

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

June 15-21, 2017

Over the course of this reporting period, the situation in northern Syria continued to grow more complicated. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued to advance in Raqqa city, but came into conflict with advancing pro-government forces to the south of Tabqa city. Conflict in this area led to the International Coalition downing a Syrian jet and warning pro-government forces against threatening SDF positions in the area. New offensives were launched and some advances were made by pro-government forces on fronts in Damascus and Daraa. The tense situation in Syria's southeastern desert remains, with Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) consolidating their control over the Iraqi side of the border. There were also significant developments among opposition factions this week and newly reported outbreaks of polio in eastern Syria.

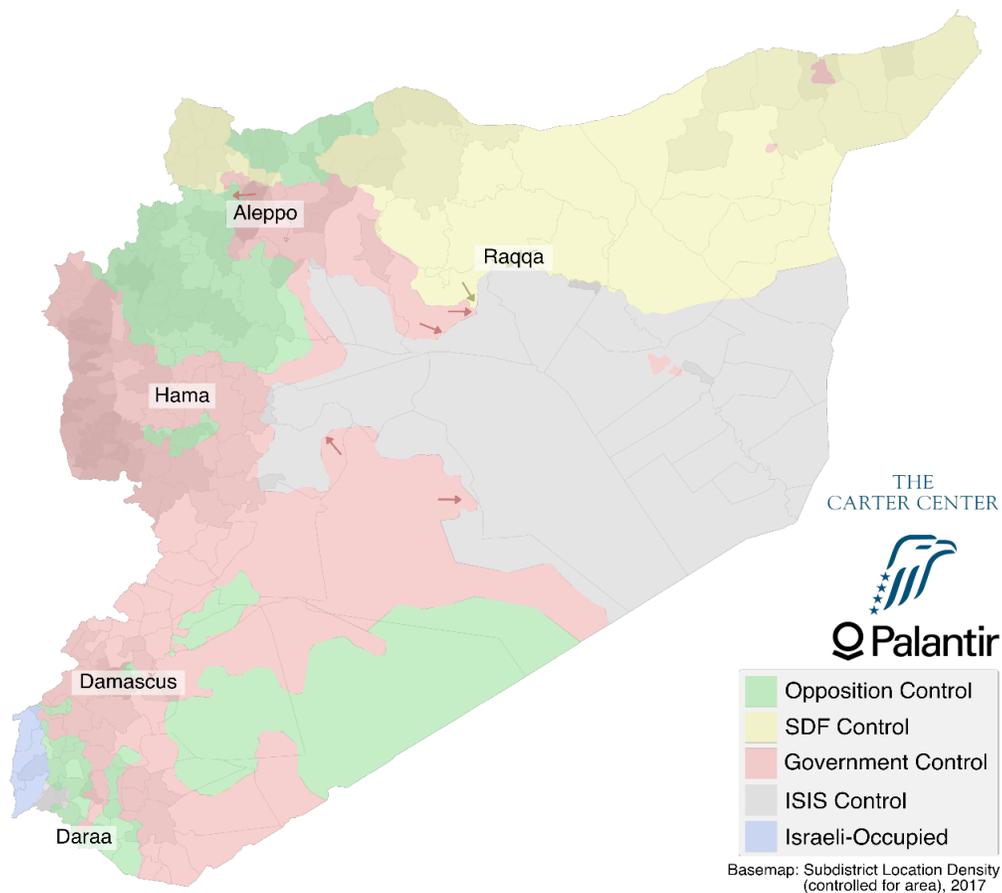


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by June 21, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period. The underlying map is shaded based upon the density of population centers, with darker areas indicating greater density.

Developments in northern Syria

During the past week, the Syrian Government’s Tiger Forces continued to advance south and east from their frontlines in western Raqqa, capturing the Resafa crossroads south of Tabqa city. On June 18, pro-government forces and the US-backed SDF clashed around the communities of Ja’adin and Shwihna north of Resafa, resulting in the capture of Ja’adin by pro-government forces and Shwihna by the SDF. Tiger Forces are now less than 120km west of Deir Ezzor, and therefore represent the closest pro-government units to Deir Ezzor.

