

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

December 7-13, 2017

A political standoff is due to come to a head in the opposition-held Idlib pocket with the HTS-backed Salvation Government calling for the rival Syrian Interim Government (SIG) to vacate all offices by Friday, December 15. The SIG has called on units affiliated with the Free Syrian Army to protect SIG personnel and offices. Elsewhere, ISIS forces in eastern Hama governorate significantly expanded their territorial control, gaining ground against Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra). ISIS captured at least seven small towns from HTS, briefly entering the administrative border of Idlib governorate before being pushed back by an HTS counteroffensive. ISIS advances in the area have benefitted from heavy Russian and government aerial bombardment of opposition forces as well as a simultaneous government offensive 15km to the west of ISIS positions. Government troop movements in the area are poised for a major offensive – most likely in an effort to take the Abu Duhur air base and gain control over the Hama-Aleppo highway.

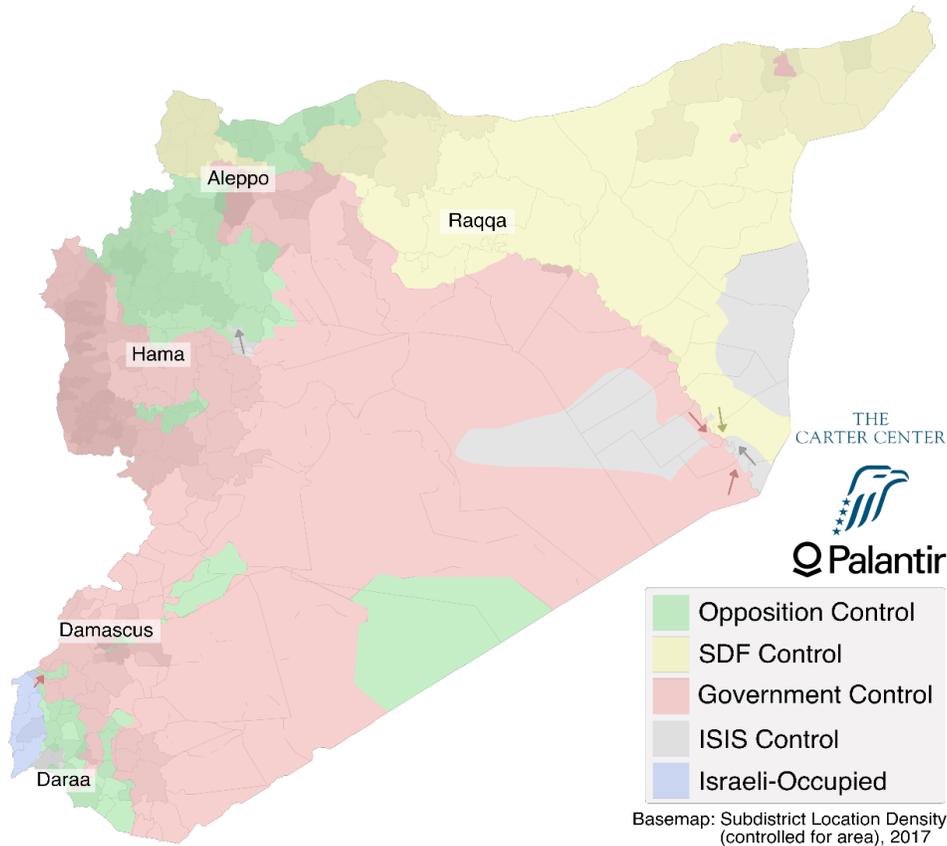


Figure 1 - Areas of control as of December 13, 2017. Arrows indicate advances made during the reporting period.

Southern Syria

Clashes continued near the Golan Heights in the area around Tal Bardiyeh throughout the past week, with pro-government forces re-taking control of Tal Bardiyeh on December 9. The area has seen repeated back-and-forth territorial advances and large-scale use of surface-to-surface rockets. Also, there have been reports of new Iranian-backed forces (including Hezbollah) arriving in the area, though these reports have yet to be confirmed.

