

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
May 18-24, 2017

This reporting period, intra-opposition strife continued in Aleppo province but has eased in Rural Damascus. Evacuation deals continued, most notably in Damascus and Homs. Coalition warplanes struck pro-government Iranian-backed militias in the southeastern Syrian desert as the groups advanced against FSA forces in the area. ISIS forces continued to crumble on fronts in Aleppo, Homs, and Raqqa.

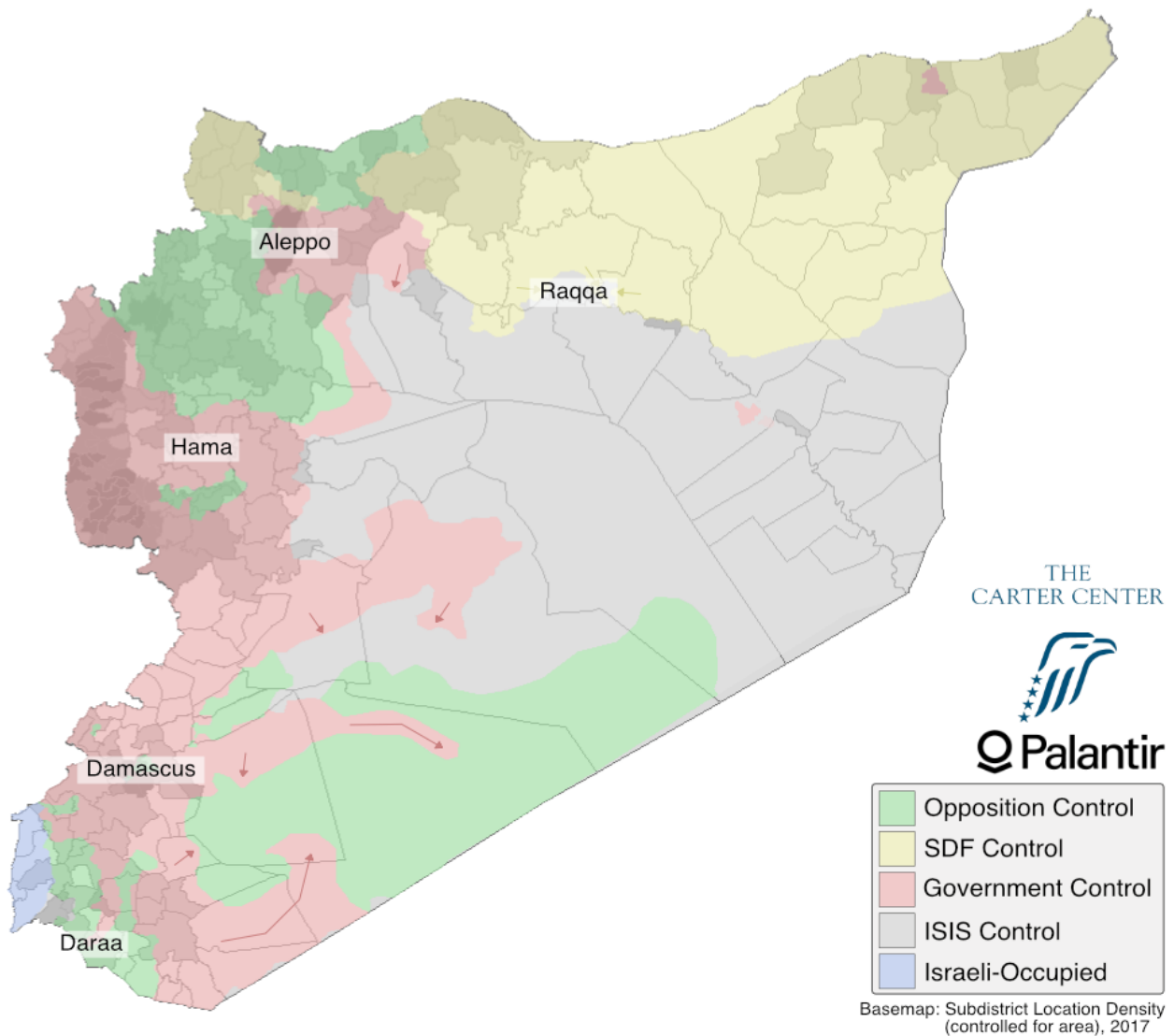


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by May 24, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period

Opposition Strife

After weeks of clashes between Jaysh al-Islam and groups aligned with Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) in the opposition-held Eastern Ghouta pocket near Damascus, struggles between opposition forces in the area seem to have calmed down. Jaysh al-Islam fighters returned to fronts against pro-government units in Beit Nayem and launched attacks on al-Rihan neighborhood in Damascus, while Faylaq al-Rahman resumed clashes against pro-government formations in Arbin (see map below).

