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## **In the Shadows of Gaza: The Unseen Escalation in Syria and its Repercussions**

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Due to the overwhelming international attention on the current war in Gaza, the significantly escalated violence in Syria has gone largely unnoticed. Yet, these dynamics require attention from the international community, both for the deteriorating humanitarian situation on the ground and the growing risk that minor miscalculations could escalate into a full-blown regional war.

Hamas' Oct. 7 surprise attack was the deadliest day for Israel since its founding. The government of Israel (Goi) responded with full-scale bombing and an invasion of Gaza. These events led quickly to increased polarization and tensions in the Middle East. Since then, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) entered into a limited war with Lebanese Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and conducted airstrikes in Syria, U.S.-Iran confrontations increased with more than 40 Iran-supported [attacks](#) against U.S. bases in Northeast Syria as of mid-November, and the Houthis in Yemen [declared](#) war on Israel. This has raised fears of the conflict escalating beyond Israel and Palestine into a regional war as other Iranian-backed forces enter the fray.

While Israel and Palestine have experienced some of the worst violence in over 70 years, this has coincided with an escalation of violence in neighboring Syria. In fact, October recorded the worst violence since the implementation of the March 5, 2020, ceasefire. And UN OCHA has documented the [displacement](#) of approximately 120,000 people in Syria since Oct. 5, 2023.

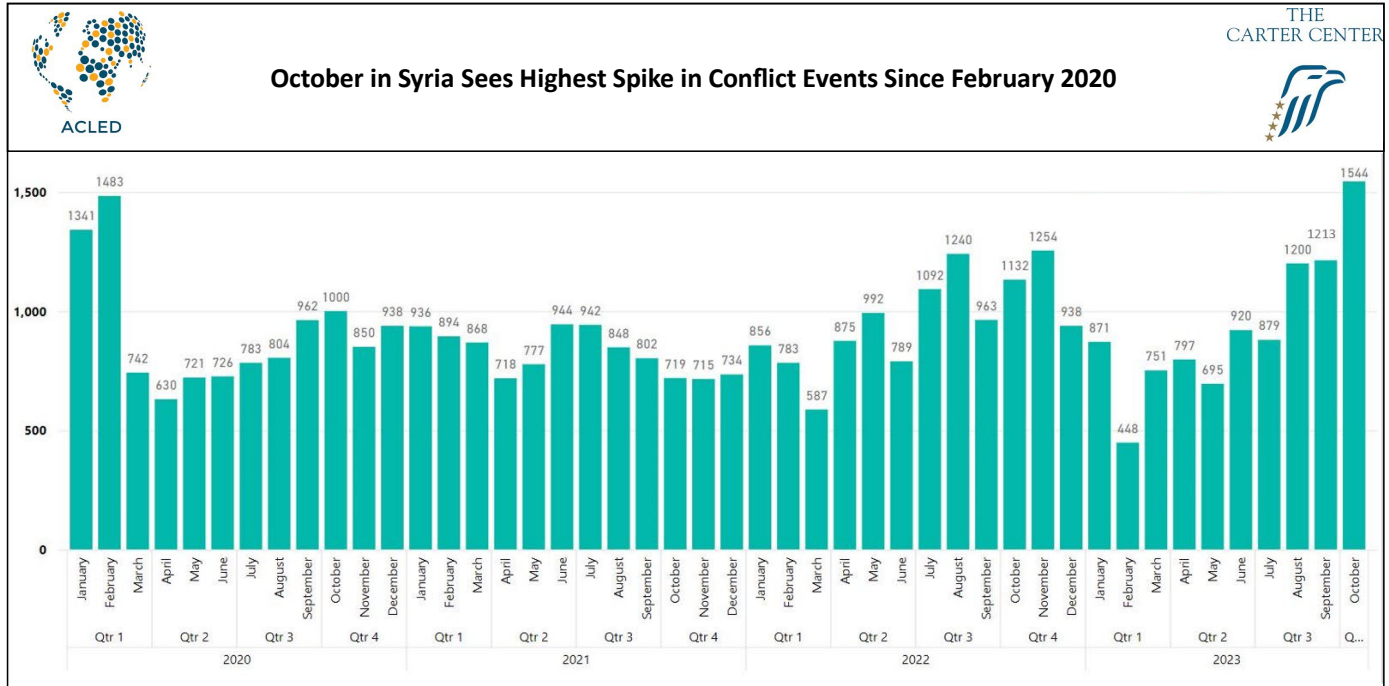


Figure 1: This graph shows total conflict events recorded in Syria since January 2020. Data from [ACLED](#) and The Carter Center.

