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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 22 June - 28 June 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Clashes erupted in Idlib Governorate between Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and a coalition of armed opposition groups organized around the “So Be Steadfast” (Fathbatou) Operations Room. There were reports of an increased Government of Syria (GoS), Turkish military and opposition militias buildup in Idlib and Hama Governorates. Clashes involving Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed oppositions groups on the one side and Kurdish and GoS armed forces on the other continued this week. Multiple demonstrations and protests were held in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Protests continued in As-Sweida and Dara’a Governorates. Clashes erupted between GoS armed forces and the Russian-backed 5th Corps in Dara’a Governorate. The Israeli air force targeted GoS armed forces in As-Sweida Governorate.
- **NORTHEAST** | There were increased protests throughout the region. Iran expanded its presence in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The Israeli air force struck GoS armed forces and Iranian-backed militias in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. ISIS continued to conduct attacks in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.

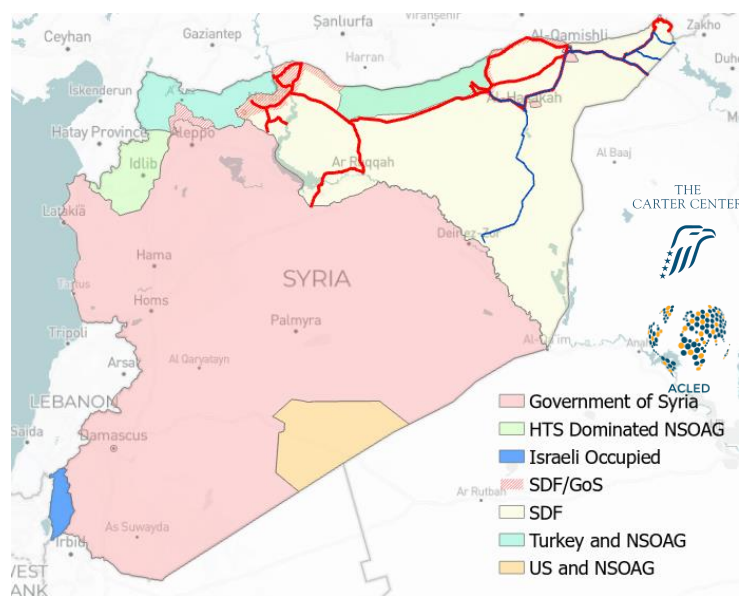


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 28 June 2020. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

Clashes erupted in Idlib Governorate between Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and a coalition of armed opposition group organized around “So Be Steadfast” (Fathbatou) Operations Room.² On 22 June, HTS arrested a Hurras al-Din (HD) leader in Idlib city, Idlib Governorate.³ The HD leader had defected from HTS on 7 April. HTS had previously arrested a commander with Ansar al-Islam on 18 June. On 23 June, HD and other Fathbatou Operations Room armed opposition groups attacked a HTS checkpoint on the western outskirts of Idlib City. During the clashes, Fathbatou Operations Room armed groups brought military reinforcements around the western areas of Idlib city. The next day, HTS clashed with Fathbatou Operations Room fighters across villages on the western outskirts of Idlib city. The fighting between the armed opposition groups displaced civilians in the villages near Idlib city. Additional clashes took place on 25 and 26 June around Idlib city. On 26 June, a ceasefire was established between HTS and the Fathbatou Operations Room armed groups.⁴ On 28 June, HTS ordered all non-HTS armed opposition groups to remove their military headquarters from Idlib city.⁵ These clashes followed months of tension between the armed opposition groups, with several of them expressing discontent with HTS’s domination in Idlib Governorate.⁶

There were reports of an increased military buildup in Idlib and Hama Governorates. On 22 and 23 June, a Turkish armed forces convoy entered Idlib Governorate via the Kafr Lusin border crossing to reinforce Turkish armed force positions in the governorate. On 23 June, Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces and armed opposition groups sent reinforcements to their respective positions along the Al Ghab plain in Hama Governorate and the frontlines in southern Idlib Governorate. On 26 and 27 June, Turkish armed forces sent reinforcements and logistical supplies to Turkish outposts near the de-escalation zones in Kafr Lusin and Bab al-Hawa in Idlib Governorate.

Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups were involved in clashes during the reporting period. On 22 June, the predominantly Kurdish Menbij Military Council clashed with armed opposition groups on the Yalishli front in Aleppo Governorate. The Menbij Military Council is a coalition of armed groups created by the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).⁷ The next day, Turkish-backed armed opposition groups clashed with the

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 A coalition of armed opposition groups, including Hurras al Din, Ansar al Islam, Ansar al Din, Tansiqiyat al-Jihad, and Liwa al-Muqatileen al-Ansar.

³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/395670>

⁴ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21040>

⁵ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/396712>

⁶ https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/idleb-armed-groups-may-2020.pdf

⁷ <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77417>

Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) on the outskirts of Mare' in northern Aleppo Governorate. On 24 June, Turkish-backed opposition's National Liberation Forces (NLF) repelled GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias⁸ after the latter crossed the Hersh Benin frontlines near Jabal al-Zawiya in southern Idlib Governorate. Russian special forces were reportedly involved in the attack,⁹ which would be a first incident of Russian involvement since the 5 March ceasefire agreement.¹⁰ Two clashes were recorded on 25 June. The first took place between GoS armed forces and the NLF in Jabal al-Zawiya, the Idlib countryside, with Turkish armed forces shelling GoS positions. In the second incident, Turkish-backed opposition fighters clashed with the YPG on the Kafr Khasher frontlines in Aleppo Governorate. On 27 June, 4 armed clashes between Turkish-backed armed opposition groups and Kurdish forces were reported in Aleppo Governorate. In Mara'anaz in the Aleppo countryside, the Turkish-backed opposition's Syrian National Army (SNA) attacked YPG fighters and GoS armed forces amid a shelling exchange between the two sides.¹¹ 3 clashes were reported between the Menbij Military Council and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups on the Arab Hassan Kabeer, Tokhar, and Yalishli frontlines near Menbij in Aleppo Governorate. Since 1 June 2020, there have been 32 armed clashes in which Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups were involved (see figure 2). 9 of these happened between 22 June and 27 June.

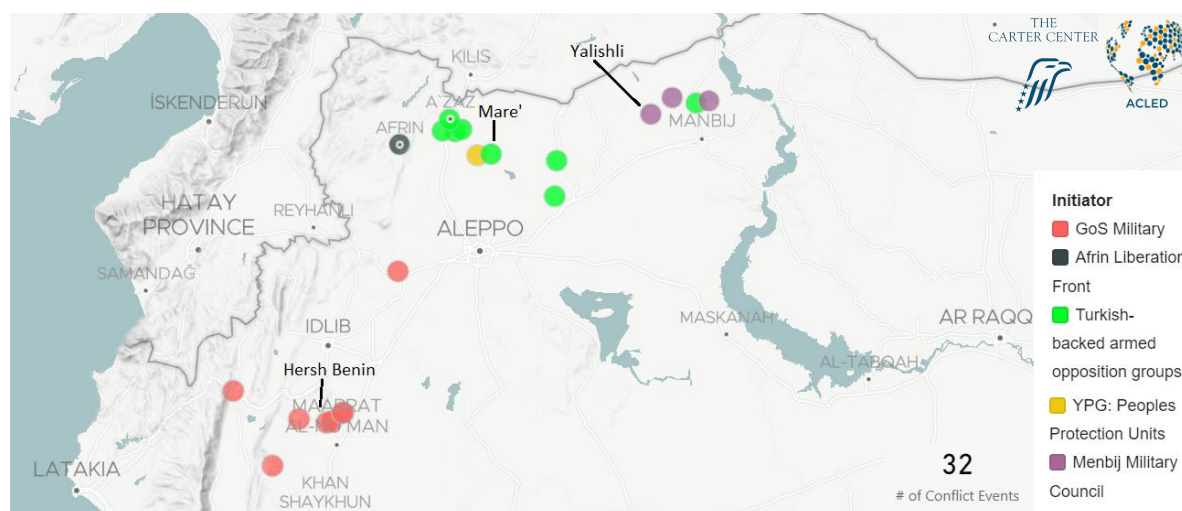


Figure 2: Clashes involving Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates between 1 June to 27 June 2020. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

Multiple demonstrations were held in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates during the reporting period. After a Turkish drone strike on 23 June killed three Kurdish women in Helenj,¹² protests against Turkish armed forces occurred the next day

⁸ 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.

