

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
April 27-May 03, 2017

During the reporting period, opposition forces advanced once more against ISIS fighters in the southeastern desert of Syria, opposition forces fought with one another once again in the Eastern Ghouta area of rural Damascus, and the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued to advance against ISIS in Tabqa city west of Raqqa. Additionally, pro-government forces advanced against feuding opposition forces in Eastern Damascus, and international and pro-government forces were deployed within YPG-held territory following recent exchanges of fire between Turkey and Kurdish forces.

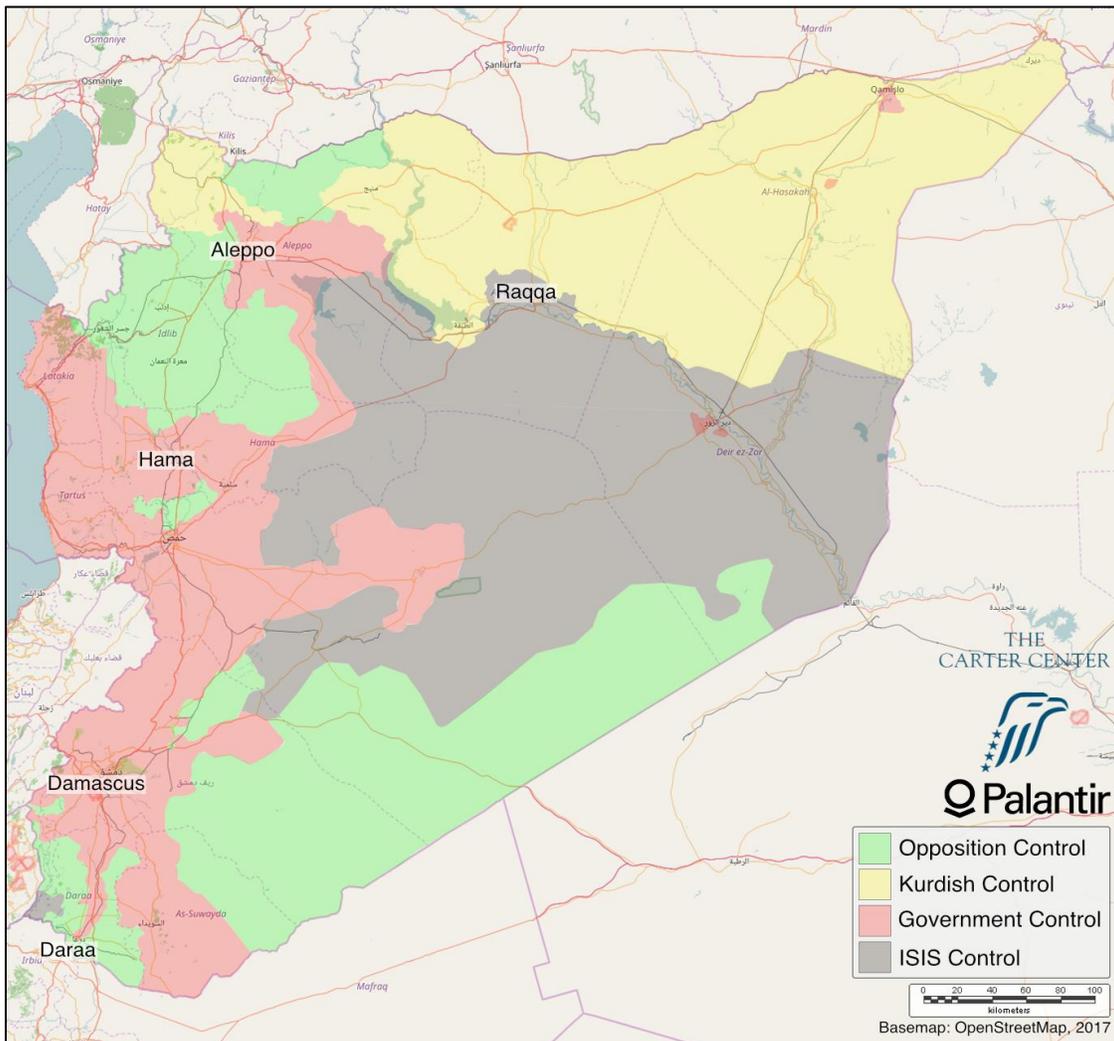


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by May 3

Southern Syria Updates

Opposition forces from the Jaysh Usoud al-Sharqiya coalition advanced against ISIS in Syria's eastern desert over this week, reaching points west of Mayadin by May 2. ISIS attempted to retake several positions that it had lost to the Usoud al Sharqiya offensive on April 29th, however, the group and its allies in the Forces of the Martyr Ahmad Abdo were able to remain in control of many of the areas around Thawra Airport, west of Abu Kamal.

