



Weekly Conflict Summary

October 6-12, 2016

This week marks another week of continued offensives on most fronts in Syria. In the north, Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) saw remarkable success against ISIS. In Aleppo city, the pro-government offensive on besieged East Aleppo experienced slow but significant advances. The opposition offensive for Lattakia launched a new phase of battles for the week of Ashura, but all advances were repelled. In Hama, the Marwan Hadid Offensive has all but stopped its advance on government-held territory due to major in-fighting within the opposition. Lastly, government forces in rural Damascus made significant advances, further shrinking the pocket of opposition control in the Damascus countryside.

The opposition offensive in northern Aleppo supported by Turkish and American elements, Operation Euphrates Shield, saw another week of large gains. By October 11, opposition forces had surrounded the ISIS stronghold of Suran from the north, west, and east, engaging in clashes on the outskirts of the city by October 12. Should Suran fall, it will set the stage for the opposition advance on Dabiq, an important city for ISIS ideology. While advancing, however, OES forces struck a civilian area, raising further concerns for the safety of civilians trying to navigate rapidly changing front lines.

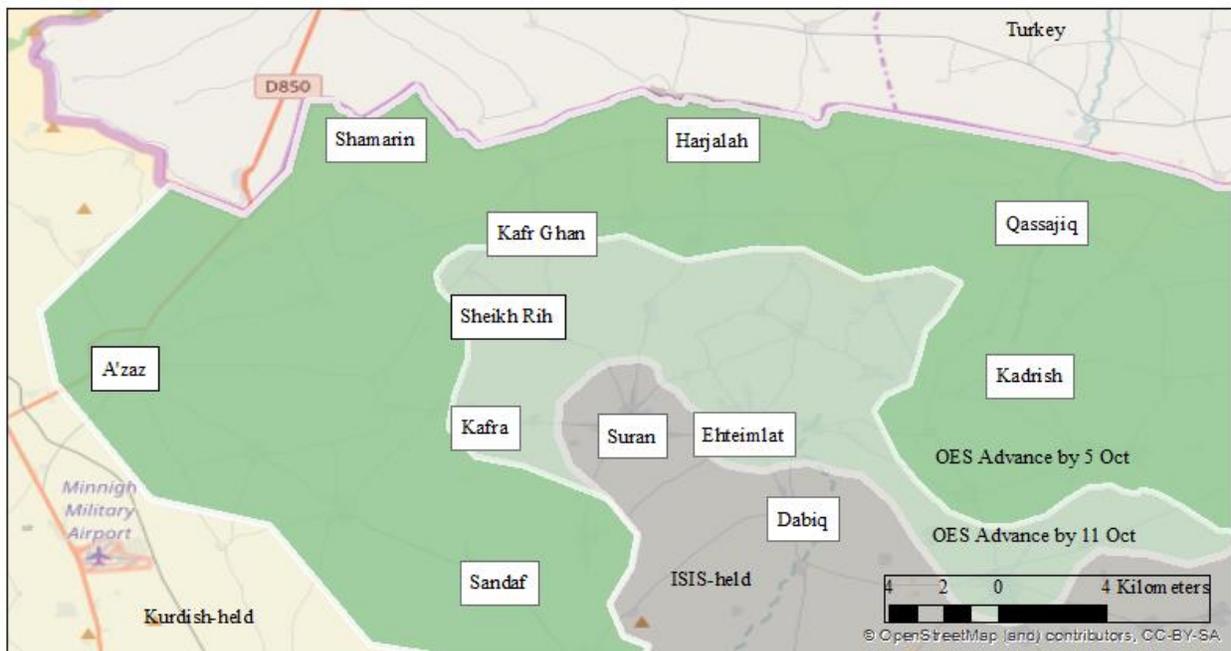


Figure 1: Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) advances in northern Aleppo governorate. Map made using software from Palantir Technologies.

The border city of Jarablus, under the control of Turkish-backed OES opposition groups, continues to receive concentrated relief from the Turkish and Qatari governments. As this makes the city a desirable

destination for many internally displaced persons (IDPs), the population is expected to continue growing as people choose to relocate there.

In the nearby city of Menbij, the Syrian Democratic Forces re-opened 40 schools for the first time in 3 years. The Menbij Civilian Council has hired 2,000 teachers to teach an estimated 30,000 students in the area. Other Kurdish-held areas, namely the Afrin canton and A'zaz district in northern Aleppo, continued to be targeted by Turkish forces this past week, reportedly resulting in civilian casualties.

The government offensive into east Aleppo saw continued success this week as pro-government forces were able to advance further into the north of opposition-held territory. Amid this advance, the humanitarian situation in East Aleppo remains of great concern. Heavy Russian and Syrian bombing and a slow-but-steady pro-government ground advance have led to a reportedly high number of civilian injuries or casualties. UN Special Envoy Stefan de Mistura volunteered on October 6 to escort Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) forces out from East Aleppo to remove any alibi for pro-government air forces to strike the area. The Syrian government has yet to respond. On October 10, the UN declared that the citizens of East Aleppo have been required to halve their food ration distributions due to the ongoing siege. The new distribution prioritizes those most in need of food, including families with disabled members, pregnant women, and households with an elderly member.

Elsewhere in Syria, the rift between Jund al-Aqsa and Ahrar ash-Sham grew over the course of this week. For the past few weeks, the two groups have openly fought each other in the northern countryside of Hama, despite both coordinating against pro-government forces in the Marwan Hadid offensive. Fighting continued this week with a Jund al-Aqsa suicide bomb targeting an Ahrar ash-Sham position in Idleb on October 10. This attack came a day after Jund al-Aqsa rejoined JFS, which has closely cooperated with Ahrar al-Sham on multiple fronts. JFS and Ahrar ash-Sham reached a ceasefire agreement on October 10, though given the history of tensions and the suicide attack, it remains unclear whether this agreement will last. Over 50 opposition groups have expressed support for Ahrar ash-Sham in the dispute.

In Rural Damascus governorate, a pro-government offensive on October 11 succeeded in capturing the town of Rihan in eastern Ghouta. The advancement brings front lines close to the opposition stronghold of Duma and nearly encircles opposition positions in Tel Kurdi. Further north, opposition forces in the towns of Qudsiyya and al-Hama surrendered to government forces on October 12. As part of the deal, opposition forces began by handing over heavy weaponry to government forces, and will eventually be transferred north to opposition held areas in Idleb governorate.

In Lattakia governorate, opposition forces conducted an offensive against government positions in the northeastern mountains near the Turkish border. The intensification of conflict led to an increase in the rate of reported shelling, but does not appear to have resulted in any territorial advances.

Civilians continued to experience the brunt of the effects of fighting throughout Syria. On October 6, an ISIS vehicle-borne IED struck the Atma border crossing, located west of Aleppo city. The attack reportedly killed 40 people and wounded many others. In Daraa city, opposition forces shelled a primary school in the al-Sehari neighborhood, reportedly killing five children, one adult, and wounding up to 20 others. In response to the international pressure, Jordan agreed on October 11 to once again allow the delivery of aid across the Syrian border (though still only via crane).

Conclusions:

The positive development of continued gains against ISIS positions in northern Syria were tempered by continued high rates of violence and civilian deaths throughout much of the rest of Syria. Persistent opposition infighting has meant little in the way of opposition advances while pro-government forces enjoyed significant advances, particularly in rural Damascus. Civilian wellbeing, particularly in Aleppo and in Kurdish regions along the Turkish border remains a primary concern.