

THE
CARTER CENTER



Syria Frontlines Update

October 9, 2015

Executive Summary

The direct intervention of Russia on September 30 has dramatically changed what was, an increasingly stagnant conflict. Substantial opposition advances earlier in the year in Idlib governorate, by May, had slowed and stalled in Sahel al-Ghab and northern Hama. Similar opposition advances in southern Syria, which recently concentrated on Daraa city at the end of June, also stalled after slow progress. Hezbollah's efforts to secure the Lebanese border were nearly complete, with only a few remaining pockets of opposition control and ceasefires tentatively holding in the city of Zabadani. The significant advance of Kurdish and allied Arab opposition forces in the northeast had also slowed after succeeding in connecting the cantons of Kobane and Hassakah. The slow-down of these front line advances coincided with a new initiative launched by the UN Special Envoy, which received lukewarm support from most parties to the conflict.

Since the Russian intervention, however, hopes of movement to a more political battlefield have been thrown into doubt. A representative critical mass of opposition forces signed a collective statement on October 3 opposing the newly unveiled UN initiative (at least in its current form). On October 7 Syrian government forces, with Russian air support, began a new offensive pushing back against the opposition advances in northern Hama governorate. The pressure has led to new alignments of opposition forces, an increase in Saudi-supplied military aid, and has fundamentally altered the status quo of the conflict.

The following report provides an overview of recent developments leading up to Russia's intervention, including an overview of the primary coalitions and "operation rooms" involved, and a snapshot of the most active government-opposition front lines in the country.

