

THE
CARTER CENTER



Quarterly Review of Syrian Political and Military Dynamics July-September 2023

SUMMARY

The Carter Center’s latest quarterly review examines the emergence of protests in the southern Syrian governorate of As-Sweida and the outbreak of conflict in the northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Both events detail Syrian civilians’ ongoing frustration and dissatisfaction with the government of Syria (GoS) and the interconnectedness of the Syrian conflict. The Syrian conflict might seem stalled, but it is far from resolved. The lack of any tangible political process to address the grievances and drivers of the conflict leads to persistent instability and continued violence. This has dire implications for the international community’s desire to stave off a new wave of refugees and prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State group (IS).

Security-Related Developments

- Russia vetoed the cross-border mechanism approved by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which allowed U.N. aid to be delivered through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing outside of GoS control. However, the U.N. and the GoS reached an agreement to keep the border crossing open.¹
- 236 protest events were reported, primarily in As-Sweida Governorate, after the GoS announced a reduction in fuel subsidies.
- Violence broke out in northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and local tribes after the SDF arrested the head of its Deir-ez-Zor security operations.
- During fighting in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, tribal fighters affiliated with the various armed opposition groups crossed the frontline in Manbij, Aleppo Governorate.
- President Bashar Al-Assad visited China to seek Chinese assistance with the reconstruction of Syria.²
- The U.S.-Iran deal to free hostages led to a temporary détente in northeast Syria, following months of military buildup and attacks.³

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/08/1139577>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/22/china-to-help-reconstruct-war-battered-syria>

³ <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/90498>

- The armed forces of the GoS forcibly removed the commander of the GoS-backed National Defense Force militia in Al-Hassakah city, Al-Hassakah Governorate, after the commander attacked a prominent tribal leader.⁴

| Conflict Events in Syria (Q1 2023 vs. Q2 2023) | | | |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Region/Governorate | Q2 | Q3 | Change (%) |
| Northwest | 1,369 | 1,628 | + 259 (19%) |
| Aleppo | 604 | 830 | +226 (37%) |
| Idlib | 508 | 566 | +58 (11%) |
| Hama | 183 | 144 | -39 (-21%) |
| Lattakia | 73 | 81 | +8 (11%) |
| Tartous | 1 | 7 | +6 (600%) |
| South & Central | 433 | 623 | +190 (44%) |
| Homs | 76 | 47 | -29 (-38%) |
| Rural Damascus | 54 | 70 | +16 (30%) |
| Damascus | 21 | 14 | -7 (-33%) |
| Quneitra | 24 | 5 | -19 (-79%) |
| Dara'a | 232 | 262 | +30 (13%) |
| As-Sweida | 24 | 225 | +201 (838%) |
| Northeast | 609 | 1,042 | +433 (71%) |
| Al-Hassakah | 129 | 298 | +169 (131%) |
| Ar-Raqqqa | 115 | 184 | +69 (60%) |
| Deir-ez-Zor | 365 | 560 | +195 (53%) |
| Total | 2,411 | 3,293 | +882 (37%) |

⁴ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/654845/>, <https://www.newarab.com/news/syrian-regime-besieges-leader-allied-militia-hasakah>

