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WEEKLY CONFLICT SUMMARY | 30 DECEMBER 2019 – 5 JANUARY 2020

WHOLE OF SYRIA SUMMARY

- **NORTHWEST** | The ongoing Government of Syria (GoS) offensive against the Hayyat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-dominated northwest slowed during this reporting period. GoS and opposition re-enforcements arrived on the frontlines. In the de-escalation zone, HTS began a recruitment drive targeting youth. In the Turkish-backed areas of northern Aleppo Governorate, local armed groups continued their clashes in Jarablus and Al Bab.
- **SOUTH & CENTRAL** | Attacks against GoS-aligned personnel continued in Daraa Governorate. In multiple locations, anti-government graffiti appeared. In central areas of the country, ISIS harassment of GoS forces continued. In Tal Ftaya town in the Qalamoun Mountains, an armed group attacked a GoS checkpoint, a first in over two years.
- **NORTHEAST** | The focus of conflict between Turkish-backed forces and GoS was in Ain Issa town. In the Operation Peace Spring area, two explosive attacks targeted Turkish-backed forces in Tal Abiad and Suluk towns. In Raqqa City, a car bomb detonated three days after Raqqa City Police had begun to confiscate vehicles over fear of an attack. In Tiyanna town, ISIS conducted a home attack against a Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) commander. Suspected Israeli airstrikes targeted Iranian linked sites in Al Bukamal for the tenth time since September.

NORTHWEST SYRIA

The Government of Syria (GoS) offensive against the Hayyat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-dominated northwest slowed during this reporting period, coinciding with [poor](#) weather conditions. Despite gains in late December,² no GoS advances were recorded in the past week. On 1 January, a HTS counter-offensive against GoS in the Al Tah area ended with no changes of territory (Figure 1). [HTS Inghimasi](#) (special forces) and several [suicide bombers](#) were involved in the operation.

