

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
September 14-20, 2017

During the reporting period, pro-government forces and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led coalition backed by the US) both advanced around the ISIS-held city of Deir Ezzor, leading to a sharp increase in tension between the two as they maneuver close to one another. ISIS-held territory in Raqqa city continued to fall to SDF advances the reporting week and pro-government forces advanced against the group in eastern Homs/eastern Hama as well. Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra) started another offensive for the northern countryside of Hama, to no real effect. A string of assassinations within Idleb targeted members of HTS. HTS formed an interim governing body to compete with the Syrian opposition's Interim Government and a coalition of opposition forces expressed their discontent with the Astana process. Units in southern Syria have continued to develop their local police work and are aiding attempts to strengthen the Syrian opposition's Interim Government that HTS opposes.

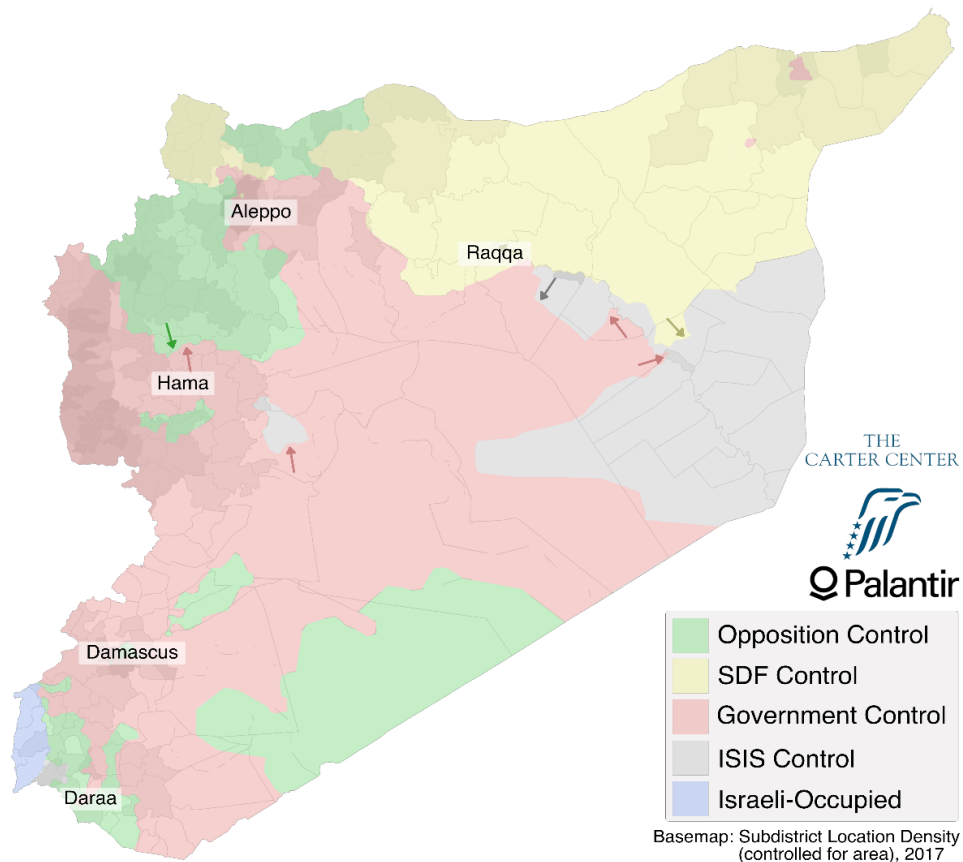


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by September 20, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period

Conflict around Deir Ezzor

In the last two weeks, pro-government forces broke the ISIS siege around Deir Ezzor city, the offensive force has worked to expand its control over the city and surrounding area. This week, pro-government forces drove back ISIS fighters at least 10-15 km from the Deir Ezzor Military Airport, from which combat missions have been launched since.

Pro-government forces have also continued to advance north and northwest of Deir Ezzor city. By September 20, a pro-government force led by the Tiger Forces, captured territory along the western bank of the Euphrates as far north as the outskirts of Tabni. Other locations captured in this advance include the communities of Buwaita and Tarif, as well as the large salt mine compound and adjacent military facility in the desert hills 5km south of Tabni. It is yet unclear if pro-government forces have fully captured Tabni.