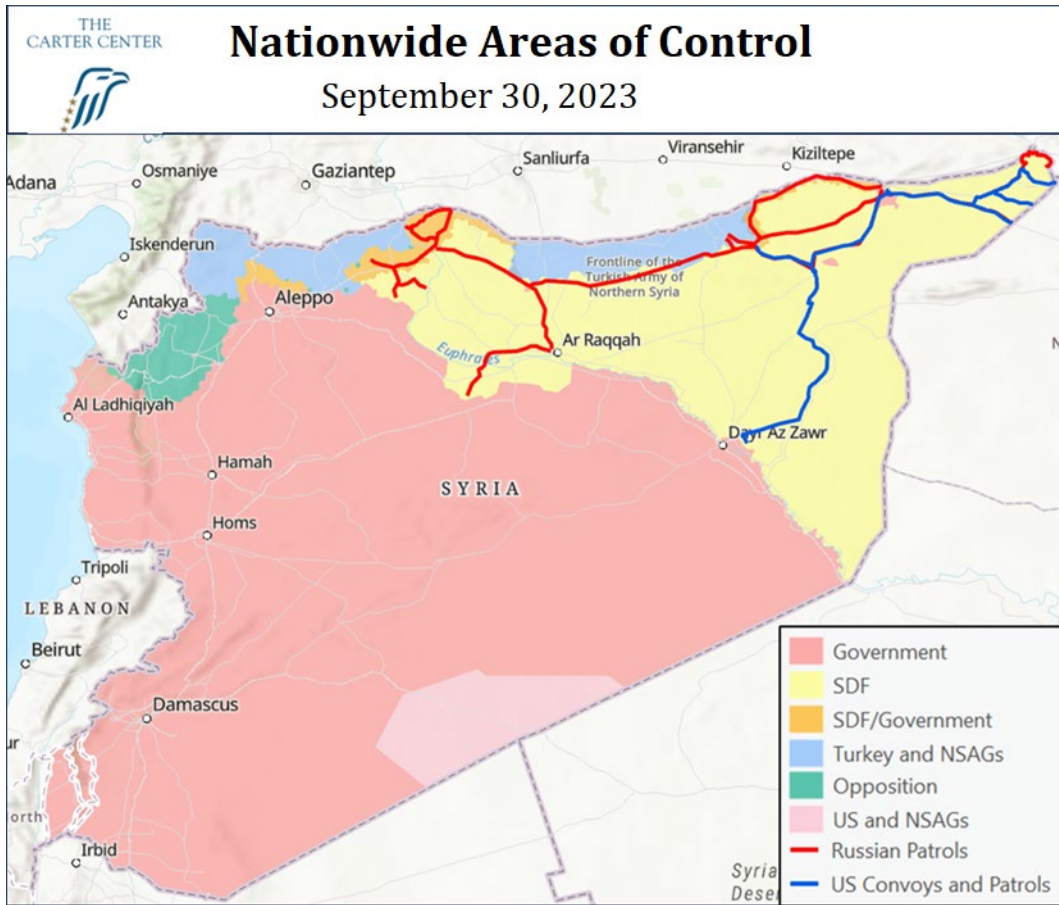


Figure 1: Dominant actors’ area of control and influence in Syria as of Sept. 30, 2023. NSAG stands for Non-State Armed Groups.⁵

⁵ Figure 1 depicts areas of the dominant actors’ control and influence. While “control” is a relative term in a complex and 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 (NSOAGs), 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 about a 55kms/34 miles de-confliction zone established by the U.S.-led coalition, which includes several aligned local armed groups. Patrols also are 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. Though they do not control local administration or local forces, there is an assumption of a high degree of coordination with local de facto authorities.

