



Weekly Conflict Summary
December 8-14, 2016

This week, pro-government forces captured nearly all of the remainder of opposition-held East Aleppo. Reports of summary executions and ceasefire breaches initially plagued attempts to evacuate the remaining civilians and opposition forces. A Russian-brokered evacuation deal made later in the week marked the end of the battle for Aleppo, but was blocked by Iranian-backed militias, hinting at more enduring and complex problems yet to come.

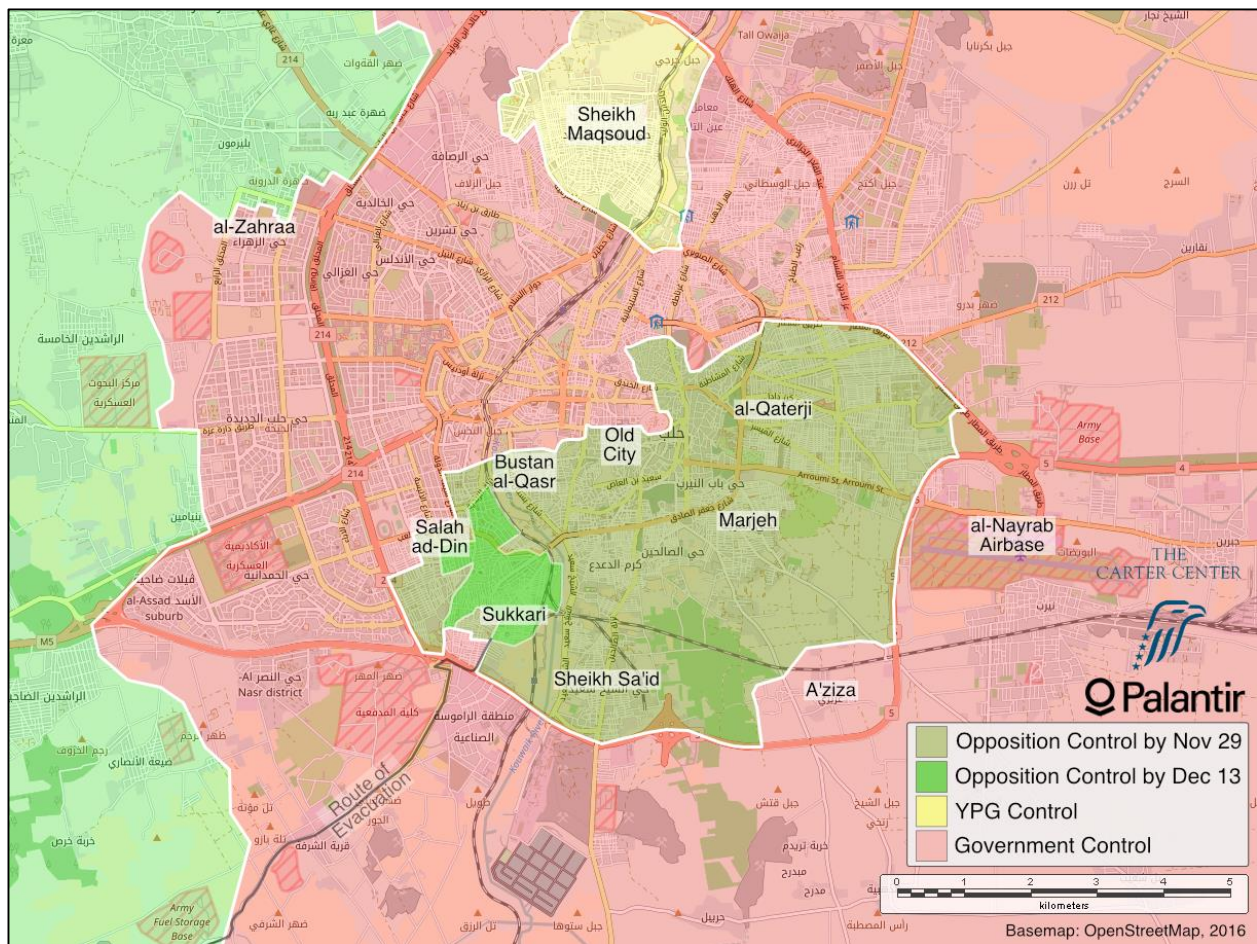


Figure 1 - Pro-government advance on what remained of opposition-held East Aleppo

