

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

February 8-14, 2018

During this reporting period, the Turkish-led Operation Olive Branch offensive continued its advance into Afrin, the northwestern canton controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a US-backed, Kurdish-led organization). Elsewhere, pro-government forces and opposition forces cleared a pocket of remaining ISIS fighters northwest of Hama after the group reappeared on opposition frontlines earlier in the week. Fighting between forces advancing from government held territory and the SDF in Syria's east resulted in retaliation from the US-led International Coalition, further escalating tensions between the forces on nearby fronts. Conflict on opposition-held Eastern Ghouta remains deadly, though a rare aid convoy was allowed to cross frontlines on February 14.

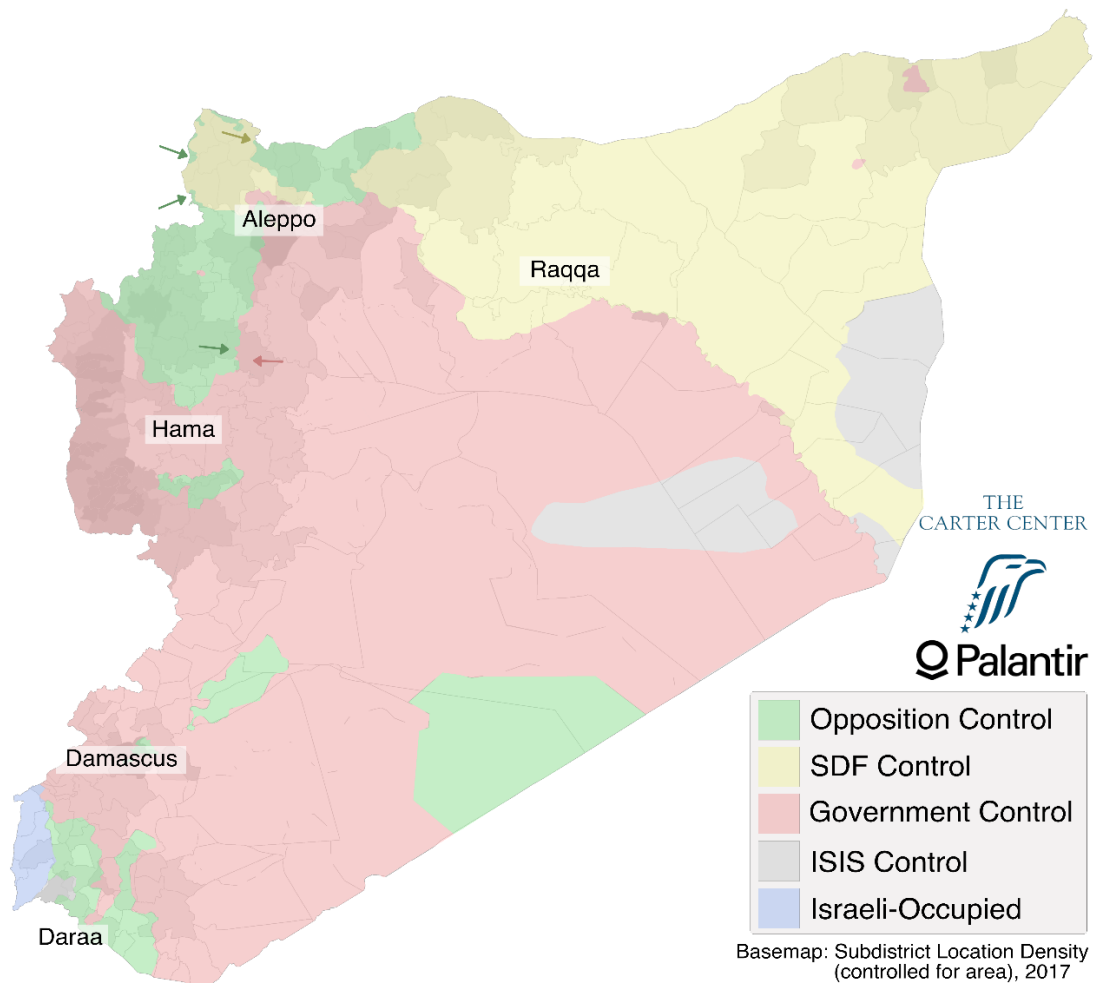


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by February 14, with arrows indicating fronts of advance during the reporting period

