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THE CARTER CENTER



WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 7 - 13 JANUARY 2019

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Hayyat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) continued its military and administrative expansion against the Turkish backed National Liberation Front (NLF) in Idleb governorate, focusing activity on the Ghab plains in the south west.
- **SOUTH** | Israel continued its campaign against Iran in Syria with airstrikes on a suspected weapons storage site at Damascus International Airport.
- **NORTHEAST** | Even as the anti-ISIS campaign in southwest Deir Ez Zor governorate continued, confusion surrounding US policy in Syria resulted in heightened tensions with Turkey.

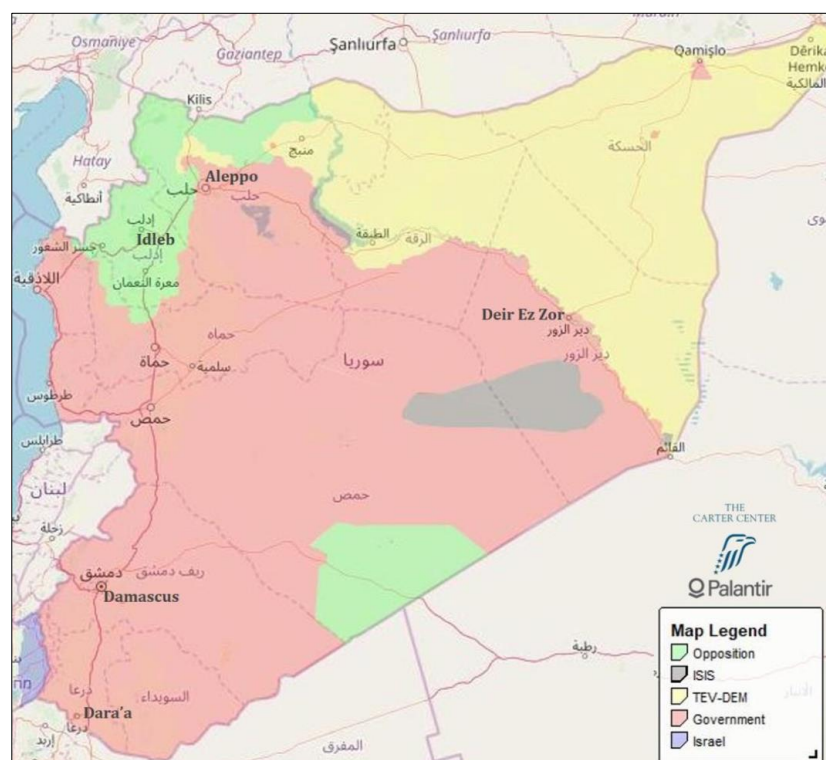


Figure 1: Areas of control throughout Syria as of 13 January 2019.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

Consolidating their substantial gains in northeast Idlib Governorate and western Aleppo last week, Al Qaeda-aligned Hayyat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) continued its expansion campaign in the north west of Syria. This week, the group switched its focus to the southwest portions of the opposition pocket, with fighting between HTS and the Turkish Backed National Liberation Front (NLF) concentrated around the Ghab plains. As a result, HTS took over several NLF controlled towns by the end of the period, including Sahel Ghab, Mount Shashabo, Hamidiya, Dukmak, Al Zuqum, Suth al Deir, Al Abideen and Qualyidin. Fighting increased by almost 20% from the prior week. At least 109 conflict events were recorded, compared to 91 reported incidents last week (Figure 2).

