



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 10 – 16 DECEMBER 2018

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Ongoing asymmetrical events continue to impact civilians and local conflict resolution actors in Idleb Governorate.
- **SOUTH** | Despite UN Resolution 2165 being extended for one more year this week, the overall reduction of cross border UN aid into southern Syria continues to affect the local security environment in the south.
- **NORTHEAST** | Rumors of a Turkish intervention in northeast Syria prompted a rare response from US officials and diverts attention of Kurdish actors from the fight against ISIS.

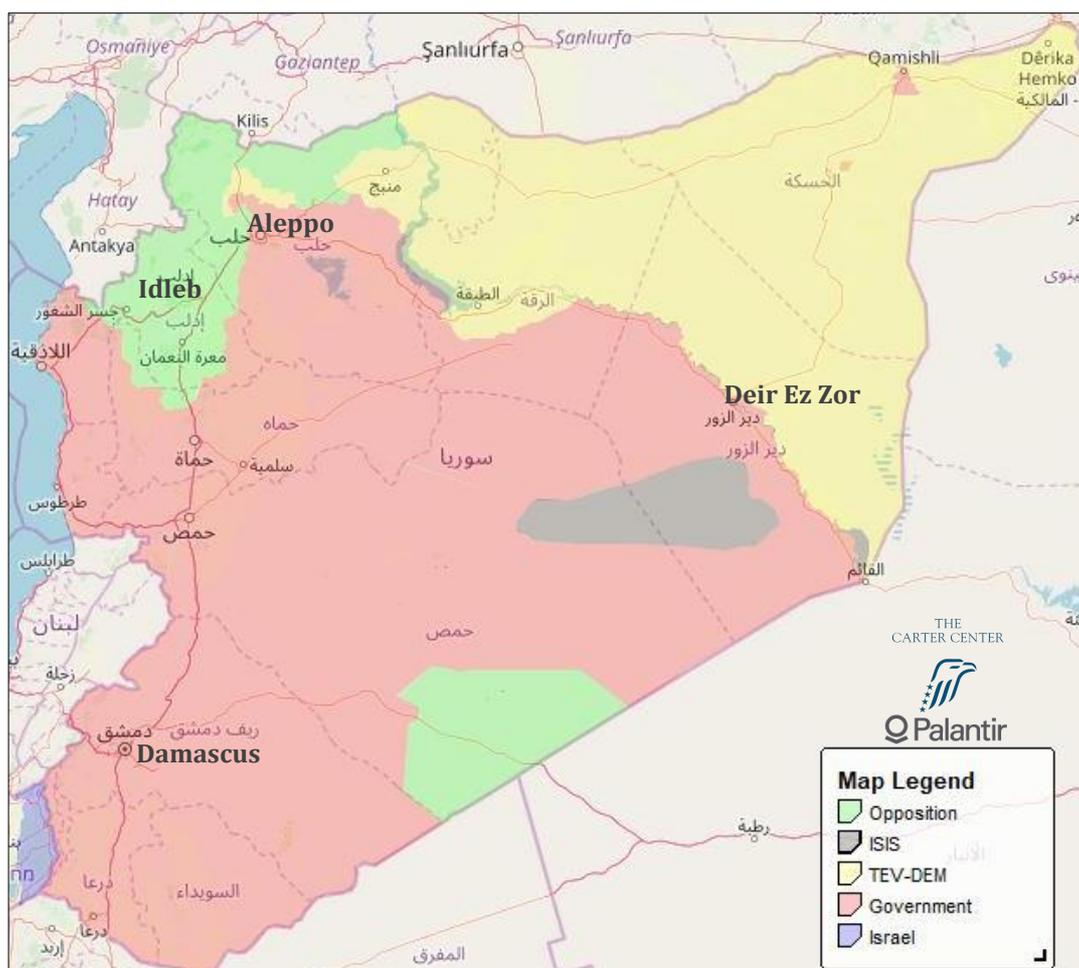


Figure 1: Areas of control throughout Syria as of 16 December 2018, including gains by SDF in Deir Ez Zor Governorate against ISIS.

## **NORTHWEST SYRIA**

Routine conflict, namely shelling from both sides, along Government of Syria (GoS) / opposition frontlines in northern Hama and southwest Aleppo governorates continued this week after the resumption of fighting following a reported chemical weapons attack in Aleppo in late November 2018.<sup>1</sup> Along with these incidences of shelling, asymmetrical events continue to affect the internal security environment in Idleb Governorate.

