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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 10 August - 16 August 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) arrested critics in Atma, Idlib Governorate. Russia announced the suspension of its joint patrol with Turkey in Idlib Governorate. The first UN aid convoy since humanitarian aid was renewed by the UNSC in July reached northwest Syria. A US drone strike killed an Uzbek commander in Idlib Governorate. The Turkish-backed opposition Syrian Interim Government announced new anti-COVID measures.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces deployed reinforcements to Jasim, Dara'a Governorate. Attacks against GoS officials and former opposition fighters increased in southern Syria. COVID-19 cases continued to increase in GoS-controlled territories.
- **NORTHEAST** | Tensions continued between the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Arab tribes. Operations against ISIS continued in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Tensions emerged between Iranian-backed militias and GoS-backed militias in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. COVID-19 cases continued to increase in northeast Syria.

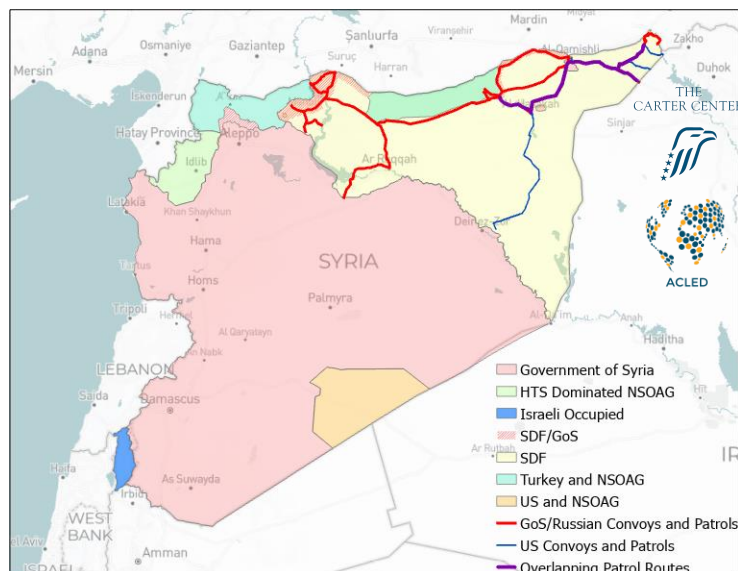


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 16 August 2020. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1 on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) arrested aid workers and journalists in Atma, Idlib Governorate. On 13 August, HTS re-arrested prominent aid worker Tauqir Sharif near Atma, Idlib Governorate.² HTS had previously arrested the aid worker on 23 June due to allegations of financial misconduct.³ HTS has also accused Sharif of being close to rival groups such as the Al-Qaeda-affiliate Hurras al-Din (HD).⁴ The same day, HTS arrested journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem in Atma, Idlib Governorate after the journalist criticized HTS's conduct,⁵ namely for torturing detainees.⁶

On 14 August, the UN announced that the first aid convoy for the northwest entered Syria through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in Idlib Governorate.⁷ The UN Security Council (UNSC) approved an extension of aid delivery to Syria on 11 July 2020.⁸ The Bab al-Hawa crossing was the only crossing in northwest Syria that was approved by the UNSC to deliver aid.

On 13 August, a US drone strike killed an Uzbek commander of the opposition in Sarmada, Idlib Governorate.⁹ The commander was closely associated with HD and provided military training to other armed opposition groups.¹⁰ This has followed US drone strikes against HD in northwest Syria,¹¹ often with the “ninja bomb” missile, a redesigned hellfire missile that has been used increasingly in Syria in recent months.¹²

Russia announced the suspension of the Turkish-Russian joint patrol in Idlib Governorate. On 12 August, Russian and Turkish armed forces patrolled the M4 highway from Turnabah to Ain al-Hawr in Idlib Governorate.¹³ The patrol was originally scheduled to be held on 29 July, but was delayed due to increased

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.enabbaladi.net/archives/407265>

