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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 6 July - 12 July 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | The Russian and Turkish joint patrol reached Ain al-Hawr, Idlib Governorate, the longest distance to date. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported in the region. There were increased clashes along the frontlines of Idlib and Aleppo Governorate. Anti-ISIS operations by Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces, GoS-backed militias, and the Russian air force continued in Hama Governorate. The United Nations Security Council renewed aid delivery to northwest Syria.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | GoS and Iran signed a new military agreement. Increased infighting was reported between GoS armed forces, Russian-backed militias, and GoS-backed militias in the region. Attacks against GoS officials and former opposition fighters continued across the region.
- **NORTHEAST** | ISIS attacks and anti-ISIS operations continued. Fighting among GoS-backed militias and Iranian-backed militias was reported in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. There were increased reports of GoS armed forces intercepting US patrols in Al-Hassakah Governorate. Protests continued in the region.

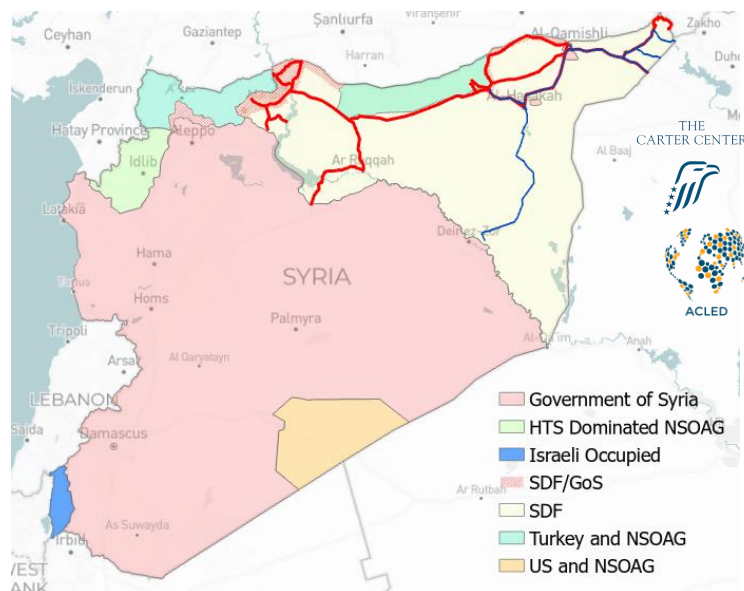


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 12 July 2020. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

For the first time, the joint Turkish and Russian armed forces patrol covered the longest distance of agreed upon length of the M4 highway in Idlib Governorate. On 7 July, the 20th joint patrol began in Turnabah in eastern Idlib Governorate and ended near the town of Badama,² roughly 10 kilometers from Ain al Hawr.³ The joint patrol involved both land vehicles as well as air craft from both parties.⁴ The Turkish-Russian joint patrols were mandated by the 5 March ceasefire agreement. Since the joint patrols began on 15 March, Turkey has increased its presence along the M4 highway in Idlib Governorate, reportedly building 15 military outposts (see figure 1).

