



Syria

Security situation

Country of Origin
Information Report

July 2021





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After 8 years of conflict, Syria is littered with landmines and unexploded bombs.

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The Netherlands, Office for Country Information and Language Analysis, Ministry of Justice (OCILA)

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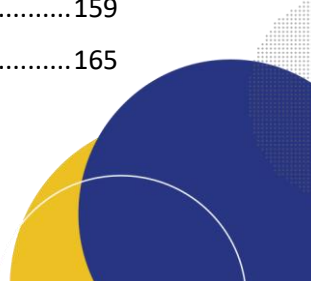
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It must be noted that the review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report, but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of EASO.

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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 28 May 2021. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this report. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the methodology section of the [Introduction](#).

¹ The 2019 EASO COI Report Methodology can be downloaded from the EASO COI Portal https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2019_EASO_COI_Report_Methodology.pdf

Glossary and abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
AOAV	Action on Armed Violence
COAR	Center for Operational Analysis and Research
CoI	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
HAD	Hurras al-Din
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
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
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 updating EASO's country guidance development on Syria.

In order to support the assessment of 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

Methodology

This report analyses the security situation in Syria, focusing in particular on the situation of the civilian population. The reference period is 2020 and the first three months of 2021. The information gathered is a result of research using public, specialised paper-based and electronic sources until 21 April 2021. Some limited additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 28 May 2021.

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. The Terms of Reference for this report can be found in [Annex IV](#) of this report.

Sources

Public sources

In accordance with EASO COI methodology, a range of different published documentary sources have been consulted on relevant topics for this report. These include: COI reports by governments; information from civil society, advocacy groups, humanitarian organisations, and NGOs; international and NGO human rights reports; reports produced by various bodies of the United Nations; Syrian and regionally-based media and social media; academic publications and think tank reports and specialised sources covering Syria. All information from these sources was consulted within time constraints and within the research constraints posed by Syria's challenging information-gathering environment.

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

Arabic online sources

This report has included some Arabic-language sources in order to provide added value to the available COI. All Arabic sources have been assessed and cross-checked/corroborated with English sources to the extent possible, in line with EASO COI Methodology. Arabic sources have been informally translated by a native Arabic speaker. Due to the volume of Arabic sources used, for the citation of all these non-English sources, this report does not follow the EASO Writing and Referencing Guide signalling in the citation each time a source is translated. This is for maximal readability and efficiency.

Oral source information

EASO researchers conducted interviews in February 2021 with the following sources and included relevant information from:

- Suhail Al-Ghazi, Syrian researcher and activist from Damascus. In addition to being the non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, he is also a member of Verify-Syria fact checking platform. His research focuses on the military and security situation of Syria as well as the socioeconomic situation in government-held areas.
- An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria. The source preferred anonymity for the sake of discretion and their personal and organisational safety.

Sources on civilian fatalities

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 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. For civilian fatalities, VDC also codes the cause of death which includes: shelling, shooting, bombing, arbitrary execution, death resulted from torture, death resulted from deprivation of health care, and use of prohibited weapons.⁵

VDC has provided EASO its updated data on civilian fatalities for 2020 and the first three months of 2021, disaggregated by month and governorate. The data is available in [Annex I](#) in 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

⁵ For detailed information on VDC's methodology see [url](#); EASO email correspondence with VDC, 21 April 2021

⁶ For detailed information on SNHR's methodology see [url](#); SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, Including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

Sources on security incidents

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, but also from reports by international institutions and non-governmental organisations and data provided by local partners of ACLED.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 9 April 2021).⁸ Additional sources have been researched to the extent possible to corroborate the ACLED findings.

Further information on ACLED's methodology and the dataset used for this report is available in [Section 1.6.2](#)

Challenges in collecting information and research limitations

The research environment in Syria is challenging. Availability of credible and up to date information is limited.⁹ The COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic has further limited the ability to conduct field research and report on recent developments pertaining to specific issues.

In the context of the Syrian conflict, media coverage in both Syrian and international media must be carefully weighed against each other. Source and information assessment took place in a highly polarised and politicised context. Bias was mitigated to the extent possible through methodological techniques such as crosschecking, corroborating, contrasting and comparing the information.

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 2020 and first three months of 2021, with a focus on the nature of the violence and impact on civilians.

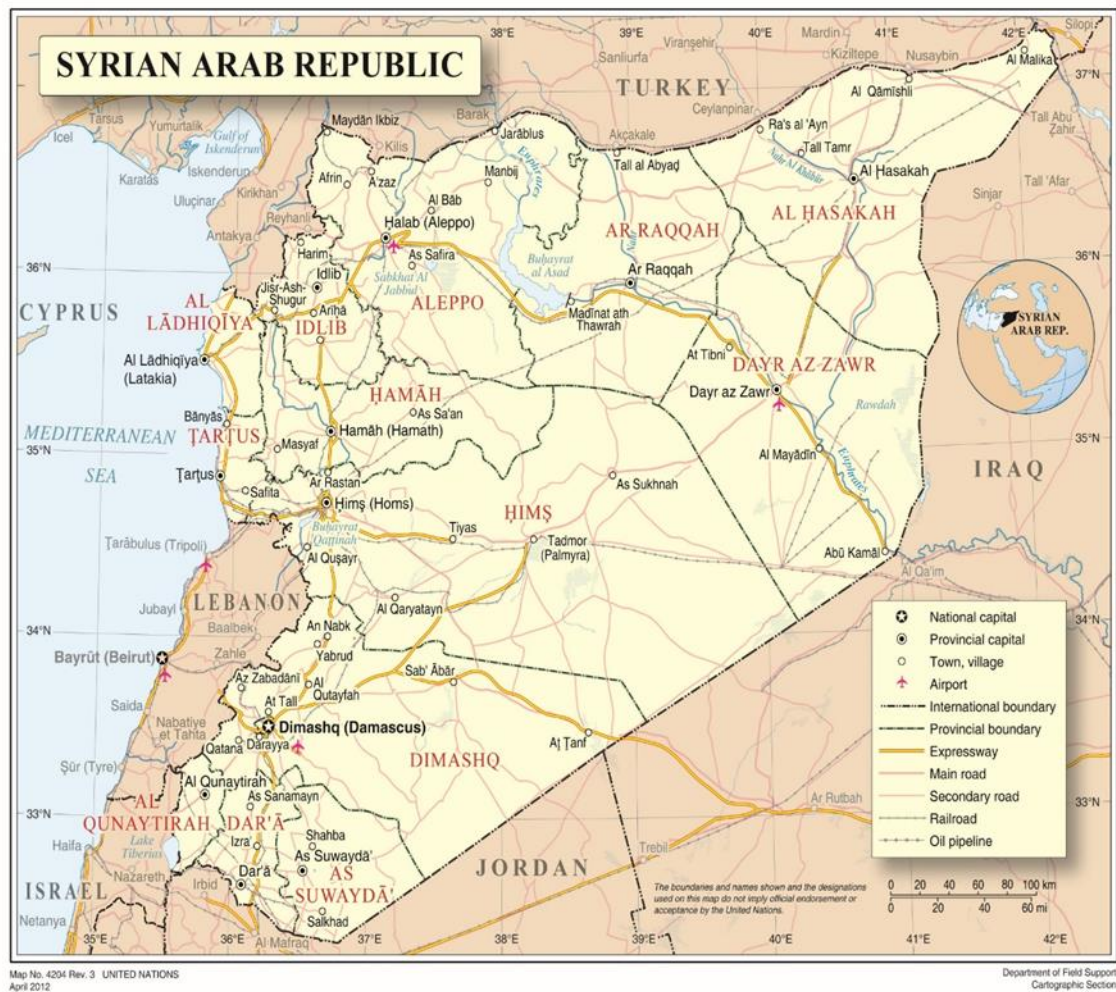
The second part provides a governorate-level description of the security situation. Each governorate chapter includes a map, brief description of the governorate, background conflict dynamics and armed actors present in the area, recent security trends, including information on civilian fatalities, security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

⁷ ACLED, Methodology, April 2019, [url](#); ACLED, FAQ ACLED Sourcing Methodology, February 2020, [url](#)

⁸ For more details on ACLED's reporting see Section [1.6.2](#). ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

⁹ The UN Human Rights Council mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, established on 22 August 2011 and tasked with investigating all alleged violations of international human rights law since March 2011 in the Syrian Arab Republic, has been denied access to the territory held by the Government of the Syria (GoS). UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 2

Map



Map 1: Syrian Arab Republic, © United Nations¹⁰

¹⁰ 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

Several armed conflicts are taking place in Syria, according to the Rule of Law in Armed Conflict Project (RULAC):¹¹

- 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 in an international armed conflict with Turkey, who has carried out military operations against GoS¹², ISIL and Kurdish armed groups in Syria, and controls parts of northern Syria with the help of anti-GoS armed groups.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.¹⁵
- Turkey is engaged in a non-international armed conflict in Syria with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) forces.¹⁶

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab (CoI) determined that as of February 2012 'the intensity and duration of the conflict, combined with the increased organizational capabilities of anti-Government armed groups, had met the legal threshold for a non-international armed conflict. With this determination, the commission applied international humanitarian law in its assessment of the actions of the parties during hostilities.'¹⁷

Further information on the conflict background in Syria is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#) 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.¹⁸

¹¹ 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, 17 December 2020, [url](#)

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

¹³ RULAC, International armed conflicts in Syria, 15 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴ RULAC, International armed conflicts in Syria, 15 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), paras 6-7, 11, 19; RULAC, International armed conflicts in Syria, 15 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶ Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, The War Report 2018, April 2019, [url](#), p. 127

¹⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/21/50], 16 August 2012, [url](#), p. 1 paras 1-3

¹⁸ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 29

The Geneva peace talks led by the UN (in 2016¹⁹ and 2017²⁰) have been unsuccessful, with the GoS and opposition representatives failing to find common ground.²¹ Outside of UN auspices, Russia, Turkey and Iran set up peace talks in January 2017 in what became known as the Astana process.²² The negotiations led to the creation of four so-called 'de-escalation areas' which stipulated the cessation of hostilities in certain areas between GoS and anti-GoS armed groups and terms for improved humanitarian access, with Russia, Turkey and Iran acting as guarantors.²³ Starting from the beginning of 2018, three out of the four de-escalation zones have been retaken by GoS forces.²⁴ The last remaining de-escalation zone covering Idlib governorate and parts of Latakia, Aleppo and Hama governorates have been subject to GoS military offensive in 2019 and early 2020.²⁵

On 16 September 2019, Turkey, Russia and Iran announced that an agreement regarding the composition of the Constitutional Committee had been reached.²⁶ 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 delegates²⁷ chosen by the UN representing 'Syrian experts, civil society, independents, tribal leaders and women'.²⁸ A 45 member Constitution-drafting group, 15 from each group, was set up in October 2019 following the committee's first meeting.²⁹ Subsequent sessions of the Constitutional Committee held in November 2019³⁰, December 2020 and January 2021, failed to make progress.³¹

In July 2020, parliamentary elections were held in GoS-controlled areas. The voting excluded Syrians who live outside GoS-held areas in north-west and north-east Syria.³² The Ba'ath Party and its allies joined under the 'National Unity' alliance won 70 % of the seats.³³ The remaining seats went to marginal parties connected to the Ba'ath Party and nominal independent candidates with ties to President Assad.³⁴ Observers stated that the process was marred by electoral fraud and political interference.³⁵ Former French ambassador to Syria Michel Duclos labelled the parliamentary elections as a 'mockery'.³⁶ All candidates had to be 'vetted by state security services, thus precluding the entry of earnest political opposition'.³⁷

¹⁹ Atlantic (The), The End of the Beginning in Syria, 30 March 2016, [url](#)

²⁰ 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](#)

²¹ CFR, Civil War in Syria, 10 March 2021, [url](#)

²² Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 28

²³ Al Jazeera, Syria's 'de-escalation zones' explained, 4 July 2017, [url](#)

²⁴ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁵ See Idlib and Aleppo chapters.

²⁶ Asharq Al-Aswat, Russia, Iran, Turkey Say Syria Constitutional Committee Ready, 16 September 2019, [url](#)

²⁷ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁸ AP News, UN envoy: More work needed on Syria constitutional committee, 21 December 2018, [url](#)

²⁹ 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](#)

³⁰ UN News, Syria: Lack of consensus following face-to-face talks, underscores need for broader process, 20 December 2019, [url](#)

³¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 4; UN Secretary General, Note to Correspondents: Transcript of remarks by Mr. Geir O. Pedersen, UN Special Envoy for Syria, following the conclusion of the Fifth Session of the Small Body of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, 29 January 2021, [url](#)

³² COAR, Potemkin parliament: Baathists consolidate control as access to power shifts, 27 July 2020, [url](#)

³³ Duclos, M., The Syrian parliamentary elections were a mockery, Atlantic Council, 31 July 2020, [url](#)

³⁴ COAR, Potemkin parliament: Baathists consolidate control as access to power shifts, 27 July 2020, [url](#)

³⁵ Shaar, K. and Akil, S., Inside Syria's Clapping Chamber: Dynamics of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections, MEI, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

³⁶ Duclos, M., The Syrian parliamentary elections were a mockery, Atlantic Council, 31 July 2020, [url](#)

³⁷ COAR, Potemkin parliament: Baathists consolidate control as access to power shifts, 27 July 2020, [url](#)

Presidential elections were held on 26 May 2021 and resulted in Assad winning 95.1 % of the votes and a fourth term as President of Syria.³⁸ The elections were boycotted in areas outside GoS control.³⁹ Syrian authorities claimed that more than 14 million Syrians voted in the presidential elections, a turnout of around 78 %.⁴⁰

European countries have expressed their intention to reject the results of 'any presidential elections not based on United Nations Security Council resolution 2254'.⁴¹ A European Parliament resolution from March 2021 stated that it 'considers the upcoming 2021 Syrian Presidential elections to be lacking any form of credibility in the eyes of the international community in the current context'.⁴² Following the May 2021 presidential elections, EU High Representative Joseph Borrell stated that they 'met none of the criteria of a genuinely democratic vote'.⁴³

1.3 International involvement

The conflict in Syria has drawn the involvement of countries such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, the US, Israel and others.⁴⁴ The conflict is viewed as being more about the geopolitical future of the Middle East rather than only about Syria.⁴⁵

Russia intervened militarily in the Syrian conflict in September 2015, in support of the Syrian government⁴⁶ and is credited with changing the tides of war in Assad's favour.⁴⁷ 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'.⁴⁸ Estimates from March 2020 put the number of Russian troops in Syria at 5 000.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ As of March 2020, Iran presence in Syria consisted of an estimated 3 000 IRGC military advisors and between 30 000 to 50 000 affiliated foreign militias.⁵² In 2020, Iranian presence and influence was reported throughout Syria, with a higher concentration in Damascus, Aleppo, Deir Ez-

³⁸ Euronews, Syria's Assad wins 4th term with 95% of vote, in election the West calls fraudulent, 28 May 2021, [url](#)

³⁹ COAR, Al-Assad 'Wins' Re-Election with 95.1% of The Vote. Now What?, 31 May 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁰ Euronews, Syria's Assad wins 4th term with 95% of vote, in election the West calls fraudulent, 28 May 2021, [url](#)

⁴¹ Asharq Al-Aswat, European Document Rejects 2021 Syrian Presidential Elections, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

⁴² European Parliament, resolution of 11 March 2021 on the Syrian conflict – 10 years after the uprising (2021/2576(RSP)), 11 March 2021, [url](#)

⁴³ EEAS, Syria: Statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell on the presidential elections, 27 May 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁴ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁴⁵ Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, The War Report 2018, April 2019, [url](#), pp. 124-125

⁴⁶ 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

⁴⁷ 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

⁴⁸ Borshchevskaya, A., Shifting Landscape, Russia's military role in the Middle East, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁴⁹ Lamrani, O., The Syrian Battlespace: A Net Assessment, Newlines Institute, 13 April 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁰ 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

⁵¹ 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

⁵² Lamrani, O., The Syrian Battlespace: A Net Assessment, Newlines Institute, 13 April 2020, [url](#)

Zor, Homs and Quneitra governorates.⁵³ Iranian-backed forces are fighting on behalf of the GoS against anti-government groups and ISIL.⁵⁴

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 (FSA)-branded factions and Islamist groups.⁵⁵ 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'.⁵⁶ The US Congressional Research Service (US CRS) stated that Turkey 'maintains military forces in northern Syria as part of a broader campaign targeting Kurdish fighters'.⁵⁷

As of March 2020, Turkey fielded between 3 000 to 4 000 troops in Syria, although the number constantly fluctuates.⁵⁸ In 2020 and early 2021, it maintained military outposts and troops in Idlib governorate⁵⁹, northern Aleppo governorate and in the area between Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ain.⁶⁰ In 2020, Turkey engaged in military confrontations with GoS forces in north-east⁶¹ and north-west Syria⁶², as well as with Kurdish forces.⁶³

The **US-led Global Coalition Against Daesh [ISIL]**, currently comprised of 83 states, was formed in 2014 to combat ISIL in Iraq and Syria⁶⁴ and since September 2014 has carried out military operations against ISIL and other targets in Syria.⁶⁵ Under former US President Donald Trump, the US reduced its involvement in the Syrian conflict⁶⁶ and as of February 2021, 900 US troops remained in Syria deployed in north-east Syria and around Tanf Garrison (Homs governorate).⁶⁷ US operations against ISIL in Syria

⁵³ Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, 6 August 2019, [url](#), p. 7; SOHR, Hama | Fierce clashes erupt between ISIS and NDF in the wake of kidnapping four persons, 4 August 2020, [url](#); HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib"; Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), p. 136; Al Monitor, Iran risks confrontation with Turkey over Idlib, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁵ 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

⁵⁶ US CRS, Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief, 9 November 2020, [url](#), p. 17

⁵⁷ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 July 2020, [url](#), Summary

⁵⁸ Lamrani, O., The Syrian Battlespace: A Net Assessment, Newlines Institute, 13 April 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁹ Greco, A., Turkey Reinforces Positions in Greater Idlib to Pressure Russia into Negotiations, ISW, 7 October 2020, [url](#); Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 30 November - 6 December 2020, 9 December 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁰ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

⁶¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 4

⁶² AA, Turkey neutralizes 101 Assad regime military personnel, 10 February 2020, [url](#); DW, Turkey targets Syria troops in deadly counterattack, 3 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁴ 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, 83 Partners United in Ensuring Daesh's Enduring Defeat, n.d., [url](#)

⁶⁵ 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](#)

⁶⁶ 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

⁶⁷ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2020 – December 31 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 11

continued in 2020⁶⁸ and first three months of 2021.⁶⁹ US airstrikes on Iranian-affiliated militias and targets in Syria were also reported.⁷⁰

Since the start of the conflict in 2011, **Israel** has carried out air strikes against mainly Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian targets in Syria⁷¹, which it considers representing a security threat to its borders.⁷² These airstrikes continued in 2020⁷³, with Israel's military claiming it hit 50 targets in Syria during the year.⁷⁴ Israeli airstrikes on GoS, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian targets were reported in 2021.⁷⁵

According to the Council on Foreign Relations writing in March 2021, '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'.⁷⁶

For an overview of the number and location of military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria as documented by Jusoor for Studies⁷⁷ in January 2021, see Map 2 below:

⁶⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2020 – December 31 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 54

⁶⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2021 – March 31, 2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), p. 63

⁷⁰ BBC News, Biden takes first military action with Syria strike on Iran-backed militias, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

⁷¹ 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; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

⁷² Reuters, Syrian state media: Israeli missile strike kills four civilians, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

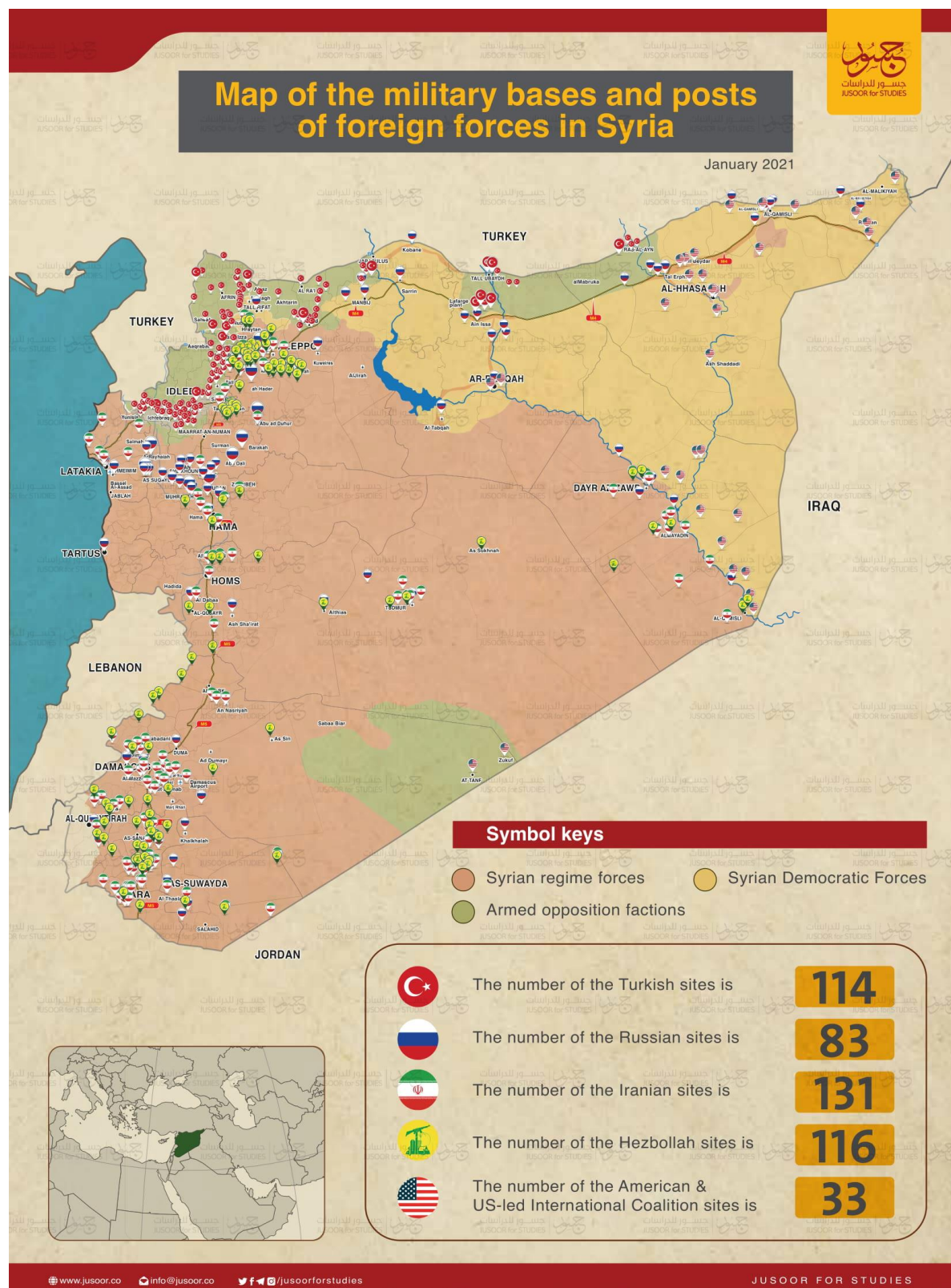
⁷³ BBC News, Syria war: Israel 'hits Iran-backed fighters near Damascus', 6 February 2020, [url](#); MEE, Israel launches air strikes in Syria, casualties reported, 6 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁴ Asharq Al-Aswat, Israel Says it Hit 50 Syria Targets in 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁵ Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 4 - 10 January, 13 January 2021, [url](#); Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 11-17 January 2021, 21 January 2021, [url](#); Guardian (The), Deadliest Israeli airstrikes on Syria in years kill 57, say observers, 13 January 2021, [url](#); Times of Israel, Israeli airstrikes said to hit targets near Damascus, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁶ CFR, Civil War in Syria, 10 March 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁷ Jusoor for Studies is 'an independent institution specializing in information management and conducting studies and research related to the Syrian political and social affairs in particular and the Middle East region in general'. See Jusoor for Studies, About us, n.d., [url](#)



Map 2: © Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria 6 January 2021, [url](https://www.jusoor.co)

1.4 Armed actors

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, 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'.⁷⁹

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 militia.⁸⁰ Bashar al Assad acts as the commander in chief of the SAA and the armed forces.⁸¹ Operational control of the forces was maintained by the Chief of Staff of the Syrian Armed Forces.⁸²

As of 2020, the Syrian Armed Forces were estimated to have 169 000 military personnel of which 130 000 were serving in the SAA.⁸³ The US Department of Intelligence estimated in a report covering the period between July and September 2020, that the SAA had between 4 000 and 10 000 troops deployed in north-east Syria, between the cities of Manbij (Aleppo governorate) and Tal Tamr (Hasaka governorate).⁸⁴

The SAA comprises of five main corps (the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Corps), each consisting of divisions and led by a major general. The 4th and 5th Corps were created under Russian initiative after September 2015.⁸⁵ The two corps operated either under joint Russian-Syrian command (4th Corps) or explicit Russian command (5th Corps).⁸⁶ Apart from the five main corps, the SAA also has several semi-independent units: the Republican Guard, the Special Forces and the 4th Armoured Division, which also fall under the command of the Chief of Staff.⁸⁷

The SAA is said to rely often on key 'praetorian units' such as the Republican Guard, the 4th Armoured Division and the Special Forces for offensive operations. These units are reportedly mainly composed of Alawites loyal to the GoS and reported to have receive preferential access to modern weapons.⁸⁸ The 4th Division is described to be made up of 'elite' forces although in practice it is 'a collection of loosely affiliated units'⁸⁹, reportedly under the command of the president's brother - Maher Assad.⁹⁰ According to a Human Rights Watch report which documented the GoS offensive on Idlib from April

⁷⁹ CFR, Civil War in Syria, 10 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁰ CIA, World Factbook, Syria, 25 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸¹ 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

⁸² ISW, The Syrian Army Doctrinal Order of Battle, February 2013, [url](#), p. 5

⁸³ Tawazun, Syria Country Profile, 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 63

⁸⁵ HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib"; Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), p. 135

⁸⁶ Waters, G., The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, Middle East Institute, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁷ HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib"; Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), p. 135

⁸⁸ 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](#)

⁸⁹ Waters, G., The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, Middle East Institute, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁰ 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; Asharq Al-Awsat, Russia Pressures Maher Assad to Return his Forces to Damascus, 14 June 2020, [url](#)

2019 to March 2020, the main GoS units involved in the offensive included the 4th and 5th Corps, the 25th Division (Tiger Forces), the Palestinian militia Liwa al-Quds and the NDF.⁹¹

A research conducted on pro-GoS Facebook pages which document deaths among the SAA and allied forces recorded 2 331 combat-related deaths in 2020. Around half of all fatalities incurred by GoS forces took place January and February 2020. For the year 2020, over 60 % of all GoS forces fatalities were recorded on the north-west front (Latakia, west Aleppo, Idlib, north Hama governorates), followed by 19 % on the central Syria front (Deir Ez-Zor, south Raqqa, east Homs, south Aleppo) and 14 % on the Southern front (Dar'a, Sweida, Quneitra, Damascus).⁹²

US CRS stated that pro-GoS forces operating in Syria include Iran, Russia and the Lebanese Hezbollah.⁹³ Various pro-government militias, both local and foreign⁹⁴, were operating in Syria alongside the regular armed forces.⁹⁵ These included local militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF) and non-Syrian militias made up of foreign fighters mainly backed by Iran.⁹⁶

For deployments of the SAA up until 3 April 2020 see [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#)

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 and areas of Raqqa and Hasaka governorates, anti-GoS armed groups are incorporated under the Syrian National Army (SNA), 'a collection of Turkish-backed armed opposition groups'.⁹⁷ As of December 2020, the SNA together with Turkish armed forces was reported to be in control of Operation Euphrates Shield (area between Azaz, Al-Bab, and Jarablus) and Operation Olive Branch (Afrin district)⁹⁸ areas in northern Aleppo governorate⁹⁹, and in the Operation Peace Spring area between Tall Abyad (Raqqa governorate) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate).¹⁰⁰

The factions that comprise the SNA are hostile towards the GoS presence in south Aleppo governorate and SDF forces controlling areas in the province, but follow Turkey's order in conducting military operations against either.¹⁰¹ According to a January 2021 report by Syrian researcher Khayrallah al-Hilu¹⁰², the SNA has not fought against the GoS in any of the three areas under its control. It has engaged in military operations led by Turkey against the SDF or outside of Syria.¹⁰³

⁹¹ HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib"; Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), p. 136

⁹² Schoenborn, T. and Waters, G., The Military Casualties of the Syrian Civil War in 2020, International Review, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

⁹³ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 July 2020, [url](#), Summary

⁹⁴ Ezzi, M., The Regime and Loyal Militias Will Struggle to Disentangle Their Relationship, Chatham House, July 2017, [url](#)

⁹⁵ ACLED, Pro-government Militia Autonomy on the Battlefield in Syria, 22 March 2018, [url](#)

⁹⁶ 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](#); Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁷ COAR, Northern Corridor: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁹⁸ Clingendael, Turkey in northwestern Syria. Rebuilding empire at the margins, June 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁹⁹ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁰⁰ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰¹ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), pp. 53-54

¹⁰² Khayrallah al-Hilu is a Syrian researcher for the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project of the Middle East Directions Programme at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University in Florence. Al-Hilu focuses on northern Syria. See Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰³ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

The SNA reportedly has between 30¹⁰⁴ to 40¹⁰⁵ distinct armed groups in its composition.¹⁰⁶ It includes armed opposition groups from northern Syria as well as displaced factions from Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs and Hama governorates.¹⁰⁷ The Levant Front is regarded as the largest faction in the SNA and the only one whose formation precedes Turkey's military intervention in Syria in 2016. The Levant Front is reported to be in control of Azaz.¹⁰⁸ The Hamza Division, al-Mutasim Brigade and the 51st Brigade are deployed in the Euphrates Shield Area between Azaz, Al-Bab and Jarablus.¹⁰⁹ In Ras al Ain, the Turkmen factions Sultan Murad Division and Hamza Division are reported to be in control.¹¹⁰ Major towns located between Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn are controlled by the Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction.¹¹¹ Afrin is dominated by the Sultan Murad Division.¹¹²

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 area¹¹³, under the Syrian National Army banner was announced¹¹⁴ by the so-called Syrian Interim Government.¹¹⁵ While nominally the SNA is a unified structure that sits under the formal supervision of the so-called Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Defence¹¹⁶, the constituent groups 'each answer directly to Turkey and maintain its pre-National Army form'.¹¹⁷ Several sources assessed that the SNA does not function as a unified military structure, with each faction acting largely independent from another.¹¹⁸

Although united under the SNA banner, the constituent groups are in practice unaccountable to other actors except Turkey¹¹⁹, compete with each other¹²⁰ and are often unpopular with the local population.¹²¹

¹⁰⁴ AA, Free Syrian Army transforms into Syrian National Army, 09 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵ Kasapoglu, C., The Syrian National Army and the Future of Turkey's Frontier Land Force, Jamestown Foundation, 12 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9; For a non-exhaustive list of the SNA comprising groups see: Carter Center (The), The Armed Opposition in Northwest Syria, 15 May 2020, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁰⁷ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁰⁸ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 5-6

¹⁰⁹ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 5

¹¹⁰ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

¹¹¹ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

¹¹² Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 5-6

¹¹³ 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; Defense Post (The), Syria Rebels Kill 15 Regime Loyalists After Russia Air Strike: Monitor, 28 October 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁴ Al Monitor, Merger solidifies opposition in Syria, boosts Turkey's forces, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁵ 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

¹¹⁶ Al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, EUI, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 5

¹¹⁷ COAR, Northern Corridor: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹¹⁸ Shaban, N., The Syrian National Army: Formation, Challenges, and Outlook, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, October 2020, [url](#), p. 5; Enab Baladi, Violations by "SNA" ...who to blame?, 12 June 2020, [url](#); COAR, Northern Corridor: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 39; Hatahet, S., The Recovery of the Local Economy in Northern Aleppo: Reality and Challenges, EUI, 25 March 2021, [url](#), p. 4

¹¹⁹ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 5-6; COAR, Northern Corridor: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹²⁰ 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; OHCHR, Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups - Bachelet, 18 September 2020, [url](#); STJ, Afrin: Clashes between Jaysh al-Islam and al-Jabha al-Shamiya lead to civilian deaths, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

¹²¹ COAR, Northern Corridor. Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 9, 40

The total strength of the SNA was estimated by Syria expert Charles Lister¹²² in a Middle East Institute article to be around 35 000 fighters¹²³ whereas the US Defense Intelligence Agency assessed the Turkish-backed armed groups consists of between 22 000 and 50 000 fighters.¹²⁴

See also the chapters on [Aleppo governorate](#), [Raqqa governorate](#) and [Hasaka governorate](#).

Further information on the SNA is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#) and [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#)

1.4.3 Syrian Democratic Forces

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, *Quwwat Suriya al-Dimuqratiya*) are the main unified military force of the the Autonomous Administration of North and East of Syria (hereafter ‘Autonomous Administration’, AANES).¹²⁵ The SDF was established in October 2015.¹²⁶ According to Syria researchers Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, the SDF was based on an anti-ISIL alliance between the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) and various armed groups, e.g. local Arab and Syriac militias, and it has served as the official defence force of the Autonomous Administration since December 2016.¹²⁷ According to a July 2020 analysis, the SDF is ‘a multi-ethnic, multi-religious force’ containing a representation¹²⁸ from Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Yezidis, Circassians and Turkmen.¹²⁹ The SDF was established in order to support the US-led coalition in the war against the ‘Islamic State’ (ISIL)¹³⁰ and it is regarded as ‘the key powerbroker’ in north-east Syria and the main partner of the US-led coalition in countering ISIL.¹³¹

The SDF exercises territorial control over 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.¹³²

The main components of the SDF are the People’s Protection Units (YPG), Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), Sutoro Forces (Assyrian and Syriac Christians), Coalition of Jazira Brigades (Arab tribes including Shummar, Sharabiyah, Jabbur, al-Bakkara, and fighters from Ras al Ain), Sanadid Forces (Arab Shummar tribe), Syriac Military Council and Elite Forces (affiliated with the Al-Ghad al-Souri movement).¹³³

¹²² 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](#)

¹²³ Lister, C., Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition groups to unite under one banner, Middle East Institute, 4 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁴ USDO, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 49

¹²⁵ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts, I.B. Tauris, 2019, pp. 66–67; RIC, Beyond the Frontlines, 19 December 2019, [url](#), p. 50

¹²⁶ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts, I.B. Tauris, 2019, pp. 66–67; RIC, Beyond the Frontlines, 19 December 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹²⁷ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts, I.B. Tauris, 2019, pp. 66–67.

¹²⁸ Enab Baladi lists the SDF’s main components as follows: People’s Protection Units (YPG), Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), Sutoro Forces (Assyrian and Syriac Christians), Coalition of Jazira Brigades (Arab tribes including Shummar, Sharabiyah, Jabbur, al-Bakkara, and fighters from Ras al-Ayn), Sanadid Forces (Arab Shummar tribe), Syriac Military Council and Elite Forces (affiliated with the Al-Ghad al-Souri movement). Enab Baladi, “Syrian Democratic Forces” Face A Decisive Battle: Who Are They?, 12 October 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁹ Holmes, A. A., Arabs Across Syria Join the Kurdish-Led Syrian Democratic Forces, MERIP, 28 July 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁰ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 33

¹³¹ van Wilgenburg, W., Syrian Democratic Forces, ECFR, n.d., [url](#)

¹³² Based on reading of maps in ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 26 March 2021, [url](#)

¹³³ Enab Baladi, “Syrian Democratic Forces” Face A Decisive Battle: Who Are They?, 12 October 2019, [url](#)

According to the United States Department of Defence (USDOD) report of August 2019, the SDF is the 'largest partner force' of the US-led Coalition in Syria. USDOD names the YPG and the Syrian Arab Coalition as SDF's main components. In addition to the SDF, the 'Syrian partner forces' of the US-led Coalition include the Provincial Internal Security Forces (PRISF) and the Internal Security Forces (InSF, also known as Asayish). These organisations are responsible for counterinsurgency operations and for holding territory captured from ISIL, and consist of fighters recruited locally and operating in their specific governorates.¹³⁴ Both are further divided into three sub-elements assigned with specific tasks.¹³⁵

In August 2019, USDOD states that the combined strength of US-led coalition's 'Syrian partner forces' was 100 000 fighters. The desirable end strength of these forces was described to be 110 000 fighters, of which 30 000 in the SDF, 45 000 in the PRISF and 35 000 in the InSF.¹³⁶ According to a YPG source cited in Reuters article published in October 2019, the SDF had approximately 40 000 fighters on the eve of the Turkish incursion.¹³⁷ In December 2020, Wladimir van Wilgenburg estimated that the SDF pays the salaries of over 100 000¹³⁸ fighters.¹³⁹ In an interview with International Crisis Group in November 2020, the SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Kobane Abdi claimed that there are over 200 000 Syrians serving in civilian and military roles in the Autonomous Administration and in the SDF.¹⁴⁰

The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) were established in 2012 as the military wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) – a Syrian branch of the EU¹⁴¹, US¹⁴² and Turkey-designated terrorist organisation Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, *Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê*).¹⁴³ The SDF is dominated by the YPG who helped establish the SDF in October 2015, provides its core fighting forces and largely ensures its leadership.¹⁴⁴ According to the International Crisis Group, the SDF 'generally accepts that the YPG is its core fighting force, which maintains command and control'.¹⁴⁵ According to COAR Global, the PYD/YPG have a dominating role in the Autonomous Administration as a whole.¹⁴⁶ Researcher Amy Austin Holmes¹⁴⁷ claims that despite of the central role of the Kurds in the SDF, the majority of SDF's rank-and-file consists of ethnic Arabs.¹⁴⁸

¹³⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1,2020–June 30,2019, 2 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 29–30.

¹³⁵ PRISF is further divided into the border security forces, the critical petroleum infrastructure security forces and the prison security forces. InSF's three elements include the police, the anti-terrorism security force (*Hêzên Antî Teror*, HAT) and the Internal Security Forces–General Security, specialized in human intelligence and reconnaissance. USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1,2020–June 30,2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 65

¹³⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1,2020–June 30,2019, 2 August 2019, [url](#), p. 30.

¹³⁷ Francis, E. & Perry, T., Syrian Kurds outgunned but vow to inflict toll on Turkish army, Reuters, 10 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁸ This estimation is likely based on the above USDOD report of August 2019 and contains both the actual SDF and the associated forces of PRISF and InSF, cf. Holmes, A. A., Arabs Across Syria Join the Kurdish-Led Syrian Democratic Forces, MERIP, 28 July 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁹ van Wilgenburg, W., The Future of the Syrian Democratic Forces: One Year after the Liberation of Baghouz and the Turkish Invasion, LSE Middle East Centre, 14 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰ International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴¹ 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](#)

¹⁴² USDOS, Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 5 - Kurdistan Workers' Party, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴³ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 33

¹⁴⁴ 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

¹⁴⁵ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁴⁶ COAR, Emboldened Self-Administration bids for greater power, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷ Amy Austin Holmes is a fellow at the Wilson Center and former associate professor at the American University in Cairo and visiting scholar at Harvard University. See [url](#)

¹⁴⁸ Holmes, A. A., Arabs Across Syria Join the Kurdish-Led Syrian Democratic Forces, MERIP, 28 July 2020, [url](#)

In a similar manner, Rojava Information Center, an independent, volunteer-staffed news agency based in SDF-controlled areas of Syria¹⁴⁹, describes the SDF as ‘an Arab-majority force’.¹⁵⁰

The Autonomous Administration has a political assembly, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)¹⁵¹, which is described by Syria researchers Rena Netjes and Erwin van Veen as a political platform ‘dominated’ by the PYD and responsible for running the Arab-majority areas of SDF-controlled north-east Syria (areas in Deir Ez-Zor, Raqqqa and southern parts of Hasaka governorate).¹⁵² Allsopp and Wilgenburg treat the SDC as ‘the political wing of the SDF’ since it has been responsible for ‘forming administrative councils and governing in non-Kurdish majority areas’, including Manbij and Raqqqa, captured during the anti-ISIL campaign.¹⁵³

The PYD and the YPG are deeply connected to the PKK on organisational and ideological levels¹⁵⁴, with PKK-members assigned with ‘key military and institutional responsibilities’ in its Syrian affiliates and ‘key positions’ in the civilian institutions of the Autonomous Administration.¹⁵⁵ The YPG and affiliated local, political, security and administrative bodies’ are reported to contain Syrian and non-Syrian Kurdish members of the PKK who returned to Syria after 2011. These individuals are known locally as ‘cadres’ (*kadros*). On the basis of information from senior SDF members, Crisis Group describes the presence of PKK-members in Syria as ‘significant’ and points out their ‘notable role’ in the anti-ISIL campaign.¹⁵⁶

In a Chatham House report, Zaki Mehchy¹⁵⁷ (et al.) describes the ‘cadres’ as ‘Kurdish individuals with technical expertise and long-term links to the inner circles of the [PYD] or the [PKK]’.¹⁵⁸ According to Mehchy (et al.) these individuals ‘hold the ultimate power and purse strings within [Autonomous Administration] institutions, and nothing can be implemented without their approval’, although they are officially serving as ‘technical advisers’.¹⁵⁹ The PKK-members active in the ranks of the SDF and the Autonomous Administration have been described as the ‘shadow authority’¹⁶⁰ inside these institutions and are seen by many as the ‘real power’¹⁶¹ in the SDF-controlled North-East Syria. This leading role of the PKK, engaged in a renewed armed conflict with the Turkish state since July 2015¹⁶², has been described, on the one hand, as a crucial obstacle¹⁶³ for the end of hostilities in northern Syria and as a factor ‘adding to the feelings of resentment and exclusion’¹⁶⁴ among the Arab residents of SDF-controlled North-East Syria.

¹⁴⁹ Rojava Information Center has collaborated with news agencies like CNN, BBC, Associated Press (AP) and The New York Times. See [url](#)

¹⁵⁰ RIC, Beyond the Frontlines, 19 December 2019, [url](#), p. 50

¹⁵¹ RIC, Beyond the Frontlines, 19 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 31-32

¹⁵² Netjes R. & van Veen, E., Henschman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist. The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict, Clingendael, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 2, 5

¹⁵³ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts, I.B. Tauris, 2019, p. 96

¹⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria’s North East, 5 September 2018, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁵⁵ International Crisis Group, The PKK’s Fateful Choice in Northern Syria, 4 May 2017, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶ International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷ Zaki Mehchy is a Consulting Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House. He is also the founder of also a co-founder of the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR). See [url](#)

¹⁵⁸ Mehchy Z. et al., Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria, Chatham House, November 2020, [url](#), p. 22

¹⁵⁹ Mehchy Z. et al., Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria, Chatham House, November 2020, [url](#), p. 26

¹⁶⁰ Mogelson, L., America’s Abandonment of Syria, The New Yorker, 20 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶¹ Zaman, A. and Wilkofsky, D., Child recruitment casts shadow over Syrian Kurds’ push for global legitimacy, Al-Monitor, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶² For further information, see International Crisis Group, Turkey’s PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer, n.d. [last updated on 29 April 2021], [url](#); RULAC, Non-international armed conflict in Turkey, n.d. [last updated 24 November 2020], [url](#)

¹⁶³ International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴ Megally, H. & El-Gamal, J. M., Preventing the Reemergence of Violent Extremism in Northeast Syria, UNESCWA & CIC, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 21-22

According to Crisis Group, SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Kobane states that the SDF has ‘agreed to gradually pull out all these non-Syrian cadres from their current positions, and ultimately from Syria’.¹⁶⁵ However, COAR Global report of January 2021 describes the PKK as ‘enormously influential within the upper ranks of the SDF and, consequently, inside the Self-Administration as a whole’ and assesses that ‘abandoning or restructuring the PKK would require a major reconfiguration of north-east Syria’s political and security apparatus’.¹⁶⁶

Further information on the SDF is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#) and [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#)

1.4.4 Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham

Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham or the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant (HTS) is described as the most important and powerful actor in the Idlib area.¹⁶⁷ 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.¹⁶⁸ The US¹⁶⁹, UN¹⁷⁰, EU¹⁷¹ and Turkey have designated HTS as a terrorist organisation affiliated with Al Qaeda.¹⁷² HTS has publicly distanced itself from Al Qaeda in 2017, claiming it is an independent entity.¹⁷³ In 2020, HTS has clashed with Al Qaeda-aligned factions operating in Idlib, significantly weakening their position.¹⁷⁴

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.¹⁷⁵ Depending on the source, HTS’s strength is evaluated to be between 7 000 and 10 000 fighters.¹⁷⁶

HTS has created several civilian bodies in the territory under its control, including a governance body responsible for civilian functions – the Syrian Salvation Government¹⁷⁷, a court system that applies Sharia law and an extensive prison system.¹⁷⁸ The Syrian Salvation Government is reportedly significantly under-resourced, relying on 7 000 civil servants to administer a population of approximately 3.2 million. Third parties have supplemented certain public services, such as

¹⁶⁵ International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶ COAR, Emboldened Self-Administration bids for greater power, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁷ 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](#)

¹⁶⁸ CSIS, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, 4 October 2018, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁶⁹ USDOS, Country Report on Terrorism 2019 - Chapter 5 - Al-Nusrah Front (ANF), 24 June 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁰ UN Security Council, United Nations Security Council Consolidated List, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁷¹ 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](#)

¹⁷² HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷³ 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

¹⁷⁴ Drevon, J. and Haenni, P., How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads. The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria, EUI, January 2021, [url](#), p. 31; Tsurkov, E., Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, ECFR, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁷⁵ 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

¹⁷⁶ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 July 2020, [url](#), p. 18; UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁷⁷ 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

¹⁷⁸ HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

international and local NGOs in healthcare, volunteers in education and tribes in administering justice.¹⁷⁹

HTS has cooperated with factions of the National Liberation Front (NLF) as part of a joint military operations room (*al-Fath al-Mubeen*). It has banned the formation of alternative military operations by other factions operating in the Idlib area without its permission.¹⁸⁰ It has also cooperated with Turkey during the GoS offensive on Idlib in 2019 and early 2020¹⁸¹ and in its aftermath.¹⁸² HTS has largely accepted the March 2020 ceasefire of hostilities in the Idlib area brokered by Turkey and Russia and has been active in precluding other hard-line anti-GoS factions in the area from violating it.¹⁸³

The CoI assessed that between July 2019 and January 2020, the GoS offensive had eroded the military and political control of HTS.¹⁸⁴ Increased Turkish presence in Idlib and high-ranking defections from the group have further weakened HTS' position.¹⁸⁵ Despite these setbacks, HTS has managed to remain the dominant armed group in the area.¹⁸⁶

Further information on HTS is available in the [EASO CoI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#) and [EASO CoI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#)

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.¹⁸⁷ The NLF was formed in 2018 by rebel armed groups in the Idlib area.¹⁸⁸ The group is made up of moderate and Islamist factions¹⁸⁹, including Feilaq-al Sham¹⁹⁰, Ahrar al-Sham¹⁹¹, the Free Idlib Army¹⁹², Jaish-al Ahrar¹⁹³ and Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki.¹⁹⁴

¹⁷⁹ Drevon, J. and Haenni, P., How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads. The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria, EUI, January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁸⁰ Tsurkov, E., Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, ECFR, n.d, [url](#)

¹⁸¹ Carter Center (The), The Armed Opposition in Northwest Syria, 15 May 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁸² International Crisis Group, Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib, 15 May 2020, [url](#), p. 20; Drevon, J. and Haenni, P., How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads. The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria, EUI, January 2021, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁸³ Carter Center (The), Power Through Strength Hayat Tahrir al-Sham solidifying control in northwest Syria, 9 November 2020, [url](#); Drevon, J. and Haenni, P., How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads. The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria, EUI, January 2021, [url](#), p. 7; Tsurkov, E., Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, ECFR, n.d, [url](#)

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. 7

¹⁸⁵ Carter Center (The), The Armed Opposition in Northwest Syria, 15 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-9

¹⁸⁶ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7; International Crisis Group, After Ten Years of War, Conflict Still Paralyzes Syria, 15 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁷ 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; Defense Post (The), Syria Rebels Kill 15 Regime Loyalists After Russia Air Strike: Monitor, 28 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁸ Lund, A., Syrian war: Understanding Idlib's rebel factions, The New Humanitarian, 3 September 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

¹⁹⁰ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 21-22

¹⁹¹ 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

¹⁹² Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

¹⁹³ Lund, A., A Jihadist Breakup in Syria, Foreign Affairs, 15 September 2017, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

While the NLF formally merged with the SNA in October 2019¹⁹⁵, it was reported that on the ground it continues to function independently from it.¹⁹⁶ NLF has also cooperated militarily with HTS against GoS forces in Idlib as part of *al-Fath al-Mubeen*, a joint military operations room.¹⁹⁷

Smaller, predominantly Islamist armed opposition groups also operate in the Idlib area and include the Al Qaeda affiliate¹⁹⁸ Hurras al-Din (HAD)¹⁹⁹, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)²⁰⁰, the Khattab Al-Shishani Brigade comprised of Chechen fighters²⁰¹, the Katiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ) made up of fighters from central Asia²⁰² and Ansar al-Tawhid²⁰³, among others.

Depending on the source, HAD was estimated to have around 2 500²⁰⁴ or between 3 500 to 5 000 fighters in Idlib.²⁰⁵ The group suffered significant leadership losses in 2020²⁰⁶, including its leader Khaled al Aruri who was killed by a US drone strike.²⁰⁷ TIP is headquartered in Harim and estimated to have between 3 000 to 4 500 fighters.²⁰⁸

HAD, together with other small opposition armed groups created the *Fa-Ithibitu* ('So Be Steadfast') military operation room, separately from the one controlled by HTS.²⁰⁹ This led to clashes between HTS and the So Be Steadfast coalition in mid-2020²¹⁰ which resulted in HTS reasserting its dominance in the area.²¹¹

See also [Chapter 2.1 Idlib](#). Further information on anti-GoS armed groups in the Idlib area is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#) and [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#)

¹⁹⁵ Al Monitor, Who are Turkish-backed forces in latest Syria incursion?, 13 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶ 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](#)

¹⁹⁷ Tsurkov, E., Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, ECFR, n.d, [url](#)

¹⁹⁸ Zelin, A., Hurras al-Din: The Overlooked al-Qaeda Group in Syria, Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 24 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁹ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 22

²⁰⁰ 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

²⁰¹ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7-8

²⁰² UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7-8

²⁰³ 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

²⁰⁴ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰⁵ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 July 2020, [url](#), p. 18

²⁰⁶ UN Security Council: Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

²⁰⁷ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 July 2020, [url](#), p. 18

²⁰⁸ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7-8

²⁰⁹ The groups participating in the operation room were Hurras al Din, Ansar al Islam, Ansar al Din, Tansiqiyat al-Jihad, and Liwa al-Muqatileen al-Ansar. See Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 22-28 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

²¹⁰ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 22-28 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2; MEE, Civil war within civil war: HTS battles rival militants, defectors in Syria's Idlib, 27 June 2020, [url](#)

²¹¹ Drevon, J. and Haenni, P., How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads. The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria, 2021, EUI, [url](#), p. 10

1.4.6 Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

The Sunni jihadist group ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as ISIS, IS and Daesh) was originally created in 2006 by the Al Qaeda wing in Iraq and smaller Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups, but later split from AQ under the ISIL moniker.²¹² ISIL is a UN and EU²¹³ designated terrorist organisation.²¹⁴ 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 2016.²¹⁵ By August 2017, the US-led coalition has conducted over 11 000 airstrikes in Syria against ISIL targets.²¹⁶ GoS forces also fought against ISIL, reclaiming territories such as Palmyra²¹⁷, while Russia claimed air strikes on ISIL targets.²¹⁸ ISIL lost territorial control in Syria in March 2019²¹⁹, and has since operated as a covert network.²²⁰

Syria and Iraq represent the 'core area for ISIL'²²¹, which ISIL operate as a single front.²²² Former Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS James Jeffrey assessed in December 2020 that ISIL activity in Syria is focused on GoS-held areas in the Badia desert (Syrian Central Desert)²²³ south of the Euphrates and east of Palmyra, where it manages to 'intermittently hold some terrain'. The same source further noted that ISIL was also maintaining a low-level insurgency along the Euphrates river in north-east Syria.²²⁴ The UN Security Council noted in a February 2021 report that ISIL uses the areas of the Syrian desert in Deir Ez-Zor governorate as a safe haven and base for launching attacks against GoS and SDF forces.²²⁵ The Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR) also reported that in 2020 ISIL took control of several pockets in the Syrian Desert, near the Palmyra-Deir Ez-Zor road, where it launched dozens of attacks on GoS forces.²²⁶

According to an analysis by Gregory Waters²²⁷ of ISIL activity in 2020, the group 'has greatly increased its capabilities in central Syria over the past year, expanding its area of operations from the heart of the Syrian Badia north to central Aleppo province, west to Salamiyah, Hamah, and south-west to

²¹² Cambanis, T. et. al, Hybrid Actors. Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East, The Century Foundation, 15 November 2019, [url](#), p. 106

²¹³ European Council, Council of the European Union, EU terrorist list, n.d., [url](#)

²¹⁴ UN Security Council, Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends One Entry on Its Sanctions List, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁵ CFR, Civil War in Syria, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁶ USDOD, Airstrikes updates, n.d., [url](#)

²¹⁷ New York Times (The), A Jewel in Syria Where 'Ruins Have Been Ruined' by ISIS, 4 April 2016, [url](#)

²¹⁸ 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](#)

²¹⁹ Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

²²⁰ 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

²²¹ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 3

²²² Jeffrey, J., Part 1: The Future of ISIS, Wilson Center, 22 December 2020, [url](#)

²²³ The Badia desert is 'a large territory not ruled effectively by any single entity. Its approximately 80,000 square kilometres are split administratively among seven governorates: Deir Ez-Zor, Hama, Raqqa, Homs, Aleppo, Rural Damascus and Sweida. It contains no large urban centres apart from Palmyra, al-Sukhnah and al-Qaryatayn'. See Fahmi, G. et. al, The Remnants of Islamic State in Syria: Military Action Alone Cannot Defeat It, EUI, April 2021, [url](#), p. 5

²²⁴ Jeffrey, J., Part 1: The Future of ISIS, Wilson Center, 22 December 2020, [url](#)

²²⁵ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

²²⁶ COAR, Syria in 2021, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

²²⁷ Gregory Waters is a non-Resident Scholar at the Middle East Institute and a research analyst at the Counter Extremism Project. His research is focused on Syrian security forces and ISIL developments, primarily using open-source research. For more information, see [url](#)

Qaryatayn, Homs'. In the first half of 2020, ISIL concentrated its insurgent activity in activity in Deir Ez-Zor and Homs governorates. In the second half of 2020, an increase of ISIL attacks and seizures of villages were reported in east Hama governorate, 'from south of Uqayribat to north of Ithriya' and around the village of Rahjan.²²⁸

A March 2021 analysis by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) wrote that ISIL controls several small swaths of territory in the mountainous areas of the Syrian Central Desert (Badia) from where it launches attacks on GoS forces, as detailed below (see also Map 3):

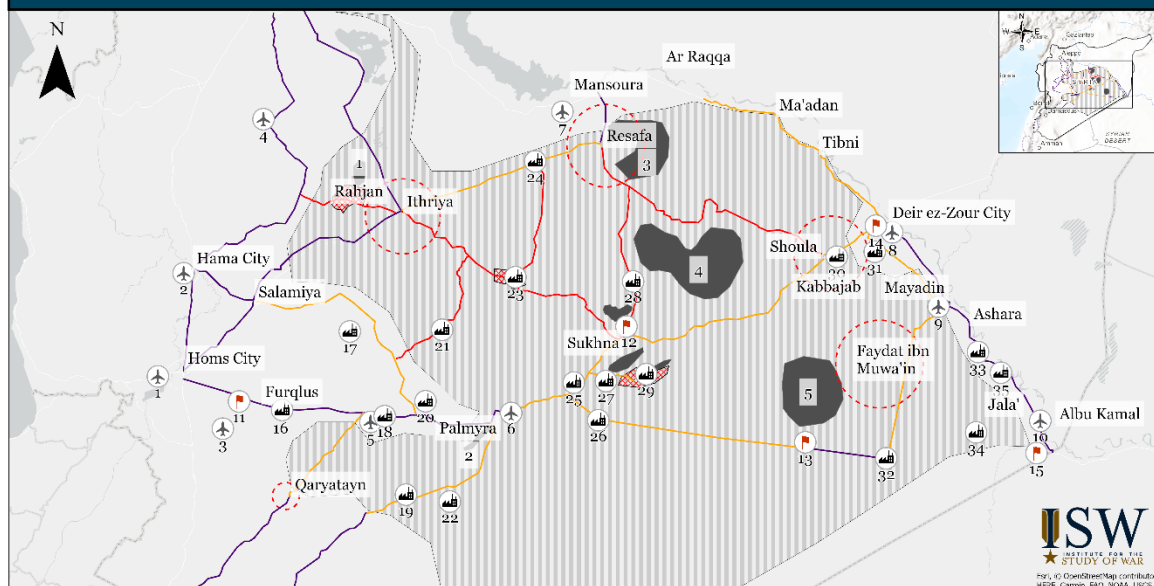
- north-east of Rahjan, towards Ithriya (Hama governorate);
- Jabal Haiyan and Jabal Abu Rujmain areas around Palmyra (Homs governorate);
- east of Resafa, overlooking Tabqa Air Base (Raqqqa governorate);
- Jabal Bishri, in the area between Resafa, Shoula and Sukhna (Homs and Deir Ez-Zor governorates);
- In the area between Shoula and Faydat (Deir Ez-Zor governorate).²²⁹

²²⁸ Waters, G., ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

²²⁹ Kahan, E., ISIS Poised for a Ramadan Surge in Syria, ISW, 9 March 2021, [url](#)



ISIS Control in the Central Syrian Desert August 2020 - February 2021



Ground Lines of Communication

- Regime-controlled
- ISIS-contested
- ISIS-dominated

ISIS Zones

- ISIS-Threatened Chokepoints
- Failed ISIS Land Grabs Since AUG 2020
- ISIS Control Zones
- ISIS Transit Zone

Regime Military Air Bases

1. Old Homs Military Air Base
2. Hama Military Airport
3. Shayrat Air Base
4. Abu Ad Duhor Air Base
5. Althias/T4 Airport
6. Palmyra Air Base
7. Tabqa Air Base
8. Deir ez-Zour Military Airport
9. Mayadin Artillery Base
10. Hamdan Air Base

Regime Military Ground Bases

11. Furqlus Base
12. Pro-regime base in Sukhna
13. Humayma
14. Panorama Base
15. Imam Ali Base

ISIS Territorial Bases

1. Northeast of Rahjan, aiming towards Ithriya
2. Jabal Haiyan and Jabal Abu Rujmain overlooking Palmyra
3. East of Resafa, overlooking Tabqa Air Base
4. Jabal Bishri, overlooking transit between Resafa, Shoula, and Sukhna
5. Gorges between Shoula and Faydat, enabling attacks on Faydat, the Deir ez-Zour-Sukhna road, and T2

Oil and Gas Infrastructure

16. Furqlus Gas Plant
17. Bila'as Gas Field
18. T4 Pumping Station
19. Phosphate Mines at Khuneifis
20. Jihar Gas Field
21. Sha'er Gas Field
22. Phosphate Mines at Sawannah
23. Tuwainan Oil Field
24. Safaiyah Gas Facility
25. Arak Gas Refinery
26. T3 Pumping Station
27. Hayl Gas Field
28. Tayba Oil Field
29. Doubayat Gas Field
30. Shula Gas Field
31. Taym Oil Field
32. T2 Pumping Station
33. Kishma Oil Field
34. Hamar Oil Fields
35. Ward Oil Field

Map by Eva Kahan and George Barros
Institute for the Study of War © 2021

Map 3: © ISW, ISIS Control in the Central Syrian Desert August 2020 – February 2021

The US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) noted that ISIL also operated in areas of Aleppo, Raqqa and Hasaka, but it was less active.²³⁰ Limited ISIL presence has been reported in the Idlib area, despite regular arrests of ISIL fighters by HTS.²³¹

²³⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23

²³¹ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

According to US sources reporting to USDOD, there were 615 ISIL attacks recorded in Syria in 2020. Around 50 % of these took place in Deir Ez-Zor governorate, followed by Homs, Raqqqa and Hama governorates. Small number of attacks were also reported in Hasaka, Aleppo, Dar'a, Idlib and Quneitra governorates.²³² According to an analysis by Gregory Waters, ISIL carried out at least 286 attacks in 2020 of which 94 were classified as high-quality attacks. Based on GoS social media sources and interviews conducted, the same source assessed that in 2020 ISIL attacks led to 432 GoS fighters and 41 civilians being killed, while more than 211 were injured, without specifying whether these were fighters or civilians.²³³

The Rojava Information Center documented 572 ISIL attacks in north-east Syria in 2020 which led to 299 fatalities, a significant decrease from 2019 when it recorded 906 ISIL attacks which led to 415 persons being killed. Most of the attacks were documented in Deir Ez-Zor governorate and other mainly Arab inhabited areas of north-east Syria.²³⁴

Between January and September 2020, the largest number of ISIL attacks was recorded by USDOD in Deir Ez-Zor governorate²³⁵, specifically in Deir Ez-Zor city and surrounding areas. ISIL operations were also reported in the eastern Homs governorate around oil infrastructure and sporadically in Dar'a and Sweida governorates. ISIL capabilities were reported in Homs, Aleppo, Quneitra and Dar'a governorates.²³⁶ ISIL carried out limited complex attacks in GoS-held areas, for instance briefly occupying several GoS positions in and around Al Suknah, Homs governorate in April 2020.²³⁷ Temporary seizure of villages by ISIL was also reported in the second half of 2020 in east Hama governorate.²³⁸

BBC reported that in January 2021 ISIL launched more than 100 attacks in north-east Syria, mainly in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. The attacks targeted persons perceived to have links to GoS or SDF, including through assassinations, kidnappings and bombings. Persons deemed wealthy were also targeted for extortion and demanded to pay large sums.²³⁹

ISIL reportedly operates in a decentralised manner, allowing decision-making to each independent cell.²⁴⁰ Most ISIL attacks were carried out by small cells²⁴¹ using small-arms fire and IEDs for attacks on

²³² Total based on cumulating quarterly reporting of ISIL attacks. USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 51; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1 2020 – December 31 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 16

²³³ The author defines high quality attacks as attacks behind frontlines, those that result in seized positions, target GoS officers, involve coordinated attacks on multiple positions, fake checkpoints, ambushes on military convoys, or attacks that kill at least three soldiers or lead to POWs. Waters, G., *ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

²³⁴ Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report 2020*, 16 January 2021, [url](#), p. 2, 9

²³⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 51-52; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 26; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23

²³⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 51-52

²³⁷ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 26

²³⁸ Waters, G., *ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

²³⁹ BBC News, *IS brutality returning to Syrian towns*, 7 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁰ UN Security Council, *Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68]*, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 6-7

²⁴¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead IG Report to the US Congress, October 1 2020 – December 31 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 12

security forces and civilians.²⁴² Larger-scale attacks which resulted in more casualties amongst security forces were reported in GoS-held areas in Homs, Hama, Raqqa and Aleppo governorates.²⁴³ ISIL attacks in GoS-held areas included complex ambushes and targeted assassinations against GoS forces.²⁴⁴, attacks on tribal leaders in Deir Ez-Zor²⁴⁵, intimidation and extortion of local merchants and farmers²⁴⁶, as well as a large-scale kidnapping of civilians in Hama governorate.²⁴⁷

While security operations against ISIL cells were carried out during the reference period²⁴⁸, observers have deemed them insufficient to neutralise ISIL presence.²⁴⁹ The UN Security Council assessed that compared to Iraq, in Syria security operations against ISIL are not as stringent.²⁵⁰

The UN Security Council estimated in a report from February 2021 that ISIL has a combined 10 000 fighters active in Syria and Iraq.²⁵¹ In a December 2020 interview, former Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS James Jeffrey estimated ISIL to have between 8 000 and 16 000 fighters in Iraq and Syria.²⁵²

Detained ISIL fighters and their families in north-east Syria number more than 100 000.²⁵³ Human Rights Watch stated in March 2021 that around 63 400 suspected ISIL family members, the majority women and children, are currently detained mainly at al Hol and Roj camps in north-east Syria. Nearly 43 000 foreigners, including women and children, who are suspected of ISIL links were also reported to be detained in north-east Syria since ISIL's territorial defeat in 2019, without being brought before a court or repatriated.²⁵⁴ Detained ISIL fighters in north-east Syria number approximately 11 000, a significant number of whom are foreign fighters.²⁵⁵

²⁴² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 26; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 22

²⁴³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23

²⁴⁴ Waters, G., ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in September 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 6

²⁴⁶ Jeffrey, J., Part 1: The Future of ISIS, Wilson Center, 22 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁷ Waters, G., Mass Kidnapping in Central Syria Reveals Dynamics of ISIS Resurgence, Newlines Institute, 8 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 56; Jeffrey, J., Part 3: The Future of Anti-ISIS Coalition, Wilson Center, 22 December 2020, [url](#); BBC News, Syria war: Russian jets 'bomb IS positions in desert region', 24 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁹ Enab Baladi, Islamic State in the Syrian Desert: an enemy used by different parties for strategic objectives, 10 January 2021, [url](#); USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2021 – March 31, 2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), p. 69

²⁵⁰ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 6-7

²⁵¹ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 6-7

²⁵² Jeffrey, J., Part 1: The Future of ISIS, Wilson Center, 22 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁵³ HRW, World Report 2021 - Syria, 13 January 2021, [url](#); 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](#), pp. 3, 7

²⁵⁴ HRW, Thousands of Foreigners Unlawfully Held in NE Syria, 23 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁵ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 20

During the reporting period, riots²⁵⁶, violence²⁵⁷ and small-scale escapes of ISIL suspects from prisons and camps in north-east Syria²⁵⁸ were reported.

In 2020, Kurdish authorities in north-east Syria issued two general amnesties: one for 25 000 Syrians affiliated with ISIL and another for low-level Syrian ISIL prisoners who were not charged with violent crimes.²⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch stated that by October 2020 around 1 000 had been released.²⁶⁰ Kurdish authorities told reporters in October 2020 that 631 detainees with ‘no blood on their hands’ had been released.²⁶¹ The Rojava Information Center reported that ISIL attacks in areas where those residents returned did not change following the releases.²⁶²

Further information on ISIL is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#) and [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#)

²⁵⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 57; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 60-61

²⁵⁷ Jeffrey, J., Part 2: ISIS Prisoners and Families, Wilson Center, 22 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁵⁸ COAR, Series of Strikes Show Pressures Building on Northwest Syria Aid Response, 29 March 2021, [url](#)

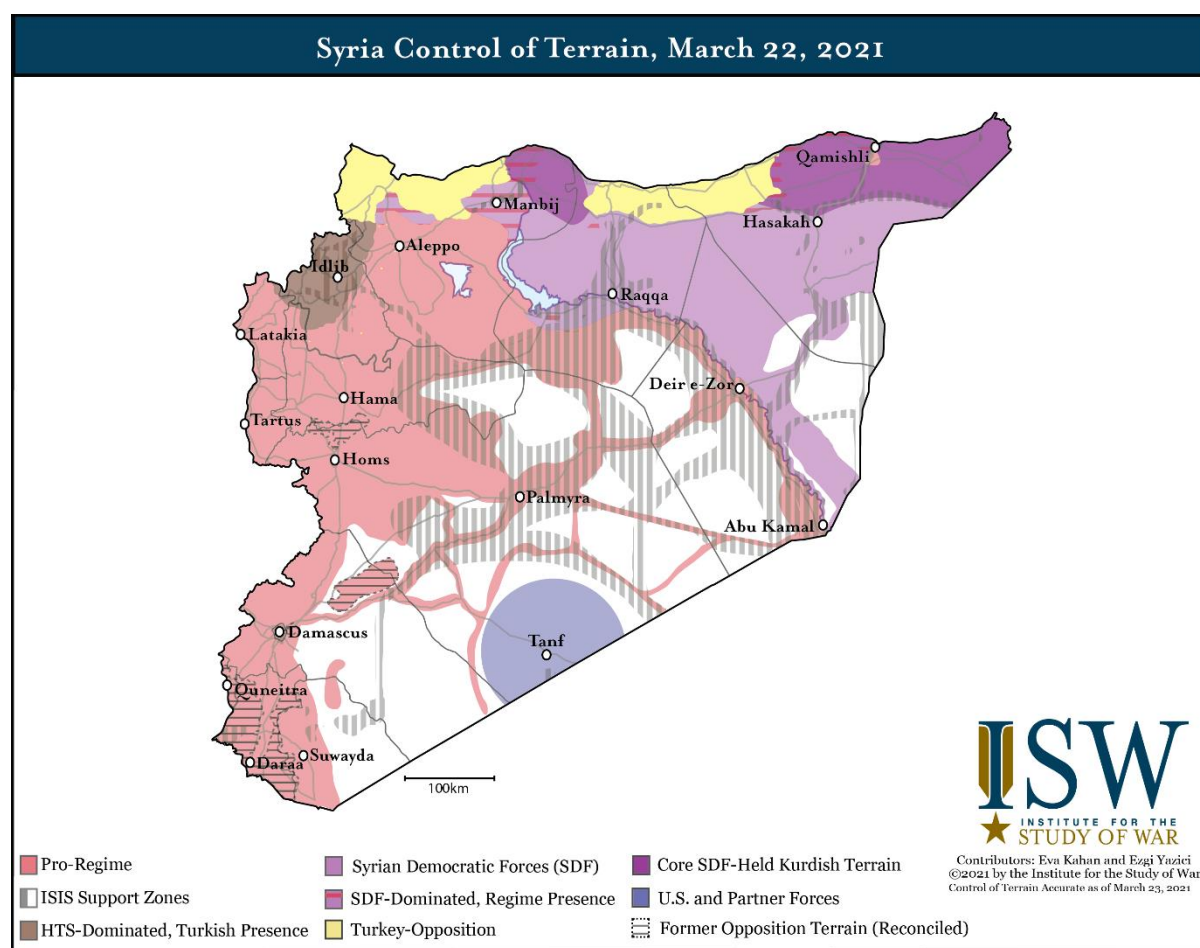
²⁵⁹ HRW, World Report 2021 - Syria, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁰ HRW, World Report 2021 - Syria, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁶¹ AP News, Syria Kurds free hundreds of IS militants as part of amnesty, 15 October 2020, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Syria Kurds free more than 600 ISIL fighters as part of amnesty, 15 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁶² Rojava Information Center, Report: ISIS sleeper-cell attacks reach record low despite mass releases, multiple Hol Camp fatalities, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

1.5 Recent security trends



Map 4: © ISW, Control of terrain in Syria, 22 March 2021

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

As of March 2021, the GoS controlled most of the country²⁶³, including the major cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, and nearly all the governorates capitals (see also [Map 4](#)).²⁶⁴ Foreign actors and pro-GoS militias exert significant influence over parts of the territory nominally under GoS control.²⁶⁵ According to the US Department of State (USDOS), the Syrian government ‘possessed limited influence over foreign military or paramilitary organizations’ operating in Syria, which included Russian forces, the Lebanese Hezbollah, the IRGC and pro-government militias such as NDF.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Based on reading of maps in ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 26 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁴ Balanche, F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁵ Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah’s Experience in Syria, EUI, 13 March 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 3, 7; Al Monitor, Iranian forces form new groups to boost influence in east Syria, 23 February 2021, [url](#); SWP, Iran’s Multi-Faceted Strategy in Deir ez-Zor. From Fighting Terrorism to Creating a Zone of Influence, March 2020, [url](#), p. 1; FP, Iran Is Trying to Convert Syria to Shiism, 15 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁶ USDOS, 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 1

The GoS controls only 15 % of the country's international land borders while the rest are being controlled by foreign actors. GoS allies control around 20 % of Syria's borders. The Lebanese Hezbollah controls the border with Lebanon from its bases in Homs and Rural Damascus. Iraqi Shia militias backed by Iran control the border area with Iraq from Abu Kamal (Deir Ez-Zor governorate) to al Tanf (Homs governorate). In Dar'a governorate, GoS control is not absolute and reconciled fighters maintain some influence on the border with Jordan. In the north of Syria, GoS has control of only one border crossing north of Latakia, the rest of the northern borders of Syria being under the control of either the Turkish-backed anti-GoS armed groups, HTS or SDF in conjunction with Russian forces.²⁶⁷

Freedom House stated that pro-government militias are 'nominally loyal to the regime but often free to exploit the population in areas they control'.²⁶⁸ In GoS-held areas in Deir Ez-Zor governorate which have been recaptured from ISIL, militias were reported to be in control²⁶⁹ and engaging in criminality and extortion of civilians.²⁷⁰ Residents of the governorate of Sweida have accused GoS-affiliated forces of tolerating or even supporting criminal networks operating in the province.²⁷¹ While GoS has sometimes engaged in operations to bring unaccountable pro-GoS militias under its control²⁷², 'enforcement remains uneven'.²⁷³

During the reporting period, in some places in Damascus²⁷⁴, Rural Damascus, Homs²⁷⁵, Dar'a²⁷⁶, Aleppo²⁷⁷ and Sweida²⁷⁸ governorates, armed clashes between pro-GoS militias were reported.²⁷⁹

Between April 2019²⁸⁰ and beginning of March 2020²⁸¹, the GoS carried out a military offensive against opposition-held areas in parts of Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates²⁸², leading

²⁶⁷ Balanche, F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#); See also the map titled Syria's borders are under external control presented by the same sources [here](#)

²⁶⁸ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2020 - Syria, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁹ Berti, B. and Tsurkov, E., Life after the Caliphate: Human Security Challenges in Syria and Iraq, KAS, [url](#), p. 15

²⁷⁰ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 23; Al Monitor, Pro-Iran militias in Syria soak merchants for cash at checkpoints, 21 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁷¹ Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal 'sulh' and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), p. 10; Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 22-28 February 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁷² 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](#)

²⁷³ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 23

²⁷⁴ Syrian Observer (The), Clashes Continued Between the Fourth Division and Iranian Militias in Damascus, 5 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁵ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 6 July – 12 July 2020, [url](#), p. 4

²⁷⁶ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 22 June – 28 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 4; Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 6 July – 12 July 2020, [url](#), p. 4; Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 17 August – 23 August 2020, [url](#), p. 4

²⁷⁷ Syrian Observer (The), Fatemiyoun Arrest Six Fourth Division Soldiers Including an Officer in Aleppo, 2 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 5; COAR, The Syrian economy at war. Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8; Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary for 28 September - 4 October 2020, 8 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁹ Al-Masri, A., Reliable no more? The current state of the Syrian armed forces, Atlantic Council, 22 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/44/61], 3 September 2020, [url](#), p. 3; 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; USIP, Amid Humanitarian Crisis, Syrian Regime Intensifies Idlib Offensive, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁸¹ BBC News, Syria war: Idlib ceasefire between Russia and Turkey begins, 6 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁸² 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

to a high number of civilian casualties²⁸³, massive displacement of civilians and a humanitarian crisis.²⁸⁴ In early 2020, the GoS offensive in north-west Syria made advances in opposition-held areas in northern Hama governorate and southern Idlib governorate.²⁸⁵ 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 2019²⁸⁶ and managed to take control of the full length of the M5 Damascus-Aleppo highway.²⁸⁷

GoS-held areas situated in proximity to the frontlines in north-west Syria have been targeted by mortar and rocket attacks.²⁸⁸ According to information obtained by the CoI, attacks by opposition forces based in north-west Syria (Idlib, northern Latakia, western Hama and western Aleppo governorates) on GoS-held areas led to at least 202 civilians being killed and 456 others injured between November 2019 and 1 May 2020.²⁸⁹

According to the 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'.²⁹⁰

During the reference period, ISIL attacks in GoS-held areas, predominantly targeting GoS security forces were assessed by sources to have caused hundreds of casualties.²⁹¹

For more information on ISIL activity in GoS-controlled areas see [Section 1.4.6 Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant \(ISIL\)](#).

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.'²⁹² In Dar'a governorate, tensions between GoS forces and opposition armed groups escalated in March 2020 leading to artillery shelling by the SAA and retaliatory attacks by opposition forces.²⁹³ Civilian casualties were reported as a result of indiscriminate shelling and rocket attacks between the two parties.²⁹⁴ Kidnappings of civilians and targeted killings of civilians, former opposition fighters and members of GoS security forces by unknown perpetrators were increasingly reported in 2020 in Dar'a and Sweida governorates.²⁹⁵

Between March and May 2020, the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) documented 52 incidents of 'apparently targeted killings' in Dar'a governorate which resulted in 17

²⁸³ UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#); OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁴ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁵ COAR, Syria in 2021, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁸⁶ UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 9, 26 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

²⁸⁷ International Crisis Group, Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib, 15 May 2020, [url](#), p. 1

²⁸⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/44/61], 3 September 2020, [url](#), pp. 15-16

²⁸⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/44/61], 3 September 2020, [url](#), p. 15

²⁹⁰ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 22

²⁹¹ Waters, G., ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#); SOHR, 79 months since the declaration of Caliphate State | ISIS members kill over 100 regime soldiers and loyalists, while cells carry out nearly 65 operations in SDF-held areas, 28 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁹² 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

²⁹³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²⁹⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 5

²⁹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 5; Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 22-28 February 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

civilians being killed.²⁹⁶ The CoI stated that at least 53 persons were killed in targeted assassinations in Dar'a governorate between January and June 2020.²⁹⁷ According to data collected and verified by researcher Abdullah Al-Jabassini²⁹⁸, at least 930 violent incidents took place between August 2018 and February 2021 in Dar'a governorate which killed at least 790 individuals.²⁹⁹ Furthermore, reporting in June 2020, the same source stated that 'assassinations, kidnappings, IED attacks and fatalities in seemingly hit-and-run incidents' are reportedly a frequent occurrence in Dar'a since the return of the province to GoS control in 2018.³⁰⁰ Between January and February 2021, a military escalation took place between former opposition fighters and GoS forces in Tafas, Dar'a governorate³⁰¹, an area described as an enclave for former opposition fighters.³⁰² Clashes between the two sides involved shelling which led to casualties among the combatants.³⁰³

During the reference period, Israeli airstrikes on Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah targets.³⁰⁴ US airstrikes on Iranian-backed militias located in GoS-held areas were reported.³⁰⁵

The economic situation in Syria sparked protests in Sweida in the first half of 2020³⁰⁶, with hundreds of demonstrators calling for Assad to step down.³⁰⁷ The protests were met with violence from security forces and arrests of activists were made.³⁰⁸

1.5.2 Areas under control of Turkish-backed armed groups

As of December 2020, Turkish-backed armed groups operating under the SNA umbrella are in control of 'Operation Euphrates Shield' (area between Azaz, Al-Bab, and Jarablus) and 'Operation Olive Branch' (Afrin district) areas in northern Aleppo governorate, and of 'Operation Peace Spring' area between Tall Abyad (Raqqa governorate) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate).³⁰⁹ The territorial control over these areas remained unchanged as of March 2021 (see [Map 4](#)).

Insurgent attacks in areas under Turkish-backed armed groups were reported throughout 2020, leading to civilian casualties.³¹⁰ While no group normally claimed responsibility for the attacks, Turkey

²⁹⁶ OHCHR, Syria: Bachelet warns of 'ticking time-bomb' as civilian killings mount, 8 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁹⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 5

²⁹⁸ Abdullah Al-Jabassini holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Kent, United Kingdom. He is a Non-Resident Scholar at the Middle East Institute (Washington, D.C., United States), and a Research Fellow for the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute (Florence, Italy). His research is focused on southern Syria, specifically Dar'a governorate. See [url](#)

²⁹⁹ Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal 'Sulh' and the Politics of Persuasion in Volatile Southern Syria, EUI, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

³⁰⁰ Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal 'Sulh' and the Politics of Persuasion in Volatile Southern Syria, EUI, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

³⁰¹ Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 22-28 February 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

³⁰² Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal 'sulh' and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), p. 10;

³⁰³ COAR, Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

³⁰⁴ Asharq Al-Aswat, Israel Says it Hit 50 Syria Targets in 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Israel strikes widely in Syria, sending signal of aggressive post-Trump posture, 18 November 2020, [url](#); Guardian (The), Deadliest Israeli airstrikes on Syria in years kill 57, say observers, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

³⁰⁵ BBC News, Biden takes first military action with Syria strike on Iran-backed militias, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

³⁰⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³⁰⁷ BBC News, Syria war: Assad sacks PM as economic crisis sparks protests, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

³⁰⁸ HRW, World Report 2021 - Syria, 13 January 2021, [url](#); HRW, Syria: Protesters Describe Beatings, Arrests, 28 June 2020, [url](#); Ezzi, M., Sweida Protests: The Start of a New Syrian Revolution?, EUI, 16 June 2020, [url](#)

³⁰⁹ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 3, 5; See also [Map 4](#): ISW, Control of terrain in Syria, 22 March 2021

³¹⁰ International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

has attributed them to YPG³¹¹ or as emanating from SDF-controlled areas.³¹² YPG-associated Kurdish armed groups, Ghadab al-Zaytoun (Wrath of Olives) and Hezen Rizgariya Efrine (Afrin Liberation Forces), were reported to 'have engaged in asymmetric warfare against factions operating under the Syrian National Army'³¹³, and carrying out assassinations and car bombs against Turkish and SNA forces.³¹⁴ Ghadab al-Zaytoun reportedly operates in Afrin and the Euphrates Shield Area.³¹⁵ Hezen Rizgariya Efrine is comprised of experienced Kurdish fighters from Afrin and was reported to carry out attacks³¹⁶ and acts of sabotage against Turkish and SNA forces.³¹⁷

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) stated that out of 194 improvised explosive device (IED) attacks verified in 2020, almost two thirds occurred in areas under the control of Turkish-backed armed groups: 83 attacks in Afrin, Jarablus, Al-Bab and Azaz (Aleppo governorate), 29 attacks in Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate) and 14 in Tall Abyad (Raqqqa governorates).³¹⁸ Between 1 January and 14 September 2020, in areas under the control of Turkish-backed armed groups OHCHR documented at least 116 civilians killed and 463 injured as a result of IED attacks by unidentified perpetrators and explosive remnants of war (ERW).³¹⁹ In February 2021, the Carter Center reported an increase in IED attacks and armed clashes in areas under SNA control in northern Aleppo governorate. The attacks were directed at SNA factions and civilians.³²⁰ No group claimed responsibility for the attacks, but pro-opposition sources attributed them to the YPG.³²¹

While USDOD stated in a report covering January-March 2020 that in the Operation Peace Spring area between Tall Abyad and Ras al Ain conditions 'have stabilised for the time being'³²², the CoI reported periodic clashes between Kurdish forces and SNA and Turkish military forces for the period between January and July 2020.³²³ During 2020, cross-line attacks between SDF and GoS forces on one side and SNA on the other were reported on the frontlines of Operation Peace Spring area.³²⁴ Inside the Operation Peace Spring area, attacks using explosive devices which led to civilian casualties were also reported.³²⁵

³¹¹ Aydinbas, A., A new Gaza: Turkey's border policy in northern Syria, ECFR, 28 May 2020, [url](#); BBC News, Syria war: Dozens killed in truck bomb attack at Afrin market, 28 April 2020, [url](#); Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 15-21 February 2021, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

³¹² International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

³¹³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 5

³¹⁴ Counter Extremism Project, Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), n.d., [url](#)

³¹⁵ Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 8, 53-54

³¹⁶ Enab Baladi, Targeting of Turkish presence escalates in northern Syria, 24 September 2020, [url](#); Al Monitor, New Kurdish group in Syria attacks Turkish-backed opposition in Afrin, 24 April 2021, [url](#)

³¹⁷ Al Monitor, Syrian Kurds ponder Afrin's recapture in shadow of Idlib crisis, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

³¹⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

³¹⁹ OHCHR, Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups – Bachelet, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

³²⁰ Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 22-28 February 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

³²¹ Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 15-21 February 2021, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

³²² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 49

³²³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 2

³²⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 4; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³²⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 4; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 2

The CoI reported that between January and April 2020, Afrin was affected by shelling and car bomb explosions which led to civilian casualties and infrastructure damage.³²⁶ In spring of 2020 an increase in attacks in Afrin was recorded which Turkey attributed to the YPG.³²⁷ On 28 April 2020, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack on a market in Afrin led to 51 people being killed, of whom at least 29 were civilians.³²⁸ Between March 2018 and July 2020, the Carter Center recorded at least 215 attacks on Turkish forces and SNA factions in Afrin.³²⁹ ACAPS assessed in March 2021 that Afrin is confronted with ‘severe insecurity, a high prevalence of explosive hazards, and widespread crime’.³³⁰

Between October and November 2020, UN Security Council reported insecurity in the Euphrates Shield area between Azaz, Al Bab and Jarablus.³³¹ The Carter Center assessed Al Bab as ‘an area of frequent conflict’, documenting at least 120 incidents that took place between January and end of July 2020.³³² Fighting between SDF forces and SNA in the Al Bab area was reported in 2020.³³³ In March 2021, missile attacks on oil facilities near Al Bab and Jarablus were reported.³³⁴ COAR attributed the attack to Russian forces.³³⁵

Infighting between different factions of the SNA which have led to civilian casualties was reported in 2020³³⁶, including in Jarablus³³⁷, al-Bab³³⁸, Afrin³³⁹ and Ras al Ain.³⁴⁰ These type of incidents continued in 2021.³⁴¹ According to a January 2021 report by the Syria researcher Al-Hilu on areas under the control of Turkish-backed armed groups, the level of security and violations against civilians is influenced by the area’s demographic composition, the dominant SNA faction in control and the presence of local population amongst its ranks. In areas where the dominant factions do not include local fighters such as Ras al Ain or Afrin, ‘violations are abundant and security is minimal.’³⁴² By contrast, improved security and fewer violations against civilians were observed in Azaz, Marea, Tall

³²⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 9

³²⁷ Aydiniasbas, A., A new Gaza: Turkey’s border policy in northern Syria, ECFR, 28 May 2020, [url](#)

³²⁸ OHCHR, Syria: Bachelet warns of ‘ticking time-bomb’ as civilian killings mount, 8 May 2020, [url](#)

³²⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary 29 June – 5 July 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³³⁰ ACAPS, Syria. Humanitarian needs in Afrin, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

³³¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³³² Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 27 July – 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³³³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 2-3

³³⁴ Al Jazeera, Missile strikes hit oil refineries in northern Syria, killing one, 5 March 2021, [url](#); Reuters, Missile strikes hit oil refineries in north Syria, killing one, 5 March 2021, [url](#)

³³⁵ COAR, 10 Years On: Adrift, the Syrian Aid Response Awaits a Paradigm Shift, 15 March 2021, [url](#)

³³⁶ OHCHR, Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups – Bachelet, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

³³⁷ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18

³³⁸ Enab Baladi, الشرطة والشرطة “أحار الشارقة” [An agreement to solve the problem of al-Bab in the countryside of Aleppo between “Ahrar al-Sharqiya” and the police], 1 April 2020, [url](#); COAR, Syria update, 6 April 2020, [url](#); Al Modon, اشتباكات بين الفصائل السورية على معابر التهريب [Clashes between the Syrian factions on smuggling crossings], 17 May 2020, [url](#)

³³⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 17; STJ, Afrin: Clashes between Jaysh al-Islam and al-Jabha al-Shamiya lead to civilian deaths, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

³⁴⁰ Enab Baladi, Violations by “SNA”...who to blame?, 12 June 2020, [url](#); Al Monitor, Turkish-backed rebels fight each other in Ras al-Ain, Syria, 22 April 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Ras al-Ain | Clashes between Turkish-backed factions leave several injured, and residents of Luzi village give “Sultan Murad” five-days notice to hand over their son’s killer, 29 December 2020, [url](#)

³⁴¹ STJ, Afrin: Clashes between Jaysh al-Islam and al-Jabha al-Shamiya lead to civilian deaths, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

³⁴² Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

Abyad, Suluk and al-Mabrukah, where the SNA factions controlling them either include locals in their ranks or share tribal links to the fighters.³⁴³

In a September 2020 briefing, OHCHR reported that ‘killings, kidnappings, unlawful transfers of people, seizures of land and properties and forcible evictions’ were documented in areas under Turkish-backed armed groups control, including Afrin, Ras al-Ain and Tall Abyad. The victims of the attacks included ‘people perceived to be allied with opposing parties or as being critical of the actions of the Turkish-affiliated armed groups’, as well as those who could be extorted for ransom.³⁴⁴ In its report covering 2020, Human Rights Watch stated that Turkey and the SNA ‘have indiscriminately shelled civilian structures and systematically pillaged private property, arrested hundreds of individuals, and carried out at least seven summary executions in areas they occupy in north-east Syria’.³⁴⁵

See also the chapters on See also the chapters on [Aleppo governorate](#), [Raqqa governorate](#) and [Hasaka governorate](#).

Information on the conflict background and security dynamics prior to 2020 in areas under the control of Turkish-backed armed groups, is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#)

1.5.3 Kurdish-controlled areas in north-east Syria

As of March 2021, in north-east Syria the 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.³⁴⁶ According to COAR, no significant changes regarding territorial control were recorded in north-east Syria during the reporting period.³⁴⁷ Maps depicting territorial control in Syria over time similarly indicate that no significant changes in control of terrain in north-east Syria took place during the reference period.³⁴⁸

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’.³⁴⁹ During the reporting period, ISIL insurgent activity was reported in Kurdish-controlled areas³⁵⁰, particularly in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.³⁵¹ ISIL attacks predominantly targeted SDF forces and the international counter-

³⁴³ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

³⁴⁴ OHCHR, Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups – Bachelet, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

³⁴⁵ HRW, World Report 2021 - Syria, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

³⁴⁶ Based on reading of maps in ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 26 March 2021, [url](#)

³⁴⁷ COAR, Syria in 2021, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

³⁴⁸ Liveuamap, Syria, 1 January 2020, [url](#); Liveuamap 30 March 2021, [url](#)

³⁴⁹ 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

³⁵⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 39; Waters, G., ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#); BBC News, IS brutality returning to Syrian towns, 7 February 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 15

³⁵¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 51; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1 2020 – December 31 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 16; Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report 2020, 16 January 2021, [url](#), p. 2, 9

ISIL coalition³⁵², but civilians, including tribal leaders, local merchants and persons deemed wealthy were also targeted.³⁵³

For more information on ISIL activity in Kurdish-controlled areas see [Section 1.4.6 Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant \(ISIL\)](#) and chapters on [Aleppo governorate](#), [Raqqqa governorate](#), [Hasaka governorate](#) and [Deir Ez-Zor governorate](#).

Unclaimed IED attacks targeting civilians or security forces were reported in Kurdish-controlled areas during the reference period.³⁵⁴

Tensions between US troops and Russian³⁵⁵ 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.³⁵⁶

Clashes involving gunfire and shelling between SDF and SNA were reported to take place between July and September 2020 on the frontlines of the Operation Peace Spring area, specifically around Tal Tamr and Ras al Ain.³⁵⁷ In autumn and early winter of 2020, military confrontations between Turkey and the SNA on one side and the SDF on the other escalated around the town of Ain Issa, located in Raqqqa governorate at 45 km from Tall Abyad.³⁵⁸ The confrontations reportedly led to civilians being injured³⁵⁹ and the displacement of 6 500 residents from the city and an additional 3 000 from the surrounding areas since mid-December 2020, according to the SDF-led administration.³⁶⁰ Clashes around Ain Issa continued in 2021.³⁶¹

Between 20 January 2021 and 2 February 2021, tensions have erupted between SDF authorities and GoS forces controlling areas of Qamishli and Hasaka cities over distribution of humanitarian assistance.³⁶² The tensions escalated on 20 January 2021 when Kurdish authorities imposed a blockade of GoS-held neighbourhoods in the two cities, restricting 'all traffic, including civilian, commercial and humanitarian shipments and partners' from entering the areas, affecting food assistance and other services for 220 000 people.³⁶³ In response, the GoS blocked the predominantly

³⁵² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 15

³⁵³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23; BBC News, IS brutality returning to Syrian towns, 7 February 2021, [url](#); Jeffrey, J., Part 1: The Future of ISIS, Wilson Center, 22 December 2020, [url](#)

³⁵⁴ OHCHR, Syria: Bachelet warns of 'ticking time-bomb' as civilian killings mount, 8 May 2020, [url](#); Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 6-12 April 2020, [url](#), p. 5; Kurdistan24, IED attack injures civilians in Syria's Manbij, 20 October 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Al-Busayrah explosion update | Number of people injured rises in blast targeting collaborators with SDF, east of Deir ez-Zor, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

³⁵⁵ 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](#); CNN, Multiple US troops injured in collision with a Russian military convoy in Syria, 26 August 2020, [url](#)

³⁵⁶ BBC News, Syria war: 'One killed' as US troops clash with government loyalists near Qamishli, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁵⁷ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 62

³⁵⁸ COAR, Syria update, 7 December 2020, [url](#); Asharq Al-Awsat, Turkish Forces Shell Villages of Ain Issa Countryside, 16 December 2020, [url](#); Airwars, Annual Report 2020, March 2021, [url](#), p. 10

³⁵⁹ COAR, Syria in 2021, 28 January 2021, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Civilians flee Ain Issa, northeast Syria as clashes escalate, 27 December 2020, [url](#)

³⁶⁰ COAR, Syria in 2021, 28 January 2021, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Civilians flee Ain Issa, northeast Syria as clashes escalate, 27 December 2020, [url](#)

³⁶¹ Al Monitor, Turkey reinforces military posts around Ain Issa amid clashes with Kurdish forces, 19 March 2021, [url](#); MEE, First reported Turkish air strikes on Kurdish zone in Syria in 17 months, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

³⁶² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

³⁶³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 4

Kurdish neighbourhood Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo city³⁶⁴ and restricted movements in in eastern Aleppo and Manbij.³⁶⁵ Clashes between GoS-affiliated NDF and the SDF-internal forces, Asayish were reported.³⁶⁶ Pro-GoS protests which took place in Hasaka were reportedly met with violence by Kurdish forces, leading to one person killed and several others wounded.³⁶⁷ A Russian-mediated deal put an end to the situation at the beginning of February 2021, with the SDF agreeing to lift the blockade of the GoS-held areas in Qamishli and Hasaka, and the GoS reinstating the supply lines in Kurdish inhabited areas in Aleppo.³⁶⁸

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 groups³⁶⁹ and the largest obstacle in GoS' campaign to regain territorial control of Syria.³⁷⁰ In 2019, GoS escalated the military operations in Idlib which continued through the first few months of 2020.³⁷¹

Since April 2019, an escalation of hostilities was reported, leading to high number of civilian deaths, massive displacement and significant damage to infrastructure.³⁷² By December 2019, GoS military offensive intensified which in turn attracted an increased military involvement from Turkey in Idlib on the side of anti-GoS armed groups.³⁷³ Between December 2019 and January 2020, military hostilities increased significantly in parts of Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates.³⁷⁴ 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 out.³⁷⁵

Since cessation of hostilities in early March 2020, the UN Security Council reported that the ceasefire in Idlib has largely held through the reporting period.³⁷⁶ In late March 2021 however, the UN Security

³⁶⁴ COAR, Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

³⁶⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 4

³⁶⁶ Al Monitor, Russia uses regime-SDF tensions to expand presence in northeast Syria, 27 January 2021, [url](#); VOA, Fresh Clashes Erupt Between Kurdish, Government Forces in Northeast Syria, 31 January 2021, [url](#)

³⁶⁷ VOA, Fresh Clashes Erupt Between Kurdish, Government Forces in Northeast Syria, 31 January 2021, [url](#); New Arab (The), One killed in northeast Syria pro-regime rally, 31 January 2021, [url](#)

³⁶⁸ COAR, Sweeping Real Estate Sales Tax Reform Discussed, 8 February 2021, [url](#)

³⁶⁹ 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](#)

³⁷⁰ ISW, Russia enables new Syria regime offensive in Idlib, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁷¹ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16

³⁷² 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

³⁷³ USIP, Amid Humanitarian Crisis, Syrian Regime Intensifies Idlib Offensive, 4 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁷⁴ 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

³⁷⁵ Al Jazeera, Turkey says Idlib ceasefire details largely agreed on with Russia, 12 March 2020, [url](#)

³⁷⁶ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 3; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 3; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 3; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 3

Council noted an escalation of hostilities in north-west Syria, giving examples of the shelling of the Atarib hospital and airstrikes on the area of the Bab al-Hawa crossing, and retaliatory mortar and rocket attacks by anti-GoS armed groups on GoS military bases and neighbourhoods of Aleppo city.³⁷⁷

While the ceasefire led according to the Col 'to a decrease in hostilities and a significant drop in civilian casualties'³⁷⁸, frequent ceasefire violations which included airstrikes³⁷⁹, exchanges of artillery fire, mutual artillery shelling across frontlines³⁸⁰ and limited raids³⁸¹, were reported throughout the rest of 2020 and in 2021. The fighting was concentrated around the Ghab plain and Jabal al-Zawiya, in the southern countryside of Idlib governorate³⁸² and in areas around the M4 highway.³⁸³ Ceasefire violations have resulted in civilian casualties.³⁸⁴

Joint Russian-Turkish patrols tasked with enforcing the March 2020 ceasefire along the M4 highway portion in Idlib governorate have come under attack from anti-GoS armed groups operating in the area, particularly by unknown groups which have been speculated to be associated with the Al Qaeda affiliate HaD.³⁸⁵ HTS clashed with rival armed groups, including HaD in mid-2020 managing to reassert its dominance in the area.³⁸⁶ Confrontations between the armed groups occasionally resulted in civilians being killed in the crossfire in July 2020.³⁸⁷

³⁷⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), pp. 2-3

³⁷⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/44/61], 3 September 2020, [url](#), p. 4

³⁷⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 1; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³⁸⁰ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 3; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³⁸¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 3

³⁸² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 2

³⁸³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 3; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³⁸⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/44/61], 3 September 2020, [url](#), p. 4; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 1

³⁸⁵ Carter Center (The), Power Through Strength Hayat Tahrir al-Sham solidifying control in northwest Syria, 9 November 2020, [url](#); Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 4 - 10 January, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

³⁸⁶ Drevon, J. and Haenni, P., How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads. The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria, 2021, EUI, [url](#), p. 10; Carter Center (The), Power Through Strength Hayat Tahrir al-Sham solidifying control in northwest Syria, 9 November 2020, [url](#); International Crisis Group: In Syria's Idlib, Washington's Chance to Reimagine Counter-terrorism, 3 February 2021, [url](#)

³⁸⁷ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary 20 July – 26 July 2020, [url](#), p 4

Since the March 2020 ceasefire, Turkey has reinforced its military presence in Idlib, particularly in the Jabal Al-Zawyeh area³⁸⁸, and expressed its readiness to respond militarily in the event of a renewed GoS offensive on the area.³⁸⁹

The GoS offensive on the Idlib area resulted in high number of civilian casualties³⁹⁰, over 1 million people displaced between December 2019 and February 2020, and a massive humanitarian crisis.³⁹¹ Between 1 November 2019 and 5 March 2020, at least 1 500 airstrikes, mainly air-to-ground missiles and barrel bombs were launched at opposition-held areas in south-east Idlib and western Aleppo governorates.³⁹² Between April 2019 and late-February 2020, OHCHR verified that at least 1 750 civilians were killed as a result of the hostilities, although the actual number is considered to be higher.³⁹³ Between December 2019 and 31 March 2020, OHCHR recorded 552 civilian deaths in north-west Syria as a result of airstrikes and ground-based strikes by GoS and pro-GoS forces.³⁹⁴

A Col report investigating 52 specific attacks on medical facilities, schools and markets in Idlib and western Aleppo governorate carried out between 1 November 2019 and 30 April 2020, found that pro-GoS forces were responsible for 534 confirmed civilian casualties and opposition armed groups for 48. The total number of civilian casualties was in the source's assessment likely higher.³⁹⁵ According to the Col, confrontations between GoS and armed groups which took place between November 2019 and June 2020 in Idlib and western Aleppo governorate were 'marked by war crimes, including launching indiscriminate attacks resulting in death or injury to civilians'.³⁹⁶

See also chapters on [Idlib governorate](#), [Aleppo governorate](#), [Hama governorate](#) and [Latakia governorate](#).

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 2016.³⁹⁷ Sources place Tanf in Homs governorate.³⁹⁸ According to International Crisis Group, the Tanf base has 'served as a launching point for counter-ISIS operations and training for Syrian opposition factions' fighting ISIL.³⁹⁹

³⁸⁸ COAR, No hasty retreat: Turkey moves stranded northwest outposts, 26 October 2020, [url](#); International Crisis Group, Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib, 15 May 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³⁸⁹ International Crisis Group, Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib, 15 May 2020, [url](#), p. 3

³⁹⁰ UN, Security Council, Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#); OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁹¹ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁹² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

³⁹³ UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁹⁴ 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. 1; 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/2020/327], 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 4

³⁹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/44/61], 3 September 2020, [url](#), p. 5

³⁹⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 18

³⁹⁷ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 51

³⁹⁸ Al, Syria 2020, 7 April 2021, [url](#); BBC News, Islamic State 'seizes key Syria-Iraq border crossing', 22 May 2015, [url](#)

³⁹⁹ International Crisis Group, Al-Tanf, Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

USDOD stated that the tribal militia Mughawir al Thawra received training from US forces.⁴⁰⁰ In April 2020, there were reports that some members of the Maghawir Al-Thawra defected to the GoS.⁴⁰¹

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.⁴⁰² As of August 2020, the camp continued to host around 10 000 IDPs in dire humanitarian conditions.⁴⁰³ In an April 2021 report, the UN Security Council assessed that 12 000 inhabitants were living in the camp.⁴⁰⁴

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.⁴⁰⁵

For more information see chapter on [Homs governorate](#).

1.6 Impact of violence on the civilian population

1.6.1 Tactics and weapons used

General

Throughout the conflict government forces and associated armed groups have used a wide range of tactics to force opposition-held areas into surrender, including using sieges, bombings of civilian populated areas⁴⁰⁶, blocking of humanitarian aid, denial of access to food and other basic services, targeted attacks on health facilities and other civilian targets.⁴⁰⁷ 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.⁴⁰⁸

Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), a not-for-profit organisation that records casualties caused by explosive weapons at the global level⁴⁰⁹, uses a RSS reader to scan Google News for key terms which relate to explosive weapons use such as: air strike, artillery, bomb, bombing, cluster bomb, cluster munitions, explosion, explosive, grenade, IED, mine, missile, mortar, rocket, shell.⁴¹⁰ Based on these entries gathered by AOAV, in 2020, Syria ranked as the second worst impacted country globally from

⁴⁰⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 37

⁴⁰¹ COAR, Syria Update, 21 April 2020, [url](#); Defense Post (The), Defectors quit last US-backed rebel group in Syria, head for regime territory, 16 April 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁰² Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 52

⁴⁰³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 8-9

⁴⁰⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁰⁵ International Crisis Group, Al-Tanf, Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#); Military Times, Iran-backed group launches attack near small garrison in Syria housing American special operators, 16 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁰⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 3

⁴⁰⁷ 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

⁴⁰⁸ Siege Watch, Final Report. Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Aftermath of Syria's Sieges, May 2018, [url](#), p. 8

⁴⁰⁹ For more information about AOAV see [url](#)

⁴¹⁰ AOAV, Methodology, n.d., [url](#)

explosive violence, with 844 incidents and 3 013 civilian deaths and injuries, according to AOAV data. The data for 2020 showed a significant decline as compared to 2019 when AOAV recorded 1 479 incidents (a decrease by 43 %) and 7 256 civilian casualties (a decrease by 58 %). Airstrikes accounted for the incidents responsible for causing most civilian casualties (37 % of the total civilian casualties), followed by IEDs (35 %) and ground launched weapons (19 %). Of the total number of casualties recorded by AOAV in 2020, 599 were attributed to Russian forces and 659 to GoS. For many attacks, perpetrators could not be identified.⁴¹¹

According to AOAV, in 2020 Aleppo (1 287 civilian casualties in 2020 compared to 1 259 in 2019) and Idlib (998 civilian casualties in 2020 compared to 3 824 in 2019) were the worst impacted area by explosive violence.⁴¹²

Airwars⁴¹³ conducts daily monitoring of civilian casualty claims relating to international military actions in Iraq and Syria. It draws on a wide range of sources, including international and local news agencies and NGOs, military briefings and social media sites.⁴¹⁴ Airwars recorded at least 784 civilian deaths in 2020, of which around 46 % it attributed to Russia's airstrikes on Idlib governorate carried out in the first two months of 2020.⁴¹⁵ These figures represent a decrease from 2019 when Airwars recorded 1 099 civilians killed by Russian and/or GoS strikes.⁴¹⁶ Following the March 2020 ceasefire, Airwars stated that civilian casualties attributed to Russia fell to the lowest levels since its intervention began in 2015.⁴¹⁷ According to Airwars, Turkey-led military activities in 2020 reportedly led to 37 civilians killed and 152 injured.⁴¹⁸

In 2020, the US-led coalition officially declared 84 strikes in Syria according to Airwars. Between 18 and 20 civilians were killed as a result of US-led coalition actions according to Airwars' assessments, a 96 % decrease in civilian casualties from 2019.⁴¹⁹

Attacks against civilian targets and population

The CoI noted that throughout the conflict civilians have been targeted with weapons such as "hell cannons", barrel bombs and improvised explosive devices that were inherently indiscriminate as constructed or as used'.⁴²⁰ Between 2011 and the end of 2020, the CoI stated that GoS forces have used artillery and airstrikes 'in a clearly indiscriminate manner', including in civilian populated areas.⁴²¹

Attacks on civilian targets and infrastructure were reported in 2020⁴²² and 2021.⁴²³ Human Rights Watch documented 46 ground and air attacks by Syrian-Russian forces on civilian objects and

⁴¹¹ AOAV, Explosive Violence Monitor 2020, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁴¹² AOAV, Explosive Violence Monitor 2020, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁴¹³ 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](#)

⁴¹⁴ For more information on Airwars methodology see [url](#)

⁴¹⁵ Airwars, Annual Report 2020, March 2021, [url](#), p. 6

⁴¹⁶ Airwars, Annual Report 2019, February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

⁴¹⁷ Airwars, Annual Report 2020, March 2021, [url](#), p. 6

⁴¹⁸ Airwars, Annual Report 2020, March 2021, [url](#), p. 9

⁴¹⁹ Airwars, Annual Report 2020, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁴²⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

⁴²¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

⁴²² 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

⁴²³ Al Jazeera, Several killed in gov't attack on hospital in northwest Syria, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

infrastructure in Idlib governorate alone which took place between March 2019 and March 2020. The attacks led to at least 224 civilians killed and 561 wounded.⁴²⁴

During the period between 5 May 2019 and 25 February 2020, Amnesty International (AI) documented 18 air and ground attacks by GoS and Russian forces on schools and hospitals in Idlib, north-western Hama and western Aleppo governorates.⁴²⁵ UNOCHA reported 61 attacks on schools and education personnel in 2020 in Syria, 70 % of which were recorded in Idlib and 69 % were by airstrikes.⁴²⁶

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 deconfliction⁴²⁷ mechanism'.⁴²⁸ An UN investigation on seven specific incidents that took place in 2019 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 governorates, 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.⁴²⁹

In 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recorded 28 attacks on health care facilities in Syria (24 confirmed and 4 probable) which led to 13 persons killed and 42 injured. Most took place in Idlib (8), Aleppo (6), Deir Ez-Zor (7), and Hasaka (3) governorates.⁴³⁰ As of March 2021, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) had documented 599 attacks on healthcare since the start of the conflict, over 90 % being attributed to GoS and Russian forces. In 2020, PHR documented 8 attacks on hospitals in north-west Syria.⁴³¹ In March 2021, a hospital in Atareb, Aleppo governorate which was included in the UN deconfliction mechanism was shelled by GoS armed forces, killing six civilians and wounding an additional 16.⁴³² The attack was condemned by the UN⁴³³ and EU.⁴³⁴

⁴²⁴ To document the 46 incidents, Human Rights Watch interviewed 113 victims and witnesses of the attacks, as well as healthcare and rescue workers, teachers, local authorities, and experts on the Syrian and Russian militaries. Human Rights Watch examined dozens of satellite images and over 550 photographs and videos taken at the attack sites, as well as logs of observers who monitored Syrian and Russian aircraft in the area (p. 2). HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib"; Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), p. 47

⁴²⁵ AI, 'Nowhere is safe for us': Unlawful attacks and mass displacement in north-west Syria [MDE 24/2089/2020], 11 May 2020, [url](#), p. 5

⁴²⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 13

⁴²⁷ Deconfliction is defined by UNOCHA as 'the exchange of information and planning advisories by humanitarian actors with military actors in order to prevent or resolve conflicts between the two sets of objectives — humanitarian and military — to remove obstacles to humanitarian action and to avoid potential hazards for humanitarian personnel'. See 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](#), p. 6

⁴²⁸ HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

⁴²⁹ The investigation concerned incidents that took place between April – July 2019. 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

⁴³⁰ WHO, Health Cluster, Attacks on health care in Syria 1 Jan – 31 Dec 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

⁴³¹ PHR, Illegal Attacks on Health Care in Syria, n.d., [url](#)

⁴³² Al Jazeera, Several killed in gov't attack on hospital in northwest Syria, 21 March 2021, [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), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁴³³ UN News, Secretary-General Strongly Condemns Recent Attacks in Syria, Including Artillery Strikes against United Nations-Supported Hospital, [url](#), 22 March 2021

⁴³⁴ Delegation of the European Union to Syria, Syria: Statement by the Spokesperson on the attack against a medical facility in Atarib, northern Aleppo, 22 March 2021, [url](#)

Use of IEDs and Explosive Remnants of War (ERW)

During the reference period, the UN Security Council reported that IEDs attacks were responsible for many recorded civilian casualties, and often used in civilian populated areas, including local markets.⁴³⁵ The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) stated that 194 IED attacks were verified in 2020, almost two thirds of which occurred in areas under the control of Turkish-backed armed groups in Aleppo, Hasaka and Raqqa governorates.⁴³⁶

UNOCHA further reported that in 2020 an average of 76 explosive incidents per day were recorded in Syria.⁴³⁷

Citing an advanced UNOCHA draft of the 2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview, the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) stated that 10.3 million people living in Syria 'are at risk from explosive contamination and approximately one third of communities are estimated to be potentially contaminated'. UNMAS stated that in the governorates of Aleppo, Dar'a, Rural Damascus, Idlib, Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor, explosive ordnance causes civilian casualties and limits access and delivery of humanitarian aid.⁴³⁸ UNOCHA stated in a February 2021 report that explosive ordnance contamination constitutes a major protection concern in Syria affecting the lives and livelihoods of the populations.⁴³⁹

UNMAS noted that since 2017 and up to October 2020, it has identified 429 areas contaminated with mines in north-west, north-east and southern Syria.⁴⁴⁰ An assessment carried out by the HALO Trust⁴⁴¹ between late 2018 and 2020 in north-west Syria revealed that explosive ordnance contamination affects 400 communities, impacting 1.6 million people.⁴⁴² Based on interviews with 4 427 victims of explosive ordnance in north-west Syria, the same source found that 61 % of them were caused by unintentional actions while 10 % resulted from people moving discovered explosive ordnance. Of all victims recorded, 88 % were men and boys and 25 % children.⁴⁴³

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines identified 1 125 mine/ERW casualties in Syria in 2019, a drop from 1 465 in 2018. Due to limited availability of data and sources, the figures are thought to be 'substantially higher' in reality.⁴⁴⁴ UNOCHA reported that 25 % of the 2 059 civilian casualties documented by OHCHR in 2020 were victims of unexploded ordnance.⁴⁴⁵

Further information on the use of IEDs and ERW in Syria in previous years is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

⁴³⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 5; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 5; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 6

⁴³⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁴³⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 10

⁴³⁸ UNMAS, Programmes: Syria, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

⁴³⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), p. 6

⁴⁴⁰ UNMAS, Programmes: Syria, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁴¹ A UK-based NGO. For more information see [url](#)

⁴⁴² HALO Trust (The), A Hidden Emergency. Why Explosive Ordnance Contamination Must Be Addressed Now in Northwest Syria, [url](#), pp. 3, 6

⁴⁴³ HALO Trust (The), A Hidden Emergency. Why Explosive Ordnance Contamination Must Be Addressed Now in Northwest Syria, [url](#), p. 9

⁴⁴⁴ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Landmine Monitor 2020, 12 November 2020, [url](#), p. 38

⁴⁴⁵ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

Use of chemical weapons

According to US government sources, the GoS has used various chemical weapons at least 50 times since the war began.⁴⁴⁶ 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 2018.⁴⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁴⁸ As of January 2021, the Col was able to document 38 chemical attacks during the conflict of which 32 were attributed to Syrian government forces, one to ISIL, while for five others the perpetrators remained unknown.⁴⁴⁹ In April 2021, OPCW released its finding following the investigation of an airstrike carried out on 4 February 2018 on Saraqeb (Idlib governorate), concluding that there are 'reasonable grounds to believe' that a military helicopter belonging to the GoS Tiger Forces dropped chlorine gas, affecting at least 12 Syrians on the ground.⁴⁵⁰

In one chemical weapon attack carried out in August 2013 by the Syrian government on rebel held areas in eastern Ghouta, outside Damascus, around 1 400 civilians were killed.⁴⁵¹ Following the 2013 attack, Syria became party of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction.⁴⁵² However, OPCW noted in November 2020 that Syria still had outstanding issues related to its compliance with the treaty.⁴⁵³

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'. Since 2012, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines recorded 686 cluster munitions attacks in Syria.⁴⁵⁴ Between 2010-2019, the same source documented 3 575 casualties from cluster munition attacks and cluster munition remnants in Syria, which ranked as the country with most such casualties in each year since 2012. In 2019, Syria incurred 232 casualties from cluster munitions, accounting for 81 % of such casualties documented globally.⁴⁵⁵

The Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor recorded at least 11 cluster munition attacks between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020 and received information on at least two dozen other unverified attacks in the same period. Most cluster munitions attacks were recorded in Idlib and Aleppo governorates.⁴⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch investigated cluster munition attacks on schools in Idlib governorate, carried out in January⁴⁵⁷ and February 2020⁴⁵⁸, which resulted in civilian casualties.

