

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

October 5-11, 2017

ISIS forces mounted a counterattack on government positions in Syria's east, gaining new territory in the southeast of opposition-held Idleb, and losing further territory around Deir Ezzor city to pro-government forces and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led coalition backed by the US). A new Turkish incursion into Syria has been observed south of SDF-held Afrin, after reaching a deal with local fighters from Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra). Protests have erupted against an ongoing pro-government bombing campaign in Idleb, which remains intense.

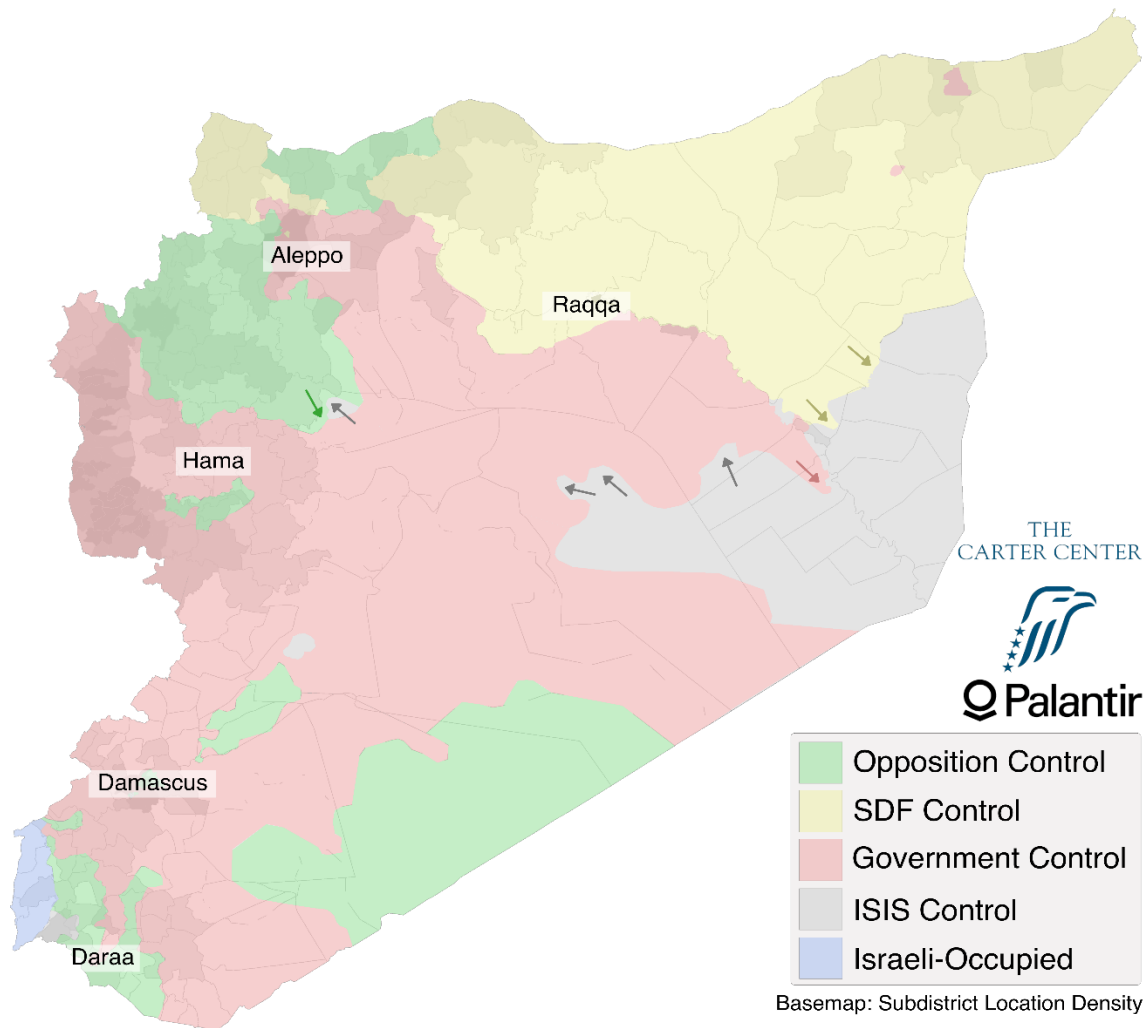


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by October 11, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period

