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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 7 – 13 OCTOBER 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Government of Syria (GoS) shelling and aerial activity onto the Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)-dominated Idlib enclave continued this week. Also, conflict activity increased in the Tal Rifaat pocket. And a suicide attack occurred in Azaz City.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Violence continued against GoS-aligned personnel in southern Syria, including one event that targeted a joint Syrian/Russian Military Patrol near Ankhel. In central areas of the country, ISIS activity continued despite a GoS operation against a suspected ISIS base near Sokhneh town.
- **NORTHEAST** | The combined Turkish and Syrian opposition invasion of northern Syria continued this week. Attacks against Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued in the Euphrates Valley. Three improvised explosive device (IED) attacks occurred in Hasakeh and Qamishli cities. Two escapes from ISIS holding facilities also occurred during the week.

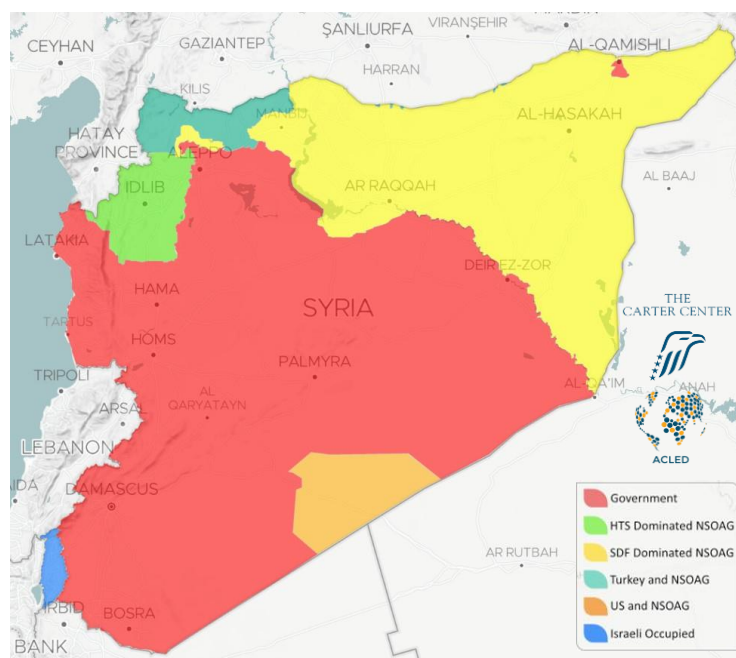


Figure 1: Dominant Actors' Area of Control and Influence in Syria as of 10 October 2019. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

Conflict between Government of Syria (GoS) and the Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)-dominated northwest continued this week, with elevated levels of GoS shelling and aerial activity impacting southern areas of the enclave. Over half of this week's 104 events focused on the southern sub-districts of Kafr Nobel, Heish, and Madiq Castle² (Figure 2).

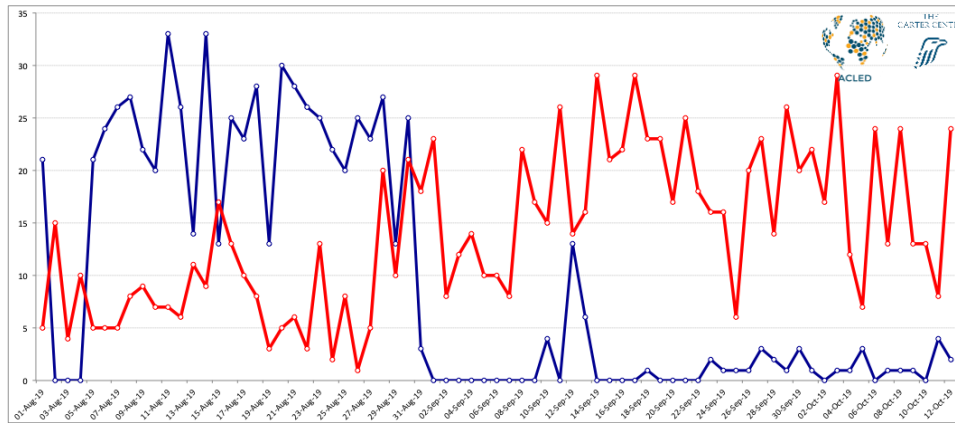


Figure 2: GoS Aerial Activity (Blue) and Shelling (Red) in Northwest Syria Since August 2019. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

Low levels of HTS and other group shelling on GoS dominated areas also continued this week. (Figure 3). The 13 events this period bring the total number of HTS and opposition shelling on GoS areas to 133 reported incidents since August. A third of these attacks have occurred in seven locations.³