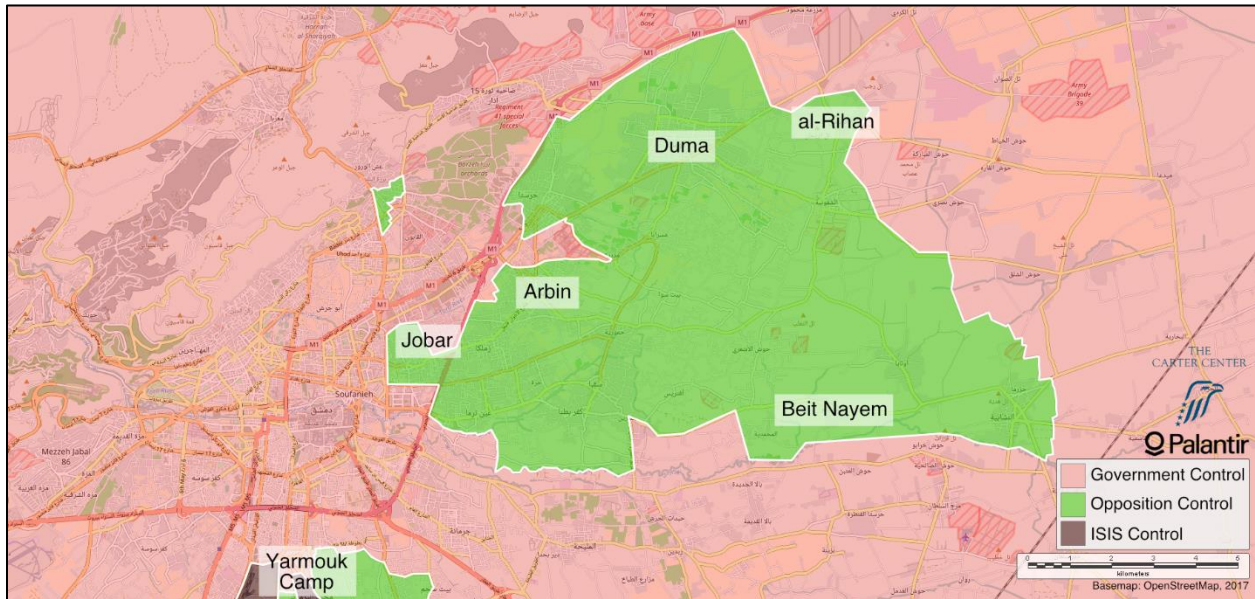


Figure 2 – Map of areas of control around Damascus and the Eastern Ghouta by May 24

Even as Eastern Ghouta fighting quieted, new intra-opposition clashes between Faylak al-Sham against Levantine Front and the Sultan Murad Brigades erupted in the northern Aleppo countryside east of Al-Rai. On May 23, Levantine Front forces attacked and captured Faylaq al-Sham positions in Kafr Ghan, Baraghideh, and Sheikh Rih after accusing them of working with HTS. Levantine Front and Sultan Murad Brigades stated that a portion of Faylak al-Sham's subunit, Liwa Fursan al-Thawra (formerly part of HTS sub-unit Nour al-Din al-Zenki), was harboring HTS fighters within it.

Sultan Murad Brigades also clashed with Ahrar al-Sham in Jarablus on the Turkish border, prompting Ahrar al-Sham to declare on May 18 that it would relocate its forces from Jarablus city to the outskirts to defuse the situation. Fearing opposition infighting, the local council in nearby A'zaz requested that opposition groups withdraw from the interior of cities under opposition control in northern Aleppo. The administration of Jarablus is coordinated by Turkey, which helped to train a large local police force in Jarablus earlier this year.

On May 21, two suicide bombers targeted an Ahrar al-Sham base in Tell Touqan located in the eastern countryside of Saraqeb, Idlib. The attack, later claimed by ISIS, killed 25 Ahrar al-Sham fighters and injured many others. The attack elicited condolences from many opposition groups, including HTS.

