

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
July 06-12, 2017

New ceasefires in southern Syria were successful in slowing the rising tide of conflict in the area, particularly in Daraa city. This most recent ceasefire comes on the heels of the largely abandoned attempt at forming “de-escalation zones” throughout much of western Syria. The limited geographic scope of this southern ceasefire may increase prospects for success, particularly as most belligerents appear to be more concerned with advancing against rapidly-collapsing ISIS frontlines in eastern Syria. The decrease in fighting in Daraa, however, has coincided with an increase in pro-government activity to the east near the Jordanian and Iraqi borders.

Despite the decrease in violence in Daraa, fighting in Rural Damascus, both between pro-government and opposition forces as well as within opposition forces, remained intense during this reporting period. In Syria’s southeastern desert, pro-government forces have advanced further into opposition-held areas in an apparent attempt to isolate a pocket of opposition-held territory in rural Damascus and eastern Suweida governorates. In northern Syria, tensions remain high between Ahrar al-Sham and Hai’yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra), especially around the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in northern Idlib. Frontlines between Kurdish groups and Arab opposition forces have also seen increased tension, including major protests against Kurdish advances.

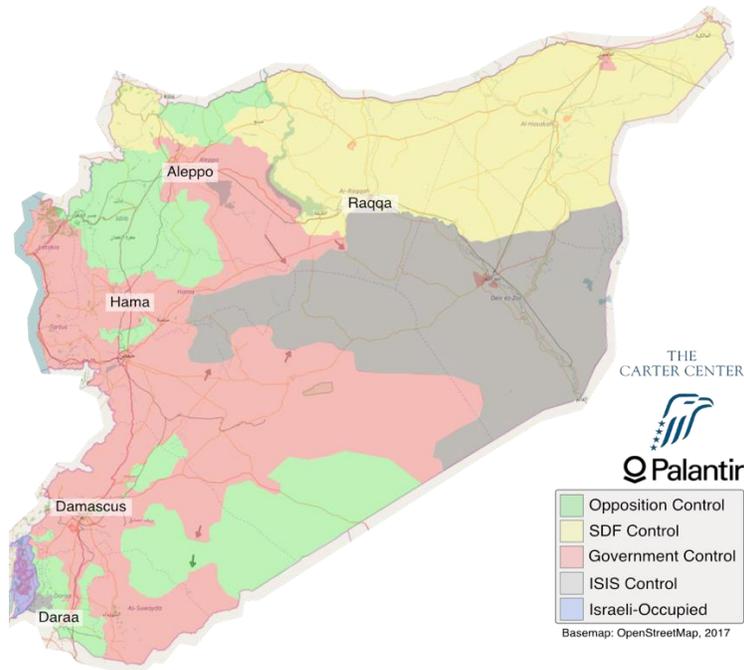


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by July 12, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period

Ceasefires and other developments in Southern Syria

On July 9, a ceasefire negotiated by Russia, the US, and Jordan went into effect, covering a large swath of southwest Syria containing Daraa, parts of Quneitra, and parts of Sweida. The Daraa governorate, fully covered in the truce, has seen some of the most intense conflict in the past few months, with hundreds of airstrikes on opposition-held territory, and successive opposition offensive operations. Despite a handful of daily ceasefire violations, the ceasefire is currently holding.

Russia, Iran, and Turkey have also created a working group to reconcile their positions on Syria before the next Astana meeting takes place on the final week of August. This week, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also stated his willingness to work with Russian officials on establishing no-fly zones as part of one of many potential joint mechanisms for ensuring peace in the country.

Also in Daraa governorate, the Saf al-Baghaa opposition operations room has announced that it will open a new base and begin training to clear ISIS-affiliated Jaysh Khalid Ibn al-Waleed from the road to Hayt in the Yarmouk basin.