Territorial Holdings in Syria by Faction October 1, 2023

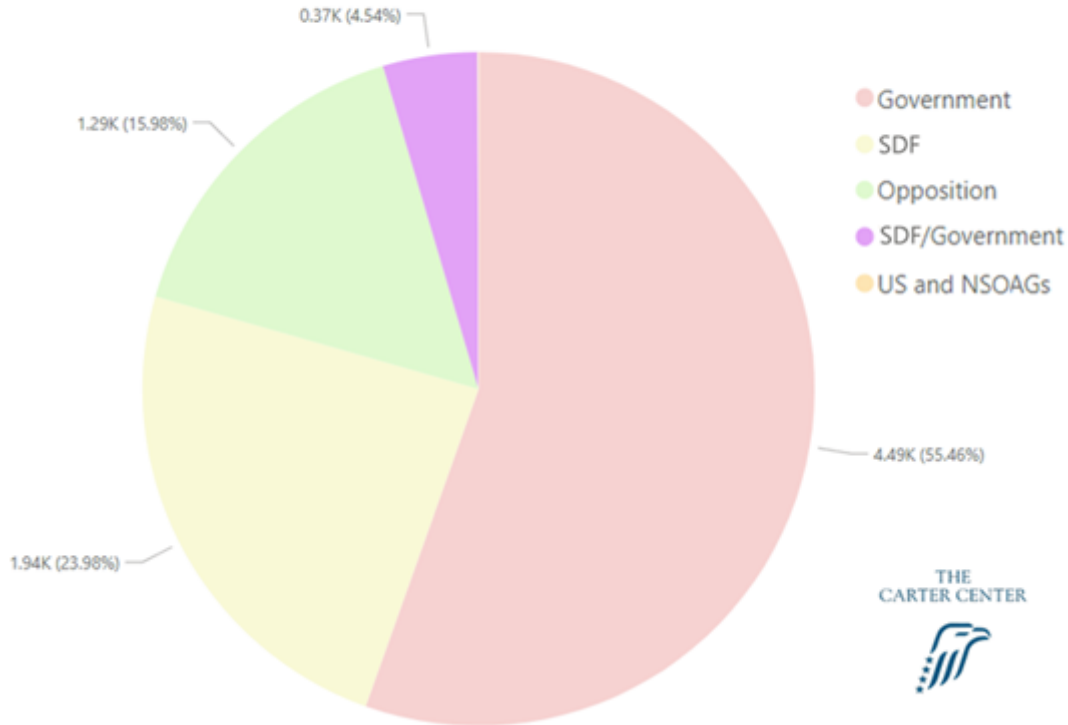


Figure 2: Breakdown of territorial holdings by party as of Oct. 1, 2023. Note: The U.S. and allied NSOAGs control .037% of Syrian territory, represented as a small sliver in the graph, according to The Carter Center’s Areas of Control Point Data.

Protests in As-Sweida

The mostly Druze governorate of As-Sweida largely stayed neutral throughout most of the Syrian conflict. This, alongside the formation of large Druze militias, has largely protected the people of As-Sweida from the violence seen throughout most of Syria. However, there has been a proliferation of criminal gangs and a severe deterioration of economic conditions in the governorate. Frustrations over the economic conditions and their impacts led to large protests in 2020 and 2022 calling for an improvement in living conditions. Despite this, the Syrian economy has continued to fare poorly. In As-Sweida, this has been exacerbated by clashes between militias, criminal gangs, and the proliferation of the Captagon trade, occasionally leading to military actions. All these factors have contributed to public dissatisfaction with the status quo.

On Aug. 17, President Bashar Al-Assad announced that he would double governmental salaries. However, this was announced in tandem with the elimination of

fuel subsidies, leading to a significant increase in food and fuel prices.⁶ This announcement led to large-scale protests in As-Sweida Governorate, resulting in some of the largest demonstrations since 2011. Protests were also reported in neighboring Dara'a Governorate.⁷ These protests were mainly critical of the GoS, with frequent calls for the resignation of top government officials, the release of detainees, the implementation of U.N. Resolution 2254, and some calling for Assad to step down.⁸ While demonstrators called for a change in government, they rejected international intervention.⁹

