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THE
CARTER CENTER



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 29 APRIL – 5 MAY 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | The situation in the Idleb pocket deteriorated this week with government forces advancing just after the reporting period ended. Elsewhere, a temporary upsurge in conflict was recorded in the Tel Rifaat pocket.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Attacks against Syrian government-aligned personnel increased in the south, with three attacks recorded in Quneitra and As Sweida Governorates. Further east, the government announced an anti-ISIS operation along the Iraqi border as ISIS attacked its forces near Sokhneh and Deir Ez Zor.
- **NORTHEAST** | Protest were held in several cities in Deir Ez Zor Governorate. Unexploded ordnance and left-over landmines were detonated.

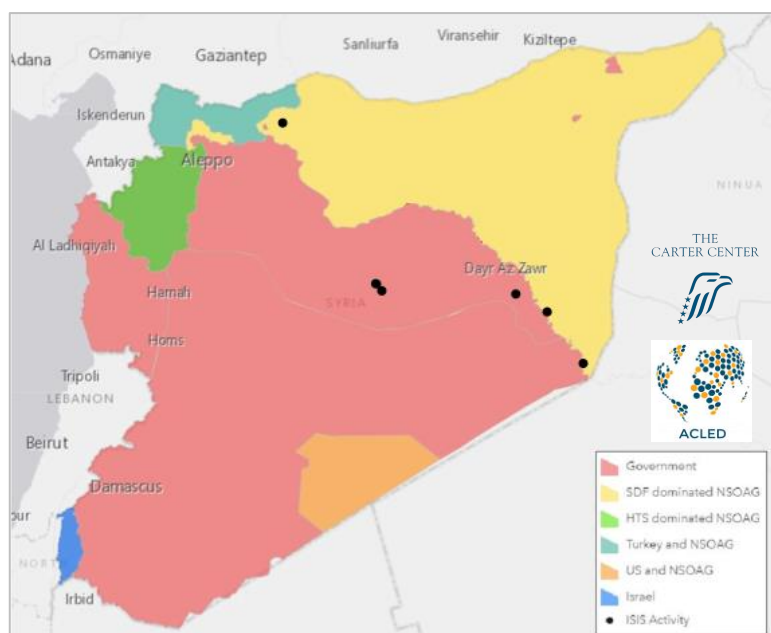


Figure 1: Dominant Actors' Area of Control and Influence in Syria as of 5 May 2019. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. For more explanation on our mapping, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

Following the previous week's spike in conflict, the situation in the Idleb pocket continued to deteriorate. A significant rise in Syrian and/or Russian airstrikes were documented this week, with 124 events recorded, contrasting to the 39 recorded in the first three weeks of April. This activity included airstrikes that struck fortified berms, likely to [breach](#) HTS frontline positions in the southwest, especially near Kurnaz town. Aerial activity this week switched from focusing on internal areas of the enclave to increasingly affecting frontline positions in the southwest portions of the pocket.

Syrian government barrel bombings in the northwest also increased this week, with at least 106 events recorded between 29 April and 5 May. This activity largely affected the Al Mar'a and Suqaylabiyeh districts of Idleb and Hama, which received 75% (80) of the recorded events in Idleb and Hama governorates this week.² It represented the first barrel bombings on the enclave since September 2018 and is typically associated with preparations for an assault.

Further arrivals of large numbers of specialist government troops and equipment were also recorded along frontlines this week. The [Tiger Forces](#)' Tarmeeh group³ arrived in the Madiq Castle area, while Russian forces brought military engineering and logistical re-enforcements to the Hiyalin village area in northern Hama. [Rumors](#) of Iranian-aligned militias also arriving to the frontlines were circulated.

Government shelling focusing heavily on the Idleb pocket also continued (154 documented events), despite two more official Turkish patrols this week (Figure 2). Of note, an artillery round [impacted](#) a Turkish observation post near the town of Jebal Shashab, the first such impact since the position was established in early 2018.

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 The remaining districts that saw barrel bombing were Ariha district in Idleb (15%), Muhradah district in Hama (5%) and Idleb and Hama districts (5%).

³ The Tarmeeh group are a special forces assault group within the Tiger Forces. More on the Tiger Forces can be found [here](#).