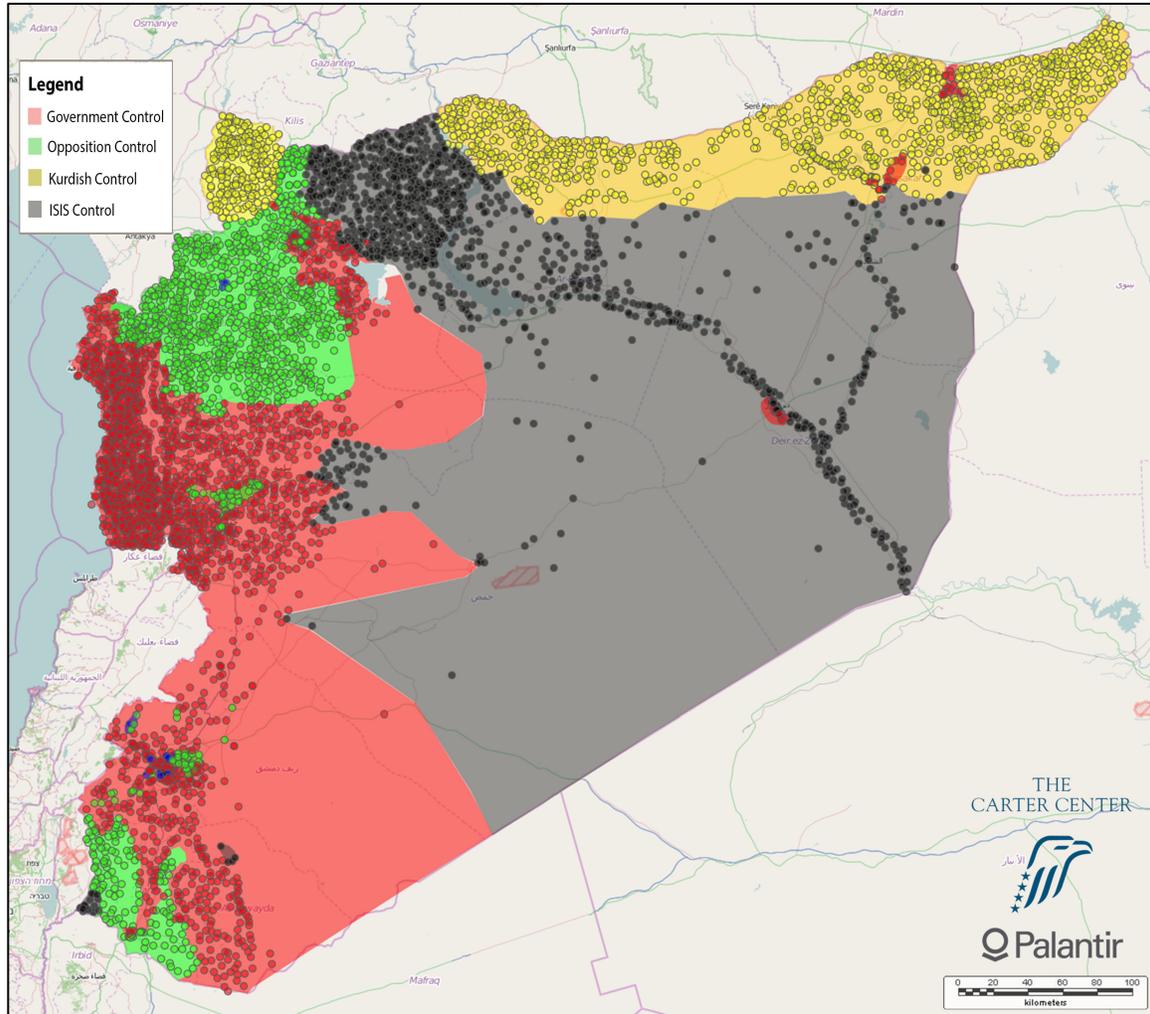


Figure 1: Areas of control in Syria as of October 9, 2015. Each dot represents a city or town, shaded areas show dominant party in rural and unpopulated areas.

Northwestern Syria

Northwestern Syria, including the governorates of Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Latakia, and Tartous, continues to encompass the largest area of opposition control. Since late 2014, the area has witnessed an important change following the reported détente amongst key “Friends of Syria” states, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. Following the diplomatic thaw, support efforts have shifted slowly from competition to tentative cooperation. While in many cases support remains unilateral, and marred by personal relationships and favoritism, the common objective of pressuring the government has taken precedence in several locales. The shift has led to rapid advances by opposition forces and Jabhat al Nusra (JAN) within multiple alliances and a reduction in infighting.

Idlib, Hama, and Latakia

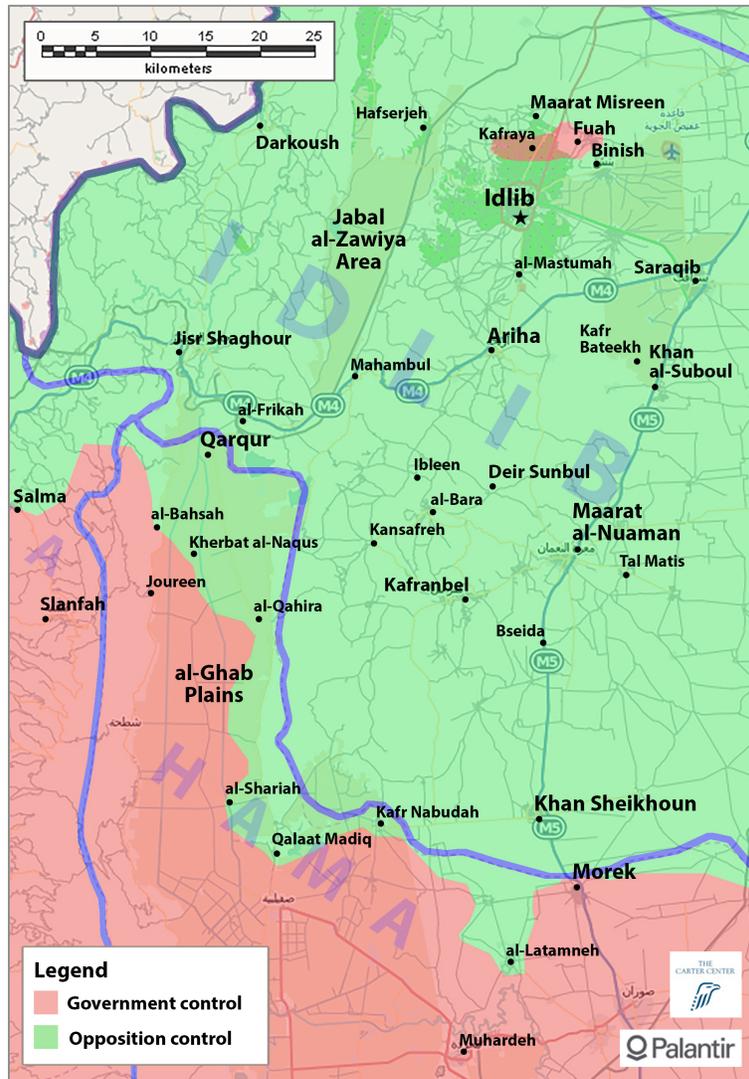


Figure 2: Areas of control in northwestern Syria as of late September 2015.

