

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

June 08-14, 2017

Summary

Over the course of this reporting period, intra-opposition strife continued to harm groups in opposition-held territory, namely in Idleb and northern Aleppo. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Afrin initiated an offensive against opposition groups in northern Syria while advancing into Raqqa city to the east. Pro-government forces also advanced against ISIS in eastern Aleppo/western Raqqa and Homs. The situation around the US garrison at the al-Tanf border crossing continues to grow more complex as pro-government forces outflanked opposition groups advancing against ISIS in the area, reaching the Iraqi border to the north of opposition and US special forces positions.

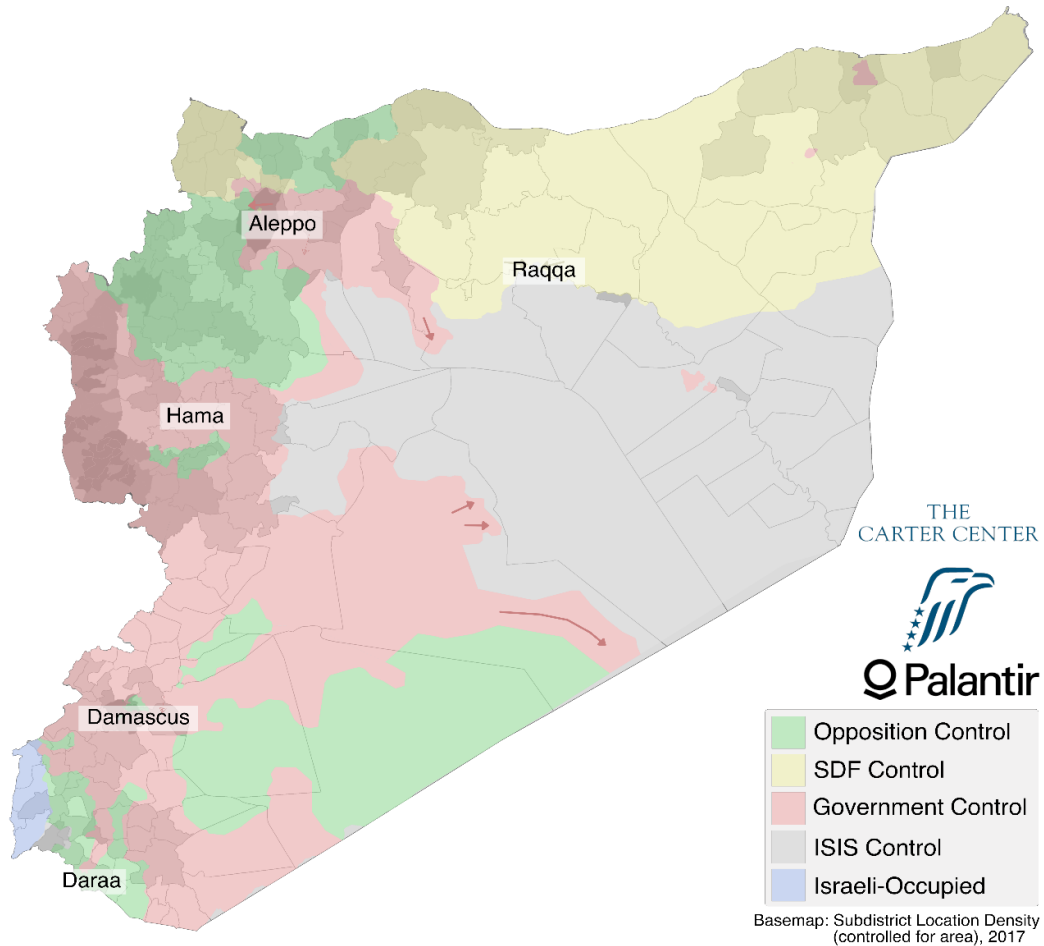


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by June 14, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period. The underlying map is shaded based upon the density of population centers, with darker areas indicating greater density

Inter-opposition clashes

Following clashes between Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) and Faylak al-Sham a week earlier, on June 8 HTS launched a new assault on Faylak al Sham and the Free Idleb Army's Division 13, a Free Syrian Army (FSA) affiliate, in Maarat al-Numan, Idleb. Clashes continued until the next day and resulted in a victory for HTS, which took control of Free Idleb Army and Faylak al-Sham positions and executed members of Division 13. Among those executed was Colonel Taysir Al Samahi, a Free Idleb Army commander and head of the Free Police in Maarat al-Numan. Clashes halted after an agreement between HTS and the Free Idleb Army was reached, pledging to form a committee to arbitrate the dispute between the two groups. Additionally, the agreement called for Free Idleb Army to surrender members being sought by HTS for prosecution, and for Division 13 to be completely dissolved into the Free Idleb Army.

