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Syria

Security situation

Country of Origin Information Report



May 2020



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Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019).¹ The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources used are referenced.

The information contained in this report has been researched, evaluated and analysed with utmost care. However, this document does not claim to be exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular application for international protection. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

'Refugee', 'risk' and similar terminology are used as generic terminology and not in the legal sense as applied in the EU Asylum Acquis, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

Neither EASO nor any person acting on its behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this report.

The drafting of this report was finalised on 6 March 2020. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 8 April 2020. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the methodology section of the [Introduction](#).

¹ The EASO methodology is largely based on the Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI), 2008, and can be downloaded from the EASO website: <http://www.easo.europa.eu>.

Glossary and abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
ACU	Assistance Coordination Unit
AOAV	Action on Armed Violence
COAR	Center for Operational Analysis and Research
Col	Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
ERW	Explosive Remnants of War
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GoS	Government of Syria
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant; also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State (IS), or Daesh
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
JKBW	Jaish Khaled Ibn Al-Walid
NDF	National Defence Forces
NLF	National Liberation Front
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Kurdish)
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SHRC	Syrian Human Rights Committee
SNA	Syrian National Army
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
STJ	Syrians for Truth & Justice
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USDOD	United States Department of Defense
VDC	Violations Documentation Center in Syria
YPG	Kurdish People's Protection Units

Introduction

The purpose of this security situation report is to provide relevant information for the assessment of international protection status determination, including refugee status and subsidiary protection, and in particular for use in EASO's country guidance development on Syria.

In order to assess the application of Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive on a serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in situations of international or internal armed conflict, the security situation report examines the nature of armed conflicts taking place in the territory, the nature of the violence and presence of armed actors in different areas, and the impact on civilians, for example in terms of casualties/fatalities and conflict-linked displacement.

This report is produced in line with the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019)² and the EASO COI Writing and Referencing Style Guide (2019).³

This report should be read in conjunction with other 2019-2020 EASO COI reports on Syria, such as the reports titled [Security situation \(November 2019\)](#), [Actors \(December 2019\)](#), [Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(January 2019\)](#), [Situation of women \(February 2020\)](#), [Socio-economic situation: Damascus City \(February 2020\)](#), [Targeting of individuals \(March 2019\)](#) and [Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility \(April 2020\)](#). These reports provide relevant information regarding topics such as the main armed actors, targeted violence, and armed conflict developments in Syria for the purpose of developing country guidance on Syria.

Methodology

This report analyses the security situation in Syria, focusing in particular on the situation of the civilian population. The reference period is 2019 and the first two months of 2020. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process until 8 April 2020.

The terms of reference (ToR) of this report were defined by EASO based on discussions held and input received from COI experts in the EASO COI specialist network on Syria and from policy experts in EU+ countries⁴ within the framework of a Country Guidance development on Syria. Terms of Reference for this report can be found in [Annex IV](#) of this report.

Sources

The two main sources on civilian fatalities in Syria used in this report are the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria (VDC) and the Syrian Network of Human Rights (SNHR).

The [Violations Documentation Centre in Syria \(VDC\)](#) is a non-profit human rights organisation established in 2011 with the stated purpose to provide independent documentation of human rights violations within Syria. VDC uses a network of human rights activists and media activists who collect information about conflict-related deaths. It also collects information from hospitals, funeral homes, the victims' families and some local media institutions. The data are then compared with and cross-checked against available video recordings and images of conflict events before being entered in the

² EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, June 2019, [url](#)

³ EASO, Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, June 2019, [url](#)

⁴ All EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland

VDC database. The data are verified further and updated as new information becomes available. VDC database lists civilian and non-civilian fatalities by name, gender, age, and governorate.⁵

VDC has provided EASO its updated data on civilian fatalities for 2019, disaggregated by month and governorate. The data is available in [Annex I](#) of this report.

The [Syrian Network of Human Rights \(SNHR\)](#) is a non-profit human rights organisation founded in 2011 which works on documenting human rights violations in Syria. SNHR relies on a network of volunteers in each governorate to compile lists of civilian fatalities and verify victims' identities by photo or video and by speaking with family members, witnesses, and hospitals. SNHR reports fatalities by gender, age, perpetrator, governorate, and other classifications. SNHR only records civilian fatalities – with the exception of the death toll among victims who died due to torture, which includes armed combatants and civilians.⁶

For data on violent incidents, publicly available curated datasets from the organisation [Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#) have been used. ACLED is a project collecting, analysing and mapping information on crisis and conflict in Africa, south and south-east Asia and Middle East and provides datasets on conflict incidents. ACLED collects data on violent incidents in Syria, coding each incident with the time and place, type of violent incident, the parties involved and the number of fatalities. The information is collected in a database that is openly accessible, searchable and kept continuously up to date. The data primarily come from secondary sources such as media reports. In addition, since April 2019, ACLED has incorporated data from the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Airwars and an additional undisclosed local partner.⁷

Security incidents numbers and associated graphs/maps at country and governorate level are based on a publicly available ACLED curated dataset for Middle East (updated until 14 March 2020).⁸ Additional sources have been researched to the extent possible to corroborate the ACLED findings.

Structure and use of the report

The report is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on presenting an overview of the armed conflicts in Syria, current political developments and information on the main parties to the conflict. It goes on to describe the security trends in different parts of Syria during 2019 and first two months of 2020, with a focus on the nature of the violence and impact on civilians.

The second part provides a governorate-level description of the security situation. Each governorate chapter includes a map, brief description of the governorate, background conflict dynamics and armed actors present in the area, recent security trends, including information on civilian fatalities, security incidents and trends, armed confrontations (etc.), and information on displacement and return, and civilian infrastructure impacted.

⁵ For detailed information on VDC's methodology see [url](#)

⁶ For detailed information on SNHR's methodology see [url](#) SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#), p. 4

⁷ ACLED, Methodology overview, 10 April 2019, [url](#); ACLED, Press Release: ACLED integrates new partner data on the war in Syria, 5 April 2019, [url](#)

⁸ For more details on ACLED's reporting see section [1.6.2](#). ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

Map



Map 1: Syria, © United Nations⁹

⁹ Syria, Map No. 4204 Rev. 3, April 2012, United Nations, [url](#)

1. General description of the security situation in Syria

1.1 Overview of conflicts

As of 2019, several armed conflicts are taking place in Syria, according to the Rule of Law in Armed Conflict Project (RULAC)¹⁰: the United States (US)-led coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is in an international armed conflict with Syria, due to its military intervention in Syria without the consent of the Government of Syria (GoS). Syria is also in an international armed conflict with Turkey, who has carried out military operations against ISIL and Kurdish armed groups in Syria, and controls parts of northern Syria with the help of anti-GoS armed groups.¹¹ Military confrontations between Syrian and Turkish armed forces took place during the conflict, most recently in March 2020.¹² Turkey is also engaged in a non-international conflict in Syria with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) forces.¹³

Syria is involved in an international armed conflict with Israel as well, who has been conducting air strikes on Iranian targets in Syria without the consent of the GoS.¹⁴

Syria is involved in a non-international armed conflict with various anti-GoS armed groups, most notably Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian National Army (SNA) and ISIL.

Further information on the conflict background in Syria is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Security situation \(November 2019\)](#) and [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#).

1.2 Political developments

The UN Security Council Resolution 2254, adopted in December 2015, calls for creating a constitutional committee that would draft a new constitution and organise UN supervised elections.¹⁵

The Geneva peace talks led by the UN (in 2016¹⁶ and 2017¹⁷) have been unsuccessful, with the GoS and opposition representatives failing to find common ground.¹⁸

Outside of UN auspices, Russia, Turkey and Iran set up peace talks in January 2017 in what became known as the Astana process.¹⁹ The negotiations led to the creation of four so-called 'de-escalation areas' which stipulated the cessation of hostilities between GoS and anti-GoS armed groups and terms for improved humanitarian access, with Russia, Turkey and Iran acting as guarantors.²⁰ Starting from the beginning of 2018, three out of the four de-escalation zones have been retaken by GoS forces.²¹ The last remaining de-escalation zone covering Idlib governorate and parts of Latakia, Aleppo and Hama governorates is subject to an ongoing GoS military offensive.²²

¹⁰ RULAC is an online portal that identifies and classifies situations of armed conflict through independent assessment based on open source information; it is located at the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, n.d., [url](#)

¹¹ RULAC, International armed conflicts in Syria, 23 May 2019, [url](#)

¹² AP News, Syrian, Turkish armies engage in new deadly clashes in Idlib, 4 March 2020, [url](#)

¹³ Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, The War Report 2018, April 2019, [url](#), p. 127

¹⁴ RULAC, International armed conflicts in Syria, 23 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 29

¹⁶ Atlantic (The), The End of the Beginning in Syria, 30 March 2016, [url](#)

¹⁷ BBC News, Syria war: Peace talks restart in Geneva, 16 May 2017, [url](#); Guardian (The), 'Golden opportunity' lost as Syrian peace talks collapse, 14 December 2017, [url](#)

¹⁸ CFR, Civil War in Syria, 20 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 28

²⁰ Al Jazeera, Syria's 'de-escalation zones' explained, 4 July 2017, [url](#)

²¹ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²² See [Idlib](#) and [Aleppo](#) chapters.

On 16 September 2019, Turkey, Russia and Iran announced that an agreement regarding the composition of the Constitutional Committee had been reached.²³ The committee comprises of 150 delegates, including 50 delegates each representing respectively the GoS and the Syrian opposition. A third list of 50 Syrian-national delegates²⁴ chosen by the UN representing 'Syrian experts, civil society, independents, tribal leaders and women'.²⁵ A limited number of Kurds are included in the committee, but not members of the YPG, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) or its political wing – the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), who control parts of north-east Syria.²⁶ This in turn has attracted protests from the Kurdish population.²⁷ A 45 member Constitution-drafting group, 15 from each group, was set up in October 2019 following the committee's first meeting.²⁸

A second session of the Constitutional Committee, held at the end of November 2019, failed to reach an agreement due to lack of consensus over the agenda. The current UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen said that this second session 'only underscores the need for a broader and comprehensive political process'.²⁹

In a television interview which took place after the first session of the Constitutional Committee, Syrian President Bashar al Assad rejected the possibility of UN-supervised elections in Syria as mandated by the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, he questioned the legitimacy of opposition members in the committee, stating that 'a few represent the terrorists and the majority represent the states which imposed them; it is exclusively Turkey, and of course those standing in the background, the Americans and others', and denied making any 'real concessions' to the constitutional reform process.³⁰ Regarding the peace talks, the US Congressional Research Service (US CRS) stated that 'it appears unlikely that the parties will reach a political settlement that would result in a transition away from Assad'.³¹

Presidential elections are set to be held in 2021.³² The opposition does not recognise the legitimacy of the elections, mainly due to 'their non-recognition of the current constitution, the launching of the work of the Syrian Constitutional Committee and the following results that must precede the election of a president for Syria'.³³ The US-Congress appointed Syria Study Group assessed that while some observers hope that the elections will be organised under UN auspices, under the current conditions in Syria and with Russia backing the Assad government in the UN Security Council, 'there is no possibility that the 2021 elections will be free, fair, and credible'.³⁴

²³ Asharq Al-Aswat, Russia, Iran, Turkey Say Syria Constitutional Committee Ready, 16 September 2019, [url](#)

²⁴ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵ AP News, UN envoy: More work needed on Syria constitutional committee, 21 December 2018, [url](#)

²⁶ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁷ MEE, Syrian Kurds protest 'unjust' exclusion from constitutional committee, 2 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁸ UN, Special Envoy Calls Launch of Constitutional Committee for Syria 'Historic Moment', but Warns Security Council Conditions on Ground Must Improve, 22 November 2019, [url](#)

²⁹ UN News, Syria: Lack of consensus following face-to-face talks, underscores need for broader process, 20 December 2019, [url](#)

³⁰ SANA, President al-Assad's interview given to al-Sourya and al-Ikhbarya TVs, 31 October 2019, [url](#)

³¹ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

³² Reuters, Syria's Assad: Anybody Will Be Able to Run at 2021 Election, 11 November 2019, [url](#)

³³ Enab Baladi, 2021 Elections. "Entitlement" or "illegal" procedure, 2 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁴ The Syria Study Group is a bipartisan task force mandated by the US Congress to make recommendations for US policy in Syria. Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 28

1.3 International involvement

The conflict in Syria has drawn the involvement of countries such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, the US, Israel and others. The conflict is viewed as being more about the geopolitical future of the Middle East rather than only about Syria.³⁵

Russia intervened militarily in the Syrian conflict in September 2015, in support of the Syrian government³⁶ and is credited with changing the tides of war in Assad's favour.³⁷ Russia's military presence was focused mainly on an aerial campaign with a naval component. Ground forces consisted 'primarily of special forces, which focused on training, advising, and assistant partner forces and conducting special reconnaissance missions'.³⁸ Russia has been providing air support to the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in the ongoing military offensive in north-west Syria.³⁹

Since 2012, Iran has supplied Assad's troops with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) advisors, a network of Shia foreign fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah and various militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.⁴⁰ Iran has also played an important role in the foundation of the Syrian pro-government militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF), which were formed under IRGC supervision.⁴¹ These forces are fighting on behalf of the Syrian government against anti-government groups and ISIL.⁴² Several sources reported that Iranian-backed armed groups are taking part in the ongoing GoS offensive in north-west Syria.⁴³

Turkey has been involved in Syria's conflict since 2011, supporting opposition groups attempting to remove the Assad government from power, such as the Free Syrian Army-branded factions and Islamist groups.⁴⁴ Turkey's main objective in Syria has been to prevent the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from 'establishing an autonomous area along Syria's northern border with Turkey'.⁴⁵ US CRS stated that Turkey 'maintains military forces in northern Syria as part of a broader campaign targeting Kurdish fighters'.⁴⁶ During 2019, Turkey engaged in military confrontations with

³⁵ Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, The War Report 2018, April 2019, [url](#), pp. 124-125; Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 12

³⁶ US CRS, Syria Conflict Overview: 2011-2018, 23 January 2019, [url](#), p. 2; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 21

³⁷ EPRS, Russia in the Middle East. From Sidelines to center Stage, November 2018, [url](#), p. 2; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 21

³⁸ Borshchevskaya, A., Shifting Landscape, Russia's military role in the Middle East, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2019, [url](#), p. 5

³⁹ Daily Sabah, Russia resumes airstrikes in Syria's opposition-held Idlib, 15 January 2020, [url](#); Guardian (The), Russian-led airstrikes kill 18 in Syria as tens of thousands flee attacks, 21 January 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁰ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 22-23; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 27-28

⁴¹ ISW, Iran's Assad Regime, 8 March 2017, [url](#), p. 3; Omran Centre for Strategic Studies, Changing the Security Sector in Syria, 01 October 2017, [url](#), p. 90

⁴² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁴³ Al Monitor, What brought Iranian forces to Idlib front?, 5 February 2020, [url](#); Telegraph (The), Exclusive: Leaked recordings show how Qassim Soleimani's soldiers are on frontlines of Syria's last rebel stronghold, 26 January 2020, [url](#); USDOS, Attacks on the People of Idlib. Press Statement Michael R. Pompeo. Secretary of State, 27 January 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴ Manhoff, T., Turkey's Foreign Policy Towards Syria. From Neo-Ottoman Adventurism to Neo-Ottoman Realpolitik, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, December 2017, [url](#), p. 5; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 17-18

⁴⁵ US CRS, Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief, 1 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴⁶ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), Summary

GoS forces in north-east⁴⁷ and north-west Syria⁴⁸, as well as with Kurdish forces⁴⁹. As of late February 2020, Turkey has significantly increased its military activities against GoS forces in north-west Syria.⁵⁰

The US-led Global Coalition Against Daesh [ISIL], currently comprising of 82 states, was formed in 2014 to combat ISIL in Iraq and Syria⁵¹ and since September 2014 has carried out military operations against ISIL and other targets in Syria.⁵² Under President Donald Trump, the US reduced its involvement in the Syrian conflict⁵³ and as of December 2019, 600 US troops remained in Syria.⁵⁴ In 2019, the US continued operations against ISIL in Syria.⁵⁵

Since the start of the conflict in 2011, Israel has carried out air strikes against mainly Hezbollah and Iranian targets in Syria⁵⁶, which it considers to represent a security threat to its borders.⁵⁷ These airstrikes continued in 2020.⁵⁸

According to the Council on Foreign Relations 'external military intervention—including the provision of arms and military equipment, training, air strikes, and even troops—in support of proxies in Syria threatens to prolong the conflict'. International actors, including the US-led coalition, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Israel operate 'in proximity to one another complicating the civil war and raising concerns over an unintended escalation'.⁵⁹

1.4 Armed actors

Three main campaigns have driven the conflict in Syria: 'coalition efforts to defeat the Islamic State, violence between the Syrian government and opposition forces, and military operations against Syrian Kurds by Turkish forces'.⁶⁰

1.4.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

The Syrian Armed Forces consist of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), the navy, the air force, the intelligence services and the National Defense Forces.⁶¹ Bashar al Assad acts as the commander in chief of the SAA

⁴⁷ Reuters, Syrian army, Turkish forces clash near border: state media, 30 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁸ AA, Turkey neutralizes 101 Assad regime military personnel, 10 February 2020, [url](#); DW, Turkey targets Syria troops in deadly counterattack, 3 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁹ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 29 July – 4 August 2019, [url](#), p. 3; Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 30 September – 6 October 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁰ BBC News, Syria war: Turkey intensifies Idlib onslaught after air strike, 1 March 2020, [url](#); New York Times (The), Turkey Declares Major Offensive Against Syrian Government, 1 March 2020, [url](#); International Crisis Group, Deadly Clashes in Syria's Idlib Show Limits of Turkey's Options, 29 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵¹ Notable states that are members of the coalition include USA, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom. See Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, The War Report 2018, April 2019, [url](#), p. 125; See also Global Coalition, 82 Partners United in Ensuring Daesh's Enduring Defeat, n.d., [url](#)

⁵² Business Insider, Trump reportedly wants to get out of Syria — here's how many troops the US has in the country, 4 April 2018, [url](#)

⁵³ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 30; International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁴ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁶ National Interest (The), Why Syria Hates Israel's Hard-To-Stop "Suicide" Drones, 9 March 2020, [url](#); US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁷ Reuters, Syrian state media: Israeli missile strike kills four civilians, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁸ BBC News, Syria war: Israel 'hits Iran-backed fighters near Damascus', 6 February 2020, [url](#); MEE, Israel launches air strikes in Syria, casualties reported, 6 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁹ CFR, Civil War in Syria, 20 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁰ CFR, Civil War in Syria, 20 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶¹ CIA World Factbook, Syria, 20 February 2020, [url](#)

and the armed forces.⁶² Operational control of the forces was maintained by the Chief of Staff of the Syrian Armed Forces.⁶³

The SAA is said to rely often on key praetorian units such as the Republican Guard, the 4th Armored Division and the Special Forces for offensive operations. These units are reportedly mainly composed of Alawites loyal to the regime and reported to have received preferential access to modern weapons.⁶⁴ The 4th Division is described to be made up of 'elite' forces although in practice it is 'a collection of loosely affiliated units'⁶⁵, reportedly under the command of the president's brother - Maher Assad.⁶⁶

According to Gregory Waters⁶⁷ of International Review, as of 17 March 2020 deployments of the SAA included units of:

- the Republican Guard with deployments in Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqqa and Deir Ez-Zor governorates;
- 4th Division with deployments predominantly in Latakia and Aleppo governorates, but also in Idlib, Hama, Dar'a and Deir Ez-Zor governorates;
- Engineering Department with deployments in Idlib governorate;
- 1st Corps, which included the 15th Special Forces Division (Idlib, Hama and Sweida governorates), 5th Division (Dar'a and Hama governorates), 7th Division (Hama, Quneitra, Dar'a and Deir Ez-Zor governorates) and 9th Division (Hama and Dar'a governorates);
- 2nd Corps, which included the 14th Special Forces Division (Idlib, Damascus, Quneitra and southern Raqqqa governorates, and in southern Syria), 1st Division (Idlib, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor, Sweida governorates), and 10th Division (Damascus, Rural Damascus, Sweida, Hasaka and Hama governorates);
- 3rd Corps, which included units in Idlib and Raqqqa governorates, the 3rd Division (Hasaka and Damascus governorates), 8th Division (Idlib and Hama governorates), 11th Division (Homs, Hama and Deir Ez-Zor governorates), 17th Division (Deir Ez-Zor and Hasaka governorates), and the 18th Division (Idlib and Homs governorates);
- 4th Corps, which included units in Idlib governorate, the 2nd Division (Latakia governorate) and the 6th Division (Idlib, Latakia and Hama governorates);
- 5th Corps (Hama, Raqqqa, Latakia, Deir Ez-Zor, Homs, Aleppo and Idlib governorates);
- Border Guards (Hasaka, Homs, Dar'a, Deir Ez-Zor, Latakia and Aleppo governorates);
- Air Defense (Idlib governorate).

During 2019, combat casualties were registered by the SAA and affiliated armed groups in all governorates except Tartous. In October 2019, following an agreement between GoS and the Kurdish-led SDF the SAA returned to Raqqqa and Hasaka countryside for the first time since 2014.⁶⁸

⁶² Article 105 of Constitution of Syrian Arab Republic Syria. See Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, published by ILO, 2012, [url](#), p. 23; Omran Centre for Strategic Studies, Transformations of the Syrian Military: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring, 31 December 2018, [url](#), p. 126; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 40

⁶³ ISW, The Syrian Army Doctrinal Order of Battle, February 2013, [url](#), p. 5

⁶⁴ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 45; Waters, G., The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, Middle East Institute, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁵ Waters, G., The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, Middle East Institute, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁶ Waters, G., The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, Middle East Institute, 18 July 2019, [url](#); Omran Centre for Strategic Studies, Transformations of the Syrian Military: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring, 31 December 2018, [url](#), p. 28

⁶⁷ Gregory Waters is a researcher on the Syrian Civil War and extremist groups, primarily by using Syrian community Facebook pages and social media sources. For more information, see [url](#)

⁶⁸ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

US CRS stated that pro-GoS forces operating in Syria include Iran, Russia and the Lebanese Hezbollah.⁶⁹ Various pro-government militias, both local and foreign⁷⁰, were operating in Syria alongside the regular armed forces.⁷¹ These included local militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF) and non-Syrian militias made up of foreign fighters mainly backed by Iran.⁷²

According to the US Department of State (USDOS), the Syrian government ‘did not maintain effective control over foreign and domestic military or paramilitary organizations’, which included Russian forces, the Lebanese Hezbollah, the IRGC and pro-government militias such as NDF.⁷³

Detailed information on the mandate/structure, protection capabilities and integrity issues of government actors and affiliated armed groups is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#).

1.4.2 The Syrian National Army

In northern Aleppo governorate, anti-GoS armed groups are incorporated under the Syrian National Army (SNA), ‘a collection of Turkish-backed armed opposition groups’ which has between 25⁷⁴ to 30⁷⁵ distinct armed groups in its composition.⁷⁶ The factions that comprise the SNA are hostile towards the GoS present in south Aleppo governorate and SDF forces controlling areas in the province, but follow Turkey’s order in conducting military operations against either.⁷⁷

In October 2019, the merger between the SNA and the National Liberation Front (NLF) - a Turkey-backed alliance of opposition-armed groups that is present in the Idlib area⁷⁸, under the Syrian National Army banner was announced⁷⁹ by the so-called Syrian Interim Government.⁸⁰ While nominally the SNA is a unified structure that sits under the formal supervision of the so-called Syrian Interim Government’s Ministry of Defence⁸¹, the constituent groups ‘each answer directly to Turkey and maintains its pre-National Army form’.⁸²

The SNA supported the October 2019 Turkish-led offensive into Kurdish-controlled areas in north-east Syria.⁸³ The SNA together with Turkish armed forces was reported to be in control of the so-called ‘safe zone’ established between Tall Abyad (Raqqa governorate) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate) following the Turkish-led offensive into north-east Syria in October 2019.⁸⁴ As of March 2020⁸⁵, in

⁶⁹ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), Summary

⁷⁰ Ezzi, M., The Regime and Loyal Militias Will Struggle to Disentangle Their Relationship, Chatham House, July 2017, [url](#)

⁷¹ ACLED, Pro-government Militia Autonomy on the Battlefield in Syria, 22 March 2018, [url](#)

⁷² Finland, FIS, Syria: Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, April 2018, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 5; Al-Masri, A., Analysis: The Fifth Corps and the State of the Syrian Army, Atlantic Council, 13 January 2017, [url](#)

⁷³ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁷⁴ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 41

⁷⁵ AA, Free Syrian Army transforms into Syrian National Army, 09 October 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁶ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁷⁷ Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 53-54

⁷⁸ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 21; Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

⁷⁹ Al Monitor, Merger solidifies opposition in Syria, boosts Turkey's forces, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰ The Syrian Interim Government is the government established by the armed opposition to Assad in 2013. See USAID, Syria Complex Emergency - Fact Sheet #1, Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, 8 November 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁸¹ al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁸² COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁸³ International Crisis Group, Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria’s North East, 27 November 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁸⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 53

⁸⁵ Based on reading of the following map: Liveuamap, Syria, 1 March 2020, [url](#); Live Universal Awareness Map (“Liveuamap”) is an independent global news and information site dedicated to factual reporting of a variety of topics including conflicts, human rights issues, protests, terrorism, weapons deployment, health matters, natural disasters, and weather related

northern Aleppo governorate, SNA factions backed by Turkey controlled an area between the cities of Afrin, Azaz, Al-Bab and Jarabulus.⁸⁶ According to a November 2019 report by the Clingendael Institute, 'SNA forces greatly facilitated the realisation of two semi-autonomous Turkish protectorates in Afrin and around the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor (west of the Euphrates) and a new buffer zone between Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn (east of the Euphrates)'. The same source assessed that 'the SNA is becoming an integrated, although irregular, element of the Turkish army'.⁸⁷

Although united under the SNA banner, the constituent groups are in practice unaccountable to other actors except Turkey, compete with each other⁸⁸ and are often unpopular with the local population.⁸⁹

The total strength of the SNA was estimated by Syria expert Charles Lister⁹⁰ in a Middle East Institute article to be around 35 000 fighters⁹¹ whereas the US Defense Intelligence Agency assessed the Turkish-backed armed groups consists of between 22 000 and 50 000 fighters.⁹²

See also the chapter on [Aleppo governorate](#).

Detailed information on the SNA is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#). For profiles targeted by the SNA see the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Targeting of individuals \(March 2020\)](#).

1.4.3 Syrian Democratic Forces

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are a Kurdish-led multi-ethnic force comprising of Kurds, Arabs and other ethnic groups created in 2015 to support the US-led coalition in the war against ISIL.⁹³ The SDF is dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) who helped establish the SDF in October 2015, provides its core fighting forces and largely ensures its leadership.⁹⁴ According to the International Crisis Group, the SDF 'generally accepts that the YPG is its core fighting force, which maintains command and control'.⁹⁵

The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) were established in 2012 as the military wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – a Syrian branch of the EU⁹⁶, US⁹⁷ and Turkey-designated terrorist organisation Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).⁹⁸ They are divided into two groups: the People's Protection Units – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) – and the Women's Protection Units – Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê (YPJ). The YPG and YPJ have a military mandate that is outlined in the Social Contract of

stories, among others. It uses a vast array of sources, software tools and big data analysis to provide information in a map-centric approach. For more information see [url](#)

⁸⁶ OHCHR, Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Civilians in North-western Syria, June 2018, [url](#), p. 1; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 53

⁸⁷ Clingendael, Strategies of Turkish proxy warfare in northern Syria, November 2019, [url](#), p. 16

⁸⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁸⁹ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 9, 40

⁹⁰ Charles Lister is a senior fellow and Director of the Countering Terrorism and Extremism Program at the Middle East Institute where he focuses his work primarily on the Syrian conflict. For more information see [url](#)

⁹¹ Lister, C., Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition groups to unite under one banner, Middle East Institute, 4 October 2019, [url](#)

⁹² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 49

⁹³ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 33

⁹⁴ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 8, 33

⁹⁵ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁹⁶ European Council, Council Decision of 17 June 2002 implementing Article 2(3) of Regulation (EC) No 2580/2001 on specific restrictive measures directed against certain persons and entities with a view to combating terrorism and repealing Decision 2002/334/EC, 18 June 2002, [url](#)

⁹⁷ USDOS, Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 5 - Kurdistan Workers' Party, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁸ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 33

the Northern and Eastern Syria Autonomous Administration: ‘The People’s Protection Units is the only national organization responsible for protecting the safety of the cantons and their regional sovereignty’. The stated goal of the YPG and YPJ is to ‘protect the Kurdish people and their cultural, political, and social existence’.⁹⁹

The YPG and YPJ are reportedly ‘responsible for defense and security, including protecting the ‘external borders’ with Iraq, Turkey and the rest of Syria’.¹⁰⁰ They are also involved in clearing out ISIL remnants and other counter-insurgency operations.¹⁰¹

SDF was neither in alliance with the Syrian opposition nor the government, but it nevertheless received support from the GoS, which funded certain state institutions in the area and paid salaries to state employees.¹⁰²

Various sources estimated SDF’s strength to be around 60 000 fighters.¹⁰³ In October 2019, YPG sources claimed that SDF number 40 000 fighters.¹⁰⁴

Detailed information on the SDF is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#). For profiles targeted by the SDF see the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Targeting of individuals \(March 2020\)](#).

1.4.4 Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham

Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham or Organization for the Liberation of the Levant (HTS) is described as the most important and powerful actor in the Idlib area.¹⁰⁵ The Center for Strategic and International Studies noted in an October 2018 report that HTS’s primary objective is aimed at establishing Islamic rule in Syria through overthrowing the Assad government and ousting Iranian militias.¹⁰⁶ The US¹⁰⁷, UN, EU¹⁰⁸ and Turkey has designated HTS as a terrorist organisation affiliated with Al Qaeda.¹⁰⁹ HTS has publicly distanced itself from Al Qaeda, claiming it is an independent entity.¹¹⁰

HTS is comprised of several armed factions, including Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (also known as Jabhat al-Nusrah and previously as the Al-Nusrah Front), Ansar al-Sham and Ajnad al-Sham, among others.¹¹¹

⁹⁹ Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Military and Security Structures of the Autonomous Administration in Syria, 23 January 2018, [url](#), pp. 14-15

¹⁰⁰ Danish Institute for International Studies, Mosaics of Power. Fragmentation of the Syrian state since 2011, 2018, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁰¹ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6

¹⁰² International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 13-14; Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 59-60

¹⁰³ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Washington Post (The), U.S. launches last-ditch effort to stop Turkish invasion of northeast Syria, 4 August 2019, [url](#); Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 32

¹⁰⁴ Reuters, Syrian Kurds outgunned but vow to inflict toll on Turkish army, 10 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 6; BBC News, Syria: Who’s in control of Idlib?, 18 February 2020, [url](#); al-Tamimi, A., From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 29 June 2018, [url](#), p. 5; HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶ CSIS, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, 4 October 2018, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁰⁷ USDOS, Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 5 - Al-Nusrah Front, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸ EU, Official Journal of the European Union, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2018/855 of 8 June 2018 amending for the 286th time Council Regulation (EC) No 881/2002 imposing certain specific restrictive measures directed against certain persons and entities associated with the ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida organisations, 11 June 2018, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹ HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁰ CSIS, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, 4 October 2018, [url](#), pp. 1-2; International Crisis Group, The Jihadist Factor in Syria’s Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, 20 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹¹¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 7

Depending on the source, HTS's strength is evaluated to be between 12 000 and 20 000 fighters.¹¹² In a January 2020 report by the UN Security Council, HTS was estimated to have between 12 000 and 15 000 fighters.¹¹³

HTS has created several civilian bodies in the territory under its control, including a governance body responsible for civilian functions – the Syrian Salvation Government¹¹⁴, a court system that applies Sharia law and an extensive prison system.¹¹⁵ The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (CoI) assessed that between July 2019 and January 2020, the GoS offensive has eroded the military and political control of HTS.¹¹⁶

Detailed information on the HTS is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#). For profiles targeted by HTS see the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Targeting of individuals \(March 2020\)](#).

1.4.5 Other anti-government armed groups in the Idlib area

The National Liberation Front (NLF) is a Turkish-backed alliance of opposition-armed groups that is present and active in the Idlib area.¹¹⁷ The NLF was formed in 2018 by rebel armed groups in the Idlib area.¹¹⁸ The group is made up of moderate and but also Islamist factions¹¹⁹, including Feilaq-al Sham¹²⁰, Ahrar al-Sham¹²¹, the Free Idlib Army¹²², Jaish-al Ahrar¹²³ and Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki.¹²⁴

On 4 October 2019, the NLF merged with the Syrian National Army (SNA). NLF groups Feilaq-al Sham and Jaish-al Ahrar were reported to have been involved in Turkey's October 2019 Operation Peace Spring in north-east Syria.¹²⁵ On the ground, the NLF reportedly continues to function independently

¹¹² UN Security Council, Twenty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities [S/2019/570], 15 July 2019, [url](#), p. 7; BBC News, Syria: Who's in control of Idlib?, 18 February 2020, [url](#); CSIS, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, 4 October 2018, [url](#), p. 3

¹¹³ UN Security Council, Letter dated 20 January 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, Letter dated 27 December 2019 from the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team in accordance with paragraph (a) of annex I to resolution 2368 (2017) addressed to the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities [S/2020/53], 20 January 2020, [url](#), p. 7

¹¹⁴ al-Tamimi, A., From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 29 June 2018, [url](#), p. 16

¹¹⁵ HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 7

¹¹⁷ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 21; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

¹¹⁸ Lund, A., Syrian war: Understanding Idlib's rebel factions, The New Humanitarian, 3 September 2018, [url](#)

¹¹⁹ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

¹²⁰ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 21-22

¹²¹ According to International Crisis Group interviews conducted in August, November and December 2018 with a former rebel commander, a Syrian opposition politician, a former Syrian local governance official, a Syrian activist. International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 22-23

¹²² Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

¹²³ Lund, A., A Jihadist Breakup in Syria, Foreign Affairs, 15 September 2017, [url](#)

¹²⁴ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

¹²⁵ Al Monitor, Who are Turkish-backed forces in latest Syria incursion?, 13 October 2019, [url](#)

of the SNA.¹²⁶ NLF was reported to be involved in the ongoing clashes with GoS forces in north-west Syria.¹²⁷

Smaller, predominantly Islamist armed opposition groups also operate in the Idlib area and include the Al Qaeda affiliate¹²⁸ Hurras al-Din (HAD)¹²⁹, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)¹³⁰ and Ansar al-Tawhid¹³¹, among others.

Detailed information on the anti-GoS armed groups operating in the Idlib area is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#).

1.4.6 Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as ISIS, IS and Daesh) was originally created by the wing of Al Qaeda in Iraq and smaller Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups.¹³² ISIL is a UN and EU¹³³ designated terrorist organisation.¹³⁴ ISIL began capturing territory in Syria in 2013 which attracted an international US-led coalition military response. Turkey has conducted ground operations against ISIL since 2016.¹³⁵ By August 2017, the US-led coalition has conducted over 11 000 airstrikes in Syria against ISIL targets.¹³⁶ GoS forces also fought against ISIL, reclaiming territories such as Palmyra¹³⁷, while Russia claimed air strikes on ISIL targets.¹³⁸

ISIL lost territorial control in Syria in March 2019¹³⁹, and has since operated as a covert network.¹⁴⁰ Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS James Jeffrey estimated in January 2020 that ISIL has between 14 000 and 18 000 fighters active in Syria and Iraq.¹⁴¹ Detained ISIL fighters and their families in north-east Syria number more than 100 000. Around 2 000 foreign ISIL fighters are detained in the area. Borders between Iraq and Syria are not adequately secured which allows some movement of ISIL fighters between the two countries.¹⁴²

¹²⁶ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi [blog], The Structure of the Syrian National Army, 21 November 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁷ Al Jazeera, Rebels kill dozens of soldiers in Syria's Idlib: State media, 23 January 2020, [url](#); Al Monitor, Is Turkey planning to curb radicals in Idlib under strategy shift?, 16 February 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁸ Zelin, A., Hurras al-Din: The Overlooked al-Qaeda Group in Syria, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 24 September 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁹ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, United States Institute of Peace, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 22

¹³⁰ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 56; International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

¹³¹ According to an activist, a rebel commander and a humanitarian analyst interviewed by International Crisis Group in October-November 2018. International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹³² Cambanis, T. et. al, Hybrid Actors. Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East, The Century Foundation, 15 November 2019, [url](#), p. 106

¹³³ European Council. Council of the European Union, EU terrorist list, n.d., [url](#)

¹³⁴ UN Security Council, Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends One Entry on Its Sanctions List, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁵ CFR, Civil War in Syria, 20 February 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁶ USDOD, Airstrikes updates, n.d., [url](#)

¹³⁷ New York Times (The), A Jewel in Syria Where 'Ruins Have Been Ruined' by ISIS, 4 April 2016, [url](#)

¹³⁸ Al Jazeera, Only a third of Russian airstrikes in Syria target ISIL, US official says, 9 January 2016, [url](#); Reuters, Four-fifths of Russia's Syria strikes don't target Islamic State: Reuters analysis, 21 October 2015, [url](#)

¹³⁹ Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰ UN Security Council, Tenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat [S/2020/95], 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁴¹ USDOS, News conference with Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, 23 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴² UN Security Council, Letter dated 20 January 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, Letter dated 27 December 2019 from the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team in accordance with paragraph (a) of annex I to resolution 2368 (2017) addressed to the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989

The United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) assessed that ISIL retains ‘clandestine networks in a number of Syrian cities, and an insurgent presence in much of rural Syria’.¹⁴³ ISIL retained capability to conduct ‘ambushes, assassinations, and IED [improvised explosive device] attacks similar in size, frequency, and complexity to those ISIS has carried out since it lost its last controlled territory in March 2019’.¹⁴⁴ Another source described ISIL military operations as guerrilla warfare and hit-and-run tactics due to lack of capacity.¹⁴⁵

From March through mid-October 2019, ISIL claimed to have conducted 321 insurgent attacks in Deir Ez-Zor governorate, 100 in Hasaka governorate, 98 in Raqqqa governorate, 32 in Homs governorate, 9 in Aleppo governorate, 8 in Dar’a governorate, and 3 in Damascus.¹⁴⁶ The UN Security Council reported in July 2019 that ISIL has carried out at least 30 attacks against the US-led coalition forces in Syria since the beginning of 2019.¹⁴⁷

The UN Security Council reported increased ISIL activity in Deir Ez-Zor and Hasaka governorates, particularly targeting the international US-led coalition and local non-state armed actors.¹⁴⁸ ISIL operations were reported to continue in Raqqqa, Hasaka and Deir Ez-Zor governorates.¹⁴⁹ The US Department of Defense (USDOD), reporting for the period between October and December 2019, stated that ‘despite the disruption in counter-ISIS efforts after the Turkish incursion, CJTF-OIR said that ISIS capabilities remained basically the same and that attacks had decreased this quarter’. The US Defense Intelligence Agency however, assessed that ISIL claimed around 20 % more attacks in each month in north-east Syria following the Turkish offensive of October 2019.¹⁵⁰

ISIL was also active in GoS-held areas to the south of the Euphrates.¹⁵¹ Attacks on GoS forces were recorded in the desert areas of Homs and Deir Ez-Zor governorates. In southern Syria, ISIL claimed attacks on GoS officials in Dar’a governorate, suggesting a potential resurgence in the area.¹⁵² ISIL was also reported to have a latent presence in rebel-held Idlib¹⁵³ where ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed following a US raid in October 2019.¹⁵⁴

USCENTCOM stated that ISIL had higher rate of success in attacking GoS forces, members of the Kurdish civil administration, other extremist organisations, and civilians, than it had against US

(2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities [S/2020/53], 20 January 2020, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

¹⁴³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 38

¹⁴⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 40

¹⁴⁵ Hassan, M., How ISIS Is Restructuring and Repositioning, Chatham House, February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶ Zelin, A., The Islamic State in Syria After the U.S. Withdrawal, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷ UN Security Council, Letter dated 15 July 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, 15 July 2019, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁴⁸ UN Security Council, Tenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat [S/2020/95], 4 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

¹⁴⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 39

¹⁵⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 38

¹⁵¹ USDOS, News conference with Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, 23 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 39-40

¹⁵³ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

¹⁵⁴ Ingram, H. and Whiteside, C., Caliph Abu Unknown: Succession and Legitimacy in the Islamic State, War on the Rocks, 25 November 2019, [url](#)

coalition forces.¹⁵⁵ In Syria's central desert, along the M20 highway that runs between Palmyra and Deir Ez-Zor, GoS soldiers and affiliated militiamen were reported to be killed almost daily in ISIL attacks carried along the highway.¹⁵⁶

The UN Security Council assessed that ISIL maintains financial reserves ranging between US 50 million and USD 300 million.¹⁵⁷ Extortion of residents in Deir Ez-Zor and Hasaka governorates was reported to occur more openly.¹⁵⁸

Further information on ISIL is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#).

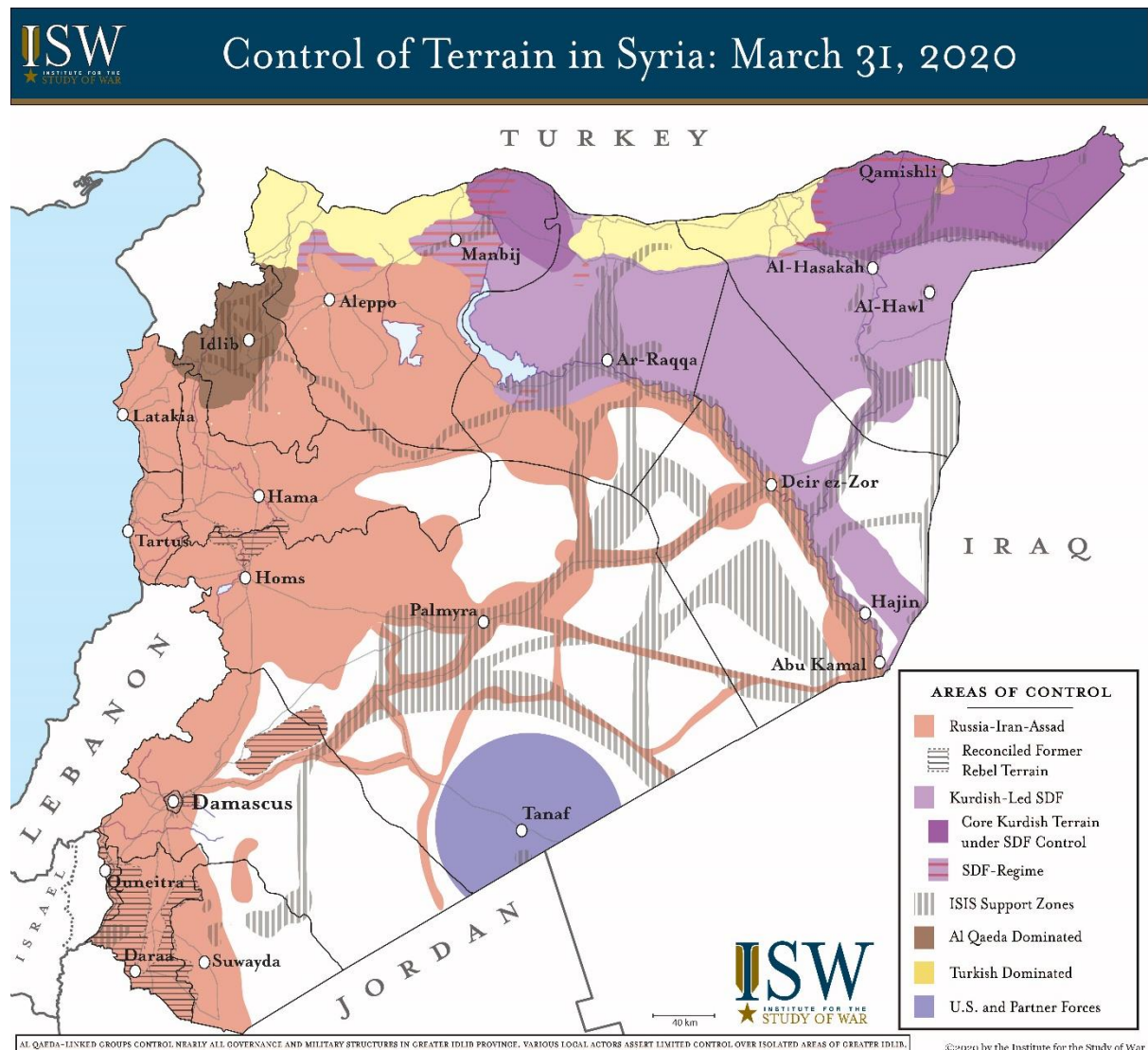
¹⁵⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 39

¹⁵⁶ Lister, C., In Syria, We're Getting Counter-terrorism All Wrong, Asharq Al-Awsat, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷ UN Security Council, Letter dated 20 January 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, Letter dated 27 December 2019 from the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team in accordance with paragraph (a) of annex I to resolution 2368 (2017) addressed to the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities [S/2020/53], 20 January 2020, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁵⁸ UN Security Council, Tenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat [S/2020/95], 4 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

1.5 Recent security trends



Map 2: © ISW, Control of terrain in Syria, 31 March 2020

1.5.1 Areas under the control of the Government of Syria (GoS)

As of March 2020, the GoS controlled most of the country¹⁵⁹, including the major cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, and nearly all the governorates capitals.¹⁶⁰ Border crossings with Jordan¹⁶¹ and Iraq for commercial traffic have been reopened.¹⁶² Following territorial gains by GoS in western Aleppo countryside in February 2020, internal flights from Aleppo were resumed and the first commercial flight between Aleppo and Damascus took place for the first time since 2012.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Based on reading of the Map 2: ISW, Control of terrain in Syria, 31 March 2020

¹⁶⁰ Lund, A., From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, July 2019, [url](#), p. 33

¹⁶¹ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 39

¹⁶² VOA, Syria, Iraq Officially Reopen Albukamel Border Crossing Closed Since 2014, 30 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶³ Arab Weekly (The), Syria's Aleppo airport resumes flights for 1st time in years, 19 February 2020, [url](#)

With Russian and Iranian support, GoS has regained control of the majority of territory from opposition forces, including opposition strongholds like Aleppo City¹⁶⁴, Dar'a governorate, eastern Ghouta, southern Damascus, Homs governorate and territories in Hama governorate.¹⁶⁵ The rebel-held Idlib area which includes neighbouring areas in north-western Aleppo, northern Hama and Latakia governorates¹⁶⁶ is regarded as the main remaining obstacle facing GoS in regaining territorial control of Syria.¹⁶⁷

According to a September 2019 report by the US Congress-appointed Syria Study Group, despite holding 60 % of the country's territory, the government's control outside Damascus 'is tenuous, in part because it lacks the forces to secure the areas it retakes, but also because it pursues punitive policies against local populations'.¹⁶⁸ Other sources pointed out that despite the government's ability to recapture the majority of Syria's territories, the conflict significantly affected the state's role, reach and institutional capacity in government-held areas.¹⁶⁹ In areas nominally under the government's control, its capacity to use force was reported to be 'dispersed, fragmented, and outsourced to multiple groups in the form of pro-regime paramilitaries, foreign powers and local militias'.¹⁷⁰

A number of Syria observers reported that pro-government militias are a potentially destabilising element that could undermine security and government control. The militia leaders have become powerful figures in the political landscape, and cannot just be removed.¹⁷¹ Freedom House stated that pro-government militias are 'largely autonomous and free to exploit the population in areas they control'.¹⁷² Checkpoints extracting bribes are reportedly a common phenomenon across GoS-held areas.¹⁷³

Violent clashes between pro-government militias for access to and control of territories, control of smuggling and extortion networks have occurred throughout the conflict.¹⁷⁴ Criminality is reported to be a main driver behind the activities of pro-government militias that make up the NDF¹⁷⁵, as many have reportedly turned into a mafia known for 'stealing, looting, corruption, gun smuggling, drug smuggling, and committing violations against civilians'.¹⁷⁶ Militias also extorted companies and confiscated private property to varying degrees.¹⁷⁷ At times, pro-government militias have engaged in direct confrontations with state authorities.¹⁷⁸ This has led to 'arrests of lower-ranking figures, attacks and clashes, and alleged assassinations of one another's reconciled opposition fighters'.¹⁷⁹ In some places in Homs, Hama and Aleppo provinces, clashes between militias escalated into exchanges of machine gun fire and the use of RPG rocket launchers, resulting in civilian

¹⁶⁴ CFR, Civil War in Syria, 20 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵ OHCHR, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁶⁶ ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 11-24 2019, 27 September 2019, [url](#); International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁶⁷ ISW, Russia enables new Syria regime offensive in Idlib, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁶⁹ Haid, H., Understanding the characteristics of the new emerging state in Syria, Chatham House, June 2019, [url](#); Khatib, L. and Sinjab, L., Syria's Transactional State How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power, Chatham House, October 2018, [url](#), p. 17; Collombier, V. (et. al), Armed conflicts and the erosion of the state, MENARA Working Papers, 22 November 2018, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁷⁰ Danish Institute for International Studies, Mosaics of Power. Fragmentation of the Syrian State Since 2011, 2018, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁷¹ Jenkins, B. M., The dynamics of Syria's civil war, Rand Corporation, 2014, [url](#), p. 6; Khaddour, K., Syria's Troublesome Militias, Carnegie Middle East Center, 5 November 2018, [url](#); Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 49

¹⁷² Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2019 - Syria, 24 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁷³ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 23

¹⁷⁴ Washington Post (The), Assad's control over Syria's security apparatus is limited, 30 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁵ Finland, FIS, Syria: Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, April 2018, 14 December 2018, [url](#), pp. 32-33

¹⁷⁶ Omran Centre for Strategic Studies, Transformations of the Syrian Military: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring, 31 December 2018, [url](#), p. 111

¹⁷⁷ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2019 - Syria, 4 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸ ECFR, Can Assad Win the Peace?, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 16-17

¹⁷⁹ Washington Post (The), Assad's control over Syria's security apparatus is limited, 30 July 2019, [url](#)

casualties.¹⁸⁰ In GoS-held areas in Deir Ez-Zor governorate which have been recaptured from ISIL, militias were reported to be in control and engaging in criminality and extortion of civilians.¹⁸¹ While GoS has sometimes engaged in operations to bring unaccountable pro-GoS militias under its control¹⁸², ‘enforcement remains uneven’.¹⁸³

In areas retaken by GoS through the so-called reconciliation agreements, such as Dar’a governorate, eastern Ghouta or Quneitra, the CoI assessed that ‘the plethora of actors involved, combined with competing approaches to “reconciliation” [...] contributed to a fragile security situation’.¹⁸⁴

In Dar’a governorate some non-state armed groups retained military control over parts of the governorate after the ‘reconciliation’.¹⁸⁵ The fragmented security landscape, without a clear ultimate authority and competing security actors, has led Dar’a to become in 2019 ‘one of the most violent regions of the country’.¹⁸⁶ In Dar’a governorate there have been ‘hit-and-run strikes on government checkpoints, assassinations, and a general sense of lawlessness’.¹⁸⁷ A European University Institute research project report published in November 2019 stated that despite the wide presence of the SAA and government security apparatuses in the western region of Dar’a, ‘the region witnesses unclaimed guerrilla attacks, IED explosions, assassinations and kidnappings of former rebels, government officials, Syrian army soldiers and security apparatus members’.¹⁸⁸ Syria expert Charles Lister noted that a ‘substantial portion of attacks’ that took place during 2019 in southern Syria were part of an organised armed insurgency against the GoS that was re-emerging in the area.¹⁸⁹ In the beginning of March 2020, armed militants attacked and captured GoS checkpoints in Al-Sanamayn city¹⁹⁰, before a settlement was reached between the two sides.¹⁹¹ (see chapter on [Dar’a governorate](#)).

Between December 2019 and January 2020, attacks using small arms and explosive devices by local cells of former opposition fighters were reported in south-west Syria. This situation attracted an increased deployment of GoS forces in the area and detention of individuals with former links to anti-GoS armed groups. Tensions between local population and GoS forces, as well as targeting of former opposition and pro-GoS individuals were reported to continue.¹⁹²

For the reporting period 11 July 2019 to 10 January 2020, the CoI described the situation in south and central Syria to remain volatile, reporting ISIL attacks on GoS forces in Dar’a, Deir Ez-Zor and Homs governorates.¹⁹³ During 2019, ISIL claimed attacks in Dar’a and launched larger-scale attacks against

¹⁸⁰ Denmark, DIS, DRC, Syria. Security Situation in Damascus. Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁸¹ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 23

¹⁸² COAR, Syria Update: 16-22 October 2019, 23 October 2019, [url](#), p. 10; International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 23; Al Modon, من يُلطِّخُ سمعة سهيل الحسن؟ [Who is staining Suheil Hassan’s name], 23 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸³ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 23

¹⁸⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 14

¹⁸⁵ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Dar’a, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

¹⁸⁷ Makki, D., As violence flares up in Daraa, control can be an illusion, Middle East Institute, 3 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁸ Al-Jabassini, A., Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries, European University Institute, 4 November 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁸⁹ Lister, C., Southern Syria Shows the War’s Changed Nature, Asharq Al-Awsat, 2 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰ SOHR, Local gunmen respond to regime security crackdown in Al-Sanamayn by attacking regime positions in east and west Daraa, 1 March 2020, [url](#); Al Masdar News, Syrian Army launches new anti-terror operation in Daraa, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹¹ SOHR, The regime forces and Russia impose a new settlement in al-Sanamin and displace 26 of who reject it to the north of Syria, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁹³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 5

Syrian security forces from the Badia desert in central Syria.¹⁹⁴ Periodic ISIL attacks on Syrian security forces positions outside the city of Palmyra, in Homs governorate were reported.¹⁹⁵ GoS soldiers and affiliated militiamen were reported to be killed almost daily in ISIL attacks on the highway linking Palmyra and Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁹⁶ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) estimated that between March and December 2019 at least 309 members of GoS forces and affiliated armed groups were killed in ISIL attacks west of the Euphrates, Deir Ez-Zor, Homs and Sweida.¹⁹⁷

In Kurdish-controlled areas in north-east Syria, following an agreement concluded in October 2019 with SDF, GoS forces have been deployed in a number of locations including Manbij and Kobane in Aleppo governorate, and Tal Tamr, Tabqa and Ayin Issa in Raqqqa governorate.¹⁹⁸ Christopher Kozak of ISW assessed in November 2019 that the SDF are still in control on the ground in Kurdish-controlled territories and there has not been a governance handover to the Syrian government following the agreement.¹⁹⁹

GoS-held areas situated in proximity to the conflict with anti-GoS armed groups occupying territory in Idlib governorate²⁰⁰, western Aleppo governorate²⁰¹, northern Hama²⁰² and north-eastern Latakia²⁰³ have been hit by artillery and rocket attacks during 2019.²⁰⁴ As of March 2020, a GoS military offensive into the rebel-held areas in north-west Syria was ongoing. GoS advances in southern Idlib and western Aleppo governorate have caused civilian casualties, massive displacement and infrastructure damage in the area.²⁰⁵ The GoS offensive has also attracted a military response by Turkey, resulting in direct confrontations between the two sides²⁰⁶ and increased tensions between Turkey and Russia.²⁰⁷

In 2019, the Israeli Air Force continued to attack Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria and air strikes targeting pro-government positions were recorded in southern Quneitra, Homs, and reportedly in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates, with some strikes being alleged to have led to civilian deaths and injuries.²⁰⁸ Israeli air strikes on targets in GoS-controlled areas were also reported in the beginning of 2020.²⁰⁹

¹⁹⁴ International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), p. 23

¹⁹⁵ According to International Crisis Group interviews with Badiya residents and humanitarian workers, April-June 2019. International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), p. 23

¹⁹⁶ Lister, C., In Syria, We're Getting Counter-terrorism All Wrong, Asharq Al-Awsat, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁷ SOHR, ISIS in 2019: "Caliphate" shifts from a "State" to "sleepers cells", regaining a strong foothold in the Syrian Desert, killing hundreds of regime soldiers and loyalists, Deir ez-Zor a hotbed for chaos and exploitation by ISIS... and "Al Hol mini-state" is ticking-bomb, 29 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁸ Based on reading of the map Syria Areas of Influence 2020 in US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁹⁹ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

²⁰⁰ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 6 December 2019, [url](#)

²⁰¹ AP, Syria's Aleppo symbol of Assad's wins and of enduring war, 13 August 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, 29 January 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²⁰² UN Human Rights Council, Statement by Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic at the 41st Session of the UN Human Rights Council, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 5

²⁰⁴ AP, Syria's Aleppo symbol of Assad's wins and of enduring war, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), pp. 3-4

²⁰⁶ NBC, Turkey-Syria clashes escalate as 800,000 displaced people battle bitter temperatures, 14 February 2020, [url](#); CNN, Turkey suffers first deaths in direct combat with Syria since start of war, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁷ France24, Turkey seeks to defuse tension with Russia in Syria, 21 February 2020, [url](#); CBS, Tensions rise as NATO urges Syria and Russia to halt airstrikes, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

²⁰⁹ BBC News, Israel-Gaza sees surge of cross-border violence, 24 February 2020, [url](#); MEE, Israel launches air strikes in Syria, casualties reported, 6 February 2020, [url](#)

According to International Crisis Group, GoS nominally controlled areas such as Dar'a, Deir Ez-Zor city, and parts of Aleppo and Homs, 'are inhospitable for returnees due to heavy destruction, the reign of abusive pro-regime militias, security problems such as ISIS attacks or a combination of all three'.²¹⁰

The conflict has had 'devastating consequences for Syria's economic activity' due to the destruction of physical and human resources, forced migration and dissolution of economic networks.²¹¹ Enab Baladi reported that the UN estimated the annual average per capita income for 2018 at USD 479.²¹² In December 2019, the Syrian pound rapidly declined in value, causing an overall increase in price of staple goods.²¹³ International sanctions against Syria have reinforced the negative impact of the conflict on the Syrian economy.²¹⁴

1.5.2 Areas under control of Turkish-backed armed groups

In the 'Operation Euphrates Shield' (area between Azaz, Al-Bab, and Jarablus) and 'Operation Olive Branch' (Afrin district)²¹⁵ areas in northern Aleppo governorate, controlled by Turkish-backed armed groups operating under the SNA umbrella²¹⁶, clashes and asymmetric attacks between different SNA factions have been frequently reported²¹⁷, leading occasionally to civilian casualties.²¹⁸ The UN and other human rights organisations documented kidnappings, abductions, torture, extortion and assassinations of civilians at the hands of armed groups operating under the SNA.²¹⁹ IED activity was reported to have increased during 2019 in areas controlled by Turkey-backed armed groups, registering an average of 14 attacks per month.²²⁰

In the Afrin district, the security situation was described to have 'deteriorated considerably'²²¹ during 2019, with a general absence of rule of law²²² and renewed hostilities²²³ being reported. In Afrin, the YPG is reported to wage 'a low-level insurgency against the Turkish military and its Syrian rebel allies'.²²⁴ YPG-associated Kurdish armed groups, Ghadab al-Zaytoun and Hezen Rizgariya Efrine, 'have engaged in asymmetric warfare against factions operating under the Syrian National Army'.²²⁵ 'IED attacks, roadside ambushes, kidnappings and executions' against the Turkey-backed groups that control the area and suspected collaborators have been reported.²²⁶

The Turkish-led offensive of October 2019 into Kurdish-controlled north-east Syria, dubbed 'Operation Peace Spring' led to the creation of a so-called 'safe zone' extending to a depth of 32 km inside Syria

²¹⁰ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 22

²¹¹ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 73

²¹² Enab Baladi, Symbol of Bashar's Era Loses Its Name, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹³ Syria Direct, Residents of Damascus suffer under rising prices and economic slowdown, 8 December 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁴ Syria Direct, Economic crisis looms as Syrian pound plummets to an all-time low, 26 November 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁵ Clingendael, Turkey in northwestern Syria. Rebuilding empire at the margins, June 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²¹⁶ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9

²¹⁷ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 39, 41

²¹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 11; SOHR, Indiscriminate Gunshots Kill Two Civilians as Clashes Continue among Turkish-Backed Factions Near Al-Bab City, 9 January 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12; Al, Syria: Tell Families of Missing the Fate of Loved Ones, 13 May 2019, [url](#); HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

²²⁰ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 28 October – 3 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²²¹ HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

²²² UN Human Rights Council, Escalating violence and waves of displacement continue to torment civilians during eighth year of Syrian conflict, 11 September 2019, [url](#)

²²³ UN News, Crisis in Syria Likely to Turn Catastrophic Unless Global Community Mobilizes to Conflict, Senior United Nations Officials Warn Security Council, 19 February 2020, [url](#)

²²⁴ DW, Explained: Why Turkey wants a military assault on Syrian Kurds, 9 October 2019, [url](#)

²²⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 5

²²⁶ Bellingcat, Wrath of the Olives: Tracking the Afrin Insurgency Through Social Media, 1 March 2019, [url](#)

between the towns of Tall Abyad (Raqqa governorate) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate). In the areas west (between Jarablus and Tall Abyad) and east (between Ras al Ain and the Syrian border with Turkey and Iraq) of the 'safe zone', security zones were established by Turkey and Russia from where SDF forces were expected to withdraw. These security zones are being 'patrolled by a mix of Turkish, Russian, and Syrian forces'.²²⁷ The offensive led to around 200 000 people being displaced, as well as civilian casualties and infrastructure damage.²²⁸

Since late October 2019, Turkish-backed groups have periodically engaged in confrontations with YPG or GoS forces.²²⁹ Increased number of indiscriminate IED attacks on residential neighbourhoods and local markets in the 'Operation Peace Spring' area have been reported, leading to civilian casualties.²³⁰ The US Defense Intelligence Agency stated there have been 'several roadside bomb attacks within the Turkish zone of control as well as sporadic clashes with YPG forces'.²³¹ Turkey and YPG have accused each other for being responsible for the attacks.²³² Between December 2019 and January 2020, hostilities in the Operation Spring Peace area were reported to have decreased, but military forces continued to operate in close proximity with each other.²³³

1.5.3 Kurdish-controlled areas in north-east Syria

As of February 2020, in north-east Syria Kurdish-led SDF controlled most of Raqqa and Hasaka governorates, part of Deir Ez-Zor governorate north-east of the Euphrates, and parts of Aleppo governorate around Manbij and Kobane, and the area around Tal Rifaat.²³⁴

The military offensive against ISIL led by SDF with air support from the US-led coalition ended ISIL's territorial control in Syria after the capture of its last stronghold in Deir Ez-Zor governorate in late March 2019. The military operations caused near complete destruction of towns, displacement of tens of thousands of people and large number of civilian casualties as a result of air strikes and intense fighting between SDF and ISIL.²³⁵

The Kurdish-controlled areas in north-east Syria comprise of most of the territory that was previously under ISIL control in Syria and are viewed as 'the main theatre for ISIS's insurgency'.²³⁶ Following ISIL's territorial defeat hostilities have largely decreased but ISIL attacks continued. ISIL operations were reported to continue in Raqqa, Hasaka and Deir Ez-Zor governorates where it conducted ambushes,

²²⁷ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²²⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²²⁹ SOHR, Fierce clashes continue in Tal Tamr amid ongoing Turkish shelling, 19 February 2020, [url](#); NBC, Fighting persists near Turkish border in Syria safe zone, Kurdish officials say, 31 October 2019, [url](#); Reuters, Syrian army, Turkish forces clash near border: state media, 30 October 2019, [url](#)

²³⁰ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 6 December 2019, [url](#); OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 8 November 2019, [url](#); SOHR, 265 persons killed or injured in 21 blasts hit Turkish-held areas in north-east Syria over the past two months, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

²³¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 49

²³² Enab Baladi, Car bomb war in northern Syria, 12 December 2019, [url](#)

²³³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²³⁴ Based on reading of maps Syria Areas of Influence 2020 in US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 4; ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 5 - 18, 2020, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

²³⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 6-8; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/321], 16 April 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²³⁶ According to International Crisis Group interview with an US official, 18 May 2019. International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 23-24

assassinations, and IED attacks on SDF forces and affiliated civilians.²³⁷ In Manbij, ISIL maintained a clandestine presence²³⁸ which it used to carry out 'hit-and-run' attacks and bombings during the first months of 2019.²³⁹ ISIL attacks on SDF-controlled areas continued in 2020.²⁴⁰

US presence in SDF-controlled areas has reduced since the start of the Turkish offensive in October 2019²⁴¹, and by December 2019 there were 600 US troops remaining in Syria.²⁴² In north-east Syria, US troops numbered 500 troops which were deployed to protect the oil fields in Hasaka and Deir Ez-Zor governorates.²⁴³ Tensions between US troops and Russian²⁴⁴ and GoS-affiliated forces in north-east Syria have been reported, and in February 2020 a clash between pro-GoS forces and US troops was reported near Qamishli.²⁴⁵

The announcement of withdrawal of US troops and the Turkish military offensive into Kurdish-led SDF controlled areas have led to an unstable situation in the area.²⁴⁶

1.5.4 Areas in north-west Syria under anti-GoS armed groups control

In north-west Syria, the Idlib area incorporating parts of Idlib governorate, northern Hama, northern Latakia and western Aleppo governorates are regarded as the last remaining stronghold of anti-GoS armed groups²⁴⁷ and the largest obstacle in GoS' campaign to regain territorial control of Syria.²⁴⁸ In 2019, GoS escalated the military operations in Idlib which continued through the first two months of 2020.²⁴⁹

Since April 2019, an escalation of hostilities was reported, leading to high number of civilian deaths, massive displacement and significant damage to infrastructure.²⁵⁰ By December 2019, GoS military offensive intensified which in turn has attracted an increased military involvement from Turkey in Idlib on the side of anti-GoS armed groups.²⁵¹ Between December 2019 and January 2020, military hostilities increased significantly in parts of Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates.²⁵²

²³⁷ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 39–40

²³⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 40

²³⁹ According to International Crisis Group interview with a SDF official. International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 16–17

²⁴⁰ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 30 December 2019 – 5 January 2020, [url](#), p. 4; Enab Baladi, ISIS carried out ten attacks in Syria since start of 2020, 17 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁴¹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: October 10 – 22 2019, 24 October 2019, [url](#); WSJ, U.S. Troops Withdrawing From Syria Draw Scorn, 21 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁴² US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²⁴³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 37; Based on reading of the map Syria Areas of Influence 2020 in US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 4

²⁴⁴ WSJ, U.S. Troops in Standoffs With Russian Military Contractors in Syria, 5 February 2020, [url](#); VOA, Reports: Tensions Grow Between US, Russian Forces in Northeast Syria, 21 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁵ BBC News, Syria war: 'One killed' as US troops clash with government loyalists near Qamishli, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁶ International Crisis Group, Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East, 27 November 2019, [url](#), p. 10

²⁴⁷ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. i; BBC News, Syria: Who's in control of Idlib?, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁸ ISW, Russia enables new Syria regime offensive in Idlib, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁹ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 16

²⁵⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 1–2

²⁵¹ USIP, Amid Humanitarian Crisis, Syrian Regime Intensifies Idlib Offensive, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁵² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 1–2, 5

The GoS offensive resulted in high number of civilian casualties²⁵³, over 1 million people displaced between December 2019 and February 2020, and a humanitarian crisis which the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator described as having the potential to become the ‘biggest humanitarian horror story of the 21st Century’.²⁵⁴ Between April 2019 and late-February 2020 the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) verified at least 1 750 civilians killed as a result of the hostilities, although the actual number is considered to be higher.²⁵⁵ 299 civilians deaths were recorded during the period from 1 January 2020 and 18 February 2020 as a result of the GoS military offensive to retake areas in Idlib and Aleppo governorates. Around 93 % of the casualties were attributed to GoS forces and allies.²⁵⁶

As of late February 2020, the GoS offensive resulted in the capture of around 200 communities in eastern Idlib and western Aleppo governorates since December 2019.²⁵⁷ In February 2020, hostilities increased²⁵⁸ and frontlines are shifting rapidly.²⁵⁹ In late February 2020, Rosemary DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs stated that ‘the security situation has continued to gravely deteriorate in and around Idlib’. Referring to the increased tensions between Turkey and Russia in northwest Syria, Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, assessed that ‘the nature of the Syria conflict has changed following a “very meaningful escalation” in the past few days’, stressing the need for a ceasefire.²⁶⁰

On 5 March 2020, a ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey was agreed in the Idlib area, whereby a security corridor stretching 6 km to the north and 6 km to the south of the M4 highway was established, where joint Russian and Turkish patrols would be carried.²⁶¹ The agreement does not include any provisions of a safe zone for IDPs.²⁶² The first joint Russian and Turkish patrols following the ceasefire agreement took place on 15 March 2020²⁶³ and the truce was reported to largely hold.²⁶⁴ However, by mid-March there have been claims by Russian officials that anti-GoS militants were not complying with the ceasefire.²⁶⁵

1.5.5 Tanf

The Tanf border crossing is in the desert in the eastern part of Syria, on the main road between Damascus and Baghdad, close to the tri-border area between Syria, Iraq and Jordan. US and allied forces from the Global Coalition Against Daesh have controlled the area since 2016.²⁶⁶ According to International Crisis Group, the Tanf base has ‘served as a launching point for counter-ISIS operations

²⁵³ UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#); OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁵⁴ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁵⁵ UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁵⁶ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁵⁷ UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 9, 26 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

²⁵⁸ UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 9, 26 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

²⁵⁹ Al Jazeera, Turkish casualties as Syria rebels fight to hold on to key town, 27 February 2020, [url](#); Guardian (The), Syrian rebels retake key town in Idlib from Assad forces, 27 February 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Backed by Russian airpower, regime forces recapture Saraqib city only four days after Turkish forces and proxy factions captured it, 2 March 2020, [url](#); Charles Lister [Twitter], posted on 1 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁰ UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁶¹ Al Jazeera, Turkey says Idlib ceasefire details largely agreed on with Russia, 12 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁶² BBC News, Syria war: Idlib ceasefire between Russia and Turkey begins, 6 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁶³ Al Monitor, Syrian opposition split over Russia-Turkey patrols in Idlib, 17 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁴ New Humanitarian (The), In the news: Ceasefire appears to hold in Syria's Idlib, 9 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁵ Reuters, Russia says militants in Syria's Idlib region not complying with ceasefire, 16 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁶ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 51

and training for Syrian opposition factions' fighting ISIL.²⁶⁷ USDOD stated that the tribal militia Mughawir al Thawra has been receiving training from US forces.²⁶⁸

The Tanf border crossing and the surrounding areas are in a desolate desert area and contain no ordinary settlements except the nearby Rukban refugee camp. The camp houses internally displaced Syrians who have been denied entry to Jordan.²⁶⁹ By the end of September 2019 the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimated that 18 787 residents of Rukban left, most of them settling in Homs governorate. An estimated 12 700 residents remained in Rukban. Conditions were reported to have deteriorated in 2019, registering critical levels of food insecurity, which led the majority of the population residents to resort to negative coping mechanisms, including reliance on family/community support, money lending and child labour. Lack of access to healthcare and employment opportunities were also a major challenge.²⁷⁰

Iranian and Iran-backed forces were deployed and set up checkpoints near the Tanf area. Incidents have been recorded between US and Iranian and/or Iran-backed forces.²⁷¹

For more information see Chapter [2.6 Homs Governorate](#).

1.6 Impact of violence on the civilian population

1.6.1 Tactics and weapons used

1.6.1.1 General

Throughout the conflict government forces and associated armed groups have used a wide range of tactics to force opposition held areas into surrendering including sieges, blocking of humanitarian aid, denial of access to food and other basic services, targeted attacks on health facilities and other civilian targets.²⁷² In 2018, the last sieges came to an end as the government took control of all rebel-held neighbourhoods and villages in Damascus and southern Syria.²⁷³

Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), a not-for-profit organization who records casualties caused by explosive weapons at the global level²⁷⁴, uses a RSS reader to scan Google News for key terms which relate to explosive weapon use as: air strike, artillery, bomb, bombing, cluster bomb, cluster munitions, explosion, explosive, grenade, IED, mine, missile, mortar, rocket, shell.²⁷⁵ Between 2011 and 2018, AOAV recorded 79 206 casualties from explosive weapons, out of which 85 % (67 263) were civilians.²⁷⁶ In 2018, Syria ranked as the worst impacted country globally from explosive violence, despite a decrease in casualties and explosive violence incidents from 2017. State actors were responsible for 77 % of civilian casualties resulted from explosive violence, with airstrikes causing 53 % of the total civilian casualties recorded.²⁷⁷

²⁶⁷ International Crisis Group, Al-Tanf, Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 37

²⁶⁹ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 52

²⁷⁰ UNOCHA, Rukban Humanitarian Update, 25 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2

²⁷¹ International Crisis Group, Al-Tanf, Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁷² Siege Watch, Final Report. Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Aftermath of Syria's Sieges, May 2018, [url](#), p. 8; Damaan Humanitarian Organization, Global Rights Compliance, World Peace Foundation, Accountability for Starvation Crimes: Syria, August 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²⁷³ Siege Watch, Final Report. Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Aftermath of Syria's Sieges, May 2018, [url](#), p. 8

²⁷⁴ For more information about AOAV see [url](#)

²⁷⁵ AOAV, Methodology, n.d., [url](#)

²⁷⁶ AOAV, The Reverberating Effects of Explosive Weapon Use in Syria, January 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁷⁷ AOAV, Explosive Violence Monitor 2018, May 2019, [url](#), p. 11

Airwars²⁷⁸ recorded at least 1 099 civilians killed by Russian and/or GoS strikes during 2019, most of them as a result of the offensive on Idlib. Turkish strikes and YPG counterfire during Operation Peace Spring led to 264 civilians being killed.²⁷⁹

The US-led coalition stated that it carried out 34 763 strikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria between August 2014 and the end of December 2019. At least 1 370 civilians were ‘killed unintentionally’ in coalition actions since the beginning of the operation.²⁸⁰ Other sources claimed that the actual death toll was many times higher. Amnesty International (AI) assessed that only during the campaign to retake Raqqa that took place from June to October 2017, more than 1 600 civilians were killed ‘as a direct result of thousands of US, UK and French air strikes and tens of thousands of US artillery strikes’.²⁸¹ Airwars, which tracks allegations of civilian deaths, estimated between 8 000 and 13 000 civilians killed by coalition actions in Iraq and Syria.²⁸² According to Airwars, in 2019 the US-led coalition was responsible for 68 incidents, a decrease of 64 % from 2018, leading to an estimated 465 to 1 113 civilians killed.²⁸³

GoS and Russian airstrikes on rebel-held areas were estimated by human rights organisations to result in around 1 300 civilian fatalities between April and November 2019.²⁸⁴ Between December 2019 and January 2020, at least 344 civilians were killed as a result of airstrikes and ground-based strikes in Idlib, parts of Aleppo and Hama governorates.²⁸⁵

1.6.1.2 Deliberate attacks against civilian targets and population

According to the US Congress appointed Syria Study Group, ‘the Assad regime has deliberately and repeatedly targeted civilians in Syria with both conventional and chemical weapons’.²⁸⁶

In 2019, GoS and affiliated forces ‘carried out indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects using aerial and artillery bombing, killing and injuring hundreds of people in Idlib and Hama in north-west Syria’.²⁸⁷ The Chair of the CoI stated in July 2019 that GoS attacks on opposition-held areas have been ‘wholly disproportionate, including attacks against protected objects and residential areas’. The attacks used prohibited weapons such as cluster bombs and incendiary weapons.²⁸⁸ Attacks by HTS and affiliated armed groups on GoS positions were described by the Chair of the CoI as ‘often indiscriminate in nature’ and ‘terrorised, killed, and maimed dozens of civilians in the country-sides of Aleppo, Hama, and elsewhere’.²⁸⁹

²⁷⁸ Airwars is a collaborative, not-for-profit transparency project run by a team of professional researchers and analysts based in the Middle East, Europe, North Africa and North America. It tracks and assesses claims of civilian non-combatant casualties and ‘friendly fire’ deaths from international military actions – primarily air and artillery strikes. For more information see [url](#)

²⁷⁹ Airwars, Annual Report 2019, February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²⁸⁰ Operation Inherent Resolve, Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve Monthly Civilian Casualty Report, 13 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁸¹ AI, Syria: Unprecedented investigation reveals US-led Coalition killed more than 1,600 civilians in Raqqa ‘death trap’, 25 April 2019, [url](#)

²⁸² Airwars, US-led Coalition in Iraq & Syria, n.d., [url](#)

²⁸³ Airwars, Annual Report 2019, February 2020, [url](#), p. 7

²⁸⁴ Guardian (The), More than 1,000 killed in Syria airstrikes since April, say monitors, 20 November 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2, 5

²⁸⁶ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 34

²⁸⁷ AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2019; Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Statement by Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic at the 41st Session of the UN Human Rights Council, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Statement by Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic at the 41st Session of the UN Human Rights Council, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

GoS and allied forces carried out ground and airstrikes on civilian infrastructure in areas held by anti-GoS armed groups in north-west Syria, including medical facilities, schools²⁹⁰, local markets²⁹¹, civilian homes, bakeries and rescue operations.²⁹² Instances of direct strikes on displacement camps in Idlib which led to civilian casualties have been reported in 2019.²⁹³

The CoI stated in a January 2019 report that ‘since 2013, the Commission has documented how pro-government forces systematically target health-care infrastructure in opposition-held areas to deprive both civilians and belligerents of medical treatment’.²⁹⁴ Between 2016 and 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) confirmed 494 attacks on health care facilities in Syria, 68 % of which took place in north-west Syria. The attacks resulted in 470 people killed and 968 injured.²⁹⁵ The GoS and Russia have been accused of deliberately targeting hospitals in north-west Syria ‘using coordinates these facilities had shared with Russia through a United Nations deconfliction mechanism’.²⁹⁶ In August 2019, the UN announced that the UN Secretary-General would launch an investigation into hospital attacks in north-west Syria covering ‘destruction of, or damage to facilities on the deconfliction list and UN-supported facilities in the area’.²⁹⁷

Attacks on civilian targets and infrastructure continued in 2020.²⁹⁸

1.6.1.3 Use of IEDs and Explosive Remnants of War (ERW)

The UN Security Council stated in a December 2019 report that ‘the use of improvised explosive devices is on the rise throughout the country, with terrible consequences for civilians’.²⁹⁹ Between 9 October and 5 November 2019, OHCHR verified 92 civilian deaths in northern and north-east Syria as a result of conflict between Turkish-backed armed groups and Kurdish forces. A further 31 civilians were killed in IED attacks or by explosive remnants of war (ERW) in Hasaka, Raqqqa and Aleppo governorate and 12 others by IED or ground-based strikes conducted by Kurdish forces on Afrin, Jarablus, al-Bab and Azaz, in Aleppo governorate.³⁰⁰

OHCHR reported on the indiscriminate use of IED attacks on residential areas and local markets in areas under the control of Turkish-backed groups and SDF in north-east Syria. Incidents were recorded in Raqqqa, Hasaka and Aleppo governorates. OHCHR documented at least 49 IED attacks between 22 October and 3 December 2019, most of them in areas under the control of Turkish-backed armed groups. The attacks led to at least 78 civilian deaths and 307 injuries.³⁰¹

²⁹⁰ OHCHR, Increasing airstrike casualties in Syria being ignored – Bachelet, 26 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁹¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), pp. 1, 6

²⁹² AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2019; Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁹³ HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Syria: Idlib IDP camp hit by deadly missile attack, 21 November 2019, [url](#); OHCHR, UN human rights chief horrified by escalating humanitarian crisis in Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁹⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 7, footnote 12

²⁹⁵ WHO, In 4 years, 494 attacks on health killed 470 patients and health staff in Syria, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁹⁶ HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁹⁷ UN Secretary General, Statement attributable to the Spokesman for the Secretary-General – on UN Board of Inquiry in northwest Syria, 1 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁸ Guardian (The), Idlib province bombing kills 21 in single day, 26 February 2020, [url](#); UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-7

²⁹⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 14

³⁰⁰ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 8 November 2019, [url](#)

³⁰¹ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 6 December 2019, [url](#)

Landmines, roadside bombs (or IEDs/improvised explosive devices) and explosive remnants of war are widespread in Syria. UNOCHA assessed that 10.2 million persons live in 1 980 communities reporting explosive hazards.³⁰²

According to the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), the following groups are particularly vulnerable to the threat of such explosives: children who pick up dangerous items from the ground, agricultural workers who plough the land and internally displaced persons who may enter areas without knowing the local risks.³⁰³ Around 20 % of the victims of explosive hazards accidents reported were children.³⁰⁴

In the governorates of Aleppo, Dar'a, Rural Damascus, Idlib, Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor, landmines, explosives and IEDs have caused injuries and deaths. In the city of Raqqa alone, several hundred people were killed by explosives shortly after returning to the city in 2018.³⁰⁵ The International Campaign to Ban Landmines identified '1,465 mine/ERW casualties in Syria from multiple sources for 2018, which is a decrease from 1,906 in 2017'.³⁰⁶

According to Mine Action Review, GoS and Russian army engineers conducted ERW clearance in 2018 in Homs governorate and in the first four months of 2019 in Damascus, Quneitra and Dar'a governorates. Details on the location, scope and outcome of the clearance operations was not available.³⁰⁷

As of October 2019, UNMAS reported that it has recorded an average of 184 explosive incidents per day during 2019.³⁰⁸ Since January 2019 and as of January 2020, SOHR recorded the death of at least 247 persons, including 65 women and 68 children, as a result of landmines, unexploded ordnance and the collapse of conflict-affected buildings.³⁰⁹

UNICEF has stated that children were as much at risk in Syria in 2018 as earlier in the conflict. In 2018, 1 106 children were killed as a result of the armed conflict. That is the highest number of conflict-related child deaths in one year since the conflict started. Mine contamination was named the number one cause by far of conflict-related child deaths, with unexploded ordnance reported to have killed or injured 434 children in total in 2018.³¹⁰

1.6.1.4 Use of chemical weapons

According to US government sources, the GoS has used various chemical weapons at least 50 times since the war began.³¹¹ A 2018 report by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) noted 143 alleged chemical attacks in open sources, between 1 December 2015 and 8 October 2018.³¹² As of March 2019, the CoI was able to document 37 chemical attacks during the conflict of which 32 were attributed to Syrian government forces while for the others the perpetrators remained unknown.³¹³ In a February 2019 report, the Global Public Policy Institute collected data on at least 336 chemical weapons attacks over the course of the war, 98 % of which were attributed to the Syrian government forces.³¹⁴ In one such chemical weapon attack carried out in August 2013 by

³⁰² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 52

³⁰³ UNMAS, Syria. Explosive Hazard Contamination, March 2019, [url](#)

³⁰⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 53

³⁰⁵ UNMAS, Syria. Explosive Hazard Contamination, March 2019, [url](#)

³⁰⁶ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Landmine Monitor 2019, November 2019, [url](#), p. 57

³⁰⁷ Mine Action Review, Syria. Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants, 2019, [url](#), p. 2

³⁰⁸ UN News, Security Council: UN welcomes efforts to de-escalate crisis in northeast Syria, 24 October 2019, [url](#)

³⁰⁹ SOHR, One Civilian Killed as an Old Landmine Explodes in Afrin, Northwest of Aleppo, 4 January 2020, [url](#)

³¹⁰ UNICEF, 2018 deadliest year yet for children in Syria as war enters 9th year, 10 March 2019, [url](#)

³¹¹ New York Times (The), U.S. Says Syria Has Used Chemical Weapons at Least 50 Times During War, 13 April 2018, [url](#)

³¹² OPCW, Summary of the Activities Carried Out by the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission to Syria, 10 October 2018, [url](#), p. 4

³¹³ UN Human Rights Council, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Chemical Weapons Attacks, 12 March 2019, [url](#)

³¹⁴ GPPI, Nowhere to Hide. The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 3, 5

the Syrian government on rebel held areas in eastern Ghouta, outside Damascus, around 1 400 civilians were killed.³¹⁵

1.6.1.5 Use of cluster munition and incendiary weapons

The Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor noted in August 2019 that ‘all of the country’s 14 governorates except Tartus have experienced the use of cluster munitions since 2012’. Most cluster munitions attacks during 2018 and during the first half of 2019 were recorded in Idlib governorate.³¹⁶

Since 2012, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munition Coalition recorded 674 cluster munitions attacks in Syria. Cluster munitions continued to be used in Syria between July 2018 and July 2019, albeit at a reduced scale compared with previous years. The GoS forces were identified as being primary user of cluster munitions in attacks on opposition-held areas. Between July 2018 and July 2019 cluster munitions attacks were recorded in Idlib governorate, while there were also allegations of use in Hama, Hasaka and Deir Ez-Zor governorates.³¹⁷ The Col reported on GoS using cluster munitions in April 2019 in attacks on Idlib governorate.³¹⁸ Human Rights Watch investigated two cluster munition attacks carried in May 2019 on Idlib governorate³¹⁹, while SNHR identified at least 43 cluster munitions attacks during the first half of 2019, nearly all in Idlib governorate.³²⁰ During the military operations of the Syrian government forces between April and June 2019 against the rebel-held areas in north-west Syria, an estimated 200 civilians were killed and internationally banned and other indiscriminate weapons such as cluster munitions, barrel bombs and incendiary weapons were used in attacks on civilians.³²¹

Human Rights Watch stated that in the military campaign in north-west Syria carried in 2019, GoS and allied forces ‘used internationally banned cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, and explosive weapons with wide-area effect including improvised “barrel bombs” against schools, homes, and hospitals, destroying key towns’. More than 1 000 civilians were reported to be killed in the attacks.³²²

According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munition Coalition ‘there is strong evidence that Russia stockpiles cluster munitions in Syria at the Hmeymim airbase southeast of Latakia city and that it has used cluster munitions in Syria or, at a minimum, in joint operations with Syrian government forces since 30 September 2015’. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that cluster munitions are ‘a legal means of warfare’ adding that ‘Russian military unflinchingly adhere[s] to the norms of international humanitarian law’.³²³ The International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munition Coalition did not find evidence of the US-led coalition or Israel having used cluster munitions in Syria. ISIL was reported to have used cluster munitions in 2014. There was no comprehensive information on whether other armed groups used them.³²⁴

³¹⁵ BBC News, Syria chemical attack: What we know, 24 September 2013, [url](#); Washington Post (The), More than 1,400 killed in chemical weapons attack, U.S. says, 30 August 2013, [url](#); Guardian (The), Syria conflict: chemical weapons blamed as hundreds reported killed, 22 August 2013, [url](#)

³¹⁶ Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, Syria. Cluster Munition Ban Policy, 27 August 2019, [url](#)

³¹⁷ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munition Coalition, Cluster Munition Monitor 2019, August 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 12

³¹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 21

³¹⁹ HRW, Russia/Syria: Flurry of Prohibited Weapons Attacks, 3 June 2019, [url](#)

³²⁰ SNHR, Notable human rights violations in Syria in the first half of 2019: Nearly 43 cluster munition attacks, 4 July 2019, [url](#), p. 24

³²¹ HRW, Russia/Syria: Flurry of Prohibited Weapons Attacks, 3 June 2019, [url](#)

³²² HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

³²³ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munition Coalition, Cluster Munition Monitor 2019, August 2019, [url](#), p. 13

³²⁴ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munition Coalition, Cluster Munition Monitor 2019, August 2019, [url](#), pp. 13-14

Explosive weapons have impacted key infrastructure in Syria, leaving communities deprived of services such as clean water, sanitation, electricity, and medical care, and forcing many to flee their homes. Weapon contamination often lasts for decades, leading to casualties and preventing returns and use of the land.³²⁵ The International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munition Coalition identified 1 465 mine/ERW casualties in Syria in 2018, a drop from 1 906 in 2017. Due to limited availability of data and sources, the figures are thought to be higher in reality.³²⁶

1.6.2 Security incidents

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) collects data on violent incidents in Syria, coding each incident with the time and place, type of violent incident, the parties involved and the number of fatalities. The information is collected in a database that is openly accessible, searchable and kept continuously up to date. The data primarily come from secondary sources such as media reports. In addition, since April 2019, ACLED has incorporated data from the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Airwars and additional undisclosed local partners.³²⁷

ACLED codes security incidents as follows:

- **Battles:** violent clashes between at least two armed groups. Battles can occur between armed and organised state, non-state, and external groups, and in any combination therein. Sub-events of battles are armed clashes, government regains territory and non-state actor overtakes territory.
- **Violence against civilians:** violent events where an organised armed group deliberately inflicts violence upon unarmed non-combatants. It includes violent attacks on unarmed civilians such as sexual violence, attacks, abduction/forced disappearance.
- **Explosions/remote violence:** events where an explosion, bomb or other explosive device was used to engage in conflict. They include one-sided violent events in which the tool for engaging in conflict creates asymmetry by taking away the ability of the target to engage or defend themselves and their location. They include air/drone strikes, suicide bombs, shelling/artillery/missile attack, remote explosive/landmine/IED, grenade, chemical weapon.
- **Riots:** are a violent demonstration, often involving a spontaneous action by unorganised, unaffiliated members of society. They include violent demonstration, mob violence.
- **Protests:** public demonstration in which the participants do not engage in violence, though violence may be used against them. It includes peaceful protests, protest with intervention, excessive force against protesters.
- **Strategic developments:** information regarding the activities of violent groups that is not itself recorded as political violence, yet may trigger future events or contribute to political dynamics within and across states. It includes agreements, change to group/activity, non-violent transfer of territory, arrests.³²⁸

For the purpose of this report only the following type of events were included in the analysis: battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians. A country overview of the data on riots and protests is also provided separately (see Section [1.6.2.4 Protests and riots](#)).

EASO used the publicly available ACLED curated dataset for Middle East (14 March 2020) for security incidents figures, graphs and maps.³²⁹

³²⁵ AOAV, The Reverberating Effects of Explosive Weapon Use in Syria, January 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

³²⁶ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munition Coalition, Landmine Monitor 2019, November 2019, [url](#), p. 57

³²⁷ ACLED, Methodology overview, 10 April 2019, [url](#); ACLED, Press Release: ACLED integrates new partner data on the war in Syria, 5 April 2019, [url](#)

³²⁸ ACLED, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Codebook, October 2017, [url](#), pp. 7-14

³²⁹ ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

According to the aforementioned ACLED³³⁰, in 2019 there were 17 655 security incidents recorded in Syria: 2 814 were coded as battles, 13 674 as explosions/remote violence, and 1 167 as violence against civilians. Most security incidents were recorded in Idlib (6 447), Hama (5 119), Aleppo (2 370) and Deir Ez-Zor (1 029) governorates. The lowest number of security incidents was recorded in Tartous (2), Quneitra (25) and Damascus (38) governorates.³³¹

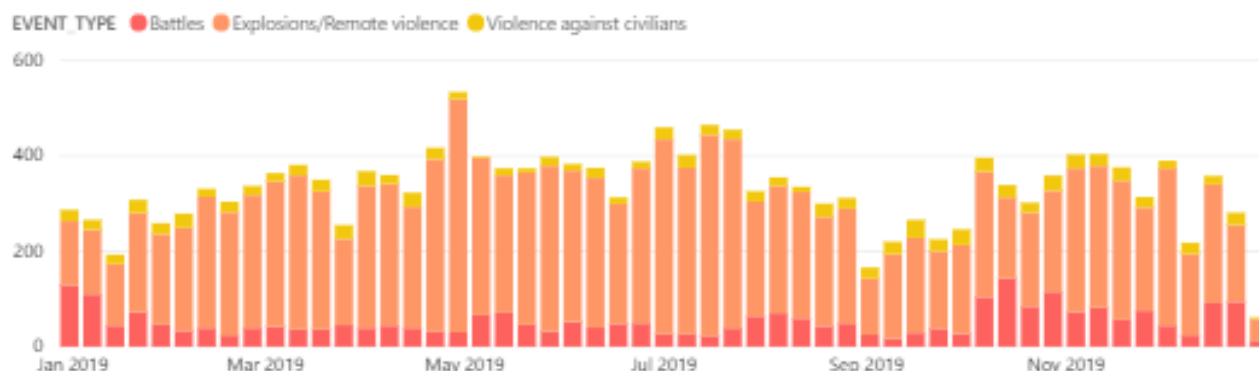


Figure 1. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in 2019, based on ACLED data³³²

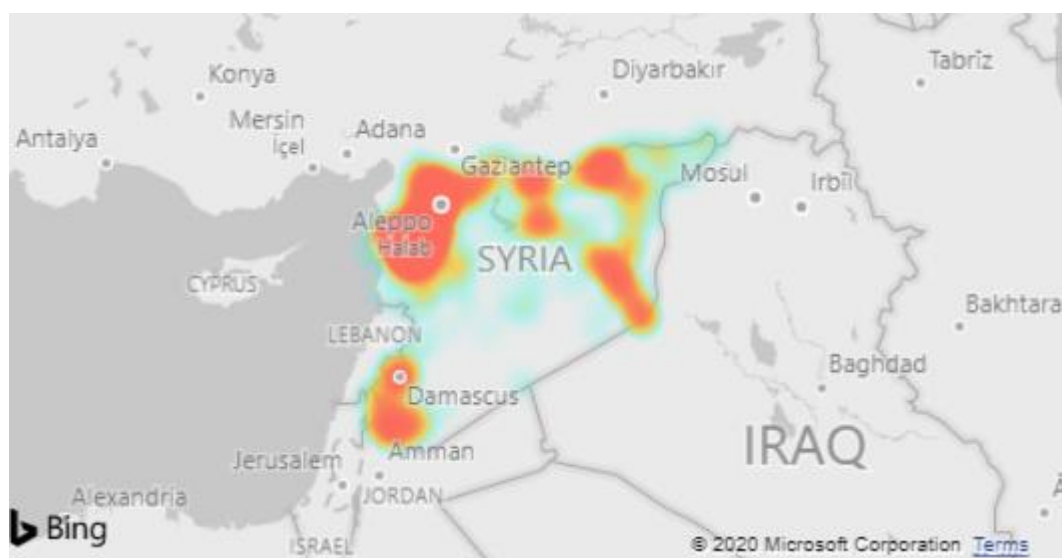


Figure 2. Heatmap of security events (coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians) occurrences in 2019 based on ACLED data³³³

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 2 672 security incidents: 661 battles, 1 844 explosions/remote violence and 167 incidents of violence against civilians. Incidents were recorded in all governorates except Tartous, with the highest number being in Idlib (1 043), Aleppo (862), Hama (172) and Hasaka (165) governorates. The fewest number of security incidents were recorded in Sweida (4), Quneitra (8) and Homs (10) governorates.³³⁴

³³⁰ ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

³³¹ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

³³² EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

³³³ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

³³⁴ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

1.6.2.1 Battles

Battles (armed clashes) is the category with the second most registered incidents. In 2019, there were 2 814 recorded by ACLED, an average of 234 battles/month. Most battles were recorded in Aleppo (563) followed by Idlib (452), Deir Ez-Zor (438) and Hasaka (390). The lowest number of battles in 2019 was recorded in Damascus (3), Quneitra (10) and Rural Damascus (25).

Most battles took place in October (424) the majority of which affected Hasaka governorate (188) with the second highest being recorded in Raqqqa governorate (85). January ranked second with 389 battles, the majority of which took place in Aleppo (122) and Deir Ez-Zor (91) governorates.³³⁵



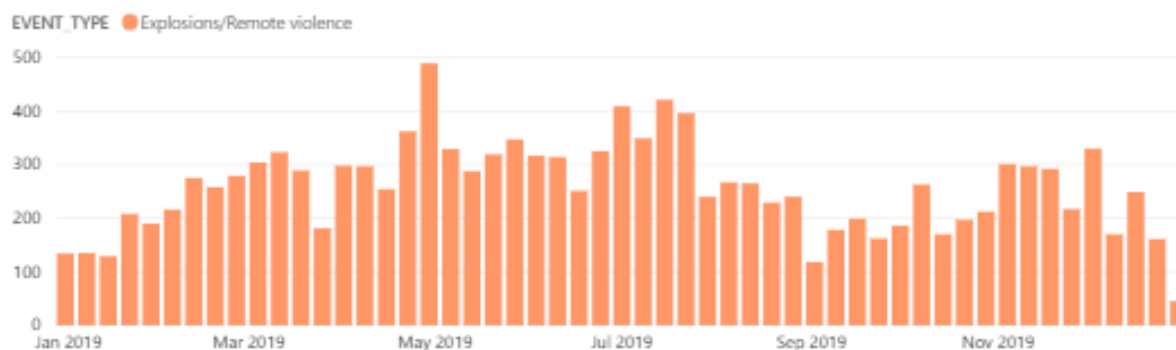
Figure 3. Evolution of 'battles' events in 2019 based on ACLED data³³⁶

The months with the lowest number of battles were September (115), the most being recorded in Aleppo (44) and Deir Ez-Zor (20) governorates, and February (127) when the most battles were recorded in Deir Ez-Zor (42) and Aleppo (34) governorates.