After breaking the siege on the airport, pro-government forces turned to the northeast to recapture territory en route to the banks of the Euphrates River in the Jaffrah area. Two crossings from the Jaffrah area have occurred since: one towards Hweijet Saqr to the west and another towards the other side of the Euphrates around Mrat/Mathlum. Pro-government forces have been unable to gain a major foothold following either crossing, but now control Mrat in the north and the southeastern portion of Hweijet Saqr amid ongoing clashes. Units bearing patches of the ISIS Hunters (a Russia-supported volunteer force previously active in Homs) have appeared among the forces attempting to secure a landing zone on the eastern bank of the Euphrates. Since September 15, tanks and other armored vehicles have crossed the river on pontoon bridges. On September 18, high level of clashes and deployment of suicide vehicle borne IED (SVBIED) attacks have occurred in and around Mrat and Mathlum, where pro-government forces were advancing.

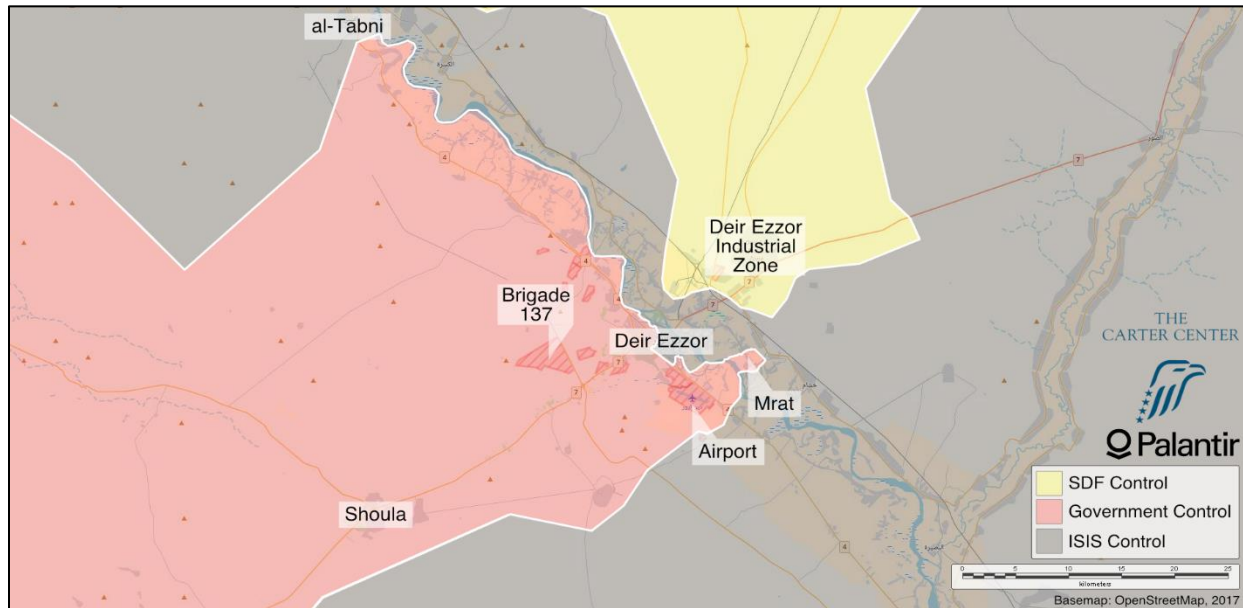


Figure 2 - Front lines around Deir Ezzor by September 20

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led and US-supported coalition) claimed to be the target of a Russian airstrike on September 16. The strike injured one SDF fighter, but no fatalities were reported. US advisers were in the vicinity but were unaffected by the strike. Within 24 hours, YPG fighters stated through the group’s media channels that they were undeterred by the strike. The SDF-linked governing body for northern Syria has established the Raqqa Civilian Council, a civil council like the one they set up in advance of the SDF offensive for Raqqa.

The SDF has advanced south from the Shaddadi area further this week, taking territory eastwards from the Deir Ezzor Industrial Zone north of the city. No further advance down the Khabour River has been reported.

