

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
August 31-September 06, 2017

During this reporting period, pro-government forces made major advances eastward from their foothold south of Raqqa city. These gains led to the end of a years-long ISIS siege of Deir Ezzor. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led coalition backed by the US) have continued to advance against ISIS in Raqqa city, pushing remaining ISIS forces further out of the city center. Despite the steady success of pro-government and SDF fighters against ISIS, the fight against ISIS is far from over. The Deir Ezzor Military Airport remains under siege and questions of a post-Raqqa SDF remain unanswered. New, major strife between opposition groups erupted in further violence in western Aleppo this week.

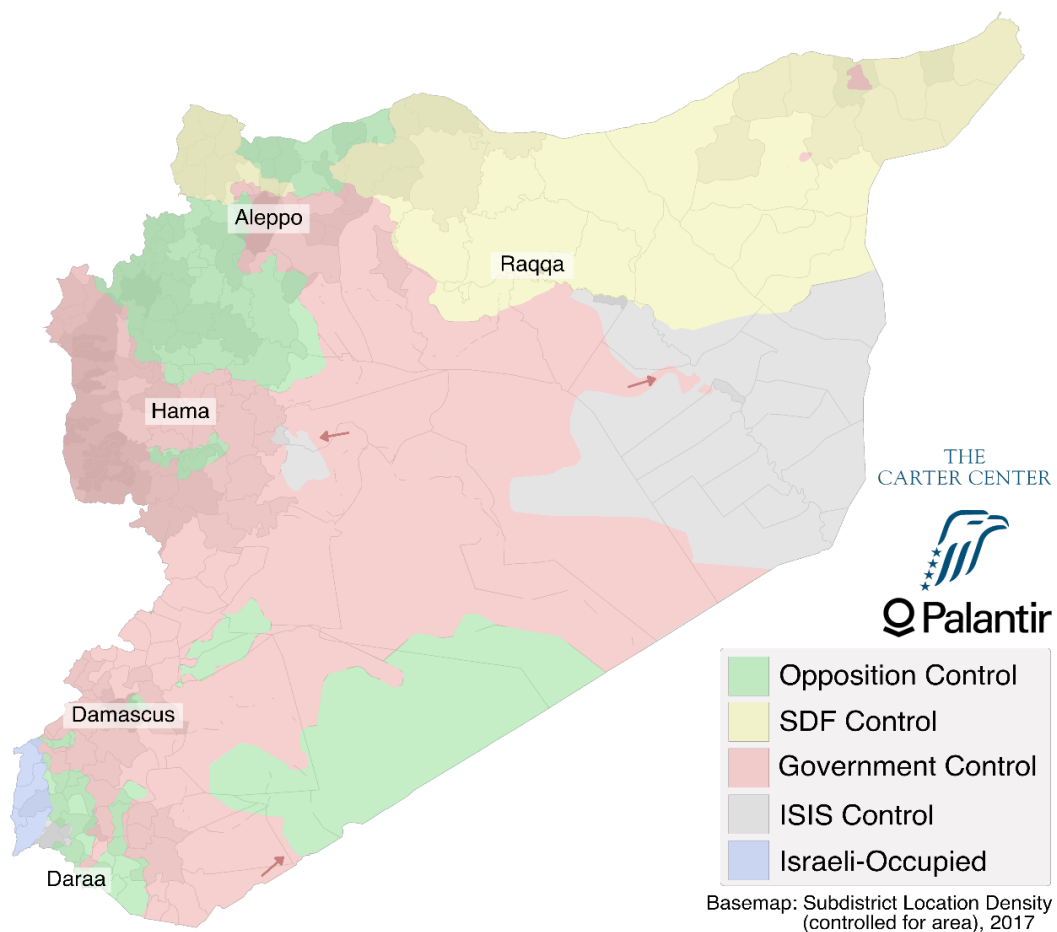


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by September 05, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period.

Eastern Syria campaign

On September 5, a large pro-government force continued its offensive out of northeastern Homs and reached besieged allies in Brigade 137 and northern Deir Ezzor, which has been surrounded by ISIS since July 2014. The offensive was three-pronged; the northern, or left prong, involved the Tiger Forces extending their control eastward from Tiba and Eastern Qasr al-Hayr, reaching Brigade 137 on September 5. The second, central prong involved the main body of pro-government forces advancing along the Sokhneh-Deir Ezzor road. This force appeared to include a diverse assortment of Syrian Arab Army units, elements of the Fifth Corps, National Defense Force (NDF) units, and at least three distinct groups of Shaitat Tribal Fighters. The third, southern prong, involved pro-government forces based in the Hmeimeh area of southeastern Homs at the administrative border with Abu Kamal district near the T2 Pumping station. Pro-government units currently operating in this area include Syrian Army First Division, Lebanese Hezbollah, Liwa Fatemiyoun, Iraqi PMUs, and Syrian Hezbollah.

