

THE
CARTER CENTER



Quarterly Review of Syrian Political and Military Dynamics October-December 2022

Acknowledgments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Carter Center's latest quarterly assess the latest political and security dynamics in the Syrian conflict: (1) Russia's increased focus on Ukraine has led to a reshuffling of its forces in Syria; (2) Turkish President Erdoğan's difficult reelection campaign has influenced a partial outreach to the Government of Syria (GoS), raising the specter of a potential reconciliation between the two countries. This caused concern among opposition groups who have relied on Turkey for political and military support; (3) Turkish armed forces carried out an air campaign against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in retaliation for the November terrorist attack in Istanbul, which Turkish authorities accorded to the PKK and its Syrian affiliate the YPG; (4) Throughout central and southern Syria, anti-ISIS operations partially stemmed the group's capabilities. But concerted and coordinated action is needed to eliminate the group militarily, and a political solution is needed to provide stability and provide good governance in territories formerly controlled by ISIS; (5) Tensions among the various factions of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) provided an opportunity for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to clash with subordinate SNA forces; (6) Tensions among the various factions of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) provided an opportunity for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to clash with subordinate SNA forces; and (7) INGOs and other international organizations worked to quickly battle the cholera outbreak in Syria.

Summary of security-related developments:

- There was a 94% increase in conflict this quarter between the Turkish armed forces and the Kurdish Led SDF after an alleged Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) attack in Istanbul.
- Fighting between the armed opposition and the GoS decreased, but Russian armed forces increased the number of airstrikes in northwest Syria.

- HTS fought against the 3rd Corps of the SNA, temporarily taking control of Afrin, Aleppo Governorate.
- The 8th Brigade in coordination with the Central Committee of Dara'a and multiple local former opposition groups carried out anti-ISIS operations in Dara'a Governorate, killing the organization's leader.
- Despite the decrease in violence in Dara'a Governorate, tensions continued between the GoS armed forces and former opposition groups.

Conflict Events in Syria (Q2 2022 vs Q3 2022)			
Region	2022 Q4	2022 Q3	Change (%)
Northwest	1876	1932	-56 (-3%)
Aleppo Governorate	1149	992	+157 (16%)
Idlib Governorate	545	687	-142 (-21%)
Hama Governorate	118	163	-45 (-28%)
Lattakia Governorate	63	86	-23 (-27%)
Tartous Governorate	1	4	-3 (-75%)
South & Central	370	340	+30 (+9%)
Homs Governorate	56	41	+15 (+37%)
Rural Damascus Governorate	65	59	+6 (+10%)
Damascus	11	11	+0 (+0%)
Quneitra Governorate	7	9	-2 (-22%)
Dara'a Governorate	205	202	+3 (+1%)
As-Sweida Governorate	26	18	+8 (+44%)
Northeast	1085	971	+114 (12%)
Al-Hassakah Governorate	513	448	+65 (+15%)
Ar-Raqqa Governorate	259	269	-10 (-4%)
Deir-ez-Zor Governorate	313	254	+59 (+23%)
Syria Overall	3331	3243	+88 (+3%)



Nationwide Areas of Control
31 December 2022

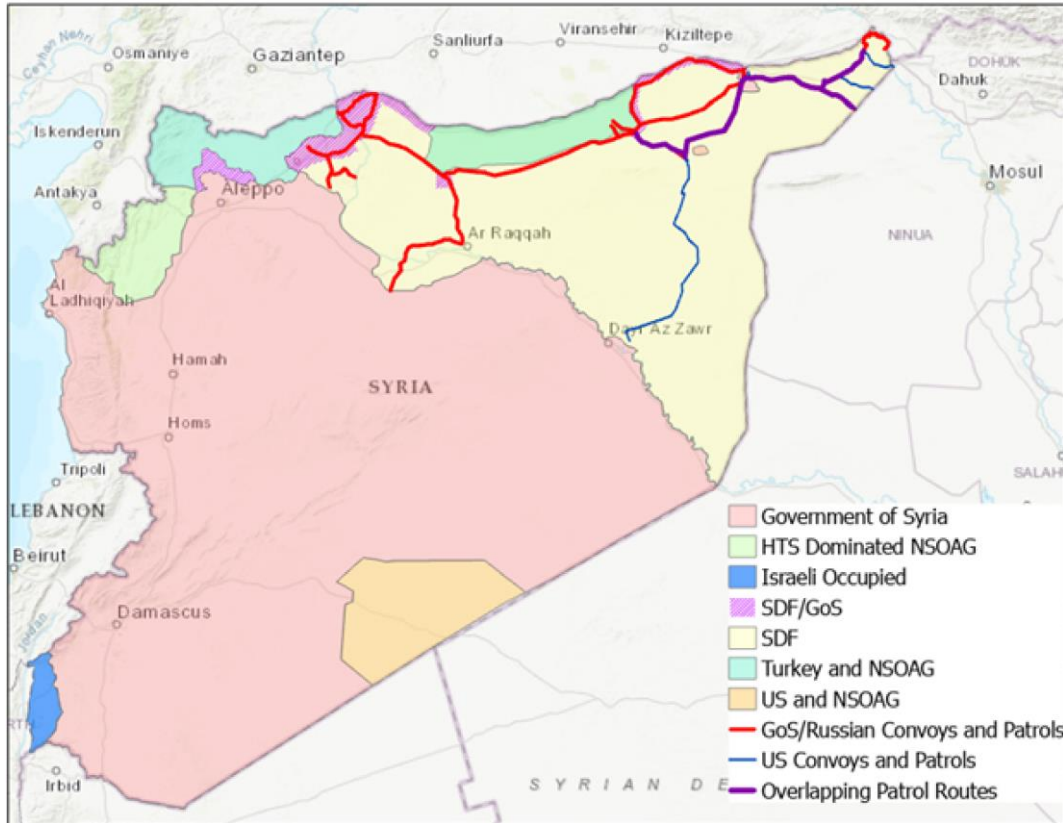


Figure 1: Dominant actors’ area of control and influence in Syria as of 31 December 2022. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1 on page 3.¹