Evacuations

By May 22, a full evacuation of the al-Wa'er district of Homs city was completed, granting the government of Syria full control over Homs city. About 700 opposition fighters were evacuated, as were their families.

Evacuees were split, with some moving to Idlib and others to Jarablus. Opposition forces still control the al-Rastan pocket north of Homs city.

Amidst reports of fighting on May 18 and 21 between HTS and ISIS in Yarmouk Camp south of Damascus, ISIS reached an agreement with the Syrian government to hand over control of its territory in Yarmouk Camp to pro-government forces in exchange for the evacuation of ISIS fighters and their families to ISIS-controlled territory in eastern Syria. The agreement is to be concluded within the next month and will first remove wounded fighters and persons needing medical treatment. HTS reached a similar agreement earlier, and has already begun evacuation of fighters from some positions within Yarmouk Camp. The two agreements struck separately with ISIS and HTS would leave Yarmouk Camp under the complete control of pro-government forces, primarily Palestinian paramilitary groups.

Daraa conflict

On May 22, pro-government forces launched another counterattack on al-Manshiyeh district in Daraa city. Fighters from the local opposition operations room, al-Bunyan al-Marsous, foiled the attempt, destroying a tank, striking a warplane, and demolishing a munitions warehouse in nearby Sajneh in the process. Syrian government and Russian forces conducted airstrikes throughout the clashes.

De-escalation and containment

The “de-escalation” zones (Daraa, Eastern Ghouta, Idlib, Homs) have largely been ignored during this reporting period as conflict in Daraa has continued in high intensity, Eastern Ghouta fights between pro-government and anti-government elements escalated, and airstrikes on Idlib province remained consistent. Notably, the opposition-held al-Rastan pocket of northern Homs has not seen any escalation.

Al-Tanf Strike

On May 17, pro-government, Iranian-backed militias began to move along the highway in Syria’s eastern desert towards Iraq. These forces included Syrian Military Security Falcons, Hezbollah, Syrian Hezbollah, Kita’ib Sayyed al-Shuhada, National Defense Forces, the 313 Battalion, and al-Ja’afariyah Force. On May 18, the pro-government convoy advanced through opposition-held territory towards the al-Tanf border crossing, where International Coalition forces are currently stationed. As the convoy breached a Coalition designated “no-entry” buffer zone, International Coalition aircraft warned and then struck pro-government forces on the highway.

Iranian-supported militias have indicated a desire to establish an overland route between Baghdad and Damascus, which would facilitate Iran’s provision of support to the Syrian government. Despite the US-led Coalition’s attack on the convoy, pro-government forces redoubled their efforts after their earlier retreat and have continued to advance toward al-Tanf, though at a reduced speed. As pro-government forces continue their operations in the desert southwest of al-Tanf, it is likely that they will approach Coalition positions again soon.

Desert Battle

Over this reporting period, pro-government forces advanced in Syria’s southeastern desert from a few separate fronts, taking territories held by both ISIS and the FSA (Jaysh Asood al-Sharqiya and its partners). On May 17, pro-government forces began pushing east from Sweida, capturing territory held by the FSA. On May 18, they advanced approximately 20km against the FSA, taking Bir Rasayi. On May 22, the pro-government forces took control of the Zelaf reservoir and nearby Zelaf town, as well as the Ruhba area north of the reservoir. On May 24, they also captured areas near Qaryatein, including Mahassa, which Jaysh Asoud al-Sharqiya previously used as its base for advancement against ISIS in the Eastern Qalamoun.

