

THE
CARTER CENTER



Nationwide Conflict Update
September 1, 2017

Introduction

After years of deadlock, the Syrian conflict has entered a period of rapid change. These changes have come as a result of two major developments: the fall of opposition-held East Aleppo in December 2016, and a competitive race to take territory from a rapidly collapsing ISIS during the past year. The fall of East Aleppo was a traumatic event for opposition forces. The city (Syria's largest prior to the conflict) was economically and symbolically vital to both the government and opposition. Its fall to the government led to a dramatic realignment of opposition forces and a prolonged period of infighting, which has seen Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, a coalition comprised mainly of the former al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) emerge as the dominant force in northern Syria.

The race to take territory from ISIS was in large part sparked by offensives by the predominantly-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to the west of the Euphrates River. The expanding Kurdish territory led Turkey to invade and block the SDF from connecting with the westernmost Kurdish enclave of Afrin, which in turn led pro-government forces to attack ISIS and block Turkish-backed forces from expanding further. The result was a race for the ISIS stronghold of al-Bab, and a dramatically weakened ISIS.

The capture of East Aleppo also freed pro-government forces to redeploy elsewhere in the country. This redeployment has resulted in a series of "reconciliation deals" (or surrenders) that further increased the momentum of pro-government gains.

With pro-government forces advancing, a reduction in international support to the opposition, and ISIS on the run, the Syrian government sees an eventual victory as a near certainty. There are, however, major questions remaining regarding what the future holds for Syria. First and foremost is the question of how front lines eventually stabilize in eastern Syria after the total collapse of ISIS – no broader deal can be reached between the parties while major frontline changes continue. Once these eastern front lines stop shifting, attention will shift back to western Syria and the remaining substantial opposition enclaves. Though de-escalation deals have been reached in much of western Syria, fighting continues and no easy solutions are to be found.

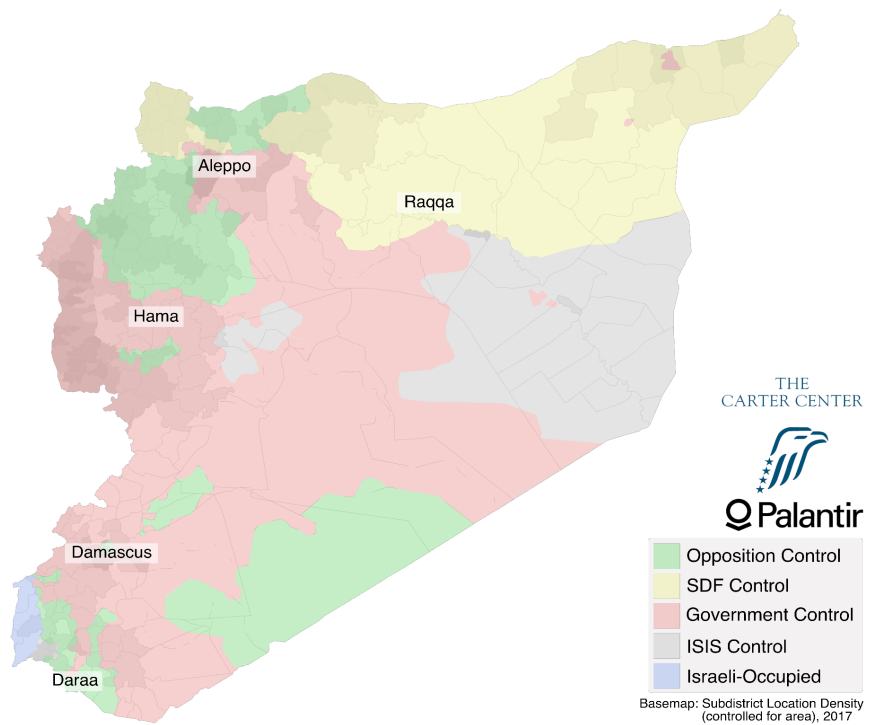
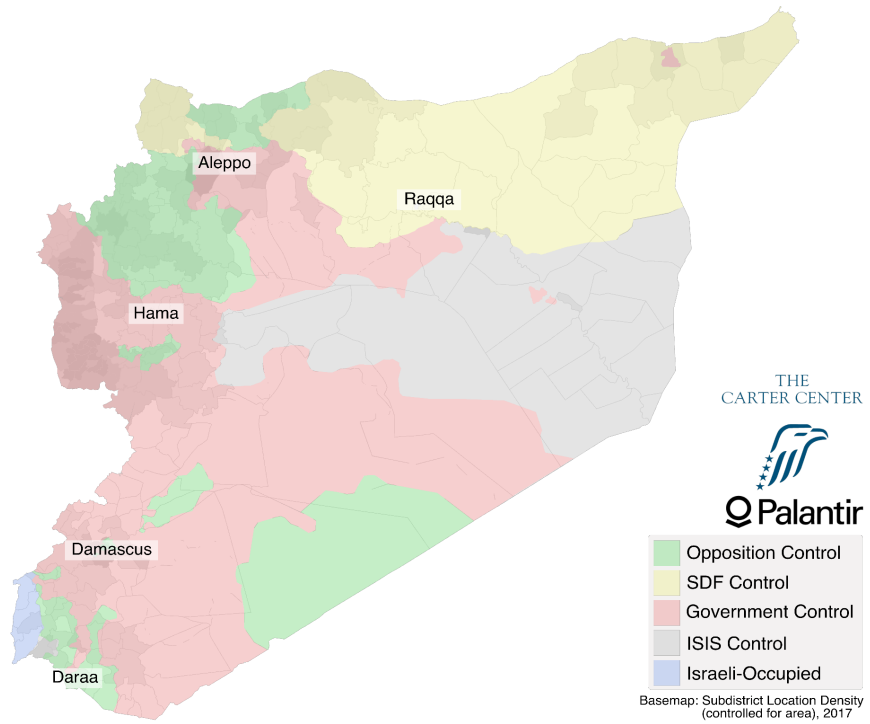
The following report summarizes major developments and remaining uncertainties in each region of Syria. Beginning with the most dynamic region, eastern Syria, the report then looks at each remaining area of fighting from south to north, concluding with an analysis of ongoing developments in Idleb, and what conflict trends suggest is in store for the near-term future of Syria.

