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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 16 - 22 SEPTEMBER 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Despite a decrease in Government of Syria (GoS) aerial bombardment, increased levels of shelling on the Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)-dominated Idlib enclave continued. In the Turkish-backed areas of northern Aleppo Governorate, improvised explosive device (IED) attacks and inter-group clashes increased.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Attacks against GoS-aligned personnel continued in southern Syria and included a ISIS-claimed IED attack. ISIS activity also resumed in central areas of the country after the completion of a GoS ISIS clearance operation last week. In Quneitra Governorate, an uncommon inter-GoS groups clash occurred in Jbhat al Khashab town.
- **NORTHEAST** | Widespread civilian protests against Iranian presence were reported in GoS-held Deir Ez Zor Governorate. The protests occurred two days after two airstrikes struck Iranian linked sites in the far east. The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued a recruitment drive that began last week. U.S./Turkish military also conducted the second joint patrol within a month in Ras al Ain town.

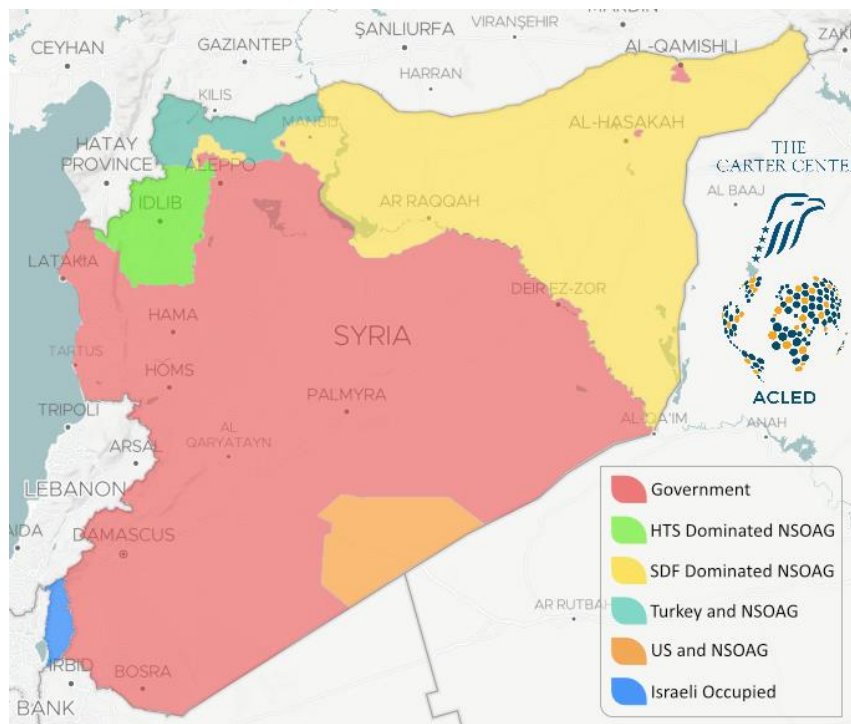


Figure 1: Dominant Actors' Area of Control and Influence in Syria as of 22 September 2019. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

Government of Syria (GoS) aerial activity declined in the northwest during the week, with just one event in Kabani Town, compared to 23 events the previous period. However, GoS shelling continued to target communities in the Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)-dominated northwest, with 139 events in 77 locations² recorded during the week. There has been a steady growth of such activity since a GoS announced ceasefire on 31 August (Figure 2).

