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Quarterly Review | January through March 2021

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Violence continued between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces and opposition armed groups in northwest Syria. Attacks against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Turkish armed forces increased in Idlib Governorate. Attacks against Turkish armed forces, Turkish-backed armed opposition groups and civilians also increased in Turkish-held territory in Aleppo Governorate.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Attacks against GoS and former opposition groups continued in Dara'a Governorate. Israeli airstrikes against Iranian assets increased across Syria.
- **NORTHEAST** | Tensions between the GoS and the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) escalated in Al-Hassakah Governorate. ISIS activities increased in the Badia desert region of Syria and Al-Hol camp.

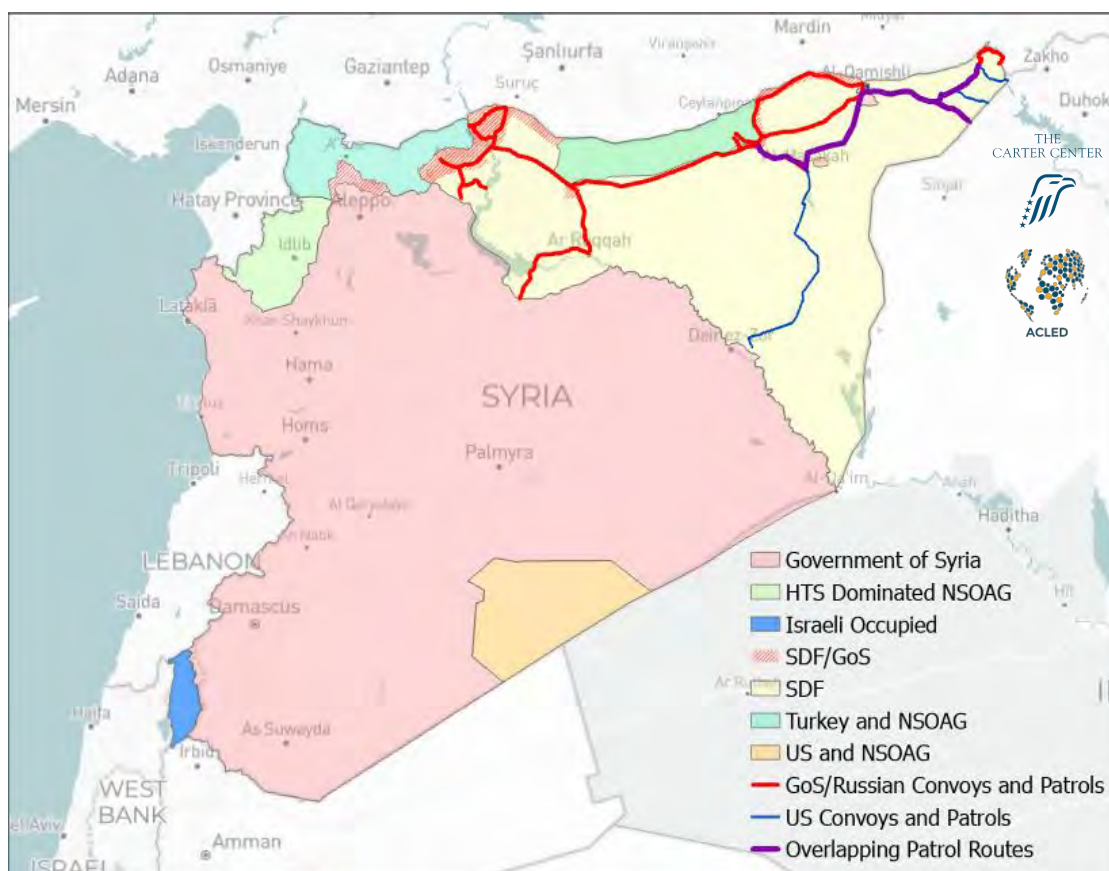


Figure 1: Areas of control and influence in Syria as of 31 March 2021. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, see footnote 1.

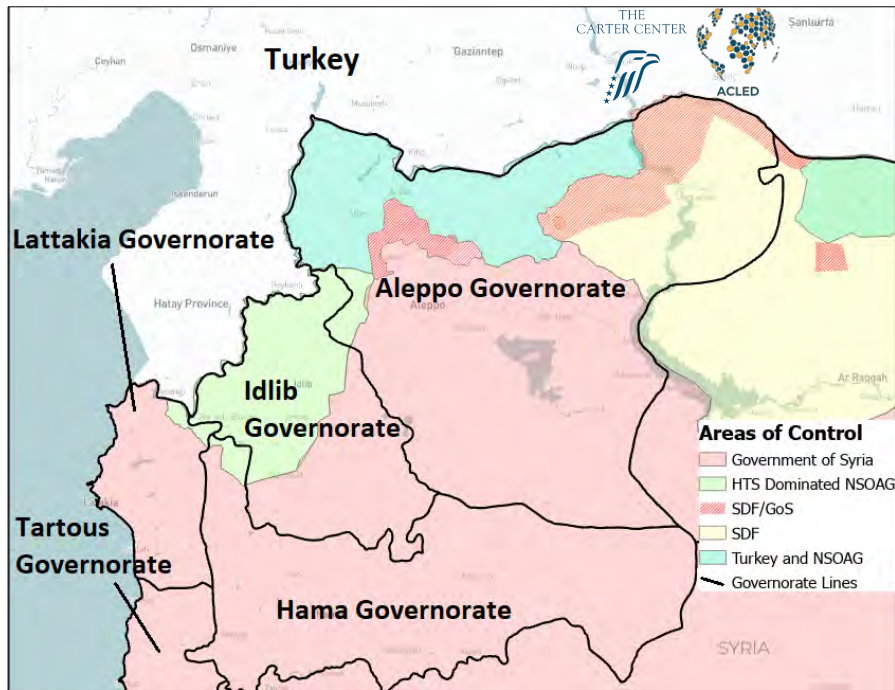
OVERVIEW OF NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

Figure 2: Areas of control in northwest Syria. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Since the implementation of the 5 March 2020 ceasefire agreement between Russia and Turkey, major military operations have been absent and territorial control demarcation lines have remained static in northwest Syria. Although violence has decreased, the region remains tense.

