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THE CARTER CENTER



CONFLICT SUMMARY | 24 NOVEMBER – 09 DECEMBER 2018

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | Elevated risk continues for civilians, peace builders and humanitarians on the ground from ongoing conflict in northwest Syria after the reported chemical weapons attack in Aleppo City on 24 November 2018, which also undermines the fragile ceasefire agreement in Idleb Governorate.
- **SOUTH** | Various asymmetrical attacks against Government of Syria (GoS) forces in Daraa Governorate demonstrate the residual threats posed by conflict actors to peace building in seemingly passive areas of Syria, but is unlikely to represent the start of a renewed insurgency at present.
- **NORTHEAST** | The enduring presence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) heavily affect conflict dynamics in this region of Syria,

MAP OF FRONTLINES FOR WHOLE OF SYRIA

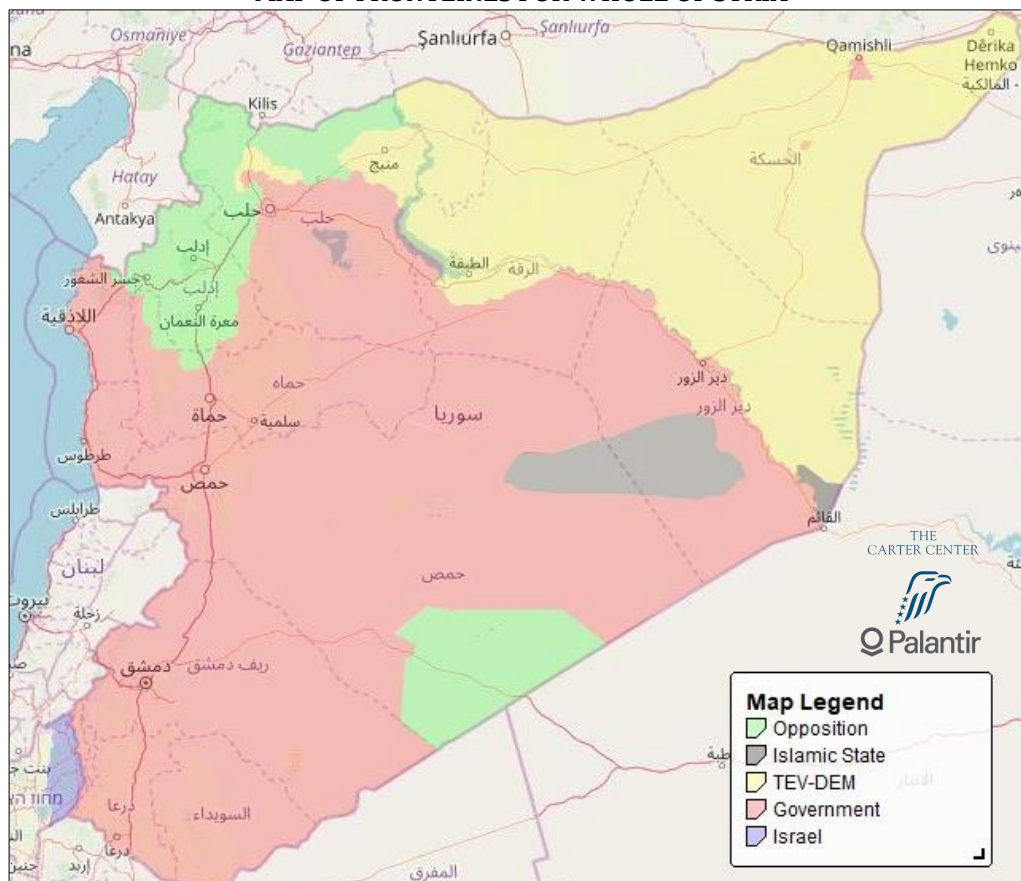


Figure 1 Areas of Control as of 09 December 2018

NORTHWEST SYRIA

For more than two weeks since a reported chemical weapon attack in Aleppo city on 24 November 2018, ongoing low levels of conflict characterised reporting from northwest Syria this period. While inconsistencies remain about the attack – such as the actors responsible and what chemical was involved – the incident re-activated GoS and opposition group frontlines, especially around Murak and Kurnaz towns in northern Hama governorate, as well as areas west of Hader and Abu Ad Duhur towns, southwest of Aleppo City. It also saw a brief resumption of GoS/Government of Russia (GoR) airstrikes on Idlib governorate on 25 November 2018, the first since September 2018.

