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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 18 May - 24 May 2020

SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Armed opposition groups and the Government of Syria (GoS) exchanged prisoners in northwest Idlib Governorate. There were increased clashes between opposition groups and GoS armed forces across the region. Infighting between Turkish-backed opposition armed groups erupted in Sudju town in northern Aleppo Governorate. The Russian-Turkish joint patrol in Idlib Governorate reached Ariha city for the first time.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Attacks against GoS armed forces and former opposition fighters continued in Dara'a Governorate. ISIS attacked GoS armed forces in Dara'a and Homs Governorate. GoS armed forces and the Quds brigade continued anti-ISIS operations in Homs Governorate. The GoS health ministry announced the largest one day increase of COVID-19 cases. Protests continued in Dara'a and As-Sweida Governorates over increased conflict and deteriorating economic conditions.
- **NORTHEAST** | Turkish-backed armed opposition groups destroyed agricultural properties in northeast Syria. Infighting between Turkish-backed opposition fighters continued this week. The predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the US troops continued their operations against ISIS. Two rival clans clashed in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The Kurdish-run Autonomous Administration temporarily relaxed travel restrictions in the region.

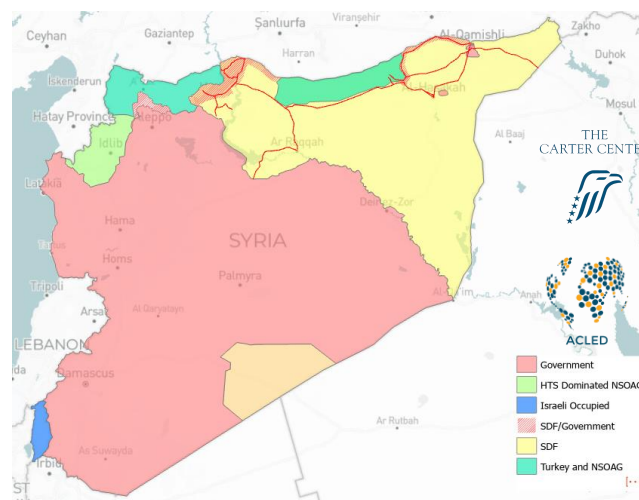


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 24 May 2020. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

This week, armed opposition groups exchanged prisoners with GoS armed forces. On 18 May, the Turkish-backed opposition's National Liberation Front (NLF) released a GoS soldier, a woman accused of spying for GoS, and the bodies of two Hezbollah fighters. In exchange, GoS armed forces released three captured NLF fighters. The exchange took place in Taftnaz in northeast Idlib Governorate.² On 22 May, Hurras al Din and GoS armed forces exchanged prisoners, also in Taftnaz. Hurras al Din released three GoS soldiers, while GoS released two women and three children.³ Prisoner exchanges between armed opposition groups and GoS armed forces have increased since the 5 March ceasefire agreement.⁴

Clashes between GoS armed forces and armed opposition groups increased during the reporting period. On 19 May, Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) attacked GoS armed forces on the Kafr Nobol frontlines in southern Idlib Governorate, killing three GoS soldiers. In response, GoS armed forces shelled Kafr Oweid in opposition-controlled territory.⁵ Armed opposition groups and GoS armed forces clashed in northern Hama Governorate along the Al-Ankawi frontline on 19-20 May.⁶ Fighting in northern Hama Governorate has increased since 10 May when Hurras al-Din attacked the GoS-controlled town of Al-Tanjara. Additional clashes occurred in Kafr Nobol and Al-Bara in Idlib Governorate after GoS armed forces engaged with opposition groups.⁷ GoS armed forces and Turkish-backed opposition fighters clashed near the Tadeff crossing near Al-Bab in northern Aleppo Governorate.⁸

Fighting erupted in the town of Sudju in the northern countryside of Aleppo Governorate. On 23 May, gunmen from Tal Refaat, northern Aleppo Governorate, clashed with Levant Front members.⁹ Fighting erupted after an altercation at a Levant Front checkpoint led to the death of a child from Tal Refaat. Other Turkish-backed factions intervened to stop the fighting. The next day, Tal Refaat gunmen withdrew from Sudju after reaching an agreement with the Levant Front.¹⁰

The joint Russian and Turkish patrols on the M4 highway in Idlib Governorate continued during the reporting period. On 20 May, the joint patrol went past Ariha

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.syriahr.com/en/?p=165274>

³ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165906>

⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/386855>

⁵ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165576>

⁶ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165434>, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165603>