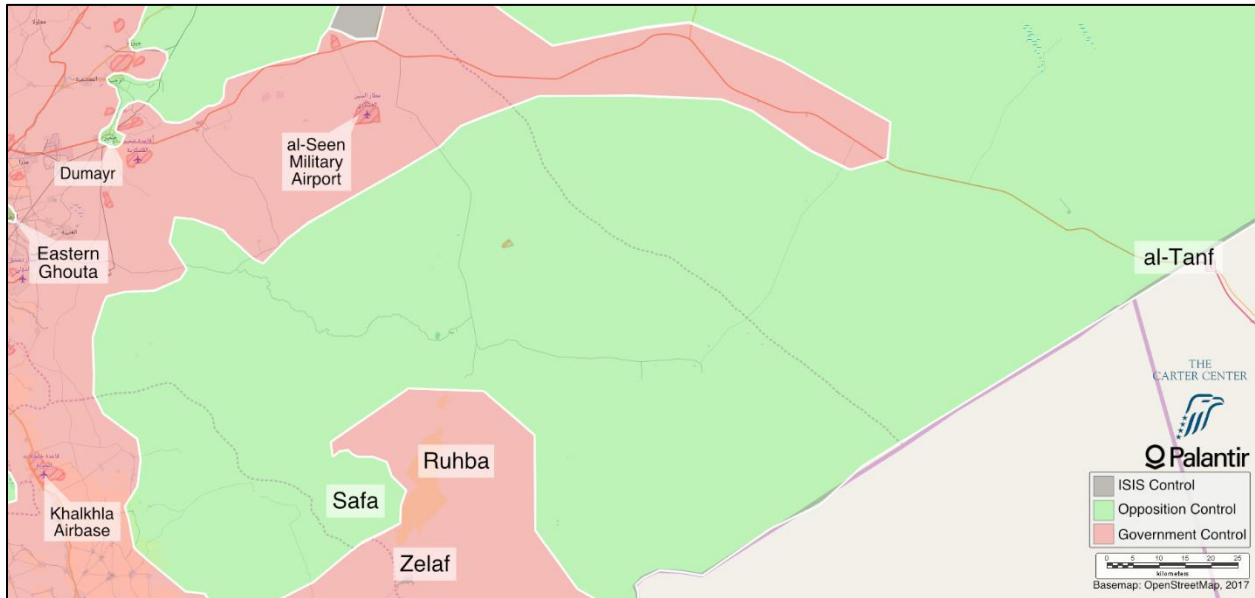


Figure 3 - Map of areas of control around Syria's eastern desert by May 24

Following these advances, on May 22 FSA fighters announced the launch of a new battle, called “Burkan al-Badia” (Desert Volcano), which seeks to expel Iranian and other foreign militias from the Badia region.

Fight Against ISIS

Following the de-escalation zone agreement that went into effect on May 5, the Syrian government has made substantial changes in the distribution of its fighting forces. The re-positioning of pro-government forces across the entirety of the government’s eastern front, from north to south, has allowed the government to continue to make substantial territorial gains in many areas.

Except for the ongoing conflict in Daraa city, and the campaign by pro-government forces towards US-backed opposition groups near al-Tanf border crossing, the majority of pro-government ground operations are now focused on advancing in areas controlled by ISIS.

In the eastern countryside of Aleppo, pro-government forces, led by the Tiger Forces and Hezbollah with the support of Russian artillery units, continued to capture villages in the countryside of Maskanah. By May 24, these forces advanced to around 7km from Maskanah, the last major location in Aleppo governorate controlled by ISIS.

