

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
May 25-31, 2017

Over the course of this reporting period, ISIS has continued to lose large swathes of territory, especially to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and pro-government forces. Conflict around Daraa city in Syria's south escalated further this week as new pro-government offensives are slated to start. Intra-opposition strife continued in Aleppo province and in Rural Damascus.

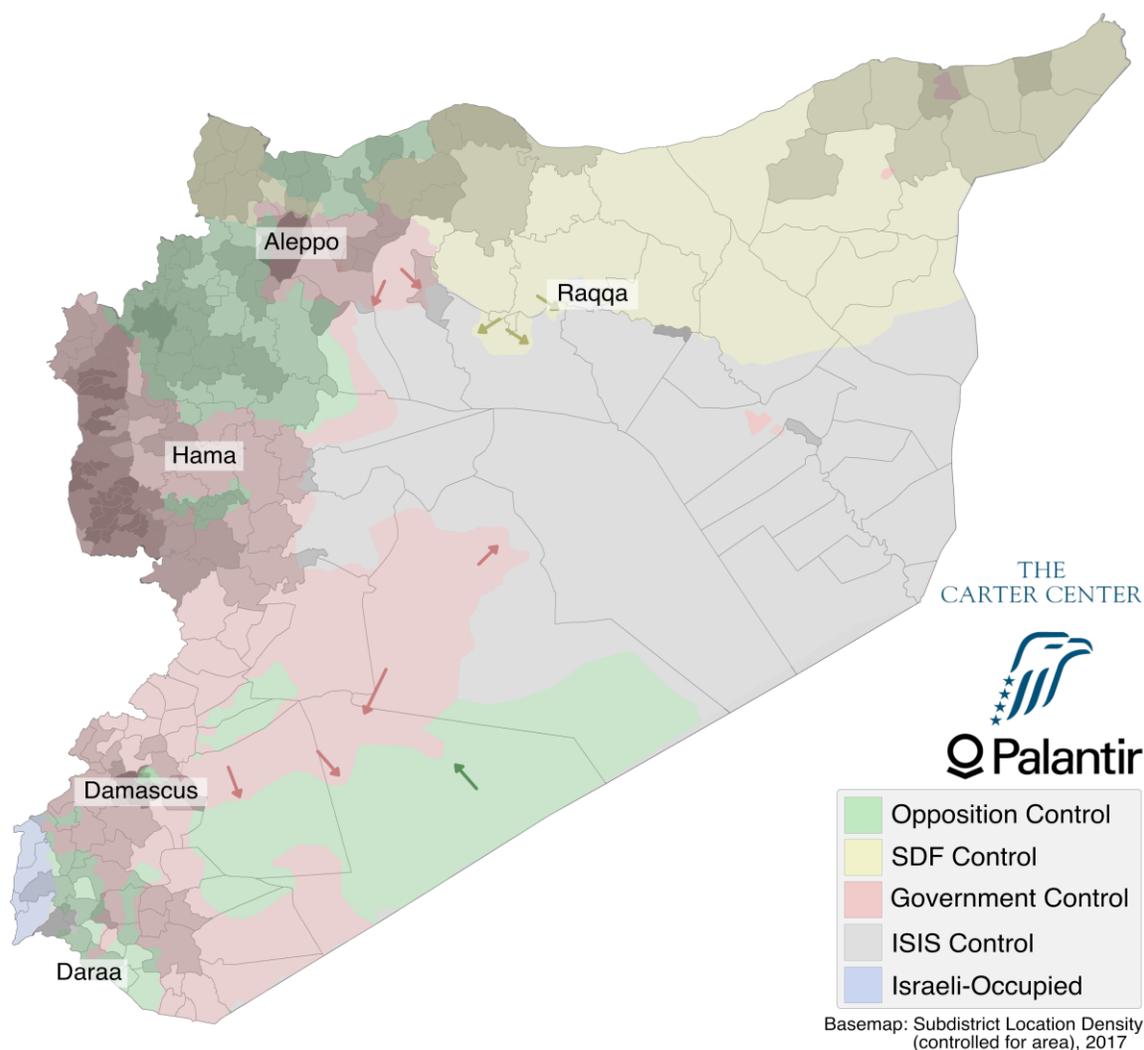


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by May 31, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period. The underlying map is shaded based upon the density of population centers, with darker areas indicating greater density.

