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CARTER CENTER



**Syria: Aleppo and Beyond**

30 November 2016

Summary

The Syrian government's attempt to take East Aleppo continues, with areas of control changing by the hour. This brief tries to review the longer-term trends beyond the battle for Aleppo. Beginning with a brief examination of major trends and the state of the conflict on major fronts, this paper concludes with an analysis of the most likely trajectory of the Syrian conflict and an assessment of the opportunities and threats to achieving a political settlement to the conflict in the near-to-medium term future.

Battle for Aleppo

The current siege of East Aleppo has continued unbroken for three months. Despite successive opposition offensives aimed at breaking the siege, pro-government forces have managed to tighten their grip on the eastern half of the city, closing in from central and northern Aleppo. Opposition counter-offensives have been plagued by infighting, further weakening their efforts to break the siege.

The siege, combined with a prolonged joint Russian-Syrian air campaign, has made life in East Aleppo nearly unlivable. When the siege appeared imminent, humanitarian aid agencies warned that existing supplies could only sustain the population for a month's time. Human casualties aside, UN Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura has warned that, should the intensity of aerial bombardment continue at its current level, East Aleppo will be little more than rubble before the end of the year.

The strategy employed in East Aleppo is the same that pro-government forces used in the first major battle of the conflict in the Baba Amro district of Homs in February 2012 and most recently in the western Damascus suburbs of Darayya and Moadamiyat ash-Sham in August 2016, as well as at least a dozen other places in between. Though some besieged communities have withstood for a very long time, the intensity of the battle for Aleppo, the number of people trapped under siege, and the repeated failed attempts at breaking the siege make it unlikely East Aleppo will endure much longer.

Aleppo has been central to the conflict since fighting first erupted there in July 2012. Since then, nearly 30% of all reported conflict events have taken place in Aleppo governorate, with the city itself seeing over three times as much violence as any other city in Syria. Should pro-government forces succeed in re-taking Aleppo, where then will they turn their attention next?