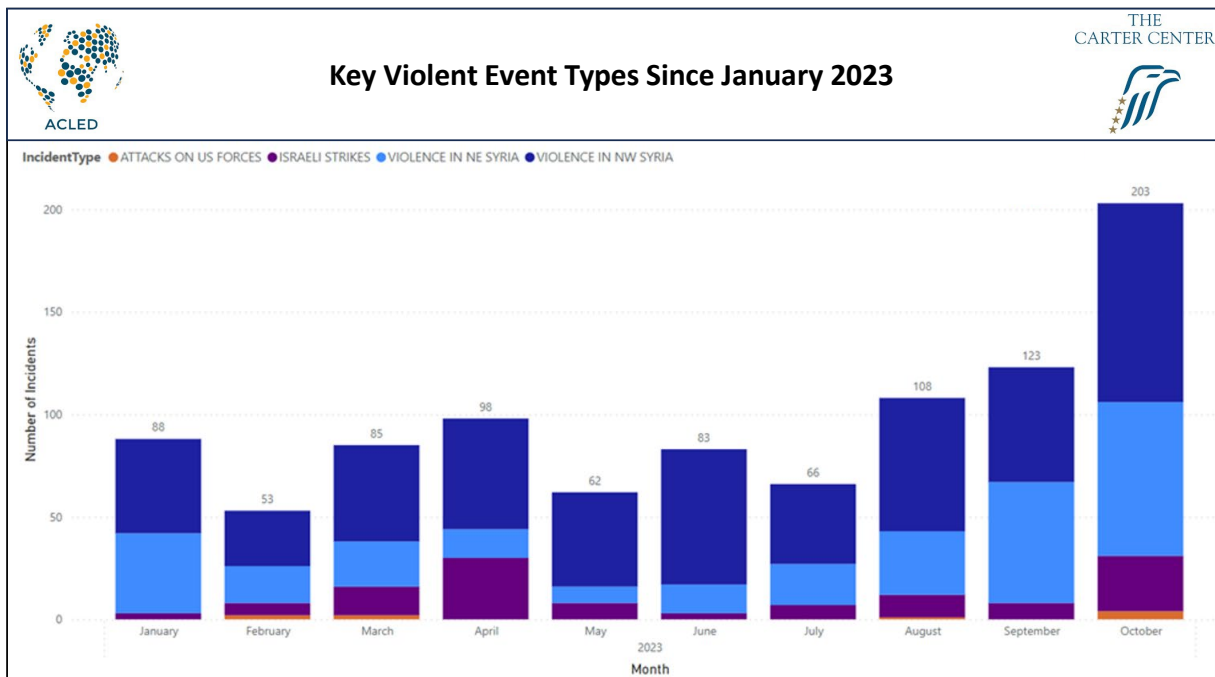


Figure 2: The graph shows conflict events related to GoS-opposition fighting in NW Syria, the Turkish-SDF conflict in NE Syria, Israeli airstrikes, and Iran-U.S. confrontations on Syrian territory since January 2023. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

## Escalating dynamics in Northwest Syria

On Oct. 5, 2023, a drone attack on a Government of Syria (GoS) graduation ceremony at the Homs Military Academy [killed](#) 89 people and injured 270 others. This was one of the deadliest attacks on GoS soldiers and civilians in years. The GoS blamed the attack on “terrorists” (a term usually used in reference to the armed opposition), though no opposition group claimed responsibility for the attack. After promising to respond in “full force,” the GoS and its allies began to bomb opposition-controlled areas in northwest Syria, particularly Idlib Governorate. Since this attack, there has been a sharp increase in aerial bombardments and shelling exchanges between the GoS and the armed opposition in northwest Syria. These are the highest levels since the start of the March 5, 2020, ceasefire which largely froze the frontlines. According to UN OCHA’s Oct. 27 [update](#), 70 people, including 27 children, have been killed in the latest uptick of violence. There were also [reports](#) from prominent human rights organizations that the GoS and its allies used cluster and incendiary munitions against civilian areas in northwest Syria.

The drone attack occurred after increasing domestic instability for the GoS. The GoS had some international victories, such as its readmittance into the Arab League and Assad’s recent trip to China, his first since the start of the Syrian war. Yet, domestic troubles remain. Dara’a Governorate continues to experience violence between its many factions, As-Sweida Governorate witnessed some of the largest sustained protests since the Syrian revolution in 2011, and the attack in Homs represented a serious security breach deep into GoS-controlled territory.

## Increased Iran-U.S. confrontations

The U.S.’s military presence in Syria has often come under attack from Iranian-backed forces. Additionally, Iranian-backed groups have often [targeted](#) the U.S. in response to Israeli airstrikes in Syria. In early 2023, reporting indicated that Iran, Russia, and the GoS were [coordinating](#) to oust U.S. forces from Syria. This was accompanied by an increase in Iranian-backed militias targeting U.S. military assets in northeast Syria. However, tensions [de-escalated](#) after Iran [agreed](#) to free five imprisoned Americans in exchange for the U.S.’s release of \$6 billion in confiscated UN assets.

