

THE  
CARTER CENTER



**Weekly Conflict Summary**  
February 15-21, 2018

During this reporting period, the government siege and bombardment of Eastern Ghouta intensified significantly, resulting in one of the deadliest periods of bombardment to date. In northern Syria, two prominent opposition groups in the opposition-held Idleb pocket announced their unification as they launched attacks against Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra). Operation Olive Branch, the ongoing Turkish-led offensive into Afrin, continued to gain territory this week amid numerous diplomatic discussions between NATO allies about the continuing fight.

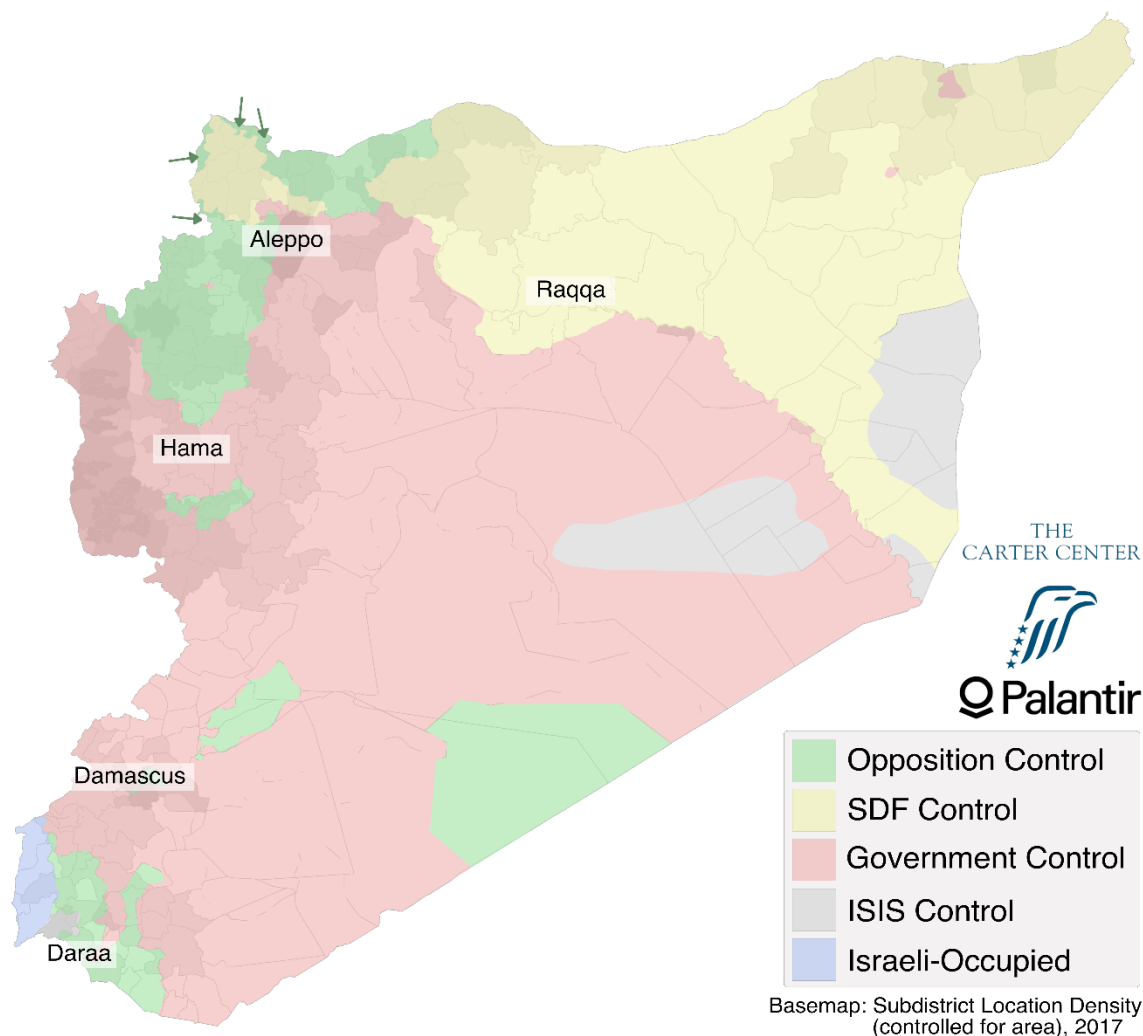


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by February 21, with arrows indicating fronts of advances during the reporting period

## East Ghouta

Syrian forces and Russian warplanes continue to strike opposition-held Eastern Ghouta. In the three days preceding the publication of this report, the total number of civilian deaths reached more than 270, including 127 on February 19 alone, making the period one of the deadliest since 2013. The shelling of Damascus from the enclave also continued during the reporting week. The UN once more called for an immediate halt to the violence.

