THE
CARTER CENTER

WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 15 - 21 February 2021

SYRIA SUMMARY

- Attacks against civilians and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups continued in Aleppo Governorate.
- Under Russian mediation, Israel and the Government of Syria (GoS) exchanged prisoners.
- Disputes in Northeast Syria between pro-GoS forces resulted in armed confrontations.
- Turkey agreed with Russia to supply wheat and grains to GoS-controlled territory.
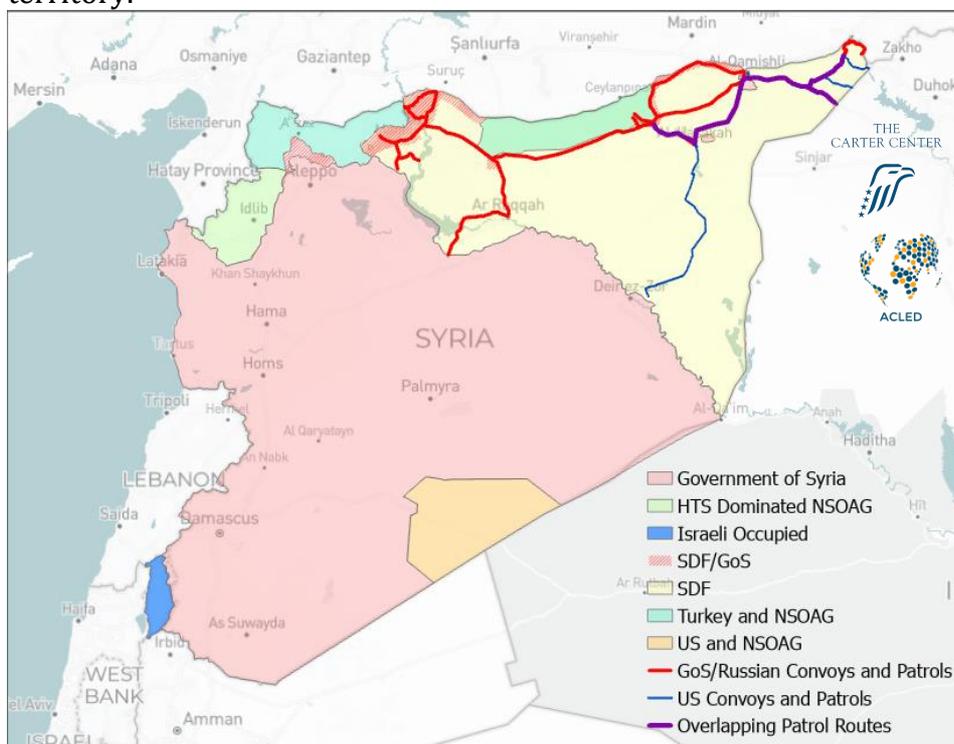

Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 21 February 2021.·NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see endnote 1.

NORTHWEST SYRIA[1]
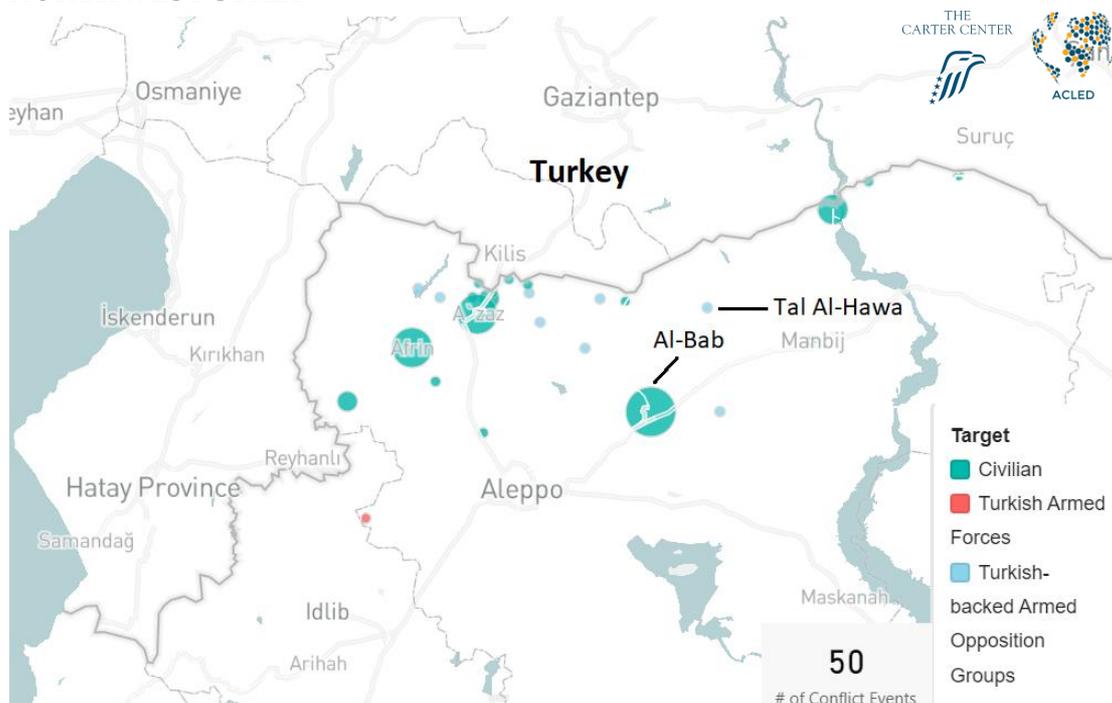
Figure 2: Attacks in Turkish-held Aleppo Governorate since 1 January 2021. Largest bubble represents 15 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Attacks in Turkish-held Aleppo Governorate