On a practical level, the change in conflict levels has raised the risk to civilians as well as peace builders and humanitarian actors on the ground. At a higher level, the change in dynamics has highlighted the fragility of the September 2018 ceasefire agreement in northwest Syria, and dominated the narrative going into the latest round of the Astana talks on 28 – 29 November 2018. While it was positive that all sides present at the meeting reaffirmed their support for the de-escalation zone, the fact that other priorities appeared to take the lead—including the ongoing formation of the constitution committee, the returnee issue, and the new topic of prisoner exchange—suggests the legitimacy of talks are diminishing. This is especially given that the talks were the shortest in the process so far.

Added to this, when viewing previous trends related to international agreements in Syria since 2016,¹ all have failed to hold in the long term, ending after a maximum of six months and resulting in either a renewal of violence or a change in territorial control. Despite the Idlib de-escalation zone agreement entering its third month of implementation, the renewed conflict and records of further GoS troop movements to the north highlight the fragility of the agreement. While limited action in northern Syria is likely to continue in the short term, a full escalation of conflict or a large-scale offensive being conducted by either side looks unlikely at the time of writing. This is due to the ongoing Astana process as well as the arrival of winter that typically affects fighting conditions in Syria.

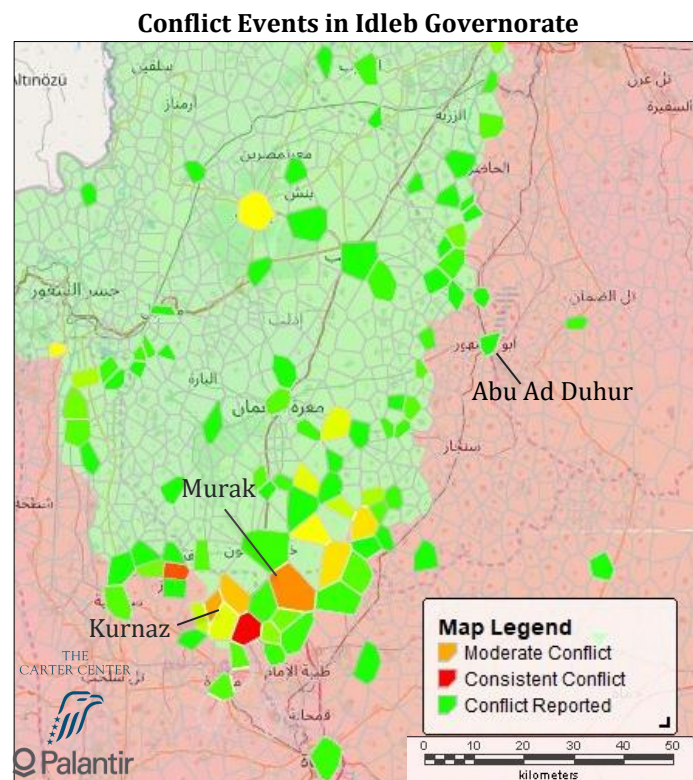


Figure 2 Levels of conflict per administrative zone, ranging from low conflict levels (bright green) to frequent levels (dark red), in Idlib from 24 November to 09 December 2018. The area in red is under GoS control while the area in green is in opposition control.

¹ Namely, the two cessation of hostilities agreements in 2016 and two de-escalation zone agreements in 2017

SOUTH SYRIA

Growing signs that GoS are not in full control of Daraa governorate despite their military takeover earlier in the year have been increasingly seen in the past month. Over two dozen low level attacks against GoS checkpoints or positions between Sanamayn, Nawa and Dar'a City from unidentified actors have been recorded in the two months. Most recently an attack occurred on 25 November 2018 involving a rocket propelled grenade and small arms fire against a GoS security building in Sanamayn town. However, it is important to note that given the low number of such attacks (less than 30 in two months), the inconsistencies in targets of attacks (i.e. GoS checkpoints, vehicles and buildings) and that almost all events appear harassing in nature and not a serious coordinated attempt to resist GoS presence or establish territorial control, it is unlikely the dynamic currently represents signs of a renewed insurgency.

