

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
September 28 – October 4, 2017

A large-scale ISIS counterattack saw it gain territory against Syrian government forces on most fronts throughout the country, including well behind front lines in the town of Qariyatain in western Homs governorate. Despite this major counterattack, government forces succeeded in clearing ISIS from the western Hama countryside, and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces managed to clear ISIS from the northern bank of the Euphrates north of Deir Ezzor.

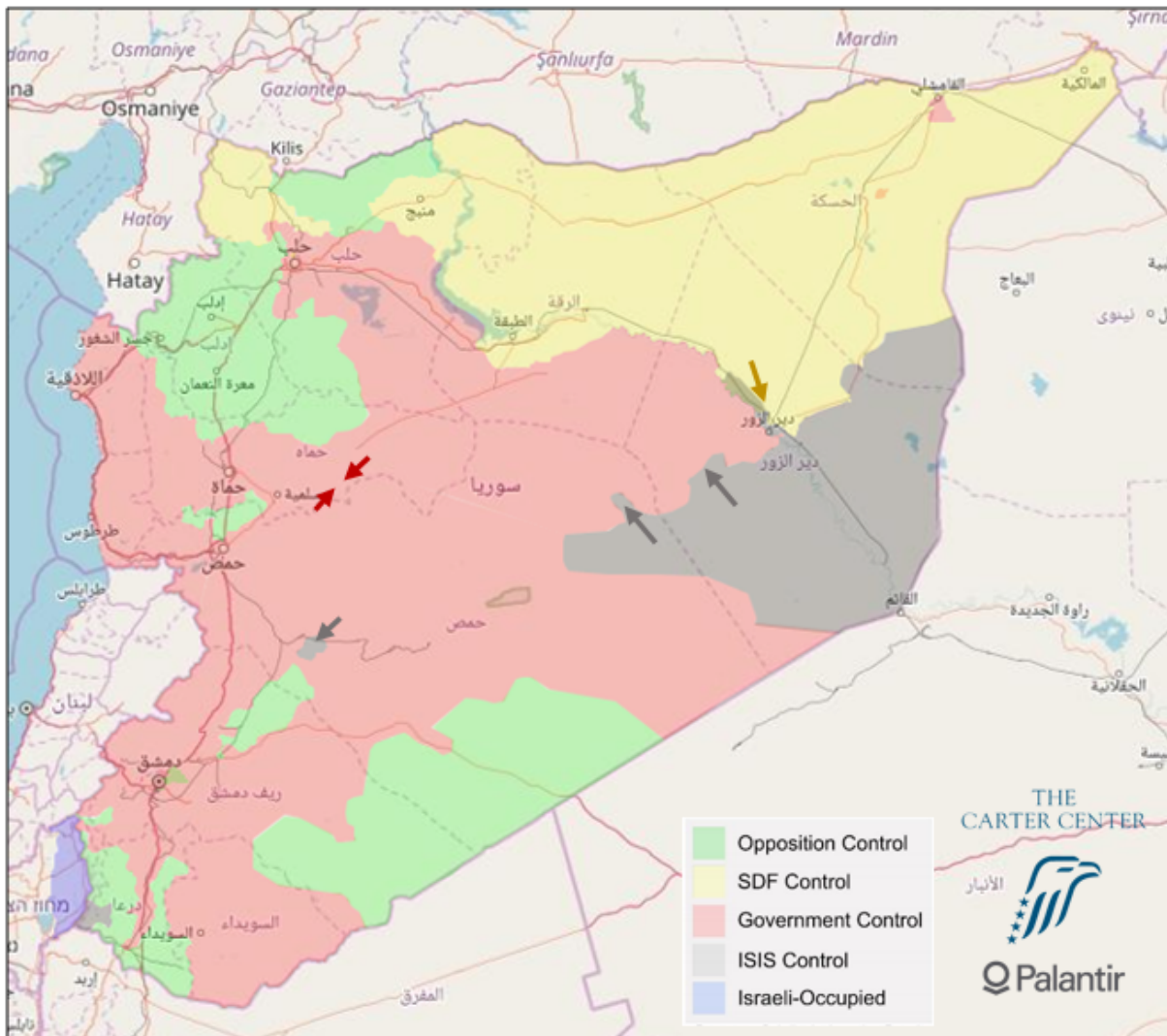


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria as of October 4, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period.