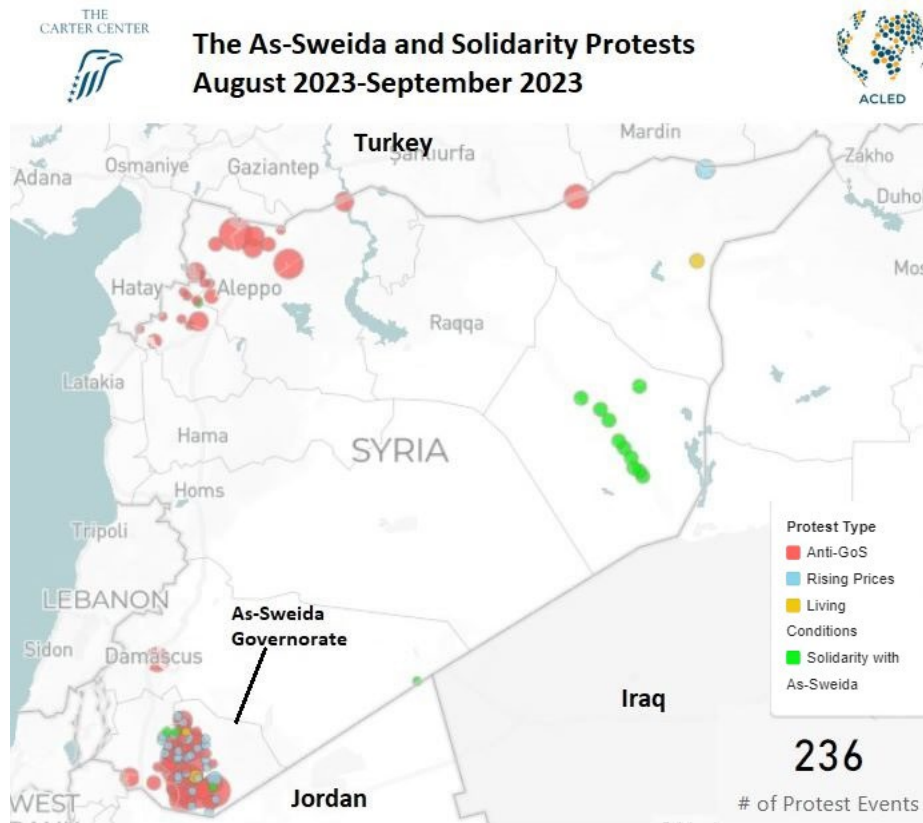


Figure 3: Protests in As-Sweida and solidarity demonstrations across Syria since August 2023. Largest bubble represents 42 protest events. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

The protests, categorized into four main groups based on their demands and grievances (refer to Figure 3), showed overlapping themes. These included anger against the government and calls for Assad's removal, rising prices, and better living conditions, along with solidarity protests in areas under Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) control and opposition-controlled regions. As-Sweida's ongoing demonstrations gained

⁶ <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/18554041>
⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/45ywjet2>
⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/ycyn3fbp>
⁹ <https://suwayda24.com/?p=21800>

international media attention, with support from the Syrian opposition, the United States, and other nations, marking the largest protests in the governorate since 2011.¹⁰

Notably, the demonstrations in As-Sweida were supported by the Druze religious leadership¹¹ as well as various Druze armed groups.¹² The Men of Dignity, one of the largest and most powerful of the Druze militias, stated their support for the demonstrations and called for the resignation of members of the government, albeit they did not directly call for the removal of Assad.¹³ Some Druze factions that had fought alongside the GoS also issued statements criticizing the government for disregarding people's needs and echoing the need for major internal changes within the GoS.¹⁴

The protests have remained peaceful and encountered relatively little resistance from the GoS and its allies, except for one incident on Sept. 14 when Baath Party members fired upon demonstrators in As-Sweida city.¹⁵ It appears that the GoS has chosen to largely disregard the protests, with few reports on the demonstration being mentioned in the pro-GoS media.¹⁶ At the same time, there are attempts by protest leaders to better coordinate the political movement stemming from these demonstrations to advocate for their demands more effectively.¹⁷ As these protests persist and gain international traction, the looming question revolves around how the GoS will react and what lies ahead for the movement.¹⁸

Clashes in Deir-ez-Zor

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controls most of northeast Syria. While the SDF's predecessor organizations, like the People's Protection Units (YPG), controlled parts of Al-Hassakah and Ar-Raqqa governorates during the war, the mostly tribal Arab region of Deir-ez-Zor Governorate was only obtained during the anti-IS campaign in 2019. Deir-ez-Zor Governorate was an opposition stronghold prior to its takeover by IS. This proved to be a problem for the SDF, which lacked strong networks within the governorate. The SDF turned to Deir-ez-Zor native Ahmad al-Khubayl, better known as Abu Khawla, to garner support from the Arab tribes. Abu Khawla was himself a Deir-ez-Zor tribesman from the Al-Baqir clan of the Akaidat tribe. After the defeat of IS, the

