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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 8 June - 14 June 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | A new armed opposition coalition was formed. A US drone strike killed two Hurras al-Din (HD) leaders. Due to the weak Syrian pound, opposition and Turkish-held areas of northwest Syria switched to the Turkish Lira. There were increased clashes in Hama Governorate between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces and GoS-backed militias on one side and armed opposition groups and ISIS on the other side. Turkey continued to build new military outposts in Idlib Governorate.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Protests against GoS continued across southern Syria. Reconciled opposition fighters defected from the GoS 4th Division in Rural Damascus Governorate. GoS armed forces clashed with US-backed armed opposition groups in the Al-Tanf area of Rural Damascus Governorate.
- **NORTHEAST** | The Kurdish-run Autonomous Administration lifted its COVID-19 curfew. Protests erupted throughout Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hassakah Governorates. Anti-ISIS operations continued in the region. Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed opposition groups arrested individuals associated with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Ar-Raqqah Governorate.

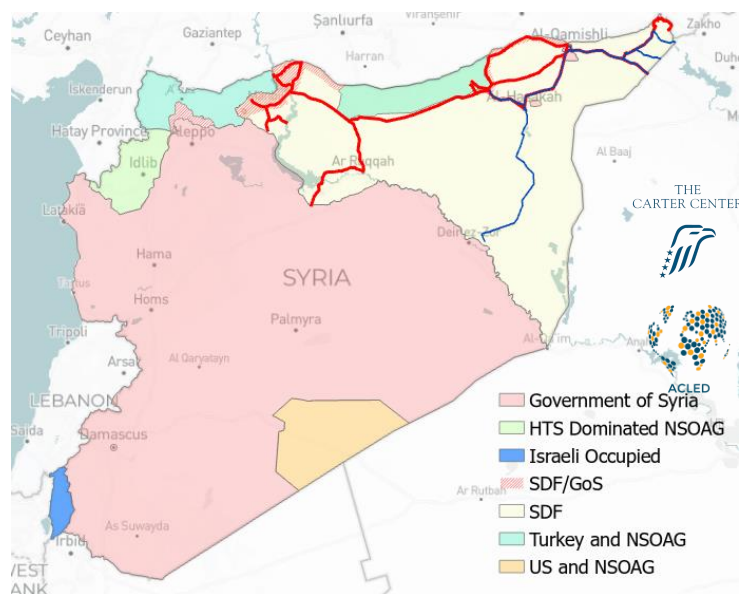


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 14 June 2020. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

On 12 June, a new armed opposition coalition was formed – the “So Be Steadfast”² Operation Room, including Hurras al-Din, Ansar al-Islam, and Ansar al-Din from the Wa Harredh al Moa-mineen Operation Room, as well as two new factions led by former Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) commanders.³ This comes after Ansar al-Tawhid ended its affiliation the Wa Harredh al Moa-mineen Operation Room on 3 May, and continuing tensions between HTS and other opposition factions.

On 14 June, a US drone strike killed two Hurras al-Din (HD) leaders in Idlib Governorate.⁴ One of the leaders killed, Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni,⁵ was considered a major Al Qaeda figure and a longtime supporter of Zarqawi, having served alongside Zarqawi in Afghanistan.⁶ US forces had previously attacked HD in 22 December 2019, when a US drone killed a non-Syrian commander of the group.

Opposition and Turkish-held areas of northwestern Syria switched to the Turkish Lira following the dramatic decrease in value of the Syrian Pound and concerns over the Caesar Act sanctions. On 8 June, the HTS-run Salvation Government also announced that it would switch to the Turkish Lira as soon as possible.⁷ On 9 June, the Turkish Post and Telegraph Organization begun to introduce the Turkish Lira after local councils decided to use the Turkish Lira.⁸ On 10 June, the Turkish-backed opposition Syrian Interim Government announced that it would switch to the Turkish Lira.⁹

During the reporting period, increased clashes were reported in Hama Governorate between GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias¹⁰ on the one side against armed opposition groups and ISIS on the other. On 8 June, the armed opposition group coalition Wa Harredh al Moa'mineen Operation room temporarily captured the towns of Al-Tanjarah and Al-Fatatra¹¹ along the al-

¹ Figure 1 denotes dominant actors' control and influence. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah maintain a presence in Syrian government-controlled territory. Non-state organized armed groups (NSOAG), including the Kurdish dominated SDF and a variety of other groups operate in areas not under GoS control. The US continues to have a presence in the SDF-controlled east of the country. The area along the junction of the Syrian border with Iraq and Jordan is a 55km de-confliction zone, established by the US-led coalition that also includes a number of aligned local armed groups. Data collected is by the publicly available project [ACLED](#).

