

THE
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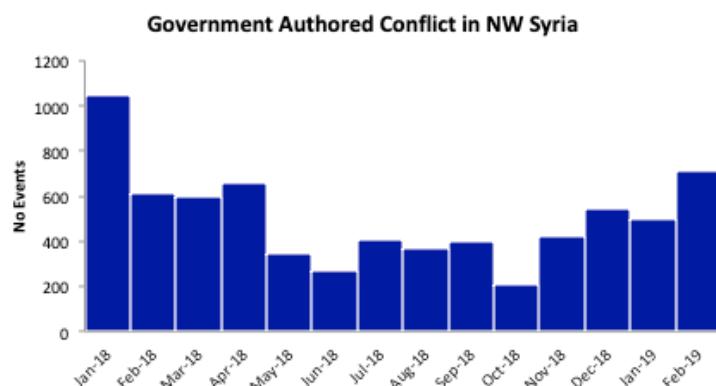
WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 25 FEBRUARY - 3 MARCH 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Ongoing, elevated Government of Syria (GoS)-initiated conflict activity continued to impact southern areas of the Hayyat Tahrir al Sham-dominated Idlib pocket. Elsewhere, improvised explosive device (IED) activity continued in Idlib city during the reporting period, highlighting a return of this activity after a two-month hiatus at the end of 2018.
- **SOUTH** | Apart from continued, low-level conflict activity against GoS personnel and civilians in Daraa, Israeli Defense Forces shelled the Druze-majority town of Hadar.
- **NORTHEAST** | Conflict continued to focus on the last remaining ISIS pocket in Baghuz. Evidence of the growing complexities of the group's legacy in northeast Syria was seen.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

Elevated Syrian military bombardments on the southern parts of the Hayyat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-dominated Idlib pocket continued this week, with at least 184 incidents of artillery and rocket shelling recorded. This brings February's total to 711 events and represents the highest recorded number of GoS-initiated events on the enclave since January 2018 (Figure 1).



As the Syria Team moves to new platforms over the next few months to house and visualize the information we collate, the formatting of weekly summaries will be altered in the interim period. In particular, our ability to produce maps will be curtailed. Thank you for your patience and please reach out should you have any questions or concerns about this transition period.

Figure 1: Documented Syrian Government-Initiated Conflict in Northwest Syria January 2018 to February 2019. Data from [ACLED](#).

This contributes to a trend of growing violence since November 2018 in the Idlib area. Also, it continues to affect significantly civilian population centers in the opposition pocket, especially in the Madiq Castle, Kafr Zeita, Tamanaah, Khan Shiukhun and Suran sub-districts, that experienced nearly 70% (125 events) of recorded Syrian Government activity during this period.

Retaliatory shelling from HTS-controlled areas also continued to affect civilians in GoS-held areas, albeit at much lower level. Over half of these conflict events were focused around Muhradah town, with the rest focusing around the towns of Qinsiba, Wadi Basur, Um al Rijn, Zahabiya, Bargati, Abu Omar and Niha, and the scientific research center in Aleppo City [according](#) to the Russian Center for Reconciliation.

HTS and aligned groups also showed their resilience to the intense bombardments, launching two notable incursions against Syrian Government frontlines in northern Hama and western Latakia this week. The first saw HTS conduct a raid in the Jabal Turkman area that killed an Iranian national and four other Syrian soldiers according to some [reports](#), while the second attack saw a large group of Al Qaeda-aligned Ansar Tawhid and Chechen fighters attack a Syrian fortified position in the Massanah area in northern Hama governorate on 4 March. This attack [killed](#) up to 20 Syrian soldiers and came a week after a HTS TOW missile [killed](#) nine Syrian Government soldiers in the same location.

Among international actors, there were further signs that Russia and Turkey—two of the three backers of the September De-escalation Zone agreement—are increasingly frustrated with the situation in Idlib. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov continued to [highlight](#) Russia's "concern" over the zone and called on Turkey to meet its commitments regarding the agreement. From Turkey, news sources [report](#) that the country issued a warning to Russia and Iran this week regarding the increase in GoS-initiated conflict that was preventing Turkey from implementing the agreement.

