

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
March 22-28, 2018

Pro-government and opposition forces followed through with evacuation deals for much of what remained of opposition-held Eastern Ghouta. Despite the deals and evacuations, fighting continues in Duma. Operation Olive Branch, the Turkish-led offensive for northwestern Syria, continued its advance southeast of Afrin city, threatening to take the remaining territory still held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Fighting between Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra) and Jabhat Tahrir Suriya (JTS, an anti-HTS opposition coalition) continued this week, with JTS forces regaining some lost territory.

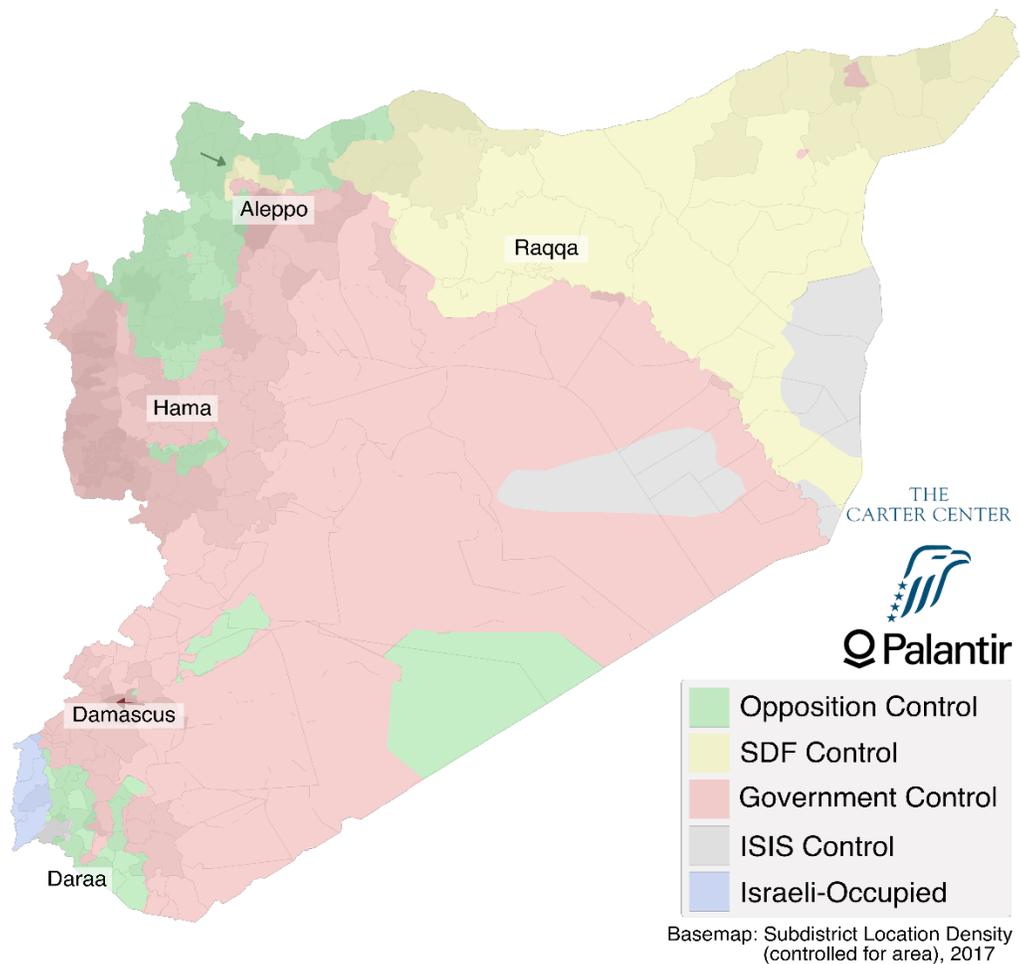


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by March 28, with arrows indicating advances during the reporting period

