

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

June 01-07, 2017

Over the course of this reporting period, ISIS continued to lose large portions of territory, particularly to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and pro-government Tiger Forces in northern Syria. New clashes erupted in rural Aleppo, Daraa, and Syria's southern desert as the Syrian government began new offensives against opposition forces on those fronts. Intra-opposition strife continues to plague groups in the opposition-held Idlib pocket.

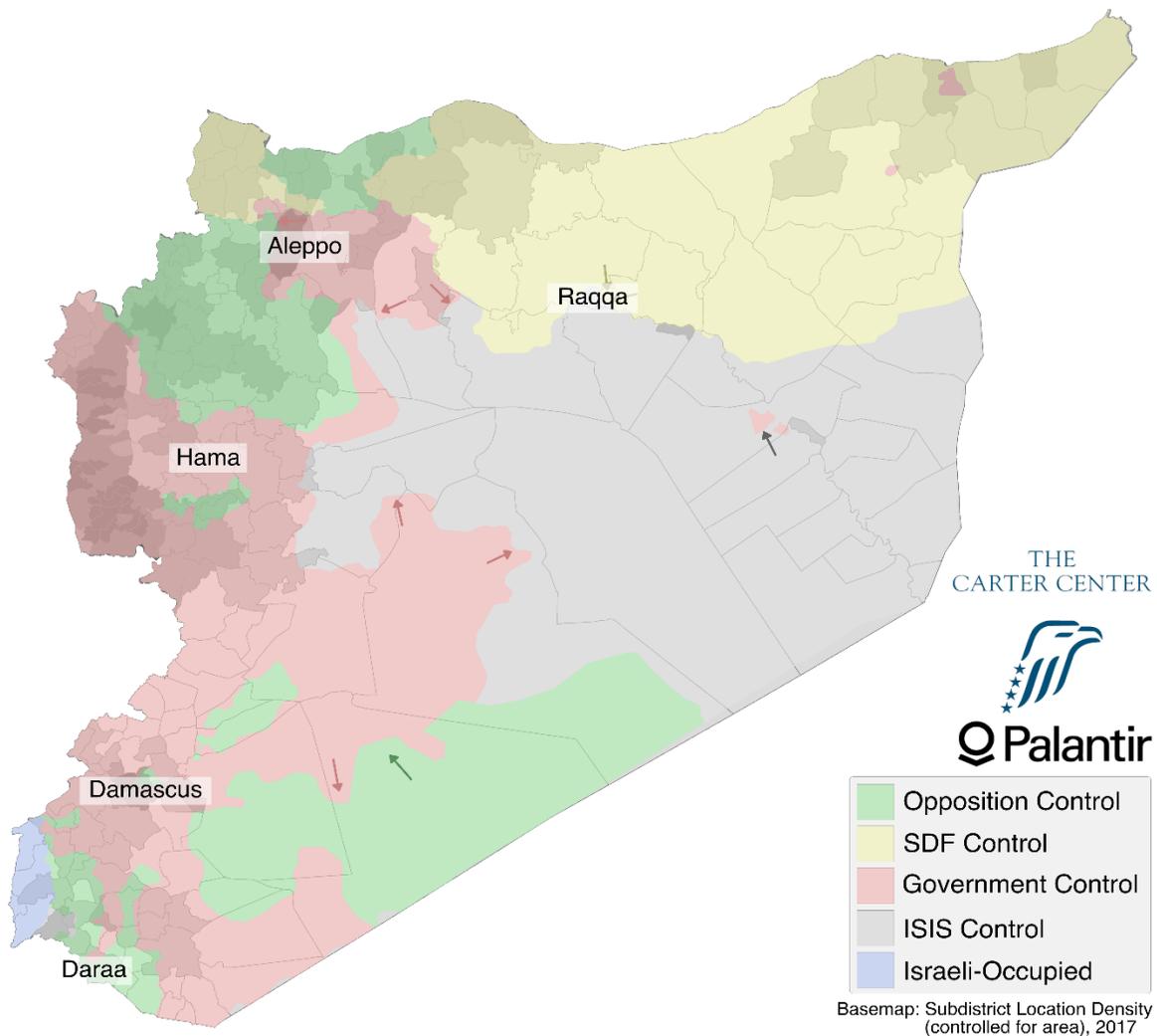


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by June 7, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period. The underlying map is shaded based upon the density of population centers, with darker areas indicating greater density.