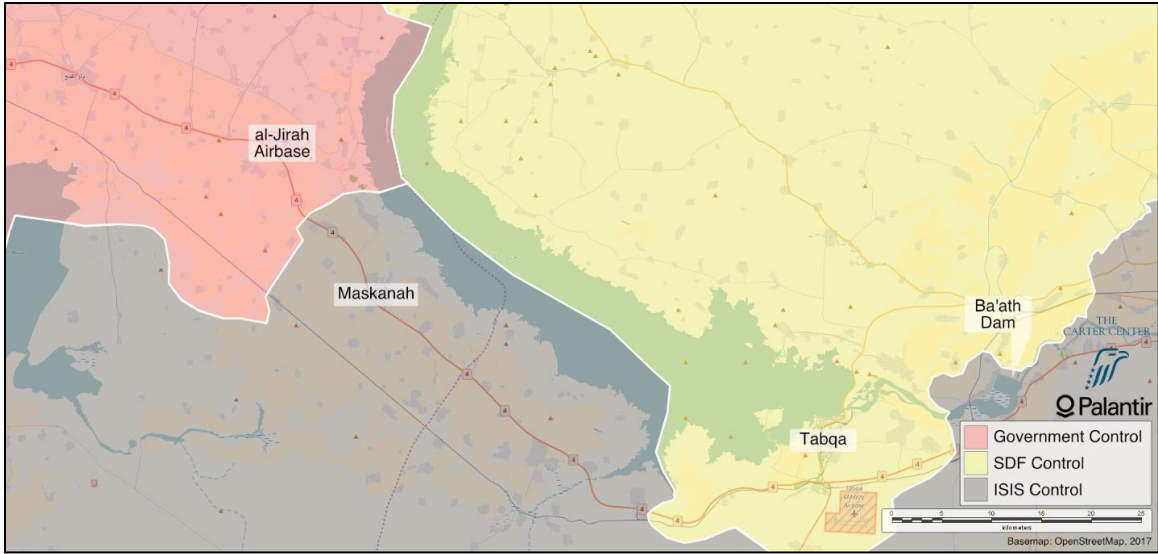


Figure 4 - Map of areas of control in the eastern countryside of Aleppo by May 24

In the countryside of eastern Hama and Homs, ISIS forces launched repeated attacks at various points along the strategically-important Khanaser-Ithriya-Salamiyeh road. The road constitutes the sole overland route connecting government-controlled areas in Aleppo with coastal, central, and southern areas of Syria. On May 18, ISIS attacked two majority-Shi'a villages near the Ithriya-Salamiyeh road, Aqareb al-Safi and Mabuja. Pro-government forces eventually recaptured the villages, though the damage from ISIS was high. The Syrian government also initiated an attack against ISIS in the Shomariyah mountains.

Around Tadmor (Palmyra), pro-government forces attempted to advance from the silos between Tadmor and Sokhneh, making some progress along the highway through the desert. Pro-government forces, including the newly-formed 5th Corps, captured the Arak Gas Fields to the east of Tadmor on May 23. Pro-government forces also gained territory to the southeast of Tadmor in the hills near the Talila Reserve. Pro-government forces also started to advance beyond Jabal Abtar along the Damascus-Tadmor highway to the south.

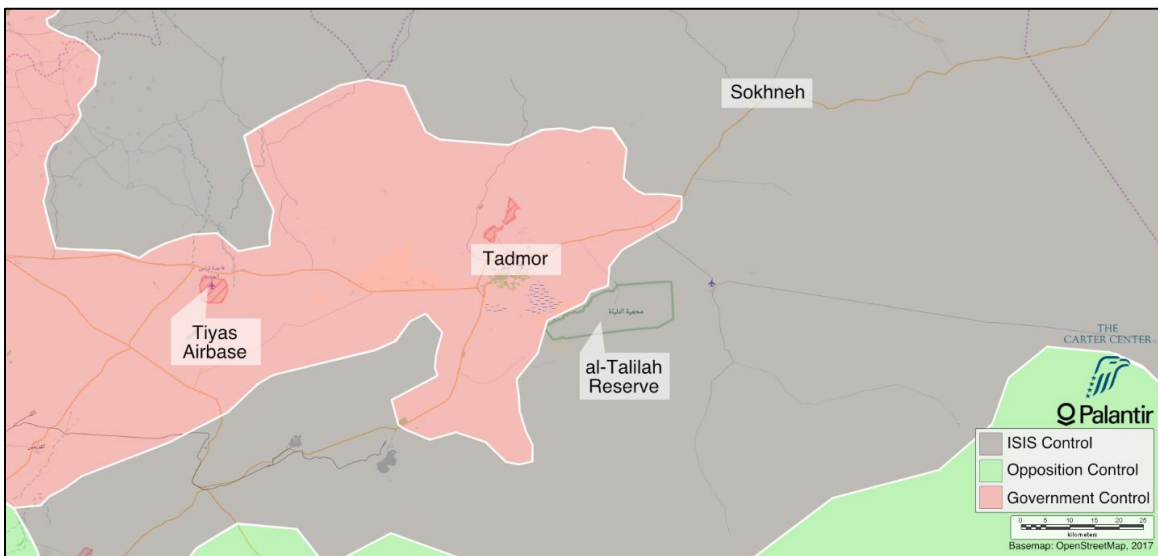


Figure 5 - Map of areas of control in eastern Homs by May 24

In Qaryatein, pro-government forces launched a new offensive against ISIS on May 23. This offensive, which coincides with the renewed advance along the Damascus-Tadmor highway from the north, is critical to creating the logistical environment conducive to the pending pro-government offensive towards Deir Ezzor. The advances would also reduce the abilities of US-backed opposition groups in the Syrian desert to reconnect two separated pockets of control east of Damascus.