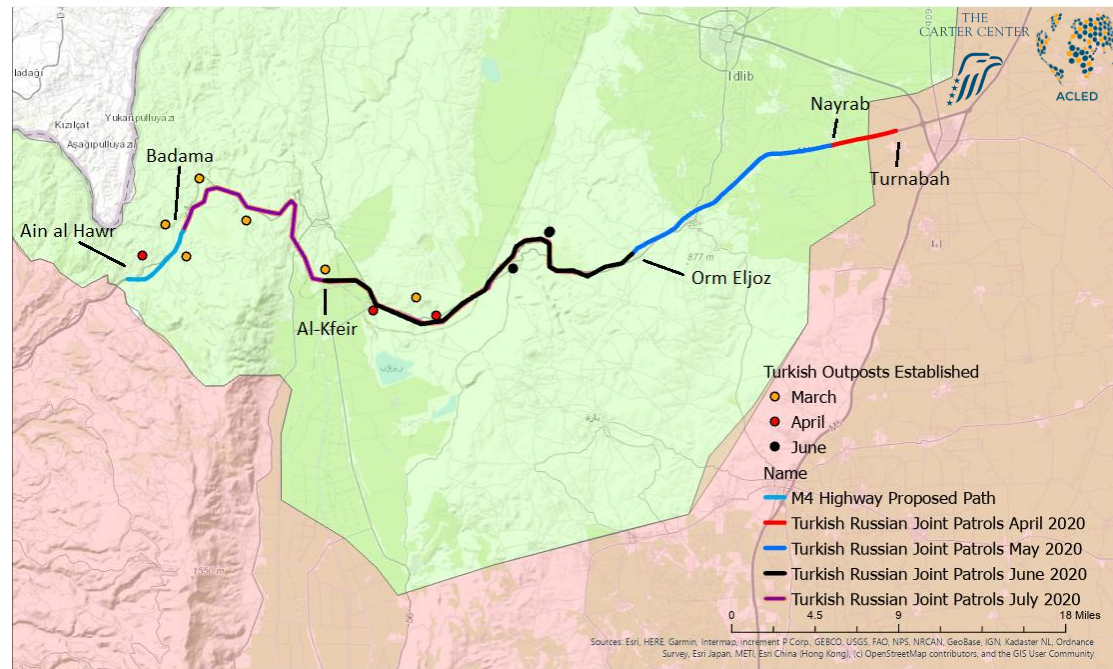


Figure 2: The Turkish-Russian Joint Patrol on the M4 Highway and new Turkish military outposts in Idlib Governorate. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the region was reported on 9 July. The case in northwest Syria was found near Bab al-Hawa in Idlib Governorate.⁵ Following this announcement, the Bab al-Hawa border crossing was closed to prevent the spread of the virus.⁶ A suspected case was identified in A'zaz, Aleppo

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](#).

² <https://tinyurl.com/y9sy7thl>

³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/399070>

⁴ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-russia-hold-20th-joint-patrol-in-northern-syria/1902967>

⁵ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/399866>

⁶ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21254>

Governorate, but was not confirmed by authorities.⁷ As of 12 July, 4 confirmed cases were reported in the region.⁸ With the increase of COVID-19 cases, aid organizations have called for the adoption of measures to slow the spread of the virus.⁹

The number of clashes involving Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces, GoS-backed militias,¹⁰ and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other increased this week. On 7 July, GoS armed forces clashed with armed opposition groups in the Fleifel area in southern Idlib Governorate. The same day, GoS armed forces fought against armed opposition fighters in the Ruwaiha area of Idlib Governorate. Both clashes were accompanied by a shelling exchange. On 8 July, an opposition sniper killed a GoS soldier near the Ruwaiha frontline. On 8 July, clashes between GoS armed forces and the YPG against Turkish-backed armed opposition groups took place in Abu Hamad, Al-Tammisha, and Big Fikha in Aleppo Governorate. The same day, GoS armed forces clashed with armed opposition groups on the Jabal al-Zawiya and Jabal Shashabo frontlines in Idlib Governorate. On 9 July, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with armed opposition groups by Ftireh in Idlib Governorate. On 10 July, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with armed opposition groups on the Al-Qahera and Tanjarah frontlines in the Al-Ghab plain, northern Hama Governorate. The same day, GoS armed forces clashed with the opposition Fatah al-Mubin Operations Room¹¹ in Al-Bara, Ruwaiha, and Kafr Battikh in southern Idlib Governorate. During the clashes at Kafr Battikh, the Turkish-backed opposition National Liberation Front destroyed a Russian reconnaissance drone. On 10 July, the Fatah al-Mubin Operations Room warned civilians from approaching the frontlines or crossings with GoS due to the ongoing clashes.¹² On 11 July, Russian armed forces stated that armed opposition groups attacked several GoS military positions along the frontlines in southern Idlib Governorate, resulting in the death of 8 opposition fighters.¹³

Anti-ISIS operations by GoS armed forces, GoS-backed militias, and the Russian air force continued in Hama Governorate. Between 6 and 7 July, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with ISIS fighters near Ithariyah in northern Hama Governorate. The armed clashes were accompanied by shelling exchanges and Russian airstrikes. The fighting killed a reported 11 GoS soldiers and 13 ISIS fighters. On 8 July, an improvised explosive device (IED) allegedly detonated by ISIS killed a GoS-backed militiaman near Ithariyah in Hama Governorate.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) renewed aid delivery to northwest Syria. Debate between the various UNSC members focused on the length of the aid

⁷ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21204>

⁸ <https://syriadirect.org/news/mapping-coronavirus-in-syria-unofficial-cases-and-hot-spots/>

⁹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21258>

¹⁰ Pro-GoS or GoS-backed militias refer to armed groups that are funded or in some way supported by GoS and coordinate with or fight alongside GoS armed forces, but are not part of the state-run military.

¹¹ A coalition of armed opposition groups, including Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Turkish-backed opposition National Liberation Front, and Jaysh al-Izza.

