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Quarterly Review of Syrian Political and Military Dynamics January-March 2023

Acknowledgments

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The Carter Center’s latest quarterly examines the impact of the deadly earthquakes on northern Syria and southern Turkey. The earthquake that took place in early February killed over 7,000 people in Syria alone, exacerbating an already dire humanitarian situation. The earthquakes provided a rare opportunity for the various parties in Syria, as well as the international community, to cooperate to alleviate the disaster. Despite some incidents, the earthquakes led to a significant drop-in overall recorded conflict activity, resulting in the lowest activity level reported in the last 2 years of conflict in Syria. International actors should find ways to maintain reduced levels of conflict across Syria.

Summary of security-related developments:

- The earthquake led to a significant, albeit temporary, reduction of reported conflict in northern Syria. However, conflict continued apace in southern and central Syria which were not heavily impacted by the natural disaster.
- Despite the earthquake and overall reduction in violence, ISIS continued to remain active in the Badia desert region of Syria. This included an ISIS attack targeting truffle collectors in Homs Governorate which killed up to 53 people.¹
- The U.S. sanctioned several individuals associated with Hezbollah and the Government of Syria over ties to captagon trafficking,² as its ally Jordan continued to struggle with containing the spread of the trade.³
- After an attack by an Iranian-backed militia killed a US contractor in Al-Hassakah Governorate, US forces retaliated by attacking Iranian-backed militia facilities.⁴ This led

¹ [تركيا "تحدّد" مخطط تفجير اسطنبول بعملية في سوريا للمزيد](#) - February 24, 2023 - Enab Baladi

² [Treasury Sanctions Syrian Regime and Lebanese Actors Involved in Illicit Drug Production and Trafficking - March 28, 2023 - Department of Treasury](#)

³ [الأردن يحبط محاولة تهريب مخدرات من سوريا](#) - March 7, 2023 - Horan Free

⁴ [Iran-backed fighters on alert in east Syria after US strikes - March 25, 2023 - Associated Press](#)

to a retaliatory rocket strike by Iranian-backed forces on multiple US bases in Northeast Syria.⁵

Conflict Events in Syria (Q4 2022 vs Q1 2023)			
Region	2023 Q1	2022 Q4	Change (%)
Northwest	1004	1876	-872 (-46%)
Aleppo Governorate	499	1149	-650 (-56%)
Idlib Governorate	342	543	-201 (-37%)
Hama Governorate	111	118	-7 (-6%)
Lattakia Governorate	52	63	-9 (-14%)
Tartous Governorate	0	1	-1
South & Central	359	370	-11 (-3%)
Homs Governorate	54	56	-2 (-4%)
Rural Damascus Governorate	67	65	2 (+3%)
Damascus	15	11	4 (+36%)
Quneitra Governorate	10	7	3 (+43%)
Dara'a Governorate	181	205	-24 (-12%)
As-Sweida Governorate	32	26	6 (+23%)
Northeast	698	1085	-387 (-36%)
Al-Hassakah Governorate	165	513	-348 (-68%)
Ar-Raqqa Governorate	202	259	-57 (-22%)
Deir-ez-Zor Governorate	331	313	18 (+6%)
Syria Overall	2061	3331	-1270 (-38%)

⁵ [Iranian-Backed Attacks on US Forces in Syria Caused 23 Traumatic Brain Injuries, Pentagon Says - April 17, 2023 - VOA News](#)