⁴⁴⁶ New York Times (The), U.S. Says Syria Has Used Chemical Weapons at Least 50 Times During War, 13 April 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁴⁷ OPCW, Summary of the Activities Carried Out by the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission to Syria, 10 October 2018, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁴⁸ GPPI, Nowhere to Hide. The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 3, 5

⁴⁴⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 8 paras 32

⁴⁵⁰ OPCW, Second Report by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team Pursuant to Paragraph 10 of Decision C-SS-4/Dec.3 "Addressing the threat from chemical weapons use" SARAQIB (Syrian Arab Republic) - 4 February 2018, 12 April 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁴⁵¹ 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](#)

⁴⁵² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁵³ OPCW, Report by the Director-General. Progress on the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme, 24 November 2020, [url](#), p. 3 para. 11.

⁴⁵⁴ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munition Monitor 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁴⁵⁵ International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munition Monitor 2020, [url](#), p. 53

⁴⁵⁶ Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, Syria. Cluster Munition Ban Policy, 24 November 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁷ HRW, Syria: Cluster Munition Attack on School, 22 January 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁵⁸ HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib"; Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 115-116

Further information on the use of cluster munitions and incendiary weapons in Syria in previous years is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

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, but also from reports by international institutions and non-governmental organisations and data provided by local partners of ACLED.⁴⁵⁹ On Syria, ACLED incorporates data from a number of partners, including the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Airwars, the Carter Center, LiveUamap, Syria Direct, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the London School of Economics' Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit, the International Security and Development Center and Clingendael Institute.⁴⁶⁰

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.⁴⁶¹

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 [Protests and riots](#)).

EASO used the publicly available ACLED curated dataset for Middle East (9 April 2021) for security incidents figures, graphs and maps.⁴⁶²

⁴⁵⁹ ACLED, Methodology, April 2019, [url](#); ACLED, FAQ ACLED Sourcing Methodology, February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁶⁰ ACLED, Syria Partner Network, April 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁶¹ ACLED, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Codebook, October 2017, [url](#), pp. 7-14

⁴⁶² ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

According to the aforementioned ACLED dataset⁴⁶³, between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 there were 12 565 security incidents recorded in Syria: 3 036 were coded as battles, 7 653 as explosions/remote violence, and 1 876 as violence against civilians. Most security incidents were recorded in Idlib (3 982), Aleppo (2 405) and Deir Ez-Zor (1 322) governorates. The lowest security incidents figures were recorded in Quneitra (56), Damascus (41) and Tartous (1) governorates. As per Figure 1 below, the highest total number of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians throughout the reference period, was recorded between January and March 2020 and between November 2020 and February 2021.

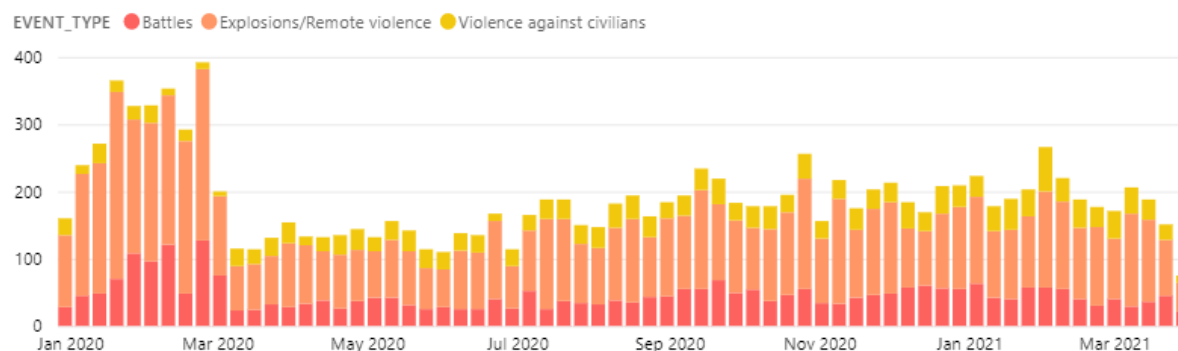


Figure 1. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data⁴⁶⁴

Figure 2 below provides a heatmap of the most affected areas in Syria by security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilian during the reference period for this report.

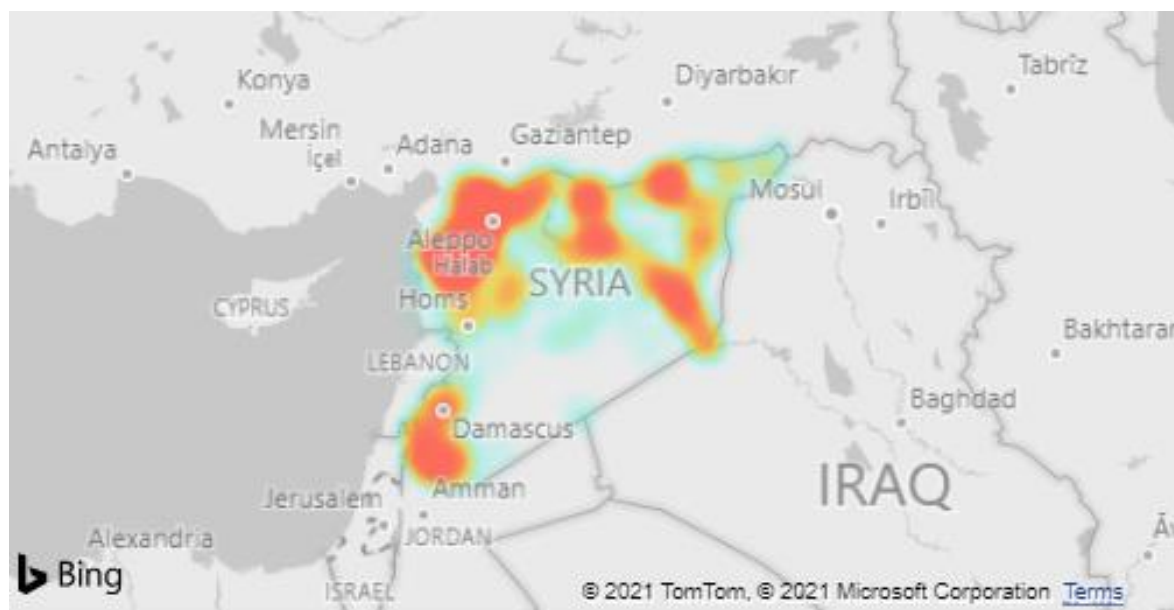


Figure 2. Heatmap of security events (coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians) occurrences between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 based on ACLED data⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶³ ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

⁴⁶⁴ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

⁴⁶⁵ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

Battles

Battles (armed clashes) is the category with the second most registered security incidents. During the reference period, there were 3 036 battles recorded by ACLED, an average of 202 battles/month. Most battles were recorded in the governorates of Idlib (641) followed by Aleppo (601), Deir Ez-Zor (422) and Hasaka (369). No battles were recorded in Tartous governorate, while other governorate with low number of battles were Damascus (3), Quneitra (19) and Sweida (22). As per Figure 3, most battles were documented between January and March 2020, while the lowest numbers were recorded between March and July 2020.⁴⁶⁶



Figure 3. Evolution of 'battles' events between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 based on ACLED data⁴⁶⁷

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 7 653 incidents recorded by ACLED between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. The largest number of explosions/remote violence was registered in Idlib (3 213), followed by Aleppo (1 556) and Hama (736) governorates. No explosions/remote violence were recorded in Tartous governorate, while other governorates with low number of explosions/remote violence were Sweida (6), Damascus (13) and Quneitra (35).

As per Figure 4, figures were particularly high between January and March 2020, while the lowest numbers were recorded between March and July 2020.



Figure 4. Evolution of 'explosions/remote violence' events between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 based on ACLED data⁴⁶⁸

Violence against civilians

The third largest category of incidents is violence against civilians with 1 876 incidents recorded by ACLED between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, an average of 124 incidents/month. Most

⁴⁶⁶ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

⁴⁶⁷ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

⁴⁶⁸ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

incidents during the year were recorded in Deir Ez-Zor (434), Hasaka (376), Aleppo (248) and Dar'a (233) governorates. The lowest number of incidents were recorded in Tartous and Latakia (1 each) and Quneitra (2) governorates.

As per Figure 5, the highest number of incidents of violence against civilians were recorded at the end of September 2020 and then again between end of December 2020 and March 2021. The lowest number of incidents was recorded between January and March 2020.



Figure 5. Evolution of 'violence against civilians' events between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 based on ACLED data⁴⁶⁹

Protests and riots

According to ACLED data, between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 there were 563 protests and 64 riots. Most protests took place in Idlib (137), Deir Ez-Zor (106) and Hasaka (95) governorates. The largest number of riots were recorded in the governorates of Deir Ez-Zor (17) followed by Hasaka (14) and Dar'a (12). As per Figure 6, most protest and riots were recorded in June-July 2020, November 2020 and March 2021.

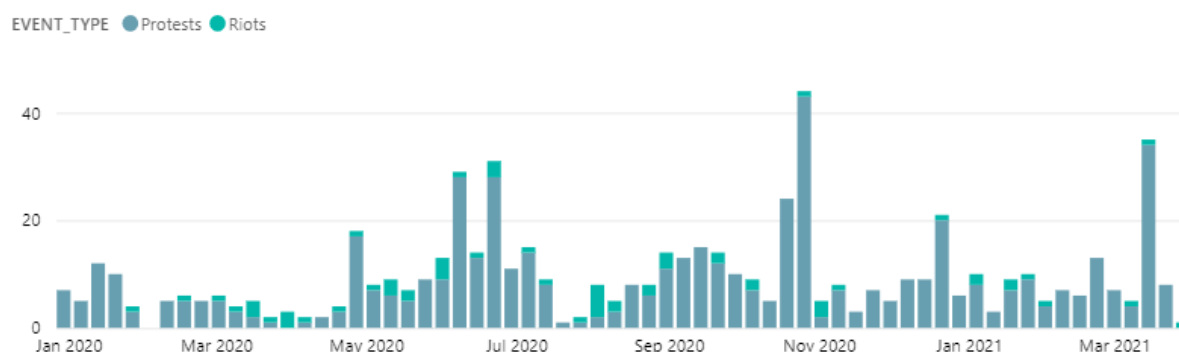


Figure 6. Evolution of 'protests' and 'riots' events between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 based on ACLED data⁴⁷⁰

Figure 7 below provides a heatmap of the most affected areas in Syria by protests and riots during the reference period for this report.

⁴⁶⁹ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

⁴⁷⁰ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

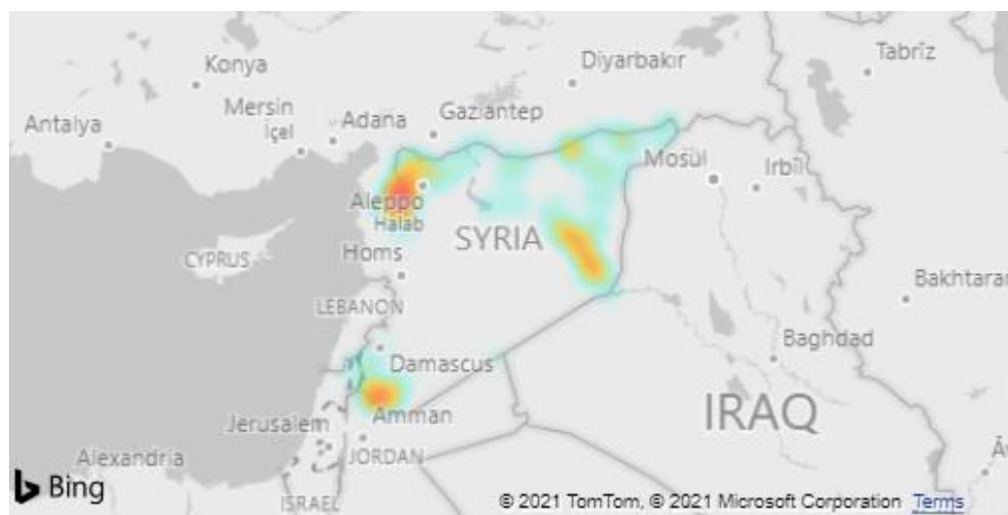


Figure 7. Heatmap of riots and protests occurrences in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 based on ACLED data⁴⁷¹

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.⁴⁷² 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 400 000.⁴⁷³ 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.'⁴⁷⁴ Currently, 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.⁴⁷⁵

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.⁴⁷⁶

In 2020, SNHR recorded 1 734 civilian fatalities, a drop by 48 % from 2019.⁴⁷⁷ VDC recorded 1 906 civilian fatalities in 2020, a decrease by 32 % compared to 2019.⁴⁷⁸ Other organisations documenting civilian casualties in Syria had comparable figures for 2020. The Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) recorded 1 750 civilian fatalities in 2020, although it does not provide information on their research methodology.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷¹ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

⁴⁷² New York Times (The), How Syria's death toll is lost in the fog of war, 13 April 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁷³ Al Jazeera, Syria death toll: UN envoy estimates 400,000 killed, 23 April 2016, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁴ UN News, UN human rights chief fears world has grown numb to Syrian carnage, 26 July 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁵ 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](#); USIP, The Current Situation in Syria, 26 August 2020, [url](#); SOHR, On International Human Rights Day: Millions of Syrians robbed of "rights" and 593 thousand killed in a decade, 9 December 2020, [url](#); BBC News, Why has the Syrian war lasted 10 years?, 12 March 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁶ New Humanitarian (The), Counting under fire: the untold story of Syria's casualty data, 27 October 2015, [url](#); New Arab (The), Will we ever really know how many people have died in Syria since 2011?, 28 January 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁷⁷ SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 7-8

⁴⁷⁸ Data shared by VDC with EASO. Available in **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁴⁷⁹ SHRC, SHRC documents the killing of 1,750 people in 2020, 2 January 2021, [url](#)

Month	OHCHR 2020 ⁴⁸⁰	SNHR 2020 ⁴⁸¹	VDC 2020 ⁴⁸²	SHRC 2020 ⁴⁸³	SNHR 2021 ⁴⁸⁴	VDC 2021 ⁴⁸⁵	SHRC 2021 ⁴⁸⁶
January		286	320	320	113	126	107
February		276	339	277	138	125	146
March		145	178	161	177	153	135
April		78	150	110			
May		125	121	90			
June		96	94	174			
July		107	130	110			
August		122	132	115			
September		102	96	81			
October		126	141	141			
November		172	131	94			
December		99	74	77			
Total	1035	1734	1906	1750	428	404	388

Figure 8. Civilian fatalities in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on SNHR, SHRC (only for 2020) and VDC data

OHCHR documented 2 059 documented civilian casualties in 2020 (1 035 deaths and 1 059 injured), a 15 % decrease from 2019.⁴⁸⁷ More than half of casualties recorded by OHCHR in 2020 were children,

⁴⁸⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁴⁸¹ 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

⁴⁸² Data shared by VDC with EASO. Available in **Error! Reference source not found.** [Annex I: VDC Casualty data](#)

⁴⁸³ SHRC, SHRC documents the killing of 1,750 people in 2020, 2 January 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁸⁴ Data only for January, February, and March 2021. SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 113 Civilians, Including 36 Children, Six Women, and Three Victims Due to Torture, in January 2021, 1 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 138 Civilians, Including 23 Children, 11 Women, and 14 Victims Due to Torture, in February 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), p. 8; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 177 Civilians, Including 28 Children, 35 Women, One Medical Worker, and 9 Victims Due to Torture, in March 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#), p. 7

⁴⁸⁵ Data only for January, February, and March 2021. Data shared by VDC with EASO. Available in **Error! Reference source not found.**

⁴⁸⁶ SHRC, SHRC documents 107 victims in January 2021, 2 February 2021, [url](#); SHRC, SHRC documents the killing of 146 people in February, 2 March 2021, [url](#); SHRC, SHRC documents the killing of 135 people in March 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁸⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12; Figures provided by OHCHR to UNOCHA. OHCHR provided the following disclaimer: 'Civilian casualties and incidents included are not comprehensive but rather reflect what OHCHR could verify to reflect human rights concerns, patterns and the impact of the armed conflict and violence on civilians in Syria. Actual civilian casualties could be higher'. See p. 100

while 25 % were victims of unexploded ordnance.⁴⁸⁸ For the period between 1 December 2019 and 31 March 2021, OHCHR recorded 3 028 civilian casualties (1 372 deaths and 1 656 injured).⁴⁸⁹

In the first three months of 2021, VDC and SNHR recorded 404 and 428 civilian fatalities, respectively (see Figure 9).

Civilian fatalities by governorate	VDC 2020 ⁴⁹⁰	SNHR 2020 ⁴⁹¹	VDC 2021 ⁴⁹²	SNHR 2021 ⁴⁹³
Damascus	100	8	13	1
Rural Damascus	51	28	19	3
Idlib	419	472	37	61
Deir Ez-Zor	207	301	62	59
Aleppo	446	402	73	104
Dar'a	202	217	51	44
Hama	35	54	48	63
Homs	44	14	9	10
Hasaka	125	118	56	73
Raqqa	140	106	17	16
Quneitra	3	3	2	2
Sweida	58	8	12	2
Latakia	2	3	-	-
Tartous	3	-	-	-
Unknown	71		5	
Total	1906	1734	404	428

⁴⁸⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁴⁸⁹ Figures based on total number of civilian fatalities and injuries reported by OHCHR to the UN Security Council between 1 December 2019 and 31 March 2021. 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; 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/2020/327], 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 4; 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 4; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 5; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 5; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 5; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 5; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁴⁹⁰ Data shared by VDC with EASO. Available in [Annex I: VDC Casualty data](#)

⁴⁹¹ SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁴⁹² Data only for January, February and March 2021. Data shared by VDC with EASO. Available in [Annex I: VDC Casualty data](#)

⁴⁹³ SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 113 Civilians, Including 36 Children, Six Women, and Three Victims Due to Torture, in January 2021, 1 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 138 Civilians, Including 23 Children, 11 Women, and 14 Victims Due to Torture, in February 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), p. 8; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 177 Civilians, Including 28 Children, 35 Women, One Medical Worker, and 9 Victims Due to Torture, in March 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#), p. 7

Figure 9. Civilian fatalities in 2020 and first three months of 2021 based on SNHR and VDC data. Monthly breakdown by governorate

VDC and SNHR also provide a monthly breakdown of civilian fatalities by the governorate in which they occurred (see Figure 9). Most civilian casualties 2020 were recorded by the two sources in the governorates of Idlib, Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor and Dar'a. Around 54 % of all civilian casualties documented by SNHR and 47 % of those documented by VDC in 2020 were recorded in governorates where anti-GoS armed groups retained some territorial control: Idlib, Aleppo, Hama and Latakia. For both SNHR and VDC, the lowest number of civilian fatalities in 2020 were recorded in Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra governorates.

Variations between the data provided by SNHR and VDC are clearly visible on some provinces: Idlib governorate ranks first in terms of number of civilian fatalities in SNHR reporting, while the highest number of civilian fatalities recorded by VDC in 2020 was in Aleppo governorate, followed closely by Idlib. Significant discrepancies in the number of civilian fatalities reported are particularly visible in the case of Damascus and Sweida governorates, with a significant higher number of civilian deaths reported by VDC (100 for Damascus and 58 for Sweida) than those reported by SNHR (8 for Damascus and 8 for Sweida). Variations in the figures are mainly related to differences in each organisation's methodology regarding the collection of data, cause of death included in the analysis, as well as varying presence and access to information in different parts of the country.⁴⁹⁴

1.6.4 Humanitarian situation

Syria is estimated to have a population between 20.3⁴⁹⁵ and 22.1 million.⁴⁹⁶ UNOCHA assessed that as of January 2021, 13.4 million persons were in need⁴⁹⁷ of humanitarian and protection assistance in Syria, with 6 million having acute needs (a 20 % increase from 2020).⁴⁹⁸ The majority of persons in need as assessed by UNOCHA live in Aleppo (around 2.7 million), Idlib (around 2.2 million), Rural Damascus (around 2 million) and Damascus (around 1.1 million) governorates.⁴⁹⁹

A combination of factors, including the financial crisis in neighbouring Lebanon, international economic sanctions⁵⁰⁰, and the COVID-19 pandemic⁵⁰¹ contributed to a significant worsening of socio-economic conditions in Syria during the reference period.⁵⁰² The economic situation has also contributed to a rapid deterioration of humanitarian conditions in Syria.⁵⁰³ Around 12.4 million Syrians

⁴⁹⁴ EASO email correspondence with VDC, 21 April 2021; See also section on [Sources on civilian casualties](#) for more information

⁴⁹⁵ CIA, World Factbook, Syria, updated 17 April 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁹⁶ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, [url](#)

⁴⁹⁷ 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

⁴⁹⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. 2021 Needs and Response Summary, 22 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁴⁹⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. 2021 Needs and Response Summary, 22 February 2021, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁰⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 9-10

⁵⁰¹ Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, EUI, June 2020, [url](#), p. 2; WFP, The Socio-economic Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Syrian Arab Republic, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 14, 21, 35, 52; Said, S., The COVID-19 and the Syrian Economy – Implications for Social Justice, FES, July 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

⁵⁰² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 9-10; HRW, World Report 2021 - Syria, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

⁵⁰³ UNOCHA/WHO, COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 22, 1 February 2021, [url](#), p. 3

were estimated to be food insecure at the beginning of 2021⁵⁰⁴, an increase from 9.4 million reported in mid-2020.⁵⁰⁵ Around 2 million people are estimated to live in extreme poverty.⁵⁰⁶

As of 16 March 2021, there were 16 656 COVID-19 cases reported in GoS-held areas, the majority being recorded in Damascus, Latakia and Aleppo. In areas outside GoS control there were an additional 8 743 COVID-19 cases reported in north-east Syria, and 21 072 cases in north-west Syria. The Syrian Ministry of Health reported 1 110 fatalities since the start of the pandemic in GoS-held areas.⁵⁰⁷ UNOHCA assessed that only 58 % of hospitals and 53 % of primary health care centres in Syria were entirely functional.⁵⁰⁸

As of July 2020, only one international border crossing - the Baba al Hawa⁵⁰⁹ - was still authorised for a period of 12 months to deliver humanitarian aid out of the four crossings established by the UN Security Council resolution 2165 (2014).⁵¹⁰ This decision came after in January 2020, the UN Security Council prolonged delivery of cross-border UN humanitarian aid for a period of six months through two of four border crossings - the Bab al Salam and Bab al Hawa crossings between Turkey and north-west Syria.⁵¹¹

Donors pledged EUR 5.3 billion towards humanitarian relief efforts for Syria in 2021-2022 at the Brussels V Conference⁵¹² - a decrease on last year's commitments and only around half the funds needed.⁵¹³

Further information on the socio-economic and humanitarian situation is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Socio-economic situation in Damascus city \(April 2021\)](#).

1.6.5 Displacement and return

UNHCR estimates that the conflict had driven some 5.6 million Syrian refugees out of the country by April 2021.⁵¹⁴ The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) stated in a March 2021 report that there are an estimated 6.5 million IDPs in Syria, 70 % of which have been displaced for over five years.⁵¹⁵

In 2020, a total of 1 822 000 IDP movements were recorded by UNOCHA across Syria, of which 73 % were movements within the same governorate. Most IDP movements took place in the governorates of Idlib (1 070 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 1 030 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate and 821 000 IDP movements within the governorate), Aleppo (690 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 726 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate and 475 000 IDP movements within the governorate), Hasaka (11 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 15 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate and 9 000 IDP movements within the governorate) and Deir Ez-Zor (11 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 15 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate and 10 000 IDP movements within the governorate). The lowest number of IDP movements were registered in the governorates of Sweida

⁵⁰⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. 2021 Needs and Response Summary, 22 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁵⁰⁵ NRC, The Darkest Decade What displaced Syrians face if the world continues to fail them, March 2021, [url](#), p. 8

⁵⁰⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. 2021 Needs and Response Summary, 22 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁵⁰⁷ UNOCHA/WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Response Update No. 16 - 18 March 2021, 18 March 2021, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁰⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. 2021 Needs and Response Summary, 22 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁵⁰⁹ UN Security Council, Limited Cross-Border Access into North-West Syria Placing Strain on Humanitarians to Reach Many in Need, Aid Worker Tells Security Council, 29 July 2020, [url](#)

⁵¹⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

⁵¹¹ UN News, Security Council beats midnight deadline, renews Syria cross-border aid in contentious vote, 10 January 2020, [url](#)

⁵¹² UNOCHA, Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region - Brussels V Conference, 29 - 30 March, 2021 - Co-chair's Statement Annex: Fundraising, 30 March 2021, [url](#)

⁵¹³ UNHCR, United Nations Chiefs urge donors to support record appeals for Syrians and the region, 29 March 2021, [url](#)

⁵¹⁴ UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response, data updated on 7 April 2021, [url](#)

⁵¹⁵ NRC, The Darkest Decade What displaced Syrians face if the world continues to fail them, March 2021, [url](#), p. 7

(1 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, of which 998 were IDP movements within the governorate), Rural Damascus (3 000 IDP movements from or within governorate, of which 323 were movements within the governorate) and Dar'a (1 000 IDP movements which took place within the governorate).⁵¹⁶

UNOCHA provides a full breakdown of the total IDP movements by governorate for 2020 (see Figure 10):

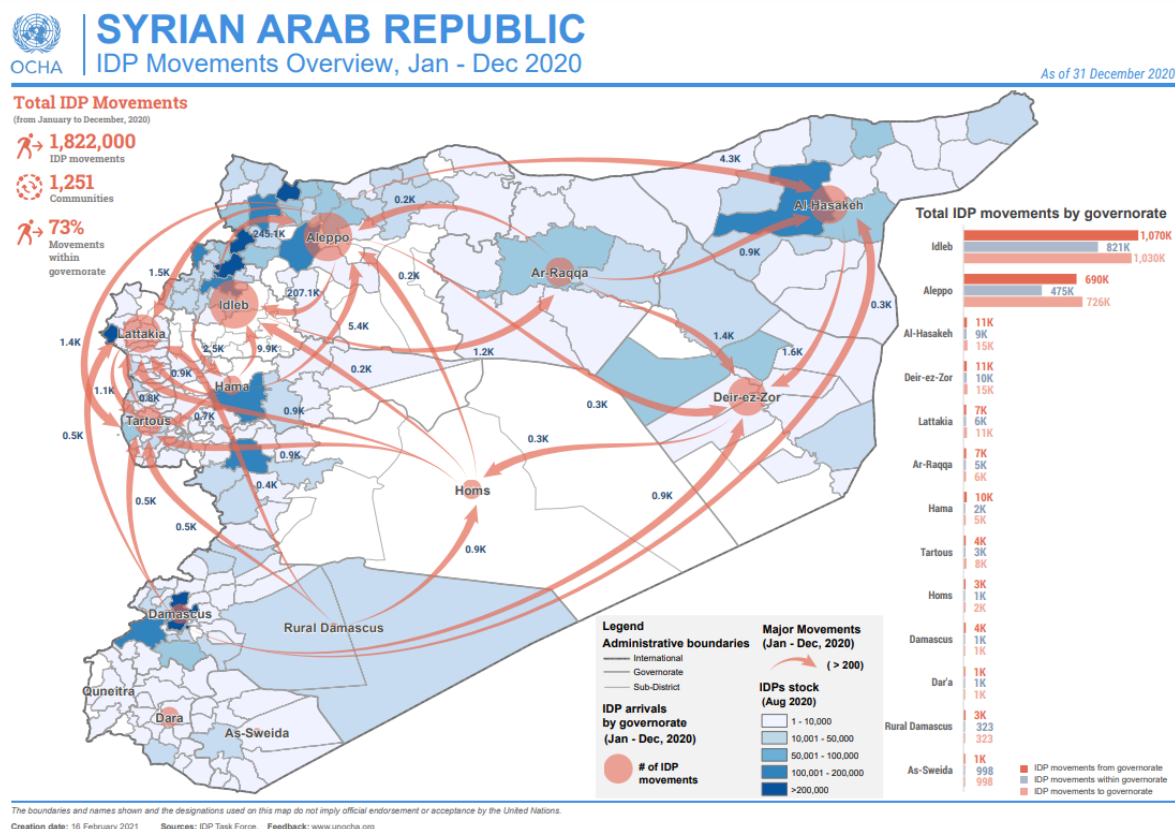


Figure 10. © UNOCHA, IDP movements by governorate in 2020⁵¹⁷

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.⁵¹⁸ In February 2020, UNICEF estimated that more than 500 000 children have been displaced by the conflict in north-west Syria since 1 December 2019. Tens of thousands of children and their families were reported to live in tents and in open air.⁵¹⁹ 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.'⁵²⁰ Since March 2020, the number of IDP movements has significantly decreased.⁵²¹

For the period after the ceasefire that followed the Idlib offensive (March to December 2020), over 600 000 displacements were recorded in Idlib and Aleppo governorates alone. Furthermore, 65 % of

⁵¹⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

⁵¹⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

⁵¹⁸ UN News, UN chief appeals for end to Syria's 'man-made humanitarian nightmare', 21 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵¹⁹ UNICEF, Over half a million children in northwest Syria forced to flee amid continued violence and harsh weather, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵²⁰ ICRC, Syria: Civilians in urgent need of safety and life-saving assistance amidst unprecedented displacement, 25 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵²¹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 14-15

those displaced in 2020 were due to security concerns while around 20 % claimed economic reasons.⁵²² NRC assessed that 'the ceasefire has largely held for much of 2020, but localised insecurity and fighting between groups and parties to the conflict still caused some displacement.'⁵²³

In January and February 2021, around 63 000 IDP movements were recorded across Syria, the majority occurring in north-west Syria, particularly in Idlib and Aleppo governorates. Most IDP movements recorded in this timeframe took place within the respective governorate.⁵²⁴ In March 2021, around 40 000 IDP movements took place, 94 % of which took place within Idlib and Aleppo governorates.⁵²⁵

As of March 2021, there were around 2.7 million IDPs in north-west Syria, of which 1.6 million were living in 1 379 IDP camps/sites.⁵²⁶ IOM assessed that around 220 000 persons living in north-west Syria are at 'immediate risk of displacement'.⁵²⁷

In terms of IDP spontaneous returns in 2020, UNOCHA recorded a total of 448 000 total spontaneous returns, 75 % of which were returns within the governorate. The highest number of IDP return movements took place in the governorates of Idlib (207 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate, 235 000 IDP return movements to or within governorate and 178 000 IDP return movements within governorate), Aleppo (145 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate, 128 000 IDP return movements to or within the governorate and 101 000 IDP return movements within governorate) and Hama (21 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate, 15 000 IDP return movements to or within the governorate and 12 000 IDP return movements within governorate). The lowest number of IDP returns was recorded in Sweida (833 IDP return movements from or within the governorate of which 50 were within the governorate), Quneitra (1 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate) and Tartous (1 000 IDP return movements from or within governorate).⁵²⁸

UNOCHA provides a full breakdown of the total IDP spontaneous return movements by governorate for 2019 (see Figure 11):

⁵²² NRC, The Darkest Decade What displaced Syrians face if the world continues to fail them, March 2021, [url](#), p. 8

⁵²³ NRC, The Darkest Decade What displaced Syrians face if the world continues to fail them, March 2021, [url](#), p. 9

⁵²⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

⁵²⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

⁵²⁶ UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 26 - As of 26 March 2021, 26 March 2021, [url](#), p. 1

⁵²⁷ IOM, Syria Crisis. IOM Consolidated Appeal 2021, 15 March 2021, [url](#), p. 3

⁵²⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

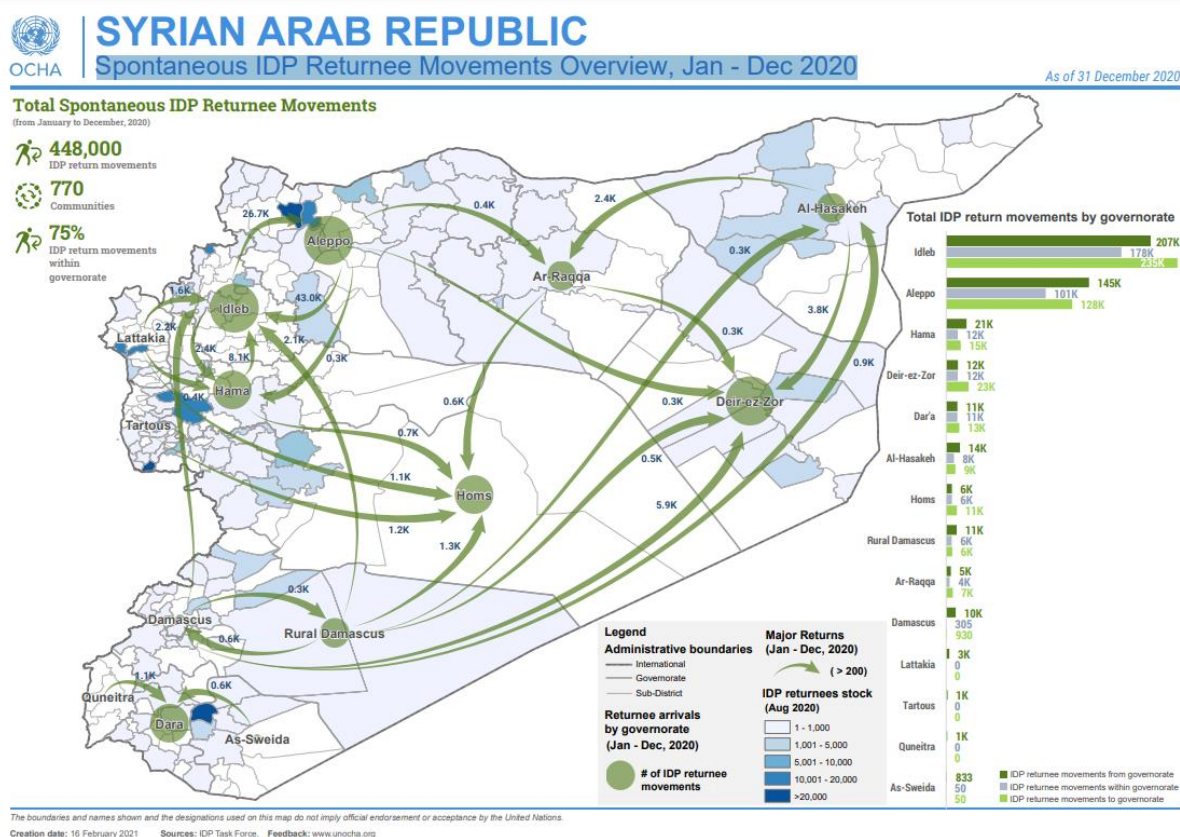


Figure 11. © spontaneous IDP return movements by governorate in 2020⁵²⁹

Around 50 % of the total IDP return movements recorded in 2020 took place between March and May. Of those returns, 94 % took place in Idlib and Aleppo governorates, indicating that the March 2020 ceasefire was an important factor influencing the return movements.⁵³⁰ In an analysis concerning the first half of 2020, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) assessed that more than 200 000 persons who were displaced by the GoS offensive in north-west Syria, returned between March and July 2020. The infrastructure damage in many areas of return made them uninhabitable in IDMC's assessment.⁵³¹

In January and February 2021, around 23 000 return movements were recorded across Syria, the majority occurring in north-west Syria, particularly in Idlib, Aleppo and Hama governorates. Most return movements recorded in this timeframe took place within the governorate.⁵³² In March 2021, around 23 000 IDP return movements took place, 35 % of which took place within Idlib and Aleppo governorates. Quneitra governorate recorded the highest number of returns in March 2021, recording 8 200 spontaneous returns.⁵³³

⁵²⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

⁵³⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 16

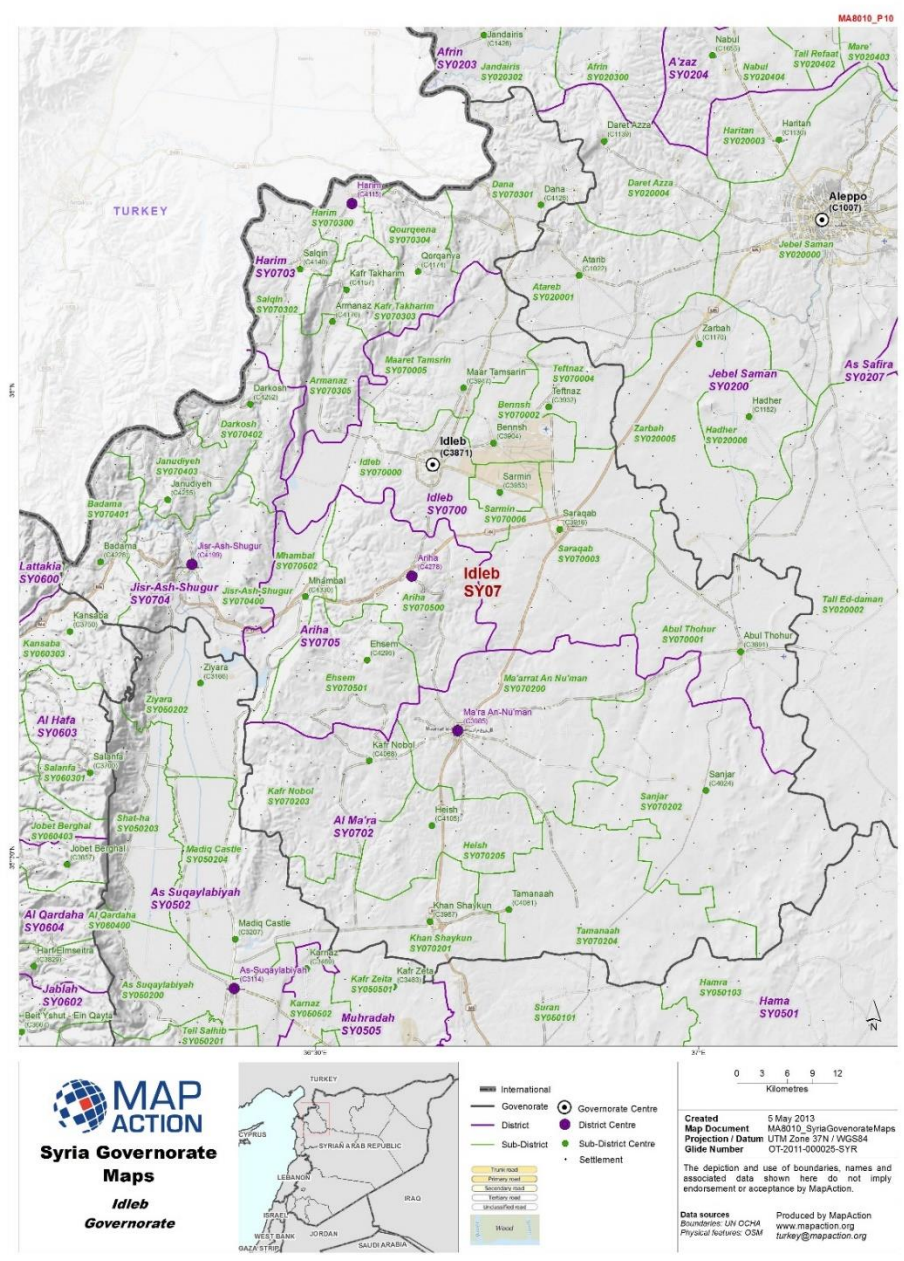
⁵³¹ IDMC, Internal displacement 2020: Mid-year update, 2020, [url](#), p. 19

⁵³² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

⁵³³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

2. Governorate-level description of the security situation

2.1 Idlib governorate



Map 5: © MapAction, Idlib governorate⁵³⁴

⁵³⁴ MapAction, Idlib governorate, 29 July 2016, url

2.1.1 General description of the governorate

Idlib is located in north-west 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, Jisr-Ash-Shugur, Harim and Al Mara.⁵³⁵

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'.⁵³⁶ Bab Al Hawa is the only UN authorised border crossing in Syria open to humanitarian aid as per Security Council Resolution 2533 (2020).⁵³⁷

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Idlib governorate to be of 1 130 000 as of 2019.⁵³⁸ In 2019, other sources estimated that the province [governorate] and surrounding areas was home to nearly 3 million people⁵³⁹, including original residents, fighters and IDPs from other areas.⁵⁴⁰ In mid-2020, IDMC reported that approximately 70 % of the 2.8 million population of Idlib were IDPs.⁵⁴¹ In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Idlib governorate to be of 2 691 361.⁵⁴²

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.⁵⁴³ The majority of the population is Sunni.⁵⁴⁴ Shia Muslims were reported to reside in rural areas of Idlib and some Christians in Jisr al-Shughur area.⁵⁴⁵ 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 in 2017 to areas under GoS control following the so-called 'Four Towns Agreement', which saw a population exchange agreed between GoS and anti-GoS armed groups.⁵⁴⁶

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 as of January 2019 were reported to have been forced to flee en masse as a result.⁵⁴⁷ 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 freedom of movement restricted on women.⁵⁴⁸

⁵³⁵ UNOCHA, Idlib Governorate Profile, August 2014, [url](#), p. 22

⁵³⁶ REACH, Syria, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 45-46

⁵³⁷ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in December 2020 and January 2021, 18 February 2021, [url](#); USDOS, Attacks on Civilians in Syria, Press Statement, 22 March 2021, [url](#)

⁵³⁸ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

⁵³⁹ 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

⁵⁴⁰ 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

⁵⁴¹ IDMC, Internal displacement 2020: Mid-year update, 23 September 2020, [url](#), p. 19

⁵⁴² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

⁵⁴³ Based on reading of Map 29. Ethnic divisions in northern Syria, Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, 2018, [url](#), p. 52

⁵⁴⁴ ACAPS, Idlib – Governorate profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁴⁵ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2019, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 15

⁵⁴⁶ 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

⁵⁴⁷ Hage Ali, M., The Weaponization of Minorities in Syria and Beyond, Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 9 January 2019, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 14-15

⁵⁴⁸ UN Human Rights Council, "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 March 2018, [url](#), p. 14

Before the conflict Idlib was marginalised economically and politically⁵⁴⁹ and ranked as one of the poorest parts of Syria in terms of income, health and education in 2014.⁵⁵⁰

2.1.2 Conflict background and armed actors

Idlib was among the first provinces to join the 2011 uprising against the Assad government.⁵⁵¹ The Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra started in 2014 to take over Idlib from local rebel groups.⁵⁵² Control over Idlib city fluctuated for several years between the GoS forces and anti-GoS armed groups, until in 2015 anti-GoS armed groups managed to gain full control.⁵⁵³ Idlib became the refuge for Syrians fleeing the GoS forces, including activists and fighters from areas recaptured by the SAA.⁵⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵⁵ The governorate has been a stronghold of jihadist militants including Al Qaeda.⁵⁵⁶

In April 2017, 83 people, including 28 children and 23 women, died in a sarin gas attack on the town of Khan Sheykhun in Idlib. Another 293 people were injured including 103 children, in this single attack.⁵⁵⁷

Since May 2017, following an agreement between Russia, Iran and Turkey, Idlib became a 'de-escalation' area, for which the cessation of hostilities and establishment of observation posts was stipulated. It remained the only de-escalation zone in Syria which was not recaptured by the GoS.⁵⁵⁸ However, GoS forces continued military operations in the area, recapturing half of the de-escalation area by mid-2018.⁵⁵⁹ In September 2018, a deal between Russia and Turkey reached at Sochi, created a demilitarised zone in parts of Idlib province.⁵⁶⁰ It also stipulated the removal of heavy weapons by armed groups⁵⁶¹ and of 'radical terrorist groups' from inside the demilitarised zone.⁵⁶² Turkey established 12 military observation posts around the demilitarised area to monitor the implementation of the agreement⁵⁶³ while Russia and Iran set up their own observation points in the GoS-controlled areas surrounding the de-escalation area.⁵⁶⁴ HTS rejected the agreement and attacked Turkish-backed rebel groups, thereby establishing more control over the Idlib area. This caused the GoS to intervene militarily, supported by Russia and by April 2019, the Sochi agreement had collapsed.⁵⁶⁵ At the same time, the GoS was seeking control over the M5 highway, a major commercial

⁵⁴⁹ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁵⁰ ACAPS, Idlib – Governorate profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁵¹ 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

⁵⁵² International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁵³ REACH, Syria, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 45-46; 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, updated 27 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁵⁵⁴ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 54

⁵⁵⁵ Carter Center (The), Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁵⁶ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; New York Times (The), U.S. Sees Rising Threat in the West From Qaeda Branch in Syria, 29 September 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁵⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 5

⁵⁵⁸ RI, Losing Their Last Refuge; Inside Idlib's humanitarian nightmare, September 2019, [url](#), p. 8; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 5

⁵⁵⁹ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 25 March 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁵⁶⁰ RI, Losing Their Last Refuge; Inside Idlib's humanitarian nightmare, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁵⁶¹ 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

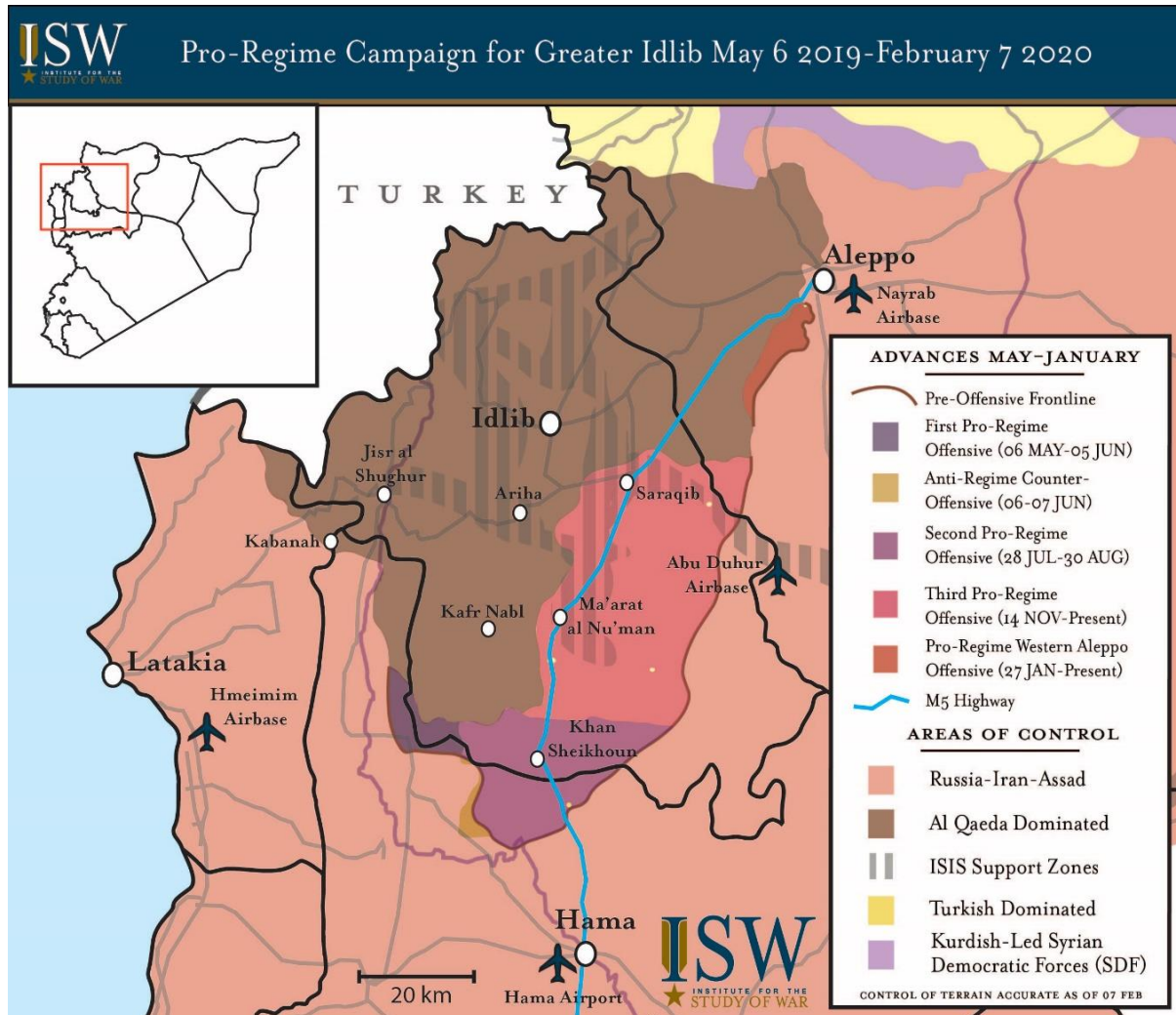
⁵⁶² International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. i

⁵⁶³ Carter Center (The), Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2

⁵⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁶⁵ RI, Losing Their Last Refuge; Inside Idlib's humanitarian nightmare, September 2019, [url](#), p. 4

route running through Idlib and Aleppo governorates, linking Aleppo to Damascus and the south of the country.⁵⁶⁶ 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 it particularly important to the area.⁵⁶⁷ At the end of August 2019, Syrian government forces recaptured Tamaniyah and other areas north of Khan Sheikhun.⁵⁶⁸ At the end of 2019 and in Q1 2020, the GoS escalated the military operations in Idlib and further advanced its positions. This offensive caused one of the worst displacement crises throughout the conflict (see [Section 1.6.5](#)).⁵⁶⁹



⁵⁶⁶ Al Jazeera, The battle for Syria's Idlib explained in 400 words, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁶⁷ Guardian (The), Rebels withdraw from key Syrian town as pro-Assad troops advance, 20 August 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁶⁸ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 26 August – 1 September 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁵⁶⁹ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 16; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

⁵⁷⁰ ISW, Russia enables new Syria regime offensive in Idlib, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

During the offensive in 2019 and the beginning of 2020, civilian infrastructure was attacked and destroyed including hospitals, markets, bakeries, schools and agricultural resources.⁵⁷¹ Hundreds of civilians were killed, including women and children.⁵⁷²

Human Rights Watch described the April 2019-March 2020 military offensive by the GoS and the Russian forces as follows:

‘The alliance launched dozens of air and ground attacks on civilian objects and infrastructure in violation of the laws of war, striking homes, schools, healthcare facilities, and markets – the places where people live, work, and study. They used cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, and improvised “barrel bombs” in populated areas to deadly effect. The attacks killed at least 1,600 civilians, destroyed and damaged civilian infrastructure, and forced the displacement of an estimated 1.4 million people.’⁵⁷³

The Council on Foreign Relations described the situation as ‘the worst humanitarian crisis of Syria’s nine-year war’.⁵⁷⁴

Anti-GoS armed groups

In January 2019, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized large areas of Idlib governorate following clashes with rival armed groups⁵⁷⁵ and by August 2019 controlled over 90 % of Idlib governorate, alongside adjacent parts of northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates.⁵⁷⁶ According to February 2020 US estimates, HTS had between 7 000 to 10 000 fighters, or more⁵⁷⁷, whereas UN estimates of January 2020 were between 12 000 and 15 000 fighters.⁵⁷⁸ In February 2021, the UN estimated HTS had 10 000 fighters, mainly Syrians.⁵⁷⁹ HTS is sanctioned by the UN as a terrorist organisation.⁵⁸⁰

HTS became the dominant actor in the Idlib area.⁵⁸¹ It also established an administrative body – the Salvation Government as a rival of the Syrian Interim Government.⁵⁸² HTS controls the import and distribution of fuel through a company called Watad Petroleum, ensuring earnings at approximately

⁵⁷¹ 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; OHCHR, Increasing airstrike casualties in Syria being ignored – Bachelet, 26 July 2019, [url](#); WHO, WHO deeply concerned about deteriorating health conditions in northwest Syria, 25 December 2019, [url](#); USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 10; International Crisis Group, The Eleventh Hour for Idlib, Syria’s Last Rebel Bastion, 6 February 2020, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁷² OHCHR, Increasing airstrike casualties in Syria being ignored – Bachelet, 26 July 2019, [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/2019/674], 21 August 2019, [url](#), p. 1; UN News, Vital Idlib aid deliveries resume after ‘heavy bombing’ – WFP, 14 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁷³ HRW, “Targeting Life in Idlib”, Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁷⁴ CFR, Can the World Alleviate Idlib’s Humanitarian Disaster Amid a Pandemic?, 6 April 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁷⁵ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 17

⁵⁷⁶ 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

⁵⁷⁷ USDOS, Ambassador James Jeffrey On the Situation in Syria, 5 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁷⁸ 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

⁵⁷⁹ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

⁵⁸⁰ UN Security Council, The List established and maintained pursuant to Security Council res. 1267/1989/2253, generated on: 19 April 2021, [url](#), p. 64

⁵⁸¹ 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](#)

⁵⁸² Clingendael, Strategies of Turkish proxy warfare in northern Syria, Back with a vengeance, November 2019, [url](#), p. 13

USD 1 million per month. HTS reportedly also controls humanitarian aid and imposes taxes on local businesses.⁵⁸³

According to Syria expert Aron Lund⁵⁸⁴, in 2018 the Idlib area was ‘governed by a patchwork of sharia courts, local councils, exile government institutions, and direct rule by armed groups’.⁵⁸⁵ HTS’ and other groups’ courts imposed death sentences and were used to impose ‘draconian social structures’, imposing religious dress codes disproportionately affecting women and girls, and also denying their freedom of movement without a male relative.⁵⁸⁶ The UN reported HTS ‘systematically imposed rules and codes of conduct on civilians living in areas under its control that are fundamentally contrary to human rights, including the right to life, liberty and security of person, to freedom of movement, to freedom of expression and to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Through self-appointed courts, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham members have inflicted harsh penalties and executed persons perceived as critical of the rules or accused of affiliation with the Government.’ Furthermore, the UN reported HTS seized property and houses.⁵⁸⁷

As of 11 April 2021, HTS was still the dominant group in the Idlib enclave, and continued to crack down on defectors from its ranks and other armed opposition groups perceived as a threat to their control, particularly Hurras al-Din (HAD)⁵⁸⁸, an Al Qaeda-linked group that split from HTS in 2018.⁵⁸⁹ The UN estimated that, as of February 2021, HAD had between 2 000 and 2 500 fighters, although it was weakened by leadership losses and overshadowed by HTS. HTS also regularly arrests ISIL fighters.⁵⁹⁰

Groups composed of mainly foreign fighters operate under the authority of HTS. One of these groups is Khattab Al-Shishani Brigade (Chechen fighters)⁵⁹¹, who claimed responsibility for attacks on the Turkish-Russian joint patrols on the M4 highway in July and August 2020.⁵⁹² Another such group is Katiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ, Central Asian fighters).⁵⁹³

Other anti-GoS armed groups are predominantly Islamist groups, having different relations with Turkey⁵⁹⁴, and who ‘have an ambiguous or symbiotic relationship’ with HTS.⁵⁹⁵ The most important ones are the National Liberation Front (NLF) - a Turkish-backed alliance of opposition-armed groups⁵⁹⁶.

⁵⁸³ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

⁵⁸⁴ 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](#)

⁵⁸⁵ Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 53

⁵⁸⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁵⁸⁷ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 4-5

⁵⁸⁸ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary [storymap], 15 April 2021, [url](#); Al-Monitor, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham intensifies campaign against al-Qaeda affiliate in Idlib, 25 February 2021, [url](#)

⁵⁸⁹ Syria Study Group, Final Report and Recommendations, USIP, 24 September 2019, [url](#), p. 22

⁵⁹⁰ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

⁵⁹¹ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

⁵⁹² Carter Center (the), The Russian-Turkish Joint Patrols in Idlib Governorate [interactive map], Syria Conflict Mapping, 17 February 2021, [url](#)

⁵⁹³ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

⁵⁹⁴ Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 55

⁵⁹⁵ International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁵⁹⁶ 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?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

which merged with the SNA in October 2019⁵⁹⁷; and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) - a Uighur-Chinese-dominated jihadist militant faction present around the city of Jisr al-Shughour in western Idlib.⁵⁹⁸ TIP is also called the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and has 3 000 to 4 500 members.⁵⁹⁹ There were other smaller Islamist groups present in the Idlib area, including Ansar al-Tawhid, a splinter of Jabhat al-Nusra, that was active in around the towns of Saraqeb and Sarmin.⁶⁰⁰

Ansar Abu Bakr al Siddiq (AABS) is a relatively small group that pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda and actively opposes the presence of Turkish forces in Idlib. It claimed responsibility for several attacks against Turkish troops in Idlib in 2021.⁶⁰¹

Further information on HTS and other anti-GoS armed groups operating in Idlib is available in [Section 1.4.4 Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#) and [Section 1.4.5 Other anti-government armed groups in the Idlib area](#). Detailed information on the anti-GoS armed groups is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Actors \(December 2019\)](#).

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

According to Gregory Waters for 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 the 5th Corps.⁶⁰² For deployments of the SAA in Idlib governorate as of 17 March 2020 see Section 2.1.2.2 of the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(March 2020\)](#)

According to a Human Rights Watch report which documented the GoS offensive on Idlib from April 2019 to March 2020, the main GoS units involved in the offensive included the 4th and 5th Corps, the 25th Division (Tiger Forces), the Palestinian militia Liwa al-Quds and the NDF.⁶⁰³

The SAA is supported by Russian air force and Iran-backed militias.⁶⁰⁴ 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.⁶⁰⁵

In March 2021, Gregory Waters reported on the presence of the Tiger Forces, 25th Division's Tarmeh Regiment fighters in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man in Idlib governorate⁶⁰⁶; the presence of the 8th Division and Republican Guard units in southern Idlib⁶⁰⁷; and on the Air Force Intelligence contracting out work with the Tiger Forces' Sheikh Khalid Dhaher Group.⁶⁰⁸

Turkey

Turkey had 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 or were surrounded by GoS forces.⁶⁰⁹ At the same time, 'several' Turkish military personnel were killed

⁵⁹⁷ Enab Baladi, "National Army" Restructured Having Merged With "National Front for Liberation", 5 October 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁹⁸ Lund, A., Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, December 2018, [url](#), p. 56; International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

⁵⁹⁹ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

⁶⁰⁰ 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

⁶⁰¹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 - March 22, 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁰² Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019 [with updates], [url](#)

⁶⁰³ HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib"; Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), p. 136

⁶⁰⁴ BBC News, Syria war: Government troops seize part of key Idlib town Saraqeb, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁵ USDOS, Attacks on the People of Idlib. Press Statement by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, 27 January 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁶ Waters, G., [Twitter], posted on: 14 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁷ Waters, G., [Twitter], posted on: 12 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁸ Waters, G., [Twitter], posted on: 22 December 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁰⁹ Al Jazeera, Turkey deploys tanks to Syrian border amid fresh Idlib violence, 2 February 2020, [url](#)

following SAA military operations in Idlib, prompting Turkish retaliatory attacks.⁶¹⁰ The Turkish Ministry of Defence reported that it had hit 115 Syrian targets and 'neutralised' 101 Syrian military personnel.⁶¹¹ Turkish observation points in Idlib were reinforced with armoured personnel carriers and tanks of Turkish Armed Forces (TAF).⁶¹² Additional armed vehicles and fighters were deployed by Turkey on its border with Syria.⁶¹³ 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 had set up military posts in the vicinity of Idlib city.⁶¹⁴

At the end of February 2020, following a GoS attack, Turkey launched operation Spring Shield, which halted the GoS advance.⁶¹⁵

In the second half of 2020, reports indicated Turkey's withdrawal from military posts in Idlib⁶¹⁶, while as they were also reportedly building up troops again in 2021.⁶¹⁷ In March 2021, France24 quoted a Western diplomat interviewed by AFP, who stated that Turkey has 15 000 troops in the Idlib enclave.⁶¹⁸

ISIL

ISIL had a presence in north-west Syria since 2013, but was largely defeated following the GoS offensive in Idlib in February 2018⁶¹⁹ and a following HTS crackdown on the group and its affiliates.⁶²⁰ On 27 October 2019, former US President Donald Trump announced the death of ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi following a raid by US Special Forces in Idlib governorate.⁶²¹ According to the US Defense Intelligence Agency covering Q4 2019, 'HTS ranks countering ISIS among its top priorities because ISIS elements in Idlib Province routinely attack HTS positions and leaders. In the last year [2019], HTS publicly took credit for targeting ISIS leaders in the province.'⁶²²

⁶¹⁰ Al Jazeera, The battle for Syria's Idlib explained in 400 words, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶¹¹ AA, Turkey neutralizes 101 Assad regime military personnel, 10 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶¹² AA, Turkey's deployment of reinforcements to observation points in Syria's Idlib, 10 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶¹³ Al Jazeera, Turkey deploys tanks to Syrian border amid fresh Idlib violence, 2 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶¹⁴ New York Times (The), Syrian Attacks Draw Turkey Deeper Into Syrian War, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶¹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 6; Daily Sabah, Turkey launches Operation Spring Shield against regime aggression in Syria, 1 March 2020, [url](#), accessed 17 May 2021

⁶¹⁶ Al Monitor, Turkish forces withdraw from largest base in northeast Syria, 20 October 2020, [url](#); MEMO, Turkey to withdraw military from positions in Syria due to 'potential risk', 11 December 2020, [url](#)

⁶¹⁷ SOHR, Turkey's military build-up | Forces bring in new column to their positions in "de-escalation zone", 29 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶¹⁸ France24, Syria's Idlib: What future for the rebel holdout?, 8 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶¹⁹ Carter Center (The), Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), Appendix 1

⁶²⁰ Carter Center (The), 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](#)

⁶²¹ USDOD, Press Briefing by Secretary Esper and General Milley in the Pentagon Briefing Room, 28 October 2019, [url](#); Ingram, H. and Whiteside, C., Caliph Abu Unknown: Succession and Legitimacy in the Islamic State, War on the Rocks, 25 November 2019, [url](#)

⁶²² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 45

During the reference period, ISIL was reported to have maintained a latent presence in rebel-held Idlib.⁶²³ In 2021, the Idlib de-escalation area continued to be a 'limited safe haven', reported the UN, where ISIL leaders and fighters reside, although 'HTS regularly arrests ISIL fighters.'⁶²⁴

2.1.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

Security trends in 2020-2021

In 2020, the GoS forces and their allies continued their offensive to retake Idlib governorate from various anti-GoS armed groups, a 'remaining obstacle' to the Assad regime's regaining of control over all of Syria's territory.⁶²⁵ In January 2020, intensive airstrikes were conducted across Idlib governorate in which barrel bombs were used. Civilian communities were also affected by shelling. The airstrikes hit civilian locations such as markets and a mosque, in which numbers of civilians were killed and injured.⁶²⁶ The GoS forces captured the strategic towns of Maaret al-Numan⁶²⁷ and Saraqeb⁶²⁸ located at the intersection of the key highways linking Damascus to Aleppo.⁶²⁹ As of late February 2020, the GoS offensive advanced also in eastern Idlib⁶³⁰, and frontlines shifted rapidly.⁶³¹ The UN called the government and pro-government aerial bombardment across the north-west in February 2020, to be 'at some of the highest levels since the start of the conflict [...] Daily clashes with non-State armed groups included mutual artillery shelling and ground clashes with high numbers of casualties.'⁶³² The offensive resulted in direct fighting between GoS forces and Turkish forces and a GoS-Russian airstrike on a Turkish convoy killed 33 Turkish soldiers in Idlib on 27 February 2020.⁶³³ This triggered Turkey to launch Operation Spring Shield in order to stop the GoS offensive in Idlib governorate.⁶³⁴ Military activity along the frontline areas subsequently increased, with several towns and villages, including

⁶²³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 51; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1 2020 – December 31 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 16; UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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/2021/68], 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

⁶²⁴ UN Security Council, Twenty-seventh 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, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 7

⁶²⁵ ISW, Russia enables new Syrian regime offensive in Idlib, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶²⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 7, as of 29 January 2020, [url](#), p. 7

⁶²⁷ Al Jazeera, Syrian army takes Maaret al-Numan after heavy bombardment, 29 January 2020, [url](#)

⁶²⁸ Guardian (The), Syria: Fall of Saraqeb delivers Assad a strategic and symbolic prize, 10 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶²⁹ 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](#)

⁶³⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 9, 26 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

⁶³¹ 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](#); Lister, C., [Twitter], posted on 1 March 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 9, 26 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

⁶³² UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

⁶³³ International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch. Tracking Conflict Worldwide, February 2020, [url](#); Carter Center (the), The Russian-Turkish Joint Patrols in Idlib Governorate [interactive map], Syria Conflict Mapping, 17 February 2021, [url](#); New York Times (The), Airstrike Hits Turkish Forces in Syria, Raising Fears of Escalation, 27 February 2020, [url](#); BBC News, Syria war: Alarm after 33 Turkish soldiers killed in attack in Idlib, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶³⁴ Carter Center (The), The Russian-Turkish Joint Patrols in Idlib Governorate, Syria Conflict Mapping, 17 February 2021, [url](#)

Saraqeb, changing control multiple times.⁶³⁵ Rosemary DiCarlo, the UN 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 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.’⁶³⁶

The CoI 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 a pattern already documented by the Commission, and may amount to war crimes. Continuing such attacks has been, and remains, completely unacceptable.’⁶³⁷

On 6 March 2020, a ceasefire in the Idlib area took effect, which was brokered by Russia and Turkey, 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.⁶³⁸ The first of such patrols took place on 15 March 2020.⁶³⁹ More joint patrols followed on different parts of the corridor throughout the period March to July 2020 and Turkey continued to establish military outposts in the area. These patrols led to protests and conflict between Turkish forces and HTS, followed by IED attacks targeting the patrols, which in turn evoked Russian/GoS air and artillery strikes against opposition areas in Idlib in July 2020. Russia stopped the joint patrols in August 2020 and Turkish forces continued patrolling without Russian forces. Armed confrontations increased again in the area.⁶⁴⁰

The March 2020 ceasefire resulted in a lull in airstrikes and a reduction in the shelling in Idlib.⁶⁴¹ IED incidents however continued to occur.⁶⁴² In May 2020, hostilities between non-state armed groups picked up in Idlib leading to a worsening security situation again.⁶⁴³ As from June 2020, shelling and

⁶³⁵ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

⁶³⁶ UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

⁶³⁷ 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](#)

⁶³⁸ Al Jazeera, Turkey says Idlib ceasefire details largely agreed on with Russia, 12 March 2020, [url](#); Guardian (The), Putin and Erdoğan agree Syria ceasefire after last-ditch talks, 6 March 2020, [url](#); UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

⁶³⁹ Al Monitor, Syrian opposition split over Russia-Turkey patrols in Idlib, 17 March 2020, [url](#); Republic of Turkey, Ministry of National Defense, First Joint Turkish-Russian Land Patrol Completed In Idlib, 15 March 2020, [url](#); UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

⁶⁴⁰ Carter Center (the), The Russian-Turkish Joint Patrols in Idlib Governorate [interactive map], Syria Conflict Mapping, 17 February 2021, [url](#); UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

⁶⁴¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 10, as of 12 March 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁴² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 13, as of 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁴³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 14, as of 15 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2

clashes increased again⁶⁴⁴, including in Idlib city and rural areas to the west of it where the violence ‘since mid-June resulted in movement restrictions, the temporary closure of some roads, and civilian casualties’.⁶⁴⁵ During the second half of 2020, hostilities took place along the M5 and south of the M4 highway. Intensified shelling and airstrikes were reported, affecting civilians.⁶⁴⁶

Also in 2021, fighting continued along the M4 and M5 highways in areas in Idlib governorate inhabited by some 400 000 people.⁶⁴⁷ ‘Daily shelling, intermittent airstrikes, and in-fighting between non-state armed groups’ was reported.⁶⁴⁸ Shelling affected southern rural Idlib⁶⁴⁹ and airstrikes affected civilian-inhabited areas in northern Idlib.⁶⁵⁰ The UN Security Council reported in February 2021:

‘In the north-west, the ceasefire in the Idlib de-escalation area was interspersed with air strikes, artillery shelling and occasional raids across contact lines. Mutual shelling was concentrated in locations south of the M4 highway, with some shelling directed at areas situated north of the highway. Raids and ground-based clashes remained local, limited and intermittent. Aerial bombardment predominantly focused on locations south of the M4 highway, with some reportedly taking place north of the highway within southern Idlib. Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, which has been designated a terrorist group by the Security Council, reportedly further consolidated its power inside the Idlib de-escalation area, while also experiencing some pushback from local groups.’⁶⁵¹

Human Rights Watch assessed the systematic and strategic targeting of civilian infrastructure by the GoS and Russian forces in their offensives, killing hundreds of civilians in air and ground strikes.⁶⁵² Such indiscriminate attacks continued in 2021.⁶⁵³

In March 2021, airstrikes affected civilian-inhabited areas in Sarmada and Qah in northern Idlib and Kafr Shalaya in south Idlib. Shelling occurred on a daily basis in frontline areas throughout Idlib.⁶⁵⁴ There were furthermore reports of Russian planes bombing the town of Benin, south Idlib⁶⁵⁵; GoS shelling of villages near Ariha⁶⁵⁶; and shelling by opposition of GoS forces’ positions.⁶⁵⁷ Turkish troops continued to be targeted by non-state armed groups through IEDs and attacks against their armed vehicles.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁴⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 15, as of 12 June 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁴⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 17, as of 13 July 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁴⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 22, as of 18 November 2020, [url](#), p. 1; UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 21, as of 20 October 2020, [url](#), p. 2; UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 19, as of 21 August 2020, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁴⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 25, as of 26 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁴⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 25, as of 26 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2; UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 24, as of 26 January 2021, [url](#), p. 1

⁶⁴⁹ SOHR, Ceasefire violations | Rebels shell regime positions in Jourin, while regime forces renew shelling Jabal Al-Zawiyah and Sahl Al-Ghab, 14 January 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁵⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 26, as of 26 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁵¹ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in December 2020 and January 2021, 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁵² HRW, Syria/Russia: Strategy Targeted Civilian Infrastructure, 15 October 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁵³ Care, Vital Aid Supplies Destroyed by Airstrikes at a CARE Warehouse in Northwest Syria, 23 March 2021, [url](#); Cuts, M., [Twitter], posted on: 21 March 2021, [url](#); Alhor, F., [Twitter], posted on: 14 January 2021, [url](#); Alhor, F., [Twitter], posted on: 21 March 2021, [url](#); Alhor, F., [Twitter], posted on: 23 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁵⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 26, as of 26 March 2021, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁵⁵ Alhor, F., [Twitter], posted on: 20 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁵⁶ White Helmets (The), [Twitter], posted on: 20 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁵⁷ NPA, Opposition bombs government sites in Syria’s Idlib and Hama countryside, 22 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁵⁸ ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 - March 22, 2021, [url](#); Alhor, F., [Twitter], posted on: 22 March 2021, [url](#)

In 2020 and 2021, HTS also clashed with other armed opposition groups in Idlib, arrested opposition leaders and members in order to assure its dominance over Idlib.⁶⁵⁹

REACH⁶⁶⁰ reported that from November 2020 until March 2021, around 50 % and more of interviewed key informants (KIs) of the district of Ariha reported violent conflict as a threat to their communities, with airstrikes as a commonly reported risk. In Idlib district, this amounted to 100 % of the KIs in the sub-districts of Sarmin and Teftnaz. Also, in other sub-districts in Idlib governorate this risk was regularly reported, e.g. in Kafr Takharim (Harim district), and Badama (Jisr-Ash-Shugur).⁶⁶¹

As of March 2021, HTS and other anti-GoS armed groups controlled the north-western part of Idlib governorate, while the GoS was in control of the areas in the southern part of the governorate, including the M5 highway.⁶⁶²

See also [Section 1.5.4 Areas in north-west Syria under anti-GoS armed groups control](#)

Security incidents

During the reporting period there were 3 982 security incidents recorded by ACLED in Idlib governorate, of whom 3 213 were coded as explosions/remote violence, 641 battles and 128 incidents of violence against civilians.⁶⁶³

The highest number of security incidents were recorded between January and March 2020 (See Figure 12), after which the level of security incidents remained largely stable throughout the reporting period.

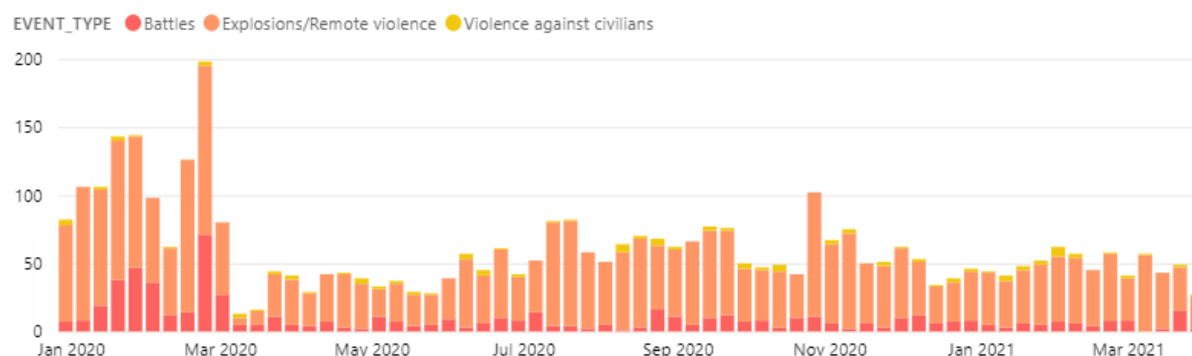


Figure 12. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Idlib governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data⁶⁶⁴

⁶⁵⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary 20 July – 26 July 2020, [url](#), p 4; Carter Center (The), Power Through Strength Hayat Tahrir al-Sham solidifying control in northwest Syria, 9 November 2020, [url](#); International Crisis Group: In Syria's Idlib, Washington's Chance to Reimagine Counter-terrorism, 3 February 2021, [url](#); Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary [storymap], 15 April 2021, [url](#); Al Monitor, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham intensifies campaign against al-Qaeda affiliate in Idlib, 25 February 2021, [url](#); Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 4 - 10 January, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁶⁰ REACH provides humanitarian data and analysis on contexts of crisis, disaster and displacement. Created in 2010, REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT); REACH, Who we are, n.d., [url](#); REACH uses a methodology of interviewing key informants (KIs), based inside residents' and IDPs' communities in Idlib, either directly or remotely (via phone). KI profiles include for example: community and religious leaders, NGO and health staff, teachers, vendors, etc.

⁶⁶¹ REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview of Syria (HSOS) [dashboard: Protection, north-west Syria, reported protection risks, violent conflict, by IDPs and residents], March 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁶² Based on reading of maps in ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 26 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁶³ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

⁶⁶⁴ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

Idlib governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Al Ma'ra	249	1304	5
Ariha	129	1190	7
Harim	33	39	53
Idlib	213	582	49
Jisr-Ash-Shugur	17	98	14
Total	641	3213	128

Figure 13. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Idlib governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

During the reporting period, 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 Ariha, Idlib and Jisr-Ash-Shugur (see Figure 13).

The following non-exhaustive list of security incidents illustrates the nature of the violence and its impact on the civilian population:

- On 11 January 2020, 'intensive airstrikes' in different parts of Idlib governorate, reportedly killed 21 civilians, including 8 children and 5 women, and injured around 75 people.⁶⁶⁵
- On 15 January 2020, airstrikes on an industrial area and a market in Idlib city killed 19 civilians and injured at least 68 others. An airstrike on the same day in Ariha city on a market injured 'tens of people'. Also, on 15 January other airstrikes in the south of Idlib killed 8 people including 5 children. Another 23 were wounded, including 9 children.⁶⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch reported 22 civilian deaths for the attack in Idlib city.⁶⁶⁷
- On 29 January 2020, air strikes destroyed the Ariha Surgical Hospital (also known as the al-Shami hospital), killing at least 14 civilians and wounding at least another 66. There were reasonable grounds to believe the strikes were carried out by Russia.⁶⁶⁸
- On 11 February 2020, an airstrike on a commercial area in Idlib city killed 12 civilians and injured 45 others.⁶⁶⁹
- On 25 February 2020, an airstrike hit the Central Hospital (also known as the Governor Hospital) in Idlib city, wounding at least four civilians.⁶⁷⁰ Also on 25 February 2020, 'an airstrike hit Rural Munib Kamisha school, killing 11 civilians, injuring more than 40 and completely destroying the facility. Eight of those killed were children, two girls and six boys, all below the age of 15. The school was reportedly being used as a shelter for internally displaced persons.'⁶⁷¹

⁶⁶⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arabic Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 6, as of 15 January 2020, [url](#), p.1

⁶⁶⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 7, as of 29 January 2020, [url](#), p. 7

⁶⁶⁷ HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib", Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 78-82

⁶⁶⁸ HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib", Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 49-52

⁶⁶⁹ HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib", Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 82-83

⁶⁷⁰ HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib", Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 53-56

⁶⁷¹ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 16-17

- On 3 March 2020, 'at least 13 civilians, including 7 boys and 1 girl, were killed and at least 18 civilians, including 3 women and 6 boys, were injured by a reported ground-based strike that landed in Idlib city.'⁶⁷²
- On 5 March 2020, 'at least 13 civilians, including 5 women and 2 girls, were killed and 21 civilians, including 4 women, 1 boy and 1 girl, were injured by a reported air strike that hit near a shelter for internally displaced persons in Ma'arratmisrin town.'⁶⁷³
- On 15 March 2020, HTS executed a civilian reportedly due to affiliation with the GoS.⁶⁷⁴
- On 17 March 2020, 'two displaced civilians (one woman and one boy) were killed and four civilians were injured after armed clashes reportedly broke out in "Qatari" camp for internally displaced persons in Kafr Lusin village.'⁶⁷⁵
- On 3 August 2020, 'three civilians were killed and one was injured by reported airstrikes that impacted in a makeshift internally displaced persons camp near the town of Binnish in eastern rural Idlib.'⁶⁷⁶
- On 14 August 2020, 'two civilians were killed and one was injured after a reported landmine detonated in agricultural land near Nayrab in eastern rural Idlib.'⁶⁷⁷
- On 15 August 2020, 'nine civilians were injured when a reported landmine detonated in agricultural land near Khan Shaykhun in southern rural Idlib.'⁶⁷⁸
- On 3 September 2020, '11 civilians, including 2 boys, were injured after a suspected improvised explosive device attached to a motorbike reportedly detonated in Ma'arratmisrin in northern rural Idlib.'⁶⁷⁹
- On 7 September 2020, 'two civilians were killed and five, including a woman and a boy, were injured after several ground-based strikes reportedly landed in the city of Ariha in southern rural Idlib. On the same day, a civilian was injured when reported ground-based strikes impacted in the town of Kansafrah in southern rural Idlib.'⁶⁸⁰
- On 4 November 2020, artillery shelling in Ariha district in Idlib affected multiple communities, killing at least eight civilians and injuring 13 others.⁶⁸¹
- On 23 December 2020, 'a civilian was killed and another was injured when a reported vehicle-borne improvised explosive device was detonated near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in northern rural Idlib.'⁶⁸²
- On 18 March 2021, a humanitarian worker was killed and 5 other civilians injured in cross-fire in Idlib governorate.⁶⁸³

⁶⁷² UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 16-17

⁶⁷³ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 16-17

⁶⁷⁴ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 16-17

⁶⁷⁵ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 16-17

⁶⁷⁶ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in October and November 2020, 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁶⁷⁷ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in October and November 2020, 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁶⁷⁸ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in October and November 2020, 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁶⁷⁹ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in October and November 2020, 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁶⁸⁰ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in October and November 2020, 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁶⁸¹ USAID, Syria - Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #1, Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, 20 November 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁸² UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in December 2020 and January 2021, 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 17

⁶⁸³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arabic Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 26, as of 26 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

- On 21 March 2021, airstrikes in Sarmada and Qah areas in Idlib killed 3 civilians, and impacted on humanitarian aid.⁶⁸⁴
- On 8 April 2021, the Syrian government forces attacked a vehicle in south Idlib, killing 7 people including 2 women and 3 children.⁶⁸⁵

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	146	123	8	17
February	124	128	14	25
March	46	50	15	19
April	6	12		
May	1	15		
June	7	21		
July	2	9		
August	30	24		
September	13	18		
October	20	29		
November	22	24		
December	2	18		
Total	419	471	37	61

Figure 14. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Idlib governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2020, Idlib recorded between 419 (VDC data)⁶⁸⁶ and 471⁶⁸⁷ civilian fatalities (SNHR data)⁶⁸⁸, the second highest number of civilian fatalities recorded by VDC and the highest number of civilian fatalities recorded by SNHR out of any province in Syria. Between 22 % (VDC data) and 27 % (SNHR data) of all civilian fatalities documented by the two sources during the year were in Idlib governorate. Most civilian fatalities were documented in the first two months of 2020.

⁶⁸⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arabic Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 26, as of 26 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁸⁵ Cutts, M., [Twitter], posted on: 9 April 2021, [url](#); Mark Cutts is the UN Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria.

⁶⁸⁶ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

⁶⁸⁷ In a January 2021 report, SNHR mentions 472 civilian fatalities in Idlib in 2020. This figure is the result of a revision of their data. EASO email correspondence with SNHR, 22 April 2021. See SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁶⁸⁸ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

According to AOAV, in 2020 Idlib was the second worst impacted governorate by explosive violence, with 998 civilian casualties recorded, a decrease from 2019 when AOAV recorded 3 824 civilian casualties.⁶⁸⁹

Human Rights Watch documented 46 ground and air attacks by Syrian-Russian forces on civilian objects and infrastructure in Idlib governorate alone which took place between March 2019 and March 2020. The attacks led to at least 224 civilians killed and 561 wounded.⁶⁹⁰

Reporting on the situation in December 2020 and January 2021, the UN Security Council reported in February 2021:

‘Civilians were killed and injured as a result of ground-based strikes in southern Idlib and western Hama and armed clashes between and within various armed groups in the north-west, northern and eastern parts of the country.’⁶⁹¹

In the first three months of 2021, VDC documented 37 civilian fatalities in Idlib governorate, while SNHR documented 61 civilian fatalities.

Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war

REACH reported that as of 1 August 2016, in and around the city of Idlib, 275 buildings had been destroyed, 339 severely damaged, and 623 moderately damaged.⁶⁹² As of June 2018, 311 buildings were reported as destroyed, 418 as severely damaged and 686 as moderately damaged, with highest damage density in the city centre.⁶⁹³ REACH furthermore reported that as of May 2019 for several sub-districts in the south of Idlib governorate and around the southern borders of the province, between 4 % and 13 % of agricultural lands had recently been burned, corresponding to ‘roughly 18 000 acres.’⁶⁹⁴ Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Idlib governorate, 29.6 % of the population was living in damaged buildings and an additional 17.2 % in self-settled camps.⁶⁹⁵

Human Rights Watch compared satellite images of the town of Maarat al-Nu`man in southern Idlib from before and after the GoS took control over it in January 2020. Imagery recorded in May 2020 showed destruction, debris and rubble across the town. Most of the town’s residential buildings and key infrastructure showed ‘heavy damage’. Many buildings were likely destroyed by heavy machinery and explosives.⁶⁹⁶

Save the Children reported that as of March 2020, more than half of Idlib’s schools (570 out of 1 062) had been destroyed, damaged or out of order due to insecurity, whilst an additional 74 schools have been ‘used as shelters for families escaping conflict’.⁶⁹⁷ Also the UN reported that airstrikes in 2020 damaged or destroyed schools.⁶⁹⁸ The UN Security Council noted that between December 2020 and

⁶⁸⁹ AOAV, Explosive Violence Monitor 2020, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁶⁹⁰ To document the 46 incidents, Human Rights Watch interviewed 113 victims and witnesses of the attacks, as well as healthcare and rescue workers, teachers, local authorities, and experts on the Syrian and Russian militaries. Human Rights Watch examined dozens of satellite images and over 550 photographs and videos taken at the attack sites, as well as logs of observers who monitored Syrian and Russian aircraft in the area (p. 2). HRW, “Targeting Life in Idlib”; Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), p. 47

⁶⁹¹ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in December 2020 and January 2021, 18 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 3 and 5

⁶⁹² REACH, Syria – City of Idlib, Shelter Damage Assessment as of 1 August 2016 [box: damage trend], 23 October 2016, [url](#)

⁶⁹³ REACH, Syria, Syrian cities damage atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 45-46

⁶⁹⁴ REACH, Syria – Northwest, Burned Agricultural Land as of 26th May 2019, 4 June 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁹⁵ Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

⁶⁹⁶ HRW, “Targeting Life in Idlib”, Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 45-46

⁶⁹⁷ Save the Children, Idlib, Syria: Two schools a day damaged or abandoned during escalation in fighting, 16 March 2020, [url](#)

⁶⁹⁸ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 5-6; UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in October and November 2020, 11 December 2020, [url](#), p.

January 2021, UNICEF recorded one incident of hostilities causing damage to educational facilities during the reporting period; namely, Al-Sabbagh school in Ariha was hit by a rocket.⁶⁹⁹

Reporting on the major military offensive between April 2019 and March 2020, Human Rights Watch stated that health care infrastructure was regularly damaged or destroyed in airstrikes or shelling.⁷⁰⁰ In 2020, WHO recorded 8 attacks on health care facilities in Idlib, the most of any governorates in Syria.⁷⁰¹ Airstrikes targeting civilian infrastructure, including industrial and commercial areas occurred in 2020 and 2021 in Idlib governorate.⁷⁰²

UNMAS stated the following for Idlib among other places in Syria:

‘the presence of explosive ordnance causes injuries and death, limits safe access to services and impedes the delivery of humanitarian aid. While everyone in contaminated areas is at risk, children, farmers, construction workers and people on the move are particularly vulnerable. Residential areas and key infrastructure, such as roads, schools, health centres, agricultural land, and settlements remain unsafe or unserviceable because of contamination, further compounding the social and economic impact of the crisis and possibilities for recovery. Ever increasing numbers of casualties from which a large number of survivors sustain permanent impairments, further contribute to heightening the demand on overwhelmed health services.’⁷⁰³

Unexploded cluster ammunition or other ordnances in Idlib causes a threat to civilians living in the area. Especially children who play with or collect scrap metal or objects are at risk of becoming victims.⁷⁰⁴

Displacement and return

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.⁷⁰⁵

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).⁷⁰⁶

⁶⁹⁹ UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in December 2020 and January 2021, 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 6

⁷⁰⁰ HRW, “Targeting Life in Idlib”, Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 49-52; 53-56; 72; See also: Al, ‘Nowhere is safe for us’, unlawful attacks and mass displacement in north-west Syria, 11 May 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁰¹ WHO, Health Cluster, Attacks on health care in Syria 1 Jan – 31 Dec 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁰² ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 - March 22, 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 7, as of 29 January 2020, [url](#), p. 7; HRW, “Targeting Life in Idlib”, Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 78-82

⁷⁰³ UNMAS, Syria, in: Where do we work, updated October 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁴ Syria Relief, 6-year-old killed by unexploded cluster bomb in Idlib, possibly 364 days after the initial attack, 2 January 2021, available from: [url](#); SOHR, Old ordnance | Explosion injures child in western Idlib, 15 May 2021, [url](#); HRW, Syria: Cluster Munition Attack on School, 22 January 2020, [url](#); MEE, In pictures: In northern Syria, recycling remnants of war is a family business, 3 April 2021, [url](#); Daily Sabah, More than 560,000 Syrians return despite cease-fire violations, 27 April 2021, [url](#); TRT, The War in Syria: UN says cluster bombs used on civilians in Idlib [YouTube video], 13 August 2019, [url](#); Syria Relief, Two children injured by unexploded cluster munition in Idlib, 5 March 2021, [url](#); Enab Baladi, Syrian families make a living out of recycling remnants of war [Image gallery], 5 March 2021, [url](#); SOHR, In 72 hours | Man and three children killed by war remnant in different parts of Syria, 5 May 2021, [url](#); New Arab (The), Two children killed, three injured in Syria mine explosions, 19 July 2020, [url](#); HALO Trust (The), A hidden emergency, Why explosive ordnance contamination must be addressed now in North-West Syria, 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁷⁰⁵ Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 54

⁷⁰⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

As of November 2019, the Idlib and northern Aleppo enclave hosted 1.12 million IDPs.⁷⁰⁷ The GoS military offensive in Idlib between December 2019 and March 2020 caused nearly 960 000 new displacements to northern Idlib and Aleppo.⁷⁰⁸ IDMC reported most were displaced for a second or third time.⁷⁰⁹ Following the March 2020 ceasefire, tens of thousands of those displaced returned to their places of origin.⁷¹⁰

For the year 2020, UNOCHA reported 1 070 000 IDP movements from or within Idlib governorate, 1 030 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate and 821 000 IDP movements within the governorate.⁷¹¹

UNOCHA reported for January 2021, 19 000 displacements from Idlib governorate, 13 000 within the governorate and 15 000 into Idlib governorate⁷¹²; and for February 2021, 16 600 displacements from Idlib governorate, 11 600 within the governorate and 14 400 to Idlib governorate.⁷¹³ For March 2021, UNOCHA reported 18 700 displacements from Idlib governorate, 11 300 within the governorate and 15 200 to Idlib governorate.⁷¹⁴

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.⁷¹⁵ Also for 2020, UNOCHA reported 207 000 IDP return movements from Idlib governorate, 178 000 returns within the governorate and 235 000 IDP return movements to the governorate.⁷¹⁶ In the first three months of 2021, UNOCHA recorded 3 100 (January 2021), 4 000 (February 2021) and 7 300 (March 2021) spontaneous IDP returns to or within Idlib governorate, the majority being returns within the governorate.⁷¹⁷

See also [Section 1.6.5 Displacement and return](#)

⁷⁰⁷ REACH, North-West Syria, situation overview, 16 March 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁰⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 6; IDMC, Internal displacement 2020: Mid-year update, 23 September 2020, [url](#), p. 18; UN Security Council, Report by the UN Secretary-General on political, humanitarian and security-related developments in February and March 2020, 23 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

⁷⁰⁹ IDMC, Internal displacement 2020: Mid-year update, 23 September 2020, [url](#), p.18

⁷¹⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria Flash Update, as of 2 April 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2; UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 13, as of 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 2

⁷¹¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements Overview, Jan-Dec 2020 [map], 16 February 2021, [url](#)

⁷¹² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

⁷¹³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arabic Republic, IDP movements, February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

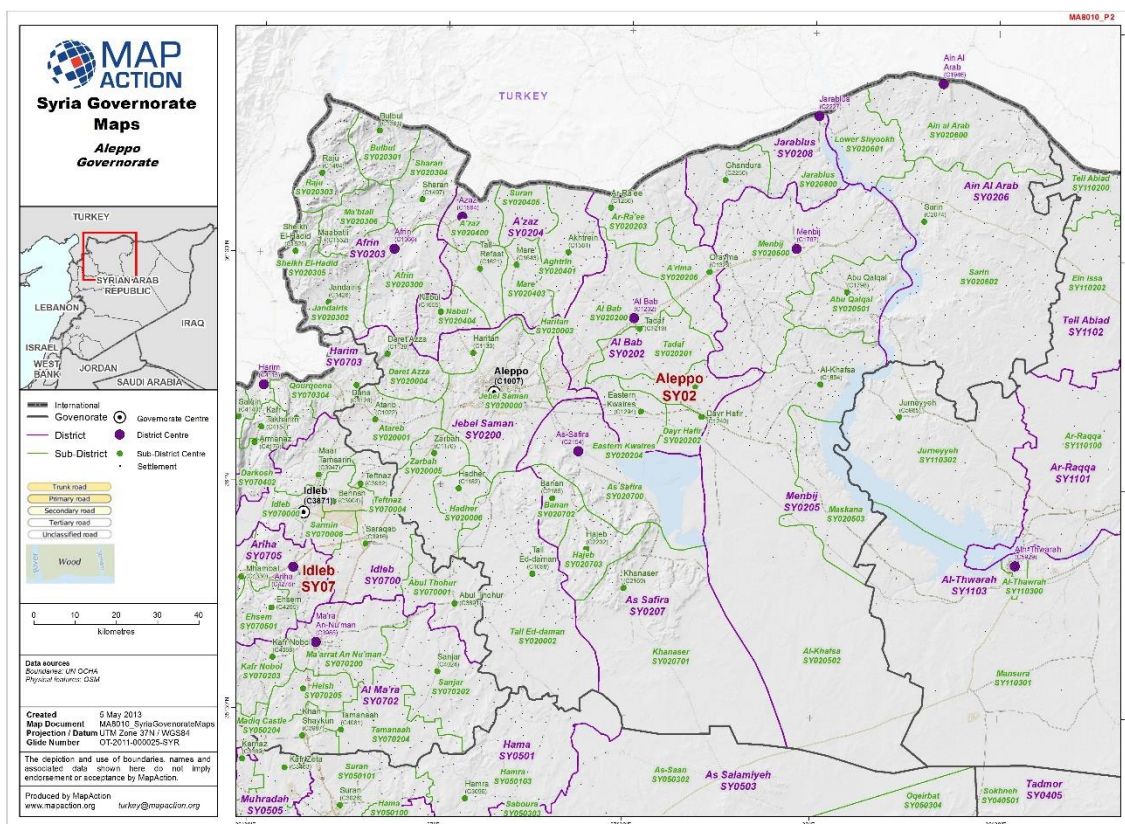
⁷¹⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arabic Republic, IDP movements, March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

⁷¹⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

⁷¹⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan-Dec 2020 [map], 16 February 2021, [url](#)

⁷¹⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

2.2 Aleppo governorate



Map 7: © MapAction, Aleppo governorate⁷¹⁸

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 Raqqqa governorate to the east. In the north it shares a 221 km long border with Turkey.⁷¹⁹ Prior to 2011, Aleppo governorate hosted around 20 % of Syria's population and was 'the major commercial and industrial hub' of the country.⁷²⁰ According to 2011 estimates, Aleppo governorate had a population of more than 4 867 991, making it the most populous province of Syria.⁷²¹ Population estimates for 2019 issued by the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics indicated that Aleppo governorate had 3 964 000 inhabitants.⁷²² In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Aleppo governorate to be of 4 014 129.⁷²³

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.⁷²⁴ Located in Jebel Saman district, Aleppo city is the

⁷¹⁸ MapAction, Aleppo governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

⁷¹⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Governorates profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 5

⁷²⁰ ACAPS, Regional Analysis Syria: All – Governorate Profiles, 1 October-31 December 2014, 28 January 2015, [url](#), p. 4

⁷²¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Governorates profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 5

⁷²² Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020 الإحصائية [Statistical Abstract 2020], n.d., [url](#), فصل-2 السكان و المؤشرات الديموغرافية [Chapter 2- population and demographic indicators], Tab 4

⁷²³ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

⁷²⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Governorates profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 5

central city of the governorate.⁷²⁵ As of 2019, the UN estimated that around 1.6 million people were living in Aleppo city.⁷²⁶

Before the conflict, over 70 % of the inhabitants of Aleppo governorate were Sunni, with minority communities such as Christians, Kurds, Armenians and Turkmen also living in the province.⁷²⁷ USDOS noted that Shia Muslims are present in the rural areas of Aleppo governorate, as well as in and around Aleppo.⁷²⁸ According to Syria expert Fabrice Balanche⁷²⁹, '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.'⁷³⁰ Sheikh Maqsoud district in Aleppo city 'constitutes a Kurdish city within the city'.⁷³¹

VDC and SOHR alleged that Turkey carried out demographic change in the Afrin region.⁷³² According to the VDC, Turkey's empowerment of the SNA and the practices of the latter forced the Kurdish inhabitants of Afrin to leave the area. The source added that thousands of eastern Ghouta rebels and their families, who were displaced to north-western Syria following reconciliation agreements with the GoS, were settled in Afrin.⁷³³

2.2.2 Conflict background and armed actors

The city of Aleppo remained divided between the GoS-controlled west and rebel-controlled east between 2012 and 2016⁷³⁴. The GoS forces retook control of the rebel-held part of Aleppo in December 2016 after a prolonged siege⁷³⁵ in which between 250 000 and 275 000 residents were still living in the rebel-held parts.⁷³⁶ In 2016, Turkey launched operation Euphrates Shield in northern Aleppo governorate to fight ISIL and contain YPG gains in the area⁷³⁷, capturing the Al-Bab area, including Jarablus and other towns.⁷³⁸ In January 2018, Turkish and affiliated local armed groups launched another offensive dubbed Operation Olive Branch on the Kurdish-held Afrin district, in Aleppo governorate⁷³⁹ which concluded in March 2018 when Turkish authorities announced complete control of the Afrin region.⁷⁴⁰ In April 2019, the GoS forces launched an offensive aimed at recapturing areas in northern Hama and southern Idlib, and in December 2019, the GoS forces advanced towards the towns of Ma'aret Al-Numan and Saraqeb on the M5 highway that links Aleppo and Damascus⁷⁴¹

⁷²⁵ UN Habitat and SDC, City Profile Aleppo Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 5

⁷²⁶ New Humanitarian (The), In Syria's Aleppo, a slow rebuild begins, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

⁷²⁷ ACAPS, Aleppo – Governorate profile. Syria Needs Analysis Project, March 2013, [url](#), p. 4

⁷²⁸ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2019, June 2020, [url](#), p. 3

⁷²⁹ 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](#)

⁷³⁰ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 44

⁷³¹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 53

⁷³² VDC-NSY, الفواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا (حلب، إدلب) [Turkey's military bases in northeast Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 August 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Demographic change | At Turkish government's orders, the Syrian National Coalition attempts to attract supporters to back up projects in Afrin, 26 March 2021, [url](#)

⁷³³ VDC-NSY, الفواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا (حلب، إدلب) [Turkey's military bases in northeast Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 August 2020, [url](#)

⁷³⁴ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 44

⁷³⁵ 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

⁷³⁶ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 34

⁷³⁷ International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁷³⁸ BBC News, Turkey 'ends' Euphrates Shield campaign in Syria, 30 March 2017, [url](#)

⁷³⁹ 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, EUI, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁷⁴⁰ Al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, EUI, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁷⁴¹ International Crisis Group, Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib, 14 May 2020, [url](#)

amid intensification of hostilities.⁷⁴² For more information about the background of the conflict in Aleppo governorate until the end of 2019, see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

The GoS forces continued to advance and bombard rebel-held areas in north-west Syria in February 2020⁷⁴³, and following the success in driving the rebels from the M5 highway and reopening it, the forces of the GoS, backed by Russian air force, recaptured several towns and villages in the north-western countryside of Aleppo, and consolidated their control in the governorate.⁷⁴⁴ On 16 February 2020, the Turkish media outlet, TRT World, citing the SOHR, reported that the SAA, backed by Russia and Iranian militias, captured 13 small towns and villages in the north and north-west Aleppo governorate.⁷⁴⁵ The Independent reported on 18 February 2020 that 30 villages in the western countryside of Aleppo were recaptured during the military operations of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA).⁷⁴⁶ In March 2020, Russia and Turkey agreed a ceasefire in north-west Syria⁷⁴⁷, which aimed at halting the military operations and freezing the frontlines.⁷⁴⁸

As regards territorial control, ORSAM, a research centre based in Ankara⁷⁴⁹, stated in November 2020, that of the total area of Aleppo province, 52 % was under the control of the GoS, 8 % was jointly controlled by the GoS and the Kurdish YPG, 16 % by the YPG/SDF, and 24 % by anti-GoS opposition forces.⁷⁵⁰ Nawar Shaban, a conflict expert at the Omran Center for strategic Studies, specified that out of the 24 % of the governorate's area controlled by opposition factions, 22 % was controlled by the Syrian National Army (SNA), and 2 % by Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS).⁷⁵¹ According to a Liveuamap, as of 23 March 2021, the southern, and most of the western and eastern parts of Aleppo governorate, including the city of Aleppo appeared to be under the control of pro-GoS forces.⁷⁵² In the western Aleppo countryside as of January 2021 reporting, GoS forces were present 18 km from Bab Al-Hawa crossing.⁷⁵³ According to reporting from January-March 2021, the north and north-west of the governorate were controlled by Turkey and allied opposition factions, and the very western parts of the governorate, which include the towns of Daret Izza and Al-Atareb, were under the control of non-state armed groups/HTS.⁷⁵⁴

The US CRS noted on 27 July 2020 that the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) which was founded in 2013 'became increasingly affiliated with the Turkish government' and was operating out of the

⁷⁴² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 11 December 2020, [url](#), para. 43

⁷⁴³ 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), para. 4; Reuters, Syrian forces seize most of Aleppo province, on eve of Turkey-Russia talks, 16 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁴⁴ Al Jazeera, Syrian army strengthens Aleppo grip before Russia-Turkey talks, 16 February 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Syrian forces consolidate control of Aleppo, air strikes under way, 17 February 2020, [url](#); Arab News, Assad's forces take over Aleppo amid fears of 'catastrophe', 17 February 2020, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 5 - 18, 2020, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁴⁵ TRT World, Syria regime seizes more Aleppo villages; car bomb kills four, 16 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁴⁶ Independent (The), The battle for Aleppo ends with liberation for some, Armageddon for others, 18 February 2020, [url](#);

⁷⁴⁷ France24, Ceasefire agreed between Putin, Erdogan comes into effect for Syria's Idlib, 5 March 2020, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), para. 19

⁷⁴⁸ Reuters, Ceasefire in Syria's Idlib comes at a cost for Turkey's Erdogan, 6 March 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), para. 4

⁷⁴⁹ ORSAM, About us, n. d., [url](#)

⁷⁵⁰ Saban, N., Analysis of territorial control in northwestern Syria and the HTS's role, ORSAM, November 2020, [url](#), p. 15

⁷⁵¹ Shaban, N., The Syrian National Army: Formation, Challenges, and Outlook, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, October 2020, [url](#), p. 3

⁷⁵² Based on reading of the following map: Liveuamap, Syria, 23 March 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁵³ COAR, Syria in 2021: Forecast for a protracted crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁴ Liveuamap, Syria, 23 March 2021, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 30 - February 18, 2021, 19 February 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 31

Turkish-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate.⁷⁵⁵ Moreover, the area of Tal Rif'at as well as the north-eastern part of the governorate around Manbij was jointly controlled by the GoS and the SDF.⁷⁵⁶ Finally, in Aleppo city, Sheikh Maqsoud district, a Kurdish majority district, was reported by different sources to be under the SDF control.⁷⁵⁷

Saban stated that five of the governorate's seven border crossings with Turkey were controlled by the SNA (namely, Jarablus, Al-Ra'e, Bab Al-Salam, Meidan, and Olive Branch), one was controlled by HTS (Atma), and one by GoS/SDF (Ain Al-Arab). Moreover, the source indicated that three of the border crossings were closed and the rest were not open to civilian crossing.⁷⁵⁸

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

Recent information on the SAA deployments in Aleppo governorate could not be found. According to Gregory Waters of International Review, deployments of the SAA in Aleppo governorate in 2019/2020 included predominantly units of the Republican Guard and of the 4th Division.⁷⁵⁹ For deployments of the SAA in Aleppo governorate as of 3 April 2020, see Section 2.2.2.1 of the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(2020\)](#).

