

THE
CARTER CENTER



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 31 DECEMBER 2018 - 6 JANUARY 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Hayyat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) has emerged as *the* key player in the northwest after widespread territorial gains against Harikat Nour al-Din al-Zinki in Western Aleppo and Idleb governorates.
- **SOUTH** | The killing of Al Qaeda-aligned, formerly Idleb based, Abu Julaybib in eastern Daraa governorate demonstrates ongoing impediments to conflict resolution efforts on the ground.
- **NORTHEAST** | The anti-ISIS campaign appeared unaffected after last month's announcement that the US would withdraw its troops in Syria, with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continuing to advance with heavy coalition support. Elsewhere, no apparent reaction was seen on the ground to Syrian government forces moving into western Menbej district late in December.

MAP OF FRONTLINES FOR WHOLE OF SYRIA

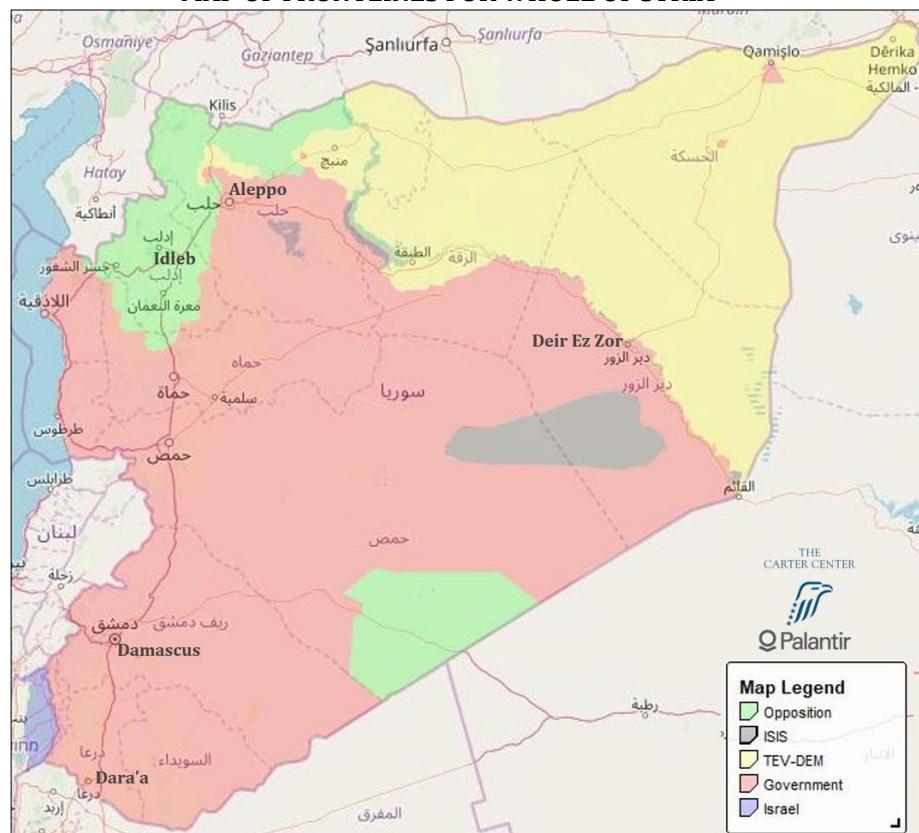


Figure 1: Areas of control throughout Syria as of 6 January 2019

NORTHWEST SYRIA

The main feature of the reporting week was the sudden resumption of internal conflict in Western Aleppo and Idlib governorates between the Al Qaeda-aligned Hayyat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and various groups within the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (NLF). Conflict increased more than 500% in the first week of 2019, compared to the last week of December, from 15 recorded events to 91 events between the two groups.