¹² <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/399924>

¹³ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/jihadist-attack-ends-in-disaster-along-southern-idlib-front-lines/>

program, and whether both the Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salaam crossings would be utilized. After several vetoes and failed draft resolutions, UNSC Resolution 2533¹⁴ was reached on 12 July to extend aid to the region for another year, but only using the Bab al-Hawa crossing at Idlib Governorate.¹⁵ Concerns persist that the use of only one crossing will be insufficient for fulfilling humanitarian needs.¹⁶

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

On 8 July, GoS and Iran signed a new agreement to strengthen military cooperation between the two countries, focusing on strengthening GoS's air defense systems.¹⁷ GoS advisors described the agreement as part of the country's response to the US-enforced Caesar Act.¹⁸

There were reports of increased infighting between GoS armed forces, Russian-backed militias, and GoS-backed militias in the region. On 7 July, the GoS Palestine Branch clashed with the GoS-backed National Defense Forces (NDF) as well as some 4th Division fighters in Damascus city. Fighting had erupted after the NDF fighters and 4th Division fighters refused to disarm.¹⁹ On 8 July, GoS armed forces killed 3 former opposition fighters and arrested three civilians in Rukban camp in Rural Damascus Governorate. On 9 July, Russian-backed 5th Corps fighters attacked a GoS armed forces checkpoint in Sayda town in eastern Dara'a Governorate. The clashes came after complaints that local GoS armed forces were harassing citizens.²⁰ On 12 July, Russian-backed Liwa al-Areen militia arrested three GoS armed forces officers, including a brigadier general in eastern Homs Governorate, on charges of treason and corruption.²¹ In recent months, tensions between various pro-government factions have increased in the region, at times erupting into armed clashes.

Attacks against GoS soldiers, GoS administrators, and former opposition fighters continued across the region. On 6 July, an unidentified armed group planted an IED near the office of a Central Committee member, seriously wounding him in Atman, Dara'a Governorate. On 6 July, unidentified gunmen threw grenades at a GoS municipality building in Karak, Dara'a Governorate. The next day, unidentified gunmen attacked a GoS air force intelligence checkpoint in Karak. On 9 July, an unidentified armed group threw explosives at the vehicle of a suspected Hezbollah member in Da'el, Dara'a Governorate. The alleged Hezbollah member reportedly escaped without injury. The same day in Karak, unidentified gunmen killed the head of the GoS water department. On 10 July, one GoS air force intelligence officer was killed by an IED planted by an unidentified group in Da'el, Dara'a Governorate. The same day, a GoS municipal council member escaped an assassination attempt by unidentified gunmen in Eastern Karak in Dara'a Governorate. On 10 July, an IED

¹⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1068181>

¹⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/renews-syria-aid-turkey-access-points-shut-200712054420871.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/400329>

¹⁷ <https://ar.farsnews.ir/iran/news/13990418000849>

¹⁸ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-iranian-military-agreement-is-first-step-to-breaking-caesar-act-shaaban/>

¹⁹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21203>

²⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/y9j7uq7e>

²¹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21276>

planted by unidentified gunmen targeted a GoS 4th Division checkpoint on the eastern outskirts of Sahm El Golan, Dara'a Governorate. On 12 June, unidentified gunmen killed a former opposition leader by Jasim in northern Dara'a Governorate.²² Since 1 January 2020, there have been at least 101 reported attacks against GoS members or former opposition fighters. In contrast, the same period in 2019 saw only 46 attacks.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

ISIS attacks and anti-ISIS operations continued this week across northeast Syria. On 6 July, alleged ISIS fighters killed a civilian in Shiheil in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The same day, the predominantly Kurdish-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with US support arrested ISIS fighters in northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate and southern Al-Hassakah Governorate. These raids were preceded by a 4 July announcement of a new anti-ISIS campaign along the Euphrates river valley.²³ On 6 July, ISIS fighters killed an Asayish fighter near Abu Khashab in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 6 July, ISIS fighters attacked a SDF checkpoint in the eastern outskirts of Ar-Raqqa city in Ar-Raqqa Governorate, reportedly killing 1 SDF fighter. On 8 July, two alleged ISIS gunmen killed a former SDF fighter in Basira town in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The same day, alleged ISIS fighters attacked GoS armed forces and the GoS-backed Quds Brigade in Kabbaj in southern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.²⁴ On 10 July, ISIS fighters attacked a SDF commander's house in Abu Hamam in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The SDF commander survived the attack.

There were increased reports of infighting between GoS-backed militias and Iranian-backed militias²⁵ in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 6 July, the GoS-backed NDF clashed with the GoS-backed Eastern Lions militia in Deir-ez-Zor city. Following the clash, the NDF took over some checkpoints manned by the Eastern Lions.²⁶ On 8 July, NDF fighters brawled with the Iranian-backed Liwa Fatemioun fighters in the south of Deir-ez-Zor city. The fight broke out after an altercation at a Fatemioun checkpoint.²⁷ On 10 July, a NDF fighter was killed at a GoS armed forces checkpoint after an argument.²⁸ On 11 July, Russian military police fired upon a GoS air force intelligence vehicle after it failed to stop at a Russian checkpoint in Al Mayadin city, eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Clashes and tensions between Russian and Iranian armed forces continue as both seek to increase their influence in the region and among GoS-backed militias.²⁹

There were increased reports of GoS armed forces intercepting US patrols in Al-Hassakah Governorate. On 9 July, GoS armed forces intercepted a US patrol in the

²² <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21287>

²³ <https://tinyurl.com/ycjgoo7a>

²⁴ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21219>

²⁵ Pro-Iranian or Iranian-backed militias refers to armed groups that are supported by Iran, like Hezbollah, and include militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan.