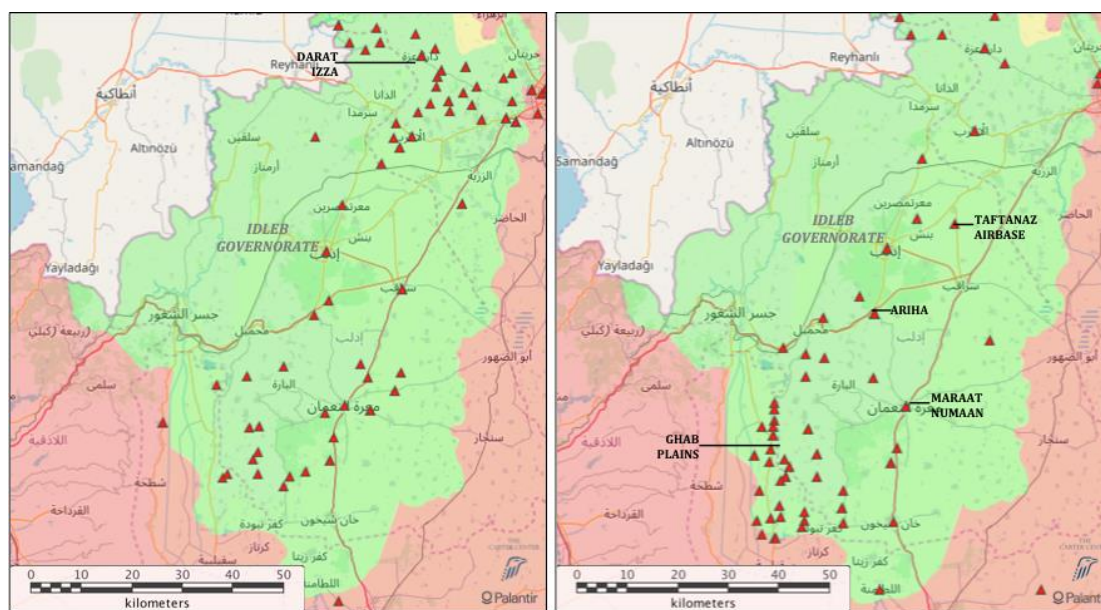


Figure 2: Comparison maps of HTS gains in Idlib and Western Aleppo Governorates between 1-6 January (left) and 7-13 January (right).

However, on 10 January, HTS and NLF agreed to a [ceasefire](#) that appeared to take effect, with just 13 events recorded in the two days after the ceasefire, compared to the 76 incidents reported between 8-9 January. However, this ceasefire lacks any clear outline as to where or for how long it applies. [Some](#) view the agreement as part of an initial stage of HTS's wider, non-military strategy for a more complete, administrative takeover of the north west.

This ceasefire comes amid a trend of especially notable, negotiated takeovers in Atareb and Hazano towns last week.¹ During this reporting period, this strategy was further developed through a series of deals, including: 1) HTS brokering a relocation deal of up to 1000 NLF members and their families from towns not yet taken in the Ghab plain to Afrin District²; 2) HTS negotiating the transfer of the Jaish al Ahrar held Taftanaz Airbase, east of Binnish town, to its control on 11

¹ See last week's Weekly Conflict Summary report [here](#)

² Although it is unclear when this relocation would occur

January; and 3) influencing the Free Idleb Police to [dissolve](#) itself at the end of the reporting period.

Also during this period, HTS attempted to consolidate recent gains in the Aleppo and Idleb area. On 8 January, a large number of arrests took place in Darat Izza town. Additionally, on 13 January, the HTS-aligned civilian National Salvation Government (NSG) [required](#) all traders, truck drivers and taxis in Idleb Governorate to register with them for a license to operate.

The ongoing rout of the NLF in northwest Syria raises serious questions over its long-term survival in Idelb governorate. By the end of this week, two of the more capable groups within the NLF, Harikat Nour al Din al Zinki and Ahrar al Sham, have effectively been defeated. HTS concentrated on taking Harikat Nour al Din al Zinki territory last week, and the remaining strongholds of Ahrar al Sham - Maraath Numaan and Ariha towns – appear under [threat](#) of an HTS takeover or falling under the influence of HTS's civilian body, the NSG. With the outstanding NLF aligned groups either fragmented and cut off from their Turkish backers, or already linked up with HTS – such as Huras al Din or the Turkistan Islamic Party (TTP) – HTS' military and civilian takeover of the northwest seems almost certain.

These events have not yet affected the internationally brokered ceasefire agreement in September 2018, which remains in place in Idelb at the time of writing. Yet the growing influence of HTS in the northwest raises doubt as to how long this process can continue – especially since the ceasefire does not include HTS, which remains committed to opposing the Syrian Government. This week, HTS dedicated some of its energy to capturing Syrian Government-held Bezzan Hill on 13 January, launching several infiltration attacks in the vicinity of Halfaya town (Figure 3). Given that these actions break the international agreement, it is unclear how long Damascus will ignore HTS' military activities.

