

THE CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary November 3-9, 2016

This week, many of the opposition gains in West Aleppo were reversed. By 8 November, pro-government forces had retaken 1070 Apartments and all of the Project 3000 Apartments. The government forces advanced southwards through the al-Hikmeh School area, which they secured within the next day. This came as opposition groups carried out heavy artillery bombardment on many of the frontlines, using mortars, Grad missiles, and heavy artillery like the D-30.

On November 4, Russia implemented another “Humanitarian Pause” over East Aleppo to allow and encourage opposition fighters and residents to evacuate from the city. The 10-hour pause was almost immediately rejected by opposition forces.

In Damascus and its countryside, government forces continued their offensives against opposition positions in eastern and western Ghouta. Opposition-held Khan al-Shih came under heavy aerial bombardment, with multiple barrel bombs reported throughout the week. On 6 November, a pro-government mortar strike hit a kindergarten in Harasta.

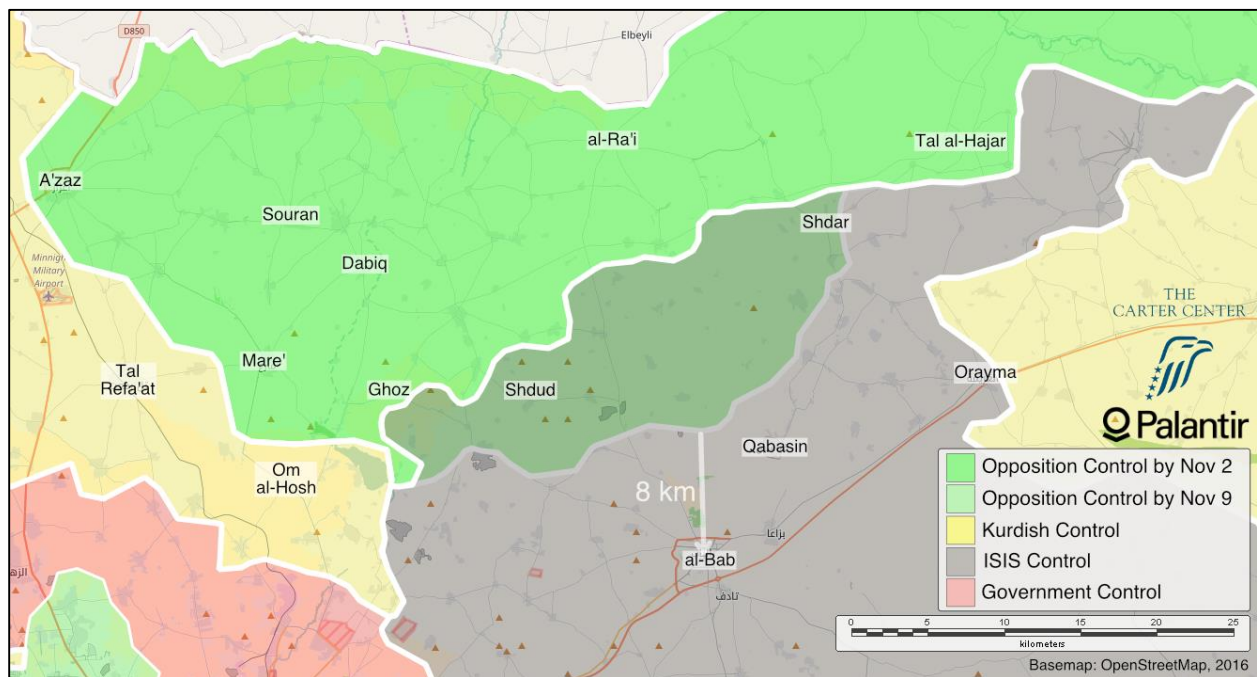


Figure 1: OES advances in norther Aleppo governorate.

Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) forces continued its advance against ISIS after several weeks of being bogged down by an ISIS counterattack and battles against Kurdish forces from the Afrin canton. The advance looked to be returning in force against ISIS, but on November 8, more opposition in-fighting broke out. This time, the struggle was between Liwa Suleiman Shah and Faylaq al-Rahman after a fighter of the former was arrested by Faylaq al-Rahman. The disagreement happened in Jarablus, marking the

fourth week in a row with major disagreements plaguing opposition forces on a frontline, though OES has had significantly less internal struggle than opposition forces face elsewhere.

The fight against ISIS in Northern Raqqa escalated this week with the announcement of a new offensive by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) for the ISIS capitol. On November 6, the primarily Kurdish coalition announced the start of the “Euphrates Wrath” offensive (EW) with an Arabic-language statement. Within 24 hours, several surprise ISIS suicide bombings were reported in Kurdish-held territory. Shortly after the start of the offensive, Liwa Thuwaar ar-Raqqa (LTR) indicated that they would not participate in the offensive, likely to disassociate themselves from Kurdish forces before they advance into a predominantly Arab region. LTR has been instrumental in the fight against ISIS, and their close tribal affiliations have helped soothe tensions between Arab and Kurdish residents in the north of Syria. LTR's desire to distance itself from the upcoming offensive is damaging, as Kurdish forces planned to advance to the outskirts of Raqqa to allow a solely Arab force to advance on the ISIS capitol. LTR was the only remaining local Arab militia in the SDF.

As part of an ongoing campaign to weaken ISIS forces before an advance on Raqqa, the International Coalition has stepped up strikes in the north of Syria. On November 8, Coalition aircraft struck al-Hesha in Raqqa, reportedly killing almost two dozen civilians and injuring nearly three dozen more.

Talks on ceasefire agreements in the al-Wa'er district of Homs continued this week as they have been for previous weeks, though there appears to have been little headway in ending conflict around the opposition-held neighborhood. Al-Wa'er has been under siege for many months.

On November 9, Admiral Kuznetsov, Russia's only aircraft carrier, arrived off the coast of Syria after a dramatic weeks-long odyssey through the North Sea, English Channel, and Mediterranean Sea. No attacks have been launched and most of the aircraft aboard the craft are interdiction aircrafts and not intended for air-to-ground assaults.

Conclusions:

The pending Kurdish-led offensive towards Raqqa risks exacerbating tensions between Syria's Kurdish and Arab populations, which could give rise to further conflict between the communities, and hinder the collective efforts against ISIS throughout Syria. Such tensions have already hindered the efforts to clear ISIS from northern Aleppo governorate, and will remain an obstacle to both military and political collaboration for the foreseeable future.

As the siege of eastern Aleppo continues, the protection of civilians – in both east and west Aleppo – remains of paramount concern. Humanitarian relief and protection of civilians from indiscriminate attacks should take precedence above all else.