

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

October 12-18, 2017

ISIS has been cleared completely from both its de facto capital, Raqqa, and secondary stronghold Mayadin. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF – a mainly Kurdish force supported by the US) captured Raqqa after more than four months of fighting, leaving the city heavily damaged due to intense aerial bombardment. Pro-government forces captured Mayadin shortly after surrounding the city while advancing southward from Deir Ezzor. The Turkish incursion into Idlib has expanded with new armaments and equipment flowing into the northern borders of the opposition-held pocket. Renewed fighting and a demand from Jordan for opposition groups to relinquish control of the Naseeb border crossing have caused new tensions within the opposition’s Southern Front coalition, including talk of the coalition’s dissolution.

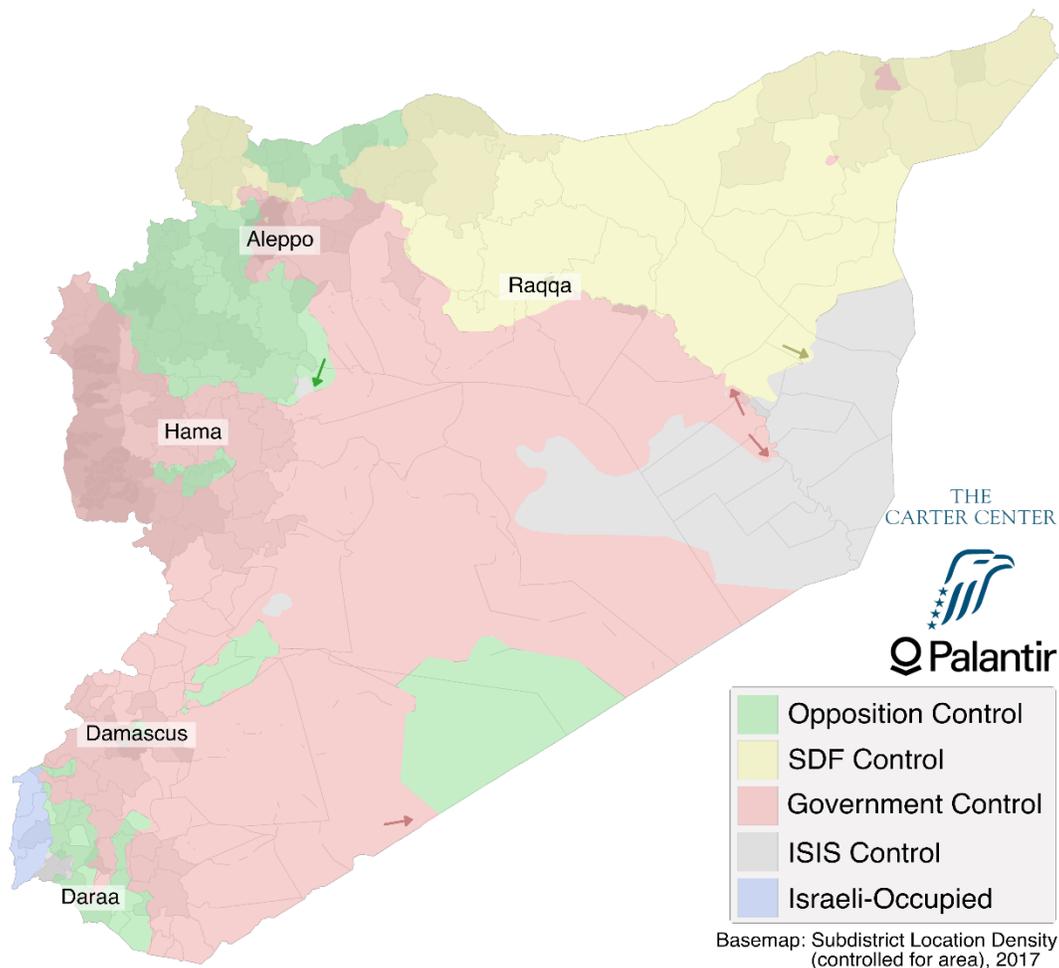


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by October 18, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period