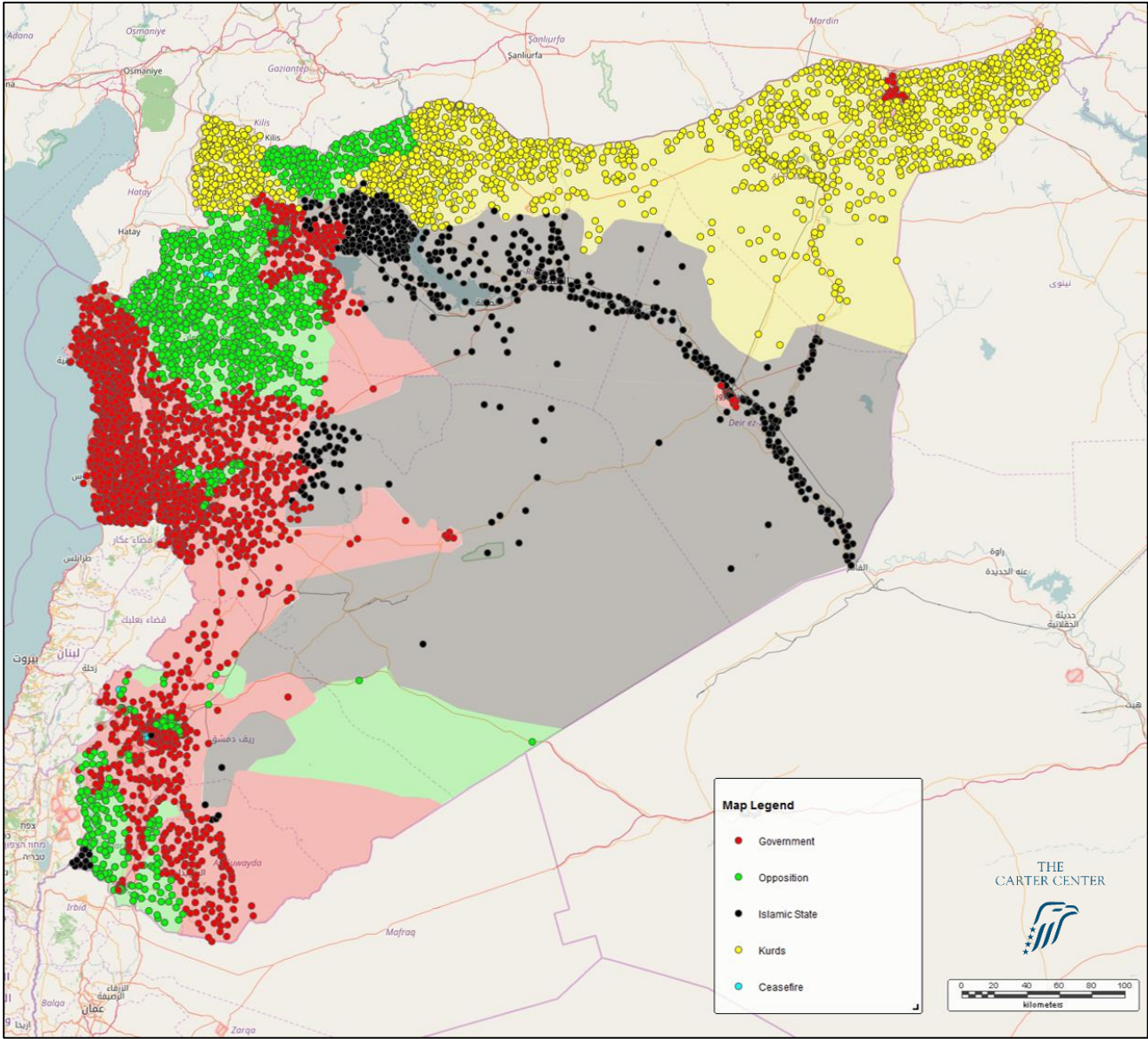


Figure 1: Areas of control throughout Syria as of November 22, 2016. Each point on the map represents a city, town, or district of major population centers. Map made using Palantir Technologies.

Summary of Major Conflict Trends

As Figure 2 (below) shows, the territorial control throughout Syria has changed significantly over the course of the past three years. The most dramatic changes in control have occurred as a result of foreign intervention, namely, the introduction of the US-led Anti-ISIS Coalition (A), the Russian Federation’s intervention on behalf of the Syrian government (B), and more recently, the intervention of Turkish forces in northern Syria on behalf of opposition forces (C).

