



2023 SYRIA IN REVIEW: CONFLICT TRENDS



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2023 Syria in Review: Conflict Trends



CA – SYR
CRISIS ANALYSIS – SYRIA

2023 Syria in Review: **Conflict Trends**

Contents

Executive Summary and Key Takeaways	4
<hr/>	
Overview	6
<hr/>	
Bombardment	6
Northwest	7
Northeast	7
South and Central Syria	7
<hr/>	
Criminality	8
<hr/>	
SDF-Tribal clashes	10
<hr/>	
Ongoing ISIS Activity	11
Anti-ISIS operations	11
ISIS attacks	12
<hr/>	
Outlook: Syria's Security Landscape Heading Into 2024	12

Executive Summary

Syria's security landscape is uncertain given the presence of international and regional actors, along with their proxies, inside Syria. These different actors have converging or diverging interests making it difficult to predict future events. That said, 2023's security dynamic points to how interconnected Syria remains with other regional conflicts, effectively showing how security dynamics in Syria remain fragile.

Syria experienced an uptick in security incidents in 2023 compared to 2022, though the zones of control have remained largely stagnant. Bombardment, criminality, social tensions leading to clashes, and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attacks were identified as the major security incidents taking place. The location and frequency of incidents varied depending on the type of security incident, but have all contributed to destabilizing communities throughout Syria and often impacting service provision in many ways. Broadly, the number of security incidents rose in early October following a series of domestic and regional security dynamics.

Bombardment was a major security threat throughout 2023 and also increased in October. In the northwest, the Syrian government launched a [fierce bombardment campaign](#) against the opposition in the northwest after an attack on the Homs military academy on 5 October. Turkish forces also conducted an aerial campaign against different targets across Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES)-held areas targeting Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions and key services infrastructure. Iran-backed militias increased their non-lethal attacks against International Coalition forces based in AANES-held areas in October following the onset of the war in Gaza. In South and Central, Israeli forces conducted the largest number of attacks in Syria in 2023 since 2018, targeting Iran-backed militia launching positions, infrastructure, and the Damascus and Aleppo international airports allegedly used to transport weapons into Syria.

Criminal activity continued in 2023 pushed by the dire economic conditions and the proliferation of drugs. The number of criminal incidents compared to 2022 varied depending on the governorate. Increases were largely attributed to the high number of warring communal actors in government-held areas who are in close proximity to each other and in competition over lucrative drug routes. Decreases were largely attributed to different measures taken by local authorities or communities to either crack down on criminal groups or dissuade individuals from taking part in criminal activity.

Throughout 2023, ISIS continued their attacks in northeastern and central Syria against the International Coalition, the SDF, and Syrian government forces. While the number of attacks in 2023 decreased compared to 2022, the terrorist organization's attacks were lethal nonetheless. ISIS conducted 184 attacks against the SDF in AANES-held areas and Syrian government military patrols and positions in the Syrian desert, resulting in more than 200 deaths. Anti-ISIS campaigns carried out by the International Coalition, the SDF, the Syrian government and its allies in different locations were unable to stamp out the ISIS presence.

Below are the key takeaways from Crisis Analysis–Syria's (CA–SYR) conflict and security overview for the 2023 Syria in Review series.

Key Takeaways

- Syria's security landscape is uncertain, given the presence of international and regional actors, along with their proxies, inside Syria. These different actors have converging or diverging interests making it difficult to predict future events.
- Aerial and mortar bombardment was the prominent security threat in 2023 and had a significant impact on local communities through causing displacement and disrupting service provision – particularly in northwest and northeast Syria.
- The number of security incidents saw a steep increase following the start of the war in Gaza, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) attack on the Turkish Ministry of Interior in Ankara, and the Homs military academy attack – all occurring during the first week of October.

- The SDF's attempt to move against the leader of the Arab-led Deir-ez-Zor Military Council (DMC), Abu Khawla, led pre existing tensions between Arab tribes and the SDF to surface. Heavy clashes took place between both sides for one month with the SDF emerging as the victor. However, tribal insurrectional activity against the SDF has not entirely ceased and continued to lower degrees in late 2023.
- Iran-backed militias based in southern Syria have been drawn into the region-wide conflict with Israel since early October. In Syria, Iranian-backed militias targeted the occupied Golan Heights in the south; International Coalition bases in the northeast and al-Tanf have also increased in the last quarter of 2023.
- Criminality increased overall in 2023 but data shows that it varies depending on the location. Lattakia, Dar'a, and As-Sweida, areas where local militias are prevalent, experienced the highest number of recorded crimes.
- ISIS attacks have continued throughout Syria despite efforts by the International Coalition, the SDF, and the Syrian government and its allies to end their presence. ISIS have concentrated their attacks in the northeast and central Syria.

Disclaimer: The security incidents and information presented in this report have been sourced from the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) with their expressed usage permission. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, the authors of this report do not guarantee the completeness or timeliness of the information provided by INSO. The authors, as well as INSO, are not liable for any inaccuracies, errors, or omissions in the information presented herein.

Overview

Security incidents unfolded across Syria in 2023 with certain flashpoints threatening to destabilize the security situation further. While no significant changes in the zones of control were observed since 2020, the following security-related themes were predominant in 2023: bombardment, criminality, tensions between the SDF and Arab Tribes, and ISIS attacks. In this report, CA-SYR provides a contextual overview, analysis, and forecast of what Syria's security landscape could look like in 2024.

