

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
October 26 – November 1, 2017

Pro-government forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led coalition backed by the US) both took more territory from ISIS in Syria's east, though with some minor setbacks. Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra) also advanced against ISIS this week in the southeastern corner of the Idlib pocket. Turkish involvement in the opposition-held Idlib pocket continued to expand, with rumors that Turkish observers would establish additional monitoring positions in southern Idlib.

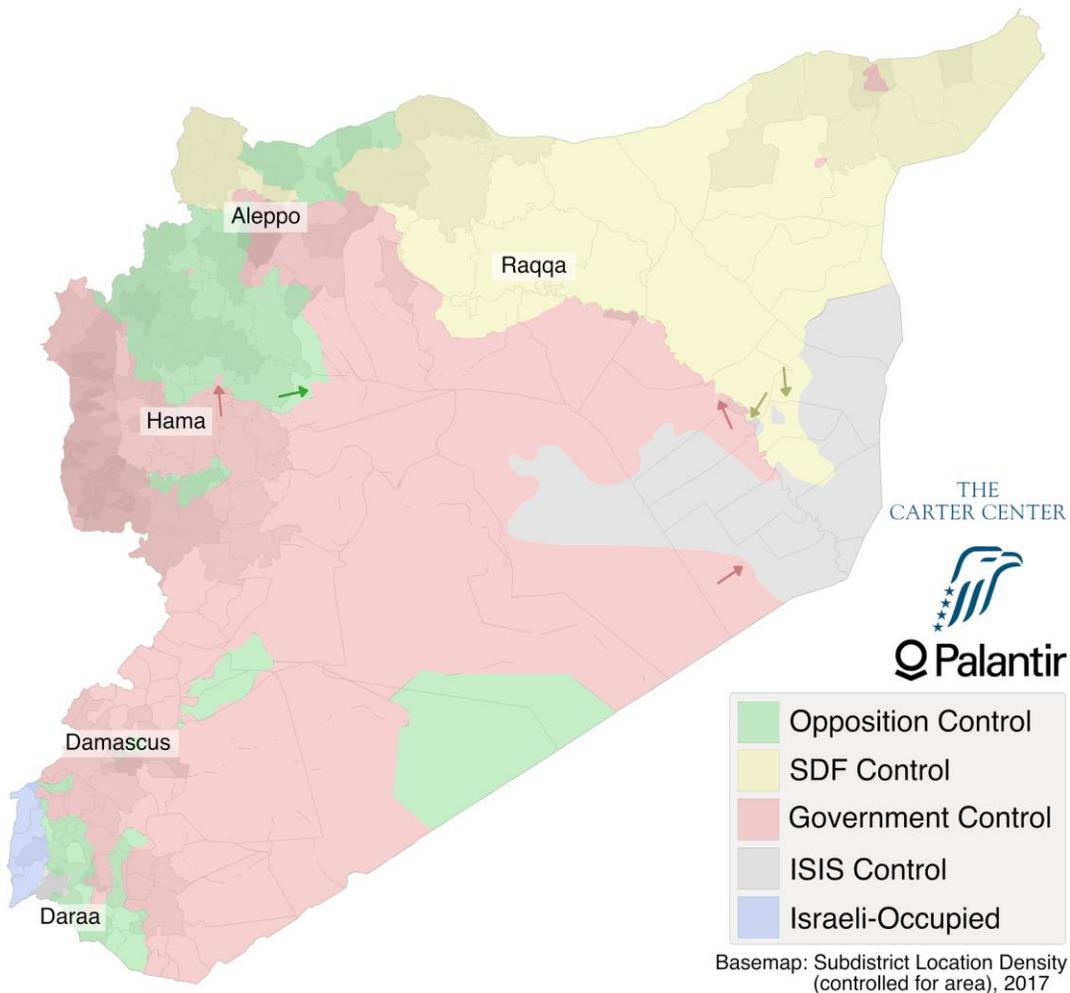


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by November 1, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period

Fight against ISIS

On October 29, ISIS began a large-scale operation to regain control from the SDF of the Al-Omar oil field southeast of the city of Deir Ezzor. ISIS killed six SDF members so far and have retaken much of the territory on the perimeter of the oil field, although the main oil facilities remain under SDF control. SDF positions in eastern Deir Ezzor governorate remain vulnerable due to logistical issues stemming from limited river crossings.

Following the capture of the T2 Pumping Station from ISIS forces on October 26, pro-government forces continued to advance across Syria's southeastern desert toward Abu Kamal, now seen as the last major ISIS stronghold in Syria. Pro-government forces are approximately 50km from the city of Abu Kamal, which lies on the west bank of the Euphrates River just upstream from the Iraqi border town of Qa'im in al-Anbar province.

