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The Quarterly Review on Syrian Military and Security Dynamics | January-March 2022

Acknowledgements

This report was authored by Hari Prasad, program associate, Jennifer Hudson and Jackson Schneider, Carter Center interns for spring 2022, and Hampton Stall, senior program associate of the Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program. In addition, the report was made possible thanks to the comments and feedback of Carter Center Staff.

SYRIA SUMMARY

The war in Syria remains frozen this quarter with little to no attempts by any of the belligerents to take new territory and continued stagnation in negotiations to end the war. The outbreak of war in Ukraine correlated with a decrease in conflict events in Syria concerns of combatants potentially traveling to eastern Europe to fight. In addition, Syria relies heavily on Russian wheat exports for its food supply. The war has caused food prices to soar in Syria and other parts of the region, leading to a massive increase in food insecurity. As the war in Ukraine continues, this could further impact dynamics in Syria. Unexploded ordnance (UXO) remains a major challenge across Syria with at least 248 reported detonations killing and maiming civilians since January 2021. Despite the lack of major military offensives, the number of civilians being impacted by UXOs have increased.

- **NORTHWEST** | Conflict activity in northwest Syria decreased by six percent between Government of Syria (GoS) and the armed opposition. Armed groups operating under the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) merged under the Azm Operations Room. Fighting between the Turkish armed forces and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued in northern Syria.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Attacks against GoS officials and fighters formerly associated with the opposition slightly decreased in southern Syria. Protests erupted in As-Sweida Governorate after the GoS cut subsidies to the region, coinciding with tensions between GoS armed groups and local As-Sweida militias.
- **NORTHEAST** | ISIS launched a major operation in Al-Hassakah Governorate that was repelled by the SDF and US armed forces. However, there was a slight decrease in reported conflict in northeast Syria this quarter.

Conflict Events in Syria (Q1 2022 vs Q4 2021)			
Region	2022 Q1	2021 Q4	Change (%)
Northwest	934	992	-58 (-6%)
South & Central	285	252	+33 (+13%)
Northeast	891	895	-4 (0%)
Syria Overall	2110	2139	-29 (-1%)



Nationwide Areas of Control
31 March 2022

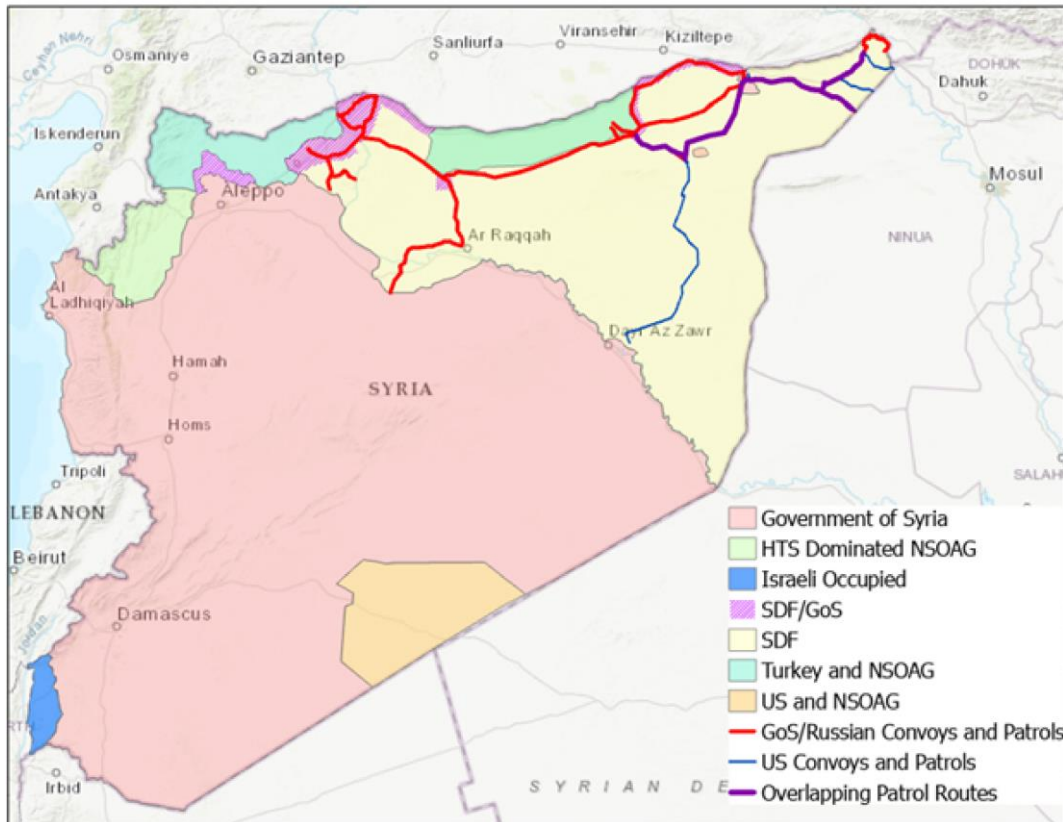


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 31 March 2022. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 1 on page 3.

