



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 22 - 28 February 2021

SYRIA SUMMARY

- Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups cracked down on rival armed groups in northwest Syria.
- Protests in Northwest Syria denounced the forthcoming presidential election.
- GoS armed forces and local militias clashed in southern Syria.
- US armed forces bombarded Iranian-backed militias in Al-Bukamal, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.

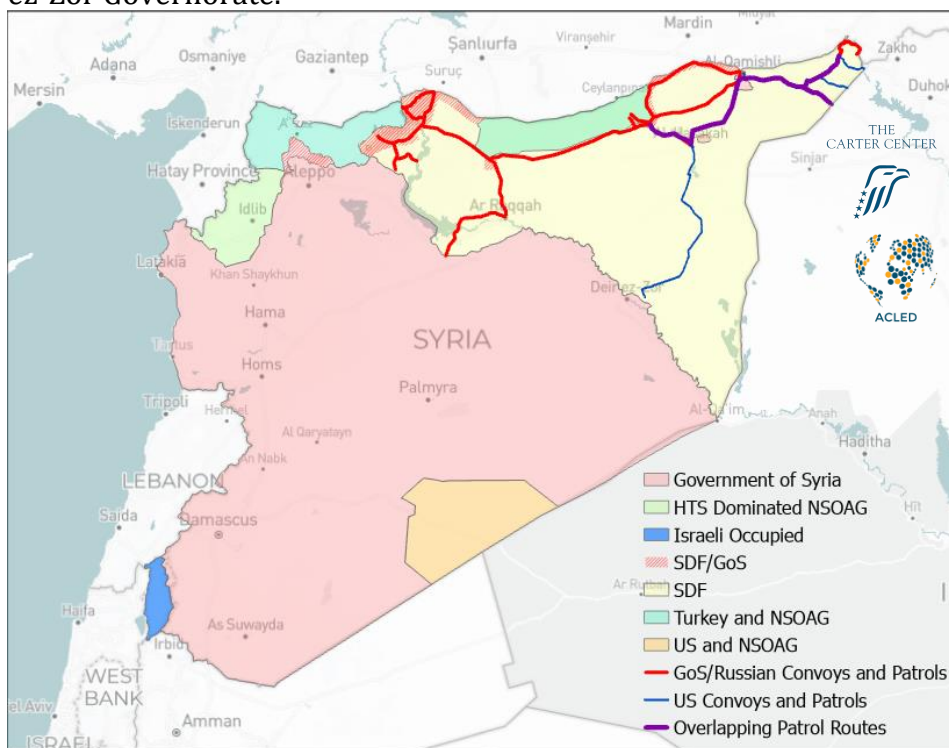


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 28 February 2021.-NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1.