² <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/06/new-jihadist-operations-room-in-nwsyria-so-be>

³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/392845>

⁴ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20867>

⁵ <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/u-s-reportedly-targets-2-senior-al-qaeda-figures-in-airstrike-in-syria.php>

⁶ <http://www.jihadica.com/abu-al-qassam-zarqawis-right-hand-man-who-stayed-loyal-to-al-qaeda/>

⁷ <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/several-cities-in-syria-move-to-adopt-turkish-lira-37202>

⁸ <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/several-cities-in-syria-move-to-adopt-turkish-lira-37202>

⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/391938>

¹⁰ Pro-GoS or GoS-backed militias refer to armed groups that are funded or in some way supported by GoS and coordinate or fight alongside GoS armed forces, but are not part of the state-run military.

¹¹ <https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=193640>

Ghaab plain in northern Hama Governorate in GoS-controlled territory.¹² GoS armed forces and the Russian air force responded, forcing the armed opposition groups to withdraw. An estimated 30 opposition fighters were killed.¹³ Following the attack, the Russian air force continued to strike opposition-held targets across Hama and Idlib Governorates.¹⁴ On 10 June, ISIS attacked GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias in the Oqeirbat area in southwestern Hama Governorate near the Badia desert. GoS armed forces responded with artillery bombardment and airstrikes. On 11 June, GoS armed forces conducted sweeping operations in the Oqeirbat subdistrict of Hama Governorate, as GoS and Russian air forces continued to strike ISIS targets. During the reporting period, the Russian air force attacked 19 targets throughout Idlib and Hama Governorates, the most since the 5 March ceasefire (see figure 2).

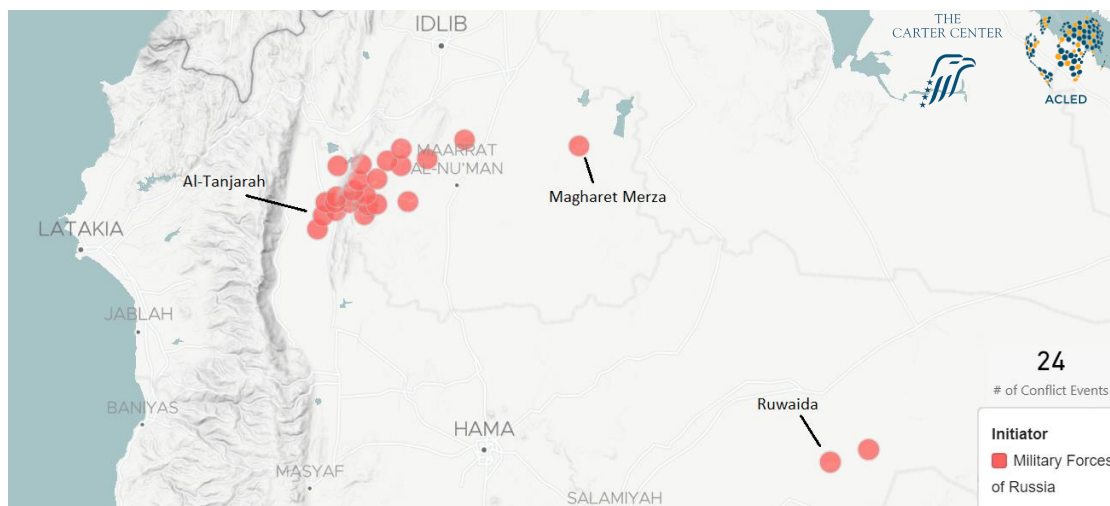


Figure 2: Russian air strikes in northwest Syria between 8 June to 13 June 2020. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

Turkish armed forces continued to establish new military outposts in Idlib Governorate. On 11 and 13 June, Turkish armed forces established two more military outposts in Jabal al-Zawiya as well as deploying some soldiers to Ariha city in southern Idlib Governorate.¹⁵ The new Turkish bases in Idlib were established amidst reports in recent weeks of increased military deployments by armed opposition groups and GoS armed forces along the frontlines in southern Idlib Governorate.¹⁶

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Amidst deteriorating economic conditions, protests against President Bashar Assad continued across southern Syria (see figure 3). Protests began in As-Sweida

¹² <https://tinyurl.com/ybjkjjau>

¹³ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/jihadists-suffered-over-30-casualties-in-failed-northwestern-hama-attack-russia/>

¹⁴ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russia-intensifies-strikes-against-jihadists-as-turkish-forces-amass-for-potential-conflict-with-syrian-army/>

¹⁵ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/392923>

¹⁶ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-armys-new-idlib-offensive-is-approaching-amid-mass-russian-buildup-analyst/>, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/jihadists-amassing-forces-in-southern-idlib-as-major-battle-inches-closer/>