Residents closed roads to protest the outbreak of clashes and demonstrated against HTS following the attack on the FSA forces in Maarat al-Numan in the days following. HTS fighters fired shots to disperse the crowds during demonstrations on June 9. On June 12, HTS withdrew its forces from Maarat al-Numan.

On June 11, heavy clashes began between opposition groups in Al-Bab and in the northern Aleppo countryside, causing casualties among armed groups and civilians alike. The clashes initially broke out between the Fifth Division (a major force within the Al Bab military council) on one side and al-Fawj al-Awal (an Ahrar al-Sham ally) on the other. The fighting quickly escalated as Ahrar al-Sham was attacked by the Fifth Division and the Sultan Murad Brigades in Al-Bab and in the nearby cities of Olan, Abla and Qabbasin, after Ahrar al-Sham attempted to intervene between the two groups fighting in Al-Bab. Clashes were limited and the dispute between the armed groups is currently being mediated by local political forces and Turkish actors.

Ahrar al-Sham has previously clashed with Sultan Murad Brigades and other armed groups in the areas captured during Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) and issued a statement in late May promising a strong response to opposition groups that it claims are plotting against it in the area.

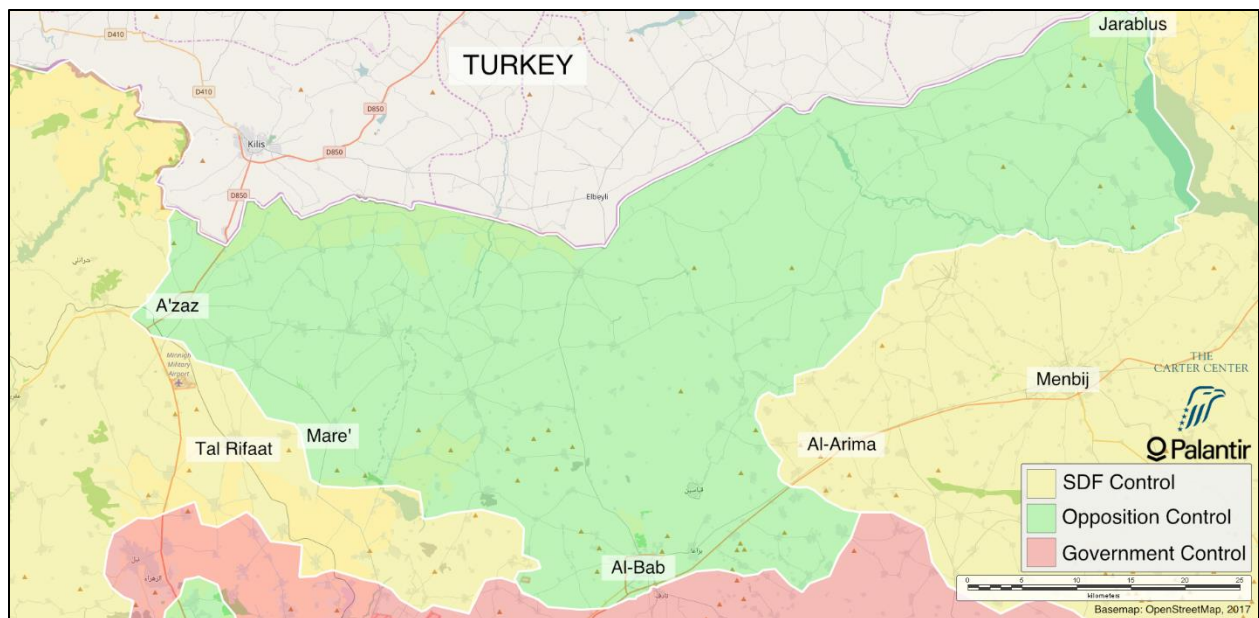


Figure 2 - Areas around the OES-held northern Aleppo pocket by June 14

SDF attempt to advance on Daret Azza area in western Aleppo

On June 12, the SDF in Afrin attempted to advance toward the opposition-held town of Daret Azza to the west of Aleppo. Ahrar al-Sham, HTS, and Faylak al-Sham defended against the attack. No advances were made but casualties among both sides were significant. At the same time as the attacks on Daret Azza, the SDF attempted to advance eastward from Afrin towards Mare’ and A’zaz.

