

THE  
CARTER CENTER**Quarterly Review of Syrian Political and Military Dynamics  
April-June 2023****SUMMARY**

The Carter Center's latest quarterly review examines the reacceptance of the Government of Syria (GoS) into the Arab League, which is widely seen as an acknowledgment of that government's "victory" in the Syrian conflict and shifts in regional priorities. But conflict and instability in Syria persist. The illegal manufacture and sale of Captagon, a synthetic amphetamine-style drug, has created additional instability in southern Syria, with Jordan resorting to air strikes to curb the trade. Regional normalization and reengagement present an opportunity to improve the humanitarian situation and encourage necessary compromise among conflicting parties. However, unconditional normalization alone is insufficient for achieving stability and peace in Syria. Instead, reengaging countries should prioritize the safe return of refugees, facilitate aid deliveries, and encourage negotiations for a sustainable political solution.

**Security-Related Developments**

- The GoS was readmitted to the Arab League after a 12-year absence, signaling a normalization.
- Drug-related violence reached its highest level in southern Syria, compounding instability in an already unstable region.
- On May 8, Jordan reportedly carried out airstrikes in Dara'a and As-Sweida governorates, targeting a suspected Captagon kingpin and factory. These airstrikes come as countries across the region struggle to deal with the illegal drug trade based in Syria.
- Following The Wagner Group's June mutiny in Russia, the Russian armed forces in Syria and the GoS moved quickly to restrain Wagner's influence and presence in the country.<sup>1</sup>
- Attacks against GoS soldiers and former opposition fighters continued in Dara'a Governorate, leading to clashes and standoffs in multiple cities throughout the area.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/syria-brought-wagner-group-fighters-heel-mutiny-unfolded-russia-2023-07-07/>,

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/641425> , <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/647781>

- The GoS carried out airstrikes near Al-Yadudah and Atman — the first in the governorate since 2018.<sup>3</sup>
- In June 2023, the GoS opened a settlement center in Talbiseh in Northern Homs Governate to defer military conscriptions and collect weapons from former opposition members after a month of escalating tensions between residents of the city and GoS armed forces.<sup>4</sup>
- After the end of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) ceasefire on June 13, Turkey escalated its drone campaign in northeastern Syria.
- Tensions between the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq and the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of northeast Syria led to the temporary closure of the Semalka-Fishkhabour border crossing, preventing the movement of people and goods between the territories.<sup>5</sup>

<b>Conflict Events in Syria (Q1 2023 vs. Q2 2023)</b>			
<b>Region/Governorate</b>	<b>Q1</b>	<b>Q2</b>	<b>Change (%)</b>
<b>Northwest</b>	<b>1,004</b>	<b>1,369</b>	<b>+ 365 (+36.4%)</b>
Aleppo	499	604	+ 105 (+21%)
Idlib	342	508	+ 116 (+48.5%)
Hama	111	183	+72 (+64.9%)
Lattakia	52	73	+21 (+40.4%)
Tartous	0	1	+1
<b>South &amp; Central</b>	<b>359</b>	<b>433</b>	<b>+74 (+20.6%)</b>
Homs	54	76	+22 (+40.7%)
Rural Damascus	67	56	-11 (-16.4%)
Damascus	15	21	+6 (+40%)
Quneitra	10	24	+14 (+140%)
Dara'a	181	232	+51 (+28.2%)
As-Sweida	32	24	-8 (-25%)
<b>Northeast</b>	<b>698</b>	<b>609</b>	<b>-89 (-12.8%)</b>
Al-Hassakah	165	129	-36 (-21.8%)
Ar-Raqqa	202	115	-87 (-43.1%)
Deir-ez-Zor	331	365	+34 (+10.3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,061</b>	<b>2,411</b>	<b>+350 (+17%)</b>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.horanfree.com/archives/13747>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/647015>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/intra-kurdish-tensions-paralyze-northeast-syrias-main-border-crossing>

