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THE
CARTER CENTER

WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 21 - 27 OCTOBER 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST |** Government of Syria (GoS) shelling and aerial activity continued in the Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)-dominated Idleb enclave. Elevated levels of conflict also continued in the Tal Rifaat area. Clashes were reported also between three Turkish-backed groups in Al Bab. The US conducted a ground raid that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in Barisha Village in Idleb Governorate.

- **SOUTH & CENTRAL |** In addition to attacks against GoS-aligned personnel in central and southern Syria, ISIS claimed its fifth attack of the year in Daraa Governorate. There are reports of criminal activity in Nahta town. GoS conducted arrests in several locations around Damascus.

  NORTHEAST | Turkish-led militias advanced in northeast Syria between Tal Abiad and Ras al Ain, despite a ceasefire and a new agreement between Turkey and Russia reached on 22 October. Turkish-backed, opposition's Syrian National Army militias were responsible for summary executions and looting. Also attacks took place against Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the Euphrates River and Khabour River Valleys.

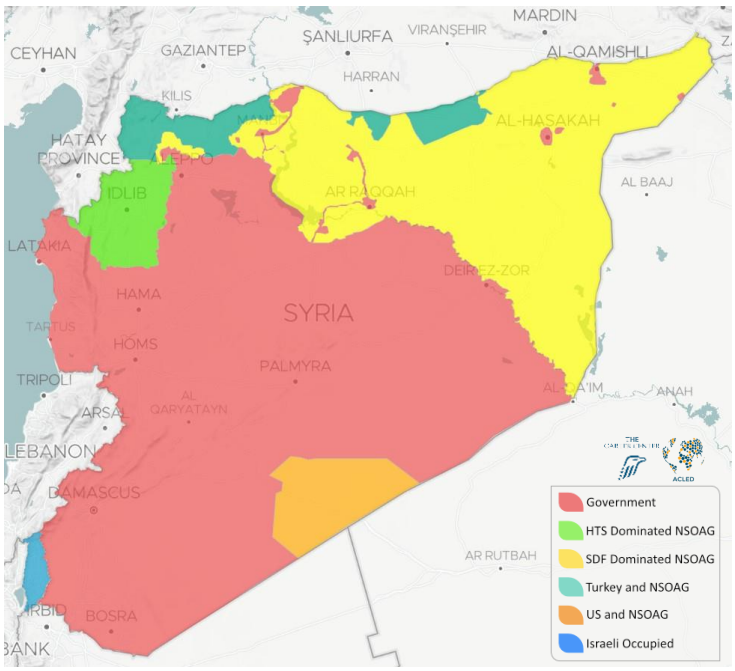

Figure 1: Dominant Actors' Area of Control and Influence in Syria as of 27 October 2019. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

Government of Syria (GoS) shelling and aerial activity continued in the Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)-dominated Idelb enclave (Figure 2). This included a return of conflict to the Kabani town in the hills of northeast Latakia Governorate, with 14 clashes between GoS forces and HTS/Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) militias. GoS shelling and aerial bombardments on the town were also reported.

During the clashes, GoS temporarily captured the nearby Zuwayqat Hill (also known as Hill 1154) on 26 October, before HTS/TIP forces pushed them back to their original positions 24 hours later. This was the first GoS advance in the area since they began attacks on the town in March 2019. Pro-government media reported heavy GoS causalities this week. Pro-opposition sources also reported several Hezbollah casualties in the fighting, a group that previously has not been associated with fighting in the area.

