



# 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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# Acknowledgements

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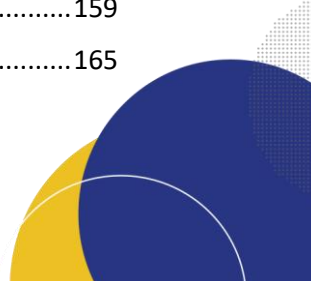
It must be noted that the review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report, but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of EASO.

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# Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019).<sup>1</sup> 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](#).

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<sup>1</sup> 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](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)<sup>2</sup> and the EASO COI Writing and Referencing Style Guide (2019).<sup>3</sup>

## 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+ countries<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>3</sup> EASO, Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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).<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

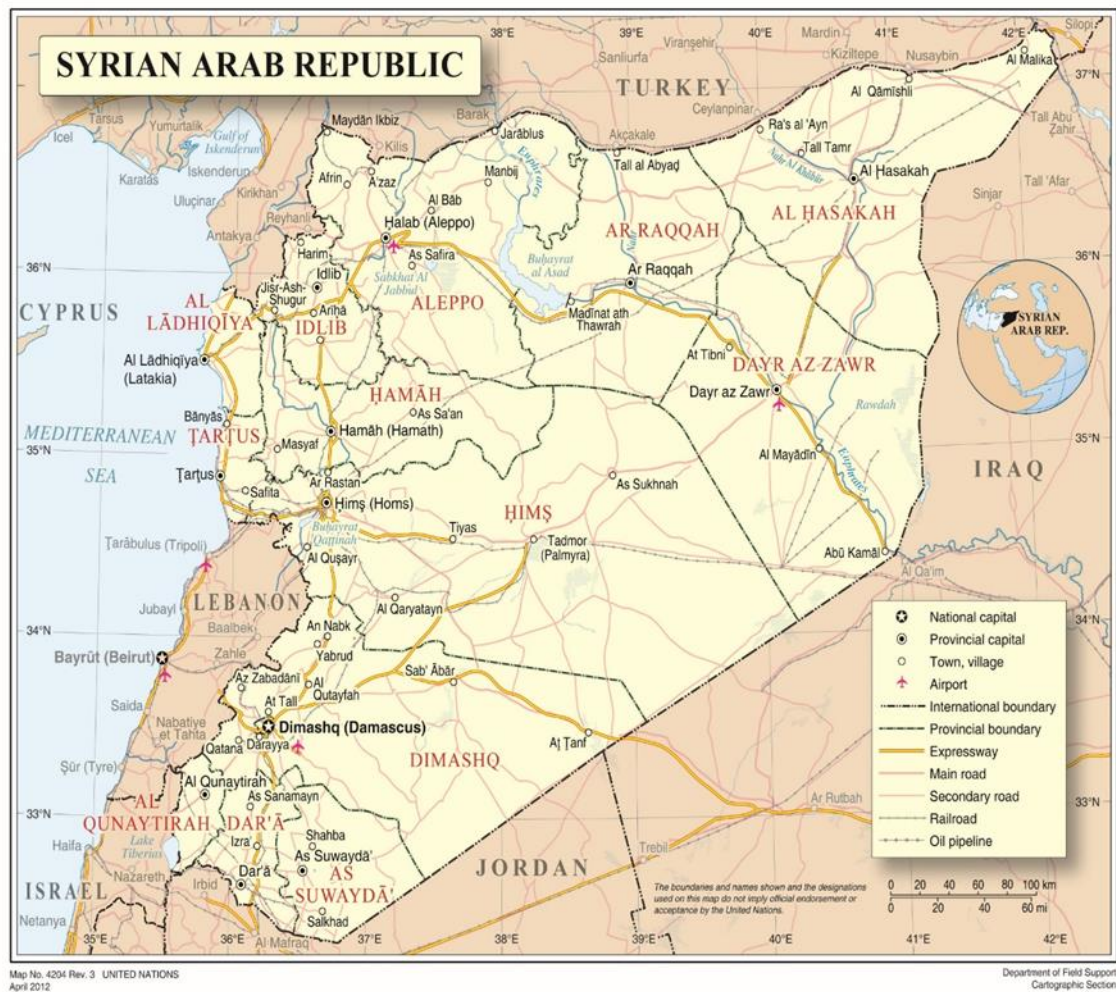
The second part provides a governorate-level description of the security situation. Each governorate chapter includes a map, brief description of the governorate, background conflict dynamics and armed actors present in the area, recent security trends, including information on civilian fatalities, security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

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

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

<sup>9</sup> 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 Nations<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> 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):<sup>11</sup>

- 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 GoS<sup>12</sup>, ISIL and Kurdish armed groups in Syria, and controls parts of northern Syria with the help of anti-GoS armed groups.<sup>13</sup>
- 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.<sup>14</sup>
- 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.<sup>15</sup>
- Turkey is engaged in a non-international armed conflict in Syria with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) forces.<sup>16</sup>

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.'<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

<sup>15</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>17</sup> 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

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

The Geneva peace talks led by the UN (in 2016<sup>19</sup> and 2017<sup>20</sup>) have been unsuccessful, with the GoS and opposition representatives failing to find common ground.<sup>21</sup> Outside of UN auspices, Russia, Turkey and Iran set up peace talks in January 2017 in what became known as the Astana process.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> Starting from the beginning of 2018, three out of the four de-escalation zones have been retaken by GoS forces.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

On 16 September 2019, Turkey, Russia and Iran announced that an agreement regarding the composition of the Constitutional Committee had been reached.<sup>26</sup> 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 delegates<sup>27</sup> chosen by the UN representing 'Syrian experts, civil society, independents, tribal leaders and women'.<sup>28</sup> A 45 member Constitution-drafting group, 15 from each group, was set up in October 2019 following the committee's first meeting.<sup>29</sup> Subsequent sessions of the Constitutional Committee held in November 2019<sup>30</sup>, December 2020 and January 2021, failed to make progress.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> The Ba'ath Party and its allies joined under the 'National Unity' alliance won 70 % of the seats.<sup>33</sup> The remaining seats went to marginal parties connected to the Ba'ath Party and nominal independent candidates with ties to President Assad.<sup>34</sup> Observers stated that the process was marred by electoral fraud and political interference.<sup>35</sup> Former French ambassador to Syria Michel Duclos labelled the parliamentary elections as a 'mockery'.<sup>36</sup> All candidates had to be 'vetted by state security services, thus precluding the entry of earnest political opposition'.<sup>37</sup>

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

<sup>20</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

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

<sup>25</sup> See Idlib and Aleppo chapters.

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

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

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

<sup>29</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>31</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> The elections were boycotted in areas outside GoS control.<sup>39</sup> Syrian authorities claimed that more than 14 million Syrians voted in the presidential elections, a turnout of around 78 %.<sup>40</sup>

European countries have expressed their intention to reject the results of 'any presidential elections not based on United Nations Security Council resolution 2254'.<sup>41</sup> 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'.<sup>42</sup> Following the May 2021 presidential elections, EU High Representative Joseph Borrell stated that they 'met none of the criteria of a genuinely democratic vote'.<sup>43</sup>

## 1.3 International involvement

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

**Russia** intervened militarily in the Syrian conflict in September 2015, in support of the Syrian government<sup>46</sup> and is credited with changing the tides of war in Assad's favour.<sup>47</sup> 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'.<sup>48</sup> Estimates from March 2020 put the number of Russian troops in Syria at 5 000.<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> In 2020, Iranian presence and influence was reported throughout Syria, with a higher concentration in Damascus, Aleppo, Deir Ez-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>46</sup> 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

<sup>47</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>50</sup> 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

<sup>51</sup> 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

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

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

**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.<sup>55</sup> 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'.<sup>56</sup> 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'.<sup>57</sup>

As of March 2020, Turkey fielded between 3 000 to 4 000 troops in Syria, although the number constantly fluctuates.<sup>58</sup> In 2020 and early 2021, it maintained military outposts and troops in Idlib governorate<sup>59</sup>, northern Aleppo governorate and in the area between Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ain.<sup>60</sup> In 2020, Turkey engaged in military confrontations with GoS forces in north-east<sup>61</sup> and north-west Syria<sup>62</sup>, as well as with Kurdish forces.<sup>63</sup>

The **US-led Global Coalition Against Daesh [ISIL]**, currently comprised of 83 states, was formed in 2014 to combat ISIL in Iraq and Syria<sup>64</sup> and since September 2014 has carried out military operations against ISIL and other targets in Syria.<sup>65</sup> Under former US President Donald Trump, the US reduced its involvement in the Syrian conflict<sup>66</sup> and as of February 2021, 900 US troops remained in Syria deployed in north-east Syria and around Tanf Garrison (Homs governorate).<sup>67</sup> US operations against ISIL in Syria

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

<sup>54</sup> 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](#)

<sup>55</sup> 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

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

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

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

<sup>59</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>61</sup> 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

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

<sup>63</sup> 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

<sup>64</sup> 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](#)

<sup>65</sup> 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](#)

<sup>66</sup> 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

<sup>67</sup> 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 2020<sup>68</sup> and first three months of 2021.<sup>69</sup> US airstrikes on Iranian-affiliated militias and targets in Syria were also reported.<sup>70</sup>

Since the start of the conflict in 2011, **Israel** has carried out air strikes against mainly Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian targets in Syria<sup>71</sup>, which it considers representing a security threat to its borders.<sup>72</sup> These airstrikes continued in 2020<sup>73</sup>, with Israel's military claiming it hit 50 targets in Syria during the year.<sup>74</sup> Israeli airstrikes on GoS, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian targets were reported in 2021.<sup>75</sup>

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'.<sup>76</sup>

For an overview of the number and location of military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria as documented by Jusoor for Studies<sup>77</sup> in January 2021, see Map 2 below:

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

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

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

<sup>71</sup> 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

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

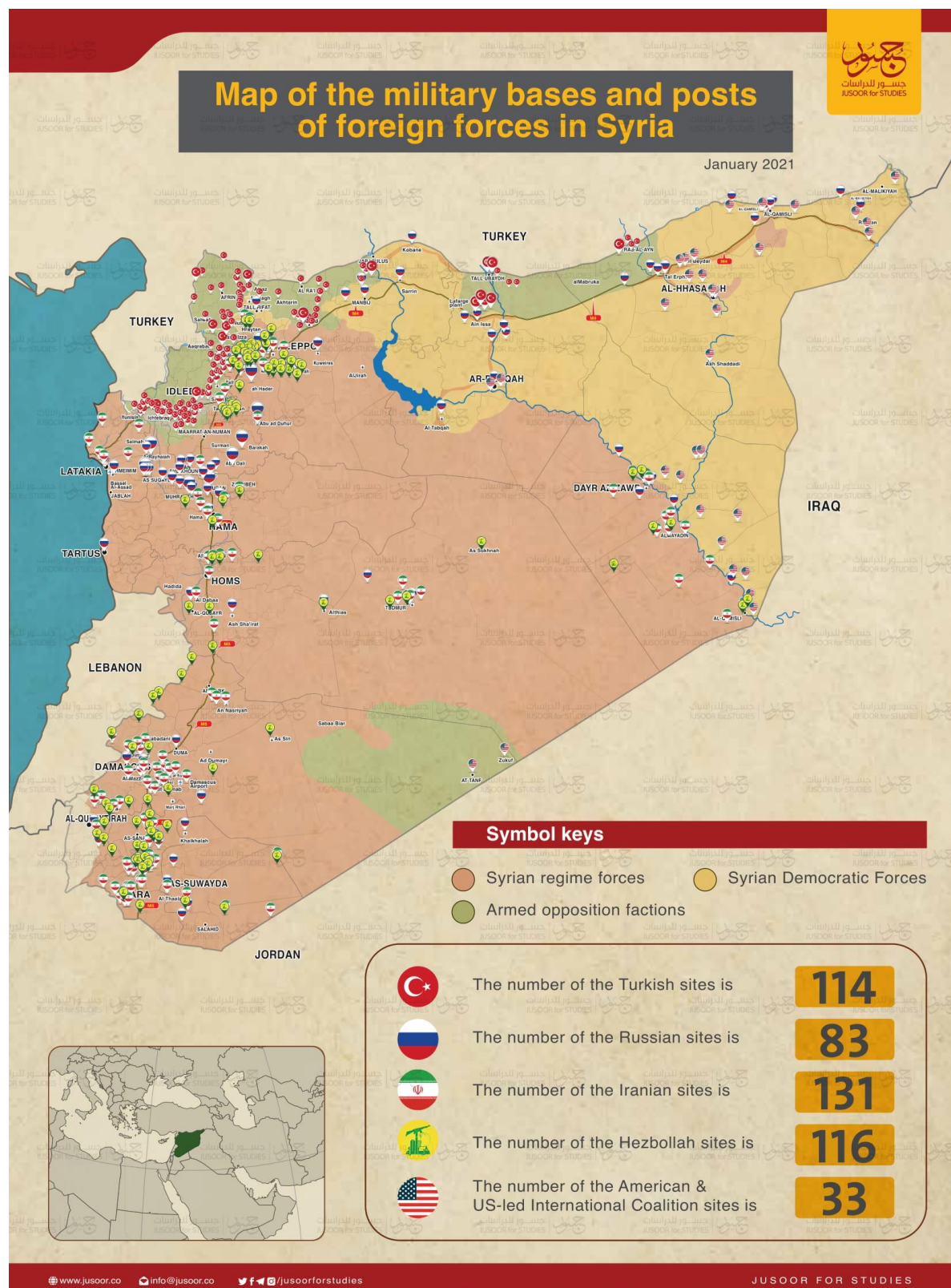
<sup>73</sup> BBC News, Syria war: Israel 'hits Iran-backed fighters near Damascus', 6 February 2020, [url](#); MEE, Israel launches air strikes in Syria, casualties reported, 6 February 2020, [url](#)

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

<sup>75</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>77</sup> 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 Syria<sup>78</sup>

<sup>78</sup> 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'.<sup>79</sup>

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

As of 2020, the Syrian Armed Forces were estimated to have 169 000 military personnel of which 130 000 were serving in the SAA.<sup>83</sup> 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).<sup>84</sup>

The SAA comprises of five main corps (the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Corps), each consisting of divisions and led by a major general. The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Corps were created under Russian initiative after September 2015.<sup>85</sup> The two corps operated either under joint Russian-Syrian command (4<sup>th</sup> Corps) or explicit Russian command (5<sup>th</sup> Corps).<sup>86</sup> Apart from the five main corps, the SAA also has several semi-independent units: the Republican Guard, the Special Forces and the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, which also fall under the command of the Chief of Staff.<sup>87</sup>

The SAA is said to rely often on key 'praetorian units' such as the Republican Guard, the 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Division is described to be made up of 'elite' forces although in practice it is 'a collection of loosely affiliated units'<sup>89</sup>, reportedly under the command of the president's brother - Maher Assad.<sup>90</sup> According to a Human Rights Watch report which documented the GoS offensive on Idlib from April

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

<sup>80</sup> CIA, World Factbook, Syria, 25 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>81</sup> 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

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

<sup>83</sup> Tawazun, Syria Country Profile, 2020, [url](#)

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

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

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

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

<sup>88</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>90</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, the 25<sup>th</sup> Division (Tiger Forces), the Palestinian militia Liwa al-Quds and the NDF.<sup>91</sup>

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).<sup>92</sup>

US CRS stated that pro-GoS forces operating in Syria include Iran, Russia and the Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>93</sup> Various pro-government militias, both local and foreign<sup>94</sup>, were operating in Syria alongside the regular armed forces.<sup>95</sup> These included local militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF) and non-Syrian militias made up of foreign fighters mainly backed by Iran.<sup>96</sup>

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'.<sup>97</sup> 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)<sup>98</sup> areas in northern Aleppo governorate<sup>99</sup>, and in the Operation Peace Spring area between Tall Abyad (Raqqa governorate) and Ras al Ain (Hasaka governorate).<sup>100</sup>

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.<sup>101</sup> According to a January 2021 report by Syrian researcher Khayrallah al-Hilu<sup>102</sup>, 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.<sup>103</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>96</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>102</sup> 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](#)

<sup>103</sup> 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 30<sup>104</sup> to 40<sup>105</sup> distinct armed groups in its composition.<sup>106</sup> It includes armed opposition groups from northern Syria as well as displaced factions from Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs and Hama governorates.<sup>107</sup> 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.<sup>108</sup> The Hamza Division, al-Mutasim Brigade and the 51<sup>st</sup> Brigade are deployed in the Euphrates Shield Area between Azaz, Al-Bab and Jarablus.<sup>109</sup> In Ras al Ain, the Turkmen factions Sultan Murad Division and Hamza Division are reported to be in control.<sup>110</sup> Major towns located between Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn are controlled by the Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction.<sup>111</sup> Afrin is dominated by the Sultan Murad Division.<sup>112</sup>

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 area<sup>113</sup>, under the Syrian National Army banner was announced<sup>114</sup> by the so-called Syrian Interim Government.<sup>115</sup> While nominally the SNA is a unified structure that sits under the formal supervision of the so-called Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Defence<sup>116</sup>, the constituent groups 'each answer directly to Turkey and maintain its pre-National Army form'.<sup>117</sup> Several sources assessed that the SNA does not function as a unified military structure, with each faction acting largely independent from another.<sup>118</sup>

Although united under the SNA banner, the constituent groups are in practice unaccountable to other actors except Turkey<sup>119</sup>, compete with each other<sup>120</sup> and are often unpopular with the local population.<sup>121</sup>

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

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

<sup>106</sup> 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>113</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>115</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>118</sup> 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

<sup>119</sup> 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

<sup>120</sup> 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](#)

<sup>121</sup> 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 Lister<sup>122</sup> in a Middle East Institute article to be around 35 000 fighters<sup>123</sup> whereas the US Defense Intelligence Agency assessed the Turkish-backed armed groups consists of between 22 000 and 50 000 fighters.<sup>124</sup>

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).<sup>125</sup> The SDF was established in October 2015.<sup>126</sup> 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.<sup>127</sup> According to a July 2020 analysis, the SDF is ‘a multi-ethnic, multi-religious force’ containing a representation<sup>128</sup> from Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Yezidis, Circassians and Turkmen.<sup>129</sup> The SDF was established in order to support the US-led coalition in the war against the ‘Islamic State’ (ISIL)<sup>130</sup> and it is regarded as ‘the key powerbroker’ in north-east Syria and the main partner of the US-led coalition in countering ISIL.<sup>131</sup>

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.<sup>132</sup>

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).<sup>133</sup>

<sup>122</sup> 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](#)

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

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

<sup>125</sup> 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

<sup>126</sup> 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

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

<sup>128</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

<sup>132</sup> 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](#)

<sup>133</sup> 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.<sup>134</sup> Both are further divided into three sub-elements assigned with specific tasks.<sup>135</sup>

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.<sup>136</sup> 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.<sup>137</sup> In December 2020, Wladimir van Wilgenburg estimated that the SDF pays the salaries of over 100 000<sup>138</sup> fighters.<sup>139</sup> 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.<sup>140</sup>

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 EU<sup>141</sup>, US<sup>142</sup> and Turkey-designated terrorist organisation Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, *Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê*).<sup>143</sup> 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.<sup>144</sup> According to the International Crisis Group, the SDF 'generally accepts that the YPG is its core fighting force, which maintains command and control'.<sup>145</sup> According to COAR Global, the PYD/YPG have a dominating role in the Autonomous Administration as a whole.<sup>146</sup> Researcher Amy Austin Holmes<sup>147</sup> 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.<sup>148</sup>

<sup>134</sup> 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.

<sup>135</sup> 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

<sup>136</sup> 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.

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

<sup>138</sup> 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](#)

<sup>139</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>141</sup> 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](#)

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

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

<sup>144</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>147</sup> 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](#)

<sup>148</sup> 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 Syria<sup>149</sup>, describes the SDF as ‘an Arab-majority force’.<sup>150</sup>

The Autonomous Administration has a political assembly, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)<sup>151</sup>, 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).<sup>152</sup> 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.<sup>153</sup>

The PYD and the YPG are deeply connected to the PKK on organisational and ideological levels<sup>154</sup>, 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.<sup>155</sup> 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.<sup>156</sup>

In a Chatham House report, Zaki Mehchy<sup>157</sup> (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]’.<sup>158</sup> 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’.<sup>159</sup> The PKK-members active in the ranks of the SDF and the Autonomous Administration have been described as the ‘shadow authority’<sup>160</sup> inside these institutions and are seen by many as the ‘real power’<sup>161</sup> 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 2015<sup>162</sup>, has been described, on the one hand, as a crucial obstacle<sup>163</sup> for the end of hostilities in northern Syria and as a factor ‘adding to the feelings of resentment and exclusion’<sup>164</sup> among the Arab residents of SDF-controlled North-East Syria.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>157</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

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

<sup>162</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>164</sup> 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’.<sup>165</sup> 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’.<sup>166</sup>

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.<sup>167</sup> 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.<sup>168</sup> The US<sup>169</sup>, UN<sup>170</sup>, EU<sup>171</sup> and Turkey have designated HTS as a terrorist organisation affiliated with Al Qaeda.<sup>172</sup> HTS has publicly distanced itself from Al Qaeda in 2017, claiming it is an independent entity.<sup>173</sup> In 2020, HTS has clashed with Al Qaeda-aligned factions operating in Idlib, significantly weakening their position.<sup>174</sup>

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

HTS has created several civilian bodies in the territory under its control, including a governance body responsible for civilian functions – the Syrian Salvation Government<sup>177</sup>, a court system that applies Sharia law and an extensive prison system.<sup>178</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>167</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

<sup>171</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>173</sup> 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

<sup>174</sup> 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](#)

<sup>175</sup> 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

<sup>176</sup> 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

<sup>177</sup> 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

<sup>178</sup> 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.<sup>179</sup>

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.<sup>180</sup> It has also cooperated with Turkey during the GoS offensive on Idlib in 2019 and early 2020<sup>181</sup> and in its aftermath.<sup>182</sup> 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.<sup>183</sup>

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

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.<sup>187</sup> The NLF was formed in 2018 by rebel armed groups in the Idlib area.<sup>188</sup> The group is made up of moderate and Islamist factions<sup>189</sup>, including Feilaq-al Sham<sup>190</sup>, Ahrar al-Sham<sup>191</sup>, the Free Idlib Army<sup>192</sup>, Jaish-al Ahrar<sup>193</sup> and Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki.<sup>194</sup>

<sup>179</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>182</sup> 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

<sup>183</sup> 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](#)

<sup>184</sup> 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

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

<sup>186</sup> 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](#)

<sup>187</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

<sup>191</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>194</sup> 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 2019<sup>195</sup>, it was reported that on the ground it continues to function independently from it.<sup>196</sup> NLF has also cooperated militarily with HTS against GoS forces in Idlib as part of *al-Fath al-Mubeen*, a joint military operations room.<sup>197</sup>

Smaller, predominantly Islamist armed opposition groups also operate in the Idlib area and include the Al Qaeda affiliate<sup>198</sup> Hurras al-Din (HAD)<sup>199</sup>, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)<sup>200</sup>, the Khattab Al-Shishani Brigade comprised of Chechen fighters<sup>201</sup>, the Katiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ) made up of fighters from central Asia<sup>202</sup> and Ansar al-Tawhid<sup>203</sup>, among others.

Depending on the source, HAD was estimated to have around 2 500<sup>204</sup> or between 3 500 to 5 000 fighters in Idlib.<sup>205</sup> The group suffered significant leadership losses in 2020<sup>206</sup>, including its leader Khaled al Aruri who was killed by a US drone strike.<sup>207</sup> TIP is headquartered in Harim and estimated to have between 3 000 to 4 500 fighters.<sup>208</sup>

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.<sup>209</sup> This led to clashes between HTS and the So Be Steadfast coalition in mid-2020<sup>210</sup> which resulted in HTS reasserting its dominance in the area.<sup>211</sup>

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 \(May 2020\)](#)

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

<sup>196</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

<sup>200</sup> 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

<sup>201</sup> 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

<sup>202</sup> 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

<sup>203</sup> 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

<sup>204</sup> 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

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

<sup>206</sup> 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

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

<sup>208</sup> 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

<sup>209</sup> 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

<sup>210</sup> 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](#)

<sup>211</sup> 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.<sup>212</sup> ISIL is a UN and EU<sup>213</sup> designated terrorist organisation.<sup>214</sup> 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.<sup>215</sup> By August 2017, the US-led coalition has conducted over 11 000 airstrikes in Syria against ISIL targets.<sup>216</sup> GoS forces also fought against ISIL, reclaiming territories such as Palmyra<sup>217</sup>, while Russia claimed air strikes on ISIL targets.<sup>218</sup> ISIL lost territorial control in Syria in March 2019<sup>219</sup>, and has since operated as a covert network.<sup>220</sup>

Syria and Iraq represent the 'core area for ISIL'<sup>221</sup>, which ISIL operate as a single front.<sup>222</sup> 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)<sup>223</sup> 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.<sup>224</sup> 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.<sup>225</sup> 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.<sup>226</sup>

According to an analysis by Gregory Waters<sup>227</sup> 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

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

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

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

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

<sup>216</sup> USDOD, Airstrikes updates, n.d., [url](#)

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

<sup>218</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>220</sup> 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

<sup>221</sup> 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

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

<sup>223</sup> 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

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

<sup>225</sup> 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

<sup>226</sup> COAR, Syria in 2021, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>227</sup> 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.<sup>228</sup>

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 (Raqqah 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).<sup>229</sup>

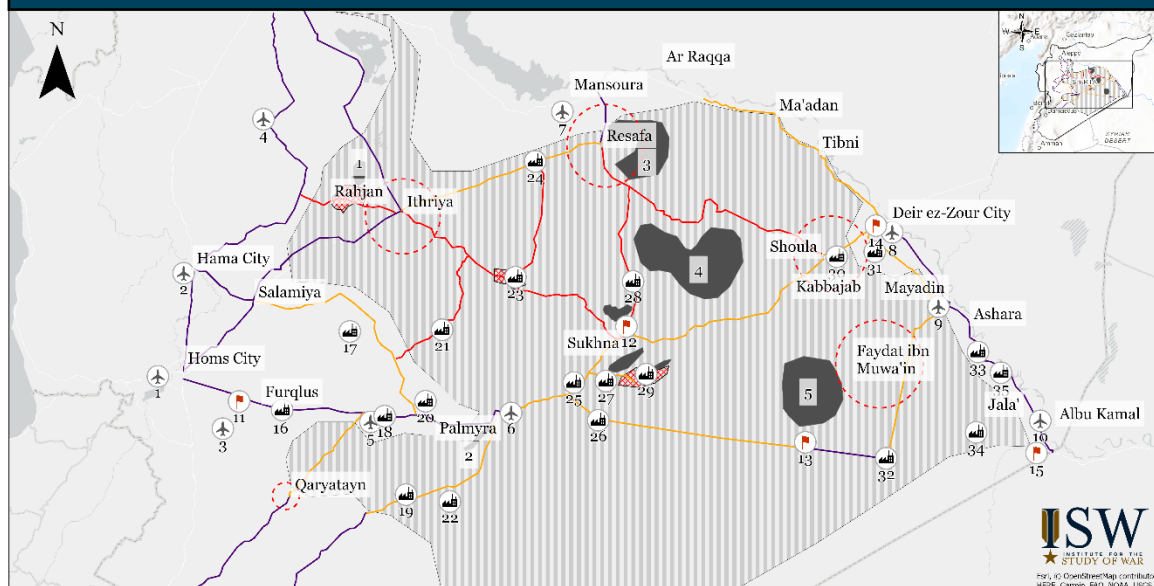
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<sup>228</sup> Waters, G., *ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>229</sup> 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.<sup>230</sup> Limited ISIL presence has been reported in the Idlib area, despite regular arrests of ISIL fighters by HTS.<sup>231</sup>

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

<sup>231</sup> 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.<sup>232</sup> 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.<sup>233</sup>

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.<sup>234</sup>

Between January and September 2020, the largest number of ISIL attacks was recorded by USDOD in Deir Ez-Zor governorate<sup>235</sup>, 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.<sup>236</sup> 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.<sup>237</sup> Temporary seizure of villages by ISIL was also reported in the second half of 2020 in east Hama governorate.<sup>238</sup>

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.<sup>239</sup>

ISIL reportedly operates in a decentralised manner, allowing decision-making to each independent cell.<sup>240</sup> Most ISIL attacks were carried out by small cells<sup>241</sup> using small-arms fire and IEDs for attacks on

<sup>232</sup> 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

<sup>233</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>235</sup> 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

<sup>236</sup> 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

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

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

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

<sup>240</sup> 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

<sup>241</sup> 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.<sup>242</sup> Larger-scale attacks which resulted in more casualties amongst security forces were reported in GoS-held areas in Homs, Hama, Raqqqa and Aleppo governorates.<sup>243</sup> ISIL attacks in GoS-held areas included complex ambushes and targeted assassinations against GoS forces.<sup>244</sup>, attacks on tribal leaders in Deir Ez-Zor<sup>245</sup>, intimidation and extortion of local merchants and farmers<sup>246</sup>, as well as a large-scale kidnapping of civilians in Hama governorate.<sup>247</sup>

While security operations against ISIL cells were carried out during the reference period<sup>248</sup>, observers have deemed them insufficient to neutralise ISIL presence.<sup>249</sup> The UN Security Council assessed that compared to Iraq, in Syria security operations against ISIL are not as stringent.<sup>250</sup>

The UN Security Council estimated in a report from February 2021 that ISIL has a combined 10 000 fighters active in Syria and Iraq.<sup>251</sup> 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.<sup>252</sup>

Detained ISIL fighters and their families in north-east Syria number more than 100 000.<sup>253</sup> 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.<sup>254</sup> Detained ISIL fighters in north-east Syria number approximately 11 000, a significant number of whom are foreign fighters.<sup>255</sup>

<sup>242</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>245</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>248</sup> 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](#)

<sup>249</sup> 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

<sup>250</sup> 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

<sup>251</sup> 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

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

<sup>253</sup> 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

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

<sup>255</sup> 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, riots<sup>256</sup>, violence<sup>257</sup> and small-scale escapes of ISIL suspects from prisons and camps in north-east Syria<sup>258</sup> 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.<sup>259</sup> Human Rights Watch stated that by October 2020 around 1 000 had been released.<sup>260</sup> Kurdish authorities told reporters in October 2020 that 631 detainees with ‘no blood on their hands’ had been released.<sup>261</sup> The Rojava Information Center reported that ISIL attacks in areas where those residents returned did not change following the releases.<sup>262</sup>

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

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<sup>256</sup> 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

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

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

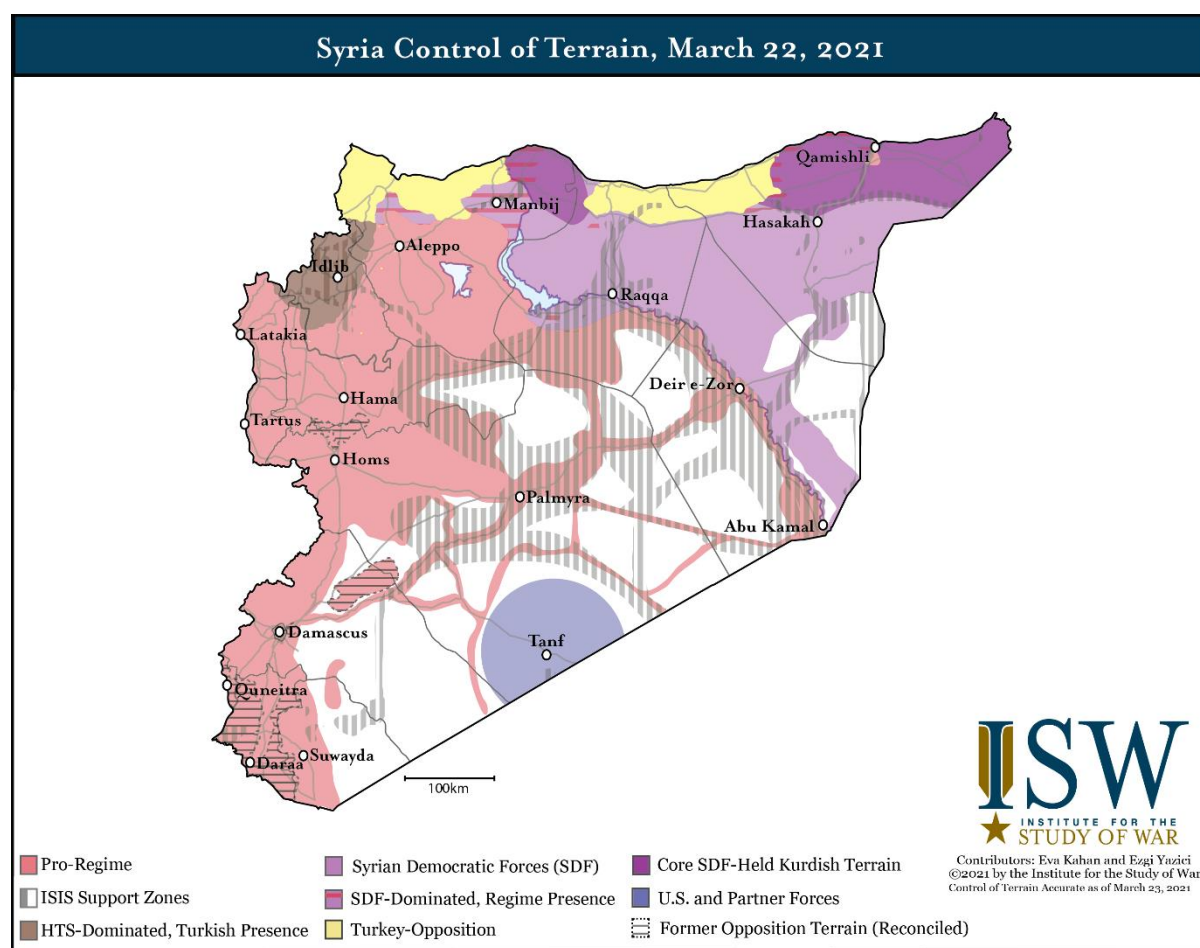
<sup>259</sup> HRW, World Report 2021 - Syria, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

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

<sup>261</sup> 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](#)

<sup>262</sup> 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 country<sup>263</sup>, including the major cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, and nearly all the governorates capitals (see also [Map 4](#)).<sup>264</sup> Foreign actors and pro-GoS militias exert significant influence over parts of the territory nominally under GoS control.<sup>265</sup> 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.<sup>266</sup>

<sup>263</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>265</sup> 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](#)

<sup>266</sup> 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.<sup>267</sup>

Freedom House stated that pro-government militias are 'nominally loyal to the regime but often free to exploit the population in areas they control'.<sup>268</sup> In GoS-held areas in Deir Ez-Zor governorate which have been recaptured from ISIL, militias were reported to be in control<sup>269</sup> and engaging in criminality and extortion of civilians.<sup>270</sup> Residents of the governorate of Sweida have accused GoS-affiliated forces of tolerating or even supporting criminal networks operating in the province.<sup>271</sup> While GoS has sometimes engaged in operations to bring unaccountable pro-GoS militias under its control<sup>272</sup>, 'enforcement remains uneven'.<sup>273</sup>

During the reporting period, in some places in Damascus<sup>274</sup>, Rural Damascus, Homs<sup>275</sup>, Dar'a<sup>276</sup>, Aleppo<sup>277</sup> and Sweida<sup>278</sup> governorates, armed clashes between pro-GoS militias were reported.<sup>279</sup>

Between April 2019<sup>280</sup> and beginning of March 2020<sup>281</sup>, the GoS carried out a military offensive against opposition-held areas in parts of Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates<sup>282</sup>, leading

<sup>267</sup> 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](#)

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

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

<sup>270</sup> 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](#)

<sup>271</sup> 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](#)

<sup>272</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

<sup>276</sup> 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

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

<sup>278</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>280</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>282</sup> 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 casualties<sup>283</sup>, massive displacement of civilians and a humanitarian crisis.<sup>284</sup> In early 2020, the GoS offensive in north-west Syria made advances in opposition-held areas in northern Hama governorate and southern Idlib governorate.<sup>285</sup> 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 2019<sup>286</sup> and managed to take control of the full length of the M5 Damascus-Aleppo highway.<sup>287</sup>

GoS-held areas situated in proximity to the frontlines in north-west Syria have been targeted by mortar and rocket attacks.<sup>288</sup> 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.<sup>289</sup>

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'.<sup>290</sup>

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.<sup>291</sup>

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.'<sup>292</sup> 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.<sup>293</sup> Civilian casualties were reported as a result of indiscriminate shelling and rocket attacks between the two parties.<sup>294</sup> 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.<sup>295</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>285</sup> COAR, Syria in 2021, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

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

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

<sup>288</sup> 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

<sup>289</sup> 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

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

<sup>291</sup> 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](#)

<sup>292</sup> 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

<sup>293</sup> 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

<sup>294</sup> 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

<sup>295</sup> 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.<sup>296</sup> The CoI stated that at least 53 persons were killed in targeted assassinations in Dar'a governorate between January and June 2020.<sup>297</sup> According to data collected and verified by researcher Abdullah Al-Jabassini<sup>298</sup>, at least 930 violent incidents took place between August 2018 and February 2021 in Dar'a governorate which killed at least 790 individuals.<sup>299</sup> 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.<sup>300</sup> Between January and February 2021, a military escalation took place between former opposition fighters and GoS forces in Tafas, Dar'a governorate<sup>301</sup>, an area described as an enclave for former opposition fighters.<sup>302</sup> Clashes between the two sides involved shelling which led to casualties among the combatants.<sup>303</sup>

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

The economic situation in Syria sparked protests in Sweida in the first half of 2020<sup>306</sup>, with hundreds of demonstrators calling for Assad to step down.<sup>307</sup> The protests were met with violence from security forces and arrests of activists were made.<sup>308</sup>

### 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).<sup>309</sup> 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.<sup>310</sup> While no group normally claimed responsibility for the attacks, Turkey

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

<sup>297</sup> 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

<sup>298</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>304</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>306</sup> 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

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

<sup>308</sup> 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](#)

<sup>309</sup> 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

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

has attributed them to YPG<sup>311</sup> or as emanating from SDF-controlled areas.<sup>312</sup> 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'<sup>313</sup>, and carrying out assassinations and car bombs against Turkish and SNA forces.<sup>314</sup> Ghadab al-Zaytoun reportedly operates in Afrin and the Euphrates Shield Area.<sup>315</sup> Hezen Rizgariya Efrine is comprised of experienced Kurdish fighters from Afrin and was reported to carry out attacks<sup>316</sup> and acts of sabotage against Turkish and SNA forces.<sup>317</sup>

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).<sup>318</sup> 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).<sup>319</sup> 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.<sup>320</sup> No group claimed responsibility for the attacks, but pro-opposition sources attributed them to the YPG.<sup>321</sup>

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'<sup>322</sup>, the CoI reported periodic clashes between Kurdish forces and SNA and Turkish military forces for the period between January and July 2020.<sup>323</sup> 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.<sup>324</sup> Inside the Operation Peace Spring area, attacks using explosive devices which led to civilian casualties were also reported.<sup>325</sup>

<sup>311</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

<sup>315</sup> 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

<sup>316</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>323</sup> 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

<sup>324</sup> 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

<sup>325</sup> 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.<sup>326</sup> In spring of 2020 an increase in attacks in Afrin was recorded which Turkey attributed to the YPG.<sup>327</sup> 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.<sup>328</sup> Between March 2018 and July 2020, the Carter Center recorded at least 215 attacks on Turkish forces and SNA factions in Afrin.<sup>329</sup> ACAPS assessed in March 2021 that Afrin is confronted with 'severe insecurity, a high prevalence of explosive hazards, and widespread crime'.<sup>330</sup>

Between October and November 2020, UN Security Council reported insecurity in the Euphrates Shield area between Azaz, Al Bab and Jarablus.<sup>331</sup> 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.<sup>332</sup> Fighting between SDF forces and SNA in the Al Bab area was reported in 2020.<sup>333</sup> In March 2021, missile attacks on oil facilities near Al Bab and Jarablus were reported.<sup>334</sup> COAR attributed the attack to Russian forces.<sup>335</sup>

Infighting between different factions of the SNA which have led to civilian casualties was reported in 2020<sup>336</sup>, including in Jarablus<sup>337</sup>, al-Bab<sup>338</sup>, Afrin<sup>339</sup> and Ras al Ain.<sup>340</sup> These type of incidents continued in 2021.<sup>341</sup> 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'.<sup>342</sup> By contrast, improved security and fewer violations against civilians were observed in Azaz, Marea, Tall

<sup>326</sup> 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

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

<sup>328</sup> OHCHR, Syria: Bachelet warns of 'ticking time-bomb' as civilian killings mount, 8 May 2020, [url](#)

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

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

<sup>331</sup> 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

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

<sup>333</sup> 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

<sup>334</sup> 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](#)

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

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

<sup>337</sup> 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

<sup>338</sup> Enab Baladi, الشرطة والشرطة "أحرار الشرقية" [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](#)

<sup>339</sup> 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](#)

<sup>340</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>342</sup> 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.<sup>343</sup>

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.<sup>344</sup> 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’.<sup>345</sup>

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.<sup>346</sup> According to COAR, no significant changes regarding territorial control were recorded in north-east Syria during the reporting period.<sup>347</sup> 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.<sup>348</sup>

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’.<sup>349</sup> During the reporting period, ISIL insurgent activity was reported in Kurdish-controlled areas<sup>350</sup>, particularly in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.<sup>351</sup> ISIL attacks predominantly targeted SDF forces and the international counter-

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

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

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

<sup>346</sup> 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](#)

<sup>347</sup> COAR, Syria in 2021, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

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

<sup>349</sup> 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

<sup>350</sup> 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

<sup>351</sup> 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 coalition<sup>352</sup>, but civilians, including tribal leaders, local merchants and persons deemed wealthy were also targeted.<sup>353</sup>

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.<sup>354</sup>

Tensions between US troops and Russian<sup>355</sup> 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.<sup>356</sup>

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.<sup>357</sup> 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.<sup>358</sup> The confrontations reportedly led to civilians being injured<sup>359</sup> 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.<sup>360</sup> Clashes around Ain Issa continued in 2021.<sup>361</sup>

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.<sup>362</sup> 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.<sup>363</sup> In response, the GoS blocked the predominantly

<sup>352</sup> 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

<sup>353</sup> 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](#)

<sup>354</sup> 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](#)

<sup>355</sup> 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](#)

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

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

<sup>358</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>361</sup> 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](#)

<sup>362</sup> 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

<sup>363</sup> 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 city<sup>364</sup> and restricted movements in in eastern Aleppo and Manbij.<sup>365</sup> Clashes between GoS-affiliated NDF and the SDF-internal forces, Asayish were reported.<sup>366</sup> 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.<sup>367</sup> 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.<sup>368</sup>

#### 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 groups<sup>369</sup> and the largest obstacle in GoS' campaign to regain territorial control of Syria.<sup>370</sup> In 2019, GoS escalated the military operations in Idlib which continued through the first few months of 2020.<sup>371</sup>

Since April 2019, an escalation of hostilities was reported, leading to high number of civilian deaths, massive displacement and significant damage to infrastructure.<sup>372</sup> 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.<sup>373</sup> Between December 2019 and January 2020, military hostilities increased significantly in parts of Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates.<sup>374</sup> 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.<sup>375</sup>

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.<sup>376</sup> In late March 2021 however, the UN Security

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

<sup>365</sup> 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

<sup>366</sup> 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](#)

<sup>367</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>369</sup> 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](#)

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

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

<sup>372</sup> 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

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

<sup>374</sup> 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

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

<sup>376</sup> 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.<sup>377</sup>

While the ceasefire led according to the Col 'to a decrease in hostilities and a significant drop in civilian casualties'<sup>378</sup>, frequent ceasefire violations which included airstrikes<sup>379</sup>, exchanges of artillery fire, mutual artillery shelling across frontlines<sup>380</sup> and limited raids<sup>381</sup>, 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 governorate<sup>382</sup> and in areas around the M4 highway.<sup>383</sup> Ceasefire violations have resulted in civilian casualties.<sup>384</sup>

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.<sup>385</sup> HTS clashed with rival armed groups, including HaD in mid-2020 managing to reassert its dominance in the area.<sup>386</sup> Confrontations between the armed groups occasionally resulted in civilians being killed in the crossfire in July 2020.<sup>387</sup>

<sup>377</sup> 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

<sup>378</sup> 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

<sup>379</sup> 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

<sup>380</sup> 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

<sup>381</sup> 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

<sup>382</sup> 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

<sup>383</sup> 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

<sup>384</sup> 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

<sup>385</sup> 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](#)

<sup>386</sup> 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](#)

<sup>387</sup> 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 area<sup>388</sup>, and expressed its readiness to respond militarily in the event of a renewed GoS offensive on the area.<sup>389</sup>

The GoS offensive on the Idlib area resulted in high number of civilian casualties<sup>390</sup>, over 1 million people displaced between December 2019 and February 2020, and a massive humanitarian crisis.<sup>391</sup> 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.<sup>392</sup> 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.<sup>393</sup> 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.<sup>394</sup>

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.<sup>395</sup> 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'.<sup>396</sup>

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.<sup>397</sup> Sources place Tanf in Homs governorate.<sup>398</sup> 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.<sup>399</sup>

<sup>388</sup> 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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>394</sup> 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

<sup>395</sup> 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

<sup>396</sup> 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

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

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

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

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

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

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.<sup>405</sup>

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 areas<sup>406</sup>, blocking of humanitarian aid, denial of access to food and other basic services, targeted attacks on health facilities and other civilian targets.<sup>407</sup> 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.<sup>408</sup>

Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), a not-for-profit organisation that records casualties caused by explosive weapons at the global level<sup>409</sup>, 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.<sup>410</sup> Based on these entries gathered by AOAV, in 2020, Syria ranked as the second worst impacted country globally from

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

<sup>401</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>403</sup> 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

<sup>404</sup> 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

<sup>405</sup> 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](#)

<sup>406</sup> 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

<sup>407</sup> 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

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

<sup>409</sup> For more information about AOAV see [url](#)

<sup>410</sup> 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.<sup>411</sup>

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.<sup>412</sup>

Airwars<sup>413</sup> 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.<sup>414</sup> 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.<sup>415</sup> These figures represent a decrease from 2019 when Airwars recorded 1 099 civilians killed by Russian and/or GoS strikes.<sup>416</sup> Following the March 2020 ceasefire, Airwars stated that civilian casualties attributed to Russia fell to the lowest levels since its intervention began in 2015.<sup>417</sup> According to Airwars, Turkey-led military activities in 2020 reportedly led to 37 civilians killed and 152 injured.<sup>418</sup>

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.<sup>419</sup>

#### *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'.<sup>420</sup> 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.<sup>421</sup>

Attacks on civilian targets and infrastructure were reported in 2020<sup>422</sup> and 2021.<sup>423</sup> Human Rights Watch documented 46 ground and air attacks by Syrian-Russian forces on civilian objects and

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

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

<sup>413</sup> 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](#)

<sup>414</sup> For more information on Airwars methodology see [url](#)

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>420</sup> 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

<sup>421</sup> 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

<sup>422</sup> 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

<sup>423</sup> 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.<sup>424</sup>

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.<sup>425</sup> 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.<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> mechanism'.<sup>428</sup> 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.<sup>429</sup>

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.<sup>430</sup> 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.<sup>431</sup> 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.<sup>432</sup> The attack was condemned by the UN<sup>433</sup> and EU.<sup>434</sup>

<sup>424</sup> 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

<sup>425</sup> 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

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

<sup>427</sup> 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

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

<sup>429</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>432</sup> 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

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

<sup>434</sup> 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.<sup>435</sup> 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.<sup>436</sup>

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

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.<sup>438</sup> 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.<sup>439</sup>

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.<sup>440</sup> An assessment carried out by the HALO Trust<sup>441</sup> between late 2018 and 2020 in north-west Syria revealed that explosive ordnance contamination affects 400 communities, impacting 1.6 million people.<sup>442</sup> 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.<sup>443</sup>

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.<sup>444</sup> UNOCHA reported that 25 % of the 2 059 civilian casualties documented by OHCHR in 2020 were victims of unexploded ordnance.<sup>445</sup>

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

<sup>435</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>438</sup> UNMAS, Programmes: Syria, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

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

<sup>440</sup> UNMAS, Programmes: Syria, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

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

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

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

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

<sup>445</sup> 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.<sup>446</sup> 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.<sup>447</sup> 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.<sup>448</sup> 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.<sup>449</sup> 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.<sup>450</sup>

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.<sup>451</sup> 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.<sup>452</sup> However, OPCW noted in November 2020 that Syria still had outstanding issues related to its compliance with the treaty.<sup>453</sup>

### *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.<sup>454</sup> 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.<sup>455</sup>

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.<sup>456</sup> Human Rights Watch investigated cluster munition attacks on schools in Idlib governorate, carried out in January<sup>457</sup> and February 2020<sup>458</sup>, which resulted in civilian casualties.

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

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

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

<sup>449</sup> 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

<sup>450</sup> 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

<sup>451</sup> 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](#)

<sup>452</sup> 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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>458</sup> 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.<sup>459</sup> 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.<sup>460</sup>

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.<sup>461</sup>

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.<sup>462</sup>

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

<sup>460</sup> ACLED, Syria Partner Network, April 2019, [url](#)

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

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



According to the aforementioned ACLED dataset<sup>463</sup>, 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.

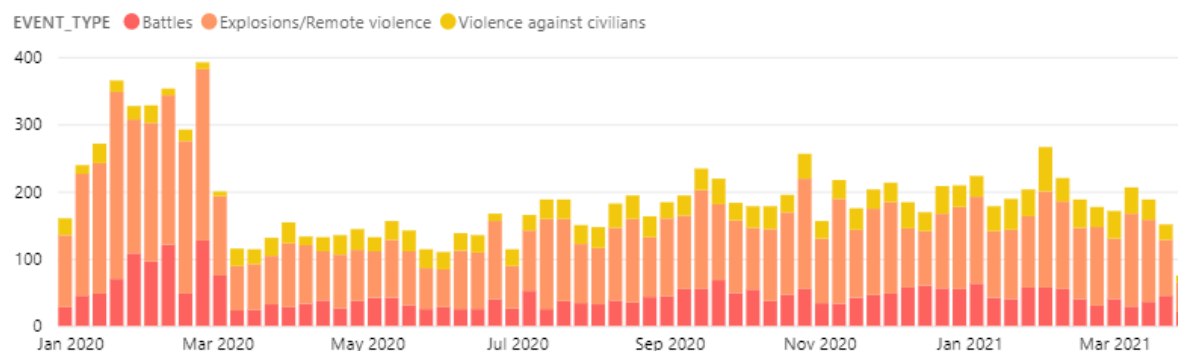


Figure 1. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>464</sup>

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.