Clashes in Rural Damascus

Clashes continued on the Ain Terma, Jobar, and Zamalka fronts, with Faylaq al-Rahman guarding the front from a pro-government offensive. On July 10, clashes broke out between Jaysh al-Islam and pro-government forces in Hosh Dawahera and Hazarma, but did not result in any change in territorial control. Pro-government forces hope to continue to advance in Eastern Ghouta in order to isolate opposition-controlled Jobar from the rest of Eastern Ghouta. The pro-government tactic of isolating an area, besieging it, and then negotiating an evacuation was employed in the Damascus districts of Qabour, Tishreen, and Barzeh Orchards in May of this year.

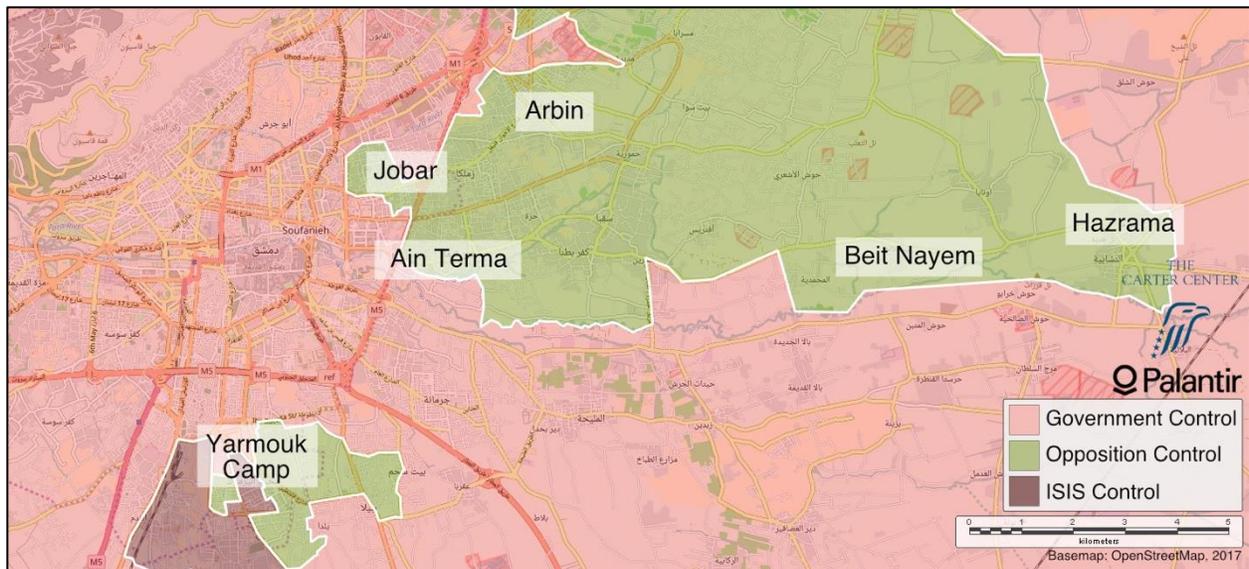


Figure 2 - Frontlines in the Eastern Ghouta by July 12

Following increased tensions in the Bekaa and Aarsal area of north-eastern Lebanon, Syrian warplanes conducted cross-border raids against opposition (allegedly HTS) forces in Lebanon. Hezbollah forces, along with other pro-government forces in Syria, are preparing for a new offensive to secure the western Qalamoun region of Syria and Aarsal region of Lebanon. The security situation for Syrian refugees in Aarsal is precarious, and there are concerns that this new offensive would worsen the humanitarian situation. On July 12, Hezbollah brokered a deal that resulted in 250 refugees returning to Syria from the Aarsal area. The

deal does not have the backing of the UN, given the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the environment in Syria to which the refugees are returning.

Territorial Changes in the Badiya

Since the beginning of the US-Russia-Jordan brokered ceasefire in southwest Syria on July 9 that includes Quneitra, Daraa, and Suweida governorates, fighting has substantially increased in the Badiya region of Rural Damascus near the administrative border with Suweida.