After the 2016 Operation Euphrates Shield and the 2018 Operation Olive Branch, Turkey has maintained control over most of northern Aleppo Governorate. Turkey's presence in northwest Syria have been denounced, especially by Kurdish groups and the Government of Syria (GoS). As Turkey has consolidated control, Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition forces have faced attacks from unidentified armed groups and Kurdish militias. Although some of these Kurdish groups claim to be independent, Turkey has argued that they are associated with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

16 February

A vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) exploded in the center roundabout in Al-Bab city, Aleppo Governorate.[2] No group claimed responsibility

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[1] Figure 1, the Carter Center's areas of control map, depicts areas of the dominant actors' control and influence. While "control" is difficult to determine in a complex, dynamic conflict, territorial control is defined as an entity having power over use of force as well as civil/administrative functions in an area. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah maintain a presence in Syrian government-controlled territory. Non-state organized armed groups (NSOAG), including the Kurdish-dominated SDF and Turkish-backed opposition groups operate in areas not under GoS control. The area along the junction of the Syrian border with Iraq and Jordan is a 55km de-confliction zone, established by the US-led coalition that also includes a number of aligned local armed groups. Patrols are also depicted in the map to show the presence of actors that may have influence in an area. This is particularly relevant as US and Russian forces regularly have patrolled towns and routes in the northeast. While they do not control local administration or local forces, there is an assumption of a high degree of coordination with local de facto authorities. Data collected is by the publicly available project ACLED.

[2] https://tinyurl.com/554v9ce8

for the attack, although some pro-opposition media outlets blamed the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces for the attack.[3]

17 February
Unidentified gunmen killed a police officer working for Turkish-backed police unit and his child in Al-Bab city, Aleppo Governorate.[4]

20 February
A suicide bomber killed a Turkish-backed opposition armed group (Sultan Murad) commander in Tal Al-Hawa, northern Aleppo Governorate, close to the Turkish border.[5]

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA
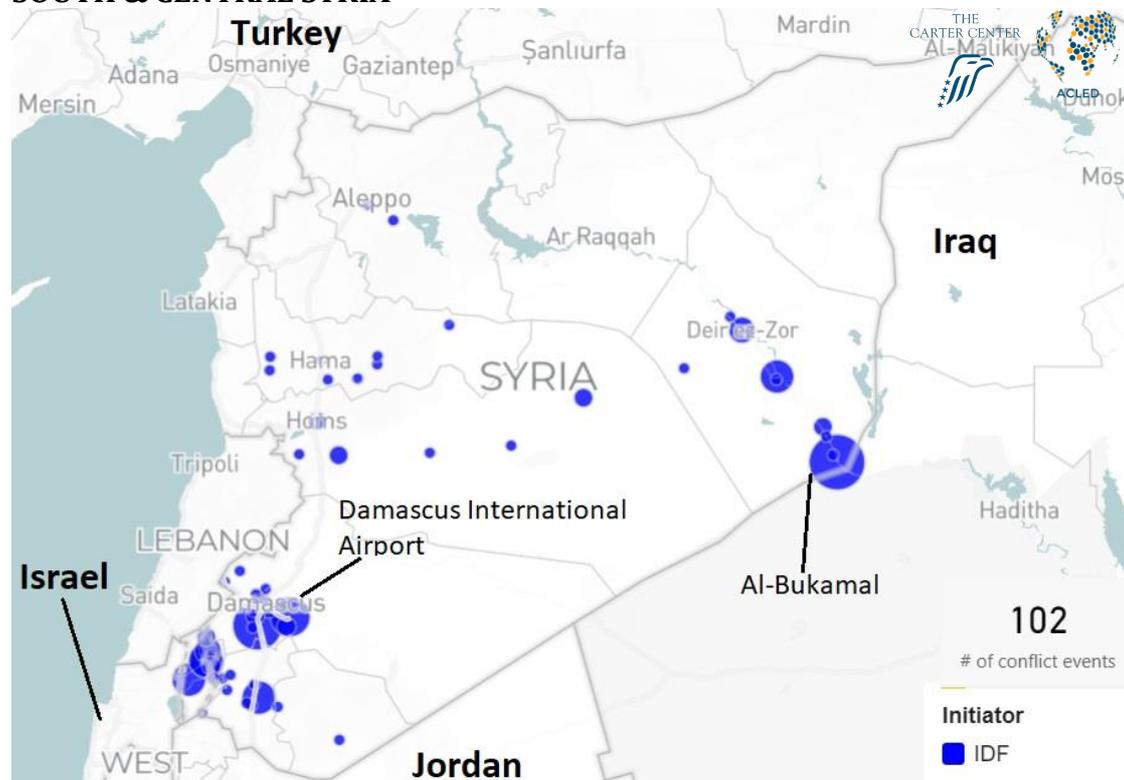
Figure 3: Conflict events involving Israel since 1 January 2020. Largest bubble represents 8 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Israel-GoS Prisoner Swap
The presence of Iranian forces and Iranian-backed militias[6] in Syria has been a source of concern for Israel.[7] Israel regularly conducts airstrikes across Syria against Iranian and GoS targets, but rarely comments on its attacks.[8] Attacks targeting Israeli armed forces in the occupied Golan Heights has also provoked reactions. In 2021, the pace of Israeli airstrikes has increased, most of which are