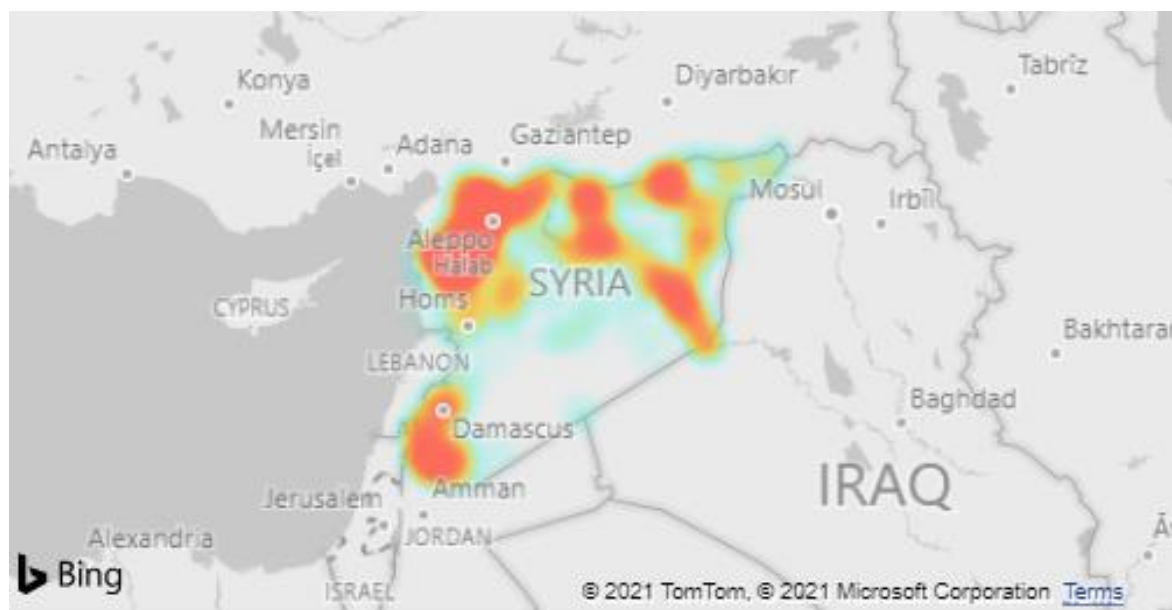


Figure 2. Heatmap of security events (coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians) occurrences between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 based on ACLED data<sup>465</sup>

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

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

<sup>465</sup> 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.<sup>466</sup>



Figure 3. Evolution of 'battles' events between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 based on ACLED data<sup>467</sup>

### 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 data<sup>468</sup>

### 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

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

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

<sup>468</sup> 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 data<sup>469</sup>

### 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.

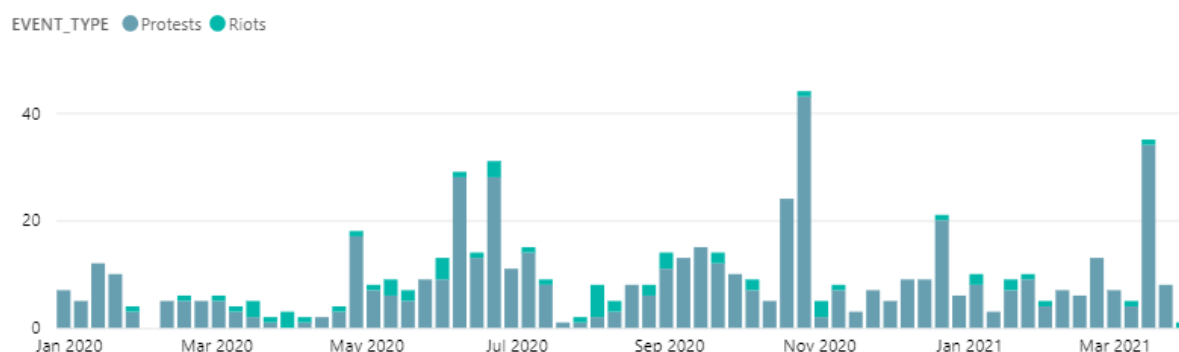


Figure 6. Evolution of 'protests' and 'riots' events between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 based on ACLED data<sup>470</sup>

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

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

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

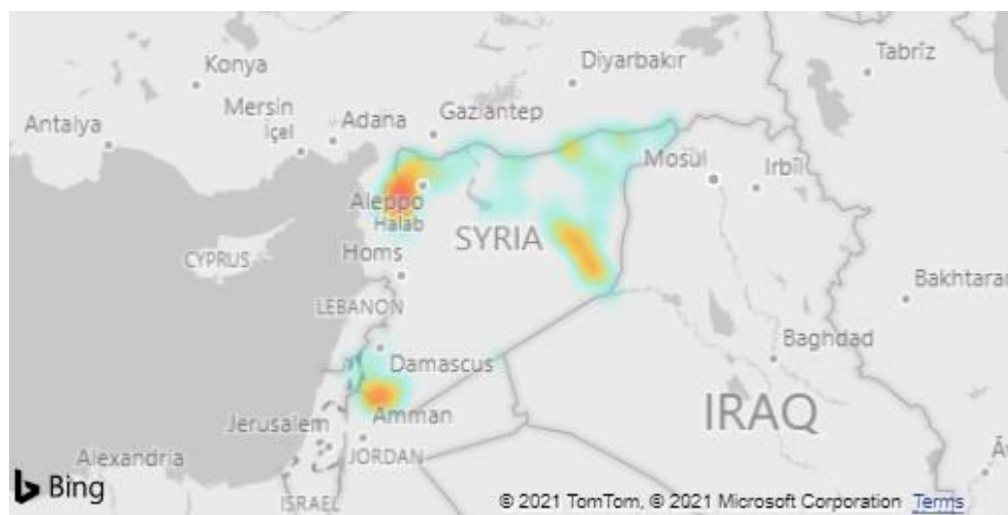


Figure 7. Heatmap of riots and protests occurrences in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021 based on ACLED data<sup>471</sup>

### 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.<sup>472</sup> 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.<sup>473</sup> 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.'<sup>474</sup> 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.<sup>475</sup>

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.<sup>476</sup>

In 2020, SNHR recorded 1 734 civilian fatalities, a drop by 48 % from 2019.<sup>477</sup> VDC recorded 1 906 civilian fatalities in 2020, a decrease by 32 % compared to 2019.<sup>478</sup> 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.<sup>479</sup>

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

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

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

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

<sup>475</sup> 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](#)

<sup>476</sup> 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](#)

<sup>477</sup> 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

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

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

Month	OHCHR 2020 <sup>480</sup>	SNHR 2020 <sup>481</sup>	VDC 2020 <sup>482</sup>	SHRC 2020 <sup>483</sup>	SNHR 2021 <sup>484</sup>	VDC 2021 <sup>485</sup>	SHRC 2021 <sup>486</sup>
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	<b>1035</b>	<b>1734</b>	<b>1906</b>	<b>1750</b>	<b>428</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>388</b>

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.<sup>487</sup> More than half of casualties recorded by OHCHR in 2020 were children,

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

<sup>481</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>484</sup> 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

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

<sup>486</sup> 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](#)

<sup>487</sup> 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.<sup>488</sup> For the period between 1 December 2019 and 31 March 2021, OHCHR recorded 3 028 civilian casualties (1 372 deaths and 1 656 injured).<sup>489</sup>

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 <sup>490</sup>	SNHR 2020 <sup>491</sup>	VDC 2021 <sup>492</sup>	SNHR 2021 <sup>493</sup>
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	
<b>Total</b>	<b>1906</b>	<b>1734</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>428</b>

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

<sup>489</sup> 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

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

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

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

<sup>493</sup> 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.<sup>494</sup>

#### 1.6.4 Humanitarian situation

Syria is estimated to have a population between 20.3<sup>495</sup> and 22.1 million.<sup>496</sup> UNOCHA assessed that as of January 2021, 13.4 million persons were in need<sup>497</sup> of humanitarian and protection assistance in Syria, with 6 million having acute needs (a 20 % increase from 2020).<sup>498</sup> 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.<sup>499</sup>

A combination of factors, including the financial crisis in neighbouring Lebanon, international economic sanctions<sup>500</sup>, and the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>501</sup> contributed to a significant worsening of socio-economic conditions in Syria during the reference period.<sup>502</sup> The economic situation has also contributed to a rapid deterioration of humanitarian conditions in Syria.<sup>503</sup> Around 12.4 million Syrians

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

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

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

<sup>497</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>500</sup> 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

<sup>501</sup> 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

<sup>502</sup> 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](#)

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

were estimated to be food insecure at the beginning of 2021<sup>504</sup>, an increase from 9.4 million reported in mid-2020.<sup>505</sup> Around 2 million people are estimated to live in extreme poverty.<sup>506</sup>

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.<sup>507</sup> UNOHCA assessed that only 58 % of hospitals and 53 % of primary health care centres in Syria were entirely functional.<sup>508</sup>

As of July 2020, only one international border crossing - the Baba al Hawa<sup>509</sup> - 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).<sup>510</sup> 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.<sup>511</sup>

Donors pledged EUR 5.3 billion towards humanitarian relief efforts for Syria in 2021-2022 at the Brussels V Conference<sup>512</sup> - a decrease on last year's commitments and only around half the funds needed.<sup>513</sup>

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.<sup>514</sup> 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.<sup>515</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>509</sup> 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](#)

<sup>510</sup> 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

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

<sup>512</sup> 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](#)

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

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

<sup>515</sup> 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).<sup>516</sup>

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

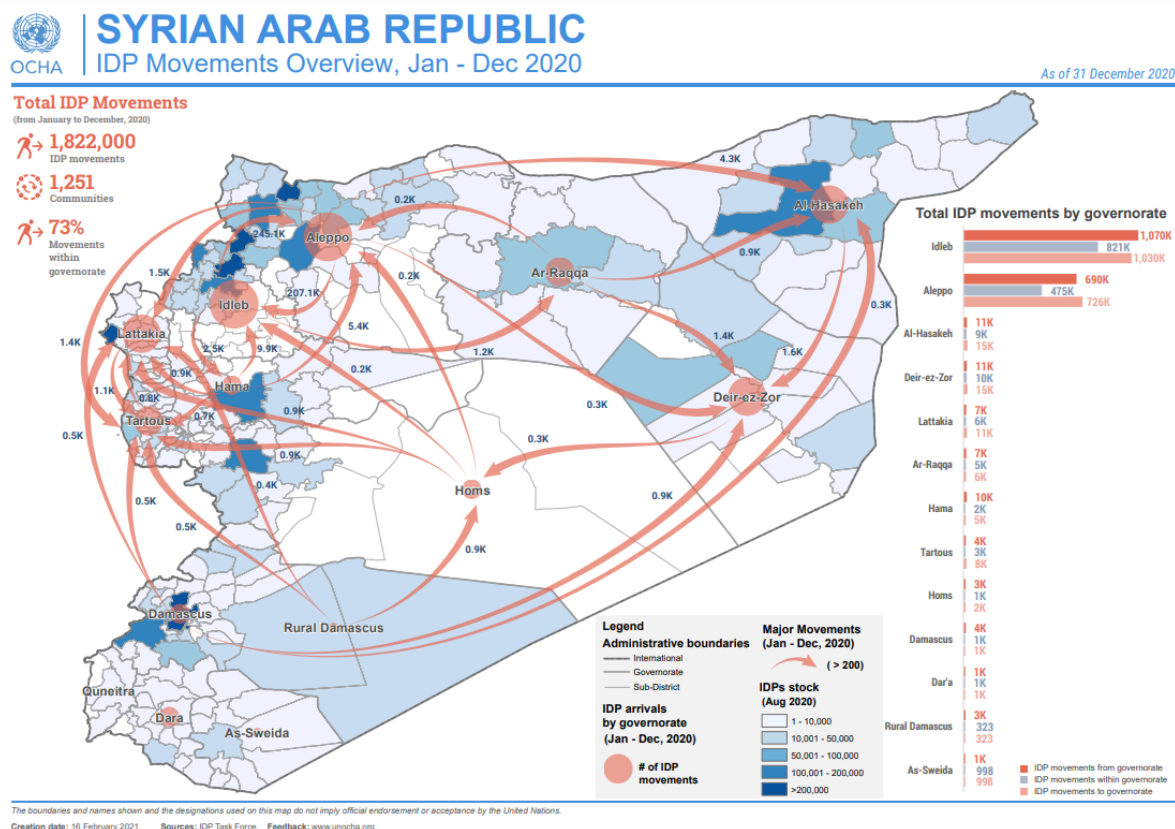


Figure 10. © UNOCHA, IDP movements by governorate in 2020<sup>517</sup>

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.<sup>518</sup> 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.<sup>519</sup> 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.'<sup>520</sup> Since March 2020, the number of IDP movements has significantly decreased.<sup>521</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>521</sup> 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.<sup>522</sup> 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.'<sup>523</sup>

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.<sup>524</sup> In March 2021, around 40 000 IDP movements took place, 94 % of which took place within Idlib and Aleppo governorates.<sup>525</sup>

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.<sup>526</sup> IOM assessed that around 220 000 persons living in north-west Syria are at 'immediate risk of displacement'.<sup>527</sup>

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).<sup>528</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



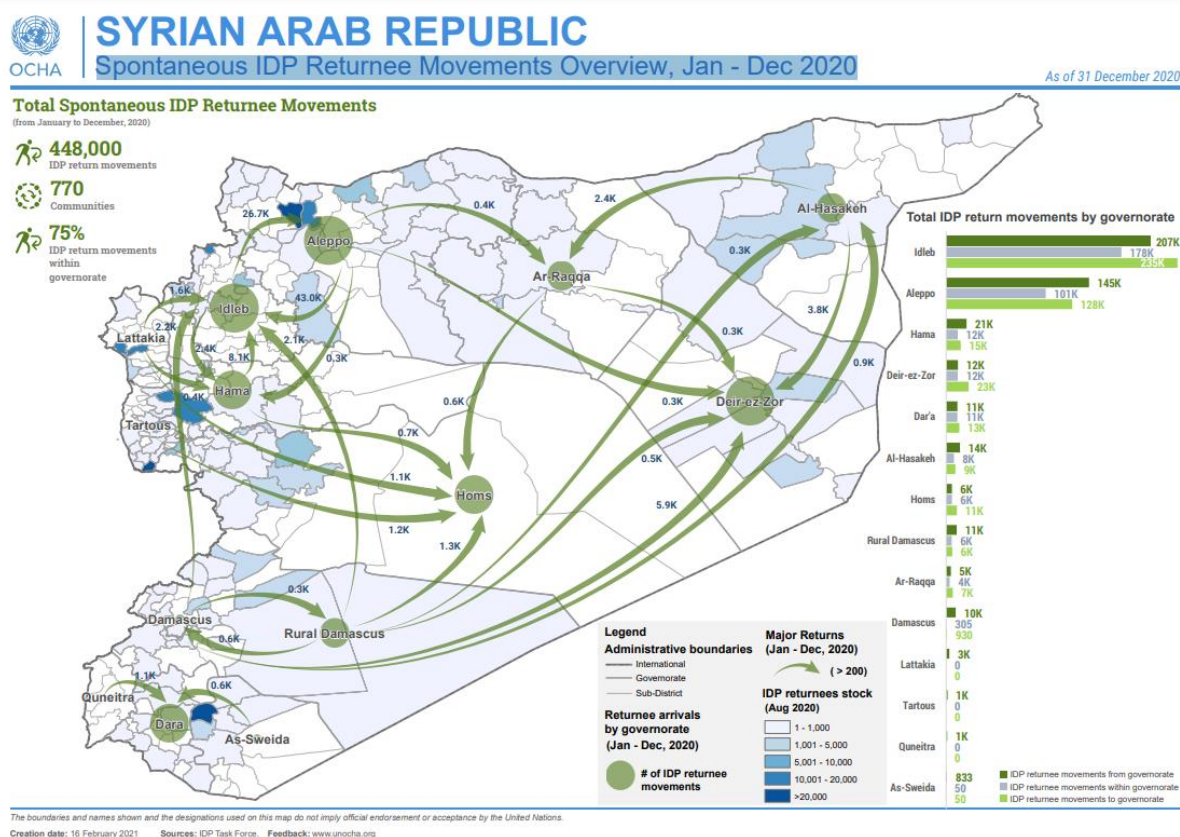


Figure 11. © spontaneous IDP return movements by governorate in 2020<sup>529</sup>

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.<sup>530</sup> 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.<sup>531</sup>

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.<sup>532</sup> 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.<sup>533</sup>

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

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

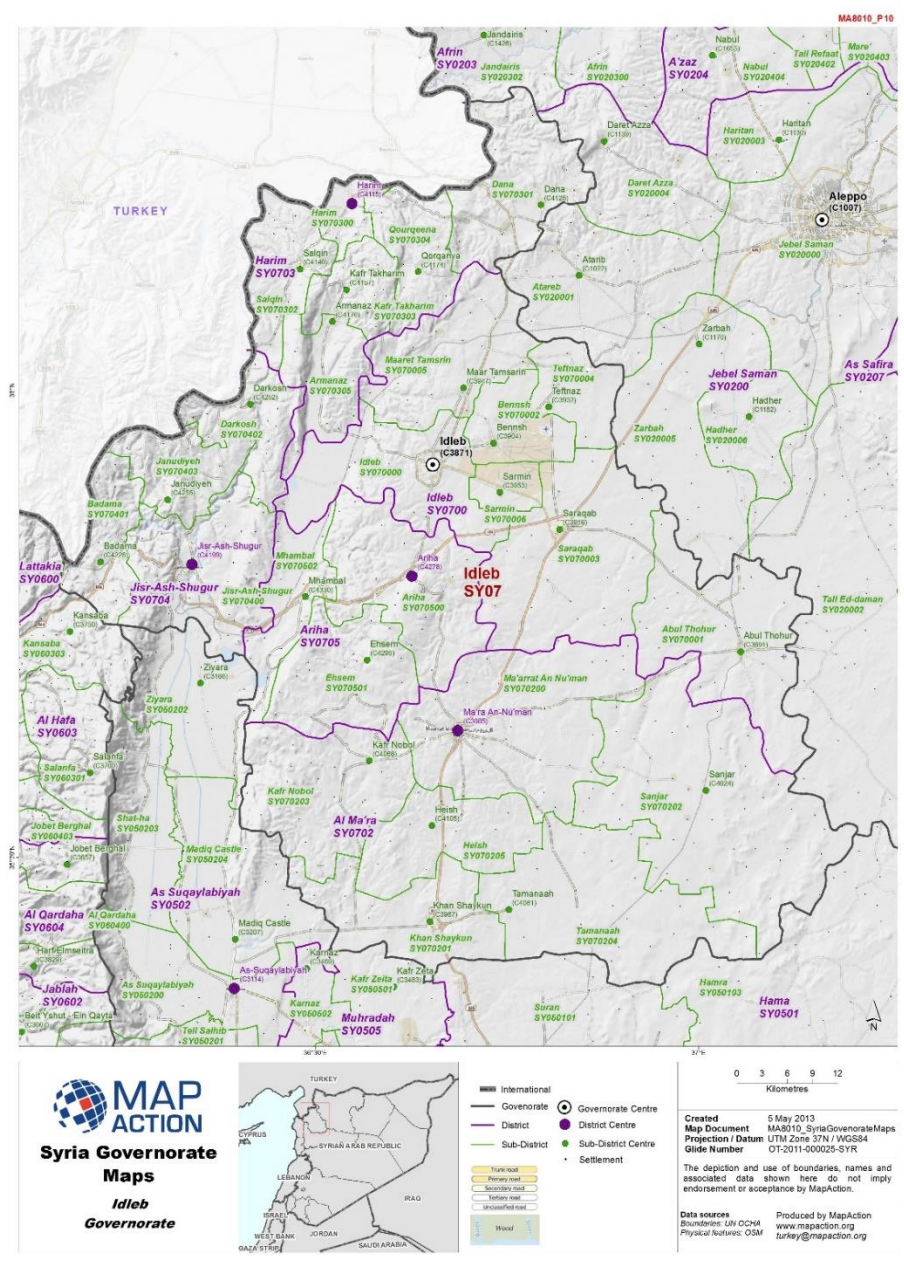
<sup>531</sup> IDMC, Internal displacement 2020: Mid-year update, 2020, [url](#), p. 19

<sup>532</sup> 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](#)

<sup>533</sup> 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 governorate<sup>534</sup>

<sup>534</sup> MapAction, Idlib governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](http://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.<sup>535</sup>

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

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Idlib governorate to be of 1 130 000 as of 2019.<sup>538</sup> In 2019, other sources estimated that the province [governorate] and surrounding areas was home to nearly 3 million people<sup>539</sup>, including original residents, fighters and IDPs from other areas.<sup>540</sup> In mid-2020, IDMC reported that approximately 70 % of the 2.8 million population of Idlib were IDPs.<sup>541</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Idlib governorate to be of 2 691 361.<sup>542</sup>

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.<sup>543</sup> The majority of the population is Sunni.<sup>544</sup> Shia Muslims were reported to reside in rural areas of Idlib and some Christians in Jisr al-Shughur area.<sup>545</sup> 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.<sup>546</sup>

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.<sup>547</sup> 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.<sup>548</sup>

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

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

<sup>537</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>539</sup> 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

<sup>540</sup> 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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>546</sup> 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

<sup>547</sup> 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

<sup>548</sup> 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 politically<sup>549</sup> and ranked as one of the poorest parts of Syria in terms of income, health and education in 2014.<sup>550</sup>

### 2.1.2 Conflict background and armed actors

Idlib was among the first provinces to join the 2011 uprising against the Assad government.<sup>551</sup> The Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra started in 2014 to take over Idlib from local rebel groups.<sup>552</sup> 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.<sup>553</sup> Idlib became the refuge for Syrians fleeing the GoS forces, including activists and fighters from areas recaptured by the SAA.<sup>554</sup> 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.<sup>555</sup> The governorate has been a stronghold of jihadist militants including Al Qaeda.<sup>556</sup>

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.<sup>557</sup>

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.<sup>558</sup> However, GoS forces continued military operations in the area, recapturing half of the de-escalation area by mid-2018.<sup>559</sup> In September 2018, a deal between Russia and Turkey reached at Sochi, created a demilitarised zone in parts of Idlib province.<sup>560</sup> It also stipulated the removal of heavy weapons by armed groups<sup>561</sup> and of 'radical terrorist groups' from inside the demilitarised zone.<sup>562</sup> Turkey established 12 military observation posts around the demilitarised area to monitor the implementation of the agreement<sup>563</sup> while Russia and Iran set up their own observation points in the GoS-controlled areas surrounding the de-escalation area.<sup>564</sup> 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.<sup>565</sup> At the same time, the GoS was seeking control over the M5 highway, a major commercial

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

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

<sup>551</sup> 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

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

<sup>553</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>556</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>558</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>561</sup> 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

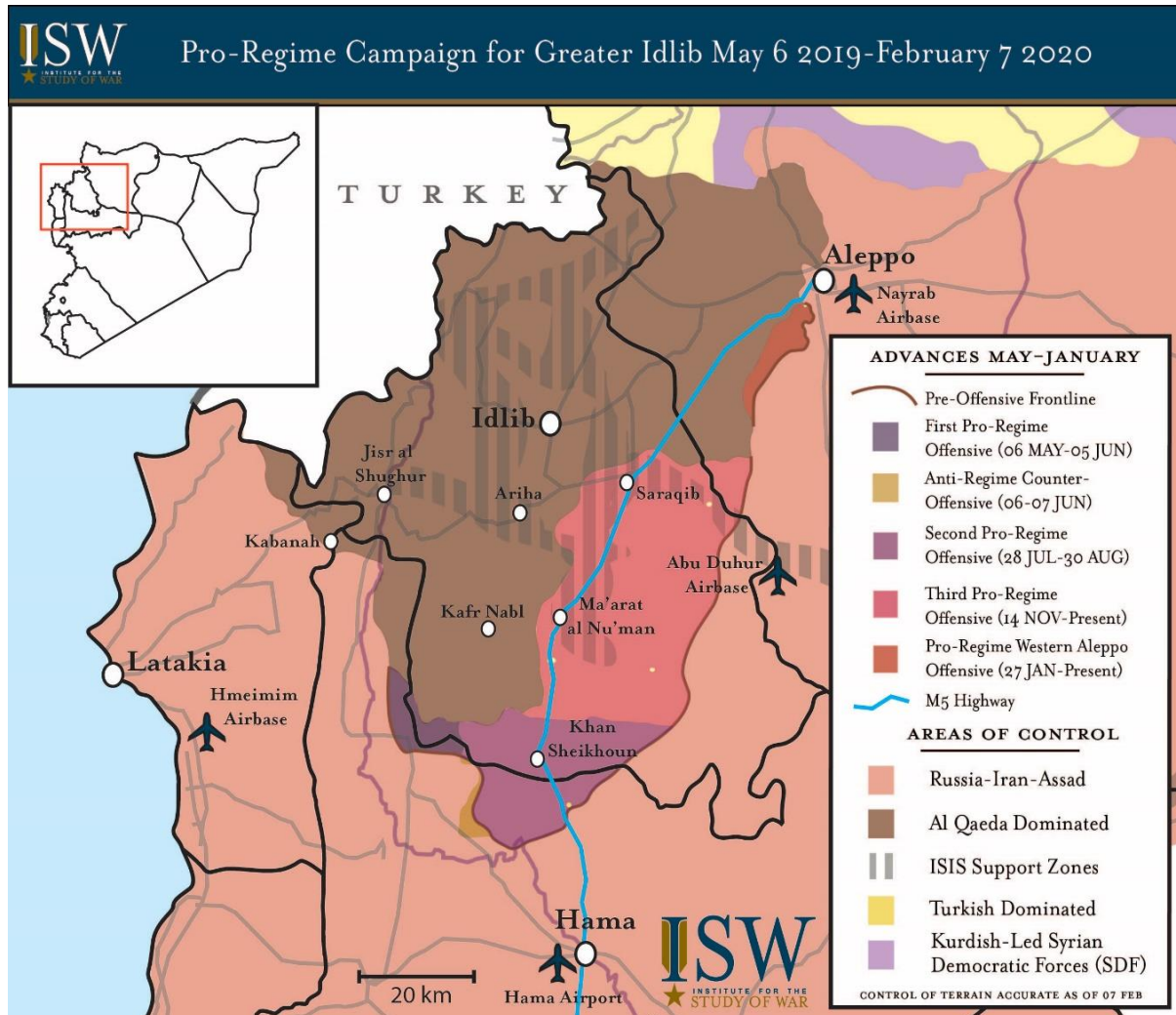
<sup>562</sup> International Crisis Group, The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, 14 March 2019, [url](#), p. i

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

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

<sup>565</sup> 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.<sup>566</sup> 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.<sup>567</sup> At the end of August 2019, Syrian government forces recaptured Tamaniyah and other areas north of Khan Sheikhun.<sup>568</sup> 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](#)).<sup>569</sup>



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

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

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

<sup>569</sup> 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

<sup>570</sup> 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.<sup>571</sup> Hundreds of civilians were killed, including women and children.<sup>572</sup>

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.’<sup>573</sup>

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

### *Anti-GoS armed groups*

In January 2019, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) seized large areas of Idlib governorate following clashes with rival armed groups<sup>575</sup> and by August 2019 controlled over 90 % of Idlib governorate, alongside adjacent parts of northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates.<sup>576</sup> According to February 2020 US estimates, HTS had between 7 000 to 10 000 fighters, or more<sup>577</sup>, whereas UN estimates of January 2020 were between 12 000 and 15 000 fighters.<sup>578</sup> In February 2021, the UN estimated HTS had 10 000 fighters, mainly Syrians.<sup>579</sup> HTS is sanctioned by the UN as a terrorist organisation.<sup>580</sup>

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

<sup>571</sup> 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

<sup>572</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

<sup>576</sup> 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

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

<sup>578</sup> 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

<sup>579</sup> 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

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

<sup>581</sup> 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](#)

<sup>582</sup> 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.<sup>583</sup>

According to Syria expert Aron Lund<sup>584</sup>, in 2018 the Idlib area was ‘governed by a patchwork of sharia courts, local councils, exile government institutions, and direct rule by armed groups’.<sup>585</sup> 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.<sup>586</sup> 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.<sup>587</sup>

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)<sup>588</sup>, an Al Qaeda-linked group that split from HTS in 2018.<sup>589</sup> 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.<sup>590</sup>

Groups composed of mainly foreign fighters operate under the authority of HTS. One of these groups is Khattab Al-Shishani Brigade (Chechen fighters)<sup>591</sup>, who claimed responsibility for attacks on the Turkish-Russian joint patrols on the M4 highway in July and August 2020.<sup>592</sup> Another such group is Katiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ, Central Asian fighters).<sup>593</sup>

Other anti-GoS armed groups are predominantly Islamist groups, having different relations with Turkey<sup>594</sup>, and who ‘have an ambiguous or symbiotic relationship’ with HTS.<sup>595</sup> The most important ones are the National Liberation Front (NLF) - a Turkish-backed alliance of opposition-armed groups<sup>596</sup>.

<sup>583</sup> 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

<sup>584</sup> 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](#)

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

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

<sup>587</sup> 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

<sup>588</sup> 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](#)

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

<sup>590</sup> 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

<sup>591</sup> 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

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

<sup>593</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>596</sup> 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 2019<sup>597</sup>; and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) - a Uighur-Chinese-dominated jihadist militant faction present around the city of Jisr al-Shughour in western Idlib.<sup>598</sup> TIP is also called the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and has 3 000 to 4 500 members.<sup>599</sup> 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.<sup>600</sup>

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.<sup>601</sup>

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 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps and the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps.<sup>602</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, the 25<sup>th</sup> Division (Tiger Forces), the Palestinian militia Liwa al-Quds and the NDF.<sup>603</sup>

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

In March 2021, Gregory Waters reported on the presence of the Tiger Forces, 25<sup>th</sup> Division's Tarmeh Regiment fighters in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man in Idlib governorate<sup>606</sup>; the presence of the 8th Division and Republican Guard units in southern Idlib<sup>607</sup>; and on the Air Force Intelligence contracting out work with the Tiger Forces' Sheikh Khalid Dhaher Group.<sup>608</sup>

### *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.<sup>609</sup> At the same time, 'several' Turkish military personnel were killed

<sup>597</sup> Enab Baladi, "National Army" Restructured Having Merged With "National Front for Liberation", 5 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>598</sup> 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

<sup>599</sup> 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

<sup>600</sup> 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

<sup>601</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 - March 22, 2021, [url](#)

<sup>602</sup> Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019 [with updates], [url](#)

<sup>603</sup> HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib"; Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), p. 136

<sup>604</sup> BBC News, Syria war: Government troops seize part of key Idlib town Saraqeb, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>605</sup> USDOS, Attacks on the People of Idlib. Press Statement by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, 27 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>606</sup> Waters, G., [Twitter], posted on: 14 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>607</sup> Waters, G., [Twitter], posted on: 12 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>608</sup> Waters, G., [Twitter], posted on: 22 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>609</sup> 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.<sup>610</sup> The Turkish Ministry of Defence reported that it had hit 115 Syrian targets and 'neutralised' 101 Syrian military personnel.<sup>611</sup> Turkish observation points in Idlib were reinforced with armoured personnel carriers and tanks of Turkish Armed Forces (TAF).<sup>612</sup> Additional armed vehicles and fighters were deployed by Turkey on its border with Syria.<sup>613</sup> 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.<sup>614</sup>

At the end of February 2020, following a GoS attack, Turkey launched operation Spring Shield, which halted the GoS advance.<sup>615</sup>

In the second half of 2020, reports indicated Turkey's withdrawal from military posts in Idlib<sup>616</sup>, while as they were also reportedly building up troops again in 2021.<sup>617</sup> In March 2021, France24 quoted a Western diplomat interviewed by AFP, who stated that Turkey has 15 000 troops in the Idlib enclave.<sup>618</sup>

### ISIL

ISIL had a presence in north-west Syria since 2013, but was largely defeated following the GoS offensive in Idlib in February 2018<sup>619</sup> and a following HTS crackdown on the group and its affiliates.<sup>620</sup> 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.<sup>621</sup> 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.'<sup>622</sup>

<sup>610</sup> Al Jazeera, The battle for Syria's Idlib explained in 400 words, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>611</sup> AA, Turkey neutralizes 101 Assad regime military personnel, 10 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>612</sup> AA, Turkey's deployment of reinforcements to observation points in Syria's Idlib, 10 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>613</sup> Al Jazeera, Turkey deploys tanks to Syrian border amid fresh Idlib violence, 2 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>614</sup> New York Times (The), Syrian Attacks Draw Turkey Deeper Into Syrian War, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>615</sup> 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

<sup>616</sup> 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](#)

<sup>617</sup> SOHR, Turkey's military build-up | Forces bring in new column to their positions in "de-escalation zone", 29 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>618</sup> France24, Syria's Idlib: What future for the rebel holdout?, 8 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>619</sup> Carter Center (The), Special Report. Internal Conflict in Northwest Syria, | Sep 2018 – Aug 2019, [url](#), Appendix 1

<sup>620</sup> 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](#)

<sup>621</sup> 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](#)

<sup>622</sup> 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.<sup>623</sup> 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.'<sup>624</sup>

### 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.<sup>625</sup> 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.<sup>626</sup> The GoS forces captured the strategic towns of Maaret al-Numan<sup>627</sup> and Saraqeb<sup>628</sup> located at the intersection of the key highways linking Damascus to Aleppo.<sup>629</sup> As of late February 2020, the GoS offensive advanced also in eastern Idlib<sup>630</sup>, and frontlines shifted rapidly.<sup>631</sup> 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.'<sup>632</sup> 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.<sup>633</sup> This triggered Turkey to launch Operation Spring Shield in order to stop the GoS offensive in Idlib governorate.<sup>634</sup> Military activity along the frontline areas subsequently increased, with several towns and villages, including

<sup>623</sup> 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

<sup>624</sup> 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

<sup>625</sup> ISW, Russia enables new Syrian regime offensive in Idlib, 7 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>626</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 7, as of 29 January 2020, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>627</sup> Al Jazeera, Syrian army takes Maaret al-Numan after heavy bombardment, 29 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>628</sup> Guardian (The), Syria: Fall of Saraqeb delivers Assad a strategic and symbolic prize, 10 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>629</sup> 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](#)

<sup>630</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 9, 26 February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>631</sup> 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

<sup>632</sup> 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

<sup>633</sup> 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](#)

<sup>634</sup> Carter Center (The), The Russian-Turkish Joint Patrols in Idlib Governorate, Syria Conflict Mapping, 17 February 2021, [url](#)



Saraqeb, changing control multiple times.<sup>635</sup> 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.’<sup>636</sup>

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.’<sup>637</sup>

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.<sup>638</sup> The first of such patrols took place on 15 March 2020.<sup>639</sup> 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.<sup>640</sup>

The March 2020 ceasefire resulted in a lull in airstrikes and a reduction in the shelling in Idlib.<sup>641</sup> IED incidents however continued to occur.<sup>642</sup> In May 2020, hostilities between non-state armed groups picked up in Idlib leading to a worsening security situation again.<sup>643</sup> As from June 2020, shelling and

<sup>635</sup> 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

<sup>636</sup> UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>637</sup> 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](#)

<sup>638</sup> 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

<sup>639</sup> 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

<sup>640</sup> 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

<sup>641</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 10, as of 12 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>642</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 13, as of 1 May 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>643</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 14, as of 15 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2

clashes increased again<sup>644</sup>, 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’.<sup>645</sup> 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.<sup>646</sup>

Also in 2021, fighting continued along the M4 and M5 highways in areas in Idlib governorate inhabited by some 400 000 people.<sup>647</sup> ‘Daily shelling, intermittent airstrikes, and in-fighting between non-state armed groups’ was reported.<sup>648</sup> Shelling affected southern rural Idlib<sup>649</sup> and airstrikes affected civilian-inhabited areas in northern Idlib.<sup>650</sup> 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.’<sup>651</sup>

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.<sup>652</sup> Such indiscriminate attacks continued in 2021.<sup>653</sup>

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.<sup>654</sup> There were furthermore reports of Russian planes bombing the town of Benin, south Idlib<sup>655</sup>; GoS shelling of villages near Ariha<sup>656</sup>; and shelling by opposition of GoS forces’ positions.<sup>657</sup> Turkish troops continued to be targeted by non-state armed groups through IEDs and attacks against their armed vehicles.<sup>658</sup>

<sup>644</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 15, as of 12 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>645</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 17, as of 13 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>646</sup> 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

<sup>647</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 25, as of 26 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>648</sup> 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

<sup>649</sup> SOHR, Ceasefire violations | Rebels shell regime positions in Jourin, while regime forces renew shelling Jabal Al-Zawiya and Sahl Al-Ghab, 14 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>650</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 26, as of 26 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>651</sup> 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

<sup>652</sup> HRW, Syria/Russia: Strategy Targeted Civilian Infrastructure, 15 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>653</sup> 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](#)

<sup>654</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 26, as of 26 March 2021, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>655</sup> Alhor, F., [Twitter], posted on: 20 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>656</sup> White Helmets (The), [Twitter], posted on: 20 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>657</sup> NPA, Opposition bombs government sites in Syria’s Idlib and Hama countryside, 22 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>658</sup> 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.<sup>659</sup>

REACH<sup>660</sup> 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).<sup>661</sup>

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.<sup>662</sup>

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.<sup>663</sup>

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.

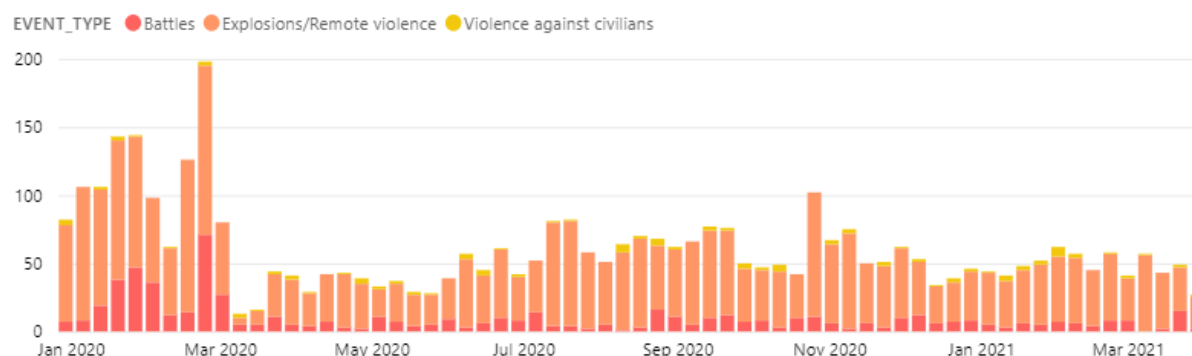


Figure 12. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Idlib governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>664</sup>

<sup>659</sup> 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](#)

<sup>660</sup> 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.

<sup>661</sup> REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview of Syria (HSOS) [dashboard: Protection, north-west Syria, reported protection risks, violent conflict, by IDPs and residents], March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>662</sup> 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](#)

<sup>663</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>664</sup> 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>641</b>	<b>3213</b>	<b>128</b>

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.<sup>665</sup>
- 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.<sup>666</sup> Human Rights Watch reported 22 civilian deaths for the attack in Idlib city.<sup>667</sup>
- 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.<sup>668</sup>
- On 11 February 2020, an airstrike on a commercial area in Idlib city killed 12 civilians and injured 45 others.<sup>669</sup>
- On 25 February 2020, an airstrike hit the Central Hospital (also known as the Governor Hospital) in Idlib city, wounding at least four civilians.<sup>670</sup> 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.'<sup>671</sup>

<sup>665</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arabic Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 6, as of 15 January 2020, [url](#), p.1

<sup>666</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 7, as of 29 January 2020, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>667</sup> HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib", Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 78-82

<sup>668</sup> HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib", Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 49-52

<sup>669</sup> HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib", Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 82-83

<sup>670</sup> HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib", Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 53-56

<sup>671</sup> 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.'<sup>672</sup>
- 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.'<sup>673</sup>
- On 15 March 2020, HTS executed a civilian reportedly due to affiliation with the GoS.<sup>674</sup>
- 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.'<sup>675</sup>
- 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.'<sup>676</sup>
- 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.'<sup>677</sup>
- On 15 August 2020, 'nine civilians were injured when a reported landmine detonated in agricultural land near Khan Shaykhun in southern rural Idlib.'<sup>678</sup>
- 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.'<sup>679</sup>
- 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.'<sup>680</sup>
- On 4 November 2020, artillery shelling in Ariha district in Idlib affected multiple communities, killing at least eight civilians and injuring 13 others.<sup>681</sup>
- 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.'<sup>682</sup>
- On 18 March 2021, a humanitarian worker was killed and 5 other civilians injured in cross-fire in Idlib governorate.<sup>683</sup>

<sup>672</sup> 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

<sup>673</sup> 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

<sup>674</sup> 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

<sup>675</sup> 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

<sup>676</sup> 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

<sup>677</sup> 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

<sup>678</sup> 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

<sup>679</sup> 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

<sup>680</sup> 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

<sup>681</sup> USAID, Syria - Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #1, Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, 20 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>682</sup> 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

<sup>683</sup> 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.<sup>684</sup>
- On 8 April 2021, the Syrian government forces attacked a vehicle in south Idlib, killing 7 people including 2 women and 3 children.<sup>685</sup>

### 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		
<b>Total</b>	<b>419</b>	<b>471</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>61</b>

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)<sup>686</sup> and 471<sup>687</sup> civilian fatalities (SNHR data)<sup>688</sup>, 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.

<sup>684</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arabic Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation report no. 26, as of 26 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>685</sup> Cutts, M., [Twitter], posted on: 9 April 2021, [url](#); Mark Cutts is the UN Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria.

<sup>686</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>687</sup> 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

<sup>688</sup> 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.<sup>689</sup>

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.<sup>690</sup>

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.’<sup>691</sup>

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.<sup>692</sup> 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.<sup>693</sup> 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.’<sup>694</sup> 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.<sup>695</sup>

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.<sup>696</sup>

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’.<sup>697</sup> Also the UN reported that airstrikes in 2020 damaged or destroyed schools.<sup>698</sup> The UN Security Council noted that between December 2020 and

<sup>689</sup> AOAV, Explosive Violence Monitor 2020, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>690</sup> 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

<sup>691</sup> 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

<sup>692</sup> REACH, Syria – City of Idlib, Shelter Damage Assessment as of 1 August 2016 [box: damage trend], 23 October 2016, [url](#)

<sup>693</sup> REACH, Syria, Syrian cities damage atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 45-46

<sup>694</sup> REACH, Syria – Northwest, Burned Agricultural Land as of 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019, 4 June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>695</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

<sup>696</sup> HRW, “Targeting Life in Idlib”, Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 45-46

<sup>697</sup> Save the Children, Idlib, Syria: Two schools a day damaged or abandoned during escalation in fighting, 16 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>698</sup> 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.<sup>699</sup>

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.<sup>700</sup> In 2020, WHO recorded 8 attacks on health care facilities in Idlib, the most of any governorates in Syria.<sup>701</sup> Airstrikes targeting civilian infrastructure, including industrial and commercial areas occurred in 2020 and 2021 in Idlib governorate.<sup>702</sup>

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.’<sup>703</sup>

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.<sup>704</sup>

### *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.<sup>705</sup>

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).<sup>706</sup>

<sup>699</sup> 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

<sup>700</sup> 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](#)

<sup>701</sup> WHO, Health Cluster, Attacks on health care in Syria 1 Jan – 31 Dec 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>702</sup> 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

<sup>703</sup> UNMAS, Syria, in: Where do we work, updated October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>704</sup> 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

<sup>705</sup> Lund, A., Syria’s Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, [url](#), p. 54

<sup>706</sup> 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.<sup>707</sup> The GoS military offensive in Idlib between December 2019 and March 2020 caused nearly 960 000 new displacements to northern Idlib and Aleppo.<sup>708</sup> IDMC reported most were displaced for a second or third time.<sup>709</sup> Following the March 2020 ceasefire, tens of thousands of those displaced returned to their places of origin.<sup>710</sup>

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.<sup>711</sup>

UNOCHA reported for January 2021, 19 000 displacements from Idlib governorate, 13 000 within the governorate and 15 000 into Idlib governorate<sup>712</sup>; and for February 2021, 16 600 displacements from Idlib governorate, 11 600 within the governorate and 14 400 to Idlib governorate.<sup>713</sup> For March 2021, UNOCHA reported 18 700 displacements from Idlib governorate, 11 300 within the governorate and 15 200 to Idlib governorate.<sup>714</sup>

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.<sup>715</sup> 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.<sup>716</sup> 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.<sup>717</sup>

See also [Section 1.6.5 Displacement and return](#)

<sup>707</sup> REACH, North-West Syria, situation overview, 16 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>708</sup> 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

<sup>709</sup> IDMC, Internal displacement 2020: Mid-year update, 23 September 2020, [url](#), p.18

<sup>710</sup> 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

<sup>711</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements Overview, Jan-Dec 2020 [map], 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>712</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements, January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>713</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arabic Republic, IDP movements, February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>714</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arabic Republic, IDP movements, March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

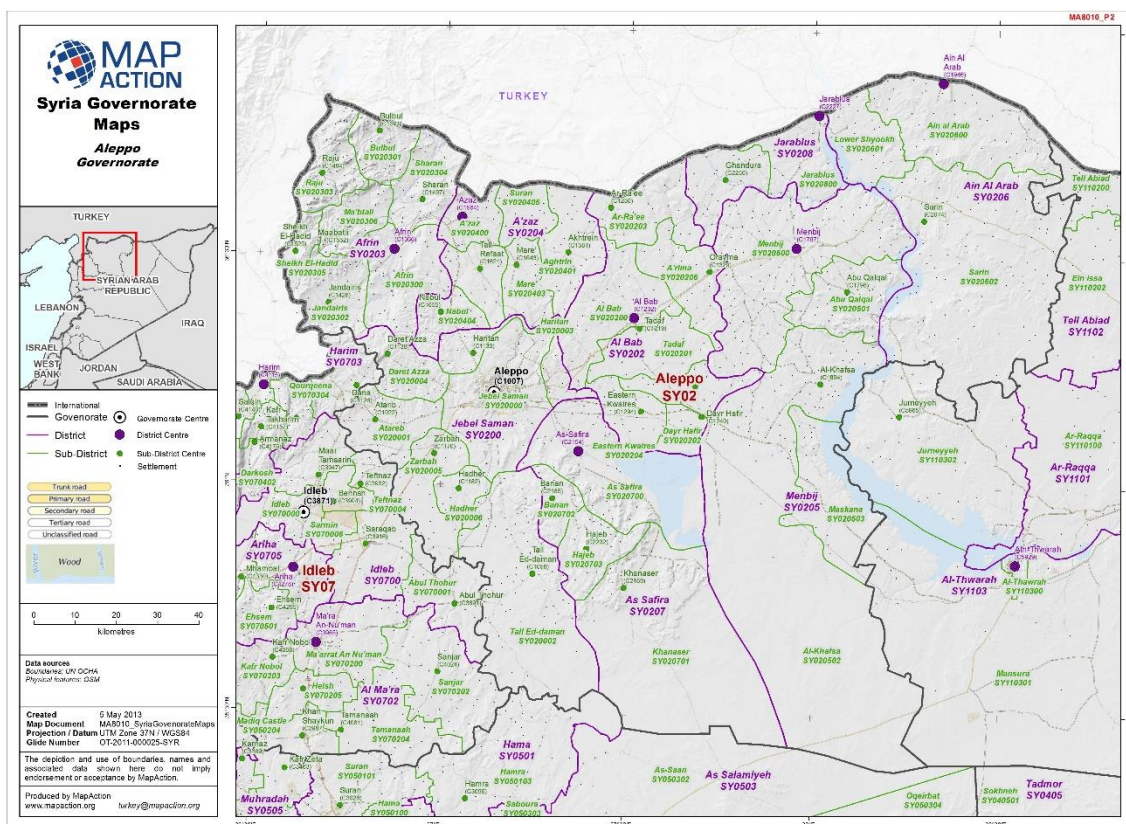
<sup>715</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

<sup>716</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan-Dec 2020 [map], 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>717</sup> 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 governorate<sup>718</sup>

### 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.<sup>719</sup> Prior to 2011, Aleppo governorate hosted around 20 % of Syria's population and was 'the major commercial and industrial hub' of the country.<sup>720</sup> According to 2011 estimates, Aleppo governorate had a population of more than 4 867 991, making it the most populous province of Syria.<sup>721</sup> Population estimates for 2019 issued by the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics indicated that Aleppo governorate had 3 964 000 inhabitants.<sup>722</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Aleppo governorate to be of 4 014 129.<sup>723</sup>

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.<sup>724</sup> Located in Jebel Saman district, Aleppo city is the

<sup>718</sup> MapAction, Aleppo governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

<sup>719</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Governorates profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>720</sup> ACAPS, Regional Analysis Syria: All – Governorate Profiles, 1 October-31 December 2014, 28 January 2015, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>721</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Governorates profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>722</sup> 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

<sup>723</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>724</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Governorates profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 5



central city of the governorate.<sup>725</sup> As of 2019, the UN estimated that around 1.6 million people were living in Aleppo city.<sup>726</sup>

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.<sup>727</sup> USDOS noted that Shia Muslims are present in the rural areas of Aleppo governorate, as well as in and around Aleppo.<sup>728</sup> According to Syria expert Fabrice Balanche<sup>729</sup>, '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.'<sup>730</sup> Sheikh Maqsoud district in Aleppo city 'constitutes a Kurdish city within the city'.<sup>731</sup>

VDC and SOHR alleged that Turkey carried out demographic change in the Afrin region.<sup>732</sup> 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.<sup>733</sup>

## 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 2016<sup>734</sup>. The GoS forces retook control of the rebel-held part of Aleppo in December 2016 after a prolonged siege<sup>735</sup> in which between 250 000 and 275 000 residents were still living in the rebel-held parts.<sup>736</sup> In 2016, Turkey launched operation Euphrates Shield in northern Aleppo governorate to fight ISIL and contain YPG gains in the area<sup>737</sup>, capturing the Al-Bab area, including Jarablus and other towns.<sup>738</sup> In January 2018, Turkish and affiliated local armed groups launched another offensive dubbed Operation Olive Branch on the Kurdish-held Afrin district, in Aleppo governorate<sup>739</sup> which concluded in March 2018 when Turkish authorities announced complete control of the Afrin region.<sup>740</sup> 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 Damascus<sup>741</sup>

<sup>725</sup> UN Habitat and SDC, City Profile Aleppo Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>726</sup> New Humanitarian (The), In Syria's Aleppo, a slow rebuild begins, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>727</sup> ACAPS, Aleppo – Governorate profile. Syria Needs Analysis Project, March 2013, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>728</sup> USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report: Syria 2019, June 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>729</sup> 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](#)

<sup>730</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 44

<sup>731</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 53

<sup>732</sup> 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](#)

<sup>733</sup> VDC-NSY, الفواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا ( حلب، إدلب ) [Turkey's military bases in northeast Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>734</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 44

<sup>735</sup> 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

<sup>736</sup> Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 34

<sup>737</sup> International Crisis Group, Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, 31 July 2019, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>738</sup> BBC News, Turkey 'ends' Euphrates Shield campaign in Syria, 30 March 2017, [url](#)

<sup>739</sup> 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

<sup>740</sup> Al-Hilu, K., Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations, EUI, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>741</sup> International Crisis Group, Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib, 14 May 2020, [url](#)

amid intensification of hostilities.<sup>742</sup> 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 2020<sup>743</sup>, 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.<sup>744</sup> 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.<sup>745</sup> 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).<sup>746</sup> In March 2020, Russia and Turkey agreed a ceasefire in north-west Syria<sup>747</sup>, which aimed at halting the military operations and freezing the frontlines.<sup>748</sup>

As regards territorial control, ORSAM, a research centre based in Ankara<sup>749</sup>, 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.<sup>750</sup> 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).<sup>751</sup> 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.<sup>752</sup> In the western Aleppo countryside as of January 2021 reporting, GoS forces were present 18 km from Bab Al-Hawa crossing.<sup>753</sup> 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.<sup>754</sup>

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

<sup>742</sup> 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

<sup>743</sup> 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](#)

<sup>744</sup> 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](#)

<sup>745</sup> TRT World, Syria regime seizes more Aleppo villages; car bomb kills four, 16 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>746</sup> Independent (The), The battle for Aleppo ends with liberation for some, Armageddon for others, 18 February 2020, [url](#);

