

THE
CARTER CENTER



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 4 - 10 FEBRUARY 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Decreasing internal conflict in Idleb coincided with the Syrian Revolution General Conference on 3 February. Further south on northern Hama frontlines, Syrian military activity continued to drive dynamics.
- **SOUTH** | A sophisticated improvised explosive device (IED) explosion against a government checkpoint, claimed by the Popular Resistance, continues the ongoing trend of low-level attacks against the government in Daraa Governorate.
- **NORTHEAST** | ISIS launched three attacks against government forces in Abu Kamal this week while further west, Syrian forces launched one of the more robust anti ISIS operations in recent months in the desert around Sokhneh town.

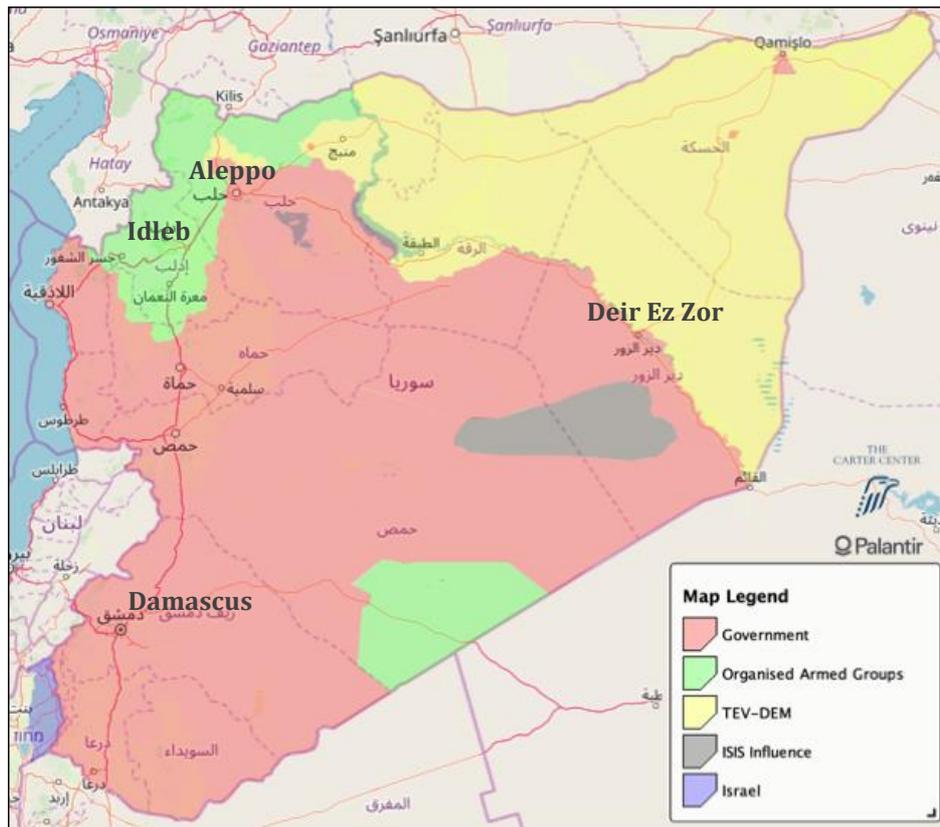


Figure 1: Dominant Actor's Area of Control and ISIS influence in Syria as of 10 February 2019.¹

NORTHWEST SYRIA

On 3 February the Syrian Revolution General Conference took place with the aim to consolidate and unify governance efforts in the northwest after the rapid expansion of HTS and its administrative body, the National Salvation Government, against a variety of other civil bodies, including the Syrian Interim Government, in Idlib. Coinciding with this, low numbers of internal conflict events in Idlib Governorate were recorded, just eight incidents, though it is unclear if the correlation is related to the Syrian Revolution General Conference. These figures contrast heavily compared to the previous week's 19 incidents, that included a high-profile suicide attack in Idlib City. While this week's reduction appears positive, more time is needed to assess if this week's change is a temporary development or part of a long-term shift in dynamics since last year, there has been a rise in asymmetrical attacks in the area, especially improvised explosive device (IED) events - 31 in January 2019 compared to 13 in December 2018.