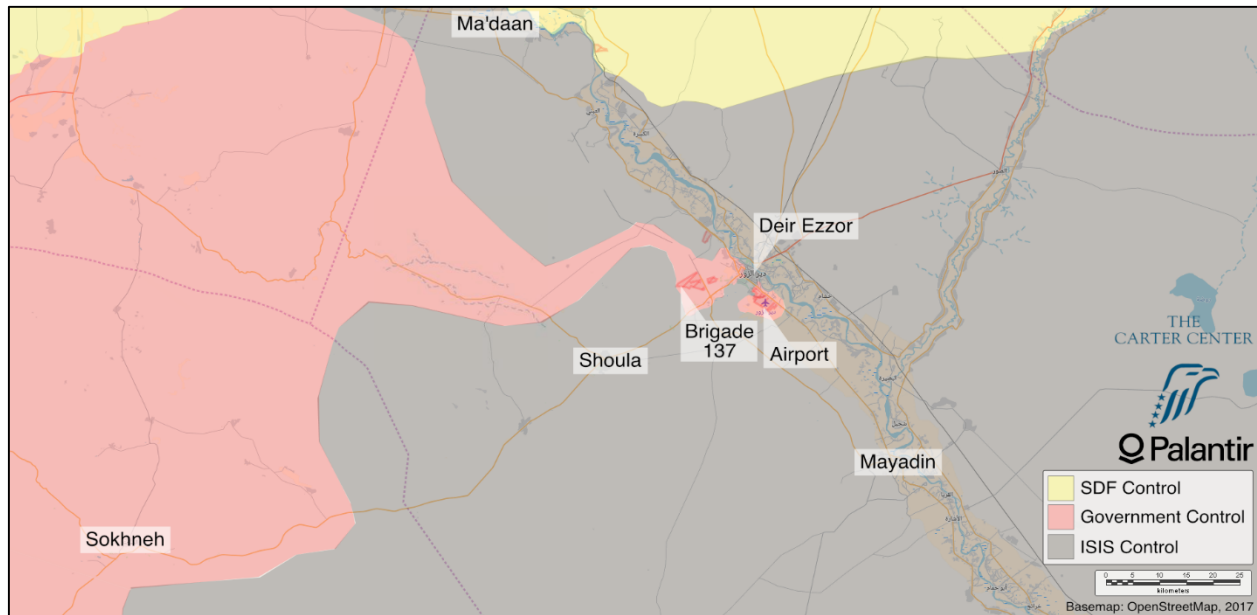


Figure 2 - Areas of control around Deir Ezzor by September 05

Despite initial success, the central prong of the Deir Ezzor offensive has seen the most resistance and suffered the largest setback during the past week. On August 30, pro-government forces advancing eastward on the Sokhneh-Deir Ezzor road entered Deir Ezzor governorate and clashed with ISIS near Harbishah, which they captured the next day. By September 2, pro-government forces had advanced to Kobajep, with Russian Spetznaz (special forces) appearing near frontlines. Over the course of the week, two Russian soldiers were reported dead.

By September 3, the pro-government force arrived at the intersection by Shoula, just south of where the Tiger Forces were advancing during the same period. An ISIS counter-attack kept pro-government forces from maintaining control of Shoula and pro-government fighters began to advance from the north instead. However, on September 5, Russian naval forces in the

Mediterranean launched three Kalibr cruise missiles against ISIS targets around the Shola intersection, hitting a munitions depot, a repair shop, and ISIS fighters.

A major challenge for pro-government forces remains in the Bishri Mountains, which stretch approximately 65km from southwest to northeast, rise to an elevation of 825m, and cover an area of more than 1200 square kilometers, straddling the administrative borders between southeast Raqqa, northeast Homs, and northwest Deir Ezzor. Pro-government forces initially claimed they had captured the area, but ISIS forces have gone to great lengths to build fortifications and stockpiles throughout these mountains and are likely hidden where Syrian forces cannot see them. A complex built into a hillside captured previously by Tiger Forces was equipped with electricity, plumbing, ventilation, and a 40-cell jail.

Pro-government forces have not taken back territory they lost to ISIS along the southern bank of the Euphrates River. These towns, located around Ghanem al-Ali, were previously held by the Tribal Fighters of Sheikh Turki al-Buhamad, who have had difficulties holding territory after the Tiger Forces were deployed elsewhere.

