



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 18 - 24 FEBRUARY 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Elevated levels of reported conflict involving Syrian Government forces and Hayyat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) dominated Idlib frontlines this week. Additionally, conflict between various armed groups behind frontlines continued with two vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks in Idlib city.
- **SOUTH** | Low-level activity against Syrian Government personnel continued, including an IED attack in Daraa City claimed by a newly established armed group.
- **NORTHEAST** | Apart from ongoing fighting around the remaining ISIS pocket in the southern part of Baghuz Fawqani village, large numbers of civilians continue to leave the ISIS area. Elsewhere, ongoing evidence of the group's residual presence was seen in Shudadah District with two ambushes against SDF convoys transporting high ranking officials.

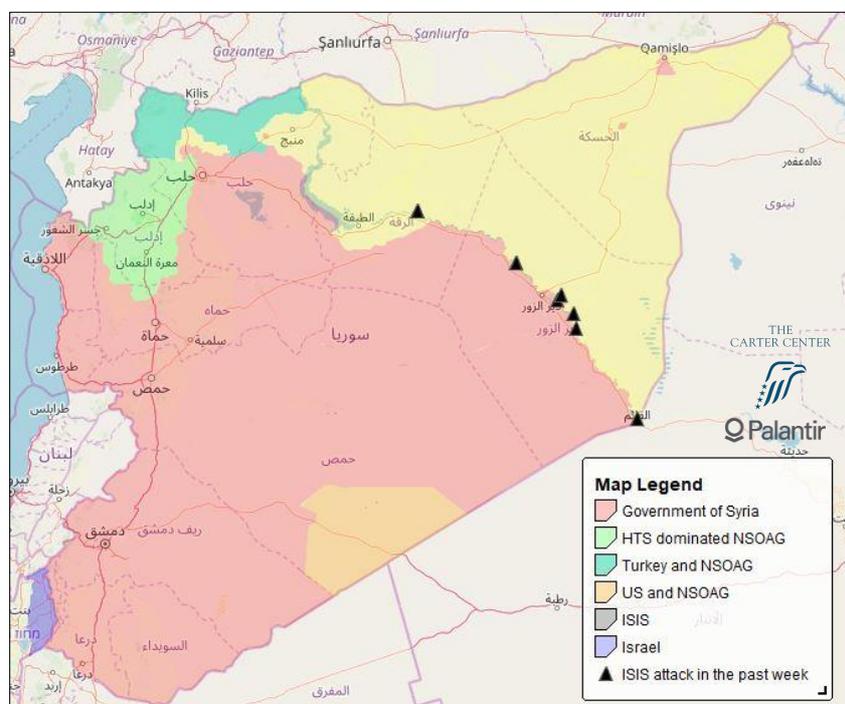


Figure 1: Dominant Actors' Area of Control and Influence in Syria as of 24 February 2019. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. For more explanation on our mapping, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

Elevated levels of documented conflict continued along the southern frontlines of the Idlib pocket, a week after the latest Sochi talks between Iran, Russia and Turkey held on 14 February. At least 150 Government of Syria (GoS) rocket and artillery bombardments targeted Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS) dominated areas, compared to 195 incidents last week. Opposition groups targeted government positions with at least 17 rocket or artillery attacks. This included two anti-tank weapon uses by Jaish al Izza, affiliated with HTS, against fortified Syrian army positions in the Masasneh area of northern Hama governorate.

This activity occurred in key urban areas near the M5 highway, the main artery connecting Aleppo to Damascus, with nearly a third of documented activity focused on just eight areas: Latamna, Huweiz, Kafr Zeita, Lahaya, Sakr, Sukayk, Khan Shiekhoun, and Maarat Nu'man (Figure 2). As a result, a large numbers of civilian casualties were reported during the week.