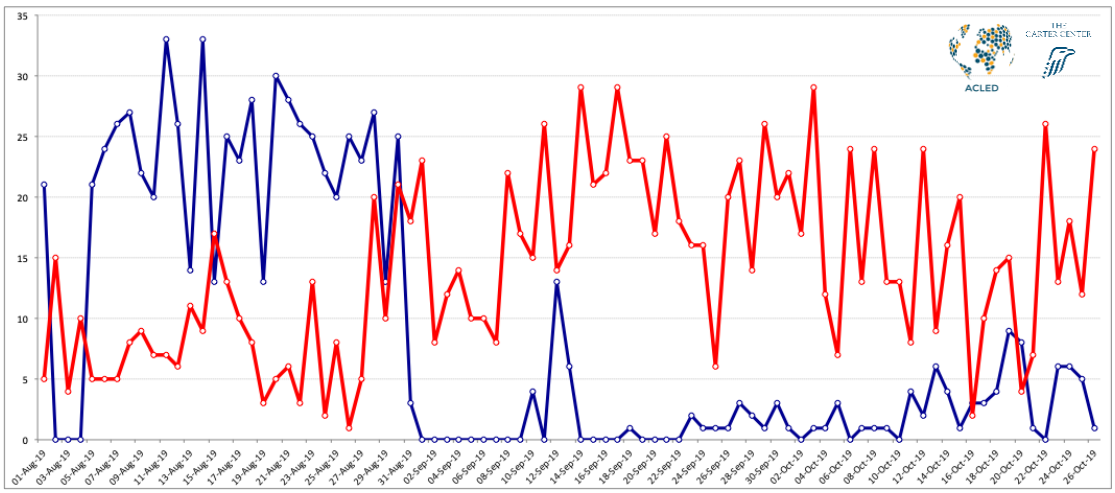

Figure 2: GoS aerial activity (Blue) and shelling (Red) in Northwest Syria since August 2019. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

HTS and other opposition militia activity in GoS held areas in the northwest also remained steady this week, with 14 recorded incidents of shelling and armed clashes. Levels of attacks by HTS and other opposition militias on GoS held territory have remained low since late August (Figure 3).

Inside the Idleb enclave, in Deir Ballut and Jabal al Zawiyah, HTS arrested three media activists and two suspected Al Qaeda-aligned Hurras al Din members. HTS also imposed a 5% tax on all olive harvests in the northwest. On 18 October, a protest demonstration took place against HTS control in Maraat al Numan.

[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 Syrian government control. The US continues to have a presence in the SDF-controlled east of country. The 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.

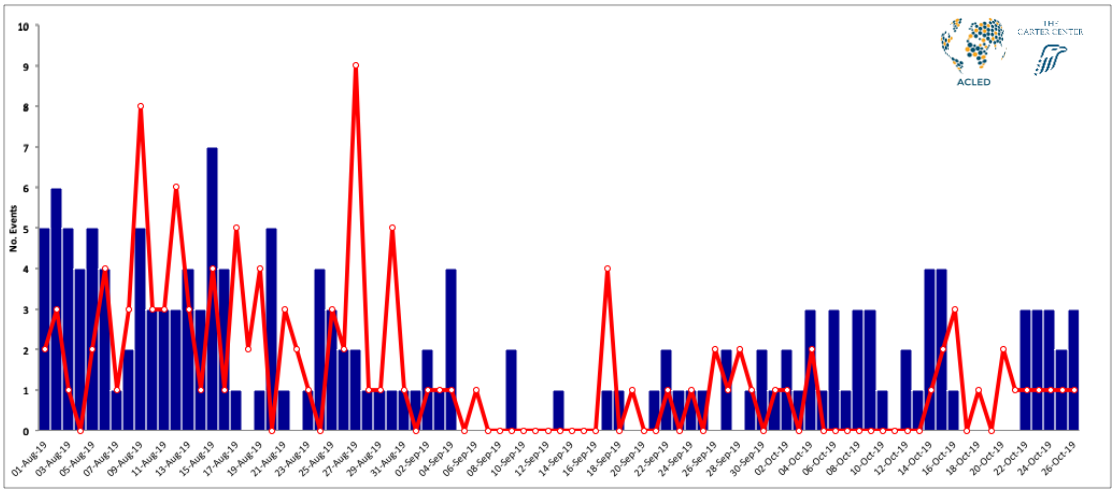

Figure 3: HTS and other militias shelling (blue) and armed clashes against (red) GoS held areas in Northwest Syria since 1 August. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