1.6.2.2 Explosions/remote violence

Explosions/remote violence, which includes explosive devices, artillery fire and air strikes, is the category with the highest number of individual incidents by far with 13 674 incidents recorded by ACLED in 2019. The largest number of explosions/remote violence was registered in Idlib (5 848), Hama (4 749) and Aleppo (1 600) governorates. The lowest number was in Tartous (1), Quneitra and Sweida governorates with 12 incidents each during 2019.

The figures varied from month to month, but remained high during 2019 with an average of over 1 100 incidents/month, with peaks in July 2019 (1 719) most of which were in Hama (883) and Idlib (534), and May (1 556) – the majority of which being recorded in Idlib (735) and Hama (575) governorates. Lower levels were recorded in January (699) and September (715).



³³⁵ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

³³⁶ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

Figure 4. Evolution of ‘explosions/remote violence’ events in 2019 based on ACLED data³³⁷

1.6.2.3 Violence against civilians

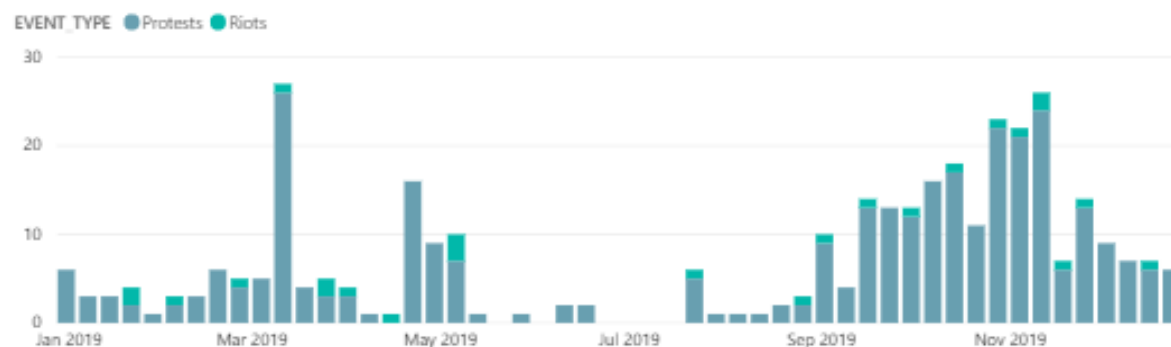
The third largest category of incidents is violence against civilians with 1 167 incidents recorded by ACLED in 2019, an average of 97 incidents/month. Most incidents during the year were recorded in Deir Ez-Zor (230), Aleppo (207), Hasaka (194) and Idlib (147) governorates. The lowest number of incidents were recorded in Tartous (1), Latakia and Quneitra (3 each) and Homs (9) governorates.

The months with the highest number of incidents of violence against civilians were September (127) with most incidents recorded in Hasaka (31) and Aleppo (26) governorates, followed by October (120) the most incidents taking place in Hasaka (26) and Idlib (19) governorates. The lowest number of incidents was recorded in May (49) and June (68).

Figure 5. Evolution of ‘violence against civilians’ events in 2019 based on ACLED data³³⁸

1.6.2.4 Protests and riots

According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 331 protests and 25 riots. Most protests took place in Idlib (95), Aleppo (74), Deir Ez-Zor (64) and Hasaka governorates (47). The largest number of riots were recorded in the governorates of Hasaka (8), followed by Aleppo (5) and Deir Ez-Zor (4).

Figure 6. Evolution of ‘protests’ and ‘riots’ events in 2019 based on ACLED data³³⁹

³³⁷ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

³³⁸ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

³³⁹ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

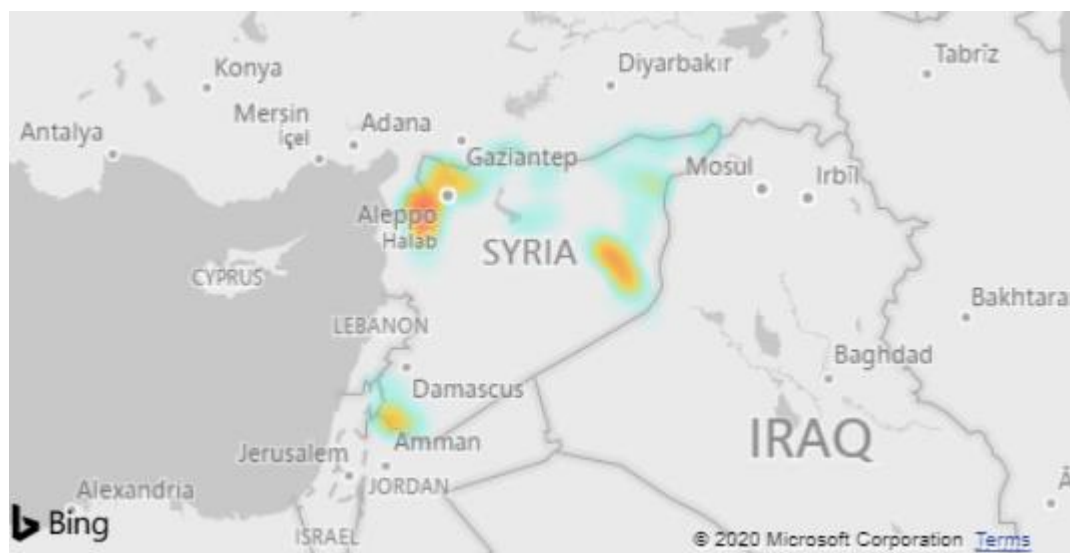


Figure 7. Heatmap of riots and protests occurrences in 2019 based on ACLED data³⁴⁰

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 49 protests and 2 riots, the majority of which took place in Idlib (16 protests and one riot), Aleppo (13) and Sweida (9) governorates.

1.6.3 Civilian fatalities

Many international monitoring groups have given up on providing detailed estimates of the number of fatalities because of the complexity of the situation and lack of access to first-hand information.³⁴¹ The UN stopped publishing statistics on conflict-related deaths in 2014, stating that it was no longer possible to arrive at accurate figures. The final estimate from 2016, partly based on UN's own statistics from 2014, was 400 000. Today, most international experts state that the number of fatalities in Syria since the war broke out in 2011 until the present is somewhere around 500 000 or higher, but indicate that these are very rough estimates.³⁴² In July 2019, Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that 'several hundreds of thousands of children, women and men have been killed in Syria since 2011,'[...]. "So many that it is no longer even possible to give a credible estimate"³⁴³.

There are several Syrian organisations that still attempt to keep count; however, the figures vary between organisations. This is related to the fact that these organisations have varying methods, ground presence, and access to information.³⁴⁴

³⁴⁰ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

³⁴¹ New York Times (The), How Syria's death toll is lost in the fog of war, 13 April 2018, [url](#)

³⁴² SOHR, More than 570 thousand people were killed on the Syrian territory within 8 years of revolution demanding freedom, democracy, justice, and equality, 15 March 2019, [url](#); New York Times (The), How Syria's death toll is lost in the fog of war, 13 April 2018, [url](#)

³⁴³ UN News, UN human rights chief fears world has grown numb to Syrian carnage, 26 July 2019, [url](#)

³⁴⁴ New Humanitarian (The), Counting under fire: the untold story of Syria's casualty data, 27 October 2015, [url](#)

2019	SNHR ³⁴⁵	SOHR ³⁴⁶	VDC ³⁴⁷	SHRC ³⁴⁸
January	197	188	145	216
February	246	281	240	264
March	334	451	176	279
April	324	297	257	292
May	416	392	107	471
June	347	275	257	336
July	433	507	397	456
August	267	231	223	286
September	118	134	132	129
October	171	226	267	199
November	277	227	332	323
December	234	279	280	271
Total	3364	3488	2813	3522

Figure 8. Civilian fatalities recorded in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on SNHR, VDC, SOHR and SHRC data

For 2019, VDC recorded 2 813 civilian fatalities³⁴⁹, the most occurring in the months of July, November, and October. For the same period, SNHR recorded 3 364 civilian fatalities, most of which took place in July, May, March and April. Other organisations documenting civilian casualties in Syria had

³⁴⁵ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁴⁶ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SOHR. See: SOHR, About 190 civilians out of about 900 people were killed in the first month of January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SOHR, In the lowest monthly toll in about 94 months, February 2019 witnesses the death of about 610 civilians, fighters, and members, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SOHR, 955 casualties on the Syrian territory -about half of them are civilians- in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SOHR, About 640 people in Syrian almost half of them are civilians, were killed in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SOHR, About 1150 people -more than third of them are civilians- were killed on the Syrian soil in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SOHR, In the highest monthly death toll since the beginning of the year, about 1315 people were killed on the Syrian soil in June 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SOHR, In the highest monthly civilian death toll since the beginning of the year, more than 500 civilians were killed on the Syrian soil in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SOHR, In the highest monthly death toll in 17 months, 1520 people were killed in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SOHR, In the lowest death toll in 102 months, 272 people were killed in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SOHR, About 980 people were killed in October and 70% of them killed by Operation "Peace Spring", and the same month witnessed the elimination of ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SOHR, In November 2019, 805 casualties fell in the Syrian territory including 230 civilians, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SOHR, December 2019: 10,000 air and ground strikes, 13 massacres, five car-bomb attacks, and nearly one thousand people killed, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁴⁷ Based on data provided by VDC to EASO

³⁴⁸ SHRC, SHRC documents 3522 deaths in 2019, 3 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁴⁹ Data shared by VDC with EASO. Available in [Annex I: VDC Casualty data](#)

comparable figures for 2019. SOHR³⁵⁰ recorded 3 488 civilian fatalities while the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) documented 3 552.³⁵¹

VDC and SNHR also provide a monthly breakdown of civilian fatalities by the governorate in which they occurred. Most civilian casualties 2019 were recorded in the governorates of Idlib, Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor and Hama.

Civilian fatalities by governorate (2019)	SNHR ³⁵²	VDC ³⁵³
Damascus	15	24
Rural Damascus	53	92
Idlib	1506	1051
Deir Ez-Zor	549	249
Aleppo	359	370
Dar'a	97	96
Hama	301	390
Homs	70	105
Hasaka	173	178
Raqqa	199	166
Quneitra	5	3
Sweida	11	4
Latakia	11	7
Tartous	-	2
Unknown	2	62
Other nationalities	13	14
Total	3364	2813

Figure 9. Civilian fatalities in 2019 based on SNHR and VDC data. Monthly breakdown by governorate

Around 65 % of all civilian casualties documented by VDC and SNHR during 2019 were recorded in governorates where anti-GoS armed groups retained territorial control: Idlib, Aleppo, Hama and Latakia. Between 37 % (VDC data) and 45 % (SNHR data) of all civilian casualties documented during the year were in Idlib governorate, by far the highest proportion out of all provinces. Aleppo governorate accounted for between 11 % (SNHR data) and 13 % (VDC data) of all civilian casualties

³⁵⁰ SOHR reportedly uses hundreds of volunteers in Syria to investigate and report on fatalities. Monthly reports on casualties cover the number of civilian fatalities, gender and perpetrators.

³⁵¹ Both SOHR and SHRC don't provide information on their methodology for collecting casualty data. See New Arab (The), Will we ever really know how many people have died in Syria since 2011?, 28 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁵² Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁵³ Based on data provided by VDC to EASO

and Hama recorded between 9 % (SNHR data) and 14 % (VDC data) of all civilian casualties during the year. High number of casualties were also recorded in Deir Ez-Zor governorate (16 % of all civilian casualties according to SNHR data and 9 % of all civilian casualties according to VDC data).

The lowest number of civilian casualties was recorded in Tartous governorate with no civilian casualties documented by SNHR during 2019 and only 2 by VDC. Similarly low figures were registered in Quneitra, Sweida and Latakia governorates, averaging below 1 % of all civilian casualties recorded in Syria in 2019.

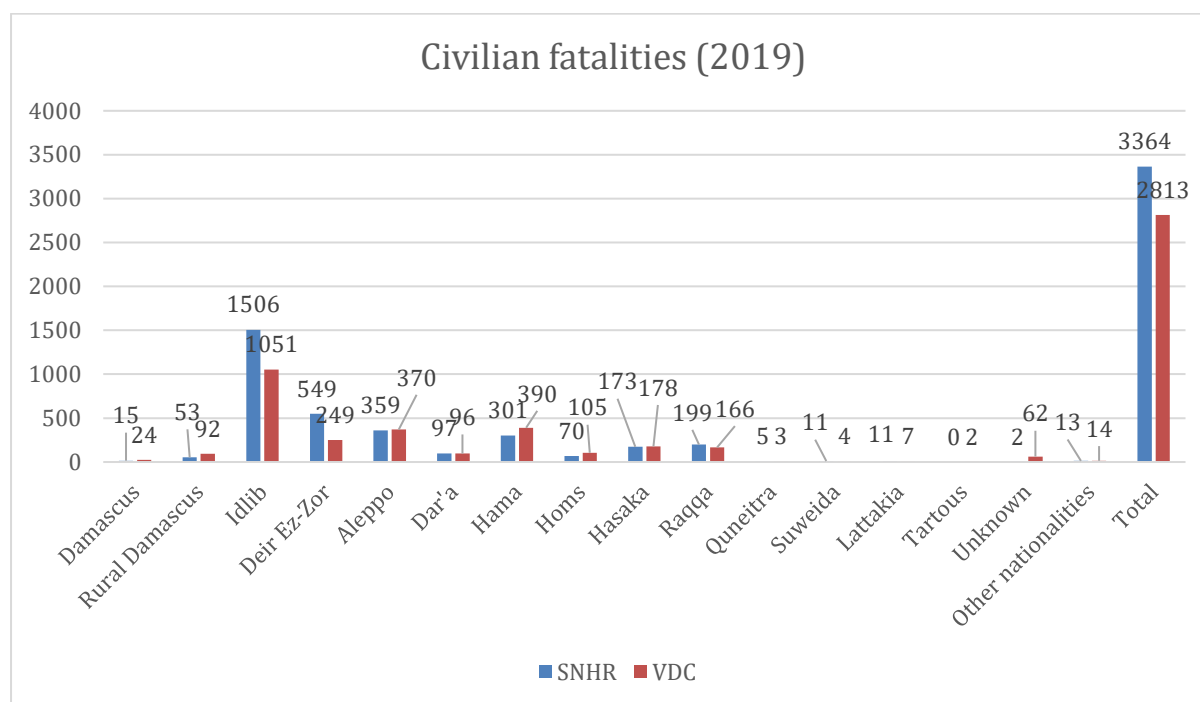


Figure 10. Graphical representation of civilian fatalities in 2019 based on SNHR and VDC data. Comparison by governorate.

Syrian Network for Human Rights Violations Documentation Center in Syria

Governorate	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	Total
Damascus	3	3	-	3	-	-	2	-	-	1	1	2	15
	3	2	3	4	2	4	-	-	2	-	4	-	24
Rural Damascus	7	8	2	3	2	1	8	2	1	7	8	4	53
	5	3	5	25	3	5	19	-	9	6	10	2	92
Idlib	18	81	120	102	235	208	250	156	29	43	108	156	1506
	18	79	54	77	8	141	206	141	30	50	105	142	1051
Deir Ez-Zor	83	51	107	60	52	26	44	34	31	24	28	9	549
	25	33	-	40	1	12	31	9	22	22	39	15	249
Aleppo	40	21	35	33	40	35	45	13	25	15	34	23	359
	48	30	13	18	21	30	64	16	22	28	47	33	370
Dar'a	5	4	2	10	6	11	6	12	8	10	9	14	97
	5	1	1	4	2	5	3	3	13	20	15	24	96
Hama	11	48	18	56	54	24	45	15	5	7	10	8	301
	10	24	31	54	54	44	66	44	14	16	18	15	390
Homs	12	14	11	10	4	6	5	-	3	1	2	2	70
	16	29	18	4	4	9	6	2	1	6	7	3	105
Hasaka	10	4	24	9	15	15	9	12	6	23	34	12	173
	2	11	2	1	8	2	2	4	4	80	36	26	178
Raqqqa	6	8	15	32	6	20	15	22	7	25	40	3	199
	11	8	15	22	3	5	-	4	6	34	48	10	166
Quneitra	1	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	5
	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Sweida	-	-	-	-	-	1	4	1	2	1	2	-	11
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	2	-	4
Lattakia	1	2	-	3	2	-	-	-	1	1	-	1	11
	1	-	-	2	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	7
Tartous	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2
Unkown	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
	1	20	34	3	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	3	62
Other nationalities	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	-	-	13
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	3	1	3	14
Total	197	246	334	324	416	347	433	267	118	171	277	234	3364
	145	240	176	257	107	257	397	223	132	267	332	280	2813

Figure 11. Monthly breakdown by governorate of civilian fatalities in 2019, based on VDC and SNHR data

While significant variations between the data provided by SNHR and VDC are clearly visible (particularly for the months of March and May), the highest number of civilian fatalities recorded by both organisations were in June, July, August and December and affected predominantly governorates Idlib, Aleppo and Hama in the context of GoS military offensives against the anti-GoS armed groups controlling territory in these provinces. (see [Idlib](#), [Aleppo](#) and [Hama](#) chapters). A spike in civilian casualties was observed in Raqqqa and Hasaka governorates between October and November 2019, which can be linked with military confrontations in these provinces which took place during the Turkish-led Operation Spring Peace (see [Hasaka](#) and [Raqqqa](#) chapters).

Following the territorial defeat of ISIL in March 2019, the number of civilian casualties in Deir Ez-Zor governorate decreased in comparison to the first three months of 2019 but maintained a steady level for the remaining of 2019.

Civilian fatalities in 2020

Between 1 December 2019 and 31 January 2020, OHCHR verified at least 427 civilians killed in security incidents, of which at least 344 were recorded in north-west Syria.³⁵⁴

In the first two months of 2020, VDC recorded 642 civilian fatalities: 317 in January 2020³⁵⁵ and 325 in February 2020.³⁵⁶ For the same reference period, SNHR recorded 562 civilian fatalities: 286 in January 2020³⁵⁷ and 276 in February 2020.³⁵⁸ Most civilian casualties documented by SNHR were in Idlib (123 in January and 128 in February), Aleppo (66 in January and 77 in February) and Deir Ez-Zor (33 in January and 23 in February) governorates.³⁵⁹

1.6.4 Humanitarian situation

UNOCHA assessed that as of end of 2018, 11.7 million persons were in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, with 5 million having acute needs.³⁶⁰ UNICEF stated that out of the 11 million people requiring humanitarian assistance, particular vulnerable categories included '4.7 million children, 1.3 million people with disabilities, as well as pregnant and lactating women'.³⁶¹

The UN Security Council stated in a December 2019 report that 'in 2019, there has been a further deterioration of an already extremely difficult humanitarian situation for people throughout the Syrian Arab Republic, where over 11 million people remain in need of assistance'.³⁶² UN humanitarian agencies and partners provided humanitarian assistance to 5.6 million Syrians on average each month during 2019.³⁶³ UNOCHA assessed in an August 2019 report that 'while there was a reduction in violence in many parts of the country in the second half of 2018, the impact of hostilities, including acts by entities designated as terrorists by the UN Security Council, on civilians remains the principal driver of humanitarian needs in Syria'.³⁶⁴

ACAPS stated that escalation of hostilities in north-west Syria since April 2019 and Operation Peace Spring which started in October 2019 in north-east Syria resulted in 'the suspension of humanitarian operations. Local humanitarian staff have been displaced and international staff have been evacuated

³⁵⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 5

³⁵⁵ VDC, Monthly Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria. January 2020, [url](#), p. 5

³⁵⁶ VDC, Monthly Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria. February 2020, [url](#), p. 5

³⁵⁷ SNHR, 286 Civilians, including Four Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in January 2020, 1 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁵⁸ SNHR, 276 Civilians, including Six Medical Personnel and Two Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in February 2020, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

³⁵⁹ SNHR, 286 Civilians, including Four Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in January 2020, 1 February 2020, [url](#), p. 8; SNHR, 276 Civilians, including Six Medical Personnel and Two Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in February 2020, 1 March 2020, [url](#), p. 8

³⁶⁰ According to UNOCHA, People in Need (PIN) refers to 'people whose physical security, basic rights, dignity, living conditions or livelihoods are threatened or have been disrupted, and whose current level of access to basic services, goods and protection is inadequate to re-establish normal living conditions within their accustomed means without assistance. People in acute need refers to those facing more severe forms of deprivation in terms of their security, basic rights and living conditions and face life-threatening needs requiring urgent humanitarian assistance'. UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 5, 8

³⁶¹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Action for Children 2020 - Syrian Arab Republic, 3 December 2019, [url](#)

³⁶² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 13

³⁶³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 6

³⁶⁴ UNOCHA, 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan. January-December 2019, August 2019, [url](#), p. 7

around the frontlines'.³⁶⁵ The UN Security Council also reported access constraints in providing humanitarian assistance. Due to increased hostilities in parts of Idlib, northern Hama and south-eastern Aleppo governorates, limited humanitarian response was available. In the so-called safe zone between Tall Abyad and Ras al Ain, north-east Syria, humanitarian assistance was halted during the military offensive and resumed on 20 November 2019. Explosive remnants contamination in Deir Ez-Zor governorate and limited road access to Raqqa governorate limited humanitarian assistance in those areas.³⁶⁶ UNOCHA Assistant Secretary General Ursula Mueller stated in December 2019 that 1.8 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in north-east Syria, adding that 'the task is considerable'.³⁶⁷ As of February 2020, the M4 highway which provides commercial and humanitarian access to north-east Syria remained closed to humanitarian transit.³⁶⁸

The majority of persons in need – around 7.2 million, live in areas under GoS control, including the four major cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama and the majority of provincial capitals.³⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch noted that the GoS has placed 'regular restrictions on the access of humanitarian organizations to communities in need or receipt of aid', a practice that is aimed to 'ensure that the humanitarian response is siphoned centrally through and for the benefit of the abusive state apparatus, at the cost of preventing aid from reaching the population unimpeded'.³⁷⁰ Other impediments to humanitarian aid delivery included security risks to humanitarian workers³⁷¹ and contamination to explosive hazards.³⁷²

UNOCHA's HNO 2019 provided the following breakdown regarding the population of people in need in Syria, broken down by the sector of need³⁷³:

³⁶⁵ ACAPS, Humanitarian Access Overview, 31 October 2019, [url](#), p. 6

³⁶⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 12

³⁶⁷ UN News, Life for civilians in Syria 'worse than when the year began', 19 December 2019, [url](#)

³⁶⁸ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

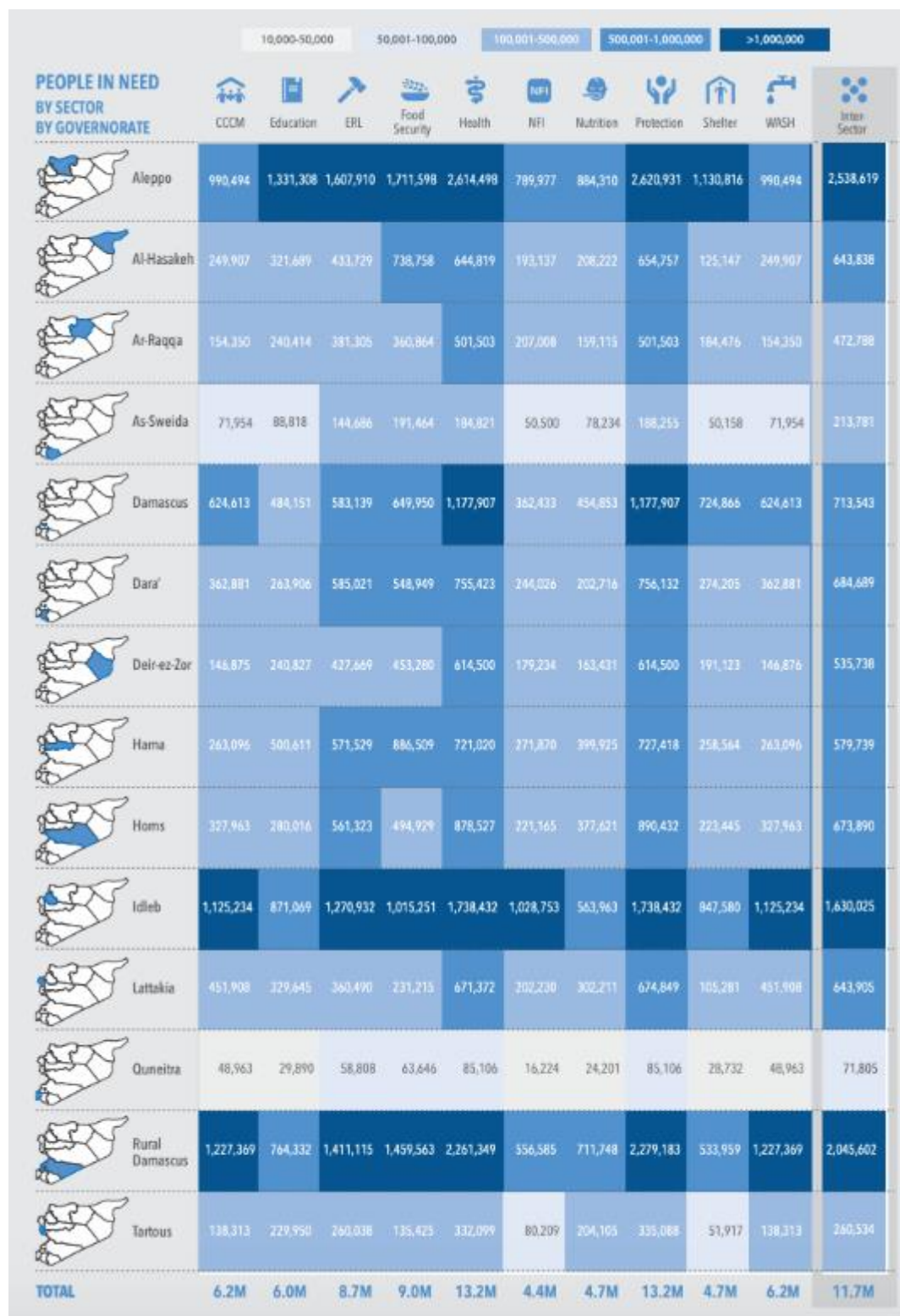
³⁶⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 36

³⁷⁰ HRW, Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria, 28 June 2019, [url](#), p. 2

³⁷¹ New Humanitarian (The), In the news: Three aid workers killed in Syria, 20 February 2020, [url](#); UN News, Three more humanitarian workers killed in Syria, with civilian death toll 'rising every day', 15 August 2019, [url](#)

³⁷² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 38; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 12

³⁷³ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 32. Sector abbreviations: CCCM (camp coordination and camp management, including camp living conditions); ERL (Early Recovery and Livelihoods, including employment, basic social services, livelihoods, social cohesion); NFI (Non-Food Items, including basic items like fuel and clothing); WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, including sewerage)

Figure 12: © UNOCHA, People in need by sector and governorate³⁷⁴

The UNOCHA's inter-sectorial severity of needs map for 2019 provides an overview of the areas with the most people in need³⁷⁵:

³⁷⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 32

³⁷⁵ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 35

INTER-SECTORAL SEVERITY OF NEEDS, 2019

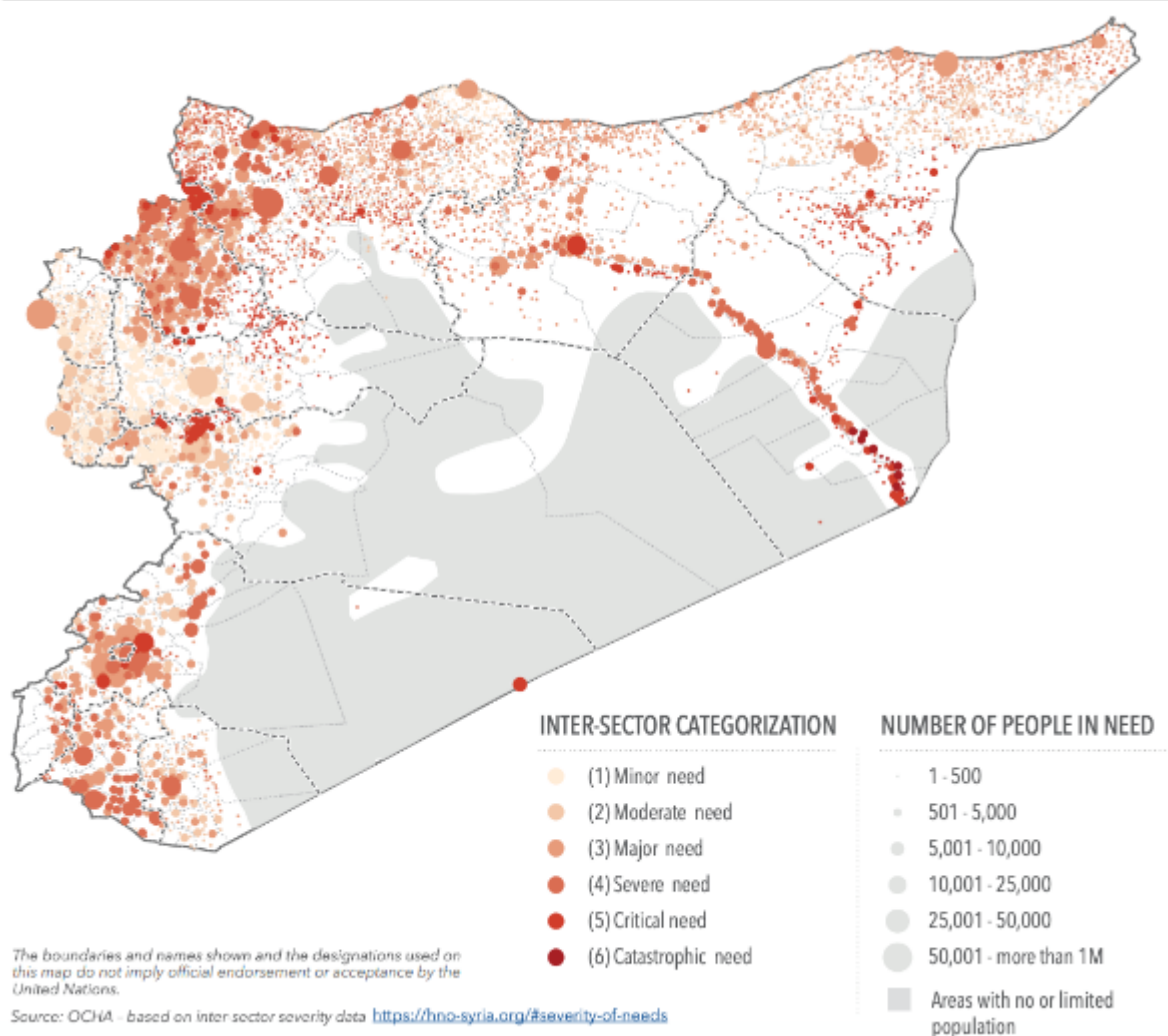


Figure 13: © UNOCHA, Inter-sectoral severity of needs 2019³⁷⁶

On 10 January 2020, the UN Security Council approved resolution 2504 prolonging the delivery of cross-border UN humanitarian aid for a period of six months but only through two of four border crossings - the Bab al Salam and Bab al Hawa crossings between Turkey and north-west Syria - just before its final deadline. Delivery of humanitarian aid through the borders with Jordan and Iraq wasn't approved, a measure that some members of the UN Security Council viewed it as a "watered down" measure to cut in half the number of crossing points and duration of the authorization'.³⁷⁷ Humanitarian organisations expressed concerns that closing the border crossings will aggravate the humanitarian situation in Syria.³⁷⁸

In January 2020, UNOCHA assessed that around '2.7 million people in north-west Syria are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, including food, shelter, water and sanitation, health and winterization assistance'.³⁷⁹ In mid-February 2020, the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs

³⁷⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 35

³⁷⁷ UN News, Security Council beats midnight deadline, renews Syria cross-border aid in contentious vote, 10 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁷⁸ IRC, No humanitarian justification for today's UNSC Syria Cross-Border Aid vote, 10 January 2020, [url](#); RI, UN Security Council Vote to Halt Cross-Border Aid from Iraq 'Chokes off a Critical Lifeline' to Syria, 10 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁷⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Update Syrian Arab Republic - Issue 08, 28 January 2020, [url](#)

and Emergency Relief Coordinator, described the situation in Idlib as having the potential of becoming the ‘biggest humanitarian horror story of the 21st Century’.³⁸⁰

1.6.5 Displacement and return

UNHCR stated in February 2020 that ‘the conflict in Syria has caused the biggest displacement crisis in the world. Over 5.5 million Syrians live as refugees in the region. More than six million Syrians are displaced within the country’.³⁸¹

During 2019, a total of 1 828 000 IDP movements were recorded by UNOCHA across Syria, of which 68 % were movements within the governorate. Most IDP movements took place in the governorates of Idlib (1 235 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 1 096 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate and 950 000 IDP movements within the governorate), Aleppo (114 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 438 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate and 94 000 IDP movements within the governorate), Hasaka (81 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 137 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate and 75 000 IDP movements within the governorate) and Deir Ez-Zor (106 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 52 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate and 49 000 IDP movements within the governorate). The lowest number of IDP movements were registered in the governorates Dar’a (21 IDP movements from or within the governorate), Quneitra (39 IDP movements to or within governorate) and Sweida (362 IDP movements to or within the governorate).³⁸²

UNOCHA provides a full breakdown of the total IDP movements by governorate for 2019 (see Figure. 14):

³⁸⁰ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁸¹ UNHCR, Newly displaced in Syria in urgent need of protection, shelter, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁸² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

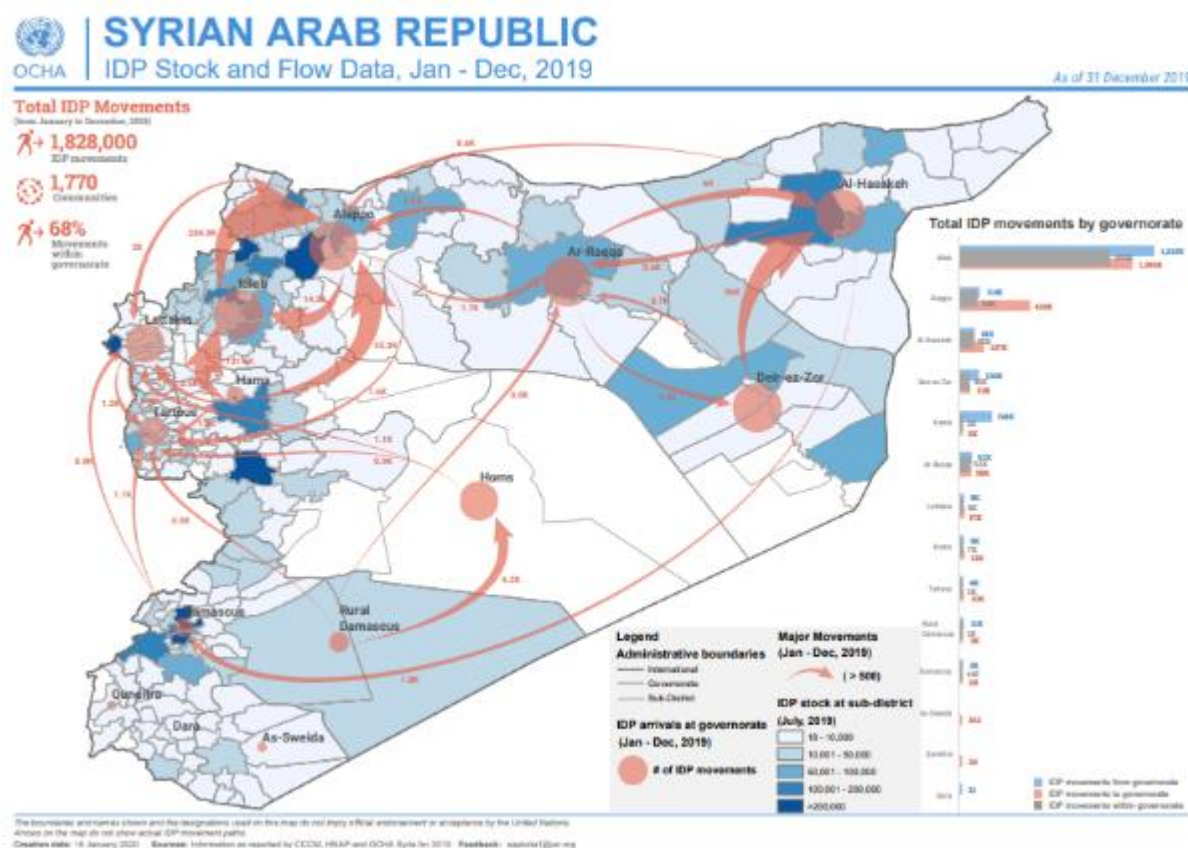


Figure 14. © UNOCHA, IDP movements by governorate in 2019³⁸³

Hostilities between armed actors were the main drivers of displacement in 2019. In January 2019 around 45 000 people were displaced within Deir Ez-Zor governorate by fighting between the SDF, backed by the US-led coalition and ISL.³⁸⁴ The Turkish-led Operation Peace Spring into north-east Syria which was launched on 9 October 2019 displaced over 200 000, of whom 123 000 returned by the end of November.³⁸⁵

Ongoing hostilities in southern Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates generated over 200 000 IDP movements each in the months of May and December 2019.³⁸⁶ In February 2020 it was estimated that around 900 000 people, the majority women and children, have been displaced since December 2019 by the hostilities in the Idlib area.³⁸⁷ UNICEF estimated that more than 500 000 children have been displaced by the conflict in northwest Syria since 1 December 2019. Tens of thousands of children and their families were reported to live in tents and in open air.³⁸⁸ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) described the situation in Idlib as 'the worst wave of displacement we've seen during the Syrian conflict. Amid the harsh winter conditions in Idlib, we see people trapped, isolated and running out of ways to cope'.³⁸⁹

³⁸³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

³⁸⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, January 2019, [url](#)

³⁸⁵ UNOCHA, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator. Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria, 19 December 2019, [url](#), p. 2

³⁸⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, May 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, December 2019, [url](#)

³⁸⁷ UN News, UN chief appeals for end to Syria's 'man-made humanitarian nightmare', 21 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁸⁸ UNICEF, Over half a million children in northwest Syria forced to flee amid continued violence and harsh weather, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁸⁹ ICRC, Syria: Civilians in urgent need of safety and life-saving assistance amidst unprecedented displacement, 25 February 2020, [url](#)

In terms of IDP spontaneous returns during 2019, UNOCHA recorded a total of 494 000 total spontaneous returns, 77 % of which were returns within the governorate. The highest number of IDP return movements took place in the governorates of Dar'a (90 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate, 90 000 IDP return movements to or within governorate and 88 000 IDP return movements within governorate), Idlib (88 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate, 80 000 IDP return movements to or within the governorate and 77 000 IDP return movements within governorate), Aleppo (65 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate, 64 000 IDP return movements to or within the governorate and 57 000 IDP return movements within governorate) and Deir Ez-Zor (60 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate, 79 000 IDP return movements to or within the governorate and 41 000 IDP return movements within governorate). The lowest number of IDP returns was recorded in Latakia (2 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate), Tartous (3 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate, 2 000 IDP return movements to or within governorate and 1 000 IDP return movements within governorate).³⁹⁰

UNOCHA provides a full breakdown of the total IDP spontaneous return movements by governorate for 2019 (see Figure 15):

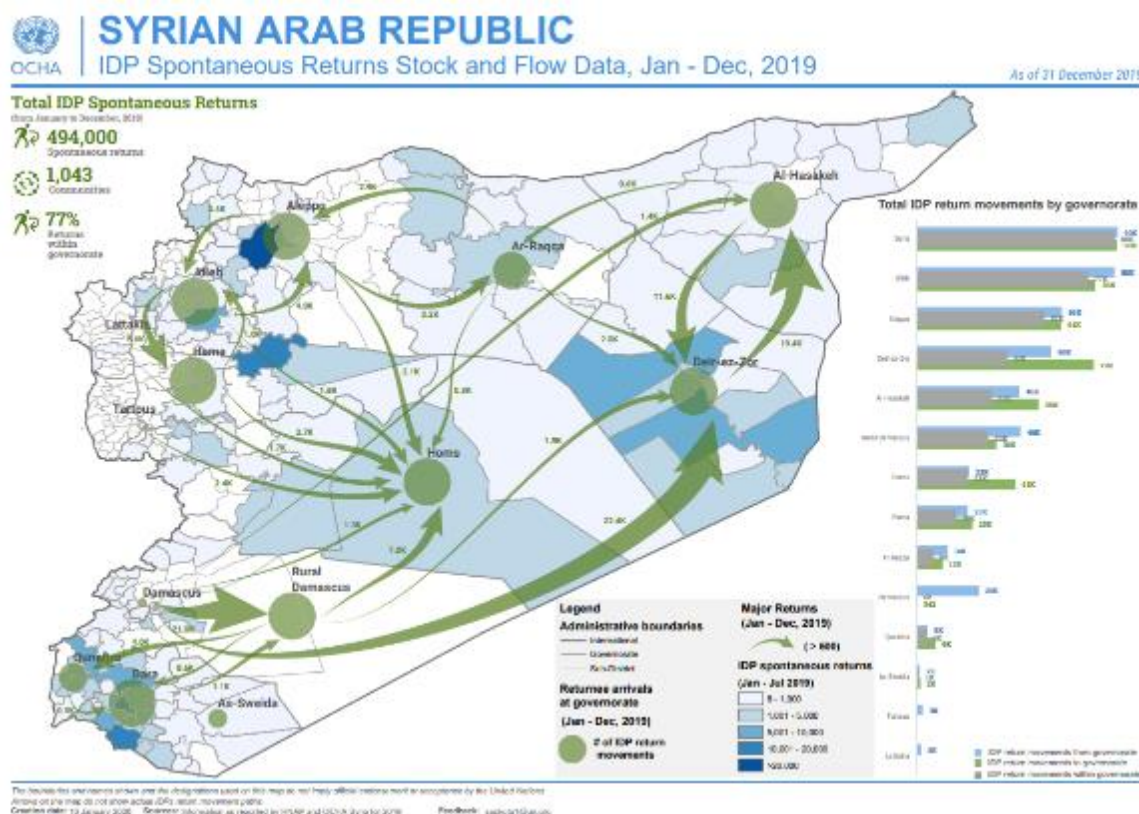


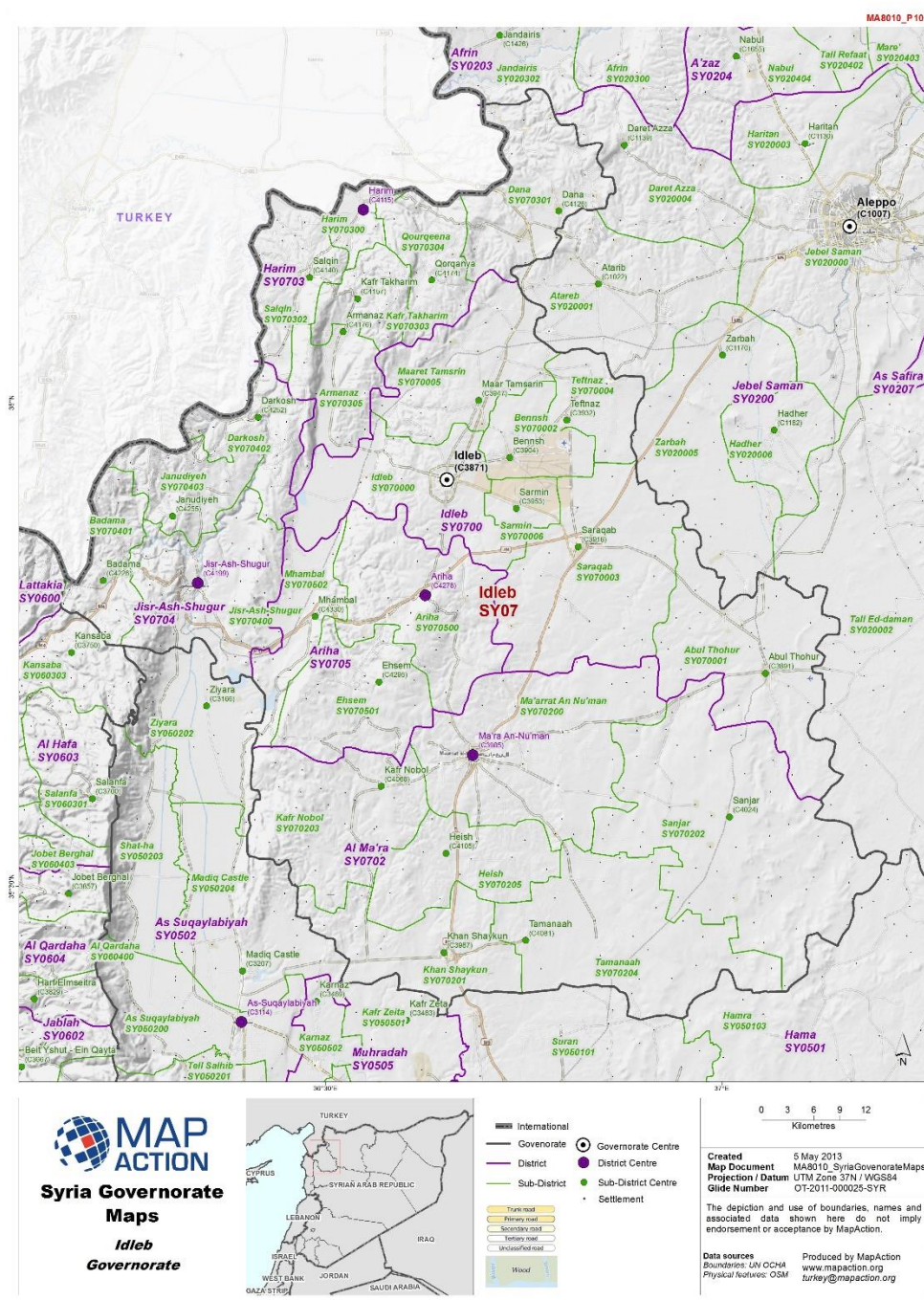
Figure 15. © IDP spontaneous return movements by governorate in 2019³⁹¹

³⁹⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

³⁹¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

2. Governorate-level description of the security situation

2.1 Idlib governorate



Map 3: © MapAction, Idlib governorate³⁹²

2.1.1 General description of the governorate

Idlib is located in northwest Syria, bordering Turkey to the north, Hama governorate to the south, Aleppo governorate to the east, and Latakia governorate to the west. The governorate is divided into five districts: Idlib, Ariha, Jirs-Ash-Shugur, Harim and Al Mara.³⁹³

Idlib city is the capital of the governorate and in 2011 had a population of over 2 million inhabitants. The city is located on the strategic road between Aleppo and Damascus governorates and is also a 'cross border operation point from Turkey, through the Bab Al Hawa crossing'.³⁹⁴

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Idlib governorate in 2016 to be of 1 445 000.³⁹⁵ In 2019 other sources estimated that the province and surrounding areas was home to 3 million people³⁹⁶, including original residents and IDPs from other areas.³⁹⁷ Of the estimated 3 million people living in Idlib, half of them were reported to be displaced from other areas of Syria.³⁹⁸ Due to ongoing conflict and IDP movements, EASO was not able to find accurate population data.

Arabs constitute the main ethnic group, with a Turkmen minority concentrated in the north-western part of the governorate, close to the border with Turkey.³⁹⁹ The majority of the population is Sunni.⁴⁰⁰ Shia Muslims were reported to reside in rural areas of Idlib.⁴⁰¹ During the conflict, Shia settlements in the governorate came under attack by anti-GoS armed groups. In the case of the predominantly Shia towns of Fuah and Kafriya, part of the population was evacuated to areas under GoS control following the Four Towns Agreement, which saw a population exchange between GoS and anti-GoS armed groups.⁴⁰²

The Druze had a presence in Jabal Al-Summaq but reportedly 'suffered persecution under the then al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (Nusra Front) and were forced to flee en masse as a result'.⁴⁰³ Christopher Kozak of ISW, interviewed by DIS in August 2019 noted that the Druze residents of Qalb Lawza, Idlib governorate were forcibly converted to Islam by HTS precursor group Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴⁰⁴ Most Christians and Druze from Idlib governorate left the area out of fear of being forced to convert to Islam, follow dress codes or having restricted freedom of movement on women.⁴⁰⁵

³⁹² MapAction, Idlib governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

³⁹³ UNOCHA, Idlib Governorate Profile, August 2014, [url](#), pp. 22

³⁹⁴ REACH/UNITAR, Syria. Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 45-46

³⁹⁵ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

³⁹⁶ Based on estimations by aid groups. See Mercy Corps, 44 Syrian and International NGOs Call for Immediate End to Attacks on Civilians and Hospitals in Idlib, Syria, 24 May 2019, [url](#); RI, Losing Their Last Refuge; Inside Idlib's humanitarian nightmare, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

³⁹⁷ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 6; Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 27

³⁹⁸ Carter Center, Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), p. 1

³⁹⁹ Based on reading of Map 29. Ethnic divisions in northern Syria, Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 52

⁴⁰⁰ ACAPS, Idlib – Governorate profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 1

⁴⁰¹ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁰² Arfeh, H., The institutionalization of demographic change in Syria, Atlantic Council, 4 April 2019, [url](#); Reuters, Evacuations from besieged Syrian towns end after two-day halt, 21 April 2017, [url](#); Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), pp. 60-61

⁴⁰³ Mohannad Hage Ali, The Weaponization of Minorities in Syria and Beyond, Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 9 January 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), p. 18

⁴⁰⁵ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic; Conference room paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/37/CRP.3], 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 14

Before the conflict Idlib was marginalised economically and politically⁴⁰⁶ and ranked as one of the poorest parts of Syria in terms of income, health and education.⁴⁰⁷

2.1.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

Idlib was among the first provinces to join the 2011 uprising against the Assad government.⁴⁰⁸ The Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra started in 2014 to take over Idlib from local rebel groups.⁴⁰⁹ Control over Idlib city fluctuated for several years between the GoS forces and anti-GoS armed groups⁴¹⁰, until in 2015 anti-GoS armed groups managed to gain full control.⁴¹¹

The governorate has been a 'stronghold of Islamist and jihadists militants among opposition groups'.⁴¹² US officials described Idlib as a Al Qaeda safe haven⁴¹³ and 'a major terrorist concern'.⁴¹⁴

Since May 2017, following an agreement between Russia, Iran and Turkey, Idlib governorate as well as parts of Latakia, Hama and Aleppo governorates⁴¹⁵ became a 'de-escalation' area, which stipulated the cessation of hostilities and improved humanitarian access.⁴¹⁶ However, GoS forces continued military operations in the area, recapturing half of the de-escalation area by mid-2018.⁴¹⁷ In September 2018, a deal between Russia and Turkey reached at Sochi, created a demilitarised zone in parts of Idlib province.⁴¹⁸ It also stipulated the removal of heavy weapons by armed groups⁴¹⁹ and of 'radical terrorist groups' from inside the demilitarised zone.⁴²⁰ Turkey established 12 military observation posts around the demilitarised area to monitor the implementation of the agreement⁴²¹ while Russia and Iran set up their own observation points in the GoS-controlled areas surrounding the de-escalation area.⁴²² However, by April 2019, the Sochi agreement collapsed following military escalation by GoS, supported by Russia.⁴²³

US CRS noted that in 2019 GoS escalated the military operations in Idlib which continued in 2020.⁴²⁴ As of January 2020, half of the governorate remained under anti-GoS control.⁴²⁵

⁴⁰⁶ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁴⁰⁷ ACAPS, Idlib – Governorate profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 1

⁴⁰⁸ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; ACAPS, Idlib – Governorate profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁰⁹ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁴¹⁰ REACH/UNITAR, Syria. Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 45-46

⁴¹¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Flash Update 2. Situation in Idlib, 30 March 2015, [url](#); US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁴¹² International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁴¹³ US Central Command, Statement from U.S. Central Command on U.S. Forces strike against al-Qaida in Syria leadership in Idlib, Syria, Aug. 31, 2019, 31 August 2019, [url](#); New York Times (The), U.S. Sees Rising Threat in the West From Qaeda Branch in Syria, 29 September 2019, [url](#)

⁴¹⁴ USDOS, Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James F. Jeffrey And Counterterrorism Coordinator Ambassador Nathan A. Sales, 1 August 2019, [url](#)

⁴¹⁵ RI, Losing Their Last Refuge; Inside Idlib's humanitarian nightmare, September 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁴¹⁶ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴¹⁷ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 25 March 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁴¹⁸ RI, Losing Their Last Refuge; Inside Idlib's humanitarian nightmare, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁴¹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁴²⁰ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. i

⁴²¹ Carter Center, Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2

⁴²² International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴²³ RI, Losing Their Last Refuge; Inside Idlib's humanitarian nightmare, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁴²⁴ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁴²⁵ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 16

2.1.2.1 Anti-GoS armed groups

HTS is the dominant actor in the Idlib area.⁴²⁶ In January 2019, it seized large areas of Idlib governorate following clashes with rival armed groups⁴²⁷ and by August 2019 controlled over 90 % of Idlib governorate, alongside adjacent parts of northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates.⁴²⁸ It also established an administrative body – the Salvation Government as a rival of the Syrian Interim Government.⁴²⁹ According to February 2020 US estimates, HTS has between 7 000 to 10 000 fighters, or more⁴³⁰, whereas UN estimates of January 2020 were between 12 000 and 15 000 fighters.⁴³¹

According to Syria expert Aron Lund⁴³², the Idlib area is ‘governed by a patchwork of sharia courts, local councils, exile government institutions, and direct rule by armed groups’.⁴³³

Apart from HTS, other anti-GoS armed groups operate in the Idlib area. They are predominantly Islamist groups, relate differently to Turkey⁴³⁴, and ‘have an ambiguous or symbiotic relationship’ with HTS.⁴³⁵ The most important ones are the National Liberation Front (NLF) - a Turkish-backed alliance of opposition-armed groups⁴³⁶ - which has merged with the SNA in October 2019⁴³⁷; the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) - a Uighur-Chinese-dominated jihadist militant faction present around the city of Jisr al-Shughour in western Idlib⁴³⁸; and Hurras al-Din (HAD), a Al Qaeda-linked group that split from HTS in 2018.⁴³⁹ There are other smaller Islamist groups present in the Idlib area, including Ansar al-Tawhid, a splinter of Jabhat al-Nusra, that is active in around the towns of Saraqeb and Sarmin.⁴⁴⁰

Detailed information on the anti-GoS armed groups in the Idlib area is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#).

2.1.2.2 The Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

According to Gregory Waters of International Review, deployments of the SAA in Idlib governorate in 2019 included predominantly units of the Republican Guard, followed by those of the 3rd Corps and

⁴²⁶ Lund, A., From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, July 2019, [url](#), p. 35; BBC News, Syria war: Why does the battle for Idlib matter?, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴²⁷ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 17

⁴²⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁴²⁹ Clingendael, Strategies of Turkish proxy warfare in northern Syria, Back with a vengeance, November 2019, [url](#), p. 13

⁴³⁰ USDOS, Ambassador James Jeffrey On the Situation in Syria, 5 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴³¹ UN Security Council, Letter dated 20 January 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, 20 January 2020, [url](#), p. 7

⁴³² Aron Lund is fellow at the Century Foundation and guest researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). He has published widely on the Middle East-North Africa region, including three books about Syria. For more information see [url](#)

⁴³³ Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 53

⁴³⁴ Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 55

⁴³⁵ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁴³⁶ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 21; Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

⁴³⁷ Enab Baladi, “National Army” Restructured Having Merged With “National Front for Liberation”, 5 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴³⁸ Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 56; International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

⁴³⁹ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 22

⁴⁴⁰ According to an activist, a rebel commander and a humanitarian analyst interviewed by International Crisis Group in October-November 2018. International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 20

the 5th Corps. Below is a list of known deployments of SAA units that operated in the province and the last known date of their deployment, as of 17 March 2020.

Republican Guard:

- Aleppo Special Tasks Battalion – Idlib Province – 4 March 2020
- 800th Battalion – Idlib Province – 28 February 2020
- 1419th Battalion – Idlib Province – 2 May 2019
- 800th Battalion – Idlib Province – 28 February 2020
- 105th Brigade/358th Battalion – Idlib Province – 3 March 2020
- 105th Brigade/398th Battalion -Idlib Province – 1 March 2020
- 124th Brigade/511th Battalion – Idlib Province – 2 November 2018
- 124th Brigade/847th Battalion – southeast Idlib – 2 December 2019
- 24th Brigade/1390th Battalion – southeast Idlib – 1 December 2019
- 30th Division/18th Brigade – Idlib Province – 24 February 2020

4th Division:

- 555th Regiment/Unknown Unit – Idlib Province – 28 February 2020
- 41st Brigade – Saraqib, Idlib – 29 February 2020
- 42nd Brigade – Jabal Zawiya, Idlib – 4 March 2020

Engineering Department

- 166th Regiment – Idlib Province – 24 February 2020

1st Corps

- 15th Special Forces Division: 15th Division/Unknown unit – Idlib Province – 10 February 2020

2nd Corps

- 14th Special Forces Division: Unknown unit – Idlib Province – 3 March 2020
- 1st Division: Unknown Unit – Idlib Province – 3 March 2020; 171st Brigade- Idlib Province – 8 February 2020

3rd Corps:

- 8th Division: Unknown Unit – Qoqfin, Idlib – 2/29/2020; 33rd Brigade – Hizareen, Idlib – 2 March 2020; 47th Brigade – Idlib Province – 3 March 2020
- 18th Division: Unknown unit – Tamanah, Idlib – 29 August 2019; 120th Brigade – Idlib Province – 29 January 2020; 131st Brigade – Nayrab, Idlib – 28 February 2020

4th Corps:

- 45th Brigade – Saraqib, Idlib – 26 February 2020

5th Corps

- 1st Regiment – Saraqib, Idlib – 2 March 2020
- 2nd Brigade/Artillery Unit – Idlib Province – 11 February 2020
- 3rd Brigade – Idlib Province – 30 January 2020
- 3rd Brigade/Tank Battalion – Samakat, Idlib – 8 January 2020
- 3rd Brigade/1588th Battalion – Saraqib – 28 February 2020
- 6th Brigade – Idlib Province – 26 December 2019

Air Defense

- 66th Brigade – Idlib Province – 29 February 2020.⁴⁴¹

⁴⁴¹ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

The SAA is supported by Russian air force and Iran-backed militias.⁴⁴² US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo assessed in a January 2020 statement that GoS military operations in Idlib were reinforced by Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah forces.⁴⁴³

2.1.2.3 Turkey

Turkey has 12 military observation points around the Idlib de-escalation zone which were set up after the 2018 deal. In the beginning of 2020, several of these posts have come under fire from GoS forces or were surrounded.⁴⁴⁴ At the beginning of February 2020, several Turkish military personnel were killed following SAA military operations in Idlib, prompting Turkish retaliatory attacks.⁴⁴⁵ The Turkish Ministry of Defence reported that it had hit 115 Syrian targets and neutralized 101 Syrian military personnel.⁴⁴⁶ Turkish observation points in Idlib were reinforced with armoured personnel carriers and tanks of Turkish Armed Forces (TAF).⁴⁴⁷ Additional armed vehicles and fighters were deployed by Turkey on its border with Syria.⁴⁴⁸

By mid-February 2020, Turkey was reported to have massed 30 000 troops and armour on the Syrian border and to have sent 5 000 troops to Idlib. Additionally, it has set up military posts in the vicinity of Idlib city.⁴⁴⁹

2.1.2.4 ISIL

ISIL had a presence in northwest Syria since 2013, but was largely defeated following GoS offensive in Idlib in February 2018⁴⁵⁰ and HTS crackdown on the group that followed.⁴⁵¹ ISIL was also reported to have a latent presence in rebel-held Idlib.⁴⁵² On 27 October 2019, US President Donald Trump announced the death of ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi following a raid by US Special Forces in the village of Barisha, Idlib governorate.⁴⁵³

According to the US Defense Intelligence Agency, 'HTS ranks countering ISIS among its top priorities because ISIS elements in Idlib Province routinely attack HTS positions and leaders. In the last year, HTS publicly took credit for targeting ISIS leaders in the province'.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁴² BBC News, Syria war: Government troops seize part of key Idlib town Saraqeb, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴³ USDOS, Attacks on the People of Idlib. Press Statement by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, 27 January 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁴ Al Jazeera, Turkey deploys tanks to Syrian border amid fresh Idlib violence, 2 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁵ Al Jazeera, The battle for Syria's Idlib explained in 400 words, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁶ AA, Turkey neutralizes 101 Assad regime military personnel, 10 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁷ AA, Turkey's deployment of reinforcements to observation points in Syria's Idlib, 10 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁸ Al Jazeera, Turkey deploys tanks to Syrian border amid fresh Idlib violence, 2 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁹ New York Times (The), Syrian Attacks Draw Turkey Deeper Into Syrian War, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁰ Carter Center, Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), Appendix 1

⁴⁵¹ Carter Center, Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), Appendix 1; Al Jazeera, After the Sochi agreement, HTS is facing internal divisions, 27 September 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁵² EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁴⁵³ Ingram, H. and Whiteside, C., Caliph Abu Unknown: Succession and Legitimacy in the Islamic State, War on the Rocks, 25 November 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 45

2.1.3 Recent security trends and impact on civilian population

In the beginning of 2019, HTS took control of territories in Idlib governorate and western Aleppo and northern Hama governorate, following clashes with other anti-GoS armed groups in the region, including the NLF⁴⁵⁵ and Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki.⁴⁵⁶

The GoS has sought to regain control of the M5 highway, a major commercial route running through Idlib and Aleppo governorates, linking Aleppo to Damascus and the south of the country. The neighbouring Latakia governorate is viewed as a GoS stronghold, while also hosting the Russian military airbase of Hmeimim.⁴⁵⁷

The CoI noted that during the first half of 2019 Idlib was ‘embroiled in military escalation and a surge of violence against civilians’. GoS forces and affiliated armed groups carried out military operations aimed at ousting HTS and affiliated armed groups from the area.⁴⁵⁸ Starting in February 2019, ground offensives and airstrikes on anti-GoS controlled areas including Idlib ‘escalated dramatically’, destroying civilian infrastructure ‘including hospitals, markets, educational facilities and agricultural resources’, and leading to the displacement of hundreds of thousands.⁴⁵⁹ In April 2019, GoS supported by Russian air force launched a military offensive against the rebel held-Idlib enclave.⁴⁶⁰

Since June 2019, the Syrian government forces increased the military offensive against the armed opposition groups in Idlib area.⁴⁶¹ The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet stated in July referring to airstrikes in Idlib and other areas in north-western Syria that ‘this latest relentless campaign of airstrikes by the government and its allies has continued to hit medical facilities, schools and other civilian infrastructure such as markets and bakeries’. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights further stated that ‘these are civilian objects, and it seems highly unlikely, given the persistent pattern of such attacks, that they are all being hit by accident,’ [...]. ‘Intentional attacks against civilians are war crimes, and those who have ordered them or carried them out are criminally responsible for their actions’. OHCHR reported that civilian casualties following airstrikes were recorded in at least 10 locations (eight in Idlib and two in Aleppo) between 16 and 25 July, and totalled at least 103 civilians, including at least 26 children.⁴⁶² The UN Security Council stated that more than 500 civilians were reportedly killed between April and July in the Idlib de-escalation area.⁴⁶³ A number of ceasefires were agreed to during the summer but they didn’t last and by December new ground and air strikes were launched by GoS forces and allied armed groups.⁴⁶⁴

In August 2019, Syrian government forces recaptured the town of Khan Sheikhun in southern Idlib area, forcing HTS to retreat. Khan Sheikhun’s position on the main road linking Idlib city to Hama made

⁴⁵⁵ Atlantic Council (The), Consequences of the HTS take-over in northwest Syria, 30 January 2019, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4, footnote 3; Syria Direct, Intra-rebel ceasefire agreement brings HTS offensive to a halt, but expands hardline control in northwest, 10 January 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁶ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁴⁵⁷ Al Jazeera, The battle for Syria's Idlib explained in 400 words, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁵⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁴⁶⁰ Al Jazeera, The battle for Syria's Idlib explained in 400 words, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁶¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

⁴⁶² OHCHR, Increasing airstrike casualties in Syria being ignored – Bachelet, 26 July 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁶³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁴⁶⁴ Al Jazeera, The battle for Syria's Idlib explained in 400 words, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

it particularly important to the area.⁴⁶⁵ At the end of August 2019, Syrian government forces recaptured Tamaniyah and areas north of Khan Sheikhun in the southern part of HTS dominated Idlib area.⁴⁶⁶ Between 1 October and 22 November, OHCHR recorded 136 civilian deaths in the Idlib area, including women and children, as a result of active hostilities.⁴⁶⁷

WHO recorded at least 83 attacks on healthcare facilities and personnel by the end of November 2019, of which 69 were reported in north-west Syria.⁴⁶⁸ According to USDOD, citing information received from the Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), of the 83 attacks '50 attacks took place in Idlib province. Cumulatively, the attacks have killed at least 54 people, injured more than 100 people, and affected at least 59 health care facilities, 5 of which were attacked twice'.⁴⁶⁹

According to USAID, GoS-airstrikes on Idlib governorate increased since mid-October 2019, targeting civilians and humanitarian infrastructure. The attacks reportedly led to multiple deaths and injuries between October and November.⁴⁷⁰ International Crisis Groups noted on the impact of the GoS offensive on Idlib that 'air and artillery strikes have destroyed hospitals, bakeries, schools and other vital infrastructure, on purpose, as a way to demoralise and uproot Idlib's civilian population and undermine its civilian administration'.⁴⁷¹

The ongoing offensive by the GoS and affiliated armed groups forces on Idlib displaced nearly 284 000 people in December 2019 alone, bringing the total number of IDPs from the area to almost 700 000⁴⁷², triggering Turkey to threaten abandoning the EU-Turkey pact that helps to fund Syrian refugees in Turkey.⁴⁷³

As of February 2020, the GoS forces and their allies are in the tenth month of an offensive to retake Idlib governorate from various anti-GoS armed groups.⁴⁷⁴ By February 2020, GoS forces captured the strategic towns of Maaret al-Numan⁴⁷⁵ and Saraqeb⁴⁷⁶ located at the intersection of the key highways linking Damascus to Aleppo.⁴⁷⁷ As of late February 2020, the GoS offensive resulted in the capture of around 200 communities in eastern Idlib and western Aleppo governorates since December 2019.⁴⁷⁸ Rosemary DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs described the situation in late February 2020 as follows:

'The security situation has continued to gravely deteriorate in and around Idlib. In the last nine days, Syrian Government forces, with support from the Russian Federation air force, have continued to advance, taking a large swath of villages in southern Idlib. Air strikes also continue in both front-line areas and population centres far removed from the fighting. During

⁴⁶⁵ Guardian (The), Rebels withdraw from key Syrian town as pro-Assad troops advance, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁶⁶ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 26 August – 1 September 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁴⁶⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁴⁶⁸ WHO, WHO deeply concerned about deteriorating health conditions in northwest Syria, 25 December 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁶⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁴⁷⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 54

⁴⁷¹ International Crisis Group, The Eleventh Hour for Idlib, Syria's Last Rebel Bastion, 6 February 2020, [url](#), p. 1

⁴⁷² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁴⁷³ Der Spiegel, A New Wave of Refugees? Idlib Violence Puts Pressure on EU-Turkey Pact, 3 January 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁴ ISW, Russian enables new Syrian regime offensive in Idlib, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

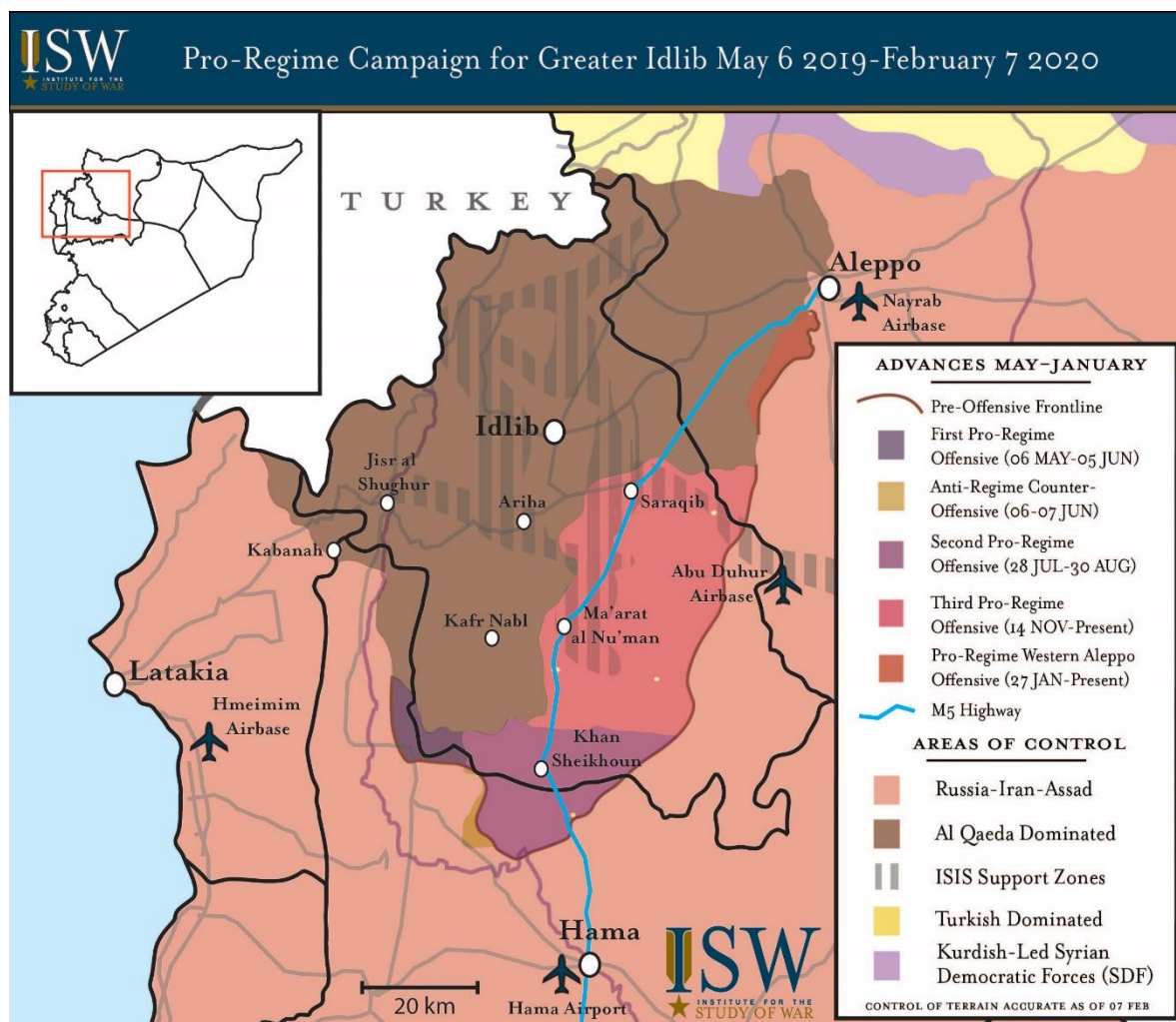
⁴⁷⁵ Al Jazeera, Syrian army takes Maaret al-Numan after heavy bombardment, 29 January 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁶ Guardian (The), Syria: Fall of Saraqeb delivers Assad a strategic and symbolic prize, 10 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁷ Guardian (The), Syria: Fall of Saraqeb delivers Assad a strategic and symbolic prize, 10 February 2020, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Syrian army takes Maaret al-Numan after heavy bombardment, 29 January 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁸ UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 9, 26 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

the same period, non-State armed groups launched a counter-attack in eastern Idlib, retaking the city of Saraqib, which they lost to Syrian Government forces in recent weeks. This action cut the Syrian Government's control of the strategic M5 highway. Turkish forces reportedly played a supporting role in this operation'.⁴⁷⁹



Map 4: © ISW, GoS campaign in the Idlib area 6 May 2019 – 7 February 2020⁴⁸⁰

In late February 2020, hostilities increased⁴⁸¹ and frontlines were shifting rapidly.⁴⁸² After suspected GoS airstrikes, potentially backed by Russia⁴⁸³, killed 33 Turkish soldiers in Idlib on 27 February⁴⁸⁴, Turkey has increased its military engagement in the area, and fighting escalated between anti-GoS armed groups and Turkey on one side and GoS forces supported by Russia on the other.⁴⁸⁵

The Col wrote in a February 2020 statement that 'in the last two weeks, attacks on civilian infrastructure, including schools, markets, and medical facilities causing civilian casualties, including many girls and boys, have been reported. The deliberate and systematic targeting of hospitals follows

⁴⁷⁹ UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸⁰ ISW, Russia enables new Syria regime offensive in Idlib, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸¹ UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 9, 26 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸² Al Jazeera, Turkish casualties as Syria rebels fight to hold on to key town, 27 February 2020, [url](#); Guardian (The), Syrian rebels retake key town in Idlib from Assad forces, 27 February 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Backed by Russian airpower, regime forces recapture Saraqib city only four days after Turkish forces and proxy factions captured it, 2 March 2020, [url](#); Charles Lister [Twitter], posted on 1 March 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸³ New York Times (The), Airstrike Hits Turkish Forces in Syria, Raising Fears of Escalation, 27 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸⁴ BBC News, Syria war: Alarm after 33 Turkish soldiers killed in attack in Idlib, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸⁵ International Crisis Group, CrisisWatch. Tracking Conflict Worldwide, February 2020, [url](#)

a pattern already documented by the Commission, and may amount to war crimes. Continuing such attacks has been, and remains, completely unacceptable'.⁴⁸⁶ In mid-February 2020 the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator stated that 'the violence in northwest Syria is indiscriminate. Health facilities, schools, residential areas, mosques and markets have been hit'.⁴⁸⁷

The European Council of the EU has issued a declaration on the situation in Idlib calling for a cessation of hostilities stating that 'the renewed military offensive in Idlib by the Syrian regime and its backers, causing enormous human suffering, is unacceptable. The EU calls on all actors to cease hostilities immediately'.⁴⁸⁸

International Crisis Group assessed in a February 2020 briefing that 'for the many rebels who lost battles elsewhere in Syria, capitulating to the regime in Idlib, their last stronghold, is hardly an option. The regime, in any case, deems the fighters who chose passage to Idlib over the "reconciliation deals" to be "irreconcilable", suggesting that it will entertain no such bargain this time'.⁴⁸⁹

On 5 March 2020 a ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey was agreed in the Idlib area, whereby a security corridor stretching 6 km to the north and 6 km to the south of the M4 highway was established, where joint Russian and Turkish patrols would be carried.⁴⁹⁰ The first joint Russian and Turkish patrols following the ceasefire agreement took place on 15 March 2020⁴⁹¹ and the truce was reported to largely hold.⁴⁹² However, by mid-March there have been claims by Russian officials that anti-GoS militants were not complying with the ceasefire.⁴⁹³

2.1.3.1 Security incidents

Between September 2018 and August 2019, the Carter Center registered 692 conflict incidents between armed opposition groups in Idlib, with the highest number being registered in January 2019 (around 160 incidents). Following the GoS offensive of May 2019 on the Idlib enclave, intra-opposition conflict decreased, although an average of 20 incidents per month were still recorded between May and August 2019.⁴⁹⁴

Prior to May 2019, the majority of incidents between armed opposition groups were recorded in three areas: 'in the southwest corner of the enclave in an arc from Maarat an Numaan, eastward to Kafr Nobel and north-westward to Jisr al Shaghour; (2) in central Idlib governorate in a triangle between Idlib City, Ariha and Saraqeb towns; and (3) in north Idlib governorate between Atareb, Dana and Sarmada towns'. From May to August, there was a significant decrease in the southwest, with most incidents being focused around Idlib City and Dana.⁴⁹⁵ The main weapons used in the confrontations were small arms or heavy machine gun fire (43 % of recorded incidents) followed by IED attacks (38 %), which include car bombs and suicide bombers and murders (8 %).⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁸⁶ UN Human Rights Council, UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Parties to the conflict must act immediately and collectively to bring meaningful respite to civilians in northwest Syria, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸⁷ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸⁸ European Council of the European Union, Declaration of the European Council on the situation in Idlib, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸⁹ International Crisis Group, The Eleventh Hour for Idlib, Syria's Last Rebel Bastion, 6 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

⁴⁹⁰ Al Jazeera, Turkey says Idlib ceasefire details largely agreed on with Russia, 12 March 2020, [url](#); See also an updated map of areas of Influence or presence in Idlib governorate as of 2 March 2020: Nicholas Danforth, Twitter 7 March 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁹¹ Al Monitor, Syrian opposition split over Russia-Turkey patrols in Idlib, 17 March 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁹² New Humanitarian (The), In the news: Ceasefire appears to hold in Syria's Idlib, 9 March 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁹³ Reuters, Russia says militants in Syria's Idlib region not complying with ceasefire, 16 March 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁹⁴ Carter Center, Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴⁹⁵ Carter Center, Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴⁹⁶ Carter Center, Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), p. 5

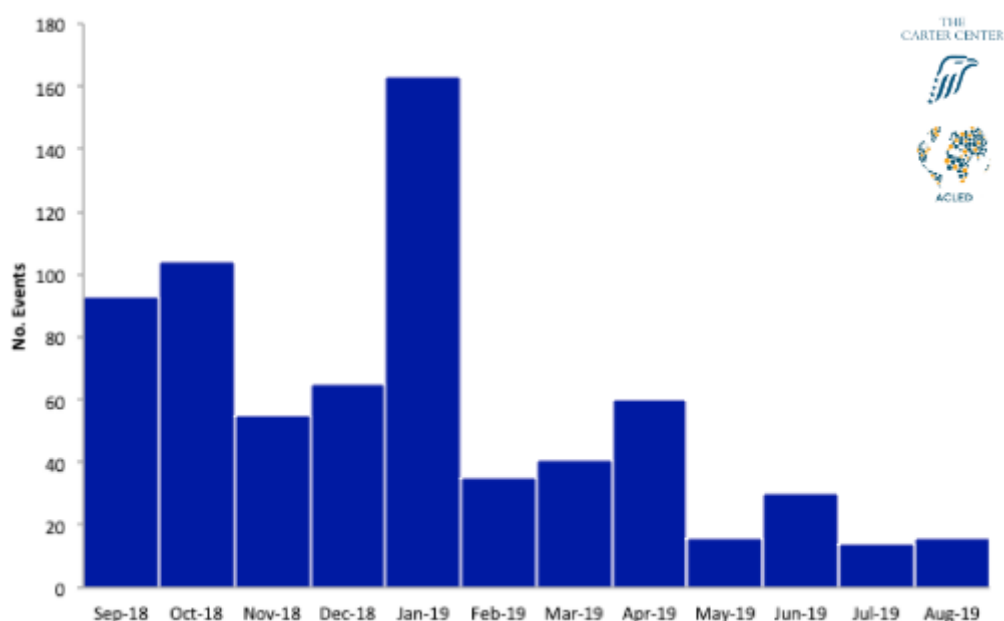


Figure 19. © Carter Center, Internal conflict between groups in northwest Syria (September 2018 – August 2019). Data from the Carter Center and ACLED.⁴⁹⁷

In 2019 there were 6 447 security incidents recorded by ACLED in Idlib governorate, of whom 5 848 were coded as explosions/remote violence, 452 battles and 147 incidents of violence against civilians.⁴⁹⁸

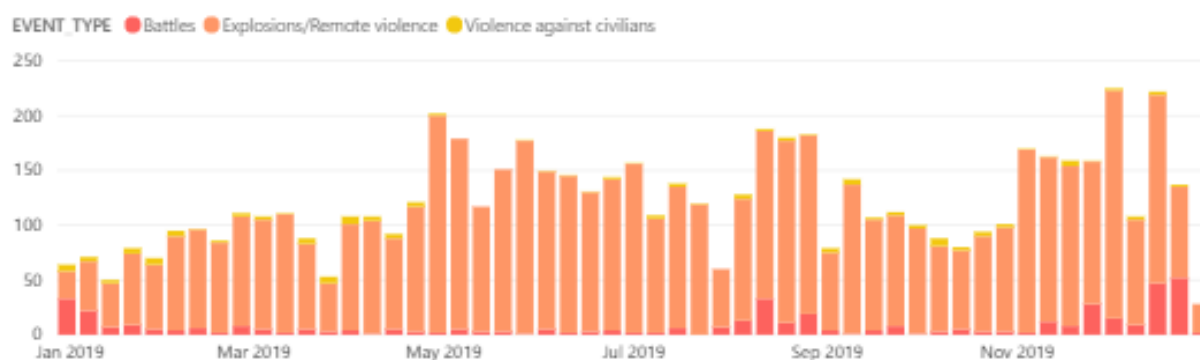


Figure 16. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Idlib governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁷ Carter Center, Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴⁹⁸ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

⁴⁹⁹ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

Idlib governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Al Ma'ra	301	4248	13
Ariha	19	455	13
Harim	31	49	43
Idlib	89	657	48
Jisr-Ash-Shugur	12	439	30
Total	452	5848	147

Figure 17. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Idlib governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district using ACLED data⁵⁰⁰

In 2019, security incidents occurred in all districts of the governorate, with the largest overall number being recorded in the district of Al Ma'ra, followed by Idlib, Ariha and Jisr-Ash-Shugur.

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 1 014 security incidents of which 235 were battles, 765 explosions/remote violence and 14 incidents of violence against civilians. Most of them occurred in the districts of Al Ma'ra (418) and Idlib (362).⁵⁰¹

2.1.3.2 Civilian fatalities

In 2019 Idlib were recorded between 1 051 (VDC data)⁵⁰² and 1 506 civilian fatalities (SNHR data)⁵⁰³, the highest number of civilian fatalities recorded out of any province in Syria. Between 37 % (VDC data) and 45 % (SNHR data) of all civilian fatalities documented during the year were in Idlib governorate, by far the highest proportion out of all provinces.

⁵⁰⁰ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

⁵⁰¹ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

⁵⁰² Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

⁵⁰³ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	18	18
February	79	81
March	54	120
April	77	102
May	8	235
June	141	208
July	206	250
August	141	156
September	30	29
October	50	43
November	105	108
December	142	156
Total	1051	1506

Figure 18. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Idlib governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

OHCHR stated that between 29 April 2019 and 15 January 2020, in the de-escalation zone in Idlib and surrounding areas ‘the UN Human Rights Office has verified incidents in which 1,506 civilians, including 293 women and 433 children, have been killed. Of these, 75 civilians including 17 women and 22 children (five percent of the total), were in areas under the control of Government forces’.⁵⁰⁴ On 18 February 2020, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet stated that ‘since 1 January this year, the UN Human Rights Office has recorded the deaths of 298 civilians in Idlib and Aleppo. Around 93 percent of those deaths were caused by the Syrian Government and its allies’.⁵⁰⁵

2.1.3.3 Displacement and return

Idlib became the refuge for Syrian fleeing the GoS forces, including activists and fighters from areas recaptured by the SAA.⁵⁰⁶ Between 2016 and 2018, tens of thousands of opposition fighters and their families from southern Syria and Homs City, were transferred to Idlib after refusing the terms of the so-called reconciliation agreements with GoS.⁵⁰⁷ According to a humanitarian official interviewed by Aron Lund in August 2018, an estimated 90 000 people have been transferred to Idlib as part of surrender agreements in 2018 alone.⁵⁰⁸

From January to December 2019, Idlib had the highest number of IDP movements in Syria, registering 1 096 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate, of which 950 000 were IDP movements within the governorate while the rest came mainly from Hama (around 132 000) and Aleppo (around 14 000) governorates. Most IDP movements from Idlib during 2019 were to Aleppo governorate (around 285 000).⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁴ OHCHR, Syria: Bachelet condemns continued killings and displacements despite ‘ceasefire’, 17 January 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁰⁵ OHCHR, UN human rights chief horrified by escalating humanitarian crisis in Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁰⁶ Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 54

⁵⁰⁷ Carter Center, Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁰⁸ Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 54

⁵⁰⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

In terms of IDP returns for 2019, Idlib had around 80 000 IDP return movements to or within the governorate, of which 77 000 were IDP return movements within the governorate, while the rest came from Aleppo and Hama governorates.⁵¹⁰

Military confrontations, including shelling and fire exchange⁵¹¹, airstrikes and ground fighting⁵¹² between GoS forces and anti-GoS groups based in the Idlib area generated IDP movements during 2019. Ongoing hostilities in southern Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates generated the highest number of IDP movements in May 2019, when 262 845 individuals - more than two thirds of all IDP movements across Syria - were displaced to or within Idlib (196 167 inside the governorate and 64 949 to the governorate from Hama governorate).⁵¹³ December was the month that registered the second highest IDP movement of 2019 in Idlib due to escalation of military confrontations, with around 214 500 movements inside Idlib governorate. 81 900 people were displaced from Idlib to Aleppo governorate.⁵¹⁴ For 2019, there were 91 330 IDP movements on average recorded per month to Idlib governorate.

Displacement continued in 2020. In February 2020, UNOCHA representatives stated that almost 700 000 civilians have been forcibly displaced in Idlib over the past 10 weeks, the largest number of IDPs during such a short time period since the conflict in Syria started.⁵¹⁵

Military operations in Idlib during 2019 which included shelling, air strikes and use of barrel bombs have inflicted major damage to civilian infrastructure, 'while hindering humanitarian aid operations and driving up food prices'.⁵¹⁶ Shelter shortages worsened as IDP numbers increased. Thousands of families were reported to be 'temporarily accommodated in public buildings, schools and mosques, relying on local charities to provide immediate assistance including cooked meals' while hundreds of other families relied on finding shelter in 'unfinished houses, shops and other sub-standard buildings, as well as in open spaces including public parks, with no access to basic services'.⁵¹⁷ In December 2019, UNOCHA Assistant Secretary General Ursula Mueller stated that due to a supply shortage of heating Idlib residents are 'burning tires, old clothes, and other household items to stay warm'.⁵¹⁸

In mid-February 2020, the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, described the situation in Idlib as having potential of becoming the 'biggest humanitarian horror story of the 21st Century'. He further noted that around 900 000 people have been displaced since 1 December 2019, the majority of whom are women and children. Settlements for IDPs were reportedly being hit by attacks, resulting in civilian injuries, deaths and further displacement. Insufficient camps lead IDPs to sleep outside in freezing temperatures, with children dying because of the cold.⁵¹⁹

In mid-February 2020, the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator stated that 'schools are suspended, many health facilities have closed. There is a serious risk of disease outbreaks. Basic infrastructure is falling apart'.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

⁵¹¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, January 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, March 2019, [url](#)

⁵¹² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, July 2019, [url](#)

⁵¹³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, May 2019, [url](#)

⁵¹⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, August 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, December 2019, [url](#)

⁵¹⁵ UN Department of Global Communications, Regular Press Briefing by the Information Service, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵¹⁶ UNOCHA, Growing Humanitarian Concerns in North-west, 23 December 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁵¹⁷ UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria. Situation Report No. 7 - As of 29 January 2020, [url](#), p. 1

⁵¹⁸ UN News, Life for civilians in Syria 'worse than when the year began', 19 December 2019, [url](#)

⁵¹⁹ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵²⁰ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

Entire towns and villages have been reportedly razed to the ground⁵²¹ and emptied of communities.⁵²² Some humanitarian actors suspended their operations in southern Idlib due to insecurity.⁵²³ Relief operations are reportedly overwhelmed and humanitarian facilities and equipment are being damaged. The UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator stated that ‘humanitarian workers themselves are being displaced and killed’.⁵²⁴

The UN has documented several direct strikes on IDP camps in Idlib which resulted in civilian casualties. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet stated that ‘no shelter is now safe’, further noting that ‘as the Government offensive continues and people are forced into smaller and smaller pockets, I fear even more people will be killed’.⁵²⁵

⁵²¹ UNOCHA, Growing Humanitarian Concerns in North-west, 23 December 2019, [url](#), p. 1

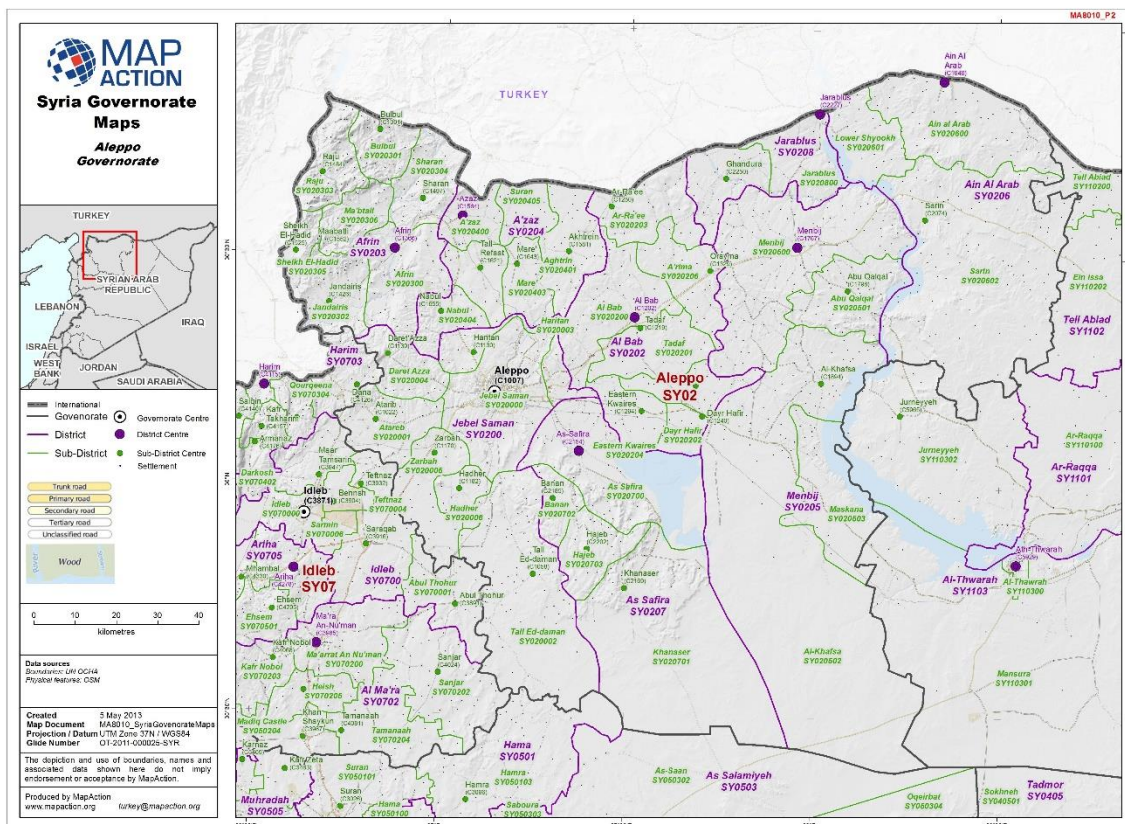
⁵²² International Crisis Group, The Eleventh Hour for Idlib, Syria’s Last Rebel Bastion, 6 February 2020, [url](#), p. 1

⁵²³ UNOCHA, Growing Humanitarian Concerns in North-west, 23 December 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁵²⁴ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵²⁵ OHCHR, UN human rights chief horrified by escalating humanitarian crisis in Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

2.2 Aleppo governorate



Map 5: © MapAction, Aleppo governorate⁵²⁶

2.2.1 General description of the governorate

Aleppo governorate is located in the north of Syria, bordering Idlib governorate to the west, Hama governorate to the south and Raqqah governorate to the east. In the north it shares a 221 km long border with Turkey.⁵²⁷ Prior to 2011, Aleppo governorate hosted around 20 % of Syria's population and was 'the major commercial and industrial hub' of the country.⁵²⁸ According to 2011 estimates, Aleppo governorate had a population of more than 4 867 991, making it the most populous province of Syria.⁵²⁹ Population estimates for 2016 issued by the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics indicated that Aleppo governorate had 3 734 000 inhabitants.⁵³⁰

The governorate is divided in eight districts: Jebel Saman, Afrin, A'zaz [Azaz], Al-Bab, Menbij [Manbij], Jarablus, Ain Al-Arab [Kobane], and As-Safira.⁵³¹ Located in Jebel Saman district, Aleppo city is the largest city in the governorate. Before the war Aleppo ranked as the largest city in Syria with a

⁵²⁶ MapAction, Aleppo governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

⁵²⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Governorates profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 5

⁵²⁸ ACAPS, Regional Analysis Syria: All – Governorate Profiles, 1 October–31 December 2014, [url](#), p. 4

⁵²⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Governorates profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 5

⁵³⁰ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

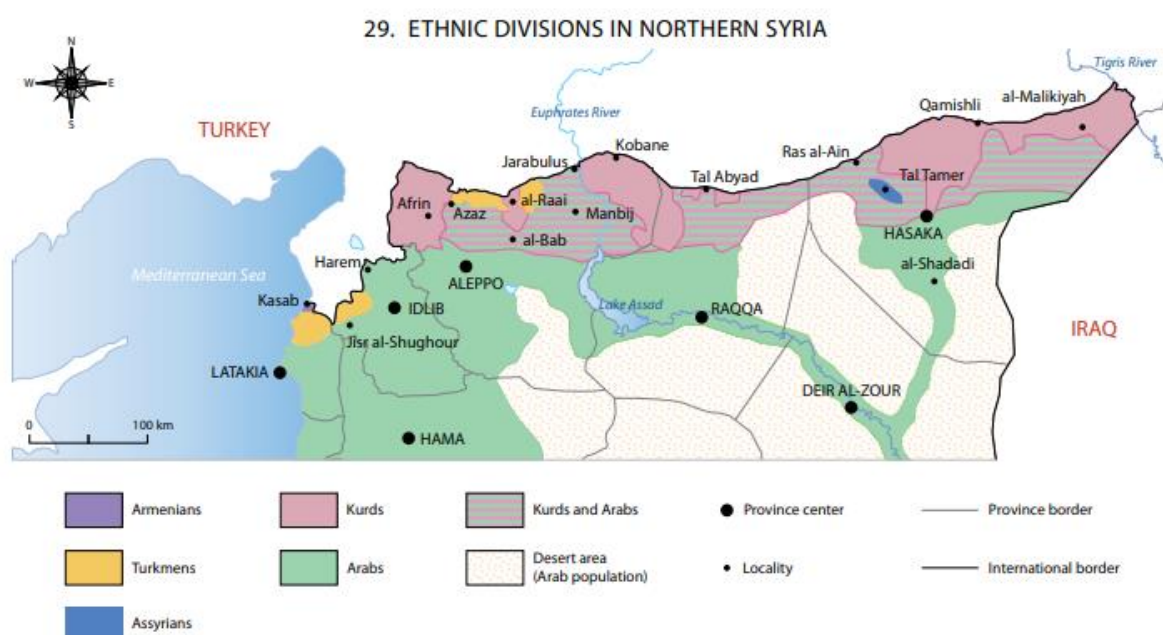
⁵³¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Governorates profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 5

population between 2.3⁵³² and 2.5 million and was also the industrial and commercial capital of the country.⁵³³ As of 2019, the UN estimates that around 1.6 million people are living in Aleppo city.⁵³⁴

Before the conflict, over 70 % of inhabitants of Aleppo governorate were Sunni, with minority communities such as Christians, Kurds, Armenians and Turkmen also living in the province.⁵³⁵ USDOS noted that Shia Muslims are present in the rural areas of Aleppo governorate, as well as in and around Aleppo.⁵³⁶

According to Syria expert Fabrice Balanche⁵³⁷, 'in 2012, the population of Aleppo [city] was 2.5 million: 1 million in the western district, another million in the east, and around 500,000 in the northern Kurdish neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiya'.⁵³⁸ Sheikh Maqsoud district in Aleppo city 'constitutes a Kurdish city within the city'.⁵³⁹

Arabs are found predominantly in the centre and south of the governorate, Kurds in the Afrin and Ain Al-Arab districts, while Turkmen are located in the northern parts of A'zaz and Al Bab districts. Manbij and Azaz are mixed between Arabs and Kurds.⁵⁴⁰



Map 6: © Fabrice Balanche, Ethnic divisions in northern Syria⁵⁴¹

⁵³² BBC News, Profile: Aleppo, Syria's second city, 28 November 2016, [url](#); New Humanitarian (The), In Syria's Aleppo, a slow rebuild begins, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

⁵³³ REACH/UNITAR, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 6

⁵³⁴ New Humanitarian (The), In Syria's Aleppo, a slow rebuild begins, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

⁵³⁵ ACAPS, Aleppo – Governorate profile. Syria Needs Analysis Project, March 2013, [url](#), p. 4

⁵³⁶ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2018, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁵³⁷ Dr. Fabrice Balanche is an associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon 2, is an adjunct fellow at The Washington Institute specialising in Lebanon and Syria since the 1990s. His expertise on Syria focuses on political geography, conflict and sectarian issues. For more information see [url](#)

⁵³⁸ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 44

⁵³⁹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 53-54

⁵⁴⁰ Based on reading of Map 29. Ethnic divisions in northern Syria, Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 52

⁵⁴¹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 52

2.2.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

In July 2012, anti-government armed groups launched an offensive against GoS in northern Syria, seizing the eastern part of Aleppo city, which was split in two.⁵⁴² Between 2012 and 2016, the city remained divided between the GoS-controlled west and rebel-controlled east.⁵⁴³ A number of opposition armed groups, including Jabhat Fateh-al Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, currently part of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham] and factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) controlled the east part of the city.⁵⁴⁴ In September 2015, Russia's military intervention in the war began, at the request of the GoS. Russia began a sustained campaign of air strikes in support of the GoS forces, which thereby gradually managed to reclaim areas from the rebel groups, including the eastern districts of Aleppo in December 2016.⁵⁴⁵ The fall of the rebel-held eastern Aleppo in December 2016 came after a prolonged siege⁵⁴⁶ in which between 250 000 and 275 000 residents were still living in the rebel-held parts.⁵⁴⁷

Following defeats at the hands of rebel groups in other areas, the GoS forces retreated from north-east Syria leaving predominantly Kurdish inhabited areas abandoned.⁵⁴⁸ This allowed the Kurds to gain greater autonomy and in early 2014 to establish a governing confederation in the three now called 'cantons' of Afrin, Kobane [Ain Al-Arab] and Jazira (Hasaka governorate).⁵⁴⁹

Other parts of the governorate came under ISIL control⁵⁵⁰ but GoS forces, backed by Russia, and the SDF coalition, supported by US special forces, gradually succeeded in defeating ISIL.⁵⁵¹ Some previously ISIL-held areas in the governorate were subsequently occupied by Turkish troops and anti-GoS armed groups allied with Turkey.⁵⁵² In 2016, Turkey launched operation Euphrates Shield in northern Aleppo governorate to fight ISIL and contain YPG gains in the area, capturing the al-Bab area⁵⁵³, including Jarabulus and other towns.⁵⁵⁴ In January 2018, Turkish and affiliated local armed groups then launched an offensive dubbed Operation Olive Branch on the Kurdish-held Afrin district, in Aleppo governorate⁵⁵⁵ which concluded in March 2018 when Turkish authorities announced complete control of the Afrin region.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁴² Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 44; BBC News, *Profile: Aleppo, Syria's second city*, 28 November 2016, [url](#)

⁵⁴³ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 44

⁵⁴⁴ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Country of Origin Information Report Syria. The security situation*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 33

⁵⁴⁵ Lund, A., *Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 21-22

⁵⁴⁶ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': *Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements*, 2017, [url](#), p. 34-35; UNOCHA, *East Aleppo Crisis Situation Report No.3*, 4 October 2016, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁴⁷ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': *Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements*, 2017, [url](#), p. 34

⁵⁴⁸ Wimmen, H. and Seluck, M., *The Rise of Syria's Kurds*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 February 2013, [url](#)

⁵⁴⁹ BBC News, *Syria conflict: Kurds declare federal system*, 17 March 2016, [url](#)

⁵⁵⁰ Wilson Center, *Syria*, n.d, [url](#); Wilson Center, *Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State*, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁵¹ Lund, A., *Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 21-22

⁵⁵² Lund, A., *Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 21-22

⁵⁵³ International Crisis Group, *Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East*, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁵⁵⁴ BBC News, *Turkey 'ends' Euphrates Shield campaign in Syria*, 30 March 2017, [url](#)

⁵⁵⁵ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/39/65]*, 9 August 2018, [url](#), p. 5; al-Hilu, K., *Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations*, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁵⁶ al-Hilu, K., *Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations*, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

As of March 2020⁵⁵⁷, the southern part of Aleppo governorate, including the city of Aleppo was under the control of pro-GoS forces.⁵⁵⁸ Sheikh Maqsoud district, a Kurdish majority district in Aleppo city, was reported to be under SDF control by confidential sources interviewed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁵⁵⁹

The Kurdish-led SDF controlled an enclave north of Aleppo city around Tal Rifaat – known as the Tal Rifaat triangle⁵⁶⁰, as well as parts in the north-east of governorate including Manbij and Kobane.⁵⁶¹ According to the Carter Center, ‘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 since 26 March 2019’.⁵⁶² An October 2019 agreement between Russia and Turkey envisaged the creation of a ‘safe zone’ in Manbij and Tel Rifaat, whereby the YPG would withdraw from the area and the GoS would take over. As of November 2019, the YPG had not withdrawn from Tal Rifaat.⁵⁶³ Earlier in October, Russia announced that YPG forces withdrew from both Manbij and Tal Rifaat.⁵⁶⁴

In northern Aleppo governorate, opposition armed groups comprised under the SNA umbrella backed by Turkey controlled the area between the cities of Afrin, Azaz, Al-Bab and Jarabulus.⁵⁶⁵

The western parts of the governorate were under the control of HTS⁵⁶⁶ and local opposition groups.⁵⁶⁷

2.2.2.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

According to Gregory Waters of International Review, deployments of the SAA in Aleppo governorate in 2019 included predominantly units of the Republican Guard and of the 4th Division. Below is a list of known deployments of SAA units that operated in the province and the last known date of their deployment, as of 17 March 2020.