Fight against ISIS

The SDF, with the support of the US and Arab allies, have begun a push into Raqqa city. As the offensive enters the city, the humanitarian situation in Raqqa has continued to rapidly deteriorate. Around 160,000 civilians have been displaced since the SDF-led “Euphrates Wrath” campaign began in May. Combat has shifted from the countryside of Raqqa to the streets of the city, where civilian deaths have begun to escalate. Among US strikes leading to casualties, the strike on June 13 killed several youth and elderly civilians, as the UN falls desperately short of projected need for humanitarian relief to Raqqa.

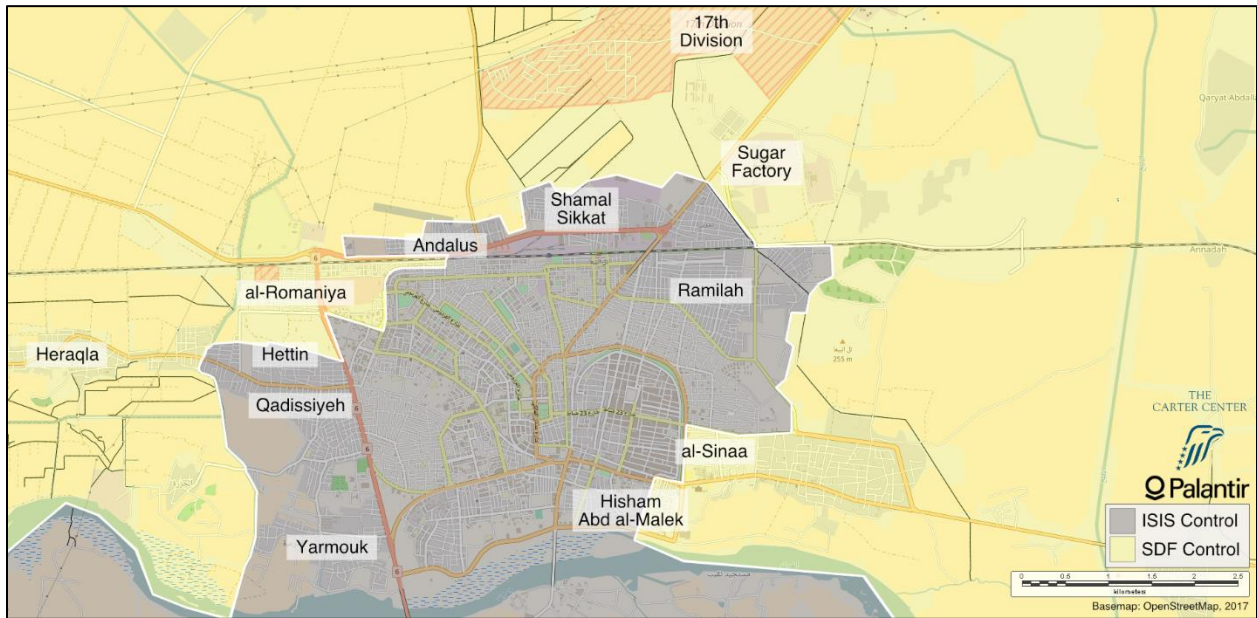


Figure 3 - Situation around Raqqa city by June 14

On June 11, SDF fighters seized the neighborhood of al-Romaniya, located on the western front of Raqqa and the first reported district captured since seizing control of the al-Meshleb district in the east on June 6. This advance was followed by an offensive on 17th Division Base and the adjoining sugar factory, which the SDF now controls. SDF and allies also advanced to partially control Yarmouk, Qadissiyeh, Hetta, Andalus, Shamal Sikkat, al-Sinaa, and Hisham Abd al-Malek neighborhoods. Gains on the outskirts of Raqqa have been significant, with the SDF now controlling all territory outside the city itself.

The pro-government, elite Tiger Forces have continued to press southeast into western Raqqa during the reporting week. By June 14, they succeeded in controlling a section of the road that stretches west-southwest out of Raqqa towards Salamiyeh and Homs. Pro-government forces are well-positioned to recapture the remaining pocket of ISIS territory east of the Khanaser-Ithriya road, south of Lake Jaboul. Controlling this territory would bring pro-government forces into contact with the SDF near Tabqa city.

