

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
September 21-27, 2017

Pro-government forces and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led coalition backed by the US) advanced further around the ISIS-held city of Deir Ezzor, leading to further tensions between the two forces as they both attempt to take territory from a weakened ISIS. The opposition-led northern Hama offensive has not resulted in any major gains during the reporting week, though pro-government forces have continued to strike by air locations deep within the Idlib pocket. Fighting in Eastern Ghouta remained fierce, though no substantial gains were made as conflict resumed on both western and eastern fronts.

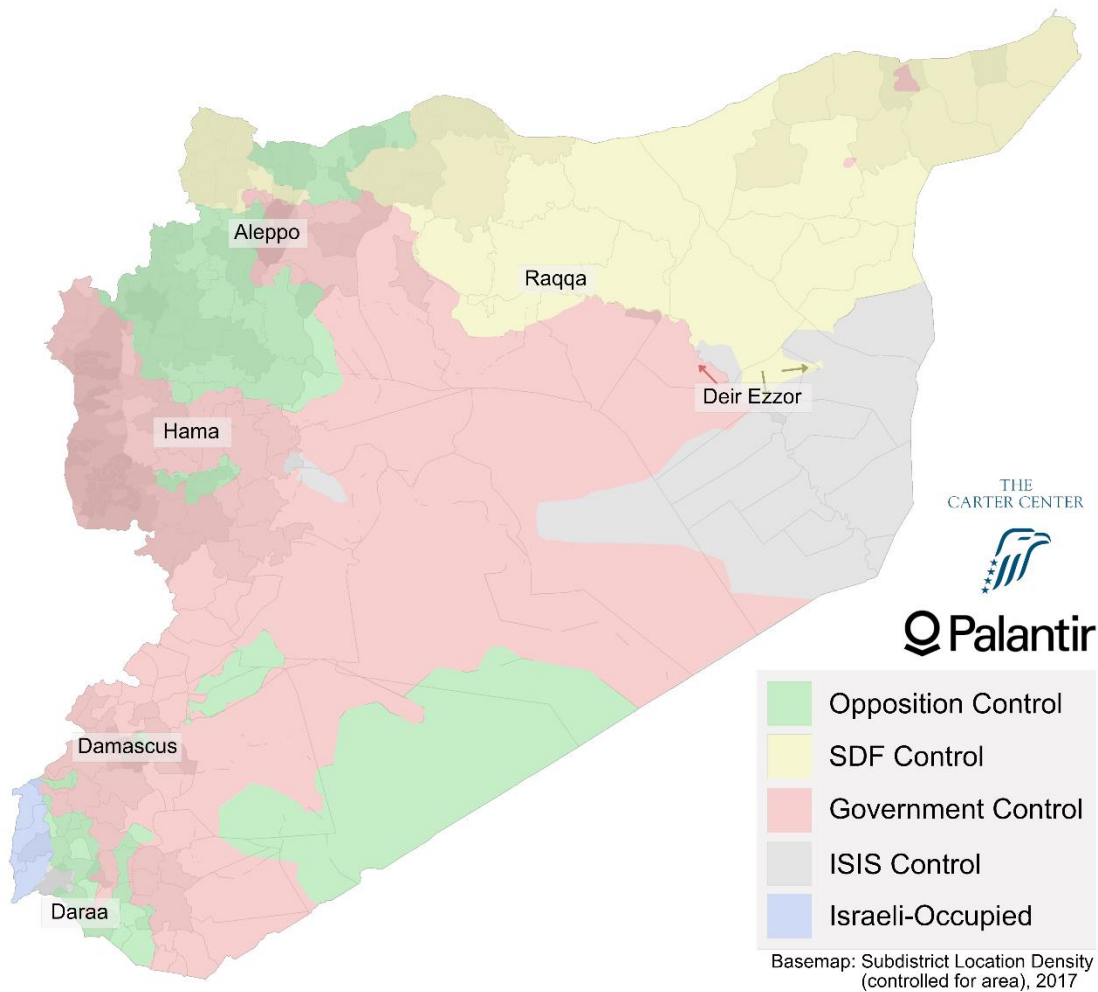


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by September 27, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period

Developments in Syria's East

Pro-government forces have now gained control of the entire western bank of the Euphrates River, from the village of Dalha in the southern Raqqa countryside to Deir Ezzor city. On September 21, the government's Tiger Forces captured Tabni in northwestern Deir Ezzor. By September 22, the Tiger Forces had also captured both Qasabi and Old Maadan. On September 23, following clashes between pro-government and ISIS forces in the Ghanem al-Ali area and the capture of Maadan town by pro-government forces, video footage was shared on social media purporting to show the moment when pro-government forces advancing east from southern Raqqa met up with pro-government forces advancing west from northwestern Deir Ezzor.