Republican Guard:

- Aleppo Special Tasks Battalion – Idlib Province – 4 March 2020
- Aleppo Special Tasks Battalion/Yiman Bilouni Group – Sukhna, Homs – 1 June 2019
- 10th Division – Kobani, Aleppo – 14 October 2019
- 100th Artillery Regiment – Manbij, Aleppo – 22 October 2019
- 152nd Regiment – Aleppo – 5 December 2019
- 104th Brigade – Manbij, Aleppo – 20 October 2019
- 105th Brigade/unknown unit – Kobani, Aleppo – 19 October 2019
- 106th Brigade – Manbij, Aleppo – 19 October 2019
- 124th Brigade – Zerbah, Aleppo – 28 February 2020

⁵⁵⁷ Based on reading of the following map: Liveuamap, Syria, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁵⁸ Based on reading of the map: ISW, Syria Situation report: January 8-21, 2020, 24 January 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁵⁹ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria. The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 33

⁵⁶⁰ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria. The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 33

⁵⁶¹ Based on reading of the map: ISW, Syria Situation report: January 8-21, 2020, 24 January 2020, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 5 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁶² Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 15 – 21 April 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁶³ Al Monitor, Displaced Syrians demand to return, seek regime-YPG exit, 21 November 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁶⁴ Reuters, Russia tells Turkey Kurdish fighters have left NE Syrian border area: Erdogan, 29 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁶⁵ OHCHR, Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Civilians in North-western Syria, June 2018, [url](#), p. 1; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 53

⁵⁶⁶ MEE, Syrian government forces set to enter iconic rebel stronghold, 27 January 2020, [url](#); SOHR, HTS opens new front in Jam'eyyat Al-Zahraa west of Aleppo with fierce attack initiated by three car-bomb explosions, 01 February 2020, [url](#); Al Masdar News, Jihadists of HTS build new trenches and tunnels along west Aleppo front: video, 16 December 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁶⁷ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria. The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 33

- 124th Brigade/873rd Battalion – Zerbah, Aleppo – 28 February 2020

4th Division:

- Lebanese Baath Forces – West Aleppo – 29 January 2020
- 42nd Brigade/185th Bat/Hourarya Group – West Aleppo – 26 January 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Zakiyah & Bakara Battalions – West Aleppo – 26 January 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Unknown Rocket Unit – Zahraa, Aleppo – 1 February 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Muhind Jadid Battalion – Aleppo – 8 January 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Muqdad Battalion – West Aleppo – 14 February 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Shams Group – West Aleppo – 8 February 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Raoud Battalion – Aleppo – 8 January 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Marwan Kamal al-Deen Groups – Aleppo – 15 February 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Yalda Group – West Aleppo – 8 February 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Abbas al-Lord Group – Aleppo – 15 January 2020
- 42nd Brigade/al-Haji Group – Aleppo – 15 January 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Abu Yahya Groups – Aleppo – 15 January 2020
- 42nd Brigade/Ighwani Group – Ithriya, Aleppo – 24 January 2020

2nd Corps, 1st Division:

- 57th Brigade/846th Battalion – Manbij, Aleppo – 27 March 2019
- 68th Brigade/282nd Battalion – Manbij, Aleppo – 30 January 2019

5th Corps:

- 4th Brigade/Fuah & Kafraya Battalions – Aleppo – 15 February 2020

Border Guards:

- 12th Regiment – Kobani, Aleppo – 26 October 2019.⁵⁶⁸

In early January 2020, sources reported the arrival in Aleppo governorate of GoS special forces units⁵⁶⁹, included the 42nd Brigade of the 4th Armored Division.⁵⁷⁰

At the end of September 2019, it was reported that Russian forces were being deployed in northern Aleppo governorate, and weapons were sent to the area around the city of Tal Rifaat.⁵⁷¹ Tal Riffaat hosts a Russian military base.⁵⁷² During the October 2019 Turkish-led offensive into north-east Syria, GoS forces, accompanied by Russian forces, were reported to be deployed in Kurdish-controlled territories, including the cities of Manbij⁵⁷³ and Kobane⁵⁷⁴ in Aleppo governorate.⁵⁷⁵ This deployments came after the GoS and the Kurdish controlled SDF announced an agreement that allowed the GoS troops to be deployed along the border with Turkey to assist Kurdish forces in repelling the Turkish offensive.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁶⁸ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁶⁹ SOHR, Regime mobilizes forces at Idlib and Aleppo frontlines and 34 soldiers and fighters killed in today's clashes, 2 January 2020, [url](#); Al Masdara News, Syrian Army reinforcements pour into Aleppo as large-scale offensive approaches, 3 January 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁷⁰ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 30 December 2019 – 5 January 2020, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁷¹ SOHR, Syrian Army, Russian Forces Deploy Reinforcements In Southeastern Idlib & Northern Aleppo, 29 September 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁷² SOHR, Turkish forces shell Tal Rifaat town hosting Russian military base, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁷³ DW, Russia-backed Syrian forces enter key city Manbij in northern Syria, 15 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁷⁴ Defense Post (The), Syrian army troops enter symbolic Kurdish city of Kobani, 16 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁷⁵ Reuters, Syrian Observatory: government forces deploy to Ain Issa in northern Syria, 14 October 2019, [url](#); New Yorker (The), Turkey, Syria, the Kurds, and Trump's Abandonment of Foreign Policy, 20 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁷⁶ Al Jazeera, Syria's army to deploy along Turkey border as Kurds strike deal, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

In November 2019, Russian aircraft and troops took over an abandoned US air base in northern Aleppo governorate, close to the border with Turkey.⁵⁷⁷

Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR)⁵⁷⁸ representatives interviewed by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) in November 2018 stated that due to limited capacity, GoS uses up to 15-20 affiliated militias to control cities under their territorial control, including Aleppo city.⁵⁷⁹ According to a June 2019 article, the IRGC and Iran-backed militias were reportedly in control of eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo city.⁵⁸⁰ Experts cited by Al Jazeera assessed that Aleppo is 'one of the main areas where IRGC enjoys a strong military presence supporting local militias' that have been fighting alongside GoS forces.⁵⁸¹

Iran-backed militias fighting on the side of the GoS were also taking part in military offensive against anti-government groups in Aleppo and Idlib governorates. During 2019, Iranian militias were present in the governorate and took part in military operations.⁵⁸² Iranian-backed forces were reported to take part in military operations in Aleppo governorate in early 2020.⁵⁸³ In February 2020, an IRGC member dubbed as 'Soleimani's guard' was killed in a battle 'with militant groups' in southern Aleppo governorate, according to Iranian sources.⁵⁸⁴

2.2.2.2 Syrian National Army

According to COAR writing in October 2019, the most powerful and influential armed groups in the SNA are: 'the Sultan Muhammad Al-Fatih Brigade and the Muntasir Billah Brigade (both based in Jarablus); Jaish Al-Islam (based in Jarablus and Al Bab); Sultan Murad (based in Al Bab); Fariq Hamza (based in Azaz); the Al-Mutassim Brigade (based in Azaz and Al Bab); and Jabhat Shamiya (based in Ar-Ra'ee)'.⁵⁸⁵ The factions with the closest relationship with Turkey are named after Ottoman sultans such as the Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade and the Sultan Murad Division, and were responsible for the protection of areas of Afrin that border Turkey. As of July 2019, a European University Institute study estimated the strength of the SNA at 30 000 fighters, who received wages and weapons supplies from Turkey.⁵⁸⁶

While nominally the SNA is a unified structure that sits under the formal supervision of the so called Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Defence⁵⁸⁷, the constituent groups 'each answer directly to Turkey and maintains its pre- National Army form'.⁵⁸⁸ The CoI noted in an August 2019 report that factions of the SNA have split the areas under their control into geographic zones of influence.⁵⁸⁹ Competition over local resources and diverse regional background of the constituent factions were

⁵⁷⁷ Business Insider, Russian forces just occupied a former US air base in Syria, 15 November 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁷⁸ COAR is a social enterprise that provides research and analysis related to the conflict in Syria as part of an EU-funded project. For more information see [url](#)

⁵⁷⁹ Denmark, DIS, DRC, Syria. Security Situation in Damascus. Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 56

⁵⁸⁰ Syrian Observer (The), Pro-Iran Militants Loot Aleppo's Antiquities, 27 June 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁸¹ Al Jazeera, Syrian military: Israeli air attack targeted Aleppo, 28 March 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁸² Syrian Observer (The), Aleppo: Tension Between Russia and Iran Escalates in the Markets, 7 August 2019, [url](#); DW, Syria: Jihadis kill dozens of government soldiers in Aleppo, 27 April 2019, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Syrian military: Israeli air attack targeted Aleppo, 28 March 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁸³ Al Monitor, What brought Iranian forces to Idlib front?, 5 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁸⁴ Asharq Al-Awsat, Iran Announces Death of Soleimani's Guard in Southern Aleppo, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁸⁵ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 41

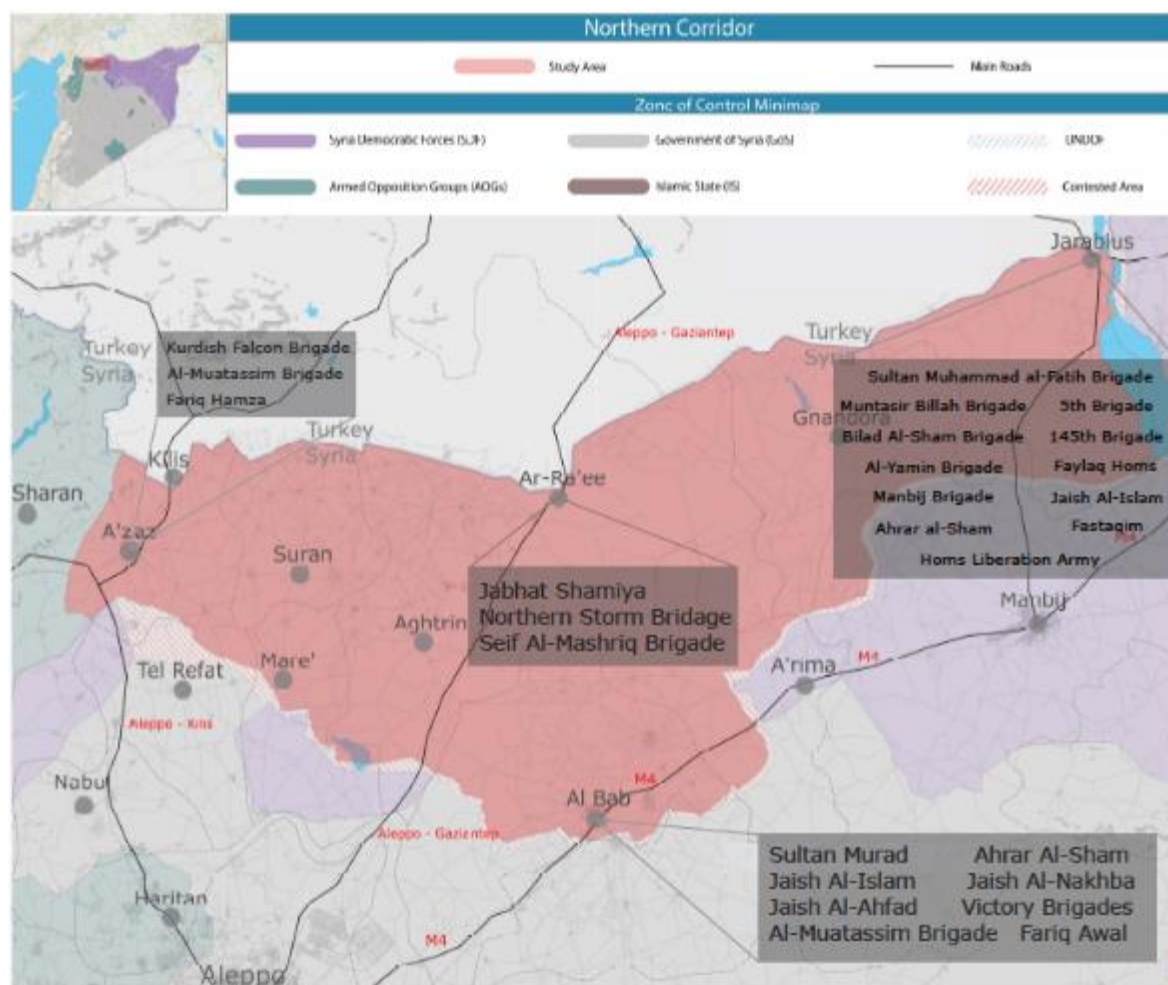
⁵⁸⁶ al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6

⁵⁸⁷ al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁵⁸⁸ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁵⁸⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 11

considered to be the main sources of tension between the SNA. Clashes and asymmetric attacks between factions have been frequently reported, with Turkey generally acting as the mediator.⁵⁹⁰



Map 7: © COAR, Presence of SNA factions in northern Aleppo governorate⁵⁹¹

2.2.2.3 Syrian Democratic Forces

The SDF forces were in control of the Kurdish occupied areas around the cities of Manbij and Kobane, which were captured from ISIL in 2016 and 2015, respectively.⁵⁹² In October 2019, the GoS and the Kurdish-controlled SDF announced an agreement that allowed the GoS troops to be deployed along the border with Turkey to assist Kurdish forces in repelling the Turkish offensive.⁵⁹³

GoS forces, accompanied by Russian forces, were subsequently deployed to the cities of Manbij⁵⁹⁴ and Kobane.⁵⁹⁵ Christopher Kozak of ISW assessed in November 2019 that the SDF are still in control on the ground in Kurdish-controlled territories and there has not been a governance handover to the

⁵⁹⁰ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 39, 41

⁵⁹¹ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 42

⁵⁹² Defense Post (The), Syrian government forces set to enter Kobani and Manbij in SDF deal, 13 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹³ Al Jazeera, Syria's army to deploy along Turkey border as Kurds strike deal, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹⁴ DW, Russia-backed Syrian forces enter key city Manbij in northern Syria, 15 October 2019, [url](#); New Yorker (The), Turkey, Syria, the Kurds, and Trump's Abandonment of Foreign Policy, 20 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹⁵ Reuters, Syrian Observatory: government forces deploy to Ain Issa in northern Syria, 14 October 2019, [url](#); Defense Post (The), Syrian army troops enter symbolic Kurdish city of Kobani, 16 October 2019, [url](#); New Yorker (The), Turkey, Syria, the Kurds, and Trump's Abandonment of Foreign Policy, 20 October 2019, [url](#)

Syrian government following the agreement.⁵⁹⁶ As previously mentioned, the SDF and GoS were also in joint control of the Tal Rifaat area.⁵⁹⁷

2.2.2.4 Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

The CoI reported in January 2019 that HTS together with other anti-GoS armed groups 'maintained their foothold' in western Aleppo governorate.⁵⁹⁸ In early 2019 HTS took over large parts of Idlib and western Aleppo governorate following clashes with other anti-GoS armed groups in the region, including the NLF⁵⁹⁹, among others.⁶⁰⁰ The CoI stated in an August 2019 report that HTS control over 90 % of Idlib governorate, alongside adjacent parts of northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates.⁶⁰¹ Sources interviewed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands stated 'the west of Aleppo province is under the control of local opposition groups'.⁶⁰² HTS presence⁶⁰³, control and military operations in western Aleppo governorate was reported during 2019.⁶⁰⁴

2.2.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

2.2.3.1 Aleppo city and its surroundings

The militias prevented the stabilisation of Aleppo after the government recaptured parts of the city held by the opposition in December 2016. In the ensuing period, local pro-government militias were involved in kidnappings and street fighting among themselves. The president eventually sent the head of one of the intelligence services to Aleppo to resolve the situation, which reduced the problem without making it disappear completely.⁶⁰⁵

Militias in the city are still accused of informal 'taxation' of trade and industry according to an August 2019 article from the Syria Observer.⁶⁰⁶ The DIS reported in early 2019 that clashes between militias in Aleppo escalated into exchanges of machine gun fire and the use of RPG rocket launchers, resulting in civilian casualties.⁶⁰⁷ Military skirmishes between the 5th Army Corps influenced by Russia and the Iranian-backed 4th Division of the SAA took place in April 2019 in Aleppo city.⁶⁰⁸

Between February and July 2019, the CoI stated that there are reasonable grounds to believe HTS and Jaysh al-Izza militants launched artillery fire on GoS-controlled areas in Aleppo countryside, which it described as 'war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks' on civilian areas which resulted in deaths

⁵⁹⁶ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁵⁹⁷ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 15 – 21 April 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁵⁹⁹ Al Jazeera, HTS offensive could draw in Syria and Turkey, 9 January 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁰ Carter Center, Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | September 2018 – August 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2

⁶⁰¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁰² Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria. The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 33

⁶⁰³ Al Masdar News, Jihadists of HTS build new trenches and tunnels along west Aleppo front: video, 16 December 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁴ MEE, 'Radical' fighters 'capture 20 towns and villages' from rebels in western Aleppo, 19 January 2019, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4; New Arab (The), HTS kills scores of Syrian regime fighters near Aleppo, 20 April 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁵ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 49-50

⁶⁰⁶ Syrian Observer (The), Aleppo: Tension between Russia and Iran escalates in the markets, 7 August 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁷ Denmark, DIS, DRC, Syria. Security Situation in Damascus. Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

⁶⁰⁸ Al-Jabassini, A., From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria, European University Institute, 14 May 2019, [url](#), p. 7

or injury of civilians.⁶⁰⁹ According to August 2019 reporting, Aleppo is so close to the rebel-held areas that the western parts of the city are regularly subjected to missile attacks. In addition, the airport has been restored but was not open for regular flights.⁶¹⁰ The UN Security Council noted in December 2019 that ‘the threat of indirect artillery fire affecting the city of Aleppo has increased over the past three months’, reporting more than 150 incidents targeting residential areas of the city between September and November. In one such incident, a building used by UNRWA was damaged.⁶¹¹

In February 2020, following territorial gains by GoS in western Aleppo countryside, internal flights from Aleppo were resumed and the first commercial flight between Aleppo and Damascus took place for the first time since 2012.⁶¹²

Other security incidents impacting civilians in GoS-controlled areas of the province were reported without identifying the perpetrators. Such illustrative incidents from 2019 and 2020 included the following:

- In March 2019, suspected Iranian/Hezbollah weapon storages sites in Aleppo city were hit by Israeli airstrikes, leading to the death of at least seven people.⁶¹³
- On 14 April 2019, six civilians were killed and 11 others were injured as a result of alleged ground-based strikes that hit a local market in the neighbourhood of Khalidiyah and a residential area in Nile Street of Aleppo city.⁶¹⁴
- On 14 May 2019, 10 civilians were killed and 11 others injured following an alleged ground-based strike that hit the Palestinian refugee camp of Nayrab in Aleppo city, which is located close to a GoS-controlled military base.⁶¹⁵
- On 16 June 2019, at least 12 civilians were killed and 17 others injured following alleged ground-based strikes that hit a wedding party in southern rural Aleppo.⁶¹⁶ The CoI also reported on the incident and attributed the strike to HTS.⁶¹⁷
- On 21 November 2019, ground-based strikes on several neighborhoods in Aleppo city, including Jamiliyah, A’zamiyah, Zahra’, Furqan, Sayf al-Dawlah, and Salah al-Din, resulted of seven civilians being killing and at least 29 others injured.⁶¹⁸

⁶⁰⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁶¹⁰ AP, Syria’s Aleppo symbol of Assad’s wins and of enduring war, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

⁶¹¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 13

⁶¹² Arab Weekly (The), Syria’s Aleppo airport resumes flights for 1st time in years, 19 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶¹³ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 25 - 31 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 2-3

⁶¹⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/508], 19 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 20-21

⁶¹⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/508], 19 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 20-21

⁶¹⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 19

⁶¹⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁶¹⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 17

- On 12 January 2020, four civilians were killed and three injured when ground-based strikes hit several residential neighbourhoods in Aleppo city. One of the reported strikes damaged a building at the Ittihad Private University.⁶¹⁹

2.2.3.2 Conflict between GoS forces and anti-GoS armed groups

In January 2019, HTS took over territory held by other anti-GoS groups, particularly the NLF, its military expansion into western Aleppo and Idlib leading to at least 200 incidents during the first two weeks of the month, as recorded by the Carter Center.⁶²⁰

In the first half of 2019 the Col reported an escalation of military hostilities in anti-GoS controlled areas, including western Aleppo governorate. Between February and July, armed groups HTS and Jaysh al-Izza attacked GoS positions in Aleppo countryside using rockets, reportedly killing scores of civilians. The attacks were described by the Col as 'indiscriminate, indirect artillery fire into densely populated civilian areas, with no apparent legitimate military objective'.⁶²¹

Reporting on February – March 2019, the UN Security Council stated that civilian casualties were recorded following ground-based strikes and airstrikes between GoS forces and HTS.⁶²²

In April and May, air and ground-based strikes by GoS and affiliated forces, and sporadic ground-based strikes by anti-GoS groups in Aleppo governorate led to 'large number of civilian deaths and injuries' as well as significant damage to infrastructure, public services such as medical and educational facilities, and housing.⁶²³ HTS bombardments and assaults were concentrated against areas west (Al Warida, Rashideen, Tishreen, and Aqrab) and north-west (Al Khalidyah, Hamadaniye and Jumeliyah) of Aleppo city.⁶²⁴ HTS bombardments of GoS positions in Aleppo continued during May 2019.⁶²⁵

Lower levels of HTS attacks on GoS controlled areas in Aleppo were recorded between August and September 2019. Clashes between Hurras al-Din and GoS forces were recorded in the Zmar area of Aleppo governorate.⁶²⁶ From 1 October to 22 November, OHCHR recorded 136 civilian deaths within the de-escalation zone in Idlib and Aleppo, attributing them to alleged airstrikes by GoS and affiliated forces as well as to ground strikes exchanged with anti-GoS armed groups.⁶²⁷ Military confrontations between GoS forces and HTS continued in December 2019.⁶²⁸

In late January 2020, ICRC stated that 'the violence in the city of Aleppo has reached an intensity not seen there since 2016, with shelling affecting several neighbourhoods. In rural western Aleppo and across Idlib governorate, meanwhile, fierce fighting is resulting in increased levels of suffering for

⁶¹⁹ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁶²⁰ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 21 – 27 January 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁶²¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 4, 8-9

⁶²² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/321], 16 April 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁶²³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/508], 19 June 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶²⁴ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 15 - 21 April 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁶²⁵ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 13 - 19 May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶²⁶ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 23 - 29 September 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁶²⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁶²⁸ Al Masdar News, Breaking: Syrian Army, jihadist rebels trade attacks in Aleppo, 16 December 2019, [url](#)

families there'.⁶²⁹ By mid-February 2020, the Syrian state agency SANA reported that GoS forces recaptured 30 villages and towns around Aleppo city in the western part of the governorate.⁶³⁰

2.2.3.3 Afrin district and other areas under Turkish-armed groups control

Since the capture of Afrin by Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups in March 2018, YPG and other armed groups were reported to having conducted 'IED attacks, roadside ambushes, kidnappings and executions' against the Turkey-backed groups that control the area and suspected collaborators. YPG, together with two other linked armed groups - Ghadab al-Zaytoun and Hezen Rizgariya Efrine [Afrin Liberation Forces] - claimed to have carried out about 220 attacks between late March 2018 and end January 2019. While no reliable data on the number casualties was available, Bellingcat estimated that at least 100 members of Turkish military and Turkey-backed groups were killed as a result of the attacks. The attacks also caused civilian casualties.⁶³¹

In the first half of 2019, the security conditions in Afrin and adjacent districts were reported to be 'dire', largely as a result of infighting between rival Turkish-backed armed groups and 'an insurgency campaign directed against the Turkish presence and supporting armed factions in the north-west of the country' carried out by YPG-linked actors operating out of Tal Rifaat and the surrounding areas.⁶³²

In Afrin the YPG is reported to wage 'a low-level insurgency against the Turkish military and its Syrian rebel allies'.⁶³³ According to a June 2019 report published by the Dutch Institute of International Relations, in Afrin Turkey has struggled to 'establish a basic level of control through tactics of suppression, confiscation and expulsion of the area's Kurdish population and its leaders which, in turn, has triggered a YPG-led insurgency'.⁶³⁴ The Col report of August 2019 noted that YPG-associated Kurdish armed groups, Ghadab al-Zaytoun and Hezen Rizgariya Efrine, 'have engaged in asymmetric warfare against factions operating under the Syrian National Army'.⁶³⁵

Reporting for the period between April and June 2019, the US Defense Intelligence Agency stated that 'Turkish forces continued to fight Syrian Kurdish forces in the northwestern Syrian enclave of Afrin'.⁶³⁶

Bomb attacks, including IED⁶³⁷ and vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks⁶³⁸, but also machine gun fire⁶³⁹ and mortars⁶⁴⁰ were used by armed groups operating in Afrin. Civilians were 'regularly caught in the crossfire of rival factions or insurgent activity' and casualties were recorded.⁶⁴¹

⁶²⁹ ICRC, Syria: A spike in civilian casualties, mass displacement in country's northwest, 31 January 2020, [url](#)

⁶³⁰ AP News, Assad's forces make advances, further securing Aleppo region, 16 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶³¹ Bellingcat, Wrath of the Olives: Tracking the Afrin Insurgency Through Social Media, 1 March 2019, [url](#); Bellingcat is an open source investigative site.

⁶³² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 5, 11

⁶³³ DW, Explained: Why Turkey wants a military assault on Syrian Kurds, 9 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶³⁴ Clingendael, Turkey in northwestern Syria. Rebuilding empire at the margins, June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁶³⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁶³⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 27

⁶³⁷ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 8-14 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶³⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 11; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 18-19

⁶³⁹ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 8 - 14 April 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁴⁰ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 17-18

⁶⁴¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 11

According to the Carter Center, 'IED activity targeted local armed groups and civilians in Turkish-backed area of Aleppo Governorate'.⁶⁴²

In October 2019, IED attacks on areas controlled by Turkish-backed armed groups increased, with seven being recorded in a single day.⁶⁴³ Armed attacks against Turkish-backed armed groups in Afrin and surrounding areas, as well as infighting between rival SNA factions continued through November 2019.⁶⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch stated in its annual report on Syria (covering 2019) that security conditions in areas surrounding Afrin 'deteriorated considerably'.⁶⁴⁵

List of illustrative incidents:

- On 20 January 2019, an IED attack near Afrin city on a bus transporting civilians left three civilians dead and seven other injured.⁶⁴⁶
- On 28 May 2019, two civilians were killed in Jinayris, Afrin district, during an exchange of fire between two factions of the SNA.⁶⁴⁷
- On 12 July 2019, a VBIED was detonated near a checkpoint in Afrin city, killing at least eight civilians, including women and children, and injuring at least another 20.⁶⁴⁸
- On 13 September 2019, a VBIED attack on a local market in Afrin city was followed by a mortar attack that hit a residential area of the city. At least 11 civilians were injured.⁶⁴⁹
- On 31 October 2019, a VBIED attack on a marketplace in Afrin city led to seven civilians killed and 15 injured.⁶⁵⁰

In areas controlled by Turkish-backed armed groups IED activity was reported to have increased during 2019, registering an average of 14 IED attacks per month.⁶⁵¹ According to ACLED and the Carter Center data for the period between January and October 2019, IED activity increased steadily from May to October, with the highest number of attacks being registered in June, August and October (see Figure 21).⁶⁵²

⁶⁴² Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 23 - 29 September 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁴³ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 28 October – 3 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁴⁴ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 4 – 10 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁴⁵ HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁴⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/157], 19 February 2019, [url](#), p. 14

⁶⁴⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁶⁴⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 18-19

⁶⁴⁹ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 17-18

⁶⁵⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁶⁵¹ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 28 October – 3 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁵² Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 28 October – 3 November 2019, [url](#), p. 4

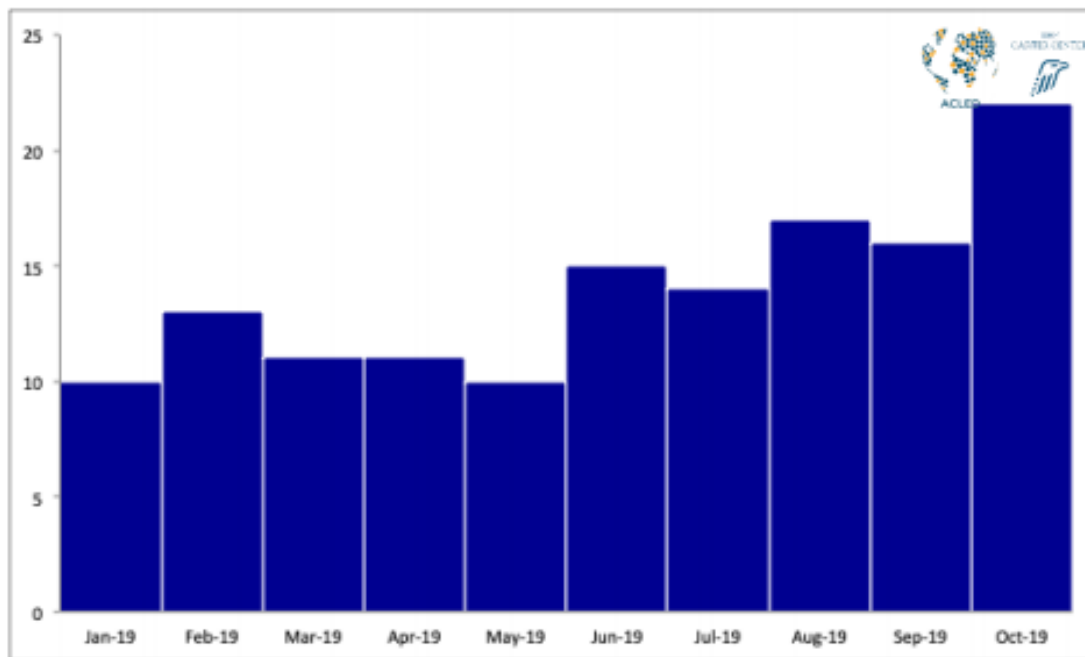


Figure 21 © Carter Center, IED activity in Turkish backed areas of northern Aleppo governorate in 2019. Data from ACLED and the Carter Center.

Clashes between different armed groups backed by Turkey were also reported throughout 2019.⁶⁵³ In September and October 2019, the Carter Center recorded 17 inter-factional clashes between Turkish-backed armed groups, out of a total of 40 recorded in 2019 (up until late October).⁶⁵⁴

On 25 November 2019, GoS carried out several airstrikes against areas controlled by Turkish-backed groups near Al Bab, targeting oil infrastructure. Syrian state media claimed that the strikes were intended to prevent 'Kurdish organizations' from smuggling oil into Turkey.⁶⁵⁵

Enab Baladi noted that in areas of northern Aleppo governorate the main threat for civilians is not the military operations but rather 'booby traps, often hidden in vehicles, killing the civilians'. Turkey has accused the YPG for the attacks while the Kurdish administration in north-east Syria and its military wing has accused the Turkish-backed SNA of being behind the attacks.⁶⁵⁶

List of illustrative incidents:

- On 15 April 2019, three civilian men were injured after an alleged explosion of an IED inside a market in the town of Qabbasin in the Bab area in eastern rural Aleppo. No group claimed responsibility for the attack.⁶⁵⁷
- On 2 June 2019, at least 11 civilians were killed and at least 23 others injured following an IED attack that occurred in the city of A'zaz in northern rural Aleppo.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵³ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 8 - 14 April 2019, [url](#), p. 3; Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 16 - 22 September 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁵⁴ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 21 - 27 October 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁶⁵⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report: November 20 - December 3, 2019, 5 December 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁵⁶ Enab Baladi, Car bomb war in northern Syria, 12 December 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁵⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/508], 19 June 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁶⁵⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 18

- On 15 September 2019, a VBIED attack on the town of Ra'i, Al Bab district killed 12 civilians and injured 15 others, and caused infrastructure damage to the hospital and houses in the area.⁶⁵⁹
- On 14 October 2019, three children were injured in Jabal camp for IDPs near Jarabulus following reported ground-based strikes.⁶⁶⁰
- On 16 November 2019, a VBIED attack on a market in Bab city killed 11 civilians and 57 were injured.⁶⁶¹
- On 26 January 2020, 1 boy was killed and 46 other civilians were injured after an alleged VBIED was detonated inside a local market in the centre of I'zaz city.⁶⁶²

2.2.3.4 Areas under Kurdish control

In the Tal Rifaat area armed clashes between the Turkey and allied armed groups on one side and YPG on the other side were reported during 2019. Bombardments on YPG positions⁶⁶³, shelling⁶⁶⁴ and frontline clashes⁶⁶⁵ between the two sides were reported between April and October 2019. The YPG reportedly also carried out attacks behind the frontlines of the Turkish-backed armed groups areas of control.⁶⁶⁶ In December 2019, local sources reported that Tal Rifaat was hit by artillery fire from 'Turkish-controlled areas' which killed at least 10 civilians, including children and injured 21 others.⁶⁶⁷ The Washington Post also reported on the incident which it label it as a Turkish airstrike on Tal Rifaat, further noting that eight of the 10 civilians killed were children.⁶⁶⁸

Data from ACLED and the Carter Center (see Figure 22) indicates that the number of security events registered in the Tal Rifaat pocket grew steadily in 2019, with the highest number being registered in October (around 80) followed by the months of May, August and November (40).

⁶⁵⁹ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 18

⁶⁶⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁶⁶¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁶⁶² UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁶⁶³ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 29 July – 4 August 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁶⁴ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 30 September – 6 October 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁶⁵ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 29 July – 4 August 2019, [url](#), p. 3; Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 30 September – 6 October 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁶⁶ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 29 July – 4 August 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁶⁷ VOA, Children Among 10 Kurdish Civilians Killed in Shelling from Turkish-Controlled Area in Syria, 3 December 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁶⁸ Washington Post (The), Separate airstrikes by Ankara and Damascus kill at least 20 in northwestern Syria, 2 December 2019, [url](#)

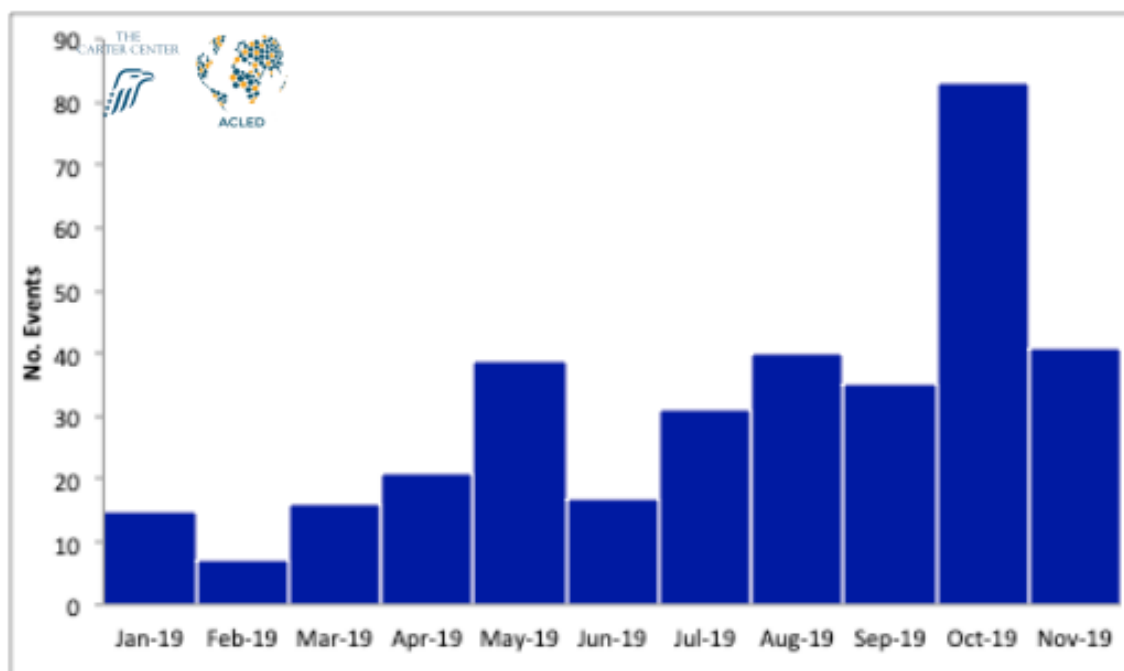


Figure 22 © Carter Center, Conflict levels in Tal Rifaat in 2019. Data from ACLED and the Carter Center⁶⁶⁹

USCENTCOM assessed that ISIL maintains a small, clandestine presence in Manbij, but it didn't register an increase of ISIL operatives since the retreat of US troops from the area [October 2019].⁶⁷⁰ The International Crisis Group reported that ISIL used underground cells in Manbij to carry out 'hit-and-run' attacks and bombings during the first months of 2019.⁶⁷¹ ISIL claimed suicide vest (SVEST) and car bomb attacks in Manbij in the first half of 2019 which led to deaths of SDF fighters⁶⁷², American soldiers and civilians.⁶⁷³

2.2.3.5 Security incidents

In 2019, there were 2 370 security incidents recorded by ACLED in Aleppo governorate, of whom 1 600 were coded as explosions/remote violence, 563 battles and 207 incidents of violence against civilians. Aleppo recorded the third highest number of security incidents in 2019 after Idlib and Hama governorates.

⁶⁶⁹ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 25 November – 8 December 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁷⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 34, 40

⁶⁷¹ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Report 204 / Middle East & North Africa, 31 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 16–17

⁶⁷² AP, 7 US-backed Kurdish fighters killed in ISIS attack in Manbij, 26 March 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁷³ New York Times (The), ISIS Attack in Syria Kills 4 Americans, Raising New Worries About Troop Withdrawal, 16 January 2019, [url](#); USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 20

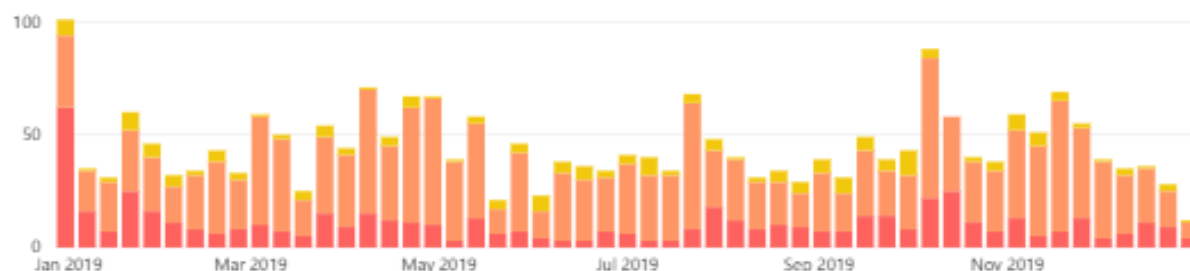


Figure 23. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Aleppo governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data⁶⁷⁴

Security incidents were recorded in all Aleppo governorate districts during 2019, with the highest number of overall incidents being recorded in Jebel Saman, A'zaz and Afrin. The largest number of battles took place in Jebel Saman, A'zaz, and Al Bab, while most incidents involving explosions/remote violence were documented in Jebel Saman, A'zaz and Afrin. Incidents of violence against civilians were particularly prevalent in Afrin. In the district of As-Safira, ACLED data recorded only one security incident in 2019.

Aleppo governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Afrin	71	138	124
Ain Al Arab	12	29	9
Al Bab	76	87	13
As-Safira	-	1	-
A'zaz	157	277	13
Jarablus	9	29	7
Jebel Saman	170	1000	31
Menbij	68	39	10
Total	563	1600	207

Figure 24. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Aleppo governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data.⁶⁷⁵

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 861 security incidents of which 195 were battles, 640 explosions/remote violence and 26 incidents of violence against civilians. Most of them occurred in the districts of Jebel Saman (617), A'zaz (120) and Afrin (74).

⁶⁷⁴ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

⁶⁷⁵ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

2.2.3.6 Civilian fatalities

In 2019, Aleppo had between 359 (SNHR data)⁶⁷⁶ and 370 civilian fatalities (VDC data)⁶⁷⁷, the third highest number of civilian fatalities recorded out of any province in Syria after Idlib and Deir Ez-Zor (according to SNHR data) or after Idlib and Hama (according to VDC data). Most civilian fatalities were recorded in the months of July, January and November.

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	48	40
February	30	21
March	13	35
April	18	33
May	21	40
June	30	35
July	64	45
August	16	13
September	22	25
October	28	15
November	47	34
December	33	23
Total	370	359

Figure 25. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Aleppo governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

2.2.3.7 Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

When Aleppo was recaptured by GoS in December 2016, massive destruction had affected the eastern parts of the city, and the majority of civilians were evacuated from in these areas.⁶⁷⁸

According to satellite detected damage analysis carried out by the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR-UNOSAT) in September 2016, apart from one neighbourhood, all others in Aleppo experienced some building damage, with the highest damage being recorded in the eastern parts and the lowest in the west of the city.⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷⁶ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁷⁷ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

⁶⁷⁸ Khaddour, K., Consumed by War. The End of Aleppo and Northern Syria's Political Order, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, October 2017, [url](#), p. 17

⁶⁷⁹ REACH/UNITAR, Syria. Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 10

Around 23.3 % of housing units in the governorate were assessed by a 2017 World Bank report to have sustained partial damage while 7.5 % were destroyed.⁶⁸⁰ In Aleppo city, around 63 % of healthcare facilities have been damaged or destroyed – with 35 % being completely destroyed.⁶⁸¹ Almost 15 million tons of debris were left in the city which would take an estimated six years to clear.⁶⁸² In February 2017 it was estimated that the total cost of the damage to Aleppo city ranges somewhere between USD 6.2 billion and USD 7.6 billion – 66 % of this is attributed to housing.⁶⁸³

A UN official interviewed by International Crisis Group assessed that infrastructure damage was most severe in eastern Aleppo city and the old city.⁶⁸⁴ As of an August 2019 article, the rebuilding of the city has been limited, and the original population was spread around the other parts of the city and the rest of the country.⁶⁸⁵ Some small parts of the old historic centre have been reconstructed, but these are not residential areas.⁶⁸⁶ In other places, those with enough money have repaired their homes or businesses to the best of their abilities, and some cafés have opened, but no organised reconstruction project has been initiated.⁶⁸⁷ Eastern parts of the city were reported to still lie in ruin, while reconstruction efforts were slow.⁶⁸⁸ In an August 2019 article, the New York Times reported that government reconstruction lacked funds. Electricity in Aleppo city was supplied primarily from generators and only private hospitals were reported to operate.⁶⁸⁹ Access to functional water networks was reportedly limited, only three in ten households could rely on the water network.⁶⁹⁰

The presence of explosive hazards in Aleppo was reported ‘to cause injuries and death, limit safe access to services and impede the delivery of humanitarian aid’, with children, farmers and construction workers being particularly vulnerable. Key infrastructure and services ‘remain unsafe or unserviceable because of contamination’.⁶⁹¹ Syrian Civil Defence reported to have cleared 2 162 submunitions in Aleppo, Idlib and Hama during 2018.⁶⁹²

The UN Security Council reported that during the summer of 2019 high temperatures and unexploded ordnance sparked fires in the governorate.⁶⁹³

Poverty, lack of basic services, infrastructure damage were listed among the main barriers for return to Aleppo, while the UN stated that it is not in a position to fund reconstruction, which is estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars.⁶⁹⁴

2.2.3.8 Displacement and return

Between January and December 2019, Aleppo ranked as the second governorate in terms of IDP movements in Syria after Idlib, registering around 438 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate, of whom 94 000 IDP movements were within the governorate, while the majority of IDP movements to Aleppo came from Idlib (around 285 000) and Hama (around 55 000) governorates.

⁶⁸⁰ World Bank (The), The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria, 2017, [url](#), p. 26

⁶⁸¹ World Bank (The), The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria, 2017, [url](#), p. 39

⁶⁸² World Bank (The), The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria, 2017, [url](#), p. 27

⁶⁸³ World Bank (The), Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, March 2017, [url](#), pp. iv, vi

⁶⁸⁴ International Crisis Group, Ways out of Europe’s Syria Reconstruction Conundrum, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁸⁵ AP, Syria’s Aleppo symbol of Assad’s wins and of enduring war, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁸⁶ Arab Weekly (The), In Syria’s Aleppo, reconstruction makes slow start, 01 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁸⁷ New Humanitarian (The), In Syria’s Aleppo, a slow rebuild begins, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁸⁸ Arab Weekly (The), In Syria’s Aleppo, reconstruction makes slow start, 01 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁸⁹ New York Times (The), What ‘Victory’ Looks Like: A Journey Through Shattered Syria, 21 August 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁹⁰ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians an Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 137

⁶⁹¹ UNMAS, Syria, March 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁹² Mine Action Review, Syria. Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants, 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁶⁹³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁶⁹⁴ New Humanitarian (The), In Syria’s Aleppo, a slow rebuild begins, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

Most IDP movements from Aleppo during 2019 were to Idlib governorate (around 14 000).⁶⁹⁵ In terms of IDP returns for 2019, Aleppo had around 64 000 IDP return movements to or within the governorate, of whom 57 000 IDP return movements were recorded within the governorate and the rest came mostly from Idlib and Raqqa governorates.⁶⁹⁶

In January 2019, military confrontations between anti-GoS armed groups in western Aleppo countryside led to internal displacement of around 16 000 IDPs within the governorate and around 2 000 to Idlib governorate. Aleppo also received 6 400 IDPs from Idlib governorate, following clashed between GoS forces and anti-Gos armed groups.⁶⁹⁷ During February 2019, shelling from GoS forces in Aleppo countryside caused the displacement of around 6 000 IDPs within the governorate. Aleppo governorate received around 17 000 IDPs, around 11 000 coming from neighbouring Hama and Idlib governorates.⁶⁹⁸

Intensified fighting, shelling and airstrikes on anti-Gos controlled areas in east Idlib, northern Hama and west Aleppo countryside continued in the following months leading to thousands of IDP movements to and within the governorate, registering increased numbers from March to May, followed by a decrease towards July.⁶⁹⁹ The months of August and December registered the highest number of IDP movements of the year as a result of high levels of conflict between GoS forces and allies on the one side and anti-Gos armed groups on the other. Most IDP movements to Aleppo governorate came from Idlib, with around 72 000 in August 2019 and 82 000 in December 2019.⁷⁰⁰ Military operations in Raqqa and Hasaka governorate in November 2019, triggered the movement of around 2 000 IDPs from these areas to Aleppo governorate.⁷⁰¹

UNOCHA assessed that IDPs remain particularly vulnerable and access for IDPs coming from Idlib to northern Aleppo was restricted.⁷⁰² The UN Security Council also noted that humanitarian access constraints in south-east Aleppo governorate were reported, especially due to escalation in hostilities. In the northern part of the governorate access challenges were also reported.⁷⁰³

⁶⁹⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁹⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁹⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, January 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁹⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, February 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁹⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, March 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, April 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, May 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, June 2019, [url](#);

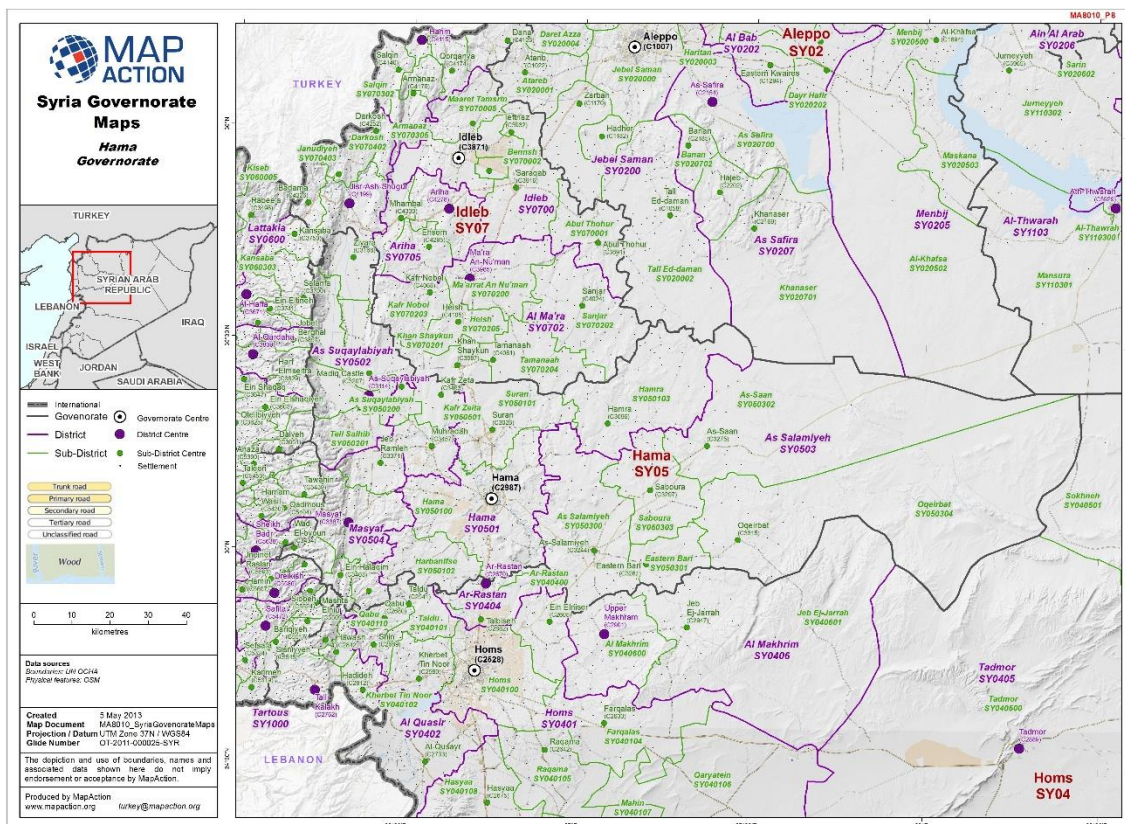
⁷⁰⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, August 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, December 2019, [url](#);

⁷⁰¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, November 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁰² UNOCHA, Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 1, 23 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁷⁰³ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 12

2.3 Hama governorate



Map 8: © MapAction, Hama governorate⁷⁰⁴

2.3.1 General description of governorate

Hama governorate is located in the central region of Syria, and has internal borders with the governorates of Latakia and Tartous to the west, Idlib to the north, and Homs to the south.⁷⁰⁵ A map shared by the Hama City Council shows that the governorate has also borders with Aleppo and Raqqa governorates to the north.⁷⁰⁶ The surface of the governorate is 10 180 square km (7.6 % of the total surface of Syria), and it comprises five districts: Hama, Misyaf, Muhardah, Suqailbiya, and Salamiyah. It also comprises six cities, 27 towns, 578 villages, and 658 farms.⁷⁰⁷

The latest census conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics in Syria was in 2004, and according to which, the number of residents in Hama governorate was 1 384 953.⁷⁰⁸ In 2014, UNOCHA estimated that the population of Hama governorate was 1.6 million, of which 245 000 were IDPs.⁷⁰⁹ The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Hama governorate in 2016 to be 1 976 000.⁷¹⁰

⁷⁰⁴ MapAction, Hama governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁵ Al-Wahda, حماه [Hama], n.d., [url](#)

⁷⁰⁶ Hama City Council, الخارطة الرقمية لمحافظة حماه [Digital Map of Hama Governorate], 1 January 2016, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁷ Al-Wahda, حماه [Hama], n.d., [url](#)

⁷⁰⁸ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, General Census, 2004, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 16

⁷¹⁰ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

With regards to the capital of the governorate, the CIA estimated that the population of Hama city was 922 000 in 2020.⁷¹¹

According to Fabrice Balanche, Sunni Muslims constituted the majority of the residents of Hama city, while Alawites are particularly absent from the city due to the hostility of its residents towards this minority.⁷¹² The western countryside, on the other hand, is more diverse, and is ‘full of Alawite, Christian, and Ismaili villages’.⁷¹³ Syria’s Ismailis are concentrated in the area of Salamiya in eastern Hama.⁷¹⁴ Additionally, the governorate has a Christian presence⁷¹⁵, particularly in the town of Muhardah, which is ‘predominantly Christian’.⁷¹⁶

2.3.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

Hama governorate was impacted by the ‘early civil unrest in Syria’ and received a big number of IDPs due to its proximity to areas of high tension.⁷¹⁷ On 3 August 2011, ABC News reported that more than 200 civilians were killed since the government forces started to crack down on protesters on 1 August⁷¹⁸, where tanks were reportedly used.⁷¹⁹ However, Fabrice Balanche suggested that the situation in Hama city was peculiar due to several elements. The city was ‘unappealing to non-Sunnis’ and Alawite neighbourhoods did not exist in the city. Moreover, the existence of numerous military bases around the city and the relative passivity that the residents of Hama showed during the war constituted an obstacle in HTS’s attempt to capture the city.⁷²⁰ Finally, the majority of the government positions were held by local Sunni Arabs who endeavoured to put an end to the early demonstrations.⁷²¹

Despite the ‘serious armed confrontations between opposition armed groups and GoS forces’⁷²², the urban centre of Hama city witnessed limited fighting and has remained under the control of GoS forces.⁷²³ The totality of the city came under the control of the government forces in 2014, and the northern and eastern countryside was captured by the opposition. Some areas were particularly contested, such as those around Muhardah, Madiq Castle, Kafr Zeita, Talaf, and Aqrab.⁷²⁴ The relative stability of the city of Hama resulted in ‘a significant trend of inward migration and settlement in Hama’.⁷²⁵

Between 2014 and 2017, Hama governorate witnessed several offensives and clashes between government forces and opposition groups. In May 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey signed an agreement in Kazakhstan, referred to as Astana Agreement, which called for the ‘cessation of hostilities between rebel groups and forces fighting on behalf of Bashar Al-Assad’s government’ in four areas. Those areas were called de-escalation zones, and northern Hama fell under Zone 1 together with Idlib province, north-eastern Latakia, and western Aleppo province.⁷²⁶

⁷¹¹ CIA World Factbook, Syria, last updated: 20 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷¹² Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 6

⁷¹³ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 43

⁷¹⁴ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 15

⁷¹⁵ USDOS, *Syria 2018 International Religious Freedom Report*, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁷¹⁶ Al Masdar News, *Syrian Christians hold mass in Mhardeh town as life in north Hama gradually normalizes*, 8 May 2017, [url](#)

⁷¹⁷ UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile*, June 2014, [url](#), p. 16

⁷¹⁸ ABC News, *Syrian Crackdown Kills Hundreds in Hama*, 3 August 2011, [url](#)

⁷¹⁹ Washington Post (The), *Syrian tanks storm protest epicentre of Hama*, 31 July 2011, [url](#)

⁷²⁰ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 43

⁷²¹ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 43

⁷²² UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile*, June 2014, [url](#), p. 16

⁷²³ World Bank (The), *Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib*, March 2017, [url](#), p. 12

⁷²⁴ UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile*, June 2014, [url](#), p. 16

⁷²⁵ World Bank (The), *Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib*, March 2017, [url](#), p. 12

⁷²⁶ Al Jazeera, *Syria’s ‘de-escalation zones’ explained*, 4 July 2017, [url](#)

2.3.2.1 The Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

According to Gregory Waters, the following SAA units divisions were deployed in Hama governorate with the name of the unit and the last known date of deployment, as of 17 March 2020:

Republican Guard:

- Unknown unit – Masasna – 3 March 2019;
- 1421st Battalion – Hama province – 9 August 2019;

4th Division:

- 555th Regiment/48th Battalion – Kafr Nabouda – 10 May 2019;
- 555th Regiment/Unknown Battalion – Kernaz – 13 January 2019;

1st Corps:

- 15th Special Forces Division: 15th Division/Unknown unit – Hobait – 14 August 2019;
- 5th Division: 15th Brigade/852nd Battalion – Hama province – 22 July 2019;
- 7th Division: 76th Battalion – Qusabiyah – 11 June 2019; 79th Battalion – Tel Malah – 24 June 2019; 84th Battalion – Hama province – 26 June 2019; 78th Brigade/85th Battalion – Hama province – 13 June 2019; 121st Brigade/225th Battalion – Qusabiyah – 21 July 2019;
- 9th Division: 33rd Brigade – Tel Malah – 2 August 2019; 43rd Brigade – Hama province – 13 May 2019; 43rd Brigade/103rd Battalion – Hama province – 4 February 2019; 89th Brigade/109th Artillery Battalion – Hama Province – 5 September 2019;

2nd Corps:

- 1st Division: 141st Artillery Regiment – Hama province – 26 January 2019; 167th Regiment – Hama province – 23 November 2019; 61st Brigade/326th Artillery Battalion – Hama province – 14 March 2019;
- 10 Division: 85th Brigade – Hama province – 25 April 2019;

3rd Corps

- 8th Division: 45th Brigade – Jurin – 14 October 2019;
- 11th Division: 60th Brigade/unknown unit – Hama province – 19 June 2019; 87th Brigade – Masasna – 3 March 2019;

4th Corps

- 6th Division: 88th Brigade – Sahl Al-Ghab – 1 March 2020;

5th Corps

- 1st Brigade/unknown unit – Hama province – 13 August 2019;
- 2nd Brigade – Zaliqiyat – 1 August 2019.⁷²⁷

Al-Modon, in an article published on 15 May 2019, also referred to the deployment of the 5th Corps, the 1st Division, the 11th Division, the 9th Division, and 79th Battalion in Hama governorate.⁷²⁸

According to Gregory Waters, north Hama constituted the core territory of the Tiger Forces. Some of the sub-groups present in Hama governorate were the Taha Regiment (which was from Sahl Al-Ghab), Sheikh Mubarak Regiment (on the Abu Dali axis), the Tarmeh Regiment (outside its hometown of Qomhana), Sahabat Regiment (near the town of Kawkab), and the Hawareth Regiment (in Sahl Al-

⁷²⁷ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

⁷²⁸ Al-Modon, خريطة الانتشار العسكري في جبهات ادلب و محيطها [Map of military deployments on Idlib Fronts and the Adjacent Parts], 15 May 2019, [url](#)

Ghab).⁷²⁹ Al-Modon stated that the Tiger Forces came second in terms of density and deployment in Hama governorate. The source mentioned the following regiments that maintained a presence in the governorate: Tarmeh, Hawashem, Elite, and Hawareth.⁷³⁰

In addition to the Tiger Forces, sources referred to the presence of Al-Ghawar militia (which is allegedly affiliated with the 4th Division)⁷³¹, the NDF, and Al-Quds Brigade in rural Hama.⁷³²

In an interview with EASO on 14 November 2019, Christopher Kozak, senior analyst at ISW, assessed that the Syrian Coast, western Homs and Hama governorates have one of the densest concentrations of pro-GoS paramilitary groups in Syria, often to the detriment of the SAA.⁷³³

2.3.2.2 Anti-government armed groups

In an article dated 15 May 2019, Al-Modon stated that the National Liberation Front (NFL) was widely present in northern Hama, with Ahrar Al-Sham being the dominant group. Other Jihadist groups participated in the fighting in northern Hama albeit they did not maintain bases in the area. Such groups included Ansar Al-Din, and the Turkistan Islamic Party. Moreover, HTS was involved in the battles in northern Hama as well.⁷³⁴ On 22 May 2019, BBC reported that HTS seized key areas in northern Hama from NLF in the wake of renewed infighting between the two groups.⁷³⁵ Furthermore, Katibat Al-Tawhid wal Jihad (Battalion of Monotheism and Jihad, KTJ) which is constituted of foreign fighters from central Asia joined HTS in 2015.⁷³⁶ According to the UN Security Council report of 15 July 2019, KTJ operated in Hama governorate and the number of its fighters grew to 500, between 30 and 40 of which were Uzbeks.⁷³⁷

Another localised anti-GoS armed group - Jaysh al-Izza - was based in northern Hama province and cooperated with HTS. Their home territory was captured by the GoS forces during the April – August 2019 offensive, and the group lost up to 70 % of its combat power and was pushed up into southern Idlib.⁷³⁸

2.3.2.3 ISIL

The Carter Center stated that 'ISIS or affiliated fighters continue to affect the security environment in areas formerly controlled by the group', which include Hama Desert. The review added that 'steady, low-level activity continued to be recorded after Syrian forces became dominant in the area'.⁷³⁹ Moreover, Al-Masdar News reported in November 2019 that clashes broke between Syrian Internal Security and ISIL militants in the eastern countryside of Hama.⁷⁴⁰

⁷²⁹ Waters, G., Understanding Syria's Military Deployments in Idlib, International Review, 10 March 2019, [url](#)

⁷³⁰ Al-Modon, خريطة الانتشار العسكري في جبهات ادلب و محيطها [Map of military deployments on Idlib Fronts and the Adjacent Parts], 15 May 2019, [url](#)

⁷³¹ Jorf News, "ميليشيا قوات الغوار" تأسر عميدا في الشرطة وضباط آخرين و معهم كتيبة حفظ النظام, [In Hama Desert.. "Al-Ghawar Forces" Militia Abducts a Police Brigadier General, Other Officers, and a Crowd Control Battalion], 17 November 2019, [url](#)

⁷³² Al-Modon, خريطة الانتشار العسكري في جبهات ادلب و محيطها [Map of military deployments on Idlib Fronts and the Adjacent Parts], 15 May 2019, [url](#)

⁷³³ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁷³⁴ Al-Modon, خريطة الانتشار العسكري في جبهات ادلب و محيطها [Map of military deployments on Idlib Fronts and the Adjacent Parts], 15 May 2019, [url](#)

⁷³⁵ BBC News, Syria group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda legacy, 22 May 2019, [url](#)

⁷³⁶ Shaam, كتيبة التوحيد و الجهاد تعلن انضمامها لجهة النصر بشكل كامل, [KTJ announces its complete joining of HTS], 30 September 2015, [url](#)

⁷³⁷ UN Security Council, Letter dated 15 July 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, 15 July 2019, [url](#), p. 14

⁷³⁸ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁷³⁹ Carter Center (The), A Review of ISIS in Syria: 2016 – 2019, March 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁷⁴⁰ Al-Masdar News, ISIS reemerges in east Hama after 2017 defeat by Syrian Army, 17 November 2019, [url](#)

2.3.2.4 Russia

While official information about the Russian military presence in Syria was publicly available, e.g. on the Kremlin website⁷⁴¹, sources tended to rely on social media posts to prove that Russian soldiers are actually deployed on the ground. The news website Noon Post shared photos, from various sources, of Russian soldiers reportedly in Hama governorate.⁷⁴² Moreover, based on analysis of social media posts, Gregory Waters stated that ‘Russians have been pictured alongside SAA units in the region at least four times this year [2019]’.⁷⁴³

2.3.2.5 Iran

In a report dated December 2018, SOHR stated that more than 15 vehicles carrying equipment and Iranian fighters arrived in northern Hama. Reportedly, the convoy reached its final destinations in Rahbat Khattab, the area south of Zaliqiyat, and the vicinity of Marzaf.⁷⁴⁴ On 4 June 2019, the Syrian platform SY24, shared a list of the prominent locations in Hama governorate in which Iranian militias are allegedly deployed. The list included locations in Misyaf, az-Zawiya, Ma’rin Mount, Shalyout village, Qomhana, and Salamiya. The source also referred to the existence of recruitment offices recruiting young men into militias affiliated with the IRGC.⁷⁴⁵

2.3.2.6 Israel

SANA, and other sources reported on several Israeli airstrikes during 2019 that targeted positions in Hama governorate, such as Misyaf and Hama airfield.⁷⁴⁶

2.3.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

On 30 January 2019, the Turkish news agency, Anadolu Agency (AA), reported that the Tiger Forces (Russia-backed) and the 4th Division (Iran-backed) clashed in Al-Rasif village in Hama province. The clashes resulted in the death of at least 70 Syrian soldiers.⁷⁴⁷ In its report of 19 February 2019, OHCHR observed an increase in ‘infighting amongst non-State actors and in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in areas they control, including by the extremist group, Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS)’.⁷⁴⁸ BBC reported in February 2019 that the HTS ‘swept through towns and villages in Idlib province, as well as adjoining parts of Aleppo and Hama’ and forced some rebel factions out and others to

⁷⁴¹ Russia, Kremlin, Speeches during visit to command post of Russian Armed Forces in Syria, 7 January 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁴² Noon Post, *الوجود الخفي للقوات الخاصة الروسية في إدلب و حماة* [the invisible presence of the Russian Special Forces in Idlib and Hama], 31 August 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁴³ Waters, G., Understanding Syria’s Military Deployments in Idlib, International Review, 10 March 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁴⁴ SOHR, Military column of the Iranian forces carries weapons, equipment, and members arrives to sites in the northern countryside of Hama and strengthens its spread in the area, 8 December 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁴⁵ Sy-24, *دراسة تكشف عن مواقع انتشار ميليشيات إيران في حماة* [A SY24 Study Reveals the Locations of Iran-Backed Militias’ Deployments in Hama], 4 June 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁴⁶ SANA, *وسائط دفاعنا الجوي تدمر هدفا معاديا في منطقة مصياف بريف حماة* [Our Air Defence Systems Destroy Enemy Missiles in Misyaf Region in Hama Countryside], 16 August 2019, [url](#); Youm7, *غارات إسرائيلية تستهدف مطاري حماة و التيفور في سوريا* [Israeli air raids target the airfields of Hama and T4 in Syria], 23 December 2019, [url](#); Garda, Syria: Israeli planes target military position near Masyaf (Hama province) April 13, 13 April 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁴⁷ AA, Russia, Iran-backed factions clash in Syria’s Hama: Iran-backed Fourth Division captures village in Hama from Russia-backed Tiger Forces, local sources assert, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁴⁸ OHCHR, Syria: Bachelet alarmed by upsurge in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib, 19 February 2019, [url](#)

surrender and recognise its 'civil administration'.⁷⁴⁹ Some of such clashes in Hama governorate escalated to the use of heavy machine guns and RPGs, and caused casualties among civilians.⁷⁵⁰

In April 2019, the GoS forces' bombardment of areas controlled by HTS in northern Hama intensified.⁷⁵¹ According to ACLED's Regional Review of June 2019, clashes in northern Hama between GoS forces and rebel groups continued amid 'intensive airstrikes conducted by Russian and regime forces'. However, the attempts of GoS forces to advance in opposition-held areas in northern Hama were unsuccessful.⁷⁵² Human Rights Watch stated that between 26 April and 3 June 2019, Syrian and Russian forces 'carried out hundreds of attacks every day across areas in the Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo governorates', and 'used banned cluster munitions and incendiary weapons in the attacks along with large air-dropped explosive weapons with wide-area effects, including "barrel bombs" in populated civilian areas'.⁷⁵³ By the end of June 2019 the SAA brought 'massive military reinforcements of heavy machinery, forces, in addition to military and logistic equipment to the northwestern countryside of Hama province'.⁷⁵⁴

In July 2019, clashes between the SAA and opposition groups were reported in the north of Hama governorate.⁷⁵⁵ On 29 July 2019, the SAA launched a large offensive on the rebel-held areas in northern Hama, and recaptured a few strategic villages.⁷⁵⁶ In August 2019, the GoS accused rebel groups in northwestern Syria of violating the Astana agreement and resumed military operations and air raids in the area, causing civilian deaths.⁷⁵⁷ Later that month, the SAA encircled a cluster of rebel-held towns in Hama countryside and imposed a siege on the area. Allegedly, the SAA opened a humanitarian corridor in the village of Soran for civilians to leave the region.⁷⁵⁸ The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) stated that on 23 August 2019 the SAA 'announced the conquest of Kafr Zeita, Latamneh, Latmeen, Lahaya and Morek' and that 'Hama province is considered to be fully under the control of the regime'.⁷⁵⁹ On 24 August 2019, the Iranian Al-Alam TV reported that the SAA captured Latamneh in northern Hama and secured the main towns in Hama countryside which were exposed to rebels' rockets. According to the source, the vast majority of northern Hama countryside was recaptured by the SAA by then.⁷⁶⁰

On 6 December 2019, OHCHR noted that '[n]on-State armed groups [...] have recently escalated attacks on Government controlled areas including in southern Idlib, northern Hama, and Aleppo city'.⁷⁶¹ Moreover, in its regional review of 1-7 December 2019, ACLED reported on an increase in the number of clashes in Idlib and northwest Hama. According to the source, 'sustained ground and aerial bombardments were carried out' whereby Russian airstrikes resulted in the death of 20 civilians and Islamist fighters.⁷⁶² UNOCHA's report of 26 December 2019 echoed this, and stated that 'fighting between GoS forces and NSAGs [Non-State Armed Groups] continue in northwest Hama with shelling injuring tens of civilians including women and children, damaging residential areas, and resulting in civilians restricting their movement'.⁷⁶³ Furthermore, a UN Security Council report dated

⁷⁴⁹ BBC News, Syria war: Jihadist takeover in rebel-held Idlib sparks alarm, 26 February 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁰ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

⁷⁵¹ New Arab (The), Syrian regime offensive leaves 26 dead in Hama, 6 May 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵² ACLED, Regional Overview – Middle East, 5 June 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁷⁵³ HRW, Russia/Syria: Flurry of Prohibited Weapons Attacks, 3 June 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁴ Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, Syrian Regime Brings Massive Military Reinforcements to Hama Countryside, 25 June 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁵ TRT World, Clashes kill 56 combatants in north-west Syria, 11 July 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁶ SOHR, الجيش السوري يشن هجوما واسعا في ريف حماة [Syrian Army Launches a Large Offensive in Rural Hama], 29 July 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁷ Al-Monitor, Syrian regime pays heavy price for two strategic towns in Hama, 9 August 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁸ Al Jazeera, Syria's army encircles rebels in Hama, imposing 'choking siege', 23 August 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁹ Germany, BAMF, Briefing Notes, 26 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

⁷⁶⁰ Al-Alam TV, الجيش السوري يقضي على "مثلث الموت" و يسيطر على ريف حماة الشمالي بالكامل [Syrian Army eliminates the "Death Triangle" and Recaptures the Entirety of Hama's Northern Countryside], 24 August 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁶¹ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 6 December 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁶² ACLED, Regional Overview: Middle East 1 – 7 December 2019, 10 December 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁷⁶³ UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria: Situation Report No. 2 – As of 26 December 2019, [url](#), p. 1

16 December 2019 stated that there were ‘active hostilities’ in north-west Syria, including northern Hama, and that ‘[s]helling by non-State armed groups [...] in government-controlled areas was also reported’.⁷⁶⁴ Finally, the local news outlet, Sham FM, reported on 23 December 2019 that the SAA targeted infiltration attempts by armed groups in the western Hama countryside with shelling and rockets.⁷⁶⁵

UNOCHA observed that since 28 April 2019, ‘there has been a marked increase in the number of airstrikes and shelling in northern Hama Governorate and southwestern Idleb Governorate reported, including the usage of barrel bombs’.⁷⁶⁶ The CoI noted that between February and July 2019, HTS and Jaysh al-Izza ‘launched a barrage of rockets towards government-held areas in the countryside surrounding Aleppo and Hama, in attacks that terrorized, killed and maimed scores of civilians’. The report considered that there were ‘reasonable grounds to believe Jaysh al-Izzah and Levant Liberation Organization militants committed the war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks resulting in the death or injury of civilians’. In addition to the use of rockets, HTS used unmanned aerial vehicles, i.e. drones, in its attacks against pro-government positions.⁷⁶⁷ Sham FM also reported that the SAA air defence systems intercepted drones that approached Hama military airfield, and one in the coastal city of Jableh.⁷⁶⁸

Media sources also reported on incidents of Israeli airstrikes that targeted GoS/GoS-affiliated positions in Hama province. SANA reported in April 2019 that the Syrian air defences intercepted ‘an Israeli aggression on Massyaf area’. Reportedly, the attack resulted in ‘the destruction of some buildings and the injury of three fighters’.⁷⁶⁹ SANA also reported in August 2019 that the Syrian air defences intercepted an attack aimed at a target in Massyaf area in Hama.⁷⁷⁰ Additionally, the most recent attack was reported on 23 December 2019, where Israeli raids targeted the Hama airfield.⁷⁷¹

Furthermore, a state of lawlessness in Hama governorate was reported by several sources. The Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU)⁷⁷² reported in March 2019 that ‘[d]ue to the continuous security chaos in Idleb governorate and adjacent countrysides of Hama and Aleppo, the number of the victims of explosions, kidnapping, and assassinations has been increasing by the beginning of 2019[...]’.⁷⁷³ Al-Modon reported in May 2019 on incidents of looting in Al-Madiq Castle happening moments after it has been recaptured by GoS forces. The report stated that cars carrying signs of the Tiger Forces and Abu Al-Fadl Al-Abbas Brigades were observed in the town.⁷⁷⁴ Enab Baladi reported in November 2019 that the residents of Hama city expressed their concern of the increasing levels of criminality and homicide in the city. The report, citing a manager of the SNHR, pointed out that the state of

⁷⁶⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 16 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

⁷⁶⁵ Sham FM, المضادات الأرضية تنصدي لمسيرات قرب مطار حماة العسكري [Air Defence Systems Repelled unmanned aerial vehicles near Hama Military Airfield], 23 December 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁶⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Flash Update: Recent Developments in North-west Syria, 7 May 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁷⁶⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/42/51), 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁷⁶⁸ Sham FM, المضادات الأرضية تنصدي لمسيرات قرب مطار حماة العسكري [Air Defence Systems Repelled unmanned aerial vehicles near Hama Military Airfield], 23 January 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁶⁹ SANA, Syrian air defenses intercept an Israeli aggression on Massyaf area, down a number of missiles, 13 April 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁰ SANA, وسائط دفاعنا الجوي تدمر هدفا معاديا في منطقة مصياف بريف حماة [Our Air Defence Systems Destroy Enemy Missiles in Masyaf Region in Hama Countryside], 16 August 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷¹ Youm7, غارات إسرائيلية تستهدف مطاري حماة و التيفور في سوريا [Israeli air raids target the airfields of Hama and T4 in Syria, 23 December 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷² The Assistance Coordination Unit is a non-governmental, non-profit institution based in Turkey that is connected to the Syrian opposition. For more information see [url](#)

⁷⁷³ ACU, Syrian Crisis: Field Updates on the North West, March 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁷⁷⁴ Al-Modon, ميليشيات إيران إلى اللطامنة.. و الاحتفالات بحماة.. و التعفيش للسقيلبية [Iran's Militias Heading to Lataminah.. The Celebrations Are in Hama.. and the Looting is for Suqailbiya], 11 May 2019, [url](#)

lawlessness in Hama is due to different factors such as the intervention of several security branches, poverty, and the perpetrators' confidence in escaping prosecution.⁷⁷⁵

Amidst reports on rapid advances by the SAA in north-west Syria in February 2020⁷⁷⁶, media sources reported on ongoing clashes, and capturing and recapturing of villages in northern Hama countryside. On 26 February 2020, Step News reported that GoS forces advanced rapidly in Hama and Idlib countryside on two axes, one of which was Deir Sunbol – Shashabo Mount in Hama governorate.⁷⁷⁷ The Iranian Al-Alam reported on 27 February 2020 that the SAA captured a plethora of villages in northern Hama countryside.⁷⁷⁸ In February 2020 the Turkish Army targeted SAA positions in several provinces including Hama, in retaliation to the death of Turkish troops.⁷⁷⁹ Moreover, on 1 March 2020, Al-Araby stated that opposition factions launched an offensive in Sahl Al-Ghab and recaptured new villages.⁷⁸⁰

A Liveuamap map shows that as of 20 February 2020, only a narrow strip extending along the northern Hama border with Idlib governorate, and stretching from Qa'urah in the east to Qarfus in the west, was still controlled by opposition factions, the rest of the province being under GoS control.⁷⁸¹

2.3.3.1 Security incidents

According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 5 119 security incidents recorded in Hama governorate, the second highest number in Syria after Idlib governorate. Of these, 358 were coded as battles, 4 749 explosions/remote violence and 12 incidents of violence against civilians.

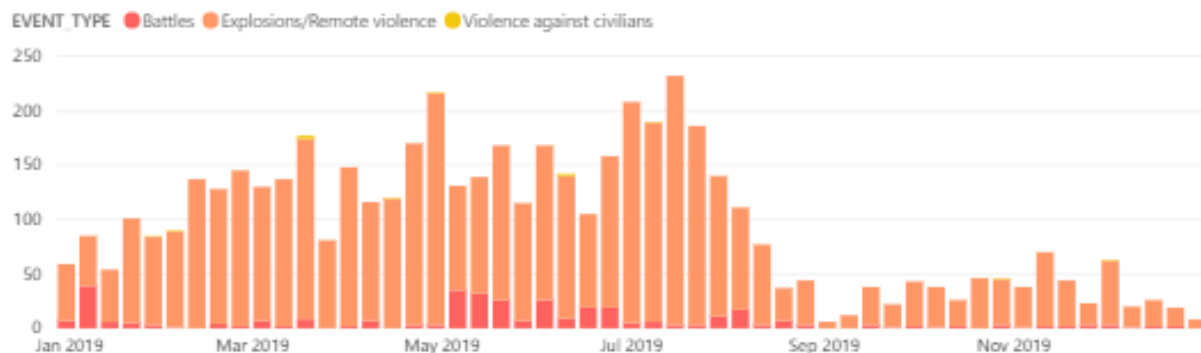


Figure 23. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Hama governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data⁷⁸²

⁷⁷⁵ Enab Baladi, "المحضر "ضد مجهول" جرائم حماة تعود إلى الواجهة.. المحضر "ضد مجهول" [Crimes of Hama Come to the Front.. and the Complaint is Against "unknown"], 3 November 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁶ Al Masdar News, Syrian Army scores massive advance across southern Aleppo, 8 February 2020, [url](#); CGTN, Russia holds key to Idlib's fate as Syrian army advances, 8 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁷ Step News, النظام السوري يتقدم بسرعة هائلة بريفي إدلب و حماة.. و المعارضة على مشارف الحصار [Syrian Regime Advances Very Rapidly in Idlib and Hama Countryside.. and the Opposition Is on the Verge of a Siege], 26 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁸ Al-Alam, الجيش السوري يحرر عددا من القرى في ريف حماة [The Syrian Army Liberates a Number of Villages in Hama Countryside], 27 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁹ National Interest (The), Turkish Jets and Howitzers Blasted Syrian Army in Retaliation for Deadly Rocket Barrage, 8 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁸⁰ New Arab (The), فصائل المعارضة السورية تستعيد 5 قرى جديدة في ريف حماة [Syrian Opposition Factions Recapture 5 New Villages in Hama Countryside], 1 March 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁸¹ Liveuamap, Syria, 24 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁸² EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

Hama governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
As-Salamiyeh	4	34	5
As-Suqaylabiyah	207	2933	2
Hama	50	510	2
Masyaf	5	37	-
Muhradah	92	1235	3
Total	358	4749	12

Figure 24. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Hama governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data.

Most security incidents were recorded in As-Suqaylabiyah district, followed by Muhradah and Hama districts.

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 172 security incidents of which 36 were battles, 135 explosions/remote violence and one incident of violence against civilians. Most of them were recorded in As-Suqaylabiyah district (152).⁷⁸³

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Hama governorate in 2019 and early 2020 included the following (grouped according to the regions in which they occurred):

Northern Hama countryside:

- On 22 January 2019, a girl was killed in Kafr Zeita and on 23 January 2019 a girl was injured in Murek 'as a result of alleged ground-based strikes'.⁷⁸⁴
- On 25 February 2019, five people were killed in a shelling that targeted the towns of Kafr Zeita, Zizafoon, and Kafr Nabudah, and the village of Jabal Sulaiman.⁷⁸⁵
- ACU reported that on 1 March 2019, GoS forces shelled numerous villages and towns in northern Hama, causing several injuries among civilians.⁷⁸⁶
- On 18 April 2019, SHRC reported that two persons were shot dead by 'unknown killers' in Latamneh.⁷⁸⁷
- On 28 April 2019, SHRC reported that five people were killed in Russian airstrikes on Al-Madiq Castle.⁷⁸⁸
- The UN Security Council stated that on 30 April 2019, three civilians were killed and ten others injured in 'what were alleged to be air and ground-based strikes that hit the town of Kafr Nabudah'.⁷⁸⁹
- On 7 May 2019, six civilians including three women and two children were killed in alleged air strikes in Kafr Zeita.⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸³ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

⁷⁸⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 19 February 2019, [url](#), p. 16

⁷⁸⁵ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 25-2-2019, 26 February 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸⁶ ACU, Field Developments in Idlib, Northern Hama Countryside, Western and Southern Aleppo Countrysides During March and April 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁷⁸⁷ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 17-4-2019, 18 April 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸⁸ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 28-4-2019, 28 April 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 19 June 2019, [url](#), p. 19

⁷⁹⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 19 June 2019, [url](#), p. 19

- On 11 May 2019, alleged air and ground-based attacks caused significant damage to a medical facility in Latamneh.⁷⁹¹
- On 12 May 2019, an alleged ground-based attack on the government-held town of Suqailbiya resulted in the death of one woman and five children.⁷⁹²
- The Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity reported that between 20 and 22 May 2019, 'approximately 100-120 forcefully recruited soldiers who were conscripted into the regime forces after going through the so called "reconciliation" process under Russian grantees were killed in a massacre carried out by regime loyalist forces near north Hama' due to their alleged intention to escape the frontlines.⁷⁹³
- On 26 May 2019, alleged ground-based strikes caused a partial damage to the hospital of Suqailbiya.⁷⁹⁴
- On 14 June 2019, an alleged air strike caused damage to a medical facility in Kafr Zeita.⁷⁹⁵
- According to the BAMF Briefing Notes on 17 June 2019, the village of Morek in which a Turkish outpost was located, was shelled, which incurred a Turkish military response for the first time.⁷⁹⁶
- Eight civilians were killed in an alleged air strike on Latamneh on 4 July 2019.⁷⁹⁷
- On 29 July 2019, 11 people were killed in government and Russian bombings on Kafr Zeita, Latamneh, and Latmin.⁷⁹⁸
- In August 2019, hostilities and fighting in northern Hama and neighbouring regions intensified. Reportedly, the SAA 'began a major ground offensive' and pro-GoS forces targeted armed opposition groups near Sahl Al-Ghab.⁷⁹⁹
- On 2 March 2020, SANA reported that a woman and a child were killed in a shelling that targeted Jourin in the far northwest countryside of Hama.⁸⁰⁰

Western Hama countryside

- In January 2019, the Syrian official newspaper Al-Thawra reported that 'terrorist groups' targeted the city of Muhardah with rockets launched from Latamneh. The rockets, according to the source, fell in agricultural lands.⁸⁰¹
- On 18 February 2019, the Lebanese Al-Nour Radio reported that non-State armed groups targeted the city of Muhardah with rockets.⁸⁰²
- On 23 February 2019, members of Jaysh al-Izza attacked a power plant in Muhardah.⁸⁰³

⁷⁹¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 19 June 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁷⁹² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 19 June 2019 (S/2019/508), [url](#), p. 20; SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 12-5-2019, 13 May 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁹³ Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, Reconciling with death, disappearance and fear, 23 July 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁷⁹⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 19 June 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁷⁹⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 18

⁷⁹⁶ Germany, BAMF, Briefing Notes, 17 June 2019, [url](#), p. 8

⁷⁹⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 18

⁷⁹⁸ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 29-7-2019, 29 July 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 3

⁸⁰⁰ SANA, Two citizens martyred, seven injured in rocket terrorist attacks on Hama Countryside, 2 March 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁰¹ Al-Thawra, مدينة محردة على أهداف بالذائف على أهداف بالذائف [Terrorist Groups Targets the City of Muharda with Projectiles], 27 January 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰² Al-Nour, المجموعات المسلحة تستهدف بالذائف الصاروخية مدينة محردة بريف حماه الشمالي الغربي [Armed Groups Target with Projectiles the City of Muharda in the Northwest Countryside of Hama, 18 February 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰³ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Reports Syria: The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 32 (Confidential sources interviewed between January and May 2019)

- The CoI reported that on 7 April 2019, members of Jaysh al-Izza ‘launched rockets towards Masyaf district (Hama), striking the National Hospital’. Reportedly, six civilians were killed and 20 others injured including medics and patients in the attack.⁸⁰⁴
- On 6 June 2019, an alleged ground-based strike caused significant damage to the Mahabba Hospital in Muḥardah.⁸⁰⁵
- OHCHR stated that it was gathering information on three attacks by non-State armed groups that caused civilian casualties in locations including Misyaf on 21 July 2019.⁸⁰⁶
- On 6 August 2019, an alleged ground-based strike that hit Ayn Sulaymu caused three civilian deaths.⁸⁰⁷

Southern Hama countryside

- On 17 August 2019, three children were killed and three others injured in an alleged explosion of ordnance in the government-controlled village of Mas’adah.⁸⁰⁸

Eastern Hama countryside

- On 9 February 2019, SHRC reported that seven people were killed in a landmine explosion in Wadi Al-Atheeb in Uqayribat district.⁸⁰⁹
- On 24 February 2019, 20 people were killed as a landmine exploded when a minibus drove over it near Salamiya.⁸¹⁰
- According to SHRC, a person was killed in a bomb explosion in Salamiya on 16 June 2019.⁸¹¹

2.3.3.2 Civilian fatalities

In 2019, sources documented between 301 civilian fatalities (SNHR data)⁸¹² and 390 civilian fatalities (VDC data)⁸¹³ in Hama governorate, making Hama the province with the second highest number of

⁸⁰⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/42/51), 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁸⁰⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/674), 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 18

⁸⁰⁶ OHCHR, Increasing airstrike casualties in Syria being ignored – Bachelet, 26 July 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/820), 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁸⁰⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/820), 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁸⁰⁹ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 8-2-2019, 9 February 2019, [url](#)

⁸¹⁰ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Reports Syria: The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 32

⁸¹¹ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 16-6-2019, 17 June 2019, [url](#)

⁸¹² Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

⁸¹³ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

civilian fatalities recorded (according to VDC data) or fourth highest number of civilian fatalities (according to SNHR data) in 2019. Most civilian fatalities occurred in the months of July, April and May.

