



Weekly Conflict Summary August 25-31, 2016

This week in Syria, a large new opposition offensive began in northern rural Hama, showing large initial territorial gains. In the north of Syria, the Euphrates Shield offensive saw new gains, and the opposition offensive in the south of Aleppo city saw no new gains amid deadly clashes and minor losses.

The Turkish-backed opposition offensive for Jarablus, Operation Euphrates Shield, captured a significant amount of territory once again this week. Jarablus, their target for phase one of the operation, was captured on August 25. The opposition offensive in the west of north Aleppo pushed further east this week as well, adding a buffer of a few kilometers beyond the hard-won ar-Rai'i. Euphrates Shield forces are now within 30km of al-Bab from two fronts.

Tensions between opposition forces and Kurdish forces in northern Syria have remained very tense as sporadic clashes between the groups continued and intensified into this week. Several images of captured hostages from opposing sides appeared on social networks of feuding groups. Tensions have been further inflamed due to Turkey's continuous shelling and aerial bombardment on nearby Kurdish areas of control.

Despite calls from Euphrates Shield groups, the US, and Turkey, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters have continued offensives against ISIS to the south of their held territory, capturing more villages between Rojava and Raqqa, the capital of the self-declared ISIS caliphate.

To the west, opposition forces in the south and southwestern neighborhoods of Aleppo attempted to hold territory they have gained over the past few weeks. Areas as far south of the city as Qarrasi were exposed to heavy fighting. Um al-Qara' hill was recaptured by pro-government forces and a number of pro-government sources celebrated the recapture of the Air Force Technical College, a development that makes opposition attempts to resupply east Aleppo even more difficult. Conflict along the frontlines in southern Aleppo city remains intense, but opposition forces have been able to maintain the connection between the southern countryside and east Aleppo city. Both sides still operate in a state of semi-siege.

A new opposition offensive in the countryside north of Hama city this week saw substantial gains against pro-government forces. The new offensive, the Marwan Hadid offensive took several smaller villages, the larger town of Helfaya that borders Muhradah, and Souran at the far east of the offensive's area of operations. The villages appear to have been easily won against pro-government forces that fled early in clashes. The area has a significant Christian population and many of the villages or towns are majority Christian. The new offensive involved fighters from Jund al-Aqsa, Jaysh al-Izza, Ajnad al-Sham, Failq al-Sham, and Jaysh al-Nasr.