Russia

Jusoor for Studies⁷⁶⁰ stated on 6 January 2021 that Russia had 10 military posts and bases in Aleppo governorate. The Russian military sites were located in different areas including Tal Rifaat⁷⁶¹, Manbij, Kobane, Kuweires, and Al-Hader.⁷⁶² In Aleppo city, the opposition website Zaman Al-Wasl⁷⁶³, reported that in April 2020, the Russian army withdrew forces from some parts of the city due to the spread of COVID-19.⁷⁶⁴

The Russian forces in Aleppo had a training role (e.g., training SAA crew in manoeuvring the Soviet T-72 tanks⁷⁶⁵, in addition to their direct engagement in the battles, where, according to Al Jazeera, it carried out 1 167 attacks in Aleppo governorate since September 2015, the second largest number of attacks after Idlib.⁷⁶⁶

Iran and Iran-backed militias

Jusoor for Studies stated on 6 January 2021 that Iran had 15 military bases and posts in Aleppo governorate.⁷⁶⁷ According to a June 2019 article, the IRGC and Iran-backed militias were reportedly in control of the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo city.⁷⁶⁸ Experts cited by Al Jazeera assessed that Aleppo is 'one of the main areas where Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards have a strong military

⁷⁵⁵ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 July 2020, [url](#), pp. 20-21

⁷⁵⁶ Liveuamap, Syria, 23 March 2021, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 30 - February 18, 2021, 19 February 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 31

⁷⁵⁷ Al Monitor, Syrian government, SDF trade accusations of violations of Russian-mediated cease-fire, 8 February 2021, [url](#); NPA, Aleppo's Sheikh Maqsoud, Ashrafiya attract other neighborhoods' residents, 21 February 2021, [url](#); AA, YPG/PKK, Assad regime mutually ease blockades, 3 February 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁵⁸ ORSAM, Analysis of Territorial Control in Northwestern Syria and the HTS's Role, November 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁷⁵⁹ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁶⁰ 'An independent institution specializing in information management and conducting studies and research related to the Syrian political and social affairs in particular and the Middle East region in general'. Jusoor, About us, n. d., [url](#)

⁷⁶¹ SOHR, Turkish forces shell Tal Rifaat town hosting Russian military base, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁶² Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria,, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁶³ Committee to Protect Journalists, Zaman Al-Wasl, n. d., [url](#)

⁷⁶⁴ Zaman Al-Wasl, Russia re-stationed forces in Aleppo due to Coronavirus, 22 April 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁶⁵ TASS, Russian military instructors hold series of drills with Syrian tank crews, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁶⁶ Al Jazeera, خمس سنوات على التدخل الروسي في سوريا [Five years of the Russian intervention in Syria], 30 September 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁶⁷ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁶⁸ Syrian Observer (The), Pro-Iran Militants Loot Aleppo's Antiquities, 27 June 2019, [url](#)

presence supporting local militias' that have been fighting alongside GoS forces.⁷⁶⁹ In an article published by the Atlantic Council on 5 November 2020, Navvar Saban observed that Iran encouraged the formation of local Shia militias and recruited Sunnis, notably clans, in Aleppo, Raqqqa and Deir Ez-Zor governorates. According to the source, fighters from these governorates were recruited under the Local Defense Forces (LDF), which were considered as part of the SAA.⁷⁷⁰ The opposition news outlet, Baladi, and the Lebanese newspaper, Al-Nahar, reported on a recent recruitment campaign launched by Iran in eastern Aleppo countryside, aimed at creating a new militia dubbed 'Ashbal Suleimani. The sources added that Iran has sent IRGC members to train the new recruits.⁷⁷¹ Another militia that Iran reportedly intended to create in Aleppo governorate was called Al-Imam Ali Brigade. According to Al-Arabiya, Iranian forces opened recruitment offices in Aleppo to this end, reportedly accepting SAA defectors and draft evaders.⁷⁷²

According to western intelligence sources cited by France 24, Iran-backed militias 'have long been entrenched in Aleppo province' where they had bases and a command centre⁷⁷³, and were reported to take part in military operations in Aleppo governorate in early 2020.⁷⁷⁴ The opposition channel, Syria TV, stated on 21 August 2020 that the following Iran-backed militias were present in Aleppo governorate:

- Abu Al-Fadl Al-Abbas (Iraqi militia – Nobbol and Zahra'a in northern Aleppo countryside);
- Al-Imam Al-Hussein Brigade (Iraqi militia – 1 150 fighters – Aleppo city);
- Al-Imam Al-Hijja Group (Syrian and Lebanese militia – 600 fighters – Aleppo);
- Al-Baqer Brigade (Syrian militia – 500 fighters);
- Soqour Al-Sahra'a (Desert Hawks – Syrian militia – 1 000 fighters – partly present in Aleppo).⁷⁷⁵

Moreover, Saban stated that Iran recruited fighters from the Shia minority in Syria, including in northern Aleppo, and formed militias such as the Aleppo branch of the Imam Al-Hijja and the Mahdi Army in Nobbol and Zahra'a.⁷⁷⁶

Jusoor Center for Studies stated that Hezbollah had 38 independent, joint or semi-shared military sites in Aleppo governorate, the group's largest presence in Syria.⁷⁷⁷ Two sources reported that Hezbollah-backed militias were present in Nobbol and Zahra'a, and that those militias looted and confiscated abandoned property in northern Aleppo countryside and harassed returnees.⁷⁷⁸

⁷⁶⁹ Al Jazeera, Syrian military: Israeli air attack targeted Aleppo, 28 March 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁰ Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁷¹ Baladi, ميليشيا إيران تجتمع بوجهاء في ريف حلب والهدف تشكيل عسكري جديد [Iran's militia meets community leaders in Aleppo countryside and the goal is to form a new military unit], 17 March 2021, [url](#); Al-Nahar, "تشكيل ميليشيوي إيراني يناقش الروس شرق حلب", [“Ashbal Suleimani” a new Iranian militia that competes with the Russians in eastern Aleppo], 17 March 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁷² Al-Arabiya, إيران تجنّد في حلب.. وتغري الشباب بتسوية أوضاعهم مع النظام [Iran recruits in Aleppo.. and entices the youth by settling their affairs with the regime], 22 March 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁷³ France24, Syria says Israeli jets attacked military outposts near Aleppo, 5 May 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁴ Al Monitor, What brought Iranian forces to Idlib front?, 3 February 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁵ Syria TV, بالتفاصيل والأرقام.. رصد شامل للميليشيات الإيرانية في سوريا [In detail and with numbers .. Comprehensive monitoring of Iran's militias in Syria], 21 August 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁶ Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁷ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁷⁸ Al-Quds Al-Arabi, ميليشيات نبل والزهره تبسط سيطرتها شمالي حلب... وتبحث عن مصادر لتمويل [Nobbol and Zahra'a militias control northern Aleppo... and look for funding sources], 28 December 2020, [url](#); Nedaa Post, الميليشيات الإيرانية تستولي على أملاك المهجرين شمال حلب [Iran's militias take possession of IDP properties north of Aleppo], 26 February 2021, [url](#)

Syrian National Army (SNA)

Sources estimated the number of SNA fighters at between 70 000 and 90 000.⁷⁷⁹ In December 2020, the Hamza Division of the SNA opened the first SNA military base and training facility of its own in the city of A'zaz.⁷⁸⁰

Shaban stated in October 2020 that the SNA comprised seven corps, the initial three that existed when the SNA was established in 2017, in addition to four that were formed after the merger with the NLF in 2019.⁷⁸¹ In a study published in August 2020, Jusoor Center observed that the SNA was comprised of three corps⁷⁸² including 25 factions scattered among Afrin region and the towns of Mar'e, A'zaz, Al-Bab and Jarablus in Aleppo countryside, in addition to Tall Abyad and Ra'as Al-Ayn in Raqqqa and Hasaka governorates. Moreover, the NLF which maintained presence in parts of Aleppo countryside was comprised of 20 factions, notably Faylaq Al-Sham, Ahrar Al-Sham, Jaysh Al-Ahrar and Soqour Al-Sham.⁷⁸³ The majority of the factions of the 1st Corps of the SNA report to the Turkish Army directly, while the remainder of the factions coordinate their moves with Turkish security officers.⁷⁸⁴

COAR listed the following 'security stakeholders' in northern Aleppo:

- the SNA;
- the Sultan Muhammad Al-Fatih brigade (mainly Arab combatants);
- Muntasir Billah brigade (based in Jarablus, mainly comprised of Arab tribesmen from Raqqqa and Turkmen from Tall Abyad);
- Jaysh Al-Islam (based in Jarablus and Al-Bab, comprised mainly of combatants evacuated from Rural Damascus);
- Sultan Murad (based in Al-Bab, combatants are mainly from northern Aleppo with a large number of Turkmen);
- Fariq Hamza (based in A'zaz, combatants from northern Aleppo);
- Al-Mutassim brigade (based in A'zaz and Al-Bab, was one of the larger FSA groups and comprised combatants from Nouredine Al-Zinki group who were ousted from Idlib by HTS); and
- Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyya (based in Al-Ra'i, an umbrella group containing combatants from Ahrar Al-Sham, Nouredine Al-Zenki, Jaysh Al-Islam, Liwa Al-Tawheed, and Suqour Al-Sham).⁷⁸⁵

Turkmen factions within the SNA, i.e. Sultan Murad and Hamza Division, were quite influential and were heavily supported by Turkey. The Levant Front (Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya) was considered the largest northern Syrian faction and comprised local fighters from northern Aleppo countryside as well as fighters from rural Raqqqa.⁷⁸⁶ The Jamestown Foundation referred to the existence of rivalries, lack of

⁷⁷⁹ Özkizilcik, O., The Syrian National Army (SNA): Structure, Functions, and Three Scenarios for its Relationship with Damascus, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, October 2020, [url](#), p. 4; Shaban, N., The Syrian National Army: Formation, Challenges, and Outlook, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, October 2020, [url](#), p. 4

⁷⁸⁰ Daily Sabah, Turkey-backed SNA opens 1st military post in Syria's Azaz, 4 December 2020, [url](#); TRT World, Syrian opposition forces open first military barracks, 4 December 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁸¹ Shaban, N., The Syrian National Army: Formation, Challenges, and Outlook, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, October 2020, [url](#), p. 4

⁷⁸² Arabi 21, تعرف على تشكيلات "الجيش الوطني السوري" المعارض (ملف), 10 August 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁸³ Jusoor for Studies, الجيش الوطني السوري تحديات التجربة والمآلات الممكنة [The SNA: challenges of the experience and potential outcome], August 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁷⁸⁴ Jusoor for Studies, الجيش الوطني السوري تحديات التجربة والمآلات الممكنة [The SNA: challenges of the experience and potential outcome], August 2020, [url](#), p. 11

⁷⁸⁵ COAR, Northern Corridor NOSAP, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 44-45

⁷⁸⁶ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 5-6, FN. 14

trust⁷⁸⁷, and diverse ideologies within the different SNA factions, and stated that the fighting against the GoS forces has united those factions so far.⁷⁸⁸ These tensions between the different SNA factions resulted in direct clashes⁷⁸⁹, five of which took place in Aleppo countryside between March and June 2020.⁷⁹⁰

In addition to the aforementioned corps, there were military and civilian police forces operating in the Turkish-controlled areas of northern Aleppo.⁷⁹¹ The military police operated under the SNA⁷⁹² and was established in the Euphrates Shield area in February 2018 and in the Olive Branch area in July 2018.⁷⁹³ According to Al-Hilu, a Syrian researcher at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, members of the military police forces 'answer first and foremost to their factions, prioritising their interests at the expense of the public interest, which is why the military police remains weak and incapable of curtailing violations'. The source added that the civilian police was supported by Turkey since it took control of northern Aleppo countryside, and that Syrians who volunteered to join were trained in Turkey.⁷⁹⁴ The civilian police was established in early 2017 and was headquartered in Jarablus. It comprised two bodies: the regular civil police which addressed issues such as local criminality and traffic regulation, and public security which was better equipped and trained and functioned as 'internal security force'.⁷⁹⁵ In Afrin region, the VDC stated that there were three civilian police centres located in Afrin city, Jendeires and Rajo as well as specialised police stations that operated under those centres.⁷⁹⁶

Turkey

Turkey has deployed forces at around 21 military outposts in the northern Aleppo countryside and 12 main bases in Afrin region.⁷⁹⁷ The VDC also listed 21 Turkish outposts in the northern countryside of Aleppo, situated mainly around Jarablus, Manbij, Al-Bab, Tadif, A'zaz, and Dabeq. The source shared a map featuring 17 Turkish outposts in Afrin region, the majority of which were to the east and south-east of Afrin city.⁷⁹⁸ In western Aleppo, a map published by Jusoor for Studies indicated that Turkey has kept military bases and outposts in areas captured by the GoS in its offensive on Aleppo and Idlib governments in February 2020. According to the map, such bases and outposts were located in Anadan, Sheikh Aqil, Al-Rashideen, Al-Mougiz, and Tall Al-Ees.⁷⁹⁹ Sources reported that the Turkish Army vacated three smaller positions in western Aleppo countryside, in Batbo school, in Kafr Naseh school and in the area between Zardna and Abyen. Reportedly, the three positions contained 20

⁷⁸⁷ Jusoor for Studies, الجيش الوطني السوري تحديات التجربة والمآلات الممكنة [The SNA: challenges of the experience and potential outcome], August 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁷⁸⁸ Jamestown Foundation (The), The Syrian National Army and the Future of Turkey's Frontier Land Force, 12 March 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁸⁹ Jusoor for Studies, الجيش الوطني السوري تحديات التجربة والمآلات الممكنة [The SNA: challenges of the experience and potential outcome], August 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁷⁹⁰ Enab Baladi, Violations by "SNA"...who to blame?, 12 June 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁹¹ COAR, Northern Corridor NOSAP, October 2019, [url](#), p. 39

⁷⁹² Jusoor for Studies, الجيش الوطني السوري تحديات التجربة والمآلات الممكنة [The SNA: challenges of the experience and potential outcome], August 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁷⁹³ VDC-NSY, القواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا (حلب، إدلب) [The Turkish military bases in northwest Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 August 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁹⁴ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 6-7

⁷⁹⁵ COAR, Northern Corridor NOSAP, October 2019, [url](#), p. 43

⁷⁹⁶ VDC-NSY, القواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا (حلب، إدلب) [The Turkish military bases in northwest Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 August 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁹⁷ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

⁷⁹⁸ VDC-NSY, القواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا (حلب، إدلب) [Turkey's military bases in northeast Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 August 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁹⁹ Jusoor for Studies, دوافع ودلالات انسحاب النقاط العسكرية التركية في إدلب [The drives and indications of the withdrawal of Turkish military outposts in Idlib], 23 October 2020, [url](#)

soldiers each, and the soldiers were ordered to join Turkish posts in Al-Zawiya Mount in Idlib as 'their mission was accomplished.'⁸⁰⁰

Syrian Democratic Forces

In Aleppo governorate, the SDF was in control of the Manbij area and an enclave to the north of Aleppo city which contains the town of Tal Rifaat, known as Shahba⁸⁰¹, as well as the Sheikh Maqsoud neighbourhood of Aleppo.⁸⁰²

The SDF forces were in control of the areas around the cities of Manbij and Kobane, which were captured from ISIL in 2016 and 2015, respectively.⁸⁰³ 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.⁸⁰⁴ GoS forces, accompanied by Russian forces, were subsequently deployed to the cities of Manbij⁸⁰⁵ and Kobane.⁸⁰⁶ Several sources interviewed by DIS between January and February 2020 noted that GoS lacked administrative authority in SDF-controlled areas.⁸⁰⁷

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

In 2019, HTS seized large parts of Idlib and western Aleppo governorates following clashes with other anti-GoS armed groups including the NLF⁸⁰⁸, and controlled over 90 % of Idlib governorate, alongside adjacent parts of northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates.⁸⁰⁹

The Middle East Institute (MEI) reported that during the offensive of the GoS forces to recapture southern Aleppo countryside and the western suburbs of Aleppo city in early 2020, 'HTS used an up-armoured BMP-1 SVBIED [Suicide Vehicle-Born Improvised Explosive Device] against a loyalist position at Al-Zahraa district on the outskirts of western Aleppo' and in other places, as a battle strategy.⁸¹⁰

According to the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), HTS ceased its assaults following the Turkish army deployments in Idlib, except during military campaigns launched by GoS forces, and abided by the ceasefire agreement. It also pushed other Jihadist factions away from the frontlines and confiscated their heavy weapons.⁸¹¹ SOHR, cited by France 24 observed that on 30 April 2020, HTS opened a trade crossing into GoS-held areas in western Aleppo countryside near Idlib's provincial borders, which incited protests against the group in north-west Syria.⁸¹²

⁸⁰⁰ Al-Alam, مصادرت تكشف لماذا سحب الجيش التركي نقاطه العسكرية من حلب [Turkish sources revealed why the Turkish Army withdrew military points from Aleppo], 10 March 2021, [url](#); Nedaa Post, لماذا سحب الجيش التركي نقاطاً عسكرية من غربي حلب؟ [Why did the Turkish Army withdraw military points from western Aleppo?], 9 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁰¹ Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute, 1 July 2020, [url](#); Strategics, The complicated Military Map in North-Eastern Syria, 24 January 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁰² Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁰³ Defense Post (The), Syrian government forces set to enter Kobani and Manbij in SDF deal, 13 October 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰⁴ Al Jazeera, Syria's army to deploy along Turkey border as Kurds strike deal, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰⁵ DW, Russia-backed Syrian forces enter key city Manbij in northern Syria, 15 October 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰⁶ 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](#)

⁸⁰⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁸⁰⁸ Carter Center (The), Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | September 2018 – August 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2; Al Jazeera, HTS offensive could draw in Syria and Turkey, 9 January 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰⁹ 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; France24, Syrians in Idlib protest opening of trade link with regime, 1 May 2020, [url](#)

⁸¹⁰ MEI, Shifting Gears: HTS's Evolving Use of SVBIEDs During the Idlib Offensive of 2019-20, 28 October 2020, [url](#)

⁸¹¹ ECFR, Guns and governance: How Europe should talk with non-state armed groups in the Middle East, n. d., [url](#)

⁸¹² France24, Syrians in Idlib protest opening of trade link with regime, 1 May 2020, [url](#)

2.2.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

In March 2020, Russia and Turkey agreed to a ceasefire in north-west Syria⁸¹³ which aimed at freezing the frontlines and operating joint patrols on the M4 highway that links Aleppo and Latakia.⁸¹⁴ In its early stages, the ceasefire agreement saw no violations⁸¹⁵, however, by mid-April 2020, Jusoor for Studies, cited by Syria Direct, stated that the agreement was violated over 109 times by the GoS forces which tried to break into areas in western Aleppo countryside, among others.⁸¹⁶ In 2021, several violations to the ceasefire agreement have been observed by Russia and Turkey in Aleppo governorate, including five on 7 February 2021⁸¹⁷ and four reported on 12 March 2021.⁸¹⁸

Aleppo city and its surroundings

According to the Col, as 'armed groups and terrorist organizations' were retreating from their areas of control during the military operations of the GoS forces, they launched 'indiscriminate attacks against residential areas under Government control in western Aleppo'. A Russian source cited by the Col reported on over 1 800 instances of shelling and more than 430 attacks by heavy weapons during the period 9 January to 27 February 2020.⁸¹⁹ According to the same source, civilians in Aleppo city 'recounted increasing incoming fire emanating from armed groups who controlled adjacent Rashideen, Dawwar El-Maliyyeh and Lairamoun in western rural Aleppo'.⁸²⁰ The ICRC also reported on intense shelling that affected several neighbourhoods in Aleppo city in the first weeks of 2020.⁸²¹ On 21 March 2021, shells, allegedly launched by Turkish-backed armed groups, fell on Al-Fardos neighbourhood in eastern Aleppo killing two and injuring 17 civilians.⁸²²

Sources reported on a state of lawlessness in the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo city. Reportedly that part of the city was controlled by militias, and the government was absent.⁸²³ Moreover, looting, thefts, kidnapping, and extortion were prevalent in old Aleppo and Bab Al-Nayrab neighbourhoods where the Barri clan were in control.⁸²⁴

⁸¹³ France24, Ceasefire agreed between Putin, Erdogan comes into effect for Syria's Idlib, 5 March 2020, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), para. 19

⁸¹⁴ Reuters, Ceasefire in Syria's Idlib comes at a cost for Turkey's Erdogan, 6 March 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), para. 4

⁸¹⁵ Al Jazeera, Turkey says no ceasefire violations in Syria's Idlib, 7 March 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Turkish defence minister sees no violations of ceasefire in Syria's Idlib, 7 March 2020, [url](#)

⁸¹⁶ Syria Direct, Will Damascus or HTS be the first to break the ceasefire in Idlib?, 16 April 2020, [url](#)

⁸¹⁷ BW Business World, Russia Registers 28 Ceasefire Violations In Syria Over Past Day, 7 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸¹⁸ Sputnik Arabic, روسيا ترصد 19 خرقاً لوقف إطلاق النار في سوريا خلال الـ 24 الساعة الأخيرة, [Russia observes 19 violations to the ceasefire agreement in Syria in the past 24 hours], 12 March 2021, [url](#); Al-Khabar, رصد 19 خرقاً لنظام وقف إطلاق النار في سوريا, [Observations of 19 violations to the ceasefire regime in Syria], 12 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸¹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 18

⁸²⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 82

⁸²¹ ICRC, Syria: A spike in civilian casualties, mass displacement in country's northwest, 31 January 2020, [url](#)

⁸²² NPA, Killed and wounded due to bombardment on Syria's eastern Aleppo, 21 March 2021, [url](#); Al-Khabar, سقوط قذائف على حلب .. شهيدان و 17 مصاباً [Mortars fell on Aleppo... Two martyrs and 17 people wounded], 21 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸²³ SOHR, [Eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods after 4 years in the control of the Syrian regime: remnants of the military machine claim dozens of lives.. Crises, lawlessness and influence of Shabiha complicate life], 21 December 2020, [url](#); I am Human Story, حلب ... قتلان آمنى وخروج عن سيطرة النظام السوري: مخلفات الآلة العسكرية تحصد أرواح عشرات المواطنين.. وأزمات وفتن آمنى وسطوة "الشبيحة" تؤزم الواقع المعيشي, [Aleppo... Lawlessness and exit from the Syrian regime's control], 7 January 2021, [url](#)

⁸²⁴ SOHR, [Eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods after 4 years in the control of the Syrian regime: remnants of the military machine claim dozens of lives.. Crises, lawlessness and influence of Shabiha complicate life], 21 December 2020, [url](#)

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Aleppo city in 2020 and early 2021 included the following:

- On 12 January 2020, ground-based strikes hit several residential areas in the city of Aleppo resulting in the death of four civilians and the injury of three others.⁸²⁵
- On 5 February 2020, reported ground-based strikes hit a residential area of Aleppo city, causing the death of five family members.⁸²⁶
- On 25 February 2020, four civilians were reportedly killed in two separate IED attacks in Aleppo city.⁸²⁷
- On 21 March 2021, the state-controlled news agency, SANA, reported that two civilians were killed, and a few others wounded in a shelling that targeted the Al-Saliheen and Al-Fardos neighbourhoods in the eastern part of Aleppo city.⁸²⁸

Western Aleppo governorate

The Col stated on 3 September 2020 that the battles over Idlib governorate and western Aleppo comprised ‘brief ground operations’ by the SAA, accompanied by ‘prolonged aerial offensives by pro-Government forces’. The source added that at least 1 500 air strikes, mainly air-to-ground missiles and barrel bombs, were launched between 1 November 2019 and 1 March 2020.⁸²⁹ The ICRC observed an intensification of battles in the first weeks of 2020 in Idlib and western Aleppo governorates.⁸³⁰ Between 20 January and 5 March 2020, at least 217 air strikes hit areas in western Aleppo, and the Col highlighted the example of Kafr Nouran town which was hit by 14 air strikes on 9 February 2020 alone.⁸³¹ The Turkish news outlet, Anadolu, reported on 9 February 2020 that, in addition to Kafr Nouran, Russian air strikes targeted the villages of Kafr Naha and Al-Rahhal in western Aleppo governorate.⁸³²

The Col provided the following chart which highlighted the hostilities against civilian facilities in western Aleppo and Idlib by actor in the period 1 November 2019 – 30 April 2020:

⁸²⁵ OHCHR, Syria: Bachelet condemns continued killings and displacements despite ‘ceasefire’, 17 January 2020, [url](#)

⁸²⁶ 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 17; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 86

⁸²⁷ 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁸²⁸ SANA, استشهاد مدنيين اثنين وإصابة آخرين بينهم أطفال جراء قذائف على حيي الصالحين والفردوس بحلب, [Martyrdom of two and injuring of others due to a shelling on Al-Saliheen and Al-Fardos in Aleppo], 21 March 2021, [url](#); WHO, WHO condemns attacks on residential neighbourhoods in Aleppo, 23 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸²⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 17

⁸³⁰ ICRC, Syria: A spike in civilian casualties, mass displacement in country’s northwest, 31 January 2020, [url](#)

⁸³¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), paras. 33-34

⁸³² AA, حسب مرصد مراقبة الطيران التابع للمعارضة السورية مقتل مدنيين اثنين في غارات روسية على ريف حلب, [Two civilians died in Russian air strikes on rural Aleppo according to the Syrian opposition aviation monitoring observatory], 9 February 2020, [url](#)

Hostilities damaging medical facilities, schools and markets and entailing civilian casualties in Idlib and western Aleppo in the period 1 November 2019 to 30 April 2020							
Category	Idlib	Western Aleppo	Total	By actor			
				Pro-Government (total)	Number attributed to Government forces ^a	Number attributed to Russian Aerospace Forces ^a	Armed groups (total)
Number of medical facilities reported damaged ^b	19	6	25	25	-	-	-
Attacks affecting medical facilities investigated by the Commission ^c	11	5+1 ^d	17	16	1	1	1
Number of schools reported damaged ^e	49	6+3 ^d	58	55	-	-	3
Attacks affecting schools investigated by the Commission ^f	8	6	14	14	6	-	-
Number of markets reported damaged ^g	14	-	14	14	-	-	-
Attacks affecting markets investigated by the Commission ^h	6	1+2 ^d	9	7	1	-	2
Other attacks affecting civilians or civilian objects investigated by the Commission ⁱ	8	2+2 ^d	12	10	2	1	2
Number of civilian deaths reported ^j	509	167	676	641	-	-	35
Civilian casualties in the 52 incidents investigated by the Commission ^k	474	60+48 ^d	582	534			48

Figure 15: Hostilities damaging medical facilities, schools and markets and entailing civilian casualties in Idlib and western Aleppo in the period 1 November 2019 to 30 April 2020⁸³³

The CoI also included in its report of 3 September 2020 the following map of attacks impacting civilians and civilian infrastructure in Idlib and western Aleppo governorates between November 2019 and June 2020:

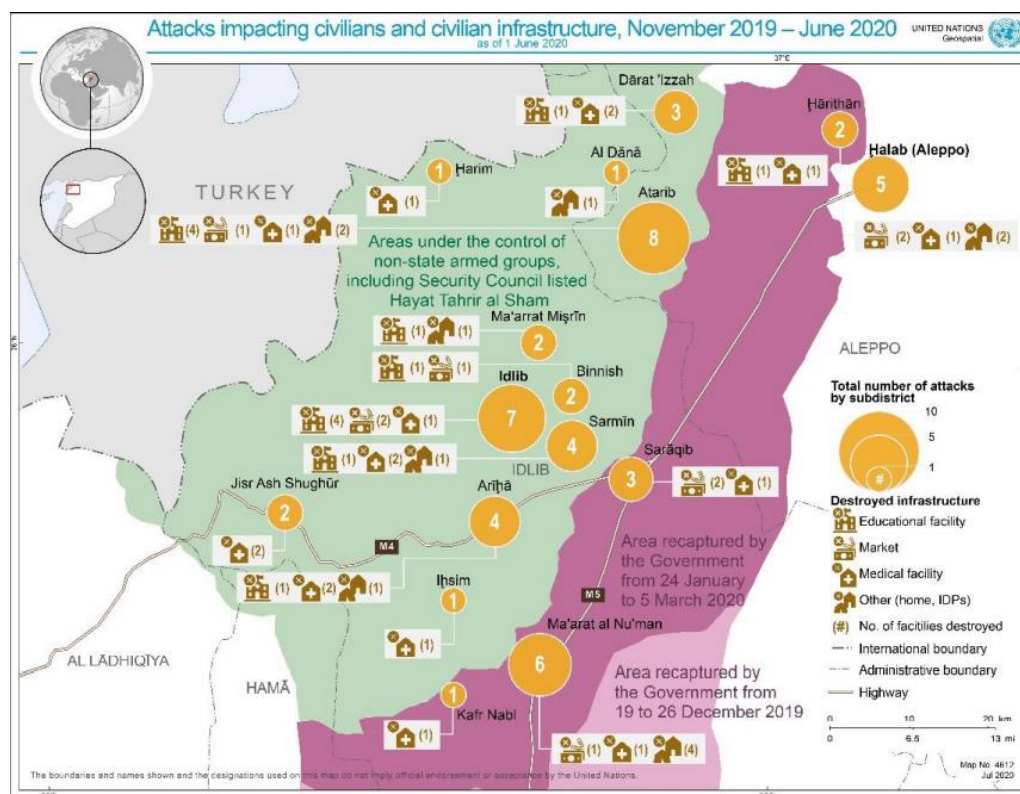


Figure 16: Attacks impacting civilian infrastructure, November 2019 – June 2020⁸³⁴

⁸³³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), p. 5

⁸³⁴ UN, Attacks Impacting Civilians and Civilian Infrastructure, Map No. 4612, July 2020, [url](#), p. 22

In 2020, WHO recorded six attacks on health care facilities in Aleppo governorate.⁸³⁵

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in western Aleppo countryside in 2020 and early 2021 included the following:

- According to a UN Security Council report, a reported air strike targeted a bus near Urum Al-Kubra on 3 February 2020 and resulted in the death of nine family members, including three women and four children.⁸³⁶
- On 10 February 2020, at least 14 civilians were killed and 23 were injured in reported air strikes that hit various areas in Abyan Sim'an town.⁸³⁷
- The CoI reported that on 11 February 2020, a group of women who returned to Kfar Halab to retrieve some belongings were shot at by the 25th Special Mission Forces Division.⁸³⁸
- On 17 February 2020, Reuters reported that 'Russian and government air strikes' targeted the town of Daret Izza in the north of Aleppo, 'wounding several civilians and forcing two hospitals to close'.⁸³⁹
- In its report of 23 April 2020, the UN Security Council reported on several air strikes that hit a kindergarten and two schools in the areas of Anjarah, Jabal Sam'an and Daret Izzah in rural Aleppo, that caused civilian deaths and material damage.⁸⁴⁰
- On 8 and 18 May 2020, two civilians were killed in reported sniper fire near the villages of Miznaz and Atareb.⁸⁴¹
- On 21 March 2021, artillery shelling, reportedly by GoS forces⁸⁴², hit a hospital in Atareb town in western Aleppo countryside.⁸⁴³ The attack caused 6 deaths and 17 injuries, including among patients and medical staff, and caused damage to the hospital.⁸⁴⁴

Turkish- and SNA-controlled areas

IED attacks and shelling

Since Turkey consolidated its control of northern Aleppo governorate, the Turkish Army and armed groups affiliated with it have been targeted by Kurdish and unidentified armed groups.⁸⁴⁵ UNOCHA stated that of the 194 IED attacks that were verified in 2020, 83 took place in Afrin, Jarablus, and A'zaz.⁸⁴⁶ Between 1 January and 14 September 2020, OHCHR documented at least 116 civilian deaths and 463 injuries as a result of IED attacks by unidentified perpetrators and explosive remnants of war (ERW) in areas under the control of Turkish-backed armed groups.⁸⁴⁷

⁸³⁵ WHO, Health Cluster, Attacks on health care in Syria 1 Jan – 31 Dec 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

⁸³⁶ 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 17

⁸³⁷ 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁸³⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 99

⁸³⁹ Reuters, Syrian forces consolidate control of Aleppo, air strikes under way, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁴⁰ 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), para. 15

⁸⁴¹ 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), 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁸⁴² Daily Sabah, Assad regime attack on hospital kills 7 civilians in Syria's Idlib, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁴³ WHO, WHO condemns attacks on residential neighbourhoods in Aleppo, 23 March 2021, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Several killed in gov't attack on hospital in northwest Syria, 21 March 2021, [url](#); France, Ministry for Europe and Foreign affairs, Syria – Attack against a hospital in northwest Syria, 22 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁴⁴ WHO, WHO condemns attacks on residential neighbourhoods in Aleppo, 23 March 2021, [url](#); Daily Sabah, Assad regime attack on hospital kills 7 civilians in Syria's Idlib, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁴⁵ Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 25-31 January 2021, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁴⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁸⁴⁷ OHCHR, Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups – Bachelet, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

The Afrin region saw a spike in shelling and car bomb explosions that led to the death and injury of ‘scores of inhabitants’ as well as to damage of civilian infrastructure between January and April 2020.⁸⁴⁸ The Carter Center assessed Al Bab as ‘an area of frequent conflict’, documenting at least 120 incidents that took place between January and end of July 2020.⁸⁴⁹ Fighting between SDF forces and SNA in the Al Bab area was reported in 2020.⁸⁵⁰

In February 2021, the Carter Center reported an increase in IED attacks and armed clashes in areas under SNA control in northern Aleppo governorate. The attacks were directed at SNA factions and civilians.⁸⁵¹ The attacks were unclaimed but pro-opposition sources attributed them to the YPG.⁸⁵² Enab Baladi reported on 31 January 2021 that an VBIED attack targeted Afrin city and resulted in the death of eight people. According to the source, this attack was one of a series of attacks that hit areas under the control of Turkish-backed factions in north-western Syria.⁸⁵³ ISW observed an ‘uptick in IED attacks in Turkish-controlled areas of Syria’ between 24 December 2020 and 6 January 2021.⁸⁵⁴ ISW reported on a ‘spate of likely-PKK perpetrated IED attacks’ in Turkish-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate. According to the source, between 30 January and 16 February 2021, nine IED attacks targeted SNA infrastructure and civilian sites in the cities and towns of Afrin, A’zaz, Bza’a, Al-Bab, Ras Al-Ayn, Al-Ra’e, and Jandires, resulting in at least 26 deaths.⁸⁵⁵

In its Weekly Conflict Summary covering the period 1 – 7 March 2021, the Carter Center reported on frequent shelling and clashes between Turkish armed forces and affiliated armed groups on the one side and the YPG and GoS armed forces on the other. Reportedly, reinforcements by both sides have been observed on frontlines in northern and eastern Aleppo governorate.⁸⁵⁶

Attacks on oil refineries

GoS and Russian attacks on makeshift oil refineries in northern and north-eastern Aleppo were reported by several sources in 2021.⁸⁵⁷ On 10 January 2021, an unidentified drone attacked oil refineries situated in Al-Bab countryside.⁸⁵⁸ Al Jazeera reported on attacks by Russian warships and forces aligned with the GoS that targeted makeshift oil refineries in Al-Hamran near Jarablus and Tarhin near Al-Bab in March 2021. Reportedly, the attacks caused huge fires, destroyed more than 200 oil trucks, and caused some damage to civilian property.⁸⁵⁹ SOHR stated that four civilians were killed and dozens injured in the attacks⁸⁶⁰, and Baladi News mentioned that in retaliation, the Turkish forces shelled areas under the control of GoS/SDF in Manbij countryside.⁸⁶¹ On 15 March 2021, Al Jazeera reported that missiles launched from Kuweires air base in Aleppo targeted ‘civilian

⁸⁴⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 38

⁸⁴⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 27 July – 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 3

⁸⁵⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 2-3

⁸⁵¹ Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 22-28 February 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁵² Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 15-21 February 2021, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁵³ Enab Baladi, ارتفاع عدد ضحايا تفجير عفرين إلى ثمانية أشخاص [The number of the victims of Afrin explosion rose to eight people], 31 January 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 30 - February 18, 2021, 19 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁶ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 1 - 7 March 2021, 7 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁸⁵⁷ SOHR, Aleppo countryside | Rocket attacks renew on the area of primitive oil refineries, 5 March 2021, [url](#); EA Worldview, UPDATED: More Russian Attacks on Oil Refineries in North Syria, 15 March 2021, [url](#); Al-Bawaba, Drone Attack Strikes Oil Refineries in North Syria, 10 January 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁸ Al-Bawaba, Drone Attack Strikes Oil Refineries in North Syria, 10 January 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁵⁹ Al Jazeera, Syria: Oil refinery attacks raise fears of ‘grave escalation’, 11 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁶⁰ SOHR, Aleppo countryside | Rocket attacks renew on the area of primitive oil refineries, 5 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁶¹ Baladi, أربعة شهداء وعشرات الجرحى يقصف روسي على ريف حلب [Four martyrs and dozens injured in a Russian strike on rural Aleppo], 6 March 2021, [url](#)

settlements and fuel tankers' in Al-Bab and Jarablus and caused injuries among civilians according to Turkey's defence ministry cited in the report.⁸⁶²

ISIL activity

As regards ISIL activity in northern Aleppo governorate, USDOD stated in its report covering the first quarter of 2020, that 'since the Turkish incursion, ISIS clandestine cells have also focused operations' in three governorates including Aleppo'.⁸⁶³ ISW stated on 11 January 2021 that on 20 December 2020, ISIL claimed 'its first attack in Afrin, Aleppo Province since 2017, demonstrating expanding area of operations'. The source added that ISIL targeted the SNA with VBIED, and that ISIL began claiming responsibilities for attacks in Al-Bab and A'zaz in June 2020.⁸⁶⁴ In January 2021, SOHR documented 'over 51 operations, including armed attacks and explosions, carried out by ISIS cells in SDF-held areas' including Aleppo.⁸⁶⁵

ISIL commanders and elements were reportedly targeted by likely US airstrikes in northern Aleppo countryside on different occasions: in Afrin on 21 May 2020 (ISIL commander)⁸⁶⁶, near Al-Bab on 20 June 2020 (former Emir of Raqqa)⁸⁶⁷, and near Ihtaimlat on 20 July 2020 (ISIL militant).⁸⁶⁸

Further information on ISIL is available in Section [1.4.6 Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant \(ISIL\)](#)

Lawlessness and infighting

The Syrian Observer, referring back to information of the outlet Baladi News, reported on a 'state of lawlessness and an increase in the number of car and motorcycle bombings, in addition to assassinations and fighting among the factions' that was prevalent in the SNA-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate.⁸⁶⁹ On 16 February 2021, Syria TV, a Syrian opposition channel based in Turkey⁸⁷⁰, reported on 'ongoing tensions' in Afrin city in the aftermath of skirmishes that involved Jaysh Al-Islam and Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyya (the Levant Front), two factions of the SNA. The source stated that a state of apprehension was prevalent among the residents of the city who feared the resumption of violence.⁸⁷¹ The clashes between the two SNA factions were also reported by Enab Baladi and Aleppo Today.⁸⁷² Later in February 2021, Al-Mayadeen, a Beirut-based pan-Arab TV channel⁸⁷³, reported that the SNA launched a 'large military campaign' in areas under its control in northern Aleppo, mainly Al-Bab and Afrin, targeting factions of Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya (the Levant Front). Reportedly, the campaign was spearheaded by the Hamzat, the Military Police, and Jaysh Al-Islam of the SNA.⁸⁷⁴ An incident of infighting that affected civilians was reported to have taken place on 23 December 2020, when clashes

⁸⁶² Al Jazeera, Turkey says civilians wounded in Syrian missile raids, 15 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁶³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General report to the United States Congress: January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 52

⁸⁶⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁶⁵ SOHR, SDF-controlled areas in January | Over 50 attacks by ISIS cells leave nearly 60 people dead and injured, and major security campaigns against corruption and ISIS cells result in the arrest of dozens, 11 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁶⁶ ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 13 - 26, 2020, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁶⁷ ISW, Syria Situation Report: June 10 - 23, 2020, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁶⁸ ISW, Syria Situation Report: July 7 - 21, 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁶⁹ Syrian Observer (The), Security Chaos, Faction Infighting in Northern Aleppo, Baladi News, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁰ Syria TV, سوريا عن تلفزيون سوريا [About Syria TV], n. d., [url](#)

⁸⁷¹ Syria TV, عفرين.. جيش الإسلام والجهة الشامية صراع على النفوذ [Afrin.. Jaysh Al-Islam and Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyya, a struggle over control], 16 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁷² Enab Baladi, عفرين.. قتيلاں باشتياك بين "جيش الإسلام" و"الجهة الشامية" [Afrin.. Two deaths in clashes between Jaysh Al-Islam and Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyya], 13 February 2021, [url](#); Aleppo Today, قتيلاں وجرحى باشتياكات بين فصائل الجيش الوطني في عفرين [Two deaths and some injuries in SNA infighting in Afrin], 13 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁷³ France24, 'Anti-Al Jazeera' channel Al Mayadeen goes on air, 12 June 2012, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁴ Al-Mayadeen, حملة واسعة أطلقها فصائل أنقرة في ريف حلب الشمالي لمواجهة "الجهة الشامية" [Large campaign launched by Ankara factions in northern rural Aleppo against Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya], 27 February 2021, [url](#)

between fighters of Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyya and Al-Mutasim brigade erupted near Shamarin village. Reportedly, a number of IDPs were injured and tents were partially damaged.⁸⁷⁵

The CoI stated on 14 August 2020 that it ‘corroborated repeated patterns of systematic looting and property appropriation’ and ‘widespread arbitrary deprivation of liberty’ in Afrin, perpetrated by various brigades of the SNA. According to the CoI, SNA fighters looted and occupied property after civilians fled the region, or even coerced residents, mainly those of Kurdish origins, to leave their houses.⁸⁷⁶ The VDC reported on the same trend⁸⁷⁷, and Enab Baladi reported on cases of real estate and crops seizure by SNA factions in Afrin.⁸⁷⁸ In a report dated 5 April 2021, the SOHR spoke of ‘ongoing thefts and looting of civilians’ properties’ in the Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield areas.⁸⁷⁹

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in SNA-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate in 2020 and early 2021 included the following:

- On 20 January 2020, a pregnant woman and her toddler son were killed, and two other boys injured, in a shelling that hit their home in Afrin, reportedly from Tall Rif’at.⁸⁸⁰
- On 10 February 2020, six civilians were killed and 12 injured in a VBIED attack in Afrin city.⁸⁸¹
- On 19 March 2020, an explosion of a VBIED in A’zaz city caused at least 2 deaths and 18 injuries among civilians.⁸⁸²
- The UN Security Council reported that on 28 April 2020, at least 31 civilians were killed, and 53 people injured ‘after a fuel truck reportedly exploded in Afrin city’.⁸⁸³ CoI reported on the same incident, stating that at least 41 civilians were killed and 61 wounded and that the attack was by a VBIED.⁸⁸⁴
- On 1 and 2 May 2020, reported small arms fire between non-state actors resulted in nine civilian injuries in Jarablus city. A similar incident took place in Al-Bab on 16 May and led to the death of a pregnant woman and the injury of seven other civilians.⁸⁸⁵
- On 25 June 2020, another male civilian was killed in a drive-by shooting claimed by ISIL in Al-Bab city.⁸⁸⁶
- On 19 July 2020, a VBIED attack in the village of Saju near A’zaz resulted in the death of eight civilians and the injury of 76 others.⁸⁸⁷

⁸⁷⁵ SNHR, IDPs injured, tents damaged in north Aleppo camp in clashes between two Syrian National Army factions on Dec 23, 24 December 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 46

⁸⁷⁷ VDC-NSY, القواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا (حلب، إدلب) [Turkey’s military bases in northeast Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 august 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁸ Enab Baladi, Real estate seizures, utilization, and royalties... Who protects property rights in Afrin?, 29 July 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁷⁹ SOHR, “Olive Branch” and “Euphrates Shield” areas in March | Over 20 arrests and kidnappings in Afrin...ongoing thefts and looting of civilians’ properties...security chaos leaves nearly 40 people dead and wounded, 5 April 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁸⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 39

⁸⁸¹ 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁸⁸² 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁸⁸³ 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), 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁸⁸⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 42

⁸⁸⁵ 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), 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁸⁸⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁸⁸⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 19

- On 6 October 2020, a reported VBIED detonated in Al-Bab city resulting in the death of 18 civilians and the injury of at least 62 others. According to the source, three humanitarian workers were injured in the incident and an NGO ambulance was damaged.⁸⁸⁸
- On 13 December 2020, armed clashes between armed groups in Jindayris city left two men injured.⁸⁸⁹
- On 31 January 2021, six people were killed and around 30 injured in a car bomb attack in A'zaz city to the north of Aleppo.⁸⁹⁰
- On 13 February 2021, a VBIED attack hit a marketplace in Al-Ra'e town, and resulted in one death and 12 injuries among civilians.⁸⁹¹
- On 5 March 2021, missile strikes took place near Al-Bab and Jarablus and resulted in at least one death and 10 injuries. According to the source, the attack was unclaimed.⁸⁹²

Further information on the security situation in areas under control of Turkish-backed armed groups is available in Section [1.5.2 Areas under control of Turkish-backed armed groups](#)

SDF-controlled areas

In Tal Rifaat area, UNICEF observed 29 security-related incidents, in January 2021.⁸⁹³ The Turkish army targeted the vicinity of Meng airport and the town of Tal Rifaat resulting in damage to two houses on 26 December 2020⁸⁹⁴, and a group called Afrin Liberation Forces shelled Turkish forces in Afrin on 23 January 2021 in retaliation for targeting civilians in Tal Rifaat.⁸⁹⁵ Other incidents of reciprocal shelling between the SDF in Tal Rifaat and the Turkish army were reported on 18 February 2021⁸⁹⁶ and on 11 March 2021.⁸⁹⁷

In Manbij area, a VBIED detonated on 20 October 2020 and left five people injured.⁸⁹⁸ On 11 January 2021, Kurdistan 24, citing the SDF-backed Manbij Military Council, reported that Turkish-backed groups shelled Al-Gat and Al-Hoshariya with heavy weapons and mortar shells.⁸⁹⁹ On 8 February 2021, the villages of Al-Şaşat, Erbe Kilo, Iwn Dadat, Erebesen, Um Edese and Cat in Manbij region were bombed by Turkish forces.⁹⁰⁰

Reporting on the period between December 2020 and January 2021, the UN Security Council noted that the contact lines in the areas of Tal Rifaat and Manbij 'saw increased artillery shelling and small

⁸⁸⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 17; see also: Syria Relief and Development [Twitter], posted on: 6 October 2020, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Truck bomb in Syria's Al-Bab kills at least 18, 6 October 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁸⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 17

⁸⁹⁰ RT, وسائل إعلام: قتل وجرحى جراء انفجار سيارة مفخخة في مدينة أعزاز شمال سوريا, 31 January 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁹¹ Al-Souria, ضحايا بتفجير استهدف سوق مدينة الراعي بريف حلب, [Casualties in a VBIED that targeted a market in Al-Ra'i town in Aleppo countryside], 13 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁹² Garda World, Syria: Missile strikes in Aleppo Governorate kill at least one person and injure 10 others, 5 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁹³ UNICEF, Whole of Syria Humanitarian Situation Report January 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁸⁹⁴ Syrian Documentation Center, Turkish targets in the vicinity of the "Meng" airport and "Tal Rifaat" in the northern countryside of Aleppo., 26 December 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁹⁵ Kurdistan Monitor, Rojava – West Kurdistan – Syria – January 2021, n. d., [url](#)

⁸⁹⁶ Daily Sabah, YPG terrorists wound 6 children in rocket attack on Syria's Afrin, 18 February 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁹⁷ NPA, القوات التركية تجدد قصفها قرى وبلدات بريف حلب الشمالي [Turkish forces resumes bombarding towns and villages in northern Aleppo countryside], 11 March 2021, [url](#); Al-Youm 7, القوات التركية تقصف 4 قرى بريف حلب الشمالي [Turkish forces bombard 4 villages in northern rural Aleppo], 11 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸⁹⁸ SHRC, Injuries due to Explosion in Menbij, 20 October 2020, [url](#); Kurdistan 24, IED attack injures civilians in Syria's Manbij, 20 October 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁹⁹ Kurdistan 24, Turkish-backed groups shell Manbij countryside, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁰⁰ ANF, Invading Turkish forces bomb Manbij, 8 February 2021, [url](#)

arms fire'.⁹⁰¹ Baladi News reported that skirmishes broke between SNA and SDF fighters on the Kafr Khasher axis, three kilometres to the south of A'zaz.⁹⁰² On 29 March 2021, the 3rd Corps of the SNA attacked SDF positions on the Mara'anaz axis in the vicinity of A'zaz which resulted in the death and injury of ten SDF fighters. Reportedly, during the attack, a Grad missile fell on the Shat road connecting A'zaz and Afrin which led to its complete closure.⁹⁰³ In Manbij area, the SOHR reported on 'violent clashes with machineguns, accompanied by artillery fire' which erupted in the northern countryside of Manbij between forces of the Manbij Military Council and Turkish-backed factions.⁹⁰⁴

Finally, in the wake of tensions between the SDF and GoS in Qamishli that started on 2 January 2021⁹⁰⁵, clashes erupted between GoS forces and Kurdish forces and militias in north-east Syria, and the tensions led to multiple sieges.⁹⁰⁶ GoS forces besieged the areas of Sheikh Maqsoud and Tal Rifaat in Aleppo governorate in response to the siege imposed by the SDF on GoS-controlled areas of Qamishli.⁹⁰⁷ The reciprocal blockades were eased gradually⁹⁰⁸ following a Russian-mediated agreement to end the siege in Hasakah and Aleppo.⁹⁰⁹

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in SDF-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate in 2020 and early 2021 included the following:

- On 23 January 2021, reported ground-based strikes in Tall Rifaat caused four civilian deaths and eight injuries.⁹¹⁰
- On 22 March 2021, the SOHR reported Turkish bases in Al-Bab city shelled several frontline villages in the SDF-controlled areas in Aleppo governorate, including the village of Abbla, the surrounding of Tal Rifaat, the village of Tal Jamil and the vicinity of Kafr Naya.⁹¹¹

Further information on the security situation in areas under control of Turkish-backed armed groups is available in Section [1.5.3 Kurdish-controlled areas in north-east Syria](#)

Israeli air strikes

In an article published on 22 April 2021, Reuters reported on an intensification of Israeli airstrikes that targeted Iranian sites in Syria. The source quoted a Syrian military defector who stated that Israeli airstrikes hit areas across Syria, including Aleppo.⁹¹² Reportedly, Israeli air strikes targeted positions of GoS forces or Iran-backed militias in Al-Safireh in eastern Aleppo countryside on 5 May 2020⁹¹³, in the vicinity of the artillery academy in Ramouseh, to the south of Aleppo city on 16 May 2020⁹¹⁴, and Al-

⁹⁰¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 18 February 2021, [url](#), para. 6

⁹⁰² Baladi, مقتل عنصر من "الجيش الوطني" في المواجهات مع "قسد" بريف حلب [Death of a SNA fighter in skirmishes with SDF in Aleppo countryside], 9 March 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁰³ Baladi, "قتلى من قسد" وقصف صاروخي يقطع طريق "إعزاز - عفرين" [Deaths among the "SDF" and a missile shelling blocks the A'zaz-Afrin road], 29 March 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁰⁴ SOHR, Military escalation in Aleppo | Clashes erupt in Manbij, while regime forces and Turkish force trade fire in northern countryside, 14 March 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁰⁵ Enab Baladi, "قسد" تضغط على النظام بالحصار في القامشلي.. الرد بالمظاهرات [SDF pressures the regime with siege in Qamishli.. Demonstrations in reaction], 12 January 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁰⁶ VOA, Fresh Clashes Erupt Between Kurdish, Government Forces in Northeast Syria, 31 January 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁰⁷ EPC, Dispute between the Kurdish Autonomous Administration and Al-Assad Regime in Al-Hasakah Governorate: Background and Possibilities, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁰⁸ AA, YPG/PKK, Assad regime mutually ease blockades, 3 February 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁰⁹ Al Monitor, Syrian government, SDF trade accusations of violations of Russian-mediated cease-fire, 8 February 2021, [url](#)

⁹¹⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 18

⁹¹¹ SOHR, Aleppo countryside | Turkish forces shell five villages and positions in Kurdish-held areas, 22 March 2021, [url](#)

⁹¹² Reuters, Israel intensifying air war in Syria against Iranian encroachment, 22 April 2021, [url](#)

⁹¹³ France24, Syria says Israeli jets attacked military outposts near Aleppo, 5 May 2020, [url](#)

⁹¹⁴ Al-Arabiya, سماع دوي انفجارات في حلب السورية [Explosions were heard in the Syrian city of Aleppo], 20 May 2020, [url](#)

Safireh military complex, known for its production and storage of ballistic missiles and chemical weapons, in Aleppo governorate on 11 September 2020.⁹¹⁵

Security incidents

During the reporting period, there were 2 405 security incidents recorded by ACLED in Aleppo governorate, of whom 1 556 were coded as explosions/remote violence, 601 battles and 248 incidents of violence against civilians. According to ACLED's dataset, Aleppo recorded the second highest number of security incidents between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 after Idlib governorate.

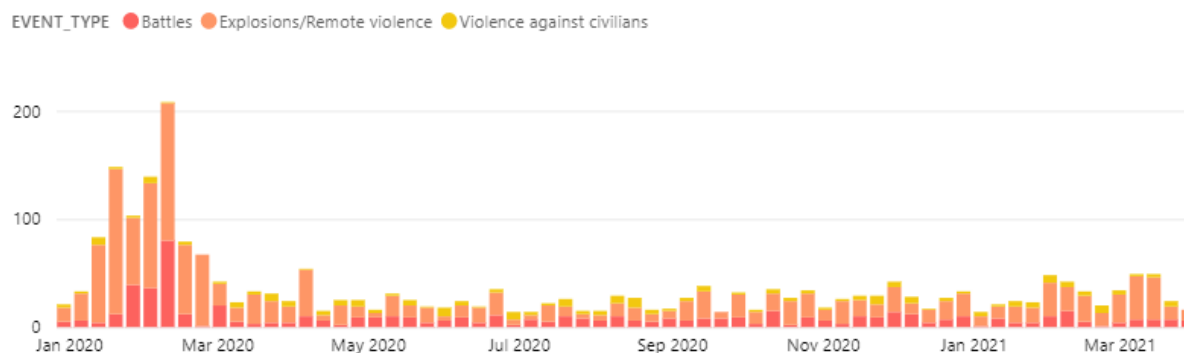


Figure 17. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Aleppo governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data⁹¹⁶

Security incidents were recorded in all Aleppo governorate districts during the reporting period, 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 (see Figure 18).

Aleppo governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Afrin	70	189	135
Ain Al Arab	4	15	6
Al Bab	98	113	37
As-Safira	3	5	2
A'zaz	128	507	39
Jarablus	35	33	5
Jebel Saman	222	620	15
Menbij	41	74	9
Total	601	1556	248

Figure 18. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Aleppo governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

⁹¹⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2 - 15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

⁹¹⁶ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

Civilian fatalities

In 2020, Aleppo had between 390⁹¹⁷ (SNHR data)⁹¹⁸ and 446 civilian fatalities (VDC data)⁹¹⁹, the second highest number of civilian fatalities recorded by SNHR, and the highest number recorded by VDC out of all governorates in Syria. Most civilian fatalities during 2020 were recorded in the months of January and February.

In the first three months of 2021, VDC recorded 73 civilian fatalities in Aleppo governorate, while SNHR recorded 104 civilian fatalities.

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	74	66	22	12
February	117	77	20	60
March	23	15	31	32
April	56	9		
May	31	58		
June	14	20		
July	26	29		
August	13	12		
September	21	22		
October	42	35		
November	22	36		
December	7	11		
Total	446	390	73	104

Figure 19. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Aleppo governorate in 2020 and the first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

According to AOA, in 2020 Aleppo was the worst impacted governorate by explosive violence, with 1 287 civilian casualties recorded, an increase from 2019 when AOA recorded 1 259 civilian casualties.⁹²⁰

Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war

In a report published in 2020, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the University of St Andrews included Aleppo governorate in the group of governorates

⁹¹⁷ In a January 2021 report, SNHR mentions 402 civilian fatalities in Aleppo in 2020. This figure is the result of a revision of their data. EASO email correspondence with SNHR, 22 April 2021. See SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

⁹¹⁸ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

⁹¹⁹ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

⁹²⁰ AOA, Explosive Violence Monitor 2020, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

that sustained the highest damage to physical capital.⁹²¹ Within this group, Aleppo sustained the highest percentage of the total damage (32.5 %). The source stated that this high percentage ‘can be explained by factors including urban size, population density and their large capital stock, mainly industrial and infrastructure’ as well as by the longer periods of fighting in comparison with other governorates.⁹²²

Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Aleppo governorate, 28.3 % of the population was living in damaged buildings.⁹²³

In Aleppo city, as of December 2016, around 63 % of healthcare facilities have been damaged or destroyed – with 35 % being completely destroyed. As of February 2017, almost 15 million tons of debris were left in the city which would take an estimated six years to clear.⁹²⁴ 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.⁹²⁵ Electricity in Aleppo city was supplied primarily from generators and only private hospitals were reported to operate.⁹²⁶ According to a report dated 6 February 2019, access to functional water networks was reportedly limited, only three in ten households could rely on the water network.⁹²⁷

SOHR observed that a considerable number of IDPs returned to their areas of origin in eastern Aleppo city, ‘despite the prevalent destruction’. Reportedly, many returnees resided in inhabitable and damaged buildings, and dozens were injured when their damaged buildings collapsed.⁹²⁸ The UK-based media outlet, the National⁹²⁹, stated on 29 March 2021 that the eastern part of Aleppo city ‘remains in ruins, largely deserted and lacking in state services’. Residents of the area, cited by the source, believed that the neglect from which the eastern part of the city suffered was ‘a form of collective punishment by the state in what was once the rebels’ most powerful stronghold’.⁹³⁰ On 28 August 2020, Enab Baladi shared pictures of the ‘destruction scenes in Salaheddine district in Aleppo city’.⁹³¹

The GoS authorised a small-scale rehabilitation of some historical sites in Old Aleppo, overseen by the Aga Khan Foundation together with the Syrian Trust for Development and by the Russian charity, Akhmad Kadyrov Foundation. Moreover, the activities of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) were limited to the rehabilitation of a number of shops in four historical markets in Old Aleppo.⁹³² According to the Guardian, the Aga Khan Foundation supported the reconstruction of some of the markets, while foreign congregations helped to restore a number of churches.⁹³³ Furthermore,

⁹²¹ ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, 2020, [url](#), p. 50; The source defines loss to physical capital as including ‘private and public construction and equipment, such as housing stock, schools, hospitals and factories, and power, water, sanitation, transport and communications infrastructure’. ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, 2020, [url](#), p. 49

⁹²² ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 50

⁹²³ Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

⁹²⁴ World Bank (The), The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria, 2017, [url](#), pp. 27, 39

⁹²⁵ World Bank (The), Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, March 2017, [url](#), pp. iv, vi

⁹²⁶ New York Times (The), What ‘Victory’ Looks Like: A Journey Through Shattered Syria, 21 August 2019, [url](#)

⁹²⁷ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians an Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 137

⁹²⁸ SOHR, أحياء حلب الشرقية بعد 4 سنوات من سيطرة النظام السوري: مخلفات الآلة العسكرية تحصد أرواح عشرات المواطنين.. وأزمات وقلتان آمني وسطوة “الشبيحة” تؤزم الواقع المعيشي, [Eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods after 4 years in the control of the Syrian regime: remnants of the military machine claim dozens of lives.. Crises, lawlessness and influence of Shabiha complicate life], 21 December 2020, [url](#)

⁹²⁹ National (The), About us, n. d., [url](#)

⁹³⁰ National (The), East Aleppo: Syria's former rebel bastion languishes in ruins, 29 March 2021, [url](#)

⁹³¹ Enab Baladi, Destruction scenes in Salaheddine district in Aleppo, 28 August 2020, [url](#)

⁹³² Syria Direct, ترميم انتفاحي مرتجل يهدد هوية المدينة التاريخية, [Aleppo ruins: selective and improvised rehabilitation that jeopardises the historical identity of the city], 1 February 2021, [url](#)

⁹³³ Guardian (The), How Syria's blasted landmarks are starting to rise from the ruins, 29 August 2020, [url](#)

those with enough money in Aleppo city 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.⁹³⁴

In western Aleppo countryside, the offensive to retake Idlib and the use of ‘explosive weapons with wide-area effects, including barrel bombs, in populated areas’ in north-west Syria caused destruction and damage to civilian infrastructure, including healthcare facilities⁹³⁵, and left frontline areas close to strategic locations in ruins.⁹³⁶ REACH stated that the conflict ‘severely affected shelter conditions for households residing in the assessed communities of return’ and that the ‘presence of completely destroyed occupied shelters and severely damaged occupied shelters was reported in 72% and 79% of communities, respectively’. The source, however, did not specify the percentages of damaged shelters in the assessed communities in Aleppo governorate.⁹³⁷ A recent attack in western Aleppo countryside took place on 21 March 2021, when artillery shelling targeted a hospital in Atareb and caused six deaths and 16 injuries.⁹³⁸

Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF), ‘a multi-donor trust fund initiated by the Group of Friends of the Syrian People and its Working Group on Economic Recovery and Development’⁹³⁹, stated that in northern Aleppo governorate, a ‘considerable amount of damage has been caused to the infrastructure due to the growing population [...] due to internal displacement which overloaded the infrastructure and increased pressure on the distribution network.’⁹⁴⁰

In its situation report published on 2 March 2021, UNOCHA observed that the prevalence of explosive hazards in residential areas and public spaces in north-west Syria ‘continues to be a particular risk to civilians’. UNOCHA added that between 20 January and 23 February 2021, there have been seven IED explosions and two incidents of ERW in north-west Syria that resulted in civilian casualties.⁹⁴¹ WFP also mentioned the existence of explosive hazards in north-west Syria.⁹⁴² In Afrin, ACAPS, citing a key informant interviewed on 26 January 2021, stated that the high prevalence of explosive hazards was one of the reasons that resulted in ‘very high protection needs, especially for women, children, and the Kurdish population’.⁹⁴³

A non-exhaustive list of incidents of explosive hazards that impacted civilians across Aleppo governorate in 2020 and early 2021 included the following:

- On 17 March 2020, a boy was killed, and his father injured in a reported landmine explosion in a field outside Ain Al-Arab in north-eastern Aleppo countryside.⁹⁴⁴
- On 8 April 2020, two civilians were injured in the detonation of two landmines in the villages of Alawshah and Tall Susin in northern Aleppo countryside.⁹⁴⁵

⁹³⁴ New Humanitarian (The), In Syria’s Aleppo, a slow rebuild begins, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

⁹³⁵ HRW, “Targeting Life in Idlib”: Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, 15 October 2020, [url](#)

⁹³⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 17

⁹³⁷ REACH, Northwest Syria - Conditions in Communities of Return Idleb, Aleppo, Hama June 2020, 17 July 2020, [url](#), p. 4; REACH collected data between 5 and 17 June 2020 from 3 – 5 key informants per assessed location covering 12 subdistricts in northwestern Syria, including Daret Izza and Atarib in Aleppo governorate. REACH, Northwest Syria - Conditions in Communities of Return Idleb, Aleppo, Hama June 2020, 17 July 2020, [url](#), p. 1

⁹³⁸ IRC, Syria: IRC statement on hospital attack in western Aleppo, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

⁹³⁹ SRTF, Overview, n. d., [url](#)

⁹⁴⁰ SRTF, Rehabilitation of Water and Sanitation Infrastructure in a District in Northern Aleppo – Phase I, 30 November 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁴¹ UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria Situation Report No. 25 - As of 26 February 2021, 26 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

⁹⁴² WFP, Syrian Arab Republic: mVAM Bulletin Issue no. 51, 31 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1

⁹⁴³ ACAPS, Humanitarian needs in Afrin, 3 March 2021, [url](#), p. 3

⁹⁴⁴ 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁹⁴⁵ 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), 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 17

- On 12 April 2020, the reported detonation of UXO resulted in the death of a civilian in Kafr Nouran in western rural Aleppo.⁹⁴⁶
- On 29 June 2020, a landmine reportedly detonated in Shu'ayb near Jarabulus and caused the death of a boy and the injury of another. Another landmine reportedly detonated in an agricultural land in the Sukkariyah village in eastern rural Aleppo on 30 June 2020 and injured two boys.⁹⁴⁷
- On 16 July 2020, an UXO detonated in Afrin city, injuring two boys who were playing with it.⁹⁴⁸
- On 23 July 2020, three child siblings were killed, and 11 civilians were injured when a weapon depot exploded near the 'Armutah' IDP camp near the village of Shamarin in A'zaz area.⁹⁴⁹
- On 26 September 2020, a reported landmine detonated in an agricultural land in the village of Qasim in north-western rural Aleppo and resulted in the injury of two civilians.⁹⁵⁰
- On 10 March 2021, one child was killed, and three others injured when a landmine detonated in Al-Myassar neighbourhood in the eastern part of Aleppo city.⁹⁵¹

Mine Action Review stated that the Syrian Civil Defence conducted 289 cluster munition remnants (CMR) clearance tasks in Aleppo governorate in 2019 and destroyed 372 submunitions and 46 UXO. The report also stated that Russian troops trained SAA engineers on mine clearance in a training centre established in Aleppo in 2017.⁹⁵²

Displacement and return

In its Humanitarian Needs Overview of 2021, UNOCHA stated that as of August 2020, Aleppo governorate had 1 235 200 IDPs.⁹⁵³ Between January and December 2020, Aleppo ranked as the second governorate in terms of IDP movements in Syria after Idlib, registering 690 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 726 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate and 475 000 IDP movements within the governorate.⁹⁵⁴ The largest numbers occurred in January (around 132 600 IDPs, including 86 100 people arriving from within Aleppo governorate and 46 400 IDPs from Idlib governorate) and February (around 291 000 IDPs, including 224 000 people arriving from within Aleppo governorate and 66 000 from Idlib governorate).⁹⁵⁵ This displacement wave coincided with the military operations whereby the forces of the GoS, backed by Russian air force, recaptured several towns and villages in the north-western countryside of Aleppo, and consolidated their control in the governorate.⁹⁵⁶ Moreover, the CoI observed that by mid-February 2020, nearly 160 000 IDPs fled the area of Atarib and its environs in western Aleppo due to the military operations in western rural

⁹⁴⁶ 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), 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 17

⁹⁴⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁹⁴⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 19

⁹⁴⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 19

⁹⁵⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 17

⁹⁵¹ ARTA, وفاة طفل وإصابة ثلاثة آخرين إثر انفجار لغم من مخلفات الحرب في حلب, 10 March 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁵² Mine Action Review, Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 168

⁹⁵³ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

⁹⁵⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁵⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2020, 25 February 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2020, 6 April 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁵⁶ Al Jazeera, Syrian army strengthens Aleppo grip before Russia-Turkey talks, 16 February 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Syrian forces consolidate control of Aleppo, air strikes under way, 17 February 2020, [url](#); Arab News, Assad's forces take over Aleppo amid fears of 'catastrophe', 18 February 2020, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 5 - 18, 2020, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

Aleppo.⁹⁵⁷ The UN Security Council report of 23 April 2020 stated that around 400 000 IDPs moved to 'areas in northern Aleppo Governorate, including I'zaz, Afrin, Jindayris and Bab'.⁹⁵⁸ UNOCHA observed that the 'relative calm' following the ceasefire agreement of March 2020 was likely the driver behind the IDPs movements registered in April⁹⁵⁹, May⁹⁶⁰, and June 2020⁹⁶¹, 'as many IDPs who have been displaced from southern Idlib and western Aleppo governorates during the hostilities between December 2019 and March 2020 returned to sub-districts near frontlines.'⁹⁶²

In 2021, UNOCHA reported on around 15 000 IDP movements (from locations within and from outside the governorate) in January and around 12 200 IDP movements (from locations within and from outside the governorate) in February.⁹⁶³ In March 2021, UNOCHA reported around 19 300 IDP movements from or within Aleppo governorate, 15 500 of which being recorded within the governorate.⁹⁶⁴

As regards the return movements in Aleppo governorate, UNOCHA indicated that in 2020 there were 145 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate, 128 000 IDP return movements to or within the governorate and 101 000 IDP return movements within governorate.⁹⁶⁵ In April 2020, UNOCHA observed a significant increase in spontaneous returns in Syria, most likely due to the 'relative calm observed on the ground' following the ceasefire agreement of March 2020. The source stated that IDPs from western Aleppo and Idlib governorates 'began to gradually return to their areas of origin', and in Aleppo governorate, the number of returnees was around 20 000 (from locations within and outside the governorate).⁹⁶⁶ The Col observed that most of the returns that took place after the ceasefire agreement were documented in areas that 'remained under the control of armed groups'. The Col added that around 140 000 IDPs displaced since December 2019 returned to areas in Idlib and western Aleppo governorates, of whom 30 000 to Atarib.⁹⁶⁷ In its report of 24 June 2020, the report of the UN Secretary-General stated that the return of IDPs in areas not controlled by the GoS in Idlib and Aleppo governorates continued, with more than 180 000 IDPs returning to areas including Atarib, Daret Izza and Taftanaz in rural Aleppo. The source added that a humanitarian assessment mission to Huraytan subdistrict found that 'limited returns' of around 5 000 people took place in the area. Reportedly, 'the scale of destruction to residential property and public infrastructure and the dire lack of public services posed a major impediment to civilian returns.'⁹⁶⁸

In 2021, UNOCHA reported on 2 241 spontaneous returns (from locations within and outside the governorate) in January and 3 658 spontaneous returns (from locations within and outside the

⁹⁵⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 64

⁹⁵⁸ 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), para. 5; see also: UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 59

⁹⁵⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements April 2020, 31 May 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁶⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements May 2020, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁶¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements June 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁶² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements May 2020, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁶³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2021, 4 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁶⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁶⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁶⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns April 2020, 2 June 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁶⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 79

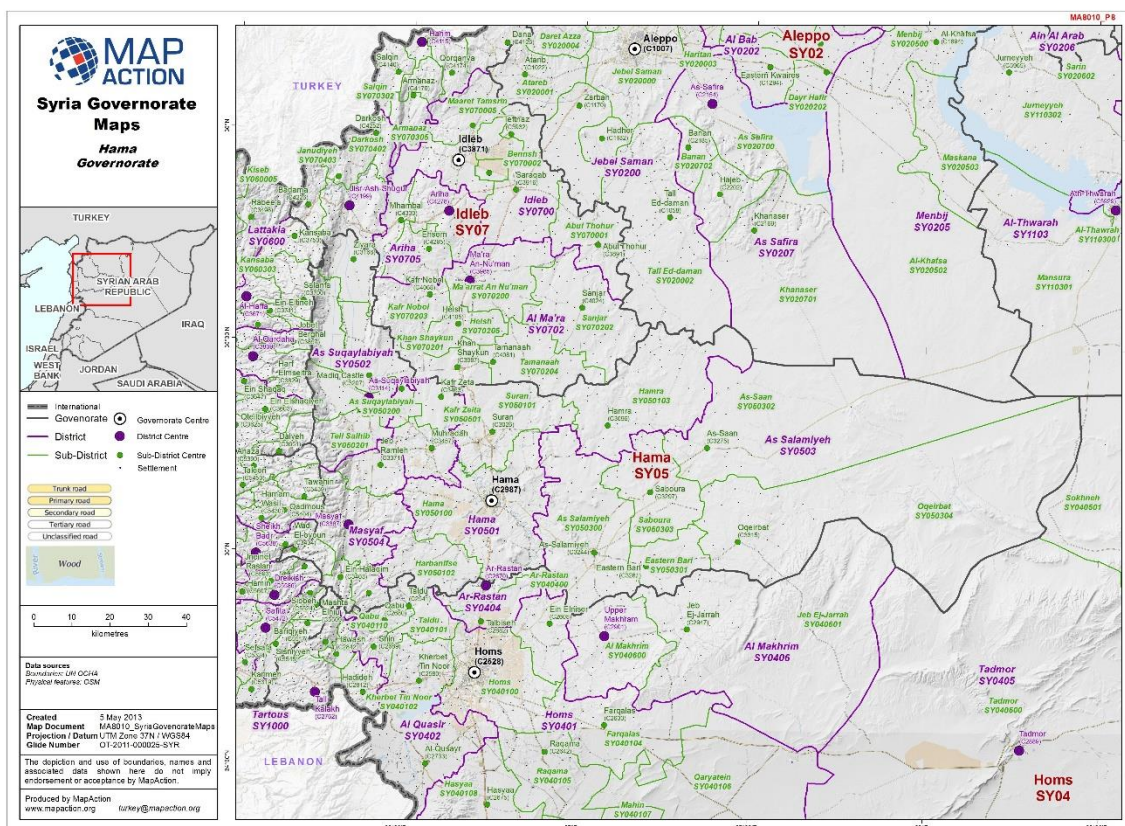
⁹⁶⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020), 24 June 2020, [url](#), para. 6

governorate) in February.⁹⁶⁹ In March 2021, UNOCHA reported 2 600 spontaneous IDP returns to or within Aleppo governorate.⁹⁷⁰

⁹⁶⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], updated 1 April 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁷⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

2.3 Hama governorate



Map 8: © MapAction, Hama governorate⁹⁷¹

2.3.1 General description of the 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, Aleppo and Raqqa to the north, and Homs to the south.⁹⁷² The surface of the governorate is 10 180 km², and it comprises five districts: Hama, Misyaf [Masyaf], Muḥardah [Muḥradah], Suqaylbiya [As-Suqaylabiyah], and Salamiyah [As-Salamiyeh]. It also comprises six cities, 27 towns, 578 villages, and 658 farms.⁹⁷³

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 1 384 953.⁹⁷⁴ The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Hama governorate in 2019 to be 2 082 000.⁹⁷⁵ In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Hama governorate to be of 1 487 074.⁹⁷⁶ With regards to the capital of the governorate, the CIA estimated that the population of Hama city was 940 000 in 2021.⁹⁷⁷

⁹⁷¹ MapAction, Hama governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

⁹⁷² UNCS and UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#)

⁹⁷³ Al-Wahda, حماء [Hama], n.d., [url](#)

⁹⁷⁴ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, General Census, 2004, [url](#)

⁹⁷⁵ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

⁹⁷⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

⁹⁷⁷ CIA, World Factbook, Syria, last updated: 3 May 2021, [url](#)

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.⁹⁷⁸ The western countryside, on the other hand, is more diverse, and is 'full of Alawite, Christian, and Ismaili villages'.⁹⁷⁹ Syria's Ismailis are concentrated in the area of Salamiya in eastern Hama.⁹⁸⁰ Additionally, the governorate has a Christian presence⁹⁸¹, particularly in the town of Muhardah, which is 'predominantly Christian'.⁹⁸²

2.3.2 Conflict background and armed actors

Hama governorate was impacted by the 'early civil unrest in Syria' and received a large number of IDPs due to its proximity to areas of high tension.⁹⁸³ According to UNOCHA, Hama was 'amongst the few governorates that were influenced by the early civil unrest in Syria' and that since the start of 2012, in Hama, 'serious armed confrontations between opposition armed groups and GoS forces' occurred⁹⁸⁴, the urban centre of Hama city witnessed limited fighting and has remained 'firmly' under the control of GoS.⁹⁸⁵ The totality of the city came under the control of the GoS 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.⁹⁸⁶ Between 2014 and 2017, several offensives and clashes occurred between government forces and opposition groups.⁹⁸⁷ The SAA and Iranian-backed militias intensified their operations in the governorate in 2017.⁹⁸⁸

In a press release dated 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)'.⁹⁸⁹ 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 surrender and recognise its 'civil administration'.⁹⁹⁰ Moreover, a DIS/DRC report dated February 2019 reported on clashes between pro-GoS militias and GoS forces, and on infighting between pro-GoS armed groups in Hama governorate. According to the source, some of these clashes escalated to the use of heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and caused casualties among civilians.⁹⁹¹

In April 2019, the GoS forces' bombardment of areas controlled by HTS in northern Hama intensified.⁹⁹² 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

⁹⁷⁸ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 6

⁹⁷⁹ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 43

⁹⁸⁰ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 15

⁹⁸¹ USDOS, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 10 June 2020, [url](#), p. 4

⁹⁸² Al Masdar News, Syrian Christians hold mass in Mhardeh town as life in north Hama gradually normalizes, 8 May 2017, [url](#)

⁹⁸³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 16

⁹⁸⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 16

⁹⁸⁵ World Bank (The), *Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib*, March 2017, [url](#), p. 12

⁹⁸⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 16

⁹⁸⁷ Washington Institute, *Russia's Military Strategy in Syria Becoming Clearer as Its Forces Engage in Combat*, 9 October 2015, [url](#); RFE/RL, *Russian-Speaking Militants Prepare To Fight Assad In Hama*, 22 October 2015, [url](#); Syria Direct, *Rebel commanders: Hama offensive to 'relieve pressure on Aleppo'*, 1 September 2016, [url](#); SOHR, *Continued clashes in Hama countryside*, 3 April 2017, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/64056/>

⁹⁸⁸ MEI, *Syrian Army, Iran-Controlled Militias Intensify Operations in Hama Province*, 14 April 2017, [url](#)

⁹⁸⁹ OHCHR, *Syria: Bachelet alarmed by upsurge in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib*, 19 February 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹⁰ BBC News, *Syria war: Jihadist takeover in rebel-held Idlib sparks alarm*, 26 February 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹¹ DIS/DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

⁹⁹² New Arab (The), *Syrian regime offensive leaves 26 dead in Hama*, 6 May 2019, [url](#)

were unsuccessful.⁹⁹³ 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 weapons and barrel bombs.⁹⁹⁴ 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 north-western countryside of Hama province’.⁹⁹⁵

In August 2019, the GoS accused rebel groups in north-western Syria of violating the Astana agreement and resumed military operations and air raids in the area, causing civilian deaths.⁹⁹⁶ 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 Suran for civilians to leave the region.⁹⁹⁷ The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) stated that on 23 August 2019 the SAA ‘announced the conquest of Kafr Zeita, Latamneh, Latmin, Lahaya and Morek’ and that Hama province was ‘considered to be fully under the control of the regime’.⁹⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹⁹ Towards the end of 2019, ‘an escalation of military operations in north-west Syria’, including in the northern part of Hama governorate was reported by different sources.¹⁰⁰⁰

As of March 2021, the GoS controlled most of Hama governorate excluding a small swath of territory in the north-western part of the province.¹⁰⁰¹ (see also [Map 4](#)).

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

Recent information on SAA deployments in Hama governorate could not be found among the sources consulted by EASO within time constraints. Units of the SAA were reported to be present in Hama governorate in early March 2020.¹⁰⁰² For deployments of the SAA in Hama governorate as of 3 April 2020 see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#)

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.¹⁰⁰³

In its report of 3 September 2020, the CoI stated that the Hama Military Airbase was used to launch an air strike on a commercial area in Idlib city that killed at least 19 civilians on 15 January 2020. The report stated that ‘consisting with witness statements, flight spotters’ reports and overflight data obtained by the Commission, indicate that a Syrian MiG 23 (Flogger) departed from Hama Military Airbase at 2:06 p.m. hours and was observed flying towards Idlib city at the time of the attack on Al-Hal market.’¹⁰⁰⁴

⁹⁹³ ACLED, Regional Overview – Middle East, 5 June 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁹⁹⁴ HRW, Russia/Syria: Flurry of Prohibited Weapons Attacks, 3 June 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹⁵ Asharq Al-Awsat, Syrian Regime Brings Massive Military Reinforcements to Hama Countryside, 25 June 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹⁶ Al Monitor, Syrian regime pays heavy price for two strategic towns in Hama, 9 August 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹⁷ Al Jazeera, Syria’s army encircles rebels in Hama, imposing ‘choking siege’, 23 August 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹⁸ Germany, BAMF, Briefing Notes, 26 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

⁹⁹⁹ 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](#)

¹⁰⁰⁰ Netherlands, Country of origin information report Syria, May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; North Press, Intensive Russian airstrikes, clashes in the de-escalation zones, 7 November 2019, [url](#); UN News, Amidst uptick in violence and displacement, UN chief calls for ‘immediate cessation of hostilities’ in Syria, 24 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰¹ Based on reading of maps in ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 26 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰² Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰³ 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](#)

¹⁰⁰⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), Annex III, paras. 9, 12

Northern Hama was the core territory of the Tiger Forces, and the following sub-groups were reportedly present in the governorate: 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-Ghab).¹⁰⁰⁵ 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.¹⁰⁰⁶ The Tiger Forces are also known as the 25th Special Mission Forces Division¹⁰⁰⁷, and they were reportedly involved in targeting a Turkish convoy of vehicles that was heading to evacuate a Turkish observation post in Hama countryside on 18 October 2020.¹⁰⁰⁸ In addition to the Tiger Forces, sources referred to the presence of Al-Ghawar militia (which is allegedly affiliated with the 4th Division)¹⁰⁰⁹, the NDF, and Al-Quds Brigade in rural Hama.¹⁰¹⁰

In an article about private security companies in Syria published on 10 September 2020, Manhal Baresh stated that a category of such companies inherited dissolved loyalist militias, and maintained presence in several governorates including Hama.¹⁰¹¹ Another category comprised companies affiliated with Russia, such as IS Hunters which was headquartered in Hama governorate.¹⁰¹² The company was 'overseen entirely' by the Wagner group and participated in battles against ISIL in the eastern Hama governorate.¹⁰¹³

Anti-GoS armed groups

In a report published on 20 January 2020, the UN Security Council, citing UN Member States, reported on military operations and attacks conducted by Hurras al-Din (HAD) in different governorates including Hama.¹⁰¹⁴ However, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) 'continued to consolidate its control in north-western Syria' and on 27 July 2020, the group took over the military positions of HAD and the Fathbatou Operations Room¹⁰¹⁵ along Al-Ghab Plain in Hama governorate.¹⁰¹⁶

An anonymous military observer, cited by Enab Baladi on 5 February 2021, stated that a group called Ansar Al-Turkistan maintained eight military points in Al-Ghab Plain in western Hama governorate. According to the source, the group is affiliated with the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and comprised

¹⁰⁰⁵ Waters, G., Understanding Syria's Military Deployments in Idlib, International Review, 10 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰⁶ 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](#)

¹⁰⁰⁷ According to Enab Baladi, the group changed its name from the Tiger Forces to the '25th Special Mission Forces Division' in August 2019 and was trained by Russian forces in Syria. Enab Baladi, إعلام روسي ينشر صورًا لسهيل الحسن مع قوات خاصة روسية [Russian media publish pictures of Suheil Al-Hasan with Russian special forces], 22 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰⁸ NPA, Russian-backed Syrian government forces target Turkish convoy in Syria, 18 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰⁹ Al-Abdullah, H., ميليشيات تابعة لقوات الأسد تهين وتأسر عميداً في الشرطة وضابطاً آخرين [Milicias affiliated with Assad forces humiliate and detain a police brigadier-general and other officers], 18 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰¹⁰ 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](#)

¹⁰¹¹ Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁰¹² Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 17; Omran for Strategic Studies, Profiling Top Private Security Companies in Syria, 11 February 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰¹³ Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁰¹⁴ 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](#), para. 17

¹⁰¹⁵ Fathbatou Operations Room is a 'coalition of armed opposition groups, including Hurras al Din, Ansar al Islam, Ansar al Din, Tansiqiyat Al-Jihad, and Liwa Al-Muqatileen Al-Ansar'. Carter Center (The), WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 27 July - 2 August 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), FN. 6

¹⁰¹⁶ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 27 July - 2 August 2020, 2 August 2020, [url, p. 2](#)

dozens of fighters who had defected from other factions such as Ahrar Al-Sham, HTS, and the FSA.¹⁰¹⁷ Moreover, Enab Baladi and Syria TV reported that a rebel faction called 'Ansar Al-Tawheed' targeted a Russian military command centre in Kafr Nabal in Idlib governorate in retaliation for the killing of 11 of the group's militants by Russian forces in western Hama governorate in January 2021.¹⁰¹⁸

Russia

Jusoor for Studies¹⁰¹⁹ stated on 6 January 2021 that Russia had 23 military bases and posts in Hama governorate; the highest number out of all governorates according to the source. A map shared by the source showed that the concentration of the Russian military sites was in the north of the governorate.¹⁰²⁰

The Syrian opposition news agency, Orient, stated that Russian officers positioned in Hama military airport dismantled what was known as 'the Idlib Liberation Operations Room' which operated from the airport and included Iran-backed militias, namely Al-Baqer Brigade, Al-Quds Brigade, the Syrian Hezbollah, and remnants of Soqur Al-Sahra'a and Maghaweer Al-Bahr. According to the source, the Russian forces expelled those groups from the airport, accusing them of treason, 'leaking coordinates and information to Israeli jet fighters', and facilitating the mobility of ISIL fighters in rural Hama.¹⁰²¹ On 28 February 2021, Orient stated that the Hama military airport was transformed into a Russian military base and that Russia started to withdraw its forces from the city of Saraqeb, in Idlib governorate, to the airport in Hama.¹⁰²²

Iran and Iran-backed militias

According to Jusoor for Studies, Iran had six military bases and posts in Hama governorate. A map shared by the source showed that Iranian military sites were present in Hama city and in the northern part of the governorate.¹⁰²³

As regards Hezbollah, Jusoor for Studies stated that the group had four military sites in Hama, comprising points that were independent, joint or semi-shared with Iranian forces.¹⁰²⁴ On 4 June 2019, the Syrian platform SY24, shared a list of the prominent locations in Hama governorate in which Iranian militias were 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.¹⁰²⁵

¹⁰¹⁷ Enab Baladi, 'قتلى وجرحى من "أنصار التركستان" بقصف قوات النظام في سهل الغاب [Deaths and injuries from Ansar Al-Turkistan in a GoS forces shelling in Al-Ghab Plain], 5 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰¹⁸ Enab Baladi, 'فصيل يقول إنه استهدف مقرًا روسيًا في كفر نابل [A faction said that it targeted a Russian premise in Kafr Nabal], 7 February 2021, [url](#); Syria TV, 'أنصار التوحيد' يقصف مقر العمليات الروسي في كفر نابل جنوبي إدلب [Ansar Al-Tawheed shells the Russian operations command centre in Kafr Nabal in southern Idlib], 7 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰¹⁹ 'An independent institution specializing in information management and conducting studies and research related to the Syrian political and social affairs in particular and the Middle East region in general'. Jusoor for Studies, About us, n. d., [url](#)

¹⁰²⁰ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰²¹ Orient, 'إقصاء واتهامات بالخيانة: الاحتلال الروسي يحيل قادة ميليشيات أسد لمحاكم ميدانية ويسقط غرفة "تحرير إدلب" [Expulsion and accusations of treason: Russian occupation refers leaders of Assad militias to field courts and drops Idlib Liberation Room], 15 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰²² Orient, 'انسحابات روسية من سراقب تصدم الموالين.. إعادة تمركز أم تفاهات جديدة مع تركيا؟ [Russian withdrawals from Saraqeb shock loyalists.. Repositioning or new agreements with Turkey?], 28 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰²³ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰²⁴ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰²⁵ 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](#)

2.3.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

Military operations in northern Hama governorate

The military operations that were launched in 2019 in north-west Syria by GoS and pro-GoS forces continued in the first quarter of 2020, and intense bombardment and airstrikes were reported.¹⁰²⁶ COAR observed that the advances of the GoS forces into northern Hama and southern Idlib governorates in early 2020 'were the only significant territorial changes of the year [2020]'.¹⁰²⁷ In February 2020, GoS forces advanced in Al-Ghab Plain and captured several villages¹⁰²⁸, while opposition groups including HTS, Ansar Al-Tawheed and the Turkistan Islamic Party 'staged a counter offensive against 12 newly captured GoS locations' including in Hama.¹⁰²⁹

On 5 March 2020, Russia and Turkey agreed a ceasefire that would halt hostilities in north-west Syria¹⁰³⁰, which sparked the spontaneous return of 200 000 IDPs between 5 and 12 June 2020.¹⁰³¹ However, hostilities resumed in May 2020 as opposition factions recaptured Al-Manara (Al-Tanjara) village in north-western Hama governorate¹⁰³², and the GoS forces shelled the villages of Ankawi, Qahira, and Quleidin in the area.¹⁰³³ On 19 and 20 May 2020, SOHR reported on clashes that erupted on the Ankawi frontline in Al-Ghab Plain between GoS forces and opposition factions.¹⁰³⁴

An increase in hostilities in southern Idlib and northern Hama governorates, including Russian air strikes occurred in the first half of June 2020.¹⁰³⁵ In its report of 20 August 2020, the UN Security Council observed that 'civilians were killed and injured as a result of shelling and intermittent airstrikes by pro-Government forces' in southern Idlib and western Hama governorates during the months of June and July 2020 despite the ceasefire agreement within the de-escalation area.¹⁰³⁶ On 23 June 2020, reinforcements by both the GoS and the armed opposition forces to their respective positions in Al-Ghab Plain in Hama governorate were reported.¹⁰³⁷ Enab Baladi reported on 27 October 2020 that the NLF shelled positions of GoS forces including Jurin camp and Al-Ghab Plain in northern Hama governorate in retaliation for a Russian airstrike that targeted areas in western Idlib governorate.¹⁰³⁸ North Press reported on 27 November 2020 that GoS forces shelled 'fortifications of the opposition groups' in Ankawi and Qelidin villages in north-western Hama. According to a field source cited by North Press, the GoS shelling resulted in 'widespread destruction of the infrastructure

¹⁰²⁶ Responsibility to Protect, R2P Monitor: Issue 54, 15 November 2020, [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), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020), 21 February 2020, [url](#), para. 14

¹⁰²⁷ SOAR, Syria in 2021: Forecast for a protracted crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰²⁸ SOHR, Regime forces advance further in Sahl Al-Ghab and ten villages separate them from having full control over Hama province, and rebels carry out new offensive far east of Idlib backed by Turkish firepower, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰²⁹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 24 FEBRUARY – 1 MARCH 2020, 1 March 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁰³⁰ Reuters, Turkey says agreed with Russia on details of Idlib ceasefire, 13 March 2020, [url](#); BBC News, Syria war: Russia and Turkey agree Idlib ceasefire, 5 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰³¹ REACH, Northwest Syria - Conditions in Communities of Return: Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, 17 July 2020, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁰³² Enab Baladi, "أول هجوم يستهدف قوات النظام في إدلب منذ اتفاق موسكو" [First attack targeting regime forces in Idlib since the Moscow agreement], 10 May 2020, [url](#); Al-Arab, الهدنة رغم الهذنة ومجموعات جهادية في غرب الهذنة.. 22 قتيلا من قوات الأسد ومجموعات جهادية رغم الهدنة, 10 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰³³ Enab Baladi, "أول هجوم يستهدف قوات النظام في إدلب منذ اتفاق موسكو" [First attack targeting regime forces in Idlib since the Moscow agreement], 10 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰³⁴ SOHR, "De-escalation zone" | Regime forces attack rebels positions in Sahl Al-Ghab leaving casualties, 19 May 2020, [url](#); SOHR, "De-escalation zone" | Clashes renew in Sahl Al-Ghab and regime artillery pounds southern Idlib, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰³⁵ USAID, SYRIA – Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #9, Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, 2 July 2020, [url](#), p. 3; Al Jazeera, Russian air raids target NW Syria for first time in three months, 3 June 2020, [url](#); SOHR, "De-escalation zone" | Nearly 30 Russian airstrikes pound rural Idlib and Hama, and regime forces shell the villages of Jabal Al-Zawiya with artillery, 8 June 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰³⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 20 August 2020, [url](#), para. 17

¹⁰³⁷ Carter Center (The), WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 22 June – 28 June 2020, 28 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁰³⁸ Enab Baladi, "ردًا على استهداف فيلق الشام" [In response to targeting Failaq Al-Sham.. NLF expands its shelling of regime positions], 27 October 2020, [url](#)

and public and private properties'.¹⁰³⁹ The same source reported on reinforcement of GoS forces being gathered in Al-Ghab plain in western Hama governorate in December 2020.¹⁰⁴⁰

Clashes and shelling between GoS and opposition forces in western rural Hama intensified in 2021.¹⁰⁴¹ On 5 February 2021, GoS forces positioned in Hakoura village in western Hama governorate targeted with a missile a military car belonging to Ansar Al-Turkistan group in Kherbet Al-Naqous village. Reportedly, seven of the group's militants were killed and nine were injured in the attack.¹⁰⁴² Enab Baladi and Aleppo Today reported that on 7 February 2021, clashes erupted at the Ankawi village axis in western Hama governorate between rebel factions and GoS forces following the latter's attempt to advance in the area. Reportedly, SAA fighters were killed and injured during the clashes.¹⁰⁴³

Violence during December 2019 and January 2020 inhibited humanitarian access to frontline or to parts of Idlib, northern Hama and southern Aleppo governorates affected by the conflict and claimed civilian lives.¹⁰⁴⁴ According to SHRC, 45 % of the documented killings in 2020 occurred in the first three months due to the GoS military operations that targeted Idlib governorate and Hama countryside.¹⁰⁴⁵ The UN Security Council stated that more than 80 % of the deaths recorded during the months of December 2019 and January 2020 occurred as a result of those attacks on Idlib and parts of Aleppo and Hama governorates.¹⁰⁴⁶ In its Syria 2020 Human Rights report, USDOS stated that the 'White Helmets documented more than 2,200 airstrikes in January and February, including 32 cluster-bomb attacks and 605 barrel bombs in Idlib, along with Aleppo and Hama'.¹⁰⁴⁷ SNHR documented one cluster munition and 1 546 barrel bomb attacks by GoS forces in Hama governorate between December 2019 and March 2020.¹⁰⁴⁸ According to the SNHR, at least 474 barrel bombs and four cluster munitions attacks targeted north-west Syria, including Hama governorate during the first half of 2020, which resulted in civilian casualties and civilian facility damage.¹⁰⁴⁹ According to Responsibility to Protect, over 1 500 civilians were killed during the period April 2019 to March 2020 in north-west Syria, including in Hama governorate, 'nearly all of which are attributable to Syrian government and Russian forces'.¹⁰⁵⁰

ISIL activities in eastern Hama governorate

Gregory Waters observed increased regular ISIL attacks against GoS forces in 2020, with the group operating outside of its traditional strongholds of east Homs and west Deir ez-Zor, and launching attacks in southern Raqqah, eastern Hamah, and southern Aleppo'. The source observed that ISIL conducted high-quality attacks which 'made up between one-third and one-half of all documented

¹⁰³⁹ NPA, Government forces continue targeting opposition groups' sites northwestern Syria, 27 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴⁰ NPA, *حشود قوات حكومية غرب حماة تزيد المخاوف من تجدد العمليات العسكرية* [Gathering of GoS forces in western Hama increases fears of renewed military operations], 22 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴¹ NPA, Syrian government intensifies bombing on opposition sites in Idlib, 30 March 2021, [url](#); Emarat Today, *تصعيد كبير بين الجيش السوري وقصائل مسلحة شمال غربي البلاد* [Large escalation between the SAA and armed factions in northwest Syria], 8 February 2021, [url](#); ANHA, Syrian Government Forces shell Idlib and Hama, 10 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴² Enab Baladi, *قتلى وجرحى من "أنصار التركستان" بقصف قوات النظام في سهل الغاب* [Deaths and injuries from Ansar Al-Turkistan in a GoS forces shelling in Al-Ghab Plain], 5 February 2021, [url](#); Syria TV, *قتلى وجرحى من "الحزب التركستاني" بقصف للنظام غربي حماة* [Deaths and injuries from the Turkistani Party in a regime shelling on western Hama], 5 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴³ Enab Baladi, *قصاصات إدلب تصد تسللاً للنظام في سهل الغاب* [Idlib factions repel a regime infiltration in Al-Ghab Plain], 7 February 2021, [url](#); Aleppo Today, *قتلى وجرحى من قوات النظام بمحاولة تقدم فاشلة غرب حماة* [Deaths and injuries among the regime forces in a failed attempt to advance in western Hama], 7 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴⁴ 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), 21 February 2020, [url](#), paras. 14, 35

¹⁰⁴⁵ SHRC, SHRC documents the killing of 1,750 people in 2020, 2 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴⁶ 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), 21 February 2020, [url](#), para. 14

¹⁰⁴⁷ USDOS, Syria 2020 Human Rights report, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 32

¹⁰⁴⁸ SNHR, Destroying Ma'aret al Numan and Saraqeb cities and displacing their residents is a clear example of the Syrian regime's tactics in the recent military campaign since early December 2019 until March 2020, 29 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 7, 8

¹⁰⁴⁹ SNHR, The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 3 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵⁰ Responsibility to Protect, R2P Monitor: Issue 54, 15 November 2020, [url](#), p. 11

attacks in exterior regions'.¹⁰⁵¹ In its weekly conflict summary of 20-26 April 2020, the Carter Center reported on 'increased confrontations between ISIS and GoS-aligned forces' in Hama governorate¹⁰⁵², and ISW, in its Syria Situation Report of 3 December 2020, also observed an expansion of ISIL attack capabilities in central Syria.¹⁰⁵³ The Bahrain-based Al-Watan newspaper spoke of an attrition strategy adopted by ISIL through carrying out ambushes, IED and surprise attacks against GoS forces and allied militias in the Aleppo-Hama-Raqqa triangle.¹⁰⁵⁴ Temporary seizure of villages by ISIL was also reported in the second half of 2020 in east Hama governorate.¹⁰⁵⁵

Some of the security incidents involving ISIL that were reported in Hama governorate in 2020 included the following:

- The Carter Center stated that on 10 April 2020, pro-GoS forces, backed by Russian airstrikes, clashed with ISIL elements in the Rahjan area in Hama governorate. The source, citing ACLED, pointed out that this incident was the first of its kind to take place in Hama governorate since 2018.¹⁰⁵⁶
- In its weekly conflict summary of 20-26 April 2020, the Carter Center mentioned an ISIL IED attack on a GoS forces vehicle in Ithariya on 20 April and clashes that erupted near the Boufayyad Dam on 23 April.¹⁰⁵⁷
- Clashes between pro-GoS forces and ISIL elements were reported to have taken place near Ithariya in northern Hama governorate between 6 and 7 July 2020. The clashes involved shelling exchanges and Russian airstrikes.¹⁰⁵⁸
- Between 4 and 6 August 2020, GoS and NDF forces clashed with unknown groups, believed to be ISIL, near Juay'ed village and in Jib Abyad village in eastern rural Hama.¹⁰⁵⁹
- On 26 October 2020, the SOHR reported on the resumption of 'fierce battles' involving ISIL elements at 'the frontlines of Al-Rahjan, Al-Shakousiyyah and Ithariya in the eastern countryside of Hama'. Reportedly, ISIL fighters captured a GoS military post and seized weapons and ammunition despite the Russian and SAA airstrikes.¹⁰⁶⁰
- On 12 November 2020, ISW reported on an attack that killed 21 pro-GoS troops near Abu Fayyad Dam in eastern Hama governorate.¹⁰⁶¹
- On 8 April 2021, SOHR reported that ISIL fighters carried out a 'surprise attack' in areas in the Oqayrabat region in eastern Hama countryside and clashed with GoS forces and loyalists. According to the source, during the attack eight police officers were arrested, 11 civilians were kidnapped, and around 40 people went missing.¹⁰⁶²

Waters published the following map which compared ISIL activities in Syria between 2019 and 2020. The map shows a significant increase in ISIL activities in eastern Hama governorate in 2020.¹⁰⁶³ In the

¹⁰⁵¹ Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵² Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary 20 - 26 April 2020, 29 April 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰⁵³ ISW, Syria Situation Report: November 11 - December 1, 2020, 3 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵⁴ Al-Watan News, سوريا.. 11 deaths from the regime and Daesh in the Badiya battles in less than one month], 19 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵⁵ Waters, G., ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵⁶ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 6 - 12 April 2020, 12 April 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁰⁵⁷ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 20 - 26 April 2020, 26 April 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰⁵⁸ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 6 July - 12 July 2020, 12 July 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰⁵⁹ SOHR, Second attack in 48 hours | Clashes renew between ISIS cells and regime forces in east Hama desert, 6 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶⁰ SOHR, ISIS resurgence in Syrian desert | Members renew attacks on regime forces' positions in eastern Hama, and Russian jets intensify airstrikes, 26 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶¹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: November 11 - December 1, 2020, 3 December 2020, [url](#)

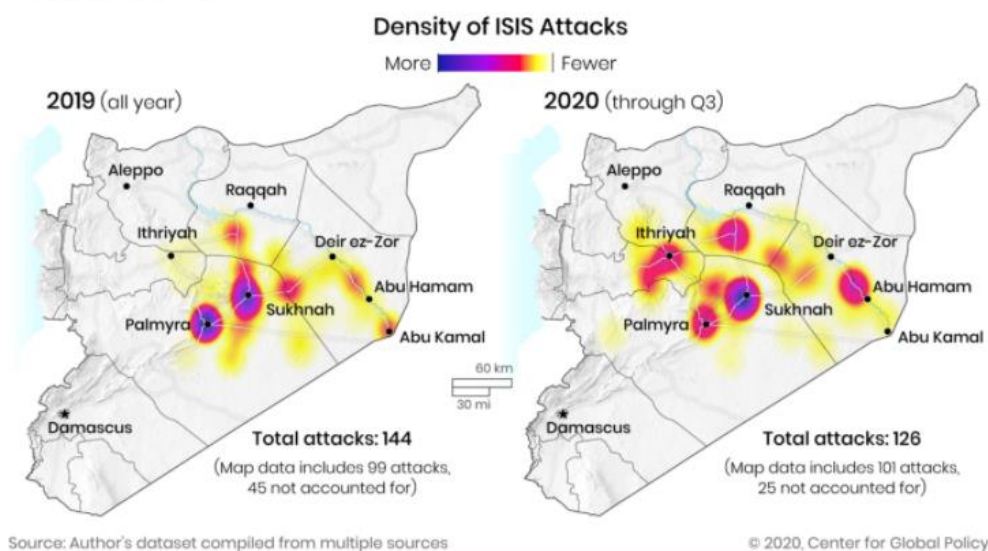
¹⁰⁶² SOHR, ISIS resurgence | Nearly 20 regime police officers and civilians kidnapped and scores missing in surprise attack on Al-Sa'an district, 6 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶³ Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

second half of 2020, an increase of ISIL attacks and seizures of villages were reported in east Hama governorate, 'from south of Uqayribat to north of Ithriya' and around the village of Rahjan.¹⁰⁶⁴

Comparing ISIS Syria activity

ISIS attacks expanded greatly in 2020, as the group solidified its presence in southern Raqqah and eastern Hama and emerged in southern Aleppo. This expansion of attacks coincided with widespread anti-ISIS operations by regime forces in April, which presented additional targets for ISIS cells.



Map 9: © Center for Global Policy, Comparing ISIS Syria activity¹⁰⁶⁵

A March 2021 analysis by ISW wrote that ISIL controls several small swaths of territory in the mountainous areas of the Syrian Central Desert (Badia) from where it launches attacks on GoS forces, including in the area north-east of Rahjan, towards Ithriya (Hama governorate).¹⁰⁶⁶

In 2021, sources reported on ongoing military operations involving ISIL and GoS forces and allied militias in the Aleppo-Hama-Raqqah triangle.¹⁰⁶⁷ In its report of 18 February 2021, the UN security Council observed that 'ISIL attacks focused on a triangle between Hama, Aleppo and Raqqah, as well as the Salamiyah-Tabaqa road.'¹⁰⁶⁸ The SOHR reported on 9 January 2021 that ISIL militants were 'able to advance and control posts in the areas of Shakozya and Al-Rahjan' in Hama governorate, following a violent attack launched by the group.¹⁰⁶⁹ SOHR also reported on GoS large military reinforcements along the Ithariya-Khanaser highway in January 2021 compelled by ISIL escalating operations in the region.¹⁰⁷⁰ Another deployment was reported to have taken place on 12 March 2021, aimed at protecting a key highway that links Hama to Raqqah and Aleppo.¹⁰⁷¹ ISW observed on

¹⁰⁶⁴ Waters, G., *ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶⁵ Waters, G., *Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign*, Newlines Institute, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶⁶ Kahan, E., *ISIS Poised for a Ramadan Surge in Syria*, ISW, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶⁷ SOHR, 19 killed in an ISIS attack in Hama, 3 February 2021, [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), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 18 February 2021, [url](#), para. 20; Iran Insider, خسائر لميليشيا "حزب الله" وقوات النمر في بادية حماة السورية [Losses from Hezbollah militia and Tiger Forces the Syrian Hama Badiya], 25 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 18 February 2021, [url](#), para. 20

¹⁰⁶⁹ SOHR, *ISIS resurgence | Cells capture new positions in Hama desert, and kill nearly 20 regime soldiers and loyalists*, 9 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷⁰ SOHR, *Syrian Regime Sends Military Reinforcements to Desert*, 12 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷¹ South Front, *Syrian Army Deploys Troops in Eastern Hama to protect Highway from ISIS (Photos)*, 12 March 2021, [url](#)

9 March 2021 that GoS forces' operations against ISIL were 'plagued' by limited operational capacity, deficit in manpower and the incompetency of conscripts, as well as the friction between the GoS backers, Russia and Iran.¹⁰⁷²

Israeli airstrikes

ISW reported that on 4 June 2020, airstrikes, likely Israeli, targeted a GoS chemical weapon and missile technology development labs near the city of Misyaf in western Hama governorate.¹⁰⁷³ ISW also reported on a set of airstrikes that targeted positions of the SAA 47th Regiment and the Lebanese Hezbollah in Al-Salamiya, eastern rural Hama, on 23/24 June 2020.¹⁰⁷⁴ On 25 December 2020, Israeli air strikes targeted warehouses and research centres in Misyaf in Hama governorate. Reportedly, ten militants, including six Iranians, were killed in the attack.¹⁰⁷⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), citing the SOHR, stated that the attack targeted and destroyed depots and rocket-manufacturing facilities that belonged to Iran-backed militias. The source cited SANA which reported that the Syrian air defences 'intercepted the "hostile" rockets and destroyed most of them'.¹⁰⁷⁶ On 22 January 2021, Israeli air strikes reportedly targeting five positions of Iran-backed militias, hit a site near Hama city. Reportedly, four members of the same family were killed, four civilians injured, and three houses destroyed in the incident.¹⁰⁷⁷ The SOHR reported on the same incident and stated that the deaths and injuries among civilians were caused by shrapnel of missiles from the GoS air-defences.¹⁰⁷⁸

Lawlessness and arrests

SOHR reported on a state of lawlessness prevalent in areas of northern Hama governorate controlled by GoS forces and allied militias. The source stated that these areas were witnessing 'growing kidnappings, thefts and exploitation of children and women'.¹⁰⁷⁹ In Hama city, around 20 people were arrested in February 2021 in the wake of a demonstration organised to commemorate the '1982 massacre' of Hama.¹⁰⁸⁰ Moreover, several sources reported that between 31 January and 2 February 2021, GoS forces conducted a raid and arrest campaign in the Janoub Al-Malaab neighbourhood of Hama city that resulted in the arrest of nine or 11 people.¹⁰⁸¹ Reportedly, the reason behind the arrests was 'writing anti-government graffiti on some walls in the neighbourhood'.¹⁰⁸²

Security incidents

According to ACLED data, there were 928 security incidents recorded in Hama governorate. Of these, 180 were coded as battles, 736 explosions/remote violence and 12 incidents of violence against civilians. A significant spike in the number of security incidents was recorded in February 2020,

¹⁰⁷² ISW, ISIS Poised for a Ramadan Surge in Syria, 9 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 2-3

¹⁰⁷³ ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 27 - June 9, 2020, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: June 24 - July 6, 2020, 9 June 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷⁵ NPA, Israeli airstrikes target defense laboratories in Syria's Hama, 25 December 2020, [url](#); Garda World, Syria: State media reports that Israeli forces targeted Masyaf early Dec. 25., 25 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷⁶ RFE/RL, At Least Six Fighters Reported Killed In Israeli Strikes In Syria, 25 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷⁷ Germany, BAMF, Briefing Notes: Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration, 25 January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁰⁷⁸ SOHR, New Israeli attack | Airstrikes hit Iranian positions nearby Hama, while shrapnel of regime air-defence missiles kills an entire family, 22 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷⁹ SOHR, After decapitated body found in eastern rural Hama | Regime forces arrest more than 20 members, 25 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸⁰ AA, Syrians mark 1982 massacre with protest in Hama: 20 people arrested, regime forces deployed in region, according to sources, 5 February 2021, [url](#); Arabi 21, 1982 مجزرة أحيت ذكرى المجزرة.. وحملة اعتقالات تطال أبناء المدينة [Crack down on a demonstration commemorating the 1982 massacre in Hama], 5 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸¹ Orient 2, لأول مرة منذ عقود: جدران حماة تتحدى وتستذكر المجزرة.. وحملة اعتقالات تطال أبناء المدينة [For the first time in decades: Hama's walls defy and commemorate the massacre.. and an arrest campaign targets the city's residents], 5 February 2021, [url](#); Syria TV, حملة اعتقالات لـ

نظام الأسد في مدينة حماة.. من استهدفت؟ [An arrest campaign by the Assad regime in Hama city.. Who was targeted?], 3 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸² SHRC, Arrests and releases in February 2021, 8 March 2021, [url](#)

followed by a decrease from March till May 2020. The number of security incidents remained relatively stable from June 2020 till March 2021 (see Figure 20).

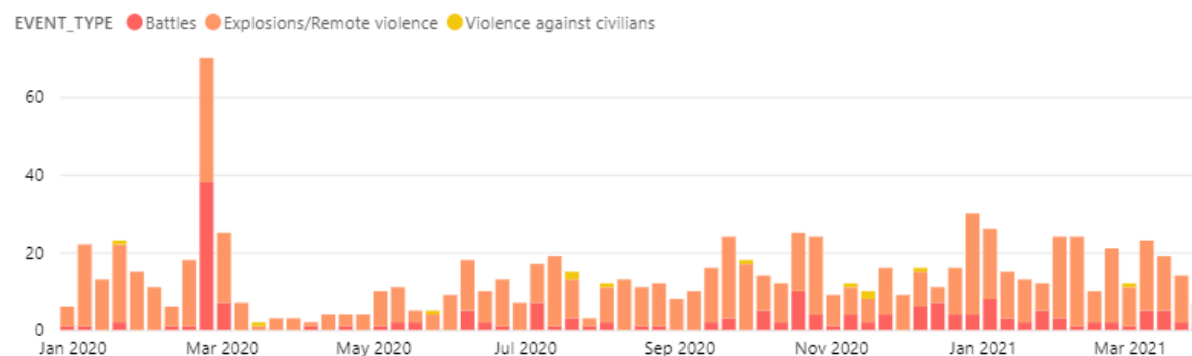


Figure 20. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Hama governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data¹⁰⁸³

Hama governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
As-Salamiyeh	66	95	6
As-Suqaylabiyah	108	573	2
Hama	4	44	2
Masyaf	2	6	1
Muhradah	-	18	1
Total	180	736	12

Figure 21. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Hama governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

Most security incidents were recorded in As-Suqaylabiyah district, followed by As-Salamiyeh and Hama districts (see Figure 21).

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Hama governorate in 2020 and early 2021 included the following:

- Reported ground-based strikes on western rural Hama killed one civilian in Qahira on 3 July 2020, injured two civilians in Dukmak on 14 July 2020, and killed one civilian and injured another in Tall Wasit on 19 July 2020.¹⁰⁸⁴
- On 6 August and 24 September 2020, a total of four civilians were injured in reported ground-based attacks that hit the villages of Tall Wasit in western rural Hama and Jurin in northern rural Hama.¹⁰⁸⁵
- According to SHRC, on 29 September 2020, members of an Iraqi militia killed nine shepherds in Al-Fasida in eastern Hama governorate.¹⁰⁸⁶
- On 5 October 2020, a reported ground-based attack injured five civilians on the road between Qarqur and Shaykh Sindiyan in western Hama governorate.¹⁰⁸⁷

¹⁰⁸³ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

¹⁰⁸⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 20 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 19-20

¹⁰⁸⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁰⁸⁶ SHRC, The 19th Annual Report on human rights in Syria 2020, January 2021, [url](#), p. 15; see also: SNHR, Extrajudicial killing claims the lives of 1,734 civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 32

¹⁰⁸⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 17

- On 26 December 2020, five people were killed in Al-Zaqoum in northern Hama after a civilian car and a tractor were targeted by GoS guided missiles.¹⁰⁸⁸
- The SOHR reported that on 7 April 2021, a civilian was injured in a shelling by the Al-Fath Al-Moubin Operations Room that targeted the village of Na'our Jurin in north-western Hama governorate. According to the source, Al-Fath Al-Mubín Room was positioned in Al-Ghab plain in Hama governorate.¹⁰⁸⁹

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	1	2	12	11
February	1	-	6	3
March	5	2	30	49
April	1	5		
May	2	1		
June	-	5		
July	3	3		
August	1	3		
September	8	4		
October	3	10		
November	3	16		
December	7	3		
Total	35	54	48	63

Figure 22 Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Hama governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2020, Hama governorate had between 54 (SNHR data)¹⁰⁹⁰ and 35 civilian fatalities (VDC data).¹⁰⁹¹ Most civilian fatalities were documented in September, October and November 2020. In the first three months of 2021, both VDC and SNHR recorded higher number of civilian casualties in Hama governorate than in the entire 2020 (see Figure 22).

¹⁰⁸⁸ SHRC, The 19th Annual Report on human rights in Syria 2020, January 2021, [url](#), p. 15; SNHR, Extrajudicial killing claims the lives of 1,734 civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 35; Enab Baladi, تعزيزات تركية إلى إدلب وضحايا مدنيون بقصف للنظام في ريف حماة [Turkish reinforcements to Idlib and civilian casualties by the regime in rural Hama], 26 December 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), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁰⁸⁹ SOHR, إصابة مواطن في قصف لـ"الفتح المبين" على قرية ضمن مناطق قوات النظام في ريف حماة, 7 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹⁰ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁰⁹¹ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war

In a report published in 2020, ESCWA and the University of St Andrews stated that Hama city sustained 4.4 % of the total damage to physical capital in Syria.¹⁰⁹² According to the source, violent clashes occurred in the city of Hama in 2012, ‘before the bulk of the armed conflict moved to the rural areas of the governorate’ which were ‘less capital intensive with lower housing density’.¹⁰⁹³

Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Hama governorate, 12.4 % of the population was living in damaged buildings.¹⁰⁹⁴

Concerning Hama city, a report by the World Bank published in March 2017 stated that 6 % of the city’s housing asset was damaged.¹⁰⁹⁵ 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 2012.¹⁰⁹⁶

In Hama countryside, InterSOS, an independent humanitarian organisation¹⁰⁹⁷, reported on 25 January 2021 that in its areas of intervention, which included northern Hama governorate, ‘most of the houses [... were] destroyed or damaged’. The source added that there was no access to electricity due to the damage to distribution channels and that access to water was only through tankers.¹⁰⁹⁸ In Al-Ghab Plain, ‘massive damage to public and private property’ was reported following a GoS bombardment of the village of Ankawi on 9 March 2021.¹⁰⁹⁹

PHR, an organisation that investigates and documents human rights violations¹¹⁰⁰, stated that between April 2019 and February 2020, 40 attacks on medical facilities in north-west Syria, including northern Hama governorate, were verified.¹¹⁰¹ Amnesty International, citing UNOCHA, stated that between April and September 2020, ‘at least 51 medical facilities and 59 schools were damaged as a result of hostilities in Idlib, Hama and northern Aleppo.’¹¹⁰²

As regards explosive hazards, the SOHR reported on an ‘increasing number of people killed recently by a landmine, unexploded bombs, and collapse of war-damaged residential buildings in various Syrian areas and cities’ including Hama.¹¹⁰³ The following illustrative incidents involving landmines and UXO were reported to have taken place in Hama governorate by different sources:

- Landmines in agricultural areas killed two civilians in Morek on 9 March 2020, and injured two civilians in Ma’an on 17 March 2020.¹¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁹² ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 51; The source defines loss to physical capital as including ‘private and public construction and equipment, such as housing stock, schools, hospitals and factories, and power, water, sanitation, transport and communications infrastructure’. ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 49

¹⁰⁹³ ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁰⁹⁴ Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

¹⁰⁹⁵ World Bank (The), Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, March 2017, [url](#), pp. 7-8

¹⁰⁹⁶ REACH/UNITAR, Syria: Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 40

¹⁰⁹⁷ InterSOS, About Us, n. d., [url](#)

¹⁰⁹⁸ InterSOS, Syria: 2020 saw fewer conflicts but increased poverty, 25 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹⁹ NPA, Government forces target opposition posts in Syria’s Hama, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁰⁰ PHR, About Us, n. d., [url](#)

¹¹⁰¹ PHR, Physicians for Human Rights’ Findings of Attacks on Health Care in Syria, March 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁰² AI, Syria 2020, 7 April 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁰³ SOHR, Old ordnance | Explosion kills two civilians in eastern countryside of Hama, and today’s death toll rises to five people in the region, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁰⁴ 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), 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 19

- The UN Security Council reported that between 4 April and 16 May 2020, one death and four injuries occurred due to reported landmine explosions in the villages of Rasm Al-Abd and Shaykh Hilal, in the agricultural area in the outskirts of the town of Si'in, near Suran.¹¹⁰⁵
- In June 2020, reported UXO killed three children and injured another in the towns of Qumhanah and Suran in northern rural Hama.¹¹⁰⁶
- On 8 November 2020, a reported UXO detonated in Qasr Al-Mukharrem village in eastern Hama governorate and killed three civilians.¹¹⁰⁷
- Sources reported on 7 March 2021 that 13-25 people were killed and injured in a landmine explosion that hit a bus in Al-Salamiyah countryside in eastern Hama governorate.¹¹⁰⁸

Mine Action Review stated that the Syrian Civil Defence conducted 137 cluster munition remnants (CMR) clearance tasks in Hama governorate in 2019 and destroyed 87 submunitions and 46 UXO.¹¹⁰⁹

Displacement and return

In 2020, UNOCHA recorded in Hama governorate 10 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 15 000 IDP movements to or within the governorate, 5 000 IDP movements from or within the governorate and 2 000 IDP movements within the governorate.¹¹¹⁰

UNOCHA's 2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview showed that as of August 2020, there were 22 320 IDPs in Hama governorate.¹¹¹¹ In 2021, UNOCHA estimated 314 IDP departures in January¹¹¹², 1 200 in February (around 500 of whom were to Idlib governorate)¹¹¹³, and 506 in March 2021.¹¹¹⁴

As regards the returns, in 2020 UNOCHA recorded for Hama governorate 21 000 IDP return movements from or within the governorate, 15 000 IDP return movements to or within the governorate and 12 000 IDP return movements within governorate.¹¹¹⁵ In 2021, UNOCHA estimated 4 000 spontaneous returns in January (of whom, around 3 300 were to Suqailbiya)¹¹¹⁶, 506 in February¹¹¹⁷, and around 1 300 in March 2021 (of which 1 000 were recorded within the governorate).¹¹¹⁸

UNOCHA stated that it was likely that 'the Russian Federation – Government of Turkey Idlib ceasefire agreement in March 2020 was a critical factor' for the overall increase in returns that took place in 2020.¹¹¹⁹ Moreover, the mobilisation of GoS forces in northern Hama countryside in August 2020 incited fear of return of battles among the resident of Al-Ghab plain¹¹²⁰.