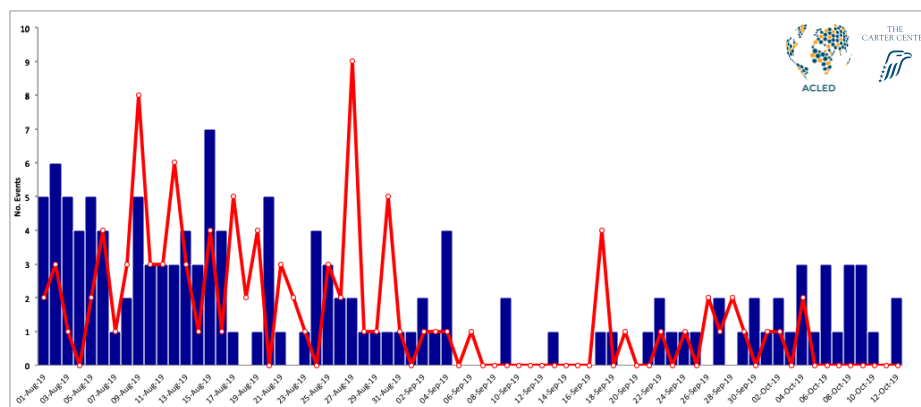


Figure 3: HTS and Other Groups Shelling (blue) and armed clashes against (red) GoS Held Areas in Northwest Syria Since 1 August. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

¹ Figure 1 denotes dominant actors' control and influence. Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and Iraqi militias maintain a presence in Syrian government-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 remaining 48% of activity was split between 13 other sub-districts.

³ Huweiz (9), Jurin (7), Aleppo (6), Khan Sheikhun (6), Madaya (6), Ar Rasif (5), and Kirkat (5).

HTS also conducted at least four arrest operations in Idleb governorate during the week, detaining a local media activist, a supervisor working for a HTS-aligned media channel, an Imam from Atareb, and a HTS commander. All were arrested for alleged criticism of HTS. The arrests follow several anti-HTS protests in the northwest in previous weeks. HTS often conducts arrest campaigns after protests against the group.

To read more about armed groups operating in the Idleb pocket, please read our recent report [here](#).

In the Tal Rifaat Pocket, conflict levels doubled after last week's increase of 14 events. At least 31 shelling exchanges and armed clashes between Turkish and aligned Syrian opposition forces and the Kurdish People Protection Units (YPG) occurred in Al Malikeyyeh (x3), Al Alqamiyyeh, Azaz (x2), Baza'a, Daghelbash (x3), Ein Daqneh, Hazwan Front, Kafr Khasher Front (x2), Maraanaz (x 2), The Mare' front (x5), Menagh Airbase (x2), Mreimin Afrin (x3), Mreimin, Shewargha Guzan (x3), Shiekh Hilal (x2), Shiekh Issa, and Tal Rifaat town. Turkish aircraft also bombed YPG positions in Harbel on 12 October. This is the first Turkish airstrike in the area since May and only the fourth in 2019.

Conflict between the two sides has fluctuated throughout 2019. However, this week's increased activity is uncommon for the pocket, with October already recording the highest number of monthly conflict events in 2019 (Figure 4). Previous increases in conflict activity have typically coincided with changes in Turkish rhetoric towards Syria or actions elsewhere in Syria, as is the case this week with multiple Turkish-led incursions into northeastern Syria.

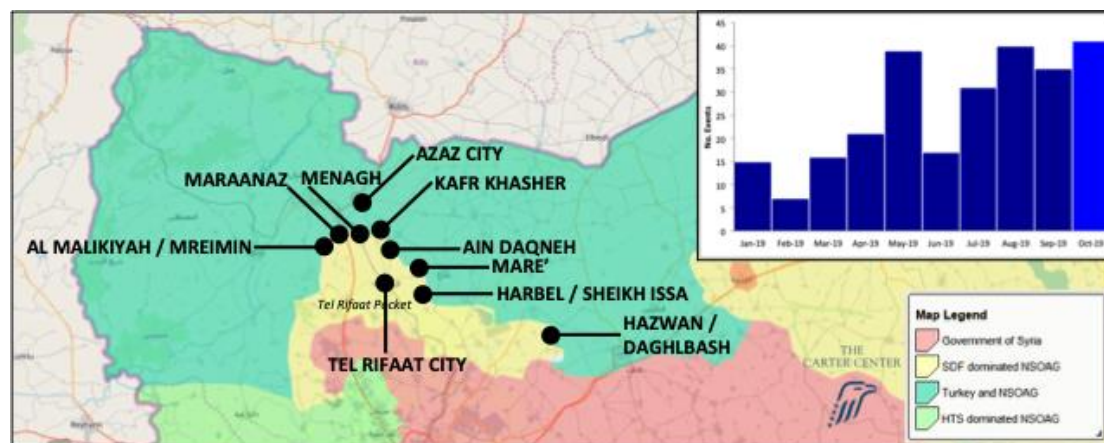


Figure 4: The Tal Rifaat Pocket with 2019 Conflict Levels Also Shown. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

