



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 14 - 20 JANUARY 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Open conflict between Hayyat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and the National Liberation Front (NLF) decreased in Idlib and Western Aleppo Governorates as a ceasefire continues to hold.
- **SOUTH** | More Israeli airstrikes impacted sites close to Damascus after a similar incident last week. Elsewhere, a rare improvised explosive device (IED) explosion took place in the southern part of the capital.
- **NORTHEAST** | An ISIS claimed suicide attack against US troops in Menbej City highlighted the enduring resilience of the group in northeast Syria as well as the spoiling effect this and other groups can have on peace building efforts on the ground.

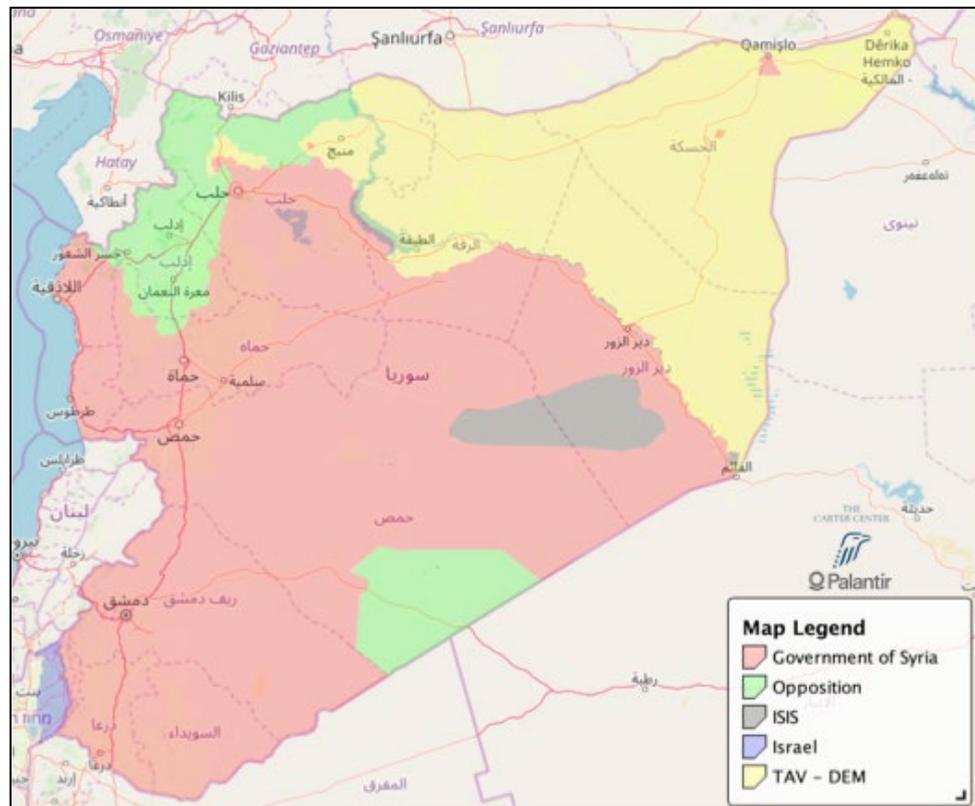


Figure 1: Areas of Control and Influence in Syria as of 20 January 2019.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

This week saw a slowdown of Al Qaeda linked Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham's (HTS) expansion into Turkish backed National Liberation Front (NLF) areas of Idleb and Western Aleppo governorates.¹ Open conflict between the two sides dropped in numbers significantly, from 109 events recorded last period, to just 20 this week. Notably, 80% of this week's incidents involved asymmetrical tactics - shootings or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) – focusing on former or current NFL controlled areas (Figure 2).

