

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
February 9-15, 2017

After a period of relative quiet, developments in the Daraa governorate picked up significantly between February 9 and 15. On February 8, eight Southern Front-affiliated groups agreed to a merger under the name “Coalition of Southern Forces” and released a public announcement about the agreement the following day. This development likely comes in no small part due to frustrations with the Southern Front and news that the Jordan-based Military Operation Command (MOC) would begin to phase out their military base. The Southern Front has been criticized by some opposition supporters as not doing enough to fight the government due to its partnership with the MOC.

On February 12 a new opposition offensive for the northern neighborhoods of Daraa city began. The opposition force included fighters from FSA groups, including a few from the Coalition of Southern Forces, as well as Haiy’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Ahrar al-Sham. These groups have formed a joint operations room which they have called Al-Bunyan Al-Marsous. The frontlines in Daraa city have long been stable and opposition forces were able to advance primarily in the western neighborhood of Manshiyeh, south of the river.

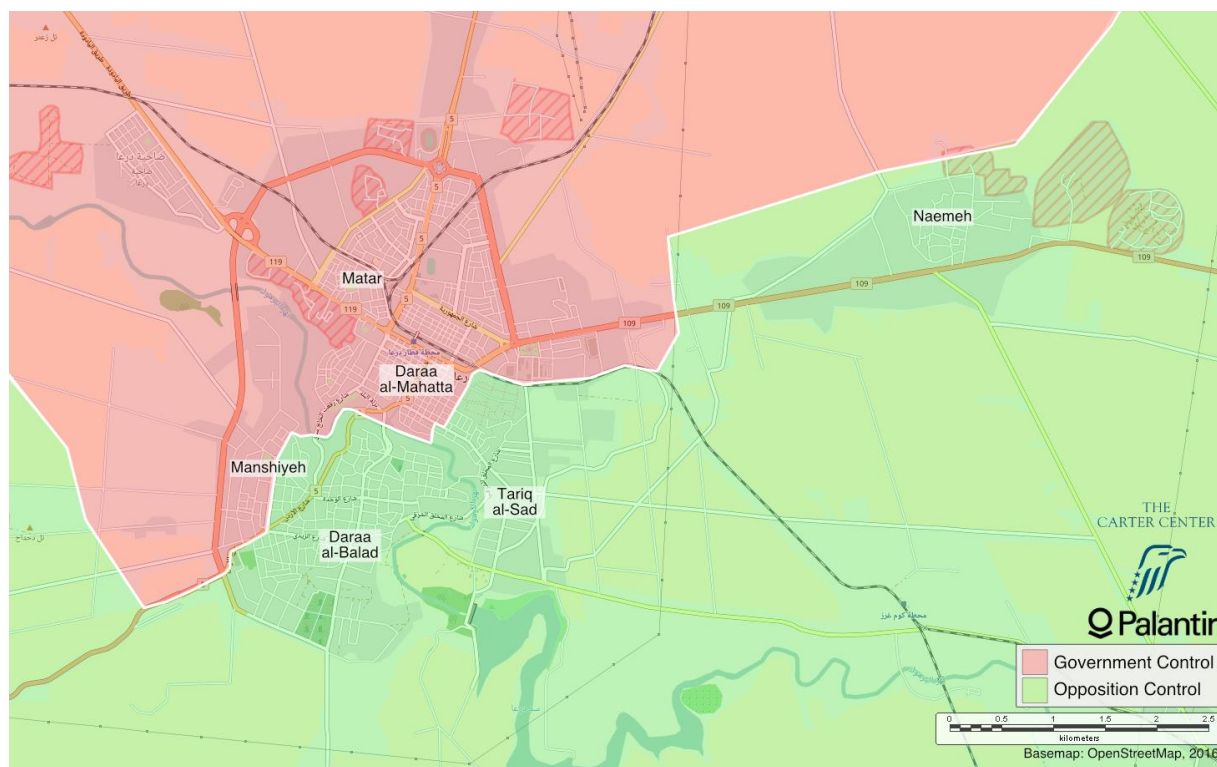


Figure 1 - Frontlines in Daraa city by February 15, 2017

Pro-government response to the new advances has included a ground force counterattack as well as heavy aerial bombardment on the southern neighborhoods of Daraa city and on the town of Naemeh in the eastern countryside. Retaliatory airstrikes have included deployment of barrel bombs and the destruction of hospitals in the city.

Gains by Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), a Turkish and Syrian opposition coalition, into ISIS-held Al-Bab city last week have been partially reversed due to significant ISIS counterattack and OES concerns of surprise attacks from the extensive network of ISIS tunnels in the city. OES forces are still within the defensive berm of Al-Bab and hold a good deal of the suburban, western portion of Al-Bab city. Turkish warplanes hit the city of Al-Bab over this period, bombing residential buildings in Al-Bab on February 13. A Russian warplane also struck a building in a village southwest of Al-Bab, killing and injuring Turkish soldiers. Russia apologized and there was no retaliation for the strike.

Pro-government forces in the southern countryside of Al-Bab advanced east against ISIS positions this week while OES forces fought the group within the city. In the town of Tal Refaat (in Afrin canton), discussions between the Syrian Army and the Afrin YPG led to an agreement of protection against opposition or Turkish aggression.

After the split between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham in the opposition-held Idleb pocket, fighters from the ISIS-linked Liwa al-Aqsa fought against the FSA Jaysh al-Nasr on the northern Hama frontline during the previous reporting period. This week, Liwa al-Aqsa was finally directly confronted by much of the other armed opposition in the area, subsequently being forced from many localities in the area. HTS finally intervened against Liwa al-Aqsa in Jaysh al-Nasr's defense, despite a previous demand that Jaysh al-Nasr pledge allegiance to HTS. Amidst the struggle, al-Aqsa executed more than 150 Jaysh al-Nasr POWs in Khan Shekhoun.

Hezbollah activity along the border between Syria and Lebanon has increased amid discussions between Hezbollah and FSA-aligned brigades in Western Qalamoun. Hezbollah forces have agreed to pull west towards the Lebanese border, handing over several towns along the M-5 highway to FSA battalions.

Conflict around the besieged, opposition-held al-Wa'er neighborhood of Homs remained high this week in the form of aerial bombardment, tank shelling, mortar fire, and sniper fire. Opposition groups, including Faylaq al-Sham, suspended a previous ceasefire with the Syrian government on February 10, citing prior violations by the government and affiliated militias. Areas in Rural Damascus also remain under siege, including the northern towns of Madaya and al-Zabadani.

In the battle for Deir Ezzor, Hezbollah and other pro-government forces advanced slightly this week in the Workers' Districts. This front is critical to pro-government forces as they attempt to reconnect western Deir Ezzor city with eastern part of the city, the latter of which contains the Deir Ezzor Military Airport.

Conclusions:

The turmoil of the opposition-held Idleb pocket appears to be settling itself, though at great human cost. A new offensive in Syria's south indicates that the Southern Front's silence did not mean the end to armed uprising as new fronts are opened on previously firm frontlines. Pro-government forces' progress against ISIS forces on the fronts in Aleppo governorate and Deir Ezzor continues at a steady pace.