On early 27 October, US Special Forces conducted a ground raid against a compound suspected of harboring senior ISIS leadership in Barisha village. During the operation, ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, detonated a suicide vest in a tunnel, killing himself. Reportedly, a Huras al Din affiliated individual owned the compound. This week's event is the first recorded incident of US forces conducting ground operations in the northwest during the Syrian conflict.[2]

Prior to the US special forces operation, Barisha had been associated with ISIS. In early August 2018, HTS attacked an ISIS cell in the village that devolved into armed clashes between the two militias. While ISIS has not held territory in the northwest of Syria for some time, previously they had some presence in Idleb. *Please see the Carter Center's reports "A Review of ISIS in Syria 2016 – 2019: Regional Differences and an Enduring Legacy" and "Special Report: Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria Sep 2018 to Aug 2019" for more details.*

For a third consecutive week, levels of conflict remained elevated between the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Turkish and aligned Syrian opposition militias in the Tal Rifaat pocket. At least nine shelling and ground clashes between the two sides occurred,[3] bringing the total number of incidents in October to 60. This is more than twice the monthly average for 2019 (25) and coincides with the start of the Turkish Operation Peace Spring in northeast Syria.

On 24 October, armed clashes between three Turkish-backed opposition's Syrian National Army[4] affiliated militias erupted in two locations in the Al Bab Sub-

[2] In June and August, for the first time since 2017, the US conducted airstrikes in Idleb against the Al Qaeda affiliated Hurras al Din group.
[3] Shelling impacted YPG positions in Daghelbash, Kaljibrin, Menagh and Maraanaz (x3) while two ground clashes between the YPG and the Turkish backed opposition's Syrian National Army were recorded in Kafr Kasher and in Kafr Kalbein, where the YPG attacked Syrian National Army positions behind frontlines. The YGP conducted an anti tank missile attack on frontlines in Basuta.
[4] The "Syrian National Army" is a newly established Turkish-backed consortium of Syrian opposition armed group made up of the National Liberation Front and Syria National Army, two of the largest armed opposition factions in the Turkish-backed areas of northern Aleppo Governorate (Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch). It is under the command of the

district of northern Aleppo. In Sukkariyah Saghira and Jeb Nassan villages, Ahrar al Sham, Hamza Division, and Ahrar Sharqiya militias opened fire on each other following a personal dispute between members of the three militias. Clashes between militias in the Turkish-backed areas of northern Aleppo Governorate have steadily grown in the last two months, with 43% (17) of the year's recorded intergroup clashes (40) occurring in September and October.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Attacks against GoS-aligned personnel and former opposition members continued. In the Daraa Camp area of Daraa City, a former opposition member was shot dead as he left his house, in Ankhel, a Hezbollah member was shot dead as he passed through the town, while in As Sanamayn, at least three small arms fire and RPG attacks were directed at former opposition group members and GoS personnel. Some analysts reported the events as being conducted by former Ahrar al Sham members who surrendered to GoS in 2018. Pro-government sources also reported that ISIS claimed an attack against a GoS convoy near Kherbet Ghazalah town on 23 October. (Figure 4).

Further evidence of criminal activity in southern Syria was reported after last week's murders of a drug dealer and smuggler in western Daraa Governorate. On 26 October, an unidentified group kidnapped a civilian from Nahta town and contacted the family to pay a ransom for his release.