As SDF and pro-government forces clashed, International Coalition aircraft shot down a Syrian Arab Airforce Su-22 warplane. The Coalition claimed that the downing of the aircraft was in response to Syrian airstrikes on SDF positions, where US Special Forces had been deployed. The Syrian pilot ejected from his plane, and was captured on the ground by SDF forces. He is reportedly now receiving medical care in Tabqa, and is the subject of negotiations between SDF and Syrian government officials, reportedly including the Tiger Forces commander, Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan.

Following the attacks, the Russian Ministry of Defense condemned this as another incident in a series of American acts of aggression, and once again suspended the use of the de-confliction communications hotline. The Russian Ministry of Defense also stated that it would treat any aircraft operating west of the Euphrates as a potential target for its air defense systems.

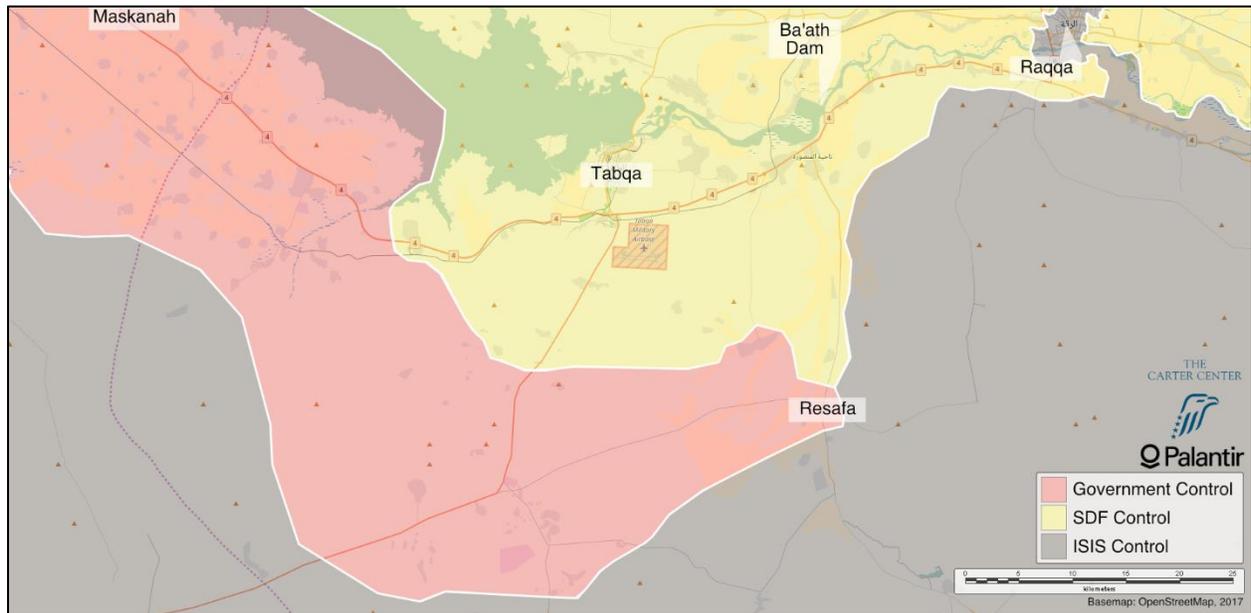


Figure 2 - Map of frontlines in the western countryside of Raqqa governorate by June 21

In the days following the downing of the government warplane, a column of Turkish armor and artillery was spotted in Kilis, Turkey heading towards the Syrian border. Turkish special forces were also spotted on the Opposition-SDF front lines near Tall Refaat. These sightings have led to rumors of a pending Turkish offensive against SDF forces in northern Aleppo.

In a rare development, SDF and pro-government forces clashed around Kafr Nobol and al-Zahraa on the outskirts of Aleppo city this week, with each side arresting members of the opposing force.

In response to the ISIS-sponsored attacks on the Iranian parliament and Shrine of Imam Khomeini in Tehran on June 7, Iranian forces, specifically the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) launched six ballistic missiles from Iran, targeting locations in the ISIS-controlled city of al-Mayadin on the Euphrates River in Deir Ezzor governorate. At least two missiles landed on targets in al-Mayadin city, one of which was formerly the Baath Party HQ.

