



The Cessation of Hostilities

April 21, 2016

Low level conflict between pro-government and opposition forces has persisted since the beginning of the cessation of hostilities on February 27, punctuated by two large escalations – one over the first weekend of April, and the second since the start of the Geneva talks on April 13. During the same period, there have been fewer civilian displacements, with some civilians returning to the cities they were displaced from prior to the ceasefire.

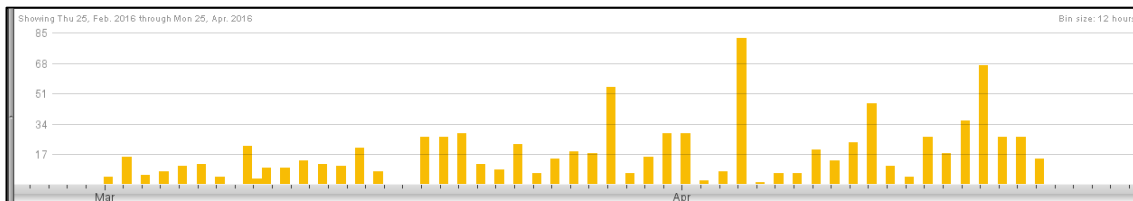


Figure 1: Timeline of documented conflict events between ceasefire participants since March 1 – April 20

Events since the resumption of talks in Geneva (detailed in the map to the right) have been largely concentrated in Aleppo city, rural Damascus, and along front lines in northern Hama and southern Idlib governorates. Despite these worrying escalations, central Idlib governorate, which is home to a large number of displaced civilians, still enjoys a relative absence of violence.

Civilian displacements throughout Syria have reduced in frequency and size since during the ceasefire, with a recent uptick in northern Aleppo as a result of fighting over the past week.

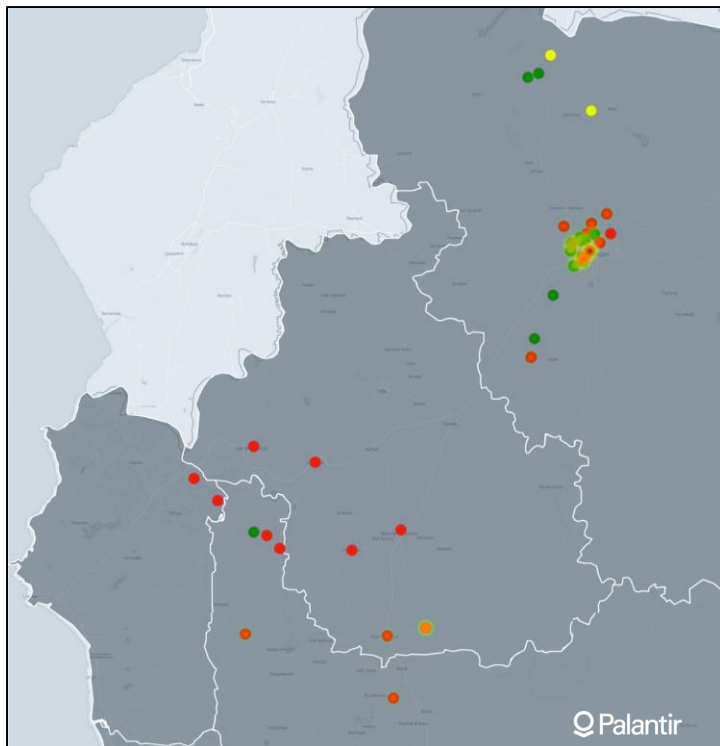


Figure 2: Reported violations of the cessation of hostilities from April 13-20th. Incidents are color-coded according to the flag color of the initiator of each attack. Red = pro-government forces, Green = opposition forces, and Yellow = Kurdish & allied forces.

The majority of significant fighting (involving location captures) has been between Jabhat al-Nusra and pro-government forces. A handful of opposition forces have assumed supportive roles in the fighting, including using anti-tank guided missiles against government targets. A large group of opposition units have been involved throughout the ceasefire period in fighting Kurdish forces in the Sheikh Maqsoud district of Aleppo city.