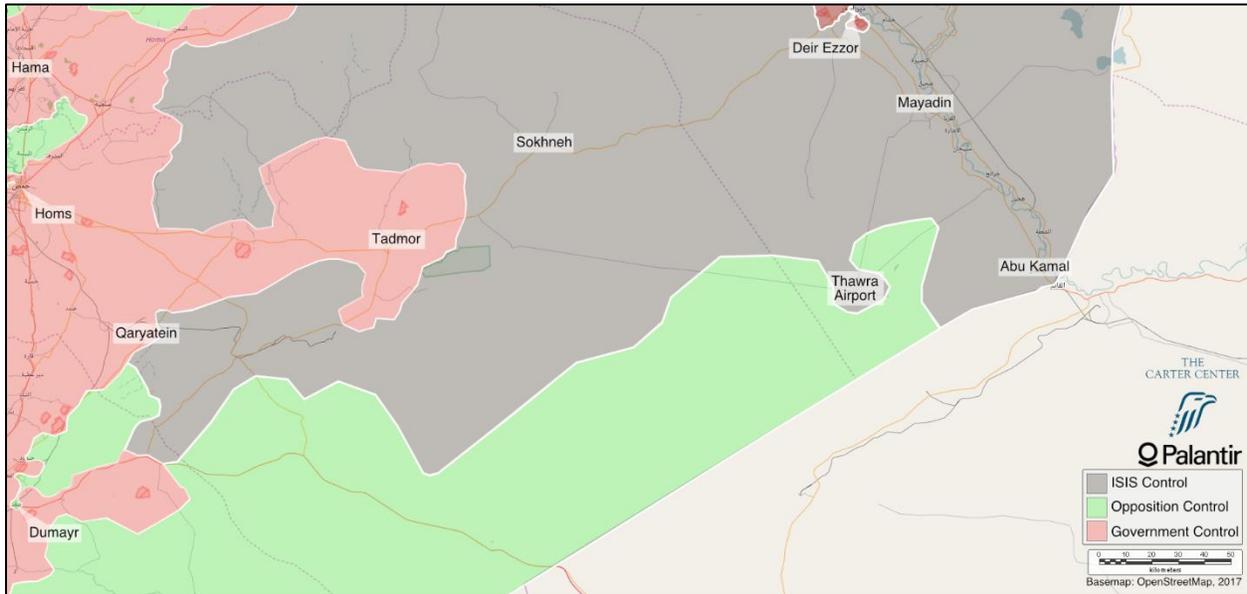


Figure 2 - Map of areas of control in southeastern Syria by May 3

Syrian Civil Defense medics reported being targeted by pro-government warplanes on May 1 while responding to a strike in Otayba, east of Damascus. Hezbollah targeted the medics again on May 2 in Eastern Daraa. In both cases, as with instances before, pro-government forces struck a civilian area, and waited for Civil Defense teams to arrive before striking again.

Inter-opposition fighting in Eastern Ghouta

On April 28, tensions between Jaysh al-Islam and Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) came to a head as clashes broke out between the two in the towns of Arbin, Kafr Batna, Madyara, and al-Ash'ari in Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus. According to Jaysh al-Islam, HTS had been harassing Jaysh al-Islam fighters for months, and kidnapped a squad of fighters trying to pass through a HTS checkpoint en route to fight pro-government forces. HTS contests this, saying that Jaysh al-Islam provoked the attack.

Jaysh al-Islam was accused of targeting other opposition groups in the area, but Jaysh al-Islam released a statement saying that its sole target is HTS. In the statement, Jaysh al-Islam urged other opposition groups (specifically Faylaq al Rahman, Fajr al-Umma, and Ahrar al-Sham) to stand united against HTS. However, Faylaq al-Rahman chose to side with HTS.

On April 29, protests broke out in several towns in Eastern Ghouta calling for an end to the opposition infighting. In Arbin, the protests turned violent when Jaysh al-Islam fighters opened fire on civilians, injuring 13. Jaysh al-Islam then issued another statement denouncing the use of violence against civilians, assuring that those responsible for the violent response had been turned over to a court. Similarly, a Jaysh al-Islam's incursion into a medical center allegedly in search of a patient being treated there caused

Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, MSF) to terminate one of its programs in Eastern Ghouta. In response, Jaysh al-Islam issued yet another statement stating that it respects all medical centers, hospitals, and medical professionals, and does not target them.

Other armed groups in the area have taken sides on the issue. Ahrar al-Sham released a statement denouncing Jaysh al-Islam's aggression. 11 Free Syrian Army-aligned (FSA) groups and the Revolutionary Council of Menegh issued a joint statement in support of Jaysh al-Islam (though, not all FSA-aligned groups appear to be in support of the statement). The Muslim Brotherhood also issued a general call for unity without taking sides.

On May 2, Jaysh al-Islam fighters killed Abu Najib, a captain of Faylaq al-Rahman, during its operations in Zamalka (Eastern Ghouta). Also on May 2, Colonel Abu Muhammad al-Kurdi defected to Jaysh al-Islam from Faylaq al-Rahman.

Pro-government forces have taken advantage of opposition infighting in the Eastern Ghouta, intensifying operations in the territory and advancing in Qaboun over this reporting period.