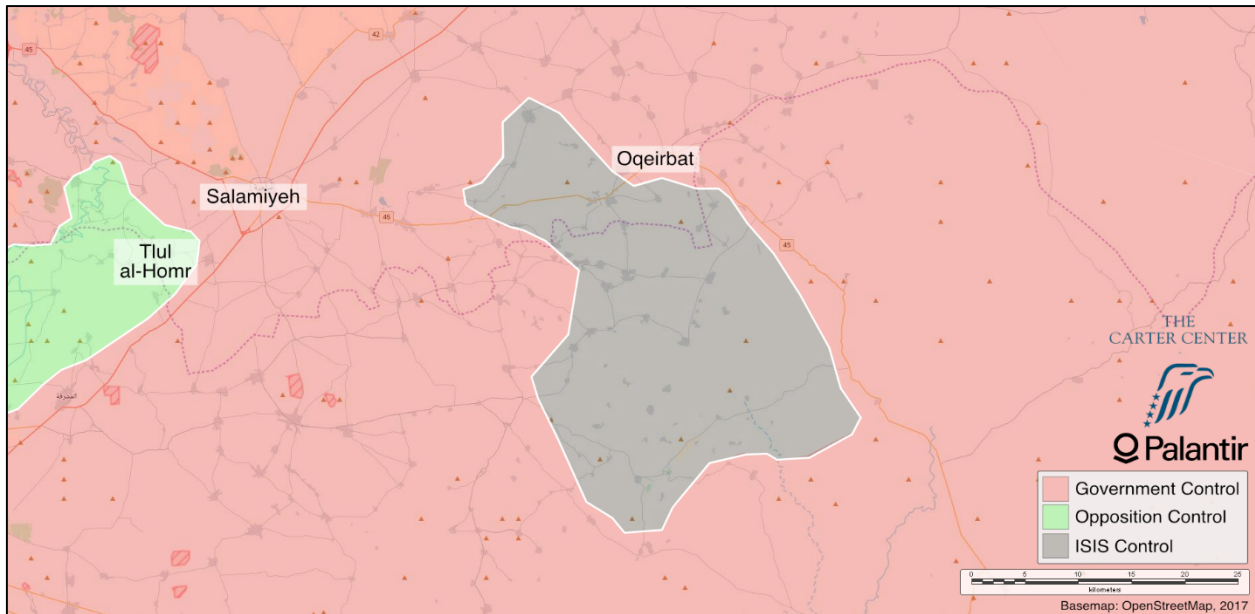


Figure 3 - Situation around Oqeirbat by September 05

During the reporting week, pro-government forces also continued to advance against ISIS in the eastern Salamiyeh countryside of Hama. The anti-ISIS force captured the town of Oqeirbat, long-referenced as the primary objective in the area.

Fight for Raqqa

On August 31, the UN declared that civilians in Raqqa are being used as human shields by ISIS as the US-led coalition and SDF attempt to wrest control of the city from the group. Out of the estimated 20,000 civilians trapped in the city, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has

documented 151 deaths in August. The US-led coalition has carried out almost 1,100 airstrikes around Raqqa in the same period.

During the reporting week, the SDF took full control of Raqqa's Old City. Since the operation to take the city began in early June, the SDF has taken control of well over half of Raqqa, as well as most of the surrounding province.

Within frontlines of the battle for Raqqa, the SDF includes primarily-Arab units that operate as part of the SDF without Kurdish soldiers among them. The SDF, which controls an area of Syria with heavy Kurdish population and was formed with major input from Kurdish YPG leadership, has struggled with its image as being mostly Kurdish. The recent death during the battle for Raqqa of the Arab leader of the Menbij Military Council may help alleviate that image problem.

The end of the battle for Raqqa city grows near, though the city has been destroyed by the military campaign to retake it. The main risks to SDF in this battle remains ISIS' use of booby traps and sniper teams.

Southern Syria

Pro-government forces managed to gain control of four additional posts along the Jordanian border in southeastern Syria. The US has been pressuring Jaysh Osoud al-Sharqiya and the Forces of Martyr Ahmad Abdo to retreat towards Jordan in order to preserve the Southern ceasefire as pro-government forces continue to make advances in the area. The groups initially insisted that they would not leave the desert, affirming in a statement their will to continue the fight and urging other groups to fight harder. However, it now appears that the Forces of Martyr Amhad al-Abdo have begun retreating towards Jordan and that Jaysh Osoud al-Sharqiya has started to retreat towards al-Tanf airbase. Maghawir al-Thawra, another FSA battalion in the desert, previously redeployed to SDF frontlines to the north of Deir Ezzor, but have yet to join any offensives in the area.

