



Weekly Conflict Summary
November 10-16, 2016

This week, pro-government forces cleared opposition forces from Dahyiet al-Assad, pushing front lines beyond the western edge of Aleppo city and consolidating gains made over the past two weeks. As pro-government forces advanced, the governor of Aleppo announced plans to create a patrol to stop the high level looting in areas retaken from opposition forces. Crimes of this sort have been difficult to manage as the frontline forces in the war-torn city rely increasingly on foreign militia, weakening centralized control over pro-government forces.

On November 13, pro-government forces issued a 24-hour ultimatum calling for opposition fighters to lay down their arms and for civilians to leave opposition-held areas before airstrikes resume. High intensity strikes resumed after the 24-hour period elapsed, striking three hospitals in East Aleppo on November 16 and 17.

As the situation in East Aleppo continues to deteriorate, civilians have protested corruption among opposition leaders and demanded their removal. Demonstrators also stormed the opposition-controlled center for aid distribution of Asbat al-Jolani, distributing the supplies to the people. Kurdish merchants from Sheikh Maqsood have also defied the government and sold supplies to besieged East Aleppo.

Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) forces made major advances towards al-Bab this week. By November 13, OES fighters captured several villages overlooking al-Bab. By November 14, fighters had penetrated the perimeter of al-Bab, advancing from the Al-Ra'i highway. On November 15, after ISIS forces pulled back to al-Bab to reinforce the city, OES forces took Qabbasin. After significant back-and-forth fighting, it appears that OES forces had secured control Qabbasin by November 16.

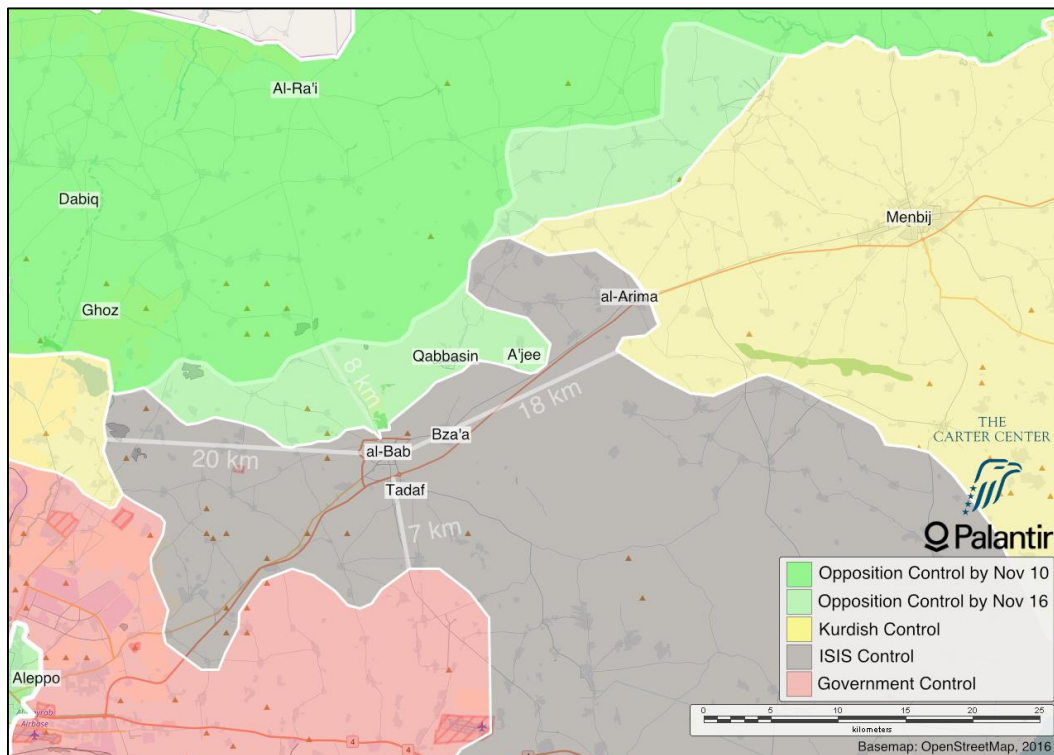


Figure 1: Territorial changes in northern Aleppo governorate.

On 13 November, a Turkish airstrike struck a Kurdish checkpoint in Afrin along a route used by IDPs from Aleppo city. The following day, Turkish artillery crews struck Kurdish positions in Tal Jijan in a likely attempt to prevent Kurdish forces from advancing eastwards towards al-Bab. These strikes mark yet another week of direct confrontation between Turkish-backed OES and Kurdish forces of the Afrin canton.

On 14 November, fighting between the Levantine Front and Ahrar al-Sham over checkpoint locations led to Ahrar al-Sham arresting a Levantine Front commander in northern Aleppo countryside. In Jarablus, sporadic clashes took place between Ahrar ash-Sham and Nour ad-Din az-Zinki. Two separate explosions struck locations in the city on November 13 and 17, which appear to be related to the infighting.

On November 14, the al-Sanadid Forces indicated they would join the SDF in the Euphrates Wrath (EW) offensive on the ISIS capital of Raqqa. Al-Sanadid boasts close Arab tribal ties in northern Syria and are thus important allies for EW following Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa's decision last week to abstain from the offensive. EW forces advanced southward towards Raqqa this week, and SDF forces around Menbij advanced to oust the remaining ISIS fighters between their territory and OES territory north of Menbij. The US announced that SDF forces would pull back across the Euphrates to allow Arab forces to occupy the towns taken by the Kurdish force. A similar statement was made in August, yet there does not appear to be a concrete plan for the handover of these towns and villages.

Airstrikes have continued on opposition-held territory throughout Idleb governorate. Over the past week, three schools were reported to have been struck in the bombardments in Idleb city, Ma'arat an-Numan, and al-Habit.

In Rural Damascus, fighting continues around Khan al-Shih, with multiple reports of artillery and air strikes on the opposition-held town. The city has been besieged and under increasing pressure since pro-government forces successfully cleared the nearby cities of Darayya and Moadamiyat as-Sham.

In southern Syria, pro-government forces have continued to target the towns of Abtaa and Da'el along the M5 highway linking Daraa and Damascus. The towns have been regularly targeted since September of this year. There are an estimated 10,000 IDPs from Abtaa and Da'el.

The southern border town of Nasib was targeted by airstrikes during the course of the week, and a building housing IDPs was struck during one of the strikes.

On November 10, President Obama ordered the Pentagon to find and kill all leadership of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. US strikes have targeted leadership from the group for months, but the new order makes the operations clear, formal, and undeniable.

Conclusions:

The OES has made major advances in the fight against ISIS in northern Aleppo over the past few weeks. With the recent advances, the battle for al-Bab has now officially begun. Should OES succeed in taking the city, advancing opposition and Turkish forces will find themselves in very close proximity to government positions to the south, raising the risk of direct confrontation between OES and government forces. Persistent infighting by opposition forces in the area indicates weak centralized control over the advance, further increasing the risk of a new front opening in the conflict in the near future.