

THE  
CARTER CENTER



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 25 - 31 MARCH 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | High levels of conflict continued to impact the HTS-dominated Idlib enclave. Elsewhere, Israeli airstrikes targeted suspected Iranian weapons storage sites east of Aleppo City.
- **SOUTH** | Along with asymmetrical attacks against individuals associated with the government in Daraa Governorate, kidnaping and two sustained clashes between ISIS and Syrian government forces in northeast As Sweida highlighted the unstable security environment.
- **NORTHEAST** | Clearance operations continued in the Baghuz area. Further north, ISIS claimed an attack against a YPG checkpoint in Menbej area.

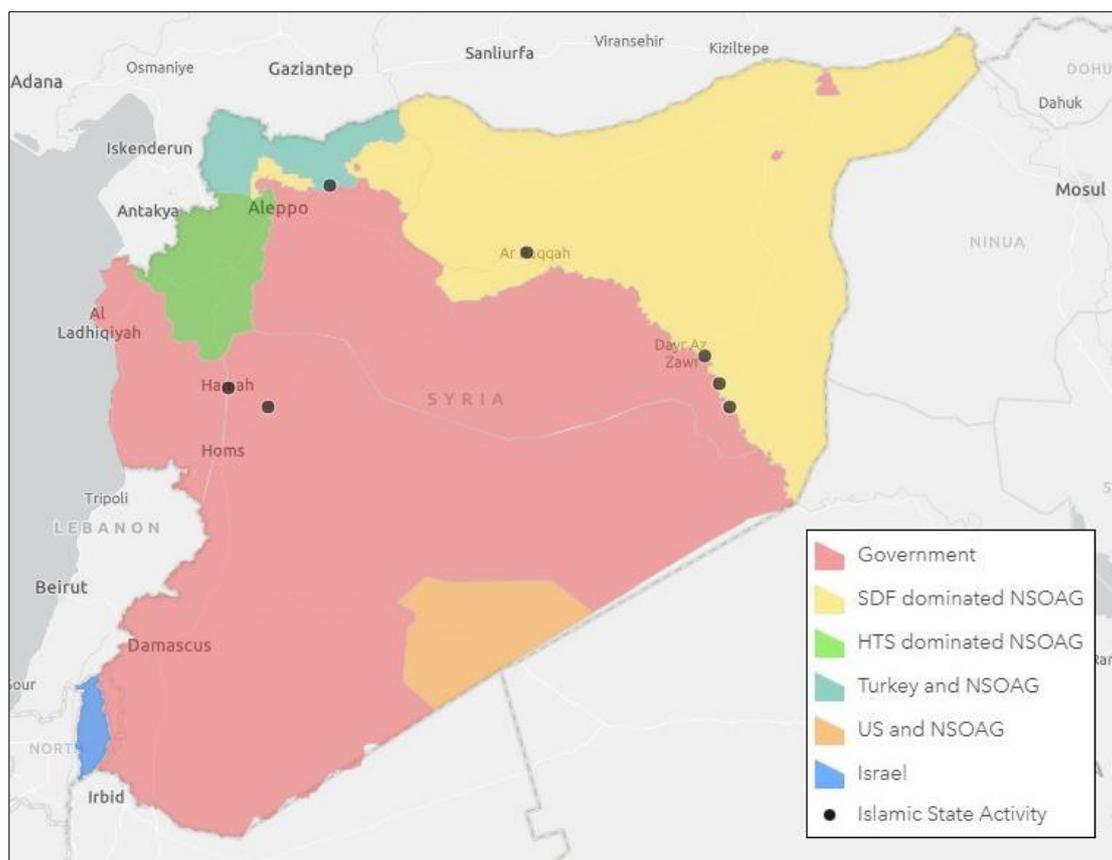
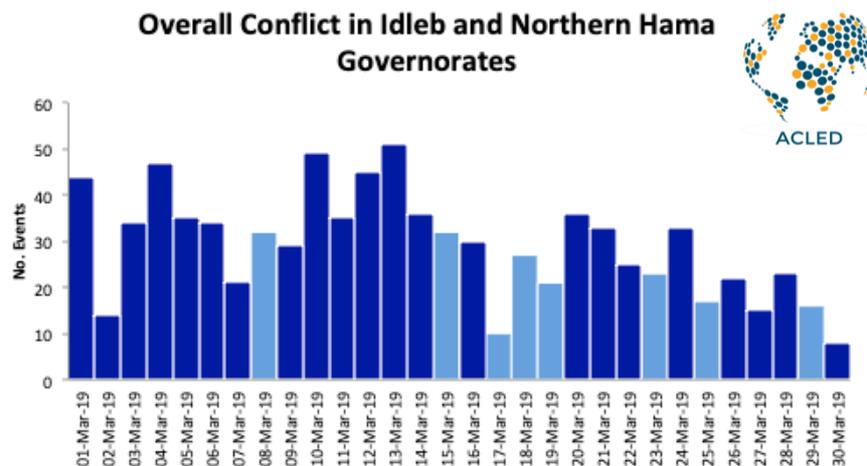


Figure 1: Dominant Actors' Area of Control and Influence in Syria as of 31 March 2019. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. For more explanation on our mapping, please see the footnote on page 2.

## NORTHWEST SYRIA

Conflict seemed to decrease in the HTS-dominated Idleb pocket this period with 134 incidents of shelling and frontline clashes recorded, compared to last week's 201 events. This coincided with two more Turkish military patrols on 25 and 29 March, bringing the total number of Turkish patrols in the enclave to eight since 8 March.<sup>2</sup> Notably, all but [one](#) of these patrols have occurred in eastern portions of the pocket. The patrols have had little effect on reducing violence in the enclave (Figure 2).



