

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

July 20-26, 2017

The ceasefire in southwestern Syria has continued into this reporting week, with few reported violations. However, fighting remained intense around Damascus city, where ceasefire announcements went ignored by all participants. Fighting on the outskirts of the city has intensified following the redeployment of troops from southern Syria to the capital following the implementation of the ceasefire in Daraa and Quneitra governorates.

In Idleb, a ceasefire between Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) and Ahrar al-Sham has quelled the rising conflict in the opposition-held governorate, but the broader conflict appears far from over. Also in northern Syria, tensions between Turkey-backed opposition groups and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have continued to rise, with repeated clashes along frontlines in Aleppo governorate.

On July 20, President Trump tweeted the end of the CIA's program providing support to vetted opposition groups. While the program has been paused multiple times in the past, this stoppage comes at a time when vetted opposition groups are particularly vulnerable to increased HTS aggression. The Pentagon is still actively supporting Syrian groups in the fight against ISIS.

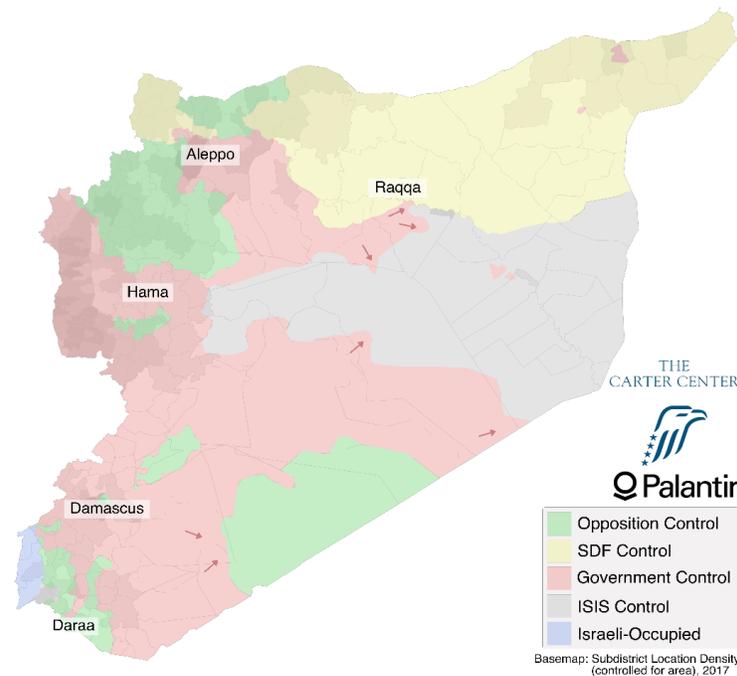


Figure 1 – Areas of control in Syria by July 26, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period. The underlying map is shaded based upon the density of population centers, with darker areas indicating greater density.

Government advances against ISIS

Pro-government forces in the southern Raqqa countryside continued to advance against ISIS. While it appeared that units from the Tiger Forces, Tribal Forces, and Fifth Corps-Third Brigade would continue to advance south from the Fahdeh oil fields on the Homs-Raqqa border towards al-Koum and Sokhneh, pro-government forces instead advanced to the northeast. The offensive succeeded in reaching the southern bank of the Euphrates river, outflanking SDF units south of the river. There were no significant ISIS counterattacks against this advance during the reporting week.