National Liberation Front الجبهة الوطنية للتحرير	
Sub- units:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • الفرقة الثانية الساحلية Second Coastal Division • فرقة 23 23 • لواء شهداء الإسلام Liwa Shuhada Islam • الفرقة الأولى مشاء First Infantry Division • جيش ادلب الحر Free Idlib Army • جيش النخبة Jaysh al-Nakhba • جيش النصر Jaysh al-Nasr • جيش الثاني Jaysh al-Thani • لواء الحرية Liwa Huriyah • National Liberation Front Special Forces 82 82 • الفرقة الأولى الساحلية First Coastal Division • قياد الشام Fayliq al-Sham • جبهة تحرير سوريا Jabhat Tahrir Souriya <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ الوبية صقور الشام Saqour al-Sham ◦ حركة احرار الشام Ahrar al-Sham ◦ حركة نور الدين الزنكي Harikat Nour al-Din al-Zinki 	

Figure 2: A listing of some of NLF's main sub-units

Conflict centered around the northern nodes of Darat Izza¹, Anadan, Umm al-Kubra and Atarab towns, areas largely controlled by the former HTS-aligned Harikat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, now HTS's main rival.

By 5 January 2019, HTS gained control over the above-mentioned towns and notably, in the case of Atarab,² did so following negotiations with civilian bodies inside the town. HTS also made [demands](#) that the NLF should return areas recently taken in the south, including ceding control of Maarat Numan. NLF made gains against HTS in southern Idlib around Naqeer and Babilla towns.

The widely coordinated nature of the attacks, in addition to the successful taking of Atareb through negotiations³ and demanding control of Maarat Numaan town, is evidence of the significant confidence and capability of HTS in the north. The

¹ The HQ of Harikat Nour al Din Al Zinki.

² A symbolically important [civil society](#) hub and key logistical node on the highway between Aleppo and the Bab al Hawa Border crossing with Turkey.

³ With [reports](#) just after the reporting period that Hazano town also ceded control to HTS this way after discussions with civilian bodies there.

rapid defeat of Harikat Nour al Din al Zinki in so many areas – seen as one of the more [capable](#) fighting partners against HTS – combined with the fragmented nature of the NLF in general, suggests that the ability of groups in the northwest to counter HTS's rising influence is limited. Indeed, HTS has emerged as *the* key player in the north, both military and politically, as well as through its consolidated control of key logistical hubs across the governorate.