⁷ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=166065>

⁸ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/fresh-clashes-breakout-between-syrian-army-tfesa-in-eastern-aleppo/>

⁹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=166257>

¹⁰ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=166437>

city for the first time since the patrols began in March 2020.¹¹ The joint patrol reached the village of Orm Eljoz in southern Idlib Governorate.¹² On 24 May, Eid prayers were organized along the M4 highway as a protest against the joint patrols.¹³ There have been regular protests and riots attempting to stop the joint patrols.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Attacks targeting GoS personnel and former opposition fighters continued across Dara'a Governorate. On 18 May, unidentified gunmen killed a civilian allegedly working with Iranian-backed militias in Bosra al-Harir in eastern Dara'a Governorate.¹⁴ On 19 May, unidentified gunmen killed two GoS soldiers in the town of Kar Shams in northwestern Dara'a Governorate.¹⁵ On 21 May, unidentified gunmen killed a former opposition fighter in the town of Hoyt in western Dara'a Governorate.¹⁶ On 21 and 22 May, unidentified gunmen attacked two prominent former opposition fighters. The first, was assassinated in the city of Sanamen in northern Dara'a Governorate.¹⁷ The second, survived an improvised explosive device (IED) attack near a marketplace in Dara'a city.¹⁸ Both former opposition fighters previously commanded armed opposition groups in Dara'a Governorate, and then they joined the GoS-Military Security branch. Following the IED attack, GoS armed forces arrested five young men in Dara'a city. On 23 May, a GoS armed forces officer survived an attack by unidentified gunmen at a checkpoint near Nahta in eastern Dara'a Governorate.¹⁹

During the reporting week, ISIS attacked GoS armed forces in Dara'a and Homs Governorates. On 18 May, ISIS killed a GoS soldier in Al-Sahwa in eastern Dara'a Governorate.²⁰ The same day in Homs Governorate, ISIS ambushed GoS armed forces and National Defense Forces (NDF) near Palmyra before fleeing into the Badia desert.²¹ The Badia desert is located within the Homs, Deir-ez-Zor, Hama, and Ar-Raqqa Governorates. Since losing the caliphate in March 2019, ISIS has carried out most of its attacks near the Badia desert.

Anti-ISIS operations continued this week. On 19 May, GoS armed forces deployed reinforcements to the Badia region in eastern Homs Governorate.²² On 21 May, GoS armed forces, NDF, and the Quds Brigade clashed with ISIS in the Badia region in eastern Homs Governorate.²³

¹¹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/386297>

¹² <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165621>

¹³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/387312>

¹⁴ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165420>

¹⁵ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165458>

¹⁶ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165764>

¹⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/386329>

¹⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/387086>

¹⁹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=166066>

²⁰ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/386021>

²¹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/385469>

²² <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-military-sends-reinforcements-to-east-homs-to-confront-isis/>

²³ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/palestinian-led-forces-in-action-against-isis-terrorists-in-eastern-homs-video/>

On 24 May, GoS Health Ministry announced that there was a total of 86 active COVID-19 cases in GoS-controlled territory, attributing the new cases to foreign travelers.²⁴ This was the largest one day increase of COVID-19 cases in GoS-controlled territory. There were 70 active cases on 23 May,²⁵ and 59 active cases on 22 May (see figure 3).²⁶ The first registered case of COVID-19 was announced on 22 March.

Protests continued in Dara'a and As-Sweida Governorates. On 22 May, protesters in Dara'a city held a vigil against a threatened GoS military offensive and called for the withdrawal of Lebanese Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias.²⁷ Tensions in Dara'a Governorate have remained high since the killing of GoS policemen in Mzeireb and the threat of a GoS military offensive to capture those responsible for the attack. On 24 May, protests took place in As-Sweida city against deteriorating economic conditions and hardships.²⁸ Protesters also called for the investigation of recent fires affecting agricultural lands in As-Sweida Governorate.²⁹ The recent fires and the weak Syrian pound have led to deteriorating economic conditions in As-Sweida Governorate.³⁰