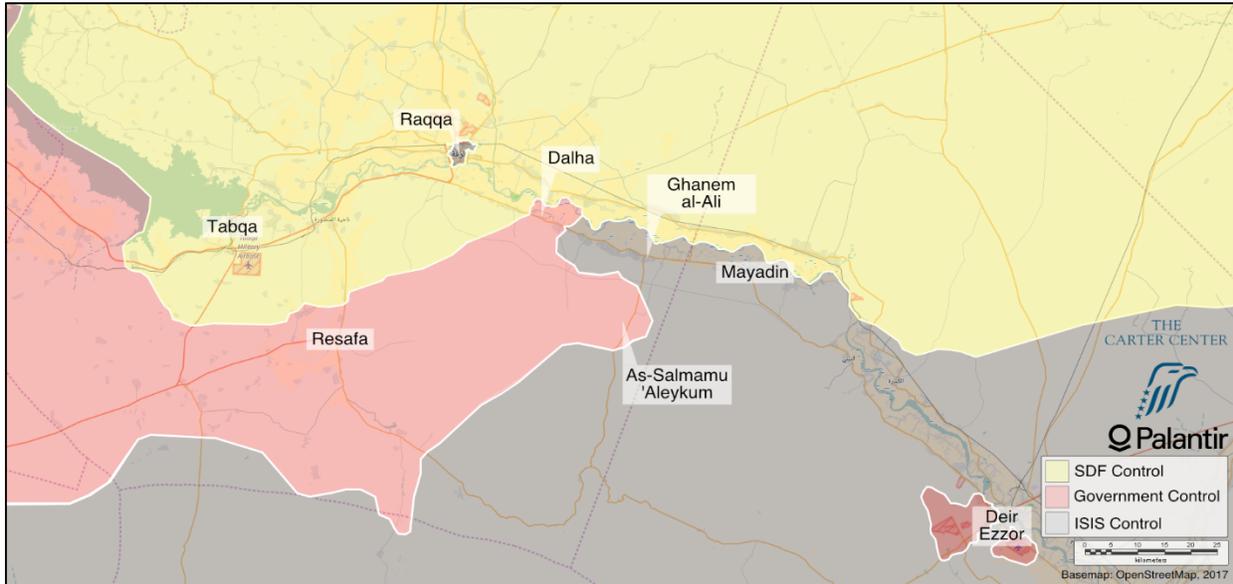


Figure 2 - Situation in eastern Aleppo and Raqqa countryside by July 26

The continued advance south of Raqqa is likely being conducted in concert with Russian forces. The Tribal Forces have a history of coordination with Russia-backed campaigns, such as those to retake Tadmor. Several Tribal Forces commanders have received medals from Russian commanders, and attended Russian military functions such as the annual 9 May Victory Day celebrations at Hmeimem Airbase in Jableh, Latakia.

Since descending from the hills into the Euphrates river valley to capture the villages of Dalha and Shinan, the Tribal Forces also advanced eastward against ISIS forces, capturing the village of As-Salamu 'Aleykum on July 24. The riverside towns of Ghanem al-Ali and Zor Shammar, to the east of Dalha, have both been targeted by Syrian government airstrikes this week, suggesting they may be the next goal of advancing pro-government forces.

The government's Fifth Corps-Third Brigade have been redeployed to Ithriya, south of Aleppo city in order to assist with stalled offensives against ISIS in eastern Hama. The brigade reported heavy losses against ISIS forces on both July 19 and 23.

Liwa al-Quds and the Jaleel Forces, two Syrian-Palestinian pro-government militias, fought against ISIS in the countryside of Hama alongside the Qalamoun Shield Forces and units from the Military Security Shield Forces. This week, pro-government forces attempted once more to advance and capture the village of Qulayb al-Thawr, located approximately 8km east of Aqareb. As with weeks before, the government's key objective in Hama remains the capture of sub-district administrative center Oqeirbat and the expulsion of ISIS forces from the eastern countryside of Hama to fully secure the eastern flank of the government's route to Aleppo.

Among the reinforcements that continue to arrive in the Tadmor area, a large convoy of tanks from the Syrian Republican Guards 800th Battalion Commandos arrived from the Eastern Suweida front. Pro-government forces advanced around Sokhneh town this week, though the timing of the final assault on the location is still uncertain. Sokhneh has been a target for pro-government forces around Tadmor for weeks, and is one of the few remaining major locations controlled by ISIS west of Deir Ezzor.

Southern Syria updates

Hezbollah and elements of the Syrian Republican Guard were involved in a campaign against opposition forces in the hills and mountains along the Lebanese border. Pro-government groups achieved some advancement against opposition forces in the area. This operation occurred in parallel with an operation in the Aarsal region on the Lebanese side of the border, where, amidst heavy fighting, both Hezbollah and Lebanese Armed Forces reportedly continue to make advances against groups related to Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) and ISIS. The Lebanese army is helping Syrian refugees flee the area to safer grounds and has deployed reinforcements on the outskirts of Aarsal to prevent fighters from fleeing into Lebanon.