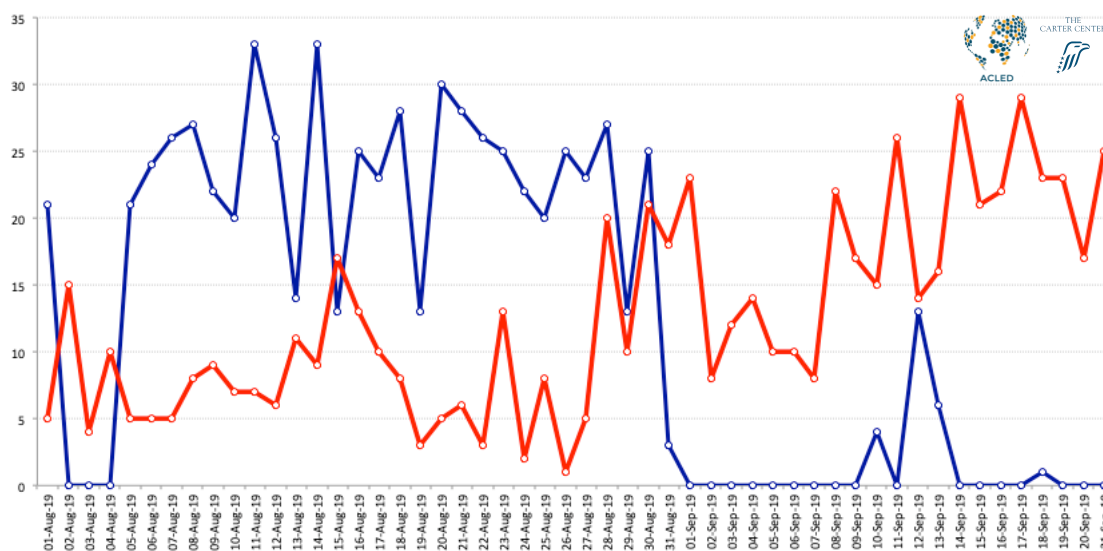


Figure 2: GoS Aerial Activity (Blue) and Shelling (Red) in Northwest Syria Since August 2019. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

HTS and other opposition groups shelling on GoS-dominated areas continued at low levels. Three events occurred in Shalaf town, in northern Latakia Governorate, and near GoS/HTS frontlines in Madiq Castle sub-district (x2). An HTS sniper also killed a GoS soldier near frontlines in Hakora town in north Hama Governorate. There has been a decrease in HTS and other opposition groups shelling on GoS-dominated areas in the northwest since late August (Figure 3).

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 A large portion of GoS activity continued to focus on southern areas of the enclave, with 17 sub-districts being affected; Kafr Nobel (37), Heish (19), Madiq Castile (15), Ziyara (15), Kansaba (8), Khan Sheikhun (6), Zarbah (6), Badma (5), Jebel Saman (5), Ehsem (4), Maraat al Numan (4), Tamannah (4), Abu Thuhur (3), Haritan (2), Rabee'a (2), Idleb (1), Jisr al Shaghaur (1), Maraat Tamsrin (1), and Sanjar (1).

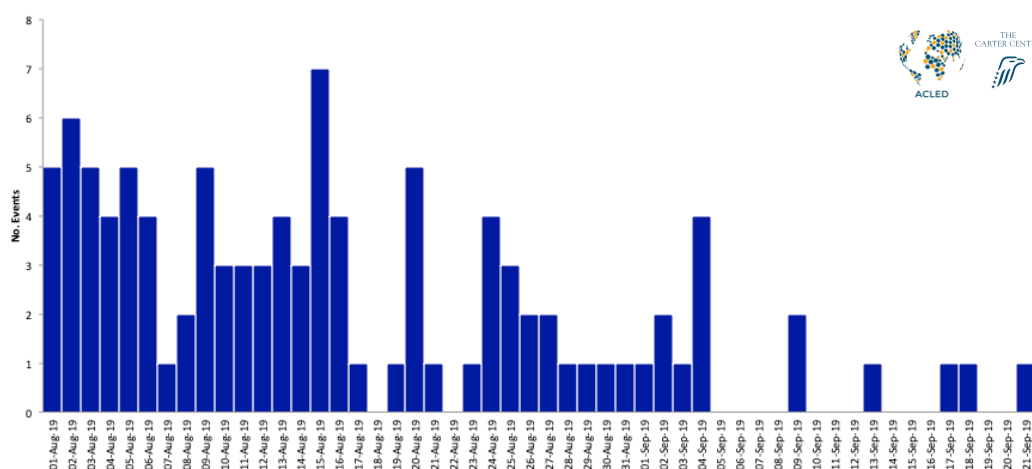


Figure 3: HTS and Other Groups Shelling of GoS Areas in Northwest Syria Since 1 August. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

Further north, an increase in violence was detected in the Turkish-backed areas of northern Aleppo Governorate this week.³ Four improvised explosive device (IED) detonations occurred in residential areas of Azzaz, Niddeh, and Afrin City (x2).⁴ Three cases of inter-group clashes between Turkish-backed factions occurred in Bafelyun village,⁵ along the Afrin – Jandairis road,⁶ and in Afrin town.⁷

This brings the total incidents of recorded conflict between Turkish-backed groups in 2019 to 28 and IED detonations to 112.