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

Security Campaigns in Northwest Syria

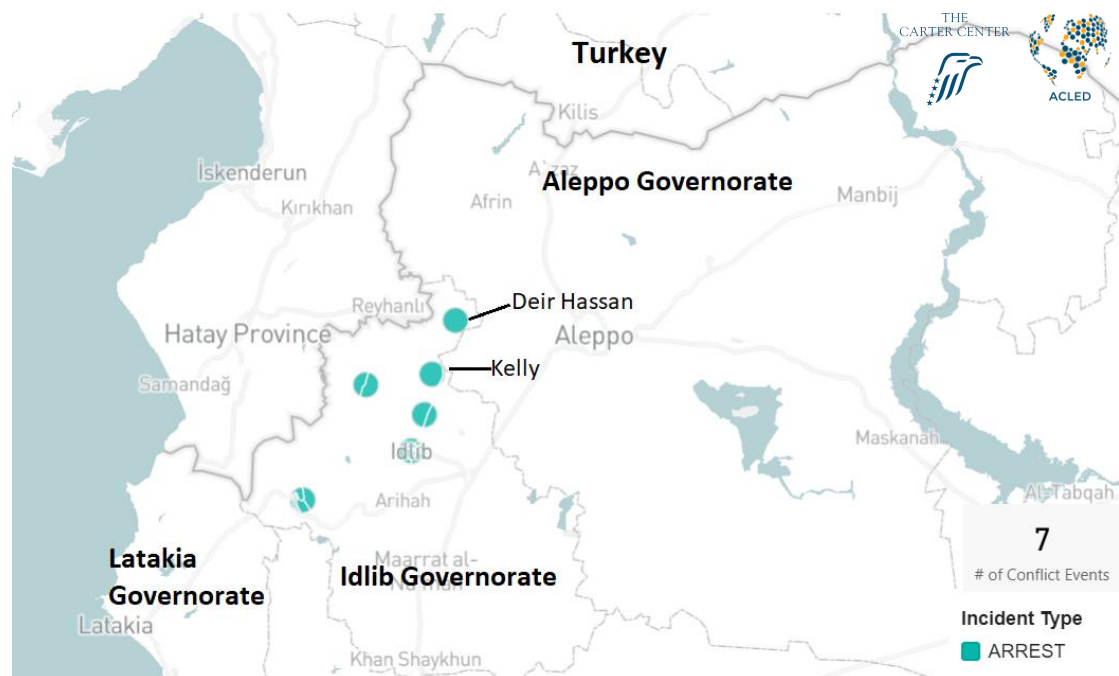


Figure 2: Locations where Hayat Tahrir al-Sham arrested Hurras al-Din fighters since February 1, 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continued the domination of opposition-controlled territory in the northwest following the 23-26 June 2020 clashes with the “So Be Steadfast Operation Room”,² Idlib Governorate.³ In this effort, HTS is continuing attacks against defectors and armed groups perceived as undermining its authority, particularly the Al-Qaeda affiliate Hurras al-Din (HD). In February 2021, HTS increased its crackdown on HD and other rival groups.⁴

Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition groups have faced multiple attacks from unidentified armed groups and Kurdish militias. Since 1 January 2021, there has been an increase of conflict events within Turkish-held

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 A coalition of violent extremist groups, including Hurras al Din, Ansar al Islam, Ansar al Din, Tansiqiyat al-Jihad, and Liwa al-Muqatileen al-Ansar.

³ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/f12a006dfaf84cc58a4348cbb23ab137>

⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2021/02/syria-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-arrest-weaken.html> , <https://tinyurl.com/xhc4kd2a>

areas of Aleppo Governorate.

25 February

HTS arrested HD fighters and its senior leadership in Kelly, Deir Hassan and Idlib city, Idlib Governorate.⁵

27 February

Turkish armed forces and the Turkish-backed opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) began a new security campaign against “terrorist cells” in Turkish-held areas of northwest Syria.⁶ In recent weeks, there have been an increase in the use of improvised explosive device (IED) and armed clashes against Turkish-backed opposition forces and civilians.⁷