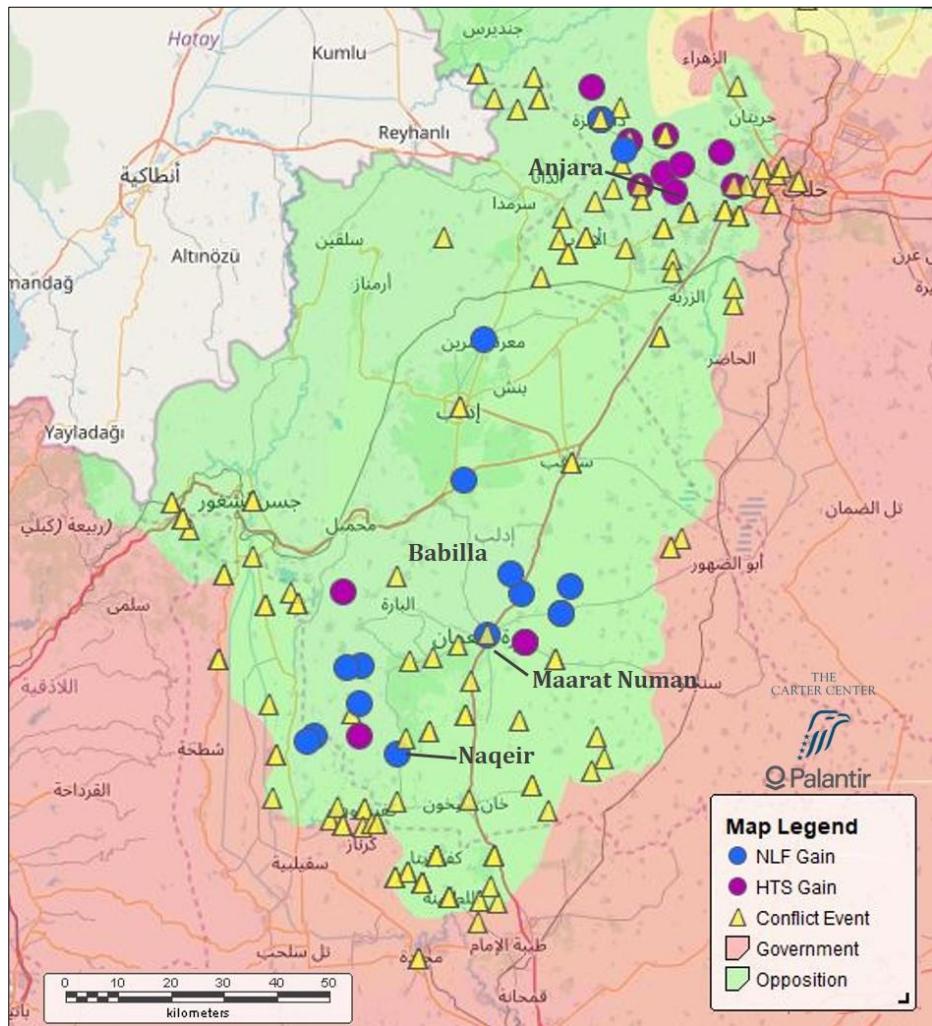


Figure 3: HTS and NLF gains in Idlib and Western Aleppo Governorates as well as overall conflict events during reporting period

SOUTH SYRIA

Low levels of conflict characterized the reporting period, with just three events recorded in Daraa governorate. However, various dynamics are still present that can affect peace building and conflict resolution efforts on the ground. For example, the ongoing conscription arrests, unexploded ordinance—with two events affecting civilians in Atman and Ankhel towns this week—and assassinations in the region, as shown by two events in the past week. Most notable was the [killing](#) of the Al Qaeda-aligned, formerly Idlib based commander, Abu Julaybib, in eastern Daraa governorate, who had returned to the region at the end of 2018 to re-new the Al Qaeda presence there. Al Qaeda's ability to send

operatives from Idlib into Syrian government-controlled areas of Syria should be of concern.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Following last month's gains around Hajin town, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued to advance south eastwards along the Euphrates River in Deir Ez Zor Governorate. By 6 January 2019, SDF forces had reached the village Al Shafah and were being supported by the US-led Coalition, despite last month's announcement of an immediate US withdrawal from Syria on 19 December 2018, now downgraded to a gradual pull out.⁴

At least 469 airstrikes by US-led Operation Inherent Resolve were recorded in Syria since mid-December until the end of the month, building on the 470 events recorded during the first half of December 2018, and representing a significant increase from earlier in the year.⁵ Additionally, two British Special Forces members were injured in an ISIS rocket [attack](#) near Deir ez Zor on 5 January. As such, it appears that the tempo of the anti-ISIS efforts in this part of Syria have yet to be affected by the developments of US policy in the past month.

However, ISIS demonstrated that it remains a considerable force, launching a complex attack on 1 January when a large unit of ISIS fighters crossed the Euphrates river and attacked a fortified Syrian government position near al Siyal town, killing at least 20 Syrian soldiers by some [reports](#). The group has also conducted at least 35 recorded attacks since mid-December, including three vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) and eight improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, further highlighting its potency.

Elsewhere in the region, no reaction on the ground has been seen since SDF forces invited Syrian government troops to take control of Al Arimah town in the western Menbej district on 28 December 2018. The move was a reaction to the US withdrawal announcement and threat of Turkish intervention in Syria. However, despite setting a precedent, it should be seen as a strategic move rather than the start of a trend in the northeast.

⁴ Covered in the last Weekly Conflict Summary [here](#).