¹ Figure 1 denotes areas of control and ISIS influence, therefore depicting an area west of Deir Ezzor city composed of towns where ISIS fighters have launched frequent attacks against Syrian government forces and civilians. This is now labeled as "ISIS Influence". Additionally, areas in which Organized Armed Groups opposed to the Syrian government (but not ISIS nor Kurds) control territory are broadly labeled as Organized Armed Groups (OAGs). Lastly, the OAG-labeled area along the border with Iraq and Jordan denotes the OAGs and US-led 55KM Deconfliction Zone.

Despite the observed decline in internal incidents reported, Maria Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson [stated](#) ongoing concerns about HTS's activity in north west Syria, noting that HTS "have not discontinued their armed raids against the Syrian armed forces" and that "regular provocations in the north of Hama Province" occur.² The data shows that HTS and other organized armed group activity in government areas has grown in the last month, with at least 48 attacks and bombardments on government positions compared to 36 in December 2018 and 54 in November 2018.

On the other hand, government activity in the Idleb pocket has also remained elevated with 369 events linked to government forces recorded in the past month, primarily artillery and rocket bombardments (Figure 2). Since the September 2018 De-escalation Zone agreement, January 2018 has seen the second highest number of conflict events associated with the Syrian government, outpaced only by December 2018 (450 events). These bombardments continue to affect civilian populations in Idleb, with the council of Latamna town [declaring](#) a humanitarian state of emergency after IDP movements from the town this week.³

Russia also directed [comments](#) towards Turkey this week, calling for the country to "step up their efforts so as to eventually change the situation" in Idleb. This is one of the first times Russia has directly commented on Turkey's role in dynamics of the northwest since the implementation of the Idleb De-escalation zone agreement in September 2018.

² For more on previous comments by Russia, see last week's Weekly Conflict Summary [here](#).

³ For more on previous IDP movements due to government bombing, see [here](#).