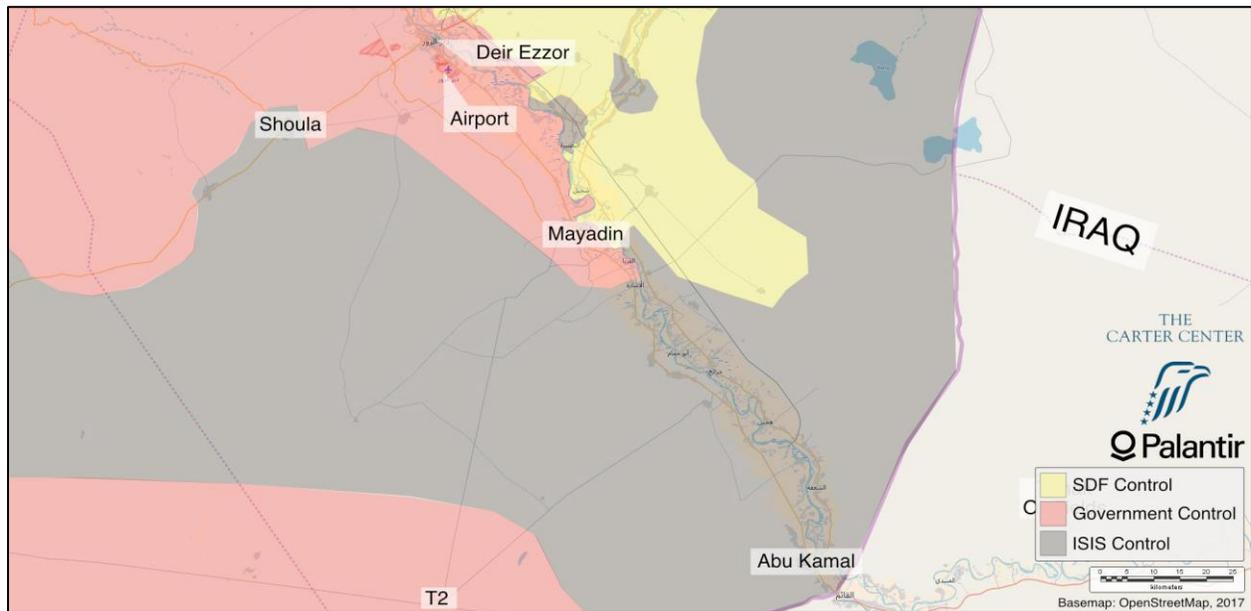


Figure 2 - Situation south of Deir Ezzor city by November 1

Pro-government forces have made steady progress against ISIS in Deir Ezzor city during the reporting week. On October 26, pro-government forces gained control of Hweijet Sakr, located immediately east of Deir Ezzor city. On October 28, the southern workers' neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor and the sports stadium were captured by pro-government forces. As of October 31, pro-government media sources also reported that this pro-government advance had continued and that the neighborhoods of Hettin and Ali Bekwa Abd al-Aziz had come completely under government control. As of November 1, clashes reportedly continue in the al-Hamidiya neighborhood, but Ba'ajein and the park abutting al-Hamidiya to the west are now both under the control of pro-government forces.

