

NORTHWEST SYRIA

For a second reporting week there were reduced levels of open conflict between Al Qaeda-linked Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS) and opposition armed groups linked to the Turkish backed National Liberation Front (NLF) in northwest Syria. Building on last reporting period's 20 events, just seven incidents were recorded between the two sides, contrasting to the first two weeks of January that recorded at least 200 incidents during HTS's sudden expansion into western Aleppo and Idleb governorates.¹

Similar to the previous reporting period, steady low levels of asymmetrical attacks involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and shootings against local armed actors were also recorded. This week saw at least four events in the vicinity of formerly NLF-influenced Kafr Deryan, Khan Shaykun and Darkosh towns, adding to the 16 events last period. In apparent response to this activity, HTS [executed](#) 12 suspected ISIS members in Idleb city on 20 January and conducted a series of raids against suspected ISIS members in Telamnas and Sarmin towns.

However, given the variety of locations, target sets, and types of IED devices seen in northwest Syria in the past two weeks, it is likely a variety of groups are responsible for conflict activities. ISIS' presence in the northwest of Syria has been limited since early 2018, after a government and HTS offensive against the group largely expelled the group from the area. Since March 2018, only 52 incidents have been linked to ISIS in the northwest, most recently on 25 January 2019 in Idleb city when two suspected ISIS members planting an IED were killed when it detonated prematurely.

Local civil society and peace building networks also continued to be affected by the recent change in dynamics in Idleb. This included the [arrest](#) of a notable Kafranbel activist, Mohanad al Aqal, by HTS on the morning of 26 January.

At a higher level, Russia again expressed concern over HTS and the situation in northwest Syria, following [comments last week](#) by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. On 23 January, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova [stated](#) that "...developments in Idleb are a serious source of concern..." and that "...the situation in the de-escalation zone is rapidly deteriorating...", particularly noting that "the number of ceasefire violations continues to grow" and that HTS continues to "pose a threat to civilians, Syrian Army Personnel and the Russian Kheimim Base." Accompanying these statements, Russian warplanes targeted Baksriya and Janudiyeh villages close to Jisr al Shaghour on 20 January, the first such incidents since September 2018.

Compared to the previous week, HTS activity against government of Syria (GoS) forces in northwest Syria tripled this week to 14 (7 armed clashes, 6 artillery bombardments, and 1 anti-tank weapon firing).² However, it is important to note

¹ For more on this, see previous Weekly Conflict Summary reports [here](#) and [here](#).

² Compared to four last week.

that this activity heavily contrasts to Syrian army activity against the Idlib pocket. At least 145 incidents involving rockets or artillery were recorded this week, and resulted in three notable civilian population movements from Al Latamna, Kafr Zeita and Morek towns on 25 January (Figure 2).

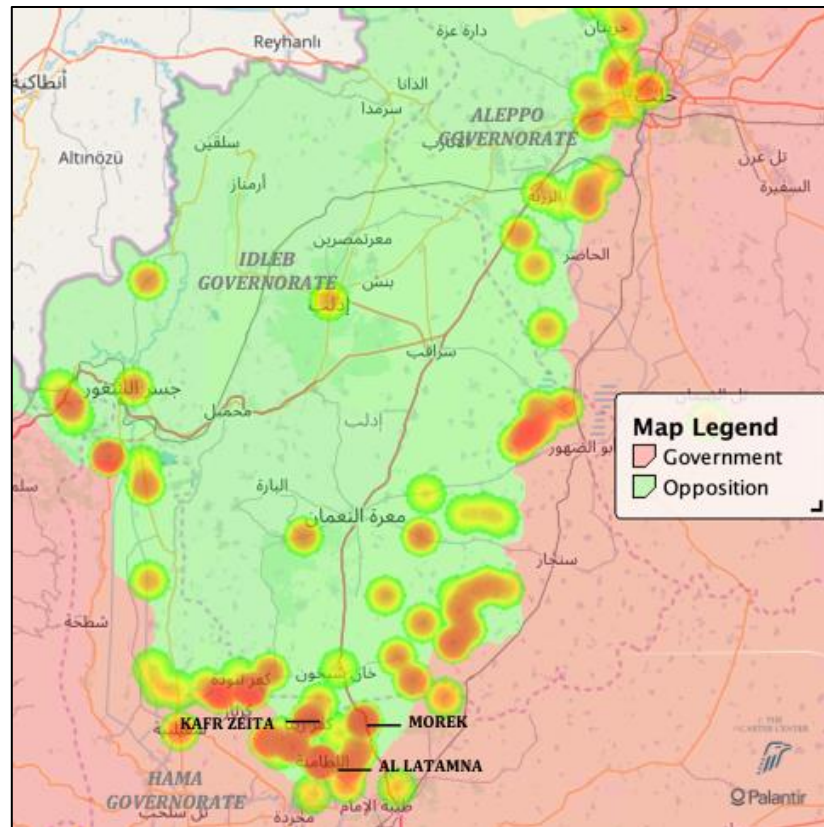


Figure 2: Heatmap of Government of Syria activity in northwest Syria in January 2019.

While the latest escalation is concerning, activity in the northwest has been higher in the past.³ Added to this, the longstanding Russian Turkish de-escalation zone agreement remains in place and there is yet, no evidence of preparations for a wide scale offensive by either side.

SOUTH SYRIA

Another IED detonation occurred in Damascus on 24 January, following the Abu Amara Brigade claimed detonation near a military intelligence complex in southern Damascus on 20 January.⁴ In the latest incident, an IED placed in a car detonated in a residential area in the east part of the Adawi neighborhood in the center of the capital. No fatalities were [reported](#) from the event and no group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

³For example, in the week of 7- 14 September 2018 when at least 286 conflict events between government and opposition forces were recorded (including 59 airstrikes).

