

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
April 20-26, 2017

During this reporting period, conflict in northern Syria escalated with Turkish airstrikes against Kurdish positions, the opposition expanded operations in southeast Syria, and evacuations under the “Four Towns Agreement” were completed. Additionally, pro-government forces continued to advance in northern Hama, and ISIS continued to lose territory on fronts in Raqqa, Homs, and Rural Damascus.

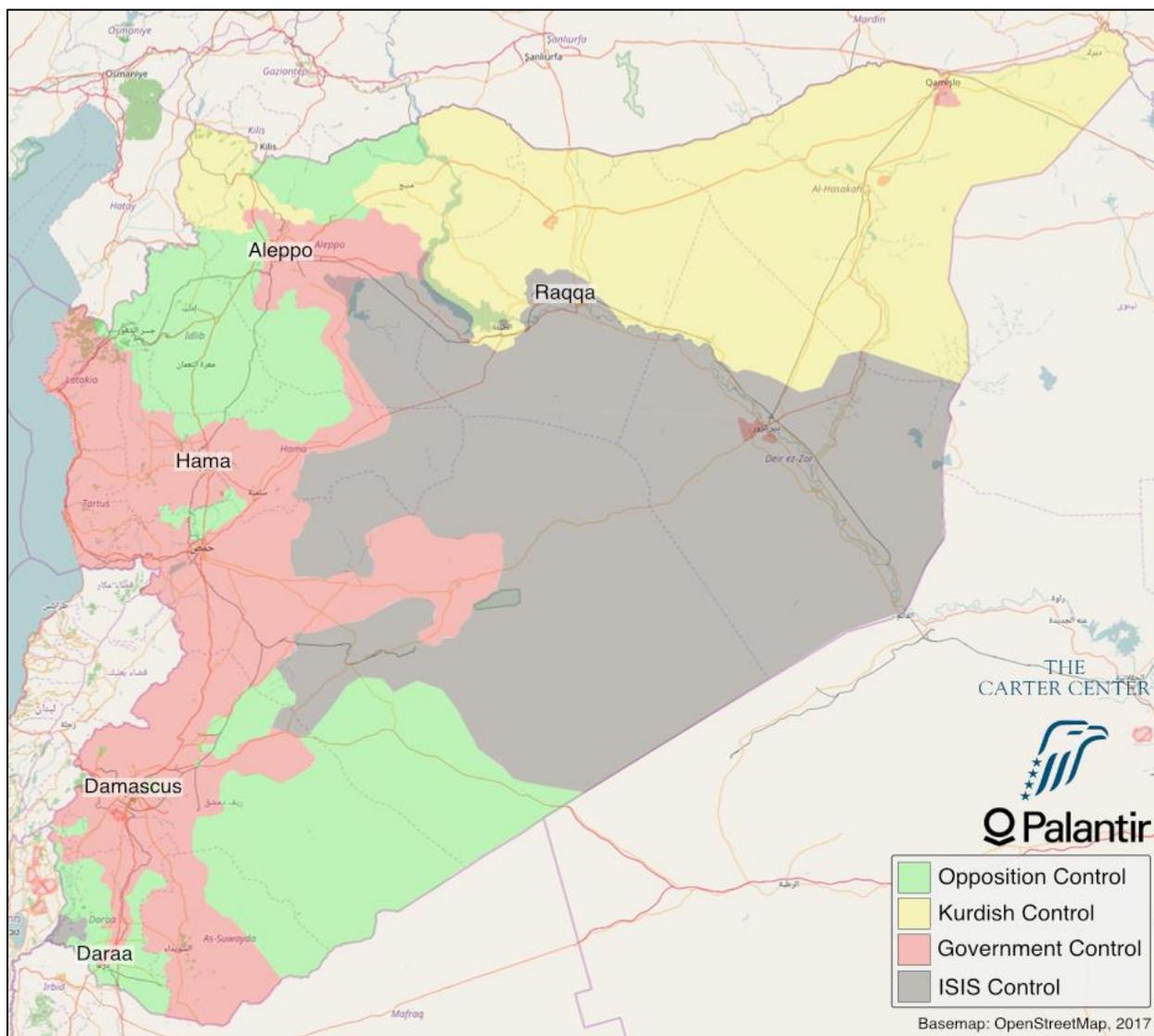


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by April 26

Northern Syria escalation

On April 25, the Turkish air force struck the predominantly-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Derik, Hasakah. Key YPG media activists were in the Radio Rojava Building hit in the strike. An American military representative visited the site hit within hours to survey the damage and show support for the International Coalition’s Kurdish partners. Kurdish activists have called for a no-fly zone over their territory in response to the strike.

