

THE
CARTER CENTER



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 18 - 24 MARCH 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Three Turkish military patrols in the Idlib de-escalation zone had little effect on the elevated levels of conflict this week. Elsewhere, signs of internal tensions between factions in the pocket were also seen, especially in Umm Seir, Armanaz, Kafr Takhrim and Idlib City.
- **SOUTH** | Assassinations against individuals aligned with the government of Syria continued this week, with two incidents recorded in Muzayrib and Sanamayn. Elsewhere, an ISIS ambush of a Syrian Army patrol on the Tadmor – Deir Ez Zor Highway, comes a month after an anti-ISIS operation in the area.
- **NORTHEAST** | Despite the total collapse of the last remaining ISIS pocket in Baghuz Fawqani Village this week, ongoing conflict continues to affect the security environment in northeast of Syria.

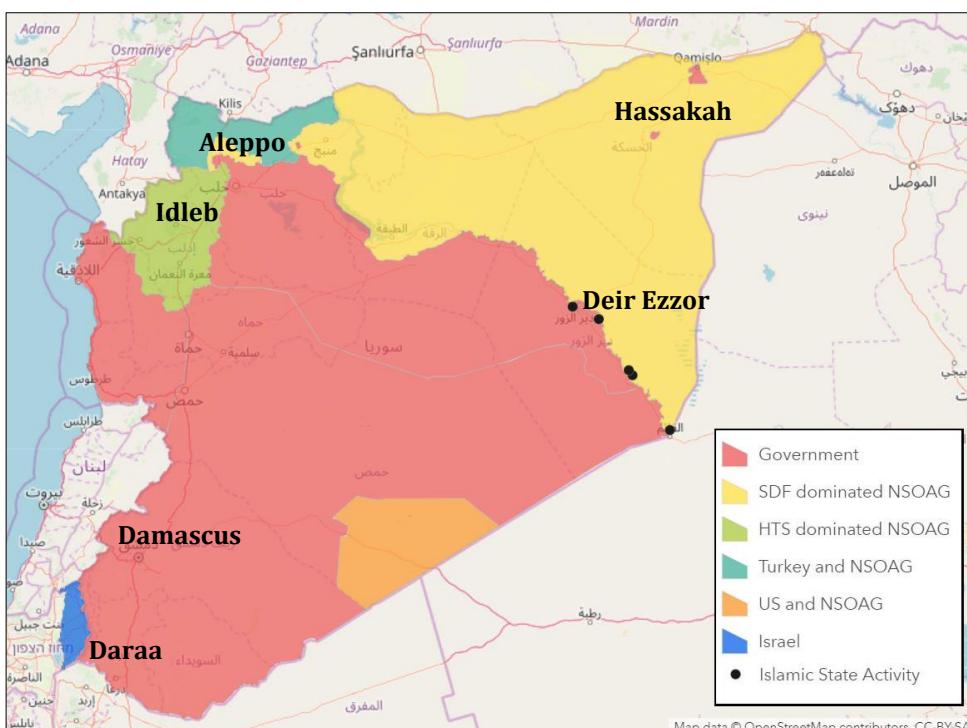


Figure 1: Dominant Actors' Area of Control and Influence in Syria, 24 March 2019. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. For more explanation on our mapping, please see the footnote on page 2.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

Government-initiated conflict, namely shelling, in the Idlib pocket remained at an elevated level this period, with 201 incidents recorded in addition to 211 events last week. This was despite three Turkish Military patrols in the Al Ais, Jebel Saman, and Murak areas of the Idlib de-escalation zone on 18, 19, and 23 March. The Turkish military has conducted at least six patrols since 8 March, without a clear impact on the overall conflict trend in the Hayyat Tahrir al Sham-dominated (HTS) enclave (Figure 2).