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Nationwide Maps

July 28, 2017 (top) and August 30, 2017 (bottom)



Eastern Syria and ISIS-held Deir Ezzor

Points of highest conflict in August: Raqqa (north), Sokhneh (center), Salba and area surrounding Oqeirbat (west)

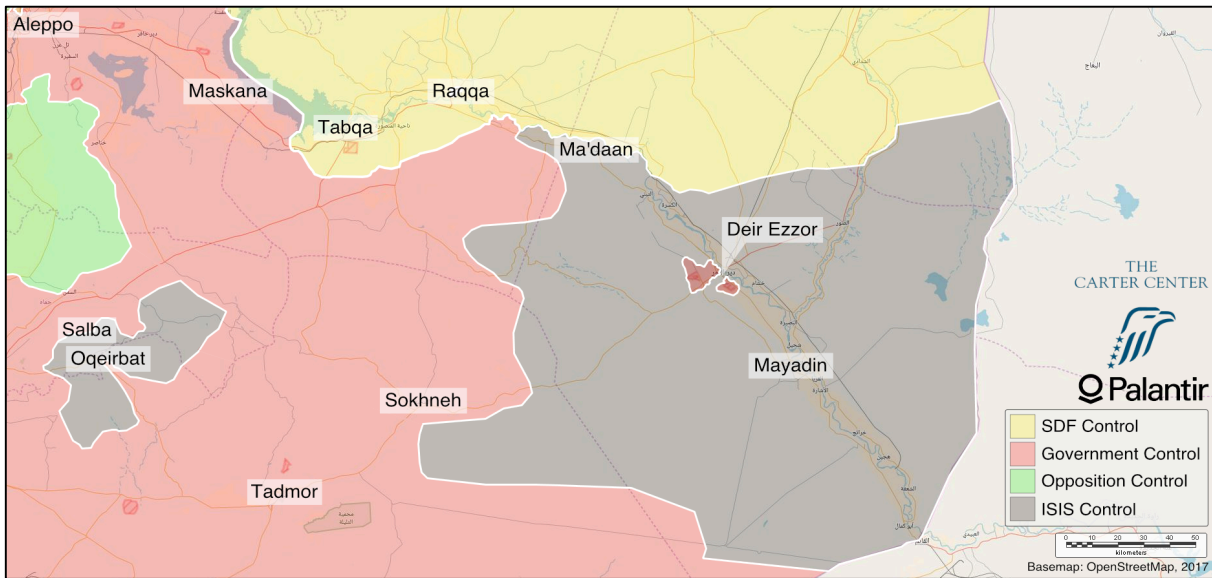


Figure 1 - Frontlines in Syria's east as of August 30

Points of highest conflict in Raqqa city in August: Ad Dari'yeh (northwest), Al-Wihdeh (north), Salhiyeh (west)