Since April 2015, four alliances have emerged in Idlib, Hama, and Latakia: the Jaysh al-Fatah operations room (Idlib and Hama), the al-Nasr campaign (Idlib and Latakia), the Tahrir Sahel al-Ghab campaign (Hama), and the Jaysh al-Nasr operations room (Hama). Led by JAN and Ahrar al-Sham, with purported Turkish and Qatari support, the Jaysh al-Fatah operations room (Jaysh al-Fatah) and closely related al-Nasr campaign represent the dominant strike force of northwestern Syria, though all four alliances have worked in concert to achieve collective goals. In Hama, the Tahrir Sahel al-Ghab campaign and Jaysh al-Nasr operations room (Jaysh al-Nasr) have arisen as ancillary alliances seemingly aiming to assist opposition efforts in Idlib. They are also local attempts to shore up support for several local Hama groups, most of whom rely on support from the Friends of Syria through the Turkey-based Military Operations Center (MOC) or various other semi-official channels.

The Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room

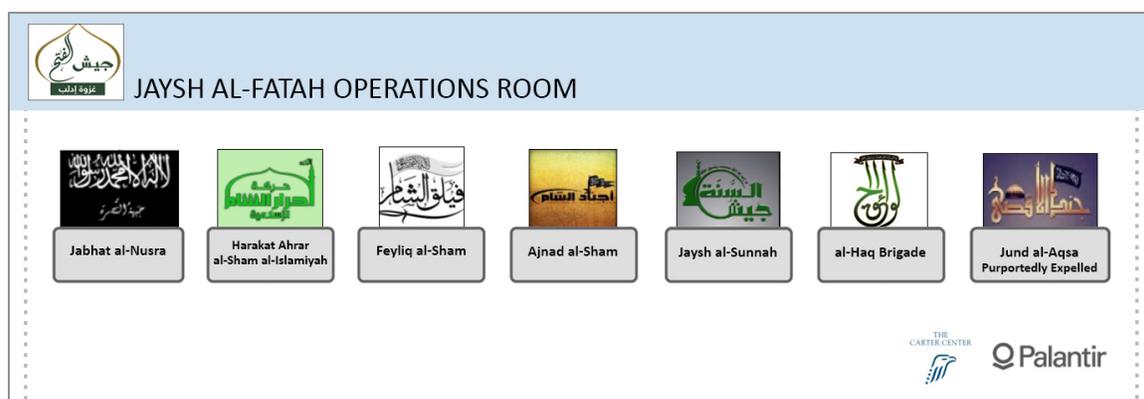


Figure 3: Members of the Jaysh al-Fatah operations room.

Jaysh al-Fatah has been the largest in size and scope of the recent alliances. Led by JAN and Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Fatah was formed from seven Islamist groups which represent a geographically and ideologically diverse force. The only commonality amongst participants is their purported links to Turkey, Qatar, or JAN. Tasked with expelling government forces from southern Idlib and northern Hama, Jaysh al-Fatah has been successful. For its inaugural offensive in late March, Jaysh al-Fatah expelled government forces from Idlib city after just five days of fighting. Idlib became the second provincial capital to fall from government control.

Following the victory in Idlib city, Jaysh al-Fatah continued to push southwest along the M4 highway. At the same time, resources shifted to the al-Nasr campaign to capture Jisr al-Shughur and cut off government supply lines. After the fall of Jisr al-Shughur, efforts were refocused to Jaysh al-Fatah's area of operations south of Idlib city, and Jaysh al-Fatah quickly gained control of al-Mastumah and Ariha by the end of May.

By August, after a brief lull in the fighting, Jaysh al-Fatah forces began to push southwest into the al-Ghab plain. Over the course of two weeks, Jaysh al-Fatah had expelled government forces from the northern quarter of al-Ghab plain, placing the government's stronghold of Latakia and Tartous under increasing pressure from the east.

The al-Nasr Campaign

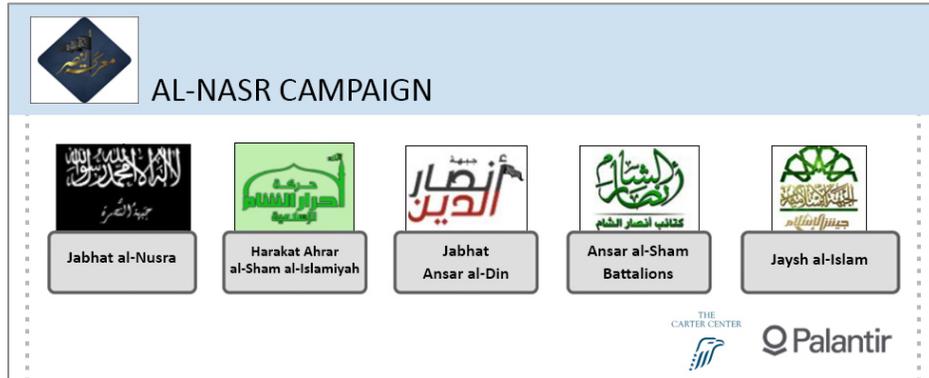


Figure 4: Members of the al-Nasr Campaign.