In central areas of Syria, ISIS activity against GoS forces continued. On 25 October, ISIS ambushed a GoS patrol near Sokhneh. Pro government sources reported that GoS forces stationed in eastern Homs Governorate attacked an ISIS group attempting to cross the border from Iraq. Pro-opposition sources reported two ISIS IED attacks against a GoS 17th Division convoy and 7th Infantry Division near Deir Ez Zor.[5]

Around Damascus, military and political intelligence personnel arrested dozens of civilians and former opposition members in Beit Saham, Babilla, Yarmouk Camp, Yalda, and Zabadani for unspecified reasons. This follows growing levels of arrests, expropriation of property, and evictions in former opposition-held areas around the capital in the past two months.

opposition's Syrian Interim Government (SIG) when it formed in early October, and is also currently engaged in Operation Peace Spring, the Turkish led invasion of Northeast Syria.

[5] The two sources can be accessed here and here

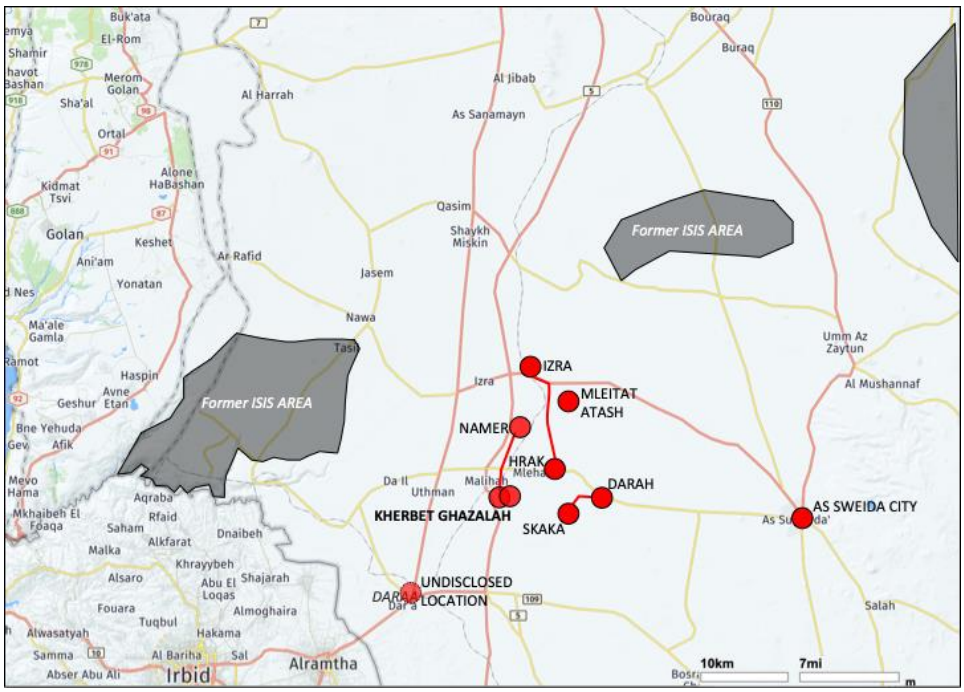

Figure 4: ISIS claimed attacks in southern Syria since August 2018 with this week's attack highlighted in bold. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Despite the implementation of a 5-day ceasefire starting 18 October, armed clashes and shelling exchanges between the Turkish-backed opposition's Syrian National Army and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were reported in 16 locations in Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates at the start of the reporting period.[6] A Turkish drone also conducted an airstrike against a SDF vehicle in Debs village on 21 October.

On 23 October when the ceasefire was set to expire, Turkey and Russia agreed a 10-point Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) covering the northeast. Notable points of the agreement included, allowing the areas between Ras al Ain and Tal Abiad taken during Turkey's invasion to remain under the control of Turkey and aligned opposition's Syrian National Army, establishing joint Syrian/Russian border patrols, Russia ensuring the removal of the SDF aligned Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from a 30km-deep zone, and the removal of YPG heavy weapons from Menbej District and the Tal Rifaat area. By 24 October, joint Syrian/Russian patrols began in Darbasiyeh and Amuda areas of Hassakeh Governorate.