<sup>747</sup> 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

<sup>748</sup> 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

<sup>749</sup> ORSAM, About us, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>750</sup> Saban, N., Analysis of territorial control in northwestern Syria and the HTS's role, ORSAM, November 2020, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>751</sup> Shaban, N., The Syrian National Army: Formation, Challenges, and Outlook, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, October 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>752</sup> Based on reading of the following map: Liveuamap, Syria, 23 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>753</sup> COAR, Syria in 2021: Forecast for a protracted crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>754</sup> 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.<sup>755</sup> 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.<sup>756</sup> Finally, in Aleppo city, Sheikh Maqsoud district, a Kurdish majority district, was reported by different sources to be under the SDF control.<sup>757</sup>

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.<sup>758</sup>

### *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.<sup>759</sup> 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 Studies<sup>760</sup> 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 Rifaat<sup>761</sup>, Manbij, Kobane, Kuweires, and Al-Hader.<sup>762</sup> In Aleppo city, the opposition website Zaman Al-Wasl<sup>763</sup>, reported that in April 2020, the Russian army withdrew forces from some parts of the city due to the spread of COVID-19.<sup>764</sup>

The Russian forces in Aleppo had a training role (e.g., training SAA crew in manoeuvring the Soviet T-72 tanks<sup>765</sup>, 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.<sup>766</sup>

### *Iran and Iran-backed militias*

Jusoor for Studies stated on 6 January 2021 that Iran had 15 military bases and posts in Aleppo governorate.<sup>767</sup> According to a June 2019 article, the IRGC and Iran-backed militias were reportedly in control of the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo city.<sup>768</sup> Experts cited by Al Jazeera assessed that Aleppo is 'one of the main areas where Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards have a strong military

<sup>755</sup> US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 27 July 2020, [url](#), pp. 20-21

<sup>756</sup> 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

<sup>757</sup> 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](#)

<sup>758</sup> ORSAM, Analysis of Territorial Control in Northwestern Syria and the HTS's Role, November 2020, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>759</sup> Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

<sup>760</sup> '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](#)

<sup>761</sup> SOHR, Turkish forces shell Tal Rifaat town hosting Russian military base, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>762</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria,, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>763</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, Zaman Al-Wasl, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>764</sup> Zaman Al-Wasl, Russia re-stationed forces in Aleppo due to Coronavirus, 22 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>765</sup> TASS, Russian military instructors hold series of drills with Syrian tank crews, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>766</sup> Al Jazeera, خمس سنوات على التدخل الروسي في سوريا [Five years of the Russian intervention in Syria], 30 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>767</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>768</sup> 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.<sup>769</sup> 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.<sup>770</sup> 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.<sup>771</sup> 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.<sup>772</sup>

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 centre<sup>773</sup>, and were reported to take part in military operations in Aleppo governorate in early 2020.<sup>774</sup> 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).<sup>775</sup>

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.<sup>776</sup>

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.<sup>777</sup> 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.<sup>778</sup>

<sup>769</sup> Al Jazeera, Syrian military: Israeli air attack targeted Aleppo, 28 March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>770</sup> Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>771</sup> 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](#)

<sup>772</sup> 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](#)

<sup>773</sup> France24, Syria says Israeli jets attacked military outposts near Aleppo, 5 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>774</sup> Al Monitor, What brought Iranian forces to Idlib front?, 3 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>775</sup> 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](#)

<sup>776</sup> Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>777</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>778</sup> 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.<sup>779</sup> 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.<sup>780</sup>

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.<sup>781</sup> In a study published in August 2020, Jusoor Center observed that the SNA was comprised of three corps<sup>782</sup> 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.<sup>783</sup> The majority of the factions of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps of the SNA report to the Turkish Army directly, while the remainder of the factions coordinate their moves with Turkish security officers.<sup>784</sup>

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).<sup>785</sup>

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.<sup>786</sup> The Jamestown Foundation referred to the existence of rivalries, lack of

<sup>779</sup> 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

<sup>780</sup> 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](#)

<sup>781</sup> Shaban, N., The Syrian National Army: Formation, Challenges, and Outlook, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, October 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>782</sup> Arabi 21, تعرف على تشكيلات "الجيش الوطني السوري" المعارض (ملف), 10 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>783</sup> Jusoor for Studies, الجيش الوطني السوري تحديات التجربة والمآلات الممكنة [The SNA: challenges of the experience and potential outcome], August 2020, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>784</sup> Jusoor for Studies, الجيش الوطني السوري تحديات التجربة والمآلات الممكنة [The SNA: challenges of the experience and potential outcome], August 2020, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>785</sup> COAR, Northern Corridor NOSAP, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 44-45

<sup>786</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 5-6, FN. 14



trust<sup>787</sup>, and diverse ideologies within the different SNA factions, and stated that the fighting against the GoS forces has united those factions so far.<sup>788</sup> These tensions between the different SNA factions resulted in direct clashes<sup>789</sup>, five of which took place in Aleppo countryside between March and June 2020.<sup>790</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned corps, there were military and civilian police forces operating in the Turkish-controlled areas of northern Aleppo.<sup>791</sup> The military police operated under the SNA<sup>792</sup> and was established in the Euphrates Shield area in February 2018 and in the Olive Branch area in July 2018.<sup>793</sup> 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.<sup>794</sup> 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'.<sup>795</sup> 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.<sup>796</sup>

### Turkey

Turkey has deployed forces at around 21 military outposts in the northern Aleppo countryside and 12 main bases in Afrin region.<sup>797</sup> 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.<sup>798</sup> 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.<sup>799</sup> 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

<sup>787</sup> Jusoor for Studies, الجيش الوطني السوري تحديات التجربة والمآلات الممكنة [The SNA: challenges of the experience and potential outcome], August 2020, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>788</sup> Jamestown Foundation (The), The Syrian National Army and the Future of Turkey's Frontier Land Force, 12 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>789</sup> Jusoor for Studies, الجيش الوطني السوري تحديات التجربة والمآلات الممكنة [The SNA: challenges of the experience and potential outcome], August 2020, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>790</sup> Enab Baladi, Violations by "SNA"...who to blame?, 12 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>791</sup> COAR, Northern Corridor NOSAP, October 2019, [url](#), p. 39

<sup>792</sup> Jusoor for Studies, الجيش الوطني السوري تحديات التجربة والمآلات الممكنة [The SNA: challenges of the experience and potential outcome], August 2020, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>793</sup> VDC-NSY, القواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا ( حلب، إدلب ) [The Turkish military bases in northwest Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>794</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 6-7

<sup>795</sup> COAR, Northern Corridor NOSAP, October 2019, [url](#), p. 43

<sup>796</sup> VDC-NSY, القواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا ( حلب، إدلب ) [The Turkish military bases in northwest Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>797</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies, EUI, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>798</sup> VDC-NSY, القواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا ( حلب، إدلب ) [Turkey's military bases in northeast Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>799</sup> 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.'<sup>800</sup>

### *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 Shahba<sup>801</sup>, as well as the Sheikh Maqsoud neighbourhood of Aleppo.<sup>802</sup>

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.<sup>803</sup> 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.<sup>804</sup> GoS forces, accompanied by Russian forces, were subsequently deployed to the cities of Manbij<sup>805</sup> and Kobane.<sup>806</sup> Several sources interviewed by DIS between January and February 2020 noted that GoS lacked administrative authority in SDF-controlled areas.<sup>807</sup>

### *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 NLF<sup>808</sup>, and controlled over 90 % of Idlib governorate, alongside adjacent parts of northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates.<sup>809</sup>

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.<sup>810</sup>

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.<sup>811</sup> 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.<sup>812</sup>

<sup>800</sup> 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](#)

<sup>801</sup> 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](#)

<sup>802</sup> Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>803</sup> Defense Post (The), Syrian government forces set to enter Kobani and Manbij in SDF deal, 13 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>804</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria's army to deploy along Turkey border as Kurds strike deal, 14 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>805</sup> DW, Russia-backed Syrian forces enter key city Manbij in northern Syria, 15 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>806</sup> 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](#)

<sup>807</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>808</sup> 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](#)

<sup>809</sup> 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](#)

<sup>810</sup> MEI, Shifting Gears: HTS's Evolving Use of SVBIEDs During the Idlib Offensive of 2019-20, 28 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>811</sup> ECFR, Guns and governance: How Europe should talk with non-state armed groups in the Middle East, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>812</sup> 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 Syria<sup>813</sup> which aimed at freezing the frontlines and operating joint patrols on the M4 highway that links Aleppo and Latakia.<sup>814</sup> In its early stages, the ceasefire agreement saw no violations<sup>815</sup>, 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.<sup>816</sup> In 2021, several violations to the ceasefire agreement have been observed by Russia and Turkey in Aleppo governorate, including five on 7 February 2021<sup>817</sup> and four reported on 12 March 2021.<sup>818</sup>

#### *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.<sup>819</sup> 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'.<sup>820</sup> The ICRC also reported on intense shelling that affected several neighbourhoods in Aleppo city in the first weeks of 2020.<sup>821</sup> 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.<sup>822</sup>

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.<sup>823</sup> Moreover, looting, thefts, kidnapping, and extortion were prevalent in old Aleppo and Bab Al-Nayrab neighbourhoods where the Barri clan were in control.<sup>824</sup>

<sup>813</sup> 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

<sup>814</sup> 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

<sup>815</sup> 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](#)

<sup>816</sup> Syria Direct, Will Damascus or HTS be the first to break the ceasefire in Idlib?, 16 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>817</sup> BW Business World, Russia Registers 28 Ceasefire Violations In Syria Over Past Day, 7 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>818</sup> 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](#)

<sup>819</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 18

<sup>820</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 82

<sup>821</sup> ICRC, Syria: A spike in civilian casualties, mass displacement in country's northwest, 31 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>822</sup> 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](#)

<sup>823</sup> 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](#)

<sup>824</sup> 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.<sup>825</sup>
- On 5 February 2020, reported ground-based strikes hit a residential area of Aleppo city, causing the death of five family members.<sup>826</sup>
- On 25 February 2020, four civilians were reportedly killed in two separate IED attacks in Aleppo city.<sup>827</sup>
- 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.<sup>828</sup>

### *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.<sup>829</sup> The ICRC observed an intensification of battles in the first weeks of 2020 in Idlib and western Aleppo governorates.<sup>830</sup> 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.<sup>831</sup> 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.<sup>832</sup>

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:

<sup>825</sup> OHCHR, Syria: Bachelet condemns continued killings and displacements despite 'ceasefire', 17 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>826</sup> 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

<sup>827</sup> 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

<sup>828</sup> 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](#)

<sup>829</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 17

<sup>830</sup> ICRC, Syria: A spike in civilian casualties, mass displacement in country's northwest, 31 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>831</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), paras. 33-34

<sup>832</sup> 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 <sup>a</sup>	Number attributed to Russian Aerospace Forces <sup>a</sup>	Armed groups (total)
Number of medical facilities reported damaged <sup>b</sup>	19	6	25	25	-	-	-
Attacks affecting medical facilities investigated by the Commission <sup>c</sup>	11	5+1 <sup>d</sup>	17	16	1	1	1
Number of schools reported damaged <sup>e</sup>	49	6+3 <sup>d</sup>	58	55	-	-	3
Attacks affecting schools investigated by the Commission <sup>f</sup>	8	6	14	14	6	-	-
Number of markets reported damaged <sup>g</sup>	14	-	14	14	-	-	-
Attacks affecting markets investigated by the Commission <sup>h</sup>	6	1+2 <sup>d</sup>	9	7	1	-	2
Other attacks affecting civilians or civilian objects investigated by the Commission <sup>i</sup>	8	2+2 <sup>d</sup>	12	10	2	1	2
Number of civilian deaths reported <sup>j</sup>	509	167	676	641	-	-	35
Civilian casualties in the 52 incidents investigated by the Commission <sup>k</sup>	474	60+48 <sup>d</sup>	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 2020<sup>833</sup>

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:

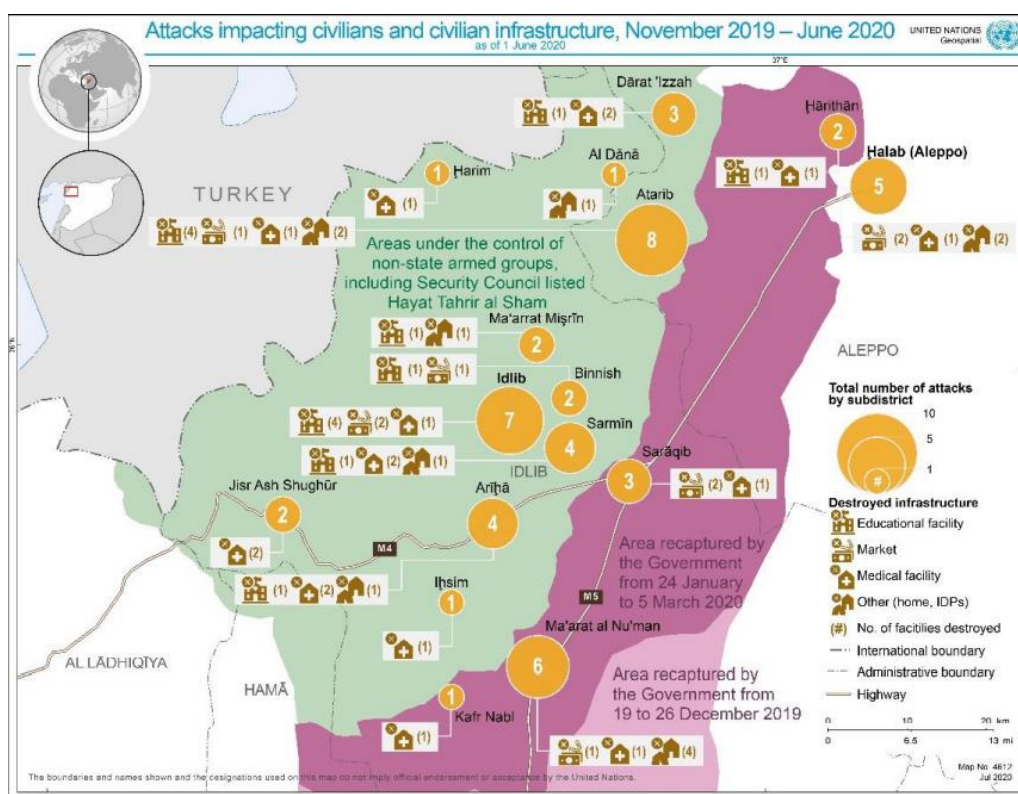


Figure 16: Attacks impacting civilian infrastructure, November 2019 – June 2020<sup>834</sup>

<sup>833</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>834</sup> 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.<sup>835</sup>

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.<sup>836</sup>
- 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.<sup>837</sup>
- 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 25<sup>th</sup> Special Mission Forces Division.<sup>838</sup>
- 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'.<sup>839</sup>
- 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.<sup>840</sup>
- On 8 and 18 May 2020, two civilians were killed in reported sniper fire near the villages of Miznaz and Atareb.<sup>841</sup>
- On 21 March 2021, artillery shelling, reportedly by GoS forces<sup>842</sup>, hit a hospital in Atareb town in western Aleppo countryside.<sup>843</sup> The attack caused 6 deaths and 17 injuries, including among patients and medical staff, and caused damage to the hospital.<sup>844</sup>

#### *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.<sup>845</sup> UNOCHA stated that of the 194 IED attacks that were verified in 2020, 83 took place in Afrin, Jarablus, and A'zaz.<sup>846</sup> 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.<sup>847</sup>

<sup>835</sup> WHO, Health Cluster, Attacks on health care in Syria 1 Jan – 31 Dec 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>836</sup> 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

<sup>837</sup> 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

<sup>838</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 99

<sup>839</sup> Reuters, Syrian forces consolidate control of Aleppo, air strikes under way, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>840</sup> 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

<sup>841</sup> 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

<sup>842</sup> Daily Sabah, Assad regime attack on hospital kills 7 civilians in Syria's Idlib, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>843</sup> 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](#)

<sup>844</sup> 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](#)

<sup>845</sup> Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 25-31 January 2021, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>846</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>847</sup> 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.<sup>848</sup> 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.<sup>849</sup> Fighting between SDF forces and SNA in the Al Bab area was reported in 2020.<sup>850</sup>

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.<sup>851</sup> The attacks were unclaimed but pro-opposition sources attributed them to the YPG.<sup>852</sup> 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.<sup>853</sup> ISW observed an ‘uptick in IED attacks in Turkish-controlled areas of Syria’ between 24 December 2020 and 6 January 2021.<sup>854</sup> 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.<sup>855</sup>

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.<sup>856</sup>

### 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.<sup>857</sup> On 10 January 2021, an unidentified drone attacked oil refineries situated in Al-Bab countryside.<sup>858</sup> 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.<sup>859</sup> SOHR stated that four civilians were killed and dozens injured in the attacks<sup>860</sup>, and Baladi News mentioned that in retaliation, the Turkish forces shelled areas under the control of GoS/SDF in Manbij countryside.<sup>861</sup> On 15 March 2021, Al Jazeera reported that missiles launched from Kuweires air base in Aleppo targeted ‘civilian

<sup>848</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 38

<sup>849</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 27 July – 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>850</sup> 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

<sup>851</sup> Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 22-28 February 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>852</sup> Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 15-21 February 2021, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>853</sup> 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](#)

<sup>854</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>855</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 30 - February 18, 2021, 19 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>856</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 1 - 7 March 2021, 7 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>857</sup> 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](#)

<sup>858</sup> Al-Bawaba, Drone Attack Strikes Oil Refineries in North Syria, 10 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>859</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria: Oil refinery attacks raise fears of ‘grave escalation’, 11 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>860</sup> SOHR, Aleppo countryside | Rocket attacks renew on the area of primitive oil refineries, 5 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>861</sup> 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.<sup>862</sup>

### 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'.<sup>863</sup> 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.<sup>864</sup> In January 2021, SOHR documented 'over 51 operations, including armed attacks and explosions, carried out by ISIS cells in SDF-held areas' including Aleppo.<sup>865</sup>

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)<sup>866</sup>, near Al-Bab on 20 June 2020 (former Emir of Raqqa)<sup>867</sup>, and near Ihtaimlat on 20 July 2020 (ISIL militant).<sup>868</sup>

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.<sup>869</sup> On 16 February 2021, Syria TV, a Syrian opposition channel based in Turkey<sup>870</sup>, 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.<sup>871</sup> The clashes between the two SNA factions were also reported by Enab Baladi and Aleppo Today.<sup>872</sup> Later in February 2021, Al-Mayadeen, a Beirut-based pan-Arab TV channel<sup>873</sup>, 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.<sup>874</sup> An incident of infighting that affected civilians was reported to have taken place on 23 December 2020, when clashes

<sup>862</sup> Al Jazeera, Turkey says civilians wounded in Syrian missile raids, 15 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>863</sup> 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

<sup>864</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>865</sup> 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](#)

<sup>866</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 13 - 26, 2020, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>867</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: June 10 - 23, 2020, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>868</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: July 7 - 21, 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>869</sup> Syrian Observer (The), Security Chaos, Faction Infighting in Northern Aleppo, Baladi News, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>870</sup> Syria TV, سوريا عن تلفزيون سوريا [About Syria TV], n. d., [url](#)

<sup>871</sup> 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](#)

<sup>872</sup> 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](#)

<sup>873</sup> France24, 'Anti-Al Jazeera' channel Al Mayadeen goes on air, 12 June 2012, [url](#)

<sup>874</sup> Al-Mayadeen, حملة واسعة أطلقها فصائل أنقرة في ريف حلب الشمالي بمواجهة "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.<sup>875</sup>

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.<sup>876</sup> The VDC reported on the same trend<sup>877</sup>, and Enab Baladi reported on cases of real estate and crops seizure by SNA factions in Afrin.<sup>878</sup> 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.<sup>879</sup>

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.<sup>880</sup>
- On 10 February 2020, six civilians were killed and 12 injured in a VBIED attack in Afrin city.<sup>881</sup>
- On 19 March 2020, an explosion of a VBIED in A’zaz city caused at least 2 deaths and 18 injuries among civilians.<sup>882</sup>
- 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’.<sup>883</sup> 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.<sup>884</sup>
- 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.<sup>885</sup>
- On 25 June 2020, another male civilian was killed in a drive-by shooting claimed by ISIL in Al-Bab city.<sup>886</sup>
- 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.<sup>887</sup>

<sup>875</sup> SNHR, IDPs injured, tents damaged in north Aleppo camp in clashes between two Syrian National Army factions on Dec 23, 24 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>876</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 46

<sup>877</sup> VDC-NSY, القواعد العسكرية التركية في شمال غرب سوريا ( حلب، إدلب ) [Turkey’s military bases in northeast Syria (Aleppo, Idlib)], 17 august 2020, [url](#)

<sup>878</sup> Enab Baladi, Real estate seizures, utilization, and royalties... Who protects property rights in Afrin?, 29 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>879</sup> 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](#)

<sup>880</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 39

<sup>881</sup> 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

<sup>882</sup> 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

<sup>883</sup> 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

<sup>884</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 42

<sup>885</sup> 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

<sup>886</sup> 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

<sup>887</sup> 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.<sup>888</sup>
- On 13 December 2020, armed clashes between armed groups in Jindayris city left two men injured.<sup>889</sup>
- 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.<sup>890</sup>
- 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.<sup>891</sup>
- 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.<sup>892</sup>

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.<sup>893</sup> The Turkish army targeted the vicinity of Meng airport and the town of Tal Rifaat resulting in damage to two houses on 26 December 2020<sup>894</sup>, and a group called Afrin Liberation Forces shelled Turkish forces in Afrin on 23 January 2021 in retaliation for targeting civilians in Tal Rifaat.<sup>895</sup> Other incidents of reciprocal shelling between the SDF in Tal Rifaat and the Turkish army were reported on 18 February 2021<sup>896</sup> and on 11 March 2021.<sup>897</sup>

In Manbij area, a VBIED detonated on 20 October 2020 and left five people injured.<sup>898</sup> 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.<sup>899</sup> 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.<sup>900</sup>

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

<sup>888</sup> 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](#)

<sup>889</sup> 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

<sup>890</sup> RT, وسائل إعلام: قتل وجرحى جراء انفجار سيارة مفخخة في مدينة أعزاز شمال سوريا, 31 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>891</sup> 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](#)

<sup>892</sup> Garda World, Syria: Missile strikes in Aleppo Governorate kill at least one person and injure 10 others, 5 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>893</sup> UNICEF, Whole of Syria Humanitarian Situation Report January 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>894</sup> 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](#)

<sup>895</sup> Kurdistan Monitor, Rojava – West Kurdistan – Syria – January 2021, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>896</sup> Daily Sabah, YPG terrorists wound 6 children in rocket attack on Syria's Afrin, 18 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>897</sup> 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](#)

<sup>898</sup> SHRC, Injuries due to Explosion in Manbij, 20 October 2020, [url](#); Kurdistan 24, IED attack injures civilians in Syria's Manbij, 20 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>899</sup> Kurdistan 24, Turkish-backed groups shell Manbij countryside, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>900</sup> ANF, Invading Turkish forces bomb Manbij, 8 February 2021, [url](#)



arms fire'.<sup>901</sup> Baladi News reported that skirmishes broke between SNA and SDF fighters on the Kafr Khasher axis, three kilometres to the south of A'zaz.<sup>902</sup> On 29 March 2021, the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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.<sup>903</sup> 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.<sup>904</sup>

Finally, in the wake of tensions between the SDF and GoS in Qamishli that started on 2 January 2021<sup>905</sup>, clashes erupted between GoS forces and Kurdish forces and militias in north-east Syria, and the tensions led to multiple sieges.<sup>906</sup> 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.<sup>907</sup> The reciprocal blockades were eased gradually<sup>908</sup> following a Russian-mediated agreement to end the siege in Hasakah and Aleppo.<sup>909</sup>

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.<sup>910</sup>
- 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.<sup>911</sup>

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.<sup>912</sup> Reportedly, Israeli air strikes targeted positions of GoS forces or Iran-backed militias in Al-Safireh in eastern Aleppo countryside on 5 May 2020<sup>913</sup>, in the vicinity of the artillery academy in Ramouseh, to the south of Aleppo city on 16 May 2020<sup>914</sup>, and Al-

<sup>901</sup> 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

<sup>902</sup> 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](#)

<sup>903</sup> 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](#)

<sup>904</sup> SOHR, Military escalation in Aleppo | Clashes erupt in Manbij, while regime forces and Turkish force trade fire in northern countryside, 14 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>905</sup> 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](#)

<sup>906</sup> VOA, Fresh Clashes Erupt Between Kurdish, Government Forces in Northeast Syria, 31 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>907</sup> EPC, Dispute between the Kurdish Autonomous Administration and Al-Assad Regime in Al-Hasakah Governorate: Background and Possibilities, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>908</sup> AA, YPG/PKK, Assad regime mutually ease blockades, 3 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>909</sup> Al Monitor, Syrian government, SDF trade accusations of violations of Russian-mediated cease-fire, 8 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>910</sup> 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

<sup>911</sup> SOHR, Aleppo countryside | Turkish forces shell five villages and positions in Kurdish-held areas, 22 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>912</sup> Reuters, Israel intensifying air war in Syria against Iranian encroachment, 22 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>913</sup> France24, Syria says Israeli jets attacked military outposts near Aleppo, 5 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>914</sup> 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.<sup>915</sup>

### 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.

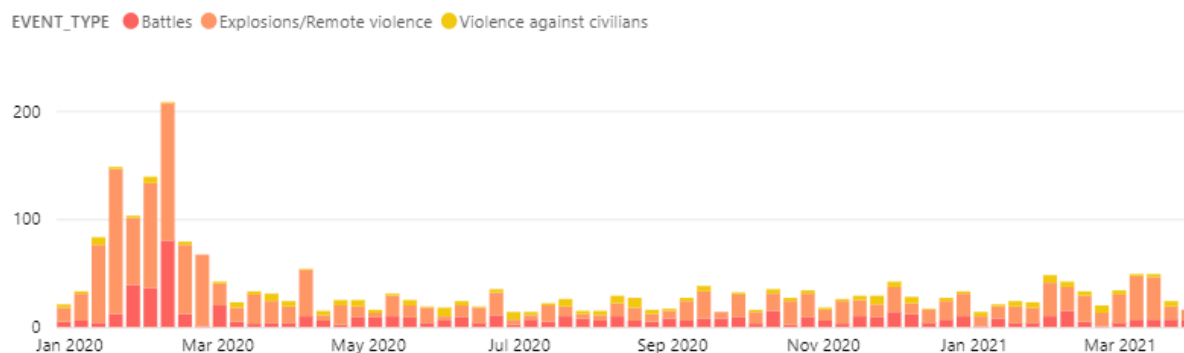


Figure 17. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Aleppo governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>916</sup>

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
<b>Total</b>	<b>601</b>	<b>1556</b>	<b>248</b>

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

<sup>915</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2 - 15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>916</sup> 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 390<sup>917</sup> (SNHR data)<sup>918</sup> and 446 civilian fatalities (VDC data)<sup>919</sup>, 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		
<b>Total</b>	<b>446</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>104</b>

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.<sup>920</sup>

### 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

<sup>917</sup> 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

<sup>918</sup> 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

<sup>919</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>920</sup> AOA, *Explosive Violence Monitor 2020*, March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

that sustained the highest damage to physical capital.<sup>921</sup> 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.<sup>922</sup>

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.<sup>923</sup>

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.<sup>924</sup> 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.<sup>925</sup> Electricity in Aleppo city was supplied primarily from generators and only private hospitals were reported to operate.<sup>926</sup> 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.<sup>927</sup>

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.<sup>928</sup> The UK-based media outlet, the National<sup>929</sup>, 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'.<sup>930</sup> On 28 August 2020, Enab Baladi shared pictures of the 'destruction scenes in Salaheddine district in Aleppo city'.<sup>931</sup>

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.<sup>932</sup> 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.<sup>933</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>921</sup> 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

<sup>922</sup> ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 50

<sup>923</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

<sup>924</sup> World Bank (The), The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria, 2017, [url](#), pp. 27, 39

<sup>925</sup> World Bank (The), Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, March 2017, [url](#), pp. iv, vi

<sup>926</sup> New York Times (The), What 'Victory' Looks Like: A Journey Through Shattered Syria, 21 August 2019, [url](#)

<sup>927</sup> World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians an Economic and Social Analysis, 6 February 2019, [url](#), p. 137

<sup>928</sup> 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](#)

<sup>929</sup> National (The), About us, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>930</sup> National (The), East Aleppo: Syria's former rebel bastion languishes in ruins, 29 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>931</sup> Enab Baladi, Destruction scenes in Salaheddine district in Aleppo, 28 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>932</sup> 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](#)

<sup>933</sup> 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.<sup>934</sup>

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 facilities<sup>935</sup>, and left frontline areas close to strategic locations in ruins.<sup>936</sup> 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.<sup>937</sup> 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.<sup>938</sup>

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'<sup>939</sup>, 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.'<sup>940</sup>

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.<sup>941</sup> WFP also mentioned the existence of explosive hazards in north-west Syria.<sup>942</sup> 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'.<sup>943</sup>

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.<sup>944</sup>
- 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.<sup>945</sup>

<sup>934</sup> New Humanitarian (The), In Syria's Aleppo, a slow rebuild begins, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>935</sup> HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib": Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, 15 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>936</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 17

<sup>937</sup> 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

<sup>938</sup> IRC, Syria: IRC statement on hospital attack in western Aleppo, 21 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>939</sup> SRTF, Overview, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>940</sup> SRTF, Rehabilitation of Water and Sanitation Infrastructure in a District in Northern Aleppo – Phase I, 30 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>941</sup> UNOCHA, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria Situation Report No. 25 - As of 26 February 2021, 26 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>942</sup> WFP, Syrian Arab Republic: mVAM Bulletin Issue no. 51, 31 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>943</sup> ACAPS, Humanitarian needs in Afrin, 3 March 2021, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>944</sup> 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

<sup>945</sup> 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.<sup>946</sup>
- 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.<sup>947</sup>
- On 16 July 2020, an UXO detonated in Afrin city, injuring two boys who were playing with it.<sup>948</sup>
- 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.<sup>949</sup>
- 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.<sup>950</sup>
- 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.<sup>951</sup>

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.<sup>952</sup>

### *Displacement and return*

In its Humanitarian Needs Overview of 2021, UNOCHA stated that as of August 2020, Aleppo governorate had 1 235 200 IDPs.<sup>953</sup> 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.<sup>954</sup> 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).<sup>955</sup> 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.<sup>956</sup> 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

<sup>946</sup> 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

<sup>947</sup> 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

<sup>948</sup> 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

<sup>949</sup> 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

<sup>950</sup> 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

<sup>951</sup> ARTA, وفاة طفل وإصابة ثلاثة آخرين إثر انفجار لغم من مخلفات الحرب في حلب, 10 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>952</sup> Mine Action Review, Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 168

<sup>953</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>954</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>955</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2020, 25 February 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2020, 6 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>956</sup> 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.<sup>957</sup> 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'.<sup>958</sup> UNOCHA observed that the 'relative calm' following the ceasefire agreement of March 2020 was likely the driver behind the IDPs movements registered in April<sup>959</sup>, May<sup>960</sup>, and June 2020<sup>961</sup>, '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.'<sup>962</sup>

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.<sup>963</sup> In March 2021, UNOCHA reported around 19 300 IDP movements from or within Aleppo governorate, 15 500 of which being recorded within the governorate.<sup>964</sup>

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.<sup>965</sup> 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).<sup>966</sup> 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.<sup>967</sup> 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.'<sup>968</sup>

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

<sup>957</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 64

<sup>958</sup> 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

<sup>959</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements April 2020, 31 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>960</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements May 2020, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>961</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements June 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>962</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements May 2020, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>963</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2021, 4 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>964</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>965</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

<sup>966</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns April 2020, 2 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>967</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 September 2020, [url](#), para. 79

<sup>968</sup> 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

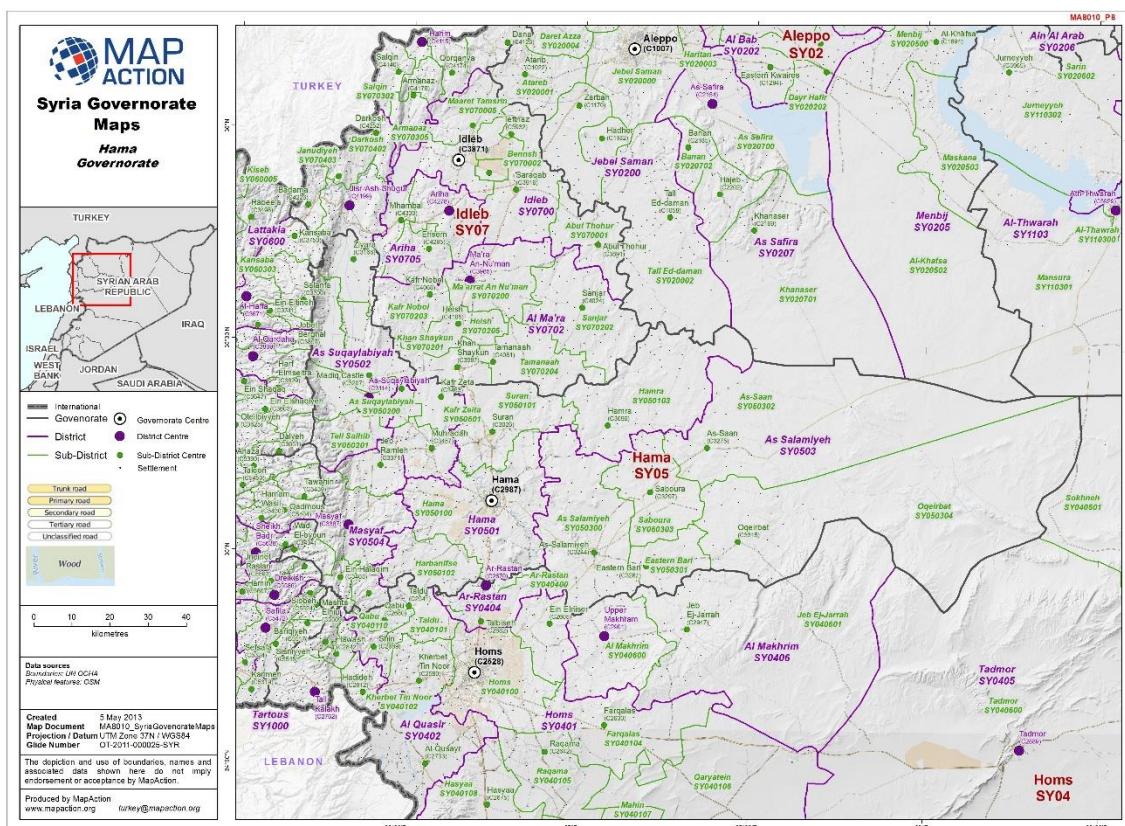
governorate) in February.<sup>969</sup> In March 2021, UNOCHA reported 2 600 spontaneous IDP returns to or within Aleppo governorate.<sup>970</sup>

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<sup>969</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], updated 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>970</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

## 2.3 Hama governorate



Map 8: © MapAction, Hama governorate<sup>971</sup>

### 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.<sup>972</sup> The surface of the governorate is 10 180 km<sup>2</sup>, and it comprises five districts: Hama, Misyaf [Masyaf], Muḥardah [Muhradah], Suqaylbiya [As-Suqaylabiyah], and Salamiyah [As-Salamiyeh]. It also comprises six cities, 27 towns, 578 villages, and 658 farms.<sup>973</sup>

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.<sup>974</sup> The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Hama governorate in 2019 to be 2 082 000.<sup>975</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Hama governorate to be of 1 487 074.<sup>976</sup> With regards to the capital of the governorate, the CIA estimated that the population of Hama city was 940 000 in 2021.<sup>977</sup>

<sup>971</sup> MapAction, Hama governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

<sup>972</sup> UNCS and UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#)

<sup>973</sup> Al-Wahda, حماء [Hama], n.d., [url](#)

<sup>974</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, General Census, 2004, [url](#)

<sup>975</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>976</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>977</sup> 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.<sup>978</sup> The western countryside, on the other hand, is more diverse, and is 'full of Alawite, Christian, and Ismaili villages'.<sup>979</sup> Syria's Ismailis are concentrated in the area of Salamiya in eastern Hama.<sup>980</sup> Additionally, the governorate has a Christian presence<sup>981</sup>, particularly in the town of Muhardah, which is 'predominantly Christian'.<sup>982</sup>

### 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.<sup>983</sup> 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' occurred<sup>984</sup>, the urban centre of Hama city witnessed limited fighting and has remained 'firmly' under the control of GoS.<sup>985</sup> 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.<sup>986</sup> Between 2014 and 2017, several offensives and clashes occurred between government forces and opposition groups.<sup>987</sup> The SAA and Iranian-backed militias intensified their operations in the governorate in 2017.<sup>988</sup>

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)'.<sup>989</sup> 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'.<sup>990</sup> 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.<sup>991</sup>

In April 2019, the GoS forces' bombardment of areas controlled by HTS in northern Hama intensified.<sup>992</sup> 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

<sup>978</sup> Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>979</sup> Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 43

<sup>980</sup> Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>981</sup> USDOS, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 10 June 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>982</sup> Al Masdar News, Syrian Christians hold mass in Mhardeh town as life in north Hama gradually normalizes, 8 May 2017, [url](#)

<sup>983</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>984</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>985</sup> World Bank (The), Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, March 2017, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>986</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>987</sup> 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/>

<sup>988</sup> MEI, Syrian Army, Iran-Controlled Militias Intensify Operations in Hama Province, 14 April 2017, [url](#)

<sup>989</sup> OHCHR, Syria: Bachelet alarmed by upsurge in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib, 19 February 2019, [url](#)

<sup>990</sup> BBC News, Syria war: Jihadist takeover in rebel-held Idlib sparks alarm, 26 February 2019, [url](#)

<sup>991</sup> DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>992</sup> New Arab (The), Syrian regime offensive leaves 26 dead in Hama, 6 May 2019, [url](#)



were unsuccessful.<sup>993</sup> 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.<sup>994</sup> 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’.<sup>995</sup>

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.<sup>996</sup> 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.<sup>997</sup> 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’.<sup>998</sup> 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.<sup>999</sup> 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.<sup>1000</sup>

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.<sup>1001</sup> (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.<sup>1002</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, the 11<sup>th</sup> Division, the 9<sup>th</sup> Division, and 79<sup>th</sup> Battalion in Hama governorate.<sup>1003</sup>

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.’<sup>1004</sup>

<sup>993</sup> ACLED, Regional Overview – Middle East, 5 June 2019, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>994</sup> HRW, Russia/Syria: Flurry of Prohibited Weapons Attacks, 3 June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>995</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, Syrian Regime Brings Massive Military Reinforcements to Hama Countryside, 25 June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>996</sup> Al Monitor, Syrian regime pays heavy price for two strategic towns in Hama, 9 August 2019, [url](#)

<sup>997</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria’s army encircles rebels in Hama, imposing ‘choking siege’, 23 August 2019, [url](#)

<sup>998</sup> Germany, BAMF, Briefing Notes, 26 August 2019, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>999</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1000</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1001</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1002</sup> Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1003</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1004</sup> 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).<sup>1005</sup> 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.<sup>1006</sup> The Tiger Forces are also known as the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Mission Forces Division<sup>1007</sup>, 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.<sup>1008</sup> In addition to the Tiger Forces, sources referred to the presence of Al-Ghawar militia (which is allegedly affiliated with the 4<sup>th</sup> Division)<sup>1009</sup>, the NDF, and Al-Quds Brigade in rural Hama.<sup>1010</sup>

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.<sup>1011</sup> Another category comprised companies affiliated with Russia, such as IS Hunters which was headquartered in Hama governorate.<sup>1012</sup> The company was 'overseen entirely' by the Wagner group and participated in battles against ISIL in the eastern Hama governorate.<sup>1013</sup>

#### *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.<sup>1014</sup> 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 Room<sup>1015</sup> along Al-Ghab Plain in Hama governorate.<sup>1016</sup>

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

<sup>1005</sup> Waters, G., Understanding Syria's Military Deployments in Idlib, International Review, 10 March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1006</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1007</sup> According to Enab Baladi, the group changed its name from the Tiger Forces to the '25<sup>th</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1008</sup> NPA, Russian-backed Syrian government forces target Turkish convoy in Syria, 18 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1009</sup> Al-Abdullah, H., ميليشيات تابعة لقوات الأسد تهين وتأسر عميداً في الشرطة وضابطاً آخرين [Militias affiliated with Assad forces humiliate and detain a police brigadier-general and other officers], 18 November 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1010</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1011</sup> Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>1012</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1013</sup> Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>1014</sup> 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

<sup>1015</sup> 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

<sup>1016</sup> 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.<sup>1017</sup> 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.<sup>1018</sup>

### *Russia*

Jusoor for Studies<sup>1019</sup> 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.<sup>1020</sup>

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.<sup>1021</sup> 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.<sup>1022</sup>

### *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.<sup>1023</sup>

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.<sup>1024</sup> 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.<sup>1025</sup>

<sup>1017</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1018</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1019</sup> '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](#)

<sup>1020</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1021</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1022</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1023</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1024</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1025</sup> 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.<sup>1026</sup> 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]'.<sup>1027</sup> In February 2020, GoS forces advanced in Al-Ghab Plain and captured several villages<sup>1028</sup>, 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.<sup>1029</sup>

On 5 March 2020, Russia and Turkey agreed a ceasefire that would halt hostilities in north-west Syria<sup>1030</sup>, which sparked the spontaneous return of 200 000 IDPs between 5 and 12 June 2020.<sup>1031</sup> However, hostilities resumed in May 2020 as opposition factions recaptured Al-Manara (Al-Tanjara) village in north-western Hama governorate<sup>1032</sup>, and the GoS forces shelled the villages of Ankawi, Qahira, and Quleidin in the area.<sup>1033</sup> 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.<sup>1034</sup>

An increase in hostilities in southern Idlib and northern Hama governorates, including Russian air strikes occurred in the first half of June 2020.<sup>1035</sup> 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.<sup>1036</sup> 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.<sup>1037</sup> 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.<sup>1038</sup> 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

<sup>1026</sup> 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

<sup>1027</sup> SOAR, Syria in 2021: Forecast for a protracted crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1028</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1029</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 24 FEBRUARY – 1 MARCH 2020, 1 March 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>1030</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1031</sup> REACH, Northwest Syria - Conditions in Communities of Return: Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, 17 July 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>1032</sup> 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 22 قتيلا من قوات الأسد ومجموعات جهادية رغم الهدنة, 10 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1033</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1034</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1035</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1036</sup> 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

<sup>1037</sup> Carter Center (The), WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 22 June – 28 June 2020, 28 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>1038</sup> Enab Baladi, "الجيئة الوطنية" توسع قصفها لنقاط النظام "فيلق الشام" 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'.<sup>1039</sup> The same source reported on reinforcement of GoS forces being gathered in Al-Ghab plain in western Hama governorate in December 2020.<sup>1040</sup>

Clashes and shelling between GoS and opposition forces in western rural Hama intensified in 2021.<sup>1041</sup> 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.<sup>1042</sup> 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.<sup>1043</sup>

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.<sup>1044</sup> 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.<sup>1045</sup> 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.<sup>1046</sup> 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'.<sup>1047</sup> SNHR documented one cluster munition and 1 546 barrel bomb attacks by GoS forces in Hama governorate between December 2019 and March 2020.<sup>1048</sup> 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.<sup>1049</sup> 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'.<sup>1050</sup>

#### *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

<sup>1039</sup> NPA, Government forces continue targeting opposition groups' sites northwestern Syria, 27 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1040</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1041</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1042</sup> Enab Baladi, قتل 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, قتل 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](#)

<sup>1043</sup> Enab Baladi, فصائل إدلب تصمد تسللاً للنظام في سهل الغاب [Idlib factions repel a regime infiltration in Al-Ghab Plain], 7 February 2021, [url](#); Aleppo Today, قتل 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](#)

<sup>1044</sup> 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

<sup>1045</sup> SHRC, SHRC documents the killing of 1,750 people in 2020, 2 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1046</sup> 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

<sup>1047</sup> USDOS, Syria 2020 Human Rights report, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 32

<sup>1048</sup> 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

<sup>1049</sup> SNHR, The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in the First Half of 2020, 3 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1050</sup> Responsibility to Protect, R2P Monitor: Issue 54, 15 November 2020, [url](#), p. 11



attacks in exterior regions'.<sup>1051</sup> 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 governorate<sup>1052</sup>, and ISW, in its Syria Situation Report of 3 December 2020, also observed an expansion of ISIL attack capabilities in central Syria.<sup>1053</sup> 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.<sup>1054</sup> Temporary seizure of villages by ISIL was also reported in the second half of 2020 in east Hama governorate.<sup>1055</sup>

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.<sup>1056</sup>
- 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.<sup>1057</sup>
- 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.<sup>1058</sup>
- 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.<sup>1059</sup>
- 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.<sup>1060</sup>
- On 12 November 2020, ISW reported on an attack that killed 21 pro-GoS troops near Abu Fayyad Dam in eastern Hama governorate.<sup>1061</sup>
- 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.<sup>1062</sup>

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.<sup>1063</sup> In the

<sup>1051</sup> Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1052</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary 20 - 26 April 2020, 29 April 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>1053</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: November 11 - December 1, 2020, 3 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1054</sup> Al-Watan News, سوريا.. 11 deaths from the regime and Daesh in the Badiya battles in less than one month], 19 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1055</sup> Waters, G., ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1056</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 6 - 12 April 2020, 12 April 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>1057</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 20 - 26 April 2020, 26 April 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>1058</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 6 July - 12 July 2020, 12 July 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>1059</sup> SOHR, Second attack in 48 hours | Clashes renew between ISIS cells and regime forces in east Hama desert, 6 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1060</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1061</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: November 11 - December 1, 2020, 3 December 2020, [url](#)

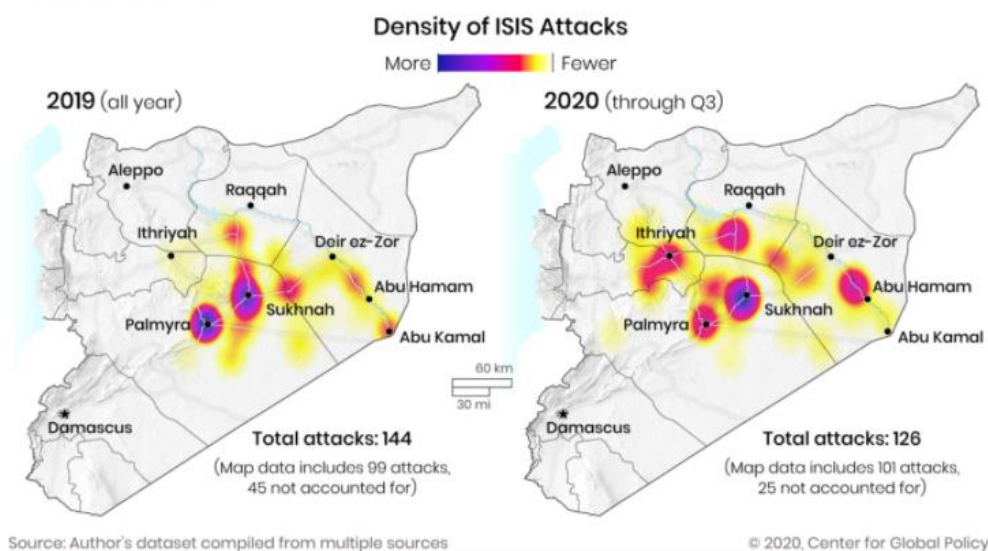
<sup>1062</sup> SOHR, ISIS resurgence | Nearly 20 regime police officers and civilians kidnapped and scores missing in surprise attack on Al-Sa'an district, 6 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1063</sup> 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.<sup>1064</sup>

## 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 activity<sup>1065</sup>

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).<sup>1066</sup>

In 2021, sources reported on ongoing military operations involving ISIL and GoS forces and allied militias in the Aleppo-Hama-Raqqah triangle.<sup>1067</sup> 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-Tabaqah road.'<sup>1068</sup> 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.<sup>1069</sup> SOHR also reported on GoS large military reinforcements along the Ithariya-Khanaser highway in January 2021 compelled by ISIL escalating operations in the region.<sup>1070</sup> 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.<sup>1071</sup> ISW observed on

<sup>1064</sup> Waters, G., *ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1065</sup> Waters, G., *Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign*, Newlines Institute, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1066</sup> Kahan, E., *ISIS Poised for a Ramadan Surge in Syria*, ISW, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1067</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1068</sup> 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

<sup>1069</sup> SOHR, *ISIS resurgence | Cells capture new positions in Hama desert, and kill nearly 20 regime soldiers and loyalists*, 9 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1070</sup> SOHR, *Syrian Regime Sends Military Reinforcements to Desert*, 12 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1071</sup> 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.<sup>1072</sup>

### *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.<sup>1073</sup> ISW also reported on a set of airstrikes that targeted positions of the SAA 47<sup>th</sup> Regiment and the Lebanese Hezbollah in Al-Salamiya, eastern rural Hama, on 23/24 June 2020.<sup>1074</sup> 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.<sup>1075</sup> 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'.<sup>1076</sup> 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.<sup>1077</sup> 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.<sup>1078</sup>

### *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'.<sup>1079</sup> 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.<sup>1080</sup> 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.<sup>1081</sup> Reportedly, the reason behind the arrests was 'writing anti-government graffiti on some walls in the neighbourhood'.<sup>1082</sup>

### *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,

<sup>1072</sup> ISW, ISIS Poised for a Ramadan Surge in Syria, 9 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 2-3

<sup>1073</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 27 - June 9, 2020, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1074</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: June 24 - July 6, 2020, 9 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1075</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1076</sup> RFE/RL, At Least Six Fighters Reported Killed In Israeli Strikes In Syria, 25 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1077</sup> Germany, BAMF, Briefing Notes: Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration, 25 January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>1078</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1079</sup> SOHR, After decapitated body found in eastern rural Hama | Regime forces arrest more than 20 members, 25 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1080</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1081</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1082</sup> 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).

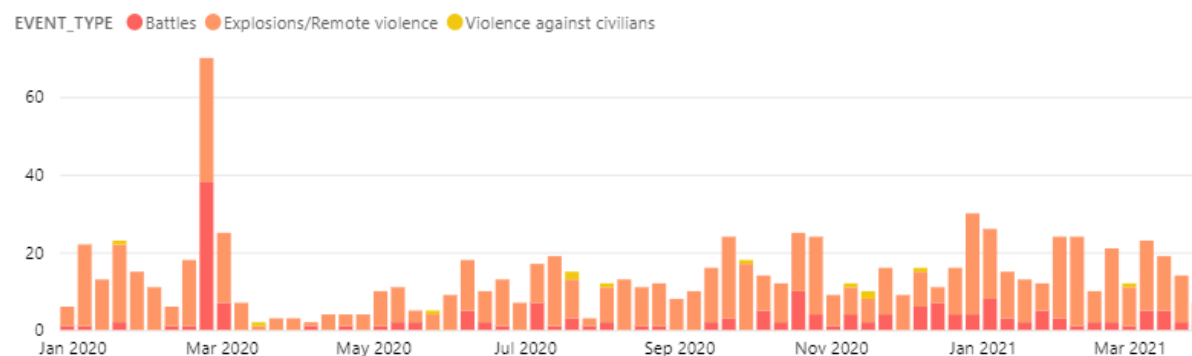


Figure 20. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Hama governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>1083</sup>

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
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>736</b>	<b>12</b>

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.<sup>1084</sup>
- 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.<sup>1085</sup>
- According to SHRC, on 29 September 2020, members of an Iraqi militia killed nine shepherds in Al-Fasida in eastern Hama governorate.<sup>1086</sup>
- On 5 October 2020, a reported ground-based attack injured five civilians on the road between Qarqur and Shaykh Sindiyan in western Hama governorate.<sup>1087</sup>

<sup>1083</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>1084</sup> 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

<sup>1085</sup> 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

<sup>1086</sup> SHRC, The 19<sup>th</sup> 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

<sup>1087</sup> 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.<sup>1088</sup>
- 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-Mubin Room was positioned in Al-Ghab plain in Hama governorate.<sup>1089</sup>

### 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		
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>63</b>

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)<sup>1090</sup> and 35 civilian fatalities (VDC data).<sup>1091</sup> 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).

