

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

February 22-28, 2018

The Syrian government's siege and bombardment of Eastern Ghouta remained intense despite two separate ceasefires from the UN and Russia. Fighting around the borders of Eastern Ghouta continued, as did opposition shelling of Damascus city. In northern Syria, new opposition coalitions have taken significant territory from Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra), apparently with minimum fighting. Operation Olive Branch, the Turkish-led offensive into Afrin, gained control over the whole of the Syria-Turkish border from Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led organization in northern Syria).

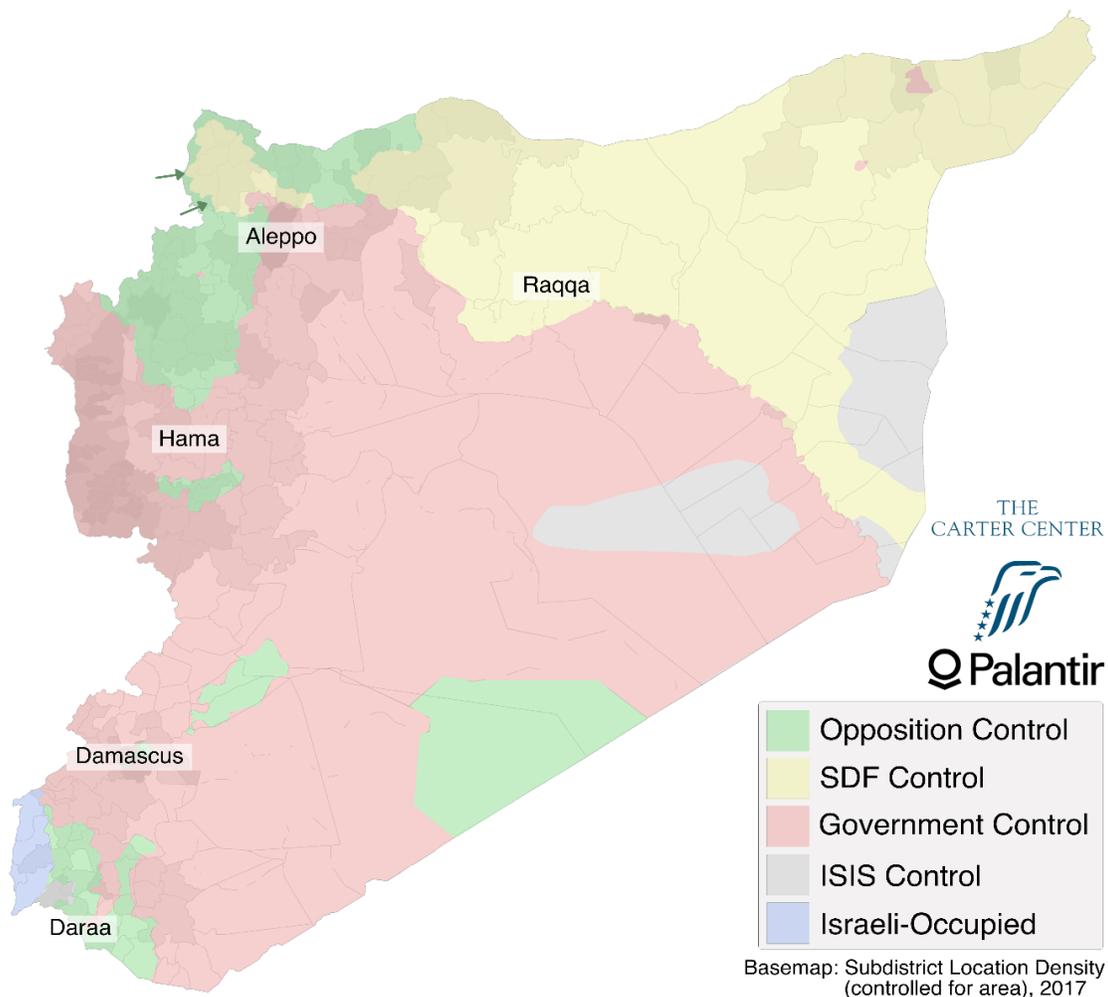


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by February 28, with arrows indicating fronts of advances during the reporting period

