

THE  
CARTER CENTER



**Weekly Conflict Summary**

February 1-7, 2018

During the reporting period, the Turkish-led Operation Olive Branch offensive continued its advance into Afrin, the northwestern canton controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a US-backed, Kurdish-led organization). Elsewhere, pro-government forces continued their advance against opposition forces and ISIS fighters in the northern Hama/southern Aleppo countryside, further securing their control in the area. Following a significant uptick in attacks on both the opposition-controlled Idleb and Eastern Ghouta pockets, the UN humanitarian coordinator, Panos Moutmzis, called for an immediate one-month cessation of hostilities for the delivery of humanitarian aid. Lastly, a new opposition “operation room” has been formed in Idleb, with the stated goal of coordinating attacks against government forces.

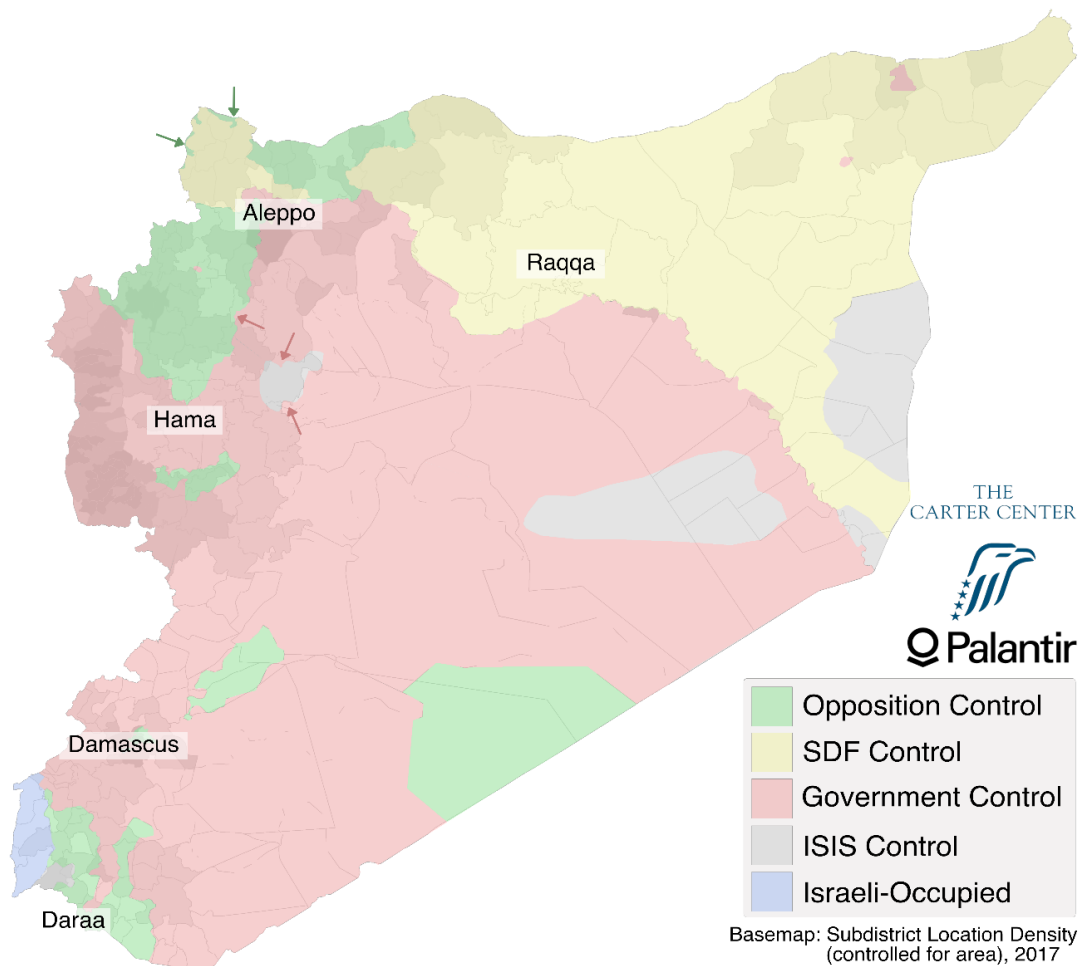


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by February 7, with arrows indicating fronts of advance during the reporting period

## Operation Olive Branch

Operation Olive Branch forces took new territory, connecting previously isolated territories west of Raju and north of Balbal. Turkey-backed Operation Euphrates Shield forces also advanced northwest of A'zaz to take a mountaintop and village from the SDF. No gains have yet been made towards Tal Refaat along the southeastern front.