On June 17 and June 20, Ahrar al-Sham repelled SDF attempts to advance in the Daret Azza area in western Aleppo. Also on June 17, multiple clashes were reported between opposition groups and the SDF in northern Aleppo along the Tal Rifaat front in Daghbash village and Tel Madiq. The two sides also clashed on June 20 near Kaljibrin, Kafr Kalbin, and Mare’.

In Raqqa city, SDF fighters continued to advance, capturing neighborhoods in the west, northwest, and east of the city. Their forces also advanced to capture the countryside south of Raqqa across the Euphrates. Retreating ISIS forces have heavily mined and booby-trapped the city and responded to SDF advances with a multiple suicide vehicle-borne IEDs this week.

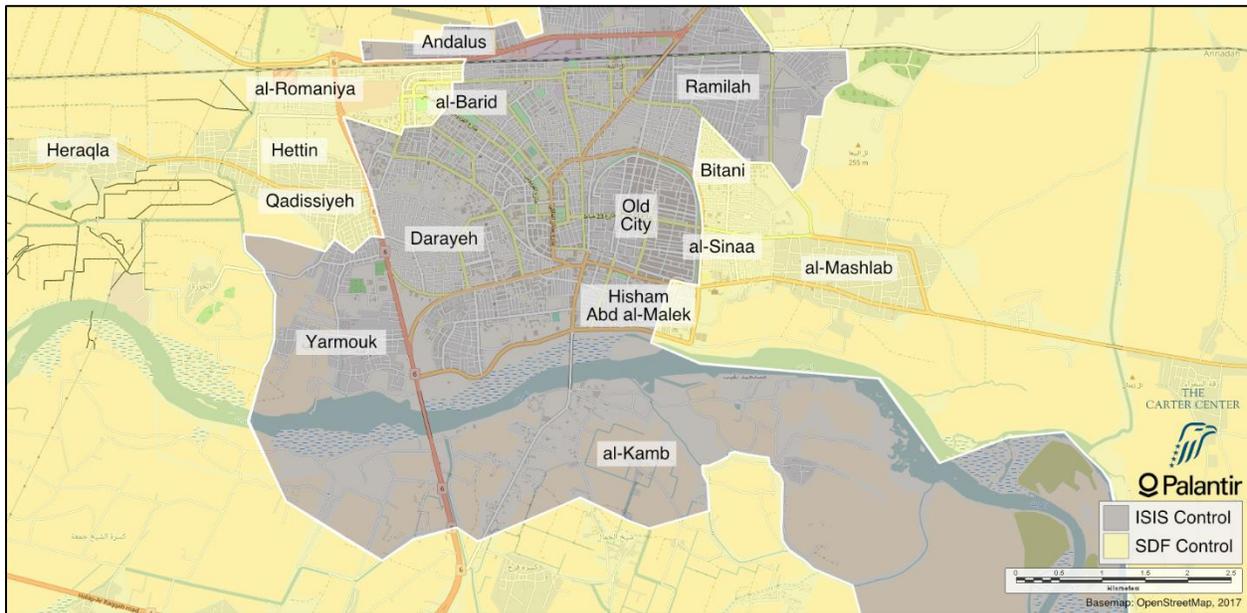


Figure 3 - Map of the situation in Raqqa city by June 21

Advances in Eastern Hama and Homs

Pro-government forces have continued operations against ISIS in the Hama countryside east of As-Salamiyeh. By June 17, the Fifth Corps Third Brigade was redeployed to the eastern Hama front. This group was part of the government’s successful operations in the eastern Aleppo countryside that led to the capture of Maskana from ISIS in early June.

Following weeks of fighting in the Homs countryside east of Tadmor, pro-government forces continue to advance towards the town of Sokhneh, expanding their control over areas around the Arak gas fields, as well as the T-3 pumping station. Reports on social media indicate that pro-government units continue to be redeployed from other areas in Syria to the Tadmor frontline. Nearly all units of Syrian Hezbollah have now been sent to the Tadmor front. The goal of this offensive from Tadmor remains to reach Deir Ezzor, approximately 150km to the northeast.

Battles in Damascus and Daraa

New offensives in Damascus and its countryside started this reporting period, as pro-government forces restarted an aerial bombardment campaign on Jobar on June 16. The bombing has continued throughout the week, with clashes between pro-government forces and Faylaq al-Rahman in Jobar and Ain Terma beginning on June 18. Jobar is included in a de-escalation zone as stipulated in the last round of talks in Astana.