Eastern Ghouta

Evacuations of hundreds of opposition fighters and their families started this week from Harasta. In the first day of evacuations, six buses took the evacuees to the opposition-controlled Idlib pocket. The evacuation is part of a deal brokered by Russia between the opposition fighters and the government and is being facilitated by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and a UN delegation. Local sources reported that some fighters remained in these areas to reconcile with the Syrian government. Russian observers have supervised initial meetings with those intending to reconcile

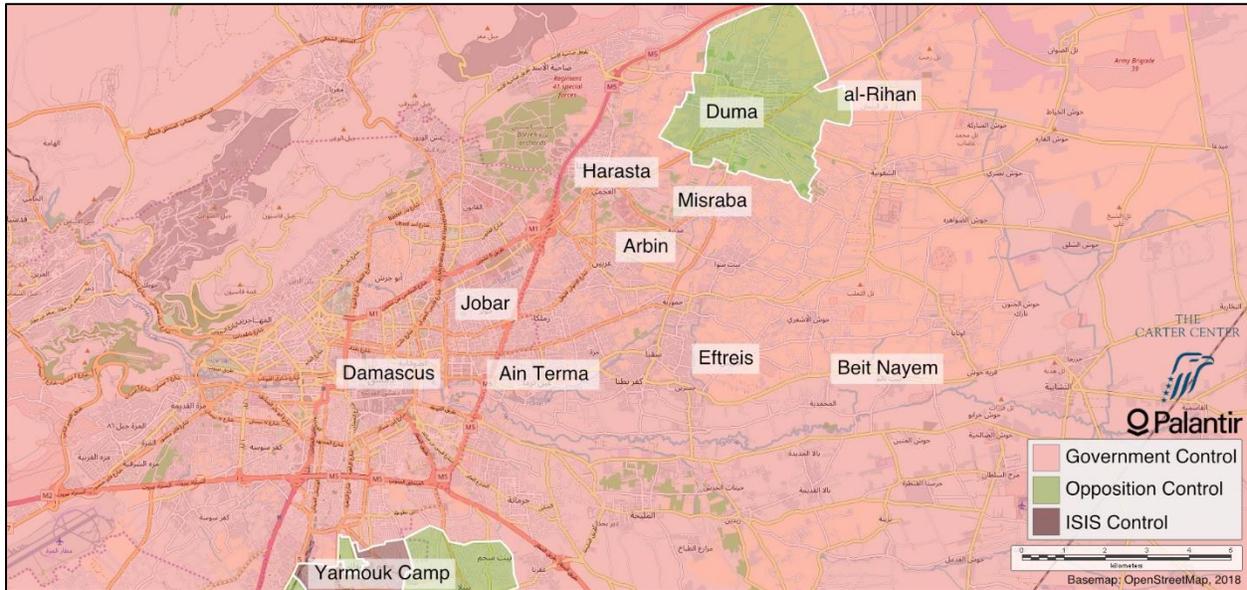


Figure 2 - Situation in Eastern Ghouta by March 28

At least 37 people were killed in a March 22 bombing of an underground shelter in Arbin, a town in the southern pocket of opposition-controlled Eastern Ghouta. The pocket is controlled by Faylaq al-Rahman, which announced on March 23 that it would agree to a ceasefire and negotiate with Russia to stop fighting.

Hundreds more fighters and civilians were bussed out of the southern Jobar pocket of Eastern Ghouta on March 25. Evacuations of both the Harasta and Jobar pockets were completed during the reporting week, leaving Duma as the only remaining pocket of opposition forces in Eastern Ghouta.

Discussions between Russian negotiators and Jaysh al-Islam (the prominent opposition unit in Duma) are ongoing. Negotiations in Duma are complicated by the fact that Jaysh al-Islam does not have good relations with armed groups in the Idlib pocket – which has been the destination of nearly all prior evacuations. This fact, and the fact that Jaysh al-Islam has been in Duma for years, has greatly complicated negotiations and pro-government forces have moved to surround the pocket for a final offensive should discussions falter. Clashes and mutual shelling have continued during negotiations. On March 22, activists uploaded multiple videos purporting to show an incendiary attack on the city.