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[3] https://tinyurl.com/5yjztmmy
[4] https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/458986
[5] https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/459756
[6] Iranian-backed militias refers to armed groups that are supported by Iran, like Hezbollah, and include militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan.
[7] https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/432892
[8] https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-iran-israel-strikes-kill-fighters

conducted in southern Syria or near the Syria-Iraq border in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.

15 February
The Israeli air force struck GoS armed forces military sites and Iranian-backed militia targets in Damascus.[9] The GoS formally complained to the Secretary-General of the United Nations requesting the organization to take "firm" action against Israel.[10]

The Israeli air force began a two-day military exercise titled the "Rose of Gailee" on the Israeli-Syrian border.[11]

17 February
Under Russian mediation, GoS and Israel agreed to exchange prisoners. Israel released two Syrian shepherds and GoS released an Israeli woman who had crossed the border.[12] The agreement included Israel paying $1.2 million for the purchase of Russian-made COVID-19 vaccine for use by the GoS.[13] The latter denied that the COVID-19 vaccines were part of the prisoner swap,[14] and Israel did not comment.[15]

NORTHEAST SYRIA

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[9] https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/syrian-air-defense-intercepts-israeli-aggression-syrian-state-tv-658987

[10] https://tinyurl.com/3swef48c

[11] https://halabtodaytv.net/archives/178856, https://tinyurl.com/vur96e9v

[12] https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/459109

[13] https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/20/world/middleeast/israel-syria-prisoner-swap-vaccines.html

[14] https://halabtodaytv.net/archives/179485

[15] https://www.dawn.com/news/1608707

Figure 4: Incidents related to pro-government infighting between 15-21 February 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Competition among Pro-Government Forces

Competition between Russia and Iran has increased in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate as each party attempts to cement their influence among GoS-backed militias[16] and their own proxies, occasionally resulting in armed confrontations between these competing groups.

15 February

On 14 February, Iranian-backed militias clashed with the GoS-backed National Defense Forces (NDF) near Deir-ez-Zor city.[17] The next day, Iranian-backed militias and the NDF met under GoS mediation to de-escalate tensions in Al-Bukamal, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.[18] The meetings ended without an agreement.[19]

18 February

The NDF and the Iranian-backed Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade clashed in Maadan, eastern Ar-Raqqa Governorate.[20] The clash occurred after a Russian airstrike accidently killed Fatemiyoun fighters in the Badia desert region, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.

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

[17] https://tinyurl.com/yu6y293w

[18] https://tinyurl.com/4tpxpu6g

[19] https://tinyurl.com/3e2pzb72

[20] https://tinyurl.com/37mjcxaa

19 February
GoS-backed militias clashed with Iranian-backed militias in the Kaba jab area, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.[21] The clashes occurred after a dispute between fighters from the two groups escalated.[22]

Russian-Turkish Agreement
On 18 February, Russia and Turkey reached an agreement for Turkish-held areas in Al-Hassakah Governorate to provide wheat and other grains to the GoS.[23] Within GoS-controlled territories, there has been an acute shortage of subsidized bread as a result of grain shortages.[24] The bread shortages have come at a time when food insecurity in the country is at a record high.[25]

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[21] https://tinyurl.com/kyev62sx
[22] https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2021/02/19/1157
[23] https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/459513 , https://halabtodaytv.net/archives/179387
[24] https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/12/03/941382003/imagine-waiting-6-hours-to-buy-a-couple-of-bags-of-bread
[25] https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1084972, https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/twelve-million-syrians-now-grip-hunger-worn-down-conflict-and-soaring