¹¹⁰⁵ 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), 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18

¹¹⁰⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 19

¹¹⁰⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 18

¹¹⁰⁸ SOHR, 11 قتيلاً و13 جريحاً حصيلة انفجار لغم بحافلة في ريف سلمية شرقي حماة [11 deaths and 13 injuries, the outcome of a landmine explosion that hit a bus in Al-Salamiya countryside in eastern Hama], 7 March 2021, [url](#); Xeber24, لغم أرضي يوقع قتلى وجرحى بصقوف المدنيين في ريف حماة [Landmine kills and injures civilians in Hama countryside], 7 March 2021, [url](#); TASS, At least 18 civilians killed in two landmine explosions in Syria's Hama, 7 March 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁰⁹ Mine Action Review, Clearing Cluster Munitions Remnants 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 168

¹¹¹⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

¹¹¹¹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

¹¹¹² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2021, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

¹¹¹³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

¹¹¹⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

¹¹¹⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

¹¹¹⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns January 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

¹¹¹⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

¹¹¹⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

¹¹¹⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 16

¹¹²⁰ NPA, Fears of military operations despite Turkish promises in Syria's Ghab Plain, 12 August 2020, [url](#)

On 26 October 2020, Enab Baladi reported that lands in Al-Salamiya and Al-Ghab Plain belonging to people residing in opposition-held areas or outside of Syria were put up for public auction by the Asset Management Committee of the military and security commission of Hama. Reportedly, the procedure was to 'ensure the investment of olive groves for the agricultural season (2020)'.¹¹²¹ In a report published on 14 February 2021, SNHR stated that at least 440 000 dunums¹¹²² of agricultural land belonging to forcibly displaced persons were seized and auctioned by the GoS in suburbs of Hama and Idlib. According to the source, this practice was 'widespread and deliberate'.¹¹²³ The auction announcements concerned farmlands located around 134 villages and towns in Hama governorate.¹¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch stated on 8 April 2021 that 'Syrian authorities are unlawfully confiscating the homes and lands of Syrians who fled Syrian-Russian military attacks in Idlib and Hama governorates'. According to the source, a pro-GoS militia and the Peasants' Union were involved in the seizing and auctioning of these lands to GoS loyalists.¹¹²⁵

¹¹²¹ Enab Baladi, Public auction in Hama to invest lands owned by displaced people or refugees abroad, 26 October 2020, [url](#)

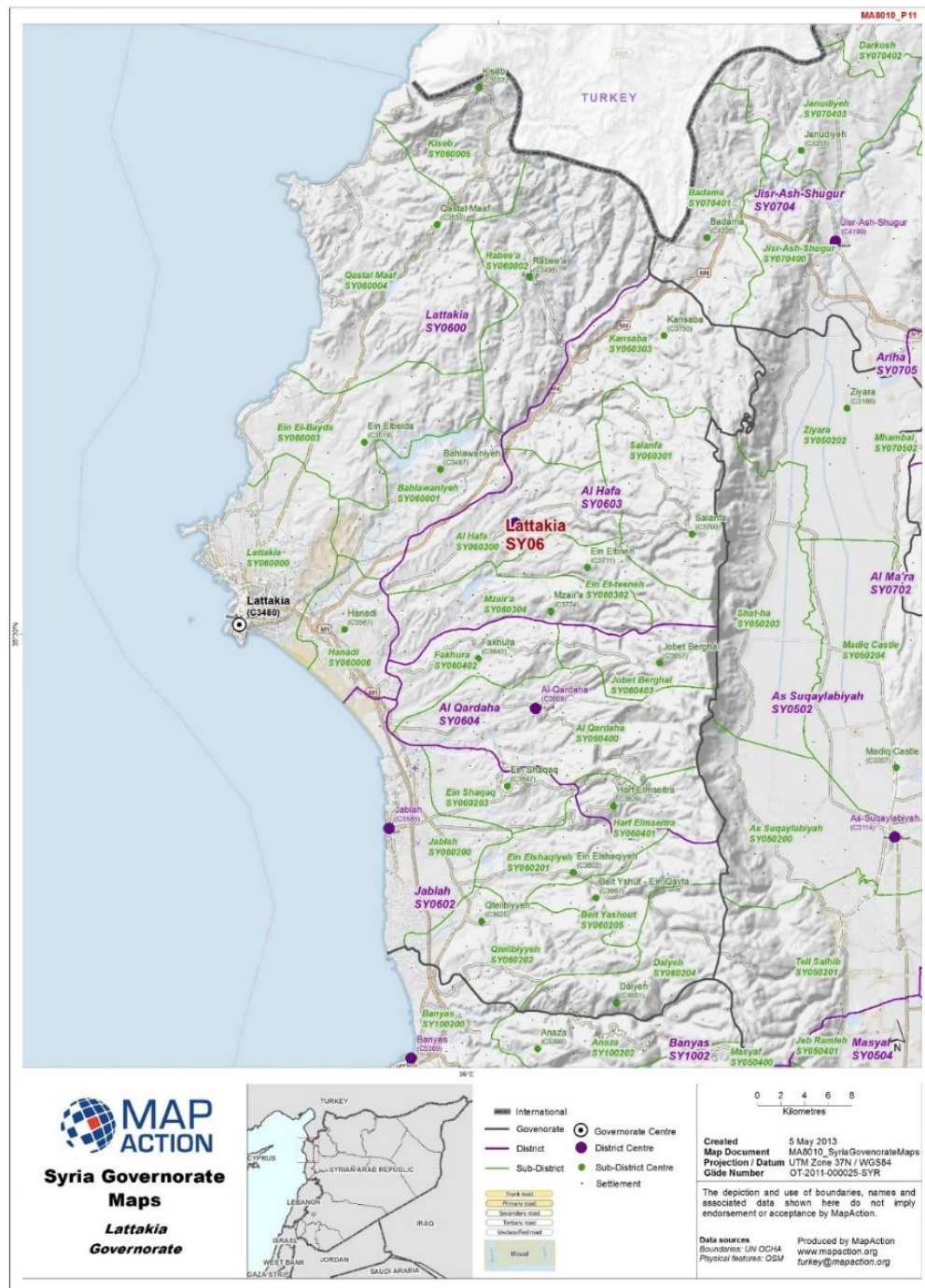
¹¹²² A dunum 'is a unit of land area enclosing 1000 square metres'. Convert Units, Measurement unit conversion: dunam, n. d., [url](#)

¹¹²³ SNHR, Public Auctions of Forcibly Displaced People's Lands Are Another Syrian Regime Method to Seize Its Opponents' Property in a Widespread and Deliberate Manner: At Least 440,000 Dunums of Agricultural Land Seized by the Syrian Regime in the Suburbs of Hama and Idlib, 14 February 2021, [url](#)

¹¹²⁴ SNHR, Public auctions of forcibly displaced people's lands are another Syrian regime method to seize its opponents' property in a widespread and deliberate manner, 14 February 2021, [url](#), p. 11

¹¹²⁵ HRW, Syria: Government Stealing Opponents' Land, 8 April 2021, [url](#)

2.4 Latakia governorate



Map 10: © MapAction, Latakia governorate¹¹²⁶

¹¹²⁶ MapAction, Syria 2013-2015, Latakia Governorate [map], last updated: 29 July 2016, [url](http://www.mapaction.org)

2.4.1 General description of the 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 north-east. Latakia is divided into four administrative districts, from north to south: Latakia, Al-Haffa, Al-Qardaha, Jablah.¹¹²⁷ 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, Qteilibiyyeh.¹¹²⁸

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.¹¹²⁹ 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. About 50 % of the population were Alawite, 40 % were Sunni, and about 10 % were Christians.¹¹³⁰

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the governorate's population at 1 319 000 as by 2019.¹¹³¹ According to the World Food Programme, interviewed by the DIS on 21 October 2020, the population was about 1.2 million.¹¹³² In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Latakia governorate to be of 1 215 928.¹¹³³

Latakia is the location of Syria's main commercial port.¹¹³⁴ It is also Syria's main container port, handling large volumes of metals, chemicals, machinery, and foodstuffs.¹¹³⁵ Latakia governorate, together with neighbouring coastal governorate Tartous, constitute the main vegetable production areas in Syria.¹¹³⁶

2.4.2 Conflict background and armed actors

The city of Latakia has been a stronghold for the Alawites and the Assad family.¹¹³⁷ Since the spring of 2012, Jabal Al-Akrad in the north-east, bordering Idlib governorate and Turkey, had been a rebel stronghold, according to Fabrice Balanche.¹¹³⁸

¹¹²⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic Governorates Profile (June 2014), June 2014, [url](#), p. 19

¹¹²⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic – Lattakia [map], 2017, [url](#)

¹¹²⁹ Izady, M., Syria: Ethnic Shift, 2010-mid 2018 (approximation), 2018-19, Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity [map], [url](#)

¹¹³⁰ Balanche, F., Latakia is Assad's Achilles Heel, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 September 2015, [url](#)

¹¹³¹ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, [url](#)

¹¹³² Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: WFP], December 2020, [url](#), pp. 5, 38

¹¹³³ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

¹¹³⁴ Times (The), Tehran eyes vital Syrian port of Latakia as gateway to Mediterranean, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

¹¹³⁵ World Port Source, Port of Lattakia, 2021 (n.d.), [url](#)

¹¹³⁶ FAO/WFP, Special Report, FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 5 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 21, 37

¹¹³⁷ L'Orient le Jour, Iran gains a foothold in Latakia, 26 March 2019, [url](#)

¹¹³⁸ Balanche, F., Latakia is Assad's Achilles Heel, 23 September 2015, [url](#)

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 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 SAA started a counterattack 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 2019.¹¹³⁹

As of March 2021, Latakia governorate was under control was under GoS control except a strip along the Turkish border and the border to Idlib governorate which was under anti-GoS armed groups.¹¹⁴⁰ (see also [Map 4](#)).

According to ACLED's control map for Syria for the third and fourth quarters of 2020, the governorate was under government control. Except for the two northern subdistricts Rabeea and Qastal Maaf which were marked as 'active', the remaining subdistricts were marked as 'inactive'.¹¹⁴¹

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.¹¹⁴²

Units of the SAA were reported to be present in Latakia governorate in early March 2020. For deployments of the SAA in Latakia governorate as of 3 April 2020 see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

The SAA's Republican Guard together with the 4th Division reportedly led an attack on positions in Kabani and Sirimaniyah held by the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), in July 2020. The two army units also fired at opposition group positions in the Al-Ghaab Plain and Jabal Al-Zawiya region.¹¹⁴³

In an October 2020 interview with DIS, Omran Center for Strategic Studies, stated that *Shabiha*, government-affiliated armed groups, were present across the governorate, and was assisting the government in maintaining security.¹¹⁴⁴

Foreign state forces and affiliated groups

The Russian air force has acquired its own airbase in Latakia¹¹⁴⁵ in Hmeimim.¹¹⁴⁶ The Russian air force conducts expeditionary operations to support the GoS.¹¹⁴⁷ Deutsche Welle reported in May 2020 that Russia had called for talks with the Syrian government, aiming to expand its airbase as well as its naval

¹¹³⁹ Waters, G., Battle of Kabani: A Rare Defeat for the Syrian Army in 2019, International Review, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁴⁰ Based on reading of maps in ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 26 March 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁴¹ ACLED, The State of Syria: Q3 2020 – Q4 2020, 22 February 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁴² ISW, Regime regains ground on the coast, 22 August 2013, [url](#)

¹¹⁴³ Geopolitics News, Syrian Army launches heavy attack on jihadist strongholds in Latakia, 3 July 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁴⁴ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 8

¹¹⁴⁵ EPRS, Russia in the Middle East, From side lines to centre stage, November 2018, [url](#), p. 5

¹¹⁴⁶ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, October 2020, [url](#), p. 11; Al Jazeera, The battle for Syria's Idlib explained in 400 words, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁴⁷ Borshchevskaya, A., Shifting Landscape, Russia's military role in the Middle East, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2019, [url](#), p. 7

base in Tartous.¹¹⁴⁸ Security analyst Joseph Trevithick posted satellite images purportedly showing works undertaken to extend a runway at the airbase, in a February 2021 article on The Drive/The WarZone, a website providing information about security and military issues.¹¹⁴⁹

Asharq Al-Awsat reported in January 2021 that Turkish forces had set up a new military post in Jabal Al-Akrad.¹¹⁵⁰

Syria analyst Gregory Waters indicated in a January 2020 article about the battle for Kabani, that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), was present in the governorate.¹¹⁵¹ Analyst Navvar Saban at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies stated that Iran had organised militias manned by Syrian Shias recruited from various areas of the country. One of these militias, the Al-Mukhtar Al-Thaqafi Brigade, was operating in Latakia.¹¹⁵² According to Jusoor, an NGO, Russia had three bases and military posts in Latakia, Iran six posts and bases, and Turkey two posts in the form of roadblocks.¹¹⁵³

Anti-GoS armed groups

Reuters news agency reported in 2019 about rebel positions in the Kubayna Mountains.¹¹⁵⁴ The Beirut-based news outlet Al-Masdar News mentioned in October 2019 that jihadists were holding on to positions in the Kabani area, while being attacked by the Syrian air force.¹¹⁵⁵ Al-Masdar News reported in another posting in September 2019 that jihadists had taken over Atterah town in the Turkmen mountains.¹¹⁵⁶ A map of control areas provided by the map service PoliticalGeographyNow indicated HTS presence in Kabani in July 2020.¹¹⁵⁷

Bellingcat, an independent collective of researchers who use open sources and social media to track armed conflicts, reported that Turkmen militias, who received limited Turkish support, were operating in Latakia governorate. These groups had an agenda of Islam, Turkism and nationalism. They have been fighting to hold areas traditionally considered to be Turkmen, as well as against the Syrian government. They were small groups, the most notable being the Second Coastal Division, a Turkmen group which also includes Arabs. Most Turkmen groups in Latakia are part of the Second Coastal Division. They could number up to 1 000 fighters, and were gaining growing support from Turkey. Another Turkmen group operating in Latakia, the Sultan Abdulhamid Han brigade, counts around 50 fighters, Bellingcat reported in February 2019.¹¹⁵⁸ The International Business Times reported in July 2020 about positions held by the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) inside Kabani town.¹¹⁵⁹

Ethnic Turkoman and Uyghur militant groups in particular were present in the Kabani mountains, the DIS reported in October 2020.¹¹⁶⁰ The Carter Center reported in March 2021 on the Fatah Al-Mubin Operations Room, a coalition of armed groups including Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, the Turkish-backed opposition National Liberation Front, and Jaysh Al-Izza, having attacked GoS soldiers near Kabani.¹¹⁶¹

¹¹⁴⁸ DW, Russia aims to boost military facilities in Syria, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁴⁹ Trevithick, J., Russia Is Extending One Of The Runways At Its Syrian Airbase, 5 February 2021, the Drive/The WarZone, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁰ Asharq Al-Awsat, سوريا «درعاً فولاذية» لشمال غربي [Turkish army creates 'steel shield' in northwestern Syria], 28 January 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁵¹ Waters, G., Battle for Kabani: A Rare Defeat for the Syrian Army in 2019, International Review, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁵² Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁵³ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁴ Reuters, Oppositions say Syrian army fails to retake Latakia mountain, 19 May 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁵ Al Masdar News, Eight Syrian choppers swarm jihadist stronghold in northeast Latakia, 12 October 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁶ Al Masdar News, Jihadists capture first town in northern Latakia, Syrian Air Force enters battle, 9 July 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁷ Political Geography Now, Syria Control Map & Report: Frontlines Stable - July 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁸ Bellingcat, Syrian Turkmen Groups in Latakia: An Overview, 7 February 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁵⁹ International Business Times, Syria's New Russian MiG 29 Unleash Hellfire on Turkey-backed Chinese Uyghur Muslim Militants, 4 June 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁰ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], December 2020, [url](#), p. 8

¹¹⁶¹ Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary, 15-21 March 2021, 24 March 2021, [url](#)

2.4.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

Security trends in 2020-2021

In January 2020, Gregory Waters noted that the fighting for Kabani had gone on for eight months.¹¹⁶² Through all of 2020 and into 2021, sources reported about fighting continuing to take place between the SAA and opposition groups posted in the governorate's north-western border areas adjacent to Idlib governorate and Turkey.¹¹⁶³ Defences in the Kabani hills belonging to TIP were attacked by the SAA in September 2020, Al Masdar reported.¹¹⁶⁴ SOHR reported of members of the TIP firing at the SAA's positions in Kawkabah village in Jabal Shashaboo.¹¹⁶⁵ Turkish-backed groups were reportedly shelling SAA's positions in the Shalaf area in January 2021, according to Southfront, an analysis organisation.¹¹⁶⁶

On 5 March 2020, Russia and Turkey agreed a ceasefire that froze the SAA's advance on Idlib. A security corridor was established along the M4 Highway connecting Latakia city, the governorate's capital, with Aleppo. A stretch of the highway became patrolled by Turkish and Russian forces.¹¹⁶⁷ Later in the year, sources reported that the Turkish military had set up posts or bases in northern Latakia.¹¹⁶⁸ Gregory Waters reported that by the second week of March 2020, there were no major military operations anywhere in Syria, and that the frontline had become 'frozen' in the north-west. The number of combat-related deaths in March, April and May showed a sharp decrease in the level of violence in north-west Syria when compared to the first two months of the year. With this decline, the north-west 'went quiet', Waters reported.¹¹⁶⁹ Still, in the Jabal Al-Akrad area fighting continued between GoS forces supported by Russian aircraft, and opposition groups. Qardaha town was shelled by HTS in mid-March 2020.¹¹⁷⁰

Russian military aircraft have been targeting opposition-held positions in the area during the reference period for this report.¹¹⁷¹ Russian airstrikes in Kabani town were reported 2-3 June 2020.¹¹⁷² Russian airstrikes in the outskirts of Kabani town were reported in January 2021, in a response to HTS targeting

¹¹⁶² Waters, G., Battle for Kabani: A Rare Defeat for the Syrian Army in 2019, International Review, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶³ Rudaw, Idlib militants launch renewed attack on the Syrian regime, while civilians protest both, 9 June 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Syrian Army Pounds Militant Positions In Northern Latakia, 26 June 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 18, 25 July 2020, [url](#), p. 2; SOHR, Ceasefire violations, Regime forces shell positions in Idlib, Hama and Latakia, while Turkistan Islamic Party attacks military position in Jabal Shashaboo, 7 December 2020, [url](#); South Front, Russian Warplanes Deliver First Airstrikes On Greater Idlib In 2021 (Video, Photos), 9 January 2021, [url](#); South Front, Military Situation in Syria on January 9, 2021, map update, 9 January 2021, [url](#); SOHR, Ceasefire violations | Oppositions shell and attack regime positions in Idlib and Latakia countryside, leaving scores dead and wounded, 8 January 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁴ Al Masdar News, Syrian Army strikes jihadist fortifications in strategic mountain region, 29 September 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁵ SOHR, Ceasefire violations | Regime forces shell positions in Idlib, Hama and Latakia, while Turkistan Islamic Party attacks military position in Jabal Shashaboo, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁶ South Front, Military Situation in Syria on January 9, 2021, map update, 9 January 2021, [url](#). South Front Analysis & Intelligence is a public analytical umbrella organization focusing on issues of international relations, armed conflicts and crises. [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁷ CNN, Turkey and Russia announce ceasefire in northwest Syria, 5 March 2020, [url](#); MEE (Middle East Eye), Ceasefire brokered by Turkey and Russia takes effect in Syria's Idlib, 5 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁸ NPA, New Turkish military point established in Latakia countryside, Syria, 1 September 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Turkey's military build-up | Turkish forces set up new military post in Jabal al-Akrad, as shelling and clashes intensify, 9 August 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁶⁹ Waters, G., The Syrian Regime's Combat losses in Spring 2020, and what lies ahead, MEI (Middle East Institute), June 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 2, 5

¹¹⁷⁰ Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary, 9-15 March 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹¹⁷¹ Al Masdar News, Russian, Syrian warplanes strike foreign jihadists in Hama, Latakia, 3 June 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Russian planes bomb opposition-held area in Syria's Latakia, say opposition, war monitor, 3 August 2020, [url](#); South Front, Russian Warplanes Deliver First Airstrikes On Greater Idlib In 2021 (Video, Photos), 9 January 2021, [url](#); DW, Russia carries out first Syria airstrikes in three months, 3 June 2020, [url](#); AP News, Russia Airstrikes on northwest Syria after blast wounds 3 Russians, 14 July 2020, [url](#); NPA, Russian airstrikes bombard opposition in Syria's Latakia, 28 December 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁷² Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary, 1-7 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

military positions of the SAA.¹¹⁷³ The International Business Times reported that Syrian military aircraft concentrated their firing at TIP positions inside Kabani and Al-Sirmaniyeh towns in June 2020. Civilian casualties were not reported.¹¹⁷⁴ The SAA advanced on 'a frontline town' in Latakia, near the Jabal Al-Akrad mountain range, Reuters reported in August 2020. Civilian casualties were not reported.¹¹⁷⁵ Al Masdar reported that the SAA was striking opposition positions in the Kabani hills in September. No casualties were reported.¹¹⁷⁶

According to an international security organisation interviewed by DIS in October 2020, no major security incidents were reported in the governorate's capital Latakia City in 2020.¹¹⁷⁷ In the governorate as such, an international security organisation interviewed by DIS in October 2020 assessed that 99 % of the security incidents it recorded between 1 May and 31 October 2020 were 'indirect artillery fire', and 1 % related to landmine/explosive remnants of war.¹¹⁷⁸ Opposition group positions in the villages of Qarra Jai, Shamrawan, and Qalat Shanbar in Northern Latakia were shelled by government forces in July 2020.¹¹⁷⁹ In October 2020, 94 % of the security related incidents were 'indirect artillery fire' in the north-eastern part of the governorate.¹¹⁸⁰ By the end of the year, ground operations by the government forces had not been reported by the sources consulted by the DIS since July, but rebel forces had been shelling government-controlled areas near the Kabani mountains.¹¹⁸¹ Also, there had been drone attacks against the Russian airbase Hmeimim and in areas associated with the SAA.¹¹⁸² On 24 March 2021, the Carter Center reported that a GoS soldier was killed and several others wounded near Kabani.¹¹⁸³

In an interview with the DIS on 23 October 2020, Navvar Saban at the Omran Studies stated that in the city of Jableh, whose majority population is Alawite, the main security incidents took place between Local Defence Forces (LDF) militias and GoS security services. Saban explained the incidents as disputes over territory and control of land areas.¹¹⁸⁴

Protests over Syria's economic situation took place in Latakia between January and October 2020, DIS reported.¹¹⁸⁵ Arrests of civilians who had criticised corruption on social media were reported in the governorate in early 2021. Among those arrested were government employees, a television presenter, and a prominent cartoonist. Tensions had reportedly increased in erstwhile GoS loyalist areas among shortages of basic services, bread and fuel.¹¹⁸⁶ In an interview with EASO for this report,

¹¹⁷³ South Front, Russian Warplanes Deliver First Airstrikes On Greater Idlib In 2021 (Video, Photos), 9 January 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁷⁴ International Business Times, Syria's New Russian MiG 29 Unleash Hellfire on Turkey-backed Chinese Uyghur Muslim Militants, 4 June 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁷⁵ Reuters, Russian planes bomb opposition-held area in Syria's Latakia, say opposition, war monitor, 3 August 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁷⁶ Al Masdar News, Syrian Army strikes jihadist fortifications in strategic mountain region, 29 September 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁷⁷ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: an international security organisation], December 2020, [url](#), p. 38

¹¹⁷⁸ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: International security organisation], December 2020, [url](#), p. 39

¹¹⁷⁹ NPA, HTS and Ansar al-Tawhid members wounded in Syria's Idlib and Latakia, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁸⁰ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: International security organisation], December 2020, [url](#), p. 39

¹¹⁸¹ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies; an international security organisation], December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

¹¹⁸² Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: an international security organisation], December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

¹¹⁸³ Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary, 15-21 March 2021, 24 March 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁸⁴ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], December 2020, [url](#), p. 8

¹¹⁸⁵ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 10

¹¹⁸⁶ MEI, Arrests in Syria's Latakia signal discontent among pro-Assad communities, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

a humanitarian organisation working in Syria stated that there were reports of mild civil unrest in the governorate, due to the deterioration of the economic situation.¹¹⁸⁷

The DIS stated that the population could move freely within the governorate, but it considered the roads in Latakia not safe due to the presence of independent LDF, and that the government was unable to implement full security on these roads.¹¹⁸⁸ Analyst Navvar Saban at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies stated that the LDF were considered part of the Syrian army, albeit locally recruited by Iran.¹¹⁸⁹ There are no areas within the governorate that have restricted access for civilians, except for military installations, the Russian airbase and the port.¹¹⁹⁰ People could move freely within the capital Latakia City.¹¹⁹¹ There are checkpoints close to the airport in Latakia.¹¹⁹² On 30 November 2020, UNOCHA reported the airport as partially open to international traffic.¹¹⁹³

On 5 May 2020, media reported of a 'rare' and 'unusual' Israeli air attack against targets the Al-Haffa (Hifa) area, leaving one civilian dead.¹¹⁹⁴

Security incidents

During the reference period, there were 208 security incidents recorded by ACLED in Latakia governorate, of whom 33 were coded as battles, 174 explosions/remote violence and 1 incidents of violence against civilians. Higher number of security incidents were recorded in July 2020 and January 2021 (see Figure 23).

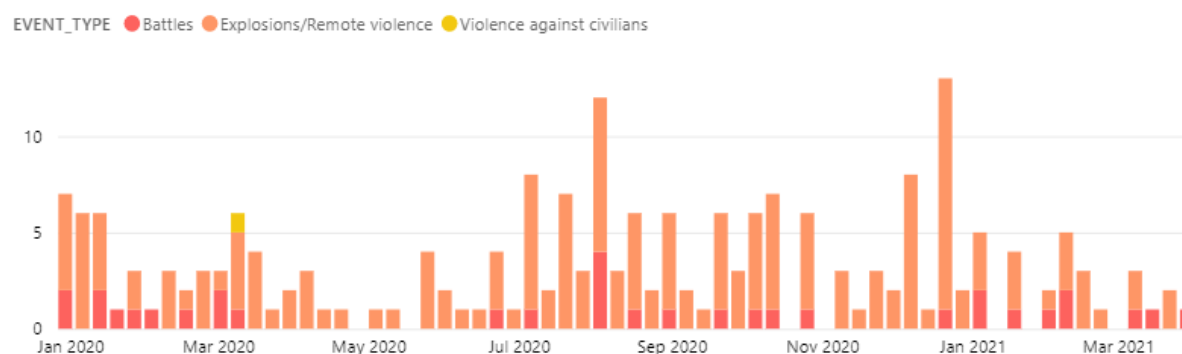


Figure 23. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Latakia governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data¹¹⁹⁵

¹¹⁸⁷ Humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Teams interview, 17 February 2021

¹¹⁸⁸ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 11

¹¹⁸⁹ Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, [url](#). Navvar Saban is a conflict expert at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies, an independent think-tank in Istanbul, Turkey, where he specializes in Iranian influence in Syria, focusing on Shia militia activity.

¹¹⁹⁰ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 11

¹¹⁹¹ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, October 2020 [source: International security organisation, para. 18], [url](#), p. 11

¹¹⁹² Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 11

¹¹⁹³ UNOCHA/WHO, Syria: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 21 As of 30 November 2020, [url](#), p. 6

¹¹⁹⁴ MEE, Syria media: One person killed as Israeli air strikes target Assad home region, 5 May 2021, [url](#); Enab Baladi, One dead, six wounded in Israeli shelling of positions in western Syria, 5 May 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁹⁵ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

Latakia governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Al-Hafa	16	117	-
Al-Qardaha	-	2	1
Jablah	7	3	-
Latakia	10	52	-
Total	33	174	1

Figure 24. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Latakia governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

Data retrieved from ACLED shows that the highest number of security incidents throughout the reporting period were recorded in the Al-Haffa and Latakia districts.

Included in ACLED's coding of 'Explosions/remote violence' are air/drone strikes and shelling/artillery/missile attacks (for more information on ACLED methodology see [Section 1.6.2 Security incidents](#)). Accordingly, the high proportion of explosions/remote violence reported by ACLED includes incidents of artillery mortar shelling, airstrikes and missile attacks of the kind listed as illustrative security incidents below.

Illustrative security incidents

- Turkish forces targeted Syrian government and Russian positions in Latakia governorate with missiles, the Daily Sabah reported on 28 February 2020.¹¹⁹⁶
- Rudaw reported that opposition groups had announced some movements in Kabani in mid-2020. Rudaw mentioned these movements in connection with a renewed offensive by insurgents in Idlib against surrounding government forces at the time.¹¹⁹⁷
- SOHR reported on 26 June 2020 that the SAA artillery targeted Mount Turkman in Latakia, where several foreign jihadist groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party and Ajnad Al-Kavkaz reportedly were having positions.¹¹⁹⁸
- On 25 July 2020, UNOCHA reported about 'more frequent shelling along frontlines' in Latakia and other governorates.¹¹⁹⁹
- SOHR reported on 2 August 2020 that GoS forces had been shelling targets in Idlib from positions in Sashaboo, and that the GoS had sent reinforcements to the frontlines in the north-eastern Latakia countryside.¹²⁰⁰
- On 3 August 2020, Reuters reported that Russian aircraft attacked opposition-held positions in the Jabal Al-Akrad mountains in Latakia.¹²⁰¹
- SOHR reported about regime forces firing rockets and artillery pieces at the Kabani area and Kafradeen village in the Latakia countryside on 7 December 2020.¹²⁰²
- On 8 January 2021, SOHR reported about mortar fire on the Qal'at Shalaf frontlines in Jabal Al-Akrad, and exchange of fire between rebel factions and regime soldiers on frontlines in

¹¹⁹⁶ Daily Sabah, Turkey strikes Assad regime bastion Latakia, other targets in Syria with missiles, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁹⁷ Rudaw, Idlib militants launch renewed attack on the Syrian regime, while civilians protest both, 9 June 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁹⁸ SOHR, Syrian Army Pounds Militant Positions In Northern Latakia, 26 June 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁹⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 18, 25 July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹²⁰⁰ SOHR, Military build-up | Regime forces bring in new reinforcement to Sahl Al-Ghab and rural Latakia, and shell factions' positions in rural Idlib, 2 August 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁰¹ Reuters, Russian planes bomb rebel-held area in Syria's Latakia, say opposition, war monitor, 3 August 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁰² SOHR, Ceasefire violations, Regime forces shell positions in Idlib, Hama and Latakia, while Turkistan Islamic Party attacks military position in Jabal Shashaboo, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

Jabal Al-Turkmen, as well as bombardment of Shamrouan and Qarrah Jaghi village, all located in the northern Latakia countryside.¹²⁰³

- On 9 March 2021, armed opposition groups repelled an 'infiltration attempt' by government forces in the countryside of Latakia.¹²⁰⁴

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	1	-	-	-
February	-	-	-	-
March	-	7	-	-
April	-	1		
May	-	-		
June	1	-		
July	-	-		
August	-	-		
September	-	-		
October	-	-		
November	-	1		
December	-	-		
Total	2	9	-	-

Figure 25. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Latakia governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2020, in Latakia governorate there were recorded between 2 (VDC data)¹²⁰⁵ and 9 civilian fatalities¹²⁰⁶ (SNHR data).¹²⁰⁷ No civilian fatalities were reported by SNHR or VDC for the first three months of 2021.

¹²⁰³ SOHR, Ceasefire violations | Opposition shell and attack regime positions in Idlib and Latakia countryside, leaving scores dead and wounded, 8 January 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁰⁴ NPA, Opposition groups repel government forces' infiltration attempt in Syria's Latakia, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁰⁵ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

¹²⁰⁶ In a January 2021 report, SNHR mentions 3 civilian fatalities in Latakia in 2020. This figure is the result of a revision of their data. EASO email correspondence with SNHR, 22 April 2021. See SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

¹²⁰⁷ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

A report by SHRC in 2019 about the impact of cluster bombs on civilians in the de-escalation zone that stretches into north-eastern Latakia, mentioned that residential areas had been targeted but the report did not specify the impact and locations.¹²⁰⁸

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.¹²⁰⁹ The exact locations and the extent of the destruction was, however, not stated.

Extensive wildfires erupted in October 2020 in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea, comprising Latakia. The fires inflicted severe damage on infrastructure and livelihoods across the governorate. The conditions causing the fires were attributed to climate change.¹²¹⁰ The World Bank stated in 2020 that war-related damage to land and property was not a prominent issue for people in Latakia. The World Bank estimated the percentage of the residential housing stock deprived by the conflict in Latakia, at 10 %, considering it the least deprived of all governorates in Syria.¹²¹¹ Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Latakia governorate, 0.4 % of the population was living in damaged buildings.¹²¹²

One of the seven public hospitals in Latakia governorate, the Ibrahim N'ama Hospital in Jableh, was partially damaged and partially functioning, DIS reported in October 2020. Of all the public health centers, 90 % were undamaged. Nine public health centers were fully or partially damaged. Nine were not functioning, six of them located in Al-Haffa, two in Al-Shamiye, and one in Latakia city.¹²¹³

The port of Latakia had not been damaged by the conflict, the World Bank reported in 2020. There were 56 ongoing government-funded projects to reconstruct roads in the governorate that had been damaged previously. The causes of the damages to these roads were not mentioned by the source.¹²¹⁴ Fuel shortages have been reported in the reference period. The shortages were ascribed to sanctions, not to war damage.¹²¹⁵

A map of explosive munitions per affected community published by the Carter Center in November 2020, showed that most of the governorate's communities were not contaminated with explosive munitions. The highest density of affected communities was in the northern half of the governorate.¹²¹⁶

Displacement and return

For all of 2020, UNHCR recorded around 7 000 IDP movements from or within Latakia governorate (6 000 displaced within Latakia, 1 100 displaced from Latakia to Tartous governorate). In the same period, 11 000 were displaced to or within the governorate (6 000 within the governorate, 5 000

¹²⁰⁸ 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](#);

¹²⁰⁹ OHCHR, Escalating violence and waves of displacement continue to torment civilians during eighth year of Syrian conflict, 11 September 2019, [url](#)

¹²¹⁰ UNOCHA, OCHA Syria Flash Update #01 Humanitarian Impact of Wildfires in Coastal Areas As of 11 October 2020, [url](#), p. 1; IFRC (International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies), Emergency Plan of Action (EPoA) Syria: Wildfires, 23 October 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹²¹¹ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020 [url](#), pp. 114, 110

¹²¹² Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

¹²¹³ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: WHO], December 2020, [url](#), p. 23

¹²¹⁴ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020 [url](#) p. 161

¹²¹⁵ NPA, 8 September 2020, [url](#); Transportation and fuel crisis, 17 December 2020, [url](#); MEMO January 2021, [url](#)

¹²¹⁶ Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 3 Aleppo, Idlib, and Latakia governorates, 13 November 2020, [url](#), p. 1

displaced to Latakia from the governorates of Damascus, Rural Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Tartous.¹²¹⁷

In terms of return movements, UNOCHA recorded 3 000 IDP returns movements to Latakia governorate in 2020.¹²¹⁸

In January 2021, there were 520 IDP movements from or within Latakia governorate, 830 IDP movements to or within, and 365 IDP movements within the governorate.¹²¹⁹ In the same month there were no return movements to the governorate from outside or from locations within, 73 returns from Latakia, and no returns from locations within the governorate only.¹²²⁰

In February 2021, there were 510 IDP movements from or within the governorate, 390 IDP movements within, and 720 IDP movements to or within the governorate.¹²²¹ In the same month there were no return movements to Latakia from outside or from locations within, 40 returns from the governorate, and no returns from locations within Latakia only.¹²²²

In March 2021, there were 540 IDP movements from or within the governorate (471 of which were recorded within the governorate).¹²²³ In terms of spontaneous IDP returns, in March 2021 UNOCHA recorded 266 returns from the governorate.¹²²⁴

IDP movements caused by the wildfires in the Latakia woodlands, were reported in October 2020.¹²²⁵

¹²¹⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

¹²¹⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

¹²¹⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

¹²²⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

¹²²¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements February 2021, 1 April, 2021, [url](#)

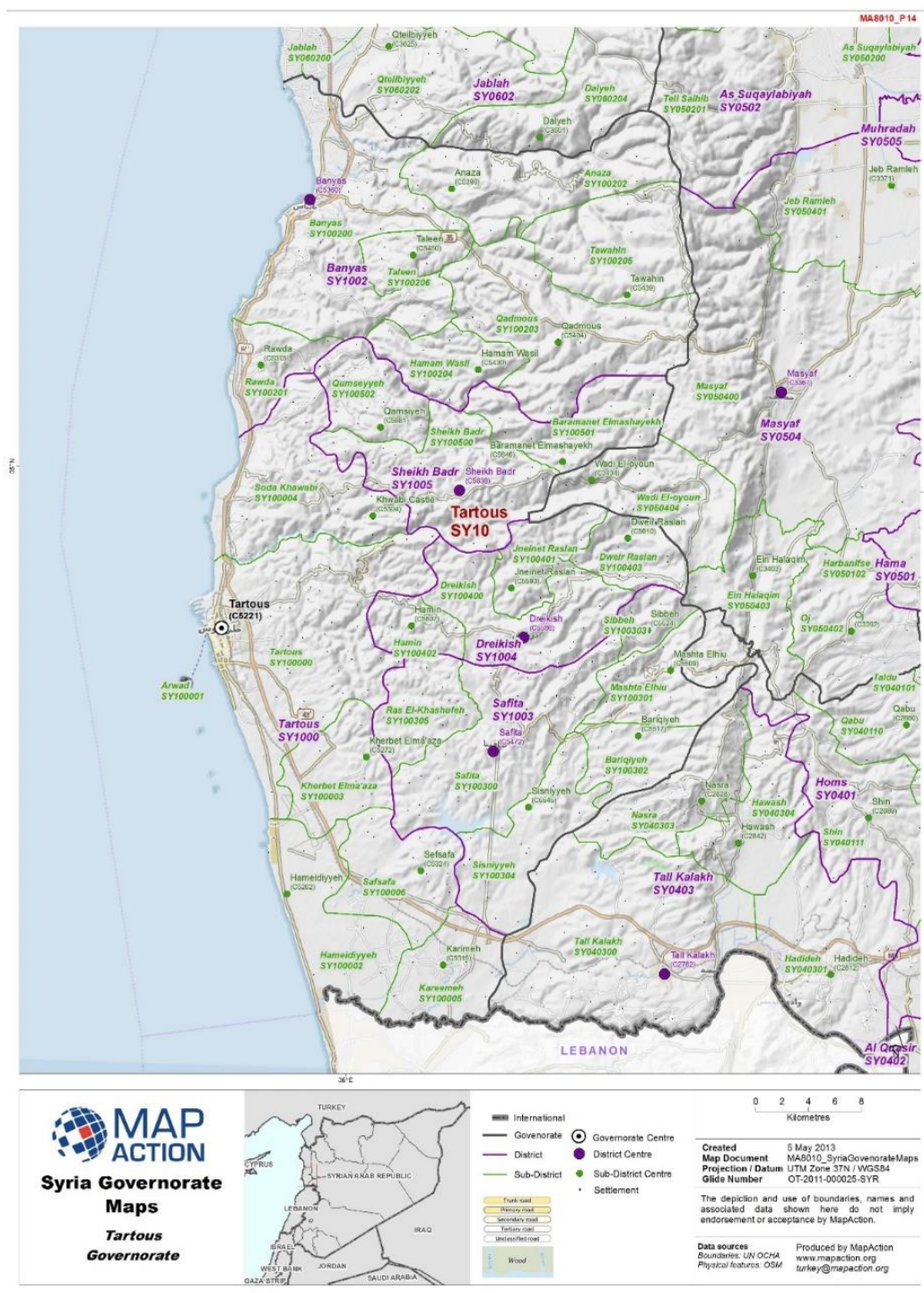
¹²²² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

¹²²³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

¹²²⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

¹²²⁵ UNOCHA, OCHA SYRIA FLASH UPDATE #01 Humanitarian Impact of Wildfires in Coastal Areas As of 11 October 2020, [url](#), p. 1; IFRC (International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies), Emergency Plan of Action (EPoA) Syria: Wildfires, [url](#), p. 2

2.5 Tartous governorate



Map 11: © MapAction, Tartous governorate map¹²²⁶

¹²²⁶ MapAction, Syria Governorate Maps – Tartous Governorate, last updated on 29 July 2019, [url](http://www.mapaction.org)

2.5.1 General description of the governorate

Tartous and Latakia governorates form the coastal region of Syria. Tartous governorate borders the Mediterranean Sea in the west, Latakia governorate in the north, the governorates of Hama and Homs in the east, and Lebanon in the south.¹²²⁷ Tartous consists of five administrative districts that are Tartous City, Baniyas, Dreikish, Safita and Sheikh Badr¹²²⁸, which are subdivided into twenty-seven sub-districts.¹²²⁹ Tartous governorate constitutes a part of the Useful Syria, term coined by Bashar al-Asad in 2016 encompassing also the governorates of Damascus and its countryside, Rif Dimashq (Rural Damascus), Homs, Hama, and Latakia, which were considered more strategic and worth defending.¹²³⁰

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Tartous governorate in 2019 to be 1 152 000.¹²³¹ As of August 2020, WFP estimated the population of Tartous governorate at 930 000.¹²³² In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Tartous governorate to be of 929 366.¹²³³

As of August 2020, UNOCHA estimated the total population, including both residents and IDPs of Tartous governorate at 929 366¹²³⁴, out of which 426 789 in Tartous district, 129 005 in Baniyas, 82 835 in Dreikish, 67 228 in Qadmous, 149 427 in Safita, 74 082 in Sheikh Badr district.¹²³⁵

According to USDOS Syria 2020 International Religious Freedom Report, 'continued population displacement adds a degree of uncertainty to demographic analyses.'¹²³⁶ Furthermore, the report states that the majority of Alawites live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia governorate, as well as in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, Homs and Damascus.¹²³⁷ In 2015 Alawites were estimated to constitute 80 % of Tartous city population, along with 10 % Sunnis and 10 % Christians.¹²³⁸ Also, population between Tartous and Homs was considered predominantly Alawite, with strong Christian minority in Safita, while Sunnis were concentrated around al-Hamidiyah.¹²³⁹

Tartous is one of nine free investment zones in Syria, granted to foreign investors, from dominantly Iran and Russia, to establish and operate projects, while benefiting from exemptions, concessions, guarantees, and exclusions of tax and custom duties.¹²⁴⁰ In addition to Baniyas and Latakia, Tartous port is one of Syria's three Mediterranean export terminals.¹²⁴¹ According to the Alma Research and Education Center, an Israeli non-profit and bipartisan organisation focused on geopolitics, in addition

¹²²⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Tartous governorate, January 2016, [url](#)

¹²²⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profiles, June 2014, p. 31, [url](#)

¹²²⁹ UNHCR, UNHCR Syria / Tartous FO, End of year 2017 / Factsheet, January – December 2017, p. 1, [url](#)

¹²³⁰ According to the source in 2011, the population of Tartous governorate was 797 000, where Alawites comprised 69 %, Sunnis 18 %, Ismailis 7 % and Christians 6 %. King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS), Hussain Ibrahim Qutrib, "Useful Syria" and demographic changes in Syria, 2016, p. 3-4, [url](#)

¹²³¹ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

¹²³² Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: WFP], [url](#), p. 5

¹²³³ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

¹²³⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian needs overview – Syrian Arab Republic, Humanitarian programme cycle 2021, March 2021, p. 23, [url](#)

¹²³⁵ UNOCHA, Humanitarian needs overview – Syrian Arab Republic, Humanitarian programme cycle 2021, March 2021, p. 98, [url](#)

¹²³⁶ USDOS, Syria 2020 International Religious Freedom Report, 12 May 2021, p. 3, [url](#)

¹²³⁷ USDOS, Syria 2020 International Religious Freedom Report, 12 May 2021, p. 3, [url](#)

¹²³⁸ Balanche, F., Latakia is Assad's Achilles heel, Policy Analysis / Policy Watch 2489, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 September 2015, [url](#)

¹²³⁹ Balanche, F., Latakia is Assad's Achilles heel, Policy Analysis / Policy Watch 2489, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 September 2015, [url](#)

¹²⁴⁰ Enab Baladi, Free zones... new investments stabilizing Iranian presence in Syria and reaping benefits, 6 March 2020, [url](#); Jamestown Foundation, Moscow plans enhanced military basing in Syria, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 79, 3 June 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁴¹ SOHR, Why Syria is a critical part of Russia's energy strategy, 22 September 2020, [url](#)

to the Syrian ports of Baniyas and Latakia, Tartous port constitutes a key part of a maritime cargo supply corridor, coordinated between Russia, Syria and Iran to secure the supply of oil¹²⁴², wheat¹²⁴³, and other products from Iran to Syrian ports, with the aim of circumventing US and European sanctions.¹²⁴⁴

In 2017, Syria and Russia signed a 49-year lease agreement, allowing an automatic renewal for another 25 years for the development and modernisation of Russian permanent naval base (first established in 1971)¹²⁴⁵, hosting the Military-Maritime Fleet (Voyenno-Morskoi Flot - VMF) in Tartous port.¹²⁴⁶ The bill giving the agreement direct effect was passed by the Syrian parliament in June 2019.¹²⁴⁷ The access to Tartous port, grants Russia a posture to power-project not only within the eastern part but the entire Mediterranean Sea¹²⁴⁸, the Middle East and North Africa.¹²⁴⁹

2.5.2 Conflict background and armed actors

As of March 2021, Tartous governorate was under GoS control¹²⁵⁰ (see also [Map 4](#)).

An undisclosed international security organisation interviewed by DIS in October 2020 stated that governorates of Tartous and Latakia 'can be considered as one entity with regards to the security situation in 2020'.¹²⁵¹ Navvar Shaban of the Omran Center for Strategic Studies, another source interviewed by the DIS, reported that throughout 2020, the GoS controlled Tartous governorate, however contrary to the international security organisation stance, Shaban noted that the security structure, imposed security measures, the behaviour of different security actors varies in different areas in the two governorates.¹²⁵²

Reportedly, anti-government armed groups are not present in the governorate of Tartous.¹²⁵³

For a detailed background overview of the conflict preceding March 2020 please consult the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

Navvar Shaban of the Omran Center for Strategic Studies, claims that the GoS security presence is stronger in majority Sunni villages, such as Baniyas in Tartous, where population movement is closely

¹²⁴² USNI, H. I. Sutton, Russian navy seen escorting Iranian tankers bound for Syria, 21 October 2020, [url](#); Diyaruna, Iranian supertanker arrives at Syria's Tartous, 9 September 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁴³ PressTV, Report: Russia, Iran, Syria working to secure oil, wheat shipments to Arab country, 18 April 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁴⁴ Alma Research and Education Center, Tal Beeri, Russia and Iran present – the naval coordination mechanism for breaking sanctions on Syria, 9 May 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁴⁵ RIAC, Turkish and Russian Approaches to Security in the Eastern Mediterranean, 10 November 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁴⁶ Sputnik International, Russia to expand capabilities of naval base in Syrian Tartus, 20 January 2017, [url](#); Эхо Петербурга (Echo of Petersburg), Путин поручил обсудить с Сирией передачу недвижимости и акватории (Putin instructed discussion with Syria about the transfer of real estate and maritime areas), 29 March 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁴⁷ France24, Syria parliament okays Russian lease of Tartus port: state media, 12 June 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁴⁸ Jamestown Foundation, Moscow plans enhanced military basing in Syria, September 2020, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 79, 3 June 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁴⁹ ISW, Jennifer Cafarella, Testimony before US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism, "10 years of war: examining the ongoing conflict in Syria", 15 April 2021, p. 7, [url](#), [original url](#); FPRI, Igor Delanoë, Russian naval forces in the Syrian war, September 2020, p. 10, [url](#); KAS, Ercan Çitlioğlu, A Turkish perspective on Syria, 26 September 2020, p. 37, 41, [url](#)

¹²⁵⁰ Based on reading of maps in ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 26 March 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁵¹ The source works with analysis of the security situation in Syria and receives daily reports on the security situation in the whole country. Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [url](#), p. 7

¹²⁵² Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: International security organisation, Omran Center] [url](#), p. 7

¹²⁵³ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: International security organisation, Omran Center], [url](#), p. 8

monitored, together with social media accounts of some individuals.¹²⁵⁴ The GoS security presence is not so pronounced in other parts of the coastal area.¹²⁵⁵

Local Defence Force (LDF) militias presence is reported to be greater in rural areas of Tartous governorate. Reportedly, this may sometimes create security issues with GoS security agencies in rural areas, due to LDFs' potential targeting of individuals and imposition of their own security measures and controls.¹²⁵⁶

According to the sources interviewed by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), the Syrian president's brother Maher al-Assad control extends over the coastal cities of Latakia and Tartous, which official and unofficial ports have been considered a hotbed for smuggling of illegal goods into and out of Syria, used to finance militias under GoS control.¹²⁵⁷ Maher al-Assad commands the 4th Armoured division, which although headquartered in Damascus, has its security bureau branch overseeing the Tartous and Latakia ports.¹²⁵⁸

In August 2020, the Syrian Observer published a translation of an unverified article by the opposite website, Shaam Network, which reported that allegedly Brigadier General Ibrahim Abbas was appointed the head of the Tartous military branch.¹²⁵⁹

Russia

According to Syria expert Fabrice Balanche, although the GoS now controls two-thirds of Syria's territory, compared to only a fifth in 2013, the GoS has failed to re-establish control over Syria's skies and territorial waters. Russia monitors its maritime zones from its naval base in Tartous, and most of its airspace from the base in Hmeimim.¹²⁶⁰ According to the Foreign Policy Research Institute, the 49 years lease agreement for Russia's naval base at Tartous allows 11 vessels to dock there, and 'Russia is currently upgrading' it 'to make it more robust as a base'.¹²⁶¹ Russian and Syrian joint military exercises are regularly conducted in the port of Tartous.¹²⁶² Russian military ships supply convoy constitutes what is considered 'the Syria Express', which operates between Russia's Black Sea ports and the ports of Tartus, Banyas and Latakia, regularly supplying the GoS with armaments.¹²⁶³ In 2019 publication of the National Defence Review (RDN, Revue Défense Nationale) of the French association,

¹²⁵⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: Omran Center], [url](#), p. 8

¹²⁵⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: Omran Center] [url](#), p. 8

¹²⁵⁶ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: Omran Center], [url](#) p. 8

¹²⁵⁷ Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), Assad regime implicated in massive Captagon bust, 13 July 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁵⁸ Jamestown Foundation, Can Kasapoglu, Could Russia lose the Syrian Arab army to Iran or general Maher al-Assad?, Publication: Terrorism Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 13, 26 June 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁵⁹ The Syrian Observer, Assad regime's latest military reassignments, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁶⁰ Balanche, F., , Policy Watch 3433, The Assad regime has failed to restore full sovereignty over Syria, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#); OHCHR, Syrian Arab Republic: approximate areas of influence as of November 2020, January 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁶¹ FPRI, Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller and Aaron Stein, Russia's war in Syria – assessing Russian military capabilities and lessons learned, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 123

¹²⁶² Russia, MDRF, Russian and Syrian military personnel conducted joint exercises to protect the waters of the port of Tartus, where the Russian Navy is based, 25 May 2020, [url](#); Russia, MDRF, A joint Russian-Syrian exercise took place in the Mediterranean sea near the province of Tartus, 10 July 2020, [url](#); Russia, MDRF, Russian and Syrian servicemen held a joint training session to repel an attack by saboteurs on the Russian Navy's CSS point in Tartus, 24 December 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁶³ NATO Defense College – Research Division, Chloé Berger and Cynthia Sallom, Russia in NATO's south: expansionist strategy or defensive posture?, NDC research paper no. 16, January 2021, [url](#), p. 22

the National Defence Studies Committee (CEDN, Comité d'études de défense nationale) it is stated that Russia supplies 2 000 tons of military equipment to Syria every day.¹²⁶⁴

Navvar Shaban of the Omran Center for Strategic Studies claims that the presence of Russia's military in Tartous harbour deterred the presence of pro-government militias, unlike in other governorates.¹²⁶⁵

Tartous city is reported to be one out of a total of 16 recruitment centres of Liwa al-Areen (The Den Brigade), a Russian-backed formation, which reportedly was initially affiliated with the military intelligence branch that directs all the military security branches.¹²⁶⁶ Liwa al-Areen was formed in the al-Armen neighbourhood of the city of Homs on 1 March 2017. The formation is estimated to comprise 1 130 fighters, and it claims to have more than 30 'martyrs'.¹²⁶⁷

Similarly, Russia continues to operate a recruitment centre in Tartous for the 5th Assault Corps, established in November 2016 under a joint Russian-Syrian command.¹²⁶⁸ Other allegedly Russia-backed militia and an active constituent of the 5th Assault Corps with a military base in Tartous is Sayadou Da'esh (SD – ISIS Hunters), established in February 2017 and operating under direct Russian command in Deir Ez-Zor.¹²⁶⁹ Reportedly, Sayadou Da'esh was involved in liberation of Palmyra and its surroundings from ISIS militants in 2017.¹²⁷⁰

In August 2020, Diyaruna news website sponsored by the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) to 'highlight movement toward greater regional stability', while focusing on 'developments that hinder' both 'terrorist activity and support for terrorism in the region',¹²⁷¹ reported that Russian proxy militia fighters of the Wagner group, operate in all areas with Russian forces presence, including Tartous.¹²⁷²

In November 2020, Asharq al-Awsat reported that allegedly under the guise of Russian companies, 'unknown parties' were recruiting Syrians for between USD 1 000 and 2 000 per month, to fight for Russian forces in Venezuela and Libya. Such activities were reported in Damascus, Homs, Tartous, Latakia and 'possibly other regions'.¹²⁷³

In February 2021, Caravanserai, another news website sponsored by USCENTCOM sharing the same mission as Diyaruna¹²⁷⁴, reported that private security company, Al-Maham for Protection and Private Guarding established in 2016, operates in Tartous, as a subsidiary owned by the Qaterji International

¹²⁶⁴ RDN, Ana Pouvreau, La stratégie de la Russie en Méditerranée (Russian Strategy in the Mediterranean), Revue n° 822, 2019, p. 112-119, [url](#), the original source is also quoted in the publication of NATO Defense College – Research Division, Chloé Berger, Cynthia Sallom, Russia in NATO's south: expansionist strategy or defensive posture?, NDC research paper no. 16, January 2021, p. 22, [url](#)

¹²⁶⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: Omran Center], [url](#), p. 8

¹²⁶⁶ Al-Tamimi, A. J., Liwa al-Areen: a Russian-backed formation, 20 June 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁶⁷ Al-Tamimi, A. J., Liwa al-Areen: a Russian-backed formation, 20 June 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁶⁸ NPA. Syria, Russia calls Druze youth to join government's Fifth Corps in Syria's Suwayda, 17 September 2020, [url](#); Al-Jabassini, A., From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria, EUI, 14 May 2019, [url](#), pp. 2, 6

¹²⁶⁹ Al-Jabassini, A., From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria, EUI, 14 May 2019, [url](#), p. 21

¹²⁷⁰ RT, 'Terrorists flee when they hear us coming' – Syria's ISIS hunters to RT (EXCLUSIVE), 6 April 2017, [url](#)

¹²⁷¹ Diyaruna, About us – Attributions, [url](#); Caravanserai, Disclaimer, [url](#)

¹²⁷² Wagner Group is allegedly deployed in Horan, Palmyra, Daraa, Hama, Aleppo, Damascus, Latakia and Tartous. Diyaruna, Russian private military companies pose grave threat to Syria: experts, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁷³ Asharq al-Awsat, Under guise of Russian companies, 'unknown parties' recruit Syrians to head to Venezuela, 8 November 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁷⁴ Diyaruna, About us – Attributions, [url](#); Caravanserai, Disclaimer, [url](#)

Group¹²⁷⁵ that has close relationship with Russia.¹²⁷⁶ Reportedly, Al-Maham operates in and around Damascus, in Homs, Tartous, Deir Ezzor and Aleppo. According to the sources, Al-Maham and similar private security contractors have been engaged by Russia to expel 'rival militias affiliated with the Syrian regime and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)' and 'to lock in gains in these regions -- now and during any future reconstruction'.¹²⁷⁷ However, 2020 EUI report reported that Al-Maham is based in Aleppo and affiliated to Iran, Syrian military intelligence and the 4th division security bureau.¹²⁷⁸

Iran and Iranian-backed armed groups

Phillip Smyth of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, claimed that 'rebuilding Shiite-dominated neighbourhoods in Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Latakia and Tartus is a key element of Iran's strategy of bolstering its influence in Syria'.¹²⁷⁹ Allegedly, Iran is behind demographic engineering plan aimed at establishing its influence in the region, this scheme comprising in bringing Shiites who fled their homes during the civil conflict, but also bringing in others from Lebanon and Iraq.¹²⁸⁰

According to a report from 2019, Liwa Al-Baath (LAB – The Baath Brigade), an active constituent of the 5th Assault Corps, a pro-GoS militia composed of volunteer forces that initially joined Kata'ib Al-Baath (KAB – The Baath Battalions, first appeared in 2012 in Aleppo city), was posted to Tartous, Latakia and Damascus governorates.¹²⁸¹

The most prominent security companies affiliated to Iran and the Syrian military intelligence branch, which have inherited loyalist militias following their dissolution under Russian pressure in 2017 include: al-Areen Security and Protection LLC (licenced in 2017), Shield Security Guarding (2015) and al-Fajr Security LLC (2018). These companies have been reported to operate from Latakia and Tartous ports to the major cities, including other locations.¹²⁸² Another private security company, Castle Security and Protection LLC (licenced in 2017) is affiliated to Iran and Maher al-Assad, and it oversees the secure passage of goods from Tartous port to Damascus and its countryside, Homs and Aleppo. According to Castle Security media office, the company aims to reduce unemployment among the young and relatives of 'martyrs', which 'explains why so many of its personnel are former National Defence members'.¹²⁸³

¹²⁷⁵ Qaterji International Group owns several companies operating in tourism petroleum, transport and import-export sectors, and the company and its owners have been sanctioned by US for helping smuggle Syria's oil and arms and for facilitating trade between GoS and ISIS. Diyaruna, Private security companies provide façade for Russian hegemony in Syria, 4 February 2021, [url](#); Caravanserai, Private security companies provide façade for Russian hegemony in Syria, 3 February 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁷⁶ Diyaruna, Private security companies provide façade for Russian hegemony in Syria, 4 February 2021, [url](#); Caravanserai, Private security companies provide façade for Russian hegemony in Syria, 3 February 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁷⁷ Diyaruna, Private security companies provide façade for Russian hegemony in Syria, 4 February 2021, [url](#); Caravanserai, Private security companies provide façade for Russian hegemony in Syria, 3 February 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁷⁸ Baresh, M., Private security companies in Syria: new agents at the Regime's service, EUI, 10 September 2020, [url](#), pp. 6, 13, 16-17

¹²⁷⁹ Al Monitor, Is Syria unable, or unwilling, to fend off Iran coronavirus contagion?, 25 March 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁸⁰ Al Monitor, Is Syria unable, or unwilling, to fend off Iran coronavirus contagion?, 25 March 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁸¹ Al-Jabassini, A., From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria, EUI, 14 May 2019, [url](#), p. 20

¹²⁸² Reportedly these companies are active in Damascus and Aleppo, at border crossings in Deir ez-Zor, between the cities of Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus, and from the al-Qa'im crossing on the Iraqi border to Damascus and Aleppo. Allegedly, they also operated between internal border crossings in Idlib and Aleppo before their closure due to GoS recapture of these areas in early 2020. Baresh, M., Private security companies in Syria: new agents at the Regime's service, EUI, 10 September 2020, [url](#), pp. 8, 13, 16-17

¹²⁸³ Baresh, M., Private security companies in Syria: new agents at the Regime's service, EUI, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 16

2.5.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

According to an international security organisation interviewed by DIS in October 2020, both Tartous and Latakia governorates can generally be considered safe areas when compared to the other governorates. The same sources noted that in the cities of Tartous and Latakias there were no major security incidents between January and October 2020.¹²⁸⁴

According to Navvar Shaban, the freedom of movement in Tartous governorate is generally unrestricted, however the GoS cannot guarantee complete safety on the roads due to the presence of independent LDFs. The same source assessed that the road between Damascus and Tartous is only considered safe when the Russian military uses it.¹²⁸⁵

Freedom of movement inside the city of Tartous is unrestricted, except for checkpoints when entering the city. The checkpoints of all four GoS security services in Tartous city are located at the northern and southern entrances to the city.¹²⁸⁶ Two DIS sources reported that in the governorate of Tartous there are no access restricted areas for civilians, except military sites and installations, such as a Russian naval base and the air defence systems.¹²⁸⁷ The Air Force Intelligence has two checkpoints in the city of Baniyas in Tartous governorate, and there are additional two checkpoints belonging to other security actors of the Syrian security apparatus. According to the international security organisation, due to the Syrian security apparatus structure it is not possible to discern with certainty which security actors are present at checkpoints.¹²⁸⁸ Reportedly, none of checkpoints between Damascus International Airport and the coastal governorates are manned by Russian or Iranian forces, instead all are managed by SAA personnel or by Syrian security services.¹²⁸⁹

As of 5 April 2021, UNOCHA reported that while most of land borders into Syria remain closed due to implementation of precautionary anti-Covid-19 measures, there are some limited exemptions. International commercial flights are ongoing, and the ports of Tartous and Latakia remain operational.¹²⁹⁰

Security incidents

According to ACLED data, during the reference period there was 1 security incident in Tartous governorate, coded as violence against civilians.

¹²⁸⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: International security organisation], [url](#), p. 38

¹²⁸⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: Omran Center], [url](#), p. 11

¹²⁸⁶ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: Omran Center], [url](#), p. 11

¹²⁸⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: Omran Center, International security organisation], [url](#), p. 11

¹²⁸⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: International security organisation], [url](#), p. 11

¹²⁸⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, p. 12, [url](#)

¹²⁹⁰ UNOCHA/WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: Covid-19, Humanitarian update no. 25, 5 April 2021, [url](#), p. 2

Tartous governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Tartous	-	-	1

Figure 26. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Tartous governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

Between 1 May and 31 October 2020, according to an unnamed international security organisation interviewed by the DIS, the following security incidents were recorded in the governorate of Tartous: one incident of terrorism, 11 crime and 67 hazards.¹²⁹¹

Additional corroborating information providing a more detailed accounts of the above-mentioned security incidents could not be consulted within the referenced DIS report, nor additional information could be found among the sources consulted by EASO within the time constraints of this report.

Illustrative security incidents

- The Col, covering the period from 11 January 2020 to 1 July 2020, reported it documented 13 accounts of torture of persons held in detention by the Syrian authorities (some were released prior to 10 January 2020), with some even being held over seven years.¹²⁹² Reportedly, some of incidents of torture took place in the Political Security Directorate branch in Tartous Central Prison and Air Force Intelligence Branch 227.¹²⁹³
- On 10 March 2020, SANA reported that a Russian soldier died and two were injured, while two civilians were killed and five were injured, when a Russian military vehicle collided with a minibus on al-Qadmous-Banias road in Tartous.¹²⁹⁴ According to some other unspecified sources, interviewed by Asharq Al-Awsat, the incident was an ISIL operation against Russian army patrol aimed at assassinating a high-ranking Russian officer.¹²⁹⁵
- On 21 August 2020, SOHR reported that GoS security services arrested a pro-GoS lieutenant colonel from Safita city, who criticised the quality of food distributed to the military.¹²⁹⁶
- In December 2020, SOHR reported alleged ongoing popular discontent in Tartus city due to economic hardship, and over unaffordable prices of essentials, such as food.¹²⁹⁷

¹²⁹¹ DIS collected the definitions of security incidents from the unnamed international security organisation via email, whereby: 'Terrorism' is divided into the categories: 'small arms fire', 'assassinations', 'improvised explosive devices/vehicle born improvised explosive devices' and 'others'; 'Crime' is divided into the categories: 'robberies', 'kidnapping', 'arrests/detentions', 'murders' and 'others'; 'Hazards' are divided into the categories: 'car accidents', 'fires', 'unexploded ordinances/explosive remnants of war', 'landmines' and 'others'. Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [url](#), p. 39

¹²⁹² UN General Assembly (UNGA), Human Rights Council (HRC), 45th session (4 September – 2 October 2020), Agenda item 4, Human rights situations that require the Council's attention, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, **, A/HRC/45/31, 14 August 2020, p. 6-7, [url](#)

¹²⁹³ UN General Assembly, HRC, 45th session (4 September – 2 October 2020), Agenda item 4, Human rights situations that require the Council's attention, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, **, A/HRC/45/31, 14 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-7

¹²⁹⁴ SANA, Two Syrians and a Russian soldier die in traffic accident in Tartous countryside, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁹⁵ Asharq Al-Awsat, Russian soldier killed in 'mysterious accident' in Syria's Tartous, 12 March 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁹⁶ SOHR, For criticizing poor quality of food and rationing in regime army | Security services arrest regime officer popular among loyalists, 21 August 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁹⁷ SOHR, "Salary is not enough for buying even a chicken" and "we have not had meat for three years" | Popular discontent grows in Tartus and entire regime-controlled areas over low income and unaffordable prices, 18 December 2020, [url](#)

- On 24 April 2021, allegedly a suspected Israeli drone hit an unidentified oil tanker near the port of Baniyas in Tartous governorate, resulting in no casualties.¹²⁹⁸ Different news sources attributed the oil tanker to Iran.¹²⁹⁹

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	-	-	-	-
February	1	-	-	-
March	-	-	-	-
April	1	-		
May	1	-		
June	-	-		
July	-	-		
August	-	-		
September	-	-		
October	-	-		
November	-	-		
December	-	-		
Total	3	-	-	-

Figure 27. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Tartous governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

No civilian fatalities were recorded by SNHR in Tartous governorate in 2020 and the first three months of 2021.¹³⁰⁰ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020 and 2021, VDC shared with EASO, three civilian deaths were recorded by VDC in Tartous in 2020.

Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war

In 2020, SNHR did not report any landmine victims in Tartous.¹³⁰¹ According to Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor, except Tartous governorate, in all other 13 governorates cluster munitions have been extensively used since 2012.¹³⁰² Until 10 December 2020, UNICEF did not record any child fatalities as a result of the impact of explosive ordnance in Tartous governorate.¹³⁰³

Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Tartous governorate, 0.4 % of the population was living in damaged buildings.¹³⁰⁴

¹²⁹⁸ Carter Center (The), Syria weekly conflict summary 19-25 April 2021, 29 April 2021, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Fire extinguished on oil tanker off Syria after suspected attack, 25 April 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁹⁹ Enab Baladi, طائرة مسيرة تستهدف ناقلة نفط إيرانية قرب ساحل بانياس للمزيد (A drone targets an Iranian oil tanker off the coast of Baniyas), 24 April 2021, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Fire extinguished on oil tanker off Syria after suspected attack, 25 April 2021, [url](#); NPA, Syria, Israel targets "strange thing" on Iranian ship off Syrian coast: source, 25 April 2021, [url](#)

¹³⁰⁰ SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

¹³⁰¹ SNHR, Syria is among the world's worst countries for the number of mines planted since 2011, despite prohibition of their use in international law, 10 December 2020, [url](#), p. 7

¹³⁰² Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor, Syria impact, 17 February 2021, [url](#)

¹³⁰³ UNICEF, United Nations Mine Action Service, Impact of explosive ordnance on children in Syria, 10 December 2020, [url](#), p. 2

¹³⁰⁴ Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

In October 2020, UNOCHA reported that 49 large-scale fires were recorded in Tartous governorate¹³⁰⁵, while the International Red Cross estimated that 200 000 people were affected in Homs, Latakia and Tartous, with 12 500 requiring humanitarian assistance.¹³⁰⁶ In the period between 1 September and 15 October 2020, WFP estimated that 4 053 hectares of agricultural and forested land in Tartous governorate were burned, more specifically in Baniyas (932), Dreikish (99), Safita (2 007), Sheikh Badr (57) and Tartous (958) districts.¹³⁰⁷ According to burn severity index, in Tartous governorate, 466 hectares suffered high severity, 1 696 med-high severity and 1 891 med-low severity.¹³⁰⁸

Displacement and return

In 2020, UNOCHA reported for Tartous governorate around 4 000 IDP movements from or within governorate, 8 000 to or within Tartous governorate and 3 000 within the governorate.¹³⁰⁹

By the end of October 2020, the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) report for Syria estimated that Tartous governorate hosted around 182 274 IDPs, or around 20 % of its population, estimated at 924 088.¹³¹⁰ According to HNAP report estimates done on basis of IDP household survey¹³¹¹, only 4 % of IDP households attempted to return to their place of origin (76 % originated from the central and south regions, 11 % from the north-west, 9 % from the north, and 4 % from the north-east region), 70 % of IDPs were displaced between two-three times, 28 % between four-five times and only 2 % once.¹³¹² In Tartous governorate, the main push factors for last displacement of IDP households were deterioration of economic situation at 96 % and conflict/security situation at 3 %. Likewise, the main pull factors are access to economic opportunities 96 % and improved security situation at 3 %.¹³¹³

In August 2020 UNOCHA population task force estimated that Tartous governorate hosted 182 668 IDPs¹³¹⁴, with 92 565 IDPs located in Tartous district, 28 927 in Safita, 21 729 in Baniyas, 16 302 in Dreikish, 14 663 in Sheikh Badr, and 8 482 in Qadmous.¹³¹⁵

In the first quarter of 2021, UNOCHA reported the total of 2 816 IDP movements for Tartous governorate (953 in January, 1 031 in February, and 832 in March). Specifically, UNOCHA reported for January 2021, 274 displacements from Tartous governorate, 184 within the governorate and 495 to Tartous governorate; for February 2021, 293 displacements from Tartous governorate, 228 within the governorate and 510 to Tartous governorate; and for March 2021, 222 displacements from Tartous governorate, 171 within the governorate and 439 to Tartous governorate.¹³¹⁶

Also for 2020, UNOCHA reported around 1 200 spontaneous IDP return movements from Tartous governorate to Homs governorate.¹³¹⁷ In the first quarter of 2021, UNOCHA reported in 29, 126 and

¹³⁰⁵ UNOCHA, Syria: Flash Update #01 Humanitarian impact of wildfires in coastal areas as of 11 October 2020, 11 October 2020, [url](#), p. 1

¹³⁰⁶ IFRC, Emergency plan of action (EPOA) Syria: wildfires, 23 October 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 5; EEAS, European Union supports humanitarian relief to Syrians affected by wildfires, 18 November 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁰⁷ WFP, Syria fire incidents – analysis of fires outbreak across Syria, September – October 2020, 19 October 2020, [url](#), p. 5

¹³⁰⁸ WFP, Syria fire incidents – analysis of fires outbreak across Syria, September – October 2020, 19 October 2020, [url](#), p. 6

¹³⁰⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements overview, Jan – Dec, 2020, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

¹³¹⁰ HNAP, Syria – IDP report series 2020 governorate profiles, assessment Date(s): 01 Oct 2020 to 31 Oct 2020, [url](#), p. 41

¹³¹¹ Humanitarian Response – OCHA Services, HNAP: Governorate profiles – IDP report series 2020, assessment Date(s): 01 Oct 2020 to 31 Oct 2020, [url](#)

¹³¹² HNAP, Syria – IDP report series 2020 governorate profiles, assessment Date(s): 01 Oct 2020 to 31 Oct 2020, [url](#), p. 41

¹³¹³ HNAP, Syria – IDP report series 2020 governorate profiles, assessment Date(s): 01 Oct 2020 to 31 Oct 2020, [url](#), p. 42

¹³¹⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian needs overview – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 23, 98

¹³¹⁵ UNOCHA, Humanitarian needs overview – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 98

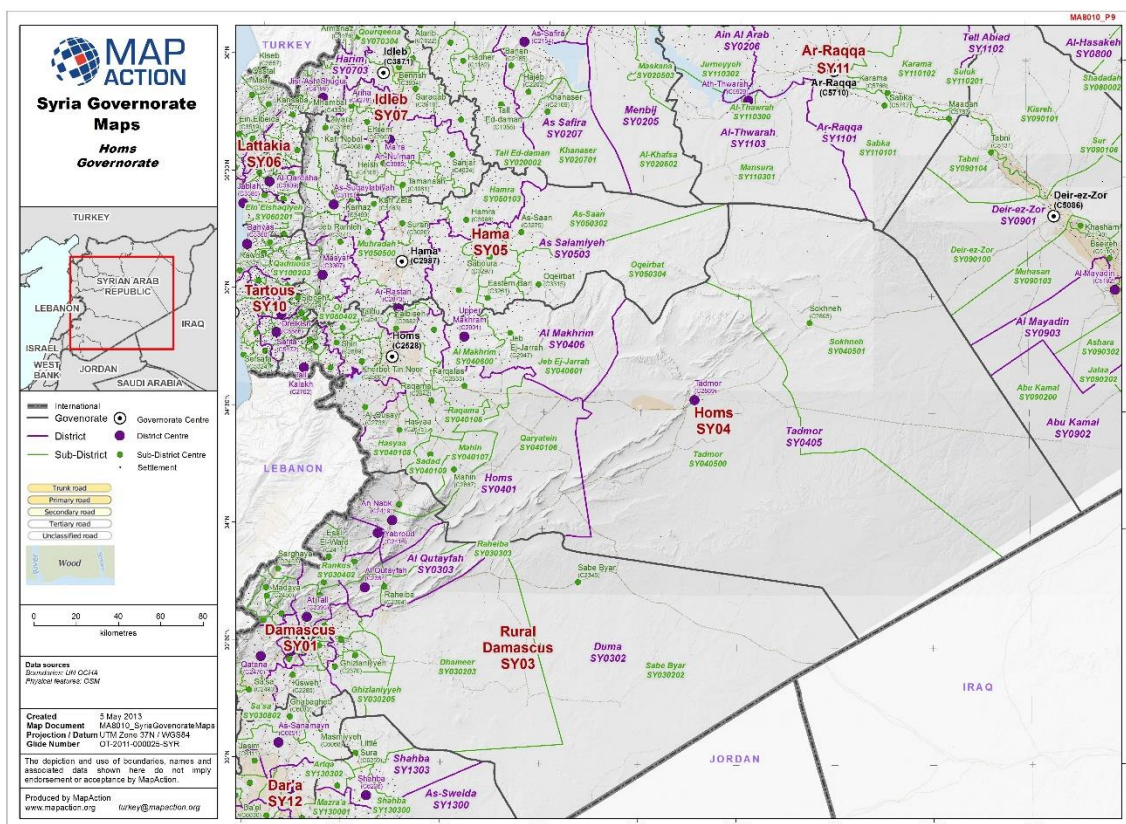
¹³¹⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements - January 2021, 4 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements - February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements - March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

¹³¹⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Spontaneous IDP returnee movements overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

52 spontaneous IDP return movements from Tartous governorate, in January, February and March respectively.¹³¹⁸

¹³¹⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP spontaneous returns - January 2021, 4 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP spontaneous returns - February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP spontaneous returns - March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

2.6 Homs governorate



Map 12: © MapAction, Homs governorate map¹³¹⁹

2.6.1 General description of the governorate

Homs governorate is located in central Syria and has borders with Iraq to the east and Lebanon to the west. It has internal borders with Deir Ez-Zor, Raqqa, Hama, Tartous, and Rural Damascus governorates.¹³²⁰ The Syrian E-Government website stated that Homs governorate shares an international border with Jordan to the east as well.¹³²¹ While a report by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and UN Habitat stated that Homs governorate comprises eight districts¹³²², UNOCHA mentioned that it comprises only six: Homs, Al-Qusayr, Tal Kalakh, Ar-Rastan, Al-Maghrim and Palmyra.¹³²³ 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.¹³²⁴

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 1 529 402.¹³²⁵ Homs governorate had

¹³¹⁹ MapAction, Homs Governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

¹³²⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#)

¹³²¹ Syria, E-Government, سورية [About Syria], n.d., [url](#)

¹³²² UN Habitat and SDC, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 5

¹³²³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 13

¹³²⁴ UN Habitat and SDC, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 5

¹³²⁵ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, General Census, The Census of housing and population results 2004 on governorates level, n.d., [url](#)

1 734 000 residents according to the official population estimates published by the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics for 2019.¹³²⁶ In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Homs governorate to be of 1 465 616.¹³²⁷

According to USDOS, in addition to Sunni Muslims who were present across the country, Homs governorate had Twelver Shia, Alawite, and Christian residents. USDOS, citing the CoI, SNHR and human rights activists, reported that pro-GoS forces and militias 'continued to seize the homes of Sunnis with the explicit intention of permanently displacing these individuals and thus altering the demographics of areas held by the government'. Analysts cited by the source stated that 'this was evidenced by population shifts in Homs'.¹³²⁸ According to Fabrice Balanche, the majority of the inhabitants of Tal Kalakh 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.¹³²⁹ Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported that with the large numbers of Christians who fled the country, Homs 'is left with a fraction of its of its previous Christian population'.¹³³⁰ Moreover, Fabrice Balanche observed 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 [...]'.¹³³¹

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.¹³³² Moreover, the governorate had phosphate mines, notably in Khneifis, which attracted Russian companies.¹³³³ The Financial Times reported in September 2019 that Russian mercenaries were on patrol to protect the state-run General Fertiliser Company in Homs.¹³³⁴

2.6.2 Conflict background 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 2014.¹³³⁵ Sectarian violence and forced displacement occurred there in 2011 and only few neighbourhoods maintained their mixed sectarian elements such as Al-Waer, Ikrima, and Id-Dikhar.¹³³⁶ According to the Global Rights Compliance¹³³⁷ and World Peace Foundation¹³³⁸, in 2012 the GoS forces applied a 'kneel or starve' strategy against rebel-held neighbourhoods such as Baba Amr, accompanied by indiscriminate attacks.¹³³⁹ In 2011, the SAA deployed tanks in Homs city¹³⁴⁰, and between mid-April and the end of August 2011, Syrian security forces killed 587 civilians mainly in Homs city, Tal Kalakh, Ar-Rastan, and Talbiseh, according to Human

¹³²⁶ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

¹³²⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

¹³²⁸ USDOS, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 10 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 3, 9

¹³²⁹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. 6, 15

¹³³⁰ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Syria: general briefing, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

¹³³¹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. 8-9

¹³³² BBC Arabic, الثروات الموجودة في مناطق سيطرة الأكراد شرق سوريا [Resources in the Kurds-controlled areas in eastern Syria, 7 October 2019, [url](#)

¹³³³ ISPI, Rebuilding Syria: The Middle East's Next Power Game?, 2019, [url](#), p. 48

¹³³⁴ 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](#)

¹³³⁵ UN Habitat and SDC, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), pp. 3, 4

¹³³⁶ Saleh, M., حوار مع محمد (أبو علي) صالح: الطائفية ومجزرة الساعة في حمص [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.

¹³³⁷ 'An international legal partnership committed to enhancing compliance with international law, particularly international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights'. Global Rights Compliance, About Us, n. d., [url](#)

¹³³⁸ 'An operating foundation affiliated solely with Tufts University's The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy [... which] aims to provide intellectual leadership for peace'. World Peace Foundation, About, n. d., [url](#)

¹³³⁹ Global Rights Compliance and World Peace Foundation, Accountability for Starvation Crimes: Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹³⁴⁰ MSF, Syria: No way out, 12 March 2021, [url](#); BBC News, Homs: Syrian revolution's fallen 'capital', 9 December 2015, [url](#)

Rights Watch.¹³⁴¹ Following a series of surrendering negotiations, the SAA captured some of the rebel-held neighbourhoods of Homs in 2014 and a mass displacement took place.¹³⁴² In May 2017, the SAA captured the totality of Homs city and hundreds of rebels and their family members were evacuated.¹³⁴³

In April 2018, the SAA launched a large-scale military operation in northern rural Homs¹³⁴⁴ which forced the rebel groups in the region to either negotiate their exit to northern Syria or to reconcile with the GoS.¹³⁴⁵ The GoS forces seized the last rebel enclave in Homs on 15 May 2018¹³⁴⁶, and buses evacuated rebels and their families from the region to northern Syria.¹³⁴⁷

In 2019 – 2020, there have been reports on numerous incidents involving ISIL and the SAA/pro-government forces, mainly in the eastern parts of the governorate. Such incidents included ambushes¹³⁴⁸ and IED attacks.¹³⁴⁹ There have also been reports on clashes between government forces and pro-GoS militias in some governorates including Homs, where the clashes escalated, and machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) were used causing injuries among civilians.¹³⁵⁰ Moreover, weapons and munitions were seized by GoS-forces in Homs governorate¹³⁵¹, and a state of lawlessness was reported in 2019.¹³⁵²

For more information on the background of the conflict in Homs governorate in 2019 and 2020, see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#)

With regards to territorial control as of 31 March 2021, the totality of Homs governorate was controlled by the GoS forces with the exception of Al-Tanf region which was controlled by the US and non-state organised armed groups (see also [Map 4](#)).¹³⁵³ Liveuamap also shows an area of ISIL presence to the south-east of Al-Sukhna in eastern rural Homs.¹³⁵⁴ Below is a description of the actors present on the ground in Homs governorate and their places of deployment where information is available.

¹³⁴¹ HRW, “We Live as in War”: Crackdowns on Protestors in the Governorate of Homs, Syria, 11 November 2011, [url](#)

¹³⁴² Global Rights Compliance and World Peace Foundation, Accountability for Starvation Crimes: Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 3; see also: Syria Direct, Rebels head north after surrendering Old Homs, 7 May 2014, [url](#)

¹³⁴³ Reuters, Syrian rebels leave last opposition district in Homs, 21 May 2017, [url](#); France24, Assad regime regains total control of Syrian city of Homs, 21 May 2017, [url](#)

¹³⁴⁴ AA, Assad begins attacks to retake rebel-held areas in Homs, 20 April 2018, [url](#)

¹³⁴⁵ RFE/RL, Syrian Rebels Accept Russian-Brokered Surrender Deal In Homs Enclave, 3 May 2018, [url](#); VOA, Syrian Government Seizes Last Rebel Enclave in Homs, 15 May 2018, [url](#); AP News, Syrian government forces seize last rebel enclave in Homs, 15 May 2018, [url](#)

¹³⁴⁶ AP News, Syrian government forces seize last rebel enclave in Homs, 15 May 2018, [url](#)

¹³⁴⁷ Homs News, [url](#) [Panorama of the main events that Homs witnessed in 2018], 31 December 2018, [url](#); Syria Direct, Rebel forces and civilians begin evacuating besieged Homs countryside: ‘We don’t want another Ghouta’, 7 May 2018, [url](#); VOA, Rebels Begin Evacuation of Syria’s Last Besieged Enclave, 7 May 2018, [url](#)

¹³⁴⁸ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 18 – 24 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4; Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 15 – 21 April 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

¹³⁴⁹ SOHR, The explosion of more IEDs and mines left behind by ISIS causes new casualties in the Syrian desert, 8 April 2019, [url](#); Middle East Institute, ISIS is escalating its insurgency in the Syrian desert, 13 April 2020, [url](#); SOHR, ISIS resurgence in Homs desert | IED explodes in military bus, killing six regime soldiers and injuring ten others, 28 August 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁵⁰ DIS/DRC, Syria. Security Situation in Damascus. Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

¹³⁵¹ SANA, ضبط كميات من الأسلحة والذخائر في ريف حمص [Seizing of weapons and munition in Homs countryside], 14 July 2019, [url](#); Al-khabar, فرع الأمن الجنائي بحمص يضبط أسلحة وذخائر مخبأة بقرية كفرلaha [The Criminal Security Branch of Homs Seizes Weapons and Munition Hidden in Kafr Laha Village], 10 November 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁵² Step News, [url](#) [Western Homs.. a “Shiite” State with Constant Fuel supply, unlike the Regime-held Areas], 14 April 2019, [url](#); SOHR, فلتان أمني وفوضى عارمة وعمليات خطف و قتل و ابتزاز تشهدها مدينة الرستن الخاضعة [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](#); 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](#)

¹³⁵³ Based on reading of the following maps: Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 22-28 March 2021, 31 March 2021, [url](#), Fig. 1; Liveuamap, Syria, 31 March 2021, [url](#)

¹³⁵⁴ Based on reading of the following map: Liveuamaps, Syria, 31 March 2021, [url](#)

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

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.¹³⁵⁵ This was corroborated by a Middle East Institute's report published on 18 July 2019¹³⁵⁶ 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'.¹³⁵⁷ Besides 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.¹³⁵⁸

Recent information on SAA deployments in Hama governorate could not be found among the sources consulted by EASO within time constraints. Units of the SAA were reported to be present in Homs governorate in early March 2020.¹³⁵⁹ For deployments of the SAA in Homs governorate as of 3 April 2020 see Section 2.6.2.1 of the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

On 15 October 2020, Baladi News, citing Nors for Studies, reported that the SAA deployed 350 fighters of the 95th Battalion Special Forces, which is a part of the 41st Regiment to Al-Sukhna town in eastern Homs as well as 175 fighters of the 72nd Battalion Special Forces of the same Regiment in Talbiseh in northern Homs governorate.¹³⁶⁰ In Al-Sukhna region, Enab Baladi reported that the SAA had 'fixed military posts' manned by the 18th Division, the 11th Division-Tanks, the Badiya National Defense, Military Security Shield Forces, and the 4th Division's Security Office. The source added that the Iranian Baqir Brigade and the Quick Reaction Force were present in those posts as well, and that both groups were affiliated with the Badiya Security Branch functioning under the Military Security in Palmyra city.¹³⁶¹ Finally, the New Arab mentioned that some of the 5th Corps' new recruits from southern Syria were sent to training camps situated in Homs city.¹³⁶²

In addition to the SAA, the following sources reported on the presence of other state security actors in Homs governorate. Aen Al-Sham for Studies, a research centre collecting information from GoS-controlled areas and focusing on Damascus, Rural Damascus and Dar'a governorates¹³⁶³, stated that the four intelligence directorates, i.e., Air Force, Military, State Security, and Political, had branches in every governorate. The source mentioned Branch 318 (State Security) and Branch 261 (Political Security) that existed in Homs governorate.¹³⁶⁴ In the governorate's southern and northern countryside, the Carnegie Middle East Center observed that 'the regime is hardly visible', and that the role of the state was reduced to intelligence gathering.¹³⁶⁵ Moreover, the COAR observed in August 2019 that local government police, which was allegedly commanded from the Russian Hmeimim Air Base, was reportedly present in the northern rural part of the governorate.¹³⁶⁶

¹³⁵⁵ ISW, The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle, February 2013, [url](#), p. 9

¹³⁵⁶ 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."

¹³⁵⁷ MEI, The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁵⁸ MEI, The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁵⁹ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁶⁰ Baladi, قوات النظام تستقدم تعزيزات كبيرة إلى ريف حمص.. ما السبب؟ [Regime forces bring large reinforcements to Rural Homs.. Why?], 15 October 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁶¹ Enab Baladi, Al-Sukhna predominated by security chaos as regime and Iranian forces grapple with IS, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

¹³⁶² New Arab (The), "الفيلق الخامس": ذراع روسيا للتقدم في جنوب سورية [The 5th corps: Russia's arm to expand in southern Syria], 14 May 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁶³ Aen Al-Sham, من نحن [Who we are], n. d., [url](#)

¹³⁶⁴ Aen Al-Sham, "الظلمة أنفسهم" بحث عن أفرع مخابرات النظام السوري ["the unjust themselves" a research on the Syrian regime's intelligence branches], 10 August 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁶⁵ Carnegie Middle East Center, Homs, a Divided Incarnation of Syria's Unresolved Conflict, 15 May 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁶⁶ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), p. 40

Pro-GoS militias

The following pro-GoS militias were reportedly present in Homs governorate in 2020-2021.

National Defence Forces (NDF)

The NDF was formed in the city of Homs in 2012 with Iranian guidance and support.¹³⁶⁷ Reportedly, the NDF has become the main security actor in northern rural Homs and it constituted several groups affiliated with different state security agencies.¹³⁶⁸ Enab Baladi reported on 18 August 2020 that the NDF opened a centre in Ar-Rastan town in rural Homs tasked with supporting the local security forces and manning two checkpoints in the town.¹³⁶⁹ Moreover, a map published by IranWire, a website specialised in Iranian affairs¹³⁷⁰, on 8 May 2020 showed a presence of the NDF in Homs city.¹³⁷¹

Liwa Al-Areen (The Den Brigade)

Liwa Al-Areen was formed in Homs city on 1 March 2017 and was initially affiliated with the Military Intelligence branch before it became affiliated with the Russian forces.¹³⁷² The group was present in an area stretching from Maskanah in rural Homs to Breij in Rural Damascus, and from Al-Rastan to Palmyra¹³⁷³, and had 16 recruitment centres in different governorates including Homs (city and countryside).¹³⁷⁴ Moreover, the group counted 1 130 fighters and was 'present in all the centres, security checkpoints and fighting frontlines'.¹³⁷⁵

Other Iran-backed militias

The Turkey-based opposition channel, Syria TV¹³⁷⁶, stated on 21 August 2020 that the following Shia militias were present in Homs governorate:

- Al-Imam Al-Rida: comprised of around 2 000 Alawi fighters from Syria and Lebanon, and present in eastern Homs countryside.
- Soqour Al-Sahra'a: fighters were trained by Iraqi militants and were present in rural Homs.¹³⁷⁷

Al-Rida forces is another Shiite militia present in Homs governorate.¹³⁷⁸ The pro-opposition website Euphrates Post stated on 1 July 2019 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 a training centre in Al-Qusayr.¹³⁷⁹

¹³⁶⁷ Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁶⁸ COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), p. 44

¹³⁶⁹ Enab Baladi, افتتاح مقر لـ"الدفاع الوطني" في الرستن بريف حمص [Opening of a NDF centre in al-Rastan in rural Homs], 18 August 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁰ IranWire, من نحن [Who we are], n. d., [url](#)

¹³⁷¹ Based on reading of the following map: Iran Wire, خريطة انتشار الميليشيات الإيرانية في سوريا والعراق [Map of the positions of Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq], 8 May 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷² Al-Tamimi, A. J., Liwa Al-Areen: A Russian-Backed Formation, 20 June 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷³ Sawt Beirut, الصراع يكتدم.. ميليشيا تابعة لروسيا تعتقل ثلاثة ضباط في نظام الأسد [Struggle intensifies.. Russian-affiliated militia arrests three officers of Al-Assad regime], 13 August 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁴ Al-Tamimi, A. J., Liwa Al-Areen: A Russian-Backed Formation, 20 June 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁵ Al-Tamimi, A. J., Liwa Al-Areen: A Russian-Backed Formation, 20 June 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁶ Syria TV, عن تلفزيون سوريا [About Syria TV], n. d., [url](#)

¹³⁷⁷ Syria TV, بالتفاصيل والأرقام.. رصد شامل للميليشيات الإيرانية في سوريا [In details and numbers.. Comprehensive view of Iranian militias in Syria], 21 August 2020, [url](#); Pro-Justice, الميليشيات الطائفية: مفرخة إيران في سوريا [Sectarian Militias: Iran's Hatchery in Syria], 10 June 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁸ Enab Baladi, دراسة ترصد التمدد الإيراني في سوريا بين عامي 2013 و2020 [A study observes the Iranian expansion in Syria between 2013 and 2020], 7 November 2020, [url](#); Carnegie Middle East Center, The Shi'a Revival, 4 May 2017, [url](#); Strategic Thinking Group, حقائق: النفوذ والوجود الإيراني في سوريا [Facts: the Iranian influence and presence in Syria], 13 November 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷⁹ 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](#)

The Lebanese Hezbollah maintained presence in the border area of Homs governorate with Lebanon, including in Al-Qusayr.¹³⁸⁰ Jusoor for Studies indicated in January 2021 that Hezbollah had 11 military sites, 'in the form of independent, joint or semi-shared points with the Iranian forces' in Homs governorate.¹³⁸¹ Moreover, a map published by IranWire indicated that Hezbollah maintained a presence in the town of Al-Sukhna in eastern Homs governorate.¹³⁸²

Iran Wire indicated the presence of the Forces of Martyr Muhammad Baqer Al-Sadr in Palmyra. According to the source, the group's task was to support the GoS's general security and the Ministry of Interior, and its members wore police uniform.¹³⁸³ Finally, SOHR reported on 6 February 2021 that unidentified Iranian-backed militias had military headquarters at the northern entrance of Al-Qaryatayn village in eastern rural Homs.¹³⁸⁴

Private security companies

Manhal Baresh¹³⁸⁵ stated that private security companies in Syria varied in terms of affiliation.¹³⁸⁶ Some of those companies were affiliated with the Security Bureau of the 4th Armoured Division, and were 'tasked with finding job opportunities for former militiamen and relatives of Alawites killed fighting for the army or pro-regime militias, especially in Homs and the Damascus suburbs'.¹³⁸⁷ Moreover, security companies affiliated with Russia were overseen by the Wagner Group and were mandated with protecting the Russian interests in Syria such as oil and gas fields west of Palmyra, phosphate sites in the Khnayfis field and the main warehouses near the T4 airbase.¹³⁸⁸

Iran

Jusoor for Studies stated on 6 January 2021 that Iran had 12 military sites (bases and posts) in Homs governorate.¹³⁸⁹ A map published in November 2020 by Atlantic Council showed an Iranian presence in several positions in eastern and western Homs governorate.¹³⁹⁰ Tehran Bureau, an Iran-focused media centre¹³⁹¹, stated that Al-Shayrat Airbase was used by Iranian forces as a 'forward operating base' for supporting Iranian-backed militias throughout central Syria.¹³⁹² Moreover, COAR reported on a presence of Iranian forces in the T4 Airbase near Homs city.¹³⁹³ In Palmyra, Syria Files reported

¹³⁸⁰ Based on reading of the following map: Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, [url](#); Syria TV, [رصد شامل للميليشيات الإيرانية في سوريا](#) [In details and numbers.. Comprehensive view of Iranian militias in Syria], 21 August 2020, [url](#); Tehran Bureau, Iran's Military Assets Inside Syria, 18 October 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁸¹ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹³⁸² Based on reading of the following map: Iran Wire, [خريطة انتشار الميليشيات الإيرانية في سوريا والعراق](#) [Map of the positions of Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq], 8 May 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁸³ IranWire, [خريطة انتشار الميليشيات الإيرانية في سوريا والعراق](#) [Map of the positions of Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq], 8 May 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁸⁴ SOHR, After attack on Iranian militias' headquarters in eastern Homs | Regime forces arrest ten people, including women, for "cooperating with ISIS", 6 February 2021, [url](#)

¹³⁸⁵ 'Syrian researcher working on the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project within the Middle East Directions Programme hosted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence': Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁸⁶ Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 6

¹³⁸⁷ Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 13

¹³⁸⁸ Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#), pp. 17-18; Omran Centre for Strategic Studies, Profiling Top Private Security Companies in Syria, 11 February 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁸⁹ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹³⁹⁰ Based on reading of the following map: Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁹¹ Tehran Bureau, Our story, n. d., [url](#)

¹³⁹² Tehran Bureau, Iran's Military Assets Inside Syria, 18 October 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁹³ COAR, 10 Years On: Adrift, the Syrian Aid Response Awaits a Paradigm Shift, 22 March 2021, [url](#)

on a 'heavy Iranian presence' where militia fighters and their families settled in the town.¹³⁹⁴ Finally, Al-Mashareq, a website sponsored by the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM)¹³⁹⁵, stated that Iran and proxies held recruitment offices and indoctrination centres in different locations in Syria including in Al-Qusayr in western rural Homs.¹³⁹⁶

Russia

Jusoor for Studies stated on 6 January 2021 that Russia had five military sites (bases or posts) in Homs governorate.¹³⁹⁷ Zaman Al-Wasl reported that Russian forces were building 'a permanent military base' near Palmyra¹³⁹⁸, which was the second Russian post set up in the Homs desert after the one established in Al-Qaryatayn.¹³⁹⁹ Moreover, Russian jet fighters launched airstrikes against ISIL positions and elements in Homs desert¹⁴⁰⁰, using two SAA air bases in eastern Hama countryside.¹⁴⁰¹

The US-led Coalition

US and allied forces from the Global Coalition Against Daesh have controlled the Tanf area in the Homs desert, close to the tri-border area between Syria, Jordan and Iraq since 2016¹⁴⁰², which has been used for launching anti-ISIL operations and training anti-GoS armed groups against ISIL.¹⁴⁰³

For more information see Section [1.5.5 Tanf](#)

ISIL

Despite its defeat in Syria in March 2019¹⁴⁰⁴, ISIL still maintains pockets in Homs governorate.¹⁴⁰⁵ As of September 2019, ISIL's 'strong presence' was concentrated in Abu Rujmain mountain to the north of Palmyra, which has caves that enable ISIL fighters to hide.¹⁴⁰⁶ Gregory Waters observed increased regular ISIL attacks against GoS forces in 2020, with the group 'operating outside of its traditional strongholds of east Homs and west Deir ez-Zor, and launching attacks in southern Raqqah, eastern Hamah, and southern Aleppo'.¹⁴⁰⁷ A March 2021 analysis by ISW wrote that ISIL controls several small swaths of territory in the mountainous areas of the Syrian Central Desert (Badia) from where it launches attacks on GoS forces, including in Jabal Haiyan and Jabal Abu Rujmain areas around Palmyra (Homs governorate) and in Jabal Bishri, in the area between Resafa, Shoula and Sukhna (Homs and Deir Ez-Zor governorates).¹⁴⁰⁸

The Middle East Institute stated that since the launch of anti-ISIL military operations by pro-GoS forces in February 2021¹⁴⁰⁹, ISIL moved its militants deeper in the Syrian desert 'near the junction of the

¹³⁹⁴ Syria Files, A Closer look on Iran's Military Presence in Palmyra Airbase: Syria Files, 17 September 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁹⁵ Al-Mashareq, About us, N. D., [url](#)

¹³⁹⁶ Al-Mashareq, Iran bankrolls aggressive drive to recruit vulnerable Syrian youth into militias, 4 January 2021, [url](#)

¹³⁹⁷ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹³⁹⁸ Zaman Al-Wasl, Russia forces equip new base in Badiya desert: source, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

¹³⁹⁹ Asharq Al-Awsat, Russia Sets up New Post Near Iranian Guards in Central Syria, 6 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰⁰ Daily Sabah, Russian airstrikes kill 21 'Daesh terrorists' in Syria: monitor, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰¹ Al Monitor, Russia launches air campaign against Islamic State in Syrian desert, 18 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰² Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 51; Magruder Jr., D., Al Tanf garrison: America's strategic baggage in the Middle East, Brookings Institution, 20 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰³ International Crisis Group, Al-Tanf, Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰⁴ Guardian (The), ISIS defeated, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces announce, 23 March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰⁵ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 9 [Interview with an International Security Organisation]; Al-Monitor, Islamic State escalates attacks in Syrian desert, 12 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰⁶ Chatham House, Pro-regime Militias and ISIS Militants Stand Against the Return of Palmyra's People, September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰⁷ Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰⁸ Kahan, E., ISIS Poised for a Ramadan Surge in Syria, ISW, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰⁹ Syria TV, روسيا والنظام "يواصلان حملة جوية وبرية ضد "داعش" في البادية [Russia and the regime continue a ground and air campaign against Daesh in Badiya], 24 February 2021, [url](#); Al Monitor, Islamic State escalates attacks in Syrian desert, 12 February 2021, [url](#)

borders of the governorates of Homs, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor' and intensified its attacks in the Homs *Badiya*.¹⁴¹⁰ Al-Monitor cited a journalist based in Idlib, who stated that ISIL 'protected itself in a pocket stretching between the Homs and Deir ez-Zor governorates, from the outskirts of Al-Sukhna to the borders of Al-Bukamal and Al-Mayadin in Deir ez-Zor'.¹⁴¹¹

2.6.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

ISIL insurgency

Sources spoke of an ISIL insurgency in central Syria in 2020.¹⁴¹² Elizabeth Tsurkov, a PhD student at Princeton University's Department of Politics, interviewed by DIS on 22 April 2020, spoke of an ISIL insurgency taking place in areas controlled by the GoS, especially in Badiya (Homs desert).¹⁴¹³ The CoI stated that ISIL remained active in central Syria during the first two months of 2020, and targeted the SAA in Al-Sukhna region in Homs governorate, which prompted the GoS to increase security in eastern Homs governorate.¹⁴¹⁴ USDOD stated that in the first quarter of 2020, ISIL launched attacks in Homs governorate, among others, and targeted oil infrastructure and pro-GoS forces in the eastern part of the governorate.¹⁴¹⁵ ISIL carried out limited complex attacks, for instance briefly occupying several GoS positions in and around Al-Sukhna, Homs governorate in April 2020.¹⁴¹⁶ Attacks carried out by ISIL against GoS forces in eastern Homs governorate and by unidentified men in Talbiseh in northern Homs governorate were reported between 29 June and 5 July 2020.¹⁴¹⁷ Moreover, the security website, Crisis 24, reported that on 28 August 2020, an IED attack targeted a bus carrying soldiers in Homs governorate.¹⁴¹⁸

In an interview for DIS conducted on 19 May 2020, Dino Krause, a PhD candidate in international security at the Danish Institute for International Studies, stated that since March 2020, ISIL carried out 'some sophisticated attacks' in Homs governorate.¹⁴¹⁹ The source observed that ISIL has retained a presence in Homs governorate, but 'has generally become stronger' and increased its activity in the governorate.¹⁴²⁰ ISW reported on 3 September 2020 that ISIL demonstrated 'growing strength in the central Syrian desert'. Reportedly, ISIL elements clashed with SAA and Russian forces in eastern Homs governorate and briefly controlled the Doubayat gas field located at 14 km south of Al-Sukhna.¹⁴²¹ In an article published on 28 April 2020 by Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, Abdullah Al-Ghadhawi assessed that in 2020, ISIL's attacks that targeted GoS forces in the area between Homs and southern Hasaka were 'more pinpointed and deadly'. He observed that ISIL has been active in areas including Homs desert, and that 'it battled the regime in the towns of Sukhna and Jibajib on the highway connecting Deir ez-Zor and Homs, and escalated its operations from kidnapping to direct confrontations'.¹⁴²²

¹⁴¹⁰ Hassan, M., ISIS and the Assad regime: Strategy and counter-strategy in Syria's Badiya, MEI, 16 March 2021, [url](#); The Syrian Badiya is also known as the Syrian desert and extends over the governorates of Raqqa, Hama, Homs, Deir Ez-Zor, and Aleppo: Al Monitor, Russia launches air campaign against Islamic State in Syrian desert, 18 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴¹¹ Al Monitor, Islamic State escalates attacks in Syrian desert, 12 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴¹² Waters, G., "A Force They Haven't Seen Before": Insurgent ISIS in Central Syria, MEI, 15 April 2020, [url](#); Counter Extremism Project, ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴¹³ Denmark, DIS, Islamic State in Syria, 29 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 25-26

¹⁴¹⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 6

¹⁴¹⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 52

¹⁴¹⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 26

¹⁴¹⁷ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 29 June - 5 July 2020, July 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴¹⁸ Crisis24, Syria: Bus carrying soldiers strikes IED in Homs province August 28, 30 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴¹⁹ Denmark, DIS, Islamic State in Syria, 29 June 2020, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁴²⁰ Denmark, DIS, Islamic State in Syria, 29 June 2020, [url](#), p. 34

¹⁴²¹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2 - 15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴²² Ghadhawi, A., ISIS in Syria: A Deadly New Focus, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 28 April 2020, [url](#)

The Carter Center, based on data from the Center and ACLED, stated that between 1 June 2019 and 2 August 2020, 41 conflict events involving ISIL took place in Homs governorate, notably around Al-Sukhna.¹⁴²³ According to Enab Baladi, Al-Sukhna area is strategically important due to the M20 which is 'the lifeline linking Deir ez-Zor province with other regime-held areas' and 'the sole supply line for regime forces deployed to Deir ez-Zor and the only ground border to connect Tehran with Damascus after the U.S. forces established the Al-Tanf Base in the tri-border area in 2014.'¹⁴²⁴ The source observed that the 'extensive military deployment by the regime and Iranian forces to Al-Sukhna did not deter IS' which claimed 38 attacks in 2020, and killed 177 people.¹⁴²⁵

In response to the increasing attacks against its forces in eastern Homs governorate, the GoS brought large reinforcements to Al-Sukhna area, reportedly in preparation to launch a new military operation in the Syrian Badiya against the group.¹⁴²⁶ Al-Masdar reported on 2 January 2021 that the Russian air force expanded its operations in central Syria and that in August 2020, 'one of the largest aerial operations of 2020 took place'. According to the source, the Russian airstrikes inflicted 'heavy damage' on ISIL cells in eastern Homs and western Deir Ez-Zor governorates, but the terrorist group intensified its attacks Al-Sukhna area towards the end of 2020.¹⁴²⁷ On 22 November 2020, the SAA carried out intensive air strikes targeting ISIL positions in the Syrian Badiya, including Al-Sukhna.¹⁴²⁸

On 31 December 2020, Al-Hurra reported on 'a state of public anger' in Homs city following an ambush that targeted buses transporting fighters of the 4th Division in the Deir Ez-Zor Badiya. According to the source, 25 persons were killed in the attack, most of whom were from loyalist neighbourhoods of Homs such as Al-Muhajireen, Al-Zahra'a, Wadi Al-Dahab, and Al-Sabil. The source explained that the state of anger was due to the GoS's refusal to acknowledge that those killed in the attack were official fighters in its ranks.¹⁴²⁹

Gregory Waters stated on 10 February 2021 that 'security along [...] [the two main highways from Damascus to Palmyra] in both Homs and Hamah provinces has declined so rapidly that major pro-regime businessmen are reportedly personally funding new, high-salary security contracts.'¹⁴³⁰ ISIL activities in Homs governorate continued through the start of 2021, and the group continued 'to be a major threat'.¹⁴³¹ Reportedly, the residents of Al-Amiriya town in the Syrian Badiya left their town towards Palmyra 'for fear of ISIS sleeper cells in the area'.¹⁴³² On 24 February 2021, Russian jet fighters carried out air strikes on ISIL positions in the Syrian desert, in support of the GoS's operations aimed at securing the Homs – Deir Ez-Zor road.¹⁴³³

¹⁴²³ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 27 July - 2 August 2020, August 2020, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁴²⁴ Enab Baladi, Al-Sukhna predominated by security chaos as regime and Iranian forces grapple with IS, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁵ Enab Baladi, Al-Sukhna predominated by security chaos as regime and Iranian forces grapple with IS, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁶ Baladi, [url](#) [Regime forces bring large reinforcements to Rural Homs.. Why?], 15 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁷ Al Masdar News, Syrian Army to face major ISIS threat in 2021, 2 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁸ Baladi, [url](#) [Intensive air strikes by the regime on "ISIL" positions in the Syrian Badiya], 22 November 2020, [url](#); Al Masdar News, Syrian Army gears up for first major offensive against ISIS this year, 22 November 2020, [url](#); Al-Ittihad, [url](#) [Syrian Army searches Al-Badiya for Daesh elements], 27 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴²⁹ Al-Hurra, [url](#) [Details of the "4th Division ambush".. and a list of names of those killed belies the Syrian regime's narrative], 31 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴³⁰ Waters, G., ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴³¹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 14 December 2020 - 3 January 2021, 7 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴³² NPA, Residents in Syria's Badiya displace due to ISIS attacks, 17 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴³³ BBC News, Syria war: Russian jets 'bomb IS positions in desert region', 24 February 2021, [url](#)

Lawlessness

Enab Baladi reported that the strategic Al Sukhna region of Homs was the site of attacks and ‘security chaos’ affecting combatants and civilians. The source interviewed three civilian residents in Al-Sukhna region who spoke of incidents of looting, security restrictions, lack of services and enforcement of the law, as well as the presence of landmines.¹⁴³⁴ SOHR stated that on 3 December 2020, fighters of Al-Quds brigade, a Russian-backed militia, stole 1 000 sheep owned by residents of Al-Sukhna and ‘opened fire indiscriminately’ to terrorize the residents, and targeted with machine guns the shepherds who managed to survive and escape’. No casualties were reported by the source.¹⁴³⁵

In Homs city, Reuters, citing Syrian state media, reported on 19 January 2021 on a blast that hit a state crude oil transportation company in Homs city. According to Reuters, the GoS did not specify the reasons behind the explosion but did not rule out that it was an attack. No casualties resulted.¹⁴³⁶

In the city of Talbiseh in northern Homs countryside, unidentified gunmen attacked the State Security branch with grenades on 16 November 2020.¹⁴³⁷ Reportedly, State Security patrols subsequently raided the area surrounding the targeted building and two security agents were injured when two gunmen shot at the patrol.¹⁴³⁸ On 15 December 2020, another attack with light weapons and grenades targeted a detachment of the Military Security branch in Ar-Rastan, which resulted in the death of four security agents, including an officer. The attack was claimed by a rebel group called *Saraya Al-Muqawama fi Homs* (Resistance Brigades in Homs).¹⁴³⁹ A researcher at Syria Inside, cited by Al-Quds Al-Arabi¹⁴⁴⁰, stated that Homs governorate, especially its northern countryside, has been witnessing attacks targeting GoS, as well as Russian and Iranian, positions in the area. According to the source, such attacks were carried out individually by frustrated locals, and not by organised armed groups.¹⁴⁴¹

SOHR reported on clashes between pro-GoS militias in the Al-Shaluh village on 19 August 2020 which resulted in the injury of three militiamen, and on murders that took place in Al-Hashimiyeh village in northern rural Homs, in Al-Rawda village in the eastern countryside of Homs, and in Al-Massoudia village in Homs countryside, in July and August 2020.¹⁴⁴² SOHR, citing activists, reported on a state of tension between pro-GoS groups in Talbiseh on 13 November 2020.¹⁴⁴³ Aleppo Today reported on a state of chaos in the northern countryside of Homs and stated that the security branches in the governorate have instructed their detachments in Al-Rastan and Al-Houleh towns to ‘ensure that no security disorder takes place’.¹⁴⁴⁴

In western Homs governorate, sources reported on security tensions in Sheen town on 19 December 2020 when one man was shot dead and another injured by members of the 4th Division

¹⁴³⁴ Enab Baladi, Al-Sukhna predominated by security chaos as regime and Iranian forces grapple with IS, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴³⁵ SOHR, Homs desert | Russian-backed “Al-Quds Brigade” militia steal about 1,000 sheep, 5 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴³⁶ Reuters, Syria says extinguishes huge fire near Homs refinery, no casualties, 19 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴³⁷ SOHR, North of Homs | Gunmen attack State Security headquarters in Talbiseh city, 16 November 2020, [url](#); Zaman Al-Wasl, هجوم يستهدف مبنى “أمن الدولة” في “تلبيسة” شمال حمص [Attack targets State Security building in Talbiseh in northern Homs], 16 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴³⁸ Zaman Al-Wasl, هجوم يستهدف مبنى “أمن الدولة” في “تلبيسة” شمال حمص [Attack targets State Security building in Talbiseh in northern Homs], 16 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴³⁹ Aleppo Today, “Saraya Al-Muqawama fi Homs” claims responsibility for the attack on a security detachment in Al-Rastan, 17 December 2020, [url](#); Al-Quds Al-Arabi, مقتل أربعة بينهم ضابط من النظام السوري في عملية لـ «سرايا المقاومة» [Death of four including an officer in the Syrian regime in an attack by “Saraya Al-Muqawama fi Homs”], 16 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴⁰ An independent Arabic newspaper based in the UK. Al-Quds Al-Arabi, Who we are, n. d., [url](#)

¹⁴⁴¹ Al-Quds Al-Arabi, «مقتل أربعة بينهم ضابط من النظام السوري في عملية لـ «سرايا المقاومة» في حمص» [Death of four including an officer in the Syrian regime in an attack by “Saraya Al-Muqawama fi Homs”], 16 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴² SOHR, Security chaos | Clashes erupt among pro-regime militias in Homs province, leaving three militiamen injured, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴³ SOHR, North of Homs | Gunmen attack State Security headquarters in Talbiseh city, 16 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴⁴ Aleppo Today, النظام يوجه تعليمات عاجلة لأفرعه الأمنية شمال حمص [The regime issues urgent instructions to its security branches in northern Homs], 13 February 2021, [url](#)

manning a checkpoint. Reportedly, the residents of the village attacked the checkpoint¹⁴⁴⁵ and set fire to it.¹⁴⁴⁶

Finally, in eastern Homs countryside, SOHR reported that armed men, likely members of Iran-backed militias, attacked shepherds in the Rasm Al-Taweel village, Jub Al-Jarrah region, with knives on 7 October 2020 and killed three of them.¹⁴⁴⁷ The pro-opposition media outlet¹⁴⁴⁸, Syria TV, reporting on the same incident, stated that nine people, including two women and three children, were killed in the attack.¹⁴⁴⁹ On 4 November 2020, Iranian-backed militias opened fire and killed 11 civilians, including four women, in Al-Rifa'i village in eastern Homs countryside.¹⁴⁵⁰

Israeli airstrikes

Israeli air strikes targeted several locations in the governorate including Shayrat and Al-Daba air bases on 31 March 2020¹⁴⁵¹, pro-Iranian militia near Palmyra on 20 April 2020¹⁴⁵², and a Lebanese Hezbollah ammunition depot in Palmyra district on 1 May 2020.¹⁴⁵³ ISW also reported on the Israeli attack that targeted a Hezbollah munition depot in the city of Homs on 1 May 2020. According to the source, the attack triggered a secondary explosion, and ISW cited GoS sources that claimed that the explosion caused 'material and human loss'.¹⁴⁵⁴ Reuters, citing SOHR, reported that the target of this air strike was a Hezbollah military base located on the Homs-Palmyra road and that sounds of the explosions could be heard across the city.¹⁴⁵⁵ On 2 September 2020, Israeli air strikes targeted the T4 base in eastern Homs.¹⁴⁵⁶

In 2021, ISW stated that 'Israel continues strikes on Iranian positions in Syria, prompting Russian fears that shared infrastructure will be targeted'. The source reported on 19 February 2021 that Russian attempts to have the Iranian militants leave the jointly controlled T4 airbase were unsuccessful. Reportedly, the Russian troops evacuated the base and were redeployed to a nearby gas plant.¹⁴⁵⁷

Security incidents

According to ACLED data, there were 147 security incidents recorded in Homs governorate, of whom 67 were coded as battles, 59 explosions/remote violence and 21 incidents of violence against civilians. Higher number of security incidents were recorded between November 2020 and March 2021 (see Figure 28).