Territorial Holdings in Syria by Faction 1 April 2022

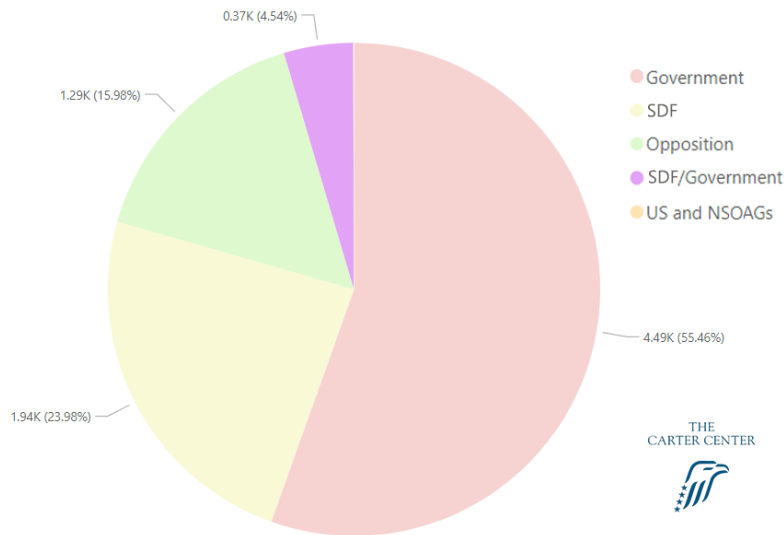


Figure 2: Breakdown of territorial holdings by party as of 1 April 2022. Note: US and NSOAGs control .037% of territory in Syria, represented as a slight sliver in the graph according to The Carter Center’s [Areas of Control Point Data](#).

NORTHWEST SYRIA¹

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](#).



Figure 3: Areas of control in northwest Syria. Data from The Carter Center.

During the first quarter of 2022, there was a decrease in overall conflict activity in northwest Syria from 992 to 934 conflict events. Similar dynamics to the previous quarter were evident in the Aleppo and Idlib governorates where over 80 percent of the activity in the northwest region took place. Nearly 90 percent of shelling and aerial bombardment in Idlib was conducted by the GoS and Russian armed forces, while nearly 70 percent in Aleppo Governorate was conducted by Turkish armed forces.

Clashes between armed groups also took place predominantly in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates. In Idlib Governorate, clashes were predominantly between the GoS and armed opposition groups, though there was also some infighting among armed opposition groups. In Aleppo Governorate, clashes were predominantly between the Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups and SDF, though there was also some infighting among Turkish-backed armed opposition groups. Conflict event counts for the first quarter of 2022 (2022 Q1) and fourth quarter of 2021 (2021 Q4) are collected in the table below:

Conflict Events in Northwest Syria (Q1 2022 and Changes)		
Governorate	2022 Q1	Change from Q4 (%)
Aleppo	420	+38 (+10%)
Idlib	357	-50 (-12%)
Hama	132	-30 (-18%)
Latakia	24	+1 (+4%)
Tartous	1	No Change
Northwest Overall	934	-41 (-4%)

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and its Impact on Syria

The invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces in February 2021 had a significant destabilizing effect on the Syrian conflict. The situation in Ukraine is very fragile, and the effects that the Russian invasion could have on Syria are largely dependent on the direction of the Russia-Ukraine conflict itself. The war in Ukraine has raised some concerns and rumors of Syrians travelling to fight in the conflict. Pro-opposition sources claim that Russia is preparing to draft over 40,000 Syrian soldiers affiliated with the regime forces to fight in Ukraine. According to Middle East Monitor, opposition forces in Syria have also expressed the desire to travel to Ukraine to fight alongside Ukrainian forces against Putin.² However, reports confirming the presence of Syrians in Russia or Ukraine are sparse to date. The war in Ukraine does cause concerns that tensions between the GoS and opposition forces that have been cooling as the Syrian conflict has stalled could heat up once more, yet in eastern Europe.

With heavy sanctions from the U.S. and EU, Syria relies heavily on Russian wheat exports for its food supply. The war has caused food prices to soar in Syria and other parts of the region, leading to a massive increase in food insecurity.³ Should the war in Ukraine continue, it may lead to an even more severe food shortage in Syria.

The Russian invasion has other geopolitical consequences for Syria and the course of its conflict. While trends in recent years have pointed toward Arab nations normalizing relations with the GoS, Damascus’s alliance with Russia may be a major setback in restoring diplomatic ties.⁴ Furthermore, the crisis in Ukraine has captured the attention of the international community, and pre-existing ongoing conflicts such as the war in Syria have fallen by the wayside: for example the Bab al-Hawa humanitarian border crossing, which requires UN approval to operate, is likely to be vetoed at the next opportunity.⁵

Conflict between the Government of Syria and the Armed Opposition

² <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220316-russia-drafting-thousands-from-syria-to-fight-in-ukraine/>

³ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/we-feared-dying-war-now-we-fear-dying-hunger-ukraine-crisis-propelling-hunger-syria>