Conflict along YPG-opposition frontlines between Mare’ and Tell Refaat in northern Aleppo erupted in the wake of the Turkish strike, with mutual exchanges of heavy artillery. YPG forces also reportedly targeted Turkish and pro-Turkish Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) opposition fighters with anti-tank guided missiles, hitting defensive positions as well as OES armor.

The SDF’s Euphrates Wrath (EW) offensive to take Tabqa and Raqqa from ISIS was rumored to have paused in the wake of the Turkish airstrike in Hasakah, awaiting a response from Coalition allies. Shortly after, however, new advances were announced and confirmed, showing the SDF in control of approximately half of Tabqa city and steadily advancing on Raqqa. SDF forces have yet to secure the vitally important controls for the Tabqa dam, which will remain vulnerable while fighting persists.

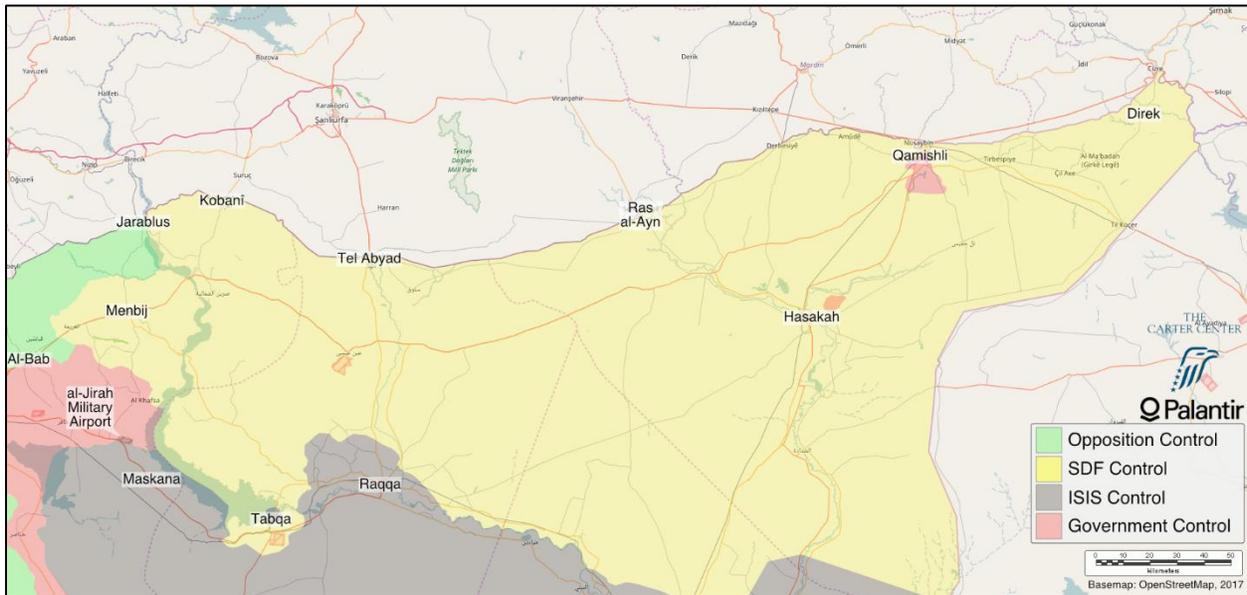


Figure 2 - Map of areas of control in northern Syria by April 26

The fight against ISIS

Pro-government forces continued to clash with ISIS at the outskirts of the Jirah Military Airbase in the eastern Aleppo countryside, but made no further advances over the reporting week. In the eastern Homs desert around Tadmor (Palmyra), pro-government forces advanced into the al-Sha’er gas fields, capturing them from ISIS forces by April 26.

The fight between ISIS and pro-government forces in Deir Ezzor city continued into this reporting period, with no major change in territorial control in the eastern Syrian city.

The opposition’s Jaysh Usoud ash-Sharqiya (the Eastern Lions Army) has continued to make progress in its “Sarjina al Jiyad Ltatheer al Hammad” (We Saddled Up to Clean the Desert) campaign against ISIS in

Syria’s southeastern desert. On April 20, the group captured the Alyana region from ISIS, forcing the surviving ISIS fighters to flee to Halba and Mahasa. The Alyana region is part of the Palmyra desert in Homs.

Opposition forces in Daraa governorate continued to fight the ISIS-affiliate, Jaysh Khalid Ibn al-Walid, striking positions with anti-tank guided missiles in addition to ongoing clashes.

Southern Syria battles

On April 23, Usoud al Sharqiya continued to advance against ISIS towards nearby besieged opposition positions in Eastern Qalamoun (the mountainous region to the east of Damascus). On April 24, pro-government forces launched an attack on Jaysh Usoud al Sharqiya in the countryside of Sweida. The group has been fighting on both the Sweida and Eastern Qalamoun fronts, against the government and ISIS respectively.