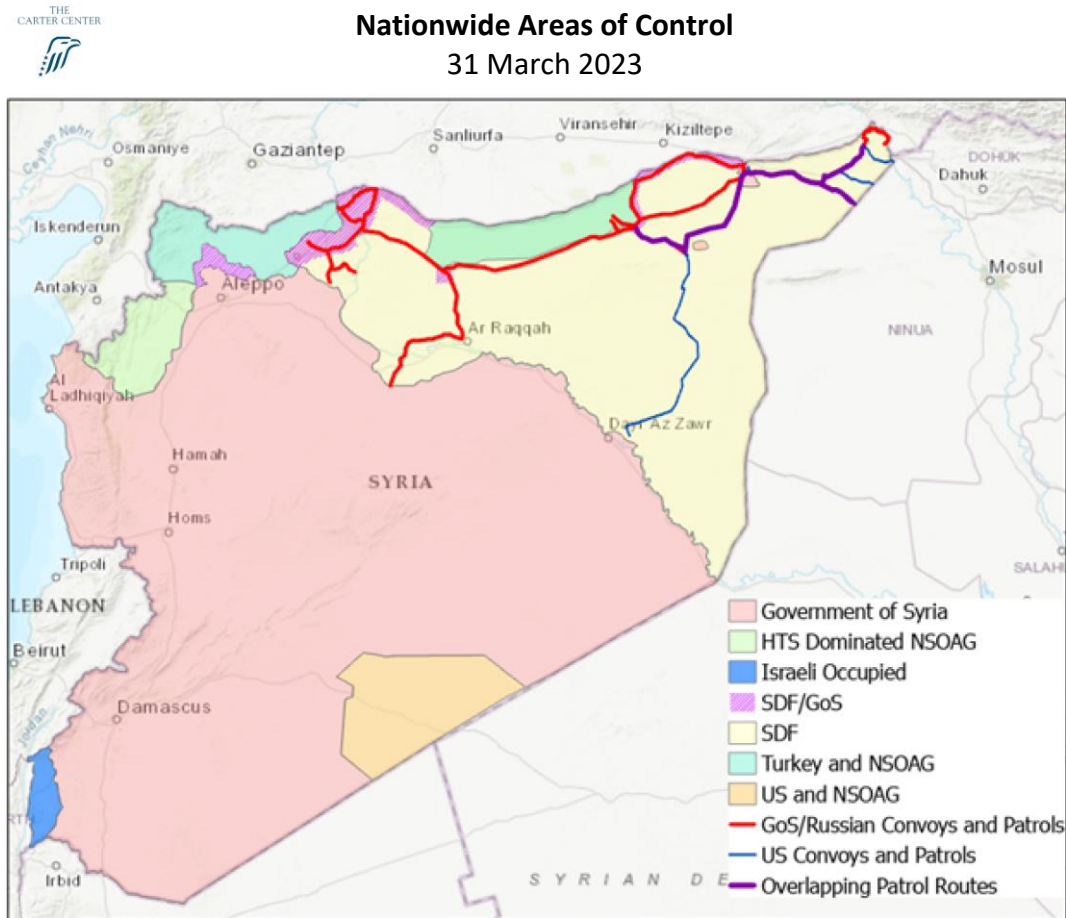


Figure 1: Dominant actors' area of control and influence in Syria as of 31 March 2023. NSOAG stands for Non-State Organized Armed Groups. Also, please see footnote 6 on page 3.⁶

