

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
July 13-19, 2017

The previous week's ceasefires in southern Syria continued into this reporting period, slowing what appeared to be an unsustainable rising tide of conflict in the area, especially around Daraa city. The decrease in fighting in the south, however, has led to a redeployment of some pro-government forces, which raises the risk level for new conflict in other parts of Syria, particularly eastern Damascus, and along the southeastern border.

Tensions among the opposition and between opposition and Kurdish groups rose sharply this reporting period, with clashes and shelling throughout the week in Idleb and northern Aleppo. Tensions have risen to a level not seen since early in 2017, with opposition troops being redeployed from areas in northern Aleppo to Idleb in advance of what many see as a pending war between Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) and Ahrar al-Sham, with the latter being backed by most other opposition groups in the area.

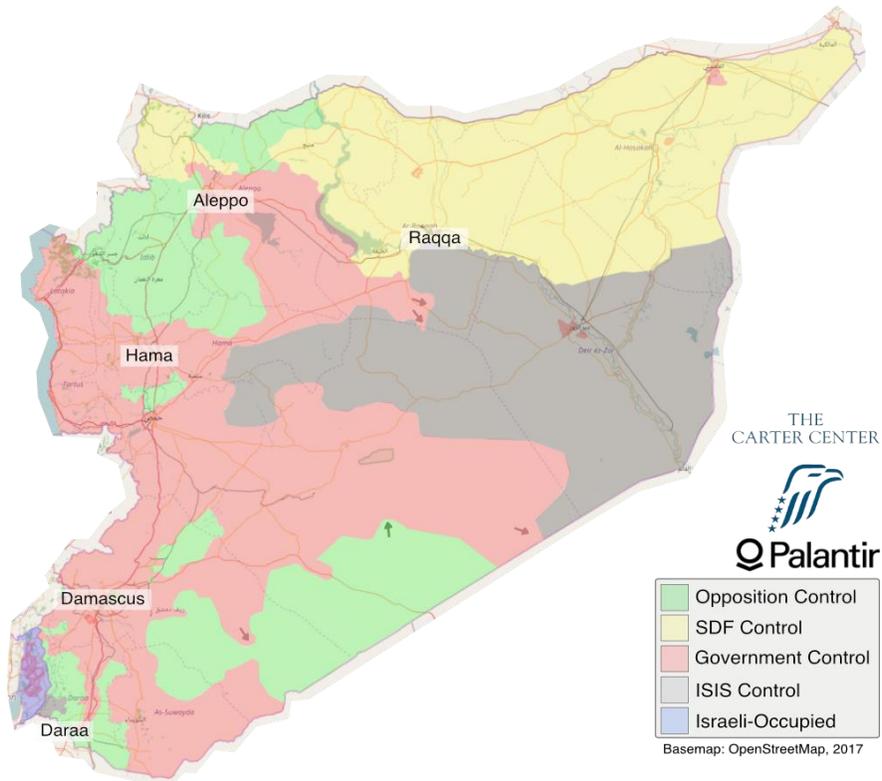


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by July 19, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period

Updates from Syria’s southern cities

The ceasefire negotiated by US, Russian, and Jordanian diplomats remains in effect in southern Syria. Reports of violations remain mixed, in large part due to misunderstandings about the exact terms of the ceasefire. Some opposition-linked accounts reported violations as early as the first day of the agreement, while other monitors claim the first violations took place on July 19. Notably, on July 13, pro-government forces shelled the towns of Samadaniyah and Ajraf, which are both included in the ceasefire agreement. On July 16, a Russian observer force arrived in Daraa governorate, where they are headquartered in Izraa’ to monitor the de-escalation zones. The pro-government Arab Nationalist Guard Forces have taken up new defensive positions along the government’s frontline in Daraa city.