Combat against ISIS

During the past week, following three consecutive months of military success against ISIS on the road to Deir Ezzor, pro-government forces suffered a major setback on their eastern front. On the night of September 27, ISIS forces launched a string of attacks along almost the entire length of the pro-government frontline, hitting government positions at al-Shoula, Kobajep, Sokhneh, al-Heil Gas Field, and the T3 Pumping station. In these attacks, ISIS captured al-Shoula, Kobajep, areas north of Sokhneh and around the T3 station. In addition to the lost territory, pro-government forces also suffered extensive casualties. By October 2, nearly 200 pro-government fighters were killed during the previous five days of clashes against ISIS.

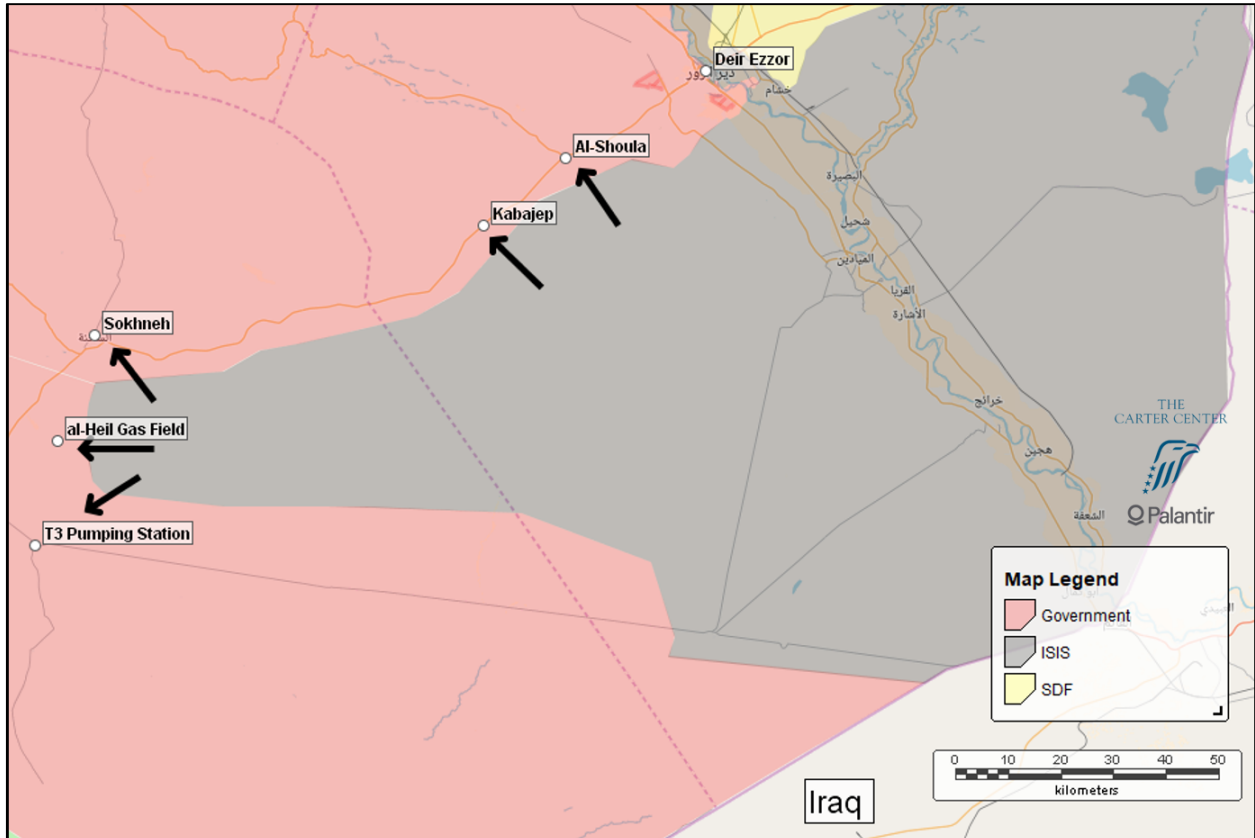


Figure 2 - ISIS advances in Eastern Syria. Frontlines as of Sep. 27, (pre-advance). Basemap via Open Street Map.

While pro-government forces have reportedly regained control of locations captured by ISIS forces since the counter-offensive began, the road between Sokhneh and Deir Ezzor remains closed with Kobajep and al-Shoula are still under ISIS control. Clashes are ongoing between ISIS and pro-government forces north of Sokhneh.