Eastern Ghouta

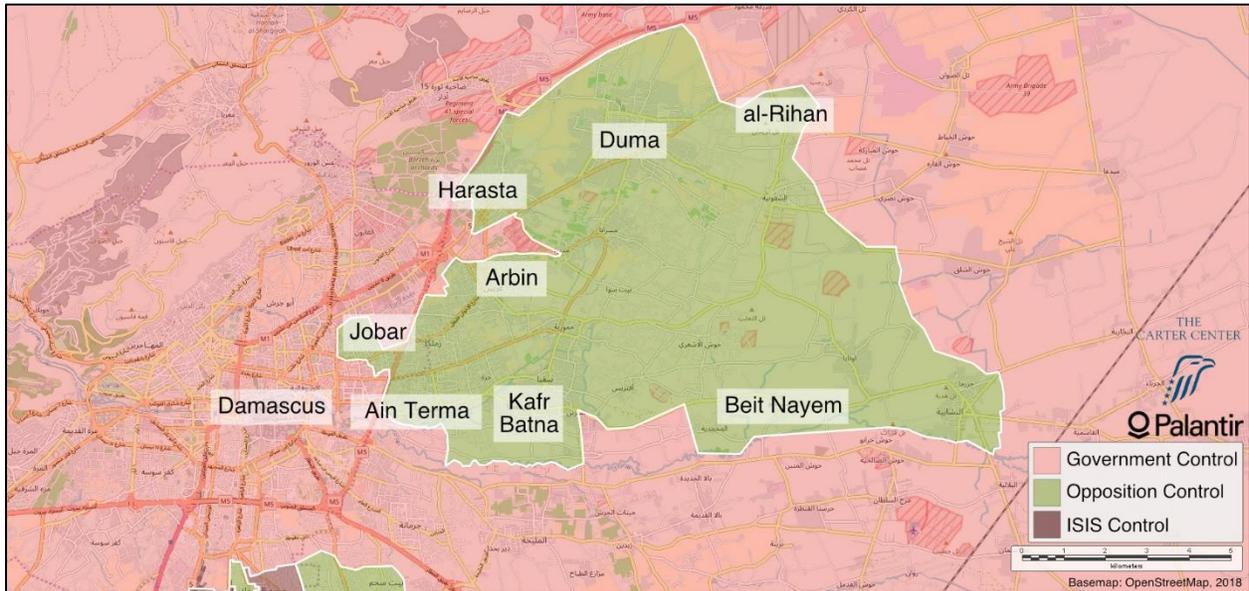


Figure 2 - Situation in Eastern Ghouta by February 28

Strikes on opposition-held Eastern Ghouta continued throughout this reporting period. The situation in the besieged area is increasingly dire, with reports of a lack of access to basic nutrition, repeated attacks on hospitals, and mounting civilian casualties. On February 24, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution calling for a 30-day nation-wide ceasefire “without delay”. The resolution was adopted after repeated delays due to disagreements between the US and Russians on the text before the vote. The UN vote was intended to allow emergency aid deliveries to the region’s hardest-hit areas.

Despite the resolution, fighting has continued throughout most of Syria, and has been particularly intense in Eastern Ghouta and in the northwestern Afrin region. As the UN ceasefire resolution did not set a start date, Russian officials announced they would establish a humanitarian corridor and a five-hour daily truce in and around Eastern Ghouta. The ceasefire, which is limited from 9am to 2pm daily, is solely intended to allow civilians to evacuate. Civilian evacuation has also been subject to negotiation, wherein safe passage has only been promised given strict concessions from the remaining opposition units in the Eastern Ghouta.

The Syrian government continued airstrikes on Eastern Ghouta on February 27, despite the Russian-brokered five-hour humanitarian pause. Opposition fighters also reportedly shelled a safe route out of the besieged enclave. The UN’s provision of aid and evacuation of those seriously injured have been severely hindered and mostly prevented due to continuous fighting.