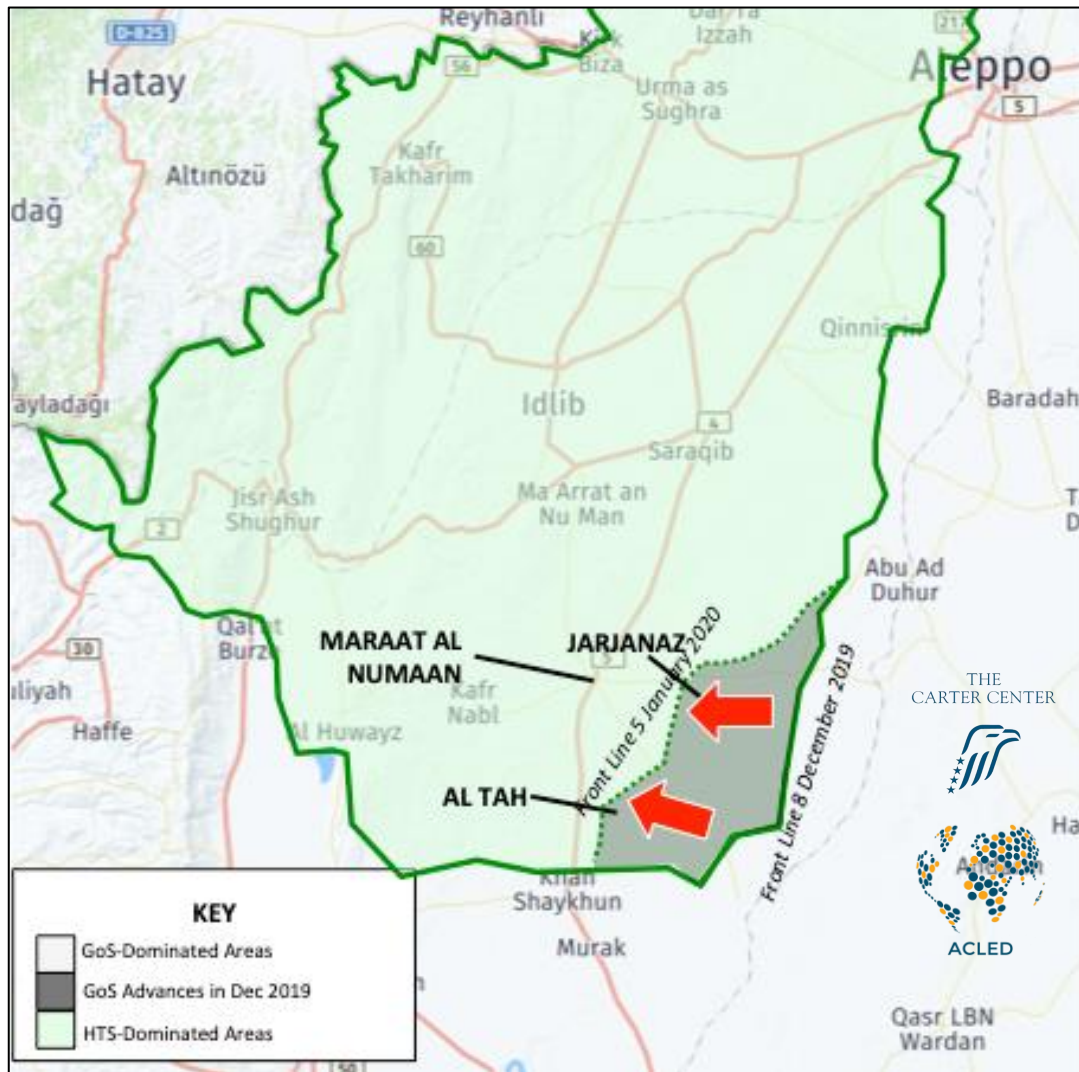


Figure 1: Current GoS vs HTS frontlines in the northwest. Data from ACLED and The Carter Center.

GoS ground bombardments continued to impact southern areas of Idlib governorate, including shells falling close to a Turkish military observation post in Maar Hatha, near Sarmin town. The Turkish military [responded](#) by shelling GoS positions near the newly captured town of Jarjanaz. It is the sixth time a Turkish military observation post in the north-west has been impacted by GoS ground fire since August 2019.

GoS and opposition reinforcements also arrived at northwest frontlines this week.

² The current offensive began in late November 2018. For more details, see the previous weekly conflict summary [here](#).

In Aleppo Governorate, [pro-government](#) and [pro-opposition](#) sources reported the arrival of GoS armored vehicles and GoS special forces units, including the 42nd Brigade of the 4th Armored Division ([Al Ghaith Forces](#)). [Pro-opposition](#) and [pro-government](#) media also reported the arrival of several hundred members of the opposition's Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (2nd and 3rd Corps) from Turkish backed areas of northern Aleppo Governorate to southern Idleb. The troop movements come after HTS agreed to allow groups to travel through HTS-dominated areas at the end of December.

Inside the HTS-dominated enclave, HTS launched a [recruitment](#) drive focused on bringing youth into its ranks. It is the second recruitment drive since [September](#). HTS also arrested a local political party member³ in Killi town. The town was the site of multiple anti-HTS protests in the previous month, including one this [week](#).

In the Turkish backed Operation Euphrates Shield area, there were two [clashes](#) between local armed groups during the week. In Jarablus, 9th Division and Jabhat al Shamiyah members clashed in the town on 3 January. On 5 January, Ahrar al Sharqiyah and Ahrar al Sham members clashed at a checkpoint on the Al Bab – Al Rai road. The reasons for the clashes are unknown, but inter-group infighting is a regular occurrence in Turkish backed areas, as previously [reported](#).

