

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

November 23-29, 2017

During the reporting week, ISIS forces in northern Hama saw a resurgence as the group multiplied their holdings in the area many times over while Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led coalition supported by the US) advanced further from their earlier holdings to reach the Iraqi border. Pro-government forces also advanced further into the opposition-held Idleb pocket from a new front. A shaky ceasefire in Syria's south was agreed-upon, as well.

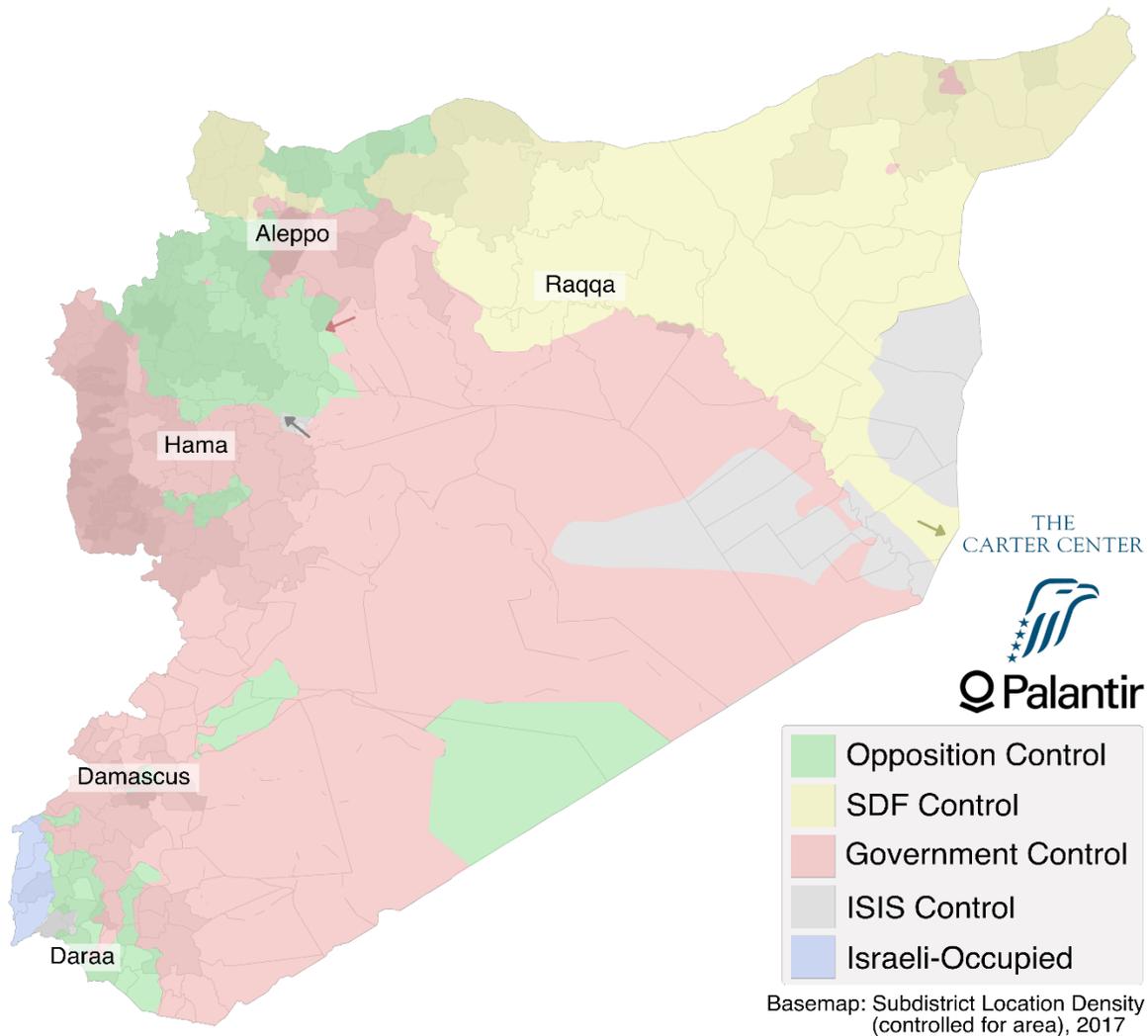


Figure 1 - Areas of control as of November 29, 2017. Arrows indicate advances made during the reporting period.