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

Territorial Holdings in Syria by Faction 31 December 2022

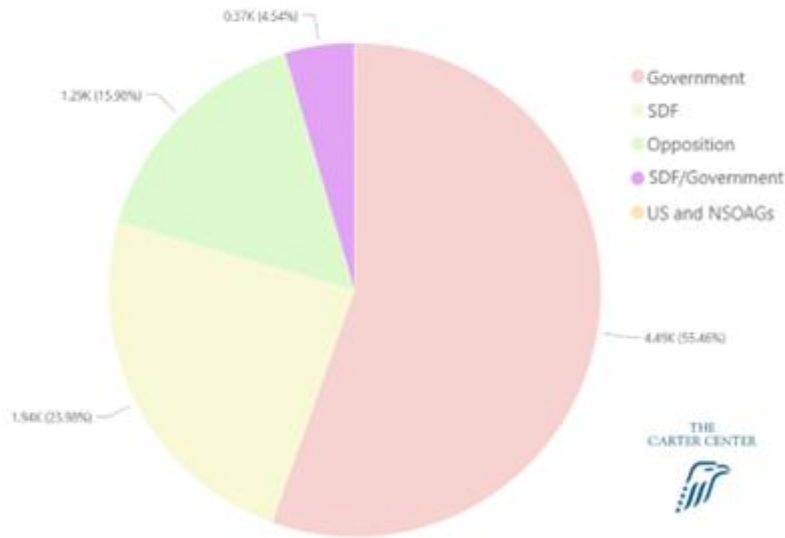


Figure 2: Breakdown of territorial holdings by party as of 31 December 2022. Note: US and NSOAGs control .037% of Syrian territory, represented as a slight sliver in the graph according to The Carter Center’s [Areas of Control Point Data](#).

Political Developments

Russian Reshuffles Position in Syria

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to a shifting of political and militant power dynamics on the ground in Syria as the Russian focus switches to their European operation. During this quarter, Russia partially withdrew their military presence in Syria, reassigning military leaders and fighter jets to their European combat theatre.² There were also reports of a Chechen group leaving Idlib Governorate to engage in anti-Russian combat in Ukraine³ and ceding parts of their territory in Syria. Russia has made it clear that they are not abandoning Syria and its strategic influence in the country is strong. Russia has a stake in de-escalating the Syrian crisis, as is evident by their role in facilitating Turkish-Syrian rapprochement and its stake in the Syrian energy sector.⁴ However, their conflict with Ukraine is impacting their ability to dedicate resources to Syria.

As Russia’s influence diminishes, the void is being filled by Turkey and Iran. With the Turkish presidential elections in May 2023, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan has steadily made overtures to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This tactical shift, marked by Ankara telling

² [General who led Syrian bombing is new face of Russian war \(AP News\)](#)

³ [Chechen fighters leave Syria to battle Russians in Ukraine \(AI Monitor\)](#)

⁴ [Moscow’s Original “Special Operation”: Why Russia Is Staying in Syria \(Carnegie Endowment\)](#)

Moscow to “clear” the SDF’s presence in Syria,⁵ indicates that Turkey and Syria could become closer allies as Erdoğan pushes for a strengthened foreign relations agenda as part of his reelection campaign. The Iranian presence in Syria is also projected to increase. Russia, who has previously been unresponsive to Iranian-Israeli tensions, has also sought a closer ally in Iran as the conflict in Ukraine continues, with Iran sending drones and weapons to Russia to assist in their Ukraine operation.⁶ Russia plays a vital role in mediating between the various international powers present in Syria. As it is forced to focus elsewhere, this could have negative consequences for the conflict in Syria as other actors try to fill the vacuum.

Negotiations between GoS and Turkey

On 28 December, the GoS and Turkish defense ministers met in Moscow. The meeting, the first of its kind in over a decade, addressed the ongoing civil war and the Syrian refugees in Turkey,⁷ thawing the trilateral relations between Ankara, Moscow, and Damascus. Turkish President Erdoğan is facing a difficult upcoming election with an inflationary economy, and an opposition party that desires full normalization with the GoS and calls for the return of Syrian refugees. This has partially influenced Turkey’s recent outreach to the GoS. Reports point to Russia as the key driver in the diplomatic process^{8, 9}

The potential easing of Syrian-Turkish relations received a mixed response. Iran praised the December 28 meeting, asserting it reflected well on the involved countries.¹⁰ However, the United States condemned the meeting, with the US Department of State stating that it does not “support other countries normalizing with the Assad regime”¹¹. In northwestern Syria, thousands of Syrian citizens reportedly took to the streets to protest the rapprochement.

Erdoğan signaled a readiness to resume discussions with GoS Bashar al-Assad; however, the GoS remains hesitant to advance peace discussions, demanding that Turkey first pull out of Syria entirely before normalizing relations.¹² Consequently, whether these initiatives will result in long-term normalized relations remains uncertain. There is a deep mistrust between Assad and Erdoğan due to years of proxy war and shifting Turkish stances on the GoS that may prevent permanent reconciliation. Further, GoS has outlined several demands from Turkey, including a full military retreat from northern Syria and to end Turkish support for certain anti-GoS Syrian opposition groups. If Turkey does not agree to some of those

⁵ [Erdogan tells Putin to 'clear' Kurdish forces from northern Syria \(France24\)](#)

⁶ [Iran and Russia find common ground through Syrian and Ukraine wars \(The Guardian\)](#)

⁷ [للمرة الأولى.. محادثات في موسكو بين وزراء دفاع ورؤساء استخبارات روسيا وتركيا وسوريا \(الجزيرة\)](#)

⁸ [Turkish-Syrian Re-engagement: Drivers, Limitations, and US Policy Implications \(Middle East Institute\)](#)

⁹ [Turkish-Syrian Re-engagement: Drivers, Limitations, and US Policy Implications \(Middle East Institute\)](#)

¹⁰ [وزير خارجية إيران: سعداء بالتقارب بين تركيا وسوريا وهناك اتفاق مع السعودية على استمرار الحوار وصولاً للتطبيع \(الجزيرة\)](#)

¹¹ [Department Press Briefing – January 12, 2023 \(US Department of State\)](#)

¹² [Syrian foreign minister: No normal ties with Turkey without end to occupation \(Reuters\)](#)

concessions, it may create increased tension between the two governments and delay – if not annul – the détente.