¹ Figure 1 depicts areas of the dominant actors' control and influence. While "control" is a relative term 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 patrol 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](#).

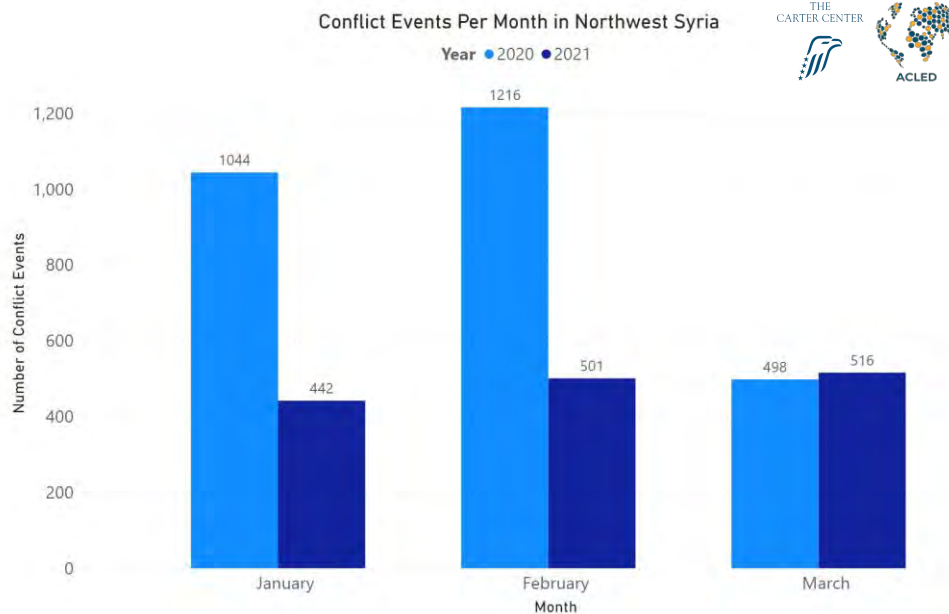


Figure 3: Comparison of conflict events between 1 January to 31 March in 2020 and 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the first quarter of 2021, 1459 conflict events were recorded in northwest Syria, which encompasses parts of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Lattakia, and Tartous Governorates. Idlib Governorate accounted for nearly half of the conflict events, with a total of 714 conflict events. In comparison, in the first quarter of 2020 a total of 2758 conflict events were documented, with 86% of which occurring before the 5 March ceasefire agreement.

In the first quarter of 2021, three conflict dynamics in northwest Syria are noteworthy: conflict between the Government of Syria (GoS) and the armed opposition, attacks by new groups against Turkish armed forces and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and attacks by unidentified, likely Kurdish, groups against Turkish forces and Turkish supported opposition armed groups.

GoS Against Armed Opposition Conflict

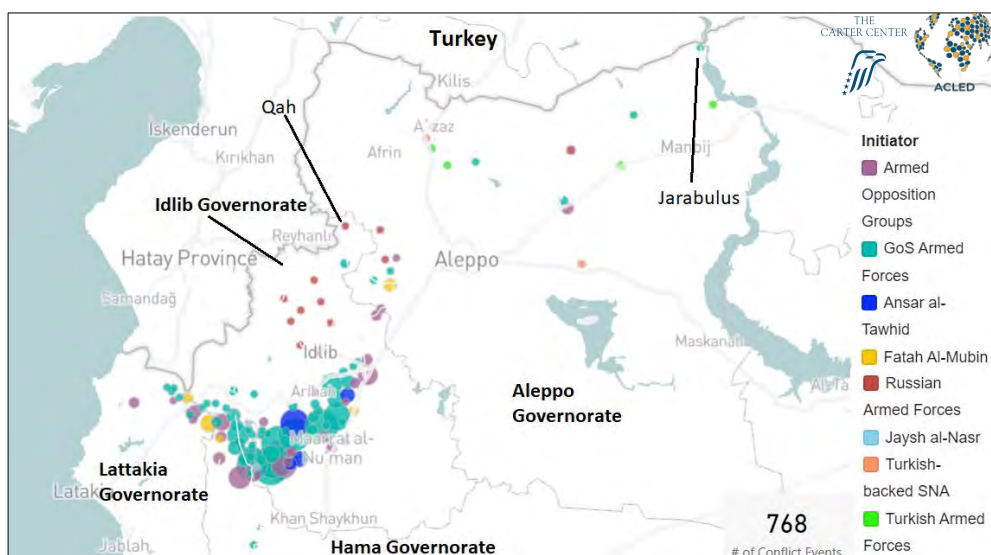


Figure 4: Clashes, aerial bombardment, and shelling between GoS armed forces and its allies on the one side, and armed opposition groups on the other across northwest Syria. Largest bubble represents 69 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Fighting between GoS armed forces and their allies on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other side has been concentrated primarily in the frontline areas near the Jabal al-Zawiyah area, Idlib Governorate. Despite the weakening of the 5 March 2020 ceasefire agreement and the absence of joint Turkish-Russian patrols along the M4 highway, conflict levels have remained stable.

However, clashes in March escalated tensions between the two sides. Russian missiles struck the town of Qah near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing from Turkey into Idlib Governorate, and oil refineries in Aleppo Governorate.² Additionally, the GoS armed forces shelled a hospital in Atareb, Aleppo Governorate. The armed opposition groups and the west denounced these attacks for undermining the economic lifeline of the region.³

