

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
January 19-25, 2017

As peace talks concluded in Astana with no deal reached, dramatic re-alignments and infighting is underway in the opposition-held Idleb province. At the beginning of the week, Ahrar al-Sham's leadership criticized Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) for harboring Jund al-Aqsa, calling them an ISIS cell. JFS previously incorporated Jund al-Aqsa within their ranks, though the group had been threatening or directly fighting Ahrar al-Sham over the course of the previous few months. This week, initial clashes between Jund al-Aqsa and Ahrar al-Sham ended with a military victory for the latter followed by a ceasefire agreement. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) then officially expelled Jund al-Aqsa from the organization, but, unexpectedly, began clashing with Ahrar al-Sham itself, storming its headquarters in Idleb.

JFS aggression created a major schism among opposition groups in Idleb. Even as JFS saw significant military victories in the middle of this week, there have been major announcements of opposition groups swearing allegiance to Ahrar al-Sham. These groups include Suqour al-Sham, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, the west Idleb battalion of Jaysh al-Islam, Kataib Thuwar al-Sham, the west Aleppo battalion of the Levantine Front, and the Fastaqim Union. In addition to these major factions, several other smaller groups have pledged allegiance, increasing the number of soldiers under Ahrar al-Sham command by approximately 8,000 to 12,000.

In addition to military groups, Syrian religious scholars and leaders have also declared their allegiance to and support for Ahrar al-Sham. Popular support for the anti-JFS alliance was also apparent in some parts of Idleb, evidenced by protests in the towns of Maarat al-Numan, Sarmada, and Atareb. After a week of losing territory to JFS fighters, Ahrar al-Sham may come out as the political victor of these disputes.

Pro-government forces east of Aleppo city began a renewed offensive northward towards Al-Bab, bombing by warplane and advancing significantly towards the west of Al-Bab. Their advance northward means government troops, led by the Tiger Forces, now share a new frontline with the Turkish-backed Operation Euphrates Shield (OES).

There has been little progress by OES forces around Al-Bab. An offensive on Suflaniyeh was reversed by an ISIS counterattack and the advances in the western neighborhoods of Al-Bab city have only led to heavy Turkish and opposition losses in the fight.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) also attempted to advance near Al-Bab from Menbij, with mixed results. The territory they control around Al-Bab remains nearly unchanged, though their western frontline southeast of Al-Bab has been in flux this week.

The SDF announced the inclusion of a large number of Arab fighters in their offensive for Ar-Raqqa, a front which saw major gains at the start of the week. These gains were almost entirely reversed in an ISIS counterattack. Despite this setback, however, the SDF has advanced significantly along the eastern side of the Euphrates.

ISIS has also advanced significantly in their siege of government-held Deir Ez-Zor, cutting the territory held by the government into two. Hezbollah and government forces have been redeployed to the countryside in an attempt to push ISIS forces from the territory they recently secured, though success has been minimal. ISIS forces appear poised to advance on the Deir Ez-Zor Military Airport, which, if successful, would deal a major blow to government forces in the area.

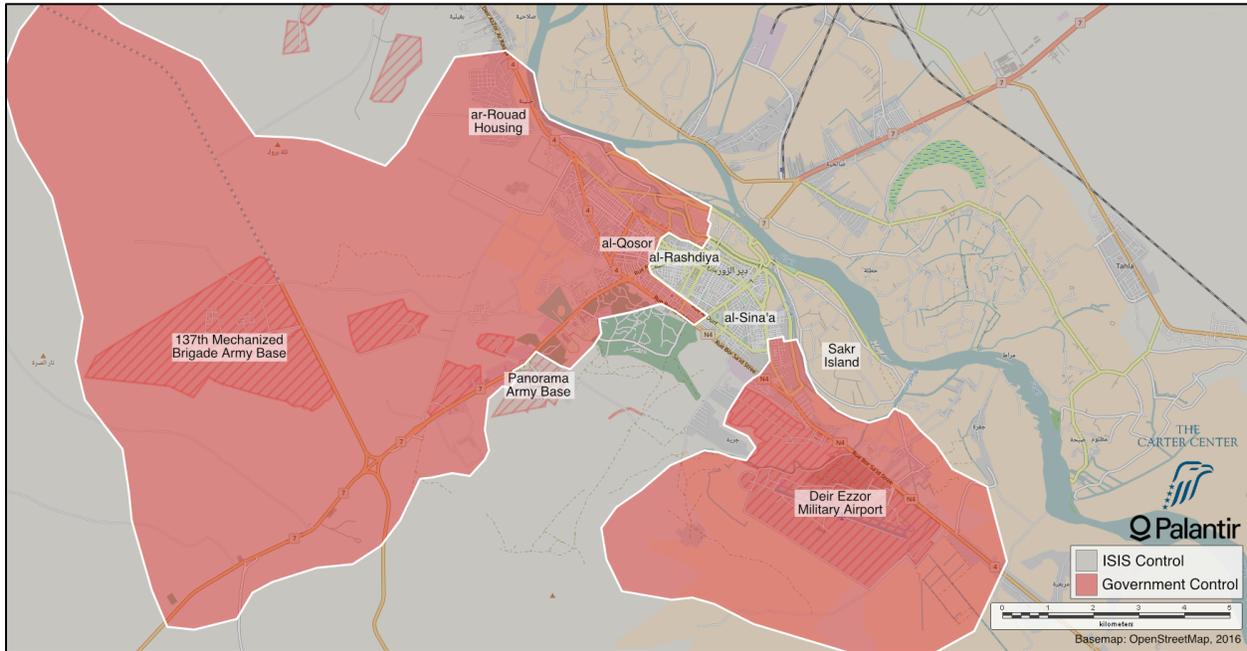


Figure 1 - Frontlines in Deir Ezzor city and its immediate countryside by 26 January 2016

ISIS has also conducted an offensive on Khanaser, the choke-point linking government positions in Aleppo to its stronghold in central and western Syria. The offensive has been intense, resulting in ISIS cutting the government's resupply route to and from Aleppo for a brief period.

The opposition-held territory around the Wadi Barada area north of Damascus remains under siege as a ground force comprised mostly of Hezbollah continues shelling the towns inside the valley. Water to most of Damascus remains spotty due to the damaged water facility at Ein al-Fijeh.

Conclusions:

The re-alignment of opposition forces in the face of major conflict between JFS and Ahrar al-Sham represents the largest shift in opposition networks in recent history. Though JFS appears to have the upper-hand militarily, the new alignment of opposition forces, coupled with popular support, may allow Ahrar al-Sham to push back. With most major factions in the opposition's largest canton joining behind Ahrar al-Sham, the outcome of this infighting will have major impacts on the trajectory of the conflict in Syria's northwest, but also on any peace talks. Ahrar al-Sham did not participate in the Astana talks.