Also, in the Turkish-backed areas, extortion/arrest operations by local Turkish-supported groups continued. At least three incidents were carried out by the National Police Forces in Raju town, the Hamza Division in Afrin City, and the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade in Juqali al Tahtaniyah village. Such activity has shown no signs of abating since it increased in May this year.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Attacks against government-aligned personnel and former opposition members continued in southern Syria. At least seven events occurred, including in As-Sanamayn, against a former opposition member, in Jassim town, against a civilian who allegedly worked with GoS intelligence, in Daraa al Balad, against a 5th Corps member, and in Hrak town, where unidentified gunmen shot dead an alleged Hezbollah member and his brother.

Three IED attacks occurred against a former opposition judicial personnel in Tal Shihab, against a civilian vehicle in Raha Village, as Sweida Governorate, and

³ Operation Olive Branch and Operation Euphrates Shield

⁴ in the Al Mahmoudiyah neighbourhood and near the central hospital

⁵ Between an unnamed Turkish-backed group and a Faylaq al Sham member following an argument at a checkpoint.

⁶ Between two unnamed Turkish backed groups.

⁷ Between Jaish al Islam and Faylaq al Sham, following an intervention from the former during an extortion attempt of a shop keeper in the town by the latter.

against a bus transporting 52nd Armoured Brigade⁸ personnel between Darah village and Skaka village, near Thalaa Airbase in As Sweida Governorate.

ISIS later [claimed](#) the attack against the 52nd Armoured Brigade near Thalaa Airbase. It is the sixth attack the group has claimed in southern Syria since a GoS offensive in southern Syria recaptured ISIS held territory in mid-2018.⁹ All of the ISIS-claimed events have occurred since June this year, three of which have occurred in August. Continuing a trend seen in previous attacks, this week's event also occurred outside historical ISIS areas of control (Figure 5).

In Quneitra Governorate, an uncommon conflict occurred near Jbhat al Khashab town on 16 September. Former members of the GoS-aligned, Khan Arnaba based, al-Bustan Brigade opened fire on local security forces (made up of former opposition members) from Jbhat al Khashab. The attack follows a personal dispute between the two groups. In response to the attack, security has been heightened at checkpoints between Jbhat al Khashab and Khan Arnaba towns.

The event is uncommon for the governorate, with only 12 recorded cases of inter-GoS clashes in Daraa (8), Quneitra (1) and As Sweida (3) in the past year.¹⁰ All but four of these events have occurred in former opposition areas of control.

