



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 28 JANUARY – 3 FEBRUARY 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Improvised explosive device (IED) attacks dominated reporting from Idleb Governorate. Along with this, further signs indicate that the Idleb de-escalation zone agreement is under strain.
- **SOUTH** | Two small arms fire (SAF) attacks against Syrian Government positions in Daraa Governorate highlight the ongoing challenges law and order in southern Syria.
- **NORTHEAST** | Further reductions of the ISIS pocket in southeast Deir Ez Zor Governorate occurred this week, leaving a small 9km<sup>2</sup> area remaining under ISIS control along the Euphrates River.

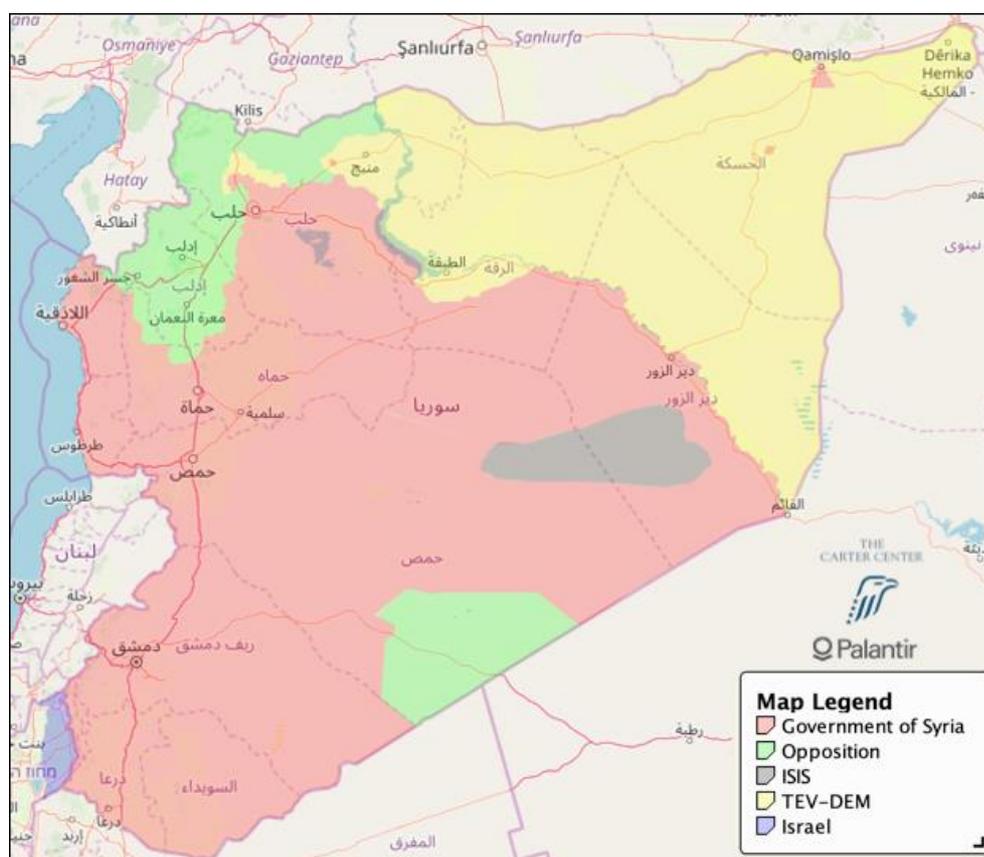


Figure 1: Areas of Control and Influence in Syria as of 03 February 2019.

## NORTHWEST SYRIA

After Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham’s (HTS) expansion into northwest Aleppo and Idleb Governorates at the start of 2019, steady low levels of asymmetrical attacks involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and shootings against local armed actors were seen for a third week in a row. This period saw at least eight events, including a high-profile suicide attack against the HTS-aligned National Salvation Government<sup>1</sup> building in Idleb city on 29 January. Unusually, the attack was conducted by a female suicide bomber and [denied](#) by ISIS two days later, after [media](#) outlets linked the attack to ISIS.