Cholera Outbreak

Following the declaration of the cholera outbreak in Syria on 10 September 2022, the disease has spread to all fourteen governorates in Syria and neighboring Lebanon. Between August and December 2022, there were 61,671 suspected cases, 1,686 confirmed positive cases, and 100 cholera-related deaths, with most cases occurring in northeastern and northwestern Syria¹³. Syrian internally displaced people (IDPs) are mostly affected due to difficulties in routing safe water supplies to IDP camps amid the ongoing war.¹⁴ The rapid increase in cases among all Syrians is mainly attributed to the widespread destruction of infrastructure in Syria (including Syrian wells), record-low water levels in the Euphrates River, and the degradation of health services and natural resources across the country¹⁵.

Public health officials are concerned that the overlapping humanitarian crisis and deteriorating security situation in heavily impacted areas will delay response to the cholera outbreak, the first of its kind in Syria since 2009. To mitigate the epidemic, UNICEF and WHO donated two million doses of the cholera vaccine in November 2022, which will be deployed in the most disease-prone governorates: Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hassakah, and Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁶ The first vaccines were officially administered in early December, and it is expected that, by November 2023, two million people will be vaccinated. The distribution of vaccines is part of the WHO's larger WASH movement, through which they will chlorinate the water, strengthen public health lab facilities and provide cholera kits to address the ongoing outbreak.

UNICEF and the WHO have warned that the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) initiative and vaccine distribution must be coupled with other humanitarian actions to stop the spread of cholera and other waterborne illnesses. Human Rights Watch stated that GoS' foreign relations, particularly with Turkey, which controls parts of the Syrian water supply, must improve, cross-line aid must be facilitated, and resources must be evenly allocated throughout Syria to ensure success in long-term cholera eradication in Syria and Lebanon¹⁷.

Military Dynamics

¹³ [Whole of Syria Cholera Outbreak Situation Report no. 10 Issued 18 December 2022 \(ReliefWeb\)](#)

¹⁴ [Cholera outbreak spreading rapidly affects thousands of people in Syria \(ReliefWeb\)](#)

¹⁵ [Cholera further exacerbates vulnerabilities in Syria \(WHO\)](#)

¹⁶ [Two million doses of oral cholera vaccines arrive in Syria \(UNICEF\)](#)

¹⁷ [Syria: Parties to Conflict Aggravate Cholera Epidemic \(Human Rights Watch\)](#)

SDF-Turkey Clashes



Conflict Between SDF and Turkey 1 October- 31 December 2022

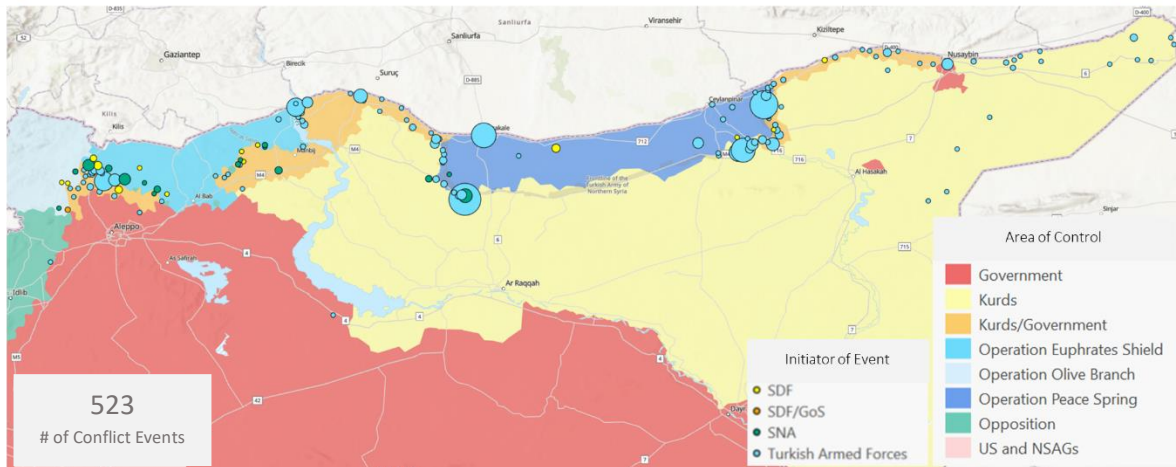


Figure 3: Conflict between Turkish armed forces and its allies against the SDF in northern Syria from October through December 2022. The largest bubble represents 34 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

ACLED and The Carter Center recorded 523 conflict events this quarter between various Kurdish armed groups and Turkish Armed Forces or Turkish-backed opposition groups. This is a 94% increase compared to the last quarter.¹⁸ This occurred in conjunction with the increase in hostile rhetoric from Ankara and a growing number of airstrikes in the region, notably under Turkish Air Force “Operation Claw Sword”.¹⁹ Aerial bombardment accounted for 15% of all conflict events, almost equivalent to the number of clashes between troops, accounting for 16% of all conflict events. (The remaining 69% is attributed to shelling.) Accordingly, this quarter saw an increase in drone strikes (29 events in Q3 respectively 44 events in Q4). This further suggests that Turkey is increasingly relying on air operations and long-range weapons instead of deploying ground troops in northeastern Syria, notably targeting Al-Hassakah Governorate. Nonetheless, Ankara signaled that this is only the beginning, clearing the way for a ground invasion.²⁰