A suicide bomber also detonated in a checkpoint in Azaz town after being stopped by Turkish-backed Syrian opposition's National Police Forces on 7 October. This is the second time in two years that a suicide bomb attack in the Turkish-backed area has occurred, after an attack against a restaurant in Azaz town in April 2018. While the first event was linked to ISIS, no group has yet claimed responsibility for this week's attack.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Low-level attacks against GoS-aligned personnel and former opposition members continued this week, with at least three events in Tal Samn, Tafs, and on the Jasim – Inkhil road in northwest Daraa Governorate, where an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) detonated as a joint Syrian/Russian military patrol passed. As first responders made up of GoS and Russian troops arrived at the scene 20 minutes later, a second device detonated nearby. Pro-government sources [reported](#) at least one Russian service member had been injured in the attack, while Russian sources [denied](#) any Russian casualties.

The attack is only the second time in three months an IED has detonated close to Russian military personnel in southern Syria. On 14 July an IED detonated as a joint Syrian/Russian patrol was travelling on the Haraba – Maaraba road in eastern Daraa Governorate. While IED activity in southern Syria has increased in the past month, as previously [reported](#), it is the first case of a double IED attack in southern Syria since the area was re-captured by GoS in August 2018.

In central areas of the country, evidence of ISIS's enduring presence was again seen with at least two attacks on GoS troops near Sokhneh town on 9 and 10 October. In the latter attack, GoS forces required aerial support to fend off the attack. A day later, pro-government media [reported](#) an ISIS base had been destroyed near the town. Further east, ISIS fired mortar shells into an Iranian linked militia's base near Abu Kamal.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Turkish military forces and Turkish supported Syrian opposition's Syrian National Army⁴ members began advancing into northern Syria on 9 October as part of Turkey's "Operation Peace Spring". Advances focused on areas between Tal Abiad and Ras al Ain and followed intense Turkish aerial and ground bombardments across 36 locations in 13 sub-districts of northern Syria at the start of the week.⁵ By the end of the week, Turkish and allied forces captured Tal Abiad and Suluk town to the southeast, as well as a stretch of the M4 highway between Ras al Ain and Sharat Tal Musa. The road is one of the main east and west routes in northern Syria and lies some 25km south of the Turkish border.

Further west, on northwestern frontlines in Menbej District, an increase in fighting between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-backed Menbej Military Council and Turkish-backed Syrian opposition groups in the Euphrates Shield area occurred during the week, with at least 22 shelling and small arms fire exchanges. This is in contrast to an average of three events per week for 2019.

The Turkish advances occurred less than a week after a phone call between

⁴ A newly established Turkish backed Syrian group made up of the National Liberation Front and Syria National Army, two of the largest factions in the Turkish-backed areas of northern Aleppo Governorate (Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch).

⁵ The 13 sub-districts of Hasakeh and Raqqah Governorates that were affected by conflict were Ras al Ain (15 events), Al Malikeyyah (9), Qamishli (6), Qahtaniyeh (5), Tal Abiad (4), Ain Issa (3), Amuda (2), Hole (2), Suluk (2), Areesh (1), Darbasiyeh (1), Raqqah (1) and Tal Tamer (1). This included one event that impacted close to a US military location near Ain al Arab on 11 October.

President Trump and Turkish President Erdogan that resulted in the White House releasing a [statement](#) on 6 October implying the United States Armed Forces would not prevent any Turkish operation in northern Syria. The Turkish assault also marks the end of the implementation of [security mechanisms](#) between Turkey and the US to create a de-militarized zone along Syrian/Turkish border that had been agreed in late August. The offensive was widely condemned by the international community including the [Arab League](#), the [EU](#), [Russia](#), [Iran](#), Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

As a result of the developments, large population movements were recorded during the week. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) [reported](#) that up to 160,000 people had been displaced, including 70,000 children. Critical infrastructure have also been affected including, three health facilities, a school, and the Alouk Water Station that serves 400,000 people in Hasakeh Governorate. Fifteen Aid Organizations working in northeast Syria have [warned](#) that humanitarian aid could be cut off if the offensive continues.

Several reports of summary executions were also reported during the week. Between 10 and 12 October, ACLED data recorded at least two events of Turkish backed groups executing civilians and a local Kurdish [politician](#) travelling in areas between Qamishli City and Tal Abiad as the offensive began.