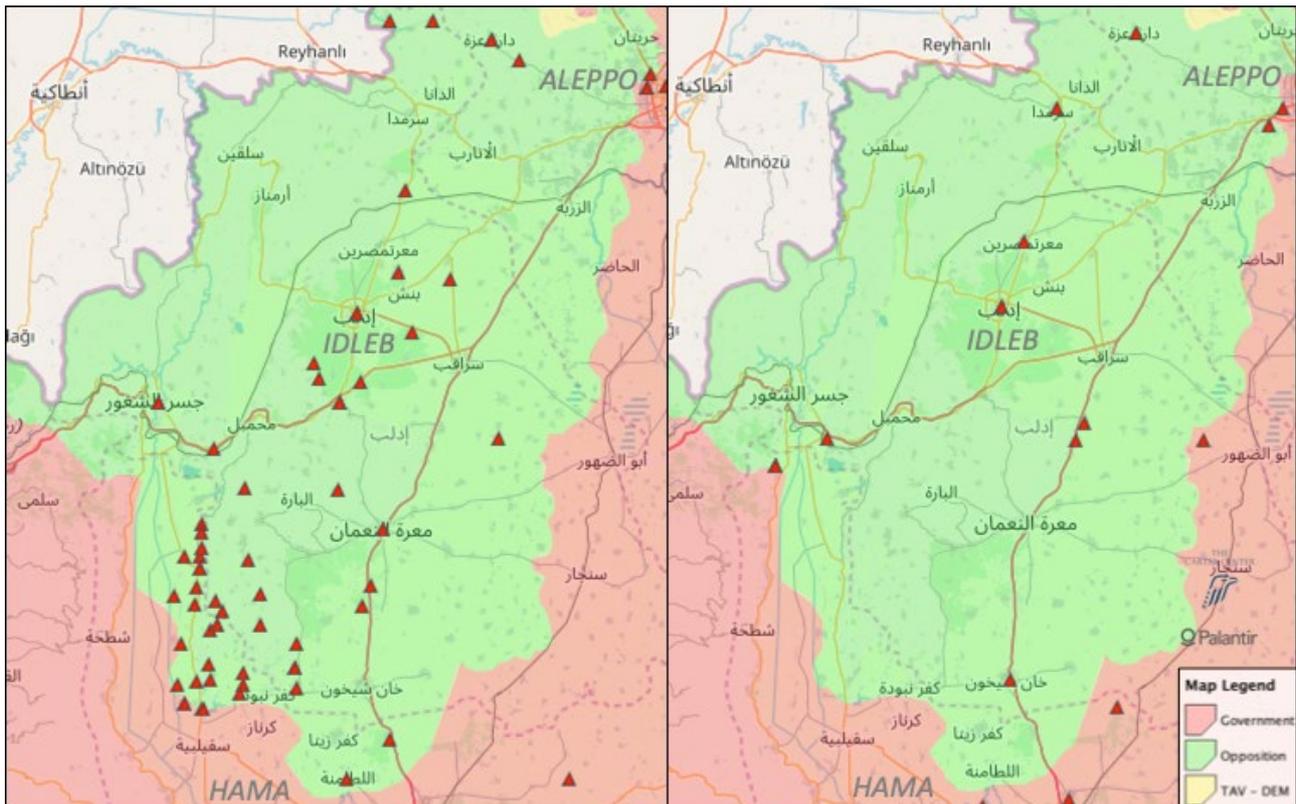


Figure 2: HTS vs NLF Activity in Northwest Syria 07 – 13 January (left) and 14 – 20 January (right).

Despite these low level attacks, the 10 January [ceasefire](#) agreement between HTS and NFL appears to be still holding. However, non-military reactions to the recent changes in dynamics in Idleb continued to be seen by both sides.

In Atareb town, the former heads of the local council and the revolutionary committee were [called](#) to attend a local police/HTS intelligence branch for questioning by the end of the reporting period. Meanwhile, in Daret Izza, HTS [expelled](#) 30 media activists, local government administrators and former NLF fighters from town. Elsewhere, at least 20 groups incorporated themselves into the NLF aligned Faylaq al Sham, in order to consolidate their numbers in the western Aleppo countryside.² In southern Idleb, NLF aligned Ahrar al Sham and

¹ Covered in last week's [report](#).

² Groups included: Ahrar Kafr Basin, Ahl al Sunna wa al Jamaa, Al Huta Al Murabitoun, Al Qassam, Al Tawheed, Al Wathiq Billah, Ansar al Haq, Ansar al Sunnah, Bayareq al Islam Brigade, Dibo Ismail,

Suqour Al Sham came to an [agreement](#) with HTS to remain on frontlines with government forces there. While the reduction in violence may appear positive, without any guidance as to where or for how long the latest HTS / NLF ceasefire agreement applies, questions remain over how long it will last.