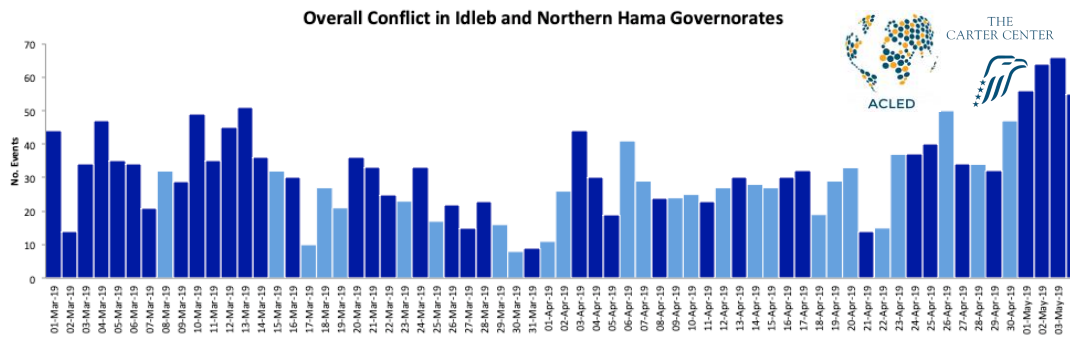


Figure 2: Conflict Levels on the Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS) dominated Idleb Pocket with days of recorded Turkish Patrols highlighted in light blue.

HTS and other groups ⁴ continued to [launch](#) rocket bombardments onto government areas or use anti-tank missiles on government positions. A notable concentration of activity was seen along the frontlines in Latakia Governorate, impacting the Jub Ramla, Skalbia, Masasna, and Rusalet Iskander towns as well as the Russian operated Hmemeim Airbase.⁵ At least one use of an anti-tank missile [impacted](#) a government checkpoint at the key frontline crossing at Qalaat Mudiq, a major point of trade and exchange between pro-government and anti-government forces for the past year.

Several HTS armed suicide bombers launched ground assaults against government positions in the towns of Jebal Al Turkman, Madiq Castle, and Nibh Almur in Latakia governorate, where government soldiers were killed according to pro government [reports](#).

HTS and other opposition groups, including the Turkistan Islamic Party and Jaish al Izza, also arrived along the south and southwest frontlines, particularly near Suqaylabiyah. Some areas also saw defensive ditches and berms being dug or fortified positions being strengthened.

This week's conflict activity had heavy impact on the civilian population in the northwest. Large [movements of internally displaced persons \(IDPs\)](#) from southern Idleb northwards were documented, with at least four large movements recorded. Some [reports](#) estimate up to 10,000 people had been displaced in the previous week alone. Civilian infrastructure was also heavily affected by aerial activity. Three hospitals in Hass, Kafr Nabuda, and Kafr Nobel⁶ towns were taken out of service by airstrikes, while a communications tower near Kafr Oweid was [destroyed](#) by an airstrike.

Just after the reporting period ended, growing indicators of an upcoming offensive were noted as government forces made limited advances in the southwest corner of

⁴ Including the Turkistan Islamic Party, [Jaish Nasr](#), [Ahrar Sharqiyah](#), Jaish al Izza and the Abu Bakr al Saddiq Army. The Turkish backed National Liberation Front (NLF) forces, also [announced](#) a retaliatory campaign against government forces in south western Hama on 5 May

⁵ Russia [announced](#) that the base had been targeted with drones or rockets at least 12 times in April alone

⁶ The latter was the town's only surgical hospital. Later the attacks were [condemned](#) by The World Health Organization (WHO).

the Idleb pocket north of Kurnaz town, taking Tal Othman hill from HTS. The situation remains fluid at the time of writing and further advances are expected in the coming week.

Elsewhere in the northwest, reports of conflict activity increased in the Tal Rifaat pocket on 4 May.⁷ After a Turkish soldier was [killed](#) and another wounded by shelling of a Turkish base west of Azaz city in the Turkish-backed Operation Euphrates Shield area, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army removed berms north of Mennagh Airbase within the Tel Rifaat pocket and advanced southwards. These forces temporarily captured the three villages of Al Malikiyah, Shewrghat, and Maranaz, before [withdrawing](#) back to their original positions due to heavy YPG shelling (Figure 3).