⁹ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-special-forces-attack-allegedly-repelled-by-turkish-backed-militants/>

¹⁰ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/395854>

¹¹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21055>

¹² <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/turkey-drone-strike-syria-sdf-kobane-russia-pompeo-kurds.html>

in nearby Ain al Arab city, Aleppo Governorate. On 26 June, Ain al Arab residents organized a protest in front of a Russian military base in Ain al Arab city due to Russian silence over the Turkish drone strike. The same day, demonstrations called for the toppling of GoS and for the release of prisoners in Atmah and Idlib city in Idlib Governorate.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Protests continued in As-Sweida and Dara'a Governorates. On 22 June, a silent protest was held in front of a GoS administration building demanding the release of arrested protesters in As-Sweida city, As-Sweida Governorate. Between 23 and 26 June, demonstrations calling for the removal of Iranian-backed militias,¹³ the release of political detainees, and the toppling of President Bashar Assad took place across Dara'a Governorate. Protests have been ongoing since 7 June 2020 when demonstrations began in As-Sweida Governorate due to deteriorating economic conditions.

Clashes erupted between GoS armed forces and the Russian-backed 5th Corps in Dara'a Governorate. On 25 June, GoS military intelligence arrested a civilian at a checkpoint in Dara'a city. In response, the Russian-backed 5th Corps besieged GoS security centers demanding that the GoS military intelligence release the prisoner.¹⁴ Tensions remained high between the GoS forces and the 5th corps, eventually escalating into clashes. On 27 June, clashes erupted between GoS armed forces and 5th Corps fighters in Hajjah, Mahja, and several other towns across Dara'a Governorate. After the fighting subsided, 5th Corps fighters controlled the checkpoints in towns around eastern Dara'a Governorate.¹⁵ With recent protests in Dara'a Governorate, 5th Corps leaders have attempted to extend their influence in the governorate, with one leader announcing the formation of a united army for the Houran region.¹⁶

On 23 June, the Israeli air force targeted GoS armed forces in Salkhad town and Tall Sahn in As-Sweida Governorate. The airstrikes killed 2 GoS soldiers. These air strikes coincided with Israeli air strikes against GoS armed forces and Iranian-backed militias in Hama and Deir-ez-Zor Governorates.¹⁷ This was the second set of Israeli airstrikes in Syria for June 2020.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

There were increased protests throughout the region during the reporting period. On 22 June, civilians protested against the deteriorating economic conditions and poor living standards in Tell Abiad, Ar-Raqqa Governorate. On 23 June, demonstrations in Ras al Ain city, Al-Hassakah Governorate, called for the removal of the governing local council and criticized abuses by Turkish armed forces. On 23 June, a demonstration in Ar-Raqqa city denounced Turkish military operations

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21028>

¹⁵ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21058>

¹⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/396822>

¹⁷ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-airstrikes-reported-against-iranian-sites-in-syria-killing-2/>

in Syria. The same day, demonstrations expressing support for President Bashar Assad took place in Al-Bukamal city, eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 24 June, residents in Abu Hamam, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, held a silent protest demanding better living conditions and better pay for teachers. On 25 June, protests against Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups occurred in Darbasiya and Western Alouk town within Al-Hassakah Governorate and Tell Abiad in Ar-Raqqa Governorate. The next day in Tell Abiad, local residents held a demonstration against the transfer of wheat to Turkey. On 27 June, local residents protesting against deteriorating economic conditions and the transfer of wheat to Turkey took place in Hammam al-Turkman in the countryside of Ar-Raqqa Governorate. The same day, a protest against Turkish armed forces was assembled at the Russian military base in Istrahat Wazir by Al-Hassakah city, Al-Hassakah Governorate. On 27 June, local residents in Shadadah city, Al-Hassakah Governorate, demonstrated against SDF and U.S. forces, which resulted in protesters burning tires and blocking streets in the city. In recent weeks, there have been increasing reports of protests across Syria due to the worsening economic situation in the country.

