

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

March 1-7, 2018

The Syrian government's bombardment of Eastern Ghouta continues, despite ceasefire attempts and UN Security Council Resolution 2401. Humanitarian aid deliveries have been repeatedly hindered by continuous violence, and have only delivered a fraction of the food and medical supplies agreed upon by all parties. The Turkish-led Operation Olive Branch achieved new gains during this reporting period. Turkish and allied opposition forces have pushed towards the city of Afrin from both the north and south, forcing the US and its Kurdish allies to declare a halt to ground operations against ISIS in eastern Syria.

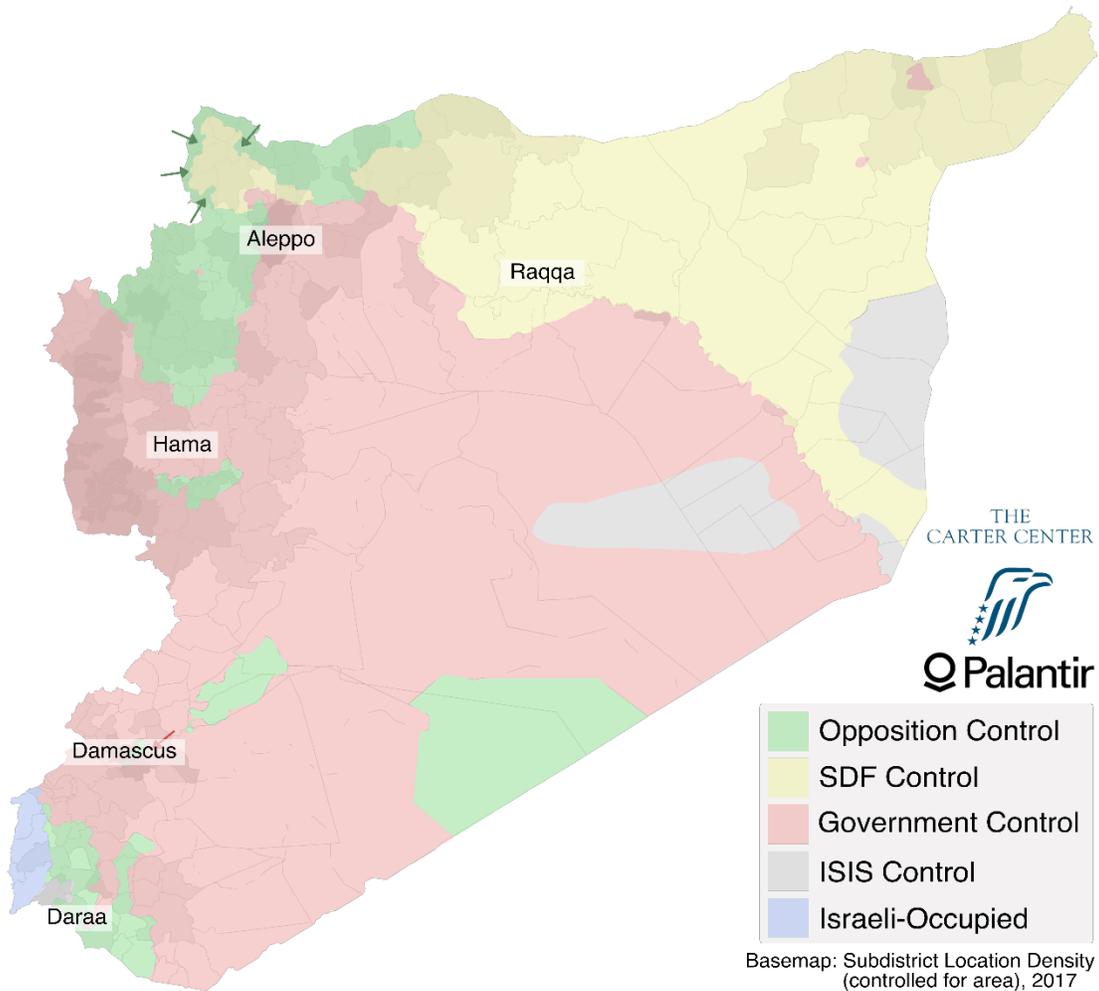


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by March 7, with arrows indicating fronts of advances during the reporting period

Eastern Ghouta

Despite a Russian plan for daily humanitarian pauses for the provision of aid and medical evacuations in opposition-held Eastern Ghouta, violence has continued throughout the reporting period. The bombardment of Damascus also continued from Eastern Ghouta. Russian officials have encouraged the use of humanitarian corridors for civilians to escape from Eastern Ghouta, however, residents do not trust that these corridors are safe, both due to mistrust in Russian and pro-government forces and fears that the opposition’s Jaysh al-Islam might shell the corridors.