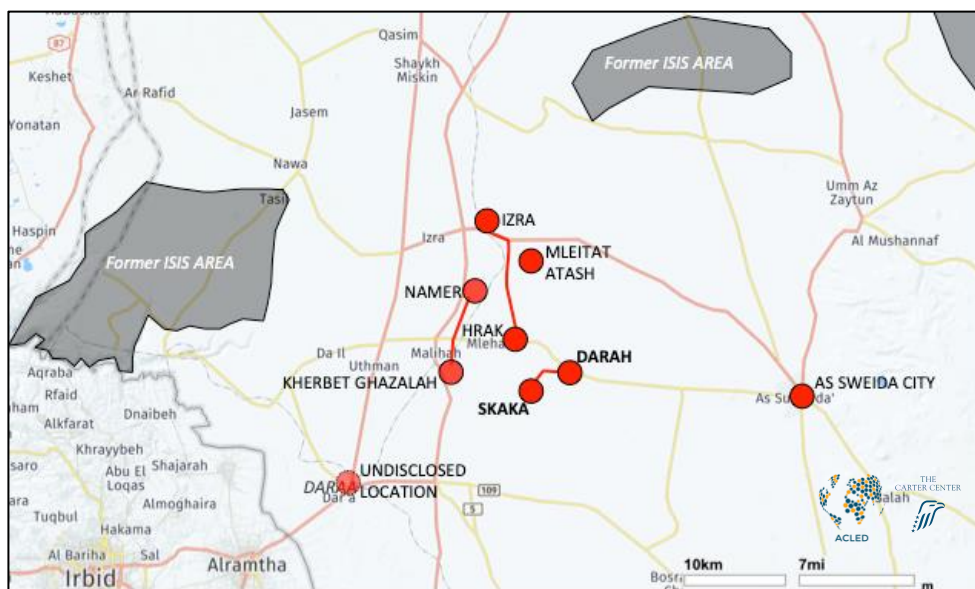


Figure 4: ISIS claimed attacks in southern Syria in 2019. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

In central areas of the country, a return of ISIS activity was reported following last week's GoS [announcement](#) that it had completed an ISIS clearance operation in

⁸ The 52nd Armoured Brigade is part of the 9th Armoured Division, one of the largest divisions in the Syrian military. Some commentators have also [alleged](#) the 52nd Armoured Brigade is linked to Hezbollah.

⁹ The group has claimed; (1) an execution of a Syria Intelligence Officer in an undisclosed location in Daraa Governorate on 4 September, (2) an ambush against a Syrian Army Patrol on the Hrak Izra Road Syria on 2 September, (3) a suicide attack in Mleitat Atash town on 27 July, (4) a suicide attack in As Sweida City on 3 July, and (5) an ambush against a joint Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) / Syrian Army patrol on the Nimr – Kherbet Ghazalah Road on 5 June.

¹⁰ In Kharab Shahem, Sur, Dael, Busra ash Sham, As Sanamayn (x2), Hit, and Daraa City (Daraa Governorate), Jbhat al Khashab (Quneitra Governorate), As Sweida City (x2) and al Roum Dam (As Sweida Governorate).

Homs Governorate.

On 17 September, a suspected ISIS planted IED detonated against a GoS military convoy to the southeast of Tadmor City. On 22 September, pro-government sources also reported an ISIS attack against a National Defence Force (NDF) position in [Sabikhan](#) town (Deir Ez Zor Governorate). In addition, ISIS conducted an ambush against a joint Russian Military/Syrian Army patrol north of [Sokhneh](#) town.

Other media [reported](#) that GoS forces ambushed an ISIS group to the east of Tadmor on 18 September, in an attack that involved the use of several anti-tank missiles and airstrikes. ISIS also [released](#) a video of the group using an anti-tank weapon reportedly north of Sokhneh town this week. However, it is unclear when and where the video was shot.

In response to these events, GoS forces [began](#) a new anti-ISIS clearance operation southeast of Tadmor, in the Hamimah area. Pro-opposition sources also [reported](#) additional Russian troops arriving to Tadmor City during the period. Despite six significant anti-ISIS operations this year, GoS activity has yet to impact the group's enduring presence in Homs Governorate (Figure 5).