⁴ <https://coar-global.org/2022/03/10/crisis-in-ukraine-impacts-for-syria/>

⁵ <https://coar-global.org/2022/03/10/crisis-in-ukraine-impacts-for-syria/>

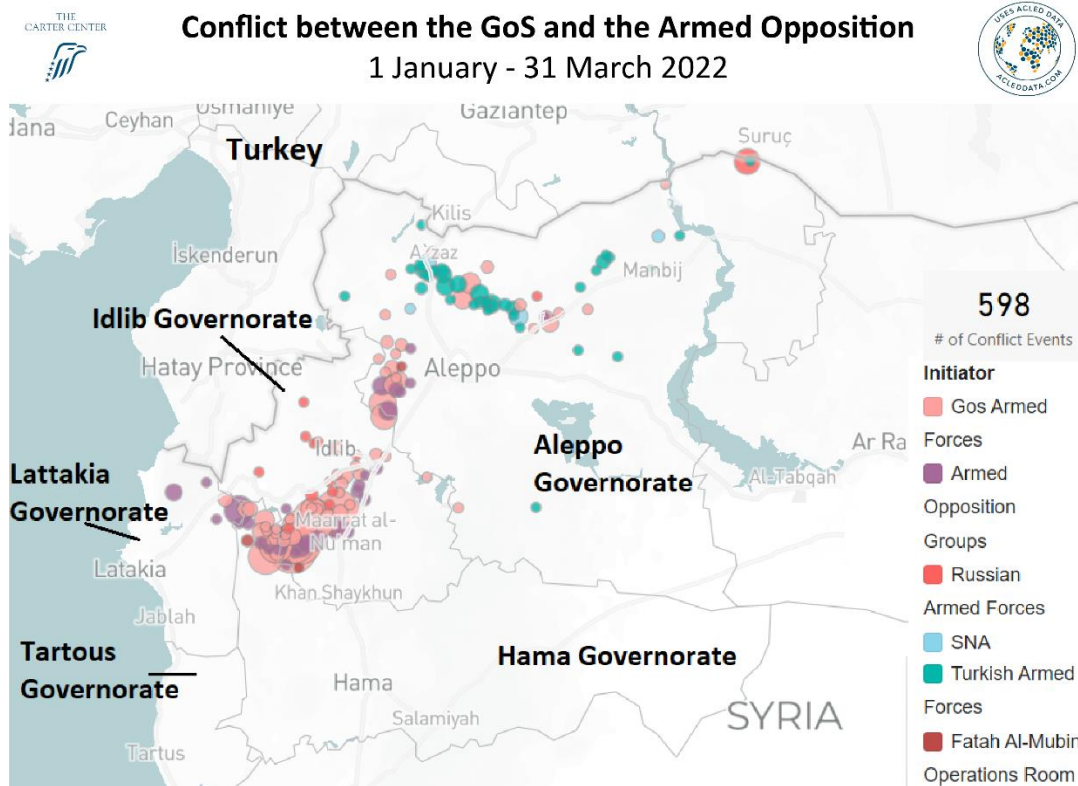


Figure 4: Conflict between GoS armed forces and armed opposition groups in northwest Syria from January to March 2022. The largest bubble represents 49 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the first quarter of 2022, there was a decrease in conflict, from 687 in the previous quarter to 602 events recorded between GoS armed forces and their allies on the one side and armed opposition groups on the other. This consisted of shelling, aerial bombardment, and clashes. Like trends throughout Syria, most of the conflict activity took place in January and decreased thereafter, with 255 conflict events in January, 218 in February, and 129 in March.

Most conflict events (~90%) were initiated by the GoS. Activity on the pro-government side was conducted primarily by GoS armed forces, with a substantial reduction in activity by Russian armed forces after January 24th, with 23 out of 30 reported airstrikes occurring taking place before January 24. Russian armed forces conducted 31 incidents of aerial bombardment and shelling, as compared to 408 incidents of aerial bombardment and shelling by GoS armed forces. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continued efforts to rebrand itself, including increasing efforts towards development projects,⁶ as well as efforts to expel

⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/syrian-ijihadist-leader-western-wear-opens-road-idlib>

foreign fighters through stricter security measures such as requiring resident identification cards for receipt of public services.⁷

Infighting and conflict within opposition-controlled territory

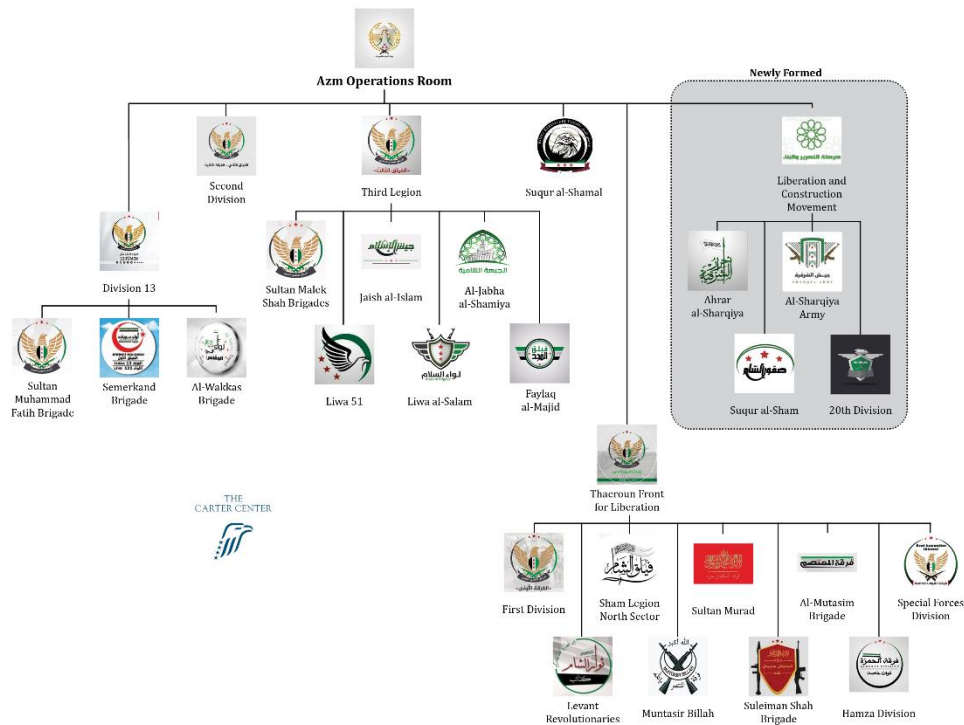


Figure 5: The composition of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army’s Azm Operations Room by 1 March 2022. Data from the Carter Center.

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) saw a sharp reduction in incidents of infighting this quarter, with only 11 incidents of infighting compared with 20 incidents in the previous quarter. This occurred alongside most of the SNA factions consolidating themselves under the Azm Operations Room. In January 2022, the Syrian Liberation Front and the Azm ‘Revolutionaries’ subgroup joined to form the Thaeeroun (ثائرون) Front For Liberation. This was followed by the creation of a new Azm subgroup, the Liberation and Construction Movement. These new mergers effectively saw most major SNA factions fall under the Azm umbrella.

⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/02/syrian-jihadi-group-tightens-noose-arab-foreign-fighters-idlib>

However, internal troubles continued in the Azm Operations Room. Abu Amsha, leader of the Suleiman Shah Brigade, faced his own issues as his group was found guilty of violations against civilians. On 16 February 2022, the SNA's judicial committee responsible for investigating Abu Amsha called for his dismissal.⁸ This led to tensions and concerns that a new bout of infighting could erupt in Aleppo Governorate. However, pressure from Turkish officials allowed Abu Amsha to keep his leadership position and continue operating.⁹ Although this internal tension has temporarily deescalated, it points to deeper issues within the SNA in resolving its hostilities between the SNA factions and holding its commanders accountable.

The Carter Center released a report on the developments within the Syrian National Army, which can be viewed in [StoryMaps](#) or in [PDF](#) form.

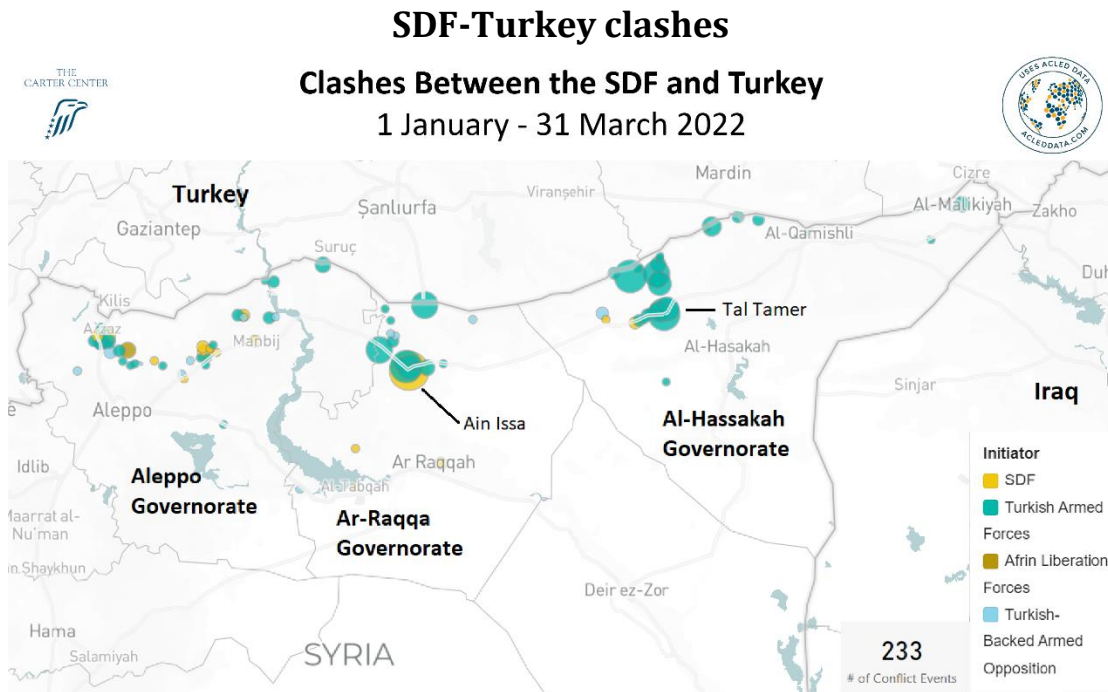


Figure 6: Conflict between Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups on one side and the SDF on the other between January and March 2022. The largest bubble represents 43 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the reporting period, conflict between various Kurdish armed groups and Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed opposition groups increased to 233 from 170 conflict events in the last quarter of 2021, which consisted of shelling, aerial bombardment, and clashes (112 in January, 75 in February, and 46 in March). Clashes between groups comprised 46 of these events, while 186 events consisted of shelling and aerial

⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/548580>.

⁹ <https://syriadirect.org/the-case-of-abu-amsha-how-commanders-of-turkish-backed-factions-in-northwestern-syria-go-unpunished/>

bombardment by Turkish armed forces and Turkish backed-opposition groups targeting SDF positions, an increase from 115 in the last quarter of 2021.

In early February, in conjunction with attacks on Kurdish targets in Iraq, Turkish armed forces shelled multiple Kurdish positions in northern Syria.¹⁰ On 2 February, SDF general commander Mazloum Abdi declared aerial bombardment by Turkish armed forces as a declaration of war.¹¹ Turkish-backed Azm Operations Room called for the targeting of SDF positions in northeast Syria in response to the SDF’s targeting of Azaz, Aleppo Governorate - which the SDF itself denies along with targeting of other areas under Turkish control.¹²