Initiated in late April, and with a similar makeup to Jaysh al-Fatah, the al-Nasr campaign was charged with expelling government forces from Jisr al-Shughur and the surrounding areas. Campaign forces, in cooperation with several other armed opposition groups, were able to gain control of Jisr al-Shughur city in under a week.

During the advance, approximately 250 government fighters and officials were surrounded by opposition forces and trapped in the Jisr al-Shughur National Hospital. After a three-week siege government forces were able to flee, but a large number were killed under heavy opposition fire.

The Tahrir Sahel al-Ghab Campaign



Figure 5: Principal members of the Tahrir Sahel al-Ghab campaign.

The Tahrir Sahel al-Ghab campaign began in mid-April, with the stated goal of expelling government forces from the al-Ghab plain of northwestern Hama. While it did include the

local contingent of Ahrar al-Sham, the campaign was led by a collection of approximately 10 local groups. Although the campaign did not make dramatic gains, it did begin to erode government control of the al-Ghab plain and cut a government supply line to the north, thereby aiding opposition efforts taking place in Idlib.

The Jaysh al-Nasr Operations Room

Jaysh al-Nasr was formed in early August to pressure government forces in Hama south of the al-Ghab plain and north of Hama city. With a similar composition to the Tahrir Sahel al-Ghab campaign, it appears to again be aiding the larger Jaysh al-Fatah as it advances in the north and holding off government advance around al-Latamneh



Figure 6: Principal members of the Jaysh al-Nasr operations room as of late September 2015.

In five months, dramatic advances have enabled the opposition, JAN, and several Al Qaida (AQ) affiliates to consolidate control of the Idlib governorate. In doing so they have placed the government heartland in Latakia and Hama under pressure for the first time since March 2014. Despite this, opposition and JAN advances in the area have slowed after butting up against a natural demographic line in the al-Ghab plain, which is home to a large number of minority communities. While the last government-held base in Idlib fell to JAN control in September, opposition and JAN attempts to take the last two government-held towns in the governorate, Fuah and Kafraya, were unsuccessful and ultimately resulted in reciprocal ceasefires including both towns and the opposition held town of Zabadani in rural Damascus.

At the same time, territorial advances made by the opposition and JAN have not lessened the hardship on civilian residents in opposition controlled areas. Hopes that Idlib city would emerge as a model of opposition administration to be emulated by the rest of the governorate and elsewhere, have largely been dashed. Government forces have continued to drop barrel bombs on the city and most other areas taken during the offensive, intra-opposition talks on administration of the city have faltered, and reports of systematic looting have emerged. While the territorial loss was humiliating for the government, the result has been a blemish for the opposition. As advances began to slow and armed groups failed to consolidate control, infighting and instability have persisted.

This worrying trend for the opposition has actually been helped by Russia’s intervention. Under pressure from aerial bombardment and an advance by government forces aimed at northern Hama, alliances (notably between JAN, Ahrar al-Sham, and the Homs Legion in northern Homs) have formed in recent days. This pressure, combined with increased popular support in the face of Russia’s intervention could have a rallying effect on opposition forces in the area and bring additional unity between groups in central Syria.

