

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

April 06-12, 2017

During this reporting period, the US military intervened for the first time against a Syrian government target. ISIS forces continued to lose territory across Syria, most precipitously around Tadmor (Palmyra) and in Syria's eastern desert. Negotiations surrounding the "Four Towns Agreement," a controversial deal aimed at the evacuation of pro-government towns Fo'ah and Kefraya and anti-government Madaya and al-Zabadani, continued into this period and seem to be progressing towards a brokered evacuation deal.

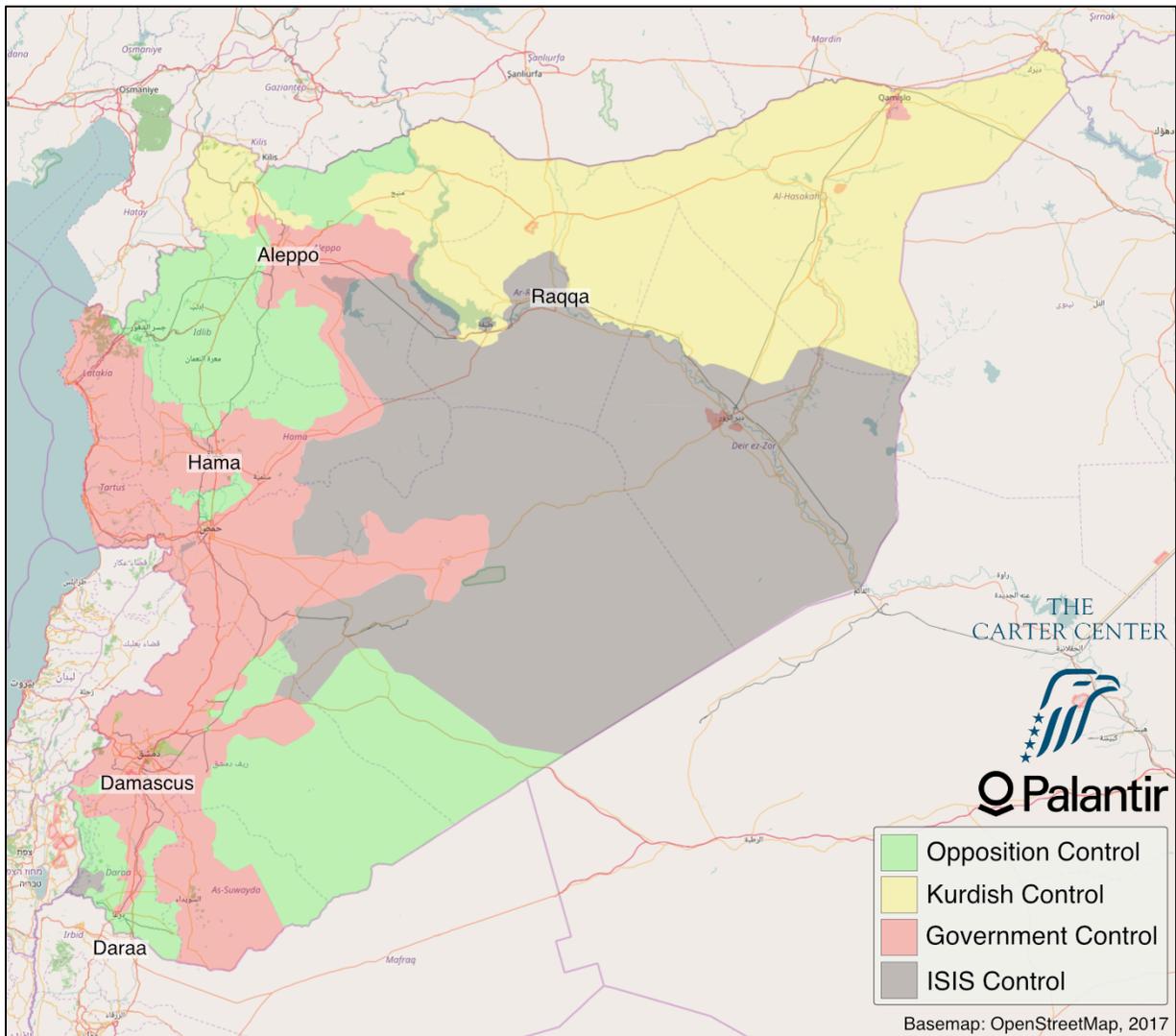


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria as of April 12.