*Figure 2: Documented Syrian military and NSOAG activity in Idleb and Northern Hama Governorates 2018/2019 (top). Timeline of Syrian military and NSOAG activity in Idleb and Northern Hama Governorates in March 2019, with the days of Turkish Military Patrols Highlighted in light blue (bottom). Data collected by [ACLED](#).*

Overall, 837 conflict events between the Syrian government and HTS-dominated groups in Idleb were recorded in the month of March – the highest levels of documented conflict since January 2018. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [voiced support for the Idleb de-escalation zone agreement, saying](#) he was “convinced that considering the difficult situation that developed there [Idleb], we will be moving and have already started moving step by step towards the goal set by the two presidents.” The announcement contrasts to Russia's statements since February on the situation and previously reported [here](#).

Elsewhere in the north, on 27 March Israeli airstrikes hit three suspected Iranian/Hezbollah weapon storage sites between Aleppo International Airport and Shiekh Najar Industrial area. The strikes on the [Sheikh Najar Industrial City complex](#), [Tell Shugheib](#), and [Nayrab Airbase](#) killed at least seven people, including

<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 denotes dominant actors control and influence. Syrian government areas also include the presence of aligned actors such as Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and Iraqi militias. Areas outside of Syrian government, ISIS and SDF influence and control have been labeled non-state organized armed group areas due to the variety of groups operating in these areas. 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 a number of aligned local armed groups. Data from the publicly available [ACLED](#) Syria dataset.

<sup>2</sup> By 4 April, the Turkish Military had conducted a total of 12 patrols in the Idleb pocket.

several Iranian nationals. This is the second time in a year that Israeli aircraft targeted sites in Aleppo Governorate, following strikes on 15 July 2018 in the Jebel Saaman area. These are also only the sixth case of Israeli strikes in northern Syria in a year. Previous strikes were in Tartous, Latakia, and Hama in July and September 2018.

Since January 2018, Israeli attacks in northern Syria account for just 10% of their attacks throughout the country. The majority of Israeli strikes typically affects southern governorates, especially Quneitra and Rural Damascus / Damascus, that have recorded 69% (41) of activity, while Daraa and As Sweida Governorates have recorded 14% (8) between them.

The Israeli aerial campaign in Syria has been consistent during the conflict, typically targeting suspected Iranian/Hezbollah weapons storage sites or Syrian military equipment or sites near the UN demilitarized zone in the Golan area of southern Syria.

## **SOUTH SYRIA**

Along with the asymmetrical attacks against individuals associated with the Syrian government in Daraa governorate using shooting or improvised explosive devices (three attacks this week), an increasing number of abductions were reported in neighbouring As Sweida Governorate this period. At least four abductions targeting civilians were recorded in As Sweida City (2), Mardak in the Shahba district and Qarayya in the Salkhad District. In two cases, a ransom was demanded for the release of the victims.

Since January 2018, 18 such activity has been recorded in As Sweida governorate. Four events to occur within a week is notable. However, it is still too early to assess if this represents the start of a change in dynamics or is an isolated spike in activity (or reporting). Regardless, the event highlights the different types of threats present in seemingly passive areas of the governorate.

Elsewhere, at least two sustained<sup>3</sup> clashes between Syrian military forces and ISIS occurred to the east of Mashnaf and Ariqa towns this week. These represented some of the first recorded ground clashes involving ISIS since December last year. The ongoing presence of the group in this area despite a sustained anti-ISIS campaign led by the Syrian government in northeast As Sweida in August 2018 should be of concern for the security environment here moving forward.

*For more on ISIS local presence around Syria, please see recent report "A Review of ISIS in Syria: Oct 2016 to Jan 2019" [here](#).*

## **NORTHEAST SYRIA**

Despite the collapse of the ISIS enclave in Baghuz Fawqani last week, ongoing activity against residual ISIS fighters continued to be reported in southeast Deir Ez Zor Governorate during the reporting period. This included several coalition airstrikes [against](#) ISIS in hills nearby Baghuz, as well as at least three arrest

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<sup>3</sup> Meaning clashes that lasted several hours.

operations in the area.

The cost of the fight against ISIS also became apparent this week, with the SDF [announcing](#) the loss of 11,000 personnel since 2012 due to the campaign against the group, in addition to the 21,000 SDF personnel injured.

On the humanitarian front, the UN [released](#) the latest figures on al Hole Camp in Hassakah governorate, currently holding over 73,000 people from former ISIS-controlled areas. Notably, the majority of those in the camp are non-Syrian. The largest portions are from Iraq (42%) while 15% are nationals from Europe, North Africa, and Asia. The remaining 43% of the population are Syrian nationals. The humanitarian situation remains [dire](#) and security concerns remain (as previously reported).

Elsewhere, ISIS [claimed](#) a 25 March attack against a YPG checkpoint between Aleppo and Menbej City that killed eight YPG militias. Of the recorded 149 attacks in the Menbej district in the past year, the different locations, types, and targets of attacks suggest multiple actors responsible rather than just ISIS. ISIS-linked activity in the Menbej district has been low – just 7% (10) of the total reported conflict activity since January 2018.

## **WATCH LIST**

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

**NORTHWEST** | Any widening of government-initiated activity in the Idleb pocket as well as further Israeli action in the north of Syria.

**SOUTH** | Increase in reported low level attacks against government-aligned individuals in Daraa governorate or kidnap activity in As Sweida governorate as well as presence of ISIS-linked activity in the northeast of the governorate.

**NORTHEAST** | Any changes to the security environment in northeast Syria following the collapse of the last remaining ISIS pocket in Baghuz. This includes any signs of how ISIS will attempt to project strength.