Bombardment

Despite no changes in zones of control, bombardment, in the form of air strikes, artillery, and missile attacks, was the prominent security threat throughout 2023 and a strong indicator that hostilities between Syria's various actors remain cemented and translate into direct security threats to communities. Bombardment took place in most of the country: opposition-held Idleb and western Aleppo, Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES)-held Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh, and government-held south and central Syria in varying degrees of intensity and periods of time (as shown in Figure 1). The number of bombardment incidents, however, significantly increased in October due to domestic and regional developments that prompted an increase in the number of attacks launched by different actors.

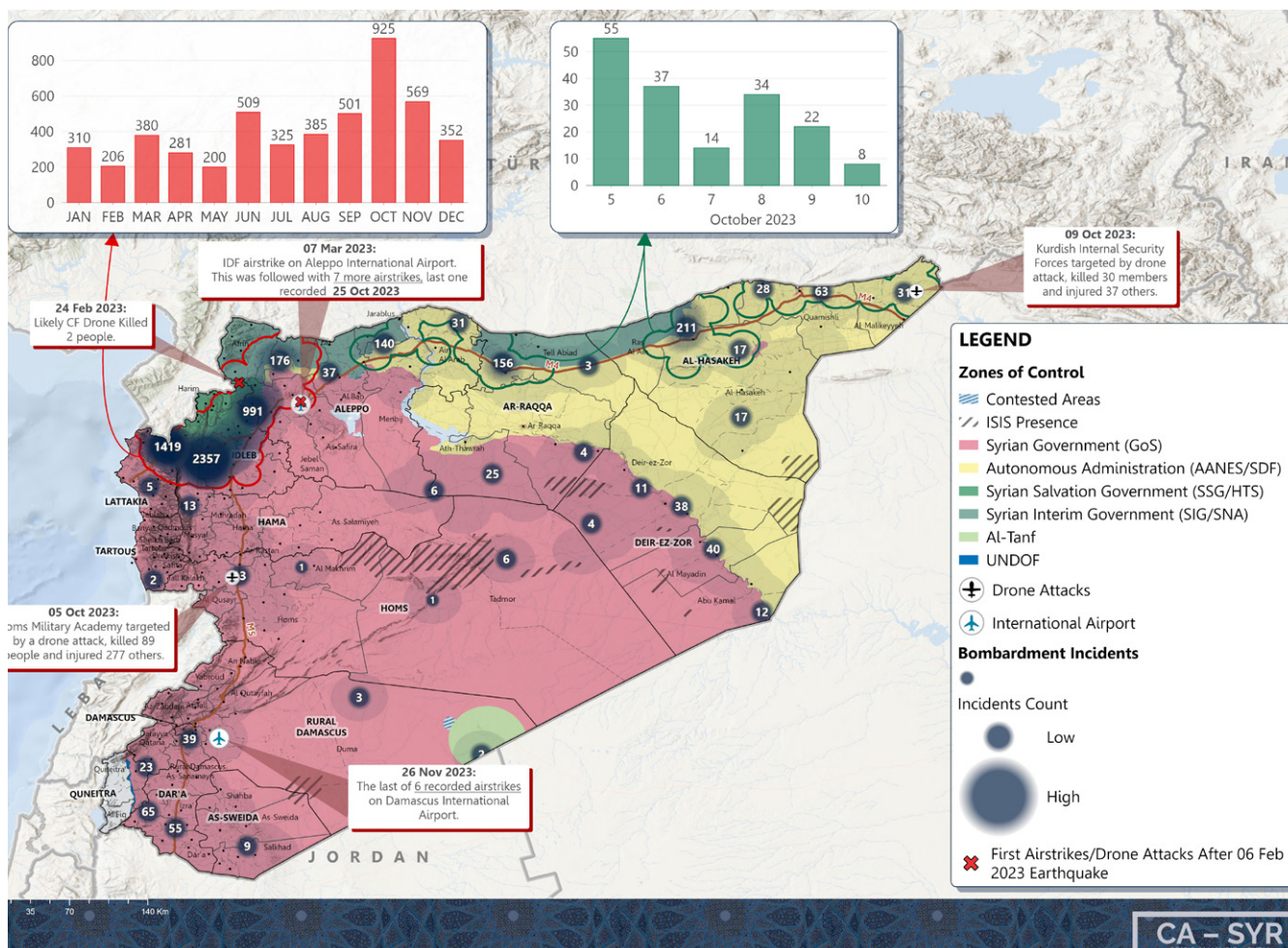


Figure 1: Heatmap of bombardment incidents across Syria in 2023

Northwest

2023 revealed that hostilities between the Syrian government and opposition forces remain entrenched and susceptible to sudden upticks. The frontline in opposition-held Idleb and northern Aleppo saw the highest number of bombardment incidents in 2023. Exchange of bombardment between opposition and Syrian government forces took place on a daily basis, averaging at 400 incidents per month. The number of incidents skyrocketed in October – increasing by 85% – after an explosion in the Syrian government’s Homs military academy on 5 October killed more than one hundred soldiers and civilians during the officers’ graduation ceremony. The [government claimed that the explosion was caused by drones](#) sent by the opposition and [retaliated with a fierce bombardment campaign](#) initially conducting hundreds of artillery strikes and dozens of airstrikes against more than 61 different communities located in opposition-held areas of Idleb and western Aleppo, killing 46 residents. The government’s retaliatory bombardment campaign hit civilian infrastructure including schools, hospitals, and medical centers, disrupting access to service provision. The bombardment caused the biggest conflict-driven displacement movement (about 120,000 civilians were displaced) since the March 2020 ceasefire agreement in the northwest between Turkey and Russia.