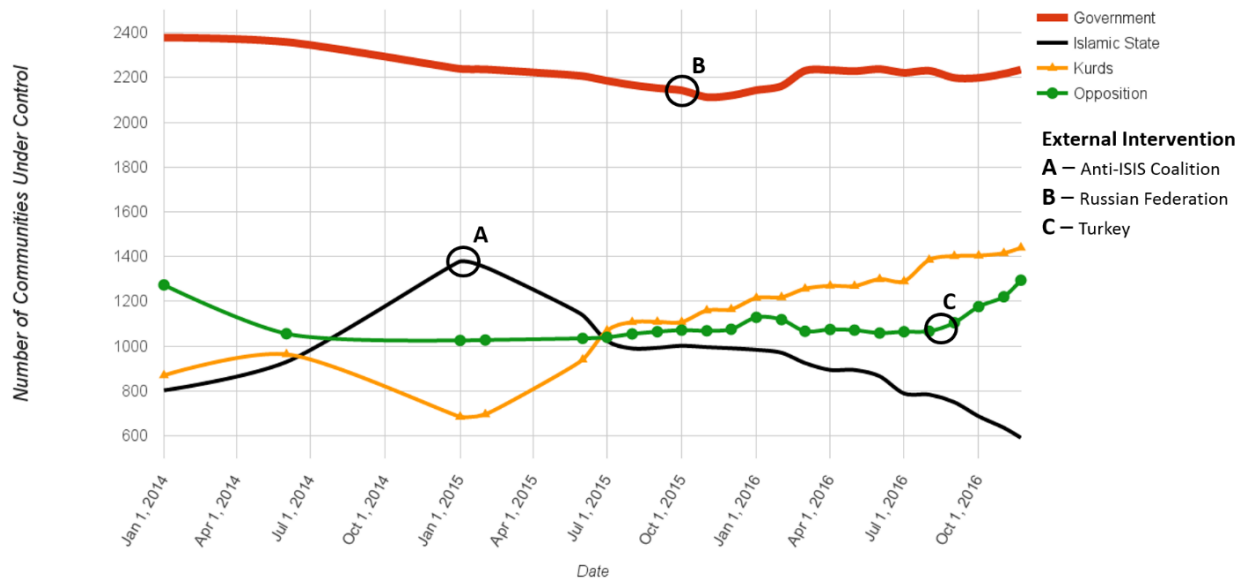


Figure 2: Number of communities under control by each major faction over time.

Perhaps the most significant and noticeable change has been the rapid advance of Kurdish (and allied) forces against ISIS beginning in January 2015. Nearly every community lost by ISIS has been taken by Kurdish forces. The dramatic change in Kurdish fortunes has strengthened the Kurdish-dominated Democratic Union Party (PYD), changing the map politically as much as physically. The growth of Kurdish territory has both worried Turkey and raised fears of subjugation among minorities as Kurdish forces consolidate control. Despite the large scale of this intervention, however, frontlines between government and opposition forces remain largely unchanged.

Russia’s intervention was equally as impactful, though resulting in less dramatic changes on the frontlines. Intervening at a time when the Syrian government had consistently lost territory for more than a year and a half, Russia’s air campaign against opposition forces and (to a lesser extent) ISIS, strengthened the Syrian government’s position and is largely responsible for the advances made in and around Aleppo city.

The most recent direct international intervention in Syria, Turkey’s intervention, has begun to change the map yet again. The pace of the change brought by the offensive aimed at countering both ISIS and Kurdish expansion has been dramatic and remains a major source of uncertainty regarding the likely trajectory of the conflict in the weeks and months to come.

Northern Syria (Figure 3)

The battle in northern Syria has been dominated by two ongoing efforts – the government’s attempts to re-take East Aleppo and Turkey’s recent direct intervention. Turkey’s intervention came just as Kurdish forces, advancing from both east and west, had narrowed the gap between their two cantons to under 50km. Unsurprisingly, Turkey and allied opposition forces in the area (collectively known as Operation Euphrates Shield or OES) have clashed with both Kurdish and ISIS forces, winning territorial gains at an unprecedented rate.

The OES advance has slowed, but not completely stopped Kurdish expansion, and has pressed as far south as al-Bab – ISIS’ last stronghold in Aleppo governorate. The Syrian and Russian air forces have both abstained from targeting OES forces throughout its recent gains, but should OES forces succeed in taking the city of al-Bab, they likely will collide with government frontlines surrounding Aleppo city. Increasing this risk is the fact that the Syrian government has indicated its intention to take al-Bab itself and even pushed its frontlines toward that goal. Although the number of Turkish forces on the ground in Syria appears to be small, any direct confrontation between Turkish and Syrian troops potentially could lead to a massive escalation of the conflict. Up to this point, both the OES and pro-government forces appear to have restrained themselves, but given the lack of centralized control over OES forces, the risk of a direct confrontation remains dangerously high.