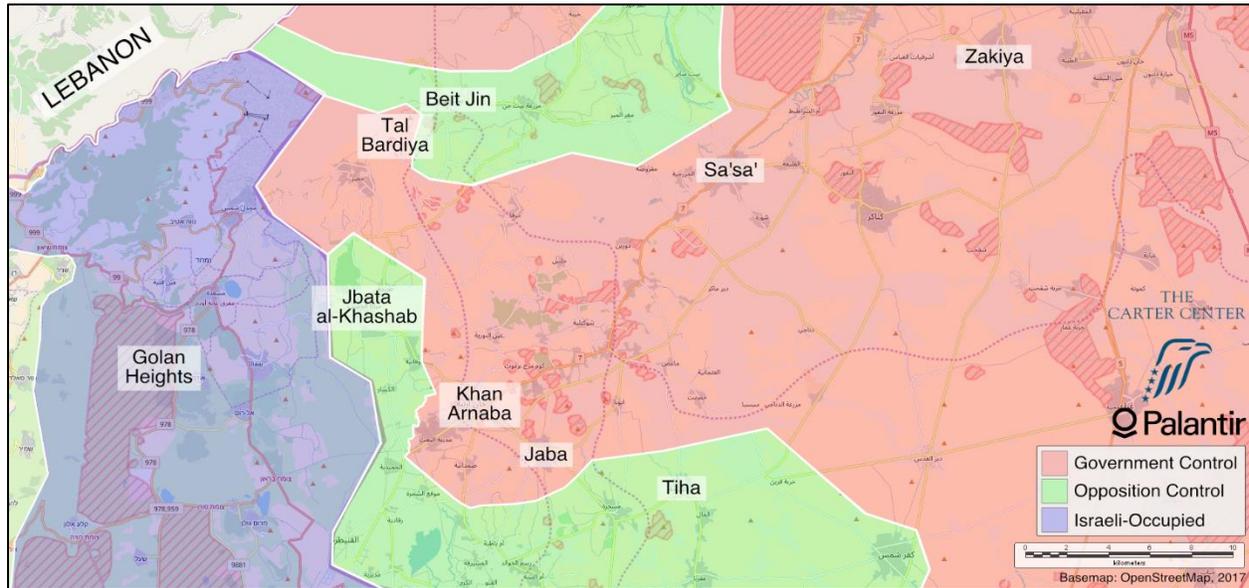


Figure 2 - Frontlines around Beit Jin by December 13

Clashes have continued in Harasta on the outskirts of Damascus city as well, primarily between Ahrar al-Sham and pro-government forces. Despite a reportedly high casualty rate on this front line, no territorial changes have been reported. Also, in Eastern Ghouta, Faylaq al-Rahman clashed with Liwa' Abu Musa al-Ashaari, an opposition armed group that separated from Faylaq al-Rahman over a year ago. The clashes began on December 11, and the reason for the clashes remains unknown.¹

The intensity of aerial bombardments targeting Eastern Ghouta has lessened somewhat during this reporting period, though air raids still continue.

Eastern Syria

This week, ISIS forces took a swathe of territory in the Lower Euphrates River Valley near Iraq's border, reconnecting two previously separated pockets of control. Pro-government forces on the southern/western bank of the Euphrates were pushed back to the southeast of Abu Hamam (see map below).

¹ عنب بلدي. "اشتباكات بين "فيلق الرحمن" ولواء انشق عنه سابقاً في الغوطة." عنب بلدي. December 11, 2017. Accessed December 14, 2017. <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/190506>.

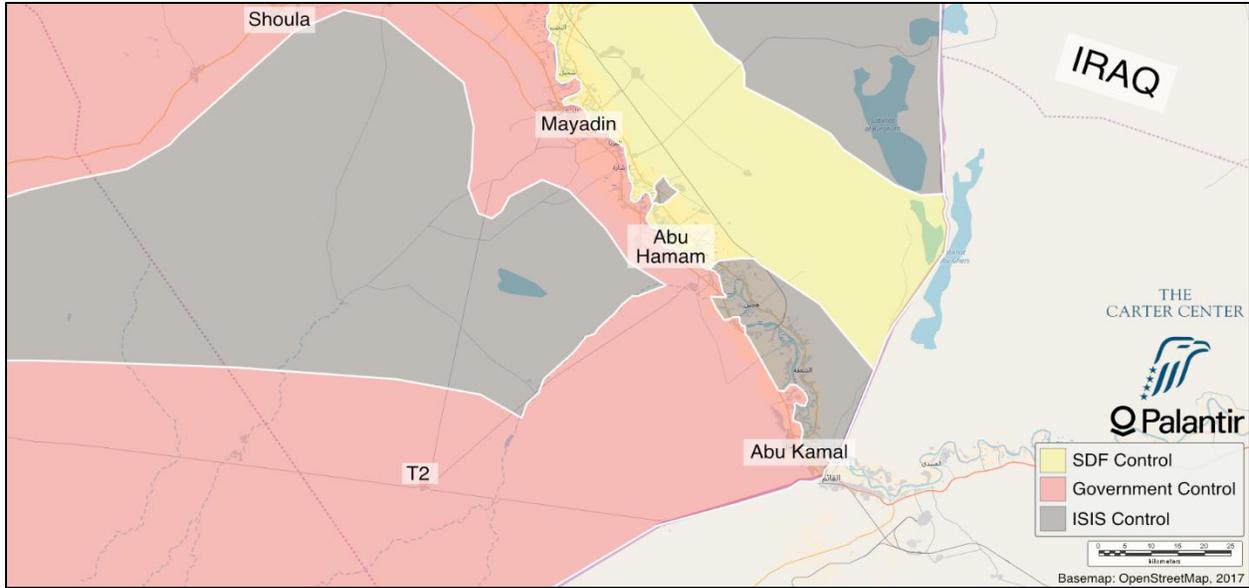


Figure 3 - Situation in eastern Syria by December 13

Hama updates

Throughout the assessment period, HTS and ISIS have clashed in northeast Hama, during which ISIS achieved a significant advance, nearly doubling its territory by expanding to the north and west. ISIS forces briefly advanced into Idleb governorate before an HTS counter-offensive halted their progress. ISIS forces in eastern Hama were reportedly aided by a convoy of ISIS “sleeper” cells from Idleb, who clashed with HTS fighters at checkpoints to the north before retreating back into the Idleb countryside.