There have been reports of abuses by advancing Turkish-backed, opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces, including footage of Operation Olive Branch forces apparently mutilating the body of a deceased YPJ fighter (an all-female Kurdish unit within the SDF).

Hundreds of US-trained YPG/SDF fighters from eastern SDF cantons arrived in Afrin this week, traveling through government-held territory to reinforce the SDF fighters on fronts against Olive Branch units. Also, there have been an increasing amount of video footage showing SDF fighters using anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs). The models used are abundant in the region, but relatively costly and rare among non-state armed groups. Should the frequency of ATGM strikes continue to rise, it could indicate external support for the SDF –likely from pro-government sources, given the models sighted to date.

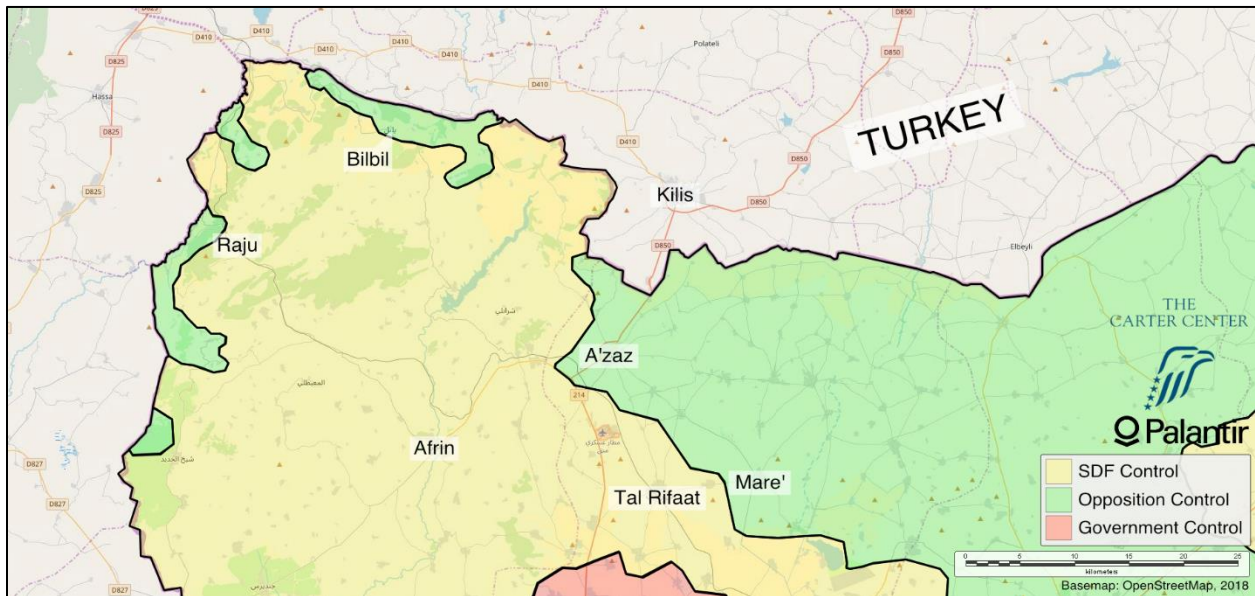


Figure 2 - Areas of control around the Afrin canton by February 7

On February 5, a Turkish soldier was killed in an indirect attack in Idleb province while Turkish forces were setting up a military post in the area. Five other soldiers were also wounded in the attack. Casualties as a result of Operation Olive Branch do not appear to have affected popular support in Turkey for the offensive, though a crack-down on media reports of the offensive has made public opinion difficult to gauge.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Ministry spokesperson Bahram Qasemi urged Turkish President Erdogan to cease the Turkish offensive into Afrin. President Rouhani also spoke out against the U.S. presence in Syria alongside the eastern SDF. Both Iranian officials cited the need for dialogue, pointing to continuing discussions at Astana.

**Idleb Pocket**

Opposition forces downed a Russian SU-25 bomber on February 3 over Idleb. The pilot, surrounded by opposition forces in the area, took his own life using a grenade. In the aftermath of the event, airstrikes on Idleb intensified dramatically. Barrels appearing to contain chlorine gas were dropped from helicopters on February 4 on Saraqeb city. The chlorine attacks resulted in the hospitalization of nine people, including three first responders.