<sup>1088</sup> SHRC, The 19<sup>th</sup> 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

<sup>1089</sup> SOHR, إصابة مواطن في قصف لـ"الفتح المبين" على قرية ضمن مناطق قوات النظام في ريف حماة, 7 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1090</sup> 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

<sup>1091</sup> 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.<sup>1092</sup> 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’.<sup>1093</sup>

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.<sup>1094</sup>

Concerning Hama city, a report by the World Bank published in March 2017 stated that 6 % of the city’s housing asset was damaged.<sup>1095</sup> 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.<sup>1096</sup>

In Hama countryside, InterSOS, an independent humanitarian organisation<sup>1097</sup>, 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.<sup>1098</sup> 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.<sup>1099</sup>

PHR, an organisation that investigates and documents human rights violations<sup>1100</sup>, stated that between April 2019 and February 2020, 40 attacks on medical facilities in north-west Syria, including northern Hama governorate, were verified.<sup>1101</sup> 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.’<sup>1102</sup>

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.<sup>1103</sup> 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.<sup>1104</sup>

<sup>1092</sup> 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

<sup>1093</sup> ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 51

<sup>1094</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

<sup>1095</sup> World Bank (The), Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, March 2017, [url](#), pp. 7-8

<sup>1096</sup> REACH/UNITAR, Syria: Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 40

<sup>1097</sup> InterSOS, About Us, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>1098</sup> InterSOS, Syria: 2020 saw fewer conflicts but increased poverty, 25 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1099</sup> NPA, Government forces target opposition posts in Syria’s Hama, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1100</sup> PHR, About Us, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>1101</sup> PHR, Physicians for Human Rights’ Findings of Attacks on Health Care in Syria, March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1102</sup> AI, Syria 2020, 7 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1103</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1104</sup> 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.<sup>1105</sup>
- In June 2020, reported UXO killed three children and injured another in the towns of Qumhanah and Suran in northern rural Hama.<sup>1106</sup>
- On 8 November 2020, a reported UXO detonated in Qasr Al-Mukharrem village in eastern Hama governorate and killed three civilians.<sup>1107</sup>
- 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.<sup>1108</sup>

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.<sup>1109</sup>

### *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.<sup>1110</sup>

UNOCHA's 2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview showed that as of August 2020, there were 22 320 IDPs in Hama governorate.<sup>1111</sup> In 2021, UNOCHA estimated 314 IDP departures in January<sup>1112</sup>, 1 200 in February (around 500 of whom were to Idlib governorate)<sup>1113</sup>, and 506 in March 2021.<sup>1114</sup>

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.<sup>1115</sup> In 2021, UNOCHA estimated 4 000 spontaneous returns in January (of whom, around 3 300 were to Suqailbiya)<sup>1116</sup>, 506 in February<sup>1117</sup>, and around 1 300 in March 2021 (of which 1 000 were recorded within the governorate).<sup>1118</sup>

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.<sup>1119</sup> 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 plain<sup>1120</sup>.

<sup>1105</sup> 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

<sup>1106</sup> 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

<sup>1107</sup> 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

<sup>1108</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1109</sup> Mine Action Review, Clearing Cluster Munitions Remnants 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 168

<sup>1110</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1111</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>1112</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2021, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1113</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1114</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1115</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns Stock and Flow Data, Jan – Dec, 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1116</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns January 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1117</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1118</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1119</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>1120</sup> 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)'.<sup>1121</sup> In a report published on 14 February 2021, SNHR stated that at least 440 000 dunums<sup>1122</sup> 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'.<sup>1123</sup> The auction announcements concerned farmlands located around 134 villages and towns in Hama governorate.<sup>1124</sup> 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.<sup>1125</sup>

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<sup>1121</sup> Enab Baladi, Public auction in Hama to invest lands owned by displaced people or refugees abroad, 26 October 2020, [url](#)

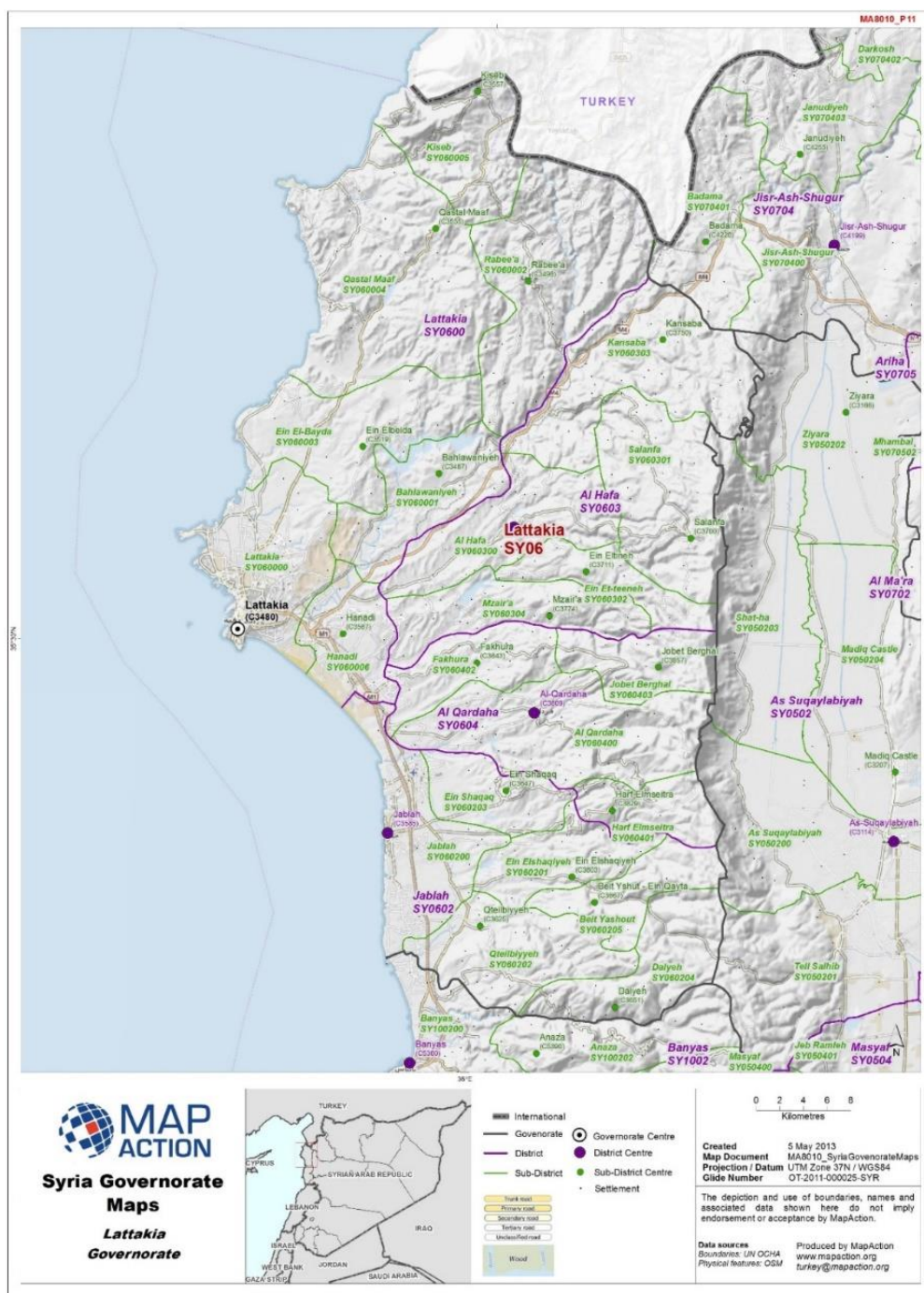
<sup>1122</sup> A dunum 'is a unit of land area enclosing 1000 square metres'. Convert Units, Measurement unit conversion: dunam, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>1123</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1124</sup> 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

<sup>1125</sup> HRW, Syria: Government Stealing Opponents' Land, 8 April 2021, [url](#)

## 2.4 Latakia governorate



Map 10: © MapAction, Latakia governorate<sup>1126</sup>

<sup>1126</sup> 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.<sup>1127</sup> 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, Qteilbiyyeh.<sup>1128</sup>

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.<sup>1129</sup> 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.<sup>1130</sup>

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the governorate's population at 1 319 000 as by 2019.<sup>1131</sup> According to the World Food Programme, interviewed by the DIS on 21 October 2020, the population was about 1.2 million.<sup>1132</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Latakia governorate to be of 1 215 928.<sup>1133</sup>

Latakia is the location of Syria's main commercial port.<sup>1134</sup> It is also Syria's main container port, handling large volumes of metals, chemicals, machinery, and foodstuffs.<sup>1135</sup> Latakia governorate, together with neighbouring coastal governorate Tartous, constitute the main vegetable production areas in Syria.<sup>1136</sup>

## 2.4.2 Conflict background and armed actors

The city of Latakia has been a stronghold for the Alawites and the Assad family.<sup>1137</sup> 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.<sup>1138</sup>

<sup>1127</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic Governorates Profile (June 2014), June 2014, [url](#), p. 19

<sup>1128</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic – Latakia [map], 2017, [url](#)

<sup>1129</sup> Izady, M., Syria: Ethnic Shift, 2010-mid 2018 (approximation), 2018-19, Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity [map], [url](#)

<sup>1130</sup> Balanche, F., Latakia is Assad's Achilles Heel, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 September 2015, [url](#)

<sup>1131</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, [url](#)

<sup>1132</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: WFP], December 2020, [url](#), pp. 5, 38

<sup>1133</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>1134</sup> Times (The), Tehran eyes vital Syrian port of Latakia as gateway to Mediterranean, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1135</sup> World Port Source, Port of Latakia, 2021 (n.d.), [url](#)

<sup>1136</sup> FAO/WFP, Special Report, FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 5 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 21, 37

<sup>1137</sup> L'Orient le Jour, Iran gains a foothold in Latakia, 26 March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1138</sup> 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.<sup>1139</sup>

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.<sup>1140</sup> (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'.<sup>1141</sup>

#### *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.<sup>1142</sup>

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 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1143</sup>

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.<sup>1144</sup>

#### *Foreign state forces and affiliated groups*

The Russian air force has acquired its own airbase in Latakia<sup>1145</sup> in Hmeimim.<sup>1146</sup> The Russian air force conducts expeditionary operations to support the GoS.<sup>1147</sup> 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

<sup>1139</sup> Waters, G., Battle of Kabani: A Rare Defeat for the Syrian Army in 2019, International Review, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1140</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1141</sup> ACLED, The State of Syria: Q3 2020 – Q4 2020, 22 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1142</sup> ISW, Regime regains ground on the coast, 22 August 2013, [url](#)

<sup>1143</sup> Geopolitics News, Syrian Army launches heavy attack on jihadist strongholds in Latakia, 3 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1144</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>1145</sup> EPRS, Russia in the Middle East, From side lines to centre stage, November 2018, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1146</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1147</sup> 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.<sup>1148</sup> 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.<sup>1149</sup>

Asharq Al-Awsat reported in January 2021 that Turkish forces had set up a new military post in Jabal Al-Akrad.<sup>1150</sup>

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.<sup>1151</sup> 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.<sup>1152</sup> 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.<sup>1153</sup>

### *Anti-GoS armed groups*

Reuters news agency reported in 2019 about rebel positions in the Kubayna Mountains.<sup>1154</sup> 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.<sup>1155</sup> Al-Masdar News reported in another posting in September 2019 that jihadists had taken over Atterah town in the Turkmen mountains.<sup>1156</sup> A map of control areas provided by the map service PoliticalGeographyNow indicated HTS presence in Kabani in July 2020.<sup>1157</sup>

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.<sup>1158</sup> The International Business Times reported in July 2020 about positions held by the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) inside Kabani town.<sup>1159</sup>

Ethnic Turkoman and Uyghur militant groups in particular were present in the Kabani mountains, the DIS reported in October 2020.<sup>1160</sup> 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.<sup>1161</sup>

<sup>1148</sup> DW, Russia aims to boost military facilities in Syria, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1149</sup> Trevithick, J., Russia Is Extending One Of The Runways At Its Syrian Airbase, 5 February 2021, the Drive/The WarZone, [url](#)

<sup>1150</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, سوريا «درعاً فولاذية» لشمال غربي [Turkish army creates 'steel shield' in northwestern Syria], 28 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1151</sup> Waters, G., Battle for Kabani: A Rare Defeat for the Syrian Army in 2019, International Review, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1152</sup> Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1153</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1154</sup> Reuters, Oppositions say Syrian army fails to retake Latakia mountain, 19 May 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1155</sup> Al Masdar News, Eight Syrian choppers swarm jihadist stronghold in northeast Latakia, 12 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1156</sup> Al Masdar News, Jihadists capture first town in northern Latakia, Syrian Air Force enters battle, 9 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1157</sup> Political Geography Now, Syria Control Map & Report: Frontlines Stable - July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1158</sup> Bellingcat, Syrian Turkmen Groups in Latakia: An Overview, 7 February 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1159</sup> International Business Times, Syria's New Russian MiG 29 Unleash Hellfire on Turkey-backed Chinese Uyghur Muslim Militants, 4 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1160</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], December 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>1161</sup> 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.<sup>1162</sup> 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.<sup>1163</sup> Defences in the Kabani hills belonging to TIP were attacked by the SAA in September 2020, Al Masdar reported.<sup>1164</sup> SOHR reported of members of the TIP firing at the SAA's positions in Kawkabah village in Jabal Shashaboo.<sup>1165</sup> Turkish-backed groups were reportedly shelling SAA's positions in the Shalaf area in January 2021, according to Southfront, an analysis organisation.<sup>1166</sup>

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.<sup>1167</sup> Later in the year, sources reported that the Turkish military had set up posts or bases in northern Latakia.<sup>1168</sup> 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.<sup>1169</sup> 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.<sup>1170</sup>

Russian military aircraft have been targeting opposition-held positions in the area during the reference period for this report.<sup>1171</sup> Russian airstrikes in Kabani town were reported 2-3 June 2020.<sup>1172</sup> Russian airstrikes in the outskirts of Kabani town were reported in January 2021, in a response to HTS targeting

<sup>1162</sup> Waters, G., Battle for Kabani: A Rare Defeat for the Syrian Army in 2019, International Review, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1163</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1164</sup> Al Masdar News, Syrian Army strikes jihadist fortifications in strategic mountain region, 29 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1165</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1166</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1167</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1168</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1169</sup> 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

<sup>1170</sup> Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary, 9-15 March 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>1171</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1172</sup> Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary, 1-7 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

military positions of the SAA.<sup>1173</sup> 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.<sup>1174</sup> 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.<sup>1175</sup> Al Masdar reported that the SAA was striking opposition positions in the Kabani hills in September. No casualties were reported.<sup>1176</sup>

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.<sup>1177</sup> 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.<sup>1178</sup> Opposition group positions in the villages of Qarra Jai, Shamrawan, and Qalat Shanbar in Northern Latakia were shelled by government forces in July 2020.<sup>1179</sup> In October 2020, 94 % of the security related incidents were 'indirect artillery fire' in the north-eastern part of the governorate.<sup>1180</sup> 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.<sup>1181</sup> Also, there had been drone attacks against the Russian airbase Hmeimim and in areas associated with the SAA.<sup>1182</sup> On 24 March 2021, the Carter Center reported that a GoS soldier was killed and several others wounded near Kabani.<sup>1183</sup>

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.<sup>1184</sup>

Protests over Syria's economic situation took place in Latakia between January and October 2020, DIS reported.<sup>1185</sup> 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.<sup>1186</sup> In an interview with EASO for this report,

<sup>1173</sup> South Front, Russian Warplanes Deliver First Airstrikes On Greater Idlib In 2021 (Video, Photos), 9 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1174</sup> International Business Times, Syria's New Russian MiG 29 Unleash Hellfire on Turkey-backed Chinese Uyghur Muslim Militants, 4 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1175</sup> Reuters, Russian planes bomb opposition-held area in Syria's Latakia, say opposition, war monitor, 3 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1176</sup> Al Masdar News, Syrian Army strikes jihadist fortifications in strategic mountain region, 29 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1177</sup> 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

<sup>1178</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: International security organisation], December 2020, [url](#), p. 39

<sup>1179</sup> NPA, HTS and Ansar al-Tawhid members wounded in Syria's Idlib and Latakia, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1180</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: International security organisation], December 2020, [url](#), p. 39

<sup>1181</sup> 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

<sup>1182</sup> 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

<sup>1183</sup> Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary, 15-21 March 2021, 24 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1184</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], December 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>1185</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>1186</sup> 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.<sup>1187</sup>

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.<sup>1188</sup> 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.<sup>1189</sup> There are no areas within the governorate that have restricted access for civilians, except for military installations, the Russian airbase and the port.<sup>1190</sup> People could move freely within the capital Latakia City.<sup>1191</sup> There are checkpoints close to the airport in Latakia.<sup>1192</sup> On 30 November 2020, UNOCHA reported the airport as partially open to international traffic.<sup>1193</sup>

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.<sup>1194</sup>

### 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).

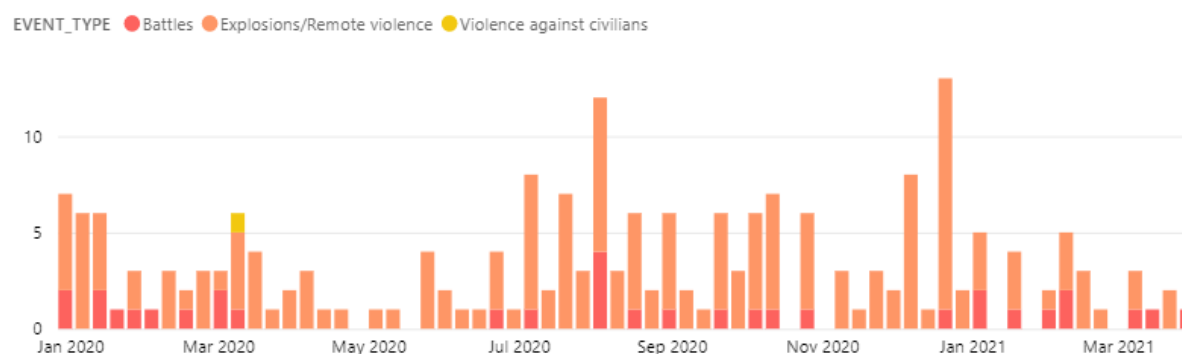


Figure 23. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Latakia governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>1195</sup>

<sup>1187</sup> Humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>1188</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>1189</sup> 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.

<sup>1190</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>1191</sup> 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

<sup>1192</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>1193</sup> UNOCHA/WHO, Syria: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 21 As of 30 November 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>1194</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1195</sup> 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	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>1</b>

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.<sup>1196</sup>
- 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.<sup>1197</sup>
- 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.<sup>1198</sup>
- On 25 July 2020, UNOCHA reported about 'more frequent shelling along frontlines' in Latakia and other governorates.<sup>1199</sup>
- 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.<sup>1200</sup>
- On 3 August 2020, Reuters reported that Russian aircraft attacked opposition-held positions in the Jabal Al-Akrad mountains in Latakia.<sup>1201</sup>
- 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.<sup>1202</sup>
- 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

<sup>1196</sup> Daily Sabah, Turkey strikes Assad regime bastion Latakia, other targets in Syria with missiles, 28 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1197</sup> Rudaw, Idlib militants launch renewed attack on the Syrian regime, while civilians protest both, 9 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1198</sup> SOHR, Syrian Army Pounds Militant Positions In Northern Latakia, 26 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1199</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Recent Developments in Northwest Syria - Situation Report No. 18, 25 July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>1200</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1201</sup> Reuters, Russian planes bomb rebel-held area in Syria's Latakia, say opposition, war monitor, 3 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1202</sup> 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.<sup>1203</sup>

- On 9 March 2021, armed opposition groups repelled an 'infiltration attempt' by government forces in the countryside of Latakia.<sup>1204</sup>

### 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	-	-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>

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)<sup>1205</sup> and 9 civilian fatalities<sup>1206</sup> (SNHR data).<sup>1207</sup> No civilian fatalities were reported by SNHR or VDC for the first three months of 2021.

<sup>1203</sup> SOHR, Ceasefire violations | Opposition shell and attack regime positions in Idlib and Latakia countryside, leaving scores dead and wounded, 8 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1204</sup> NPA, Opposition groups repel government forces' infiltration attempt in Syria's Latakia, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1205</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>1206</sup> 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

<sup>1207</sup> 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.<sup>1208</sup>

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.<sup>1209</sup> 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.<sup>1210</sup> 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.<sup>1211</sup> 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.<sup>1212</sup>

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.<sup>1213</sup>

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.<sup>1214</sup> Fuel shortages have been reported in the reference period. The shortages were ascribed to sanctions, not to war damage.<sup>1215</sup>

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.<sup>1216</sup>

*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

<sup>1208</sup> 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](#);

<sup>1209</sup> OHCHR, Escalating violence and waves of displacement continue to torment civilians during eighth year of Syrian conflict, 11 September 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1210</sup> 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

<sup>1211</sup> World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020 [url](#), pp. 114, 110

<sup>1212</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

<sup>1213</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, [Source: WHO], December 2020, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>1214</sup> World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020 [url](#) p. 161

<sup>1215</sup> NPA, 8 September 2020, [url](#); Transportation and fuel crisis, 17 December 2020, [url](#); MEMO January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1216</sup> 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.<sup>1217</sup>

In terms of return movements, UNOCHA recorded 3 000 IDP returns movements to Latakia governorate in 2020.<sup>1218</sup>

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.<sup>1219</sup> 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.<sup>1220</sup>

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.<sup>1221</sup> 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.<sup>1222</sup>

In March 2021, there were 540 IDP movements from or within the governorate (471 of which were recorded within the governorate).<sup>1223</sup> In terms of spontaneous IDP returns, in March 2021 UNOCHA recorded 266 returns from the governorate.<sup>1224</sup>

IDP movements caused by the wildfires in the Latakia woodlands, were reported in October 2020.<sup>1225</sup>

<sup>1217</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1218</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1219</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1220</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1221</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements February 2021, 1 April, 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1222</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

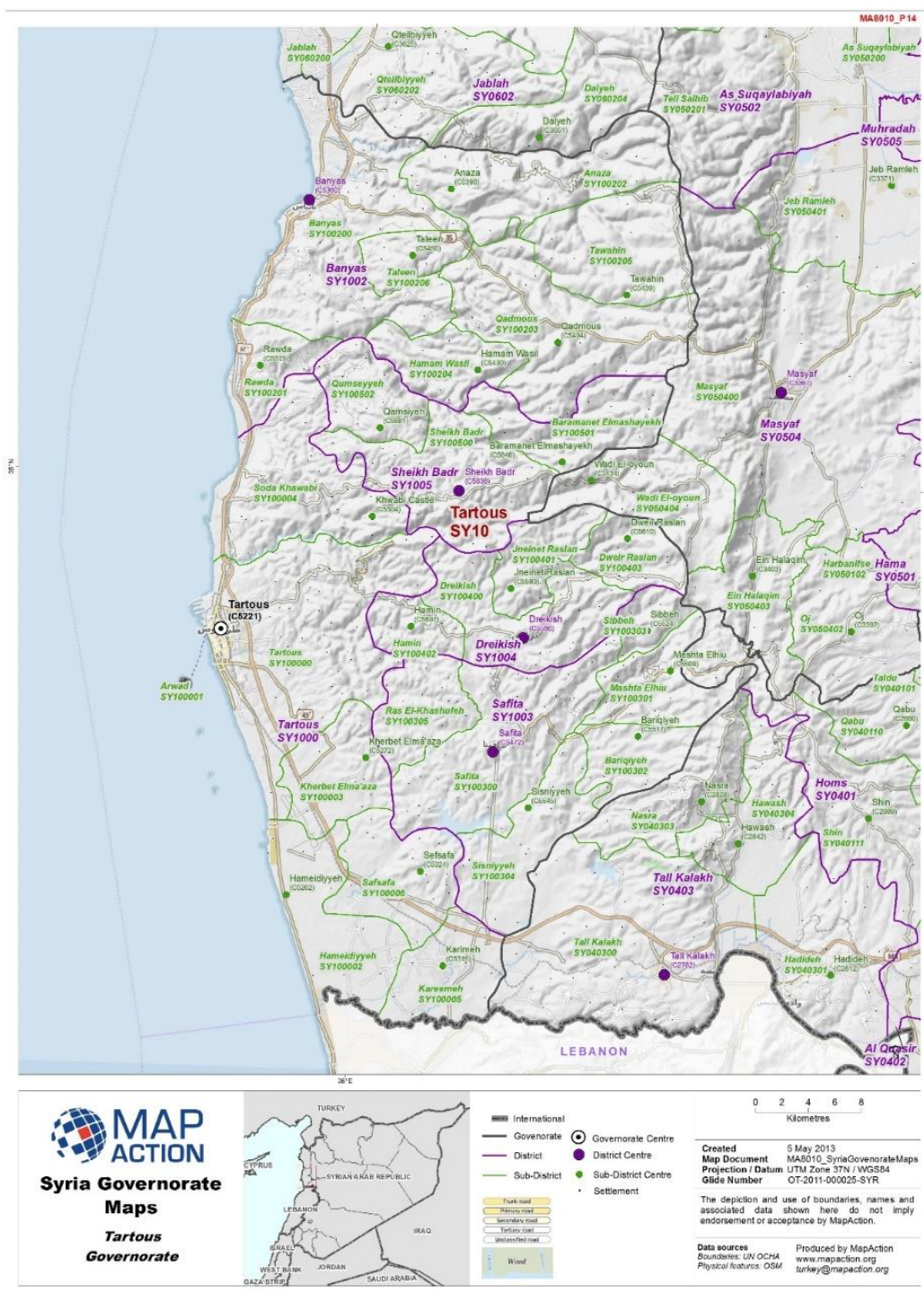
<sup>1223</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1224</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1225</sup> 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 map<sup>1226</sup>

<sup>1226</sup> 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.<sup>1227</sup> Tartous consists of five administrative districts that are Tartous City, Baniyas, Dreikish, Safita and Sheikh Badr<sup>1228</sup>, which are subdivided into twenty-seven sub-districts.<sup>1229</sup> 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.<sup>1230</sup>

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Tartous governorate in 2019 to be 1 152 000.<sup>1231</sup> As of August 2020, WFP estimated the population of Tartous governorate at 930 000.<sup>1232</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Tartous governorate to be of 929 366.<sup>1233</sup>

As of August 2020, UNOCHA estimated the total population, including both residents and IDPs of Tartous governorate at 929 366<sup>1234</sup>, 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.<sup>1235</sup>

According to USDOS Syria 2020 International Religious Freedom Report, 'continued population displacement adds a degree of uncertainty to demographic analyses.'<sup>1236</sup> 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.<sup>1237</sup> In 2015 Alawites were estimated to constitute 80 % of Tartous city population, along with 10 % Sunnis and 10 % Christians.<sup>1238</sup> Also, population between Tartous and Homs was considered predominantly Alawite, with strong Christian minority in Safita, while Sunnis were concentrated around al-Hamidiyah.<sup>1239</sup>

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.<sup>1240</sup> In addition to Baniyas and Latakia, Tartous port is one of Syria's three Mediterranean export terminals.<sup>1241</sup> According to the Alma Research and Education Center, an Israeli non-profit and bipartisan organisation focused on geopolitics, in addition

<sup>1227</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Tartous governorate, January 2016, [url](#)

<sup>1228</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profiles, June 2014, p. 31, [url](#)

<sup>1229</sup> UNHCR, UNHCR Syria / Tartous FO, End of year 2017 / Factsheet, January – December 2017, p. 1, [url](#)

<sup>1230</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1231</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>1232</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, [Source: WFP], [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1233</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>1234</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian needs overview – Syrian Arab Republic, Humanitarian programme cycle 2021, March 2021, p. 23, [url](#)

<sup>1235</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian needs overview – Syrian Arab Republic, Humanitarian programme cycle 2021, March 2021, p. 98, [url](#)

<sup>1236</sup> USDOS, Syria 2020 International Religious Freedom Report, 12 May 2021, p. 3, [url](#)

<sup>1237</sup> USDOS, Syria 2020 International Religious Freedom Report, 12 May 2021, p. 3, [url](#)

<sup>1238</sup> Balanche, F., Latakia is Assad's Achilles heel, Policy Analysis / Policy Watch 2489, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 September 2015, [url](#)

<sup>1239</sup> Balanche, F., Latakia is Assad's Achilles heel, Policy Analysis / Policy Watch 2489, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 September 2015, [url](#)

<sup>1240</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1241</sup> 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 oil<sup>1242</sup>, wheat<sup>1243</sup>, and other products from Iran to Syrian ports, with the aim of circumventing US and European sanctions.<sup>1244</sup>

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)<sup>1245</sup>, hosting the Military-Maritime Fleet (Voyenno-Morskoi Flot - VMF) in Tartous port.<sup>1246</sup> The bill giving the agreement direct effect was passed by the Syrian parliament in June 2019.<sup>1247</sup> The access to Tartous port, grants Russia a posture to power-project not only within the eastern part but the entire Mediterranean Sea<sup>1248</sup>, the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>1249</sup>

## 2.5.2 Conflict background and armed actors

As of March 2021, Tartous governorate was under GoS control<sup>1250</sup> (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'.<sup>1251</sup> 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.<sup>1252</sup>

Reportedly, anti-government armed groups are not present in the governorate of Tartous.<sup>1253</sup>

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

<sup>1242</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1243</sup> PressTV, Report: Russia, Iran, Syria working to secure oil, wheat shipments to Arab country, 18 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1244</sup> Alma Research and Education Center, Tal Beeri, Russia and Iran present – the naval coordination mechanism for breaking sanctions on Syria, 9 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1245</sup> RIAC, Turkish and Russian Approaches to Security in the Eastern Mediterranean, 10 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1246</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1247</sup> France24, Syria parliament okays Russian lease of Tartus port: state media, 12 June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1248</sup> Jamestown Foundation, Moscow plans enhanced military basing in Syria, September 2020, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 79, 3 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1249</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1250</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1251</sup> 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

<sup>1252</sup> 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

<sup>1253</sup> 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.<sup>1254</sup> The GoS security presence is not so pronounced in other parts of the coastal area.<sup>1255</sup>

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.<sup>1256</sup>

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.<sup>1257</sup> Maher al-Assad commands the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured division, which although headquartered in Damascus, has its security bureau branch overseeing the Tartous and Latakia ports.<sup>1258</sup>

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.<sup>1259</sup>

### *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.<sup>1260</sup> 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'.<sup>1261</sup> Russian and Syrian joint military exercises are regularly conducted in the port of Tartous.<sup>1262</sup> 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.<sup>1263</sup> In 2019 publication of the National Defence Review (RDN, Revue Défense Nationale) of the French association,

<sup>1254</sup> 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

<sup>1255</sup> 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

<sup>1256</sup> 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

<sup>1257</sup> Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), Assad regime implicated in massive Captagon bust, 13 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1258</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1259</sup> The Syrian Observer, Assad regime's latest military reassignments, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1260</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1261</sup> 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

<sup>1262</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1263</sup> 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.<sup>1264</sup>

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.<sup>1265</sup>

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.<sup>1266</sup> 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'.<sup>1267</sup>

Similarly, Russia continues to operate a recruitment centre in Tartous for the 5<sup>th</sup> Assault Corps, established in November 2016 under a joint Russian-Syrian command.<sup>1268</sup> Other allegedly Russia-backed militia and an active constituent of the 5<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1269</sup> Reportedly, Sayadou Da'esh was involved in liberation of Palmyra and its surroundings from ISIS militants in 2017.<sup>1270</sup>

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',<sup>1271</sup> reported that Russian proxy militia fighters of the Wagner group, operate in all areas with Russian forces presence, including Tartous.<sup>1272</sup>

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'.<sup>1273</sup>

In February 2021, Caravanserai, another news website sponsored by USCENTCOM sharing the same mission as Diyaruna<sup>1274</sup>, 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

<sup>1264</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1265</sup> 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

<sup>1266</sup> Al-Tamimi, A. J., Liwa al-Areen: a Russian-backed formation, 20 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1267</sup> Al-Tamimi, A. J., Liwa al-Areen: a Russian-backed formation, 20 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1268</sup> 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

<sup>1269</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria, EUI, 14 May 2019, [url](#), p. 21

<sup>1270</sup> RT, 'Terrorists flee when they hear us coming' – Syria's ISIS hunters to RT (EXCLUSIVE), 6 April 2017, [url](#)

<sup>1271</sup> Diyaruna, About us – Attributions, [url](#); Caravanserai, Disclaimer, [url](#)

<sup>1272</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1273</sup> Asharq al-Awsat, Under guise of Russian companies, 'unknown parties' recruit Syrians to head to Venezuela, 8 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1274</sup> Diyaruna, About us – Attributions, [url](#); Caravanserai, Disclaimer, [url](#)

Group<sup>1275</sup> that has close relationship with Russia.<sup>1276</sup> 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'.<sup>1277</sup> However, 2020 EUI report reported that Al-Maham is based in Aleppo and affiliated to Iran, Syrian military intelligence and the 4<sup>th</sup> division security bureau.<sup>1278</sup>

#### *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'.<sup>1279</sup> 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.<sup>1280</sup>

According to a report from 2019, Liwa Al-Baath (LAB – The Baath Brigade), an active constituent of the 5<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1281</sup>

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.<sup>1282</sup> 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'.<sup>1283</sup>

<sup>1275</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1276</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1277</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1278</sup> Baresh, M., Private security companies in Syria: new agents at the Regime's service, EUI, 10 September 2020, [url](#), pp. 6, 13, 16-17

<sup>1279</sup> Al Monitor, Is Syria unable, or unwilling, to fend off Iran coronavirus contagion?, 25 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1280</sup> Al Monitor, Is Syria unable, or unwilling, to fend off Iran coronavirus contagion?, 25 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1281</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria, EUI, 14 May 2019, [url](#), p. 20

<sup>1282</sup> 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

<sup>1283</sup> 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.<sup>1284</sup>

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.<sup>1285</sup>

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.<sup>1286</sup> 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.<sup>1287</sup> 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.<sup>1288</sup> 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.<sup>1289</sup>

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.<sup>1290</sup>

#### *Security incidents*

According to ACLED data, during the reference period there was 1 security incident in Tartous governorate, coded as violence against civilians.

<sup>1284</sup> 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

<sup>1285</sup> 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

<sup>1286</sup> 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

<sup>1287</sup> 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

<sup>1288</sup> 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

<sup>1289</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria – security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, 18 December 2020, p. 12, [url](#)

<sup>1290</sup> 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.<sup>1291</sup>

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.<sup>1292</sup> Reportedly, some of incidents of torture took place in the Political Security Directorate branch in Tartous Central Prison and Air Force Intelligence Branch 227.<sup>1293</sup>
- 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.<sup>1294</sup> 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.<sup>1295</sup>
- 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.<sup>1296</sup>
- 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.<sup>1297</sup>

<sup>1291</sup> 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

<sup>1292</sup> UN General Assembly (UNGA), Human Rights Council (HRC), 45<sup>th</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1293</sup> UN General Assembly, HRC, 45<sup>th</sup> 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

<sup>1294</sup> SANA, Two Syrians and a Russian soldier die in traffic accident in Tartous countryside, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1295</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, Russian soldier killed in 'mysterious accident' in Syria's Tartous, 12 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1296</sup> SOHR, For criticizing poor quality of food and rationing in regime army | Security services arrest regime officer popular among loyalists, 21 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1297</sup> 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.<sup>1298</sup> Different news sources attributed the oil tanker to Iran.<sup>1299</sup>

### 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	-	-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	-	-	-

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.<sup>1300</sup> 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.<sup>1301</sup> According to Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor, except Tartous governorate, in all other 13 governorates cluster munitions have been extensively used since 2012.<sup>1302</sup> Until 10 December 2020, UNICEF did not record any child fatalities as a result of the impact of explosive ordnance in Tartous governorate.<sup>1303</sup>

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.<sup>1304</sup>

<sup>1298</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1299</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1300</sup> SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, including 99 in December, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>1301</sup> 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

<sup>1302</sup> Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor, Syria impact, 17 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1303</sup> UNICEF, United Nations Mine Action Service, Impact of explosive ordnance on children in Syria, 10 December 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>1304</sup> 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 governorate<sup>1305</sup>, while the International Red Cross estimated that 200 000 people were affected in Homs, Latakia and Tartous, with 12 500 requiring humanitarian assistance.<sup>1306</sup> 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.<sup>1307</sup> According to burn severity index, in Tartous governorate, 466 hectares suffered high severity, 1 696 med-high severity and 1 891 med-low severity.<sup>1308</sup>

### *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.<sup>1309</sup>

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.<sup>1310</sup> According to HNAP report estimates done on basis of IDP household survey<sup>1311</sup>, 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.<sup>1312</sup> 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 %.<sup>1313</sup>

In August 2020 UNOCHA population task force estimated that Tartous governorate hosted 182 668 IDPs<sup>1314</sup>, 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.<sup>1315</sup>

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.<sup>1316</sup>

Also for 2020, UNOCHA reported around 1 200 spontaneous IDP return movements from Tartous governorate to Homs governorate.<sup>1317</sup> In the first quarter of 2021, UNOCHA reported in 29, 126 and

<sup>1305</sup> UNOCHA, Syria: Flash Update #01 Humanitarian impact of wildfires in coastal areas as of 11 October 2020, 11 October 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>1306</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1307</sup> WFP, Syria fire incidents – analysis of fires outbreak across Syria, September – October 2020, 19 October 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1308</sup> WFP, Syria fire incidents – analysis of fires outbreak across Syria, September – October 2020, 19 October 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>1309</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements overview, Jan – Dec, 2020, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1310</sup> HNAP, Syria – IDP report series 2020 governorate profiles, assessment Date(s): 01 Oct 2020 to 31 Oct 2020, [url](#), p. 41

<sup>1311</sup> Humanitarian Response – OCHA Services, HNAP: Governorate profiles – IDP report series 2020, assessment Date(s): 01 Oct 2020 to 31 Oct 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1312</sup> HNAP, Syria – IDP report series 2020 governorate profiles, assessment Date(s): 01 Oct 2020 to 31 Oct 2020, [url](#), p. 41

<sup>1313</sup> HNAP, Syria – IDP report series 2020 governorate profiles, assessment Date(s): 01 Oct 2020 to 31 Oct 2020, [url](#), p. 42

<sup>1314</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian needs overview – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 23, 98

<sup>1315</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian needs overview – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 98

<sup>1316</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1317</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Spontaneous IDP returnee movements overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

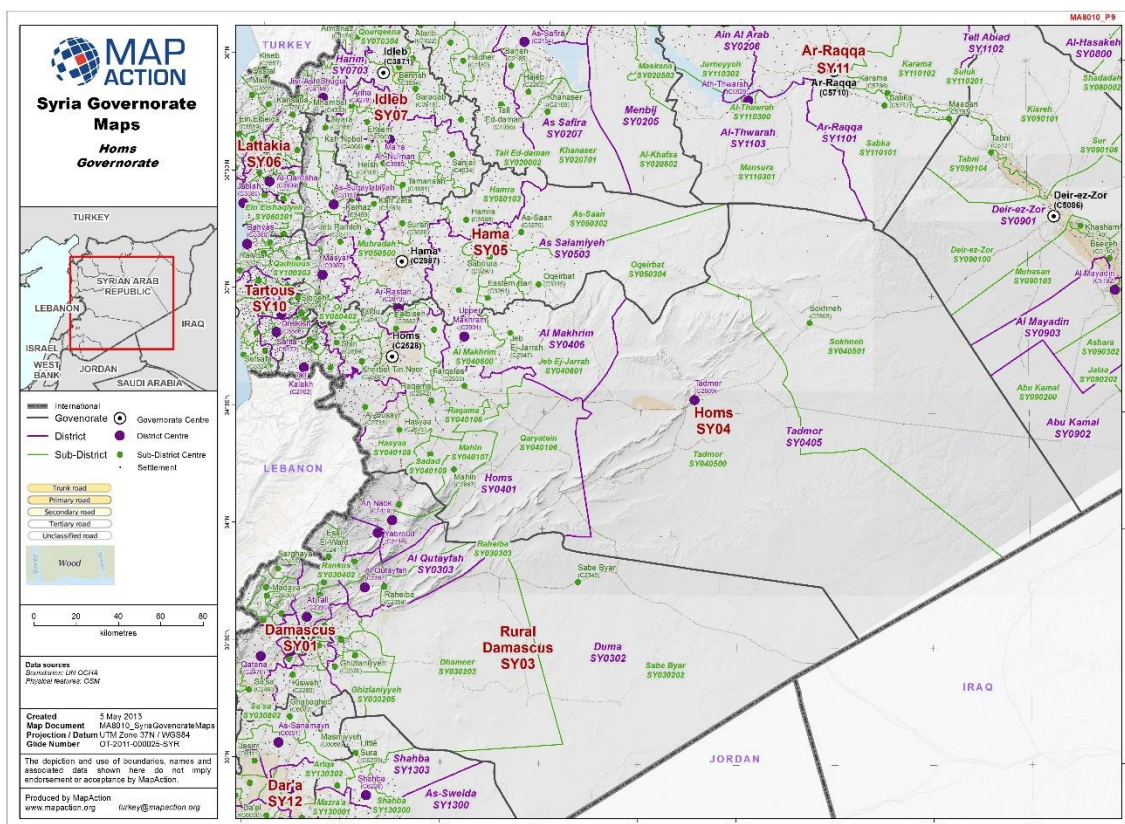
52 spontaneous IDP return movements from Tartous governorate, in January, February and March respectively.<sup>1318</sup>

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<sup>1318</sup> 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 map<sup>1319</sup>

### 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.<sup>1320</sup> The Syrian E-Government website stated that Homs governorate shares an international border with Jordan to the east as well.<sup>1321</sup> While a report by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and UN Habitat stated that Homs governorate comprises eight districts<sup>1322</sup>, UNOCHA mentioned that it comprises only six: Homs, Al-Qusayr, Tal Kalakh, Ar-Rastan, Al-Maghrim and Palmyra.<sup>1323</sup> 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.<sup>1324</sup>

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.<sup>1325</sup> Homs governorate had

<sup>1319</sup> MapAction, Homs Governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

<sup>1320</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#)

<sup>1321</sup> Syria, E-Government, سورية [About Syria], n.d., [url](#)

<sup>1322</sup> UN Habitat and SDC, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1323</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Governorates Profile, June 2014, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>1324</sup> UN Habitat and SDC, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1325</sup> 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.<sup>1326</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Homs governorate to be of 1 465 616.<sup>1327</sup>

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'.<sup>1328</sup> 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.<sup>1329</sup> 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'.<sup>1330</sup> 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 [...]'.<sup>1331</sup>

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 m<sup>3</sup> per day.<sup>1332</sup> Moreover, the governorate had phosphate mines, notably in Khneifis, which attracted Russian companies.<sup>1333</sup> The Financial Times reported in September 2019 that Russian mercenaries were on patrol to protect the state-run General Fertiliser Company in Homs.<sup>1334</sup>

## 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.<sup>1335</sup> 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.<sup>1336</sup> According to the Global Rights Compliance<sup>1337</sup> and World Peace Foundation<sup>1338</sup>, in 2012 the GoS forces applied a 'kneel or starve' strategy against rebel-held neighbourhoods such as Baba Amr, accompanied by indiscriminate attacks.<sup>1339</sup> In 2011, the SAA deployed tanks in Homs city<sup>1340</sup>, 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

<sup>1326</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>1327</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>1328</sup> USDOS, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 10 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 3, 9

<sup>1329</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. 6, 15

<sup>1330</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Syria: general briefing, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1331</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp. 8-9

<sup>1332</sup> BBC Arabic, الثروات الموجودة في مناطق سيطرة الأكراد شرق سوريا [Resources in the Kurds-controlled areas in eastern Syria, 7 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1333</sup> ISPI, Rebuilding Syria: The Middle East's Next Power Game?, 2019, [url](#), p. 48

<sup>1334</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1335</sup> UN Habitat and SDC, City Profile – Homs: Multi Sector Assessment, May 2014, [url](#), pp. 3, 4

<sup>1336</sup> 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.

<sup>1337</sup> '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](#)

<sup>1338</sup> '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](#)

<sup>1339</sup> Global Rights Compliance and World Peace Foundation, Accountability for Starvation Crimes: Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>1340</sup> MSF, Syria: No way out, 12 March 2021, [url](#); BBC News, Homs: Syrian revolution's fallen 'capital', 9 December 2015, [url](#)

Rights Watch.<sup>1341</sup> 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.<sup>1342</sup> In May 2017, the SAA captured the totality of Homs city and hundreds of rebels and their family members were evacuated.<sup>1343</sup>

In April 2018, the SAA launched a large-scale military operation in northern rural Homs<sup>1344</sup> which forced the rebel groups in the region to either negotiate their exit to northern Syria or to reconcile with the GoS.<sup>1345</sup> The GoS forces seized the last rebel enclave in Homs on 15 May 2018<sup>1346</sup>, and buses evacuated rebels and their families from the region to northern Syria.<sup>1347</sup>

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 ambushes<sup>1348</sup> and IED attacks.<sup>1349</sup> 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.<sup>1350</sup> Moreover, weapons and munitions were seized by GoS-forces in Homs governorate<sup>1351</sup>, and a state of lawlessness was reported in 2019.<sup>1352</sup>

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](#)).<sup>1353</sup> Liveuamap also shows an area of ISIL presence to the south-east of Al-Sukhna in eastern rural Homs.<sup>1354</sup> Below is a description of the actors present on the ground in Homs governorate and their places of deployment where information is available.

<sup>1341</sup> HRW, "We Live as in War": Crackdowns on Protestors in the Governorate of Homs, Syria, 11 November 2011, [url](#)

<sup>1342</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1343</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1344</sup> AA, Assad begins attacks to retake rebel-held areas in Homs, 20 April 2018, [url](#)

<sup>1345</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1346</sup> AP News, Syrian government forces seize last rebel enclave in Homs, 15 May 2018, [url](#)

<sup>1347</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1348</sup> 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

<sup>1349</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1350</sup> DIS/DRC, Syria. Security Situation in Damascus. Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>1351</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1352</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1353</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1354</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps' 11<sup>th</sup> Division was headquartered in Homs governorate and was in charge of securing central Syria.<sup>1355</sup> This was corroborated by a Middle East Institute's report published on 18 July 2019<sup>1356</sup> which stated that the 11<sup>th</sup> Division was mandated to secure central Homs, and that by mid-war, it 'was almost fully committed to Homs and Deir ez-Zor'.<sup>1357</sup> Besides the 11<sup>th</sup> Division, the 60<sup>th</sup> and 67<sup>th</sup> Brigades as well as the 135<sup>th</sup> Regiment were reportedly present in the eastern parts of Homs governorate, around Palmyra in particular.<sup>1358</sup>

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.<sup>1359</sup> 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 95<sup>th</sup> Battalion Special Forces, which is a part of the 41<sup>st</sup> Regiment to Al-Sukhna town in eastern Homs as well as 175 fighters of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Special Forces of the same Regiment in Talbiseh in northern Homs governorate.<sup>1360</sup> In Al-Sukhna region, Enab Baladi reported that the SAA had 'fixed military posts' manned by the 18<sup>th</sup> Division, the 11<sup>th</sup> Division-Tanks, the Badiya National Defense, Military Security Shield Forces, and the 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1361</sup> Finally, the New Arab mentioned that some of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps' new recruits from southern Syria were sent to training camps situated in Homs city.<sup>1362</sup>

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 governorates<sup>1363</sup>, 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.<sup>1364</sup> 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.<sup>1365</sup> 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.<sup>1366</sup>

<sup>1355</sup> ISW, The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle, February 2013, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>1356</sup> 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."