¹⁴⁴⁵ Xeber24, [Security tensions in rural Homs following the killing of a man by 4th Division agents], 20 December 2020, [url](#); SOHR, [In the wake of the death of a man by 4th Division fire.. Sheen region in western rural Homs witnesses great tension], 20 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴⁶ Xeber24, [Security tensions in rural Homs following the killing of a man by 4th Division agents], 20 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴⁷ SOHR, [سلاح بالسيوف.. ميليشيات الموالية لإيران تقتل 3 من رعاة المواشي في ريف حمص الشرقي], 7 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴⁸ Media Landscapes, Syria, n. d., [url](#)

¹⁴⁴⁹ Syria TV, [Shepherds including children and women massacred in eastern Homs], 6 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵⁰ SOHR, New massacre | Iranian militias kill 11 civilians, steal sheep and set fire to several houses in eastern Homs, 4 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵¹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 30 March – 5 April 2020, April 2020, [url](#), p. 3;

¹⁴⁵² Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 20 – 26 April 2020, April 2020, [url](#), p. 4; RFE/RL, Pro-Iranian Fighters Reported Killed In Israeli Attack In Syria, 21 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵³ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 27 April – 3 May 2020, May 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴⁵⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 29 - May 12, 2020, 14 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵⁵ Reuters, Syria says casualties in Homs blast, war monitor says Israel behind it, 1 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵⁶ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 31 August - 6 September 2020, 6 September 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴⁵⁷ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 30 - February 18, 2021, 19 February 2021, [url](#)

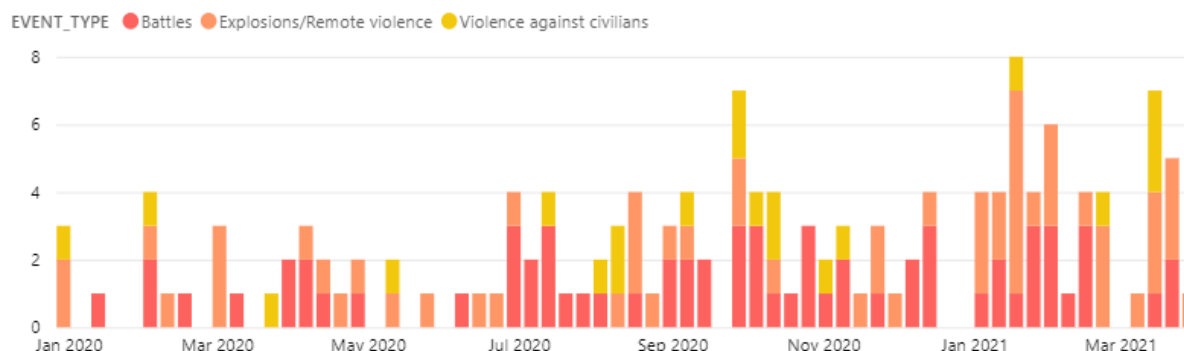


Figure 28. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Homs governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data¹⁴⁵⁸

Homs governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Al Makhrim	-	1	6
Al Qusayr	-	3	-
Ar Rastan	5	3	6
Homs	12	10	4
Tadmor	49	41	5
Tall Kalakh	1	1	-
Total	67	59	21

Figure 29. Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Homs governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

More than half of the security incidents recorded by ACLED during the reporting period were documented in the district of Tadmor (64 %).

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Homs governorate in 2020 and early 2021 included the following:

- ISIL cells killed six SAA soldiers in a landmine attack that targeted their bus in the area of Hamima to the east of Al-Sukhna city on 30 April 2020.¹⁴⁵⁹
- On 1 May 2020, several explosions at a weapons depot in the city of Homs were reported. At least 15 civilians were injured.¹⁴⁶⁰
- SOHR reported that on 2 September 2020, airstrikes, likely to be Israeli, hit the area of the T4 airport in eastern Homs countryside.¹⁴⁶¹
- On 4 November 2020, Iranian-backed militias opened fire and killed 11 civilians, including four women, in Al-Rifa'i village in eastern Homs countryside.¹⁴⁶²

¹⁴⁵⁸ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

¹⁴⁵⁹ SOHR, ISIS resurgence: cells attack regime military bus in Homs, killing six soldiers, including high-ranking officer, 30 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶⁰ 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), 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18; Step News, [الفيديو | قتل وجرح نتيجة انفجارات مجهولة تضرب حمص وحلب.. والنظام السوري يوضح](#) [In video.. Deaths and injuries in unidentified explosions that hit Homs and Aleppo.. The Syrian regime clarifies], 1 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶¹ SOHR, Israeli attacks | Airstrikes target T4 airport area in Homs countryside, and air defenses try to intercept, 2 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶² SOHR, New massacre | Iranian militias kill 11 civilians, steal sheep and set fire to several houses in eastern Homs, 4 November 2020, [url](#)

- On 19 January 2021, Reuters, citing Syrian state media, reported that an explosion hit 'a government-owned crude oil transportation company' in Homs city.¹⁴⁶³

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	1	2	6	5
February	-	-	1	2
March	2	1	2	3
April	4	-		
May	3	1		
June	-	1		
July	8	-		
August	2	3		
September	-	2		
October	9	3		
November	13	2		
December	2	-		
Total	44	15	9	10

Figure 30. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Homs governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2020, Homs governorate had between 15¹⁴⁶⁴ (SNHR data)¹⁴⁶⁵ and 44 civilian fatalities (VDC data).¹⁴⁶⁶ For the first three months of 2021, SNHR recorded 10 civilian fatalities in Homs governorate, while VDC recorded 9.

Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war

In a report published in 2020, ESCWA and the University of St Andrews included Homs governorate in a group of governorates that sustained the highest damage to physical capital (81.8 %).¹⁴⁶⁷ Within this

¹⁴⁶³ Reuters, Syria says extinguishes huge fire near Homs refinery, no casualties, 19 January 2021, [url](#); Daily Sabah, سوريا.. عدة انفجارات تتسبب بحريق ضخم في منشأة نفطية في مدينة حمص [Syria.. Several explosions cause a large fire in an oil facility in Homs city], 20 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶⁴ In a January 2021 report, SNHR mentions 14 civilian fatalities in Homs in 2020. This figure is the result of a revision of their data. EASO email correspondence with SNHR, 22 April 2021. See SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁴⁶⁵ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁴⁶⁶ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020 and 2021 shared by VDC with EASO

¹⁴⁶⁷ ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 50; The source defines loss to physical capital as including 'private and public construction and equipment, such as housing stock, schools, hospitals and factories, and

group, Homs governorate accounted for a lower percentage of the total of (8 %). The source observed that the damage in Homs, ‘though hard’, was localised, and that ‘most of these localized conflicts in this governorate ended through local settlements’, unlike Raqqa which was recaptured through heavy bombing.¹⁴⁶⁸ Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Homs governorate, 15.2 % of the population was living in damaged buildings.¹⁴⁶⁹

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.¹⁴⁷⁰ International Crisis Group stated in a February 2020 report that parts of Homs, ‘are inhospitable for returnees due to heavy destruction’.¹⁴⁷¹

Enab Baladi, citing al-Watan website, reported on 30 July 2020 that the Public Works Directorate of Homs city ‘ended the removal works of 105 properties of crumbling buildings threatening passers-by and public safety in the city’, without specifying the neighbourhoods in which the works were carried out.¹⁴⁷²

The New Arab reported on 15 December 2020 that Al-Khalidiya neighbourhood in Homs city is still destroyed and lacks basic services and daily needs, especially electricity and bread. According to the source, the neighbourhood had around 90 000 residents before the war, and has now around 7 500 residents. Moreover, communication in the neighbourhood is almost non-existent, the schools are still destroyed, the roads are damaged and the health centres are not sufficient.¹⁴⁷³ Al-Ayyam reported on 3 May 2020 that destruction and rubble are still prevalent in Al-Khalidiya neighbourhood and that return to the neighbourhood is subject to cumbersome procedures.¹⁴⁷⁴ Enab Baladi stated on 10 July 2019 that Al-Khalidiya neighbourhood was one of the neighbourhoods of Homs that sustained the heaviest damage together with Jurat Al-Shayyah neighbourhood.¹⁴⁷⁵

UNRWA reported on 2 May 2020 that at least one classroom in the Al-Shajara School in the Homs Palestine refugee camp was damaged by a shrapnel ‘emanating from an explosion in an ammunition depot outside the camp’.¹⁴⁷⁶ WHO stated on 27 January 2021 that four health centres in Jaboureen, Tir-Maaleh, Kafr-Nan, and Taldu in northern Homs governorate were renovated with Russian support.¹⁴⁷⁷

The following are examples of civilian casualties from landmines or UXO that were reported to have taken place in Homs governorate in 2020-2021:

- Two children were killed in a landmine explosion near Palmyra city on 11 August 2020.¹⁴⁷⁸

power, water, sanitation, transport and communications infrastructure’. ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 49

¹⁴⁶⁸ ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 50

¹⁴⁶⁹ Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

¹⁴⁷⁰ REACH/UNITAR, Syria: Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 44

¹⁴⁷¹ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 22

¹⁴⁷² Enab Baladi, Homs governorate removes hundreds of “ramshackle” properties, 30 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷³ New Arab (The), [url](#) [Al-Khalidiya neighbourhood in Homs is without electricity and bread], 15 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷⁴ Al-Ayyam, [url](#) [What are the conditions that the Assad government put in place for the return of the residents of Al-Khalidiya neighbourhood?], 3 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷⁵ Enab Baladi, [url](#) [Homs governorate removes the rubble from Al-Khalidiya and Bab Al-Siba’a neighbourhoods], 10 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷⁶ UNRWA, UNRWA Shocked at Shrapnel Incident Causing Damage to School Building in Homs, Syria, 2 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷⁷ WHO, WHO addresses health inequities in Syria and ensures improved access to health care for all, 27 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 18

- On 2 and 3 October 2020, six boys were injured in reported UXO detonations in Baba Amr and Wadi Al-Dhahab neighbourhoods of Homs city.¹⁴⁷⁹
- On 8 January 2021, a man was killed in a landmine explosion in an agriculture field in Dab'ah village in south-eastern Homs governorate.¹⁴⁸⁰
- The SNHR reported that on 7 February 2021, a child was killed in a mine explosion in Jouret Al-Arayes area of Baba Amr neighbourhood in Homs city. According to the source, the mine was in the rubble of a destroyed building.¹⁴⁸¹
- SOHR reported that on 15 April 2021, a landmine detonated and struck a bus in Wadi Abyad Dam in the Tadmor Badiya in eastern Homs governorate. Reportedly, four people were killed and ten were injured.¹⁴⁸²

Displacement and return

In its Humanitarian Needs Overview of 2021, UNOCHA stated that in August 2020, the IDP population in Homs governorate was 311 000, and that nearly 30 000 IDPs resided in 'collective centers in Homs and Hama', and many were not able to return.¹⁴⁸³ Between January and December 2020, UNOCHA registered 3 000 IDP movements from and within Homs governorate, 2 000 IDP movements to and within the governorate and 1 000 IDP movements within the governorate.¹⁴⁸⁴

In January and February 2020, UNOCHA indicated IDP movements from several governorates to Latakia, including from Homs.¹⁴⁸⁵ In October 2020, 501 IDPs left Homs governorate, mainly to Aleppo and Idlib governorates, and 369 IDPs arrived to the governorate from outside, mainly from Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁴⁸⁶ In 2021, UNOCHA reported on 185 IDPs movements (from locations within and to outside the governorate) in January, 287 IDPs movements in February¹⁴⁸⁷, and 192 IDP movements in March 2021 (of which 85 were recorded within the governorate).¹⁴⁸⁸

As regards return movements in Homs governorate, UNOCHA estimated that the number of returnees in 2020 was 10 978.¹⁴⁸⁹ The source noted that in September and October 2020, Tadmor town (Palmyra) received around 600 and 500 IDP movements consecutively¹⁴⁹⁰, and that Homs city received

¹⁴⁷⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 18; SANA, إصابة 5 أطفال بجروح جراء انفجار عبوة ناسفة من مخلفات الإرهابيين في حي بابا عمر بحمص 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 18; SOHR, مقتل مواطن جراء انفجار لغم أرضي من مخلفات الحرب بجراره الزراعي بريف القصير غربي حمص [Death of a citizen when a landmine remnant of war detonated in his tractor in Al-Qusayr countryside in western Homs], 8 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸¹ SNHR, Extrajudicial killing claims the lives of 138 civilians, including 23 children, 11 women, and 14 victims due to torture, including a child, in February 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), p. 5; Al-Mawrid, مقتل طفل وإصابة آخر جراء انفجار لغم أرضي في حي بابا عمرو بمدينة حمص [One child was killed and others injured in a landmine detonation in Baba Amr neighbourhood in Homs city], 8 February 2021, [url](#); Zaman Al-Wasl, مقتل طفل وإصابة آخر بانفجار لغم أرضي في "بابا عمرو" [Homs.. One child killed and others wounded in a landmine destination in Baba Amr], 8 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸² SOHR, مخلفات الحرب ترفع عدد ضحايا باحثي فطر الكمأة إلى 4 شهداء في بادية حمص [Remnants of war raises the number of victims among mushroom hunters to 4 martyrs in Homs Badiya], 18 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸³ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic 2021, March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁴⁸⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2020, 25 February 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2020, 6 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements October 2020, 24 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2021, 4 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], updated 1 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns September 2020, 27 October 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns October 2020, 24 November 2020, [url](#)

around 500 return movements in November and in December 2020.¹⁴⁹¹ In 2021, UNOCHA stated that the numbers of IDP returns to Homs governorate (including returns from locations within the governorate and from outside) were 892 in January (of whom around 400 to Homs city)¹⁴⁹², 692 in February (of whom more than 300 to Homs sub-district)¹⁴⁹³, and 527 in March.¹⁴⁹⁴

The CoI observed that ‘Syrians are routinely denied return to their places of origin, notably due to restrictions on access placed by the Government and fear of arrest in retaken and formerly besieged areas’ including Homs.¹⁴⁹⁵

¹⁴⁹¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns November 2020, 6 January 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns December 2020, 27 January 2021, [url](#)

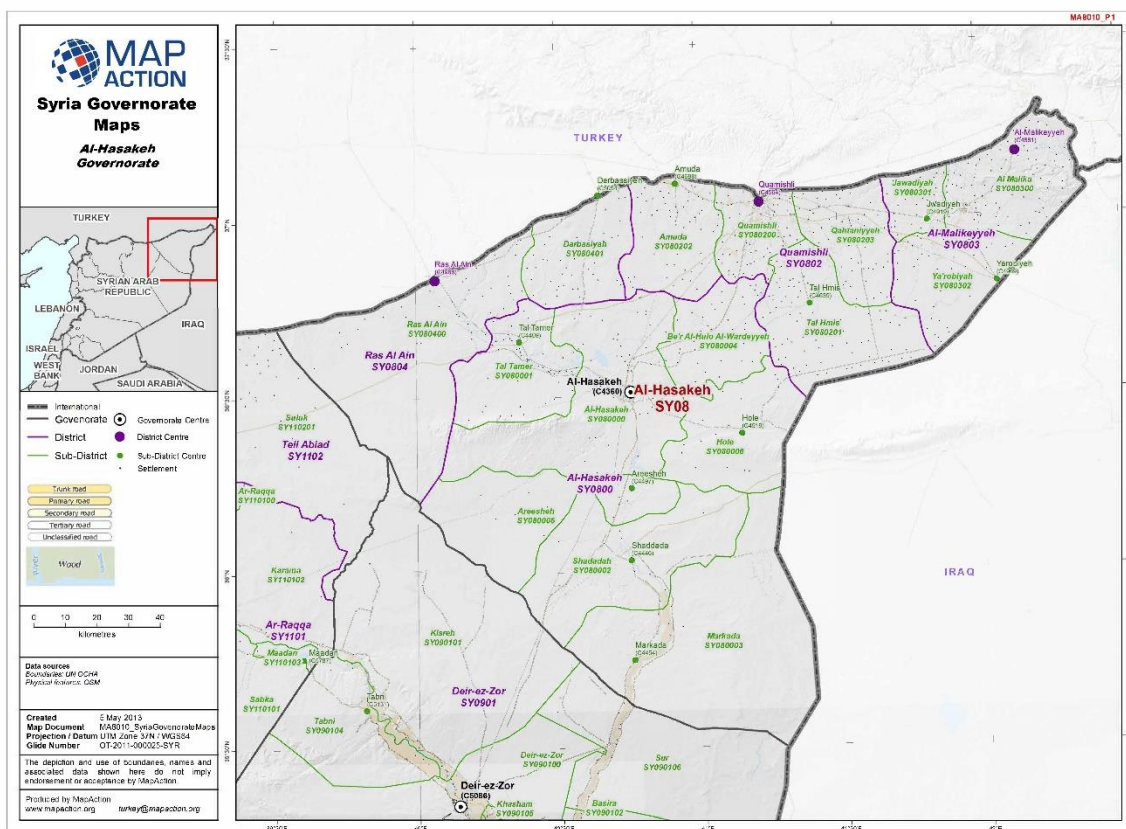
¹⁴⁹² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic IDP Spontaneous Returns January 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic IDP Spontaneous Returns February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), para. 43

2.7 Hasaka governorate



Map 13: © MapAction, Hasaka governorate¹⁴⁹⁶

2.7.1 General description of the governorate

Al-Hasakah governorate (hereafter ‘Hasaka’ governorate) is located in the north-eastern 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 south-west 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 (see Map 13).¹⁴⁹⁷ There are four main districts in the governorate: Hasaka, Ras al-Ayn [Ras al Ain], Qamishli, and Al-Malikiya, divided into, in total, 16 sub-districts, and a large number of small towns and villages.¹⁴⁹⁸

Hasaka governorate is mainly under the control of the Autonomous Administration of North and East of Syria (hereafter ‘Autonomous Administration’, AANES) (see also [Section 1.4.3 Syrian Democratic Forces](#)), with an unified military force, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)¹⁴⁹⁹ and a political assembly,

¹⁴⁹⁶ MapAction, Al-Hasakah governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹⁷ MapAction, Al-Hasakah governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#); UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, January 2017, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁴⁹⁸ The district of Hasaka is further divided into sub-districts of Al-Hasakah, Areesha, Be’r Al-Hulo Al-Wardeye, Hole, Markada, Shadada and Tall Tamer; Al-Malikiya into sub-districts of Al-Malikiya, Jawadiya and Yarobiya; Qamishli into sub-districts of Qamishli, Amuda, Tal Hmis and Qahtaniya; and Ras Al-Ayn into sub-districts of Ras Al-Ayn and Darbasiya. UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, January 2017, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁴⁹⁹ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts, I.B. Tauris, 2019, pp. 66–67; RIC, Beyond the Frontlines, 19 December 2019, [url](#), p. 50

the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC).¹⁵⁰⁰ The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), have a dominant role in the SDF¹⁵⁰¹, the SDC¹⁵⁰² and in the Autonomous Administration as a whole.¹⁵⁰³ In this administrative context, Hasaka governorate is appointed with the name *Jazira* (or, in Kurdish, *Cizire*) and it has been considered as one of the 'cantons'¹⁵⁰⁴ or, since 2018, one of the 'regions'¹⁵⁰⁵ under the Autonomous Administration.

Population estimates for 2019 issued by the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics indicate that Hasaka governorate had 1 803 000 inhabitants.¹⁵⁰⁶ In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Hasaka governorate to be of 1 127 309 inhabitants.¹⁵⁰⁷

According to Fabrice Balanche, Hasaka has an ethnic Kurdish majority.¹⁵⁰⁸ Areas north of Hasaka city are depicted by Balanche mainly as either Kurdish or mixed areas, populated by both Kurds and Arabs. Southern Hasaka governorate is depicted as populated mainly by Arabs.¹⁵⁰⁹ Hasaka's Assyrian Christian population is concentrated in Tal Tamr area.¹⁵¹⁰ Other ethnic and religious minorities present in the governorate include Syriac Christians¹⁵¹¹, Armenians and Yazidis.¹⁵¹²

According to Fabrice Balanche, Hasaka governorate was responsible for approximately one-third of Syria's total oil output before the outbreak of the conflict (in 2010) and the governorate maintains its status as Syria's largest producer of wheat.¹⁵¹³ Depending on the source, the areas controlled by SDF produce between 70¹⁵¹⁴ and 72 %¹⁵¹⁵ of Syria's wheat. According to statistics provided in FAO/WFP Special Report of July 2017, Hasaka governorate's share of Syria's total wheat production was approximately 40.6 % in the 2015/2016 agricultural season and approx. 34.5 % in the 2016/2017 season.¹⁵¹⁶

According to an analysis by Kenneth R. Rosen, published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 95 % of Syria's known reserves of oil and gas can be found in north-east Syria, with oilfields 'centred' in areas around the cities of Hasaka and Deir ez-Zor (the later in GoS-controlled Deir Ez-Zor governorate). Rosen notes that the oil fields located in Hasaka and Deir Ez-Zor governorates have become a natural, 'strategic target' since the outbreak of the conflict.¹⁵¹⁷ International Crisis Group estimates that the oil fields in SDF-controlled North-East Syria (mainly Hasaka governorate and

¹⁵⁰⁰ Rojava Information Center, Beyond the Frontlines, 19 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 31-32

¹⁵⁰¹ Haenni, P. & Guesnay, A., Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State: The Syrian Kurdish Movement's Resilience Strategy, European University Institute, 17 February 2020, [url](#), p. 1 n2

¹⁵⁰² Netjes R. & van Veen, E., Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist. The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict, Clingendael, April 2021, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁵⁰³ COAR, Emboldened Self-Administration bids for greater power, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁰⁴ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 54

¹⁵⁰⁵ Rojava Information Center, Beyond the Frontlines, 19 December 2019, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁵⁰⁶ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁵⁰⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

¹⁵⁰⁸ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 56

¹⁵⁰⁹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 52

¹⁵¹⁰ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 52; MRGI, Christians, Armenians and Assyrians, March 2018, [url](#)

¹⁵¹¹ Holmes, A. A., Despite Ceasefire Agreement, Turkey Implicated In More Than Eight Hundred Violations, Council on Foreign Relations, 13 October 2020, [url](#); MRGI, Christians, Armenians and Assyrians, March 2018, [url](#)

¹⁵¹² MRGI, Syria, March 2018, [url](#)

¹⁵¹³ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp.57-58

¹⁵¹⁴ WFP, Syrian Arab Republic – mWAM Bulletin Issue no. 51: December 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵¹⁵ Information provided by Syria Report and cited in: Christou, W. & Advani, R., Damascus struggles to secure wheat supply amidst coronavirus crisis, Syria Direct, 18 May 2020, [url](#); HRW, Syria: Bread Crisis Exposes Government Failure, 21 March 2021, [url](#); Tsurkov, E. & Jukhada, Q., Kneel and Starve: Under the Watchful Eye of the Secret Police, Syrians Go Hungry, Newlines Institute, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵¹⁶ FAO/WFP, Special Report: FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 18 July 2017, [url](#), p. 25

¹⁵¹⁷ Rosen, K. R., Who Benefits from a U.S. Oil Deal in Northeast Syria?, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Fikra Forum, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

eastern parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate) were the source ‘for more than 80 percent of the country’s pre-war production’.¹⁵¹⁸

2.7.2 Conflict background and armed actors

Hasaka governorate is mainly under the control of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).¹⁵¹⁹ Their allies in the US-led coalition have presence in the governorate.¹⁵²⁰ The Government of Syria (GoS) maintains its own enclaves or ‘security zones’ inside the SDF-controlled cities of Hasaka and Qamishli, while the GoS forces are also present at Qamishli airport.¹⁵²¹ In addition, the GoS forces and their Russian allies are present in the Syrian-Turkish border and along the frontlines between the SDF-controlled areas and the Turkish-controlled area in northern Hasaka governorate.¹⁵²² Since the military incursion in October 2019¹⁵²³, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the Turkish-backed Syrian armed groups operating under the umbrella of the so-called ‘Syrian National Army’ (SNA) have been in control of a territory roughly delimited by the Syrian-Turkish border in the north, the M4 highway in the south, administrative border between Raqqqa and Hasaka governorates in the west and the Khabur river in the east. This area includes the town of Ras al-Ayn (Serê Kaniyê) and its surroundings.¹⁵²⁴ Along with an adjoining territory of roughly equal size in northern Raqqqa governorate (see Chapter [2.8 Raqqqa governorate](#)), this area constitutes the so-called Operation Peace Spring area.¹⁵²⁵

The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), took over the Kurdish majority areas in northern Syria after the withdrawal of the GoS forces in July 2012.¹⁵²⁶ According to Rena Netjes and Erwin van Veen, the areas under the PYD/YPG’s control in Hasaka governorate in 2012 included also the mixed areas (populated mainly by both Kurds and Arabs)¹⁵²⁷ ¹⁵²⁸, and Balanche describes the events of 2012 as the ‘PYD takeover of Hasaka [governorate]’.¹⁵²⁹ The PYD/YPG expanded their areas of control significantly between 2015 and 2018, extending their reach ‘far beyond the majority-Kurdish areas’ with the help of US-led coalition and

¹⁵¹⁸ International Crisis Group, Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria’s North East, 5 September 2018, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁵¹⁹ Based on reading of maps in Etana Syria, Military Control Across Syria [Map], 1 April 2021 [published on 6 April 2021], [url](#); Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]

¹⁵²⁰ Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#); van Wilgenburg, W., The Future of the Syrian Democratic Forces: One Year after the Liberation of Baghouz and the Turkish Invasion, LSE Middle East Centre, 14 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵²¹ International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#); Mehchy Z. et al., Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria, Chatham House, November 2020, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁵²² Based on reading of maps in Balanche, F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]

¹⁵²³ For further information on the October 2019 Turkish incursion, see EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵²⁴ Based on reading of maps in Etana Syria, Military Control Across Syria [Map], 1 April 2021 [published on 6 April 2021], [url](#); Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021 [first published in Arabic on 21 December 2020], [url](#), p. 3; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]

¹⁵²⁵ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021 [first published in Arabic on 21 December 2020], [url](#), p. 3

¹⁵²⁶ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts, I.B. Tauris, 2019, p. 13

¹⁵²⁷ The ethno-religious composition of Hasaka’s population is discussed above in Section 2.7.1

¹⁵²⁸ Netjes R. & van Veen, E., Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist. The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict, Clingendael, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 21-22

¹⁵²⁹ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 54

seizing 'Syria's most significant oil fields' and almost all the areas formerly held by ISIL east of the Euphrates river.¹⁵³⁰

During the reference period for this report, there have been reports of recurrent shelling and armed clashes between the Turkish forces/ Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF along the frontlines between the Operation Peace Spring area and the SDF-controlled areas in Hasaka and Raqqa governorates.¹⁵³¹ (For further information on Hasaka, see [Section 2.7.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population](#), for Raqqa, see [Section 2.8.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population](#)). Immediately after the October 2019 incursion, international human rights organisations reported on serious human rights violations and potential war crimes, including i.a. summary killings of civilians and indiscriminate attacks targeting civilian areas, carried out by the Turkish forces and the Turkish-backed armed groups.¹⁵³² Serious human rights violations committed by these actors were reported also during the reference period.¹⁵³³ (For further information, see [Section Human rights violations in Operation Peace Spring area \(Ras al-Ayn\)](#)).

During the reference period, tensions have been reported also between the SDF and the GoS forces¹⁵³⁴ deployed in the governorate as well as between their respective allies the US-led Coalition and Russia. These tensions have been linked to the control of north-east Syria's oil.¹⁵³⁵ The SDF controls Syria's main oil fields and depends on them for revenue¹⁵³⁶, with the Autonomous Administration deriving approximately 60 % of its total income from selling petroleum. In July 2020, the Autonomous Administration signed a deal with US based oil company Delta Crescent Energy, LCC, in order to gain more autonomy with regard to north-east Syria's oil reserves. The Syrian government, Russia, Iran and Turkey all protested over the deal. The deal also drew criticism from local Arab tribes, aiming for autonomous control of fossil fuel reserves in their areas of influence.¹⁵³⁷ It has been estimated that the deal increased tensions between the SDF and other actors operating in north-east Syria.¹⁵³⁸

According to a field study by Hanny Megally and Jasmine M. El-Gamal, factors such as the partial US withdrawal and the Turkish incursion in October 2019 have caused a 'sense of insecurity' and 'ma[de] it nearly impossible for residents of the region to normalize their daily lives'. This insecurity is connected to the 'fear of the unknown' connected to the potential 'continuation of the conflict' and 'further mass displacement'. Megally and El-Gamal note that this constant fear has affected the psychological health of the respondents.¹⁵³⁹

¹⁵³⁰ International Crisis Group, Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East, 5 September 2018, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁵³¹ REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, November 2020, 21 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 2; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020,3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 63; 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3 [Para. 5]

¹⁵³² AI, Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies, 18 October 2019, [url](#); HRW, Syria: Civilians Abused in 'Safe Zones', 27 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵³³ See, in particular, OHCHR, Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups – Bachelet, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵³⁴ See, for example, UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 10]

¹⁵³⁵ COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#); USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020,3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 60

¹⁵³⁶ MEE, Syrian oil fields no longer priority for US forces, says Pentagon, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵³⁷ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 59

¹⁵³⁸ COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵³⁹ Megally, H. & El-Gamal, J. M., Preventing the Reemergence of Violent Extremism in Northeast Syria, UNESCWA & CIC, March 2021, [url](#), p. 25

Syrian Democratic Forces

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are the main unified military force¹⁵⁴⁰ of the Autonomous Administration currently in control of most of Hasaka governorate.¹⁵⁴¹ (See Section [1.4.3 Syrian Democratic Forces](#) for further information.)

According to Wladimir van Wilgenburg, the SDF has maintained the control of all the checkpoints located in SDF-controlled North-East Syria.¹⁵⁴² This despite the presence of and/or pressure exerted by the Government of Syria (GoS), Russian, Iranian, and Turkish forces (see [Section 2.7.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population](#)). According to Fabrice Balanche, the Syrian-Turkish border in SDF-controlled parts of Hasaka governorate is in joint control of Russian forces and the SDF. The SDF also controls the Syrian-Iraqi border north of the Euphrates river. With the assistance of US forces deployed in the area, the SDF controls the Syrian side of Fish Khabur/Semalka border crossing in the Syrian-Iraqi border. Balanche claims that Fish Khabur/Semalka is the only border crossing open north of the Euphrates with the Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias controlling most of the Iraqi side and prohibiting the use of any other crossing points.¹⁵⁴³ However, according to Harith Hasan and Kheder Khaddour, the PYD/YPG-affiliated Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has utilised the informal Al-Faw crossing between southern Hasaka governorate and Iraq's Sinjar district (in Ninewa province) for illegal crossing and smuggling activities.¹⁵⁴⁴ (For further information on the PKK' role in SDF-controlled areas, see Section [1.4.3 Syrian Democratic Forces](#)).

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

According to an estimate by the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), cited in the USDOD report of August 2020, the number of SAA and affiliated armed groups personnel deployed in SDF-controlled governorates of Hasaka and Raqqqa after October 2019 and Turkish Operation Peace Spring ranges between 4 000 and 10 000. In addition, the GoS has increased its recruitment efforts among the locals to strengthen its ranks.¹⁵⁴⁵

The GoS maintains its own enclaves or 'security zones' inside the SDF-controlled cities of Hasaka and Qamishli.¹⁵⁴⁶ According to Mehchy (et al.), these enclaves contain various governance and administrative institutions, including 'the governorship, the courthouse, the municipality, the provincial council, the civil and land registries, the transportation directorate, the police, public banks, the education directorate and the main branch of the Ba'ath Party' and the branches of Syrian intelligence services.¹⁵⁴⁷ According to COAR Global, schools following the GoS curriculum operate in Hasaka and Qamishli enclaves and are attended by a 'considerable number of students' in order to gain education officially recognised both nationally and internationally.¹⁵⁴⁸ In addition, the SAA

¹⁵⁴⁰ Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., *The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, I.B. Tauris, 2019, pp. 66–67; RIC, *Beyond the Frontlines*, 19 December 2019, [url](#), p. 50

¹⁵⁴¹ Based on reading of maps in Etana Syria, *Military Control Across Syria* [Map], 1 April 2021 [published on 6 April 2021], [url](#); Jusoor for Studies, *Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria* [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]

¹⁵⁴² van Wilgenburg, W., *The Future of the Syrian Democratic Forces: One Year after the Liberation of Baghouz and the Turkish Invasion*, LSE, 14 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴³ Balanche, F., *The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴⁴ Hasan, H. & Khaddour, K., *The Making of the Kurdish Frontier: Power, Conflict, and Governance in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderlands*, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 30 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴⁵ USDOD, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁵⁴⁶ International Crisis Group, *The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria*, 25 November 2020, [url](#); Mehchy Z. et al., *Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria*, Chatham House, November 2020, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁵⁴⁷ Mehchy Z. et al., *Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria*, Chatham House, November 2020, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁵⁴⁸ COAR, *Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts*, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

controls the Qamishli airport.¹⁵⁴⁹ With regard to the SAA's military strength in Hasaka governorate, Mehchy (et al.) claim that the SAA has 'significant presence' inside Hasaka and Qamishli enclaves and controls 'critical military bases' in the governorate.¹⁵⁵⁰

Since October 2019, the GoS forces have been stationed (along with Russian forces) on the Syrian Turkish border and on the internal border separating the areas controlled by Turkey and affiliated armed groups from the areas controlled by the SDF in Hasaka governorate.¹⁵⁵¹ The map on 'The Complex Operating Environment of North-eastern Syria' in the USDOD report of February 2021 notes the presence of GoS forces in the town of Tal Tamr.¹⁵⁵² According to the Carter Center report of February the GoS has an enclave also in Tal Tamr town.¹⁵⁵³ According to Fabrice Balanche, the Syrian-Turkish border between Ras al-Ayn and Tigris river (the Iraqi border) is in joint control of Russian forces and the SDF. Balanche claims that the GoS forces have only a symbolic presence of a few hundred troops in the border area.¹⁵⁵⁴

See the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#) for more specific information on SAA formations deployed in Hasaka governorate as of March 2020.¹⁵⁵⁵

The US-led Coalition

According to Wladimir van Wilgenburg, the US-led Coalition has 500 personnel on the ground in the governorates of Hasaka and Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁵⁵⁶ According to Fabrice Balanche, US troops are present in Hasaka towns of Rmelan and Al-Shaddadi and they control the crossroads between the M4 highway and the Amuda-Hasaka road and the road between Rmelan and the Fish Khabour border crossing with Iraq.¹⁵⁵⁷

The map on 'The Complex Operating Environment of North-eastern Syria' reproduced in the USDOD report of February 2021 and based on analysis by ISW and Congressional Research Service notes the presence of US forces in As-Shaddadi.¹⁵⁵⁸ According to Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021, the US has 19 military sites in Hasaka governorate: four in Al-Malikiya district (including one in Rmelan), one in Qamishli, one east of Qamishli and one west of Qamishli, one south of Qamishli (along the Qamishli-Hasaka road), two in Hasaka city and one directly south of the city, three along the Tal Tamr-Qamishli road and two along the Tal Tamr-Hasaka road, one south of Tal Tamr and one in Al-Shadadi.¹⁵⁵⁹ According to a map by researcher Levent Kemal, the US has 7 military sites in Hasaka governorate: one in the city of Qamishli, three in Al-Malikiya district, one along the road between Tal Tamr and Qamishli, one along the road from Qamishli to Hasaka and one in the southern part of the governorate (Al-Shadadi).¹⁵⁶⁰

¹⁵⁴⁹ International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#); Mehchy Z. et al., Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria, Chatham House, November 2020, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁵⁵⁰ Mehchy Z. et al., Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria, Chatham House, November 2020, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁵⁵¹ Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#); van Wilgenburg, W., The Future of the Syrian Democratic Forces: One Year after the Liberation of Baghouz and the Turkish Invasion, LSE Middle East Centre, 14 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁵² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 56

¹⁵⁵³ Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 18 - 24 January 2021, 27 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁵⁴ Balanche, F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁵⁵ EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 135–136

¹⁵⁵⁶ van Wilgenburg, W., The Future of the Syrian Democratic Forces: One Year after the Liberation of Baghouz and the Turkish Invasion, LSE Middle East Centre, 14 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁵⁷ Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁵⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 56

¹⁵⁵⁹ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶⁰ Kemal, L., Suriye'de YPG bölgesindeki Rus ve ABD üsleri sayıları [Map] [Twitter], 1 March 2021, [url](#)

According to an analysis by COAR Global from 19 October 2020, the US-led Coalition has ‘taken several concrete steps to increase their footprint in and around oil-rich areas’ in both Hasaka and Deir Ez-Zor governorates. These actions have included sending additional troops and equipment to Shaddadi base in southern Hasaka governorate.¹⁵⁶¹ According to the article by Arab News published in February 2021, The US-led Coalition was planning to erect a new military base in Ayn Diwar area. The article cites ISW’s Nicholas Heras, according to whom the ‘base would be located near the most important entry point into north-east Syria from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.’¹⁵⁶² The article is based on reporting by the SOHR, which published its own analysis on the US-led Coalition’s actions to set up a new military base in Ayn Diwar and to significantly reinforce its military presence in north-east Syria.¹⁵⁶³

Russia

According to the USDOD report of May 2020, Russia has at least 300 military police patrolling in north-east Syria.¹⁵⁶⁴ According to an analysis by the DIA, cited in the USDOD report of August 2020, Russian forces have ‘a presence at the Qamishli airport¹⁵⁶⁵ and [patrol] in [Hasaka and Raqqqa governorates], including in towns along the M4 highway leading to the Iraqi border’.¹⁵⁶⁶ In late January 2021, ISW reported that Russia had deployed 300 additional Military Police to areas in Hasaka (Amuda and Tal Tamr) and Raqqqa (Ayn Issa) governorates bordering the Turkish-controlled Operation Peace Spring area, as a reaction to increased hostilities and as a deterrent to possible Turkish incursion.¹⁵⁶⁷

According to Fabrice Balanche, in Hasaka governorate, Russian forces are present in some military bases and in the border zones between Syria and Turkey and between the areas controlled by the SDF and the Operation Peace Spring area, where they have been stationed alongside the GoS forces since October 2019. In addition, Russian and the GoS forces are stationed along the section of Khabur river running between the cities of Tal Tamr and Hasaka. Since May 2020, the traffic along the M4 highway between Ayn Issa and Tal Tamr has been restricted to convoys with Russian escorts and no SDF units or local civilians were allowed to use this section of the highway on their own.¹⁵⁶⁸ In May 2020, ISW reported that four Russian-escorted convoys would be trafficking daily between Ayn Issa and Tal Tamr.¹⁵⁶⁹ The Syrian-Turkish border between Ras al-Ayn and the Tigris River (the Syrian-Iraqi border) is in joint control of Russian forces and the SDF.¹⁵⁷⁰

The map on ‘The Complex Operating Environment of North-eastern Syria’ in the USDOD report of February 2021 notes the presence of Russian forces in three positions east and south of Qamishli city and in the city of Tal Tamr.¹⁵⁷¹ According to Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021, Russia has up to 13 military sites¹⁵⁷² in Hasaka governorate: five in or near the city of Qamishli, two in the Syrian–

¹⁵⁶¹ COAR, Fire on the coast: Damascus vows support — but not much, 19 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶² Arab News, Anti-Daesh coalition to set up military base along Turkish-Syrian border, 16 February 2021 [updated on 24 February 2021], [url](#)

¹⁵⁶³ SOHR, 77 months of International Coalition operations in Syria: Security campaigns with SDF result in the arrest of over 60 people, and large reinforcement of 250 trucks enter Syria, 23 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 62

¹⁵⁶⁵ See also ISW, Syria Situation Report: March 18 - 31, 2020, 2 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁵⁶⁷ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-29, 2021, 29 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶⁸ Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶⁹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 13 - 26, 2020, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁰ Balanche, F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2020–December 31, 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 56

¹⁵⁷² The source (Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)) contains ambiguous information on the exact number of Russian military sites in Hasaka governorate. While the number of Russian military sites varies between 11-13, this report refers to the most detailed of the maps on Russian military sites,

Turkish border (with one west and another east from the city of Qamishli), one in Al-Malikiya district, one in the city of Hasaka, three in or near Tal Tamr and one west of Tal Tamr in the border between Turkish and SDF-controlled areas.¹⁵⁷³ According to a map by researcher Levent Kemal, Russia has 7 military sites in Hasaka governorate: one in the city of Qamishli, two in the Syrian–Turkish border zone west of Qamishli and four in the border separating Turkish-controlled Ras al-Ayn from SDF-controlled areas.¹⁵⁷⁴ The main difference between the two estimates concerns the existence of Russian military sites in Hasaka city and in Al-Malikiya district.

According to Balanche, Russian forces have attempted to erect a military outpost at Al-Malikiya and establish control of the border crossing with Iraq (Semalka/Fish Khabur).¹⁵⁷⁵ According to COAR Global, on 3 and 4 June 2020, Russia reportedly attempted to establish military points in Kasan and Qasr Deeb to gain a permanent military foothold in rural Al-Malikiya. However, Russian forces were forced to withdraw from the area after encountering, first, local civilian resistance and, later, US forces inhospitable to their presence in the area.¹⁵⁷⁶ ISW also noted these developments and claimed that Russian forces withdrew their presence from Qamishli airport on 4 June as the result of their failed expansion.¹⁵⁷⁷ According to COAR Global, Russian forces had attempted to erect a military base in Ayn Diwar area five times before 12 October, on which day they were yet again forced to pull back from the area. Ayn Diwar is located in Al-Malikiya district, close to Turkish border. COAR Global states that the SDF had organised the local civilian population to block the Russian advance.¹⁵⁷⁸

Turkey and affiliated armed groups

Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and affiliated armed groups of the so-called ‘Syrian National Army’ (SNA) control the territory roughly delimited by the Syrian–Turkish border in the north, the M4 highway in the south, administrative border between Raqqqa and Hasaka governorates in the west and the Khabur river in the east. This area includes the town of Ras al-Ayn (Serê Kaniyê) and its surroundings.¹⁵⁷⁹

According to Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021, Turkey has 4 military sites in this eastern half of Operation Peace Spring area, all of them located in and around the town of Ras al-Ayn.¹⁵⁸⁰ According to researcher Khayrallah al-Hilu, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) are positioned in the town of Ras al-Ayn (two positions), in barracks, and in observation posts located along the M4 highway. In addition, Turkish intelligence utilises the SNA to detect and suppress the opposition to Turkish rule in Ras al-Ayn area and Turkey ‘relies’ on Syrian National Police and General Security forces operating in the area.¹⁵⁸¹

The town of Ras al-Ayn, the main population centre of the eastern half of Operation Peace Spring area, is controlled mainly by two Turkish-backed armed groups, Sultan Murad Division and Hamza Division,

depicting 13 such sites in different parts of the governorate. Jusoor for Studies, Map of Russia’s bases and posts in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷³ Jusoor for Studies, Map of Russia’s bases and posts in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁴ Kemal, L., Suriye’de YPG bölgesindeki Rus ve ABD üsleri sayıları [Map] [Twitter], 1 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁵ Balanche, F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁶ COAR, Self Administration bids to corner grain market as SYP collapses, 8 June 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁷ ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 27 - June 9, 2020, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁸ COAR, Fire on the coast: Damascus vows support — but not much, 19 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]; Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021 [first published in Arabic on 21 December 2020], [url](#), p. 3

¹⁵⁸⁰ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸¹ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021 [first published in Arabic on 21 December 2020], [url](#), p. 4 [cf. map on p. 5]

both operating under the official SNA umbrella. Other SNA groups are also present in the area.¹⁵⁸² According to al-Hilu, Turkey has placed the local administration in both Ras al-Ayn and Tall Abyad under the administrative supervision of Şanlıurfa province.¹⁵⁸³

ISIL

According to a May 2020 estimate by Aaron Y. Zelin, ISIL had conducted ‘numerous’ attacks in Hasaka governorate during the preceding fourteen months.¹⁵⁸⁴ (For further information, see [Section ISIL’s insurgency in Hasaka governorate](#)). According to an analysis by Fabrice Balanche published in July 2020, ISIL has presence in southern parts of Hasaka governorate.¹⁵⁸⁵

In the report published in November 2020, International Crisis Group assesses that ISIL has ‘residual’ presence in north-east Syria. While Crisis Group states that ISIL’s capabilities to launch attacks are still ‘limited’, its fighters have the ability ‘to coalesce, set up checkpoints and extort protection money from local oil traders’ and ‘routinely threaten’ locals – including land and shop owners, factory managers, doctors and others – in order to extort money (*zakat*) from those perceived to be wealthy enough to pay.¹⁵⁸⁶ However, although Crisis Group’s assessment covers the whole north-east Syria, the types of incidents included in the assessment – e.g. the setting up of fake¹⁵⁸⁷ checkpoints¹⁵⁸⁸, the targeting of oil traders¹⁵⁸⁹ and the extortion of *zakat* from the local population¹⁵⁹⁰ – have been reported most notably in Deir Ez-Zor governorate (see [Section ISIL’s insurgency in Deir Ez-Zor](#)).

2.7.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

The conflict between the SDF and the Turkish forces

According to the Col, ‘periodic clashes’ involving the YPG, Turkish-backed armed groups (SNA) and the Turkish military continued to affect the security situation of north-east Syria in the first half of 2020 (11 January–1 July 2020).¹⁵⁹¹ According to the UN Security Council, during the reporting period between February and March 2020, sources reported ‘intermittent artillery shelling and a limited number of ground-based clashes’ in Ras al-Ayn and Tall Abyad frontlines.¹⁵⁹² The security situation during the period between April and May 2020 was described in similar terms, affecting especially the

¹⁵⁸² Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021 [first published in Arabic on 21 December 2020], [url](#), *passim*; STJ, Syria: Crops Looted, Lands Seized in “Peace Spring” Territories, 11 March 2021, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁵⁸³ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁵⁸⁴ Zelin, A. Y. & Knights, M., The Islamic State’s Resurgence in the COVID Era?, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 29 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸⁵ Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#) [map]

¹⁵⁸⁶ International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸⁷ The term ‘fake checkpoint’ refers to checkpoints set up by ISIL but seemingly run by other armed actors, in this case, mainly the GoS or the SDF (drafters remark).

¹⁵⁸⁸ Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS’ Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸⁹ Haenni, P. & Guesnay, A., Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State, EUI, 17 February 2020, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁵⁹⁰ Cockburn, P., After IS, LRB Vol. 43 No. 3, 4 February 2021, [url](#); Al-Kanj, S., Islamic State regroups in Syrian Kurdish region, Al Monitor, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 2

¹⁵⁹² 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/2020/327], 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 3 [para. 6]

eastern and western ‘edges’ of the frontlines between the SDF-controlled Hasaka and Raqqah governorates and the Operation Peace Spring area.¹⁵⁹³

During the reporting period between June and July 2020, the UN Security Council reported ‘a rising number of cross-line attacks’ involving (Turkish-backed) ‘non-State armed groups’, the SDF and the GoS forces along the Operation Peace Spring area’s frontlines. The attacks were described to affect especially the ‘southern contact lines’ between Ras al-Ayn and Tall Abyad.¹⁵⁹⁴ During this period, security incidents were also reported along the Syrian-Turkish border. For example, ISW reported a suicide drone attack that was allegedly carried out by Turkish forces and targeted a meeting between Russian forces and Kurdish Asayish in northern Hasaka governorate on 16 July 2020. At least two Russian military police, two Asayish members and two others were injured in the incident.¹⁵⁹⁵ USDOD noted the clashes between GoS forces and Turkish-backed armed groups in areas bordering the Operation Peace Spring area in Hasaka and Raqqah governorates between July and September 2020.¹⁵⁹⁶

According to the UN Security Council, during the period between August and September, ‘several cross-line attacks’ occurred in the southern frontlines of the Operation Peace Spring area, focusing particularly around the town of Tal Tamr.¹⁵⁹⁷ During the period between October and November 2020, the UN Security Council reported an ‘increase in reports of mutual cross-line attacks’ and noted that the attacks were reported especially in the south-eastern frontlines (Tal Tamr) of the Operation Peace Spring area.¹⁵⁹⁸

According to an update by SOHR from 9 October 2020, 146 civilians, 510 SDF fighters, 279 Turkish-backed armed group fighters, 28 GoS soldiers and 10 Turkish soldiers had lost their lives as the result of the Turkish incursion and the ensuing clashes along the Operation Peace Spring frontlines since October 2019.¹⁵⁹⁹ According to an analysis by Amy Austin Holmes (based on ACLED data) of October 2020, Turkey had violated the October 2019 ceasefire agreement, settling the frontlines of Operation Peace Spring area, more than 800 times. In her analysis, Holmes focuses on the area of Tal Tamr, mainly in control of SDF-affiliated Syriac and Assyrian armed groups, where the ceasefire agreement had been violated 138 times.¹⁶⁰⁰

According to REACH, in November 2020, north-east Syria ‘saw the most intense fighting since February’ while ‘localized clashes’ broke out in the frontlines between the Operation Peace Spring area and the SDF-controlled parts of Hasaka and Raqqah governorates.¹⁶⁰¹ Starting from November 2020, clashes were reported especially in the frontlines near the town of Ayn Issa, in Raqqah governorate. (For further information, see [Section The conflict between the SDF and the Turkish forces \(Ayn Issa frontline\)](#)). However, in November 2020, clashes were also reported in Ras al-Ayn and Tal

¹⁵⁹³ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 3 [para. 7]

¹⁵⁹⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 9]

¹⁵⁹⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report: July 7 - 21, 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 63

¹⁵⁹⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 3 [para. 8]

¹⁵⁹⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 10]

¹⁵⁹⁹ SOHR, “Peace Spring” a year on: A new map of influence...growing humanitarian disaster and continuous Turkish violations, 9 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰⁰ Holmes, A. A., Despite Ceasefire Agreement, Turkey Implicated In More Than Eight Hundred Violations, Council on Foreign Relations, 13 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰¹ REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, November 2020, 21 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1

Tamr areas.¹⁶⁰² According to Al-Monitor, in addition to strengthening their military positions in the frontlines opposite Ayn Issa by setting up a new military base in Saida, the Turkish forces and Turkish-backed armed groups were also setting up military posts opposite Tal Tamr and Zirkan in late November 2020.¹⁶⁰³

According to ISW Syria Situation Report discussing the period between 16 December 2020-7 January 2021, Turkish forces' escalating kinetic activity in the frontlines in Hasaka governorate caused disturbance in the civilian life in the area.¹⁶⁰⁴ According to the UN Security Council, 'mutual shelling and limited ground-based clashes' were reported along the contact lines around Tall Tamer and Abu Rasin between February and March 2021.¹⁶⁰⁵ In March 2021, clashes between Turkish forces and the SDF were reported also in northern Hasaka governorate. In early March, SOHR documented 'gunfire from Turkish territory' targeting the Syrian border village of Shourk where both the SDF and the GoS forces area reportedly positioned.¹⁶⁰⁶ In late March 2021, renewed, intensive clashes between the Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF were reported in the vicinity of Tall Tamer.¹⁶⁰⁷

According to the UN Security Council report of April 2020, the operations of Allouk water station were cut several times in March 2020. The water station is located in eastern Operation Peace Spring area and acts as the main source of water for approximately 460 000 people in Hasaka city, Al-Hol and Arisha camps and other parts of SDF-controlled western Hasaka governorate.¹⁶⁰⁸ During the reference period for this report, several similar service cuts were reported. The UN Security Council reports contain information on 'multiple' service cuts in April and May 2020¹⁶⁰⁹, 'several' disruptions between June and July 2020¹⁶¹⁰, 'a two-week disruption' that ended on 27 August 2020.¹⁶¹¹ According to ISW, Turkish forces and Turkish-backed armed groups utilised their control of the Allouk Water Station to cut the water supply of Hasaka city and other areas in western Hasaka governorate on 5 July 2020.¹⁶¹²

According to Human Rights Watch, Turkish authorities had cut the operations of Allouk water station multiple times since the beginning of 2020, failing 'to ensure adequate water supplies to [SDF-controlled] areas' in Hasaka governorate and possibly 'weaponising water' in the context of the conflict between Turkey and the SDF.¹⁶¹³ In September 2020, OHCHR raised similar concerns about Turkish-backed armed groups utilising water as a weapon.¹⁶¹⁴ According to the UN Security Council, Allouk water station resumed its operations on 20 December 2020 (the duration of the preceding

¹⁶⁰² Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 9-15 November 2020, 18 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰³ Tastekin, F., Is Turkey gearing up for military move against Syrian Kurds?, Al-Monitor, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 12 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰⁵ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3 [Para. 5]

¹⁶⁰⁶ SOHR, Al-Hasakah: Turkish forces attack border village, igniting popular anger, while Russian forces check the situation, 6 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰⁷ van Wilgenburg, W., Heavy fighting erupts near Tal Tamir in northern Syria, Kurdistan 24, 27 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰⁸ 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/2020/327], 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

¹⁶⁰⁹ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 3 [para. 7]

¹⁶¹⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 10]

¹⁶¹¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 3 [para. 10]

¹⁶¹² ISW, Syria Situation Report: June 24 - July 6, 2020, 9 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶¹³ HRW, Turkey/Syria: Weaponizing Water in Global Pandemic?, 31 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶¹⁴ OHCHR, Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups – Bachelet, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

service cut is not mentioned in the report) only to have them cut again on 17 January and restored once more on 23 January 2021.¹⁶¹⁵

SDF-affiliated Rojava Information Center (RIC) claims that arsons linked to hostilities between Turkey and the SDF and targeting agricultural areas were carried out in different parts of north-east Syria in May 2020.¹⁶¹⁶ According to a joint report by PAX for Peace and Syrians For Truth and Justice (STJ) of August 2020, 436 882 acres of land burned in Hasaka governorate between 15 May and 25 July 2020. Approximately 43 000 acres of this land were located along the front lines between the SDF-controlled areas and the Turkish-controlled Operation Peace Spring area, which is described as a 'new pattern' when compared to similar crop fires in previous years.¹⁶¹⁷

According to PAX and STJ, the agricultural lands set aflame for several reasons: Some are set by accident and some on purpose by the farmers themselves while others are set as 'a side effect of shelling and small-scale clashes occurring in the area'.¹⁶¹⁸ Both the SDF and the Turkish-backed armed groups have been blamed for setting the fires on purpose, while in 2019 ISIL claimed responsibility for arsons targeting 'apostates' in both Syria and Iraq.¹⁶¹⁹ According to PAX and STJ, especially the Turkish-backed armed groups have utilised the threats of arson as a means to extort the farmers in the region.¹⁶²⁰

Human rights violations in Operation Peace Spring area (Ras al-Ayn)

Researcher Khayrallah al-Hilu describes the security situation in areas controlled by Turkey and affiliated armed groups, including the Operation Peace Spring area, as 'fragile' and names two factors affecting this assessment: the violations perpetrated by the Turkish-backed armed groups under the 'Syrian National Army' (SNA) umbrella and the frequent security gaps, leading to armed confrontations, bombings and assassinations, in particular areas.¹⁶²¹ The Col reported a large number of security incidents in the areas of Ras al-Ayn and Afrin in the first half of 2020 (11 January–1 July 2020), including violations by Turkish-backed armed groups, shelling and attacks with vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED).¹⁶²²

According to International Crisis Group article published in November 2020, there have been tens of asymmetrical insurgent attacks in the Turkish-controlled Operation Peace Spring area since the beginning of 2020. These attacks have originated from SDF-controlled areas, targeted Turkish-backed armed groups and resulted in dozens of civilian casualties. Crisis Group estimates that the probability of 'an escalatory cycle of violence, including potentially forceful Turkish military response, remains high.'¹⁶²³ According to a March 2020 update by the Carter Center, since October 2019, 'explosive

¹⁶¹⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 11]

¹⁶¹⁶ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁶¹⁷ PAX/ STJ, Front Lines Aflame: Crop Fires Ravage Syria's Jazirah Region, Scorching Fields and Destroying Harvests, 24 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 3, 37

¹⁶¹⁸ PAX/ STJ, Front Lines Aflame: Crop Fires Ravage Syria's Jazirah Region, Scorching Fields and Destroying Harvests, 24 August 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁶¹⁹ PAX/ STJ, Front Lines Aflame: Crop Fires Ravage Syria's Jazirah Region, Scorching Fields and Destroying Harvests, 24 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-8

¹⁶²⁰ PAX/ STJ, Front Lines Aflame: Crop Fires Ravage Syria's Jazirah Region, Scorching Fields and Destroying Harvests, 24 August 2020, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁶²¹ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁶²² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 9 [para. 37]

¹⁶²³ International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

activity' (e.g. IED's) targeting Turkish forces and the Turkish-backed armed groups had concentrated in Ras al-Ayn and surrounding areas and in areas of Tall Abyad, Suluk and Hammam al-Turkman.¹⁶²⁴

According to OMRAN, in the eastern parts of Operation Peace Spring area controlled by Turkey/Turkish-backed armed groups in Hasaka governorate, 28 assassinations or attacks with explosives were reported between July 2019 and June 2020.¹⁶²⁵ Of these attacks, 16 occurred between January and June 2020. The attacks resulted in 170 casualties of whom 121 were civilians. OMRAN notes that 'civilian entities' were targeted directly in 18 of the attacks.¹⁶²⁶ The UN Security Council notes that attacks within the Operation Peace Spring area, including attacks targeting civilians, continued during the reporting period between August and September 2020. These attacks included IED and VBIED attacks, as well as attacks conducted with small firearms.¹⁶²⁷ According to ISW, the PKK carried out IED attacks in Ras al-Ayn area (and other areas controlled by Turkey/Turkish-backed armed groups) between 24 December 2020-6 January 2021 as a response to escalated clashes between Turkey and the SDF in north-east Syria.¹⁶²⁸

With regard to Ras al-Ayn, al-Hilu describes the violations perpetrated by Turkish-backed armed groups as 'abundant' and security as 'minimal', with the armed groups in control of the area and without ties to the local community acting on the basis of their own discretion. This is explained by the fact that, Sultan Murad Division and Hamza Division, the SNA formations most prevalent in the area do not consist of locals but of fighters from other parts of Syria settled in the area with their families and with the blessing of Turkish authorities.¹⁶²⁹ In contrast, violations have been rare in the Arab towns of Al-Mabrukah and Suluk (latter in Raqqqa governorate) where the SNA formation in charge has tribal ties to the area and includes a significant number of local fighters.¹⁶³⁰

According to a statement by the OHCHR from 18 September 2020, in the preceding months 'an alarming pattern' of serious human rights violations, including 'increased killings, kidnappings, unlawful transfers of people, seizures of land and properties and forcible evictions' had been reported in the Operation Peace Spring area (in Ras al-Ayn and Tall Abyad areas) as well as in other parts of Turkish-controlled northern Syria (Afrin in Aleppo governorate). These violations targeted people considered as opponents and/or critics of the Turkish-backed armed groups as well as those considered affluent enough for ransom purposes. Women and children were also abducted and disappeared. In addition, infighting between different armed groups subjected the civilian population in these areas to indirect attacks leading to civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure.¹⁶³¹ Other types of serious human rights violations, e.g. torture and looting, by Turkish-backed armed were also reported in Turkish-controlled northern Syria¹⁶³² and particularly in Operation Peace Spring area¹⁶³³ during the reference period for this report.

¹⁶²⁴ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 9-15 March 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁶²⁵ All the attacks were carried out with explosives: 18 with VBIED's, 8 with landmines and 2 with IED's. OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 53

¹⁶²⁶ OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 50-51

¹⁶²⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 3 [para. 8]

¹⁶²⁸ ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 12 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶²⁹ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁶³⁰ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁶³¹ OHCHR, Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups – Bachelet, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶³² USDOS, Syria 2020 Human Rights Report, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁶³³ SOHR, "Peace Spring" a year on: A new map of influence...growing humanitarian disaster and continuous Turkish violations, 9 October 2020, [url](#)

In the report published on 1 March 2021, the Col notes the pattern of ‘arrests, beatings, kidnappings and, on occasion, disappearances’, targeting mainly the returnees of Kurdish origin (and also women) that has been observed in Ras al-Ayn area after the Operation Peace Spring (although in a lesser scale than in Afrin).¹⁶³⁴ In addition, the Col has observed ‘repeated patterns of systematic looting and property appropriation’ and ‘widespread arbitrary deprivation of liberty’ and holds various Turkish-backed armed groups responsible for these violations. Turkish-backed armed group members (and their families) have also taken control of the houses vacated by the fleeing residents and resorted into various forms of coercion, including abductions, torture, and murder, to force some residents, most of them ethnic Kurds, to flee their homes¹⁶³⁵

The Carter Center reported on cases of looting in Operation Peace Spring area, and particularly in Turkish-controlled parts of Hasaka governorate, during the first half of 2020.¹⁶³⁶ In early April 2020, infighting among Turkish-backed armed groups in Ras al-Ayn over rights to loot was also reported. According to Carter Center this infighting was ‘a larger trend’ in Turkish-controlled areas.¹⁶³⁷ According to SOHR, the internal disputes between Turkish-backed armed groups in Operation Peace Spring area intensified in the preceding few months (before the publication of SOHR’s October 2020 update) leading to infighting between the groups.¹⁶³⁸ The Col notes that the organisation received information about the infighting between Turkish-backed armed groups in Ras al-Ayn in June 2020.¹⁶³⁹ STJ report of March 2021 contains information on 9 cases of crop looting and 3 cases of expropriation of agricultural lands in Ras al-Ayn between April and June 2020, with cases of extorted land rent also reported.¹⁶⁴⁰

SOHR claims that human rights violations by Turkish-backed armed groups are connected to Turkish policy of ‘demographic change’ in the Operation Peace Spring area.¹⁶⁴¹ The UN Security Council report of June 2020, discussing the period between April and May 2020, notes the transfer of families of Turkish-backed armed group fighters from Jarabulus area to Ras al-Ayn and Tall Abyad where these families took over the houses of civilians displaced from their homes.¹⁶⁴² According to al-Hilu, Turkey has repopulated Ras al-Ayn with IDPs from other parts of Syria and with families of Turkmen fighters deployed to the area. This demographic policy has been implemented at the expense of Ras al-Ayn’s former inhabitants associated with the Autonomous Administration and forcibly displaced from the area. Al-Hilu cites data according to which only 12 % of the population has returned to Ras al-Ayn with most of the returnees being either members of the local Arab tribes or activists and other people wanted by the SDF.¹⁶⁴³ According to al-Hilu, Sultan Murad and Hamza Divisions have seized approximately 800 homes belonging to Kurds or Arabs associated with the Autonomous

¹⁶³⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/55], 11 March 2021 [published 1 March 2020], [url](#), p. 13 [para. 38]

¹⁶³⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), pp. 10-11 [para. 46, 49 & 50]

¹⁶³⁶ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 9-15 March 2020, [url](#), p. 4; Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 13-19 April 2020, [url](#), p. 4; Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 15-21 June 2020, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁶³⁷ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 6-12 April 2020, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁶³⁸ SOHR, “Peace Spring” a year on: A new map of influence...growing humanitarian disaster and continuous Turkish violations, 9 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶³⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 3 [para. 5]

¹⁶⁴⁰ STJ, Syria: Crops Looted, Lands Seized in “Peace Spring” Territories, 11 March 2021, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁶⁴¹ SOHR, “Peace Spring” a year on: A new map of influence...growing humanitarian disaster and continuous Turkish violations, 9 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁴² 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 6 [para. 18]

¹⁶⁴³ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 9

Administration.¹⁶⁴⁴ Almost 2 000 families of SNA fighters have been settled to Ras al-Ayn from northern Aleppo governorate.¹⁶⁴⁵

According to the Col, civilians making complaints to SNA leaders have faced threats, extortion, detention and kidnappings for ransom at the hands of SNA members, with the Col expressing concern for 'the prevalent and recurrent use of hostage-taking' by Turkish-backed armed groups. In addition, Turkish-backed armed groups have detained civilians, with the most frequent reason being supposed links to the Autonomous Administration. While in detention, civilians have been subjected to beatings, torture, deprivation of food and water. Col notes that the detainees are mainly of Kurdish origin and that both their faith and ethnicity have brought up during the interrogations, in some cases in the presence of Turkish officials.¹⁶⁴⁶ The Col pays special attention to the fact that Turkish-backed armed groups have allegedly detained at least 49 Kurdish and Yazidi women in the areas of Ras al-Ayn and Afrin in the November 2019–July 2020 period. Women and girls residing in these areas have been subjected to intimidation, detention, rape and sexual violence at the hands of SNA-members and they have suffered psychological harm as a result of the stigma associated with the breach of 'female honor'. In addition, the Col notes the allegations of abductions and forced marriages targeting Kurdish women in these areas, with the members of Sultan Murad Brigade named as the main perpetrators.¹⁶⁴⁷

According to the Col, Syrian nationals detained in Ras al-Ayn by Turkish-backed armed groups and indicted for crimes committed in the area have been transferred to Turkey in violation of Turkey's obligations as an occupying power in the Operation Peace Spring area.¹⁶⁴⁸ In February 2021, Human Rights Watch reported on at least 63 Syrian nationals detained by Turkish forces and Turkish-backed armed groups between October and December 2019 in Ras al-Ayn and transferred to detention facilities in Turkey. In Turkey, the detainees are facing charges under the Turkish Penal Code for alleged crimes committed in Syria.¹⁶⁴⁹

With regard to violations reported specifically in Ras al-Ayn, the Col names SNA's Hamza Division as the armed group responsible for 'widespread and organized looting and property appropriation'. Civilians from Ras al-Ayn, interviewed by the Col, had fears about their ability to remain in the area or to return from displacement into their looted homes. According to the Col, civilian houses have been appropriated also by the Turkish armed forces in Dawoudiya village, north of Tall Tamer, and utilised thereafter for military purposes.¹⁶⁵⁰ Concerning cases of arbitrary detention and torture, the Col discusses the case of two women detained at a jointly administered Turkish/SNA checkpoint in Ras al-Ayn area in November 2019 with one of the women threatened with rape and physically abused during the interrogation.¹⁶⁵¹

¹⁶⁴⁴ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁶⁴⁵ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁶⁴⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 12 [para. 52, 53 & 54]

¹⁶⁴⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 13 [para. 56]

¹⁶⁴⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 13 [para. 57]

¹⁶⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch, Illegal Transfers of Syrians to Turkey, 3 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), pp. 11, 12 [para. 49, 50 & 51]

¹⁶⁵¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 12 [para. 54]

Tensions between the SDF and other actors in north-east Syria

According to the USDOD report discussing the period between January and March 2020, the local communities in SDF-controlled areas face pressure from ‘state actors in the region’ to relinquish their support to the SDF. The pressure is compounded by the ethnic rivalry between Arabs and Kurds, communities’ sense of neglect and the allegations criticising the SDF’s repressive security measures.¹⁶⁵² In the USDOD report discussing the period between April and June 2020, the GoS, Russia, Turkey and Iran and affiliated militias are mentioned explicitly as the actors responsible for putting pressure on north-east Syria’s local Arab population.¹⁶⁵³

According to USDOD, the GoS has exerted pressure on the populations of north-east Syria by holding public tribal meetings to garner declarations of support, by conscripting or recruiting locals into pro-government forces, by proposing reconciliation arrangements and by threatening the population with violence. Russia has exerted pressure by acting as a representative for the GoS, providing aid deliveries and financial and economic incentives, deploying its military police and recruiting to Russian-backed pro-government armed groups (also for the conflict in Libya). Iran, Hezbollah, and other Iranian-backed armed groups have exerted pressure by offering financial and economic incentives in exchange for support or conversion to Shi’ism, by recruiting fighters to Iranian-backed groups and by deploying these groups into local Arab community areas. Turkey has supported armed groups and tribal bodies with ties to SDF-controlled areas, although USDOD estimates that these bodies have little sway over the populations in SDF-held areas.¹⁶⁵⁴

COAR Global speculates that the July 2020 oil deal between the Autonomous Administration and a US-based company – and the concomitant strengthening of the US’ influence in north-east Syria – might be linked to the ‘increased protests, targeted assassinations, and politically-motivated violence’ in the SDF-controlled areas that are ‘likely’ utilised by the GoS as a means to destabilize the Autonomous Administration.¹⁶⁵⁵ According to an analysis by COAR Global from 31 August 2020, the security incidents reported in north-east Syria ‘paint a picture of a region in which local parties to the conflict, regional actors, and international powers are all deploying increasingly hostile tactics to tip the balance of power and secure parochial self-interest’.¹⁶⁵⁶ These incidents include the confrontations between the US and Russia (discussed below), the GoS attempts to exploit the grievance of north-east Syria’s local Arab and tribal populations (discussed in the context of Deir Ez-Zor governorate in [Section Tribal protests in the SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor](#)), the (potentially linked) assassinations of local tribal notables and Turkish-backed Syrian National Army’s (SNA) possible weaponisation of water targeting western Hasaka governorate (see above).

The tensions between the SDF and the GoS rose to prominence in late 2020/early 2021. According to COAR Global, the SDF-affiliated Asayish detained three officers and dozens of other GoS forces’ members in Qamishli city on 10 January 2021. In addition, Asayish surrounded the GoS-controlled Halko, Taye and Zanko neighbourhoods, blocking the movement of food and medicine. The blockade led to protests in the GoS-controlled enclave and to similar blockade enforced by the GoS forces and targeting the PYD/YPG-controlled Shaykh Maqsoud neighbourhood in Aleppo city. On 17 January 2021 the confrontation between the SDF and the GoS expanded to Hasaka city, where the SDF enforced a blockade targeting the GoS-controlled enclave in the city. In addition, the SDF presented the GoS with an ultimatum, requesting the withdrawal of the GoS forces from both cities before 20 January 2021. COAR Global notes that the confrontation escalated a week after detention

¹⁶⁵² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 55

¹⁶⁵³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 54

¹⁶⁵⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 55

¹⁶⁵⁵ COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵⁶ COAR, Self-Administration steps back from negotiations, as attacks step up across the northeast, 31 August 2020, [url](#)

of civilian employees of the Autonomous Administration by the GoS Airforce Intelligence and reciprocal arrests by the Asayish targeting the GoS.¹⁶⁵⁷

The blockades continued at the end of January 2021. The later half of the month saw more protests in GoS-held enclaves in Hasaka and Qamishli, attended by local tribal figures. According to local media sources, cited by COAR Global, Russian forces deployed additional troops to Qamishli airport on 23 January 2021, likely in order to put pressure on the SDF.¹⁶⁵⁸ According to the UN Security Council, the tensions between the GoS and the SDF also led to 'mutual detention incidents, the arrest of government forces and the prevention of government employees from accessing their workplaces'.¹⁶⁵⁹ According to Wladimir van Wilgenburg, reporting for Kurdistan 24, NDF fighters attacked an Asayish checkpoint in Qamishli's Halko neighbourhood on 23 January 2021. One NDF fighter was killed in the attack. Wilgenburg describes the incident as an illustration of increasing tensions between the GoS and the SDF in the city.¹⁶⁶⁰ On 30 January 2021, NDF fighters attacked an Asayish checkpoint in Marsho neighbourhood in Hasaka city. One person was killed and three others were wounded in the incident that took place after the protests against the Asayish-enforced blockade on the GoS enclave in the city.¹⁶⁶¹

The mediation by Russia led to the de-escalation of the confrontation on 2 February 2021.¹⁶⁶² According to COAR Global the blockades were partially lifted, allowing the movement of some goods, including food and fuel.¹⁶⁶³ According to the UN Security Council report of February 2021, the security situation in the area 'remained tense'.¹⁶⁶⁴ In a April 2021 report, discussing the situation in Syria in February and March 2021, the UN Security Council notes that 'some de-escalation of tensions' had taken place between the GoS and the SDF. However, it is also stated that the 'security posture of both parties remained heightened' and that 'sporadic confrontations and mutual detentions' were reported.¹⁶⁶⁵

According to an analysis by COAR Global, SDF-affiliated Asayish arrested six teachers in Darbasiyah, northern Hasaka governorate on 20 January 2021 after they had been exposed for organising private lessons following the GoS curriculum. The arrests led to protests organised by teachers and students which were dispersed by the Asayish and led to more arrests.¹⁶⁶⁶ Wilgenburg reports that the raids took place on 19 January and that, all in all, seven teachers were arrested.¹⁶⁶⁷ The UN Security Council report of February 2021 notes that the SDF-affiliated authorities released the arrested teachers and students 'after several days', with only one teacher still in custody.¹⁶⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵⁷ COAR, Qamishli Clashes: GoS and SDF Seek Pressure Points, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵⁸ COAR, Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 10]

¹⁶⁶⁰ van Wilgenburg, W., Syrian government troops attack Kurdish forces in Qamishli, Kurdistan 24, 23 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶¹ van Wilgenburg, W., Syrian regime-aligned militia, Kurdish-led forces clash in Hasakah; casualties reported, Kurdistan 24, 31 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶² COAR, Sweeping Real Estate Sales Tax Reform Discussed, 8 February 2021, [url](#); van Wilgenburg, W., Kurdish-led authorities in Syria reach deal with Damascus to lower tensions, Kurdistan 24, 2 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶³ COAR, Sweeping Real Estate Sales Tax Reform Discussed, 8 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 12 [para. 41]

¹⁶⁶⁵ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3 [Para. 5]

¹⁶⁶⁶ COAR, Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶⁷ van Wilgenburg, W., Disputes, arrests over school curriculum in northeastern Syria, Kurdistan 24, 29 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 6 [para. 23]

Tensions between the US-led Coalition and Russia

According to the USDOD report published in November 2020, tensions between US-led Coalition and Russian forces increased in August with Russian forces increasing their encroachments into SDF/Coalition-controlled areas, possibly as the result of oil deal made between the Autonomous Administration and a US based oil company in late July 2020. The majority of these incidents occurred 'in or around the north-eastern Qamishli deconfliction zone' with 'Russian forces routinely enter[ing] the Coalition areas south of the deconfliction zone' both on the ground and in the air.¹⁶⁶⁹

On 25 August 2020, as a result of confrontation between US and Russian forces, a Russian military vehicle hit an American military vehicle on purpose near Al-Malikiya.¹⁶⁷⁰ Several US soldiers were injured in the incident.¹⁶⁷¹ COAR Global connects the incident to tensions caused by the oil deal between the Autonomous Administration and an US based oil company.¹⁶⁷² According to information provided by CJTF-OIR, in addition to Russia, also the GoS forces were trying to increase their presence in Hasaka governorate.¹⁶⁷³ According to USDoD, on 17 August 2020, the expansion of GoS presence in Hasaka governorate led to an attack by GoS forces targeting US-led Coalition forces at a GoS checkpoint.¹⁶⁷⁴ According to ISW the incident involved also the SDF and took place in Tall al-Zahab.¹⁶⁷⁵ One¹⁶⁷⁶ or two¹⁶⁷⁷ GoS soldiers were killed in the incident.

The USDOD report for February 2021 notes that the tensions between the US-led Coalition and Russian forces in north-east Syria decreased during the last three months of 2020, along with the Russian military activity. Between October and December 2020, the Russian forces were still attempting to erect military posts near Malikiya and operating near Rmeila and Qahtaniya where the August 2020 confrontation took place, although their attempts to gain a foothold in the oilfields had decreased.¹⁶⁷⁸ However, the operation environment for US-led Coalition in north-east Syria remained 'complex' due to the presence of Russian and GoS forces in the area.¹⁶⁷⁹

Opposition to the SDF's rule

According to an assessment by United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) and USDOS, cited in the USDOD report of August 2020, the power-sharing arrangement between ethnic Kurds and Arabs in the SDF-controlled North-East Syria is 'imbalanced' and encumbered by the enduring rivalries between different Arab tribes.¹⁶⁸⁰ The efforts by the SDF and the SDC to include Arab leaders have been limited. Local Arabs involved in SDF-affiliated military and civilian institutions 'lack equal

¹⁶⁶⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020,3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 60

¹⁶⁷⁰ COAR, Self-Administration steps back from negotiations, as attacks step up across the northeast, 31 August 2020, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 19 - September 1, 2020, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁷¹ COAR, Self-Administration steps back from negotiations, as attacks step up across the northeast, 31 August 2020, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 19 - September 1, 2020, 4 September 2020, [url](#); USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#) p. 61

¹⁶⁷² COAR, Self-Administration steps back from negotiations, as attacks step up across the northeast, 31 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁷³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020,3 November 2020, [url](#) p. 61

¹⁶⁷⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#) p. 61

¹⁶⁷⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁷⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#) p. 61

¹⁶⁷⁷ ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁷⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 60

¹⁶⁷⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁶⁸⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1,2020–June 30,2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 54

influence and feel excluded from military and political decision-making processes'. Among the Arab leaders involved, 'decision-making authority is disproportionately concentrated in the hands of a small number of individuals' closely associated with the PYD.¹⁶⁸¹ A field study published by UNESCWA in March 2021 describes this power-sharing arrangement as 'one of the main grievances', especially among north-east Syria's Arab population, and describes the sense of 'overall disproportionately low Arab participation in Kurdish-led governance and military structures' and of the leading role of PKK-trained Kurds (the 'cadres', discussed further in Section [1.4.3 Syrian Democratic Forces](#)) as its main sources.¹⁶⁸²

According to the Col report discussing the first half of 2020, the SDF and associated actors detained civilians and subjected them to torture and kept resorting to practice of using children in military roles.¹⁶⁸³ The Col notes eight cases where civilians, including 'civil society workers, political activists and persons of Arab ethnicity', had been arbitrarily detained by the SDF and the YPG in the governorates of Hasaka and Raqqqa. These civilians were held in SDF intelligence facilities or prisons and their legal safeguards as detainees had been violated. The Col also discusses two cases of torture and ill-treatment, both from Hasaka governorate. First involved a member of an Arab tribe taken into custody by the SDF military intelligence for supposedly collaborating with Turkey, held incommunicado in different facilities between March 2019–March 2020 and subjected to solitary confinement, deprivation of food and water and methodological physical abuse by the SDF. Second involved a political activist taken into SDF custody in November 2019 and subjected to solitary confinement, methodically administered physical abuse and torture during the detention.¹⁶⁸⁴

In 2020, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) continued their so-called 'unity talks' in order to create a joint governing body¹⁶⁸⁵ and potentially a wider 'power-sharing framework'.¹⁶⁸⁶ According to The Washington Institute's Sirwan Kajjo, the central security related disagreements between the PYD and the KNC are related to the forced military conscription by the SDF and to the role of the Rojava Peshmerga, a competing KDP-backed armed force with 8 000 fighters currently based in the KRG.¹⁶⁸⁷ Other security related contentious issues include the Autonomous Administration's need to distance itself from the PKK and to expel from its ranks the PKK's non-Syrian 'cadres'¹⁶⁸⁸, who have played a central role in its civilian and military institutions. At the end of the reference period, the 'unity talks' had stalled.¹⁶⁸⁹

The Al-Monitor article published in December 2020 claims that the PKK is 'likely signaling displeasure' towards the 'unity talks' by resisting the efforts of the SDF commander-in-chief Mazlum Kobane to end child recruitment in the SDF-controlled areas. According to Al-Monitor, the PKK-affiliated Revolutionary Youth (*Ciwanen Soresger*) has resumed the recruitment of minors in the SDF-controlled areas and targeted their parents with 'threats and intimidation'.¹⁶⁹⁰ According to COAR Global, armed

¹⁶⁸¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 54

¹⁶⁸² Megally, H. & El-Gamal, J. M., Preventing the Reemergence of Violent Extremism in Northeast Syria, UNESCWA & CIC, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 21–22

¹⁶⁸³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 15

¹⁶⁸⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 16

¹⁶⁸⁵ Kajjo, S., Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2020, [url](#), p. 2, *passim*; Netjes, R. & Hauch, L., The Gordian knot of Kurdish unity talks in Syria, The Atlantic Council, 22 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸⁶ COAR, PYD-KNC peace talks: Whither peace in Syria's northeast?, 28 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸⁷ Kajjo, S., Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 5–6

¹⁶⁸⁸ COAR, PYD-KNC peace talks: Whither peace in Syria's northeast?, 28 September 2020, [url](#); Netjes, R. & Hauch, L., The Gordian knot of Kurdish unity talks in Syria, The Atlantic Council, 22 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸⁹ Dri, K. F., Rojava parties blame each other for stalled unity talks, Rudaw, 1 April 2021, [url](#); van Wilgenburg, W., US ready to facilitate return to contentious Syrian Kurdish dialogue: Envoy, Kurdistan 24, 29 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁹⁰ Zaman, A. & Wilkofsky, D., Child recruitment casts shadow over Syrian Kurds' push for global legitimacy, Al-Monitor, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

individuals likely associated with the PKK ‘attacked the offices of rival local Kurdish political parties’ on 16 December 2020 in the cities of Amuda, Darbasiyah, Hasaka and Ayn al-Arab (Kobane). COAR Global estimates that the attack was linked to the clash between the YPG and the Iraqi Peshmerga in Fish Khabur/ Semalka border crossing on 15 December 2020.¹⁶⁹¹

During the reference period for this report, protests against the SDF and the affiliated civil administration, reported especially in SDF-controlled Deir Ez-Zor governorate (see [Section Tribal protests in the SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor](#)), were reported also in Hasaka governorate.¹⁶⁹²

ISIL’s insurgency in Hasaka governorate

According to Rojava Information Center (RIC), affiliated to the Autonomous Administration, 572 attacks, presumably carried out by ISIL, were reported in the SDF-controlled North-East Syria in 2020. All in all, 299 people were reportedly killed in these attacks. The authorities conducted 221 security operations targeting ISIL sleeper cells and 575 arrests targeting allegedly ISIL-affiliated individuals. The wide majority of the attacks were carried out in eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate, with only 134 attacks reported in other parts of the SDF-controlled areas (for monthly figures, see [Section ISIL’s insurgency in Deir Ez-Zor](#)).¹⁶⁹³ According to RIC, in 2020, ISIL ‘switched tactics’ and focused on the assassination campaign of ‘high valued targets’, i.e. local civilian and military leaders, instead of engaging in direct clashes with the SDF (and other forces) at security checkpoints or military bases. As in the previous year, ISIL also utilised IED’s and VBIED’s in its attacks.¹⁶⁹⁴

According to information by USCENTCOM, cited in the USDOD report of May 2020, ISIL attacks in Hasaka governorate decreased 80 % between January and March 2020 when compared to the previous quarter.¹⁶⁹⁵ Between April and June 2020, the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) did not observe any increase in ISIL’s activities in Hasaka governorate.¹⁶⁹⁶ According to RIC, in February 2020, ISIL carried out 61 attacks in SDF-controlled North-East Syria. Only 4 of these were carried out in Hasaka governorate, while no attacks were reported in ‘any of the northern Kurdish cities along the border’.¹⁶⁹⁷ However, according to the August 2020 report by the Col, attacks by ISIL targeting the US-led international coalition and the SDF in Hasaka governorate increased in the first half of 2020 (11 January-1 July 2020).¹⁶⁹⁸ According to a 29 May 2020 assessment by Aaron Zelin, ISIL had conducted 153 attacks in Hasaka governorate in the last 14 months.¹⁶⁹⁹

According to the OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, 11 assassinations or attacks with explosives occurred in the SDF-controlled parts of Hasaka governorate in the period between January and June 2020. None of these attacks took place in January, while 2¹⁷⁰⁰ attacks were reported in February, 1 in

¹⁶⁹¹ COAR, Need for seed: Damascus increasingly desperate for wheat, 21 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁹² Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 8-14 June 2020, [url](#), p. 5; Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 22-28 June 2020, [url](#), p. 5; Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 1 - 7 February 2021, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁹³ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁶⁹⁴ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁶⁹⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁶⁹⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27

¹⁶⁹⁷ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 3, 7

¹⁶⁹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 15 [para. 70]

¹⁶⁹⁹ Zelin, A. Y. & Knights, M., The Islamic State’s Resurgence in the COVID Era?, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 29 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁰⁰ With regard to February 2020, the OMRAN report contains conflicting information on the number of incidents, with either 1 or 2 incidents reported. Since the latter number is used by OMRAN to calculate the overall number of incidents between July 2019–June 2020, this number is used here as well. See OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 19

March, 1 in April, 5 in May, and 2 in June.¹⁷⁰¹ Between July 2019 and June 2020, all in all 50 attacks were reported, including 26 attacks with explosives and 24 assassinations and resulting in 221 casualties. 152 of the reported casualties were civilians who were directly targeted in 22 of the attacks.¹⁷⁰² OMRAN states that the number of VBIED's (22) reported in Hasaka governorate during the period between July 2019 and June 2020 demonstrated the 'fragility' of Autonomous Administration's security structure when it comes to preventing these attacks. OMRAN estimates that these attacks were carried out by ISIL sleeper cells and actors associated with the GoS/Iran and hostile towards the SDF and the YPG.¹⁷⁰³

According to USDOD, ISIL continued its operations in Hasaka governorate between July and September 2020, although in a less active manner than in Deir Ez-Zor or Homs. In late August, ISIL assassinated 4 members of local SDF-affiliated militia in the southern Hasaka province which showed that it was still capable in conducting operations in the governorate.¹⁷⁰⁴ According to RIC, ISIL carried out 45 attacks in the SDF-controlled North-East Syria in October 2020¹⁷⁰⁵, of which 7 took place in Hasaka governorate.¹⁷⁰⁶ According to journalist Zain al-Abidin, interviewed for the Al-Monitor article published in November 2020, ISIL has targeted the SDF in the 'area between southern Raqqa and south-eastern countryside of Hasaka[governorate]'. According to al-Abidin, ISIL has 'constantly' targeted SDF patrols along the Kharafi road, linking the governorates of Deir Ez-Zor and Hasaka.¹⁷⁰⁷

The UN Security Council report of April 2021, discussing the situation in Syria in February and March 2021, notes that ISIL continued to target the GoS forces and the SDF with ambushes and assassination attempts also in Hasaka governorate.¹⁷⁰⁸ According to the USDOD, ISIL's 'small-scale IED and hit-and-run attacks' and assassinations continued in Syria in the period between January and March 2021¹⁷⁰⁹, with assassinations targeting 'tribal and civic leaders and other influential figures' also in SDF-controlled parts of Hasaka governorate.¹⁷¹⁰ USDOD notes that both members of security forces and civilians were targeted by these assassinations.¹⁷¹¹

The security situation in Al-Hol Camp

According to the UN Security Council report of February 2021, approximately 61 800 suspected ISIL family members are still residing in Al-Hol Camp, 94 % of whom are women and children, of which

¹⁷⁰¹ OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 16–19

¹⁷⁰² OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁷⁰³ OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 23, 27

¹⁷⁰⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020,3 November 2020, [url](#) pp. 23, 24.

¹⁷⁰⁵ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁷⁰⁶ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁷⁰⁷ Al-Kanj, S., Islamic State regroups in Syrian Kurdish region, Al-Monitor, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁰⁸ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3 [Para. 6]

¹⁷⁰⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1,2021–March 31,2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁷¹⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1,2021–March 31,2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁷¹¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1,2021–March 31,2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), p. 62

53 % are younger than 12 years of age.¹⁷¹² In 2020, attacks¹⁷¹³ targeting the SDF-affiliated camp guards and an increase in violent incidents in the camp were reported.¹⁷¹⁴

According to an analysis by COAR Global, the security situation on Al-Hol Camp worsened in January 2021, with 12 residents killed in the first 16 days of the month. COAR Global estimates that probably the most significant factor weakening the conditions in the camp is the 'inability of the camp management to limit or mitigate residents' exposure to radical ideology.'¹⁷¹⁵ According to RIC, in January 2021, 20 people were killed, 10 of them beheaded, in Al Hol camp in January 2021.¹⁷¹⁶ According to the UN Security Council, the UN had received information on at least 14 killings in the period between 1 and 28 January 2021.¹⁷¹⁷

In February 2021 all in all 19 deaths were recorded: 9 people were assassinated, including a member of the SDF, and 9 people killed because of a fire.¹⁷¹⁸ In addition, a MSF-worker was killed by unknown actors, which resulted in MSF halting temporarily its operations in the camp.¹⁷¹⁹ According to RIC, the 'trend of attacks' by ISIL-affiliates in Al-Hol began in September 2020, when 6 attacks in the camp were reported.¹⁷²⁰

According to the UN Security Council report of April 2021, discussing the situation in Syria in February and March 2021, at least 42 residents of Al-Hol camp had been killed in 2021.¹⁷²¹ Late March 2021, the SDF responded to the rising levels of violence by launching an anti-ISIL security operation inside Al-Hol Camp with the support of US-led Coalition.¹⁷²² The security operation was concluded on 1 April 2021, with 125 camp residents detained as the result of the operation.¹⁷²³

Security incidents

According to ACLED data, there were 1 251 security incidents recorded in Hasaka governorate, of whom 369 were coded as battles, 506 explosions/remote violence and 374 incidents of violence against civilians. Higher levels of security incidents were recorded between September 2020 and February 2021 (see Figure 31).¹⁷²⁴

¹⁷¹² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 12]

¹⁷¹³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 53

¹⁷¹⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁷¹⁵ COAR, Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷¹⁶ Rojava Information Center, Report: High Value Arrest and High Profile Assassinations Kick Off New Year, 7 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷¹⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 12]

¹⁷¹⁸ Rojava Information Center, Report: High Arrests from SDF and Al Hol Murders Continue in February, 7 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷¹⁹ MSF, MSF denounces unsafe environment in Al-Hol camp in wake of staff killing, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷²⁰ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Ccell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁷²¹ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3 [Para. 7]

¹⁷²² BBC News, Kurdish-led campaign under way to rid al-Hol camp of IS, 28 March 2021, [url](#); Kajjo S. & Omer, Z., US-Backed Syrian Forces Launch Anti-IS Campaign in al-Hol Camp, VOA, 29 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷²³ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3 [Para. 7]

¹⁷²⁴ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

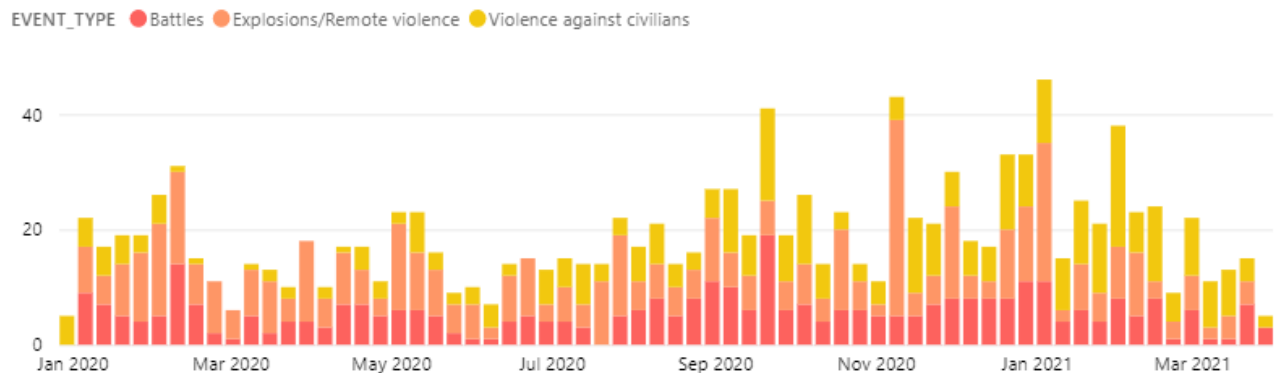


Figure 31. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Hasaka governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data¹⁷²⁵

Security incidents were recorded in all Hasaka governorate districts during the reporting period. However, significant with higher number of overall incidents being recorded in Hasaka (683) and Ras Al Ain (434) districts (see Figure 32).¹⁷²⁶

Hasaka governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Hasaka	198	223	264
Malikeyyeh	3	18	14
Qamishli	28	26	43
Ras Al Ain	140	239	55
Total	369	506	374

Figure 32. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Hasaka governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

Illustrative security incidents

- On 6 March 2020, a VBIED attack targeted Turkish forces positioned in Hammam al-Turkman¹⁷²⁷, south of Tall Abyad. The attack targeted a joint checkpoint of TAF/Turkish-backed armed groups. Two Turkish soldiers and two SNA-members were killed and one soldier injured.¹⁷²⁸
- On 16 March 2020, a VBIED exploded in Shaddadi city, injuring at least two civilians.¹⁷²⁹
- On 4 April 2020, a member of SDF-affiliated Asayish was killed in a clash with the NDF that took place in an NDF-run checkpoint. One civilian was also killed in the incident.¹⁷³⁰
- On 2 May 2020, pro-GoS armed forces looted civilian properties in Abu Rasin and Tall Tamer.¹⁷³¹

¹⁷²⁵ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

¹⁷²⁶ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

¹⁷²⁷ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 2-9 March 2020, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁷²⁸ Al-Ali, Z., Turkish soldiers killed in a car explosion south of Tal Abyad, NPA, 6 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷²⁹ 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/2020/327], 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

¹⁷³⁰ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 30 March-5 April 2020, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁷³¹ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 27 April-3 May 2020, [url](#), p. 5

- On 17 May 2020, exchange of small arms fire erupted between armed groups near Makran village. One civilian was killed and another injured.¹⁷³²
- On 4 June 2020, the SDF fired into the air in order to break a peaceful protest in Shaddadi city, in the rural areas of southern Hasaka governorate, killing one civilian and wounding three others in the altercation.¹⁷³³
- On 5 June, a VBIED exploded in Ras al-Ayn city killing one child and wounding seven other civilians.¹⁷³⁴
- On 6 June 2020, a VBIED exploded in the Ghanam livestock market in the town of Tall Halaf, located in Ras al-Ayn area, killing four civilians and wounding four others.¹⁷³⁵
- On 23 June 2020, a VBIED exploded in a market in the town of Tall Halaf, located in Ras al-Ayn area, killing five civilians and wounding 18 others.¹⁷³⁶
- On 3 July 2020, an exchange of machine gun and RPG fire broke out between armed groups in Ras al-Ayn city, killing a child and wounding six other civilians.¹⁷³⁷
- On 11 August 2020, the UN Security Council noted an unspecified incident that led to 'a civilian man' getting killed at a checkpoint located near the town of Qahtaniya, in the rural areas of northern Hasaka governorate.¹⁷³⁸ According to United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Qahtaniya area has been marked with tensions that have affected especially those more than 100 displaced families, who are 'mostly Kurds not aligned with the dominant political parties'.¹⁷³⁹
- On 24 September 2020, a suspected VBIED exploded in the town of Tall Halaf, in Ras al-Ayn area, wounding at least one civilian. Roughly an hour later another suspected VBIED exploded in the town killing two civilians and wounding six others.¹⁷⁴⁰
- On 1 November, the leader of Deir Ez-Zor Military Council Abu Khawla survived an assassination attempt in Hasaka city. On that same day, an Asayish commander was assassinated in Markadah, in southern Hasaka governorate.¹⁷⁴¹
- On 3 November 2020, the SDF arrested a Tayy tribe spokesman in Qamishli city, presumably as a reaction to the tribe's support for the presence of Turkish forces in areas surrounding the city.¹⁷⁴² On 15 November, Tayy tribal leaders held a gathering in Jormuz area, declared their

¹⁷³² 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

¹⁷³³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 20 [Annex]

¹⁷³⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 20 [Annex]

¹⁷³⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 20 [Annex]

¹⁷³⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 20–21 [Annex]

¹⁷³⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 21 [Annex]

¹⁷³⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 17 [Annex]

¹⁷³⁹ USIP, The Current Situation in Syria, 26 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 17 [Annex]

¹⁷⁴¹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: October 28 - November 10, 2020, 13 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴² ISW, Syria Situation Report: October 28 - November 10, 2020, 13 November 2020, [url](#)

support for President Bashar al-Assad, the SAA and Russia and called for Arab tribes to expel the SDF, US forces and Turkey from north-east Syria.¹⁷⁴³

- On 27 November 2020, a VBIED claimed the lives of three SNA fighters and injured four others in a Turkish-backed armed group checkpoint in Mabrouka, in the eastern part of Operation Peace Spring area. ISW estimates that the attack was carried out either by ISIL or the PKK.¹⁷⁴⁴
- On 2 January 2021, a VBIED exploded and killed two children and wounded one other civilian in Ras al-Ayn.¹⁷⁴⁵
- On 22 January 2021, two female employees of local civil administration were abducted and beheaded in the countryside of Shaddadi, in southern Hasaka governorate.¹⁷⁴⁶ According to Wladimir van Wilgenburg, reporting for Kurdistan 24, the victims' bodies were discovered in al-Dashisha, which is described by a local researcher as a 'well-known' ISIL headquarters in Hasaka governorate.¹⁷⁴⁷ The killing of 'the head of a local council and her deputy' was also noted by the UN Security Council.¹⁷⁴⁸
- On 25 February 2021, a VBIED exploded in Faruj market in Ras al-Ayn city, killing five civilians and injuring one.¹⁷⁴⁹

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	5	7	18	25
February	10	6	24	17
March	5	11	14	31
April	6	9		
May	9	6		
June	14	10		
July	23	14		
August	14	17		
September	11	15		
October	13	7		
November	12	7		
December	3	8		
Total	125	117	56	73

Figure 33. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Hasaka governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

¹⁷⁴³ ISW, Syria Situation Report: November 11-December 1, 2020, 3 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: November 11-December 1, 2020, 3 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

¹⁷⁴⁶ NPA, Women's Board in AANES condemns beheading of two female civil employees, 24 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴⁷ van Wilgenburg, W., Two local female politicians abducted and killed in northeast Syria, Kurdistan 24, 24 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 5 [para. 20]

¹⁷⁴⁹ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

In 2020, Hasaka had between 117¹⁷⁵⁰ (SNHR data)¹⁷⁵¹ and 125 civilian fatalities (VDC data).¹⁷⁵² Most civilian fatalities were documented between July and September 2020. In the first three months of 2021, SNHR recorded 56 civilian fatalities in Hasaka, while VDC recorded 73 civilian fatalities (see Figure 33).

Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war

UNESCWA estimates the cost of physical capital loss of Hasaka governorate between 2011-2018 around USD 1.3 billion (1.6 % of all the damage inflicted on Syrian physical capital) and states that there have been only 'minimal and isolated episodes of conflict' in the governorate under firm control of the Kurdish forces.¹⁷⁵³

According to Mine Action Review's 2020 report on mine clearance, the retreating 'Islamic State' fighters 'left massive contamination of mines of an improvised nature and other improvised devices' causing heavy damage to the returning civilians in areas under ISIL's former influence in Hasaka governorate.¹⁷⁵⁴ Mine Action Review notes that international and national demining organisations have taken part in demining activities in areas under SDF control in north-east Syria. Humanitarian demining organisations and commercial companies have reportedly carried out 'large-scale clearance' in former ISIL areas with a company called Tetra Tech operating in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Baghuz and focusing on critical infrastructure (healthcare, schools, water and electricity).¹⁷⁵⁵

Mine Action Review's 2020 report describes the 'safe zone', established during Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 and covering parts of northern Hasaka and Raqqa governorates, as 'heavily contaminated by mines and improvised devices'.¹⁷⁵⁶ The report adds that, according to humanitarian organisations, the contamination of the Operation Peace Spring area has led to civilian casualties.¹⁷⁵⁷ The report notes that Turkey has cleared mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the area¹⁷⁵⁸, although it has not provided details of the mine clearing operations (to the monitoring organisations).¹⁷⁵⁹

¹⁷⁵⁰ In a January 2021 report, SNHR mentions 118 civilian fatalities in Hasaka in 2020. This figure is the result of a revision of their data. EASO email correspondence with SNHR, 22 April 2021. See SNHR, *Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020*, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁷⁵¹ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, *Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians*, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, *Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians*, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, *Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians*, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, *Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020*, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁷⁵² Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

¹⁷⁵³ UNESCWA/ University of St Andrews, *Syria at War; Eight Years On, 2020* [published on 23 September 2020], [url](#), p. 50–51

¹⁷⁵⁴ Mine Action Review, *Clearing the Mines 2020*, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 378

¹⁷⁵⁵ Mine Action Review, *Clearing the Mines 2020*, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 379

¹⁷⁵⁶ Mine Action Review, *Clearing the Mines 2020*, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 274

¹⁷⁵⁷ Mine Action Review, *Clearing the Mines 2020*, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 270

¹⁷⁵⁸ Mine Action Review, *Clearing the Mines 2020*, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 379

¹⁷⁵⁹ Mine Action Review, *Clearing the Mines 2020*, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 274

In January 2020, Turkish state-run news service Anadolu Agency cited a statement by the Turkish Ministry of National Defense according to which Turkish forces had dismantled 891 landmines and 1 660 IEDs in the Operation Peace Spring area.¹⁷⁶⁰ In a similar statement from late March 2020, Turkish MoD reported the dismantling of 38 claymore mines, three anti-tank mines and five kilograms of explosive material.¹⁷⁶¹ In January 2021, Turkish pro-government newspaper Daily Sabah referred to a MoD statement, according to which Turkish military had started to provide the landmine awareness education for children living in the Operation Peace Spring area. In addition, Daily Sabah mentions Turkey's efforts to demine the 'safe zone' area.¹⁷⁶²

Displacement and return

According to UNOCHA, approximately 11 000 IDPs were newly displaced in Hasaka governorate in 2020. Of these, approximately 9 000 were displaced within Hasaka governorate while a significant number of displacements to Deir Ez-Zor governorate (1 600) was also registered. Approximately 6 000 IDPs from other governorates were displaced to Hasaka. Significant numbers of arrivals from Aleppo (4 300), Raqqa (900) and Damascus (300) were registered.¹⁷⁶³ In January 2021, 474 new IDPs from Hasaka were registered. 411 of these were displaced within the governorate.¹⁷⁶⁴ In February 2021, approximately 2 300 new IDPs from Hasaka governorate were registered. 1 900 of these were displaced within the governorate.¹⁷⁶⁵ In March 2021 UNOCHA recorded 286 IDP movements from or within Hasaka governorate, of which 144 took place within the governorate.¹⁷⁶⁶

According to UNOCHA, approximately 9 000 IDPs returned to their homes located in Hasaka governorate in 2020. Of these, approximately 8 000 were those displaced within the governorate. Significant numbers of returnees from Damascus (900) and Rural Damascus (300) were also registered. At the same time, approximately 6 000 IDPs residing in Hasaka returned to their homes in other governorates, mainly to Deir ez-Zor (3 800) and Raqqa (2 400).¹⁷⁶⁷ In January 2021, 183 IDPs returned to their homes in Hasaka governorate. Of these 176 were originally displaced within the governorate. In addition, 477 IDPs returned from Hasaka to other governorates.¹⁷⁶⁸ In February 2021, 369 IDPs returned to their homes in Hasaka governorate. Of these 22 were originally displaced within the governorate. In addition, 491 IDPs returned from Hasaka to other governorates.¹⁷⁶⁹ In March 2021 UNOCHA recorded 202 IDP return movements from or within Hasaka governorate, of which 44 took place within the governorate.¹⁷⁷⁰

¹⁷⁶⁰ AA, Turkey destroys hundreds of mines, IEDs in Syria, 9 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶¹ AA, Turkey destroys dozens of mines in northern Syria, 27 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶² Daily Sabah, Turkish personnel educate children in northern Syria for protection from mines, 10 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020 (As of 31 December 2020), 8 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (January 2021), 4 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020 (As of 31 December 2020), 8 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (January 2021), 2 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁷⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

groups, including Kurds, Turkmen, Circassians and Armenians. The majority of Raqqa's Arab population are Sunni Muslims.¹⁷⁷⁶

According to Dukhan (et al.), the great majority of Raqqa's population and resources are located in areas controlled by the SDF.¹⁷⁷⁷ In 2020, media sources have emphasised the reinvigoration¹⁷⁷⁸ of Raqqa city's civilian life, despite of the wide-ranging destruction inflicted on the city during the anti-ISIL campaign. According to an anonymous north-east Syria researcher, cited in COAR Global's 'Syria in 2021' forecast, Raqqa governorate 'witnessed a clear intensification in reconstruction' in 2020. Rehabilitation of infrastructure has taken place in Raqqa city and the surrounding rural areas, returning IDPs have turned Raqqa city into 'an important commercial center'.¹⁷⁷⁹ A similar trend has been reported also with regard to Tabqa¹⁷⁸⁰, another major city in SDF-controlled Raqqa governorate.

According to Enab Baladi, several civilian and military governance institutions associated with the Autonomous Administration and the SDF have their headquarters' in Raqqa city and local residents state that the Autonomous Administration has re-established 'some aspects of civilian life' in the city.¹⁷⁸¹ The Washington Post describes the city as largely destroyed, but at the same time vibrant with people in areas spared from the destruction.¹⁷⁸² The New Yorker explains the fact that the 'obliterated city abounds with activity' with the observation that the US-led Coalition's air campaign left the ground levels of taller multi-story buildings 'more or less' intact.¹⁷⁸³

Depending on the source, the areas controlled by SDF produce between 70¹⁷⁸⁴ and 72 %¹⁷⁸⁵ of Syria's wheat. According to statistics provided in FAO/WFP Special Report of July 2017, Raqqa governorate's share of Syria's total wheat production was approximately 19.6 % in the 2015/2016 agricultural season and approximately 19 % in the 2016/2017 season.¹⁷⁸⁶

Raqqa's economy and natural resources are discussed in detail in the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).¹⁷⁸⁷

2.8.2 Conflict background and armed actors

The central parts of Raqqa governorate are under the control of the Kurdish-dominated SDF. The GoS and its allies control the southern parts of the governorate.¹⁷⁸⁸ As the result of the Turkish military incursion in October 2019¹⁷⁸⁹, the GoS forces and/or their Russian allies have been present along the

¹⁷⁷⁶ Dukhan, H. et al., The Kin Who Count: Mapping Raqqa's Tribal Topology, Middle East Institute, 24 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁷⁷ Dukhan, H. et al., The Kin Who Count: Mapping Raqqa's Tribal Topology, MEI, 24 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁷⁸ See, for example, Cockburn, P., After IS, LRB Vol. 43 No. 3, 4 February 2021, [url](#); Mogelson, L., America's Abandonment of Syria, The New Yorker, 20 April 2020, [url](#); Sly, L. & Martins, A., The former 'caliphate capital' is haunted by fears of an ISIS comeback, The Washington Post, 22 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁷⁹ COAR, Syria in 2021: Forecast for a Protracted Crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#), p. 13

¹⁷⁸⁰ Kalo, R. & Kajjo, S., Rebuilding Efforts Continue in Syria's Former IS Stronghold, VOA, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸¹ Al-Omar, H., Al-Raqqa: over a decade of the Syrian revolution, Enab Baladi, 29 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸² Sly, L. & Martins, A., The former 'caliphate capital' is haunted by fears of an ISIS comeback, The Washington Post, 22 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸³ Mogelson, L., America's Abandonment of Syria, The New Yorker, 20 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸⁴ WFP, Syrian Arab Republic – mWAM Bulletin Issue no. 51: December 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸⁵ Information provided by Syria Report and cited in: Christou, W. & Advani, R., Damascus struggles to secure wheat supply amidst coronavirus crisis, Syria Direct, 18 May 2020, [url](#); HRW, Syria: Bread Crisis Exposes Government Failure, 21 March 2021, [url](#); Tsurkov, E. & Jukhada, Q., Kneel and Starve: Under the Watchful Eye of the Secret Police, Syrians Go Hungry, Newlines Institute, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸⁶ FAO/WFP, Special Report: FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 18 July 2017, [url](#), p. 25

¹⁷⁸⁷ EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 146-148

¹⁷⁸⁸ Based on reading of maps in Etana Syria, Military Control Across Syria [Map], 1 April 2021 [published on 6 April 2021], [url](#); Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]

¹⁷⁸⁹ For further information on the October 2019 Turkish incursion, see EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#)

main roads¹⁷⁹⁰ in the SDF-controlled areas and in the frontlines¹⁷⁹¹ separating the SDF-controlled parts of Raqqqa from the Turkish-controlled area in northern Raqqqa governorate. Since October 2019, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the Turkish-backed Syrian armed groups operating under the umbrella of the so-called 'Syrian National Army' (SNA) have been in control of most of the territory north of M4 highway in northern Raqqqa governorate, including the border town of Tall Abyad and its surroundings and the district of Suluk.¹⁷⁹² Along with an adjoining territory of roughly equal size in northern Hasaka governorate (see [Section 2.7.2](#)), this area constitutes the so-called Operation Peace Spring area.

During the reference period for this report, the security situation in Raqqqa governorate has been affected by ISIL's growing insurgency. In 2020, ISIL's activities increased especially in the GoS-controlled southern parts of Raqqqa governorate. However, in early 2021, ISIL's attacks increased also in the SDF-controlled parts of the governorate (see [Section ISIL's resurgence in Raqqqa governorate](#) below). In addition, there have been reports of recurrent shelling and armed clashes between the Turkish forces/ Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF along the frontlines between the Operation Peace Spring area and the SDF-controlled areas in Hasaka and Raqqqa governorates (for Raqqqa, see [Section The conflict between the SDF and the Turkish forces \(Ayn Issa frontline\)](#), for Hasaka, [Section The conflict between the SDF and the Turkish forces](#)).

