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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 26 AUGUST – 1 SEPTEMBER 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Government of Syria (GoS) forces advanced in Idlib this week. Elevated levels of conflict continued between Turkish-aligned groups and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in the Tal Rifaat pocket. The U.S. conducted a strike on the Al Qaeda-affiliated Huras al Din. Protest demonstrations denouncing HTS took place in the northwest.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Attacks against GoS-aligned personnel and civilians continued in southern Syria, despite GoS deploying re-enforcements the previous week. ISIS attacks against GoS and aligned personnel also continued in central areas of the country. Also, an improvised explosive device (IED) was detonated in Qudsaya, near Damascus.

NORTHEAST | Implementation of the “safe zone” started in northern Syria this week, with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) troop further withdrawing and a joint US/Turkish aerial patrol above Ras al Ain. Low-level attacks against the SDF continued in the Euphrates River Valley.

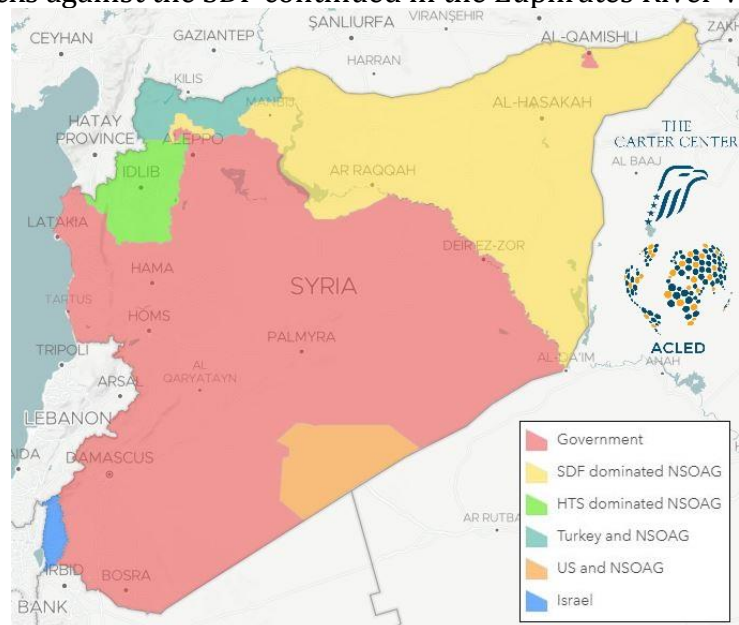


Figure 1: Dominant Actors' Area of Control and Influence in Syria as of 1 September 2019. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. For more explanation on our mapping, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

The GoS forces advanced in the southern portions of the Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)-dominated Idlib pocket this week. Despite initial resistance to the government assault, including a [suicide car bomb](#) and a brief HTS [counter-attack](#) that resulted in the capture of a number of Syrian Army positions near Atshan village for less than 24 hours,² GoS forces were able to re-capture Tamaniyah and areas north of Khan Sheikhun by 29 August. HTS and various other opposition groups withdrew further north (Figure 2).³