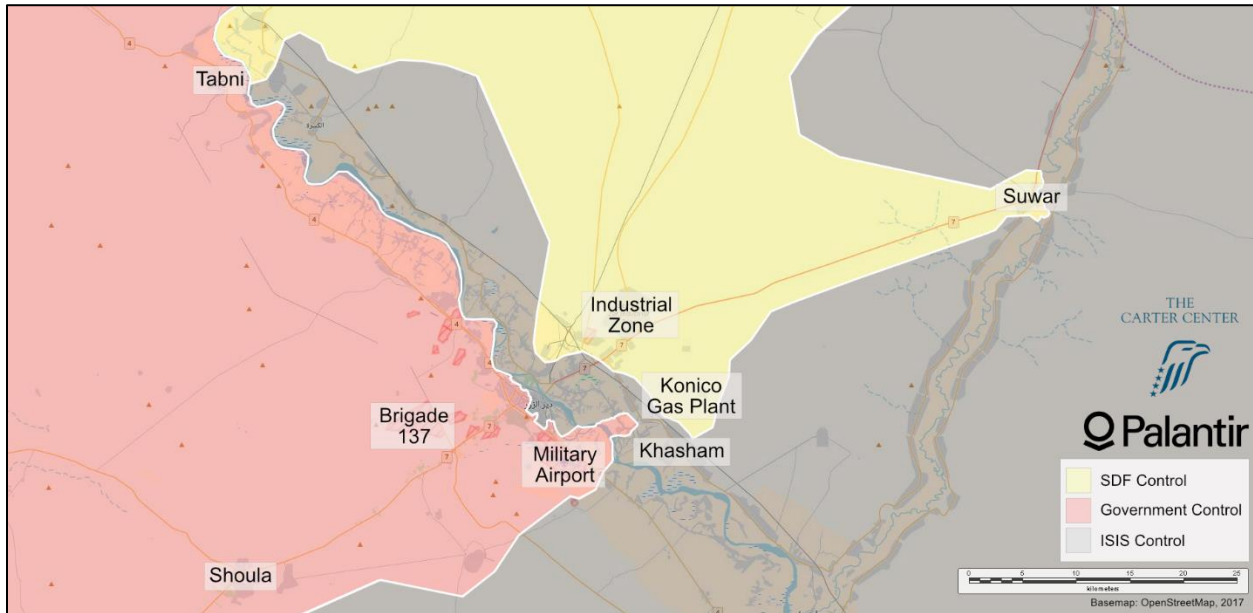


Figure 2 - Frontlines around Deir Ezzor by September 27

As clashes between pro-government and ISIS forces southeast on Hawajet Saqr continue near Deir Ezzor city, advances by pro-government forces on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River have been slow. The majority of the fighting between pro-government and ISIS forces have focused around the town of Khasham, which pro-government forces captured on September 24. As many as 80 pro-government fighters have been killed in clashes and vehicle-borne IED (SVBIED) attacks by ISIS since September 18 on the eastern bank of the river and another seven Russian fighters have seen a similar fate on the frontline.

The slow advance by pro-government forces is in marked contrast to the simultaneous advances further inland by the US-backed SDF. Tiger Forces redeployed to northern Hama instead of to the Deir Ezzor front as pro-government forces have failed to gain control of a single oil or gas facility east of the Euphrates.

Russian warplanes targeted the SDF in 3 different locations in Deir Ezzor, including a gas field they had seized from ISIS. This is the second time in September that the SDF has accused Russia of launching airstrikes against them. Russia also claimed that the US supports ISIS, claiming to have seen no recorded conflict between the two near Deir Ezzor. On September 21, before these accusations, Russian officials warned the US that it would target areas where US special forces operate should pro-government forces come under fire. The SDF were at least 7km away from pro-government positions.

The SDF now control the overwhelming majority of the city of Raqqa. Though the city has not been fully captured and fighting for the northern portion of the city continues into this reporting week, the end of the battle for Raqqa is within reach. ISIS is still kidnapping civilians and using them as human shields and

using the chaos of the city to surprise the SDF at their flanks. The city has largely been destroyed by conflict and near continuous bombing.