Fight against ISIS

In the eastern Aleppo countryside, pro-government forces advanced south from Jirah Airbase to reach the outskirts of Maskana, the last major ISIS-controlled town in Aleppo governorate. The government’s Tiger Forces took control of the Maskana train station to the west of Masakana by May 28 while a pro-government force including elements of the 5th Assault Corps advanced rapidly towards Jaboul Lake, taking control of the entire eastern shoreline by May 29.

After weeks of preparations in Eastern Hama, on May 31 a pro-government offensive against ISIS started. The offensive aims for Oqayribat first, to prevent ISIS from further harassing communities and supply lines in the Salamiyeh area. An ISIS attack on May 28 in the area reportedly left at least seven pro-government fighters dead. Once this is complete, pro-government forces are expected to continue to push east, driving ISIS from the Khanaser-Ithriya-Salamiyeh Road (leading to Aleppo), and eventually joining up with pro-government forces moving south out of Maskanah, positioning themselves near Tabqa and Raqqa.

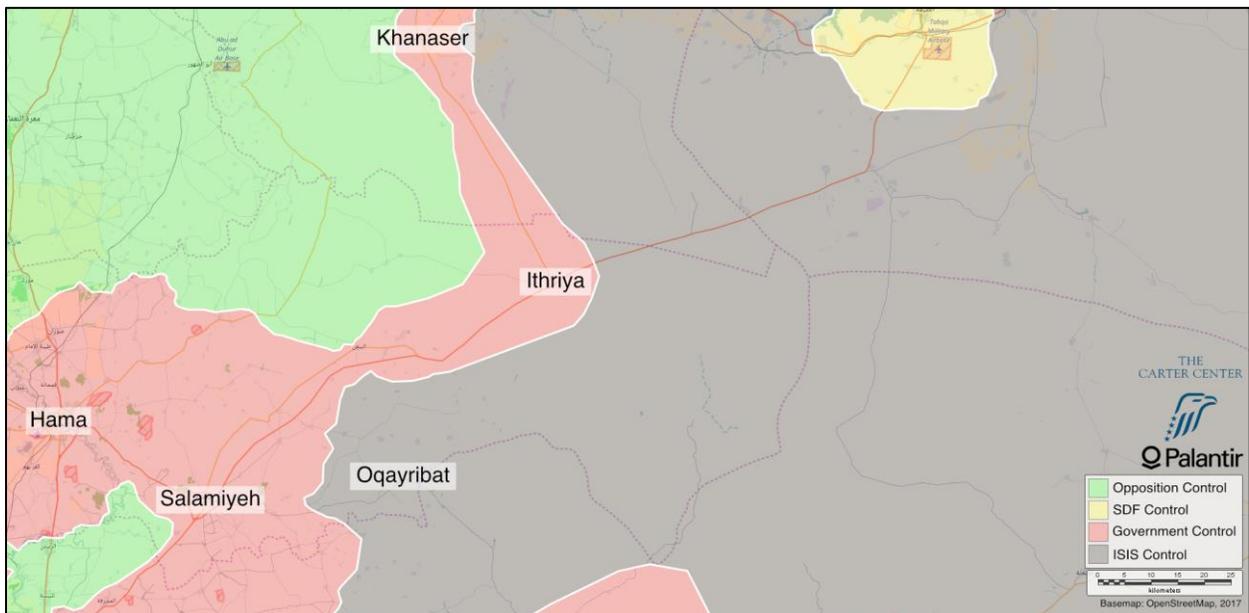


Figure 2 - Map of the area around the Khanaser-Ithriya-Salamiyeh Road

Fighting continues east and south of Tadmor, Homs. Additional pro-government armed groups arrived on the eastern Homs front to take part in the much-anticipated Operation Lavendar. Within the reporting week, pro-government forces succeeded in securing the entire Damascus-Tadmor highway after ISIS withdrew from the area. This leaves an opposition-controlled pocket in the Eastern Qalamoun surrounded by government-controlled territory, and allows the government and its allies to move personnel and supplies to the eastern Homs front with greater ease. On May 31, Russian naval forces (both a surface ship and submarine) launched a total of four cruise missiles targeting two buildings in the ISIS-controlled T3 Pumping Station area southeast of Tadmor.