<sup>1357</sup> MEI, The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1358</sup> MEI, The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1359</sup> Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1360</sup> Baladi, قوات النظام تستقدم تعزيزات كبيرة إلى ريف حمص.. ما السبب؟ [Regime forces bring large reinforcements to Rural Homs.. Why?], 15 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1361</sup> Enab Baladi, Al-Sukhna predominated by security chaos as regime and Iranian forces grapple with IS, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1362</sup> New Arab (The), "الفيلق الخامس": ذراع روسيا للتقدم في جنوب سورية [The 5<sup>th</sup> corps: Russia's arm to expand in southern Syria], 14 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1363</sup> Aen Al-Sham, من نحن [Who we are], n. d., [url](#)

<sup>1364</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1365</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center, Homs, a Divided Incarnation of Syria's Unresolved Conflict, 15 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1366</sup> 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.<sup>1367</sup> Reportedly, the NDF has become the main security actor in northern rural Homs and it constituted several groups affiliated with different state security agencies.<sup>1368</sup> 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.<sup>1369</sup> Moreover, a map published by IranWire, a website specialised in Iranian affairs<sup>1370</sup>, on 8 May 2020 showed a presence of the NDF in Homs city.<sup>1371</sup>

#### 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.<sup>1372</sup> The group was present in an area stretching from Maskanah in rural Homs to Breij in Rural Damascus, and from Al-Rastan to Palmyra<sup>1373</sup>, and had 16 recruitment centres in different governorates including Homs (city and countryside).<sup>1374</sup> Moreover, the group counted 1 130 fighters and was 'present in all the centres, security checkpoints and fighting frontlines'.<sup>1375</sup>

#### Other Iran-backed militias

The Turkey-based opposition channel, Syria TV<sup>1376</sup>, 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.<sup>1377</sup>

Al-Rida forces is another Shiite militia present in Homs governorate.<sup>1378</sup> 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.<sup>1379</sup>

<sup>1367</sup> Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1368</sup> COAR, Northern Rural Homs: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile, August 2019, [url](#), p. 44

<sup>1369</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1370</sup> IranWire, من نحن [Who we are], n. d., [url](#)

<sup>1371</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1372</sup> Al-Tamimi, A. J., Liwa Al-Areen: A Russian-Backed Formation, 20 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1373</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1374</sup> Al-Tamimi, A. J., Liwa Al-Areen: A Russian-Backed Formation, 20 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1375</sup> Al-Tamimi, A. J., Liwa Al-Areen: A Russian-Backed Formation, 20 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1376</sup> Syria TV, عن تلفزيون سوريا [About Syria TV], n. d., [url](#)

<sup>1377</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1378</sup> 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 [Facts: the Iranian influence and presence in Syria], 13 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1379</sup> 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.<sup>1380</sup> 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.<sup>1381</sup> Moreover, a map published by IranWire indicated that Hezbollah maintained a presence in the town of Al-Sukhna in eastern Homs governorate.<sup>1382</sup>

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.<sup>1383</sup> 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.<sup>1384</sup>

### Private security companies

Manhal Baresh<sup>1385</sup> stated that private security companies in Syria varied in terms of affiliation.<sup>1386</sup> Some of those companies were affiliated with the Security Bureau of the 4<sup>th</sup> 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'.<sup>1387</sup> 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.<sup>1388</sup>

### Iran

Jusoor for Studies stated on 6 January 2021 that Iran had 12 military sites (bases and posts) in Homs governorate.<sup>1389</sup> A map published in November 2020 by Atlantic Council showed an Iranian presence in several positions in eastern and western Homs governorate.<sup>1390</sup> Tehran Bureau, an Iran-focused media centre<sup>1391</sup>, stated that Al-Shayrat Airbase was used by Iranian forces as a 'forward operating base' for supporting Iranian-backed militias throughout central Syria.<sup>1392</sup> Moreover, COAR reported on a presence of Iranian forces in the T4 Airbase near Homs city.<sup>1393</sup> In Palmyra, Syria Files reported

<sup>1380</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1381</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1382</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1383</sup> IranWire, [خريطة انتشار الميليشيات الإيرانية في سوريا والعراق](#) [Map of the positions of Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq], 8 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1384</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1385</sup> '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](#)

<sup>1386</sup> Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>1387</sup> Baresh, M., Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service, European University Institute, 10 September 2020, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>1388</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1389</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1390</sup> Based on reading of the following map: Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1391</sup> Tehran Bureau, Our story, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>1392</sup> Tehran Bureau, Iran's Military Assets Inside Syria, 18 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1393</sup> 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.<sup>1394</sup> Finally, Al-Mashareq, a website sponsored by the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM)<sup>1395</sup>, stated that Iran and proxies held recruitment offices and indoctrination centres in different locations in Syria including in Al-Qusayr in western rural Homs.<sup>1396</sup>

### *Russia*

Jusoor for Studies stated on 6 January 2021 that Russia had five military sites (bases or posts) in Homs governorate.<sup>1397</sup> Zaman Al-Wasl reported that Russian forces were building 'a permanent military base' near Palmyra<sup>1398</sup>, which was the second Russian post set up in the Homs desert after the one established in Al-Qaryatayn.<sup>1399</sup> Moreover, Russian jet fighters launched airstrikes against ISIL positions and elements in Homs desert<sup>1400</sup>, using two SAA air bases in eastern Hama countryside.<sup>1401</sup>

### *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 2016<sup>1402</sup>, which has been used for launching anti-ISIL operations and training anti-GoS armed groups against ISIL.<sup>1403</sup>

For more information see Section [1.5.5 Tanf](#)

### *ISIL*

Despite its defeat in Syria in March 2019<sup>1404</sup>, ISIL still maintains pockets in Homs governorate.<sup>1405</sup> 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.<sup>1406</sup> 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'.<sup>1407</sup> 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).<sup>1408</sup>

The Middle East Institute stated that since the launch of anti-ISIL military operations by pro-GoS forces in February 2021<sup>1409</sup>, ISIL moved its militants deeper in the Syrian desert 'near the junction of the

<sup>1394</sup> Syria Files, A Closer look on Iran's Military Presence in Palmyra Airbase: Syria Files, 17 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1395</sup> Al-Mashareq, About us, N. D., [url](#)

<sup>1396</sup> Al-Mashareq, Iran bankrolls aggressive drive to recruit vulnerable Syrian youth into militias, 4 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1397</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1398</sup> Zaman Al-Wasl, Russia forces equip new base in Badiya desert: source, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1399</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, Russia Sets up New Post Near Iranian Guards in Central Syria, 6 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1400</sup> Daily Sabah, Russian airstrikes kill 21 'Daesh terrorists' in Syria: monitor, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1401</sup> Al Monitor, Russia launches air campaign against Islamic State in Syrian desert, 18 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1402</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1403</sup> International Crisis Group, Al-Tanf, Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1404</sup> Guardian (The), ISIS defeated, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces announce, 23 March 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1405</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1406</sup> Chatham House, Pro-regime Militias and ISIS Militants Stand Against the Return of Palmyra's People, September 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1407</sup> Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1408</sup> Kahan, E., ISIS Poised for a Ramadan Surge in Syria, ISW, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1409</sup> 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*.<sup>1410</sup> 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'.<sup>1411</sup>

### 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.<sup>1412</sup> 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).<sup>1413</sup> 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.<sup>1414</sup> 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.<sup>1415</sup> ISIL carried out limited complex attacks, for instance briefly occupying several GoS positions in and around Al-Sukhna, Homs governorate in April 2020.<sup>1416</sup> 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.<sup>1417</sup> Moreover, the security website, Crisis 24, reported that on 28 August 2020, an IED attack targeted a bus carrying soldiers in Homs governorate.<sup>1418</sup>

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.<sup>1419</sup> The source observed that ISIL has retained a presence in Homs governorate, but 'has generally become stronger' and increased its activity in the governorate.<sup>1420</sup> 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.<sup>1421</sup> 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'.<sup>1422</sup>

<sup>1410</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1411</sup> Al Monitor, Islamic State escalates attacks in Syrian desert, 12 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1412</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1413</sup> Denmark, DIS, Islamic State in Syria, 29 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 25-26

<sup>1414</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 6

<sup>1415</sup> USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve: January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 52

<sup>1416</sup> USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 26

<sup>1417</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 29 June - 5 July 2020, July 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>1418</sup> Crisis24, Syria: Bus carrying soldiers strikes IED in Homs province August 28, 30 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1419</sup> Denmark, DIS, Islamic State in Syria, 29 June 2020, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>1420</sup> Denmark, DIS, Islamic State in Syria, 29 June 2020, [url](#), p. 34

<sup>1421</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2 - 15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1422</sup> 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.<sup>1423</sup> 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.'<sup>1424</sup> 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.<sup>1425</sup>

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.<sup>1426</sup> 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.<sup>1427</sup> On 22 November 2020, the SAA carried out intensive air strikes targeting ISIL positions in the Syrian Badiya, including Al-Sukhna.<sup>1428</sup>

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 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1429</sup>

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.'<sup>1430</sup> ISIL activities in Homs governorate continued through the start of 2021, and the group continued 'to be a major threat'.<sup>1431</sup> 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'.<sup>1432</sup> 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.<sup>1433</sup>

<sup>1423</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 27 July - 2 August 2020, August 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1424</sup> Enab Baladi, Al-Sukhna predominated by security chaos as regime and Iranian forces grapple with IS, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1425</sup> Enab Baladi, Al-Sukhna predominated by security chaos as regime and Iranian forces grapple with IS, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1426</sup> Baladi, [url](#) [Regime forces bring large reinforcements to Rural Homs.. Why?], 15 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1427</sup> Al Masdar News, Syrian Army to face major ISIS threat in 2021, 2 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1428</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1429</sup> Al-Hurra, [url](#) [Details of the "4<sup>th</sup> Division ambush".. and a list of names of those killed belies the Syrian regime's narrative], 31 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1430</sup> Waters, G., ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1431</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 14 December 2020 - 3 January 2021, 7 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1432</sup> NPA, Residents in Syria's Badiya displace due to ISIS attacks, 17 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1433</sup> 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.<sup>1434</sup> 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.<sup>1435</sup>

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.<sup>1436</sup>

In the city of Talbiseh in northern Homs countryside, unidentified gunmen attacked the State Security branch with grenades on 16 November 2020.<sup>1437</sup> 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.<sup>1438</sup> 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).<sup>1439</sup> A researcher at Syria Inside, cited by Al-Quds Al-Arabi<sup>1440</sup>, 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.<sup>1441</sup>

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.<sup>1442</sup> SOHR, citing activists, reported on a state of tension between pro-GoS groups in Talbiseh on 13 November 2020.<sup>1443</sup> 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’.<sup>1444</sup>

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 4<sup>th</sup> Division

<sup>1434</sup> Enab Baladi, Al-Sukhna predominated by security chaos as regime and Iranian forces grapple with IS, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1435</sup> SOHR, Homs desert | Russian-backed “Al-Quds Brigade” militia steal about 1,000 sheep, 5 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1436</sup> Reuters, Syria says extinguishes huge fire near Homs refinery, no casualties, 19 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1437</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1438</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1439</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1440</sup> An independent Arabic newspaper based in the UK. Al-Quds Al-Arabi, Who we are, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>1441</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1442</sup> SOHR, Security chaos | Clashes erupt among pro-regime militias in Homs province, leaving three militiamen injured, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1443</sup> SOHR, North of Homs | Gunmen attack State Security headquarters in Talbiseh city, 16 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1444</sup> 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 checkpoint<sup>1445</sup> and set fire to it.<sup>1446</sup>

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.<sup>1447</sup> The pro-opposition media outlet<sup>1448</sup>, Syria TV, reporting on the same incident, stated that nine people, including two women and three children, were killed in the attack.<sup>1449</sup> 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.<sup>1450</sup>

### *Israeli airstrikes*

Israeli air strikes targeted several locations in the governorate including Shayrat and Al-Daba air bases on 31 March 2020<sup>1451</sup>, pro-Iranian militia near Palmyra on 20 April 2020<sup>1452</sup>, and a Lebanese Hezbollah ammunition depot in Palmyra district on 1 May 2020.<sup>1453</sup> 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'.<sup>1454</sup> 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.<sup>1455</sup> On 2 September 2020, Israeli air strikes targeted the T4 base in eastern Homs.<sup>1456</sup>

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.<sup>1457</sup>

### *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).

<sup>1445</sup> Xeber24, [Security tensions in rural Homs following the killing of a man by 4<sup>th</sup> Division agents], 20 December 2020, [url](#); SOHR, [In the wake of the death of a man by 4<sup>th</sup> Division fire.. Sheen region in western rural Homs witnesses great tension], 20 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1446</sup> Xeber24, [Security tensions in rural Homs following the killing of a man by 4<sup>th</sup> Division agents], 20 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1447</sup> SOHR, [سلاح بالسيوف.. ميليشيات الموالية لإيران تقتل 3 من رعاة المواشي في ريف حمص الشرقي], 7 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1448</sup> Media Landscapes, Syria, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>1449</sup> Syria TV, [Shepherds including children and women massacred in eastern Homs], 6 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1450</sup> SOHR, New massacre | Iranian militias kill 11 civilians, steal sheep and set fire to several houses in eastern Homs, 4 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1451</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 30 March – 5 April 2020, April 2020, [url](#), p. 3;

<sup>1452</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1453</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 27 April – 3 May 2020, May 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>1454</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 29 - May 12, 2020, 14 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1455</sup> Reuters, Syria says casualties in Homs blast, war monitor says Israel behind it, 1 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1456</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary | 31 August - 6 September 2020, 6 September 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>1457</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 30 - February 18, 2021, 19 February 2021, [url](#)

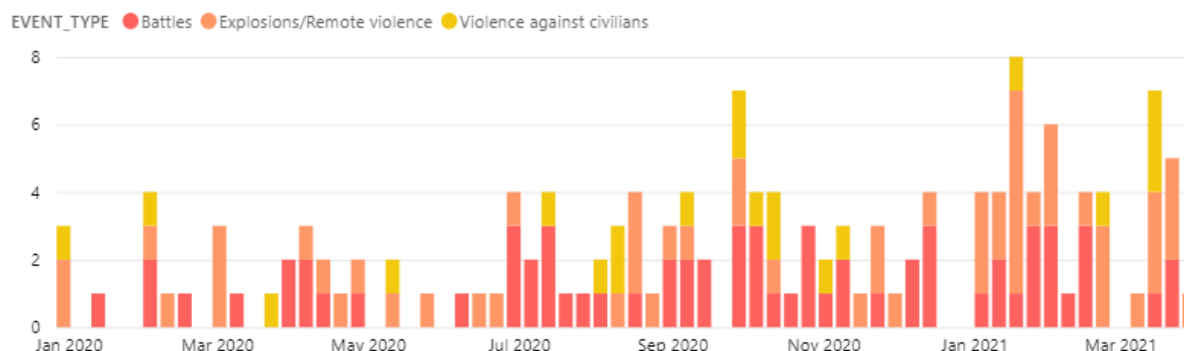


Figure 28. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Homs governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>1458</sup>

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	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>21</b>

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.<sup>1459</sup>
- On 1 May 2020, several explosions at a weapons depot in the city of Homs were reported. At least 15 civilians were injured.<sup>1460</sup>
- SOHR reported that on 2 September 2020, airstrikes, likely to be Israeli, hit the area of the T4 airport in eastern Homs countryside.<sup>1461</sup>
- 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.<sup>1462</sup>

<sup>1458</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>1459</sup> SOHR, ISIS resurgence: cells attack regime military bus in Homs, killing six soldiers, including high-ranking officer, 30 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1460</sup> 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 وجرحي 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](#)

<sup>1461</sup> SOHR, Israeli attacks | Airstrikes target T4 airport area in Homs countryside, and air defenses try to intercept, 2 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1462</sup> 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.<sup>1463</sup>

### 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	-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>

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 15<sup>1464</sup> (SNHR data)<sup>1465</sup> and 44 civilian fatalities (VDC data).<sup>1466</sup> 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 %).<sup>1467</sup> Within this

<sup>1463</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1464</sup> 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

<sup>1465</sup> 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

<sup>1466</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020 and 2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>1467</sup> 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.<sup>1468</sup> 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.<sup>1469</sup>

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.<sup>1470</sup> International Crisis Group stated in a February 2020 report that parts of Homs, ‘are inhospitable for returnees due to heavy destruction’.<sup>1471</sup>

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.<sup>1472</sup>

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.<sup>1473</sup> 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.<sup>1474</sup> 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.<sup>1475</sup>

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’.<sup>1476</sup> 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.<sup>1477</sup>

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.<sup>1478</sup>

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power, water, sanitation, transport and communications infrastructure’. ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 49

<sup>1468</sup> ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War: Eight Years On, [url](#), p. 50

<sup>1469</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

<sup>1470</sup> REACH/UNITAR, Syria: Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 44

<sup>1471</sup> International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees’ Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 22

<sup>1472</sup> Enab Baladi, Homs governorate removes hundreds of “ramshackle” properties, 30 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1473</sup> New Arab (The), [url](#) [Al-Khalidiya neighbourhood in Homs is without electricity and bread], 15 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1474</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1475</sup> Enab Baladi, [url](#) [Homs governorate removes the rubble from Al-Khalidiya and Bab Al-Siba’a neighbourhoods], 10 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1476</sup> UNRWA, UNRWA Shocked at Shrapnel Incident Causing Damage to School Building in Homs, Syria, 2 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1477</sup> WHO, WHO addresses health inequities in Syria and ensures improved access to health care for all, 27 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1478</sup> 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.<sup>1479</sup>
- 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.<sup>1480</sup>
- 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.<sup>1481</sup>
- 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.<sup>1482</sup>

### *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.<sup>1483</sup> 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.<sup>1484</sup>

In January and February 2020, UNOCHA indicated IDP movements from several governorates to Latakia, including from Homs.<sup>1485</sup> 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.<sup>1486</sup> In 2021, UNOCHA reported on 185 IDPs movements (from locations within and to outside the governorate) in January, 287 IDPs movements in February<sup>1487</sup>, and 192 IDP movements in March 2021 (of which 85 were recorded within the governorate).<sup>1488</sup>

As regards return movements in Homs governorate, UNOCHA estimated that the number of returnees in 2020 was 10 978.<sup>1489</sup> The source noted that in September and October 2020, Tadmor town (Palmyra) received around 600 and 500 IDP movements consecutively<sup>1490</sup>, and that Homs city received

<sup>1479</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1480</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1481</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1482</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1483</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic 2021, March 2021, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>1484</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1485</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2020, 25 February 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2020, 6 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1486</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements October 2020, 24 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1487</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2021, 4 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1488</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1489</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], updated 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1490</sup> 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.<sup>1491</sup> 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)<sup>1492</sup>, 692 in February (of whom more than 300 to Homs sub-district)<sup>1493</sup>, and 527 in March.<sup>1494</sup>

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.<sup>1495</sup>

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<sup>1491</sup> 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](#)

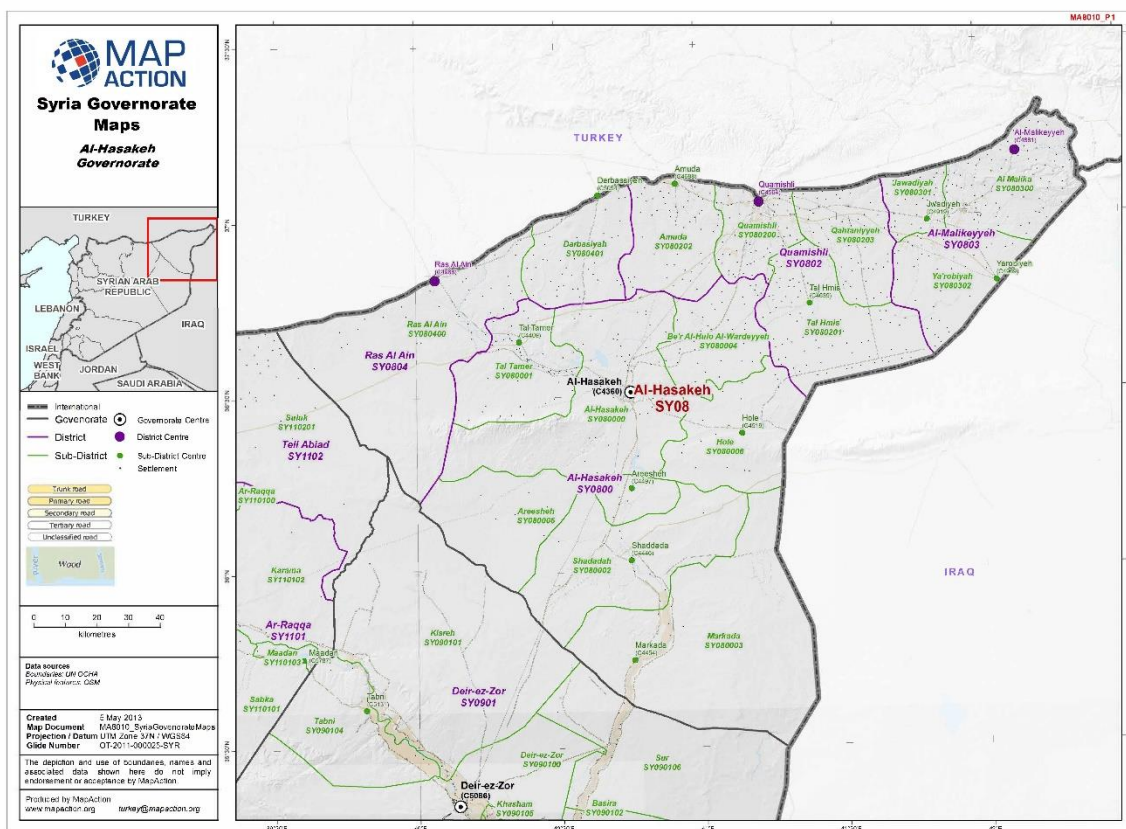
<sup>1492</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic IDP Spontaneous Returns January 2021, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1493</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic IDP Spontaneous Returns February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1494</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1495</sup> 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 governorate<sup>1496</sup>

### 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).<sup>1497</sup> 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.<sup>1498</sup>

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)<sup>1499</sup> and a political assembly,

<sup>1496</sup> MapAction, Al-Hasakah governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

<sup>1497</sup> MapAction, Al-Hasakah governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#); UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, January 2017, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>1498</sup> 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

<sup>1499</sup> 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).<sup>1500</sup> The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), have a dominant role in the SDF<sup>1501</sup>, the SDC<sup>1502</sup> and in the Autonomous Administration as a whole.<sup>1503</sup> 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'<sup>1504</sup> or, since 2018, one of the 'regions'<sup>1505</sup> 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.<sup>1506</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Hasaka governorate to be of 1 127 309 inhabitants.<sup>1507</sup>

According to Fabrice Balanche, Hasaka has an ethnic Kurdish majority.<sup>1508</sup> 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.<sup>1509</sup> Hasaka's Assyrian Christian population is concentrated in Tal Tamr area.<sup>1510</sup> Other ethnic and religious minorities present in the governorate include Syriac Christians<sup>1511</sup>, Armenians and Yazidis.<sup>1512</sup>

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.<sup>1513</sup> Depending on the source, the areas controlled by SDF produce between 70<sup>1514</sup> and 72 %<sup>1515</sup> 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.<sup>1516</sup>

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.<sup>1517</sup> International Crisis Group estimates that the oil fields in SDF-controlled North-East Syria (mainly Hasaka governorate and

<sup>1500</sup> Rojava Information Center, Beyond the Frontlines, 19 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 31-32

<sup>1501</sup> 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

<sup>1502</sup> Netjes R. & van Veen, E., Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist. The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict, Clingendael, April 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>1503</sup> COAR, Emboldened Self-Administration bids for greater power, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1504</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 54

<sup>1505</sup> Rojava Information Center, Beyond the Frontlines, 19 December 2019, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>1506</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>1507</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>1508</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 56

<sup>1509</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 52

<sup>1510</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1511</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1512</sup> MRGI, Syria, March 2018, [url](#)

<sup>1513</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), pp.57-58

<sup>1514</sup> WFP, Syrian Arab Republic – mWAM Bulletin Issue no. 51: December 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1515</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1516</sup> FAO/WFP, Special Report: FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 18 July 2017, [url](#), p. 25

<sup>1517</sup> 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’.<sup>1518</sup>

## 2.7.2 Conflict background and armed actors

Hasaka governorate is mainly under the control of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>1519</sup> Their allies in the US-led coalition have presence in the governorate.<sup>1520</sup> 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.<sup>1521</sup> 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.<sup>1522</sup> Since the military incursion in October 2019<sup>1523</sup>, 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.<sup>1524</sup> 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.<sup>1525</sup>

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.<sup>1526</sup> 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)<sup>1527</sup> <sup>1528</sup>, and Balanche describes the events of 2012 as the ‘PYD takeover of Hasaka [governorate]’.<sup>1529</sup> 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

<sup>1518</sup> International Crisis Group, Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria’s North East, 5 September 2018, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>1519</sup> 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]

<sup>1520</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1521</sup> 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

<sup>1522</sup> 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]

<sup>1523</sup> For further information on the October 2019 Turkish incursion, see EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1524</sup> 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]

<sup>1525</sup> 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

<sup>1526</sup> Allsopp, H. & van Wilgenburg, W., The Kurds of Northern Syria. Governance, Diversity and Conflicts, I.B. Tauris, 2019, p. 13

<sup>1527</sup> The ethno-religious composition of Hasaka’s population is discussed above in Section 2.7.1

<sup>1528</sup> Netjes R. & van Veen, E., Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist. The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict, Clingendael, April 2021, [url](#), pp. 21-22

<sup>1529</sup> 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.<sup>1530</sup>

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.<sup>1531</sup> (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.<sup>1532</sup> Serious human rights violations committed by these actors were reported also during the reference period.<sup>1533</sup> (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 forces<sup>1534</sup> 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.<sup>1535</sup> The SDF controls Syria's main oil fields and depends on them for revenue<sup>1536</sup>, 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.<sup>1537</sup> It has been estimated that the deal increased tensions between the SDF and other actors operating in north-east Syria.<sup>1538</sup>

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.<sup>1539</sup>

<sup>1530</sup> International Crisis Group, Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East, 5 September 2018, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>1531</sup> 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]

<sup>1532</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1533</sup> See, in particular, OHCHR, Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups – Bachelet, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1534</sup> 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]

<sup>1535</sup> 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

<sup>1536</sup> MEE, Syrian oil fields no longer priority for US forces, says Pentagon, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1537</sup> 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

<sup>1538</sup> COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1539</sup> 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 force<sup>1540</sup> of the Autonomous Administration currently in control of most of Hasaka governorate.<sup>1541</sup> (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.<sup>1542</sup> 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.<sup>1543</sup> 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.<sup>1544</sup> (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.<sup>1545</sup>

The GoS maintains its own enclaves or 'security zones' inside the SDF-controlled cities of Hasaka and Qamishli.<sup>1546</sup> 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.<sup>1547</sup> 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.<sup>1548</sup> In addition, the SAA

<sup>1540</sup> 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

<sup>1541</sup> 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]

<sup>1542</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1543</sup> Balanche, F., *The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1544</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1545</sup> 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

<sup>1546</sup> 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

<sup>1547</sup> Mehchy Z. et al., *Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria*, Chatham House, November 2020, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>1548</sup> COAR, *Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts*, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

controls the Qamishli airport.<sup>1549</sup> 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.<sup>1550</sup>

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.<sup>1551</sup> 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.<sup>1552</sup> According to the Carter Center report of February the GoS has an enclave also in Tal Tamr town.<sup>1553</sup> 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.<sup>1554</sup>

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.<sup>1555</sup>

### *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.<sup>1556</sup> 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.<sup>1557</sup>

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.<sup>1558</sup> 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.<sup>1559</sup> 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).<sup>1560</sup>

<sup>1549</sup> 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

<sup>1550</sup> Mehchy Z. et al., Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria, Chatham House, November 2020, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>1551</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1552</sup> 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

<sup>1553</sup> Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 18 - 24 January 2021, 27 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1554</sup> Balanche, F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1555</sup> EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 135–136

<sup>1556</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1557</sup> Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1558</sup> 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

<sup>1559</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1560</sup> 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.<sup>1561</sup> 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.’<sup>1562</sup> 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.<sup>1563</sup>

### *Russia*

According to the USDOD report of May 2020, Russia has at least 300 military police patrolling in north-east Syria.<sup>1564</sup> According to an analysis by the DIA, cited in the USDOD report of August 2020, Russian forces have ‘a presence at the Qamishli airport<sup>1565</sup> and [patrol] in [Hasaka and Raqqqa governorates], including in towns along the M4 highway leading to the Iraqi border’.<sup>1566</sup> 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.<sup>1567</sup>

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.<sup>1568</sup> In May 2020, ISW reported that four Russian-escorted convoys would be trafficking daily between Ayn Issa and Tal Tamr.<sup>1569</sup> 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.<sup>1570</sup>

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.<sup>1571</sup> According to Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021, Russia has up to 13 military sites<sup>1572</sup> in Hasaka governorate: five in or near the city of Qamishli, two in the Syrian–

<sup>1561</sup> COAR, Fire on the coast: Damascus vows support — but not much, 19 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1562</sup> Arab News, Anti-Daesh coalition to set up military base along Turkish-Syrian border, 16 February 2021 [updated on 24 February 2021], [url](#)

<sup>1563</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1564</sup> 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

<sup>1565</sup> See also ISW, Syria Situation Report: March 18 - 31, 2020, 2 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1566</sup> 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

<sup>1567</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-29, 2021, 29 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1568</sup> Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1569</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 13 - 26, 2020, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1570</sup> Balanche, F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1571</sup> 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

<sup>1572</sup> 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.<sup>1573</sup> 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.<sup>1574</sup> 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).<sup>1575</sup> 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.<sup>1576</sup> 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.<sup>1577</sup> 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.<sup>1578</sup>

#### *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 Raqqa 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.<sup>1579</sup>

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.<sup>1580</sup> 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.<sup>1581</sup>

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,

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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](#)

<sup>1573</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of Russia’s bases and posts in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1574</sup> Kemal, L., Suriye’de YPG bölgesindeki Rus ve ABD üsleri sayıları [Map] [Twitter], 1 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1575</sup> Balanche, F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1576</sup> COAR, Self Administration bids to corner grain market as SYP collapses, 8 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1577</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 27 - June 9, 2020, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1578</sup> COAR, Fire on the coast: Damascus vows support — but not much, 19 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1579</sup> 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

<sup>1580</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1581</sup> 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.<sup>1582</sup> 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.<sup>1583</sup>

### ISIL

According to a May 2020 estimate by Aaron Y. Zelin, ISIL had conducted ‘numerous’ attacks in Hasaka governorate during the preceding fourteen months.<sup>1584</sup> (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.<sup>1585</sup>

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.<sup>1586</sup> 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 fake<sup>1587</sup> checkpoints<sup>1588</sup>, the targeting of oil traders<sup>1589</sup> and the extortion of *zakat* from the local population<sup>1590</sup> – 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).<sup>1591</sup> 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.<sup>1592</sup> The security situation during the period between April and May 2020 was described in similar terms, affecting especially the

<sup>1582</sup> 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

<sup>1583</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>1584</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1585</sup> Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#) [map]

<sup>1586</sup> International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1587</sup> 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).

<sup>1588</sup> Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS’ Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1589</sup> Haenni, P. & Guesnay, A., Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State, EUI, 17 February 2020, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>1590</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1591</sup> 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

<sup>1592</sup> 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.<sup>1593</sup>

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.<sup>1594</sup> 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.<sup>1595</sup> 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.<sup>1596</sup>

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.<sup>1597</sup> 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.<sup>1598</sup>

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.<sup>1599</sup> 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.<sup>1600</sup>

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.<sup>1601</sup> 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

<sup>1593</sup> 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]

<sup>1594</sup> 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]

<sup>1595</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: July 7 - 21, 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1596</sup> 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

<sup>1597</sup> 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]

<sup>1598</sup> 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]

<sup>1599</sup> SOHR, “Peace Spring” a year on: A new map of influence...growing humanitarian disaster and continuous Turkish violations, 9 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1600</sup> Holmes, A. A., Despite Ceasefire Agreement, Turkey Implicated In More Than Eight Hundred Violations, Council on Foreign Relations, 13 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1601</sup> REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, November 2020, 21 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1

Tamr areas.<sup>1602</sup> 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.<sup>1603</sup>

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.<sup>1604</sup> 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.<sup>1605</sup> 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.<sup>1606</sup> In late March 2021, renewed, intensive clashes between the Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF were reported in the vicinity of Tall Tamer.<sup>1607</sup>

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.<sup>1608</sup> 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 2020<sup>1609</sup>, 'several' disruptions between June and July 2020<sup>1610</sup>, 'a two-week disruption' that ended on 27 August 2020.<sup>1611</sup> 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.<sup>1612</sup>

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.<sup>1613</sup> In September 2020, OHCHR raised similar concerns about Turkish-backed armed groups utilising water as a weapon.<sup>1614</sup> According to the UN Security Council, Allouk water station resumed its operations on 20 December 2020 (the duration of the preceding

<sup>1602</sup> Carter Center (The), Syria Weekly Conflict Summary 9-15 November 2020, 18 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1603</sup> Tastekin, F., Is Turkey gearing up for military move against Syrian Kurds?, Al-Monitor, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1604</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 12 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1605</sup> 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]

<sup>1606</sup> SOHR, Al-Hasakah: Turkish forces attack border village, igniting popular anger, while Russian forces check the situation, 6 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1607</sup> van Wilgenburg, W., Heavy fighting erupts near Tal Tamir in northern Syria, Kurdistan 24, 27 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1608</sup> 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]

<sup>1609</sup> 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]

<sup>1610</sup> 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]

<sup>1611</sup> 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]

<sup>1612</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: June 24 - July 6, 2020, 9 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1613</sup> HRW, Turkey/Syria: Weaponizing Water in Global Pandemic?, 31 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1614</sup> 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.<sup>1615</sup>

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.<sup>1616</sup> 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.<sup>1617</sup>

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'.<sup>1618</sup> 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.<sup>1619</sup> 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.<sup>1620</sup>

#### *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.<sup>1621</sup> 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).<sup>1622</sup>

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.'<sup>1623</sup> According to a March 2020 update by the Carter Center, since October 2019, 'explosive

<sup>1615</sup> 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]

<sup>1616</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>1617</sup> PAX/ STJ, Front Lines Aflame: Crop Fires Ravage Syria's Jazirah Region, Scorching Fields and Destroying Harvests, 24 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 3, 37

<sup>1618</sup> PAX/ STJ, Front Lines Aflame: Crop Fires Ravage Syria's Jazirah Region, Scorching Fields and Destroying Harvests, 24 August 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>1619</sup> PAX/ STJ, Front Lines Aflame: Crop Fires Ravage Syria's Jazirah Region, Scorching Fields and Destroying Harvests, 24 August 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-8

<sup>1620</sup> PAX/ STJ, Front Lines Aflame: Crop Fires Ravage Syria's Jazirah Region, Scorching Fields and Destroying Harvests, 24 August 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>1621</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>1622</sup> 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]

<sup>1623</sup> 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.<sup>1624</sup>

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.<sup>1625</sup> 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.<sup>1626</sup> 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.<sup>1627</sup> 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.<sup>1628</sup>

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.<sup>1629</sup> 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.<sup>1630</sup>

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.<sup>1631</sup> Other types of serious human rights violations, e.g. torture and looting, by Turkish-backed armed were also reported in Turkish-controlled northern Syria<sup>1632</sup> and particularly in Operation Peace Spring area<sup>1633</sup> during the reference period for this report.

<sup>1624</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 9-15 March 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>1625</sup> 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

<sup>1626</sup> 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

<sup>1627</sup> 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]

<sup>1628</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 12 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1629</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>1630</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>1631</sup> OHCHR, Syria: Violations and abuses rife in areas under Turkish-affiliated armed groups – Bachelet, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1632</sup> USDOS, Syria 2020 Human Rights Report, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>1633</sup> 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).<sup>1634</sup> 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 homes<sup>1635</sup>

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.<sup>1636</sup> 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.<sup>1637</sup> 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.<sup>1638</sup> The Col notes that the organisation received information about the infighting between Turkish-backed armed groups in Ras al-Ayn in June 2020.<sup>1639</sup> 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.<sup>1640</sup>

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.<sup>1641</sup> 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.<sup>1642</sup> 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.<sup>1643</sup> According to al-Hilu, Sultan Murad and Hamza Divisions have seized approximately 800 homes belonging to Kurds or Arabs associated with the Autonomous

<sup>1634</sup> 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]

<sup>1635</sup> 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]

<sup>1636</sup> 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

<sup>1637</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 6-12 April 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1638</sup> SOHR, “Peace Spring” a year on: A new map of influence...growing humanitarian disaster and continuous Turkish violations, 9 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1639</sup> 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]

<sup>1640</sup> STJ, Syria: Crops Looted, Lands Seized in “Peace Spring” Territories, 11 March 2021, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>1641</sup> SOHR, “Peace Spring” a year on: A new map of influence...growing humanitarian disaster and continuous Turkish violations, 9 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1642</sup> 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]

<sup>1643</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 9



Administration.<sup>1644</sup> Almost 2 000 families of SNA fighters have been settled to Ras al-Ayn from northern Aleppo governorate.<sup>1645</sup>

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.<sup>1646</sup> 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.<sup>1647</sup>

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.<sup>1648</sup> 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.<sup>1649</sup>

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.<sup>1650</sup> 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.<sup>1651</sup>

<sup>1644</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>1645</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>1646</sup> 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]

<sup>1647</sup> 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]

<sup>1648</sup> 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]

<sup>1649</sup> Human Rights Watch, Illegal Transfers of Syrians to Turkey, 3 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1650</sup> 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]

<sup>1651</sup> 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.<sup>1652</sup> 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.<sup>1653</sup>

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.<sup>1654</sup>

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.<sup>1655</sup> 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’.<sup>1656</sup> 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

<sup>1652</sup> 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

<sup>1653</sup> 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

<sup>1654</sup> 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

<sup>1655</sup> COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1656</sup> 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.<sup>1657</sup>

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.<sup>1658</sup> 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'.<sup>1659</sup> 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.<sup>1660</sup> 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.<sup>1661</sup>

The mediation by Russia led to the de-escalation of the confrontation on 2 February 2021.<sup>1662</sup> According to COAR Global the blockades were partially lifted, allowing the movement of some goods, including food and fuel.<sup>1663</sup> According to the UN Security Council report of February 2021, the security situation in the area 'remained tense'.<sup>1664</sup> 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.<sup>1665</sup>

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.<sup>1666</sup> Wilgenburg reports that the raids took place on 19 January and that, all in all, seven teachers were arrested.<sup>1667</sup> 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.<sup>1668</sup>

<sup>1657</sup> COAR, Qamishli Clashes: GoS and SDF Seek Pressure Points, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1658</sup> COAR, Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1659</sup> 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]

<sup>1660</sup> van Wilgenburg, W., Syrian government troops attack Kurdish forces in Qamishli, Kurdistan 24, 23 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1661</sup> van Wilgenburg, W., Syrian regime-aligned militia, Kurdish-led forces clash in Hasakah; casualties reported, Kurdistan 24, 31 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1662</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1663</sup> COAR, Sweeping Real Estate Sales Tax Reform Discussed, 8 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1664</sup> 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]

<sup>1665</sup> 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]

<sup>1666</sup> COAR, Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1667</sup> van Wilgenburg, W., Disputes, arrests over school curriculum in northeastern Syria, Kurdistan 24, 29 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1668</sup> 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.<sup>1669</sup>

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.<sup>1670</sup> Several US soldiers were injured in the incident.<sup>1671</sup> COAR Global connects the incident to tensions caused by the oil deal between the Autonomous Administration and an US based oil company.<sup>1672</sup> According to information provided by CJTF-OIR, in addition to Russia, also the GoS forces were trying to increase their presence in Hasaka governorate.<sup>1673</sup> 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.<sup>1674</sup> According to ISW the incident involved also the SDF and took place in Tall al-Zahab.<sup>1675</sup> One<sup>1676</sup> or two<sup>1677</sup> 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.<sup>1678</sup> 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.<sup>1679</sup>

*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.<sup>1680</sup> 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

<sup>1669</sup> 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

<sup>1670</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1671</sup> 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

<sup>1672</sup> COAR, Self-Administration steps back from negotiations, as attacks step up across the northeast, 31 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1673</sup> 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

<sup>1674</sup> 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

<sup>1675</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1676</sup> 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

<sup>1677</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1678</sup> 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

<sup>1679</sup> 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

<sup>1680</sup> 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.<sup>1681</sup> 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.<sup>1682</sup>

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.<sup>1683</sup> 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.<sup>1684</sup>

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 body<sup>1685</sup> and potentially a wider 'power-sharing framework'.<sup>1686</sup> 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.<sup>1687</sup> 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'<sup>1688</sup>, who have played a central role in its civilian and military institutions. At the end of the reference period, the 'unity talks' had stalled.<sup>1689</sup>

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'.<sup>1690</sup> According to COAR Global, armed

<sup>1681</sup> 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

<sup>1682</sup> Megally, H. & El-Gamal, J. M., Preventing the Reemergence of Violent Extremism in Northeast Syria, UNESCWA & CIC, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 21–22

<sup>1683</sup> 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

<sup>1684</sup> 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

<sup>1685</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1686</sup> COAR, PYD-KNC peace talks: Whither peace in Syria's northeast?, 28 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1687</sup> Kajjo, S., Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 5–6

<sup>1688</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1689</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1690</sup> 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.<sup>1691</sup>

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.<sup>1692</sup>

### *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](#)).<sup>1693</sup> 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.<sup>1694</sup>

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.<sup>1695</sup> Between April and June 2020, the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) did not observe any increase in ISIL’s activities in Hasaka governorate.<sup>1696</sup> 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’.<sup>1697</sup> 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).<sup>1698</sup> According to a 29 May 2020 assessment by Aaron Zelin, ISIL had conducted 153 attacks in Hasaka governorate in the last 14 months.<sup>1699</sup>

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 2<sup>1700</sup> attacks were reported in February, 1 in

<sup>1691</sup> COAR, Need for seed: Damascus increasingly desperate for wheat, 21 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1692</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1693</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>1694</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>1695</sup> 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

<sup>1696</sup> 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

<sup>1697</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 3, 7

<sup>1698</sup> 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]

<sup>1699</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1700</sup> 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.<sup>1701</sup> 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.<sup>1702</sup> 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.<sup>1703</sup>

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.<sup>1704</sup> According to RIC, ISIL carried out 45 attacks in the SDF-controlled North-East Syria in October 2020<sup>1705</sup>, of which 7 took place in Hasaka governorate.<sup>1706</sup> 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 Raqqqa 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.<sup>1707</sup>

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.<sup>1708</sup> 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<sup>1709</sup>, with assassinations targeting 'tribal and civic leaders and other influential figures' also in SDF-controlled parts of Hasaka governorate.<sup>1710</sup> USDOD notes that both members of security forces and civilians were targeted by these assassinations.<sup>1711</sup>

#### *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

<sup>1701</sup> 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

<sup>1702</sup> OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 19

<sup>1703</sup> 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

<sup>1704</sup> 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.

<sup>1705</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>1706</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>1707</sup> Al-Kanj, S., Islamic State regroups in Syrian Kurdish region, Al-Monitor, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1708</sup> 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]

<sup>1709</sup> 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

<sup>1710</sup> 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

<sup>1711</sup> 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.<sup>1712</sup> In 2020, attacks<sup>1713</sup> targeting the SDF-affiliated camp guards and an increase in violent incidents in the camp were reported.<sup>1714</sup>

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.'<sup>1715</sup> According to RIC, in January 2021, 20 people were killed, 10 of them beheaded, in Al Hol camp in January 2021.<sup>1716</sup> 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.<sup>1717</sup>

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.<sup>1718</sup> In addition, a MSF-worker was killed by unknown actors, which resulted in MSF halting temporarily its operations in the camp.<sup>1719</sup> 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.<sup>1720</sup>

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.<sup>1721</sup> 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.<sup>1722</sup> The security operation was concluded on 1 April 2021, with 125 camp residents detained as the result of the operation.<sup>1723</sup>

### *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).<sup>1724</sup>

<sup>1712</sup> 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]

<sup>1713</sup> 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

<sup>1714</sup> 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

<sup>1715</sup> COAR, Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1716</sup> Rojava Information Center, Report: High Value Arrest and High Profile Assassinations Kick Off New Year, 7 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1717</sup> 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]

<sup>1718</sup> Rojava Information Center, Report: High Arrests from SDF and Al Hol Murders Continue in February, 7 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1719</sup> MSF, MSF denounces unsafe environment in Al-Hol camp in wake of staff killing, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1720</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Ccell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1721</sup> 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]

<sup>1722</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1723</sup> 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]

<sup>1724</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

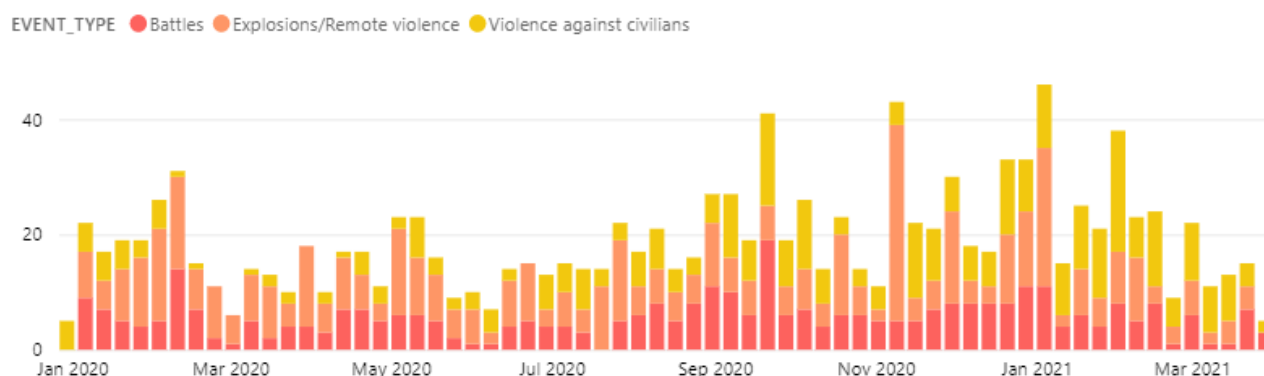


Figure 31. Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Hasaka governorate in between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>1725</sup>

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).<sup>1726</sup>

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
<b>Total</b>	<b>369</b>	<b>506</b>	<b>374</b>

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-Turkman<sup>1727</sup>, 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.<sup>1728</sup>
- On 16 March 2020, a VBIED exploded in Shaddadi city, injuring at least two civilians.<sup>1729</sup>
- 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.<sup>1730</sup>
- On 2 May 2020, pro-GoS armed forces looted civilian properties in Abu Rasin and Tall Tamer.<sup>1731</sup>

<sup>1725</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>1726</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>1727</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 2-9 March 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>1728</sup> Al-Ali, Z., Turkish soldiers killed in a car explosion south of Tal Abyad, NPA, 6 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1729</sup> 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]

<sup>1730</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 30 March-5 April 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1731</sup> 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.<sup>1732</sup>
- 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.<sup>1733</sup>
- On 5 June, a VBIED exploded in Ras al-Ayn city killing one child and wounding seven other civilians.<sup>1734</sup>
- 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.<sup>1735</sup>
- 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.<sup>1736</sup>
- 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.<sup>1737</sup>
- 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.<sup>1738</sup> 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'.<sup>1739</sup>
- 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.<sup>1740</sup>
- 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.<sup>1741</sup>
- 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.<sup>1742</sup> On 15 November, Tayy tribal leaders held a gathering in Jormuz area, declared their

<sup>1732</sup> 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]

<sup>1733</sup> 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]

<sup>1734</sup> 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]

<sup>1735</sup> 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]

<sup>1736</sup> 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]

<sup>1737</sup> 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]

<sup>1738</sup> 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]

<sup>1739</sup> USIP, The Current Situation in Syria, 26 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1740</sup> 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]

<sup>1741</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: October 28 - November 10, 2020, 13 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1742</sup> 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.<sup>1743</sup>

- 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.<sup>1744</sup>
- On 2 January 2021, a VBIED exploded and killed two children and wounded one other civilian in Ras al-Ayn.<sup>1745</sup>
- On 22 January 2021, two female employees of local civil administration were abducted and beheaded in the countryside of Shaddadi, in southern Hasaka governorate.<sup>1746</sup> 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.<sup>1747</sup> The killing of 'the head of a local council and her deputy' was also noted by the UN Security Council.<sup>1748</sup>
- On 25 February 2021, a VBIED exploded in Faruj market in Ras al-Ayn city, killing five civilians and injuring one.<sup>1749</sup>

### *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		
<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>73</b>

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

<sup>1743</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: November 11-December 1, 2020, 3 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1744</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: November 11-December 1, 2020, 3 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1745</sup> 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]

<sup>1746</sup> NPA, Women's Board in AANES condemns beheading of two female civil employees, 24 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1747</sup> van Wilgenburg, W., Two local female politicians abducted and killed in northeast Syria, Kurdistan 24, 24 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1748</sup> 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]

<sup>1749</sup> 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 117<sup>1750</sup> (SNHR data)<sup>1751</sup> and 125 civilian fatalities (VDC data).<sup>1752</sup> 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.<sup>1753</sup>

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.<sup>1754</sup> 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).<sup>1755</sup>

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'.<sup>1756</sup> The report adds that, according to humanitarian organisations, the contamination of the Operation Peace Spring area has led to civilian casualties.<sup>1757</sup> The report notes that Turkey has cleared mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the area<sup>1758</sup>, although it has not provided details of the mine clearing operations (to the monitoring organisations).<sup>1759</sup>

<sup>1750</sup> 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

<sup>1751</sup> 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

<sup>1752</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>1753</sup> UNESCWA/ University of St Andrews, Syria at War; Eight Years On, 2020 [published on 23 September 2020], [url](#), p. 50–51

<sup>1754</sup> Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 378

<sup>1755</sup> Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 379

<sup>1756</sup> Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 274

<sup>1757</sup> Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 270

<sup>1758</sup> Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 379

<sup>1759</sup> 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.<sup>1760</sup> 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.<sup>1761</sup> 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.<sup>1762</sup>

### *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.<sup>1763</sup> In January 2021, 474 new IDPs from Hasaka were registered. 411 of these were displaced within the governorate.<sup>1764</sup> In February 2021, approximately 2 300 new IDPs from Hasaka governorate were registered. 1 900 of these were displaced within the governorate.<sup>1765</sup> In March 2021 UNOCHA recorded 286 IDP movements from or within Hasaka governorate, of which 144 took place within the governorate.<sup>1766</sup>

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).<sup>1767</sup> 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.<sup>1768</sup> 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.<sup>1769</sup> In March 2021 UNOCHA recorded 202 IDP return movements from or within Hasaka governorate, of which 44 took place within the governorate.<sup>1770</sup>

<sup>1760</sup> AA, Turkey destroys hundreds of mines, IEDs in Syria, 9 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1761</sup> AA, Turkey destroys dozens of mines in northern Syria, 27 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1762</sup> Daily Sabah, Turkish personnel educate children in northern Syria for protection from mines, 10 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1763</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020 (As of 31 December 2020), 8 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1764</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (January 2021), 4 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1765</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1766</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1767</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020 (As of 31 December 2020), 8 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1768</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (January 2021), 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1769</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1770</sup> 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.<sup>1776</sup>

According to Dukhan (et al.), the great majority of Raqqa's population and resources are located in areas controlled by the SDF.<sup>1777</sup> In 2020, media sources have emphasised the reinvigoration<sup>1778</sup> 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'.<sup>1779</sup> A similar trend has been reported also with regard to Tabqa<sup>1780</sup>, 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.<sup>1781</sup> The Washington Post describes the city as largely destroyed, but at the same time vibrant with people in areas spared from the destruction.<sup>1782</sup> 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.<sup>1783</sup>

Depending on the source, the areas controlled by SDF produce between 70<sup>1784</sup> and 72 %<sup>1785</sup> 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.<sup>1786</sup>

Raqqa's economy and natural resources are discussed in detail in the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#).<sup>1787</sup>

## 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.<sup>1788</sup> As the result of the Turkish military incursion in October 2019<sup>1789</sup>, the GoS forces and/or their Russian allies have been present along the

<sup>1776</sup> Dukhan, H. et al., The Kin Who Count: Mapping Raqqa's Tribal Topology, Middle East Institute, 24 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1777</sup> Dukhan, H. et al., The Kin Who Count: Mapping Raqqa's Tribal Topology, MEI, 24 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1778</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1779</sup> COAR, Syria in 2021: Forecast for a Protracted Crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>1780</sup> Kalo, R. & Kajjo, S., Rebuilding Efforts Continue in Syria's Former IS Stronghold, VOA, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1781</sup> Al-Omar, H., Al-Raqqa: over a decade of the Syrian revolution, Enab Baladi, 29 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1782</sup> Sly, L. & Martins, A., The former 'caliphate capital' is haunted by fears of an ISIS comeback, The Washington Post, 22 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1783</sup> Mogelson, L., America's Abandonment of Syria, The New Yorker, 20 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1784</sup> WFP, Syrian Arab Republic – mWAM Bulletin Issue no. 51: December 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1785</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1786</sup> FAO/WFP, Special Report: FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 18 July 2017, [url](#), p. 25

<sup>1787</sup> EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 146-148

<sup>1788</sup> 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]

<sup>1789</sup> For further information on the October 2019 Turkish incursion, see EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#)



main roads<sup>1790</sup> in the SDF-controlled areas and in the frontlines<sup>1791</sup> 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.<sup>1792</sup> 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 USDOD<sup>1793</sup> and several other sources<sup>1794</sup> 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.<sup>1795</sup> 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.<sup>1796</sup> The continued presence of US military bases in (SDF-controlled parts of) Raqqqa governorate is also noted by media sources.<sup>1797</sup>

<sup>1790</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1791</sup> 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]

<sup>1792</sup> 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]

<sup>1793</sup> 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

<sup>1794</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1795</sup> 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

<sup>1796</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1797</sup> 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.<sup>1798</sup> 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.<sup>1799</sup> The GoS has reportedly controlled the Tabqa military air base since October 2019, although the city itself is in SDF control.<sup>1800</sup>

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.<sup>1801</sup>

### *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).<sup>1802</sup> 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.<sup>1803</sup> 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.<sup>1804</sup>

### *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

<sup>1798</sup> 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

<sup>1799</sup> 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

<sup>1800</sup> Kalo, R. & Kajjo, S., Rebuilding Efforts Continue in Syria's Former IS Stronghold, VOA, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1801</sup> EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 135–136

<sup>1802</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1803</sup> Kemal, L., Suriye'de YPG bölgesindeki Rus ve ABD üsleri sayıları [Map] [Twitter], 1 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1804</sup> 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.<sup>1805</sup> 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.<sup>1806</sup>

### *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.<sup>1807</sup> 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.<sup>1808</sup>

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).<sup>1809</sup> 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').<sup>1810</sup> 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.<sup>1811</sup>