The recent military and administrative gains by HTS in northwest Syria have also raised concerns over the humanitarian impact of this activity. It was [announced](#) this week that funding to health projects in opposition-held parts of Aleppo governorate had been suspended. On a wider level, despite the slowdown of HTS action against the NLF, the ongoing targeting of government areas by elements from the Idlib pocket continues to threaten the longstanding Russian / Turkish brokered ceasefire agreement for the northwest of Syria.³ [Comments](#) made by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on 18 January about HTS “continuing to shoot at Syrian troop positions and civilian facilities from the Idlib zone” and that the group “is violating the de-militarized zone’s regime” highlight the growing Russian concern about the situation in Idlib.

SOUTH SYRIA

This week, more Israeli Defense Force (IDF) strikes in Syria followed [last week's](#) IDF airstrikes onto Damascus International Airport. On the afternoon of 20 January, IDF airstrikes impacted at least 10 areas. Three strikes hit suspected Iranian military sites on Damascus International Airport, near Kisweh town, and near Khalkhalah in northern As Sweida Governorate. Seven other airstrikes hit mobile air defense systems around southern Syria. The IDF’s Iron Dome system [on](#) Mt Hermon in the Golan Heights also intercepted a projectile fired from Syria. It is notable that IDF were again quick to [claim](#) this week’s unusual daylight strikes, after a rare [acknowledgement](#) by Israeli authorities of last week’s events.

These latest airstrikes now bring the total number of IDF events in Syria in January 2019 to 11, a significant increase compared to December (2 events). Despite this escalation, levels of conflict events still fall within the typical ranges of activity seen in Syria. On average, 9 IDF events per month have been recorded in Syria in the past two years, with this month’s count only slightly above this. Indeed, IDF activity in Syria has been higher in the past. In February 2018 the IDF impacted at least 15 sites in southern Syria. High levels of activity were also recorded in April 2017 (8 events) and September 2016 (9 events).

The events do not appear to represent any change in Israel’s strategy in Syria. IDF action in Syria has consistently followed a targeting strategy against Iranian storage sites/personnel or Syrian government heavy weaponry. However, growing IDF activity in the medium term or widening of target sets in Syria could change this assessment, as it would represent a departure from past trends.

Hurras al Aqsa, Jaish al Ahfad, Jund al Allah, Saad bin Moazz, Saraya al Shahba, Shuhada Awijel Kafnaha, Shuhadaa Hour, Suqour al Islam, Thuwar al Sham and Yamin Ghayyath.

³ At least 4 events targeted government areas this week, including two incidents that involved the shelling of north west Aleppo City.

Away from this activity, a rare IED event was recorded in the southern part of the capital on 20 January. The IED had been placed on the eastern section of Al Motahalik al Janoubi Street – a major thoroughfare through southern Damascus – near a military intelligence complex. It was either [dismantled](#) or [detonated](#) with few casualties, according to conflicting reports. The Abu Amara Brigade, a group that has not previously conducted IED attacks in Damascus, [claimed](#) responsibility for the attack.

This is the first IED event in the central part of the capital in over a year—after Syrian security forces [intercepted](#) a suicide car bomb in December 2017. Prior to this time, IED events had been relatively common in the city, occurring on average once a month between 2016 and 2017 and typically claimed by ISIS or HTS. These events often targeted security or government locations, or sites affiliated with the Shia community, resulting in large numbers of casualties. However, with the event not fitting previous patterns and it occurring after such a long pause in activity, the overall security environment in Damascus is unlikely to have changed.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

In the south west corner of Deir Ez Zor Governorate, the remaining ISIS pocket further decreased this week, with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) taking the villages of Ulay'at and Soussa towns by the end of the period (Figure 3).

