

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
February 23-March 1, 2017

On February 23, Operation Euphrates Shield (OES – a coalition of Turkish and Syrian opposition) fighters forced ISIS to retreat from Al-Bab city, a city previously key to the ISIS foothold in northern Syria. In the days following, OES forces cleared ISIS forces from Qabbasin and several villages southeast of Al-Bab. OES forces advanced east to Jeb al-Hamir and Skariya al-Kubra just south of al-Orima. These advances east have expanded the frontline between Kurdish forces and OES fighters in northern Aleppo. While OES was fighting in Al-Bab, the Syrian Government’s Tiger Forces advanced eastwards in the countryside south of Al-Bab, eventually reaching territory controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF – a coalition of largely Kurdish and Arab opposition forces) near Jeb al-Khafi and Tlila.

OES forces, especially Liwa Sultan al-Murad, have announced that their target after Al-Bab is Manbij, the Kurdish-held city east of the Euphrates and central seat of the Manbij Military Council (a largely Arab sub-unit of the SDF). Turkish President Erdogan has stated similar aims. These professed goals further complicate the balance of forces in the region, as US forces and equipment are again starting to appear with Kurdish forces around Manbij. On March 1, OES forces reignited the front with the SDF, battling Kurdish forces around al-Houta. On March 2, the Manbij Military Council announced they would be handing a portion of their territory over to Syrian Government forces to create a buffer zone against the OES. The boundaries of this new government enclave are still unclear, and questions remain as to which unit of the Syrian military will occupy the area.

On March 1, Russian warplanes hit SDF fighters in an area of Manbij where US forces had been stationed. The Russian Ministry of Defense quickly announced that the strike was an accident and that they thought the forces on the ground were ISIS fighters. US special forces arrived in Manbij on February 27, but were apparently not in the area hit.

In the Raqqa countryside, SDF forces consolidated control over the ISIS territory they had encircled. Advances this week were minimal as the SDF took time to reinforce and resupply their frontlines around the ISIS stronghold. SDF officials also have stated publicly that if the OES attempts to advance on Manbij, they will pull forces from the Raqqa fronts to mount a counteroffensive in the west.

Pro-government forces in eastern Homs achieved significant advances this week, finally entering parts of the ISIS-held city of Tadmor (Palmyra) on March 1. As of March 2, Syrian government forces had recaptured the remainder of the city. ISIS fighters advanced in the southwest of Syria, expanding significantly the territory they hold in their Quneitra pocket.

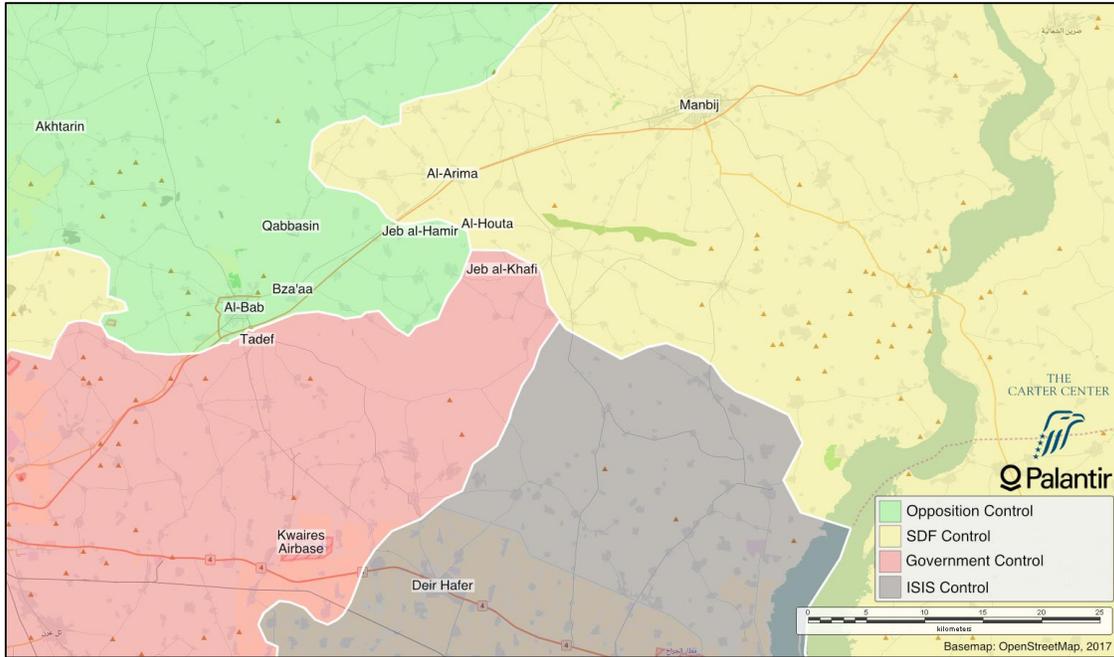


Figure 1: Areas of Control around Al-Bab as of March 1, 2017.

In Homs city, the Military Security Branch HQ (a military intelligence unit concerned with detention and interrogation) was hit by five Haiy’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) suicide bombers on February 26. In the 24 hours preceding the attack, pro-government airstrikes hit an unusually high number of opposition-held locations, including Ariha, Daraa, Deir Hafr, Duma, Khan al-Sheikhoun, Lahaya, Harasta, and al-Wa’er.

Abu al-Khayr al-Masri was killed in a US drone strike on his car in al-Mastoume in Idleb governorate on February 26. Al-Masri was son-in-law to the late Al-Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden and widely considered Al-Qaeda’s deputy leader, who has been involved in many countries since the 90s.

A pro-government offensive for the opposition-held Qaboun pocket in Rural Damascus restarted this week and saw some initial gains in the western section of the area. The opposition’s pocket of control in Eastern Ghouta has shrunk consistently over the past year, and is likely to contract more in the face of a renewed government offensive.

There seems to have been very little adherence to the ceasefire, even as Geneva IV continued into this week. Heavy rains in much of Syria for the final two days of the week offered a temporary reduction in airstrikes, though the Dumayr Dam was damaged by the rain, causing massive overflows as far south as the Dumayr Airbase, east of Damascus city.

Conclusions:

The situation around Al-Bab continues to grow more complicated, even as ISIS has been expelled from key localities in the area. ISIS forces lost significant territory this week on several key frontlines as all sides of the conflict have aimed to take territory from the group in the north.