

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
December 14-20, 2017

The ISIS-held pocket in northern Hama governorate continues to grow, with both ISIS and government forces advancing northward into the Idleb pocket. Though political conflict continues between the opposition's alternate civilian structures – the Salvation Government and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), armed opposition groups in the Idleb pocket have begun to implement elements of a reconciliation agreement. In southern Syria, fighting has erupted throughout much of Daraa and Quneitra governorates, with government forces advancing in the Beit Jinn pocket near the Golan Heights. In response to mounting violence, opposition armed groups in the south have formed a new joint operations room.

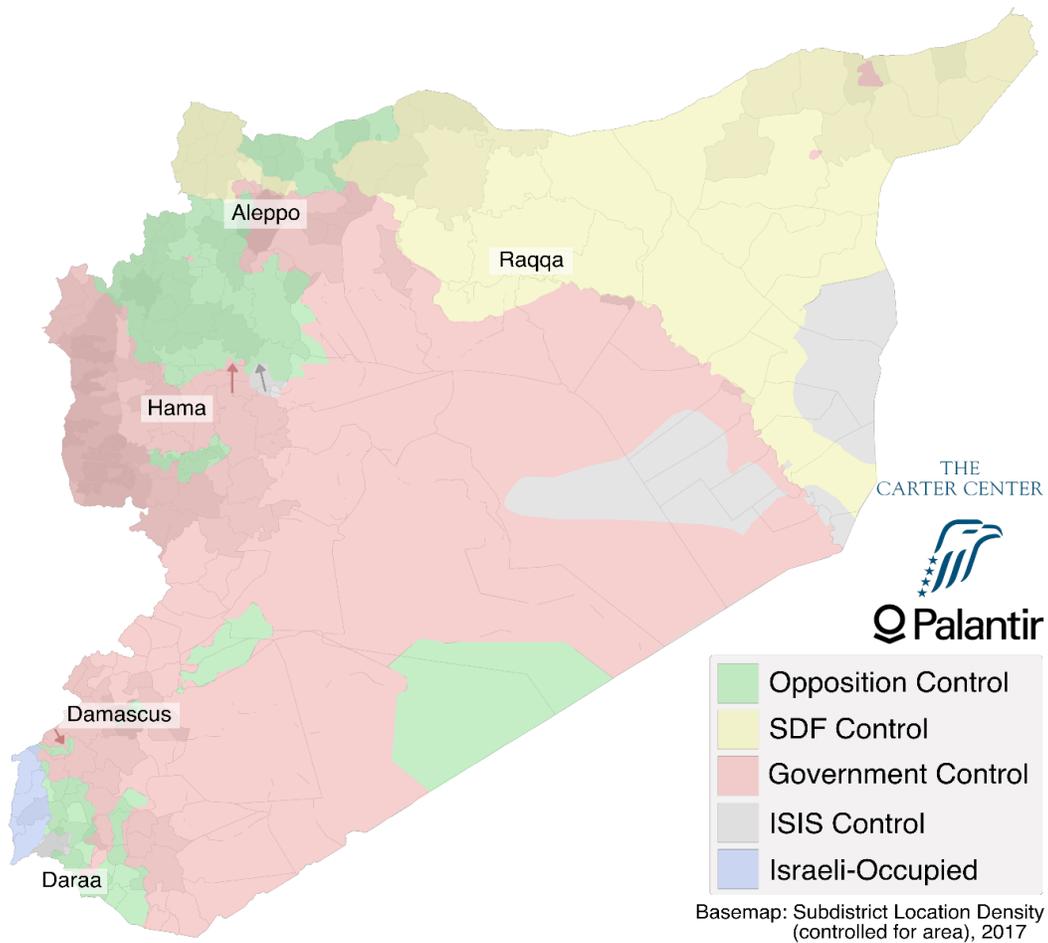


Figure 1 - Areas of control as of December 20, 2017. Arrows indicate advances made during the reporting period. Shaded areas represent areas with higher population density.

Southern Syria updates

Despite an agreed-upon ceasefire, pro-government forces shelled Daraa al-Balad and other opposition-controlled areas in Daraa throughout the week. The opposition's Al-Bunyan al-Marsous operations room reported on December 11 that pro-regime militias targeted several neighborhoods in Daraa al-Balad for the first time since the most recent ceasefire was put into effect. The operations room warned that it would respond to the shelling. In the following days, artillery shelling and clashes spread to frontlines throughout southern Syria and opposition-held areas of Daraa city.

