

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
March 30 – April 5, 2017

During this reporting period, opposition forces lost many of their gains on the northern Hama front. As opposition forces began pushing back, even regaining some territory, a chemical attack in opposition-held Khan Sheikhoun killed and injured many in the city's southern neighborhoods. This prompted a targeted strike by US forces against a Syrian military airport in Homs governorate (alleged to be the site used to launch the chemical attack). Additionally, more intra-opposition conflict resumed this week, with Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as the aggressor.

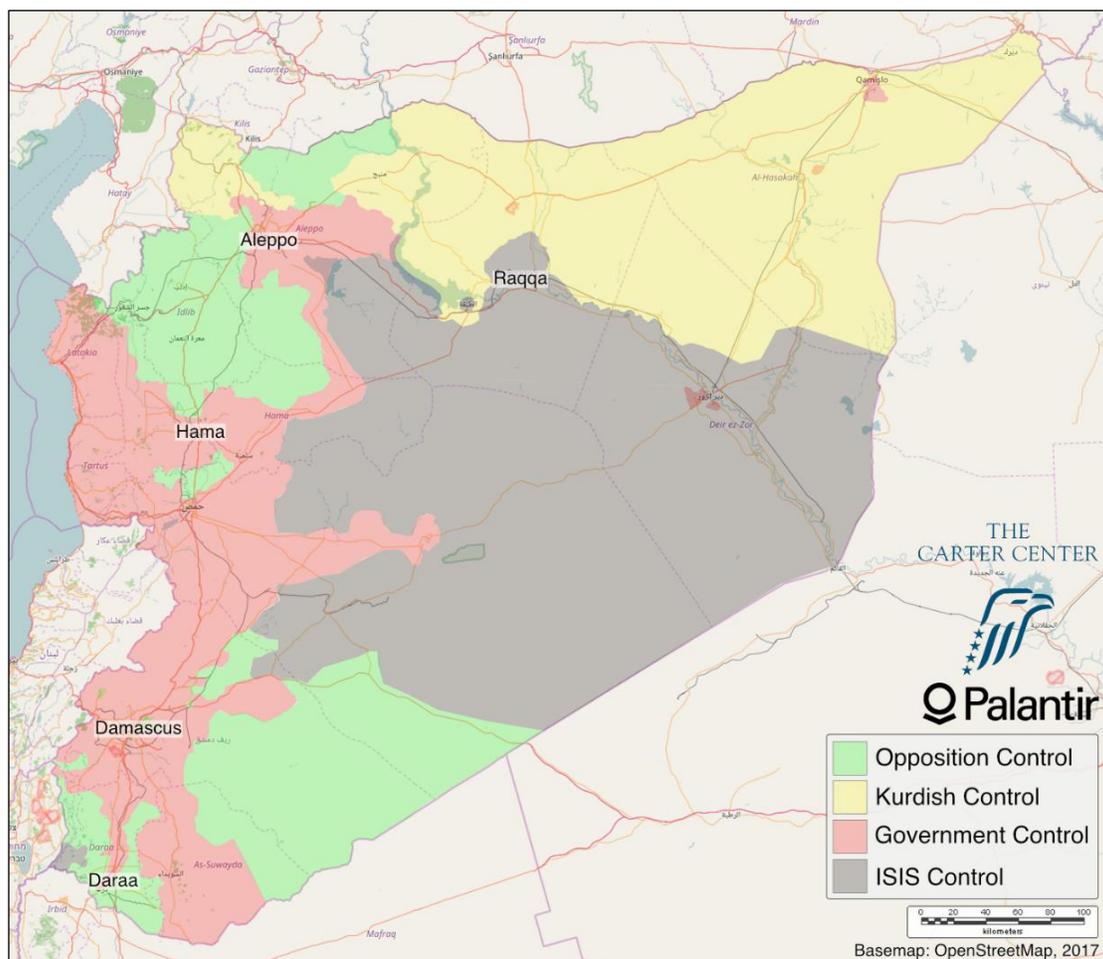


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria as of April 6.

Northern Hama offensives

By March 31, opposition forces retreated from most of the territory gained in the preceding week. Opposition forces in northern Hama lost territory on their western front around Maharda as well as their southern front around Majdal, Maarzaf, and Khattab (see map below). On the eastern front of their offensive, the town of Souran also returned to pro-government hands. The towns of Maardis and nearby Iskanderia changed hands a few times over the week, with HTS forces killing several advancing Tiger Forces fighters as the pro-government group aimed to retake the towns. HTS briefly withdrew from this front line, but returned late in this reporting period after remaining opposition forces in the area began sustaining heavy losses as the Tiger Forces deployed to the area. The Free Idlib Army, Jaysh al-Izza, Faylaq al-Sham, Jaysh al-Nasr, and Ahrar al-Sham have all been involved in the frontlines of the offensive. Pro-government offensives in this area stalled after March 31, and opposition forces began to advance yet again. This was the state of affairs immediately preceding the chemical weapons attack.

