

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

December 29, 2016—January 4, 2017

December 30th marked the start of the third ceasefire attempt of 2016. The ceasefire, which has partially held, is to be coupled with political negotiations in Astana, Kazakhstan in late January. Despite this political progress, fighting has continued on several fronts throughout Syria, most notably in the Wadi Barada valley north of Damascus.

Pro-government airstrikes on opposition-held Wadi Barada continued throughout the week, disrupting water supplies for residents in the region and Damascus city itself. Hezbollah and Syrian forces comprise the primary ground force clashing with opposition forces near Wadi Barada, with Hezbollah taking the lead around Suq Wadi Barada. Around 100,000 civilians remain in the opposition-held area. The opposition forces in the canton include Saif al-Sham, Liwa Qaddisiya, Ahrar al-Sham, and Tahrir al-Sham. Pro-government forces have made advances in Wadi Barada and have struck opposition-held areas in East Ghouta, leading to Turkey warning that repeated violations could lead the Astana process to collapse.

Pro-government forces, however, have not been the only to violate the ceasefire agreement. Opposition forces in the northern countryside of Idleb shelled the besieged pro-government cities of Kefraya and al-Fo'ah, hitting the area with grad missiles.

In Eastern Homs, the battle surrounding Taifour Military Airport (AKA the T4 Airbase) continues. ISIS forces have been repelled by a large wave of new pro-government reinforcements in the past two weeks. A renewed air campaign on the countryside of Eastern Homs has destroyed a lot of the armor captured by ISIS in previous weeks. Pro-government forces have been unable to advance from beyond the air base to start a new offensive for ISIS-occupied Palmyra.

Opposition forces in the desert of southeast Syria launched a new offensive against ISIS this week, the “Restoring Dignity” offensive. Opposition forces involved include the Army of Eastern Lions, Ahmad al-Abdu Martyrs Forces, Jaysh Ahrar al-Asha'ar, Maghawir al-Thawrah (a reconstituted New Syrian Army), Qalamoun Martyrs Brigade, and Qaryatein Martyrs Brigade. The opposition groups have seen some initial success in the sparsely-populated desert.

The Turkish-backed Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) advance on Al-Bab has this week seen few measurable successes as OES advances were met with fierce ISIS counterattacks. Turkish forces also renewed their strikes against Kurdish positions in Afrin, following approximately three weeks of relatively little confrontation. Additionally, Russian warplanes hit ISIS positions near Al-Bab on January 3, destroying at least five ISIS bases in the suburbs of the city.

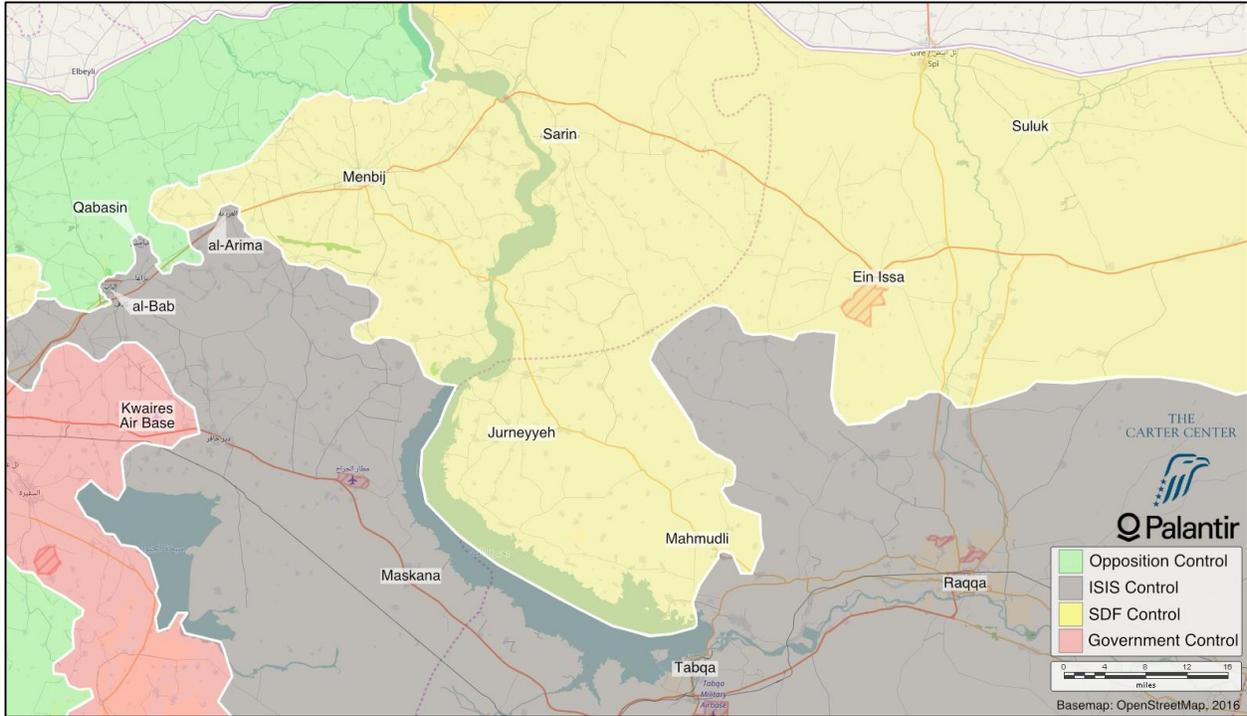


Figure 1 - Map of frontlines in northern Syria by January 4, 2017

To the east of the Euphrates, the SDF's Euphrates Wrath (EW) offensive enjoyed more gains this week against ISIS in the countryside of Raqqa. SDF forces now enjoy full control of the Western Euphrates from the Turkish border to the Tabqa dam, which is now within sight of advancing EW forces. ISIS retaliated with several suicide attacks, killing dozens of EW fighters, though not halting the advance.

Conclusions:

Despite the ceasefire, conflict remained high throughout the week. Political cooperation in advance of the Astana conference is positive, but almost certainly this will collapse if all belligerents do not demonstrate their commitment to the process by halting offensive operations. The renewed conflict in Wadi Barada has, once again, disproportionately impacted civilians by disrupting water supplies. All parties involved must work to ensure adherence to the ceasefire or risk yet another return to full-scale violence.