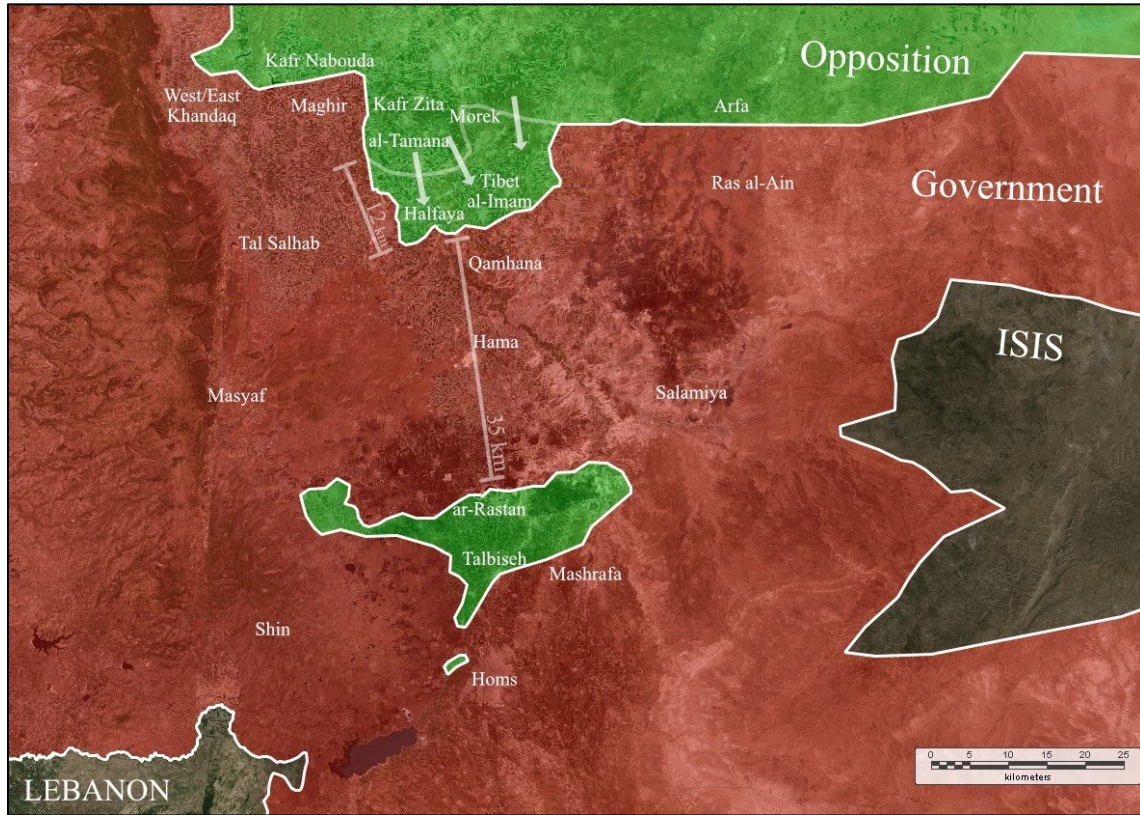


Figure 1 - Opposition offensive in northern Hama by August 31

The siege of opposition-controlled Darayya city on the western outskirts of Damascus led to a conditional surrender of the remaining opposition forces inside. On August 23, Shuhada al-Islam, the opposition force in Darayya, agreed to evacuate their remaining 700 soldiers and any civilians who wished to leave. Opposition fighters and their families were to be evacuated to northern Idleb, while other civilians were to arrive in Harjalah in the Kisweh sub-district in Western Ghouta. Some Shuhada al-Islam fighters have since joined Jaysh al-Islam. Around 2,000 people were evacuated. This surrender ended a four-year siege of the city.

Fighters in Ma'damiyeh, which borders Darayya in Rural Damascus, entered similar talks with pro-government forces for their subsequent surrender. Opposition forces in al-Wa'er, Homs, also pursued similar negotiations, though the terms of their surrender have not yet been set. Another 48-hour ceasefire is in effect as the leadership of both sides discusses the terms of their surrender in al-Wa'er. The remaining forces at Ma'damiyeh will be evacuated after any remaining fighters of Shuhada al-Islam leave Ma'damiyeh.

Protests broke out condemning the Southern Front for their failure to aid Shuhada al-Islam at Darayya. Demonstrations centered on cities in Daraa governorate with open calls for the leadership of Southern Front to be replaced.

On August 25, more incendiary attacks were reported on a hospital in Maarat al-Numan in Idleb. On August 30, Saraqab's remaining water pumping station was completely destroyed in another airstrike.

Civilian kidnappings in Daraa and As-Suweida by pro-government affiliates has led to renewed tension between the Druze community in Tha'leh and Sunni communities in Daraa governorate. The pro-government Baath Brigades abducted 9 civilians in Daraa earlier this month, and additional kidnappings have followed. Druze and Sunni community leaders in Dar'a and As-Suweida re-established contact to attempt to negotiate the release of all civilians kidnapped by any armed group.

After a nearly two-week outage in much of Daraa governorate, electricity has returned to many households. Communities and households are provided with 1-3 hours of electricity per day and electricity is diverted to water pumping stations in the region every third day.

Conclusions:

This week, pro-government forces suffered losses in Hama while gaining strategic territory in the south of Aleppo city. ISIS is being steadily weakened as even more territory has been taken from them along the Turkish border. Rising tensions among Arab opposition and Kurdish forces are of great concern, especially in the fight against ISIS in the north. Swift action to deescalate the fights between the two forces should be taken, and Turkish forces should avoid conflict with Kurdish forces in northern Syria.