Behind frontlines, low-level attacks against SDF and aligned personnel continued. In Hasakeh City, two motorcycle bombs detonated in the Ghoweran and the Ajajeh areas of the city. In Qamishli City, a suicide car bomb detonated on Munir Habib Street. A suicide bomber was also shot dead in Menbej city before he could detonate his device. In the Euphrates River Valley at least seven attacks against SDF personnel occurred in Shiheil (x2), Tayanna, Gharanij, Jadid Bakkara, Sabkhah, and in Basira, where a civilian council member was shot dead.

In contrast to previous months, there were no SDF arrest operations against alleged ISIS members this week. Instead, several SDF contingents were transferred from the Euphrates River Valley, especially around Deir Ez Zor City and the Omar Oil Fiends, to Ras al Ain and Tal Abiad.

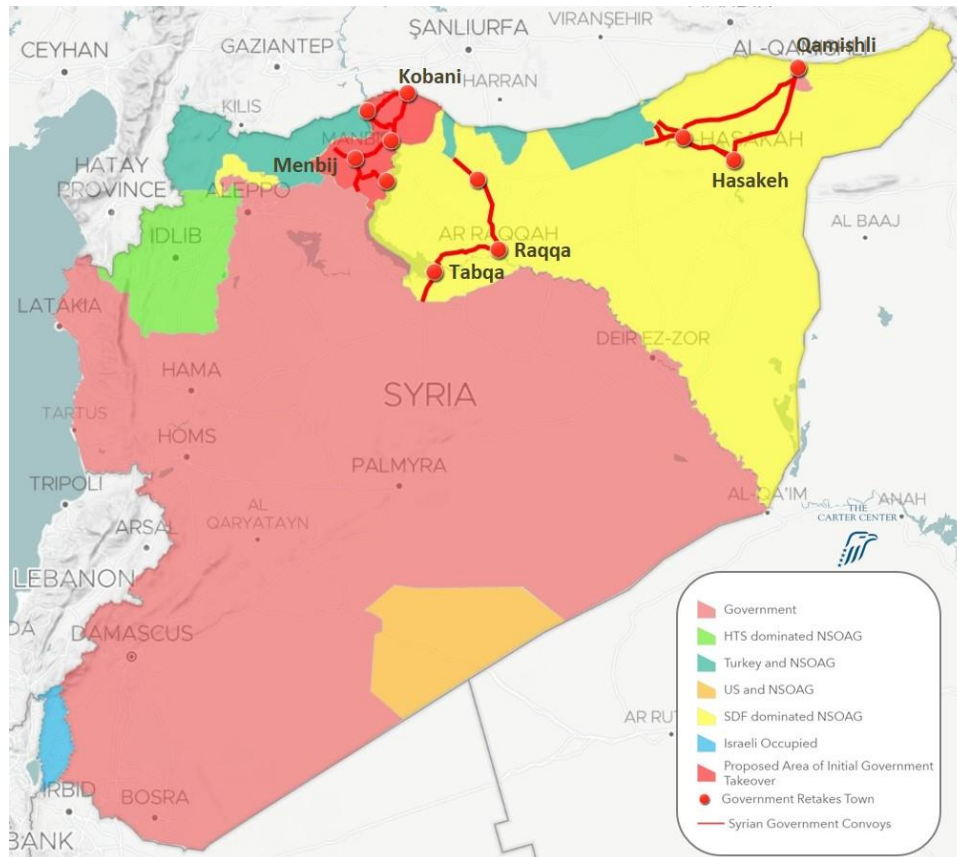
For the fifth consecutive week, suspected Israeli airstrikes struck an Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) site near Abu Kamal on 11 October. This is the sixth time the area has been struck by airstrikes since 3 September.⁶

Two incidents also took place in camps holding people who are suspected of being wives and children of ISIS fighters. In Al Hole Camp⁷, female residents attacked camp security guards, set fire to several tents, and an unknown escaped on 9 October. On 11 October, Turkish shelling targeted an SDF-run prison holding captured ISIS members near Qamishli City. The attack resulted inmates escaping.

⁶ After last strikes on 3, 8, 18, 28, and 30 September.

⁷ Al-Hole Camp is one of several camps in northeast Syria. It primarily holds Syrian and foreign women and children who are suspected of being family members of ISIS fighters. These camps are overseen by the SDF.

Just after the reporting period ended, further Turkish advances were made in northeast Syria between Ras al Ain and Tal Abiad. On 14 October, Turkish-backed groups captured areas around Yashli and Um Adese al Furat Villages in Menbij District. On 15 October, the US [announced](#) its forces were withdrawing fully from north and east Syria. In the meantime, the SDF and Damascus, with Russian mediation, entered into an agreement allowing GoS armed forces to secure parts of the northeast. The situation continues to develop at the time of writing. The map below depicts areas of control as of 17 October 2019.



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