

THE CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary March 23-29, 2017

During this reporting period, ISIS forces lost significant territory on several fronts. The group is struggling to maintain its physical foothold in Syria against pressure from all other armed forces.

ISIS Territory Loss

In northern Syria, pro-government forces advanced once more against ISIS forces, surrounding and then taking Deir Hafer in northeastern Aleppo governorate, located southeast of al-Bab. Pro-government forces also succeeded in surrounding the nearby Jirah Military Airport from three sides. The pro-government advance against ISIS south of al-Bab is now continuing with relatively little resistance from ISIS. Frontlines in Deir Ezzor city far to the east remained mostly stable, though ISIS forces captured a large ammunition stash from pro-government forces during this period.

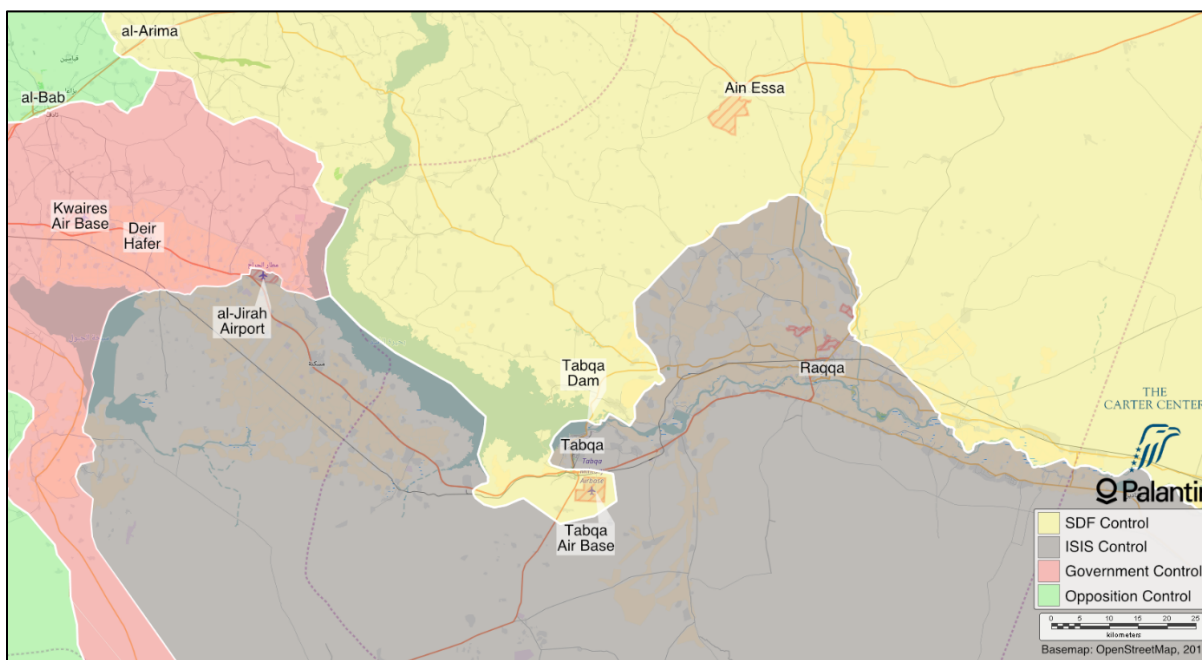


Figure 1 - Situation around Al-Bab and Raqqa by March 29

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) advanced from their landing on the southern bank of the Euphrates to take the Tabqa Military Airport on March 26. US special forces operators have been significantly involved in these operations. A separate offensive from the north of Tabqa took the northern half of the Tabqa dam on March 24. The control room of the dam (within ISIS-held territory) was struck by a missile, damaging equipment but not causing any critical structural damage. On March 28, a shell from an International Coalition airstrike killed the director of the dam in a strike on Tabqa city. SDF fighters also

advanced east of Raqqa, consolidating more control of areas north of the Euphrates river. Landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) remain a major difficulty for these advances and constitute a significant threat to Kurdish fighters and local populations.

Also during this reporting period, opposition forces in Syria’s southeastern desert and mountains made additional progress in their offensive against ISIS. ISIS fighters were completely expelled from their remaining Suweida pocket in the ongoing offensive spearheaded by the opposition’s Eastern Lions Army. Other opposition groups also advanced against ISIS from the Dumayr pocket, and the two pockets of opposition-held territory grew closer to connecting in Rural Damascus. Should these two pockets connect, opposition fighters would be able to travel more easily between the two areas. FSA units in this area were hit by an airstrike as they were advancing against ISIS this week.

Ongoing opposition offensives and evacuations

On March 29, the Turkish government announced the end of the Euphrates Shield military operation. The operation, which brought Turkish troops and allied armed opposition groups into northern Aleppo, succeeded in removing ISIS forces from many important localities in northwestern Syria, including Dabiq and Al-Bab. It is unclear how Turkish policy will develop further from the Turkey-influenced pocket of opposition control in northern Aleppo, though minor skirmishes with Kurdish forces in Afrin and around Menbij continued into this week.