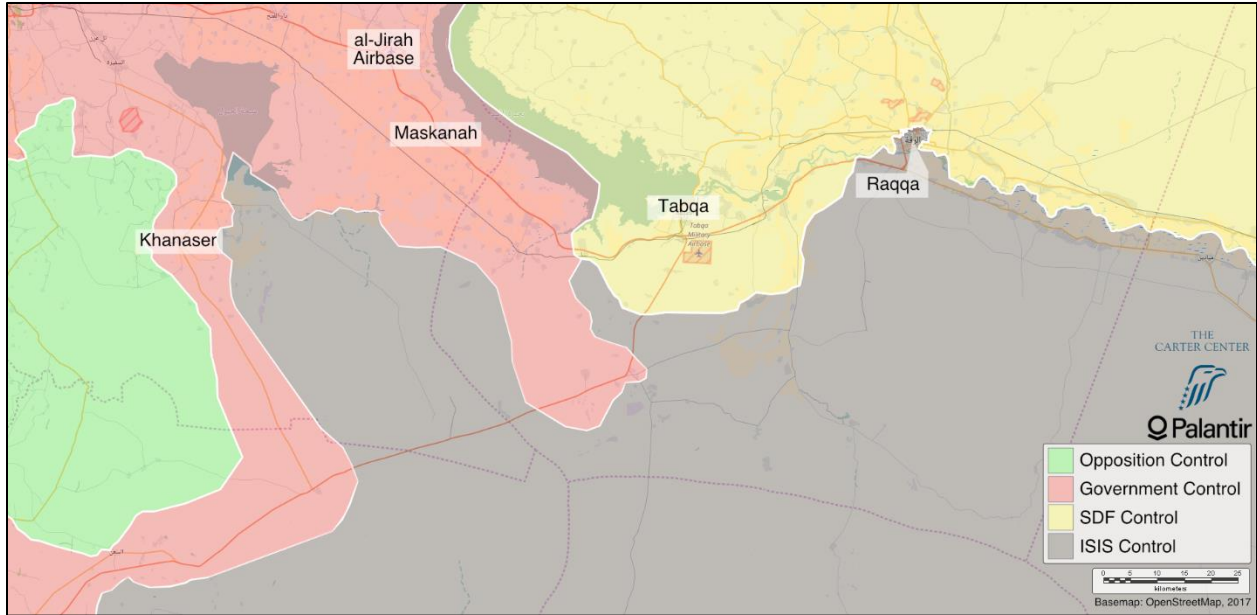


Figure 4 - Frontlines in the eastern Aleppo/western Raqqa countryside by June 14

Pro-government forces have also continued to make gains in the Tadmor countryside to the south. By June 13, pro-government forces captured Arak town and Arak gas field east of Tadmor. By June 14, pro-government forces fully captured the T-3 pumping station and surrounding area southeast of Tadmor.

Situation around al-Tanf

After more than a month of skirmishes and airstrikes along the Damascus-Baghdad highway near the al-Tanf border crossing, pro-government forces, composed primarily of Iranian-backed Shi'a militias, bypassed the US-led International Coalition's unilaterally designated "deconfliction zone," traversing more than 100km of open desert to reach the Syrian border with Iraq 60km northeast of al-Tanf. The pro-government forces skirted the edge of the "deconfliction zone," but are not believed to have entered it during their advance. At the border, the pro-government forces met with Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) arriving from the other side of the border, who have also pledged to open the border between the two countries.

US-backed opposition forces in al-Tanf and the Syrian desert, including the FSA Jaysh Usoud al-Sharqiya, are now surrounded by government-controlled territory. Thus, the opposition's advances against ISIS near Deir Ezzor now has an uncertain future.

Earlier in the week, FSA groups shelled pro-government militias at Zaza checkpoint along the Damascus-Baghdad highway. FSA groups also repelled pro-government attempts to advance and launched a successful offensive to capture a checkpoint on June 8. The same day, the US struck two vehicles approaching al-Tanf, and downed a weaponized drone.

Additional reinforcements from Iranian-backed Shi'a militias such as Liwa Imam al-Baqir are still arriving on the border. In addition to securing their positions against both ISIS and US-backed opposition groups, the stated objective of these forces is to progress up along the border towards the Euphrates River and the border city of Al-Bukamal, in parallel with their Iraqi PMU counterparts on the Iraqi side who will move along the border towards the Iraqi border town of al-Qa'im. On June 13, Russian forces, which have abstained from fighting in the area thus far, were also reported to be moving towards the border.