Protests in Northwestern Syria

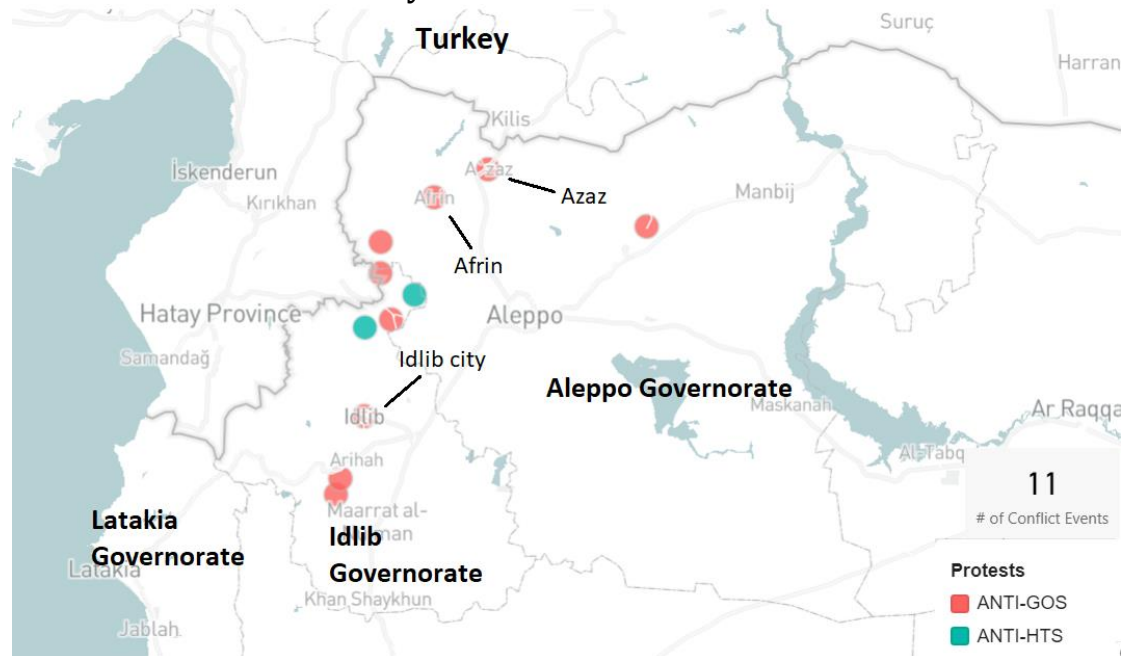


Figure 3: Protests in northwest Syria between 22-28 February 2020. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

On 26 February, anti-Government of Syria (GoS) protests were held throughout Turkish-held areas of northwest Syria, criticizing President Bashar Assad and denouncing the forthcoming elections as “illegitimate”.⁸ Thousands of civilians reportedly took part in the protests.

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/ezrxw4us>

⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/3xtdzk3k>

⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/7dzketmh>

⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/kztt6vfz>

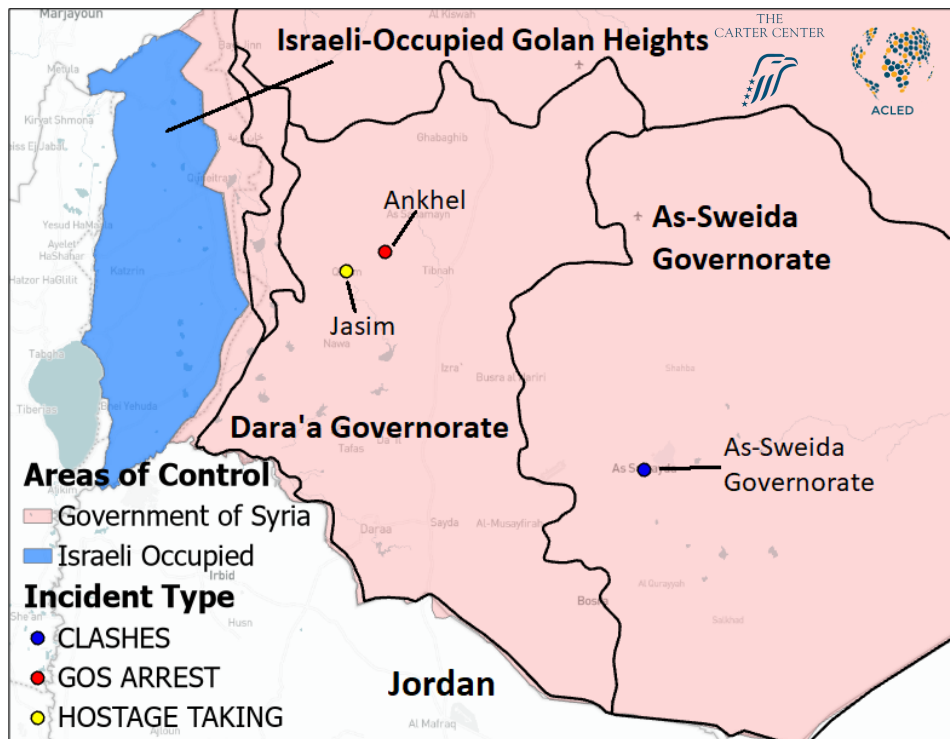


Figure 4: Conflict between GoS armed forces and local militias in southern Syria between 22-28 February. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Instability in Southern Syria