Pro-government forces continue to advance against ISIS forces in the Hama and Homs countryside east of Salamiyeh and the Shomariyeh Mountains, substantially shrinking ISIS control, though losing control over some minor towns on previously active frontlines.

Hama civilians are still fleeing fighting between pro-government and ISIS fighters in eastern Hama for southern Idleb. On September 21, the Syrian government and ISIS finalized an evacuation deal for civilians remaining in this pocket, allowing civilians, fighters, and families of fighters to evacuate to pre-designated areas, including areas controlled by Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra). IDP arrivals on September 22 were estimated at 1500 persons, with around 700 arriving and being distributed in southern Idleb IDP camps the day before.

Negotiations between Russian military commanders and ISIS to secure evacuation of ISIS fighters (with their weapons) from eastern Hama in exchange for return of four deceased Russian soldiers have failed.

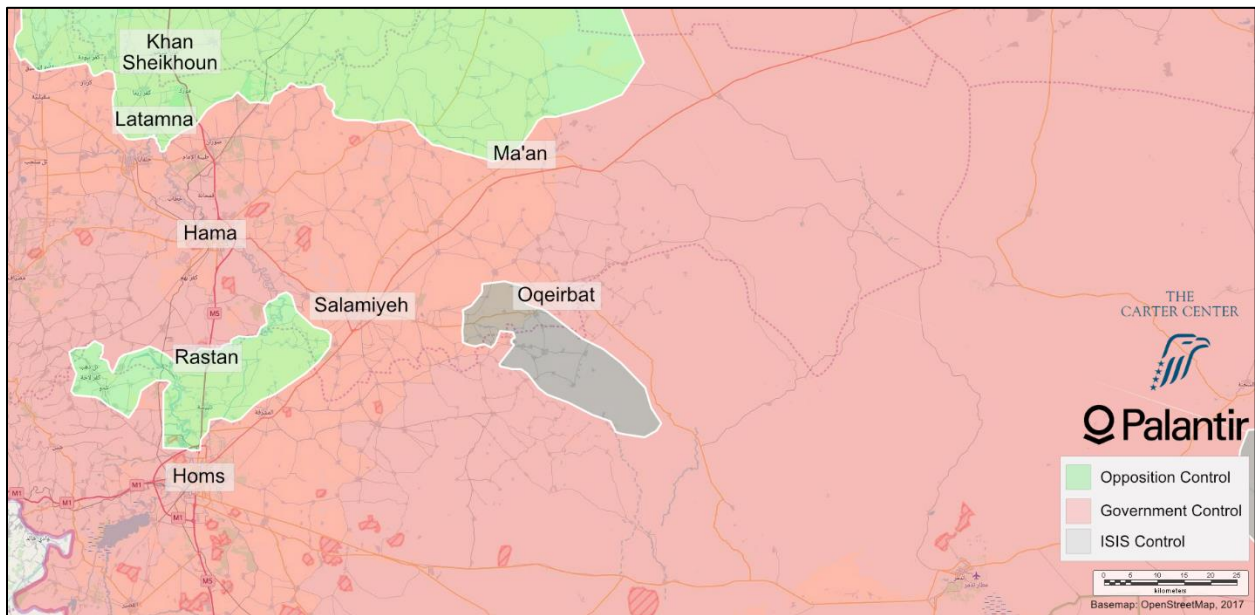


Figure 3 - Frontlines east of Homs and Hama by September 27

Developments in northern Hama

On September 24, pro-government forces from across Syria began redeploying towards the northern Hama countryside. The pro-government Tiger Forces were heading towards Hama from their most recent area of operations on the western bank of the Euphrates River north of Deir Ezzor, while the pro-government Quneitra Hawks Brigade have mobilized from their home base in southwestern Syria. This redeployment follows last week's escalation in fighting between pro-government forces and HTS in the Ma'an area approximately 10km northeast of Suran, Hama. After days of clashes, this offensive and government counteroffensive has led to only a minor exchange of territory along the Hama frontline near Ma'an. All previous gains by opposition forces were reversed by pro-government forces early in the fighting. Ahrar al-Sham and HTS are reported to have launched a joint operation against pro-government forces.

