

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
March 2-8, 2017

On March 2, the Manbij Military Council (MMC), an entity within the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), announced they would be transferring control of many localities along the frontline with the Turkey-backed Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) to the Syrian government. On March 3, the Syrian government and some Russian ground forces began to move into these locations, forming a buffer on the northern and western frontlines of the SDF-held Manbij pocket west of the Euphrates. By March 5, Russian and American forces became the primary foreign forces present within these areas previously held solely by the SDF.

US special forces are very visible within the MMC-controlled area, especially in areas northwest of Manbij. The US has nearly doubled the number of troops deployed in Syria, as the Trump administration announced plans to send the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines to provide artillery support to the SDF for their offensive to Raqqa in the coming months.

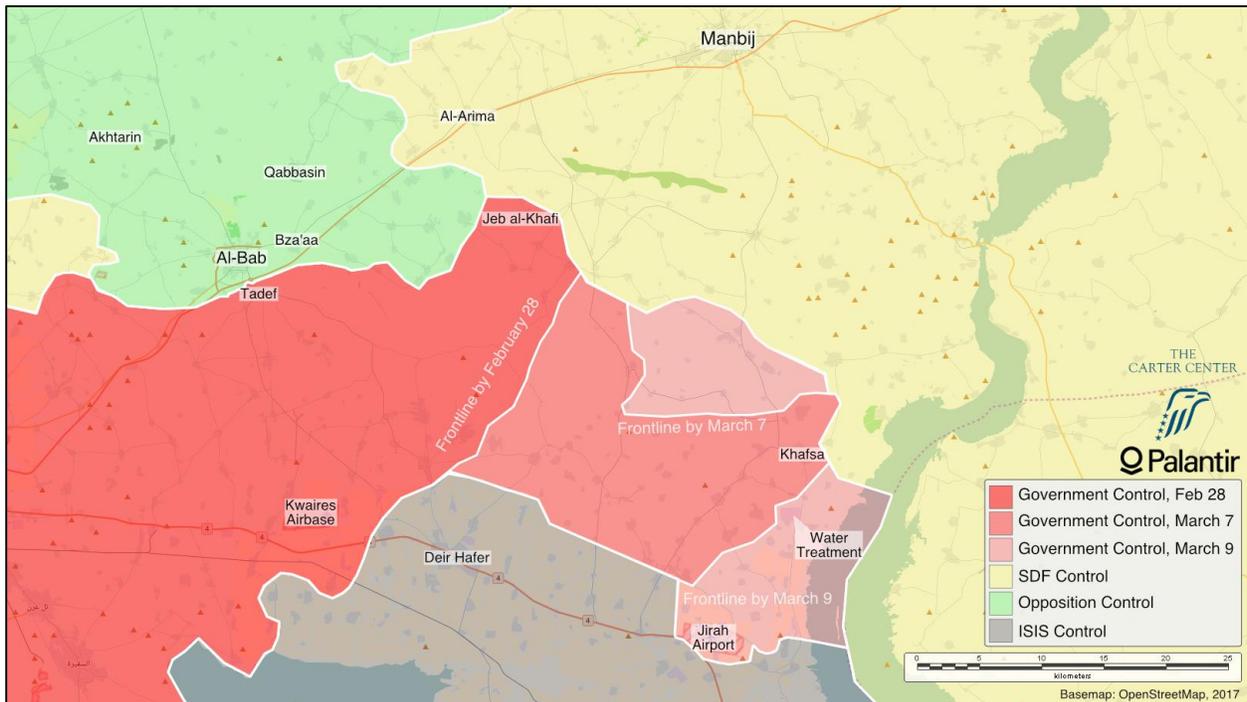


Figure 1 - Pro-government advances south of Al-Bab between February 28 and March 9, 2017

South of Manbij and Al-Bab, The Syrian Government's Tiger Forces advanced eastwards to the Euphrates River, clearing ISIS forces from villages along the way. Pro-government forces retook Khafsa and the water treatment plant on the edge of the Euphrates, opening new water flows into Aleppo that had

been closed for months due to ISIS. On March 9, pro-government forces also captured Jirah Airport to the south.

To the east, SDF fighters in Raqqa also advanced against ISIS, reaching the Euphrates river for the second time in as many weeks, and severing supply lines between Raqqa and Deir Ezzor on the north side of the Euphrates. On March 6, they pushed ISIS back to a point on the river 70km east of Raqqa and 50km northwest of Deir Ezzor. Frontlines within Deir Ezzor city, where the Syrian government continues to battle ISIS, remained stable.

On March 2, pro-government forces once again took Tadmor (Palmyra) from ISIS fighters. This was achieved by a coalition of pro-government militias backed by air support from the Syrian government, Russia, and increasingly by American warplanes.

During the preceding week, the ISIS affiliate Jaysh Khalid Ibn-Walid made gains in Syria's south. During the current reporting week, the group began to solidify control over their newly-held territory in Quneitra. The ISIS affiliate's gains have substantially expanded the amount of territory it controls. Battles between the opposition and pro-government forces in Daraa city just 15km away continued in moderate intensity.

Opposition infighting between Haiy'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Ahrar al-Sham reignited during the current reporting week. On March 2, HTS again called on opposition groups in Idlib to be absorbed into the organization. By the end of the day, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham clashed in Bab al-Hawa, Maarat Misrin, Saraqeb, and Shalakh. In all cases, HTS initiated the conflict. New clashes erupted later in the week, followed by an agreement regarding fighting in the town of al-Mastoumeh, though tensions remain extremely high. Even after the most recent ceasefire deal, clashes between the groups broke out once more in the Jebel al-Zawiya region, which has been a key flashpoint for weeks in the ongoing battle between HTS and Ahrar. Several assassination attempts failed against Ahrar fighters.

On March 4, opposition fighters in the Idlib pocket shot down a Syrian government plane. The plane crashed into Turkey where the pilot was taken to a hospital. Ahrar al-Sham claimed the downing.

Conflict has persisted between opposition and pro-government forces in the western countryside of Aleppo, especially on the frontlines west of Aleppo city around al-Rashidein and al-Zahraa. OES forces and Kurdish fighters from Afrin also fought along the A'zaz-Tall Refaat frontlines north of Aleppo city.

Hezbollah forces in Syria's south have shifted locations once more, redeploying to Arsal and Lebanon's south in conjunction with the Lebanese Armed Forces. Hezbollah presence in Syria on Lebanon's border remains high, and these movements have had a minimal effect on Hezbollah troop drawdown in the border areas.

Conclusions:

The current reporting week marks some key shifts in US policy in Syria. Not only have US elements upped their involvement alongside pro-government forces in Tadmor (Palmyra), but US forces have moved to defend SDF-held areas from OES forces in the north. Opposition strife in Idlib continues and ISIS once again lost significant territory, continuing a trend of rapid collapse in some areas of Syria.