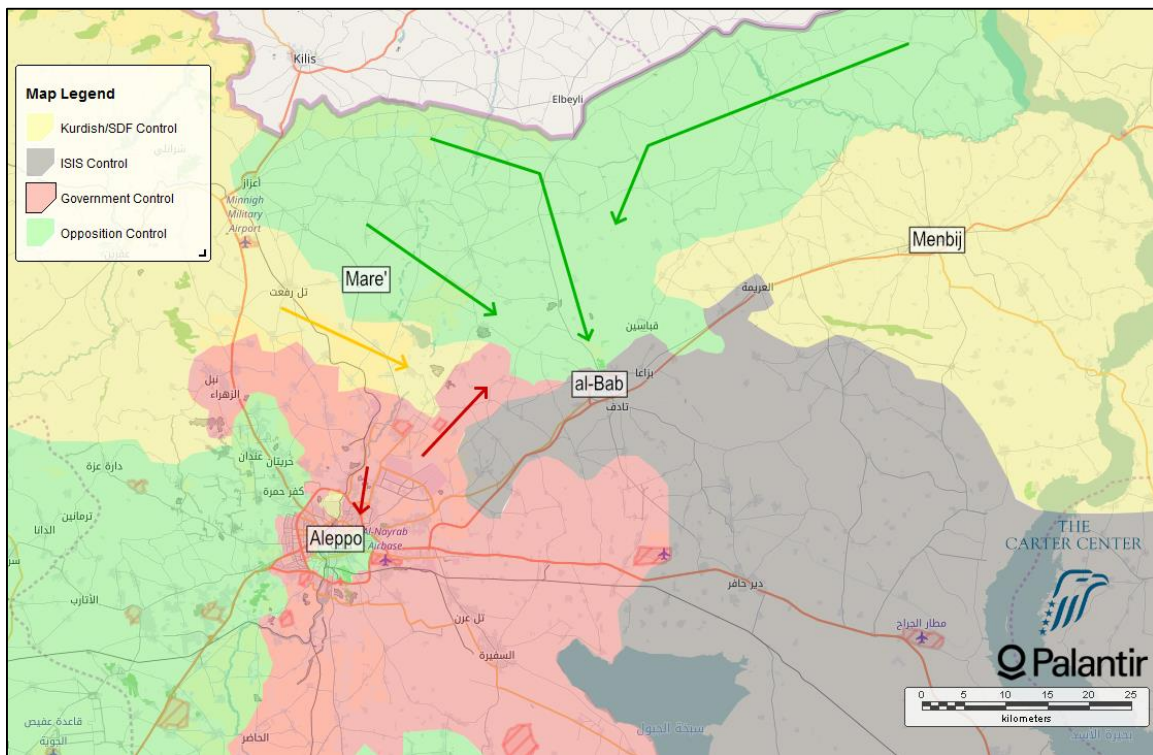


Figure 3: Areas of control in northern Aleppo governorate showing directions of advance as of November 30, 2016. Map made using Palantir Technologies. Note, since the creation of this map, Kurdish forces in Menbij have advanced further west towards al-Bab.

Western Syria (Figure 4)

President Assad has repeatedly stated that his forces will re-take the entirety of Syria. However, pro-government forces have not conducted any major campaigns to move ground troops into the largest pocket of opposition-controlled territory, Idlib governorate, which is now home to an estimated 1.5 – 2 million Syrians. Some back-and-forth territorial changes have taken place in northern Hama (Figure 4). Most recently, pro-government forces were able to take advantage of opposition infighting in the area, although the territory taken has been relatively minimal.

A large-scale campaign to take back the entirety of opposition territory in Idlib governorate is not within the current capabilities of the Syrian government and its allies, at least not without massive civilian casualties and redeployment of huge numbers of forces that are currently maintaining control of other key regions. Territorial advances made in Aleppo and elsewhere have been made by deploying large numbers of allied paramilitary forces from throughout the region, as well as substantial support from Hezbollah and Iranian forces. The divisions of the Syrian military that have shown themselves to be capable of making territorial advances (the Tiger Forces, Desert Hawks, and the Republican Guard) are otherwise engaged throughout Syria or are too few in number to conduct such a prolonged, major offensive.

The government’s military limitations aside, opposition forces are similarly strained. Forces in northern Hama conducted an offensive in August in an attempt to distract government forces from frontlines in Aleppo, but achieved little before infighting and pressure from Aleppo pulled forces away from frontlines in Hama.