Since the end of last December, a stepped-up government campaign killed more than 400 civilians, including at least 100 children. Local observers assert the attacks are a prelude to a major offensive on the rebel-held territory, which has been under siege since 2013. Nearly 400,000 people live in Eastern Ghouta, many of them internally displaced from other areas of the country.

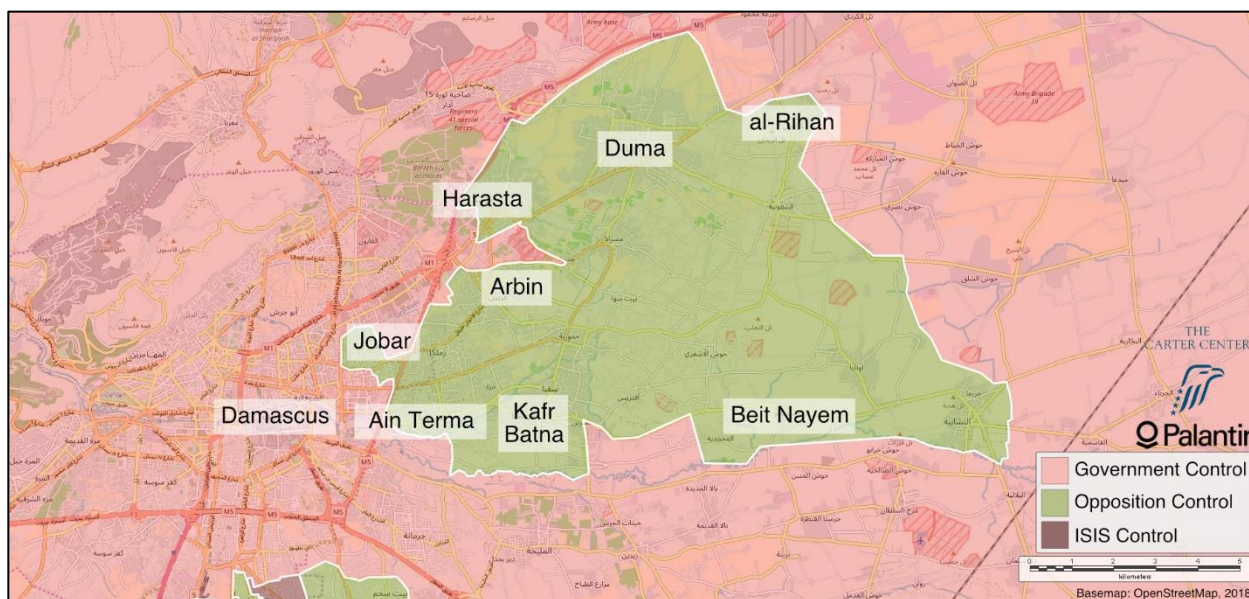


Figure 2 - Situation in Eastern Ghouta by February 21

## Northern Syria

A merger between Nour al-Din al-Zenki (a formerly-US-vetted and supported unit from Aleppo) and Ahrar al-Sham was announced this week under the name Jabhat Tahrir Souria (JTS). The merger puts the Ahrar leadership in charge of the new organization, but places Zenki commanders as chief deputies of most other postings (including military and political branches). The goal of the new merger is to fight against HTS. In response to this formation, HTS has called for rebel unity amid ongoing clashes between the two forces. Many of the units that have joined JTS are also members of the operation room formed two weeks ago, the Dahr al-Ghzaa Military Operations Room.

Turkey's Operation Olive Branch forces gained significant territory during the reporting week. The offensive succeeded in joining together pockets of control to encompass nearly all of the Turkish border with Afrin. Of key importance is the new connection formed between the city of Azaz and Afrin's northern border. Turkish forces and Turkish-supported FSA have also advanced around Bilbil and Raju fronts during the reporting week (see map below).