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

As already stated above, the central parts of Raqqqa governorate are under the control of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The structure of the SDF is discussed in [Section 1.4.3 Syrian Democratic Forces](#).

The US-led Coalition

The information concerning the US-led Coalitions military presence in Raqqqa governorate is ambiguous. On the one hand, conflict maps by USDOD¹⁷⁹³ and several other sources¹⁷⁹⁴ show that the US has no military sites in the governorate and it is the US-led Coalition's position that Coalition forces operating in north-east Syria have 'limited their ground movements' to Hasaka and Deir ez-Zor governorates.¹⁷⁹⁵ On the other, Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021 contains information on 2 US military sites in Raqqqa governorate: one immediately to the west and one immediately to the east/north-east of Raqqqa city.¹⁷⁹⁶ The continued presence of US military bases in (SDF-controlled parts of) Raqqqa governorate is also noted by media sources.¹⁷⁹⁷

¹⁷⁹⁰ Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#); Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁹¹ Based on reading of maps in Balanche, F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]

¹⁷⁹² Based on reading of maps in Etana Syria, Military Control Across Syria [Map], 1 April 2021 [published on 6 April 2021], [url](#); Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021 [first published in Arabic on 21 December 2020], [url](#), p. 3; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]

¹⁷⁹³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 56

¹⁷⁹⁴ Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#); Kemal, L., Suriye'de YPG bölgesindeki Rus ve ABD üsleri sayıları [Map] [Twitter], 1 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁹⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1,2021–March 31,2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), pp. 61-62

¹⁷⁹⁶ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁹⁷ AA, US continues to reinforce military bases in Syria, 26 September 2020, [url](#); Baladi, US building new military bases in Syria's Raqqqa amid Russian expansion, 26 May 2020, [url](#);

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

As already stated above, the GoS and its allies control the southern parts of Raqqqa governorate and are also present in the SDF-controlled parts of the governorate (the main roads and the frontlines between the SDF-controlled and the Turkish-controlled areas).

According to the USDOD report of August 2020, the number of SAA and affiliated armed groups personnel deployed in SDF-controlled governorates of Hasaka and Raqqqa after October 2019 ranges between 4 000 and 10 000. It is also stated that the GoS has increased its recruitment efforts among the locals to strengthen its ranks.¹⁷⁹⁸ Since late 2020, the GoS forces have increased their presence at the Ayn Issa frontline. The map on 'The Complex Operating Environment of North-eastern Syria' in the USDoD report of February 2021 notes the presence of GoS forces in the town of Ayn Issa and in Al-Tabqa.¹⁷⁹⁹ The GoS has reportedly controlled the Tabqa military air base since October 2019, although the city itself is in SDF control.¹⁸⁰⁰

See the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#) for more specific information on SAA formations deployed in Raqqqa governorate as of March 2020.¹⁸⁰¹

Russia

The Russian forces are present in the GoS-controlled Raqqqa governorate and, to a limited extent, in the SDF-controlled parts of the governorate.

According to Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021, Russia has 7 military sites in Raqqqa governorate: six north of the city of Raqqqa (with three in the border area between Turkish-controlled and SDF-controlled areas and one immediately north of the city) and one in Al-Tabqa (in the district of Al-Thawrah).¹⁸⁰² According to a map by researcher Levent Kemal, Russia has 10 military sites in Raqqqa governorate: Eight north of the city of Raqqqa (with five along the border with Turkish-controlled areas), one north-east of Raqqqa city and one in Al-Thawra.¹⁸⁰³ The information concerning the existence of a Russian military site north-east of Raqqqa city represents the main difference between the two estimates.

Since late 2020, the Russian forces have increased their presence in the Ayn Issa frontline (see [Section The conflict between the SDF and the Turkish forces \(Ayn Issa frontline\)](#)). The map on 'The Complex Operating Environment of North-eastern Syria' in the USDoD report of February 2021 notes the presence of Russian forces south of Ayn Issa.¹⁸⁰⁴

Iran

According to a map published by the Atlantic Council and charting the influence of Iran and its militias in Syria in 2020, Iranian-backed armed groups control the town of Resafa in southern Raqqqa governorate and have influence in the Euphrates river valley in the eastern part of the governorate, near the administrative border between Raqqqa and Deir Ez-Zor. The Iranian-backed groups are marked to have influence also along the main roads in GoS-controlled parts of the governorate. These include parts of the central road connecting Raqqqa to Aleppo governorate to the west and Deir Ez-Zor governorate to the east and road connecting Tabqa (Madinat Ath-Thawrah) to Homs governorate. In

¹⁷⁹⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1,2020–June 30,2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁷⁹⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 56

¹⁸⁰⁰ Kalo, R. & Kajjo, S., Rebuilding Efforts Continue in Syria's Former IS Stronghold, VOA, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰¹ EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 135–136

¹⁸⁰² Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰³ Kemal, L., Suriye'de YPG bölgesindeki Rus ve ABD üsleri sayıları [Map] [Twitter], 1 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 56

addition, Iranian-backed armed groups are depicted to have a pocket of influence in Ayn Issa area, bordering the Operation Peace Spring area controlled by Turkey and its affiliates.¹⁸⁰⁵ According to an analysis by Haian Dukhan and Ammar Alhamad, Iran has provided support to tribal militias in Raqqa governorate in order to gain influence in the governorate.¹⁸⁰⁶

Turkey and affiliated armed groups

According to Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021, Turkey has 9 military sites in the western half of Operation Peace Spring area, three in and around the town of Tall Abyad, two in Suluk subdistrict and four north of Ayn Issa, near the M4 highway and the frontline with the SDF.¹⁸⁰⁷ According to researcher Khayrallah al-Hilu, Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) are positioned in the town of Tall Abyad (three positions) and in the military bases in Karmazah and Bir Asheq. In addition, TAF has barracks in the area and operates several observation posts located along the M4 highway. Although Turkish intelligence services are present in Tall Abyad area, their direct involvement in detecting and suppressing the opposition to Turkish rule is considered rare since Turkey utilises the SNA in this role.¹⁸⁰⁸

According to al-Hilu, the town of Tall Abyad, the main population centre of the western half of Operation Peace Spring area, is controlled by the Third Corps of the 'Syrian National Army' (SNA).¹⁸⁰⁹ According to Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, the formations of SNA's Third Corps are mainly affiliated to Jabhat al-Shamiya ('the Shami Front'/'the Levant Front').¹⁸¹⁰ The STJ report of March 2021 names Jabhat al-Shamiya, Faylaq al-Majd and Ahrar al-Sharqiya as the Turkish-backed groups in control of Tall Abyad. Other SNA groups are also present in the area in limited numbers.¹⁸¹¹

ISIL

ISIL has a presence in GoS-controlled southern Raqqa governorate.¹⁸¹² According to March 2021 analysis by ISW, ISIL controls small patch of territory 'east of Resafa, overlooking Tabqa air Base (in Thawra district).¹⁸¹³

According to Gregory Waters' analysis published in August 2020, the estimates concerning the number of ISIS fighters operating in the Badia desert region (in western Deir Ez-Zor, northern Homs and southern Raqqa governorates) vary between 1 000 and 1 800 fighters. Based on the information provided by an NDF officer and confirmed by SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Kobane Abdi, Waters states that 'these fighters are organized into 15 to 20 active groups' and notes that 'approximately 70 % of all fighters [are] located in the urban belt along the western side of the Euphrates'.¹⁸¹⁴ In an analysis published in February 2021 analysis, Waters' notes that, in 2020, ISIL utilised its presence in Raqqa to conduct attacks also in other Syrian governorates (e.g. Hama).¹⁸¹⁵

¹⁸⁰⁵ Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰⁶ Dukhan, H. & Alhamad, A., Iran's Growing Network of Influence among Eastern Syrian Tribes, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy/ Fikra Forum, 6 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰⁷ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰⁸ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021 [first published in Arabic on 21 December 2020], [url](#), p. 4 [cf. map on p. 5]

¹⁸⁰⁹ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021 [first published in Arabic on 21 December 2020], [url](#), p. 8

¹⁸¹⁰ Al-Tamimi, A. J., The Structure of the Syrian National Army, 21 November 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸¹¹ Syrians for Truth and Justice, Syria: Crops Looted, Lands Seized in "Peace Spring" Territories, 11 March 2021, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁸¹² Based on reading of maps in Etana Syria, Military Control Across Syria [Map], 1 April 2021 [published on 6 April 2021], [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]; Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸¹³ Kahan, E., ISIS Poised for a Ramadan Surge in Syria, ISW, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸¹⁴ Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸¹⁵ Waters G., ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

Besides the GoS-controlled areas, ISIL has also conducted attacks in SDF-controlled parts of Raqqah governorate during the reference period of this report (see [Section ISIL's resurgence in Raqqah governorate](#)). According to Patrick Cockburn, ISIL 'rules' by night in 'parts of the countryside around' Raqqah¹⁸¹⁶, nominally under the control of the SDF. This presence of ISIL in SDF-controlled areas and the targeting¹⁸¹⁷ of SDF's members and associates as well as secular and non-practicing locals is discussed further below, in the context of Deir Ez-Zor governorate (see [Section ISIL's insurgency in Deir Ez-Zor](#)).

2.8.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

ISIL's resurgence in Raqqah governorate

In an analysis published in August 2020, Gregory Waters claims that ISIL has put into effect 'an ever-expanding insurgency' against the Syrian Arab army (SAA) and its allies, mainly Russia, Iran and affiliated militias, in central Syria, including southern Raqqah and western parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate. This insurgency began already in late 2017. However, since the beginning of 2019, the ISIS cells operating in central Syria, including the ones based in the southern countryside of Raqqah governorate, have become stronger and expanded their 'geographic reach and effectiveness of their attacks'. Waters estimates that ISIL attacks targeting GoS forces had become 'increasingly regular' in southern Raqqah governorate after early 2020.¹⁸¹⁸

In an analysis of ISIL's activities in Syria in 2020, Waters describes how ISIL cells were increasingly active in the governorates of Aleppo, Hama and Raqqah in 2020. In August, ISIL commenced 'a sustained campaign along the Ithriya-Tabqa highway', utilising firearms, landmines and fake checkpoints in attacks targeting the GoS forces. In December 2020, ISIL's attempts to disrupt the passenger traffic along the highway with small arms fire continued, which caused 'a precipitous decline in security along a crucial trade route'. In addition, ISIL cells utilised the southern parts of Raqqah governorate to conduct attacks in Aleppo and Hama governorates.¹⁸¹⁹ The USDOD report discussing ISIL's activities between July and September 2020 notes the 'larger scale, high casualty attacks' targeting GoS forces in Raqqah governorate.¹⁸²⁰

According to the USDOD, ISIL attacks in Raqqah governorate decreased 70 % in the first three months of 2020 when compared to the previous quarter.¹⁸²¹ ISIL attacks surged occasionally in Raqqah governorate between April and June 2020, the biggest surge of 14 attacks in one week occurring between 14 and 20 May, after which the number of ISIL attacks decreased to one per week. However, the DIA, cited in the USDOD report, did not observe any increase in ISIL's capabilities or activities in Raqqah governorate.¹⁸²² According to an assessment by Aaron Zelin from 29 May 2020, ISIL conducted 168 attacks in Raqqah governorate in the preceding 14 months.¹⁸²³ According to data collected by Gregory Waters, ISIL conducted 46 attacks in Raqqah governorate in 2020, with 1 attack taking place in

¹⁸¹⁶ Cockburn, P., After IS, LRB Vol. 43 No. 3, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸¹⁷ Cockburn, P., After IS, LRB Vol. 43 No. 3, 4 February 2021, [url](#); Al-Kanj, S., Islamic State regroups in Syrian Kurdish region, Al-Monitor, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸¹⁸ Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸¹⁹ Waters, G., ISIL in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸²⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#) p. 23

¹⁸²¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁸²² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27

¹⁸²³ Zelin, A. Y. & Knights, M., The Islamic State's Resurgence in the COVID Era?, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 29 May 2020, [url](#)

January, 2 in February, 2 in March, 1 in April, 2 in May, 1 in June, 4 in July, 9 in August, 9 in September, 5 in October, 2 in November and 8 in December 2020.¹⁸²⁴

According to Waters, in the last three months of 2020, GoS and Russian forces engaged in regular airstrikes targeting static ISIL targets in Raqqa governorate, in eastern Homs governorate and in the rural parts of GoS-controlled Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁸²⁵ According to COAR Global, 'local sources across Syria' estimated that, with regard to attacks carried out by ISIL, December 2020 was the most active month of 2020. COAR Global states that many of the reported attacks took place in SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor and in GoS-controlled western Deir Ez-Zor, in southern parts of Raqqa governorate, and in Homs governorate.¹⁸²⁶

With regard to SDF-controlled North-East Syria, ISIL's activities have concentrated in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. The SDF-controlled Raqqa governorate is mentioned only once in the RIC report on ISIL attacks carried out in the SDF-controlled North-East Syria in 2020. While discussing the casualty figures of October 2020 RIC notes that ISIL carried out 45 attacks in the SDF-controlled northeast Syria in October 2020¹⁸²⁷, of which 4 took place in Raqqa governorate.¹⁸²⁸

However, according to the August 2020 report by the Col, Raqqa governorate saw attacks by ISIL targeting both the SDF and the GoS forces in the first half of 2020 (11 January–1 July 2020). The Col estimates that ISIL resorted increasingly to asymmetric attacks during this period.¹⁸²⁹ On 5 May, the SDF carried out arrests targeting alleged ISIL-affiliates in the towns of Jurneyyeh. On 6 May, similar arrests were carried out in Raqqa city.¹⁸³⁰ On 30 May 2020, ISIL claimed responsibility for injuring a local SDF-affiliated *mukhtar* in Raqqa city.¹⁸³¹ On 14 July, several bombs exploded in Raqqa city.¹⁸³² According to ISW, ISIL carried out three simultaneous IED attacks near the Al-Tub al-Hadith Hospital and one IED attack in Jazrah neighbourhood. ISW described the attack as a demonstration of ISIL's capabilities in the SDF-controlled city while no casualties were reported.¹⁸³³

A local journalist cited in the Al-Monitor article published in November 2020 claims that ISIL has targeted the SDF 'especially in the area between southern Raqqa and the south-eastern countryside of Hasaka[...]'.¹⁸³⁴ According to the Al-Monitor article published in February 2021, many residents of SDF-controlled Raqqa city are living in fear of ISIL, cells of which are still targeting civilians 'with bombings in residential areas, assassinations and threats'. In addition, the article claims that ISIL is still imposing its 'taxation system' (*zakat*) on some residents of the city.¹⁸³⁵ The Washington Post states that many ISIL members were still present in the city in late 2019. Many locals claimed that ISIL was 'too despised' by the local population to re-establish itself while many others claimed that ISIL's cells were 'all around' and 'plotting to retake the city'.¹⁸³⁶ According to a local civil society activist interviewed by the New Yorker, 'the prevalence of niqabs and veils' among the women in Raqqa city is partly the result of ISIL's 'lingering influence' in the city.¹⁸³⁷

¹⁸²⁴ Waters G., *ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸²⁵ Waters, G., *ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸²⁶ COAR, *Quamishli Clashes: GoS and SDF Seek Pressure Points*, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸²⁷ Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

¹⁸²⁸ Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁸²⁹ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31]*, 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 15 [para. 70]

¹⁸³⁰ Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary: 4-10 May 2020*, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁸³¹ Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary: 25-30 May 2020*, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁸³² ISW, *Syria Situation Report: July 7 - 21, 2020*, 23 July 2020, [url](#); USDOD, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020*, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 50

¹⁸³³ ISW, *Syria Situation Report: July 7 - 21, 2020*, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸³⁴ Al-Kanj, S., *Islamic State regrouping in Syrian Kurdish region*, Al-Monitor, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸³⁵ Hammoud, H., *Islamic State continues to terrorize Raqqa*, Al-Monitor, 18 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸³⁶ Sly, L. & Martins, A., *The former 'caliphate capital' is haunted by fears of an ISIS comeback*, The Washington Post, 22 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸³⁷ Mogelson, L., *America's Abandonment of Syria*, The New Yorker, 20 April 2020, [url](#)

According to Wladimir van Wilgenburg, in early January 2021, ISIL claimed seven attacks, including IED and hit-and-run attacks, targeting the SDF and Asayish in Raqqqa city and the SDF-controlled rural areas of Raqqqa governorate. On 4 January 2021, multiple civilians were injured in an attack conducted in Raqqqa city. On 6 January, two Asayish members were killed in an attack conducted in the eastern countryside of Raqqqa. On 10 January, a civilian was injured in an IED attack in Al-Malahi area in Raqqqa city.¹⁸³⁸ On 8 February, an ISIL attack in the town of Kabush, located in north-western Raqqqa governorate, claimed the lives of four Asayish members. According to van Wilgenburg, ISIL attacks targeting the SDF and its affiliates had increased since December 2020 in Raqqqa governorate.¹⁸³⁹

Human rights violations by the SDF

As already discussed above, in the context of Hasaka governorate, the power in SDF-controlled areas has concentrated disproportionately in the hands of ethnic Kurds and a small group of Arab leaders closely associated with the PYD (see [Section Opposition to the SDF's rule](#)). According to US Department of State, this unequal power-relationship applies also to Raqqqa and Tabqa, both in Raqqqa governorate.¹⁸⁴⁰ During the reference period for this report, there have been reports on violations by the YPG, the SDF and their affiliates targeting Raqqqa governorate's civilian population, e.g. seizing civilian property¹⁸⁴¹ and forced military conscription.¹⁸⁴²

According to OMRAN, between October 2019 and December 2019, Raqqqa city saw 19 people being extrajudicially detained and 11 abducted in 9 separate incidents. All the detainees were civilians with the YPG bearing the responsibility for all the incidents. Of the abducted, 7 were civilians and 4 YPG members. ISIL was responsible for two abduction incidents targeting YPG members.¹⁸⁴³ Between January and March 2020, 17 people were extrajudicially detained and 19 abducted in 9 different incidents. All the detainees were civilians with the YPG detaining 12 and Asayish detaining 5. The abductions targeted 9 civilians, 8 YPG members and 2 members of the local administration. ISIL abducted people in 3 separate incidents.¹⁸⁴⁴

On 3 March 2020, SDF security forces conducted a raid targeting a local NGO operating in western Raqqqa governorate and detained the board chairman of the NGO and some of its employees. According to local sources contacted by COAR Global, the SDF had recently conducted similar raids targeting different local NGOs. Local sources associated the raids with the increased screening measures the SDF had adopted since late 2019 to spot individuals opposing the Autonomous Administration and possibly being affiliated with Turkish-backed armed groups.¹⁸⁴⁵

The conflict between the SDF and the Turkish forces (Ayn Issa frontline)

As already discussed above in the context of Hasaka governorate, the UN Security Council reported 'intermittent artillery shelling' and some 'ground-based clashes' along the frontlines between SDF-

¹⁸³⁸ van Wilgenburg, W., ISIS increases attacks in Raqqqa as Turkish-backed forces shell Ain al-Issa, Kurdistan 24, 12 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸³⁹ van Wilgenburg, W., Asayish confirms deaths of 4 members in ISIS attack near Raqqqa, Kurdistan 24, 11 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 54

¹⁸⁴¹ Enab Baladi, Accusations against "SDF" of seizing civilians' property in Syria's al-Tabqa, 25 October 2020, [url](#); STJ, Raqqqa: The Northern Democratic Brigade Arbitrarily Seizes over 80 Houses, 9 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴² Al-Omar, H., Conscription by SDF agonizing Raqqqa residents, Enab Baladi, 20 February 2021, [url](#); SNHR, Syrian Democratic Forces Have Arrested/ Detained at Least 61 Teachers Over Educational Curricula and for Forced Conscription Since the Beginning of 2021. Persecution of Nearly 550 Teachers Arbitrarily Dismissed from Their Jobs for Refusing Forced Conscription in the Governorates of Raqqqa, Deir Ez-Zour and Hasaka, 19 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴³ OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 59

¹⁸⁴⁴ OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 61

¹⁸⁴⁵ COAR, Erdogan and Putin push pause on Idlib, 9 March 2020, [url](#)

controlled Raqqa governorate and the Turkish-controlled Operation Peace Spring area between February and May 2020.¹⁸⁴⁶ According to the August 2020 report by the Col, ‘periodic clashes’ involving the YPG, Turkish-backed armed groups and the Turkish military continued to affect the security situation of north-east Syria in the first half of 2020 (11 January-1 July 2020).¹⁸⁴⁷ Starting from the reporting period between June and July as well as continuing during the reporting period between October and November 2020, a trend of increasing cross-line attacks was reported.¹⁸⁴⁸

According to the USDOD report of February 2021, clashes between the SDF and Turkish forces re-escalated in the period between October and December 2020 and led to ‘exchanges of artillery fire and IED attacks’ in areas around the town of Ayn Issa. In October 2020, Turkey threatened the SDF with another military intervention if the SDF would not remove its forces from areas bordering Turkey. In November and December, Turkish-backed armed groups made several advances into areas close to Ayn Issa. However, the SDF managed to block these advances and reclaim the areas initially captured by the SNA.¹⁸⁴⁹ According to USDOD, on 25 November 2020, armed clashes broke out between Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF in north-east Syria. Several civilians are injured and at least 18 fighters from Turkish-backed armed groups killed in the clashes.¹⁸⁵⁰

The Report of the Secretary-General to the UN Security Council of February 2021 notes ‘a sharp increase in mutual shelling and ground-based clashes’ between Turkish forces and the SDF close to Ayn Issa town since late November 2020. These clashes ‘resulted in the death, injury and displacement of civilians’.¹⁸⁵¹ REACH noted a significant escalation in fighting along the frontlines between the Operation Peace Spring area and the SDF-controlled parts of Raqqa and Hasaka governorates in November.¹⁸⁵² On 24 November 2020, ‘military clashes and landmine explosions’ were reported in Ayn Issa area and REACH’s local informants reported on ‘threats from shelling, airstrikes, unexploded ordnance (UXOs), or imminent conflict’.¹⁸⁵³

According to an analysis by COAR Global, on 28 November, Turkish-backed armed groups operating under the SNA umbrella targeted the area with shelling that injured several civilians. In addition, occasional clashes between the opposing parties were reported in the area. Again on 5 December, the Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups subjected the SDF positions in and around Ayn Issa and Abu Rasin to heavy shelling. COAR Global estimates that the escalation followed the Turkish entrenchment north of Ayn Issa and particularly the setting up of a new military base in Sayda, just about 100 m from the M4 highway.¹⁸⁵⁴

¹⁸⁴⁶ 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/2020/327], 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 3 [para. 6]; 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 3 [para. 7]

¹⁸⁴⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 2 [para. 5]

¹⁸⁴⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 9]; UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 3 & para. 10]

¹⁸⁴⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2020–December 31, 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 60–61

¹⁸⁵⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2020–December 31, 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 55

¹⁸⁵¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 9]

¹⁸⁵² REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, November 2020, 21 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁸⁵³ REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, December 2020, 28 January 2021, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁸⁵⁴ COAR, Turkey pressures Ein Issa as the SDF pivots toward politics, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

According to USDOD, in December 2020, Russian forces planned to erect a military post in Ayn Issa to prevent further clashes from occurring in the area.¹⁸⁵⁵ According to ISW, Turkish forces continued the shelling of SDF-controlled villages near Ayn Issa and their simultaneous attempts to capture these villages between 16 December 2020 and 5 January 2021. ISW estimates that Turkish forces escalated their 'kinetic activity' in the frontlines in Raqqa governorate which disturbed the civilian life in the area. On 6 January 2021, Turkish artillery shelled the vicinity of the Russian military base increasing the tensions between the two parties.¹⁸⁵⁶ In the report from 18 February 2021, the UN Security Council states that while the active hostilities had ended in the vicinity of Ayn Issa 'the area remained tense'.¹⁸⁵⁷

An ISW analysis from late January 2021 states that Russian forces had deployed 300 additional Military Police to areas in Raqqa (Ayn Issa) and Hasaka governorates (Amuda and Tall Tamer) bordering the Turkish-controlled Operation Peace Spring area in north-east Syria. ISW estimates that the move was a reaction to the escalation of hostilities in November 2020 and aimed at preventing a possible Turkish intervention.¹⁸⁵⁸ The GoS forces were also strengthening their military presence in Ayn Issa area.¹⁸⁵⁹ According to COAR Global, Ayn Issa is strategically important because of its location along the M4 highway, which connects the GoS-controlled areas to the SDF-controlled areas and the SDF-controlled areas in Aleppo governorate (Ayn al-Arab/Kobani and Manbij) to other SDF-controlled areas in north-east Syria. In addition, the town 'acts as the gateway' to Raqqa city.¹⁸⁶⁰ Al-Monitor article from 10 March 2021 cites Firas Faham, an expert from Jusoor Center for Studies, who assesses that the GoS and Russia are utilising the threat of Turkish incursion in order to reinforce the GoS presence and expel the SDF from Ayn Issa area.¹⁸⁶¹ COAR Global's analysis of December 2020 is compatible with Faham's assessment, stating that Russia has repeatedly 'proposed that the SDF hand over administrative control of Ayn Issa to the Government of Syria'.¹⁸⁶²

Between January and March 2021, clashes between Turkish forces/Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF around Ayn Issa continued. According to Sirwan Kajjo, the clashes intensified in late December 2020 and early January 2021 as the result of attacks conducted by the Turkish-backed armed groups against the SDF.¹⁸⁶³ In early January 2021, Turkish attempts to infiltrate villages in Ayn Issa countryside resulted in clashes that were accompanied with shelling.¹⁸⁶⁴ According to the UN Security Council, 'mutual shelling and limited ground-based clashes' were reported along the contact lines around Ayn Issa between February and March 2021.¹⁸⁶⁵ In February, REACH's informants reported on the 'threat from shelling' in Ayn Issa area.¹⁸⁶⁶ In late March 2021, intensive clashes between the Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF broke out again in the vicinity of Ayn Issa.¹⁸⁶⁷ According to USDOD, tensions along the Syrian-Turkish border 'remained high' between January and March 2021 with Turkey

¹⁸⁵⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2020–December 31, 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁸⁵⁶ ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 12 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁵⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 4 [para. 9]

¹⁸⁵⁸ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-29, 2021, 29 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁵⁹ COAR, Al-Assad alienates minority supporters in a bid for the Sunni Arab majority, 14 December 2020, [url](#); Al-Khateb, K., Why is Syrian military deploying in Kurdish-held areas?, Al-Monitor, 10 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶⁰ COAR, Turkey pressures Ein Issa as the SDF pivots toward politics, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶¹ Al-Khateb, K., Why is Syrian military deploying in Kurdish-held areas?, Al-Monitor, 10 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶² COAR, Al-Assad alienates minority supporters in a bid for the Sunni Arab majority, 14 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶³ Kajjo, S., Fighting Continues Over Flashpoint Town in Northern Syria, VOA, 5 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶⁴ Syrian Observer (The), SDF, Armed Opposition Factions Clash in Ayn Issa, 14 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁶⁵ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3 [Para. 5]

¹⁸⁶⁶ REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, February 2020, 24 March 2020, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁸⁶⁷ van Wilgenburg, W., Syria: Heavy fighting between SDF and Turkey-backed groups continues around Ain Issa, Kurdistan 24, 23 March 2021, [url](#)

launching its first airstrikes in 17 months against the SDF positions around Ayn Issa on 20 March 2021.¹⁸⁶⁸

Security incidents and human rights violations in Operation Peace Spring area (Tall Abyad)

Researcher Khayrallah al-Hilu states that, according to Tall Abyad's local council, in late 2020 the civilian population of Tall Abyad area was approximately 140 000, of whom roughly 6 000 were IDPs from other parts of Syria.¹⁸⁶⁹ According to al-Hilu, with regard to the Operation Peace Spring area, violations targeting Kurds and Arabs associated with the Autonomous Administration have been more rare in Tall Abyad than in Ras al-Ayn. This is explained by the fact that the SNA formation in control of Tall Abyad has a significant number of local fighters in its ranks. This applies also for Arab towns of Suluk and Al-Mabrukah (in Hasaka governorate), which are controlled by a formation with tribal ties to the area and a significant number of local fighters.¹⁸⁷⁰

During the reference period, human rights violations reported especially in the eastern part of Operation Peace Spring area (for further information on Ras al-Ayn area, see [Section Human rights violations in Operation Peace Spring area \(Ras al-Ayn\)](#)). However, similar violations have been reported also in the western part of the area. According to the report by the Col discussing the situation in Syria in the first half of 2020 (11 January–1 July 2020), displaced families from Tall Abyad claimed that they were unwilling to return to their homes because they were afraid of rape and sexual violence at the hands of the members of Turkish-backed armed groups.¹⁸⁷¹ However, other serious human rights violations described by the Col report and allegedly committed in the areas under Turkish-control were mainly concentrated in Ras al-Ayn and Afrin (see [Section Human rights violations in Operation Peace Spring area \(Ras al-Ayn\)](#) and [2.2.3 Turkish- and SNA-controlled areas](#) respectively).

According to the Carter Center, in June 2020, Turkish-backed armed groups initiated a series of arrests targeting individuals allegedly affiliated with the SDF in 'throughout' Raqqqa governorate. On 9 June, arrests were carried out in Ayn al-Arus and Badi. On 13 June, a tribal leader associated with the SDF was arrested in Tall Abyad city.¹⁸⁷² According to OMRAN, in the western parts of Operation Peace Spring area controlled by Turkey/Turkish-backed armed groups in Raqqqa governorate, 30 assassinations or attacks with explosives were reported between July 2019 and June 2020.¹⁸⁷³ Of these attacks, 15 occurred between January and June 2020. The attacks resulted in 206 casualties. Of these casualties 176 were civilians who were targeted directly in 20 attacks.¹⁸⁷⁴

A STJ report of March 2021 contains information on 3 cases of expropriation of agricultural lands in Tall Abyad between April and August 2020, with cases of extortion of rent for land use also reported.¹⁸⁷⁵

¹⁸⁶⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2021–March 31, 2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), p. 61, 70

¹⁸⁶⁹ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 10

¹⁸⁷⁰ Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁸⁷¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 13 [para. 61]

¹⁸⁷² Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 8-14 June 2020, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁸⁷³ 18 of these attacks were carried out with VBIED's, 7 with landmines, 2 with IED's, 2 with firearms, and 1 with grenades. OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 53

¹⁸⁷⁴ OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁸⁷⁵ STJ, Syria: Crops Looted, Lands Seized in "Peace Spring" Territories, 11 March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

Security incidents

According to ACLED data, there were 1 238 security incidents recorded in Raqqa governorate, of whom 303 were coded as battles, 703 explosions/remote violence and 232 incidents of violence against civilians. The number of security incidents remained steady for the first half of 2020, registering an increase in security incidents between October 2020 and February 2021 (see Figure 34).¹⁸⁷⁶

EVENT_TYPE ● Battles ● Explosions/Remote violence ● Violence against civilians

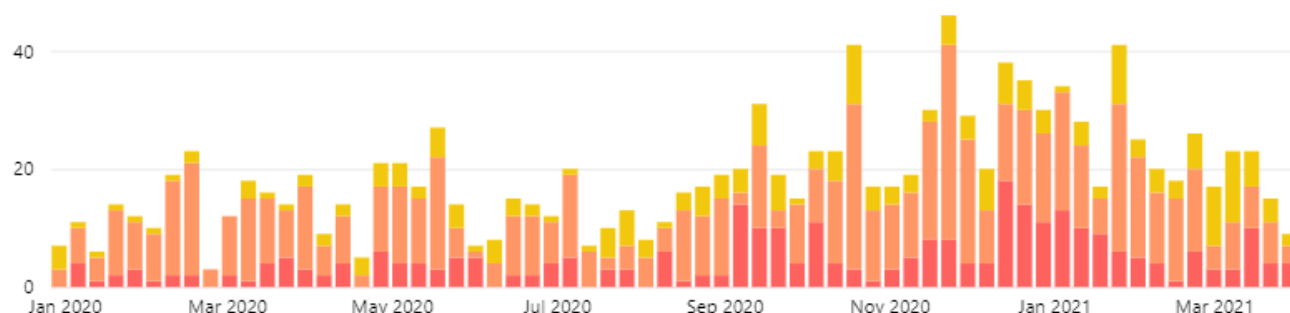


Figure 34: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Raqqa governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data¹⁸⁷⁷

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 (See Figure 35).¹⁸⁷⁸

Raqqa governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Raqqa	85	145	139
Ath-Thawrah	62	88	42
Tall Abyad	156	470	51
Total	303	703	232

Figure 35: Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Raqqa governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

Illustrative security incidents

- On 4 April 2020, unknown perpetrators killed eight civilians in the town of Ma'dan.¹⁸⁷⁹
- On 22 April 2020, a roadside IED exploded in Raqqa city, killing a child and injuring another.¹⁸⁸⁰

¹⁸⁷⁶ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

¹⁸⁷⁷ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

¹⁸⁷⁸ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

¹⁸⁷⁹ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

¹⁸⁸⁰ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

- On 7 May 2020, ISIL assassinated a colonel acting as the chief of the GoS Air Force Intelligence in Dibsi Afnan sector in northern Raqqa governorate. According to Gregory Waters, this marked 'the northernmost known [ISIL] attack in [GoS]-held Raqqa'.¹⁸⁸¹
- On 25 May 2020, a civilian was stabbed by an SDF-member in Raqqa city.¹⁸⁸²
- On 5 June 2020, an armed group operating in Tall Abyad city detained six family members of an escaped detainee. According to the UN Security Council, one of the detainees was released on 6 June while there was no information of the fate of the remaining five detainees.¹⁸⁸³
- On 20 June, an UXO exploded and killed a child in Tall Abyad city.¹⁸⁸⁴
- On 7 July 2020, a VBIED exploded in Tall Abyad city killing six civilians and wounding at least 14 others.¹⁸⁸⁵
- On 18 July 2020, a landmine exploded in Hunaydah village, located in the rural parts of western Raqqa governorate, killing two children.¹⁸⁸⁶
- On 6 August 2020, a hand grenade exploded in Tall Abyad city, injuring 20 civilians.¹⁸⁸⁷
- On 16 October 2020, a ground-based strike targeting Ayn Issa town killed one civilian and wounded eight others.¹⁸⁸⁸
- On 28 November 2020, a news source claimed that two civilians had been killed and several others injured as the result of increased shelling at the Ayn Issa frontline.¹⁸⁸⁹
- On 31 December, Al-Qaeda-affiliate Hurras al-Din ('Guardians of Religion') attacked a Russian base in Tall al-Samen with a VBIED.¹⁸⁹⁰ According to Syria Direct, opposition sources claimed that several Russian soldiers were killed or injured in the attack.¹⁸⁹¹ ISW reports that several Russian soldiers were injured in the attack. According to ISW, the attack, utilising both a VBIED and firearms, was the first carried out by Hurras al-Din outside north-west Syria.¹⁸⁹²

¹⁸⁸¹ Waters, G., The Syrian Regime's Combat Losses in Spring 2020, and What Lies Ahead, MEI, June 2020, [url](#), p. 9; the exact date of the incident is confirmed by Waters, G., May 7 - Lt Colonel Ahmad Mahmoud, Air Force Intelligence commander of Dibsi Afnan sector of W #Raqqa, killed by a landmine... [Twitter], 8 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁸² Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 25-30 May 2020, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁸⁸³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 20 [Annex]

¹⁸⁸⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 20 [Annex]

¹⁸⁸⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 20 [Annex]

¹⁸⁸⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 20 [Annex]

¹⁸⁸⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

¹⁸⁸⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

¹⁸⁸⁹ Enab Baladi, ضحايا نتيجة تصاعد قصف يستهدف "عاصمة قسد" عين عيسى [Casualties from an escalation of shelling targeting 'SDF' capital' Ayn Issa], 28 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹⁰ ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#); Al Nofal, W., By targeting a Russian base in Raqqa, Hurras al-Din sends a multifaceted message, Syria Direct, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹¹ Al Nofal, W., By targeting a Russian base in Raqqa, Hurras al-Din sends a multifaceted message, Syria Direct, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹² ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

- On 5 January 2021, a landmine exploded and killed two children in an agricultural area near Ayn Issa.¹⁸⁹³
- On 26 January 2021, a roadside IED exploded and killed three civilians and wounded two others in Tall Abyad city.¹⁸⁹⁴
- Between 19 and 21 March 2021, one child was killed four other civilians injured in clashes between the Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF.¹⁸⁹⁵

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	23	29	9	5
February	20	17	3	4
March	14	6	5	7
April	10	2		
May	11	6		
June	12	3		
July	14	11		
August	10	9		
September	10	5		
October	2	1		
November	9	15		
December	5	4		
Total	140	108	17	16

Figure 36. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Raqqa governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

¹⁸⁹³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

¹⁸⁹⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

¹⁸⁹⁵ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]; van Wilgenburg, W., Syria: Heavy fighting between SDF and Turkey-backed groups continues around Ain Issa, Kurdistan 24, 23 March 2021, [url](#)

In 2020, Raqqa had between 108¹⁸⁹⁶ (SNHR data)¹⁸⁹⁷ and 140 civilian fatalities (VDC data).¹⁸⁹⁸ Most civilian fatalities were documented in January, February and July 2020. In the first three months of 2021, SNHR recorded 16 civilian fatalities in Raqqa governorate, while VDC recorded 17 civilian fatalities in the same period.

Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war

The situation of the civilian population of Raqqa governorate with regard to infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war is analysed in the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).¹⁸⁹⁹

UNESCWA reports the damage to physical capital of Raqqa governorate around 6.7 billion USD (8.3 % of all the damage inflicted on Syrian physical capital) between 2011–2018 and notes how the US-led coalition's bombing campaign against ISIL in 2017 'destroyed the entire urban system' in the governorate.¹⁹⁰⁰

According to Mine Action Review's 2020 report on mine clearance, the retreating 'Islamic State' fighters 'left massive contamination of mines of an improvised nature and other improvised devices' causing heavy damage to the returning civilians in areas under ISIL's former influence in Raqqa governorate.¹⁹⁰¹ Mine Action Review notes that international and national demining organisations have taken part in demining activities in areas under SDF control in north-east Syria. Humanitarian demining organisations and commercial companies have reportedly carried out 'large-scale clearance' in former ISIL areas with a company called Tetra Tech operating in Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor and Baghuz and focusing on critical infrastructure (healthcare, schools, water and electricity).¹⁹⁰²

For information on the Turkish-controlled Operation Peace Spring area with regard to landmines and explosive remnants of war, see [Section Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war](#) of the Hasaka governorate chapter.

Displacement and return

According to UNOCHA, approximately 7 000 IDPs were newly displaced in Raqqa governorate in 2020. Of these, approximately 5 000 were displaced within Raqqa governorate while significant numbers of displacements to Deir Ez-Zor (1 400) and Hasaka (900) governorates were also registered.

¹⁸⁹⁶ In a January 2021 report, SNHR mentions 106 civilian fatalities in Raqqa in 2020. This figure is the result of a revision of their data. EASO email correspondence with SNHR, 22 April 2021. See SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁸⁹⁷ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁸⁹⁸ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020–2021 shared by VDC with EASO

¹⁸⁹⁹ EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 158–159

¹⁹⁰⁰ UNESCWA/ University of St Andrews, Syria at War; Eight Years On, 2020 [published on 23 September 2020], [url](#), p. 50–51.

¹⁹⁰¹ Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 378

¹⁹⁰² Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 379

Approximately 1 000 IDPs from other governorates were displaced to Raqqa. Significant numbers of arrivals from Idlib (1 200) were registered.¹⁹⁰³ In January 2021, no new IDPs from Raqqa were registered while 25 people from other governorates were displaced to Raqqa.¹⁹⁰⁴ In February 2021, 19 new IDPs from Raqqa governorate were registered, all of them were displaced to other governorates. At the same time, 550 IDPs arrived to Raqqa from other governorates.¹⁹⁰⁵ In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 9 IDP movements which took place within the governorate.¹⁹⁰⁶

According to UNOCHA, approximately 7 000 IDPs returned to their homes located in Raqqa governorate in 2020. Of these, approximately 4 000 were displaced within the governorate, while significant numbers of returnees from Hasaka (2 400) and Aleppo (400) governorates were also registered. At the same time, approx. 1 000 IDPs residing in Raqqa returned to their homes in other governorates, mainly to Homs and Deir ez-Zor.¹⁹⁰⁷ In January 2021, 160 IDPs returned to their homes in Raqqa governorate. Of these none were originally displaced within the governorate. In addition, 4 IDPs returned from Raqqa to other governorates.¹⁹⁰⁸ In February 2021, 60 IDPs returned to their homes in Raqqa governorate. Of these none were originally displaced within the governorate. No returns to other governorates were registered.¹⁹⁰⁹ In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 366 IDP return movements to the governorate.¹⁹¹⁰

¹⁹⁰³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020 (As of 31 December 2020), 8 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (January 2021), 4 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

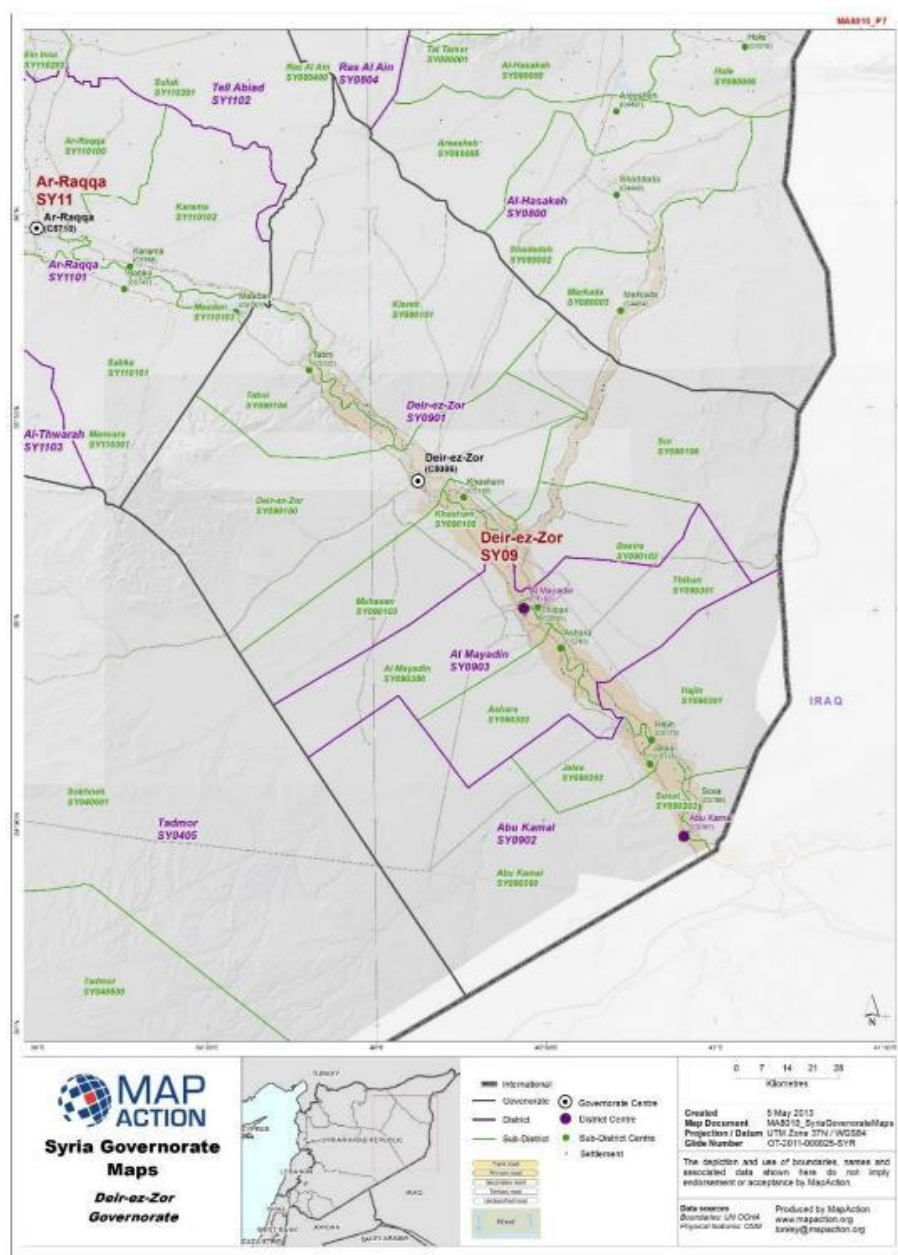
¹⁹⁰⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 8 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (January 2021), 2 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹¹⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

2.9 Deir Ez-Zor governorate



Map 15: © MapAction, Deir Ez-Zor governorate map¹⁹¹¹

2.9.1 General description of the governorate

Deir Ez-Zor governorate is located in eastern Syria. The governorate has an international border with Iraq to the east, and internal borders to with Homs to the south, with Raqqqa to the west and with Hasaka to the north. The Euphrates river passes through the governorate, dividing it into two parts.

¹⁹¹¹ MapAction, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](http://www.mapaction.org)

(see Map 15).¹⁹¹² Deir Ez-Zor is administratively divided into three districts: Deir Ez-Zor, Al-Mayadin, and Al-Bukamal (alternatively Albu Kamal, Abu Kamal), and into 14 sub districts.¹⁹¹³

The Central Statistics Bureau of Syria estimated that the population of Deir Ez-Zor governorate was 1 206 000 in 2019.¹⁹¹⁴ In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Deir Ez-Zor governorate to be of 765 352 inhabitants.¹⁹¹⁵

According to Ziad Awad, Deir Ez-Zor governorate has ‘overwhelmingly’ Sunni Arab population¹⁹¹⁶ and the local society has been ‘characterised by ethnic, religious and sectarian homogeneity’.¹⁹¹⁷ In the report published in October 2019, Awad estimates that approximately 350 000-400 000 people live in GoS-controlled areas and states that the proportion of Shi’as is still ‘marginal’.¹⁹¹⁸ In the ACU report of December 2017, the proportion of Shi’as was estimated as 2 %(almost 25 000 individuals)¹⁹¹⁹ of Deir Ez-Zor’s total population.¹⁹²⁰

The Syrian-Iraqi border crossing in Al-Bukamal has been described as ‘a major strategic thoroughfare between Damascus and Baghdad’ and as ‘the focal point of a regional geopolitical rivalry’ between Iran and the US/Israel.¹⁹²¹

2.9.2 Conflict background and armed actors

Deir Ez-Zor governorate is roughly divided into two areas of control. The western part of the governorate – that is, mainly the areas west of the Euphrates river – is controlled by the GoS and its Iranian and Russian allies. This area covers the major cities (Deir Ez-Zor city, Mayadin and Al-Bukamal) and the logistical route connecting GoS-controlled areas to the Syrian-Iraqi border. The eastern part of the governorate – most of the areas east of the Euphrates River – is controlled by the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and their allies in the US-led coalition.¹⁹²² The GoS and its allies had captured most of the areas west of the Euphrates river from the so-called ‘Islamic State’ (ISIL) by the end of 2017. The GoS has controlled parts of Deir Ez-Zor city throughout the conflict.¹⁹²³ The SDF and the US-led coalition captured the last ISIL-held territorial enclave on the eastern side of the river in March 2019.¹⁹²⁴

During the reference period for this report, the security situation in Deir Ez-Zor governorate has been affected by ISIL’s expanding and intensifying insurgency, the tribal protests affecting the SDF-

¹⁹¹² MapAction, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#); UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, January 2017, [url](#), p. 13

¹⁹¹³ The district of Deir Ez-Zor is further divided into sub-districts of Deir ez-Zor, Basira, Khasham, Kisreh, Muhasan, Sur and Tabi; Albu Kamal into sub-districts of Abu Kamal, Hajin, Jalaa and Susat; and Al-Mayadin into sub-districts of Al-Mayadin, Ashara and Thiban. UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, January 2017, [url](#), p. 13

¹⁹¹⁴ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁹¹⁵ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

¹⁹¹⁶ Awad, Z., Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities, European University Institute, 21 October 2019, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁹¹⁷ Awad, Z., Deir Al-Zor after Islamic State: Between Kurdish Self Administration and a Return of the Syrian Regime, European University Institute, March 2018, [url](#), [p. 19] [unnumbered]

¹⁹¹⁸ Awad, Z., Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities, European University Institute, 21 October 2019, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁹¹⁹ An approximation calculated by the drafter.

¹⁹²⁰ ACU utilises the estimates based on 2011 census according to which the total population of Deir ez-Zor is 1 237 413. ACU, Displacement and Violations in Deir Ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa, December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁹²¹ Hasan, H. & Khaddour K., The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 31 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹²² Based on reading of maps in Etana Syria, Military Control Across Syria [Map], 1 April 2021 [published on 6 April 2021], [url](#); Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]

¹⁹²³ For details, see EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 162–163

¹⁹²⁴ For details, see EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 162–163

controlled parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate and the Iran-related security incidents (mainly US and Israeli airstrikes) reported in GoS-controlled parts of the governorate (for further information, see [Section Iran-related security incidents in GoS-controlled Deir Ez-Zor](#)). In addition, Syria's major oilfields¹⁹²⁵ are located in the SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate. These include Al-Omar oil field, which is the largest oil field in Syria. According to Fabrice Balance, Al-Omar oil field alone was responsible for 50 % of Syria's [pre-war] oil production.¹⁹²⁶ However, in the article published in September 2020, Kenneth R. Rosen describes Al-Omar oil field as 'mostly abandoned'.¹⁹²⁷

The control of Syria's oil wealth was a significant source of tensions reported in both Deir Ez-Zor and Hasaka governorates (for Deir Ez-Zor, see Section [2.9.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population](#), for Hasaka governorate, see Section [Tensions between the SDF and other actors in north-east Syria/Tensions between the US-led Coalition and Russia](#)).

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

The GoS forces – consisting mostly of the SAA formations and National Defense Forces (NDF) – control the western part of Deir Ez-Zor governorate with the help of Iranian-backed armed groups and Russia. According to Kayla Koontz and Gregory Waters, the 17th Infantry Division of the SAA, led by Major General Ghassan Mohammed since December 2017, is the most central SAA formation in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. Since November 2019, Maj. Gen. Mohammed has also acted as the head of the Deir Ez-Zor Military and Security Committee nominally in charge of all the military and security operations conducted in the governorate.¹⁹²⁸

According to Oula Alrifai and Ali Alleile, the GoS-controlled western parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate can be divided into two 'spheres of influence'. The SAA is in control of the northern part of this area, 'run' by the 4th Division and the 5th Corps. The southern part of GoS-controlled Deir Ez-Zor governorate, including the cities of Mayadin and Al-Bukamal, is 'increasingly dominated' by the Iranian-backed armed groups.¹⁹²⁹ The fact that the 5th Corps is controlled¹⁹³⁰ or at least backed¹⁹³¹ by Russia while the 4th Division of the SAA is affiliated with Iran¹⁹³² complicates this dynamic.

In July 2019 Gregory Waters stated that the 3rd Battalion of the 7th Brigade of the 5th Corps has been permanently present in Deir Ez-Zor governorate where it has both held territory and conducted anti-ISIL operations with units from the 17th Division. In addition, other 5th Corps Brigades have also participated in the anti-ISIL operations conducted in the governorate.¹⁹³³ However, Alrifai and Alleile claim that the 5th Corps formations in Deir Ez-Zor governorate were transferred in their entirety to Raqqa governorate in July 2020.¹⁹³⁴

¹⁹²⁵ Awad, Z., Deir Al-Zor after Islamic State: Between Kurdish Self Administration and a Return of the Syrian Regime, European University Institute, March 2018, [url](#), [p. 9] [unnumbered].

¹⁹²⁶ Balance, F., The Race for Deir al-Zour Province, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 17 August 2017, [url](#)

¹⁹²⁷ Rosen, K. R., Who Benefits from a U.S. Oil Deal in Northeast Syria?, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Fikra Forum, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹²⁸ Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 4–5

¹⁹²⁹ Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹³⁰ Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹³¹ Lavrov, A., The Efficiency of the Syrian Armed Forces: An Analysis of Russian Assistance, Malcolm H. Kerr, Carnegie Middle East Center, 26 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹³² COAR, The Syrian economy at war, Part 1: Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#), p. 8; Al-Dassouky, A., The Role of the Syrian Army's Fourth Division, Chatham House, October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹³³ Waters, G., The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, Middle East Institute, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹³⁴ Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

According to Koontz and Waters, the Deir Ez-Zor NDF is led by tribal figure Firas Jeham and recruits extensively among the tribes in the region.¹⁹³⁵ According to Alrifai and Alleile, the GoS' 'efforts to establish control on the ground' in areas recaptured from ISIL in 2017 were 'limited' which gave the local NDF free reign and resulted in war crimes and human rights abuses, including looting and forced appropriation of civilian property. After March 2019, the GoS' presence in the western parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate has remained limited which has led to a 'Iranian-Russian competition over resources and land'.¹⁹³⁶

See [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#) for information on other SAA formations deployed in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁹³⁷

Iran and Iranian-backed armed groups

Iranian forces and other Iranian-affiliated armed groups are present in eastern Syria where they provide support for other GoS-affiliated forces in their anti-ISIL operations and maintain control of the territory captured from ISIL and the logistical routes connecting Syria (and Lebanon) to Iran (via Iraq).¹⁹³⁸ According to Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021, Iran has 13 military sites in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. These sites are located mainly around the cities of Deir Ez-Zor, Al-Mayadin and Al-Bukamal.¹⁹³⁹ According to ORSAM analyst Ömer Behram Özdemir, Iranian-backed armed groups are stationed along the line between Tabni (west of Deir Ez-Zor city) and Al-Bukamal (near the Syrian-Iraqi border) while they are also operating in the rural areas of western Deir Ez-Zor (bordering the Badia desert).¹⁹⁴⁰ Alrifai and Alleile estimate that almost 1 000 Iranian fighters and 'a few hundred' fighters from Iranian-backed Iraqi and Afghani armed-groups are deployed in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁹⁴¹

According to a map published by the Atlantic Council and charting the influence of Iran and Iranian-backed armed groups in Syria in 2020, these control the cities of Al-Bukamal and Al-Mayadeen and have permanent presence/military sites north-west of Al-Bukamal city, south-west of Deir Ez-Zor city, and along the (military) road between unofficial border crossing south-west of Al-Bukamal/Qa'im crossing and eastern Homs governorate. Outside these cities and other sites of more permanent presence, Iranian-backed armed groups are noted to have influence along the main roads in western Deir Ez-Zor governorate. These include the road running through the Euphrates river valley from Al-Bukamal/Qa'im border crossing to Raqqa governorate, the section of M20 highway running between Deir Ez-Zor city and Homs governorate and the (military) road between unofficial border crossing south-west of Al-Bukamal/Qa'im crossing and eastern Homs governorate.¹⁹⁴²

According to Fabrice Balanche, the Iranian-backed armed groups are also in control of both the internal border separating the western, GoS-controlled part of Deir Ez-Zor governorate from the eastern part of the governorate controlled by the SDF. These groups also control the Syrian-Iraqi border south of the Euphrates.¹⁹⁴³ According to Alrifai and Alleile, the IRGC and the Iranian-backed

¹⁹³⁵ Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 4–5

¹⁹³⁶ Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹³⁷ EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 163–164

¹⁹³⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1,2020–March 31,2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 61; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 57

¹⁹³⁹ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴⁰ Özdemir, Ö. B., Three Fronts of Iranian-Backed Militia in Deir ez-Zor, ORSAM, 22 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴¹ Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴² Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴³ Balanche F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

armed groups are also active in ‘several villages’ east of the Euphrates river.¹⁹⁴⁴ According to ISW, on 10 September 2020, the IRGC erected a military post in Hatlah, located on the eastern side of Euphrates River, along the road from Deir Ez-Zor city to Hasaka. ISW estimates that the IRGC tried to extend its presence to mainly SDF-controlled eastern part of Deir Ez-Zor governorate in order to garner support among the local Arab tribes.¹⁹⁴⁵

According to a Washington Institute for Near East Policy report of March 2021, Iran has also ‘taken over a great deal of key public and private infrastructure’, e.g. in health care sector, in the GoS-controlled western part of Deir Ez-Zor governorate. Iranian religious organisations have also taken care of the local population, promising aid ‘in return for loyalty and openness to Twelver Shia teachings, values, and ways of life’.¹⁹⁴⁶ In addition, Iranian forces have also recruited Syrians into the ranks of various Iranian-backed armed groups to strengthen their influence in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁹⁴⁷ Ahmed al-Ramadan, the director of opposition-affiliated Euphrates Post interviewed by Al-Monitor, describes the Fatemiyoun Brigade as ‘one of the largest Iranian militias deployed in Deir ez-Zor’ and describes it as one of the groups increasing their recruitment efforts among local youth in early 2021.¹⁹⁴⁸

According to the map published by the Atlantic Council, Lebanese Hezbollah has military presence and a pocket of influence south of Deir Ez-Zor city.¹⁹⁴⁹ Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021 charts Hezbollah 7 military sites in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁹⁵⁰ According to Özdemir, in addition to Hezbollah, the following Iranian-backed armed groups have presence in GoS-controlled Deir Ez-Zor governorate (as of 2021):

- Liwa al-Quds
- Liwa al-Baqir
- The Fatemiyoun Brigade
- The Zainebiyoun Brigade
- Syrian¹⁹⁵¹ ‘Brigade 313’
- Various Iraqi Shia militias (Badr Organization, Harakat al-Abdal, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kata’ib al-Imam Ali, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Liwa al-Tufuf, Liwa Zulfiqar)^{1952 1953}

Russia

According to Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021, Russia has 7 military sites in GoS-controlled western parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate, all of them in Euphrates river valley with four in

¹⁹⁴⁴ Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2 -15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴⁶ Alrifai, O. A., In the Service of Ideology: Iran's Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 14 March 2021, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁹⁴⁷ Al-Khateb, K., Iranian forces form new groups to boost influence in east Syria, Al Monitor, 23 February 2021, [url](#); Alrifai, O. A., In the Service of Ideology: Iran's Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 14 March 2021, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁹⁴⁸ Al-Khateb, K., Iranian forces form new groups to boost influence in east Syria, Al Monitor, 23 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴⁹ Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵⁰ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵¹ For further information on Brigade 313 and other Iran-backed Syrian Shia militias, see Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵² For more information on these groups, see Dury-Agri, J. R. et al., Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces. Orders of Battle, ISW, December 2017, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵³ Özdemir, Ö. B., Three Fronts of Iranian-Backed Militia in Deir ez-Zor, ORSAM, 22 February 2021, [url](#)

and around Deir Ez-Zor city.¹⁹⁵⁴ According to Alrifai and Alleile, Russian forces operating in Deir Ez-Zor governorate have pursued to 'secure strategic sites', including the Deir ez-Zor military airport.¹⁹⁵⁵

In April 2020, Russian forces sent a patrol in Mayadin. Alrifai and Alleile estimate that the patrols purpose was to 'signal Iranian militias' about Russia's intentions to take over the oil resources south of Mayadin and that Russia intends to 'contain [Iran's] influence further south in Al-Bukamal'.¹⁹⁵⁶ ISW reports that Russian forces strengthened their positions near Al-Bukamal with 300 military personnel and armoured vehicles on 16 December 2020 and set up a new military base with more armoured vehicles in Al-Bukamal city on 5 January 2021. ISW speculates that this move demonstrated Russia's will to gain influence in areas traditionally in control of the Iranian-backed armed groups.¹⁹⁵⁷

On 31 May 2020, opposition media Enab Baladi reported that Russia had begun the recruitment of Syrian mercenaries for the Libya conflict, attempted before in southern Syria, also in GoS-controlled Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁹⁵⁸

Syrian Democratic Forces

For background information on the SDF, see Section [1.4.3 Syrian Democratic Forces](#).

According to Fabrice Balanche, the SDF controls the internal border between the Syrian government-controlled western part and the SDF-controlled eastern part of Deir Ez-Zor governorate. In the eastern part of the governorate, SDF also controls the international border between Syria and Iraq.¹⁹⁵⁹ However, Aaron Zelin claims that the eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate can be considered as an administrative hinterland for the SDF which focused mainly on Hasaka governorate. Zelin estimates that ISIL has benefitted from this lack of local control and support for the SDF in Deir Ez-Zor as well as from the October 2019 Turkish military incursion, which forced the SDF to relocate its forces closer to Turkish border. The partial withdrawal of US forces has also played a role.¹⁹⁶⁰

The US-led Coalition

According to Fabrice Balanche, US troops have presence in the oilfields that stretch along the eastern bank of the Euphrates river in south-east Deir Ez-Zour governorate.¹⁹⁶¹ The map on 'The Complex Operating Environment of North-eastern Syria' in the USDOD report of February 2021 notes the presence of US forces the eastern bank of Euphrates River, opposing the city of Mayadin.¹⁹⁶² According to Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021, the US has 10 military sites in SDF-controlled eastern parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate: nine in the oilfields east/south-east of Deir Ez-Zor city and two in/near the town of Sur.¹⁹⁶³ According to a map by researcher Levent Kemal, the US has 8 military sites

¹⁹⁵⁴ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵⁵ Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵⁶ Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵⁷ ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵⁸ Enab Baladi, بالتفاصيل.. التجنيد الروسي في ليبيا يصل إلى دير الزور, [In detail.. The Russian recruitment to Libya arrives to Deir ez-Zor], 31 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵⁹ Balanche F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶⁰ Zelin, A. Y. & Knights, M., The Islamic State's Resurgence in the COVID Era?, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 29 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶¹ Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#) [map]

¹⁹⁶² USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2020–December 31, 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 56

¹⁹⁶³ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

in Deir Ez-Zor governorate: Six in the oilfields, one in the town of Sur and one close to administrative border with Raqqqa governorate.¹⁹⁶⁴

According to an analysis by COAR Global from 19 October 2020, the US-led Coalition has increased its military presence in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. Two military bases have been established in the SDF-controlled eastern part of the governorate, one in near Jazerat Oil Field and another in Baghuz. In addition, more troops and equipment has been sent to Al-Omar Oil Field base, situated north of Al-Mayadin city.¹⁹⁶⁵

ISIL

ISIL has more permanent presence and activity in GoS-controlled western parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁹⁶⁶ According to Gregory Waters, it has been estimated that between 1 000 and 1 800 ISIL fighters operate in Badia desert region (in western Deir Ez-Zor, northern Homs and southern Raqqqa governorates), forming 15 to 20 groups with 'approximately 70 % of all fighters located in the urban belt along the western side of the Euphrates'.¹⁹⁶⁷ According to International Crisis Group, ISIL's fighters have the ability 'to coalesce, set up checkpoints and extort protection money from local oil traders' and 'routinely threaten' locals – including land and shop owners, factory managers, doctors and others – in order to extort money (*zakat*) from those perceived to be wealthy enough to pay. In addition, ISIL has the 'ability to train new recruits in desert areas west of the Euphrates', supposedly in GoS control.¹⁹⁶⁸

The USDOD report of November 2020, describes the Middle Euphrates river valley and the desert areas in Deir Ez-Zor governorate as ISIL's 'support zone' which its members can utilise to avoid security operations and to transfer arms, equipment and personnel across the Syrian-Iraqi border.¹⁹⁶⁹ In addition, the report mentions 'the permissive environment' provided by the lack of effective anti-ISIL operations in the sparsely inhabited desert areas of GoS-controlled western Deir Ez-Zor, bordering Homs governorate.¹⁹⁷⁰

2.9.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

ISIL's insurgency in Deir Ez-Zor

In an analysis published in August 2020, Gregory Waters states that ISIL has put into effect 'an ever-expanding insurgency' against the SAA and its allies, mainly Russia, Iran and affiliated militias, in central Syria, including southern Raqqqa and western parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate. This insurgency began already in late 2017. However, since the beginning of 2019, the ISIS cells operating in central Syria, including the ones based in the rural and urban areas of GoS-controlled western Deir Ez-Zor governorate, have become stronger and expanded their 'geographic reach and effectiveness of their attacks'.¹⁹⁷¹ According to the report published by OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies discussing the security situation in Deir Ez-Zor governorate between July 2019 and June 2020, the number of

¹⁹⁶⁴ Kemal, L., Suriye'de YPG bölgesindeki Rus ve ABD üsleri sayıları [Map] [Twitter], 1 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶⁵ COAR, Fire on the coast: Damascus vows support — but not much, 19 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶⁶ Based on reading of maps in Etana Syria, Military Control Across Syria [Map], 1 April 2021 [published on 6 April 2021], [url](#) [Map]; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021 [published 18 February 2021], [url](#), p. 31 [Annex II J] [Map]

¹⁹⁶⁷ Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶⁸ International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#) p. 22

¹⁹⁷⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#) p. 23

¹⁹⁷¹ Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

assassinations and attacks with explosives (162) reported during this period, and ‘likely’ carried out by ISIL, indicates the existence of ‘a connected network for assassinations and explosions with the capacity to act’ with the actors responsible for the security in different parts of the governorate ‘unable to halt these incidents’.¹⁹⁷²

According to an assessment by Aaron Zelin from late May 2020, Deir Ez-Zor had seen most ISIL attacks in Syria, especially in 2020. Zelin notes that ISIL had conducted 638 attacks in Deir Ez-Zor governorate in the preceding 14 months.¹⁹⁷³ According to the OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, between July 2019 and June 2020, all in all 162 attacks were reported in Deir Ez-Zor governorate, including 123 assassinations and 39 attacks with explosives, resulting in 444 casualties. 191 of the reported casualties were civilians who were directly targeted in 8 of the attacks.¹⁹⁷⁴ With regard to Deir Ez-Zor’s ISIL’s activities in Deir Ez-Zor in 2020, 94 assassinations or attacks with explosives occurred in the governorate in the period between January–June 2020. 17 of these took place in January, 12 in February, 11 in March, 17 in April, 29 in May, and 8 in June.¹⁹⁷⁵ According to data gathered by Gregory Waters and presented in the article published by Newlines Institute, ISIL conducted 93 attacks in Deir ez-Zor governorate in 2020, with 11 attacks in January, 3 in February, 6 in March, 11 in April, 13 in May, 3 in June, 3 in July, 10 in August, 11 in September, 8 in October, 6 in November and 8 in December 2020.¹⁹⁷⁶ According to US sources reporting to the USDOD, there were 615 ISIL attacks recorded in Syria in 2020. Around 50 % of all ISIL attacks documented by USDOD in 2020 took place in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁹⁷⁷

According to Kayla Koontz and Gregory Waters, ISIL has increased attacks targeting shepherds and local militias in the GoS-controlled western Deir Ez-Zor governorate in order to breed general instability and anger against the SAA.¹⁹⁷⁸ The SAA formation (the 17th Division) in charge of the governorate and the local tribal NDF are said to lack the willingness and the ability to cooperate in launching anti-ISIL operations in the governorate.¹⁹⁷⁹ The security situation in GoS controlled Deir Ez-Zor is described as ‘untenable’ and in need of expanded military support from the government and operation level cooperation between the SAA and NDF.¹⁹⁸⁰ Koontz and Waters note that, since January 2020, there has been a sharp increase of ISIL attacks in the urban areas between Deir Ez-Zor city and Ma’adan. These attacks have targeted villages and members of Busaraya tribe that the GoS has relied heavily on when establishing and expanding the Deir Ez-Zor branch of the NDF.¹⁹⁸¹ According to Waters, ISIL receives assistance from NDF commanders with facilitating the smuggling of weapons and

¹⁹⁷² OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 27

¹⁹⁷³ Zelin, A. Y. & Knights, M., The Islamic State's Resurgence in the COVID Era?, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 29 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁷⁴ OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁹⁷⁵ OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 16–19

¹⁹⁷⁶ Waters G., ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#) [Table: ‘ISIS Accaks by Province’]

¹⁹⁷⁷ Total based on cumulating quarterly reporting of ISIL attacks. USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 51; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1 2020 – December 31 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁹⁷⁸ Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁹⁷⁹ Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁹⁸⁰ Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁹⁸¹ Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 3–4, 5–6.

human individuals across the Euphrates river. In addition, Waters notes an ISIL attack from mid-November 2020, in which an NDF commander was killed, allegedly as a result of intelligence shared with ISIL by a rival commander.¹⁹⁸²

In 2020, ISIL cells have also been active in the SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate. According to Zelin, in these areas, ISIL has engaged in revenge strikes against local leaders, staged attacks against oil and gas supply lines, conducted raids targeting convoys and kidnapped people for ransom and also for the purposes of prisoner swaps and intelligence gathering.¹⁹⁸³ Koontz and Waters state that ISIL is targeting local tribal leaders allied with the SDF with the aim of destabilising the security and undermining the political legitimacy of the Autonomous Administration in the region.¹⁹⁸⁴ Koontz and Waters point out that the increasing number of ISIL attacks in the SDF-controlled areas is exacerbating the tensions rising from the fact that local tribes are the main targets of the attacks while their ability to respond is subordinated to SDF's security structure which is currently overburdened and unable to reduce the number of attacks.¹⁹⁸⁵

The Col states that attacks by ISIL targeting the US-led international coalition and the SDF in Deir Ez-Zor governorate increased in the first half of 2020 (11 January–1 July 2020).¹⁹⁸⁶ At the same time, the security situation in Deir Ez-Zor governorate 'deteriorated' also as the result of increased security operations by the SDF targeting alleged ISIL members.¹⁹⁸⁷ According to RIC, in 2020 ISIL cells operating in the SDF-controlled North-East Syria carried out 572 attack, killing 299 people. The SDF-affiliated authorities conducted 221 security operations targeting ISIL sleeper cells and 575 arrests targeting allegedly ISIL-affiliated individuals. The wide majority of the attacks were carried out in the SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁹⁸⁸

The central factors of USDOD's analysis on ISIL's activities in Syria have remained constant through 2020. In the period between January and March 2020, USDOD noted the 'steady stream of attacks' in Deir Ez-Zor governorate¹⁹⁸⁹, with the attacks focusing on Deir Ez-Zor city and adjacent areas¹⁹⁹⁰, although the attacks in the governorate decreased 37 % when compared to the previous quarter.¹⁹⁹¹ According to RIC, in January 2020, ISIL carried out 50 attacks in SDF-controlled North-East Syria with 40 of the attacks taking place in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. 32 people, including 13 village elders were killed in the attacks.¹⁹⁹² In February, ISIL carried out 61 attacks SDF-controlled North-East.¹⁹⁹³ 26 people were killed in these attacks.¹⁹⁹⁴ In March 2020, ISIL carried out 48 attacks SDF-controlled

¹⁹⁸² Waters, G., *ISIL in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁸³ Zelin, A. Y. & Knights, M., *The Islamic State's Resurgence in the COVID Era?*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 29 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁸⁴ Koontz, K. & Waters, G., *Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor*, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁹⁸⁵ Koontz, K. & Waters, G., *Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor*, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 9–10

¹⁹⁸⁶ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31]*, 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 15 [para. 70]

¹⁹⁸⁷ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31]*, 14 August 2020 [published 15 September 2020], [url](#), p. 2 [para. 5]

¹⁹⁸⁸ RIC, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁹⁸⁹ USDOD, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 19

¹⁹⁹⁰ USDOD, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 52

¹⁹⁹¹ USDOD, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁹⁹² Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁹⁹³ Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

¹⁹⁹⁴ Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

North-East Syria.¹⁹⁹⁵ 24 people were killed in these attacks¹⁹⁹⁶, of which 73 % (35 attacks) were carried out in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.¹⁹⁹⁷

According to USDOD, in the period between April and June 2020, most ISIL attacks were carried out in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. The majority of the attacks targeted the SDF and utilised small arms and IEDs¹⁹⁹⁸, while USDOD estimated that ISIL 'continues to receive some support from Sunni communities' of the Middle Euphrates river valley.¹⁹⁹⁹ According to RIC, ISIL carried out 47 attacks²⁰⁰⁰ in the SDF-controlled North-East Syria in April 2020.²⁰⁰¹ 29 people were killed in these attacks.²⁰⁰² In May 2020, ISIL carried out 84 attacks in SDF-controlled North-East Syria²⁰⁰³, killing 36 people.²⁰⁰⁴ In June 2020, ISIL carried out 45 attacks²⁰⁰⁵, resulting in 22 fatalities.²⁰⁰⁶ RIC notes that 73 % of the attacks (33 attacks) were carried out in the 'Arab dominant regions' of SDF-controlled north-east Syria (i.e. in Deir Ez-Zor, Raqqa and southern Hasaka governorates).^{2007 2008}

USDOD notes that, between July–September 2020, ISIL's activities in Syria focused on Deir Ez-Zor governorate (along with Homs) and increased during the summer months. The attacks in GoS-controlled parts of the governorate were mostly IED-attacks, attacks carried out with small arms, ambushes and assassinations.²⁰⁰⁹ USDOD assesses that the most significant ISIL attack in the period between July–September 2020 occurred in GoS-controlled Deir Ez-Zor governorate on 27 August, when ISIL ambushed a NDF militia and killed at least 30 of its members.²⁰¹⁰ According to RIC, ISIL carried out 34 attacks SDF-controlled North-East Syria in July 2020.²⁰¹¹ 18 people were killed in these attacks.²⁰¹² In August 2020, ISIL carried out 64 attacks SDF-controlled North-East Syria.²⁰¹³ 32 people were killed in these attacks.²⁰¹⁴ Besides ISIL, the Turkish-backed SNA, the GoS-affiliated NDF and Iranian-backed armed groups all conducted attacks in SDF-controlled North-East Syria in August 2020.²⁰¹⁵ In September 2020, ISIL carried out 51 attacks SDF-controlled North-East Syria²⁰¹⁶, killing 15 people.²⁰¹⁷

¹⁹⁹⁵ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

¹⁹⁹⁶ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁹⁹⁷ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁹⁹⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1,2020–June 30,2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27

¹⁹⁹⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1,2020–June 30,2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27

²⁰⁰⁰ According to RIC, attacks in Ayn Issa carried out by Turkish-backed SNA-affiliated armed group Ahrar al-Sharqiya were included in the reporting. RIC, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰⁰¹ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

²⁰⁰² Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰⁰³ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

²⁰⁰⁴ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰⁰⁵ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

²⁰⁰⁶ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰⁰⁷ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 52 [Map]; Netjes R. & van Veen, E., Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist. The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict, Clingendael, April 2021, [url](#), p. 5

²⁰⁰⁸ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰⁰⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23

²⁰¹⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1,2020–September 30,2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 25

²⁰¹¹ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

²⁰¹² Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰¹³ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

²⁰¹⁴ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰¹⁵ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 5

²⁰¹⁶ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

²⁰¹⁷ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

According to USDOD, ISIL's attacks in Syria in the period between October and December 2020 focused on both the GoS-controlled areas and the SDF-controlled areas. The majority of the attacks were carried out in the Middle Euphrates river valley, with almost 50 % of the attacks reported in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.²⁰¹⁸ All ISIL attacks were 'small-scale attacks and assassinations' and targeted both civilians and members of both the SDF and GoS forces.²⁰¹⁹ According to USDOD, ISIL claimed 27 attacks targeting the SDF in this period.²⁰²⁰ Between October and December 2020, ISIL also continued its assassination campaign targeting both military and civilian leadership in SDF-controlled areas in order to increase the tensions between the SDF and the local population.²⁰²¹ According to RIC, ISIL carried out 45 attacks SDF-controlled North-East Syria in October 2020.²⁰²² 10 people were killed in these attacks.²⁰²³ According to RIC, 31 attacks took place in Deir Ez-Zor, 7 in Hasaka, 4 in Raqqqa and 3 in Manbij.²⁰²⁴ In November 2020, ISIL carried out 16 attacks SDF-controlled North-East Syria in November 2020²⁰²⁵, killing 15 people.²⁰²⁶ In December 2020, 34 attacks were carried out²⁰²⁷, resulting in 34 fatalities.²⁰²⁸ 29 of these attacks were reported in the 'Arab regions'.^{2029 2030}

According to local sources cited by COAR Global and assessing the year 2020, ISIL was most active in December 2020 and many attacks were reported in both SDF-controlled and GoS-controlled parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate.²⁰³¹ According to the article by Sirwan Kajjo from 27 December 2020, ISIL attacks in SDF-controlled Deir Ez-Zor governorate intensified in the preceding weeks. On 26 December 2020, the SDF and the US-led Coalition launched a campaign targeting ISIL cells in northern Deir Ez-Zor governorate.²⁰³² According to REACH, in November 2020, attacks by ISIL and the 'heightened tensions' between the SDF-affiliated local authorities and the local population 'increased security concerns' among the population in SDF-controlled Deir Ez-Zor.²⁰³³

According to the UN Security Council report of April 2021, discussing the situation in Syria in February and March 2021, ISIL continued to target the GoS forces and the SDF with 'ambush attacks and assassination attempts' in Deir Ez-Zor and Hasaka governorates, as well as in eastern rural areas of Homs governorate.²⁰³⁴ According to the USDOD, ISIL's 'small-scale IED and hit-and-run attacks' and assassinations continued in Syria in the period between January and March 2021.²⁰³⁵ ISIL was said to maintain a 'significant presence in rural farming communities' in the SDF-controlled areas and assassinations targeting 'tribal and civic leaders and other influential figures' continued in SDF-

²⁰¹⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 18

²⁰¹⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 15

²⁰²⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 16

²⁰²¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1,2020–December 31,2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 15

²⁰²² Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

²⁰²³ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰²⁴ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

²⁰²⁵ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

²⁰²⁶ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰²⁷ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

²⁰²⁸ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰²⁹ Cf. 'Arab dominant regions' above.

²⁰³⁰ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

²⁰³¹ COAR, Qamishli Clashes: GoS and SDF Seek Pressure Points, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁰³² Kajjo, S., US-Backed SDF Targets IS Militants in Eastern Syria, VOA, 27 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁰³³ REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, November 2020, 21 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1

²⁰³⁴ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3 [Para. 6]

²⁰³⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1,2021–March 31,2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), p. 2

controlled parts of Deir Ez-Zor and Hasaka²⁰³⁶, with civilians also targeted by these attacks.²⁰³⁷ The USDOD estimates that, in this period, ISIL was responsible for ‘near-daily attacks’ against the GoS and affiliated forces, including Russia, in the Middle Euphrates river valley.²⁰³⁸

According to Al-Monitor article published in November 2020, ISIL leaders and other people affiliated with the organisation were able to maintain their presence in the area after the capture of ISIL’s last territorial stronghold in Baghouz with the assistance of local tribes. Local journalist Zain al-Abidin claims that ISIL’s capacity to operate in eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate has been made possible, i.e., by the SDF’s lack of popularity, the fear instilled by ISIL in the local population and the collaboration between some SDF leaders and ISIL operatives in the region. Abidin claims that ISIL operatives are targeting civilians in eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate, forcing them to pay protection money or ‘taxes’ (*zakat*) for the organisation and targeting the people dealing with drugs or selling tobacco, those deemed as secular, those having extramarital affairs or those ‘engage[d] in sorcery’.²⁰³⁹ These practices of collecting *zakat* and ‘punishing’ of secular and non-practising Muslims’ by ISIL in parts of nominally SDF-controlled Deir Ez-Zor are also noted by Patrick Cockburn.²⁰⁴⁰ Journalist Ahmed al-Sheble, cited in the Al-Monitor article published in November 2020, claims that, with regard to SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate, ISIL is particularly active in the villages of Al-Shuhail, Hajin, Susah and Baghouz.²⁰⁴¹

According to the article by the BBC, ISIL carried out ‘more than 100 attacks in north-eastern Syria’ in January 2021. The article notes that the attacks took place mainly in Deir ez-Zor province. A researcher interviewed for the article focuses on ‘a small area east of Deir Ez-Zor city’, controlled by the SDF, and notes that attacks in that area alone included assassinations, kidnappings, beheadings and bomb and VBIED attacks. In addition, the researcher claims that in a town located in that particular unnamed area, ISIL fighters are free to terrorize the local population at night-time, since the SDF leaves the area after sunset. Similar claim is made by another local source who states that the area where she lives is ‘almost under the IS members’ control’ at night-time and that every day ‘one or two people [are] getting killed’. Similar claim is made by Patrick Cockburn, according to whom ‘parts of the countryside around Deir [ez-Zor]’ are ruled by ISIL by night.²⁰⁴² The source in the BBC article states that people linked to the GoS or the SDF are mainly at risk while ‘shopkeepers and other businesspeople are also being targeted’ with threats, extortion and kidnappings and killings of their family members. In addition, there have been cases of local criminals posturing as ISIL members to extort the local population.²⁰⁴³

Tribal protests in the SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor

As already discussed above with regard to Hasaka and Raqqa governorates, the power in SDF-controlled areas has concentrated disproportionately in the hands of ethnic Kurds and a small group of Arab leaders closely associated with the PYD. Although the Kurds do not have representation in Deir Ez-Zor local council, advisors affiliated with the PYD set limits on the council’s ability to make decisions, and many local Arab leaders have complained that Kurds have too much control over the

²⁰³⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1,2021–March 31,2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), p. 16

²⁰³⁷ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1,2021–March 31,2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), p. 62

²⁰³⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1,2021–March 31,2021, 4 May 2021, [url](#), p. 6

²⁰³⁹ Al-Kanj, S., Islamic State regroups in Syrian Kurdish region, Al-Monitor, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁴⁰ Cockburn, P., After IS, LRB Vol. 43 No. 3, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁰⁴¹ Al-Kanj, S., Islamic State regroups in Syrian Kurdish region, Al-Monitor, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁴² Cockburn, P., After IS, LRB Vol. 43 No. 3, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁰⁴³ Thomson, M., IS brutality returning to Syrian towns, BBC, 7 February 2021, [url](#)

administrative institutions in the governorate.²⁰⁴⁴ Menchy (et al.) mention the fuel committee of Deir Ez-Zor, responsible for ‘fuel allocation and distribution in [Deir ez-Zor] region’, as an example of ‘widespread corruption’ within the Autonomous Administration governance structures and describes the leading role of the PKK-affiliated ‘cadros’ (for further information see Section [1.4.3 Syrian Democratic Forces](#)) as one of the main factors enabling the committee’s abuse of power.²⁰⁴⁵

In March 2020, Al-Monitor’s Khaled al-Khateb reported that security conditions in SDF-controlled eastern parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate were deteriorating as a result of the SDF security operations targeting civilians and ongoing demonstrations against the SDF, possibly provoked by locals associated with the GoS. Al-Khateb reports that The SDF has ‘a tight grip on all aspects of civilian life’ in the eastern parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate and cites sources criticising both the corruption of local councils connected to the SDF and the repressive measures adopted by the SDF-led administration toward peaceful protesters. On 8 March 2020, the SDF-affiliated Deir Ez-Zor military council fired directly on protesters in the town of Mohaymada, killing one civilian and wounding many others. On 13 March, the SDF-affiliated local security forces conducted raids in Jadeed Ekedat and in a refugee camp in Mohaymada, supposedly as a reaction to a roadside bomb that exploded on 11 March in the town of Shafa, targeting SDF-patrol and killing one and wounding dozens. Al-Khateb lists six incidents from preceding months (early 2020) where the SDF-led local security forces had targeted protesters with raids and arrests in SDF-controlled parts of eastern Syria.²⁰⁴⁶

According to COAR Global, the SDF announced the beginning of a new wide-ranging anti-ISIL campaign on 4 June 2020 that covered SDF-controlled areas from southern rural Hasaka governorate to Baghouz in eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate. The campaign extended to areas on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border and it was coordinated with Iraqi central government, the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces and the US-led international coalition. On 10 June, SDF announced the end of the initial phase of the campaign during which raids had been conducted in 65 locations and 110 individuals arrested. Local sources told COAR Global that the campaign was a direct response to ISIL’s increasing activity in the area, while they suspected that the campaign also targeted individuals opposing the SDF, including individuals affiliated with the GoS.²⁰⁴⁷

On 4 August 2020, increasing tensions between the SDF and local tribes led to demonstrations in the SDF-controlled towns of Al-Shuhayl, Theban and Al-Hawayiji.²⁰⁴⁸ The demonstrations were provoked by the assassination of Aqidat tribal chief Matsher Hamoud al-Hafl on 2 August 2020, as well as by other assassinations targeting prominent tribal figures in late July/early August.²⁰⁴⁹ ISW reports that the SDF responded to the protests violently, opening fire at protestors and injuring 7.²⁰⁵⁰ According to Al-Monitor, the SDF opened fire towards protestors in Al-Hawayiji,²⁰⁵¹ where, according to COAR Global, ‘five civilians and four SDF members were injured in a shootout.’²⁰⁵² Different sources claim different parties responsible for the assassinations: According to Koontz and Waters ISIL claimed

²⁰⁴⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1,2020–June 30,2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 54

²⁰⁴⁵ The source describes the ‘cadros’ as ‘Kurdish individuals with technical expertise and long-term links to the inner circles of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) or the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)’. Mehchy Z. et al., Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria, Chatham House, November 2020, [url](#), p. 22

²⁰⁴⁶ In all, Al-Khateb lists eight incidents. However, two of these (Tabqa and Mansoura) occurred in Raqqa governorate. Al-Khateb, K., Deir ez-Zor residents protest rule by Syrian Kurdish group, Al-Monitor, 20 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁴⁷ COAR, Damascus scrambles to contain economic rage as protests spread, 15 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁴⁸ COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#); Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 7–8

²⁰⁴⁹ COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#); Al-Kanj, S., Who is behind wave of killings of tribal sheikhs in east Syria?, 8 September 2020, [url](#); Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 7–8

²⁰⁵⁰ ISW, Syria Situation Report: July 22 - August 4, 2020, 6 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁵¹ Al-Kanj, S., Who is behind wave of killings of tribal sheikhs in east Syria?, 8 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁵² COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#)

responsibility for one of the assassinations that targeted the Aqidat spokesman Suleiman al-Kassar.²⁰⁵³ According to RIC, 'a Iranian-linked group' was responsible for al-HafI's assassination.²⁰⁵⁴ The tribal and/or local sources interviewed for the Al-Monitor assert the blame to the SDF.²⁰⁵⁵ COAR Global notes the tendency of the local tribes to blame the SDF and claims assassinations and protests are 'likely' part of the GoS' strategy to destabilize the SDF-controlled North-East Syria.²⁰⁵⁶

Some Aqidat tribal figures gathered in GoS-held Deir Ez-Zor city between 5–9 August 2020 to form a tribal militia opposing the US and the SDF presence in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.²⁰⁵⁷ The SDF held its own gathering, hosted by the Bakir tribe, in eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate to reach out to the tribes.²⁰⁵⁸ According to Koontz and Waters, the unrests in Deir Ez-Zor resulted in a formation of a new local security force that was described as 'not subject to the SDF' by a local tribe (Shaytat).²⁰⁵⁹ According to US government sources, SDF-led administration also addressed the grievances of local communities on the administrative level, e.g., by launching 'community listening sessions in each major population center' and an anti-corruption campaign investigating the Autonomous Administration officials. The DIA estimated that the unrests in SDF-controlled Deir Ez-Zor gave ISIL, GoS and Iran new possibilities to gain support among the tribes and to destabilise SDF-controlled North-East Syria, although the majority of local Arab population preferred the SDF over ISIL or the corrupted and abusive GoS.²⁰⁶⁰

ISW reports that on 8 September 2020 members of Aqidat tribe violently captured members of the SDF and expelled them from Jdid Aqidat.²⁰⁶¹ Based on information reported by the local media, an analysis by COAR Global notes that the SDF conducted a raid in the town of Jdid Aqidat and imposed a curfew on the town as a response to a reported ISIL attack targeting the SDF in the area. COAR Global notes that the locals believe the SDF's 'raid campaign' in Deir Ez-Zor aimed to display 'overwhelming force to deter future assassinations or unrest'.²⁰⁶²

In early December 2020, SOHR reported on 'escalating protests' against the corruption of the SDF-controlled governance institutions in the rural parts of SDF-controlled Deir Ez-Zor governorate.²⁰⁶³ According to COAR Global, people of several towns in the rural SDF-controlled Deir Ez-Zor organised demonstrations in early January 2021 against the 2014 'self-defence law' that enables the forced conscription to the SDF. The demonstrations resulted in 'violent clashes and repression', with the SDF dispersing them with force. COAR Global notes that other demonstrations against 'the worsening living conditions, public services, and security conditions' had taken place in previous weeks (December 2020).²⁰⁶⁴ According to the Al-Monitor article published on 8 January 2021, the protests were motivated by the 'lack of services, arbitrary arrests and alleged discrimination' by the SDF.²⁰⁶⁵ According to Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD), the main grievance behind the protests organised in late 2020 and early 2021 and 'increased tensions' in SDF-controlled Deir Ez-Zor was the

²⁰⁵³ Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 7–8

²⁰⁵⁴ Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 5

²⁰⁵⁵ Al-Kanj, S., Who is behind wave of killings of tribal sheikhs in east Syria?, 8 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁵⁶ COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁵⁷ COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁵⁸ ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁵⁹ Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10

²⁰⁶⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#) pp. 53–54

²⁰⁶¹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2 -15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁶² COAR, Lavrov touts Russia's primacy in Damascus visit, 14 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁶³ SOHR, Deir Ezzor demonstrations: Tens of residents protest corruption of SDF officials, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁶⁴ COAR, Emboldened Self-Administration bids for greater power, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁰⁶⁵ Kittleson, S., Protests, info warfare continue in Syria's Deir ez-Zor, Al-Monitor, 8 January 2021, [url](#)

December 2020 forced conscription of teachers and students into the SDF. SADC notes ‘the lack of concern of civil peace, the deterioration of the security situation and the high costs of living’ in SDF-controlled Deir Ez-Zor.²⁰⁶⁶

According to USDOD, the GoS and Russian forces made attempts in the period between April and June 2020 to gain more access to major oilfields in the SDF-controlled North-East Syria (eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate). Between July and September 2020, these actors increased their attempts to extend their influence over the SDF and put pressure on the US to eventually withdraw from Syria. However, no significant attempts were made to gain access to the SDF-controlled oilfields by force.²⁰⁶⁷ ISW reports that on 18 August 2020 three Katyusha rockets were fired near a US-led Coalition base located at Conoco Oil Fields in SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate with no casualties or material damages reported.²⁰⁶⁸ ISW reports that the 18 August attack was later claimed by an Iranian-backed militia. On 29 August 2020, another Iranian-backed armed group attacked the US-led Coalition base in Conoco Oil Fields with mortars.²⁰⁶⁹ According to USDOD, the GoS and its allies (Russia and Iran) maintained their push to gain influence among the local tribes in the Middle Euphrates River Valley in late 2020. However, USCENTCOM estimates that no major tribal groupings had drawn its support from the SDF.²⁰⁷⁰

According to the USDOD report of February 2021, discussing the period October between December 2020, the Autonomous Administration had addressed the grievances of local Arab population by increasing tribal representation in some governance structures, by arranging eight dialogue sessions with local communities and by agreeing to speed up the return process of Syrians interned in the Al-Hol camp to their homes in Deir Ez-Zor and Raqqa governorates.²⁰⁷¹ In the report published in November 2020, Syria analysts Kayla Koontz and Gregory Waters observe that Deir Ez-Zor’s tribal population has been absorbed to a ‘significant extent’ into the respective security structures of the GoS and the SDF. However, the lack of support from both the government and the autonomous administration in the face of increasing ISIL attacks compromises the long-term stability of the governorate.²⁰⁷²

Iran-related security incidents in GoS-controlled Deir Ez-Zor

On 11 March 2020, local media sources reported about clashes between militias loyal to the IRGC and the 4th Division of the SAA over the control of a checkpoint in the city of Mayadeen, claiming the life of one civilian and injuring two others.²⁰⁷³ According to COAR Global this incident (reported originally by Al-Modon) and similar clashes between pro-GoS armed groups have happened repeatedly since the government and its allies took over the western parts of Deir Ez-Zor in late 2019. COAR Global estimates that these clashes, motivated mainly by the competition over checkpoints, smuggling routes, and other spoils of war, are a central factor driving the local conflict in GoS-controlled Deir Ez-Zor.²⁰⁷⁴

According to OMRAN, between October and December 2019, Al-Bukamal city saw 36 people being extrajudicially detained and 55 abducted in 11 separate incidents. 26 civilians were detained by the

²⁰⁶⁶ SADC, SADC seriously concerned with the actions of SDF authorities in Deir Ezzor, 2 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁰⁶⁷ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#) p. 59

²⁰⁶⁸ ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁶⁹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 19 - September 1, 2020, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁷⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2020–December 31, 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 57

²⁰⁷¹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2020–December 31, 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 58

²⁰⁷² Koontz, K. & Waters, G., Between the Coalition, ISIS, and Assad: Courting the Tribes of Deir ez-Zor, Middle East Institute, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 1

²⁰⁷³ Al Modon, الميليشيات الإيرانية تطرد الفرقة الرابعة من الميادين [Iranian militias expel the Fourth Division from Al-Mayadeen], 11 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁷⁴ COAR, Bump in the road for first Russian-Turkish patrol on the M4, 16 March 2020, [url](#)

Local Defence Forces (LDF). 10 members of the GoS forces were detained by the Russian military police. 18 civilians and 37 members of the GoS forces were abducted. The GoS forces' members were abducted and later killed by ISIL while the fate of the civilians remains unknown.²⁰⁷⁵ Between January and March 2020, 30 people were detained and 10 abducted in 9 different incidents in Al-Bukamal. 16 of the detainees were civilians and 14 from the LDF. The arrests were carried out by the LDF and the Russian military police. 6 abductees were from the LDF, 3 civilians and 1 from GoS security services. ISIL carried out 2 abductions in which 3 civilians and 2 members of the LDF were kidnapped.²⁰⁷⁶

According to Harith Hasan and Kheder Khaddour, the Al-Bukamal area in Syrian-Iraqi border is affected by tensions between the GoS and Iranian-backed armed groups.²⁰⁷⁷ According to a local defected member of the GoS forces interviewed in the Al-Monitor article published in December 2020, GoS forces and Iranian-backed armed groups share the control of cities in the GoS-controlled western Deir Ez-Zor governorate. The source notes that the potentially violent altercations between the GoS forces and the Iranian-backed armed groups about the control of checkpoints and the right to exact fees from passers-by are a 'daily' phenomenon in the area.²⁰⁷⁸ In September 2020, Alrifai and Alleile also noted the intensifying rivalry between Iran and Russia in GoS-controlled western Deir Ez-Zor that 'could spill over into armed confrontations'.²⁰⁷⁹

During the reference period for this report, Israeli airstrikes targeting the Iranian-backed armed groups (including Hezbollah, Liwa Fatemiyoun, IRGC and Kata'ib Hezbollah) in GoS-controlled areas of Deir Ez-Zor governorate (mainly areas in and around Al-Bukamal), leading to casualties among the fighters.²⁰⁸⁰ On 25 February 2021, the US carried out an airstrike targeting facilities of a border control point operated by Iran-backed Iraqi militias.²⁰⁸¹ The airstrike was carried out near the city of Al-Bukamal²⁰⁸² where it reportedly targeted Imam Ali air base.²⁰⁸³ SOHR claimed that the strikes killed at least 17 militia members.²⁰⁸⁴ However, according to ISW, only one militia member was killed and another two wounded in the strike.²⁰⁸⁵ The US officials described the operation as a response to attacks targeting US forces in Iraq (rockets attacks in Erbil in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region on 15 February) and it gained special significance as the first military action by the Biden administration.²⁰⁸⁶

²⁰⁷⁵ OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 59

²⁰⁷⁶ OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 60–61

²⁰⁷⁷ Hasan, H. & Khaddour K., The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 31 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁷⁸ Ahmed, A., Pro-Iran militias in Syria soak merchants for cash at checkpoints, Al Monitor, 21 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁷⁹ Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁰ COAR, 5th Corps and Government forces clash in Dar'a: A step-change for Syria's most restive region as Oudeh and Russia bid for more power?, 29 June 2020, [url](#); COAR, Bump in the road for first Russian-Turkish patrol on the M4, 16 March 2020, [url](#); COAR, Changes to military service reflect Damascus's unrealistic aims, growing socio-economic divide, 24 November 2020, [url](#); COAR, Qamishli Clashes: GoS and SDF Seek Pressure Points, 18 January 2021, [url](#); The Guardian/ AFP, Deadliest Israeli airstrikes on Syria in years kill 57, say observers, 13 January 2021, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-29, 2021, 29 January 2021, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 30 - February 18, 2021, 19 February 2021, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: June 24 - July 6, 2020, 9 July 2020, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: March 4-17, 2020, 20 March 2020, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: November 11-December 1, 2020, 3 December 2020, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2 -15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁸¹ BBC News, Biden approves US airstrike on Iran-backed militias in Syria, 26 February 2021, [url](#); Rudaw/AFP, US strikes 'Iranian-backed militant' site in Syria: Pentagon, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁰⁸² Rudaw/AFP, US strikes 'Iranian-backed militant' site in Syria: Pentagon, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁰⁸³ Al Jazeera, US attacks 'Iranian-backed military infrastructure' in Syria, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁴ BBC News, Biden approves US airstrike on Iran-backed militias in Syria, 26 February 2021, [url](#); Rudaw/AFP, US strikes 'Iranian-backed militant' site in Syria: Pentagon, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 - March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁶ BBC News, Biden approves US airstrike on Iran-backed militias in Syria, 26 February 2021, [url](#); CNN, US carries out air strikes in Syria targeting Iranian backed militias, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

Security incidents

According to ACLED data, in 2020 there were 1 322 security incidents recorded in Deir Ez-Zor governorate, of whom 422 were battles, 466 explosive/remote violence and 434 incidents of violence against civilians.²⁰⁸⁷

The number of security incidents was highest between September and November 2020 and December 2020 and March 2021, lower levels being recorded in March, June and July 2020 (see Figure 37).²⁰⁸⁸

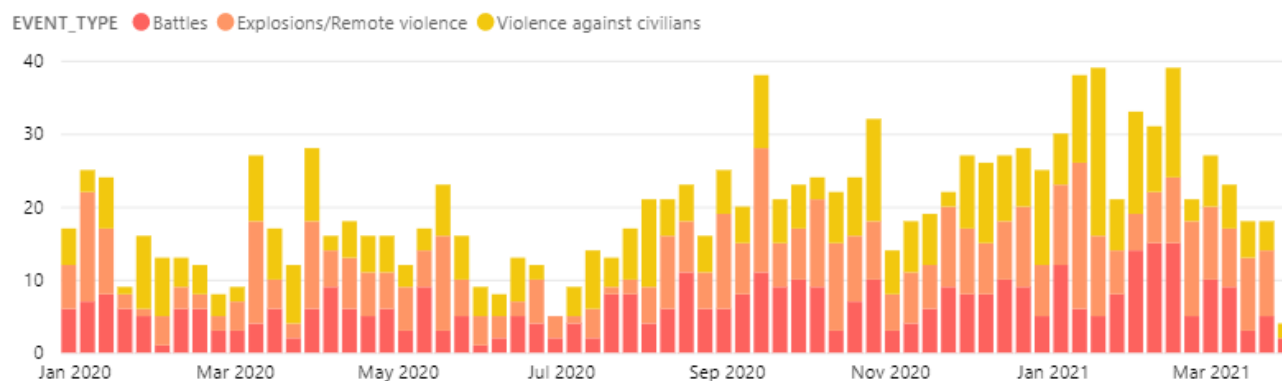


Figure 37: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Deir Ez-Zor governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data²⁰⁸⁹

Deir ez-Zor governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Albu Kamal	51	148	53
Al Mayadin	122	126	96
Deir Ez-Zor	249	192	285
Total	422	466	434

Figure 38: Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Deir Ez-Zor governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

Security incidents were recorded in all three districts during the reference period, the highest number being documented in Deir Ez-Zor district (see Figure 38).²⁰⁹⁰

Illustrative security incidents

- On 11 March 2020, a roadside IED exploded in the town of Sha'fah, killing one civilian and injuring four others.²⁰⁹¹
- On 17 March 2020, a civilian was abducted and killed in Hawayji by unknown perpetrators.²⁰⁹²

²⁰⁸⁷ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁸ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

²⁰⁸⁹ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

²⁰⁹⁰ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

²⁰⁹¹ 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/2020/327], 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

²⁰⁹² 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/2020/327], 23 April 2020, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

- On 19–20 April 2020, five civilians were abducted and later killed by unknown perpetrators. Their bodies were discovered near the village of Turayf.²⁰⁹³
- On 23 April 2020, a drive-by shooting in Shahil city claimed the life of one civilian.²⁰⁹⁴
- On 1 May 2020, a roadside IED exploded near the city of Busayrah, killing two children and injuring three other civilians.²⁰⁹⁵
- On 21 May 2020, a VBIED exploded in Busayrah city marketplace, killing a child and injuring 15 other civilians. Another VBIED exploded nearby soon after.²⁰⁹⁶
- On 24 May 2020, online news outlet SY24 reported on a violent armed clash between Bakir and Albufria tribes in the town of Mashakh, in SDF-controlled Deir Ez-Zor governorate, that resulted in at least 10 civilian casualties.²⁰⁹⁷ According to COAR Global, the clash was a manifestation of a long term feud between the tribes and could have been caused by the fact that a Shaykh of the Bakir tribe had wielded his influence in the SDF-led local administration for the benefit of his own tribe.²⁰⁹⁸
- On 25 May 2020, a mine exploded in an agricultural area near the village of Mar'iyah, killing a child and injuring another civilian.²⁰⁹⁹
- On 1 June 2020, a village chief was killed in Gharibah village, Basirah area in the rural parts of eastern Deir ez-Zor governorate as a result of a drive-by-shooting later claimed by ISIL.²¹⁰⁰
- On 2 June 2020, ISIL claimed the assassination of the head of local commune ('komin') in Breiha in SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate. According to COAR Global, and contrary to the claim by ISIL, the assassination could have been a result of a personal blood feud. Regardless of the actual cause of the assassination, the act can be seen as a demonstration of ISIL's limited-scale salience in the governorate.²¹⁰¹
- On 3 June 2020, an unknown party carried out a drive-by shooting in the Busaytin village in the rural parts of northern Deir Ez-Zor governorate, killing a member of the Busaytin Local Council.²¹⁰²
- On 15 June 2020, 'unknown armed men' attacked the Autonomous Administration municipality building in Tayyani town and killed the town mayor.²¹⁰³ According to the UN Security Council gunmen assaulted the headquarters of the Tayyani Local Council in the town

²⁰⁹³ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

²⁰⁹⁴ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

²⁰⁹⁵ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

²⁰⁹⁶ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

²⁰⁹⁷ SY-24, قتل وجرحى باقتتال بين عشيرتين في دير الزور, 24 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁹⁸ COAR, M4 opens as Russia flexes muscles in NES, 1 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁹⁹ 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/2020/576], 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 19 [Annex]

²¹⁰⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 21 [Annex]

²¹⁰¹ COAR, Self Administration bids to corner grain market as SYP collapses, 8 June 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁰² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 21 [Annex]

²¹⁰³ Enab Baladi, اغتيال رئيس بلدية تابع لـ"الإدارة الذاتية" في دير الزور [The assassination of a mayor of the "Autonomous Administration" in Deir Ezzor], 15 June 2020, [url](#)

of Tayyani, located in the rural parts of eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate. The chief of the council was shot to death during the incident later claimed by ISIL.²¹⁰⁴

- On 25 June 2020, an UXO exploded in Al-Mayadin city in the eastern parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate, killing a child.²¹⁰⁵
- On 18 August 2020, an ISIL attack conducted by ISIL targeted a Russian convoy.²¹⁰⁶ According to an analysis by Gregory Waters, the attack took place at Tayem Gas Field, located near Deir ez-Zor city, and claimed the lives of a Russian Major General, a senior commander of GoS forces and four others.²¹⁰⁷ According to ISW, the attack took place on 17 August and the commander of the NDF in Mayadin district was killed in the attack.²¹⁰⁸
- On 27 August 2020, ISIL ambushed an NDF unit near al-Musarib, north of Deir ez-Zor city, killing its commander and between 14 and 30 NDF fighters.²¹⁰⁹
- On 29 August 2020, a child was killed in sniper fire in the vicinity of Suwaydan Jazirah, located in the rural parts of eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate.²¹¹⁰
- On 11 September 2020, a drive-by shooting claimed the life of one civilian in Kubar town, located in the rural parts of western Deir Ez-Zor governorate.²¹¹¹
- On 23 September 2020, a drive-by shooting claimed the life of one civilian in Basirah city, located in the rural parts of eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate. The responsibility for the attack was later claimed by ISIL.²¹¹²
- On 23 September 2020, a drive-by shooting claimed the life of one civilian in Dhiban, located in the rural parts of eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate. The responsibility for the attack was later claimed by ISIL.²¹¹³
- On 28 September 2020, infighting among the GoS forces (Military Security and the local NDF) broke out in al-Ashara. At least one civilian died as the result of the infighting.²¹¹⁴
- On 17 October 2020, an UXO exploded in the town of Baghouz, killing two children and injuring three others.²¹¹⁵

²¹⁰⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 21 [Annex]

²¹⁰⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/813], 20 August 2020, [url](#), p. 21 [Annex]

²¹⁰⁶ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 25

²¹⁰⁷ Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁰⁸ ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁰⁹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 19 - September 1, 2020, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

²¹¹⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

²¹¹¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

²¹¹² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

²¹¹³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1031], 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

²¹¹⁴ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, Syria Weekly Conflict Summary for 28 September – 4 October 2020, 8 October 2020, [url](#)

²¹¹⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

- On 20 October 2020, a drive-by shooting claimed the life of a tribal leader in the town of Sabhah, located in the rural parts of eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate.²¹¹⁶
- On 29 October 2020, an SDF-affiliated civilian administrator was slain by ISIL in al-Sabha.²¹¹⁷
- On 11 November 2020, a body of a civilian allegedly murdered by ISIL was discovered in Daman village, in the rural parts of eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate.²¹¹⁸
- On 18 November 2020, ISIL ambushed a SAA formation in Deir Ez-Zor governorate killing 10 SAA members, including a brigadier general.²¹¹⁹
- Between 22–23 December 2020, a series of alleged ISIL attacks targeting SDF-affiliated civilian and military leadership. A local official from Deir Ez-Zor died in one of the attacks (a car bomb).²¹²⁰
- On 12 December 2020, a landmine exploded and killed two civilians in Susah city, located in the rural parts of eastern Deir Ez-Zor.²¹²¹
- On 24 December 2020, ISIL ambushed a SAA transport vehicle close to al-Shula along the Deir Ez-Zor City–Palmyra highway. ISW notes that the casualties caused by the attack remain unreported. Another ambush along the same highway, near Kobajep killed at least 30 soldiers. The ambushes targeted units from SAA's 4th and 17th Division and involved IED's and automatic weapons fire. ISW estimates that ISIL's attacks along the Deir Ez-Zor City–Palmyra highway had 'grown more spectacular' and were threatening GoS's ability to transport personnel and to conduct anti-ISIL operations in the area.²¹²²
- On 30 December 2020, ISIL attacked a GoS convoy in western parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate and killed up to 39 people.²¹²³ According to an analysis by COAR Global, the attack occurred near the town of Kebajib that is located approximately 50 km south-west of the city of Deir Ez-Zor. COAR Global estimates that 'at least 25 soldiers were killed and 13 were injured' in the attack and notes that, according to Russian media, the attack claimed also the lives of 8 civilians.²¹²⁴
- On 6 January 2021, an UXO exploded and killed two children in Duwayr city, located in the rural parts of eastern Deir Ez-Zor.²¹²⁵
- On 10 February 2021, ISIL attacked a GoS convoy in Al-Mayadin. At least 26 were killed in the attack, including 7 SAA members and Liwa al-Quds fighters.²¹²⁶
- On 5 March 2021, ISIL-related clashes broke out 'on the main road running through Shahil town close to an NGO-supported hospital'. The SDF responded to these clashes by assaulting

²¹¹⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/1195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

²¹¹⁷ ISW, Syria Situation Report: October 28 - November 10, 2020, 13 November 2020, [url](#)

²¹¹⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/11195], 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 17 [Annex]

²¹¹⁹ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2020–December 31, 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 54

²¹²⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2020–December 31, 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 55

²¹²¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

²¹²² ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

²¹²³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress October 1, 2020–December 31, 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 18

²¹²⁴ COAR, Sanctions on Syria's Central Bank Set Course for a Grim 2021, 4 January 2021, [url](#)

²¹²⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020); Report of the Secretary-General [S/2021/160], 18 February 2021, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

²¹²⁶ COAR, State Steps up as Soldiers Enter Public Service in Doves, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

people inside the hospital, injuring several NGO staff members, patients and visitors and temporarily detaining 12 people.²¹²⁷

- On 9 March 2021, a drive-by shooting claimed the life of a 'prominent tribal figure' in Hawayij Diyab village.²¹²⁸

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	25	33	22	23
February	15	23	20	22
March	21	31	20	14
April	14	29		
May	25	20		
June	5	17		
July	6	8		
August	25	21		
September	16	23		
October	14	18		
November	21	46		
December	20	36		
Total	207	305	62	59

Figure 39. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Deir Ez-Zor governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2020, Deir Ez-Zor governorate had between 305²¹²⁹ (SNHR data)²¹³⁰ and 207 civilian fatalities (VDC data).²¹³¹ Most civilian fatalities were documented in January, November and December 2020. In the

²¹²⁷ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3 [Para. 6]

²¹²⁸ 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/2021/390], 22 April 2021, [url](#), p. 18 [Annex]

²¹²⁹ In a January 2021 report, SNHR mentions 301 civilian fatalities in Deir Ez-Zor in 2020. This figure is the result of a revision of their data. EASO email correspondence with SNHR, 22 April 2021. See SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

²¹³⁰ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

²¹³¹ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

first three months of 2021, SNHJR recorded 59 civilian fatalities, while VDC recorded 62 civilian fatalities in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.

Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war

The situation of the civilian population of Deir Ez-Zor governorate with regard to infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war is analysed in the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).²¹³²

UNESCWA estimates the physical capital loss of Deir Ez-Zor governorate around USD 5.5 billion (6.8 % of all the damage inflicted on Syrian physical capital) between 2011–2018 and explains the amount of damage by noting how intense hit-and-run clashes between the GoS forces and ISIL were ‘a constant between 2014 and 2017’.²¹³³

According to Mine Action Review’s 2020 report on mine clearance, the retreating ‘Islamic State’ fighters ‘left massive contamination of mines of an improvised nature and other improvised devices’ causing heavy damage to the returning civilians in areas under ISIL’s former influence, including Deir Ez-Zor governorate.²¹³⁴ Mine Action Review notes that international and national demining organisations have taken part in demining activities in areas under SDF control in north-east Syria. Humanitarian demining organisations and commercial companies have reportedly carried out ‘large-scale clearance’ in former ISIL areas with a company called Tetra Tech operating in Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor and Baghuz and focusing on critical infrastructure (healthcare, schools, water and electricity).²¹³⁵

Displacement and return

According to UNOCHA, approximately 11 000 IDPs were newly displaced in Deir Ez-Zor governorate in 2020. Of these, approximately 10 000 were displaced within Deir Ez-Zor governorate while a significant number of displacements to Homs governorate (300) was also registered. Approx. 5 000 IDPs from other governorates were displaced to Deir Ez-Zor. Significant numbers of arrivals from Hasaka (1 600), Raqqa (1 400), Damascus (900) and Aleppo (300) were registered.²¹³⁶ In January 2021, 390 new IDPs from Deir Ez-Zor were registered, all of them were displaced within the governorate. In addition, 170 IDPs were displaced to Deir Ez-Zor from other governorates.²¹³⁷ In February 2021, 32 new IDPs from Deir Ez-Zor governorate were registered. All of them were displaced within the governorate. 172 IDPs arrived to Deir Ez-Zor from other governorates.²¹³⁸ In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 115 IDP movements from or within the governorate.²¹³⁹

According to UNOCHA, approximately 23 000 IDPs returned to their homes located in Deir Ez-Zor governorate in 2020. Of these, approx. 12 000 were those displaced within Deir Ez-Zor governorate. Most of the returnees from other governorates returned from Damascus (5 900) and Hasaka (3 800) with smaller numbers also from Rural Damascus, Raqqa, and Aleppo.²¹⁴⁰ In January 2021, 832 IDPs returned to their homes in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. Of these 15 were originally displaced within the governorate. In addition, 13 IDPs returned from Deir Ez-Zor to other governorates.²¹⁴¹ In February 2021, 924 IDPs returned to their homes in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. Of these 78 were originally

²¹³² EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 174–175

²¹³³ ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War; Eight Years On, 2020 [published on 23 September 2020], [url](#), p. 50–51.

