

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
November 30-December 6, 2017

During the reporting period, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led coalition supported by the US) and pro-government forces continued to advance against ISIS in Syria's east. Disagreements between Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) and current followers of Al-Qaeda in Idlib led to significant political fallout among remaining radical elements. A southern ceasefire eroded further during the reporting week, as well.

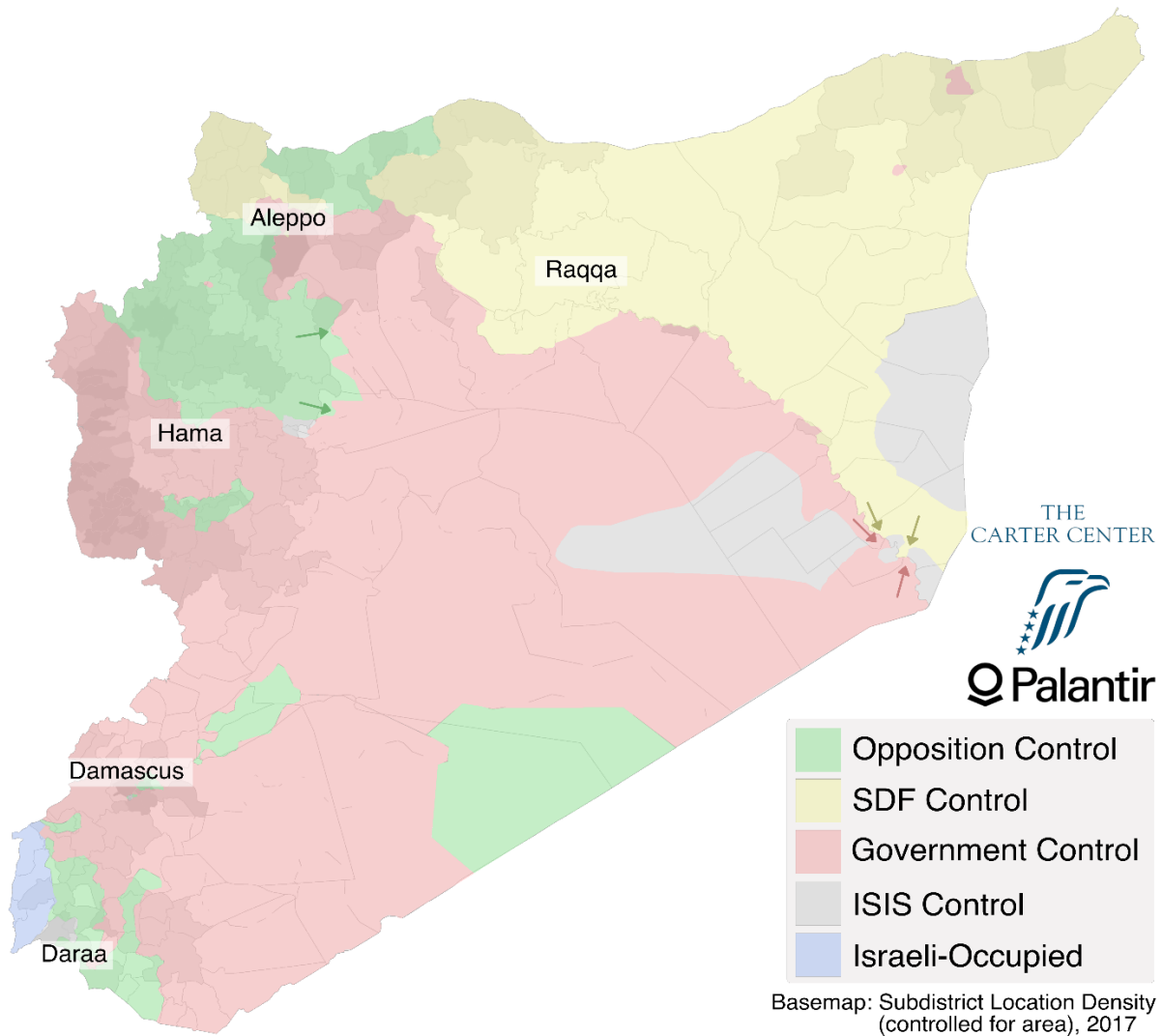


Figure 1 - Areas of control as of December 6, 2017. Arrows indicate advances made during the reporting period.

Fights against ISIS

Advances on the eastern holdings of ISIS are still divided by the Euphrates River, with each anti-ISIS force advancing on their respective bank of the river. The SDF advanced along the northern/eastern bank of the Euphrates, taking an airport and Abu Hamam. Pro-government forces advanced to connect their two fronts southeast of Abu Hamam, besieging a large chunk of remaining ISIS-held territory.