This week saw at least seven events (displayed below in Figure 2), including one roadside IED attack against suspected Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) members in Kafr Aleppo, a shooting of two Ahrar al-Sham members near Tah town and a small arms fire assassination against a local policeman in al-Rae town. Two bodies of former opposition group fighters were also found in Harim town on 12 December 2018.

This builds on last reporting period's 10 conflict events and follows a growing trend of assassination activity in Idleb Governorate, especially towards HTS, in the past two weeks. By contrast, November 2018 had an average of two events per week and had remained steady since the August 2018 Ceasefire Agreement in the governorate.

While nowhere near the levels earlier in 2018—such as in June and July that saw six or seven incidents per week—the persistent dynamic demonstrates the ongoing internal tensions and rivalries still at play between different groups in Idleb Governorate.

The attacks are even more notable after last week's local ceasefire talks between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham in western areas of Idleb. The activity also continues to disrupt local conflict resolution and peacebuilding work in Idleb Governorate.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the resumption of conflict, see the previous week's Weekly Conflict Summary dated 03 - 09 December 2018 [here](#).

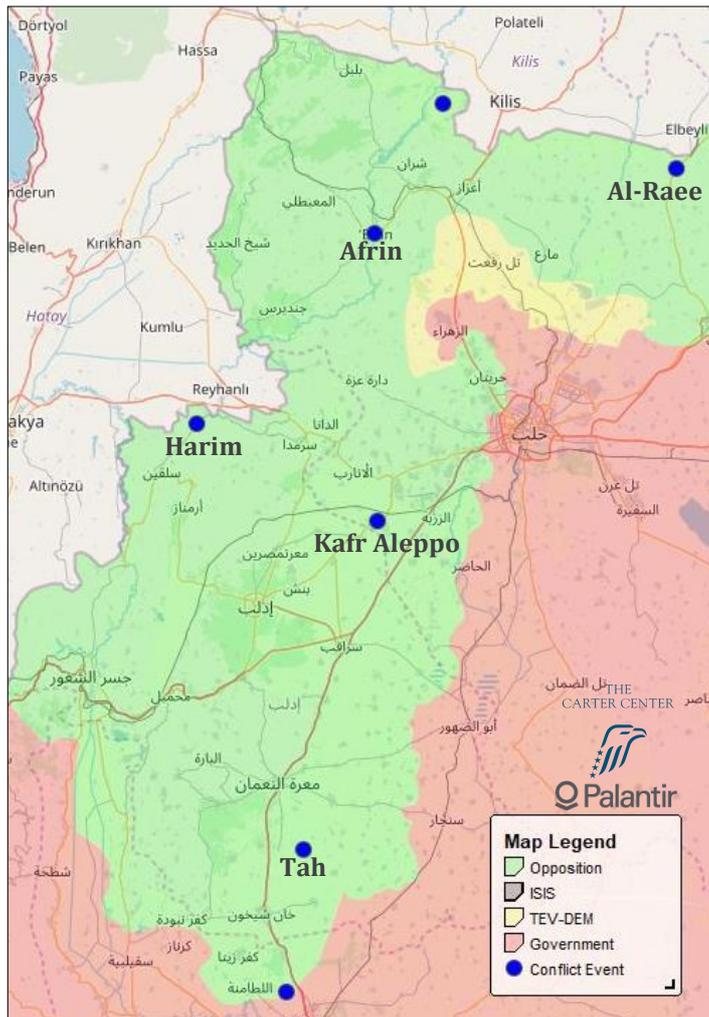


Figure 2: Location of assassinations in Idleb and Aleppo Governorates between 10 December and 16 December 2018

**SOUTH SYRIA**

Dominating reports from the south was the extension of UN Resolution 2165 (now 2449) on 13 December 2018 for another year, which allows cross border UN aid from Jordan, Iraq and Turkey without the permission of Damascus. The resolution, that began in 2014 and has been renewed on a yearly basis since this time, was set to expire on 10 January 2019.

As this cross border aid meets significant portions of humanitarian needs in Syria,<sup>2</sup> and the significant context changes in the country in 2018, questions had remained until recently over if and how long the resolution would be extended. This was especially the case after recent comments from Russia’s ambassador to the UN, Dmitry Polyansky, who on 29 November 2018 stated that Russia sought an “adjustment of the cross border mechanism”.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In 2017, 20% according to a [report](#) by the World Food Programme and UNHCR

<sup>3</sup> For comments by Ambassador Polyansky see [here](#).