Over the weekend, opposition shelling on Damascus city continued, originating from the Yarmouk pocket to the south, which is controlled by ISIS, HTS, and a handful of smaller opposition groups. Given the proximity of this pocket to central Damascus, and the continued threat posed by armed groups in the area, it is likely that government forces will move on this pocket in the very near future.

Afrin

Operation Olive Branch units continued to gain territory southeast of Afrin city this week, moving to threaten both Tel Refaat and the Menagh Airbase to its north. Turkish President Erdogan stated that Operation Olive Branch would conclude with the capture of Tel Refaat..

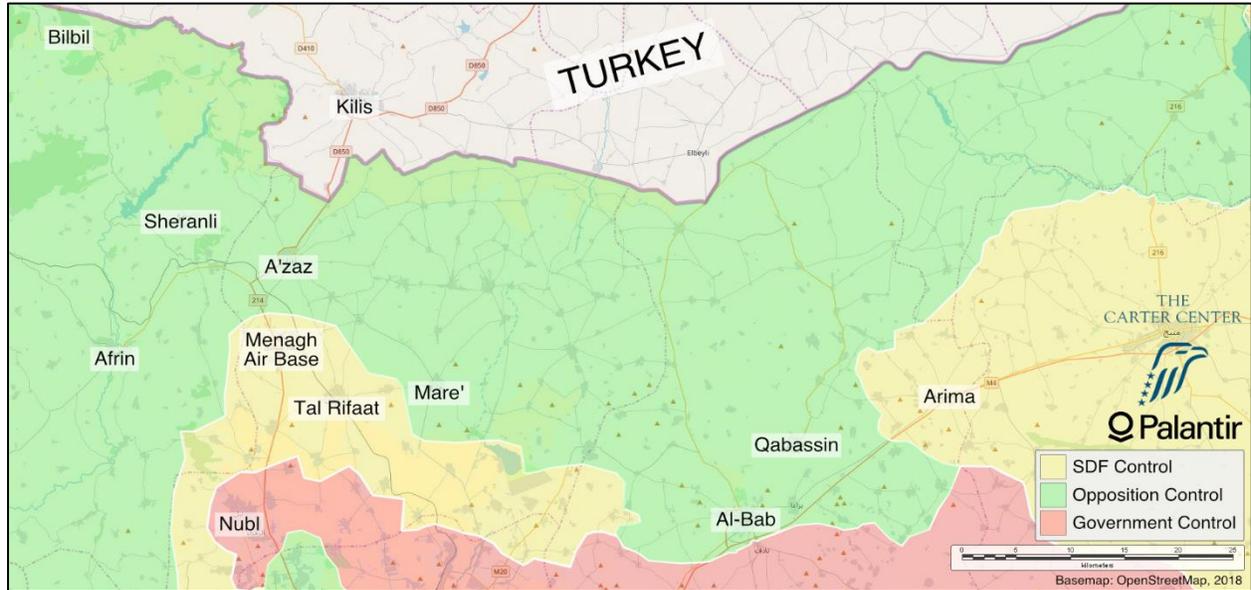


Figure 3 - Situation in northwestern Syria by March 28

In the wake of the previous week’s reports of looting in Afrin city, the Turkey’s foreign minister indicated that Turkish forces were investigating the crimes to punish those responsible. The FSA leadership also made a similar claim.

Turkish officials have indicated once more that they wish the complete withdrawal of the SDF from territories around Menbij and those holdings west of the Euphrates River. Implementation of this withdrawal has been discussed by American and Turkish officials at length.

Idleb Pocket

Battle between Hai’yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly the Al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra) and Jabhat Tahrir Souriya (JTS, a coalition of opposition units fighting HTS) continued into the reporting week. JTS gained some territory in the western countryside of Aleppo, though neither side appears to be able to make significant gains.

A protest against the ongoing conflict between HTS and JTS in Atareb, western Aleppo was put down by HTS fighters, who fired into the crowd. Fighting between HTS and JTS has occurred throughout the opposition-held Idleb pocket, with clashes occurring recently in Ariha, Idleb, the western Aleppo countryside, and along the central highway south of Idleb city.