

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

April 19-25, 2018

During the reporting week, a team from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) gained access to the site of an alleged chemical weapons attack to investigate for evidence of any chemical weapons use in Duma. Pro-government forces during the reporting week took control of opposition-held Eastern Qalamoun and started an offensive for the Yarmouk Camp area south of Damascus. A surprise ISIS offensive in Syria's southwest took territory from the opposition before their gains were reversed shortly thereafter.

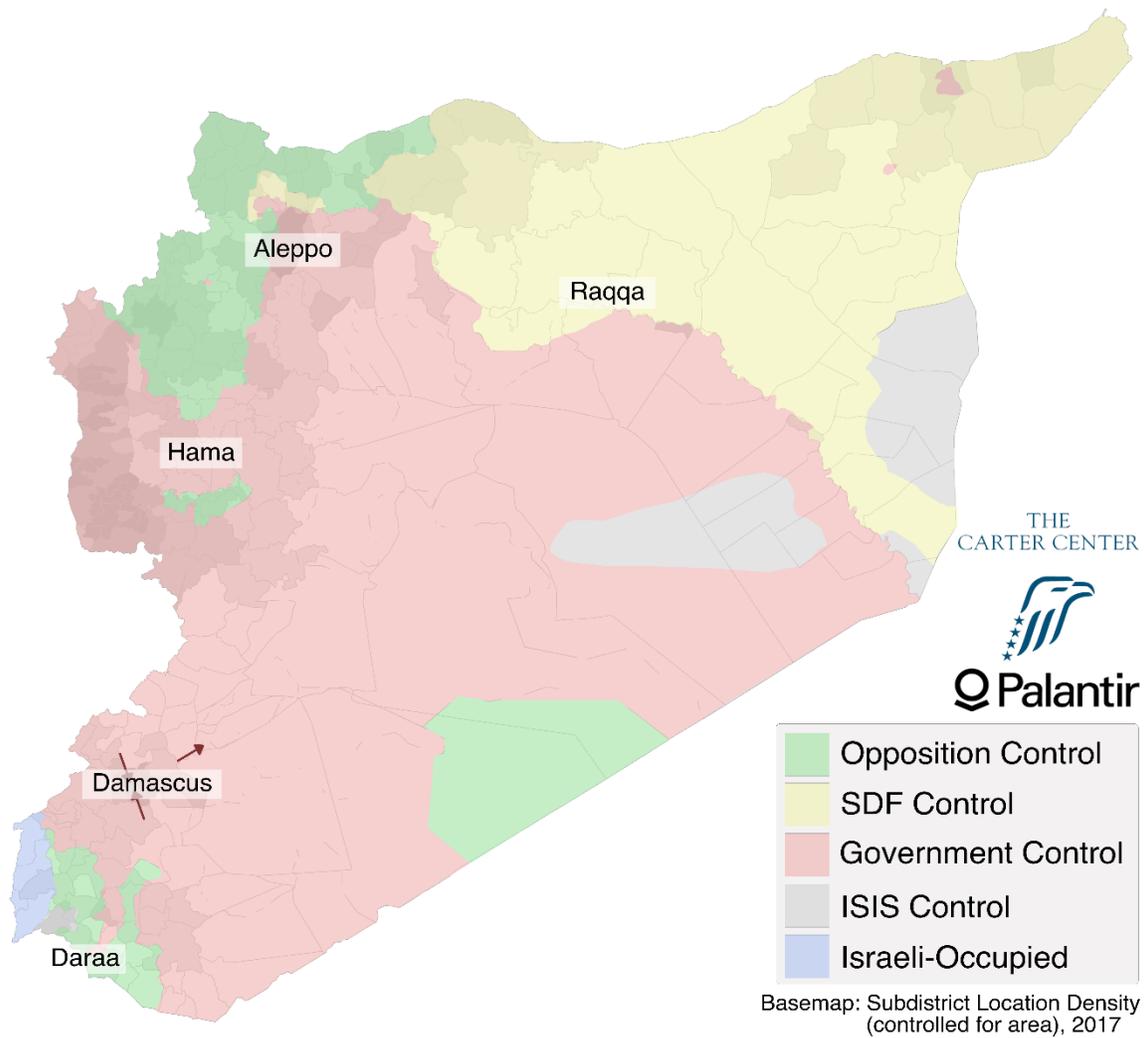


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by April 25. Arrows represent areas of advance during this week.

Duma and Eastern Qalamoun

After numerous delays, the multinational team of investigators from the OPCW finally gained access to the area of an alleged chemical weapons attack in Duma. On April 25, the fact-finding mission gained access to a second site in Duma. The OPCW will file a report based on their findings, though the report will only identify which, if any, chemicals were used, but identifying the party responsible is not part of their mandate.