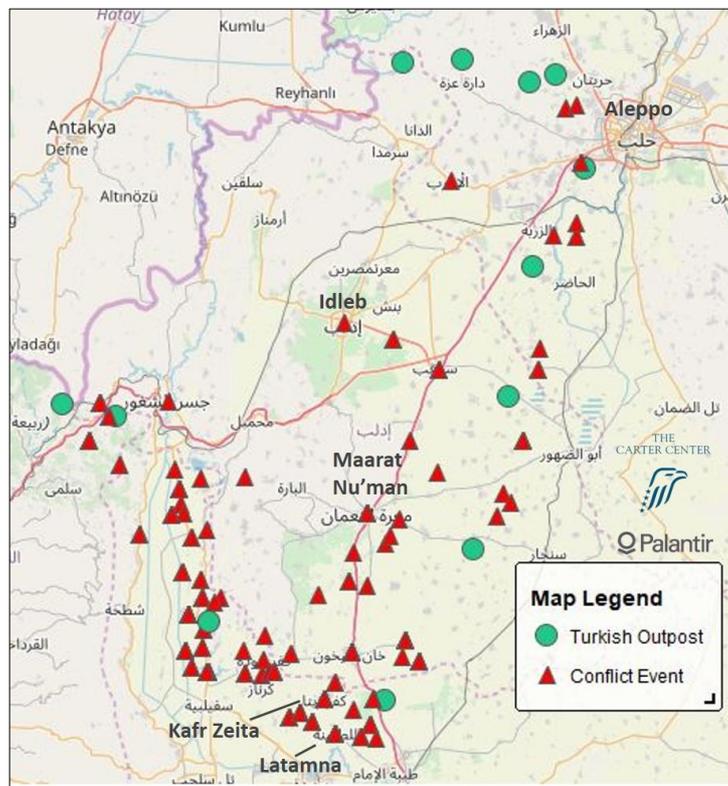


Figure 2: Location of documented conflict events in the Idlib area during the reporting period, with Turkish Observation Posts identified in green.

¹ Figure 1 denotes dominant actors control and influence. Syrian Government areas also include the presence of allied actors such as Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and Iraqi militias. Areas outside of Syrian Government control have been labeled non-state organized armed group (NSOAG) areas due to the variety of groups operating in these areas. The NSOAG labeled area at the intersection of the borders between Syria, Iraq and Jordan denotes the US-led coalition's 55km deconfliction zone that contains a number of local armed groups. Finally, the black triangles indicate locations of attacks by ISIS in the past week in Syrian Government, SDF, NSOAG dominated areas.

Continuing a trend from previous weeks, IDP [movements](#) also occurred from the aforementioned urban areas in addition to towns within the Idleb de-confliction zone covered in the agreement from September 2018. One source [stating](#) as many as many as 5,000 IDPs have left this area during the period. An estimate from August 2018 states around 2.5 million civilians [remain](#) in the northwest pocket.

The elevated conflict activity after the latest round of talks in Sochi highlights the fragility of the September 2018 de-escalation zone agreement and raises concerns of an impending GoS/Russian offensive. [Reports](#) of the resumption of Syrian Government airstrikes on Maraat Numan this week, the first since November 2018, and Russia's increasingly negative statements over the situation in the northwest in the past month adds merit to these concerns.²

Despite the negative signs, reported conflict activity in the northwest has been higher at previous times in the year such as January 2018 and April 2018 (Figure 3). In previous situations, namely Darayya City in August 2016 and Qaboun and Barza in Damascus area in early 2017, heavy bombardments have been used by the GoS as a tactic to force an area to capitulate without further offensive action.

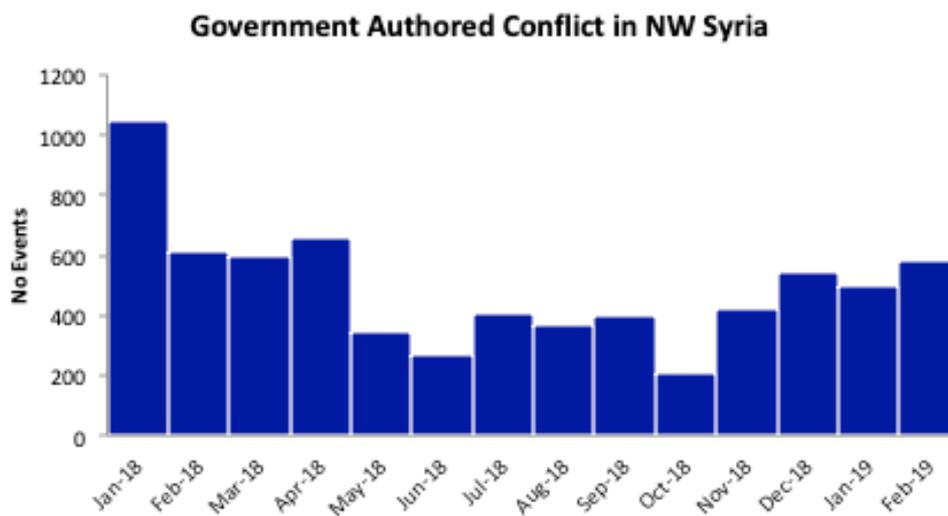


Figure 3: Government associated conflict recorded in northwest Syria since January 2018.