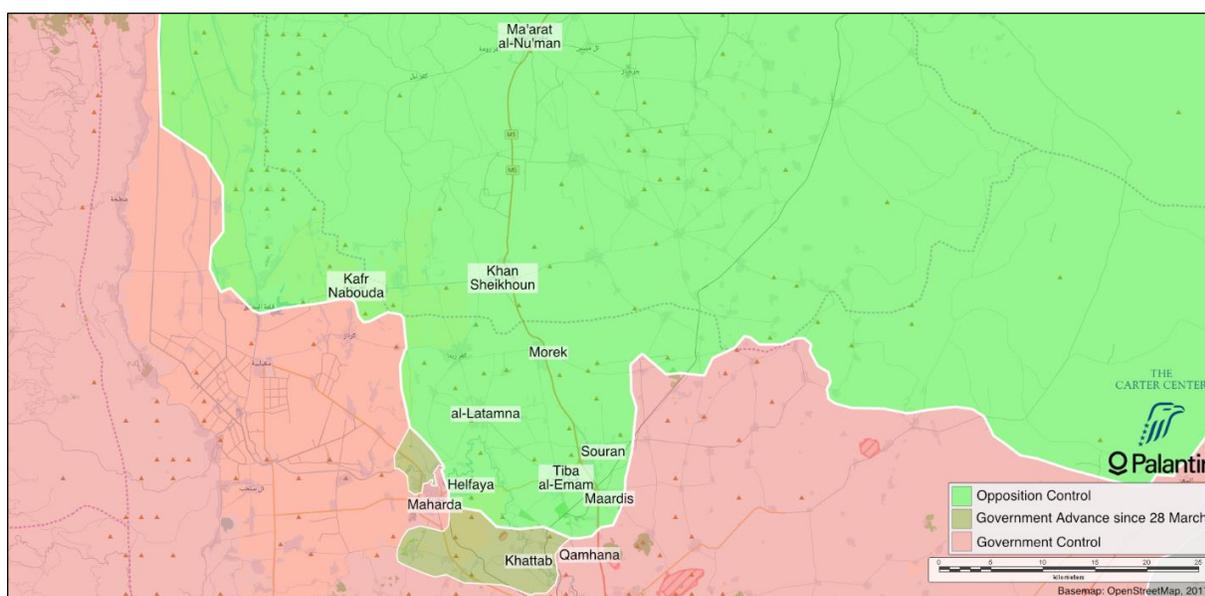


Figure 2 - Map of areas of control north of Hama

Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack

The southern Idlib city of Khan Sheikhoun was hit with a chemical attack on the morning of Tuesday, April 4. Initial evidence suggested the attack may have involved Sarin or a similar nerve agent. According to numerous reports, the death toll has ranged from 70 to 100 people, with hundreds others injured.

Shortly after the attack occurred in Khan Sheikhoun (10-15km from nearest frontlines), White Helmets arrived on the scene to administer medical aid and to take victims to nearby hospitals, mostly to the town of Maarat al-Nu'man located about 20km to the north of Khan Sheikhoun. At least one hospital treating the wounded from the attack was allegedly hit by an airstrike.

Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) crews arrived in Idlib within a few hours of the attack. By April 6, AFAD crews and collaborating organizations announced based on autopsies that a nerve agent was likely deployed in Khan Sheikhoun. Ahrar al-Sham negotiated entry and protection for AFAD's Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) team. Ahrar al-Sham,

HTS, and Ajnad Al-Sham have all invited journalists to Khan Sheikhoun and have promised protection, though Turkey temporarily closed the border for those wishing to enter Syria.

In response to the attacks on Khan Sheikhoun, a broad and diverse group of opposition units have released videos of retributive shelling events, launching Grad missiles and mortars towards government-controlled Latakia and Hama.

On April 6, opposition forces in the Idleb pocket announced a new offensive for Latakia. The offensive includes the establishment of two operations rooms. The first, Qanikum Ghalibun, is headed by HTS. The second operations room, Nashr al-Saburin, includes participation by FSA-affiliated battalions and Ahrar al-Sham affiliates. This separation is similar to the division between opposition operation rooms in Aleppo city, though divisions differ slightly.

Developments within the opposition

Between March 30 and April 5, a commander in Firqa 13 was allegedly targeted for assassination by HTS, but survived the attack. Another leader from Firqa 13 was killed by HTS over this reporting period, too. Firqa 13 was a vetted FSA group during US arming programs, and has not taken sides during the tensions between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham.

In Idleb governorate, Jaysh al-Fatah (Ahrar al-Sham and HTS) reached a tentative agreement with Hezbollah to allow for the evacuation of pro-government villages al-Fo'ah and Kefraya in exchange for the release of prisoners and the evacuations of opposition-held towns of Zabadani, Madaya, and Bloudan in Rural Damascus. The deal was criticized by the Syrian National Coalition as promoting a policy of demographic change and has since been postponed.

A new coalition of opposition groups was announced during this period. The coalition does not yet have a name but is founded on the attempted merger of independent groups within the opposition (not affiliated to Ahrar al-Sham or HTS). With the new operations room comes an agreement from foreign supporters that military aid for the affiliated groups will resume.

Northern Syria

In Syria's north, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters surrounded ISIS-held Tabqa, securing the town of al-Safsafah by April 6 with support from US forces. Tabqa is a key city south of the Euphrates, and is essential to establishing a firm foothold before proceeding against ISIS in Raqqa.

Last week, Turkey announced the end of Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), and there is still no new indication of what the next phases of Turkish involvement in northern Syria will look like.

On March 31, a new international anarchist armed group formed in northern Syria. The group is called the International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), and will operate alongside the SDF in the fight against ISIS. Notably, this organization claims political aims beyond Syria, but has no significant presence elsewhere at the present time.

Conclusions:

Opposition gains in Hama from the previous period were almost completely reversed during this reporting period, though opposition forces have begun to rally once again. The chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun has united much of the opposition in retaliation against pro-government areas of Syria and has prompted statements from international actors that could lead to increased involvement in the politics and conflict in Syria. More intra-opposition strife resumed this week, though not nearly to the degree as in some other prior periods.