### *ISIL*

ISIL has a presence in GoS-controlled southern Raqqa governorate.<sup>1812</sup> According to March 2021 analysis by ISW, ISIL controls small patch of territory 'east of Resafa, overlooking Tabqa air Base (in Thawra district).<sup>1813</sup>

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'.<sup>1814</sup> 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).<sup>1815</sup>

<sup>1805</sup> Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1806</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1807</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1808</sup> 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]

<sup>1809</sup> 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

<sup>1810</sup> Al-Tamimi, A. J., The Structure of the Syrian National Army, 21 November 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1811</sup> Syrians for Truth and Justice, Syria: Crops Looted, Lands Seized in "Peace Spring" Territories, 11 March 2021, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>1812</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1813</sup> Kahan, E., ISIS Poised for a Ramadan Surge in Syria, ISW, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1814</sup> Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1815</sup> 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' Raqqah<sup>1816</sup>, nominally under the control of the SDF. This presence of ISIL in SDF-controlled areas and the targeting<sup>1817</sup> 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.<sup>1818</sup>

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.<sup>1819</sup> 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.<sup>1820</sup>

According to the USDOD, ISIL attacks in Raqqah governorate decreased 70 % in the first three months of 2020 when compared to the previous quarter.<sup>1821</sup> 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.<sup>1822</sup> According to an assessment by Aaron Zelin from 29 May 2020, ISIL conducted 168 attacks in Raqqah governorate in the preceding 14 months.<sup>1823</sup> According to data collected by Gregory Waters, ISIL conducted 46 attacks in Raqqah governorate in 2020, with 1 attack taking place in

<sup>1816</sup> Cockburn, P., After IS, LRB Vol. 43 No. 3, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1817</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1818</sup> Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1819</sup> Waters, G., ISIL in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1820</sup> 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

<sup>1821</sup> 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

<sup>1822</sup> 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

<sup>1823</sup> 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.<sup>1824</sup>

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.<sup>1825</sup> 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.<sup>1826</sup>

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 2020<sup>1827</sup>, of which 4 took place in Raqqa governorate.<sup>1828</sup>

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.<sup>1829</sup> 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.<sup>1830</sup> On 30 May 2020, ISIL claimed responsibility for injuring a local SDF-affiliated *mukhtar* in Raqqa city.<sup>1831</sup> On 14 July, several bombs exploded in Raqqa city.<sup>1832</sup> 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.<sup>1833</sup>

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[...]'.<sup>1834</sup> 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.<sup>1835</sup> 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'.<sup>1836</sup> 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.<sup>1837</sup>

<sup>1824</sup> Waters G., *ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1825</sup> Waters, G., *ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1826</sup> COAR, *Qamishli Clashes: GoS and SDF Seek Pressure Points*, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1827</sup> Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>1828</sup> Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>1829</sup> 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]

<sup>1830</sup> Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary: 4-10 May 2020*, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1831</sup> Carter Center (The), *Weekly Conflict Summary: 25-30 May 2020*, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>1832</sup> 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

<sup>1833</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: July 7 - 21, 2020*, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1834</sup> Al-Kanj, S., *Islamic State regrouping in Syrian Kurdish region*, Al-Monitor, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1835</sup> Hammoud, H., *Islamic State continues to terrorize Raqqa*, Al-Monitor, 18 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1836</sup> Sly, L. & Martins, A., *The former 'caliphate capital' is haunted by fears of an ISIS comeback*, The Washington Post, 22 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1837</sup> 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.<sup>1838</sup> 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.<sup>1839</sup>

#### *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.<sup>1840</sup> 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 property<sup>1841</sup> and forced military conscription.<sup>1842</sup>

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.<sup>1843</sup> 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.<sup>1844</sup>

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.<sup>1845</sup>

#### *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-

<sup>1838</sup> van Wilgenburg, W., ISIS increases attacks in Raqqqa as Turkish-backed forces shell Ain al-Issa, Kurdistan 24, 12 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1839</sup> van Wilgenburg, W., Asayish confirms deaths of 4 members in ISIS attack near Raqqqa, Kurdistan 24, 11 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1840</sup> 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

<sup>1841</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1842</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1843</sup> OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 59

<sup>1844</sup> OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 61

<sup>1845</sup> 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.<sup>1846</sup> 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).<sup>1847</sup> 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.<sup>1848</sup>

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.<sup>1849</sup> 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.<sup>1850</sup>

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’.<sup>1851</sup> 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.<sup>1852</sup> 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’.<sup>1853</sup>

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.<sup>1854</sup>

<sup>1846</sup> 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]

<sup>1847</sup> 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]

<sup>1848</sup> 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]

<sup>1849</sup> 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

<sup>1850</sup> 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

<sup>1851</sup> 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]

<sup>1852</sup> REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, November 2020, 21 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>1853</sup> REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, December 2020, 28 January 2021, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>1854</sup> 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.<sup>1855</sup> 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.<sup>1856</sup> 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'.<sup>1857</sup>

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.<sup>1858</sup> The GoS forces were also strengthening their military presence in Ayn Issa area.<sup>1859</sup> 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.<sup>1860</sup> 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.<sup>1861</sup> 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'.<sup>1862</sup>

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.<sup>1863</sup> In early January 2021, Turkish attempts to infiltrate villages in Ayn Issa countryside resulted in clashes that were accompanied with shelling.<sup>1864</sup> 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.<sup>1865</sup> In February, REACH's informants reported on the 'threat from shelling' in Ayn Issa area.<sup>1866</sup> In late March 2021, intensive clashes between the Turkish-backed armed groups and the SDF broke out again in the vicinity of Ayn Issa.<sup>1867</sup> According to USDOD, tensions along the Syrian-Turkish border 'remained high' between January and March 2021 with Turkey

<sup>1855</sup> 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

<sup>1856</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 12 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1857</sup> 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]

<sup>1858</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-29, 2021, 29 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1859</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1860</sup> COAR, Turkey pressures Ein Issa as the SDF pivots toward politics, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1861</sup> Al-Khateb, K., Why is Syrian military deploying in Kurdish-held areas?, Al-Monitor, 10 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1862</sup> COAR, Al-Assad alienates minority supporters in a bid for the Sunni Arab majority, 14 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1863</sup> Kajjo, S., Fighting Continues Over Flashpoint Town in Northern Syria, VOA, 5 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1864</sup> Syrian Observer (The), SDF, Armed Opposition Factions Clash in Ayn Issa, 14 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1865</sup> 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]

<sup>1866</sup> REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, February 2020, 24 March 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>1867</sup> 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.<sup>1868</sup>

### *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.<sup>1869</sup> 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.<sup>1870</sup>

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.<sup>1871</sup> 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.<sup>1872</sup> 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.<sup>1873</sup> 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.<sup>1874</sup>

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.<sup>1875</sup>

<sup>1868</sup> 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

<sup>1869</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>1870</sup> Al-Hilu, K., The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: On Strategy, Discrepant Policies, European University Institute, 14 January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>1871</sup> 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]

<sup>1872</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 8-14 June 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>1873</sup> 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

<sup>1874</sup> OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 51

<sup>1875</sup> 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).<sup>1876</sup>

EVENT\_TYPE ● Battles ● Explosions/Remote violence ● Violence against civilians

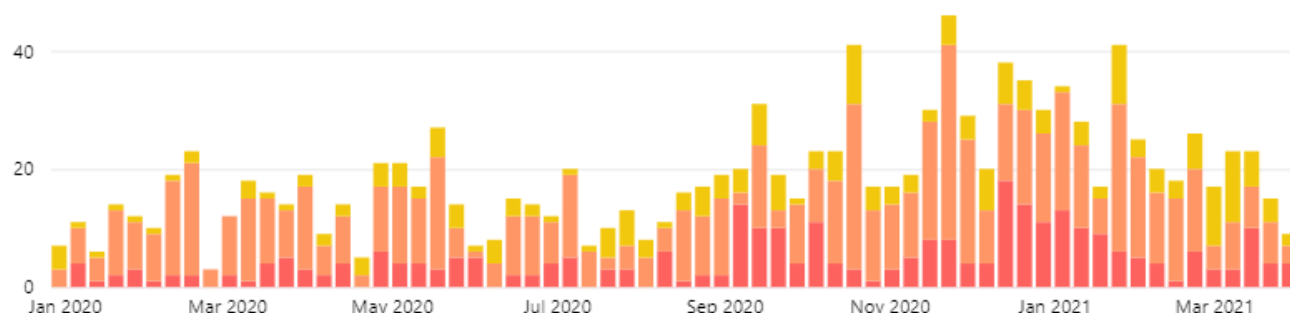


Figure 34: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Raqqa governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>1877</sup>

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).<sup>1878</sup>

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
<b>Total</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>703</b>	<b>232</b>

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.<sup>1879</sup>
- On 22 April 2020, a roadside IED exploded in Raqqa city, killing a child and injuring another.<sup>1880</sup>

<sup>1876</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>1877</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>1878</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>1879</sup> 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]

<sup>1880</sup> 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'.<sup>1881</sup>
- On 25 May 2020, a civilian was stabbed by an SDF-member in Raqqa city.<sup>1882</sup>
- 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.<sup>1883</sup>
- On 20 June, an UXO exploded and killed a child in Tall Abyad city.<sup>1884</sup>
- On 7 July 2020, a VBIED exploded in Tall Abyad city killing six civilians and wounding at least 14 others.<sup>1885</sup>
- On 18 July 2020, a landmine exploded in Hunaydah village, located in the rural parts of western Raqqa governorate, killing two children.<sup>1886</sup>
- On 6 August 2020, a hand grenade exploded in Tall Abyad city, injuring 20 civilians.<sup>1887</sup>
- On 16 October 2020, a ground-based strike targeting Ayn Issa town killed one civilian and wounded eight others.<sup>1888</sup>
- 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.<sup>1889</sup>
- On 31 December, Al-Qaeda-affiliate Hurras al-Din ('Guardians of Religion') attacked a Russian base in Tall al-Samen with a VBIED.<sup>1890</sup> According to Syria Direct, opposition sources claimed that several Russian soldiers were killed or injured in the attack.<sup>1891</sup> 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.<sup>1892</sup>

<sup>1881</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1882</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary: 25-30 May 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>1883</sup> 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]

<sup>1884</sup> 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]

<sup>1885</sup> 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]

<sup>1886</sup> 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]

<sup>1887</sup> 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]

<sup>1888</sup> 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]

<sup>1889</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1890</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1891</sup> Al Nofal, W., By targeting a Russian base in Raqqa, Hurras al-Din sends a multifaceted message, Syria Direct, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1892</sup> 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.<sup>1893</sup>
- On 26 January 2021, a roadside IED exploded and killed three civilians and wounded two others in Tall Abyad city.<sup>1894</sup>
- 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.<sup>1895</sup>

#### *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		
<b>Total</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>16</b>

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

<sup>1893</sup> 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]

<sup>1894</sup> 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]

<sup>1895</sup> 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 108<sup>1896</sup> (SNHR data)<sup>1897</sup> and 140 civilian fatalities (VDC data).<sup>1898</sup> 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 \(May 2020\)](#).<sup>1899</sup>

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.<sup>1900</sup>

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.<sup>1901</sup> 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).<sup>1902</sup>

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.

<sup>1896</sup> 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

<sup>1897</sup> 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

<sup>1898</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020–2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>1899</sup> EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 158–159

<sup>1900</sup> UNESCWA/ University of St Andrews, Syria at War; Eight Years On, 2020 [published on 23 September 2020], [url](#), p. 50–51.

<sup>1901</sup> Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 378

<sup>1902</sup> 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.<sup>1903</sup> In January 2021, no new IDPs from Raqqa were registered while 25 people from other governorates were displaced to Raqqa.<sup>1904</sup> 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.<sup>1905</sup> In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 9 IDP movements which took place within the governorate.<sup>1906</sup>

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.<sup>1907</sup> 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.<sup>1908</sup> 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.<sup>1909</sup> In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 366 IDP return movements to the governorate.<sup>1910</sup>

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<sup>1903</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020 (As of 31 December 2020), 8 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1904</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (January 2021), 4 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1905</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1906</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

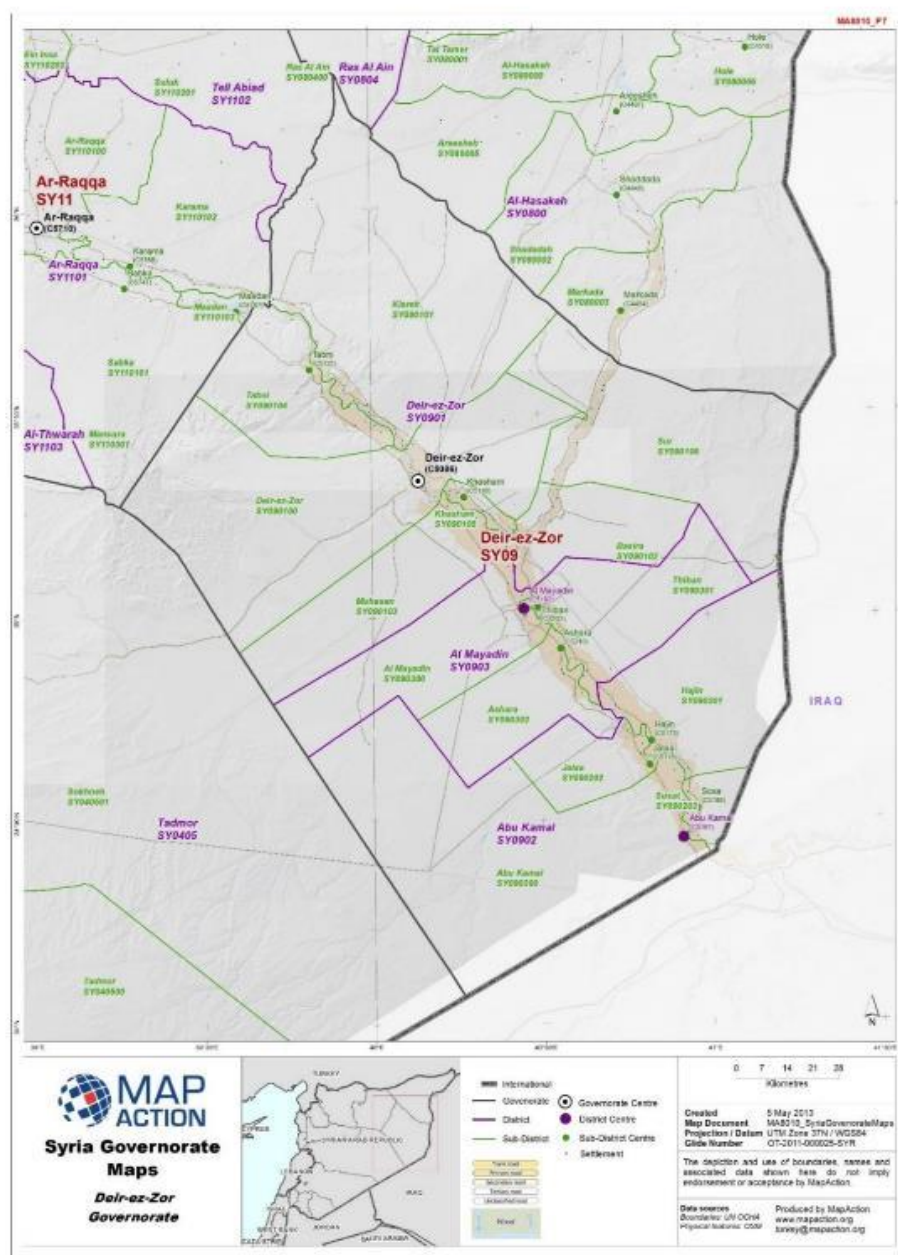
<sup>1907</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 8 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1908</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (January 2021), 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1909</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1910</sup> 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 map<sup>1911</sup>

### 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.

<sup>1911</sup> MapAction, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](http://www.mapaction.org)



(see Map 15).<sup>1912</sup> 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.<sup>1913</sup>

The Central Statistics Bureau of Syria estimated that the population of Deir Ez-Zor governorate was 1 206 000 in 2019.<sup>1914</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Deir Ez-Zor governorate to be of 765 352 inhabitants.<sup>1915</sup>

According to Ziad Awad, Deir Ez-Zor governorate has ‘overwhelmingly’ Sunni Arab population<sup>1916</sup> and the local society has been ‘characterised by ethnic, religious and sectarian homogeneity’.<sup>1917</sup> 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’.<sup>1918</sup> In the ACU report of December 2017, the proportion of Shi’as was estimated as 2 %(almost 25 000 individuals)<sup>1919</sup> of Deir Ez-Zor’s total population.<sup>1920</sup>

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.<sup>1921</sup>

## 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.<sup>1922</sup> 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.<sup>1923</sup> The SDF and the US-led coalition captured the last ISIL-held territorial enclave on the eastern side of the river in March 2019.<sup>1924</sup>

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-

<sup>1912</sup> MapAction, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#); UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, January 2017, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>1913</sup> 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

<sup>1914</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>1915</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>1916</sup> Awad, Z., Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities, European University Institute, 21 October 2019, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>1917</sup> 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]

<sup>1918</sup> Awad, Z., Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities, European University Institute, 21 October 2019, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>1919</sup> An approximation calculated by the drafter.

<sup>1920</sup> 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

<sup>1921</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1922</sup> 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]

<sup>1923</sup> For details, see EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 162–163

<sup>1924</sup> 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 oilfields<sup>1925</sup> 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 Balanche, Al-Omar oil field alone was responsible for 50 % of Syria's [pre-war] oil production.<sup>1926</sup> However, in the article published in September 2020, Kenneth R. Rosen describes Al-Omar oil field as 'mostly abandoned'.<sup>1927</sup>

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 17<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1928</sup>

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 4<sup>th</sup> Division and the 5<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1929</sup> The fact that the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps is controlled<sup>1930</sup> or at least backed<sup>1931</sup> by Russia while the 4<sup>th</sup> Division of the SAA is affiliated with Iran<sup>1932</sup> complicates this dynamic.

In July 2019 Gregory Waters stated that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 5<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> Division. In addition, other 5<sup>th</sup> Corps Brigades have also participated in the anti-ISIL operations conducted in the governorate.<sup>1933</sup> However, Alrifai and Alleile claim that the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps formations in Deir Ez-Zor governorate were transferred in their entirety to Raqqa governorate in July 2020.<sup>1934</sup>

<sup>1925</sup> 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].

<sup>1926</sup> Balanche, F., The Race for Deir al-Zour Province, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 17 August 2017, [url](#)

<sup>1927</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1928</sup> 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

<sup>1929</sup> Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1930</sup> Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#);

<sup>1931</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1932</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1933</sup> Waters, G., The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, Middle East Institute, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>1934</sup> 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.<sup>1935</sup> 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'.<sup>1936</sup>

See [EASO COI Report: Syria - Security situation \(May 2020\)](#) for information on other SAA formations deployed in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.<sup>1937</sup>

#### *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).<sup>1938</sup> 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.<sup>1939</sup> 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).<sup>1940</sup> 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.<sup>1941</sup>

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.<sup>1942</sup>

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.<sup>1943</sup> According to Alrifai and Alleile, the IRGC and the Iranian-backed

<sup>1935</sup> 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

<sup>1936</sup> Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1937</sup> EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 163–164

<sup>1938</sup> 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

<sup>1939</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1940</sup> Özdemir, Ö. B., Three Fronts of Iranian-Backed Militia in Deir ez-Zor, ORSAM, 22 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1941</sup> Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1942</sup> Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1943</sup> 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.<sup>1944</sup> 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.<sup>1945</sup>

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’.<sup>1946</sup> 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.<sup>1947</sup> 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.<sup>1948</sup>

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.<sup>1949</sup> Jusoor Center for Studies map of January 2021 charts Hezbollah 7 military sites in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.<sup>1950</sup> 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
- Syrian<sup>1951</sup> ‘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)<sup>1952 1953</sup>

### *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

<sup>1944</sup> Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1945</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2 -15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1946</sup> 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

<sup>1947</sup> 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

<sup>1948</sup> Al-Khateb, K., Iranian forces form new groups to boost influence in east Syria, Al Monitor, 23 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1949</sup> Saban, N., Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1950</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1951</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1952</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1953</sup> Özdemir, Ö. B., Three Fronts of Iranian-Backed Militia in Deir ez-Zor, ORSAM, 22 February 2021, [url](#)

and around Deir Ez-Zor city.<sup>1954</sup> 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.<sup>1955</sup>

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'.<sup>1956</sup> 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.<sup>1957</sup>

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.<sup>1958</sup>

### *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.<sup>1959</sup> 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.<sup>1960</sup>

### *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.<sup>1961</sup> 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.<sup>1962</sup> 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.<sup>1963</sup> According to a map by researcher Levent Kemal, the US has 8 military sites

<sup>1954</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria [Map], 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1955</sup> Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1956</sup> Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1957</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1958</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1959</sup> Balanche F., The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1960</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1961</sup> Balanche, F., The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 July 2020, [url](#) [map]

<sup>1962</sup> 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

<sup>1963</sup> 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 Raqqa governorate.<sup>1964</sup>

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.<sup>1965</sup>

### ISIL

ISIL has more permanent presence and activity in GoS-controlled western parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate.<sup>1966</sup> 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 Raqqa governorates), forming 15 to 20 groups with 'approximately 70 % of all fighters located in the urban belt along the western side of the Euphrates'.<sup>1967</sup> 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.<sup>1968</sup>

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.<sup>1969</sup> 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.<sup>1970</sup>

## 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 Raqqa 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'.<sup>1971</sup> 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

<sup>1964</sup> Kemal, L., Suriye'de YPG bölgesindeki Rus ve ABD üsleri sayıları [Map] [Twitter], 1 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1965</sup> COAR, Fire on the coast: Damascus vows support — but not much, 19 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1966</sup> 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]

<sup>1967</sup> Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1968</sup> International Crisis Group, The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria, 25 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>1969</sup> 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

<sup>1970</sup> 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

<sup>1971</sup> 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’.<sup>1972</sup>

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.<sup>1973</sup> 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.<sup>1974</sup> 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.<sup>1975</sup> 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.<sup>1976</sup> 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.<sup>1977</sup>

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.<sup>1978</sup> The SAA formation (the 17<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1979</sup> 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.<sup>1980</sup> 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.<sup>1981</sup> According to Waters, ISIL receives assistance from NDF commanders with facilitating the smuggling of weapons and

<sup>1972</sup> OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>1973</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1974</sup> OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 20

<sup>1975</sup> 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

<sup>1976</sup> Waters G., ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#) [Table: ‘ISIS Accaks by Province’]

<sup>1977</sup> 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

<sup>1978</sup> 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

<sup>1979</sup> 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

<sup>1980</sup> 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

<sup>1981</sup> 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.<sup>1982</sup>

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.<sup>1983</sup> 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.<sup>1984</sup> 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.<sup>1985</sup>

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).<sup>1986</sup> 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.<sup>1987</sup> 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.<sup>1988</sup>

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 governorate<sup>1989</sup>, with the attacks focusing on Deir Ez-Zor city and adjacent areas<sup>1990</sup>, although the attacks in the governorate decreased 37 % when compared to the previous quarter.<sup>1991</sup> 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.<sup>1992</sup> In February, ISIL carried out 61 attacks SDF-controlled North-East.<sup>1993</sup> 26 people were killed in these attacks.<sup>1994</sup> In March 2020, ISIL carried out 48 attacks SDF-controlled

<sup>1982</sup> Waters, G., *ISIL in Syria: 2020 in Review*, Newlines Institute, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>1983</sup> 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](#)

<sup>1984</sup> 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

<sup>1985</sup> 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

<sup>1986</sup> 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]

<sup>1987</sup> 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]

<sup>1988</sup> RIC, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>1989</sup> 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

<sup>1990</sup> 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

<sup>1991</sup> 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

<sup>1992</sup> Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>1993</sup> Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>1994</sup> Rojava Information Center, *Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria*, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

North-East Syria.<sup>1995</sup> 24 people were killed in these attacks<sup>1996</sup>, of which 73 % (35 attacks) were carried out in Deir Ez-Zor governorate.<sup>1997</sup>

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 IEDs<sup>1998</sup>, while USDOD estimated that ISIL 'continues to receive some support from Sunni communities' of the Middle Euphrates river valley.<sup>1999</sup> According to RIC, ISIL carried out 47 attacks<sup>2000</sup> in the SDF-controlled North-East Syria in April 2020.<sup>2001</sup> 29 people were killed in these attacks.<sup>2002</sup> In May 2020, ISIL carried out 84 attacks in SDF-controlled North-East Syria<sup>2003</sup>, killing 36 people.<sup>2004</sup> In June 2020, ISIL carried out 45 attacks<sup>2005</sup>, resulting in 22 fatalities.<sup>2006</sup> 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).<sup>2007 2008</sup>

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.<sup>2009</sup> 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.<sup>2010</sup> According to RIC, ISIL carried out 34 attacks SDF-controlled North-East Syria in July 2020.<sup>2011</sup> 18 people were killed in these attacks.<sup>2012</sup> In August 2020, ISIL carried out 64 attacks SDF-controlled North-East Syria.<sup>2013</sup> 32 people were killed in these attacks.<sup>2014</sup> 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.<sup>2015</sup> In September 2020, ISIL carried out 51 attacks SDF-controlled North-East Syria<sup>2016</sup>, killing 15 people.<sup>2017</sup>

<sup>1995</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>1996</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>1997</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>1998</sup> 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

<sup>1999</sup> 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

<sup>2000</sup> 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

<sup>2001</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>2002</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2003</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>2004</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2005</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>2006</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2007</sup> 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

<sup>2008</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>2009</sup> 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

<sup>2010</sup> 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

<sup>2011</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>2012</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2013</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>2014</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2015</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>2016</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>2017</sup> 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.<sup>2018</sup> All ISIL attacks were 'small-scale attacks and assassinations' and targeted both civilians and members of both the SDF and GoS forces.<sup>2019</sup> According to USDOD, ISIL claimed 27 attacks targeting the SDF in this period.<sup>2020</sup> 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.<sup>2021</sup> According to RIC, ISIL carried out 45 attacks SDF-controlled North-East Syria in October 2020.<sup>2022</sup> 10 people were killed in these attacks.<sup>2023</sup> According to RIC, 31 attacks took place in Deir Ez-Zor, 7 in Hasaka, 4 in Raqqqa and 3 in Manbij.<sup>2024</sup> In November 2020, ISIL carried out 16 attacks SDF-controlled North-East Syria in November 2020<sup>2025</sup>, killing 15 people.<sup>2026</sup> In December 2020, 34 attacks were carried out<sup>2027</sup>, resulting in 34 fatalities.<sup>2028</sup> 29 of these attacks were reported in the 'Arab regions'.<sup>2029 2030</sup>

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.<sup>2031</sup> 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.<sup>2032</sup> 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.<sup>2033</sup>

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.<sup>2034</sup> 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.<sup>2035</sup> 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-

<sup>2018</sup> 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

<sup>2019</sup> 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

<sup>2020</sup> 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

<sup>2021</sup> 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

<sup>2022</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>2023</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2024</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>2025</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>2026</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2027</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 7

<sup>2028</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2029</sup> Cf. 'Arab dominant regions' above.

<sup>2030</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>2031</sup> COAR, Qamishli Clashes: GoS and SDF Seek Pressure Points, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2032</sup> Kajjo, S., US-Backed SDF Targets IS Militants in Eastern Syria, VOA, 27 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2033</sup> REACH, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, November 2020, 21 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>2034</sup> 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]

<sup>2035</sup> 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 Hasaka<sup>2036</sup>, with civilians also targeted by these attacks.<sup>2037</sup> 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.<sup>2038</sup>

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.a., 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’.<sup>2039</sup> 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.<sup>2040</sup> 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.<sup>2041</sup>

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.<sup>2042</sup> 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.<sup>2043</sup>

#### *Tribal protests in the SDF-controlled eastern Deir Ez-Zor*

As already discussed above with regard to Hasaka and Raqqqa 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

<sup>2036</sup> 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

<sup>2037</sup> 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

<sup>2038</sup> 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

<sup>2039</sup> Al-Kanj, S., Islamic State regroups in Syrian Kurdish region, Al-Monitor, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2040</sup> Cockburn, P., After IS, LRB Vol. 43 No. 3, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2041</sup> Al-Kanj, S., Islamic State regroups in Syrian Kurdish region, Al-Monitor, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2042</sup> Cockburn, P., After IS, LRB Vol. 43 No. 3, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2043</sup> Thomson, M., IS brutality returning to Syrian towns, BBC, 7 February 2021, [url](#)

administrative institutions in the governorate.<sup>2044</sup> 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.<sup>2045</sup>

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.<sup>2046</sup>

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.<sup>2047</sup>

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.<sup>2048</sup> 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.<sup>2049</sup> ISW reports that the SDF responded to the protests violently, opening fire at protestors and injuring 7.<sup>2050</sup> According to Al-Monitor, the SDF opened fire towards protestors in Al-Hawayiji,<sup>2051</sup> where, according to COAR Global, ‘five civilians and four SDF members were injured in a shootout.’<sup>2052</sup> Different sources claim different parties responsible for the assassinations: According to Koontz and Waters ISIL claimed

<sup>2044</sup> 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

<sup>2045</sup> 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

<sup>2046</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2047</sup> COAR, Damascus scrambles to contain economic rage as protests spread, 15 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2048</sup> 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

<sup>2049</sup> 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

<sup>2050</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: July 22 - August 4, 2020, 6 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2051</sup> Al-Kanj, S., Who is behind wave of killings of tribal sheikhs in east Syria?, 8 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2052</sup> 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.<sup>2053</sup> According to RIC, 'a Iranian-linked group' was responsible for al-Hafi's assassination.<sup>2054</sup> The tribal and/or local sources interviewed for the Al-Monitor assert the blame to the SDF.<sup>2055</sup> 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.<sup>2056</sup>

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.<sup>2057</sup> The SDF held its own gathering, hosted by the Bakir tribe, in eastern Deir Ez-Zor governorate to reach out to the tribes.<sup>2058</sup> 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).<sup>2059</sup> 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.<sup>2060</sup>

ISW reports that on 8 September 2020 members of Aqidat tribe violently captured members of the SDF and expelled them from Jdid Aqidat.<sup>2061</sup> 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'.<sup>2062</sup>

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.<sup>2063</sup> 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).<sup>2064</sup> 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.<sup>2065</sup> 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

<sup>2053</sup> 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

<sup>2054</sup> Rojava Information Center, Annual Sleeper Cell Report for North and East Syria, January 2021, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>2055</sup> Al-Kanj, S., Who is behind wave of killings of tribal sheikhs in east Syria?, 8 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2056</sup> COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2057</sup> COAR, Cry Havoc: Assassinations Spark Anti-SDF Backlash, 17 August 2020, [url](#); ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2058</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2059</sup> 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

<sup>2060</sup> 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

<sup>2061</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2 -15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2062</sup> COAR, Lavrov touts Russia's primacy in Damascus visit, 14 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2063</sup> SOHR, Deir Ezzor demonstrations: Tens of residents protest corruption of SDF officials, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2064</sup> COAR, Emboldened Self-Administration bids for greater power, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2065</sup> 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.<sup>2066</sup>

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.<sup>2067</sup> 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.<sup>2068</sup> 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.<sup>2069</sup> 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.<sup>2070</sup>

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.<sup>2071</sup> 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.<sup>2072</sup>

#### *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 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2073</sup> 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.<sup>2074</sup>

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

<sup>2066</sup> SADC, SADC seriously concerned with the actions of SDF authorities in Deir Ezzor, 2 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2067</sup> 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

<sup>2068</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2069</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 19 - September 1, 2020, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2070</sup> 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

<sup>2071</sup> 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

<sup>2072</sup> 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

<sup>2073</sup> Al Modon, الميليشيات الإيرانية تطرد الفرقة الرابعة من الميادين [Iranian militias expel the Fourth Division from Al-Mayadeen], 11 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2074</sup> 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.<sup>2075</sup> 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.<sup>2076</sup>

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.<sup>2077</sup> 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.<sup>2078</sup> 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'.<sup>2079</sup>

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.<sup>2080</sup> On 25 February 2021, the US carried out an airstrike targeting facilities of a border control point operated by Iran-backed Iraqi militias.<sup>2081</sup> The airstrike was carried out near the city of Al-Bukamal<sup>2082</sup> where it reportedly targeted Imam Ali air base.<sup>2083</sup> SOHR claimed that the strikes killed at least 17 militia members.<sup>2084</sup> However, according to ISW, only one militia member was killed and another two wounded in the strike.<sup>2085</sup> 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.<sup>2086</sup>

<sup>2075</sup> OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An Evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#), p. 59

<sup>2076</sup> 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

<sup>2077</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2078</sup> Ahmed, A., Pro-Iran militias in Syria soak merchants for cash at checkpoints, Al Monitor, 21 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2079</sup> Alrifai, O. A. & Alleile A., Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2080</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2081</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2082</sup> Rudaw/AFP, US strikes 'Iranian-backed militant' site in Syria: Pentagon, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2083</sup> Al Jazeera, US attacks 'Iranian-backed military infrastructure' in Syria, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2084</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2085</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 - March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2086</sup> 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.<sup>2087</sup>

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).<sup>2088</sup>

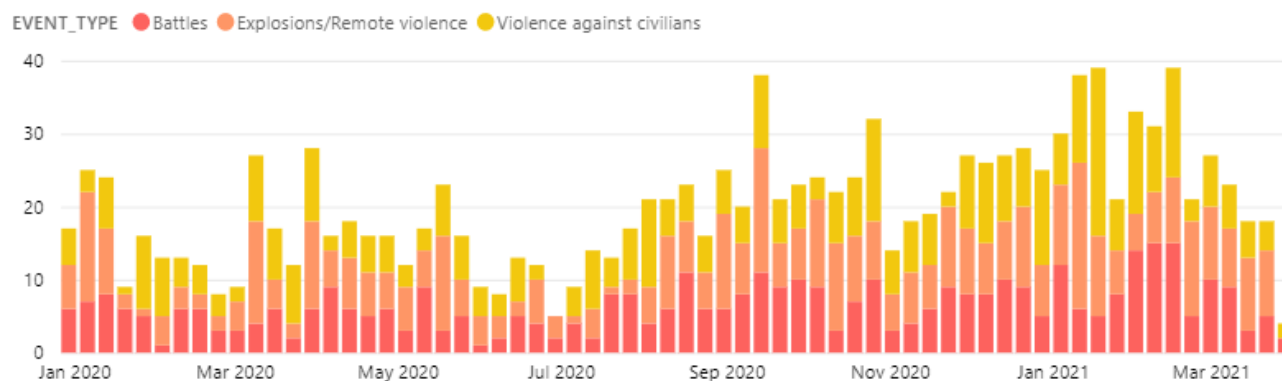


Figure 37: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Deir Ez-Zor governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>2089</sup>

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
<b>Total</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>466</b>	<b>434</b>

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).<sup>2090</sup>

### Illustrative security incidents

- On 11 March 2020, a roadside IED exploded in the town of Sha'fah, killing one civilian and injuring four others.<sup>2091</sup>
- On 17 March 2020, a civilian was abducted and killed in Hawayji by unknown perpetrators.<sup>2092</sup>

<sup>2087</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>2088</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>2089</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>2090</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>2091</sup> 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]

<sup>2092</sup> 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.<sup>2093</sup>
- On 23 April 2020, a drive-by shooting in Shahil city claimed the life of one civilian.<sup>2094</sup>
- On 1 May 2020, a roadside IED exploded near the city of Busayrah, killing two children and injuring three other civilians.<sup>2095</sup>
- 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.<sup>2096</sup>
- 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.<sup>2097</sup> 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.<sup>2098</sup>
- On 25 May 2020, a mine exploded in an agricultural area near the village of Mar'iyah, killing a child and injuring another civilian.<sup>2099</sup>
- 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.<sup>2100</sup>
- 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.<sup>2101</sup>
- 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.<sup>2102</sup>
- On 15 June 2020, 'unknown armed men' attacked the Autonomous Administration municipality building in Tayyani town and killed the town mayor.<sup>2103</sup> According to the UN Security Council gunmen assaulted the headquarters of the Tayyani Local Council in the town

<sup>2093</sup> 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]

<sup>2094</sup> 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]

<sup>2095</sup> 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]

<sup>2096</sup> 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]

<sup>2097</sup> SY-24, قتل وجرحى باقتتال بين عشيرتين في دير الزور, 24 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2098</sup> COAR, M4 opens as Russia flexes muscles in NES, 1 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2099</sup> 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]

<sup>2100</sup> 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]

<sup>2101</sup> COAR, Self Administration bids to corner grain market as SYP collapses, 8 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2102</sup> 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]

<sup>2103</sup> 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.<sup>2104</sup>

- On 25 June 2020, an UXO exploded in Al-Mayadin city in the eastern parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate, killing a child.<sup>2105</sup>
- On 18 August 2020, an ISIL attack conducted by ISIL targeted a Russian convoy.<sup>2106</sup> 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.<sup>2107</sup> According to ISW, the attack took place on 17 August and the commander of the NDF in Mayadin district was killed in the attack.<sup>2108</sup>
- 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.<sup>2109</sup>
- 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.<sup>2110</sup>
- 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.<sup>2111</sup>
- 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.<sup>2112</sup>
- 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.<sup>2113</sup>
- 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.<sup>2114</sup>
- On 17 October 2020, an UXO exploded in the town of Baghouz, killing two children and injuring three others.<sup>2115</sup>

<sup>2104</sup> 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]

<sup>2105</sup> 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]

<sup>2106</sup> 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

<sup>2107</sup> Waters, G., Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2108</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020, 20 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2109</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 19 - September 1, 2020, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2110</sup> 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]

<sup>2111</sup> 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]

<sup>2112</sup> 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]

<sup>2113</sup> 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]

<sup>2114</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, Syria Weekly Conflict Summary for 28 September – 4 October 2020, 8 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2115</sup> 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.<sup>2116</sup>
- On 29 October 2020, an SDF-affiliated civilian administrator was slain by ISIL in al-Sabha.<sup>2117</sup>
- 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.<sup>2118</sup>
- On 18 November 2020, ISIL ambushed a SAA formation in Deir Ez-Zor governorate killing 10 SAA members, including a brigadier general.<sup>2119</sup>
- 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).<sup>2120</sup>
- On 12 December 2020, a landmine exploded and killed two civilians in Susah city, located in the rural parts of eastern Deir Ez-Zor.<sup>2121</sup>
- 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 4<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2122</sup>
- On 30 December 2020, ISIL attacked a GoS convoy in western parts of Deir Ez-Zor governorate and killed up to 39 people.<sup>2123</sup> 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.<sup>2124</sup>
- On 6 January 2021, an UXO exploded and killed two children in Duwayr city, located in the rural parts of eastern Deir Ez-Zor.<sup>2125</sup>
- 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.<sup>2126</sup>
- 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

<sup>2116</sup> 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]

<sup>2117</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: October 28 - November 10, 2020, 13 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2118</sup> 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]

<sup>2119</sup> 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

<sup>2120</sup> 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

<sup>2121</sup> 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]

<sup>2122</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2123</sup> 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

<sup>2124</sup> COAR, Sanctions on Syria's Central Bank Set Course for a Grim 2021, 4 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2125</sup> 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]

<sup>2126</sup> 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.<sup>2127</sup>

- On 9 March 2021, a drive-by shooting claimed the life of a 'prominent tribal figure' in Hawayij Diyab village.<sup>2128</sup>

### 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		
<b>Total</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>59</b>

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 305<sup>2129</sup> (SNHR data)<sup>2130</sup> and 207 civilian fatalities (VDC data).<sup>2131</sup> Most civilian fatalities were documented in January, November and December 2020. In the

<sup>2127</sup> 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]

<sup>2128</sup> 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]

<sup>2129</sup> 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

<sup>2130</sup> 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

<sup>2131</sup> 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 \(May 2020\)](#).<sup>2132</sup>

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’.<sup>2133</sup>

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.<sup>2134</sup> 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).<sup>2135</sup>

#### *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.<sup>2136</sup> 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.<sup>2137</sup> 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.<sup>2138</sup> In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 115 IDP movements from or within the governorate.<sup>2139</sup>

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.<sup>2140</sup> 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.<sup>2141</sup> In February 2021, 924 IDPs returned to their homes in Deir Ez-Zor governorate. Of these 78 were originally

<sup>2132</sup> EASO, Syria - Security Situation. May 2020, [url](#), pp. 174–175

<sup>2133</sup> ESCWA and University of St Andrews, Syria at War; Eight Years On, 2020 [published on 23 September 2020], [url](#), p. 50–51.

<sup>2134</sup> Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 378

<sup>2135</sup> Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 379

<sup>2136</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020 (As of 31 December 2020), 8 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2137</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (January 2021), 4 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2138</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2139</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2140</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 8 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2141</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (January 2021), 2 March 2021, [url](#)

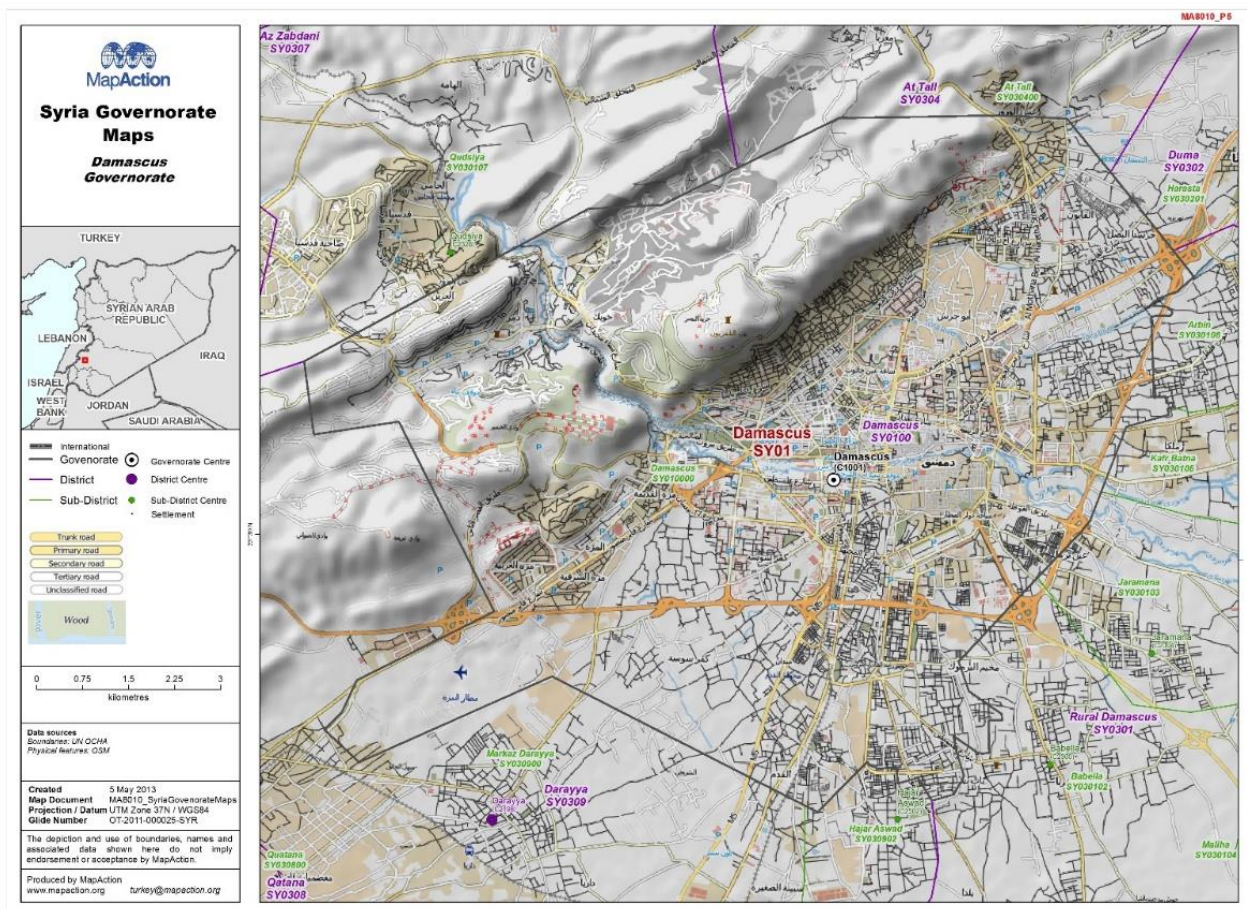
displaced within the governorate. No returns to other governorates were registered.<sup>2142</sup> In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 1 100 IDP return movements to or within the governorate.<sup>2143</sup>

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<sup>2142</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns (February 2021), 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2143</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

## 2.10 Damascus governorate



Map 16: © MapAction, Damascus governorate<sup>2144</sup>

### 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-Mazzeah, Rukn Al-Din, Al-Salihiyah, Al-Mouhajrin, Saroujah, Al-Qanawat, Old Damascus, and Yarmouk camp.<sup>2145</sup>

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.<sup>2146</sup> In January 2019

<sup>2144</sup> UNOCHA, Syria sub-districts maps [maps], n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2145</sup> 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

<sup>2146</sup> 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.<sup>2147</sup> 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.<sup>2148</sup>

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the city’s population at 2 079 000 as of 2019.<sup>2149</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Damascus governorate to be of 1 827 501 inhabitants.<sup>2150</sup> As of March 2021, the CIA estimated Damascus’ population at 2 440 000 inhabitants.<sup>2151</sup>

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.<sup>2152</sup> Sunni communities in former opposition-held areas in Damascus have been subject to mass displacement to other parts of the country.<sup>2153</sup> Conversely, Shias from other parts of the country have become displaced to Damascus.<sup>2154</sup>

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.<sup>2155</sup> Damascus International Airport is located 30 km south-east of downtown Damascus.<sup>2156</sup> 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

<sup>2147</sup> UNRWA, Yarmouk (unofficial camp), last updated 1 January 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Profile: Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, 7 April 2015, [url](#)

<sup>2148</sup> 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

<sup>2149</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2150</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>2151</sup> CIA, World Factbook, Syria, last updated: 30 March 2021 [url](#)

<sup>2152</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2153</sup> Ghosh-Siminoff, S., Demographic Engineering in Syria Sets the Stage for Future Conflicts, 13 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2154</sup> Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah’s Experience in Syria, [Source: journalist Raed al-Salhani], 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2155</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Damascus, last updated 12 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2156</sup> 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.<sup>2157</sup>

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.<sup>2158</sup> In May 2018, ISIL surrendered in Yarmouk and Tadamoun.<sup>2159</sup> 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.<sup>2160</sup>

As of March 2021, Damascus governorate was under the control of the GoS (see also [Map 4](#)).<sup>2161</sup>

#### *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 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps and 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps.<sup>2162</sup>

According to analyst Mazen Ezzi, writing in March 2020, Lebanese Hezbollah maintains a headquarters and a light weapons depot near the Ruqayya mosque<sup>2163</sup>, a Shia shrine in the al-Amarah quarter of the Old City of Damascus.<sup>2164</sup> 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.<sup>2165</sup> Furthermore, these two groups are described by analyst Alexey Khlebnikov as of Iraqi origin, being largely sponsored by Iran.<sup>2166</sup>

<sup>2157</sup> Norway, Landinfo, Syria, Konflikten i Damaskus – En tidslinje [Syria, the conflict in Damascus – a timeline], 8 September 2020; [url](#), pp. 9, 15

<sup>2158</sup> Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 10

<sup>2159</sup> Waters, G., 'A force the haven't seen before': Insurgent ISIS in Central Syria, MEI, 15 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2160</sup> 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.

<sup>2161</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2162</sup> Waters, G., Current Syrian Army Deployments, International Review, 13 December 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2163</sup> Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, 2020, 13 March 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-7

<sup>2164</sup> 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

<sup>2165</sup> Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, [Source: journalist Raed al-Salhani ] 13 March 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-7

<sup>2166</sup> 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.<sup>2167</sup>

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.<sup>2168</sup>

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.<sup>2169</sup> Jussor for Studies mapped four Russian military bases in Damascus.<sup>2170</sup>

### *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.<sup>2171</sup> 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.<sup>2172</sup> 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.<sup>2173</sup> 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.<sup>2174</sup> 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.<sup>2175</sup> 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.<sup>2176</sup>

## 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

<sup>2167</sup> Jussor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2168</sup> 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.

