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**Weekly Conflict Summary**  
May 05-10, 2017

During the reporting period, elements of an Astana de-escalation plan were enacted while pro-government forces advanced in Hama and the Eastern Ghouta region of Damascus. Opposition infighting in Eastern Ghouta and Idlib appears to have stopped for the time being. Fighting in and around Daraa city remained high this week, and both opposition and the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued to take territory from ISIS.

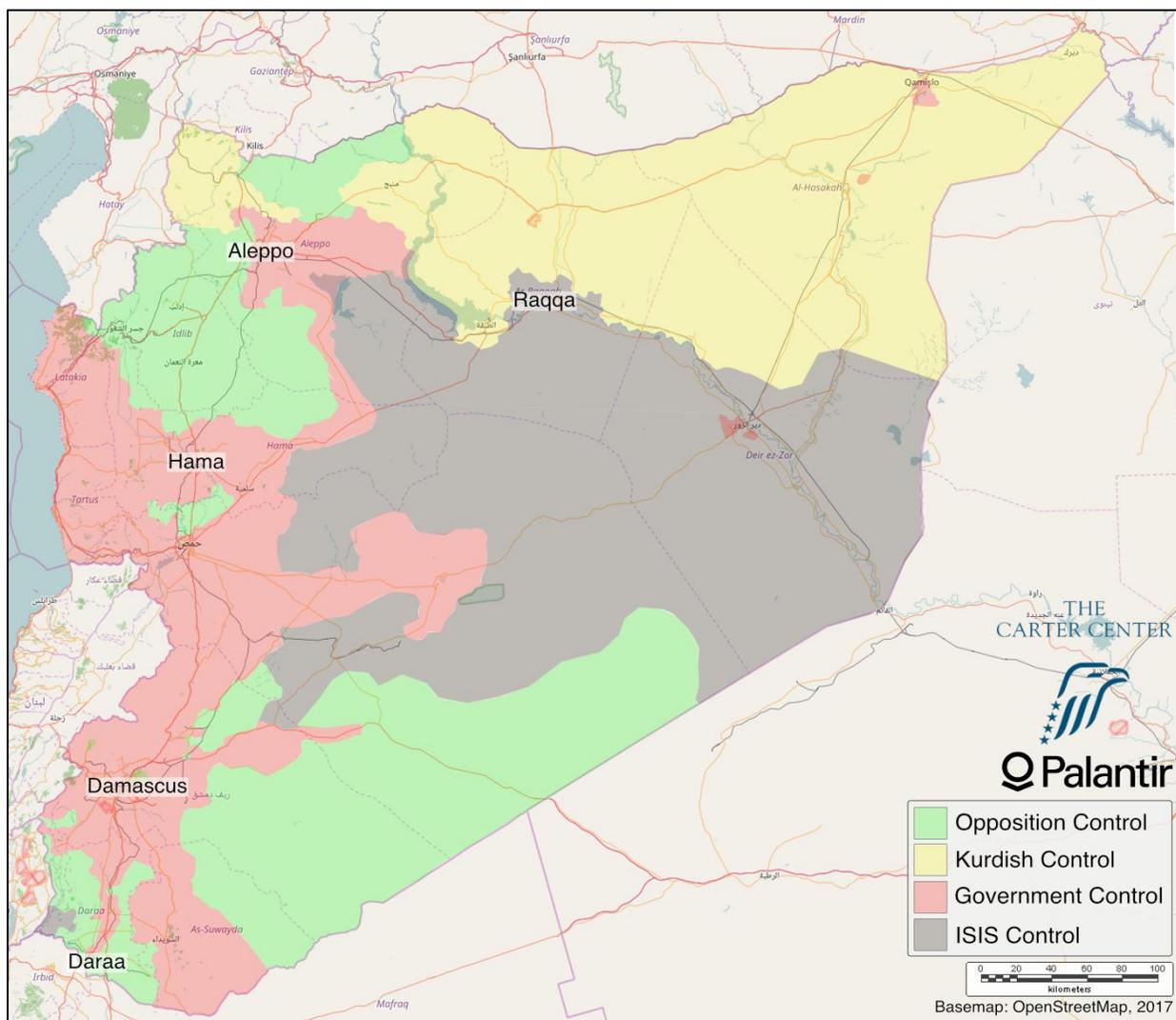


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by May 10

### **Ongoing peace processes**

On May 4, representatives of Iran, Russia, and Turkey signed a Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas throughout much of Syria. The agreement outlines four areas of de-escalation wherein all belligerent parties are expected to abide by ceasefire conditions. The deal came into effect on May 5 and is in part a result of the Astana peace talks. The four “areas of de-escalation” include opposition and government front lines in Idleb, surrounding the opposition-held al-Rastan pocket in northern Homs, Eastern Ghouta excluding the Qaboun neighborhood on the outskirts of Damascus city, and the southern governorates of Daraa and Suweida. No clear indication has been made of how the agreement will be enforced, and the Syrian government has refused the possibility of UN peacekeepers playing a role in policing the terms of the Astana agreement.

On May 9, Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaida affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) issued a fatwa rejecting the Astana agreement as a “treason to God” stating that “every Muslim must work to violate the terms of the agreement.” The fatwa ruling also obligates opposition groups to fight unspecified corrupt, collaborationist, and mercenary elements to prevent their entry into Syria for any reason.