⁶ 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 March 2023

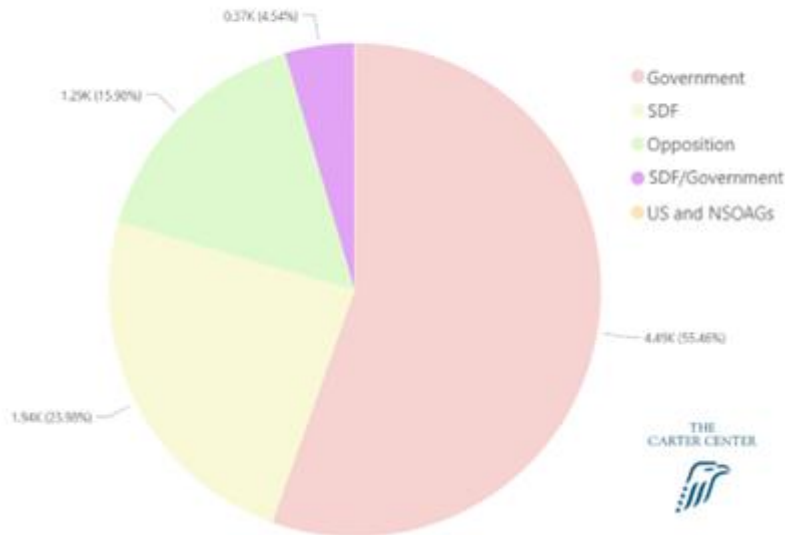


Figure 2: Breakdown of territorial holdings by party as of 31 March 2023. Note: US and its allied NSOAGs control .037% of Syrian territory, represented as a slight sliver in the graph according to The Carter Center’s [Areas of Control Point Data](#).

The Earthquake

In the early hours of February 6, 2023, an Mw 7.8 earthquake struck southern Turkey and northern Syria, with an equally strong Mw 7.7 aftershock hitting the same area just hours later. The quakes have killed over 50,000 people, with at least 7,259 deaths in Syria.⁷ The quakes have also caused extensive material damage: in northwest Syria alone, roughly 150 towns reported damage and at least 10,600 buildings were either partially or completely destroyed.⁸ The loss of life and property destruction has overwhelmed the already-struggling healthcare system in Syria, sparking concerns about abilities to mitigate cholera and measles outbreaks.

The severity of the earthquakes prompted the international community to respond, though initial aid deliveries were slow to reach their target rapidly. Along with the destruction caused by the quake which temporarily made Bab al-Hawa, the only border crossing in northern Syria that UN aid is allowed to cross, unusable. Many also criticized sanctions for complicating aid delivery and remittances. To mitigate this, the United Nations partnered with Ankara and Damascus to temporarily open two additional border crossings into

⁷ [Syria/Turkey Earthquakes Situation Report #7, March 8, 2023 \(ReliefWeb\)](#)

⁸ [Türkiye/Syria: Earthquakes - Feb 2023 \(ReliefWeb\)](#)

northern Syria⁹ – Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Ra’ee – but many have noted that aid was too slow to arrive to Syria¹⁰.

The earthquakes also led to a significant international response. The EU pledged EUR3.5 million to emergency aid in Syria. This money was divided among partner NGOs on the ground and through aid materials being delivered to various Syrian regions.¹¹ The announcement came after the GoS, in a historic move, reached out to the EU requesting humanitarian assistance.¹² On the American side, the US mobilized aid through the form of partner NGOs, as well as through the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).¹³ The US reaffirmed its refusal to work with or contact the GoS.¹⁴ On February 9, the US expanded the general licensing to allow more humanitarian work in Syria.¹⁵ This was to allow for increasing provisions of aid, and to do so in a faster manner.