Two weeks after fighters from Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) and ISIS agreed to evacuate from the Palestinian Yarmouk Camp, ISIS fighters have been selling their belongings in the street in preparation for their journey east to Deir Ezzor province. No date has been set for final evacuations, but some evacuations of HTS fighters have happened in the previous weeks.

Following a two-week-long air campaign, pro-government forces launched a ground assault on the Daraa city, clashing with opposition forces from the al-Bunyan al-Marsous operations room near the Palestinian refugee camp and Tariq al-Sad districts. On June 14, opposition groups used Grad rockets to strike the Marj al-Ruhayl airbase in the southern countryside of Damascus, from which the government ran its airstrikes on the city. Despite the attack, no helicopters were destroyed, and the airbase is still being used to launch planes and helicopters.

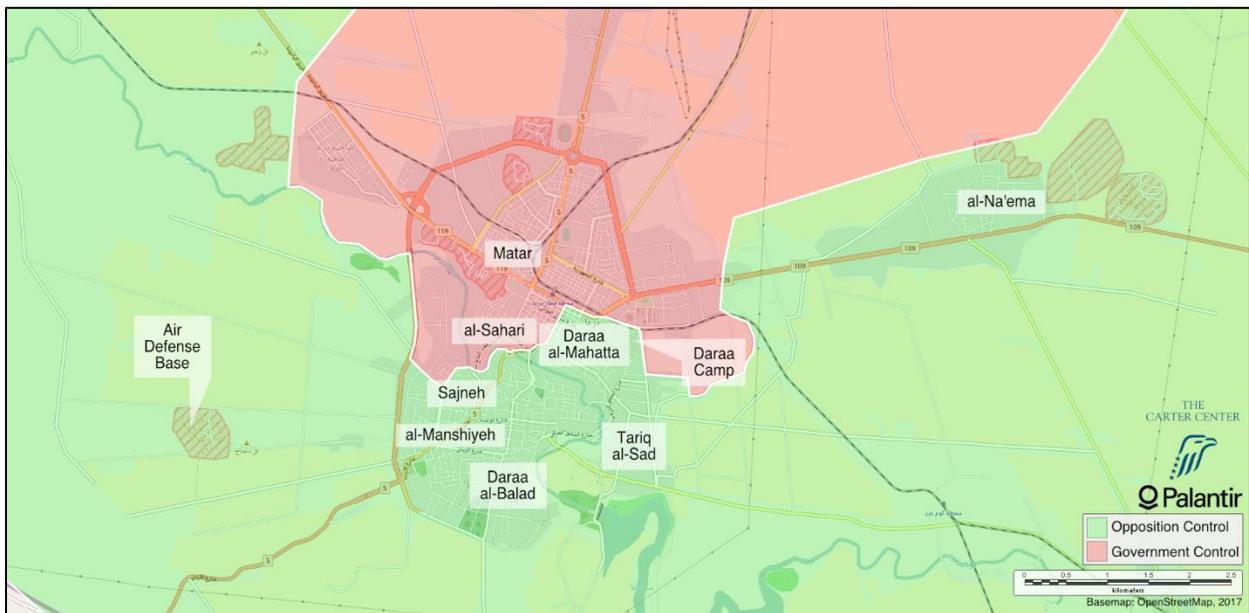


Figure 4 - Map of the situation in Daraa city by June 21

On June 17, a two-day ceasefire in Daraa began, and was extended for another day on June 19. Fighting was not stalled outside of the city, however, and on June 19, al-Furqan Brigades attacked pro-government cars and trucks on the Damascus-Daraa highway near Khibet al-Ghazaleh. In the early hours of June 20, pro-government forces launched a surprise attack through the farmland west of Daraa city's Mansheyeh neighborhood and succeeded in capturing the air defense base west of the city, nearly reaching the Jordanian border. Opposition forces rallied in a successful counter-offensive, reclaiming the air defense base and other territory, capturing several members of the government's Fifth Corps in the process, along with at least one T-72 tank.