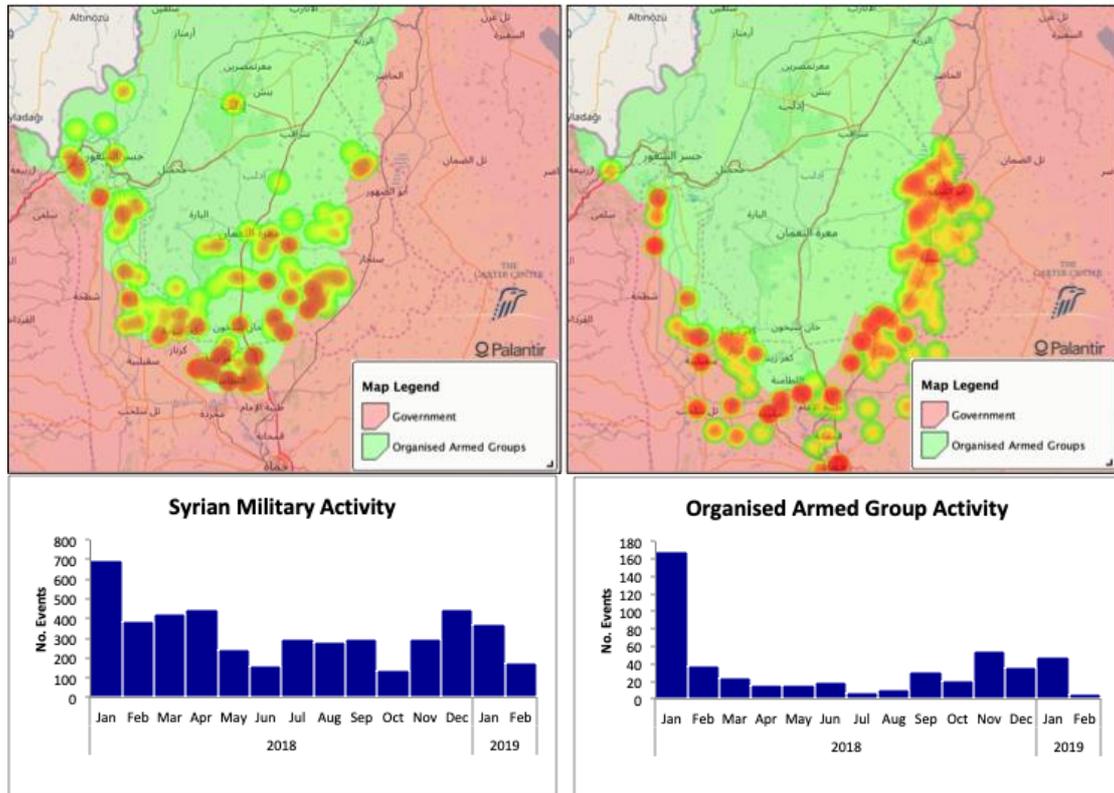


Figure 2: Government Activity onto Organized Armed Group Territory in Northwest Syria (left) and Organized Armed Group Activity onto Government territory in North West Syria (right).

SOUTH SYRIA

Further evidence of an active but low-level resistance against the Syrian government was recorded again this week. Building on last week's small arms fire (SAF) attacks against military locations in Daraa Governorate, at least two similar attacks were recorded in Ghadagheb and As Sanamayn towns (Figure 3).

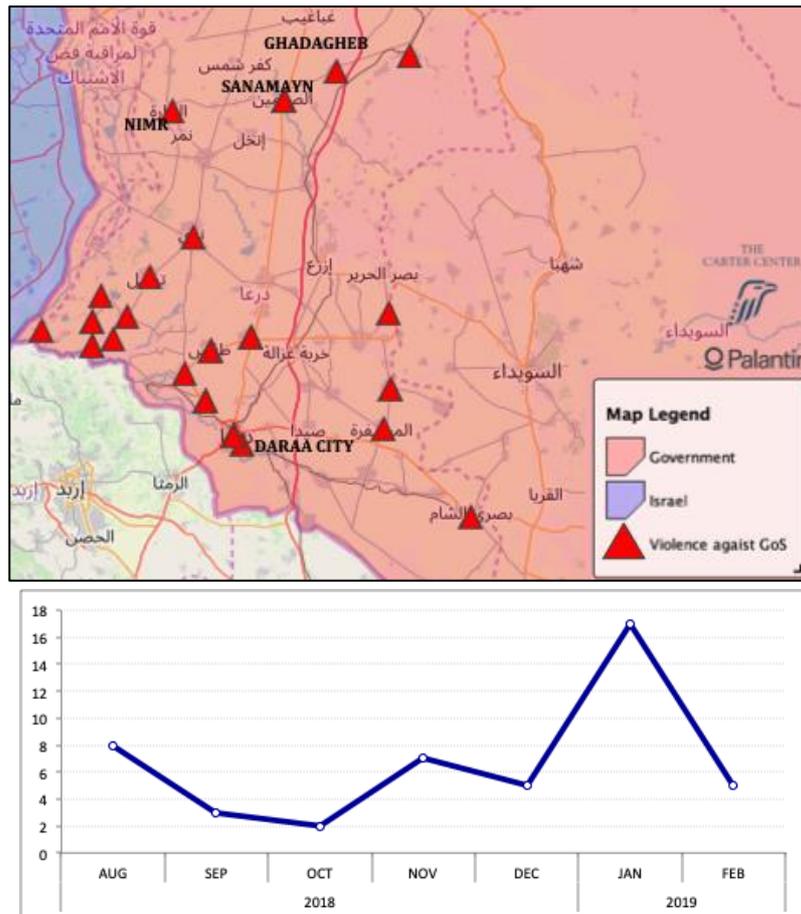


Figure 3: Violent Incidents Affecting Government Personnel in Daraa Governorate Aug 2018 – Feb 2019.