Despite the positive news this week, the renewal is unlikely to change the situation in southern Syria. Already, there has been a significant reduction in cross border UN humanitarian aid since mid-2018, after GoS and aligned forces took control of the Nasib and Ramtha border crossings. Despite the UN resolution, and that the GoS takeover in July resulted in a notable drop in violence across southern Syria, the last UN convoy entering Syria from Jordan was on 25 June 2018.

These factors would exacerbate the growing humanitarian concerns for the region and will have implication for the overall security environment in the south. In the last three months, steady low levels of robberies, kidnappings and shootings against civilians and GoS personnel have been recorded in Daraa governorate, with at least 15 recorded since August 2018, most recently on 11 December 2018 in Tafs town (although it is important to note that due to the restrictive reporting environment not all events have been recorded).

This demonstrates the challenges faced by GoS to establish full law and order across the governorate, and adds to the complexity of local long term conflict resolution efforts on the ground.

### **NORTHEAST SYRIA**

In southeast Deir Ez Zor Governorate, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fully captured Hajin and nearby Abu al-Khatir from ISIS, after spending the past couple of weeks gradually securing the area. SDF forces also fully captured the Baghuz and Jabal al-Baghuz area in the south near the Iraqi border, another area they have spent the past two weeks fighting ISIS forces.

Despite these noteworthy changes in territorial control, rumors of impending action by Turkey and aligned forces in northeast Syria were the key features this week. On 12 and 14 December 2018, President Erdogan stated that Turkish forces will enter northern Syria “within days”, east of the Euphrates River, if the YPG was not removed. He also accused the US of “delaying the implementation of the Menbij Roadmap.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, stakeholders moved troops to the northern Syrian border, especially in the vicinity of Tal Abyad town, including Turkish aligned opposition groups and the YPG, the latter sending a contingent of Special Forces on 13 December 2018. Turkish aligned FSA re-enforcements also arrived on the Menbij frontlines. Civilian protests against potential Turkish intervention were also seen in various towns in northeast Syria throughout the week.

While such statements and actions have been seen before in 2018, it was notable that the rumor prompted a rare response from the US Department of Defense, which stated on 13 December 2018: “Unilateral military action into north east

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<sup>4</sup> For the statement of 12 December 2018, please see [here](#), the statement of 14 December 2018, [here](#) and the statement of the Menbij roadmap, [here](#).

Syria by any party, particularly as U.S. personnel may be present or in the vicinity, is of grave concern. We could find any such actions unacceptable.”<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of whether Turkish action is seen or not in the short term, the rumors have not only highlighted the fragility of the situation along northern Syria’s border but also the weakening trust Turkey has in the US to guarantee its border security.

The recent threats also demonstrate the difficulty Washington faces in convincing Ankara that providing support to local partners (including in areas where the YPG are present) is supportive of Turkey’s national security interest. As such, future developments in the northeast region will not only be heavily linked to how the US can respond to Turkey’s demands, but also to reassure local actors on the ground, such as the YPG and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), that they will be able to continue with their own strategic goals.<sup>6</sup>

### **WATCH LIST**

The watch list outlines various dynamics that the Carter Center’s Syria Project is monitoring in the coming week(s) that may indicate changes in dynamics.

**NORTHWEST** | We are monitoring change in levels of asymmetrical warfare internally in Idlib governorate as well as any change in routine conflict dynamics on GoS / opposition frontlines in northern Hama and south west Aleppo governorates.

**SOUTH** | We are monitoring the impact the ongoing lack of humanitarian aid in southern Syria could have on the security and crime environment there.

**NORTHEAST** | We are monitoring for more concrete signs of intervention in northern Syria by Turkey, especially along the border areas around Kobane, Tal Abyad and Ras al Ein towns. We are also observing how this ongoing dynamic could impact local US aligned actor relations as well as on the anti ISIS campaign in south west Deir Ez Zor governorate.

*Please note The Weekly Conflict Summary reports will resume in January 2019.*

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<sup>5</sup> For the Pentagon’s statement please see [here](#)

<sup>6</sup> The latter point is looking increasingly unlikely following the US announcement on 19 December 2018 that it will immediately withdraw all troops in Syria that occurred after the reporting period. For more on the US withdrawal please see [here](#)