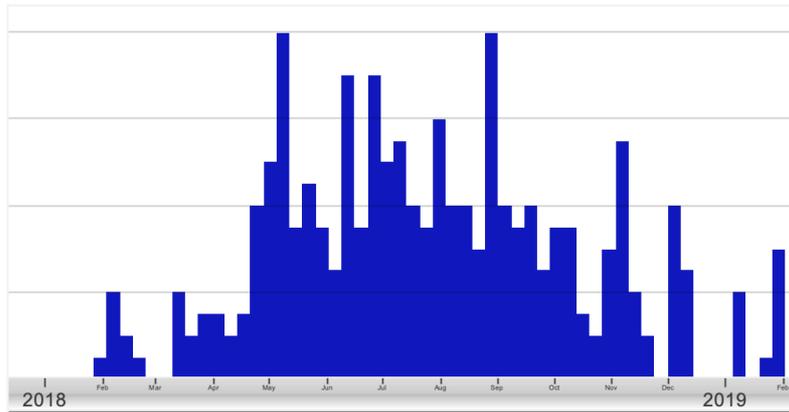


Figure 2: Timeline of IED activity in northwest Syria since February 2018.

IED attacks are relatively common in northwest Syria with at least 303 incidents recorded in the past 12 months (Figure 2). While ISIS is known to operate in Idleb,<sup>2</sup> it is important to note that the variety of locations, target sets, and types of attacks make it likely that more than one group is responsible for the events and that multiple tensions between and within groups are present. Indeed, lending more credence to this assessment, low numbers of ISIS activity in the northwest has been reported since February 2018, just 71 events (Figure 3). Of this, the majority of events involved Small arms fire (SAF) attacks (33), while just eight IED related attacks were linked to ISIS - only one of these involving a suicide attack.<sup>3</sup> In January 2019, 31 IED attacks were noted, compared to 13 in December 2018.

<sup>1</sup> The National Salvation Government is a civil administration that was formed in November 2017 by HTS to govern civilian affairs in its areas of control in northwest Syria.

<sup>2</sup> This week saw ISIS [media](#) warn its members in Idleb not to travel in groups for fear of arrest by HTS after last week’s mass arrests of suspected ISIS members.

<sup>3</sup> In September 2018, an ISIS linked suicide bomber detonated a device in Tel El-Karamej town in Harim District.

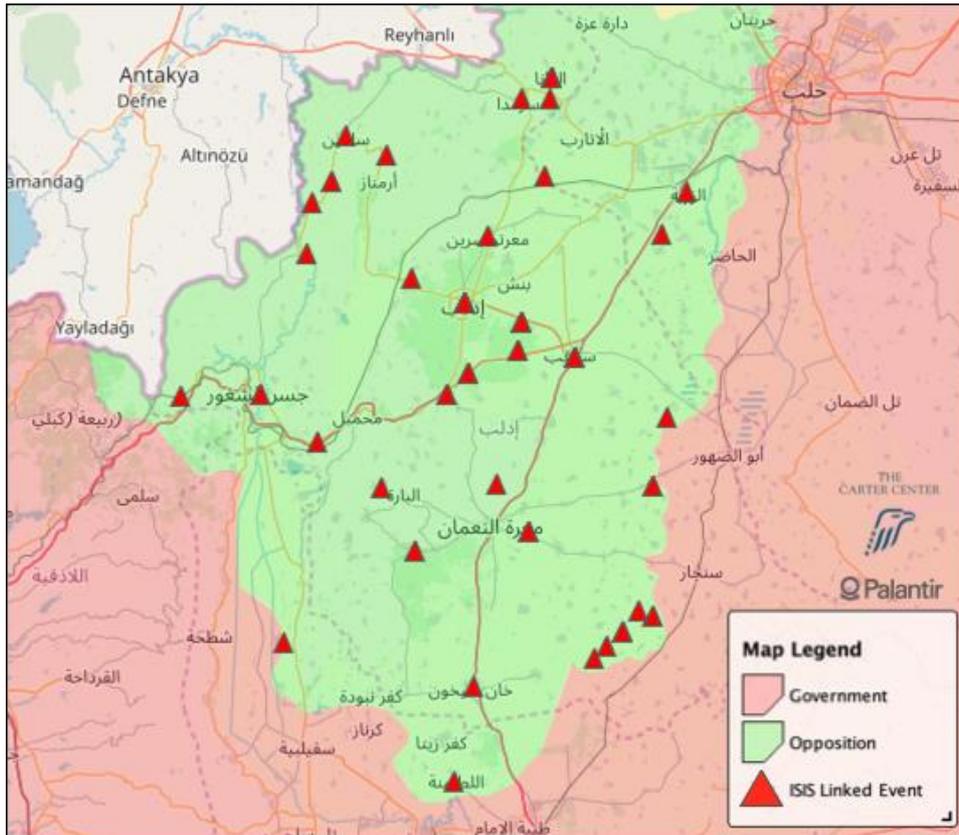


Figure 3: IED activity in northwest Syria since February 2018.