Iran expanded its presence in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 25 June, Iranian-backed militias began land purchases in Al-Bukamal and nearby towns in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.¹⁸ The reason for these purchases was not revealed. On 27 June, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-Quds Force commander Esmail Ghaani was reported to have visited Al-Bukamal and delivered a speech to Iranian-backed forces in the city.¹⁹ This was the first visit to Syria of an IRGC-Quds Force commander after the assassination of Qassem Soleimani on 3 January 2020. On 28 June, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) opened new recruitment centers in eastern Al-Bukamal, reportedly requiring all internally displaced persons returning to the city to have a family member serve with an Iranian-backed armed group.²⁰

The Israeli air force carried out multiple airstrikes in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 23 June, the Israeli air force attacked GoS armed forces and Iranian-backed militias in Kaba Jeb along the Sokhneh-Deir-ez-Zor highway in western Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, and in As-Sweida and Hama Governorates. On 27 June, Israeli airstrikes hit GoS armed forces and Iranian-backed militias in Abbas town, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, reportedly killing 6 Iranian-backed fighters. The town is close to the city of Al-Bukamal, which IRGC-Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani visited this week (see above).²¹ These were the first airstrikes Israel had conducted in northeastern Syria since 4 May 2020. Since 1 January 2019, Israel has conducted 4 airstrikes against Iranian-backed militias in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate (see figure 3).

ISIS continued to conduct attacks in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 22 June, ISIS prisoners rioted in Kasra jail in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The prisoners demanded

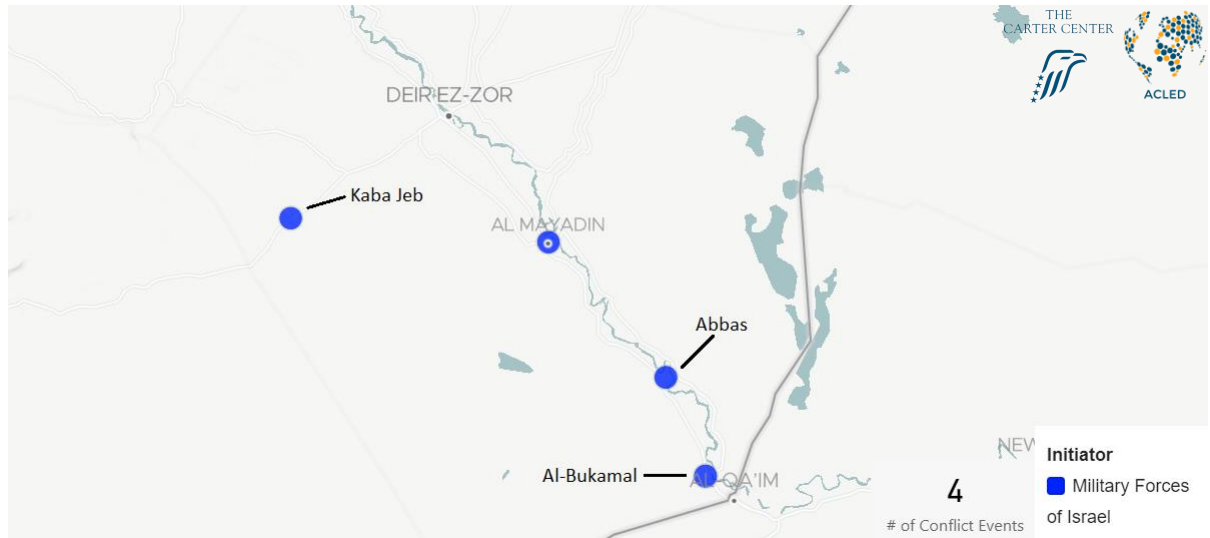
¹⁸ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21034>

¹⁹ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/irans-quds-force-commander-makes-first-visit-to-syria-since-qassem-soleimanis-assassination/>

²⁰ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/21061>

²¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-iran-usa/iran-news-agency-reports-visit-of-new-quds-chief-to-syria-idUSKBN23Y0KL>

improved living conditions. The SDF and Asayish imposed a security cordon around the prison and quelled the riots. On 23 June, Iranian-backed militias ambushed ISIS fighters in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, killing 4 ISIS fighters. On 25 June, ISIS fighters attacked a SDF checkpoint in Sosa town, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The attack killed 2 SDF fighters.



*Figure 3: Israeli air strikes against Iranian-backed forces between 1 January 2019 to 27 June 2020.
Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.*

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