Governorate on 7 June and spread to other parts of southern Syria. On 8 June, demonstrations in As-Sweida city¹⁷, As-Sweida Governorate, and Tafas, Dara'a Governorate, called for the release of prisoners, the overthrow of the GoS, and worsening economic conditions. Protests continued the next day, with demonstrations in Shahba and Jaramana town in As-Sweida and Rural Damascus Governorates respectively. On 10 June, a pro-GoS demonstration was organized after GoS officials appealed for support,¹⁸ protesting against US sanctions on Syria.¹⁹ The same day, anti-GoS protests took place in Dara'a city and Jasim in Dara'a Governorate, calling for the expulsion of Iranian-backed militias,²⁰ and solidarity with protesters in As-Sweida Governorate. On 13 June, protesters in Majdal Shams in Israeli-occupied Golan Heights called for the overthrow of GoS and solidarity with As-Sweida Governorate protesters.²¹

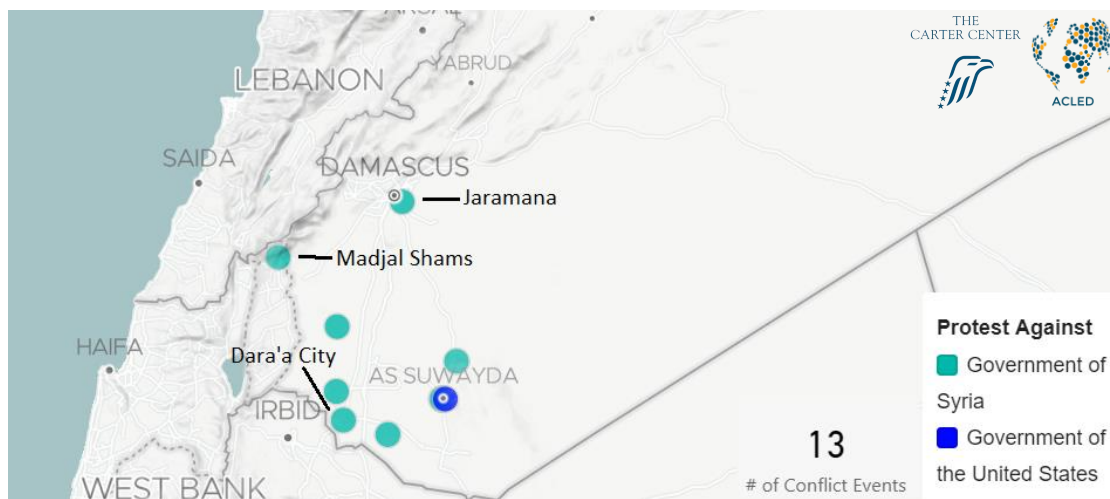


Figure 3: Protests in southern Syria between 8 June to 13 June 2020. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

On 13 June, reconciled opposition fighters defected from the GoS 4th Division in Dhameer in Rural Damascus Governorate. The reason for their defection is unknown. The defection led to clashes between GoS 4th Division and the soldiers who defected. GoS air force and tanks supported the GoS 4th Division.²² All defected fighters were killed.²³

On 8 June, GoS armed forces advanced into “The 55 KM” US-controlled Al-Tanf area in Rural Damascus Governorate,²⁴ clashing with the US-backed Al-Maghawir

¹⁷ <https://suwayda24.com/?p=14213>

¹⁸ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20802>

¹⁹ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200610-syria-regime-orders-citizens-to-attend-pro-assad-rally/>

²⁰ Pro-Iranian or Iranian-backed militias refers to armed groups that are backed or controlled by Iran, liked Hezbollah, and include foreign militias such as from Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan.

²¹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/392505>

²² <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20855>

²³

<https://damascusv.com/archives/25494?fbclid=IwAR1UgkFXo6BmKTUI9w77iFwkLV0tk7vw-UTdhboeYyNPDCGVhKajSZuRUVY>

²⁴ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20778>

Al-Thawra (MAT) armed group, which repelled the attack. MAT had previously clashed with GoS armed forces in February 2020.²⁵

On 11 June, President Bashar Assad fired Prime Minister Imad Khamis and appointed the Minister of water resources, Hussein Arnous, as interim replacement. This change comes amidst protests and deteriorating economic conditions across the country.²⁶

NORTHEAST SYRIA

On 14 June, the Kurdish-run Autonomous Administration relaxed some of its COVID-19 measures, lifting the curfew for all areas under its control, but maintaining the closure of most border crossings.²⁷ The Autonomous Administration previously relaxed some of its COVID-19 related measures on 18 May.

Demonstrations against the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and deteriorating economic conditions took place in SDF-controlled areas in Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hassakah Governorates. On 8 June, protesters in Shadadah and Markada in Al-Hassakah Governorate protested against worsening economic conditions. The same day, protests were recorded across Deir-ez-Zor Governorate against the deteriorating economic conditions and allegations of corruption within the SDF.²⁸ The SDF dispersed protests and arrested demonstrators in Sur, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On 9 June, additional protests were reported in Al-Hawayji, Kasra, Al-Shabkhah, Thiban, and other towns across Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.²⁹ In Shadadah, Al-Hassakah Governorate, protesters blocked roads in the city.