²⁶ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21182>

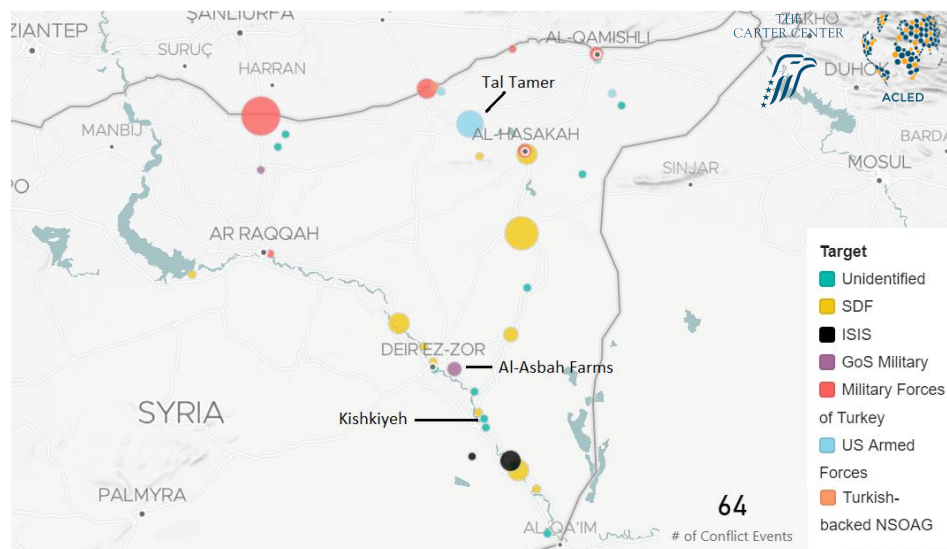
²⁷ <https://en.deirezzor24.net/tension-takes-place-between-the-national-defense-and-fatimiyeon-militias-in-deir-ezzor/>

²⁸ <https://en.deirezzor24.net/a-member-of-the-national-defense-militia-is-killed-by-elements-of-an-assads-forces-checkpoint-in-silo-town/>

²⁹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21263>

Qamishli city outskirts.³⁰ On 10 July, GoS armed forces stopped a US patrol in Mansaf Tahtani near Tal Tamer in western Al-Hassakah Governorate.³¹ On 10 and 11 July, GoS armed forces prevented a US patrol from passing through their checkpoint in Tal Tamer, forcing the US patrol to return to base. On 11 July, GoS armed forces and protesters prevented a US patrol from progressing in the villages of Al-Sibat, Tal Shamiran, and Mansaf Tahtani,³² near the US base in Tal Tamer. On 12 July, another confrontation between US forces and GoS armed forces was reported at Mansaf Tahtani village.³³

Demonstrations against the SDF, GoS, and US forces increased during the reporting period. On 6 July, protesters in Tartab, Al-Hassakah Governorate called for the withdrawal of US forces from Syria. On 8 July, teachers in Abu Hamam and Kishkiyeh in Deir-ez-Zor demonstrated against alleged corruption in the local governing council. Three protests were reported on 10 July: in Shiheil, Al-Asbah Farms, and Al-Qasir in Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hassakah Governorates. In Shiheil in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, civilians demanded the release of prisoners held by the SDF. In Al-Asbah Farms in northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, demonstrators called for the overthrow of GoS, the expulsion of Iranian-backed militias, and the release of prisoners. In Al-Qasir near Qamishli city in Al-Hassakah Governorate, protesters denounced the recently applied Caesar Act sanctions and demanded the expulsion of US and Turkish armed forces from Syria. On 11 July, demonstrators in Gharanij in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate called for the release of prisoners from SDF jails and better living conditions. Protests and public anger have erupted in recent weeks due to deteriorating economic conditions across the country. Since 1 January 2020, there have been 64 reported demonstrations in the region (see figure 3), 44 of which took place since 1 June 2020 as Syria's currency rapidly lost its value.



³⁰ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-army-intercepts-us-military-convoy-near-qamishli-refuses-to-give-access-to-road/>

³¹ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-army-intercepts-another-us-military-convoy-in-northeast-syria/>

³² <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/new-videos-show-syrian-army-troops-attempting-to-surround-us-forces-at-checkpoint/>

³³ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-commander-threatens-us-soldiers-if-you-return-i-will-burn-your-patrol-video/>

Figure 3: Protests and demonstrations reported in northeast Syria since 1 January 2020. Largest bubble is 7 conflict events. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

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