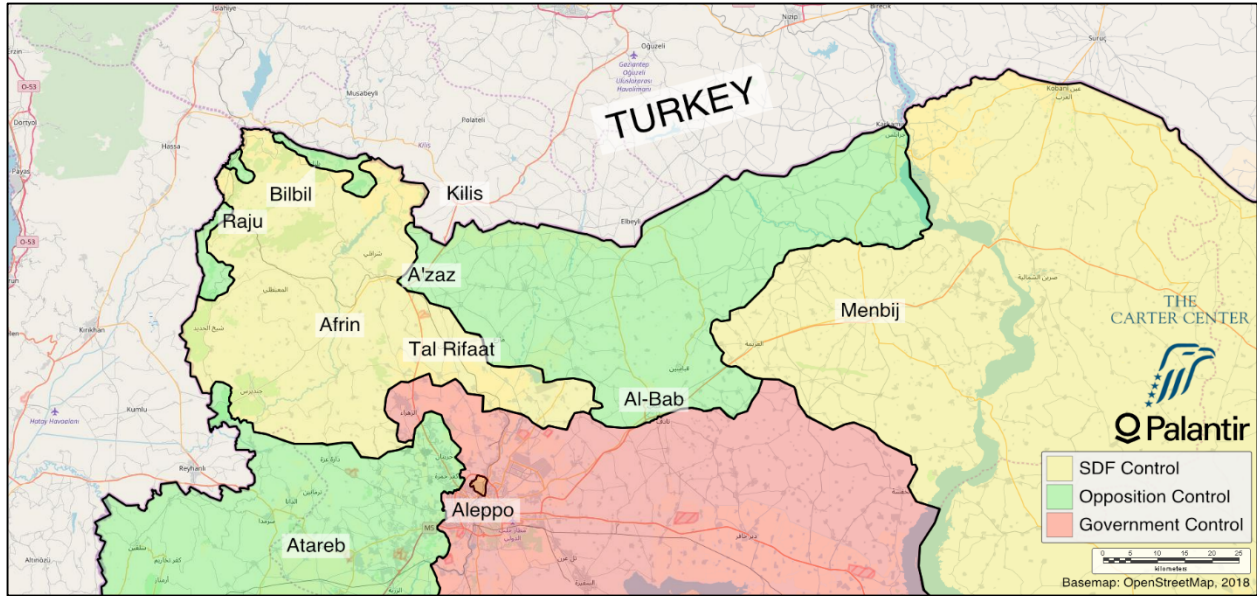


Figure 2 - Situation in Syria's northwest, by 14 February

After a short lull, Turkish airstrikes on Afrin resumed at the start of this reporting period. The renewal of strikes follows a phone conversation between Presidents Erdogan and Putin about strengthening military cooperation in Syria. The Turkish military claims to have destroyed or "neutralized" at least 34 fighters from the YPG and ISIS in the recent round of airstrikes, though ISIS has never had a presence in Afrin.

The death toll for Turkish forces in northeastern Syria has risen above thirty after a Turkish military helicopter was downed by the SDF militia on February 9, the deadliest day of the operation for Turkey so far. President Erdogan has said whoever downed the helicopter will pay a "high price" for the attack.

Over a dozen more people who have criticized the Turkish military's offensive in Syria have been arrested in Turkey, including the co-leader of the Pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The HDP is Turkey's second-largest opposition party. Since the launch of the campaign in Syria's Afrin region on January 19, Turkish authorities have detained around 600 individuals for protests or critical social media posts.

Jim Matthews, a British volunteer who joined the Kurdish YPG to fight ISIS, is now facing charges in the UK upon his return. He is charged under British anti-terror laws. The YPG is a member of the SDF coalition to fight Daesh alongside the UK, but the British government has warned volunteers that they could face legal consequences. This is believed to be the first case of its kind in the UK.