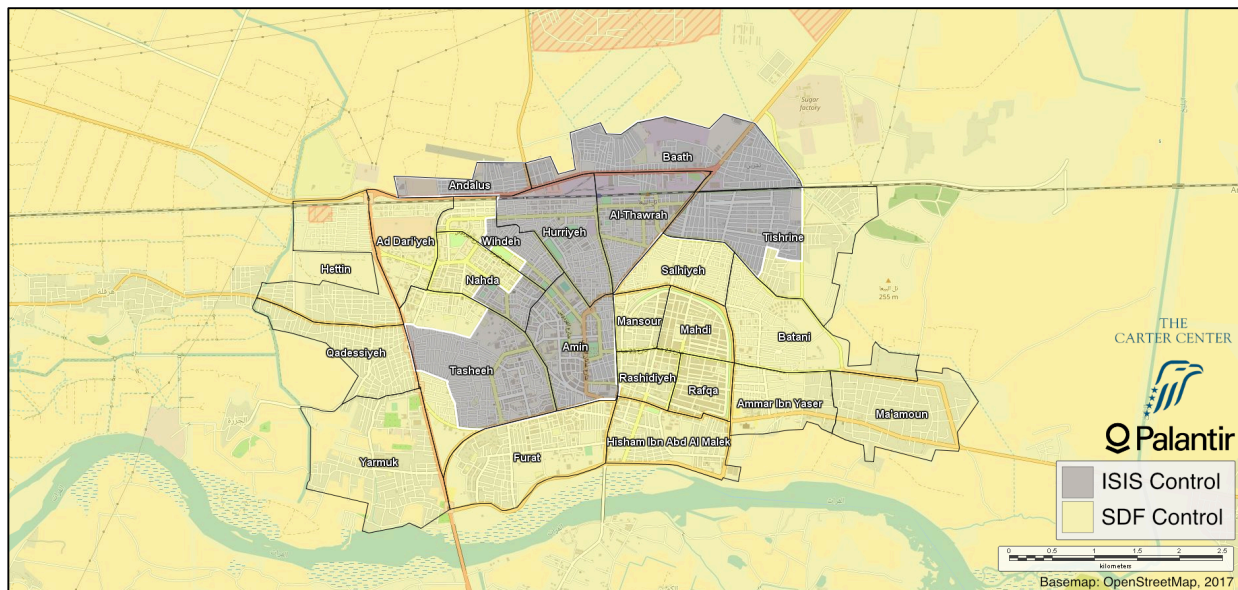


Figure 2 - Frontlines in Raqqa city as of August 30

Eastern Syria, where ISIS maintains its major foothold, is the space in which most conflict resources are currently deployed. This year, pro-government forces redirected their frontline units from battles against opposition forces to instead fight ISIS eastwards from Aleppo and Homs.

January 2017 marked the first point in the conflict that pro-government forces began to seriously engage ISIS through ground offensives, which have been further enabled by a series of opposition enclaves surrendering to besieging government forces.

In August, pro-government forces, which had advanced to an area south of Raqqa in the months previous, continued to take territory south of the SDF-besieged city to further outflank the Kurdish-led, US-supported group. In concert with these offensives, pro-government forces swept south from government-held territory to meet up with another offensive from the south around Sokhneh, Homs. An offensive for Oqeirbat succeeded in cutting off ISIS resupplies to the eastern Homs city and the battle for the towns surrounding the province remain fierce.

It has become accepted that the SDF will succeed in their advance to retake the former ISIS capital, Raqqa, though the role of the SDF in the period after the recapture of the city remains in question. The SDF, acting as the most successful partner for the US in counter-ISIS ground offensives since 2016, has been focusing on civil projects around Raqqa alongside its military operations for the city. One of the most notable is a community policing effort, wherein US funding is aiding the predominantly-Kurdish force to create a police service for post-ISIS Raqqa (in addition to local Kurdish Asayish “self-defense” units).

The main question for Syria's east, is the advance on Deir Ezzor and the lower Euphrates River valley. Pro-government forces have been framing their battles in Sokhneh and the south of Raqqa as battles en route to Deir Ezzor, where two pockets of pro-government forces have been surrounded by ISIS for years. However, the SDF established a military council for Deir Ezzor months before pro-government forces started making any advances towards the city. As pro-government forces get closer to Deir Ezzor, the SDF-aligned Deir Ezzor Military Council has made more statements about their own impending offensive for the city. SDF fighters currently maintain the closest frontline to Deir Ezzor, though no offensive maneuvers have yet been taken.

Pro-government forces have seen some minor hiccups in the offensive towards Deir Ezzor. Most recently, ISIS forces overran pro-government fighters at an artillery base in Ghanem al-Ali, south of the Euphrates River on August 29. In addition to the loss of territory, pro-government forces lost munitions and artillery systems to the advancing force, which were released in an ISIS video swiftly after the capture of the town.