On July 20, a ceasefire deal was announced between the government and opposition in Eastern Ghouta that would entail the opening of al-Wafideen crossing for civilians and humanitarian aid. The deal was meant to renew the de-escalation deal outlined at the last round of Astana talks, however, the two largest factions in Eastern Ghouta, Jaysh al-Islam and Faylaq al-Rahman, were not involved in the negotiations and reportedly did not know of the deal as of July 23. Furthermore, pro-government forces chose to escalate airstrikes on Eastern Ghouta, particularly on the neighborhood of Ain Terma on the outskirts of the city.

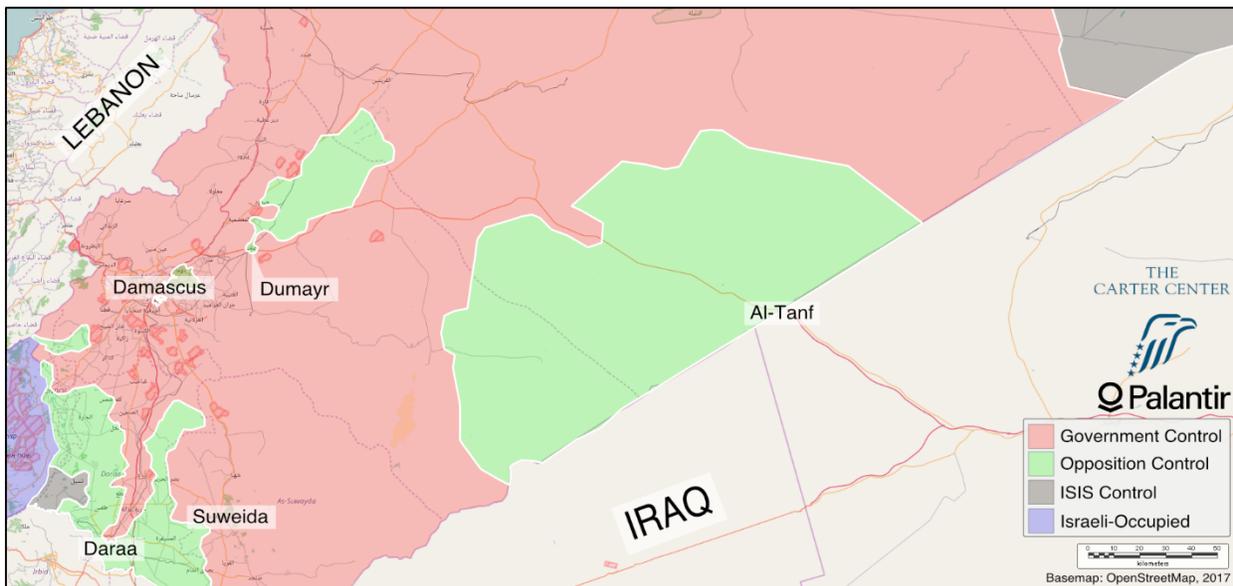


Figure 3 - Frontlines in southeastern Syria by July 26

Clashes have continued between pro-government forces and Jaysh Osoud al-Sharqiya in the desert east of Suweida. An ongoing pro-government offensive to cut off and recapture territory from the opposition in Eastern Sweida was successful this week, with pro-government forces expelling opposition units, and pushing frontlines further towards the Iraqi border.

The US-Russia-Jordan negotiated ceasefire continues to hold in Daraa, as well as parts of Quneitra and Sweida, which are experiencing a period of relative calm. By July 24, Russian military police had been dispatched to areas spanning from Daraa into the Golan Heights (about 13km from the Israeli border) and have been setting up checkpoints to enforce the ceasefire.

Continuation of conflict between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham

Fierce opposition infighting between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham continued into this reporting period. The clashes were concentrated in northern Idlib along the Syrian-Turkish border and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, the Jabal al-Zawiya area south of Idlib, and in some areas of northern and western Hama. A ceasefire agreement was reached on July 21, but required Ahrar al-Sham to withdraw from Bab al-Hawa and the full transfer of the border crossing to the civilian authority. More clashes took place on July 22 and 23, before an additional agreement stopped the fighting and saw Ahrar al-Sham withdraw from the border crossing. A group of 400 fighters withdrew from Idlib to Northern Aleppo in or near Jarablus, in part facilitated by Turkish elements as the groups traveled through Turkey.