On April 18, pro-government forces started to advance on opposition-held Eastern Qalamoun, an area northeast of Duma. By April 19, pro-government forces took Dumayr at the southwestern frontier of the area. Immediately afterward, the offensive force moved north on both western and eastern fronts to further cut into opposition-held territory. By April 23, all of Eastern Qalamoun had been taken by pro-government forces. Opposition fighters then began to leave the area on buses bound for Idleb and Jarablus in northern Syria. This pocket was one of the last remaining territories held by the opposition in the Damascus area. The offensive came just a week after reconciliation negotiations failed.

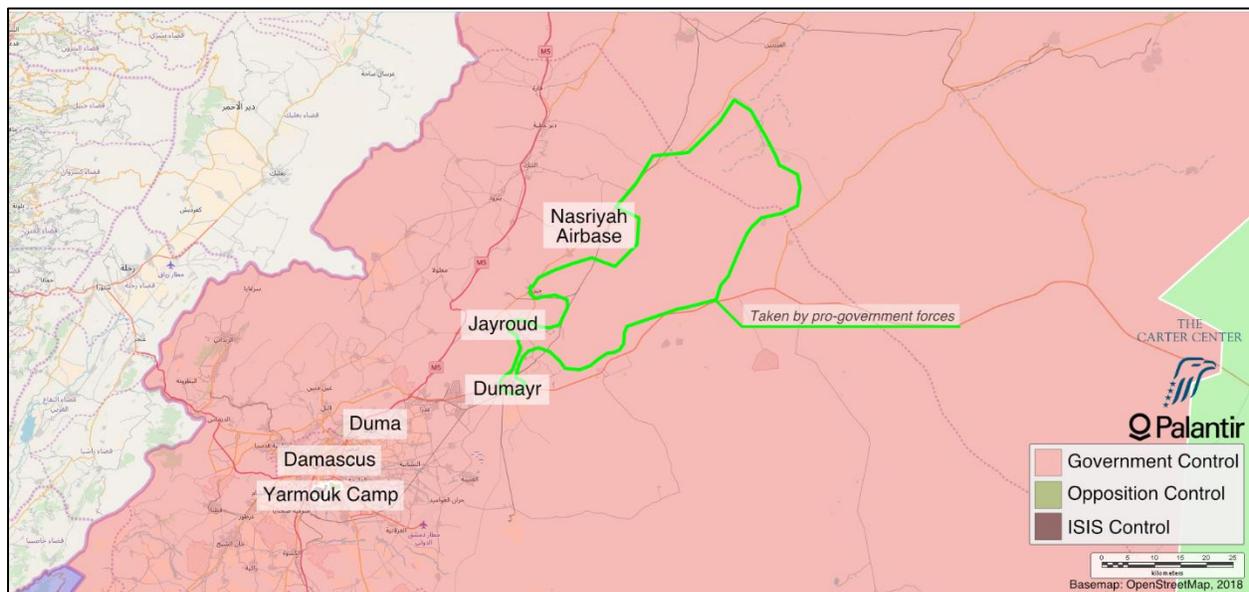


Figure 2 - Situation around Damascus and the Eastern Qalamoun by April 25

When discussions collapsed on April 17, pro-government forces began the offensive. After a brief uptick in aerial bombardment and shelling, the ground offensive began to gain ground on both the southern and northern fronts of ISIS-controlled Yarmouk Camp and Hajjar al-Aswad. Opposition held territory bordering ISIS positions (largely dominated by Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham – formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra) has not been targeted by the ongoing ground offensive.