Northeast

The dynamic between Turkey and the Syrian Democratic Forces remains a highly destabilizing factor for northeast Syria. Turkish aggression on SDF-held areas was relatively calm throughout 2023, but witnessed a significant uptick from October lasting until the end of the year. Soon after the [Kurdistan Workers’ Party \(PKK\) claimed responsibility](#) for the 1 October Ankara bombing, Turkey launched a series of airstrikes against AANES-held areas between 5 and 10 October. [Turkey conducted airstrikes](#) against 145 sites in the northeast, including key infrastructure predominantly in Al-Hasakeh and Quamishli, killing approximately 28 Internal Security Forces (ISF, also known as Asayish) personnel and injuring 29 others. The targeted key infrastructure included electricity generation and transformation stations in Al-Hasakeh, Quamishli, and Amuda in addition to the As-Sweidiyeh gas-powered electricity station, which provides electricity to hospitals and bakeries in both Al-Hasakah and Quamishli. [Turkish airstrikes against AANES-held areas](#) continued with the last attack in 2023 taking place in late December, killing 8 civilians and wounding 10 others and further degrading the local energy infrastructure.

Iran-backed militias [attacked International Coalition bases](#) in AANES-held areas and al-Tanf infrequently. The attacks significantly increased following the start of the war in Gaza in October, though are not exclusive to the time period since early October. Iran-backed militias, operating under the umbrella of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, [attacked International Coalition bases 32 times in October and November](#) using rockets and drones, but did not cause any casualties. The [US later retaliated](#) with several airstrikes, with the first being on 26 October against two Iranian ammunition and weapons facilities near Abu Kamal town.

South and Central Syria

The threat of Iranian presence near the occupied Golan Heights continues to prompt Israeli aggression. Throughout 2023, Israel targeted Iran-backed militia leaders, ammunition depots, convoys, and military assets in government-held areas with airstrikes and artillery, particularly in Rural Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Dar’a, and Quneitra to [prevent them from expanding](#) their capabilities and footprint across the country. They also continued to conduct airstrikes against the Aleppo and Damascus International Airports in an attempt to [disrupt Iran’s aerial supply line of weapons](#) to its proxies in Syria and Lebanon. These attacks have intensified following the [start of the war in Gaza in early October](#), making 2023 the year with the [highest number of recorded Israeli attacks](#) (shown in Figure 2). Israeli forces are likely to have ramped up their attacks against Iran-backed forces to deter Iran-backed militias from conducting [further strikes targeting the occupied Golan Heights](#) in light of [Iran’s warning that its proxies could attack Israel](#).

The war on Gaza also arguably had a second-order impact on Syria, namely: certain Syria-relevant actors may seek to exploit global attention on Gaza to advance their interest in Syria, risking further deterioration of the security situation. Turkey’s bombardment on AANES-held northeast Syria targeting civilian