As a reaction to the increased violence, four opposition armed factions formed a new coalition on December 19, "The Coalition of Revolutionaries of Jaydur", comprised of forces from the Jaydur Houran Brigades, the Houran Mujahideen Brigades, the First Special Missions Brigade, and the Osama Bin Zaid Brigade. The new coalition will operate in northwestern Daraa near the border with Rural Damascus governorate.

Shelling has continued throughout Eastern Ghouta for the past week, particularly the districts of Ain Terma, Harasta, and Douma. The latest round of shelling led to a social media campaign #SolidarityWithKarim in which social media users posted a photo of themselves covering one eye, referring to an infant who lost his mother, lost his eye, and had his skull fractured from shelling this week in Eastern Ghouta.

Also from the Eastern Ghouta, Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) released photos of a small group of fighters' bodies, claiming that they were executed in Jaysh al-Islam prisons. Jaysh al-Islam later released a statement claiming that the fighters were killed in combat, and that HTS was spreading lies in an attempt to divide the opposition.

In Southern Damascus, ISIS launched a surprise attack, briefly taking control of parts of Tadamon neighborhood. Within a few hours, they were expelled by the pro-government National Defense Forces and Palestinian militias.

Though fighting and shelling persisted throughout much of southern Syria, the only significant changes in territorial control were reported in the opposition-held Beit Jinn pocket, near the Golan Heights. Following their successful push to capture Tal Bardiya last week, pro-government forces launched an offensive on the surrounding area of Maghar Elmir where clashes were ongoing at the time of writing, though pro-government forces have nearly cut the small pocket of opposition control in half (see map below).

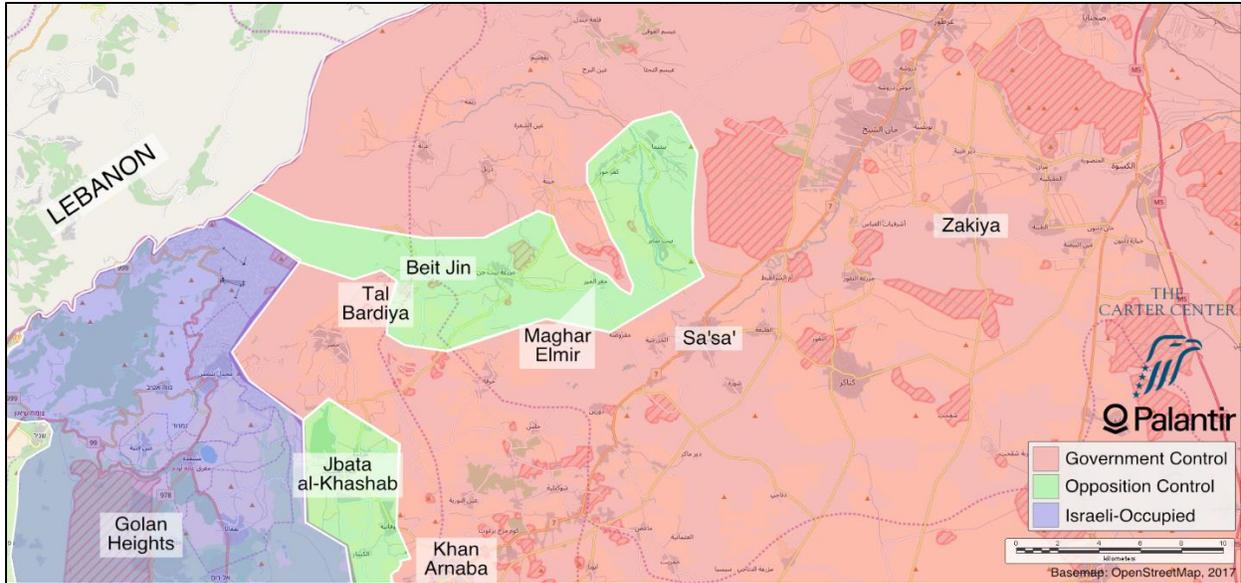


Figure 2 - Areas of control around Beit Jinn by December 20

Opposition developments

This week, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham followed through on a previously agreed-upon prisoner exchange. The agreement also included Nour al-Din al-Zinki and Jaish al-Ahrar in the creation of a shared operations room for the defense of the opposition-held pocket in greater Idleb to counter the advance of both pro-government and ISIS forces in northeastern Hama. Some Ahrar al-Sham commanders and officials remain in HTS custody, but the head of the HTS, Mohammed al-Jolani, has promised their release.