To defuse tensions, Russia proposed opening some internal border crossings between GoS and opposition-controlled territories. On 30 March, Russia closed the internal crossings, with pro-GoS media accusing opposition groups of attacking the crossings and preventing people from leaving opposition-controlled territory.⁴ The internal crossings controversy is closely tied to the dispute between supporters and adversaries of the GoS on the renewal of cross-border aid (called Cross-Border Mechanisms or CBM). Russia and the GoS argue that direct cross border aid to opposition-controlled territories (northwest) and by-passing GoS controlled border crossings would violate Syria's sovereignty and international humanitarian law. In addition, they argue, such delivery of aid discriminates against Syrians within GoS-controlled territories. Third, they argue, HTS benefits significantly from such deliveries. Western supporters of CBM argue that humanitarian aid to Syria only through entry points controlled by Damascus would give the GoS the ability to limit the delivery of humanitarian aid to opposition-controlled territories. The opposition Syrian National Coalition claims that the GoS will use control of aid to coerce the opposition and circumvent international sanctions.⁵ Western supporters of CBM also point to the 3 million people depending on this continued aid in northwest Syria, expressing doubt that the GoS can and will meet their needs.⁶ The United Nations Security Council will take up this issue in July 2021,

Attacks Against Turkish armed forces and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/11/oil-refineries-hit-in-across-syria-in-latest-strike>

³ <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/strikes-northwest-syria-kill-person-wide-damage-76601613>

⁴ <http://www.sana.sy/?p=1348437>

⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/39e3uet8>, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/04/domestic-and-border-crossings-russias-mean-to-stifle-northern-syria/>

⁶ https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200508_Todman_Syria_v3_WEB%20FINAL%20UPDATED.pdf?BE2YtXjDLhq d31uwcQ85upTEPZphqmqZ



Figure 5: Attacks against HTS and Turkish armed forces in opposition-controlled territory between 1 January 2021 to 31 March 2021. Largest bubble represents 6 conflict events. Data from [Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi](#), The Carter Center, and ACLED.

Since the 5 March 2020 ceasefire agreement and July 2020 clashes between HTS and rival hardline groups, a consistent trend has emerged in Idlib Governorate involving attacks by newly formed armed groups that often do not surface again after mounting a series of attacks during a short time period. Some researchers have speculated that these new armed groups serve as fronts for HTS rivals who have been marginalized following the July 2020 clashes. (For an analysis of the armed group dynamics, see The Carter Center's report [here](#)). These attacks target the Turkish military and HTS in opposition-controlled territory.

Between 1 January and 31 March 2021, the Ansar Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq Squadron was the most active of these new armed groups, with 9 reported attacks on Turkish armed forces. On 10 February, another new armed group called the Mujahid Vanguard Organization struck a Turkish patrol with an improvised explosive device (IED) near Orm El-Jowz, Idlib Governorate. These attacks occurred as Turkey continued to entrench its presence in Idlib Governorate and secure the M4 highway in Idlib Governorate.⁷ These groups have been criticized for their focus on fighting Turkey and for denouncing HTS, rather than fighting the GoS and Russia. The Ansar Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq Squadron was even accused of serving as a proxy force for the GoS and its allies. The group released a statement claiming they were independent and their attacks on Turkey were due to the latter's cooperation with Russia.⁸

On 7 January, another new armed formation called Abdullah Bin Unais claimed responsibility for an attack on HTS, denouncing the latter as apostates.⁹ The group reappeared on 1 March, when it targeted again the HTS. Most violent extremist groups consider HTS as apostate due to its willingness to tolerate Turkey's

⁷ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/d63d2259894f4575a37bc3e9b8d9720f>, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0637e58b11024a13bc36081a7b8bae5a>

⁸ <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2021/03/clarification-statement-from-the-ansar-abu-bakr>

⁹ <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/09/the-abdullah-bin-unais-group>

presence in opposition-controlled territory, as well as crackdown on other extremist groups.

HTS's rule over the opposition-controlled territory depends on its rejection of dissent and its usefulness to Turkey in controlling hardline groups.¹⁰ Attacks by these hardline groups undermine HTS's control of Idlib Governorate, as well as Turkey's attempts to secure the M4 highway in accordance with the 5 March ceasefire agreement with Russia.

Attacks Against Turkish Forces and Turkish Supported Opposition Armed Groups

After the 2016 Operation Euphrates Shield and the 2018 Operation Olive Branch incursions in northern Syria, Turkey has maintained control over most of northern Aleppo Governorate. Kurdish groups and the GoS have denounced Turkey's presence in northwest Syria, calling it a military occupation and accusing Turkey of ethnic cleansing against the Kurds. As Turkey consolidates control in this region, Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition forces have faced attacks from unidentified armed groups and Kurdish militias. Although some of these Kurdish groups claim to be independent, Turkey has argued that they are associated with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

Attacks against Turkish armed forces and the Turkish-backed opposition Syrian

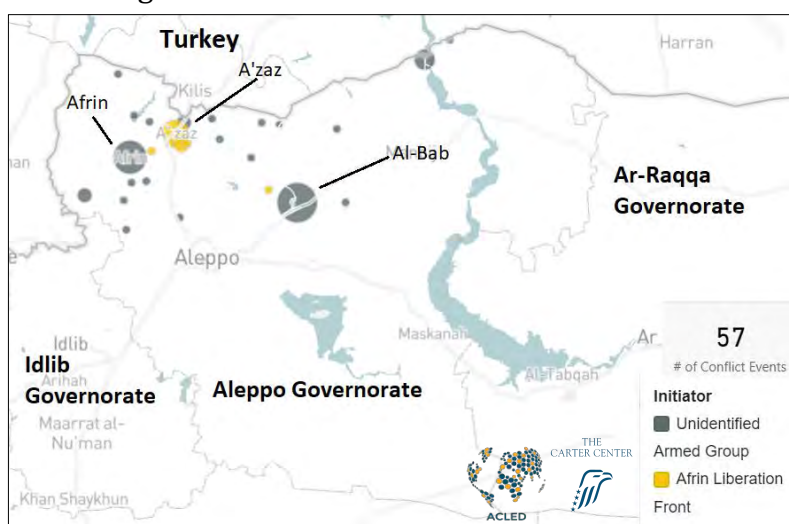


Figure 7: Attacks within Turkish-held territory in northwest Syria since 1 January 2021. Largest bubble represents 10 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

National Army (SNA) in northern Aleppo governorate remained constant in the first quarter of 2021. Between 1 January and 31 March, there were 27 recorded attacks against Turkish armed forces and the SNA, compared to 25 attacks during the same reporting period in 2020. Most attacks in Turkish-held northern Aleppo Governorate were

unclaimed, with only 7 attacks reportedly claimed by the Afrin Liberation Front and other Kurdish armed groups. On 30-31 January, two car bomb explosions killed 12 civilians in the area.¹¹ As tensions between Turkey and the YPG continued, there were concerns that escalating violence in Turkish-held territory could lead to further Turkish retaliation against Kurdish-controlled territory.