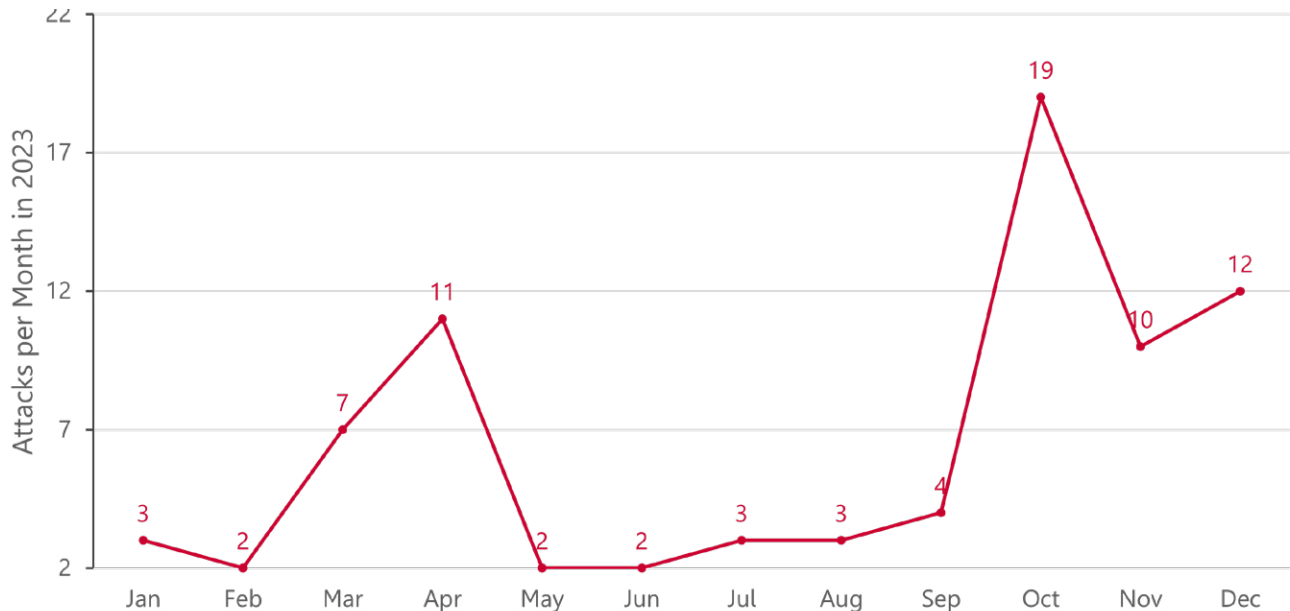


Figure 2: Number of IDF attacks on Syria throughout 2023

infrastructure arguably reached new heights. Media coverage of both events was minimal compared to previous similar rounds of violence.

Criminality

Criminal activity¹ increased in 2023 compared to 2022; however, the degree varied in frequency depending on the location. Crime has been rampant in Syria following thirteen years of conflict and the near collapse of state control over the country. An increase in humanitarian needs brought about by a [deteriorating economy](#), a [decline in humanitarian funding](#), [unemployment](#), and the [proliferation of narcotics](#) manufacturing and use have pushed people into a life of crime to sustain their needs.

Crimes were notably high in Lattakia, Dar'a, and As-Sweida compared to the rest of the country (as shown in Figure 3). In Lattakia the "[militiafication](#)" of armed criminal groups by the government in exchange for their support against the opposition increased crime in the governorate, particularly in Lattakia city. These criminal groups have become stronger and financially independent of the penurious government as they resort to crime to fund their operations. Their growing influence at the expense of state sovereignty has intensified the turf wars between them and have given them free reign.

In Dar'a, the [security situation is unstable](#) as a protracted [shadow war](#) continues between the former opposition groups and the government; infighting amongst former opposition groups themselves is also a contributing factor to the instability in the region. Formal government security entities are often denied access to large parts of the governorate and is unable/unwilling to maintain security, particularly following claims that it is [fomenting instability](#). In As-Sweida, criminal groups are a chronic problem and have engaged in kidnapping, extortion, and drug smuggling. Criminal activity was temporarily reduced following a [locally-led initiative to crackdown](#) on criminal groups in the governorate back in July 2022. However, [criminal activity resurfaced this year](#), particularly in the form of kidnapping residents for ransom.

Despite the concentration of criminal activity in certain locations, the year-on-year change in criminal activity has varied in 2023 depending on the location. Overall, crime has increased in Dar'a, Lattakia, Homs, Hama, Rural Damascus, Damascus, and Quneitra but decreased in the remaining governorates. The high number of criminal groups and armed actors in close proximity, as mentioned above have likely resulted in a significant increase in crimes, while local sources have stated that difficult economic conditions and increased poverty have pushed residents in Damascus and Rural Damascus to crime to make ends meet (as shown in Figure 3).

¹ Criminal activity refers to actions that violate the law and are harmful either to individuals or society as a whole. These acts can include using small arms (SAF), IEDs, hand grenades, theft, assault, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and kidnapping

The decrease in other locations can be attributed to several reasons. For example, in As-Sweida, [media sources noted that criminal activity](#), particularly kidnapping, decreased for several months well into the beginning of 2023 after many of As-Sweida's criminal groups were dismantled between July and

