

THE  
CARTER CENTER



**Weekly Conflict Summary**  
June 29-July 5, 2017

Fighting remains intense in southwestern Syria, despite the area being designated as a “de-escalation zone.” Opposition offensives on Baath city on the border of the Golan Heights have been turned back following a counter-offensive and intense artillery bombardment. This fighting, as well as intense bombardment on other designated de-escalation areas, has led to major opposition factions declaring they will boycott the upcoming talks in Astana.

Elsewhere, sporadic conflict in the opposition-held Idleb pocket intensified over the reporting week. Tensions among opposition forces in the area have continued, as well as tensions along the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) frontlines in northern Aleppo governorate. ISIS forces continued to lose territory on several fronts, though regained some blocks they lost previously in Raqqa city.

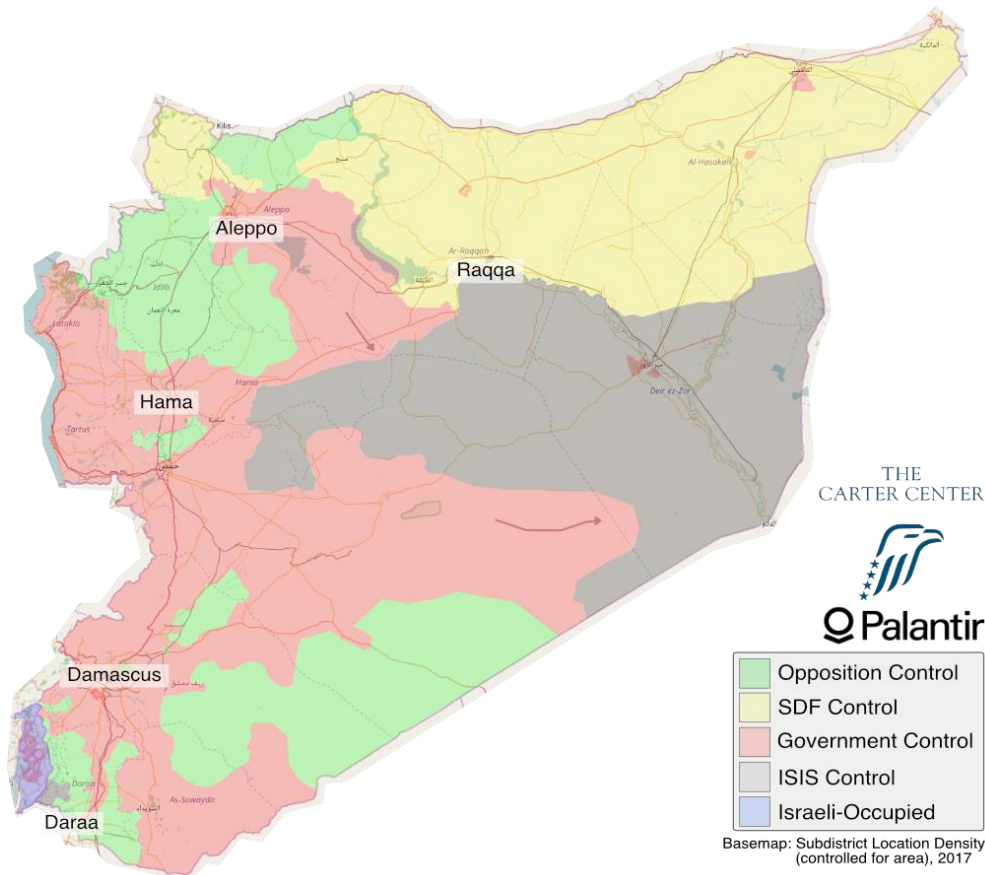


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by July 5, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period

### **Continued attacks in Idleb**

IED bombings have continued at a high rate throughout Idleb governorate during the reporting week despite Ahrar al-Sham's elimination of an ISIS cell on June 28. This cell was presumably responsible for some of the recent attacks. All members of the ISIS cell were killed or detonated explosive belts, killing themselves and causing civilian casualties. Ahrar al-Sham fighters also stopped a potential suicide car bomb operation, killing the driver near Maaret al-Nu'man, Idleb.

During the assessment period, there were multiple IED attacks and one foiled attempt in Idleb city on June 27, July 2, and July 3. IED attacks and attempts were also reported in Armanaz, Hafasraja, Salqin, Isqat, Sheikh Yousef, and in Saraqeb (all in Idleb area), including an attack targeting an Ahrar al-Sham official.

A friendly fire incident at an Ahrar al-Sham checkpoint resulted in the shooting death of the deputy director of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. On July 4, two Ahrar al-Sham members, one of them a commander and a local official, were kidnapped by unknown persons.

### **Further opposition tensions**

On June 30, clashes in the countryside of Aleppo between Ahrar al-Sham and Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) but the incident seems to have been isolated. A dispute between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham over electricity provision continued into this reporting period, resulting in prolonged electricity outages in some areas of Idleb. Ahrar al-Sham reported completion of repairs and the resumption of electricity service to the HTS-dominated Khan Sheikhoun area on July 3. This has been a persistent issue since early June.