The SDF is mostly focused on the battle for Raqqa. The major questions in the East depend on the speed at which ISIS falls in the city and the pace at which pro-government forces can advance eastwards on a frontline that saw recent losses. The SDF has not indicated what it will aim to do after the fall of Raqqa, and engagement towards Deir Ezzor seems to be a potential option for the group (especially as their military council continues to indicate its desire to do so).

Daraa and the South of Syria

Points of highest conflict in August: Daraa al-Balad (Daraa city), Ofania (northern Quneitra), Tiha (northern Quneitra)

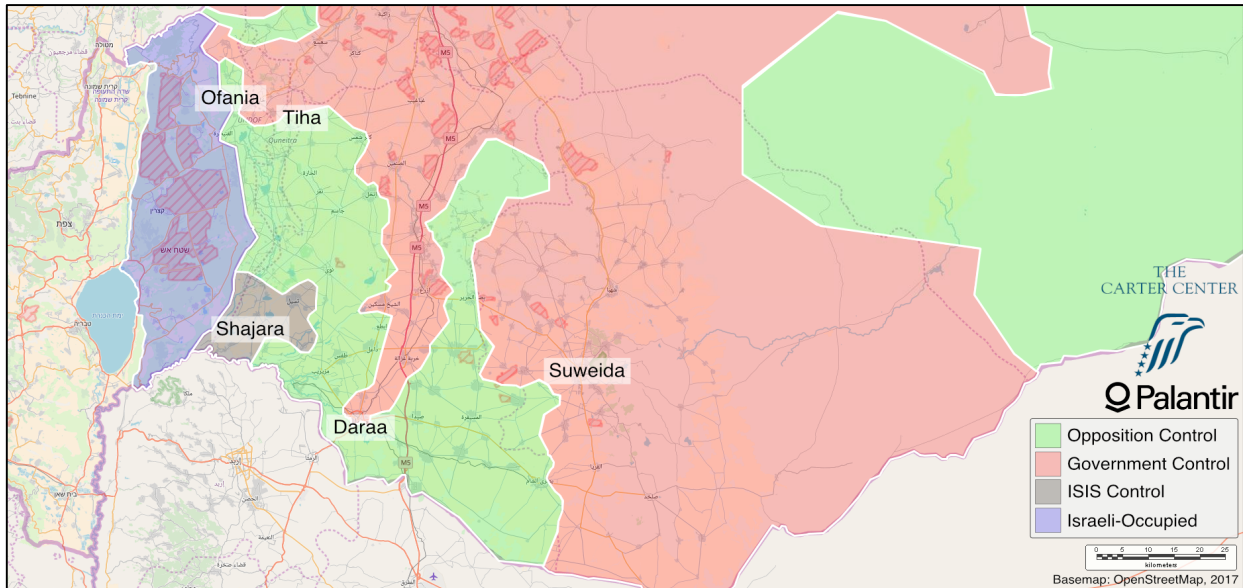


Figure 3 - Frontlines around Daraa as of August 30

Syria's south has seen significant changes in the past few months. Jordanian influence through both the Military Operations Command (MOC) as well as through informal tribal networks has kept Syria's South (of which Daraa is central) from starting significant offensives outside of Daraa city for a while. This influence previously solidified the Southern Front, a coalition of FSA units in and around Daraa, as the key source of opposition power in the South.

An opposition offensive on the southern neighborhoods of Daraa city from February to June 2017 accomplished significant early gains against the government. In the period following, pro-government forces mounted a major counter-offensive, though succeeded in very little regain of territory. This government counter-offensive included heavy Russian aerial bombardment as well as redeployments of elite pro-government units to the fronts.

Despite the resources committed towards a government counter-offensive in Daraa city, pro-government forces could not maintain the cost of the operations against the poorly-armed but resilient opposition forces in the south of the city. This caused the Syrian government, through Russia, the US, and Jordan, to seek a ceasefire in the city and surrounding area. This ceasefire has since largely held, with only a few breaches of the agreement per week (Daraa al-Balad is listed as a point of highest conflict above, but conflict in the south has been marginal, especially compared to elsewhere in Syria).

Jaysh Khalid Ibn al-Walid, the ISIS affiliate in southwestern Syria, has maintained its control over the Shajara area on the border with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Opposition offensives against the pocket have seen minor gains, but meaningful resources have not yet been devoted to the eradication of ISIS from this pocket, largely due to lapses in support from the MOC and fears of renewed pro-government offensives in nearby Daraa.