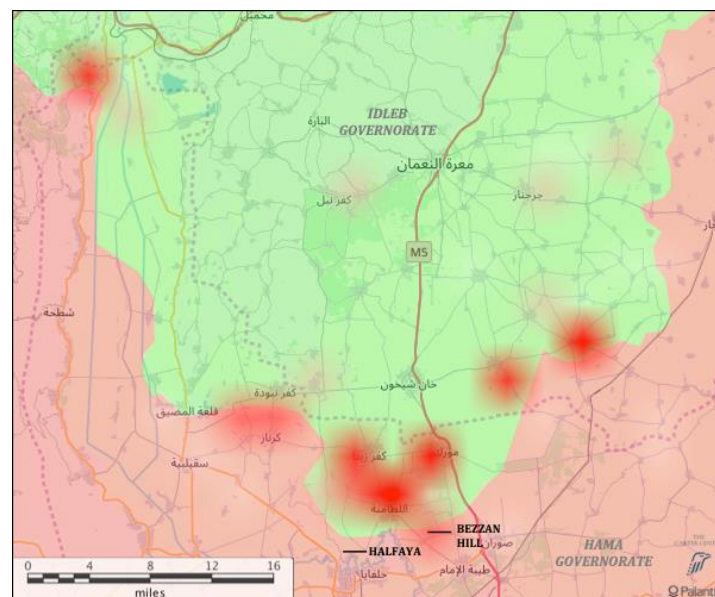


Figure 3: Heat Map of GoS activity in Idleb and Northern Hama Governorates between 7-13 January 2019.

SOUTH SYRIA

On 11 January, Israel Defense Force (IDF) airstrikes targeted a suspected weapons storage facility near Damascus International Airport, to the south east of the capital.

The airstrikes, the first in 2019, are the latest in a long series of IDF activity in the vicinity of the capital since the conflict began in Syria in 2011. In the last two months alone, at least three IDF aerial attacks have hit sites around Damascus, including the International Airport on 9 December 2018. These strikes add to the 100+ IDF events recorded in Syria since January 2016. Notably, the recent strikes prompted a rare [acknowledgement](#) by Israeli authorities, who typically neither confirm or deny such events.

It is important to note that the IDF campaign in Syria has been remarkably consistent during the conflict. Targets typically fall into two categories: 1) Hezbollah or Iranian weapons storage sites / personnel or 2) Syrian Government heavy weaponry or newly built defensive structures near the UN demilitarized zone at the Golan heights. This week's event fall into the first category.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

In keeping with historical trends, the majority of conflict recorded in the northeast this period was connected to the SDF and coalition campaign against ISIS. Recorded events fell by 13%, with at least 41 incidents recorded this period compared to last period's 47 events. This ongoing activity led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to make further advances south of Hajin town³ and reach the outskirts of Ulay'at town. The four villages of Soussa, Al Marashidah, As Safafiniyeh and Ash Shajlab remain under ISIS control in south east Der Ez Zor Governorate, an area some 3km by 7km (Figure 4).

Despite these advances, significant ISIS elements still pose a threat to security in the area. This period saw a sustained nighttime counter attack by ISIS against the SDF in al Marashidah and Soussa towns on 7 January, with over 40 SDF casualties reported. The complex operation exploited a sandstorm in the area and followed previously seen tactics of the group launching weather assisted military operations during winter months in Syria. Further behind frontlines, in Busayrah town (some 80km northwest from Ulay'at town), a suspected ISIS motorcycle improvised explosive device (IED) detonated against an SDF patrol on 11 January resulting in three casualties.⁴ ISIS also retains influence in a large desert pocket between Sokhneh, Deir Ez Zor and Abu Kamal towns, that periodically affects traffic in these areas as [shown](#) by an ISIS ambush on a Syrian army patrol on 12 January.

³ Taken last month.

⁴ These events follow on from the daring ISIS raid across the Euphrates River on 2 January 2018 in the vicinity of Al Siyal town Covered in last period's report [here](#).