Fight against ISIS

On October 17, the SDF captured the final neighborhoods of Raqqa city from ISIS, marking the end of Operation Euphrates Wrath after nearly a year of advancement. In the days following, SDF member groups, including the mainly-Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG and YPJ), have documented civilians leaving heavily-mined zones. Much of the city has been destroyed and the civilian toll of the Coalition-provided close air support has been significant. Though the last neighborhoods were captured on October 17, clean-up operations persist and ISIS fighters are still surrendering to SDF units in large numbers.

No more measurable progress has been made into ISIS-controlled Deir Ezzor, with both the SDF and pro-government forces instead advancing outwards from their held territory near Deir Ezzor. Pro-government forces captured Mayadin on October 14, consolidating their control by capturing surrounding towns in the days after. ISIS withdrew nearly without a fight and no counterattacks have been mounted in retaliation for the new pro-government advances. The rapid capture of this city is unusual because it has been considered the de-facto headquarters of ISIS since ISIS leadership fled Raqqa at the start of Operation Euphrates Wrath.

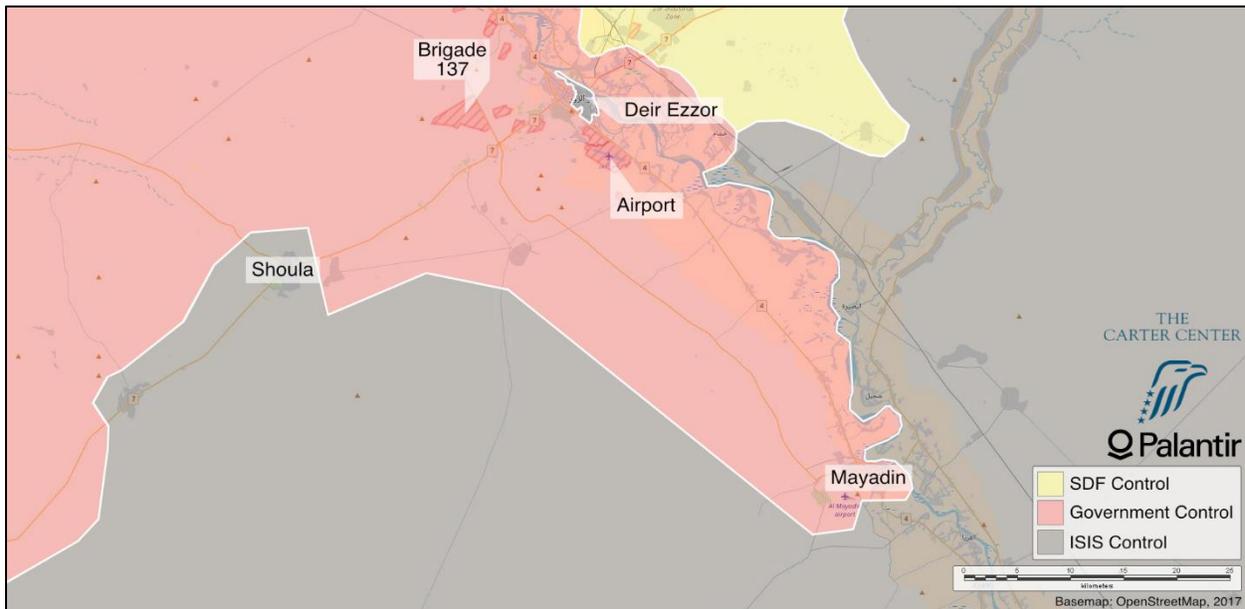


Figure 2 - Frontlines around Deir Ezzor and Mayadin by October 18

Syrian Arab Army General Issam Zahreddine was killed in Deir Ezzor on October 18, reportedly due to an ISIS landmine. Zahreddine greeted the Tiger Forces when the two-year siege of Deir Ezzor was broken in September. He also oversaw security forces in Duma during the initial government crackdown on protests there, and sparked controversy in September when he warned refugees not to return to Syria.