³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/395746>

⁴ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/british-aid-worker-tauqir-sharif-syria-idlib-hts-arrest>

⁵ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21780>

⁶ <https://cpj.org/2020/08/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-militants-abduct-us-journalist-bilal-abdul-kareem-and-driver-in-syria/>

⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/408160>

⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/y48r5dbc>

⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/y6dfozzz>

¹⁰ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21776>

¹¹ <https://taskandpurpose.com/military-tech/r9x-hellfire-missile-syria-photos>

¹² <https://www.militarytimes.com/2020/06/20/photos-show-devastation-unleashed-on-terror-leaders-by-sword-carrying-ninja-bomb/>

¹³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/407320>

conflict in Idlib Governorate. On 13 August, Russia announced that it was suspending its participation in the joint patrols due to increased terrorist attacks.¹⁴ The Turkish-Russian joint patrols were mandated by the 5 March ceasefire agreement (see figure 2 below).

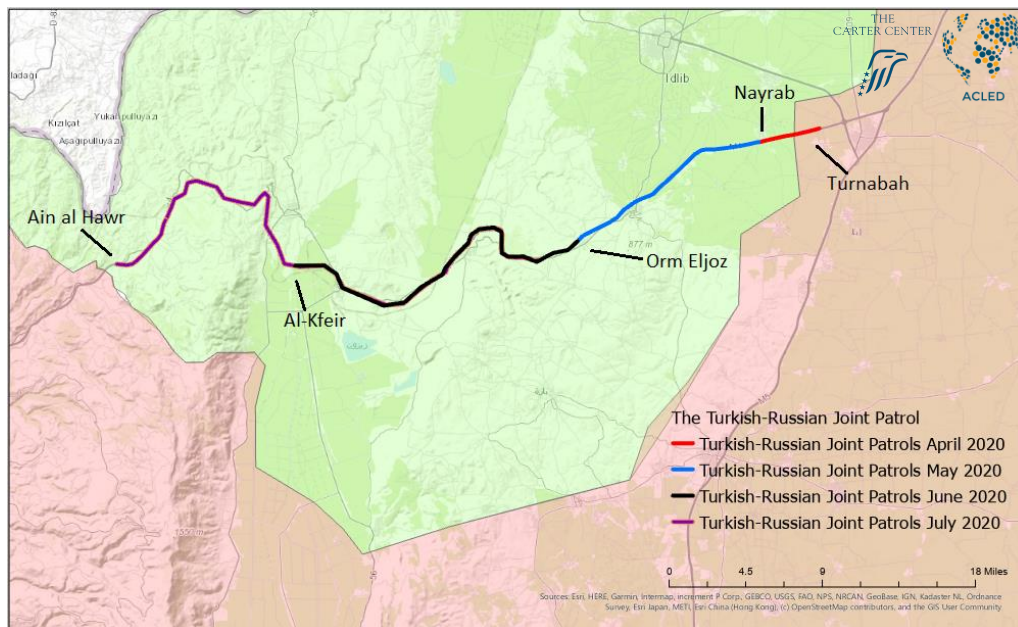


Figure 2: The Turkish-Russian Joint Patrol on the M4 highway in Idlib Governorate. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

COVID-19 cases continued to increase in the region. On 13 August, there were a total of 50 reported infections in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates.¹⁵ The same day, 2 patients in Aleppo Governorate recovered from the virus.¹⁶ On 16 August, the Turkish-backed opposition's Syrian Interim Government issued new measures to combat the spread of the virus, including prohibiting public gatherings, issuing free masks, and encouraging social distancing in restaurants and cafes.¹⁷

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

On 10 August, Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces deployed reinforcements, closed agricultural roads, and established new checkpoints in Jasim city, Dara'a. GoS justified the reinforcements as necessary for tracking down ISIS fighters in the city. Members of the Central Committee, a negotiation body for former opposition fighters, have criticized the move, arguing that this was aimed at strengthening state authority to force a new settlement process with former opposition fighters.¹⁸ The Central Committee was formed shortly after GoS retaken Dara'a Governorate in 2018, negotiating with GoS and Russia regarding reconciliation and other governance issues.