Shi'a militias, most notably Lebanese Hezbollah, have been active in Southern Syria, regardless of their commitment to stay clear of an area around the Israeli border. This has made Israeli officials increasingly nervous and has, in turn, led to increasingly bellicose declarations from the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and Israeli government. Most recently, Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed Shi'a militias have been active against opposition frontlines in Suweida. While not necessarily close enough to Israel to breach agreements, Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed Shi'a militias are increasingly emboldened by the perceived tide of the Syrian conflict and have been operating with greater fervor and publicity in Syria's south for months.

Al-Tanf and the Jordan-Iraq-Syria Border Region

Points of highest conflict in August: Damascus, Qarra (Lebanese border), Ofania (northern Quneitra)

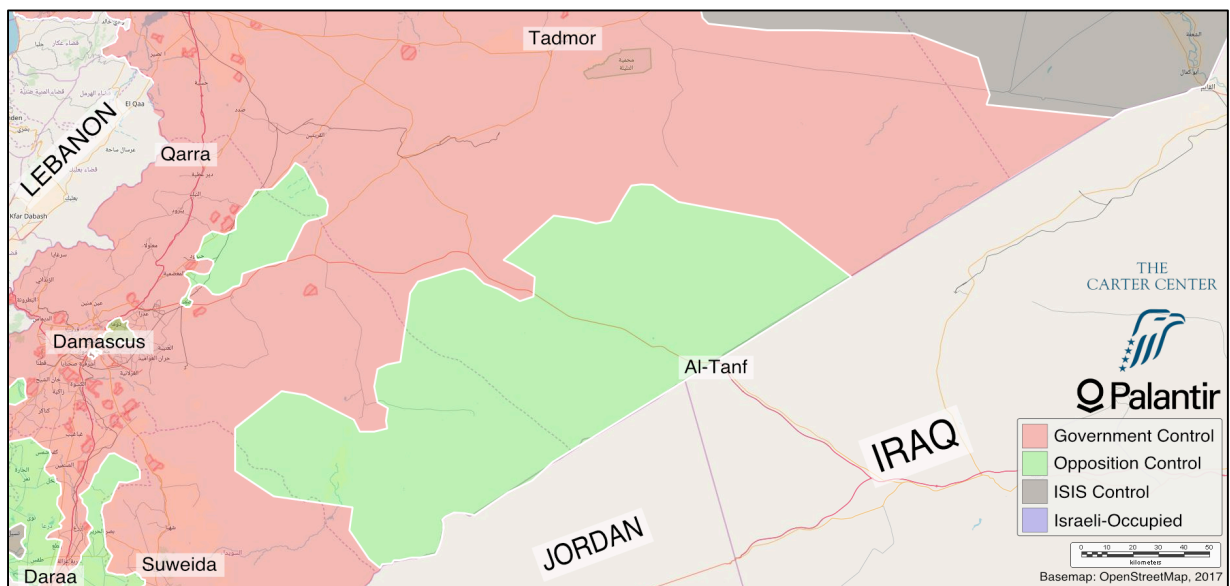


Figure 4 - Frontlines around al-Tanf as of August 30

One of the few regions of Syria that continues to see frontline changes between pro-government and opposition forces is the stretch of land along the Jordanian and Iraqi borders, popularly known as the “Tanf pocket” after the Syrian-Iraqi border crossing in the area. Opposition forces have maintained a small presence in this area for much of the conflict, but began to receive attention in mid-2016 as opposition units, supported by US special forces, captured the border crossing from ISIS. The military goals of this force have been twofold: to clear the Jordanian border of ISIS forces, and to advance towards Deir Ezzor and ISIS strongholds along the Euphrates river.

For a time, the US-backed opposition forces made significant progress. They succeeded in clearing all of the Jordanian border, and occasionally struck ISIS positions near the Euphrates river. Advances against ISIS increased in 2017, allowing opposition forces to expand to the north and east at a rapid pace. Though these US-backed opposition forces only conducted offensives against ISIS, their rapid progress threatened to connect with besieged opposition territory in the eastern Qalamoun mountains (see map above). Also, as ISIS began to collapse on fronts throughout Syria and Iraq, this southern territory took on new importance. Not only were opposition forces poised

to advance through the Syrian desert towards the resource-rich East, but they were now seen as blocking the strategically important highway connecting Damascus to Baghdad.

In May of 2017, both Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units and Iranian-backed pro-government forces in Syria began to advance towards the Tanf border crossing, clashing with opposition forces along the highway. The proximity of these advances to US forces led to Coalition airstrikes on advancing pro-government units. After repeated incidents, pro-government forces eventually conducted a rapid offensive around opposition positions, reaching the Iraqi border to the northeast.