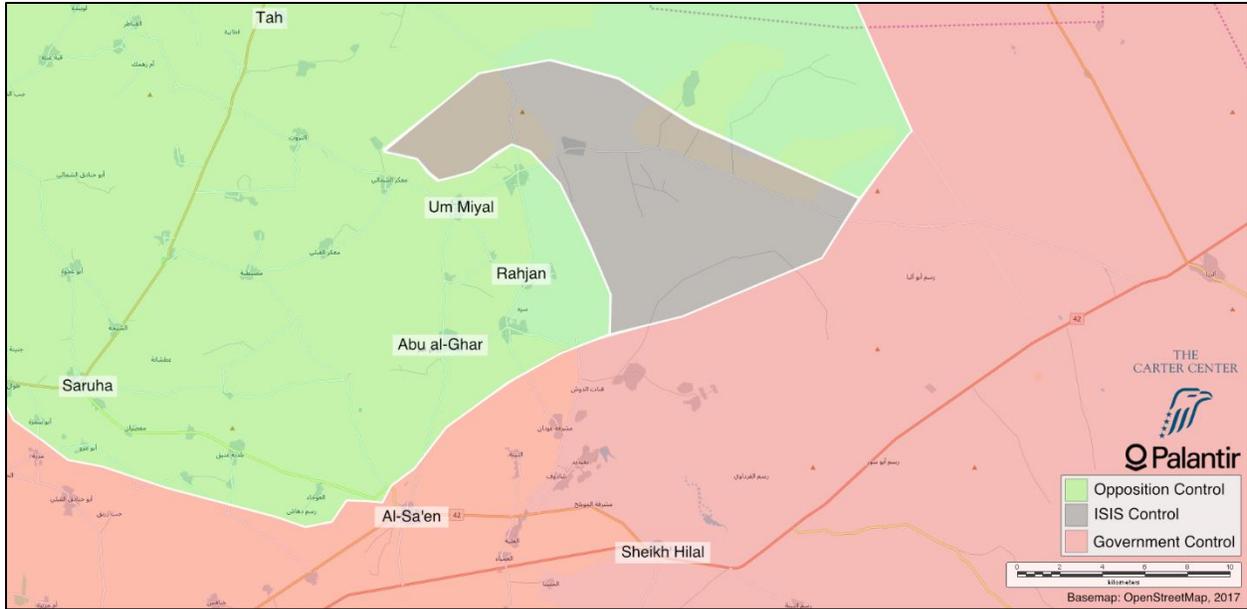


Figure 3 - Frontlines at the southeastern border of the opposition-held Idlib pocket by October 18

During the previous reporting period, Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) lost significant territory to a surprise ISIS offensive. This ISIS advance on October 9 created a temporary ISIS-controlled pocket in northeast Hama. HTS halted and reversed the ISIS advance with a counter-offensive involving the use of artillery, armored vehicles, and suicide attacks. The HTS counter-offensive is most active from the west end of the ISIS “pocket” and has so far captured a little less than half of the towns lost in the initial ISIS attack. HTS has so far recaptured Um Miyal, Abu Kahf, Abu al-Ghar, Rahjan, and Mustarihah, and Northern and Southern Sarha.

Developments within the opposition

Intra-opposition clashes in northern Aleppo broke out between the Sham Front and Sultan Murad Division following the decision by the Sham Front to hand over control of the lucrative Bab al-Salama border crossing to the opposition’s Syrian Interim Government. The Sham Front decision to hand over control to the Syrian Interim Government was also a response to previous threats by Sultan Murad to take over the crossing by force of arms. Clashes between the groups have since ceased and the matter is being arbitrated.