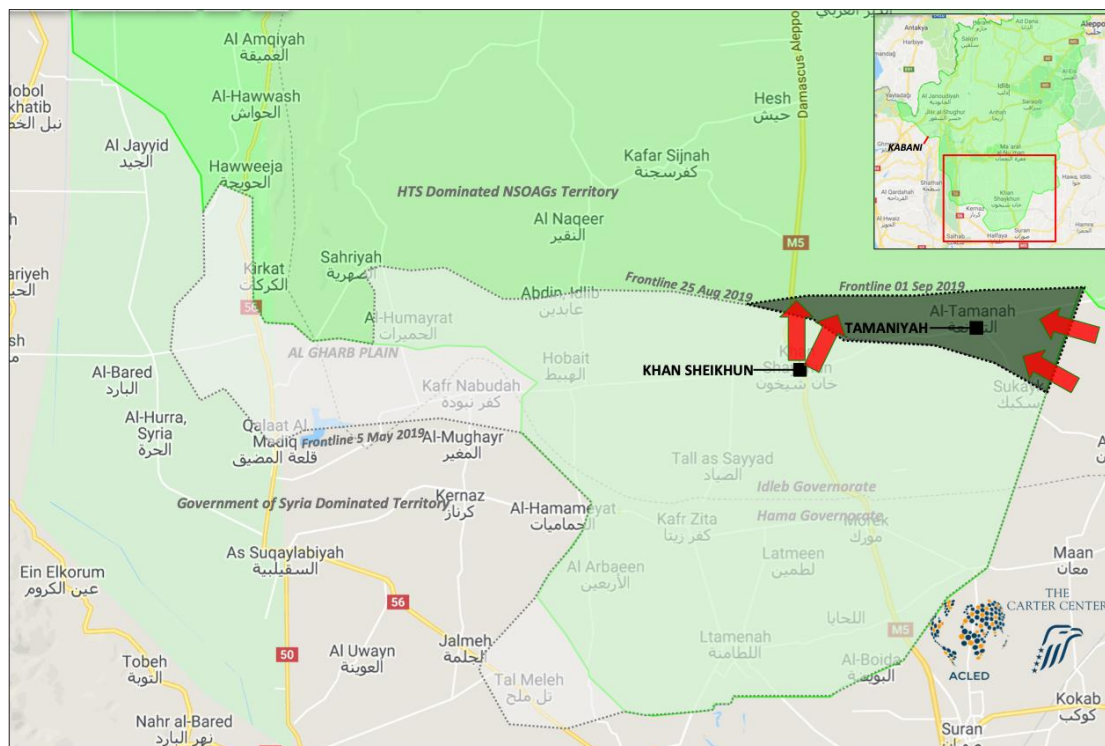


Figure 2: Frontlines in the northwest of Syria as of 1 September 2019 with recaptured areas in grey and the latest advances in black.

Aerial and ground bombardments accompanied GoS advances, with 180 such incidents reported. Two strikes also hit [close](#) to two Turkish Military Observation posts near Sheir Maghar and Andan. This is the sixth and seventh times Turkish Military Observation posts have been targeted in the northwest in 2019, all of which have occurred since the GoS offensive in Idlib began in May.

¹ Figure 1 denotes dominant actors' control and influence. Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and Iraqi militias maintain a presence in Syrian ment-dominated territory. Non-state organized armed groups (NSOAG), includingg the Kurdish dominated, US backed SDF and a variety of other groups operate in areas not under Syrian government control. The NSOAG labeled area along the border with Iraq and Jordan is a 55km de-confliction zone, established by the US-led coalition that also includes a number of aligned local armed groups. Data collected is by the publicly available project ACLED.

² Including the [villages](#) of Al Hawa, Jaduiyah, Al Saloumiyeh.

³ In addition to Tamaniyah town, the [villages](#) of Al Khaween, Zarzour, Tal Aghbar, Um Jalal, Tal Sayyed Ali, Tal Turki, Tal Sidi Jafar, and Sikkat were also recaptured.

GoS advances came just prior to a Syrian Ministry of Defense [announcement](#) that it would implement a ceasefire in Idlib from 06:00hrs onwards on 31 August. While a reduction in airstrikes was notable, with just three recorded in Tah, Urum al Kubra, and Kafr Naha, GoS shelling continued, with at least 16 areas targeted.⁴ Opposition groups also fired a rocket that hit a GoS position in the Jurin area the day after the ceasefire announcement. The Russian Center for Reconciliation and Conflicting Sides also [reported](#) that 19 government-controlled settlements were also impacted by shelling at the start of the week.

Conflict also [continued](#) in the Kabani area in northeast Latakia Governorate, where GoS efforts focused on southern areas of the HTS/Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)-controlled town. However, despite five airstrikes, four-barrel bomb explosions, and three shelling incidents this week, no advances were recorded. More GoS re-enforcements also arrived in the Kabani area on 26 August in addition to troop arrivals last month.