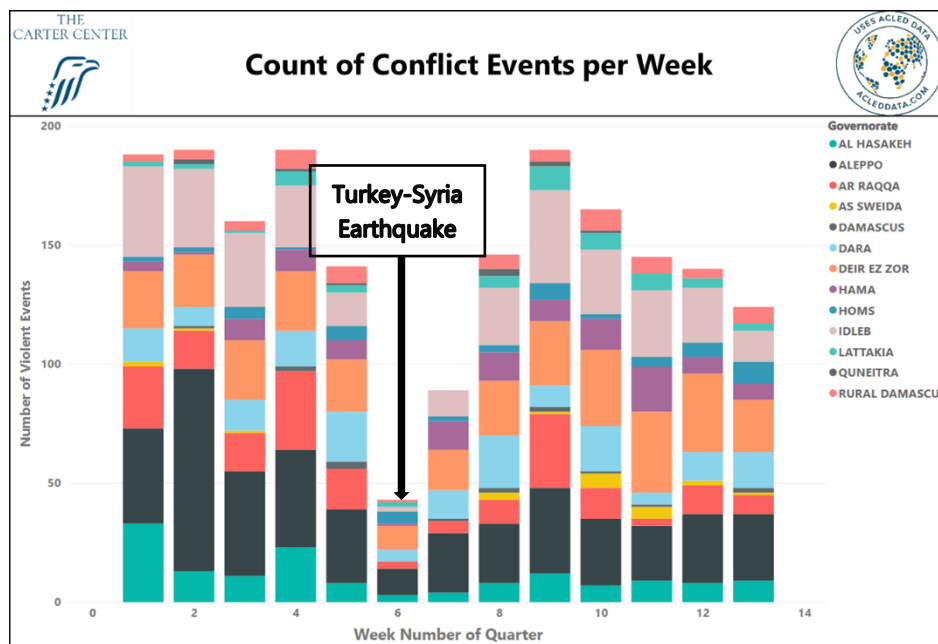


Figure 3: Total conflict events in Syria between January 1 to March 31, 2023 by week. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

The consequences of the earthquake are still being felt, and greatly impacted security dynamics in Syria. Across northern Syria, there was a significant drop in reported military activity, with the largest reported drop in Aleppo Governorate. Indeed, January-March 2023 saw the least amount of conflict events recorded in Syria in years, even beating the April-

⁹ [Syria-Türkiye: Three border crossings now operational for earthquake aid delivery \(United Nations\)](#)

¹⁰ [Syria Earthquake: Why did the UN aid take so long to arrive? \(BBC\)](#)

¹¹ [Earthquake: EU mobilises support for Syria and further aid to Türkiye \(European Union\)](#)

¹² [Syria requests EU support for the first time after earthquake \(Reuters\)](#)

¹³ [US pledges post-earthquake aid, but no contact with Syria’s Assad \(Al-Jazeera\)](#)

¹⁴ [Department Press Briefing – February 6, 2023 \(US Department of State\)](#)

¹⁵ [Treasury Issues Syria General License 23 To Aid In Earthquake Disaster Relief Efforts \(US Treasury\)](#)

June 2020 period after the March 5, 2020 ceasefire came into effect. However, this drop of activity was temporary, with conflict activity returning just a few days after the earthquake.

One of the largest drops in reported conflict activity due to the earthquake came from the decreased tensions between the SDF and Turkey. In the previous year, tensions between the SDF and Turkey remained high, with regular threats by Turkey to launch a new offensive to root out the Kurdish groups. The earthquake put a temporary end to this, with the devastation and the political fallout in Turkey complicating an already difficult election campaign for Turkish President Erdogan. The SDF offered aid to the areas impacted by the earthquake,¹⁶ though politics and tensions between the two sides have occasionally led to aid being held up at inline crossings.¹⁷ The threat of a new Turkish offensive has largely died down with some pleasantries exchanged by both sides due to the earthquake. Yet while the threat of a new offensive has temporarily died down tensions between both sides continued. Turkey even claimed to have undertaken an operation in SDF-controlled Qamishli, Al-Hassakah Governorate, to kill the organizer of 2022's terrorist attack in Istanbul, which Turkey accused the SDF of harboring.¹⁸

Conclusion

The deadly earthquake provided a unique opportunity for the various parties and the international community to cooperate to address the humanitarian situation in Syria. While there was some important mobilization in aid, opening border crossings, sanctions relief, and even a temporary decrease in conflict activity, this was not enough to address the needs of the Syrian people. Despite the devastation, tensions and mistrust between the various parties threaten to hamper the humanitarian response. Thus, international efforts should center on finding ways to alleviate the human suffering and laying the groundwork for much-needed early recovery and sustainable peace.

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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¹⁶ [SDF: Our forces on full alert to grant immediate aid for those affected by earthquake - February 6, 2023 - Hawar News](#)

¹⁷ [Enmities from Syrian civil war obstruct a quake aid convoy - February 10, 2023 - Reuters](#)

¹⁸ ["مخطط تفجير اسطنبول بعملية في سوريا" - تركيا "تحديد" - February 24, 2023 - Enab Baladi](#)