Fight against ISIS

The situation in and around Sokhneh remains unclear, with no indication that pro-government forces retook territory they lost in the previous reporting period. Several towns in the western countryside of Deir Ezzor, including al-Shola, have also not yet been recaptured by pro-government forces. Though these recent ISIS offensives have cut the main road to Deir Ezzor, pro-government forces can still reach the city from the north.

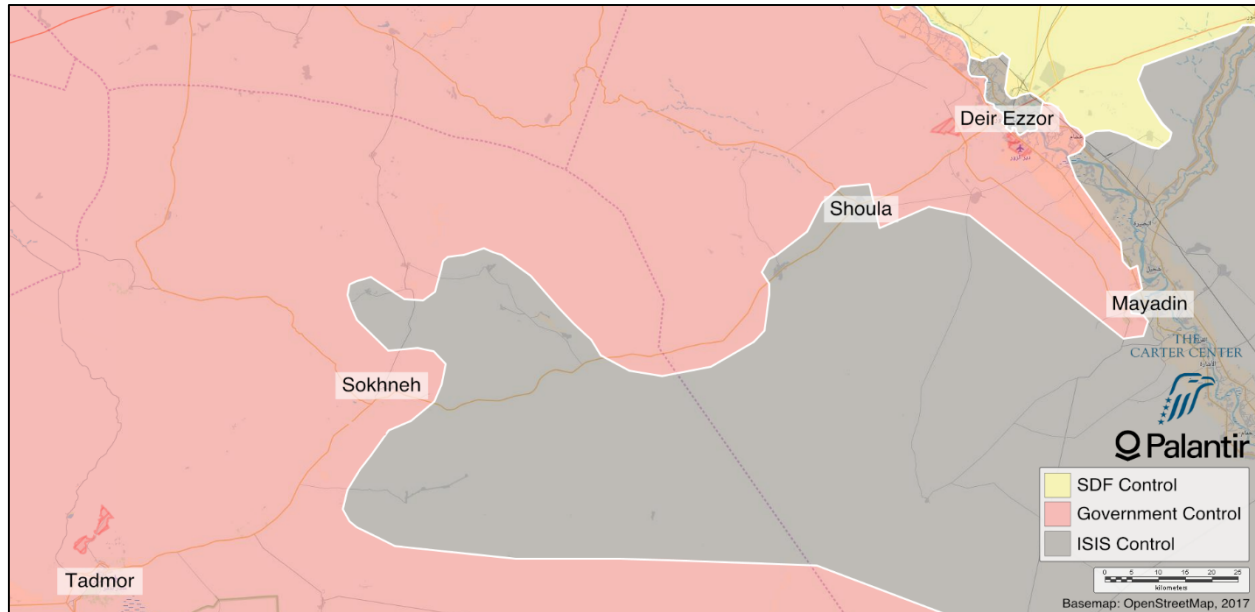


Figure 2 - Frontlines southwest of Deir Ezzor city by October 11

On October 9-10, pro-government forces advanced upstream on the east bank of the Euphrates River into ISIS controlled territory, gaining control of the Hatla area and reaching the highway and the eastern end of the destroyed Siyassiyeh Bridge. This advance is a significant step towards the pro-government forces' encirclement of the remaining ISIS-controlled districts of Deir Ezzor city. ISIS forces may still have limited ability to move between the city and their ever-dwindling territory on the opposite bank upstream, the Russian-installed bridge and anti-mine netting downstream from the city now prevent river travel in this direction.