ISIS advances were also aided by Syrian and/or Russian planes bombing HTS positions along front lines with ISIS. Airstrikes in the area have been intense, but have so far not targeted any ISIS-held territory.

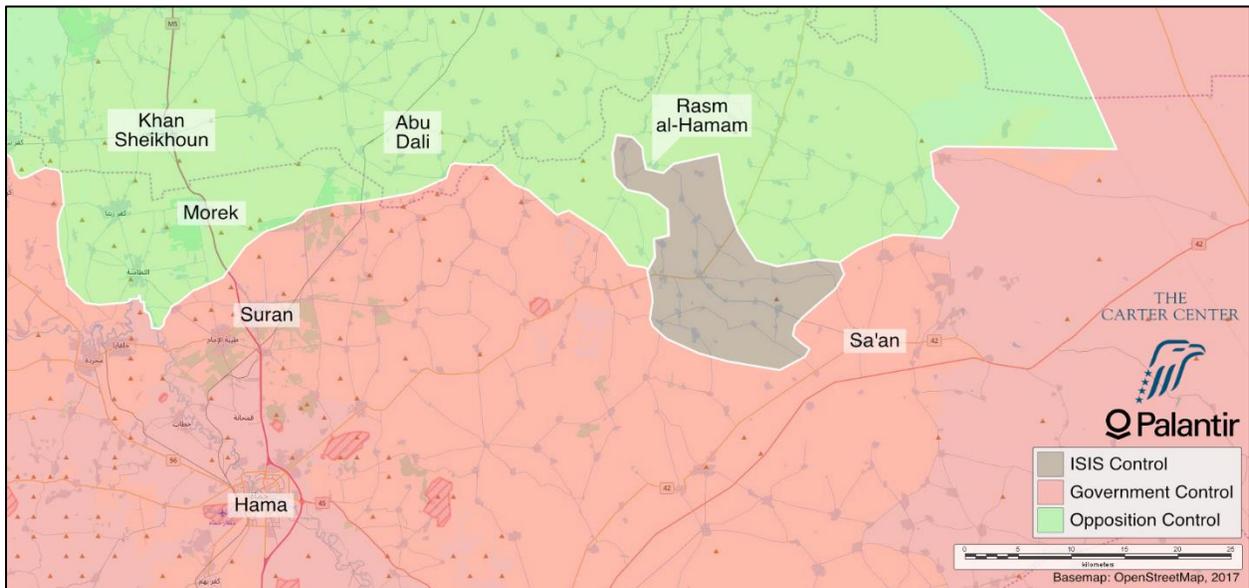


Figure 4 - Situation in northeastern Hama by December 13

Opposition developments

On December 11, leaders of four major opposition groups in Idleb, Abu Mohammad al Golani from HTS, Hassan Soufan from Ahrar al-Sham, Abu Saleh Tahhan from Jaish al-Ahrar, and Tawfiq Shihab al-Din from Nour al-Din al-Zinki (NDZ), met in the presence of prominent scholars Abdullah al-Mohaysni and Al Sheikh Musleh Ulyani to formulate a response to the advances in eastern Hama and encroachment on opposition territory in Idleb. The meeting resulted in the following agreements:²

- The formation of a shared operations room and military coordination,
- The ending of outstanding issues between NDZ and HTS
- The release of all prisoners between all groups (including up to eight Ahrar al-Sham commanders, likely detained by HTS during clashes earlier this year)
- The gradual restoration by HTS of the “rights” of the groups Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Ahrar, likely referencing the return of property seized by HTS

Meanwhile, tensions have increased significantly in the interior of the opposition-controlled territories in northern Syria (excluding territory captured by Turkish-backed opposition forces during the Euphrates Shield operation against ISIS) between the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government on one side and multiple elected local councils and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) on the other.

The Salvation Government, operating in territories directly or effectively under the control of HTS, announced its intention to dissolve current local councils in multiple towns, and hold new local council elections. The local council in Ariha, Idleb has refused the order to disband and hand over authority to an interim local council. The Ariha Local Council asserts that only Ariha residents can make the decision to dissolve the current local council. The local council in Maarat al Nu’aman has also rejected the legitimacy of the decision by the Salvation Government to call for new elections.

The Salvation Government's call for new local council elections comes shortly after it announced a wish to subsume the SIG, restructure the SIG's Ministry of Defense, and create a unified military body. After this initiative was rejected by the SIG, the Salvation Government issued a demand for the SIG to vacate all offices and possessions by Friday, December 15. The SIG has called on the Free Syrian Army to defend SIG staff and property.

² الشامية, الدرر. "بعضور" الجولاني و"صوفان" .. "الدرر الشامية" تكشف تفاصيل اجتماع 4 فصائل بالشمال المُحرَّر. "الدرر الشامية". December 11, 2017. Accessed December 14, 2017. <http://eldorar.com/node/116699>.