The first round of evacuations from the opposition enclave in the al-Wa’er suburb of Homs city was completed on March 27 after delays, with nearly 400 families transported by green buses to the border town of Jarablus in northern Aleppo. Camps for the displaced were not yet complete and lacked many basic needs. The al-Wa’er deal was initially reached on March 13 and involves the displacement of a total 20,000 residents, two-thirds of whom are civilians.

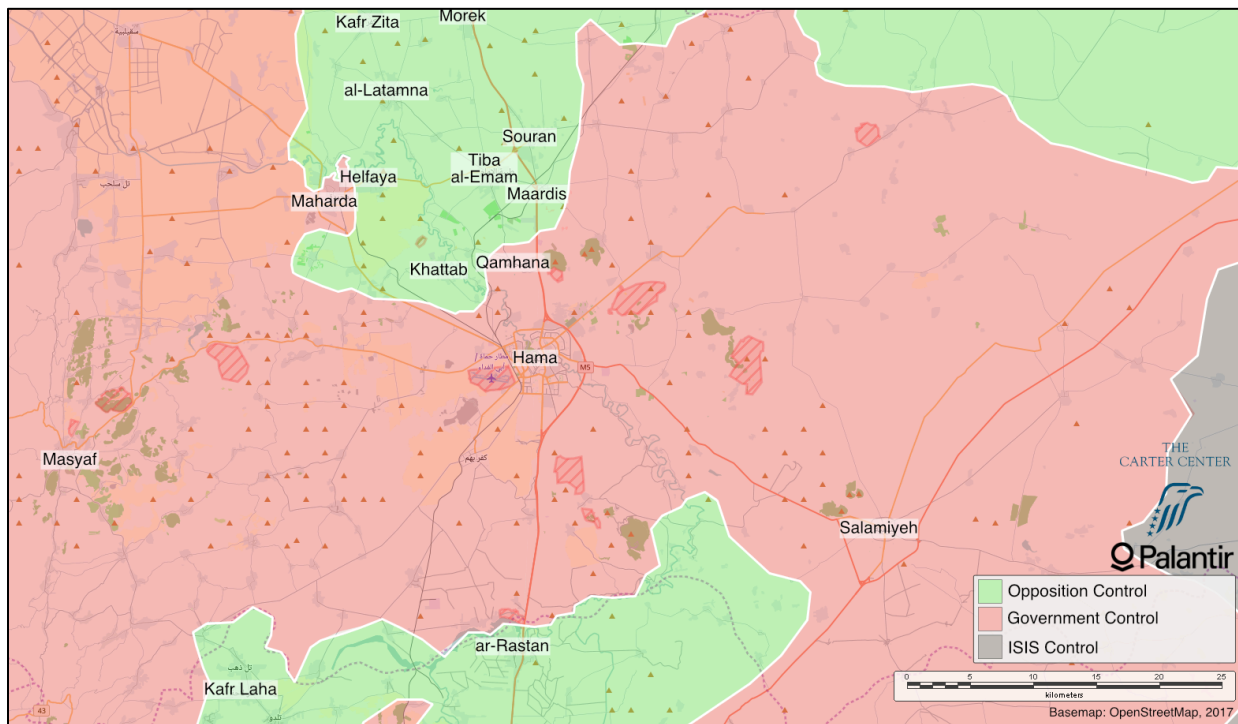


Figure 2 - Situation around Hama by March 29

Opposition units in northern Hama continued their offensive against pro-government forces throughout this reporting period. Jaysh al-Nasr has been heavily involved in fronts around Khattab to Maardis. Jaysh al-Izza has focused their efforts west of Hama city around the towns of Majdal and Maarzaf, where they repelled a large pro-government counterattack on March 29. Faylaq al-Sham has also joined the offensive, focusing their efforts around the northern countryside of Maharda. Opposition forces have captured most of the area north of the river bordering Maharda, nearly surrounding a major power plant in the area. The Free Idlib Army has also been involved in the north Hama offensive, primarily around Khattab and Qamhana. Additionally, after a notable and prolonged absence, Ahrar al-Sham has joined the offensive, but has remained on the northwestern frontline near Karnaz, approximately 10km away from other opposition fronts. Ahrar al-Sham and Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) units have kept their distance from one another on frontlines, though technically they share an operation room.

TOW missiles and other Anti-Tank Guided Missile systems have been sighted among some of the opposition factions in Hama, though the offensive overall has included much lower deployment of sophisticated weaponry than offensives that have come before. Given the decrease in international support for opposition units in the area, it is likely that the sophisticated weaponry that has been seen has come from pre-existing stockpiles.

The cities of Damascus and Daraa once again endured the highest intensity conflict during the reporting period. The bulk of the fighting in both cities was centered on the frontlines between opposition and government forces, with some exceptions for airstrikes within the heart of opposition held-territory. Opposition-held Idlib governorate was subjected to many airstrikes over the period, as well, particularly Jisr al-Shughor.

A new pro-government unit, Brigade 145, was formed in Tartous this week. The announcement called all men between the age of 25 and 50 into conscripted service.

Conclusions:

ISIS forces continued to contract over this period, sustaining significant losses to all other major stakeholders in the conflict. Opposition forces continued to advance on frontlines against pro-government forces and ISIS, giving indication that with some level of coordination they remain able to take territory in offensives.