Since May, Turkish President Erdoğan’s threat of a fourth Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria, targeting SDF, did not materialize in the last quarter of 2022.²¹ However, Turkish mobilization along the Turkish-Syrian border and the number of airstrikes targeting

¹⁸ Between July-September 2022, ACLED and the Carter Center recorded 270 conflict events in fighting between the various Kurdish armed groups and Turkish Armed Forces, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/2022/final--quarterly-conflict-summary-july-sept-2022final.pdf

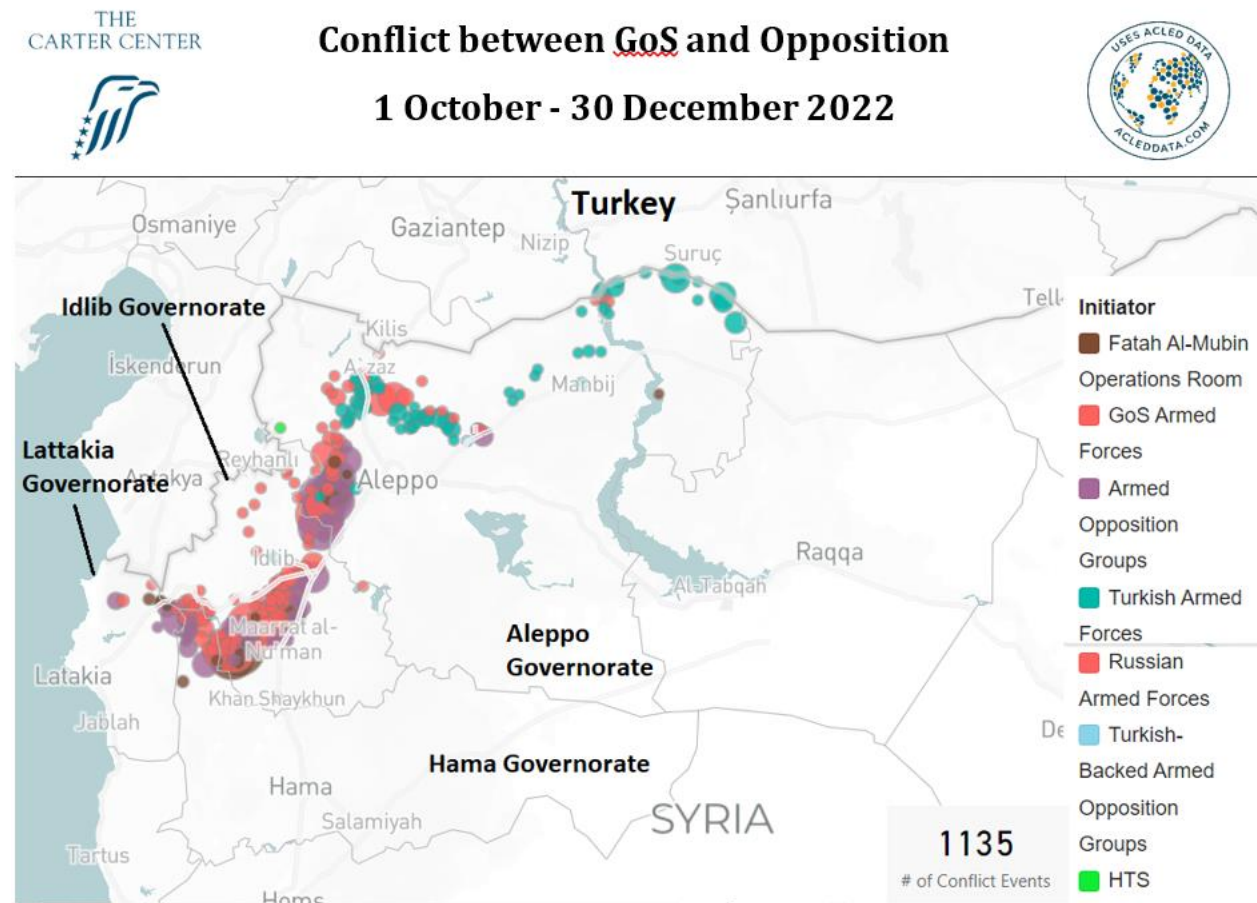
¹⁹ [Northeast Syria: Turkish Strikes Exacerbate Humanitarian Crisis \(Human Rights Watch\)](#)

²⁰ [Turkey will launch Syria ground operation after strikes - Erdogan \(BBC News\)](#)

²¹ [Questions and Answers: Turkey’s Threatened Incursion into Northern Syria \(Human Rights Watch\)](#)

SDF positions have intensified.²² A fear among SDF officials still lingers of an anticipated Turkish ground invasion.²³ SDF officials highlight the disastrous impact of such an invasion on the diversion of resources to contain ISIS, such as guarding prisons, housing thousands of detainees, or targeting ISIS sleeper cells.²⁴ While there has been no Turkish ground invasion yet, Turkey has stepped up its airstrikes in the region. On 20 November 2022, the Turkish Air Force launched "Operation Claw Sword", into northern Syria, as a retaliation for the Istanbul bombings, which they blamed on the PKK and its Syrian affiliate the YPG. The airstrikes have destroyed vital infrastructure and disrupted everyday life and security; a destabilizing factor in the region that might help revitalize ISIS.²⁵

Conflict Between the Government of Syria and the Armed Opposition



²² [Commander of Syrian Kurds calls on Biden to prevent Turkish invasion \(Politico\)](#)

²³ [U.S.-backed force in Syria wants 'stronger' U.S. warning for Turkey \(Reuters\)](#)