Two British ISIS fighters, Alexandra Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, were captured by the SDF during the reporting week. The two men were part of a group of four British fighters nicknamed 'the Beatles,' a group that came to notoriety in 2014 and thought to be responsible for murdering dozens of hostages. Among their alleged victims were US journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff.

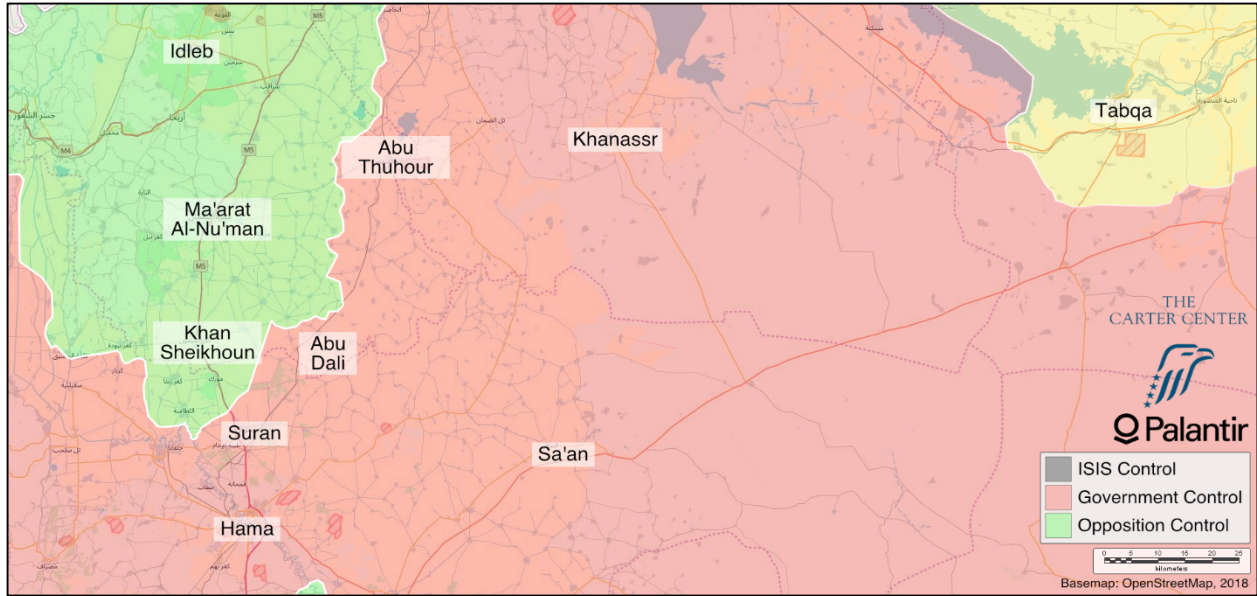


Figure 3 - Situation southeast of the opposition-held Idleb pocket by 14 February

On the southeastern corner of the opposition-held Idleb, ISIS units once again were cleared from a pocket and were able to move past government frontlines to take positions from opposition forces. The newly-created pocket of ISIS control has since been cleared by both pro-government and opposition forces, with the latter capturing truckloads of ISIS fighters in the process. Other than minor gains, this is the first time in months when opposition forces have gained a significant chunk of territory on this front.

On February 8, forces attacking from government held territory clashed with the US-backed SDF in Deir Ezzor governorate. Over 500 fighters – some sources claiming them to be government forces and other claiming they are tribal fighters from the area, supported by artillery and advancing with tanks, began to advance towards SDF-held oilfields in Khusham. SDF fighters, assisted by the International Coalition, routed the offensive, resulting in large number of deaths among the opposing force. As more information has emerged, it appears that Russian mercenaries were also killed in the counteroffensive. Both foreign mercenaries and local fighters have an interest in controlling the lucrative oil fields and facilities under SDF control, which might have motivated the attack. Russia claimed to have had no forces in the area.

