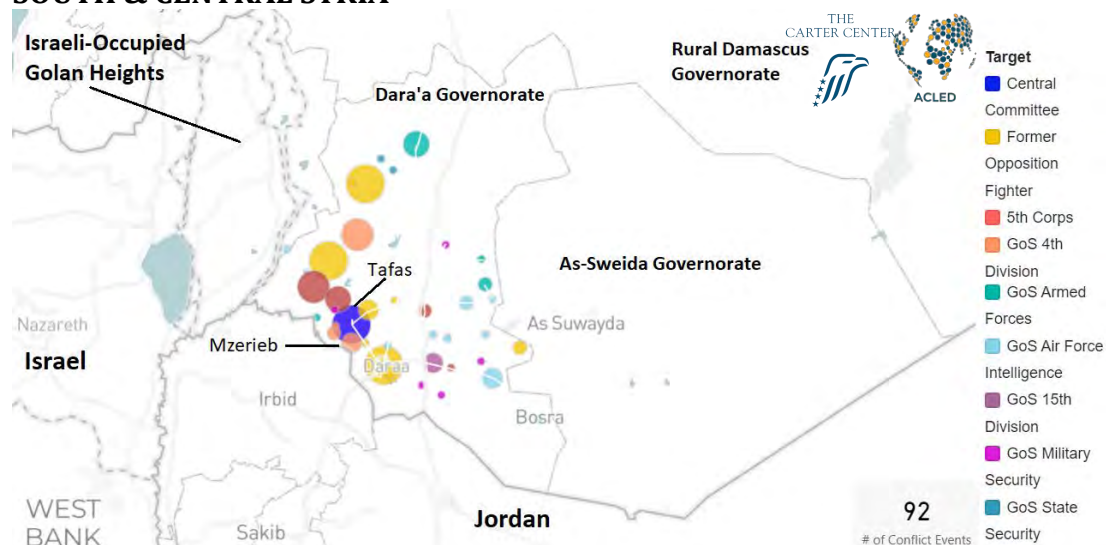


Figure 3: Attacks against former opposition fighters and GoS armed forces since 1 January 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Instability in Southern Syria

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-russia-points/russia-proposes-turkey-to-reopen-3-crossing-points-in-syria-tass-idUSKBN2BF2QQ>

⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/y5wz5v6n>

⁵ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1831191/middle-east>

⁶ <https://halabtodaytv.net/archives/183195>

⁷ <https://www.rt.com/news/519076-turkey-russia-syria-crossings-reopen/>

⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/468925>

⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/39e3uet8>

¹⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/et3wy6eb>

¹¹ <https://tinyurl.com/2p53rce2>

¹² <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/security-council-us-call-unhindered-access-syrian-aid-distribution-turkey>

Since the takeover of Dara’a Governorate by the GoS in 2018, some former opposition commanders have gained prominence by leading influential political and military groups. At times, tensions between those two sides have resulted in arrests and violence, such as the January-February standoff in Tafas, Dara’a Governorate. Tensions have been exacerbated by continuing attacks and assassinations of GoS officers and former opposition fighters, mostly by unidentified perpetrators. On 16 March, 20 GoS 4th Division soldiers were killed in clashes with a former opposition fighter’s militia in Mzerieb, Dara’a Governorate.

22 March

A former opposition leader survived an assassination attempt by unidentified gunmen in Mzerieb, Dara’a Governorate.¹³

26 March

The GoS 4th Division sent reinforcements to Mzerieb and Yadudah in Dara’a Governorate.¹⁴¹⁵

27 March

Russia mediated a meeting between GoS representatives and the Central Committee of Dara’a, a group composed of former opposition fighters responsible for negotiating with Russia and the GoS about local governance grievances, in Dara’a city.¹⁶ The meeting sought to address outstanding issues and deescalate tensions regarding the military buildup in Mzerieb.

Opposition Conference in Damascus

On 22 March, opposition politicians in Syria announced the creation of a new coalition called the “National Democratic Front”.¹⁷ The new coalition included several opposition political parties, such as the Arab Democratic Socialist Union, and advocated for a political solution to the Syrian Civil War.¹⁸ The coalition was to be formally launched on 27 March at a conference in Damascus.¹⁹ On 27 March, the attendees of the conference accused GoS security services of preventing the conference from being held.²⁰ As a result, the conference has been temporarily postponed.²¹ If held, this would be the first political opposition conference held in Damascus since September 2012.²²

NORTHEAST SYRIA

¹³ <https://tinyurl.com/jezuhzns>

¹⁴ <https://halabtodaytv.net/archives/183378>

¹⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/mtz9abak>

¹⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/uc86dx2z>

¹⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/8cpkcs>

¹⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/8cpkcs>

¹⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/468464>

²⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/2xb725yw>

²¹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/469711>

²² <https://tinyurl.com/8cpkcs>



Figure 4: Al-Hol camp in Al-Hassakah Governorate, northeast Syria. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Al-Hol Camp

The al-Hol camp in eastern al-Hassakah Governorate was established in 1991 to house Iraqi refugees.²³ After 2016, the camp has been used to house those fleeing from ISIS. Since the demise of ISIS Caliphate in early 2019, al-Hol has been housing some 65,000 mostly women and children, largely family members of ISIS fighters.²⁴ Thousands of foreign ISIS members remain in the camp, while their countries of origin have refused to take them back.²⁵ The al-Hol camp is the site of regular violence and escape attempts. According to the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), ISIS killed 15 al-Hol inhabitants in March alone.²⁶

23 March

The SDF called on the international community to take responsibility for ISIS detainees.²⁷ Since 2018, the United States and governing Kurdish Autonomous Administration (KAA) regularly have called on those countries to repatriate their citizens, citing security risks in the region.²⁸

²³ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Al-Hawl-Camp-ISIS-Resurgence-Extremism-Syria-Iraq>

²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/31/inside-al-hawl-camp-the-incubator-for-islamic-states-resurgence>

²⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/5/kurds-to-allow-is-linked-syria-families-to-quit-al-hol-camp>

²⁶ <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/24152-ISIS-kills-15-residents-of-Syria%E2%80%99s-sprawling-al-Hol-displacement-camp-in-March:-SDF>

²⁷ <https://npasyria.com/en/56419/>

²⁸ <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/17610-Syrian-Kurds-call-on-foreign-countries-to-take-back-IS-fighters>

The same day, unidentified gunmen killed an Iraqi refugee in the camp. It was the second killing of an Iraqi refugees that week.²⁹

26 March

The SDF's internal security forces, Asayish found the body of a Syrian man in an education center located in the sixth sector of the al-Hol camp.³⁰

28 March

Due to the deteriorating security situation, the SDF and the Asayish launched a new security campaign to clear out ISIS fighters and confiscate any weaponry.³¹ The campaign is expected to last 15 days, and would reportedly involve 6,000 fighters including the Asayish, SDF, and Women's Protection Units (YPJ).³² The SDF justified the extensive security campaign, commenting that the camp had become a "hotbed" for terrorism activities and regular violence against civilians.³³

For earlier weekly conflict summaries, please click [here](#).

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²⁹ <https://npasyria.com/en/56411/>

³⁰ <https://npasyria.com/en/56521/>

³¹ <https://npasyria.com/en/56656/>

³² <https://npasyria.com/en/56656/>

³³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/469975>