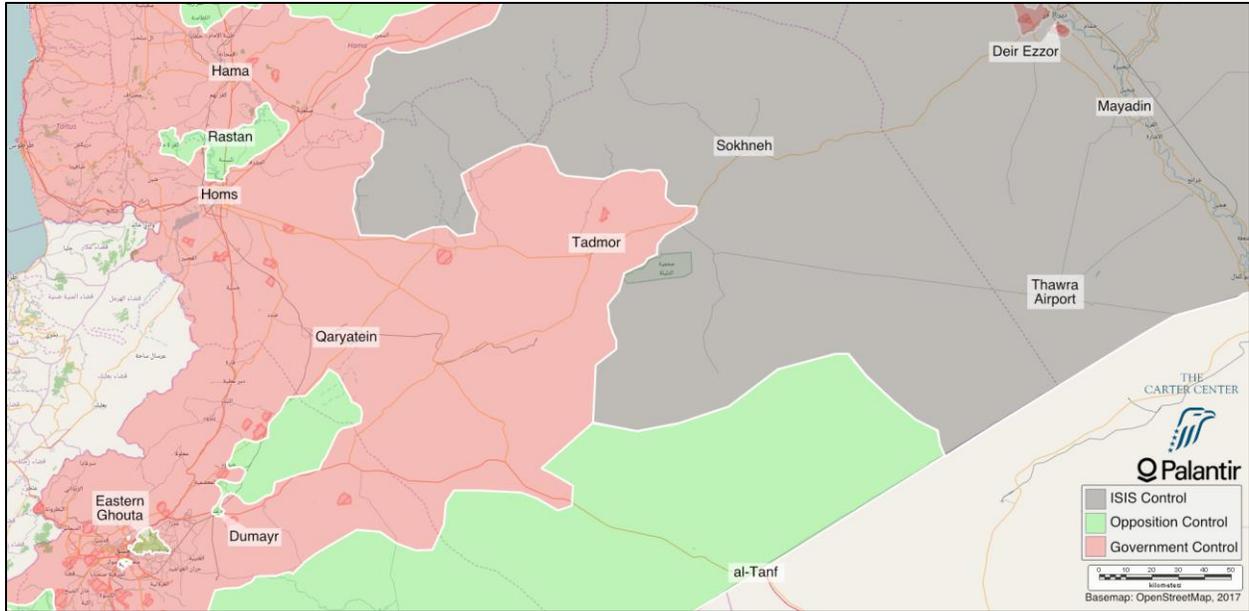


Figure 3 - Map of areas of control in eastern Homs and Rural Damascus by May 31

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued to advance this week against ISIS in the countryside around Raqqa. SDF fighters also consolidated their control around Tabqa, expanding to take territory west and south of the key city. The SDF also advanced south of the Euphrates from the Abu Qabiya area, taking territory west, east, and south from their initial gains on the southern bank of the Euphrates.

