



## **Southern Syria Conflict Update**

### **July 10, 2015**

This report was compiled from open source information and information reported to The Carter Center. The brief is not meant to be comprehensive but rather to serve as a reference guide and summary of what information is available at present time.

### **Overview**

Since late 2014, southern Syria has witnessed the gradual advance of opposition forces. While the opposition has consolidated and expanded its control in southern and central areas of Daraa and Quneitra, the government and its allies appear determined to maintain a presence in the south and isolate opposition groups in the area.

Leading the gradual opposition advance is the Southern Front, a coalition of more than 50 armed opposition groups, each individually backed by the Friends of Syria. Meant to pressure the government, counterbalance rising Islamist opposition forces, and support an eventual political process, the Southern Front has been largely successful. However the Front remains a precariously loose coalition hinged on hopes of a political process that has yet to materialize.

Meanwhile, signs of Jabhat al-Nusra's (JAN) decline in the south have become increasingly visible. The gradual decline of this influential component of the southern armed opposition raises questions about who will fill the resulting vacuum. With the Southern Front, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah (Ahrar al-Sham), the Islamic State (IS), and others seeking to take advantage of this decline, the future of Syria's southern opposition looks to remain uncertain for the foreseeable future.

This report highlights opposition advances in southern Syria, challenges facing the Southern Front, JAN's decline, and the implications that these may have in the near future.

### **Opposition Advances**

Late 2014 marked a period of steady opposition advance in southern Syria. In September, opposition forces gained control of Syria's entire border with the Israeli occupied Golan Heights, and pushed east to take strategic areas along the Daraa-Rural Damascus provincial border. In December, the opposition cut a

government supply line to Daraa city with the capture of Sheikh Miskeen and the neighboring 82<sup>nd</sup> Brigade base.

Government forces, with assistance from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah, responded to opposition advances with a large scale offensive in February along the Daraa-Rural Damascus provincial border. Opposition forces were expelled from much of the area, but were able to block further advances. Meanwhile, government forces fortified positions throughout northern Daraa and Quneitra, leading opposition forces to shift their attention south.

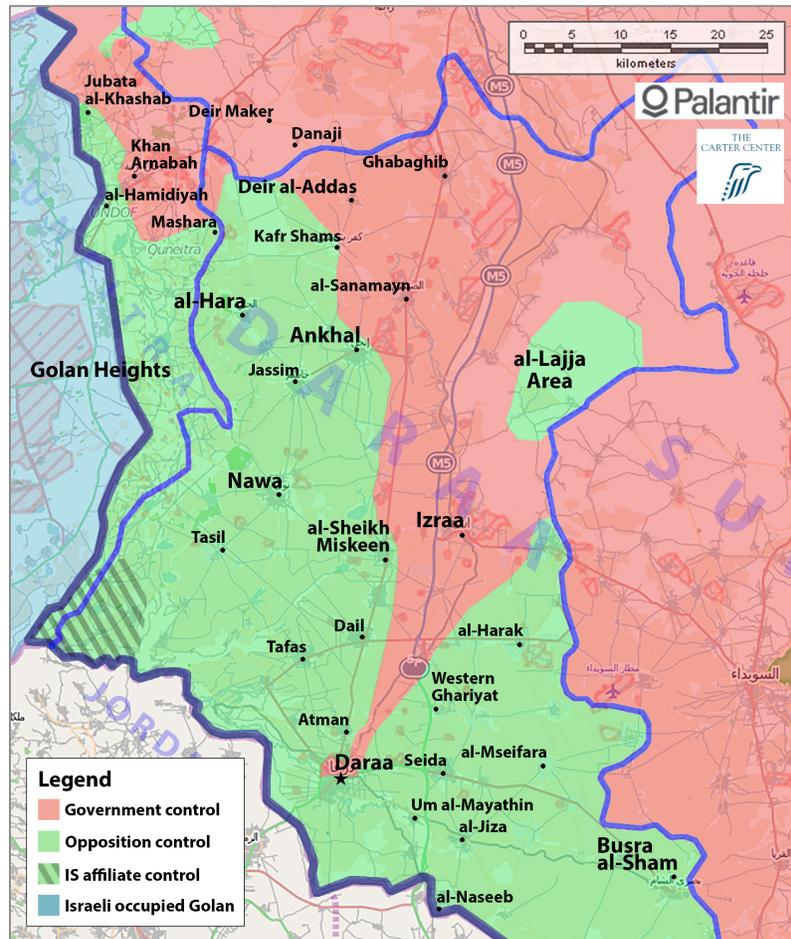


Figure 1: Areas of control in southern Syria as of early July 2015.