The outbreak of the recent Israel-Hamas war further complicated U.S.-Iran relations. The U.S. [moved](#) several of its ships to the Mediterranean Sea. Due to Iran’s support to Hamas, the U.S. and Qatar [agreed](#) to block Iran from accessing any of the \$6 billion. This has led to one of the biggest increases in Iranian-backed attacks against U.S. forces in Tanf and northeast Syria. The U.S. has occasionally responded with air and missile strikes against Iranian-backed positions in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. [Reportedly](#), there have been 43 attacks on U.S. forces between Oct. 7- Nov. 17, with the U.S. responding with three rounds of airstrikes against Iranian targets in Syria.

## Turkish Airstrikes in Northeast Syria

In addition to the Iranian-backed airstrikes on U.S. bases in northeast Syria, Turkey initiated airstrikes on northeastern Syria. According to local observers, they are the worst seen since Turkey’s 2019 *Operation Peace Spring*. Turkish airstrikes have targeted civilian infrastructure and [impacted](#) water and electricity for residents in northeast Syria. Pro-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) news sources [claimed](#) in the initial days of the bombing that at least 47 civilians were killed in Turkish airstrikes.

The bombings were initiated after Oct. 1, 2023 when the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) claimed [responsibility](#) for a suicide bombing in Ankara. Turkey responded with airstrikes targeting PKK bases in

northern Iraq. On Oct. 4, Turkey [claimed](#) the attackers were trained in Syria in a thinly veiled reference to the Kurdish-led SDF. Turkey views the SDF as an extension of the PKK and considers the territory it controls in northeast Syria as a threat to its national security. Mazloum Abdi, the commander-in-chief of the SDF, [denied](#) that the Ankara attack came from or traversed Syria.

Regardless, Turkish airstrikes against SDF-controlled territories in northeast Syria increased. On Oct. 5, U.S. armed forces [downed](#) a Turkish drone, citing concerns that the unmanned aircraft had ventured too close to their military base in Al-Hassakah Governorate. A NATO force, specifically the U.S., attacking another NATO member, like Turkey, would perhaps have elicited greater concern if it was not for the outbreak of violence in Israel and Palestine.

The controversy around the SDF has been tricky for the U.S. to balance. The U.S. is closely aligned with the SDF as well as other NATO countries, including Turkey. The U.S. continues to have a military presence in SDF-controlled territory, with the relationship particularly focused on anti-ISIS operations. Over the past few years, Russia and the U.S. had to apply diplomatic pressure to stop Turkish offensives in northeast Syria.

### **Rising Israeli Airstrikes in Syria**

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Israel has regularly carried out [airstrikes](#) and intelligence [operations](#) in Syria. Israeli airstrikes primarily focus on preventing arms transfers to Hezbollah in Lebanon as well as attacking assets close to the Iranian military. As Syria's frontlines were frozen, Israeli airstrikes increased starting in 2021. In the past, Israel would inform its Russian counterparts of airstrikes to prevent any encounters or escalation. But with new tensions after Russia [hosted](#) a Hamas delegation, Israel has picked up the pace of airstrikes and stopped [informing](#) Russia of incoming Israeli airstrikes. Since Oct. 7, Israel has attacked the airports in Damascus and Aleppo multiple times, temporarily putting them out of service. According to ACLED data, Israel carried out 25 military strikes in Syria in October 2023. In contrast, Israel had conducted 25 military strikes total between July 1-Sept. 30.

### **Conclusion**

Prior to the outbreak of the latest Israel-Hamas war, Syria was already witnessing one of the worst escalations of violence since the March 5, 2020, ceasefire. The violence in northwest and northeast Syria was largely independent of unfolding developments in Israel and Palestine. Instead, it was driven by Turkish-SDF tensions in the northeast and GoS-opposition clashes in the northwest. While the global spotlight remains fixated on the unfolding developments in Gaza, it is important for the international community to collaborate to de-escalate violence in Syria, re-energize a trustworthy political process, and strive for the reviving of a comprehensive and lasting nationwide ceasefire while adopting a cooperative strategy to counter the terrorist threat. The heightened tensions in Syria, which manifested in the rise of Israeli airstrikes and Iranian-U.S. exchanges, carry the risk of a spillover effect. The ongoing developments across northern Syria further jeopardize the already precarious humanitarian conditions for civilians. To address both the humanitarian crisis and contribute to regional peacemaking, it is crucial for observers and policymakers to direct attention towards the deteriorating situation in the war-torn country and mitigate risk for further escalation.

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