¹⁰ https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/idleb-armed-groups-may-2020.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/un-condemn-syria-bombing.html>

OVERVIEW OF SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

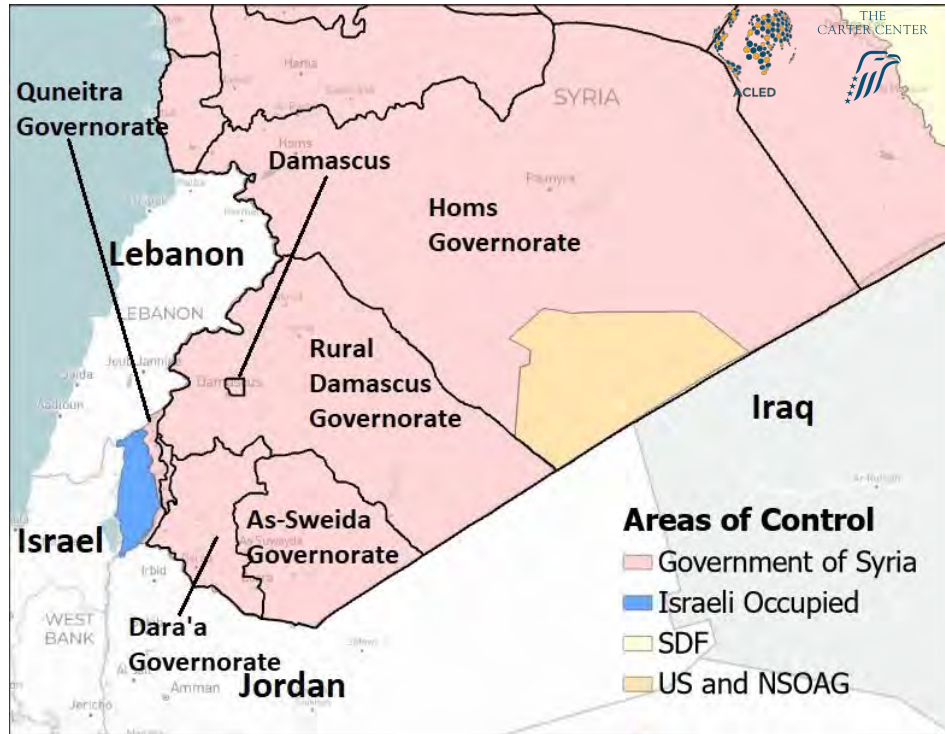


Figure 8: Areas of control in south and central Syria. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Though conflict levels in south and central Syria remain the lowest in the country, data from [ACLED](#) and The Carter Center indicates that violence there has increased, especially in Dara'a Governorate.

The primary conflict dynamic remains the ongoing attacks against GoS figures and former opposition fighters in Dara'a Governorate. There was also a noticeable increase in Israeli airstrikes during the reporting period.

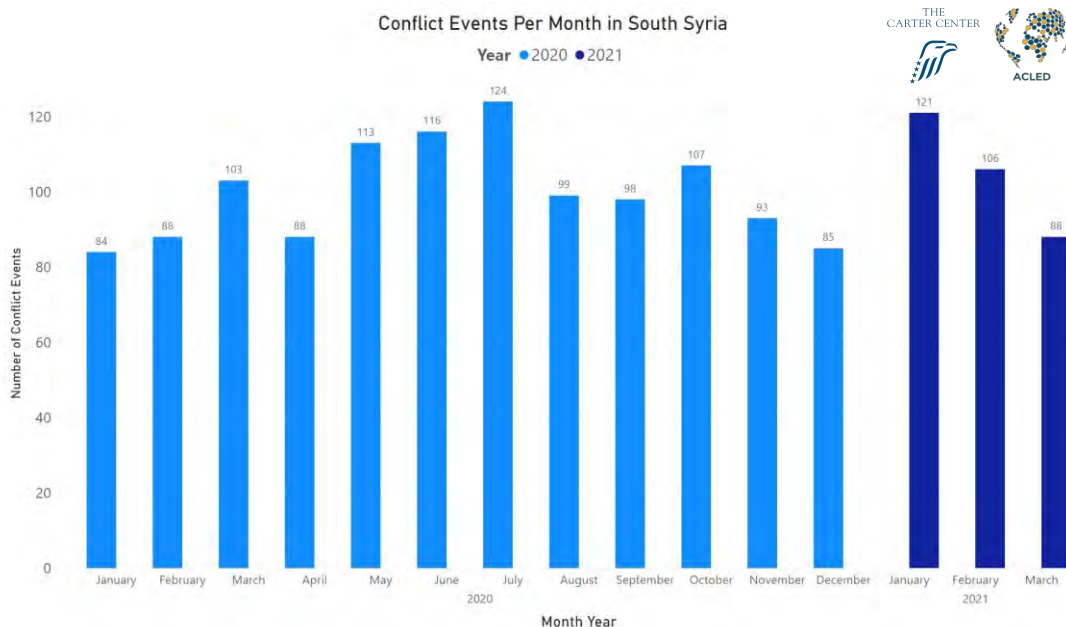


Figure 9: The number of conflict events by month since January 2020. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Tension between GoS and the Former Opposition in Dara'a Governorate