US Strikes on Homs Airbase

On the early morning of April 7, US warships launched 59 Tomahawk missiles at the government-held Shayrat Military Airbase near Homs. President Trump ordered the strike in response to the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun on April 4, which US officials claim originated from the airbase. The strike targeted hangars, airplanes, and fueling depots at the airbase. Runways have only suffered light damage and sorties were flown from the airport within days. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer both said the strikes destroyed about 20% of the Syrian government's working aircraft, though experts disagree.

In the day following the strike, Russian planes struck an area of Idleb and pro-government planes struck the US-supported Jaysh Usood al-Sharqia for the first time on Jabal Dawka, despite the fact that the group has to date only fought against ISIS. Suspected thermite (incendiary) bombs were dropped on Saraqeb on April 9 and the following days. The use of flame accelerants like white phosphorus has been fairly common in attacks on the opposition-held Idleb pocket, but thermite attacks like this week's remain rare.

On the Hama front, pro-government forces (including Tiger Forces, National Defense Forces, and Hezbollah) have re-taken the town of Maardis, less than 2km south of the outskirts of Suran. Tibat el-Imam, another opposition-controlled community lies less than 5 km to the northwest. Maardis has changed hands frequently during the opposition offensive in northern Hama, but government forces have strengthened their positions in this frontline town in recent days.

To the west, pro-government forces have not succeeded in advancing from the Muhradah front into the adjacent community of Halfaya, but commanders within pro-government forces have indicated that capturing Halfaya from opposition groups is a priority. The city of al-Lataminah has been under sustained and heavy aerial and artillery bombardment for days, amid reports of wide use of incendiary munitions in the area.

Pro-government forces have blocked an opposition offensive in Latakia, which was announced after the sarin attacks on Khan Sheikhoun.

Daraa offensive

By April 7, the opposition's Bunyan al-Marsous operations room made headway against pro-government forces in Daraa, taking control of the areas of Dada and Sanfour (both in Manshiyeh). No major advances have been reported since April 7, but clashes are continuing, accompanied by shelling and aerial bombardment. Hezbollah fighters have been reported among the pro-government forces present in the area, and Russian warplanes have reportedly been spotted running airstrikes on Daraa al Balad, a district of Daraa city. The use of barrel bombs has been reported on a near-daily basis.

A hospital in Da'el was hit by airstrikes on April 9th, causing damage and putting it out of service.