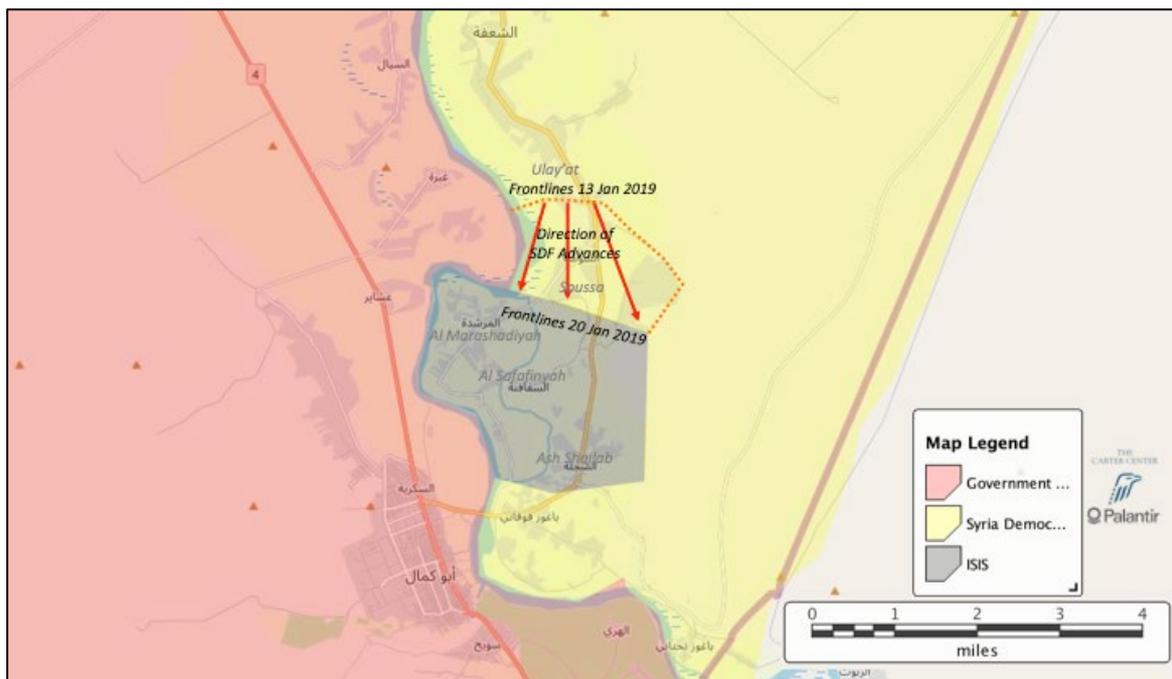


Figure 3: Areas of Influence map in southwest Deir Ez Zor Governorate as of 20 January 2019.

Despite this activity, signs of ongoing ISIS resilience continued to surface. On 16 January, an [explosion](#) in a restaurant in Menbej city killed two US soldiers, a US Defense Department civilian, and a military contractor as well as 15 civilians. Four other US soldiers were [injured](#) in the event that ISIS later [claimed](#) as a suicide attack.

Explosive events are not uncommon in Menbej District, with at least 29 IED events recorded in the past 12 months alone. These have typically involved improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or Vehicle borne IEDs (VBIEDs) to target local governance or military actors in Menbej City. On at least one occasion, US forces encountered a roadside IED in March 2018.

However, the last recorded suicide attack in the district was over two years ago, in October 2016, making the ISIS event this week even more notable. While this event and the previous IED activity in the district could suggest that ISIS enjoys a degree of resilience in Menbej, it is important to note that the variety of targets, locations and types of devices seen over the past year indicate that a range of actors are operating in the area, rather than just one. These actors, either conducting regular, low level attacks, or single, high profile events can have the same potential spoiling effect regarding conflict resolution or peace building efforts in the region.

WATCH LIST

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

NORTHWEST | Ongoing internal dynamics within the Idleb pocket, especially signs for further HTS or NLF territorial changes, or signs of government or Russian preparations for a military operation in northwest Syria.

SOUTH | Signs of any change to Iranian or Israeli strategy in Syria as well as further IED or high profile attacks in Damascus in the short term.

NORTHEAST | Any signs of changing dynamics as the anti-ISIS campaign in south west Deir Ez Zor governorate comes to an end, ongoing political dynamics between Damascus and Kurdish groups in the northeast as well as between Turkey and the US.