The reporting week has seen continued advancement for the opposition’s Bunyan al-Marsous operations room in Daraa city. Opposition forces have advanced to fight in both al-Manshiyeh and Sajna neighborhoods amid heavy pro-government airstrikes on opposition-held portions of the city. Opposition forces have also destroyed a large number of pro-government equipment on this front.

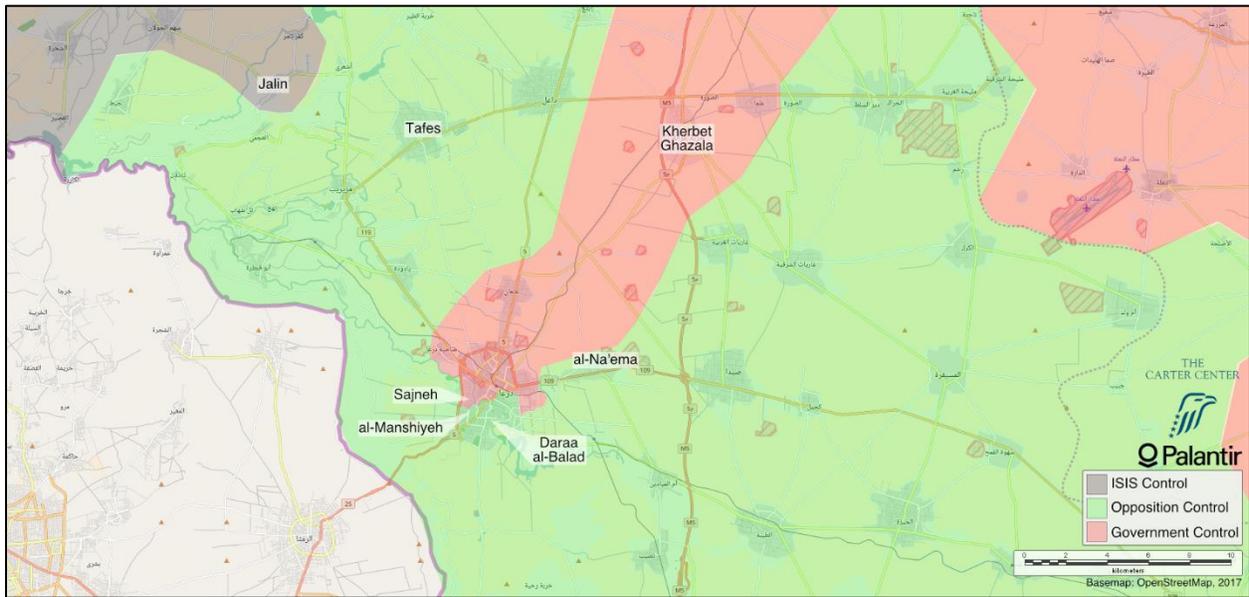


Figure 3 - Map of areas of control around Daraa city near the Jordanian border by April 26

The joint operation between Jaysh al-Islam and Fajr al-Umma in the Eastern Ghouta region of Damascus, known as “Wa T’awano” (And Cooperate), advanced briefly at the start of this reporting period, but was soon met with a strong response from pro-government forces. Combat was particularly intense in Qaboun on the outskirts of Damascus city, which saw heavy airstrikes on April 22 and a renewed government ground assault on April 23. On April 25, pro-government forces captured the electrical grid station in eastern Qaboun and captured several opposition controlled tunnels between Qaboun and Eastern Ghouta. These tunnels are part of a smuggling network that facilitates trade between the besieged Eastern Ghouta pocket and Damascus city. In addition to Qaboun, pro-government airstrikes targeted most large cities in Eastern Ghouta, including Harasta, Arbin, and Duma.

During this reporting period, Hezbollah forces advanced against opposition fighters near the occupied Golan Heights around fronts in Khan Arnaba and Madina al-Ba'ath.

Battles in Hama

Pro-government forces continued their advance on opposition-held areas in the northern countryside of Hama, initially capturing Tibet al-Imam and Halfaya last week to advance northwards toward al-Latamna and Morek. Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) had reportedly refused multiple Ahrar al-Sham offers of support and coordination to counter the government assaults. Khan Sheikhoun, the location of the April 4 chemical attack, is now within 13km of advancing pro-government front lines. Not only has the opposition advance in the first weeks of April been fully reversed, but opposition forces have lost long held towns to new government advances. The April battles were exceedingly bloody and accounted for a major loss of life on both sides of the frontlines.