On May 7, the evacuation of approximately 200 persons (150 HTS fighters and their family members) from Yarmouk Camp in southern Damascus city began as an unknown number of residents from the pro-government towns of al-Fo'ah and Kefraya were evacuated to government-held territory. The remaining fighters and residents from Yarmouk Camp are to be moved to northern Hama where they will be exchanged with evacuees from al-Fo'ah and Kefraya. Final evacuations will then be accompanied by a transfer of control of HTS territory (perhaps 30-40% of Yarmouk Camp) to the government and local Palestinian factions.

ISIS, which also controls a portion of Yarmouk camp, has continued to attack HTS positions in anticipation of the planned evacuations, most recently on May 9. ISIS claims to have approximately 2,000 fighters in Yarmouk Camp, though this figure cannot be independently verified.

### **Developments on the Hama front**

Pro-government forces made minor advances on the northern Hama front, capturing a small village and pressing opposition forces further from a key power plant near the towns of Muhrada and Halfaya. Pro-government sources have credited the advance to the units from the Syrian government's 4th Mechanized Division, the recently formed 5th Assault Corps, and Iranian-backed militias such as Kata'ib al-Imam Ali.

Following this small advance, government ground operations in the northern Hama countryside appear to have paused. Airstrikes, however, have continued in the area, particularly on the town of al-Latamna, which has borne the brunt of pro-government artillery and aerial bombardment over the last month. Russian officials stated that their air force had already ceased operating in areas to be designated de-escalation zones on or before May 1, but Syrian warplanes and helicopters to have continued operations.