In early April, opposition forces seized the Nasib border crossing, the last government controlled crossing in Daraa and an important economic asset for the government. Long surrounded by opposition territory, Southern Front members had been urged by Friends of Syria supporters not to take the crossing or disrupt the roadway to Damascus. However, in late March, the discovery of a JAN tunnel to the crossing forced the Friends of Syria and Southern Front member groups to act. The seizure of the crossing proved to be an unexpected, important victory for the southern opposition.

Opposition forces began to consolidate their control of southeastern Daraa in the spring, with the seizure of the contested, historic city of Busra al-Sham. In June, the opposition gained control of the sprawling

52<sup>nd</sup> Brigade base and several surrounding cities in less than a week. With near complete control of southeastern Daraa, the opposition halted further eastward advances at the Daraa-Suweida provincial border.

Suweida, home to a majority Druze population, remains under government control despite waning support for the government amongst residents. Since the beginning of the conflict, the southern opposition has sought to avoid agitating the neighboring Druze population. Commanders have built connections with Druze leaders, apologized for incursions, and in June, halted an opposition assault on the Thala Military Airport on Suweida's western edge. The Daraa-Suweida provincial border has remained relatively calm since. In Quneitra, isolated government held Druze villages became vulnerable in mid-June, lying on the periphery of opposition campaigns to gain full control of the governorate and open opposition supply routes to Rural Damascus. However, the campaigns were reduced following strong resistance by government forces and external directives not to place the Druze communities at risk.

In late June, the Southern Storm campaign to take full control of Daraa city was announced. The long awaited campaign involves nearly all opposition forces in Daraa, including Southern Front members, Harakat al-Muthana al-Islamiyah (al-Muthana), Ahrar al-Sham, and JAN. However, following the premature announcement of the campaign, the government launched an intense aerial bombardment campaign and reinforced positions around the city. The campaign has proven costly for the opposition, who nevertheless seem determined to continue until they take full control of the city.

## **The Southern Front**

The southern armed opposition, specifically the Southern Front, has received increased international attention throughout 2015. Much of this attention is a result of their military successes and the relative absence of Islamist opposition forces, which dominate northern Syria. Established by the Friends of Syria following the collapse of Geneva II peace talks in early 2014, each member group is supported individually through the Military Operations Center (MOC), a body of international intelligence and military advisors from the Friends of Syria. However, the Southern Front is also facing increasing challenges. Commanders still complain of inadequate support, the government has effectively sealed off southern Syria from Damascus and appears determined to maintain a presence in the south, JAN and similar groups continue to play an active role in the south, and the IS has made quiet inroads into the region. Importantly, there is no political process on the horizon for Front member groups to support.

To keep up with growing external perceptions of the Southern Front as a unified body, and a genuine desire for greater cohesion, equity, and inclusivity amongst members, the Front has increasingly focused efforts on transforming the coalition into a true organization. Concentrating on the development of various organizational structures, their attempts have been met by challenges that reflect the inherent nature of the coalition and disagreement amongst the Friends of Syria. The current Southern Front arrangement necessitates that every member is beholden to the policies of the MOC and left with little autonomy as a member group or as a whole. While external interference is not unique to the Southern Front, the levels of interference in the Front are high and have weakened the Front's ability to take collective action. Without a shift in MOC policy that lessens the impact of competition amongst MOC states and allows for greater Syrian ownership of the Southern Front, efforts by Front member groups to

act collectively will likely be unsuccessful and counterproductive. Two recent developments exemplify these challenges.



Figure 2: Principle members of the Southern Front as of early July 2015.