This standoff remains to this day. The hoped-for goal of attacking ISIS from the south is no longer an option unless the US-supported forces do so by fighting through pro-government positions. Instead, these forces appear to have a new purpose – to frustrate Iranian attempts to secure a land route connecting Damascus to Baghdad.

US goals aside, opposition fighters from this area hail primarily from Deir Ezzor and appear intent on returning to their homes. Some units have defected to government forces, who continue to progress eastwards, while others have traveled to northern, Kurdish-controlled territories to try to negotiate a role in offensives leading to Deir Ezzor. While many fighters remain, it is clear that pro-government forces want to gain control of this border region much more than opposition groups want to defend it.

Capital Area and Eastern Ghouta

Points of highest conflict in August: Jobar (eastern Damascus), Ain Terma (eastern Damascus), Kafr Batna (western Eastern Ghouta)

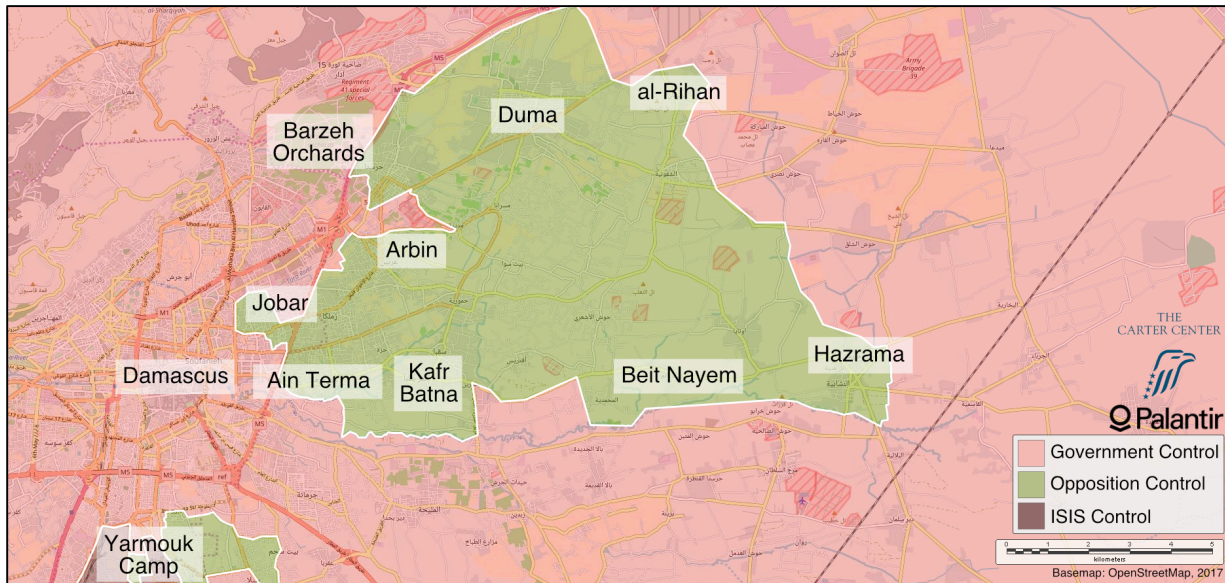


Figure 5 - Frontlines in Eastern Ghouta as of August 30

Eastern Ghouta has seen its own stint of intra-opposition conflict in the recent past, mostly centered along the frontline between Faylaq al-Rahman/Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Jaysh al-Islam that splits Eastern Ghouta into western and eastern areas. Faylaq al-Rahman/HTS operate in the west of Eastern Ghouta, maintaining a frontline with pro-government forces in Jobar and Ain

Terma. Jaysh al-Islam is east of the divide between opposition groups, and historically tied to the area around Duma in the northeast of the Eastern Ghouta pocket.

While the area is besieged, areas in the east of Eastern Ghouta have a robust farming and bread production line to resupply the local population. Along the western end of Eastern Ghouta, where Faylaq al-Rahman and HTS have control, daily shelling and air raids continue to take lives, especially in Jobar and Ain Terma. It seems that pro-government forces have recently devoted the brunt of their force to advancement on the western front of Eastern Ghouta.

The Eastern Ghouta is also historically a place of significant opposition tunnel systems, which Jaysh al-Islam notably used for a lucrative smuggling operation for years. After the surrender deals around Eastern Ghouta, including more recently the surrender of the Barzeh Orchards a bit north of Jobar, many of these tunnels have been destroyed by advancing pro-government forces.

