



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 11 – 17 FEBRUARY 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | A slight reduction in conflict in the Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)-dominated Idleb governorate coincided with a new round of Sochi discussions. In Turkish-backed Operation Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch areas of northern Syria, improvised explosive device (IED) activity gradually increased.
- **SOUTH** | Ongoing, low-level attacks against Syrian Government personnel in Daraa Government continued this week, while further east, Russia announced the establishment of two humanitarian corridors at the edge of the US-marked 55km de-confliction zone in Al Tanf Border Crossing.
- **NORTHEAST** | ISIS' last remaining territory in the Baghuz Fawqani pocket in Deir Ez Zor disintegrated this week to just a 700m square area. However, increasing numbers of civilians from former ISIS areas combined with the large numbers of former ISIS fighters being held by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) highlight the growing humanitarian concerns for the region.

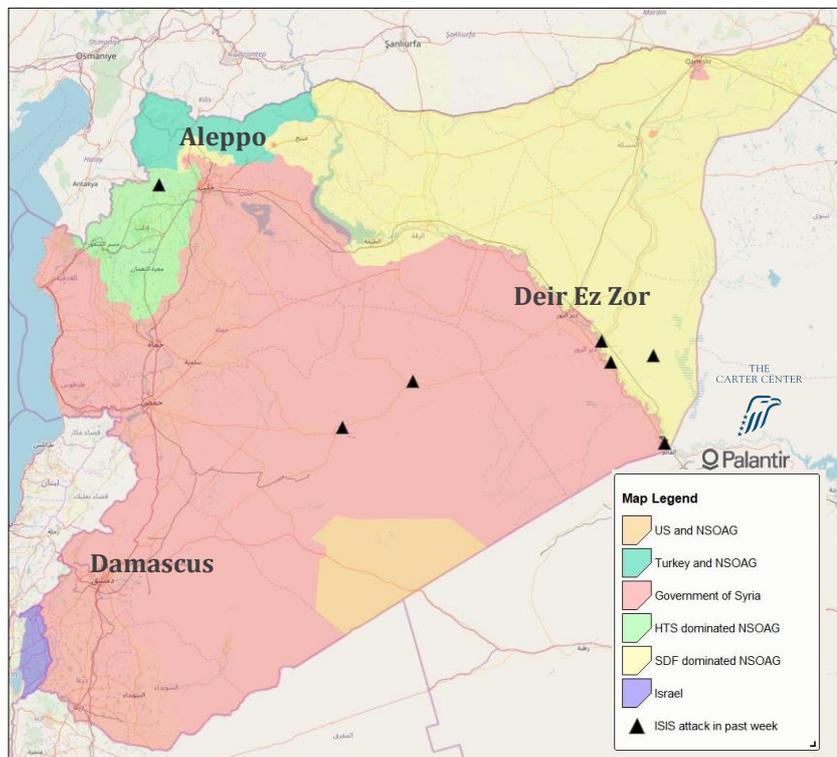


Figure 1: Dominant Actors' Area of Control and Influence in Syria as of 17 February 2019. NSOAG stands for Non-state Organized Armed Groups. For more explanation please see the footnote on page 2.¹

NORTHWEST SYRIA

Coinciding with the latest round of Sochi talks on 14 February, conflict between the Government of Syria and the various organised armed groups in Idleb governorate – dominated by al Qaeda-backed Hayyat Tahrir ash Sham – reduced slightly this week. At least 195 incidents between the two sides were recorded this week as compared to 250 events in the previous week, but still adding to the elevated conflict levels seen in January 2019.

The talks, which saw Iran, Russia and Turkey largely focus on the northeast of Syria,² included expressions of “[serious concern](#)” regarding HTS’ attempts to increase its control over Idleb, building upon similar statements over the past month.³ All parties agreed to “take specific steps to reduce violations in the Idleb de-escalation area,” but “without military” action [according](#) to Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov.

