

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
February 16-22, 2017

The largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) saw another week of significant gains against ISIS around Ar-Raqqa (Figure 1). From the Muayzilah/Abu Wahl frontlines, SDF forces were able to push ISIS west back to the western bank of the Balikh River. SDF forces also took the Shanina bridge and pushed into the western bank of the river to cut another resupply route into the ISIS capital of Raqqa. From the same fronts but moving southeast, SDF forces made important gains, temporarily reaching the Euphrates river at Jadidi Khabouour before retreating to safer positions. However, SDF forces advancing from the eastern front from Makman and Mahbash took a large grouping of villages centered around Sabah al-Kheir village. This gave SDF fighters the chance to advance westwards, isolating a pocket of ISIS positions. On February 23, SDF forces cleared the remaining ISIS fighters from the pocket northwest of Sabah al-Kheir.

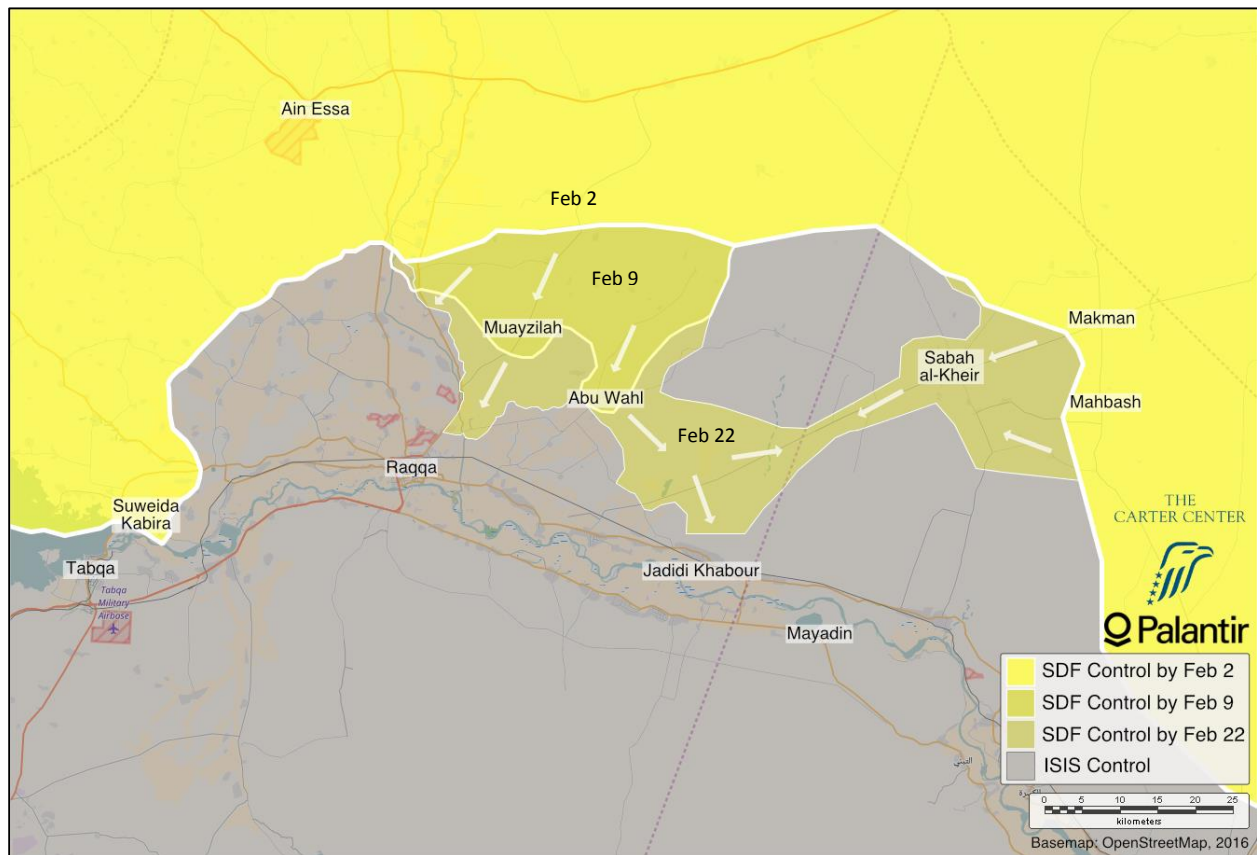


Figure 1 - SDF advance against ISIS around the ISIS capital of Raqqa by February 22, 2017

During the reporting week, the Turkey-backed Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) forces struggled for hard-earned gains in Al-Bab. In addition to holding a southern front to cut off any remaining resupply through the Al-Bab roundabout south of the city, by February 22, OES forces penetrated further into the western part of the city than ever before. OES fighters pushed to and occupied the Sport Center in al-Salam neighborhood and as far north as the Brandt Central Park, securing roundabouts along the way. However, this was no easy battle as OES forces spent the beginning of the week retreating even from within the Sheikh Aqil area of west Al-Bab. On February 23, after a hard-fought battle, OES forces were able to capture downtown Al-Bab, forcing an ISIS retreat. The city is now under OES control.

Pro-government forces continued their advance south of Al-Bab, taking significant territory as they advanced eastwards. After previous fighting around Ghoz, pro-government forces have re-focused their attention from villages held by Turkey-backed OES forces to instead advancing directly against ISIS-held towns as far east as Rasm al-Hermel.

Pro-government forces in Deir Ezzor were able to capture Tal Alloush and a good deal of territory in the Martyrs Cemetery area. Within the Workers' Districts along Rue Bor Sa'id, pro-government forces are still 1.5 km away from uniting West Deir Ezzor to East Deir Ezzor and weakening the ISIS siege of the Deir Ezzor Military Airport.

On the Tadmor front, pro-government forces were able to advance eastwards towards Tadmor. ISIS has still been able to shell the Taifour Military Airport, so the advance has come with some degree of hesitation.

Intra-opposition conflict within the Idlib pocket continued into this week, ending in events that will likely stymie conflict for at least the short term. Liwa al-Aqsa, the trouble-making Jund al-Aqsa splinter group, has left Morek and Khan Sheikhoun to migrate to ISIS-held east Hama after a prisoner exchange with the opposition. Liwa al-Aqsa is now undoubtedly an ISIS affiliate and is being treated as such by the opposition in Idlib. Before vacating their territory, Liwa al-Aqsa fighters meticulously destroyed all of their heavy equipment, making it unusable by other opposition fighters.

Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) fighters deployed a BGM-71 TOW against pro-government forces in the western countryside of Aleppo city this week. The weapons had previously been provided by the CIA to highly-vetted opposition groups, though the arms program ended months ago. There is speculation about where HTS acquired the anti-tank guided missile system, though it was likely from a captured weapons store or was a leftover from when Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki was on the US-vetted list.

The opposition offensive in Daraa, al-Bunyan al-Marsous, continued into the reporting week as violence remained high in the city, especially in Daraa al-Balad, Daraa al-Mahatta, and al-Menshiyyeh.

Buses in the northwestern Rural Damascus town of Sarghaya evacuated opposition fighters and their families to Idlib this week following a negotiated surrender. Pro-government attacks on opposition-held Eastern Ghouta also increased this week.

Conclusions:

Both OES and SDF forces scored major victories against ISIS this week. Pro-government offensives on the southern Al-Bab and Tadmor fronts also gained significant traction, and the Deir Ezzor operation to retake lost ground in the city made minor gains as well. Intra-opposition strife is now cooling off after weeks of major internal conflict.