²⁴ [Syria Kurds halt joint ops with U.S.-led coalition after Turkish raids \(Reuters\)](#)

²⁵ [Turkey's operation against Kurds in Syria risks reviving IS group \(France24\)](#)

Figure 4: Conflict between GoS armed forces and armed opposition groups in northwest Syria from October through December 2022. The largest bubble represents 44 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Violent incidents decreased this quarter, notably in the form of shelling and clashes between the GoS armed forces and their allies against armed opposition groups. In the fourth quarter of 2022, ACLED recorded 1,135 conflict events between these actors. This is a decrease (-19.62%) from the 1,412 conflicts recorded in Q3. However, the number of aerial bombardments almost doubled from its Q3 levels. This can be partly explained by Russia being more active in Syria militarily than in Q3, with Russian airstrikes increasing from 9 in Q3 to 18 in Q4. Importantly, there was an increase in the number of armed clashes between armed opposition groups against the GoS and its Russian and Iranian allies in December, with the month accounting for 54 of the total 94 clashes reported during the quarter. Notably, HTS and its allies carried out more “inghimasi” attacks, or limited suicide raids by its specialized units, against GoS armed forces.²⁶ The increase in this use of tactics coincides with both criticism of HTS for attacking other opposition groups (see below) as well as indicating that it remains willing to attack the GoS.²⁷

In September 2022, the chair of the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic warned that Syria may yet again return to “larger-scale fighting”²⁸. Fortunately, this has not been the case with the general Q3-Q4 decline in conflict events between GoS armed forces and their allies against armed opposition groups. Most of the recorded conflict events involved artillery shelling, with the GoS armed forces and its allies initiating 656 of the total 1004 shelling events. There is little evidence that the underlying dynamics between the GoS and the opposition have changed. Instead, the shelling, accounting for almost 90% of all conflict events in Q4, is due to the lack of any military offensive and aims to weaken their opponents on the frontlines.

The decrease in conflict events has several potential causes; all of them relate to Russia and Turkey’s²⁹ ongoing strategic influence in Syria. HTS alleges that the Russian operatives serve as a tactical pressure on Turkey to initiate normalized relations with Syria³⁰, indicating that, even though Russian interests are increasingly revolving around Ukraine, they are maintaining their strategic power over Syria and continuing to serve as a critical stakeholder and ally for the GoS. For Turkey, shelling and clashes in northern Syria likely represent ongoing operations against the YPG, a Kurdish group designated a terrorist organization by the Turkish government. In late 2022, Turkey also announced an operation against SDF-

²⁶ ["عمليات" انغماسية "بالجملة" ... أهداف ودلالات التصعيد العسكري لـ"هيئة تحرير الشام" \(Syria.TV\)](#)

²⁷ [رسائل العمليات "الانغماسية" لـ"تحرير الشام" شمالي سوريا \(عنب بلدي\)](#)

²⁸ [Syria could return 'to larger-scale fighting', UN warns \(Al-Jazeera\)](#)

²⁹ [Frozen Syria? Assessing the state of play and opportunities for engagement \(MEI\)](#)

³⁰ [Russian warplanes hit targets in northwest Syria \(Al Monitor\)](#)

controlled areas of northeastern Syria in response to the November 2022 Istanbul bombing³¹, which Ankara states was carried out by the PKK/YPG.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's incursion into Turkish-held Syria

The opposition in northwest Syria remains divided among two major groups/alliances: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib Governorate, and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) in Aleppo Governorate. The SNA is primarily composed of former Free Syrian Army groups but has resulted in a divided organization with numerous factions that have been prone to infighting. HTS's survival and governance project in Idlib Governorate depends on Turkey's continued protection, although tensions between the two parties remain.³² The fractious nature of the SNA has provided an opportunity for HTS to exploit it. Several times in the past, and as recently as June 2022, HTS has provided support for friendly SNA factions in their internal conflicts.³³ Although agreements were made and territories were returned to the status quo, it showed the increasing power and influence that HTS had among certain SNA factions.

On 7 October,³⁴ the activist Muhammad Abd Al-Latif "Abu Ghanoum" and his pregnant wife were killed in Al-Bab city in Aleppo Governorate by alleged fighters from the Hamza Division of the SNA.³⁵ The Third Corps of the SNA (with its two largest factions: the Levant Front and Jaysh Al-Islam) arrested the Hamza Division fighters and confiscated the local headquarters of the group, leading the Hamza Division to mobilize its fighters.³⁶ This led to clashes, primarily between the Third Corps and the Hamza Division and its ally, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, leading the former to expel the Hamza Division from several areas in Afrin in eastern Aleppo Governorate.³⁷ On 12 October, HTS entered the Turkish-held Aleppo Governorate, on the side of Hamza and the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division.³⁸ HTS's military offensive led to the group successfully taking over Afrin city and the surrounding areas and pushing out the Third Corps to Azaz.³⁹ Fighting finally stopped on 17 October after the intervention of Turkey and the SNA- Thaeroun Front for Liberation.⁴⁰ On 19 October, HTS

³¹ [Turkish forces nearly ready for a Syria ground operation -officials \(Reuters\)](#)

³² [The Armed Opposition in Northwest Syria \(The Carter Center\), Power Through Strength: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham solidifying control in northwest Syria \(Syria Conflict Mapping Project\)](#)

³³ [Quarterly Review on Syrian Political and Military Dynamics \(The Carter Center\)](#)

³⁴ [\(Syria.TV\) الحكاية من البداية ..كيف أشعل اغتيال "أبو غنوم" في الباب كامل ريف حلب؟](#)

³⁵ [\(Syria.TV\) باتهام مباشر لـ"الحمزات" .. قضية اغتيال "أبو غنوم" أمام "محكمة لاهاي" الدولية](#)

³⁶ [\(Syria.TV\) البيان الأول لـ"الحمزات" .. إعلان النفير العام وتهديد بالانتقام من ناشطي الباب](#)