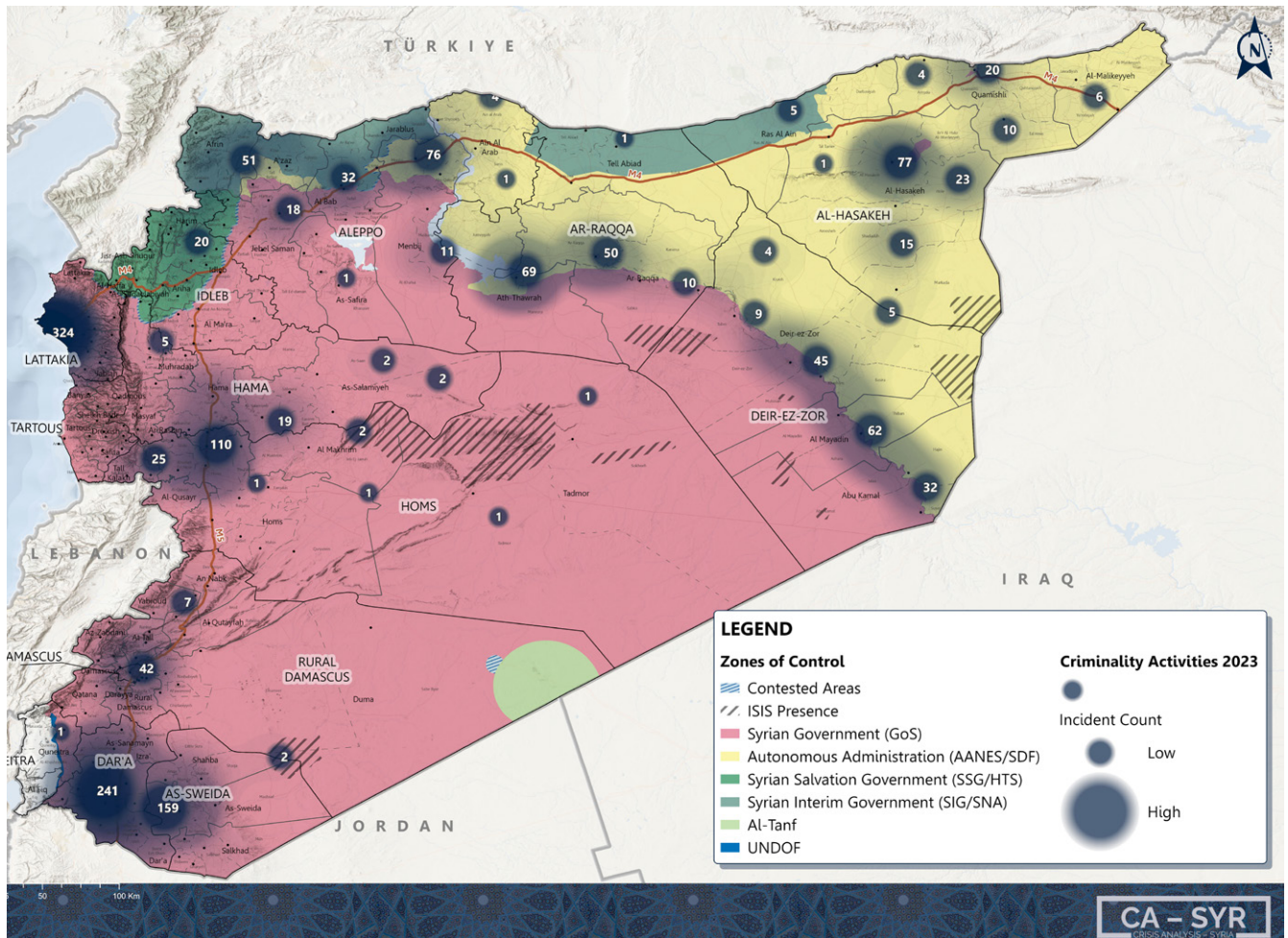


Figure 3: Heatmap displaying criminal activity across Syria

September 2022. Local sources later noted that criminal activity decreased again after the [start of anti-government protests in As-Sweida city](#) in August 2023. In Ar-Raqqa, local sources attributed the drop in crime to several measures taken by city councils and security forces; street lights and cameras were installed in Ar-Raqqa city and [arrest campaigns](#) were conducted by the Autonomous Administration's ISF/Asayish against those alleged to be involved in the narcotics trade.

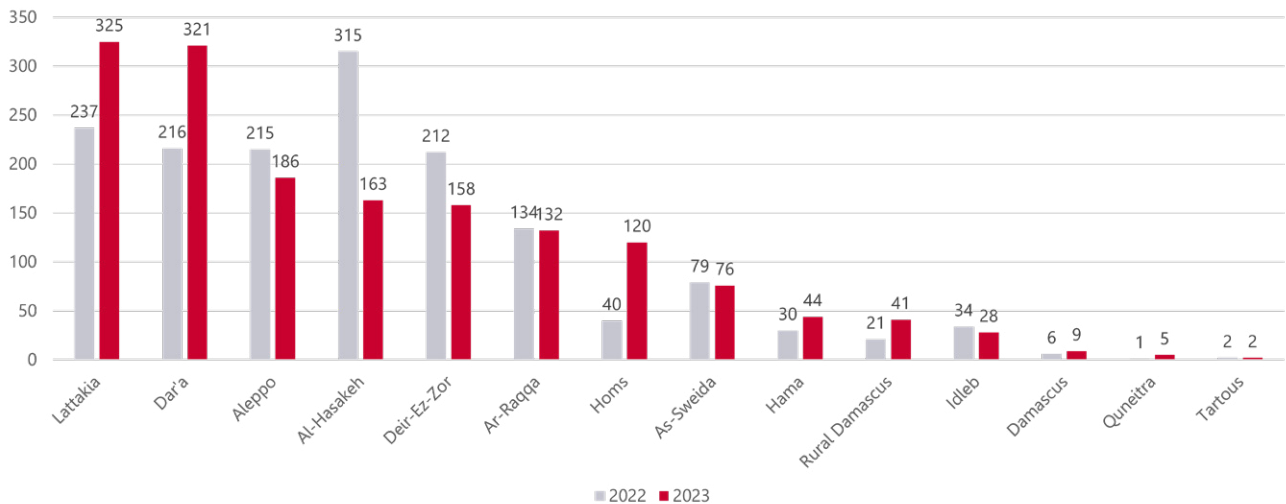


Figure 4: Comparison of the overall number of criminal activity across Syria between 2022 and 2023

SDF-Tribal clashes

Clashes erupted between the SDF and members of Arab tribes in Deir-ez-Zor in late 2023 due to underlying tensions between both sides. The Arab tribes in Deir-ez-Zor are [discontented living under the AANES rule](#). They blame the AANES for the deteriorating living conditions and consider themselves to be marginalized. Similar to other parts of northeast Syria, several communities in Deir-ez-Zor stand against SDF policies such as conscription and others introduced by AANES such as attempts to [enforce educational curricula](#) that they disapprove of.