After much debate and careful planning, a UN convoy of 46 trucks crossed the siege lines into Eastern Ghouta, where about 400,000 civilians remain besieged. Before entering Eastern Ghouta, though, pro-government officials removed critical health supplies aboard the convoy, including trauma kits, surgical equipment, dialysis sessions and insulin. The limited delivery that succeeded in reaching Eastern Ghouta was turned back because of clashes with only half of its food delivered. The UN has described the situation as desperate with “high rates of acute malnutrition observed,” and has called on all sides to respect humanitarian law and cease targeting civilian areas in both Eastern Ghouta and Damascus.

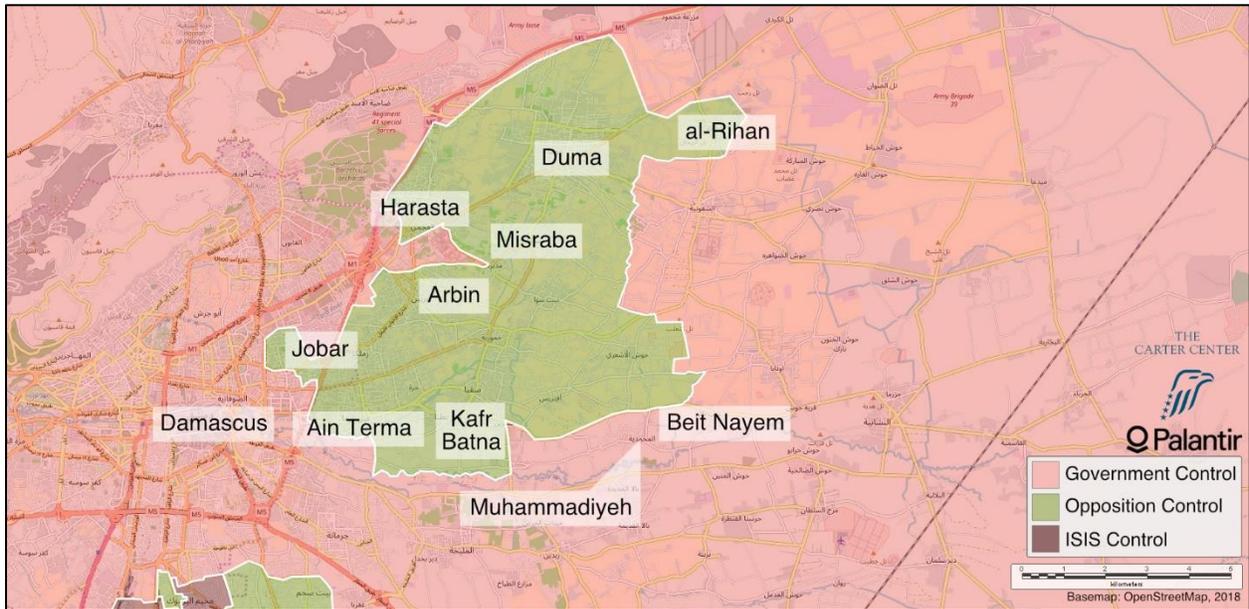


Figure 2 - Situation in Eastern Ghouta by March 7

Pro-government militias from Aleppo have arrived at the Eastern Ghouta front, joining the government’s “Tiger Forces,” who are leading the offensive. These newly-arriving fighters are from Shi’a militias of mixed national origin. The forces, accompanied by heavy air strikes, are concentrating their efforts on the town of Misraba, which, if taken, would divide the opposition-held enclave in two. Pro-government forces have taken about half of the opposition-held enclave since the start of the offensive, but have yet to enter the major urban centers on the outskirts of Damascus.

The Russian Ministry of Defense said on March 7 that some opposition forces in the Eastern Ghouta were ready to accept a Russian offer to leave with their families. They blamed opposition groups in the pocket for failures to evacuate the fighters. Opposition forces have voiced their own doubts about the legitimacy of the Russian offer.