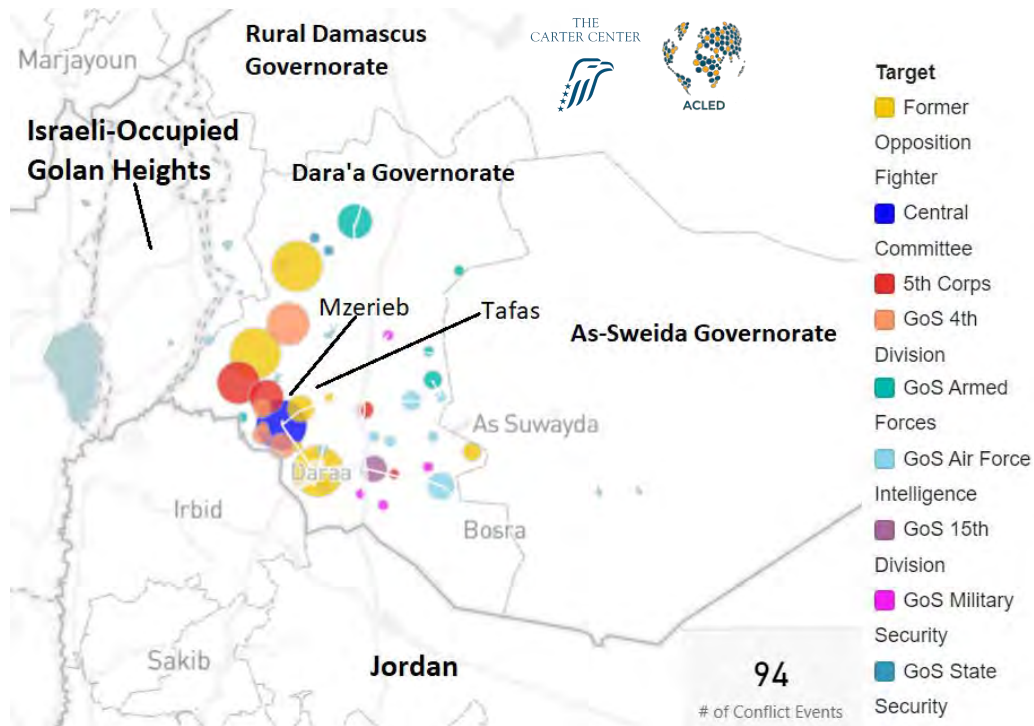


Figure 10: Attacks against former opposition fighters and GoS armed forces by unidentified armed groups since 1 January 2021. Largest bubble represents 7 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Dara'a Governorate continues to account for over half of all conflict events in South and Central Syria. As in 2020, tension between GoS and former opposition fighters remains the primary cause of conflict in Dara'a Governorate. Since the takeover of the governorate by the GoS in 2018, some former opposition commanders have gained prominence by leading influential political and armed groups. At times, tension between the two sides have resulted in arrests and violence, which have been exacerbated by consistent attacks and assassinations of GoS officers and former opposition fighters, mostly by unidentified perpetrators.

In January 2021, the GoS 4th Division, led by Maher Assad, surrounded the town of Tafas and demanded the disarmament of local militias and the surrender of 6 former opposition commanders. Russia moved quickly to mediate. Despite an agreement to end the Tafas siege, tension returned after the 16 March clashes when a former opposition group killed 20 GoS 4th Division soldiers in Mzerieb, Dara'a Governorate.

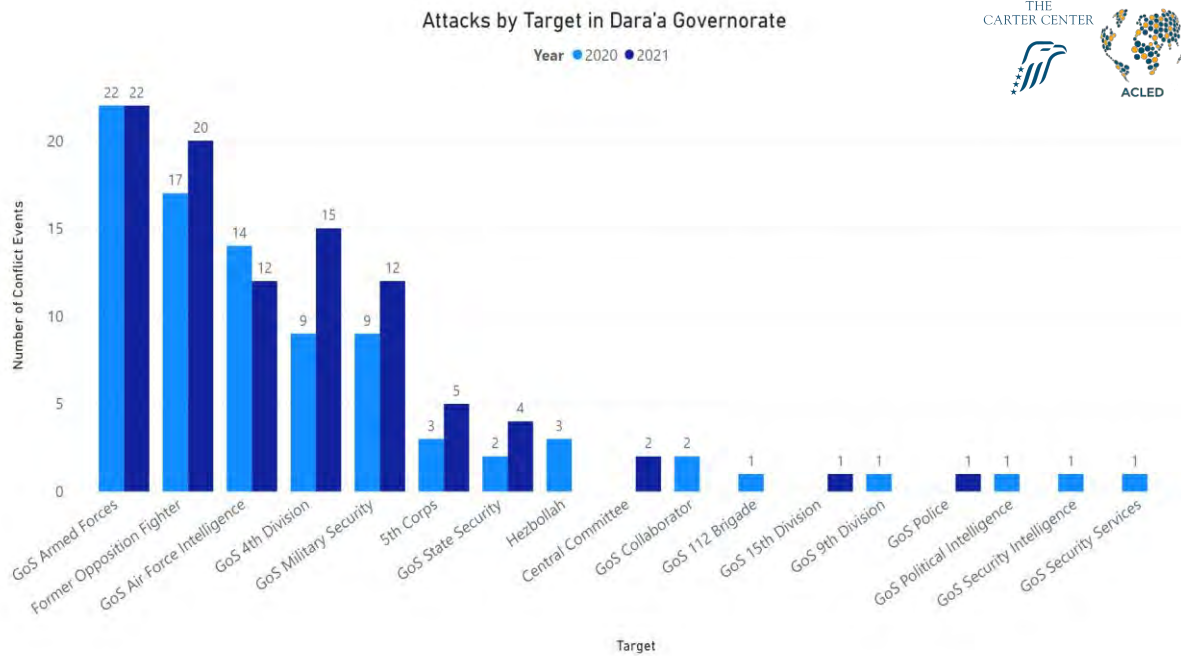


Figure 11: Targets of attacks (including assassinations) in Dara'a Governorate since 1 January 2020. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the reporting period, there were 94 attacks by unidentified armed groups against GoS and former opposition fighters. In comparison, during the same period in 2020 only 56 attacks by unidentified armed groups were recorded against GoS and former opposition fighters. Half of the recorded attacks occurred during the siege of Tafas on 24 January-11 February, when there were 41 reported attacks by unidentified gunmen against GoS and former opposition fighters. Although Russia mediated an agreement to end the siege of Tafas, it has been unsuccessful in stemming the violence in Dara'a Governorate. Former opposition fighters consider the GoS 4th Division as close to Iran, whose presence in Dara'a Governorate remains unpopular.