Battle against ISIS

SDF units advanced against ISIS eastward from the oil wells they controlled east of Deir Ezzor city. This offensive, still a part of the ongoing Cizire Storm operation, resulted in SDF fighters reaching the Iraqi border by November 25.

Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag said that Turkey will closely monitor whether the US is abiding by its pledge to cut off weapons supply to the YPG. This statement follows a November 25 phone call between President Erdogan and President Trump, during which the latter reportedly assured that Washington would no longer send weapons to the YPG.

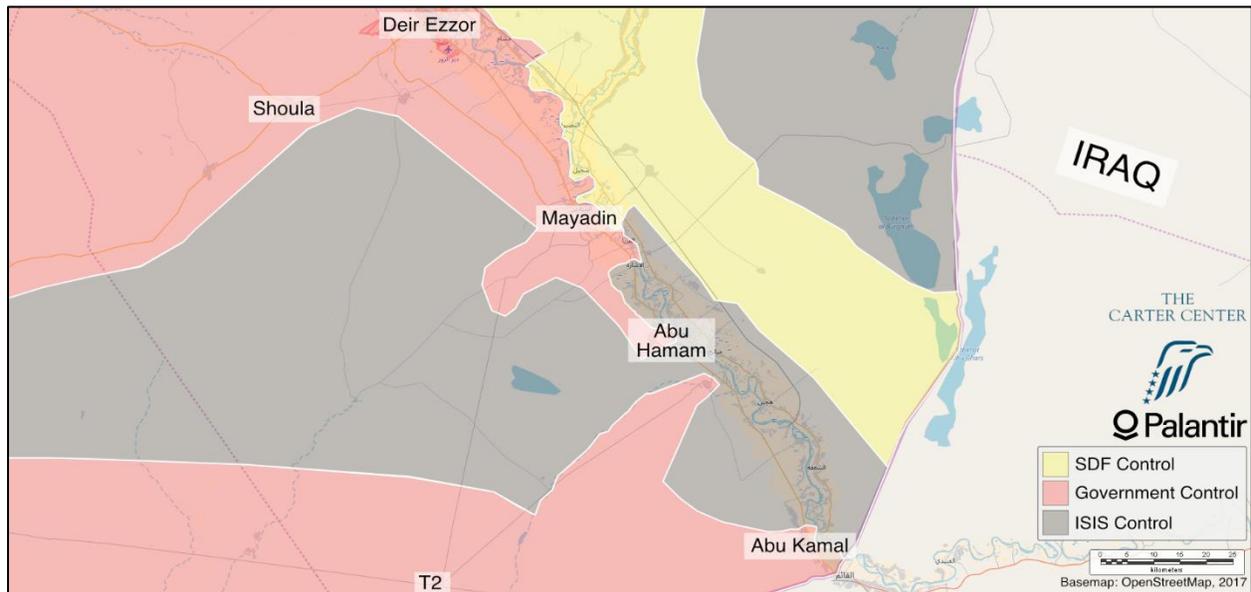


Figure 2 - Frontlines in eastern Syria by November 29

No major gains have been made against ISIS by pro-government forces this week, though airstrikes have been heavy in the lower Euphrates River valley. On November 26, Russian bombers struck residential buildings in al-Shafah in Deir Ezzor province, killing at least 53 civilians and wounding at least 18 people. The village is one of the few remaining locations still held by ISIS in the east.

ISIS fighters and their families besieged by pro-government forces on Kati' Island in Deir Ezzor have offered to relinquish remaining territory in Deir Ezzor in exchange for safe passage to Idlib. It is notable that ISIS has recently established a foothold near Idleb at the expense of opposition groups and Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-aligned Jabhat al-Nusra) in eastern Hama.

