

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

November 16-22, 2017

Pro-government forces continued their march against ISIS in Syria's east, advancing through the desert from previous holdings. After a period of violence, clashes between Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra) and Nour al-Din al-Zenki (NDZ) have stopped this week. A pro-government offensive into the southern frontlines of the opposition-held Idlib pocket afforded pro-government units small gains during the reporting week in advance of several impending peace conferences.

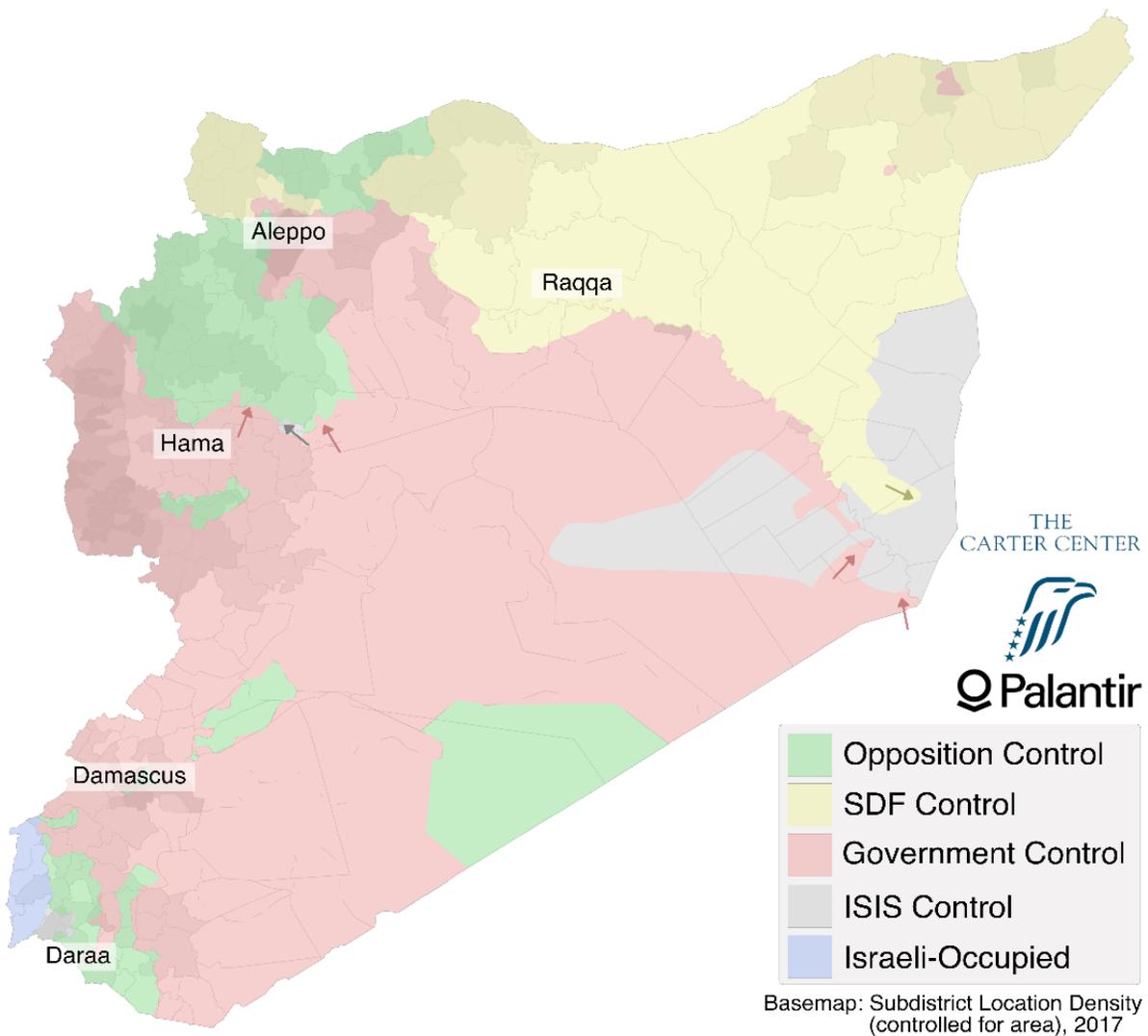


Figure 1 - Areas of control as of November 22, 2017. Arrows indicate advances made during the reporting period

Fight against ISIS

On November 19, pro-government forces succeeded in gaining control over the city of Abu Kamal in eastern Deir Ezzor governorate. The pro-government ground forces assaulting the city from the west were made up primarily of Syrian, Lebanese, and Iraqi Hezbollah units, as well as other Iranian-backed armed groups from Syria and Iraq. These forces were supported by airstrikes from Russian and Syrian warplanes, and by artillery fire from both pro-government positions inside Syria to the west of Abu Kamal and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU) positions across the border in Iraq. Little attempt was made on the part of international or pro-government media sources to disguise or downplay the dominant role of Iranian-backed forces in the operations around Abu Kamal.