In the context of a new SDF offensive, Operation Cezire Storm, Syrian Government officials have made several new anti-SDF statements. Dr. Buthaina Shaaban, a long-time political and media advisor to the Syrian President, is a notable example of this new trend, calling the SDF an illegitimate foreign force in the country. This anti-SDF sentiment was echoed from the Russian Ministry of Defense as well, which claimed that the “SDF militants work to the same objectives as Islamic State terrorists,” claiming that “Russian drones and intelligence have not recorded ANY confrontations between IS and the [SDF].”¹ Tensions between the military forces around Deir Ezzor remain extremely high, and political figures as well as soldiers have expressed their contempt at one another this week. It appears that, in light of recent successes across Syria, the Syrian government has little interest in striking a conciliatory tone in its interactions with the SDF.

Other fights against ISIS

This week, pro-government forces continued to advance against the ISIS forces surrounded in the East Hama/East Homs countryside west of Oqeirbat. The Fourth Armored Division, National Defense Forces (NDF) and Liwa al Quds have all been active on this front this week, and ISIS positions in the area continue to be targeted by Russian airstrikes.

The SDF continued to advance in Raqqa city, taking large swathes of the city’s northeastern neighborhoods as well as some key locations in the city center’s security box. The offensive for the city of Raqqa this week jumped ahead of predicted schedules and the completion of the battle for Raqqa is within weeks now.

Northern Hama offensive

Almost five months have passed since pro-government forces concluded their counteroffensive in the northern Hama countryside. During this time, pro-government forces have continued to target with artillery fire communities near the frontlines, including Latamna, Morek, and Kafr Zeita.

On September 19, however, activity in the northern countryside of Hama picked up once more as discussions in Astana attempted to delineate the terms of de-escalation zone in Idleb. In the early hours of September 19, HTS units and fighters from the Turkistan Islamic Party launched an offensive against government positions in the Maan area northeast of Suran, spearheaded by at least one SVBIED attack, launched under a concerted media blackout, though leaks have indicated the rules of engagement for groups that would be joining HTS in their new offensive. The HTS offensive was titled “O Servants of God, Be Steadfast” and briefly captured Tulaysiyah and surrounding villages, all of which were returned to pro-government control on September 20. The pro-government frontline force includes the Air Force Intelligence Sabahat Group and the Komeet Intrusion Forces. Hezbollah units have previously been stationed in this area, too.

¹ Russian Embassy in South Africa. Twitter, 21 Sept. 2017, twitter.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/910912250998861824.