The US [conducted](#) a strike on a Huras al Din site in northern Idlib Governorate on 31 August. Pro-opposition [sources](#) reported the airstrikes as targeting a joint Al Qaeda-affiliated Huras al Din and Ansar al Tawhid (formally Jund al Aqsa) meeting north of Idlib city. This is the [second](#) time in two months that the US targeted the group in the northwest. Prior to these attacks, the US had not targeted sites in Idlib since March 2017.

In the Tal Rifaat pocket,⁵ frontline clashes between the Kurdish People's Protection Units and Turkish-backed Syrian opposition groups continued this week. Five events were reported in the Maare, Shiekh Issa, Daghelbash, Malikiyah, and Maaranaz areas, while two artillery bombardments also impacted Azzaz and Maaranaz. Such activity follows growing levels of conflict in the enclave in the previous two months (Figure 3).

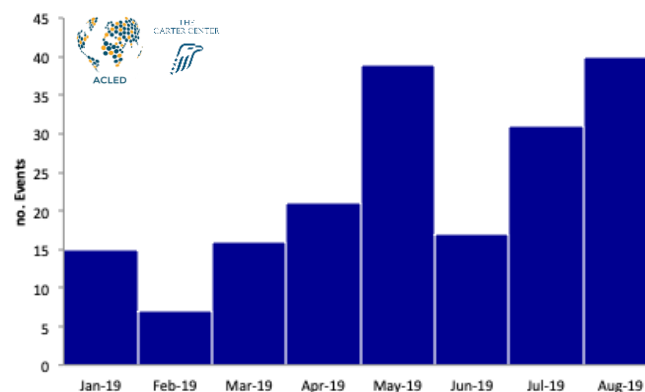


Figure 3: Conflict levels in the Tal Rifaat Pocket in 2019.

Protests were also recorded in the northwest this week. On 30 August, in [Atmeh](#)

⁴ Kafr Nobel, Jarjnaz, Has, Maaret Harma, Deir Sharqi, Kafr Sajna, Maaret Tayrah, Wiramba, Babuline, Nqeir, Heish, Um Jalal, Maaret al Numan, Maraand, Al Haweeja, and Shahranaaz.

⁵ The Tal Rifaat area is under joint control of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and GOS forces since late 2016. Russian forces also conducts joint patrols with Turkish troops in the area since 14 February 2019, and with YPG forces between 26 March 2019 and 10 April 2019.

and [Bab al Hawa](#), a large group of people protested at the Turkish/Syrian border denouncing recent military action in the northwest, about the state of internally displaced persons (IDP) in northern Idleb, and to demand freedom of movement into Turkey. In Bab al Hawa, Turkish border guards [dispersed](#) the crowd with tear gas and live fire after protestors broke through the main border gate. It resulted in a 24-hour closure of the border crossing.

Coinciding with the border protests, smaller anti-HTS protests also took place. On 31 August, [protestors denounced HTS after the group prevented them from joining renewed demonstrations at the Syrian/Turkish border near Bab al Hawa](#).⁶ In [Saraqeb](#), a demonstration took place against the HTS rule on 1 September. These protests come during a period of increased HTS crackdowns on dissent to its rule.

Pro-government [sources](#) announced that the Tiger Forces have been incorporated into the Syrian Army structure and re-named the 25th Special Task Division. The elite unit, headed by Suhail Hassan, had [grown](#) out of Airforce Intelligence Special Operations and had previously operated under the authority of the latter. This change follows [several](#) attempts earlier this year to incorporate the Tiger Forces into the Syrian Army.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Attacks against GoS-aligned personnel and civilians continued in southern Syria this week, with unidentified persons shot in a local police vehicle in Jleïn, a Syrian military checkpoint coming under small arms fire in Ankhel, and a 4th division member assassinated in Yadudeh.

There was also an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosion targeting a Syrian Military vehicle on the Karak – Eastern Ghariyah road, a civilian being shot dead in Sanamayn town, and a local mayor being [targeted](#) at his home in Ash Shajarah. A Baath party member was also killed in Nabe elFawar town in Quneitra Governorate, which is only the third recorded attack of its kind in the area in 2019. These incidents bring the total number of attacks in southern Syria in 2019 to 274 (Figure 4).