Since the takeover of Dara'a Governorate by the Government of Syria (GoS) in 2018, some former opposition commanders have gained prominence by leading influential political and military bodies. At times, tensions between those two sides have resulted in arrests and violence, such as the January-February standoff in Tafas, Dara'a Governorate. Tensions have been exacerbated by continuing attacks against and assassinations of GoS officers and former opposition fighters, mostly by unidentified perpetrators.

Relations between the predominantly Druze population of As-Sweida Governorate and the GoS have been strained as well. Local people have accused various GoS branches of turning a blind eye to criminal gangs and even supporting them.⁹

24 February

Local militias clashed with GoS-backed militias in As-Sweida city,¹⁰ after the GoS-backed militias tried to close local businesses accused of participating in drug trade.¹¹ At least one fighter reportedly was killed in the clashes.¹² Reports also alleged that the clash was the result of a previous dispute between the militia leaders.¹³ Drug smuggling between Lebanon and Jordan has been a concern for

⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/y5axsz52>

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ <https://tinyurl.com/2eavvv5x>

¹² <https://suwayda24.com/?p=16413>

¹³ <https://tinyurl.com/2eavvv5x>

As-Sweida Governorate.¹⁴ Hezbollah fighters and GoS officials have been accused of profiting from the drug trade.¹⁵

27 February

GoS State Security arrested a former opposition leader in Ankhel, Dara’a Governorate. Supporters of the former opposition leader took dozens of GoS soldiers and police officers as hostages in Jasim.¹⁶ Following negotiations, both sides agreed to release their prisoners and hostages.¹⁷

27 February

The Central Committee of Dara’a, a group composed of former opposition fighters responsible for negotiating with Russia and the GoS about local governance grievances, concluded an agreement with Russian armed forces,¹⁸ conceding that Russian armed forces and GoS Military Security forces would patrol between Izra, Tafas, and Dara’a city.¹⁹ The agreement also stipulated the release of a group of GoS detainees, a persistent concern for the Central Committee and other former opposition groups in Dara’a Governorate.²⁰ Russia mediates frequently between GoS armed forces and former opposition groups in an attempt to prevent the escalation of violence.