Anti-ISIS offensives

On June 6, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced the beginning of the first phase of the battle for Raqqa city, the de facto ISIS capital. The announcement came as the SDF expelled ISIS forces from the western, northern, and eastern countryside of Raqqa city, reaching and breaching the edges of the city itself.

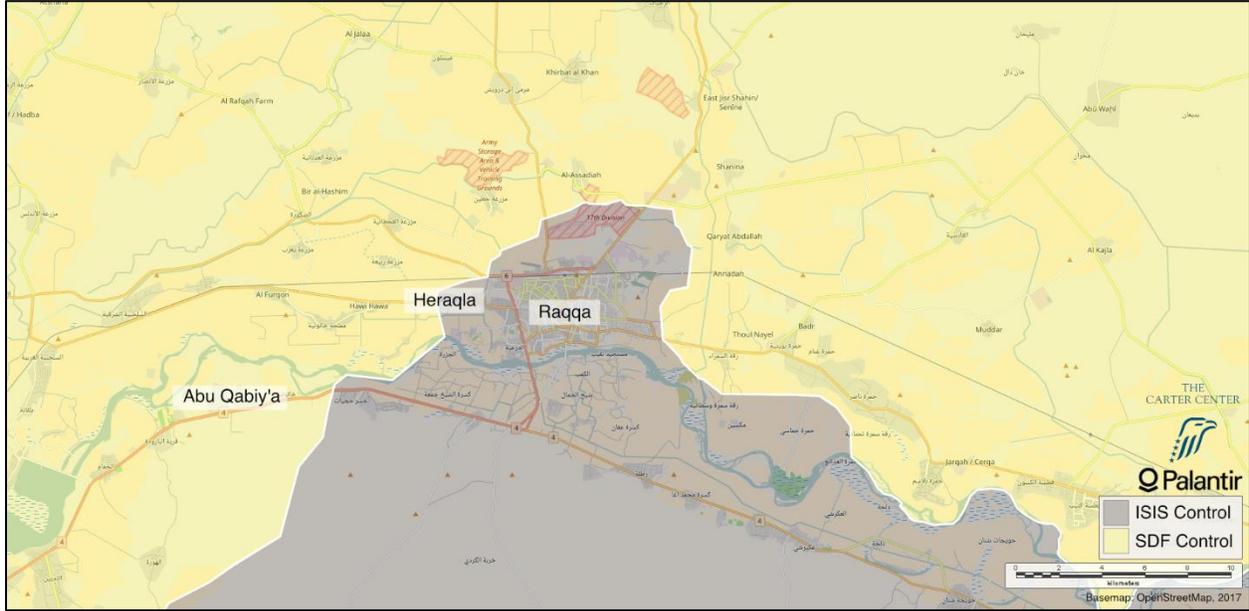


Figure 2 - Map of areas of control around Raqqa city by June 7

Kurdish YPG forces captured positions in Heraqla, west of Raqqa city, and briefly advanced to the eastern outskirts of Raqqa before retreating. The fight for Raqqa is likely to be a long and difficult one, as close air support will be limited in the populated urban environment, and the city will be heavily booby-trapped to slow the offensive.

A pro-government force, including the elite Tiger Forces, advanced again this week against ISIS in the eastern countryside of Aleppo, capturing Maskana by June 3. Shortly after, ISIS withdrew many of its forces from the area, facilitating a continued advance of pro-government forces which breached the administrative boundary of Raqqa governorate by June 7.