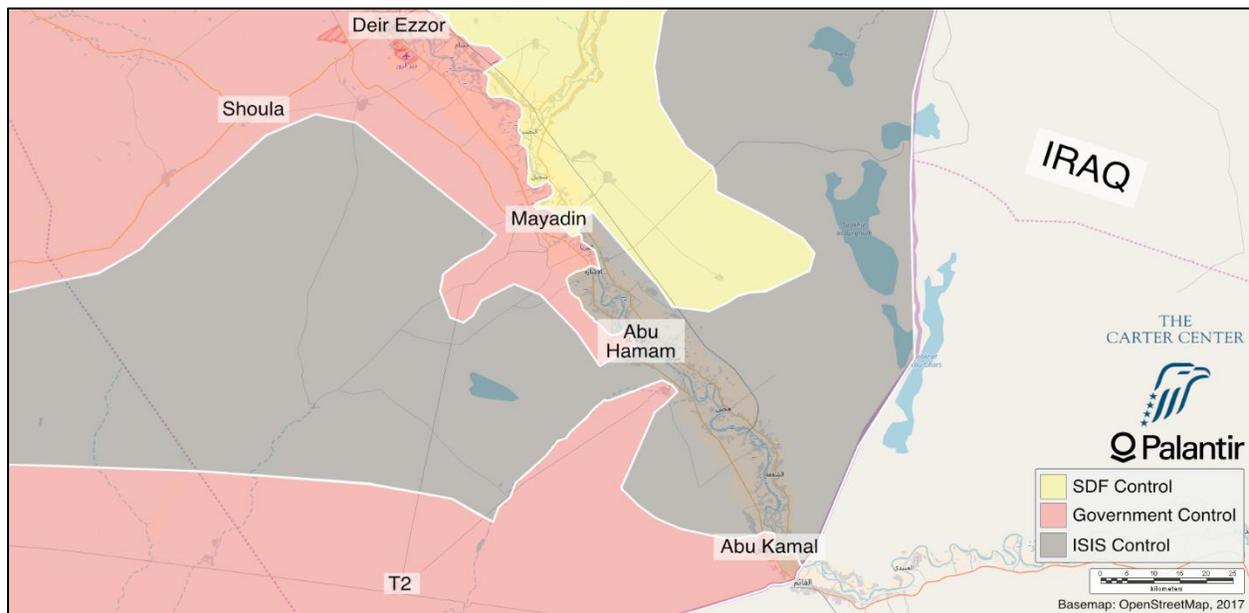


Figure 2 - Frontlines in eastern Syria by November 22

The Pentagon stated that they are planning on remaining in Syria after the defeat of ISIS, despite having previously stated that the US is only in Syria to fight ISIS. They claim that a continuing American presence will help prevent the rise of another similar group. The Syrian government and its allies have all called for the US to leave Syria, declaring its presence illegitimate.

Talal Silo, a leading figure of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), surrendered to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces near Jarablus on November 15. Following his surrender, Silo provided to Turkish intelligence information on the PYD and the situation in Afrin, a western canton still controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led coalition of forces in northern Syria).

Idleb pocket updates

On Nov 17, NDZ and HTS reached a ceasefire agreement, bringing a halt to ten days of wide-ranging clashes in western Aleppo countryside. The signing of the agreement was attended by representatives of Ahrar al Sham and Jaish al-Ahrar and mediated by Abdullah al-Moheisni and Musleh Mohamed al-Alyani, two prominent sheikhs. The agreement also included a statement calling both parties to form a joint-

operations room. Following the NDZ-HTS ceasefire, opposition leaders from NDZ, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham have met to discuss a joint operations room styled on the “Jaish al-Fateh” operations room of 2015.

