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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 24 August - 30 August 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed against armed opposition groups. A Turkish-backed armed opposition group announced that it would relocate its headquarters out of Afrin city, Aleppo Governorate. The joint Russian-Turkish armed forces patrol confronted another attack in Idlib Governorate. Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham arrested foreign fighters in Idlib Governorate. COVID-19 cases continued to increase in northwest Syria.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | An attack on a pipeline near Damascus resulted in power cuts throughout the country. Attacks against GoS armed forces and former opposition fighters increased in Dara'a Governorate. GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with ISIS in Homs Governorate. COVID-19 cases continued to rise in GoS-controlled territory.
- **NORTHEAST** | ISIS continued attacks in northeast Syria as Russia announced a new operation against the group. Russian and US patrol vehicles collided in Al-Hassakah Governorate. COVID-19 cases continued to increase in northeast Syria.

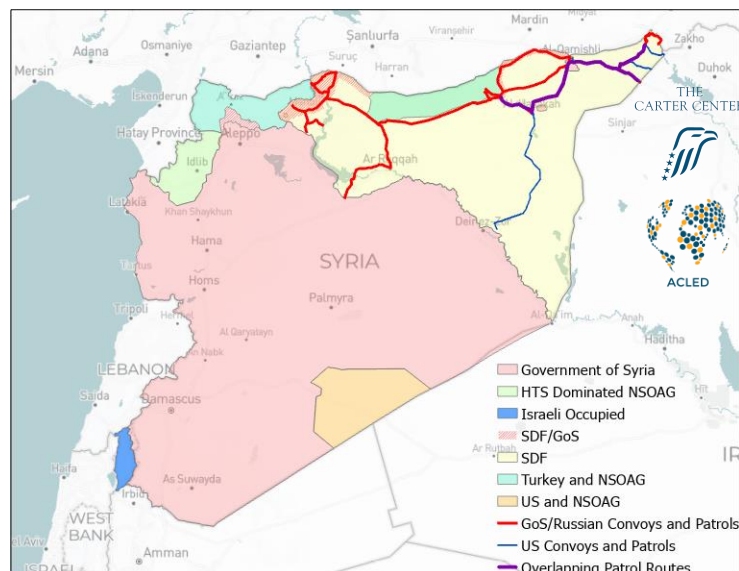


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 30 August 2020. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1 on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

Clashes between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces and GoS-backed militias² against armed opposition groups increased this week. On 24 August, opposition snipers killed a GoS soldier on the Hursh Bayanin frontline near Jabal al-Zawiyah, Idlib Governorate.³ The same day, GoS armed forces and the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition's National Liberation Front clashed near Jabal al-Zawiyah, Idlib Governorate.⁴ On 25 August, armed opposition fighters killed a GoS soldier on the Jobas frontline in Idlib Governorate.⁵ On 26 August, Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) snipers killed two GoS soldiers on the frontlines in western Aleppo Governorate.⁶ On 27 August, GoS armed forces clashed with armed opposition groups in al-Rawiha, Benin, and Harsh Binn, Idlib Governorate.⁷ On 30 August, GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with armed opposition groups on the Taqad frontline in western Aleppo Governorate.⁸

On 24 August, the Turkish-backed opposition's 3rd Corps of the Syrian National Army (SNA) announced that it would withdraw from its military headquarters in Afrin city, Aleppo Governorate.⁹ The move comes after numerous incidents of violence against civilians by the 3rd Corps.¹⁰ The relocation of the 3rd Corps headquarters out of Afrin city is expected to take a week.

On 25 August, a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) struck the Turkish-Russian joint patrol in Orm Eljoz, Idlib Governorate, damaging a Russian armed forces vehicle.¹¹ The Khattab al-Shishani (Chechen) Brigades claimed responsibility for the attack.¹² This was the third attack by the Khattab al-Shisani Brigades, and the fourth overall attack on the joint patrol. On 30 August, Turkish armed forces

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 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.

³ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180982/>

⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/410758>

⁵ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181358/>

⁶ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181358/>

⁷ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181595/>

⁸ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181994/>

⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/410750>

¹⁰ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180941/>

¹¹ <https://tinyurl.com/vy4qu4tz>

¹² <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/411071>

deployed along the M4 highway and Ariha city in preparation for another joint patrol.¹³

On 26 August, HTS released a religious leader of Ansar al-Din.¹⁴ HTS had previously arrested the Ansar al-Din leader on 11 August. Ansar al-Din is part of the rival coalition Fathbatou Operations Room,¹⁵ a coalition of armed opposition groups that has fought HTS. On 29 August, HTS arrested six foreign fighters in Harem, Idlib Governorate.¹⁶ On 29 August, HTS arrested Hizb ut-Tahrir men in Atma, northern Idlib Governorate.¹⁷ The same day, Hizb ut-Tahrir women in Atma demonstrated against HTS's actions, before HTS forcibly dispersed the protests.¹⁸