Israeli Airstrikes

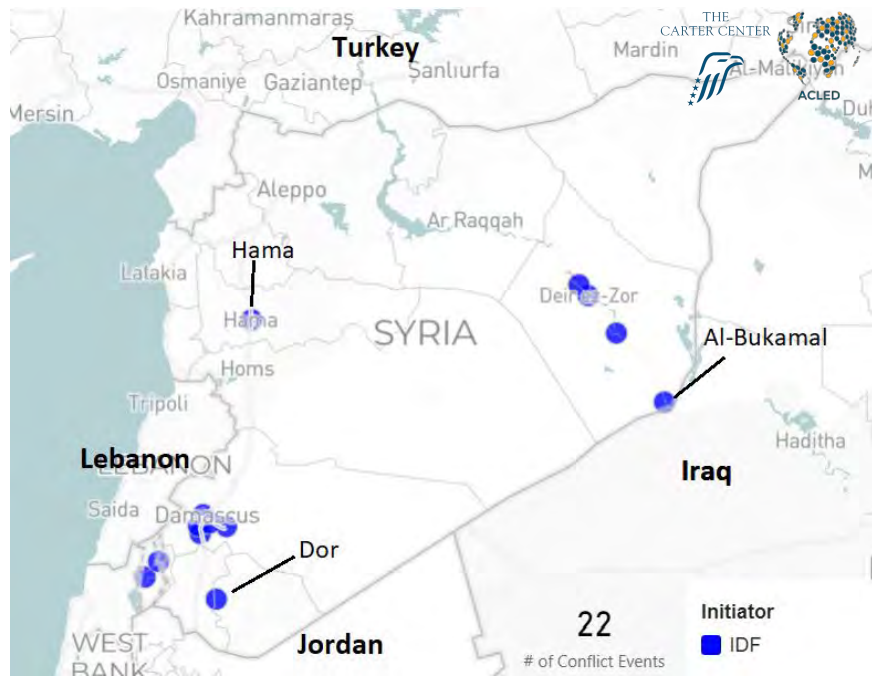


Figure 12: Israeli airstrikes in Syria between 1 January 2021 to 31 March 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

In 2021, the pace of Israeli airstrikes in Syria increased to nearly weekly events in January and February. The majority of attacks targeted Iranian forces and Iranian-backed militias in Syria,¹² which Israel views as a major threat.

The pace of Israeli airstrikes decreased following the 17 February GoS-Israel prisoner exchange in which Israel released two Syrian shepherds in exchange for an Israeli tourist. The deal also included the Israeli purchase of Russian-made COVID-19 vaccines for Syria.¹³ Between 1 January and 17 February, there were 23 reported Israeli airstrikes across Syria, but between 17 February and 31 March only 2 were reported.

The presence of Iranian-controlled fighters in Syria remains a source of concern for Israel. Since 2019, Israel has pursued an increasingly aggressive policy against Iran, with U.S. backing. On 13 January, an Israeli airstrike against Iranian targets in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate was reportedly aided by U.S. intelligence input.¹⁴ The increased number of airstrikes in Syria coincided with an escalation of Israeli actions against Iran across the Middle East, with Israel attacking Iranian ships in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, including ships bound for Syria.¹⁵

OVERVIEW OF NORTHEAST SYRIA

¹² Iranian-backed militias refers to armed groups that are supported by Iran, like Hezbollah, and include militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan.

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/20/world/middleeast/israel-syria-prisoner-swap-vaccines.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/syria-says-israeli-airstrikes-hit-sites-near-iraq-border/>

¹⁵ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-strikes-target-iranian-oil-bound-for-syria-11615492789>



Figure 13: Areas of control in northeast Syria. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the first quarter of 2021, there was a slight reduction of violence in northeast Syria compared to the previous quarter, partially due to the alleviation of conflict around Ain Issa area, Ar-Raqqa Governorate. Between 1 October and 31 December 2020, there were 1332 reported conflict events in northeast Syria. During the first quarter of 2021, 1191 conflict events were reported. At the same time period, tension between the GoS and the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) escalated into sieges of GoS and Kurdish areas in Aleppo and Al-Hassakah Governorates, as well as the highest level of reported ISIS activities since March 2019 when ISIS lost its territorial control.

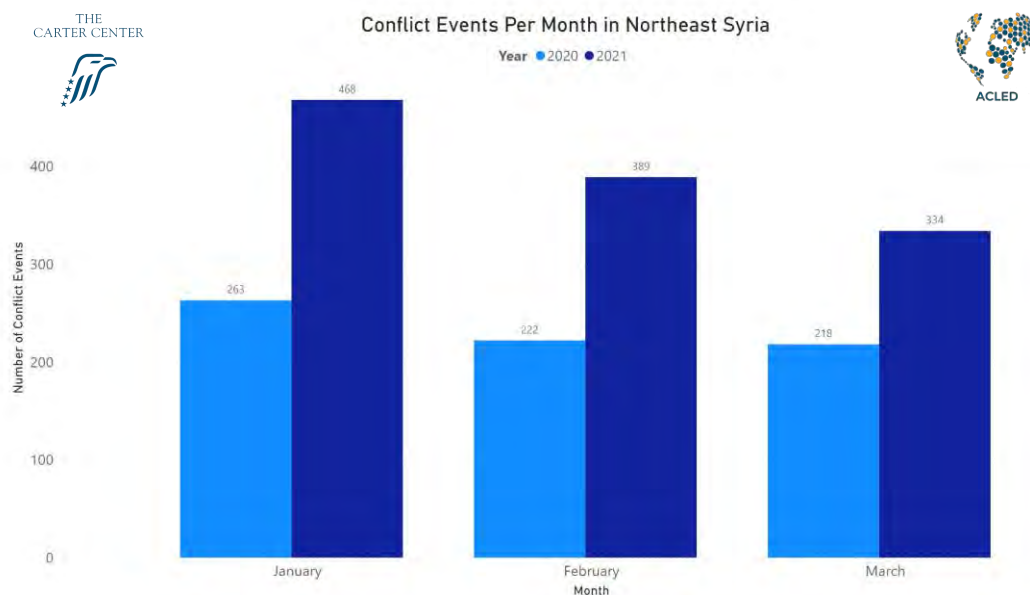


Figure 14: Total conflict events by month between October 2020 to March 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