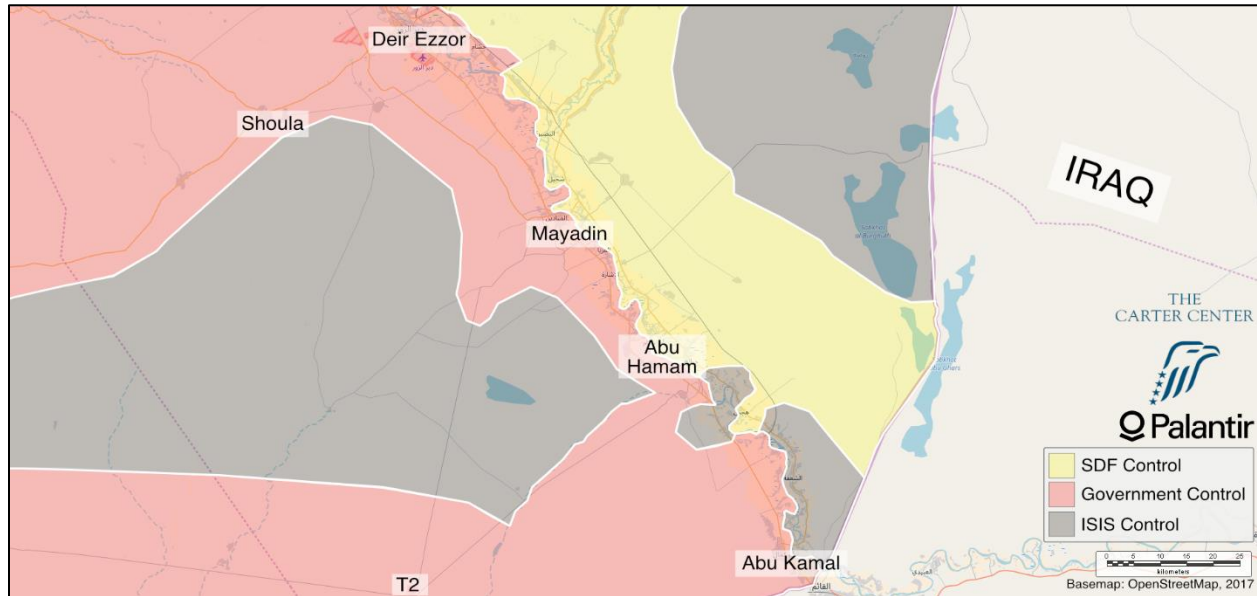


Figure 2 - Situation in eastern Syria by December 6

The US-led coalition, which backs the SDF in northern Syria, announced on December 1 that it would be withdrawing more than 400 US Marines who were fighting ISIS following the fall of the group's de facto capital, Raqqa. The Coalition has said that this is a sign of progress, and that it will continue adjusting its military presence in Syria. The US additionally promised to re-evaluate its aid to the predominantly Kurdish SDF following complaints from Turkey.

Against the wishes of both the Syrian and Turkish governments, the PYD, a northern Syrian party associated with the SDF, held local elections on December 1 in areas they control. Kurdish forces were not invited to attend the UN-led Geneva peace talks that started earlier this week and Kurdish leaders have said they are being careful to not provoke the international community.

Developments in Idleb

HTS and ISIS frontlines in eastern Hama have remained largely the same although ISIS has managed to advance slightly on the westernmost fronts. HTS forces intercepted an ISIS sleeper cell moving to join ISIS forces in eastern Hama from the Idlib countryside.

Clashes between HTS, opposition, and pro-government forces continued throughout the assessment period in northern and northeastern Hama with heavy fighting near the Rahjan frontline. HTS recaptured the town of Rahjan on December 3.

An HTS counter-offensive launched on November 29 reversed many of the gains made by pro-government forces late in the previous assessment period along the Khanasser-Rashidiya frontline in southern Aleppo. HTS forces made early gains in their counter-offensive and recaptured and held Ramla, Rashidiya, and several other towns on the Khanasser front as well as in more southern frontiers.