Tensions in the Syrian Desert

Conflict continued in Syria's southeastern desert between opposition units, and Iranian-backed pro-government forces near the al-Tanf border crossing. Pro-government forces continue to mass troops and fortify positions leading to the al-Tanf border crossing, despite warnings by US special forces in the area, and the deployment of a HIMARS long-range rocket artillery unit to the area. On June 16, opposition forces in the area destroyed several helicopters at the nearby government military airport. While pro-government forces did not advance any further during this reporting period, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) solidified their foothold on the Iraqi side of the border by securing the al-Waleed Border Crossing point, immediately opposite al-Tanf. Shortly after, on June 20, Coalition forces shot down an Iranian UAV near the crossing, which US officials believe to have been operated by members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Opposition developments

Inter-opposition tensions remain high in northern Aleppo. On June 16 and 17, the city of Aktharin, located to the east of Mare', witnessed extensive clashes in the city as Firqat al-Hamza launched an assault on the Liwa Sultan Murad, justifying its attack by claiming it is rooting out corrupt elements within the group. The clashes prompted the military council in Akhtarin to issue a statement forbidding the entry of any armed group into the city until further notice. Firqat al-Hamza and the Liwa Sultan Murad cooperated earlier this month in an assault on Ahrar al-Sham forces in the area.

Additional clashes were reported in Al-Bab on June 20 between Faylaq al-Sham and Liwa Sultan Murad on one side and armed fighters from one of the larger local families on the other, following a dispute that ended in the death of a member of the local family and the injury of 10 others.

There have been additional reports of defections from Liwa Sultan Murad. Following last week's report of a commander defecting with troops, an additional unit was reported to have defected to the Kurdish-led SDF.

Two major mergers were announced between opposition groups in northern Aleppo. First, Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal merged with Faylaq al-Sham, strengthening the latter's position in the northern canton. Secondly, Liwa al-Shamal (which previously had been a sub-unit of Faylaq al-Sham) merged with Faylaq al-Sham's rival Liwa Sultan Murad.

On June 15, the shooting and killing of an Ahrar al-Sham member by an HTS fighter led to limited clashes between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham at the Allawin checkpoint near Frikeh in Idlib governorate. The matter has since been resolved by HTS and Ahrar al-Sham, with the responsible HTS fighter awaiting judgment.

Abdullah al-Muhaysini, a prominent pro-HTS sheikh, survived an assassination attempt on June 16 in Idlib city. Muhaysini was previously injured in Maarat al-Numan during clashes between HTS and Division 13.

The commander of Liwa Tamkin, an early defector to HTS and former Ahrar al-Sham sub-unit, defected from HTS and rejoined Ahrar al-Sham on June 18, although it is unclear how many of Liwa Tamkin's forces returned with him.

On June 18, Ahrar al-Sham's Judiciary/Judicial Committee announced that it will adopt the Unified Arab Code in all affiliated courts. The decision to adopt the Unified Arab Code came after many months of deliberation. Ahrar al-Sham Spokesperson Mohammed Abu Zayd justified the decision stating that the Unified Arab Code is not "innovation" and is the result of fifteen years of work by Shari'a experts/scholars and adoption of the unified code will allow for greater standardization in judicial decisions by Ahrar al-

Sham courts. The decision is not without controversy within Ahrar al-Sham circles, as a prominent Ahrar al-Sham judge, Ibrahim Shasho, announced his resignation because of the move. On June 21, Ahrar al-Sham also released a fatwa allowing inclusion of the FSA flag in its own flag/emblem design.

Polio in Eastern Syria

Polio has crippled several children in Raqqa and Mayadin in recent weeks. This is the second outbreak of polio in Syria since the beginning of the conflict, and is reported to have emerged from the vaccine itself. The reduced infrastructure to implement vaccinations in eastern Syria creates an ideal breeding ground for this method of transmission.

Conclusions:

Infighting continues to hamstring the opposition's efforts at cohesion, though new developments among certain factions show a hopeful movement towards more moderate elements in the Idleb pocket. In the last two weeks, the SDF's skirmishes with both pro-government and anti-government forces complicate their role within Syria and the peace process. The long trend of ISIS collapse nationwide and recently within Raqqa city continued this week as the SDF and pro-government forces both advanced against the group in western Raqqa. The situation around al-Tanf remains a point of major uncertainty, especially as foreign forces continue to ratchet up their involvement on the front.