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	10	11
February	24	48
March	31	18
April	54	56
May	54	54
June	44	24
July	66	45
August	44	15
September	14	5
October	16	7
November	18	10
December	15	8
Total	390	301

Figure 25. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Hama governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

2.3.3.3 Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

In addition to civilian deaths, ground-based and air strikes launched by the warring parties resulted in the destruction of ‘critical civilian infrastructure’.⁸¹⁴ A UN Security Council report pointed out that such strikes destroyed crops and caused damage to agricultural equipment; rehabilitation of the soil was compromised.⁸¹⁵ In an interview with Sham FM, the Chief of Police of Hama governorate stated that rockets launched by rebel groups fell in Salhab town and resulted in the burning of crops.⁸¹⁶ The UN Security Council noted that between April and May 2019 air and ground-based strikes by GoS and affiliated forces caused damage on ‘local markets, homes, settlements for internally displaced persons and other civilian infrastructure’.⁸¹⁷

In Hama countryside, several incidents of attacks on healthcare facilities and schools were reported in 2019. According to AI, GoS forces, supported by Russia, carried out ‘deliberate and systematic assault on hospitals and other medical facilities in Idlib and Hama’.⁸¹⁸ UNOCHA reported on attacks that targeted the hospitals of Latamneh and Madiq Castle on 29 April 2019, as well as the Qastun Health Centre and the surgical unit in Kafr Nabodah on 1 May 2019.⁸¹⁹ According to a UNOCHA report, 11 health facilities were attacked in Hama governorate between 28 April and 17 May 2019.⁸²⁰ Moreover, the UN Security Council pointed out 14 locations across Hama governorate in which health facilities were targeted between April and May 2019; these included Misyaf, Latamneh, Madiq Castle,

⁸¹⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/42/51), 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁸¹⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁸¹⁶ Sham FM, اللواء خالد هلال قائد شرطة محافظة حماه لشام إف أم: المجموعات المسلحة استهدفت ب 4 قذائف بلدة سلحب شمال غرب حماة أدت إلى اشتعال النيران في المحاصيل الزراعية وتم السيطرة عليها [Breaking News: Marshal Khaled Hilal the Police Chief in Hama Governorate to Sham FM: Armed Groups Targeted with 4 Projectiles the Town of Salhab Northwest of Hama Which Led to Fire Breaking out in Agricultural Crops, the Fire Has Been Contained], 22 June 2019, [url](#)

⁸¹⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 19 June 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁸¹⁸ AI, Syria: Security Council must address crimes against humanity in Idlib, 17 May 2019, [url](#)

⁸¹⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Flash Update: Recent Developments in North-west Syria, 7 May 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁸²⁰ UNOCHA, Situation Report 2: Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria, 17 May 2019, [url](#), p. 2

Kafr Zeita, and Suqailbiya.⁸²¹ WHO stated in May 2019 that ‘there are now no functioning hospitals in northern Hama, and emergency care is provided by only 3 surgical units supported by WHO. Close to 300 000 civilians are affected’.⁸²²

In addition to hospitals and health facilities, the UN Security Council enumerated cases where schools were attacked, including three schools in Madiq Castle and three in Huwayz.⁸²³ Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster reported in March 2019 that more than 300 schools in northern Hama and southern Idlib were reportedly closed due to aerial bombardments, which deprived around 80 000 children from education.⁸²⁴ For the period between June – July 2019, UNICEF with ‘verified’ eight incidents of attacks that affected educational facilities in Hama governorate.⁸²⁵

With regards to the infrastructure damage incurred by military activities in Hama city, a report by the World Bank published in March 2017 stated that 6 % of the city’s housing asset was damaged.⁸²⁶ In its report of March 2019, REACH observed that Hama city suffered low density damage compared to Aleppo and Raqqa, with a ‘damage density ranging from 0.1 – 1.2 buildings per hectare across the majority of the city’. Moreover, the report noted that the damage in Hama city was concentrated in one particular neighbourhood, Sabil, which underwent complete demolition in 2012.⁸²⁷

The city of Hama relied on two power plants and excess electricity from the southern and northern grids to cover its power needs. However, the damage that those two power plants suffered together with the fuel shortage in the country prevented ‘the facilities from operating at full capacity’. According to social media sources, local news outlets and other public sources, power supply dropped to five to nine hours per day as of March 2017.⁸²⁸ In December 2019, the pro-opposition website, Halab Today, reported that power outage in Hama has reached 22 hours a day.⁸²⁹ Additionally, SANA reported on in mid-February 2020 that Muhardah power plant was hit by a drone ‘terrorist attack’ causing material damage.⁸³⁰

In its report of March 2017, the World Bank observed that well water was the main water source for Hama city, and that 68 wells were assessed and were found ‘intact and functioning’.⁸³¹ Nevertheless, according to the local media source, Athr Press, the main water filtering facility for the city is located in Al-Kseir, and the source reported that there was a temporary water supply interruption due to an increase in water turbidity.⁸³² Furthermore, local media sources reported in January 2020 on the pollution of tap water in Salamiya due to a maintenance error that led to contamination with grey water.⁸³³

⁸²¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/508), 19 June 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁸²² WHO, WHO condemns multiple attacks on health facilities in north-western Syria, 8 May 2019, [url](#)

⁸²³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 19 June 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁸²⁴ CCCM Cluster, IDP Situation Monitoring Initiative (ISMI): Monthly Overview of IDP Movements and Spontaneous Returns in north-west Syria, March 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁸²⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁸²⁶ World Bank (The), Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, March 2017, [url](#), pp. 7-8

⁸²⁷ REACH/UNITAR, Syria: Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 40

⁸²⁸ World Bank (The), Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, March 2017, [url](#), p. 33

⁸²⁹ Halab Today, انقطاع الكهرباء أكثر من 22 ساعة في اليوم [Hama.. Power Outage of More than 22 Hours a Day], 9 December 2019, [url](#)

⁸³⁰ SANA, تعرض محطة محردة لتوليد الكهرباء لاعتداء إرهابي بقذائف من طائرات مسيرة أطلقتها التنظيمات الإرهابية [Muharda Power Plant Attacked by Missiles Fired from Drones Launched by Terrorist Groups], 16 February 2020, [url](#)

⁸³¹ World Bank (The), Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, March 2017, [url](#), p. 43

⁸³² Athr Press, مياه حمة توضح سبب انقطاع المياه عن المدينة و تعلن عن موعد التغذية [Hama Water Agency Clarifies the Reason Behind Water Outage and Announces the Date of Resumption of Supply], 28 December 2019, [url](#)

⁸³³ Baladi News, حمة.. مياه مختلطة بالصراف الصبي إلى منازل السلمية [Hama.. Water Mixed with Grey Water to Households in Salamiyah], 13 January 2020, [url](#); Eldorar, حمة يثير غضب الموالين [Contamination of Potable Water with Grey Water in Salamiyah City in Eastern Hama Infuriates Supporters], 13 January 2020, [url](#)

Remnants of war

Several sources reported on incidents of casualties related to war remnants in Hama governorate in 2019. The UN Security Council observed that civilians 'in various populated and agricultural areas in the Syrian Arab Republic' continue to be killed and injured by '[...] explosive hazards, including landmines and unexploded ordnances, in various populated and agricultural areas'.⁸³⁴ Enab Baladi, referring to Sham FM, reported on 8 February 2019 that seven persons were killed in Wadi Al-Atheeb in eastern Hama in a landmine explosion.⁸³⁵ SHRC stated that on 31 August, three persons were killed in a landmine explosion in Tal Bazam village.⁸³⁶ Furthermore, Hama Media Office, an independent news agency, reported in September 2019 that one person was killed and another injured in a landmine explosion in Suha village in eastern Hama countryside.⁸³⁷

2.3.3.4 Displacement and return

UNOCHA showed that in 2019 around 194 000 were displaced from Hama governorate, 2 000 of whom were displaced within the governorate. The majority of displacement movements from Hama were to Idlib (around 132 000) and Aleppo (around 55 000) governorates.⁸³⁸

UNOCHA data showed an increase in displacement patterns between February and September, which is correlated with the increase in the intensification of violence in north-west Syria in 2019. In February 2019, CCCM Cluster reported on 'large displacement waves' in Idlib, western Aleppo, and northern Hama governorates, with 'a total of 61,896 IDP arrivals and 113,623 IDP departures'.⁸³⁹ The number of IDPs reached 300 000 according to the World Food Programme (WFP)⁸⁴⁰, and more than 400 000 in the first six weeks of 2019 according to an Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimate.⁸⁴¹ In July 2019, Médecins Sans Frontières reported that 'bombing and shelling of Syria's southern Idlib and northern Hama governorates [...] has forced more than 450 000 people to flee north towards the Turkish border in the past three months'.⁸⁴²

According to UNOCHA data, in 2019 there were around 25 000 return movements in Hama, of whom 18 000 were returns within the governorate and the rest returned mainly from Idlib governorate.⁸⁴³

With regards to property in government-controlled areas, the Col in its January 2019 report documented cases in several governorates, including Hama, where the government seized 'the movable and immovable property of individuals deemed to have engaged in terrorism activities'. The Col stated that around 70 000 Syrians reportedly 'faced asset freeze decisions by the Ministry of Finance in the past two years alone'.⁸⁴⁴

⁸³⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), 16 April 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁸³⁵ Enab Baladi, مقتل سبعة أشخاص بانفجار لغم بريف حماة الشرقي [Death of Seven Persons in a Landmine Explosion in Eastern Hama Countryside], 8 February 2019, [url](#)

⁸³⁶ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 31-8-2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#)

⁸³⁷ HMO, مخلفات الحرب تحصد المزيد من أرواح المدنيين شرق حماة [War Remnants Reap More Civilian Souls in Eastern Hama], 28 September 2019, [url](#)

⁸³⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec 2019, 24 January 2020, [url](#)

⁸³⁹ CCCM Cluster, IDP Situation Monitoring Initiative (ISMI), February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁸⁴⁰ UN News, Vital food crops destroyed in Syria amid upsurge in fighting across Idlib, Hama, 4 June 2019, [url](#)

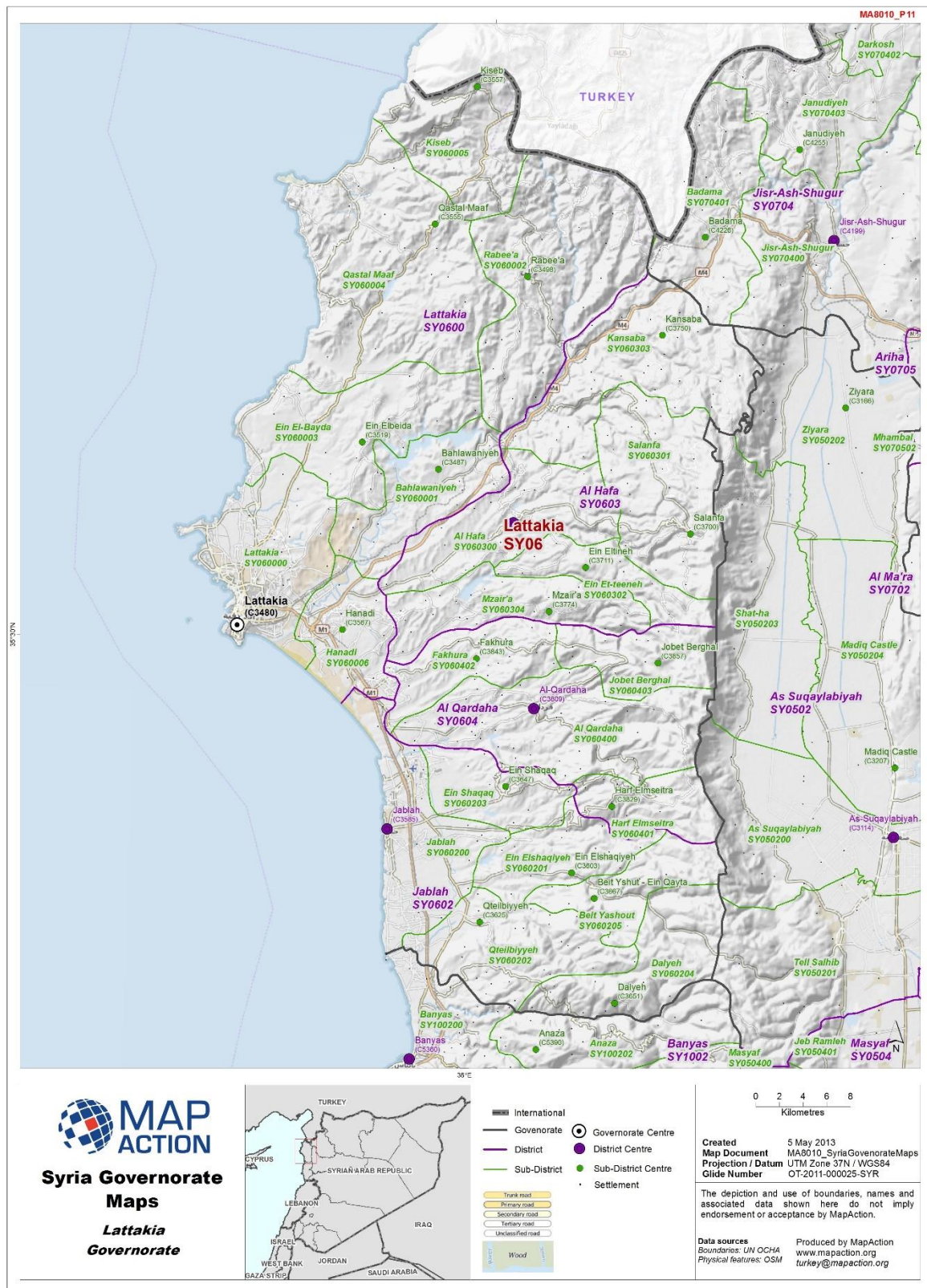
⁸⁴¹ IDMC, Syria: Figure Analysis – Displacement Related to Conflict and Violence, May 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁸⁴² MSF, Syria: Escalating conflict in Idlib is causing more deaths, injuries, and massive displacement, 31 July 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁴³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec 2019, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁴⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/40/70), 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 16

2.4 Latakia governorate



Map 9: © MapAction, Latakia governorate⁸⁴⁵

2.4.1 General description of governorate

Latakia governorate is situated in the north-west of the country and borders the Mediterranean Sea on its western border. To the north, it shares an international border with Turkey. Latakia is bordered by Tartous to the south, Hama to the east, and Idlib to the northeast. Latakia is divided into four administrative districts, from north to south: Latakia, al-Haffa, Al-Qardaha, Jablah.⁸⁴⁶ These four districts are divided into altogether 20 sub-districts. They are located in their respective districts as follows:

- Latakia: Latakia which includes the governorate capital by the same name, Bahalwaniyeh, Rabe'ea, Qastal Maaf, Ein El-Bayda, Kasab;
- Al-Haffa: Hanadi, Salanfa, Ein Et-teeneh, Kansaba, Mzair'a, Al-Haffa;
- Al-Qardaha: Fakhura, Al-Qardaha, Jobet Berghal Harf Elmseitra;
- Jablah: Jabla, Ein Elsharqiyyeh, Ein Shaqaq, Beit Yashout, Dalyeh, Qteilbiyyeh.⁸⁴⁷

Population estimates for 2016 issued by the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics indicated that Latakia governorate had 1 453 000 inhabitants.⁸⁴⁸

The main ethno-religious group in 2018 were Alawites. Other groups present were Kurds, Bujak and Bayir Turkomans, Sunni Arabs, Nusairis (Arabic speaking Gnostics) and Levantines (Arabic speaking Christians of various denominations), according to map provided by Michel Izady at Columbia University.⁸⁴⁹ The sub-districts of Rabia and Qastal Maaf to the north are mainly Sunni Turkmen populated, as are the coastal villages of Burj Islam and Salib al-Turkman, according to Syria analyst Fabrice Balanche. Balanche stated that the population in Latakia in 2010 amounted to about 400 000, but did not state whether the figure referred to the capital of the governorate as a whole. Balanche stated that about 50 % of the population were Alawite, 40 % were Sunni, and about 10 % were Christians.⁸⁵⁰

Latakia is the location of Syria's main commercial port.⁸⁵¹ In March 2019, it was reported that the government of Syria reached an agreement with Iran to permit Iran to manage Latakia Port. According to the Lebanese newspaper L'Orient du Jour, Iran regarded control of the port as an opportunity to strengthen its influence in Syria and the rest of the Middle East.⁸⁵² The British newspaper The Times reported that Iran was seeking land access to the Mediterranean Sea via Latakia Port for the transportation of goods.⁸⁵³

Latakia governorate, together with neighbouring coastal governorate Tartous, constitute the main vegetable production areas in Syria. The port of Latakia is one of the two ports for imports of wheat to the whole country, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).⁸⁵⁴

The railway from Latakia heads inland. Stretches of the railway are intact in Latakia, according to the UAE-based news outlet Gulf News, which reported that the railway and its connection to Latakia Port

⁸⁴⁵ MapAction, Syria 2013-2015, Latakia Governorate [map], last updated: 29 July 2016, [url](#)

⁸⁴⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic Governorates Profile (June 2014), June 2014, [url](#), p. 19

⁸⁴⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic – Lattakia [map], 2017, [url](#)

⁸⁴⁸ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

⁸⁴⁹ Izady, M., Syria: Ethnic Shift, 2010-mid 2018 (approximation), 2018-19, Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity [map], [url](#)

⁸⁵⁰ Balanche, F., Latakia is Assad's Achilles Heel, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 September 2015, [url](#)

⁸⁵¹ Times (The), Tehran eyes vital Syrian port of Latakia as gateway to Mediterranean, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁵² L'Orient le Jour, Iran gains a foothold in Latakia, 26 March 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁵³ Times (The), Tehran eyes vital Syrian port of Latakia as gateway to Mediterranean, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁴ FAO/WFP, Special Report, FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 5 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 21, 37

was important to the Syrian government for post-war reconstruction purposes and for the revitalisation of land trade.⁸⁵⁵

2.4.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

According to ACLED, most of Latakia governorate had been under government control since the start of the conflict.⁸⁵⁶ Latakia has been a stronghold for the Alawites and the Assad family.⁸⁵⁷ The Wall Street Journal stated that the Assad family who has run Syria since 1971, draws heavily on fellow Alawites. Alawites dominate high posts in the military and the intelligence apparatus, as well as key state institutions.⁸⁵⁸ Analyst Aron Lund, writing for the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in 2019, considered Latakia as being a regime loyalist core region.⁸⁵⁹ ISW mentioned that the GoS early on in the conflict had displaced the Sunni Arab inhabitants from their coastal enclaves.⁸⁶⁰

The New York Times traced the start of the conflict in Latakia to 26 March 2011, citing witnesses who had said that by sunset that day, Baath Party offices were burning in at least two cities, the military had been deployed in the governorate and government forces had opened fire with live rounds. A military assault on Latakia city later in the year had driven out the Palestinians of refugee neighbourhoods there.⁸⁶¹

Since the spring of 2012, Jabal al-Akrad had been a rebel stronghold, according to Fabrice Balanche.⁸⁶²

In an article for the International Review, analyst Gregory Waters stated that rebel forces had kept a foothold in Latakia for nearly the entire length of the civil war in Syria, creating a frontline in the mountains. In August 2013, several Salafi factions started a new offensive there. Government outposts were overrun and the rebels seized 10 Alawite villages. A few weeks later the government forces pushed the rebels back to the frontline as it had been before the offensive. Bouts of fighting in the area had followed during the next two years. In August 2016 the small mountain town of Kabani was seized by rebels. Strategically Kabani was of significance to the rebels' defence of their gains in Idlib governorate further to the east, according to Waters. The Syrian Army started a counter attack shortly after the rebels had taken over Kabani, meanwhile the rebel forces made other gains along the 30 km frontline. A new government offensive was launched in April 2019, also this one without decisive results. Attacks and counter attacks followed during the rest of 2019. Waters expected another government offensive to retake Kabani would take place in 2020.⁸⁶³

An ISW map from January 2020 showed all of Latakia being under pro-government control except a strip along the Turkish border and the border to Idlib governorate which was under control of Al-Qaeda linked groups.⁸⁶⁴

⁸⁵⁵ Gulf News, Syria's train coming back to life, 9 September 2018, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁶ ACLED, Mapping Territorial Control, Contestation, and Activity in Syria, 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁸⁵⁷ L'Orient le Jour, Iran gains a foothold in Latakia, 26 March 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁸ WSJ, Assad Draws Shock Troops from Elite Sect in Syria, 28 August 2012, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁹ Lund, A., From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, July 2019, [url](#), p. 46

⁸⁶⁰ ISW, Regime gains ground on the coast, 22 August 2013, [url](#)

⁸⁶¹ New York Times (The), Events in Syria: A Chronology, n.d., [url](#)

⁸⁶² Balanche, F., Latakia is Assad's Achilles Heel, 23 September 2015, [url](#)

⁸⁶³ Waters, G., Battle of Kabani: A Rare Defeat for the Syrian Army in 2019, International Review, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁶⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-21, 2020, 24 January 2020, [url](#)

2.4.2.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

State military forces of Syria and other countries, paramilitary forces supporting the GoS, and rebel forces, have been present in the governorate. Since 2013, when the GoS managed to isolate rebel strongholds to the mountain areas, there had been no need for it to permanently deploy troops on any massive scale in the governorate, the ISW stated. The population of loyalist paramilitary fighters already existed there. The ISW also pointed to the largely Alawite and Christian populations, the GoS' reliable security apparatus, and the presence of paramilitary forces supporting the GoS forces there, as reasons for the relative stability of the governorate.⁸⁶⁵

Various pro-GoS militias were operating in the governorate. According to Christopher Kozak, the Syrian coast is an area where there is among the 'densest concentrations of pro-regime paramilitary groups' where they are able to augment salaries with extortions at checkpoints. There is a large predominance of paramilitaries funded by local businessmen or military units, giving the example of the former Desert Hawks, based in Latakia and militias affiliated to the 4th Armoured division, which is 'basically a couple of armoured battalions with a circle of militias around them rather than a regular military unit.'⁸⁶⁶ Desert Hawks, a rebel group, had been disbanded and integrated into the Syrian army's Fourth Armored Division and was operating on frontlines in northern Latakia.⁸⁶⁷ Kozak further stated that men from the coastal areas could be conscripted to either the Syrian Army or volunteer for many of the paramilitary groups operating on the coast. These militias were paying twice as much as the Syrian Army did, and the men could themselves choose to restrict their service to certain areas, as opposed to if being conscripted into the Syrian Army and sent further afield to the frontlines.⁸⁶⁸ Gregory Waters reported in 2017 about the coastal Alawite sub-district of Jableh, citing a pro-government source on Jableh being the 'main reservoir of the Syrian Army'.⁸⁶⁹

Regarding the impact of the conflict on the civilian population, Christopher Kozak assessed that the villages in the coastal areas, the smaller ones in particular, has been emptied of young men who had been conscripted to the army. Kozak estimated that a percentage of 60 to 70 of young males of the Alawite community, had served and either gotten killed or wounded in action. As a result, the Alawite population on the coast had eroded.⁸⁷⁰ The New York Times reported in 2019 about families in the coastal areas who had been taking heavy losses of family members.⁸⁷¹ Syria analyst Fabrice Blanche reported in 2019 that more than 80 bodies of army soldiers had been brought back to Latakia during the month of May.⁸⁷²

According to Gregory Waters of International Review, as of 17 March 2020 deployments of the SAA in Latakia included units of:

4th Division:

- 977th Battalion – Latakia Province – 7 May 2019; Kuwasir Group – Kabani, Latakia – 30 July 2019; 40th Brigade – Kabani, Latakia – 26 October 2019; 42nd Brigade/Basil Group – Salma, Latakia – 13 January 2019; 42nd Brigade/Dirgham Group – Kabani, Latakia – 3 December 2019; 42nd Brigade/Maher Group – Kabani, Latakia – 12 January 2019; 42nd Brigade/Murajil Group – Kabani, Latakia – 20 January 2019;

⁸⁶⁵ ISW, Regime regains ground on the coast, 22 August 2013, [url](#)

⁸⁶⁶ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁸⁶⁷ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁸⁶⁸ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁸⁶⁹ Waters, G., Jableh's Sacrifice: Testing the Limits of Syrian Loyalty, International Review, 20 December 2017, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁰ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁸⁷¹ New York Times (The), What "Victory" looks like: A Journey Through Shattered Syria, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁷² Blanche, F., A Humanitarian Time Bomb in Idlib, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 28 June 2019, [url](#)

4th Corps:

- 2nd Division: 218th Battalion – Kabani, Latakia – 26 January 2020; 826th Regiment – Slanfah, Latakia – 26 December 2018; 144th Brigade – Latakia Province – 14 October 2018;
- 6th Division: Unknown unit – Latakia Province – 24 November 2018;

5th Corps: 1st Brigade/1st Battalion – Latakia Province – 1 November 2019;

Border Guards: 11th Regiment – Latakia Province – 17 January 2020.⁸⁷³

The Russian air force had acquired its own airbase and landing strip at Hmeimim, as noted in a report by the European Parliamentary Research Service.⁸⁷⁴ The Russian air force conducts expeditionary operations to support the GoS.⁸⁷⁵ Russian air force carried out strikes on rebel strongholds in Latakia and neighbouring governorates, the Wall Street Journal reported in October 2019, citing the SOHR.⁸⁷⁶

Syria analyst Gregory Waters indicated in a January 2020 article about the battle for Kabani, that a second foreign state force, the IRGC, was present in the governorate.⁸⁷⁷ Other sources that could indicate Iranian presence, have not been found.

2.4.2.2 Anti-GoS armed groups

Reuters news agency reported in 2019 about rebel positions in the Kubayna Mountains.⁸⁷⁸ The Beirut-based news outlet Al-Masdar News mentioned in September 2019 that jihadists were holding Kabani town.⁸⁷⁹ Al-Masdar News reported in another posting in September 2019 that jihadists had taken over Atterah town in the Turkmen mountains.⁸⁸⁰ Areas in Latakia near the border to Idlib were dominated by the jihadist group HTS, according to Middle East Eye (MEE) in January 2020.⁸⁸¹

Bellingcat reported that Turkmen militias, who received limited Turkish support, operate in Latakia. These groups had an agenda of Islam, Turkism and nationalism, in addition to that of defending their own geographical areas. They were small groups working under the umbrella of a largely Turkmen group, The Second Coastal Division. They could number up to 1 000 fighters, and were gaining growing support from Turkey, Bellingcat reported in February 2019.⁸⁸²

2.4.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

The Swedish Migration Agency, cited sources consulted and observations made during fact finding missions to Damascus in September 2015, September 2016, and May 2017, and reported in 2019 that [informal translation] ‘the general security situation in large parts of the government-controlled areas in the western parts of the country have been relatively “stable” in recent years’.⁸⁸³ The February 2019 report by the Swedish Migration Agency cited an undated Liveuamap and stated with reference to Latakia that ‘the absolutely largest share, included the provincial capital, is under government control (with a significant Russian presence)’. According to the report, based on the same map, the mountain areas north-east of Salma and Rabia near Idlib were contested areas under rebel dominance. The

⁸⁷³ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁴ EPRS, Russia in the Middle East, From side lines to centre stage, November 2018, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁵ Borshchevskaya, A., Shifting Landscape, Russia’s military role in the Middle East, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁸⁷⁶ WSJ, Russia Strikes Syrian Rebel Stronghold, Raising Fear of Assad Regime Offensive, 24 October 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁷ Waters, G., Battle for Kabani: A Rare Defeat for the Syrian Army in 2019, International Review, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁸ Reuters, Rebels say Syrian army fails to retake Latakia mountain, 19 May 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁹ Al Masdar News, Syrian choppers swarm jihadist stronghold in northeast Latakia, 23 September 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁸⁰ Al Masdar News, Jihadists took Atterah town in Turkmen mountains, 9 July 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁸¹ MEE, Syrian government forces set to enter iconic rebel stronghold, January 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁸² Bellingcat, Syrian Turkmen Groups in Latakia: An Overview, 7 February 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁸³ Sweden, Lifos, Sakerhetslaget i Syrien (version 3.0), 1 March 2019, [url](#), p. 7

report further commented that ‘concerning its closeness to war zones in Idlib and Hama even northeastern Latakia is affected, however no significant amount of Latakia’s civilian population’.⁸⁸⁴

In their conclusion to the report, the Swedish Migration Agency stated that in most of the government-controlled areas in Latakia including the capital, it considered security as significantly more acceptable for those who, in the eyes of the GoS, did not have any kind of ‘controversial record’.⁸⁸⁵

As for the beginning of 2019, only one sub-district of the governorate, located in the northeast, remained contested while all the other sub-districts were under control of the Syrian government, according to ACLED.⁸⁸⁶ Data retrieved for the whole of 2019 from the ACLED database, showed that most recorded incidents of conflict related violence in the governorate took place in the northern part of Latakia district, and the eastern part of al-Haffa district (see section on [Security incidents](#)).⁸⁸⁷

In January 2019, a car bomb attack occurred in Latakia city in the crowded al Hammam square; the attack broke the otherwise ‘relative calm’ in the city and killed one person and injured 14.⁸⁸⁸ Reports about similar incidents in the governorate during 2019, have not been found.

In June 2019, Syria analyst Fabrice Balanche stated that artillery and aviation were ‘pounding Jabal Kabani’ for days successively but without success for the Syrian and the Russian forces that carried out the attacks.⁸⁸⁹ The Carter Center reported that government forces had been advancing on the southern edges of Kabani town on 13 June 2019 but been pushed back by the HTS and the TIP to their original positions the same day.⁸⁹⁰ The Carter Center reported that conflict continued in the Kabani area, where the government forces were focusing on the southern areas of the town which was controlled by the HTS and TIP. Despite airstrikes, barrel bomb drops and shelling, no advances had been recorded as of September 2019.⁸⁹¹ Gregory Waters reported in 2019 of intensive artillery shelling – ‘hammering’ - of Kabani town but did not mention anything about the actual impact on the civilian population in the town.⁸⁹²

In September 2019, the Chinese news agency Xinhua reported that a period of calm had prevailed in the de-escalation zone that included Idlib and nearby countryside areas of Hama, Latakia and Aleppo governorates. The calm had followed the unilateral announcement of a ceasefire by the Syrian army.⁸⁹³ The ceasefire entered into force on 31 August, Al-Jazeera reported.⁸⁹⁴

In September 2019, Al-Masdar News reported that the Syrian air force and the Syrian army together carried out attacks on rebel positions in and around the mountain town Kabani.⁸⁹⁵ The Russian news agency Interfax reported in October 2019 that rebel groups had breached the ceasefire and attacked villages in Latakia as well as in Aleppo, Idlib and Hama governorates.⁸⁹⁶ UNOCHA stated in October 2019 that airstrikes in the Kabani area had been taking place and that artillery shelling had continued to be reported along the frontlines in eastern Latakia governorate.⁸⁹⁷

⁸⁸⁴ Sweden, Lifos, Sakerhetslaget i Syrien (version 3.0), 1 March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

⁸⁸⁵ Sweden, Lifos, Sakerhetslaget i Syrien [Security situation in Syria] (version 3.0), 1 March 2019, [url](#), p. 48

⁸⁸⁶ ACLED, The State of Syria April – June 2019, 12 July 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁸⁷ ACLED, Data, n.d., [url](#)

⁸⁸⁸ Reuters, Syria: Blast in coastal city of Latakia kills one, 22 January 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁸⁹ Balanche, F., A Humanitarian Time Bomb in Idlib, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 28 June 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁹⁰ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 10 – 16 June 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁸⁹¹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 26 August – 1 September 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁹² Waters, G., Battle for Kabani: A Rare Defeat for the Syrian Army in 2019, International Review, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁹³ Xinhuanet, Cautious calm prevails Syria’s Idlib amid ceases-fire, 4 September 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁹⁴ Al Jazeera, Russia declares “ceasefire” as Syrians try to storm border post, 30 August 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁹⁵ Al Masdar News, Syrian choppers swarm jihadist stronghold in northeast Latakia, 23 September 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁹⁶ Interfax, 21 October 2019, Attacks by militants continue in Syria’s Aleppo, Latakia, Idlib, Hama provinces – Reconciliation Center, 30 August 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁹⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria. Situation Report No. 13 – as of 8 October 2019, [url](#), p. 2

In a map provided by ACLED for the third quarter of 2019, Jablah sub-district continued to be marked as ‘active’ but the actual kind of activity was not commented upon.⁸⁹⁸

In December 2019, Al-Masdar News reported on battles between GoS forces and the jihadist groups HTS and TIP near Kabani.⁸⁹⁹ Al-Masdar News reported in another posting in December 2019 that territory in the Zuweiqat Mountains had been captured and recaptured by the belligerents after several days of battling that eventually ended in a deadlock.⁹⁰⁰ In January 2020, Waters noted that the fighting for Kabani had gone on for eight months.⁹⁰¹

2.4.3.1 Security incidents

In 2019, there were 560 security incidents recorded by ACLED in Latakia governorate, of whom 149 were coded as battles, 408 explosions/remote violence and 3 incidents of violence against civilians.

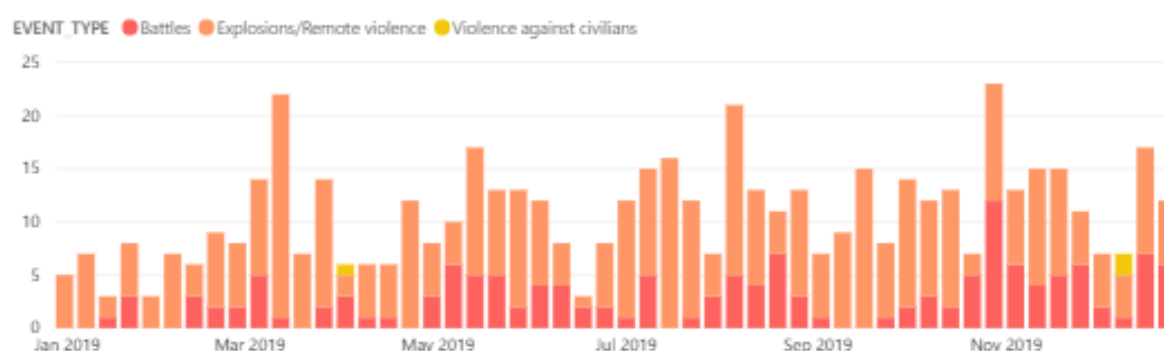


Figure 26. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Latakia governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data⁹⁰²

Latakia governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Al-Hafa	108	287	-
Al-Qardaha	-	5	1
Jablah	5	16	2
Latakia	36	100	-
Total	149	408	3

Figure 27. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Latakia governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data.

Data retrieved from ACLED shows that the highest number of security incidents throughout 2019 were recorded in the Al-Haffa and Latakia districts.

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 31 security incidents of which 8 were battles and 23 explosions/remote violence. Almost half of them were recorded in Al-Haffa (15).

⁸⁹⁸ ACLED, The State of Syria, July-September 2019, 10 October 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁹⁹ Al Masdar News, Syrian Army advances in northeast Latakia after intense battle with jihadists, 26 December 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁰⁰ Al Masdar News, Capturing and recapturing in Zuweiqat Mountains, battling for several days at Kaani, deadlock, 24 December 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁰¹ Waters, G., Battle for Kabani: A Rare Defeat for the Syrian Army in 2019, International Review, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁰² EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

2.4.3.2 Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	1	1
February	-	2
March	-	-
April	2	3
May	1	2
June	-	-
July	-	-
August	-	-
September	-	1
October	1	1
November	-	-
December	2	1
Total	7	11

Figure 28. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Latakia governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2019, sources documented between 7 (VDC data)⁹⁰³ and 11 (SNHR data)⁹⁰⁴ civilian fatalities in Latakia governorate.

2.4.3.3 Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

According to analyst Kheder Khaddour, writing for the German research institution Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in 2016, even in the parts of Latakia governorate that have been kept out of the war civilians' living conditions had been affected. However, Khaddour concluded that the local communities seemed to have proven themselves resilient and that their roles and relationships had not 'mutated drastically' even after five years of conflict. In the words of the author, 'local relationships – between Sunnis and Alawites, and between Alawites and the regime – had proved stronger than the conflict, and the armed factions' sectarian narratives have cemented previous divisions rather than creating new ones'.⁹⁰⁵

⁹⁰³ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

⁹⁰⁴ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁰⁵ Khaddour, K., The Coast in Conflict. Migration, Sectarianism and Decentralization in Syria's Latakia and Tartus Governorates, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, July 2016, [url](#), pp. 6, 9-10, 15

Gregory Waters reported in 2017 about a ‘growing economic and structural disaster plaguing the coast’, citing local Jableh Facebook pages where locals complained about severe water and fuel shortages. Waters also cited pro-government local news outlets that were blaming the central government for neglecting Jableh district for the benefit of the capital. Waters reported about unmaintained infrastructure across the coast that created health and safety hazards for civilians, and about raw sewage running through busy streets.⁹⁰⁶

In a joint report in 2019, the FAO and WFP reported in 2019 that apple production in the north-east of Latakia had become reduced due to burning and cutting down of trees and dangers to accessing the area.⁹⁰⁷ Syria Untold, a Berlin-based independent online media platform advancing critical perspectives on Syria and Syrians, reported in 2019 about members of militias, the Syrian Army and the state security apparatus, who were engaged in illegal cutting and burning of agricultural trees as well as woodlands, for selling it as coal and firewood.⁹⁰⁸ WFP reported in September 2019 that it had dispatched nutrition products for the prevention of acute malnutrition that was reaching children also in Latakia.⁹⁰⁹

A report by SHRC in 2019 about the impact of cluster bombs on civilians in the de-escalation zone that stretches into northeastern Latakia, mentioned that residential areas had been targeted but the report did not specify the impact and locations.⁹¹⁰

With regard to healthcare in the governorate in general, UNOCHA stated that 671 372 people were ‘in need’ of healthcare.⁹¹¹

The New York Times reported in 2019 that electricity in Latakia was slowly and erratically being restored by one crew shift at the time.⁹¹² Tehran Times reported in November 2019 that Iran is constructing an electric power plant in Latakia.⁹¹³

In a news release by OHCHR in September 2019 it was stated that during the government offensive to oust HTS fighters from areas including Latakia, ‘infrastructure essential to the survival of the civilian population’, had been destroyed.⁹¹⁴ The exact locations and the extent of the destruction was, however, not stated.

2.4.3.4 Displacement and return

UNOCHA data on displacement showed that in 2019, around 17 000 IDP movements were recorded to or within Latakia governorate, of whom around 8 000 were within the governorate while the rest came mainly from Hama, Aleppo, Homs and Damascus governorate. Around 1 300 displacement movements were recorded during 2019 from Latakia governorate to Tartous governorate.⁹¹⁵ UNOCHA noted that large population movements were due to the ongoing violence in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama and Homs. In July 2019, the third largest movement was recorded in Latakia governorate with a total of 3 358 individuals tracked from Hama governorate.⁹¹⁶

⁹⁰⁶ Waters, G., Jableh’s Sacrifice: Testing the Limits of Syrian Loyalty, *International Review*, 20 December 2017, [url](#)

⁹⁰⁷ FAO/WFP, Special Report – FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 5 September 2019, [url](#), p. 22

⁹⁰⁸ Syria Untold, War on the Forests on the Syrian Coast. Who is the Culprit, 6 June 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁹⁰⁹ WFP, Syria Situation Report #9, September 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁹¹⁰ SHRC, Nearly 457 attacks by Syrian and Russian Regimes Using Cluster Munitions were Documented, 24 of them since the Sochi Agreement, 16 April 2019, [url](#)

⁹¹¹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 32, 69

⁹¹² New York Times (The), What “Victory” looks like: A Journey Through Shattered Syria, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

⁹¹³ Tehran Times, Syria calls for Iran’s contribution to its electricity projects, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

⁹¹⁴ OHCHR, Escalating violence and waves of displacement continue to torment civilians during eighth year of Syrian conflict, 11 September 2019, [url](#)

⁹¹⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

⁹¹⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements July 2019, 9 September 2019, [url](#)

According to UNOCHA data, around 2 000 return movements were recorded from Latakia governorate in 2019. UNOCHA's spontaneous returns mapping for January to December 2019 indicated that there were no returns to or within Latakia during the year.⁹¹⁷

ISW analyst Christopher Kozak stated in an interview with EASO in late 2019 that rather than individuals from Latakia having left and then returned to their home places, there were IDPs from other parts of the country such as rebel held areas like Homs, Idlib and Hama governorates who had been moving in. The reason, in Kozak's opinion, was that Latakia had been a safer area throughout the war. Kozak further noted that there is a source of tension between the host communities on the Syrian Coast and the IDPs that have moved in. Depending on their geographical origin, IDPs are seen as unwelcomed or opposition sympathetic, so local authorities make life harder for them.⁹¹⁸

⁹¹⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

⁹¹⁸ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

⁹¹⁹ MapAction, Syria Governorate Maps – Tartous Governorate, last updated on 29 July 2019, [url](#)

2.5.1 General description of the governorate

The governorate of Tartous is situated on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It is surrounded by the governorates of Hama, Homs, and Latakia and bordered by Lebanon to the south.⁹²⁰ The governorate is divided into five administrative districts: Banyas (Baniyas), Sheikh Badr, Dreikish, Safita, and Tartous, each divided further into sub-districts.⁹²¹

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Tartous governorate at 1 114 000 as of 2016.⁹²² Latakia and Tartous form the 'Alawite region' in Syria. Alawites constitute 80 % of the governorate's population, followed by Sunni Muslims and Christians (10 % each). Christians are the main inhabitants in Safita and Wadi al-Nasara while Sunni Muslims reside around al-Hamidiyah and Talkalakh, the countryside surrounding Tartous.⁹²³ The city of Banyas, which saw the outbreak of the anti-government protests in 2011, is around 70 % Sunni Muslim and 30 % Alawite.⁹²⁴

Tartous and Latakia form the Syrian coastal region.⁹²⁵ Next to Latakia, Tartous is Syria's main port city.⁹²⁶ It serves as a 'gateway into the Syrian economy' and a transit hub that connects Syria with the neighbouring countries.⁹²⁷ According to the World Bank's 2020 report, [t]he use of the ports [of Tartous and Latakia] for transit has practically ceased, while exports and imports are at only 23 % and 40 % percent of their 2010 levels respectively', although the conflict has not touched the ports directly. The port was also affected by the collapse in phosphate exports and the destruction of the rail network and is used as a naval military facility as of 2020 reporting.⁹²⁸ In June 2019, the Syrian parliament ratified a bill, according to which the port of Tartous was leased to Russia for 49 years.⁹²⁹

2.5.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

After the start of an anti-government demonstration in Banyas in 2011, GoS forces advanced into the city's Sunni districts and shot dead six civilians, according to human rights campaigners.⁹³⁰ Following an ambush on GoS forces by rebels, GoS forces and militias attacked Banyas in an operation against 'armed terrorists' on 3 May 2013, in which state media reported 40 opposition fighters were killed. However, according to opposition activists, more than 200 men, women, and children were killed by government forces in an alleged 'massacre' during the operation.⁹³¹ Due to the clashes, hundreds of families fled the village of Ras a-Nabaa in the southern part of Banyas and the village of Beida.⁹³²

In May 2016, the city of Tartous was targeted by ISIL: at least 50 persons were reported killed in three attacks, named as the 'first of their kind' to occur in Tartous⁹³³ and conducted by suicide bombers simultaneously with the blasts in Jableh, a city in the governorate of Latakia.⁹³⁴ In September 2016, a double bomb attack, organised by ISIL just outside the city Tartous simultaneously with the blasts in

⁹²⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), 26 August 2014, [url](#), p. 31

⁹²¹ MapAction, Syria Governorate Maps – Tartous Governorate, last updated on 29 July 2019, [url](#)

⁹²² Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population of Syria by governorates 2016 (000), n.d., [url](#)

⁹²³ Balanche, F., Latakia is Assad's Achilles Heel, the Washington Institute, 23 September 2015, [url](#)

⁹²⁴ Reuters, Syria army attacks Baniyas, raising sectarian tension, 7 May 2011, [url](#)

⁹²⁵ Khaddour K., The Coast in Conflict, Migration, Sectarianism, and Decentralization in Syria's Latakia and Tartus Governorates, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, July 2016, [url](#), p. 4

⁹²⁶ UNHCR Syria / Tartous FO, End of year 2017 / Factsheet, January – December 2017, [url](#), p. 2

⁹²⁷ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p.73

⁹²⁸ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p.74

⁹²⁹ France 24, Syria parliament okays Russian lease of Tartus port: state media, 12 June 2019, [url](#)

⁹³⁰ Reuters, Syria army attacks Baniyas, raising sectarian tension, 7 May 2011, [url](#)

⁹³¹ BBC News, Syrian activists document al-Bayda and Baniyas 'massacre', 28 May 2013, [url](#)

⁹³² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), [url](#), p. 31

⁹³³ Reuters, Bombs kill nearly 150 in Syrian government-held cities: monitor, 23 May 2016, [url](#)

⁹³⁴ Guardian (The), Scores dead in Isis attacks on Syrian coastal cities, 23 May 2016, [url](#); BBC News, Syria conflict: Deadly blasts rock Assad strongholds, 23 May 2016, [url](#)

the cities of Homs, Hasaka, and Damascus, led to at least 43 casualties in Tartous.⁹³⁵ On 1 January 2017, SOHR reported on several explosions carried out by suicide bombers on the seaside promenade area in the city of Tartous, in which two persons, who were believed to belong to GoS forces, were killed.⁹³⁶

As of March 2020, Tartous governorate is under GoS control.⁹³⁷

Alawites were reportedly supporting the government at the beginning of the conflict, including via taking part in military service.⁹³⁸ Tartous was one of the governorates, in which recruits were drawn primarily from communities loyal to the GoS and where children were used to staff checkpoints.⁹³⁹ One third of all Assad 'loyalist casualties' come from the city of Tartous, making it known as 'the mother of martyrs'. The source notes that more than 70 000 young Alawite soldiers have been killed and 120 000 others wounded, while another 10 000 are unaccounted for, and this does not include non-Alawites from the governorate.⁹⁴⁰ According to Syria analyst Gregory Waters' report for Bellingcat (2018), which analyses Facebook posts of 'martyrdom' announcements about killed Syrian soldiers, almost 32.7 % of all reported 'martyrs' in the civil war in Syria come from the governorates of Tartous and Latakia, although these governorates contain less than 8.8 % of Syria's population estimated as of 2011.⁹⁴¹ Sources indicate that in subsequent years, the population was becoming increasingly embittered toward Assad due to the continuing conflict.⁹⁴²

2.5.2.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed actors

In October 2015, the 4th Corps was established under a joint Russian-Syrian command. Reportedly, it was established among 'current soldiers and volunteers, as well as incorporating local loyalist militias, mostly the National Defence Forces (NDF), from Latakia and Tartous.⁹⁴³ Some sources have claimed that some 'elements' of the 2nd Corps' 10th Division, which is one of the smallest divisions in the SAA, undertake training by Russian officers in the district of Safita.⁹⁴⁴

2.5.2.2 Russia

Russian forces have a strategically located naval base in Tartous governorate and an airbase at Hmeimim, Latakia governorate⁹⁴⁵, which is right next to Tartous and 'both are a major component' of Russia's presence in Syria.⁹⁴⁶ In the beginning of October 2016, Russia deployed S-300 surface-to-air-missiles to Russia's naval base at Tartous.⁹⁴⁷ Under the deal signed with the GoS on 18 January 2017, Russia 'started establishing a permanent military presence at naval and air bases in Syria' by expanding

⁹³⁵ Al Jazeera, Syria's war: Blasts hit Tartous, Homs, Hasaka, 6 September 2016, [url](#)

⁹³⁶ SOHR, Explosions hit Tartous city cause casualties in the first minutes of the New Year, 1 January 2017, [url](#)

⁹³⁷ See map 2. ISW, Control of terrain in Syria, 31 March 2020 available on [Section 1.5](#)

⁹³⁸ Nation (The), Tartous, Syria, Women Wear Black, Youth Are in Hiding, and Bitterness Grows, 15 May 2017, [url](#)

⁹³⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "They have erased the dreams of my children": children's rights in the Syrian Arab Republic. Conference Room Paper [A/HRC/43/CRP.6], January 2020, [url](#), para. 32

⁹⁴⁰ Stratfor, Tartus, the Mother of Martyrs, 7 June 2015, [url](#)

⁹⁴¹ Waters, G., Fifteen Months of Death: Pro-Government Casualties of the Syrian Civil War, Bellingcat, 3 October 2018, [url](#)

⁹⁴² Nation (The), Tartous, Syria, Women Wear Black, Youth Are in Hiding, and Bitterness Grows, 15 May 2017, [url](#); Stratfor, Tartus, the Mother of Martyrs, 7 June 2015, [url](#)

⁹⁴³ Waters, G., The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, MEI, 18 July 2019, [url](#); Al-Tamimi, A. J., The Fifth Legion: A New Auxiliary Force", Syria Comment, December 24, 2016, [url](#)

⁹⁴⁴ Waters, G., The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, MEI, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁴⁵ Borshchevskaya, A., Shifting Landscape, Russia's military role in the Middle East, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, September 2019, [url](#), p. 7; EPRS, Russia in the Middle East. From Sidelines to Center Stage, 21 November 2018, [url](#), p. 5

⁹⁴⁶ Borshchevskaya, A., Shifting Landscape, Russia's military role in the Middle East, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, September 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁹⁴⁷ BBC News, Syria conflict: Russia sends missile system to Tartus base, 4 October 2016, [url](#)

the Tartous naval facility and using the Hmeimim airbase ‘indefinitely’.⁹⁴⁸ In December 2019, Russian and Syrian forces held the first joint naval drills at the port of Tartous⁹⁴⁹, followed by another joint military exercise in January 2020.⁹⁵⁰

2.5.2.3 Pro-Iranian/Shia militias and Hezbollah

Iranian militias were reported to be present on the coastal front in Latakia and Tartous as of 2018.⁹⁵¹ As noticed by a Humanitarian Conflict Analyst, interviewed by the Finnish Immigration Service in 2018, there were instances when the deployments of Shia militias, and particularly Hezbollah, in Latakia and Tartous were opposed by the Alawite militias.⁹⁵²

2.5.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, the governorate of Tartous has largely been controlled by GoS and experienced ‘no major attacks’.⁹⁵³ During the period 2011–2019, VDC registered 424 conflict-related deaths in Tartous governorate, 327 of which were of civilians and 97 of non-civilians.⁹⁵⁴ According to the evaluation made by Gregory Waters, Tartous is the only Syrian governorate, in which no pro-GoS combat deaths has been registered in 2019.⁹⁵⁵

Illustrative security incidents

- On 27 January 2020, Syrian state news agency SANA reported on an attack on oil facilities off the coast of Banyas, stating that bombs were planted underwater by divers: no one claimed the responsibility over the attack, while GoS stated it was carried out by ‘terrorists’.⁹⁵⁶
- On 12 March 2020, Asharq Al-Awsat reported on the deaths of ‘a Russian soldier and two Syrian civilians’ in a road accident: while ‘a source in Damascus’ was conveyed to deny that the Russian military vehicle had been targeted with an explosive device, ‘other sources’ were reported to say that the event was ‘an ISIS operation against Russian army patrol aiming to assassinate a high-ranking Russian officer’.⁹⁵⁷

2.5.3.1 Security incidents

In 2019, ACLED recorded 2 security incidents in Tartous governorate, of whom one coded as explosions/remote violence and one incident of violence against civilians.

⁹⁴⁸ Reuters, Russia establishing permanent presence at its Syrian bases: RIA, 26 December 2017, [url](#)

⁹⁴⁹ Moscow Times (The), Russia, Syria Hold First Joint Naval Drills, 17 December 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁵⁰ Moscow Times (The), Russian, Syrian Troops Hold Joint Drills, updated 22 January 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁵¹ Omran for Strategic Studies/Carnegie Middle East Center, Transformation of the Syrian Military: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring, 31 December 2018, [url](#), p. 94

⁹⁵² Finland, FIS, Syria: Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, April 2018, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 21

⁹⁵³ Netherlands, MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The Security Situation, (June/July 2019), July 2019, [url](#); UNHCR Syria / Tartous FO, End of year 2017 / Factsheet, January – December 2017, [url](#), p. 3

⁹⁵⁴ Based on a database search for the period 1 April 2011–31 December 2019 of the VDC database accessed on 22 March 2020. VDC, Killed, Tartous, 1 April 2011 – 31 January 2019, accessed on 22 March 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁵⁵ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁵⁶ Arab News, Underwater bombs damage Syria’s offshore oil facilities, 27 January 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁵⁷ Asharq Al-Awsat, Russian Soldier Killed in ‘Mysterious Accident in Syria’s Tartous’, 12 March 2020, [url](#)



Figure 29. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Tartous governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data⁹⁵⁸

Tartous governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Tartous	-	1	1

During the first two months of 2020 ACLED did not record any security incidents in Tartous.

2.5.3.2 Civilian fatalities

Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict (2019)

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	-	-
February	-	-
March	-	-
April	-	-
May	-	-
June	-	-
July	-	-
August	-	-
September	-	-
October	-	-
November	-	-
December	2	-
Total	2	-

Figure 30. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Tartous governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2019, VDC recorded two civilian casualties in Tartous which were documented in December 2019.

2.5.3.3 Displacement and return

Because the coastal areas have remained 'relatively insulated' from violence compared to the rest of the country, a large number of Syrians has moved away from affected areas to the 'relative calm' of

⁹⁵⁸ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

the coast. A large number of the influx were Sunni Muslims⁹⁵⁹, accommodating IDPs from Idlib, Aleppo, and Homs⁹⁶⁰ as well as from Hama, Raqqa, and Deir Ez-Zor.⁹⁶¹

From January to December 2019, UNOCHA recorded around 10 000 IDP movements to or within Tartous governorate, of which 3 000 IDP movements were within the governorate and the rest came from Aleppo, Latakia, Hama and Damascus governorates. Around 1 000 IDP movements were recorded during the year from Tartous governorate to Latakia governorate.⁹⁶² In January 2020, 747 IDPs were recorded.⁹⁶³

According to UNOCHA, Tartous received no return IDP movements in the period between January and December 2019 while 3 000 IDPs left Tartous to return to other governorates, including about 2 400 returning to Homs.⁹⁶⁴

⁹⁵⁹ Khaddour K., *The Coast in Conflict, Migration, Sectarianism, and Decentralization in Syria's Latakia and Tartus Governorates*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, July 2016, [url](#), p. 6

⁹⁶⁰ UNHCR Syria / Tartous FO, *End of year 2017 / Factsheet, January – December 2017*, [url](#), p. 2

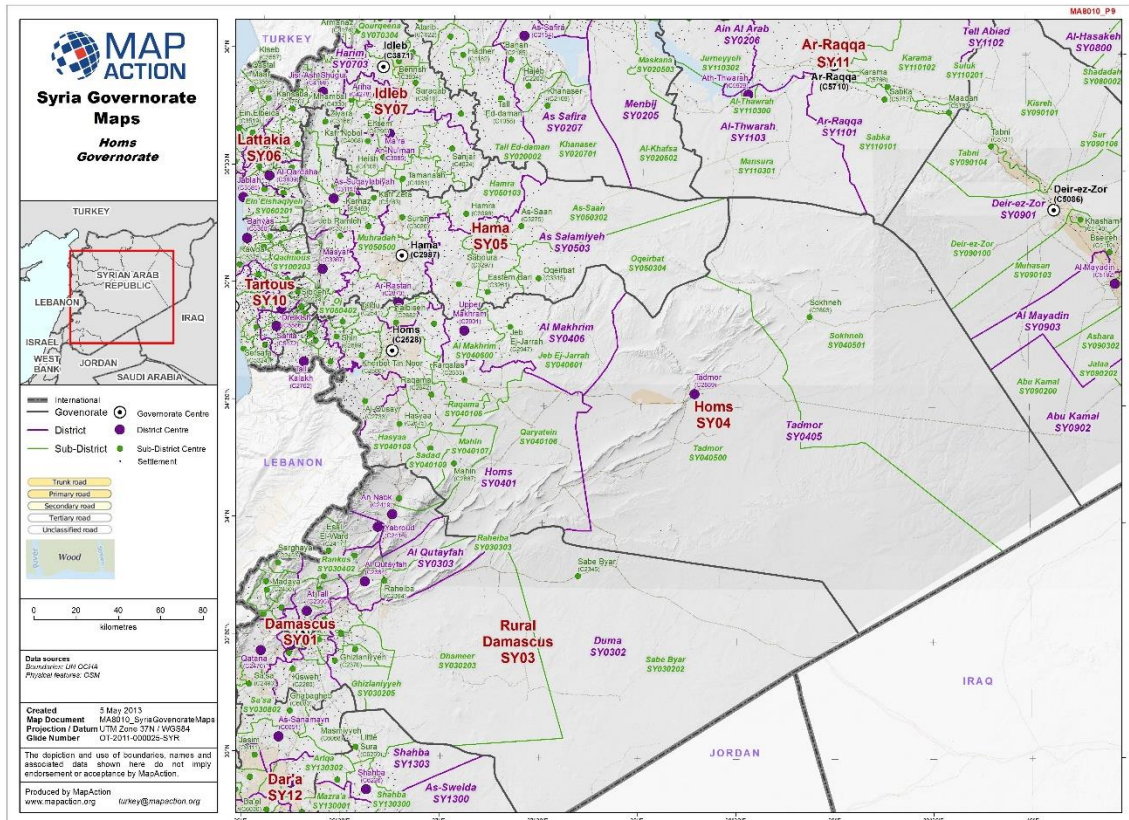
⁹⁶¹ UNDP, *Tartous: Growing mushrooms for improved living conditions*, n.d., [url](#)

⁹⁶² UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019*, [url](#)

⁹⁶³ UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data for Jan-2020 [third sheet tab – Summary since 2016]*, updated February 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁶⁴ UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic – IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow, Jan-Dec, 2019, 31 December 2019*, [url](#)

2.6 Homs governorate



Map 11: © MapAction, Homs governorate map⁹⁶⁵

2.6.1 General description of governorate

Homs governorate is located in central Syria and has borders with Iraq from the east and Lebanon from the west. It has internal borders with Deir Ez-Zor, Raqqa, Hama, Tartous, and Rural Damascus governorates.⁹⁶⁶ The Syrian E-Government website stated that Homs governorate shares an international border with Jordan to the east as well.⁹⁶⁷ While a report by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and UN Habitat stated that Homs governorate comprises eight districts⁹⁶⁸, UNOCHA mentioned that it comprises only six: Homs, Al-Qusayr, Tal Kalakh, Ar-Rastan, Al-Maghrim and Palmyra.⁹⁶⁹ Homs is the largest governorate in Syria in terms of surface, and the third in terms of population, as of May 2014. The capital of the governorate is Homs city which is also the central city of Homs district.⁹⁷⁰

⁹⁶⁵ MapAction, Homs Governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

⁹⁶⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#)

⁹⁶⁷ Syria, E-Government, سورية [About Syria], n.d., [url](#)

⁹⁶⁸ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC and UN Habitat, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 5

⁹⁶⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#); OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 13

⁹⁷⁰ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC and UN Habitat, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 5

The latest census conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics in Syria was in 2004, and according to which, the number of residents in Homs governorate was 1 529 402.⁹⁷¹ Homs governorate had 1 573 000 residents according to the official population estimates published by the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics for 2016.⁹⁷² The CIA World Factbook estimated that the population of Homs was 1 336 000 in as of 20 February 2020.⁹⁷³

According to USDOS, in addition to Sunni Muslims who were present across the country, Homs governorate had Twelver Shia, Alawite, and Christian residents.⁹⁷⁴ According to Fabrice Balanche, the majority of the inhabitants of Talkalakh were Sunni, and Alawites constituted 25 % of the population of Homs city, which also had a notable concentration of Christians when the civil unrest started.⁹⁷⁵ He further argued that Homs ‘has long been internally divided into neighbourhoods with strong sectarian identities, and the bloody confrontations seen during the initial phase of the uprising unfolded right on the boundaries between the Alawite and Sunni districts [...]’.⁹⁷⁶

Homs governorate has two oil fields (Hayan and Jazal which produce 6 000 and 3 000 barrels per day) as well as seven gas fields with a production capacity ranging between 300 000 and 3 000 000 m³ per day.⁹⁷⁷ Moreover, the governorate had phosphate mines, notably in Khneifis, which attracted Russian companies.⁹⁷⁸ The Financial Times reported in September 2019 that Russian mercenaries were on patrol to protect the state-run General Fertiliser Company in Homs.⁹⁷⁹

2.6.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

The city of Homs was one of the most impacted cities in the war, and its old part suffered a two-year-long siege till it became accessible again in May 2014.⁹⁸⁰ As mentioned above, the city maintained a religious and sectarian diversity. However, as of July 2011, criminality and kidnappings started to spread and on 16 July 2011, 54 people were killed in sectarian violence. Furthermore, sectarian polarisation reached unprecedented levels when rebels killed several people in November 2011, which brought the retaliation of the security forces who killed 34 people. At that point, the Shiite residents of Homs city were forcefully displaced and neighbourhoods started to become either purely Sunni or purely made up of other sects, with the exception of a few which maintained their mixed sectarian elements such as Al Waer, Ikrima, and Id-Dikhar.⁹⁸¹ According to Global Rights Compliance and World Peace Foundation, the GoS forces applied a ‘kneel or starve’ strategy (e.g. cutting off water and food supplies) against rebel-held neighbourhoods such as Baba Amr, accompanied by indiscriminate attacks against those areas.⁹⁸² According to Human Rights Watch, Syrian Security Forces killed 587 civilians mainly in Homs city, Tal Kalakh, Rastan, and Talbiseh between mid-April and end of

⁹⁷¹ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, General Census, The Census of housing and population results 2004 on governorates level, n.d., [url](#)

⁹⁷² Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

⁹⁷³ CIA, World Factbook, Syria, last updated: 20 February 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁷⁴ USDOS, 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁹⁷⁵ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. 6, 15

⁹⁷⁶ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. 8-9

⁹⁷⁷ BBC Arabic, سوريا، الأكراد سيطرة في مناطق سيطرة الأكراد شرق سوريا [Resources in the Kurds-controlled areas in eastern Syria], 7 October 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁷⁸ ISPI, Rebuilding Syria: The Middle East’s Next Power Game?, 2019, [url](#), p. 48

⁹⁷⁹ FT, Moscow collects its spoils of war in Assad’s Syria, 1 September 2019, [url](#)

A key ingredient for the production of fertilisers is phosphate, and Syria has the third largest deposit of phosphate in the world: Arab Weekly (The), Russia and Iran tussle for Syria’s war spoils, 7 September 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁸⁰ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC and UN Habitat, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), pp. 3, 4

⁹⁸¹ Saleh, M., الطائفية و مجزرة الساعة في حمص: حوار مع محمد (أبو علي) صالح [Dialogue with Muhammad (Abu Ali) Saleh: Sectarianism and the Clock Massacre in Homs], 14 June 2019, [url](#); Muhammad Saleh is a Marxist Syrian writer and activist.

⁹⁸² Global Rights Compliance and World Peace Foundation, Accountability for Starvation Crimes: Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 3

August 2011.⁹⁸³ Following a series of surrendering negotiations, the SAA captured some of the rebel-held neighbourhoods of Homs and a mass displacement took place.⁹⁸⁴ In May 2017, the SAA captured the totality of Homs city and hundreds of rebels and their family members were evacuated.⁹⁸⁵

The rebels in the northern rural part of Homs governorate continued to target neighbourhoods in Homs city and some villages with rockets and explosive ammunition in attacks that incurred many civilian deaths. In April 2018, the SAA launched a large-scale military operation in northern rural Homs which forced the rebel groups in the region to either negotiate their exit to northern Syria or to reconcile with the GoS. An agreement was reached, whereby GoS forces and Russian military police entered northern rural Homs on 2 May 2018 and buses evacuated 26 550 people (rebels and their families) from the region to northern Syria.⁹⁸⁶

According to COAR, the reconciled northern rural Homs witnessed various violations to the reconciliation agreement by GoS forces. Reportedly, hundreds of people were arrested, public services were neglected, and the levels of poverty and unemployment have remained high since the end of the siege.⁹⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the pro-GoS website, Homs News, listed a few developmental projects in Homs governorate by the GoS which included the decentralisation of the regional estate offices in Al-Qusayr, Al-Maghrim, Shin, and Tal Kalakh, the rehabilitation of the electrical grid in northern rural Homs, and the opening of conciliation and personal status courts in Kherbet Al-Tin and Al-Qaryatein.⁹⁸⁸

With regards to territorial control, Liveuamap showed that as of March 2020, the totality of Homs governorate is controlled by the GoS forces with the exception of Al-Tanf region and some small ISIL pockets scattered in the Syrian Desert.⁹⁸⁹ Below is a description of the actors present on the ground in Homs governorate and their places of deployment where information is available.

2.6.2.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

According to Gregory Waters from the International Review, the following SAA units were deployed in Homs governorate, with the name of the unit and the last known date of deployment (as of 17 March 2020):

Republican Guard:

- Aleppo Special Tasks Battalion/Yiman Bilouni Group – Sukhna, Homs – 1 June 2019;

2nd Corps:

- 1st Division - 320th Battalion – Homs Province – 24 January 2019;

3rd Corps:

- 11th Division: Unknown Reserve unit – Homs Province – 17 June 2019; 60th Brigade/unknown unit – Palmyra, Homs – 26 June 2019; 135th Artillery Regiment – Humaymah, Homs – 8 November 2018;
- 18th Division: Unknown unit – Homs Province – 29 November 2019; 167th Brigade – T3, Homs – 10 June 2019;

⁹⁸³ HRW, "We Live as in War": Crackdowns on Protestors in the Governorate of Homs, Syria, 11 November 2011, [url](#)

⁹⁸⁴ Global Rights Compliance and World Peace Foundation, Accountability for Starvation Crimes: Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁹⁸⁵ Reuters, Syrian rebels leave last opposition district in Homs, 21 May 2017, [url](#); France 24, Assad regime regains total control of Syrian city of Homs, 21 May 2017, [url](#)

⁹⁸⁶ Homs News, بانوراما الأحداث التي مرت بها حمص عام 2018 م [Panorama of the main events that Homs witnessed in 2018], 31 December 2018, [url](#)

⁹⁸⁷ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), p. 13

⁹⁸⁸ Homs News, بانوراما الأحداث التي مرت بها حمص عام 2018 م [Panorama of the main events that Homs witnessed in 2018], 31 December 2018, [url](#)

⁹⁸⁹ Based on reading of the following map: Liveuamap, Syria, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

5th Corps:

- 3rd Brigade/Unknown unit – Shayrat Airbase – 3 August 2019;

Border Guard:

- 6th Regiment – Tanf, Homs – 22 January 2019;
- 8th Regiment/866th Battalion – Tanf, Homs – 27 November 2019.⁹⁹⁰

In addition to these Divisions and Brigades, the Turkey-based Qasioun news agency reported on 19 April 2019 that 13 members of the 14th Division were killed in an ambush by ISIL in Al-Sukhna Badiya in eastern Homs.⁹⁹¹

According to an ISW report published in 2013, the 3rd Corps' 11th Division was headquartered in Homs governorate and was in charge of securing central Syria.⁹⁹² This was corroborated by a Middle East Institute's report published on 18 July 2019⁹⁹³ which stated that the 11th Division was mandated to secure central Homs, and that by mid-war, it 'was almost fully committed to Homs and Deir ez-Zor'.⁹⁹⁴ In addition to the 11th Division, the 60th and 67th Brigades as well as the 135th Regiment were reportedly present in the eastern parts of Homs governorate, around Palmyra in particular. Moreover, the Special Forces' 54th Regiment which suffered heavy losses was incorporated into the Air Intelligence based in Homs city. Furthermore, a significant number of reconciled combatants were incorporated into the 5th Corps, 4th Brigade, and were deployed in the desert around Palmyra with minimalistic training and equipment and, according to a source interviewed by the Middle East Institute in July 2019, have been suffering severe losses.⁹⁹⁵

In addition to the SAA, other state actors were reportedly present in Homs governorate. Those included local government police which was allegedly managed by the Russian Hmeimim Air Base. The GoS security apparatus was reportedly present in the governorate, and it included Air Force Intelligence, Military Security, and Political Security. According to the source, the security agencies were responsible for 'manning checkpoints, conscripting individuals into the SAA, and detaining individuals wanted for their military service'. They also had poor reputation amongst locals.⁹⁹⁶ Moreover, sources referred to the Tiger Forces as 'a collection of local militias, originating from Hama, Homs, and the coast [...] often founded and commanded by prominent Alawite families'.⁹⁹⁷

Pro-government militias

In an interview with EASO on 14 November 2019, Christopher Kozak from the ISW stated that together with the Syrian Coast, western Homs had 'one of the densest concentrations of pro-regime paramilitary groups in Syria, often to the detriment of the SAA'.⁹⁹⁸

According to COAR, the NDF was present in Homs governorate and comprised former opposition militants who went through the reconciliation process and members of prominent families from northern rural Homs. Reportedly, the NDF has become the main security actor in northern rural Homs and it constituted several groups affiliated with different state security agencies:

⁹⁹⁰ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹¹ Qasioun News, قتل و جرحى لقوات النظام في حمص [Deaths and Injuries among Regime Forces in Homs], 19 April 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹² ISW, The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle, February 2013, [url](#), p. 9

⁹⁹³ The author outlined the methodology used to collect information as follows: "All information comes from multiple corroborating [social media] posts, as well as an interview with a Syrian loyalist connected to the military. As with any project of this scale, there are bound to be omissions. Some units are still in flux, moving between divisions, or in the process of being resurrected. Therefore, the following sections should be viewed as a working guide for the general state of the SAA today."

⁹⁹⁴ Middle East Institute, The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹⁵ Middle East Institute, The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹⁶ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), pp. 40, 44

⁹⁹⁷ Waters, G., Tiger Forces, Part 1: Crimes of the "Cheetah" Groups, International Review, 23 July 2018, [url](#)

⁹⁹⁸ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

- Military Security-linked NDF: reconciled fighters of Jaysh Al-Tawheed – Mainly present in Talbiseh – Tasked to pursue conscription evaders – allegedly linked to the Russians.
- Air Force Intelligence-linked NDF: former opposition fighters and volunteers from Al-Dali family – tasked to detain individuals for intelligence purposes.
- Tiger Forces-linked NDF: former opposition militants and members of notable northern rural Homs families – Present across northern rural Homs with a concentration in Rastan.⁹⁹⁹

The pro-opposition website Euphrates Post stated that Al-Rida Forces was formed by Iran in 2011 as part of the popular committees in the Shia-majority villages and neighbourhoods of the Homs governorate. According to the source, the militia comprised 21 000 fighters, mainly Syrian Shiites, and was based in around 50 villages in rural Homs including Um Al-Amad and Um Jneinat. Reportedly, its leadership included leaders from the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian experts. The militia had headquarters and conscription offices in Al-Hazmiya, Al-Sabtiya, Al-Mazra'a, Al-Zarzouriya, Al-Abbasiya, and Al-Qaryatein and has a training centre in Al-Qusayr.¹⁰⁰⁰

A report published in June 2019 by the NGO Pro-Justice provided a comprehensive list of the Iran-backed militias in Syria. The list included the following groups that were allegedly active in Homs governorate when the report was published:

- Battalions of Imam Ali – PMU-affiliated – around 1 000 fighters – Syrian Desert;
- Battalions of Hezbollah Al-Nujaba'a, Battalions of Sayyed Al-Shuhada'a, and Harakat Al-Abdal – between 1 500 and 1 700 fighters each – Syrian Desert;
- Sayyeda Ruqayya and Force 313 – affiliated with the Lebanese Hezbollah – between 150 and 200 fighters each – Syrian Desert;
- Imam Reza Brigade – Comprised of Syrian and Lebanese Alawites – around 2 000 militants – eastern rural Homs;
- Ousud Wadi Al-Nasara Brigade – Iran-backed – around 700 Christian fighters – Homs governorate;
- Soqour Al-Sahra'a – Alawite fighters – rural Homs and Aleppo.¹⁰⁰¹

Additionally, Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies listed Thul Faqar Brigade as one of the Iraqi militias that operated in Homs.¹⁰⁰²

With regards to Hezbollah, a report dated March 2019 stated that the Lebanese group reduced its presence in Syria, but maintained bases in different parts of the country including Homs governorate.¹⁰⁰³ This was corroborated by USDOS which stated that Hezbollah deployed fighters around Damascus and Homs.¹⁰⁰⁴

2.6.2.2 Anti-government militias

Media sources reported on attacks that targeted GoS headquarters and posts in Homs governorate, carried out by the Resistance Brigades (Saraya Al-Mukawama). According to Zaman Alwasl, a 'newly-formed rebel group' in Homs governorate attacked two posts run by the Syrian Military Police and the

⁹⁹⁹ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), pp. 40, 44

¹⁰⁰⁰ Euphrates Post (The), "ميليشيا الرضا" أكبر الفصائل العسكرية "الشيعية" في سوريا [“Militia Al-Rida” the Biggest “Shiite” Armed Group in Syria], 1 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰¹ Pro-Justice, مفرخة إيران في سوريا: الميليشيات الطائفية: [Sectarian Militias: Iran's Hatchery in Syria], 10 June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰² Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies, الدور والمستقبل: الميليشيات العراقية في سوريا: [Iraqi Militias in Syria: Role and Future], 1 April 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁰⁰³ Alami, M., Can Assad's Demobilization, Demilitarization, and Rehabilitation Strategy Actually Consolidate Syria's Paramilitary Forces?, 6 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰⁴ USDOS, 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 14

State Security in Al-Rastan on 27 October 2019.¹⁰⁰⁵ Another attack was reported by the opposition website, Nedaa Syria, on 20 November 2019, whereby the Brigades ‘targeted two buses carrying members of the security forces of the GoS in the city of “Talbisah” north of Homs’. Reportedly, the Resistance Brigades stated its unwillingness to escalate ‘for the safety of people’.¹⁰⁰⁶

2.6.2.3 ISIL

Despite its defeat in Syria in March 2019,¹⁰⁰⁷ ISIL still maintains pockets in Homs governorate.¹⁰⁰⁸ ISIL’s ‘strong presence’ is concentrated in Abu Rujmain mountain to the north of Palmyra, which has caves that enable ISIL fighters to hide.¹⁰⁰⁹ According to the BBC, ISIL fighters continued to launch sporadic attacks on the SAA and on Russian targets in Homs.¹⁰¹⁰ Moreover, a Carter Center report covering the period 25 November – 8 December 2019 stated several incidents of ISIL activity in Waer Dam Road, Saalu Desert and Al-Sukhna town in Homs governorate.¹⁰¹¹ AA estimated that around 1 500 ISIL fighters operated from the Syrian Desert in scattered groups.¹⁰¹²

2.6.2.4 Iran

COAR stated that there was a limited Iranian presence in Al-Ghantu and Al-Dar Al-Kabira in Homs governorate. Reportedly, Iranian military forces in the area operated as ‘advisors for the Shia and Alawite communities adjacent to NRH [Northern Rural Homs]’.¹⁰¹³ Moreover, an ISW map published on 2 April 2018 indicated that the IRGC or proxies set up bases in Palmyra, Shayrat Airbase, T4 Airbase, Al-Qusayr, and Homs City at the time.¹⁰¹⁴ Enab Baladi referred to the T4 airport in Al-Shaerat as Iranian military bases in Homs governorate.¹⁰¹⁵ Moreover, in a report published in January 2020, International Crisis Group stated that ‘Iranian and Iran-backed forces are deployed in close proximity to the al-Tanf desert outpost, which sits on the strategically significant Baghdad-Damascus highway’.¹⁰¹⁶ According to Zaman Alwasl, Iran has been reinforcing its outposts in the regions of Palmyra and Al-Sukhna in Homs governorate as a result of the redeployment of government forces to Idlib.¹⁰¹⁷ In January 2020, ten members of the IRGC were killed and injured in Al-Sukhna in eastern Homs in an IED attack by ISIL.¹⁰¹⁸

¹⁰⁰⁵ Zaman Al-Wasl, New rebel group hits regime security in Homs, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰⁶ Syria Call, “Resistance Brigades” strikes the Assad regime in Homs and threatens to escalate, 20 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰⁷ Guardian (The), ISIS defeated, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces announce, 23 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰⁸ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 9 [Interview with an International Security Organisation]

¹⁰⁰⁹ Chatham House, Pro-regime Militias and ISIS Militants Stand Against the Return of Palmyra’s People, September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰¹⁰ BBC News, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: What his death means for IS in Syria, 27 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰¹¹ Carter Center (The), Two Week Conflict Summary, 25 November – 8 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁰¹² AA, سوريا.. مقتل 35 من جنود النظام في كمين لداعش ببادية حمص: عناصر التنظيم اشتبكت مع قوات النظام المؤلفة من الجيش، والمجموعات الإرهابية المدعومة إيرانيًا [Syria.. Death of 35 of Regime’s Soldiers in an ISIL Ambush in Homs Badiya: ISIL elements clashed with Regime Forces Composed of the Syrian Army and Iran-Backed Terrorist Groups], 20 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰¹³ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), p. 44

¹⁰¹⁴ ISW, Posture of Syrian Regime and Allies: April 2, 2018, April 2018, [url](#)

¹⁰¹⁵ Enab Baladi, A maneuver between two allies: With whom does al-Assad have interest?, 30 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰¹⁶ International Crisis Group, Al-Tanf, Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰¹⁷ Zaman Alwasl, الميليشيات الإيرانية تعزز مواقعها في تدمر والسخنة [Homs.. Iranian Militias Reinforce Their Outposts in Palmyra and Al-Sukhna], 30 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰¹⁸ Baladi News, عشرة قتلى من "الثوري الإيراني" شرقي حمص [10 deaths among the “IRGC” in Eastern Homs, 3 January 2020, [url](#)

2.6.2.5 Russia

Russian Military Police held a limited presence in northern rural Homs, with an insignificant role as of July 2019.¹⁰¹⁹ According to COAR, the presence of the Russian Military Police was to guarantee the reconciliation agreement but ‘they have since largely withdrawn and only a small number now remain’.¹⁰²⁰ Nonetheless, Nedaa Syria reported on 22 September 2019 that 15 Russian and Syrian troops were killed and injured in an ISIL ambush in Homs governorate.¹⁰²¹

2.6.2.6 US

In a response to envoys of UN Member States, the Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UN Office in New York, Bashar Al-Jaafari, stated in January 2020 that the US ‘occupies al-Tanf region’ and ‘protects and sponsors a terrorist group called “Maghawer al-Cham” who attacked al-Sweida city two years ago and killed hundreds of civilians’.¹⁰²² According to International Crisis Group, the US established a military base in Al-Tanf in 2016 which was used as a ‘launching point’ for operations against ISIL and to train Syrian anti-jihadist opposition groups. Reportedly, the base ensured the creation of a 55-km de-confliction zone ‘beyond which lie an array of forces described as either ‘pro-regime’ or ‘Iran-backed’ that have set up checkpoints in the area.’¹⁰²³

2.6.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

Information about incidents in Homs city was scarce. However, the Carter Center reported between March and April 2019 on numerous incidents involving ISIL and the SAA/pro-government forces, mainly in the eastern parts of the governorate. Such incidents included ambushes¹⁰²⁴ and IED attacks.¹⁰²⁵

Based on interviews with Rami Abdurrahman (SOHR), Christopher Kozak (ISW) and COAR Global, a report published by the DIS/DRC in February 2019 stated that there were clashes between GoS forces and pro-government militias for economic interests and conflicting agendas. Reportedly, in some governorates including Homs, the clashes escalated, and machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) were used causing injuries among civilians.¹⁰²⁶ Moreover, the report stated that the north-eastern parts of Homs, bordering Idlib, were ‘most exposed to shelling exchange between opposition groups and government forces’.¹⁰²⁷

Additionally, anti-government graffiti were reportedly found in Al-Rastan town in northern rural Homs in June 2019. The graffiti called for the people to ‘continue the revolution’ and to ‘overthrow the government’.¹⁰²⁸ This incident was the first of its kind since Al-Rastan was recaptured by GoS in May

¹⁰¹⁹ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), p. 44

¹⁰²⁰ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), p. 40

¹⁰²¹ Nedaa Syria, Russian Troops and Forces of the Assad regime been ambushed in Homs, 22 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰²² SANA, Al-Jaafari calls for lifting economic, coercive measures imposed on the Syrian People, 29 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰²³ International Crisis Group, Al-Tanf, Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰²⁴ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 18 – 24 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

¹⁰²⁵ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 15 – 21 April 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

¹⁰²⁶ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria. Security Situation in Damascus. Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁰²⁷ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria. Security Situation in Damascus. Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁰²⁸ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 3 – 9 June 2019, [url](#), p. 6; Nedaa Syria, سنعيد سيرتها الأولى ... حمص تتوعد [We will return it to its former condition... Homs threatens Assad regime again], 6 June 2019, [url](#)

2018.¹⁰²⁹ In October 2019, the Resistance Brigades in Homs carried out its first attack against government forces in Al-Rastan.¹⁰³⁰

Sources reported on the seizing of weapons and munitions and on a state of lawlessness in Homs countryside. In July 2019, SANA reported that the Homs Criminal Security branch seized weapons, munitions and cars in a village in Homs governorate. Reportedly, the weapons included guns, RPGs, and bullets.¹⁰³¹ In November 2019, the Criminal Security branch of Homs also seized weapons and munitions hidden in a farm in Kafr Laha. Reportedly, some of the seized items were modified to be used as IEDs.¹⁰³² The pro-opposition website, Step News, reported in April 2019 that in the western countryside of Homs (particularly in the villages of Ram Jabal, Al-Dalbuz, Al-Zarzouriyeh, Al-Mazra'a, and Um Hartein), there was a prevalent state of lawlessness under the control of Hezbollah-backed Shiite militias. According to the source, those militias were involved in fuel and livestock smuggling activities between Syria and Lebanon.¹⁰³³ SOHR reported on a state of total chaos and lawlessness in Al-Rastan which is, de facto, under the control of the IRGC. The report added that incidents of kidnapping, looting, and extortion increased notably in the city.¹⁰³⁴ Moreover, an article by RT Arabic published in March 2019 stated that four civilians were shot dead by unidentified militants in Al-Sawaneh region in eastern rural Homs.¹⁰³⁵

The CoI flagged 'a climate of fear' in northern rural Homs created by the GoS 'through a campaign of arbitrary arrests and detentions'. Such state practices affected civilians who 'began witnessing a flagrant absence of the rule of law and arbitrary use of State power reminiscent of the conditions that sparked this horrific conflict in the first place'.¹⁰³⁶

With regards to governance, COAR pointed out that 'formal local governance bodies in NRH [northern rural Homs] have low capacity and low political autonomy', with the centre of decision making being in Homs city.¹⁰³⁷ Moreover, security and intelligence agencies together with GoS-affiliated militias set up checkpoints aimed at monitoring civilians and conscripting individuals eligible for military service. According to the report, 'civilians have cited increasingly frequent harassment, theft and tariff charges at checkpoints'.¹⁰³⁸

The Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity stated in a July 2019 report that all the FSA affiliates in northern rural Homs were forcibly recruited by the GoS to fight in eastern Homs, despite the guarantees of Russia that they would be exempted from recruitment for at least six months.¹⁰³⁹ The report added that dozens of those who refused to report to the SAA were detained and tens of those who were recruited from Al-Rastan were killed in the battles in northern Hama.¹⁰⁴⁰

¹⁰²⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 3 – 9 June 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁰³⁰ Zaman Al-Wasl, New rebel group hits regime security in Homs, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰³¹ SANA, ضبط كميات من الأسلحة والذخائر في ريف حمص [Seizing of weapons and munition in Homs countryside], 14 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰³² Alkhabar, فرع الأمن الجنائي بحمص يضبط أسلحة وذخائر مخبأة بقرية كفر لاه [The Criminal Security Branch of Homs Seizes Weapons and Munition Hidden in Kafr Laha Village], 10 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰³³ Step News, دويلة "شيوعية" لا تنقطع عنها المحرقات على عكس مناطق النظام [Western Homs.. a "Shiite" State with Constant Fuel supply, unlike the Regime-held Areas], 14 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰³⁴ SOHR, فلتان أمني وفوضى عارمة وعمليات خطف و قتل و ابتزاز تشهدها مدينة الرستن الخاضعة لنفوذ "الحرس الثوري الإيراني" شمال مدينة حمص [A State of Lawlessness, Total Chaos, Abductions, and Extortion in Al-Rastan Town Controlled by the Iranian Republican Guard in northern Homs], 3 October 2019 [url](#)

¹⁰³⁵ RT Arabic, مقتل 4 مدنيين برصاص مجهولين في ريف حمص الشرقي [4 Civilians were shot dead by unidentified individuals in eastern rural Homs], 16 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰³⁶ UN Human Rights Council, UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Continued hostilities and lawlessness countrywide render safe and sustainable returns impossible, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰³⁷ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁰³⁸ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), pp. 40, 42

¹⁰³⁹ Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, Situation Report: Reconciling with death, disappearance and fear, 23 July 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁰⁴⁰ Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, Situation Report: Reconciling with death, disappearance and fear, 23 July 2019, [url](#), pp. 3, 5

The CoI reported in August 2019 that Israel ‘continued to attack alleged Iranian and Hezbollah targets in the Syrian Arab Republic’, and that in May and June 2019, the Israeli Air Force targeted pro-government positions in Homs and southern Quneitra. According to the report, Israeli air strikes on Homs, Rural Damascus and Damascus that were carried out on 1 July 2019 allegedly resulted in deaths and injuries among civilians.¹⁰⁴¹ Several media sources reported on Israeli air strikes that took place between July 2019 and January 2020 and targeted positions in different places in Syria including Homs governorate.¹⁰⁴²

Reporting on the period between July 2019 and January 2020, the CoI stated that ‘sporadic clashes between the Syrian army and ISIL terrorists were also ongoing around Sukhnah and Tadmur (Homs Governorate) and had a significant impact on the security and freedom of movement of civilians’.¹⁰⁴³ According to the Carter Center, ‘ISIS activity in central and southern Syria has become common in 2019’.¹⁰⁴⁴ In its report covering the period 28 October to 3 November 2019, the Carter Center stated that ‘ISIS activity remains elevated despite several GoS operations against ISIS in recent months’.¹⁰⁴⁵ USCENTCOM also reported on ISIL attacks against GoS forces in Homs governorate that had ‘varying degrees of success’.¹⁰⁴⁶

2.6.3.1 Security incidents

According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 69 security incidents recorded in Homs governorate, of whom 33 were coded as battles, 27 explosions/remote violence and 9 incidents of violence against civilians.

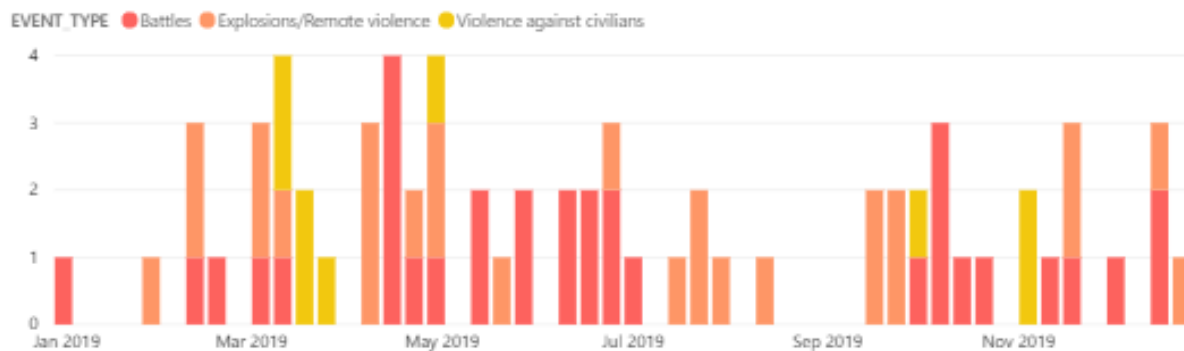


Figure 31. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Homs governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data¹⁰⁴⁷

¹⁰⁴¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/42/51), 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁰⁴² Times of Israel (The), Syria says 4 killed as Israel hits targets in Homs and Damascus in major strike, 1 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria war: Israeli ‘hits Iranian targets in Homs and Damascus’, 1 July 2019, [url](#); Fox News, Israel airstrikes target Iran-linked military base in Syria, state media reports, 2 December 2019, [url](#); Newsweek, Syria Blames Israel for Airstrikes as Rockets Hit Base with U.S. Forces in Iraq, 14 January 2020, [url](#); Haaretz, Three Said Killed in Israeli Strike on Iranian Base in Syria, 15 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 5 para 16

¹⁰⁴⁴ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 17 – 23 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁰⁴⁵ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 28 October – 3 November 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁰⁴⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 39

¹⁰⁴⁷ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

Homs governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Al Makhrim	-	-	1
Al Qusayr	-	3	
Ar Rastan	3	-	4
Homs	4	9	2
Tadmor	26	14	2
Tall Kalakh	-	1	-
Total	33	27	9

Figure 32. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Homs governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data.

Most security incidents recorded by ACLED in 2019 were in the districts of Tadmor and Homs.

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 10 security incidents of which 4 were coded as battles, 4 explosions/remote violence and 2 incidents of violence against civilians. Most of them were recorded in Homs district.

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Homs governorate in 2019 included the following (grouped according to the regions in which they occurred):

Homs Desert

Several sources reported on ISIL military activity in the eastern desert region of Homs governorate in 2019. Such activities included ambushes, direct skirmishes and the use of IEDs against pro-GoS forces, but there was no mention of civilian casualties in the outcome of those activities. Following are the major incidents that took place in Homs desert:

- On 24 March 2019, ISIL ambushed a Syrian military patrol in the vicinity of Palmyra.¹⁰⁴⁸
- On 17 April 2019, 14 SAA soldiers and one Hezbollah member were killed in an ISIL ambush in the Kowm village area, north of Sokhneh.¹⁰⁴⁹
- On 20 April 2019, AA reported that 35 SAA soldiers were killed in an ISIL attack in Homs desert.¹⁰⁵⁰
- In the second half of April, at least eight major ISIL attacks on government patrols were recorded.¹⁰⁵¹
- On 2 May 2019, the SAA supported by the NDF and Hezbollah started an anti-ISIL operation in the area stretching from Abu Kamal to Al-Tanf.¹⁰⁵²
- On 15 and 17 May 2019, 20 pro-GoS soldiers were killed in ISIL ambushes in the vicinities of Sawane and Khneifis phosphate mines.¹⁰⁵³
- On 21 and 24 May 2019, ISIL elements ambushed a SAA patrol in the east of Al-Sukhna and near the T3 Pumping Station near Palmyra city.¹⁰⁵⁴

¹⁰⁴⁸ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 18 – 24 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

¹⁰⁴⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 15 – 21 April 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

¹⁰⁵⁰ سوريا.. مقتل 35 من جنود النظام في كمين لداعش ببادية حمص: عناصر التنظيم اشتبكت مع قوات النظام المؤلفة من الجيش، و المجموعات، AA, [Syria.. Death of 35 of Regime's Soldiers in an ISIL Ambush in Homs Badiya: ISIL elements clashed with Regime Forces Composed of the Syrian Army and Iran-Backed Terrorist Groups], 20 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵¹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 22 – 28 April 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰⁵² Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 29 April – 5 May 2019, [url](#), P. 5

¹⁰⁵³ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 13 – 19 May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰⁵⁴ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 20 – 26 May 2019, [url](#), p. 4

- On 14 July 2019, an explosive attack damaged a pipeline to the Sha'er/Ibla Gas Fields. In the wake of 'increased ISIS activity in central areas of the country in recent months', government forces launched 'clearance operations' against ISIL in the desert area between Al-Sukhna and Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁰⁵⁵
- In the third week of July 2019, ISIL carried out one IED attack against the GoS-affiliated Palestinian Liberation Army on the Palmyra-Homs road.¹⁰⁵⁶
- Between 4 and 10 November 2019, clashes between ISIL and NDF in the area of T2 Pumping Station and Arwad Dam, as well as SAA airstrikes against ISIL positions around Al-Sukhna and in the Syrian Desert were documented.¹⁰⁵⁷
- Between 24 November and 8 December 2019, an IED attack against a SAA military bus in the Waer Dam, a landmine explosion in the Saalu desert, the kidnapping of two SAA soldiers near Al-Sukhna town, and ambushes against government patrols near the Arwad Dam, and the T2 and T3 Pumping Stations were reported.¹⁰⁵⁸
- Between 30 December 2019 and 5 January 2020, multiple ISIL raids against GoS forces near Al-Sukhna were reported.¹⁰⁵⁹

Northern rural Homs

- On 26 and 27 February 2019, the Syrian security apparatus arrested more than 35 children/students in Al-Rastan, in the wake of pictures shared on social media, suggesting the existence of Ahrar Al-Sham group in the region recaptured by the GoS in May 2018.¹⁰⁶⁰
- On 20 November 2019, the pro-opposition news agency, Nedaa Syria, reported that the Resistance Brigades in Homs attacked two buses that were transporting security forces agents in Talbiseh. Reportedly, five agents were killed in the attack, and nine injured.¹⁰⁶¹

2.6.3.2 Civilian fatalities

In 2019, sources documented between 70 (SNHR data)¹⁰⁶² and 105 (VDC data)¹⁰⁶³ civilian fatalities in Homs governorate. Most civilian fatalities were recorded during January – March 2019.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 8 – 14 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁰⁵⁶ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 15 – 21 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁰⁵⁷ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 4 – 10 November 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁰⁵⁸ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 25 November – 8 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4; Almasdar News, ISIS suffers heavy losses in disastrous attack against Syrian Army troops, 5 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 30 December 2019 – 5 January 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰⁶⁰ STJ, أسباب مجهولة [Arrests among children/students in Homs governorate for unknown reasons], 7 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶¹ Nidaa Syria, "سرايا المقاومة" تعلن توجيه ضربة عسكرية جديدة لنظام الأسد في حمص وتوعد بالتصعيد [“Resistance Brigades” announces militarily targeting Assad regime in Homs and threatens to escalate], 20 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶² Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶³ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	16	12
February	29	14
March	18	11
April	4	10
May	4	4
June	9	6
July	6	5
August	2	-
September	1	3
October	6	1
November	7	2
December	3	2
Total	105	70

Figure 33. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Homs governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

2.6.3.3 Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

Infrastructure damage

A report published in 2014 by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and UN Habitat stated that ‘Homs Governorate is one of the mostly impacted amongst all Governorates, both in terms of damage to infrastructure, and strains on areas receiving IDPs’.¹⁰⁶⁴ The source added that the city of Homs was ‘one of the most heavily impacted cities in Syria’ when compared to Hama, Aleppo, and Rural Damascus. The source estimated that in May 2014, 96 700 housing units were not habitable, and that 26 neighbourhoods out of the city’s 36 neighbourhoods were ‘nonfunctional, either partially or totally’.¹⁰⁶⁵ A satellite detected damage density image (of April 2014) provided by a REACH and UNITAR report showed that the mostly impacted neighbourhoods of Homs city were Jouret Ash-Shayyah, Qosour, Boghtasiyyah, Khalidiyah, Bayada, Deir Ba’alba Shamali and Janoubi, Sabil, Karm Shamsham, Hameidiyyeh, Bab Ad-Dahab, Bab As-siba’, Bab Houd, Mahatta, Karm Az-Zeitoun, Arman, Wadi Ath-Thahab, and Baba Amr.¹⁰⁶⁶ A World Bank report published in 2020 estimated that Homs city had approximately 41 941 buildings, of which 7 911 were partially damaged and 2 708 destroyed. According to the report, ‘the damage ratio in Homs has remained practically unchanged when compared with 2014 data’ due to the bulldozing of ‘heavily damaged structures’ and in part because of additional destruction that has occurred during this period’. Karm Shamsham and Deir Ba’alba neighbourhoods suffered total destruction during the conflict.¹⁰⁶⁷ Furthermore, a Reach and UNITAR report published in March 2019 indicated that in Homs city, 3 082 buildings were destroyed, 5 750 suffered severe damage, and 4 946 moderate damage.¹⁰⁶⁸ International Crisis Group stated in a February 2020 report that parts of Homs, ‘are inhospitable for returnees due to heavy destruction’.¹⁰⁶⁹

With regards to the damage caused to the road networks, Homs governorate is one of the eight Syrian governorates that ‘still present damage in roads and bridges’. Reportedly, 27 % of the total damage

¹⁰⁶⁴ SDC/UN Habitat, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁰⁶⁵ SDC/ UN Habitat, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁰⁶⁶ REACH/UNITAR, Syria: Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 42

¹⁰⁶⁷ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 109

¹⁰⁶⁸ REACH/UNITAR, Syria: Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 44

¹⁰⁶⁹ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 22

to road networks is in Homs governorate, 83 % of which is in Homs city.¹⁰⁷⁰ Reportedly, more than 750 km of the governorate's nearly 1 100 km of roads were affected by the conflict, nevertheless 'the situation is improving, with about 365 km of roads cleared since January 2017'.¹⁰⁷¹ According to COAR, the focus of the GoS and prominent local families after the reconciliation phase was on repairing the most important damaged roads in Homs governorate. However, only the M5 and routes that linked wealthier urban areas were repaired, while roads elsewhere remained either in poor condition or impassable. Moreover, public transport in northern rural Homs is limited and private transportation is expensive due to increased fuel prices in Syria.¹⁰⁷² According to the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and UN Habitat report of 2014, rail roads suffered substantial damage and have been non-operational since 2011.¹⁰⁷³ No information regarding the current condition of the railway system in Homs governorate could be retrieved.