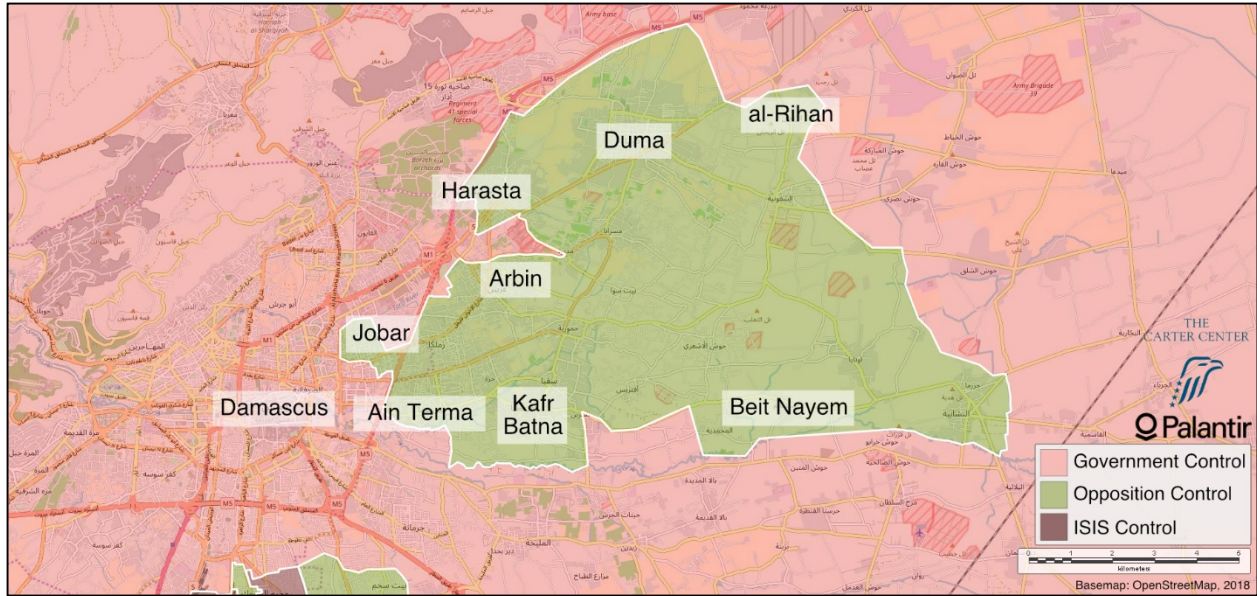


Figure 4 - Situation around Eastern Ghouta by 14 February

Damascus city and Eastern Ghouta, a territory controlled by the opposition north east of Damascus and under siege by the government for years, have come under heavy bombardment over the course of this week. Dozens of shells originating from Eastern Ghouta have landed in Damascus on a daily basis for over a week, and ongoing shelling and aerial bombardment of Eastern Ghouta by pro-government forces have resulted in the death of hundreds. The shelling of Damascus temporarily forcing a lock-down of UN staff in the city.

For the first time since November 2017, an aid convoy was allowed to enter Eastern Ghouta on February 14. The convoy of nine trucks contained food and medical aid sufficient for over 7,000 civilians, according to the World Food Program – East Ghouta is estimated to have a population of approximately 400,000 people.

Syrian anti-aircraft defense systems brought down an Israeli F-16 jet fighter on its way back from a raid on the T4 air base in central Syria. The two pilots ejected from their plane over Israeli controlled territory, and were both hospitalized in the aftermath. Israel stated that it conducted “large scale” hits that targeted “Iranian” positions deep in Syrian territories after the downing of the F-16. This downing was the first incident of its kind in thirty years and prompted the Israeli military, for the first time, to explicitly state that it struck Iranian targets in Syria. Prime Minister Netanyahu vowed to continue Israeli strikes in Syria.

Syrian Assistant Foreign Minister Ayman Sussan told reporters Israel would meet further retribution should it continue to strike targets in Syrian territory. Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman responded that Israel will react to any provocation as Israel deems appropriate.

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