⁴ For more on this see last week's Weekly Conflict Summary [here](#).

The short period between the two attacks is notable, and comes after a hiatus in such activity in Damascus [since](#) December 2017. However, it is still unclear if these latest events are connected, given the differences in locations, devices and claims of responsibility.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

This week the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) implemented an offensive against the small ISIS pocket in the southwest corner of Deir Ez Zor Governorate from two axes. Continuing advances from the north, making further inroads against Al Marashidiyah and Al Safafaniyah villages, SDF forces also began operations to the south of the pocket in the vicinity of Baghuz Fawqani town. Just three villages remained in the ISIS enclave by the end of the reporting period (see Figure 3).

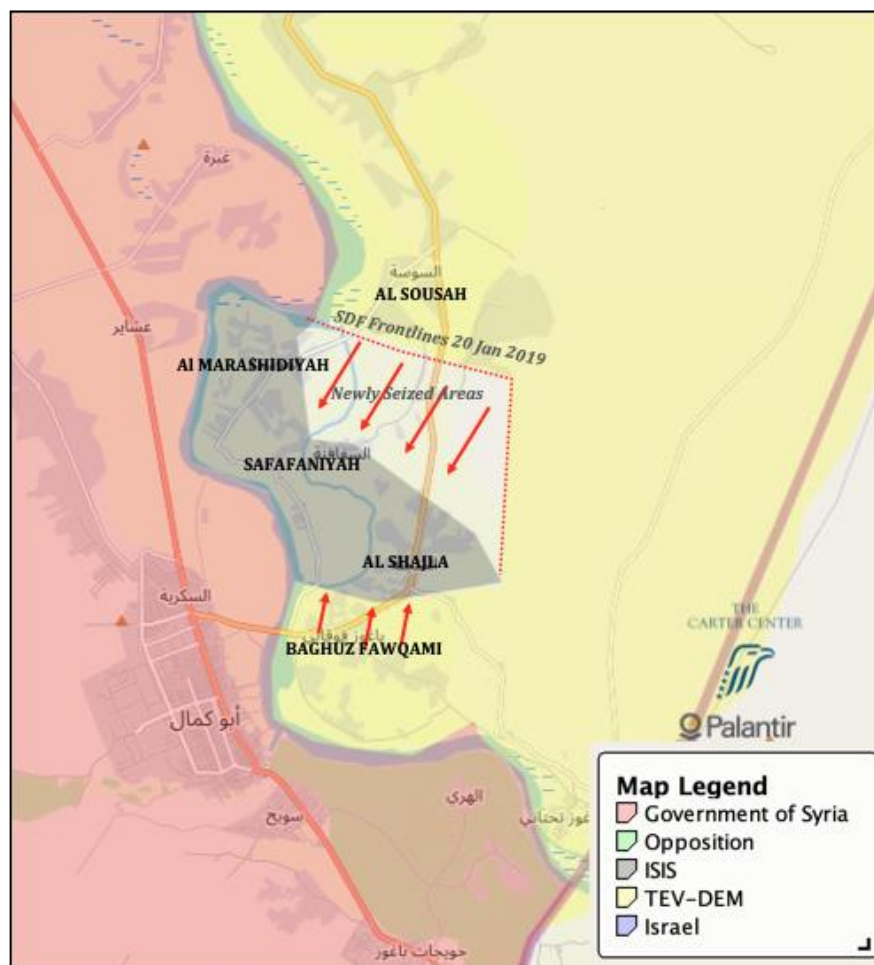


Figure 3: Areas of Influence in southwest Deir Ez Zor Governorate as of 27 January 2019.

These advances triggered population movements from the ISIS pocket including several hundred civilian IDPs – in one [case](#) up to 500 people in a day – as well as the mass surrender of foreign ISIS fighters. On 22 January at least 70 foreigners [surrendered](#) to SDF forces in Souseh town while, two days later, another [group](#) of foreign fighters surrendered in Baghuz Fawqani village.

Despite this activity, notable ISIS activity continued and even resulted in SDF forces [withdrawing](#) temporarily from Baghuz Fawqami village after heavy clashes with the group. Elsewhere, further signs of ISIS resilience and capability were also seen after the 16 January [explosion](#) against US personnel in Menbej city. On 21 January, an ISIS suicide vehicle borne IED detonated in the vicinity of a joint Kurdish Security Force / US patrol near the 47th Bridge west of Shadadah town in southern Hassakeh governorate. At least five local casualties were recorded.

Explosive events are not uncommon in the Shadadah District, with at least 32 ISIS-linked IED incidents recorded in the past 12 months. However, these have exclusively involved IEDs targeting local military actors, with this week's event the first reported case against US forces in the area. The ongoing ISIS activity in the northeast continues to highlight the enduring threat posed by ISIS, as well as their considerable capacity to launch attacks in seemingly pacified areas of the country.

WATCH LIST

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

NORTHWEST | Ongoing internal dynamics within the Idlib pocket, especially the worsening of relations between HTS and the NLF, or signs that Russian, Syrian, or Turkish forces are making preparations for large scale military operations in the northwest.

SOUTH | Further IED or high profile attacks in Damascus in the short term.

NORTHEAST | Signs of changing dynamics as the anti-ISIS campaign in southwest Deir Ez Zor governorate draws to an end, especially change in asymmetrical attacks against military actors in the region, particularly the US.