

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1291
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	The Carter Center
Titel:	Weekly Conflict Summary 25 May – 31 May 2020
Udgivet:	31. maj 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	25. august 2020



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 25 May - 31 May 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Clashes between armed opposition groups and Government of Syria (GoS) continued. There were increased attacks against Turkish-backed armed opposition groups. A dispute escalated into infighting between Turkish-backed opposition groups in Afrin, Aleppo Governorate. Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) killed a former Jund Al Aqsa leader in Nayrab, Idlib Governorate. Protests continued in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Attacks against former opposition fighters by unidentified gunmen continued across Dara'a Governorate. A group of former opposition commanders were ambushed in Mzerieb, Dara'a Governorate. GoS relaxed some of its COVID-19 restrictions. ISIS continued attacks on GoS forces in Dara'a and Homs Governorates.
- **NORTHEAST** | ISIS attacks in the region continued this week. The M4 highway once again opened for civilian use. US and Russian armed forces conducted separate and joint patrols in Al-Hassakah Governorate. Violence against civilians in the region decreased during the reporting period.

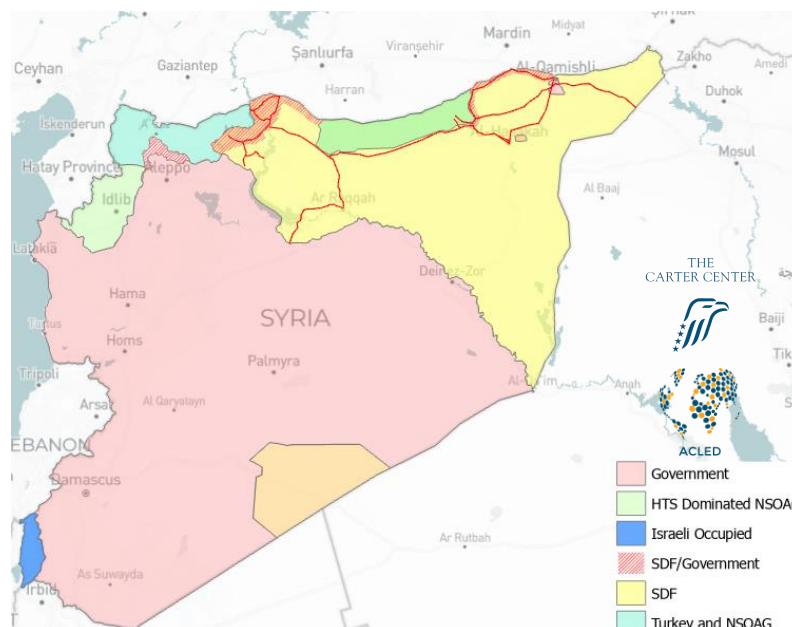


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 31 May 2020. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

Clashes between armed opposition groups and GoS armed forces continued this week. On 27 May, GoS forces and opposition groups clashed in the Taqad area in western Aleppo Governorate. On 28 May, opposition groups repelled a GoS armed forces attack in the towns of Ftireh and Fleifel in southern Idlib Governorate. The next day in Ftireh, HTS clashed with GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias,² with both sides engaging in an artillery exchange. On 30 May, GoS armed forces and opposition fighters clashed on the Banin frontline in Idlib Governorate.

There were increased attacks against Turkish-backed armed opposition groups during the reporting period. There were three attacks on 25 May. A National Liberation Front commander was killed in an Iranian drone strike in Bara in southern Idlib Governorate.³ The same day, an improvised explosive device (IED) injured a Sultan Murad Division fighter near Al-Bab city in northern Aleppo Governorate. In Al-Bab city, Sultan Murad Division fighters clashed with local gunmen. The cause for the clash was not revealed.⁴ On 30 May, the Turkish-backed opposition's National Police Forces faced two attacks in northern Aleppo Governorate. Unidentified gunmen killed two opposition police officers near Ar-Ra'ee city. An IED targeted an opposition police commander in Jarablus in northern Aleppo Governorate. No fatalities were reported in the IED attack. Turkish-backed armed opposition groups have faced regular attacks in Turkish-held territory in Aleppo Governorate. Since 1 January 2019, Turkish-backed opposition groups have been targeted in 184 attacks (see figure 2).

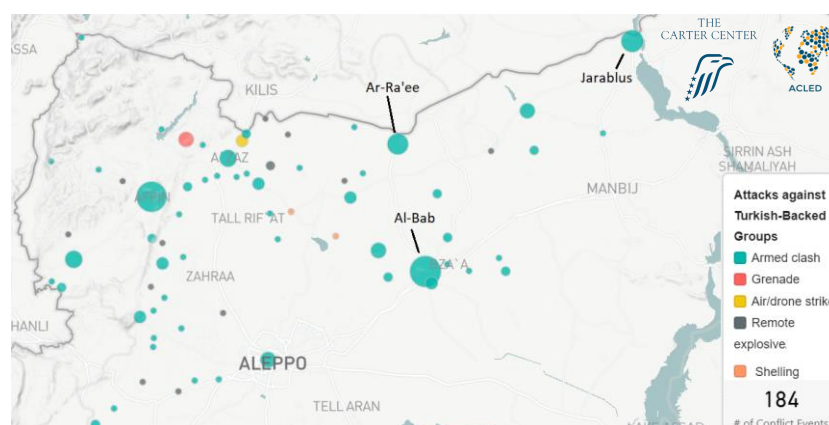


Figure 2: Attacks against Turkish-backed armed opposition groups in Aleppo Governorate between 1 January 2019- 30 May 2020. Largest bubble represents 29 conflict events, smallest bubbles represent 1 conflict event. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