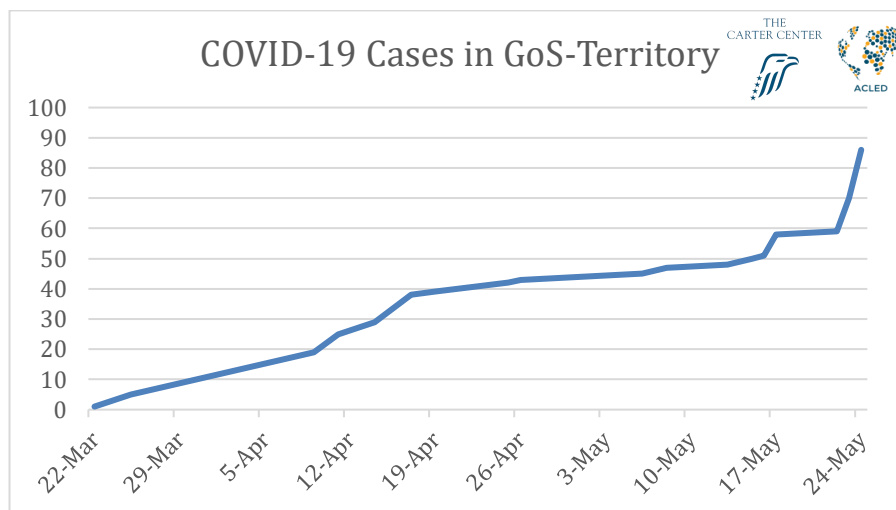


Figure 3: Reported COVID-19 cases in GoS-controlled territory. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Turkish-backed armed opposition groups destroyed agricultural properties and imposed new fines in Turkish-held Operation Peace Spring (OPS) areas in the region. On 19 May, Turkish-backed groups were accused of setting fire to agricultural fields within SDF-controlled areas in Tal Tamer.³¹ The Turkish-

²⁴ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=192370>

²⁵ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=192250>

²⁶ <https://sana.sy/en/?p=192186>

²⁷ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165907>

²⁸ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=166282>

²⁹ <https://suwayda24.com/?p=14016>

³⁰ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/387359>

³¹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165600>

backed groups also prevented fire crews from putting out the fires. Additional fires were set by Turkish-backed groups on 21 and 24 May near Turkish-held areas in Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hassakah, and Aleppo Governorates.³² On 22 May, the Turkish-backed opposition's Hamza Division imposed new agricultural taxes on all farmers under Operation Peace Spring (OPS) areas.³³

Infighting between Turkish-backed armed opposition groups continued this week in Al-Hassakah Governorate. On 20 May, Ahrar al-Sharqiyya and Hamza Division fighters fought in Tal Halaf in northern Al-Hassakah Governorate.³⁴ The same day, fighting among Turkish-backed armed opposition groups occurred across villages in rural Al-Hassakah Governorate due to disputes over crop sharing.³⁵ On 24 May, clashes erupted between Suqour al-Shamal and the 20th Division in Ras Al-Ain.³⁶ Infighting between Turkish-backed armed opposition groups has become a common occurrence in Turkish-held areas across northwest and northeast Syria.

The SDF and the US forces continued operations against ISIS. After an IED killed 2 SDF fighters in Ar-Raqqa city, the SDF arrested ISIS members across Ar-Raqqa Governorate.³⁷ The same day, the SDF arrested ISIS prisoners who had escaped from Al-Hol camp in Al-Hassakah Governorate. The SDF also arrested Al-Asayish³⁸ members who were accused of helping the escape of ISIS prisoners in exchange for large sums of money.³⁹ The SDF and US forces carried out a joint raid on 22 May in Al-Shuhayl in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.⁴⁰ The same day, Al-Asayish repelled an ISIS attack on the Al-Taqba prison in Ar-Raqqa Governorate.⁴¹ On 23 May, the US forces reported that it had killed two of ISIS's regional leaders during a raid in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The raid, a joint operation between the SDF and US forces, occurred five days earlier on 17 May.⁴²

On 23 May, clashes erupted between the Al-Bakir and Al-Bufrio clans in Masakh in northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The clashes resulted in 15 deaths.⁴³ The fighting erupted after Al-Bakir fighters accused the other clan of killing one of their family members. Village elders intervened to stop the violence.⁴⁴ On 24 May, the SDF opened an investigation into the causes of the fighting.⁴⁵

On 18 May, the Kurdish-run Autonomous Administration announced it was temporarily opening crossings to other governorates in northeastern Syria. The

³² <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165754>, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=166395>

³³ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=166015>

³⁴ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/new-round-of-infighting-ignites-tensions-between-militants-in-northern-syria/>

³⁵ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165746>

³⁶ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=166283>

³⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/385894>

³⁸ Internal Security Forces for the Kurdish-run Autonomous Administration.

³⁹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165728>

⁴⁰ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165895>

⁴¹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165889>

⁴² <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20492>

⁴³ <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/20506>

⁴⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/y89oxl9p>

⁴⁵ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/387444>

crossings would be open between 19-26 May. The Autonomous Administration previously closed the crossings to reduce the spread of COVID-19.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/385446>