The World Bank noted that despite the 'consistent availability of potable water' in Homs, 'water quantity has been less than fully sufficient to address household needs'. Moreover, disruptions to sewerage services were reported, but allegedly, 'WASH infrastructure in Homs is undergoing extensive reconstruction and repair'.¹⁰⁷⁴ Furthermore, the pro-opposition Qasioun News Agency claimed in November 2019 that the residents of Homs city reported on power cuts that reached 12 hours a day.¹⁰⁷⁵ In an interview with the radio station Sham FM on 5 January 2020, the director of the electricity department in Homs allegedly stated that the current power outage hours in the city are 16.¹⁰⁷⁶ A report by the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity stated that 74 % of the IDPs who returned to Homs were requested by the government to pay for 'non-existent services', such as electricity and municipal fees, 'for all periods when these areas were out of its control, or when the returnees were out of the area'.¹⁰⁷⁷

Additionally, sources reported on attacks that targeted natural resources facilities in Homs governorate. The ISW reported that between 10 and 23 July 2019, ISIL derailed a train carrying phosphate near Khneifis and likely attacked a natural gas pipeline in the vicinity of the Sha'er Gas Fields.¹⁰⁷⁸ The attack on the phosphate train was also reported by Step News Agency which added that casualties among the train crew were recorded.¹⁰⁷⁹ Moreover, SANA reported that on 21 December 2019, Homs Refinery, the Gas Factory of the southern Central Region, and the Ar-Rayyan Gas Station were targeted by 'simultaneous terrorist attacks' that caused damage to production units.¹⁰⁸⁰ SOHR reported on the same incidents and added that ISIL attacked a gas station located 12 km off the Hil Gas Field in Homs Desert which resulted in the death of 13 SAA soldiers and four civilian employees in the station.¹⁰⁸¹ The pro-opposition Euphrates Post reported that on

¹⁰⁷⁰ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 161

¹⁰⁷¹ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 162

¹⁰⁷² COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), pp. 24-25

¹⁰⁷³ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC and UN Habitat, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁰⁷⁴ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 177

¹⁰⁷⁵ Qasioun News, حمص... تقنين الكهرباء يتجاوز 12 ساعة والقادم أسوأ [Homs... power cut exceeds 12 hours and it may get worse], 28 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷⁶ Sham FM, حمص.. التقنين المطبق 4 ساعات قطع مقابل 2 تزويد [In Homs.. The applied schedule is 4 hours off to 2 hours on], 5 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷⁷ Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁰⁷⁸ ISW, Syria Situation Report: July 10 – 23, 2019, 25 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷⁹ Step News Agency, عبوة ناسفة تضرب قطار نقل الفوسفات شرقي حمص [IED hits a Phosphate cargo train in eastern Homs], 21 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸⁰ SANA, السيطرة على الحريق جراء الاعتداء الإرهابي في مصفاة حمص و البدء بأعمال الصيانة في المنشآت المتضررة [Fire caused by the terrorist attack that targeted Homs refinery brought under control and maintenance starts], 21 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸¹ SOHR, طائرات مجهولة تستهدف مصفاة حمص و حقول للغاز بعد 24 ساعة من هجوم تنظيم "الدولة الإسلامية" على محطة غاز ببادية حمص, [Unidentified airplanes targets Homs refinery and gas fields 24 hours after ISIL launched an attack on a gas station in the Badiya of Homs], 21 December 2019, [url](#)

20 December 2019, ISIL captured the Arak Oil Field in eastern Homs following violent clashes with the SAA and affiliated forces. ISIL then executed the civilian employees of the field.¹⁰⁸²

Remnants of war

Sources also reported on several deaths among civilians caused by landmines and explosive remnants of war in Homs governorate. Homs News listed around 20 deaths and injuries, mainly civilians, in explosions of war remnants in different parts of the governorate.¹⁰⁸³ According to Mine Action Review, GoS and Russian army engineers conducted ERW clearance in 2018 in Homs governorate. Details on the location, scope and outcome of the clearance operations was not available.¹⁰⁸⁴ In 2019, SOHR stated on 14 August that two children were killed and three injured in a landmine explosion in Al-Hosh village in northern rural Homs.¹⁰⁸⁵ The same source reported that one child was killed and another wounded when a landmine exploded in a sports hall in Wadi Ath-Thahab quarter in Homs City. It added that between February and September 2019, explosions of remnants of war resulted in the death of 141 people, including 57 women and 39 children, in different parts of Syria including Homs.¹⁰⁸⁶ Finally, SANA reported in November 2019 that two civilians were killed and one injured in a mine explosion in Twinan village in the eastern countryside of Homs.¹⁰⁸⁷

2.6.3.4 Displacement and return

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and UNITAR's report dated May 2014 stated that Homs city suffered a high impact of displacement as approximately 468 000 out of 806 000 people were displaced by November 2013, of which 56 % left the city to Wadi Al-Nasara and to the governorates of Damascus, Rural Damascus and Tartous, while 44 % were displaced within the city.¹⁰⁸⁸ UNOCHA stated that in 2018, 4 000 people arrived in Homs governorate, while 24 000 departed from it, with the numbers including displacement from locations within and outside governorate. Moreover, 363 000 were categorised under 'long-term displacement'.¹⁰⁸⁹

In 2019, UNOCHA recorded around 13 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate, of whom around 7 000 were within the governorate, while the rest came mainly from Rural Damascus governorate.¹⁰⁹⁰ The highest number of IDP movements to or within Homs governorate during the year was recorded by UNOCHA in May, when it tracked '4 109 people displaced from Rukban camp in rural Damascus [some sources state that the camp is located in Homs governorate] and 2 424 people from within Homs governorate'.¹⁰⁹¹

With regards to returnees, UNOCHA recorded around 44 000 return movements to or within the governorate, of whom 23 000 were within the governorate and the rest came mostly from Rural Damascus, Hama and Tartous governorates.¹⁰⁹²

¹⁰⁸² Euphrates Post (The), *تنظيم الدولة يسيطر على حقل نفطي شرقي حمص و يعدم بعض عامله* [ISIL captures an oil field in eastern Homs and executes some of the employees], 20 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸³ Homs News, *بانوراما الأحداث التي مرت بها حمص عام 2018 م* [Panorama of the main events that Homs witnessed in 2018], 31 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸⁴ Mine Action Review, Syria. Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants, 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁰⁸⁵ SOHR, *مخلفات الحرب السورية تواصل حصدها لأرواح المدنيين و تقتل و تصيب 5 أطفال في قرية بريف حمص الشمالي* [Remnants of the Syrian war continue to reap the souls of civilians and kill and injure 5 children in a village in NRH], 14 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸⁶ SOHR, *استشهد طفل و إصابة آخر جراء انفجار لغم من مخلفات الحرب في الصالة الرياضية في مدينة حمص* [One child was martyred and another injured in the explosion of a mine, remnant of war, in the Sports Hall of Homs City], 20 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸⁷ SANA, *شهيدين مدنيان و إصابة امرأة إثر انفجار لغم من مخلفات إرهابي (داعش) بريف حمص الشرقي* [Two civilian martyrs and one woman injured in the explosion of a mine of the remnants of (Daesh) in the eastern countryside of Homs], 19 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸⁸ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC and UN Habitat, *City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment*, May 2014, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁰⁸⁹ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019*, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁰⁹⁰ UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Stock and Flow Data*, Jan – Dec, 2019, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹¹ UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements*, May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹² UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data*, Jan – Dec 2019, 24 January 2019, [url](#)

In a briefing to the Security Council, the Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator stated in January 2019 that nearly 20 000 people, i.e. some 50 % of the residents of Al-Rukban camp in eastern Homs were estimated to have left the camp in the past months.¹⁰⁹³ In a report published in December 2019, the UN Security Council stated that ‘three of the five collective shelters in Homs were evacuated to make room for potential new arrivals and to centralize service provision’. The report added that ‘former Rukban residents were consolidated in two shelters in Homs’.¹⁰⁹⁴ According to a report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published in June 2019, ‘the future of the camp remains the object of intense U.S.-Russian negotiations’, whereby Russia’s plan to repatriate the residents of the camp ‘does not offer any formal security guarantees to address residents’ concerns or fears of forced conscription, arrest, or detention’.¹⁰⁹⁵ The European Institute of Peace reported that ‘evacuees from Rukban IDP camp are being detained, ill-treated, and forced to undergo interrogation and reconciliation’. It further added that ‘fears that similar processes could be used in the event of larger-scale returns from Lebanon are rising’.¹⁰⁹⁶ The CoI noted that it received reports that at least 100 individuals evacuated from Rukban were subsequently detained by GoS forces after arrival in Homs.¹⁰⁹⁷

Media sources reported on return movements to Homs governorate. Step News Agency reported in May 2019 that Homs Governor announced the start of returns to Palmyra where buses would be put between 8 and 18 June 2019 at the disposal of citizens who would want to return.¹⁰⁹⁸ The Iranian Television, Al-Alam, reported on 30 September that more than 1 000 families returned to Al-Khalidiyah neighbourhood in Homs city.¹⁰⁹⁹ In a report published in September 2019, Chatham House stated that despite the claims of the GoS media to encourage returns to Palmyra, ‘this return is happening on a very small scale and only for those who have connections with the regime and fought alongside its national defence militias’. The report added that Palmyrene IDPs in Al-Rukban camp ‘have been arrested, some killed, while others [...] conscripted into fighting with the regime’s militias’ upon their attempt to return.¹¹⁰⁰

Reuters reported in July 2019 that only 10 % of Al-Qusayr pre-war residents were allowed to return to their town. This, according to former residents, is ‘partly because Al-Qusayr ... is now a security zone where only those with special permission can enter’.¹¹⁰¹ Al-Sharq Al-Awsat claimed in November 2019 that mainly pro-GoS refugees were allowed to return to Al-Qusayr, and that around 14 000 residents have returned since 2013.¹¹⁰²

Various sources indicated concerns and obstacles that would prevent IDPs from returning to their homes in Homs governorate. COAR, using local sources, stated that upon their return to northern rural Homs, unaccompanied women were requested to provide a proof that their ‘immediate military-aged male family members are deceased’. Reportedly, military-aged men face restrictions to their return

¹⁰⁹³ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria, 29 January 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁰⁹⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/949), 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁰⁹⁵ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (The), Rukban’s Humanitarian Purgatory, 26 June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹⁶ EIP, Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 16 para 86

¹⁰⁹⁸ Step News Agency, محافظ حمص يدعو أهالي تدمر للعودة إليها و يحدد الموعد [Homs Governor call upon the IDPs of Tadmor to return to it and sets a date], 29 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹⁹ Al-Alam TV, عودة الحياة لحي الخالدية في حمص السورية [Video.. Life Returns back to Al-Khalidiya Quarter in Syrian Homs], 30 September 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁰⁰ Chatham House, Pro-regime Militias and ISIS Militants Stand Against the Return of Palmyra’s People, September 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁰¹ Reuters, Syrians return to their home city by Lebanese border in state-organized trip, 7 July 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁰² Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, Exclusive – Syrian Refugees Trickle Back to Qusayr under Watchful Eyes of the Regime, Hezbollah, 13 November 2019, [url](#)

as they are required to obtain ‘security clearance’ from the Air Force Intelligence branch of Homs.¹¹⁰³ The report, based on local reports, added that sectarian differences in northern rural Homs might be used ‘as a basis to deny some civilians from accessing their land and using agricultural infrastructure which crosses sectarian lines’.¹¹⁰⁴

According to the International Center for Transitional Justice, sectarian violence and the subsequent lack in trust between the Sunni Muslims on the one hand, and the other religious minorities on the other ‘will make the city and the governorate one of the most challenging contexts for coexistence and return’.¹¹⁰⁵ The Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity included several testimonies in its report of October 2019 which were in-line with the findings of COAR and ICTJ.¹¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, a report of USCIRF published in April 2019 claimed that Sunni Muslim IDPs in the country suffered from marginalization and had their homes and districts redistributed to Shia fighters in parts of the country. With regards to cities including Homs, the report stated that ‘security forces have refused to grant permits for most Sunni Muslim civilians to return to their family homes’. Additionally, the report made reference to Law No. 10 of 2018 which ‘placed severe restrictions on the ability of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to reclaim family homes and properties’.¹¹⁰⁷ In its January 2019 report, the CoI noted that several incidents were documented whereby properties were seized in several governorates including Homs, pursuant to the counter-terrorism Law No. 19 of 2012.¹¹⁰⁸

¹¹⁰³ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), p. 43

¹¹⁰⁴ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), pp. 29 – 30

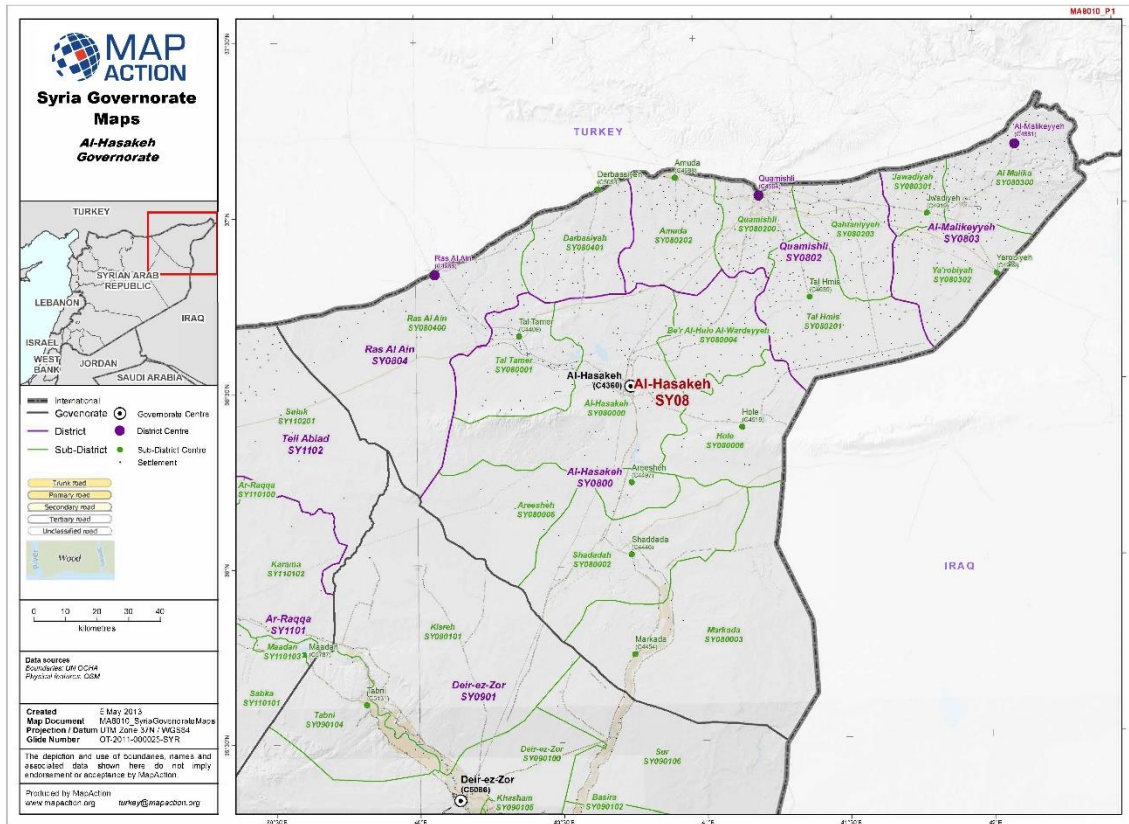
¹¹⁰⁵ ICTJ, Briefing: An Uncertain Homecoming, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 7 – 8

¹¹⁰⁶ Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad’s Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 11, 13, 34

¹¹⁰⁷ USCIRF, Syria – Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2018), April 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹¹⁰⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 16

2.7 Hasaka governorate



Map 12: © MapAction, Hasaka governorate map¹¹⁰⁹

2.7.1 General description of governorate

Al-Hasakah governorate (hereafter 'Hasaka' governorate) is located in the northeastern corner of Syria, bordering Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east and the Syrian Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor governorates to the west and southwest respectively. Its capital, Hasaka, is basically located in the middle of the governorate, on the intersection of the Khabour river and the road from al-Qamishli (bordering Turkey to the north) towards Deir Ez-Zor.¹¹¹⁰

There are four main districts in the governorate: Hasaka, Ras al Ain, Qamishli, and al-Malikiya, divided into, in total, 16 sub-districts, and a large number of small towns/villages.¹¹¹¹

According to the Kurds in the region, Hasaka (*al-Jazira*,¹¹¹² as well as Afrin and Kobane in Aleppo governorate), has also been considered a 'canton' in the Kurdish *Rojava* ('Western Kurdistan')

¹¹⁰⁹ MapAction, Al-Hasakah governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

¹¹¹⁰ MapAction, Syria Governorate Maps, Al-Hasakah Governorate, 5 May 2013, [url](#); Balanche, F., La Syrie au coeur des enjeux internationaux Janvier 2020, Zones de Contrôle [map], [Twitter] 14 February 2020, [url](#); Liveuamap, Map of Syrian Civil War, n.d., [url](#)

¹¹¹¹ MapAction, 5 May 2013, [url](#); UNFPA/WoS, Voices from Syria 2019, 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 54

¹¹¹² Al-Jazira ('the Island' on Euphrates and Tigris, or Upper Mesopotamia) is also the historical term for a greater region corresponding to parts of southeastern Turkey, northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq (drafters remark).

project¹¹¹³; the Kurdish name for Kurdish-majority regions of Syria. *Rojava* is also commonly used to describe the wider autonomous region officially known as North and East Syria (NES) or, since 2015, the (expanding) Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), with a high political assembly, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), and a unified military force, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).¹¹¹⁴ However, there are GoS held enclaves to the north-east of Hasaka city and in the northern city of Qamishli.¹¹¹⁵

Population estimates for 2016 issued by the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics indicated that Hasaka governorate had 1 621 000 inhabitants¹¹¹⁶ compared to fully 1.5 million before the conflict.¹¹¹⁷ The main ethnic groups in the governorate are Kurds (including the Yazidi minority, with their own religious identity, customs and traditions), Arabs, Syriac Christians, Assyrian Christians, Armenian Christians, Turkmen and Chechens.¹¹¹⁸

The economy of Hasaka is based on agriculture, with fertile ground and, historically, access to water, but the fact that some of Syria's most important oil fields are situated in the governorate has drawn the interest of both internal and external actors. According to Fabrice Balanche, before the war, Hasaka's residents produced a third of Syria's oil, most of its cotton, and half of its cereals, which helped to ensure the country's food independence.¹¹¹⁹

Hasaka governorate is also an important battle space that influences the regional conflict against ISIL.¹¹²⁰

2.7.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

Following the retreat of GoS forces from large parts of northeast Syria in 2012, with time, the Kurds were able to gain greater autonomy, create their own institutions and security forces.¹¹²¹ Since 2014, the PYD and its armed wing, the YPG, has also become the most essential political and military force on the ground in the US-led coalition campaign against ISIL in Syria. This has also enabled it to basically take over Syria's north-east and to establish the above-mentioned Autonomous Administration.¹¹²² An important step in this direction, in October 2015, was the YPG partnership with some local, mainly Arab, militias in the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF have since then expanded, and is now a heterogeneous alliance of multi-ethnic armed groups under the command of the most trained and ideologically committed elite battalions of the YPG. Kurdish-led forces have since also reclaimed large swaths of earlier ISIL-territory, including the provincial capital of Raqqa. As of October 2017, the SDF controlled about 25 % of Syria, according to Fabrice Balanche; territories home to

¹¹¹³ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. 54, 51-66; RiC, *Beyond the Frontlines*, 19 December 2019, [url](#)

¹¹¹⁴ RiC, *Rojava: key facts*, n.d., [url](#); see further, EASO, *Syria: Actors*, December 2019, [url](#), pp. 39-48; Haenni, P. and Quesnay, A., *Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State*, EUI, 17 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-5; RiC, *Beyond the Frontlines*, 19 December 2019, [url](#)

¹¹¹⁵ SMA, *Säkerhetsläget i Syrien [The Security Situation in Syria]*, 1 March 2019, [url](#), p. 15; cf. red enclaves in the northeast on map, AA, *US forces relocate its bases in Syria*, 9 November 2019, [url](#); Liveuamap, *Map of Syrian Civil War*, n.d., [url](#)

¹¹¹⁶ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, *Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates*, n.d., [url](#)

¹¹¹⁷ UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic Governorates Profile*, 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 25

¹¹¹⁸ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. 51-66; RiC, *Rojava: key facts*, n.d., [url](#)

¹¹¹⁹ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 56

¹¹²⁰ See further, Jamestown Foundation, *The Struggle for Syria's al-Hasakah Governorate*, 3 April 2015, [url](#)

¹¹²¹ US, CRS, *The Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran*, 23 January 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹¹²² Haenni, P. and Quesnay, A., *Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State*, EUI, 17 February 2020, [url](#), p. 1; see further, RiC, *Beyond the Frontlines*, 19 December 2019, [url](#)

around 2.5 million people, yet the Kurdish portion of this population falling below 50 % with the occupation of large parts of the mainly Arab Euphrates Valley.¹¹²³

The PYD was established in 2003, but is affiliated with the EU¹¹²⁴, US¹¹²⁵ and Turkey-designated terrorist organisation Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).¹¹²⁶ According to International Crisis Group, Turkey has long watched events in Syria's north-east with discomfort, in particular the rise of YPG, which it considers a PKK front, as a military force as well as the core of an autonomous administration in the region. However, the US military presence in Syria has acted as a deterrent to attempts by either Turkey or Damascus to attack the YPG, and until the fall of 2019 the US was able to dissuade Turkey from military action, with promises to create a 'safe zone' along the border that YPG would vacate.¹¹²⁷

However, after ISIL had basically lost its territorial control in Syria 2019, and at a time when Turkey assessed the US would no longer continue to fully defend SDF/YPG, Turkey finally decided to launch its Operation Peace Spring on 9 October 2019 in order to oust the SDF/YPG from the Syrian side of the border and establish that 'safe zone' for resettlement of Syrian refugees.¹¹²⁸ The offensive was primarily carried out by a composite of Syrian armed elements operating under the Syrian National Army (SNA)¹¹²⁹ umbrella (guided and supported by the Turkish army and intelligence), occupying an area of approximately 1 000 km² (440 km wide and 30 km deep) between Tal Abyad (in Raqqqa governorate) and Ras al Ain (in Hasaka governorate) before 17 October, while SDF/YPG largely retreated from the affected areas.¹¹³⁰

Convinced that the US would not protect them against the Turkish offensive, on 14 October 2019 the SDF subsequently concluded a military agreement with Damascus/Russia, authorising the return of some SAA troops to areas near the Turkish border earlier controlled by the SDF/YPG, in order to confront the SNA presence.¹¹³¹

2.7.2.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

Reporting from July 2019 stated that the government maintained a limited security presence in north-eastern Syria which included the cities of Qamishli and Hasaka, both in Hasaka governorate.¹¹³²

According to Gregory Waters¹¹³³ writing for Middle East Institute (MEI), some SAA units returned to the Brigade 93 base in northern Raqqqa governorate and the adjacent town of Ain Issa (also Raqqqa governorate), the towns of Manbij and Kobane/Ain al-Arab (both in Aleppo governorate), as well as Tel Tamar, and the border towns of al-Malikiya and Darbasiyah (all in Hasaka governorate).¹¹³⁴

¹¹²³ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 51 Haenni, P. and Quesnay, A., *Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State*, EUI, 17 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2

¹¹²⁴ European Council, Council Decision of 17 June 2002 implementing Article 2(3) of Regulation (EC) No 2580/2001 on specific restrictive measures directed against certain persons and entities with a view to combating terrorism and repealing Decision 2002/334/EC, 18 June 2002, [url](#)

¹¹²⁵ USDOS, *Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 5 - Kurdistan Workers' Party*, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

¹¹²⁶ Syria Study Group, *Final Report and Recommendations*, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 33

¹¹²⁷ International Crisis Group, *Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East*, 27 November 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹¹²⁸ Haenni, P. and Quesnay, A., *Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State*, EUI, 17 February 2020, [url](#), p. 1

¹¹²⁹ Regarding SNA, see further [Section 1.4.2](#)

¹¹³⁰ Haenni, P. and Quesnay, A., *Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State*, EUI, 17 February 2020, [url](#), p. 1; cf. map, USDOD, *Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, October 1, 2019 – December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 7

¹¹³¹ Haenni, P. and Quesnay, A., *Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State*, EUI, 17 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2

¹¹³² International Crisis Group, *Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East*, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 13

¹¹³³ Gregory Waters has a B.A. in Political Economy and Foreign Policy in the Middle East from the University of California, Berkeley. He has researched and written about the Syrian civil war and extremist groups, primarily utilizing Syrian community Facebook pages.

¹¹³⁴ Waters, G., *Return to the northeast: Syrian Army deployments against Turkish forces*, MEI, 20 November 2019, [url](#)

Further, according to Waters, there seem to be a variety of SAA units deployed in the north-eastern area since October 2019, among them the two battalions of the 54th Regiment, now under the command of the 17th Division which has historically been in command of northeast Syria (before ISIL and SDF). The 54th Regiment seems to have initially deployed its two battalions to the border between Ya'rubiya and Qamishli in the second part of October, whereas the 23rd Battalion seemed to head toward Ya'rubiya and the 79th Battalion to Malikiya at that point. However, later in October members of the 23rd Battalion seemed to be in Tel Tamar, and on 29 October the 54th Regiment reported on deaths in Tel Hawa. Notably in this context, according to Waters, the Hasaka branch of the NDF refused to deploy alongside the SDF due to 'deep animosity between the NDF and SDF rooted in the August 2016 fighting between the two sides, and an unwillingness to lose men'.¹¹³⁵ Mainly the below SAA elements have been deployed in Hasaka governorate in 2019, according to Waters:

- Ras al Ain/Tel Tamar Front: 17th Division, 54th Regiment, 23rd and 79th Battalions, 121st Artillery Regiment, 123rd Artillery Regiment; 3rd Division, 20th Brigade, 38th Battalion; and 10th Division, 62nd Brigade;
- North-east Hasakah: 5th Regiment, Boarder Guards.¹¹³⁶

As of 17 March 2020, deployments of the SAA in 2019, 2020, included units of:

2nd Corps:

- 10th Division: 62nd Brigade/Unknown Battalion – Tel Tamr, Hasakah, 11 November 2019;

3rd Corps:

- 17th Division: 54th Special Forces Regiment – Tel Tamr, Hasakah – 9 November 2019; 54th SF Regiment/23rd Battalion – Tel Tamr, Hasakah – 26 October 2019; 54th SF Regiment/79th Battalion – Malikiya, Hasakah – 20 October 2019; 121st Artillery Regiment – Um Shafiyah, Hasakah – 9 November 2019; 123rd Artillery Regiment – Tel Shamran, Hasakah – 28 October 2019;

Border Guards:

- 5th Regiment – Hasakah Province – 27 October 2019.¹¹³⁷

2.7.2.2 Syrian Democratic Forces

Hasaka governorate at large, including the governorate capital, was basically under the control of the SDF/YPG, and under the American sphere of influence¹¹³⁸, with a number of US military bases¹¹³⁹, for most of 2019. Already in 2017, the SDF/YPG had basically driven ISIL out of the governorate, but cells were still operating there 2018-2019.¹¹⁴⁰

The parts of northeast Syria under the control of SDF saw 'relative stability' in recent years, according to the Diaconia of ECCBs SDGs and Migration project authors¹¹⁴¹, and in comparison with other Syrian

¹¹³⁵ Waters, G., Return to the northeast: Syrian Army deployments against Turkish forces, MEI, 20 November 2019, [url](#)

¹¹³⁶ Waters, G., Return to the northeast: Syrian Army deployments against Turkish forces, MEI, 20 November 2019, [url](#). For further details on SAA deployments in Syria, see also IR, Current Syrian Army Deployments, 13 December 2019, [url](#); MEI, Syria's Republican Guard, 11 December 2018, [url](#)

¹¹³⁷ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

¹¹³⁸ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 30-31

¹¹³⁹ See map, AA, US forces relocate its bases in Syria, 9 November 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁴⁰ SMA, Säkerhetsläget i Syrien [The Security Situation in Syria], 1 March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹¹⁴¹ Diaconia ECCB, Center of Relief and Development, How to Help Syria Recover?, n.d., [url](#), p. 6. Authors: Global Call to Action Against Poverty (Belgium), Bulgarian Platform for International Development (Bulgaria), Federazione Organismi Cristiani Servizio Internazionale Volontario (Italy), ActionAid Hellas (Greece), Ambrela (Slovakia) and Povod (Slovenia) – coordinated by Diaconia of ECCB (Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren).

governorates (neighbouring ones included), Hasaka had thus been relatively spared from indiscriminate violence and civilian casualties of war.¹¹⁴²

At the time of writing, the SDF/YPG is still the main force on the ground in northeastern Syria.¹¹⁴³ SDF/YPG retains control of vast territory, well-functioning military forces, oil resources and governance structures, allowing it to function¹¹⁴⁴ as long as the US is *de facto* still involved.¹¹⁴⁵ What will happen next, however, also depend on where Turkey and Russia will focus their attention after Idlib.¹¹⁴⁶

2.7.2.3. US

In February 2020, USDOD reported that in north-east Syria US troops had a presence near Qamishli in Hasaka governorates and near the oil fields in Deir Ez-Zor.¹¹⁴⁷ US deployments are said to be in coordination with the SDF.¹¹⁴⁸

So far in 2020, according to Al-Monitor, remaining US troops in north-east Syria have cut off Russian patrols many times along roads leading to American military positions, somewhat delineating zones of current US influence. These incidents coincide with the US military (re-)building bases in north-east Syria, which at this point indicate that the US is reasserting itself in the area. Thus, the US will not easily allow Russia to expand in its withdrawal zone, including the M4 highway and the Samalka crossing.¹¹⁴⁹ In another example, SOHR stated that a US military patrol intercepted a Russian patrol on Hasaka – Aleppo international highway (M4), in the area between Qamishli and Hasaka. According to SOHR, 'this incident comes as a part of the ongoing hassles between the two sides, especially on the M4 highway'.¹¹⁵⁰

2.7.2.4 Turkey and affiliated armed groups

The SNA together with Turkish armed forces was reported to be in control of the so-called safe zone established between Tall Abyad (Raqqa governorate) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate) following the Turkish-led offensive into north-east Syria in October 2019.¹¹⁵¹ The offensive led to the creation of a so-called safe zone extending to a depth of 32 km inside Syria between the towns of Tall Abyad (Raqqa governorate) and Ras Al Ain (Hasaka governorate). In the areas west (between Jarablus and Tall Abyad) and east (between Ras Al Ain and the Syrian border with Turkey and Iraq) of the 'safe zone', security zones were established by Turkey and Russia from where SDF forces were expected to withdraw. These security zones are being 'patrolled by a mix of Turkish, Russian, and Syrian forces'.¹¹⁵²

¹¹⁴² SMA, Säkerhetsläget i Syrien [The Security Situation in Syria], 1 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 29-31, 48

¹¹⁴³ Haenni, P. and Quesnay, A., Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State, EUI, 17 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2; Balanche, F., La Syrie au coeur des enjeux internationaux Janvier 2020, Zones de Contrôle [map], [Twitter] 14 February 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁴⁴ Haenni, P. and Quesnay, A., Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State, EUI, 17 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2

¹¹⁴⁵ Al-Monitor, Following Russian expansion, roadblocks in northeast Syria delineate zones of US control, 11 February 2020, [url](#); cf. Syriac Press, North & East Syria: 62 U.S. trucks with military equipment and logistics enter Syria, 16 March 2020, [url](#); SOHR, U.S. forces intercept Russian patrol on M4 in Al-Hasakah, 17 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁴⁶ Al-Monitor, Is Russia cozying up to Syria's Kurds amid rift with Turkey?, 20 February 2020, [url](#); Al-Monitor, How Idlib escalation could affect Syrian Kurds, 10 February 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁴⁷ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, p. 35

¹¹⁴⁸ Rudaw, US sends troops to Deir ez-Zor to protect oil fields from ISIS, destabilizing actors: official, 26 October 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁴⁹ Al-Monitor, Following Russian expansion, roadblocks in northeast Syria delineate zones of US control, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁰ SOHR, U.S. forces intercept Russian patrol on M4 in Al-Hasakah, 17 March 2020, [url](#); cf. also several other earlier news items on US-Russia troops in contact by SOHR, 'Lokal news, 'al-Hasakah', 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁵¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 53

¹¹⁵² US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 13

As of March 2020, Turkey has continued to reinforce its military presence in Syria, and made a proposal to Russia to remove the control of oilfields in Qamishli and Deir Ez-Zor from SDF.¹¹⁵³

2.7.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

According to International Crisis Group, the US withdrawal announcement in October 2019 and the subsequent Turkish offensive into north-eastern Syria 'shattered an awkward but fairly stable stalemate that had persisted for several years.'¹¹⁵⁴

International Crisis Group reports that Turkey began its assault with artillery and air bombing. These strikes initially focused on a stretch between the border cities of Tall Abyad and Ras al Ain, from which the YPG had removed its fortifications and some of its fighters as part of an earlier agreement between the US and Turkey, but soon expanded. Meanwhile, the YPG began shelling Turkish territory. Exchanges of artillery fire continued across the border in subsequent days, endangering civilian lives. Early November 2019, the UN reported to International Crisis Group that, as a result of the fighting, a total of 92 civilians had died (OHCHR) and close to 200 000 had been displaced (UNOCHA).¹¹⁵⁵ In that context, there were also reports of targeting of civilian infrastructure, such as Turkish shelling damaging the main water station supplying Hasaka province, exposing thousands of people to the risk of not having safe drinking water.¹¹⁵⁶ According to SOHR, drinking water supplies to Hasaka city and surrounding areas in its countryside have also been interrupted by 'Turkish forces' stationed in Allouk water purification station in Ras al Ain after that.¹¹⁵⁷

Against this background, AI reported that following Turkey's/SNA's offensive in the north-eastern area between Tall Abyad (Raqqqa) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka) starting 9 October 2019, the fighting was 'marked by indiscriminate attacks' targeting residential areas. AI quotes SOHR as reporting that 120 civilians were killed in the area between 9 and 20 October 2019. AI also wrote that 'a Turkish air strike on a market on 13 October hit a civilian convoy that included many journalists traveling to Ras al-Ayn'. The Kurdish Red Crescent counted six civilians killed and 59 other wounded in the strike. In another incident a few days earlier, a mortar killed an 11-year-old boy and injured his eight-year-old sister in Qamishli. Meanwhile, a female Kurdish politician and political activist, Hevrin Khalaf, was dragged, beaten and shot to death (with her bodyguard who was 'summarily executed') when captured by Ahrar al-Sharqiye, a Turkey-backed armed opposition group, on the M4 highway; in the same ambush they killed two Kurdish fighters and abducted two civilian men. Further, according to reports, Turkey/SNA seized property from people in Tall Abyad and Ras Al Ain and turned homes into military headquarters, while civilians displaced by the fighting against the SDF were also prevented from returning to their homes. At the same time UN sources reported that armed groups supported by Turkey carried out 54 arbitrary arrests for the purpose of ransom to punish people for requesting to recover stolen property, or for alleged affiliation to the PYD or YPG.¹¹⁵⁸

A UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General of mid-December 2019 sums up the development of events:

'Hostilities in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic have resulted in civilian death and injury and in several cases have damaged and destroyed essential civilian infrastructure. The Aluk water station, which provides 460,000 people with water in Hasakah Governorate, was non-operational on multiple occasions.'... 'Over 200,000 people have been displaced since

¹¹⁵³ Al-Monitor, Erdogan turns to oil in a bid to salvage Syria policy, 13 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East, 27 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 10

¹¹⁵⁵ International Crisis Group, Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East, 27 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹¹⁵⁶ Al-Monitor, Turkish attacks cut water supply to Syrian province, 18 October 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁷ SOHR, Turkish forces in Allouk water station re-interrupt water in Al-Hasakah city and surrounding areas, 22 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁸ AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2019; Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

9 October owing to the hostilities. Two camps for displaced people had to be completely evacuated after coming under attack, with residents relocated to other camps in the north-east.'... 'In late October, tens of thousands of civilians began to return to their areas of origin, and humanitarian operations resumed once hostilities had decreased following a series of agreements among the parties to the conflict.'¹¹⁵⁹

Since the end of October 2019, there has been a ceasefire over the area based on a memorandum of understanding between Russia and Turkey.¹¹⁶⁰ The ceasefire and partial reversal of the withdrawal of the US forces, remaining at the oilfields, has somewhat restored the stalemate that prevailed before the Turkish offensive, but leaving the current situation more volatile, according to International Crisis Group.¹¹⁶¹

The ceasefire has not been respected at all times. SAA units have since engaged in combat with Turkish forces and Turkish-backed SNA units, suffering dozens of casualties including the wounding of the military commander of Hasaka governorate on 9 November 2019. In principle, the Tel Tamar front of Hasaka has seen 'the bulk of fighting' since the SAA deployed along the frontlines, according to Waters.¹¹⁶² SOHR also reported that 'Turkish-backed factions' stationed in Tal Mohammed in rural Abu Racine have carried out artillery shelling, 'targeting' the villages of Tal Ward and Rabia' in rural Hasaka¹¹⁶³, and other areas controlled by the government forces and the SDF. There was no information about casualties in this context at that point.¹¹⁶⁴ On a general level, the current situation is still volatile, and a variety of security related incidents are ongoing.¹¹⁶⁵

In 2020, SOHR have also reported that 'Turkish-backed factions' stationed in Tal Mohammed in rural Abu Racine have been 'targeting' the villages of Tal Ward and Rabia' in rural Hasaka by shelling¹¹⁶⁶, as well as other areas controlled by the GoS and the SDF.¹¹⁶⁷

In addition, in a February 2020 article, Dareen Khalifa and Elizabeth Tsurkov¹¹⁶⁸ reported that 'worrying dynamics are emerging on the ground in northeast Syria':

After losing its last pockets of territory, the self-proclaimed Islamic State shifted its strategy to insurgency, which now threatens to undermine security across the area. Its operations have

¹¹⁵⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/949), 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹¹⁶⁰ Russian Presidential Office, Memorandum of Understanding Between Turkey and the Russian Federation, 22 October 2019, [url](#); International Crisis Group, Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East, 27 November 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹¹⁶¹ International Crisis Group, Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East, 27 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 10

¹¹⁶² Waters, G., Return to the northeast: Syrian Army deployments against Turkish forces, MEI, 20 November 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁶³ SOHR, Turkish-backed factions shell villages in rural Al-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh, 19 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁴ SOHR, Turkish-backed factions shell sites of SDF and regime forces in rural Tal Abyad, 23 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁵ Drafters assessment. Concerning 2020, see also e.g. the following news items from SOHR: Turkish forces expel workers in "Allok" water pumping station threatening to stop water supply, 24 February 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Turkish-backed factions continue their violations in "Peace Spring" areas... kidnapping women and stealing 150 sheep in Tal Tamr countryside, 22 February 2020, [url](#); Cautious calm prevails in Tal Tamr following fierce clashes between regime forces and Turkish-backed factions, 22 February 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Turkish-backed factions attempt to infiltrate regime forces points and erupt clashes in Tal Tamr countryside, 21 February 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Turkish Forces and loyal factions shell Tal Tamr villages causing power outages, 20 February 2020, [url](#); SOHR, New explosion rocks Ras Al-Ain just three days after many persons killed in car-bomb explosion in Tal Abyad, 19 February 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Two separate IED explosions in Al-Hasakah and Deir Ezzor cause material damage only, 19 February 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁶ SOHR, Turkish-backed factions shell villages in rural Al-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh, 19 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁷ SOHR, Turkish-backed factions shell sites of SDF and regime forces in rural Tal Abyad, 23 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁸ Dareen Khalifa is a Senior Analyst on Syria for the International Crisis Group. For more information see [url](#). Elizabeth Tsurkov is a Fellow in the Middle East Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, focusing on the Levant, as well as a doctoral student in political science at Princeton University, and a Research Fellow at the Forum for Regional Thinking, a progressive Israeli-Palestinian think-tank based in Jerusalem. For more information see [url](#)

taken the form of targeted attacks, including roadside bombings, hit-and-run assaults, and assassinations by fighters embedded in tribal communities.¹¹⁶⁹

Reportedly, lately the SDF has been 'unable to fully address this growing problem,' partly due to the Turkish offensive in northeast Syria and the partial US withdrawal the fall of 2019. The offensive itself caused 'mass displacement and human suffering' along the border and further south, but it also 'raised the threat of an IS resurgence in the area', since the Kurdish-led forces are now 'stretched thin between responding to the incursion, leading ongoing operations against IS cells, and guarding prisons and camps holding thousands of IS fighters and their relatives. These circumstances, together with a growing sense of the SDF as a lame duck, is being exploited by IS to penetrate local communities and act with growing impunity in the rural regions in eastern Syria.'¹¹⁷⁰

In Hasaka governorate ISIL is thought to operate sophisticated clandestine networks capable of carrying out more complex attacks.¹¹⁷¹ Between April and June 2019, the USCENTCOM reported ISIL attacks on SDF forces aiming to limit their movement and inflict casualties in Hasaka governorate.¹¹⁷² From March through mid-October 2019 ISIL claimed to have conducted 100 insurgent attacks in Hasaka governorate.¹¹⁷³

The Rojava Information Center reported that there was a steady month-on-month decrease in ISIL sleeper cell attacks, and an increase in SDF anti-ISIL raids in the months leading up to September 2019. Following the Turkish offensive in October, however, the number of attacks is reported to have consistently risen while the rate of SDF raids has fallen (77 %, December), as well as the arrests of sleeper-cell members. Furthermore, 84 documented attacks occurred in the month of December, equal to the previous month but up 162 % when compared to the beginning of the year. From January to December 2019, the number of ISIL-claimed attacks has risen 722 %. In total, the source documented 906 sleeper-cell attacks (with 406 estimated fatalities) in 2019, 683 of which were claimed by ISIL; and 395 joint raids by SDF and Coalition forces. Most important, the month of October 2019, civilian fatalities rose 325 %, according to the source, summarising: 'the number of fatalities and incidents spiked following the October 2019 operation'.¹¹⁷⁴

ISIL continued capability to conduct small-scale operations, like ambushes, assassinations, and IED attacks against GoS forces and SDF and their civilian affiliates in the Middle Euphrates River Valley and Hasaka governorate is confirmed by the USDOD through the Central Command.¹¹⁷⁵ Also the UN Security Council, stated in February 2020 that 'challenges remain in securing the border between' Syria and Iraq, where 'fighters are managing to cross in both directions'. ISIL activity has increased in Deir Ez-Zor and Hasaka governorates; 'a spike in attacks targeting the international counter-ISIL coalition and local non-State armed groups in the northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic has been observed.'¹¹⁷⁶ Having said that, as stated by a spokesperson for the US-led coalition on a joint press conference with

¹¹⁶⁹ War on the Rocks, Has Turkey's Incursion into Syria Opened the Door for an Islamic State Comeback?, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁷⁰ War on the Rocks, Has Turkey's Incursion into Syria Opened the Door for an Islamic State Comeback?, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁷¹ According to International Crisis Group interview with an US official, 18 May 2019. International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 23-24

¹¹⁷² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹¹⁷³ Washington Institute for Near East Policy (The), The Islamic State in Syria After the U.S. Withdrawal, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁷⁴ RiC, Report: 2019 review of sleeper cell attacks and anti-ISIS raids in North and East Syria, 27 January 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁷⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2019 – December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 39-40

¹¹⁷⁶ UN Security Council, Tenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

the SDF in Syria in Ramalan, north-east Syria: ‘most of the Hasakah region, from here to Derik, did not have active ISIS fighters, because the community would not allow it’.¹¹⁷⁷

In and around the so-called safe zone, sources indicate that persons of Kurdish ethnicity – especially those affiliated to, or with attributed affiliation to SDF/YPG or any part of the Kurdish forces, have been at risk of denied returns, arbitrarily arrested or had their property confiscated.¹¹⁷⁸

Furthermore, there are reports that some minorities, especially Yazidis, are expressing fears based on what has happened to them before, both during ISIL and during the Turkish-led occupation of Afrin (Aleppo).¹¹⁷⁹ According to Wladimir van Wilgenburg¹¹⁸⁰ and sources consulted by him, the very old Yazidi Afrin community ‘is now erased’, whereas thousands of residents from twenty Yazidi villages surrounding Afrin fled to northern Aleppo after Turkey attacked the area in January 2018. ‘Islamist rebels took over the region with Turkish support on 18 March, desecrating Ezidi shrines and other holy places. In October 2019, the situation worsened’ when ‘Turkey launched the cross border offensive, displacing hundreds of Ezidi families’ from 13 villages across Ras al Ain district.¹¹⁸¹ Further, according to experts consulted by van Wilgenburg, there are basically three regions with a Yazidi population left in Hasaka governorate, near the cities of Hasaka, Qamishli, and Ras al Ain. All the remaining Yazidi villages are located along the Turkish border, an area that would be under threat if Turkey launches new attacks on SDF.¹¹⁸²

2.7.3.1 Security incidents

According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 893 security incidents recorded in Hasaka governorate, of whom 390 were coded as battles, 309 explosions/remote violence and 194 incidents of violence against civilians. The number of security incidents remained steady for the first half of 2019, registering a significant increase starting with October 2019.

¹¹⁷⁷ Kurdistan 24, US-led Coalition rejects Assad’s charge of stealing Syria’s oil, 7 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁷⁸ HRW, Syria: Civilians Abused in ‘Safe Zones’, 27 November 2019, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 11

¹¹⁷⁹ SMA, Landinformation: Syrien – Säkehetssituationen i provinsen al-Hasaka [Country of Origin Information: Syria – The Security Situation in al-Hasakah Governorate], 25 February 2020, [url](#), para. 2.4.3; Yazda, Statement by Yazidi Community leaders on Turkish invasion of NE Syria and targeting of Yazidis, n.d., [url](#); Rudaw, Stop Turkish invasion of northeast Syria, say Yezidi activists, 20 October 2019, [url](#); VOA, Hundreds of Yazidis displaced amid Turkey’s incursion in northeastern Syria, 16 October 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁸⁰ Wladimir van Wilgenburg is a reporter and analyst specialized in Kurdish affairs. He graduated from Utrecht University with a MA in Conflict Studies in 2011, and from Exeter University with a MA in Kurdish studies in 2013. He covered several major battles against ISIS in northern Syria, and Iraqi Kurdistan and other subjects for outlets such as Middle East Eye (MEE), Daily Beast, The Region, Defense Post, Al Jazeera, and Foreign Policy. Furthermore, he conducted research and analysis for several think tanks such as Carnegie Endowment, Atlantic Council, and the Jamestown Foundation, and co-authored a book on the Syrian Kurds. For more information see [url](#)

¹¹⁸¹ Kurdistan 24, Experts warn that Syria’s Yezidi minority is close to extinction, 8 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁸² Kurdistan 24, Experts warn that Syria’s Yezidi minority is close to extinction, 8 March 2020, [url](#)



Figure 34. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Hasaka governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data¹¹⁸³

Hasaka governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Hasaka	143	140	121
Malikeyyeh	9	13	6
Qamishli	15	45	33
Ras Al Ain	223	111	34
Total	390	309	194

Figure 35. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Hasaka governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

Security incidents were recorded in all Hasaka governorate districts during 2019, with the highest number of overall incidents being recorded in Hasaka (404) and Ras Al Ain (368) districts.

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 165 security incidents of which 53 were battles, 82 explosions/remote violence and 30 incidents of violence against civilians. Most security incidents were recorded in Hasaka (95) and Ras Al Ain (60) districts.

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Hasaka governorate in 2019 included the following:

- On 11 July 2019, at least 12 civilians were injured following a VBIED detonation near a church in Qamishli.¹¹⁸⁴
- On 7 August 2019, three children were killed and two other civilians injured after an alleged VBIED was detonated in town of Qahtaniyah. ISIL claimed responsibility for the attack which it alleged was targeting a SDF vehicle.¹¹⁸⁵
- On 10 October 2019, three civilians were killed following an alleged ground-based strike on the city of Qamishli.¹¹⁸⁶

¹¹⁸³ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

¹¹⁸⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 19

¹¹⁸⁵ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹¹⁸⁶ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 18

- On 12 October 2019, videos emerged showing the execution of three Kurdish captives (one appearing to wear a military uniform) by the Turkish-affiliated armed group Ahrar al-Sharqiya on the Hasaka-Manbij highway. One the same day, reports emerged of the execution of Kurdish politician Kurdish female politician, Hevrin Khalaf, apparently by Ahrar al-Sharqiya on the same highway.¹¹⁸⁷
- On 23 October 2019, one boy was killed and another man injured after a landmine reportedly exploded in rural Ras al Ain.¹¹⁸⁸
- On 26 November 2019, at least 12 civilians were killed following a VBIED detonated in a residential area in the town of Tel Halaf in rural Ras al-Ain.¹¹⁸⁹
- On 18 December 2019, six civilians were killed in an alleged VBIED detonated inside a local market in Mabrukah.¹¹⁹⁰
- On 19 December 2019, five civilians were killed and seven others injured after a VBIED was detonated in a residential area of Tall Halaf.¹¹⁹¹

2.7.3.2 Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	2	10
February	11	4
March	2	24
April	1	9
May	8	15
June	2	15
July	2	9
August	4	12
September	4	6
October	80	23
November	36	34
December	26	12
Total	178	173

Figure 36. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Hasaka governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

¹¹⁸⁷ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 15 October 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁸⁸ UN Security Council: Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹¹⁸⁹ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 6 December 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁹⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 17

¹¹⁹¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 17

In 2019, Hasaka had between 173 (SNHR data)¹¹⁹² and 178 civilian fatalities (VDC data)¹¹⁹³. Most civilian fatalities were documented between October and December 2019.

2.7.3.3 Displacement and return

UNOCHA data on displacement showed that in 2019, around 55 000 IDP movements were recorded to or within Hasaka governorate, of whom around 33 000 were within the governorate while the rest came mainly from Deir Ez-Zor governorate. Around 13 000 displacement movements were recorded during 2019 from Hasaka governorate, the vast majority towards Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹¹⁹⁴

UNOCHA reports that prior to the Turkish offensive on 9 October 2019, the region already hosted approximately 710 000 persons displaced from earlier phases of the conflict; around 91 000 of whom remain in al-Hol (68 080 persons¹¹⁹⁵), Areesha, Mahmoudli, Newroz and Roj camps.¹¹⁹⁶

According to UNHCR data as of 12 November 2019, 220 000 population movements had been recorded since the Turkish-led military operations in north-east Syria began on 9 October. At that point, 74 381 persons remained displaced from Hasaka (48 134), Raqqa (19 471) and Aleppo (6 776) governorates, whereas 117 132 persons had returned to their areas of origin in Hasaka (65 210), Raqqa (41 817) and Aleppo (10 105) governorates, while 28 667 persons had been displaced more than once. There were 90 active collective shelters in Hasaka that were accommodating 16 961 persons while 32 collective shelters had been emptied.¹¹⁹⁷

As of 18 December 2019, 70 590 persons remained displaced from Hasaka, Raqqa, and Aleppo governorates. The majority found shelter in local communities, but there are also 77 shelters in Hasaka governorate. According to UNHCR (30 November) more than 17 500 persons have crossed into neighbouring Iraq. In December, three new informal IDP settlements were established: Tweineh (hosting an estimated 4 120 persons), Tal-Samen (20) and Daham (1 800).¹¹⁹⁸

The Al Hol camp hosts more than 66 000 persons, around 96 % of whom are women and children.¹¹⁹⁹ Because of their familial links to ISIL, they have reportedly suffered discrimination at the hands of SDF forces, including harassment, denial of health care restricted movement due to security

¹¹⁹² Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁹³ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

¹¹⁹⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁹⁵ WHO, Syria crisis - WHO's Response in Al-Hol Camp, Al-Hasakeh Governorate - Issue 17 | 25 October-7 December 2019, 7 December 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁹⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: North East Syria Displacement (18 December 2019), 25 December 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁹⁷ UNHCR, UNHCR Syria Situation Report for the North East Syria Humanitarian Emergency, 17 November 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁹⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: North East Syria Displacement (18 December 2019), 25 December 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁹⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

considerations, and looting.¹²⁰⁰ Because of the dire humanitarian conditions, at least 390 displaced people died of pneumonia, dehydration or malnutrition, either on the way to the camp or after their arrival.¹²⁰¹

Insecurity and violence in the camp was reported to increase, with ISIL sympathisers inside the camp having established a female morality police to 'monitor adherence to dress codes and enforce punishments on women perceived to be "infidels"'. Instances of assassinations of women inside the camp and stabbing of at least one SDF guard were reported in September 2019.¹²⁰² AI reported that in 2019 'a few European, African and Asian governments repatriated some of the displaced women and children who were nationals of their countries'.¹²⁰³

According to UNOCHA data, around 137 000 return movements were recorded to or within Hasaka governorate in 2019, of whom 76 000 were within the governorate while the rest return mainly from Deir Ez-Zor, and some from Raqqqa governorate.¹²⁰⁴

UNFPA reported that an estimated 129 041 displaced persons had returned to their places of origin. Of these, 118 936 had returned to Hasaka and Raqqqa, including: 18 200 to Qamishli, 7 625 to Tal Tamer, 8 425 to Malikiyah, 42 869 to Ras al Ain and 41 817 to Tall Abyad (Raqqqa).¹²⁰⁵

In January 2020, about 464 800 IDP movements were tracked across Syria. The third-largest movement in the first month of the year was recorded in Hasaka governorate, with around 4 900 IDP of which 3 700 displaced within the governorate while the rest moved from Aleppo governorate. Further, it recorded about 21 400 spontaneous IDP returnees in different locations across Syria. The second largest return movement was to Hasaka governorate, with around 4 800 returnees, about 4 600 of which returned from within the governorate and about 100 returnees from Sweida governorate.¹²⁰⁶

¹²⁰⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 12 para 61

¹²⁰¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹²⁰² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 12 para 62

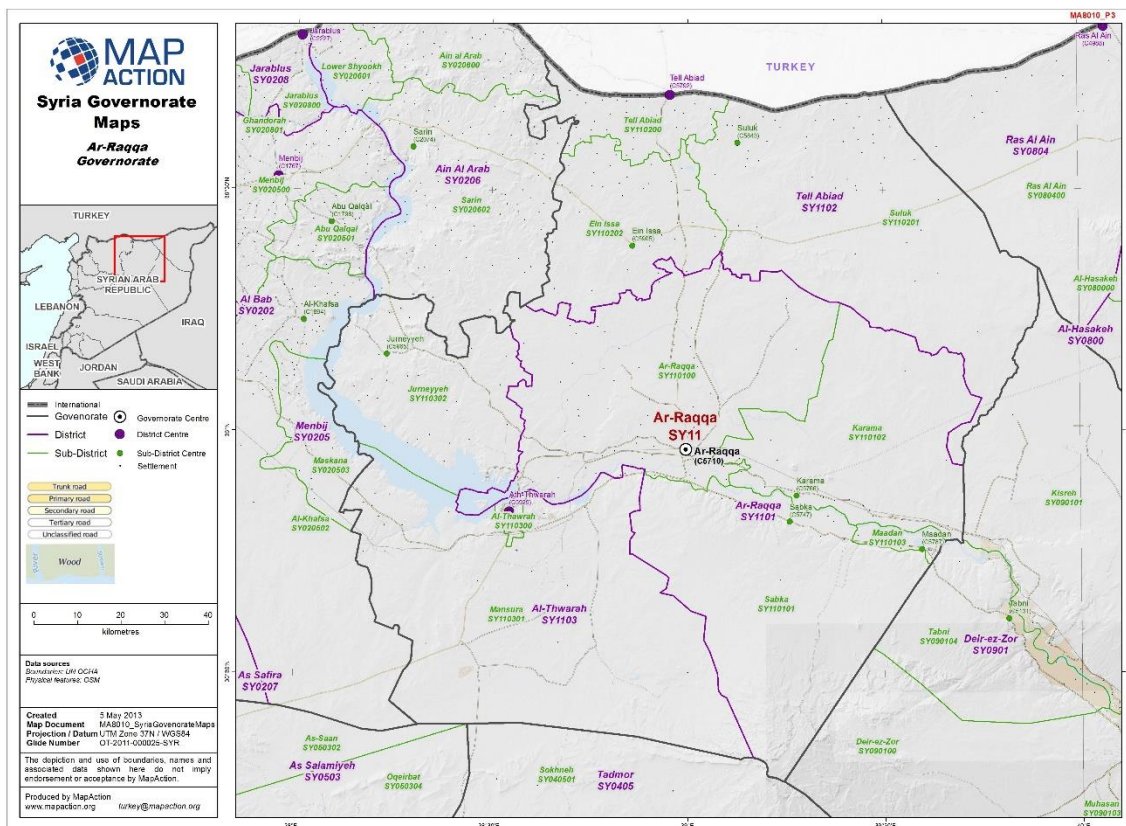
¹²⁰³ AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2019; Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁰⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁰⁵ UNFPA, North-East Syria Flash update #12, 05 - 18 January 2020, 18 January 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹²⁰⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (January 2020), 25 February 2020, [url](#)

2.8 Raqqa governorate



Map 12: © MapAction, Raqqa governorate¹²⁰⁷

2.8.1 General description of governorate

Raqqa, or Ar-Raqqa¹²⁰⁸, governorate is located in the north-central part of Syria.¹²⁰⁹ It has international borders with Turkey to the north, and borders to the west with Aleppo governorate, to the east with Hasaka and Deir Ez-Zor governorates and to the south with Hama and Homs Governorates (see Map 12).¹²¹⁰ The governorate is divided in three districts with the respective districts capitals: Ar-Raqqa, Al-Thawra, and Tell-Abiad.¹²¹¹ The governorate is further divided into the following sub-districts: Ar-Raqqa, Sabka, Karama, Maadan, Tell Abiad, Suluk, Ein Issa, Al-Thawra, Mansura, Jurneyyeh.¹²¹² The main cities in Raqqa governorate are Ar-Raqqa, Al-Thawra (or Tabqa¹²¹³), and Tell-Abiad (or Tall Abyad), at the Turkish border.¹²¹⁴

¹²⁰⁷ MapAction, Ar Raqqa Governorate [map], 29 July 2016, [url](#)

¹²⁰⁸ Henceforth, this report will use the spelling 'Raqqa' for simplicity

¹²⁰⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 34; UNOCHA, Ar-Raqqa Governorate Reference map [map], n.d., [url](#)

¹²¹⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas: Syrian Arab republic, Syria sub-district maps, n.d., [url](#)

¹²¹¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 34; UNOCHA, Ar-Raqqa Governorate Reference map [map], n.d., [url](#)

¹²¹² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas: Syrian Arab republic, Syria sub-district maps, n.d., [url](#)

¹²¹³ The city of Al-Thawra/Al-Thawrah or Tabqa was established after construction of the Euphrate's dam. ACU/IMU, Ar-Raqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report, December 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹²¹⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas: Syrian Arab republic, Syria sub-district maps, n.d., [url](#)

The Syrian Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Raqqqa governorate at 867 000 by mid-2014¹²¹⁵ and 853 000 by 2016.¹²¹⁶ As of 2011, the main ethnic groups in the Raqqqa governorate were Sunni Arabs and Bedouins. The northern area around Tall Abyad, along the border with Turkey, is Kurdish area.¹²¹⁷ The ethnic composition in the governorate underwent some changes due to the conflict as is discussed below.

When ISIL conquered the town of Tall Abyad in spring 2013, Kurds were expelled by ISIL-backed Arab tribes, according to Balanche. When later the city was reconquered by the PYD, the Arab population was not expelled.¹²¹⁸ Balanche concluded that ISIL has subjected the Kurds to ‘ethnic cleansing’: ‘IS forces in northeast Syria have sought to exploit a development that local Sunni Arabs regard as their greatest threat: the prospect of living under Kurdish control. [...] IS has therefore subjected Kurds in the Euphrates Valley and elsewhere to ethnic cleansing (e.g., in Tall Abyad in 2013).’¹²¹⁹

In Al-Thawra, located along the Euphrates near an important dam, the majority were Christians and Alawite, because of many employees from the Ministry of Irrigation (working on the Euphrates dam). However, these minorities fled in spring 2013 when ISIL seized Raqqqa. Also, the Christian minority in Raqqqa city (about 1 000 persons) fled when ISIL captured the city and imposed its strict Islamic laws.¹²²⁰ Before the war, Raqqqa governorate also had a Shia minority, but they fled for ISIL and those who did not flee, were killed by ISIL, according to Balanche.¹²²¹

The Raqqqa and Deir Ez-Zor areas, in particular the Euphrates valley southeast of Raqqqa and between Deir Ez-Zor and Abu Kamal is Syria’s main oil-producing region. However, to the locals’ frustration, the government did not reinvest any oil revenues in local development, according to the researcher Balanche.¹²²² In an analysis of the economic situation in Raqqqa governorate, Balanche noted: ‘with a third of their population illiterate, a birth rate of eight children per woman, and over 50% of their work-force tied to agriculture before the war, the provinces of Raqqqa and Deir al-Zour suffer from low levels of development’.¹²²³

Raqqqa governorate is also Syria’s main area producing irrigated ‘strategic crops’ (wheat, barley, cotton and yellow corn (another source mentions sugar beet¹²²⁴), according to ACU.¹²²⁵ Arable land formed 41 % and non-arable land 59 % of the governorate’s land area. There were 10 key irrigation projects fed by the Euphrates and Balikh rivers, and the lakes of the Euphrate and Al-Baath dams.¹²²⁶ However, the clashes in the governorate, the rising prices of fuel, the change of control that occurred several times, and the large-scale displacement have impacted the degree of agricultural production.¹²²⁷

In 2013, opposition forces captured the entire Euphrates Valley and in 2014 ISIL took Raqqqa as its capital. According to Balanche, the ‘high population growth, economic unrest, underdeveloped infrastructure, and archaic social patterns was [sic] particularly favorable to IS, which quickly eliminated local regime forces and secular opponents in the area, then imposed “authentic” Salafism

¹²¹⁵ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, The Population in Syria by Governorates in Mid 2014, Table 3/2, n.d., [url](#)

¹²¹⁶ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by Governorates 2016, Table 4/2, n.d., [url](#)

¹²¹⁷ Based on maps on Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. XIV, 5, 111. According to Balanche, around two million of Syria’s three million Kurds live in a strip of territory along the Turkish border.’ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. 16, XIII

¹²¹⁸ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 25

¹²¹⁹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 87

¹²²⁰ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 25

¹²²¹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 87

¹²²² Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 85

¹²²³ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 87

¹²²⁴ Al-Ameen for Humanitarian support, Data & Need Assessment unit, Ar-Raqqqa in numbers, 13 October 2017, [url](#), p. 5

¹²²⁵ ACU/IMU, Ar-Raqqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report, December 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹²²⁶ ACU/IMU, Ar-Raqqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report, December 2019, [url](#), p. 11

¹²²⁷ ACU/IMU, Ar-Raqqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report, December 2019, [url](#), pp. 22-23; Al-Ameen for Humanitarian support, Data & Need Assessment unit, Ar-Raqqqa in numbers, 13 October 2017, [url](#), p. 7

on the largely Sunni Arab population'. ISIL also took care to provide food and water to the population under their control, allow irrigation on farmland, while stimulated agriculture.¹²²⁸

During the conflict, ISIL resorted to illegally sell crude and semi-refined oil to neighbouring countries 'and even Syrian government territory', as Balanche noted. ISIL used the oil production to gain financial autonomy. As of 2015, the oil wells produced an estimated USD 1-2 million per day. However, most income for ISIL came from local consumption of petrol (for vehicles, irrigation pumps, and generators) by the 2 million Syrians and 6 million Iraqis living within ISIL-controlled areas. The group also gained income from taxation on local trade and confiscation of properties of expelled and displaced populations. The international coalition against ISIL has destroyed several oil-well facilities and refineries to cut off ISIL's revenue streams.¹²²⁹

2.8.2 Background of the conflict and actors

The first attack on Raqqa governorate was on 1 August 2012, when 'opposition forces'¹²³⁰ seized the Suluk sub-district. On 19 September 2012, Tall Abyad followed, at the Turkish border, and on 4 March 2013, Raqqa city was seized.¹²³¹ On 11 February 2013, opposition forces, including Jabhat al-Nusra fighters, took control of the Taqba dam and Tabqa (Al-Thawra) city.¹²³²

Raqqa became the first governorate centre completely taken from Syrian government's control. On 15 August 2013, fighting broke out between the armed opposition forces and the emerging ISIL or ISIS (then an Al-Qaeda faction).¹²³³ The clashes led to expulsion of the former and a complete takeover of Raqqa city by ISIL at end of December 2013.¹²³⁴

Reports differ whether ISIL was evicted from Raqqa in January 2014. According to ISW, by 13-14 January 2014, ISIL had secured full control over the city and soon after started to issue its strict religious decrees, including bans on smoking and dress requirements for women.¹²³⁵ However, a Stanford report on mapping militant organizations, reported, partly based on a NYT article, that Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and their allies drove ISIL out of Raqqa city on 6 January 2014 and that ISIL only recaptured it in July 2014.¹²³⁶ On 29 June 2014, ISIL declared a caliphate with its capital in Raqqa city and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIL, as the caliph. The group called upon all Muslims to declare allegiance to the new caliphate.¹²³⁷

Many human rights violations have been reportedly perpetrated by ISIL. The CoI has reported on massacres of civilians, killing and beheading captured soldiers, displaying the bodies and heads in Raqqa's city squares.¹²³⁸

Towards the end of 2016, international coalition forces started offensives against ISIL in Raqqa and other places. On 6 November 2016, SDF forces began to conquer main roads and rural villages, with

¹²²⁸ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. 25, 85

¹²²⁹ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 85

¹²³⁰ The 'opposition forces' at that time consisted of Al Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and 'members of the Islamic Front umbrella organization'. CISAC, *Mapping Militant Organizations - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*, Stanford University. Last modified August 2017, [url](#); Roggio, Bill, *Al Nusrah Front Seizes Control of Syrian City of Raqqah*, Long War Journal, 8 March 2013, [url](#)

¹²³¹ ACU/IMU, *Ar-Raqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report*, December 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹²³² New York Times (The), *Syrian Insurgents Claim to Control Large Hydropower dam*, 11 February 2013, [url](#)

¹²³³ Syria Direct, *ISIS builds power base unchecked, takes over A-Raqqa*, 16 August 2013, [url](#); ACU/IMU, *Ar-Raqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report*, December 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹²³⁴ ACU/IMU, *Ar-Raqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report*, December 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹²³⁵ ISW, *ISIS Governance in Syria*, July 2014, [url](#), p. 12

¹²³⁶ CISAC, *Mapping Militant Organizations - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*, Stanford University. Last modified August 2017, [url](#); partly based on: New York Times (The), *Rebel Infighting Spreads to an Eastern Syrian City*, 6 January 2014, [url](#)

¹²³⁷ Al Jazeera, *In declaring a caliphate, Islamic State draws a line in the sand*, 30 June 2014, [url](#)

¹²³⁸ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/28/69]*, 5 February 2015, [url](#), p. 29 para 21-22

the aim to isolate Raqqa. In June 2017, SDF started a siege of the city and fiercely fought to drive ISIL out. On 17 October 2017, the last ISIL fighters surrendered and Raqqa came under SDF control.¹²³⁹ This was considered by a Chatham House analyst ‘an emblematic loss for ISIS because it put an end to its claim of ruling a physical Islamic state’.¹²⁴⁰

After the fighting was over, the city was ‘a panorama of ruined buildings and rubble’¹²⁴¹ and was kept under SDF control until October 2019 (see Section [2.8.3](#)).

2.8.2.1 ISIL

The main actor in the period before 2017 was ISIL, however, it was expelled from Raqqa city and governorate in 2017. Since that time, ISIL has carried out hit-and-run attacks, suicide attacks and bombings.¹²⁴² Between 2016 and 2017, ISIL had worked together with local affiliated groups in its actions against the SDF and governmental military forces in Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor and Hasaka governorates. Notable groups were: Kaitib Bisha’r Al Nasr, Liwa al Ikhlas, Liwa Allah Akbar, Liwa Daraa Al Ansar, and Jaish Mo’ata al Islami. According to the Carter Center, ‘there are notable correlations between the locations of some of the heaviest fighting involving these groups and the locations of ongoing, residual ISIL attacks throughout 2018 and 2019. In particular, these correlations can be seen in Tabqa City, Raqqa City, and the stretch between al Basirah and Danaj towns south of Deir Ez Zor City’.¹²⁴³

The below map (Map 13), created by the Carter Center, describes ISIL-linked activity in north-west Syria from 2016/2017 (red triangles) and ongoing ISIL activity between January 2018 and January 2019 (light red circles). The map shows that in Raqqa governorate, ISIL-linked activity was widespread between 2016 and 2017, a large area from Raqqa city and Tall Abyad at the Turkish border, and from Raqqa westwards to Tabqa (Al-Thawra) city. Between January 2018 and January 2019, ISIL-linked activity was still noted in a stretch of cities to the west and east of Raqqa, and in the international border town of Tall Abyad, but not in the rural countryside in between.¹²⁴⁴

¹²³⁹ CISAC, Mapping Militant Organizations – The Islamic State, Stanford University, Last modified September 2019, [url](#); Malsin, Jared. Raqqa Lies in Ruins as ISIS Near Defeat as Military Force, Time, n.d. [26 October 2017], [url](#); Lund, A. Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 22

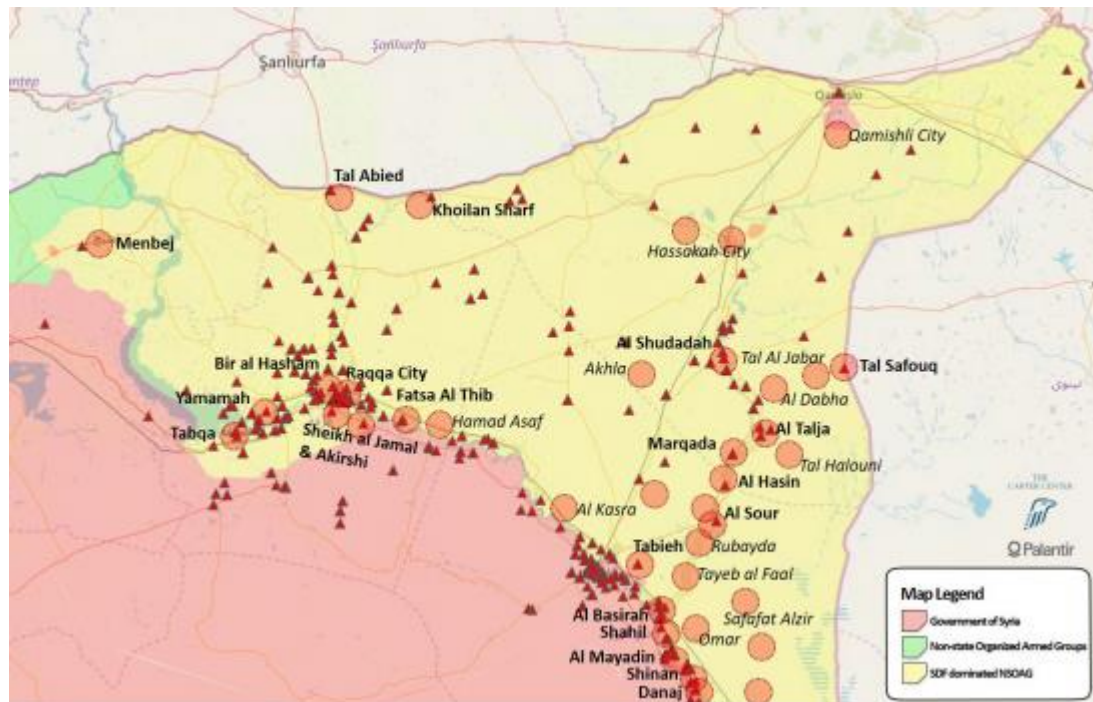
¹²⁴⁰ Guardian (The), Raqqa recaptured from Islamic State by US-backed forces. 17 October 2017, [url](#)

¹²⁴¹ Guardian (The), Raqqa recaptured from Islamic State by US-backed forces. 17 October 2017, [url](#)

¹²⁴² International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#) p. 16; Carter Center, A review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional differences and an enduring legacy, March 2019, [url](#), p. 10

¹²⁴³ Carter Center, A review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional differences and an enduring legacy, March 2019, [url](#), p. 14

¹²⁴⁴ Based on reading the map in Carter Center, A review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional differences and an enduring legacy, March 2019, [url](#), p. 15



Map 13: © Carter Center, ISIL-linked activity in northwest Syria from 2016 / 2017 (red triangles) and ongoing ISIL activity between January 2018 and January 2019 (light red circles) ¹²⁴⁵

2.8.2.2 Syrian Democratic Forces

Since 2017, SDF has been in control of Raqqah governorate. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) wrote about the SDF in Raqqah governorate:

‘Although this [SDF] is a mixed Kurdish-Arab force, the Syrian Kurds of the YPG are in control of the SDF. This creates tensions. Members of the new government in Raqqah and elsewhere have been murdered by unknown assailants, perhaps in order to sabotage the cooperation between Arabs and Kurds. Some accuse the YPG of working with the same Sunni tribal leaders who collaborated with ISIL, and there are also allegations of corruption’ ¹²⁴⁶

As of March 2020, the SDF controlled most of Raqqah governorate. ¹²⁴⁷

2.8.2.3 Turkey and affiliated armed groups

Following the Turkish-led incursion into northeast Syria in October 2019, the SNA together with Turkish armed forces was reported to be in control of the so called ‘safe zone’ established between Tall Abyad (Raqqah governorate) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate). ¹²⁴⁸

After an agreement was reached between Turkey and Russia on 23 October 2019, the SDF withdrew on 28 October 2019 from the area along the Turkish-Syrian border between Tall Abyad and Ras al Ain, giving way to Turkish-supported non-state armed groups. ¹²⁴⁹ In Tall Abyad, the Turkish-backed rebel

¹²⁴⁵ Carter Center, A review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional differences and an enduring legacy, March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹²⁴⁶ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 39

¹²⁴⁷ Based on reading of Map 2: ISW, Control of terrain in Syria, 31 March 2020, see [url](#)

¹²⁴⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 53

¹²⁴⁹ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 28 October-3 November 2019, [url](#)

group SNA¹²⁵⁰ has reportedly become ‘largely’ in control of the city.¹²⁵¹ The SNA has reportedly committed executions and looting of property in the newly seized areas of the northeast.¹²⁵² The SNA is, according to Clingendael, under control of Turkey, which ‘supplies the SNA with training, salaries and weapons in exchange for its participation in Turkish military operations in and outside of its buffer zones.’¹²⁵³

2.8.2.4 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

On 14 October 2019, the SAA, after a seven years absence, took control of ‘long swathes of the Turkish-Syrian border’, after the SDF ‘agreed to a Russian-brokered deal to try to hold off a Turkish attack’.¹²⁵⁴

According to Gregory Waters, the following SAA units divisions were deployed in Raqqqa governorate with the name of the unit and the last known date of deployment, as of 17 March 2020:

- Republican Guard: 104th Brigade/476th Battalion – Ain Issa, Raqqqa – 20 November 2019;
- 2nd Corps: 14th Special Forces Division 554th Regiment – southern Raqqqa – 29 February 2020;
- 5th Corps: 103rd Artillery Regiment – Raqqqa Province – 4 November 2019; 47th Regiment/2nd Battalion – Ain Issa, Raqqqa – 8 November 2019; 5th Brigade/2nd Battalion – Ain Issa, Raqqqa – 9 December 2019; 7th Brigade/3rd Battalion – Ain Issa, Raqqqa – 26 October 2019.¹²⁵⁵

As of March 2020, the GoS controlled areas in Raqqqa governorate south of and along the Euphrates river.¹²⁵⁶

On 9 December 2019, Russian troops moved into Raqqqa, following an agreement with the SDF, to guarantee safety after the departure of the US forces.¹²⁵⁷ According to the February 2020 USDOD report, ‘at least 300 Russian military police are deployed in northeastern Syria, occupying the towns of Kobani, Raqqah, Tal Tamr, Amuda and Ayn Issa – areas previously occupied by U.S. forces.’ Russia, in collaboration with the GoS, also deployed forces to the Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates River west of Raqqqa city.¹²⁵⁸

2.8.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

2.8.3.1 ISIL activity

During the first months of 2019, ISIL carried out ‘hit-and-run’ attacks and bombings from a network of underground cells in SDF-held areas.¹²⁵⁹ Between April and June 2019, USCENTCOM reported that in Raqqqa governorate, ISIL conducted assassinations and attacks on local elites ‘to prevent the

¹²⁵⁰ ‘The SNA was established in October 2019 and is made up of the National Liberation Front and Syria National Army.’ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 28 October-3 November 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹²⁵¹ Reuters, Turkey blames Kurdish militia after deadly bombing in Syrian town, 2 November 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁵² Independent (The), ‘When they come, they will kill you’: Ethnic cleansing is already a reality in Turkey’s Syrian safe zone, 29 November 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁵³ Clingendael, Strategies of Turkish proxy warfare in northern Syria, Back with a vengeance, November 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹²⁵⁴ Telegraph (The), Assad troops enter north-east Syria after Russia-backed deal with Kurds, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁵⁵ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁵⁶ Based on reading of Map 2: ISW, Control of terrain in Syria, 31 March 2020, see [url](#)

¹²⁵⁷ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 31 January 2020, [url](#), p. 37; Defense Post (The), Russian troops enter Syria’s Raqqqa, filling void of withdrawing US forces, 10 December 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁵⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 48

¹²⁵⁹ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#) p. 16, footnote 86

establishment of capable security and governance structures'.¹²⁶⁰ In August 2019, it was reported that the use of IEDs against SDF personnel had increased in the previous month of July, with 46 events, compared to the 44 events in the two months before. Events in Raqqah governorate occurred in Raqqah city and Taqba (Al-Thawra), but most events took place in Hasaka governorate.¹²⁶¹

From March through mid-October 2019, ISIL claimed to have conducted 98 insurgent attacks in Raqqah governorate.¹²⁶² According to a USDOD report, covering the second quarter of 2019, 'in Raqqah, ISIL targeted local elites and conducted terrorist attacks and assassinations intended to prevent the establishment of capable security and governance structures'.¹²⁶³

According to an Israeli intelligence organisation, The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, ISIL has become more active in the region: 'Since the beginning of the Turkish invasion in Syria [...], a considerable increase has been recorded in ISIS's activity in the Ar-Raqqah area. The activity mainly consisted of activation of IEDs'. The organisation documented seven attacks in October 2019 in Raqqah governorate, aimed at SDF military targets, such as headquarters, vehicles, and fighters.¹²⁶⁴ In 2020, ISIL has launched several other attacks in Raqqah, Homs and Hasaka governorates, in the first weeks of January 2020.¹²⁶⁵

2.8.3.2 Turkish offensive in north-east Syria

The security situation along the northern border of Raqqah governorate rapidly changed in October 2019 when US forces were withdrawn.¹²⁶⁶ On 9 October, Turkey launched an offensive called 'Operation Peace Spring' into the Syrian border area, by the Turkish Armed Forces, together with the SNA¹²⁶⁷ with the aim to create a 'safe zone' of 120 km wide and 30 km deep, roughly between Tall Abyad (Raqqah governorate) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate).¹²⁶⁸ The Turkish goal of this 'safe zone' was reportedly to 'effectively eliminate Kurdish rebels in the region, who were the target, and relocate refugees from the Syrian civil war'.¹²⁶⁹

Turkish and SNA forces started bombing and artillery shelling Kurdish positions in Kobane and Syrian border towns such as Tall Abyad, Ras al Ain and Qamishli. On 10 October, ground troops entered the region.¹²⁷⁰ OHCHR recorded 147 civilian casualties as a result of Operation Peace Spring, which also made 200 000 people to flee their homes in Hasaka, Raqqah and Aleppo governorates. By

¹²⁶⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹²⁶¹ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 29 July–4 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 4–5

¹²⁶² Washington Institute for Near East Policy (The), The Islamic State in Syria After the U.S. Withdrawal, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁶³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹²⁶⁴ Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, [url](#). See also RFI, Islamic State group attacks Raqqah as Turkey prepares Syria offensive, 9 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁶⁵ Enab Baladi, ISIS carried out ten attacks in Syria since start of 2020, 17 January 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁶⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 4 para 12

¹²⁶⁷ 'On 4 October [2019] representatives of various Syrian armed opposition groups announced their formal unification under the umbrella of the Syrian National Army. See A/HRC/42/51, para. 16'. UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 4

¹²⁶⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 2 para 3; BBC News, Tal Abyad car bomb: At least 13 killed in Syrian border town, 2 November 2019, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Eight dead in blast in Turkish-held Syrian town, 10 November 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁶⁹ Geopolitical Monitor, Operation Peace Spring: A Timeline -Backgrounders, 18 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁷⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), para 12, 45

26 November 2019, 123 000 people had returned.¹²⁷¹ In the week of 7-13 October 2019, intense Turkish aerial and ground bombardments hit 13 sub-districts in northern Syria.¹²⁷² The northern Tall Abyad and Suluk districts were frequently targeted by Turkish forces. On 13 October 2019, Tall Abyad was almost completely in control of Turkish troops and Turkish-backed non-state armed groups.¹²⁷³ After coming under Turkish control, Tall Abyad has been targeted by several heavy attacks by car bombs and other explosive devices (see section on illustrative security incidents). The Turkish government blamed the PKK/YPG for the attacks.¹²⁷⁴

On 14 October 2019, the SDF reached an agreement with the governmental SAA to take control of long stretches of territory along the border with Turkey, in order to 'hold off a Turkish attack'.¹²⁷⁵ The SAA also entered the city of Tabqa (Al-Thawra) city, its military base, and the city of Ein Issa.¹²⁷⁶ Since the agreement between SDF and the GoS, protests against the return of the government have broken out in several cities and villages in Raqqqa governorate. Dozens of young Raqqqa men are reported to have fled the city, for fear of forced conscription and revenge attacks.¹²⁷⁷

After a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by Turkey and Russia on 23 October 2019, the SDF withdrew on 28 October 2019 and Turkish-supported groups such as SNA entered the area along the Turkish-Syrian border between Tall Abyad and Ras al Ain.¹²⁷⁸ Points of the agreement included: the areas between Ras al Ain and Tall Abyad, taken during Turkey's Operation Peace Spring, remains under the control of Turkey and Turkey-backed opposition group's SNA, joint Syrian/Russian border patrols will be established and the SDF/YPG troops will withdraw from a 30 km zone.¹²⁷⁹

In November 2019, Russian and Turkish troops started patrolling areas of Raqqqa and Hasaka governorates. Several IEDs and small arms attacks targeted SDF personnel in Raqqqa city, and villages along the Khabour River and Euphrates River Valleys.¹²⁸⁰ By late November 2019, the so-called 'safe zone' between Tall Abyad and Ras al Ain had been secured by Turkey, and artillery shelling and air strikes had significantly decreased. Nevertheless, as the Col reported, 'the area experienced frequent attacks, including sporadic artillery shelling, ground skirmishes, car bombs and the use of other improvised explosive devices'.¹²⁸¹

Concerning the conduct of the SNA during the Operation Spring Peace offensive, the Col 'finds that there are reasonable grounds to believe that Syrian National Army fighters perpetrated the war crime of murder and repeatedly committed the war crime of pillaging, further seriously contravening the

¹²⁷¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 2 para 3

¹²⁷² Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 7-13 October 2019, [url](#), p. 4; SOHR, Turkish Forces kill 7 civilians as they try to escape their fire, and continue their attacks on Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn with heavy land and air support, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁷³ SOHR, Turkish Forces kill 7 civilians as they try to escape their fire, and continue their attacks on Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn with heavy land and air support, 11 October 2019, [url](#); Reuters, Turkish army, Syrian allies enter Tel Abyad, situation calm: Reuters witness, 13 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁷⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 2, 6, 19, para 3, 19; Al Jazeera, Over a dozen killed in car bomb attack near Turkey-Syria border, 3 November 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁷⁵ Telegraph (The), Assad troops enter north-east Syria after Russia-backed deal with Kurds, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁷⁶ Reuters, Syrian army deploys to town near Raqqqa-state media, 14 October 2019, [url](#); XinhuaNet, Syrian army enters Kurdish-held city, air base to help counter Turkish assault, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁷⁷ Al Jazeera, Raqqqa residents flee amid fear of Syrian government return, 15 February 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁷⁸ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 28 October-3 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6

¹²⁷⁹ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 21-27 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁸⁰ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 11-24 November 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹²⁸¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), para 46

right to enjoyment of possessions and property'.¹²⁸² AI has gathered witness testimonies of war crimes and other violations committed by Turkish and Turkey-backed Syrian forces who are said to 'have displayed a shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes, including summary killings and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians during the offensive into northeast Syria'.¹²⁸³

2.8.3.3 Security incidents

According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 482 security incidents recorded in Raqqa governorate, of whom 198 were coded as battles, 212 explosions/remote violence and 72 incidents of violence against civilians. The number of security incidents remained steady for the first half of 2019, registering a significant increase in security incidents starting with October 2019.

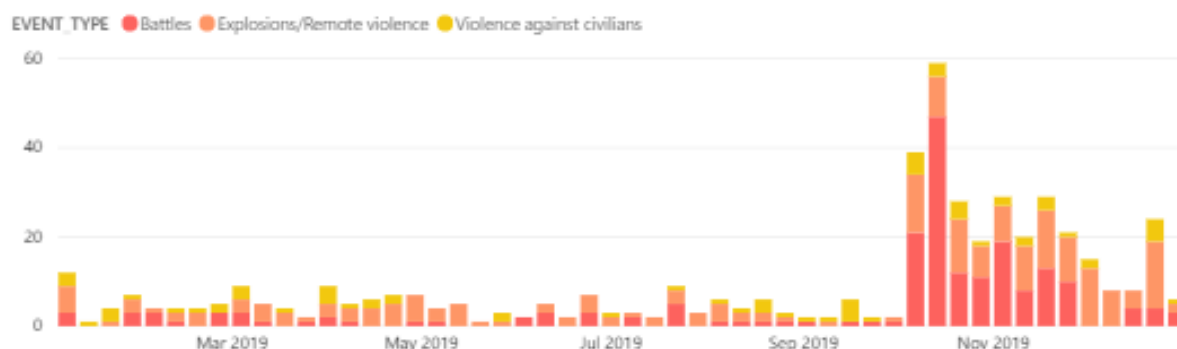


Figure 37. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Raqqa governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data¹²⁸⁴

Most security incidents were recorded in Tall Abyad district, followed by Raqqa district which had the highest number of incidents of violence against civilians out of all districts in the governorate.

Raqqa governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Raqqa	42	88	37
Ath-Thawrah	7	22	15
Tall Abyad	149	102	20
Total	198	212	72

Figure 38. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Raqqa governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 105 security incidents of which 14 were battles, 78 explosions/remote violence and 13 incidents of violence against civilians. Most of them were recorded in Tall Abyad (80).

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Raqqa governorate in 2019 and early 2020 included the following:

¹²⁸² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 12 para 59

¹²⁸³ AI, Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies, 18 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁸⁴ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

- On 7 January 2019, a suicide attack was conducted by ISIL on the SDF municipal council in Raqqa. Five people died and more than 20 were injured. The Dutch MFA noted in this regard: 'escaped ISIL fighters have gone into hiding and formed sleeping cells. They have the capacity to carry out attacks'.¹²⁸⁵
- On 2 April 2019, armed clashes between ISIL and SDF in central Raqqa city ended in the detonation of explosives by four ISIL members which killed at least 14 people. According to Carter Center, this is 'only the second suicide attack since late 2017' – after the suicide attack against SDF headquarters on 7 January 2019.¹²⁸⁶
- On 9 April 2019, a bomb attack in Raqqa city killed eight people, four civilians and four SDF-members. The attack occurred in two phases, of which the second blast caused the casualties. According to the source, there is a steady increase in attacks on SDF-areas, and also an increase in killings of SDF-fighters and commanders.¹²⁸⁷
- On 29 April 2019, several SDF fighters and civilians were killed by ISIL in a bomb attack in Raqqa City, as the Dutch MFA noted. Confidential sources told the MFA: 'members of ISIL still live in Raqqa and the surrounding area'.¹²⁸⁸
- In June 2019, the SDF started a campaign to enforce military service conscription, after having called, on 14 May, on all men in the age of 18-28 to do their 'self-defense duty'. The SDF arrested civilian males in Deir Ez-Zor, Hasaka and Raqqa governorates.¹²⁸⁹
- On 1 June 2019, a suicide bomber blew himself up with a booby trapped vehicle around the Al-Na'im Roundabout (Raqqa city). The attack resulted in the killing of 10 citizens and seven SDF fighters and injured tens of people. The bomber reportedly belonged to an ISIL cell whose members were arrested later that month.¹²⁹⁰ According to the UN Security Council, at least seven civilians were killed and at least 11 others injured.¹²⁹¹
- On 13 June 2019, three IEDs detonated in Raqqa city near the Firdous Mosque, Al Mashahadani Hospital and Al Rasheed park. It is not known whether there were civilian casualties involved.¹²⁹²
- On 6 August 2019, two¹²⁹³ or five¹²⁹⁴ IED attacks took place in Raqqa city. One device exploded near the national hospital and did not lead to civilian casualties, the other one detonated next to the house of the community leader (mukhtar) of the Jami'a al-Nour neighbourhood and killed him.¹²⁹⁵

¹²⁸⁵ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 40, footnote 349

¹²⁸⁶ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 1-7 April 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹²⁸⁷ Reuters, Bomb kills eight in Syrian city of Raqqa, 9 April 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁸⁸ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 40

¹²⁸⁹ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 27 May- 2 June 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹²⁹⁰ SOHR, A landmine explosion rocks one of the neighborhoods of Al-Raqqah city, 21 June 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁹¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 19

¹²⁹² Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 10-16 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4-5

¹²⁹³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 19

¹²⁹⁴ According to the SOHR, five explosions occurred in Raqqa city on this day. This number could not be corroborated with other sources. SOHR, 5 explosions hit al-Raqqah city in less than 24 hours causing human and material losses, 6 August 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁹⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 19

- On 26 August 2019, a VBIED detonated in Falastin street, Thawra (Tabqa), killing two civilians and injuring three more.¹²⁹⁶
- On 8 October 2019, ISIL militants launched three suicide attacks against SDF headquarters, cars and fighters in Raqqa city.¹²⁹⁷
- On 11 October 2019, as part of the Turkish offensive Operation Peace Spring, Turkish troops and Turkish-backed fighters launched attacks on Tall Abyad and villages around it. In total seven civilians were killed that day.¹²⁹⁸
- On 12 October 2019, Turkey-backed Syrian rebels Ahrar al-Sharqiya reportedly ambushed and killed nine civilians, at a roadblock on the M4 highway south of Tall Abyad. Amongst the victims was the Kurdish politician Havrin Khalaf.¹²⁹⁹ In reaction to the execution of Khalaf and others the CoI 'finds that there are reasonable grounds to believe that Syrian National Army fighters perpetrated the war crime of murder'.¹³⁰⁰
- SDF holds family members of ISIL fighters in Ayn Isa camp, south of Tall Abyad. There are incidents of the harassment of encamped women by armed SDF guards reported.¹³⁰¹ During the Turkish offensive of October 2019, the camp came under fire, after which a small number of inhabitants were transferred to Al Hol camp while the rest remained unaccounted for.¹³⁰²
- On 14 October 2019, two civilians were killed in ground-based bomb attacks in the village of Dik, in northern Raqqa.¹³⁰³
- The Turkish-backed opposition's SNA reportedly executed three health workers on 24 October 2019 in Suluk. The SNA was also alleged of looting of property (housing and businesses) in the newly-seized areas.¹³⁰⁴
- On 2 November 2019, at least 11 civilians were killed and 14 civilians were injured in a heavy car blast inside a market in Tall Abyad in northern Raqqa.¹³⁰⁵ According to SOHR cited by several sources, victims were fighters as well as civilians. No group has claimed responsibility.¹³⁰⁶

¹²⁹⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/820], 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 19. According to SOHR, one person was killed and 9 persons injured. SOHR, A booby-trapped vehicle explosion in one of the neighborhoods of Al-Tabqa city in the western sector of Al-Raqqah province leaves casualties and injuries mostly children, 26 August 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁹⁷ RFI, Islamic State group attacks Raqqa as Turkey prepares Syria offensive, 9 October 2019, [url](#). See also Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Spotlight on Global Jihad (October 7-23, 2019), 24 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁹⁸ SOHR, Turkish Forces kill 7 civilians as they try to escape their fire, and continue their attacks on Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn with heavy land and air support, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁹⁹ Guardian (The), Kurdish politician among nine civilians shot dead by pro-Turkey forces in Syria, 13 October 2019, [url](#); Defense Post (The), Turkey-backed Syrian rebels kill Kurdish politician, execute prisoners, 13 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁰⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), pp. 11-12 para 58-59

¹³⁰¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹³⁰² International Crisis Group, Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS, 18 November 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹³⁰³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹³⁰⁴ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 21-27 October 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹³⁰⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 19

¹³⁰⁶ Al Jazeera, Over a dozen killed in car bomb attack near Turkey-Syria border, 3 November 2019, [url](#); Reuters, Turkey blames Kurdish militia after deadly bombing in Syrian town, 2 November 2019, [url](#). See also BBC News, Tal Abyad car bomb: At least 13 killed in Syrian border town, 2 November 2019, [url](#)

- On 10 November 2019, a car bomb in Suluk, south-east of Tall Abyad, killed at least eight civilians and injured 20 others.¹³⁰⁷
- On 23 November 2019, a car bomb was detonated in the centre of Tall Abyad, killing at least ten and injuring over 25 people. Residents reportedly blamed the attack on the YPG and PKK, while the SDF accused 'Turkish-backed mercenaries' for the attack.¹³⁰⁸
- In two different incidents on 18 and 23 December 2019, VBIEDs were used and killed two, and three civilians respectively. In the last event 21 civilians were injured as well.¹³⁰⁹
- On 9 October and 19 November, schools in Raqqa governorate were hit by rockets or crossfire. On 11 October 2019, the national hospital in Tall Abyad was attacked by an air strike.¹³¹⁰
- On 14 January 2020, ISIL launched a VBIED attack against YPG fighters in the village of Abou Rajab in rural Raqqa, killing and injuring several YPG members. This was part of a series of attacks by ISIL in Raqqa, Homs and Hasaka governorates, in the first weeks of January 2020.¹³¹¹

2.8.3.4 Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	11	6
February	8	8
March	15	15
April	22	32
May	3	6
June	5	20
July	-	15
August	4	22
September	6	7
October	34	25
November	48	40
December	10	3
Total	166	199

Figure 39. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Raqqa governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2019 sources documented between 166 (VDC data)¹³¹² and 199 civilian fatalities (SNHR data)¹³¹³ in Raqqa governorate. The highest number of civilian fatalities was documented in the months of October and November.

¹³⁰⁷ TRT World, Car bomb attack kills at least eight civilians in Syria's Tal Abyad, 10 November 2019, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Eight dead in blast in Turkish-held Syrian town, 10 November 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁰⁸ Reuters, Car bomb kills at least 10 people near Syria's border with Turkey, 23 November 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁰⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 17

¹³¹⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 19, para 19

¹³¹¹ Enab Baladi, ISIS carried out ten attacks in Syria since start of 2020, 17 January 2020, [url](#)

¹³¹² Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

¹³¹³ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians,

2.8.3.5 Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

A profile of the governorate in 2014 reported that ‘the public health system in Ar-Raqqa has been severely damaged. The poor health infrastructure and the large influx of IDPs into rural Ar-Raqqa will further strain these limited resources. [...] School enrolment is very low; a limited number of the 1449 schools are operating’.¹³¹⁴

Raqqa governorate has been severely damaged by the fighting, especially after the military operation against ISIL between June and October 2017. The many aerial bombardments and other military activities led not only to a high number of fatalities, but also of ‘large-scale destruction of hospitals, schools, and other critical civilian infrastructure’.¹³¹⁵

By 20 October 2017, the SDF took control of Raqqa city, which had been abandoned by nearly all inhabitants. According to a REACH damage analysis of Raqqa city carried out in October 2017, ‘despite initial recovery efforts, conflict-related damage still remains widespread amid a complex safety and security environment and civilians’ access to basic services are very limited’. The least damaged parts are in the western, eastern and north-eastern suburbs of the city, compared to the central areas. Inhabitants returned to those areas first, and gradually they have returned to other areas which were cleared of rubble and UXOs. The neighbourhood with the highest damage density is Mansour.¹³¹⁶

AI researchers visiting Raqqa city in February 2019, interviewed survivors and witnesses, and documented the destruction of large parts of Raqqa. The organisation concluded that Raqqa has been largely destroyed by the forces of the US-led coalition against ISIL which resulted in the death of more than 1 600 civilians, ‘far more than the 180 deaths the Coalition has so far admitted’. It added that the city, two years after the start of the battle for control, was still ‘completely devastated’.¹³¹⁷

Between May and June 2019, ACU conducted a detailed mapping of the current humanitarian needs and the level of destruction in Raqqa governorate, in particular in five cities and irrigation projects.¹³¹⁸ Below, the main issues are presented for Raqqa, Thawra and Tall Abyad.