SOUTH & CENTRAL SYRIA

Attacks against GoS-aligned personnel continued in southern Syria. In [Tafas](#), gunmen attacked a GoS military barracks. In [Dara al Balad](#), an improvised explosive device (IED) struck a former opposition commander. In [Muzayrib](#), gunmen on a motorcycle killed a GoS 4th Division soldier near the town⁴. In [Bosra al Harir](#), an unidentified group attacked a checkpoint killing a GoS soldier. These attacks are part of a growing trend of violence in southern Syria in 2019, particularly against GoS fortified locations, such as barracks or checkpoints.⁵

There were signs of civil unrest in several GoS-held areas of southern Syria this week. In Busra al Sham, civilian [demonstrators](#) called for GoS to release detainees from the town and for a cessation of GoS attacks in Idleb Governorate. In [Shajarah](#) and [As Sweida City](#), multiple graffiti appeared on walls in the town calling for GoS to halt their bombardment of Idleb. Some slogans also denounced President Al-Assad and HTS leader Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani.⁶ Similar graffiti appeared in Nawa and Nahta towns in the previous month.

In central areas of the country, ISIS continued to harass GoS forces in the deserts of Homs and Deir Ez Zor. Attacks included an ambush against an 11th Division bus near [Subaykhan](#) town and an IED attack against a GoS convoy on the Deir Ez Zor–Tadmor [road](#). ISIS also launched multiple raids lasting several hours against GoS positions near [Sokhneh](#) town during the week. ISIS activity has resumed despite GoS and Iraqi undertaking anti-ISIS operations last month.

There was also an uncommon attack against a GoS Military Intelligence checkpoint

³ Islamic Liberation Party.

⁴ Pro-opposition [media](#) reported the individual killed was a local drug dealer.

⁵ For more information see our August 2019 report "[Conflict in Southern Syria](#)" [here](#).

⁶ Stating "Down with Al-Assad, Down with Al-Jolani".

in the Qalamoun Mountains this week. On 1 January, unidentified gunmen opened fire at a GoS checkpoint [Tal Ftaya](#), near the Lebanese border. It is the first recorded event in ACLED data from this area of Syria in over two years.

NORTHEAST SYRIA

In the Turkish-backed Operation Peace Spring areas of northeast Syria, GoS forces and Turkish-backed groups exchanged artillery and small arms fire on the [Ain Issa Front](#) at the start of the reporting period.

Behind frontlines, there were two attacks against Turkish-backed forces during the reporting period. On 31 December, an IED detonated against a Turkish military patrol in Tal Abiad. Pro-government sources [reported](#) that a Turkish soldier was killed in the blast. On January 2, in the opposition-aligned Syrian National Army⁷-controlled town of [Suluk](#), a car bomb detonated in the center of the town. Since Operation Peace Spring began, both towns have been the sites of regular IED attacks against Turkish backed forces.⁸

In the Jazrah area of Raqqa City, a car bomb [detonated](#) near a Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) commander's house on 4 January. The detonation came four days after Raqqa City [Police](#) had begun to confiscate motorcycles and other vehicles in the city over fear of an attack.

On 2 January, ISIS [claimed](#) to have assassinated a Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) intelligence officer in a raid on his house in Tiyanna town. Home attacks appear to be increasing in SDF-held areas of the northeast. Of the 16 home attack events recorded in ACLED data in the previous 12 months, 10 have occurred since September.⁹

An Abu Kamal, suspected Israeli Airstrikes struck Iranian linked sites on [5 January](#). This was the 10th incident of airstrikes against Iranian linked sites in the area since September.

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⁷ The Syrian National Army is a Turkish-backed entity made up of several hundred Syrian armed groups currently under the control of the opposition's Syrian Interim Government.

⁸ With at least 12 explosive attacks recorded in ACLED data in the two towns since October 2019. In the year prior to this, just one event had been recorded.

⁹ With attacks in Abu Hardoub (1), Basira (3), Darnaj (2), Zir (2), Gharibah (1), Sabkhah (1), Shiheil (1), Sweidan Jazira (1), Tabqa (1), Tayyana (1), and in the vicinity of Deir ez Zor (1).