In response to the previous reporting week's offensive against pro-government positions in the Ma'an area of the Northern Hama countryside, the Syrian and Russian air forces have launched an intensive and wide-ranging campaign of strikes against dozens of opposition-controlled communities in Idleb, Hama, and

Aleppo governorates. Areas targeted by airstrikes stretch from the opposition controlled town of Hayyan in the northern Aleppo countryside to al-Latamna in the northern Hama countryside, and from Badama in western Idleb to Hajeb in the southern Aleppo.

Since September 19, approximately 1,100 airstrikes have struck the opposition-controlled pocket covering Idleb. since the start of the air campaign beginning on September 19. The intensity of the airstrikes has prompted the Turkish foreign minister to ask Russia for restraint as civilian and FSA fighter death toll mounts, adding that killing civilians is a violation of the Astana agreement.

Syrian and Russian airstrikes have targeted Hama and Idleb infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, emergency service providers, and power stations. This week, airstrikes have severely damaged or destroyed power or transfer stations in Khan Sheikhoun, Saraqeb, and Kafr Ayn. Syrian Civil Defense centers were hit with multiple airstrikes in southern Idleb in Tamana'a and Khan Sheikhoun and a first responder team was also targeted during rescue operations in Tal Mardikh. Airstrikes also hit hospitals in Kafr Nubol, Al Tah, Kafr Nubol, and Khan Sheikhoun. The opposition-managed Directorate of Education has closed schools in southern Idleb amidst reports that Syrian and Russian forces have targeted schools in Kafr Tahurma, Maarat Harma, Dar al Kabira, Tal Maraq, and Maarzit as well as Hibet and Khan Sabil, where schools were used to shelter IDPs.

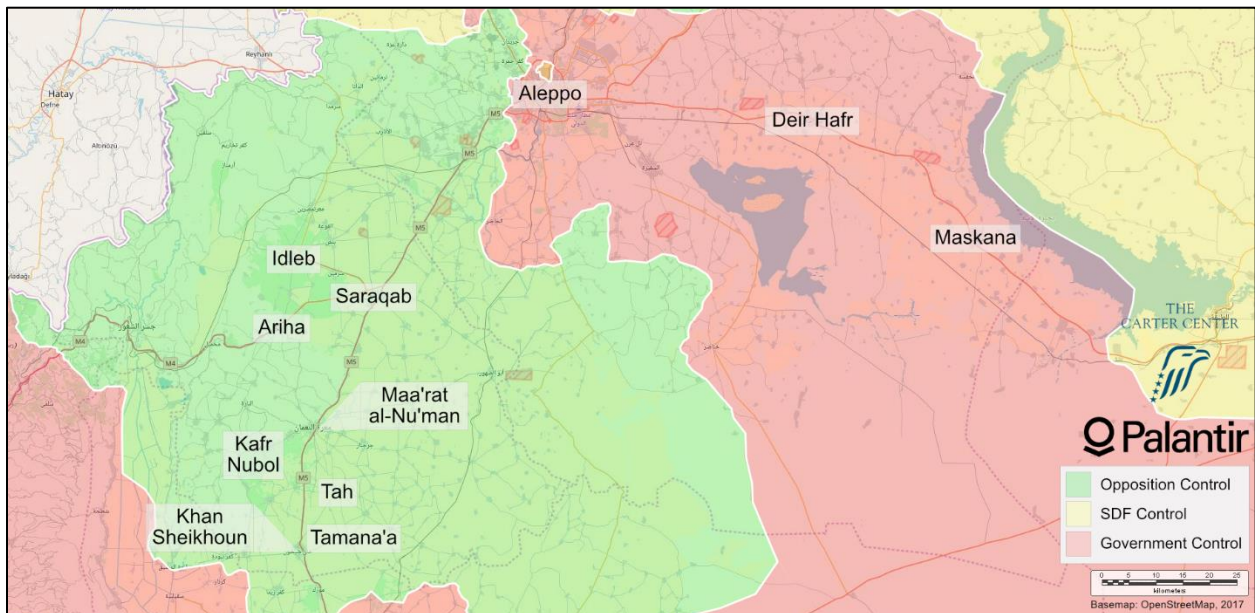


Figure 4 - Frontlines around the opposition-controlled Idleb pocket, dated September 27

Despite continued claims by the Russian Ministry of Defense that they only target Jabhat al-Nusra positions (using the old name for HTS), there are continued reports that Russian planes are targeting opposition groups not affiliated with the terrorist organization, including major Astana partner Faylaq al Sham. During the assessment period, Russian strikes targeted Faylaq al Sham's HQ in Tal Mardikh (killing 40-45 fighters and injuring dozens), and the Hamza Brigade (a sub-unit of Ahrar al-Sham, another Astana partner) in Ayn al Zarqa near Darkoush. Opposition groups participating in Astana provided maps marking locations of FSA and HTS positions in northern Syria in order to avoid being targeted.