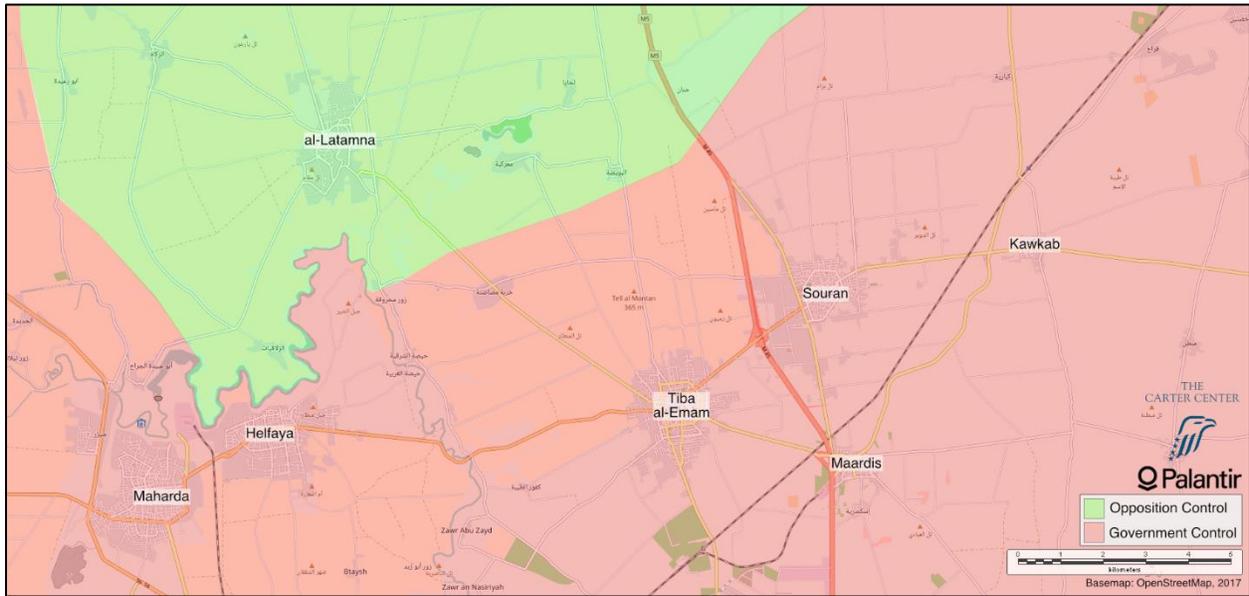


Figure 4 - Map of areas of control in the northern countryside of Hama by April 26

In opposition-controlled southern Idlib, a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) was destroyed by airstrikes on April 26. The camp was situated near Marata, Idlib. Airstrikes hit hospitals in the Idlib opposition pocket in Abdin, Kafr Takharim, and Deir Sharqi over this reporting period.

Evacuation agreement developments

Evacuations of fighters and civilians from the pro-government Fo'ah and Kefraya, and pro-opposition Zabadani and Madaya were completed by April 21 with the arrival of convoys from Fo'ah and Kefraya to Aleppo and a convoy from Zabadani to the western outskirts of Aleppo city. The Syrian government released 750 prisoners on April 21, fulfilling a provision of the Four Towns Agreement to release 1,500 prisoners within two months of the agreement's implementation. Pro-opposition media confirmed 120 prisoners arrived in opposition-controlled territory in the western outskirts of Aleppo and that the remaining 630 prisoners opted for release within government-controlled territory. Within this agreement, the Syrian government reserved the right of determining the prisoners it would release.

Political developments

At an April 26 press conference in Moscow, following a meeting between Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Saudi counterpart Adel al-Jubeir, Lavrov reiterated the Russian government's position with respect to Iranian-backed Lebanese militia Hezbollah. Lavrov stated that Russia saw no difference between Hezbollah (or Iranian forces) and the Russian air force, as both were in Syria at the invitation of the Syrian government. In contrast to Israel and the United States, Russia does not view Hezbollah as a foreign terrorist organization.

Emad al-Din al Mohammed, Director of Media Relations for HTS, and Omar al-Khattab, Military Spokesperson for Ahrar al-Sham, confirmed recent rumors that HTS and Ahrar al-Sham leaders are discussing coordination mechanisms for military operations in northern Syria, like the Jaysh al-Fatah operations room of 2015. Khattab stated that the operations room would include other armed factions and that it was ultimately Ahrar al-Sham's goal to establish a unified military body and military command for operations on all fronts. HTS's Emad al-Din stressed that, while discussions are ongoing, so far nothing has been agreed. There is also a social media campaign calling for the reestablishment of Jaish al Fateh, which has gained some traction amongst opposition media and activists

Conclusions:

This reporting period saw a significant escalation on two fronts: the Turkish-Kurdish conflict in northern Syria and pro-government attacks on the opposition's Jaysh Usoud al-Sharqia in southeastern Syria. The war in the northern Hama countryside continued to progress in favor of pro-government forces, which have continued to focus the bulk of their attention on this front line. Despite these advances, negotiations regarding the "Four Towns Agreement" were successful during this reporting period, though the heavy civilian toll of the ongoing conflict remains of great concern.