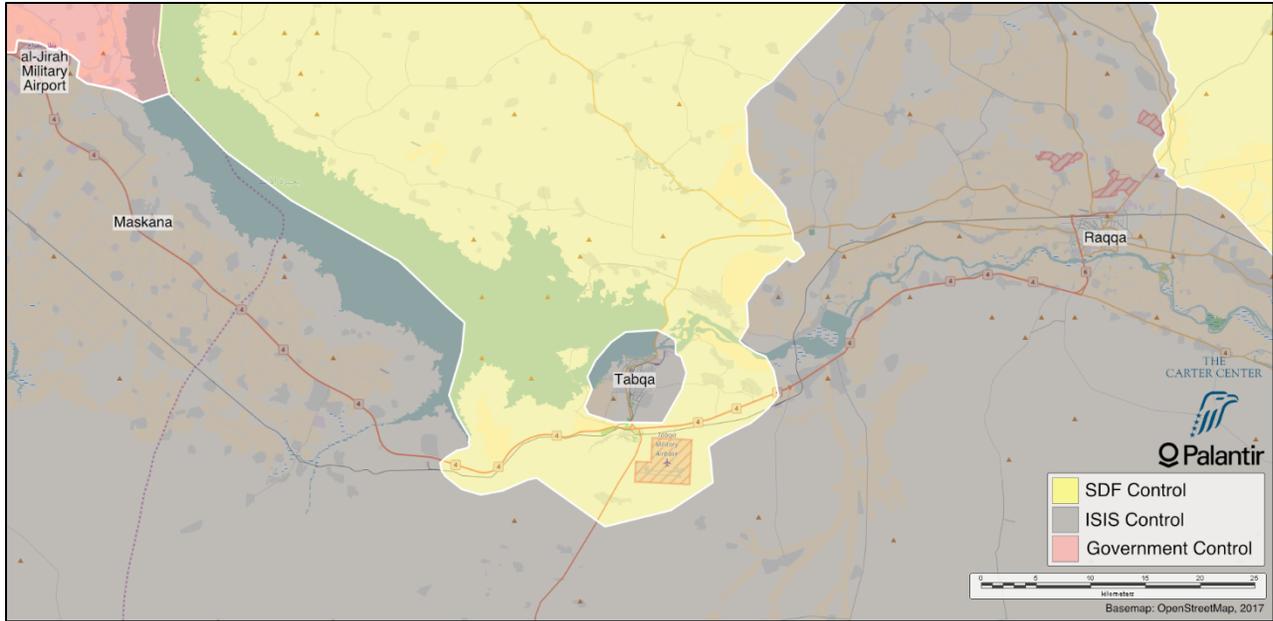


Figure 2 - Map of areas of control around Tabqa

The ongoing fight against ISIS

On April 8, ISIS launched an attack on al-Tanf border crossing, which is located near both the Iraqi and Jordanian borders. The attack was repelled by the opposition’s Osood al Sharqiya (The Eastern Lions), who have focused their “We Saddled Up to Clean the Desert” campaign on eastern areas of Rural Damascus. A new wave of the offensive was announced by Jaysh al-Islam, focusing on the Eastern Qalamoun in Rural Damascus. Should these offensives progress, there is a chance that the government and ISIS-induced siege on opposition-held communities in the Eastern Qalamoun area will be lifted.

Government forces advanced further south along the Tadmor-Damascus highway, reportedly capturing approximately 50 square kilometers of territory from ISIS forces, including Syriatel Hill and Qasr al-Halabat more than 20km south of Tadmor city. Pro-government forces in the eastern countryside of Aleppo have not been able to secure any substantial gains in their battle for ISIS-held Jirah Military Airport.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have surrounded ISIS-held Tabqa in Raqqa province, but have not yet been able to establish control over the mechanical room of the Tabqa dam, which may face significant technical difficulties in the coming months due to rising water in the Tabqa lake. If the dam is damaged, it has potential to cause a severe humanitarian disaster in cities and towns downstream, including Raqqa.

On April 12, a Coalition airstrike struck a location held by Liwa Suqur al-Raqqa, a key Arab ally of the SDF in the advance on Raqqa, killing over a dozen fighters. The group blamed the strike on their Kurdish allies and announced they were pulling out of the Raqqa offensive. This poses a serious challenge for the SDF, already seen as being a Kurdish-dominated organization, as it advances towards Arab-majority Raqqa.

Developments within the opposition

On April 6th, Ahrar al-Sham and Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly Jabhat al Nusra, clashed near the Turkish border on the road to the Atma IDP camp (approximately 10 km north of the Bab al Hawa border crossing). HTS attempted to dismantle two newly established Ahrar al-Sham checkpoints near the IDP camp, which resulted in an exchange of gunfire. With the intervention of local sheikhs, calm was restored, but tension in the area remains high between the two opposing groups amid reports that Ahrar al-Sham is reinforcing positions in the area.

“Four Towns” agreement progress

19 prisoners held by pro-government forces in Fo'ah in northern Idleb were released on April 12 under the "Four Towns Agreement" between pro-government and anti-government forces over the evacuation of Kefraya, al-Fo'ah, al-Zabadani, and Madaya, towns that have been under siege for years. Under the agreement, 12 civilians from Kefraya and Fo'ah, along with the remains of eight soldiers were released by opposition groups and arrived in Aleppo. Operations to evacuate up to 8,000 civilians from Fo'ah are set to begin on April 13 amid protests against population transfer.

Conclusions:

This reporting period saw significant change in the conflict due to US airstrikes, new offensives, and the continued retreat of ISIS front lines. Internal opposition fighting between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham continued into this period, though not as intensely as in previous periods. The “Four Towns” evacuations agreement has started after weeks of negotiations.