However, after an official [statement](#) by Russian President Putin who [noted](#) that “creating the Idleb de-escalation zone is a temporary measure. Aggressive incursions by militants must not go unpunished,” the long-term viability of the agreement looks increasingly fragile.⁴ The next round of talks between Turkey, Russia and Iran will take place in April.

In the Operation Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield areas of northern Syria, low level asymmetrical activity involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and assassinations against various Turkish-backed armed group members continued. At least three IED events in Daghelbash, al Ra’ee and Sandaf villages were recorded between 11 February and 17 February while in Jarablus city an Ahrar al Sharqiyah member was fatally shot by unidentified actors.

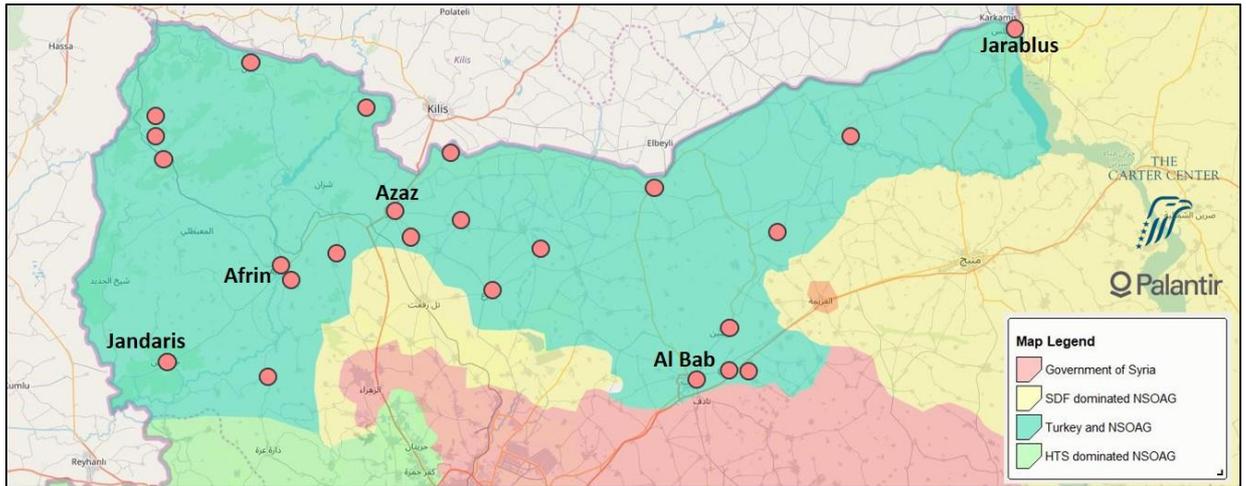
Since 1 December 2018, IED activity in the two zones has gradually increased, While a variety of actors are likely responsible for the events--given the wide range of locations, targets and devices used in the attacks--the increasing frequency of attacks is a noteworthy change in dynamics.

¹ Figure 1 denotes areas of control and influence. The black triangles indicate locations of attacks by ISIS fighters in the past week against Syrian Government forces, SDF, Non-state Organized Armed Groups (NSOAG), and civilians. Additionally, areas in which NSOAG opposed to the Syrian Government (but neither ISIS nor Kurds) control territory are broadly labeled as Non-state Organized Armed Groups (NSOAG). Lastly, the NSOAG-labeled area along the border with Iraq and Jordan denotes the presence of the US-led 55KM Deconfliction Zone and the armed groups associate with them.

² That saw Iran, Turkey and Russia agree to coordinate arrangements after the expected US withdrawal later this year but without elaborating further.

³ See previous Weekly Conflict Summaries [here](#).

⁴ 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.