However, one attack on 5 February, saw an improvised explosive device (IED) detonate inside a Syrian military checkpoint near Nimr town in one the first direct IED attacks against government forces since their takeover of Daraa governorate in summer 2018. The event was [claimed](#) by the “Popular Resistance”, a group that has previously claimed several attacks against government forces around Daraa Governorate using their strong online presence [since](#) November 2018. However, unlike previous cases, the group released a detailed video of the attack accompanying the claim.

Notably, the attack coincided with the Popular Resistance’s attempt to garner local support. A day before the attack, an online statement was released calling for men to join their ranks and four days later a [video](#) of a group of men pledging allegiance to the Popular Resistance emerged.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

The US-backed and Kurdish-controlled Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) held their recent advances against ISIS in the southwest Deir Ez Zor Governorate. This week fighting was concentrated to the south of the pocket in the vicinity of Baghuz Fawqani village (Figure 4). This area saw heavy contestation between the two sides, including at least five prolonged clashes between the SDF and ISIS as well as coalition airstrikes in support of the SDF on at least four

occasions. Large numbers of civilian IDPs and foreign ISIS members also continued to [exit](#) the enclave, with one [exodus](#) involving 200 civilians in a single day.

Despite this pressure, ISIS fighters maintained their areas of control in the villages of Safafaniyah and Shajlah. In addition to launching at least [two](#) suicide vehicle borne attacks against the SDF, the group also managed to conduct three notable infiltration attacks across the Euphrates River to the west. On 5 February, the group also attacked government positions in [Al Suwayiyah](#) town, while on 7 [February](#) and 10 [February](#), ISIS engaged Syrian troops in eastern areas of Abu Kamal City.

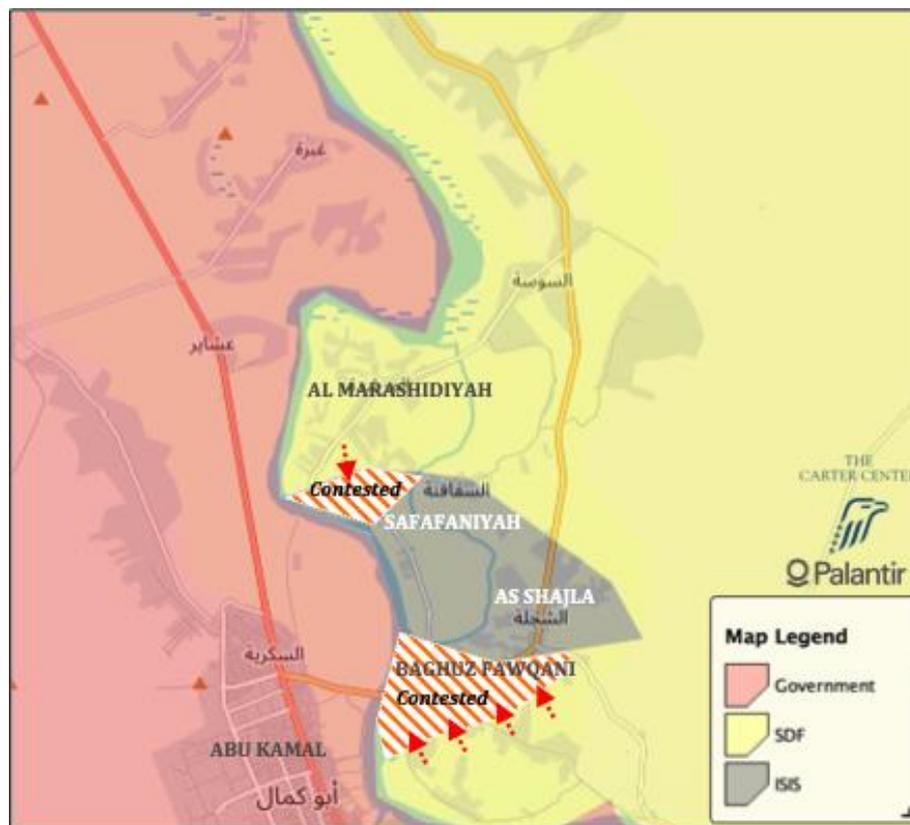


Figure 4: Areas of Control and Influence in Baghuz Fawqani and Environs as of 10 February 2019.