Aleppo

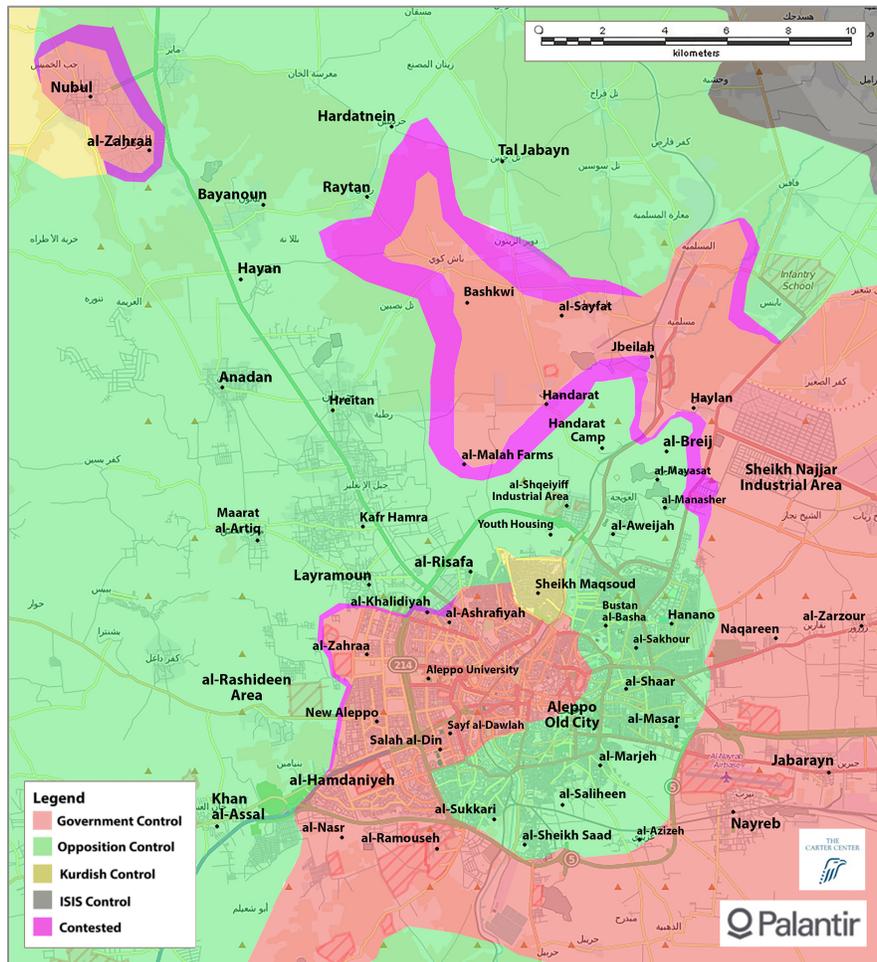


Figure 7: Areas of control in Aleppo city as of late September 2015.

Since April 2015, an important opposition alliance has emerged in Aleppo, the Fatah Halab operations room. While intra-opposition disputes have historically plagued the armed opposition, they have been especially acute in Aleppo. External and internal factors have contributed to the decline of most large local alliances: the al-Tawheed Brigade, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, and the Levantine Front. Thus, in what appears to be an attempt to avoid previous mistakes, Fatah Halab was formed as a loose coalition to increase coordination amongst disparate member groups. Importantly it has refrained from organizational mergers. Since its establishment it has made gradual gains in northwestern Aleppo city and helped slow the ISIS advance in northern Aleppo.



Figure 8: Principal members of the Fatah Halab operations room as of late September 2015.

The Fatah Halab Operations Room

Established in late April, Fatah Halab includes more than 30 armed opposition groups. Membership encompasses all major Aleppo based groups, which since the creation of Fatah Halab have either reentered the MOC after a fall out in late 2014 or entered the MOC for the first time. Fatah Halab also includes several Idlib based groups supported by the MOC. These groups have developed an increasingly robust presence in Aleppo,

following near total collapse in late 2014 after they were targeted in Idlib by JAN. Importantly the operations room excludes JAN, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and Ahrar al-Sham.

Likely as a reaction to the growing strength of Fatah Halab, JAN and several opposition groups formed the Ansar al-Shariah operations room in early July. The operations room does not appear to have continued past July, and many of its members have since joined Fatah Halab, while some smaller groups have merged with JAN.

Fatah Halab has made gradual gains around Aleppo city since April. In July, members placed significant pressure on western Aleppo city, taking the Scientific Research Center, as well as parts of the al-Khalidiyeh and Jamaat al-Zahraa neighborhoods temporarily. Further efforts have been weakened as troops were forced to redeploy to the north in order to block ISIS advances into opposition controlled territory north of the city. Opposition forces from Fatah Halab, alongside Ahrar al-Sham, have been struggling to hold the approximately 33 mile (54 kilometer) frontline with ISIS, however poor coordination and a lack of coalition air support have led to heavy opposition losses and the partial ISIS encirclement of the northern city of Mare', an important opposition stronghold. The ISIS advance places the group approximately 11 miles (18 kilometers) from the principal opposition supply route to Aleppo city.