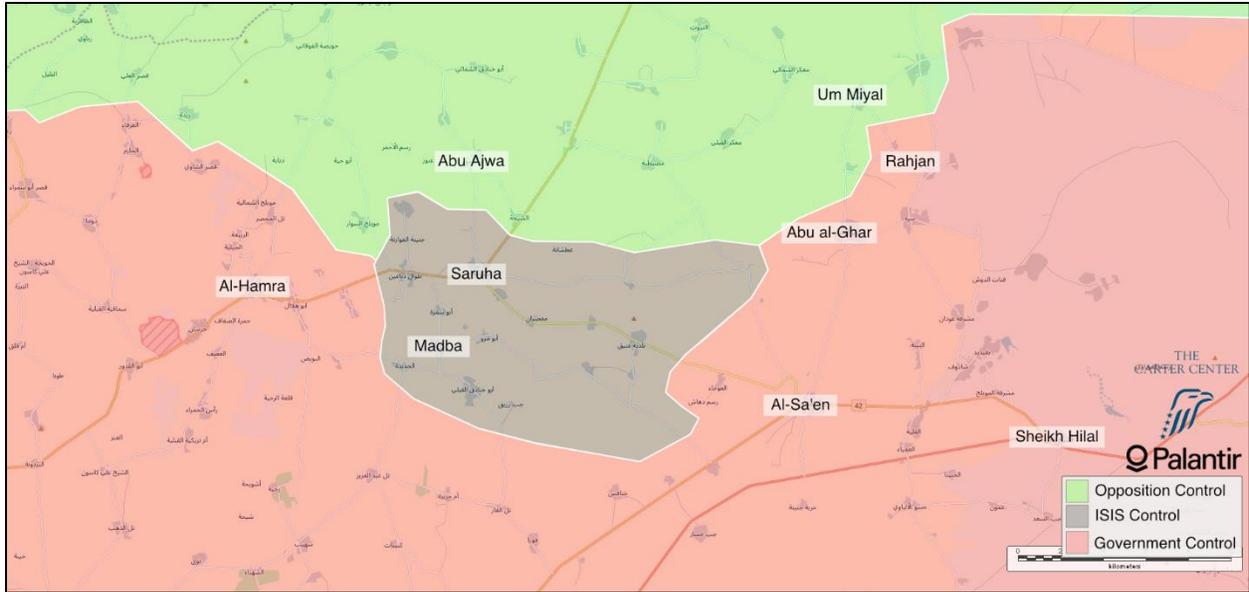


Figure 3 - Situation in northeastern Hama by November 29

Hama frontlines update

On November 21, the outnumbered and beleaguered ISIS forces in eastern Hama launched an offensive on opposition territory, rapidly capturing over 20 towns and villages in fighting that occurred throughout the assessment period. The ISIS offensive was supported by heavily armed reinforcements arriving from the eastern desert from Nov 21-26. Most of the territory under ISIS control was captured early in the offensive and frontlines between ISIS and opposition forces have mostly remained the same throughout the assessment period. Clashes are ongoing and that HTS has recaptured the town of Abu Ajwa in a counter-offensive launched on Nov 27.

While airstrikes and clashes between opposition and pro-government forces continued along the northern Hama frontlines amid ongoing airstrikes on opposition positions, no significant changes in the frontlines were made during the assessment period.