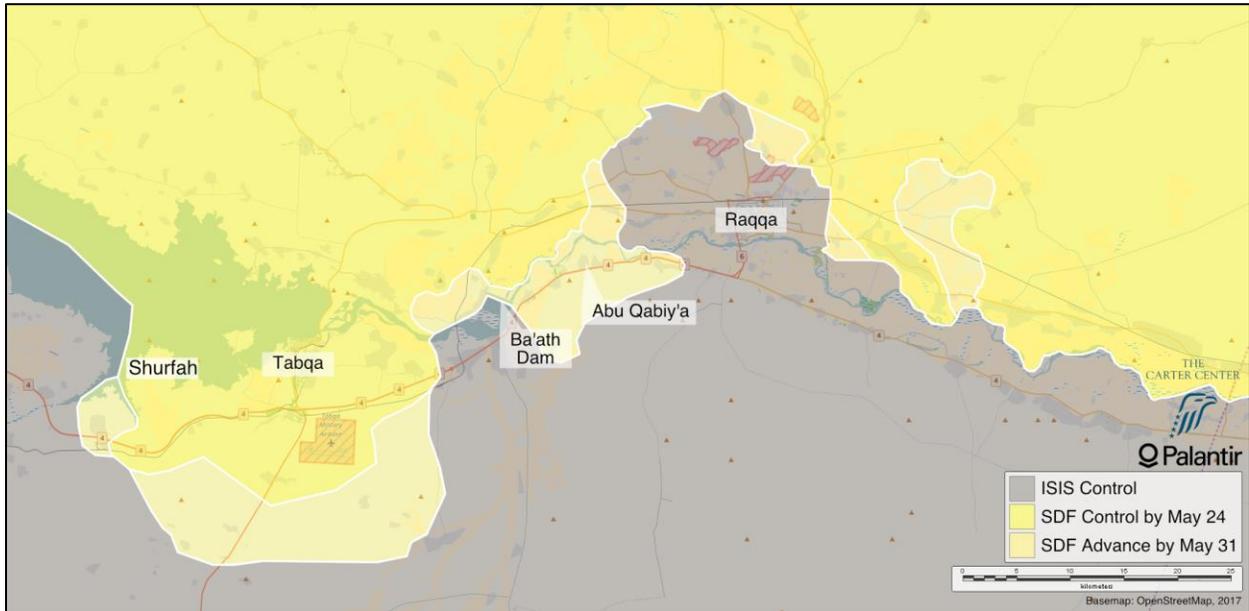


Figure 4 - Map of SDF advances around Raqqa, May 24-31

On 29 May, Iran-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU, otherwise known as the Popular Mobilization Front, an umbrella term for Iraqi Shi'a militias) reached the Iraqi-Syrian border about 140km Northeast of Deir Ezzor near SDF-held territory. Qassem Suleimani, commander of Iran's foreign-deployed Quds Force, was among the PMU forces.

Southern operations

Pro-government forces are reportedly gathering in Daraa in preparation for another offensive on opposition-held areas in Daraa city. This campaign would also likely aim to capture the border crossing south of the city, effectively cutting opposition-controlled territory in Daraa in two. The Syrian military's 4th Armored Division and 5th Assault Corps are moving to the fronts, along with Russian vehicles.

ISIS forces in southern Daraa and Quneitra governorate have begun burning crops as the opposition's Ahrar Nawa coalition continues to advance against the group.

In eastern Suweida governorate and the eastern Badiya region along the Jordanian and Iraqi borders, government forces have continued to consolidate their recent gains against western-backed opposition forces. Units from the Iranian Republican Guard and 313 Commando Battalion have also been spotted along the border. Tensions in the area continue to rise following a Coalition airstrike on advancing pro-government forces. On May 28, the international coalition airdropped leaflets warning the militias to stay away from al-Tanf.

FSA, Pentagon-backed opposition group Jaysh Osoud al-Sharqiya held its ground on May 27 when pro-government forces attacked some key positions in the desert. However, FSA forces have lost ground during the reporting week against pro-government militias in the area. On May 30, the Iraqi PMU announced that US control of the Syrian-Iraqi border was unacceptable, and that it would mobilize on the Iraqi side of the border to support the militias on the Syrian side. Later on May 30, Kata'ib Imam Ali, an Iraqi militia, announced that the fight for al-Tanf would begin soon. The US-led Coalition's FSA allies (namely Maghawir al-Thawra and Jaysh Osoud al-Sharqiya) also received additional arms, including TOW missiles and armored vehicles, in preparation for clashes. That night, the FSA launched an attack on the pro-government militias, preceded by Grad rockets, forcing the militias to retreat to the Zaza checkpoint, about 100 km away from al-Tanf.

The newly-formed opposition "Desert Volcano" battle in Syria's eastern desert gained a new member, Shuhuda' al-Quryatayn.

Evacuations and other deals

In Damascus, the evacuation of opposition fighters and their families from Barzeh was completed on May 29. A prisoner exchange took place in northern Hama between opposition groups and a pro-government militia, resulting in the release of a Faylak al-Sham leader and two other commanders in exchange for three pro-government prisoners and three remains.

Opposition tensions

Faylak al-Sham announced it would be expelling its northern Aleppo branch from its ranks following review of internal and external complaints. The unit, Liwa al-Shamal, which operates in Jarablus, al-Bab, and A'zaz, protested the decision and called for the Faylak al-Sham general leadership to form a committee to investigate the complaints raised against it and to allow Liwa al-Shamal to continue operating as a sub-unit until the decision of the committee is reached. Liwa al-Shamal has also paraded its fighters and equipment in Jarablus city to garner public support.