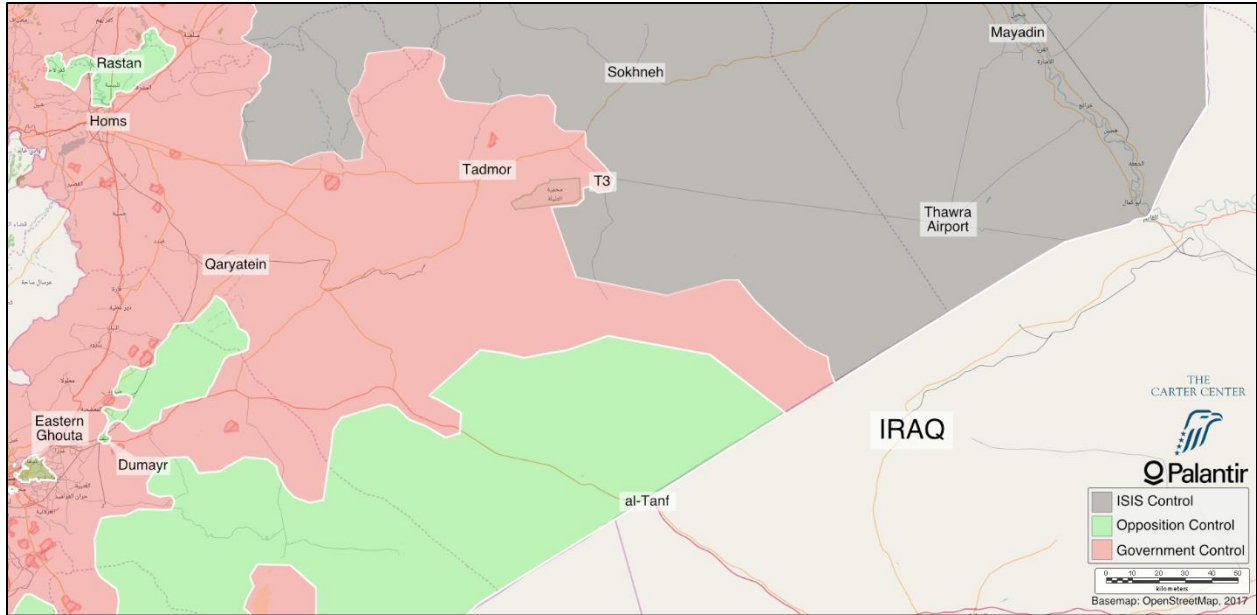


Figure 5 - Situation in southeastern Syria by June 14

On June 11, Jordanian border guards killed five people approaching its border near Tanf. The US also moved heavy mobile rocket artillery from Jordan to the area in Syria near Al-Tanf, for the first time.

Conflict in Southern Syria

The intense airstrikes on Daraa that began the previous week have continued during this reporting week, causing thousands of civilians to flee the city. Barrel bombs and incendiary munitions have both been used during the fourteen days of bombardment.

In addition to the airstrikes, pro-government forces launched an assault on areas around the Palestinian refugee camp and Tariq al-Saad neighborhoods of Daraa city on June 9. Government shelling and airstrikes against opposition-controlled areas of Daraa city continue unabated as opposition offensives inflict casualties among the government’s 4th Armored Division.

On June 12-13, civilians took to the streets in government-controlled Suweida city following the detention of a local human rights activist. Demonstrations in the city grew violent, and the entrance of the police headquarters in the city were set on fire. In the past months, the volume of kidnappings and detentions in the southern governorate has been high, with as many as 242 people from Suweida missing.

In the Eastern Ghouta region east of Damascus city, pro-government forces continued to advance on the opposition-held town of Hosh al-Dawahira with no success. Four female prisoners were released by the government on June 9 as part of a prisoner swap between Jaysh al-Islam and the government in eastern Damascus.

Conclusions:

Infighting continues to plague the opposition’s efforts to advance and hold territory, and the SDF’s new offensives on the frontlines around Mare’ further complicate this tension. De-escalation agreements nationwide appear to have collapsed completely as heavy bombardment of Daraa continued into this week. ISIS continues to collapse to SDF and pro-government forces who are advancing against the group on nearly all fronts. The situation around al-Tanf remains a point of major uncertainty in the conflict, especially as new foreign forces meet up with groups operating in Syria.