Overall Conflict in Idlib and Northern Hama Governorates

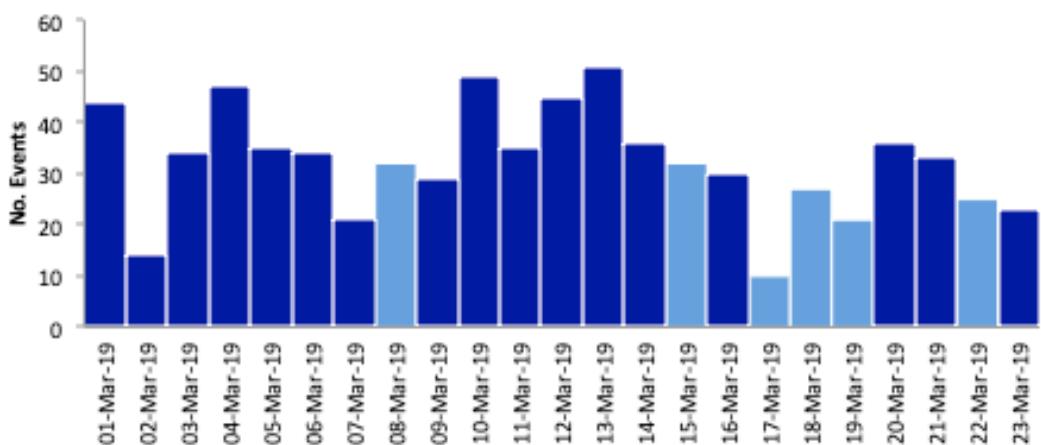


Figure 2: Timeline of Syrian military and NSOAG activity in Idlib and Northern Hama Governorates in March 2019, with the dates of Turkish Military Patrols Highlighted in light blue.

The number of airstrikes also continued to increase across the pocket with 22 incidents recorded. This brings the total number of airstrikes from the past two weeks to 46, almost double than what was recorded in January and February combined (24). This activity also widened from last week, affecting 13 sub districts in Hama and Idlib governorates, compared to six last week.²

Elsewhere in the pocket, conflict between HTS and Ahrar ash Sham were [recorded](#) this week in Umm Seir, Kafr Takharim, Armanaz, Has, and Mastumeh towns.

¹ Figure 1 denotes dominant actors' control and influence. Syrian government-controlled areas include the presence of allied actors such as Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and Iraqi militias. Areas outside of Syrian government control include the SDF in the northeast supported by US forces, the Turkish military and aligned militias, such as the Free Syrian Army and the National Liberation Front, in the northwest, and HTS controlling large portions of the de-escalation zone around Idlib. Of note, the NSOAG-labeled area along the border with Iraq and Jordan denotes the US-led coalition's 55km de-confliction zone that contains several aligned local armed groups.

² The sub districts that were affected this week were: As Suqaylabiyah, Binnish, Heish, Idlib, Jisr Ash Shaghour, Kafr Nobol, Kafr Zeita, Khan Shaykun, Maraat Numan, Maraat Tamsrin, Saraqib, Sarmin and Suran. Sub districts affected by last week's airstrikes were; Ariha, Idlib, Jisr ash Shaghour, Kafr Nobol, Marat Numan and Saraqib.

In addition, there were three improvised explosive device attacks and light arms fire targeting HTS-affiliated officials in Idleb City on 22 March. The first IED targeted an HTS commander at the Jarrah roundabout, the second targeted a Libyan HTS member in the Al Wahdah school, and the third device killed the Attorney General of the HTS-aligned Salvation Government in the Bustan Ghannoum area. Unidentified gunmen also killed a civilian administrator of the Salvation Government at his residence.

While IED activity has been common in the city in the past 12 months, it is remarkable for so many attacks against HTS-aligned officials to occur within 24 hours. March has seen the highest levels of IED attacks in the city since January 2019 (Figure 3).