Afrin

Though UN Security Council Resolution 2401 covers the whole of Syria, Turkish officials have largely ignored the ceasefire, saying it does not apply to their operations in Afrin. Despite ongoing fighting, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent have sent an aid convoy to Afrin with the agreement of all warring sides in the area.

Eight Turkish soldiers were killed and thirteen wounded in clashes on the first day of March, marking one of the deadliest days in Turkey's five-week-old offensive. At least 40 Turkish soldiers have been killed since the launch of the operation.

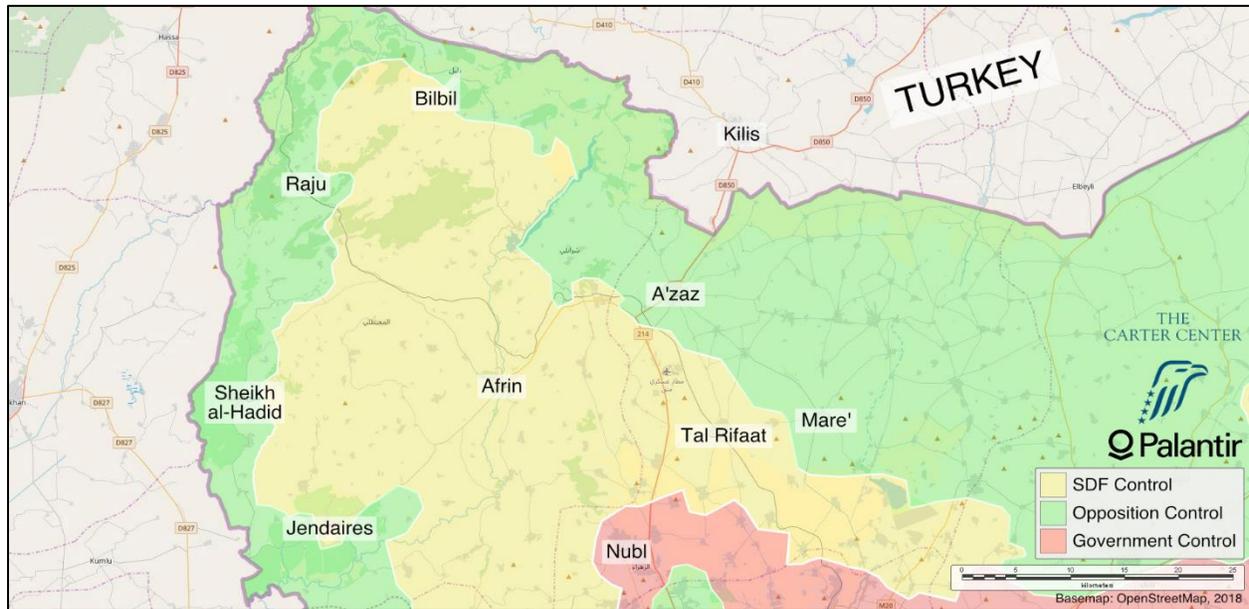


Figure 3 - Situation in northwestern Syria by March 7

Turkish warplanes bombed a small town to the north of Afrin, killing at least 36 fighters loyal to the Syrian government. Pro-government militia, including the National Defense Force (NDF) entered Afrin last week to support the Kurdish-led SDF, though no official agreement between the SDF and the Syrian government has been reached to commit pro-government units to this front. The attack was the third strike in 48 hours on pro-government forces in Afrin.

Due to the ongoing battles for Afrin, US-supported military operations in eastern Syria against ISIS have been placed on hold. Militias of the SDF, have diverted their resources to fight the Turkish intervention in Afrin. On March 5, a Pentagon spokesman acknowledged the “operational pause”, is only meant to apply to ground operations and did not extend to airstrikes. The Pentagon reasserted its support for the SDF, describing the group as key to the completion of operations against ISIS in Syria.

On March 6, approximately 1,700 fighters from SDF-affiliated Jaysh al-Thuwar, Jabhat al-Akrad, and Liwa al-Shamal reportedly left frontlines in Deir Ezzor to defend Afrin from the Turkish advance. The following day, Turkish officials called on the US to prevent the flow of SDF fighters to Afrin.

Given fears about the flows of new internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Afrin, the Turkish government aims to set up refugee camps in Idleb and northern Aleppo. These camps would be under the control of Turkish forces and their Syrian opposition allies, and would hold up to 170,000 IDPs in nine locations.