¹ Figure 1 denotes dominant actors' control and influence. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah maintain a presence in Syrian government-controlled territory. Non-state organized armed groups (NSOAG), including the Kurdish dominated SDF and a variety of other groups operate in areas not under GoS control. The US continues to have a presence in the SDF-controlled east of the country. 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. Data collected is by the publicly available project [ACLED](https://www.acleddata.com/).

² GoS armed forces includes the Syrian Arab Army, intelligence agencies, or specific brigades/divisions within the SAA (air force and navy). Pro-GoS/GoS-backed militias refer to armed groups that are funded or in some way supported by GoS and coordinate or fight alongside GoS armed forces, but are not part of the state-run military.

³ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20525>

⁴ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=166659>

On 28 May, a local dispute escalated into infighting between Turkish-backed armed opposition groups in Afrin, Aleppo Governorate. Hamza Division fighters attempted to buy groceries on loan, but the store owner refused.⁵ The Hamza Division fighters bombed the store, which escalated into clashes with Jaish al Islam and Ahrar al Sham fighters who supported the store owner.⁶ Clashes continued until other elements of the Turkish-backed opposition's Syrian National Army stopped the fighting. The clashes resulted in civilian deaths, including one child. The various factions involved promised to open an investigation into the clashes.⁷ On 29 May, Afrin residents protested the abuses by Turkish-backed opposition groups, calling for the removal of their military headquarters out of the city and for the abuses to end.

On 29 May, HTS killed a former Jund Al Aqsa leader after raiding his house in Nayrab in Idlib Governorate. HTS defended its raid, alleging that the former Jund Al Aqsa leader was providing support to ISIS.⁸ This raid comes at a time when HTS is facing increased pressure from other armed opposition groups as well as protesters.⁹

This week, there were increased levels of protests in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates. On 25 May, civilians protested against GoS in Saraqab and Sarmin in Idlib Governorate, calling for GoS armed forces to withdraw from areas captured during the December 2019-March 2020 military offensive, as well as allowing displaced civilians to return to their homes. Another protest with similar demands took place on 29 May in Idlib city. On 30 May, two protests took place in Turkish-held territory in Aleppo Governorate. In Afrin city, protesters called for the release of prisoners who are detained by opposition groups. In Azaz, protesters gathered in front of a relief office to demonstrate against perceived corruption in the humanitarian aid sector.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Attacks against former opposition fighters by unidentified gunmen continued across Dara'a Governorate. On 27 May, an unidentified gunman injured two former opposition fighters in Tafas to the north of Dara'a city. The same day in Ankhel town in the Dara'a Governorate countryside, unidentified gunmen killed a former opposition fighter and a child. The next day in Jalin town in the Dara'a countryside, another former opposition fighter was killed. On 29 May, a former HTS fighter was shot and killed in Jlein area near Mzerieb in Dara'a Governorate. Since GoS gained control of Dara'a Governorate in August 2018, GoS soldiers and former opposition fighters have been attacked regularly.

On 27 May, a group of former opposition commanders with the Central Committee in Dara'a were ambushed by unidentified gunmen near Mzerieb town in Dara'a

⁵ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20577>

⁶ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-afin-inter-rebel-fighting-kills-child>

⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/388563>

⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/388850>

⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/388850>

Governorate.¹⁰ The Central Committee in Dara'a was formed shortly after GoS retook the governorate in 2018, negotiating with GoS and Russia regarding reconciliation and other governance issues. Three former opposition fighters were killed in the attack. Some Central Committee members have accused a former opposition commander and his fighters of joining ISIS and committing the attack.¹¹ On 28 May, fighters associated with the Central Committee and the Russian-backed 5th Corps attacked the headquarters of the accused former opposition commander.¹²

On 25 May, the GoS Health Ministry registered the largest one day increase of COVID-19 cases in GoS-controlled territory. The increase was attributed to travelers returning to the country. On 26 May, GoS removed its overnight curfew and restrictions on domestic travel, as well as relaxing several of its other COVID-19 related measures.¹³ Mosques¹⁴ and Churches¹⁵ decided to open, while adhering to health measures to slow the spread of COVID-19.