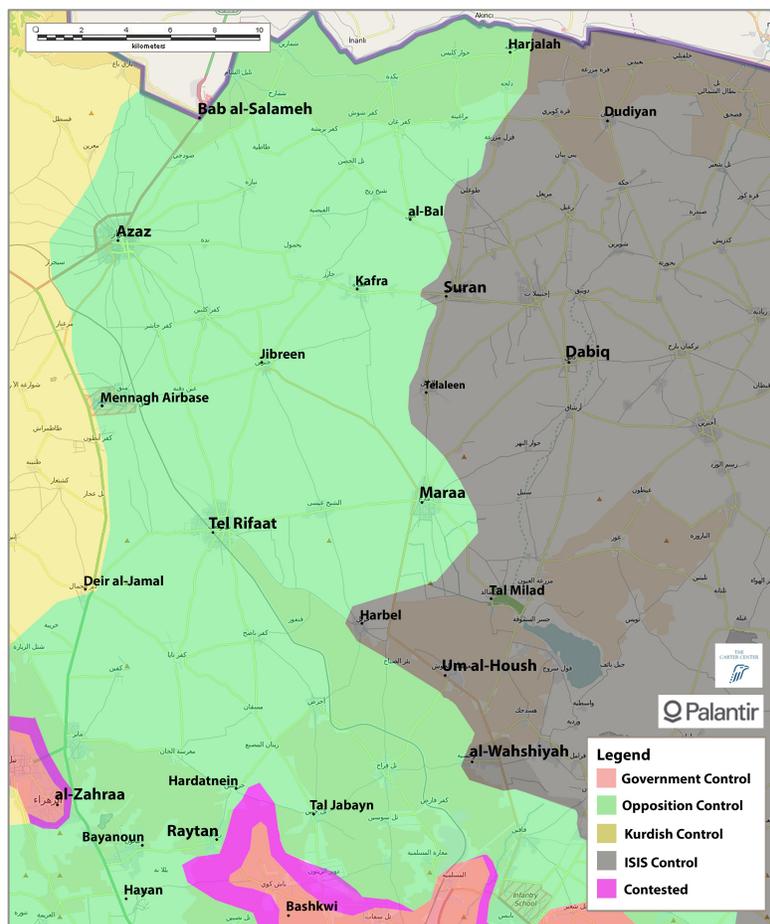


Figure 9: Areas of control in northern Aleppo as of late September 2015.

International Support

Supporting an alliance of relatively moderate armed opposition forces in northern Syria, such as Fatah Halab, appears to be an increasing priority for the northern MOC, especially as Turkey seeks to establish a “safe zone” in northern Aleppo. While US led Train and Equip efforts have failed and Turkey continues to support various groups unilaterally, including Ahrar al-Sham, Aleppo has provided the northern MOC a set of relatively moderate forces to be used to fight the government, combat the ISIS, and resist JAN efforts to expand its presence in the governorate.

Although Fatah Halab may bear some resemblance to the Southern Front, and appear as a nascent effort by the MOC to develop a northern counterpart, there are significant differences between the two alliances. Unlike the southern MOC (see below), the northern MOC enjoys little command and control over recipients of support. Much of this can be attributed to two factors: persistent disagreement amongst member states of the northern MOC and the historically independent nature of Aleppo groups.

Without clear directives from the northern MOC, members of Fatah Halab have relied on ad-hoc sub-alliances to coordinate efforts. Such was the case for the opposition’s advances in western Aleppo, when several Fatah Halab member groups organized the Ezzat Halab campaign. Elsewhere, particularly along frontlines against the ISIS north of the city, Fatah Halab members and Ahrar al-Sham have been unable to establish a coherent unified command.

Southern Syria

Southern Syria, including the governorates of Daraa, Quneitra, Suweida, Rural Damascus, and Damascus, has witnessed opposition advances slow in recent months. In Daraa and Quneitra opposition efforts have stalled in Daraa city and opposition forces have only managed to secure minor advances in Quneitra. Meanwhile, pockets of opposition control in and around Damascus have been placed under increasing pressure from government forces. Despite several small scale opposition advances in September, the government remains in firm control of the capital and the surrounding areas. In Suweida, the majority Druze population’s tepid pro-government stance has shown signs of strain. The government is currently suspected of having carried out the September assassination of Sheikh Wahid Baalous, one of its most outspoken critics in Suweida, and has been largely unable to reverse the tide of anti-government sentiment.