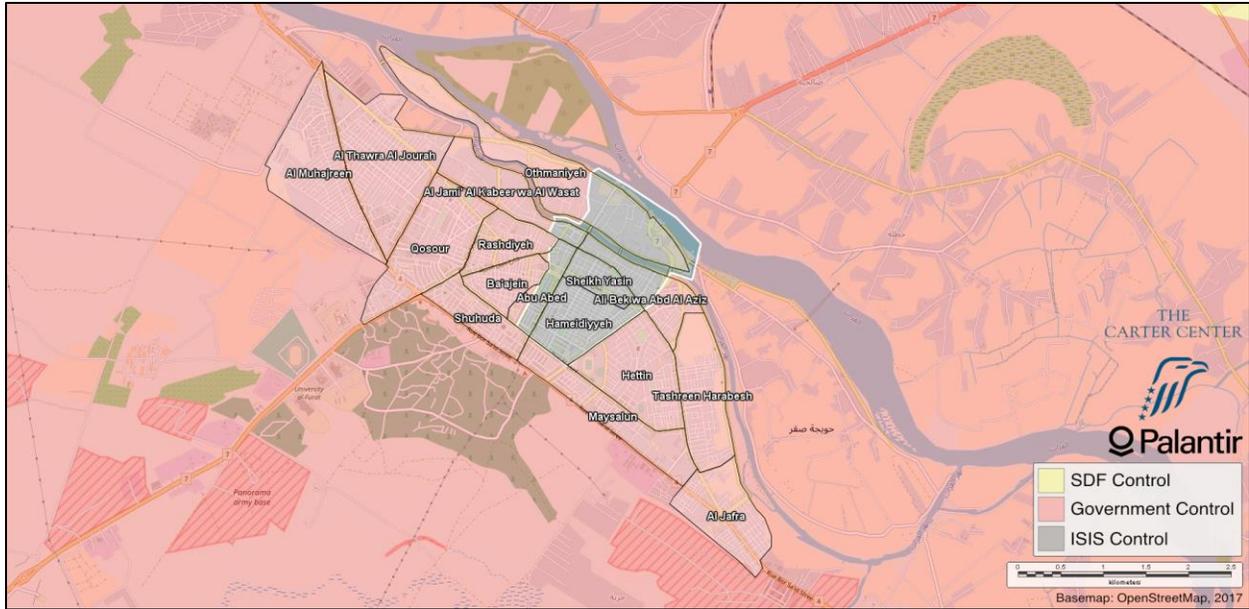


Figure 3 - Situation in Deir Ezzor city by November 1

During this reporting period, HTS recaptured the eastern Hama towns of Nufayla, al Qanah, and Msheirfeh and the strategic position of Tel Sarha from ISIS forces, continuing to regain territories lost during a surprise ISIS offensive in early October. The ISIS pocket in eastern Hama is severely diminished, having suffered significant losses to both HTS and pro-government forces during October.

HTS has also waged a counter-offensive against pro-government forces in the same area in Eastern Hama, in some areas within kilometers of clashes with ISIS forces, while pro-government forces opened another front with HTS near the city of Abu Dali further to the west. HTS’ clashes with pro-government forces have been concentrated along the frontlines of Jeb Abyad and Abu Lafa and in Abu Dali to the west amidst reports of multiple attempts by pro-government forces to advance. Two HTS suicide attacks were reported to have targeted pro-government positions in Jeb Abyad and in the countryside of Abu Lafa.

The opposition’s Central Division has joined HTS in holding the frontline with pro-government forces near Marijab Jamalán and Abu Lafa/Jeb Abyad, deploying an anti-tank guided missile team. Additionally, the opposition’s Jaish al-Izza has also deployed its fighters and equipment to the Abu Dali frontline alongside HTS.

During this reporting period, Russian warplanes conducted airstrikes in multiple locations in the eastern Hama countryside, with a significant concentration of strikes on the Abu Dali area and the city of Latamna, the latter of which has also been consistently targeted with shelling and airstrikes by pro-government and Russian forces throughout 2017.

Developments within opposition-held territory

According to a statement by the Head of the Chiefs of Staff for the Free Syrian Army, General Ahmad al-Berri, the Turkish army is expected to set up 11 monitoring posts in territory currently

under opposition control in northwestern Syria. Only two such locations have been confirmed so far. In addition to northern Idleb and the western Aleppo countryside, Turkish forces are expected to establish a presence at nine additional points in western Idleb, southern Idleb, and Northern Hama Countryside, including the opposition-controlled town of al-Latamna. According to al-Berri, Turkish forces have also entered territory in Syria’s coastal region, likely referring to territory to the southeast of the Turkish border town of Yayladagi, where opposition groups have long had a presence in the Jebel al-Akrad area of northern Latakia governorate. If Turkish forces do establish a presence in northern Hama, it will likely deter future attacks by pro-government forces. The towns of al-Latamna and Kafr Zeita have been targeted with artillery or aerial bombardments on an almost daily basis since at least March of this year.