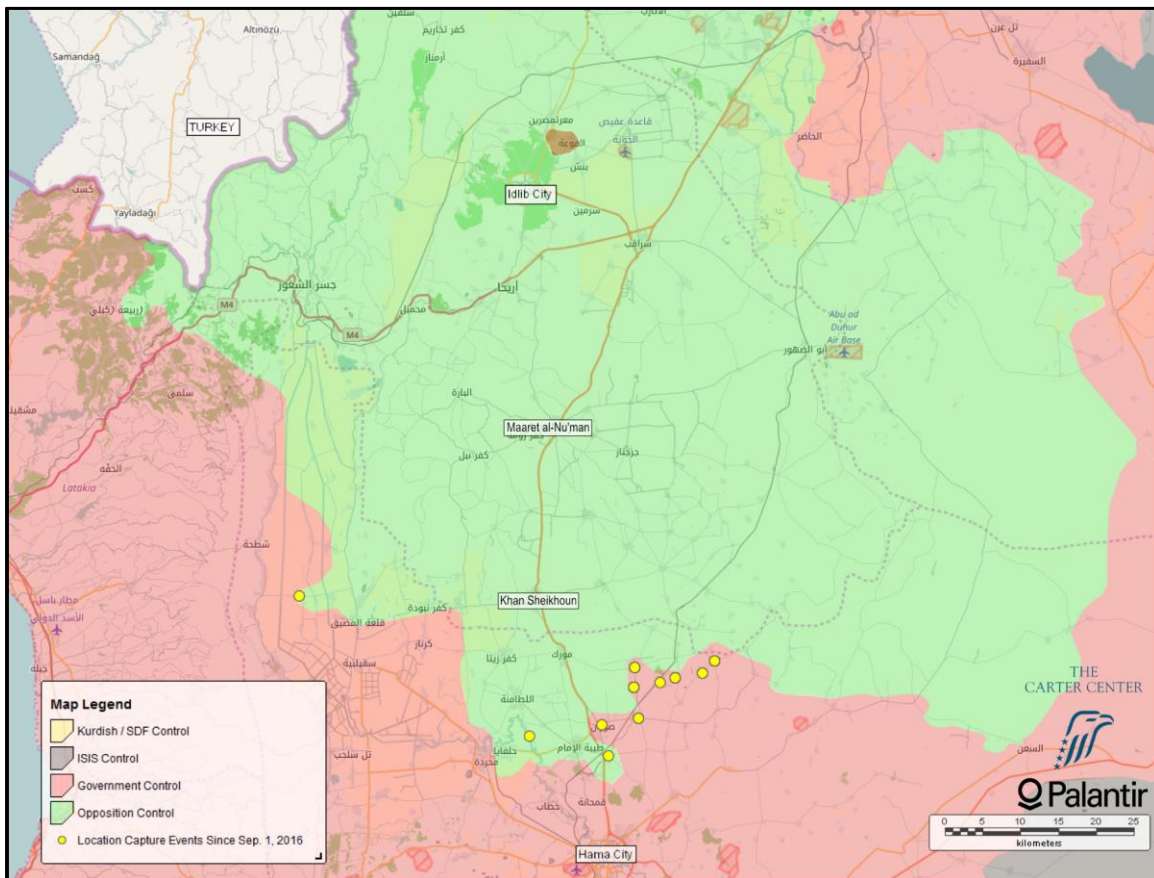


Figure 4: Areas of control in Idlib, Latakia, and Northern Hama as of November 22, 2016. Map made using Palantir Technologies.

Southern Syria (Figure 5)

Southern Syria, encompassing the Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates as well as Quneitra, Duma, and Suweida, has seen substantial activity in recent months. While Daraa, Quneitra, and Suweida remain relatively quiet when compared to other regions of Syria, pro-government forces have made substantial progress in Rural Damascus in the Eastern and Western Ghouta regions surrounding the capital.

In late August of this year, one of the longest sieges of the war came to a close with the conditional surrender of the western Damascus suburb of Darayya. Shortly after, fighters in nearby Moadamiyat ash-Sham reached a similar agreement whereby they were transferred to opposition-held territory in Idlib after handing over full control of the city to government forces. The successful capture of these western territories has enabled pro-government forces to advance further in Eastern Ghouta, shrinking areas of opposition control by almost half over the course of the year.

As is the case in almost every other region of Syria, infighting has consistently plagued opposition forces in Damascus and its surroundings, contributing to the further loss of territorial control. As external support of the opposition’s Southern Front coalition has lessened in recent months, it is possible that infighting in Daraa governorate could disrupt the relative calm that has prevailed over southern Syria.