As a result of the latest clashes, Ahrar al-Sham suffered a significant loss of territory throughout Idlib as well as control of Idlib city and the critical Bab al-Hawa crossing, a primary source of income for the group. Ahrar al-Sham has also suffered significant loss of its fighter base with the defection to HTS of the “Badia Division,” with a (likely exaggerated) estimate of 7,000 fighters, along with twelve other reported units defecting. Though HTS has seen defections because of the fighting, it has still clearly come out on top.

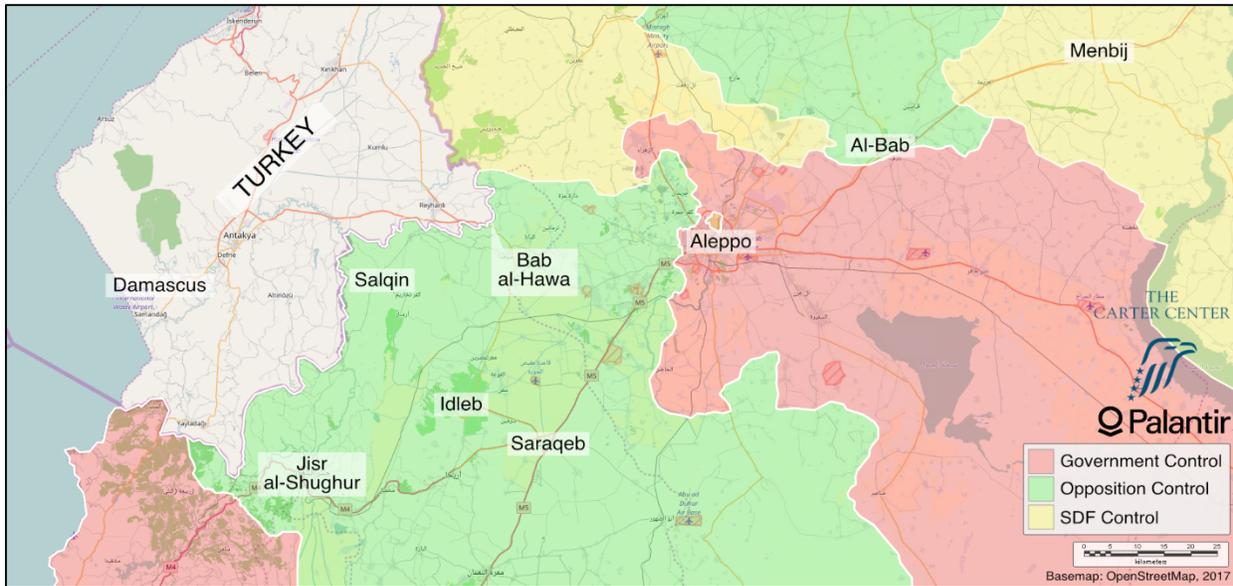


Figure 4 - Area around Bab al-Hawa crossing

In addition to its negotiated capture of Bab al-Hawa, HTS is now in control of much or all of the Syria-Turkish border area from Badama in Western Idlib to Harim in northern Idlib. On July 23, HTS established control of Idlib city and nearby Bannish after clashes and shelling.

Over the reporting period, HTS is confirmed to have captured or Ahrar al-Sham vacated the following towns: Saraqeb, Habit, Dana, Azmarin, Tal Amar, Aqrabat, Atma, Sarmada, Karsaa, Rasha, Mahkama, Tremla, Faqie, Base 57, Marrat al Sin, Baarbu, Qasabiyeh in Jabal Shashabo, Maarat Misrin, Ram Hamdan, Kafr Yahmool, Jisr al Shughur, Za’iniya, Khirbet al-Joz border crossing, Idlib city, Bannish, and Daret Azza.

There has been significant internal division about HTS actions against Ahrar al-Sham. Abdullah al-Muhaysini, a prominent HTS-aligned sheikh, declared there was no fatwa issued by the HTS Shura Council allowing for HTS attack of Ahrar al-Sham. Nur al-Din al-Zinki finally defected from HTS on July 20 after months of rumored threats. The group left in protest of HTS refusal to bring a halt to the fighting. On July 22, an HTS leader was killed by poisoning supposedly after denouncing aggressions against Ahrar al-Sham and HTS leader al-Jolani.

Further northern Syria developments

In addition to clashes with HTS, Ahrar al-Sham battalions battled against SDF in northern Aleppo along the border of the territory held by the Turkey-backed Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) forces. These clashes centered around the southwestern and western front as they have in weeks prior, with no change in territory.