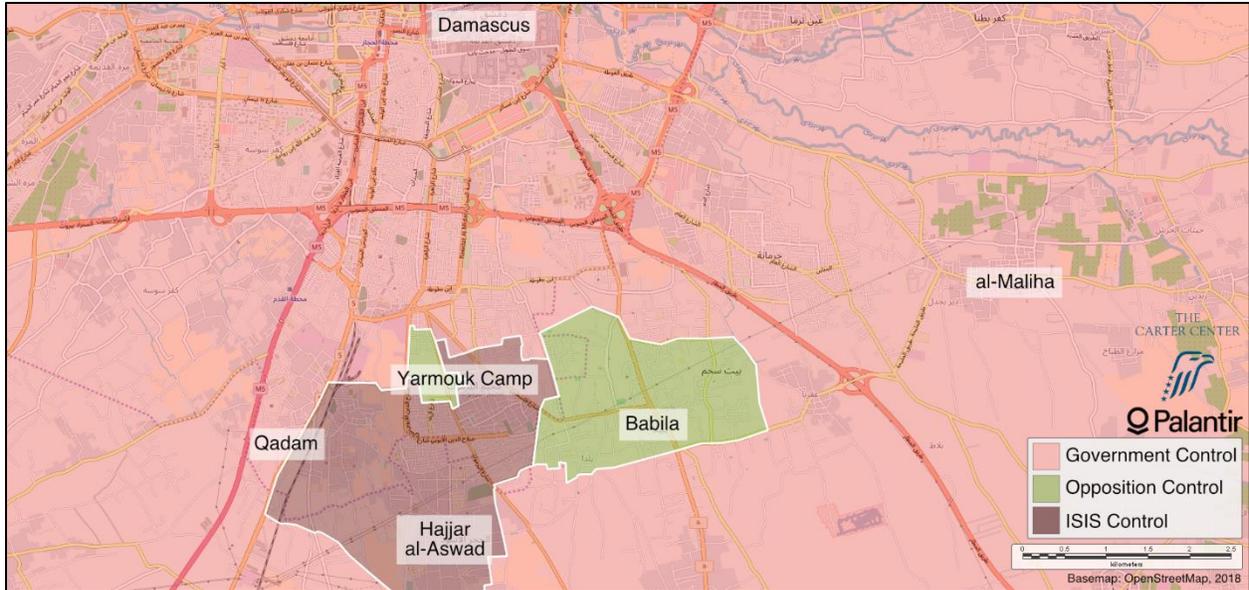


Figure 3 - Frontlines south of Damascus by April 25

Yarmouk Camp residents have faced siege or near-siege conditions for years, with recent fighting only exacerbating the difficult living conditions. Only days into the tightening of the siege, the city already lacks food, medical supplies, and medical personnel. Roughly 5,000 Palestinians from Yarmouk have already been internally displaced to neighboring Yalda.

Southern Syria

In the southwest Syria, northwest of Daraa city, clashes erupted this week between southern opposition armed groups and the remaining ISIS affiliate in the area, known as Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid. On April 19, Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid launched an offensive towards Sheikh Sa'ad, taking control of much of the town before an opposition counterattack repelled the offensive.

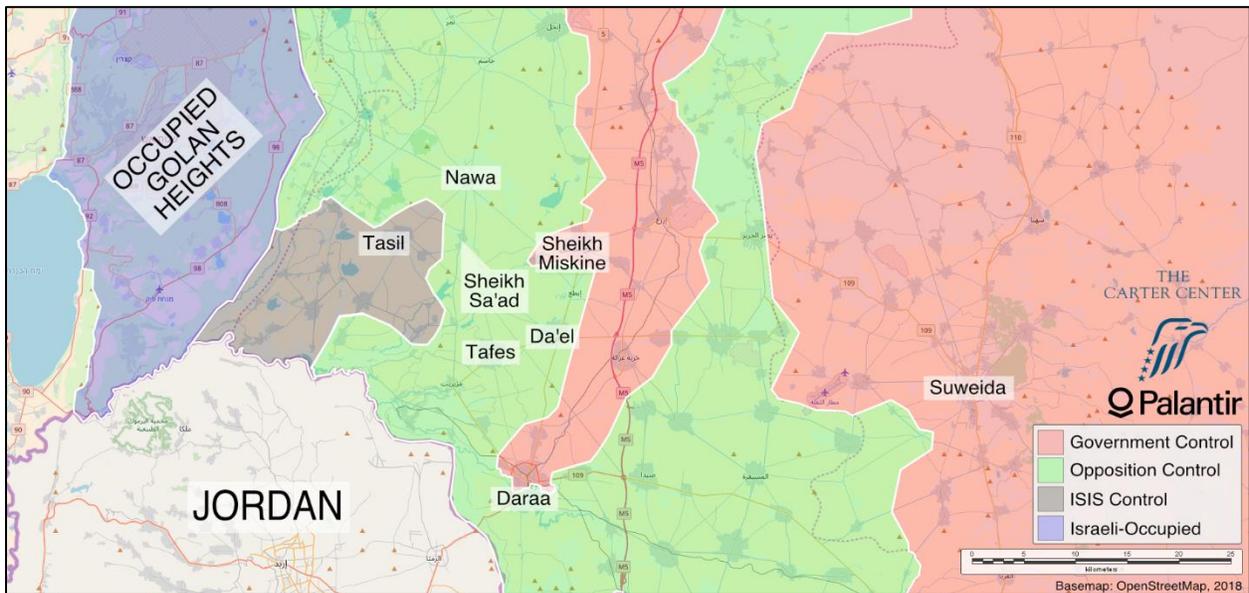


Figure 4 - Situation in southwestern Syria by April 25

Much of the recent fighting between opposition forces and Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid has taken place further to the south, near the opposition-held town of Tafes. The rapid offensive, which involved heavy weaponry, represents an unusual escalation beyond anything that has been seen in the area recent months. If Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid were to succeed in capturing Sheikh Sa'ed, the opposition forces in the area could soon find their territory divided and possibly cut-off from cross-border aid deliveries from Jordan.

ISIS

In his first statement in about 10 months, ISIS spokesman Abu Hassan al-Muhajir called for violence on neighboring Arab states. The April 22 announcement is a shift in strategy from his previous call for attacks in Europe and North America. Since their peak in 2014, the group has lost nearly all the territory they held for their self-declared state.