³⁷ [7 min read | 'Accountability, or fall': Syrian National Army's Hamza Division under fire after assassination of opposition activist in northern Aleppo \(Syria Direct\)](#)

³⁸ [\(Syria.TV\) لماذا تحالفت "تحرير الشام" مع "الحمزات والعشقات"؟ وما السيناريوهات القادمة؟](#)

³⁹ [تحرير الشام "تقتحم عفرين" و"الفيلق الثالث" ينسحب نحو اعزاز \(للمزيد\) عنب بلدي](#)

⁴⁰ [\(عنب بلدي\) تدخل تركي عبر "هيئة ثائرون" يجمد الاقتتال في ريف حلب للمزيد](#)

withdrew most of its forces from Afrin, although reports indicated that some HTS-linked fighters remained in the area.⁴¹ As of this report, the status quo of territorial control returned to what it was before HTS’s offensive, but Afrin and other bordering areas remain under the control of SNA factions friendly to HTS.

Without Turkish support, the SNA remains a relatively weak organization with many competing factions to unify. HTS has taken advantage of these divisions and was able to control a large swath of Turkish-held territory temporarily. It was only after Turkish pressure that it decided to withdraw. This raises important questions about the future of the SNA, how Turkey will respond to these provocations, and it also raises the concern of some countries that HTS could take over and effectively sideline the remaining opposition groups in Syria.

Attacks against Former Opposition Fighters and GoS Armed Forces in Dara’a Governorate

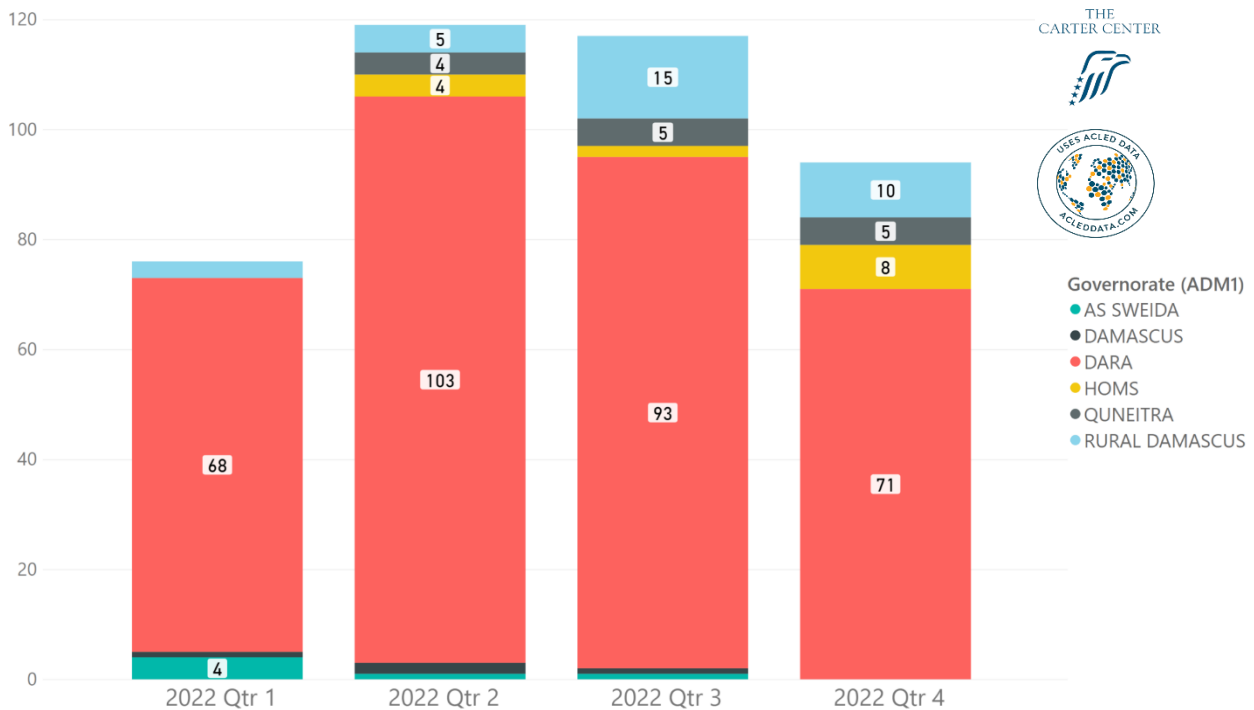


Figure 5: Attacks against former opposition fighters and GoS armed forces in southern Syria in 2022. The y axis is the number of total conflict events reported. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

In 2018, the GoS armed forces and its allies launched Operation Basalt, which ended with the GoS reconquering Dara’a Governorate and the rest of southern Syria. As part of the operation, the GoS and Russia allowed some opposition fighters to reconcile, deferring their

⁴¹ تحرير الشام “شمالى حلب ..إعلان الخروج والإبقاء على الأذرع للمزيد) عنب بلدى”

military conscription in exchange for turning over their heavy weapons. As a result, thousands of fighters formerly associated with the armed opposition were allowed to remain active, albeit theoretically accepting GoS rule over the governorate. However, tensions between the former opposition and the GoS armed forces persist, leading to a wide range of assassinations by unidentified actors. Although the perpetrators are unknown, GoS officials and the former opposition representatives blame each other for the attacks. During the reporting period, there was a decrease in reported events of unidentified attackers targeting former opposition fighters and GoS soldiers in southern Syria in reported 94 incidents. 71 of these attacks took place in Dara'a Governorate. In the past, this has led to prolonged violence and sieges of cities by GoS armed forces, particularly in Dara'a Governorate.