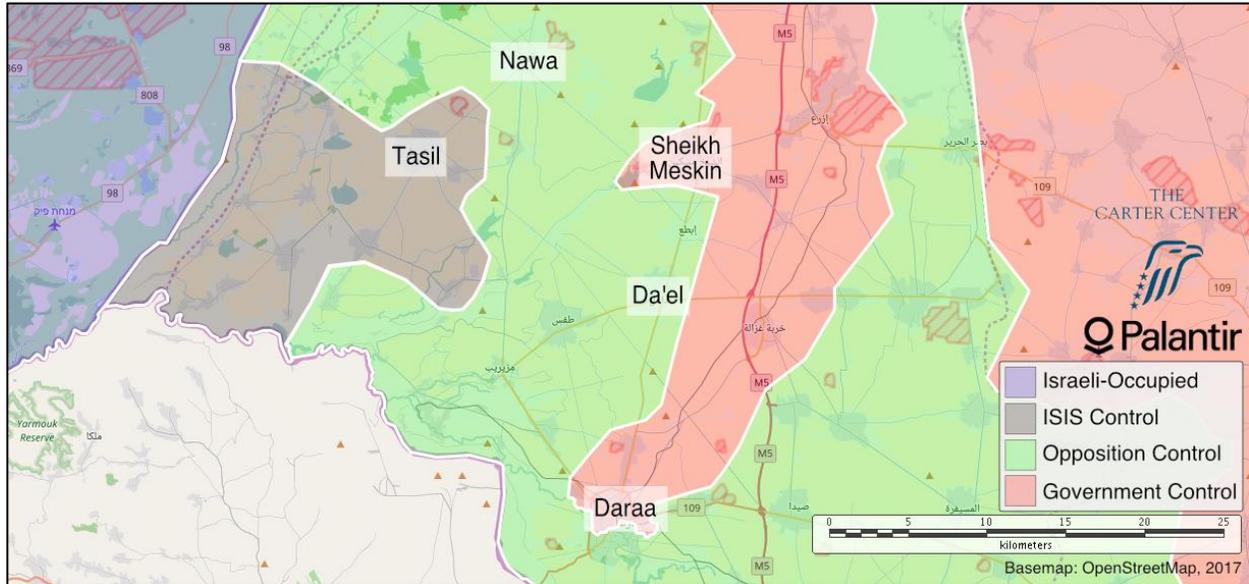


Figure 2 – Front lines around Daraa city by July 19

While announcements from opposition groups over the previous few weeks have suggested a desire to shift offensive efforts to focus on the ISIS-affiliated Jaysh Khalid Ibn al-Waleed in the Yarmouk Basin, there seems to have been very little activity in the area during the reporting week, suggesting that the promised offensive has not yet begun.

In Damascus, pro-government forces continued to advance on opposition-controlled Ain Terma and Zamalka on the outskirts of the city, immediately across the Southern Bypass Highway from opposition-controlled Jobar neighborhood. By July 17, pro-government forces had made significant advances in the Ain Terma area and discovered an opposition-held tunnel. These gains were largely reversed by July 18, after which front lines appear to have stagnated, despite heavy artillery and aerial bombardment on opposition positions. Also in Eastern Ghouta, clashes continued between pro-government forces and Jaysh al-Islam at Hosh Dawahira. Clashes in the area have been almost continuous over the previous month.

The Syrian government has taken advantage of the ceasefire in Daraa and moved elements of the Fourth Armored Division and 42nd Battalion back to Damascus to take part in the government’s campaign to retake the Jobar neighborhood on the eastern edge of Damascus city. This unit was an integral part of the government’s earlier campaigns to capture Mo’adamiyeh, Khan al-Shih, Darayya, Wadi Barada, and most recently Qaboun, where eventual evacuation deals were reached after weeks of siege. The redeployment of

these units indicates that the intensity of fighting in Jobar and neighboring Ain Terma is expected to increase further in the coming weeks.

Fighting between Jaysh al-Islam and HTS has continued in al-Ashaari in East Ghouta. In response to the intermittent infighting (which has been taking place in the Eastern Ghouta since mid-April) the Military Council in Damascus and Rural Damascus launched an initiative to end bloodshed between opposition groups on July 5. Jaysh al-Islam announced on July 13 that it had joined the initiative, and was seeking to be part of a united opposition in the Eastern Ghouta. Jaysh al-Islam has continued for months to double down on its governance efforts and partnerships with civil society in an effort to repair its image following past infighting and crackdowns on protesters.