Northern Homs

Points of highest conflict in August: Tal Dahab (northwestern Rastan pocket), Tal Dara (northeast of Rastan pocket), Harbanifse (northern Rastan pocket)

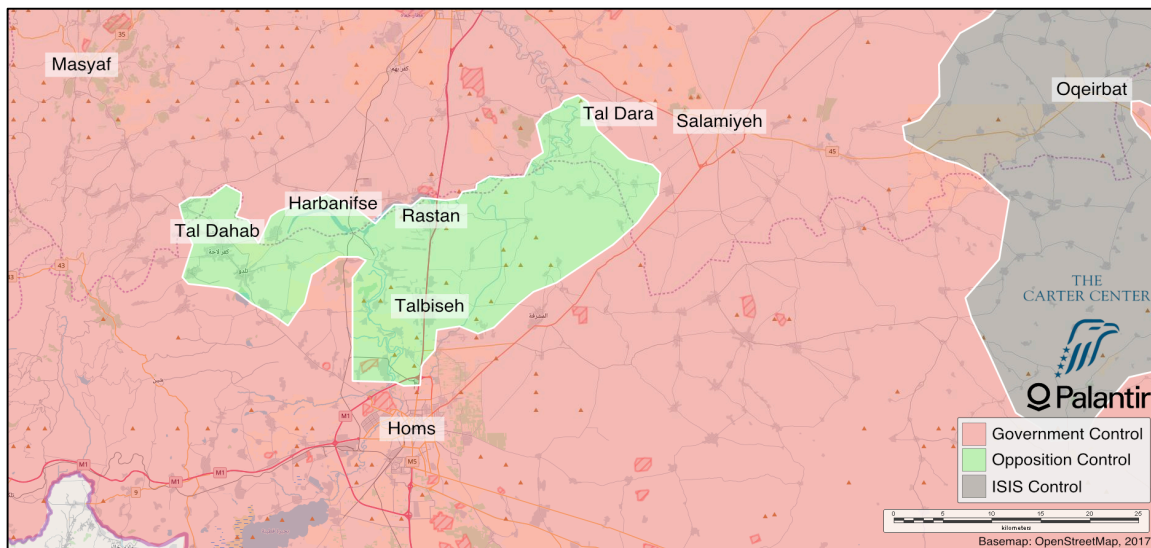


Figure 6 - Situation in northern Homs as of August 30

The northern Homs opposition pocket has been held by opposition forces since early in the conflict, with little in the way of territorial change since central Homs city and the district of al-Wa’er were evacuated. Despite the lack of territorial change, the area has been subject to nearly constant shelling and aerial bombardment, particularly on the major population centers of Rastan, Talbiseh, and Tal Dahab. Additionally, force-on-force clashes have occurred regularly on most front lines, with more regular, intense clashes occurring on the eastern frontlines near the city of Salamiyeh.

A Russian-backed ceasefire took effect on August 1, but has brought no noticeable reduction in violence. As the Syrian government pushes for a permanent ceasefire or “reconciliation deal,” Homs-based opposition groups have dug in their heels and demanded the release of government-held detainees. As opposition negotiators have refused to back down from their demands, Syrian government airstrikes have increased over the course of the month, becoming an almost daily

occurrence in the past week. Opposition negotiators have succeeded in releasing some prisoners in prior negotiations, but only a fraction of the number demanded. This is likely to be the case in northern Homs as well, either because the government feels it has the upper hand or because many of the detainees requested are already dead.

In addition to detainee release, opposition negotiators have another reason to resist a permanent ceasefire. Most of the reconciliation deals that have been negotiated in the past have resulted in remaining fighters being transferred to Idleb, which has served as a pressure release of sorts for the Syrian government. As HTS has become the dominant armed group in Idleb, and is increasingly aggressive towards rivals, independent Homs-based units are likely hesitant to be dumped into HTS' heartland, particularly if they think Idleb may be the government's next target.

Idleb Pocket and Surrounding Area

Points of highest conflict in August: al-Latamna (northern Hama), Morek (northern Hama), al-Zahraa (western Aleppo city)