<sup>2169</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>2170</sup> Jussor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2171</sup> 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

<sup>2172</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>2173</sup> 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

<sup>2174</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>2175</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: international security organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>2176</sup> 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'.<sup>2177</sup>

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.<sup>2178</sup>

In the month of February 2020, the number of IED incidents increased dramatically.<sup>2179</sup> During this month, six explosions occurred in Damascus City and another two in Rural Damascus<sup>2180</sup>, a comparatively high number considering the total of 17 for all of the previous year.<sup>2181</sup> In October 2020, the DIS reported that few security incidents had been heard of taking place in Yarmouk camp.<sup>2182</sup>

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.<sup>2183</sup> During the reference period of this report, Israeli airstrikes on Damascus have been reported.<sup>2184</sup> 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.<sup>2185</sup> 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.<sup>2186</sup>

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.<sup>2187</sup> 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

<sup>2177</sup> 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

<sup>2178</sup> 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

<sup>2179</sup> 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

<sup>2180</sup> SOHR, Damascus deteriorating security: six explosions rock Damascus in 15 days, 26 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2181</sup> 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

<sup>2182</sup> 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

<sup>2183</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>2184</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2185</sup> Enab Baladi, Wounded in Israel's eighth bombing in 2021 on the outskirts of Damascus, 8 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2186</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2187</sup> 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.<sup>2188</sup> By December, the SOHR had recorded 39 kidnappings in Damascus and Rural Damascus in 2020.<sup>2189</sup> Other sources have mentioned instances of kidnappings in Damascus.<sup>2190</sup>

- 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-Suwaidaa city in order to hospitalize a patient.<sup>2191</sup>

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.<sup>2192</sup>

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.<sup>2193</sup>

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.<sup>2194</sup>

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.<sup>2195</sup>

<sup>2188</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2189</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2190</sup> Al Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; SACD, Denmark is setting a dangerous precedent which must be reversed, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2191</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2192</sup> 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

<sup>2193</sup> 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

<sup>2194</sup> SOHR, After killing and arresting six persons by security services | Regime checkpoints put on high alert in Damascus and countryside, 15 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2195</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

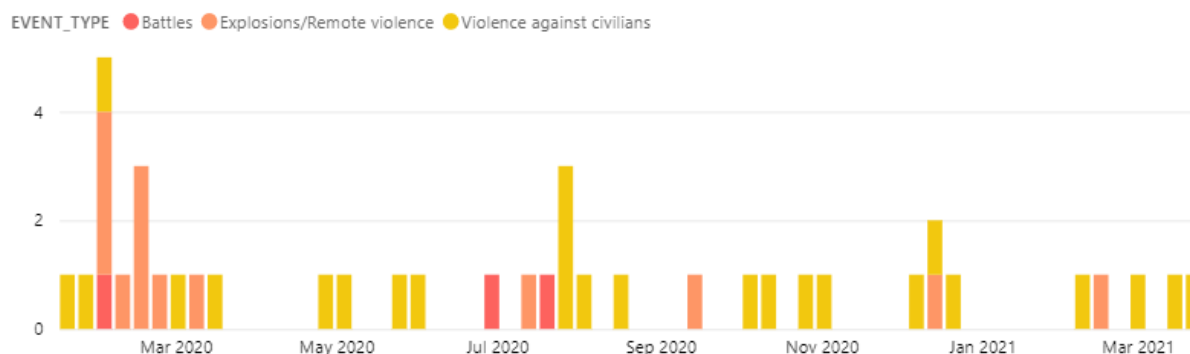


Figure 40: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Damascus governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>2196</sup>

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.<sup>2197</sup>
- 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.<sup>2198</sup> The attack lasted for 15 minutes, according to the Voice of America.<sup>2199</sup> 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.<sup>2200</sup>
- Xinhua reported about another blast on 20 February 2020, having taken place in the Marjeh area in the centre of Damascus.<sup>2201</sup>
- 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.<sup>2202</sup>
- On 14 March 2020, Enab Baladi reported of the ninth explosion taking place in Damascus up to that point in 2020.<sup>2203</sup>

<sup>2196</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>2197</sup> Global Times (The), 1 injured in Damascus explosion, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2198</sup> Al Jazeera, Six killed in Israeli air raid on Damascus: Monitor, 24 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2199</sup> VOA, Syrian Capital Rocked by Explosions as Israel Hits Targets, 23 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2200</sup> Xinhua, 5 civilians wounded by blast in Damascus, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2201</sup> Xinhua, Explosive device rips through pickup in Syrian capital, 20 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2202</sup> Garda World, Car bombing reported in Damascus February 25, 25 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2203</sup> 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.<sup>2204</sup>
- The SOHR reported a car bomb having been set off in Damascus in September 2020.<sup>2205</sup>
- 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.<sup>2206</sup>
- In February 2021, Israeli rockets were fired against Damascus, reportedly targeting Iranian sites, the Times of Israel reported.<sup>2207</sup> 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.<sup>2208</sup> 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-Khteeb' detention facility in Damascus, 3-8 deaths per day was pointed to as common in this particular facility.<sup>2209</sup> A map published by the UN in 2021 documented the occurrence of torture and deaths in government prisons in Damascus.<sup>2210</sup> 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.<sup>2211</sup>

#### *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		
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1</b>

<sup>2204</sup> CGTV, Developing story: One killed in Damascus blast on eve of polls, 19 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2205</sup> SOHR, A car bomb exploded in the capital, Damascus, 19 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2206</sup> SOHR, Damascus | IED explodes and security forces dismantle another one near bus terminal of al-Sumariya area, 15 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2207</sup> Times of Israel (The), Israel said to hit Iranian targets in Syria after Tehran blamed for ship blast, 28 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2208</sup> France24, Syria shoots down Israeli missiles over Damascus, state media says, 16 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2209</sup> Syria Direct, Torture and death: Life in al-Khteeb detention center, 29 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2210</sup> OHCHR, Violations verified in detention facilities in south Syrian Arab Republic, February 2021 (n.d.), [url](#)

<sup>2211</sup> 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 9<sup>2212</sup> (SNHR data)<sup>2213</sup> and 100 civilian fatalities (VDC data).<sup>2214</sup> 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'.<sup>2215</sup>

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.<sup>2216</sup> 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.<sup>2217</sup>

<sup>2212</sup> 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

<sup>2213</sup> 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

<sup>2214</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>2215</sup> REACH, Syria, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 19 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 15-29

<sup>2216</sup> 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

<sup>2217</sup> 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.<sup>2218</sup>

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.<sup>2219</sup>

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.<sup>2220</sup> 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.<sup>2221</sup>

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.<sup>2222</sup>

### *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

<sup>2218</sup> Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 3, 10-11

<sup>2219</sup> Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 3, 10-11

<sup>2220</sup> Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria – Report 3 - Northwest Syria: Aleppo, Idleb, and Latakia Governorates, August 2020, [url](#), p. 20

<sup>2221</sup> 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

<sup>2222</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

governorate.<sup>2223</sup> Around 1 000 IDP movements were recorded within Damascus governorate in 2020.<sup>2224</sup>

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.<sup>2225</sup>

In January 2021, there were 240 IDP movements from Damascus governorate, no movements within the governorate, and no IDP movements to the governorate.<sup>2226</sup> 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.<sup>2227</sup>

In February 2021, there were 205 IDP movements from Damascus governorate, no movements within, and 39 IDP movements to the governorate.<sup>2228</sup> 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.<sup>2229</sup>

In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 9 IDP displacement movements from Damascus governorate and around 3 600 IDP return movements from the governorate.<sup>2230</sup>

Further information displacement and return in Damascus is available in the [EASO COI report: Syria – Socio-economic situation in Damascus city \(April 2021\)](#).

<sup>2223</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2224</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Movements Overview, Jan – Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2225</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2226</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

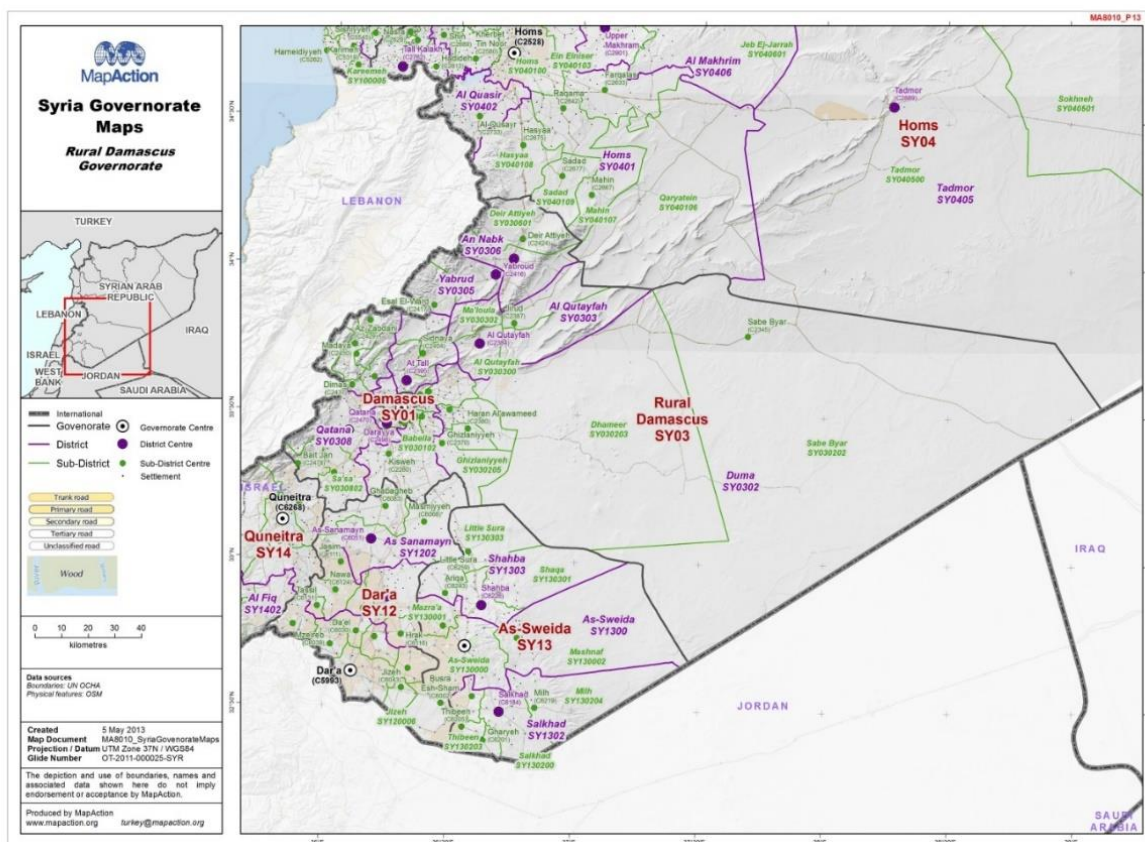
<sup>2227</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2228</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements February 2021, 1 April, 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2229</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2230</sup> 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 governorate<sup>2231</sup>

### 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.<sup>2232</sup> To the south it borders Quneitra, Dara'a and Sweida governorates.<sup>2233</sup>

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-Zabdan, Dimas, Ein Elfijeh, Madaya, Sarghaya, Qatana, Bait Jan, Sa'sa, Markaz Darayya, Sahnaya, and Hajar Aswad.<sup>2234</sup>

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.<sup>2235</sup>

<sup>2231</sup> Mapaction, Syria 2013-2015, Rural Damascus Governorate [map], last updated:29 July 2016, [url](#)

<sup>2232</sup> REACH, Rural Damascus Governorate, April 2018, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS), April 2018, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>2233</sup> UNHCR, Provision of Life-Saving Assistance and Supporting Communities, End of Year Report 2018, 2019, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>2234</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, Syria sub-district maps, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2235</sup> 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.<sup>2236</sup> While REACH separates between 'neighbourhoods' and 'sub-districts' in this map, the UNOCHA Humanitarian Atlas lists them all as 'sub-districts'.<sup>2237</sup> 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.<sup>2238</sup> To the south-west, between Damascus city and Darayya, is Western Ghouta.<sup>2239</sup>

The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Rural Damascus governorate in 2019 to be 3 200 000.<sup>2240</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Rural Damascus governorate to be of 3 023 110 inhabitants.<sup>2241</sup>

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.<sup>2242</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, laws subsequently passed by the GoS have forced many of the displaced into further displacement.<sup>2243</sup>

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 Imamis<sup>2244</sup> (Twelver Shias).<sup>2245</sup> 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.<sup>2246</sup>

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

<sup>2236</sup> REACH, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

<sup>2237</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Atlas, Syrian Arab Republic, Syria sub-district maps, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2238</sup> 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.

<sup>2239</sup> Al-Araby, Map – Syria – Ghouta, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2240</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2241</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>2242</sup> 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.

<sup>2243</sup> HRW, Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria, 28 June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2244</sup> Izady, M., Syria: Ethnic Composition in 2010, in: Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity, Columbia Univ. Gulf 2000, 2006 – present, 2010, [url](#)

<sup>2245</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, Twelver Shi'ah, updated 4 April 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2246</sup> Goujon, R., Stratfor, The Geopolitics of the Syrian Civil War, 4 August 2015, [url](#)



in such areas.<sup>2247</sup> 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.<sup>2248</sup> 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.<sup>2249</sup> '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.<sup>2250</sup>

In 2018, REACH described Rural Damascus as a largely agricultural governorate.<sup>2251</sup> 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.<sup>2252</sup> The Middle East Institute (MEI) reported in 2019 that Eastern Ghouta's economy relied mainly on manufacturing, trade and agriculture.<sup>2253</sup>

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.<sup>2254</sup> Damascus International Airport is located 30 km south-east of downtown Damascus.<sup>2255</sup>

### 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

<sup>2247</sup> 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.

<sup>2248</sup> HRW, Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 42

<sup>2249</sup> Guardian (The), Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control, 14 January 2017, [url](#)

<sup>2250</sup> France24, War, displacement reshuffle Syria's demographic map, 25 May 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2251</sup> REACH, Rural Damascus Governorate, April 2018, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS), April 2018, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>2252</sup> FAO/WFP, Special Report, FAO/WFP crop and food security assessment mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 9 October 2018, [url](#), p. 45

<sup>2253</sup> MEI/ETANA Syria, Despair and Decay: Eastern Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, 14 November 2019, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>2254</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic - Rural Damascus Reference Map, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2255</sup> Damascus International Airport, Maps of Damascus airport, 2021 (n.d.), [url](#)

area were retaken in 2018.<sup>2256</sup> As of the spring and summer of 2018, the government regained full control over the governorate.<sup>2257</sup> The government had succeeded by means of a mix of military action and political deals.<sup>2258</sup> The GoS security and military forces have since been governing the formerly opposition-held areas.<sup>2259</sup>

As of March 2021, Damascus governorate was under the control of the GoS (see also [Map 4](#)).<sup>2260</sup>

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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> Division of the SAA was reported by the Col to have a presence in Madaya and Eastern Ghouta.<sup>2261</sup> 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.<sup>2262</sup> 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.<sup>2263</sup>

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.<sup>2264</sup>

Russia and Iran, as well as Hezbollah, were maintaining a continued presence in Rural Damascus, according to Mazen Ezzi.<sup>2265</sup> Analyst Navvar Saban, stated that the IRGC keeps a base at the Damascus International Airport, and a camp in Zabadani.<sup>2266</sup> According to Jusoor for Studies, as by January 2021

<sup>2256</sup> Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 8-9

<sup>2257</sup> 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

<sup>2258</sup> Carter Center (The), Explosive Munitions in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>2259</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), p. 22

<sup>2260</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2261</sup> 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

<sup>2262</sup> Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and Refugee Return: An evaluation of Select Cases, December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2263</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 6, 9.

<sup>2264</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 20-21

<sup>2265</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>2266</sup> 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.<sup>2267</sup> 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.<sup>2268</sup>

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.<sup>2269</sup>

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.<sup>2270</sup>

Sayyida Zainab, a Shia town in southern Damascus, is controlled by Shia militias, most notably Lebanese Hezbollah, Ezzi stated.<sup>2271</sup> 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.<sup>2272</sup>

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.<sup>2273</sup> 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.<sup>2274</sup>

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'.<sup>2275</sup> 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.<sup>2276</sup>

<sup>2267</sup> Jusoer for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2268</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2269</sup> Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, 2020, 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2270</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EIU (European University Institute), 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-8

<sup>2271</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EIU (European University Institute), 27 November 2020, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>2272</sup> Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, 2020, 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>2273</sup> Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, 2020, 13 March 2020, [url](#), pp. 8-9

<sup>2274</sup> Jusoer for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2275</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EIU (European University Institute), 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 14-15

<sup>2276</sup> 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 2020<sup>2277</sup>, has been attributed to an armed group called Saraya Qasioun.<sup>2278</sup> The existence of this group was, however, doubted by a source consulted by DIS.<sup>2279</sup> 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.<sup>2280</sup> Most of the attacks were reported to have taken place in Qudsaya north-west of the capital, and/or in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>2281</sup> 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.<sup>2282</sup>

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.<sup>2283</sup>

### *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.<sup>2284</sup> 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.<sup>2285</sup>

## **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.<sup>2286</sup> According to Syria Direct, the government's hold on security in Rural Damascus

<sup>2277</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2278</sup> 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

<sup>2279</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Syria Direct], October 2020, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>2280</sup> 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

<sup>2281</sup> 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

<sup>2282</sup> 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

<sup>2283</sup> Al-Tamimi, A. J., Saraya Qasioun: Interview, Pundicity [Blog], 7 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2284</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 21 – February 4, 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2285</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct, Jusoor], October 2020, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>2286</sup> 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'.<sup>2287</sup> 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.<sup>2288</sup> 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.<sup>2289</sup> In Palestinian refugee camps in the governorate, the situation was generally calm.<sup>2290</sup> There were no security incidents on the road connecting Damascus with Damascus International Airport during 2020, according to sources interviewed by the DIS<sup>2291</sup>, but a certain risk of becoming detained at the checkpoints on the road remained.<sup>2292</sup>

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.<sup>2293</sup> The ISW recorded Israeli strikes against military targets in December 2020 and January 2021<sup>2294</sup>, 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.<sup>2295</sup> 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.<sup>2296</sup>

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.<sup>2297</sup> 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.<sup>2298</sup> 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.<sup>2299</sup> 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.<sup>2300</sup>

<sup>2287</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Syria Direct] October 2020, [url](#), p. 35

<sup>2288</sup> 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

<sup>2289</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2290</sup> 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

<sup>2291</sup> 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

<sup>2292</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: SNHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>2293</sup> AP News, Syria says Israeli strike kills 2 soldiers, wounds 7, 31 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2294</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2295</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report January 30 – February 18, 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2296</sup> 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

<sup>2297</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>2298</sup> Enab Baladi, Wounded in Israel's eighth bombing in 2021 on the outskirts of Damascus, 8 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2299</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2300</sup> 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.<sup>2301</sup> 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.<sup>2302</sup> The Col similarly reported on cases of arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and detentions in areas such as Douma and Eastern Ghouta.<sup>2303</sup>

During the reporting period, in some places in Rural Damascus, governorate, armed clashes between pro-GoS militias were reported.<sup>2304</sup>

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.<sup>2305</sup>

### 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.

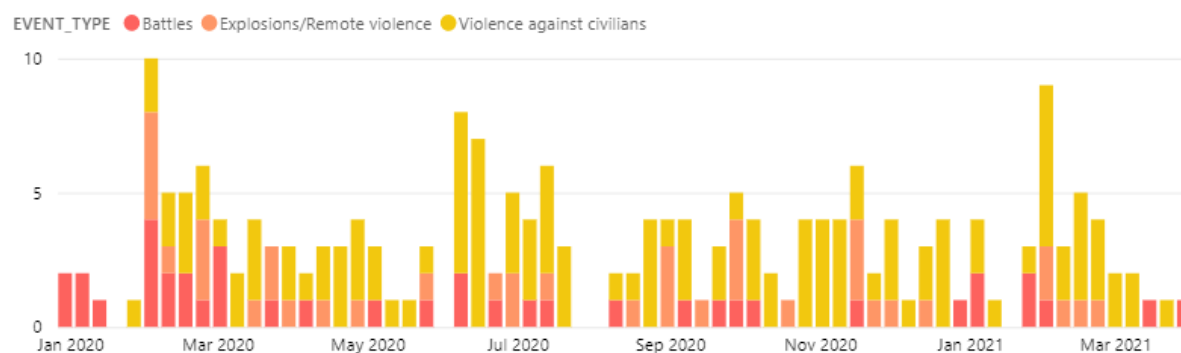


Figure 43: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Rural Damascus governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>2306</sup>

<sup>2301</sup> 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

<sup>2302</sup> 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

<sup>2303</sup> 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

<sup>2304</sup> MEMO, In-fighting erupts between Syria intelligence, army in Damascus, 8 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2305</sup> Diyaruna, Rural Damascus arrests fuel anti-regime protests, 23 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2306</sup> 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	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>125</b>

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.<sup>2307</sup>
- A car was blown up with an IED in Jaramana on 24 February, SANA reported on 1 March 2020.<sup>2308</sup>
- 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.<sup>2309</sup>
- 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.<sup>2310</sup>
- 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.<sup>2311</sup>
- 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.<sup>2312</sup>
- On 7 July 2020, Saraya Qasioun claimed the assassination of a person named Nizar Zaidan, serving in the SAA's Fourth Armoured Division.<sup>2313</sup>

<sup>2307</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, Concerns among Damascus residents after several blasts, 27 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2308</sup> SANA, Material damage caused in IED blast in Damascus Countryside, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2309</sup> ISW, Situation Report, March 4-17, [url](#)

<sup>2310</sup> Syria Call, [Facebook], IED kills a person in Damascus as 'Saraya Qasioun' launches 'vendetta operations', posted on: 14 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2311</sup> SOHR, Accidental explosion: Grenade explodes in neighbourhood in Damascus, killing NDF member and injuring others, 30 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2312</sup> SOHR, Accidental explosion: Grenade explodes in neighbourhood in Damascus, killing NDF member and injuring others, 30 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2313</sup> Saraya Qasioun, 7 July 2020, [url](#)

- The Syrian Observer reported in mid-July 2020 about more than 40 arrests having taken place in Douma.<sup>2314</sup>
- 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.<sup>2315</sup>
- On 22 October 2020, the SOHR reported that the Mufti of Damascus and Rural Damascus had been killed in an IED incident in Qudsaya.<sup>2316</sup>
- 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.<sup>2317</sup>
- 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.<sup>2318</sup>
- 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.<sup>2319</sup>

#### 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		
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>3</b>

<sup>2314</sup> Syrian Observer (The), State Security Services Arrest Dozens in Douma for Forced Military Recruitment, 16 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2315</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 15-16

<sup>2316</sup> SOHR, Mufti of Damascus and countryside killed in IED explosion, 22 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2317</sup> SOHR, Child injured in grenade explosion in Jaramana, 18 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2318</sup> SOHR, Eastern Ghouta: Air-Force Intelligence arrests two women and young man from Douma city, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2319</sup> 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 27<sup>2320</sup> (SNHR data)<sup>2321</sup> and 51 civilian fatalities (VDC data).<sup>2322</sup> 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.<sup>2323</sup> 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.<sup>2324</sup> 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.<sup>2325</sup>

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.<sup>2326</sup>

Access to electricity and water in the governorate was limited to two to three hours a day, Refugee Protection Watch reported.<sup>2327</sup> 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

<sup>2320</sup> 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

<sup>2321</sup> 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

<sup>2322</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>2323</sup> 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

<sup>2324</sup> 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)

<sup>2325</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 55

<sup>2326</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

<sup>2327</sup> 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.<sup>2328</sup> In Moadhamiyat Al-Sham alone, 1 500 residents had become ill by drinking water contaminated with sewers in October 2020, Mazen Ezzi stated.<sup>2329</sup>

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.<sup>2330</sup> 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.<sup>2331</sup> 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.<sup>2332</sup>

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.<sup>2333</sup> In Darayya city and its surroundings, schools were almost completely lacking, and the government had not acted to reconstruct those destroyed, the DIS reported.<sup>2334</sup> According to Refugee Protection Watch, the state of education in Eastern Ghouta was considered 'dire'.<sup>2335</sup> Many students from Rural Damascus had to go to Damascus City to attend school.<sup>2336</sup> 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.<sup>2337</sup>

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.<sup>2338</sup> 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

<sup>2328</sup> Refugee Protection Watch, Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria: The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees, October 2020, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>2329</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EIU (European University Institute), 27 November 2020, [url](#), p. 21

<sup>2330</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR: 4], October 2020, [url](#), p. 55

<sup>2331</sup> Refugee Protection Watch, Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria: The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees, October 2020, [url](#), p. 9, 28

<sup>2332</sup> Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, June 2020, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>2333</sup> Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, June 2020, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>2334</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 55

<sup>2335</sup> Refugee Protection Watch, Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria: The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees, October 2020, [url](#), p. 29

<sup>2336</sup> International humanitarian organisation working in Syria, interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>2337</sup> 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

<sup>2338</sup> 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.<sup>2339</sup>

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.<sup>2340</sup>

### *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.<sup>2341</sup> 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.<sup>2342</sup> In the same month there were 987 returns within Rural Damascus and 22 returns from Rural Damascus to Homs.<sup>2343</sup>

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).<sup>2344</sup> 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).<sup>2345</sup> In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 103 IDP movements to or within the governorate, and 608 IDP returns to or within Rural Damascus.<sup>2346</sup>

A large number of IDPs from Eastern Ghouta, Harasta and Douma were living in Damascus City, an international humanitarian organisation working in Syria assessed.<sup>2347</sup>

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.<sup>2348</sup> 987 return movements to the governorate were recorded in January 2021.<sup>2349</sup> 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.<sup>2350</sup>

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

<sup>2339</sup> Carter Center (The), Explosive Weapons Use in Syria - Report 2 - Damascus City and Rural Damascus Governorate, January 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2340</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2341</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements overview, Jan – Dec, 2020, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2342</sup> UNOCHA, IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data, 2 March 2021 [url](#)

<sup>2343</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns, January 2021, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2344</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements, February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2345</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns, February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2346</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2347</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, MS Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>2348</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. Spontaneous IDP Returnee Movements Overview, Jan - Dec 2020, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2349</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements Data, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2350</sup> 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.<sup>2351</sup>

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.'<sup>2352</sup> 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.<sup>2353</sup> 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.<sup>2354</sup> 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.<sup>2355</sup>

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.<sup>2356</sup> As of mid-2020, some 15 000 people were reported to be living in Darayya.<sup>2357</sup> For accessing and returning to the destroyed areas in Eastern Ghouta such as Douma, Harasta, Shefouniya and Arbin, a security approval was required.<sup>2358</sup> People who had not been active in the armed opposition would usually not face difficulties returning to Eastern Ghouta.<sup>2359</sup>

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.<sup>2360</sup>

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.<sup>2361</sup>

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,

<sup>2351</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR] October 2020, [url](#), 53

<sup>2352</sup> 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

<sup>2353</sup> 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

<sup>2354</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2355</sup> Denmark, DIS, [Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SOHR] October 2020, [url](#), p. 21

<sup>2356</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Syria Direct] October 2020, [url](#), p. 21

<sup>2357</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2358</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR] October 2020], [url](#), p. 53

<sup>2359</sup> Denmark, DIS, Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Suhail Al-Ghazi], October 2020 [url](#), p. 22

<sup>2360</sup> 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

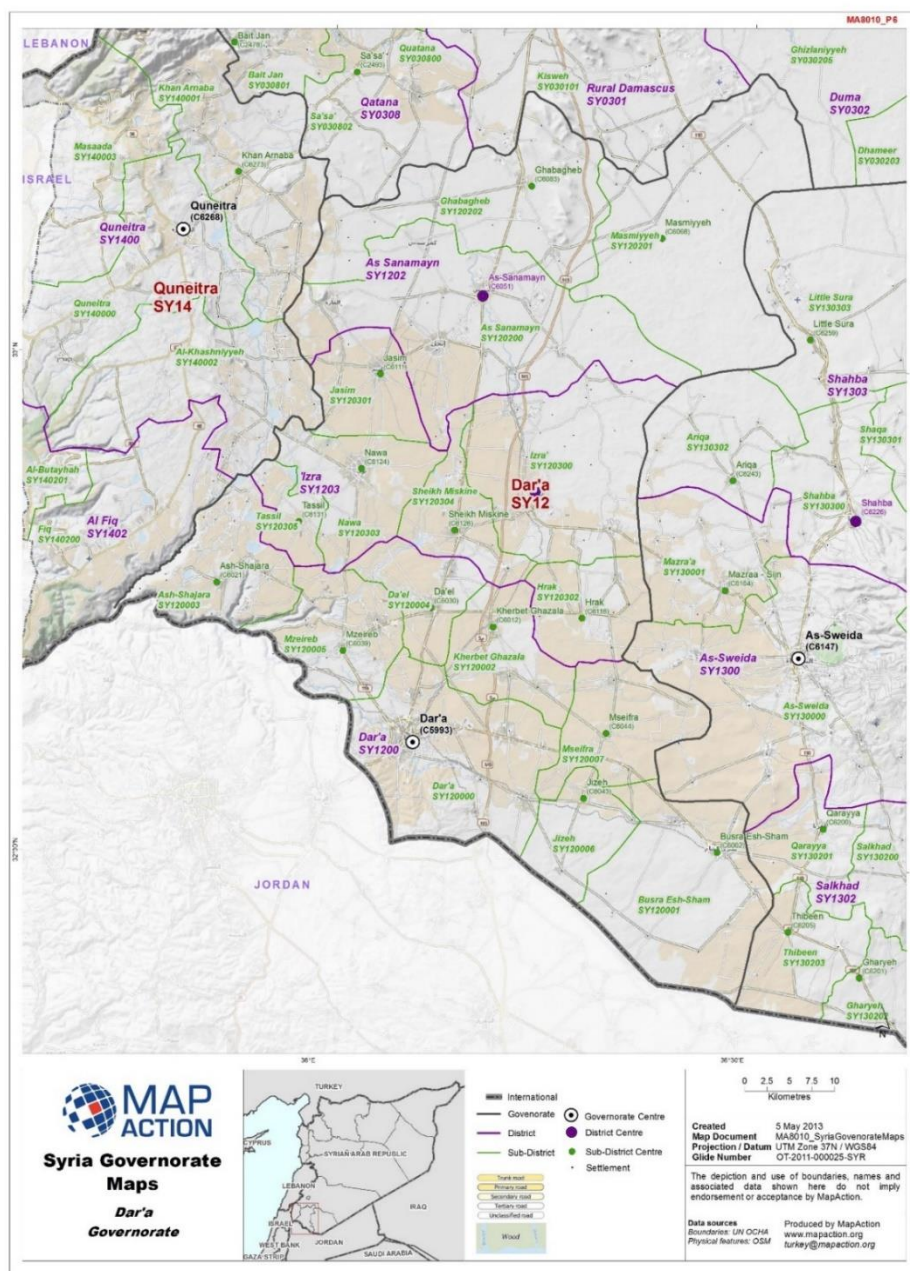
<sup>2361</sup> Ezzi, M., Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?, EUI, 27 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8

houses belonging to residents supporting the opposition had reportedly been burnt and looted, causing many displaced residents to decline from returning out of fear.<sup>2362</sup>

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<sup>2362</sup> Syria Report (The), Syrian Government Restricts Returns to Southern Damascus Suburb, 17 March 2021, [url](#)

## 2.12 Dar'a governorate



Map 18: © MapAction, Dar'a governorate<sup>2363</sup>

### 2.12.1 General description of the governorate

Dar'a governorate is located in the southern part of Syria, below Damascus, sharing borders with the governorates of Quneitra to the west, Rural Damascus to the north, As-Sweida to the east and an international border with Jordan to its south. Dar'a governorate is comprised of the three

<sup>2363</sup> MapAction, Dar'a governorate, 29 July 2016, [url](#)

administrative districts of Dar'a, Izra' and As Sanamayn.<sup>2364</sup> 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.<sup>2365</sup>

Dar'a city, the capital, is the largest city in the governorate.<sup>2366</sup> According to 2019 estimates by the Syrian Bureau of Statistics, the population of Dar'a governorate was approximately 925 000.<sup>2367</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Dar'a governorate to be of 1 022 990 inhabitants.<sup>2368</sup>

The population of Dar'a is almost entirely Sunni Muslim, with some Christian communities.<sup>2369</sup> Fabrice Balanche describes it as a Sunni Arab 'stronghold' in the conflict with the Assad government.<sup>2370</sup> 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.<sup>2371</sup>

Dar'a governorate is strategically important as a transit route between Syria, Jordan, and Gulf states, and, bordering the Golan Heights.<sup>2372</sup> The M5 highway passes through the governorate connecting Damascus to Jordan, and to Aleppo to the north.<sup>2373</sup> Loss of control over these highways connecting Damascus city with the GoS-controlled border crossing with Jordan would threaten GoS' control over the capital.<sup>2374</sup> 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.<sup>2375</sup> These characteristics have made it 'traditionally one of the most militarised regions in Syria', according to UNOCHA.<sup>2376</sup>

## 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.<sup>2377</sup> As a result, the governorate experienced 'heavy fighting' causing displacement of large number of residents to locations inside and outside Syria.<sup>2378</sup> Initially,

<sup>2364</sup> Based on UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Reference Map, 17 January 2013, [url](#)

<sup>2365</sup> 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

<sup>2366</sup> Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>2367</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2368</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>2369</sup> 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

<sup>2370</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>2371</sup> COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>2372</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 37

<sup>2373</sup> ACAPS, Regional Analysis Syria: AII Part A II – Governorate Profiles, 1 October-31 December 2014, [url](#), p. 26

<sup>2374</sup> Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>2375</sup> Integrity Research and Consultancy, Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate, August 2014, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>2376</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic – Governorates Profile (June 2014), 6 August 2014, [url](#), p. 37

<sup>2377</sup> 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

<sup>2378</sup> 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.<sup>2379</sup>

From 2012 to 2014, a first wave of conflict-related displacement occurred, pushing hundreds of thousands to leave Dar'a.<sup>2380</sup> 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.<sup>2381</sup> 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.<sup>2382</sup>

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.<sup>2383</sup> 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.<sup>2384</sup>

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 5<sup>th</sup> Corps of the SAA, ostensibly to fight against ISIL.<sup>2385</sup>

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.<sup>2386</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, to be led by Oudeh.<sup>2387</sup> 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.<sup>2388</sup>

Since June 2019 and through 2020 the governorate's strategic geographical location<sup>2389</sup> combined with a 'weak regime control' in the south<sup>2390</sup> led to an escalation of violence and insecurity. Foreign

<sup>2379</sup> Balanche, F., *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>2380</sup> COAR, *Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP)*, September 2019, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>2381</sup> COAR, *Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP)*, September 2019, [url](#), pp. 13-14

<sup>2382</sup> Integrity Research and Consultancy, *Research Summary Report: Local Governance in Dara'a Governorate*, August 2014, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>2383</sup> International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>2384</sup> International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>2385</sup> International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>2386</sup> COAR, *Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP)*, September 2019, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>2387</sup> 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

<sup>2388</sup> OHCHR, *The "Unreconciled" Concerns of Civilians in Dar'a Governorate*, May 2019, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>2389</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2390</sup> 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.'<sup>2391</sup>

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.<sup>2392</sup> After reconciliation, the six main pro-GoS actors deployed in Dar'a have been identified by COAR as: the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, State Security Branch, Political Security Branch, Air Force Intelligence, Military Security Branch, and the 5<sup>th</sup> 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'.<sup>2393</sup>

The 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2394</sup>

The Russia-backed 5<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2395</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2396</sup>

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 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade (of the Russian-backed 5<sup>th</sup> Corps) had nearly 1 600 fighters, 900 of which were former rebels.<sup>2397</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade continued to be the main armed actor in eastern Dar'a, also in view of the low control by the GoS forces. The 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade 'preserves order and security by setting up checkpoints and carrying out regular patrols'. Al-Jabassini reported that under 8<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2398</sup> Control over checkpoints brings additional financial gain to fighters 'through regional war economy activities, including smuggling, human trafficking, and the illegal narcotics trade'.<sup>2399</sup>

With headquarters in Busra al-Sham, the 8<sup>th</sup> 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

<sup>2391</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2392</sup> International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>2393</sup> COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>2394</sup> COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-11, 17, 18

<sup>2395</sup> COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 40

<sup>2396</sup> COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>2397</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., Rampant violence, military escalation, and the role of intermediaries in Daraa, Syria, MEI, 1 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2398</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., Rampant violence, military escalation, and the role of intermediaries in Daraa, Syria, MEI, 1 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2399</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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'.<sup>2400</sup>

According to Al-Jabassini, the 8<sup>th</sup> 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'.<sup>2401</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade has established a 'relatively secure climate' in eastern Dar'a, improved service delivery in parallel with government institutions. The 8<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2402</sup>

Despite its relevant role, the 8<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2403</sup>

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 5<sup>th</sup> Corps' 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade'.<sup>2404</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade is the protection and security they enjoy from being in the ranks, namely from arbitrary detention at GoS checkpoints or other 'regime transgressions'.<sup>2405</sup>

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'.<sup>2406</sup>

In July 2020, the 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2407</sup>

### *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 authority<sup>2408</sup>, 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

<sup>2400</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>2401</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), pp. 6, 13

<sup>2402</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8

<sup>2403</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2404</sup> COAR, The Syrian economy at war: Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2405</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>2406</sup> COAR, The Syrian economy at war: Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2407</sup> COAR, The Syrian economy at war: Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2408</sup> Reuters, New Assad statue triggers protest in cradle of Syrian revolt, 10 March 2019, [url](#)

remnants of the opposition to the Assad regime'.<sup>2409</sup> Western Dar'a has seen Iranian influence strengthening through its 'state security affiliates and local proxies' in that area<sup>2410</sup>, as well as in the south-west, where Hezbollah and other Iranian-militias operate.<sup>2411</sup> These groups have also been accused of also being involved in assassinations against those opposed to their presence.<sup>2412</sup> However, their members have also been the targets of attacks in Dar'a.<sup>2413</sup>

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.<sup>2414</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> Division and the Air Force Intelligence Directorate.<sup>2415</sup>

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.'<sup>2416</sup>

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).<sup>2417</sup>

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'<sup>2418</sup> 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'.<sup>2419</sup>

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'.<sup>2420</sup>

<sup>2409</sup> INSS, The Struggle for Control of Southern Syria: Where is Israel?, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2410</sup> COAR, Southwestern Dar'a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), p. 41

<sup>2411</sup> Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as 'security breakdown' mires Daraa's fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2412</sup> Nofal, W., Will the Security Crisis in Southern Syria Spark a 'New Revolution', Chatham House, January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2413</sup> 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

<sup>2414</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2415</sup> Tokmajyan, A., How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2416</sup> INSS, The Struggle for Control of Southern Syria: Where is Israel?, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2417</sup> INSS, The Struggle for Control of Southern Syria: Where is Israel?, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2418</sup> 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

<sup>2419</sup> Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS), European University Institute, 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>2420</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> Corps' 8<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade), against Iranian and Hezbollah presence in the south.<sup>2421</sup>

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 8<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2422</sup>

*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 Basin<sup>2423</sup> and al-Jaidour area<sup>2424</sup>, as well as towns of Tafas, Muzayrib, and Tal Shihab, as well as being based in Dar'a City to a lesser extent.<sup>2425</sup> 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'.<sup>2426</sup>

The Dar'a Popular Resistance group emerged online in November 2018.<sup>2427</sup> 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.<sup>2428</sup> It has claimed to deter abuses by GoS and Iran and criticised opposition figures who collaborate with Russia.<sup>2429</sup> The group has carried out attacks on checkpoints in Al-Sanamayn and against the Criminal Security Branch in Dar'a city, for instance.<sup>2430</sup> Low level attacks, ambushes, raids on military outposts continue to be reported as of November 2019.<sup>2431</sup>

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.

<sup>2421</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2422</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., Is Ahmad al-Oda winning the "hearts and minds" of Daraa's people?, MEI, 22 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2423</sup> 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

<sup>2424</sup> 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

<sup>2425</sup> STJ, Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa, 13 January 2020, [url](#), pp. 5-6

<sup>2426</sup> Etana Syria, Attacks & Assassinations in South-West Syria, 28 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2427</sup> 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

<sup>2428</sup> 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

<sup>2429</sup> ISW, Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy, November 2019, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>2430</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria, European University Institute, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 15-16

<sup>2431</sup> 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.<sup>2432</sup>

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.<sup>2433</sup> 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'.<sup>2434</sup>
- 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.<sup>2435</sup>

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 2019<sup>2436</sup>, 2020<sup>2437</sup> and in early 2021.<sup>2438</sup>

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.<sup>2439</sup> 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 control<sup>2440</sup>, including some areas of the governorate that were formerly opposition-held and have been retaken or reconciled through local agreements.<sup>2441</sup> 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

<sup>2432</sup> STJ, Fresh Wave of Violence Storms Already Vulnerable "Settlement Agreement" in Daraa, 10 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2433</sup> Carter Center (The), Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2434</sup> Syria Direct, Mysterious assassinations, bombings as 'security breakdown' mires Daraa's fragile peace, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2435</sup> Carter Center (The), Conflict in Southern Syria (August 2018-July 2019), August 2019, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2436</sup> 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

<sup>2437</sup> 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

<sup>2438</sup> ISW, Syria situation report: February 19 – March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2439</sup> 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

<sup>2440</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2441</sup> 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”.<sup>2442</sup>

Although the GoS had nominal control over the south<sup>2443</sup> 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’.<sup>2444</sup>

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.’<sup>2445</sup> 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.<sup>2446</sup>

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.<sup>2447</sup>

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.’<sup>2448</sup>

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.<sup>2449</sup> 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’<sup>2450</sup>, 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’.<sup>2451</sup>

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.’<sup>2452</sup>

<sup>2442</sup> OHCHR, The “Unreconciled” Concerns of Civilians in Dar’a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 3-4

<sup>2443</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2444</sup> 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

<sup>2445</sup> Haid, H., Understanding the characteristics of the new emerging state in Syria, Chatham House, June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2446</sup> Tokmajyan, A., How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2447</sup> Tokmajyan, A., How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2448</sup> Tokmajyan, Armenak, How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2449</sup> COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>2450</sup> COAR, Southwestern Dar’a: Needs Oriented Strategic Area Profile (NOSAP), September 2019, [url](#), pp. 4-5

<sup>2451</sup> COAR, Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar’a Governorate, 3 December 2019, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>2452</sup> 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.’<sup>2453</sup>

### *Security trends in 2020-2021*

The security situation in the south deteriorated throughout 2020<sup>2454</sup>, revealing ‘chronic instability and state fragmentation’.<sup>2455</sup> 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’.<sup>2456</sup> The Col highlighted ‘tensions between local opposition fighters and government forces, as well as civilians’.<sup>2457</sup> As reported by COAR, assassinations and armed attacks continued, many directed at both GoS security forces and local civil servants.<sup>2458</sup>

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.’<sup>2459</sup>

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’.<sup>2460</sup> 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’.<sup>2461</sup> In eastern Dar’a, former opposition fighters ‘flocked’ to the Corps’s 8th Brigade, expanding its manpower.<sup>2462</sup>

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’.<sup>2463</sup> Between March and May 2020, OHCHR documented 52 incidents of ‘apparently targeted killings’ in Dar’a governorate which resulted in 17 civilians being killed.<sup>2464</sup>

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

<sup>2453</sup> COAR, Syria in 2021, Forecast for a Protracted Crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2454</sup> 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

<sup>2455</sup> COAR, Double Trouble: Southern Syria Erupts on Two Fronts, 1 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2456</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 13

<sup>2457</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 7

<sup>2458</sup> COAR, Syria in 2021, Forecast for a Protracted Crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2459</sup> 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

<sup>2460</sup> Carter Center, A Path to Conflict Transformation in Syria, A Framework for a Phased Approach, January 2021, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>2461</sup> International Review, The Military Casualties of the Syrian Civil War in 2020, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2462</sup> COAR, Syria in 2021, Forecast for a Protracted Crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2463</sup> STJ, Fresh Wave of Violence Storms Already Vulnerable “Settlement Agreement” in Daraa, 10 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2464</sup> 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.<sup>2465</sup>

According to data collected and verified by researcher Abdullah Al-Jabassini<sup>2466</sup>, at least 930 violent incidents took place between August 2018 and February 2021 in Dar'a governorate which killed at least 790 individuals.<sup>2467</sup>

On 1 March 2020, Syrian forces launched an operation to secure greater control over al-Sanamayn city.<sup>2468</sup> ISW described the town as a 'hotbed of insurgent and anti-regime activity'.<sup>2469</sup> 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.<sup>2470</sup>

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 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, with armed rebels being given the possibility to evacuate to other rebel-held areas, and the regime taking full control of al-Sanamayn.<sup>2471</sup>

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.'<sup>2472</sup>

<sup>2465</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 17

<sup>2466</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2467</sup> Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal 'Sulh' and the Politics of Persuasion in Volatile Southern Syria, EUI, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>2468</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2469</sup> ISW, March 1 Attacks on Regime Positions Demonstrate Growing Strength of Southern Syria Insurgency, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2470</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2471</sup> Tokmajyan, Armenak, How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2472</sup> 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.'<sup>2473</sup>

2020 saw a continuation of assassinations and bombings directed at government forces, former opposition members and civilians.<sup>2474</sup> Most incidents were unclaimed and perpetrators unknown.<sup>2475</sup> In February 2021, ETANA, an independent civil society group with connections to the opposition<sup>2476</sup>, indicated that 'unknown perpetrators were responsible for 30% of attacks and 42% of assassinations' in the south of Syria.<sup>2477</sup> 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'.<sup>2478</sup>

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'.<sup>2479</sup> 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.<sup>2480</sup> In May 2020, two rounds of likely Israeli air strikes attacked Iranian proxy and GoS forces in Ma'ariya (western Dar'a governorate)<sup>2481</sup> and the SAA's 5<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Division near Izra (north-east Dar'a).<sup>2482</sup>

Small-scale ISIL attacks were reported in Dar'a governorate in 2020.<sup>2483</sup> 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'.<sup>2484</sup> Around the same time, ISW assessed that ISIL could be 'reassert[ing its] presence in southern Syria'.<sup>2485</sup>

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 4<sup>th</sup> Division entered Tafas, despite

<sup>2473</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 7

<sup>2474</sup> 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

<sup>2475</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2476</sup> Etana Syria, History, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2477</sup> Etana Syria, Attacks & Assassinations in South-West Syria, 28 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2478</sup> FT, Assassinations in southern Syria expose limits of Assad's control, 28 April 2020, [url](#), [subscription based]

<sup>2479</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 7

<sup>2480</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 1 – 14, 2020, 16 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2481</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 29 – May 12, 2020, 14 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2482</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 13-26, 2020, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2483</sup> 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

<sup>2484</sup> Lister, C., ISIS's dramatic escalation in Syria and Iraq, MEI, 4 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2485</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 1 - 14, 2020, 16 April 2020, [url](#)



attempts from the Russian-supported 5<sup>th</sup> Corps to broker a solution. Several 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2486</sup>

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 groups<sup>2487</sup>] 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.<sup>2488</sup> 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.'<sup>2489</sup>

### 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.<sup>2490</sup>

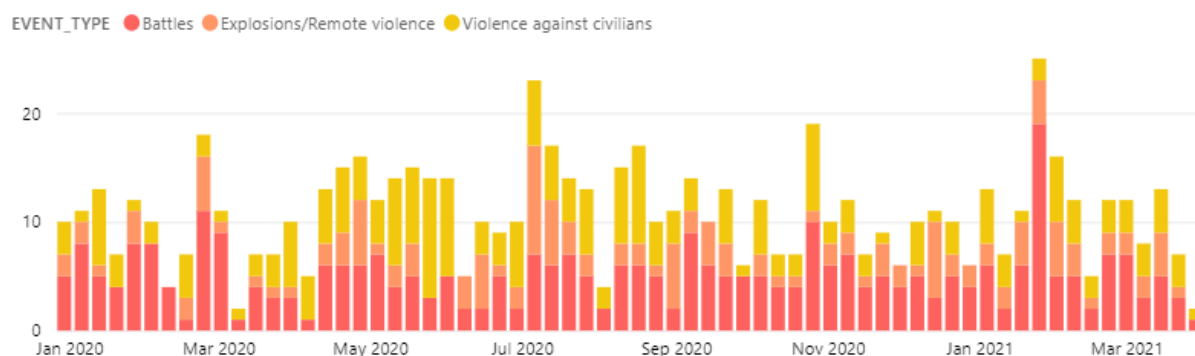


Figure 46: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Dar'a governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>2491</sup>

<sup>2486</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: January 8-29, 2021, 29 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2487</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Insecurity in Southern Syria: Tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda (January – February 2021), Policy Brief 161, March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>2488</sup> Al Monitor, Damascus scrambles for more control in southern Syria, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2489</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Insecurity in Southern Syria: Tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda (January – February 2021), Policy Brief 161, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 3-4

<sup>2490</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>2491</sup> 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>233</b>

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).<sup>2492</sup>

### 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.<sup>2493</sup>
- In January 2020, two civilians were kidnapped by an opposition member and two previous abductees were found dead near Dar'a city.<sup>2494</sup>
- 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.<sup>2495</sup>
- 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.<sup>2496</sup>
- 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.<sup>2497</sup>
- On 27 May 2020, unknown gunmen, reportedly ISIS, ambushed a convoy with members of the Dar'a Central Committee and SAA 5<sup>th</sup> Corps 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Muzayrib, killing three members of the Committee and injuring four other people, including two members of the SAA 8<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2498</sup>
- 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.<sup>2499</sup>

<sup>2492</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>2493</sup> SOHR, Daraa in six months: Attacks and assassination attempts rise as security chaos continues, 2 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2494</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 13-19 January 2020, [url](#), pp. 3-4

<sup>2495</sup> COAR, Syria Update: 24 February 2020 – Two aid workers killed as southern Syria teeters on the brink, 24 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2496</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 15

<sup>2497</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 15 - 28, 2020, 30 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2498</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 27 - June 9, 2020, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2499</sup> 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.<sup>2500</sup>
- On 16 August 2020, in Tafas, a civilian with a disability was killed in a reported drive-by shooting.<sup>2501</sup>
- 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'.<sup>2502</sup>
- 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.<sup>2503</sup>
- On 27 August 2020, a civilian was killed in Jallayn, in a drive-by shooting.<sup>2504</sup>
- On 28 August 2020, a civilian was reportedly killed by unknown attackers in his home in Yadudah town in western rural Dar'a.<sup>2505</sup>
- On 10 September 2020, in Dar'a city, a civilian was killed in a drive-by shooting.<sup>2506</sup>
- On 12 September, one civilian was killed in a drive-by shooting in Muzayrib.<sup>2507</sup>
- 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.<sup>2508</sup>
- On 10 September 2020, suspected ISIS gunmen killed Brigadier General Tala Qassem of the SAA 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, two members of the SAA's 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2509</sup>
- On 13 September 2020, two members of the SAA 5<sup>th</sup> Corps 8th Brigade and one Bedouin were killed in clashes between local population and the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade near al-Ghariya al-Sharqiya and al-Soura, in Dar'a governorate. Attackers are suspected ISIS.<sup>2510</sup>
- 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.<sup>2511</sup>
- On 8 November 2020 local militias took control of al-Masakin checkpoint in north-western Dar'a, allegedly killing five GoS soldiers.<sup>2512</sup>

<sup>2500</sup> 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

<sup>2501</sup> 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

<sup>2502</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: August 19 - September 1, 2020, 4 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2503</sup> 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

<sup>2504</sup> 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

<sup>2505</sup> 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

<sup>2506</sup> 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

<sup>2507</sup> 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

<sup>2508</sup> 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

<sup>2509</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2-15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2510</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: September 2-15, 2020, 18 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2511</sup> International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, Syria, October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2512</sup> 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’.<sup>2513</sup>
- On 14 March 2021 an ISIS militant shot and injured one SAA officer in Jubailiya (Dar’a).<sup>2514</sup>
- 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.<sup>2515</sup>

#### **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.<sup>2516</sup>
- 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.<sup>2517</sup> 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.<sup>2518</sup>
- 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.<sup>2519</sup>
- In April 2020, ISIS gunmen attacked a GoS vehicle and killed two SAA commanders near Herak in north-east Dar’a governorate.<sup>2520</sup>
- 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 15<sup>th</sup> Division in south-eastern Dar’a governorate.<sup>2521</sup>
- 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.<sup>2522</sup>
- On 25 August 2020, a girl was killed in a drive-by shooting in Jasim.<sup>2523</sup>
- On 10 September 2020, a civilian was killed in a drive-by shooting in Jasim.<sup>2524</sup>
- On 12 September 2020, two civilians were injured in a drive-by shooting in Shaykh Miskin.<sup>2525</sup>
- On 14 March 2021 – ISIS militant killed an SAA officer in al-Harak (Izra district).<sup>2526</sup>

#### **As Sanamayn district** (Sub-districts: As Sanamayn, Ghabagheb, Massimiyyeh)

<sup>2513</sup> International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, Syria, February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2514</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: February 19 - March 22, 2021, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2515</sup> International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch, Syria, March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2516</sup> SOHR, Daraa in six months: Attacks and assassination attempts rise as security chaos continues, 2 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2517</sup> 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

<sup>2518</sup> Carter Center, Weekly Conflict Summary, 6-12 January 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>2519</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 15 - 28, 2020, 30 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2520</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: April 15 - 28, 2020, 30 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2521</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 13-26, 2020, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2522</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: July 7-21, 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2523</sup> 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

<sup>2524</sup> 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

<sup>2525</sup> 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

<sup>2526</sup> 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.<sup>2527</sup> At least three civilians (including an imam) were killed, and several others were injured.<sup>2528</sup>
- On 19 May 2020 attackers identified as ISIL gunmen fired on two members of the SAA 7<sup>th</sup> Division in Kafr Shams in northern Dar'a.<sup>2529</sup>

### 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		
<b>Total</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>44</b>

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)<sup>2530</sup> and 217 civilian fatalities (SNHR data)<sup>2531</sup> 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).