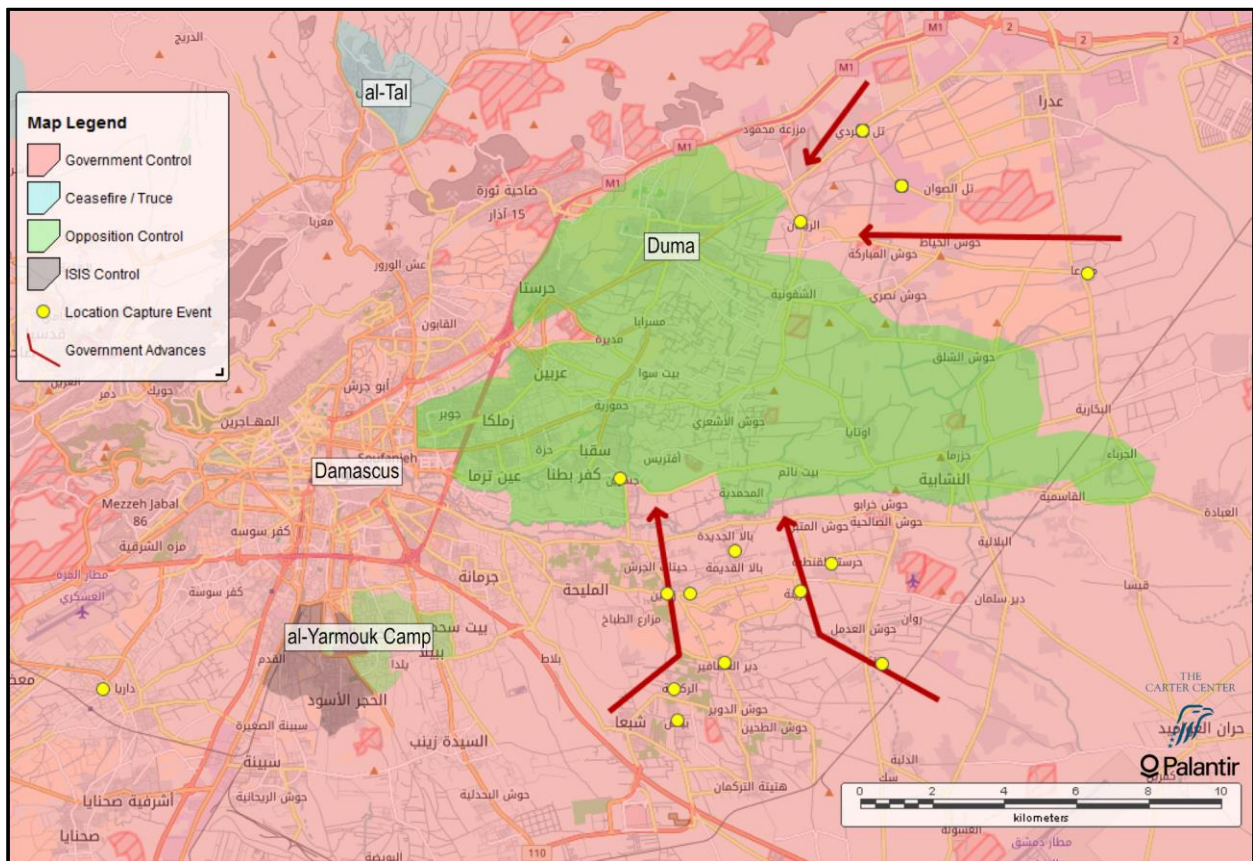


Figure 5: Areas of control in Damascus and its suburbs, and location capture events. Map made using Palantir Technologies.

Eastern Syria (Figure 6)

Territorial control over Eastern Syria has remained relatively stagnant for the past several months. The Kurdish-led advance against ISIS forces slowed before nearing major ISIS strongholds along the Euphrates river, and instead moved to the west of the Euphrates further into the Aleppo governorate. Kurdish forces have instead consolidated control over much of their territory, establishing local governance systems, and periodically clashing with remaining enclaves of government control in both Hasakah and Qamishli.

Recently, the offensive to take Raqqa city was announced, though it quickly faced hurdles as important Arab elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced that they would not participate in the fight to take Raqqa.

