



Weekly Conflict Summary

August 18-24, 2016

Armed opposition groups and Turkish forces crossed the northern border and captured the town of Jarablus after a few hours of brief skirmishes. Turkish artillery and airstrikes targeted the surrounding area before crossing the border several kilometers west of Jarablus. From this point of infiltration, opposition forces marched east, taking three villages before reaching Jarablus, which they easily captured from ISIS. By August 24, opposition forces controlled enough territory east and south of their point of reentry into Syria that they were able to link up with territory held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on the western side of the Euphrates near Amarnah.

The new offensive, Operation Euphrates Shield, includes coordination between Jaysh al-Tahrir, Jaysh al-Nasr, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki, Liwa Mutasim, Forqat Hamza, Faylq al-Sham, Jabhat Shamia, and Sultan Murad. FSA groups involved in the fighting along the Turkish border say that their fighters in the north are new local recruits rather than fighters pulled from the frontlines in Aleppo city.

Some Euphrates Shield groups and the SDF clashed at times amid the new offensive, but there are reports that the SDF has agreed to hand over control of Menbij to the Menbij Military Council. If any conflict between Kurdish forces and Turkish-backed forces escalates, civilians in the region may once again face displacement even as thousands of IDPs have only just begun to return. High prices and severe shortages in basic foodstuffs such as rice, sugar, bulgur, and vegetables remain a major concern, but life seems to be returning to normal after many weeks of conflict.

After the previous week's failure, a subsequent opposition offensive on al-Rai'i succeeded against the ISIS forces in the city. This was a critical victory for the opposition fight against ISIS, as it showed that the opposition in the A'zaz pocket of Syria is still able to advance eastward against their enemy as a new opposition offensive moves westward from Jarablus.

New violence broke out in Hasakah city this week as clashes between pro-government forces and the YPG grew in fervor amid aerial bombardment on YPG-held areas. Any non-aggression pact between Kurds and the Syrian government forces in Hasakah city is over, as YPG forces captured significant portions of the city. Fighting parties eventually brokered a ceasefire, originally reported as total withdrawal of pro-government troops from the city. It now appears that pro-government forces are allowed to hold a small security area in the middle of the city, and YPG forces have been able to maintain their newly gained territory. As many as 30,000 people have been displaced due to the fighting, many fleeing to Amuda, Darbasiyah, Malikiyyeh, Qamishli, Ras al Ain, Tal Tamer, and Upper Rmeilan.

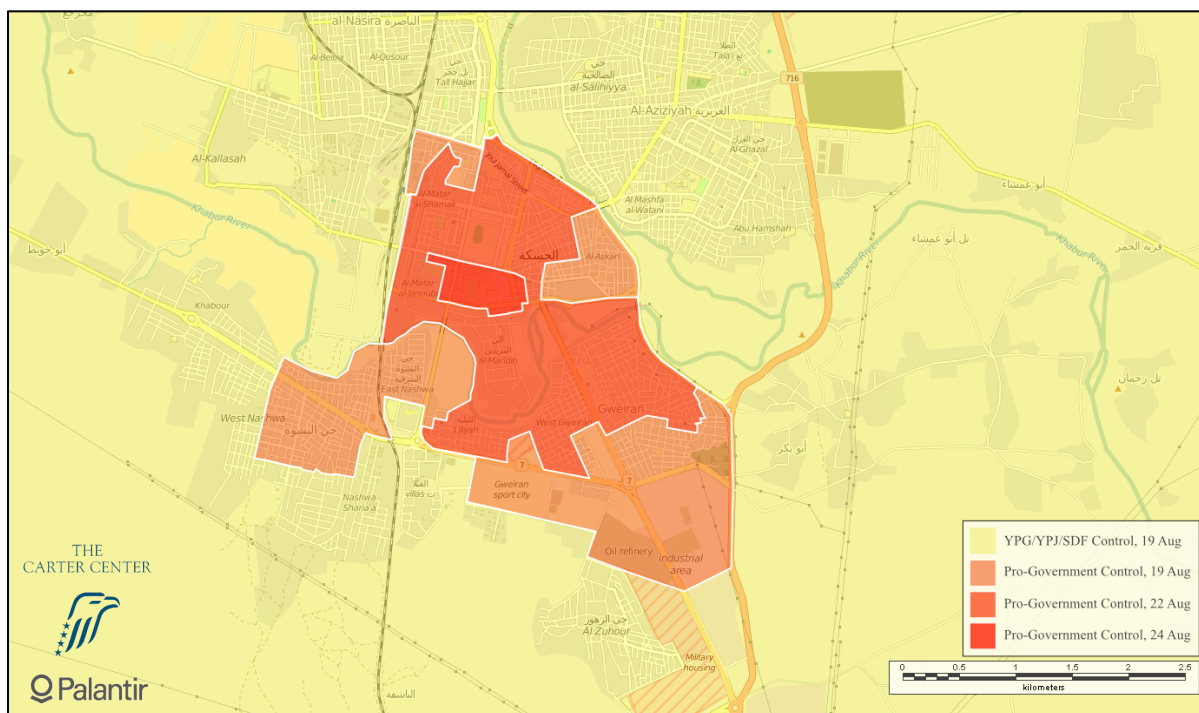


Figure 1 - Waning pro-government control on Hasakah city, August 19-24, 2016.

In the north of Aleppo city, opposition media sources reported that both YPG and opposition groups planned to attack a pro-government resupply route along Castello Road. Should these claims be followed with offensive action, this could mark yet another siege of populations of Aleppo, this time in the much more populous West Aleppo. No ground has yet been gained. Additionally, barrel bombing continues in Aleppo city, with reports of high civilian casualties.

In southern Aleppo, government forces continued their offensive against opposition forces, capturing the Al-Ramouseh Bridge and Roundabout and attacking the Aleppo Artillery Academy.

On August 19, barrel bombs filled with napalm targeted the only remaining field hospital in Darayya. Equipping additional hospitals in Darayya remains impossible due to the siege of the city. Government airplanes and helicopters targeted Darayya repeatedly over the course of the week, often dropping barrel bombs.

On August 24, the remaining opposition forces in Darayya agreed to the full surrender of the town to pro-government forces. Anti-government forces will be relocated to Idleb. Earlier this week, pro-government forces continued their forward advance into the city, prompting this final agreement.

The city of Saraqeb in Idleb experienced substantially less aerial bombardment over the course of this week. Whereas the week of August 11-17 saw daily attacks, this week saw only three days of airstrikes. The Tel Sheikh IDP Camp in the Khan Sheikhoun countryside was hit twice, allegedly by Syrian planes on August 19.

Much of Daraa governorate has suffered a total power outage since August 15 after four key transmission towers were sabotaged. They have since been repaired, but most households have not yet seen a return of power.

Conclusions

Turkey's direct introduction to the conflict represents a dramatic escalation of the conflict, with far-reaching implications. Given the animosity between Turkish forces and the mainly Kurdish SDF, the anti-ISIS operation could very easily morph into major confrontations between Turkish and Kurdish forces and ultimately harm anti-ISIS efforts in the area.

Concerns remain over sieges or potential sieges in Aleppo, Idleb's countryside, and Rural Damascus, even as opposition forces in Darayya agree to total surrender. Access to humanitarian aid is essential to reducing the human impact of the conflict, and sieges work against organizations trying to provide these basic necessities.