Figure 3 - Situation in Syria's southeast (also known as the “Badiya”) by July 12

On July 10, as part of a surprise government offensive in violation of the ceasefire, pro-government forces captured positions from opposition forces east of Khalkhala (in northern Suweida governorate). The same day, FSA-linked Jaysh Usoud al-Sharqiya re-established control over Um Rumam, approximately 60km to the east. A day later, Usoud al-Sharqiya damaged and set fire to a government helicopter near al-Seen airbase. Pro-government forces have advanced south of al-Seen airbase and taken control of Jabal Makhoul and Jabal Seis. Usoud al-Sharqiya and Quwat al-Shaheed Ahmad al-Abdo also released a joint statement condemning Russia’s role of providing air support for pro-government ground operations, calling for action from the international community and urging other opposition groups not to back any deal where Russia is a guarantor. By July 13, fighting on these fronts cooled. Pro-government units involved in this latest round of fighting included the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), National Defense Forces (NDF), and the Palestinian Liberation Army, in addition to elements of the Syrian Arab Army. Though fighting has subsided, the territory recently gained by pro-government forces places them in a strong position to advance further and isolate the opposition-controlled territory in eastern Suweida governorate.

While the offensive on Baath City in Quneitra has finished, clashes continue between pro-government and opposition forces in the governorate. On July 8, before the ceasefires, pro-government forces tried to take al-Ajraf and Western Samadaniyah, resulting in clashes with the opposition’s Liwa Saif al-Sham. The Syrian Arab Army also clashed with HTS, capturing Mukhtar on July 9.

Reports have circulated for the past few weeks that up to 100 FSA-aligned Maghawir al-Thawra fighters had moved from the area near al-Tanf on the Iraqi border to al-Shaddadi, an SDF-controlled area in al-Hasakeh. The leader of Maghawir al-Thawra, Mohammed al-Tala’a, and the head of the group’s media office, Albara’ al-Fares, both clarified the situation this week. According to their statements, Maghawir al-Thawra has been in negotiations with the International Coalition about Maghawir al-Thawra opening a base

in al-Shaddadi. However, Maghawir al-Thawra has expressed a wish to remain independent of the SDF, a demand that has caused the negotiations to stall. Secondly, the bulk of Maghawir al-Thawra’s fighters have not yet been deployed to al-Shaddadi, with only 40 having traveled to the northern city. This move would bring Maghawir al-Thawra fighters, most of whom are from Deir Ezzor, closer to home, which has been the group’s stated goal since its inception.

Arab-Kurdish struggles

YPG forces continued to exchange fire with opposition and Turkish forces along the Tel Refaat-Azaz front in northern Aleppo. Clashes between SDF/YPG and opposition forces also occurred near the village of Sheikh Issa which is located to the immediate west of Mare’.

Northern Aleppo residents in the areas secured during the Euphrates Shield operation held protests in multiple cities and towns against Kurdish occupation of Tel Refaat and other so-called “Arab” towns captured by the YPG and in support of rumored Turkish-backed military operations in Afrin.