At a higher level, the Russian-brokered de-escalation zone agreement in Idlib, established in September 2018, is showing signs of strain. Russia repeated concerns over the situation in Idlib for a third week in a row, with Maria Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, [stating](#) on 31 January, that “tensions persist around the Idlib De-escalation Zone.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, this period saw 129 events of Government of Syria (GoS) shelling across the southern Idlib frontline, building upon last week’s 145 rocket and artillery bombardments. HTS military activity against government areas also were noted, with eight clashes and one anti-tank weapon event recorded. This adds to the 14 events last week, itself a tripling of the week before.

This short-term rise in conflict by both sides for nearly a month and the rhetoric from Russia over Idlib raises concerns over the long-term viability of the September 2018 de-escalation agreement. Indeed, when considering previous trends of international agreements in Syria since 2016, the outlook is negative. All have failed to hold for more than six months and either resulted in a renewal of violence or territorial changes. It is noteworthy that the September agreement is entering its fifth month of implementation.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Russia’s previous statements about Idlib, please see last week’s Weekly Conflict Summary [here](#).

## SOUTH SYRIA

This week, two notable small arms fire attacks by unidentified actors were recorded against GoS positions in Daraa Governorate. The first event, on 31 January, targeted a checkpoint near Nahta town. The second event, on 03 February, involved a sustained small arms fire (SAF) attack against a Military Intelligence Site in Da’el town during a riot, and represented one of the more serious incidents of violence since summer 2018.

The attacks are the latest in a steady trend of low-level attacks against government positions in Daraa Governorate. Since August 2018, at least 39 acts of violence against GoS positions or personnel have been recorded. In particular this has been focused in the former IS-aligned Khalid Bin Walid controlled areas in the Yarmouk basin, as well as former opposition hubs such as Daraa, Nawa, Tafs and Hara cities. Not only this, this activity has also become increasingly regular over the past five months (Figure 4).