At the end of August, GoS armed forces besieged the town of Jasim in Dara'a Governorate on the pretext of wanting to eliminate ISIS cells in the area. This led to some clashes between local armed groups and the GoS. At the end of September, the situation remained unresolved. As GoS pressure mounted and an offensive seemed imminent, local officials in Jasim agreed to fight the ISIS cells in the city to avoid a GoS offensive.⁴² Alongside the 8th Brigade and the Central Committee of Dara'a, local Dara'a groups carried out multiple anti-ISIS operations in Jasim and nearby areas in mid-October. After a suicide bombing failed to assassinate a major former FSA commander in Dara'a city, these same groups began to target cells belonging to former opposition figures allegedly connected to ISIS. An audio call was leaked suggesting that these former opposition figures had pledged loyalty to ISIS and were responsible for numerous attacks on the 8th Brigade and other local groups, a charge both figures denied.⁴³ This led to a new round of anti-ISIS operations led by the 8th Brigade. These operations resulted in the killing of high-level ISIS officials, and a temporary reduction of tension between different GoS factions and the former opposition (see below). During the anti-ISIS operations, attacks by unidentified actors decreased in Dara'a Governorate, with only 12 incidents in November compared to 31 in October. However, the number of attacks doubled in December, suggesting this was only a temporary lull.

Despite the operations against ISIS, the underlying dynamics are unlikely to shift drastically.⁴⁴ While ISIS might have committed some of the assassinations, tensions between the former opposition groups and different GoS factions persist. However, the resurgence of ISIS points out the dangers of the security vacuum in Dara'a Governorate and the threat of more violence. Since 2018, the former opposition and GoS forces have frequently engaged in sieges that have negatively impacted civilian life and allowed ISIS cells to regroup. If the GoS factions and former opposition groups do not work to create a more stable and equitable situation in the south, violence will persist.

The Battle Against ISIS

⁴² [فصائل محلية تقتل قياديين من تنظيم "الدولة" في درعا للمزيد \(عناب بلدي\)](#)

⁴³ [Former opposition and military security-linked groups battle 'IS cells' in Daraa \(Syria Direct\)](#)

⁴⁴ [Uprooting ISIS may not stop Daraa assassinations \(Enab Baladi\)](#)



The Battle Against ISIS

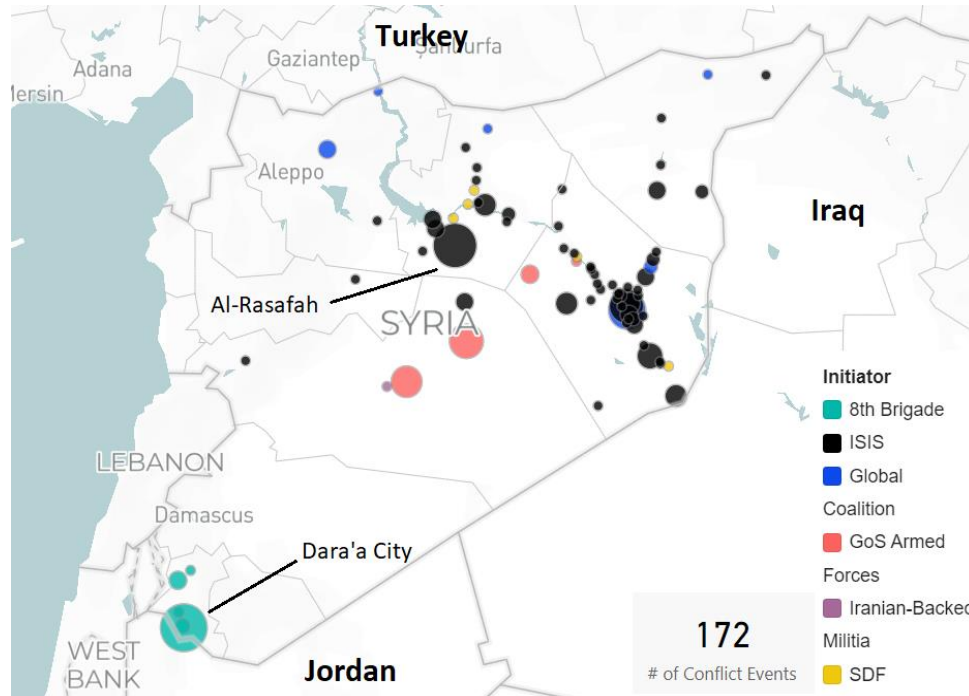


Figure 6: Incidents involving ISIS between October-December 2022. The largest bubble represents 14 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the fourth quarter of 2022, there was an increase in overall conflict events involving the Islamic State, as recorded by ACLED. There were 172 ISIS-related conflict events compared to 144 in the previous quarter. Notably, Q4 is the first quarter in 2022 that saw an increase in ISIS-related conflict events, disregarding the ISIS prison break attempt in Al-Hassakah city in January 2022. Moreover, the ISIS conflict events in Q4 were relatively evenly distributed across the last three months of 2022, although successively increasing. Analysts argue that without continual military action against ISIS, the group will regroup.⁴⁵

In October 2022, the GoS and its allies launched a new anti-ISIS operation in Central Syria, temporarily decreasing ISIS’s activities in the region.⁴⁶ However, there was a rise in ISIS activities in December as GoS operations ended and ISIS possibly received reinforcements from other arenas.⁴⁷ According to ISIS expert Gregory Waters, 2022 saw a significant reduction in the number of ISIS attacks in the Badia desert region compared to 2021.⁴⁸ Yet,

⁴⁵ [ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in September 2022 \(Counter Extremism Project\)](#)

⁴⁶ [ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in October 2022 \(Counter Extremism Project\)](#)

⁴⁷ [ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in December 2022 \(Counter Extremism Project\)](#)

⁴⁸ [CEP Report: Central Syria’s ISIS Insurgency In 2022 \(Counter Extremism Project\)](#)

the number of overall casualties inflicted by ISIS are persistent, suggesting that their capability remains and they are choosing their attacks more carefully.