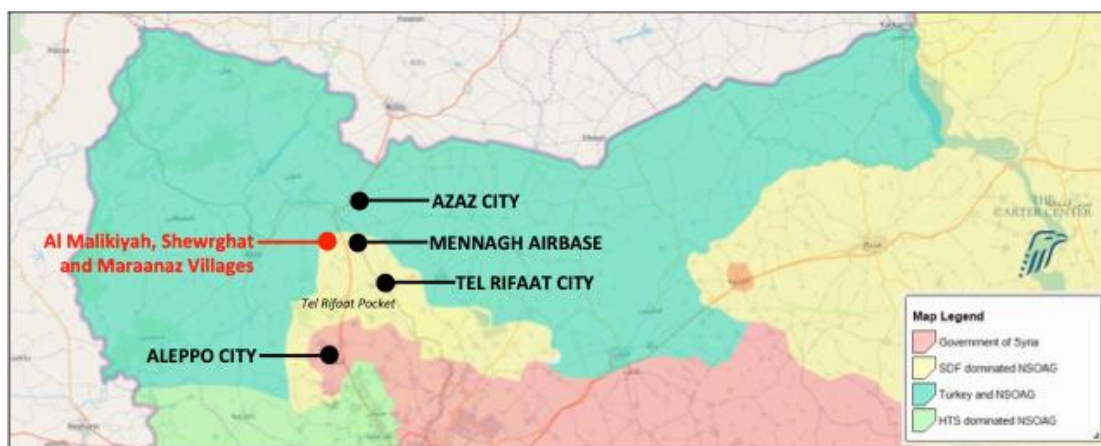


Figure 3: Latest escalation of conflict in the Tel Rifaat pocket, with the area of temporary changes of control highlighted in red.

While tensions in the area have been growing in the past month, including two weeks ago when shelling exchanges between the Turkish and YPG forces erupted (previously reported [here](#)), this latest action is one of the more serious incidents in the situation there. The activity in the past three weeks also comes after Russian forces [announced](#) their withdrawal from the area in early April.

SOUTH AND CENTRAL SYRIA

Targeting of government-aligned personnel and former opposition fighters continued to be reported in the south this week. On 2 May, a former opposition commander was the target of an assassination attempt in Quneitra Governorate. This was one of the first recorded attacks of its kind in the governorate since its takeover by Syrian government forces last year. The Popular Resistance group later [claimed](#) the attack online.

Such activity has typically focused on Daraa Governorate, which saw four attacks in Tafas, Mzeireb (2), and Edwan towns this week. However, in the past month,

⁷ The Tal Rifaat area is under joint control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and government aligned forces since late 2016. Russian forces had also been conducting joint patrols with Turkish troops in the area since 14 February 2019, and with SDF forces between 26 March 2019 and 10 April 2019.

attacks against government-aligned personnel have also occurred in Damascus city and in As Sweida Governorate, which saw two attacks against pro-government militia members in As Sweida City and Ara towns this week. Such a widening of activity, despite the small numbers of events, should be of concern for the future security situation of the south.

Further to the northeast, government forces [announced](#) on 2 May they had begun an anti-ISIS operation between the city of Abu Kamal and the Al Tanf Zone in the deserts of Homs Governorate with the support of National Defense Forces and Hezbollah. The action is likely a reaction to ISIS' recent activity in the central and eastern areas of the country (as previously reported).

However, the last major government-led anti-ISIS operation in the area in February 2019 did little to curb the group's activity there in the long term. On the same day as the operation was announced, ISIS ambushed a government military convoy in the deserts east of Sokhneh town, while further east ISIS attacked government positions in Ashara in Deir Ez Zor Governorate.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Away from the now routine IED and small arm attacks against military actors in the Euphrates River Valley in the northeast of Syria, of which four incidents were recorded this week, protest activity continued to be reported. At least nine protests were recorded in Hussein, Shiheil (2), Thiban, Zghir, Jazireh, Al Shanan, Dahleh, and Tayyana. This builds upon last week's 12 recorded demonstrations – itself an increase from previous months.

Grievances were voiced, as in previous weeks, against SDF arrest policies, the lack of provision of basic services, the high prices of goods, and the perceived unfair distribution of local oil resources, especially to government areas.

Finally, the residual threat from unexploded ordnance and landmines planted earlier in the conflict in the region were highlighted this week with at least three events recorded in Sur and Sosat villages (2).