

- 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

Coinciding with the latest round of Sochi talks on 14 February, conflict between the Government of Syria and the various organised armed groups in Idlib 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.

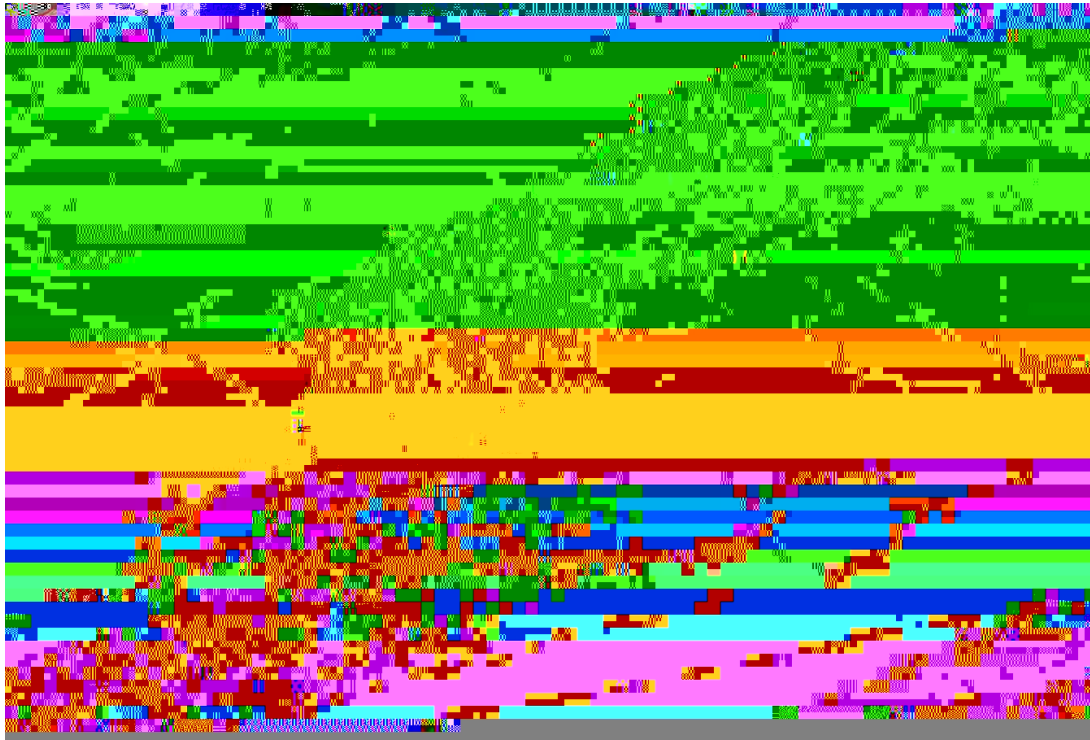
The talks, which saw Iran, Russia and Turkey largely focus on the northeast of Syria,<sup>2</sup> included expressions of [“serious concern”](#) regarding HTS’ attempts to increase its control over Idlib, building upon similar statements over the past month.<sup>3</sup> All parties agreed to “take specific steps to reduce violations in the Idlib 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 Idlib 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.<sup>4</sup> 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



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.*

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.