The collapse of opposition front lines led to a swift advance by pro-government forces. By the end of the day on December 11, pro-government forces captured the neighborhoods of Sheikh Said, Salheen, and Karm ad-Dada. By December 12, opposition forces had been pushed back further, losing more territory from the west and east of East Aleppo, retreating west across the Qweik River to exercise control over only a few neighborhoods. By December 14, front lines had almost completely collapsed, leaving remaining opposition forces and civilians confined to a small section of the city (as seen in Figure 1).

After days of confusion over a deal brokered by Turkey and Russia, a plan for the evacuation of 4,000 opposition fighters was agreed overnight between December 14 and 15. These evacuations began as green buses transported fighters and their families to opposition territory west of Aleppo on December 15, after initially being blocked by Iranian-backed pro-government militias. Around 500 wounded are reportedly being transported to a hospital in the border town of Aqribat in northern Idleb countryside. Additionally, some residents from the two besieged Shia villages of al-Fo'ah and Kafrayya in northern Idleb are also to be evacuated.

Due to the violence in Aleppo, demonstrations have broken out again across Syria. On December 13, the Local Council of Saraqeb and Saraqeb countryside in Idleb governorate suspended all operations in protest against the silence from the international community. Other civil society organizations in opposition-held territory followed suit. On December 14, protesters marched in Idleb, Atmeh, Dana, and Maar Tahroma, calling for opposition unification.

Protests in Daraa broke out in the cities of Da'el, Abtaa, Hrak and Naseeb to demonstrate solidarity with opposition groups and civilians in Eastern Aleppo. Protesters have also called for the ousting of current opposition armed group leaders in Daraa and for increased military action against pro-government forces.

Amid limited resistance from opposition forces in the area, pro-government forces have advanced in the northwestern Daraa countryside. With the capture of Faqie, pro-government forces increased their control over the old Damascus-Daraa highway in their advance towards Jasim and Ankhel. The capture of Faqie further solidifies government control of the city of Mahaja, located 5 km to the east. No government forces are stationed within Mahaja but the city is almost completely encircled by government checkpoints. Shortly after taking Faqie, pro-government forces bombed Barqa, leading to the displacement of civilians.

A sandstorm on the Jordanian border hit Hadalat and Rukban IDP camps on December 13th, bringing cold weather, high winds, and rains. Neither camp is receiving aid or medical support of any kind due to the closure of the border by the Jordanian government. Almost all IDPs in these camps are housed in makeshift shelters and tents not suitable for habitation, and which are at risk of collapse in severe weather conditions.

On December 8, a renewed ISIS offensive for government-held Palmyra resulted in major ISIS gains. ISIS fighters retook Palmyra from pro-government forces and advanced westwards, establishing a siege on the T4 base by December 14. Not only are the land gains significant, but ISIS fighters also have reported massive gains in new equipment from a retreating pro-government force in addition to capturing both grain stores and oil and natural gas fields.

Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) forces were bolstered this week with the arrival of more Turkish forces. OES forces swept south from the west of Al-Bab, securing another side of the ISIS-held city of Al-Bab. The first footage of an OES advance into Al-Bab itself was released this week, though the large-scale offensive for the city appears to not yet have started.

SDF forces continue to take territory from ISIS north of Raqqa, pressing southward toward the Euphrates, preparing to flank the city from the west.

Conclusions:

The end of the battle for Aleppo marks a new chapter in the Syrian conflict. Having successfully cleared Aleppo city of opposition forces, the question now becomes, where will pro-government forces move next? This question is further complicated by the clear divide in interests among pro-government parties, as evidenced by the fractious events surrounding the evacuation of Aleppo. Furthermore, the swift advances made by ISIS underscores the inability of pro-government forces to operate on multiple fronts at once, as well as the continued risk posed by ISIS despite shrinking territorial control.