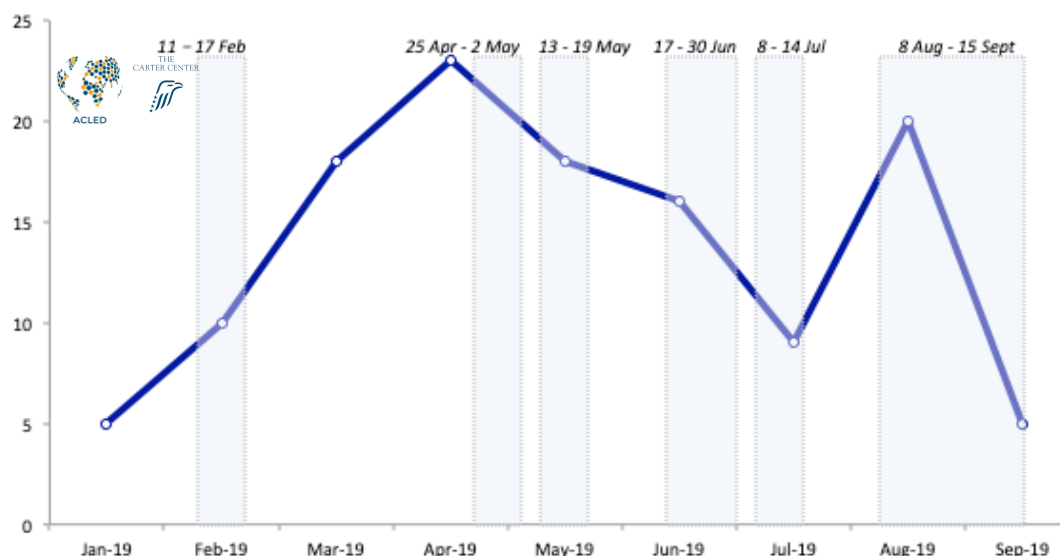


Figure 5: ISIS Activity in GoS-held areas of central Syria in 2019 (Deir Ez Zor, Homs and Raqqa Governorates) with GoS Anti-ISIS Security Operations highlighted in blue. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Widespread protests occurred in several GoS-held locations in the northeast of Syria this week. On 20 September, demonstrators gathered in Deir Ez Zor City and the towns of Husseinayah, Khasham, Mathlum, Mrat, Tabiyeh Jazira, and Salhiyah to protest against the presence of Iranian and allied groups in Deir ez Zor province. Some protestors also called for the withdrawal of GoS forces from Deir Ez Zor and the arrival of SDF instead. In Salhiyah, protestors stormed a bridge that connected GoS-held areas with SDF-held areas, raised the SDF flag, before GoS forces dispersed the crowd with live fire. Several casualties were reported on [social media](#).

Protests are uncommon for GoS held areas of the northeast, with only one previous protest recorded in lower Baqras against a GoS security operation. However, the timing and stated grievance of these latest protests is notable. Not only has there been evidence of a growing Iranian presence in Deir Ez Zor in the past month,¹¹ but the protests follow increasing numbers of suspected Israeli airstrikes against the Iranian backed groups in the area since the start of September.

Additional two airstrikes on bases and weapons storage sites of pro-Iranian forces occurred on the outskirts of Abu Kamal and Heri Village on 17 and 18 September. Similar to the previous strikes, the origin of the attacks were unclear. While Israel is one of the only entities in the Syrian conflict to use airstrikes consistently to target Hezbollah and Iranian aligned troops in Syria (at least 55 events in 2018 and 2019), some pro-government [sources](#) reported the attacks as Saudi-led airstrikes.¹²

Several troop movements also occurred in the northeast. SDF re-enforcements arrived in Jiah, Ma'amal, and Jneineh towns, close to Deir Ez Zor City, while contingents of GoS forces arrived in Salhiyah and the Hatlah Area of Deir Ez Zor City.

Low-level attacks against the SDF in the northeast continued this week, with at least three small arms attacks in Basira, Dashishah, and Harjijiyeh. An additional four IED denotations occurred in Thiban, Shiheil (x2), and Basria towns. Such activity has been concentrated increasingly between Basria and Tayyana towns, a stretch of land that pro-opposition sources [alleged](#) this week as key oil smuggling routes between SDF and GoS held areas (Figure 7).

¹¹ With several Iranian backed casualties being reported from fighting with ISIS in August and September (as reported [here](#)) as well as a well-publicized [announcement](#) by the Iranian backed Baqir Brigade made from the city, that also contains Al Nujabaa Force, Al Quds Force, the Fetimiyoun Forces, Hezbollah, the Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Zaynabiyoun Forces.

¹² In response to a suspected Iranian drone attack on Saudi Oil infrastructure on 14 September. If confirmed they would be the first Saudi airstrikes in Syria since the conflict began in 2011.