IED activity in Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch Areas

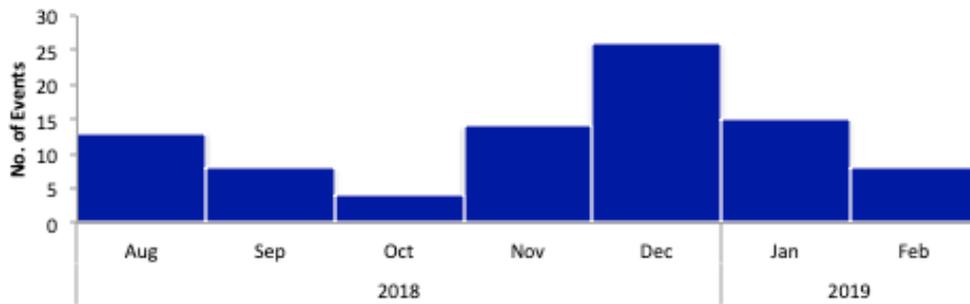


Figure 2: IED activity in Operation Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch Areas in Northern Syria since August 2018.

SOUTH SYRIA

Ongoing low levels of conflict towards Syrian Government personnel continued in southern Syria, with at least three such events recorded. Two occurred in the vicinity of Sanamayn town, an increasing hub of this kind of activity since the government takeover of the South in mid-2018. Elsewhere, an armed ambush against a military bus on the Tafs – Daraa road that killed at least one high-ranking intelligence officer on 15 February was quickly claimed by the ‘Popular Resistance’. This is the second sophisticated attack linked to the group in Daraa in as many weeks, after last week’s notable IED attack close to Nimr town.⁵

Further east, the Syrian Air Force carried out some of the first airstrikes against ISIS positions in northeast As Sweida Governorate since November last year. The airstrikes impacted a group of ISIS members moving northeast of Tarba, and southwest of their previous stronghold in the Safaa hills. This is the first activity linked to ISIS in this area since an armed clash between Syrian Government fighters and ISIS on 30 Decem 2018.

Finally, Russia [announced](#) that it was establishing two checkpoints at the edge of the US-marked 55km de-confliction zone around the Al Tanf border crossing. The checkpoints will be jointly run with Russian Military Police and the Syrian Coordination Committee of Refugee Repatriation.

⁵ For more on this and the group, please see last week’s Weekly Conflict Summary [here](#).

According to the statement, the checkpoints are designed to act as a humanitarian corridor to help civilians living in Rukban IDP camp on the Jordanian border, west of Al Tanf, to return to government areas of Syria should they choose. The move comes soon after two UN humanitarian aid convoys visited the camp from Damascus [earlier](#) this month and provided aid to some 40,000 people living there (Figure 3).