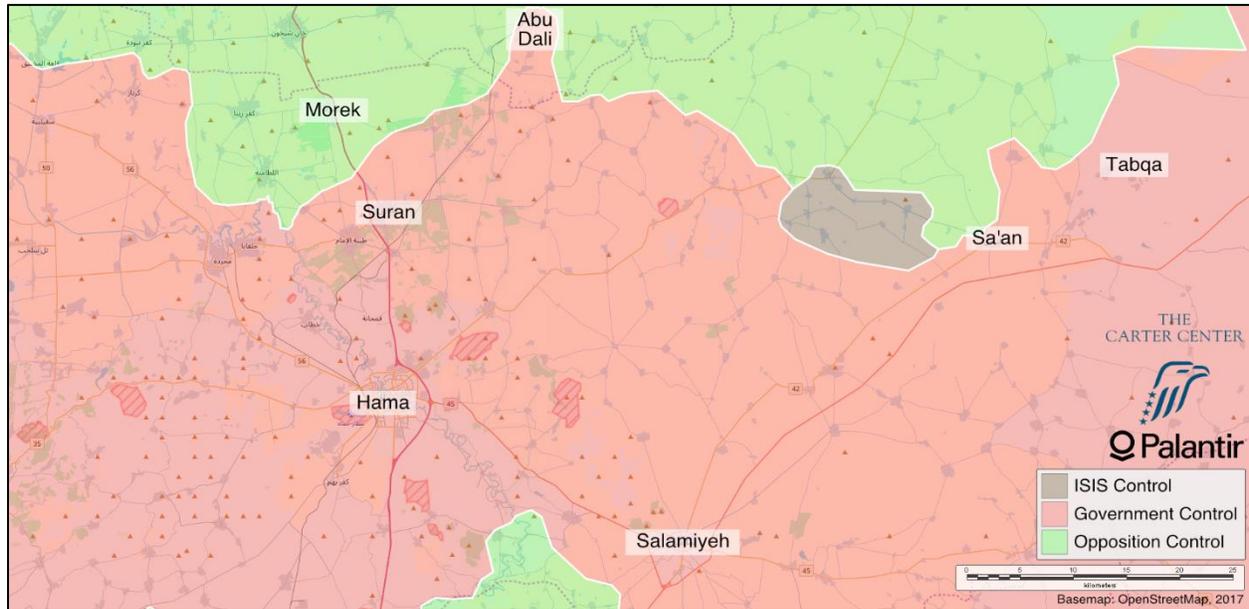


Figure 3 - Frontlines in northern Hama by November 22

A pro-government offensive in the northeast Hama countryside renewed this week, with initial success in advancement against opposition groups around Abu Dali. Units from the Syrian Armed Forces’ Fourth Armored Division are playing a prominent role in the area. Pro-government forces have also made slight gains in northeastern Hama.

On November 21, ISIS forces in northern Hama successfully launched an attack on HTS territory and are in full or partial control of an additional four to six towns, more than doubling their area of control. Clashes are ongoing.

Fighting between pro-government and HTS forces southwest of Khanaser continued this week. Pro-government forces, including National Defense Force (NDF) units, were unsuccessful in their attempt to capture al-Rashidiyah village.

Southern Syria

November 14 marked the beginning of ongoing clashes in Harasta between pro-government forces and the “Indeed They Were Wronged” (Wa innahum Dhalamou) operations room. The operations room is led by Ahrar al-Sham, though Faylaq al-Rahman is involved as well. The clash areas have been targeted by airstrikes throughout the week, but Ahrar al-Sham has managed to control territory near the al-Ajami neighborhood.

In addition to the clashes in Harasta, airstrikes have targeted the Eastern Ghouta for seven consecutive days, killing over 60 civilians. The increase in aerial bombardment coincided with the beginning of the clashes in Harasta, but Arbin, Misraba, Kafr Batna, and Douma were all targeted. The towns of Da’el and Kafr al-

Shams in Daraa have closed their crossings into government-held territory as a gesture of solidarity with the besieged towns of the Eastern Ghouta.

Jaysh al-Islam targeted ISIS positions on Beirut Street on November 20. Beirut Street is located between the Jaysh al-Islam-controlled town of Yalda and the ISIS-controlled portion of the Yarmouk Camp south of Damascus.

On November 19, Jaysh Ahrar al-Asha'ir announced that it had formed a new “military police,” a unit tasked with preserving order among the group. Jaysh Ahrar al-Asha'ir also announced a partnership with the courts in Houran to eliminate ISIS forces in the area. The partnership with the court system likely comes due to recent assassination attempts on military and court officials, as the court also seeks greater security for its judges.