The most recently recorded Syrian Government troop rotations onto the Idleb frontlines involved the [arrival](#) of regular troops (5th Corps and 9th Division) to replace the more elite 4th Division, who have typically held a prominent role in offensive action along with the Republican Guards and Tiger Forces. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [stated](#) at the end of the reporting period that no "joint military operations" was planned in Syria, adding further credence to uncertain developments.

In central Idleb city, two high profile vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) [attacks](#) occurred on 18 February and resulted in over 70 civilian

² For these statements see previous weekly reporting [here](#).

casualties, maximizing civilians and first responders casualties. While there has been increasing reports of IED activity in Idleb city in the past two months (see previous weekly reports), it is notable that this is the second mass casualty attack in the city within a month.³ Prior to this attack, IED activity typically targeted armed groups.

SOUTH SYRIA

Following last week's asymmetrical attacks against GoS personnel around Daraa Governorate, at least two more incidents occurred in this reporting period. The first involved a grenade attack against the head of the municipal council in Mzeireb. The second involved an explosive device in Daraa City and was claimed by the "Southern Companies," a group with online presence dating back only to 6 February 2019. The Southern Companies also [claimed](#) responsibility for a 15 February explosive attack against a checkpoint in Daraa City and took [credit](#) for various anti-government graffiti that has emerged around Daraa Governorate in recent months.⁴ The group is now the second to appear in southern Syria aimed at actively resisting GoS presence in southern Syria, after "The Popular Resistance", which operated in Daraa since late 2018 with increasing regularity (covered in last week's report).

Further east, additional Syrian Government forces arrived at checkpoints in Sweida City, Shahba town, and the Um Dabib area through the week. The timing of the re-enforcements is notable, coming a week after some of the first actions against ISIS in northeast As Sweida since 2018.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Despite low levels of conflict being recorded in ISIS's last remaining 700m² pocket south of Baghuz Fawqani Village in southwest Deir Ez Zor Governorate, notable conflict events continued in the area this week. This included the [death](#) of a senior ISIS leader, Abu Dujana Azzer, in fighting in the Baghuz Fawqani village, a recorded incident of intra-ISIS fighting where an Iraqi commander was shot dead for seeking to surrender to the SDF, and at least two coalition airstrikes, most recently on 22 February.

In addition to the fighting, the growing humanitarian and political complexities associated with the collapse of the ISIS pocket also continued this week. Not only did large numbers of civilians continue to leave the area, including in one case 150 ISIS child soldiers on 23 February,⁵ but also growing numbers of other nationalities, such as previously [abducted](#) Iraqi Yazidi women and children, 280 of whom were [returned](#) to Iraq this week. With the territorial defeat of ISIS almost

³ On 29 January a suicide bomber detonated her device as she attempted to enter the Salvation Government headquarters in the city resulting in at least five casualties. Despite the attack being blamed on ISIS elements it was unusually [denied](#) by the group in a statement.

⁴ And covered in this previous weekly conflict summary [here](#)

⁵ Who had been part of the group's 'Cubs of the Caliphate'.

complete, questions over the status of foreigners fighting with the YPG have been [raised](#), many of whom seek to remain in Syria.

With an [estimated](#) 5000 civilians, 1500 ISIS members, and a number of prisoners still thought to remain inside the small ISIS-controlled area in Baghuz, numbers higher than previously estimated, the pressures faced by the SDF, who again [stated](#) this week they were struggling to deal with the numbers, is not yet over.

Outside the Baghuz area, ISIS activity was recorded in areas along the Euphrates River far outside their control. At least six small arms fire attacks and two suicide attacks against SDF forces occurred in the stretch between Deir Ez Zor City and Ash Shafah village. Further north, in two of the more notable attacks, suspected ISIS members conducted two separate [ambushes](#) against SDF convoys between Deir Ez Zor City and Shuhadah town carrying the SDF Deir Ez Zor Military Council Commander Abu Khawala and SDF Deir Ez Zor Military Council Spokeswoman Leilawa Al Abdullallah on 14 and 15 February. Such ongoing activity in seemingly pacified areas of the northeast continues to be a cause of concern.

WATCH LIST

The watch list outlines various dynamics the Carter Center is monitoring in the coming weeks:

NORTHWEST | Changes in levels of routine conflict dynamics between government and opposing frontlines in the Idleb pocket, especially southern frontlines.

SOUTH | Growing asymmetrical activity by organized armed groups, especially the Popular Resistance or Southern Companies in Daraa governorate, or a return of ISIS activity in north east As Sweida governorate.

NORTHEAST | Signs of continuing ISIS presence in northeast Syria in seemingly pacified areas of the region as well as the impact the growing humanitarian situation from the ISIS pocket in Baghuz could have on the security environment.