

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
March 9-15, 2017

This reporting period saw consistently high levels of violence throughout Syria. Conflict in the Eastern Ghouta region outside Damascus remained particularly high, especially in Qaboun, where pro-government forces are attempting to advance. Pro-government forces destroyed several opposition tunnels at the start of the week as they work to consolidate control over gains made in the previous reporting period.

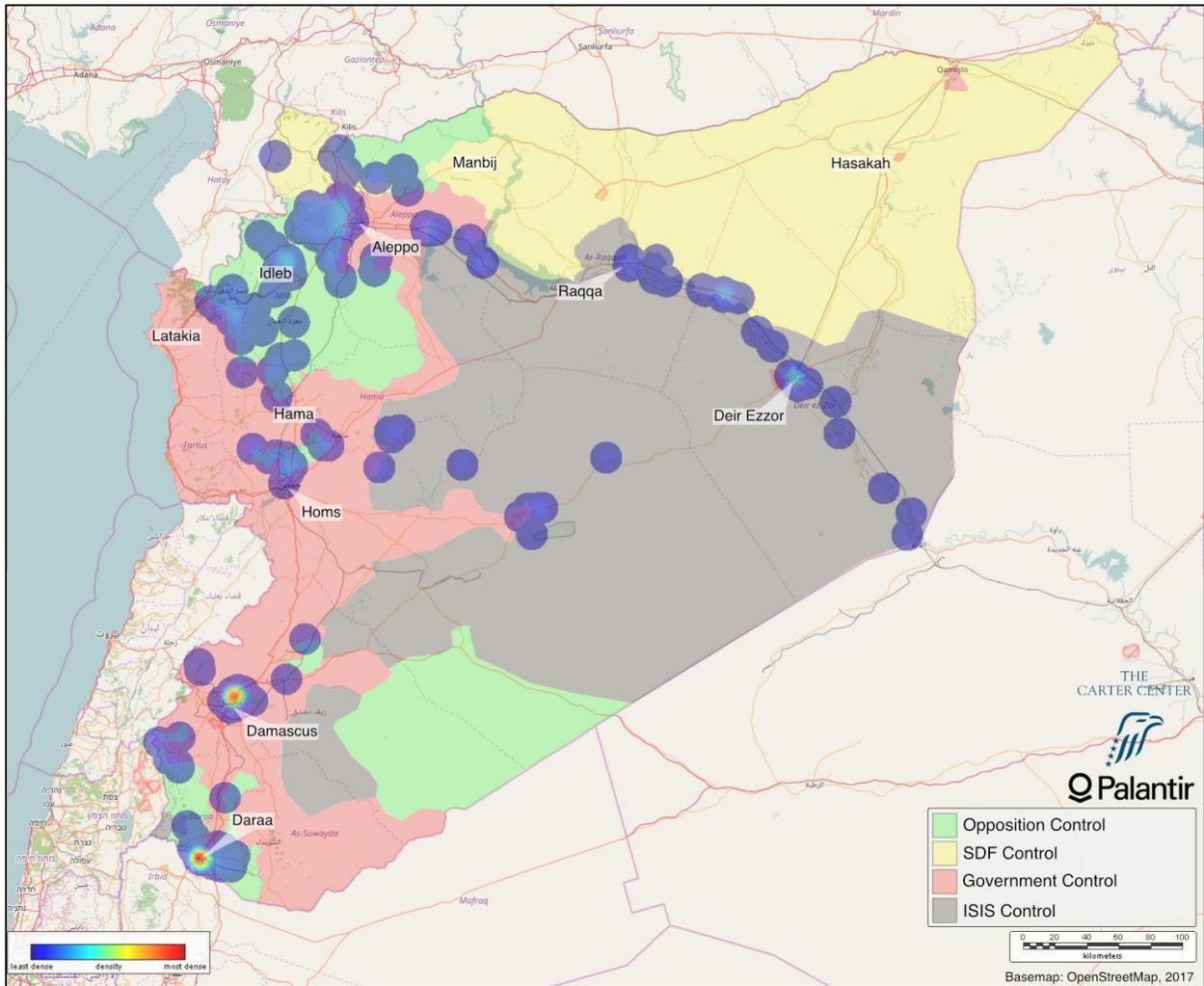


Figure 1: Heatmap showing relative levels of recorded conflict throughout the country.

On March 10, a Shi'a pilgrimage site in the Old City of Damascus was struck by large blasts, killing many worshippers. On the same day, two suicide bombings hit areas of the Kafr Sousa district of Damascus, killing primarily soldiers. The Kafr Sousa bombings were claimed by Haiy'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). On March 11, the US declared HTS a terrorist organization (like earlier iterations of the group, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra). On March 15, two suicide bombings hit areas of Damascus, the first at the Palace of Justice near Nasr Street, and the second at a restaurant on the main road that runs through al-Rabweh. These two blasts killed over 50 civilians and have not been claimed by any group.

In southern Syria, Daraa city saw heavy conflict, especially on the western portion of the city frontline as the al-Mawt Wala al-Muzaleh (Death Rather than Humiliation) opposition offensive continued around the al-Menshiyyeh neighborhood. Opposition-held southern Daraa endured significant conflict as well, due to shelling and airstrikes by the Syrian government.

On March 13, the terms of the surrender deal for the Homs neighborhood of al-Wa'er was revealed. It will involve a displacement by bus of 20,000 residents in batches of 1,500 each week. Two-thirds of those to be evacuated are civilians. Syrian opposition representatives stated on the same day that they would not be attending the next round of the Astana talks.

In Aleppo governorate, the western Aleppo front remained active during the reporting week as opposition groups clashed with pro-government fighters and shelled their locations. Airstrikes on opposition-held areas of the western Aleppo countryside continued into this week, with a significant number of Russian airstrikes hitting the town Orem al-Kubra located southwest of Aleppo city.

In the opposition-held Idleb pocket, opposition fighters increased their attacks around the primarily Shi'a villages of Kefraya and al-Fo'ah this week in a continued attempt to take over the last pocket of government control in the Idleb governorate. Fighting escalated along the Latakia frontline as well.

The Syrian Government's Tiger Forces mounted another offensive eastward in the eastern Aleppo countryside, advancing towards ISIS-held Deir Hafr and Maskana. Conflict between pro-government elements and ISIS remained high in Deir Ezzor city, with very little change in frontlines during this reporting period.

The situation in the Al-Bab/Menbij area remains tense. On March 9, Turkish forces shelled "Syrian border guards" who had set up along the western frontline between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Turkey-backed Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) forces near the town of Arima. Pro-government soldiers were killed in the attack. There have been small shifts in local control between SDF and OES forces along this frontline, but overall control remains largely unchanged from the previous period.

SDF fighters have advanced further against ISIS in the Raqqa governorate, taking more territory north of the Euphrates River. The SDF retreated from earlier positions on their southern front, but consolidated more control to the east of Raqqa. This past week, US special forces were sighted training SDF fighters, following an increase in US military presence in the area.

Conclusions:

This reporting week marks the 6th anniversary since the start of the Syrian conflict. High-casualty terrorist bomb attacks hit the Syrian capital, killing many civilians, while Syrian and Russian airstrikes continued to target opposition-held areas. ISIS continued to lose territory on several fronts while the situation around Al-Bab and Menbij remains tense with multiple forces converging in these areas.