The map below shows known location captures in northwest Syria, color-coded by the initiating party (though some of these locations have changed hands multiple times). In addition to these, government forces advanced in two locations in southern rural Damascus, north of the international airport.

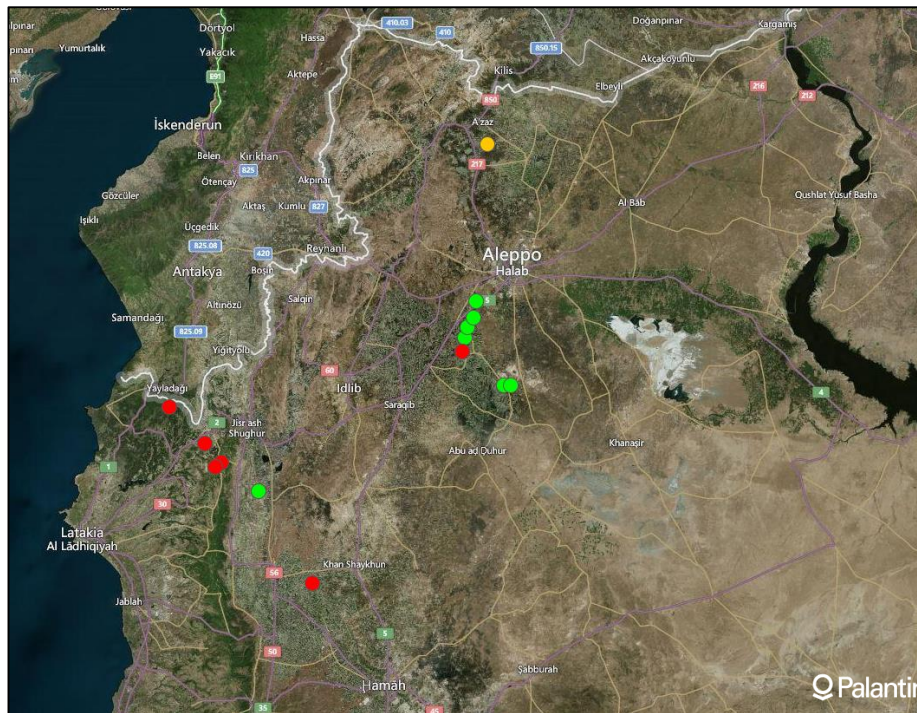


Figure 3: Reported location capture events in northwestern Syria since March 1. Events are color coded according to reported initiator of the first location capture in each location.

Observations with respect to the ceasefire

The opposition was informed that if they do not participate in the ceasefire, they will have no role in the political process and cannot expect any support from the US (or anyone else the US can influence). As a result, a good number of opposition forces have abided by the ceasefire. Others in the opposition have hedged their bets and are fighting a bit here and there. A hard line group among the opposition (including Jabhat al-Nusra) is agitating actively for the ceasefire to fail.

Russia has exerted pressure on the Syrian government by announcing the withdrawal of its main fighting force at the beginning of the cessation of hostilities. After the cessation started, Russia refrained from responding to some Jabhat al-Nusra/opposition offensives

that pushed the regime back in south Aleppo in the first week of April, thus signaling that the Syrian government depends on Russia's assistance to hold ground. As the airstrikes on Maarat an-Numan showed, there are still spoilers on the Syrian government side who do not seem interested in ending the war. Such spoilers are likely hoping that, if the fight continues, they can neutralize the moderate opposition, giving the world a choice between al-Qaeda/ISIS and the regime. These spoilers seem to hope that Russia is bluffing and, if the opposition were to prevail again, Russia will come back and help the regime.

Main Takeaways

Media sources, and some on both sides of the conflict are suggesting that the ceasefire is over. However, the escalating violence is still relatively isolated and civilian safety is much improved since the ceasefire started. This should be capitalized on at all costs, and parties should not be allowed to give up on the peace process.