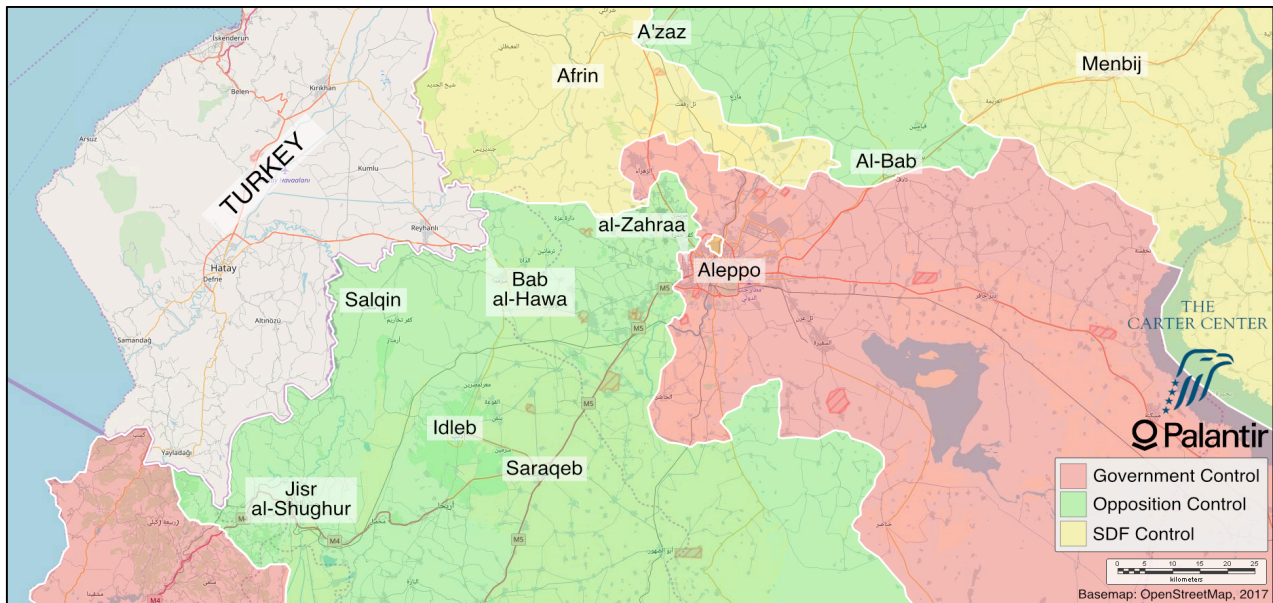


Figure 7 - Frontlines in the north of the Idleb pocket by August 30

In recent months, Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra) has made significant military gains in the opposition-controlled Idleb pocket (a canton containing Idleb and parts of Hama, Aleppo, and Lattakia governorates). These gains have largely been at the expense of HTS' Islamist Idleb rival, Ahrar al-Sham, as well as more moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) battalions in the area.

These advances by HTS culminated in the full military take-over of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing west of Aleppo city, a key crossing from Turkey for resupply and aid to the Idleb pocket. After capturing the crossing, HTS gave up full control of the checkpoint at Bab al-Hawa to a neutral civilian body, though HTS continues to have significant control over the flow of goods across the border. In response, Turkey has significantly decreased the flow of goods across the border, including the banning of cash crossing into Idleb.

This does call into question what Turkey's role in opposition-controlled Idlib might be in the near future. Turkish aid agencies had been very active in Idlib, including in the governorate capital. Turkey's contemporary relationship with HTS has been one of aggression from both sides. Turkey may intervene to create an HTS-free zone in northern Idlib (as previously achieved in northern Aleppo), though no action has been taken so far and opinions are split as to how likely such a move may be.

The Idlib pocket has long been the destination for those evacuated from besieged opposition-held areas around Syria. These evacuations, while agreed upon by military forces responsible in the areas, have included large transfers of civilians from opposition-held areas in Syria's south to Idlib. Idlib, therefore, has a significant portion of Syria's pro-opposition civilian population. This fact will figure into the calculus of any warring party that might consider an offensive into Idlib, as the offensive for Idlib will result in a massive humanitarian crisis through both new civilian displacements and a massive loss of civilian life. Given the current priorities and capacity of pro-government parties, an offensive into Idlib is likely still a long way off.

Idlib is also the location of a large portion of Syria's Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), a series of post-2011 governance structures staffed by local representatives and usually responsible for civil affairs in towns held by the opposition. In the past couple of months, the opposition-held town of Saraqab held local elections, which included a campaign period and a lengthy debate between candidates streamed over Facebook Live. There have also been significant protests against HTS aggression throughout the Idlib pocket. Some of these have garnered a response by local HTS fighters, though protests were not immediately deterred by these threats.

LCCs have been seriously impacted by HTS aggression throughout and following major skirmishes with Ahrar al-Sham and FSA affiliates. In some cases, LCCs are taken over or disbanded by HTS and in other instances many of the authorities of the civilian councils are taken over by the HTS civil body instead.

The Kurdish-held Afrin canton to the north of the Idlib pocket poses another major question for Turkey and the Syrian government. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) units in Afrin have received training and equipment from the Russians stationed nearby and are provided cover by Russian observers whenever Turkey threatens another invasion. In recent weeks, the frontline between SDF-controlled Afrin and the OES opposition pocket has majorly heated up, with near-daily shelling and skirmishes between the parties.