On the second day of the Russian truce, pro-government forces took territory at the southeastern corner of Eastern Ghouta. Syrian forces considered the ground offensive justified under the provision of the Security Council ceasefire resolution exempting attacks against designated terrorist organizations.

Opposition Infighting

A widespread campaign against HTS began following the formation of Jabhat Tahrir Souriya (JTS, a coalition of Ahrar al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zenki) on February 18. This new offensive has resulted in reports of more than two dozen locations captured from HTS, though many of these captures appear to have been the result of voluntary withdrawals, including from Idleb city, with intense fighting only occurring in a few key locations.

Afrin

Turkish forces and allied opposition fighters have succeeded in securing the full border of Afrin, connecting the opposition-held canton in northern Aleppo with Idlib. Turkish-backed units also advanced to the west, south, and southeast of Jendaires city this week, nearly surrounding the city from three sides. Jendaires is a key city within Afrin at the territory's southwestern frontier, and will likely be a fiercely contested location.

During the reporting week, members of the National Defense Force (NDF, a pro-government local militia found in many cities in Syria) from Nubl town north of Aleppo moved into SDF-held territory in Afrin. While in the canton, members of the Nubl NDF were spotted in Afrin and Jendaires cities.

On February 22, SDF units in the Aleppo city district of Sheikh Maqsoud left the neighborhood under pressure from pro-government forces. The Kurdish-majority neighborhood is now controlled by pro-government forces.

Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag confirmed that further Turkish army and special forces will be deployed to Afrin to continue the operation. Mr. Bozdag indicated that these forces would be used in new battles, likely urban clearing operations.

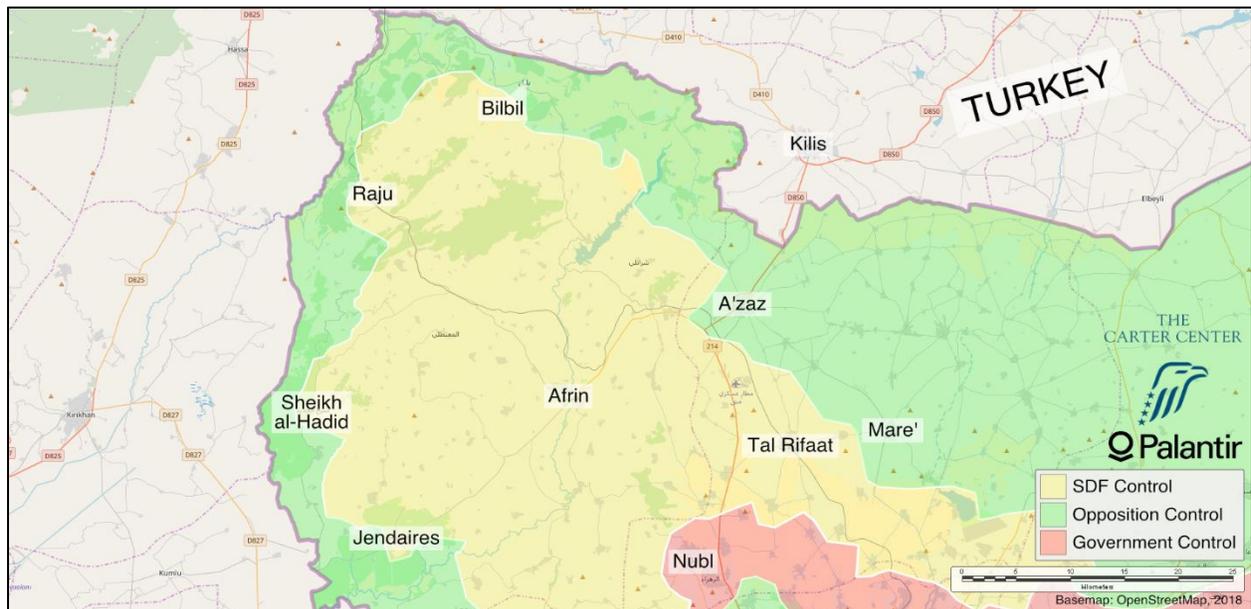


Figure 3 - Situation in northwestern Syria by February 28