On October 12, Turkish forces deployed to Sheikh Barakat Mountain and the Daret Azza area with troops, armored vehicles, rocket artillery, and tanks to establish monitoring sites in accordance with a de-escalation zone agreement from the Astana talks. Their deployment is also to prevent SDF expansion to the south along the Turkish border and is in possible preparation for a future offensive against Kurdish forces in Afrin canton. Up to 60 military vehicles have so far been stationed in the areas of Atmeh, Al Qah and Deir Sam'an. Construction vehicles have also appeared in the area, presumably to fortify Turkish positions. Some FSA armed groups from Operation Euphrates Shield are on the Turkish side of the Bab al-Hawa border but will not be deployed in Idleb following a Turkish agreement with HTS.

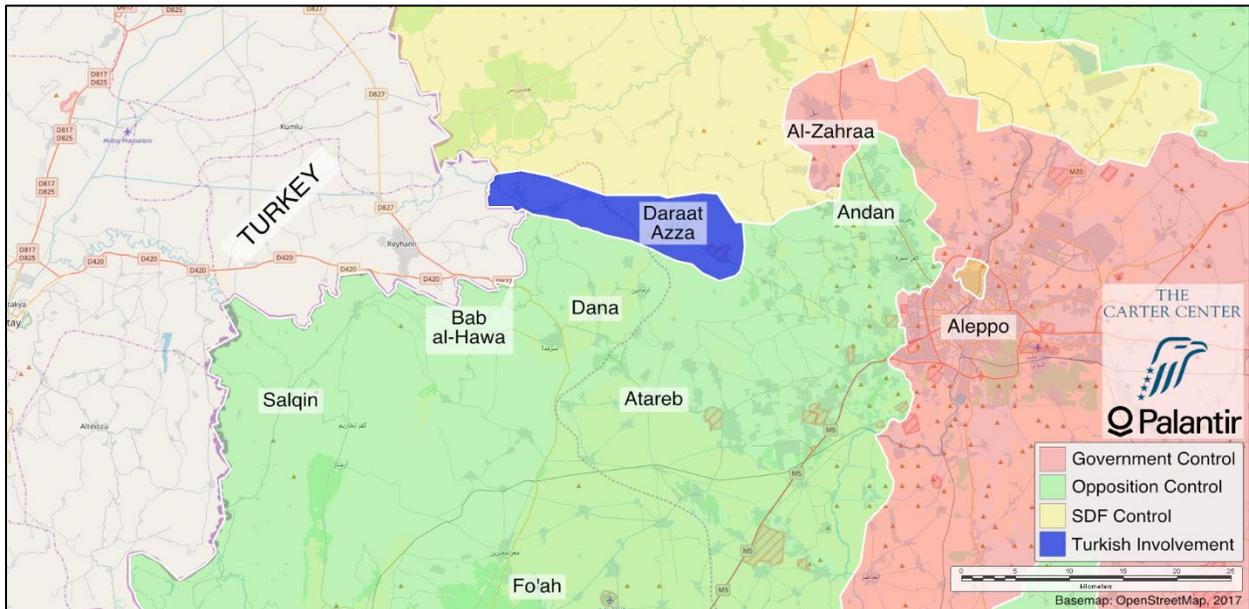


Figure 4 - Situation in northwestern Aleppo by October 18

Bab al-Hawa border crossing restrictions have been lifted by Turkey to allow the free flow of goods and materials. Restrictions had been placed on the entry of building materials and other items since early August following HTS takeover of the crossing from Turkey-friendly Ahrar al-Sham.

Multiple opposition groups announced the formation of the “3rd Infantry Division”, a new unit created with Turkish backing. Six more battalions defected from HTS during this assessment period to form Jabhat Tahrir Suria.

Developments in the South

On October 12, several opposition groups, most of which belong to the Southern Front, launched a new offensive to break the siege on the town of Hayt in the Yarmouk Basin, which is surrounded by ISIS-affiliated Jaysh Khalid Ibn al-Waleed. While unsuccessful in breaking the siege, the groups were able to defend their positions and successfully end a counterattack by Jaysh Khalid Ibn al-Waleed on October 17.