Clashes continue between pro-government forces and Faylaq al-Rahman at the Jobar/Ain Terma front east of Damascus. The clashes have been accompanied by aerial bombardment, and seem to signal an end to the agreement reached between the two parties. Conflict on the eastern portion of the Eastern Ghouta, where Jaysh al-Islam is headquartered, has remained low in comparison.

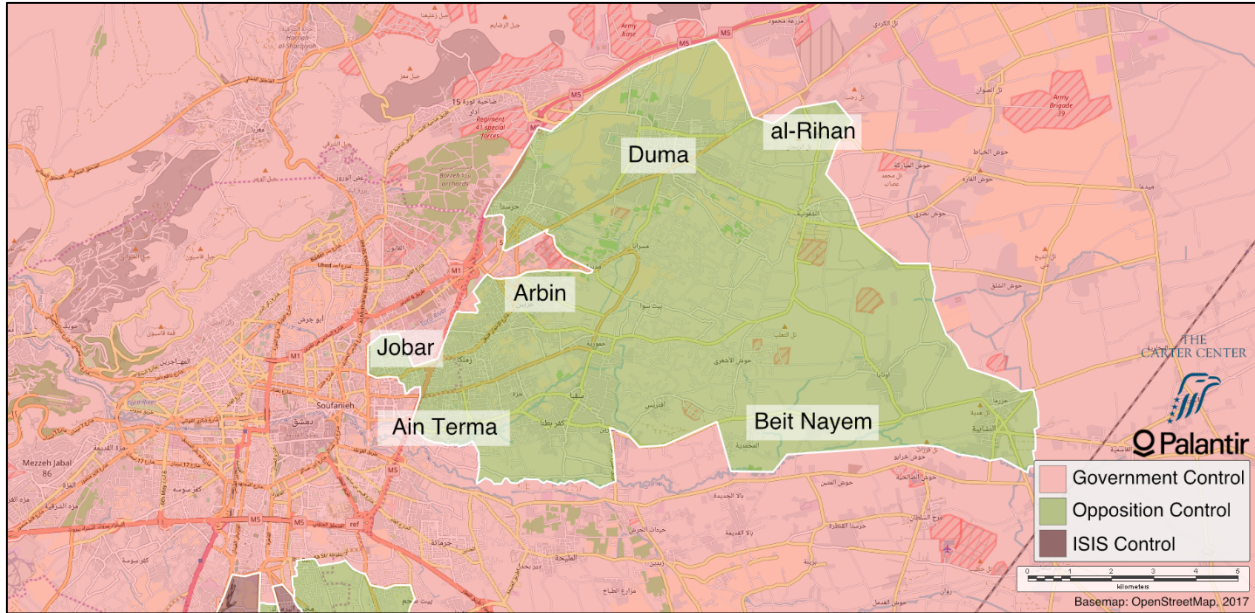


Figure 4 - Frontlines around the Eastern Ghouta by September 05

Developments within the opposition

On August 30, the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC) and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) based in Gaziantep in Turkey issued an official call to form a united revolutionary army and a Ministry of Defense for all opposition territories and forces in Syria. The initiative has gained support from over 40 opposition groups including prominent ones like Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Sham, Faylaq al-Sham, Nur al-Din al-Zenki, Jaysh al-Islam, and the Free Idleb Army. Other groups from Aleppo, Idleb, Hama, Latakia, Homs, the Operation Euphrates Shield area in northern Aleppo, and the Badia (southern desert) have also indicated their support.

Jawad Abu Hatab has been appointed as interim Minister of Defense and consultations are underway between the SIG and the Southern Front for a permanent appointment. Faylaq al-Rahman and the Southern Front have not yet voiced support for the calls by the SIC and the SIG to form a united revolutionary army or a Ministry of Defense.

Clashes and tensions renewed between Nur al-Din al-Zenki (NDZ) and Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra) during this reporting period. On August 28, Sayyed Barsha, a Zenki commander, was killed in an IED assassination in the Tilaada area in northern Idleb. Clashes continued driven in part by conflict within the Barsha family whose members belong both to HTS and Zenki.