Attacks against GoS officials and former opposition fighters increased during the reporting period. On 11 August, unidentified gunmen ambushed a GoS Criminal

¹⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/407934>

¹⁵ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21782>

¹⁶ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21782>

¹⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/y2ld9obw>

¹⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/406926>

Security Branch patrol near the Jaramana district in Damascus city.¹⁹ On 11 August, unidentified gunmen killed a former opposition fighter in Masaken Jalin, western Dara'a Governorate. On 12 August, unidentified gunmen killed a former opposition judge in Dar al-Adl, Dara'a Governorate.²⁰ On 14 August, unidentified gunmen assassinated the mayor of Ibb and his two children in Ibb, northeastern Dara'a Governorate.²¹ On 14 August, unidentified gunmen killed an alleged Hezbollah collaborator near Busra al-Sham, Dara'a Governorate.²² On 16 August, unidentified gunmen killed a former opposition fighter in Tafas, Dara'a Governorate.²³ Since GoS regained control of Dara'a Governorate in August 2018, attacks against GoS officials and reconciled opposition fighters have steadily increased.

COVID-19 cases continued to increase in GoS-controlled territories. On 13 August, Jordan closed its border crossing with Syria due to an uptick of COVID cases.²⁴ On 16 August, GoS Interior Ministry set new regulations for the entry of individuals from Lebanon, while also limiting those allowed to travel to the country.²⁵ Observers believe that the COVID-19 crisis is more severe throughout Syria than what is reported, with some estimating 112,500 cases in Damascus alone.²⁶ As of 16 August, GoS reported 1,677 COVID-19 cases in GoS-controlled territory (see figure 3 below).²⁷

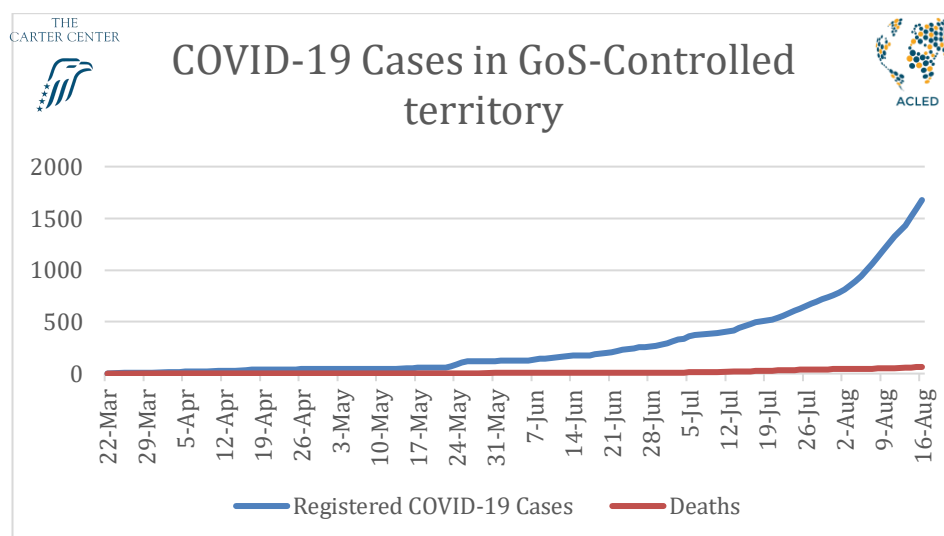


Figure 3: Reported COVID-19 cases in GoS-controlled territory. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

¹⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/y3q28l2z>

²⁰ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/179375/>

²¹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/407972>

<https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/mayor-of-southern-syria-town-and-his-2-children-killed-by-unknown-assailants/>

²² <https://www.syriahr.com/en/179827/>

²³ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/179857/>

²⁴ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/jordan-to-close-border-with-syria-amid-spike-in-coronavirus-cases/>