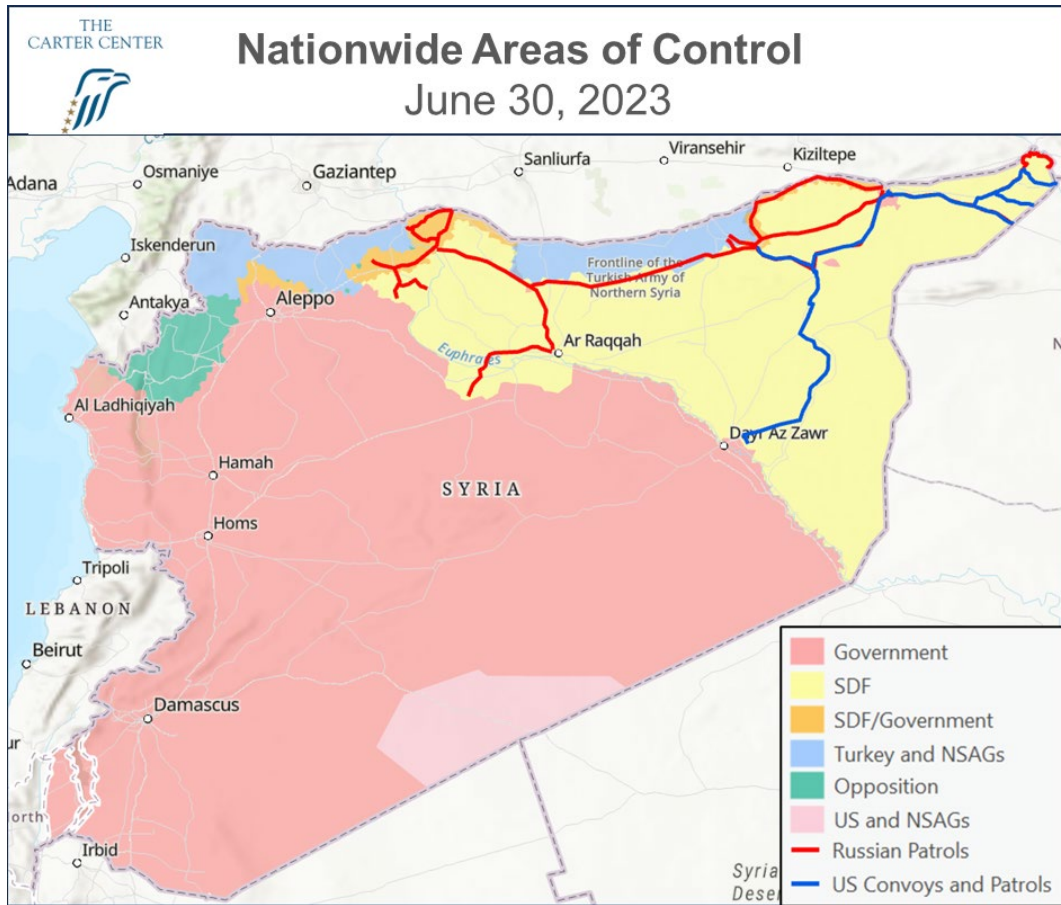


Figure 1: Dominant actors’ area of control and influence in Syria as of June 30, 2023. NSAG stands for Non-State Armed Groups.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 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 (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 a 55km de-confliction zone established by the U.S.-led coalition, which includes a number of 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. Data is collected from a variety of open sources.

## Territorial Holdings in Syria by Faction

July 1, 2023

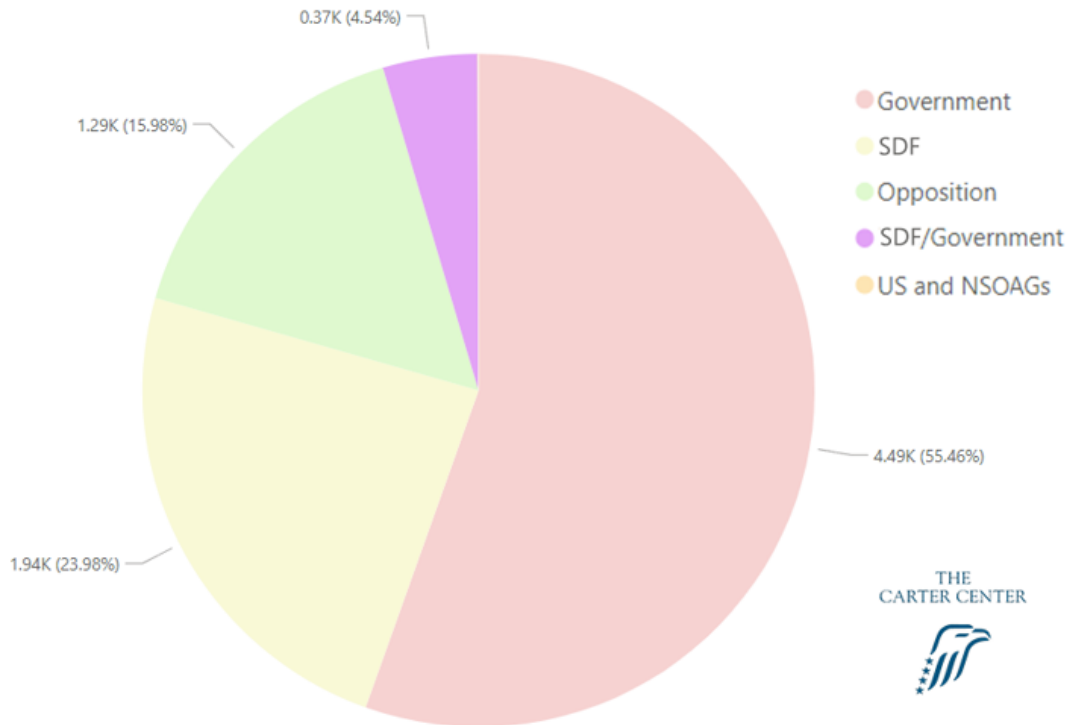


Figure 2: Breakdown of territorial holdings by party as of June 30, 2023. Note: The U.S. and allied NSOAGs control .037% of Syrian territory, represented as a small sliver in the graph according to The Carter Center’s [Areas of Control Point Data](#).