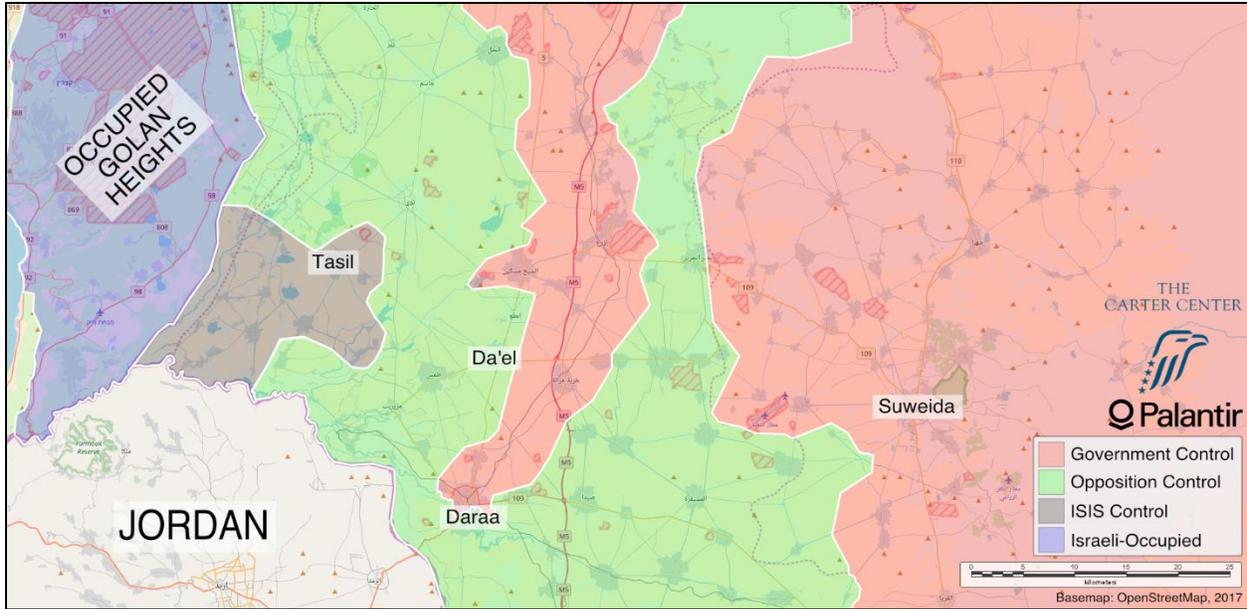


Figure 5 - Frontlines around Daraa and Shajara by October 18

Clashes returned to the Manshiyeh neighborhood of Daraa al-Balad on October 12 for the first time since the southern ceasefire went into effect in July. Prior to the ceasefire, Manshiyeh witnessed some of the fiercest fighting in Daraa between the opposition’s Bunyan al-Marsous operations room and pro-government forces.

On October 13, pro-government forces launched an assault from the Damascus-Daraa highway on al-Malzoumah and al-Warad in al-Lajat area (in northeastern Daraa). While opposition forces were able to win back the territory that was taken, activists note that several Bedouins from the area were detained around the time of the fighting. This assault is also the first of its kind since the ceasefire began. On October 15 in al-Lajat, an IED injured the head of the reconciliation delegation for the area. He survived the attack, which targeted his car in the town of al-Sharay’.

Finally, leaders of several Daraa-based armed groups met at the Shabab al-Sunna headquarters in Busra al-Sham on October 13. The outcomes of the meeting included reaffirming the commitment of the groups to the goals of the Syrian revolution, a refusal to open the Naseeb border crossing following a demand by Jordan, the formation of a new committee to create a shared military leadership for Daraa, the formation of a committee to overhaul the judicial system, and the announcement of the impending dissolution of the Southern Front. It is worth noting that plans to dissolve and reorganize the Southern Front are discussed frequently, but have never been put into action.