During the current reporting period, pro-government forces led by the Tiger Forces advanced rapidly downstream along two separate roads that run parallel to the west bank of the Euphrates River. Pro-government forces reached the outskirts of Mayadin by October 6, and gained control of the desert hills overlooking the city and Euphrates Valley from the northwest, west, and southwest.

The SDF-led offensive for Raqqa city continues, with major Coalition airstrikes hitting the city throughout the reporting period. No major gains have been made as anti-ISIS forces consolidate control over previous gains and work to de-mine parts of the city.

HTS and opposition updates

On October 7, Turkey announced the start of a long-rumored Idlib operation, with troops entering Syria north of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing and extending along half of the southern border of the SDF-held Afrin canton. Turkey stated that the incursion aims to establish monitoring positions to observe a

“de-escalation zone,” but also hopes to contain the SDF forces in the area. The Turkish announcement also stated that Russian forces would provide air support to the operations. Turkish units are not yet deployed in any significant number in Syria but are reportedly supporting FSA units from within Turkey’s borders although they do intend to deploy in the near future.

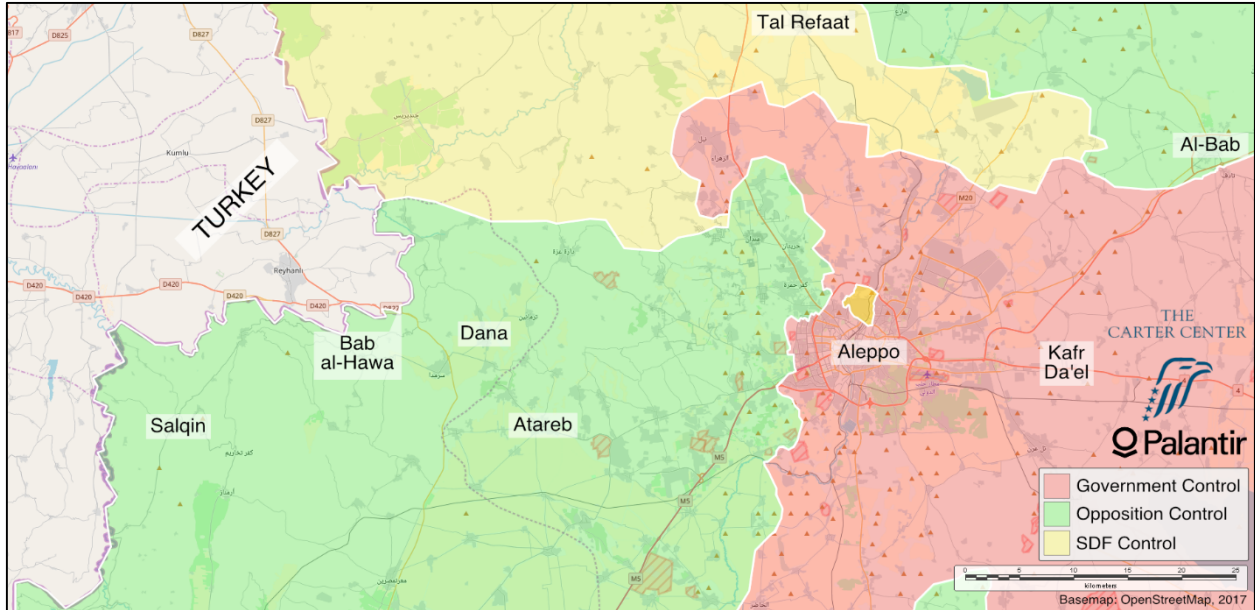


Figure 3 - Situation in western Aleppo governorate by October 11

Despite reports of the cross-border exchange of artillery between Turkish and HTS forces north of Bab al-Hawa, HTS and Turkey have since agreed to allow for Turkish control of a buffer zone area along the YPG-opposition frontline from Atme in western Idleb to Daret Azza to Anadan in eastern Aleppo. The agreement came after an HTS-accompanied Turkish reconnaissance operation was reported in the area around Sheikh Barakat mountain, which overlooks opposition and YPG-controlled territory. Per the agreement, HTS forces would draw down from these areas and not interfere with Turkish operations. Turkish reconnaissance units have since deployed to Idleb to establish “monitoring sites”.