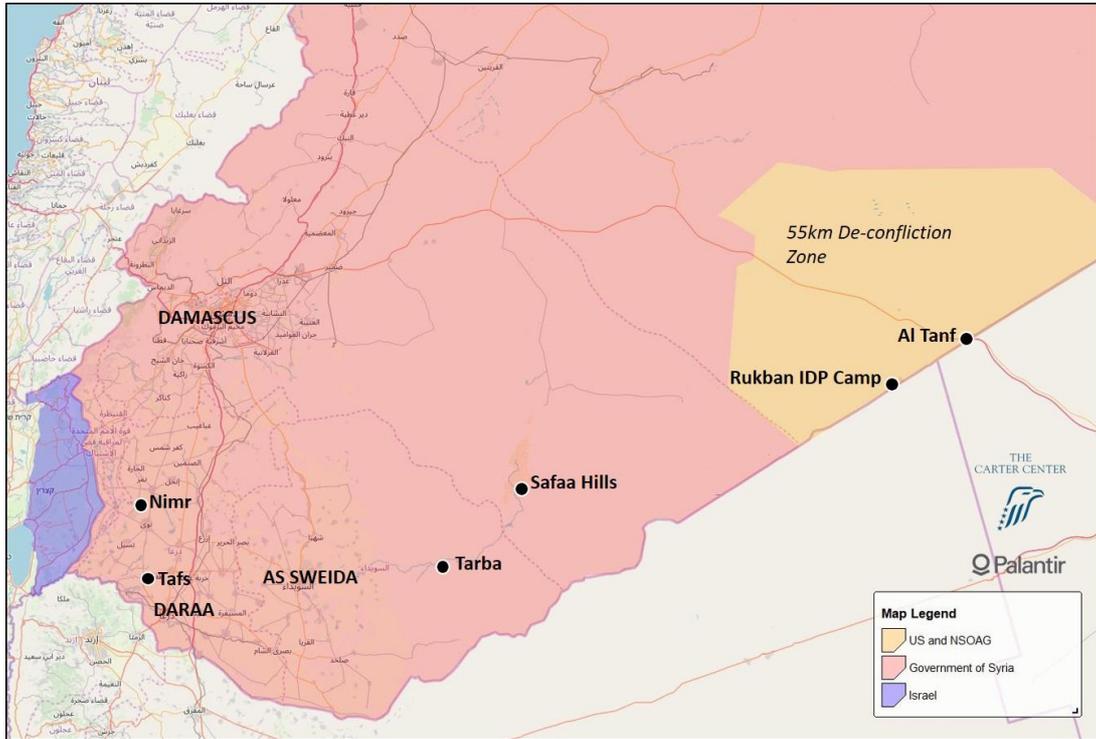


Figure 3: Locations mentioned in this week’s report including the US marked 55km de-confliction zone.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

This week saw the collapse of ISIS’ last remaining area of territorial control in southwest Deir Ez Zor Governorate. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) took Al Shajlah village and the Baghuz Faqani – Abu Kamal Bridge to the north by 13 February, after intense ground assaults. A day later, SDF fighters from the south finished clearance operations in Shiekh Hamad, allowing the group to advance on Baghuz Faqani’s eastern flank and [reducing](#) ISIS’s remaining area of control to some 700 square meters. However, with large numbers of civilians still in the area, the SDF [announced](#) that they were slowing progress to ensure minimal civilian casualties (Figure 4).