Ajnad al-Sham reportedly defected from HTS and returned to Ahrar al-Sham with approximately 200 fighters. Ahrar has seen a consistent trickle of new fighters join the group's ranks as tensions with HTS have persisted.

There are multiple reports of HTS arresting fighters in Idleb for participation in the Turkey-backed Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), with one commentator claiming that over 100 fighters had been arrested thus far. The Descendants of Saladin Brigade, a previous participant in OES, announced that it will not take part in an offensive on Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) or YPG in Afrin. The commander of the Descendants of Saladin Brigade was arrested and the group disarmed by Turkish forces in the days and weeks after the official end of OES.

On June 30, a military commander of the Moatasem Brigade (a previous participant in OES) defected to the SDF protesting what he claims are Turkish intentions to occupy northern Syria.

Shelling and clashes have continued along opposition and Turkish frontlines with SDF/YPG throughout this assessment period amidst the imminent threat of Turkish-backed operations to capture territory in Afrin canton. Turkish news agencies have continued to circulate rumors of a planned Turkish base of operations in Sheikh Barakat Mountain near Daret Azza, west of Aleppo city. Skirmishes along this frontline have been persistent over this reporting period. As the rhetoric on all sides grows increasingly heated, major confrontation seems increasingly imminent.

### **Anti-ISIS operations**

On July 1, the US-backed SDF launched a new offensive against ISIS to retake the eastern Raqqa neighborhood of Al-Sinaa. The SDF previously took Al-Sinaa on June 12, less than a week after they first entered Raqqa. However, ISIS pushed back before launching a counter offensive, resulting in ISIS regaining control of the neighborhood on June 30. Al-Sinaa is important to both the SDF and ISIS because it is

adjacent to the city center, where most of the ISIS forces defending Raqqa are located.

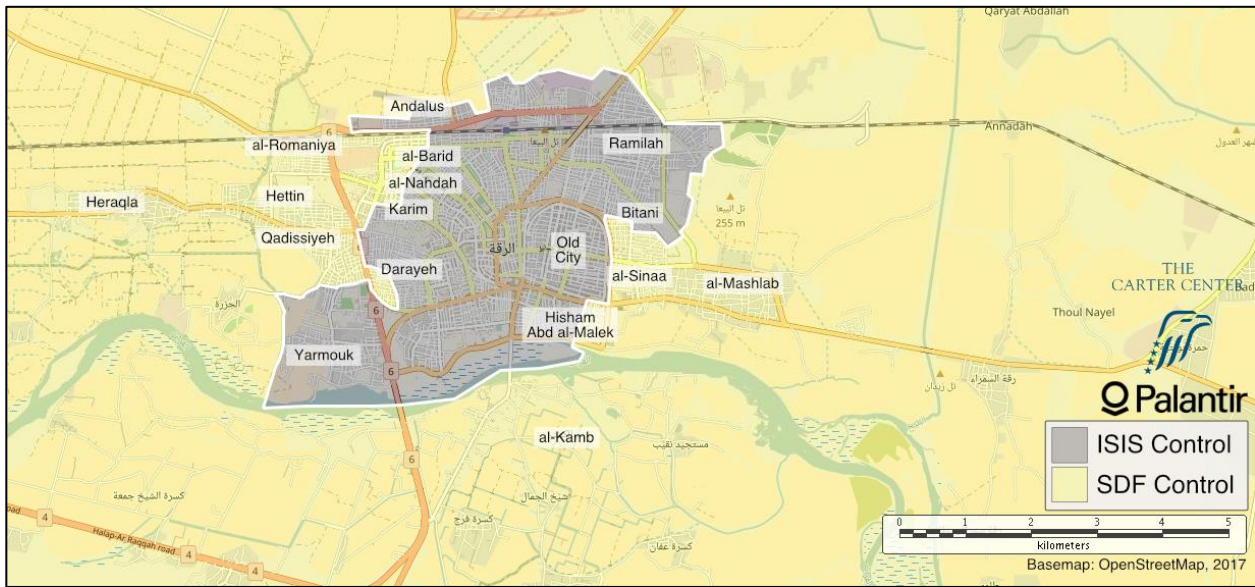


Figure 2 - Frontlines around Raqqa city by July 5

On July 1, pro-government National Defense Force (NDF) units advanced against ISIS along the Salamiyeh-Ithriya Road connecting Aleppo with government-held Hama. Also on July 1, pro-government units led by the Tiger Forces advanced eastward, gaining control of the Resafa-Ithriya road, south of Raqqa. The advance along this road led to the government capture of 13 villages. By July 4, the entire area east of the Khanaser-Ithriya road (and north of the Resafa-Ithriya road) also came under Syrian government control. Pro-government forces fighting against ISIS on the Khanaser front reportedly included the 124th Brigade of the Syrian Republican Guard, along with units of the NDF and Syrian Hezbollah, with the Tiger Forces operating nearby in eastern Hama.

