

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
January 26-February 1, 2017

Over the course of the week in review, developments in the relationship between Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) and Ahrar al-Sham in opposition-held Idleb have further solidified the opposition into two distinct camps. On the one hand, JFS announced a new merger under the name Ha'iyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), including groups that had previously pledged allegiance to JFS as well as some other major opposition groups. The merger includes new symbolism to be adopted by all members and the discarding of previous JFS symbols. Abu Mohamad al-Jolani, the leader of JFS, remains at the head of the new group. The new name and symbolism suggest that HTS is being organized as a single entity rather than a coalition.

Ahrar al-Sham, on the other hand, has gained a significant level of opposition support from the majority of remaining opposition groups in Idleb. These groups have pledged allegiance to Ahrar al-Sham and have been incorporated into Ahrar's shura council, with representation based on troop-count contribution. However, those included in the expanded shura council have maintained their own logos and branding.

The drama of the past month within Idleb led to HTS forces taking significant territory from Ahrar and Ahrar-aligned groups. Despite this, new pledges to Ahrar significantly outnumber the number of pledges to HTS and defections from Ahrar. Ahrar al-Sham is now easily the largest fighting force in Syria, though it will have to carefully manage its relationship to HTS in order to secure its support base in Idleb.

There has been an outburst of new protest movements across opposition-held Syria to express anti-JFS, anti-government, and anti-YPG sentiment over the course of the last two weeks of January. On January 25, JFS fighters fired on protesters in the town of al-Hilzun, located in northern Idleb, as they demonstrated against the group. The protest at al-Hilzun marks the first instance of retaliation against protestors by local fighters during this new round of protests.

In northern Rural Damascus, opposition fighters and their families were evacuated from the Wadi Barada area on January 30 after weeks of heavy conflict between opposition forces and Hezbollah and Syrian Arab Army forces surrounding the area. Repairs were then possible on the Ein al-Fijeh spring after a previous air strike had put it out of service. The Ein al-Fijeh spring provides water for millions in Rural Damascus and has been cut for over a month, sparking renewed humanitarian concerns for civilians in Damascus. The evacuation of opposition forces from Wadi Barada continues the trend of opposition-held areas around Damascus surrendering control to government forces following periods of siege.

In Deir Ezzor, pro-government forces have yet to regain territory lost to ISIS forces in the second half of January, though conflict on the frontlines of the city has been fierce. A reignited ISIS offensive on the Deir Ezzor Military Airport made some significant advances that were swiftly repelled by pro-government forces at the base.

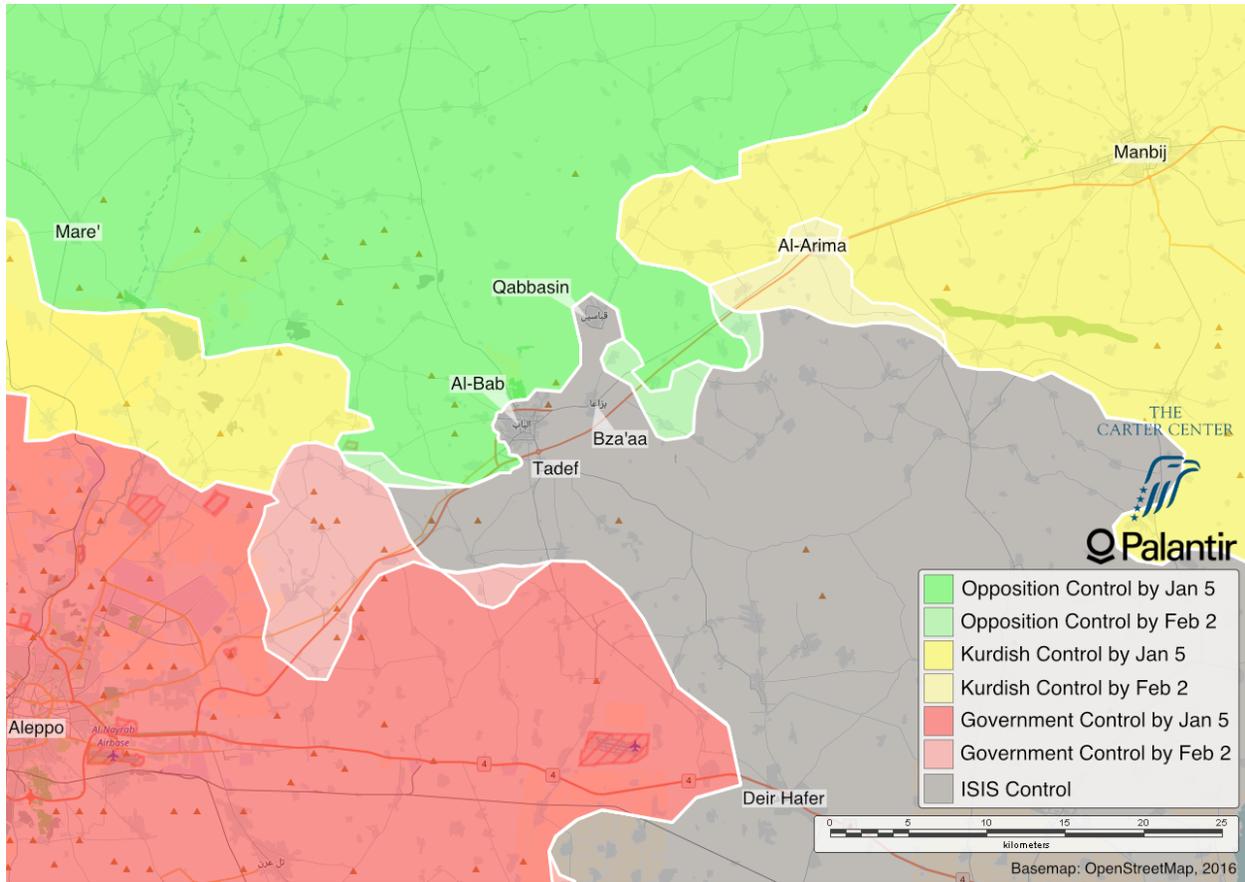


Figure 1 - Advances around Al-Bab during January 2017

On the al-Bab frontline, Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) forces have advanced slightly to the east of the town. Pro-government forces have advanced steadily northwards against ISIS fighters as they continue to make their way to al-Bab as well. The OES front to the west of al-Bab includes a heavy contingent of Turkish forces while the pro-government advance northwards has been carried out primarily by the Syrian army’s Tiger Forces.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) offensive for Raqqa, launched in November 2016, has been a difficult fight for SDF forces though they appear to be advancing overall. This has been an extremely volatile frontline in part due to the difficulty of defending the sparsely populated areas in contest. A final shipment of military hardware from the Obama administration arrived for SDF forces in the last week of January, in the form of armored SUVs. The continuation of shipments to SDF forces under the new administration in Washington remains unclear.

Conclusions:

Shifts in alliances and mergers between major opposition forces has created significant uncertainty in opposition-held Idleb. Meanwhile, the advance of pro-government and opposition forces towards the ISIS-held town of al-Bab raises questions on who will control the town should ISIS be defeated.