SDF-GoS tensions

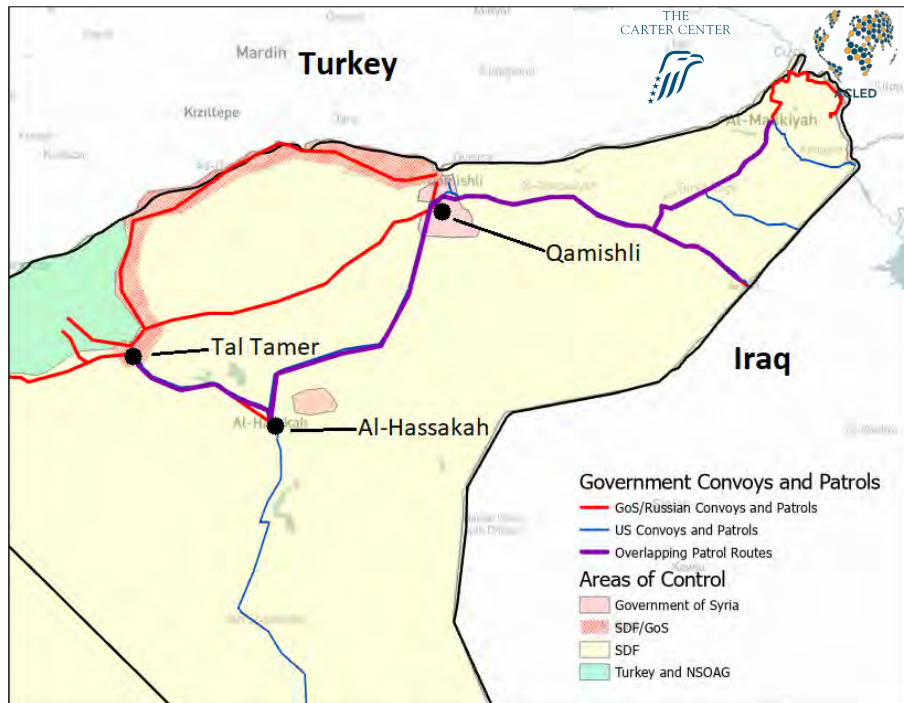


Figure 15: Cities where the SDF besieged GoS-held neighborhoods. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Throughout the Syrian conflict, there was tension between the GoS and the SDF primarily in Al-Hassakah Governorate. Qamishli and Al-Hassakah cities remained under the control of the SDF with a few neighborhood pockets under the control of the GoS. This caused tension between the SDF and the GoS soldiers, occasionally escalating into clashes between the two sides.¹⁶ Between 13 January and 2 February, the SDF besieged GoS-held neighborhoods in Qamishli and Al-Hassakah city and stopped trade with and oil sales to the GoS. The SDF blamed the GoS for the tension, criticizing restrictions elsewhere on the movement of people and goods in Kurdish-controlled areas in Sheikh Maqsoud and Tel Rifaat, Aleppo Governorate.¹⁷ On 2 February, an agreement mediated by Russia ended the SDF sieges in Al-Hassakah and Aleppo Governorates.¹⁸¹⁹

Despite the lifting of the sieges, tension remained between the GoS and Russia on the one side and the SDF on the other. The Kurdish Autonomous Administration (KAA) resumed oil sales to GoS on March 7,²⁰ as GoS-controlled areas faced fuel shortages.²¹ The SDF accused Russia of trying to blackmail the KAA over Ain Issa,²²

¹⁶ <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/04/what-is-behind-tension-between-kurdish-led-nes-and-syrian-regime-in-qamishli/>

¹⁷ <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/fresh-clashes-erupt-between-kurdish-government-forces-northeast-syria>, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/syria-regime-kurds-sdf-siege-qamishli-hasakah-agreement.html>

¹⁸ <https://halabtodaytv.net/archives/177025>

¹⁹ tinyurl.com/3bplv3vv

²⁰ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/464163>

²¹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/464093>

²² <https://tinyurl.com/4fy46kb4>

Ar-Raqqa Governorate,²³ from where Russian armed forces withdrew temporarily and left SDF forces exposed to a potential Turkish attack. GoS armed forces have also deployed additional reinforcements to the area, but this has added to the tensions with the SDF, which viewed the heavy reinforcements as trying to change the balance of power between the forces on the ground.²⁴ The SDF finds itself in a precarious position as it attempts to balance its relations with GoS and Russia, deal with internal disputes, and governs most of northeastern Syria while attempting to face Turkish threats to Ain Issa and other SDF-controlled territory.