### Syria’s Readmission to the Arab League

After the government’s crackdown during the 2011 uprising, Syria faced regional isolation and censure. Many neighboring countries supported the uprising against the GoS. However, 12 years into the conflict — and with the GoS in control over most of Syria — regional governments that previously supported the uprising began normalizing relations with Syria. In May 2023, the GoS was readmitted into the Arab League — the most prominent move toward normalization to date.

The devastating February earthquake in northwestern Syria provided an immediate rationale for many Arab States to provide aid directly to the GoS.<sup>7</sup> Some nations, like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), argued that the readmittance and normalization with the GoS would provide a path for making new partnerships to ensure regional prosperity and stability.<sup>8</sup> While Qatar permitted Syria’s readmittance into the Arab League, it maintains

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/04/1161125960/the-earthquakes-have-prompted-arab-states-to-re-engage-with-syrian-president-bas>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/8/how-has-the-world-reacted-to-syria-rejoining-the-arab-league>

that full normalization can occur only with a political solution to the conflict.<sup>9</sup> Russia applauded Syria’s return to the Arab League, while the United States condemned it.<sup>10</sup>

Syria’s readmittance comes as multiple Arab countries seek a new strategy to influence regional politics. Many Arab nations are now reengaging with the GoS in the hopes of stemming the Captagon trade,<sup>11</sup> returning Syrian refugees,<sup>12</sup> and containing Iranian influence.<sup>13</sup> This shift in approach reflects the evolving political landscape in the region. Many Arab countries, like Saudi Arabia, increasingly are focusing on regional stability for economic development, rather than perpetuating regional tensions.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this political “victory,” the conflict in Syria persists. Fighting against the GoS continues in northwest Syria, where armed opposition forces control territory. Northeast Syria remains under the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, who have significant resources and maintain tense relations with the GoS. In Dara’a Governorate, which has been under GoS control since 2018, attacks against former opposition figures and government officials have continued unabated. These tensions have led to the sieges of multiple cities in Dara’a, a trend that has continued this quarter.

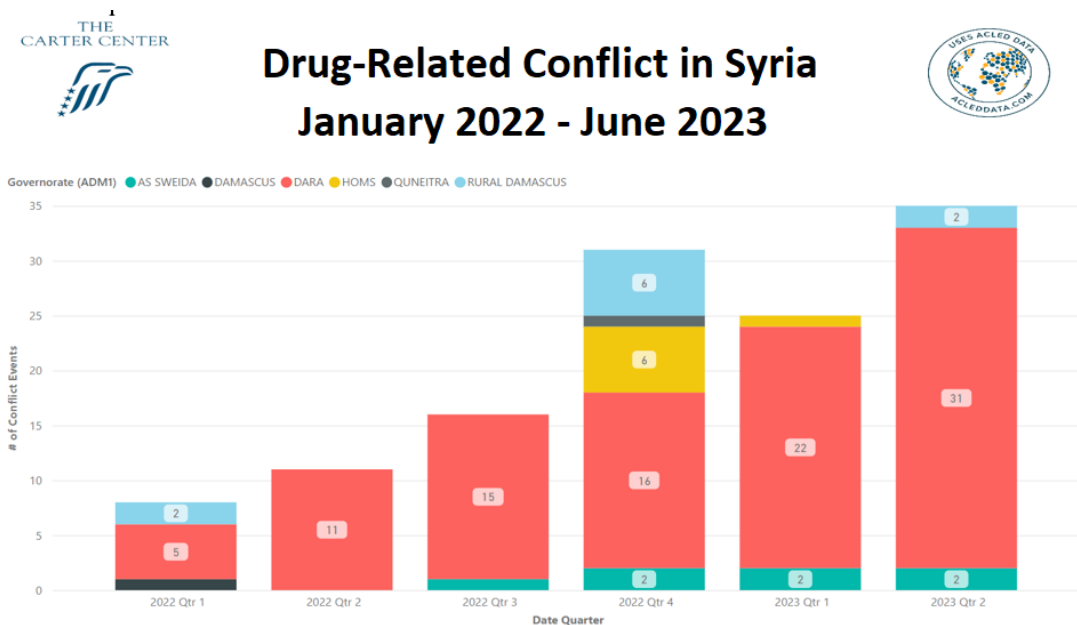


Figure 3: Drug-related conflict events in southern Syria between January 2022 and June 2023. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/8/how-has-the-world-reacted-to-syria-rejoining-the-arab-league>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/arab-league-set-readmit-syria-relations-with-assad-normalise-2023-05-07/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/mona-yacoubian-arab-normalization-syrias-assad>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/syria-normalizing-relations-arab-countries-who-will-benefit>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/uae-paves-way-syrias-return-arab-fold-plenty-hurdles-remain>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/syria/bashar-al-assad-arab-league>,  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/syria/upsides-syrian-normalization-assad>