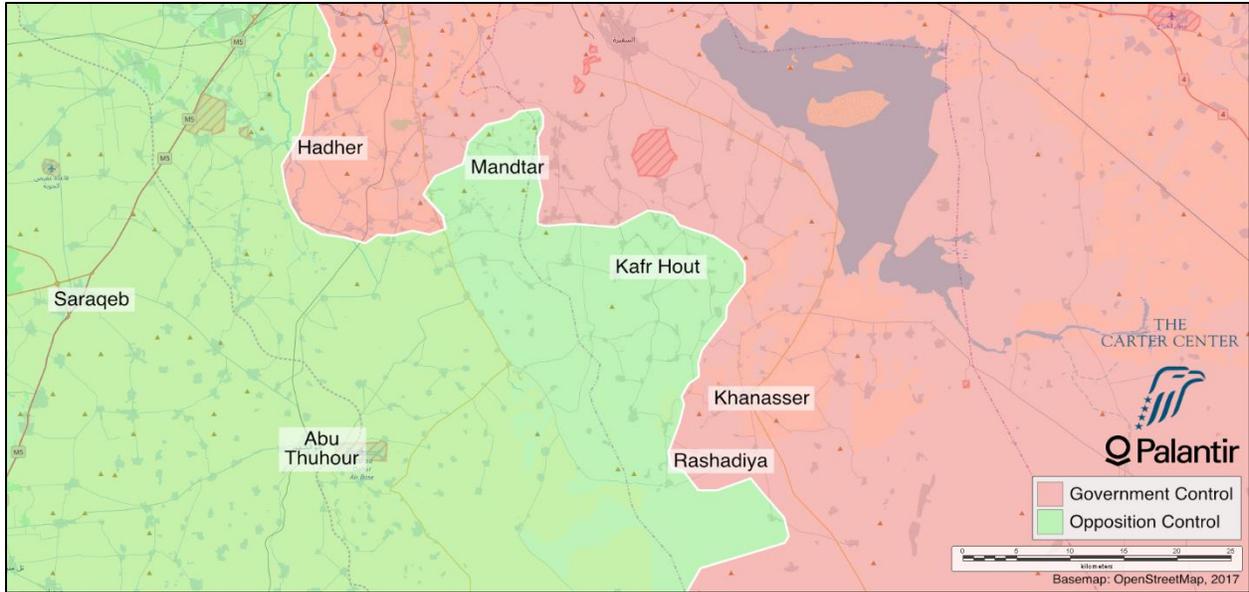


Figure 4 - Frontlines in southwestern Aleppo by November 29

On November 27, pro-government forces launched an offensive in southern Aleppo breaking opposition lines on the Rashadiya-Khanasser frontline, capturing territory to bring pro-government forces within 30km of the Abu Thohur military airport from a third front.

Turkey has suggested that it could expand its military mission in Syria to Afrin and Aleppo, following a meeting of the National Security Council on November 28. An expansion of the Turkish "observation mission" in Idlib province would likely bring Turkish forces into conflict with the US-backed Kurdish militias, who control the Afrin region.

Opposition developments

During the assessment period, HTS forces arrested the former Jabhat al-Nusra Chief Sharia Official Sami Al-Oraydi, and former Jabhat al-Nusra Emir and Shura Council Member Abu Julayjib. Both persons, Jordanian nationals and influential amongst Al Qaeda leaning fighters in Syria, had previously split from Jabhat al Nusra in rejection of its decision to sever ties with Al-Qaeda and to form Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. HTS has accused both of attempting to undermine HTS and has referred them to its internal courts. Multiple other non-Syrian fighters that had previously held positions of authority within Jabhat al-Nusra were also arrested, including Abu Himam al-Suri (former Nusra commander), Abu Qasim al-Urdoni, and Abu Masaab al-Zarqawi.

Twenty-one opposition groups, including Ahrar al-Sham and Nur al-Din al-Zenki, released a statement rejecting the outcome of the second iteration of the Riyadh Conference specifically rejecting the inclusion in the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) of any parties against the revolution or seeking a solution that would keep Assad’s government in power. Signatory opposition groups also demanded the inclusion in the HNC of opposition members committed to the principles and objectives laid out in the “Revolutionary Covenant”, a 2014 document setting out political and military ideals (including the commitment to fight against both Assad’s forces and ISIS).

Updates in the South

On November 27, a Russian ceasefire deal was put forward for November 28-29 on rebel-held Eastern Ghouta, which has been under siege by pro-government forces since 2013. The Syrian government accepted this proposal on November 28.

Prior to the ceasefire, intensive airstrikes continued throughout the Eastern Ghouta. On November 23 alone, over 40 airstrikes hit the Eastern Ghouta, including 16 on the town of Harasta. The towns of Madayra and Misraba were targeted multiple times, while Arbin and Duma were hit before the Russian announcement of a ceasefire. On November 28, aircraft struck Hammoriyeh and Misraba despite the ceasefire. A convoy carrying food and medical aid entered Eastern Ghouta on November 28, amid continuing government airstrikes on the area.

Prior to the ceasefire, pro-government forces launched an attack on Jobar on November 25, but were stopped by Faylaq al-Rahman.

Clashes have begun again in the Beit Jinn pocket after a period of relative calm. The 4th Division of the SAA launched a new offensive against opposition forces near Tal Bardiyeh on November 27, though opposition forces remain in control of the locality.

The US-backed opposition group Maghawir al-Thawra recently relieved 180 fighters from duty, leaving their forces between 40 and 60 fighters. While Maghawir al-Thawra claims that it let the fighters go due to weak performance, some have speculated that the downsizing signals an attempt by the international coalition to decrease its presence in and around the Tanf.