SDF operations against ISIS continued during the reporting period. On 10 June, the SDF announced that it completed the first phase of its anti-ISIS campaign that began on 4 June. According to SDF, they had conducted 56 raids and arrested 110 alleged ISIS members during this period.³⁰ The same day, SDF riot police conducted a two-day operation in Al-Hol Camp in Al-Hassakah Governorate. The operation was to register all ISIS-affiliated detainees in the camp, especially the foreigners.³¹ The SDF arrested 40 ISIS members during the operation.

GoS armed forces and GoS-backed militias continued to fight ISIS during the reporting period. On 10 June, GoS armed forces and the GoS National Defense Forces (NDF) announced a new campaign against ISIS in the Euphrates River region in Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hassakah Governorates. Additional NDF troops were deployed to reinforce the GoS presence in the Badia desert where ISIS has been active.³² On 11 June, ISIS released videos of its fighters executing GoS soldiers.³³

²⁵ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/391634>

²⁶ <https://apnews.com/2624d6189e71fd760b175d48d4ea3f87>

²⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/393226>

²⁸ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20774>

²⁹ <https://nedaa-sy.com/en/news/20821>

³⁰ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/392023>

³¹ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/110620201>

³² <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/392183>

³³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/392317>

The release of these videos coincided with ISIS clashes in Hama Governorate (see northwest Syria). On 13 June, ISIS fighters ambushed a GoS-backed Quds Brigade convoy in the eastern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.³⁴ In recent months, the number of ISIS attacks has increased (see figure 4).

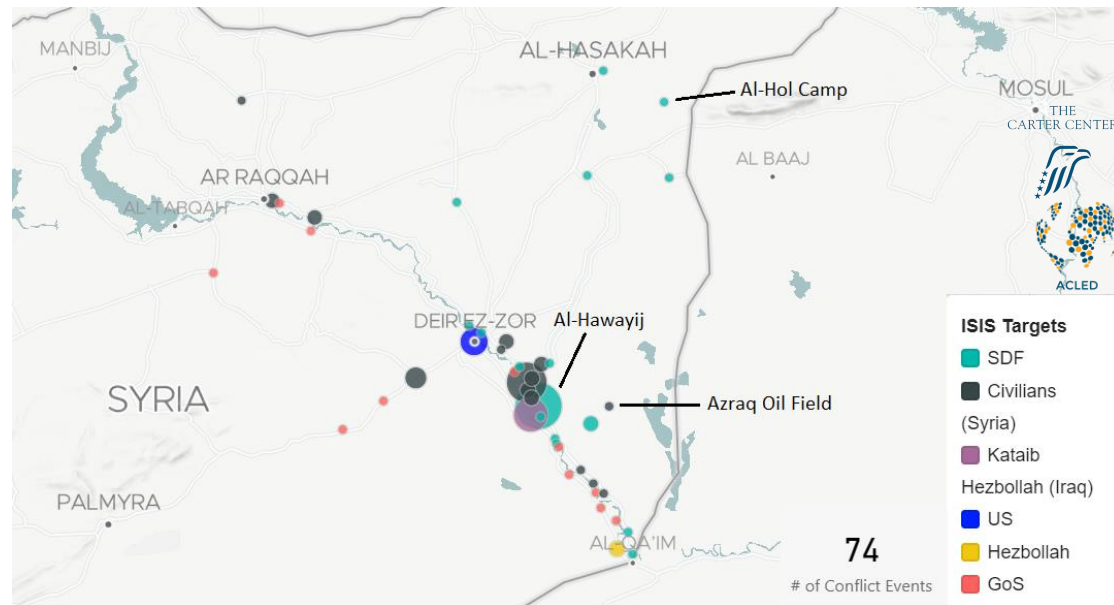


Figure 4: ISIS attacks in northeast Syria between 1 January 2020 to 13 June 2020. The largest bubble equals 7 conflict events. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

Turkish-backed armed opposition groups conducted a series of arrests throughout Ar-Raqqa Governorate targeting alleged SDF-affiliated individuals. On 9 June, the Turkish-backed opposition Levant Front arrested 35 people in Ein Al-Arus and Badi in the countryside of Ar-Raqqa Governorate. The Levant Front alleged that the arrested individuals were spies for the SDF. On 13 June, Turkish-backed armed opposition groups in Operation Peace Spring areas arrested the head of the Al-Hanadi tribe in Tell Abiad. The tribal leader was part of a group facilitating SDF's military relations with local tribes.

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³⁴ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20846>