On May 23, the US-led International Coalition airdropped fighters in eastern Syria against ISIS. The opposition fighters were dropped near the Humayda area of al-Bukamal city southeast of Deir Ezzor.

ISIS forces advanced against pro-government forces in the northern neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor city on May 24.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued their advance against ISIS north, west, and east of Raqqa city, ISIS's capital in Syria. This reporting period, SDF fighters consolidated control over much of the western countryside of Raqqa, capturing localities to within 13km of Raqqa. The SDF also began to take more locations around the Ba'ath Dam, west of Raqqa between the city and previously-captured Tabqa. To the east of Raqqa city, SDF fighters advanced more along the highway between Raqqa and Deir Ezzor north of the Euphrates, in an advance intended to isolate the remaining ISIS-held localities in the eastern countryside of Raqqa.

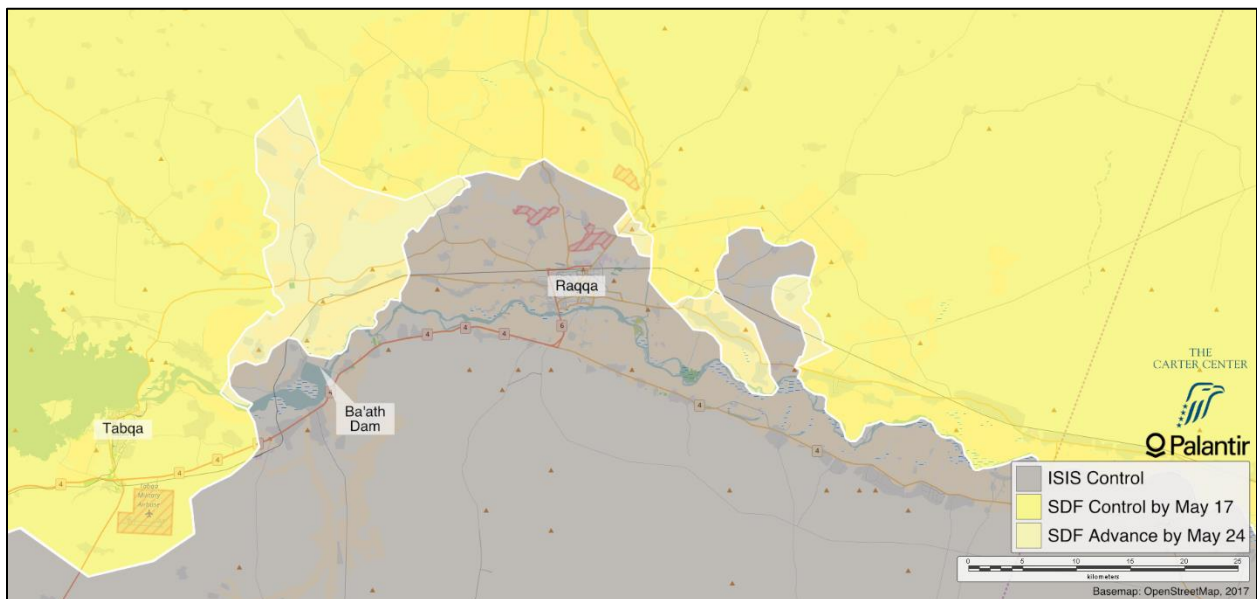


Figure 6 - Map of SDF advances around Raqqa, May 17-24

Civil developments

In Raqqa, the first group of 50 Arab police graduated from US-led coalition training. The seven-day training course provides training on patrols, conflict resolution, response to car bombs, and checkpoint duties. The second group of future police are scheduled to begin training next week, with the eventual goal to train a force of 3,000 to stabilize the areas of Raqqa province freed from ISIS.

The city of Al Rai in northern Aleppo, taken from ISIS during the Turkey-backed Operation Euphrates Shield, is set to become an official border crossing allowing passage of commercial traffic and civilians to and from Turkey.

Conclusions:

Intra-opposition strife continues to threaten the stability of opposition-held territory. Breaches of the de-escalation agreement are also concerning. Additionally, ISIS continues to lose territory throughout Syria, continuing a long trend. The advance of pro-government forces in Syria's eastern desert may lead to additional clashes between pro-government and Coalition forces along the Syria-Iraqi border.