With the ISIS counter-offensive underway to the west of the Euphrates, pro-government forces have not made further progress on the east bank. Meanwhile, the US-backed SDF continue to capture territory between the east bank of the Euphrates and the west bank of the Khabur river. Locations captured by SDF in the past week include the town of Sur and the Jafra Oil field and processing facilities. Pro-government forces have reportedly advanced several kilometers south on the west bank, from the Jebel Thardah and Military Airport area towards ISIS-controlled Mayadin.

Shortly after the ISIS counter-offensive began, ISIS forces also launched an attack against the town of Qaryatein, located deep within government-controlled territory, just 70km southeast of Homs city. On

October 1, ISIS forces recaptured the town, forcing a withdrawal of pro-government forces in the surrounding countryside. Qaryatein was under ISIS control between August 5, 2015 and April 3, 2016. The retaking of Qaryatein highlights the challenges facing the overstretched pro-government forces, who are particularly vulnerable in the mountainous and sparsely populated interior and eastern deserts.

Despite the setbacks elsewhere, pro-government forces have continued to advance against ISIS forces in the eastern Hama and eastern Homs countrysides. By October 4, pro-government forces regained control of all territory previously held by the group in rural eastern Hama. The final two ISIS-held towns were captured by pro-government forces around noon on October 4, after ISIS forces were allowed to withdraw to ISIS frontlines to the southeast.

Southern Syria

Fighting between pro-government and opposition forces has increased in the Bait Jan area in southwestern Rural Damascus in the foothills of Jebel Sheikh. The opposition-controlled pocket around Bait Jan is the only remaining opposition-controlled territory near the Syrian-Lebanese border. In addition to clashes between pro-government and opposition forces on the northern and southern sides of the pocket, there are reports of repeated airstrikes and barrel-bombings on areas under opposition control. The situation in the Beit Jen area is further complicated by its proximity to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The ongoing presence of Iranian-backed militias near the de facto border between Syria and Israel greatly increases the likelihood of future escalations in the conflict and long-term instability in the region.

Near the capital, clashes and shelling have continued during the reporting week throughout the opposition-held areas of Eastern Ghouta. On September 28, Faylaq al-Rahman released footage of their fighters conducting an attack using the tunnel networks in Ain Terma. Pro-government forces have continued to attempt to take areas near Hosh Dawahira, and were repelled by Jaysh al-Islam on October 1 and 4. Shellings have been reported more frequently during the previous week with the Civil Defense branch in the Eastern Ghouta responding to shellings in Beit Sawa, Misraba, Douma, and Saqba. Opposition-held al-Marj and Douma were also shelled.

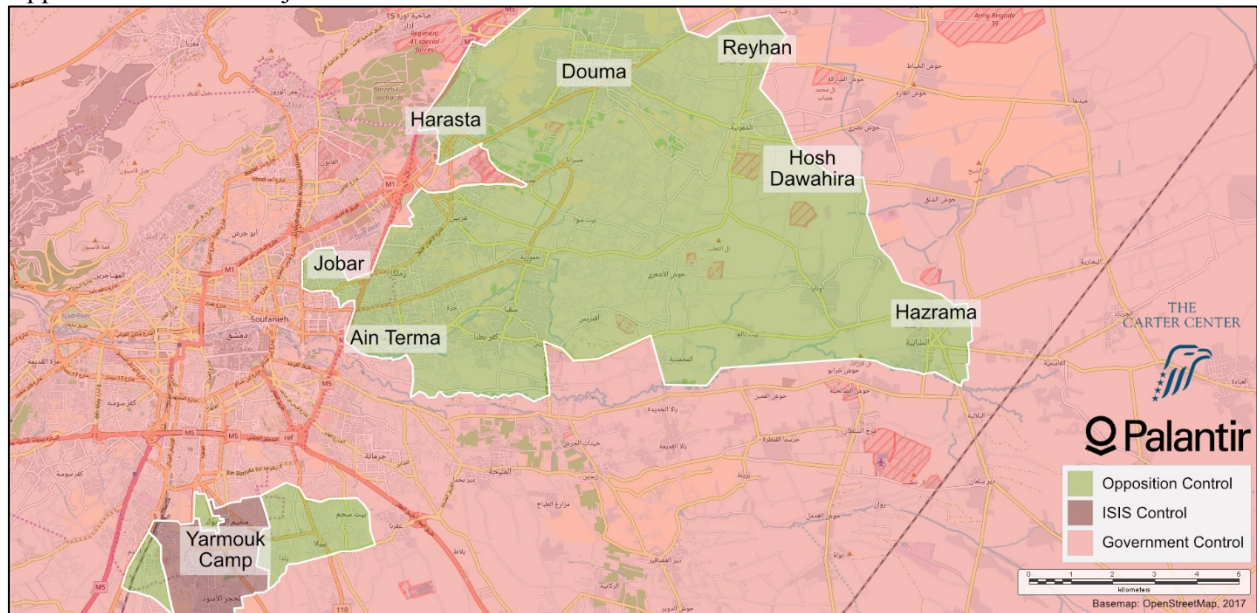


Figure 3 - Areas of control in Damascus as of October 4, 2017.