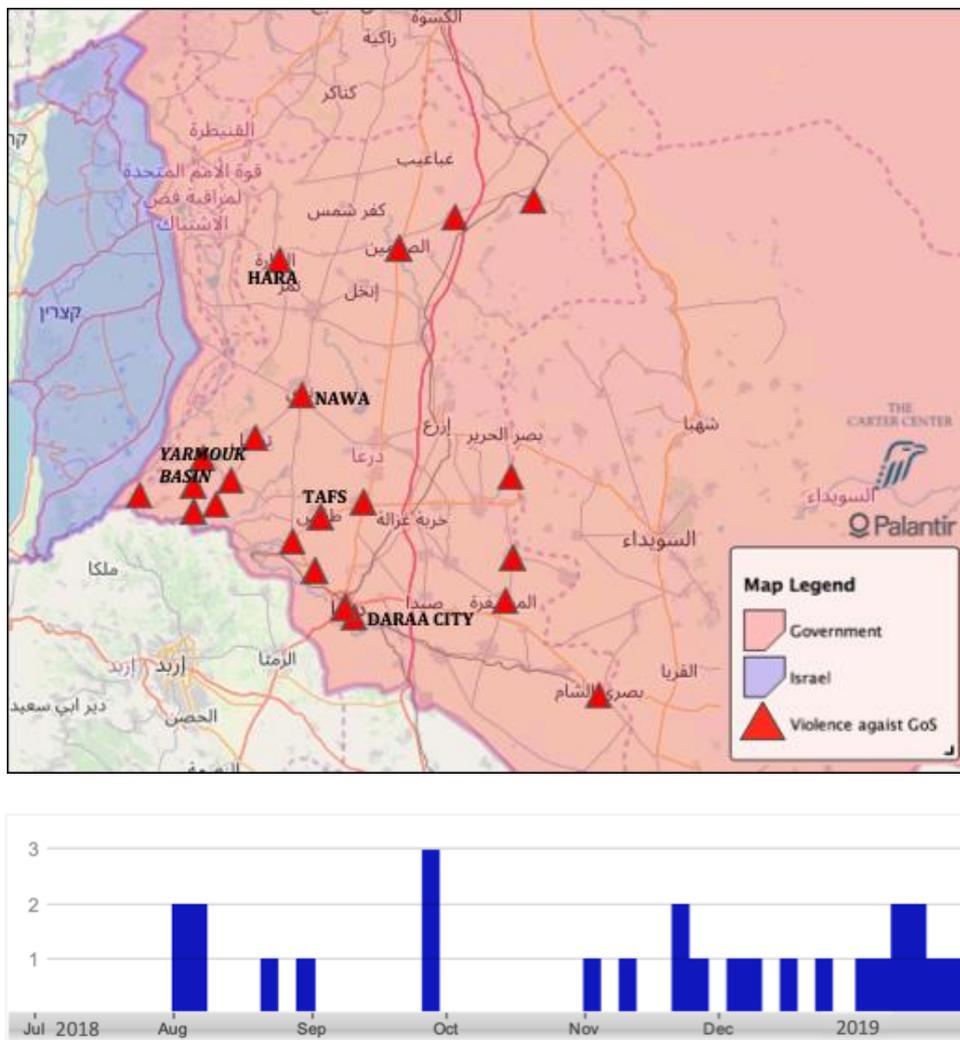


Figure 4: Map and Timeline of attacks against Government of Syria in Daraa Governorate since August 2018.

However, unlike previous months, incidents of non-violent resistance have also been [recorded](#) across southern Syria in the past month. There were at least three cases of anti-government graffiti appearing in various towns around Daraa since the start of 2019, while on 29 January a protest took place in Daraa city against ongoing government arrests for conscription.<sup>5</sup>

While concerning, especially the development of non-violent forms of resistance, the low numbers of events have yet to generate any momentum towards a sustained or coordinated resistance against the government of Syria. Rather, the current events are more reflective of the ongoing challenges faced by the government to establish full law and order across the governorate.

## NORTHEAST SYRIA

This week, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) advanced against the remaining ISIS-controlled villages in the southwest corner of Deir Ez Zor governorate. By the end of the reporting period, the villages of al Sousah and Marashidiyah were effectively under SDF control. However, the southern offensive from Baghuz Fawqani town that began last week stalled somewhat this period (Figure 5).

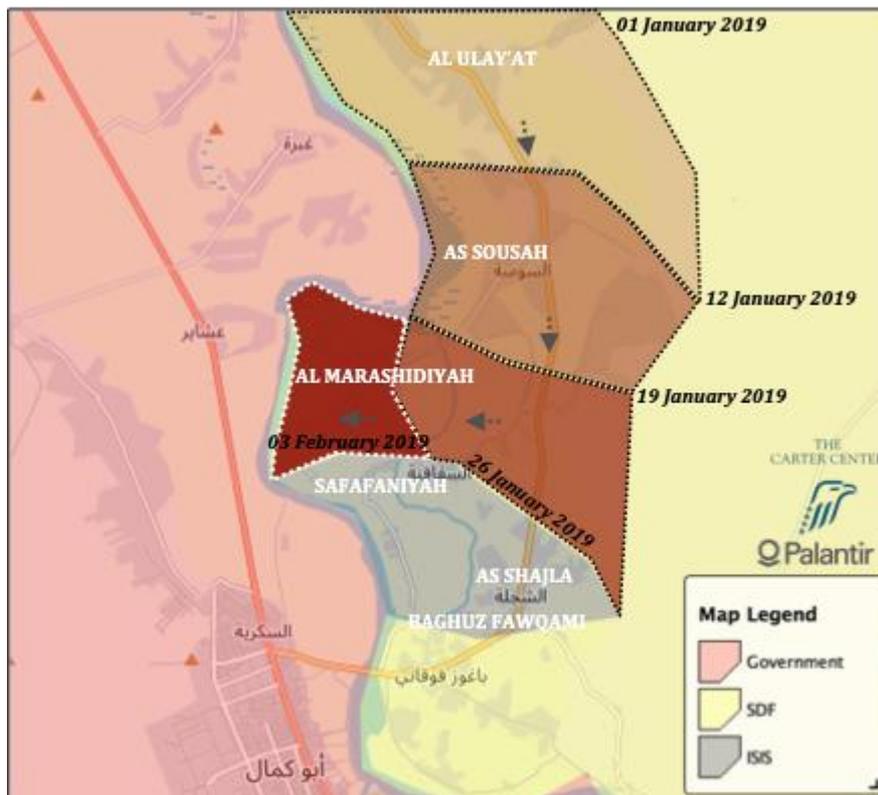


Figure 5: Progress of SDF anti-ISIS campaign in southwest Deir Ez Zor Governorate January 2019.