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

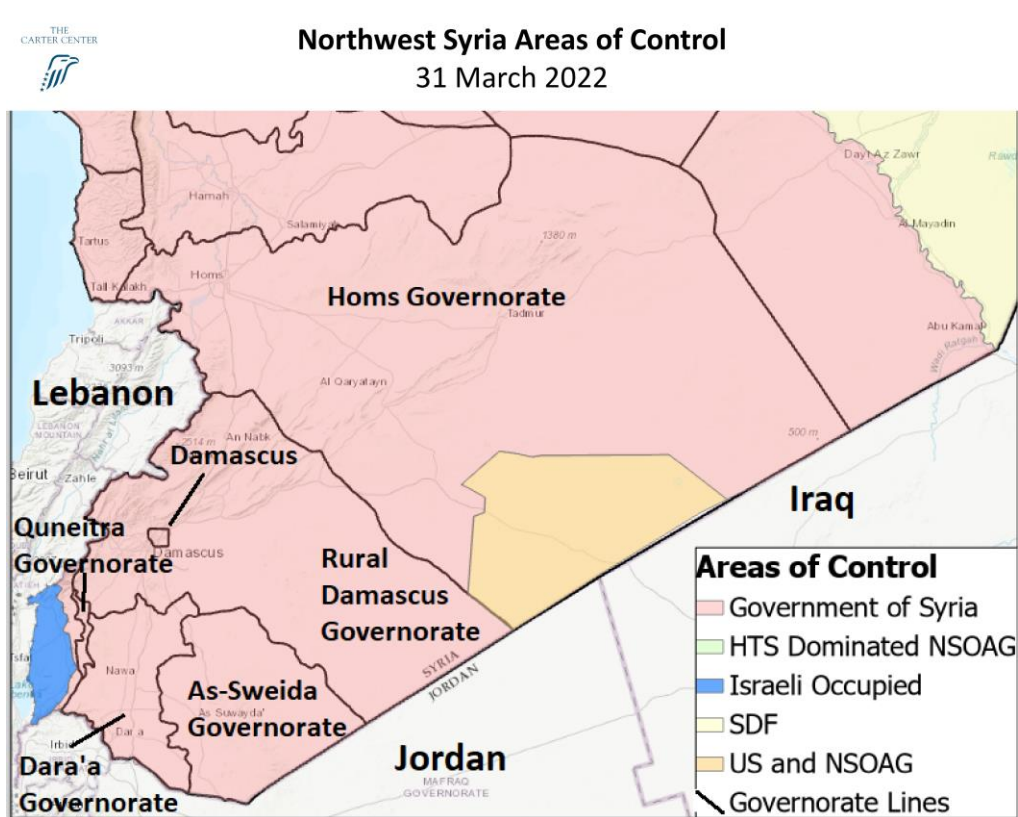


Figure 7: Areas of control in south and central Syria. Data from The Carter Center.

During the first quarter of 2021, there was a slight increase in conflict activity in southern and central Syria as compared to the previous quarter. Most of the increased activity occurred in As-Sweida Governorate as protests erupted over the cancellation of subsidies in the region. Dara’a Governorate remained the most active governorate in the region, accounting for nearly half of all recorded activity in southern and central Syria.

¹⁰ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220202-turkey-strikes-kurd-targets-in-iraq-syria>

¹¹ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/020220223>

¹² <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/559056>

Conflict Events in South & Central Syria (Q1 2022 and Changes)		
Governorate	2022 Q1	Change from 2021 Q4 (%)
Dara'a	140	+9 (+7%)
As-Sweida	45	+21 (+88%)
Quneitra	4	-4 (-50%)
South Overall	189	+26 (+16%)
Homs	41	-10 (-20%)
Damascus	5	No Change
Rural Damascus	50	+17 (+52%)
Central Overall	96	+7 (+8%)
South and Central Overall	285	+33 (+13%)

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

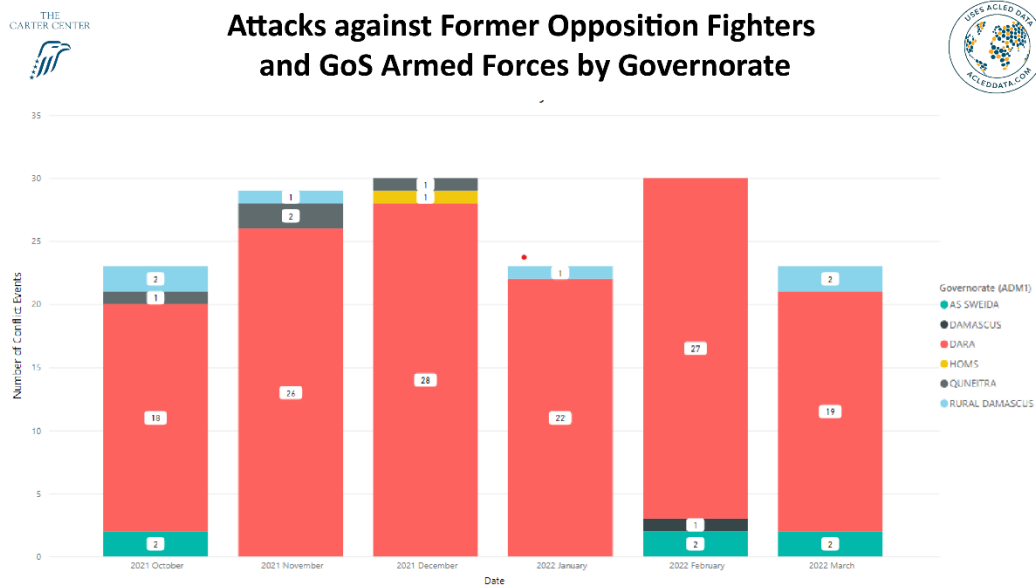


Figure 8: Attacks against former opposition fighters and GoS armed forces in southern Syria since October 2021. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

In 2018, the GoS armed forces and its allies launched Operation Basalt, which ended with GoS reconquering Dara'a Governorate and the rest of southern Syria. As part of the operations, GoS and Russia allowed some opposition fighters and groups to be spared from

violence and deferred their military conscription in exchange for turning over their heavy weapons and giving up the armed struggle. As a result, thousands of fighters formerly associated with the armed opposition were allowed to remain active, albeit theoretically accepting GoS's rule over the governorate. However, tensions between the former opposition and GoS armed forces persist, leading to a wide range of assassinations by unidentified actors. Although the attacks are by unidentified actors, GoS officials and the former opposition representatives blame each other for the attacks. During the reporting period, unidentified armed groups attacked former opposition fighters and GoS soldiers in southern Syria on at least 76 incidents. 68 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.

Assassinations against former opposition figures and GoS soldiers has fallen since its peak in May 2021. The new round of settlement agreements firmly tipped the balance of power away from the former opposition formations (see [previous quarterly](#)). The new settlement agreements reportedly required additional men to register for possible military conscription, surrender more weapons, and increase the number of GoS armed forces checkpoints in the cities. This effectively increased the presence and power of GoS armed forces in Dara'a Governorate and severely curtailed the power of former opposition groups. Although the number of political assassinations has remained relatively steady since November 2021, this has not stopped tensions between the former opposition and GoS armed forces. On 15 March, GoS State Security clashed with local groups in Jasim, Dara'a Governorate. The clashes only ended after the Russian-backed 8th Brigade mediated the end to the conflict.¹³ The assassinations continue to be an area of concern that can lead to further violence and clashes.