Since October 1, pro-government forces have made further progress eastward along Syria's southern border with Jordan, advancing approximately 40km, and seizing control of numerous border posts. As pro-government forces have advanced, the Jordanian government has begun maintenance work on the Jaber border crossing. On October 4, Jordan gave a 10-day warning to the opposition forces currently holding the Naseeb border, demanding that they hand over the crossing to the Syrian government, or Jordan would open the Jaber crossing instead.

Idleb updates

Russian and Syrian forces launched 800-1,500 airstrikes, 1,200 missile strikes, and over 60 barrel bombs on towns and the countryside of Idleb, Hama, and Aleppo. As of October 3, 200 persons have been killed and over 700 injured, many of them civilians. Early strikes by Russian and GoS warplanes targeted crucial electrical and medical infrastructure, including six hospitals and five civil defense centers.

Physicians for Human Rights declared that three of Idleb's main hospitals in Khan Sheikhoun, Kafr Nabl, and Al Tah were severely damaged or destroyed over five airstrikes. The Rahma Hospital in Khan Sheikhoun and the Kafr Nabl Surgical Hospital, also known as Sham Hospital were targeted twice in one week, forcing both hospitals to close. The Sham Hospital, which served a population of 600,000 people with over 4,000 patients per month, suffered extreme damage forcing its closure indefinitely.

Local councils declared the opposition-held cities of Jisr al Shughur, Hibet, Latamna, and Morek as disaster areas because of damage to infrastructure from the extensive bombings. 70% of Jisr al Shughur in western Idleb is destroyed or damaged after the air campaign of the last two weeks. The intense aerial bombardment has displaced 16,000 of the city's 20,000 residents who report having no place to seek refuge. Northern Hama, in the areas of Morek and Latamna, has witnessed similar mass displacement with some reports claiming 200,000 IDPs have fled the airstrikes and shelling for relatively safer areas in the north.

Northern Hama Countryside

During the previous week, pro-government forces redeployed to the northern Hama countryside. The arrival of this force, including the elite Tiger Forces, coincided with further escalation of airstrikes on opposition-held territory north of the northern Hama frontlines, the location of a recent opposition offensive against government frontlines in the Maan area northwest of Suran. This redeployment matches a buildup of Turkish military equipment along the northern border of Idleb as well, suggesting possible incursions into the opposition enclave from both north and south.

HTS updates

During the reporting week, Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) released a statement announcing the resignation of Abu Jaber al Sheikh as general leader of HTS and his subsequent demotion to leadership of the HTS Shura Council. The statement also announced that Golani would assume temporarily leadership of HTS until a new leader is appointed. Abu Jaber had been previously described in one of the leaked recordings by commanders loyal to Golani as not having real influence or control of HTS and that real control lay with Golani. On October 3, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that HTS leader Golani was critically injured in a Russian airstrike. HTS officials initially refused to comment but have since denied the Russian claim.

Multiple defections from HTS, including Katibat al Siddiq (Idleb), Khalid ibn Walid Brigades (Hama), and Liwa Naser Salahudeen (Aleppo), were also announced during the reporting week. Liwa Shuhada al-Gharb, one of the larger HTS sub-units in Hama, also defected due to HTS' mishandling of the latest Hama offensive and its aggressions against other opposition groups. The defection of the Ibn Taymiyyah Brigades in Daret Azza on October 1 led to two days of clashes with other nearby HTS forces as the two

groups fought for control of military positions in the Sheikh Barakat mountain, a strategic point of defense overlooking the YPG frontline and close to the Syrian border with Turkey. HTS captured all positions and subsequent talks between the two groups restored calm after an agreement was reached for Ibn Taymiyyah to “continue its work with HTS”.

In addition to internal strife and defections, HTS leadership have also been increasingly targeted for assassination over the last month. This reporting period, two HTS leaders were assassinated and a third was seriously injured. Recent statements by the Turkish Foreign Minister confirming Turkish efforts within Idlib to ply armed groups away from HTS have stoked speculation of Turkish involvement in the assassinations.