A significant anti-ISIS operation was carried out in Dara'a Governorate as the 8th Brigade, Central Committee, and other local Dara'a groups fought against ISIS cells present in the city. The anti-ISIS operations occurred throughout October and November, resulting in major clashes across the governorate. In particular, two former opposition leaders were accused of sheltering ISIS and carrying out attacks on their behalf, a charge they deny.⁴⁹ Perhaps most surprising was the 30 November announcement by ISIS that said its leader, Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, was killed. The U.S. Central Command later confirmed that he was killed in Dara'a Governorate in mid-October, most likely in Jasim City.⁵⁰ This announcement suggests that even the local groups responsible for killing the ISIS leader were unsure of his true identity, speaking to how well ISIS hid the true extent of its leadership in Dara'a Governorate.⁵¹

While ISIS has suffered a serious loss, these events have shown that it continues to endure and has started to play a bigger role in places such as southern Syria. Although these anti-ISIS operations do help stem the group's capabilities, concerted and coordinated action is needed to eliminate the group militarily, and a political solution is needed to provide stability in territories formerly controlled by ISIS. Short of radical solutions, ISIS will take advantage of the instability and complex antagonistic politics between the actors to assert itself.

Unexploded Ordnance in Syria

⁴⁹ [ISIS is back in the open in southern Syria \(Middle East Institute\)](#)

⁵⁰ [ISIS leader's death raises intriguing questions \(Middle East Institute\)](#)

⁵¹ [ISIS leader's death raises intriguing questions \(Middle East Institute\)](#)



Unexploded Ordnance in Syria

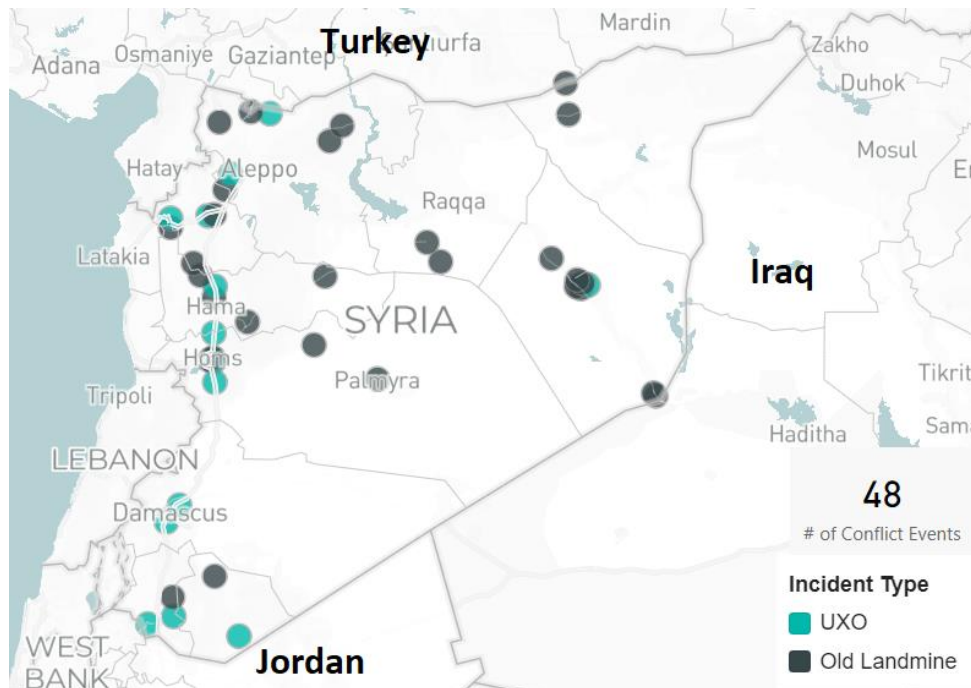


Figure 7: Detonations of old landmines and unexploded ordnance in Syria between October-December 2022. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Unexploded ordnance (UXO) remains an important issue in Syria. The impact of UXO and leftover landmines continues to impact the day-to-day lives of civilians. This quarter, there were 48 reported incidents of civilians or others killed by old landmines and other UXO. Children especially have been vulnerable to UXOs and landmines. Throughout the year, the Syrian Civil Defense documented at least 32 incidents of UXO and old landmines injuring or killing civilians in northwest Syria alone.⁵² Some cities, particularly those formerly controlled by ISIS, still face significant contamination due to the high number of explosives used and the number of IEDs used by the terrorist group.⁵³ While mine action groups have continued to remove old landmines and UXOs, their efforts have been limited due to the ongoing conflict in Syria and the sanctions regime, whereby critical equipment for demining is held up at international ports due to sanctions over-compliance. This impact will only continue as UXO build up from the high explosive weapon usage.

The Carter Center released a report mapping unexploded ordnance in Syria between December 2012 – May 2021, which can be viewed in [StoryMaps](#) here or in [PDF](#) form here.

Conclusion

⁵² قتيلاً بسبب مخلفات الحرب شمال غربي سوريا في 2022 للمزيد (عنبلدي 29)

⁵³ [Unprecedented levels of contamination in Raqqa \(ReliefWeb\)](#)

There were several dangerous escalations in the final quarter of 2022. HTS took advantage of the dysfunction of the SNA to temporarily take over Turkish-held territory. Fighting between the Turkish armed forces and the SDF escalated after an alleged PKK attack in Istanbul. Finally, Dara'a Governorate witnessed one of its deadliest periods since the siege of Dara'a al-Balad in 2021. Turkish and Syrian ministers also made steps that hinted towards reconciliation, but normalization remains a difficult and far-reaching goal to achieve. The chaos and fighting between the various parties to the Syrian conflict have allowed space for ISIS to continue operating. Without a careful and inclusive political solution, this will lead to more instability in the country, to the detriment of all its citizens.

For earlier conflict summaries, please click [here](#). For an interactive map of historical areas of control in Syria, please click [here](#).

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