Pro-government military operations

Clashes have continued in the southeastern Syrian desert throughout the week. On July 16, Shuhada al-Qaryatayn captured several pro-government positions north of al-Tanf garrison. Jaysh Usoud al-Sharqiya has also been heavily involved in clashes in the desert.

By the morning of July 17, pro-government forces had advanced to within 11 km of the eastern Homs town of Sokhneh, the final major town controlled by ISIS in Homs governorate. National Defense Forces (NDF) aided the pro-government force to advance to hills north and east of the T3 pumping station. The advance has since stopped, potentially as pro-government forces await the approach of Tiger Forces from the north.

Pro-government forces made only minimal advances in the Eastern Salamiyeh countryside. Liwa al-Quds and the Qalamoun Shield Forces remain on the front, though neither force appears to be capable of advancing against ISIS without reinforcements. Notably, the Tiger Forces, which have been active on this front line, were not sighted over this reporting period.

The reporting week brought news of activity by the Fifth Corps' enigmatic "ISIS Hunters", who have been primarily seen in the Tadmor (Palmyra) area guarding gas fields and the Tadmor Military Airbase. Some units of the ISIS Hunters have begun moving north from the al-Sha'er gas fields towards the Homs-Raqqa road, in an attempt to reach ISIS-controlled Oqeirbat from the south. It is unclear what military capabilities the ISIS Hunters actually possess that can contribute to the government's intractable eastern Hama front with ISIS, but placing additional pressure on diminished ISIS forces in the area may aid an eventual government advance on this front.