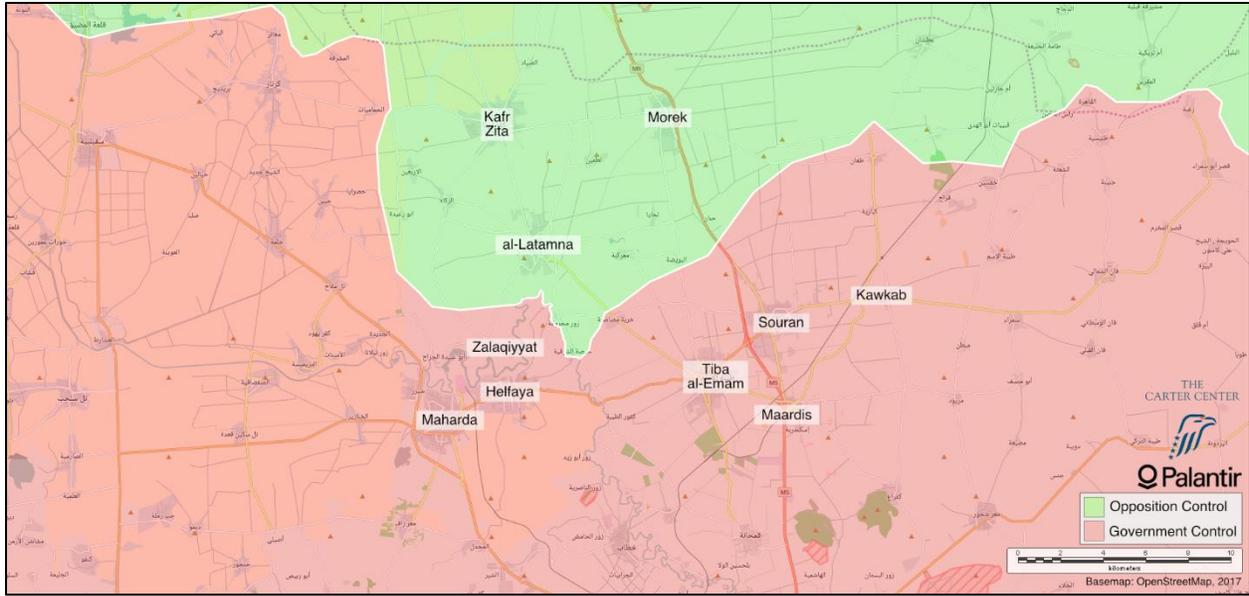


Figure 2 - Map of areas of control in northern Hama by May 10

### Rural Damascus

On May 7, an evacuation deal between opposition and pro-government forces in the Qaboun-Barzeh pocket of the capital was reached, ending months of fighting and leading to the transfer of opposition fighters and their families to Idleb. As many as 22 buses arrived in Qaboun to assist with the evacuation. Reports estimate that more than 900 civilians (including 246 children and 104 women) and over 100 fighters remain in Barzeh. The evacuation of opposition fighters and families to Idleb is expected to be concluded by May 13.

### Opposition infighting

On May 4, Jaysh al-Islam’s spokesman, Hamza Birqadar, announced that Arbin in Rural Damascus had been completely cleared of HTS. The following day, Jaysh al-Islam released a statement declaring to have achieved most of its goals for ridding the Eastern Ghouta area of HTS. Jaysh al-Islam also stated it would end the operation out of concern for public safety, its relations with the area’s other opposition groups, and the wishes of local leaders. The statement also made clear that Jaysh al-Islam places the responsibility for the remaining HTS forces in the Eastern Ghouta on the shoulders of other opposition groups.

While Jaysh al-Islam may be halting its military operations, its media campaign against HTS has continued with three new videos. The third video, released on May 9, claims to show a former Jabhat al-Nusra fighter recounting his experiences with Nusra/HTS leadership, including his inclusion in a plot to assassinate an Ahrar al-Sham leader named Abu Ja’far.

The Majd Brigades, which split from Faylaq al-Rahman in 2016, announced on May 8 they had resolved their differences and rejoined Faylaq al-Rahman. The announcement included a general call for opposition groups in the Eastern Ghouta to unite.

### **Daraa and Eastern Desert updates**

Fighting in Daraa city remained high this reporting period, despite minimal changes of control within the city. The opposition's Bunyan al-Marsous operations room has focused its efforts in Sajneh neighborhood, one of the few areas of government control south of the city's river.

Opposition forces advanced in the northern countryside of Daraa, cutting the M5 highway at Mahjeh between Daraa and Damascus. Opposition fighters from Ahrar Nawa continued to target ISIS forces on the outskirts of Adwan, west of Daraa city.

In Syria's eastern desert, the opposition force Jaysh Usoud al-Sharqiya has attempted to continue its advance against ISIS, but has come under repeated fire from pro-government airstrikes. After multiple strikes, Jaysh Usoud al-Sharqiya retaliated against pro-government forces by launching grad missiles at Khalkhalah airbase, which is situated between opposition control in the eastern desert and the opposition pocket around Daraa. Jaysh Usoud al-Sharqiya has previously refused to fight pro-government forces and focuses its efforts on taking territory from ISIS. Pro-government forces also advanced on the ground in this area, stating that their aim is to capture the highway between Damascus and Baghdad – territory that is currently held by Jaysh Usoud al-Sharqiya.

### **The fight against ISIS**

Battalions of the elite government Tiger Forces will be transferred to the Tadmor front in eastern Homs countryside to take part in an operation to advance towards ISIS-besieged Deir Ezzor. The preparations for this operation are under way, and are expected to include significant support from Russian forces.