The decision by Faylak al-Sham comes on the heels of infighting between other opposition groups against Fursan al-Thawra, yet another northern sub-unit of Faylak al-Sham. The pressure on the group resulted in the arrest of Fursan al-Thawra members and their withdrawal from positions in northern Aleppo. Their

soldiers were accused of looting, corruption, and maintaining allegiance to Nur al-Din al-Zenki and Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra).

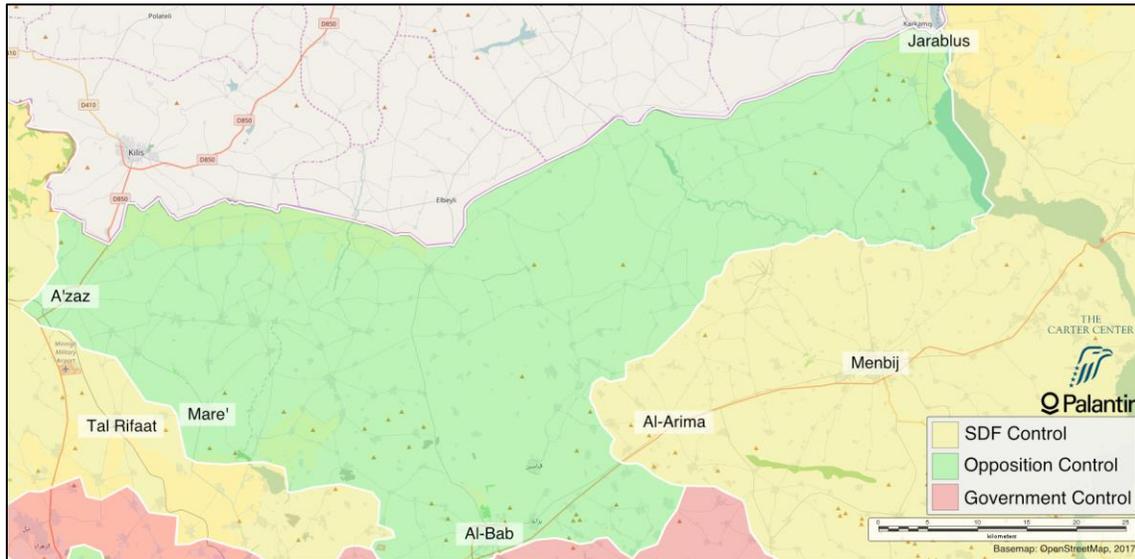


Figure 5 - Map of the situation around the Turkey-backed Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) pocket in northern Syria by May 31

Ahrar al-Sham released a statement on May 31 that both underscored its commitment of non-aggression towards other groups while simultaneously promising a strong response to opposition groups that it claims are plotting to attack its fighters and positions. Ahrar al-Sham has previously clashed with Liwa Sultan Murad, a former ally within Operation Euphrates Shield, and last week announced its decision to relocate its positions from within Jarablus to the outskirts to defuse tensions within the city and protect citizens from potential infighting.

The shaky peace between Jaysh al-Islam, Faylak al-Rahman, and HTS came to an end during the reporting week. On May 25, the Syria Direct news platform released a report alleging that Faylak al-Rahman and HTS had forcibly removed the families of Jaysh al-Islam fighters from their homes. On May 30, Jaysh al-Islam attempted to storm HTS/Faylak al-Rahman positions in al-Ashari (Duma pocket). The resumption of infighting means that Jaysh al-Islam is now fighting on frontlines with both opposition and government forces.

Mergers and potential opposition developments

In the opposition-held Rastan pocket in northern Homs countryside, Faylak Homs announced its merger with Ahrar al-Sham, making Ahrar al-Sham the largest opposition group in the Rastan pocket.

Within the territories secured by the Turkey-backed Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), Turkey has announced that it will support the formation of a unified opposition “National Army”. The army would aim to secure the northern Syria countryside from pro-government forces and the Kurdish YPG.

Conclusions:

Infighting continues to hamstring the opposition’s efforts to advance and hold territory. De-escalation agreements continue to be violated, as new offensives resume on territories deemed off-limits. ISIS also continues to lose territory throughout the country, primarily to the SDF and pro-government forces. The tense situation around the al-Tanf border crossing continues, and may lead to further escalation in the future.