Away from this area, the government of Syria also launched a robust anti-ISIS operation in the Sokhneh desert between Tadmor and Deir Ez Zor cities. Clearance operations began in the Wadi Suheil, Al Heil and Mazrouka Hills areas, supported with several Syrian airstrikes against the group in these locations.⁴ Notably, these were the first airstrikes in this area since early December 2018, when airstrikes impacted a group of fighters near Sokhneh town (Figure5).

⁴ Information from Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team's Weekly Report January 31 - February 6, 2019.

Further [west](#), on 5 February, five civilians were killed in a landmine explosion that had been planted by ISIS in Rasm al Ahmar village in the Salamiyah countryside. Such events highlight the ongoing legacy of the group to affect the security environment in seemingly pacified areas of the country.

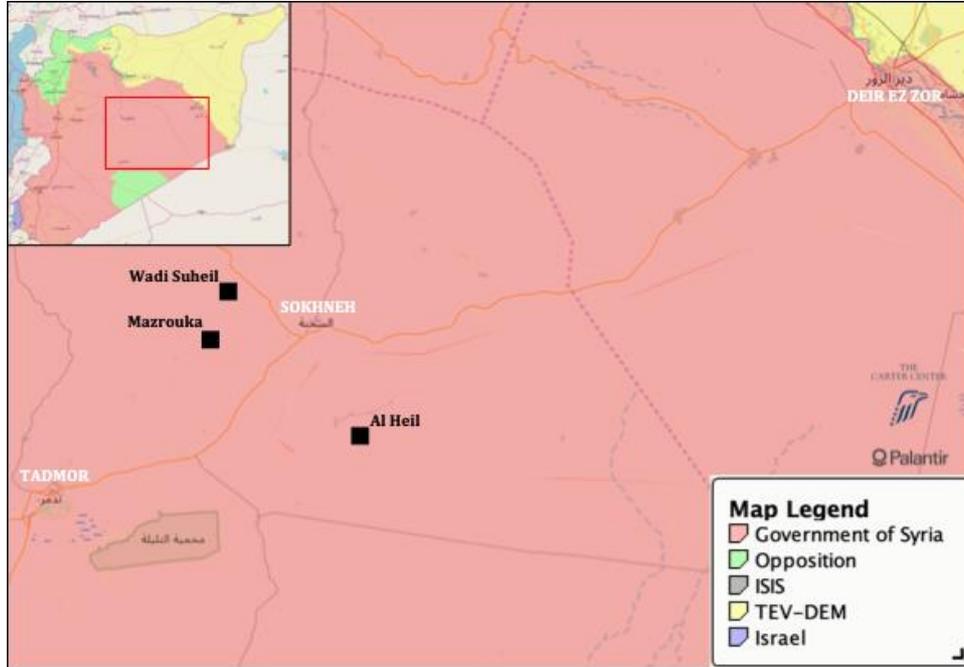


Figure 5: Locations of Government Anti-ISIS Operations in February 2019.

WATCH LIST

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

NORTHWEST | Outcome of discussion in Sochi on 14 February and/or further signs of pressure against the September 2018 De-escalation Agreement, such as increases in conventional conflict or significant troop movements by both sides or the resumption of regular Syrian or Russian airstrikes.

SOUTH | Rise in asymmetrical attacks or increasingly sophisticated attacks against Syrian military positions in the short term.

NORTHEAST | Signs of how ISIS reacts to the reduction of their territory, especially changes in asymmetrical attacks against military actors in the region or their activity elsewhere in seemingly pacified areas of the country.