This reporting period, the US announced another increase in material support for the Kurdish-led SDF in their campaign against ISIS. The SDF have previously received limited small arms support (primarily to the Arab elements of the SDF), enjoy close air support from the US, and have recently been aided by a new contingent of US troops and artillery.

### **Northern Syria updates**

After another week of fighting, the SDF succeeded in capturing Tabqa dam on May 10. The SDF also advanced elsewhere in Raqqa governorate, closing the remaining distance to Raqqa city by approximately 30%. Initial aerial footage indicates that damage to structures in most of Tabqa city remains minimal.

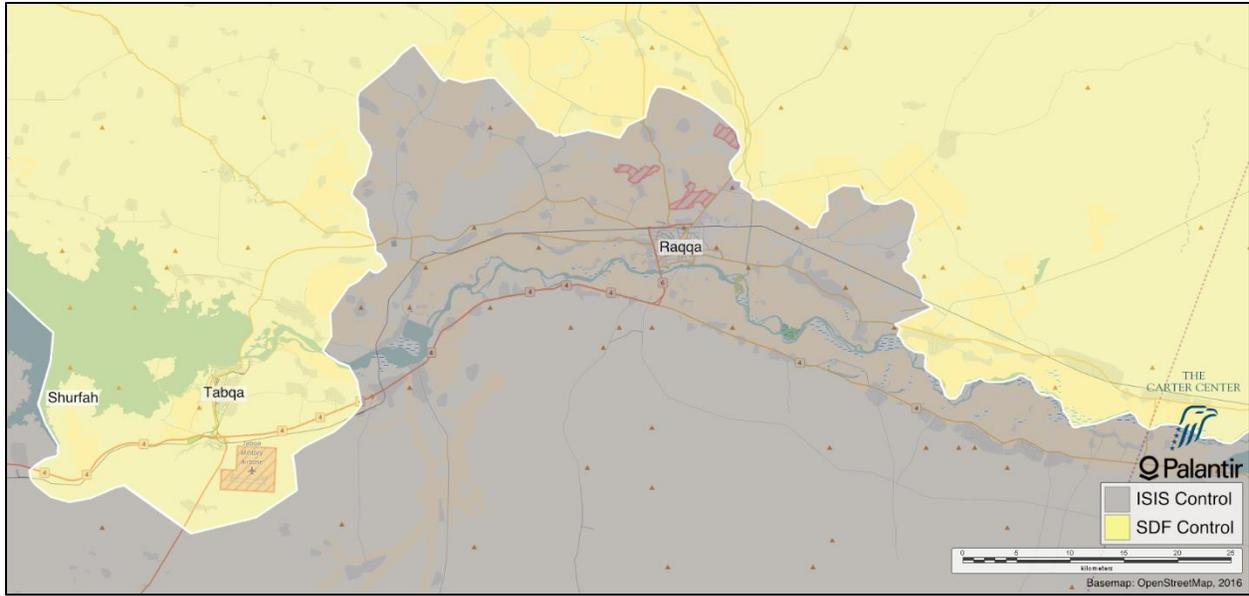


Figure 3 - Map of areas of control around Tabqa and Raqqa by May 10

During this reporting period, tensions between Turkey and Syrian Kurdish forces remained high, with Turkish forces firing artillery at Kurdish positions around northern Syria. SDF advances as well as new announcements of increasing US support have played a major role in this escalation.

On May 6, Turkish authorities denied that it has plans to deploy Turkish forces in Idleb governorate. Turkey’s role in the “de-escalation” plan remains murky, even as it is one of the three signatories to the agreement. Some opposition forces suspected that Turkish forces were to be deployed to Idleb with the intention to establish “security” zones in the pocket, bringing Operation Euphrates Shield opposition forces from Northern Aleppo as a primary occupation force. In response to these rumors, HTS began mobilizing fighters towards Sheikh Barakat Mountain near Daret Izza, leading to heightened tensions between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham fighters in the area.

Conclusions:

The de-escalation plan represents a positive step toward reducing the violence in Syria and transforming the conflict, but major questions around implementation remain. Despite the agreement, conflict has remained high on multiple fronts, and tensions continue to increase between Turkey and Syrian Kurdish forces, as well as between rival opposition factions.