Renewed and continuing fighting in the Eastern Ghouta

Despite government attempts over the course of September to secure areas in Eastern Ghouta through treaties and ceasefire agreements, the tentative peace that was in place appears to be unravelling in areas controlled by Jaysh al-Islam and Faylaq al-Rahman. Clashes have continued throughout the reporting week

at the Jobar/Ain Terma front, with pro-government forces making several unsuccessful attempts to advance and Faylaq al-Rahman launching a nighttime raid on the Ain Terma front on September 27. In addition to the continuing clashes with Faylaq al-Rahman, pro-government forces have begun to engage in clashes with Jaysh al-Islam after a period of relative calm. The two groups clashed near Reyhan and Hosh Dawahira on September 25, which resulted in Jaysh al-Islam damaging a government tank. Clashes also took place between pro-government forces and FSA forces near Beit Jinn on September 27. In addition to the clashes, sporadic shelling and airstrikes are on the rise.

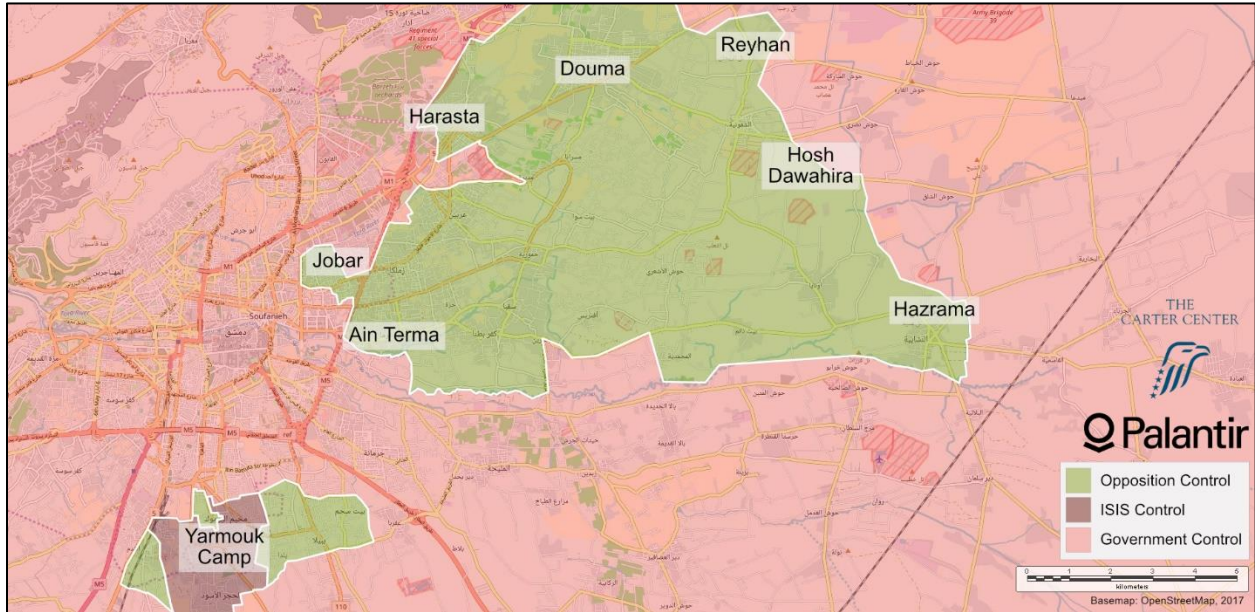


Figure 5 - Frontlines in Eastern Ghouta by September 27

Further developments within the opposition

A major merger was announced this week between Sultan Murad Bloc, The Victory Bloc, and the National Army Bloc under the newly established opposition’s Defense Ministry in a step towards establishing a more unified opposition. The three military blocs represent 26 opposition groups and an estimated 10,000 fighters.

On September 21, Turkish President Erdogan indicated that Turkey will deploy troops to Idleb as part of the “de-escalation” agreement made with Russia last month. Turkey, Russia, and Iran are to discuss establishment of a de-escalation zone in Afrin.

Turkish armored vehicles and bulldozers have entered Bab al Hawa crossing for the first time but have remained on the Turkish side of the border overlooking the crossing and nearby town of Atma.