Additionally, ongoing low-level activity linked to ISIS continued to be recorded internally in Idlib. On 2 March, HTS [executed](#) 10 alleged ISIS members involved in a suicide attack that struck a restaurant in Idlib city the day before, killing seven people, including a HTS commander. The attack was the third attack within a month to impact the city. While improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have been common in the city for the past year, there was a two-month hiatus of these type of attacks from November to December 2018 (Figure 2).

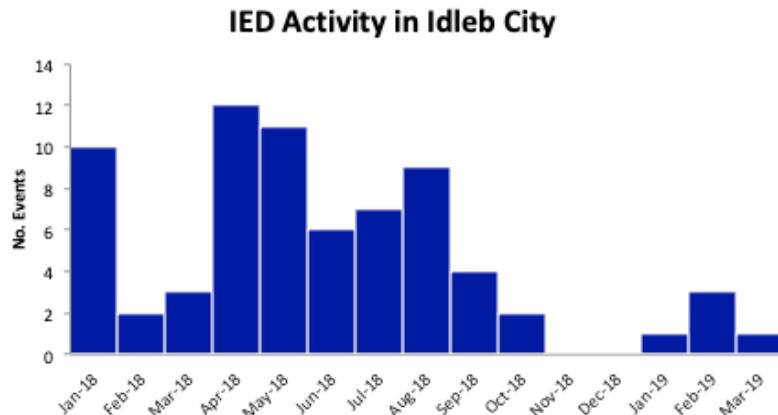


Figure 2: Documented IED activity in Idleb City January 2018 to February 2019.

SOUTH SYRIA

In addition to the low-level conflict activity in Daraa that continues to target Syrian military personnel, as well as civilians,² the most notable conflict event in the south this week was the shelling of two Syrian Government positions in Hadar in northern Quneitra governorate by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) on 3 March.

This is only the third time the IDF have shelled the majority Druze town in the past year, the earlier incidents being in July and May 2018. However, in the wider area, IDF have regularly targeted GoS positions in the governorate, in attempts to enforce the demilitarized designation of the Golan Heights area, most recently on 11 February in Quneitra City. Some attacks have also targeted Hezbollah and Iranian troops in the area, as was the case with the 11 February attack, that saw pro-government media [reporting](#) Iranian nationals among the casualties.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

Conflict in the small ISIS pocket in Baghuz Fawqani village slowed down due to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its allies seeking to minimize civilian casualties in the 700m square area³ and the high [number](#) of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and IEDs in the areas close to the village hampering SDF advances. Despite this, other events in the area were recorded including a coalition [airstrike](#) against an ISIS weapons storage site in the village as well as Syrian troops engaging ISIS members attempting to cross the Euphrates River.

In an unusual move, the SDF [released](#) 283 people associated with ISIS following mediations from local tribal leaders from Deir Ez Zor. Those released had reportedly previously held administrative positions within the group. The move highlights the growing complexities associated with the legacy of ISIS in the northeast. Also of note during the reporting period were the assassinations of SDF

² Most recently seen on 25 February in Yadudah town, when gunmen shot dead a former opposition judge. The growing dynamic has been reported in previous weekly conflict summaries.

³ Covered in last week's Conflict Summary.

members in areas along the Euphrates River between Deir Ez Zor and Baghuz, which saw five such events this period.

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 | Any change in conflict dynamics on GoS / opposition frontlines in the south of the Idleb pocket, especially any resumption of airstrikes or significant troop movements.

SOUTH | The ongoing low level conflict against government personnel and civilians as well as any change to the Israeli strategy in Quneitra, namely increase in targeting of government positions outside of the UN de-militarized zone.

NORTHEAST | The ongoing impact of ISIS in the south west Deir Ez Zor security environment as well as any change in asymmetrical attacks against SDF forces.