On February 1, a hospital in Hama province was destroyed by airstrikes. The facility was built 20 meters underground, indicating a bunker buster munition was likely used to target the hospital. There have been 14 strikes against medical facilities in Syria since the start of the year, with the rate of attacks increasing sharply following the downing of the Russian bomber.

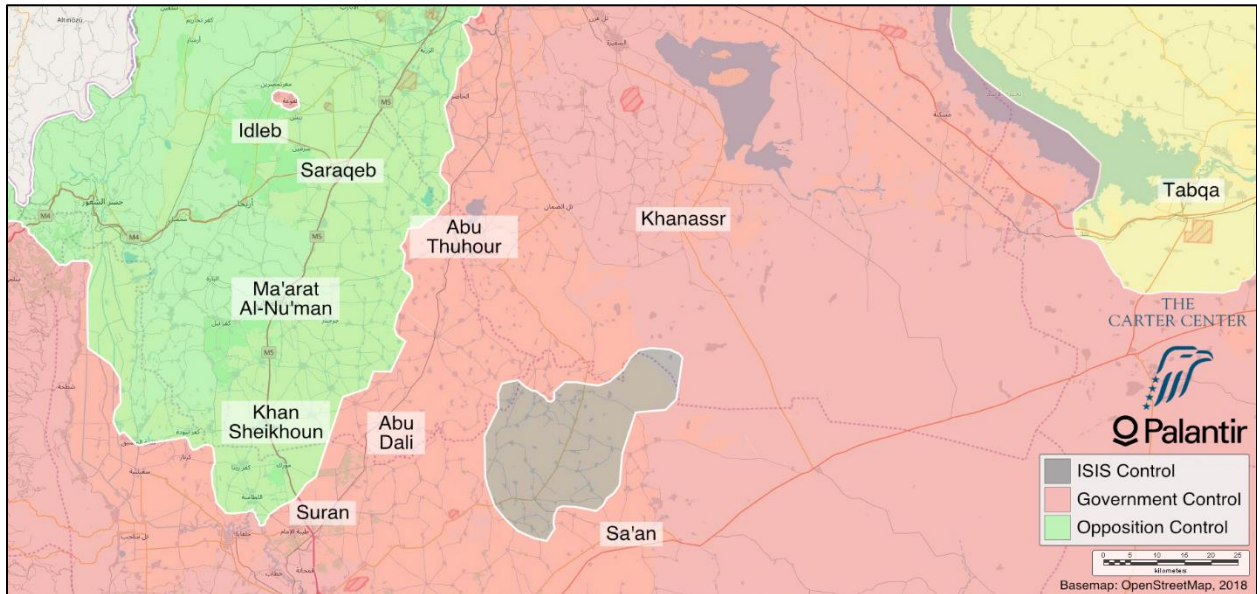


Figure 3 - Areas of control around the opposition-held Idleb pocket by February 7

The pro-government offensive into the southeast of the opposition-held Idleb pocket again saw advances this week, capturing villages northwest of Abu Thohour and toward Saraqeb. Opposition forces no longer appear to be present in the pocket east of Abu Thuhour, which shrunk dramatically during this reporting period after a multi-front offensive by government forces.

Opposition forces in Idleb announced the formation of a new “operations room” to confront recent gains by pro-government forces (diagramed below). This operations room, the Dahr al-Ghzaa Military Operations Room, includes 11 groups at its formation, including at least two units currently involved in Operation Olive Branch (Faylak al-Sham and Jaysh al-Nakhba).