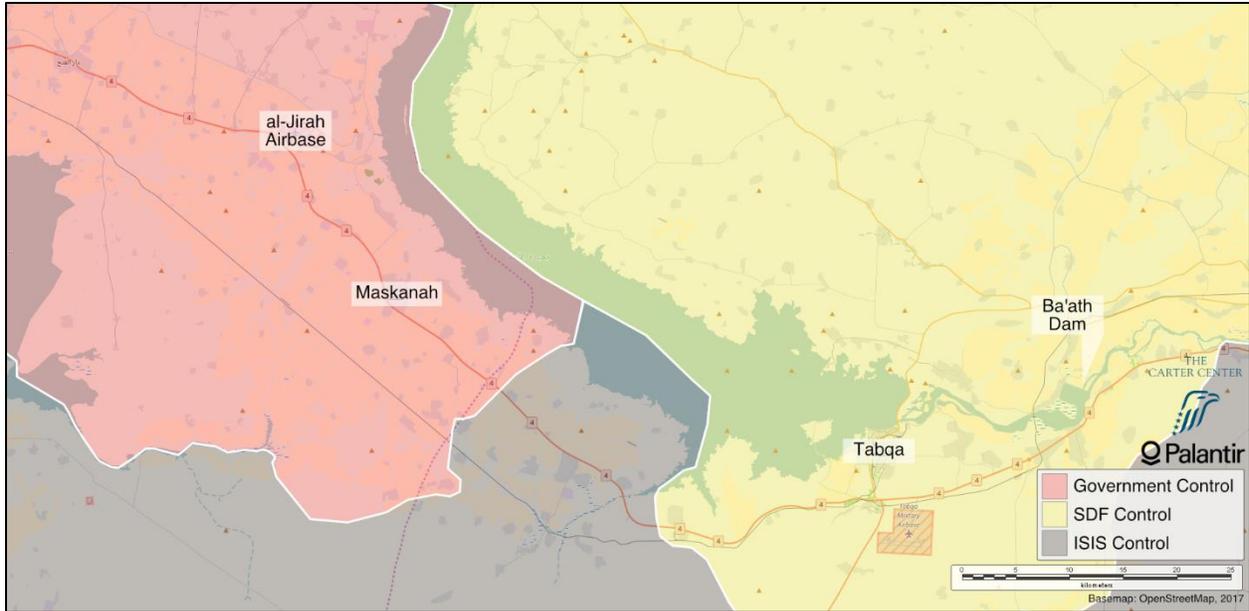


Figure 3 - Map of areas of control in the eastern countryside of Aleppo and western countryside of Raqqa by June 7

Pro-government forces, including Hezbollah, progressed in their offensive east of Tadmor towards Deir Ezzor. Pro-government forces advanced towards the T3 pumping station area and the Arak gas fields, which they have attempted to capture and hold for weeks.

In the city of Deir Ezzor, ISIS forces (perhaps bolstered by troop withdrawals elsewhere) conducted a renewed offensive against government-held positions in and around the city. ISIS attacked pro-government positions in Deir Ezzor from two flanks, focusing on the area southwest of the city. On June 3, ISIS forces broke through pro-government defenses around Brigade 137 (west of the city), capturing areas south of the base by June 4. Despite initially losing ground to the large ISIS offensive, government forces rallied and regained all territory lost by June 6.

Government offensives and counter-offensives

After several weeks of focusing primarily on ISIS, this reporting period saw pro-government forces initiate new offensives against opposition forces.

A new offensive northwest of Aleppo city, led by the Palestinian pro-government force Liwa al-Quds and elements of the Republican Guard, targeted opposition territory in the Andan and Hayyan suburbs of Aleppo city. Though these areas have long been strongholds for the opposition, it is possible that persistent infighting may facilitate a pro-government advance in the area. Additionally, clashes between pro-government and opposition forces erupted near al-Bab in northern Aleppo after months of relative calm.