However, in the days following the agreement, ground clashes and shelling exchanges between the SDF and the opposition's Syrian National Army continued

[6] In Hasakeh Governorate, the Syrian National Army clashed and shelled SDF in Manajir, Um Ashba, Madhba and Abu Rusayn; in Al Hasakeh governorate, and areas south west of Tal Abiad, Kafr Hussein and Kherbet al Berger in Raqqa Governorate on 21 October, on 22 October, National Army clashed and shelled the SDF in Al Jalba, Kafifeh Kaif Khalfa, Tabash, and Wbideh villages in Raqqa Governorate as well as SDF forces capturing Mashrafa, Kirbat al Maimeh, Alia and Bir Qadam villages in Hassakeh Governorate after clashing with National Army members there.

in at least 33 in locations in the northeast.[7] The opposition's Syrian National Army made further advances in 13 areas close to Tal Abiad and Ras al Ain on 26 October.[8] Resistance against the Syrian National Army incursion into northeast Syria were reported this week, with four improvised explosive device (IED) attacks in Suluk town (x2), Hammam al Turkman village, and Tal Abiad.

The deadline for parts of the Turkish/Russian MoU to be implemented expired just after this publication's reporting period ended.

GoS forces secured additional locations in the northeast after capturing major highways between main cities in the region and key border points with Iraq and Turkey. On 26 October, some 2,000 GoS troops arrived along the M4 highway between Ain Issa and Tal Tamr towns, as well as the Malikiyah District.

For a second consecutive week, further U.S. withdrawals from the northeast were reported with several hundred US military vehicles in Shadadah and Qamishli district seen leaving for northern Iraq on 21 and 25 October.

Allegations that the Turkish-backed opposition's Syrian National Army committed summary executions and looting of property in newly seized areas of the northeast were again reported this week. In Suluk, Syrian National Army members executed three health workers on 24 October. Homes and commercial businesses near Ain Issa, Al Dahaliz, Ras al Ain (x2), and Tal Abiad (x2) were looted during the week. This is the third week of such reports and follows a pattern of similar activities that were seen during Turkish backed operations in northern Aleppo Governorate in 2017 and 2018.[9]

Near Al Hol Camp, which holds ISIS family members and other suspects from former ISIS dominated areas of Syria, SDF guards arrested five women and 18 children on 24 October. Escapes from the camp is a growing concern regarding the security of the camp since the Turkish invasion of the northeast.

Along the Euphrates River and Khabour River Valleys, attacks against SDF personnel continued. At least four IED attacks targeted SDF patrols in Hawayij, Shadadah (x2), and Markada. Unidentified gunmen ambushed SDF patrols in Breiha, Suhat al Boferyu, Hawayij, and Shiheil. Further civilian demonstrations against GoS and Russian presence in the northeast were reported in the Abu Hamam, Shiheil, and Al Sabah Farms areas of Deir Ez Zor Governorate on 25 October. The towns have often been the sites of past anti-GoS protests in 2019.

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[7] Armed clashes and shelling occurred in Abu Rasayn (x2), Amiriyeh, Al Ahras, Al Asadiyeh (x2), Al Safah, Bab al Kheir, Bir Nuh, Daoudiyeh, Dardara (x2), Java (x2), Lian Salhiyyeh, Manajir (x3), Mashrafah (x2), Muraykiz, Tal Diyab (x2) and Um Ashba in Hassakeh Governorate, and in Abduki, Ain Issa Countryside, Hweijet al Abd, Kitkania, Om Eshbeh, Sharkrak, Shirgerat, and Tal Abiad (x2) in Raqqa Governorate.

[8] With the Syrian National Army taking Amiryeh, Humayd, Matalla and Taweela villages near Ras al Ain after clashes with the SDF on 26 October, while Abdi Koy, al Alwat al Gharbiyeh, al Alwat al Janoubiyeh, Al Slebi, Arbaine, Kirbert al Fares, Leylan, and Western Alouk villages coming under their control after the SDF withdrew by the end of the week.

[9] Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch.