

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

September 7-13, 2017

During this reporting period, pro-government forces and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led coalition backed by the US) have each advanced further against ISIS on their respective frontlines. Both forces have seen significant advances, but the fight against ISIS is not yet over and grows more complicated as SDF and pro-government forces near each other's fronts around Deir Ezzor city. Leaks of audio recordings from former members of Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) have led to significant public backlash against the group, and some internal arrests. Lastly, Ahrar al-Sham announced its participation in the sixth Astana peace process, which began this week.

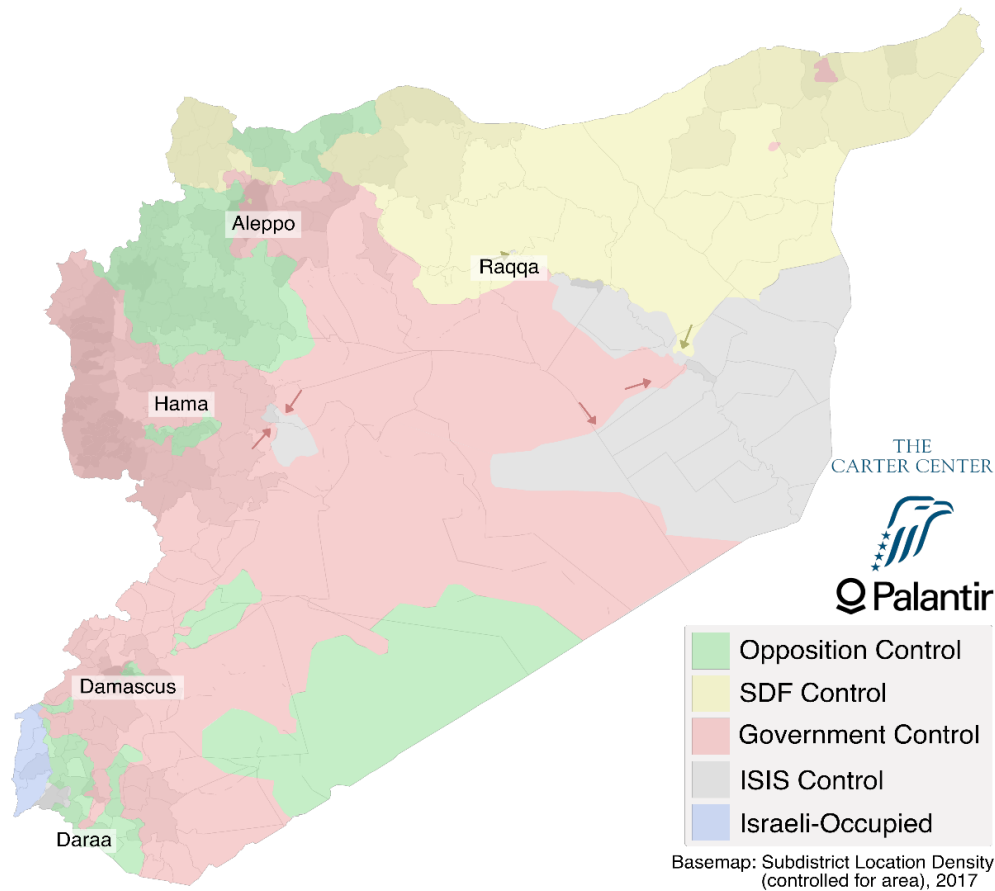


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by September 13, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period

Anti-ISIS battles

The SDF continued their advance against the remaining ISIS-held neighborhoods of Raqqa city. The SDF continued to clear ISIS fighters from positions in areas just southwest of the city center, making significant gains and capturing the city’s grand mosque in the process.

SDF fighters have also continued to advance towards Deir Ezzor city from the direction of Shaddadi. SDF units briefly advanced to the ridge on the north bank of Deir Ezzor before retreating to more entrenched positions. The SDF also announced the formation of the Deir Ezzor Civilian Council, a governing body similar to those established by the SDF in Menbij and Raqqa.

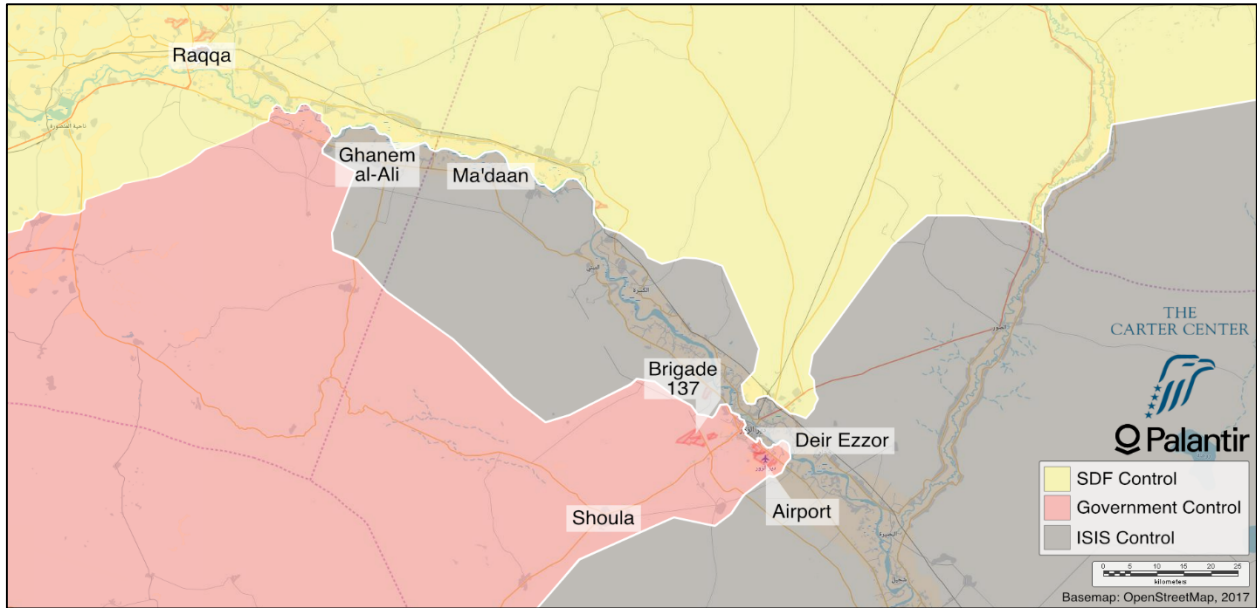


Figure 2 - Front lines in Syria's East by September 14

Following the lifting of the ISIS siege on government-controlled Brigade 137 and Deir Ezzor city on 5 September, pro-government forces spent this week fighting to secure the routes into the city and expand their control of the surrounding area. By September 10, pro-government forces had cleared the main highway into Deir Ezzor city and connected with the besieged eastern enclave of government forces near the military airbase.

With supply lines into the city secured, pro-government forces accompanied by Russian forces pushed north out of the Military Airbase and captured an ISIS held village south of Deir Ezzor city. Russian-made pontoon bridges have been deployed to the area to enable pro-government forces to attempt to cross the Euphrates River. With this advance, remaining ISIS forces in Deir Ezzor city are now besieged.

Throughout the reporting week, pro-government forces have made small but significant advances against the ISIS forces still present but encircled in the eastern Hama countryside and eastern Homs countryside. NDF units have been involved in the fight for the pocket, specifically in the southwestern corner. By September 10, the pumping station located between Qulayb al-Thawr and Salba was taken by pro-government forces. This pumping station is on an oil line that stretches 75km in an almost straight line to the southwest where it terminates at the Syrian government’s oil refinery on the western outskirts of Homs city. Oqeirbat has changed hands a few times during the

reporting week, though it seems pro-government forces now maintain at least a tenuous grasp over the city.

Developments in the South

There have been multiple conflicting reports regarding the current state of affairs in the southeastern “al-Tanf pocket” of opposition control, near the intersection of the Iraqi, Jordanian, and Syrian borders. Some reports have suggested that opposition groups in the area were in the process of withdrawing to the border crossing, but clashes and even airstrikes were reported on September 9 and 10. The two main opposition groups in the area, Jaysh Osoud al-Sharqiya and Quwat al-Shaheed Ahmad al-Abdo, facilitated the evacuation of nearly all residents of the Hadalat IDP camp, and resettled them in the Rukban camp (on the Jordanian border) as clashes were growing too close for the displaced to safely remain in the former camp.

On a related note, the Maghaweir al-Thawra forces that relocated from this southern pocket to SDF-held Shaddadi last month have refused to fight alongside the SDF, and therefore will not take part in the ongoing advance on Deir Ezzor.

In Daraa governorate, rumors about the potential reopening of the Naseeb border crossing led to a sit-in by protesters opposed to the move. On September 5, protesters blocked the Damascus-Daraa highway demanding the release of government-held prisoners should the crossing reopen.

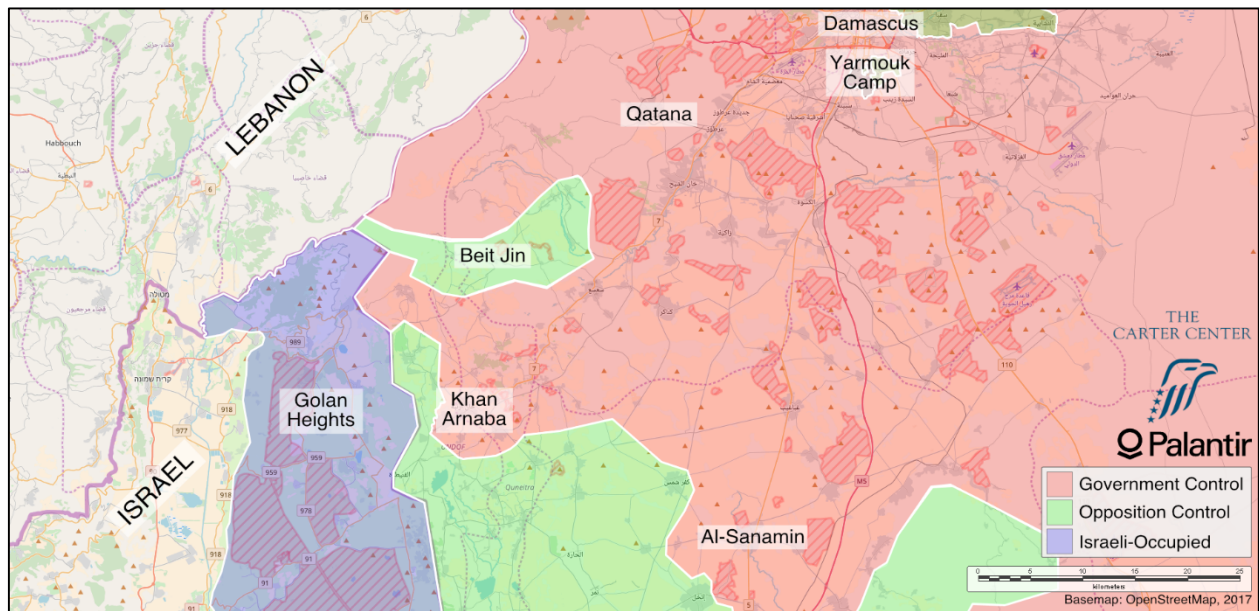


Figure 3 - Frontlines around Beit Jan in northern Quneitra by September 14

Clashes took place between pro-government and opposition forces in the town of Beit Jinn, along the border with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. This battlefield, which is near to Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, has seen significant previous participation by Hezbollah and Hezbollah-linked groups, and has remained a flashpoint in the otherwise calm southern region.

Pro-government forces in Damascus, particularly elements of the Fourth Armored Division, continued to shell areas in both Jobar and Ain Terma, immediately east of Damascus city. A

renewed pro-government offensive is expected as soon as a new wave of reinforcements arrive near Jobar this week. All attempts at de-escalation from previous weeks have gone unheeded by the conflict participants.

On September 7, Jaysh Khalid Ibn al-Waleed, the ISIS affiliate in southwest Syria, captured a town, marking its first advance in a long time.

Opposition developments

FSA groups make preparations to relocate within Northern Aleppo from populated areas to military barracks with the support and cooperation of the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC) and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). The demilitarization of al Bab, Jarablus, and other cities leaves the responsibility to maintain order to the “Free Syrian Police”, a force trained and equipped by Turkey. This redeployment furthers the SIG’s renewed call for opposition groups to form a national army. Armed groups that have announced redeployment plans include Ahrar al Sham, the Sultan Murad Division, The Sham Front, and the Mu’tasim Brigade.

Towns in southern Idleb continued to receive IDPs fleeing conflict in Hama. Both pro-government and ISIS forces have forces have targeted IDPs fleeing the conflict.

During the assessment period, audio recordings of incriminating communications between HTS leaders leaked. The recordings reveal that forces within HTS expressly loyal to Golani have little regard for other authority figures within the group, including the Sharia committee (formerly headed by Muhaysni, who resigned in the wake of the controversy) and Abu Jaber al Sheikh. HTS has confirmed the veracity of the leaks as they cause considerable fallout amongst the rank and file, leading to high level resignations and reports of groups renouncing membership. Based upon the content of the recordings, they likely cover conversations that occurred in the days surrounding the HTS-Ahrar al-Sham clashes in mid-July.

Following the leaked recordings, HTS’ Judicial Council sentenced Maghira, the commander of HTS’ Idleb forces, to one month in prison on charges of “insulting and ridiculing the HTS Sharia committee members and their work”. Abu Husayn al Urduni, commander of Jabhat al-Nusra forces within HTS, was only required to issue an apology despite suggesting assassinations of HTS Sharia committee members in the recordings.

On September 11, Abdullah al Muhaysni and Muslih Al Ulyani of the HTS Sharia Committee announced their resignations. They cited disappointment in HTS’ role in opposition disunity, the leadership’s disregard of the Sharia Committee’s directives in continuing its aggression against Ahrar al-Sham, and the inability of leadership to meet conditions they presented as necessary for them to remain.

Multiple battalions/brigades (including Fawj al Awwal, Al Ansar Battalion, Muhajireen Battalion, Martyrs Brigade of al Tawheed, Mohammad al Fateh Brigade, Jaysh Asood al Islam, Swords of Islam) split or defected from HTS during the assessment period following the leaked recordings and Muhaysni’s resignation. On September 14, Jaish al Ahrar, the second largest group within HTS and headed by Abu Saleh Tahhan (formerly Ahrar al-Sham), also left HTS.

Reconciliation Deals

The Russian Center for National Reconciliation at Hmeimem Military Airbase claimed it had reached an agreement with opposition groups in the Rastan pocket (north of Homs) to open the Hama-Rastan road. They claimed to deliver aid via the road, though the point of delivery appears to be near a pro-government checkpoint almost 10km north of the opposition-held pocket. Opposition sources in Rastan deny the opening of the road and have released contrary photographic evidence. A member of the opposition’s Negotiations Commission attributed the primary reason for failed negotiations to the government’s refusal to release prisoners from Homs, an ongoing point of contention in area negotiations.

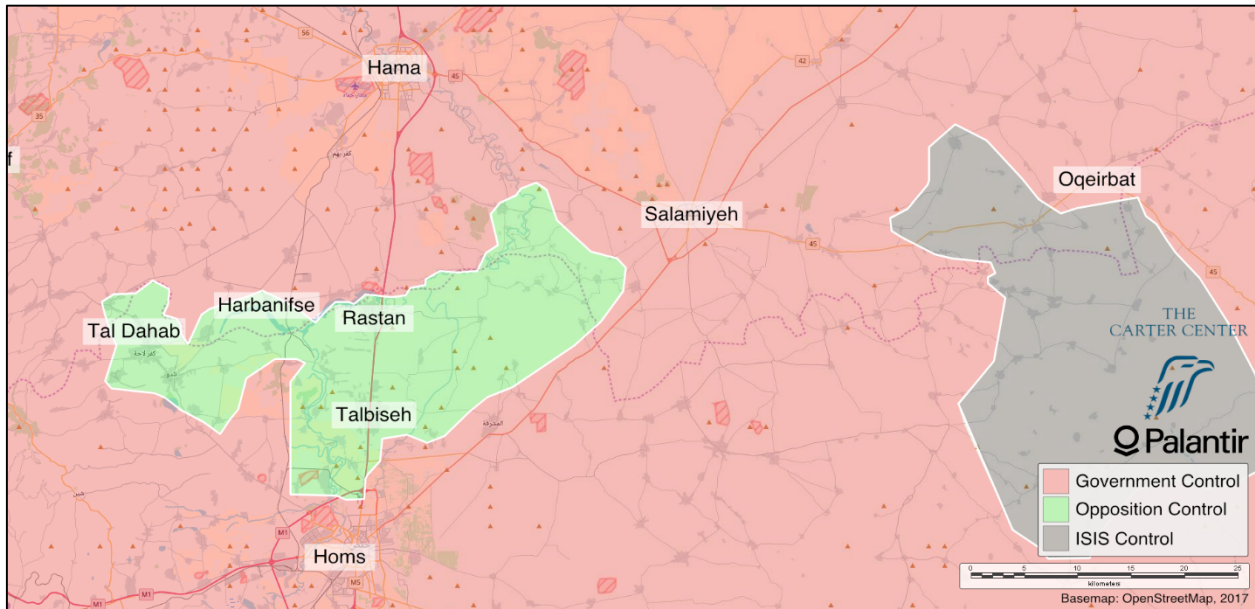


Figure 4 - Situation around Rastan and Oqeirbat by September 14

Pro-government negotiators have asked for three concessions in return for any prisoner release: 1) that fighters from Rastan enter “reconciliation” proceedings with the government; 2) that these fighters join ranks with the Syrian Arab Army to fight ISIS and Hai’yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra); and 3) that the groups completely withdraw from the vicinity of Homs city.

On September 12, Hassan Soufan announced that Ahrar al-Sham will participate in Astana talks alongside other opposition negotiators. This is the sixth round of Astana negotiations and the first time that the group has participated since January 2017 when they withdrew in protest.

The Syrian government awarded a large reconstruction contract worth 130 million Euros (~155 million USD) to Mabna, an Iranian company that specializes in electrical power plants and infrastructure. The company has promised to import 5 gas-fired power plants to the city of Aleppo, provide 540 megawatts of electricity to the coastal Latakia province, and build wind and solar plants throughout the country.