The tense situation around the al-Tanf border crossing between Syria and Iraq grew even more tense this reporting period with a surge in troops, weapons, and rhetoric regarding the contested area. On June 1, the US sent more troops and supplies to protect al-Tanf base as Iranian-backed militias came closer. On June 4, Maghaweir al-Thawra, other FSA forces, and US special forces set up a new garrison at Zaghif, 70km north of al-Tanf. This new garrison is an expected launching point for operations on the eastern border crossing of al-Bukamal (130km north of Zaghif). On June 5, FSA forces launched an attack on pro-government militias using Grad rockets, while government and Russian planes launched airstrikes on opposition fighters in the area. The attacks led to clashes along the Damascus-Baghdad highway, during

which the FSA regained a few positions south of Zaza checkpoint and destroyed some armored vehicles. On June 6, the US conducted a strike targeting more than 60 militia soldiers inside the de-confliction zone around al-Tanf, destroying two artillery pieces and an anti-aircraft weapon, as well as damaging a tank. Despite the continued resistance by US-backed armed groups, pro-government forces are expected to continue their mission to reach the Syrian-Iraqi border at al-Tanf.

Also in the southern desert, the opposition’s Jaysh Asoud al-Sharqiya destroyed a government warplane leaving Dumayr Military Airport on June 5 and pro-government forces captured Tal Abed south of the airbase from Jaysh Asoud al Sharqiya on June 6.

In Daraa city, the opposition al Bunyan al Marsous operations room has continued to gain ground against pro-government forces this week. On June 3, the group destroyed a pro-government militia headquarters in Sajnah neighborhood. Clashes continued throughout the week in Manshiyeh neighborhood.