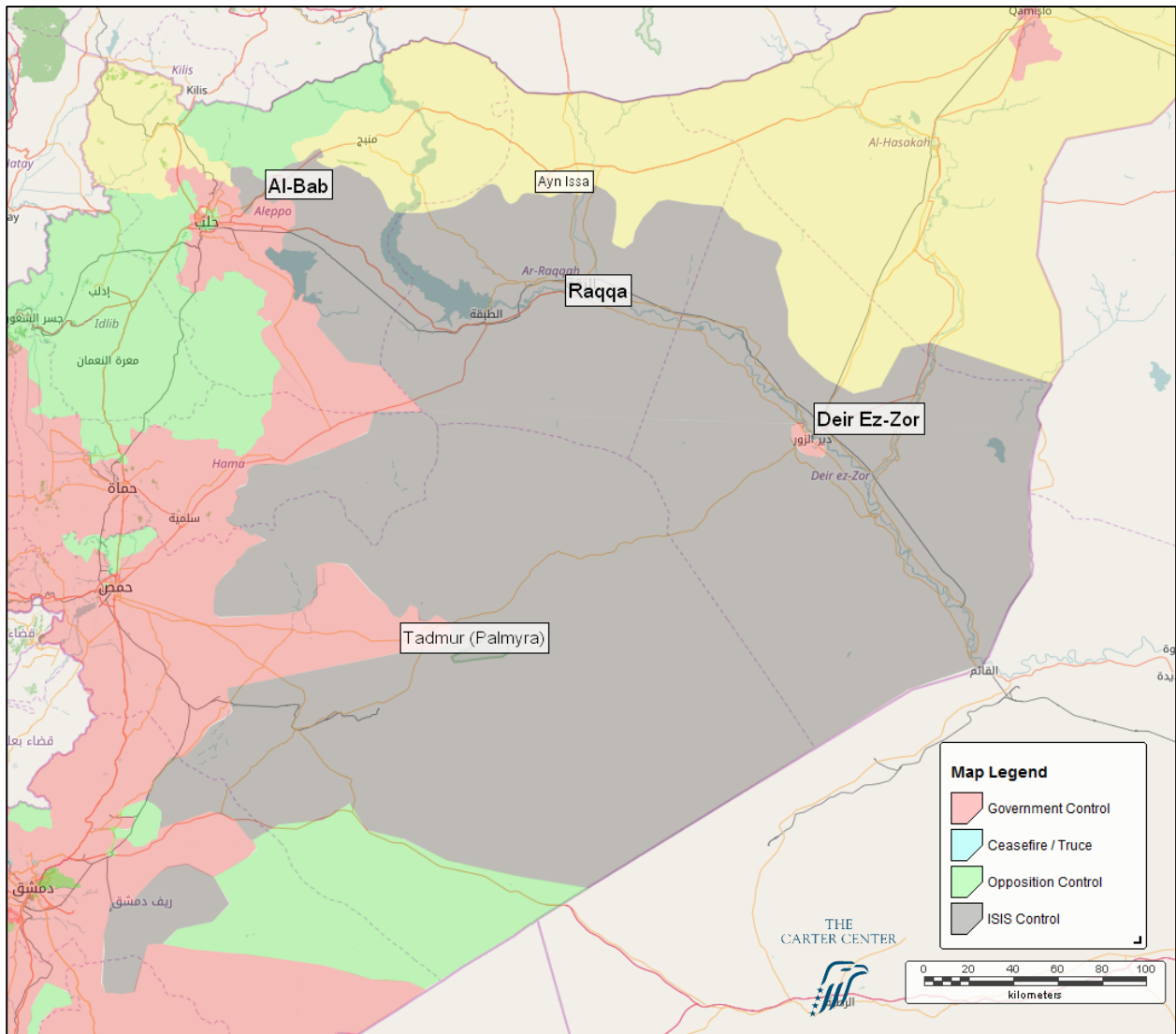


Figure 6: Areas of control in in Eastern Syria as of November 22, 2016. Map made using software from Palantir Technologies.