¹⁰ <https://suwayda24.com/?p=21809>

¹¹ <https://suwayda24.com/?p=21721>

¹² <https://aymennaltamimi.substack.com/p/the-protests-in-al-suwayda-interview>

¹³ https://aymennaltamimi.substack.com/p/the-protests-in-al-suwayda-ii-rijal?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=465186&post_id=136386184&isFreemail=false&utm_medium=email

¹⁴ <https://aymennaltamimi.substack.com/p/the-new-round-of-protests-in-al-suwayda>

¹⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/283kp3wx>

¹⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/sykn45r8>

¹⁷ <https://syriadirect.org/everyones-movement-suwayda-bets-on-the-staying-power-and-solidarity-of-its-protests/>, <https://www.newarab.com/news/who-are-syrias-new-opposition-group-10-august-movement#:~:text=The%2010th%20of%20August%20Movement,%20which%20says%20it%20has%20thousands,p rarily%20led%20by%20Syrian%20youth.>

¹⁸ <https://syriadirect.org/as-assad-ignores-suwaydas-uprising-what-is-the-movements-future/>

SDF controlled the northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate and largely delegated authority to Abu Khawla and the SDF-created Deir-ez-Zor Military Council (DMC). Abu Khawla's role was controversial, and he was often accused of harming the local population and furthering the interests of his own tribes at the expense of rival tribes. Despite this, the SDF largely allowed Abu Khawla and the DMC to continue their operations. This fraught alliance was exacerbated by the strong presence of IS remnants in the governorate, accusations of Kurdish favoritism by the SDF, and tensions with GoS-aligned forces who control the southern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate.

However, tensions began to escalate between the SDF and DMC in July as the former began moving its units and taking over control of checkpoints from DMC soldiers. This led to minor clashes and a standoff between the two formerly allied forces.¹⁹ The situation was exacerbated by leaked audio recordings from Abu Khawla, which indicated significant disagreements between the DMC and SDF.²⁰ Abu Khawla accepted an invitation to mediate the conflict in Al-Hassakah city to resolve the tensions. However, on Aug. 27, the SDF arrested Abu Khawla and several of his colleagues.²¹ This was shortly followed by the SDF launching "Operation Security Reinforcement" apparently to crack down on IS cells and criminals "perpetrating injustices against the local population."²²

Between Aug. 27 and Sept. 7, the SDF and DMC fighters clashed across several locations in northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. By Sept. 7, the SDF took control of Dhiban, the final village controlled by the DMC. Although the SDF was able to take control of northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, several prominent DMC commanders, including Ibrahim Al-Hifl, were able to flee to southern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, which is controlled by the GoS and its allies. During the SDF's operations, the reactions of various Deir-ez-Zor clans and tribes were mixed. Some were supportive of the DMC, while others took a more cautious approach, calling for a cease-fire.²³ The SDF also faced accusations of human rights violations, further contributing to the general anti-SDF sentiment held by some of the tribes.²⁴

As the conflict in Deir-ez-Zor continued, tribesmen associated with the Turkish-backed opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) and other opposition groups crossed the front lines to Manbij, Aleppo Governorate, and Tal Tamer, Al-Hassakah Governorate, and temporarily gained control of some new military positions.²⁵ The SNA-affiliated tribesmen justified their actions as support for the tribesmen in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Russian

¹⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/zb4fuen7>

²⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/4p4tzxk9>

²¹ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/280820231>

²² <https://sdf-press.com/en/2023/08/our-sdf-forces-launch-operation-security-reinforcement-against-isis-cells-in-deir-ezzor/>

²³ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/deir-ez-zor-torn-between-arab-tribes-struggle-independence-and-sdfs-efforts-subdue>

²⁴ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/deir-ez-zors-tribes-reach-breaking-point>

²⁵ <https://www.newarab.com/news/syria-arab-tribes-cross-deir-az-zour-join-sdf-fight>, <https://tinyurl.com/k62uf5d6>

airstrikes, in coordination with GoS and SDF artillery bombardment, later forced the retreat of the SNA tribesmen, restoring the status quo in northwest Syria. Additionally, there were reports of opposition-aligned tribesmen from Idlib Governorate infiltrating into Turkish-held territory in northwest Syria.

