

Quarterly Review | January through March 2021

SYRIA SUMMARY

- NORTHWEST | Violence continued between Government of Syria (GoS) armed forces and opposition armed groups in northwest Syria. Attacks against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Turkish armed forces increased in Idlib Governorate. Attacks against Turkish armed forces, Turkish-

OVERVIEW OF NORTHWEST SYRIA--

Since the implementation of the 5 March 2020 ceasefire agreement between Russia and Turkey, major military operations have been absent and territorial control demarcation lines have remained static in northwest Syria. Although violence has decreased, the region remains tense.

Fighting between GoS armed forces and their allies on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other side has been concentrated primarily in the frontline areas near the Jabal al-Zawiyah area, Idlib Governorate. Despite the weakening of the 5 March 2020 ceasefire agreement and the absence of joint Turkish-Russian patrols along the M4 highway, conflict levels have remained stable.

However, clashes in March escalated tensions between the two sides. Russian missiles struck the town of Qah near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing from Turkey into Idlib Governorate, and oil refineries in Aleppo Governorate.²

presence in opposition-controlled territory, as well as crackdown on other extremist groups.

HTS's rule over the opposition-controlled territory depends on its rejection of dissent and its usefulness to Turkey in controlling hardline groups.¹⁰ Attacks by these hardline groups undermine HTS's control of Idlib Governorate, as well as Turkey's attempts to secure the M4 highway in accordance with the 5 March ceasefire agreement with Russia.

Attacks Against Turkish Forces and Turkish Supported Opposition Armed Groups

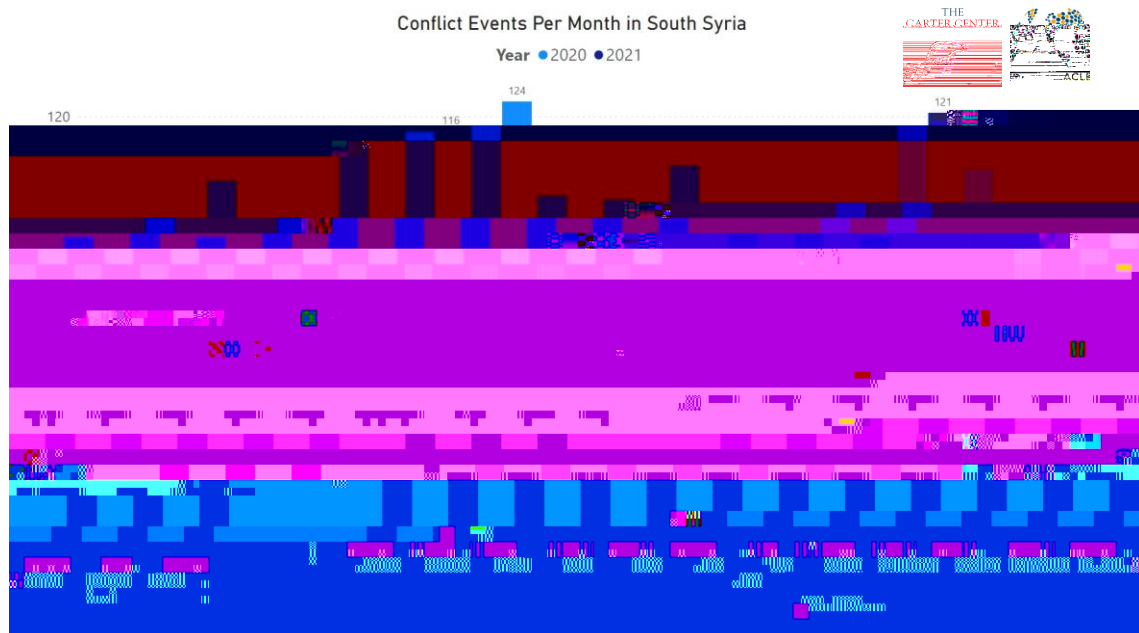
After the 2016 Operation Euphrates Shield and the 2018 Operation Olive Branch incursions in northern Syria, Turkey has maintained control over most of northern Aleppo Governorate. Kurdish groups and the GoS have denounced

OVERVIEW OF SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA



Though conflict levels in south and central Syria remain the lowest in the country, data from [ACLED](#) and The Carter Center indicates that violence there has increased, especially in Dara'a Governorate.

The primary conflict dynamic remains the ongoing attacks against GoS figures and former opposition fighters in Dara'a Governorate. There was also a noticeable increase in Israeli airstrikes during the reporting period.



Tension between GoS and the Former Opposition in Dara'a Governorate

Dara'a Governorate continues to account for over half of all conflict events in South and Central Syria. As in 2020, tension between GoS and former opposition fighters remains the primary cause of conflict in Dara'a Governorate. Since the takeover of the governorate by the GoS in 2018, some former opposition commanders have gained prominence by leading influential political and armed groups. At times, tension between the two sides have resulted in arrests and violence, which have been exacerbated by consistent attacks and assassinations of GoS officers and former opposition fighters, mostly by unidentified perpetrators.

In January 2021, the GoS 4th Division, led by Maher Assad, surrounded the town of Tafas and demanded the disarmament of local militias and the surrender of e been

Ar-Raqqa Governorate,²³ from where Russian armed forces withdrew temporarily and left SDF forces exposed to potential Turkish attacks. GoS armed forces have also deployed additional reinforcements to the area, but this has added to the tensions with the SDF, which viewed the heavy reinforcements as trying to change the balance of power between the forces on the ground.²⁴ The SDF finds itself in a precarious position as it attempts to balance its relations with GoS and Russia, deal with internal disputes, and governs most of northeastern Syria while attempting to face Turkish threats to Ain Issa and other SDF-controlled territory.

The Battle Against ISIS

During the first quarter of 2021, there was a sharp escalation of attacks by ISIS and their supporters,²⁵ particularly in the Bad

associated with ISIS are interned. Thousands of foreign ISIS members remain in the camp, while their countries of origin have refused to take them back. Since 2018, the United States and governing Kurdish Autonomous Administration (KAA) regularly have called on those countries to repatriate their citizens, citing security risks in the region.²⁷ However, these countries cite concerns with security, prosecution, and argue that taking back ISIS prisoners would be political suicide.²⁸

In 2020, there were 92 conflict events in Al-Hol camp. By contrast, in the first three months alone of 2021 there were 57 conflict events at the camp. Most attacks were conducted by unidentified armed individuals in the camp who are suspected to be ISIS loyalists.²⁹ The UN and humanitarian organizations have expressed concern about the camp,³⁰ as have the GoS and Russia.³¹ On 28 March, the SDF launched a major new security campaign to clear the camp of ISIS agents.³² By 31 March, the SDF arrested 71 individuals in the camp.³³

ISIS continues to be a major challenge for all actors in S/F2 12 Tnv0 g0 Gf1o(WñBT/F2 12 TfDe

rise of ISIS are still present today,³⁴ allowing ISIS to conduct even deadlier attacks against its opponents in the Middle East.

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