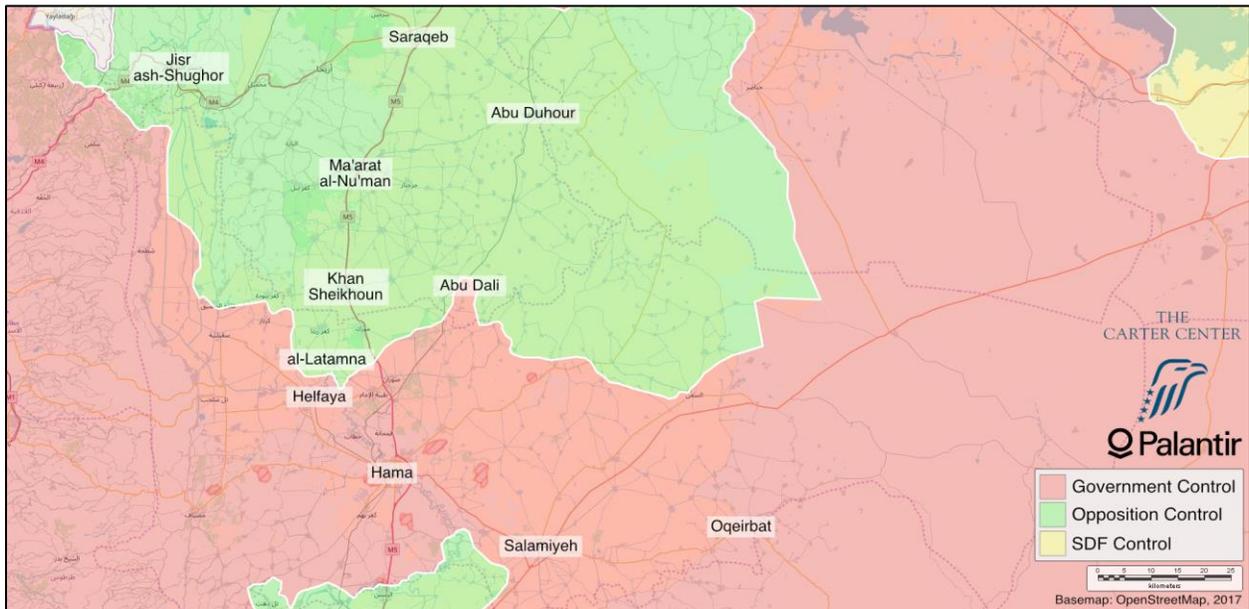


Figure 4 - Situation in northern Hama by November 1

HTS has continued to suffer from a string of assassination operations most recently implemented in Khan Sheikhoun, Dana, and Hazano (southern Idleb). During the reporting week alone, five HTS members (including at least two military commanders) were killed in IED attacks or at close range by unidentified assailants. ISIS elements within opposition territory are the primary suspect behind the attacks.

Unknown assailants also attempted to assassinate Abu Saleh Talhan, current leader of Jaish al Ahrar, and formerly the military commander of Ahrar al-Sham and later HTS forces. Talhan and Jaish al Ahrar defected from HTS earlier this year.

The opposition’s Syrian Interim Government (SIG) has taken control of the Bab al Salameh border crossing completing the handover process from Jabhat al Shamiyeh which began in early October. The decision by Jabhat al Shamiyeh to hand over the border crossing initially sparked conflict between the armed group and the Sultan Murad Division which was quickly resolved with the mediation of the SIG. The Bab al Salameh border crossing is estimated to generate USD 1 million per month.

Also during the reporting period, Firqat al Hamza, which operates in the areas captured by the Turkish-backed Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Aleppo, announced it will hand over its military college and training facility to the Ministry of Defense of the SIG. Jabhat al Shamiyeh transferred control of its military college earlier this month.

The handover of the border crossing and the military facilities follow an agreement signed between the SIG and FSA armed groups operating in the northern Aleppo area to form an opposition “National Army” and to agree to SIG administration of all border crossings in northern Aleppo.

On October 31, pro-government reinforcements traveled from government-controlled coastal regions to the Ghab plain in western Hama. Speculation among social media monitors suggests that these fighters will contribute to the anticipated pro-government offensive against opposition forces in Idleb.

Developments in the South

Last week, the siege of the Eastern Ghouta became the topic of a social media campaign using the hashtag #AssadBesiegesGhouta. After circulating amongst social media activists, the campaign was picked up by the United Nations News Centre on October 27 and became a topic of interest during the most recent rounds of the Astana talks. Perhaps as a result of recent attention to the siege, the Syrian government permitted UN aid convoys to enter Babbila, Yalda, and Beit Sahem (all south of Damascus, not in the Eastern Ghouta region) on October 27, and Kafr Batna and Saqba on October 30.

The entry of aid convoys, however, has not yet been linked to a decrease in violence. On October 26, Saqba was targeted by artillery shelling. On October 29, just one day before the aid convoys arrived, a childcare center in Kafr Batna was shelled, injuring students. On October 30, pro-government forces also targeted a school in Jisrein with heavy artillery. Finally, a school in Misraba and areas in Ain Terma were shelled on October 31. The targeting of schools in the area caused the Revolutionary Council in Damascus and Rural Damascus to release a statement calling on the UN to investigate the situation.

Pro-government forces made a new attempt to capture the opposition held district of Jobar in southern Damascus city on October 25. The offensive was repelled by Faylaq al-Rahman, but clashes have continued throughout the week. Clashes have also continued between pro-government forces and Faylaq al-Rahman in Ain Terma, adjacent to Jobar.

Pro-government forces continue to clash with armed opposition groups, including HTS, in the Beit Jen pocket in southwestern Rural Damascus, near the border with the Golan Heights. The pro-government campaign against opposition forces in the area has been ongoing for 45 days, without significant advances. On October 28, HTS issued a statement claiming to have killed 220 pro-government soldiers and wounded more than 100 others, and to have destroyed one Gvozdika self-propelled gun, five tanks, one mobile anti-aircraft vehicle, and two 14.5mm heavy machine guns.

A series of IED attacks targeted military leaders throughout Daraa on the morning of October 27. One attack targeted a leader of the opposition’s Jaysh al-Asha’ir on the Simaj-Sama road. Another targeted a car belonging to the opposition’s Jaysh al-Ababil on the Zimrein-Um al-’Aswaj road.