### What's Next for the Conflict?

As ISIS is expelled from remaining territory in Iraq, it will likely re-deploy retreating forces to eastern Syria. The obvious target for such a deployment would be Deir Ez-Zor, though it is also possible that ISIS may instead choose to bolster frontlines in al-Bab as OES forces attempt to take the city. Alternatively, they may decide to strengthen fortifications around Raqqa in advance of the much-anticipated assault on the organization's de facto capital. As opposition forces in southern Syria grow increasingly frustrated with the lack of support flowing across the Jordanian border and successive government advances in the suburbs of Damascus, ISIS may find a sympathetic-enough population in southern Syria to enable a southern expansion.

Although the fight against ISIS will undoubtedly grow more difficult following a re-deployment of ISIS forces, the rapid advance of Turkish-backed opposition forces against ISIS positions in northern Syria is likely to spark a broader race to gain control over eastern Syria, particularly if the OES manages to push past al-Bab without being blocked by either Syrian government or Kurdish forces.

This competition for eastern Syria has the potential to drastically alter the dynamics of the Syrian conflict. The territory is resource-rich, would provide a connection to Iraqi territory, and contains major population centers. For the opposition, gaining this territory would help maintain relevance if they do indeed lose control over the city of Aleppo. For the Syrian government, control of eastern Syria would provide access to much-needed revenue streams and would prevent Turkey-backed opposition forces or potentially secessionist Kurds from expanding their areas of control.

To be sure, the most economically and politically valuable territory in Syria lies to the west of the Damascus-Aleppo axis, a fact that would encourage the Syrian government to focus its attention to the west. Attempts at a total military victory in western Syria, however, would very likely only hurt the government in the long run. No matter how much the government may try, Syria cannot be governed without significant support from the Sunni majority. The government may be able to force the surrender of small, scattered opposition enclaves, bussing the surrendered fighters to Idlib, but any attempt to take the majority-Sunni, pro-opposition strongholds of Idlib and Daraa would be folly and a distraction from the more pressing race to take back eastern Syria from a weakened ISIS.

Attempts to take the "low hanging fruit" of small opposition enclaves dispersed throughout Syria would likewise be counterproductive to the government's overall goals. There are a few common themes that are shared by most opposition groups in small enclaves throughout rural Damascus, Southern Syria, and Homs: they are generally localized, with strong connections to local power structures; they are relatively weak, having few to no sources of revenue or reliable supply lines into their territories; and they are predominantly moderate, both politically and socially/religiously. Moderates are also present throughout Idlib and Aleppo, but the mix of groups operating in these larger areas consistently contains a higher percentage of extremist ideologues and opportunistic extortionists.

The Syrian government is currently only capable of carrying out small-scale offensives or slow-but-effective long-term sieges. This means that they are really only capable of going after softer opposition targets - the very people that will be necessary in building a unified future Syria.

Historically, moderate opposition groups had been favored targets of the government and its allies, as they were perceived to be a viable alternative to the government and were able to attract more widespread international support. Furthermore, the more extreme the opposition became, the more support the government gained (both domestically and internationally) in its fight against the opposition. While the viability of the moderate opposition may now be broken, its support base from Syrian citizens will not necessarily disappear with the loss of territory. To win over the opposition's support base, the government



must now offer serious concessions to them – total cessation of aerial bombardment, free access for humanitarian aid, release of detainees, and viable reforms.

The capacity of the Syrian central government to assert control over outlying regions has been severely diminished. Just like localized power structures that have emerged in opposition-controlled areas, so too have local authorities emerged in government-controlled areas with security heads competing with local opportunists as virtual “warlords”. Governance structures and rule of law will have to be rebuilt from the ground up throughout the country before the fundamental pillars of Syrian civil society are further eroded. In this process, civil society must assume a significant role and the government must take the opportunity afforded by its strengthened position to negotiate a settlement with the opposition.

The battle for Aleppo easily has been responsible for more death and misery than any other single battle over the course of the Syrian conflict. Abuses have been rampant on all sides and have disproportionately affected civilians. The takeover of Aleppo will not stop the Syrian war, but may create the momentum to allow belligerents to shift their focus from seeking outright military victory toward making the necessary political compromises to stop the destruction of Syria.