These [tensions began to surface](#) after the SDF began maneuvering to remove Abu Khawla, the leader of the Arab-led Deir-ez-Zor Military Council (DMC) and primary security actor in Deir-ez-Zor from his position. The SDF and ISF both deployed combatants to the eastern Deir-ez-Zor countryside where the DMC headquarters is located causing DMC combatants to be put on high alert. Despite a [US-mediated agreement](#) reached by both sides on 26 July, clashes erupted after news broke [that Abu Khawla and other prominent DMC members were arrested](#) in Al-Hasakeh on 27 August.

These simmering tensions were later capitalized on by conflict entrepreneurs as the DMC and members of Arab tribes began attacking SDF positions and checkpoints across the eastern and northern Deir-ez-Zor

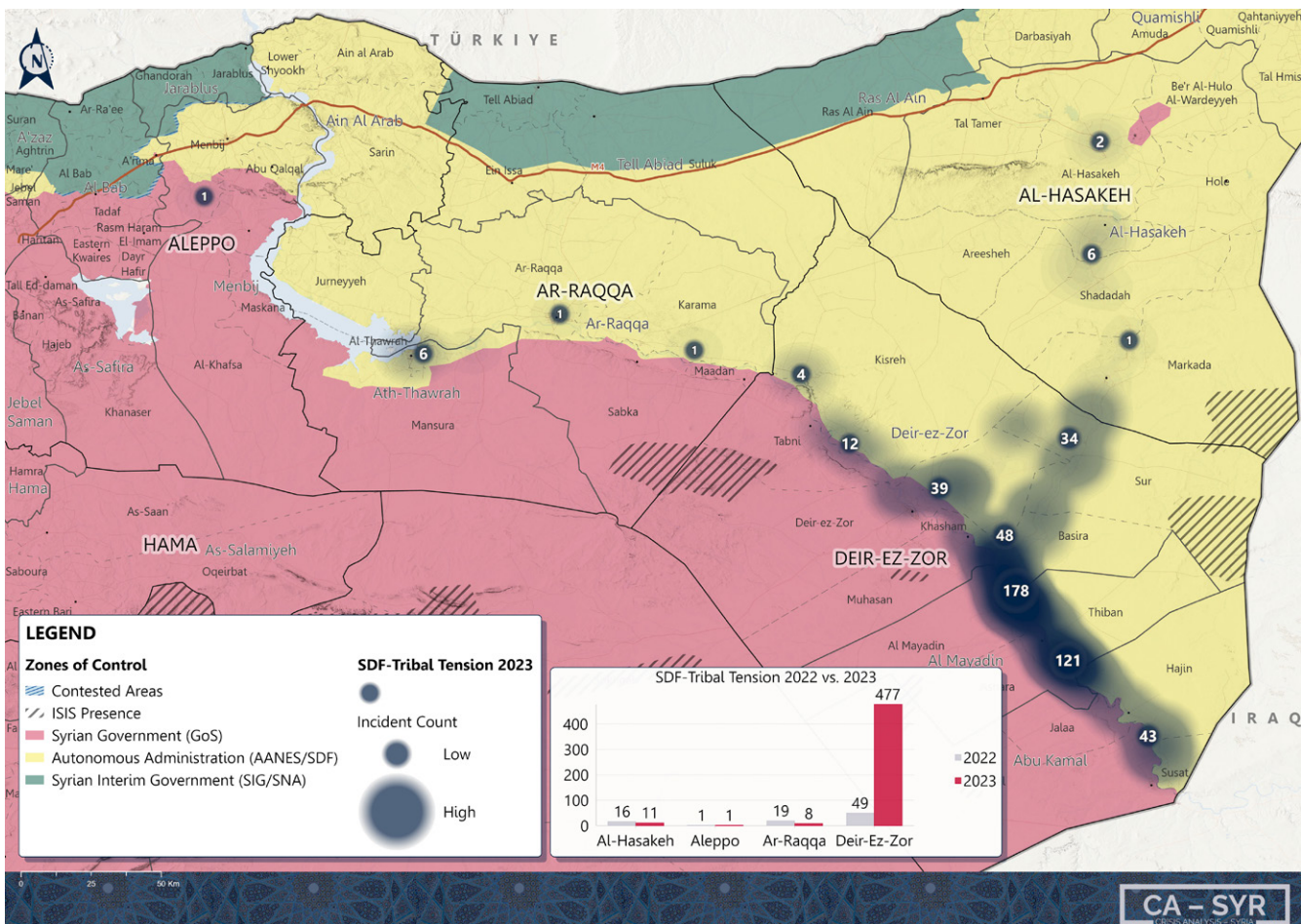


Figure 5: Heatmap of SDF-Tribal clashes in 2023

countryside, leading media sources to report on 2 September that [the SDF lost control of land](#) stretching from Thiban to Baguz alongside the Euphrates river. The SDF later regained control in early November and [established 120 new military positions](#) along the river stretching from Jazaret Elbuhmeid to Al Bagouz. However, the SDF victory did not bring an end to the fighting but rather led to the [formation of the Arab Tribal Forces](#) composed of 11 brigades and led by the Ekeidat tribal confederation leader, Ibrahim al-Hifil. The fight for control over territory in AANES-held areas was suddenly [substituted with a tribal-led insurgency against the SDF](#) amid ongoing rumors of the Syrian government’s involvement in supporting the fight against the SDF. The formation of this new insurgency is therefore reflective of how unresolved

grievances could lead to further destalinization and enable external actors to increase involvement in ways that ultimately bring more instability.