COVID-19 cases continued to increase in northwest Syria. On 27 August, Syria's Response Coordinators group warned about the effects of COVID-19 on the refugee camps, pointing out the impossibility of remote education and lack of healthcare supplies in the camps.¹⁹ As of 30 August, there were 71 reported COVID-19 cases in northwest Syria.²⁰

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

On 24 August, an attack on a gas pipeline near Damascus resulted in power cuts throughout the country.²¹ By 25 August, the pipeline was repaired and power was reportedly restored.²² GoS called the incident a terrorist attack, but did not blame any specific group.²³ The United States alleged that ISIS was responsible for the attack.²⁴ This was the sixth recorded attack on the pipeline since the start of the Syrian civil war.²⁵

Attacks against GoS armed forces and former opposition fighters increased during the reporting period. On 24 August, an improvised explosive device (IED) planted by an unidentified armed group injured a former opposition fighter associated with GoS Military Intelligence in Dara'a city, Dara'a Governorate.²⁶ Four different attacks by unidentified gunmen were recorded on 25 August. A former opposition fighter survived an assassination attempt near Nasib, Dara'a Governorate. However, his two children were killed in the attack.²⁷ The same day, unidentified

¹³ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181901/>

¹⁴ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181494/>

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181814/>

¹⁷ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181808/>

¹⁸ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/notorious-french-militant-leader-arrested-hts-syrias-idlib>

¹⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/y4k8mqfh>

²⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/y3675bhv>

²¹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/410747>

²² <https://sana.sy/en/?p=201057>

²³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-24/gas-pipeline-explosion-causes-power-outage-across-syria-sana>

²⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/410874>

²⁵ <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/electricity-cut-syria-explosion-hits-gas-pipeline-72563164>

²⁶ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181052/>

²⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/411023>

gunmen injured a former opposition fighter affiliated with GoS air force intelligence in Tasil, Dara'a Governorate.²⁸ On 25 August, unidentified gunmen killed two GoS 4th Division fighters in Dara'a city.²⁹ On 25 August, unidentified gunmen injured an alleged GoS armed forces collaborator and killed his child in Jasim, Dara'a Governorate.³⁰ On 26 August, unidentified gunmen kidnapped a Hezbollah collaborator in Jamleh, Dara'a Governorate.³¹ On 26 August, unidentified gunmen attacked a GoS armed forces checkpoint in Tafas, Dara'a Governorate.³² On 30 August, an IED planted by an unidentified armed group injured an alleged collaborator for the Russian-backed 5th Corps in Jasim, Dara'a Governorate.³³ Since GoS regained control of Dara'a Governorate, attacks against former opposition fighters and GoS soldiers and officials have steadily increased.

GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias clashed with ISIS in Homs Governorate. On 25 August, GoS armed forces, the GoS-backed National Defense Forces, and Iranian-backed Quds brigade launched a new operation against ISIS in the Badia desert region of Homs Governorate.³⁴ This coincided with a new Russian anti-ISIS operation in northeastern Syria. On 28 August, a bus carrying GoS armed forces soldiers hit 2 IEDs allegedly planted by ISIS, killing 4 GoS soldiers near Palmyra, Homs Governorate.³⁵

COVID-19 cases continued to rise in GoS-controlled territory. As of 30 August, there were 2703 reported COVID-19 cases in GoS-controlled territory, an increase of some 400 from the previous week (see figure 2).³⁶ As COVID-19 has spread around Syria, medical personnel have been affected particularly by the virus. Since the start of the pandemic, 45 medical doctors in Damascus and Rural Damascus Governorate have reportedly died from COVID-19.³⁷

²⁸ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181145/>

²⁹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181150/>

³⁰ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181248/>

³¹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181498/>

³² <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181356/>

³³ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181932/>

³⁴ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-army-kicks-off-massive-desert-operation-to-eliminate-isis-cells/>

³⁵ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/bus-carrying-syrian-army-soldiers-targeted-by-terrorists-in-eastern-homs/>