<sup>2527</sup> SOHR, Fierce clashes erupt in Al-Sanamayn as regime forces storm the city using heavy weapons, 1 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2528</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 13-15

<sup>2529</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 13-26, 2020, 30 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2530</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>2531</sup> 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 city<sup>2532</sup>. 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.<sup>2533</sup>

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 city<sup>2534</sup>), five were partially functioning and one was not functioning (al-Hirak<sup>2535</sup>).<sup>2536</sup> 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).<sup>2537</sup> UNOCHA reported that the 'largest ratio of non-functional primary health care centres to population' found in various governorates includes Dar'a.<sup>2538</sup>

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.<sup>2539</sup> 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.<sup>2540</sup>

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.<sup>2541</sup> 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.<sup>2542</sup>

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.<sup>2543</sup>

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

<sup>2532</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 19

<sup>2533</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

<sup>2534</sup> PHR, Obstruction and Denial, Health System Disparities and COVID-19 in Daraa, Syria, December 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>2535</sup> PHR, Obstruction and Denial, Health System Disparities and COVID-19 in Daraa, Syria, December 2020, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>2536</sup> 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

<sup>2537</sup> 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

<sup>2538</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 25

<sup>2539</sup> Etana Syria, Syria Military Brief: South Syria, 15 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2540</sup> 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

<sup>2541</sup> International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-9

<sup>2542</sup> OHCHR, Press briefing note on Dar'a, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2543</sup> 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.<sup>2544</sup>

### *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.<sup>2545</sup> 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.<sup>2546</sup> Spontaneous IDP return movements in Dar'a accounted for three per cent of the total returns in Syria in 2020.<sup>2547</sup>

Following the January 2021 clashes in Tafas between opposition faction's fighter and the 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2548</sup> UNOCHA recorded 291 IDP movements from or within Dar'a in February 2021.<sup>2549</sup> No IDP movements were recorded by UNOCHA in Dar'a governorate in March 2021.<sup>2550</sup>

In terms of returns to Dar'a in 2021, UNOCHA recorded no IDP return movements in January<sup>2551</sup>, 215 IDP return movements to the governorate in February<sup>2552</sup>, and 643 IDP return movements to or within the governorate in March.<sup>2553</sup>

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.<sup>2554</sup> Arrest and detention of civilians following GoS takeover was widely documented by sources<sup>2555</sup> and continued to be 'commonplace' in Dara'a in early 2020.<sup>2556</sup>

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,

<sup>2544</sup> Carter Center (The), Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, Report 1 - Southern Syria: As Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates, November 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-9

<sup>2545</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, IDPs Tracking, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements, January-December 2020, last update 27 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2546</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, IDPs Tracking, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns, January-December 2020, last update 27 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2547</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p.16

<sup>2548</sup> SNHR, The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in January 2021, 4 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 4, 9

<sup>2549</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2550</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Movements. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2551</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns. January 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2552</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP Spontaneous Returns. February 2021, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2553</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic. IDP Spontaneous Returns. March 2021, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2554</sup> 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

<sup>2555</sup> 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

<sup>2556</sup> 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.<sup>2557</sup>

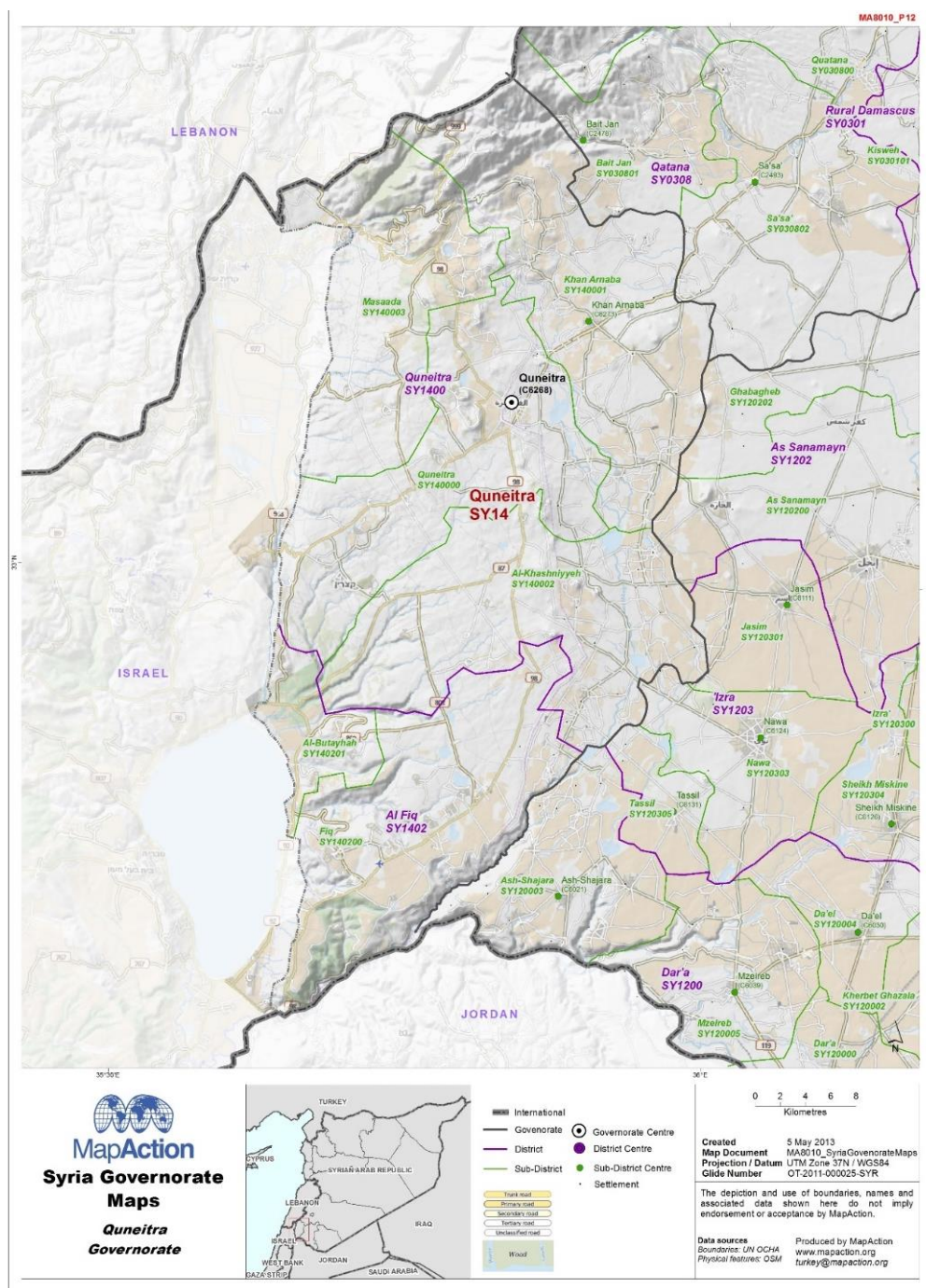
The January 2021 Col report indicated that 'In addition to the displacement and destruction, Syrians are routinely denied return to their places of origin, notably due to restrictions on access placed by the Government and fear of arrest in retaken and formerly besieged areas, in particular in Rif Damashq, Daraa, Quneitra, Homs, Hama and Aleppo.'<sup>2558</sup>

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<sup>2557</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>2558</sup> 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 governorate<sup>2559</sup>

<sup>2559</sup> 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 Damascus<sup>2560</sup>, and borders Lebanon, Jordan, and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.<sup>2561</sup> 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.<sup>2562</sup> The city of Quneitra remained abandoned after it was destroyed by Israel in 1974<sup>2563</sup> and is a part of a demilitarised buffer zone between Syrian and Israel under the supervision of UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF).<sup>2564</sup> The new provincial administrative centre is Madinat al-Baath (Baath city).<sup>2565</sup>

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.<sup>2566</sup> The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Quneitra governorate in 2019 at 117 000.<sup>2567</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Quneitra governorate to be of 105 124 inhabitants.<sup>2568</sup>

As of March 2011, Syrian Arabs (Arabic speaking) constituted the largest part of the population of Quneitra.<sup>2569</sup> According to the division along the religious lines, the population of Quneitra is largely Sunni Muslim; the religious minorities comprise the Druze<sup>2570</sup> and Shi'a Muslims.<sup>2571</sup> The Druze reside in the town of Hader, the Syrian-controlled part of the Golan Heights.<sup>2572</sup>

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.<sup>2573</sup>

### 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.<sup>2574</sup> The 'Southern Front' of FSA<sup>2575</sup>, which was formed in

<sup>2560</sup> Jamestown Foundation (The), The Battle for al-Quneitra, the "Gateway to Damascus" in: Terrorism Monitor Volume 12, Issue 5, 6 March 2014, [url](#)

<sup>2561</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, Governorates Profile (June 2014), 26 August 2014, [url](#), p. 43

<sup>2562</sup> MapAction, Syria Governorate Maps – Quneitra Governorate, last updated 29 July 2016, [url](#)

<sup>2563</sup> AP News, Syrians celebrate retaking town near Israel-occupied Golan, 27 July 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2564</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Al-Qunaytirah, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2565</sup> Reuters, Syrian insurgents attack government-held town near Israel, 20 November 2014, [url](#)

<sup>2566</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, General Census, The census housing and population results 2004 on governorates level, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2567</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2568</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>2569</sup> Austria, Federal Ministry of the Interior & Austrian Ministry of Defence and Sports, Atlas Syria, 2015, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>2570</sup> Austria, Federal Ministry of the Interior & Austrian Ministry of Defence and Sports, Atlas Syria, 2015, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>2571</sup> 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.

<sup>2572</sup> Al Jazeera, Violence hits Druze village Hader in Syria's Quneitra, 3 November 2017, [url](#)

<sup>2573</sup> 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

<sup>2574</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2575</sup> 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 2014<sup>2576</sup> as an ‘umbrella organization for most armed opposition groups in the provinces of Dara’a and Quneitra’<sup>2577</sup> had claimed to have 30 000 fighters in the provinces of Quneitra, Dar’a, and Sweida.<sup>2578</sup> In April 2014, FSA gained several strategic victories in Quneitra<sup>2579</sup>, such as a takeover of the Eastern Tel Ahmar Hills.<sup>2580</sup> In the end of August 2014, FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra reportedly seized the Quneitra crossing<sup>2581</sup>; clashes between GoS and the armed opposition intensified in September 2014, particularly in Madinat al-Baath.<sup>2582</sup>

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.<sup>2583</sup> During 2014, GoS continued aerial bombardments on the armed opposition, including in densely populated areas of Quneitra.<sup>2584</sup> In June 2015, FSA started an offensive against GoS forces, claiming that Jabhat al-Nusra was kept away from the operation.<sup>2585</sup>

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 4<sup>th</sup> zone of de-escalation.<sup>2586</sup> In May and June 2018, GoS forces, backed by Russian airstrikes, started retaking the territories of Quneitra<sup>2587</sup>, which caused intense fighting.<sup>2588</sup> 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.<sup>2589</sup> 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.<sup>2590</sup> In October 2018, the Quneitra crossing reopened for the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) troops.<sup>2591</sup>

As of March 2021, Quneitra was under GoS control<sup>2592</sup> (see also [Map 4](#)).

#### *Syrian Arab Army and affiliated armed groups*

As noted by Gregory Waters in June 2019, the 1<sup>st</sup> Corp of the SAA (which was formed to serve the first line of defence against Israel since 1980s and had stations of its 61<sup>st</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigades along the Golan Heights<sup>2593</sup>) remained almost entirely deployed in the governorates of Quneitra and Dar’a.<sup>2594</sup> The deployments of SAA units in Quneitra consisted of three battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps’ 7<sup>th</sup>

<sup>2576</sup> 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

<sup>2577</sup> Syria Direct, Protests in Daraa: Russia absent as Damascus weaponizes ‘tribal schisms,’ 5 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2578</sup> BBC News, Syria conflict: Rebels launch Quneitra offensive, 17 June 2015, [url](#)

<sup>2579</sup> Lister, C., The Free Syrian Army: A decentralized insurgent brand, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings, November 2016, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>2580</sup> Syria Direct, ‘Almost complete control’ for rebels in southern Quneitra, 27 April 2014, [url](#)

<sup>2581</sup> DW, Syrian rebels announce seizure of Golan Heights border crossing, 27 August 2014, [url](#)

<sup>2582</sup> ICRC, Syria: Emergency relief for thousands displaced by fighting in Quneitra, 15 September 2014, [url](#)

<sup>2583</sup> Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2584</sup> ACAPS, Regional Analysis, Syria, Strategic Needs Analysis Project, Q4 2014, 1 October - 31 December 2014, [url](#), p. 47

<sup>2585</sup> BBC News, Syria conflict: Rebels launch Quneitra offensive, 17 June 2015, [url](#)

<sup>2586</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria’s ‘de-escalation zones’ explained, 4 July 2017, [url](#)

<sup>2587</sup> Reuters, Syrian flag raised in Quneitra on Syrian side of Golan Heights, 26 July 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2588</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>2589</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria’s war: Evacuation of rebels from Quneitra begins, 21 July 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2590</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p.19

<sup>2591</sup> Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2592</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2593</sup> Holliday, J., Syrian Army, Doctrinal Order of Battle, Institute for the Study of War, February 2013, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2594</sup> Waters, G., The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army’s Destruction and Rebirth, MEI, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

Division 90<sup>th</sup> Brigade (3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, deployed to Hader, Hassan Battalion and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion 4<sup>th</sup> Company) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps' 14<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Division (36<sup>th</sup> Regiment), deployed to Jabal al-Sheikh.<sup>2595</sup>

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.<sup>2596</sup>

According to Gregory Waters, SAA started to conscribe into its units reconciled rebels from the governorates of Damascus, Dar'a, and Quneitra since 2016.<sup>2597</sup> 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.<sup>2598</sup> 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'.<sup>2599</sup>

### *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.<sup>2600</sup> In September 2019, the towns of Madinat al-Baath and Khan Arnaba were reported as Hezbollah's headquarters.<sup>2601</sup> 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.<sup>2602</sup>

The size of Iranian forces and/or Iranian proxies in Syria is debated.<sup>2603</sup> 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.<sup>2604</sup> 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.<sup>2605</sup> 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

<sup>2595</sup> 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.

<sup>2596</sup> UN Security Council, United Nations Disengagement Observer Force: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2020/506, 8 June 2020, [url](#), para. 7

<sup>2597</sup> Waters, G., The Growing Role of Reconciled Rebels in Syria, International Review, 21 April 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2598</sup> Al Monitor, Ex-FSA fighters recruited by Damascus to fight opposition in northern Syria, 13 June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2599</sup> 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

<sup>2600</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2601</sup> SOHR, The Lebanese Hezbollah continues its efforts to bring the province of Al-Quneitra under its full control, 10 September 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2602</sup> SOHR, Buying loyalty: Iran-backed militias offer young people in Al-Quneitra financial incentives, 12 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2603</sup> Tokmajyan, A., How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg, Carnegie Middle East Center, July 2020, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>2604</sup> Ezzi, M., Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria, EUI, 13 March 2020, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>2605</sup> 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.<sup>2606</sup>

### *Israel*

In 2020, Israel was frequently carrying out airstrikes, particularly against (pro)-Iranian forces and Hezbollah.<sup>2607</sup> 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’.<sup>2608</sup>

### *Russia*

Russian military police were deployed along the Golan Heights border in August of 2018, following the recapture of Quneitra by the GoS.<sup>2609</sup> 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.<sup>2610</sup> In August 2020, a Russian military police unit was reportedly patrolling observation posts on the Golan Heights.<sup>2611</sup> Jusoor for Studies mapped two Russian ‘military sites’ in Quneitra as of 5 January 2021.<sup>2612</sup> Furthermore, in 2020, Russia was reportedly recruiting Quneitra male inhabitants to fight in Libya.<sup>2613</sup>

### *UNDOF*

UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) troops returned to the Golan Heights after the Quneitra crossing was reopened for UNDOF in October 2018.<sup>2614</sup> 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.<sup>2615</sup>

### *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-Nusra<sup>2616</sup>) 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.<sup>2617</sup> ISIL was reported to maintain ‘its capabilities’ in Quneitra as of the first quarter of 2020<sup>2618</sup> 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.<sup>2619</sup>

<sup>2606</sup> 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

<sup>2607</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2608</sup> Times of Israel (The), IDF destroys 2 Syrian military positions in rare cross-border raid – report, 14 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2609</sup> Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2610</sup> TASS, Russian military police ensure peace in Syria’s Quneitra province, chief says, 23 September 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2611</sup> Russia-Islamic world, Russian military police checked observation posts on the Golan heights in Syria, 31 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2612</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the Military Bases and Posts of Foreign Forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2613</sup> Al Monitor, Why Russia’s grip on Syrian military is weaker than it seems, 21 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2614</sup> Jerusalem Post (The), Strategic Quneitra crossing between Syria and Israel reopened, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2615</sup> UN Security Council, United Nations Disengagement Observer Force: report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/282, 22 March 2021, [url](#), para. 18

<sup>2616</sup> CISAS, Stanford University, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2617</sup> AMN News, ISIS ambushes Syrian Army vehicle carrying several soldiers in Daraa, 23 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2618</sup> USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2020 – March 21, 13 May 2020, [url](#), p. 52

<sup>2619</sup> 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'.<sup>2620</sup> An international organisation interviewed by DIS, reported on the presence of ISIL and Al-Qaeda in Quneitra.<sup>2621</sup>

### 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.'<sup>2622</sup> 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.<sup>2623</sup>

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.<sup>2624</sup> 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.<sup>2625</sup> 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 [...]'.<sup>2626</sup>

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.<sup>2627</sup>

<sup>2620</sup> DIS, Syria – Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 13-14, 53

<sup>2621</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria – Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Tartous, Latakia and Quneitra, December 2020, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>2622</sup> 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

<sup>2623</sup> Syria Direct (The), Protests in Daraa: Russia absent as Damascus weaponizes 'tribal schisms,' 5 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2624</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Insecurity in Southern Syria: Tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda (January – February 2021), ORSAM, March 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2625</sup> SOHR, Regime forces storm village in rural Al-Quneitra, arresting several civilians, 17 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2626</sup> 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

<sup>2627</sup> 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.<sup>2628</sup>

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.<sup>2629</sup> The situation remained unchanged as of April 2021.<sup>2630</sup>

In 2020, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) continued conducting airstrikes on territories in Quneitra, targeting military positions of GoS forces and forces loyal to GoS<sup>2631</sup> as well as pro-Iranian<sup>2632</sup> and Hezbollah forces.<sup>2633</sup> The airstrikes continued in 2021.<sup>2634</sup>

### 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.

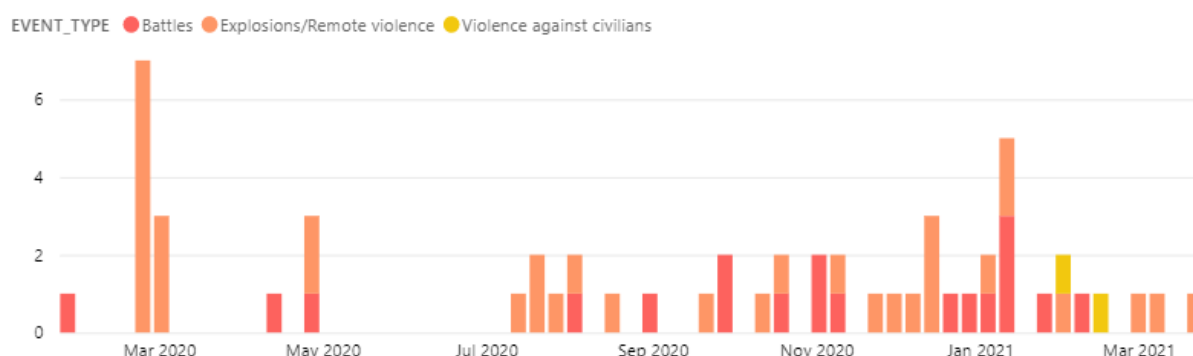


Figure 49: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Quneitra governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>2635</sup>

<sup>2628</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2629</sup> 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

<sup>2630</sup> 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

<sup>2631</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2632</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2633</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2634</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2635</sup> 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>2</b>

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.<sup>2636</sup>
- 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.<sup>2637</sup> As reported by SANA, the attack damaged the school’s roof, doors, and windows.<sup>2638</sup>
- 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.<sup>2639</sup>
- In November 2020, a ‘regime member’ was reportedly killed in an IED explosion near the village of Jaba in the district of Quneitra.<sup>2640</sup>
- 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.<sup>2641</sup>
- In February 2021, a member of Quneitra Council was killed by unknown gunmen in Madinat al-Baath.<sup>2642</sup>
- 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.<sup>2643</sup>

<sup>2636</sup> Al Jazeera, 1 killed in Israel drone attack on Golan Heights: Syrian state TV, 27 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2637</sup> SOHR, Al-Quneitra: Three Hezbollah-backed militiamen killed in Israeli attacks on school in northern countryside, 21 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2638</sup> SANA, Material damage to school in Quneitra due to Israeli missile attack, 21 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2639</sup> SOHR, Al-Quneitra countryside: Regime security agent killed and former opposition leader injured in two separate incidents, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2640</sup> SOHR, Al-Quneitra countryside: Regime security agent killed and former opposition leader injured in two separate incidents, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2641</sup> SOHR, IED attack: Explosion kills two Air-Force intelligence agents in al-Quneitra countryside, 14 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2642</sup> SOHR, Armed attack: Member of Al-Quneitra Council assassinated in Al-Baath city, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2643</sup> 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	-	-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

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 SNHR<sup>2644</sup> and VDC<sup>2645</sup> 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.<sup>2646</sup> Syrian Civil Defence (SCD) was reported to be engaged in clearance of unexploded submunitions in Quneitra 'over the past two years'.<sup>2647</sup> 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.<sup>2648</sup>

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

<sup>2644</sup> 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

<sup>2645</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>2646</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>2647</sup> 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

<sup>2648</sup> 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.<sup>2649</sup>

### *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 %.<sup>2650</sup>

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.<sup>2651</sup> In 2020, UNOCHA reported that 1 100 return movements were recorded from Quneitra to Dar'a governorate.<sup>2652</sup>

In the first three months of 2021, UNOHCA did not record any IDP movements or return movements for Quneitra governorate.<sup>2653</sup>

<sup>2649</sup> Carter Center (the), Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, Report 1, Southern Syria: As Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates, November 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-10

<sup>2650</sup> World Bank (The), The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), pp. 25, 27-28

<sup>2651</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2652</sup> UNOCHA, IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data, 2 March 2021 [url](#)

<sup>2653</sup> 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](#)



The Syrian Bureau of Statistics estimated that the population in the governorate of Sweida in 2019 was 530 000.<sup>2659</sup> In a March 2021 report, UNOCHA estimated the population of Sweida governorate to be of 380 495 inhabitants.<sup>2660</sup>

The Druze are an ethnicity that exist both as a religious sect and as a tribe.<sup>2661</sup> The governorate of Sweida is mainly populated by the Druze minority in Syria.<sup>2662</sup> Many Druze live in the Jabal al-Arab (Jabal al-Druze) region of Sweida governorate.<sup>2663</sup> 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.<sup>2664</sup> 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.<sup>2665</sup>

## 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.<sup>2666</sup> 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.<sup>2667</sup> Sweida remained neutral during the initial uprising in Syria and during the ensuing conflict.<sup>2668</sup> 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.<sup>2669</sup>

Sweida has largely avoided heavy attacks<sup>2670</sup> and artillery shelling during the war.<sup>2671</sup> 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.<sup>2672</sup> 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.<sup>2673</sup>

<sup>2659</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Estimate of the population in Syria by governorates, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2660</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview. Syrian Arab Republic, March 2021, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>2661</sup> 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

<sup>2662</sup> 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

<sup>2663</sup> USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>2664</sup> 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.

<sup>2665</sup> Edwards, M., 'Security chaos': Kidnappings and clashes threaten relative peace in Syria's Sweida, MEE, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2666</sup> Rollins, T., Kidnappings, cross-border clashes threaten increasingly fragile status quo in Syria's South, MEI, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2667</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2668</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2669</sup> 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

<sup>2670</sup> MEE, 'Security chaos': Kidnappings and clashes threaten relative peace in Syria's Sweida, 1 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2671</sup> 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

<sup>2672</sup> Balanche, F., Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, [url](#), p. 41

<sup>2673</sup> 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.<sup>2674</sup> In response, the GoS launched an offensive in rural Sweida on 6 August 2018 to force out the ISIL fighters from the region.<sup>2675</sup> Syrian forces with Russian air support, conducted over 35 airstrikes along the desert area that ISIL controlled at that time in east Sweida.<sup>2676</sup> The offensive ended officially on 19 November 2018, after clearing the al-Safa plateau in the eastern Badia desert.<sup>2677</sup>

As of March 2021, Sweida governorate was under GoS control<sup>2678</sup> (see also [Map 4](#)).

Although compulsory military service 'extends to Druze community'<sup>2679</sup> based on the Syrian Constitution<sup>2680</sup>, 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'.<sup>2681</sup> 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.<sup>2682</sup> 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.<sup>2683</sup>

### *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.<sup>2684</sup>

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.<sup>2685</sup> Deployments of the SAA as of 17 March 2020 included units of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps.<sup>2686</sup>

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);

<sup>2674</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Qunaitra, Sweida. Situation Report No. 5. As of 2 August 2018, 2 August 2018, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>2675</sup> 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

<sup>2676</sup> Al Masdar News, Syrian Army scores major advance in east Sweida after Russian airstrikes hammer ISIS, 6 August 2018, [url](#), accessed

<sup>2677</sup> 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

<sup>2678</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2679</sup> COAR, The Syrian economy at war, Part 1: Armed group mobilisation as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, 30 September 2020, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>2680</sup> Syria, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic – 2012, Article 46, [url](#)

<sup>2681</sup> USIP, How will new U.S. sanctions impact Syria's conflict? 17 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2682</sup> Rollins, T., Kidnappings, cross-border clashes threaten increasingly fragile status quo in Syria's South, MEI, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2683</sup> ORSAM, Insecurity in southern Syria: tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda, (January – February 2021), March 2021, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>2684</sup> Jusoor for Studies, Map of the military bases and posts of foreign forces in Syria, 6 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2685</sup> 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

<sup>2686</sup> 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)<sup>2687</sup>;
- The Atil group (pro-GoS created in 2015).<sup>2688</sup>

During 2020, the Iran-backed NDF asserted its presence in Sweida governorate.<sup>2689</sup> 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).<sup>2690</sup>

### ISIL

On 21 August 2020, SOHR indicated that ISIL re-emerged and was present in large parts of Homs and Sweida desert.<sup>2691</sup> According to a local source, ISIL cells were reportedly active in Al-Karaa area of Sweida governorate<sup>2692</sup> and as of May 2020, they were present in the area between Al-Karaa and Tilal Al-Safa.<sup>2693</sup> In its report covering the period between January and March 2020, USDOD also reported on ISIL presence in Sweida governorate.<sup>2694</sup> According to several ISW reports issued in March 2021, 'ISIL support zones' remained in Sweida governorate.<sup>2695</sup>

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-Raqqa countryside, (5) Ithriyah area in northern Hama and (6) [Sweida] desert.'<sup>2696</sup>

On 11 October 2020, the SAA began a wide range of operation in ISIL suspected areas within the desert of Sweida.<sup>2697</sup> On 16 March 2021, an article published by the MEI (Middle East Institute) reported that ISIL was active in eastern Sweida governorate.<sup>2698</sup>

### 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

<sup>2687</sup> 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

<sup>2688</sup> NPA, Syria's Suwayda notables appeal to al-Karama forces to end local group's violations, 12 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2689</sup> COAR, The Syrian economy at war, part 1, armed group mobilisation as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, 30 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2690</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2691</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2692</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2693</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2694</sup> 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

<sup>2695</sup> ISW, Syria Situation Report: 19 February – 22 March 2021, 25 March 2021 [url](#)

<sup>2696</sup> SOHR, ISIS attacks in one week 100 regime soldiers and loyal militiamen killed and go missing, despite Russian intense airstrikes, 29 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2697</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2698</sup> 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.<sup>2699</sup>

In December 2020, SOHR sources indicated that Sweida governorate reportedly became a safe sanctuary for gangs, where security situation has deteriorated, and kidnappings continued.<sup>2700</sup>

According to a February 2021 report, Sultan Pasha al-Atrash Battalion was created by Druze to fight ISIL.<sup>2701</sup> 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'.<sup>2702</sup>

### **Rijjal al-Karama (Men of Dignity) and Sheikh al-Karamah (Sheikh of Dignity) forces**

In 2012, the movement Rijjal al-Karama (Men of Dignity<sup>2703</sup>) was established as a local Druze defence force independent from the GoS<sup>2704</sup>, with Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'ous as its leader<sup>2705</sup>. It also established the neutrality of Sweida's Druze towards the 2011 revolution.<sup>2706</sup> The movement remained against the conscription of Druze to the GoS army.<sup>2707</sup>

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.<sup>2708</sup> In December 2020, the Institute for National Security Studies named the al-Karama as one of the local groups controlling Sweida.<sup>2709</sup>

## **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'.<sup>2710</sup> 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.<sup>2711</sup>

<sup>2699</sup> 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

<sup>2700</sup> SOHR, Security chaos in southern Syria, gunmen attack cargo truck on Damascus-Al-Suwaydaa road, 5 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2701</sup> Al Monitor, Syrian Regime scrambles to defuse tensions after insult to Druze leader, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2702</sup> NPA, Local military group formed in Syria's Suwayda, 17 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2703</sup> 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

<sup>2704</sup> Rollins, T., Kidnappings, cross-border clashes threaten increasingly fragile status quo in Syria's South, MEI, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2705</sup> 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

<sup>2706</sup> 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

<sup>2707</sup> 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

<sup>2708</sup> Enab Baladi, Sheikh of Dignity Shield: New Faction Found in Sweida, 22 February 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2709</sup> INSS, The Struggle for Control of Southern Syria: Where is Israel?, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2710</sup> Carter Center (the), Analysing shifts in territorial control within Syria offers glimpse of future challenges, 13 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2711</sup> 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.<sup>2712</sup> On 7 June 2020, during the protest people in Sweida used anti-GoS slogans due to the worsening of the socio-economic situation.<sup>2713</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, on 15 June 2020, security forces responded with beatings and arrests of the protesters in Sweida.<sup>2714</sup> The GoS used pro-government gangs called '*shabiha*' to suppress the protests with violence.<sup>2715</sup> 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.<sup>2716</sup> 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'.<sup>2717</sup>

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.<sup>2718</sup> As reported in January 2021, the killing of GoS forces and elements of NDF has reportedly increased in Sweida governorate.<sup>2719</sup>

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.<sup>2720</sup> 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.<sup>2721</sup> 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.<sup>2722</sup> 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.<sup>2723</sup>

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.<sup>2724</sup> 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,

<sup>2712</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2713</sup> Daher, J., State institutions and regime networks as service providers in Syria, European University Institute, 25 June 2020, [url](#), p. 22

<sup>2714</sup> HRW, Syria, Protesters describe beatings, arrests, 28 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2715</sup> USIP, How will new U.S. sanctions impact Syria's conflict?, 17 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2716</sup> SOHR, Al-Suwaydaa, regime security forces release all young men arrested in June demonstrations, only one driven to mandatory service, 10 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2717</sup> 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

<sup>2718</sup> NPA, Assassination of government forces on the rise in Syria's Suwayda, 14 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2719</sup> NPA, Assassinations of government forces on the rise in Syria's Suwayda, 14 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2720</sup> Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, Syria weekly conflict summary 11-17 January 2021, 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>2721</sup> SOHR, With machine guns and RPGs, clashes in Sweida leaves injuries, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2722</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2723</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Insecurity in southern Syria: Tracking Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda, (January – February 2021), ORSAM, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 7-8

<sup>2724</sup> 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'.<sup>2725</sup> During the period between March 2020 and March 2021, *sulh* mechanism<sup>2726</sup> 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 2018<sup>2727</sup>) and local armed groups in western Sweida.<sup>2728</sup> Eight Brigade has reportedly sought to prevent Druze population to access their agricultural land<sup>2729</sup> 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.<sup>2730</sup> 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.<sup>2731</sup> 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.<sup>2732</sup>

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 civilians<sup>2733</sup> and was described as having been chaotic in Sweida's southern countryside during the past six months.<sup>2734</sup>

Residents of the governorate of Sweida have accused GoS-affiliated forces of tolerating or even supporting criminal networks operating in the province.<sup>2735</sup> 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'.<sup>2736</sup>

### 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.

<sup>2725</sup> Rollins, T., Kidnappings, cross-border clashes threaten increasingly fragile status quo in Syria's South, MEI, 20 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2726</sup> 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

<sup>2727</sup> Al-Jabassini, A., The Eight Brigade: striving for supremacy in Southern Syria, EUI, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>2728</sup> Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal "Sulh" and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>2729</sup> COAR, The Syrian economy at war, Part 1: Armed group mobilisation as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, 30 September 2020, [url](#), S. 8

<sup>2730</sup> Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal "Sulh" and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>2731</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2732</sup> Enab Baladi, Three military moves by 'Eight Brigade', efforts to increase its strength, 17 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2733</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2734</sup> NPA, Local military group formed in Syria's Suwayda, 17 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2735</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2736</sup> Al-Jabassini, A. and Ezzi, M., Tribal "Sulh" and the politics of persuasion in volatile southern Syria, EUI, 22 March 2021, [url](#), p. 10



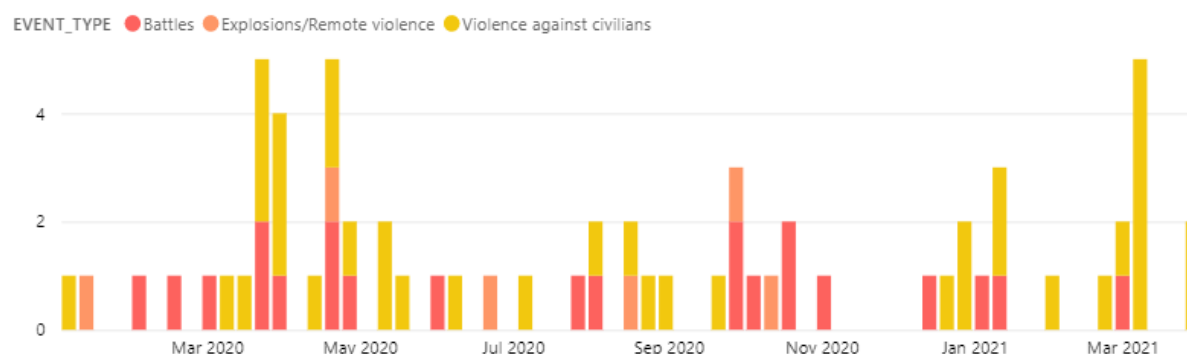


Figure 52: Evolution of security events coded battles, explosions/remote violence and violence against civilians in Sweida governorate between January 2020 and March 2021, based on ACLED data<sup>2737</sup>

Sweida governorate – Security incidents			
District	Battles	Remote violence	Violence against civilians
Sweida	12	4	28
Salkhad	6	1	4
Shahba	4	1	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>38</b>

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.<sup>2738</sup>
- 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.<sup>2739</sup>
- On 3 April 2020, armed men blocked a road near by the town of Al-Mazra'a and kidnapped a civilian on a motorcycle.<sup>2740</sup>
- 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.<sup>2741</sup>

Between 5 and 28 February 2021 several cases of kidnapping were reported by SOHR in Sweida.

<sup>2737</sup> EASO analysis based on publicly available ACLED data. ACLED, Curated Data Files, Middle East (9 April 2021), [url](#)

<sup>2738</sup> SOHR, Two paramedics kidnapped in rural Al-Suwaidaa, 6 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2739</sup> SOHR, Insecurity in al-Suwaidaa increases: citizens kidnapped near military checkpoints, 26 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2740</sup> SOHR, As tension continues in al-Suwaidaa countryside, unidentified gunmen kidnap a young man in al-Mazra'a town, 3 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2741</sup> 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).<sup>2742</sup>
- On 13 March 2021, unknown armed men kidnapped a man at a farm nearby Al-Darah village in western Sweida governorate.<sup>2743</sup>

#### 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.<sup>2744</sup>
- 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.<sup>2745</sup> The mine has reportedly been planted by ISIL when they were in control of the area in the past.<sup>2746</sup>

#### 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.<sup>2747</sup>
- 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.<sup>2748</sup>
- On 27 March 2020, violent clashes took place between local factions in Sweida and armed men of Bosra al-Sham.<sup>2749</sup>
- 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.<sup>2750</sup>

<sup>2742</sup> SOHR, Security Chaos, two unidentified men found dead in western Sweida, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2743</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2744</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2745</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2746</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2747</sup> SOHR, Insecurity in al-Suwaia increases: citizens kidnapped near military checkpoints, 26 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2748</sup> SOHR, After kidnapping one of their members, "Sheikh al-Karama" forces attack security centers in Salkhad and detain officers, 23 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2749</sup> SOHR, As tension continues in al-Suwaia countryside, unidentified gunmen kidnap a young man in al-Mazra'a town, 3 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2750</sup> 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'.<sup>2751</sup>
- 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.<sup>2752</sup> Nearby the same area, earlier on 9 March 2021, two dead bodies of unknown men were discovered.<sup>2753</sup>
- On 29 March 2021, armed men shot and killed a young man from Um al-Rumman town in the southern countryside of Sweida.<sup>2754</sup> 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.<sup>2755</sup>

#### 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.<sup>2756</sup> 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.<sup>2757</sup>
- 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.<sup>2758</sup> 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.<sup>2759</sup>

#### 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	-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>2</b>

<sup>2751</sup> SOHR, Security chaos in southern Syria, gunmen attack cargo truck on Damascus-Al-Suwaiaa road, 5 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2752</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2753</sup> SOHR, Security chaos, two unidentified men found dead in western Sweida, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>2754</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2755</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2756</sup> IranWire, Iran militia battered by Israeli air raids in Syria, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2757</sup> ISW, Syrian situation report: 24 June – 6 July 2020, 6 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2758</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2759</sup> 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)<sup>2760</sup> and 58 civilian fatalities (VDC data).<sup>2761</sup> 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.<sup>2762</sup> For instance, 14 people were killed in January<sup>2763</sup>, 29 people were killed in March<sup>2764</sup>, 14 people were killed in April<sup>2765</sup>, 4 people were killed in May<sup>2766</sup>, 8 people were killed in June<sup>2767</sup>, 9 people were killed in August<sup>2768</sup>, 24 people were killed in September<sup>2769</sup>, 7 people were killed in October<sup>2770</sup>, 12 people were killed in November<sup>2771</sup> and 8 people were killed in December 2020.<sup>2772</sup>

### *Infrastructure damage and explosives remnants of war*

Sweida governorate has been spared extensive damage in the conflict, compared to other areas of Syria.<sup>2773</sup> 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

<sup>2760</sup> 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

<sup>2761</sup> Based on monthly civilian fatalities figures for 2020-2021 shared by VDC with EASO

<sup>2762</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2763</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2764</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2765</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2766</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2767</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2768</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2769</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2770</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2771</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2772</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2773</sup> 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.<sup>2774</sup>

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.<sup>2775</sup>

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.<sup>2776</sup>

### *Displacement and return*

In the period between January and December 2020, UNOCHA recorded 998 IDPs movements within Sweida governorate.<sup>2777</sup> In January and February 2021, no IDP movement was reported by UNOCHA from Sweida to other governorates or from other governorates to Sweida.<sup>2778</sup> and 50 IDPs return spontaneously during the same period (including from locations within Sweida).<sup>2779</sup> In March 2021, UNOCHA recorded 19 IDP movements from Sweida governorate and 127 IDP return movements from the governorate.<sup>2780</sup>

During the period between January to December 2020, UNOCHA recorded 50 return movements within the Sweida governorate and 833 return movements from Sweida governorate.<sup>2781</sup>

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 5<sup>th</sup> Corps affiliates. According to the source, these Christians were forced to flee in 2014.<sup>2782</sup>

<sup>2774</sup> Carter Center (the), Explosive Weapons Contamination in Syria, Report 1, Southern Syria: As Sweida, Daraa, and Quneitra Governorates, November 2019, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>2775</sup> Global Shelter Cluster, Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter/NFI Sector Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021, 1 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

<sup>2776</sup> Suwayda24, 2020 حصىلة 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](#)

<sup>2777</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements overview, Jan-December 2020, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2778</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements, January 2021, n.d., [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements, February 2021, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2779</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, spontaneous IDP returnee movements overview, Jan-December 2020, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2780</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2781</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, IDP movements overview, Jan-December 2020, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2782</sup> 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		388		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. <sup>2783</sup>
1973	President Assad removes the constitutional requirement that the president must be a Muslim. The army suppresses ensuing riots. <sup>2784</sup>
October 1973	Syria and Egypt launch attacks on Israel. Syria fails to retake the Golan Heights and hostilities end in a ceasefire. <sup>2785</sup>
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. <sup>2786</sup> 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'. <sup>2787</sup> 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.' <sup>2788</sup>
1980	Islamist resistance to the Assad government grows. <sup>2789</sup> After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Muslim groups instigate uprisings and riots in Aleppo, Homs and Hama. <sup>2790</sup> 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. <sup>2791</sup>
December 1981	The Golan Heights are formally annexed by Israel. <sup>2792</sup>
February 1982	Muslim Brotherhood attacks on government and uprising in the city of Hama is suppressed in a month-long siege by the army. <sup>2793</sup> An estimated 10 000 to 25 000 civilians are killed. <sup>2794</sup> 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. <sup>2795</sup>
1990	Iraq invades Kuwait. Syria joins the US-led coalition against Iraq. <sup>2796</sup>

<sup>2783</sup> CIA, World Factbook, Syria, updated 31 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2784</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2785</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2786</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2787</sup> New York Times (The), Syrian Troops Leave Lebanon After 29-Year Occupation, 26 April 2005, [url](#)

<sup>2788</sup> AI, Syria: Briefing to the Committee Against Torture, 20 April 2010, [url](#), pp. 12-13

<sup>2789</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2790</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2791</sup> CFR, Remembering the Hama Massacre, 2 February 2012, [url](#)

<sup>2792</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2793</sup> CFR, Remembering the Hama Massacre, 2 February 2012, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2794</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center, The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1 February 2012, [url](#)

<sup>2795</sup> Ismael, Q., The Hamah Massacre - February 1982, Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence, 22 December 2009, [url](#)

<sup>2796</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

2000	President Assad dies and is succeeded by his second son, Bashar. <sup>2797</sup>
2005	Syrian forces withdraw from Lebanon under international pressure following the assassination of Lebanese premier Rafiq al-Hariri <sup>2798</sup> , a critic of Syrian presence in Lebanon. <sup>2799</sup>
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. <sup>2800</sup>
July 2011	A group of SAA defectors announce the formation of the Free Syrian Army. <sup>2801</sup>
August 2011	The Syrian National Council is formed in Istanbul, claiming to be the official representative of the Syrian opposition. <sup>2802</sup>
November 2011	OHCHR estimates that at least 3 500 civilians had been killed by GoS forces since March 2011. <sup>2803</sup>
November 2011	Al Qaeda affiliate Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) forms the Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) in Syria. <sup>2804</sup> 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. <sup>2805</sup>
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. <sup>2806</sup>
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. <sup>2807</sup> Rebels capture the eastern half of Aleppo city. <sup>2808</sup>
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. <sup>2809</sup> The following month, the US, UK, France, Turkey and Gulf states formally recognise opposition National Coalition as 'legitimate representative' of Syrian people. <sup>2810</sup>
March 2013	Raqqa is captured by rebels. The FSA, Nusra Front and ISI all operate in Raqqa. <sup>2811</sup>
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. <sup>2812</sup> US sources estimated that 1 400 persons were killed in the attack. <sup>2813</sup> UN investigation confirmed the attack was carried out

<sup>2797</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2798</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2799</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2800</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2801</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2802</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2803</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 23 November 2011, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>2804</sup> US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>2805</sup> Counter Extremism Project, Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), n.d., [url](#), p. 3

<sup>2806</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2807</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2808</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#); USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2809</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#); Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2810</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2811</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2812</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2813</sup> 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. <sup>2814</sup>
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. <sup>2815</sup>
January 2014	ISIL captures Raqqa city, which becomes its capital. <sup>2816</sup>
January-February 2014	UN-brokered peace talks in Geneva fail, as Syrian authorities 'refuse to discuss a transitional government'. <sup>2817</sup>
June 2014	GoS holds presidential election. Assad wins the election with some 90 % of the vote. The opposition dismiss the results of the election. <sup>2818</sup>
June 2014	The UN and EU <sup>2819</sup> designated terrorist organisation <sup>2820</sup> ISIL declares 'caliphate' <sup>2821</sup> in territory from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in eastern Iraq. <sup>2822</sup> 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. <sup>2823</sup>
September 2014	US and a coalition of Arab countries launch air strikes against ISIL around Aleppo and Raqqa. <sup>2824</sup>
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. <sup>2825</sup>
February 2015	ISIL militants abduct at least 200 Assyrian Christians in north-eastern Syria. <sup>2826</sup> Most of them were released by February 2016 after ransom was paid to ISIL. <sup>2827</sup>
March 2015	The Nusra Front and several allied militias capture the city of Idlib. <sup>2828</sup>
May 2015	ISIL captures the ancient city of Palmyra in central Syria. <sup>2829</sup> Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) Islamist rebel alliance takes control of Idlib governorate, putting pressure on GoS-held Latakia. <sup>2830</sup>

<sup>2814</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2815</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2816</sup> Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2817</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2818</sup> Reuters, Assad wins Syria election with 88.7 percent of votes: speaker, 4 June 2014, [url](#)

<sup>2819</sup> European Council, Council of the European Union, EU terrorist list, n.d, [url](#)

<sup>2820</sup> UN Security Council, Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends One Entry on Its Sanctions List, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2821</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2822</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2823</sup> USDOS, 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>2824</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2825</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2826</sup> Reuters, Islamic State in Syria abducts at least 150 Assyrian Christians, 25 February 2015, [url](#)

<sup>2827</sup> BBC News, Islamic State 'releases Assyrian Christian hostages', 22 February 2016, [url](#)

<sup>2828</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2829</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2830</sup> 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. <sup>2831</sup>
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. <sup>2832</sup>
October 2015	YPG and other armed groups merge to form the Syrian Democratic Forces. US deploys its first military forces in Syria. <sup>2833</sup>
December 2015	Homs is recaptured by GoS forces. Rebels are allowed to evacuate. <sup>2834</sup>
March 2016	GoS forces, with Russian and Hezbollah support, recapture Palmyra from ISIL. <sup>2835</sup>
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. <sup>2836</sup>
December 2016	GoS forces, backed by Russian air support and Iranian-sponsored militias, recapture Aleppo city. <sup>2837</sup> 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'. <sup>2838</sup> 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. <sup>2839</sup>
January 2017	The Nusra Front merged with four smaller militant groups and rebranded itself as Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS). <sup>2840</sup> The US <sup>2841</sup> , UN, EU <sup>2842</sup> and Turkey has designated HTS as a terrorist organisation affiliated with Al Qaeda. <sup>2843</sup>
March 2017	Airstrikes suspected to deploy a chemical weapon agent hit the Latamneh area in the suburbs of Hama, injuring up to 70 persons. <sup>2844</sup> 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. <sup>2845</sup>
April 2017	Between 80 <sup>2846</sup> and 100 civilians <sup>2847</sup> 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

<sup>2831</sup> HRW, World Report 2016 - Syria, 27 January 2016, [url](#)

<sup>2832</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#); BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2833</sup> US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>2834</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2835</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Timeline of events Timeline of events, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>2836</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2837</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#); USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2838</sup> AI, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 37

<sup>2839</sup> OHCHR, Statement by the Commission of inquiry on Syria on the situation of civilians affected by the capture of Aleppo, 14 December 2016, [url](#)

<sup>2840</sup> Wilson Center, Al Qaeda's Latest Rebranding: Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, 24 April 2017, [url](#)

<sup>2841</sup> USDOS, Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 5 - Al-Nusrah Front, 1 November 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2842</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2843</sup> HRW, Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group, 28 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2844</sup> UOSSM, Breaking: Chemical Weapons Attack in Latamneh, Hama Injures 70, 30 March 2017, [url](#)

<sup>2845</sup> UN News, Syrian air force used deadly chemical weapons in 2017 attacks, global watchdog finds, 8 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2846</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2847</sup> US CRS, Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response, 12 February 2020, [url](#), p. 3



	which warplanes had flown the mission'. <sup>2848</sup> 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. <sup>2849</sup> In September 2017, a UN investigation found the Syrian government responsible for the chemical attack. <sup>2850</sup>
October 2017	The US-backed SDF defeat ISIL and retake Raqqa, after a four month campaign in which the city was largely destroyed. <sup>2851</sup> The battle of Raqqa 'was marked by violations committed by all sides and came at an extremely high cost to civilians'. <sup>2852</sup> 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'. <sup>2853</sup> Around 6 000 ISIL fighters were killed during the campaign. <sup>2854</sup> 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'. <sup>2855</sup>
January 2018	Turkey together with FSA factions launch Operation Olive Branch <sup>2856</sup> , an offensive on northern Syria aimed at ousting Kurdish forces controlling the area around Afrin. <sup>2857</sup>
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. <sup>2858</sup> 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'. <sup>2859</sup> 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'. <sup>2860</sup>
July 2018	GoS recaptures almost all of the south of the country <sup>2861</sup> , including Da'ra governorate. <sup>2862</sup>

<sup>2848</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2849</sup> 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](#)

<sup>2850</sup> Al Jazeera, Syria forces behind Khan Sheikhoun gas attack: UN probe, 6 September 2017, [url](#)

<sup>2851</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2852</sup> 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

<sup>2853</sup> AI, Syria: Unprecedented investigation reveals US-led Coalition killed more than 1,600 civilians in Raqqa 'death trap', 25 April 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2854</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2855</sup> HRW, World Report 2018 - Syria, 18 January 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2856</sup> 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

<sup>2857</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2858</sup> AI, Human rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2018 - Syria [MDE 24/9903/2019], 26 February 2019, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>2859</sup> 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

<sup>2860</sup> 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

<sup>2861</sup> BBC News, Syria profile – Timeline, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2862</sup> 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. <sup>2863</sup> Syria and Russia claimed that rebels were responsible, but rebel groups denied the allegation. <sup>2864</sup>
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. <sup>2865</sup> 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'. <sup>2866</sup> Since losing its territorial control in Syria, ISIL operated as a covert network <sup>2867</sup> , retaining 'clandestine networks in a number of Syrian cities, and an insurgent presence in much of rural Syria'. <sup>2868</sup>
April 2019	GoS forces with Russian air support intensify airstrikes against rebel-held areas in north-west Syria. <sup>2869</sup> Further escalation of hostilities took place in July and August. <sup>2870</sup> 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'. <sup>2871</sup> 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. <sup>2872</sup>
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'. <sup>2873</sup>
December 2019 –	Military hostilities between GoS and anti-GoS armed groups increased significantly in parts of Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo

<sup>2863</sup> BBC News, Syria war: Aleppo 'gas attack' sparks Russia strikes, 25 November 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2864</sup> Bellingcat, Open Source Survey of the Alleged November 24 2018 Chemical Attack in Aleppo, 28 November 2018, [url](#)

<sup>2865</sup> Wilson Center, Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2866</sup> 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

<sup>2867</sup> 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

<sup>2868</sup> USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 38

<sup>2869</sup> USIP, Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad, 2 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2870</sup> 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

<sup>2871</sup> HRW, World Report 2020 - Syria, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2872</sup> 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

<sup>2873</sup> 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. <sup>2874</sup> The GoS offensive resulted in high number of civilian casualties <sup>2875</sup> and over 1 million people displaced between December 2019 and February 2020. <sup>2876</sup> 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. <sup>2877</sup>
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. <sup>2878</sup> The list is available <a href="#">here</a> . 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. <sup>2879</sup> The list is available <a href="#">here</a> . In July 2020, a second round of sanctions was imposed by USDOS which included 14 new designations, including President Assad's eldest son, Hafez. <sup>2880</sup>
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. <sup>2881</sup>

<sup>2874</sup> 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

<sup>2875</sup> UN, Security Council: Syria, 28 February 2020, [url](#); OHCHR, Press briefing note on Syria, 18 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2876</sup> UNOCHA, Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement on Northwest Syria, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2877</sup> Al Jazeera, Turkey says Idlib ceasefire details largely agreed on with Russia, 12 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2878</sup> EU Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No 36/2012 concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria, 28 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2879</sup> USDOS, Syria Caesar Act Designations, 17 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2880</sup> AP News, US slaps sanctions on Syrian president's eldest son, 29 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>2881</sup> Al Jazeera, Civilians flee Ain Issa, northeast Syria as clashes escalate, 27 December 2020, [url](#); COAR, Syria in 2021, 28 January 2021, [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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