⁵ For more information on Coalition airstrikes, see their website [here](#)

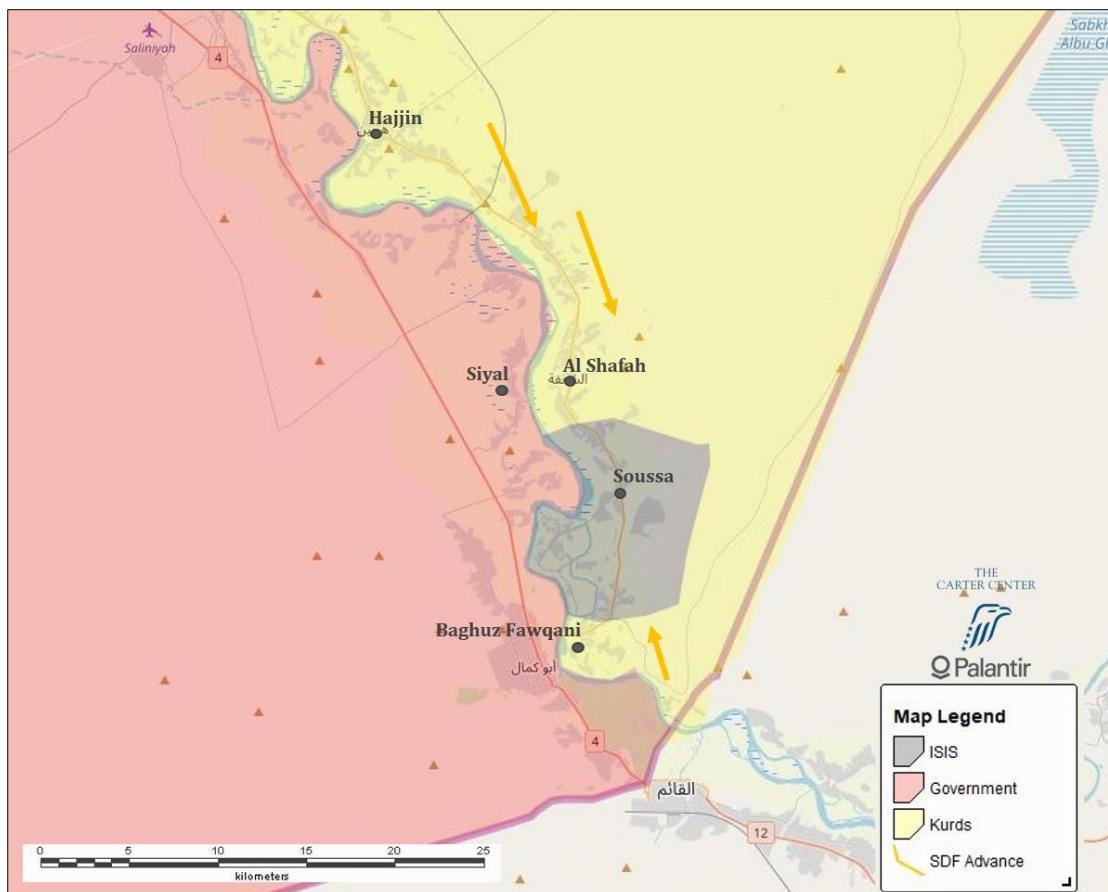


Figure 4: Changes in control in north east Syria since 31 December 2018, notably in southwest Deir Ez Zor Governorate.

WATCH LIST

The watch list outlines various dynamics that the Carter Center's Syria Project is monitoring in the coming weeks.

NORTHWEST | The ongoing internal dynamics within the Idlib pocket, especially signs for further HTS or NLF territorial changes or a widening of HTS's negotiation tactics (as seen on Atareb and Hazano towns).

SOUTH | Signs of a reaction to the killing of Al Qaeda-affiliated Abu Julaybib in southern Syria.

NORTHEAST | The ongoing anti-ISIS campaign and the ongoing political dynamics between Damascus and Kurdish groups in the northeast.

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