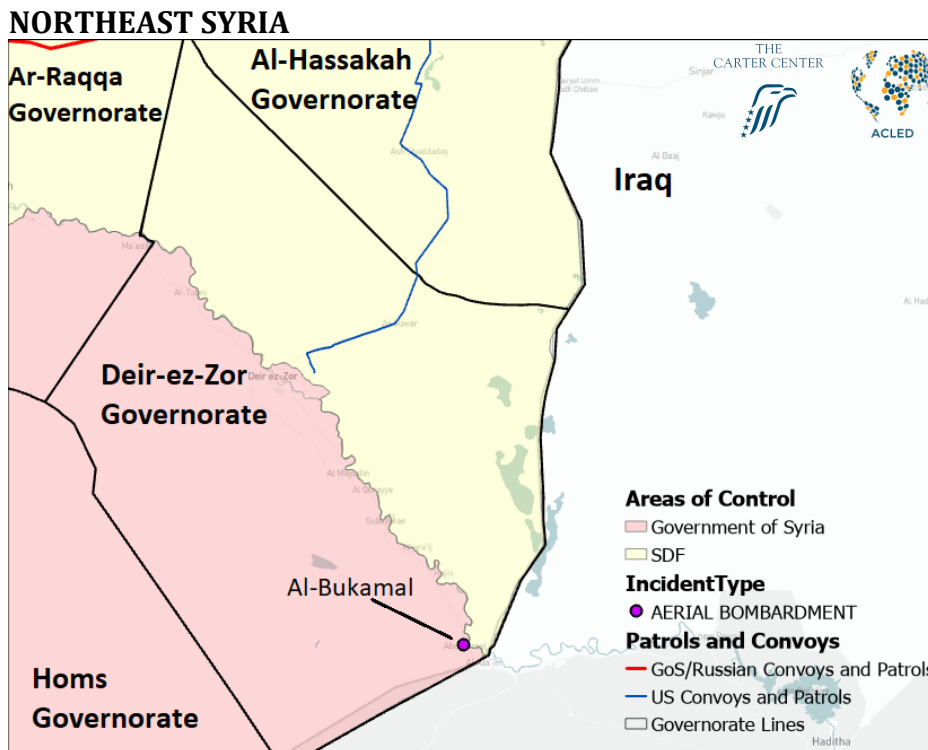


Figure 5: The site of the 26 February US airstrike, Al-Bukamal, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

¹⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/459843>

¹⁵ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/461065>

¹⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/fkjdiym>

¹⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/jjz2sw52>

¹⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/yyzfayjn>

¹⁹ <https://syrianobserver.com/news/64205/daraa-central-committee-meeting-outcomes.html>

²⁰ <https://syrianobserver.com/news/64205/daraa-central-committee-meeting-outcomes.html>

US Airstrikes in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate

On 15 February, a relatively unknown militia group, *Saraya Awliya al-Dam* (Guardians of the Blood Brigade) shelled the Erbil International Airport used by US armed forces in northern Iraq.²¹ The rocket attack killed 2 people, including a contractor working for US forces and an Iraqi civilian.²² US officials and Iraqi leaders condemned the attack,²³ with Prime Minister of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, Masrour Barzani, calling the strike “a terrorist attack”.²⁴ US and Iraqi officials have argued that the relatively unknown militia group is a front for Iranian-backed militias like Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq.²⁵ Iran denied any responsibility for the attack.²⁶

On 26 February, US armed forces conducted airstrikes against the headquarters and facilities used by the Iranian-backed militias Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada in Al-Bukamal, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.^{27,28} The US government announced that the airstrikes were a retaliation for the attack on US contractors in Iraq.²⁹ Iranian-backed militias, especially Iraqi militias, are prevalent in Al-Bukamal. Reports on the death toll from the US bombing vary, from the US military reporting 1 militia fighter dead, Reuters reporting 17 fighters killed,³⁰ to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reporting 22 dead.³¹ Russia³² and the GoS condemned the bombing³³ as a violation of international law and a pretext for further intervention.

For earlier weekly conflict summaries, please click [here](#).

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²¹ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/usled-coalition-no-americans-killed-in-iraq-rocket-attack-101613468310666.html>

²² <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/220220211>

²³ <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/15/968182912/rockets-kill-civilian-contractor-injure-u-s-service-member-others-in-erbil-iraq>

²⁴ <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-interview/20210227-iraqi-kurdistan-pm-barzani-rocket-attack-on-us-base-in-erbil-definitely-terrorist-attack>

²⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/15/north-iraq-airbase-hosting-us-troops-targeted-by-several-rockets>

²⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/15/north-iraq-airbase-hosting-us-troops-targeted-by-several-rockets>

²⁷ <https://npasyria.com/en/55141/>

²⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/461683>

²⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/26/us-strikes-iranian-backed-military-infrastructure-in-syria>

³⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/26/us-strikes-iranian-backed-military-infrastructure-in-syria>

³¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-air-strike-syria-iranian-backed-militia-killed-one-n1259180>

³² <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/461406>

³³ <https://halabtodaytv.net/archives/180242>