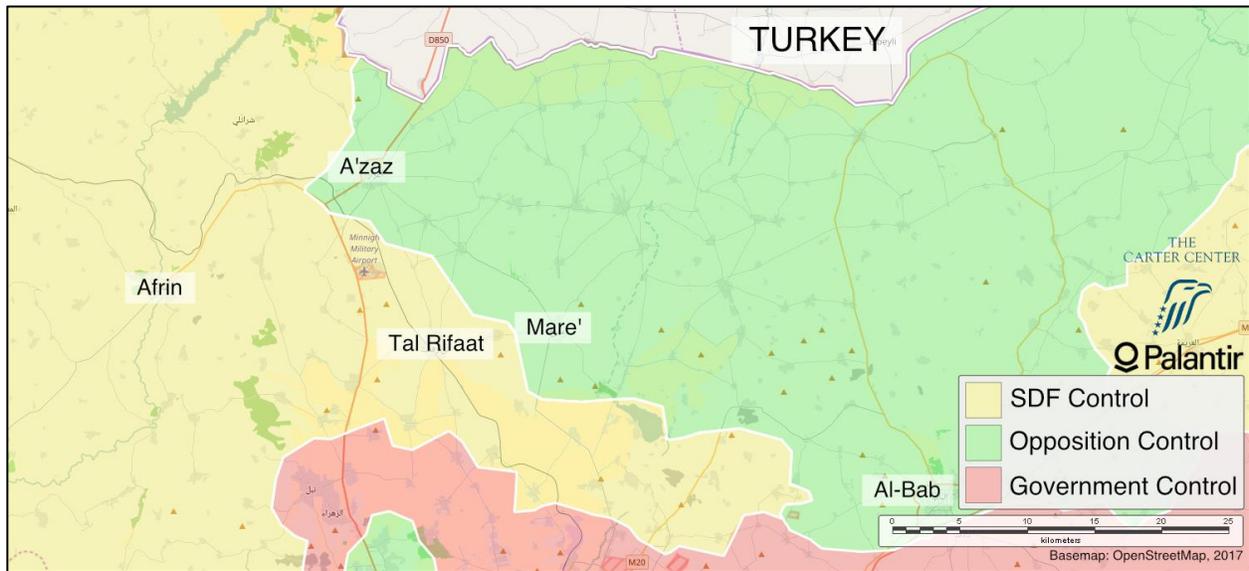


Figure 4 - Situation in northern Aleppo by July 12

Residents in Afrin Canton also held protests against Turkish and opposition attacks against Kurds in the area and against the rumored Turkish-backed operations to capture YPG-held territory in Afrin.

Opposition forces in the northern Aleppo enclave have continued to re-align themselves. Most recently, the First Brigade of Menbij announced its merger with Ahrar al-Sham. The First Brigade’s has previously been active against YPG/SDF forces in northeastern Aleppo near Jarablus. Ahrar al-Sham has regularly gained new sub-units over the past several weeks.

Developments within opposition-held territory

On July 8, the Syrian FSA revolutionary flag was raised for the first time alongside the white “Tawhid banner” over Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which is under Ahrar al-Sham control but managed by civilian authorities. Demonstrations were held in nearby Deir Hassan (possibly HTS organized) protesting the raising of the FSA flag. It is notable that the FSA flag was raised at a time of rising tension along the Syria-Turkey border and particularly around the Bab al-Hawa crossing, where HTS has expressed its resolve to “kill any Turkish soldier entering Idleb.” HTS has also positioned field artillery on the hills near the border crossing.

Two HTS fighters were killed by Soqour al-Sham, a sub-unit of Ahrar al-Sham, in Sarjah town in southeastern Idlib, further raising tensions in the area. Additionally, an HTS fighter fired shots in a confrontation with Syrian Civil Defense (SCD, also known as the “White Helmets”) in Jisr al-Shughour over a local dispute. An HTS statement confirms shots fired but explained they were the improper actions of an individual fighter, and the issue appears to have been resolved.

IED/suicide bomb attacks sharply decreased during this reporting period, with only three reported IEDs including one which may have been an accidental explosion. The three incidents targeted Ahrar al-Sham fighters and an Ahrar al-Sham position. On July 9, HTS launched a large operation in multiple locations in Idlib governorate against suspected ISIS cells. HTS-affiliated channels claim the operation included over 1,000 fighters establishing additional checkpoints and patrols and conducting raids in Idlib city and nearby Sarmin and Nayrab. Raids, patrols, and checkpoints were also established in the northern Idlib towns of Dana, Salqin, Harim, Eskat, Yasniya, Qurqaniyeh, and Hattan. Raids targeted 45 ISIS cells/locations and arrested over 120 persons, including local ISIS leaders.

As HTS did not communicate its plans to other armed groups in Idlib, the scale of HTS fighter mobilization and movements in the lead-up to the anti-ISIS operation was a cause of increasing alarm for FSA/Ahrar al-Sham forces. Ahrar al-Sham concerns prompted the issue of warning statements on Ahrar al-Sham-affiliated channels and by al-Sham leadership. HTS mobilizations in northern Idlib also prompted mobilization of Ahrar al-Sham reinforcements to the Bab al-Hawa area, further adding to tensions around the border crossing. Once operations began, however, an HTS spokesperson released a statement clarifying the nature of the operations.