<sup>5</sup> [Slogans](#) have included “Hrak is free”, “we are coming and you will regret it”, “the revolution continues” and “down with the Baath Party”.

After last [week's](#) large population movements from the area, UNOCHA announced on 30 January that nearly 20,000 people had been displaced from the Hajin pocket to Al Hole Camp in Hassakeh Governorate since the start of the year as a result of SDF operations. As part of this, more foreign ISIS members were [detained](#) by the SDF this week, especially in Marashadiyah village.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this loss of territory, ISIS still controls three villages at the time of writing: Al Safafinah, al Shajlah and Baghuz Fawqani – after the relatively slow progress made against the group by the SDF in the past month (just 5km). Away from this activity, ongoing low level localized attacks by ISIS in eastern Syria demonstrate that the group maintains the capacity to affect the security environment in areas under government control. Since the Syrian military retook the region by October 2017, at least 98 incidents linked to ISIS have been recorded in this area, most recently on 26 December 2018 (Figure 6).

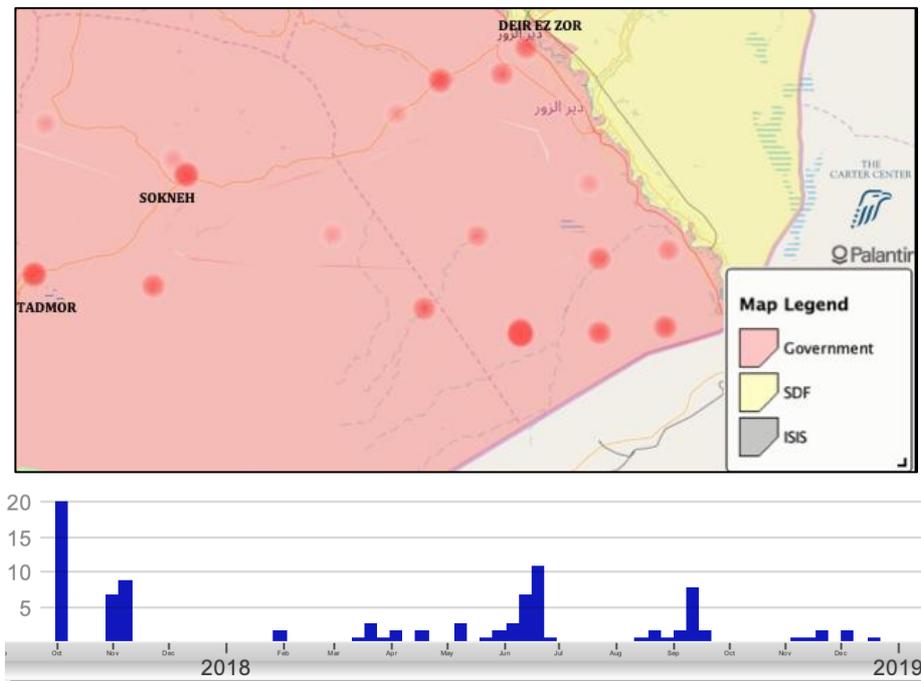


Figure 6: Heatmap and timeline of ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor and Homs Governorate occurring between October 2017 and January 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Of note, just after the reporting period ended, on 05 February, the US State Department [released](#) a statement calling on foreign countries to repatriate captured ISIS fighters to their country of origin to face prosecution.

## **WATCH LIST**

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

**NORTHWEST** | Further high-profile attacks or growing IED activity within Idleb, especially against HTS, or further signs that the September 2018 De-escalation Agreement is failing, such as increase in conventional conflict, resumption of airstrikes or significant troop movements.

**SOUTH** | Rise in asymmetrical attacks against Syrian military positions or an increase in non-violent forms of resistance against the government of Syria in the short term.

**NORTHEAST** | Signs of how ISIS reacts to the loss of their territory, especially changes in asymmetrical attacks against military actors in the region.