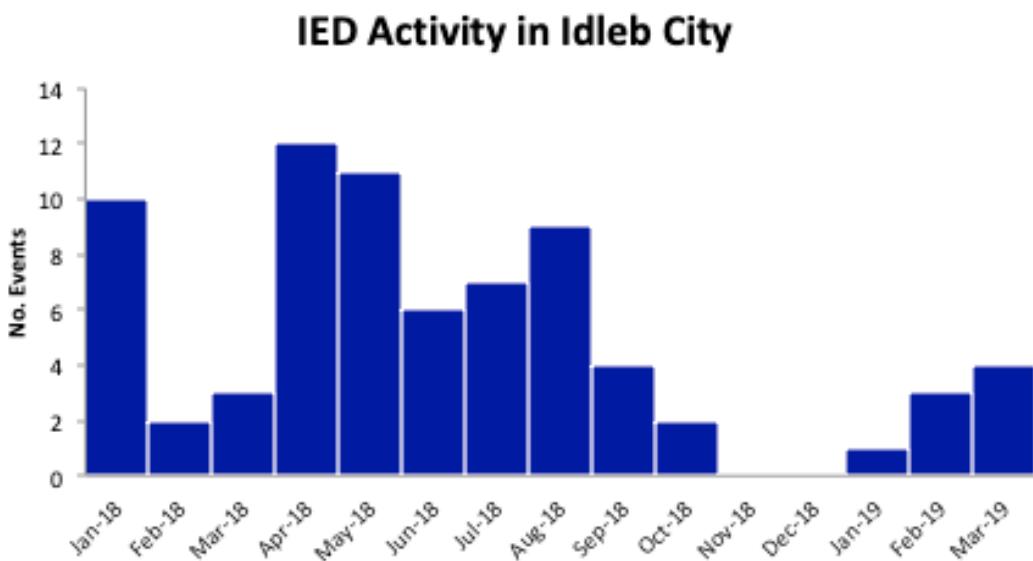


Figure 3: Recorded IED activity in Idleb City from January 2018 to March 2019.

SOUTH AND CENTRAL SYRIA

In the south of the country, further attacks against individuals connected with the government of Syria occurred this week. At least three attacks against former opposition members who had joined the Syrian military were recorded in [Sanamayn](#) and Muzayrib and Tal Shihab towns. The Popular Resistance group also claimed the assassination of an Air Force Intelligence official at a checkpoint in Da'el using small arms fire. Three days earlier, an unidentified person had targeted with grenades another Air Force Intelligence officer in the town.

This brings to 34 the number of recorded assassinations against government personnel in Daraa in 2019. So far this year, reported attacks in the south have occurred every 2.5 days on average.

Further north, evidence of ISIS activity was detected this week in the Sokhneh desert of Homs governorate. On 23 March, several bodies were discovered in the

vicinity of Sokhneh town. The next day, ISIS ambushed a Syrian military patrol on the road between Palmyra and Deir Ez Zor city. Government-aligned media [reported](#) that several Syrian soldiers were killed. The attack occurred just over a month after the Syrian Army conducted an anti-ISIS operation in the area (as previously reported [here](#)).

NORTHEAST SYRIA

This week, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) recaptured ISIS's last remaining encampment in the south of Baghuz Faqwani village and formally [announced](#) the territorial defeat of the group on 23 March. However, the SDF and coalition forces conducted further clearance operations in the area in the [days](#) following the announcement. The US-led Operation Inherent Resolve [stated](#) these actions were designed to "ensure long term security for the area" after the defeat of ISIS.

The collapse of the ISIS pocket in Baghuz resulted in a total of 72,000 people, including 40,000 children, displaced from Baghuz to the Al Hole Camp in Hassakeh Governorate in 2019, [according](#) to the International Rescue Committee. A large [riot](#) in the camp at the end of the reporting period, protesting overcrowding, raised security concerns.

While ISIS was defeated in Baghuz, the steady low-levels of violence against SDF personnel in areas formerly controlled by ISIS continued to be reported in the northeast of Syria this week. Nine incidents were recorded in the towns of Abu Hamam, Kalta, Jadid Bakkara, Jurdi al Sharqi, Tayyana, Hajin, Shiheil, and Basira. This brings the total number of recorded events against SDF personnel in Deir Ez Zor governorate to 317 in 2019, 37 percent (118) of which occurred in four sub districts: Thiban, Basira, Ashara and Hajin.³

A variety of actors are likely responsible for these incidents given the locations, types of attacks, and targets. The continuing violence should be of concern.⁴

WATCH LIST

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

NORTHWEST | Any increase in inter-group clashes or IED activity, especially in Idleb city or southern frontlines. Any widening of government activity in the area.

SOUTH | Increase in the number of attacks against government-aligned individuals in Daraa. Increase in ISIS-linked activity in areas under government dominance, or a geographic expansion of this activity.

³ Excluding the Baghuz – Al-Shafah pocket, that was a frontline area in 2019.

⁴ For more on ISIS in Syria, please see the Syria Conflict Mapping 15 March report "A Review of ISIS in Syria 2016 – 2019: Regional Differences and an Enduring Legacy" [here](#).

NORTHEAST | Change in the security environment in the northeast following the collapse of the last ISIS pocket in Baghuz. Additionally, any signs of how ISIS will attempt to project strength and what the SDF will prioritize for security.