Raqqa city has a population of 299 824 people, 30 % of which are IDPs. The level of damage of houses depends per neighbourhood. The public water network is disproportionately destroyed, the sewage system largely destroyed, the electricity grid completely destroyed and households depend on public electricity generators. More than half of the schools are non-functional. Roads are also heavily damaged.¹³¹⁹

Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

¹³¹⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 34; UNOCHA, Ar-Raqqa Governorate Reference map [map], n.d., [url](#)

¹³¹⁵ REACH/UNITAR, Syria, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12

¹³¹⁶ REACH/UNITAR, Syria, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12

¹³¹⁷ AI, Syria: new multimedia site tells story of Coalition's destruction of Raqqa, 6 June 2019, [url](#)

¹³¹⁸ ACU/IMU, Ar-Raqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report, December 2019, [url](#), pp. 13-14

¹³¹⁹ ACU/IMU, Ar-Raqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report, December 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12, 65

Thawra city has a population of 131 500 people, 33 % of which are IDPs. The public water network is disproportionately destroyed; the public electricity grid has minor malfunctions, and electricity is supplied for most of the day; road network is heavily damaged. A majority of schools (17 out of 29) are non-functional.¹³²⁰

Tall Abyad city has a population of 12 600 people, 5 % of which are IDPs. Level of damage in this city was (as of June 2019) less than in Raqqa and Thawra.¹³²¹

After the start of Operation Peace Spring and the increased violence in the border areas, about 150 schools closed down in Tall Abyad and Ras al Ain, depriving ‘scores of children’ of education.¹³²²

2.8.3.6 Displacement and return

Between January and December 2019, UNOCHA recorded around 58 000 IDP movements to or within Raqqa governorate, of which 52 000 IDP movements were within the governorate and the rest came from Hasaka, Deir Ez-Zor, Rural Damascus and Aleppo governorates. Around 10 000 IDP movements were recorded during the year from Raqqa governorate to Hasaka, Aleppo and Deir Ez-Zor governorates.¹³²³ In terms of IDP returns for 2019, Raqqa had about 12 000 IDP return movements to or within the governorate, of which 8 000 were return movements within the governorate and the rest came mainly from Aleppo and Hasaka governorates.¹³²⁴

As of 19 November 2019, 222 392 people were displaced from the border areas in northern Syria towards the central and southern parts of the Raqqa, Hasaka and Aleppo governorates as a result of the Turkish offensive, according to UNOCHA.¹³²⁵ As of 16 October 2019, UNHCR reported that most displacements took place from Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate) and Tall Abyad (Raqqa governorate) at the border with Turkey, with some families being displaced multiple times.¹³²⁶

According to the UN Security Council, after Operation Peace Spring, ‘as at 26 November, 123,000 people had returned, while almost 75,000 remained displaced from Hasakah, Raqqah and Aleppo Governorates and nearly 17,000 had fled to Iraq’.¹³²⁷

The UN Security Council further noted: ‘humanitarian supplies and commercial goods from Damascus heading for Qamishli and the rest of the north-east are being redirected along alternate supply lines because parts of the strategic M4 highway are closed. Access to services for populations either remaining in or returning to Raqqah Governorate has reportedly declined since 9 October’.¹³²⁸

As of February 2020, the UN Security Council gave the following data on IDPs in the northeast (which is including Raqqa governorate):

‘Some 70,000 people remained displaced in the north-east since 9 October 2019, including 14,000 in collective shelters for internally displaced persons. Prior to 9 October, the north-east had already hosted approximately 710,000 displaced civilians. Children accounted for 42

¹³²⁰ ACU/IMU, Ar-Raqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report, December 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12, 77-78

¹³²¹ ACU/IMU, Ar-Raqqa Governorate, Panoramic Report, December 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12, 109-110

¹³²² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 17 para 94

¹³²³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

¹³²⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

¹³²⁵ UNOCHA, Syria, Situation Report#12, Humanitarian impact of the military operation in northeastern Syria, 1-19 November 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹³²⁶ UNHCR, Syria Situation Report for the North East Syria Humanitarian Emergency (As of 16 October 2019), [url](#), p. 1

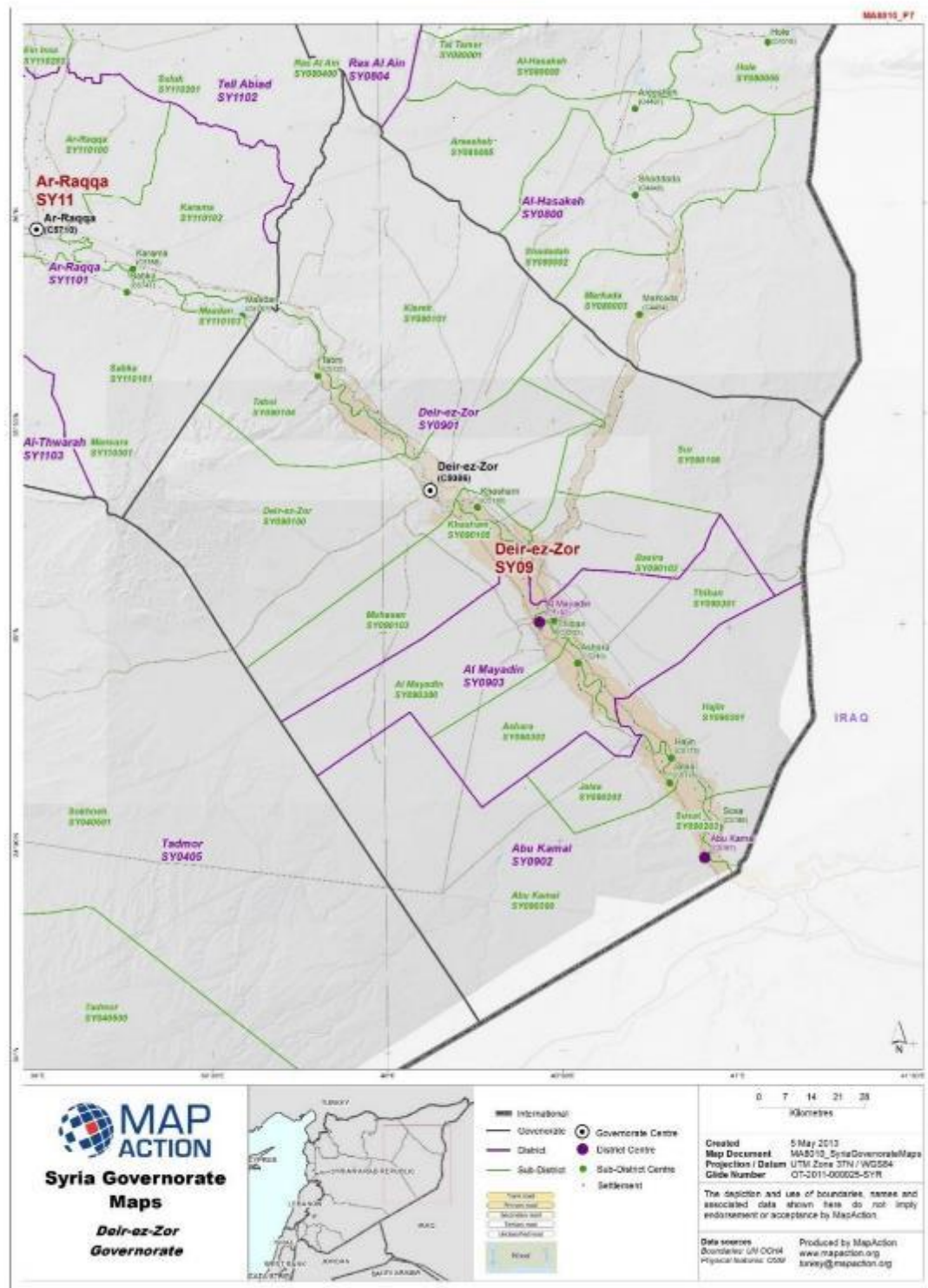
¹³²⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 2, para 3

¹³²⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 12, para 12

per cent of that population, most of whom were hosted by local communities. An additional 90,000 people remained hosted in several displacement camps'.¹³²⁹

¹³²⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020), Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3 para 7

2.9 Deir Ez-Zor governorate



Map 14: © MapAction, Deir Ez-Zor governorate map¹³³⁰

¹³³⁰ MapAction, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](http://www.mapaction.org)

2.9.1 General description of governorate

Deir Ez-Zor governorate is located in the east of Syria, around 450 km to the northeast of Damascus. The governorate's capital is Deir Ez-Zor city. The governorate stretches over 33 000 km², and is considered the second biggest governorate in terms of surface after Homs.¹³³¹ It shares one international border with Iraq, and internal borders with the governorates of Hasaka, Raqqqa, and Homs.¹³³² It is administratively divided into three districts: Deir Ez-Zor, Al-Mayadin, and Abu Kamal, and to 14 sub districts.¹³³³ According to a REACH map, the sub districts are: Kisreh, Tabni, Deir Ez-Zor, Sur, Basira, Khasham, Muhasan, Al Mayadin, Thiban, Ashara, Hajin, Jalaa, Abu Kamal, and Susat.¹³³⁴ The Euphrates River passes through the governorate, dividing it into two parts.¹³³⁵

ACU stated that a 2011 census showed that the population of Deir Ez-Zor governorate was 1 237 413.¹³³⁶ The Central Statistics Bureau of Syria estimated that the population of Deir Ez-Zor governorate was 1 124 000 in 2016.¹³³⁷

The majority of the inhabitants of Deir Ez-Zor governorate were Arabs, with Kurdish and Armenian minorities present alongside.¹³³⁸ ACU stated that 98 % of the population of the governorate were Sunni, and 2 % were Shia who used to live in Hseiniyeh village.¹³³⁹ There used to be a Christian community in the Euphrates region, including Deir Ez-Zor, notably Armenians, but according to Fabrice Balanche, most have fled ISIL persecution.¹³⁴⁰ Furthermore, Deir Ez-Zor governorate is highly tribal and has several clans, with Al-Akidat and Al-Bakara being the largest among them.¹³⁴¹

According to sources, Deir Ez-Zor governorate is rich in natural resources. It has 60 % of Syria's underground wealth according to ACU.¹³⁴² Al-Sharq Al-Awsat estimated that the eastern Euphrates contains 90 % of Syria's oil and 50 % of Syria's gas.¹³⁴³ The largest of the oil fields in Deir Ez-Zor governorate are Al-Tanak, Al-Omar, and Al-Ward.¹³⁴⁴ Around 40 % of Syria's electricity is produced by the Kuniko gas plant. In addition to oil and gas, Deir Ez-Zor is the first governorate in the production of cotton, and the third in the production of wheat.¹³⁴⁵

2.9.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

In the wake of the civil unrest in Syria in March 2011, Deir Ez-Zor governorate witnessed anti-government protests which instigated crackdowns by government forces.¹³⁴⁶ According Al Jazeera reporting of August 2011, 'the area outside the Arouda, Ibn Abi Taleb and Hrouil mosques erupted into chaos after security forces and plainclothes "thugs" opened fire on people leaving prayers and attacked them with batons', causing four deaths.¹³⁴⁷ By summer 2012, the FSA controlled more than

¹³³¹ BBC News, تعرف على دير الزور [Know about Deir ez-Zor], September 2017, [url](#)

¹³³² UNOCHA, Deir Ez-Zor Governorate: Reference Map, 9 May 2016, [url](#)

¹³³³ ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹³³⁴ REACH, Northeast Syria: Area-Based Assessment of Deir ez-Zor Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹³³⁵ ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹³³⁶ ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹³³⁷ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

¹³³⁸ BBC News, تعرف على دير الزور [Know about Deir ez-Zor], September 2017, [url](#)

¹³³⁹ ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹³⁴⁰ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 87

¹³⁴¹ ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹³⁴² ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹³⁴³ Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, استنفار أميركي لاحتواء توتر عربي - كردي شرق سوريا [US Alert to Contain Arab-Kurdish Tension in Eastern Syria], 2 May 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁴⁴ BBC News, تعرف على دير الزور [Know about Deir ez-Zor], September 2017, [url](#)

¹³⁴⁵ ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹³⁴⁶ Guardian (The), Syrian government forces attack Houleh and Deir Ezzor, 7 August 2011, [url](#)

¹³⁴⁷ Al Jazeera, 'Dozens dead' in Syria after Friday protests, 13 August 2011, [url](#)

three-quarters of Deir Ez-Zor city.¹³⁴⁸ On 25 September 2012, and following the deployment of a military campaign of the Republican Guard in Deir Ez-Zor city, 460 civilians were killed in Al-Jourah, in addition to dozens of victims in Qosour and Jubaila neighbourhoods of the city. Moreover, 86 bodies of mostly women, children, and elderly were found among the tombs in a graveyard on 19 October 2012, allegedly executed by GoS forces.¹³⁴⁹

In 2014, ISIL captured the FSA-held neighbourhoods and imposed a siege on the GoS-held parts of the city in early 2015.¹³⁵⁰ Reportedly, the siege badly impacted civilians as it prevented the entry of food and deprived besieged areas of electricity. The siege lasted for two years and resulted in the displacement of most of the population of Deir Ez-Zor city.¹³⁵¹ In the countryside, and after fighting with Al-Nusra Front and opposing Arab tribes, ISIL succeeded in capturing the province almost entirely, on 20 July 2014.¹³⁵² Right afterwards, ISIL started persecuting the tribes that had fought the group, and around 700 members of Al-Shaitat tribe, mostly civilians, were executed by the group in the villages of Graneij, Abu Hamam, and Kushkiya.¹³⁵³ Motivated by revenge, around 200 members of the Al-Shaitat, as well as members of other tribes in Deir Ez-Zor, joined the SAA in its fight against ISIL.¹³⁵⁴

In 2017, major military operations were conducted by the SAA supported by Russia and Iran, which led to the recapturing of Deir Ez-Zor city.¹³⁵⁵ According to ACU, Syrian and Russian airstrikes resulted in the death of hundreds of civilians in Al-Mayadin, Khasham, Kasra, Abu Kamal and Muhasan.¹³⁵⁶ By the end of 2017, ISIL lost most of its territorial control in the western side of the Euphrates.¹³⁵⁷ On the eastern side of the river, the SDF was engaged in fierce fighting with the group¹³⁵⁸ until early 2019 when ISIL was confined to a small pocket of land near the Syria-Iraq border.¹³⁵⁹ In March 2019, the last ISIL-held territory in Baghouz village was captured by SDF.¹³⁶⁰

According to a European University Institute report, the governorate ‘remains fragmented and disputed’ between areas subject to the control of the US-backed SDF and those under the control of GoS forces.¹³⁶¹

2.9.2.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

According to Gregory Waters, the following SAA military units were or have been deployed in Deir Ez-Zor governorate, with the name of the unit and the last known date of deployment (as of 17 March 2020):

- Republican Guard: 103rd Brigade – Deir Ez Zor Province – 13 February 2019;
- 4th Division: Unknown Unit – Eastern Deir Ez Zor Province – 21 September 2019;

¹³⁴⁸ Aswad, Z., The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir ez-Zor: Identifying Key Local Players, European University Institute, March 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹³⁴⁹ ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 7

¹³⁵⁰ Aswad, Z., The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir ez-Zor: Identifying Key Local Players, European University Institute, March 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹³⁵¹ ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 7

¹³⁵² Al-Jumhuriya, داعش والعشائر في دير الزور، التمرد و الاحتواء [DAESH and Deir ez-Zor Tribes: Rebellion and Containment], 11 April 2017, [url](#)

¹³⁵³ SOHR, "الدولة الإسلامية" قتل 700 من "الشعبيات" السورية, 17 August 2014, [url](#)

¹³⁵⁴ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 90

¹³⁵⁵ Aswad, Z., The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir ez-Zor: Identifying Key Local Players, European University Institute, March 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁵⁶ ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 7

¹³⁵⁷ ISW, ISIS's Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency, June 2019, [url](#), p. 23

¹³⁵⁸ Washington Post (The), U.S.-backed forces battle ISIS around the edges of Raqqa's Old City, 13 June 2017, [url](#)

¹³⁵⁹ Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, 'Heavy Clashes' as SDF Battles ISIS in Syria, 10 February 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁶⁰ CNN, ISIS has lost its final stronghold in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces says, 23 March 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁶¹ Aswad, Z., The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir ez-Zor: Identifying Key Local Players, European University Institute, March 2019, [url](#), p. 5

- 1st Corps: 7th Division: 137th Regiment – Harbisha, Deir Ez Zor – 23 October 2019;
- 2nd Corps: 1st Division: 58th Brigade – Deir Ez Zor Province – 25 March 2019; 91st Brigade/unknown unit – Deir Ez Zor Province – 30 April 2019;
- 3rd Corps: 11th Division: 462nd Battalion – Boukamal, Deir Ez Zor – 19 July 2018; 17th Division: 213th Battalion – Deir Ez Zor Province – 8 January 2020; 484th Battalion – Deir Ez Zor Province – 28 October 2019; 10th Reserve Regiment – Deir Ez Zor Province – 6 October 2019; 137th Regiment – Deir Ez Zor Province – 2 February 2019;
- 5th Corps: 1st Brigade/13th Battalion – Boukamal, Deir Ez Zor – 7 February 2019; 7th Brigade/unknown unit – Deir Ez Zor Province – 10 January 2020;
- Border Guards: 10th Regiment/55th Battalion – Deir Ez Zor Province – 8 September 2019; 10th Regiment/74th Battalion – Deir Ez Zor Province – 8 September 2019.¹³⁶²

Alongside the SAA, the following pro-GoS actors were reported to be present and active in Deir Ez-Zor governorate:

- Baath Brigades: affiliated with the party branch in Deir Ez-Zor.¹³⁶³
- NDF: According to Al-Masdar News, members of NDF were deployed to front-lines with the SDF in Deir Ez-Zor in October 2019.¹³⁶⁴ A Middle East Institute chart based on ACLED data showed that in 2018, NDF was present in Deir Ez-Zor.¹³⁶⁵
- Al-Busraya Tribal Forces: In an interview with Jawad Al-Tamimi¹³⁶⁶, a leader in Al-Busraya Forces stated that the group fought in Deir Ez-Zor alongside the SAA and was affiliated with the Air Force Intelligence apparatus. He also stated that the group captured three villages in the SDF-held territory of Deir Ez-Zor before it was repelled by US airstrikes.¹³⁶⁷

2.9.2.2 Iran and Iranian-backed groups

A Washington Institute article from October 2019 stated that ‘Iran and its proxies control at least seven towns on the east side of the Euphrates River stretching south of Deir al-Zour city, from Mayadin to al-Bukamal’. They exercise full authority with 4 500 personnel belonging to the IRGC and other Shia militias.¹³⁶⁸ The Danish Institute for International Studies observed that the IRGC and other Shia militias are dominant in western Deir Ez-Zor, in villages alongside the Euphrates, and along the Syrian-Iraqi border.¹³⁶⁹ Another source observed that ‘the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commands a variety of militias in the governorate of Deir ez-Zor working to achieve its military objective of protecting its sphere of influence’. He clarified that ‘the IRGC’s external arm is known as the Quds Force’¹³⁷⁰ and it controls several militias through a cell operating from the IRGC’s headquarters in Deir Ez-Zor.¹³⁷¹ According to sources, Iran proxies include:

¹³⁶² Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁶³ Aswad, Z., The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir ez-Zor: Identifying Key Local Players, European University Institute, March 2019, [url](#), p. 14

¹³⁶⁴ Al-Masdar News, Syrian Army deploys large number of soldiers to Deir Ezzor for potential Euphrates offensive, 8 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁶⁵ Middle East Institute, The fight over the spoils of war in Deir ez-Zor heats up, 16 January 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁶⁶ An independent analyst and researcher on Iraq and Syria. Some of his articles are published by research websites such as The Washington Institute and the Middle East Institute

¹³⁶⁷ Al-Tamimi, A. J., مقابلة حصرية مع قيادي عسكري من عشيرة البوسرايا [Situation in Deir ez-Zor: Exclusive Interview with a Military Leader in Al-Bousaraya Tribe], 17 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁶⁸ Alrifai, Oula A., What Is Iran Up To in Deir al-Zour?, 10 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁶⁹ Danish Institute for International Studies, Immanent Conflict without Immanent War: Local Actors and Foreign Powers Are Scrabbling for Influence in Iraq and Syria, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁰ Aswad, Z., Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities, 21 October 2019, [url](#), European University Institute, p. 3, fn. 3

¹³⁷¹ Aswad, Z., Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities, 21 October 2019, [url](#), European University Institute, pp. 3, 4

- Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU): The Washington Institute and the Danish Institute for International Studies made reference to the presence of PMU in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹³⁷² Moreover, in May 2019, Smart News reported that a PMU convoy entered the governorate of Deir Ez-Zor coming from Iraq.¹³⁷³
- Al-Baqir Brigade: According to Athr News, Al-Baqir Brigade is a group made up of members of Arab tribes on the eastern side of the Euphrates, notably Al-Bakara tribe.¹³⁷⁴ Reportedly, the group threatened to launch an attack to capture the SDF-held territory across the Euphrates.¹³⁷⁵ The group also had a presence in Al-Mayadin City.¹³⁷⁶
- Hezbollah: In 2018, Hezbollah participated in the offensive against ISIL in Deir Ez-Zor.¹³⁷⁷ It had a presence in the centre of Deir Ez-Zor city, in Dahiyat Al-Assad.¹³⁷⁸

In addition to the above mentioned groups, Zaman Al-Wasl made reference to the presence of other Iran-backed militias in Deir Ez-Zor, notably the Afghan Fatimiyoun, the Pakistani Zainabiyoun, Zayn Al-Abidin, the Iraqi Haydariyoun, and Harakat Hezbollah Al-Nujaba.¹³⁷⁹ According to the Danish Institute for International Studies, the IRGC and Iran-backed militias perform tasks related to local governance and establishment of religious institutions in addition to their military tasks.¹³⁸⁰

2.9.2.3 Russia

The Syrian opposition media outlet, Orient, reported in October 2018 that Iranian militias withdrew from several points in Deir Ez-Zor governorate and handed them to Russian forces, for unknown reasons.¹³⁸¹ In an article dated November 2018, Chatham House reported on several conflict incidents that involved Russian and Iranian forces in Deir Ez-Zor, including mutual assassination and arrests of military personnel.¹³⁸² In February 2019, Russian and Syrian forces approached a US/SDF position and clashes broke out that led to the death of 30 Russian soldiers, allegedly working for the Wagner Group.¹³⁸³ In October 2019, Al-Masdar News reported that joint Russian, Syrian and Iranian forces held military drills along the western bank of the Euphrates, in proximity to the US forces.¹³⁸⁴

¹³⁷² Alrifai, Oula A., What Is Iran Up To in Deir al-Zour?, 10 October 2019, [url](#); Danish Institute for International Studies, Immanent Conflict without Immanent War: Local Actors and Foreign Powers Are Scrabbling for Influence in Iraq and Syria, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷³ Smart News, [رتل لميليشيا "الحشد الشعبي" يدخل دير الزور قادما من العراق](#) [A PMU Militia Convoy Enters Deir ez-Zor Coming from Iraq], 29 May 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁴ Athr News, ["قوات مؤلفة من العشائر العربية تعلن عن جهوزيتها لاستعادة ريف دير الزور الغربي من "قسد"](#) [Forces Composed of Arab Tribes Announces Its Readiness to Recapture Western Deir ez-Zor Countryside from "SDF"], 15 September 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁵ COAR, Syria Update: September 18 – 24, 2019, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹³⁷⁶ Zaman Al-Wasl, Tehran attempts to make Deir Ezzor province an Iranian territory, 29 September 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁷ MEI, The fight over the spoils of war in Deir ez-Zor heats up, 16 January 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁸ Zaman Al-Wasl, Tehran attempts to make Deir Ezzor province an Iranian territory, 29 September 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁹ Zaman Al-Wasl, Tehran attempts to make Deir Ezzor province an Iranian territory, 29 September 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁸⁰ Danish Institute for International Studies, Immanent Conflict without Immanent War: Local Actors and Foreign Powers Are Scrabbling for Influence in Iraq and Syria, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁸¹ Orient News, [انسحاب مفاجئ لميليشيات إيرانية من شرقي دير الزور وتسليمها للروس](#) [Sudden Withdrawal of Iranian Militias from Eastern Deir ez-Zor and Handing Over to the Russians], 7 October 2018, [url](#)

¹³⁸² Chatham House, Russian-Iranian Conflict Erupts in Deir ez-Zor, November 2018, [url](#)

¹³⁸³ Middle East Institute, Russia's Middle East: You probe with bayonets. If you find mush, you proceed, 27 February 2019, [url](#); Foreign Policy described Wagner Group as 'a shadowy mercenary outfit waging secret wars on the Kremlin's behalf from Ukraine to Syria to the Central African Republic. FP, The Rise and Fall of a Russian Mercenary Army, 6 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁸⁴ Al-Masdar News, Russia, Syria, Iran hold military drills near US forces in Deir Ezzor, 2 October 2019, [url](#)

2.9.2.4 Syrian Democratic Forces

As of March 2020 the part of Deir Ez-Zor governorate situated to the east of the Euphrates is under the control of SDF.¹³⁸⁵ Control of the governorate was divided between the government and the SDF following parallel campaigns against ISIL in late 2017.¹³⁸⁶ There were reports on tensions and a general feeling of discontent among the Arab residents of the SDF-controlled parts of Deir Ez-Zor, mainly due to the perception of SDF as ‘an external force led by Kurds and intent on changing social mores and norms’.¹³⁸⁷

2.9.2.5 US

The Danish Institute for International Studies stated that despite the US initial plans to pull out from Syria’s north-east, it seemed to have decided to keep around 500 troops in Deir Ez-Zor.¹³⁸⁸ On 30 October 2019, the New York Times reported that around 500 soldiers would be deployed in Syria to protect the oil fields.¹³⁸⁹ A US CRS map depicting areas of influence in Syria as of January 2020, showed the US/Coalition had a military base near Al Mayadin.¹³⁹⁰ In February 2020, USDOD reported that in north-east Syria US troops had a presence near Qamishli in Hasaka governorates and near the oil fields in Deir Ez-Zor.¹³⁹¹ US deployments are said to be in coordination with the SDF.¹³⁹²

According to Fabrice Balanche, a number of Sunni militias in Deir Ez-Zor governorate were backed by the US. Such militias included Usud Al-Sharqiya (Lions of the East), Jaysh Maghawir Al-Thawra (Rebel Commando Army), and Liwa Tahrir Deir ez-Zor (Deir ez-Zor Liberation Brigade). The number of those fighters was 2 000 at most.¹³⁹³ In July 2019 it was reported that the US resumed training Jaysh Al-Maghawir in Al-Tanf base as well as in camps in Jordan.¹³⁹⁴

2.9.2.6 ISIL

Despite the loss of its last stronghold in Baghouz, ISIL maintained a steady low-level violence in Deir Ez-Zor’s eastern countryside, which including road bombings, assassinations and drive-by shootings.¹³⁹⁵ According to the BBC, ‘the nucleus of IS activity in Syria is the greater region of Deir al-Zour in the north-east, particularly the areas extending south of Bosaira towards Diban.’¹³⁹⁶ According to a Refugees International report, the threat of ISIL is greater in Deir Ez-Zor governorate than in Raqqa, and SDF foresaw clearance operations to drive out ISIL fighters and sleeper cells in its areas of control.¹³⁹⁷ Moreover, the Carter Center reported in March 2019 that ISIL activities between Al-Shudadah and Deir Ez-Zor city increased, and the USDOD reported that between October and end of

¹³⁸⁵ Based on reading of Map 2: ISW, Control of terrain in Syria, 31 March 2020, see [url](#)

¹³⁸⁶ COAR, Syria Update: September 18 – 24, 2019, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹³⁸⁷ Atlantic Council, The future of northeast Syria, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁸⁸ Danish Institute for International Studies, Immanent Conflict without Immanent War: Local Actors and Foreign Powers Are Scrabbling for Influence in Iraq and Syria, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁸⁹ New York times (The), Hundreds of U.S. Troops Leaving, and Also Arriving in, Syria, 30 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁹⁰ Based on reading of the map Syria Areas of Influence 2020 in US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹³⁹¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 35

¹³⁹² Rudaw, US sends troops to Deir ez-Zor to protect oil fields from ISIS, destabilizing actors: official, 26 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁹³ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 91

¹³⁹⁴ New Arab (The), التدريب الأميركي لفصائل الجيش الحر: سوابق غير مشجعة [The US Training of Free Syrian Army factions: Non-Encouraging Precedents], 21 July 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁹⁵ International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), p. 24

¹³⁹⁶ BBC News, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: What his death means for IS in Syria, 27 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁹⁷ RI, An Uncertain Future: Fragility and Humanitarian Priorities in Northeast Syria, 25 July 2019, [url](#)

December 2019, ISIL 'continued to carry out operations in Raqqa, Hasakah and Dayr az Zawr Provinces as it did before the U.S. departure'.¹³⁹⁸

2.9.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

2.9.3.1 Tensions

In the wake of ISIL defeat in Syria and the capturing of the group's former territory of control by both GoS forces and the SDF, there have been reports on increasing tension between the residents of those areas and the forces controlling them. BBC reported in October 2019 that Arab tribes rejected both the SDF and the SAA presence in surrounding areas. Those Arab tribes have reportedly been staging demonstrations against GoS and its Iranian ally.¹³⁹⁹ Such demonstrations were partly instigated by a statement of the commander of the Baqir Brigade in which he threatened to launch an offensive aimed at capturing SDF-held regions of Deir Ez-Zor. The demonstrators were reportedly IDPs from GoS-held areas, and for them, returning to their communities is almost impossible.¹⁴⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the research institute/think tank of the training academy of the Austrian Armed Forces, IFK, stated that on 6 May 2019, 3 800 IDPs did, indeed, return to their towns and villages in Deir Ez-Zor encouraged by a general amnesty granted for army deserters by a decree issued in 2018. The region from which those IDPs came, however, was not mentioned by the source.¹⁴⁰¹ Furthermore, the Atlantic Council stated that the GoS 'pursued its own line of effort to engage with Arab tribal elements in the area, perhaps in conjunction with Iran, with the aim of undermining support for SDF rule'.¹⁴⁰²

On its part, the SDF also endeavoured to 'forge ties with Deir al-Zour's Arab residents' by involving them in counter-ISIL efforts¹⁴⁰³ and an increasing role in local governance in areas it succeeded in seizing from the government.¹⁴⁰⁴ However, strikes and demonstrations against SDF have been reported.¹⁴⁰⁵ Sources provided various possible reasons for this unrest, including complaints about insufficiency of services and inequity in the division of the governorate's oil revenues¹⁴⁰⁶ and the SDF raids on Arab communities targeting ISIL sleeper cells which seemed to incite anger among the Arab residents who 'organized dozens of street protests against the SDF in Deir ez-Zor Province in April and May 2019'.¹⁴⁰⁷ The ethnic factor also seemed to play a role in increasing the tension, and the presence of the PYD-led SDF was regarded by the Arab communities in Deir Ez-Zor as external, and a threat to their norms.¹⁴⁰⁸ According to a Sky News Arabia report, the SDF presence in Deir Ez-Zor was regarded as 'Kurdish occupation' by some locals.¹⁴⁰⁹

The collaboration between the SDF and the GoS, especially with regard to oil, seemed to be a trigger for an uprising against the SDF.¹⁴¹⁰ Furthermore, there were reports on tensions between the Arab

¹³⁹⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 39

¹³⁹⁹ BBC News, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: What his death means for IS in Syria, 27 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰⁰ COAR, Syria Update: September 18 – 24, 2019, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴⁰¹ IFK, Factsheet Syria: 16 April 2019 – 03 June 2019, June 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁴⁰² Atlantic Council, The future of northeast Syria, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰³ International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), p. 25

¹⁴⁰⁴ COAR, Syria Update: September 18 – 24, 2019, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴⁰⁵ Smart News, تجار ينغذون إضرابا شرق دير الزور احتجاجا على تردي الوضع الأمني [Merchants Start a Strike in Eastern Deir ez-Zor to Protest the Deteriorating Security Situation], 25 June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰⁶ International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), p. 25

¹⁴⁰⁷ IFK, Factsheet Syria: 16 April 2019 – 03 June 2019, June 2019, [url](#), p. 2; ISW, ISIS's Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency, June 2019, [url](#), p. 43

¹⁴⁰⁸ Atlantic Council, The future of northeast Syria, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰⁹ Sky News Arabia, انتفاضة دير الزور ضد "قسد" .. غضب كامن تشعله صهاريج النفط [Deir ez-Zor Revolution against SDF.. Static Rage Fuelled by Oil Tanks], 29 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴¹⁰ Jamestown Foundation (The), The PKK Roots of America's Ally in Syria, 14 June 2019, [url](#); Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, استنفار أميركي لاحتواء توتر عربي – كردي شرق سوريا [US Alert to Contain Arab-Kurdish Tension in Eastern Syria], 2 May 2019, [url](#)

and Kurdish elements within the very structure of the SDF, and speculations that such tensions could impact the unity and stability of the SDF surfaced.¹⁴¹¹ In May 2019, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat reported on the role the US has been playing to contain a potential split in the structure of the SDF between Arab tribal members and Kurdish fighters.¹⁴¹² According to the Danish Institute for International Studies, the Arab tribes in Deir Ez-Zor showed a division of affiliation from the beginning of the civil unrest in Syria. Some factions in Deir Ez-Zor joined the SDF, others were aligned with GoS forces, and the rest pledged allegiance to ISIL. The same source stated that as the US influence waned, 'Iran, Turkey and Russia are all trying to reach out to tribal groups, potentially breaking up the SDF from within'.¹⁴¹³

Another element that contributed to the increase of tension in Deir Ez-Zor governorate was ISIL. The pressure of a potential ISIL resurgence reduced the support of local Sunni Arabs to SDF. The latter's raids against presumed ISIL cells seemed to have ignited protests in the governorate.¹⁴¹⁴ According to the pro-opposition media outlet, Horrya, SDF committed a massacre in Al-Shuheil town on 9 May 2019 during a raid on a potential ISIL sleeper cell.¹⁴¹⁵ Moreover, ISIL worked actively towards 'sap[ping] confidence in the SDF and its related civilian institutions'. For instance, ISIL posted the names of SDF enlistees and civil servants on several mosques in the city of Deir Ez-Zor, demanding them to repent.¹⁴¹⁶ In June 2019, ISW reported that ISIL started to burn crops across Deir Ez-Zor governorate and might have started to impose Zakat taxes on certain categories of the population.¹⁴¹⁷ According to the Atlantic Council, the SDF's expansion of territory and governance increased corruption and consequently fed into the local concern of its ability to maintain security. The source stated that 'the entirety of the SDF project depends on the US security guarantee to protect the border from Turkish military intervention, and from the regime and its allies along the Euphrates river to the south'.¹⁴¹⁸

2.9.3.2 Iranian influence

According to a Chatham House article published in February 2019, Iran exploited 'the lack of a regional or international vision for the situation in Syria as well as the dwindling presence of anti-Iranian international players there'.¹⁴¹⁹ The Middle East Institute observed that the importance of Deir Ez-Zor to Iran lied in the latter's strategic location which would allow for the creation of a strip of friendly territory stretching from Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria.¹⁴²⁰

Reportedly, Iran and its proxies in Deir Ez-Zor governorate engaged in recruiting local men in the ranks of militias such as the PMU. Those who refused to be recruited would be arrested, or even killed, the thing that negatively influenced the numbers of IDP returns in the region.¹⁴²¹ SOHR noted an increase in Iran's recruitment operations in the western side of the Euphrates, where men and young men have been recruited to join the ranks of Iranian militias. It also made reference to Iranian operations to spread Shiism in the region.¹⁴²² Erem News reported in August 2019 that Iran-backed groups opened

¹⁴¹¹ Danish Institute for International Studies, Immanent Conflict without Immanent War: Local Actors and Foreign Powers Are Scrabbling for Influence in Iraq and Syria, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴¹² Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, استنفار أميركي لاحتواء توتر عربي - كردي شرق سوريا [US Alert to Contain Arab-Kurdish Tension in Eastern Syria], 2 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴¹³ Danish Institute for International Studies, Immanent Conflict without Immanent War: Local Actors and Foreign Powers Are Scrabbling for Influence in Iraq and Syria, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴¹⁴ ISW, ISIS's Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency, June 2019, [url](#), p. 43

¹⁴¹⁵ Horrya, "سدف" ترتكب مجزرة خلال مدهمتها "الشحيل" في دير الزور [“SDF” Commits a Massacre in a Raid on “Shauheil” in Deir ez-Zor], 9 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴¹⁶ International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), p. 25

¹⁴¹⁷ ISW, ISIS's Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency, June 2019, [url](#), p. 44

¹⁴¹⁸ Atlantic Council, The future of northeast Syria, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴¹⁹ Chatham House, Iran is Winning Deir ez-Zor by Default, February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁰ Middle East Institute, The fight over the spoils of war in Deir ez-Zor heats up, 16 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴²¹ New Arab (The), النظام يطمس هوية دير الزور [The Regime Obliterates the Identity of Deir ez-Zor], 5 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴²² SOHR, Iran continues the recruiting and “Shiism” operations, raising to about 5200, the number of people recruited recently in the west Euphrates area and the Syrian south, 20 July 2019, [url](#)

schools in several towns in Deir Ez-Zor governorate, including Al-Mayadin, aimed at converting children aged 6-10 years old to Shiism.¹⁴²³ Additionally, militia members have reportedly been manning checkpoints across the governorate, extorting money from IDPs on the move.¹⁴²⁴ On 10 December 2019, Fox News stated that, according to satellite images it has obtained and Western intelligence sources who reviewed the information, Iran was building an underground tunnel in the Imam Ali military base in Abu Kamal for the purpose of storing 'missiles and large-scale weapons'.¹⁴²⁵

2.9.3.3 Infighting and clashes

Local media sources reported on various incidents of infighting and clashes between different actors, that took place in 2019 in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. In April 2019, SY24 reported on violent clashes between an IRGC-backed militia and members of one of the Syrian intelligence apparatuses in Abu Kamal, in which light weapons were used.¹⁴²⁶ In July 2019, the opposition news outlet, Orient, reported on clashes that broke out between the NDF and an Iran-backed militia in Al-Mayadin.¹⁴²⁷ Qasioun News reported in August 2019 that infighting broke out between GoS forces and Iran-backed Iraqi militias in Muhasan, Buleil, and Abu Kamal in eastern Deir Ez-Zor. The source stated that the clashes resulted in 12 deaths, but it did not specify whether the victims were civilians or militants.¹⁴²⁸ Furthermore, the Carter Center reported that on 4 December, GoS forces and members of Al-Baqir Brigade clashed in Salihya town for unknown reasons.¹⁴²⁹ In addition, civilians were terrorised when clashes between the SAA and members of the IRGC's 47th Brigade broke out during food distribution in Abu Kamal.¹⁴³⁰ Finally, in February 2020, a civilian was injured when a clash broke out between the SAA 4th Division and the Iran-backed Fatimiyoun Brigade in Al-Mayadin.¹⁴³¹

In addition to infighting amongst pro-GoS forces, Eldorar reported that clashes broke out between the SAA and the SDF in Tayana in eastern rural Deir ez-Zor. Reportedly, the incident took place when a SAA unit attempted to cross the Euphrates to the eastern bank controlled by the SDF.¹⁴³²

2.9.3.4 ISIL's territorial defeat and its reaction

The period before the capturing of Baghouz by the SDF witnessed an intensification of military operations that affected civilians in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. The UN Security Council stated that on 18 January 2019, at least 21 civilians were killed in alleged air strikes that targeted Baghouz in eastern Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁴³³ In the same report, the Council observed that 'air and ground-based strikes continued to kill and injure civilians and damage and destroy civilian infrastructure, in particular in eastern Dayr

¹⁴²³ Erem News, *مليشيات إيران تنشر التشيع في دير الزور السورية* [Report: Iran's Militias Spreads Shiism in Syria's Deir ez-Zor], 27 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁴ Middle East Institute, *The fight over the spoils of war in Deir ez-Zor heats up*, 16 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁵ FOX News, *Iran building new underground tunnel to house missiles: intelligence sources*, 10 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁶ SY24, *اشتباكات بين مليشيا إيران ومخابرات النظام في دير الزور* [Clashes between Iran-backed militia and the regime's intelligence in Deir ez-Zor], 10 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁷ Orient, *اشتباكات بين مليشيا الدفاع الوطني و المليشيات الإيرانية شرق دير الزور* [Clashes between NDF Militia and Iran-backed Militias in Eastern Deir ez-Zor], 24 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁸ Qasioun News, *اشتباكات بين قوات النظام و مليشيات عراقية شرق دير الزور* [Clashes between Regime Forces and Iraqi Militias in Eastern Deir ez-Zor], 28 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁹ Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary*, 25 November – 8 December 2019, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁴³⁰ Orient, *اشتباكات بين مليشيا أسد و لإيران شرق دير الزور* [Clashes between Assad and Iran Militias in Eastern Deir ez-Zor], 11 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴³¹ 7al, *اشتباك جديد بين مليشيات إيرانية والجيش السوري في دير الزور* [New Clash between Iranian Militias and the Syrian Army in Deir ez-Zor], 28 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴³² Eldorar, *تدمير "همر" و سقوط قتلى .. اشتباكات عنيفة بين مليشيا "قسد" و "قوات الأسد" شرق دير الزور* [Destruction of a "Hammer" and Deaths. Violent Clashes Between "SDF" Militias and "Assad Forces" in Eastern Deir ez-Zor], 5 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴³³ UN Security Council, *Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/157)*, 19 February 2019, [url](#), p. 15

al-Zawr'.¹⁴³⁴ In its report of 16 April 2019, the UN Security Council stated that 'large numbers of civilians were reportedly killed and injured in Baghuz and surrounding areas in south-eastern Day al-Zawr Governorate as a result of air strikes and intense fighting between the Syrian Democratic Forces and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant'.¹⁴³⁵ In the report, the UN Security Council cited an incident that took place on 10 February 2019, and in which at least four civilians were killed in alleged SDF ground-based strikes on a populated area in Baghuz.¹⁴³⁶ According to Airwars, at least 470 civilians were killed in the US-led coalition strikes against ISIL in Deir Ez-Zor governorate in the first quarter of 2019.¹⁴³⁷

The number of incidents related to landmine and IED detonations in the area between Deir Ez-Zor and Baghouz amounted to 48 since the start of 2019 and 10 March 2019. These were attributed to ISIL's 'ongoing legacy' in these areas.¹⁴³⁸

In the period that followed the fall of Baghouz, ISIL-related activities in Deir Ez-Zor governorate continued. The Carter Center reported in March 2019 that despite the defeat of ISIL, 'nine incidents were recorded in the towns of Abu Hamam, Kalta, Jadid Bakkara, Jurdi al Sharqi, Tayyana, Hajin, Shiheil, and Basira. This brings the total number of recorded events against SDF personnel in Deir Ez Zor governorate to 317 in 2019'.¹⁴³⁹ In May 2019, suspected ISIL attacks against SDF patrols and GoS forces were reported in several districts.¹⁴⁴⁰

ISIL attacks included roadside bombs, drive-by shooting and assassinations of local SDF collaborators. Arab elements of the SDF have been particularly targeted in the area to deter the predominantly Arab local population from cooperating with the SDF/YPG forces. According to sources interviewed by the International Crisis Group¹⁴⁴¹, ISIL attacks in Deir Ez-Zor governorate 'have been concentrated in a strip along the Euphrates River between the towns of al-Buseira and al-Tayyana'. In Deir Ez-Zor city ISIL has posted lists of SDF recruits and civilian employees on mosques demanding that they 'repent'.¹⁴⁴² From March through mid-October 2019, ISIL claimed to have conducted 321 insurgent attacks in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁴⁴³

In June 2019, the Carter Center observed that ISIL ambushed GoS forces in the town of Harbisha and the villages of Al-Boleil and Toob in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁴⁴⁴ Furthermore, ISIL attacked the NDF in Sabikhan town on 22 September¹⁴⁴⁵, and clashed with the Palestinian Quds Brigade east of Deir Ez-Zor city on 5 December¹⁴⁴⁶. In an interview with EASO on 14 November 2019, Christopher Kozak stated that there have been assassinations in the Euphrates River Valley, in particular targeting village elders, people perceived as informants against ISIL, or collaborators with the SDF or its affiliates in the Deir Ez-Zour Military Council.¹⁴⁴⁷ Reportedly, ISIL was taking revenge on the people of Deir Ez-Zor, condemning them as 'guilty' of its defeat. According to Difesa and Sicurezza, this revenge took the

¹⁴³⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/157), 19 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

¹⁴³⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/321), 16 April 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁴³⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/321), 16 April 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁴³⁷ Airwars, Annual Report 2019, n. d., [url](#), p. 2

¹⁴³⁸ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 4 – 10 March 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁴³⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 18 – 24 March 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴⁴⁰ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 15 – 21 April 2019, [url](#), p. 5; Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 6 – 12 May 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

¹⁴⁴¹ International Crisis Group interviews with Western officials and Deir al-Zour journalist, May-July 2019.

¹⁴⁴² International Crisis Group, Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, 11 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 24-25

¹⁴⁴³ Washington Institute for Near East Policy (The), The Islamic State in Syria After the U.S. Withdrawal, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴⁴ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 3 – 9 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6

¹⁴⁴⁵ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 16 – 22 September 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁴⁴⁶ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 25 November – 8 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴⁴⁷ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

form of murders of civilians.¹⁴⁴⁸ In December 2019, the Carter Center stated that ‘since July, civilians have been increasingly affected by violence in SDF-dominated areas of Deir Ez Zor Governorate, with November recording the highest number of attacks against civilians in 2019 to date’.¹⁴⁴⁹

Reporting on the period between July 2019 and January 2020, the CoI stated that ISIL increased its attacks against pro-GoS forces, especially around Mayadin and Albu Kamal.¹⁴⁵⁰

2.9.3.5 Lawlessness

A state of lawlessness was reported in several areas of Deir ez-Zor governorate in 2019. The USCENTCOM-sponsored website, Diyaruna, stated that a ‘feeling of malaise has been spreading among residents of rural Deir Ezzor in areas west of the Euphrates River following a recent spate of kidnappings and killings and a growing climate of lawlessness’. The site added that the livelihood of farmers was impacted by violence and instability.¹⁴⁵¹ Sham FM reported on an ongoing state of lawlessness in SDF-controlled areas, including in Deir Ez-Zor, and stated that a man was killed on the road between Thubyan and Tayyana, and that two unidentified bodies were found in the desert of Abu Khashab in the northern part of the governorate.¹⁴⁵²

In February 2020, SOHR reported that unknown assailants killed a teacher in Sabha village in eastern Deir Ez-Zor using a military gun.¹⁴⁵³ As regards the situation in the city of Deir Ez-Zor, the International Crisis Group shared a testimony of a public sector employee who stated that crimes, fighting and murders occurred on a daily basis and that the police had no authority in the light of the presence of security forces and militiamen.¹⁴⁵⁴

2.9.3.6 Security incidents

According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 1 029 security incidents recorded in Deir Ez-Zor governorate, of whom 438 were battles, 361 explosive/remote violence and 230 incidents of violence against civilians.

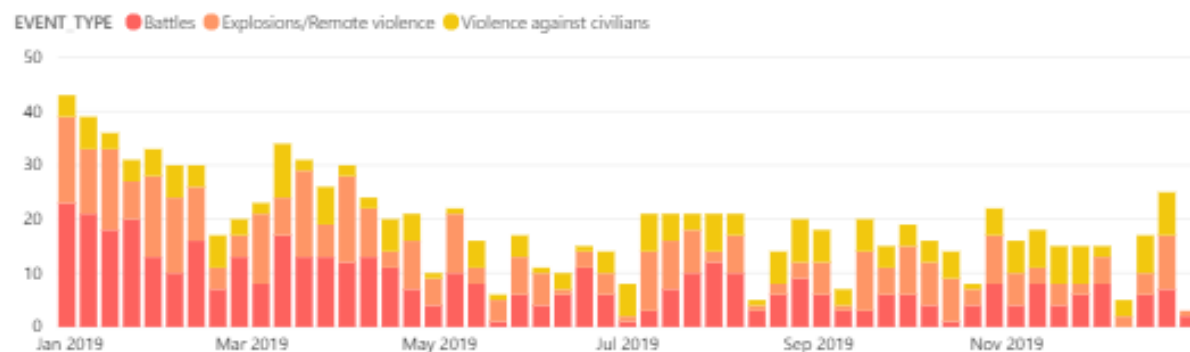


Figure 40. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Deir Ez-Zor governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data¹⁴⁵⁵

¹⁴⁴⁸ Difesa and Sicurezza, Syria, Isis takes revenge on the population in Deir Ezzor for last blows, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 25 November – 8 December 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁴⁵⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 5 para 16

¹⁴⁵¹ Diyaruna, Malaise in Deir Ezzor after civilian executions, 15 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵² Sham FM, [url](#) فلتان أمني في مناطق سيطرة "قسد" في ريف دير الزور [Lawlessness in "SDF"-controlled Areas in Rural Deir ez-Zor], 10 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵³ SOHR, Lawlessness in SDF-held areas: a civilian assassinated by unknown gunmen and IED goes off in rural Deir Ezzor, 8 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 23 footnote 133

¹⁴⁵⁵ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

Deir ez-Zor governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Albu Kamal	136	171	34
Al Mayadin	123	62	102
Deir Ez-Zor	179	128	94
Total	438	361	230

Figure 41. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Deir Ez-Zor governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data.

Security incidents were recorded in all three districts in 2019, the highest number being documented in Deir Ez-Zor district.

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 136 security incidents of which 47 were battles, 44 explosions/remote violence and 45 incidents of violence against civilians. Security incidents were recorded in all three districts: Al Mayadin (48), Deir Ez-Zor (45) and Albu Kamal (43).

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Deir Ez-Zor governorate in 2019 and early 2020 included the following:

- According to the Col, on 3 January 2019, a series of airstrikes targeted a residential building in Sha'fah which resulted in the death of 16 civilians, 12 of whom were children.¹⁴⁵⁶
- Between 4 and 10 February 2019, the SDF advanced towards the last ISIL pocket in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. Reportedly, large numbers of civilian IDPs fled the region. Moreover, ISIL launched attacks against the SAA in GoS-held areas of the governorate.¹⁴⁵⁷
- On 21 February 2019, 10 employees in Al-Omar oil field were killed in the city of Al-Shuhail as a bomb exploded in their bus.¹⁴⁵⁸
- Between 18 and 24 February 2019, at least six small arms fire attacks and two suicide attacks against the SDF took place between Deir Ez-Zor city and the village of Sha'fah.¹⁴⁵⁹
- Between 23 February and 3 March 2019, 'the SDF released 283 people associated with ISIL following mediations from local tribal leaders from Deir ez Zor'.¹⁴⁶⁰
- On 7 July 2019, two persons were killed in a motorcycle explosion that targeted a livestock market in Abu Hammam city.¹⁴⁶¹
- On 9 July 2019, seven persons were killed in a landmine explosion in Al-Dablan.¹⁴⁶²
- On 14 July 2019, three persons were killed, of whom two in a motorcycle explosion in the city of Al-Soor.¹⁴⁶³
- As of 28 July 2019, 38 demonstrations against the SDF were reported in northeast Syria in 2019, including 11 in or around Basira.¹⁴⁶⁴
- On 8 August 2019, at least two mortar shells exploded in Hawaib Ditayb town, a rare incident in the governorate since the fall of Baghouz. No casualties were reported.¹⁴⁶⁵

¹⁴⁵⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/42/51), 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁴⁵⁷ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 4 – 10 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6

¹⁴⁵⁸ SHRC, The Daily Report of Victims of Human Rights Violations in Syria, 21 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 18 – 24 February 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁴⁶⁰ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 23 February – 3 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁴⁶¹ SHRC, The Daily Report of Victims of Human Rights Violations in Syria, 7 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶² SHRC, The Daily Report of Victims of Human Rights Violations in Syria, 9 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶³ SHRC, The Daily Report of Victims of Human Rights Violations in Syria, 13 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶⁴ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 22 – 28 July 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁴⁶⁵ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 5 – 11 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4

- On 11 August 2019, a crossfire between the SDF and unidentified armed men resulted in the death of one child and the injury of three other civilians in Sha'fa. Moreover, on the same day, a crossfire between the SDF and unidentified gunmen in Busayrah resulted in the death of one girl and the injury of two other civilians.¹⁴⁶⁶
- On 3 and 8 September 2019, strikes targeted Hezbollah and IRGC sites in Abu Kamal. The Carter Center stated that none of the attacks was attributed to a particular actor, nonetheless, 'Israel is one of the only entities in the Syrian conflict to consistently use airstrikes to target Hezbollah and Iranian' locations'.¹⁴⁶⁷
- On 20 September 2019, a massive protest against GoS presence took place in the SDF-held area, and protesters captured a government checkpoint outside Al-Salihiyeh.¹⁴⁶⁸
- On 20 September 2019, large protests took place in Deir Ez-Zor city, Hseiniyeh, Khasham, Mathlam, Mrat, and Tabiyeh. In Salhiyah, protestors stormed a bridge and raised the SDF flag, and several casualties were reported as government forces used live fire.¹⁴⁶⁹
- In September 2019, 'OHCHR documented at least seven incidents of arbitrary arrests or enforced disappearances that targeted civilians [...] who had been perceived as critical of the Syrian Democratic Forces in areas under its control', including Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁴⁷⁰
- On 5 October 2019, one civilian was killed and two others injured in an explosive remnant of war inside a residence in Marashidah, in eastern rural Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁴⁷¹
- On 14 January 2020, eight shepherds were killed in western Deir Ez-Zor, reportedly by GoS-affiliated militias.¹⁴⁷²

2.9.3.7 Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	25	83
February	33	51
March	-	107
April	40	60
May	1	52
June	12	26
July	31	44
August	9	34
September	22	31
October	22	24
November	39	28
December	15	9
Total	249	549

¹⁴⁶⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/820), 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁴⁶⁷ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 1 – 8 September 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁴⁶⁸ COAR, Syria Update: September 18 – 24, 2019, September 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁴⁶⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 16 – 22 September 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁴⁷⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/820), 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁴⁷¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁴⁷² SHRC, Horrific Massacre in Deir ez-Zor Countryside, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

Figure 42. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Deir Ez-Zor governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2019, sources documented between 249 (VDC data)¹⁴⁷³ and 549 (SNHR data)¹⁴⁷⁴ civilian fatalities in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.

2.9.3.8 Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

Infrastructure damage

According to a World Bank report, out of 5 712 buildings in Deir Ez-Zor city, 1 058 were partially damaged and 259 destroyed, meaning that 23.1 % of buildings were damaged or destroyed.¹⁴⁷⁵ A video footage from the city, shared by Syria TV, showed substantial damage to buildings in Al-Hamidiyeh, Takaya, and Jubeileh neighbourhoods in Deir Ez-Zor city, as well as in Susah town.¹⁴⁷⁶

Regarding water supply, the World Bank stated that 30 % of the households in several governorates including Deir Ez-Zor relied entirely on water provided by trucks, due to sharp drop in the levels of piped coverage.¹⁴⁷⁷ In Al-Jourah, Al-Qusoor, and Harabesh neighbourhoods of Deir Ez-Zor city, the water network was quite intact, nevertheless, around 50 % of households did not receive network water. Moreover, the network suffered ‘major damage’ in the unpopulated neighbourhoods of the city. There has been an increase in water pumped daily, but the report made reference to a substantial damage to the main water purification plant.¹⁴⁷⁸ Finally, the report observed that ISIL’s ‘rudimentary techniques for producing petroleum and mazout [...] in Al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor has led to widespread land pollution that may contaminate critical groundwater supplies’.¹⁴⁷⁹

With regards to electricity, the World Bank observed that the grid in Deir Ez-Zor city sustained no damage, and electricity was, hence, available.¹⁴⁸⁰ An activist interviewed by Al-Araby stated that electricity is available in the city of Deir Ez-Zor, albeit not in all the neighbourhoods. He added that in rural areas in the GoS and SDF-held areas, residents used generators.¹⁴⁸¹ The International Crisis Group, however, stated in a report published in February 2020, and based on observations and remote interviews conducted in January and July 2019, that ‘Deir al-Zour suffers from blackouts lasting up to twenty hours per day, crippling operations of business and institutions’.¹⁴⁸²

¹⁴⁷³ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

¹⁴⁷⁴ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷⁵ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 109

¹⁴⁷⁶ Syria TV, صور الدمار داخل مدينة دير الزور [Exclusive and New.. Pictures of Destruction in Dei ez-Zor] [Online video], 17 July 2019, [url](#), 01:20 – 05:05

¹⁴⁷⁷ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 137, 140

¹⁴⁷⁸ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 176-177

¹⁴⁷⁹ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 142

¹⁴⁸⁰ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 157

¹⁴⁸¹ New Arab (The), النظام يطمس هوية دير الزور [The Regime Obliterates the Identity of Deir ez-Zor], 5 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸² International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 23, footnote 133

The World Bank mentioned Deir Ez-Zor as one of the governorates that ‘still present damage in roads and bridges’.¹⁴⁸³ According to the International Crisis Group, since the recapturing of Deir Ez-Zor city by the GoS forces, only a few roads have been cleared of rubble.¹⁴⁸⁴ An activist interviewed by Al-Araby indicated that rubble still existed in the majority of the neighbourhoods of Deir Ez-Zor city and the villages in the GoS-held, as well as SDF-controlled areas, and that transportation between the city and the countryside was functional through minivans.¹⁴⁸⁵

Concerning education and health, the International Crisis Group, citing a public-sector employee who serves in Deir Ez-Zor, mentioned that most of the schools in Deir Ez-Zor city lacked in doors, windows and water tanks.¹⁴⁸⁶ Al-Araby reported that only 5 % of the governorate’s schools were operational. Moreover, there is a shortage in personnel as militias forcefully recruited teachers in the GoS-held areas.¹⁴⁸⁷ The health situation in the governorate was not better, especially with the outbreak of diseases such as Leishmaniasis.¹⁴⁸⁸ While the health care system suffered a shortage in personnel and medication in the GoS-controlled areas of Deir Ez-Zor governorate, the situation seemed to be better in SDF-held areas. Reportedly, those who needed medical attention in the GoS-held areas had to go to Damascus or Hama.¹⁴⁸⁹

Remnants of war

In its report of April 2018, UNOCHA stated that ‘[e]xplosive hazard contamination continues to present a daily risk for thousands of children, women and men across Deir-ez-Zor governorate with increasing numbers of blast wounded victims treated due to explosive incidents’.¹⁴⁹⁰ It added in its report of April 2019 that ‘surveying and clearance of explosive hazards in southeast Deir Ez-Zour governorate will become a priority down the line, as the displaced start to return to their areas of origin’.¹⁴⁹¹ SHRC reported on several incidents where civilians were killed by explosions of landmines and war ordnances. Some examples are the death of one person in a landmine explosion in Al-Khasham on 23 May¹⁴⁹²; the death of three persons in a landmine explosion near Al-Omar oil field on 1 October 2019¹⁴⁹³; and the death of a woman in a landmine explosion in Al-Marashda village on 5 October 2019.¹⁴⁹⁴

2.9.3.9 Displacement and return

UNOCHA data on displacement showed that in 2019, around 52 000 IDP movements were recorded to or within Deir Ez-Zor governorate, of whom around 49 000 were within the governorate while the rest came mainly from Raqqa governorate. Around 57 000 displacement movements were recorded during 2019 from Deir Ez-Zor governorate, the vast majority towards Hasaka governorate.¹⁴⁹⁵

The month-by-month data breakdown showed that the most significant wave of displacement occurred over the first three months of 2019. In January, 52 000 persons were displaced within or

¹⁴⁸³ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 161

¹⁴⁸⁴ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 23, footnote 133

¹⁴⁸⁵ New Arab (The), النظام يطمس هوية دير الزور [The Regime Obliterates the Identity of Deir ez-Zor], 5 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸⁶ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 23

¹⁴⁸⁷ New Arab (The), النظام يطمس هوية دير الزور [The Regime Obliterates the Identity of Deir ez-Zor], 5 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸⁸ Al-Akhbar, "لشكان شرق سوريا... تركة "داعش" للاثمانيا... ISIL's Legacy to the Inhabitants of Eastern Syria], 23 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸⁹ New Arab (The), النظام يطمس هوية دير الزور [The Regime Obliterates the Identity of Deir ez-Zor], 5 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹⁰ UNOCHA, Syria Crisis: Northeast Syria, 15 April 2018, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁴⁹¹ UNOCHA, Syria: Humanitarian Response in Al Hol Camp, 2 April 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁴⁹² SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria, 23 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹³ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria, 1 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹⁴ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria, 6 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

from the governorate¹⁴⁹⁶; 30 000 in February¹⁴⁹⁷, and 20 000 in March.¹⁴⁹⁸ This wave of displacement corresponded to the escalation of hostilities against ISIL in Baghouz area in the first quarter of 2019.¹⁴⁹⁹ According to REACH, 'the largest proportions of IDPs were recorded in Khasham and Kisreh, followed by Thiban sub-districts'.¹⁵⁰⁰ As of April 2019, more than 73 000 IDPs from Deir Ez-Zor governorate were hosted in Al-Hol camp in Hasaka governorate.¹⁵⁰¹

According to REACH, there were three IDP camps in which a high percentage of residents were from Deir Ez-Zor governorate:

- Al-Hol: 20 % of the residents originated from Susat district, 15 % from Abu Kamal, and 9 % from Hajin.¹⁵⁰² According to Refugees International, the vast majority of the camp residents were women and children, notably family members of ISIL fighters.¹⁵⁰³ UNOCHA stated in July 2019 that a number of camp residents were being registered in order to return to their areas of origin, but no date for return was set yet.¹⁵⁰⁴
- Abu Khashab: 59 % of the camp residents originated from Al-Mayadin, 17 % from Abu Kamal, and 8 % from Deir Ez-Zor city.¹⁵⁰⁵
- Areesheh (Hasaka governorate): 39 % of the camp's residents originated from Al-Mayadin, 24 % from Asharah, and 11 % from Deir Ez-Zor city.¹⁵⁰⁶

According to UNOCHA data, around 79 000 return movements were recorded to or within Deir Ez-Zor governorate in 2019, of whom 41 000 were within the governorate while the rest return mainly from Damascus and Hasaka governorates.¹⁵⁰⁷

The World Bank observed that lack of land and property documents was a 'regionally concentrated concern', with the percentage reaching 20 % in Deir Ez-Zor. The report made reference to a number of legislative decrees that seemed to facilitate confiscation of property, including Law No. 10 of the year 2018 and Law No. 33 of the year 2017.¹⁵⁰⁸ The International Crisis Group warned that 'some nominally regime-controlled areas, such as Daraa, Deir al-Zour city, and parts of Aleppo and Homs, are inhospitable for returnees due to heavy destruction, the reign of abusive pro-regime militias, security problems such as ISIS attacks or a combination of all three'.¹⁵⁰⁹

¹⁴⁹⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Stock and Flow Data, 31 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab republic: IDP Movements, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab republic: IDP Movements, 17 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Update: Syrian Arab Republic, 4 April 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁵⁰⁰ REACH, Northeast Syria: Area-Based Assessment of Deir ez-Zor Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁵⁰¹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Update: Syrian Arab Republic, 4 April 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁵⁰² REACH, Camp and Informal Site Profiles: Overview, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁵⁰³ RI, An Uncertain Future: Fragility and Humanitarian Priorities in Northeast Syria, 25 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁰⁴ UNOCHA, Syria: Humanitarian Response in Al Hol Camp, 5 July 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁵⁰⁵ REACH, Camp and Informal Site Profiles: Overview, October 2019, [url](#), p. 4

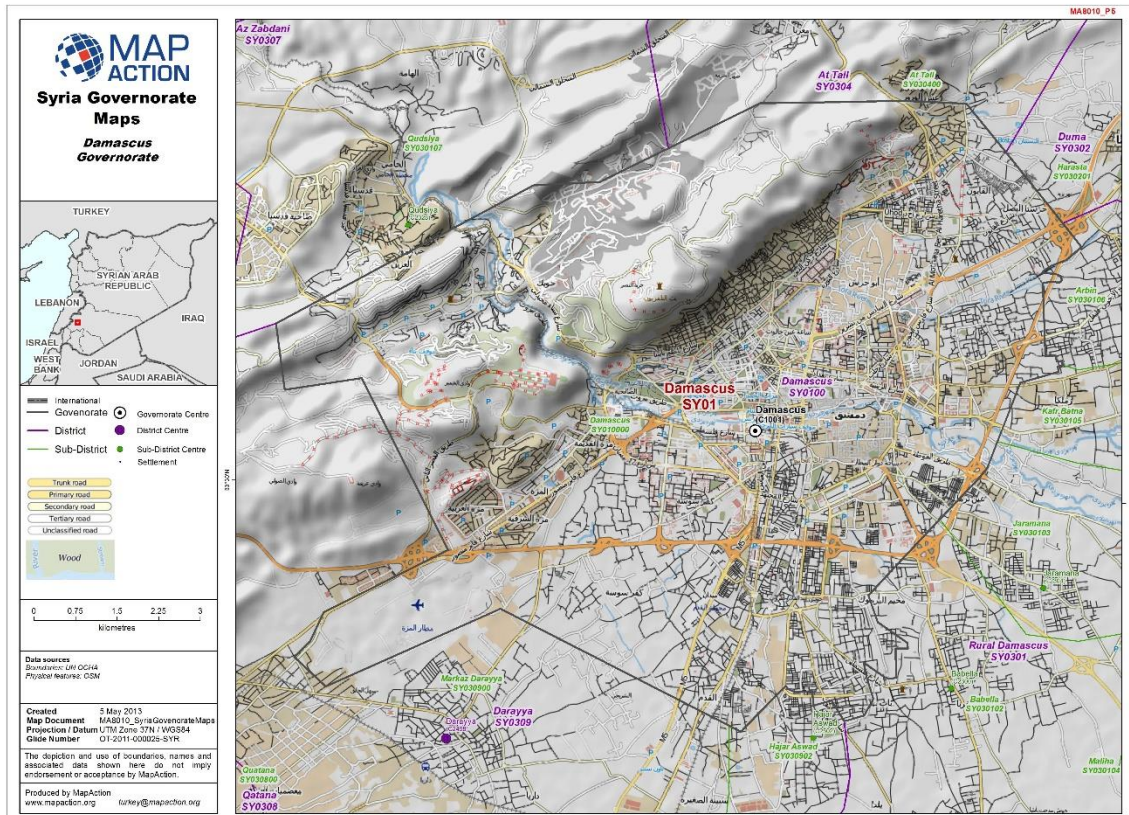
¹⁵⁰⁶ REACH, Camp and Informal Site Profiles: Overview, October 2019, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁵⁰⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁰⁸ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 115

¹⁵⁰⁹ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 22

2.10 Damascus governorate



Map 15: © MapAction, Damascus governorate¹⁵¹⁰

2.10.1 General description of governorate

Damascus governorate, covering Syria's capital, is located in the south-western part of Syria and is completely surrounded by the Rural Damascus (Rif Damashq) governorate. The governorate is divided into 16 municipal districts: Barzeh, Qaboun, Jobar, Al-Shaghour, Al-Midan, Al-Qadam, Kafr Sousa, Dummer, al-Mazze, Rukn al-Din, Al-Salihiyah, Al-Mouhajrin, Saroujah, Al-Qanawat, Old Damascus, and Al-Yarmouk camp.¹⁵¹¹

Al-Yarmouk is a refugee camp, located 8 km from Damascus city centre, and set up in 1957 by the Syrian government to house approximately 160 000 Palestinian refugees. Although the camp is considered 'unofficial' by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), the UN organisation supported it with health and education services.¹⁵¹² Heavy fighting in December 2012 led to severe damage to buildings and infrastructure, and the displacement of thousands of Palestinian refugees and Syrian inhabitants. As of 1 January 2019, the camp was to a large extent destroyed and housed only 'a few dozen' families.¹⁵¹³

¹⁵¹⁰ MapAction, Syria 2013-2015, Damascus Governorate [map], last updated 4 July 2016, [url](#)

¹⁵¹¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), pp. 2-3; UNOCHA, Damascus Governorate Reference map [map], n.d., [url](#); ACU, The Demographic Change & Forced Displacement in Syria, 20 June 2017, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁵¹² UNRWA, Yarmouk (unofficial camp), last updated 1 January 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Profile: Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, 7 April 2015, [url](#)

¹⁵¹³ UNRWA, Yarmouk (unofficial camp), last updated 1 January 2019, [url](#)

A Damascus-based urban planning expert noted: ‘the city of Damascus is linked and adjacent to, and largely integrated with, large parts of its environs which are administered by the Governorate of Rural Damascus, to such an extent that it is difficult to distinguish the administrative boundaries separating them in the contiguous built-up areas’. The expert further noted that the capital houses the country’s major administrative and ministerial buildings, the presidential palace and residences of wealthy persons and high political and administrative officials. These reside in neighbourhoods characterised as ‘security zones’.¹⁵¹⁴

Estimations of the current population numbers of the governorate of Damascus vary greatly. According to the latest general census of population and housing, conducted by the Syrian government in 2004, the governorate of Damascus had 1.55 million inhabitants.¹⁵¹⁵ The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Damascus at 1.85 million by mid-2014¹⁵¹⁶ and at 2 011 000 by 2016.¹⁵¹⁷

According to UNHCR, the total population of the capital was 1 925 387 by the end of 2017, comprising of 1 273 068 resident inhabitants, 647 602 IDPs, and 4 717 returnees.¹⁵¹⁸ According to UNOCHA, the number of spontaneous returnees by August 2018 was 16 200.¹⁵¹⁹ As of March 2020, the CIA estimated Damascus population to be of 2 392 000 inhabitants.¹⁵²⁰

Accurate and updated information on the ethno-religious composition of Damascus is not available. In its report on religious freedom in Syria for 2018, USDOS noted that the large majority of Syrian population is Sunni Muslim. The report mentioned the presence of Alawites, Twelver Shia, and Christians in Damascus, without specifying the size of the communities.¹⁵²¹ The researcher Fabrice Balanche mentioned the Druze, Christian, Ismaili and Alawite as residents of Damascus suburbs. He added that ‘demonstrations in Jdeidat Artouz, a Druze/Christian area, and Bab Touma, the capital’s main Christian quarter, were largely undertaken by Sunni residents’. He did not indicate the size of the non-Sunni ethnic-religious groups in Damascus.¹⁵²²

According to Balanche, ‘Damascus is the typical model of the encircled city’, according to which model the government tries to counterbalance the influx of rural Sunni by building up good relations with the capital’s bourgeoisie, and by installing loyal supporters such as Alawite military garrisons and their families.¹⁵²³

The capital, considered vital to the government and to the interest of its allies, was in 2016 one of the governorates, coined ‘Useful Syria’ by President Bashar Al-Assad, who stated that he will defend them with all his might, and considered remaining governorates as ‘less strategic’.¹⁵²⁴

The economic preponderance of the Damascus governorate, and as a consequence its military strategic dominance, is based on the presence of national governmental and administrative institutions, as well as the military and secret service. The state runs ‘all major factories and most strategic industries’. Damascus houses industries and factories such as ‘textile plants, chemical industry, cement works, and food-processing factories’. The production of food and clothing is mostly in hands of private businesses. The capital has been renowned over centuries for its production of

¹⁵¹⁴ Abdin, Y., The fragility of community security in Damascus and its environs, April 2019, [url](#), p. 900

¹⁵¹⁵ Syria, Central Bureau Of Statistics, General Census, The census housing and population results 2004 on governorates level, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁵¹⁶ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, The Population in Syria by Governorates in Mid 2014, Table 3/2, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁵¹⁷ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁵¹⁸ UNHCR, Syria/Damascus/Factsheet, January – December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁵¹⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 30-31

¹⁵²⁰ CIA, World Factbook, Syria, last updated: 16 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵²¹ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report for 2018 - Syria, [url](#), pp. 3, 4

¹⁵²² Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁵²³ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁵²⁴ Qutrib, Hussain Ibrahim, “Useful Syria” and Demographic Changes in Syria, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 2017, [url](#), pp. 3, 5

luxurious textiles, copper engraving, woodwork, and brocades which are still being manufactured in the old centre of the city.¹⁵²⁵

More information on the socio-economic situation of Damascus, can be found in the [EASO COI report Syria: Socio-economic situation Damascus \(February 2020\)](#).¹⁵²⁶

2.10.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

In March 2011, numerous incidents took place in conservative neighbourhoods of Damascus, according to the city planning expert Abdin.¹⁵²⁷ Fighting taking place in the surrounding governorate of Rural Damascus had also affected the situation in the Damascus governorate. According to Abdin, 'in general, the rural hinterland and even some of the city's suburbs witnessed recurrent skirmishes and battles, and the city suffered from road closures, a proliferation of security checkpoints and an influx of thousands of internally displaced persons from the districts surrounding Damascus into safe districts inside the city'.¹⁵²⁸

According to the Carter Center's November 2017 report on the Yarmouk Palestinian camp, the FSA and al-Qaeda-aligned Jabhat al-Nusra captured Yarmouk in December 2012. 'Since then, clashes between various groups, aircampaigns, and sieges have decimated the Camp's community and infrastructure. Less than 5% of the original population remains'.¹⁵²⁹

In December 2012, Yarmouk became the centre of armed conflict and 140 000 Palestinian refugees and thousands of Syrians fled the area.¹⁵³⁰ During the first half of 2014, several neighbourhoods or districts in Damascus governorate experienced fierce fighting, such as the southern neighbourhoods Qadam, Al-Isali, Tadmoun, and Jobar.¹⁵³¹

ISIL entered Yarmouk on the southern edge of the city in April 2015, and conquered large parts of the camp, with the help of Jabhat al-Nusra. However, by April 2016 clashes led to a major split between the two groups.¹⁵³² The complicated situation in Yarmouk was summarised by Carter Center in November 2017 as follows: 'since then [April 2015], Yarmouk Camp has been home to a ISIS, al-Qaeda aligned Jabhat al-Nusra (now known as Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham), FSA factions, local Palestinian factions, pro-government paramilitary fighters, and government troops, making it a microcosm of the broader conflict.'¹⁵³³

From the ISIL-controlled suburb of Hajar al Aswad in Rural Damascus, the group also periodically let its presence be felt in the capital centre with 'high-profile suicide attacks'.¹⁵³⁴ In Yarmouk, control was divided between ISIL and Jabhat Fatah al Sham.¹⁵³⁵ By November 2017, ISIL controlled 50-60 %, Jabhat al-Nusra, 'now under the moniker of "Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham" (HTS)' 30-40 % and some pro-government Palestinian groups about 10 %.¹⁵³⁶ The Carter Center noted:

¹⁵²⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Damascus, last updated 10 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵²⁶ EASO, Syria: Socio-economic situation Damascus, February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵²⁷ Abdin, Y. The fragility of community security in Damascus and its environs, Opinion note, in: International Review of the Red Cross, 99(3), pp. 897–925, [url](#), p. 910

¹⁵²⁸ Abdin, Y. The fragility of community security in Damascus and its environs, Opinion note, in: International Review of the Red Cross, 99(3), pp. 897–925, [url](#), p. 910

¹⁵²⁹ Carter Center, Status Report on Yarmouk Camp, 14 November 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁵³⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁵³¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁵³² Carter Center, Status Report on Yarmouk Camp, 14 November 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁵³³ Carter Center, Status Report on Yarmouk Camp, 14 November 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁵³⁴ Carter Center, A review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional differences and an enduring legacy, March 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁵³⁵ 'Formally Jabhat al Nusra and now named Haya'at Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)'. Carter Center, A review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional differences and an enduring legacy, March 2019, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁵³⁶ Carter Center, Status Report on Yarmouk Camp, 14 November 2017, [url](#), p. 1

‘In the southern Damascus suburbs of Hajar al Aswad and Yarmouk camp, an uneasy truce and collaboration had existed between ISIS and JFS since early 2016. This continued into 2017, with only 24 conflict events between the two groups recorded throughout the year. In contrast, there were a combined 432 recorded conflict activities carried out by ISIS or JFS against the Syrian government or its allied forces’.¹⁵³⁷

When in 2018 Syrian government forces laid siege on both neighbourhoods Hajar al Aswad and Yarmouk, the relationship between JFS/HTS and ISIL became more hostile and conflicts between the two groups increased significantly, from 24 recorded incidents in 2017 to over 188 in 2018. Large areas of Yarmouk came under ISIL influence.¹⁵³⁸ According to UNOCHA, increased hostilities in 2018 in southern Damascus and other areas (such as East Ghouta in Rural Damascus), caused ‘significant loss of human life, large-scale displacement and extensive destruction of civilian property and infrastructure’.¹⁵³⁹ People from the southern district of Yarmouk, one of the ‘formerly UN-declared besieged areas’ were displaced to areas in the northwestern parts of Syria.¹⁵⁴⁰

Action Group for Palestinians of Syria reported in January 2018 that ISIL continued to exercise a strict security policy over Yarmouk residents, searching all persons leaving or entering the area and blocking their access to food items.¹⁵⁴¹ SOHR reported in February 2018 clashes between ISIL and HTS. ISIL launched a new attack on Yarmouk camp in order to ‘advance in the area and extend its control at the expense of Hayyat al-Sham’.¹⁵⁴²

In April 2018, following a massive military operation, the GoS regained control of eastern Ghouta, in Rural Damascus governorate.¹⁵⁴³ The southern Damascus suburb Yarmouk and the neighbouring Hajar al-Aswad were recaptured by the end of May 2018.¹⁵⁴⁴ According to Al Jazeera, in May 2018 the GoS ‘reclaimed a final scrap of territory held by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) group in southern Damascus, cementing total control over the capital for the first time in six years’.¹⁵⁴⁵ Just before the GoS offensive of May 2018, ISIL controlled ‘all but a small portion’ of Yarmouk. According to the Carter Center, ‘no conflict events linked to ISIS have been recorded there [in southern Damascus] since May 2018’.¹⁵⁴⁶ By autumn 2018, a marked decrease in violence in government-controlled parts of the country was noted by the Col.¹⁵⁴⁷ This reduction in violence is also reflected in ACLED figures on casualties and incidents in Damascus.¹⁵⁴⁸

Sources interviewed by the DIS/DRC during a Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) conducted in November 2018, stated that units of 4th Armored Division and the Republican Guard were ‘endemically based in Damascus’.¹⁵⁴⁹ According to Gregory Waters of International Review, as of 17 March 2020, deployments of the SAA in Damascus included units of 2nd Corps and 3rd Corps.¹⁵⁵⁰ Newly established

¹⁵³⁷ Carter Center, A review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional differences and an enduring legacy, March 2019, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁵³⁸ Carter Center, A review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional differences and an enduring legacy, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 5, 17-18

¹⁵³⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p.11

¹⁵⁴⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁵⁴¹ AGPS, Female ISIS members search the women of Yarmouk camp, and motorbikes banned after ISIS’s commands: 10-01-2018, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴² SOHR, Renewed attack by ISIS in Yarmouk Camp south of the capital Damascus, 24 February 2018, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴³ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State’s Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁵⁴⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), pp. 3, 9, para. 4, 37

¹⁵⁴⁵ Al Jazeera, Syria’s war: Large explosion rocks capital Damascus, 20 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴⁶ Carter Center, A review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional differences and an enduring legacy, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 5, 17-18

¹⁵⁴⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), para 4, 37

¹⁵⁴⁸ For a trend of casualties and incidents over 2018 and first half of 2019, see EASO, Syria: Security situation, November 2019, [url](#), pp. 28-30

¹⁵⁴⁹ DIS, DRC, Security Situation in Damascus. Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 53

¹⁵⁵⁰ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

local resistance group Saraya Qasioun, which operates in Rural Damascus, claimed attacks on personnel of GoS-affiliated forces in Damascus, although the reliability of the claim was questionable.¹⁵⁵¹

As of March 2020, Damascus governorate was under the control of the GoS.¹⁵⁵²

2.10.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

Since May 2018, when the GoS forces regained control over Damascus and most of rural Damascus, there have been relatively few acts of violence in the city.¹⁵⁵³ According to DIS, the improvement in the security situation is ‘mainly because the government retook control of the last opposition-held areas in Damascus governorate, including Jobar and Yarmouk, and due to the government’s clearing of armed rebels from Rural Damascus, including Eastern Ghouta’.¹⁵⁵⁴

Between July 2013 and May 2019, the Carter Center recorded ‘at least 94,792 uses of explosive munitions based on 16,147 conflict events in Damascus city and Rural Damascus Governorate’. Of these, 61 % were ‘ground-launched explosive weapons’ and 38 % ‘air-dropped explosive munitions’.¹⁵⁵⁵ Nearly 70 % of the total number of explosive munitions were used in 19 locations in Rural Damascus. The remaining 30 % (27 958) of estimated munitions use occurred across 181 communities in Rural Damascus governorate and 74 communities or neighbourhoods around Damascus city.¹⁵⁵⁶ The capital witnessed ‘at least 13 094 individual uses of explosive munitions’.¹⁵⁵⁷

In Damascus city, the following neighbourhoods were most hit by explosive munitions in the period between July 2013 and May 2019: Jobar, with 4 521 munitions (4.77 % of the total), Qaboun with 1 335 munitions (1.41 %) and Yarmouk camp with 1 303 munitions (1.37 %).¹⁵⁵⁸

Of the explosive munitions used in the capital, shelling formed the vast majority (82 %), followed by airplane-dropped munitions (17 %) and 1 % of landmines, IEDs, or other ground-launched weapons.¹⁵⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵¹ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 22-28 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁵⁵² Based on reading of Map 2: ISW, Control of terrain in Syria, 31 March 2020, see [url](#)

¹⁵⁵³ EASO, Syria: security situation, November 2019, [url](#), p. 24; Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁵⁵⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), p. 6

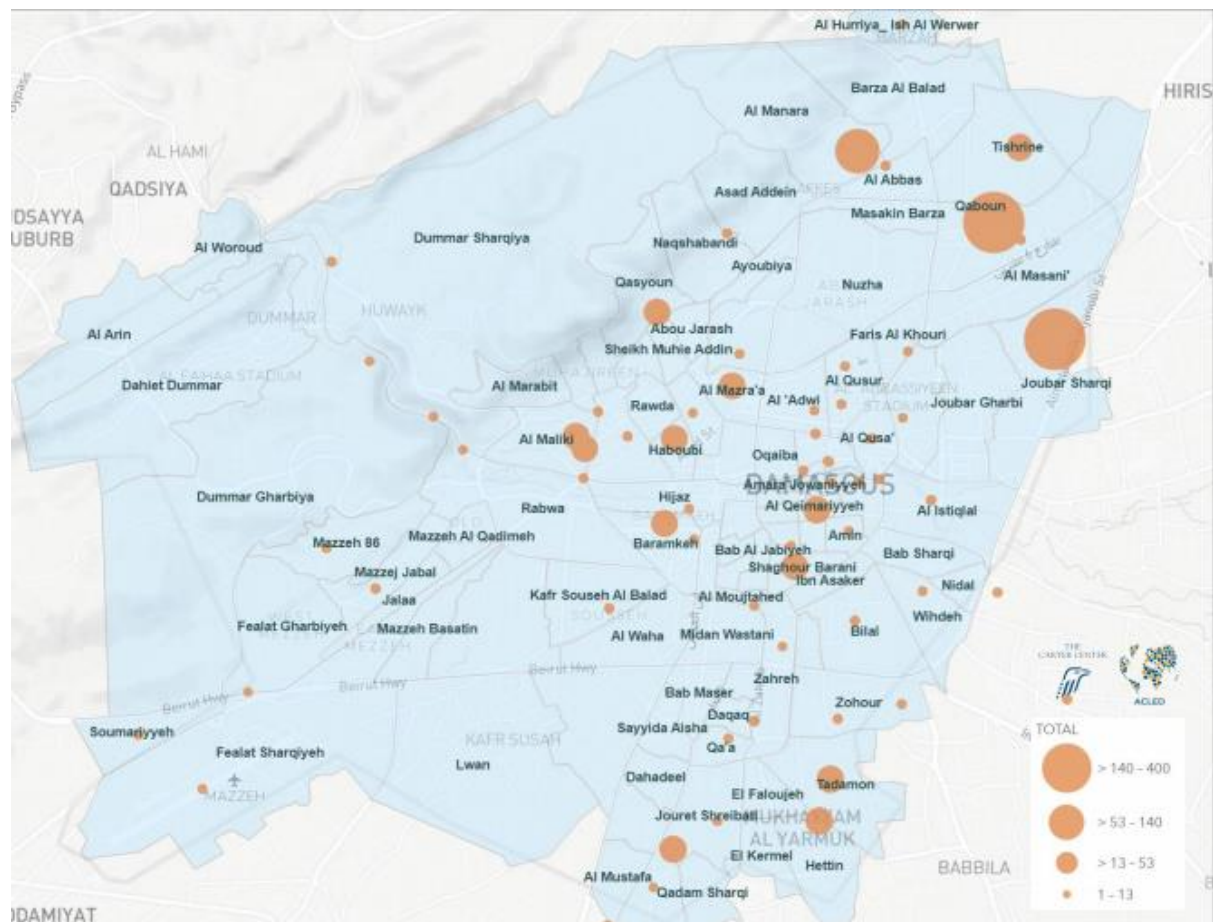
¹⁵⁵⁵ Carter Center, Explosive Weapons Use in Syria, Report 2, Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁵⁵⁶ Carter Center, Explosive Weapons Use in Syria, Report 2, Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁵⁵⁷ Carter Center, Explosive Weapons Use in Syria, Report 2, Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁵⁵⁸ Carter Center, Explosive Weapons Use in Syria, Report 2, Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁵⁵⁹ Carter Center, Explosive Weapons Use in Syria, Report 2, Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 9



Map 16: © Carter Center, Damascus neighbourhoods and location of munitions uses, with point size corresponding to the number of munitions¹⁵⁶⁰

The amount of roadblocks controlling access to Damascus city has decreased significantly since the GoS took control of large areas of territory, in the first half of 2018. As of November 2018, most checkpoints have been placed around the central old city and the Mezzeh district. At that time, there were still checkpoints at the entrance of the city and around the city (such as the highways coming into Damascus from Lebanon, the M5 Highway headed towards Homs and the road leading to Damascus International Airport).¹⁵⁶¹

Checkpoints are reportedly run by different GoS security and intelligence services such as 'Air Force Intelligence, Military Intelligence Directorate, and State Security Directorates as well as regular units of the SAA, particularly the 4th Armoured Division and the Republican Guard', as well as 'Internal Security (al-Amn al-Dakheli), which is a part of the State Security (Amn al-Dawla), whilst others are run by the Military Security (al-Amn al-Askari)'.¹⁵⁶²

According to sources interviewed by the DIS in November 2018, controls within Damascus 'do not amount to much', but ID documents are thoroughly checked at the entrance of the city. The Air Force Intelligence service is the strictest in checking. Authorities search for conscription evaders and persons sought for other reasons.¹⁵⁶³

¹⁵⁶⁰ Carter Center, Explosive Weapons Use in Syria, Report 2, Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁵⁶¹ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 12-13

¹⁵⁶² Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 13-14

¹⁵⁶³ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 14

The level of control of access to Damascus differs for persons from former opposition-controlled areas inside and outside Damascus governorate, according to the September 2019 DIS report. ‘People from former opposition-controlled areas within the governorate such as Jobar and Yarmouk are usually less subjected to scrutiny at checkpoints compared to individuals from other former rebel-held areas’. People wanting to enter the city coming from former opposition-controlled areas close to Damascus, such as eastern Ghouta, are thoroughly scrutinised and questioned at ‘a series of checkpoints in and around strategic areas of Eastern Ghouta’.¹⁵⁶⁴ Sources interviewed by DIS stated that people from Christian, Shiite Muslims, Alawite and Druze minorities are usually not checked or interrogated at checkpoints in Damascus.¹⁵⁶⁵

According to DIS, ‘Yarmouk Camp is still considered a military zone, which means severe restrictions on entry and exit. Former Yarmouk residents must apply for permits to enter both Damascus and Yarmouk. Security services screen applicants as well as their families’.¹⁵⁶⁶ In October 2019, evictions and dozens of arrests occurred in Yarmouk and other districts in and around Damascus (Beit Saham, Babilla, Yalda, and Zabadani).¹⁵⁶⁷

More information on freedom of movement in Damascus, can be found in the [EASO COI report Syria: Socio-economic situation Damascus \(February 2020\)](#).¹⁵⁶⁸

2.10.3.1 Security incidents

According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 38 security incidents recorded in Damascus governorate, of whom 3 were coded as battles, 17 explosions/remote violence and 18 incidents of violence against civilians.

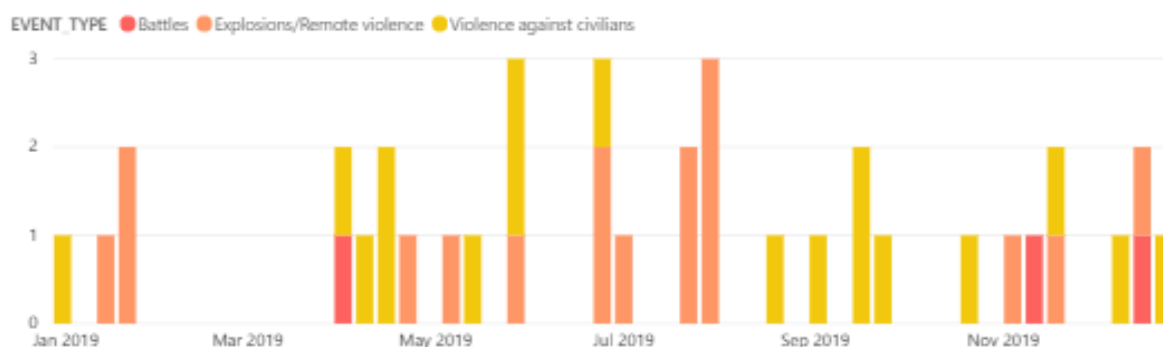


Figure 43. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Damascus governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data¹⁵⁶⁹

Damascus– Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Damascus	3	17	18

¹⁵⁶⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-9

¹⁵⁶⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12

¹⁵⁶⁶ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁵⁶⁷ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 21-27 October 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁵⁶⁸ EASO, Syria: Socio-economic situation Damascus, February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶⁹ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 12 security incidents of which one was coded as battles, 8 explosions/remote violence and 3 incidents of violence against civilians.

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Damascus governorate in 2019 and early 2020 included the following:

- On 20 January 2019, a large explosion occurred in the south of Damascus near a military intelligence office, leaving several people killed and injured.¹⁵⁷⁰ According to Carter Center, the IED had been placed on the eastern section of Al Motahalik al Janoubi Street – a major thoroughfare through southern Damascus – near a military intelligence complex. The attack was claimed by the Abu Amara Brigade, an HTS ally¹⁵⁷¹, which has not previously conducted IED attacks in Damascus. This was the first IED event in the central part of the capital in over a year.¹⁵⁷² ISW mentioned an attack in Kafr Sousa district in South Damascus by the same group on the 21 January.¹⁵⁷³ It is not clear whether this refers to the same or to a new attack. At least three blasts were heard in Damascus in the same week of January, according to Reuters.¹⁵⁷⁴
- On 24 January 2019, a car bomb went off in Adawi neighbourhood in the north-east of the city, close to the Russian embassy. A few people were injured.¹⁵⁷⁵ No group has claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁵⁷⁶
- On 24 April 2019, a car bomb in the Nahr Asiah area in south Damascus killed the driver and wounded five others. The group Saraya Qasioun claimed responsibility for the attack and said that it targeted a government intelligence officer.¹⁵⁷⁷
- On 11 May 2019, another IED attack was recorded in the capital of Damascus. The device detonated in the Al Zahira area of the Midan neighbourhood in southern Damascus City. No group claimed the attack.¹⁵⁷⁸
- On 1 July 2019, Israeli air strikes hit Damascus and the governorates Rural Damascus and Homs, allegedly killing and wounding several people. It is not sure whether there were victims in Damascus.¹⁵⁷⁹ According to several sources, the targets were outside the Damascus governorate, linked with Iranian forces in Sahnaya in Rural Damascus¹⁵⁸⁰, IRGC south of Damascus and a research facility in Jamraya (northwest of Damascus).¹⁵⁸¹ Other targets mentioned are the Mezzeh Airbase and Daraya (in the outskirts of Damascus, mainly located in the Rural Damascus governorate).¹⁵⁸²

¹⁵⁷⁰ Al Jazeera, Syria's war: Large explosion rocks capital Damascus, 20 January 2019, [url](#); The National, Fatalities reported after 'huge explosion' in Damascus, 20 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷¹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 10-23, 25 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷² Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 14-20 January 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁵⁷³ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 10-23, 25 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁴ Reuters, Car bomb explodes in Damascus, no casualties: Syrian state media, 24 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁵ Times of Israel, Car bomb explodes near Russian embassy in Damascus, 24 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁶ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 21-27 January 2019, [url](#), p. 3; Reuters, Car bomb explodes in Damascus, no casualties: Syrian state media, 24 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁷ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 22-28 April 2019, [url](#), pp. 2-3

¹⁵⁷⁸ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 6-12 May 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁵⁷⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), para 21

¹⁵⁸⁰ SOHR, Israeli strikes kill 6 civilians -half of them are children- in Rif Dimashq, and kill about 10 members of regime's loyal militias of non-Syrian nationalities in the countryside of Homs and near the capital, Damascus, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸¹ Haaretz, Israel Strikes Iranian Targets in Syria, Report Says; 16 Killed, 21 Wounded, 1 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria war: Israeli jets 'hit Iranian targets in Homs and Damascus', 1 July 2019, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Syria calls Israeli strikes 'state terrorism', 1 July 2019, [url](#); MEE, Israeli missile strike kills four civilians, Syrian state media says, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸² Al Masdar News, Israeli Air Force launches huge attack on Mezzeh Airbase in Damascus : photos, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

- In July 2019, both Saraya Qasioun and ISIL claimed an IED attack on an NDF commander in Damascus.¹⁵⁸³
- On 22 July 2019, an IED placed in a vehicle detonated in the Nahr Eshe area, in the north of the Kadam neighbourhood of Damascus city.¹⁵⁸⁴
- On 12 November 2019, the home of a Palestinian Islamic Jihad commander was attacked by an Israeli airstrike in the western Mezzeh area of Damascus, 'an affluent neighbourhood where international diplomats live and UN buildings are located'. According to the Carter Center, from 2018 up to November 2019, the majority of Israeli air strikes targeted Iranian and Iranian-aligned actors (such as Hezbollah) in Syria.¹⁵⁸⁵
- Six explosions in Damascus city took place in February 2020, all of them caused by car bombs, leading to five deaths and 15 injured.¹⁵⁸⁶ Explosive devices were detonated in the areas of Al-Fahama¹⁵⁸⁷, Al-Mazze (10 February)¹⁵⁸⁸, Bab Musalla (18 February)¹⁵⁸⁹ and Al-Marjah (20 February).¹⁵⁹⁰ On 25 February 2020, an explosion hit a car near the Tishreen stadium in Damascus city, killing one and injuring one or more persons.¹⁵⁹¹ Another explosion that day injured several people in the tunnel of al-Omawiyin square.¹⁵⁹²

2.10.3.2 Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	3	3
February	2	3
March	3	-
April	4	3
May	2	-
June	4	-
July	-	2
August	-	-
September	2	-
October	-	1
November	4	1
December	-	2
Total	24	15

Figure 44. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Damascus governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

¹⁵⁸³ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 22-28 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁵⁸⁴ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 22-28 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸⁵ Carter Center Weekly Conflict Summary, 11-24 November 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁵⁸⁶ SOHR, Damascus deteriorating security: six explosions rock Damascus in 15 days, 25 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸⁷ Carter Center Weekly Conflict Summary, 3-9 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁵⁸⁸ XinhuaNet, Fresh explosion in Damascus kills 1, 25 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸⁹ MENAFN, Explosion kills 5 in Syria's Damascus, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹⁰ XinhuaNet, Fresh explosion in Damascus kills 1, 25 February 2020, [url](#). Asharq Al-Awsat, Concerns Among Damascus Residents After Several Blasts, 27 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹¹ Syria Calls, 8 Persons killed and others wounded in an explosive device explosion in Damascus and its countryside in 24 hours, 26 February 2020, [url](#); XinhuaNet, Fresh explosion in Damascus kills 1, 25 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹² Asharq Al-Awsat, Concerns Among Damascus Residents After Several Blasts, 27 February 2020, [url](#)

In 2019, sources documented between 15 (SNHR data)¹⁵⁹³ and 24 (VDC data)¹⁵⁹⁴ civilian fatalities in Damascus governorate.