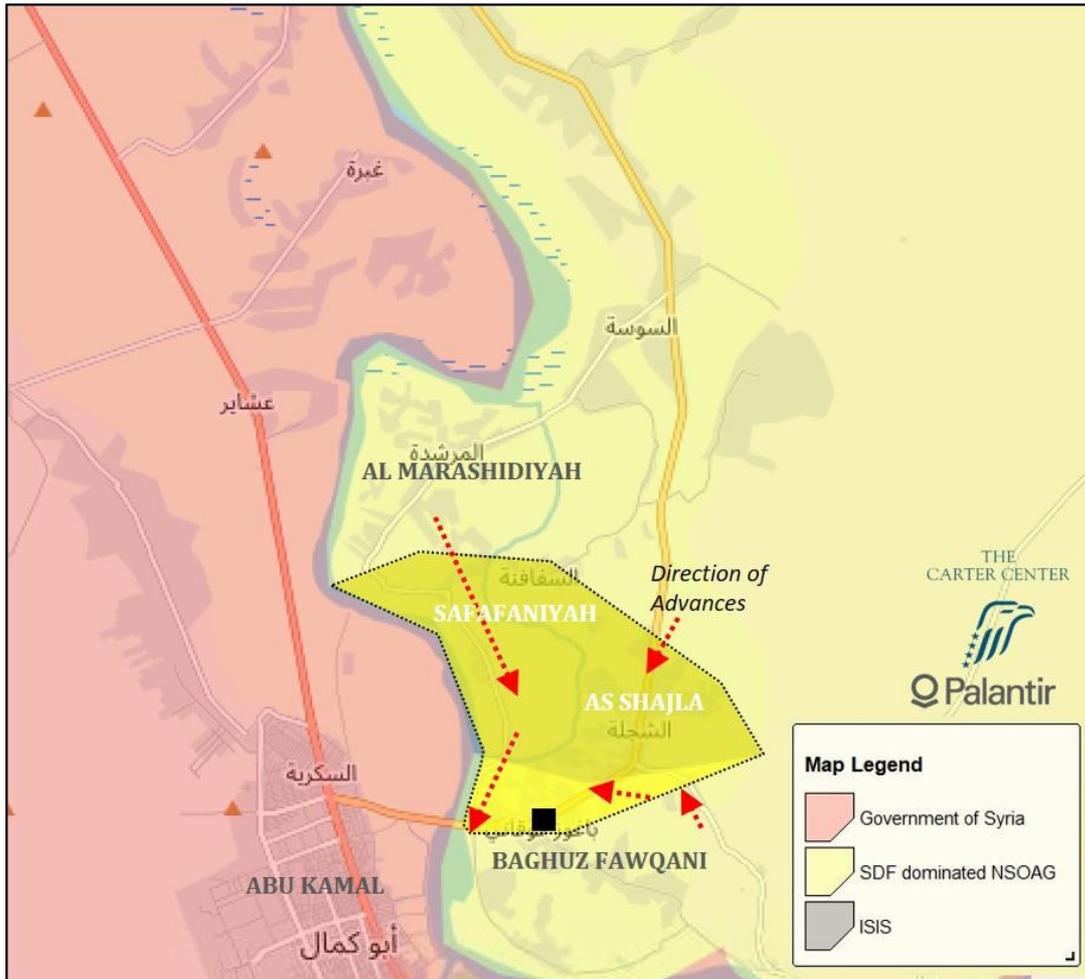


Figure 4: SDF advances against ISIS in southeast Deir Ez Zor Governorate 11 – 17 February 2019.

ISIS fighters continued to put up fierce resistance, using several anti-tank weapons, at least two vehicle borne suicide bombings, and [even](#) technical vehicles mounted with heavy machine guns being deployed against SDF. Coalition warplanes [conducted](#) at least 179 airstrikes in Syria in the two weeks prior to the reporting period, also demonstrating the intensity of fighting for this final area of ISIS territorial control.

With these developments, open conflict with ISIS in Syria seems to be reaching an end. However, questions remain over the legacy of the group in the area, with five incidents of low level ISIS-related activity recorded near Raqqa city, Basira, and Thiban in the last week alone, all areas outside of the Baghuz pocket.

The group's legacy has also been seen indirectly, through two landmine incidents affecting civilians in the former ISIS stronghold of Hajin town and one in Raqqa city this week, long after the areas were re-captured.

Finally, of note, growing concerns over the humanitarian situation in northeast Syria were expressed by local and international officials. Kurdish representatives [announced](#) this week that they are holding at least 800 suspected ISIS operatives and 700 women and 1500 children from former ISIS territory in Syria and struggling to support them. Additionally, Added the International Rescue Committee [reported](#) that at least 62 women and children from former ISIS areas

had died in recent weeks after arriving at Al Hole IDP camp in Hassakah Governorate due to the lack of medical care. The camp currently holds 40,000 people.

The Syria Conflict Mapping Project will be publishing a report further exploring the legacy of ISIS in Syria. Please visit our [publication page](#) for updates.

WATCH LIST

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

NORTHWEST | Changes in levels of routine conflict dynamics between Syrian Government and opposition frontlines in the Idleb pocket, especially in northern Hama and south west Aleppo governorates. Away from this area, signs of changing IED activity in the Turkish-backed Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch areas, especially any increases in the short term.

SOUTH | Growing asymmetrical activity by organized armed groups, especially the Popular Resistance, in Daraa Governorate or a re-emergence of ISIS activity in northeast As Sweida Governorate.

NORTHEAST | Signs of continuing ISIS presence in northeast Syria and effects of the growing humanitarian situation on the security environment.