Confrontations in As-Sweida

¹³ <https://www.horanfree.com/?p=11019>

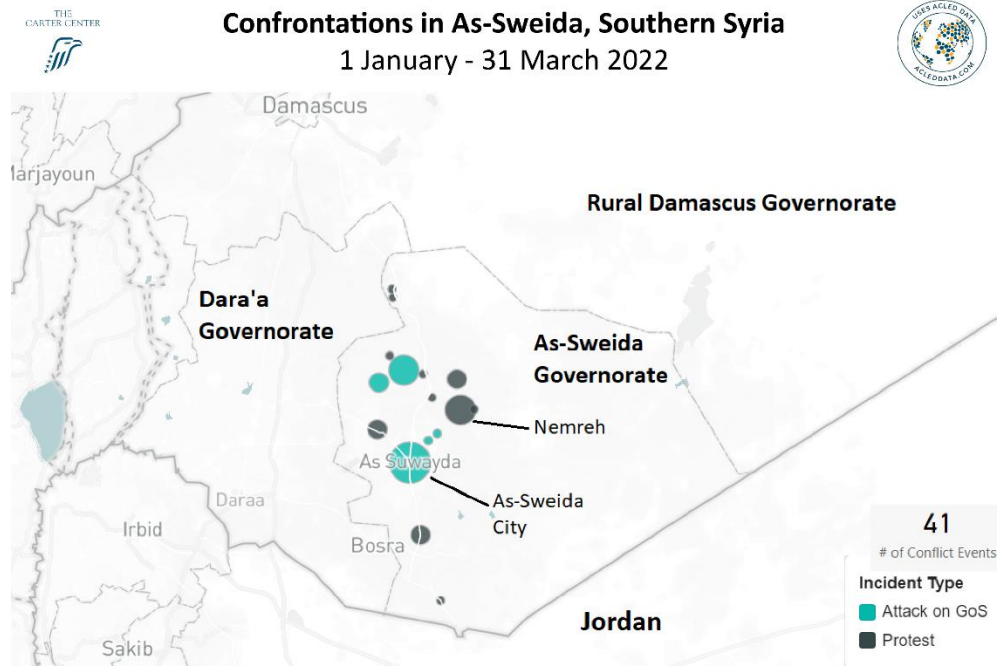


Figure 9: Protests and clashes in As-Sweida Governorate between January-March 2022. The largest bubble represents 16 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Throughout most of the Syrian conflict, As-Sweida Governorate has largely avoided violence between the GoS and opposition. Despite this, tensions between the GoS and the local armed groups in the governorate has increased. This is due to several factors, including the deteriorating economic status and the activity of kidnapping and other criminal gangs with links to GoS armed forces. Since 2020, there have been major protests in As-Sweida decrying the economic situation.

Smaller protests were reported in January and March, which saw demonstrations against the lack of security and increasing crimes.¹⁴ Initially, these protests were limited. However, major protests broke out in February after a controversial GoS decision to remove 600,000 families in areas under GoS control from accessing food and gas subsidies.¹⁵ Protesters decried the worsening economic conditions as well as corruption among GoS officials.¹⁶ Some demonstrators called for a democratic or civil state.¹⁷ In response to the protests, GoS armed forces and Lebanese Hezbollah mobilized additional soldiers to the governorate.¹⁸ Despite this, there were few reports of GoS armed forces cracking down on protesters.

However, the increased mobilization of GoS soldiers and militia figures led to escalating tensions among the local As-Sweida armed groups and GoS. This followed a trend from the last quarter which saw standoffs in As-Sweida city between local groups and GoS armed

¹⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/542509>, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/557210>

¹⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/hundreds-turn-out-for-rare-protest-in-southern-syria/a-60749896>

¹⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/11/syria-sweida-protesters-decry-corruption-poor-living-standards>

¹⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/551360>, <https://www.dw.com/en/hundreds-turn-out-for-rare-protest-in-southern-syria/a-60749896>

¹⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/546803>

forces. Clashes were reported in January and March, with checkpoints manned by GoS soldiers targeted by local armed groups.¹⁹ The Counter-Terrorism Forces, a local armed group affiliated with the Liwa Party also representing Druze interests, reportedly arrested a Hezbollah commander accused of drug smuggling and turned him over to the U.S.-backed Maghawir al-Thawra faction in Al-Tanf, Homs Governorate.²⁰ Between demonstrations and armed groups increasingly confronting GoS armed forces and their allies, tensions in As-Sweida Governorate has escalated.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