The Captagon trade continues to flourish, impacting conflict dynamics in southern Syria. Between April and June 2023, at least 35 conflicts involved drugs, such as the killing of alleged drug dealers, arrests, and clashes between rival armed groups involved in smuggling. This is the highest level of conflict reported around the drug trade in southern Syria. By contrast, only 25 drug-related events were reported in the first quarter of 2023, and 68 events in all of 2022.

The GoS contends that it is a victim of drug smuggling and is simply a transit country,<sup>15</sup> a claim that international observers have largely rejected. Drug smuggling, particularly Captagon, has proven profitable for members of the GoS and non-state groups. Additionally, international investigations have found that the drug trade is closely linked to Hezbollah and the GoS Fourth Division, both key pro-government actors.<sup>16</sup> The drug networks in southern Syria are relatively fragmented and decentralized,<sup>17</sup> leading to rivalries and violence between armed actors. Worryingly, the rationale of combatting drugs has been used by the GoS as a justification for crackdowns on towns in Dara'a and Homs governorates.<sup>18</sup>

The fight against the Captagon trade has fueled indiscriminate violence against civilians. Though countries such as Jordan engage with the GoS partially to stem the drug trade, they have indicated their willingness to use military force as needed. In May 2023, suspected Jordanian airstrikes in southern Syria targeted a prominent Captagon smuggler and manufacturing facility, marking a major escalation of Jordan's war on drugs. An airstrike on a drug dealer in As-Sweida killed seven people, including the smuggler's wife and children. The al-Ramthan tribe, to which the smuggler belonged, condemned the airstrikes but confirmed that the suspected individual was a drug dealer. The tribe attributed the thriving drug trade to poverty and the marginalization of young people.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

Despite the reacceptance of the GoS by many Arab states, conflict in Syria continues. Regional attempts to counteract the Captagon trade have not succeeded, and normalization has not led to greater stability.<sup>20</sup> A particular concern is the intention of many Arab states to forcibly repatriate Syrian refugees. Alongside Syria's predominantly unstable and economically fragile status, human rights organizations have highlighted the concerns

<sup>15</sup> <https://alwatan.sy/archives/351464>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-66012698>

<sup>17</sup> <https://coar-global.org/2022/07/30/smugglers-and-security-agents-fragmentation-and-decentralisation-in-southern-syrias-captagon-networks/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://en.majalla.com/node/292101/opinion/damascus-using-drug-crackdown-pretext-reassert-control>

<sup>19</sup> <https://aymennaltamimi.substack.com/p/the-airstrike-targeting-a-drug-smuggler>

<sup>20</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/31/syria-assad-normalization-saudi-arabia-jordan-terrorism-islamic-state-captagon/>

facing refugees who are forced to return.<sup>21</sup> Some countries like Lebanon have even increased deportations of refugees following the readmittance of the GoS.<sup>22</sup>

The reengagement of Arab countries with the GoS has the potential to improve the humanitarian situation and foster necessary compromise. The Syrian government's decision in February to open additional border crossings for earthquake relief was a result of pressure from the UAE.<sup>23</sup> *However, full regional normalization with the GoS alone will not result in stability or peace.* Instead, countries that choose to reengage must ensure the safe and voluntary return of refugees, allow for uninhibited aid deliveries, and encourage the various parties in the Syrian conflict to negotiate a sustainable political solution.

An inclusive solution would establish a foundation for stability, subsequently enabling reconstruction and economic growth. Furthermore, a thriving economy might compel individuals involved in the drug trade to consider alternative income-generating opportunities, diminishing the influence of armed groups and militias profiting from illicit activities. Many countries have accepted the continued rule of President Assad as a reality, but some foundational aspects of a lasting peace are lacking. Regional cooperation, if handled carefully, could improve the situation for the Syrian people.

*This report was authored by Hari Prasad, Alexander Mills, Emory Bouffard, 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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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/10/20/our-lives-are-death/syrian-refugee-returns-lebanon-and-jordan>, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/lebanon-halt-summary-deportations-of-syrian-refugees/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/05/lebanon-armed-forces-summarily-deporting-syrians>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/assad-approved-syria-quake-aid-with-uae-nudge-sources-say-2023-02-23/>