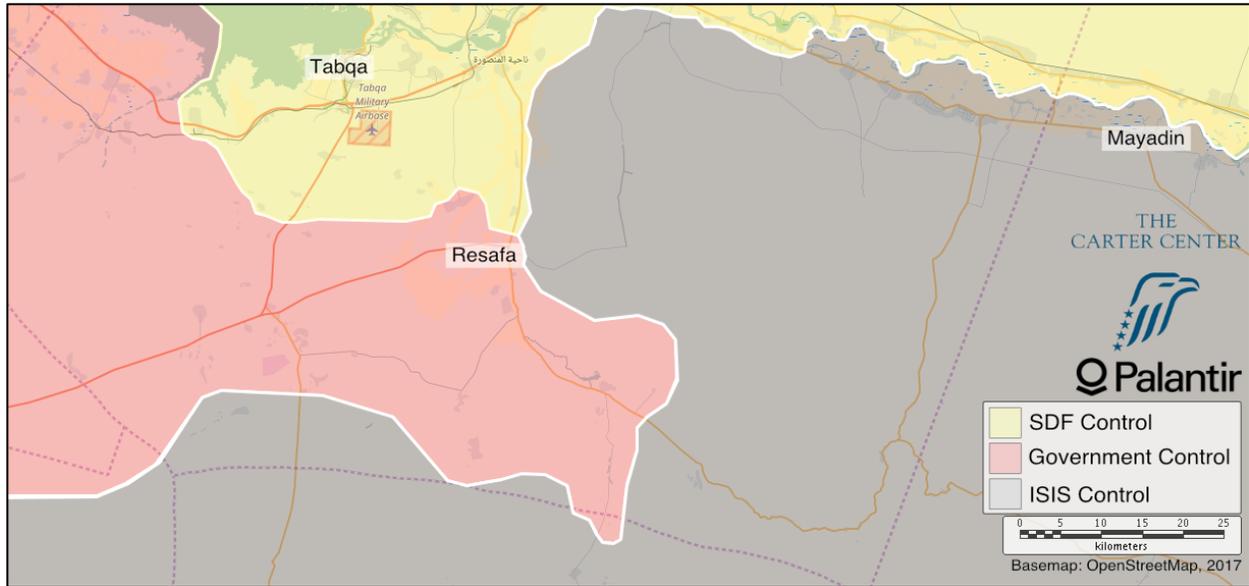


Figure 3 – Front lines in Western Raqqa governorate by July 19

To the north, pro-government forces around the Resafa intersection advanced to secure territory south of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) locations. Government forces have used the intersection as the main staging point for the operations in southern Raqqa to recapture the road to Ithriya (to the west), further securing the main pro-government supply route in the area. During this reporting period, the Tiger Forces, Fifth Corps' Third Brigade, and the pro-government Tribal Fighters advanced southward from Resafa in southern Raqqa, taking several gas and oil fields by July 16. On the morning of July 19, after days of rapid government advances against ISIS, ISIS forces reportedly launched a multi-pronged counter-attack on pro-government positions near the Resafa intersection. Despite heavy losses among the 124th Brigade, no ground has yet been lost.

By July 19, units of the pro-government Tiger Forces and Tribal Fighters crossed into the Sokhneh sub-district and captured the Fahdeh oil field. The area is mountainous, and it is unclear how quickly pro-government forces will be able to progress.

Developments in northern Syria

On July 17, nearly a dozen Turkish-backed opposition fighters were killed in clashes with units from the SDF around the SDF-held town of Ain Daqna in northwestern Aleppo. Other, more minor clashes also continued along frontlines elsewhere in Afrin over the course of this reporting period. Opposition groups involved in clashes stated that they see the SDF as "occupiers" in northern Aleppo and elsewhere.

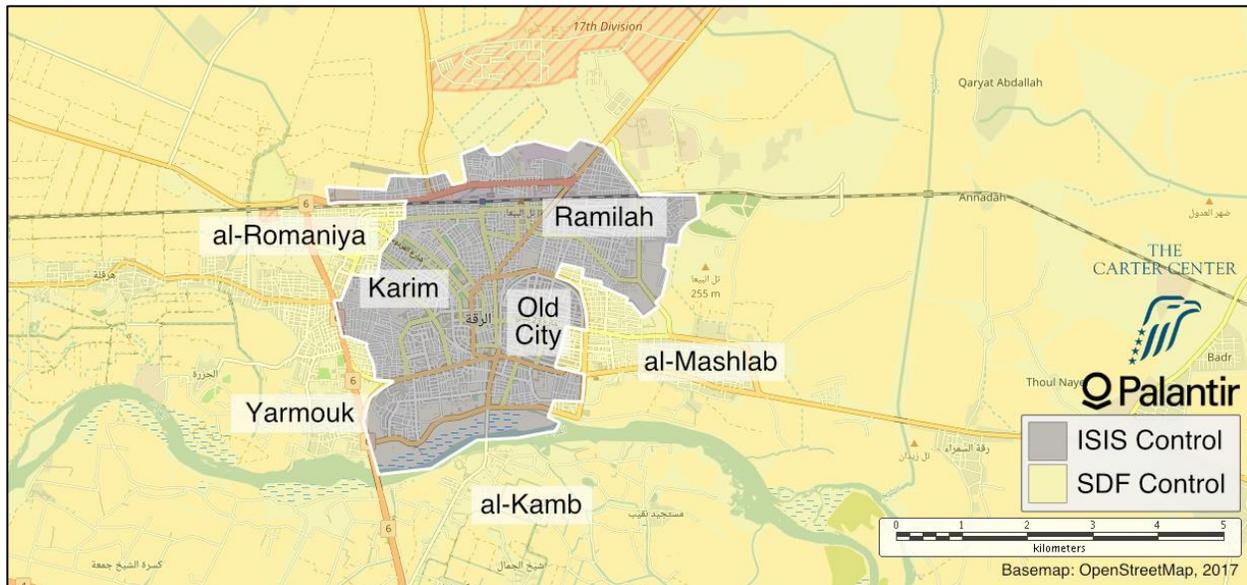


Figure 4 - Map of frontlines in Raqqa city by July 19

SDF progress in the battle for Raqqa has continued, though fighting has been intense. SDF fighters advanced in the Yarmouk district as well as on eastern fronts, capturing several city blocks from ISIS forces in Raqqa's Old City. This is the first time that SDF fighters have broken through the walls of the Old City, bringing them close to the city center. International Coalition airstrikes were reported to have been particularly intense on July 17th as SDF fighters struggled to advance.