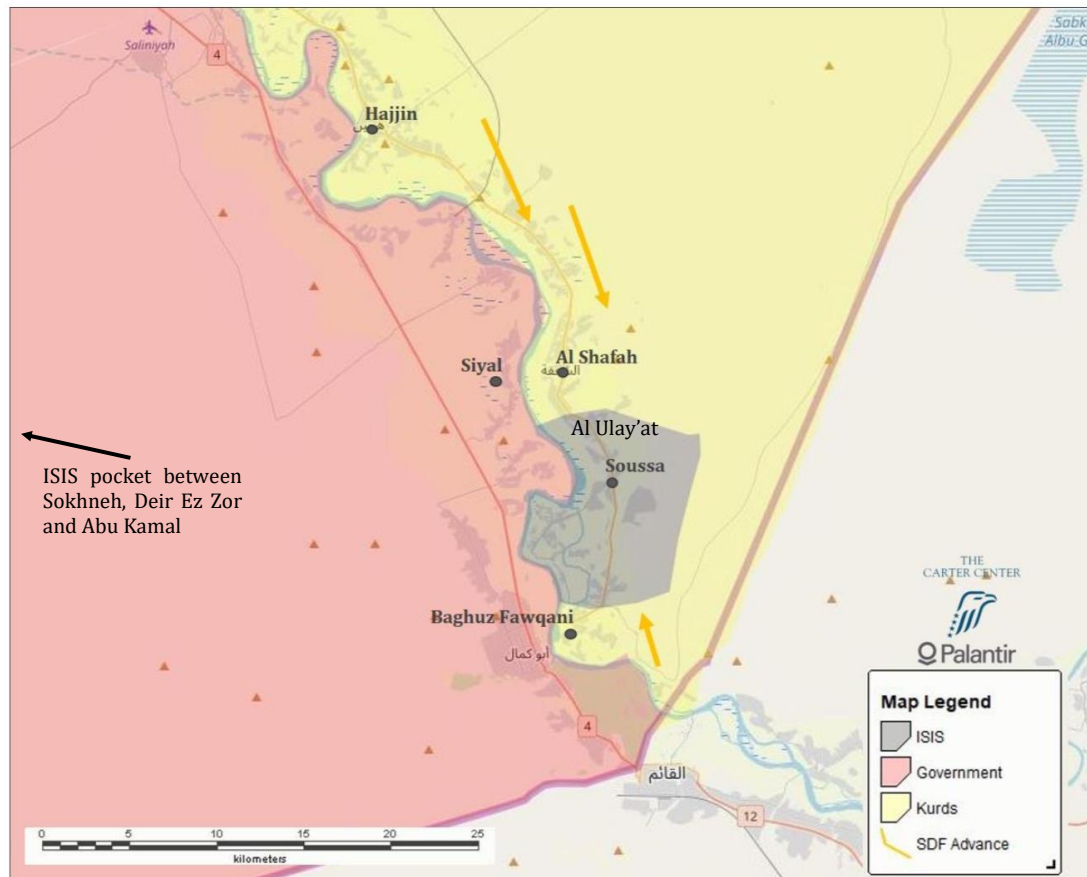


Figure 4: SDF advances in Deir Ez Zor governorate against ISIS since 1 January 2019.

Despite ongoing confusion surrounding the US policy in Syria surfacing again this week after several contradictory responses from different US policy decision makers,⁵ there is no indication on the ground of reduced US presence. Ongoing US Patrols in northern Menbej District are still occurring, most recently on 11 January, while US led coalition airstrikes continued against ISIS in Deir Ez Zor governorate – at least seven recorded sorties this week. US reinforcements arrived close to Hajin town on 12 January.

The latest comments by US foreign policy officials have not reduced fears on the ground of international actors, especially Turkey, taking advantage of the situation in northeast Syria. Large-scale Turkish troop movements to the Syrian border were [reported](#) this week, signaling a potential Turkish intervention in northeast Syria even as tensions between the US and Turkey also escalated during the reporting period. On 7 January, President Erdogan [snubbed](#) a visit by US National Security Adviser John Bolton to Ankara over comments made by the US implying that Turkey would provide guarantees that it would not target US allied

⁵ At the start of the week of 7 January, the US military [announced](#) it had begun “the process of our deliberate withdrawal from Syria”, while during a tour of the region, US National Security Adviser John Bolton [stated](#) that the withdrawal was dependent on certain assurances by actors in the region before it could begin. In the UAE, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [focused](#) on the US’s enduring commitment to “fully defeat ISIS and drive Iranian forces from Syria” as well as [state](#) that 2000 uniformed soldiers in the country had begun to withdraw.

Kurdish groups in Syria. On 13 January, President Trump [tweeted](#) that the US “...will devastate Turkey Economically if they hit the Kurds...”, implying further sanctions could be placed on Turkey. Adding further confusion to the situation, President Trump also implied Turkey should “create [a] 20-mile safe zone” without further elaboration.

WATCH LIST

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

NORTHWEST | Ongoing internal dynamics within the Idleb pocket, especially signs for further HTS or NLF territorial changes, a widening of HTS’s civilian control or signs of government preparations for a military operation against the enclave.

SOUTH | Signs of any change to Iranian or Israeli strategy in Syria.

NORTHEAST | The ongoing anti-ISIS campaign in south west Deir Ez Zor governorate, ongoing political dynamics between Damascus and Kurdish groups in the northeast as well as between Turkey and the US.