Developments within Kurdish-held areas

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) advanced against ISIS in Tabqa, securing the entirety of the city on May 4 after a negotiated withdrawal of remaining ISIS fighters. Tabqa is the first major city south of the Euphrates to be captured by SDF forces, and affords the SDF-led Euphrates Wrath (EW) Raqqa offensive coalition a new foothold in the advance on the ISIS capital of Raqqa.

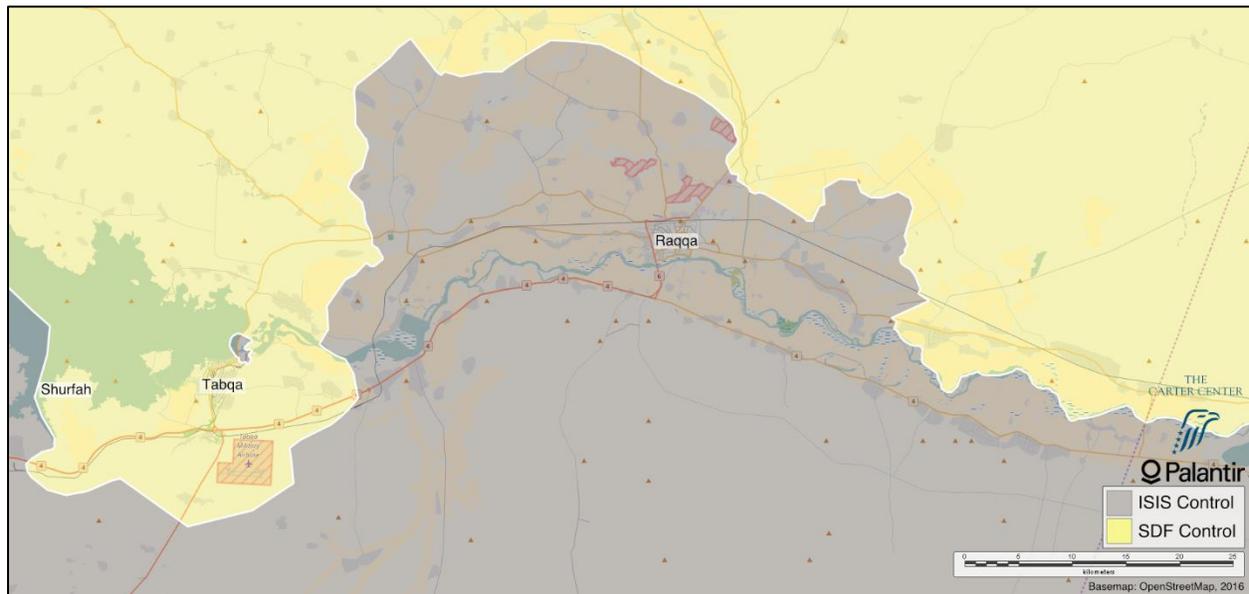


Figure 3 - Map of areas of control around Tabqa and Raqqa by May 3

After last reporting period's Turkish airstrike in northeastern Hasakah, US armored personnel carriers (APCs) and US ground forces were seen entering Syria from Iraq on April 28, reportedly to deploy along the Turkish-Syrian border in Hasakah and to deter further escalation between YPG and Turkish forces in the area. What appears to be the same convoy of US armored vehicles accompanied by YPG units passed through the border city of Qamishli and was last seen in the village of Ghanamiyah in the Darbasiyah sub-district, 50 kilometers west of Qamishli near the location where the YPG and Turkish forces clashed at the

end of the previous reporting period. On April 27, YPG and Turkish forces also clashed on frontlines in Kurdish-controlled Afrin.

Following the escalation in cross-border hostilities between Turkish and YPG forces this week, Russian forces increased their presence and visibility among YPG frontlines in the Afrin pocket. Russian soldiers conducted joint patrols with YPG fighters in border areas. Russian forces also distributed food parcels at a refugee camp in Afrin.

This reporting period, numerous images of Syrian government flags flying on buildings and defensive positions were spotted in Afrin near the YPG front lines with Turkish-backed opposition groups in the area. These locations include a damaged mosque in Ayn Daqneh, a watchtower in Maraanaz, and atop a pillbox along the frontline. Russian and YPG forces were also seen holding a flag ceremony in the courtyard of a school building in Kafr Jana, where Russia has reportedly been working since late March to establish a training base. In Menbij. The presence of Russian and Syrian forces has been established since early March.

Updates on the Astana talks

Peace talks were set to resume on May 3 in Astana, Kazakhstan, but the opposition delegation suspended its participation in protest of continued airstrikes targeting opposition areas. However, the opposition delegation did not withdraw or completely leave the talks. Before suspending their participation, the opposition delegation was to discuss a Russian plan to implement de-escalation zones in Idleb, northern Homs, Eastern Ghouta, and the South. Ahrar al-Sham Spokesperson Mohamad Abu Zaid has denied rumors that Ahrar al-Sham intended to sign off on any agreement.

Conclusions:

This reporting period saw a swift response from international actors to quell escalating violence between Turkey and Syrian Kurdish forces, which appears to be working. Also, an escalation of conflict between opposition forces has created further disunity among them. ISIS continued to lose territory against all parties, with a major defeat in Tabqa at the hands of the SDF.