Government battle against ISIS

Despite the much-heralded deployment of the pro-government Desert Hawks to the government’s eastern Hama front two weeks ago, progress by pro-government forces against ISIS east of Salamiyeh has been slow. The Desert Hawks were expected to take the lead in the government’s offensive against ISIS, alongside units from the NDF, Liwa al-Quds, and the Qalamoun Shield Forces of the Syrian Army’s Third Division. Initially, pro-government forces attempted to advance in the area on two separate fronts, moving east from the village of Aqareb (due east of Hama), and southeast from the Salamiyeh-Resafa highway (see map below). The stated objective of these offensives is to reach the town of Oqeirbat, capital of the eponymously named sub-district, located approximately 70km east of Hama city. On July 10, Desert Hawks and Liwa al-Quds forces advanced east from Aqareb, briefly gaining a foothold in the first village along their path, but were beaten back by an ISIS counter-offensive, suffering considerable losses. The Desert Hawks are also involved in the advance southeast from Sheikh Hilal, but there is no evidence that progress has been made on this front.

On July 13, pro-government forces succeeded in capturing several small villages south of the Salamiyeh-Resafa highway, including Um Tuwaynah, al-Hardaneh, and the hills of Khirbet Zeinab. The capture of these villages—assuming the government’s positions are maintained—represents a significant step in securing one of the final stretches of the road that is vulnerable to attack by ISIS forces. This land route to government-held Aleppo city has been regularly cut by both opposition and ISIS attacks in the past.

Pro-government forces captured al-Heil Gas Field located south east of the Tadmor - Sokhneh Road, although clashes between pro-government forces and ISIS continue on the outskirts of the gas field. Since the end of the government’s Northern Hama counter-offensive in late April, multiple reports have described the ongoing movement of a wide array of pro-government forces towards the east Tadmor front, with the eventual goal of lifting the ISIS siege on Deir Ezzor. More so than any other area in Syria, the east Tadmor front appears to be the location of the greatest coordination between the Syrian government, its backers, and a wide array of allied forces.