This week, ISIS continued attacks on GoS forces in Dara'a and Homs Governorates. On 27 May, ISIS killed two GoS soldiers near Mseifra in Dara'a Governorate. On 30 May, ISIS killed four GoS soldiers and GoS-backed militia fighters in the Badia desert near Sokhneh, Homs Governorate.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Documented ISIS attacks in the region increased during the reporting period. On 26 May, an ISIS IED exploded near an oil truck in Markada, Al-Hassakah Governorate. No fatalities were reported. On 28 May, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias with Russian air support clashed with ISIS near the Al Thawra oil fields in Ar-Raqqa Governorate. The clashes killed an estimated 8 GoS soldiers and militiamen, and 11 ISIS fighters. The same day, ISIS women detainees organized a protest in Al-Hol camp in Al-Hassakah Governorate, demanding the release of their husbands. On 28 May, the body of an Iraqi refugee was found in Al-Hol camp, allegedly killed by ISIS women in the camp. The same day, ISIS attacked a Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) post in Al-Shahabat village, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, killing 3 SDF fighters. On 29 May, 2 Quds Brigade fighters died after an ISIS landmine detonated in the Mayadin desert in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 30 May, ISIS claimed credit for wounding a SDF *mukhtar* in Ar-Raqqa city, Ar-Raqqa Governorate. Since ISIS lost its final piece of territory on 23 March 2019, the group has conducted 279 attacks across northeast Syria (see figure 3).

¹⁰ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20567>

¹¹ <https://syriadirect.org/news/attack-on-daraa-central-committee-revives-suspicious-of-isis-regime-cooperation/>

¹² <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20572>

¹³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/syria-coronavirus-curfew-uptick-cases-damascus-idlib.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/387804>

¹⁵ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=192514>

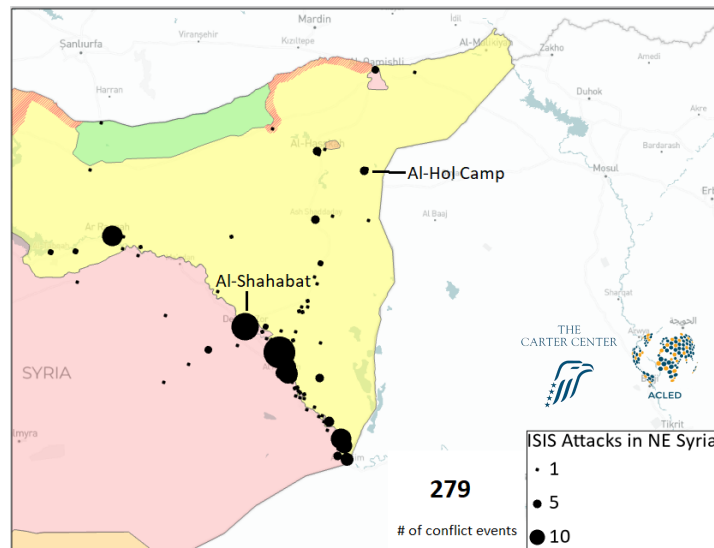


Figure 3: ISIS attack in northeast Syria between 23 March 2019 to 30 May 2020. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

The M4 highway in northeast Syria was re-opened for civilian use for the first time in seven months.¹⁶ On 25 May, GoS, Russia, and the SDF brought military reinforcements from Ein Issa in Ar-Raqqa Governorate to Tal Tamer in Al-Hassakah Governorate. The different armed forces were deployed along the M4 highway in preparation for the re-opening of the roadway for civilian use in northeast Syria. The highway opened on 26 May.¹⁷

US and Russian armed forces conducted separate and joint patrols in Al-Hassakah Governorate. On 25, 26, 28, and 29 May, Russian armed forces patrolled the Tal Tamer area of Al-Hassakah Governorate. On 25 May, US military vehicles blocked a Russian patrol on the M4 highway, forcing the Russian patrol to end. On 26 May, the US deployed a patrol on the outskirts of Rmelan city in northeast Al-Hassakah Governorate. On 29 May, the US carried out another patrol in Al-Hassakah city. On 27 May, US and Russian armed forces conducted their first joint patrol on the outskirts of Rmelan city though US forces deny that it was a joint patrol.¹⁸ Rather, it is described as part of a de-confliction process between both armed forces.¹⁹

Documented violence against civilians decreased during the reporting period. On 25 May, a SDF fighter stabbed a civilian in Ar-Raqqa city, Ar-Raqqa Governorate. On 28 May, two unidentified gunmen threw a grenade in Al-Shadadah town in southern Al-Hassakah Governorate, injuring four children. On 29 May, a child was killed by the SDF in Thiban town in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. As a result, Thiban residents protested at the SDF command center in the town. On 30 May, a SDF fighter injured three civilians at a checkpoint in al-Hawayij in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The incident took place after a dispute arose between the SDF fighter and the civilians. The same day in Safyan, northern Ar-Raqqa Governorate, unidentified gunmen kidnapped a child.

¹⁶ <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2302736/russian-forces-reopen-strategic-m4-highway-northern-syria>

¹⁷ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=192571>

¹⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/388246>

¹⁹ <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/russia-eyes-military-expansion-northeast-syria>

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