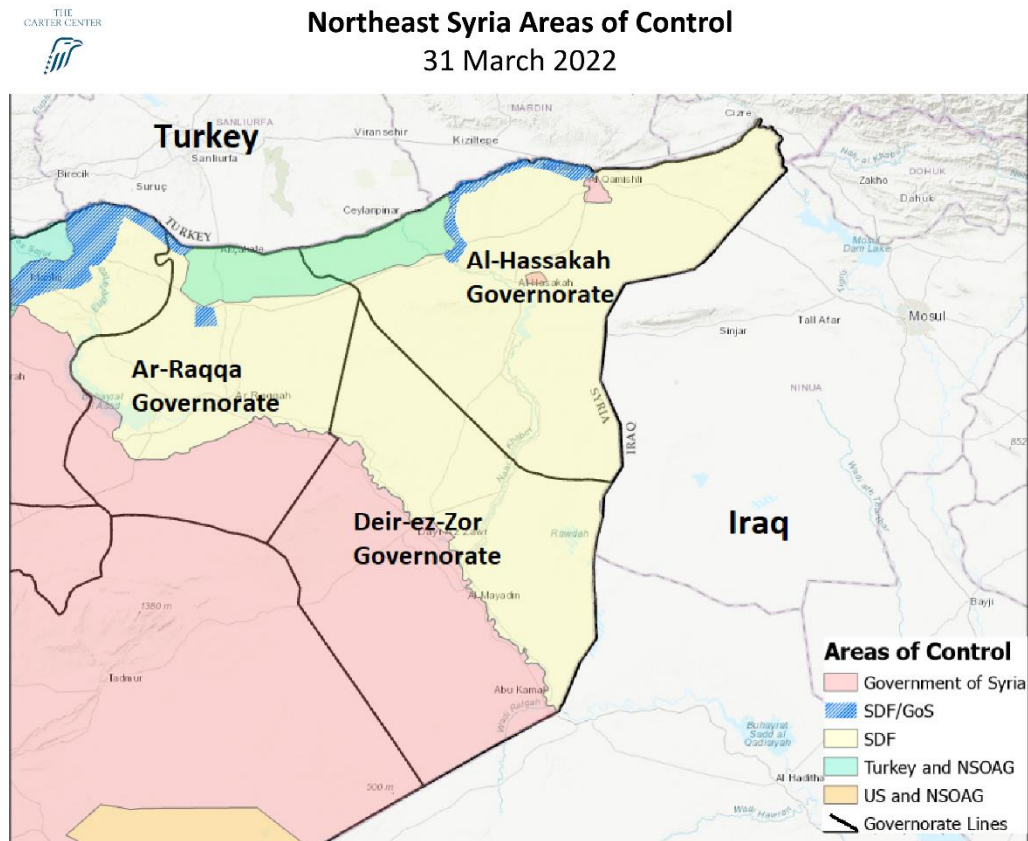


Figure 10: Areas of control in northeast Syria. Data from The Carter Center.

During the first quarter of 2022, there was a slight decrease in violence to 891 recorded conflict events compared to 895 in the last quarter of 2021. Conflict events decreased from 352 to 335 in Al-Hassakah, increased in Ar-Raqqah from 261 to 304, and decreased in Deir-Ez-Zor from 282 to 252. Over 60 percent of this activity took place in January.

¹⁹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/557001>, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/557091>.

²⁰ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/551049>

Conflict Events in Northeast Syria (Q1 2022 and Changes)		
Governorate	2022 Q1	Change from Q3 (%)
Deir-ez-Zor	252	-30(-11%)
Ar-Raqqa	304	+43(+16%)
Al-Hassakah	335	-17(-5%)
Northeast Overall	891	-4(0%)

The Battle Against ISIS

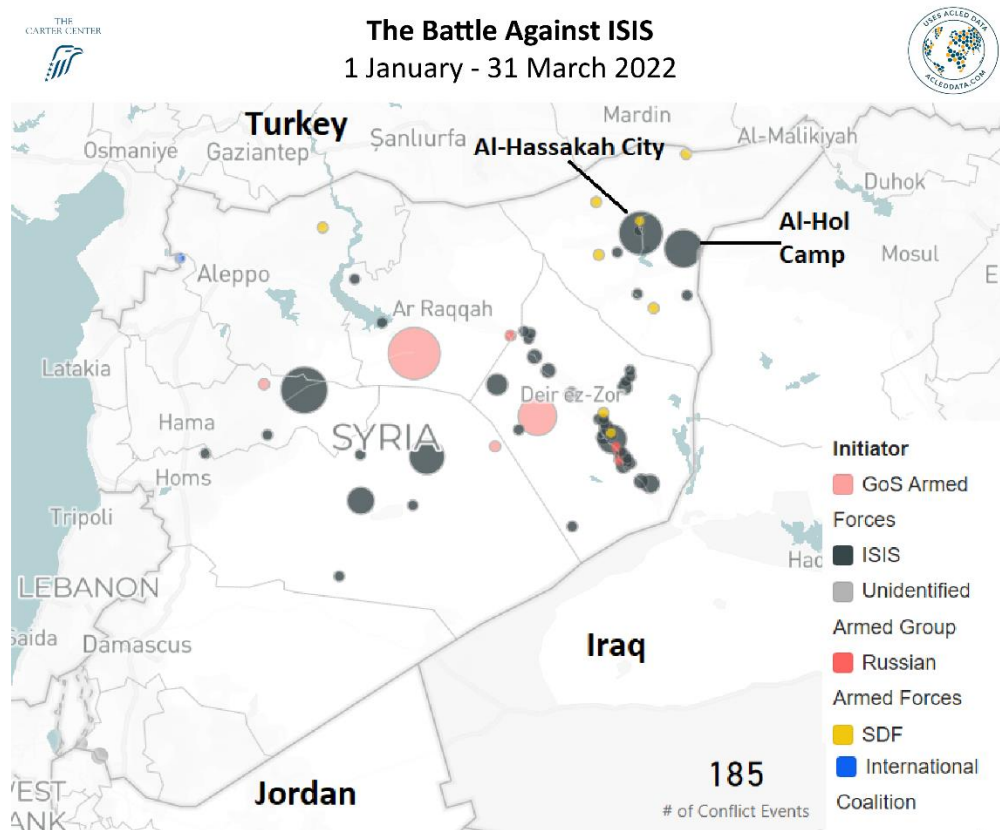


Figure 11: Incidents involving ISIS between January-March 2022. The largest bubble represents 35 conflict events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

During the first quarter of 2022, the Islamic State remained very active in northeastern and eastern Syria. There were 185 ISIS-related events, comprised of clashes and aerial bombardment. The most activity took place in Al-Hassakah Governorate (23 clashes), Ar-Raqqa Governorate (37 clashes and aerial bombardment), and Deir-ez-Zor Governorate (62 clashes and aerial bombardment). Although this is a slight increase from 174 ISIS-related events in the last quarter of 2021, over 50 percent of the reported activity took place in January 2022 during which ISIS attempted a prison break in the Al-Hassakah Governorate. In January, 36 events consisted of aerial bombardment targeting ISIS by GoS and Russia, 35

were clashes between ISIS and SDF and its allies, and 13 were clashes between ISIS and GoS and Russia.