The attacks continue despite GoS counter efforts in the past two months. Last week, GoS deployed further re-enforcements to southern Syria, particularly to western areas of Daraa Governorate.

For more on conflict dynamics on southern Syria, see our ["Special Report: Conflict in Southern Syria | August 2018 – July 2019."](#)

⁶ As reported in Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team's Daily Update on 2 September 2019.



Figure 4: Conflict levels in the Southern Syria since August 2018.

In central areas of the country, ongoing ISIS activity continued despite ongoing GoS efforts. Four clashes between ISIS and GoS aligned actors⁷ were recorded in the Mayadin Desert (x2), Baqras, and Jalaa. Despite two large GoS anti-ISIS operations in Homs and Deir Ez Zor governorates in the past month, 15 ISIS-linked conflict events targeting GoS and GoS-aligned forces were recorded in August. This is five more than was recorded in July.

In Qudsaya town, 8km northwest of Damascus City, an IED detonated in a vehicle on 29 August. Pro-opposition [sources](#) reported that the device targeted the head of Qudsaya Municipal Council. This is only the second recorded conflict event in the town in 2019. In April, an IED also detonated, destroying a vehicle that belonged to a government-aligned individual. As part of the greater Damascus area, this week's event fits into a trend of growing IED attacks, with nine incidents this year in or near the capital, compared to no events recorded in 2018.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) withdrew more troops along the Syrian/Turkish border in the north of Raqqqa and Hassakeh governorates this week. This comes following SDF withdrawals from Ras al Ayn and Tal Abiad during the previous week. A joint U.S./Turkish aerial patrol was seen above Ras al Ain on 29 August, the first of its kind since the two countries [agreed](#) on implementing the first phase of the "safe zone" on 22 August.

SDF arrests of alleged ISIS members continued in the northeast, in Hasakeh City, Tal Brak, and in Tayanna and Jiah towns, where Global Coalition against Daesh aircraft supported these security operations.

However, low-level attacks against SDF and its allies continued during the week. Small arms fire incidents were recorded in Raqqqa City, Baghuz, Hawayij, and Thiban, as well as IED incidents took place in Sur, Hasakeh City, Khurafi,

⁷ Including the Iranian Republic Guard Corps (IRGC), the Iranian-backed Fatemiyoun Brigades and the National Defense Forces (NDF).

Shadadah, and Tabqa. In [Basira](#), a grenade was thrown at a local council member's house. Such incidents have been proliferating during the previous two months, despite SDF/coalition security operations (Figure 5).

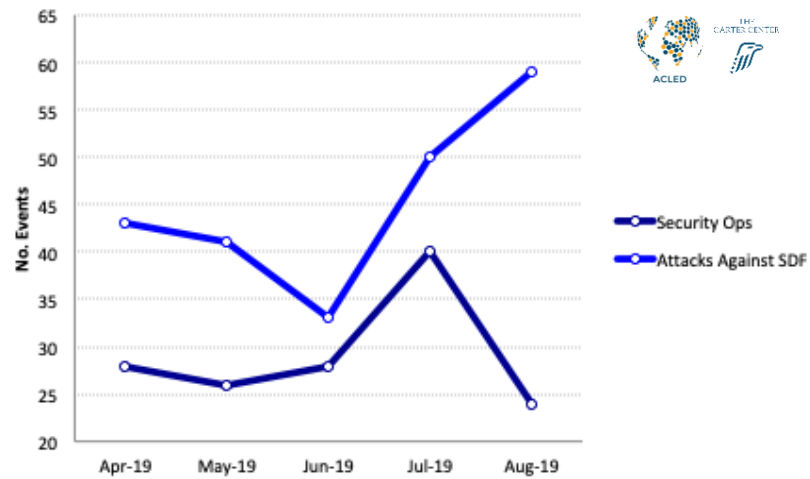


Figure 5: Conflict level events and SDF security operations in northeast Syria April 2019.

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