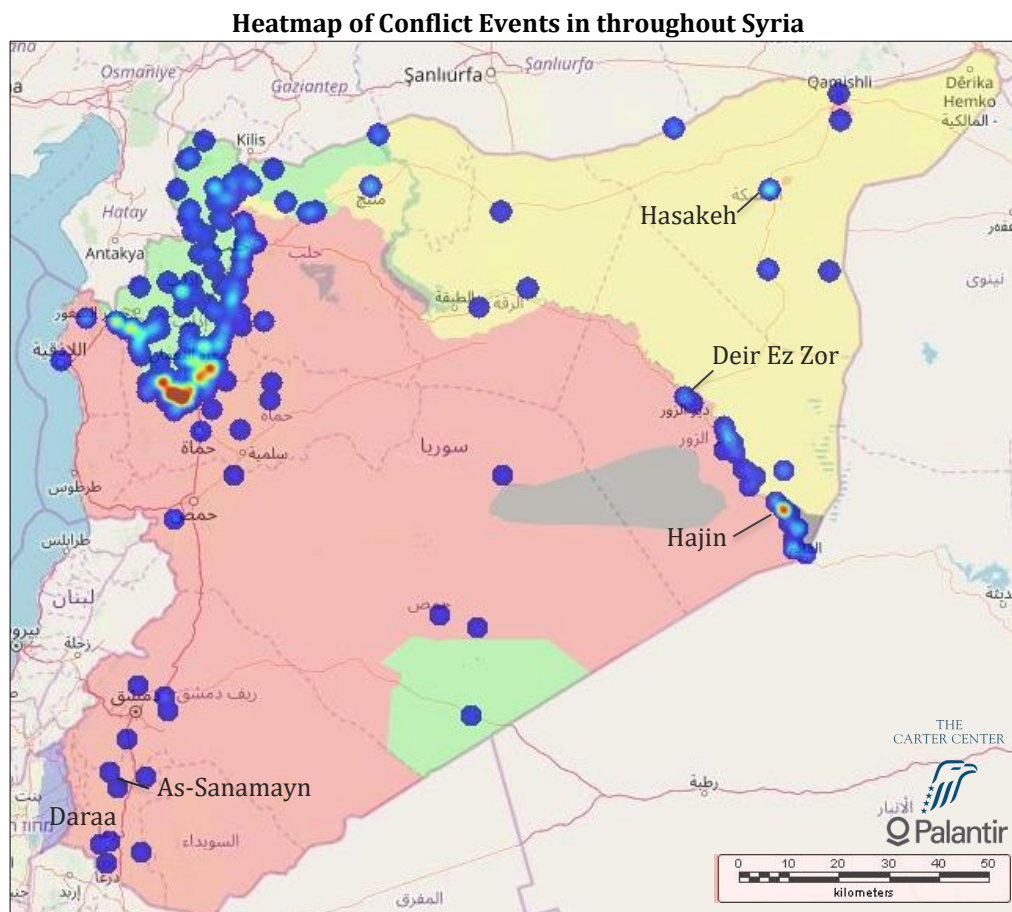


Figure 3 Heatmap of conflict events throughout Syria from 24 November to 09 December, highlighting towns in southern and eastern Syria. Areas in red are GoS controlled, areas in green are opposition controlled, areas in yellow are TEV-DEM controlled and areas in black are ISIS controlled.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

IS continues to endure in eastern Syria despite prolonged military action from GoS, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and coalition forces. Fighting in the past week has focused around ISIS's de-facto capital Hajin town, some 15 km from Abu Kamal at the Iraqi border, where SDF advanced into its northeastern sectors on 03 December 2018. SDF forces made steady advances despite heavy ISIS resistance, capturing the city's main hospital by the end of the reporting period, but clearance operations continue at the time of writing. Elsewhere, ISIS fighters continue to conduct low level attacks against SDF forces in Al Mayadin and against GoS forces in the vicinity of Deir Ez Zor City, an ongoing trend in the region. Coalition airstrikes against ISIS continued to increase, with at least 1054 events recorded between October 1 and December 12 compared to 281 between August 1 and September 30.²

² Tallied via <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/News/Strike-Releases/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/693263/monthly-airstrikes-in-iraq-and-syria/>

While these operations have undoubtedly reduced the capacity and territorial control of the group, and supported recent SDF advances, the notable resilience ISIS have shown since Raqqa and Mosul were recaptured in 2017, along with the difficulty of taking over and controlling ISIS' remaining desert terrain, suggests the group will continue to influence the security environment in this part of Syria for the time being. In the short term, with the arrival of winter and poorer weather conditions, the campaign against ISIS could slow or even temporarily reverse--previous years have seen ISIS launch successful military operations against GoS or SDF forces, taking advantage of fog, sandstorms and heavy rain to capture positions.