2.10.3.3 Infrastructure damage

The most damaged parts of Damascus city are in the southern (Yarmouk) and eastern districts, extending towards eastern Ghouta. In Yarmouk, 5 489 buildings have been damaged or destroyed, while in eastern Ghouta (part of which falls within Damascus city) 32 276 buildings have been damaged or destroyed.¹⁵⁹⁵ In particular, the districts Jobar and to a lesser extent Al Masani, on the edge of Damascus city, have been severely damaged, according to satellite images of April and September 2018.¹⁵⁹⁶

2.10.3.4 Displacement and return

In 2018, about 625 000 long-term IDPs were living in Damascus, according to UNOCHA's Humanitarian Needs Overview report on Syria.¹⁵⁹⁷ IDPs live on 43 sites in Damascus, the majority of which are 'collective centres' (public buildings, factories, etc used to house 5 or more IDP families) or informal settlements, with often poor access to basic services.¹⁵⁹⁸ According to the March 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview by UNOCHA, 713 000 persons were reported as 'people in need' in Damascus governorate of which 468 000 'people in acute need'.¹⁵⁹⁹

UNOCHA data on displacement showed that in 2019, there were 352 IDP movements were recorded to or within Damascus governorate, of which 60 were within the governorate. Most displacement movements recorded during 2019 from Damascus governorate were to Rural Damascus governorate.¹⁶⁰⁰

According to UNOCHA data, around 2 000 return movements were recorded to or within Damascus governorate in 2019, of which 445 were within the governorate, while the rest came mainly from Hasaka governorate. Return movements from Damascus governorate were recorded mainly to, Tartous (around 1 100) and Latakia (around 900) governorates.¹⁶⁰¹

The CoI reported in January 2020 that returning residents in the Damascus districts Qadam and Qabun were not allowed to enter their properties to inspect damages, or only for a few hours. The CoI added:

¹⁵⁹³ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹⁴ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

¹⁵⁹⁵ REACH/UNITAR, Syria, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁵⁹⁶ REACH/UNITAR, Syria, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁵⁹⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 16, 31

¹⁵⁹⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 56-58

¹⁵⁹⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 31

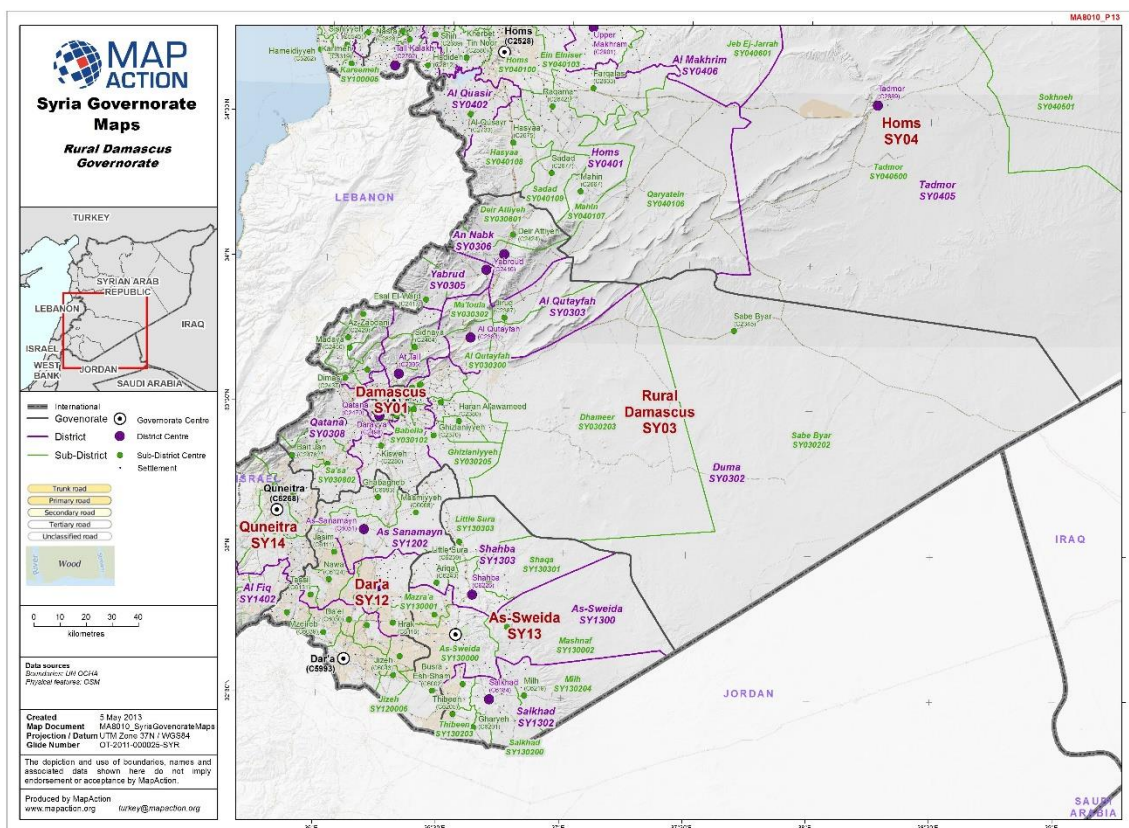
¹⁶⁰⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

‘other residents were informed by government officials that any permanent return to their homes, or reconstruction of privately owned houses, was prohibited’.¹⁶⁰²

¹⁶⁰² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), para 79

2.11 Rural Damascus governorate



Map 17: © MapAction, Rural Damascus governorate¹⁶⁰³

2.11.1 General description of governorate

Rural Damascus [Rif Dimashq] is a largely agricultural governorate surrounding Damascus city. It has international borders with Iraq and Jordan to the east and Lebanon to the west. It borders Homs governorate to the north. To the south it borders Quneitra, Dar'a and Sweida governorates.¹⁶⁰⁴ The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of the governorate at 2 957 000 in 2016.¹⁶⁰⁵

According to ACLED, Rural Damascus is comprised of the following nine districts: Al Qutayfah, An Nabk, At Tall, Az-Zabadani, Darayya, Douma, Qatana, Rural Damascus and Yabroud (see section on Security incidents). According to UNOCHA, the governorate is divided into 36 sub-districts: Kisweh, Babella, Jaramana, Maliha, Kafr Batna, Arbin, Qudsiya, Douma, Harasta, Sabe Byar, Dhameer, Nashabiyeh, Ghizlaniyyeh, Haran Al'awameed, Al Qutayfah, Jirud, Ma'loulah, Raheiba, At Tall, Sidnaya, Rankus, Yabroud, Esal El-Ward, An Nabk, Deir Attiyeh, Az-Zabdani, Dimas, Ein Elfijeh, Madaya, Sarghaya, Qatana, Bait Jan, Sa'sa, Markaz Darayya, Sahnaya, and Hajar Aswad.¹⁶⁰⁶

Bordering Damascus city to the east is an area named eastern Ghouta. In a map provided by REACH, eastern Ghouta comprises Harasta, Arbin, Douma and Misraba subdistricts, and the neighbourhoods

¹⁶⁰³ MapAction, Syria 2013-2015, Rural Damascus Governorate [map], last updated: 29 July 2016, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰⁴ UNHCR, Provision of Life-Saving Assistance and Supporting Communities, End of Year Report 2018, 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁶⁰⁵ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁶⁰⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, Syria sub-district maps, n.d., [url](#)

Modira, Beit Sawa, Hammura, Zamalka, Jobar, Al-Masani, Qaboun, Aradi el-Jadide, Elauine, Hay Elsadie, Dahiet elasad, Hezzeh, Saqba, Ein Terma, Kafr Batna, Eftreis, and Jisrein.¹⁶⁰⁷ In the aforementioned REACH map, all these are mentioned as ‘neighbourhoods’. However, in the UNOCHA Humanitarian Atlas four of them are listed as sub-districts.¹⁶⁰⁸

A map by Michael Izady provided by Columbia University showed that most of the governorate was inhabited by Sunni Muslim Arabs. To the west of Damascus city the population is more mixed, containing areas inhabited by Druze, Levantines (Arabic speaking Christians), Aramaeans, Circassians and Ismailis (Sevener Shias), in addition to Sunni Arabs. To the north the population includes Turkomans, Levantines, Aramaians and Imamis.¹⁶⁰⁹ A map published in an article by Reva Goujon, an analyst at Stratfor, shows a Shia populated area in the governorate that stretches northwest from west of Damascus City.¹⁶¹⁰

In 2018, REACH described Rural Damascus as a largely agricultural governorate.¹⁶¹¹ Concerning the densely populated eastern Ghouta area, the MEI (Middle East Institute) mentioned manufacturing, trade and agriculture as the three main pillars of its economy.¹⁶¹² In 2018, the FAO described eastern Ghouta as an urban/peri-urban area with a population of some 393 000 inhabitants.¹⁶¹³

2.11.2 Background of the conflict and actors in Rural Damascus

The Carter Center reported that in 2011, pockets of resistance to the government formed in five different areas of Rural Damascus. One of these areas was eastern Ghouta. Various towns in eastern Ghouta became key hubs for armed opposition groups.¹⁶¹⁴

From early 2013, when GoS forces laid siege to eastern Ghouta, the civilian population’s abilities to escape or to receive supplies of food, medicines and fuel, became limited. In the following years the Syrian military conducted numerous airstrikes in the area, including a sarin gas attack in 2013 that killed 1 400 people. In the same period, armed opposition groups based in the area launched rocket attacks on central Damascus. In spite of a ‘de-escalation zone’ having been declared for eastern Ghouta in mid-2017, the government attacks increased, according to the US CRS.¹⁶¹⁵

In August 2016, the GoS, with Russian military support, began its efforts to recapture the areas that had been taken over by opposition groups. The Syrian government’s efforts started with the Darayya area, situated on the southern outskirts of Damascus. The government forces then moved to retake areas near Khahn el Shih and Wadi Barida in 2017. The southern neighbourhoods of Damascus and the Beit Jan area in the southwest were reconquered in 2018.¹⁶¹⁶ BBC reported that the GoS forces

¹⁶⁰⁷ REACH Initiative, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁶⁰⁸ UNOCHA, Syria sub-districts maps [maps], n.d., [url](#)

¹⁶⁰⁹ Izady, M., Syria: Ethnic Composition in 2010, in: Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity, Columbia Univ. Gulf 2000, 2006 - present, 2010, [url](#)

¹⁶¹⁰ Stratfor, The Geopolitics of the Syrian Civil War, 4 August 2015, [url](#)

¹⁶¹¹ REACH Initiative, Rural Damascus Governorate, April 2018 Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS), April 2018, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁶¹² MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁶¹³ FAO/WFP, Special Report, FAO/WFP crop and food security assessment mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 9 October 2018, [url](#), p. 45

¹⁶¹⁴ Carter Center (The), Explosive Weapons Use in Syria, Report 2, Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, Syria Project, Conflict Mapping, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 8-9

¹⁶¹⁵ US, CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 February 2018, [url](#), pp. 8, 16. The report was retrieved from EveryCRSReport, a project of Demand Progress in collaboration with Congressional Data Coalition, a bipartisan coalition founded by Demand Progress and The R Street Institute to promote open legislative information.

¹⁶¹⁶ Carter Center (The), Explosive Weapons Use in Syria, Report 2, Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, Syria Project, Conflict Mapping, [url](#), p. 9

recaptured Eastern Ghouta in April 2018.¹⁶¹⁷ The government did not lift the siege of eastern Ghouta until it had regained control, and by mid-2018 humanitarian organisations had started entering the area, the humanitarian organization Caritas reported.¹⁶¹⁸ Having lasted more than five years, the siege of eastern Ghouta had been the longest running siege in recent history, according to REACH.¹⁶¹⁹

As of March 2020, Rural Damascus governorate was under the control of the GoS.¹⁶²⁰

More information on the conflict background in Rural Damascus is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(January 2019\)](#).

2.11.2.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

According to Gregory Waters of International Review, as of 17 March 2020 deployments of the SAA in Rural Damascus included units of:

2nd Corps

- 14th Special Forces Division: 111th Battalion – Zabadani, Damascus – 13 January 2019;
- 10th Division: 258th Battalion – Douma, Damascus – 15 April 2018; 51st Brigade – Hajar al-Aswad, Damascus – 1 May 2018.¹⁶²¹

COAR identified the Republican Guard as being ‘the ultimate military and security authority in Eastern Ghouta’, whose control has made clashes between different pro-GoS armed groups a rare occurrence in the region as compared to other GoS-controlled areas.¹⁶²²

In an article published by Chatham House, analyst Haid Haid points out that the government has absolute access and relatively high authority in recaptured areas such as eastern Ghouta.¹⁶²³ A map provided by the ISW in February 2020 showed that pro-government forces were retaining their control of Rural Damascus governorate.¹⁶²⁴ A map provided by the MEI showed the locations of the Syrian government checkpoints in East Ghouta as per the end of October 2019.¹⁶²⁵

MEI mentioned in a report of November 2019 that Russian military police were posted in the governorate, in addition to GoS forces. The locations of the Russian posts were shown in a map provided by MEI. Out of the two posts, one was in Misraba inside the Douma sub-district, and the other one in the Eastern outskirts of Douma town. In the view of MEI, the Russian military police exerted only limited influence over Syrian forces in the area. The Russians had sometimes been approached by civilians who had asked them to interfere when the civilians had felt abused by Syrian forces. Their ability to provide lasting improvement for the civilians had, however been moderate, the MEI explained.¹⁶²⁶

¹⁶¹⁷ BBC News, Syria war: Fall of Eastern Ghouta pivotal moment for Assad, 13 April 2018, [url](#); BBC News, Syria war: Army takes full control of Damascus after ousting IS, 21 May 2018, [url](#)

¹⁶¹⁸ Caritas, Aid to Syria’s Ghouta devastated by longest siege in modern history, 18 September 2018, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁶¹⁹ REACH Initiative, Syria – Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁶²⁰ Based on reading of Map 2: ISW, Control of terrain in Syria, 31 March 2020, see [url](#)

¹⁶²¹ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶²² COAR, Eastern Ghouta. NOSAP, July 2019, [url](#), p. 49

¹⁶²³ Haid, H., Understanding the characteristics of the new emerging state in Syria, Chatham House, June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶²⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 21 – February 4, 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶²⁵ MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Checkpoints in East Ghouta, 29 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶²⁶ MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), p. 9

SOHR reported in August 2019 that the Syrian State Security Branch responsible for Ghouta had acted against extortion committed by Syrian military police, upon the request of the Russian military police who had received complaints about extortion from civilians living in the area.¹⁶²⁷

Analyst Gregory Waters reported in July 2019 that the Syrian Army's 3rd Division had been pulled back to its permanent bases in the Damascus countryside.¹⁶²⁸ At this point Waters made a reference to a news report published by Orient News in 2013, which mentioned that these bases are located in Rahiba and Qutaifa which is also the brigade's main headquarter.¹⁶²⁹

2.11.2.2 ISIL

According to the map provided by the ISW, as of February 2020, ISIL was still sustaining a support zone straddling the border with Sweida governorate, crossing Rural Damascus and continuing into Homs governorate.¹⁶³⁰ ISIL's support zone was also shown in an earlier map published by the ISW in April 2019.¹⁶³¹

2.11.2.3 Anti-GoS armed groups

The Syrian opposition website Syria Call stated in December 2019 that an armed group named Saraya Qasioun had attacked checkpoints, and that it was escalating its militant operations in eastern Ghouta.¹⁶³² This group had claimed an attack against an intelligence official in April 2019. The statement released by the group was featured on Liveuamap.¹⁶³³ The group's affiliations were not commented upon by the two sources.

2.11.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

EASO checked ISW's Syria Situation reports published throughout 2019 and could not find reference to Rural Damascus in these reports. These reports are published biweekly, providing a map that summarises significant developments in the war in Syria during each reporting period.¹⁶³⁴ In February 2020, the ISW reported an insurgent attack in Khan el-Sheikh having been carried out by means of a VBIED, and stated that an insurgent campaign was unfolding in the entire country's south. The ISW did not give any details about the character or extent of the campaign itself, or with regard to Rural Damascus.¹⁶³⁵

Analyst Christopher Kozak at the ISW, stated in an interview with EASO that the Syrian government was treating individuals from former opposition held areas with a heavy degree of suspicion. In Kozak's view, suspicion was particularly intense for those from eastern Ghouta and Darayya. The local population was heavily monitored. Kozak described the security presence as very high, and stated that routinely arrests were undertaken of activists, medical personnel, and former media activists. Kozak

¹⁶²⁷ SOHR, The Russians expel the the Syrian regime's military police from Douma because of material extortion against people wanted for the conscription service, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶²⁸ Waters, G, The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, MEI, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶²⁹ Orient News, الفرقة الثالثة: اللواء: مهامها حماية اللواء: 155 خزان للشبيحة وأبرز مهامها حماية اللواء: 155 [The Third Division: a reservoir for the Shabiha, the most prominent of which is to protect the 155th Brigade] 8 March 2013, [url](#)

¹⁶³⁰ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 21 – February 4, 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶³¹ ISW, ISIS Resurgence update – April 2019, Sweida, 16 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶³² Syria Call, Once again, "Saraya Qasiyon" targets a checkpoint of the Assad regime in Eastern Ghouta, 19 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶³³ Liveuamap, Syria [map], 24 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶³⁴ All reports are accessible at: ISW, n.d., Syria Situation Reports, [url](#)

¹⁶³⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 21 – February 4, 2020, February 2020, [url](#)

was of the opinion that basically anyone associated with the opposition in eastern Ghouta could be arrested. Darayya and Hajar al-Aswad were still depopulated according to Kozak.¹⁶³⁶

COAR stated that movement restrictions, conscription policy and abusive armed actor practices constitute the main security issues in eastern Ghouta.¹⁶³⁷

In August 2019, the Col reported that Israeli aerial attacks in Rural Damascus, Damascus and Homs governorates, allegedly had led to civilian deaths and casualties.¹⁶³⁸ An Israeli attack on the airport was reported in November 2019 by the Times of Israel, citing the Syrian state news agency SANA.¹⁶³⁹ An Israeli aerial attack on targets near Damascus International Airport was reported in February 2020. The attack had been confirmed by the Israeli military.¹⁶⁴⁰ No civilian casualties were mentioned in these two reports.

Incidents that were commonly reported in Rural Damascus through 2019 were extortion, lootings of movables and homes, confiscations of houses, and extrajudicial arrests of persons perceived by the GoS to be in opposition to it.

2.11.3.1 Looting, extortion and confiscation of homes

COAR stated that looting and extortion at checkpoints was extremely common in eastern Ghouta.¹⁶⁴¹ The Syrian Kurdish news outlet ARK News reported in April 2019 that GoS forces were looting and confiscating private homes in eastern Ghouta. According to the sources, this had been formally approved. The aim was partly to punish perceived opposition loyalists, partly to force out the original inhabitants so the area could be repopulated with GoS loyalists, the ARK News reported.¹⁶⁴²

The Dubai-based news outlet Orient Net reported in January 2019 that GoS militias had been looting houses in many retaken areas, including eastern Ghouta.¹⁶⁴³ It was not stated whether the incidents had taken place in 2019 or 2018. SOHR reported in September 2019 that GoS officers were systematically looting cars and selling them for profits.¹⁶⁴⁴

SOHR reported in August 2019 that Syrian military police were searching through Douma city and extorted money from wanted draft evaders, against refraining from arresting them. The State Security Branch had sought to stop the extortion by expelling the military police patrols from the affected neighbourhoods, according to the SOHR.¹⁶⁴⁵

In September 2019, the Carter Center, citing ACLED reported that families who had been evicted from their houses in formerly rebel held areas in eastern Ghouta would have to make a payment in order to be allowed to return to their homes.¹⁶⁴⁶

In November 2019, the MEI reported that government agencies were extorting money from inhabitants of eastern Ghouta. Various government agencies were enforcing the payment of power bills dating back to 2011, from inhabitants who had been internally displaced for years. They had been notified that those who did not pay their bills in time would be evicted from their homes. Residents

¹⁶³⁶ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

¹⁶³⁷ COAR, Eastern Ghouta. NOSAP, July 2019, [url](#), p. 49

¹⁶³⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁶³⁹ Times of Israel (The), Syrian state media reports blasts near Damascus airport, 19 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴⁰ AP, Syrian capital rocked by explosions as Israel hits targets, 24 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴¹ COAR, Eastern Ghouta. NOSAP, July 2019, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁶⁴² ARK News, Assad regime confiscates civilians' property in Eastern Ghouta, 13 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴³ Orient Net, Assad militias loot civilians' houses in Deir Ezzor, 29 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴⁴ SOHR, Looting cars is a profession practiced by the Syrian regime's officers in the Eastern Ghouta, 1 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴⁵ SOHR, The Russians expel the Syrian regime's military police from Douma because of material extortion against people wanted for the conscription service, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴⁶ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 1-8 September 2019, [url](#), p. 5

who were not able to produce documentation proving their ownership, or a rental agreement, had also become subject to eviction, the MEI reported.¹⁶⁴⁷ The MEI did not mention the exact locations in eastern Ghouta where these kinds of evictions had taken place.

The Carter Center stated that since the government regained control in 2018, evictions and property seizures have been consistently reported in eastern Ghouta. As examples, the Carter Center mentioned incidents in Kafr Batna, Hezeh, Beit Sawa, Ein Terma, Hamouriyah and Saqb towns in July.¹⁶⁴⁸ The SOHR reported that in April 2019, the government had published name lists allowing the 'precautionary' seizure of property and property documents, as well as extracting money, from civilians at various locations across eastern Ghouta. The seizures had been targeting members of local councils and their wives, media activists, workers in the relief and medical sectors, and others detained in government prisons, the SOHR stated.¹⁶⁴⁹

The SOHR also reported in August 2019 that government security branches had confiscated the homes of displaced persons in several towns across eastern Ghouta and evicted families of members of opposition groups from their homes in July. Their furniture had been confiscated and their houses closed. According to the SOHR, some of the evictions and confiscations had been carried out in Saqba, Hazza, Kafr Batna, Beit Sawa, Ain Tarma, and Hamouriya towns.¹⁶⁵⁰

2.11.3.2 Arbitrary arrests, disappearances, detention and conscription

COAR noted that 'armed actors have a reputation for regularly abusing the population of Eastern Ghouta. Arbitrary arrests, detentions, and harassment is reportedly common', NDF being mentioned as the armed actor most commonly associated with these practices.¹⁶⁵¹

Human Rights Watch reported in May 2019 that intelligence branches were arbitrarily detaining, disappearing, and harassing people in areas retaken from the anti-government groups, among them eastern Ghouta. Those targeted were former armed and political opposition leaders, media activists, aid workers disappearances, defectors, and family members of activists and former anti-government fighters who had all signed reconciliation agreements with the GoS.¹⁶⁵² The MEI reported in a November 2019 report about extrajudicial arrests in eastern Ghouta, but did not specify the exact time and locations where this was said to have taken place. Night time raids on homes, mass arrests and forced disappearances had commonly occurred across eastern Ghouta. Inhabitants in eastern Ghouta risked becoming arrested at checkpoints, and arrests could be extrajudicial. MEI stated that government personnel guarding checkpoints, government offices and hospitals, were using lists of wanted persons to check people against.¹⁶⁵³

Syria Direct, an independent journalism organization that provides coverage of Syria, reported in March 2019 about arrests, disappearances and widespread campaigns of forced conscription across east Ghouta.¹⁶⁵⁴ According to reporting by the SOHR in July 2019, state intelligence services were carrying out raids and arrests of tens of persons in house raids in Al-Tal and Al-Doumayr. Many were arrested as suspected of having defected from military service, and many had earlier on signed

¹⁶⁴⁷ MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 10, 14

¹⁶⁴⁸ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 1-8 September 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁶⁴⁹ SOHR, Security tightening on people getting out of the Eastern Ghouta towards Damascus as a main road between the Eastern Ghouta and the capital Damascus is opened by the regime forces, 7 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵⁰ SOHR, The Russians expel the Syrian regime's military police from Douma because of material extortion against people wanted for the conscription service, 28 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵¹ COAR, Eastern Ghouta. NOSAP, July 2019, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁶⁵² HRW, Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵³ MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁶⁵⁴ Syria Direct, As displaced East Ghoutans mark one year in exile, tales of arrests and forced conscriptions reverberate from back home, 28 March 2019, [url](#)

reconciliation agreements with the government, the SOHR reported.¹⁶⁵⁵ Zaman al Wasl reported in December 2019 that the GoS had been carrying out a conscription campaign and was conducting raids in Douma, and in the Qalamun, Ruhaiba and Doumayr towns in the Qalamoun region.¹⁶⁵⁶ According to Syria Call in February 2020, GoS forces were arresting people they said were suspected draft evaders, criminals and rebels. The arrests had taken place in homes and shops in Ottaya and Nashabiyah towns in eastern Ghouta.¹⁶⁵⁷

SOHR reported that lists of wanted persons were in use and that Douma city was ‘constantly witnessing raids and arrests’. Security forces had arrested around 100 persons who actually had settled their situations with the authorities, in the towns of Saqba, Kafr Batna, Hamouriyeh, Arbin, Jisrayn, Al-Maliha, Zabadin, and Deir Al-Asafir. The source indicated that military police were pressuring the families of detainees for money, against releasing them.¹⁶⁵⁸ In another news article, SOHR mentioned that in April 2019, five families in Harasta had been notified by the authorities that their children had received death sentences, and that the families had not received any further information whether the sentences actually had been executed. The sentenced children allegedly had connections with opposition groups. SOHR did not give any information about the actual age of the children.¹⁶⁵⁹

Qasioun News reported in September 2019 that GoS intelligence had arrested a doctor and nurses in Douma as well as civil defence workers in Harasta.¹⁶⁶⁰ SOHR mentioned in October 2019 that the GoS had arrested 50 young men in Harasta, but it did not mention any reasons for the arrests.¹⁶⁶¹

Syria Call mentioned in December 2019 that ‘great security restrictions’ had been imposed, and that ‘ongoing detention campaigns’ were taking place in East Ghouta, but did not specify any further.¹⁶⁶²

SNHR, mentioned in December 2019 that three civilians had been arrested at a checkpoint in Harasta.¹⁶⁶³ In December 2019, also Syria Call reported on arrests in Harasta.¹⁶⁶⁴ The opposition news site Zaman al-Wasel reported in December 2019 that state intelligence had arrested 50 persons in Douma.¹⁶⁶⁵ Syria Call reported in January 2020 that the GoS had launched an arrest campaign in eastern Ghouta.¹⁶⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵⁵ SOHR, Security tightening on people getting out of the Eastern Ghouta towards Damascus as the main road between the Eastern Ghouta and Damascus is opened by the regime forces, 7 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵⁶ Zaman al-Wasl, Eastern Ghouta: State Intelligence arrests 50 people in Douma, 2 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵⁷ Syria Call, Assad’s militia launches arrest campaign in the towns of “Ottaya” and “Al-Nashibiya” east of Damascus, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵⁸ SOHR, The Russians expel the Syrian regime’s military police from Douma because of material extortion against people wanted for the conscription service, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵⁹ SOHR, Security tightening on people getting out of the Eastern Ghouta towards Damascus as the main road between the Eastern Ghouta and Damascus is opened by the regime forces, 7 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶⁰ Qaisoun News, Eastern Ghouta: Regime intelligence arrested doctors, 29 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶¹ SOHR, The regime forces arrest about 50 young men from Harasta city in the Eastern Ghouta in Rif Dimashq including people returned to city under auspices of the “reconciliation” committee, 24 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶² Syria Call, Once again “Saraya Qasiyon” targets a checkpoint of the Assad regime, in the Eastern Ghouta, 19 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶³ SNHR, Syrian regime arrested civilians in Harasta city in Damascus suburbs, on December 8, 9 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶⁴ Syria Call, The Assad regime’s military carry out new arrests in Eastern Ghouta and increase their security restrictions west of Damascus, 9 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶⁵ Zaman al-Wasl, Eastern Ghouta: State Intelligence arrests 50 people in Douma, 2 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶⁶ Syria Call, The Assad regime launches new campaign of arrests in Eastern Ghouta, holds former activists wanted for recruitment, 16 January 2020, [url](#)

2.11.3.3 Freedom of movement

The CoI stated that a ‘network of checkpoints remained across “reconciled areas”’, including eastern Ghouta.¹⁶⁶⁷ The MEI stated in a report in October 2019 that residents of eastern Ghouta were running the risk of harassment, extortion and arrest when passing the checkpoints.¹⁶⁶⁸ In Douma city, authorisations were required in order to enter and exit. Those without such authorisations residents reportedly had ‘to pay large bribes at checkpoints to gain access to hospitals to treat their medical conditions’.¹⁶⁶⁹

Government forces prevented 150 residents from the towns of Ein Khadra, Ain el-Fijah, and Bsimah in Wadi Barada from returning to their places of residence unless approval by the security service’s Palestine Branch, according to SOHR, referring to information it originally had posted in April 2019. If approval was granted, it would only apply for a few hours, and the holder would not be allowed to move between the place of residence and other locations. The main road of Ain Tarma that runs between eastern Ghouta and Damascus was opened in July 2019 after seven years of closure. Residents who wished to go to Damascus needed security approvals, a requirement that had been imposed on all citizens over six years of age. It has been rigidly enforced, according to SOHR, who stated that a bus full of passengers would be turned back if only one single passenger did not have the necessary approval.¹⁶⁷⁰

The MEI reported in a November 2019 report that dozens of checkpoints were dotting eastern Ghouta, making it impossible to travel from place to place or to Damascus without passing through them.¹⁶⁷¹ In an interview with EASO, analyst Christopher Kozak of ISW stated in November 2019 that the local population from former opposition held areas in Rural Damascus needed to pass through checkpoints in order to enter Damascus. If permission was given at all, it would be time limited, according to Kozak.¹⁶⁷²

The GoS increased the restrictions on civilians’ freedom of movement in the villages of Kanaker, Al-Danagah and Deir Maker west of Damascus, Syria Call reported in December, after oppositional graffiti had been appearing on house walls there.¹⁶⁷³

2.11.3.4 Security incidents

According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 204 security incidents recorded in Rural Damascus governorate, of whom 25 were battles, 38 explosions/remote violence and 141 incidents of violence against civilians.

¹⁶⁶⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 14

¹⁶⁶⁸ MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Checkpoints in East Ghouta, 29 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 14

¹⁶⁷⁰ SOHR, Security tightening on people getting out of the Eastern Ghouta towards Damascus as the main road between the Eastern Ghouta and Damascus is opened by the regime forces, 7 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁷¹ MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁶⁷² EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019

¹⁶⁷³ Syria Call, The Assad regime’s militias carry out new arrests in Eastern Ghouta and increase their security restrictions west of Damascus, 9 December 2019, [url](#)

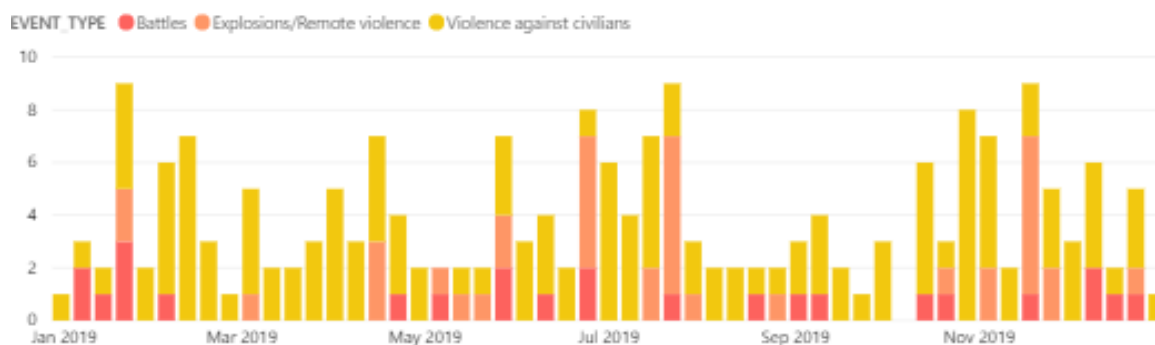


Figure 45. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Rural Damascus governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data¹⁶⁷⁴

Rural Damascus governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Al Qutayfah	-	-	1
An Nabk	2	5	-
At Tall	-	-	130
Az-Zabadani	2	1	-
Darayya	2	4	-
Duma	8	4	5
Qatana	1	7	1
Rural Damascus	10	16	3
Yabroud	-	1	1
Total	25	38	141

Figure 46. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Rural Damascus governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data.

Most security incidents recorded in 2019 in Rural Damascus were coded as violence against civilians, the highest number being documented in At Tall district, followed by Rural Damascus and Duma districts.

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 31 security incidents of which 14 were battles, 7 explosions/remote violence and 10 incidents of violence against civilians. Most of them were recorded in At Tall (13).

¹⁶⁷⁴ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

2.11.3.5 Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	5	7
February	3	8
March	5	2
April	25	3
May	3	2
June	5	1
July	19	8
August	-	2
September	9	1
October	6	7
November	10	8
December	2	4
Total	92	53

Figure 47. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Rural Damascus governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2019, sources documented between 53 (SNHR data)¹⁶⁷⁵ and 92 (VDC data)¹⁶⁷⁶ and civilian fatalities in Rural Damascus governorate.

2.11.3.6 Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

In its damage assessment of various cities in the eastern Ghouta region, REACH classified 8 606 buildings in Harasta, Douma, Misraba and Arbin with surrounding neighbourhoods as ‘destroyed’, 10 787 as ‘severely damaged’, and 12 883 as ‘moderately damaged’. In Al-Zabadani, 659 buildings were counted as ‘destroyed’, 1 251 as ‘severely damaged’, and 1 454 as ‘moderately damaged’. The corresponding figures for al-Nashabiyah were: 747 ‘destroyed’, 778 ‘severely damaged’, and 335 ‘moderately damaged’. REACH noted that large areas of eastern Ghouta’s neighborhoods and communities had been affected by aerial bombardments. It estimated that at the end of 2017, half a year before the government retook control, that 93 % of structures in the Jobar neighbourhood had been damaged or destroyed, and set the corresponding percentage for Ein Terma neighbourhood to 71.¹⁶⁷⁷ In its assessment of damage to buildings in the whole of the eastern Ghouta region, REACH

¹⁶⁷⁵ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁷⁶ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

¹⁶⁷⁷ REACH Initiative, Syria – Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, pp. 16, 17, 20, [url](#)

indicated a total of 34 136 destroyed, severely damaged and moderately damaged buildings as of 2018.¹⁶⁷⁸

Syria Direct reported in March 2019 that much of eastern Ghouta was still in ruins, the urban landscape in many areas remaining ‘crushed’. In a neighbourhood like Ain--Tarma, destruction had been estimated at 70 %. Water supply had not been reinstated in many neighborhoods, and regular power cuts were leaving pockets of eastern Ghouta in the dark, according to Syria Direct.¹⁶⁷⁹

Basic services and infrastructure

The CoI stated that ‘living conditions remained dire’ particularly in eastern Ghouta, where there was limited access to basic services and insufficient progress on reconstruction efforts.¹⁶⁸⁰ The SOHR also reported in August 2019 about the absence of basic services in eastern Ghouta.¹⁶⁸¹ The MEI reported in November 2019 that basic services were widely unavailable in eastern Ghouta.¹⁶⁸²

In the same news report of August 2019, SOHR reported that the water network in eastern Ghouta was out of use. The local residents were taking water from improvised wells made during the siege, and potable water could be bought only at high prices. The power supply was repeatedly breaking down and interrupted. Rubble from destroyed buildings had not been removed and was blocking the roads, SOHR reported from Douma town in August.¹⁶⁸³

In its east Ghouta report of November 2019, MEI mentioned that the water supply had been destroyed to an extreme extent and was in disrepair. Informally excavated wells and tanker trucks provided most of the accessible drinking water, which was often polluted. Water trucks would get their supplies from improvised wells. Up to 60 % of the residents had no access to power and for those who had, power was delivered only six hours per day. Of those who did get power, 30 % got it from private generators at high cost. Water supply that had been destroyed was brought back first to loyal high-ranking government officials and to business people. The sewage system in eastern Ghouta was 90 % destroyed. Waste water ended up in the groundwater. Above the ground, built-up waste had not been removed.¹⁶⁸⁴

Most schools were in total disrepair, the MEI reported in November 2019. Neither was any reconstruction of schools under way. The schools that were operating were understaffed and the staff at work was underpaid. Volunteering staff was working on short term assignments. Since tests and exams only could be completed in Damascus, pupils and students from eastern Ghouta would have to undertake a long and expensive travel to reach the sites. Girls who had to make the travel alone, would be travelling at the risk of sexual harassment, for example at the checkpoints, the report stated. The school buildings had no heating, and sanitation was poor. Lice were abundant. Many school

¹⁶⁷⁸ REACH specifies Eastern Ghouta to include the following areas - Eastern Ghouta settlements: Harasta, Duma, Misraba, Modira, Arbin, Ein Terma, Hammura, Zamalka, Hezzeh, Saqba, Kafr Batna, Jisrein and Al Nashabyiah including, Hazrama, Hawsh al Khanim, Hawsh Salihyah, Al Fadaiya, Al Bilaliyah, Marj As-Sultan. Damascus neighborhoods: Al Masani, Jobar

¹⁶⁷⁹ Syria Direct, Displaced East Ghoutans mark one year in exile as tales of arrests and forced conscription reverberate from back home, 28 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 13

¹⁶⁸¹ SOHR, The city of Douma in Rif Dimashq lives deteriorated service reality about 18 months after the regime forces and gunmen loyal to them had imposed their control over the city, 2 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸² MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 9, 13, 14

¹⁶⁸³ SOHR, The city of Douma in Rif Dimashq lives deteriorated service reality about 18 months after the regime forces and gunmen loyal to them had imposed their control over the city, 2 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸⁴ MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 9, 13, 14

buildings were in such bad state that occasionally they would collapse, causing injuries to those inside.¹⁶⁸⁵

According to the MEI, operational hospitals in eastern Ghouta were few and understaffed. Shortages in equipment and medicine were ongoing. The Health Directorate provided hospital staff only sporadically. The town of Irbin, with 80 000 inhabitants, as well as other areas, were without any medical facilities. Open hospitals in Eastern Ghouta were grossly understaffed. Medicine stocked there was largely limited to painkillers and antibiotics. The intelligence services required doctors to inform them prior to providing treatment to patients. Medical staff who had been discovered treating civilians without informing regime intelligence, have been known to be arrested and investigated. Infant mortality was at a high rate due to absence of high-quality medical care. Women who needed to go to Damascus to deliver, needed permission.¹⁶⁸⁶

The FAO reported in 2017 about damage inflicted upon the agricultural sector reporting that Rural Damascus was one of the governorates with the largest agricultural production losses, alongside Hasaka, Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor, Dar'a and Idlib.¹⁶⁸⁷

Road infrastructure was described as in bad condition. Except for the main entrance and exit roads to eastern Ghouta, main roads remained unrepaired. Byroads had decayed into dirt tracks. Sinkholes, craters and debris were abundant in roads and tracks. Remote places would become isolated during bad weather in winter.¹⁶⁸⁸

No assessments of damages caused by the Israeli aerial attacks in February 2020 and November 2019 have been found. According to information on arrivals and departures posted on the home page of Damascus International Airport in March 2020, flights appeared to be operating daily.¹⁶⁸⁹

Explosive remnants of war

In a 2020 report, the Carter Center reported that explosive remnants were impacting at least 273 communities in Rural Damascus governorate. Nearly 70 % of the total amount of munitions used between July 2013 and May 2019 occurred in 19 locations in Rural Damascus and Damascus city: Darayya, Harasta, Douma, Zabadani, Khan al Shih, Jobar, Arbin, Ain Terma, Marj Sultan, Misraba, Qaboun, Yarmouk camp, Saqba, Deir Khabiyah, Dahiet al Assad, Zamalka, Hamouriya, Modira, and Moadamiyat al Sham. The areas of Rural Damascus with the highest number of recorded explosive munitions use were in Darayya (14.8 % of the total), Harasta (10.47 %), Douma (7.2 %), Zabadani (6.49 %), Khan al Shih (4.94 %) and Jobar (4.77 %); other areas had 1-3 % of the total.¹⁶⁹⁰

2.11.3.7 Displacement and return

UNOCHA data on displacement showed that in 2019, around 36 000 IDP movements were recorded to or within Rural Damascus governorate, of whom around 32 000 were within the governorate while the rest came from Damascus and Dar'a governorates. Most displacement movements recorded during 2019 from Rural Damascus governorate were to Homs governorate.¹⁶⁹¹

¹⁶⁸⁵ MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 9, 13, 14

¹⁶⁸⁶ MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 9, 13, 14

¹⁶⁸⁷ FAO, Counting the Cost – Agriculture in Syria after six years of crisis, 2017, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸⁸ MEI/ETANA SYRIA, Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), pp. 9, 13, 14

¹⁶⁸⁹ Damascus International Airport, Damascus flight arrivals – Lives status updates [2 March 2020], [url](#)

¹⁶⁹⁰ Carter Center (The), Explosive Weapons Use in Syria, Report 2, Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, Syria Project, Conflict Mapping, January 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁶⁹¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

According to UNOCHA data, around 3 000 return movements were recorded to or within Rural Damascus governorate in 2019, of which 2 000 were within the governorate. Return movements from Rural Damascus governorate were recorded mainly to Homs (around 6 000), Tartous and Raqqa governorates.¹⁶⁹²

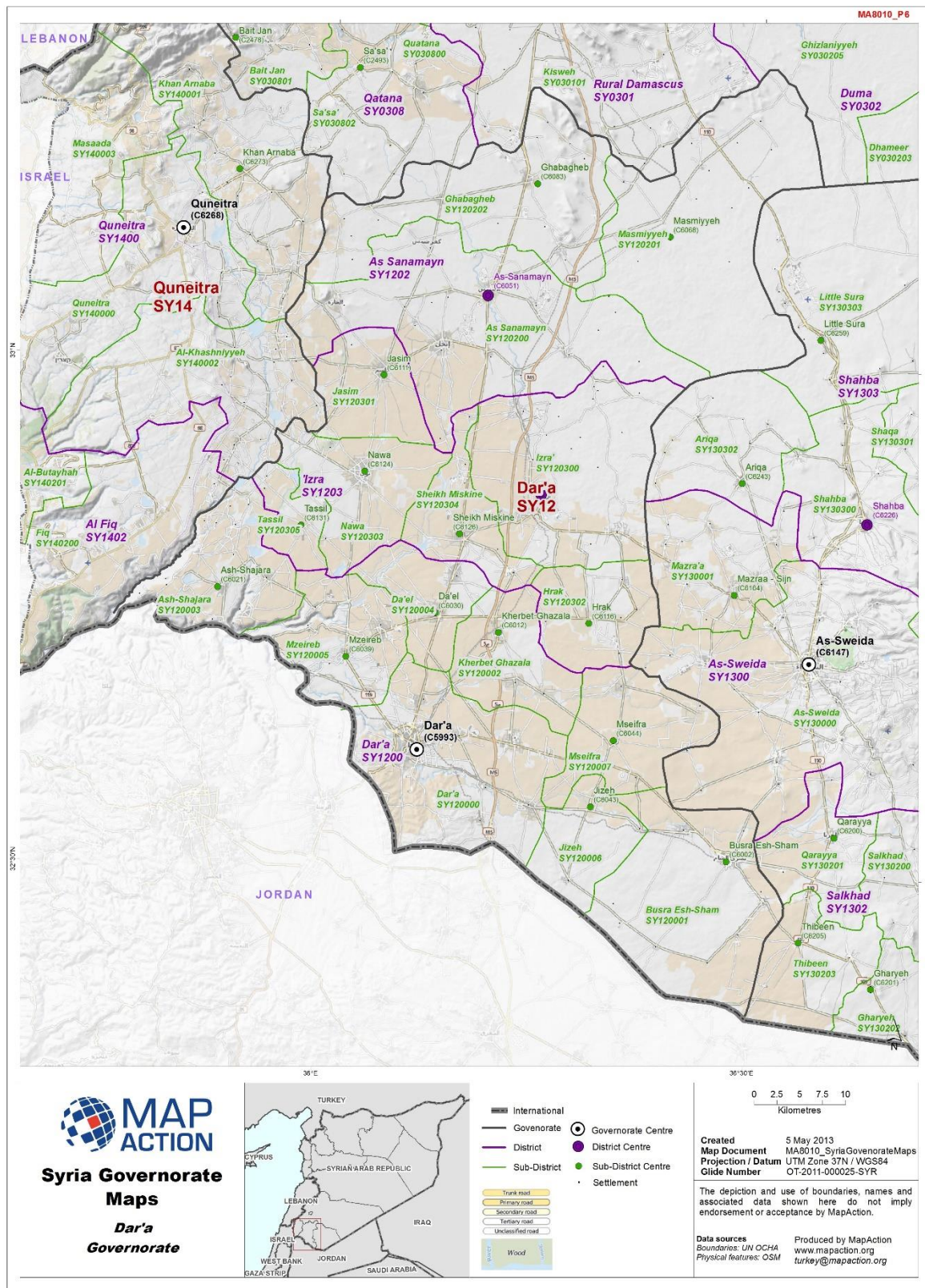
According to the CoI, those who wanted to return to their houses in eastern Ghouta had to 'pay utility charges for the entire period of the conflict, including times during which the services were not in place or the individual did not benefit from such utilities. This placed a prohibitively expensive burden upon civilians'. In Darayya, 'certain segments of the civilian population were compelled by pro-government forces to sell their property at greatly reduced prices'.¹⁶⁹³

Christopher Kozak noted that in Hajar al-Aswad and the Yarmouk Camp, residents are not allowed to go back – the area is still a military zone and residents need to apply for a day pass to get back and see their properties.¹⁶⁹⁴

¹⁶⁹² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁹³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), pp. 14-15

¹⁶⁹⁴ EASO Interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 14 November 2019



Map 18: © MapAction, Dar'a governorate¹⁶⁹⁵

2.12.1 General description of governorate

Dar'a governorate is located in the southern part of Syria, below Damascus, sharing borders with the governorates of Quneitra to the east, Rural Damascus to the north, As-Sweida to the west and an international border with Jordan to its south. Dar'a governorate is comprised of the three administrative districts of Dar'a, Izra' and As Sanamayn.¹⁶⁹⁶ Each district is sub-divided further into sub-districts:

- Dar'a district: Dar'a, Jizeh, Bushra Esh-Sham, Mseifra, Kherbet Ghazala, Da'el, Mzeireb, Ash Shajara. Dar'a City is the governorate capital;
- As Sanamayn district: As Sanamayn [includes district capital], Ghabagheb, Massimiyeh;
- Izra' district: Izra', Hrak, Sheikh Miskine, Nawa [district capital is Nawa town], Jasim, Tassil.¹⁶⁹⁷

Dar'a city, the capital, is the largest city in the governorate.¹⁶⁹⁸ According to 2016 estimates by the Syrian Bureau of Statistics, the population of Dar'a governorate was approximately 845 000.¹⁶⁹⁹

The population of Dar'a is almost entirely Sunni Muslim, with some Christian communities.¹⁷⁰⁰ Fabrice Balanche describes it as a Sunni Arab 'stronghold' in the conflict with the Assad government.¹⁷⁰¹ However, COAR remarked that the south has also traditionally served as a 'pillar' of the Ba'ath party system, producing a number of key party leaders, officials, and public servants, connections which later impacted the manner in which the region entered into reconciliation agreements with the GoS after its take-over by pro-government forces in 2018.¹⁷⁰²

Dar'a governorate is strategically important as a transit route between Syria, Jordan, and Gulf states, and, bordering the Golan Heights.¹⁷⁰³ The M5 highway splits the governorate connecting Damascus to Jordan, and to Aleppo to the north.¹⁷⁰⁴ The loss of control over these highways connecting Damascus city with the GoS-controlled border crossing with Jordan would threaten GoS' control over the capital.¹⁷⁰⁵ Its strategic value and proximity to Israeli and Jordanian border have made it significant to the GoS in terms of investing in both services and troops.¹⁷⁰⁶ These characteristics have made it 'traditionally one of the most militarised regions in Syria', according to UNOCHA.¹⁷⁰⁷

¹⁶⁹⁵ MapAction, Dar'a governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

¹⁶⁹⁶ Based on UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#)

¹⁶⁹⁷ Spellings are from UNOCHA's 2015 Dar'a Governorate map: UNOCHA, Dar'a Governorate Reference Map, December 2015, [url](#); Alternative spellings can be found in: Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁶⁹⁸ Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁶⁹⁹ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁷⁰⁰ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 13, and map 2 (Sectarian and Ethnic Distribution in Syria 2011) on p. XIII

¹⁷⁰¹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 27

¹⁷⁰² COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁷⁰³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profile, 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 37

¹⁷⁰⁴ ACAPS, Regional Analysis Syria: All – Governorate Profiles, 1 October-31 December 2014, [url](#), p. 26

¹⁷⁰⁵ Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 6; See also: MEE, Tensions in Syria's Daraa are getting out of hand, 26 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁰⁶ Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁷⁰⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 37

2.12.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

Dar'a was the location where the first protests against the Assad government took place in 2011, leading to the outbreak of the war.¹⁷⁰⁸ As a result, the governorate experienced 'heavy fighting' causing displacement of large number of residents to locations inside and outside Syria.¹⁷⁰⁹ Initially, the protests in Dar'a were linked to frustrations with the GoS over decades of lack of interest in the region from the state.¹⁷¹⁰ A Sunni opposition movement developed in Dar'a governorate during the beginning of the conflict and protests.¹⁷¹¹ In 2012, rebels under the FSA seized control of Balad district in Dar'a City, leading to heavy government bombing and violence between the GoS and opposition forces, with rebels and armed opposition groups later gaining control over most of the south of the governorate.¹⁷¹² From 2012 to 2014, waves of conflict-related displacement occurred, pushing hundreds of thousands to leave Dar'a.¹⁷¹³ In early 2015, ISIL temporarily moved into south-western Dar'a and the ISIL-affiliate group Jaish Khaled Ibn Al-Walid (JKBW) briefly took over several communities in 2016; ISIL was later pushed back to the Yarmouk Basin.¹⁷¹⁴ As of August 2014, the GoS was able to retain strategic control over larger urban centres like Dar'a city and the M5 highway, which splits the governorate in two, thereby preventing the consolidation of local governance in opposition areas.¹⁷¹⁵

In 2017, Dar'a was designated as one of four 'de-escalation' zones by the US, Jordan, and Russia, and created with the intention to allow a decline in hostilities.¹⁷¹⁶ However in June 2018, as the GoS gained a stronger position in the conflict, it began building up forces in Dar'a and began a Russian supported bombing and shelling campaign against rebel positions, displacing more than 270 000 people.¹⁷¹⁷ The offensive caused one of the most 'rapid and significant' displacement events in the conflict, with shelling and airstrikes causing 40 000 people to be temporarily displaced in the space of a month.¹⁷¹⁸ The large scale military campaign in summer 2018 with artillery strikes and aerial bombardment successfully forced the opposition rebel groups to negotiate a surrender.¹⁷¹⁹

In July 2018, with Russian support, the Assad government retook control of Dar'a through a combination of military campaigns and reconciliation agreements backed by the Russians. Some deals permitted local fighters to keep their light weapons in exchange for surrender, and some were integrated into the Russian directed 5th Corps, ostensibly to fight against ISIL.¹⁷²⁰ The reconciliation deals resulted in a 'patchwork' of authority across different actors in Dar'a, leading to what COAR describes as 'space for unprecedented levels of instability' post-reconciliation.¹⁷²¹ Russia prioritised its deals in the south-eastern rural parts of Dar'a, while the GoS made its deals in western and northern Dar'a, while in other areas, this sometimes occurred with both simultaneously. GoS deals leveraged

¹⁷⁰⁸ Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 6; UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 37

¹⁷⁰⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 37

¹⁷¹⁰ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁷¹¹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁷¹² Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁷¹³ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁷¹⁴ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), pp. 13-14

¹⁷¹⁵ Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁷¹⁶ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁷¹⁷ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 2

¹⁷¹⁸ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), pp. 14-15

¹⁷¹⁹ Al-Jabassini, A., From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Damascus, European University Institute, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 4, 5; Al Masdar News, Breaking: Russian Air Force launches massive assault on 2nd largest city in Daraa, 18 July 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷²⁰ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1, 1-2

¹⁷²¹ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 12

local social capital and connections to maintain ties with the government and urge locals to reconcile; Russian deals, by contrast, focused on negotiating with armed opposition actors and retaining direct links with Russia, most prominently by dealing with Ahmad Oudeh, commander of the Shabab As-Sunna group in Busra El-Sham area, reconfiguring these opponents into new and reconciled groups and fighters under the 5th Corps, to be led by Oudeh.¹⁷²² Government civilian institutions and local councils were reportedly established and operating in ‘all areas’ including those under the control of reconciled non-state armed groups, as of a May 2019 UN report on Dar’a.¹⁷²³

Further background information about the security situation in Dar’a during 2018 and 2019, including after reconciliation agreements is also available in the 2019-2020 EASO COI Reports: [Syria: Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(February 2020\)](#) and Syria: [Syria Security situation \(November 2019\)](#).

2.12.2.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

Following the Syrian government’s retaking of Dar’a in summer 2018, the state security agencies have taken over local governance and returned the area to a ‘security state’ according to International Crisis Group.¹⁷²⁴ After reconciliation, the six main pro-government actors deployed in Dar’a have been identified by COAR as: the 4th Division, State Security Branch, Political Security Branch, Air Force Intelligence, Military Security Branch, and the 5th Corps, each with supposed distinctions in mandate, but in practice, overlapping and competing for local influence and acting as ‘local armed groups’.¹⁷²⁵ Government intelligence and security organisations are involved in local governance and security in Dar’a, including issuing security clearances to civilians and aid organisations.¹⁷²⁶ The Washington Post reported in July 2019 that Syrian military intelligence ‘is the dominant apparatus’ of the GoS within parts of Dar’a governorate.¹⁷²⁷

The 4th Division is among the most powerful divisions and directly linked to the upper ranks of the Assad government, while the Political Security Branch and Air Intelligence are known to have links with Iran. Military Security Branch is a security agency which falls under the Defense ministry, and in Dar’a, it functions as a key division of the army, as much as an intelligence and security service, while also being perceived as close to Russia. It is present and influential in border communities along the Israeli border and it also the most influential actor in Dar’a City.¹⁷²⁸

The Russia-backed 5th Corps of the SAA formed from reconciled former opposition armed groups and fighters was created to prevent ‘security vacuums’ in Dar’a and contain Iranian influence in the area.¹⁷²⁹ The 5th Corps in Dar’a is led by Ahmed Oudeh and has a large presence in the eastern rural parts of Dar’a, as the main influential armed actor. It coordinates with Russia exclusively.¹⁷³⁰ In Bushra Ash Sham, for example, the 5th Corps is ‘relatively concentrated’.¹⁷³¹

According to an analysis by Gregory Waters, published in the International Review¹⁷³², as of 17 March 2020 the ‘last known’ locations of SAA units deployed in Dar’a governorate were:

¹⁷²² COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-8; OHCHR, The “Unreconciled” Concerns of Civilians in Dar’a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

¹⁷²³ OHCHR, The “Unreconciled” Concerns of Civilians in Dar’a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁷²⁴ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State’s Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁷²⁵ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁷²⁶ COAR, Southwestern Dar’a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 25

¹⁷²⁷ Washington Post, Assad’s control over Syria’s security apparatus is limited, 30 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷²⁸ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-11, 17, 18

¹⁷²⁹ COAR, Southwestern Dar’a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 40

¹⁷³⁰ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁷³¹ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁷³² International Review is a volunteer-run not-for-profit organisation that provides analysis based on open submissions that are based on ‘credible sources’ such as academic studies and open sources. [url](#). Gregory Waters is a guest contributor

- The 4th Division: 666th Regiment and 666th Regiment/449th Battalion (17 July 2019);
- 1st Corps/5th Division: 175th Artillery Regiment/97th Battalion in Izra (27 April 2019);
- 1st Corps/5th Division: 12th Brigade (14 October 2018);
- 1st Corps/7th Division: 121st Brigade and 257th Battalion – Tel Sha’r (27 May 2019);
- 1st Corps/9th Division: 52nd Brigade – Sanamayn, Dar’a (3 March 2020);
- The Border Guards, 8th Regiment/865th Battalion in Dar’a governorate (8 November 2019).¹⁷³³

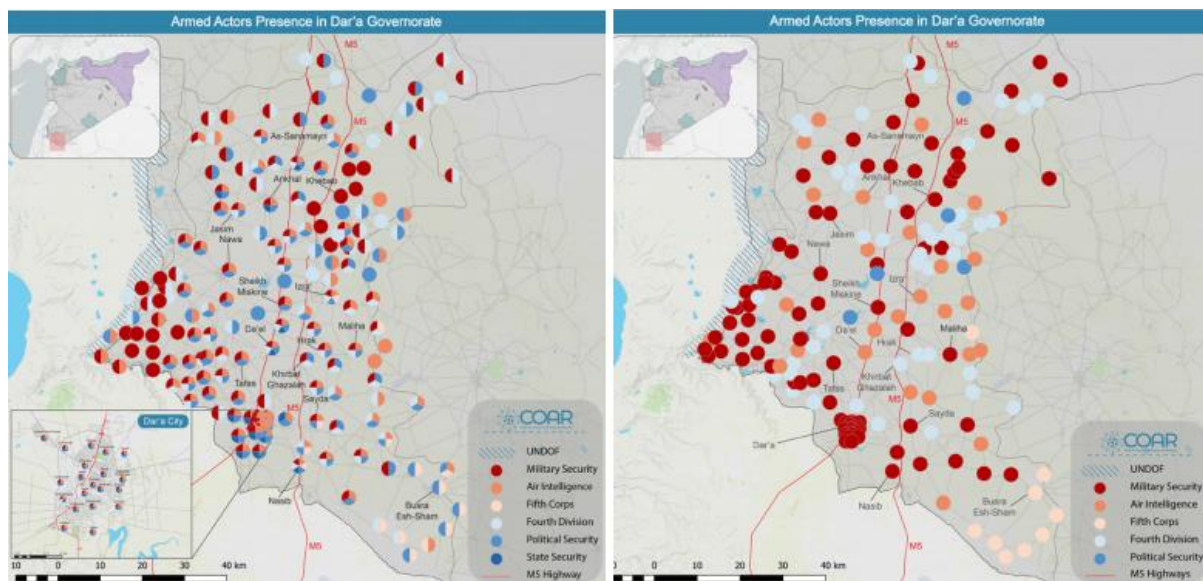
In an article published by the Middle East Institute (MEI), Waters also mentions other units that were present in Dar’a:

- 1st Corps/5th Division: 38th Brigade based out of Sayda, east of Dar’aa and is ‘the only division to remain almost entirely within one region for the whole war. It has bases from east to west across the centre of Dar’a and was tasked with holding it;’¹⁷³⁴
- 1st Corps/9th Armoured Division: was almost exclusively deployed in Dar’a, all of its components sent units to participate in various offensives in Damascus and Sweida during the second quarter of 2018;
- Remnants of the 15th Special Forces Division located in Dar’a City.¹⁷³⁵

Jaish Mu’taz Billah is a reconciled former opposition group that used to be part of 5th Corps, but retains partial authority in Tafas.¹⁷³⁶

Russian forces themselves do not have a permanent presence, according to the UN; however, Russian police systematically patrol areas across Dar’a.¹⁷³⁷

COAR provided a mapping of the main pro-government security actors presence and influence in Dar’a governorate as of August-September 2019:



Map 19: © COAR, Armed actors' presence in Dar'a governorate¹⁷³⁸

to the Middle East Institute and a research consultant for the Counter Extremism Project who has previously published his work on Bellingcat and OpenDemocracy. [url](#)

¹⁷³³ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, 13 December 2019, [url](#) [article appears to have been updated in March 2020 adding the 52 Brigade in Dar’a]

¹⁷³⁴ Waters, G., The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, MEI, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

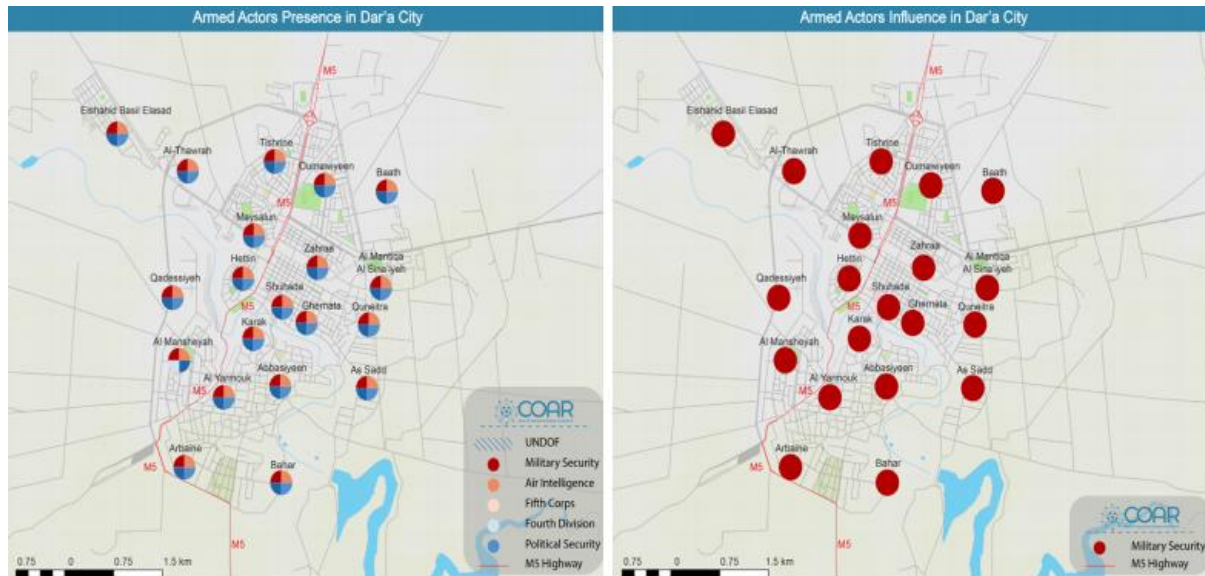
¹⁷³⁵ Waters, G., The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, MEI, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷³⁶ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 41

¹⁷³⁷ OHCHR, The "Unreconciled" Concerns of Civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-5

¹⁷³⁸ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 15

The same report provides a map for the main pro-GoS security actors presence and influence in the capital, Dar'a City, where it is also noted that all pro-government armed groups are present, except for the 5th Corps:



Map 20: © COAR, Armed actors' presence in Dar'a City¹⁷³⁹

2.12.2.2 Hezbollah and Iran-backed groups

Iranian-backed local militias reportedly 'hold sway' in the south on the border between Jordan and the Golan Heights where the government is unable to exert authority.¹⁷⁴⁰ Western Dar'a has seen Iranian influence strengthening over its affiliates in that area¹⁷⁴¹, as well as in the south-west, where Hezbollah and other Iranian-militias operate.¹⁷⁴² These groups have also been accused of also being involved in assassinations against those opposed to their presence.¹⁷⁴³ Their members have also been the targets of attacks in Dar'a.¹⁷⁴⁴

2.12.2.3 Opposition armed groups and fighters, including the Dar'a Popular Resistance (Al Muqawama al Shabia Daraa)

Former opposition fighters and groups, including the Popular Resistance, are present in several areas of Dar'a, especially the western suburbs, such as the Yarmouk Basin¹⁷⁴⁵ and al-Jaidour area¹⁷⁴⁶, as well as towns of Tafas, Muzayrib, and Tal Shihab, as well as being based in Dar'a City to a lesser extent.¹⁷⁴⁷

¹⁷³⁹ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁷⁴⁰ Reuters, New Assad statue triggers protest in cradle of Syrian revolt, 10 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴¹ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 41

¹⁷⁴² Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as 'security breakdown' mires Daraa's fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴³ Nofal, W., Will the Security Crisis in Southern Syria Spark a 'New Revolution', Chatham House, January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴⁴ 11 attacks on Hezbollah individuals have occurred in the south of Syria since August 2019; Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 13-19 January 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁷⁴⁵ This includes area towns including Tasil, Koya, Bait Irah, Nafa`ah, Sahem el-Golan, al-Shabraq, Jilin, Hayt, al-Jumlah, Ain Thakar, al-Shajara and al-Qusayr.

¹⁷⁴⁶ This includes areas of Nawa, Jasim, al-Harah, and Nimr.

¹⁷⁴⁷ STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), pp. 5-6

The Dar'a Popular Resistance group emerged online in November 2018.¹⁷⁴⁸ The group's 'origins, memberships, and affiliations are largely unknown' though according to COAR it could be either a guerrilla type insurgent group or a 'front' for different state-linked forces to engage in 'interfactional rivalry'. The group has carried out a number of attacks against government targets, including military headquarters, checkpoints, as well as hit and run assaults, bombings, and assassinations of reconciled figures.¹⁷⁴⁹ It has claimed to deter abuses by Assad and Iran and to target those who collaborate with Russia.¹⁷⁵⁰ The group has carried out attacks on checkpoints in Al-Sanamayn and in Dar'a city against the Criminal Security Branch, for instance.¹⁷⁵¹ Low level attacks, ambushes, raids on military outposts, and targeting of Iranian, pro-GoS and former opposition members continue to be reported as of November 2019.¹⁷⁵²

Other emerging groups in Dar'a dissatisfied with the government since reconciliation identified by sources include:

- the Southern Companies (Siraya Janoubiya); first appeared online in February 2019.¹⁷⁵³ This anti-government group targeted a Baath office in eastern Dar'a with an explosion, threatening to target government facilities if they did not 'stay away from civilians'.¹⁷⁵⁴
- the Special Task Companies (Liwa al Muhim al Siraya); first appeared online in March 2019;
- the Freeman of Kanaker (Ahrar Bilada Kanaker); first appeared online in April 2019.¹⁷⁵⁵

2.12.2.4 ISIL affiliates

ISIL has reportedly been active in Dar'a during 2019¹⁷⁵⁶ and early 2020.¹⁷⁵⁷ Local ISIL-affiliate group Jaish Khaled Ibn Al-Walid (JKBW) formerly dominated parts of the south-west of Dar'a, but there have been few attacks since the 2018 takeover and reconciliation.¹⁷⁵⁸

2.12.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

2.12.3.1 Territorial presence and influence

Sources provided indicated that in January 2020 Dar'a governorate is under nominal GoS control, including some areas of the governorate that were formerly opposition-held and have been retaken

¹⁷⁴⁸ Al-Jabassini, A., From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Damascus, European University Institute, June 2019, [url](#), p. 15; COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 43; Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁷⁴⁹ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), pp. 4, 37, 43; ISW, Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy, November 2019, [url](#), p. 27

¹⁷⁵⁰ ISW, Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy, November 2019, [url](#), p. 27

¹⁷⁵¹ Al-Jabassini, A., From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Damascus, European University Institute, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 15-16

¹⁷⁵² ISW, Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy, November 2019, [url](#), p. 27; See also: Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as 'security breakdown' mires Daraa's fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁵³ Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁷⁵⁴ Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as 'security breakdown' mires Daraa's fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁵⁵ Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁷⁵⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 40, Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁷⁵⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), para. 16

¹⁷⁵⁸ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 14; For a map, see Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 22-28 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

or reconciled through local agreements.¹⁷⁵⁹ The UN explained that territories ‘currently under the effective control’ of GoS and its forces are those taken by military operations, including 80 % of eastern and north-eastern rural Dar’a (such as Lajjat, Busr al-Harir, al-Hirak, al-Maliha al-Sharqiya, al-Maliha al-Gharbiya, Maliha al-Atash and Saida), areas of western rural Dar’a (such as the former ISIL-area al Yarmouk Valley), and parts of Dar’a City, such as Dar’a al-Mahatta, which have been under state control since 2011. The UN stated that ‘the rest of Dar’a is under effective control of former non-state armed groups, including those that agreed to the “reconciliation deals”’.¹⁷⁶⁰

However, Syria expert Haid Haid, explained in a July 2019 paper that some parts of Dar’a are under ‘Russia’s protection’ naming Busra al-Sham, al-Sahwa, Ma’araba, and al-Jizah; these are former rebel areas that were recaptured through surrender deals organised by Russia. According to Haid, in these areas, ‘regime forces are unable to enter those locations but can still create checkpoints at their outskirts and entrances’ meaning that GoS ‘access and authority in those zones are largely limited to what Russia allows it to do’.¹⁷⁶¹ The negotiated deals with Russia allowed some former rebels to keep some degree of autonomy¹⁷⁶², or, positions of influence.¹⁷⁶³ In practice, the region is subjected to a complex web of political control¹⁷⁶⁴ with multiple, overlapping, uncoordinated branches of the security and military, despite officially retaking state control from the opposition.¹⁷⁶⁵ Armed groups ‘control some areas that the government nominally holds’.¹⁷⁶⁶ COAR, writing in December 2019, described the mapping of security actors in Dar’a as having differing zones of predominance:

‘Different zones of influence can be roughly demarcated in Dar’a; however the effective control of each group is contested by the sheer presence of other actors. Certainly, while it is clear that the Military Security, Air Intelligence, 4th Division, and 5th Corps are the predominant armed actors in southern Syria, they do not have clearly defined zones of control or authority, outside of some limited areas. Essentially, throughout most of Dar’a governorate, there is no ‘ultimate authority’ to appeal to and no clear guarantor of security at the individual or community level. Multiple military and security groups are present throughout the region, often acting at cross purposes; security branches detain individuals linked to other security branches, clashes between pro-Government groups are common, and military and civilian leadership are often compelled to appeal to multiple different authorities to resolve conflicts.’¹⁷⁶⁷

Furthermore, in January 2020, the Col stated that there is still a network of checkpoints across Dar’a that ‘severely restricted’ civilian movement, contravening assurances made in reconciliation processes.¹⁷⁶⁸

COAR described the south, including Dar’a, as being in a state of lawlessness, with both civilian protests and growing armed opposition resistance.¹⁷⁶⁹ A fragmented security environment, mixture of reconciliation configurations, multiple and competing structures of authority, significant levels of

¹⁷⁵⁹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-21, 2020, 24 January 2020, [url](#); US, CRS, Armed conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁷⁶⁰ OHCHR, The “Unreconciled” Concerns of Civilians in Dar’a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

¹⁷⁶¹ Haid, H., Understanding the characteristics of the new emerging state in Syria, Chatham House, June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶² Haid, H., Understanding the characteristics of the new emerging state in Syria, Chatham House, June 2019, [url](#); MEE, A year in exile, Daraa’s displaced watch hometowns descend into disorder, 21 July 2019, [url](#); Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as ‘security breakdown’ mires Daraa’s fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶³ Arab Weekly, Daraa protests show that city remains outside regime’s orbit, 17 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶⁴ MEE, A year in exile, Daraa’s displaced watch hometowns descend into disorder, 21 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶⁵ MEE, A year in exile, Daraa’s displaced watch hometowns descend into disorder, 21 July 2019, [url](#); Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as ‘security breakdown’ mires Daraa’s fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶⁶ ECFR, Can Assad Win the Peace?, 15 May 2019, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁷⁶⁷ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁷⁶⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), para. 73

¹⁷⁶⁹ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

lawlessness, and frequent security incidents has created a ‘climate of instability’ in Dar’a. COAR has stated that it would be ‘inaccurate to state that the area is now under full government control’¹⁷⁷⁰, noting that there are ‘no clear patterns of influence or control’ and that presence and influence by different armed groups can change across communities, ‘almost by kilometer’.¹⁷⁷¹

2.12.3.2 Security developments after the GoS’ recapture of Dar’a

According to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ report on Syria’s security situation, published in July 2019, since August 2018, there ‘was no further serious fighting’ in Dar’a governorate.¹⁷⁷² However, other sources contrast this with reports of violence. Abdullah Al-Jabassani, a researcher on Syrian conflict, wrote in a June 2019 paper that armed attacks continued to occur against the GoS in Dar’a in October and November 2018, resulting in fatalities and injured troops, through unknown individuals or groups like the so-called Popular Resistance.¹⁷⁷³ COAR stated in a December 2019 report on Dar’a’s security situation that despite the takeover by the state, ‘since at least January 2019, Dar’a governorate — in contrast to other reconciled areas — has become one of the most violent regions of the country. Numerous assassinations, clashes, and asymmetric attacks take place on a weekly basis, and there is a growing anti-Government insurgent movement’.¹⁷⁷⁴ The same report remarks that there is a growing armed opposition insurgency which conducts assassinations and asymmetric attacks across the whole governorate; noting that pro-government actors are fragmented and competing with one another, leading to open clashes, not only there but also elsewhere in the country.¹⁷⁷⁵ The south-west of Dar’a the region is marked by instability from intra-faction rivalries and insurgency.¹⁷⁷⁶ COAR described Dar’a in September 2019 as ‘the most violent and lawless post-reconciled area in Syria’.¹⁷⁷⁷

According to the Carter Center’s August 2019 analysis of conflict data in the south,

‘It is clear from the range of locations, weapon types, and targets that a variety of conflict actors are present in southern Syria, each with their own aims and capacity. What is common among almost all incidents against GoS-aligned personnel, former opposition groups, and civilians is that those responsible are not aiming to hold territory – as they did prior to August 2018. The attacks appear to be designed to disrupt rather than to establish control and are often isolated incidents (e.g. IEDs or individual assassinations)’.¹⁷⁷⁸

Security incidents such as assassinations attacks in Dar’a are difficult to attribute to a perpetrator¹⁷⁷⁹, and assassinations affect all factions as each rival force attempts to carry out their own agendas through such campaigns.¹⁷⁸⁰ The Carter Center explained that ‘similar to the target of attacks, determining who is responsible for the conflict incidents in southern Syria isn’t always possible. However, given the range of locations, the types of weapons used, and the nature of the targets, it is likely that a multitude of conflict actors are responsible for the incidents’.¹⁷⁸¹ International Crisis Group also remarked that sometimes circumstances suggest security forces are the perpetrators, while at other times, they appear to be revenge attacks by former rebels against those seen as betraying the

¹⁷⁷⁰ COAR, Southwestern Dar’a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

¹⁷⁷¹ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁷⁷² Netherlands, MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria – The security situation, July 2019, [url](#), p. 21

¹⁷⁷³ Al-Jabassani, A., From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Damascus, June 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁷⁷⁴ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁷⁷⁵ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁷⁷⁶ COAR, Southwestern Dar’a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁷⁷⁷ COAR, Southwestern Dar’a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 38

¹⁷⁷⁸ Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁷⁷⁹ STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), p. 9; Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁷⁸⁰ Nofal, W., Will the Security Crisis in Southern Syria Spark a ‘New Revolution’, Chatham House, January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸¹ Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

opposition.¹⁷⁸² In other cases, there are also competing interests between those accused of carrying out assassinations, conflicts between security apparatuses within the GoS, divided loyalties, and fissures or allegiances, leading to assassinations.¹⁷⁸³

Assassinations of reconciled opposition fighters, local leaders and opponents, and civilians killed or disappeared by unknown perpetrators, continued to be reported by sources, following takeover of Dar'a by Syrian state forces in 2018.¹⁷⁸⁴ COAR noted in September 2019 that frequency of local incidents has caused alarm and violence such as unclaimed assassinations, bombings, hit and run assaults, and attacks on government targets have created an environment of local instability.¹⁷⁸⁵ Assassinations and disappearances appear to target all sides in Dar'a's post-reconciliation environment.¹⁷⁸⁶ The UN stated that most of these attacks are reprisals by parties in the conflict and noted that civilians who joined GoS security or civilian bodies are 'likely to continue to be targeted'.¹⁷⁸⁷ In December 2019, the UN noted that local cells of former opposition fighters carrying out attacks on GoS-linked targets with small arms and explosives was sometimes in response to GoS detentions of local people with former links to opposition groups.¹⁷⁸⁸

There have been numerous different reports of assassinations and attacks from a range of sources over the past year, several of which noted an increase in conflict incidents over the course of 2019.¹⁷⁸⁹

A Carter Center report on Conflict in Southern Syria, analysing ACLED data and covering the period from August 2018 to July 2019, reported a 'steady growth' in low-level conflict targeting GoS-aligned individuals and former opposition members and civilians. The source remarked that 'just over 60 % of these incidents have been recorded since March 2019, an average of seven per week, with 'at least 249 violent incidents against GoS and aligned personnel, former opposition members, and civilians'. The 'vast majority' of conflict activity in the south occurred in Dar'a governorate, with 60 % of incidents analysed happening across 10 locations in southern Syria, 9 of which were in southern Dar'a governorate [Dar'a City, As Sanamayn, Tafas, Da'el, Mzeireb, Nawa, Birs Elharir, Hrak, Yadudeh]. These areas are also known as former opposition 'hubs' of activity known also for being traditionally involved in organised crime economies like smuggling and kidnapping for ransom.¹⁷⁹⁰ According to this report,

¹⁷⁸² International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁷⁸³ Nofal, W., Will the Security Crisis in Southern Syria Spark a 'New Revolution', Chatham House, January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸⁴ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 12-13; Al-Jabassini, A., From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Damascus, June 2019, [url](#), p. 14; Syria Direct, 'We don't even know if he's alive' – despite promises of reconciliation rebels and former opposition figures disappear, 5 November 2018, [url](#); STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), p. 5; Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), pp. 7, 9; Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as 'security breakdown' mires Daraa's fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#); AFP, Cradle of Syria's uprising turns into 'chaotic' south, 30 August 2019, [url](#); Nofal, W., Will the Security Crisis in Southern Syria Spark a 'New Revolution', Chatham House, January 2020, [url](#); OHCHR, The "Unreconciled" Concerns of Civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-10

¹⁷⁸⁵ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁷⁸⁶ MEE, Tensions in Syria's Daraa are getting out of hand, 26 January 2020, [url](#); UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), para. 11; Haid, H., Syria war: Who is behind the anti-regime attacks in Daraa? MEE, 5 August 2019, [url](#); Nofal, W., Will the Security Crisis in Southern Syria Spark a 'New Revolution', Chatham House, January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸⁷ OHCHR, The "Unreconciled" Concerns of Civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-11

¹⁷⁸⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), para. 11

¹⁷⁸⁹ SOHR, Daraa in six months: Attacks and assassination attempts rise as security chaos continues, 2 January 2020, [url](#); STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), p. 6; Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), pp. 2, 3; Haid Haid, Syria war: Who is behind the anti-regime attacks in Daraa? MEE, 5 August 2019, [url](#); Nofal, W., Will the Security Crisis in Southern Syria Spark a 'New Revolution', Chatham House, January 2020, [url](#); Integrity UK, Syria Intelligence Report for 29 February to 2 March 2020, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3; Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 30 December 2019-5 January 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁷⁹⁰ Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), pp. 2, 3

the main recorded security incidents in the south involved heavy machine gun and small arms fire, which accounted for over half of all recorded incidents. This was followed by landmines, IEDs, and criminal activities (10-11 %), and kidnapping, grenades, and shelling (3-6 %).¹⁷⁹¹ The same report noted that the main targets were GoS and its aligned actors in 47 % of incident data, while civilians were the second most targeted (31 %) and former opposition and non-state armed group members were third (17 %).¹⁷⁹²

In August 2019, OHCHR recorded 27 incidents of attacks aimed at civilians who had reconciled with the government, leading to the deaths of 17 men.¹⁷⁹³

From August to November 2019, the organisation Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) also documented a sharp rise in assassinations, killings, and attacks against security actors of the government, which they characterised as ‘likely the most violent’ period since reconciliation. Assaults have also included killings, kidnappings, IEDs, and attacks on security posts, among others. This caused the deaths of an estimated 94 people and more than 91 injured in this period, mainly in western suburbs of Dar’a, where many former opposition fighters exist. These occurred mainly in the cities and towns of Tal Shihab, Muzayyrib, Tafas, Jasim, Inkhil, al-Shajarah, al-Sanamayn, Nawa, Tasil, and others.¹⁷⁹⁴ This included 72 assassinations mainly of Syrian government members and loyalists, local officials, mukhtars, informants, members of the Ba’ath party, members of the 4th Division, and also former rebel commanders who reconciled with the GoS.¹⁷⁹⁵ A further 32 failed assassinations occurred in that time, according to the same source, attacking both government loyalists and opponents.¹⁷⁹⁶

The Daraa Martyrs Documentation office, a local human rights monitoring group, recorded around 262 assassination attempts across Dar’a during 2019, causing the killing of 152 people, including 102 former opposition fighters who had joined government forces or militias.¹⁷⁹⁷

SOHR also documented a rise in security issues in the latter half of 2019; it stated that 163 people were killed from June to December 2019, including 25 civilians; the rest were members of GoS forces, loyalists, reconciled fighters including former leaders, 16 members of Hezbollah militias and Iranian forces, and six 5th Corps members. SOHR recorded 234 attacks and assassinations on different people attempted through IEDs, mines, booby trapped cars, and shootings.¹⁷⁹⁸ COAR reported that during February 2020, southern Syria had a ‘staggering rate of targeted killings’ reporting approximately a rate of one per day.¹⁷⁹⁹

COAR reported in September 2019 that since the reconciliation agreement in the period between July 2018 and July 2019, 690 people were detained, despite having reconciliation paperwork, often on arbitrary charges or on suspicion of terrorism.¹⁸⁰⁰

In terms of ISIL activity in Dar’a, USDOD reported that although there had been a number of months of ‘relative quiet’ in southern Syria, ISIL killed three GoS intelligence officials in November and

¹⁷⁹¹ Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁷⁹² Carter Center, Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁷⁹³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) S/2019/820, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁷⁹⁴ STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), pp. 3-5

¹⁷⁹⁵ STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁷⁹⁶ STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁷⁹⁷ Nofal, W., Will the Security Crisis in Southern Syria Spark a ‘New Revolution’, Chatham House, January 2020, [url](#); See also: MEE, Tensions in Syria’s Daraa are getting out of hand, 26 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁹⁸ SOHR, Daraa in six months: Attacks and assassination attempts rise as security chaos continues, 2 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁹⁹ COAR, Syria Update: 24 February 2020 – Two aid workers killed as southern Syria teeters on the brink, 24 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰⁰ COAR, Southwestern Dar’a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), pp. 22, 43-44

December 2019, suggesting increased ISIL activity in the south and a deterioration in the reconciliation agreements between the Assad government and opposition groups.¹⁸⁰¹

The UN remarked in December 2019 that insecurity is persistent, where attacks and clashes continue to be reported through the end of 2019, and tensions between the local population and the Syrian state have been rising in ‘recent weeks’.¹⁸⁰² The Col reported that the GoS had issued an amnesty in September 2019 for those arrested after July 2018 aimed at reducing tensions; however relatively few were released – amounting to a few hundred people in Dar’a held on minor offences.¹⁸⁰³

There were reports in early 2020 of growing civilian discontent, anti-government graffiti, demonstrations, and dissatisfaction with the government’s implementation of reconciliation agreements and treatment of the local population following the 2018 takeover, with some analysts remarking that assassinations and bombings are an indication of the increasing discontent with government violations.¹⁸⁰⁴ According to COAR, reporting on 24 February 2020, southern Syrians’ reconciliation papers are set to expire on 26 March 2020, meaning those previously reconciled who do not have valid settlement cards will be unable to cross state-run checkpoints and will have an increased risk of detention; critical, as thousands in Dar’a have not reconciled, creating local ‘pervasive fear’ ‘that any attempt to reconcile is tantamount to submitting to arrest or military deployment to frontlines in Idleb’. Furthermore, COAR reports that ‘extremist group recruiters’ from Hurras Al-Din and possibly Jaysh Khalid bin Walid, have increased their physical presence in the south of Syria and grown their recruitment efforts from western rural Dar’a and to the eastern half of Dara’a in recent months.¹⁸⁰⁵

2.12.3.3 March 2020 security operations in Dar’a

On 1 March 2020, Syrian forces launched an operation to secure greater control over As Sanamayn city.¹⁸⁰⁶ The assault was described by SOHR as the largest military escalation in Dar’a since the reconciliation of 2018.¹⁸⁰⁷ ISW describes the town as a ‘hotbed of insurgent and anti-regime activity’.¹⁸⁰⁸ As Sanamayn town had been under GoS control prior to the 2018 reconciliation process in Dar’a, so had not entered a previous settlement agreement with fighters.¹⁸⁰⁹

On 1 March 2020, heavy clashes, artillery fire, and casualties were reported during the confrontations between security forces and former fighters in As Sanamayn town¹⁸¹⁰ and tanks and armoured units

¹⁸⁰¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 40

¹⁸⁰² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/949], 16 December 2019, [url](#), para. 11

¹⁸⁰³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), paras. 16, 71

¹⁸⁰⁴ Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as ‘security breakdown’ mires Daraa’s fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#); Syria Direct, Protests in Daraa: Russia absent as Damascus weaponizes ‘tribal schisms’, 5 February 2020, [url](#); see also: MEE, Tensions in Syria’s Daraa are getting out of hand, 26 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰⁵ COAR, Syria Update: 24 February 2020 – Two aid workers killed as southern Syria teeters on the brink, 24 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰⁶ SOHR, Fierce clashes erupt in Al-Sanamayn as regime forces storm the city using heavy weapons, 1 March 2020, [url](#); ISW, March 1 Attacks on Regime Positions Demonstrate Growing Strength of Southern Syria Insurgency, 3 March 2020, [url](#); Syria Direct, Clashes in Daraa evoke memories of the start of the Syrian revolution, 2 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰⁷ SOHR, Fierce clashes erupt in Al-Sanamayn as regime forces storm the city using heavy weapons, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰⁸ ISW, March 1 Attacks on Regime Positions Demonstrate Growing Strength of Southern Syria Insurgency, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰⁹ SOHR, The regime forces and Russia impose a new settlement in al-Sanamin and displace 26 of who reject it to the north of Syria, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸¹⁰ SOHR, Fierce clashes erupt in Al-Sanamayn as regime forces storm the city using heavy weapons, 1 March 2020, [url](#); Integrity UK, Syria Intelligence Report for 29 February to 2 March 2020, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3

were deployed during the operation.¹⁸¹¹ Clashes escalated and heavy shelling followed when rebels took over several neighbourhoods.¹⁸¹² Sources report that at least three to four civilians were killed in As Sanamayn.¹⁸¹³

On 2 March 2020, security forces also moved on Tafas city with tanks. Opposition fighters then also seized checkpoints near towns of Tafas, Shaem al Joulan, Karak, and Jallin, and fired on checkpoints near towns of Sheikh Sa'ad, Umm Wala, and Jassim, while seizing all entrances to Muzayrib town¹⁸¹⁴; they also took over the entry routes to Dar'a city from the western countryside, following clashes with security forces in Tafas.¹⁸¹⁵ UK Integrity, an intelligence consulting firm, reported that the opposition insurgents involved in roadblocks were believed to be part of the Popular Resistance group. Clashes also took place in Oum al-Mayathen and Hirak.¹⁸¹⁶

Syria Direct also reported that several soldiers were taken hostage in armed attacks in several towns and cities in Dar'a after the assault on Sanamayn: 'in response to the government's military campaign, unidentified militants captured four officers from the Fourth Division after a raid on their headquarters in the town of Sahm al-Jowlan in the western countryside of Daraa. Two members belonging to government forces were also captured in the town of al-Karak al-Sharqi in the eastern countryside of Daraa. At an Air Force Intelligence checkpoint known as "Tabilne," located between the cities of Tafas and Da'el in the western countryside of Daraa, several soldiers were captured following an attack by armed groups, as shown in a video taken by activists in Daraa. Government forces responded by bombing the city of Tafas, resulting in the deaths of three civilians'.¹⁸¹⁷ SOHR reported that seven opposition fighters were killed in shelling and clashes on 2 March 2020 in As-Sanamayn city¹⁸¹⁸. UK Integrity stated that three security force members were killed in Muzayrib and two were captured in Tafas, while three opposition fighters were killed in Tafas.¹⁸¹⁹

Protests against the government's action and Russian offensive in As Sanamayn occurred in several locations across Dar'a and some rebels and protesters blocked roads in Nawa, Karak, and near Muzayrib¹⁸²⁰ as well as Dael, Jilleen, and Sheikh Saad.¹⁸²¹

On these recent developments, ISW noted it was uncommon for insurgent groups in the south to hold seized positions for long.¹⁸²² UK Integrity stated that the governorate may be redrawn into fighting following the 'explosive' events of 1-2 March and uptick in recent attacks and assassinations.¹⁸²³

Clashes and checkpoint attacks were ongoing as of 3 March reporting.¹⁸²⁴ On 3 March, SOHR reported that a settlement was reached between GoS forces and the opposition, with Russian mediation, to

¹⁸¹¹ ISW, March 1 Attacks on Regime Positions Demonstrate Growing Strength of Southern Syria Insurgency, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸¹² Integrity UK, Syria Intelligence Report for 29 February to 2 March 2020, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁸¹³ SOHR, Local gunmen respond to regime security crackdown in Al-Sanamayn by attacking regime positions in east and west Daraa, 1 March 2020, [url](#); Integrity UK, Syria Intelligence Report for 29 February to 2 March 2020, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁸¹⁴ ISW, March 1 Attacks on Regime Positions Demonstrate Growing Strength of Southern Syria Insurgency, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸¹⁵ SOHR, Daraa's Al-Sanamin: security alert and demonstrations take place in different cities and towns of Daraa, and several killed or wounded during clashes, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸¹⁶ Integrity UK, Syria Intelligence Report for 29 February to 2 March 2020, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁸¹⁷ Syria Direct, Clashes in Daraa evoke memories of the start of the Syrian revolution, 2 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸¹⁸ SOHR, The regime forces and Russia impose a new settlement in al-Sanamin and displace 26 of who reject it to the north of Syria, 3 March 2020, [url](#); Integrity UK, Syria Intelligence Report for 29 February to 2 March 2020, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁸¹⁹ Integrity UK, Syria Intelligence Report for 29 February to 2 March 2020, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁸²⁰ ISW, March 1 Attacks on Regime Positions Demonstrate Growing Strength of Southern Syria Insurgency, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸²¹ Integrity UK, Syria Intelligence Report for 29 February to 2 March 2020, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁸²² ISW, March 1 Attacks on Regime Positions Demonstrate Growing Strength of Southern Syria Insurgency, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸²³ Integrity UK, Syria Intelligence Report for 29 February to 2 March 2020, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁸²⁴ SOHR, The regime forces and Russia impose a new settlement in al-Sanamin and displace 26 of who reject it to the north of Syria, 3 March 2020, [url](#); Integrity UK, Syria Intelligence Report for 29 February to 2 March 2020, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3

settle the security situation and evacuate 26 opponents to the north who did not agree to the reconciliation.¹⁸²⁵

2.12.3.4 Security incidents

In 2019, ACLED recorded 343 security incidents in Dar'a governorate, of which, 160 were coded as battles, 80 explosions/remote violence and 103 incidents of violence against civilians, showing a gradual increase in incidents recorded by ACLED across 2019.



Figure 48. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Dar'a governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data¹⁸²⁶

Dar'a governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
As-Sanamayn	38	7	16
Dar'a	86	45	64
Izra	36	28	23
Total	160	80	103

Figure 49. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Dar'a governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data.

Security incidents were recorded in all governorate districts, with the highest number in Dar'a, followed by Izra and As-Sanamayn.

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 83 security incidents of which 46 were battles, 15 explosions/remote violence and 22 incidents of violence against civilians. Most of them occurred in the district of Dar'a (56).

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Dar'a governorate in 2019 and early 2020 included the following (grouped by the district in which they occurred):

Dar'a district [subdistricts: Dara'a, Jizeh, Bushra Esh-Sham, Mseifra, Kherbet Ghazala, Da'el, Mzeireb, Ash Shajara]

¹⁸²⁵ SOHR, The regime forces and Russia impose a new settlement in al-Sanamin and displace 26 of who reject it to the north of Syria, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸²⁶ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

- In April 2019, a landmine in the town of ash Shajara exploded injuring several people, including children (18 April 2019) and an unexploded rocket blew up and injured a child in Naseeb town (22 April 2019).¹⁸²⁷
- In June 2019, two reconciled fighters, including a commander who had negotiated reconciliation with Russia, were shot and killed by unknown assailants in Dar'a and Tafas cities, respectively.¹⁸²⁸
- On 17 July 2019, a roadside bomb in Dar'a City killed five soldiers of the 4th Brigade and injured 15 others.¹⁸²⁹
- On 24 August 2019, a local council chief was killed by unknown gunmen in a drive-by shooting in Mzeireb.¹⁸³⁰
- In October 2019, a young man's body was found who was shot and killed as a GoS collaborator near Naseeb town.¹⁸³¹
- In November 2019, 'sustained clashes' occurred between Popular Resistance and GoS military intelligence east of Dar'a city (Gharaz), followed by attacks on checkpoints and GoS forces in Jassim town [Izra] and Haraa [As Sanamayn].¹⁸³²
- In January 2020, a municipal building was set on fire near Lajat after locals defaced it with anti-GoS and anti-Iran graffiti and taking down a picture of Assad.¹⁸³³
- In January 2020, two civilians were kidnapped by an opposition member and two were found dead near Dar'a city.¹⁸³⁴
- On 19 February 2020, two local Oxfam aid workers were shot and killed by an unknown gunman on the road between Mzeireb and Yadoudeh in Dar'a governorate.¹⁸³⁵

Izra' district (Sub-districts: Izra', Hrak, Sheikh Miskine, Nawa, Jasim, Tassil)

- A landmine on the road to Nawa city exploded on 14 April 2019, injuring 7 people.¹⁸³⁶
- On 27 July 2019, local media reported that a suicide bomber targeted a GoS checking near Malihet El Attash in eastern Dar'a [Izra district], killing six soldiers. The attack reportedly followed a clash between 5th Corps and ISIL in the area. COAR remarked that the suicide attack was 'unprecedented' in the area since GoS re-established control in summer 2018, despite that IEDs, VBIEDs, shootings, abductions are 'not uncommon'.¹⁸³⁷ Media reported it was claimed by ISIL.¹⁸³⁸
- Unknown gunmen shot and assassinated a person for collaborating with the Military Security Branch in Nawa city in late December 2019.¹⁸³⁹

¹⁸²⁷ SOHR, the explosion of a bomb from the Syrian war's remnant wounds a child in Naseeb town east of Daraa, 23 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸²⁸ AW, Tensions summer in Syria's Daraa amid increased assassinations, 12 June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸²⁹ AA, Bomb blast kills 5 regime soldiers in Syria's Daraa, 17 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸³⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) S/2019/820, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁸³¹ SOHR, Body of a collaborator with the regime found in Daraa countryside raising the death toll to 100 in 4 months, 20 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸³² Carter Center Weekly Conflict Summary, 11-24 November 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁸³³ SOHR, Daraa in six months: Attacks and assassination attempts rise as security chaos continues, 2 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸³⁴ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 13-19 January 2020, [url](#), pp. 3-4

¹⁸³⁵ COAR, Syria Update: 24 February 2020 – Two aid workers killed as southern Syria teeters on the brink, 24 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸³⁶ SOHR, the explosion of a bomb from the Syrian war's remnant wounds a child in Naseeb town east of Daraa, 23 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸³⁷ COAR, Syria Update: July 25 to July 31, 2019, 31 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸³⁸ Germany, Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, Group 62 – Information Centre Asylum and Migration, Briefing Notes – 29 July 2019, 29 July 2019, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁸³⁹ SOHR, Gunmen assassinate a collaborate with regime "Military Security" in Daraa, 27 December 2019, [url](#)

- Unknown gunmen opened fire with machine guns and a grenade on Air Force Intelligence checkpoint in rural eastern Dar'a, near Karak al-Sharqi in January 2020.¹⁸⁴⁰
- A checkpoint was attacked in Nahta town, eastern Dar'a countryside, and 20 regime soldiers were taken hostage by locals responding to the arrest of a local person, in January 2020. In the same week, Al Karak Sharqi town locals attacked a military checkpoint and took 8 soldiers hostage, seizing their weapons and materials, and pressuring the government to release detainees.¹⁸⁴¹ Carter Center described these two events as the 'most serious cases of civil disobedience in former opposition held areas since the GoS takeover' in summer 2018.¹⁸⁴²

As Sanamayn district (Sub-districts: As Sanamayn, Ghabagheb, Massimiyyeh)

- Clashes occurred following a 15 May 2019 arrest campaign in As-Sanamayn town against former non-state armed group leaders in several towns. State forces encircled the As Sanamayn town and deployed reinforcements to prevent civilians from entering and leaving for several days. Several detainees were released to ease tensions; however, casualties occurred on both sides in clashes and retaliation attacks on GoS checkpoints in four locations of Yarmouk Basin followed, causing humanitarian access to be affected although efforts and missions continued.¹⁸⁴³
- In July 2019, two children were reportedly shot by a government sniper in As-Sanamayn town.¹⁸⁴⁴
- In mid-October 2019, a double-IED exploded on the Jassim-Inkhel road between Izra and As Sanamayn districts targeting a joint Syrian/Russian patrol; a second device exploded when first responders arrived. One soldier was injured, according to pro-GoS sources.¹⁸⁴⁵
- In late October 2019, FSA members attacked Syrian security forces leading to 'heavy clashes' after attacks by the FSA on numerous checkpoints and SAA responding with heavy weapons, marking the largest development on As Sanamayn city this year.¹⁸⁴⁶
- Also in October 2019, ISW reported that militants associated with Salafist-Jihadist group Ahrar al-Sham were in gunfights with pro-GoS forces at checkpoints in the town of As-Sanamayn with RPGs and small arms, causing school closures and curfews.¹⁸⁴⁷
- On 1 March 2020, heavy clashes occurred in As-Sanamayn city between former rebels and GoS forces, when the Syrian security forces launched a security operation to increase control of the city, blocking entry/exit, and launching artillery bombardment; there were casualties reported but no details.¹⁸⁴⁸

2.12.3.5 Civilian fatalities

The following table provides a comparison of documented civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict (2019) in Dar'a governorate as provided by VDC and SNHR:

¹⁸⁴⁰ SOHR, Daraa in six months: Attacks and assassination attempts rise as security chaos continues, 2 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴¹ SOHR, Tension mounts in Daraa's Nahteh, and residents of other towns and villages threaten to escalate operations against the Syrian regime, 12 January 2020, [url](#); Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 6-12 January 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁸⁴² Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 6-12 January 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁸⁴³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018) (S/2019/508), 19 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-9

¹⁸⁴⁴ SHRC, The Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 18-7-2019, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴⁵ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 7-13 October 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁸⁴⁶ Al Masdar News, Heavy clashes breakout in southern Syria after militants launch new attacks, 22 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴⁷ ISW, Syria Situation Report: October 10-22, 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴⁸ SOHR, Fierce clashes erupt in Al-Sanamayn as regime forces storm the city using heavy weapons, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	5	5
February	1	4
March	1	2
April	4	10
May	2	6
June	5	11
July	3	6
August	3	12
September	13	8
October	20	10
November	15	9
December	24	14
Total	96	97

Figure 50. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Dar'a governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2019 sources documented between 96 (VDC data)¹⁸⁴⁹ and 97 civilian fatalities (SNHR data)¹⁸⁵⁰ in Dar'a governorate. The number of civilian fatalities increased in the second half of 2019 with the highest numbers being recorded in December, October and November.