²¹³⁴ Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 378

²¹³⁵ Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 379

²¹³⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020 (As of 31 December 2020), 8 March 2021, [url](#)

²¹³⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (January 2021), 4 March 2021, [url](#)

²¹³⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

²¹³⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁴⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 8 March 2021, [url](#)

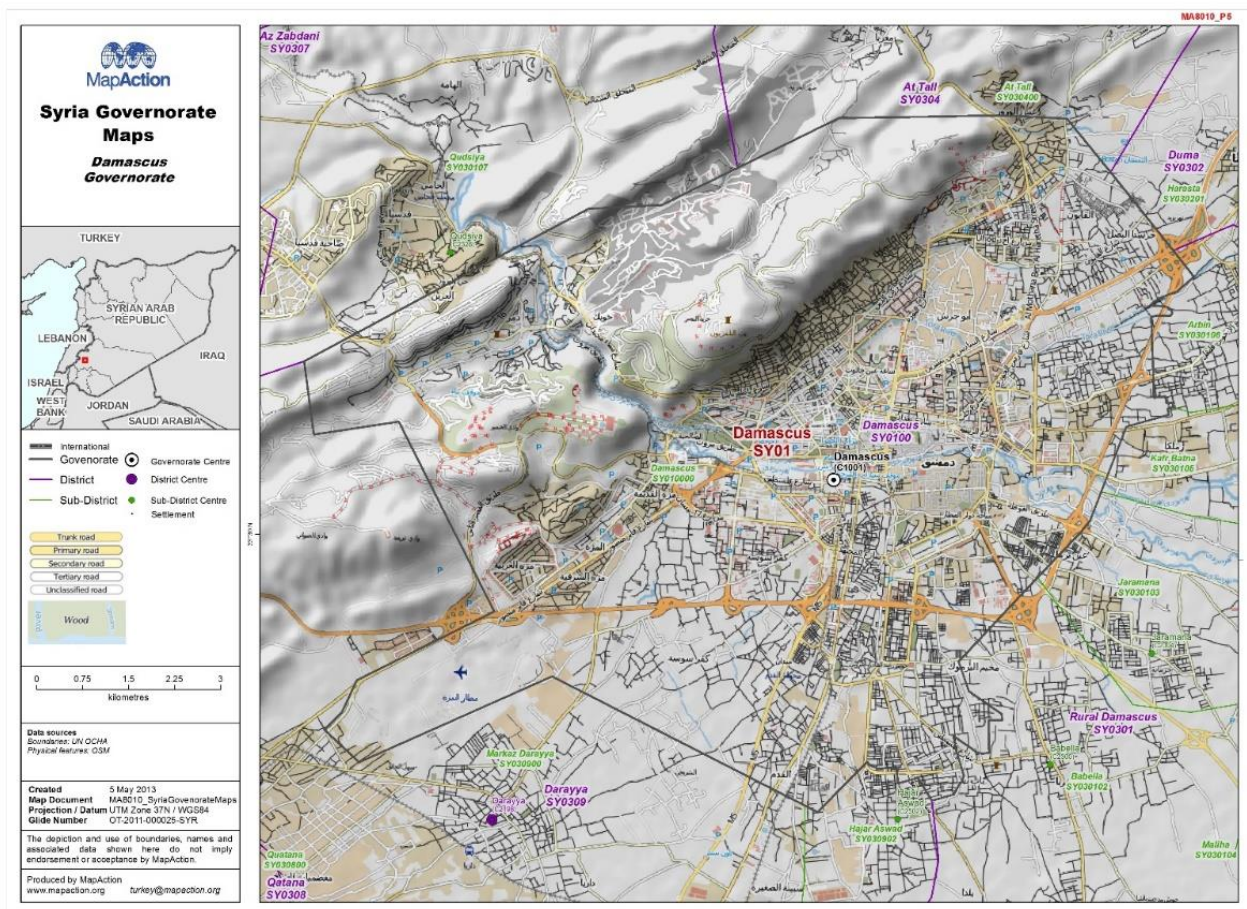
²¹⁴¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (January 2021), 2 March 2021, [url](#)

displaced within the governorate. No returns to other governorates were registered.²¹⁴² In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 1 100 IDP return movements to or within the governorate.²¹⁴³

²¹⁴² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁴³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

2.10 Damascus governorate



Map 16: © MapAction, Damascus governorate²¹⁴⁴

2.10.1 General description of the governorate

Damascus governorate, which covers 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, Dummar, Al-Mazzeh, Rukn Al-Din, Al-Salihiyah, Al-Mouhajrin, Saroujah, Al-Qanawat, Old Damascus, and Yarmouk camp.²¹⁴⁵

Yarmouk is a refugee camp, located 8 km from Damascus city centre. It was 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.²¹⁴⁶ In January 2019

²¹⁴⁴ UNOCHA, Syria sub-districts maps [maps], n.d., [url](#)

²¹⁴⁵ 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

²¹⁴⁶ UNRWA, Yarmouk (unofficial camp), last updated 1 January 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Profile: Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, 7 April 2015, [url](#)

UNRWA described the camp as ‘largely destroyed’ and with ‘just a few dozen families’ living there.²¹⁴⁷ Damascus city is largely integrated with large parts of the governorate of Rural Damascus through contiguous built-up areas. Hence, it is difficult to distinguish the administrative boundaries separating them.²¹⁴⁸

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the city’s population at 2 079 000 as of 2019.²¹⁴⁹ In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Damascus governorate to be of 1 827 501 inhabitants.²¹⁵⁰ As of March 2021, the CIA estimated Damascus’ population at 2 440 000 inhabitants.²¹⁵¹

Accurate and updated information on the ethno-religious composition of Damascus is not available. Throughout the conflict, the city’s demography was subject to constant change marked by new arrivals and departures and ensuing overcrowding, a Syrian fellow with Synaps, an information network, pointed out. Displaced communities from across the country have become packed together in the capital, giving rise to a larger, more ‘segmented’ and more ‘heterogenous’ population.²¹⁵² Sunni communities in former opposition-held areas in Damascus have been subject to mass displacement to other parts of the country.²¹⁵³ Conversely, Shias from other parts of the country have become displaced to Damascus.²¹⁵⁴

Government, national political institutions and administration, including large military and security services establishments, are centred in Damascus. All major production facilities and most strategic industries are state-run. In the 1990s, small, service-oriented industries in private sector began to assert themselves. Textile plants, the chemical industry, cement works, and food-processing factories are for the most part spread out to the south, east, and north-east. Most of the population’s requirements for food, clothing, and other consumer goods are met by private businesses. Major highways connect Damascus with major cities as well as with the capitals of neighbouring countries.²¹⁵⁵ Damascus International Airport is located 30 km south-east of downtown Damascus.²¹⁵⁶ For more information, see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Socio-economic situation: Damascus city \(April 2021\)](#)

2.10.2 Conflict background and armed actors

During the conflict which in this governorate lasted from November 2012 until the government regained control in May 2018, opposition groups infiltrated the Jobar district of Damascus city itself, gaining partial control of this district (spring 2013) as well as those of Barzeh and Qabun north-east of the city centre (summer 2013), and in the southern districts of Al-Qadam and Yarmouk, according to the Norwegian COI unit Landinfo. Still, nearly all of Damascus governorate remained under GoS control throughout the conflict. The areas in Damascus governorate remaining under GoS control throughout the conflict mentioned by Landinfo, were Dummar, Al-Mazzeah, Kafr Sousa (with the

²¹⁴⁷ UNRWA, Yarmouk (unofficial camp), last updated 1 January 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Profile: Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, 7 April 2015, [url](#)

²¹⁴⁸ Abdin, Y., The fragility of community security in Damascus and its environs, International Review of the Red Cross Conflict in Syria, 99 (3), 2017, [url](#), pp. 897–925. Yassar Abdin is an urban planning expert based in Damascus. He is the former Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and of the High Institute of Regional Planning at Damascus University

²¹⁴⁹ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

²¹⁵⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

²¹⁵¹ CIA, World Factbook, Syria, last updated: 30 March 2021 [url](#)

²¹⁵² Syrian fellow with Synaps, No Damascus like home, 10 February 2020, [url](#). In this article, the author reflects over the impact of the conflict on the demography of the author’s hometown, Damascus.

Synaps is an information network that among other services, publishes analysis and fieldwork, see [url](#) and [url](#)

²¹⁵³ Ghosh-Siminoff, S., Demographic Engineering in Syria Sets the Stage for Future Conflicts, 13 March 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁵⁴ Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah’s Experience in Syria, [Source: journalist Raed al-Salhani], 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 8

²¹⁵⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Damascus, last updated 12 February 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁵⁶ Damascus International Airport, Maps of Damascus airport, 2021 (n.d.), [url](#)

exception of an opposition offensive in March 2013), Muhajerin, Al-Salihiyah, Rukn Al-Din, Saroujah, Al-Qanawat, Old Damascus (Dimashq Al-Qadima), and most of Al-Shaghour and Al-Midan. Through 2016-2018, the government gradually regained control of the suburbs.²¹⁵⁷

According to the Carter Center, the conflict inside Damascus city mainly played out in opposition-held areas, including the Jobar, Qaboun, Tishreen, and Barzeh neighbourhoods, areas that were connected to eastern Ghouta, the opposition's stronghold. Jobar was connected to the Zamalka and Ain Terma areas of the Jaish Al-Islam. The Qaboun, Tishreen, and Barzeh neighbourhoods were kept separated from eastern Ghouta by the government forces but were still able stay connected to eastern Ghouta by underground smuggling tunnels controlled by the armed group Fajr Al-Summa. The southern neighbourhoods of Yarmouk Camp and Tadamoun frequently experienced conflict activity during the conflict in Damascus.²¹⁵⁸ In May 2018, ISIL surrendered in Yarmouk and Tadamoun.²¹⁵⁹ As the government regained all of Damascus and Rural Damascus in May 2018, the SAA's Fourth Division eventually came in control of the whole of southern Damascus.²¹⁶⁰

As of March 2021, Damascus governorate was under the control of the GoS (see also [Map 4](#)).²¹⁶¹

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

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.²¹⁶²

According to analyst Mazen Ezzi, writing in March 2020, Lebanese Hezbollah maintains a headquarters and a light weapons depot near the Ruqayya mosque²¹⁶³, a Shia shrine in the al-Amarah quarter of the Old City of Damascus.²¹⁶⁴ Also located there are armed men wearing the Iranian Basij militia insignia. A source interviewed by Ezzi in 2019, considered the Ruqayya shrine area a closed security area in which Shia militias from several countries are deployed to protect Shia pilgrims at the shrine, as well as the Bab Al-Saghir cemetery. As of the March 2020 report, the Al-Shaghour neighbourhood, the capital's central Shia area, was reported to have been left open to the public without checkpoints. Hezbollah maintained security in this area by operating a network of surveillance cameras distributed around the old Damascus neighbourhoods, the Ruqayya shrine and the Umayyad Mosque. Ezzi listed nine different militias operating in Damascus in support of Hezbollah, among these is Hurras Al-Shaghour Maqam (Guardians of The Shrine) which is charged with protecting the surroundings of the Ruqayya and Sayyeda Zaynab shrines. Two other militias, the Abu Fadl Al-Shaghour Abbas Brigade and the Zulfiqar Brigade, are similarly closely related to Hezbollah but at the same time owned or led by the GoS' Republican Guard respectively.²¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, these two groups are described by analyst Alexey Khlebnikov as of Iraqi origin, being largely sponsored by Iran.²¹⁶⁶

²¹⁵⁷ Norway, Landinfo, Syria, Konflikten i Damaskus – En tidslinje [Syria, the conflict in Damascus – a timeline], 8 September 2020; [url](#), pp. 9, 15

²¹⁵⁸ Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 10

²¹⁵⁹ Waters, G., 'A force the haven't seen before': Insurgent ISIS in Central Syria, MEI, 15 April 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁶⁰ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EIU (European University Institute), [url](#), p. 15. Mazen Ezzi is a research contributor working on the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project (WPCS) within the Middle East Directions Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence. Ezzi's work focuses on the war economy in Syria and the areas under regime control.

²¹⁶¹ Based on reading of the following maps: Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 22-28 March 2021, 31 March 2021, [url](#), Fig. 1; Liveuamap, Syria, 31 March 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁶² Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁶³ Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, 2020, 13 March 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-7

²¹⁶⁴ Al-Rifai, O., In the Service of Ideology: Iran's Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria, March 2021 (n.d), Washington Institute (The), Policy Notes No. 100, [url](#), p. 6

²¹⁶⁵ Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, [Source: journalist Raed al-Salhani] 13 March 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-7

²¹⁶⁶ Khlebnikov, A., Russia and Syrian Military Reform, Challenges and Opportunities, 26 March 2020, Carnegie Middle East Center, [url](#). Alexey Khlebnikov is a consultant and Middle East expert at the Russian International Affairs Council.

According to Jussor for Studies, Hezbollah had 12 military sites in Damascus and Rural Damascus, either independently or jointly with Iranian forces.²¹⁶⁷

Also, Shia militias recruited by Iran from outside of Syria have some presence in Damascus, according to analyst Navvar Saban, a conflict expert at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies. The Afghan-manned Fatemiyoun Brigade has an estimated 3 000 to 14 000 fighters spread between three battalions in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama governorates. The Pakistani-manned Zaynibion Brigade has an estimated 1 000 to 5 000 fighters deployed in Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa, and Hama governorates.²¹⁶⁸

On the Russian presence, Mazen Ezzi stated that from October 2018 the Russian military had limited its personnel to 100 in the three towns Yalda, Babbila and Beit Sahm.²¹⁶⁹ Jussor for Studies mapped four Russian military bases in Damascus.²¹⁷⁰

Anti-GoS armed groups

According to sources interviewed by the DIS in August 2020, ISIL and other opposition groups no longer had any presence in Damascus or Rural Damascus.²¹⁷¹ Still, attacks carried out with explosives have been reported in Damascus against military and security personnel. These attacks have generally been attributed to an armed group called Saraya Qasioun.²¹⁷² The existence of this group was doubted, however, by sources consulted by DIS in August and September 2020. These sources considered the attacks as internal acts of retribution carried out among military and security elements, rather than as targeted attacks carried out by an organised group.²¹⁷³ A first wave of attacks was reported to have taken place between January and mid-March 2020. A subsequent lull lasted until late June. From then on, the attacks picked up again.²¹⁷⁴ Most of the attacks were reported to have taken place in Qudsaya north-west of the capital and in eastern Ghouta, but some attacks reportedly took place inside the capital itself.²¹⁷⁵ While the attacks during the first wave had some impact on their surroundings, those taking place during the second wave were not reported to have impacted civilians.²¹⁷⁶

2.10.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

Security trends in 2020-2021

Since 2018, when the GoS retook all areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus from opposition groups, there have been no major security incidents (such as battles or military operations etc.) in the two

²¹⁶⁷ Jussor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁶⁸ Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, Atlantic Council, [url](#). Navvar Saban is a conflict expert at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies, where he specializes in Iranian influence in Syria, focusing on Shia militia activity. The Omran Center is an independent research institution focusing on Syria, located in Istanbul, Turkey. Saban is also a non-resident researcher at the Orsam Center.

²¹⁶⁹ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), p. 15

²¹⁷⁰ Jussor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁷¹ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)], October 2020, [url](#), pp. 35, 52

²¹⁷² Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²¹⁷³ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: an international security organisation; Suhail Al-Ghazi; Jussor; Syria Direct; Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 15

²¹⁷⁴ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 15

²¹⁷⁵ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²¹⁷⁶ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 14

governorates, the DIS reported in October 2020. The government's control of security in the former opposition held areas in Damascus was reported as 'calm', and 'firm'.²¹⁷⁷

Among the security incidents that did take place, targeted killings and assassinations of GoS military and security service officers and affiliated officials was a major issue in in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates in 2020, according to the DIS.²¹⁷⁸

In the month of February 2020, the number of IED incidents increased dramatically.²¹⁷⁹ During this month, six explosions occurred in Damascus City and another two in Rural Damascus²¹⁸⁰, a comparatively high number considering the total of 17 for all of the previous year.²¹⁸¹ In October 2020, the DIS reported that few security incidents had been heard of taking place in Yarmouk camp.²¹⁸²

In an interview with EASO in February 2021, Syria expert Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that occasional Israeli air raids have taken place against Iranian-backed militia bases in the capital and its countryside. These air strikes did not target militia bases areas or buildings, but civilian houses may have been damaged collaterally by air defence system activated by the GoS.²¹⁸³ During the reference period of this report, Israeli airstrikes on Damascus have been reported.²¹⁸⁴ For instance, Enab Baladi reported that the 'eighth' Israeli air attack in 2021 on government positions in Damascus and Rural Damascus had taken place on 8 April.²¹⁸⁵ No civilian casualties were reported in this attack.

During the reporting period, in some places in Damascus armed clashes between pro-GoS militias were reported.²¹⁸⁶

The DIS reported in October 2020 that kidnappings of civilians for ransom, including kidnapping of children, had been increasing in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates through the previous months.²¹⁸⁷ According to the SOHR, an increasing number of incidents of child kidnappings was occurring in Damascus as well as in other governorates. Not only ransom but also organ trade was mentioned as motives behind these kidnappings. 'Widespread' forcible recruitment to mercenaries was mentioned as still another motivation, in which kidnapping gangs would snatch children and subsequently hand them over to mercenaries. Both boys and girls, in particular displaced and undocumented ones, could become kidnapped. Child kidnappings became a pressing concern in Damascus in June 2020, according to the SOHR. Locations where kidnappings had taken place were mentioned by the SOHR as the Al-Thalath Anzat and the Al-Thurayya parks in the Al-Maydan neighbourhood; the main park and the Al-Ansari mosque park in the Al-Zahira neighbourhood; the Nirmin park in the Al-Muhajireen neighbourhood, and the Tanzim Kafr Susah park, according to the

²¹⁷⁷ Global Times (The), 1 injured in Damascus explosion, 11 February 2020, [url](#); Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Syria Direct], October 2020, [url](#), p. 11

²¹⁷⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: an international security organisation; Suhail Al-Ghazi; Jusoos; Syria Direct; Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²¹⁷⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: an international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²¹⁸⁰ SOHR, Damascus deteriorating security: six explosions rock Damascus in 15 days, 26 February 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁸¹ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: an international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²¹⁸² Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR); an international humanitarian organisation; an international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), pp. 11, 13

²¹⁸³ Al-Ghazi, S., Teams interview, 3 February 2021

²¹⁸⁴ Al-Arabiya, Syrian capital rocked by explosions as Israel claims responsibility, 24 February 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Syria says Israel attacks areas around southern Damascus, 28 February 2021, [url](#); France24, Syria shoots down Israeli missiles over Damascus, state media says, 16 March 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁸⁵ Enab Baladi, Wounded in Israel's eighth bombing in 2021 on the outskirts of Damascus, 8 April 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁸⁶ Syrian Observer (The), Clashes Continued Between the Fourth Division and Iranian Militias in Damascus, 5 April 2021, [url](#); Asharq Al-Awsat, Iranian Militias, Syrian Regime Tussle over 'Sayyida Zainab', 16 May 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁸⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Omran Studies; SOHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 14

SOHR.²¹⁸⁸ By December, the SOHR had recorded 39 kidnappings in Damascus and Rural Damascus in 2020.²¹⁸⁹ Other sources have mentioned instances of kidnappings in Damascus.²¹⁹⁰

- On 6 January 2020, two young men working at the Al-Manarah International Hospital in Damascus were kidnapped by unknown individuals near the Al-Shahbaa bridge, on their way in an ambulance to Al-Suwaida city in order to hospitalize a patient.²¹⁹¹

The DIS mentioned lootings and rumours of lootings by pro-GoS militias in Jobar and Yarmouk during 2020, but also noted that the information was uncertain since no organisation had had access to the camp and civilians' access had been highly restricted.²¹⁹²

Movement between Damascus city and countryside was generally not restricted, the DIS reported, except for Syrians and Palestinians whose names were on wanted lists for reasons related to military service, political or anti-government activities, and criminal charges. Relatives of prominent political or armed activists have become harassed, interrogated or even arrested at checkpoints.²¹⁹³

For more information about factors influencing scrutiny at checkpoints, see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Socio-economic situation: Damascus city \(April 2021\)](#).

On 15 March 2021, the SOHR reported that security alert had become heightened and corresponding measures tightened at GoS checkpoints. Some temporary checkpoints had been set up in side streets as well as in main streets. At the same time, all side and main roads leading to the western Ghouta areas as well as eastern Ghouta became closed, and the checkpoints separating the capital from eastern Ghouta reinforced with GoS military.²¹⁹⁴

For more information about checkpoints and freedom of movement in Damascus, please see [EASO COI Report: Syria - Socio-economic situation: Damascus city \(April 2021\)](#).

Security incidents

According to ACLED data, during the reporting period there were 41 security incidents recorded in Damascus governorate, of whom 3 were coded as battles, 13 explosions/remote violence and 25 incidents of violence against civilians (see Figure 41). Nearly all (24 out of the 25) of the incidents recorded by ACLED as 'violence against civilians', refer to violent attacks on unarmed civilians such as sexual violence, attacks, abduction/forced disappearance.²¹⁹⁵

²¹⁸⁸ SOHR, Kidnapping mafias in Syria | Security chaos helps gangs to "flourish", recruitment of children and organ trade are major motives behind kidnapping increase, 2 August 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁸⁹ SOHR, SOHR Exclusive | 2020: 115 children and women among over 510 people kidnapped in Syria, with Afrin and regime-held areas topping the list, 27 December 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁹⁰ Al Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; SACD, Denmark is setting a dangerous precedent which must be reversed, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁹¹ SOHR Exclusive | 2020: 115 children and women among over 510 people kidnapped in Syria, with Afrin and regime-held areas topping the list, 27 December 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁹² Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR); an international humanitarian organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 11

²¹⁹³ Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Jusoor; SNHR; SOHR], October 2020, [url](#), pp. 18-19

²¹⁹⁴ SOHR, After killing and arresting six persons by security services | Regime checkpoints put on high alert in Damascus and countryside, 15 March 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁹⁵ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

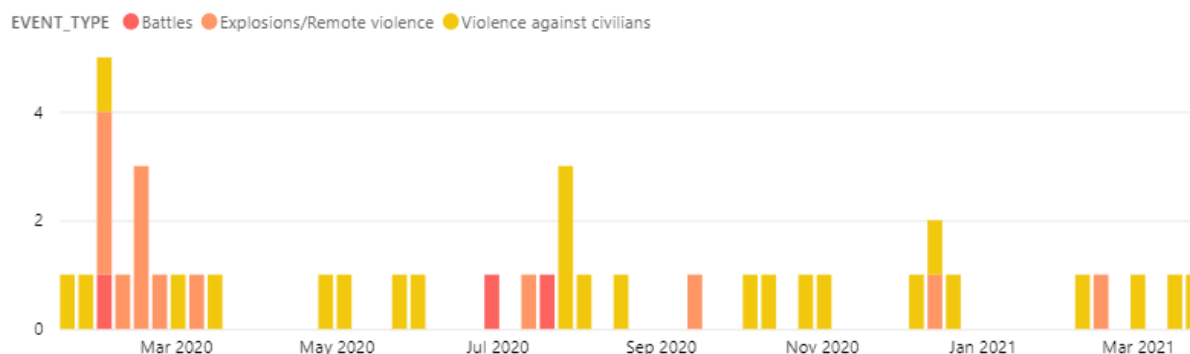


Figure 40: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Damascus governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data²¹⁹⁶

Damascus– Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Damascus	3	13	25

Figure 41: Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Damascus governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents reported to have taken place in Damascus governorate in 2020 and early 2021 includes targeted attacks, kidnappings for ransom, lootings, and Israeli air strikes on military targets:

- One person was wounded when an explosive device attached to a car went off in the Mezzeh area in Damascus 10 February 2020, the Chinese daily Global Times reported. The targeted car was of a brand and type commonly used by security forces. There was no further information about who exactly was targeted.²¹⁹⁷
- In February 2020, Al-Jazeera reported of six people, two of them Palestinian militants and four Iran-backed militia members, had been killed in an Israeli air raid on Damascus city.²¹⁹⁸ The attack lasted for 15 minutes, according to the Voice of America.²¹⁹⁹ No civilian casualties were reported by these sources.
- On 18 February 2020, Xinhua reported that five civilians were wounded by an explosion in the Bab Musallah area of the capital.²²⁰⁰
- Xinhua reported about another blast on 20 February 2020, having taken place in the Marjeh area in the centre of Damascus.²²⁰¹
- A car bombing that killed four persons was reported near the Tishreen Stadium in central Damascus on 25 February 2020 by Garda World, a Canada-based international security company. No group had claimed responsibility.²²⁰²
- On 14 March 2020, Enab Baladi reported of the ninth explosion taking place in Damascus up to that point in 2020.²²⁰³

²¹⁹⁶ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

²¹⁹⁷ Global Times (The), 1 injured in Damascus explosion, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁹⁸ Al Jazeera, Six killed in Israeli air raid on Damascus: Monitor, 24 February 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁹⁹ VOA, Syrian Capital Rocked by Explosions as Israel Hits Targets, 23 February 2020, [url](#)

²²⁰⁰ Xinhua, 5 civilians wounded by blast in Damascus, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²²⁰¹ Xinhua, Explosive device rips through pickup in Syrian capital, 20 February 2020, [url](#)

²²⁰² Garda World, Car bombing reported in Damascus February 25, 25 February 2020, [url](#)

²²⁰³ Enab Baladi, Ninth explosion in Syrian capital Damascus and its countryside since beginning of 2020, 14 March 2020, [url](#)

- On the eve of parliamentary elections in July 2020, two explosions near the Anis Bin Malik mosque in the Nahr Aisha area of Damascus killed one person and wounded another, China Global Television Network reported.²²⁰⁴
- The SOHR reported a car bomb having been set off in Damascus in September 2020.²²⁰⁵
- In December 2020, the SOHR reported about an IED explosion near the bus terminal in the al-Sumariya area, a residential area for GoS officers and GoS-loyal militias. Another IED was found and dismantled in the same area by security forces.²²⁰⁶
- In February 2021, Israeli rockets were fired against Damascus, reportedly targeting Iranian sites, the Times of Israel reported.²²⁰⁷ The source did not report civilian casualties.
- France24 reported that Syrian air defenses had shot down Israeli rockets fired against targets in Damascus on 10 March 2021.²²⁰⁸ The source did not report civilian casualties.

In an article 29 April 2020, Syria Direct mentioned a total of over 104 000 prisoners in government prisons across the country to have died of torture during the conflict. Focusing on the 'al-Khateeb' detention facility in Damascus, 3-8 deaths per day was pointed to as common in this particular facility.²²⁰⁹ A map published by the UN in 2021 documented the occurrence of torture and deaths in government prisons in Damascus.²²¹⁰ A report to the UN stated in March 2021 that prisoners were transferred to Damascus from other parts of the country in a centralised manner. Bodies of prisoners who had died or were extrajudicially killed in the custody of the four main intelligence agencies are buried at these locations and were transferred from the Tishreen, Harasta and Mezzeh 601 military hospitals in Damascus to two specific mass burial sites in Najha and Qutayfa on the outskirts of Damascus.²²¹¹

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	6	-	1	1
February	7	1	7	-
March	10	2	5	-
April	16	-		
May	7	1		
June	14	1		
July	9	-		
August	6	1		
September	4	-		
October	9	-		
November	7	2		
December	5	1		
Total	100	9	13	1

²²⁰⁴ CGTV, Developing story: One killed in Damascus blast on eve of polls, 19 July 2020, [url](#)

²²⁰⁵ SOHR, A car bomb exploded in the capital, Damascus, 19 September 2020, [url](#)

²²⁰⁶ SOHR, Damascus | IED explodes and security forces dismantle another one near bus terminal of al-Sumariya area, 15 December 2020, [url](#)

²²⁰⁷ Times of Israel (The), Israel said to hit Iranian targets in Syria after Tehran blamed for ship blast, 28 February 2021, [url](#)

²²⁰⁸ France24, Syria shoots down Israeli missiles over Damascus, state media says, 16 March 2021, [url](#)

²²⁰⁹ Syria Direct, Torture and death: Life in al-Khateeb detention center, 29 April 2020, [url](#)

²²¹⁰ OHCHR, Violations verified in detention facilities in south Syrian Arab Republic, February 2021 (n.d.), [url](#)

²²¹¹ UN Human Rights Council, A decade of arbitrary detention and imprisonment - Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Advance Edited Version, 11 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 9-10

Figure 42. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Damascus governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2020, Damascus governorate had between 9²²¹² (SNHR data)²²¹³ and 100 civilian fatalities (VDC data).²²¹⁴ In the first three months of 2021, SNHR recorded one civilian death in Damascus, whereas VDC recorded 13 civilian deaths.

Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

Based on satellite detection, REACH recorded the following conflict-induced damage to buildings, by affected area as per 2016:

- Jobar (straddling Damascus city and Rural Damascus governorate): 14.8 buildings damaged or destroyed per hectare.
- Barza (Barzeh) Al-Balad (straddling Damascus city and Rural Damascus governorate); and the areas of Midan Wastani and Bab Tuma in central Damascus: 'severe damage'.
- Yarmouk: more than 80% of all buildings in Yarmouk camp and its surrounding areas.
- Yarmouk and Hajar Aswad (in Rural Damascus) taken together: 2 109 buildings destroyed; 1 765 buildings severely damaged; 1 615 buildings moderately damaged.
- Central Tadamoun: destruction with 'high damage severity'.²²¹⁵

Analysts Barend Wind of the University of Groningen, Netherlands, and Batoul Ibrahim of the Czech University of Life Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic, pointed in an article in Habitat International, out Barzeh and Yarmouk as 'damaged'/'severely damaged' in a map of housing damage they published in 2020. Also, the authors considered the laws and decrees aimed at post-war reconstruction that the government has adopted, not as a framework for reconstruction but as a deepening of pre-war urban development plans. Reconstruction needs had not been a leading principle, the authors argued.²²¹⁶ The DIS reported in October 2020 that 'no actual reconstruction process' was taking place in the capital. The government had not begun reconstruction in Jobar and Yarmouk, the two most damaged areas. While it had taken some initiative to restore the infrastructure in these areas and some progress had been made, this was limited and by far insufficient to make the areas habitable and suited to a normal life.²²¹⁷

²²¹² In a January 2021 report, SNHR mentions 8 civilian fatalities in Damascus in 2020. This figure is the result of a revision of their data. EASO email correspondence with SNHR, 22 April 2021. See SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

²²¹³ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

²²¹⁴ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

²²¹⁵ REACH, Syria, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 19 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 15-29

²²¹⁶ Wind, B. and Ibrahim, B., The war-time urban development of Damascus: How the geography- and political economy of warfare affects housing patterns, Habitat International, Vol. 96, February 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-8

²²¹⁷ Denmark, DIS (Danish immigration Service), Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: SNHR; Syria Direct; Suheil Al-Ghazi], October 2020, [url](#), p. 24

For more information about reconstruction in Damascus, also see the [EASO-COI Report Syria Socio-economic situation: Damascus City \(April 2021\)](#).

Between 2013 and 2019, at least 13 094 individual explosive munitions were used across all neighbourhoods within Damascus city, the Carter Center reported. Most frequently used were various types of munitions for shelling, but also rockets, mortar and artillery munitions and air-dropped munitions such as barrel bombs. Nearly 70 % of munition use was concentrated in the former opposition-held neighbourhoods of Jobar, Qaboun, Yarmouk Camp, Barzeh, Tadamoun, and Tishreen. In government-controlled areas of the capital, especially Qassa, Al-Qadam, Abbasiyeen (Mamouniyah), Adawi, and the Old City, a total of 1 322 munitions was used. The remaining 2 855 munitions used represented 65 other areas of Damascus.²²¹⁸

Tadamoun, a neighbourhood bordering Yarmouk, was located on the frontlines between Yarmouk Camp and the opposition dominated Babila and Yalda areas in Rural Damascus. Tadamoun became frequently fought over but remained under government control throughout the conflict. The fighting in these neighbourhoods, close to the city centre and to static frontlines, was persistent but at lower levels than more outlying areas, and fewer barrel bombs were used, according to the Carter Center. The opposition groups in these areas were mainly using mortars and rockets with limited range and accuracy. Shelling activity was thus limited to eastern and southern areas of the capital. The Carter Center reported that the risk of remaining contamination was considerably reduced due to the strict security environment in government-held areas of the capital, and to the capacity of government forces to clear unexploded ordnances in the city. In contrast, opposition-held areas that had experienced higher levels of conflict and had lower capacity of civil defence units to engage in clearance operations, became left with more unexploded ordnances.²²¹⁹

Applying a failure rate of 10% - 30% to the total explosive munitions uses documented, the Carter Center considered that between 24,430 – 73,290 explosive munitions at a minimum, have failed to detonate in north-west Syria, southern Syria, and in and around Damascus.²²²⁰ The Carter Center did not provide figures of undetonated ordnances exclusively for Damascus governorate.

According to the DIS, in 2020 ERW and landmines were exploding and causing civilian casualties in Damascus and Rural Damascus on a weekly basis. Such incidents were, however, limited to areas where major military confrontations had taken place before the summer of 2018, such as Jobar. To some extent, ERW also remained a risk in Yarmouk.²²²¹

Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Damascus governorate, 1.2 % of the population was living in damaged buildings.²²²²

Displacement and return

UNOCHA data on displacement showed that between January and December 2020, around 4 000 IDP movements were recorded from Damascus to Latakia (500), Tartous (500), Deir Ez-Zor (900), and Al-Hasakeh (300) governorates. In the same period, no IDP movements were recorded to Damascus

²²¹⁸ Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 3, 10-11

²²¹⁹ Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 3, 10-11

²²²⁰ Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria – Report 3 - Northwest Syria: Aleppo, Idleb, and Latakia Governorates, August 2020, [url](#), p. 20

²²²¹ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: an international security organisation; an international humanitarian organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 14

²²²² Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

governorate.²²²³ Around 1 000 IDP movements were recorded within Damascus governorate in 2020.²²²⁴

In terms of IDP returnee movements, in 2020 UNOCHA recorded 10 000 such movements from or within Damascus, 930 movements to or within Damascus and 305 movements within Damascus.²²²⁵

In January 2021, there were 240 IDP movements from Damascus governorate, no movements within the governorate, and no IDP movements to the governorate.²²²⁶ In the same month there were no return movements to Damascus from outside or from locations within the governorate, 755 returns from Damascus mostly to Deir Ezzor, and no returns from locations within Damascus only.²²²⁷

In February 2021, there were 205 IDP movements from Damascus governorate, no movements within, and 39 IDP movements to the governorate.²²²⁸ In the same month there were 90 return movements to Damascus from outside or from locations within the governorate, 943 returns from Damascus mostly to Deir Ezzor, and no returns from locations within Damascus only.²²²⁹

In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 9 IDP displacement movements from Damascus governorate and around 3 600 IDP return movements from the governorate.²²³⁰

Further information displacement and return in Damascus is available in the [EASO COI report: Syria – Socio-economic situation in Damascus city \(April 2021\)](#).

²²²³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

²²²⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

²²²⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

²²²⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

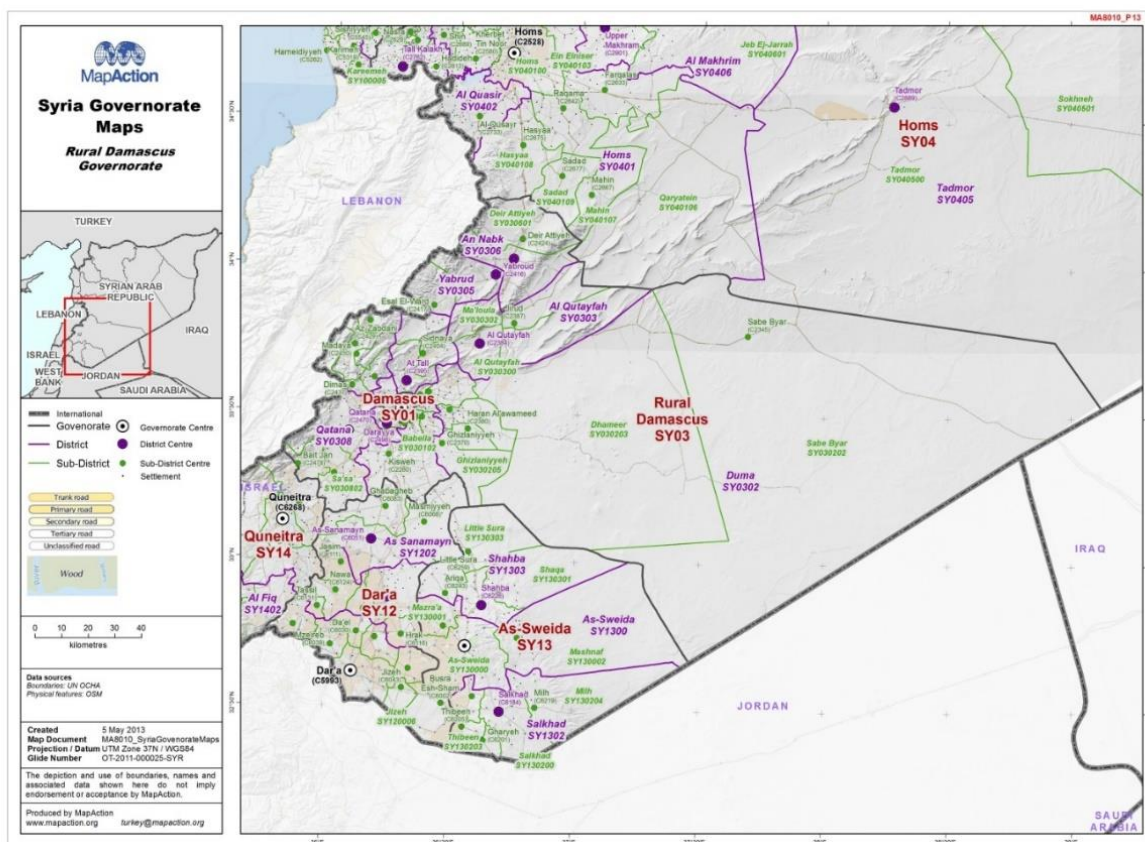
²²²⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

²²²⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements February 2021, 1 April, 2021, [url](#)

²²²⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

²²³⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

2.11 Rural Damascus governorate



Map 17. MapAction, Rural Damascus governorate²²³¹

2.11.1 General description of the governorate

Rural Damascus (*Rif Dimashq* in Arabic) 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.²²³² To the south it borders Quneitra, Dara'a and Sweida governorates.²²³³

According to UNOCHA, the governorate is divided into 36 sub-districts: Kisweh, Babila, 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.²²³⁴

Large parts of Rural Damascus governorate and Damascus city are largely integrated in contiguous built-up areas. Hence, it is difficult to distinguish the administrative boundaries separating them.²²³⁵

²²³¹ Mapaction, Syria 2013-2015, Rural Damascus Governorate [map], last updated:29 July 2016, [url](#)

²²³² REACH, Rural Damascus Governorate, April 2018, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS), April 2018, [url](#), p. 1

²²³³ UNHCR, Provision of Life-Saving Assistance and Supporting Communities, End of Year Report 2018, 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²²³⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, Syria sub-district maps, n.d., [url](#)

²²³⁵ Abdin, Y., The fragility of community security in Damascus and its environs, International Review of the Red Cross, Conflict in Syria No. 99 (3), 2017, [url](#), pp. 899–900

Bordering Damascus city to the east is an area named Eastern Ghouta. According to a map provided by the Reach Initiative, Eastern Ghouta comprises Harasta, Arbin, Douma and Misraba sub-districts, and the neighbourhoods Modira, Beit Sawa, Hammura, Zamalka, and Qaboun (in Damascus governorate), Al-Masani, Aradi el-Jadide, Elauine, Hay Elsadie, Dahiet elasad, Hezzeh, Saqba, Ein Terma, Kafr Batna, Eftreis, and Jisrein.²²³⁶ While REACH separates between 'neighbourhoods' and 'sub-districts' in this map, the UNOCHA Humanitarian Atlas lists them all as 'sub-districts'.²²³⁷ Yalda, Babila and Beit Sham are commonly called 'the three southern Damascus towns', according to analyst Mazen Ezzi at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy.²²³⁸ To the south-west, between Damascus city and Darayya, is Western Ghouta.²²³⁹

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Rural Damascus governorate in 2019 to be 3 200 000.²²⁴⁰ In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Rural Damascus governorate to be of 3 023 110 inhabitants.²²⁴¹

During the GoS offensive against Eastern Ghouta and Jobar in spring 2018, displacement took place on a large scale, significantly decimating the population in the areas fought over, such as Eastern Ghouta whose population became decimated by the half, according to 'the best estimates available' as provided by PAX, a Netherlands-based NGO.²²⁴² According to Human Rights Watch, laws subsequently passed by the GoS have forced many of the displaced into further displacement.²²⁴³

A map by Michael Izady provided by Columbia University in 2010 shows 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 in addition to Sunni Arabs. To the north the population includes Turkomans, Levantines, Aramaeans and Imamis²²⁴⁴ (Twelver Shias).²²⁴⁵ A map published in 2015 by Reva Goujon, an analyst at Stratfor, shows a Shia-populated area in the governorate that stretches north-west from west of Damascus City.²²⁴⁶

The fighting which ended in 2018 carried with it significant demographic changes in some of the former opposition-held areas in the governorate. Rather than as an unintended consequence of the fighting, PAX described the large-scale displacement that has taken place there with the subsequent vastly reduced population numbers, as a strategy of 'demographic engineering' applied by the government for political reasons. In the spring of 2018, the population of one such area, Eastern Ghouta, became decimated by the half during the final fighting, according to PAX. The combination of systematic forced population transfers and the creation of various kinds of obstacles to return, most notably Law No 10, ratified in April 2018, which would allow the government to confiscate displaced persons' real estate, has worked to make permanent the demographic changes that have taken place

²²³⁶ REACH, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

²²³⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, Syria sub-district maps, n.d., [url](#)

²²³⁸ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EIU (European University Institute), 27 November 2020, [url](#), p., p. 14. Mazen Ezzi is a research contributor working on the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project (WPCS) within the Middle East Directions Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence. Ezzi's work focuses on the war economy in Syria and the areas under regime control.

²²³⁹ Al-Araby, Map – Syria – Ghouta, n.d., [url](#)

²²⁴⁰ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

²²⁴¹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

²²⁴² PAX, Siege Watch Tenth Quarterly Report Part 1 – Eastern Ghouta February – April 2018, 30 April 2018, [url](#), p. 80. PAX works with committed citizens and partners to protect civilians against acts of war, to end armed violence, and to build just peace.

²²⁴³ HRW, Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria, 28 June 2019, [url](#)

²²⁴⁴ Izady, M., Syria: Ethnic Composition in 2010, in: Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity, Columbia Univ. Gulf 2000, 2006 – present, 2010, [url](#)

²²⁴⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica, Twelver Shi'ah, updated 4 April 2019, [url](#)

²²⁴⁶ Goujon, R., Stratfor, The Geopolitics of the Syrian Civil War, 4 August 2015, [url](#)

in such areas.²²⁴⁷ As Human Rights Watch noted, laws passed by the GoS ostensibly intended to facilitate reconstruction, have actually had the effect of restricting the ability of people perceived to be opposed to the government, to return to their homes thus forcing them into further displacement.²²⁴⁸ For more information about Law No 10 and its impact, see the [EASO COI report: Syria – Socio-economic situation in Damascus city \(April 2021\)](#).

Demographic changes began to take place in some former opposition held places in the governorate, as Shias from other places in Syria as well as from foreign countries began to repopulate these places instead of the original Sunni population, the Guardian reported in 2017. Original Sunni IDPs from Zabadani, Madaya, Wadi Barada and Darayya were replaced by Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi Shias. Citing a hospital director in Zabadani, the Guardian reported that the GoS' motivation for this repopulation was to remove Sunnis away from the areas between Damascus and Homs.²²⁴⁹ 'Population swaps' of this kind has granted the GoS a stronger support base inside its territory of control, France 24 reported in 2018, citing analyst Fabrice Balanche.²²⁵⁰

In 2018, REACH described Rural Damascus as a largely agricultural governorate.²²⁵¹ The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) described Eastern Ghouta in 2018 as an urban/peri-urban area with a population of some 393 000 inhabitants.²²⁵² The Middle East Institute (MEI) reported in 2019 that Eastern Ghouta's economy relied mainly on manufacturing, trade and agriculture.²²⁵³

The governorate's road network connects the Syrian capital to any area beyond. The density of roads is visible in a map provided by UNOCHA. The map also shows the main highways to the west (connecting the capital with Lebanon), south (to Jordan via Daraa governorate), as well as one highway going east stopping at the international airport, and one heading north-east crossing into Homs governorate.²²⁵⁴ Damascus International Airport is located 30 km south-east of downtown Damascus.²²⁵⁵

2.11.2 Conflict background and armed actors

The Carter Center characterised the conflict in Rural Damascus as pockets of resistance to the government having formed in five general regions as the conflict started in 2011. These pockets became formed in Eastern Ghouta, in areas south of Damascus city, in the Wadi Barida Valley to the north-west, in areas between the towns of Khan el Shih and Kisweh, and in the Beit Jan area in the south-west of the governorate. These pockets became key hubs for armed opposition groups. As the government forces sought to retake them, static frontlines were formed, often lasting for several years. In late 2015, Russia entered the military conflict in support of the Syrian government, which then became enabled to focus on retaking the pockets of resistance. In August 2016 the government forces began their effort by approaching the Darayya area. Then followed areas near Khan El Shih and the Wadi Barida in 2017. Eastern Ghouta, the southern Damascus neighbourhoods, and the Beit Jan

²²⁴⁷ PAX, Siege Watch Tenth Quarterly Report Part 1 – Eastern Ghouta February – April 2018, 30 April 2018, [url](#), p. 80. PAX works with committed citizens and partners to protect civilians against acts of war, to end armed violence, and to build just peace.

²²⁴⁸ HRW, Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 42

²²⁴⁹ Guardian (The), Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control, 14 January 2017, [url](#)

²²⁵⁰ France24, War, displacement reshuffle Syria's demographic map, 25 May 2018, [url](#)

²²⁵¹ REACH, Rural Damascus Governorate, April 2018, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS), April 2018, [url](#), p. 1

²²⁵² FAO/WFP, Special Report, FAO/WFP crop and food security assessment mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 9 October 2018, [url](#), p. 45

²²⁵³ MEI/ETANA Syria, Despair and Decay: Eastern Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), p. 15

²²⁵⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic - Rural Damascus Reference Map, n.d., [url](#)

²²⁵⁵ Damascus International Airport, Maps of Damascus airport, 2021 (n.d.), [url](#)

area were retaken in 2018.²²⁵⁶ As of the spring and summer of 2018, the government regained full control over the governorate.²²⁵⁷ The government had succeeded by means of a mix of military action and political deals.²²⁵⁸ The GoS security and military forces have since been governing the formerly opposition-held areas.²²⁵⁹

As of March 2021, Damascus governorate was under the control of the GoS (see also [Map 4](#)).²²⁶⁰

More information on the background of the conflict is available in the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

Units of the 2nd Corps of the SAA were reported to be present in Rural Damascus governorate in early March 2020. For deployments of the SAA in Rural Damascus governorate as of 17 March 2020, see Section 2.11.2 of the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

The 4th Division of the SAA was reported by the CoI to have a presence in Madaya and Eastern Ghouta.²²⁶¹ In Douma, to the north-east of the capital, the following GoS actors were in control or active, as the Omran Center for Strategic Studies stated in December 2020: GoS Military Security, Criminal Security, Political Security, the Republican Guard, the Al-Khatib Branch of State Security, and the Airforce Intelligence and Hezbollah.²²⁶² Analyst Mazen Ezzi of the European University Institute considered the Al-Khatib Branch of State Security, which in turn he deemed to be under influence of the Russian military, to be the force controlling Douma since April 2018. Syrian State Security and Russian military police are partnering closely in Douma. This has allowed them to expel Syrian military police and the SAA's Fourth Division from patrolling.²²⁶³

In Moadhamiyat al-Sham, a town in Western Ghouta, responsibility for security has been transferred from the SAA's Fourth Division to Military Security, which also supervised the local militia Shield of the Capital, and also 'colluded' with local leaders such as mukhtar Abu Jamal Mahmoud whose family members had volunteered in local loyalist militia under his encouragement.²²⁶⁴

Russia and Iran, as well as Hezbollah, were maintaining a continued presence in Rural Damascus, according to Mazen Ezzi.²²⁶⁵ Analyst Navvar Saban, stated that the IRGC keeps a base at the Damascus International Airport, and a camp in Zabadani.²²⁶⁶ According to Jusoor for Studies, as by January 2021

²²⁵⁶ Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 8-9

²²⁵⁷ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Lund, A., Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, December 2018, [url](#), p. 22

²²⁵⁸ Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 9

²²⁵⁹ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), p. 22

²²⁶⁰ Based on reading of the following maps: Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 22-28 March 2021, 31 March 2021, [url](#), Fig. 1; Liveuamap, Syria, 31 March 2021, [url](#)

²²⁶¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 8 para 30

²²⁶² Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#)

²²⁶³ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 6, 9.

²²⁶⁴ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 20-21

²²⁶⁵ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²²⁶⁶ Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, Atlantic Council, [url](#). Navvar Saban is a conflict expert at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies, where he specializes in Iranian influence in Syria, focusing on Shia militia activity. He is also a non-resident researcher at the Orsam Center.

Iran was operating 27 bases and posts in Rural Damascus and Damascus City together. The same source noted that Hezbollah had 12 military sites in Damascus and Rural Damascus, either independently or jointly with Iranian forces.²²⁶⁷ In February 2021, the SOHR reported that Iranian personnel and Hezbollah recently turned farms into new military headquarters and created underground premises connected by trenches and tunnels for protection against Israeli air attacks.²²⁶⁸

Lebanese Hezbollah had a 'strong grip' in Western Ghouta, Ezzi noted, where it was sharing some sites with the SAA's Fourth Division. In this area, and in its border area to Lebanon, Hezbollah was focusing on gathering intelligence on opposition groups and their activities.²²⁶⁹

In the Zabadani area north-east of the capital, Hezbollah exercised a 'tight military and security grip', according to Ezzi, who considered Zabadani a part of Hezbollah's 'sphere of influence'. Also, the Fourth Armoured Division of the SAA, the GoS military intelligence and the NDF has been exerting military and security influence over the Zabadani area.²²⁷⁰

Sayyida Zainab, a Shia town in southern Damascus, is controlled by Shia militias, most notably Lebanese Hezbollah, Ezzi stated.²²⁷¹ There, Hezbollah has established weapons armouries, intelligence centres, operations rooms and prisons, and is the only force responsible for protecting the Sayyidah Zaynab Shia shrine. There were also 'dozens' of other Shia militias based in the area, all closely related to Hezbollah.²²⁷²

For Hezbollah, the southern Damascus countryside constitutes part of a larger strategic area that provides it with access to the Israeli border, Mazen Ezzi reported. In Qalamoun, Hezbollah was maintaining roads, tunnels and armouries, located in places that are considered to be 'relatively safe' from Israeli air raids. In this area, more than half of all the military manpower in Western Qalamoun and 20 % of that in Eastern Qalamoun was filled by Hezbollah. Hezbollah is also deployed to the protection of an Iranian IRGC base in Al-Nasiriya, Eastern Qalamoun.²²⁷³ The group was operating 12 'points' that it operated either independently, jointly or in a 'semi-shared' manner with Iran in Rural Damascus and Damascus City.²²⁷⁴

Mazen Ezzi stated that from October 2018, the Russian military presence had limited its duties to daily patrols with around 100 personnel in Babila, Yalda and Beit Sahm, three towns located in Babila sub-district and collectively known as 'the southern Damascus towns'.²²⁷⁵ Russian forces were reportedly in control of Eastern Ghouta. Their presence in Eastern Ghouta has averted assassinations and kidnappings, which have taken place in small numbers elsewhere in the governorate, according to sources interviewed by the DIS.²²⁷⁶

²²⁶⁷ Jusoer for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

²²⁶⁸ SOHR, Digging trenches and tunnels: Iranian militias and Hezbollah camouflage and boost positions in eastern Damascus for fear of Israeli attacks, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

²²⁶⁹ Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, 2020, 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 8

²²⁷⁰ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EIU (European University Institute), 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-8

²²⁷¹ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EIU (European University Institute), 27 November 2020, [url](#), p. 14

²²⁷² Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, 2020, 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 6

²²⁷³ Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, 2020, 13 March 2020, [url](#), pp. 8-9

²²⁷⁴ Jusoer for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

²²⁷⁵ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EIU (European University Institute), 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 14-15

²²⁷⁶ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR); Syria Direct], October 2020, [url](#), p. 11

Anti-GoS armed groups

An increase in attacks reported against military and security personnel in early 2020²²⁷⁷, has been attributed to an armed group called Saraya Qasioun.²²⁷⁸ The existence of this group was, however, doubted by a source consulted by DIS.²²⁷⁹ These sources considered the reported attacks as acts committed by individuals or internal assassinations among military and security elements, rather than activities by an organised armed group. Two such attacks were mentioned as belonging to a first wave reported to have taken place between January and mid-March. Then there was a lull until June, after which the attacks picked up again.²²⁸⁰ Most of the attacks were reported to have taken place in Qudsaya north-west of the capital, and/or in Eastern Ghouta.²²⁸¹ The attacks during the first wave reported to have had some impact 'on their surroundings', while those during the second wave (since June 2020) had not impacted civilians.²²⁸²

In an interview with Aymenn Jawad al Tamimi, an independent analyst and a specialist in the Syrian conflict, a representative of the Saraya Qasioun explained that the group had been formed in early 2019 by opposition elements who had been displaced from Damascus and its surrounding regions, and that it was operating in those areas. By mid-2020, the group's representative claimed, the group had carried out over 10 operations in those areas. As well as mentioning Saraya Qasioun's opposition to the GoS, the representative mentioned opposition to 'the Russian and Iranian occupations' as an additional motivation.²²⁸³

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.²²⁸⁴ However, in October 2020, the DIS reported that ISIL and other opposition groups no longer were present in the governorate and that state intelligence services had eliminated all opposition cells in Rural Damascus.²²⁸⁵

2.11.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

Security trends in 2020-2021

Since 2018, when the GoS retook control of all areas in Rural Damascus there had been no major security incidents (such as battles or military operations) in the governorate, with the exception of Israeli airstrikes, GoS air defence missiles landing in inhabited areas and attacks against security officials of the SAA.²²⁸⁶ According to Syria Direct, the government's hold on security in Rural Damascus

²²⁷⁷ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR); Syria Direct], October 2020, [url](#), p. 13; Asharq al-Awsat, Concerns among Damascus residents after several blasts, 27 February 2020, [url](#)

²²⁷⁸ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: an international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²²⁷⁹ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Syria Direct], October 2020, [url](#), p. 15

²²⁸⁰ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), pp. 13, 15

²²⁸¹ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: international security organisation], para. 3, October 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²²⁸² Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: an international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 14

²²⁸³ Al-Tamimi, A. J., Saraya Qasioun: Interview, Pundicity [Blog], 7 July 2020, [url](#)

²²⁸⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 21 – February 4, 2020, [url](#)

²²⁸⁵ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct, Jusoor], October 2020, [url](#), p. 15

²²⁸⁶ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Suhail Al-Ghazi], October 2020, [url](#), p. 40

had remained 'firm'.²²⁸⁷ According to Omran, interviewed by DIS in August 2020, the number of security incidents in the governorate had significantly decreased. The source however did not provide figures.²²⁸⁸ Sources interviewed by DIS noted that in 2020, targeted attacks with explosives against military and security officers and affiliated officials, had appeared as a major type of security incident in the governorate.²²⁸⁹ In Palestinian refugee camps in the governorate, the situation was generally calm.²²⁹⁰ There were no security incidents on the road connecting Damascus with Damascus International Airport during 2020, according to sources interviewed by the DIS²²⁹¹, but a certain risk of becoming detained at the checkpoints on the road remained.²²⁹²

Israeli airstrikes against military targets were reported in 2020 as well as in 2021. Airstrikes against Syrian military posts south of Damascus were reported in July and August 2020.²²⁹³ The ISW recorded Israeli strikes against military targets in December 2020 and January 2021²²⁹⁴, and airstrikes on 3 February 2021 on sites south and south-east of Damascus and, on 15 February 2021, strikes on 'Iran-linked weapons storage facilities near Damascus', SAA First division troops near al-Kiswah and a SAA Fourth Division headquarter near al-Bajaa.²²⁹⁵ The targets have been specific military targets. Occasional air defence missiles fired by the GoS forces were reported as having landed on civilian areas, causing casualties.²²⁹⁶

Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that the occasional Israeli air raids that had taken place against Iranian-backed militia bases in the capital and its countryside, had not targeted civilian areas or buildings. However, civilian houses may have been damaged by air defence systems activated by the GoS. In 2020, an air defence missile fell on a house near Damascus International Airport and caused the death of three civilians.²²⁹⁷ Enab Baladi reported that the 'eighth' Israeli air attack in 2021 on government positions in Rural Damascus and Damascus had taken place on 8 April 2021.²²⁹⁸ No civilian casualties were reported in this attack.

The OHCHR reported 'widespread lawlessness' such as arbitrary arrests, and general insecurity prevailing in the previously besieged areas, including Ghouta, Dar'a and Douma.²²⁹⁹ Sources interviewed by the DIS reported that a growing number of kidnappings of civilians for ransom, including kidnapping of children, had taken place in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates during 2020.²³⁰⁰

²²⁸⁷ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Syria Direct] October 2020, [url](#), p. 35

²²⁸⁸ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Suhail Al-Ghazi, a non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy; Syria Direct; Jusoos] October 2020, [url](#), pp. 11-12

²²⁸⁹ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: an international security organisation; Suhail Al-Ghazi; Jusoos; Syria Direct; Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 13. See also: Asharq al-Awsat, Concerns among Damascus residents after several blasts, 27 February 2020, [url](#)

²²⁹⁰ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: an international humanitarian organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 11

²²⁹¹ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Sources: Syria Direct, Jusoos, Omran Studies, SOHR], October 2020, [url](#), pp. 14-15

²²⁹² Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: SNHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 14

²²⁹³ AP News, Syria says Israeli strike kills 2 soldiers, wounds 7, 31 August 2020, [url](#)

²²⁹⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, [url](#)

²²⁹⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report January 30 – February 18, 2021, [url](#)

²²⁹⁶ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, October 2020, [url](#), p. 14 [Source: Suhail Al-Ghazi], p. 40

²²⁹⁷ Al-Ghazi, S., interview, 3 February 2021

²²⁹⁸ Enab Baladi, Wounded in Israel's eighth bombing in 2021 on the outskirts of Damascus, 8 April 2021, [url](#)

²²⁹⁹ OHCHR, Statement by Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, at 43rd Human Rights Council session, 9 March 2020, [url](#)

²³⁰⁰ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Sources: Omran Studies, SOHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 14

In 2020, the Col reported that 'arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and torture remained pervasive' in specific areas under GoS control, including Rural Damascus.²³⁰¹ There was a high level of extrajudicial detentions and abductions perpetrated in the cities of Douma and Daraa, the Omran Center for Strategic Studies reported, involving a 'multitude of actors and ... haphazard methods of extrajudicial detentions and abductions'. In Douma city, the number amounted to 20 extrajudicial detentions in the fourth quarter of 2019 and the first quarter in 2020, according to the Omran Center. 10 of these were abductions. Of a total number of 103 detainees, 78 were connected to the reconciliation process and 25 were civilians. Political Security was responsible for one operation, Hezbollah for two, Civil Police for one, Khatib branch for one, Russian Military Police for two, and Air Force Intelligence joined with Military Security in two incidents. One operation remained anonymous. The number of abductees in the same period was 19, including 18 civilians and one military, with those responsible being unidentified for all.²³⁰² The Col similarly reported on cases of arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and detentions in areas such as Douma and Eastern Ghouta.²³⁰³

During the reporting period, in some places in Rural Damascus, governorate, armed clashes between pro-GoS militias were reported.²³⁰⁴

In September 2020, protests against arrests, including arrests carried out without legal arrest warrants issued by court, were reported to have taken place in Kanaker town.²³⁰⁵

Security incidents

According to ACLED data, during the reporting period there were 204 security incidents recorded in Rural Damascus governorate, of whom 40 were battles, 39 explosions/remote violence and 125 incidents of violence against civilians.

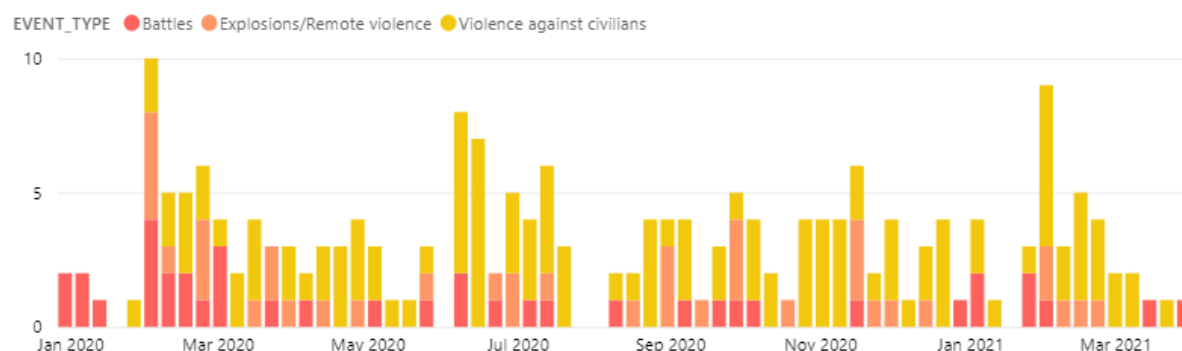


Figure 43: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Rural Damascus governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data²³⁰⁶

²³⁰¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 4 para 13

²³⁰² Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 66, 62, 60, 65

²³⁰³ 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 para 68

²³⁰⁴ MEMO, In-fighting erupts between Syria intelligence, army in Damascus, 8 July 2020, [url](#)

²³⁰⁵ Diyaruna, Rural Damascus arrests fuel anti-regime protests, 23 September 2020, [url](#)

²³⁰⁶ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

Rural Damascus governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Al Qutayfah	1	-	1
An Nabk	2	1	2
At Tall	2	1	113
Az-Zabadani	2	3	-
Darayya	-	2	-
Duma	11	7	5
Qatana	10	8	1
Rural Damascus	11	17	3
Yabroud	1	-	-
Total	40	39	125

Figure 44: Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Rural Damascus governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

Most security incidents recorded by ACLED during the reporting period 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 (see Figure 44).

Illustrative security incidents

- Asharq al-Awsat reported that in February 2020, that there had been one IED incident on the road between Saqba city and Hazza town, and one in Qatana town.²³⁰⁷
- A car was blown up with an IED in Jaramana on 24 February, SANA reported on 1 March 2020.²³⁰⁸
- The ISW reported two attacks by Saraya Qasioun in the towns of in Qatana (26 February 2020) and Jaramana (1 March 2020), and that the group previously had claimed two other attacks in Beit Jinn and Sa'sa, all four towns located in the Damascus countryside.²³⁰⁹
- Syria Call reported two targeted shootings of named members of the SAA's Fourth Division, claimed by Saraya Qasioun in Beit Jann, on 14 March 2020.²³¹⁰
- The SOHR reported that on 25 March 2020, an explosion caused by unidentified men throwing a grenade against a military checkpoint near Kanaker town in western Rural Damascus. The source did not report about any civilian casualties.²³¹¹
- A checkpoint operated by GoS Military Security and Air Force Intelligence on the road between Al-Dumayr and Al-Ruhayba areas in eastern Qalamoun in Rural Damascus, was shot against by unidentified gunmen on 29 March 2020, the SOHR reported.²³¹²
- On 7 July 2020, Saraya Qasioun claimed the assassination of a person named Nizar Zaidan, serving in the SAA's Fourth Armoured Division.²³¹³

²³⁰⁷ Asharq Al-Awsat, Concerns among Damascus residents after several blasts, 27 February 2020, [url](#)

²³⁰⁸ SANA, Material damage caused in IED blast in Damascus Countryside, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

²³⁰⁹ ISW, Situation Report, March 4-17, [url](#)

²³¹⁰ Syria Call, [Facebook], IED kills a person in Damascus as 'Saraya Qasioun' launches 'vendetta operations', posted on: 14 March 2020, [url](#)

²³¹¹ SOHR, Accidental explosion: Grenade explodes in neighbourhood in Damascus, killing NDF member and injuring others, 30 March 2021, [url](#)

²³¹² SOHR, Accidental explosion: Grenade explodes in neighbourhood in Damascus, killing NDF member and injuring others, 30 March 2021, [url](#)

²³¹³ Saraya Qasioun, 7 July 2020, [url](#)

- The Syrian Observer reported in mid-July 2020 about more than 40 arrests having taken place in Douma.²³¹⁴
- Arrests of military defectors, draft evaders and people associated with reconciliation and reconciliation committee members that had fallen out with the GoS, continued into September 2020 across Yalda, Babila and Beit Sham in southern Damascus, according to Mazen Ezzi. These arrests had begun in 2018.²³¹⁵
- On 22 October 2020, the SOHR reported that the Mufti of Damascus and Rural Damascus had been killed in an IED incident in Qudsaya.²³¹⁶
- A grenade exploded on the outskirts of a Baath Party neighbourhood in Jaramana, injuring a child, and there were reports about an IED exploding near the bus terminal in the Al-Sumariya area without any casualties, the SOHR reported on 18 December 2020.²³¹⁷
- The SOHR reported that on various dates during the first half of February 2021, scattered arrests and raids as well as large-scale arrests of up to 300 young people, many in order to be recruited for compulsory and reserve military service, had been carried out in Douma and other cities and towns in Eastern Ghouta by Air-Force Intelligence and the Syrian military police. The SOHR mentioned the locations Douma, Masraba, Harasta, Hamouria, Saqba, Kafr Batna, Ain Tarma, Zamalka, Jisrin and Al-Meliha.²³¹⁸
- On 15 March 2021, the SOHR reported that the level of alert had been heightened, and corresponding security measures tightened at GoS checkpoints. Some temporary checkpoints were set up in side streets as well as main streets. At the same time, all side and main roads leading to the western Ghouta areas as well as eastern Ghouta were closed, and the checkpoints separating the capital from eastern Ghouta reinforced with additional GoS military.²³¹⁹

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	10	10	4	-
February	5	-	5	2
March	4	1	10	1
April	3	3		
May	3	-		
June	4	2		
July	5	5		
August	3	1		
September	2	-		
October	2	2		
November	4	2		
December	6	1		
Total	51	27	19	3

²³¹⁴ Syrian Observer (The), State Security Services Arrest Dozens in Douma for Forced Military Recruitment, 16 July 2020, [url](#)

²³¹⁵ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 15-16

²³¹⁶ SOHR, Mufti of Damascus and countryside killed in IED explosion, 22 October 2020, [url](#)

²³¹⁷ SOHR, Child injured in grenade explosion in Jaramana, 18 December 2020, [url](#)

²³¹⁸ SOHR, Eastern Ghouta: Air-Force Intelligence arrests two women and young man from Douma city, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

²³¹⁹ SOHR, After killing and arresting six persons by security services: Regime checkpoints put on high alert in Damascus and countryside, 15 March 2021, [url](#)

Figure 45: Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Rural Damascus governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2020, Rural Damascus governorate had between 27²³²⁰ (SNHR data)²³²¹ and 51 civilian fatalities (VDC data).²³²² In the first three months of 2021, SNHR recorded 3 civilian fatalities in Rural Damascus, while VDC recorded 19 civilian fatalities.

Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war

Sources consulted by DIS in October 2020 mentioned the following cities and areas in Rural Damascus as those most damaged by the conflict: Yarmouk, Hajar Al-Aswad, Jobar, Douma, Harasta, Darayya, Qaboun, Maliha, Arbin, Madyara, Ein Tarma, Zamalka and Hamouriya. Less affected were the Qalamoun areas and the Wadi Barada, Madaya, Al-Zabadani and Baqqin villages.²³²³ Joseph Daher mentioned cities such as Douma and Darayya having been subjected to massive destruction and significant displacement, while Qudsaya and Muadamiyat had been less affected.²³²⁴ After its recapture by GoS, Darayya city and its surroundings have been almost completely lacking electricity, water and sanitation networks as well as other infrastructure. The government had not taken action to renovate these networks, the DIS reported.²³²⁵

Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Rural Damascus governorate, 44.7 % of the population was living in damaged buildings.²³²⁶

Access to electricity and water in the governorate was limited to two to three hours a day, Refugee Protection Watch reported.²³²⁷ In Douma and Eastern Ghouta, residents had to rely on flashlights due to lack of generators. Since the supply of potable water was scarce, people would resort to using water

²³²⁰ In a January 2021 report, SNHR mentions 28 civilian fatalities in Rural Damascus in 2020. This figure is the result of a revision of their data. EASO email correspondence with SNHR, 22 April 2021. See SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

²³²¹ 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

²³²² Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

²³²³ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Suhail Al-Ghazi; an international humanitarian organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 24, 54-55

²³²⁴ Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, June 2020, [url](#), pp. 5-6. Joseph Daher is Part-Time Professor at the EUI. He completed a Doctorate in Development Studies at SOAS, University of London (2015), and a Doctorate in Political Science at Lausanne University (2018), Switzerland. He currently teaches at Lausanne University and is a part time affiliate professor at the European University Institute, Florence (Italy). He is the author of Hezbollah: Political Economy of the Party of God (Pluto Press, 2016) and Syria After the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience (Pluto Press 2019)

²³²⁵ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 55

²³²⁶ Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

²³²⁷ Refugee Protection Watch, Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria: The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees, October 2020, [url](#), p. 27. The Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) Coalition is comprised of Basmeh and Zeitooneh, ALEF Act for Human Rights, PAX, 11.11.11 and Upinion.

wells, or they would buy water to drink and for cooking.²³²⁸ In Moadhamiyat Al-Sham alone, 1 500 residents had become ill by drinking water contaminated with sewers in October 2020, Mazen Ezzi stated.²³²⁹

Hospitals were almost completely lacking in Darayya city and its surroundings, and no action to reconstruct those destroyed had been taken by the government, according to the DIS.²³³⁰ The Refugee Protection Watch reported that health services in the governorate were considered good by respondents to a survey the RPW had undertaken in late 2019/early 2020, and then again in a follow-up survey between July and September 2020. Most respondents, especially in Eastern Ghouta expressed their approval of how the public health sector was functioning. In specific areas of Rural Damascus, however, 40 % of the respondents described the health service system as 'poor' due to the lack of public health facilities and the excessive cost of private health care. Most respondents in mentioned private healthcare services as unaffordable. Despite public health facilities being available in several areas, the quality of services was adversely affected by shortages of personnel and lack of medical supplies. The RPW's findings at the end of 2020 were in conformity with their findings earlier in that year.²³³¹ The lack of public hospitals in the governorate had forced many patients to travel to Damascus City or to seek private hospitals, Joseph Daher noted.²³³²

According to Joseph Daher, 39 schools in the Damascus countryside were completely destroyed as of the beginning of the 2019 school year, and 500 schools in Damascus countryside needed renovations. Daher considered some schools that had reopened in different localities of Eastern Ghouta, as far from suited for education. Most of these schools were lacking sanitation and potable water. Classes remained generally overcrowded.²³³³ In Darayya city and its surroundings, schools were almost completely lacking, and the government had not acted to reconstruct those destroyed, the DIS reported.²³³⁴ According to Refugee Protection Watch, the state of education in Eastern Ghouta was considered 'dire'.²³³⁵ Many students from Rural Damascus had to go to Damascus City to attend school.²³³⁶ The DIS reported that that in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sbeineh, Khan Al-Shieh and Qabr Al-Sit, it had been possible to rebuild clinics, schools, and the sewage and water networks.²³³⁷

According to UNMAS, explosive remnants of war (ERW) and other explosives has left settlements, residential areas and agricultural land unsafe. Also, key infrastructure such as roads, schools and health centres are beyond serviceability, UNMAS stated.²³³⁸ Explosives used in Rural Damascus in the period July 2013–May 2019, numbered at least 81 698, according to the Carter Center. Landmines, unexploded ordnances and IEDs counted for just under 1 % of the total. The rest were ground-launched explosive munitions. Shelling of unknown types, artillery munitions, and rockets of various types accounted for most of the ground launched explosives used. Munitions dropped from airplanes and barrel bombs dropped from helicopters have also been used. The largest contiguously damaged

²³²⁸ Refugee Protection Watch, Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria: The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees, October 2020, [url](#), p. 27

²³²⁹ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EIU (European University Institute), 27 November 2020, [url](#), p. 21

²³³⁰ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR: 4], October 2020, [url](#), p. 55

²³³¹ Refugee Protection Watch, Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria: The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees, October 2020, [url](#), p. 9, 28

²³³² Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, June 2020, [url](#), p. 12

²³³³ Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, June 2020, [url](#), p. 14

²³³⁴ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 55

²³³⁵ Refugee Protection Watch, Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria: The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees, October 2020, [url](#), p. 29

²³³⁶ International humanitarian organisation working in Syria, interview, 17 February 2021

²³³⁷ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: The international humanitarian organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 25

²³³⁸ UNMAS, Syria, October 2020, [url](#)

area covered Jaramana, Kafr Batna, Harasta, Arbin, Hajar Aswad and Maliha, on the eastern side of the capital. 85 % of the activity had affected seven areas in the governorate - Markaz Darayya, Harasta, Douma, Kafr Batna, Zabadani, Nashabiyeh, Arbin, and Qatana. The communities Darayya, Harasta, Douma, Zabadani, Khan Al-Shih, Arbin, and Ain Terma recorded 58% of munitions used in the governorate.²³³⁹

Reporting to the UN Security Council in April 2021, the UN Secretary General mentioned that since its first deployment to Rural Damascus in August 2020, the UNMAS explosive ordnance assessment team had located and marked 630 items of explosive ordnance in the governorate.²³⁴⁰

Displacement and return

In 2020, UNOCHA reported for Rural Damascus governorate around 3 000 IDP movements from or within governorate, of which 323 were movements within the governorate.²³⁴¹ In January 2021, there were 15 IDP movements, all from Damascus, and 58 IDP movements from the governorate. 23 of these were to Tartous and 35 to Latakia.²³⁴² In the same month there were 987 returns within Rural Damascus and 22 returns from Rural Damascus to Homs.²³⁴³

In February 2021, there were 69 IDP movements from Rural Damascus governorate (which includes displacement within the governorate), 46 movements within, and 46 movements to the governorate (which includes displacement to other locations within the governorate).²³⁴⁴ In the same month there were 702 return movements to Rural Damascus from outside or from locations within, 702 returns taking place within Rural Damascus only and 1 100 returns from the governorate (which includes return to locations inside the governorate).²³⁴⁵ In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 103 IDP movements to or within the governorate, and 608 IDP returns to or within Rural Damascus.²³⁴⁶

A large number of IDPs from Eastern Ghouta, Harasta and Douma were living in Damascus City, an international humanitarian organisation working in Syria assessed.²³⁴⁷

In 2020, UNOCHA recorded 11 000 return movements from or within Damascus Rural governorate, out of which 6 000 return movements took place within the governorate.²³⁴⁸ 987 return movements to the governorate were recorded in January 2021.²³⁴⁹ There were 22 returns going out from the governorate to Homs in January 2021 and 987 taking place within the governorate, a total of 1 009 of returns from locations in Rural Damascus.²³⁵⁰

SNHR reported that displaced people were not completely prevented from returning to Rural Damascus. However, returns to specific areas in Eastern Ghouta where neighbourhoods and homes had been completely destroyed, such as in Douma, Harasta, Shefouniya and Arbin, were only partially

²³³⁹ Carter Center (The), Explosive Weapons Use in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 8

²³⁴⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020) Report of the Secretary-General, 22 April 2021, [url](#)

²³⁴¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements overview, Jan – Dec, 2020, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

²³⁴² UNOCHA, IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data, 2 March 2021 [url](#)

²³⁴³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns, January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

²³⁴⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements, February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

²³⁴⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns, February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

²³⁴⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

²³⁴⁷ An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, MS Teams interview, 17 February 2021

²³⁴⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

²³⁴⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements Data, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

²³⁵⁰ UNOCHA, IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

permitted. Only persons who had obtained security permission, and who were able to repair their houses at their own cost, were permitted to return.²³⁵¹

The Col noted in August 2020 that 'civilians reported that they were still being prevented from returning to their often-habitable houses in Qaboun, Jawbar, Yarmouk camp and parts of Darayya.'²³⁵² Other sources interviewed by DIS in August-September 2020 noted that people were being allowed to return to Darayya City except to the south-western area which houses the Shia memorial of Sukayna, and to the north eastern part close to Mezzeh in Damascus. Still, as nearly 80 % of the houses in the Darayya area were destroyed, few people had returned. There were also some cases of people who had not been given permission to rebuild their houses.²³⁵³ Procedures necessary to obtain permission to rebuild were very cumbersome, creating barriers to bringing in building materials. Even with a permission, bribing could be needed to get the materials through.²³⁵⁴ Access to Harran Al-Awameed and to some areas in Darayya district and in Eastern Ghouta, was restricted. Access to Sahnaya in Darayya district was not restricted, an area which had been controlled by the GoS during the conflict.²³⁵⁵

Many civilians have returned to Al-Muadamiya, a city in Darayya sub-district, despite a number of arrests that had taken place in this area.²³⁵⁶ As of mid-2020, some 15 000 people were reported to be living in Darayya.²³⁵⁷ For accessing and returning to the destroyed areas in Eastern Ghouta such as Douma, Harasta, Shefouniya and Arbin, a security approval was required.²³⁵⁸ People who had not been active in the armed opposition would usually not face difficulties returning to Eastern Ghouta.²³⁵⁹

An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria interviewed by DIS in August 2020 reported that Palestinian refugees had returned to some of refugee camps in Rural Damascus. Palestinian refugees from Yarmouk remained displaced, though, and some of those families were residing in camps in Rural Damascus.²³⁶⁰

Mazen Ezzi mentioned that a gradual and 'extremely limited' return had taken place to Zabadani. Ezzi attributed this to the tight control over the area exercised by Hezbollah, which had allowed only a few former residents to return.²³⁶¹

The Syria Report reported about procedural obstacles put in place by the GoS that prevented people from returning to Sbeineh town, a suburb in the Damascus countryside south of the capital. Also,

²³⁵¹ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR] October 2020, [url](#), 53

²³⁵² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 8 para 31

²³⁵³ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Omran Studies; Syria Direct; Jusoer; Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 21

²³⁵⁴ Al-Araby, داريا الممنوعة على أهلها... ساحة لإيران ومليشياتها [Daria is forbidden to her family... Square for Iran and its militias], 3 April 2019, [url](#)

²³⁵⁵ Denmark, DIS, [Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SOHR] October 2020, [url](#), p. 21

²³⁵⁶ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Syria Direct] October 2020, [url](#), p. 21

²³⁵⁷ Al-Khabar, Four Years since the return of its residents... since the return of its residents...Darayya starts removing the traces of the war, 28 August 2020, [url](#)

²³⁵⁸ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR] October 2020], [url](#), p. 53

²³⁵⁹ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Suhail Al-Ghazi], October 2020 [url](#), p. 22

²³⁶⁰ Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: an international humanitarian organisation in Syria], October 2020, [url](#), p. 56

²³⁶¹ Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8

houses belonging to residents supporting the opposition had reportedly been burnt and looted, causing many displaced residents to decline from returning out of fear.²³⁶²

²³⁶² Syria Report (The), Syrian Government Restricts Returns to Southern Damascus Suburb, 17 March 2021, [url](#)

administrative districts of Dar'a, Izra' and As Sanamayn.²³⁶⁴ 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, Massimiyyeh;
- Izra' district: Izra', Hrak, Sheikh Miskine, Nawa [district capital is Nawa town], Jasim, Tassil.²³⁶⁵

Dar'a city, the capital, is the largest city in the governorate.²³⁶⁶ According to 2019 estimates by the Syrian Bureau of Statistics, the population of Dar'a governorate was approximately 925 000.²³⁶⁷ In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Dar'a governorate to be of 1 022 990 inhabitants.²³⁶⁸

The population of Dar'a is almost entirely Sunni Muslim, with some Christian communities.²³⁶⁹ Fabrice Balanche describes it as a Sunni Arab 'stronghold' in the conflict with the Assad government.²³⁷⁰ 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 2018.²³⁷¹

Dar'a governorate is strategically important as a transit route between Syria, Jordan, and Gulf states, and, bordering the Golan Heights.²³⁷² The M5 highway passes through the governorate connecting Damascus to Jordan, and to Aleppo to the north.²³⁷³ Loss of control over these highways connecting Damascus city with the GoS-controlled border crossing with Jordan would threaten GoS' control over the capital.²³⁷⁴ 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.²³⁷⁵ These characteristics have made it 'traditionally one of the most militarised regions in Syria', according to UNOCHA.²³⁷⁶

2.12.2 Conflict background 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.²³⁷⁷ As a result, the governorate experienced 'heavy fighting' causing displacement of large number of residents to locations inside and outside Syria.²³⁷⁸ Initially,

²³⁶⁴ Based on UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#)

²³⁶⁵ 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

²³⁶⁶ Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 5

²³⁶⁷ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

²³⁶⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

²³⁶⁹ 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

²³⁷⁰ Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 27

²³⁷¹ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 18

²³⁷² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 37

²³⁷³ ACAPS, Regional Analysis Syria: AII Part A II – Governorate Profiles, 1 October-31 December 2014, [url](#), p. 26

²³⁷⁴ Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 6

²³⁷⁵ Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 6

²³⁷⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 37

²³⁷⁷ 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

²³⁷⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 37

the protests in Dar'a were linked to frustrations with the GoS over decades of lack of interest in the region from the state.²³⁷⁹

From 2012 to 2014, a first wave of conflict-related displacement occurred, pushing hundreds of thousands to leave Dar'a.²³⁸⁰ 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 late 2016; ISIL was later pushed back to the Yarmouk Basin.²³⁸¹ As of August 2014, the GoS was able to retain strategic control over larger urban centres including key portions of Dar'a city and the M5 highway, which splits the governorate in two, thereby preventing the consolidation of local governance in opposition areas.²³⁸²

In 2017, opposition-held parts of Dar'a (and Quneitra) were designated as one of four 'de-escalation' zones by the US, Jordan, and Russia, created with the intention to allow hostilities to cease.²³⁸³ 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 270 000 people.²³⁸⁴

In July 2018, with Russian support, the GoS 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 of the SAA, ostensibly to fight against ISIL.²³⁸⁵

The reconciliation deals resulted in a 'patchwork' of agreements across different actors in Dar'a, leading to what COAR describes as having created 'space for the emergence of unprecedented levels of instability' post-reconciliation.²³⁸⁶ Russia prioritised its negotiations in the south-eastern rural parts of Dar'a, while the GoS mainly conducted negotiations in western and northern Dar'a, while in other areas, this sometimes occurred with both simultaneously. GoS deals leveraged local social capital and connections to those who maintained ties with the government to 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 of fighters, including under the 5th Corps, to be led by Oudeh.²³⁸⁷ Government civilian institutions and local councils were reportedly established and operating in 'all areas' including those under the control of reconciled former non-state armed groups, as of a May 2019 UN report on Dar'a.²³⁸⁸

Since June 2019 and through 2020 the governorate's strategic geographical location²³⁸⁹ combined with a 'weak regime control' in the south²³⁹⁰ led to an escalation of violence and insecurity. Foreign

²³⁷⁹ Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 3

²³⁸⁰ COAR, *Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP)*, September 2019, [url](#), p. 14

²³⁸¹ COAR, *Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP)*, September 2019, [url](#), pp. 13-14

²³⁸² Integrity Research and Consultancy, *Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate*, August 2014, [url](#), p. 14

²³⁸³ International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²³⁸⁴ International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²³⁸⁵ International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²³⁸⁶ COAR, *Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP)*, September 2019, [url](#), p. 12

²³⁸⁷ COAR, *Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate*, 3 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-8; see also: OHCHR, *The "Unreconciled" Concerns of Civilians in Dar'a Governorate*, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

²³⁸⁸ OHCHR, *The "Unreconciled" Concerns of Civilians in Dar'a Governorate*, May 2019, [url](#), p. 5

²³⁸⁹ SOHR, *Daraa in one year: security chaos, overlapping interests and hidden conflict... people suffer the scourge of external and internal interventions*, 25 June 2020, [url](#); Tokmajyan, A., *How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

²³⁹⁰ Tokmajyan, A., *How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

actors expanded their influence in the area, particularly Israel in the shared border with the Golan Heights, and Iran and Russia, that engaged in 'an indirect competition for influence in the region.'²³⁹¹

Further background information about the security situation in Dar'a between 2018 and 2020, 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: Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

Following the GoS' retaking of Dar'a in summer 2018, the state security agencies have taken control over local governance and returned the area to a 'security state' according to International Crisis Group.²³⁹² After reconciliation, the six main pro-GoS 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' and 'power brokers'.²³⁹³

The 4th Division is among the most powerful army 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 is also the most influential actor in Dar'a City.²³⁹⁴

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.²³⁹⁵ The 5th Corps in Dar'a is led by Ahmad 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.²³⁹⁶

For deployments of the SAA in Dar'a governorate as of 17 March 2020, see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

By June 2020, the 8th Brigade (of the Russian-backed 5th Corps) had nearly 1 600 fighters, 900 of which were former rebels.²³⁹⁷ The 8th Brigade continued to be the main armed actor in eastern Dar'a, also in view of the low control by the GoS forces. The 8th Brigade 'preserves order and security by setting up checkpoints and carrying out regular patrols'. Al-Jabassini reported that under 8th Brigade-Russian military police 'with the exception of a few violent incidents, areas that fall under their control enjoy better security than other parts of the governorate' because the Brigade confronts Syrian forces and orders them to remove checkpoints and stop abuses.²³⁹⁸ Control over checkpoints brings additional financial gain to fighters 'through regional war economy activities, including smuggling, human trafficking, and the illegal narcotics trade'.²³⁹⁹

With headquarters in Busra al-Sham, the 8th Brigade concentrates most of its forces in eastern Dar'a (next to Sweida and the border with Jordan), although 'small groups also operate elsewhere across

²³⁹¹ SOHR, Daraa in one year: security chaos, overlapping interests and hidden conflict...people suffer the scourge of external and internal interventions, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

²³⁹² International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 9

²³⁹³ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 9

²³⁹⁴ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-11, 17, 18

²³⁹⁵ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 40

²³⁹⁶ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 12

²³⁹⁷ Al-Jabassini, A., Rampant violence, military escalation, and the role of intermediaries in Daraa, Syria, MEI, 1 June 2020, [url](#)

²³⁹⁸ Al-Jabassini, A., Rampant violence, military escalation, and the role of intermediaries in Daraa, Syria, MEI, 1 June 2020, [url](#)

²³⁹⁹ COAR, The Syrian economy at war: Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#)

Daraa governorate'. It is formed by four battalions, each with three companies, in addition to 'headquarters, supplies, reconnaissance, and fire-support companies'. They receive 'logistical support, ammunition, and arms, including rifles, artillery, anti-tank missiles, and machine guns, through [Russia's] Hmeimim airbase.' The 8th Brigade has two main tasks: first, reconnaissance and defence of northern Latakia from potential attacks by rebels based in Idlib; second, protect headquarters, 'manage checkpoints, and preserve general order in the eastern region of Daraa governorate'.²⁴⁰⁰

According to Al-Jabassini, the 8th Brigade is a relevant armed actor with 'indispensable military, security, and intermediary role', capitalising from the 'volatility and chaos in southern Syria' and 'helping Russia to achieve its interests in the south'.²⁴⁰¹ The 8th Brigade has established a 'relatively secure climate' in eastern Dar'a, improved service delivery in parallel with government institutions. The 8th Brigade and especially Oudah have established a central role in defusing tensions and reaching agreements across Dar'a, given their military capacity and respect earned from clan elders and sheikhs.²⁴⁰²

Despite its relevant role, the 8th Brigade faces four significant challenges in the region, according to Al-Jabassini: the lack of formal recognition by the Syrian Ministry of Defense, the ambitions of Iran and its proxies in southern Syria, the regular retaliations with local armed groups in Sweida, and the ongoing rivalries among former rebel leaders.²⁴⁰³

In September 2020, COAR noted that 'military recruitment in Dar'a is primarily conducted through the Russian-backed 5th Corps and the Iranian-backed 4th Division' (although formally under the SAA, in practice acting as proxies for Iran and Russia), providing recruits both with 'protection against criminal charges or outstanding security threats by the Syrian state', but also generous salaries and military training. Reportedly in June 2020, 'several thousands of men applied to join the 5th Corps' 8th Brigade'.²⁴⁰⁴ Although the promise of a salary is important, Abdullah Al-Jabassini, researcher with a focus on wartime and post-conflict dynamics in southern Syria, argues that the primary reason former rebels join the 8th Brigade is the protection and security they enjoy from being in the ranks, namely from arbitrary detention at GoS checkpoints or other 'regime transgressions'.²⁴⁰⁵

The Air Force Intelligence and Military Security also recruit in Dar'a, in practice 'often overlap[ping] with recruitment to the 5th Corps and 4th Division'.²⁴⁰⁶

In July 2020, the 4th Division reportedly opened recruitment centres in Mzeireb and Zayzun and received 2 700 new recruits (mainly deserters from SAA and members of armed groups). The new recruits also receive temporary ID cards that protect them from pending criminal and security charges from the government. However, the short-term nature of the contracts brings uncertainty to fighters, that face both financial risk and arrest by Syrian authorities.²⁴⁰⁷

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 authority²⁴⁰⁸, side by side with the 'competing interests of the many actors that are active there: regime forces, local militias supported by Iran, Hezbollah, Russian forces, and the local Sunni and Druze population, which includes the

²⁴⁰⁰ Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 6

²⁴⁰¹ Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), pp. 6, 13

²⁴⁰² Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8

²⁴⁰³ Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 8

²⁴⁰⁴ COAR, The Syrian economy at war: Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁰⁵ Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 6

²⁴⁰⁶ COAR, The Syrian economy at war: Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁰⁷ COAR, The Syrian economy at war: Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁰⁸ Reuters, New Assad statue triggers protest in cradle of Syrian revolt, 10 March 2019, [url](#)

remnants of the opposition to the Assad regime'.²⁴⁰⁹ Western Dar'a has seen Iranian influence strengthening through its 'state security affiliates and local proxies' in that area²⁴¹⁰, as well as in the south-west, where Hezbollah and other Iranian-militias operate.²⁴¹¹ These groups have also been accused of also being involved in assassinations against those opposed to their presence.²⁴¹² However, their members have also been the targets of attacks in Dar'a.²⁴¹³

As of January 2021, Jusoor for Studies mapped 38 military bases and posts held by Iran and while Hezbollah had 21 independent, joint or semi-shared points with Iranian forces in Dar'a governorate.²⁴¹⁴ The size of Iran-backed groups (and its proxies') presence in the south of Syria is unclear. Israeli intelligence claimed that Iran had '800 operatives throughout Syria and works through allied groups'; protests in areas outside the GoS control 'often include demands for the departure of so-called 'Iranian militias', referring to Hezbollah and other proxies of Iran. There are connections between Iran and the SAA's 4th Division and the Air Force Intelligence Directorate.²⁴¹⁵

According to the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), 'Iran is anchoring its presence in the southern Syrian provinces close to the Israeli border in order to create an additional front of friction and conflict with Israel through its proxies.'²⁴¹⁶

In southern Syria, Iran reportedly relies on local groups (homeland defence forces and local defence militias), 'that it recruits, equips, and trains; Syrian army units under Iranian influence (among them the 4th Division, under the command of Maher al-Assad); and especially Hezbollah': the Southern Command (includes Hezbollah officers as advisers and supervisors in the Syrian army), and the Golan File Unit (direct Hezbollah command).²⁴¹⁷

According to Mazen Ezzi, research contributor of the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project at the European University Institute, Hezbollah pursues a planned presence in Dar'a, Quneitra, the 'Triangle of Death'²⁴¹⁸ and southern Damascus, as these are strategic areas of access to the Syrian Israeli border, thus 'giving it an opportunity to pose a threat to Israel'.²⁴¹⁹

In Dar'a, Hezbollah has supported the creation of groups built from the remaining Shia in the governorate, including: Saraya al-Areen 313 ('Brigades of Den 313'), composed of Busra Shia, the al-Imam al-Mahdi Brigade (Shia from Busra, Qarfa and al-Sheikh Maskin), and the Hadrat Abbas Brigade, in Izr'a. Hezbollah has four large military bases in southern Syria, three of which in Dar'a (a fourth in Quneitra). They are used as 'training and preparation centres for new volunteers and arms and ammunition depots'.²⁴²⁰

²⁴⁰⁹ INSS, The Struggle for Control of Southern Syria: Where is Israel?, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁴¹⁰ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 41

²⁴¹¹ Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as 'security breakdown' mires Daraa's fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

²⁴¹² Nofal, W., Will the Security Crisis in Southern Syria Spark a 'New Revolution', Chatham House, January 2020, [url](#)

²⁴¹³ Carter Center (The), 11 attacks on Hezbollah individuals have occurred in the south of Syria since August 2019, Weekly Conflict Summary, 13-19 January 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²⁴¹⁴ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria 6 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁴¹⁵ Tokmajyan, A., How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁴¹⁶ INSS, The Struggle for Control of Southern Syria: Where is Israel?, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁴¹⁷ INSS, The Struggle for Control of Southern Syria: Where is Israel?, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁴¹⁸ The Triangle of Death is located at the intersection of the governorates of Damascus, Dar'a and Quneitra. It was named the Triangle of Death after the heavy losses suffered there by the Afghan Fatimiyoun Brigade in 2015. Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS), European University Institute, 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 9, footnote 27

²⁴¹⁹ Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS), European University Institute, 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 9

²⁴²⁰ Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS), European University Institute, 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 9

On 20 June 2020 Iranian forces and Hezbollah were accused of attacking a bus transporting soldiers of the 5th Corps' 8th Brigade. The bus hit a roadside IED near Kahil (eastern Dar'a), killing 9 soldiers and injuring 13 others. The following days large protests took place in Busra al-Sham (headquarters of the 8th Brigade), against Iranian and Hezbollah presence in the south.²⁴²¹

According to Abdullah Al-Jabassini, 'Iran and Hezbollah see the Eighth Brigade as an actor that impedes their plans to establish a long-term presence in Daraa'; on the one hand they cannot enter Busra al-Sham, 'the main Shi'a population center in southern Syria, whose displaced Shi'a families are not allowed to return to the town by Ahmad al-Oda [...], commander of the Eighth Brigade', and on the other, the registration of more than 7 000 men to the 8th Brigade in June 2020 could signify a massive addition to al-Oudah's manpower, and thus pose a threat to Iran and Hezbollah presence in southern Syria.²⁴²²

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, were present in several areas of Dar'a, especially the western suburbs, such as the Yarmouk Basin²⁴²³ and al-Jaidour area²⁴²⁴, as well as towns of Tafas, Muzayrib, and Tal Shihab, as well as being based in Dar'a City to a lesser extent.²⁴²⁵ One source, however, notes that although some violent incidents were claimed in the name of 'popular resistance', this 'does not denote a coherent movement, but is an expression of the pervasive popular anger against the regime's oppressive military policies in the area'.²⁴²⁶

The Dar'a Popular Resistance group emerged online in November 2018.²⁴²⁷ The group's 'origins, memberships, and affiliations are largely unknown' though according to COAR it could be either a guerrilla type insurgent group or even 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 hit and run assaults and bombings on military headquarters and checkpoints, as well as assassinations of reconciled figures.²⁴²⁸ It has claimed to deter abuses by GoS and Iran and criticised opposition figures who collaborate with Russia.²⁴²⁹ The group has carried out attacks on checkpoints in Al-Sanamayn and against the Criminal Security Branch in Dar'a city, for instance.²⁴³⁰ Low level attacks, ambushes, raids on military outposts continue to be reported as of November 2019.²⁴³¹

Between December 2019 and March 2020, STJ documented the presence in Dar'a of both armed former fighters and opposition military groups, of which the most relevant is the Popular Resistance.

²⁴²¹ COAR, 5th Corps and Government forces clash in Dar'a: A step-change for Syria's most restive region as Oudeh and Russia bid for more power?, 29 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2; Al-Jabassini, A., Is Ahmad al-Oda winning the "hearts and minds" of Daraa's people?, MEI, 22 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁴²² Al-Jabassini, A., Is Ahmad al-Oda winning the "hearts and minds" of Daraa's people?, MEI, 22 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁴²³ 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. STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), pp. 5-6

²⁴²⁴ This includes the towns of Nawa, Jasim, al-Harah, and Nimr. STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), p. 6

²⁴²⁵ STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), pp. 5-6

²⁴²⁶ Etana Syria, Attacks & Assassinations in South-West Syria, 28 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁴²⁷ Al-Jabassini, A., From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria, EUI, June 2019, [url](#), p. 15; COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 43; Carter Center (The), Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 8, footnote 9

²⁴²⁸ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), pp. 4, 37, 43; See also: ISW, Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy, November 2019, [url](#), p. 27

²⁴²⁹ ISW, Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy, November 2019, [url](#), p. 27

²⁴³⁰ Al-Jabassini, A., From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria, European University Institute, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 15-16

²⁴³¹ 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](#)

Around 200 incidents recorded in the governorate during this period occurred in western and northern rural Daraa, particularly in Muzayrib, Tafas, Dael, Jasim, al-Shajara, Inkhil, Masakin Jaleen, Jumla, Nawa, Tasil and al-Sanamayn.²⁴³²

Other emerging armed groups in Dar'a dissatisfied with the government since reconciliation identified by sources include:

- the Southern Companies (Siraya Janoubiya); first appeared online in February 2019.²⁴³³ This anti-government group targeted a Baath office in eastern Dar'a with an explosion, threatening to target other government facilities if they did not 'stay away from civilians'.²⁴³⁴
- 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 2019.²⁴³⁵

Information on activity of the above emerging groups in Dar'a between January 2020 and the time of writing this report could not be found among the sources consulted by EASO within time constraints.

ISIL affiliates

ISIL has reportedly been active in Dar'a during 2019²⁴³⁶, 2020²⁴³⁷ and in early 2021.²⁴³⁸

Several attacks and security incidents were attributed to ISIS in Dar'a governorate in 2020 and 2021, please see [Illustrative security incidents](#).

Local ISIL-affiliate group Jaish Khaled Ibn Al-Walid (JKBW) formerly dominated parts of the south-west of Dar'a, but by July 2019 only two attacks by ISIS had been registered in Dar'a since the 2018 takeover and reconciliation.²⁴³⁹ Information on ISIL-affiliated groups active in Dar'a governorate could not be found among the sources consulted by EASO within time constraints.

2.12.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

Territorial control

During the reference period of this report Dar'a governorate was under nominal GoS control²⁴⁴⁰, including some areas of the governorate that were formerly opposition-held and have been retaken or reconciled through local agreements.²⁴⁴¹ The UN explained that territories 'currently under the effective control' of GoS and its forces are those taken by military operations, including some 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, Malihat al-Atash and Saida), areas of western rural Dar'a (including 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 the territories in Dar'a remain under the

²⁴³² STJ, Fresh Wave of Violence Storms Already Vulnerable "Settlement Agreement" in Daraa, 10 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁴³³ Carter Center (The), Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

²⁴³⁴ Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as 'security breakdown' mires Daraa's fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

²⁴³⁵ Carter Center (The), Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

²⁴³⁶ 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 (The), Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 38, footnote 13

²⁴³⁷ ISW, Syria situation report: April 1 - 14, 2020, 16 April 2020, [url](#); USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 51-52

²⁴³⁸ ISW, Syria situation report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁴³⁹ COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 14; For a map, see Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 22-28 July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁴⁴⁰ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-21, 2020, 24 January 2020, [url](#); US CRS, Armed conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 July 2020, [url](#), p. 4; OHCHR, Syrian Arab Republic: Approximate areas of influence as of November 2020, Map no. 4620.10, January 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁴¹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-21, 2020, 24 January 2020, [url](#)

effective control of former armed non-State groups, including those that agreed to the “reconciliation deals”.²⁴⁴²

Although the GoS had nominal control over the south²⁴⁴³ its military forces and presence remained ‘vulnerable’. The Russian-backed strategy of return and inclusion of former rebel groups ‘transformed the conflict in the south from open rebellion to low-intensity resistance’.²⁴⁴⁴

Syria expert Haid Haid, explained in a July 2019 paper that some parts of Dar’a were under ‘Russia’s protection’ naming Busra al-Sham, al-Sahwa, Ma’araba, and al-Jizah; these include 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.’²⁴⁴⁵ The GoS, however, used conflict occasions to show its presence and influence, including when, in May 2020, it used the killing of nine local policemen by a former rebel to reinforce its presence in south-western Dar’a by deploying military units.²⁴⁴⁶

In areas of Dar’a city where former rebels maintain control as per the 2018 agreement, problems with the GoS are solved through Russian mediation. They continue to carry light weapons, and many have no affiliation with the GoS’ security or military institutions.²⁴⁴⁷

Tokmajyan further noted the volatility of control over Dar’a, noting that ‘the strategic impose of the south, the regime’s inability to reimpose its full sovereignty over the area, and the involvement of new actors such as Iran and Russia have granted this formerly peripheral region, where the interests of multiple actors now converge and conflict, a crucial role in regional affairs.’²⁴⁴⁸

In 2019, COAR described the south, including Dar’a, as being in a state of lawlessness, with both civilian protests and growing armed opposition resistance.²⁴⁴⁹ A fragmented security environment, mixture of reconciliation configurations, multiple and competing structures of authority, significant levels of lawlessness, and frequent security incidents has created a ‘climate of instability’ in Dar’a. COAR stated that it would be ‘inaccurate to state that the area is now under full government control’²⁴⁵⁰, 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’.²⁴⁵¹

In its report of October 2020, the UN Security Council stated ‘In the southern part of the country, insecurity and administrative restrictions continued to prevent sustained access to areas formerly controlled by non-State armed groups, in particular in Dar’a al-Balad neighborhood in Dar’a city and in parts of western Dar’a and Qunaytirah.’²⁴⁵²

²⁴⁴² OHCHR, The “Unreconciled” Concerns of Civilians in Dar’a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

²⁴⁴³ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-21, 2020, 24 January 2020, [url](#); US CRS, Armed conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 July 2020, [url](#), p. 4; OHCHR, [map] Syrian Arab Republic: Approximate areas of influence as of November 2020, January 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁴⁴ Tokmajyan, A., How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#), accessed 15 April 2021

²⁴⁴⁵ Haid, H., Understanding the characteristics of the new emerging state in Syria, Chatham House, June 2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁴⁶ Tokmajyan, A., How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁴⁷ Tokmajyan, A., How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁴⁸ Tokmajyan, Armenak, How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁴⁹ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁴⁵⁰ COAR, Southwestern Dar’a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

²⁴⁵¹ COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁴⁵² UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), para. 34

In January 2021, COAR described the situation in the south as further fragmented, with ‘continued unrest in Dar’a’ showing that ‘Russia faces limitations as a local power broker, and neither it nor the Syrian Government has yet demonstrated the capacity to pacify southern Syria.’²⁴⁵³

Security trends in 2020-2021

The security situation in the south deteriorated throughout 2020²⁴⁵⁴, revealing ‘chronic instability and state fragmentation’.²⁴⁵⁵ Reporting on the period between January and July 2020, the Col stated that the security situation in Dar’a ‘significantly deteriorated, with a number of incidents of armed violence between the multitude of armed actors vying for control’.²⁴⁵⁶ The Col highlighted ‘tensions between local opposition fighters and government forces, as well as civilians’.²⁴⁵⁷ As reported by COAR, assassinations and armed attacks continued, many directed at both GoS security forces and local civil servants.²⁴⁵⁸

The UN Security Council’s October 2020 report indicated ‘continued clashes affecting civilians and the assassinations of fighters reconciled from former armed opposition groups and of Government-affiliated figures, as well as continued localized protests against Government raids, arbitrary detention, conscription drives and the lack of public services. Intermittent clashes continued to take place, notably in the vicinity of Dar’a.’²⁴⁵⁹

In 2020, failed reconciliation agreements and a growing economic crisis exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19, brought a ‘renewed insurgency’ to the south of Syria, leaving the GoS under ‘unprecedented pressure’.²⁴⁶⁰ The growing insurgency, with ‘Former rebels, ISIS cells, and criminal groups’ carrying out ‘more than 150 attacks resulting in the deaths of combatants, and dozens more killing civilians’, paved way to the growth of the 5th Corps’ 8th Brigade as a ‘pseudo independent force in the south’.²⁴⁶¹ In eastern Dar’a, former opposition fighters ‘flocked’ to the Corps’s 8th Brigade, expanding its manpower.²⁴⁶²

Between December 2019 and March 2020, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) recorded at least 200 incidents of violence in Dar’a, resulting in up to 131 deaths and ‘dozens’ injured, among militants and civilians. Most incidents took place in ‘western and northern rural Daraa, especially in the cities and towns of Muzayrib, Tafas, Dael, Jasim, al-Shajara, Inkhil, Masakin Jaleen, Jumla, Nawa, Tasil and al-Sanamayn’. A new trend in assassinations arose in Dar’a, with killings directed at ‘civil activists, including doctors, media, and independent relief activists’.²⁴⁶³ Between March and May 2020, OHCHR documented 52 incidents of ‘apparently targeted killings’ in Dar’a governorate which resulted in 17 civilians being killed.²⁴⁶⁴

In its August 2020 report, the Col noted:

‘Reports of targeted killings of individuals increased across Dar’a and Suwayda’ Governorates during the reporting period, in what appeared to be retaliatory acts by numerous local armed

²⁴⁵³ COAR, Syria in 2021, Forecast for a Protracted Crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁵⁴ COAR, Syria in 2021, Forecast for a Protracted Crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#); UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 13

²⁴⁵⁵ COAR, Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁵⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 13

²⁴⁵⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 7

²⁴⁵⁸ COAR, Syria in 2021, Forecast for a Protracted Crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁵⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), para. 12

²⁴⁶⁰ Carter Center, A Path to Conflict Transformation in Syria, A Framework for a Phased Approach, January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

²⁴⁶¹ International Review, The Military Casualties of the Syrian Civil War in 2020, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁶² COAR, Syria in 2021, Forecast for a Protracted Crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁶³ STJ, Fresh Wave of Violence Storms Already Vulnerable “Settlement Agreement” in Daraa, 10 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁶⁴ OHCHR, Syria: Bachelet warns of ‘ticking time-bomb’ as civilian killings mount, 8 May 2020, [url](#)

actors. Reportedly, there were at least 53 such killings across Dar'a between January and June targeting medical professionals, political actors with both pro- and anti-government stances, judges, members of armed groups who had "reconciled" their status, and members of the security apparatus. In nearly all documented cases, the killings were carried out by men on motorcycles using small arms, rendering identification of the perpetrator difficult.²⁴⁶⁵

According to data collected and verified by researcher Abdullah Al-Jabassini²⁴⁶⁶, at least 930 violent incidents took place between August 2018 and February 2021 in Dar'a governorate which killed at least 790 individuals.²⁴⁶⁷

On 1 March 2020, Syrian forces launched an operation to secure greater control over al-Sanamayn city.²⁴⁶⁸ ISW described the town as a 'hotbed of insurgent and anti-regime activity'.²⁴⁶⁹ As al-Sanamayn had been under GoS control prior to the 2018 reconciliation process in Dar'a, it had not entered a previous settlement agreement with fighters.²⁴⁷⁰

The GoS operation to maintain control of the area prompted a reaction from the population, and demonstrations quickly became violent with gunmen exchanged fire with the GoS military and security personnel. The operation in al-Sanamayn ended through a mediated solution brokered by Ahmad al-Audeh, commander of the Russian-backed 5th Corps, with armed rebels being given the possibility to evacuate to other rebel-held areas, and the regime taking full control of al-Sanamayn.²⁴⁷¹

Armenak Tokmajyan, wrote on the aftermath of the situation in al-Sanamayn:

'A conclusion from Al-Sanamayn and the [population's] reaction to the regime's takeover of rebel-held areas is that where Russia brokered deals—Busra al-Sham, Daraa City, and Tafas—there remains the possibility of organized armed resistance. In several instances, the arrest of former rebels or civilians from Tafas and Daraa City at regime checkpoints located outside the zones covered by the Russian agreement provoked an escalation. Former rebels mobilized their networks and threatened to destabilize the situation unless the detainees were released. Some of those threats led to armed confrontations while others died out. However, the reality remains that opposition groups are still able to defend themselves against the regime's transgressions. In Busra al-Sham the situation has been more complicated, characterized by a mixture of restraint and defiance. The regime is more cautious with the Fifth Corps led by Audeh, as it is protected by Russia. In fact, in several instances, Audeh and his comrades have antagonized the regime's military and security personnel without facing any consequences.'²⁴⁷²

²⁴⁶⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 17

²⁴⁶⁶ Abdullah Al-Jabassini holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Kent, United Kingdom. He is a Non-Resident Scholar at the Middle East Institute (Washington, D.C., United States), and a Research Fellow for the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute (Florence, Italy). His research is focused on southern Syria, specifically Dar'a governorate. See [url](#)

²⁴⁶⁷ Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal 'Sulh' and the Politics of Persuasion in Volatile Southern Syria, EUI, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

²⁴⁶⁸ 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](#)

²⁴⁶⁹ ISW, March 1 Attacks on Regime Positions Demonstrate Growing Strength of Southern Syria Insurgency, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁷⁰ SOHR, The regime forces and Russia impose a new settlement in al-Sanamayn and displace 26 of who reject it to the north of Syria, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁷¹ Tokmajyan, Armenak, How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁷² Tokmajyan, A., How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

For further information on the March 2020 al-Sanamayn operation, see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).