Ongoing ISIS Activity

Attacks by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continued across Syria in 2023 despite anti-ISIS campaigns carried out by the International Coalition, SDF, and Syrian government forces. The attacks were largely concentrated in northeast and central Syria against the SDF and Syrian government forces (shown in Figure 6). In terms of numbers, the attacks decreased when compared to 2022 because of the absence of major ISIS-centric security incidents like the Sina'a prison attack the year before (See inset chart in Figure 6).

Anti-ISIS operations

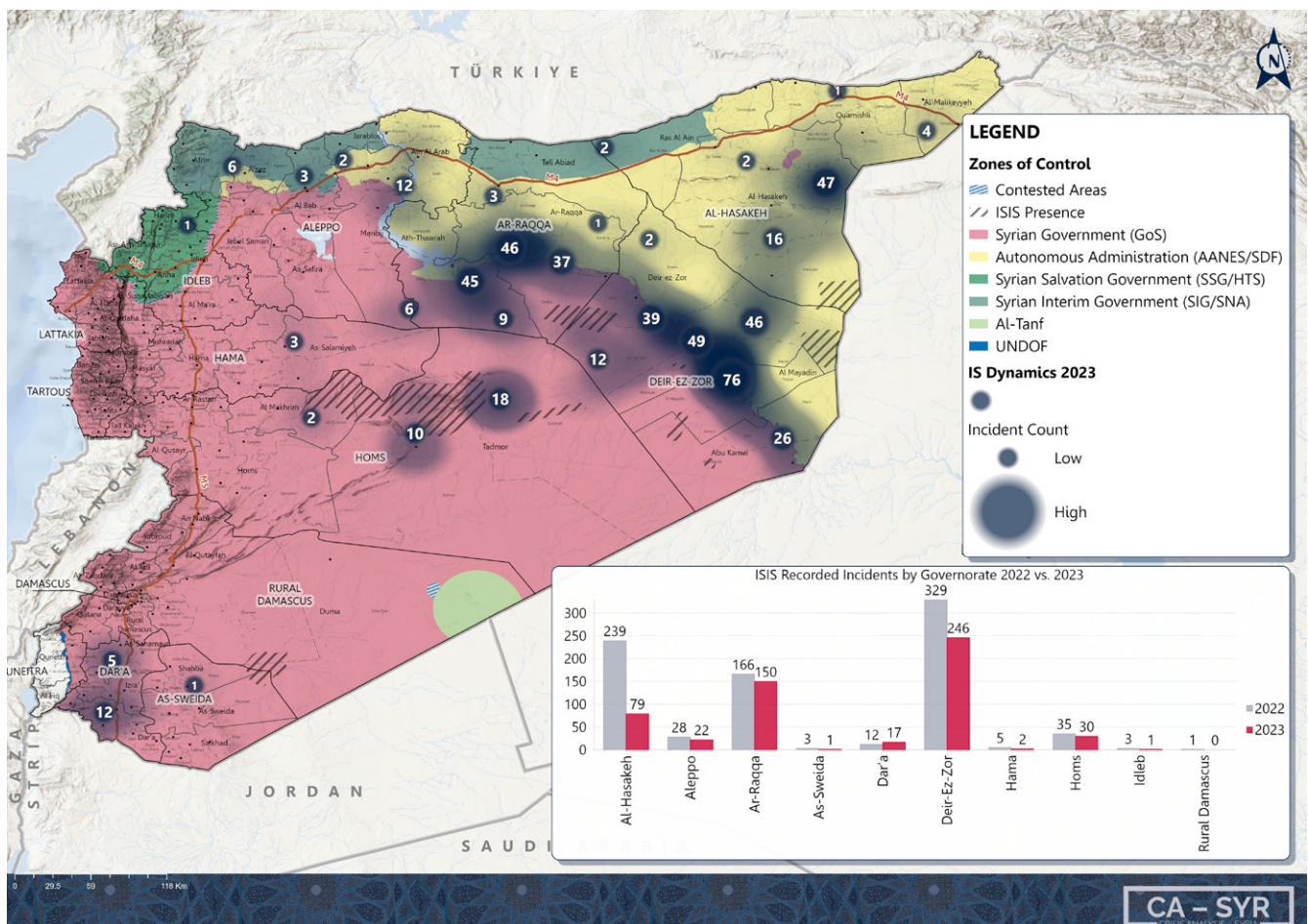


Figure 6: Heatmap of ISIS attacks in 2023

The [SDF launched a security campaign](#) in Ath-Thawra (*Tabqa*) and Karama in Ar-Raqqa governorate between 25 January and 2 February in which they arrested the Wali of Ar-Raqqa (an ISIS leader in Ar-Raqqa) along with 127 ISIS members who were plotting to attack the ISF/Asayish headquarters. The US Central Command also announced that the International Coalition and partner forces [conducted 43 operations against ISIS](#) during January 2023 in Iraq and Syria, towards “fighting terrorism and restoring stability in the region.” The [SDF later established various checkpoints and military positions](#) in Al-Hasakeh and Deir-ez-Zor to prevent ISIS expansion and hinder the movement of its members.

