



Weekly Conflict Summary

August 4-10, 2016

Conflict this week remained intense, especially in Aleppo and Idleb, where major fighting centered around the capitals of both governorates.

Anti-government forces broke the siege of opposition-held east Aleppo city, in large part due to the revitalized Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra. Opposition forces breached and subsequently occupied the majority of Ramousa neighborhood in southwest Aleppo early in the week, the final area separating them from opposition territory in al-Ameriyeh neighborhood. Though a few opposition aid deliveries have been reported and photographed as part of a JFS media campaign, the resupply route into East Aleppo remains effectively closed due to frequent air strikes and ongoing conflict.

On August 10, opposition sources reported a chlorine gas attack on opposition-held positions in eastern Aleppo. These reports have yet to be independently verified.

Overall, the humanitarian situation in Aleppo city remains precarious as both government and opposition forces operate in a state of semi-siege. While opposition-held territory and government-held territory are both contiguous, supply routes are still extraordinarily risky. Infrastructure providing power to the city's water pumps was damaged during the intense combat over the past couple of weeks, leaving the entire city without running water.

The Russian Federation announced daily three-hour ceasefires in Aleppo to allow aid convoys to reach eastern parts of the city. While the UN responded positively to this announcement, calling for an expansion to weekly 48-hour ceasefires, opposition forces criticized the lack of similar efforts while opposition portions of the city were besieged.

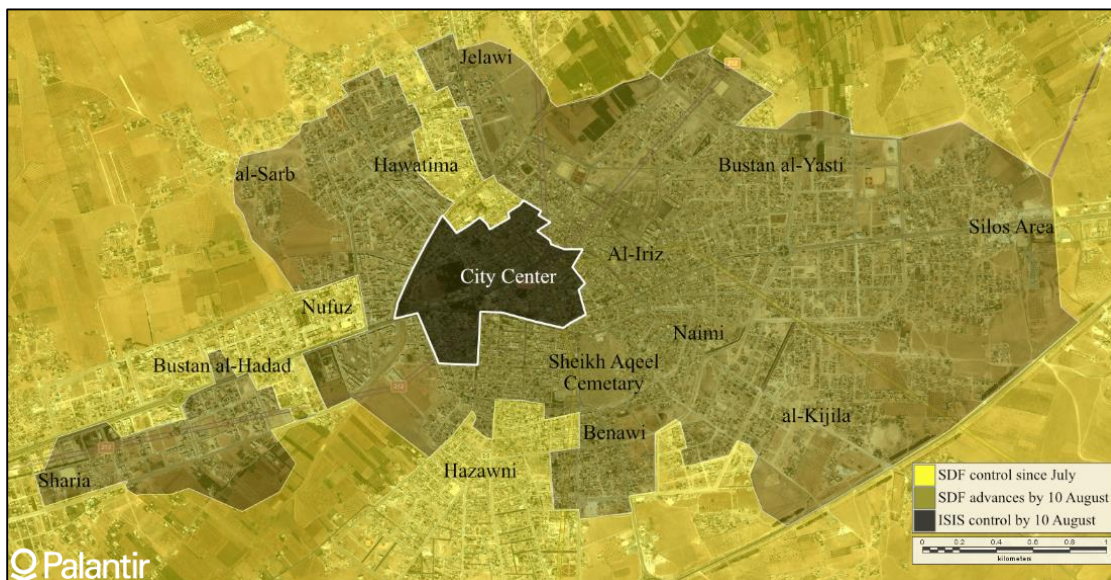


Figure 1 - SDF advance on Menbij city, as of 10 August.

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) advanced further into ISIS-held Menbij city, relegating ISIS fighters to a portion of the city center (Figure 1, above). In their retreat, ISIS fighters have taken much of the remaining civilian population hostage, issuing threats to SDF commanders against the lives of the civilian population. SDF sources estimate about 100 ISIS fighters and at least 1,000 civilians remain.

In an attempt to break the siege of Menbij city, ISIS forces have pressured areas north of the city. This ongoing effort recently led to significant territorial gains in the northern countryside, though ISIS forces remain approximately 7km away from front lines in the city as of August 10.

Tensions between Kurdish groups and anti-government forces elsewhere in Aleppo have been on a steady rise, most recently indicated by renewed YPG shelling on opposition-held A'zaz on August 10. Some fear that after the SDF clears Menbij of ISIS fighters, Kurdish forces may renew their campaign to connect the YPG-held northwestern Afrin Canton with the SDF-held Kobani Canton to the east. The two cantons are only separated by 50km of ISIS held territory.

Internally-displaced persons (IDPs) from Menbij city continue to arrive in SDF-controlled areas in the eastern and southern Menbij countryside, often through minefields or under sniper fire. An estimated 60,000 IDPs have resettled in the countryside of Menbij since the start of the SDF offensive. IDPs continue to receive very little humanitarian aid in the area.

On August 7, Russian forces were accused of bombing a residential area of Idleb city with thermite (incendiary) bombs while four airstrikes on August 6 hit a Doctors Without Borders (MSF) Amal Hospital in Millis, Idleb. The hospital served 70,000 people in the area and specialized in pediatrics before it shut down due to the airstrike. An ongoing aerial campaign targeting Saraqeb, Idleb has also caused extensive infrastructural damage and a mass displacement of residents. Reports indicate that around only 10,000 of the city's 53,000 residents still remain.

Though there has been relatively little fighting in southern Syria, an opposition group reportedly shelled government positions in Daraa city, causing civilian deaths and injuries. This event was condemned by a local coalition of opposition groups, Banyan al-Marsoos Operations Room, which condemned all operations within their area without prior coordination. In encouraging this coordination, they intend to minimize future civilian casualties.

Elsewhere in Daraa governorate, approximately 130 families were displaced from the city of Aqraba on August 6. Civilians fled to the city of Hara or to Quneitra governorate after government helicopters targeted Aqraba with four barrel bombs. An estimated 2,400 people remain in Aqraba (30% of the original population of 8,000).

As has been the case for the past few weeks, the Jordanian government continues to limit humanitarian access to tens of thousands of displaced Syrians stranded in Hadalat and Rukban refugee camps along the Syria-Jordan border. Jordanian authorities at the Tal Shihab border crossing still refuse entry of severely injured persons to medical facilities in Jordan.

Conclusion

The high level of conflict extending through much of Syria remains exceedingly worrisome for the peace process. Major offensives and new attempts to garrison or retake lost territory have aggravated the humanitarian impact of the war these past few weeks. Engagement in talks for long term ceasefires for the provision of assistance to trapped or impacted civilian populations are of utmost importance to reduce the damage endured by people who are not party to the conflict. Continued use of chemical, incendiary, cluster, and other indiscriminate munitions should be condemned by all sides.