³⁶ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=201572>

³⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/y2twod2a>

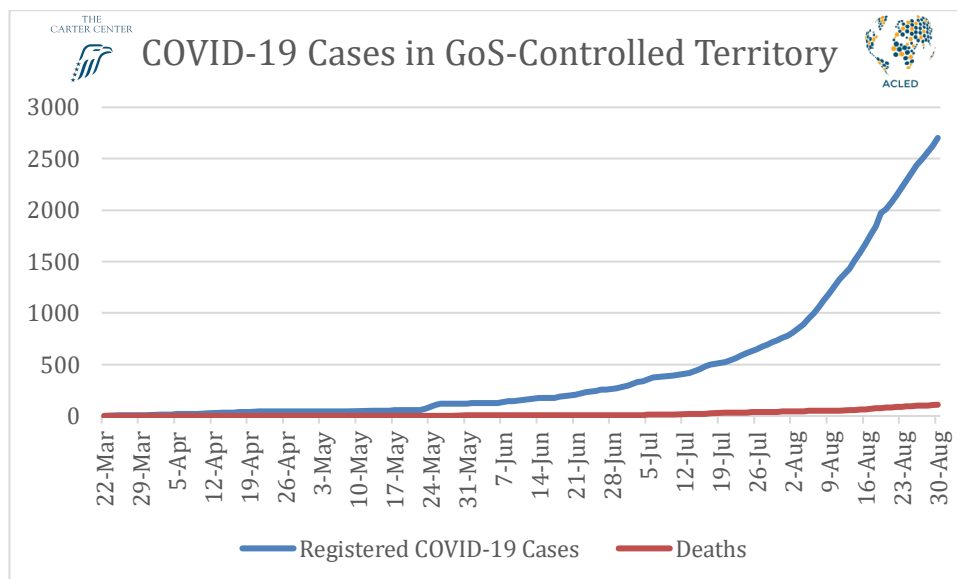


Figure 2: Reported COVID-19 cases in GoS-controlled territory. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Russia began a new operation against ISIS in northeast Syria. On 24 August, an ISIS-planted landmine killed two GoS-backed militiamen near Al-Rusafa, Ar-Raqqa Governorate.³⁸ The same day, GoS and Russian armed forces dispatched military reinforcements to Deir-ez-Zor Governorate to fight against ISIS.³⁹ On 26 August, Russia announced a new military operation named “White Desert” against ISIS in central and eastern Syria.⁴⁰ This followed the killing of a Russian general by ISIS the previous week. On 27 August, ISIS clashed with GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias in western Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.⁴¹ On 28 August, ISIS attacked GoS armed forces and the NDF in western Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.⁴² 14 GoS soldiers, a NDF officer, and 5 ISIS fighters died in the fighting.⁴³ The same day, ISIS killed 6 GoS Military Intelligence officials on the road connecting Deir-ez-Zor city to Al-Mayadeen, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.⁴⁴ On 29 August, ISIS cells killed 4 Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters near al-Deshishah town, southern al-Hassakah Governorate.⁴⁵ On 30 August, two SDF fighters were killed by a suspected ISIS-planted IED in Taqba, western Ar-Raqqa Governorate.⁴⁶ ISIS continues to remain active in the Badia desert region of central Syria. The United Nations has estimated that there are over 10,000 ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq.⁴⁷

³⁸ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181027/>

³⁹ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-and-syrian-armies-send-reinforcements-to-raqqa-after-isis-launches-new-attacks/>

⁴⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/yypwqejr>

⁴¹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181540/>

⁴² <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/isis-launches-big-attack-on-syrian-army-forces-in-western-deir-ezzor/>

⁴³ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181620/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181614/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/181807/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/412467>

⁴⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/un-over-10000-islamic-state-fighters-active-in-iraq-syria/2020/08/24/f1021ca0-e659-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5_story.html

Russian and US patrol vehicles collided in Al-Hassakah Governorate. On 24 August, a US armed forces patrol chased a Russian armed forces patrol near Al-Qahtaniyah, al-Hassakah Governorate.⁴⁸ On 25 August, a Russian armed forces patrol chased US armed forces vehicles near Al-Malikiyah, Al-Hassakah Governorate.⁴⁹ On 26 August a standoff between US and Russian patrol vehicles led to a chase between the two sides, resulting in a collision.⁵⁰ Four US soldiers were reportedly injured in the collision.⁵¹ The US denounced the incident, accusing Russia of breaching deconfliction protocols used to prevent escalation between the two sides.⁵² Russia accused the US of interfering with its patrol.⁵³ On 27 August, US armed forces attempted to block a Russian armed forces patrol vehicle in an undisclosed area in northeast Syria.⁵⁴ Tensions and blockages between US and Russian patrols in the northeast remain a common occurrence, though most events conclude without further incident.

COVID-19 cases continued to increase in northeast Syria. Due to the COVID-19 situation, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration suspended school for the immediate future.⁵⁵ As of 30 August, there were 544 COVID-19 cases and 35 total deaths in northeast Syria,⁵⁶ an increase of 150 from the previous week.⁵⁷

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⁴⁸ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/180942/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/watch-russian-army-chases-us-military-in-northeast-syria/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/us-soldiers-wounded-during-russian-chase-in-northeast-syria/>

⁵¹ <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/08/26/vehicle-collision-with-russians-injures-4-us-troops-in-syria/>

⁵² <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/us-russia-road-rage-syria-video>

⁵³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53930795>

⁵⁴ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/cat-and-mouse-game-us-military-chases-after-russian-army-in-northeast-syria/>

⁵⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/y39ql7ex>

⁵⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/y39ql7ex>

⁵⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/y4lrhc9m>