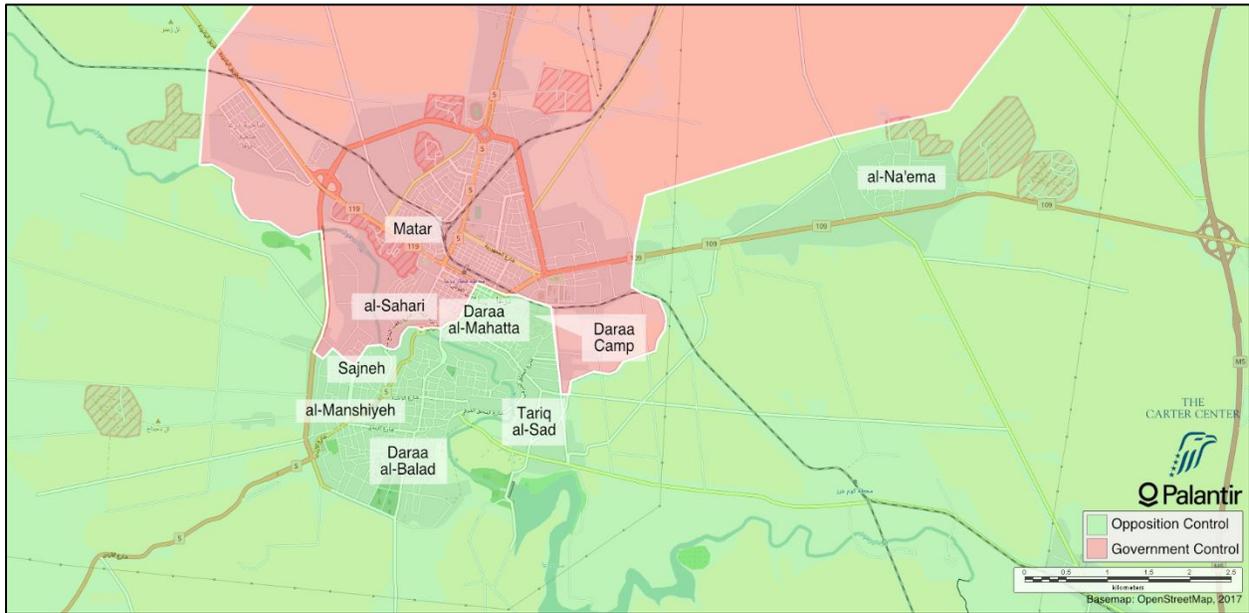


Figure 4 - Map of areas of control in Daraa city by June 7

On June 4, following a buildup of fighters from the Syrian army, Hezbollah, 4th Armored Division, 5th Assault Corps, and National Defense Force (NDF), pro-government forces began a new offensive against the opposition in Daraa city. So far, al Bunyan al-Marsous has repelled the offensive, which focused on the areas east of the Palestinian refugee camp in the city. The clashes throughout the week were accompanied by aerial bombardment by Russian and Syrian aircrafts, which included the extensive use of barrel bombs.

Opposition tensions

On June 1, Hai’yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) and Ahrar al-Sham clashed in the Jabal Hass area south of Aleppo city in al-Mada’en, Qneirat, and Smeiriyeh following a series of arrests and reprisal arrests of HTS and Ahrar al-Sham fighters in the area. The clashes resulted in the HTS capture of Ahrar al-Sham positions in Qneirat and reports of casualties on both sides, as well as civilian casualties due to the HTS assault.

A halt to fighting in Jabal Hass was negotiated on June 1, with an agreement calling for the release of all prisoners, the removal of checkpoints, and the formation of a council for arbitration. A June 6 meeting in

Tell Touqan near Saraqeb, Idleb to attempt to resolve the dispute ended in open fighting as HTS attacked Liwa Asood al-Islam, a sub-unit of Ahrar al-Sham.

Tensions between the two rivals also escalated in Idleb and Aleppo due to a feud over the purchase of wheat. The service arm of HTS issued a mandate on May 28 requiring wheat farmers in opposition-controlled territory in northern Syria to sell their yields to HTS at a price of 103-105 SYP per kilogram. This mandate was countermanded by a statement released by the Ahrar al-Sham-affiliated public service body on May 31 announcing it would purchase wheat at 140-142 SYP, matching the price set by the Syrian government. On May 31 HTS closed the Bab al-Hawa border crossing (apparently in response to the feud) and was preventing the passage of commercial and aid vehicles. After May 31 operations appeared to return to normal.

On June 7, under intense pressure from HTS, Faylaq al-Sham ceded control of several of its positions in northern Hama and Idleb governorate to HTS. In these areas, fighters were allowed safe passage, but in other areas HTS confiscated members' weapons and equipment.

HTS previously clashed with Faylaq al-Sham on June 2 in the western Aleppo countryside and on May 27 in Maar Shurin in southern Aleppo.

Evacuation deals and mergers

On June 1, an unknown number of people requiring medical treatment were evacuated from HTS-controlled areas in Yarmouk Camp in exchange for the evacuation of 16 persons from the pro-government towns of Kafraya and Fo'ah in Idleb governorate.

A Qatari ransom payment to Iran and Iranian-backed militias may have been a factor triggering the severance of diplomatic ties to Qatar by many Gulf states earlier this week. The ransom payments, estimated at \$700m, were secretly brokered as part of the prior Four Towns Agreement, in which Qatar played a key role in negotiations.

This week, Faylaq al-Sham and Jaysh al-Nukhba merged with five additional opposition groups to form the "Victory Bloc" in Northern Aleppo.

Conclusions:

Infighting continues to harm the opposition's efforts to advance and hold territory, and may have even been the cause of new pro-government offensives this week. It appears that de-escalation agreements nationwide are no longer being adhered to as violations of these ceasefires continued into this week. ISIS continues to lose territory at an unsustainable rate as SDF fighters surround and advance into the ISIS capitol of Raqqa. The tense and escalating situation around the al-Tanf border remains a point of great uncertainty as no warring party appears ready to back down over control of the highway.