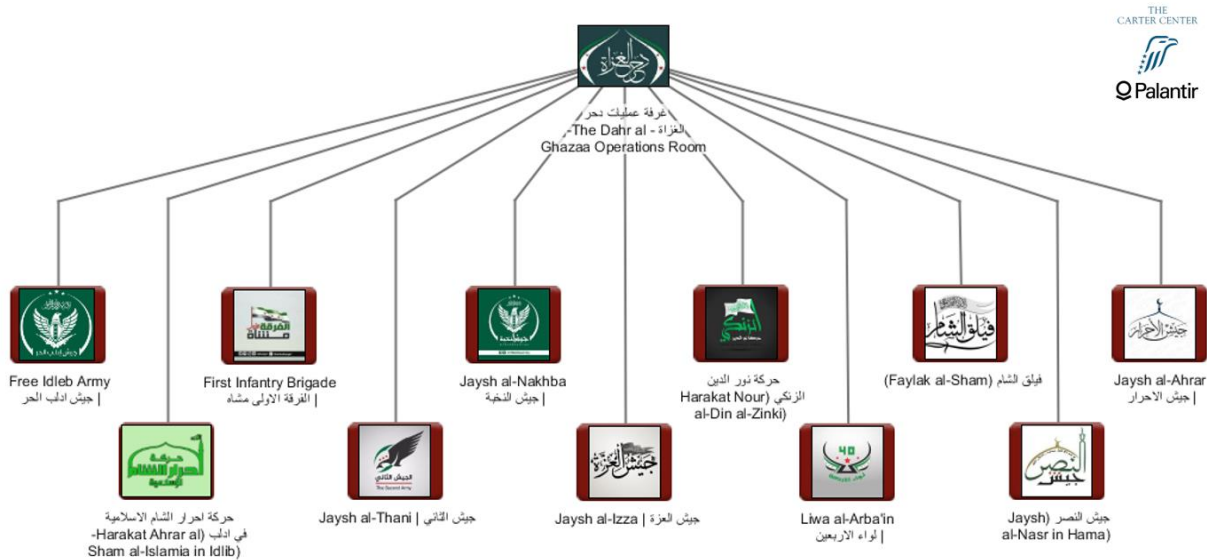


Figure 4: The Dahr al-Ghazaa Military Operations Room.

### Southern Syria

Intense aerial bombardments targeting the besieged area of Eastern Ghouta has led to the UN humanitarian coordinator for Syria calling for an immediate, one-month ceasefire to enable humanitarian aid delivery. Eastern Ghouta has not received humanitarian aid deliveries since last November. This, coupled with intense aerial bombardments and multiple reports of chlorine gas attacks on civilian centers, has led the UN to assert that the humanitarian situation is more dire than at any point in the seven years of conflict. Reports on civilian casualties vary, but the total for deaths on February 6 alone is roughly 80.

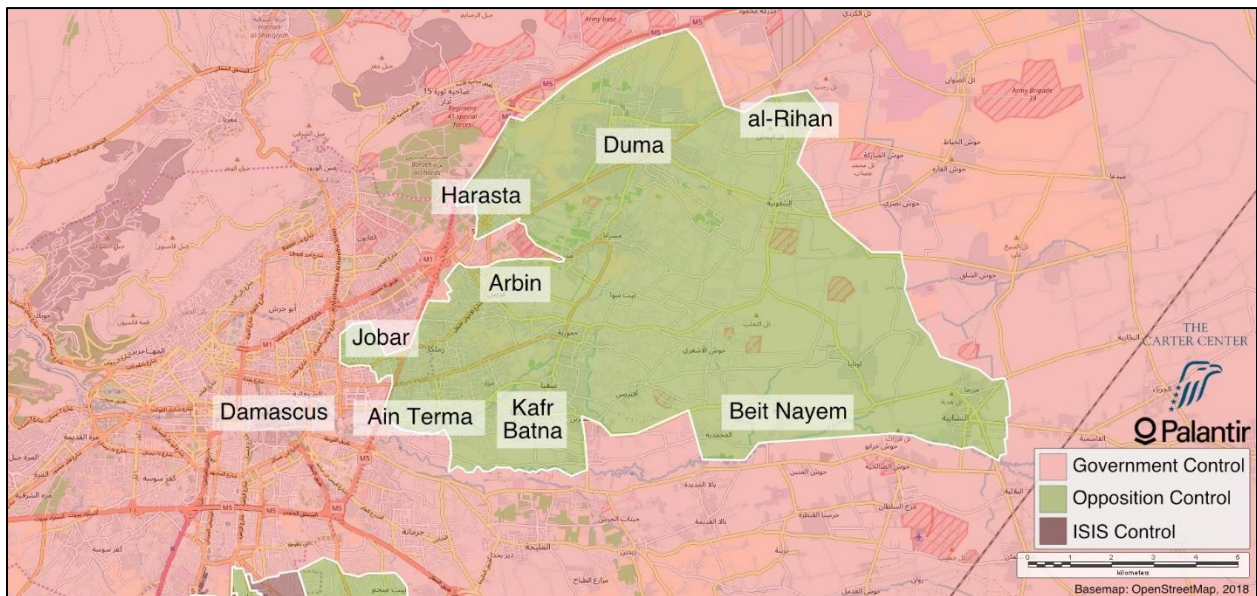


Figure 5 - The situation around Eastern Ghouta by February 7