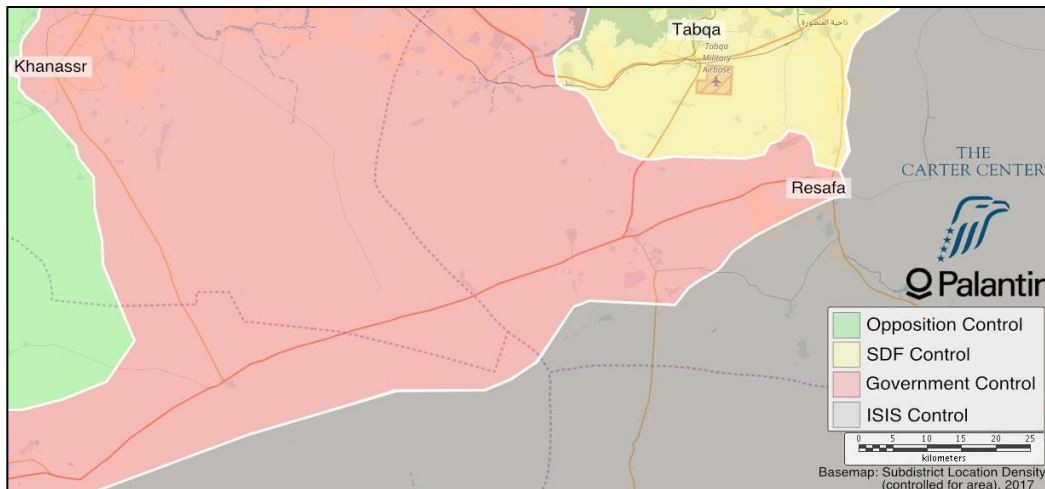


Figure 3 - Frontlines in the eastern countryside of Aleppo and western countryside of Raqqa by July 5

The pro-government Desert Hawks Forces also joined the fight in eastern Hama after traveling from Syria's coast. Desert Hawks fighters were pictured holding the severed heads of ISIS fighters killed in battle. Fighters also allegedly looted and vandalized civilian property, particularly in the village of Aqareb al-Safiyeh, the site of a mid-May massacre by ISIS forces.

The "ISIS Hunters" rejoined pro-government frontlines north of the Hayyan Gas Fields and T4 Airbase this week. Since their formation by Russian forces, the primary mission of the ISIS Hunters has been defensive, mostly guarding gas fields and other vulnerable installations and infrastructure that is valuable to the government.

To the east of Tadmor, pro-government forces continued to make slow but steady progress against ISIS. Following last week's capture of the Arak gas field and consolidation of control surrounding the T3 pumping station, the offensive forces have continued to advance towards Sokhneh, the last major town in Eastern Homs countryside controlled by ISIS. Pro-government forces also gained control of the Ramamein hills overlooking the Heil gas field north of the T3 pumping station.

### **Developments in the south of Syria**

The opposition's Jaysh Muhammad's offensive in Quneitra continued this week with very little change in territorial control. Pro-government forces began an attempt to push towards al-Hamidiyeh on June 28, though the battles garnered the groups few gains by June 29. On June 30, shells landed in the Golan Heights for a second week in a row, which prompted Israeli airstrikes on Baath City and East Samadaniya.

While sporadic clashes in the Baath City area continue, by July 1, pro-government forces succeeded in recapturing all territory lost during the previous 7-10 days during opposition offensives. Clashes also continued in Daraa city between the al-Bunyan al-Marsous operations room and pro-government forces, though no major gains were reported for either side. On July 3, the Syrian government announced a 4-day ceasefire in Daraa, Quneitra, and Sweida.

On June 28, ISIS-affiliate Jaysh Khalid Ibn al-Walid appointed its third Emir in a one-month period as his predecessor was killed in an airstrike (most likely by the International Coalition) in the town of Jalin. Several opposition groups joined together on July 5 to form a new operations room "Al-Saf al-Wahid" to focus on fighting ISIS in the Yarmouk basin.

In Eastern Ghouta, clashes have continued on the Ain Terma front, and spread to Zamalka. On June 1, pro-government forces allegedly used chlorine gas in both Ain Terma and Zamalka amidst clashes against opposition forces on both fronts. In addition to the clashes between the government and Faylaq al-Rahman on these fronts, pro-government forces battled Jaysh al-Islam along the Damascus-Homs highway in areas near Duma on July 3 and Hazarma on July 5.

In Rural Damascus, a reconciliation agreement between opposition and pro-government groups appears to be in the works for the town of Jayrud, northeast of the Qalamoun mountains. The groups have been in negotiations since 2 July in an effort to reach a reconciliation deal with the Syrian government. One of the sticking points in negotiations has been the government's demand that its forces gain control over points along a gas line that passes through the Jayroud area.