The Battle Against ISIS

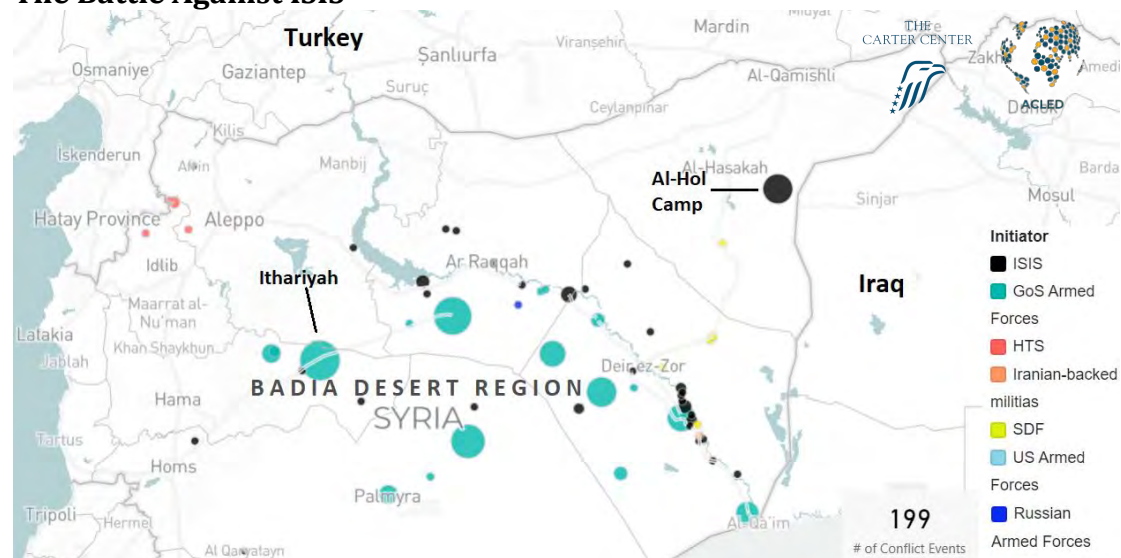


Figure 16: Conflict events involving ISIS and their supporters between 1 January 2021 to 31 March 2021. Largest bubble represents 28 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the first quarter of 2021, there was a sharp escalation of attacks committed by ISIS and their supporters,²⁵ particularly in the Badia desert region of central and northeast Syria. There were 199 reported ISIS events throughout all of Syria, 130 of which took place in northeast Syria. In contrast, there were only 42 ISIS-related conflict events for the first quarter of 2020.

GoS armed forces and its allies were involved in at least 150 of these conflict events during the reporting period, mainly in the Badia desert region where GoS has tenuous control. ISIS has conducted increasingly deadly attacks in the area, such as the 3 January ambush that killed 9 people near Salamiyah, Hama Governorate.²⁶ Despite numerous military operations and frequent Russian airstrikes against ISIS, the group continues to conduct operations.

There was also a significant increase of conflict events in Al-Hol camp, Al-Hassakah Governorate, where more than 65,000 mostly women and children

²³ <https://tinyurl.com/yp4tbc3f>

²⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/syria-regime-russia-deploy-kurdish-forces-turkey.html>

²⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55887870>

²⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/travel-syria-middle-east-islamic-state-group-96d043a19096e8d60ddcc5bfb8fb1701>

associated with ISIS are interned. Thousands of foreign ISIS members remain in the camp, while their countries of origin have refused to take them back. 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.²⁷ However, these countries cite concerns with security, prosecution, and argue that taking back ISIS prisoners would be political suicide.²⁸

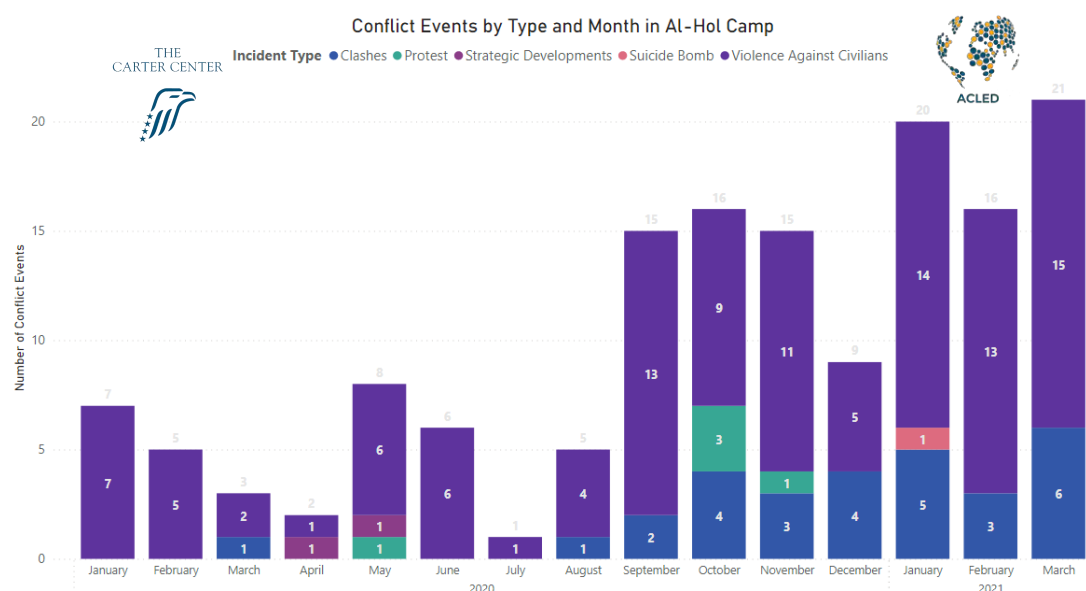


Figure 17: The number of conflict events in Al-Hol camp by month and incident type. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

In 2020, there were 92 conflict events in Al-Hol camp. By contrast, in the first three months alone of 2021 there were 57 conflict events at the camp. Most attacks were conducted by unidentified armed individuals in the camp who are suspected to be ISIS loyalists.²⁹ The UN and humanitarian organizations have expressed concern about the camp,³⁰ as have the GoS and Russia.³¹ On 28 March, the SDF launched a major new security campaign to clear the camp of ISIS agents.³² By 31 March, the SDF arrested 71 individuals in the camp.³³

ISIS continues to be a major challenge for all actors in Syria. Despite losing its caliphate, the group has regrouped in the Badia desert region and rebuilt its capacity as a guerilla group. Many of the socioeconomic fault lines that led to the

²⁷ <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/17610-Syrian-Kurds-call-on-foreign-countries-to-take-back-IS-fighters>

²⁸ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/repatriating-isis-foreign-fighters-key-to-stemming-radicalization-experts-say-but-many-countries-dont-want-citizens-back/>

²⁹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/al-hol-killings-deaths-syria-northeast-islamic-state-camp.html>

³⁰

https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/21_january_joint_statement_on_al_hol_-_final.pdf, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-msf-denounces-unsafe-environment-al-hol-camp-wake-staff-killing>

³¹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/465404>

³² <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/a3006d4891f24e8ad8a3eaeaff6114b>

³³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/470919>

rise of ISIS are still present today,³⁴ allowing ISIS to conduct even deadlier attacks against its opponents in the Middle East.

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

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³⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/2/we-liv-in-constant-fear-iraq-and-syria-face-isil-resurgence>