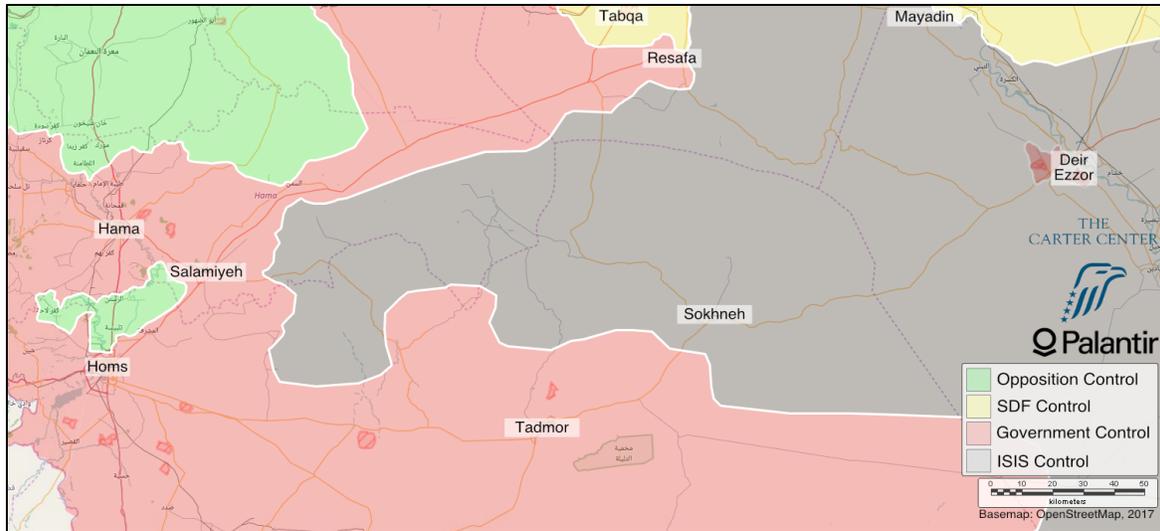


Figure 5 - Frontlines around Tadmor by July 12

After a week of relative inactivity, at least some elements of Tiger Forces have resumed their eastward offensive in the Resafa area of southwestern Raqqa governorate (see map above). The government-aligned Tribal Forces, sometimes nicknamed “Lions of Raqqa,” are also active in this area. The stated goal of this renewed offensive out of Resafa is to establish a second front against ISIS-controlled Sokhneh, located 80km to the south, but it would also effectively exert additional pressure on ISIS forces in eastern Hama. This offensive would also solidify government control over the network of roads leading eastward to Deir Ezzor and positions pro-government forces to potentially play a role in the aftermath of the International Coalition and SDF’s campaign against ISIS in Raqqa city.

SDF and International Coalition fight against ISIS

In the aftermath of a strong ISIS counter-offensive at the start of the week, Kurdish-led SDF has succeeded in capturing further territory from ISIS in the city of Raqqa. SDF advance has slowed within the Old City of Raqqa as a result, but the Old City’s historic walls have been breached at several points by SDF and their allies.

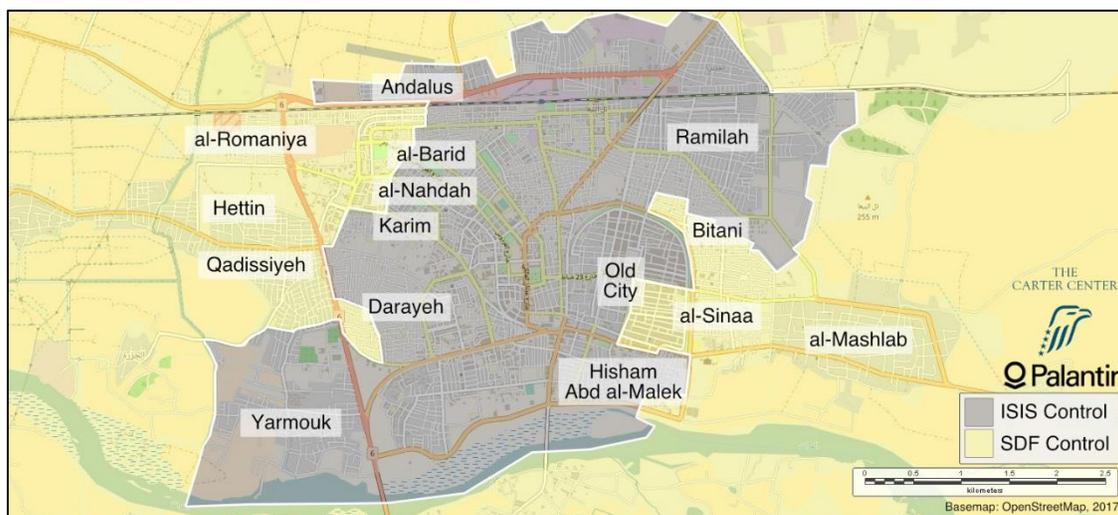


Figure 6 - Situation in Raqqa city by July 12

SDF fighters also advanced once more on the southern banks of the Euphrates, south of Raqqa city. Offensives in this area have further solidified the siege of Raqqa, and begun what appears to be an advance towards Mayadin, where much of the remaining ISIS leadership is believed to have fled.

The full capture of Mosul was announced this week after a year of combat and heavy destruction of the city. The International Coalition believes the offensive for the whole of Raqqa city could take months to eradicate ISIS in their former capitol. As with the offensive for Mosul, the primary dangers to continued advancement include tactically positioned snipers and groups of captive civilians, who are often used as deterrence to aggressive offensives. Additionally, IEDs continue to take a heavy toll on advancing SDF fighters.

News this week indicated that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the founder and leader of ISIS, might have been killed in Tal Afaar, an area west of Mosul in Nineveh province. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights echoed this report, citing a high-up ISIS member in Deir Ezzor province as a source. ISIS media channels have been silent on the matter.