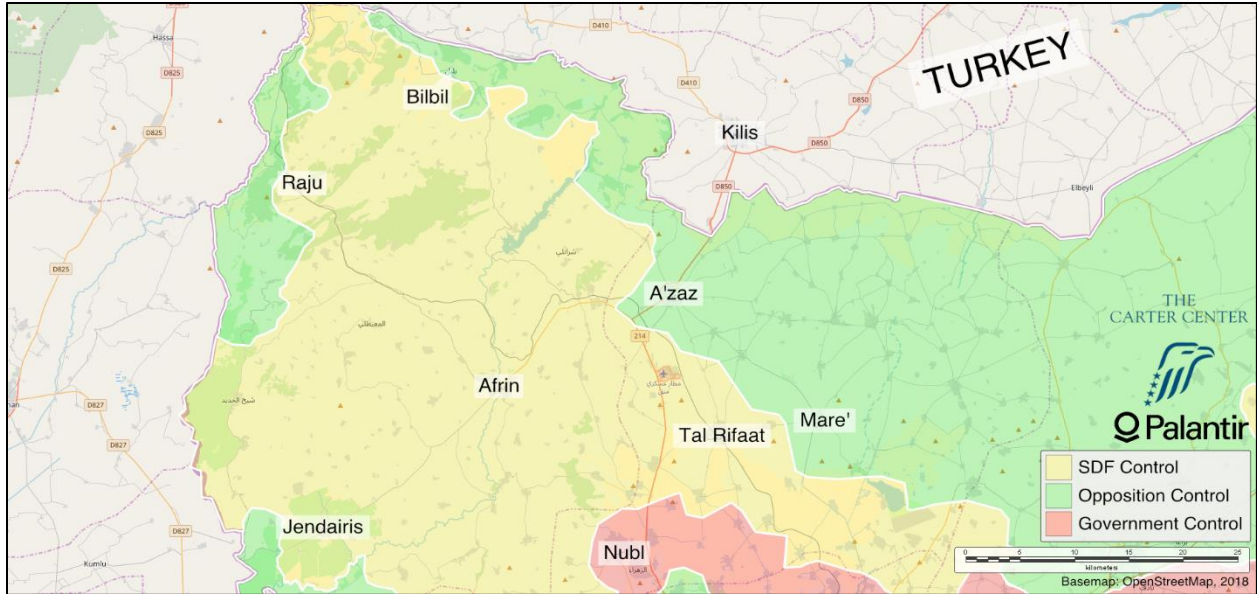


Figure 3 - Situation in northwestern Syria by February 21

Turkish President Erdogan said that Turkey has thwarted the deployment of Syrian government troops into Afrin, and that Turkish forces and their Syrian allies would begin laying siege to the town of Afrin in the coming days. At the time of Erdogan’s speech, no pro-government forces had entered Afrin to assist the Kurds in fighting Turkey. However, members of the pro-government National Defense Force (NDF) of Nubl, a northern Aleppo town bordering the Afrin canton, arrived in Jendairis and Afrin shortly afterwards, where they promised to fight Turkish units.

On February 15, during a visit to several Middle Eastern countries, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that the U.S. has "never given heavy arms" to the Syrian Kurdish YPG militias and so has "nothing to take back." On the same day, Turkey called for the YPG to be expelled from the SDF. Mattis said that the US and NATO are attempting to address Turkey's security concerns regarding recent rocket attacks along its border with Syria. A "joint mechanism" was announced by the two parties to deal with disputes including Kurdish-YPG control of the Syrian city of Manbij and the status of Pennsylvania-based exiled cleric Fetullah Gulen. The specifics of the joint mechanism have yet to be announced, however, Turkey is reported to be pressing for a joint US-Turkish deployment in Manbij.

Over 20 more arrests have been carried out in Turkey regarding disapproval of the Operation Olive Branch offensive. The suspects are accused of sharing posts on social media opposing Turkey's military operations in Syria and insulting the Turkish president. In Turkey, 786 Afrin-related arrests have been reported since the start of the operation.

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