2.12.3.6 Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

Infrastructure damage

Integrity Research and Consultancy produced a 2014 report on local governance in Dar'a based on interviews with 50 key informants and 25 stakeholders with knowledge of Dar'a governance structures, explaining that, at the time of that report, the government held 'a monopoly on the provision of core services such as water and electricity to opposition areas' while it also targeted infrastructure in opposition controlled areas to damage opposition capacity to deliver services to residents.¹⁸⁵¹

In February 2019, International Crisis Group reported that after Assad's retaking of Dar'a in 2018, education, medical and economic resources had been depleted by the conflict and were slow to

¹⁸⁴⁹ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

¹⁸⁵⁰ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁵¹ Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 5

recover, despite the presence of the state.¹⁸⁵² Similarly, in May 2019, the UN reported that there had been little improvement in the rehabilitation of Dar'a's infrastructure, noting that electricity and water remained unreliable and unevenly distributed, and that many civilians were unable to return to due the widespread destruction and damage to their homes, as well as problems of looting. Access to water, housing, education, and basic needs in the governorate was reported to be difficult for many residents.¹⁸⁵³

The Col stated that 'in addition to arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances, the general humanitarian situation in Dar'a remains bleak. Services and utilities, including electricity, water and gas, are unavailable for the vast majority of inhabitants. In most villages, gas cylinders are either unavailable or prohibitively expensive'.¹⁸⁵⁴ According to COAR, in the southwest of Dar'a, neglected maintenance of basic infrastructure rather than 'massive damage' were the issues linked to high need for basic services such as power and water. Heavy damage to road networks in some areas was a problem, however, especially between Tafas and Nawa; reconstruction has mainly concentrated on strategically important M5 Highway.¹⁸⁵⁵

Explosive munitions and remnants of war

The Carter Center released a report on the use of explosive weapons in southern Syria, which found that there were 31 518 instances of individual uses of explosive munitions across 135 communities in Dar'a between July 2013 and May 2019, representing 87 % of the 'total activity' using explosive munitions in southern Syria. Ground launched munitions were the most common type used in Dar'a (45 %). Most explosive weapons use was concentrated on Dar'a City and its rural surroundings, as well as other major population areas where key armed groups' centres were located; furthermore explosive munitions were used for targeting roads during the period, particularly, the M5.¹⁸⁵⁶

OHCHR reported that IED, booby traps and unexploded remnants of war continued to injure civilians, mainly children, killed or seriously injured, including in Dar'a.¹⁸⁵⁷ Several examples from December 2019 include:

- One child died from a 'cluster bomb' explosion from a previous shelling attack in of Jasim city.¹⁸⁵⁸
- Four people killed, including a child, from a 'cluster bomb' explosion near Nassib town.¹⁸⁵⁹
- A landmine killed a child near Nassib town.¹⁸⁶⁰
- Three people were killed in a landmine explosion on the road between Nawa and Jasim.¹⁸⁶¹

2.12.3.7 Displacement and return

UNOCHA's annual mapping of IDP spontaneous stock and flow data for the period between January and December 2019 indicated that there were 21 IDPs who flowed out of the governorate during the year.¹⁸⁶² UNOCHA's spontaneous returns mapping for 2019 indicates that there were about 90 000

¹⁸⁵² International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-9

¹⁸⁵³ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Dar'a, 21 May 2019, [url](#), OHCHR, The "Unreconciled" Concerns of Civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 6-7

¹⁸⁵⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/42/51, 15 August 2019, [url](#), para. 71

¹⁸⁵⁵ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), pp. 23-24

¹⁸⁵⁶ Carter Center, Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, Report 1 - Southern Syria: As Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates, November 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-9

¹⁸⁵⁷ OHCHR, The "Unreconciled" Concerns of Civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁸⁵⁸ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 1-12-2019, 2 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁵⁹ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 12-12-2019, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶⁰ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 17-12-2019, 18 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶¹ SHRC, Daily report of victims of human rights violations in Syria 21-12-2019, 22 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan-Dec 2019, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

returns during the year: 88 000 from within Dar'a and about 2 000 from Quneitra and Rural Damascus.¹⁸⁶³

The UN reported that the government 'imposed a "reconciliation" process' on civilians who remained in Dar'a, requiring civilians to sign oaths of allegiance, and reveal names of wanted persons; 'wanted lists' were compiled and there were accounts of enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention of civilians seen to have 'betrayed the country'.¹⁸⁶⁴ Arrest and detention of civilians following GoS takeover was widely documented by sources¹⁸⁶⁵ and continued to be 'commonplace' in Dara'a in early 2020.¹⁸⁶⁶ In the first 10 months of the reconciliation and return of Dar'a to Syrian authorities (31 July 2018-31 March 2019), the UN received reports on the targeted killing of a number of former members of armed groups and civilians who took up government positions; they noted 11 such incidents. It also received reports of the arrest, detention, or disappearance of 380 people, often with no reasons given, with some reportedly on suspicion of terrorism; 150 were released, but 230 remained unaccounted for at the time of that report.¹⁸⁶⁷

Following the reconciliation deals made, the UN reported that many civilians displaced by the conflict returned to their place of origin in Dar'a; however, they expressed concern about whether full information was provided to those who returned.¹⁸⁶⁸ Dissatisfied with the government's implementation of the reconciliation agreements, continued arrests, and detentions of civilians, tensions increased in the south, mainly in Dar'a and Sweida and there were peaceful anti-government protests held in some former opposition strongholds against arrest campaigns and occasional insurgent attacks.¹⁸⁶⁹

According to COAR, since the summer of 2019, 'it appears that a new form of displacement' is occurring in southern Syria, whereby roughly 25 000 people from Dar'a and Quneitra have reportedly left via smuggling routes since the beginning of 2019; some analysts have told COAR that this was due to fears of detention, conscription, and deterioration of public services.¹⁸⁷⁰

Syria Direct documented 102 separate protests in Dar'a by locals between November 2019 and January 2020. These included sit-ins, roadblocks, graffiti, and coordinated attacks against government forces in the south.¹⁸⁷¹

¹⁸⁶³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow, Jan-Dec, 2019, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/42/51, 15 August 2019, [url](#), paras. 68-72

¹⁸⁶⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), S/2019/157, 19 February 2019, [url](#), para. 15; HRW, Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#); OHCHR, The "Unreconciled" Concerns of Civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁸⁶⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), para. 68

¹⁸⁶⁷ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Dar'a, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

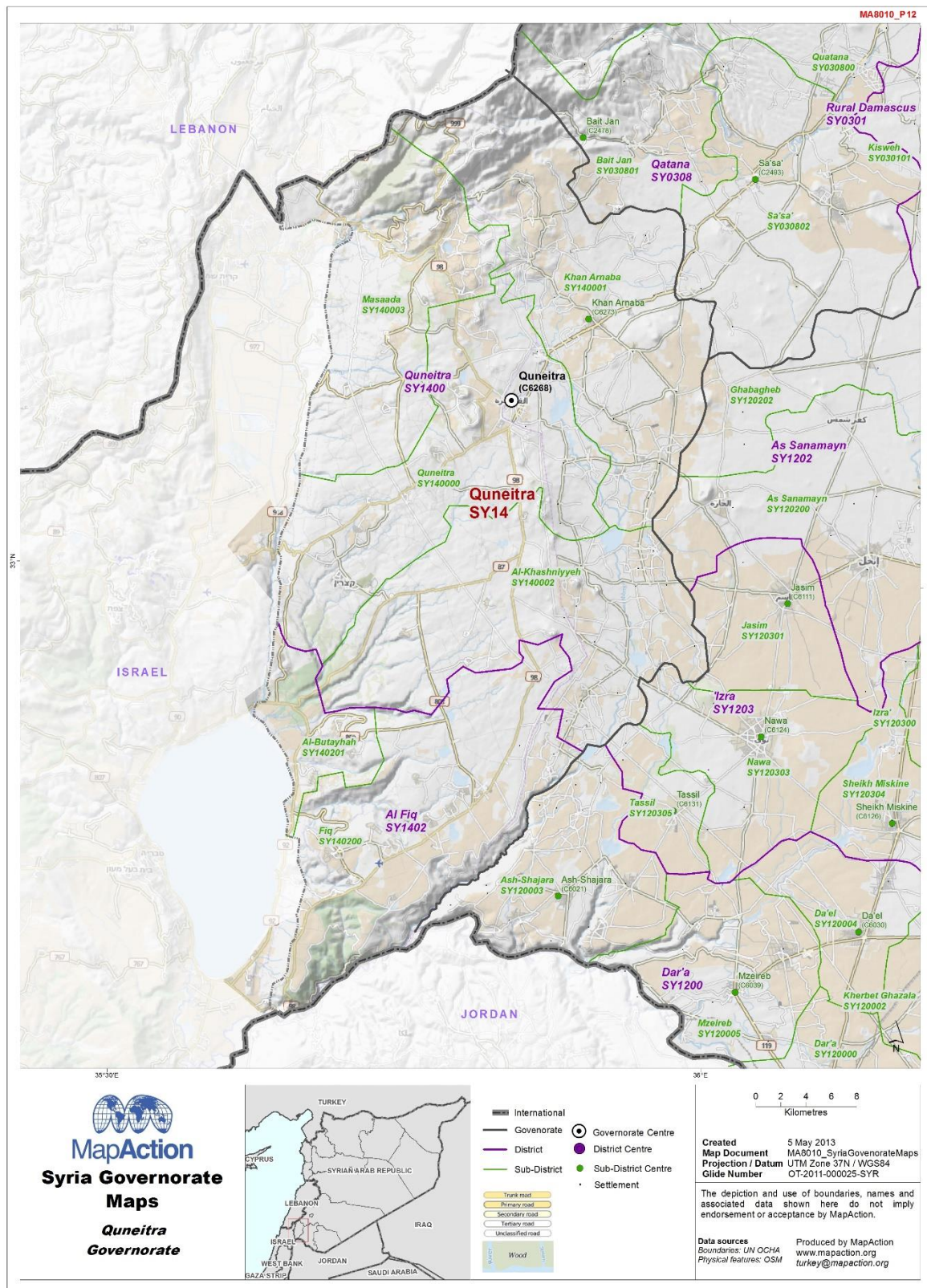
¹⁸⁶⁸ OHCHR, Press briefing note on Dar'a, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), S/2019/674, 21 August 2019, [url](#), para. 6

¹⁸⁷⁰ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁸⁷¹ Syria Direct, Protests in Daraa: Russia absent as Damascus weaponizes 'tribal schisms', 5 February 2020, [url](#); see also: UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018) and 2449 (2018), S/2019/674, 21 August 2019, [url](#), para. 6

2.13 Quneitra governorate



Map 21: © MapAction, Quneitra governorate¹⁸⁷²

2.13.1 General description of the governorate

The governorate of Quneitra (al-Qunaytirah) is situated in southern Syria, 70 km from Damascus¹⁸⁷³, and borders Lebanon, Jordan, and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.¹⁸⁷⁴ The governorate is divided into two districts: the district of Quneitra, which comprises the sub-districts of Quneitra, Masaada, Khan Arnaba, Al-Khashniyyeh, and the district of Al Fiq, divided into the sub-districts of Fiq and Al-Butayhah.¹⁸⁷⁵ The city of Quneitra remained abandoned after it was destroyed by Israel in 1974, following the 1973 Mideast war.¹⁸⁷⁶

According to the latest general census of the population and housing, conducted by the Syrian government in 2004, the governorate of Quneitra had a population of around 66 600.¹⁸⁷⁷ The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Quneitra governorate at 81 000 as of 2016.¹⁸⁷⁸

As of March 2011, the population of Quneitra was composed largely of Syrian Arabs (Arabic speaking).¹⁸⁷⁹ Circassians, whose number was believed to be around 5 000 as of March 2011, inhabited the villages of Bir-Ajam and Breiqa in the Golan Heights and were displaced in 2012 during the military operation against anti-government rebels.¹⁸⁸⁰ According to the division along the religious lines, the population of Quneitra is largely Sunni Muslim; the religious minorities comprise the Druze¹⁸⁸¹ and Shia Muslims¹⁸⁸². The Druze reside largely in the town of Hader, the Syrian-controlled part of the Golan Heights¹⁸⁸³, and surrounding areas and get their income predominantly from agriculture and government jobs.¹⁸⁸⁴ Until the Syrian civil war started in 2011, a 'limited number of Druze civilians' were using the border crossing between Syria and Israel 'for the transportation of agricultural produce'.¹⁸⁸⁵

2.13.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

The governorate of Quneitra became the area of major fighting in May and June 2013, after the Syrian rebel forces seized the Quneitra crossing on the Syrian-Israeli border.¹⁸⁸⁶ In February 2014, around 50 rebel factions formed the 'Southern Front' of FSA¹⁸⁸⁷, which declared itself as 'the moderate voice and

¹⁸⁷² MapAction, Syria Governorate Maps – Quneitra Governorate, last updated 29 July 2016, [url](#)

¹⁸⁷³ Jamestown Foundation (The), The Battle for al-Quneitra, the "Gateway to Damascus" in: Terrorism Monitor Volume 12, Issue 5, 6 March 2014, [url](#)

¹⁸⁷⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), 26 August 2014, [url](#), p. 43

¹⁸⁷⁵ MapAction, Syria Governorate Maps – Quneitra Governorate, last updated 29 July 2016, [url](#)

¹⁸⁷⁶ AP News, Syrians celebrate retaking town near Israel-occupied Golan, 27 July 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸⁷⁷ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, General census, the census housing and population results 2004 on governorates level, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁸⁷⁸ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁸⁷⁹ Austria, Federal Ministry of the Interior, ATLAS Syria, 2015, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁸⁸⁰ Meiqari, D., The Circassian Heritage in Syria within the Context of Multiply Displacements, Shattuck Center, CEU School of Public Policy, 19 June 2019, [url](#). In August 2019, 'the first convoy of Circassians' returned to their villages in Quneitra, see MEI/ETANA Syria, Manufacturing Division, the Assad Regime and Minorities in South-West Syria, March 2020, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁸⁸¹ Austria, Federal Ministry of the Interior, ATLAS Syria, 2015, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁸⁸² MEI/ETANA Syria, Manufacturing Division, the Assad Regime and Minorities in South-West Syria, March 2020, [url](#), p. 13. The source mentions the presence of Shia Muslims in the villages of Kwdana and Saida al-Jolan.

¹⁸⁸³ Al Jazeera, Violence hits Druze village Hader in Syria's Quneitra, 3 November 2017, [url](#)

¹⁸⁸⁴ MEI/ETANA Syria, Manufacturing Division, the Assad Regime and Minorities in South-West Syria, March 2020, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁸⁸⁵ Reuters, Explainer: What is the significance of the Golan Heights, 21 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸⁸⁶ FP, Syrian regime and rebel forces clash in the Golan Heights, 6 June 2013, [url](#); Jamestown Foundation (The), The Battle for al-Quneitra, the "Gateway to Damascus" in: Terrorism Monitor Volume 12, Issue 5, 6 March 2014, [url](#)

¹⁸⁸⁷ FSA was formed in 2011 and evolved into Syrian National Army (SNA) in 2018. See, AA, Free Syrian Army transforms into Syrian National Army, 9 October 2019, [url](#). For the FSA forces which have been active in Quneitra, see FSA Platform, Free Syrian Army Forces [website], n.d. [url](#).

the strong arm of the Syrian people' and claimed to have 30 000 fighters in the provinces of Quneitra, Dar'a, and Sweida.¹⁸⁸⁸ In April 2014, FSA gained several strategic victories in Quneitra¹⁸⁸⁹, such as a takeover of the Tel Ahmar Hills.¹⁸⁹⁰

In July 2014, FSA, Jabhat al-Nusra and other armed groups attacked the Golan Heights.¹⁸⁹¹ After the seizure of the city of Quneitra by the rebel groups, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) closed the Quneitra crossing. UN troops left the area in the same year, following the abduction of the UN peacekeepers by the non-state armed groups.¹⁸⁹² GoS continued aerial bombardments on armed opposition groups, including on densely populated areas in the governorate, during the year.¹⁸⁹³ In June 2015, FSA started an offensive against GoS forces in the governorate, claiming that Jabhat al-Nusra was kept away from the operation.¹⁸⁹⁴

In May 2017, the establishment of four zones of de-escalation was designated by Russia, Turkey, and Iran to end hostilities between anti-GoS armed groups and GoS forces: according to the agreement, the parts of Quneitra and Dar'a provinces were included into the 4th zone of de-escalation.¹⁸⁹⁵ The CoI reported in February 2018 on a decrease of violence in Quneitra since June 2017, following a ceasefire brokered by the US, Russia, and Jordan.¹⁸⁹⁶ GoS forces, backed by a Russian air campaign, started pushing into Quneitra after a month long offensive in Dar'a.¹⁸⁹⁷ UNOCHA described Quneitra as among locations in Syria affected by 'intense fighting' in 2018.¹⁸⁹⁸ Under a deal agreed between anti-GoS armed groups and pro-GoS forces in July 2018, rebels, their families and assorted civilians were evacuated from Quneitra to Idlib governorate.¹⁸⁹⁹ By mid-August, GoS took under its control the areas held formerly by rebels and ISIL in Quneitra as well as other parts of southern Syria.¹⁹⁰⁰ In October 2018, Quneitra crossing in the Golan Heights between Syria and Israel reopened for the UN Disengagement Observer Force troops.¹⁹⁰¹

2.13.2.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

Despite losing many of its bases to the Syrian opposition, the 1st Corps, which was formed to serve the first line of defence against Israel since 1980s, remained almost entirely deployed in the governorates of Quneitra and Dar'a. In January 2019, 61st Infantry Brigade and 141st Artillery Regiment of the 1st Corps were redeployed to Hama.¹⁹⁰²

According to Gregory Waters, the deployments of SAA units in Quneitra as of 17 March 2020 were as follows:

- 1st Corps: 7th Division 90th Brigade: Hassan Battalion, deployed on 7 June 2018; 3rd Battalion 4th Company, deployed on 26 December 2018; 3rd Battalion, deployed on 16 July 2019 to Hader;

¹⁸⁸⁸ BBC News, Syria conflict: Rebels launch Quneitra offensive, 17 June 2015, [url](#)

¹⁸⁸⁹ Lister, C., The Free Syrian Army: A decentralized insurgent brand, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings, November 2016, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁸⁹⁰ Syria Direct, 'Almost complete control' for rebels in southern Quneitra, 27 April 2014, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹¹ Al-Monitor, Jabhat al-Nusra joins clashes in Golan, 11 July 2014, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹² Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹³ ACAPS, Regional Analysis Syria: All – Governorate Profiles, 1 October-31 December 2014, [url](#), p. 47

¹⁸⁹⁴ BBC News, Syria conflict: Rebels launch Quneitra offensive, 17 June 2015, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹⁵ Al Jazeera, Syria's 'de-escalation zones' explained, 4 July 2017, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/37/72], 1 February 2018, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁸⁹⁷ Reuters, Syrian flag raised in Quneitra on Syrian side of Golan Heights, 26 July 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁸⁹⁹ Al Jazeera, Syria's war: Evacuation of rebels from Quneitra begins, 21 July 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p.19

¹⁹⁰¹ Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰² Waters, G., The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, MEI, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

- 2nd Corps: 14th Special Forces Division (36th Regiment), deployed to Jabal al-Sheikh – 18 January 2019).¹⁹⁰³

Since 2016, SAA started to conscribe into its units reconciled rebels from the governorates of Damascus, Dar’a, and Quneitra.¹⁹⁰⁴ In 2018, reconciled fighters from Quneitra were conscribed into the 1st Corps’ 9th Armoured Division, which was receiving ‘Russian training’ until the beginning of 2019.¹⁹⁰⁵ As reported by Al-Monitor in June 2019, the GoS has been recruiting former FSA members from Quneitra, among other Syrian governorates, to fight in northern Syria.¹⁹⁰⁶

2.13.2.2 Pro-Iranian forces and Hezbollah

Since the re-establishment of GoS control over southern Syria in 2018, opposition websites have been reporting on a growing presence of pro-Iranian forces (e.g. the Shi’ite Iraqi Al-Imam Al-Hussein Brigade, Abu Al-Fadl Al-‘Abbas Brigade, and the Al-Radwan Division, an elite Hezbollah force) and their incorporation into SAA units in proximity to Syria’s border with Israel and Jordan.¹⁹⁰⁷ According to Reuters, a ‘strong presence’ of Iranian-backed militias in parts of Quneitra was conveyed by an Israeli intelligence source in July 2018.¹⁹⁰⁸ In September 2019, SOHR reported that Hezbollah was continuing to attempt to establish its ‘full control’ over Quneitra governorate through ‘the funds of powerful people in the area’ as well as executing its control over ‘official establishments’ and conducting military recruitment; the towns of al-Baath and Khan Arnabah were mentioned as Hezbollah’s headquarters.¹⁹⁰⁹ As reported by SOHR in February 2020, the Iranian-backed militias’ stations were found in the northern part of the governorate while recruitment attempts were taking place in several settlements in proximity to the Golan Heights.¹⁹¹⁰

2.13.2.3 Russia

Russian military police were deployed along the Golan Heights border in August of 2018, followed the recapture of Quneitra by the GoS.¹⁹¹¹ In September 2019, the Chief of the Russian Armed Forces’ Military Police in Syria confirmed the presence of Russian military police units in Quneitra, stating that the officers at the Russian observation points were monitoring ceasefire violations and Israeli Air Force (IAF) strikes on Syrian targets.¹⁹¹²

2.13.2.4 Anti-GoS armed groups

According to the ‘pro-government’ news website Al-Masdar News¹⁹¹³, FSA, ISIL, and HTS (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra¹⁹¹⁴) have ‘active sleeper cells’ in the governorate of Dar’a and ‘carry out sporadic attacks against the Syrian military and their allies’ in the governorates of Quneitra, Dar’a, and

¹⁹⁰³ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁴ Waters, G., The Growing Role of Reconciled Rebels in Syria, International Review, 21 April 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁵ Waters, G., The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army’s Destruction and Rebirth, MEI, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁶ Al-Monitor, Ex-FSA fighters recruited by Damascus to fight opposition in northern Syria, 13 June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁷ Mozes, N., Websites Opposed To The Syrian Regime: Iran Continues To Consolidate Its Presence In Southern Syria, In Violation Of Understanding Between Russia, Israel, Jordan in: MEMRI (The Middle East Media Research Institute), 4 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁸ Reuters, Syrian flag raised in Quneitra on Syrian side of Golan Heights, 26 July 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁹ SOHR, The Lebanese Hezbollah continues its efforts to bring the province of Al-Quneitra under its full control, 10 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹¹⁰ SOHR, Buying loyalty: Iran-backed militias offer young people in Al-Quneitra financial incentives, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹¹¹ Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹¹² TASS, Russian military police ensure peace in Syria’s Quneitra province, chief says, 23 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹¹³ Al-Masdar News, About, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁹¹⁴ Previously JAN, see SICAS, Stanford University, n.d., [url](#)

Sweida.¹⁹¹⁵ A Counter Extremism Project's publication states that Jabhat al-Nusra 'still conducts violent activities' in Quneitra, as well as in Dar'a and other parts of the country.¹⁹¹⁶ A study published by European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center mentioned the presence of HTS in Quneitra as of 2019.¹⁹¹⁷

2.13.2.5 Israel

In February 2019, Israel confirmed conducting multiple artillery strikes on military positions on a Golan Heights border area of Quneitra, causing material damage.¹⁹¹⁸ During the period between May to June 2019, IAF targeted pro-GoS positions in southern Quneitra in response to alleged rocket attacks from Syria.¹⁹¹⁹ Sources quoted by Haaretz gave unconfirmed reports that some of the strikes caused casualties among military personnel with varying numbers from three Syrian soldiers killed and seven wounded to 10 killed, including seven Iranian and Hezbollah militants.¹⁹²⁰ In the beginning of February 2020, it was reported that IAF airstrikes targeted military and 'Iran-backed' positions in Quneitra, as well as in Dar'a, Damascus, and Rural Damascus.¹⁹²¹

2.13.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

According to the Carter Center, since January 2019, 'a steady growth in low-level conflict' targeting GoS and aligned personnel, former opposition members and civilians was reported in southern Syria following the re-establishment of GoS control over large parts of Dar'a and Quneitra.¹⁹²² In August 2019, STJ reported on 'tense' security situation in southern Syria, particularly following expiry of the 'settlement deadline' on 24 June 2019, resulting in demands 'to extend the postponement of the deserters' and arrests of members of the Civil Defence in Quneitra by the Air Force Intelligence.¹⁹²³

In January 2020, the CoI reported on a 'fragile' security situation in the governorates in which the reconciliation process was imposed, including the governorate of Quneitra. The report stated that the promises of the GoS—including 'releasing those that had been arrested and detained, recognizing educational certificates and reinstating teachers, remained largely unfulfilled' and that '[c]ivilians in retaken areas indicated that the lack of respect for the "reconciliation" processes and agreements was a significant factor of current fear and tension among the population.'¹⁹²⁴

According to Al-Monitor, the GoS is recruiting 'thousands' of reconciled fighters in the areas taken under the control in 2017-2018, including the governorate of Quneitra. Since early 2019, the fighters have been reportedly transferred to the northern countryside of Hama and Idlib.¹⁹²⁵

¹⁹¹⁵ Al-Masdar News, ISIS ambushes Syrian Army vehicle carrying several soldiers in Daraa, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹¹⁶ Counter Extremism Project, Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), n.d., [url](#). No JAN/HTS-organized attack is listed by the source in the list of violent activities after July 2017 in Quneitra (at the date of the access, the source described the events up to the end of 2019).

¹⁹¹⁷ Kotzias, P., Syria: The Role of HTS in the Current Strategic Scenario in the Syrian Conflict, Briefing, ESISC (European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center), 15 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁹¹⁸ SOHR, Netanyahu confirms Israel artillery strikes in Quneitra, 18 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹¹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), para. 21

¹⁹²⁰ TRT World, Israeli missile hits Quneitra, Syria reports casualties, 27 May 2019, [url](#); Haaretz, Israel Strikes Syria Following Rocket Fire; 10 Syria, Iranian, Hezbollah Militants Said Killed, 3 June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹²¹ BBC News, Syria War: Israel 'hits Iran-backed fighters near Damascus, 6 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹²² Carter Center (The), Conflict in Southern Syria, August 2018 – July 2019, August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁹²³ STJ, Syria: Thousands Forced to Flee Qunaitra and Daraa 'Silently', 27 August 2019, [url](#). The initial deadline expired on 24 December 2018, after which it was postponed for six months. STJ is an NGO that documents human rights violations in Syria, for the details see Syrians for Trust & Justice, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁹²⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 14

¹⁹²⁵ Al-Monitor, Ex-FSA fighters recruited by Damascus to fight opposition in northern Syria, 13 June 2019, [url](#)

In December 2019, SOHR reported on continuing recruitment by Hezbollah of Syrian youth and men in the area of the Golan Heights.¹⁹²⁶ In February 2020, sources of SOHR reported that local commanders of Iranian-backed militias were offering financial incentives to dignitaries of al-Habariyah, Sultanah, and other towns in proximity to the Golan Heights to persuade young people to join the Iranian militias.¹⁹²⁷

During 2019, IAF were reported to have conducted a number of airstrikes on territories in Quneitra governorate, targeting GoS forces and forces/militias loyal to GoS.¹⁹²⁸ The airstrikes continued during the first months of 2020.¹⁹²⁹

2.13.3.1 Security incidents

In 2019, ACLED recorded 25 security incidents recorded in Quneitra governorate, of whom 10 were coded as battles, 12 explosions/remote violence and 3 incidents of violence against civilians.

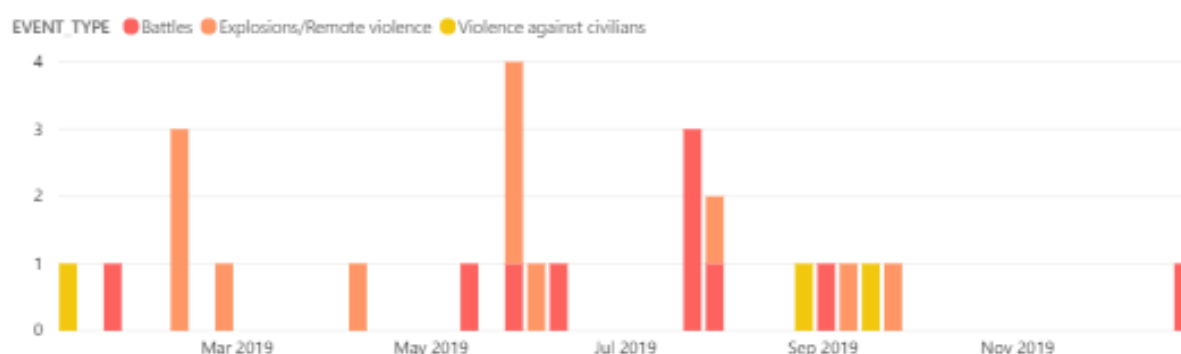


Figure 51. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Quneitra governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data¹⁹³⁰

Quneitra governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Quneitra	10	12	3

Figure 52. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Quneitra governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data.

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 8 security incidents of which 1 were battles and 7 explosions/remote violence.

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Quneitra governorate in 2019 and early 2020 included the following:

¹⁹²⁶ SOHR, Hezbollah continues to recruit youth and men near border with the occupied Syrian Golan, 27 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹²⁷ SOHR, Buying loyalty: Iran-backed militias offer young people in Al-Quneitra financial incentives, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹²⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6; Asharq Al-Awsat, Israel Targets Assad's Forces in Quneitra, 2 June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹²⁹ Asharq Al-Awsat, Israeli Airstrikes on Central Syria Kill, Injure Regime Soldiers, 5 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹³⁰ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

IAF-led airstrikes

- On 11 February 2019, IAF conducted a shell attack on Hezbollah and Iranian forces in the premises of the cities of Jubata al-Khashab and Quneitra, in the result of which at least four militiamen loyal to the GoS were reported injured.¹⁹³¹ According to the Times of Israel, IAF targeted pro-GoS forces to counter weapon smuggling to Hezbollah and to push back Iranian-backed forces.¹⁹³² In March 2019, SOHR reported on an explosion caused by a rocket shell in the western outskirts of the town of Hodr, the northern sector of Quneitra.¹⁹³³
- In May and June 2019, IAF targeted pro-GoS positions in southern Quneitra in response to alleged rocket attacks, as reported by the Col.¹⁹³⁴ At the end of May 2019, as a result of a shelling, an officer and a member of the GoS forces were reported to be killed.¹⁹³⁵
- In the beginning of June 2019, casualties among military staff were reported after IAF strikes targeted positions of 'Iranians, Hezbollah, the regime forces, and the loyal militias' in Tel al-Sha'ar.¹⁹³⁶ In July and August 2019, IAF conducted airstrikes on military targets in the vicinity of the villages of Nab' al-Sakhr¹⁹³⁷ and Tal Briqa¹⁹³⁸ respectively.
- On 22 July 2019, a Druze resident of Hader in the Golan Heights was killed in his car by an alleged Israeli missile: according to Syrian media reports, the killed person was engaged in the recruitment of Syrians for Hezbollah militia.¹⁹³⁹
- On 27 February 2020, a person, who was defined as a member of the 'Syrian resistance to liberate Golan' by SOHR and identified as a person working at a police station by Quneitra governor, was killed in an Israeli drone strike in Hader.¹⁹⁴⁰

Unknown perpetrators

- On 11 April 2019, three children of the same family were killed in an IED explosion in the vicinity of Khar Arnaba town, as reported by SNHR. According to the source, the perpetrators were not identified.¹⁹⁴¹
- In the middle of June 2019, a former faction commander who had joined the forces of the GoS in a reconciliation process was killed as a result of gunfire targeting him and his brother.¹⁹⁴²
- In the beginning of September 2019, a former member of the rebel factions who had joined the GoS forces (military security) was killed by a gunman in the town of Om Batnah.¹⁹⁴³

¹⁹³¹ SOHR, Less than 3 weeks after the last shelling...the Israeli forces target a position west of Hodr town in Al-Quneitra countryside, 4 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹³² Times of Israel (The), Syria reports Israeli artillery attack on Quneitra, 11 February, [url](#)

¹⁹³³ SOHR, Less than 3 weeks after the last shelling...the Israeli forces target a position west of Hodr town in Al-Quneitra countryside, 4 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹³⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), para. 21

¹⁹³⁵ SOHR, The Israeli shelling kills an officer and a member of the regime forces in Al-Quneitra, 28.05.2019, [url](#); SOHR, Israeli shelling targets a military vehicle in Al-Quneitra countryside leaving an officer dead and injures other members in the ranks of the regime forces, 27 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹³⁶ SOHR, Israeli missile hits Quneitra, Syria reports casualties, 3 June 2019, [url](#); SOHR, At least 10 people -including 3 Syrians- were killed in the Israeli strikes on positions of the Iranians, Hezbollah, and the regime forces in Quneitra and near the capital Damascus, 2 June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹³⁷ SOHR, The Israeli strikes on Daraa and Al-Quneitra countryside kill about 10 of the Syrian regime's loyal militiamen mostly of non-Syrian nationalities, 25 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹³⁸ SOHR, New Israeli strikes target positions in Quneitra one week after the recent targeting of the Syrian south, which killed about 10 militias loyal to the regime forces of Syrian and non-Syrian nationalities, 1 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹³⁹ Al-Monitor, IDF takes out Hezbollah targets on Syrian border, 26 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴⁰ Al Jazeera, 1 killed in Israel drone attack on Golan Heights: Syrian state TV, 27 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴¹ SNHR, The death of three children from the same family in the explosion of an unknown- source IED in Khan Arnaba town in Quneitra suburbs, on April 11, 12 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴² SOHR, As part of the continuous targeting of members and the "reconciliation" faction leaders with the regime forces in the Syrian south, unidentified gunmen assassinate a former faction commander in Quneitra countryside, 12 June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴³ SOHR, New assassination targets a fighter reconciled with the regime forces in Quneitra countryside and explosion hits the camp of the 4th Division injures a colonel and 4 members west Daraa, 4 September 2019, [url](#)

- On 23 December 2019, a killing of a member of the government's 'military police' by unknown perpetrators was reported in the town of Khan Arnaba.¹⁹⁴⁴
- On 29 January 2020, SOHR reported on unidentified gunmen who attacked and opened a fire on an 'Air-force Intelligence' vehicle of the GoS on the road between the cities of Al-Baath and Al-Hamdia.¹⁹⁴⁵

2.13.2 Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	-	1
February	-	-
March	-	-
April	3	3
May	-	-
June	-	-
July	-	-
August	-	-
September	-	-
October	-	-
November	-	1
December	-	-
Total	3	5

Figure 53. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Quneitra governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2019, sources documented between 3 (VDC data)¹⁹⁴⁶ and 5 (SNHR data)¹⁹⁴⁷ civilian fatalities in Quneitra governorate.

2.13.3 Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

Assessing the situation in Quneitra and Dar'a, WFP reported in June 2019 on high levels of infrastructure destruction, which led to 'a lack of critical services such as sanitation, health, and drinking water'. Returning families found their homes partially or fully destroyed and looted;

¹⁹⁴⁴ SOHR, Armed attack targets regime checkpoints and positions in Al-Sanamayn city, and "military police" member assassinated in Quneitra countryside, 23 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴⁵ SOHR, Gunmen attack regime 'Air-force Intelligence' vehicle in rural al-Quneitra southern Syria, 29.01.2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴⁶ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

¹⁹⁴⁷ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

rebuilding efforts were reported to be ‘hampered by a lack of resources and materials, as well as high prices’. Hamideyyih, Mashara, Um Batna, and Bir Ajam towns in the governorate were reported having no shops or bakeries and no functioning schools were found in Bir Ajam and Um Batna.¹⁹⁴⁸

According to open source data collected by the Carter Center and ACLED, more than 4 000 individual uses of explosive munitions (11 % of total use in southern Syria), were recorded in 55 communities across Quneitra between July 2013 and May 2019. The use of shells of unknown type constituted 58 % of cases, followed by air-dropped munitions, which were used in 22 % of the instances. Besides, 35 instances connected to landmines, IEDs, and unexploded ordnances (UXO) were recorded during this period. Territorially, the majority of instances of the use of explosive munitions was registered in Khan Arnaba sub-district (58 %), followed by the towns of Mashara, Jbata al-Khashab, Baath, and Khan Arnaba, Quneitra city, Hamediyeh, and other locations.¹⁹⁴⁹ In November 2018, different types of weapons, including shells and munitions, which were left behind by NSAG, were found in a lake close to the Golan Heights.¹⁹⁵⁰

2.13.4 Displacement and return

According to the 2020 report of the World Bank, the governorate of Quneitra received more than 10 % new inhabitants in the period between 2011 and 2018, experiencing thus the second largest (after Idlib) proportionate influx of people; consequently, the population density in Quneitra increased by around 34 %.¹⁹⁵¹ As a result of the Russia-backed GoS offensive of mid-June 2018¹⁹⁵², around 164 000 IDPs moved towards camps and villages in Quneitra, close to the Golan Heights area, from rebel-controlled areas in Dar’a and Quneitra.¹⁹⁵³

UNOCHA reported 39 cases of IDP movements to Quneitra governorate in 2019.¹⁹⁵⁴ This number reveals a sharp contrast with the previous years: 21 801 cases of internal displacement movement to/within the governorate were registered in 2017 and 24 787 cases in 2018.¹⁹⁵⁵

With regards to returnees, UNOCHA recorded around 9 000 return movements to or within the governorate, of whom about 4 000 were within the governorate and the rest came mainly from Rural Damascus governorate.¹⁹⁵⁶

According to STJ, 25 000 persons are believed to have fled from Dar’a and Quneitra governorates in the period between January and August 2019. The same source mentioned that many of them were smuggled out the respective governorates in military vehicles—and with the help of military officials—to Turkey (via Idlib) and Lebanon (Homs).¹⁹⁵⁷

¹⁹⁴⁸ WFP, Syria – Dar’a and Quneitra Rapid Assessment, Food Security Update, 11 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 3

¹⁹⁴⁹ Carter Center (the), Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, Report 1, Southern Syria: As Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates, November 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-10. On the methodology, see pp. 3-4.

¹⁹⁵⁰ SANA, Weapons and munitions left behind by terrorists uncovered in Quneitra, 19 November 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵¹ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 25, 28

¹⁹⁵² Guardian (The), Syrian forces’ push into Daraa ‘could spark humanitarian crisis’, 27 June 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵³ UNOCHA, Jordan, Syrian Arab Republic: Dar’a, Qunaitra, Sweida, Flash Update No. 4, 2 July 2018, [url](#), p. 3; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/39/65], 9 August 2018, [url](#), p. 30

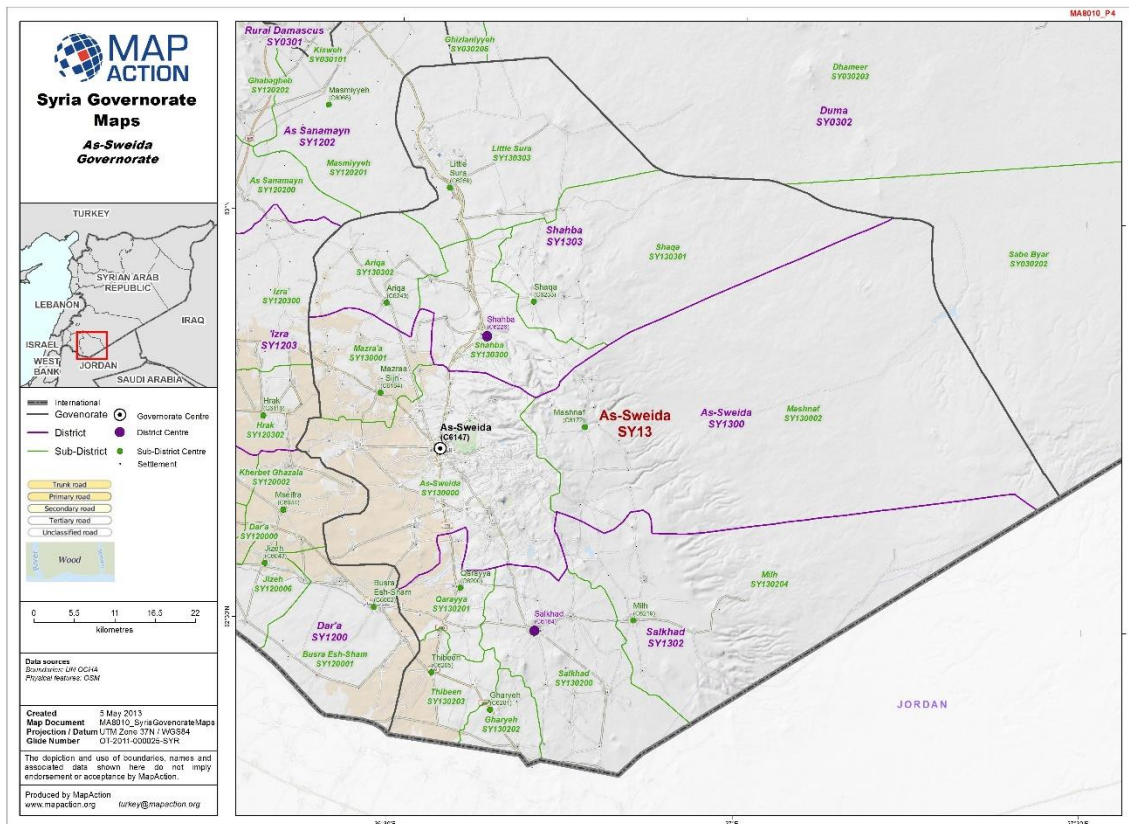
¹⁹⁵⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, 31 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data for Jan-2020 [third sheet tab – Summary since 2016], updated February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec 2019, 24 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵⁷ STJ, Syria: Thousands Forced to Flee Qunaitra and Daraa ‘Silently’, 27 August 2019, [url](#). See also: COAR, Southwestern Dar’a, Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, September 2019, [url](#), p. 15 and Al-Monitor, Young Syrians flee Daraa, Quneitra in droves, 27 August 2019, [url](#)

2.14 Sweida governorate



Map 22: © MapAction, Sweida governorate map¹⁹⁵⁸

2.14.1 General description of the governorate

The governorate of Sweida is located in the southern part of Syria and has borders with the governorates of Dar'a and Rural Damascus and an international border with Jordan to its south.¹⁹⁵⁹ Sweida governorate comprises three districts: As-Sweida, Shahba and Salkhad, which each have sub-districts.¹⁹⁶⁰

- As-Sweida sub-districts: As-Sweida [governorate capital¹⁹⁶¹], Mazraa and Mashnaf;
- Salkhad sub-districts: Salkhad, Milh, Qarayya, Gharyeh and Thibeen;
- Shahba sub-districts: Shahba, Ariqa, Shaqa and Little Sura.¹⁹⁶²

The Syrian Bureau of Statistics estimated that the population in the governorate of Sweida in mid-2016 was 509 000.¹⁹⁶³

¹⁹⁵⁸ MapAction, Sweida Governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), 26 August 2014, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁹⁶⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), 26 August 2014, [url](#), p. 40

¹⁹⁶¹ UNOCHA, 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 28 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁹⁶² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), 26 August 2014, [url](#), pp. 40-41

¹⁹⁶³ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

The Druze are an ethnicity that exist both as a religious sect and as a tribe.¹⁹⁶⁴ The governorate of Sweida is the most important home region of the Druze minority in Syria.¹⁹⁶⁵ The Druze make up 91 % of the governorate's total population. Other groups present as of 2018 included Christians (3 %) and Sunni Muslims (6 %), who have Bedouin roots.¹⁹⁶⁶ The Druze population in Sweida has been treated with 'caution' by the GoS as a 'politically sensitive minority', and large scale mass arrests and bombings have largely been avoided in Sweida.¹⁹⁶⁷

2.14.2 Background of the conflict and armed actors

The governorate of Sweida has remained under government control during the conflict, however, much of its military and civil authority is from local political and military factions within the governorate preoccupied with defending it from outside attackers.¹⁹⁶⁸ Sweida remained neutral during the revolution in Syria and during the ensuing conflict.¹⁹⁶⁹ In spring 2011, local Druze officials and sheikhs neither participated in the general revolt nor made statements in support of the Syrian government.¹⁹⁷⁰ After the revolution began in 2011, the Druze of Sweida split in three groups: those loyal to the GoS, those supporting the revolution and those that remained neutral; the last category constituted the majority.¹⁹⁷¹ The neutrality of the Druze during the conflict contributed to the cessation of compulsory and reserve recruitment by the government forces, therefore giving the Druze of Sweida a type of special status since 2011.¹⁹⁷² However, in Sweida, 50 000 individuals were reportedly wanted for the military service and a large number of them joined local militias and gangs in order to ensure salaries, power and protection.¹⁹⁷³ Since mid-2018, the GoS and its allies were increasingly pressuring Sweida to resolve the issue of the Druze youths absconding from their military service. Following the July 2018 ISIL attacks in Sweida, the GoS temporarily stopped putting pressure on Sweida concerning this matter.¹⁹⁷⁴

Sweida has largely avoided heavy attacks¹⁹⁷⁵ and artillery shelling during the war.¹⁹⁷⁶ In June 2015, rebels from the Southern Front group tried to seize the al-Thaala military base, an important base to Sweida's defence. Local Druze militias collaborated with GoS forces and fended them off.¹⁹⁷⁷ SOHR

¹⁹⁶⁴ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁹⁶⁵ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁹⁶⁶ The London School of Economics report cited the Decision Support Office in Sweida Province as a source for this information. Source: Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁹⁶⁷ MEE, 'Security chaos': Kidnappings and clashes threaten relative peace in Syria's Sweida, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶⁸ Syria Direct, At least 150 people killed in devastating IS ground offensive, suicide attacks on Suwayda province, 25 July 2018, [url](#); Syria Direct, The state of Syria's south: A month-long reporting series from Syria Direct, 11 September 2017, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶⁹ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2; Hunaidi, S., ISIS Has Not Been Defeated. It's Alive and Well in Southern Syria, Foreign Policy, 3 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁷⁰ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁹⁷¹ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁹⁷² al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-10

¹⁹⁷³ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁹⁷⁴ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁹⁷⁵ MEE, 'Security chaos': Kidnappings and clashes threaten relative peace in Syria's Sweida, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁷⁶ SNHR, The brutal attacks on Suwayda governorate between the Terrorism of the Syrian Regime and ISIS. 154 civilians killed, including 15 children, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁹⁷⁷ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 41

reported in June 2018 that rebels hit the city of Sweida with shellfire on 19 June 2018 for the first time since 2015.¹⁹⁷⁸

The CoI noted that in the months of July until December 2018 it documented hostilities towards remaining ISIL remnants. It further stated that while ISIL's presence throughout the country had significantly reduced, ISIL terrorists remained able to carry out terrorist attacks throughout the reporting period from mid-July 2018 to mid-January 2019.¹⁹⁷⁹

After the GoS forces recaptured the suburbs of southern Damascus in May 2018, a large number of ISIL terrorists evacuated their strongholds in the area and nearby and reportedly gathered in their stronghold in al-Badia desert, which is located near the governorate of Sweida.¹⁹⁸⁰

July 2018 ISIL attacks

On 25 July 2018, coordinated attacks and suicide bombings by ISIL took place in the city of Sweida and in eastern rural Sweida.¹⁹⁸¹ Early that morning, ISIL fighters raided and attacked, in a coordinated manner, a number of villages¹⁹⁸² in the governorate of Sweida.¹⁹⁸³ The ISIL fighters were dressed in traditional Druze attire and went door to door shooting civilian men, women, and children; they spared one member from each family to recount the events of the attacks.¹⁹⁸⁴ SNHR stated that it recorded the deaths of 130 civilians across the 8 villages and the abduction from the al Shbeki village of approximately 29 civilians.¹⁹⁸⁵ The UN stated that 68 civilians were killed in al Shbeki but gave no further figures for other villages.¹⁹⁸⁶ On the same day after the rural attacks, ISIL fighters wearing explosive vests/belts committed suicide attacks in different neighbourhoods in the city of Sweida.¹⁹⁸⁷ The CoI reported that the attacks in Sweida city killed at least 200 civilians and injured 170 others. During these attacks, ISIL fighters also abducted at least 32 Druze women and children and one 19-year-old Druze male student; the latter was later executed. The hostages were subjected to what the UN described as 'inhumane conditions' and, while in captivity, two more hostages were killed. Two more hostages were executed when ISIL's demands for an exchange of prisoners were not met.¹⁹⁸⁸

The UN stated that there are reasonable grounds that the July 2018 attack targeting the Druze in Sweida in which civilians who were not directly involved in hostilities were made the object of

¹⁹⁷⁸ SOHR, Shells hit south Syria city for first time in three years, 20 June 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹⁷⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 9, para. 36

¹⁹⁸⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 9, para. 37

¹⁹⁸¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Qunaitra, Sweida. Situation Report No. 5. As of 2 August 2018, 2 August 2018, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁹⁸² According to the SNHR, those villages were the following: al Shbeki, al Mtouna, al Swaimra, al Shreih, Gheidat Hamayel, Douma, Tarba and Rami. Source: SNHR, The brutal attacks on Suwayda governorate between the Terrorism of the Syrian Regime and ISIS. 154 civilians killed, including 15 children, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁹⁸³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 9, para. 38; SNHR, The brutal attacks on Suwayda governorate between the Terrorism of the Syrian Regime and ISIS. 154 civilians killed, including 15 children, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁹⁸⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 9, para. 38

¹⁹⁸⁵ SNHR, The brutal attacks on Suwayda governorate between the Terrorism of the Syrian Regime and ISIS. 154 civilians killed, including 15 children, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁹⁸⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), para. 38

¹⁹⁸⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 9, para. 39; SNHR, The brutal attacks on Suwayda governorate between the Terrorism of the Syrian Regime and ISIS. 154 civilians killed, including 15 children, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁹⁸⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 9, para. 39-41

sectarian attacks could amount to war crimes by ISIL.¹⁹⁸⁹ SOHR reported that the GoS and Russia made a deal with ISIL to release abducted women and children; no further details were provided.¹⁹⁹⁰

In response, the GoS launched an offensive in rural Sweida on 6 August 2018 to force out the ISIL fighters from the region.¹⁹⁹¹ Syrian forces with Russian air support, conducted over 35 airstrikes along the desert area that ISIL controlled at that time in east Sweida.¹⁹⁹²

The CoI stated that on 20 October 2018, six Druze women and children that were abducted from the al-Shabki village were exchanged for 17 individuals detained by the government, many of whom had familial ties to ISIL fighters. The remaining hostages – 21 Druze women and children – were rescued on 8 November 2018 in an operation by the government forces launched in Humeima in Palmyra district. According to the same source, during the operation, at least two young boys were caught in the crossfire and killed. The offensive ended officially on 19 November 2018, after clearing the al-Safa plateau in the eastern Badia desert.¹⁹⁹³

2.14.2.1 Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

According to a 2019 European University Institute report on the Druze of Sweida, there were three branches of the Syrian Security Services located in Sweida city: the Military Intelligence, the Air Force Intelligence and the Political Security.¹⁹⁹⁴

According to Gregory Waters of International Review, deployments of the SAA in 2019 as of 17 March 2020 included units of:

- 1st Corps: 15th Special Forces Division, 15th Division/Unknown unit – Tarba, Suwayda – 28 July 2019;
- 2nd Corps: 1st Division, 91st Brigade – Suwayda Province – 21 November 2018, 10th Division, 62nd Brigade/424th Battalion – Suwayda Province – 6 September 2018.¹⁹⁹⁵

According to one source, in Sweida there are also security groups that are contracted to branches of the Syrian security services and to the regular forces of the 15th Division and the 4th Division of the Syrian Army. There are also local cells linked to Hezbollah and Russia.¹⁹⁹⁶

2.14.2.2 ISIL

According to an article at Foreign Policy dated April 2019, ISIL was regrouping near the city of Sweida.¹⁹⁹⁷ While the GoS claimed that after its offensive, there were no more ISIL fighters in the Safa hills after the July 2018 attack, in the desert east of Sweida, in April 2019, locals were confirming the

¹⁹⁸⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), para. 43

¹⁹⁹⁰ SOHR, After the deal of handing over the kidnapped people, hundreds of ISIS members vanish from Tlul al-Safa after 116 days of the deadliest attack ever in al-Suwaydaa, 17 November 2018, [url](#),

¹⁹⁹¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), pp. 5, 9, paras. 13 and 43

¹⁹⁹² Al-Masdar News, Syrian Army scores major advance in east Sweida after Russian airstrikes hammer ISIS, 6 August 2018, [url](#), accessed

¹⁹⁹³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 9, para. 42

¹⁹⁹⁴ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁹⁹⁵ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁹⁶ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁹⁹⁷ Hunaidi, S., ISIS Has Not Been Defeated. It's Alive and Well in Southern Syria, Foreign Policy, 3 April 2019, [url](#)

return of ISIL. The source also stated that local Druze factions discovered ISIL fighters when scouting the area in March 2019.¹⁹⁹⁸

The CoI stated in a January 2019 report that, while ISIL's presence in Syria was significantly reduced, ISIL redoubts were still able to commit terrorist attacks against civilians in the governorate of Sweida, in the reporting period of mid-July 2018 to mid-January 2019.¹⁹⁹⁹

2.14.2.3 Factions, militias and gangs

According to a 2019 report, armed family groups, gangs and militias dominated Sweida. They secured funding either domestically or externally by the war economy. Some of these groups were supporting the GoS, while some were neutral and others were against the government. A large number of the individuals wanted for military service joined militias and gangs, in order to secure protection and a salary.²⁰⁰⁰ According to a 2019 report on Sweida, the following militias and armed family factions were 'in control' of the governorate of Sweida in 2019:

- National Defence Forces (NDF) (pro-GoS, good terms with Hezbollah);
- Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) (pro-GoS, good terms with Hezbollah);
- Baath Brigades (pro-GoS);
- Al-Bustan Association, the Protectors of the Homeland (Humat al-Diyar) (pro-GoS, good terms with Hezbollah);
- Men of Dignity Movement (Rijal al-Karama) (neither pro-opposition or GoS);
- Single Artery (al-Shiryan al-Wahed) (some anti-GoS sub-groups);
- Al-Fahd Forces (close to Russia);
- Cleric of Dignity Forces (Quwwat Sheikh al-Karama) (anti-GoS)²⁰⁰¹;
- Home Guards (pro-GoS local group in Sweida city and most villages).²⁰⁰²

Rijjal al-Karama (Men of Dignity) and Sheikh al-Karamah (Sheikh of Dignity) forces

In 2012, the movement Rijjal al-Karama (Men of Dignity²⁰⁰³) was set up, with Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous as its leader.²⁰⁰⁴ The movement 'has paved the way for a secular leadership, albeit within a religious framework'. It also established the neutrality of Sweida's Druze towards the 2011 revolution.²⁰⁰⁵ The movement was against the conscription of Druze to the GoS army and had committed to protect peaceful protests and demonstrations.²⁰⁰⁶

¹⁹⁹⁸ Hunaidi, S., ISIS Has Not Been Defeated. It's Alive and Well in Southern Syria, Foreign Policy, 3 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 9, para. 36

²⁰⁰⁰ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

²⁰⁰¹ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

²⁰⁰² Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, 6 January 2020, [url](#), pp. 18-19

²⁰⁰³ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰⁰⁴ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 20

²⁰⁰⁵ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰⁰⁶ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 20

The Men of Dignity movement did not initially take a position in the Syrian conflict.²⁰⁰⁷ However, in 2015 Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous took a stronger position against the GoS.²⁰⁰⁸ In September 2015, he was killed alongside 50 other movement members in an explosion of his convoy. Following the death of Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous, the Men of Dignity movement announced the creation of the Karama Sheikh Forces. The aim of the latter movement was to avenge the death of Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous, protect Sweida and maintain the approach of refusal of association and of refusal of the forced conscription.²⁰⁰⁹ According to a February 2019 article by the news agency Enab Baladi, the Sheikh of Dignity forces did not deviate from the Men of Dignity Movement and its principles.²⁰¹⁰

According to the same article, the Sheikh al-Karamah/Sheikh of Dignity forces announced the formation of a new faction in the city of Sweida, the Der' Sheikh al-Karamah/Sheikh of Dignity Shield. The group warned 'against any violation to the governorate's dignity' and that 'no arbitrary arrests in the mountain and no forced detention of citizens, requested to perform the military services or politically prosecuted will be tolerated'.²⁰¹¹

2.14.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

The Col, for the reporting period mid-July 2018 to mid-January 2019, stated that attacks against civilians and civilian targets, which resulted in civilian deaths and injuries, continued to be documented in the governorate of Sweida, namely the 25 July 2018 attacks on the Druze.²⁰¹²

SOHR reported in March 2019 that cells of ISIL continued being present and active in Sweida's desert. The source further documented that violent clashes took place between GoS forces and 'gunmen loyal to them' and ISIL fighters in the area of Ard Al-Karaa in the north-eastern Sweida desert.²⁰¹³

Since August 2018, the conflict progressively moved to the south and southeast part of the region, particularly in an area between the cities of Dar'a and Sweida. According to a 2019 report by the Carter Center covering the period August 2018 - July 2019, there were 249 violent incidents against GoS and GoS-aligned personnel, former opposition members, and civilians. Over half of the southern Syrian incidents took place across 10 locations, including Sweida city, with 35 recorded attacks and a total of 62 across the entire governorate of Sweida. In the case of the city of Sweida, the targets were traditionally associated with different forms of organised crime economies, including smuggling, kidnappings and ransom.²⁰¹⁴

A 2019 London School of Economics report on Sweida, written by Sweida-based analyst Taim Zaidan, noted that, after 2011, Sweida 'became a prospering market for smuggling, and the trade of weapons and drugs'.²⁰¹⁵ For the first time, organised gangs started appearing and having control and influence over all the areas of Sweida's economy. That included trade of basic goods, armed robberies, looting, kidnapping and human trafficking. Kidnappings for ransom were one of the most important sources

²⁰⁰⁷ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 20

²⁰⁰⁸ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰⁰⁹ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 20

²⁰¹⁰ Enab Baladi, Sheikh of Dignity Shield: New Faction Found in Sweida, 22 February 2019, [url](#)

²⁰¹¹ Enab Baladi, Sheikh of Dignity Shield: New Faction Found in Sweida, 22 February 2019, [url](#)

²⁰¹² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), paras. 23, 36-43

²⁰¹³ SOHR, Al-Suwaitdaa province witnesses the return of the ISIS cells' activity in the province's north-eastern desert through battles that left casualties in the ranks of its members, 25 March 2019, [url](#)

²⁰¹⁴ Carter Center (the), Conflict in Southern Syria August 2018 – July 2019, August 2019, [url](#), pp. 2-4

²⁰¹⁵ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, 6 January 2020, [url](#), p. 7

of income for gangs and militias.²⁰¹⁶ A July 2019 Syria Direct article stated that in the past four months the number of kidnappings in Sweida had increased ‘sharply’.²⁰¹⁷ According to 2019 European University Institute report, Sweida has become a drug smuggling route towards Jordan²⁰¹⁸ while another source also noted that ‘the Military Intelligence Directorate controls the drugs smuggling routes across Sweida’s borders with Jordan’.²⁰¹⁹

According to a November 2019 Carter Center report on Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, covering the south for the period between July 2013 and May 2019, there were 231 security incidents across 69 communities, with at least 783 individual uses of explosive munitions recorded in Sweida representing only 2 % of the total munitions use in Syria. The most common types of explosive weapons that were used in the period indicated above in the governorate of Sweida:

- ground-launched explosive munitions, representing 75 % of the documented uses;
- aerial-launched munitions (21 %), mainly airplane-dropped munitions;
- landmines, IEDs and UXO, representing 4 % of the documented activity.²⁰²⁰

According to the same source, explosive munitions were predominantly focused in the district of Shahba and specifically in the sub-district of Shaqa, which is located along the border with the governorate of rural Damascus, where over half the explosive weapons use in Sweida occurred.²⁰²¹

From mid-January 2020, there were reports of protests taking place in Sweida, related to the poor living conditions and the rising prices.²⁰²² According to ISW, the head of the Presidency of the Religious Community of Sweida, Sheikh Hekmat al-Hijiri, voiced his support to the movement of protests asking for improved living conditions.²⁰²³

Some protests that took place in 2019 and 2020 include:

- On 8 May 2019 a protest took place in the city of Sweida concerning the ongoing fuel crisis. The protesters were demanding that the government provides a solution for the fuel crisis.²⁰²⁴ According to the Carter Center, the protest was non-violent.²⁰²⁵
- Starting on 17 January 2020 many residents of the governorate of Sweida began protesting against the deteriorating economic conditions and the rising prices.²⁰²⁶
- In the period 13-19 January 2020, in the city of Sweida and in the town of Shahba, civilians gathered and protested for the poor living conditions and the rising food prices.²⁰²⁷ There were reports of the protests also continuing in the following week of 20-26 January 2020.²⁰²⁸

According to a March 2020 Al Monitor article, during the protests the residents of Sweida were also asking for ‘loosening the security grip imposed on them by the Syrian government’. However, the

²⁰¹⁶ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²⁰¹⁷ Syria Direct, Suweida governorate terrorized by increased gang activity, kidnappings, 31 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰¹⁸ al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²⁰¹⁹ Zaidan, T., Sweida: Conflict Dynamics and the Role of Civil Society, 6 January 2020, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰²⁰ Carter Center, Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, Report 1. Southern Syria: As Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates, November 2019, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰²¹ Carter Center, Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, Report 1. Southern Syria: As Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates, November 2019, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰²² Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 13 - 19 January 2020, [url](#), p. 4; Enab Baladi, Suweida is protesting and establishing wave of protests across Syria, 21 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁰²³ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 21- February 4, 2020, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁰²⁴ AMN, Syrians protest government fuel crisis in Sweida, 8 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁰²⁵ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 6 - 12 May 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰²⁶ SOHR, Sweida discontent: protests renew against poor living conditions, 26 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁰²⁷ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 13 - 19 January 2020, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰²⁸ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 20 - 26 January, [url](#), p. 4

source stated that security branches affiliated with the GoS forces continued to impose further restrictions, including arrests and recruitment of young men to the army.²⁰²⁹

2.14.3.1 Security incidents

According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 74 security incidents recorded in Sweida governorate, of whom 35 were coded as battles, 12 explosions/remote violence and 27 incidents of violence against civilians.

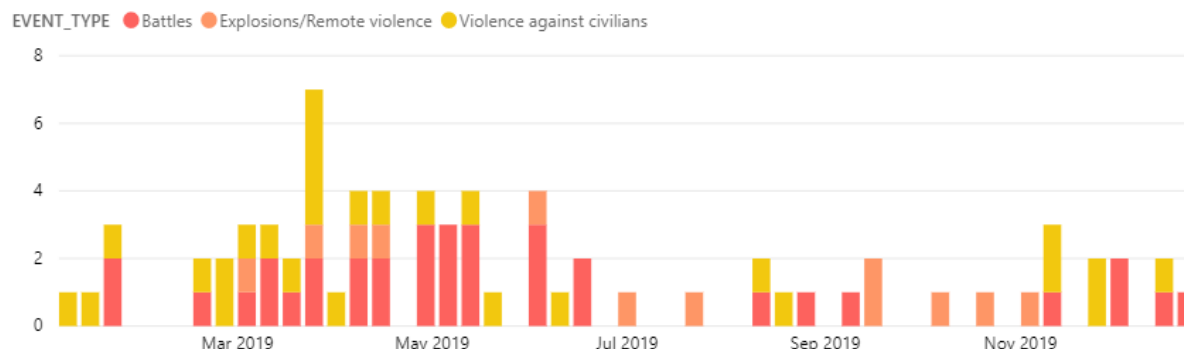


Figure 54. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Sweida governorate in 2019, based on ACLED data²⁰³⁰

Sweida governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Sweida	26	10	21
Salkhad	-	-	1
Shahba	9	2	5
Total	35	12	27

Figure 55. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Sweida governorate in 2019. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

Most security incidents documented by ACLED in 2019 took place in Sweida district, whereas in Salkhad district only one incident of violence against civilians was recorded in 2019.

In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 4 security incidents of which 2 were battles, one explosions/remote violence and one incident of violence against civilians.

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Sweida governorate in 2019 and early 2020 included the following (grouped by type of incident):

Kidnappings

- During the period from 25 to 31 March 2019, an increasing number of kidnappings was reported in the governorate of Sweida. At least four abductions targeting civilians were recorded in the following locations: the city of Sweida (2), Mardak in Shahba district and Qarayya in the Salkhad district. In two of these cases, ransom was asked in order to release the individuals being kidnapped.²⁰³¹

²⁰²⁹ Al-Monitor, Syrian government struggles with unrest in Suwayda, 13 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁰³⁰ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (14 March 2020), [url](#)

²⁰³¹ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 25 - 31 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

- On 16 June 2019, Muhannad Shihab al-Din, a carpenter and political activist was kidnapped while working at his shop in the city of Sweida. He was kidnapped after armed men raided his shop.²⁰³² According to the news agency Middle East Eye, the shop was raided by Syrian government security forces.²⁰³³ SNHR noted that Muhannad Shihab al-Din was involved in most of the protests in the city of Sweida, which were being held because of the spread of kidnappings.²⁰³⁴
- On 17 June 2019, a major and a colonel of the Syrian army were abducted on the Salkhad to As Sweida Highway; this constituted the first kidnapping of its kind on record in the area, according to the source.²⁰³⁵
- On 17 June 2019, members of a local Druze militia gathered outside a military intelligence branch in the city of Sweida after the arrest of a local opposition activist.²⁰³⁶ According to Al Masdar News, a group of locals 'stormed' the Syrian military intelligence headquarters in relation to the arrest of activist Muhannad Shahebeddine and took at least ten officers as hostages. The following day the group of locals agreed to release the hostages and leave the area after they entered into negotiations with the Syrian government.²⁰³⁷
- Syria Direct reported that in July 2019, a 'local gang' kidnapped a clothes trader on the way between the cities Salkhad and Suweida. Afterwards, the kidnappers contacted his wife, sent her a picture of him being beaten and tortured and demanded ransom of approximately two million Syrian pound. The same source also reported an attempted kidnapping of two men. The kidnappers held them at gunpoint and chased them by car. The two men escaped; however, the kidnappers shot at them and as a result the two men sustained 'moderate' injuries.²⁰³⁸
- SHRC reported that, on 20 November 2019, Dr. Muhammad Anas al-Hariri was kidnapped by unknown gunmen after he left work at the Sweida National Hospital [Sweida city].²⁰³⁹
- On 22 December 2019, the director of the Salkhad hospital in the countryside of the governorate of Sweida was kidnapped by an unidentified group.²⁰⁴⁰
- Different sources reported that, on 6 January 2020, two paramedics working in Al-Manara International Hospital in Damascus were kidnapped at Jisr Shahbaa as they were on their way to relieve a patient in Al-Suwaida city. The kidnappers were unknown.²⁰⁴¹
- According to the SOHR, two kidnapping attempts of citizens took place in Sweida by armed gunmen; one on 25 February 2020 and one on 26 February 2020. The latter took place in the western countryside of Sweida, near a military checkpoint of the government.²⁰⁴²

IED attacks

- The Carter Center cited open sources reporting on 28 July 2019 that 5 soldiers were killed and 2 more were injured by an IED planted by ISIL in the countryside of eastern Sweida. The information could not be corroborated by other sources.²⁰⁴³

²⁰³² SNHR, Security Forces in Suwayda are responsible for the abduction and enforced disappearance of political activist Mohannad Shehab al Din, 24 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

²⁰³³ MEE, 'Security chaos': Kidnappings and clashes threaten relative peace in Syria's Sweida, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰³⁴ SNHR, Security Forces in Suwayda are responsible for the abduction and enforced disappearance of political activist Mohannad Shehab al Din, 24 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

²⁰³⁵ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 17 - 26 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

²⁰³⁶ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 17 - 26 June 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

²⁰³⁷ Al Masdar News, Locals seize Syrian intel HQ in Sweida after arrest of activist, 17 June 2019, [url](#)

²⁰³⁸ Syria Direct, Suweida governorate terrorized by increased gang activity, kidnappings, 31 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰³⁹ SHRC, The 18th Annual Report On Human Rights in Syria 2019. January 2019-December 2019, January 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁴⁰ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 17 - 23 February 2020, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰⁴¹ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 17 - 23 February 2020, [url](#), p. 4; SOHR (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights), Two paramedics kidnapped in rural Al-Suwaida, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁴² SOHR, Insecurity in al-Suwaida increases: citizens kidnapped near military checkpoints, 26 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁴³ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 22 - 28 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

- According to the Carter Center report for the period 16-22 September 2019, an IED attack took place in the reported period against a civilian vehicle in the village of Raha, in Sweida. In addition, during the same reporting period, an IED attack took place against a bus transporting personnel of the 52nd Armoured Brigade between the villages of Darah and Skaka, close to the Thala Airbase in the governorate of Sweida. ISIL assumed responsibility for the attack.²⁰⁴⁴
- In the period 4-10 November 2019, ISIL took responsibility for a bus being attacked with an IED. The attack took place in Rakhim village and the bus was transporting government troops between the villages of Dara and Skaka, in the governorate of Sweida.²⁰⁴⁵ According to SOHR, the attack injured all the bus passengers.²⁰⁴⁶

Explosives and suicide bombings

- On 3 July 2019 a suicide bomber in the Qanawat area of the city of Sweida killed 5 civilians and injured 13 others. This suicide attack was linked with ISIL and, according to the source, it constituted the first suicide attack in the governorate of Sweida in over a year.²⁰⁴⁷ The same number of casualties and injured is reported by the SOHR.²⁰⁴⁸ The news agency Al Arabiya reported that the explosion killed 3 people and injured 7 others.²⁰⁴⁹

Clashes/attacks

- In the period from 25 to 31 March 2019, at least two clashes which lasted several hours took place to the east of the towns of Mashnaf and Ariqa, between the SAA and ISIL.²⁰⁵⁰
- On 15 April 2019, a Military Intelligence Officer was killed by unidentified actors in the governorate of Sweida, in the city of Salkhad. According to the source, this constituted the first recorded event of this type in this city in 12 months.²⁰⁵¹
- In the period from 29 April to 5 May 2019, two attacks against pro-government militia members took place in the city of Sweida and the town of Ara, both located in the governorate of Sweida.²⁰⁵²
- In the period from 6 to 12 May 2019, one attack took place near the town of al Thaala [west of Sweida city] in the governorate of Sweida. As a result of the attack, two SAA soldiers were killed at an ad hoc checkpoint.²⁰⁵³
- In the period from 13 to 19 May 2019, two NDF personnel were attacked in a hit and run at the villages of Atil and Samma al Hneidat [northeast and northwest of Sweida city].²⁰⁵⁴
- In the period from 3 to 9 June 2019, two intelligence buildings were targeted by unspecified groups in two separate attacks, using RPGs. In addition, on 4 June 2019, a 15th Special Forces Division Officer was assassinated in the Tareeq al Hajj area, which is located in western Sweida governorate, while he was traveling in the area.²⁰⁵⁵ According to the source, an increasing number of such attacks was being recorded in the governorate of Sweida since November 2018.

²⁰⁴⁴ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 16 - 22 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

²⁰⁴⁵ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 4 - 10 November 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰⁴⁶ SOHR, IED targets a bus carries members of the regime forces in the western countryside of al-Suwaiaa and causes injuries, 9 November 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁴⁷ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 1 - 7 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰⁴⁸ SOHR, A suicidal attack in the outskirts of Al-Suwaiaa city south of Syria leaves about 18 casualties and wounded, 3 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁴⁹ Al Arabiya, Three killed in motorcycle bomb attack in Syria's Sweida, 3 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁵⁰ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 25 - 31 March 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²⁰⁵¹ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 15 - 21 April 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁰⁵² Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 29 April - 5 May 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

²⁰⁵³ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 6 - 12 May 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰⁵⁴ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 13 - 19 May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁰⁵⁵ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 3 - 9 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

- On 6 June 2019, at a checkpoint in the city of Sweida, in the Al Anquod Roundabout, between a local government militia and the SAA.²⁰⁵⁶
- On 13 February 2020, the SOHR documented an attack using machine guns against the military security detachment in the city of Salkhad, in the governorate of Sweida. The attack caused severe damage to citizens' houses.²⁰⁵⁷
- On 23 February 2020, the SOHR reported that clashes took place between members of Sheikh al-Karama forces and the government's military security forces at the telephone department building in the city of Salkhad, in the governorate of Sweida. The source noted that machine guns were used and there was no information on casualties.²⁰⁵⁸

Airstrikes

- On 20 January 2019, airstrikes by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) took place, affecting at least 10 areas. Three strikes hit suspected Iranian military sites, with one of the locations being near Khalkhalah in the northern part of the Sweida governorate.²⁰⁵⁹
- In the week 11-17 February 2019, the Syrian Air Force carried out airstrikes against ISIL positions in northeast Sweida governorate. The airstrikes according to the source 'impacted a group of ISIS members moving northeast of Tarba, and southwest of their previous stronghold in the Safaa hills.' These airstrikes constituted the first activity related to ISIL in the area since armed clashes took place between the government and ISIL on 30 December 2018 and one of the first airstrikes against ISIL in northeast Sweida since November 2018.²⁰⁶⁰

2.14.3.2 Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC	SNHR
January	-	-
February	-	-
March	-	-
April	-	-
May	-	-
June	-	1
July	-	4
August	-	1
September	2	2
October	-	1
November	2	2
December	-	-
Total	4	11

Figure 56. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Sweida governorate in 2019. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

²⁰⁵⁶ Carter Center (the), Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018 – July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

²⁰⁵⁷ SOHR, Insecurity in al-Suwaiaa increases: citizens kidnapped near military checkpoints, 26 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁵⁸ SOHR, After kidnapping one of their members, "Sheikh al-Karama" forces attack security centers in Salkhad and detain officers, 23 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁵⁹ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 14 – 20 January 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁰⁶⁰ Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 11 – 17 February 2019, [url](#), p. 3

In 2019, sources documented between 4 (VDC data)²⁰⁶¹ and 11 (SNHR data)²⁰⁶² civilian fatalities in Sweida governorate.

2.14.3.3 Displacement and return

According to a Chatham House 2019 report, the governorate of Sweida was the destination for many civilians seeking refuge from the shelling and siege of parts of Dar'a, Homs, Idlib, Aleppo and the Aleppo and Damascus countryside, and also for civilians fleeing from ISIL attacks in Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor. The main cities in the governorate of Sweida that have accommodated the majority of IDPs are Sweida, Shahha and Salkhad.²⁰⁶³

In the period between January and December 2019, UNOCHA recorded 362 IDPs arrivals to the governorate of Sweida.²⁰⁶⁴ In 2018, 12 661 IDPs arrived to Sweida.²⁰⁶⁵ In the period January 2019 until December 2019, UNOCHA did not report any IDP departures from the governorate of Sweida or any IDPs being displaced within the governorate.²⁰⁶⁶

According to UNOCHA, from January to December 2019 there were around 2 000 returns to or within the governorate, of which 1 000 were within the governorate²⁰⁶⁷ while in 2018 there were 2 460.²⁰⁶⁸

²⁰⁶¹ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2019 shared by VDC with EASO

²⁰⁶² Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: SNHR, 197 Civilians, Including Two Medical Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in January 2019, 1 February 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 246 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Six Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented Killed in Syria in February 2019, 1 March 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 334 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2019, 1 April 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 324 Civilians, Including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2019, 1 May 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 416 Civilians, Including Four Medical Personnel and One Member of the Civil Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in May 2019, 1 June 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 1,864 Civilians, Including Six Media Workers and 21 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2019, 1 July 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 433 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers and Eight Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2019, 1 August 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 267 Civilians, Including One Media Worker and Five Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2019, 1 September 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 118 Civilians, Including One Medical Personnel Member Staff, Documented Killed in Syria in September 2019, 1 October 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 171 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Documented Killed as a Result of the Conflict in Syria in October 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 277 Civilians, Including Two Media Workers, Three Medical Personnel and Two Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in November 2019, 1 December 2019, [url](#); SNHR, 3,364 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in 2019, 1 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁶³ Merei, Y., N., The Livelihoods of Internally Displaced Syrians in Suwayda: Job Opportunities, Education and Prospects for Return, Chatham House, December 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁶⁴ UNOCHA, IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data, December 2019, n.d., [url](#)

²⁰⁶⁵ UNOCHA, IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data, December 2019, n.d., [url](#)

²⁰⁶⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. January 2019, 14 February 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. February 2019, 10 April 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. March 2019, 17 April 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. April 2019, 14 May 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. May 2019, 8 June 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. June 2019, 29 July 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. July 2019, 9 September 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. August 2019, 0 October 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. September 2019, 1 November 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. October 2019, 25 November 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. November 2019, 20 December 2019, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP movements. December 2019, 24 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁶⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁶⁸ UNOCHA, IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data, December 2019, n.d., [url](#)

Annex II: Chronology

Date	Key events
November 1970	Hafez al-Assad, a member of the socialist Baath Party and the minority Alawi sect, comes to power following a coup. ²⁰⁶⁹
1973	President Assad removes the constitutional requirement that the president must be a Muslim. The army suppresses ensuing riots. ²⁰⁷⁰
October 1973	Syria and Egypt launch attacks on Israel. Syria fails to retake the Golan Heights and hostilities end in a ceasefire. ²⁰⁷¹
June 1976	Syria intervenes in the Lebanese civil war sending a force of 25 000 soldiers to Lebanon to prevent the defeat of its Maronite Christian allies. It maintains military presence in Lebanon for the next three decades and exerts significant influence on Lebanese politics. ²⁰⁷² During its presence in Lebanon, Syria maintained up to 30 000 soldiers in the country, had clashes with Israeli forces and various Lebanese factions, and ‘lost thousands of soldiers throughout the conflict’. ²⁰⁷³ According to AI, during Syria’s military presence in Lebanon ‘human rights violations including enforced disappearance and torture were carried out by Syrian military and intelligence personnel against Lebanese nationals, Palestinian refugees and others’. ²⁰⁷⁴
1980	Islamist resistance to the Assad government grows. ²⁰⁷⁵ After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Muslim groups instigate uprisings and riots in Aleppo, Homs and Hama. ²⁰⁷⁶ Rising internal unrest in 1979-81; Muslim Brotherhood attempts to topple Assad regime with targeted killings, guerrilla warfare, and large-scale uprisings. In 1979-81, Muslim Brotherhood militants kill over three hundred Assad supporters in Aleppo alone; Syrian forces respond by killing two thousand members of the Muslim Brotherhood. ²⁰⁷⁷
December 1981	The Golan Heights are formally annexed by Israel. ²⁰⁷⁸
February 1982	Muslim Brotherhood attacks on government and uprising in the city of Hama is suppressed in a month-long siege by the army. ²⁰⁷⁹ An estimated 10 000 to 25 000 civilians are killed. ²⁰⁸⁰ Special forces belonging to the intelligence services, in particular the ‘Defence Brigades’ (<i>Sirayat al-difa</i>) commanded by Rif’at al-Assad,

²⁰⁶⁹ CIA World Factbook, Syria, updated 31 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁷⁰ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁷¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁰⁷² Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁷³ New York Times (The), Syrian Troops Leave Lebanon After 29-Year Occupation, 26 April 2005, [url](#)

²⁰⁷⁴ AI, Syria: Briefing to the Committee Against Torture, 20 April 2010, [url](#), pp. 12-13

²⁰⁷⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁰⁷⁶ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁷⁷ CFR, Remembering the Hama Massacre, 2 February 2012, [url](#)

²⁰⁷⁸ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁷⁹ CFR, Remembering the Hama Massacre, 2 February 2012, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁰ Carnegie Middle East Center, The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1 February 2012, [url](#)

	President Hafez al-Assad's brother, are reported to carry out massive arrests of civilians, as well as torture and executions. ²⁰⁸¹
1990	Iraq invades Kuwait. Syria joins the US-led coalition against Iraq. ²⁰⁸²
2000	President Assad dies and is succeeded by his second son, Bashar. ²⁰⁸³
2005	Syrian forces withdraw from Lebanon under international pressure following the assassination of Lebanese premier Rafiq al-Hariri ²⁰⁸⁴ , a critic of Syrian presence in Lebanon. ²⁰⁸⁵
March 2011	Protesters in Dar'a city demanding release of political prisoners are shot dead by security forces. Violent unrest spreads nationwide over the following months. ²⁰⁸⁶
July 2011	A group of SAA defectors announce the formation of the Free Syrian Army. ²⁰⁸⁷
August 2011	The Syrian National Council is formed in Istanbul, claiming to be the official representative of the Syrian opposition. ²⁰⁸⁸
November 2011	OHCHR estimates that at least 3 500 civilians had been killed by GoS forces since March 2011. ²⁰⁸⁹
November 2011	Al Qaeda affiliate Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) forms the Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) in Syria. ²⁰⁹⁰ Since its founding, the group has 'conducted formal military campaigns, assassinations, hostage takings, and 'lone wolf' operations, including suicide bombings', claiming 57 of 70 suicide attacks conducted in Syria by June 2013. ²⁰⁹¹
May 2012	Pro-GoS <i>shabiha</i> militias reportedly kill more than 100 people, including more than 40 children and 30 women, in the village of Houla, Homs governorate. ²⁰⁹²
July 2012	An attack by the Free Syria Army on intelligence services in Damascus kills and injures senior Syrian military and security officials responsible for the crackdown against the opposition. ²⁰⁹³ Rebels capture the eastern half of Aleppo city. ²⁰⁹⁴
November 2012	Syrian opposition leaders announce the formation of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in Qatar. Islamist factions are excluded from the coalition. ²⁰⁹⁵ The following month, the US, UK, France, Turkey and Gulf states formally recognise opposition National Coalition as 'legitimate representative' of Syrian people. ²⁰⁹⁶
March 2013	Raqqa is captured by rebels. The FSA, Nusra Front and ISI all operate in Raqqa. ²⁰⁹⁷

²⁰⁸¹ Ismael, Q., The Hamah Massacre - February 1982, Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence, 22 December 2009, [url](#)

²⁰⁸² BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁸³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁴ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁶ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁷ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁸ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 23 November 2011, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰⁹⁰ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²⁰⁹¹ Counter Extremism Project, Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), n.d., [url](#), p. 3

²⁰⁹² USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁹³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁰⁹⁴ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#); USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁹⁵ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#); Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁰⁹⁶ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁹⁷ Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 28 October 2019, [url](#); USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

August 2013	Hundreds of people are killed by chemical weapons in an attack on the Damascus suburbs of Eastern and Western Ghouta. The attack is suspected to have been carried out by Assad forces. ²⁰⁹⁸ US sources estimated that 1 400 persons were killed in the attack. ²⁰⁹⁹ UN investigation confirmed the attack was carried out using the nerve gas sarin but does not specify the perpetrator, and does not give an exact number of victims. ²¹⁰⁰
November 2013	Islamist groups Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Sham and the Kurdish Islamic Front merge to form the Islamic Front. The group aims to overthrow the Assad government and replace it with an Islamic government. ²¹⁰¹
January 2014	ISIL captures Raqqa city, which becomes its capital. ²¹⁰²
January-February 2014	UN-brokered peace talks in Geneva fail, as Syrian authorities 'refuse to discuss a transitional government'. ²¹⁰³
June 2014	GoS holds presidential election. Assad wins the election with some 90 % of the vote. The opposition dismiss the results of the election. ²¹⁰⁴
June 2014	The UN and EU ²¹⁰⁵ designated terrorist organisation ²¹⁰⁶ ISIL declares 'caliphate' ²¹⁰⁷ in territory from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in eastern Iraq. ²¹⁰⁸ Since the establishment of its rule in areas of Syria and Iraq, ISIL has killed hundreds of civilians, carrying out public executions, beheadings and crucifixions. Religious minorities in Syria such as Shias, Ismailis, Alawites, and Christians, as well as Sunni Muslims who did not adhere to the group's religious laws were specifically targeted. ²¹⁰⁹
September 2014	US and a coalition of Arab countries launch air strikes against ISIL around Aleppo and Raqqa. ²¹¹⁰
January 2015	Kurdish forces, with the help of US and coalition air strikes push ISIL out of Kobane on Turkish border after four months of fighting. ²¹¹¹
February 2015	ISIL militants abduct at least 200 Assyrian Christians in northeastern Syria. ²¹¹² Most of them were released by February 2016 after ransom was paid to ISIL. ²¹¹³
March 2015	The Nusra Front and several allied militias capture the city of Idlib. ²¹¹⁴

²⁰⁹⁸ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁹⁹ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²¹⁰⁰ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²¹⁰¹ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁰² Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁰³ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁰⁴ Reuters, Assad wins Syria election with 88.7 percent of votes: speaker, 4 June 2014, [url](#)

²¹⁰⁵ European Council. Council of the European Union, EU terrorist list, n.d, [url](#)

²¹⁰⁶ UN Security Council, Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends One Entry on Its Sanctions List, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁰⁷ Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 28 October 2019, [url](#); USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁰⁸ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁰⁹ USDOS, 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 13

²¹¹⁰ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹¹¹ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹¹² Reuters, Islamic State in Syria abducts at least 150 Assyrian Christians, 25 February 2015, [url](#)

²¹¹³ BBC News, Islamic State 'releases Assyrian Christian hostages', 22 February 2016, [url](#)

²¹¹⁴ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

May 2015	ISIL captures the ancient city of Palmyra in central Syria. ²¹¹⁵ Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) Islamist rebel alliance takes control of Idlib governorate, putting pressure on GoS-held Latakia. ²¹¹⁶
August 2015	GoS airstrikes on markets and residential areas in besieged Douma kill at least 112 people. ²¹¹⁷
September 2015	Russia carries out its first air strikes in Syria, claiming to target ISIL. US officials claim that Russia is instead targeting Syrian opposition forces. ²¹¹⁸
October 2015	YPG and other armed groups merge to form the Syrian Democratic Forces. US deploys its first military forces in Syria. ²¹¹⁹
December 2015	Homs is recaptured by GoS forces. Rebels are allowed to evacuate. ²¹²⁰
March 2016	GoS forces, with Russian and Hezbollah support, recapture Palmyra from ISIL. ²¹²¹
August 2016	Turkey launches Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria, aimed at removing ISIL militants and Kurdish forces from a section of the border area. ²¹²²
December 2016	GoS forces, backed by Russian air support and Iranian-sponsored militias, recapture Aleppo city. ²¹²³ AI reported that GoS and Russian forces carried out a campaign of 'unlawful aerial attacks on civilians and civilian objects in eastern Aleppo city, which included attacks that constituted war crimes'. ²¹²⁴ OHCHR stated that it received reports of human rights violations perpetrated by GoS forces, including 'summary executions, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and forced conscription'. There were also allegations that opposition groups Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) and Ahrar al-Sham prevented civilians from leaving the city. ²¹²⁵
January 2017	The Nusra Front merged with four smaller militant groups and rebranded itself as Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS). ²¹²⁶ The US ²¹²⁷ , UN, EU ²¹²⁸ and Turkey has designated HTS as a terrorist organisation affiliated with Al Qaeda. ²¹²⁹
March 2017	Airstrikes suspected to deploy a chemical weapon agent hit the Latamneh area in the suburbs of Hama, injuring up to 70 persons. ²¹³⁰ Following investigation, OPCW concluded in 2020 that the Syrian airforce used sarin and chlorine in three separate airstrikes on Latamneh, which affected up to 106 persons. ²¹³¹

²¹¹⁵ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹¹⁶ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹¹⁷ HRW, World Report 2016 - Syria, 27 January 2016, [url](#)

²¹¹⁸ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹¹⁹ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²¹²⁰ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹²¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²¹²² BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹²³ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#); USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹²⁴ AI, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 37

²¹²⁵ OHCHR, Statement by the Commission of inquiry on Syria on the situation of civilians affected by the capture of Aleppo, 14 December 2016, [url](#)

²¹²⁶ Wilson Center, Al Qaeda's Latest Rebranding: Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, 24 April 2017, [url](#)

²¹²⁷ USDOS, Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 5 - Al-Nusrah Front, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

²¹²⁸ EU, Official Journal of the European Union, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2018/855 of 8 June 2018 amending for the 286th time Council Regulation (EC) No 881/2002 imposing certain specific restrictive measures directed against certain persons and entities associated with the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida organisations, 11 June 2018, [url](#)

²¹²⁹ HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹³⁰ UOSSM, Breaking: Chemical Weapons Attack in Latamneh, Hama Injures 70, 30 March 2017, [url](#)

²¹³¹ UN News, Syrian air force used deadly chemical weapons in 2017 attacks, global watchdog finds, 8 April 2020, [url](#)

April 2017	Between 80 ²¹³² and 100 civilians ²¹³³ were killed in an alleged sarin gas attack on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib governorate. Two days after the Khan Sheikhoun attack, the US 'fired 59 cruise missiles at a Syrian airfield from which warplanes had flown the mission'. ²¹³⁴ It was the first direct US attack on a Syrian government target. On 24 April, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on 271 people involved in Syrian weapons development. ²¹³⁵ In September 2017, a UN investigation found the Syrian government responsible for the chemical attack. ²¹³⁶
October 2017	The US-backed SDF defeat ISIL and retake Raqqa, after a four month campaign in which the city was largely destroyed. ²¹³⁷ The battle of Raqqa 'was marked by violations committed by all sides and came at an extremely high cost to civilians'. ²¹³⁸ AI assessed that during the campaign to retake Raqqa that took place from June to October 2017, more than 1 600 civilians were killed 'as a direct result of thousands of US, UK and French air strikes and tens of thousands of US artillery strikes'. ²¹³⁹ Around 6 000 ISIL fighters were killed during the campaign. ²¹⁴⁰ ISIL 'used civilians as human shields in its defense of Raqqa and other towns, and employed internationally banned landmines to hold off the advance of attacking forces'. ²¹⁴¹
January 2018	Turkey together with FSA factions launch Operation Olive Branch ²¹⁴² , an offensive on northern Syria aimed at ousting Kurdish forces controlling the area around Afrin. ²¹⁴³
April 2018	Claims of a new chemical attack carried out on 7 April in Eastern Ghouta's main town of Douma, prompt the US, UK and France to carry out a wave of punitive strikes on Syrian targets. ²¹⁴⁴ An investigation by OPCW found 'reasonable grounds that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon took place. This toxic chemical contained reactive chlorine. The toxic chemical was likely molecular chlorine'. ²¹⁴⁵ The GoS offensive carried out between February and April 2018 to recapture Eastern Ghouta killed hundreds of civilians, while also 'decimating numerous homes, markets, and hospitals in bombardments amounting to the war crimes of

²¹³² USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹³³ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²¹³⁴ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹³⁵ New York Times (The), Dozens of U.S. missiles hit air base in Syria, 6 April 2017, [url](#); New York Times (The), U.S. imposes sanctions on Syrian Government workers after sarin attack, 24 April 2017, [url](#)

²¹³⁶ Al Jazeera, Syria forces behind Khan Sheikhoun gas attack: UN probe, 6 September 2017, [url](#)

²¹³⁷ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹³⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/37/72], 1 February 2018, [url](#), p. 9

²¹³⁹ AI, Syria: Unprecedented investigation reveals US-led Coalition killed more than 1,600 civilians in Raqqa 'death trap', 25 April 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁴⁰ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁴¹ HRW, World Report 2018 - Syria, 18 January 2018, [url](#)

²¹⁴² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/39/65], 9 August 2018, [url](#), p. 5

²¹⁴³ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁴⁴ AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2018 - Syria [MDE 24/9903/2019], 26 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²¹⁴⁵ OPCW, Report of the Fact-Finding Mission Regarding the Incident of Alleged USE of Toxic Chemical as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018, 1 March 2019, [url](#), p. 4

	launching indiscriminate attacks, and deliberately attacking protected objects'. ²¹⁴⁶
July 2018	GoS recaptures almost all of the south of the country ²¹⁴⁷ , including Da'ra governorate. ²¹⁴⁸
November 2018	A toxic gas attack reportedly injured some 100 people in Aleppo. ²¹⁴⁹ Syria and Russia claimed that rebels were responsible, but rebel groups denied the allegation. ²¹⁵⁰
March 2019	SDF forces capture ISIL's last stronghold in Baghouz village in Deir Ez-Zor governorate, putting an end to ISIL's territorial control in Syria. ²¹⁵¹ The military operations carried out by SDF and the US-led coalition against ISIL's last remaining pockets, 'led to near complete destruction of towns and villages in and around Hajin and Baghouz'. ²¹⁵² Since losing its territorial control in Syria, ISIL operated as a covert network ²¹⁵³ , retaining 'clandestine networks in a number of Syrian cities, and an insurgent presence in much of rural Syria'. ²¹⁵⁴
April 2019	GoS forces with Russian air support intensify airstrikes against rebel-held areas in north-west Syria. ²¹⁵⁵ Further escalation of hostilities took place in July and August. ²¹⁵⁶ The GoS and Russia have been accused of deliberately targeting hospitals in north-west Syria 'using coordinates these facilities had shared with Russia through a United Nations deconfliction mechanism'. ²¹⁵⁷ An UN investigation on seven specific incidents involving facilities on the UN deconfliction list concluded that it is 'highly probable' the GoS or its allies carried out the air strikes on four civilian facilities (three hospitals and one school) in Idlib and Hama provinces, although it noted that the evidence was not sufficient to reach a conclusive finding. The board also found that it is 'plausible' that damage done to another hospital in Hama was attributable to GoS and its allies. Regarding the attack carried out in May 2019 on Nayrab Palestine Refugee Camp in Aleppo province, the board concluded that it is 'probable' that armed opposition groups or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham were responsible for the attack. ²¹⁵⁸
October 2019	Turkish forces, supported by the SNA launch Operation Peace Spring, a military offensive against Kurdish forces in north-east Syria. In and around the area between Ras al Ain and Tall Abyad, 'civilians were subjected to myriad violations

²¹⁴⁶ UN Human Rights Council, The siege and recapture of eastern Ghouta; Conference room paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/38/CRP.3], 20 June 2018, [url](#), Summary

²¹⁴⁷ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁴⁸ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁴⁹ BBC News, Syria war: Aleppo 'gas attack' sparks Russia strikes, 25 November 2018, [url](#)

²¹⁵⁰ Bellingcat, Open Source Survey of the Alleged November 24 2018 Chemical Attack in Aleppo, 28 November 2018, [url](#)

²¹⁵¹ Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁵² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

²¹⁵³ UN Security Council, Tenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat [S/2020/95], 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

²¹⁵⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 38

²¹⁵⁵ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁵⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), p. 3

²¹⁵⁷ HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁵⁸ UN Secretary General, Summary by the Secretary-General of the report of the United Nations Headquarters Board of Inquiry into certain incidents in northwest Syria since 17 September 2018 involving facilities on the United Nations deconfliction list and United Nations supported facilities, 6 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-17

	of human rights and international humanitarian law by Syrian National Army fighters'. ²¹⁵⁹
December 2019 – March 2020	Military hostilities between GoS and anti-GoS armed groups increased significantly in parts of Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates. ²¹⁶⁰ The GoS offensive resulted in high number of civilian casualties ²¹⁶¹ and over 1 million people displaced between December 2019 and February 2020. ²¹⁶² On 5 March 2020, a ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey was agreed in the Idlib area, establishing a security corridor where joint Russian and Turkish patrols would be carried. ²¹⁶³

²¹⁵⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020 [published 2 March 2020], [url](#), pp. 10-11

²¹⁶⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/141], 21 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2, 5

²¹⁶¹ UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#); OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁶² UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁶³ Al Jazeera, Turkey says Idlib ceasefire details largely agreed on with Russia, 12 March 2020, [url](#)

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Christopher Kozak is the Editor and Senior Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War where he focuses on Syria with an emphasis on the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its foreign supporters, including Russia and Iran. Kozak is the author of *An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria* and has published numerous articles on the Syrian Civil War. He has also been invited to provide briefings to political leaders, military officers and intelligence officials from the U.S. and its foreign allies. He studied Arabic at the University of Amman in Jordan and received a B.S. in Political Science and International Studies (Global Security) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2014.

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Annex IV: Terms of Reference

In order to assess Article 15(c) QD: serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in situations of international or internal armed conflict, the security situation report should examine the following indicators of indiscriminate violence:

- ☐ Is an armed conflict taking place?
 - ☐ Who are the armed groups?
 - ☐ Are there confrontations?
 - ☐ What are their areas of control?
 - ☐ What are the areas where confrontations take place? Have there been offensives taking place?
- ☐ What is the nature/extent of the violence?
 - ☐ Where? Geographical scope / intensity of armed conflict in different areas
 - ☐ Presence of actors / conflict in different areas of the territory
 - ☐ Number of incidents over a specified reference period? Frequency of security incidents / trends?
 - ☐ Nature and methods/tactics used – are they likely to cause (intended and/or unintended) civilian casualties? What are the main causes of civilian casualties?
 - ☐ Are civilian targets attacked? (hospitals, schools, etc.)
 - ☐ Number of civilian casualties? Patterns over time?
- ☐ What is the impact of the violence? Displacement:
 - ☐ How many civilians have been displaced by the conflict?
 - ☐ Is there secondary displacement? (forced return, evictions, etc.)

Research should aim to cover:

1. General description of the security situation
 - a. Short overview of main conflict context
 - b. Overview of current conflict actors, key conflict dynamics/trends, and political context (2019)
2. Security situation and conflict impact on civilians by governorate