Commander-in-Chief of the SDF Mazloum Abdi acknowledged there were shortcomings with the armed group's governance in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate and pledged to try to address all tribal grievances.²⁶ The SDF justified its dismantling of the DMC due to alleged plans that Abu Khawla was collaborating with the GoS and Iran.²⁷ In addition, Abdi accused the GoS and Iran of sending fighters to assist the DMC during the clashes.

The clashes in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate prompted a significant international response. The U.S. military mission in the region emphasized its support for the SDF and called for a halt to any fighting, arguing that the instability would only strengthen IS.²⁸ GoS Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad praised the clashes as part of a "struggle against the [U.S.] occupation and its militias."²⁹ Turkish President Recep Erdogan issued a statement in support of the Arab Tribes "retaking their lands" from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)/YPG.³⁰ Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan commented that until the U.S. halts its support for the YPG/SDF, conflicts like those in Deir-ez-Zor are "just the beginning."³¹ Russian Presidential Spokesman Dmitry Peskov commented that Russia was committed to restoring order and fighting terrorism in accordance with the 2019 Sochi Accords.³²

While the SDF managed to regain control of northern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, the situation remains volatile. On Sept. 20, former DMC commander Ibrahim al-Hifl announced the creation of a new tribal force that would fight against the SDF.³³ Since Sept. 10, there have been at least 36 reported attacks against SDF forces in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, indicating the beginning of a potential insurgency in the region.

The conflict in Deir-ez-Zor highlights the continued volatility and interconnectedness of the Syrian conflict. What began as a local clash due to internal problems in the SDF led to a large-scale escalation across northern Syria, involving nearly every major international actor active in the Syrian conflict. The long-term impact of these clashes is still being assessed, and it is challenging to fully gauge what impact it will have on the anti-IS campaign and the stability for Syrian civilians. Outside of Deir-ez-Zor, the

²⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/09/syrian-kurdish-commander-kobane-acknowledges-arab-grievances-tensions-ease-deir>

²⁷ <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/assads-hidden-hand-in-the-uprising-against-the-kurds-in-eastern-syria/>

²⁸ <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/NEWSROOM/News-Articles/Stories-Display/Article/3514556/combined-joint-task-force-operation-inherent-resolve-urges-end-to-violence-peac/>

²⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/yh43wmny>

³⁰ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/arab-tribes-fight-against-pkk-ypg-terror-group-in-syria-struggle-of-honor-turkish-president-erdogan/2983970>

³¹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkiye-eu-relations-should-not-be-held-hostage-to-interests-of-some-countries-turkish-foreign-minister/2985009>

³² <https://tass.com/world/1670617>

³³ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/660750/>

mobilization of tribal fighters to contest the front lines in Manbij, Aleppo Governorate, was used by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to gain control of the valuable al-Hamran crossing in Jarabulus, Aleppo Governorate, leading to new tensions among the various opposition factions in northwest Syria.³⁴ Without a legitimate political process to bring the different parties together and address local grievances, a new round of violence may break out again.

Conclusion

Since 2020, international attention has largely shifted away from Syria and the conflict has been considered a stalemate. While there were few attempts to alter the status quo, front lines remained relatively stable, and none of the warring parties launched any new sustained offensive to take territory. However, dissatisfaction with the GoS and deteriorating living conditions are fueling a new wave of discontent, as seen by the protests in As-Sweida Governorate. What began as an internal conflict within the SDF in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate quickly led to new escalations in northwest Syria and opposition fighting between HTS and the SNA. The return to stable front lines belies the fragility and instability present in Syria, and the situation could quickly unravel again.

Please note the reporting period for this quarterly review predates the Israel-Gaza conflict, which began on Oct. 7.

This report was authored by Hari Prasad, Gabriel Wein, Jessica Sobieski, and Evan Leendertse of The Carter Center, with contributions from other staff members.

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

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³⁴ <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2023/09/tahrir-al-sham-tests-turkey-over-a-strategic-crossing-ankara-halts-hts-greed/>