²⁵ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=200160>

²⁶ <https://tande.substack.com/p/syria-in-context-investigation-covid>

²⁷ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=200175>

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Tensions continued between the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Arab tribes in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 10 August, a pro-GoS sheikh of the Al-Bakara tribe called for the formation of a political body for Syria's tribes as well as aligning with GoS for a "liberation war".²⁸ On 11 August, the Akkidat tribe issued a statement blaming the lack of security and gave a list of demands that the SDF and US must fulfil within one month.²⁹ On 12 August, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration (KAA) suspended the implementation of Law No. 7 which dealt with absentee properties after significant pushback from the local communities.³⁰ On 13 August, the SDF released 9 prisoners from Dhiban, Al-Suhail, and Al-Suwar after negotiations with tribal elders in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.³¹ On 15 August, Arab tribesmen forcibly took over SDF checkpoints in Jadid Akidat and Jadid Bakara, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.³² This came after the SDF tried to arrest a local militia leader.³³ On 16 August, US armed forces held consultations with the SDF and its local affiliates regarding the ongoing events in the region.³⁴ This tension between the SDF and Arab tribes has coincided with increased pressure by GoS and Turkey to gain influence in SDF-controlled territories.³⁵

Operations against ISIS continued during the reporting period. On 12 August, GoS 4th Division and the GoS-backed Quds Brigade clashed with ISIS in Al-Tebbiy, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.³⁶ On 12 August, the SDF and US armed forces arrested three former ISIS fighters in Al-Kasser, eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.³⁷ On 15 August, ISIS clashed with the GoS-backed Quds Brigade and killed 3 Quds fighters, in the Al-Khor area of the Al-Mayadeen desert, eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.³⁸

On 11 August, tensions emerged between Hezbollah and the GoS-backed National Defense Forces (NDF) after the former arrested Hezbollah fighters in Al-Mayadeen, northwest Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.³⁹ This led to reciprocal arrest of NDF fighters by Hezbollah.⁴⁰ On 14 August, six Iranian-backed militia⁴¹ fighters defected and joined the NDF in Al-Bukamal, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.⁴² Competition between Russia and Iran has increased in eastern Deir-ez-Zor

²⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/407050>

²⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/407221>, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/179086/>

³⁰ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21764>

³¹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/179403/>

³² <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21814>

³³ <https://tinyurl.com/yxgvleo6>

³⁴ <https://deirezzor24.net/en/international-coalition-and-mazloun-abdi-hold-lengthy-official-meetings-in-al-omar-field-in-deir-ezzor/>

³⁵ <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2443691/conflict-rages-over-%E2%80%98weapons-and-heart%E2%80%99-tribes-northeastern-syria>

³⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/407346>

³⁷ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/179215/>

³⁸ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21806>

³⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/y25vxytc>

⁴⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/y25vxytc>

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² <https://tinyurl.com/yybk4ajf>

Governorate as each party tries to cement their influence among GoS-backed militias⁴³ and their own proxies.⁴⁴

COVID-19 cases continued to increase in northeast Syria. On 12 August, the KAA announced 27 new cases, bringing their total case count to 171 in SDF-controlled areas of Syria.⁴⁵ On 13 August, the Kurdish National Council said it was temporarily closing all of its offices in the region due to the spread of COVID-19.⁴⁶ As of 16 August, there were 204 total reported COVID cases and 11 deaths in the region.⁴⁷

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The Carter Center's Syria team will be rolling out a new format for the weekly conflict summary to focus on key trends in a new, interactive setting. Coming soon, stay tuned!

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/8/4/syria-insight-russia-moves-into-iran-controlled-eastern-syria>

⁴⁵ <https://syriadirect.org/news/mapping-coronavirus-in-syria-unofficial-cases-and-hot-spots/>

⁴⁶ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21775>

⁴⁷ <https://anfenglishmobile.com/rojava-syria/coronavirus-cases-in-northeast-syria-on-the-rise-45992>