

THE CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary December 1-7, 2016

The battle for Aleppo continued into this week as pro-government forces advanced even further into previously-held opposition territory in East Aleppo. Initially, a major government offensive was repelled by an opposition counteroffensive, but a second pro-government offensive following this retreat gained even further ground than before. By December 7, opposition forces had withdrawn from Marjeh neighborhood in the southeast, al-Qaterji in the northeast, and the Old City in the north. Almost every neighborhood between these areas has also now been taken by pro-government forces, who are refocusing their efforts for the frontlines on Bustan al-Qasr, Salah ad-Din, and Sukkari (Figure 1). These frontlines are on the north and west of what remains of East Aleppo, a new primary axis after the advances of this past week.

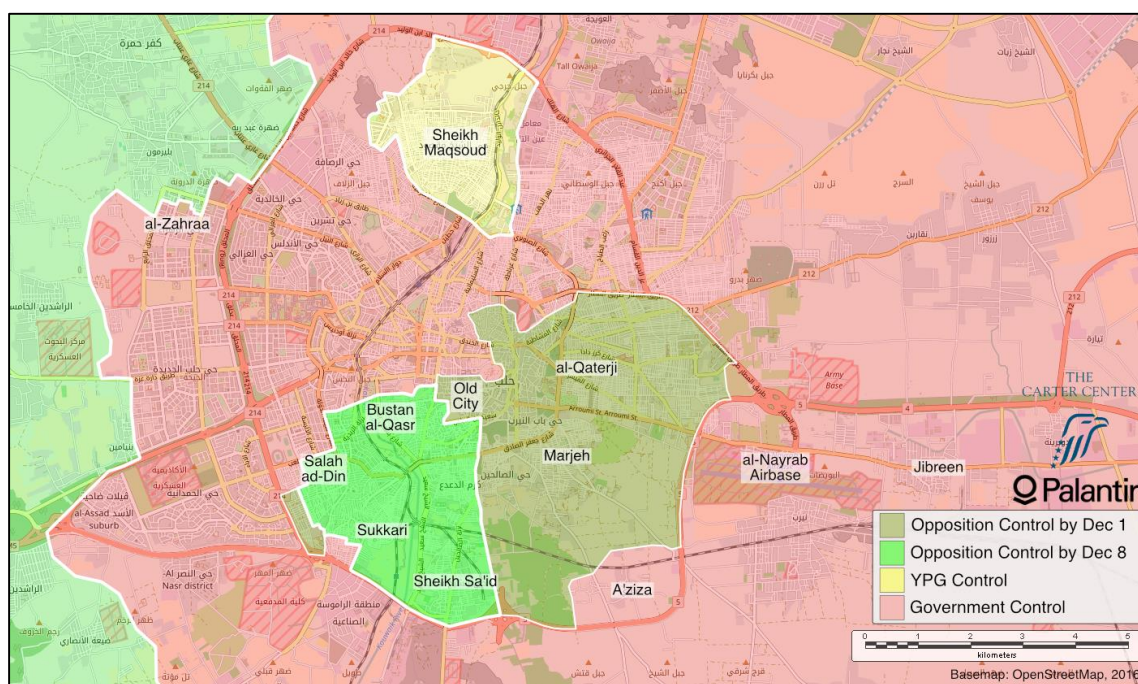


Figure 1 Areas of control in Aleppo city as of December 8, showing loss of territory by opposition forces.

More than 70% of once opposition-held territory has now fallen under pro-government control. It is estimated that at least 90,000 people previously in opposition-controlled areas of Aleppo city are now in areas under the control of pro-government forces. Local leaders in East Aleppo have estimated that 150,000 remain in the opposition-held canton, though this number is difficult to verify given the pace of changes. Many of East Aleppo's IDPs have been relocated by government buses to large group shelters in at least two locations in the Jibreen industrial area east of the Aleppo International Airport. UNHCR reported on 2 December that these areas had already reached maximum capacity.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced on December 8 that pro-government forces will temporarily suspend combat operations to allow for the evacuation of approximately 8,000 civilians trapped in areas of the city immediately affected by fighting. It is unclear whether or not this pause can be expanded to allow for the evacuation of more civilians, or if opposition armed groups will agree to the pause in fighting.

In Rural Damascus, another opposition surrender deal was enacted. On December 2, opposition fighters in al-Tal turned over their arms and were transported with other residents to Idleb. The number of people who left al-Tal numbers at around 3,000. The influx of IDPs from areas in Rural Damascus, the most recent of which is al-Tal, has overwhelmed public infrastructure in Idleb province and has put additional strain on institutions already struggling to keep up with demands of local residents.

Opposition-held territory in Idleb has been hit repeatedly over this period by Syrian and Russian aircraft. Several localities were reportedly hit with incendiary munitions from December 5-7, including Maarat al-Nu'man and Tefnaz. The increase in airstrikes on Idleb appears to be a result of the Syrian and Russian air forces redirecting planes from the shrinking opposition pocket in East Aleppo.

In Binnish, also in Idleb, a healthcare center was put out of service due to bombing on December 5, including its clinics, a lab, and pharmacy. On December 6, schools across Idleb were reported closed by civilian councils due to extensive aerial bombardment. Currently, the only civil services remaining open in Idleb governorate this week were bakeries, the White Helmet headquarters, and hospitals.

In response to the pro-government offensive for the remainder of East Aleppo, revenge attacks were launched by elements of the opposition on the Shi'a villages of al-Fo'ah and Kefraya, killing and injuring dozens.

In eastern Homs, ISIS forces advanced against government forces around Tadmor (Palmyra), capturing oil fields and destroying a good deal of government armor. The new ISIS offensive follows a slight lull in what had been an advancing pro-government offensive against ISIS. ISIS advances are substantial and could represent a re-deployment of fighters away from eroding front-lines in neighboring Iraq.

Conclusions:

As pro-government forces continue to advance in East Aleppo, the remaining civilian population must be kept in mind. Noncombatants who wish to leave the remaining territory must be allowed free and safe passage out to secure locations and must be kept from retributive attacks. Additionally, reports of large-scale disappearances of men from East Aleppo raise serious concerns for reprisal killings by advancing pro-government forces.