On October 9, ISIS launched a surprise attack on HTS forces, moving through government-held territory with tanks and artillery to capture 13 villages in eastern Hama. HTS has accused pro-government forces of allowing ISIS to pass through government-controlled territory into opposition territory. This seems likely as ISIS’ appearance in the area coincided with the culmination of the government’s anti-ISIS operations a short distance to the south.

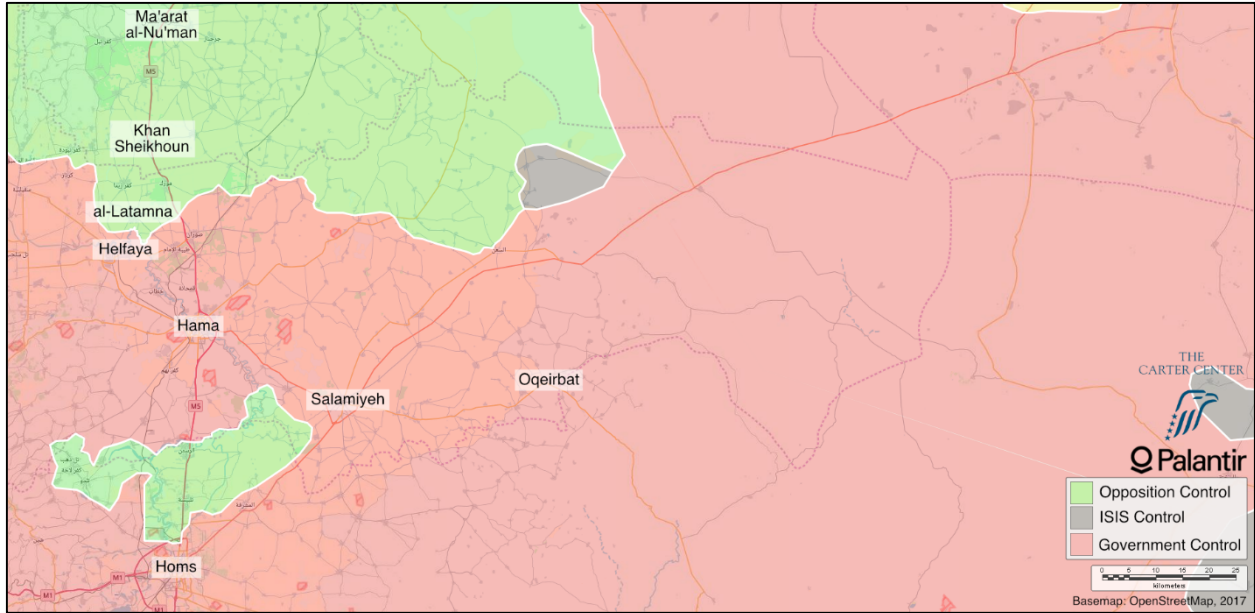


Figure 4 - Frontlines east of Hama by October 11

In the suburbs of Damascus, the increased levels of violence seen in previous weeks in Eastern Ghouta have continued into this reporting period. Artillery and mortar fire, airstrikes, and clashes have all been reported throughout the Eastern Ghouta. Clashes have continued between pro-government forces and Jaysh al-Islam at the Hosh Dawahira front. Clashes, shelling, and aerial bombardment also continued at the Ain Terma front between Faylaq al-Rahman and pro-government forces, the latter of which launched a failed nighttime assault on October 10. The Syrian Army's 4th Division launched an assault on Beit Jinn on October 6, opening a new front in the Rural Damascus governorate. Finally, pro-government forces have announced several times throughout the week that they have advanced to control the entire length of the Jordanian border in Rural Damascus and Suweida governorates, leaving only a small portion now controlled by opposition forces.