First, in late 2014, Southern Front member groups attempted to establish a unified court system, known as Dar al-Adel. Originally including judges from Southern Front member groups, JAN, and al-Muthana, the court sought to enable the southern opposition to hold itself accountable and ensure security in opposition held areas of the south. However, the MOC considered the court to be contrary to its policy of isolating JAN and provided no support. Consequently, disputes between armed groups continue to be resolved on an ad-hoc basis and the MOC continues to issue directives contrary to those of Dar al-Adel. While such an arrangement may suit the MOC’s short term policies, its efforts to thwart Dar al-Adel leave Southern

Front member groups ill-equipped to ensure the continued, orderly administration of a large opposition held enclave.

Secondly, in May, a joint command council for the Southern Front was announced. Presented as an elected body exercising command and control over all members of the Southern Front, it appeared as if the member's common desire for greater cohesion had been realized. However, it quickly became public that those behind it had not consulted large segments of the Southern Front and that no indication had been given that the MOC was relinquishing command and control to the council. Surprised and confused by the announcement, many in the Front viewed the council as an unrepresentative body, hastily imposed by MOC member states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Such unilateral moves threaten to amplify the perceived lack of equity and inclusivity within the Southern Front. Concerned members of the Front did not, however, begrudge council members or denounce the council. Instead, they critiqued the process behind its formation and began seeking ways to make the council more representative.

Following the announcement of the joint command council, the Southern Front announced the formation of the Southern Front operations rooms. The announcement appears to signal a more inclusive attempt at strengthening internal coordination amongst Southern Front member groups. It comes at a time when more attention will likely be placed on the south, as the opposition's campaign to take Daraa city gains momentum. However, it remains to be seen if such a formation has the full support of the MOC, or is simply a way to resolve internal disputes.

## **The Decline of JAN**

Since 2014, the MOC has worked to gradually isolate JAN, choosing to forgo direct confrontation. By most accounts the policy has been a success, and the presence of JAN has been significantly reduced across the south. Several southern opposition commanders recently estimated JAN's numbers between 500 and 1,500. Although such figures are difficult to verify, JAN's reduced role in military operations and judicial affairs speak to their general accuracy. Nevertheless, JAN remains one of the most important forces in the south and will likely remain a feature of the southern landscape for the foreseeable future.

While JAN has sought to push back against MOC policies, its efforts have largely backfired, damaging its local standing and causing internal rifts. The foiled JAN surprise attack on the Nasib crossing, meant to humiliate the Southern Front, drew vocal condemnation from many in the southern opposition. The fact that JAN encouraged looting of the crossing following opposition seizure only increased tensions. Compounding the effects of its isolation, JAN is being gradually depleted by ongoing operations against local IS affiliates, Jaysh al-Jihad and the Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade.

JAN's decline in the south has created a vacuum which the Southern Front, Ahrar al-Sham, the IS, and others increasingly seek to fill. An influx of MOC support has allowed several Southern Front member groups to integrate local JAN fighters and maintain momentum in the field. However, this growth has been limited.

Meanwhile, Ahrar al-Sham has integrated hundreds of former JAN fighters into its southern contingent, possibly laying the foundation for continued Ahrar al-Sham growth in the south. If it is able to allocate

enough resources to draw out and incorporate discontented members of the Southern Front, Ahrar al-Sham could become the largest single group in the south and play a leading role in the military, judicial, and political affairs of the region. Notably critical reactions from Southern Front members to the recent announcement of Jaysh al-Fatah-South, a smaller manifestation of the Ahrar al-Sham-JAN led operations room in Idlib, demonstrate that some in the south may be worried about the growing reality of such a scenario.

Despite increased external support to integrate former JAN fighters, forces across the south will continue to remain vulnerable to IS co-option. Internal and external actors remain divided on how to confront the IS and appear unable to develop collective mechanisms to prevent its entry to southern Syria. Thus the IS will likely be a continual nuisance for the southern opposition, both in their struggle against government forces and in their efforts to administer opposition territories.

## **Conclusion**

The pace of southern opposition advances is likely to slow throughout the remainder of 2015. The southern opposition may gain control of Daraa city, but pushing further north will be costly and slow. Such a scenario is problematic for the Southern Front. Unable to maintain momentum against government forces, its longevity will be increasingly reliant on international efforts towards a political solution. If the Friends of Syria fail to revive such efforts, and military and political stagnation sets in, Front member groups may grow restive with a continuous lack of progress toward their preferred outcome, and may look to Islamist forces as an attractive alternative should these forces continue to make gains in northern Syria.