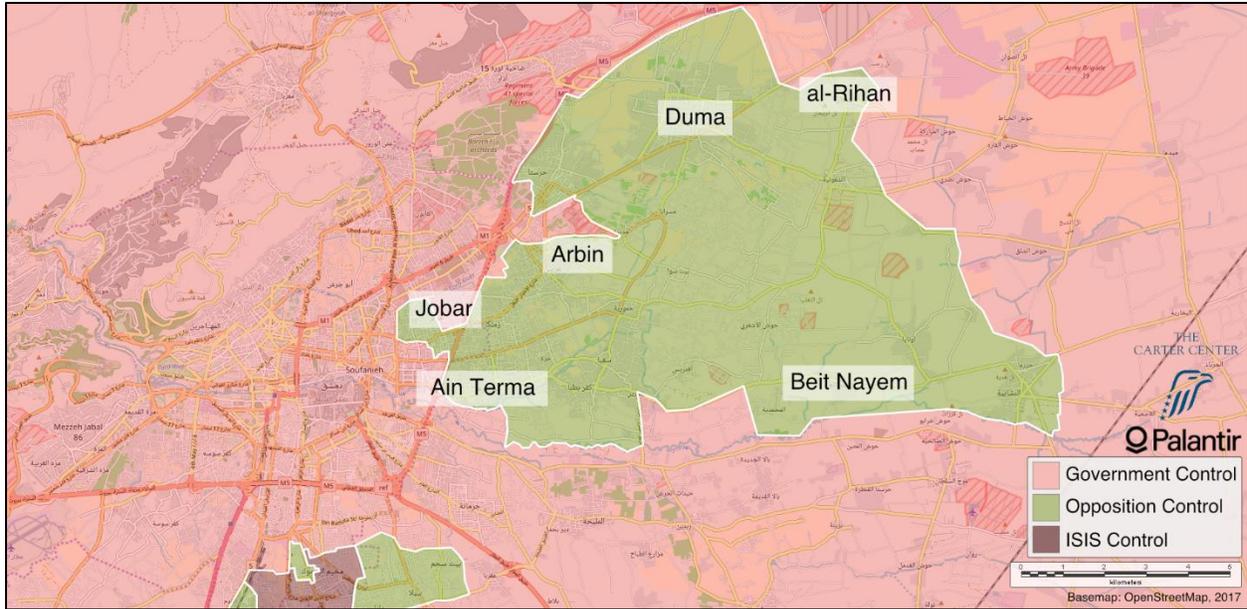


Figure 6 - Areas of control around Damascus and the Eastern Ghouta by October 18

Eastern Ghouta continues to witness regular clashes, aerial bombardment, and shelling. Harasta was shelled on October 13, followed by airstrikes on Shifouniyeh and Reyhan on October 13. On October 16, government forces shelled Kafr Batna, Misraba, Duma, and Beit Sawa, and launched airstrikes on Hazzeh, Hosh al-Dawahira, and Hazarma. Clashes between Faylaq al-Rahman and pro-government forces on the Ain Terma front have continued.

A ceasefire was reached between Jaysh al-Islam and pro-government forces with Russia and Egypt mediating. No details about the duration or precise location of the ceasefire areas have been released, but it is expected that it includes Yalda and Beit Sahem. Given the relatively low levels of conflict in the area, residents worry that citizens could be forcibly displaced as in the case of previous reconciliation deals.

FSA forces in the Syrian desert (Jaysh Osoud al-Sharqiya, Quwwat al-Shaheed Ahmad al-Abdo, and Maghaweir al-Thawra) have all retreated into the deconfliction zone surrounding the Tanf base. This retreat solidifies pro-government forces' control in the Badia along the Jordanian border. Ten fighters from Quwwat al-Shaheed Ahmad al-Abdo defected to pro-government forces prior to the retreat.

A Syrian surface-to-air missile targeted an Israeli military plane during a routine flight over Lebanese airspace, prompting Israel to respond by striking a Syrian airbase east of Damascus and warning Syria “not to play with fire.”