The Syrian government also conducted a [number of combing operations in the Syrian desert](#) in search of ISIS combatants. The Syrian army’s 17th and 18th divisions, supported by the 11th Division’s artillery, Liwaa al-Quds, and the [Russian air force conducted similar operations](#) in the Al Mayadin desert in Deir-ez-

Zor following lethal ISIS attacks in the area. Government forces also sent combatants and machine gun-mounted trucks to the area to reinforce their positions in the event of renewed ISIS attacks.

ISIS attacks

Despite the precautions and measures taken by the abovementioned actors, ISIS continued using insurgent tactics to deal significant damage while avoiding a direct confrontation. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), [ISIS carried out 165 attacks against the SDF in 2023](#), which resulted in the death of 89 SDF combatants and 26 civilians. ISIS lost 19 members and commanders during clashes and anti-ISIS operations launched by the SDF and the International Coalition. [ISIS also conducted 19 attacks in Central Syria](#), mostly in the Homs and Deir-ez-Zor deserts in 2023 that left 75 Iran-backed and pro-government combatants killed. ISIS attacks against government forces have been more lethal than those against the SDF. The ratio of kills per attack in AANES-held areas is 0.5, while in government-held areas it is 4. This stark difference in lethality can be attributed to the targets in government-held areas generally being unsuspecting remote and isolated military positions and patrols, making it difficult for friendly forces to support them when an attack occurs.

Outlook: Syria's Security Landscape into 2024



Image 1: Smoke billows as a result of alleged Syrian government bombardment in Idlib. (Source: Daily Sabah)

The presence of competing international and regional actors and their proxies inside Syria makes it difficult to predict what the security landscape will look like moving forward. Their goal of preserving their influence inside Syria and the region often leads to diverging interests making it difficult to predict security developments in the future. That said, the past year demonstrates how Syria remains dependent on international influencers and the support of external actors to significantly drive security and political change. Security dynamics in Syria will remain fragile in 2024.

Syria's domestic issues attributed to the deteriorating security situation throughout 2023 when compared with 2022, are likely to remain present in 2024. The themes outlined in this report such as the government's continuous bombardments on Idlib, Turkish bombardment on AANES-held areas, and the SDF's battle with insurgents are likely to continue driving further conflict in different ways. In January 2024, [Turkish forces conducted airstrikes](#) against 25 different SDF targets in [northeastern Syria including](#)

key infrastructure. On 8 January, Syrian government forces reportedly **fired incendiary artillery rounds** towards Idleb, injuring 24 people. ISIS, on the other hand, **ambushed a bus carrying Syrian government combatants**, killing 14. As such, with all actors remaining far off reaching any political resolution that could bring peace forward, these security and conflict trends are expected to continue to the detriment of local communities.

As the war in Gaza continues, the US' ability to deter, prevent, and mediate in Syria decreases as the conflict slowly spills over into the wider region. The rules of engagement may become more fluid with time as attacks escalate and the risk of parties miscalculating or misinterpreting the other's actions grow, making detente more difficult. It is also unclear if the **US intends to draw down its military presence in Syria** and Iraq and what security architecture it intends to leave behind to **keep ISIS in check**. With the war on Gaza still unfolding, Syria remains at risk of being further used as a conflict theater by competing regional actors to settle scores as has been the risk since 7 October.

The proliferation of weapons, the **militiafication of criminal groups**, and the narcotics trade are all expected to continue and potentially increase in 2024. The continued economic deterioration and the emergence of crime as a negative coping mechanism is leading to the proliferation of several small and competing **self-financed armed groups**. Their close proximity and competition put them at odds, fueling criminal activity and leading to significant instability in certain governorates such as Latakia, As-Sweida, and Dar'a.

The proliferation of drugs does not only spur internal competition that is more than likely to contribute to a decline in security conditions, but also has the potential impact to further worsen internal security dynamics amid increased hostility by regional neighbors who seem to have escalated their rules of engagement amid the government's failure to address the issue. The Jordanian army intensified its anti-narcotics operations and continued conducting airstrikes against smuggler hideouts in southern Syria. On 9 January, the **Jordanian Air Force allegedly conducted airstrikes** against three different locations in As-Sweida suspected of being used in drug smuggling operations into Jordan. Jordanian army and security agencies later **raided the hideouts of several drug dealers and smugglers** along the border and arrested seven individuals. The Jordanian army later **announced on 11 January** that it will be intensifying its military operations to combat drug smuggling on the Syrian-Jordanian border and that it had arrested more than twenty smugglers in two operations.



Image 2: A damaged fuel depot spews fire, allegedly due to Turkish aerial operations in northeast Syria. Source: Delil Souleiman/AFP via Middle East Institute

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Crisis Analysis – Syria (CA-SYR) was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. CA-SYR's most important function is to collect and analyze data and information. Since 2015, our analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the conflict. CA-SYR is a team within Mercy Corps, and is part of the Mercy Corps response to the Syrian crisis.

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