Daraa and Quneitra

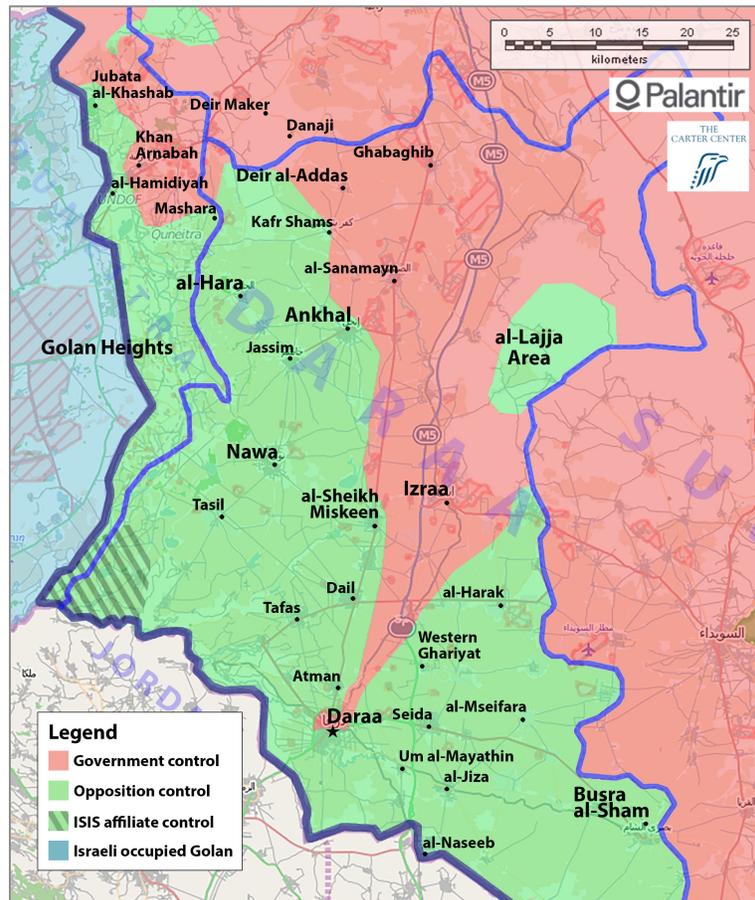


Figure 10: Areas of control in southern Syria as of late September 2015.

Almost entirely surrounded by opposition forces, government control of the northern half of Daraa city has remained a major obstacle to opposition efforts to consolidate control of the governorate. Thus in late June, southern opposition forces announced the commencement of the Southern Storm campaign to take full control of Daraa city. The campaign was led by Southern Front member groups, and included forces from JAN, Ahrar al-Sham, and Harakat al-Muthana.

With the swift fall of Idlib city just two months prior and the southern opposition's steady advances since 2014, many believed Daraa would fall to opposition hands in a matter of weeks. However from the outset, the campaign was plagued by difficulties. Internally the campaign was mired by information leaks, poor coordination, and tensions between opposition forces from Daraa city and those from surrounding areas. Faced with intense aerial bombardment and government reinforcements, opposition forces sustained heavy losses and two of the campaign's seven operations rooms completely collapsed.

By early August the Southern Storm campaign was halted, only to resume two weeks later. Despite reports that the MOC had approved a resumption of the campaign, it has not yet provided opposition forces the level of support necessary to take the city.

Consequently, as of mid-September the campaign once again effectively stalled. Meanwhile opposition forces throughout the south have refocused efforts to pressure government positions in northern Quneitra, in an attempt to break the government’s siege of western Ghouta. As of late September, the opposition has seen initial successes in these operations.