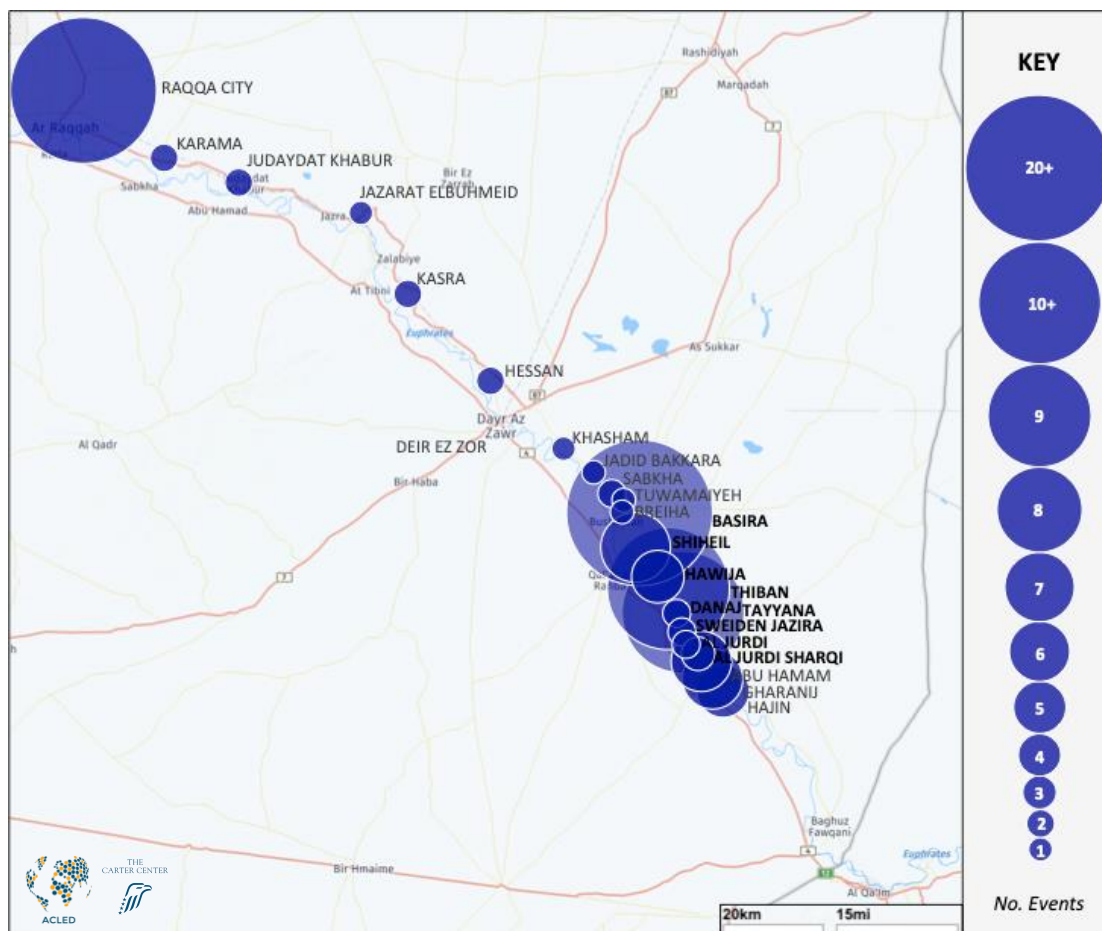


Figure 7: Attacks against SDF forces in Northeast Syria in 2019 with areas between Basira and Tayyana towns highlighted in bold. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

Further north, for the second time within a month, US and Turkish forces conducted a joint ground patrol in northeast Syria. On 16 September, Turkish, US, and local Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) patrolled the areas between Ras al Ain, Mabrouka, and Eastern Hassakah Governorate. The patrol is inline with the implementation of “[security mechanisms](#)” between Turkey, the US, and the SDF in the northeast since an agreement was reached in late August.

The SDF also continued their recruitment drive across the northeast during the week. Between 16 and 20 September, the SDF and YPG conducted raids in Ain Al Arab, Hasakah City, Hole, Menbej City, Qamishli City, Raqqa City Shadadah, Tabqa, Tal Brak, and Tal Hmeis for conscription purposes. Such activity builds on last week’s campaigns in Hasakah city (x2), Shadadah (x2) and Basira (x3).

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