On January 20th in Al-Hassakah city, ISIS attempted a prison break and infiltrated al-Sinaa prison, the largest ISIS detainee prison.²¹ The SDF backed by the US-led coalition engaged in battles for six days, while the US provided air support to regain control of the prison.²² Many perpetrators and prison escapees infiltrated al-Hassakah city, triggering the spread of violence throughout the city (see map below).²³ Kurdish forces regained control of the prison on January 26th.²⁴ US operations in Idlib Governorate Syria culminated in the self-inflicted death of ISIS leader Qurayshi during a US Special Operations Forces raid on February 3rd.²⁵ The Turkish-backed armed opposition groups also increased their operations against ISIS during this period in the northern Aleppo countryside.²⁶ ISIS-related conflict activity in the Al-Hassakah Governorate decreased throughout February and March. A notable clash occurred between SDF and ISIS cells at al Hol camp in late March.²⁷ In March, SDF initiated a sweep operation against ISIS cells south of Al-Hassakah.²⁸



²¹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/islamic-state-attempts-prison-break-syrias-hasakah-sdf-says>

²² <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/islamic-state-prison-break-reinforces-value-us-military-protection-syrias-kurds>

²³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/islamic-state-prison-break-reinforces-value-us-military-protection-syrias-kurds>; <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/syrias-kurdish-led-forces-advance-islamic-state-prison>

²⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/syrias-kurdish-led-forces-regain-control-islamic-state-prison>

²⁵ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-leader-killed-us-raid-syria>

²⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/turkish-backed-rebels-step-attacks-islamic-state-north-syria>

²⁷ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/560462>

²⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/555841>

Figure 12: Approximate locations of the SDF/US-ISIS battle in Al-Hassakah city. Data from The Carter Center.

In February and March, ISIS-related activity was highest in Deir Ezzor. In eastern Syria, ISIS continued near daily activity, both in targeting Kurdish-led SDF and local civilians assumed to be cooperating with SDF. ISIS started instituting Sharia rules in the Deir Ezzor countryside, as well as imposing taxes on residents by armed force and oil traders as a source of funding.²⁹ Analysts point towards the fragile security situation in the region, in part due to contentions between GoS and SDF. In February and March, there was an increase in ISIS activity – including several ambushes of pro-government military targets in the Syrian desert, which some analysts attributed to security gaps in the areas and coincided with the additional deployment of GoS armed forces.³⁰ Clashes occurred in late March between GoS forces and allied militia groups in the Al-Rusafa and Badia deserts following the Syrian government’s increased investment in combating the region beginning in February. The Syrian government brought in reinforcements in mid-March to bolster these efforts.³¹ The Al-Quds Brigade, 18th Division of GoS armed forces, and the Russian-backed Fifth Corps frequently clashed with ISIS cells in the Badia desert region. Russia also launched air raids in the region.

Unexploded Ordnance in Syria

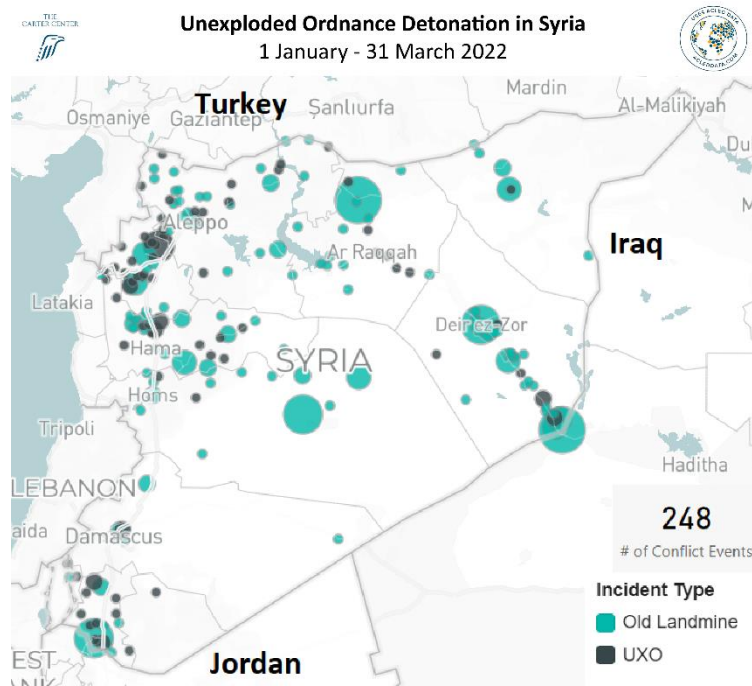


Figure 13: Detonations of old landmines and unexploded ordnance in Syria since 1 January 2021. The largest bubble represents 6 detonation events. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

²⁹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/islamic-state-ramps-activities-eastern-syria>

³⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/islamic-state-takes-advantage-ukraine-war-increase-attacks;>
<https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/550587>

³¹ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/558478>

Unexploded ordnance (UXO) remains an increasingly important issue in Syria. Since 1 January 2021, there have been 248 reported incidents of civilians or others being killed by leftover landmines and other UXO. The White Helmets, an opposition-associated medical service that responds to airstrikes to rescue civilians and has taken on mine and UXO clearance in northwestern Syria, noted that between January 2021 to March 2022, at least 15 civilians were killed and multiple UXO were found in agricultural fields, civilian homes, and children’s playgrounds.³² Human rights organizations have warned that despite the lack of new military offensives across Syria, the number of civilians killed by UXO has increased.³³ UXO impact civilian safety, humanitarian access, economic development, as well as environmental health, making it clear that their clearance should be a priority for all parties involved.

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.

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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³² <https://tinyurl.com/37u99jep>

³³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/538339>, <https://euromedmonitor.org/uploads/reports/Syriareport.pdf>