The Status of Southern Opposition Forces

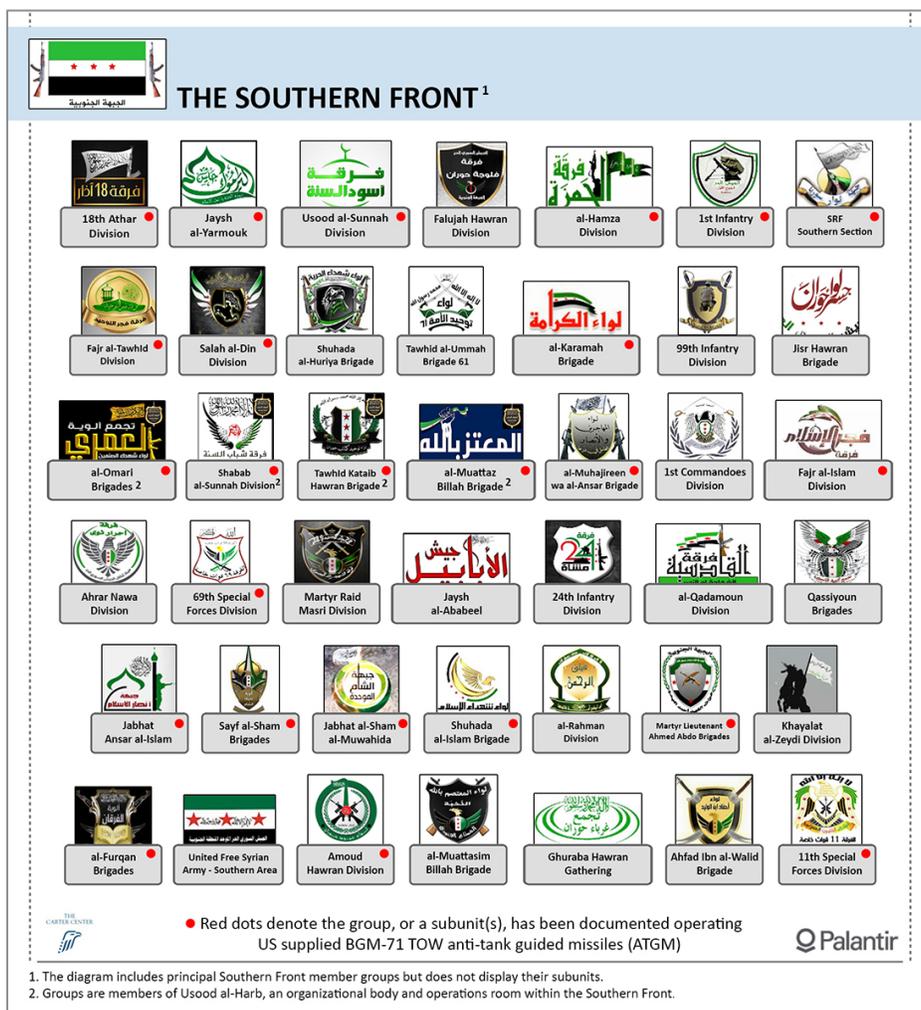


Figure 11: Principal members of the Southern Front as of late September 2015.

The failure of the highly anticipated assault on Daraa city has brought internal issues of the Southern Front to the fore. Beginning in late 2014, MOC efforts to overhaul the Southern Front into a more unified, effective force, have worked to create and exacerbate rivalries among member groups, and have led to significant local mistrust of the MOC. The imposed replacement of commanders and preferential support for groups under new leadership has marginalized large segments of the Southern Front. Meanwhile three of the Southern Front’s largest alliances, which were seen as an important step towards unifying the alliance’s 50 disparate members, have fallen apart. As of September the alliance appeared to be in the most tenuous position of its two year history.

ISIS in the South

While the creation and development of Southern Front has reduced the presence of JAN in the South, ISIS has become an increasing threat. As isolated reports emerge of small scale defection to ISIS and weapons sales between Southern Front member groups and ISIS, the ISIS affiliated Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade has remained in firm control of the southwestern corner of the Daraa governorate. Repeated efforts by JAN and Ahrar al-Sham to unseat the group have been unsuccessful, and Southern Front member groups have largely not engaged the group on orders from the MOC. Elsewhere, Harakat al-Muthana and Jamaat Beit al-Muqdis continue to operate unhindered, despite being viewed by many in the south as ISIS affiliates.

Conclusion

While it is still too early to effectively evaluate what impact Russia's intervention will have on the conflict, several trends are already clear. Opposition groups, which had been suffering from stagnation, have received a boost in popularity, an influx of materiel support, and have already further unified in some areas; emboldened government forces have begun offensives to push back in areas of recent opposition gains; and nascent political efforts have been set back.

Given the current status of front lines and the direction of new government offensives, it appears likely that central Syria will again be the focal point for the conflict in the coming weeks. Government forces, hoping to regain ground and consolidate control where possible, have already begun offensives in Hama, and the pocket of opposition control in northern Homs governorate has been one of the primary targets for Russian aerial bombardment.

Ultimately, the Syrian conflict will not be ended by military means alone, and offensives fueled by Russian support cannot be sustained indefinitely. Clearly, Russia's intervention has strengthened the Syrian government's hand and is likely to raise the level of violence in the west of the country. The question of Russia's intervention – or Iran's for that matter – becomes even more clearly a question of what deal can be reached between regional and international backers of both the government and opposition. With few examples of successful collaboration to draw on, the question for Syria then becomes how many more escalations can the country sustain?

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