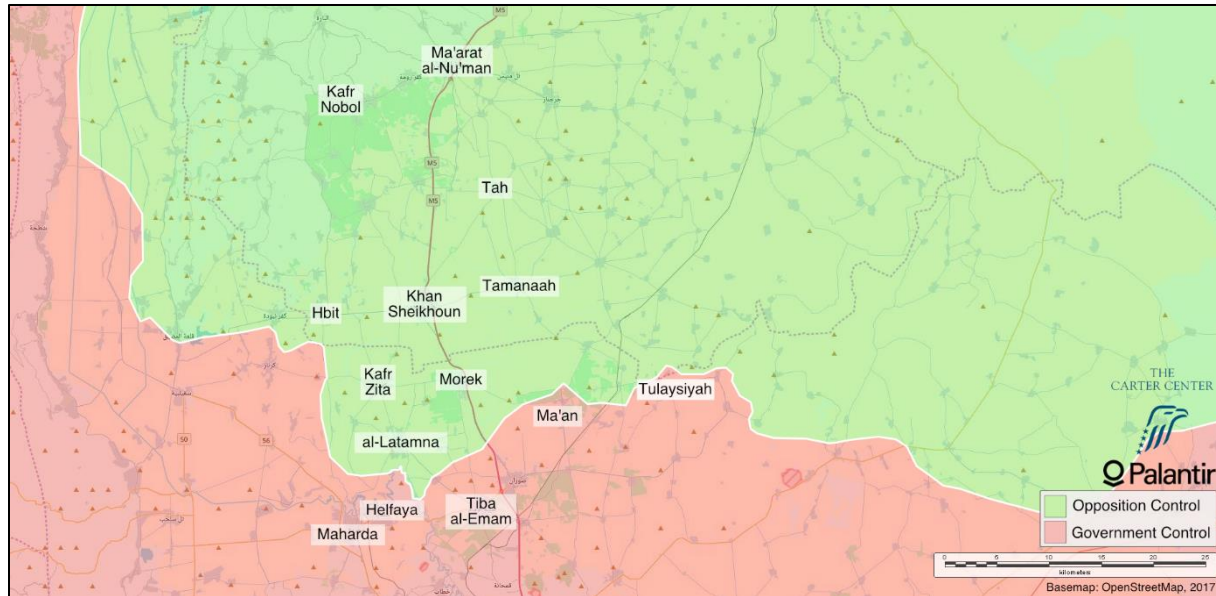


Figure 3 – Frontline in northern Hama by September 20

Syrian and Russian forces increased their shelling and aerial bombardment of communities in northern Hama and southern Idleb, striking Latamna, Morek, Kafr Zeita, Hbit, Khan Sheikhoun, and Tamanaah this week. Further to the north, Kafr Nobol was also subject to airstrikes. Russian airstrikes hit medical facilities in Kafr Nobol, Khan Sheikhoun, and Tah. A civil defense center in Tamanaah belonging to the White Helmets was also put out of service by an airstrike. In Hbit, an airstrike reportedly hit a school being used as shelter for displaced families, while in Kafr Zeita, two medical personnel were killed by an airstrike in that town. This response to the Hama offensive accounted for a reported 270 airstrikes throughout the opposition-held pocket in a 48-hour period (according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights).

Several airstrikes hit Ahrar al-Sham positions and homes of known Ahrar al-Sham leaders. Ahrar al-Sham is a rival of HTS and has been disproportionately attacked in the wake of an offensive that Ahrar al-Sham was not participating in.

Southern Syria

Pro-government shelling of opposition-controlled areas in Jobar and Ain Terma has continued during the last week. No change in territorial control has been reported. While clashes continue between pro-government forces and Faylaq al-Rahman in Jobar, east of Damascus, pro-government forces shelled Duma further to the southeast, which was previously included as part of a ceasefire agreement between the Syrian government and Jaysh al-Islam.

A reconciliation agreement for the towns of Babbila, Yalda, and Beit Sahem has been met with criticism from both civilians and military actors, including a protest and overnight sit-in in Yalda on September 13. The agreement would give the Syrian government partial control of the towns and return the responsibility of providing services to the government in exchange for surrendering weapons. The agreement also includes the forced relocation of dissenting forces to opposition-controlled territories in Idleb. Jaysh al-Islam, Furqat Dimashq, Jaysh al-Ababil, Ahrar al-Sham, Kata'ib Aknaf Beit al-Maqaddas, and Liwa' Sham al-Rasoul all released a joint statement condemning the reconciliation agreement in general and specifically the relocation provision.

On September 15, Faylaq al-Rahman announced the formation of the Revolutionary Leadership in Damascus and Rural Damascus. The initiative is led by Faylaq al-Rahman, is comprised of 10 military and civilian leaders, and is intended to integrate military and political activities in Faylaq al-Rahman-controlled areas.

Pro-government forces are restricting the shipment of vegetables to Rahiba in the Eastern Qalamoun to one truck a day, compared to seven shipments per day in the past. Construction equipment is now banned as well and prices for basic goods have skyrocketed.

On September 19, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) used a Patriot Missile anti-air system to shoot down an Iranian-made UAV flying over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Continuing Hezbollah operations near Israeli forces have made the IDF and Israeli politicians nervous, prompting Israeli strikes into Syria in previous weeks.

One of the provisions of the July 8 tripartite (Russia, US, Jordan) ceasefire agreement between pro-government and anti-government forces in the south is that opposition groups focus their attention on targeting ISIS-affiliate Jaysh Khaled Ibn al-Waleed. A second provision is that opposition group work on developing local police forces. The opposition's Al-Bunyan al-Marsous operations room has focused on combatting drug traffickers in the city of Daraa, and on September 14, they captured their first drug shipment. Jaysh Ahrar al-Asha'ir also runs a policing program in the Rukban IDP camp. On September 14, they seized a shipment of weapons that was hidden in a water tank. By September 14, approximately 6,500 Syrian refugees have returned to Syria from Jordan since the southern ceasefire agreement went into effect.