On August 31, Zenki released a strongly-worded statement accusing HTS “secret agents” of carrying out the assassination of Barsha and for having attempted to assassinate him previously. In the statement, NDZ confirmed it killed one HTS member while attempting to apprehend him and arrested another HTS member who later confessed to the assassination (though likely under duress). The Zenki statement also claimed that the local HTS commander, Qutaibeh Barsha,

instigated further clashes in the town and that HTS members executed and desecrated the bodies of NDZ fighters who had surrendered. On September 6, a Zenki leader, Ashraf Rahim, was kidnapped near Sheikh Hassan in northern Idleb. Zenki accused HTS of carrying out the kidnapping, and demanded his release. These incidents occurred within a 6 km radius between the cities of Sheikh Hassan, Tilaada, and Hezreh north of the city of Dana, Idleb.

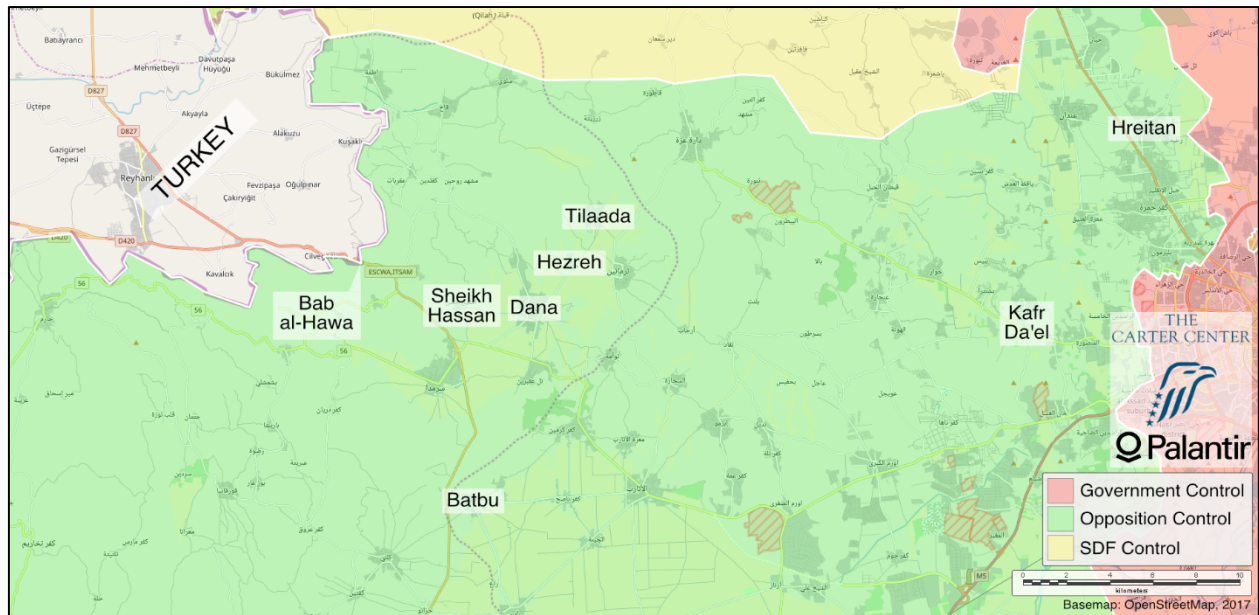


Figure 5 - Areas of control in western Aleppo governorate by September 05

On September 6, Hossam Atrash, a former HTS Shura Council member and a current leader within Zenki, claimed that HTS leader Jolani urged the HTS Shura Council on multiple occasions to pursue political relations with Iran. Atrash claims that Jolani openly stated that he would “sit with Druze, the Christians and the Alawites” if it meant the elimination of Ahrar al-Sham, a key rival of HTS. Hossam Atrash called for leaders of HTS to open a public debate on the issue in Idleb city.

On September 6, a joint operation was conducted between HTS Elite Forces and Malhama Tactical on pro-government positions in the Airforce Intelligence complex in Aleppo city. Malhama Tactical is a private military contractor that has provided training to HTS and other opposition groups, most recently involved in the provision of training to HTS and Ajnad al Kavkaz soldiers. The unit also participated in another early August raid on pro-government positions in Aleppo city.

On August 29, the Idleb Governorate Council issued a statement demanding armed groups not to interfere with the independent functioning of any local councils. The statement came shortly after HTS' dissolution of the Idleb City Council.

During the reporting week, hundreds of IDPs arrived in small groups to towns in southern Idleb, fleeing the fighting between ISIS and pro-government forces in the eastern countryside of Salamiyeh and Oqayrabat areas.

Russian negotiators reached an agreement with opposition leaders in northern Homs countryside that would allow the reopening of the road between Homs and Hama. This is presumably referring to the M5 Damascus-Aleppo International Highway that passes through both Rastan and Talbiseh. Details of the deal are not yet clear.