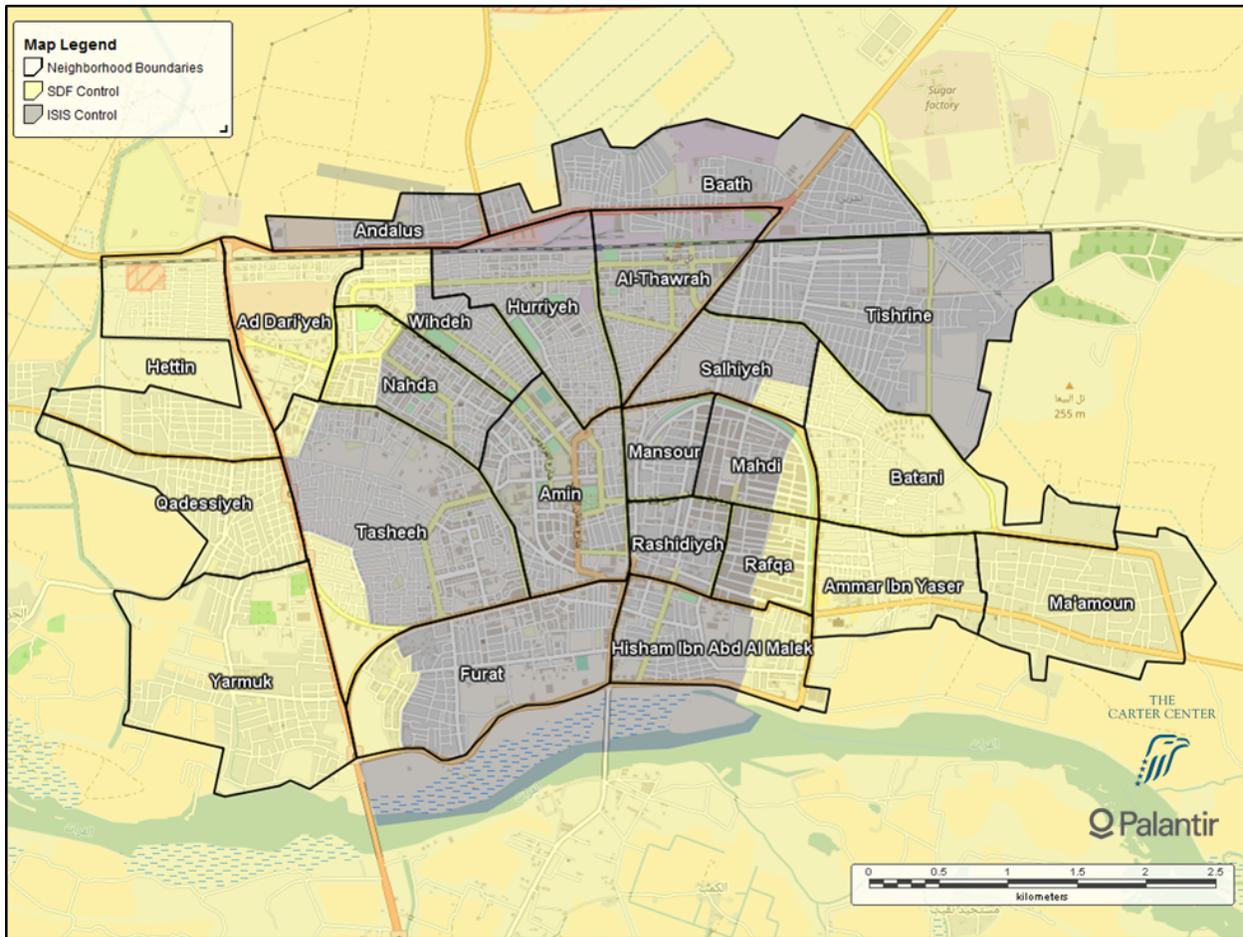


Figure 5 - Frontlines in Raqqa city by July 26

SDF fighters continued to advance in Raqqa city against ISIS forces. The battle for Raqqa has been slow but steady, with the SDF retaking some areas lost to previous ISIS counterattacks and advancing further along southwestern and eastern fronts simultaneously. SDF fighters maintain a foothold within the Old City of Raqqa and appear to be attempting to flank the walled district from the north and south.