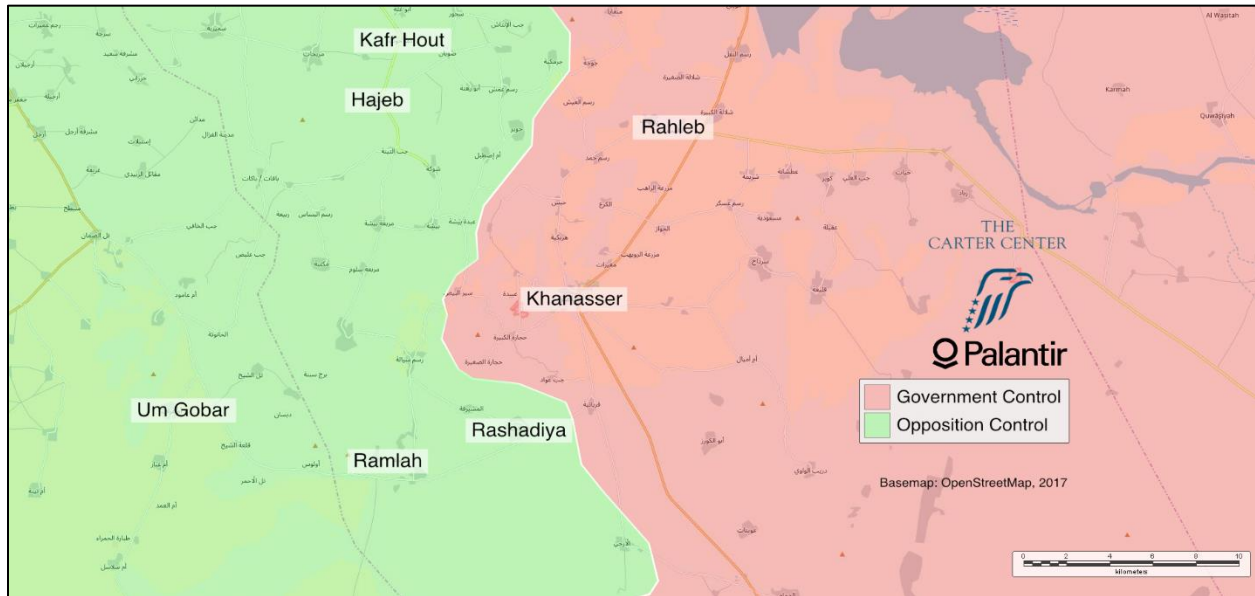


Figure 3 - Situation around Khanasser by December 6

On November 30, positions held by the Islamic Party of Turkestan were targeted by unidentified aircraft in the town of Khirbet al-Joz and the Jisr al-Shughur area in western Idlib governorate. The targeting of these forces occurred shortly after the first reports of their involvement in the clashes in eastern Hama.

There has been considerable fallout and a breaking of ranks within HTS stemming from the recent arrests of Al-Qaeda loyalists Sami al Uraydi, Abu Julayjib Tubaysi, and other non-Syrian “jihadists”. Multiple HTS members are reported to have resigned while others have condemned the arrests and have demanded the release of all those recently arrested. Commanders and members of the Badia Sector, which defected from Ahrar al-Sham earlier this year, threatened to leave HTS if their demand to release detainees was not met. On December 3, additional HTS members announced their suspension of cooperation with HTS unless the release of detainees was enacted immediately, further demanding that HTS talk with Al-Qaeda to resolve their differences.

The scale of the condemnations has forced Jolani and HTS to form a committee to enter reconciliation talks with Al-Qaeda, prompting the release of Abu Julayjib Tubaysi and another captive on December 4. Sami al Uraydi remains in custody. Upon his release, Abu Julayjib Tubaysi renewed his oath of allegiance to Al Qaeda.

Al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda, released a lengthy video statement rejecting Jabhat al-Nusra’s (and thus HTS’) decision to cut ties with Al-Qaeda. In his statement, he declared that the group’s oath of allegiance is still binding.

Northern Aleppo updates

During the assessment period, Turkish reinforcements (primarily artillery and armored personnel carriers) arrived in Kilis, a Turkish border town adjacent to opposition-controlled territory in northern Aleppo and the YPG-controlled Afrin canton. 180 Turkish commandos were dispatched to the Syrian city of Al-Bab in northern Aleppo, although their expected role there was not made clear.

Turkey plans to open an additional border crossing for commercial traffic in northern Aleppo between the towns of Al-Beyli, Turkey and Al-Rai, Syria. A Turkish official estimated that the border would be operational in early December and had become necessary due to increasing commercial traffic in the area.

Southern Syria Updates

Despite the ceasefire on November 28 and 29 that resulted in a de-escalation of aerial bombardment in Eastern Ghouta, airstrikes have resumed targeting the same areas. On December 2, over 30 airstrikes hit Eastern Ghouta, including the towns of Arbin and Hammoriyeh. In addition to airstrikes by planes and helicopters, pro-government forces have started to rig drones to drop bombs. One such UAV was spotted over Jobar on December 4.

In addition to the renewed airstrikes, clashes have continued in both Ain Terma and Harasta. On the night of December 28, pro-regime forces launched an attack on the Idaret al-Marakabat area in Harasta, which was repelled by the Ahrar al-Sham-led “Wa Innahum Dhulamou” operations room. The operations room foiled a second and third advancement attempt on December 1 and 6, killing at least 20 pro-government fighters as clashes continue.

After several days of relative calm in the Beit Jinn pocket, clashes resumed on November 30 in areas around Tal Bardiyeh, which 4th Division forces captured on December 1. An opposition counterattack returned control of the location by December 2, despite the heavy use of heavy rockets against the opposition-held pocket. During the clashes, opposition forces shot down a government helicopter.

On December 4, the Israeli Air Force conducted an airstrike on the scientific research center in Jamraya, a suburb northwest of Damascus. The center is reportedly responsible for Syria’s missile program, and its employees have been sanctioned for developing chemical weapons in the past.

A protest on November 29 in government-held Suweida resulted in 6 deaths.