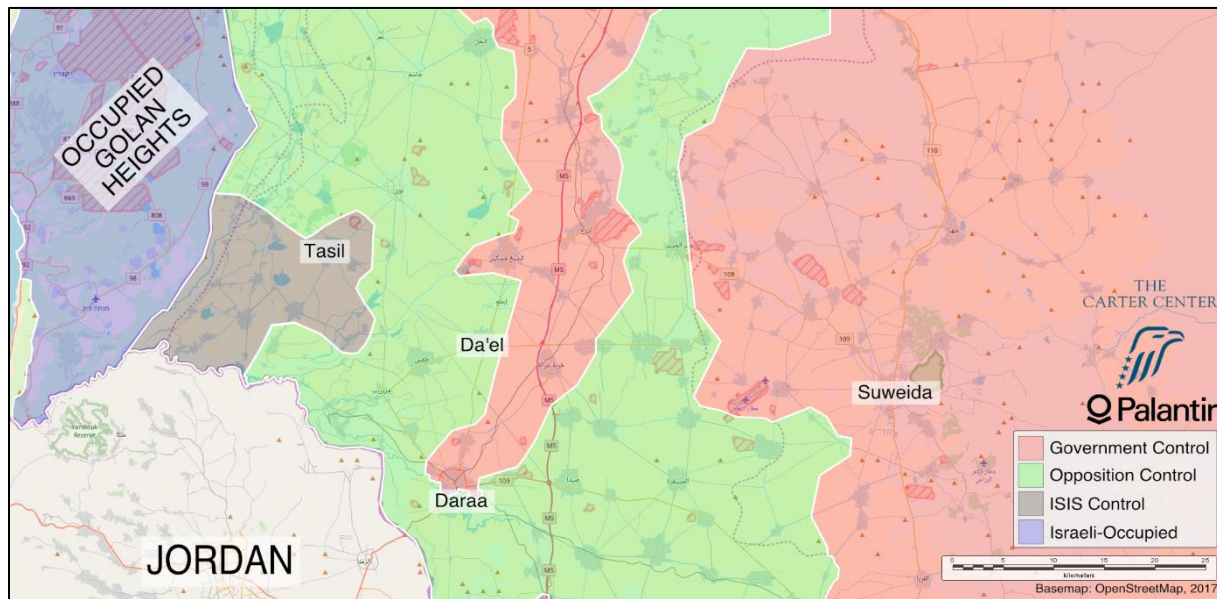


Figure 4 - Situation in southwestern Syria by September 20

A contingent of Maghaweir al-Thawra fighters and their allies in the international coalition withdrew from the Zaqaf base, destroying it as they left on September 17. The base had been intended to serve as the staging ground for the international coalition's offensive on Deir Ezzor, which has since been made impossible by the Syrian government's own Deir Ezzor offensive.

Further developments in opposition territory

On September 17, the Syrian General Conference (convened with HTS backing earlier in September) formed a “constituent assembly” tasked with appointing a prime minister to head a government managing opposition territory in northern Syria. The outcome of the general conference was rejected by the Syrian Interim Government which declined to attend the conference.

The opposition’s Syrian Interim Government has announced appointments to the general staff of the Ministry of Defense. Fadlallah al Haji, the head of Faylaq al Sham, will serve as Defense Minister. The commander of the FSA’s 51st Brigade, Haytham al Afasi, was appointed as Deputy Minister. Regional deputies for opposition controlled territories were also appointed. The appointment of regional deputies for Daraa and Quneitra imply that some agreement was reached between the Southern Front groups and the opposition’s Syrian Interim Government.

The newly-created Jabha al-Wataniya li-Tahrir Souria announced on September 14 that it would join the opposition groups boycotting the Astana 6 conference.

There have been a series of assassinations in Idlib this week, primarily targeting HTS members, including a commander and legal scholars. On September 13, unknown persons assassinated HTS commander Abu Mohammad al Jazrawi (formerly of Jund al-Aqsa) in the city of Saraqeb. On September 18, a local HTS official was assassinated in Harim. On September 15 and September 20, three HTS legal scholars, including two members of the Sharia Committee, were killed in different operations in Idlib city. The assassination of the HTS legal scholars follows the revelation in a series of leaked recordings of discussions by top HTS leaders loyal to Golani on the need to arrest or assassinate dissenting HTS legal scholars. Additionally, reports indicated that Jaish al-Ahrar, a former Ahrar al-Sham unit and powerful component of HTS, has defected from the group following the revelation of these recordings

By September 18, Turkish military reinforcements including tanks, armored vehicles, self-propelled artillery, trucks, and troop transports arrived in Hatay province via train to the Iskanderun train terminal. There were around 80 vehicles in the convoy. These reinforcements are likely being deployed to the Reyhanli district of Hatay province, which borders on HTS-controlled Bab al-Hawa as well as YPG-controlled Afrin.