The US military confirmed that advisers are operating inside Raqqa, working with local SDF fighters in their battle against ISIS. These troops are not involved in direct combat but are calling air strikes and are working closer to the fight than did the US forces supporting Iraqi military in Mosul.

During a lull in the fighting over the weekend, about 500 civilians escaped from Raqqa into SDF-held territory. Although significant, thousands more civilians may be forcefully held within remaining ISIS-held neighborhoods.

A Kurdish counter-terrorism official contended that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is still alive. Baghdadi's death remains a major point of contention, and no firm evidence in support of his death has been publicly presented. ISIS itself has remained silent on the matter.

Conflict between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham

There has been a major escalation in tension and fighting between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham over the course of this reporting period. The rival groups engaged in multiple clashes involving tanks, heavy machine guns, and mortars throughout Idleb governorate. Fighting was heavily concentrated in the Jabal al-Zawiya area south of Idleb city, and areas along the Turkish border from Salqin to Dana near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing.

On July 12, two HTS members were found dead near the town of Sarjah in the Jabal al-Zawiya area. Upon discovery, HTS accused Ahrar al-Sham's sub-unit, Suqour al-Sham of killing the members. The two sides met and reached an agreement to resolve the matter by establishing a Shari'a committee to rule on the case, but HTS fighters continued to mobilize, prompting statements from Ahrar al-Sham asserting the group's readiness to defend itself against any attack.

A day later, Ahrar al-Sham fighters nearly clashed with HTS in the town of Killi, prompting local representatives to ban the entry of heavy weaponry into the town without approval by a local committee. The agreement also banned the establishment of checkpoints on key roads, and designated the local court as the body to settle any future disputes.

On July 14, clashes erupted due to a dispute over electricity provision in the eastern Idleb town of Tal Tukan, resulting in the HTS capture of the town. Another agreement was reached to halt the fighting and refer the Tal Toukan dispute to a local court. The agreement included the release of prisoners, the dismantling of checkpoints, and the return of Tal Toukan to its original state, implying for both groups to withdraw from the town.

The following days saw continued tensions throughout Idleb and reports of continued mobilization of HTS fighters. HTS fighter movements near Saraqab led to protests on July 15 by some residents who were recorded burning tires on roads to prevent the entry of HTS into the area. There were also elections on July 18 in Saraqab for local councils. During the previous week, candidates had argued their case on a live-streamed debate. Turnout for the local election was reported to be 55%. On July 19, HTS took control of much of Saraqab's civil infrastructure, shooting into the air to scatter protestors.

Heightened tensions between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham led to yet another written agreement on July 16 between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham to de-escalate the situation. Although tensions were eased for a short while, Ahrar al-Sham almost immediately accused HTS of violating the agreement, leading to clashes and tit-for-tat seizing of checkpoints throughout much of the governorate.

In the early hours of July 19, Ahrar al-Sham launched a surprise attack on HTS positions in Sarmada near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing effectively extending the conflict into northern Idleb along the Turkish-Syria border.

Other opposition updates

During the reporting week, Ahrar al-Sham announced plans to establish a Unified Administration in Idleb, with the support many local councils and civil society groups. The Unified Administration would possibly centralize decisions in northern Syria on military, political, civil and judicial matters.

On July 13, a merger was announced between Liwa Samarqand, Liwa Sultan Mohammed Al-Fateh, and Liwa Muntaser Billah to form the National Army Bloc in the areas previously captured during Turkey-backed Operation Euphrates Shield. The merger, while a far cry from the rumors regarding the formation of a full unification of northern brigades, follows a trend of increased unification of groups in the Turkey-backed opposition pocket.