Between March and June 2020 tensions rose between local opposition fighters and GoS forces, as well as civilians. In mid-March, artillery shelling by the SAA targeted the south of Dar'a, 'triggering retaliatory attacks by local militants near Nawa. The situation remained volatile in May and June following clashes, targeted killings, and the killing of nine Syrian police officers in Muzayrib. In response to these incidents, the SAA deployed additional troops to the region.'²⁴⁷³

2020 saw a continuation of assassinations and bombings directed at government forces, former opposition members and civilians.²⁴⁷⁴ Most incidents were unclaimed and perpetrators unknown.²⁴⁷⁵ In February 2021, ETANA, an independent civil society group with connections to the opposition²⁴⁷⁶, indicated that 'unknown perpetrators were responsible for 30% of attacks and 42% of assassinations' in the south of Syria.²⁴⁷⁷ Local factors also contributed to the high murder rate in Dar'a, including 'revenge killings under retributive tribal justice and rivalries between smugglers and criminal gangs operating in the province'.²⁴⁷⁸

Tensions with Israel continued with 'Israeli airstrikes [...] directed at a broad range of targets across the Syrian Arab Republic, including Iranian and Iranian-backed actors'.²⁴⁷⁹ In April 2020, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) released a video showing senior officers of the SAA and Hezbollah conducting an inspection tour of pro-Assad positions close to the Golan Heights, either in Dar'a or Quneitra. The IDF said that Israel would hold the GoS responsible for 'any sabotage activity' initiated from Syria against Israel.²⁴⁸⁰ In May 2020, two rounds of likely Israeli air strikes attacked Iranian proxy and GoS forces in Ma'ariya (western Dar'a governorate)²⁴⁸¹ and the SAA's 5th Mechanised Division near Izra (north-east Dar'a).²⁴⁸²

Small-scale ISIL attacks were reported in Dar'a governorate in 2020.²⁴⁸³ In May 2020, an analysis published by the Middle East Institute (MEI) indicated that ISIL was escalating its attacks in Dar'a governorate, 'claiming at least seven targeted assassinations, ambushes, and bomb attacks'.²⁴⁸⁴ Around the same time, ISW assessed that ISIL could be 'reassert[ing its] presence in southern Syria'.²⁴⁸⁵

On 24 January 2021, after tribal clashes and threats made against the 4th Division by an ISIL-aligned community leader from Tafas, the Iranian-backed Syrian Army 4th Division entered Tafas, despite

²⁴⁷³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 7

²⁴⁷⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), para. 20; MEE, Syria: Hundreds gather in Daraa to celebrate anniversary of uprising, 18 March 2021, [url](#); SNHR, The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in January 2021, 4 February 2021, [url](#), p. 3

²⁴⁷⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), para. 20; MEE, Syria: Hundreds gather in Daraa to celebrate anniversary of uprising, 18 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁷⁶ Etana Syria, History, n.d., [url](#)

²⁴⁷⁷ Etana Syria, Attacks & Assassinations in South-West Syria, 28 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁷⁸ FT, Assassinations in southern Syria expose limits of Assad's control, 28 April 2020, [url](#), [subscription based]

²⁴⁷⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 7

²⁴⁸⁰ ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 1 – 14, 2020, 16 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁸¹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 29 – May 12, 2020, 14 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁸² ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 13-26, 2020, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁸³ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 51; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 23; USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1 2020 – December 31 2020, 9 February 2021, [url](#), p. 16

²⁴⁸⁴ Lister, C., ISIS's dramatic escalation in Syria and Iraq, MEI, 4 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁸⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 1 - 14, 2020, 16 April 2020, [url](#)

attempts from the Russian-supported 5th Corps to broker a solution. Several 4th Division members were injured during clashes with former members of the opposition group Fajr al-Islam. Russia threatened to launch airstrikes against Tafas (the first in Dar'a since 2018) if locals did not hand over a number of individuals wanted by the GoS by 28 January. This deadline was later changed to 1 February in order to enable a delegation from Dar'a to travel to Damascus to discuss a solution to the crisis.²⁴⁸⁶

A Russian-supported agreement was signed between the GoS and the Central Reconciliation Committee [a group of local figures and former leaders of the opposition groups²⁴⁸⁷] on 8 February 2021, obliging former opposition fighters to clear government buildings they had used as their headquarters, as well as the hand-over of their weapons. In line with the agreement, Tafas residents wanted by the GoS were permitted to leave Tafas for the eastern countryside of Da'ra.²⁴⁸⁸ According to Suhail al-Ghazi, research assistant at ORSAM and non-resident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, writing on the outcomes and implementation of the agreement:

'[...] the Fourth Division was the main beneficiary of it. The Fourth Division was able to reach new areas and establish checkpoints inside the western countryside and weaken the local factions by forcing them to hand over their weapons. While Russia benefited by avoiding a military escalation that might lead to the collapse of the reconciliation agreement if the clashes spread to other regions, and Russia was able to establish its presence in the western countryside as well. Although the local factions and the Central Reconciliation Committee were able to avoid the military operation and the destruction it carries, the loss of heavy weapons in the region will weaken the factions in the future if the regime forces, especially the Fourth Division, try to expand and impose new conditions.'²⁴⁸⁹

Security incidents

During the reporting period, ACLED recorded 716 security incidents in Dar'a governorate, of which, 336 were coded as battles, 147 explosions/remote violence and 233 incidents of violence against civilians. Higher levels of security incidents were documented in January 2021, May and July 2020.²⁴⁹⁰

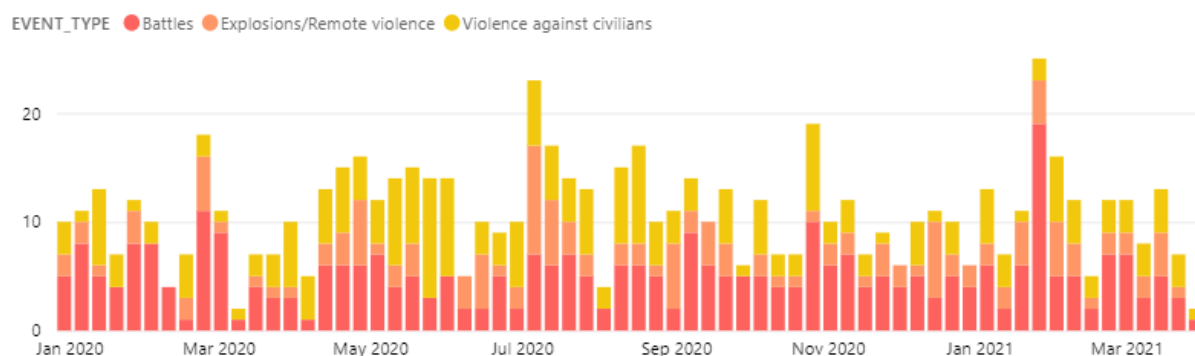


Figure 46: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Dar'a governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data²⁴⁹¹

²⁴⁸⁶ ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-29, 2021, 29 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁸⁷ Al-Ghazi, S., Insecurity in Southern Syria: Tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda (January – February 2021), Policy Brief 161, March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

²⁴⁸⁸ Al Monitor, Damascus scrambles for more control in southern Syria, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁸⁹ Al-Ghazi, S., Insecurity in Southern Syria: Tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda (January – February 2021), Policy Brief 161, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 3-4

²⁴⁹⁰ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

²⁴⁹¹ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

Dar'a governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
As-Sanamayn	27	17	16
Dar'a	221	94	163
Izra	88	36	54
Total	336	147	233

Figure 47: Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Dar'a governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. 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 (see Figure 47).²⁴⁹²

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Dar'a governorate in 2020 and early 2021 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]

- In January 2020, locals set a municipal building was set on fire near Lajat after defacing it with anti-GoS and anti-Iran graffiti and taking down a picture of Assad.²⁴⁹³
- In January 2020, two civilians were kidnapped by an opposition member and two previous abductees were found dead near Dar'a city.²⁴⁹⁴
- On 19 February 2020, two local Oxfam aid workers were shot and killed by unknown gunmen on the road between Mzeireb and Yadoudeh in Dar'a governorate.²⁴⁹⁵
- On 18 March 2020, in Jallayn (Dar'a), mortar and rocket attacks by the SAA killed six civilians, including two children, and injured another civilian.²⁴⁹⁶
- In April 2020, unidentified attackers killed a member of the Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) on the road near al-Shajara, while unidentified militants detonated an IED on a Syrian Air Force Intelligence vehicle north of Daraa City, leaving one SAFI member dead and a colonel injured. Another IED was detonated by unidentified attackers in Da'il, killing three SAA soldiers and injuring two others.²⁴⁹⁷
- On 27 May 2020, unknown gunmen, reportedly ISIS, ambushed a convoy with members of the Dar'a Central Committee and SAA 5th Corps 8th Brigade in Muzayrib, killing three members of the Committee and injuring four other people, including two members of the SAA 8th Brigade. Mahmoud Bardan, a former Free Syrian Army commander who was a relevant negotiator during the 2018 Assad-takeover of southern Syria, was one of the men killed.²⁴⁹⁸
- On 4 August 2020, a civilian was killed in a reported drive-by shooting on the road connecting Tafas and Muzayrib. On 7 August 2020, a civilian died in a reported drive-by shooting in Dar'a city.²⁴⁹⁹

²⁴⁹² EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

²⁴⁹³ SOHR, Daraa in six months: Attacks and assassination attempts rise as security chaos continues, 2 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁹⁴ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 13-19 January 2020, [url](#), pp. 3-4

²⁴⁹⁵ COAR, Syria Update: 24 February 2020 – Two aid workers killed as southern Syria teeters on the brink, 24 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁹⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 15

²⁴⁹⁷ ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 15 - 28, 2020, 30 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁹⁸ ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 27 - June 9, 2020, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁹⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 18

- On 13 August 2020, two distinct drive-by shooting incidents killed four civilians: one person on the road between Ma'raba and Ghasm, and another three people, including a boy and a girl, in the village of Mudawwarah.²⁵⁰⁰
- On 16 August 2020, in Tafas, a civilian with a disability was killed in a reported drive-by shooting.²⁵⁰¹
- On 18 August 2020, ISIS claimed the assassination of a member of the Lebanese Hezbollah and another person in Busra al-Harir. The next day, on 19 August 2020, ISIS claimed the assassination of a former journalist in Dar'aa city on 19 August, considering him 'guilty of offending the Prophet'.²⁵⁰²
- On 24 August 2020, in Da'il (northern rural Dar'a), two boys died and three other civilians, including a boy, were injured in a roadside IED explosion and drive-by shooting.²⁵⁰³
- On 27 August 2020, a civilian was killed in Jallayn, in a drive-by shooting.²⁵⁰⁴
- On 28 August 2020, a civilian was reportedly killed by unknown attackers in his home in Yadudah town in western rural Dar'a.²⁵⁰⁵
- On 10 September 2020, in Dar'a city, a civilian was killed in a drive-by shooting.²⁵⁰⁶
- On 12 September, one civilian was killed in a drive-by shooting in Muzayrib.²⁵⁰⁷
- On 26 September, three civilians were wounded in a reported drive-by shooting on the road connecting Yadudah and Muzayrib in western rural Dar'a.²⁵⁰⁸
- On 10 September 2020, suspected ISIS gunmen killed Brigadier General Tala Qassem of the SAA 5th Corps, two members of the SAA's 4th Division, and Muhammad Qasim al-Yunis, an Iranian militia recruiter in Dar'a Province. On 15 September, suspected ISIS gunmen killed Firas al-Naasan, Syrian Air Force Commander. Although ISIS has not claimed the attacks, ISW assesses there are likely to be their responsibility, given it had claimed similar attacks in Dar'a recently.²⁵⁰⁹
- On 13 September 2020, two members of the SAA 5th Corps 8th Brigade and one Bedouin were killed in clashes between local population and the 8th Brigade near al-Ghariya al-Sharqiya and al-Soura, in Dar'a governorate. Attackers are suspected ISIS.²⁵¹⁰
- In October 2020, unidentified gunmen killed at least five former opposition leaders reconciled with Assad's regime in the south-west of Dar'a governorate, including commander Adham al-Karad on 14 October.²⁵¹¹
- On 8 November 2020 local militias took control of al-Masakin checkpoint in north-western Dar'a, allegedly killing five GoS soldiers.²⁵¹²

²⁵⁰⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 18

²⁵⁰¹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 18

²⁵⁰² ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 19 - September 1, 2020, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁵⁰³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵⁰⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵⁰⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵⁰⁶ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵⁰⁷ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵⁰⁸ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵⁰⁹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2-15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁵¹⁰ ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2-15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁵¹¹ International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, Syria, October 2020, [url](#)

²⁵¹² International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, Syria, November 2020, [url](#)

- In January 2021, unknown attackers ‘launched targeted killings of civil servants and IED attacks against former rebels’.²⁵¹³
- On 14 March 2021 an ISIS militant shot and injured one SAA officer in Jubailiya (Dar’a).²⁵¹⁴
- On 16 March 2021, in the south-west of Dar’a governorate, gunmen loyal to the former opposition commander known as Abu Tariq Al-Subaihi ambushed GoS troops, leaving 21 soldiers and an unknown number of gunmen dead.²⁵¹⁵

Izra’ district (Sub-districts: Izra’, Hrak, Sheikh Miskine, Nawa, Jasim, Tassil)

- 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 2020.²⁵¹⁶
- A checkpoint was attacked in Nahta town, eastern Dar’a countryside, and about 20 GoS 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 eight soldiers hostage, seizing their weapons and materials, and pressuring the government to release detainees.²⁵¹⁷ 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 2018.²⁵¹⁸
- Between 16 and 22 April 2020, ISIS gunmen attacked an unidentified pro-GoS military vehicle on a road near Busra al-Harir in north Daraa Province, killing three and injuring two. After the attack, unidentified pro-GoS forces conducted an arrest campaign in Maliha al-Atash, south of Busra al-Harir, and reportedly detained six civilians.²⁵¹⁹
- In April 2020, ISIS gunmen attacked a GoS vehicle and killed two SAA commanders near Herak in north-east Dar’a governorate.²⁵²⁰
- On 17 May 2020, ISIL militants killed two unidentified pro-GoS militants in the towns of al-Jizah and al-Nimr. On 18 May, ISIS assassinated a member of the SAA 15th Division in south-eastern Dar’a governorate.²⁵²¹
- On 12 July 2020, unknown gunmen killed Abu Bakr al-Hassan, a member of the Dar’a Central Committee and former leader of the Free Syrian Army, in Jasim.²⁵²²
- On 25 August 2020, a girl was killed in a drive-by shooting in Jasim.²⁵²³
- On 10 September 2020, a civilian was killed in a drive-by shooting in Jasim.²⁵²⁴
- On 12 September 2020, two civilians were injured in a drive-by shooting in Shaykh Miskin.²⁵²⁵
- On 14 March 2021 – ISIS militant killed an SAA officer in al-Harak (Izra district).²⁵²⁶

As Sanamayn district (Sub-districts: As Sanamayn, Ghabagheb, Massimiyyeh)

²⁵¹³ International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, Syria, February 2021, [url](#)

²⁵¹⁴ ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 - March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁵¹⁵ International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, Syria, March 2021, [url](#)

²⁵¹⁶ SOHR, Daraa in six months: Attacks and assassination attempts rise as security chaos continues, 2 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁵¹⁷ 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 (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 6-12 January 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²⁵¹⁸ Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 6-12 January 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²⁵¹⁹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 15 - 28, 2020, 30 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁵²⁰ ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 15 - 28, 2020, 30 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁵²¹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 13-26, 2020, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁵²² ISW, Syria Situation Report: July 7-21, 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁵²³ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵²⁴ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵²⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵²⁶ ISW, Syria situation report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

- 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.²⁵²⁷ At least three civilians (including an imam) were killed, and several others were injured.²⁵²⁸
- On 19 May 2020 attackers identified as ISIL gunmen fired on two members of the SAA 7th Division in Kafr Shams in northern Dar'a.²⁵²⁹

Civilian casualties

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	9	14	18	13
February	7	22	20	13
March	24	18	13	18
April	13	6		
May	22	17		
June	18	16		
July	32	28		
August	22	28		
September	7	11		
October	20	21		
November	15	19		
December	13	17		
Total	202	217	51	44

Figure 48. Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Dar'a governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2020, Dar'a governorate had between 202 (VDC data)²⁵³⁰ and 217 civilian fatalities (SNHR data)²⁵³¹ and. Most civilian fatalities were documented in July and August 2020. In the first three months of 2021, SNHR recorded 44 civilian fatalities in Dar'a governorate, while VDC recorded 51 civilian fatalities during the same period (See Figure 48).

²⁵²⁷ SOHR, Fierce clashes erupt in Al-Sanamayn as regime forces storm the city using heavy weapons, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁵²⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 13-15

²⁵²⁹ ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 13-26, 2020, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁵³⁰ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

²⁵³¹ Based on data extracted from monthly reports on civilian casualties published by SNHR. See: 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

March 2021's UNOCHA Humanitarian Needs Overview indicates that 10 years of conflict have left 15 % of residential properties uninhabitable in Dar'a city, and around 40 % of the water, sewage and irrigation substantially damaged in Dar'a city²⁵³². Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Dar'a governorate, 32.2 % of the population was living in damaged buildings.²⁵³³

In December 2019 the WHO published a study on public hospital capacity in Syria indicating there were seven public hospitals in Dar'a governorate, out of which one was fully functional (Dar'a city²⁵³⁴), five were partially functioning and one was not functioning (al-Hirak²⁵³⁵).²⁵³⁶ By 2019, six out of the seven public hospitals were partially damaged, and one had not suffered damage. Dar'a had the lowest percentage (38 %) of available beds in functional hospitals in the country - 311, versus the original capacity - 810 (measured mainly in Jassem hospital, Nawa hospital, and the Dar'a national hospital).²⁵³⁷ UNOCHA reported that the 'largest ratio of non-functional primary health care centres to population' found in various governorates includes Dar'a.²⁵³⁸

The poor hospital infrastructure in Dar'a has suffered further pressure as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to ETANA's April 2021 report, Dar'a governorate is experiencing a major coronavirus spike, and doctors struggle with poor infrastructure and lack of basic medical equipment.²⁵³⁹ During 2020, the UN Security Council had already reported an increase of cases and insufficient facilities to respond to all suspected cases across Syria, with surgeries being suspended and wards adapted to receive COVID-19 patients.²⁵⁴⁰

In February 2019, International Crisis Group reported that since Assad's retaking of Dar'a in 2018, education, medical and economic resources had been depleted by the conflict and were slow to recover, despite the presence of the state.²⁵⁴¹ 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.²⁵⁴²

By March 2021 in Dar'a governorate, UNMAS reported that explosive ordnance continued to cause 'injuries and death, limits safe access to services and impedes the delivery of humanitarian aid', preventing safe access to and use of residential areas and key infrastructure (roads, schools, health centres, agricultural land, and settlements). UNMAS notes that exact data collection on the topic is difficult due to limited access to the contaminated areas.²⁵⁴³

The Carter Center released a report on the use of explosive weapons in southern Syria, which found that there were at least 31 518 instances of individual uses of explosive munitions across 135

²⁵³² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 19

²⁵³³ Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

²⁵³⁴ PHR, Obstruction and Denial, Health System Disparities and COVID-19 in Daraa, Syria, December 2020, [url](#), p. 5

²⁵³⁵ PHR, Obstruction and Denial, Health System Disparities and COVID-19 in Daraa, Syria, December 2020, [url](#), p. 17

²⁵³⁶ WHO, Health Resources and Services Availability Monitoring System, HeRAMS Annual Report, January - December 2019, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2020, [url](#), p. 5

²⁵³⁷ WHO, Health Resources and Services Availability Monitoring System, HeRAMS Annual Report, January - December 2019, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2020, [url](#), pp. 12, 14-15

²⁵³⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 25

²⁵³⁹ Etana Syria, Syria Military Brief: South Syria, 15 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁴⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), para. 3

²⁵⁴¹ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-9

²⁵⁴² OHCHR, Press briefing note on Dar'a, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁵⁴³ UNMAS, Syria, March 2021, [url](#)

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 M5.²⁵⁴⁴

Displacement and return

From January to December 2020, UNOCHA recorded 1 161 IDP movements to locations in Dar'a governorate; 1 011 individual displacements from within the province itself, and 150 from Sweida to Dar'a.²⁵⁴⁵ During the same reference period, 13 275 persons spontaneously returned to locations in Dar'a, 11 434 from within Dar'a, 1 139 from Quneitra, 576 from Sweida and 126 from Rural Damascus.²⁵⁴⁶ Spontaneous IDP return movements in Dar'a accounted for three per cent of the total returns in Syria in 2020.²⁵⁴⁷

Following the January 2021 clashes in Tafas between opposition faction's fighter and the 4th Division of the SAA, around 10 000 people left Tafas and were displaced due to fears of an attack by the SAA to the city.²⁵⁴⁸ UNOCHA recorded 291 IDP movements from or within Dar'a in February 2021.²⁵⁴⁹ No IDP movements were recorded by UNOCHA in Dar'a governorate in March 2021.²⁵⁵⁰

In terms of returns to Dar'a in 2021, UNOCHA recorded no IDP return movements in January²⁵⁵¹, 215 IDP return movements to the governorate in February²⁵⁵², and 643 IDP return movements to or within the governorate in March.²⁵⁵³

The Col reported that after capturing Dar'a in summer 2018, 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, especially humanitarian workers seen to have 'betrayed the country' for recording attacks by the GoS.²⁵⁵⁴ Arrest and detention of civilians following GoS takeover was widely documented by sources²⁵⁵⁵ and continued to be 'commonplace' in Dara'a in early 2020.²⁵⁵⁶

UNOCHA reported that 'Despite the difficult conditions confronting those IDPs who opt to return, including neighbourhoods contaminated with explosive hazards (26 % of all direct victims of explosive ordnance recorded in the past five years are IDPs); depleted livelihoods and savings; damaged,

²⁵⁴⁴ Carter Center (The), Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, Report 1 - Southern Syria: As Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates, November 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-9

²⁵⁴⁵ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, IDPs Tracking, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements, January-December 2020, last update 27 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁴⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, IDPs Tracking, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns, January-December 2020, last update 27 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁴⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p.16

²⁵⁴⁸ SNHR, The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in January 2021, 4 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 4, 9

²⁵⁴⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁵⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁵¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns. January 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁵² UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns. February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁵³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁵⁴ 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

²⁵⁵⁵ 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

²⁵⁵⁶ 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

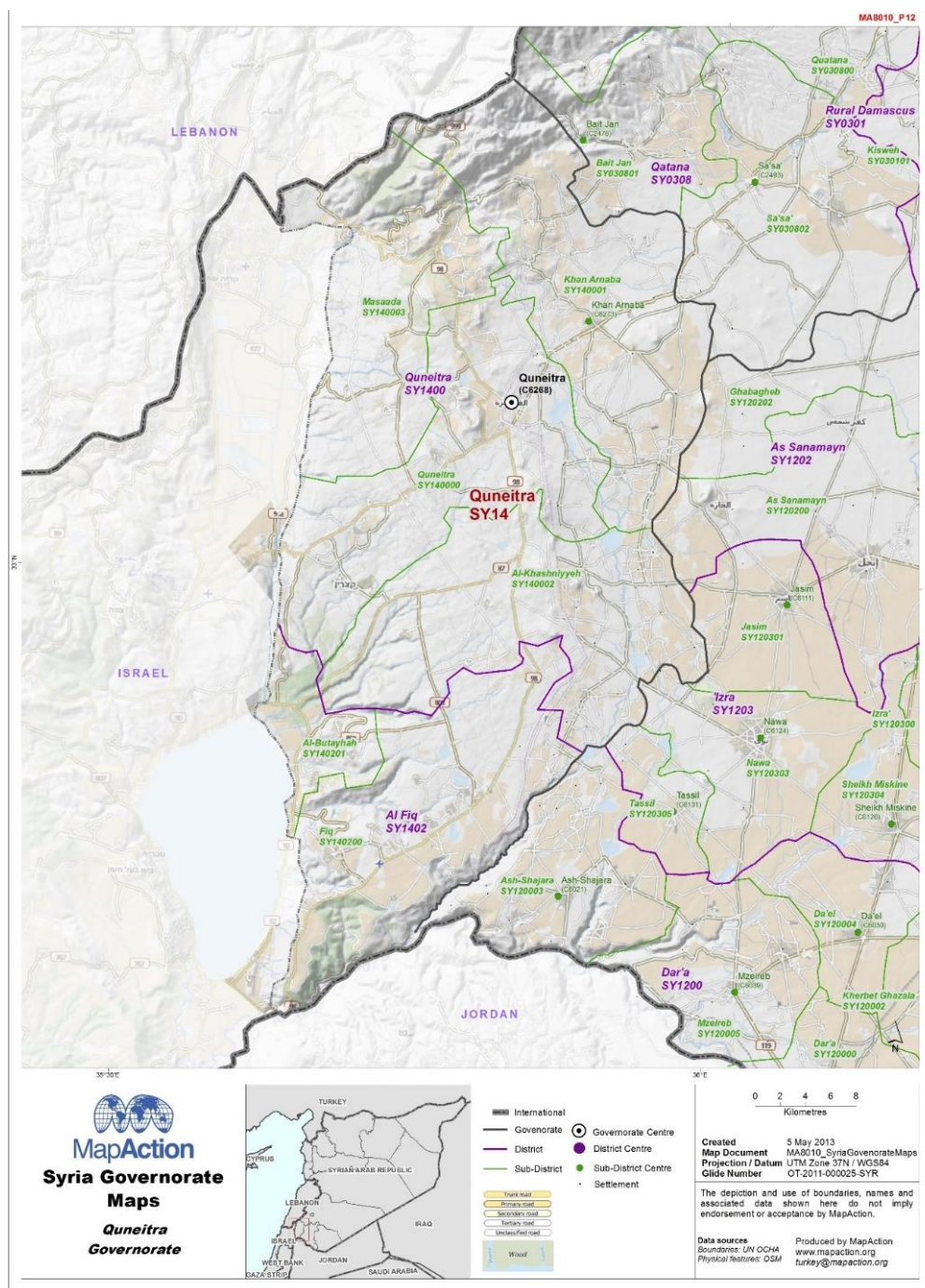
destroyed or looted properties; and limited or no access to basic services, under one million self-organized spontaneous IDP return movements have taken place since the beginning of 2018. Two-thirds of these are concentrated in just seven districts across three governorates – Dar'a, Iz'ra and As Sanamayn in Dar'a; Jebel Samen in north-western Aleppo; and Deir Ez-Zor, Abu Kamal and Al Mayadin in Deir-Ez-Zor respectively.²⁵⁵⁷

The January 2021 Col report indicated that 'In addition to the displacement and destruction, Syrians are routinely denied return to their places of origin, notably due to restrictions on access placed by the Government and fear of arrest in retaken and formerly besieged areas, in particular in Rif Damashq, Daraa, Quneitra, Homs, Hama and Aleppo.'²⁵⁵⁸

²⁵⁵⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 17

²⁵⁵⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 January 2021, [url](#), para. 43

2.13 Quneitra governorate



Map 19: © MapAction, Quneitra governorate²⁵⁵⁹

²⁵⁵⁹ MapAction, Syria Governorate Maps – Quneitra Governorate, last updated 29 July 2016, [url](http://www.mapaction.org)

2.13.1 General description of the governorate

The governorate of Quneitra (al-Qunaytirah) is situated in southern Syria, 70 km from Damascus²⁵⁶⁰, and borders Lebanon, Jordan, and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.²⁵⁶¹ 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.²⁵⁶² The city of Quneitra remained abandoned after it was destroyed by Israel in 1974²⁵⁶³ and is a part of a demilitarised buffer zone between Syrian and Israel under the supervision of UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF).²⁵⁶⁴ The new provincial administrative centre is Madinat al-Baath (Baath city).²⁵⁶⁵

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 66 600.²⁵⁶⁶ The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Quneitra governorate in 2019 at 117 000.²⁵⁶⁷ In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Quneitra governorate to be of 105 124 inhabitants.²⁵⁶⁸

As of March 2011, Syrian Arabs (Arabic speaking) constituted the largest part of the population of Quneitra.²⁵⁶⁹ According to the division along the religious lines, the population of Quneitra is largely Sunni Muslim; the religious minorities comprise the Druze²⁵⁷⁰ and Shi'a Muslims.²⁵⁷¹ The Druze reside in the town of Hader, the Syrian-controlled part of the Golan Heights.²⁵⁷²

Circassians, whose number was believed to be around 5 000 in 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.²⁵⁷³

2.13.2 Conflict background and armed actors

The governorate of Quneitra became the area of fighting in May 2013 after the FSA captured the Quneitra crossing on the Syria-Israeli border.²⁵⁷⁴ The 'Southern Front' of FSA²⁵⁷⁵, which was formed in

²⁵⁶⁰ Jamestown Foundation (The), The Battle for al-Quneitra, the "Gateway to Damascus" in: Terrorism Monitor Volume 12, Issue 5, 6 March 2014, [url](#)

²⁵⁶¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), 26 August 2014, [url](#), p. 43

²⁵⁶² MapAction, Syria Governorate Maps – Quneitra Governorate, last updated 29 July 2016, [url](#)

²⁵⁶³ AP News, Syrians celebrate retaking town near Israel-occupied Golan, 27 July 2018, [url](#)

²⁵⁶⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Al-Qunaytirah, n.d., [url](#)

²⁵⁶⁵ Reuters, Syrian insurgents attack government-held town near Israel, 20 November 2014, [url](#)

²⁵⁶⁶ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, General Census, The census housing and population results 2004 on governorates level, n.d., [url](#)

²⁵⁶⁷ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

²⁵⁶⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

²⁵⁶⁹ Austria, Federal Ministry of the Interior & Austrian Ministry of Defence and Sports, Atlas Syria, 2015, [url](#), p. 15

²⁵⁷⁰ Austria, Federal Ministry of the Interior & Austrian Ministry of Defence and Sports, Atlas Syria, 2015, [url](#), p. 14

²⁵⁷¹ MEI/Etana Syria, Manufacturing Division: The Assad Regime and Minorities in South-West Syria, March 2020, [url](#), p. 13-14. The source mentions the presence of Shia Muslims in the villages of Kwdana and Saida al-Jolan.

²⁵⁷² Al Jazeera, Violence hits Druze village Hader in Syria's Quneitra, 3 November 2017, [url](#)

²⁵⁷³ 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

²⁵⁷⁴ 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](#)

²⁵⁷⁵ 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 that were located in Quneitra, see FSA Platform, Free Syrian Army Forces [website], n.d. [url](#).

February 2014²⁵⁷⁶ as an ‘umbrella organization for most armed opposition groups in the provinces of Dara’a and Quneitra’²⁵⁷⁷ had claimed to have 30 000 fighters in the provinces of Quneitra, Dar’a, and Sweida.²⁵⁷⁸ In April 2014, FSA gained several strategic victories in Quneitra²⁵⁷⁹, such as a takeover of the Eastern Tel Ahmar Hills.²⁵⁸⁰ In the end of August 2014, FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra reportedly seized the Quneitra crossing²⁵⁸¹; clashes between GoS and the armed opposition intensified in September 2014, particularly in Madinat al-Baath.²⁵⁸²

After the seizure of the city of Quneitra by the armed opposition, 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 anti-GoS armed groups.²⁵⁸³ During 2014, GoS continued aerial bombardments on the armed opposition, including in densely populated areas of Quneitra.²⁵⁸⁴ In June 2015, FSA started an offensive against GoS forces, claiming that Jabhat al-Nusra was kept away from the operation.²⁵⁸⁵

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 the governmental forces in Syria. According to the agreement, parts of the provinces of Quneitra and Dar’a were included into the 4th zone of de-escalation.²⁵⁸⁶ In May and June 2018, GoS forces, backed by Russian airstrikes, started retaking the territories of Quneitra²⁵⁸⁷, which caused intense fighting.²⁵⁸⁸ Under a deal agreed between anti-GoS armed groups and pro-government forces in July 2018, rebels and their families were evacuated from Quneitra to Idlib.²⁵⁸⁹ By mid-August 2018, GoS had taken under its control the areas held formerly by anti-GoS armed groups and ISIL in Quneitra as well as other parts of southern Syria.²⁵⁹⁰ In October 2018, the Quneitra crossing reopened for the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) troops.²⁵⁹¹

As of March 2021, Quneitra was under GoS control²⁵⁹² (see also [Map 4](#)).

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

As noted by Gregory Waters in June 2019, the 1st Corp of the SAA (which was formed to serve the first line of defence against Israel since 1980s and had stations of its 61st and 90th Infantry Brigades along the Golan Heights²⁵⁹³) remained almost entirely deployed in the governorates of Quneitra and Dar’a.²⁵⁹⁴ The deployments of SAA units in Quneitra consisted of three battalions of the 1st Corps’ 7th

²⁵⁷⁶ BBC News, Syria conflict: Rebels launch Quneitra offensive, 17 June 2015, [url](#); Lister, C., The Free Syrian Army: A decentralized insurgent brand, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings, November 2016, [url](#), p. 15

²⁵⁷⁷ Syria Direct, Protests in Daraa: Russia absent as Damascus weaponizes ‘tribal schisms,’ 5 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁵⁷⁸ BBC News, Syria conflict: Rebels launch Quneitra offensive, 17 June 2015, [url](#)

²⁵⁷⁹ Lister, C., The Free Syrian Army: A decentralized insurgent brand, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings, November 2016, [url](#), p. 15

²⁵⁸⁰ Syria Direct, ‘Almost complete control’ for rebels in southern Quneitra, 27 April 2014, [url](#)

²⁵⁸¹ DW, Syrian rebels announce seizure of Golan Heights border crossing, 27 August 2014, [url](#)

²⁵⁸² ICRC, Syria: Emergency relief for thousands displaced by fighting in Quneitra, 15 September 2014, [url](#)

²⁵⁸³ Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

²⁵⁸⁴ ACAPS, Regional Analysis, Syria, Strategic Needs Analysis Project, Q4 2014, 1 October - 31 December 2014, [url](#), p. 47

²⁵⁸⁵ BBC News, Syria conflict: Rebels launch Quneitra offensive, 17 June 2015, [url](#)

²⁵⁸⁶ Al Jazeera, Syria’s ‘de-escalation zones’ explained, 4 July 2017, [url](#)

²⁵⁸⁷ Reuters, Syrian flag raised in Quneitra on Syrian side of Golan Heights, 26 July 2018, [url](#)

²⁵⁸⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 5

²⁵⁸⁹ Al Jazeera, Syria’s war: Evacuation of rebels from Quneitra begins, 21 July 2018, [url](#)

²⁵⁹⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p.19

²⁵⁹¹ Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

²⁵⁹² Based on reading of maps in ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 26 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁹³ Holliday, J., Syrian Army, Doctrinal Order of Battle, Institute for the Study of War, February 2013, [url](#), p. 8

²⁵⁹⁴ Waters, G., The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army’s Destruction and Rebirth, MEI, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

Division 90th Brigade (3rd Battalion, deployed to Hader, Hassan Battalion and 3rd Battalion 4th Company) and the 2nd Corps' 14th Special Forces Division (36th Regiment), deployed to Jabal al-Sheikh.²⁵⁹⁵

As reported by the UN Secretary-General in June 2020, UNDOF observed 'the continuous presence' of the Syrian Armed Forces in the separation area, engaged in clearance of unexploded ordnance and training as well as staffing checkpoints, including in the proximity of the towns of al-Baath and Khan Arnaba and along the main road that connects Quneitra to Damascus.²⁵⁹⁶

According to Gregory Waters, SAA started to conscribe into its units reconciled rebels from the governorates of Damascus, Dar'a, and Quneitra since 2016.²⁵⁹⁷ Al-Monitor reported in June 2019 the GoS was recruiting former FSA members from Quneitra, among other Syrian governorates, to fight in northern Syria, reportedly transferring the fighters to the northern countryside of Hama and Idlib since early 2019.²⁵⁹⁸ During a meeting with the DIS in January 2020, Gregory Waters listed Quneitra among the areas, in which the recruitment was taken place 'more intensively'.²⁵⁹⁹

Iranian and Iranian-backed armed groups

Since the re-establishment of GoS control over southern Syria in 2018, opposition websites reported on a growing presence of pro-Iranian forces and their incorporation into SAA units in proximity to Syria's border with Israel and Jordan.²⁶⁰⁰ In September 2019, the towns of Madinat al-Baath and Khan Arnaba were reported as Hezbollah's headquarters.²⁶⁰¹ As reported by SOHR in February 2020, the stations of the Iranian-backed militias were found in the northern part of Quneitra, while local commanders of these militias were recruiting youth of al-Habariyah, Sultanah, and other towns in the proximity to the Golan Heights through dignitaries of the area.²⁶⁰²

The size of Iranian forces and/or Iranian proxies in Syria is debated.²⁶⁰³ In March 2020, researcher Mazen Ezzi reported that Hezbollah had one 'large fixed' military base in Quneitra, which served as a training centre for recruits and an ammunition depot.²⁶⁰⁴ As of January 2021, Turkey-based research institute Jusoor for Studies mapped in Quneitra five 'military sites' kept by Iran and seven 'military sites' established by Hezbollah.²⁶⁰⁵ In April 2021, Israel-based Alma Research and Education Centre reported on six pro-Iranian militias, present in Quneitra in 2019-2020, listing Sunni militias groups of *Majmuat 220* (Group 220), active in Madinat al-Baath and the surrounding areas, *Majmuat Ahmad Kabul* (Ahmad Kabul Group) in Khan Arnaba and the northern countryside of Quneitra, *Liwa' Suqur al-Quneitra* (Suqur al-Quneitra Brigade) in Jabah and Khan Arnaba, *Dir al-Quneitra* (Shield of al-Quneitra) in Madinat al-Baath and the surrounding areas, and *Majmuat Muhad Nasar* (Muhad Nasar Group) in Jubata al-Khashab and Druze militias of *Majmuat Basil Hasun* (Basil Hasun Group), reportedly active

²⁵⁹⁵ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, data as of 17 March 2020, [url](#). No changes regarding the deployment of SAA in Quneitra were made by the source in 2020.

²⁵⁹⁶ UN Security Council, United Nations Disengagement Observer Force: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2020/506, 8 June 2020, [url](#), para. 7

²⁵⁹⁷ Waters, G., The Growing Role of Reconciled Rebels in Syria, International Review, 21 April 2018, [url](#)

²⁵⁹⁸ Al Monitor, Ex-FSA fighters recruited by Damascus to fight opposition in northern Syria, 13 June 2019, [url](#)

²⁵⁹⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria, Military Service, Report based on a fact-finding mission to Istanbul and Beirut (17-25 February 2020), May 2020, [url](#), p. 46

²⁶⁰⁰ 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, MEMRI, 4 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁰¹ SOHR, The Lebanese Hezbollah continues its efforts to bring the province of Al-Quneitra under its full control, 10 September 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁰² SOHR, Buying loyalty: Iran-backed militias offer young people in Al-Quneitra financial incentives, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁰³ Tokmajyan, A., How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, July 2020, [url](#), p. 16

²⁶⁰⁴ Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, EUI, 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 9

²⁶⁰⁵ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

in Hader. Furthermore, the source stated that ‘activists’ of Sunni militia *Liwa’ 313* Brigade, located in Dar’a, might be also scattered around Quneitra.²⁶⁰⁶

Israel

In 2020, Israel was frequently carrying out airstrikes, particularly against (pro)-Iranian forces and Hezbollah.²⁶⁰⁷ In October 2020, special forces of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) reportedly destroyed two military positions on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights ‘in response to the Syrian military’s growing presence in the buffer zone’.²⁶⁰⁸

Russia

Russian military police were deployed along the Golan Heights border in August of 2018, following the recapture of Quneitra by the GoS.²⁶⁰⁹ 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 IAF strikes on Syrian targets.²⁶¹⁰ In August 2020, a Russian military police unit was reportedly patrolling observation posts on the Golan Heights.²⁶¹¹ Jusoor for Studies mapped two Russian ‘military sites’ in Quneitra as of 5 January 2021.²⁶¹² Furthermore, in 2020, Russia was reportedly recruiting Quneitra male inhabitants to fight in Libya.²⁶¹³

UNDOF

UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) troops returned to the Golan Heights after the Quneitra crossing was reopened for UNDOF in October 2018.²⁶¹⁴ As reported by the UN Secretary-General in March 2021, Israel started restricting the movement of UNDOF and Observer Group Golan personnel through the Quneitra crossing since early March 2020.²⁶¹⁵

ISIL and other non-state armed groups

As reported by the Al-Masdar News (AMN) in October 2019, FSA, ISIL, and HTS (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra²⁶¹⁶) had ‘active sleeper cells’ in the governorate of Dar’a and were carrying out ‘sporadic attacks against the Syrian military and their allies’ in the governorates of Quneitra, Dar’a, and Sweida.²⁶¹⁷ ISIL was reported to maintain ‘its capabilities’ in Quneitra as of the first quarter of 2020²⁶¹⁸ and, while the number of attacks claimed by the group decreased between February and mid-April 2020, it then attacked military convoys in Quneitra, as well as in Dar’a and Sweida in the second quarter of 2020.²⁶¹⁹

²⁶⁰⁶ Alma Research and Education Center, The Iranian Shiite Axis Expansion – Establishment of Mercenary Local Militias in Southern Syria, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 9, 19-22

²⁶⁰⁷ RFE/RL, Pro-Iranian Fighters Reported Killed in Israeli Strikes in Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Syria says it responded to ‘Israeli aggression’, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁰⁸ Times of Israel (The), IDF destroys 2 Syrian military positions in rare cross-border raid – report, 14 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁰⁹ Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

²⁶¹⁰ TASS, Russian military police ensure peace in Syria’s Quneitra province, chief says, 23 September 2019, [url](#)

²⁶¹¹ Russia-Islamic world, Russian military police checked observation posts on the Golan heights in Syria, 31 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁶¹² Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁶¹³ Al Monitor, Why Russia’s grip on Syrian military is weaker than it seems, 21 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁶¹⁴ Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

²⁶¹⁵ UN Security Council, United Nations Disengagement Observer Force: report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/282, 22 March 2021, [url](#), para. 18

²⁶¹⁶ CISAS, Stanford University, n.d., [url](#)

²⁶¹⁷ AMN News, ISIS ambushes Syrian Army vehicle carrying several soldiers in Daraa, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁶¹⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2020 – March 21, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 52

²⁶¹⁹ UN Security Council, Twenty-sixth 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/2020/717, 23 July 2020, [url](#), para. 16

As expressed by Navvar Shaban, the Information Unit Manager and Military Expert at Omran Center for Strategic Studies in his interview with DIS in October 2020, popular resistance groups, consisting of former rebel fighters who either did not reconcile with the GoS in 2018 or who reconciled but are still fighting GoS covertly, were present in rural areas of Quneitra; however, according to the expert, these groups 'have not been operating and have not claimed responsibility for any attacks since May 2020'.²⁶²⁰ An international organisation interviewed by DIS, reported on the presence of ISIL and Al-Qaeda in Quneitra.²⁶²¹

2.13.3. Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

In January 2020, the CoI reported on a 'fragile' security situation in the governorates, in which the reconciliation process between the GoS and former opposition members 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 'civilians 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.'²⁶²² Syria Direct noted that arrests of opposition members and confiscation of their properties by GoS in the aftermath of the region's recapture in summer 2018 increased popular discontent.²⁶²³

In 2020, the GoS was reported to impose reconciliation terms with former opposition fighters in southern Syria by forcing them to join the Fourth Division or, otherwise, deporting them to northern Syria, which caused the escalation of violence in the governorates of Dar'a and Quneitra.²⁶²⁴ In April 2020, SOHR reported that GoS forces arrested 'a number of civilians and youths wanted by the security services' in Al-Nasiriyah town in Quneitra district; a day before the arrest, SOHR documented a targeted killing of a GoS soldier by unknown gunmen in the same location.²⁶²⁵ In an interview with DIS in February 2020, a 'western diplomat working on Syria' noted that 'the harassment of families of evaders and deserters is more prevalent in former opposition-controlled areas, such as Ghouta, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Dar'a, Quneitra [...]'.²⁶²⁶

According to an international security organisation interviewed by DIS in October 2020, an increase in small arms fire attacks, IEDs and VBIEDs attacks against GoS forces was recorded in Quneitra in 2020. These attacks were sometimes claimed by ISIL while others have been attributed by the source to former opposition fighters.²⁶²⁷

²⁶²⁰ DIS, Syria – Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 13-14, 53

²⁶²¹ Denmark, DIS, Syria – Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, December 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²⁶²² UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/43/57, 28 January 2020, [url](#), para. 72

²⁶²³ Syria Direct (The), Protests in Daraa: Russia absent as Damascus weaponizes 'tribal schisms,' 5 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁶²⁴ Al-Ghazi, S., Insecurity in Southern Syria: Tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda (January – February 2021), ORSAM, March 2021, [url](#), p. 8

²⁶²⁵ SOHR, Regime forces storm village in rural Al-Quneitra, arresting several civilians, 17 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁶²⁶ Denmark, DIS, Syria, Military Service, Report based on a fact-finding mission to Istanbul and Beirut (17-25 February 2020), May 2020, [url](#), p. 85

²⁶²⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria – Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, December 2020, [url](#), p. 41

During the reference period of this report, security checkpoints located in Quneitra as well as the GoS military and police personnel were targeted, without any group claiming responsibility for the attacks.²⁶²⁸

In December 2020, the UN-Secretary General noted that ‘insecurity and administrative restrictions continued to prevent sustained access to areas formerly controlled by non-State armed groups’ in the southern part of Syria, including to parts of Quneitra.²⁶²⁹ The situation remained unchanged as of April 2021.²⁶³⁰

In 2020, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) continued conducting airstrikes on territories in Quneitra, targeting military positions of GoS forces and forces loyal to GoS²⁶³¹ as well as pro-Iranian²⁶³² and Hezbollah forces.²⁶³³ The airstrikes continued in 2021.²⁶³⁴

Security incidents

According to ACLED data, there were 56 security incidents recorded in Quneitra governorate, of whom 19 were coded as battles, 35 explosions/remote violence and 2 incidents of violence against civilians.

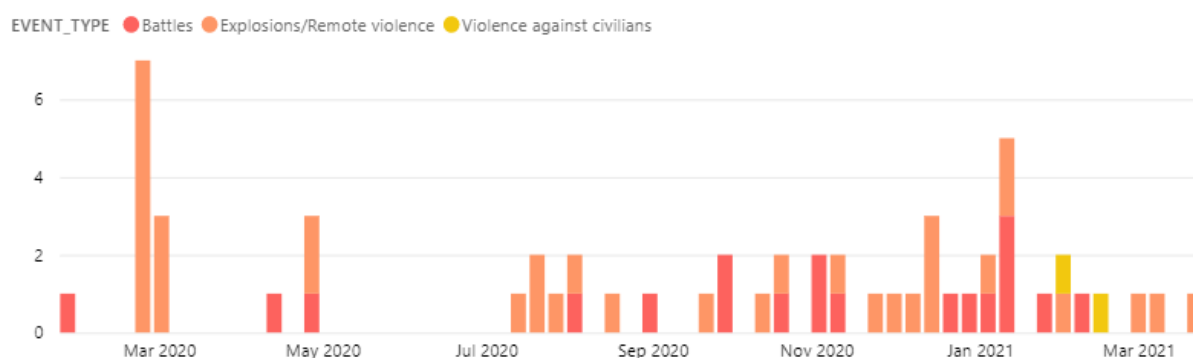


Figure 49: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Quneitra governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data²⁶³⁵

²⁶²⁸ SOHR, Gunmen attack regime ‘Air-force Intelligence’ vehicle in rural al-Quneitra southern Syria, 29 January 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Al-Quneitra countryside: Regime security agent killed and former opposition leader injured in two separate incidents, 9 November 2020, [url](#); Syrian Observer (The), Two Attacks Target Assad Forces in Quneitra Countryside, 19 January 2021, [url](#); SOHR, Al-Quneitra: Unknown gunmen assassinate State Security agent in countryside, 1 January 2021, [url](#); SOHR, Armed attack: Member of Al-Quneitra Council assassinated in Al-Baath city, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁶²⁹ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020): Report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/390, 22 April 2021, [url](#), para. 33

²⁶³⁰ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020): report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/160, 18 February 2021, [url](#), para. 33

²⁶³¹ MEMO, Israel bombs Syrian targets near Damascus, 6 February 2020, [url](#); Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 2 – 9 March 2020, n.d., [url](#), p. 3; Asharq Al-Awsat, Israeli Airstrikes on Central Syria Kill, Injure Regime Soldiers, 5 March 2020, [url](#); AMN News, Israeli helicopters strike Syrian army posts in Quneitra, 25 July 2020 [url](#); Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 3 – 9 August 2020, n.d., [url](#), pp. 1, 3; France24, Israeli jets strike targets in Syria in retaliation for Golan Heights attack, 4 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁶³² SOHR, New Israeli attack in rural Damascus and Quneitra: Eight non-Syrian militiamen killed, and rocket depots and vehicles destroyed in airstrikes on positions of pro-Iran militias and Lebanese Hezbollah, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁶³³ Garda World, Syria: IDF airstrikes target suspected Hezbollah positions in Quneitra province on July 24/update 1, 24 July 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Al-Quneitra: Three Hezbollah-backed militiamen killed in Israeli attacks on school in northern countryside, 21 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁶³⁴ AP News, Syrian military says Israeli strikes in the country’s south, 3 February 2021, [url](#); Al-Jazeera, Syria says it responded to ‘Israeli aggression,’ 4 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁶³⁵ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

Quneitra governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Al Fiq	1	-	-
Quneitra	19	35	2
Total	19	35	2

Figure 50: Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Quneitra governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

Almost all security incidents were recorded in the district of Quneitra, with only 1 security incident recorded in the district of Al Fiq (see Figure 50).

Illustrative security incidents

- In February 2020, a person, who was defined by SOHR as a member of the 'Syrian resistance to liberate Golan' and identified as a person working at a police station by the Quneitra governor, was killed in an Israeli drone strike in Hader.²⁶³⁶
- In October 2020, SOHR reported on an IAF attack on a school that reportedly hosted groups loyal to Hezbollah and Iranian forces in Al-Hurriyah village in the northern part of Quneitra, in the result of which three militiamen of groups related to Hezbollah were reportedly killed.²⁶³⁷ As reported by SANA, the attack damaged the school's roof, doors, and windows.²⁶³⁸
- In November 2020, as reported by SOHR, a person who worked in 'Al-Jisr security detachment' of Military Security was found killed by gunshot in Quneitra countryside; the same month, 'a former opposition leader' who had reportedly joined the Military Security, was injured by unknown gunmen in Mumtana village.²⁶³⁹
- In November 2020, a 'regime member' was reportedly killed in an IED explosion near the village of Jaba in the district of Quneitra.²⁶⁴⁰
- In December 2020, an IED planted in proximity to the building of the Air-Force Intelligence branch and recruitment centre in Khan Arnaba killed two members of the personnel.²⁶⁴¹
- In February 2021, a member of Quneitra Council was killed by unknown gunmen in Madinat al-Baath.²⁶⁴²
- In April 2021, a civilian was reportedly killed in a vehicle-borne IED explosion in the area of Rasm al-Karm of Umm Batina municipality, Quneitra district.²⁶⁴³

²⁶³⁶ Al Jazeera, 1 killed in Israel drone attack on Golan Heights: Syrian state TV, 27 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁶³⁷ SOHR, Al-Quneitra: Three Hezbollah-backed militiamen killed in Israeli attacks on school in northern countryside, 21 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁶³⁸ SANA, Material damage to school in Quneitra due to Israeli missile attack, 21 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁶³⁹ SOHR, Al-Quneitra countryside: Regime security agent killed and former opposition leader injured in two separate incidents, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁴⁰ SOHR, Al-Quneitra countryside: Regime security agent killed and former opposition leader injured in two separate incidents, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁴¹ SOHR, IED attack: Explosion kills two Air-Force intelligence agents in al-Quneitra countryside, 14 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁴² SOHR, Armed attack: Member of Al-Quneitra Council assassinated in Al-Baath city, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁴³ SANA, A civilian martyred in explosive device blast in Quneitra countryside, 18 April 2021, [url](#)

Civilian casualties

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	-	-	-	-
February	-	1	1	-
March	-	-	1	2
April	1	-		
May	2	-		
June	-	-		
July	-	-		
August	-	1		
September	-	1		
October	-	-		
November	-	-		
December	-	-		
Total	3	3	2	2

Figure 51: Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Quneitra governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2020, Quneitra governorate both SNHR²⁶⁴⁴ and VDC²⁶⁴⁵ recorded 3 civilian fatalities each. In the first three months of 2021, both sources recorded 2 civilian fatalities in Quneitra governorate (See Figure 51).

Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war

In its 2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview, UNOCHA listed Quneitra as one of the governorates with the areas contaminated with explosive ordnance.²⁶⁴⁶ Syrian Civil Defence (SCD) was reported to be engaged in clearance of unexploded submunitions in Quneitra 'over the past two years'.²⁶⁴⁷ Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Quneitra governorate, 19 % of the population was living in damaged buildings.²⁶⁴⁸

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 in Quneitra between July 2013 and May 2019. The use of shells of unknown type accounted for 58 % of

²⁶⁴⁴ 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

²⁶⁴⁵ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

²⁶⁴⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 27

²⁶⁴⁷ Mine Action Review, Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants 2020, A Report by Mine Action Review for the Second Review Conference of the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 167

²⁶⁴⁸ Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

the instances, followed by air-dropped munitions, which constituted 22 % of the instances; landmines, improvised explosive devices (IED), and unexploded ordnances (UXO) were used in 35 instances. Territorially, 58 % of the instances of explosive munitions use was registered in Khan Arnaba sub-district, with the towns of Mashara, Jbata al-Khashab, Madinat al-Baath, and Khan Arnaba constituting 35 % of the instances of the use of explosive munitions in this sub-district. High figures were also recorded in the cities of Quneitra and Hamediyeh; 38 % of all the instances were registered across 48 communities of the governorate.²⁶⁴⁹

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 %.²⁶⁵⁰

According to UNOCHA, there were no cases of IDP movements to or within Quneitra governorate in 2020. In 2019 UNOCHA reported on 39 cases of internal displacement to or within Quneitra, which revealed a sharp contrast to 24 787 cases of IDP movements to/within the governorate having been recorded by UNOCHA in 2018 and 21 801 cases in 2017. Similarly, UNOCHA recorded no cases of return to/within Quneitra in 2020, compared to 8 583 cases registered in 2019, 42 751 cases registered in 2018, and 665 cases recorded in 2017.²⁶⁵¹ In 2020, UNOCHA reported that 1 100 return movements were recorded from Quneitra to Dar'a governorate.²⁶⁵²

In the first three months of 2021, UNOHCA did not record any IDP movements or return movements for Quneitra governorate.²⁶⁵³

²⁶⁴⁹ Carter Center (the), Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, Report 1, Southern Syria: As Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates, November 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-10

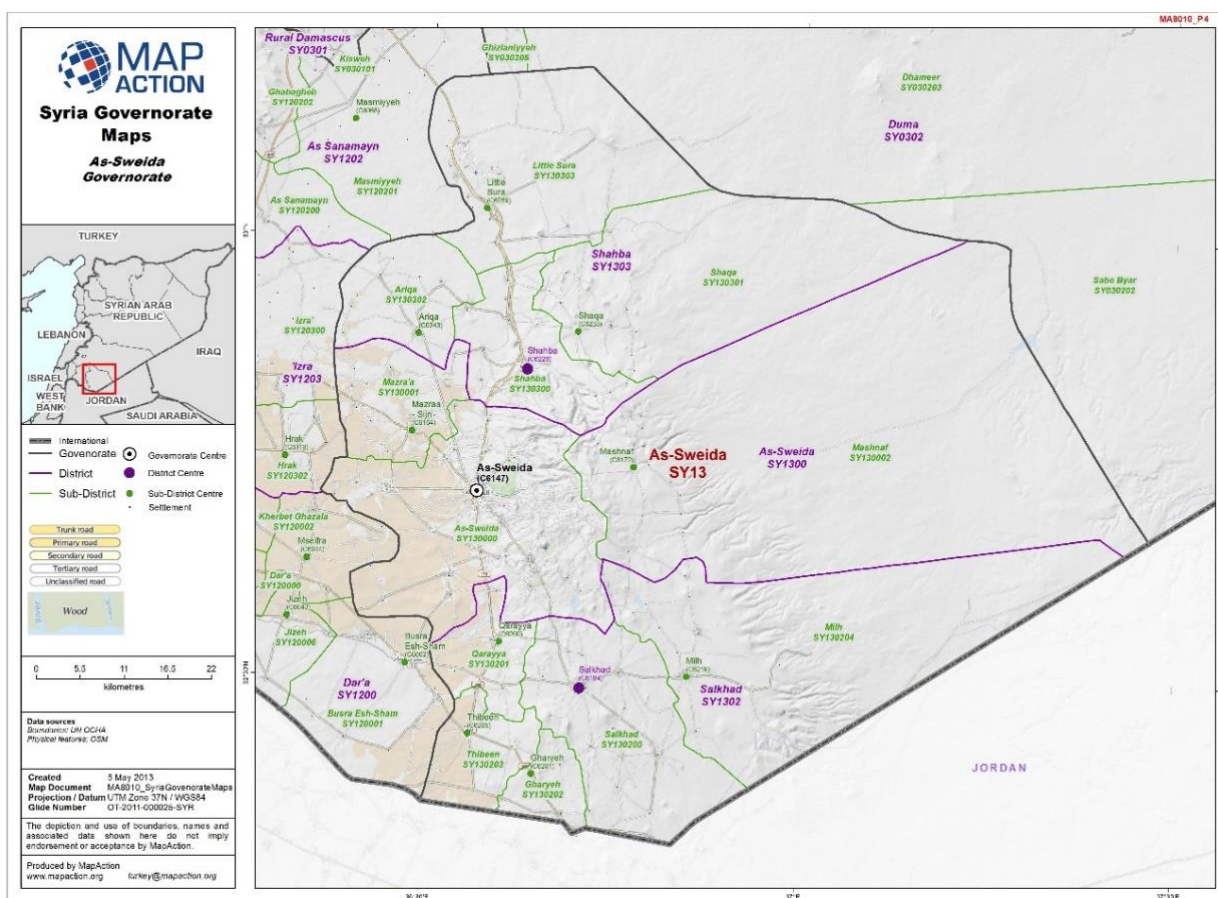
²⁶⁵⁰ World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), pp. 25, 27-28

²⁶⁵¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data for Jan-2020 [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], updated 1 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁵² UNOCHA, IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data, 2 March 2021 [url](#)

²⁶⁵³ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements, February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns, February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns, January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

2.14 Sweida governorate



Map 20: © MapAction, Sweida governorate²⁶⁵⁴

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 Daraa and Rural Damascus and an international border with Jordan to its south.²⁶⁵⁵ Sweida governorate comprises three districts: As-Sweida, Shahba and Salkhad, which each have sub-districts.²⁶⁵⁶

- As-Sweida sub-districts: As-Sweida [governorate capital²⁶⁵⁷], Mazraa and Mashnaf;
- Salkhad sub-districts: Salkhad, Milh, Qarayya, Gharyeh and Thibeen;
- Shahba sub-districts: Shahba, Ariqa, Shaqa and Little Sura.²⁶⁵⁸

²⁶⁵⁴ MapAction, Sweida Governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

²⁶⁵⁵ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), 26 August 2014, [url](#), p. 9

²⁶⁵⁶ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), 26 August 2014, [url](#), p. 40

²⁶⁵⁷ UNOCHA, 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²⁶⁵⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), 26 August 2014, [url](#), pp. 40-41

The Syrian Bureau of Statistics estimated that the population in the governorate of Sweida in 2019 was 530 000.²⁶⁵⁹ In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Sweida governorate to be of 380 495 inhabitants.²⁶⁶⁰

The Druze are an ethnicity that exist both as a religious sect and as a tribe.²⁶⁶¹ The governorate of Sweida is mainly populated by the Druze minority in Syria.²⁶⁶² Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab (Jabal al-Druze) region of Sweida governorate.²⁶⁶³ 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.²⁶⁶⁴ Throughout the war in Syria, the Druze population in Sweida has been treated with 'a degree of caution' by the GoS as a 'politically sensitive minority', and large-scale mass arrests and bombings have largely been avoided in Sweida.²⁶⁶⁵

2.14.2 Conflict background and armed actors

Historically, the GoS has not exercised its power directly in Sweida as in other governorates, it had to mainly rely on local factions sponsored by intelligence agencies and security branches.²⁶⁶⁶ During the conflict, the governorate of Sweida has officially remained under government control, however, much of its military and civil authority is from political and military factions within the governorate and preoccupied with defending it from outside attackers.²⁶⁶⁷ Sweida remained neutral during the initial uprising in Syria and during the ensuing conflict.²⁶⁶⁸ Its neutrality was enhanced by an implicit religious *hurum* (excommunication), which dissuaded Druze males from joining any of the parties in the conflict, including conducting their obligatory military service outside Sweida governorate.²⁶⁶⁹

Sweida has largely avoided heavy attacks²⁶⁷⁰ and artillery shelling during the war.²⁶⁷¹ 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.²⁶⁷² 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.²⁶⁷³

²⁶⁵⁹ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

²⁶⁶⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

²⁶⁶¹ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²⁶⁶² Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²⁶⁶³ USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 3

²⁶⁶⁴ 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. The report cites the Decision Support Office in Sweida Province as a source for these percentages.

²⁶⁶⁵ Edwards, M., 'Security chaos': Kidnappings and clashes threaten relative peace in Syria's Sweida, MEE, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁶⁶ Rollins, T., Kidnappings, cross-border clashes threaten increasingly fragile status quo in Syria's South, MEI, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁶⁷ 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](#)

²⁶⁶⁸ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 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](#)

²⁶⁶⁹ Al-Jabassini, A. and Mazen Ezzi, Tribal "Sulh" and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, European University Institute, 22 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

²⁶⁷⁰ MEE, 'Security chaos': Kidnappings and clashes threaten relative peace in Syria's Sweida, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁷¹ 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

²⁶⁷² Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 41

²⁶⁷³ 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

On 25 July 2018, coordinated attacks and suicide bombings by ISIL took place in the city of Sweida and in eastern rural Sweida.²⁶⁷⁴ In response, the GoS launched an offensive in rural Sweida on 6 August 2018 to force out the ISIL fighters from the region.²⁶⁷⁵ Syrian forces with Russian air support, conducted over 35 airstrikes along the desert area that ISIL controlled at that time in east Sweida.²⁶⁷⁶ The offensive ended officially on 19 November 2018, after clearing the al-Safa plateau in the eastern Badia desert.²⁶⁷⁷

As of March 2021, Sweida governorate was under GoS control²⁶⁷⁸ (see also [Map 4](#)).

Although compulsory military service 'extends to Druze community'²⁶⁷⁹ based on the Syrian Constitution²⁶⁸⁰, Druze community has been largely spared by the GoS to do military service, 'a tacit concession by the GoS in exchange for the community's support'.²⁶⁸¹ However, as of May 2020, Syrian security forces were 'keen to intervene in Sweida in order to reassert control' and to go after those who fled from military service.²⁶⁸² As of February 2021, an estimated number of 20 000 people were wanted for military service in Sweida, who remained under the protection of armed factions. Armed factions' checkpoints always stopped the military police to enter the Sweida governorate areas.²⁶⁸³

Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups

Sweida governorate continued to remain under the control of the Syrian Arab Army as of January 2021, including its affiliated foreign troops such as Russia and Iran that each one operates five military sites, and Hezbollah that operates three military sites in Sweida governorate.²⁶⁸⁴

According to a 2019 report by Mahmoud al-Lababidi 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.²⁶⁸⁵ Deployments of the SAA as of 17 March 2020 included units of the 1st and 2nd Corps.²⁶⁸⁶

According to a January 2020 report on Sweida, the following pro-government militias were present in Sweida:

- National Defence Forces (NDF) (pro-GoS, good terms with Hezbollah);
- Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) (pro-GoS, good terms with Hezbollah);
- Ba'ath Brigades (pro-GoS);
- Al-Bustan Association, (pro-GoS, good terms with Hezbollah);

²⁶⁷⁴ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Qunaitra, Sweida. Situation Report No. 5. As of 2 August 2018, 2 August 2018, [url](#), p. 1

²⁶⁷⁵ 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

²⁶⁷⁶ Al Masdar News, Syrian Army scores major advance in east Sweida after Russian airstrikes hammer ISIS, 6 August 2018, [url](#), accessed

²⁶⁷⁷ 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

²⁶⁷⁸ Based on reading of maps in ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#); Liveuamap, Syria, 26 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁷⁹ COAR, The Syrian economy at war, Part 1: Armed group mobilisation as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, 30 September 2020, [url](#), p. 7

²⁶⁸⁰ Syria, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic – 2012, Article 46, [url](#)

²⁶⁸¹ USIP, How will new U.S. sanctions impact Syria's conflict? 17 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁸² Rollins, T., Kidnappings, cross-border clashes threaten increasingly fragile status quo in Syria's South, MEI, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁸³ ORSAM, Insecurity in southern Syria: tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda, (January – February 2021), March 2021, [url](#), p. 7

²⁶⁸⁴ Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁸⁵ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 10

²⁶⁸⁶ Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

- Home Guards (pro-GoS local armed group created in Sweida by Nazih Jarbou' the son of former Aql Sheikh Hussein Jarbou);
- Tawhid party (Former Lebanese deputy Wi'am Wahhab, close to the GoS);
- Al-Fahd Forces (close to Russia)²⁶⁸⁷;
- The Atil group (pro-GoS created in 2015).²⁶⁸⁸

During 2020, the Iran-backed NDF asserted its presence in Sweida governorate.²⁶⁸⁹ For instance, the Qarayya-based NDF from the south-western town of Sweida conducted the recruitment of 450 Druze fighters into its ranks in response to the increasing tensions between local Druze and Eight Brigade (Fifth Corps).²⁶⁹⁰

ISIL

On 21 August 2020, SOHR indicated that ISIL re-emerged and was present in large parts of Homs and Sweida desert.²⁶⁹¹ According to a local source, ISIL cells were reportedly active in Al-Karaa area of Sweida governorate²⁶⁹² and as of May 2020, they were present in the area between Al-Karaa and Tilal Al-Safa.²⁶⁹³ In its report covering the period between January and March 2020, USDOD also reported on ISIL presence in Sweida governorate.²⁶⁹⁴ According to several ISW reports issued in March 2021, 'ISIL support zones' remained in Sweida governorate.²⁶⁹⁵

On 29 August 2020, SOHR reported that

'ISIL operations focused on positions in (1) an area between Al-Shawla desert in western Deir Ezzor and Al-Bokamal desert in the east, (2) Deir Ezzor-Al-Mayadeen road, (3) Hmimah-T3 road to the flank of Palmyra city in eastern Homs, (4) Al-Rassafah area in Al-Raqqah countryside, (5) Ithriyah area in northern Hama and (6) [Sweida] desert.'²⁶⁹⁶

On 11 October 2020, the SAA began a wide range of operation in ISIL suspected areas within the desert of Sweida.²⁶⁹⁷ On 16 March 2021, an article published by the MEI (Middle East Institute) reported that ISIL was active in eastern Sweida governorate.²⁶⁹⁸

Factions, militias and gangs

According to a 2019 report, 'armed family groups, gangs and militias' dominated Sweida. They secured funding either externally or domestically by the war economy. Some of these groups were supporting

²⁶⁸⁷ 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. 19, 22

²⁶⁸⁸ NPA, Syria's Suwayda notables appeal to al-Karama forces to end local group's violations, 12 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁸⁹ COAR, The Syrian economy at war, part 1, armed group mobilisation as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, 30 September 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁹⁰ COAR, The Syrian economy at war, part 1, armed group mobilisation as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, 30 September 2020, [url](#); INSS, The Struggle for Control of Southern Syria: Where is Israel?, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁹¹ SOHR, ISIS resurgence: Russian jets strike ISIS positions in the desert, and IED explosion in eastern Al-Suwaydaa kills or injures six regime soldiers, 21 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁹² Suwayda24, 2020 السويداء 24 توثق مقتل 14 شخصاً في حوادث عنف خلال شهر كانون الثاني من عام 2020 [informal translation 'Suwayda24 documented the death of 14 people in violent incident in January 2020'], 3 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁹³ Suwayda24, 2020 السويداء بعد الاشتباه بخلايا داعشية [informal translation 'Firing of mortar in the desert of Sweida on suspected ISIS cells'], 22 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁹⁴ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 51-52

²⁶⁹⁵ ISW, Syria Situation Report: 19 February – 22 March 2021, 25 March 2021 [url](#)

²⁶⁹⁶ SOHR, ISIS attacks in one week 100 regime soldiers and loyal militiamen killed and go missing, despite Russian intense airstrikes, 29 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁹⁷ Suwayda24, 2020 عمليات تمشيط واسعة في بادية السويداء وإصابة قائد أحد القطاعات [informal translation 'sweeping operation in the Sweida desert, injuring a sector commander'], 14 October 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Sweeping operations: Five regime officers and soldiers injured in landmine explosion in Al-Suwaydaa desert, 14 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁹⁸ Hassan, M., ISIS and the Assad regime: Strategy and counter strategy in Syria's Badia, MEI, 16 March 2021, [url](#)

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.²⁶⁹⁹

In December 2020, SOHR sources indicated that Sweida governorate reportedly became a safe sanctuary for gangs, where security situation has deteriorated, and kidnappings continued.²⁷⁰⁰

According to a February 2021 report, Sultan Pasha al-Atrash Battalion was created by Druze to fight ISIL.²⁷⁰¹ On 16 April 2021, residents of al-Qrayya town in south-east Suwayda created a 'military' local armed group to prevent 'pro-Lebanese Hezbollah livestock owners on their agricultural lands'.²⁷⁰²

Rijjal al-Karama (Men of Dignity) and Sheikh al-Karamah (Sheikh of Dignity) forces

In 2012, the movement Rijjal al-Karama (Men of Dignity²⁷⁰³) was established as a local Druze defence force independent from the GoS²⁷⁰⁴, with Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous as its leader²⁷⁰⁵. It also established the neutrality of Sweida's Druze towards the 2011 revolution.²⁷⁰⁶ The movement remained against the conscription of Druze to the GoS army.²⁷⁰⁷

According to a February 2019 article, the Sheikh al-Karamah/Sheikh of Dignity forces reportedly established a new faction in the city of Sweida called 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.²⁷⁰⁸ In December 2020, the Institute for National Security Studies named the al-Karama as one of the local groups controlling Sweida.²⁷⁰⁹

2.14.3 Recent security trends and impact on the civilian population

Security trends in 2020-2021

The Carter Center, in its May 2020 report, indicated that in the recent months conflict has restarted in the south of Syria due to long-term 'division and grievances between communities'.²⁷¹⁰ According to the CoI report of August 2020, security situation has drastically deteriorated in Sweida and Dar'a governorates, where several armed groups fought against each other for control, which caused a number of violent incidents.²⁷¹¹

²⁶⁹⁹ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, EUI, 28 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 2, 9

²⁷⁰⁰ SOHR, Security chaos in southern Syria, gunmen attack cargo truck on Damascus-Al-Suwaydaa road, 5 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁰¹ Al Monitor, Syrian Regime scrambles to defuse tensions after insult to Druze leader, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁰² NPA, Local military group formed in Syria's Suwayda, 17 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁰³ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 7

²⁷⁰⁴ Rollins, T., Kidnappings, cross-border clashes threaten increasingly fragile status quo in Syria's South, MEI, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁰⁵ 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

²⁷⁰⁶ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, European University Institute, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 7

²⁷⁰⁷ 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

²⁷⁰⁸ Enab Baladi, Sheikh of Dignity Shield: New Faction Found in Sweida, 22 February 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁰⁹ INSS, The Struggle for Control of Southern Syria: Where is Israel?, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁷¹⁰ Carter Center (the), Analysing shifts in territorial control within Syria offers glimpse of future challenges, 13 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁷¹¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/45/31, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 13

From mid-January 2020, there were reports of protests taking place in Sweida, related to the poor living conditions and the rising prices.²⁷¹² On 7 June 2020, during the protest people in Sweida used anti-GoS slogans due to the worsening of the socio-economic situation.²⁷¹³ According to Human Rights Watch, on 15 June 2020, security forces responded with beatings and arrests of the protesters in Sweida.²⁷¹⁴ The GoS used pro-government gangs called '*shabiha*' to suppress the protests with violence.²⁷¹⁵ On 10 July 2020, SOHR reported on the release of eight people by the security forces who were arrested in mid-June during the protest, except one young man who was kept to do his compulsory military service.²⁷¹⁶ As of August 2020, the CoI reported that arbitrary detention, forced disappearance and torture continued to exist in Sweida, 'involving government security forces, including the Military Intelligence Directorate and the Military Police'.²⁷¹⁷

As of January 2021, security situation in Sweida remained reportedly chaotic including the absence of security forces to maintain order and stability. There has been an increase in the killing of 'government security forces and unknown individuals' in Sweida city.²⁷¹⁸ As reported in January 2021, the killing of GoS forces and elements of NDF has reportedly increased in Sweida governorate.²⁷¹⁹

Kidnappings sometimes resulted into serious clashes between armed groups. For instance, In March and September 2020, local militias from Dar'a governorate clashed with militias from Sweida governorate following the kidnapping of local residents.²⁷²⁰ On 24 February 2021, SOHR reported on armed clashes between local factions and gangs after armed factions tried to arrest gangs who were allegedly promoting drugs 'near the municipal stadium and al-Bassel roundabout' in Sweida City.²⁷²¹ In January 2021, tensions between local armed factions and Military Intelligence branch in Sweida increased and as a result, local armed factions were deployed on Damascus-Sweida road, where they established a checkpoint to search every vehicle to arrest GoS officers. For instance, on 23 January 2021, local factions arrested a GoS officer on the aforementioned road.²⁷²² In response to the arrest of 'draft dodgers' by the GoS, armed factions kidnapped GoS soldiers to exchange them with the arrested civilians from Sweida.²⁷²³

As of March 2021, Sweida governorate was characterised to be in a 'state of lawlessness' with widespread violence, and uncontrolled criminal activities, external interference, security fragmentation, massive presence of weapons, and tribal customs and traditions.²⁷²⁴ Due to the absence of law in Sweida, during the recent years, tribal conflict resolution mechanism in Sweida has been transformed into *tarsh al-dam* (bloodshed), which is used to solve issues related to 'kidnappings,

²⁷¹² Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, 13 - 19 January 2020, [url](#), p. 4; Enab Baladi, Suwaida is protesting and establishing wave of protests across Syria, 21 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁷¹³ Daher, J., State institutions and regime networks as service providers in Syria, European University Institute, 25 June 2020, [url](#), p. 22

²⁷¹⁴ HRW, Syria, Protesters describe beatings, arrests, 28 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁷¹⁵ USIP, How will new U.S. sanctions impact Syria's conflict?, 17 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁷¹⁶ SOHR, Al-Suwaydaa, regime security forces release all young men arrested in June demonstrations, only one driven to mandatory service, 10 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁷¹⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/45/31, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 13, 21

²⁷¹⁸ NPA, Assassination of government forces on the rise in Syria's Suwayda, 14 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁷¹⁹ NPA, Assassinations of government forces on the rise in Syria's Suwayda, 14 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁷²⁰ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, Syria weekly conflict summary 11-17 January 2021, 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 1

²⁷²¹ SOHR, With machine guns and RPGs, clashes in Sweida leaves injuries, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁷²² SOHR, After insulting spiritual Sheikh in Al-Suwayda, population discontent grows, and military intelligence branch releases kidnapped person from the city to calm the situation, 26 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁷²³ Al-Ghazi, S., Insecurity in southern Syria: Tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda, (January – February 2021), ORSAM, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 7-8

²⁷²⁴ Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal "Sulh" and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 1, 2

murder and other violent crimes'.²⁷²⁵ During the period between March 2020 and March 2021, *sulh* mechanism²⁷²⁶ was used to resolve conflict between the Daraa's Eighth Brigade (sub-division of Fifth Corps, established by Russia in Busra al-Sham town eastern Dar'a in October 2018²⁷²⁷) and local armed groups in western Sweida.²⁷²⁸ Eight Brigade has reportedly sought to prevent Druze population to access their agricultural land²⁷²⁹ although its presence near al-Qurraya town (Sweida) was aimed at protecting eastern Busra al-Sham and its surrounding areas from kidnapping as the local armed groups in Sweida were reportedly unable to do so.²⁷³⁰ Following the September 2020 heavy clashes between local armed factions and Eight Brigade that caused 115 casualties in Sweida, GoS deployed troops in Al-Qurayah and Samma areas in western countryside of Sweida at the border of Daraa to prevent future clashes.²⁷³¹ In November 2020, the Eight Brigade pulled out completely its forces from Al-Qurraya town following an agreement between the local dignitaries from Sweida and the neighbouring Daraa governorate.²⁷³²

As reported on 13 March 2021, the security situation in the South Syrian region including in Sweida reportedly aggravated due to the killing and kidnaping of civilians²⁷³³ and was described as having been chaotic in Sweida's southern countryside during the past six months.²⁷³⁴

Residents of the governorate of Sweida have accused GoS-affiliated forces of tolerating or even supporting criminal networks operating in the province.²⁷³⁵ Local criminal groups reportedly controlled Ariqa town of Sweida and were viewed by locals as operating 'under a cover provided by the state security apparatuses' as they conducted kidnapping, torture and murder in western Sweida and on the main road between Damascus and Sweida City. Following a kidnapping incident on the Sweida-Damascus main road, the Syrian military forces entered the city (Sweida) and pulled out after several members of criminal groups decided 'to join the Syrian military on the condition that they remained in Sweida governorate'.²⁷³⁶

Security incidents

According to ACLED data, there were 66 security incidents recorded in Sweida governorate, of whom 22 were coded as battles, 6 explosions/remote violence and 38 incidents of violence against civilians.

²⁷²⁵ Rollins, T., Kidnappings, cross-border clashes threaten increasingly fragile status quo in Syria's South, MEI, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁷²⁶ According to Al-Jabassini and Ezzi, *sulh* is 'a traditional conflict-resolution mechanism, to resolve civilian disputes and to contribute to maintaining some degree of local order'. It involves 'ideals of collaboration, mediation and settlement to maintain the order and stability of the larger community by persuading aggrieved parties to forego vengeance, accept fair compensation and reconcile'. It is exercised and managed by 'local notables', including clan sheikhs, family elders, Druze clerics, and individuals that enjoy authority. Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal "Sulh" and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 1, 3

²⁷²⁷ Al-Jabassini, A., The Eight Brigade: striving for supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²⁷²⁸ Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal "Sulh" and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), p. 1

²⁷²⁹ COAR, The Syrian economy at war, Part 1: Armed group mobilisation as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, 30 September 2020, [url](#), S. 8

²⁷³⁰ Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal "Sulh" and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), p. 11

²⁷³¹ SOHR, Repercussion of 'Daraa Al-Suwaiaa' conflict, regime troops deploy on administrative border between the two provinces, five days after 115 gunmen killed and wounded, 4 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁷³² Enab Baladi, Three military moves by 'Eight Brigade', efforts to increase its strength, 17 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁷³³ SOHR, Security chaos in south Syria, unknown gunmen shoot dead farmer after hijacking his motorcycle, while others kidnap civilian in western Sweida, 13 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁷³⁴ NPA, Local military group formed in Syria's Suwayda, 17 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁷³⁵ Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal 'sulh' and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), p. 10; Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 22-28 February 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁷³⁶ Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal "Sulh" and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), p. 10

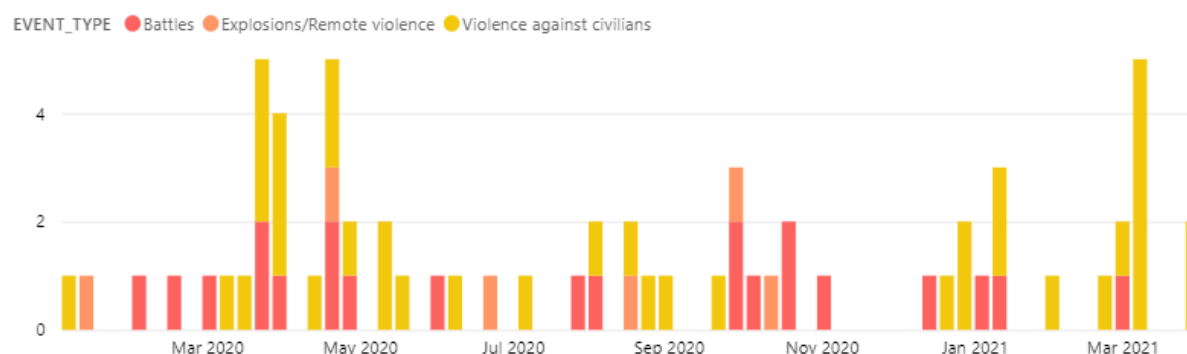


Figure 52: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Sweida governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data²⁷³⁷

Sweida governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Sweida	12	4	28
Salkhad	6	1	4
Shahba	4	1	6
Total	22	6	38

Figure 53: Security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Sweida governorate between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021. Breakdown by district based on ACLED data

According to ACLED data, most security incidents documented by ACLED took place in Sweida district (see Figure 53).

Illustrative security incidents

A non-exhaustive list of security incidents that were reported to have taken place in Sweida governorate in 2020 and early 2021 included the following (grouped by type of incident):

Kidnappings

- 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.²⁷³⁸
- 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.²⁷³⁹
- On 3 April 2020, armed men blocked a road near by the town of Al-Mazra'a and kidnapped a civilian on a motorcycle.²⁷⁴⁰
- On 26 March 2020, local armed local armed gang kidnapped for ransom people coming from Busra al-Sham to sell cattle in a local market in Sweida.²⁷⁴¹

Between 5 and 28 February 2021 several cases of kidnapping were reported by SOHR in Sweida.

²⁷³⁷ EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

²⁷³⁸ SOHR, Two paramedics kidnapped in rural Al-Suwaidaa, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁷³⁹ SOHR, Insecurity in al-Suwaidaa increases: citizens kidnapped near military checkpoints, 26 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁴⁰ SOHR, As tension continues in al-Suwaidaa countryside, unidentified gunmen kidnap a young man in al-Mazra'a town, 3 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁴¹ Rollins, T., Kidnappings, cross-border clashes threaten increasingly fragile status quo in Syria's South, MEI, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

- On 5 February a woman disappeared from Melh village and a man was kidnapped by an armed group for ransom in front of his house in Sweida city, who was later released by the help of local factions.
- On 12 February a child was kidnapped in front of his house in Sweida city and was later released.
- On 15 February a civilian was kidnapped in Sweida city for ransom.
- On 17 February a civilian was kidnapped for ransom in the industrial area of Sweida city (who was from Damascus).
- On 23 February, unknown people kidnapped a young man in front of his house on Al-Hayy road in Sweida city.
- On 28 February, armed men on motorcycles kidnapped two farmers in Ara town in the south-western countryside of Sweida, who were later released following the mediation by dignitaries of Sweida and the commanders of the Fifth Corps (Russian-backed).²⁷⁴²
- On 13 March 2021, unknown armed men kidnapped a man at a farm nearby Al-Darah village in western Sweida governorate.²⁷⁴³

IED attacks

- On 21 August 2020, SOHR reported that an IED blast took place in Sadd Al-Zalaf area in Sweida desert, which killed three regime soldiers and injured three others.²⁷⁴⁴
- On 14 October 2020, a vehicle belonged to the Fifth Brigade was hit by a mine in the neighbouring Tel Asadi, south-east of Zulf dam in Sweida desert injuring four officers and a soldier.²⁷⁴⁵ The mine has reportedly been planted by ISIL when they were in control of the area in the past.²⁷⁴⁶

Clashes/attacks

- 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.²⁷⁴⁷
- 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.²⁷⁴⁸
- On 27 March 2020, violent clashes took place between local factions in Sweida and armed men of Bosra al-Sham.²⁷⁴⁹
- On 29 September 2020, fourteen people were killed, and several others were wounded during clashes between armed groups and Eight Brigade in al-Qurra area of Sweida.²⁷⁵⁰

²⁷⁴² SOHR, Security Chaos, two unidentified men found dead in western Sweida, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁴³ SOHR, Security Chaos in South Syria, unknown gunmen shoot dead farmer after hijacking his motorcycle, while others kidnap civilian in western Sweida, 13 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁴⁴ SOHR, ISIS resurgence, Russian jets strike ISIS positions in the desert, and IED explosion in eastern Al-Suwaia kills or injures six regime soldiers, 21 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁴⁵ Suwayda24, عمليات تمشيط واسعة في بادية السويداء وإصابة قائد أحد القطاعات [informal translation 'sweeping operation in the Sweida desert, injuring a sector commander'], 14 October 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Sweeping operations, five regime officers and soldiers injured in landmine explosion in Al-Suwaia desert, 14 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁴⁶ Suwayda24, عمليات تمشيط واسعة في بادية السويداء وإصابة قائد أحد القطاعات [informal translation 'sweeping operation in the Sweida desert, injuring a sector commander'], 14 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁴⁷ SOHR, Insecurity in al-Suwaia increases: citizens kidnapped near military checkpoints, 26 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁴⁸ SOHR, After kidnapping one of their members, "Sheikh al-Karama" forces attack security centers in Salkhad and detain officers, 23 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁴⁹ SOHR, As tension continues in al-Suwaia countryside, unidentified gunmen kidnap a young man in al-Mazra'a town, 3 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁵⁰ Al-Jabassani, A., Southern Syria: 'Sibling feud' or engineered violence, MEI, 7 October 2020, [url](#); Carter Center (the), Weekly Conflict Summary, Syria weekly conflict summary for 28 September – 4 October 2020, 8 October 2020, [url](#)

- On 5 January 2021, unknown armed men opened fire on a cargo truck on Sweida-Damascus road, near Al-Mattuna village, to 'hijack the car and kidnap its driver'.²⁷⁵¹
- On 13 March 2021, a farmer was killed by unknown armed men in Al-Kherbeh town in western countryside of Sweida who refused to give up his motorcycle to the attackers.²⁷⁵² Nearby the same area, earlier on 9 March 2021, two dead bodies of unknown men were discovered.²⁷⁵³
- On 29 March 2021, armed men shot and killed a young man from Um al-Rumman town in the southern countryside of Sweida.²⁷⁵⁴ According to Suwayda24, on 29 March 2021, security forces stormed a house in Al Nabauni village in Um al-Rumman town of Sweida killing a young man.²⁷⁵⁵

Israeli airstrikes

- On 23 June 2020, four Israeli warplanes bombed Iranian militia bases, food stores and munitions stock in Tal Al-Sahn area in the countryside of Sweida, which caused casualties.²⁷⁵⁶ During the same period, Israeli air raids targeted an Iranian proxy communication and radar centre, causing two deaths and severe damage to the communication tower in Salkhad, southern Sweida governorate.²⁷⁵⁷
- On 6 January 2021, an Israeli airstrike launched two missiles on a radar facility of a battalion of the SAA in the west of the 'Al-Dur' village in the western countryside of Sweida, which destroyed the radar and killed a member of the SAA.²⁷⁵⁸ According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, in Sweida on 7 January 2021, an Israeli airstrike targeted a radar facility in Najran Brigade on the countryside of Sweida.²⁷⁵⁹

Civilian fatalities

Month	VDC 2020	SNHR 2020	VDC 2021	SNHR 2021
January	4	-	2	1
February	6	1	4	-
March	18	1	6	1
April	8	1		
May	1	-		
June	4	-		
July	1	-		
August	6	2		
September	1	1		
October	3	-		
November	3	2		
December	3	-		
Total	58	8	12	2

²⁷⁵¹ SOHR, Security chaos in southern Syria, gunmen attack cargo truck on Damascus-Al-Suwaiaa road, 5 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁵² SOHR, Security Chaos in South Syria, unknown gunmen shoot dead farmer after hijacking his motorcycle, while others kidnap civilian in western Sweida, 13 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁵³ SOHR, Security chaos, two unidentified men found dead in western Sweida, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁵⁴ SOHR, After many killed and injured in security raid on Um Al-Romman village, Residents protest in front of 'Al-Muwahhidun Al-Druze House' in Al-Suwaiaa city, 4 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁵⁵ Suwayda24, جهات أمنية اقتحمت القرية وفتحت النار عشوائياً على المواطنين [informal translation 'security forces stormed the village and killed opened fire indiscriminately on the residents'], 2 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁵⁶ IranWire, Iran militia battered by Israeli air raids in Syria, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁵⁷ ISW, Syrian situation report: 24 June – 6 July 2020, 6 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁵⁸ Suwayda24, توثيق مقتل 10 أشخاص في الشهر الأول من عام 2021 في السويداء [informal translation 'the death of 10 people was documented in Sweida during the first month of 2021'], 3 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁵⁹ Al-Ghazi, S., Insecurity in southern Syria: tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda, (January – February 2021), ORSAM, March 2021, [url](#), p. 6

Figure 54: Civilian fatalities as a result of armed conflict in Sweida governorate in 2020 and first three months of 2021. Monthly breakdown based on VDC and SNHR data

In 2020, Sweida governorate had between 8 (SNHR data)²⁷⁶⁰ and 58 civilian fatalities (VDC data).²⁷⁶¹ In the first three months of 2021, SNHR recorded 2 civilian fatalities, while VDC recorded 12 civilian fatalities.

In 2020, Suwayda24, Syrian local news agency, documented 137 persons killed and 171 others injured as a result of violent incidents in Sweida. Of the 137 fatalities recorded, 85 were civilians and 43 were members of the local armed factions in Sweida.²⁷⁶² For instance, 14 people were killed in January²⁷⁶³, 29 people were killed in March²⁷⁶⁴, 14 people were killed in April²⁷⁶⁵, 4 people were killed in May²⁷⁶⁶, 8 people were killed in June²⁷⁶⁷, 9 people were killed in August²⁷⁶⁸, 24 people were killed in September²⁷⁶⁹, 7 people were killed in October²⁷⁷⁰, 12 people were killed in November²⁷⁷¹ and 8 people were killed in December 2020.²⁷⁷²

Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war

Sweida governorate has been spared extensive damage in the conflict, compared to other areas of Syria.²⁷⁷³ According to open-source data collected by the Carter Center and ACLED, at least 783 individual uses of explosive munitions (2 % of total use in southern Syria), were recorded in 69

²⁷⁶⁰ 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; SNHR, 145 Civilians, including Two Medical Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in March 2020, 1 April 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, 78 Civilians, including One Media Workers, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020, 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 1,006 Civilians, including three Media Workers and 12 Medical and Civil Defense Personnel, Documented Killed in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 16; SNHR, 107 Civilians, including 26 Children and 11 Women, Documented Killed in Syria in July 2020, 2 August 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, 122 Civilians, including 21 Children and Seven Women, Documented Killed in Syria in August 2020, 1 September 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 102 Civilians, including 15 Children, 10 Women, Three Medical Personnel and 12 Victims Due to Torture, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 126 Civilians, including 18 Children, Eight Women, One Media Worker and 10 Victims Due to Torture, 1 November 2020, [url](#), p. 10; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 172 Civilians, including 16 Children, 11 Women, and 30 Victims Due to Torture, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 9; SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 14

²⁷⁶¹ Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

²⁷⁶² Suwayda24, 2020 قتيلاً في السويداء حصيلة العنف عام 2020 [informal translation '137 people were killed as a result of violence in 2020 in Sweida'], 2 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁶³ Suwayda24, 2020 السويداء 24 توثق مقتل 14 شخصاً في حوادث عنف خلال شهر كانون الثاني من عام 2020 [informal translation 'Suwayda24 documented the death of 14 people in violent incident in January 2020'], 3 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁶⁴ Suwayda24, 2020 السويداء 24 ترصد مقتل 29 شخص في السويداء خلال شهر آذار 2020 [informal translation 'Suwayda24 traced the killing of 29 people in Sweida in March 2020'], 3 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁶⁵ Suwayda24, 2020 السويداء 14 مقتل شخصاً في السويداء خلال شهر نيسان 2020 [informal translation '14 people were killed in Sweida in April 2020'], 5 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁶⁶ Suwayda24, 2020 4 أشخاص في السويداء خلال شهر أيار 2020 إثر حوادث عنف [informal translation '4 people were killed in Sweida in May 2020 as result of violent incidents'], 1 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁶⁷ Suwayda24, 2020 السويداء 24 ترصد مقتل 8 أشخاص خلال شهر حزيران 2020 [informal translation 'Suwayda24 report the killing of eight people during the month of June 2020'], 2 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁶⁸ Suwayda24, 2020 16 شخصاً بين قتل وجرح في السويداء خلال شهر آب/اغسطس 2020 [informal translation '16 people killed and injured in Sweida in August 2020'], 9 August 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁶⁹ Suwayda24, 2020 السويداء 24 ترصد مقتل 24 شخصاً في شهر أيلول 2020 [informal translation 'Suwayda24 reports the killing of 24 people in September 2020'], 6 October 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁷⁰ Suwayda24, 2020 السويداء 24 ترصد مقتل 7 أشخاص خلال شهر تشرين الأول 2020 [informal translation 'Suwayda24 reports 7 people killed in October 2020'], 5 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁷¹ Suwayda24, 2020 السويداء 24 ترصد مقتل 12 شخصاً في السويداء خلال شهر تشرين الثاني 2020 [informal translation 'Suwayda tracks the killing of 12 people in Sweida during November 2020'], 3 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁷² Suwayda24, 2020 السويداء 24 توثق مقتل 8 أشخاص في السويداء خلال شهر كانون الأول 2020 [informal translation 'Suwayda24 documented the killing of 8 people in Sweida in December 2020'], 2 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁷³ Arab Weekly (The), Rising discontent in Syria's Daraa, Sweida reflects simmering woes, 16 February 2020, [url](#); MEE, Unrest roils Syria's Sweida as pro- and anti-government protests continue, 10 June 2020, [url](#)

communities in Sweida between July 2013 and May 2019. Most type of munitions used in Sweida were ground-launched explosive munitions (75 %), followed by aerial-launched munitions (21 %). Use of explosive munitions was particularly documented in Shahba district, with the majority recorded in the Shaqa subdistrict where half of all explosive weapons used in Sweida were recorded.²⁷⁷⁴

Based on the Syria Multi-sector Needs Assessment of 2020, the Shelter Cluster assessed that in Sweida governorate, 0.7 % of the population was living in damaged buildings.²⁷⁷⁵

In 2020, Suwayda24 documented the killing of three civilians as result of remnants of war in Sweida governorate, including the explosion of IEDs and mines in areas where military operations took place in the past. In addition, during the same period, six people died accidentally while manipulating weapons in Sweida governorate.²⁷⁷⁶

Displacement and return

In the period between January and December 2020, UNOCHA recorded 998 IDPs movements within Sweida governorate.²⁷⁷⁷ In January and February 2021, no IDP movement was reported by UNOCHA from Sweida to other governorates or from other governorates to Sweida.²⁷⁷⁸ and 50 IDPs return spontaneously during the same period (including from locations within Sweida).²⁷⁷⁹ In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 19 IDP movements from Sweida governorate and 127 IDP return movements from the governorate.²⁷⁸⁰

During the period between January to December 2020, UNOCHA recorded 50 return movements within the Sweida governorate and 833 return movements from Sweida governorate.²⁷⁸¹

On 3 May 2020, SOHR reported on the return of a large number of Christian families to their village, Kharba in the countryside of Sweida following agreements with the factions who mediate reconciliation with the GoS, notably Russian-backed 5th Corps affiliates. According to the source, these Christians were forced to flee in 2014.²⁷⁸²

²⁷⁷⁴ Carter Center (the), Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, Report 1, Southern Syria: As Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates, November 2019, [url](#), p. 7

²⁷⁷⁵ Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

²⁷⁷⁶ Suwayda24, 2020 حسيبة العنف عام 2020 قتيلاً في السويداء 137 [informal translation '137 people were killed as a result of violence in 2020 in Sweida'], 2 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁷⁷ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements overview, Jan-December 2020, n.d., [url](#)

²⁷⁷⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements, January 2021, n.d., [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements, February 2021, n.d., [url](#)

²⁷⁷⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, spontaneous IDP returnee movements overview, Jan-December 2020, n.d., [url](#)

²⁷⁸⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

²⁷⁸¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements overview, Jan-December 2020, n.d., [url](#)

²⁷⁸² SOHR, Al Suwaidaa, Tens of Christian families return to their village after six years of displacement, under agreements with Russian backed factions, [url](#)

Annex I: VDC data

VDC Fatalities recorded in 2020

	Rural Damascus		Damascus		Latakia		Homs		Hama		Idlib		Aleppo		Raqqa		Deir Ez Zor		Hassaka		Tartous		Sweida		Qunayra		Dar'a		Unknown		Total
	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	
Jan	10	2	6	1	1	9	1	3	1	1	166	230	74	55	23	16	25	31	5	13	0	0	4	0	0	0	9	19	15	7	787
Feb	5	1	7	8	0	8	0	2	1	0	124	584	117	215	20	11	15	14	10	7	1	0	6	0	0	2	7	22	26	1	1214
Mar	4	3	10	1	0	0	2	3	5	2	46	259	23	26	14	17	21	14	5	2	0	0	10	9	0	0	24	50	6	8	572
Apr	3	0	16	2	0	0	4	17	1	4	6	19	56	13	10	15	14	24	6	7	1	0	8	4	1	2	13	20	11	1	278
May	3	0	7	2	0	2	3	9	2	33	1	23	31	12	11	14	25	25	9	2	1	0	1	1	2	0	22	39	3	6	289
Jun	4	6	14	3	1	1	0	3	0	4	7	49	14	33	12	11	5	3	14	7	0	0	4	2	0	0	18	23	1	7	246
Jul	5	2	9	3	0	2	8	2	3	3	2	35	26	21	14	16	6	7	23	9	0	0	1	0	0	0	32	17	1	5	252
Aug	3	2	6	1	0	7	2	14	1	4	30	12	13	8	10	5	25	36	14	7	0	0	6	2	0	3	22	11	0	5	249
Sep	2	5	4	1	0	2	0	2	8	1	13	32	21	2	10	10	16	46	11	14	0	0	1	15	0	0	7	26	3	4	256
Oct	2	1	9	2	0	3	9	10	3	1	20	82	42	10	2	13	14	18	13	5	0	1	3	3	0	1	20	18	4	10	319
Nov	4	9	7	4	0	1	13	11	3	14	22	13	22	18	9	10	21	16	12	15	0	0	3	0	0	1	15	22	0	6	271
Dec	6	3	5	3	0	6	2	2	7	9	2	11	7	10	5	22	20	50	3	6	0	2	3	1	0	5	13	11	1	6	221
Sub-total	51	34	100	31	2	41	44	78	35	76	419	1349	446	423	140	160	287	284	125	94	3	3	58	37	3	14	282	278	71	66	4874
Total	85		131		43		122		111		1768		869		308		491		219		6		95		17		488		137		4874

VDC Fatalities recorded in 2021

	Rural Damascus		Damascus		Latakia		Homs		Hama		Idlib		Aleppo		Raqqa		Deir Ez Zor		Hassaka		Tartous		Sweida		Qunayra		Dar'a		Unknown		Total
	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	Civilian	Not civilian	
Jan	4	1	1	1	0	1	6	8	12	21	8	12	22	9	9	3	22	26	19	7	0	0	2	1	0	8	18	28	4	1	253
Feb	5	2	7	1	0	1	1	16	6	5	14	10	20	10	3	5	20	17	24	3	0	1	4	1	1	3	20	8	0	1	289
Mar	10	2	5	1	0	2	2	3	30	2	15	17	31	22	5	15	20	17	14	1	0	0	6	2	1	7	13	26	1	1	271
Sub-total	19	5	13	3	0	4	9	27	48	29	37	39	73	41	17	23	62	60	56	11	0	1	12	4	2	18	51	62	5	3	733
Total	24		16		4		36		76		76		114		40		122		67		1		16		20		113		8		733

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. ²⁷⁸³
1973	President Assad removes the constitutional requirement that the president must be a Muslim. The army suppresses ensuing riots. ²⁷⁸⁴
October 1973	Syria and Egypt launch attacks on Israel. Syria fails to retake the Golan Heights and hostilities end in a ceasefire. ²⁷⁸⁵
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. ²⁷⁸⁶ 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'. ²⁷⁸⁷ 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'. ²⁷⁸⁸
1980	Islamist resistance to the Assad government grows. ²⁷⁸⁹ After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Muslim groups instigate uprisings and riots in Aleppo, Homs and Hama. ²⁷⁹⁰ 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. ²⁷⁹¹
December 1981	The Golan Heights are formally annexed by Israel. ²⁷⁹²
February 1982	Muslim Brotherhood attacks on government and uprising in the city of Hama is suppressed in a month-long siege by the army. ²⁷⁹³ An estimated 10 000 to 25 000 civilians are killed. ²⁷⁹⁴ Special forces belonging to the intelligence services, in particular the 'Defence Brigades' (<i>Sirayat al-difa'</i>) commanded by Rif'at al-Assad, President Hafez al-Assad's brother, are reported to carry out massive arrests of civilians, as well as torture and executions. ²⁷⁹⁵
1990	Iraq invades Kuwait. Syria joins the US-led coalition against Iraq. ²⁷⁹⁶

²⁷⁸³ CIA, World Factbook, Syria, updated 31 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁷⁸⁴ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁸⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁷⁸⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁸⁷ New York Times (The), Syrian Troops Leave Lebanon After 29-Year Occupation, 26 April 2005, [url](#)

²⁷⁸⁸ AI, Syria: Briefing to the Committee Against Torture, 20 April 2010, [url](#), pp. 12-13

²⁷⁸⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁷⁹⁰ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁹¹ CFR, Remembering the Hama Massacre, 2 February 2012, [url](#)

²⁷⁹² BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁹³ CFR, Remembering the Hama Massacre, 2 February 2012, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁹⁴ Carnegie Middle East Center, The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1 February 2012, [url](#)

²⁷⁹⁵ Ismael, Q., The Hamah Massacre - February 1982, Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence, 22 December 2009, [url](#)

²⁷⁹⁶ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

2000	President Assad dies and is succeeded by his second son, Bashar. ²⁷⁹⁷
2005	Syrian forces withdraw from Lebanon under international pressure following the assassination of Lebanese premier Rafiq al-Hariri ²⁷⁹⁸ , a critic of Syrian presence in Lebanon. ²⁷⁹⁹
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. ²⁸⁰⁰
July 2011	A group of SAA defectors announce the formation of the Free Syrian Army. ²⁸⁰¹
August 2011	The Syrian National Council is formed in Istanbul, claiming to be the official representative of the Syrian opposition. ²⁸⁰²
November 2011	OHCHR estimates that at least 3 500 civilians had been killed by GoS forces since March 2011. ²⁸⁰³
November 2011	Al Qaeda affiliate Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) forms the Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) in Syria. ²⁸⁰⁴ 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. ²⁸⁰⁵
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. ²⁸⁰⁶
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. ²⁸⁰⁷ Rebels capture the eastern half of Aleppo city. ²⁸⁰⁸
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. ²⁸⁰⁹ The following month, the US, UK, France, Turkey and Gulf states formally recognise opposition National Coalition as 'legitimate representative' of Syrian people. ²⁸¹⁰
March 2013	Raqqa is captured by rebels. The FSA, Nusra Front and ISI all operate in Raqqa. ²⁸¹¹
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. ²⁸¹² US sources estimated that 1 400 persons were killed in the attack. ²⁸¹³ UN investigation confirmed the attack was carried out

²⁷⁹⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁹⁸ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁹⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁸⁰⁰ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁰¹ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁰² USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁰³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 23 November 2011, [url](#), p. 8

²⁸⁰⁴ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²⁸⁰⁵ Counter Extremism Project, Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), n.d., [url](#), p. 3

²⁸⁰⁶ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁰⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁸⁰⁸ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#); USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁰⁹ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#); Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁸¹⁰ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸¹¹ 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](#)

²⁸¹² USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸¹³ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

	using the nerve gas sarin but does not specify the perpetrator, and does not give an exact number of victims. ²⁸¹⁴
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. ²⁸¹⁵
January 2014	ISIL captures Raqqa city, which becomes its capital. ²⁸¹⁶
January-February 2014	UN-brokered peace talks in Geneva fail, as Syrian authorities 'refuse to discuss a transitional government'. ²⁸¹⁷
June 2014	GoS holds presidential election. Assad wins the election with some 90 % of the vote. The opposition dismiss the results of the election. ²⁸¹⁸
June 2014	The UN and EU ²⁸¹⁹ designated terrorist organisation ²⁸²⁰ ISIL declares 'caliphate' ²⁸²¹ in territory from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in eastern Iraq. ²⁸²² 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. ²⁸²³
September 2014	US and a coalition of Arab countries launch air strikes against ISIL around Aleppo and Raqqa. ²⁸²⁴
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. ²⁸²⁵
February 2015	ISIL militants abduct at least 200 Assyrian Christians in north-eastern Syria. ²⁸²⁶ Most of them were released by February 2016 after ransom was paid to ISIL. ²⁸²⁷
March 2015	The Nusra Front and several allied militias capture the city of Idlib. ²⁸²⁸
May 2015	ISIL captures the ancient city of Palmyra in central Syria. ²⁸²⁹ Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) Islamist rebel alliance takes control of Idlib governorate, putting pressure on GoS-held Latakia. ²⁸³⁰

²⁸¹⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁸¹⁵ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸¹⁶ Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁸¹⁷ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸¹⁸ Reuters, Assad wins Syria election with 88.7 percent of votes: speaker, 4 June 2014, [url](#)

²⁸¹⁹ European Council, Council of the European Union, EU terrorist list, n.d, [url](#)

²⁸²⁰ UN Security Council, Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends One Entry on Its Sanctions List, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁸²¹ 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](#)

²⁸²² BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸²³ USDOS, 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 13

²⁸²⁴ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸²⁵ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸²⁶ Reuters, Islamic State in Syria abducts at least 150 Assyrian Christians, 25 February 2015, [url](#)

²⁸²⁷ BBC News, Islamic State 'releases Assyrian Christian hostages', 22 February 2016, [url](#)

²⁸²⁸ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸²⁹ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸³⁰ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

August 2015	GoS airstrikes on markets and residential areas in besieged Douma kill at least 112 people. ²⁸³¹
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. ²⁸³²
October 2015	YPG and other armed groups merge to form the Syrian Democratic Forces. US deploys its first military forces in Syria. ²⁸³³
December 2015	Homs is recaptured by GoS forces. Rebels are allowed to evacuate. ²⁸³⁴
March 2016	GoS forces, with Russian and Hezbollah support, recapture Palmyra from ISIL. ²⁸³⁵
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. ²⁸³⁶
December 2016	GoS forces, backed by Russian air support and Iranian-sponsored militias, recapture Aleppo city. ²⁸³⁷ 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'. ²⁸³⁸ 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. ²⁸³⁹
January 2017	The Nusra Front merged with four smaller militant groups and rebranded itself as Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS). ²⁸⁴⁰ The US ²⁸⁴¹ , UN, EU ²⁸⁴² and Turkey has designated HTS as a terrorist organisation affiliated with Al Qaeda. ²⁸⁴³
March 2017	Airstrikes suspected to deploy a chemical weapon agent hit the Latamneh area in the suburbs of Hama, injuring up to 70 persons. ²⁸⁴⁴ Following investigation, OPCW concluded in 2020 that the Syrian air force used sarin and chlorine in three separate airstrikes on Latamneh, which affected up to 106 persons. ²⁸⁴⁵
April 2017	Between 80 ²⁸⁴⁶ and 100 civilians ²⁸⁴⁷ 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

²⁸³¹ HRW, World Report 2016 - Syria, 27 January 2016, [url](#)

²⁸³² USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸³³ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

²⁸³⁴ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸³⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

²⁸³⁶ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸³⁷ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#); USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸³⁸ AI, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 37

²⁸³⁹ OHCHR, Statement by the Commission of inquiry on Syria on the situation of civilians affected by the capture of Aleppo, 14 December 2016, [url](#)

²⁸⁴⁰ Wilson Center, Al Qaeda's Latest Rebranding: Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, 24 April 2017, [url](#)

²⁸⁴¹ USDOS, Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 5 - Al-Nusrah Front, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁴² 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](#)

²⁸⁴³ HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁴⁴ UOSSM, Breaking: Chemical Weapons Attack in Latamneh, Hama Injures 70, 30 March 2017, [url](#)

²⁸⁴⁵ UN News, Syrian air force used deadly chemical weapons in 2017 attacks, global watchdog finds, 8 April 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁴⁶ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁴⁷ US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

	which warplanes had flown the mission'. ²⁸⁴⁸ 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. ²⁸⁴⁹ In September 2017, a UN investigation found the Syrian government responsible for the chemical attack. ²⁸⁵⁰
October 2017	The US-backed SDF defeat ISIL and retake Raqqa, after a four month campaign in which the city was largely destroyed. ²⁸⁵¹ The battle of Raqqa 'was marked by violations committed by all sides and came at an extremely high cost to civilians'. ²⁸⁵² 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'. ²⁸⁵³ Around 6 000 ISIL fighters were killed during the campaign. ²⁸⁵⁴ 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'. ²⁸⁵⁵
January 2018	Turkey together with FSA factions launch Operation Olive Branch ²⁸⁵⁶ , an offensive on northern Syria aimed at ousting Kurdish forces controlling the area around Afrin. ²⁸⁵⁷
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. ²⁸⁵⁸ 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.' ²⁸⁵⁹ 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 launching indiscriminate attacks, and deliberately attacking protected objects'. ²⁸⁶⁰
July 2018	GoS recaptures almost all of the south of the country ²⁸⁶¹ , including Da'ra governorate. ²⁸⁶²

²⁸⁴⁸ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁴⁹ 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](#)

²⁸⁵⁰ Al Jazeera, Syria forces behind Khan Sheikhoun gas attack: UN probe, 6 September 2017, [url](#)

²⁸⁵¹ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁵² 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

²⁸⁵³ AI, Syria: Unprecedented investigation reveals US-led Coalition killed more than 1,600 civilians in Raqqa 'death trap', 25 April 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁵⁴ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁵⁵ HRW, World Report 2018 - Syria, 18 January 2018, [url](#)

²⁸⁵⁶ 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

²⁸⁵⁷ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁵⁸ AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2018 - Syria [MDE 24/9903/2019], 26 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²⁸⁵⁹ 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

²⁸⁶⁰ 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

²⁸⁶¹ BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁶² USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

November 2018	A toxic gas attack reportedly injured some 100 people in Aleppo. ²⁸⁶³ Syria and Russia claimed that rebels were responsible, but rebel groups denied the allegation. ²⁸⁶⁴
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. ²⁸⁶⁵ 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'. ²⁸⁶⁶ Since losing its territorial control in Syria, ISIL operated as a covert network ²⁸⁶⁷ , retaining 'clandestine networks in a number of Syrian cities, and an insurgent presence in much of rural Syria'. ²⁸⁶⁸
April 2019	GoS forces with Russian air support intensify airstrikes against rebel-held areas in north-west Syria. ²⁸⁶⁹ Further escalation of hostilities took place in July and August. ²⁸⁷⁰ 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'. ²⁸⁷¹ 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. ²⁸⁷²
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 of human rights and international humanitarian law by Syrian National Army fighters'. ²⁸⁷³
December 2019 –	Military hostilities between GoS and anti-GoS armed groups increased significantly in parts of Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo

²⁸⁶³ BBC News, Syria war: Aleppo 'gas attack' sparks Russia strikes, 25 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁸⁶⁴ Bellingcat, Open Source Survey of the Alleged November 24 2018 Chemical Attack in Aleppo, 28 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁸⁶⁵ Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁶⁶ 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

²⁸⁶⁷ 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

²⁸⁶⁸ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 38

²⁸⁶⁹ USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁷⁰ 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

²⁸⁷¹ HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁷² 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

²⁸⁷³ 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

March 2020	governorates. ²⁸⁷⁴ The GoS offensive resulted in high number of civilian casualties ²⁸⁷⁵ and over 1 million people displaced between December 2019 and February 2020. ²⁸⁷⁶ 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. ²⁸⁷⁷
May-July 2020	As of May 2020, the EU has enacted sanctions on 295 persons and 78 entities in view of the situation in Syria. It also targets companies and business people benefitting from their ties with the GoS and the war economy. ²⁸⁷⁸ The list is available here . On 17 June 2020, USA officially enacted sanctions contained in the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. The sanctions targeted 39 Syrian individuals, including business executives. ²⁸⁷⁹ The list is available here . In July 2020, a second round of sanctions was imposed by USDOS which included 14 new designations, including President Assad's eldest son, Hafez. ²⁸⁸⁰
December 2020	Turkish and Kurdish forces clashed in the city of Ain Issa (Raqqqa governorate), forcing over 9 500 Syrian civilians to flee their homes. ²⁸⁸¹

²⁸⁷⁴ 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

²⁸⁷⁵ UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#); OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁷⁶ UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁷⁷ Al Jazeera, Turkey says Idlib ceasefire details largely agreed on with Russia, 12 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁷⁸ EU Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No 36/2012 concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria, 28 May 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁷⁹ USDOS, Syria Caesar Act Designations, 17 June 2020, [url](#)

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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 provide information concerning the following:

- ❑ **General description of the security situation for the reference period between January 2020 and March 2021**
 - Overview of the conflict
 - General background of the conflict and recent developments in Syria with a focus on the period between January 2020 and March 2021
 - Political developments
 - International involvement
 - Actors in conflict
 - Overview of actors
 - Presence and areas of control/influence
 - Type of weapons and tactics used
 - Recent security trends and armed confrontations focusing on the period between January 2020 and March 2021
 - Geographical overview of the security situation
 - Impact of violence on the civilian population
 - Tactics and weapons used
 - Security incidents
 - Civilian casualties
 - Humanitarian situation
 - Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war
 - Displacement and return
- ❑ **Security situation and conflict impact on civilians by governorates for the reference period between January 2020 and March 2021**
 - General description (map, districts, population, ethno-religious composition)
 - Conflict background (actors, control/presence)
 - Recent security trends (include information on particularly affected/not affected districts, where available)
 - Impact of the security situation on the civilian population
 - Security incidents
 - Civilian casualties
 - Infrastructure damage and explosive remnants of war
 - Displacement and return



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