On Dec 14, HTS returned control of a checkpoint in western Aleppo countryside to Nour al-Din al-Zinki as part of the agreement between the forces. HTS also agreed to return positions it captured from Ahrar al-Sham earlier in the year, and are reportedly willing to discuss the control of Bab al-Hawa border crossing at a later time. Meanwhile, Jaish al-Ahrar deployed forces to northern Hama alongside Jaish al-Izza and the Islamic Party of Turkestan.

On Dec 15, the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government announced that it had suspended its demand to the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) to close all ministries and offices in Idleb. Despite this announcement, on Dec 19, security forces affiliated with HTS and the Salvation Government entered and closed SIG facilities in multiple locations. These shutdowns included the SIG Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Health in Maaret al-Nu'man, and SIG agricultural offices in Saraqeb and Hibet. Two SIG officials from Maaret al-Nu'man, including the SIG Deputy Minister for Local Councils Abd al-Salam al-Amin, were arrested. On Dec 20, HTS-affiliated security forces arrested officials from the SIG Ministry of Education as they were crossing into Turkey at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing.

Idleb pocket frontlines

Opposition forces were reported to have halted a government offensive on their positions in southern Aleppo west of government-controlled Khanasir. Jaish al-Ahrar forces are reported to have coordinated with HTS in the defense of this front, suggesting a degree of success in implementing prior agreements to collaborate.

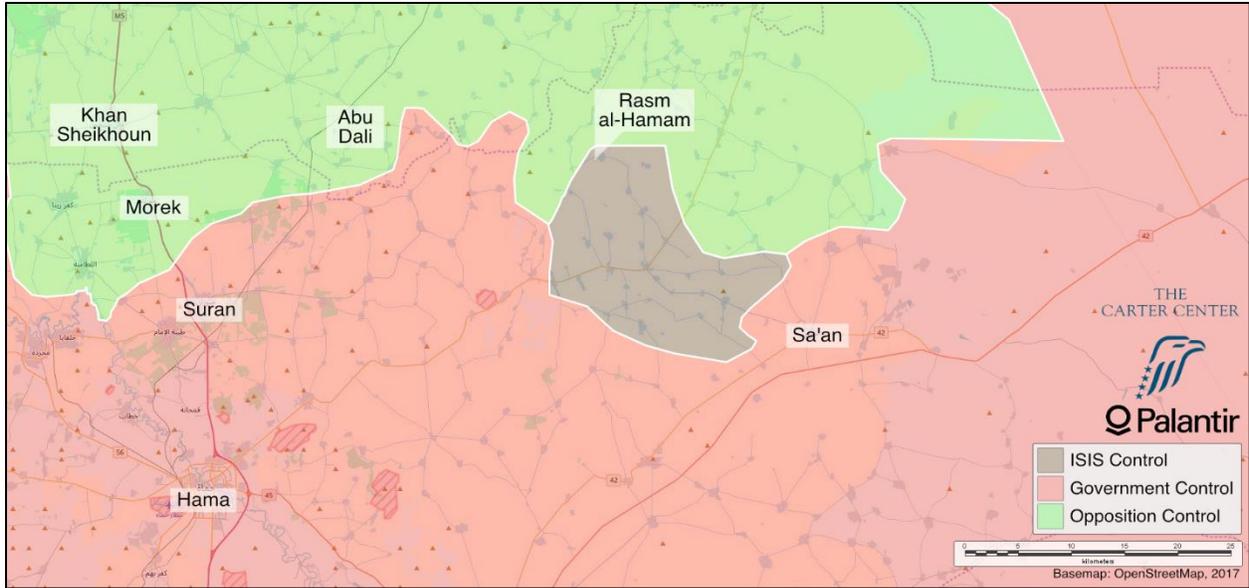


Figure 3 - Frontlines in northeastern Hama by December 20

Intense clashes continued between opposition and government forces southeast of Abu Dali, during which government forces have made slight advances, capturing and holding two nearby towns to the east. Nearly 300 civilians in southern Idleb were mobilized and provided with arms by HTS for the defense of the Idleb and Hama frontlines.

The HTS frontline with ISIS has been relatively quiet during this assessment period, with only sporadic clashes reported. The latest update as of Dec 20 was the capture of Rasm al-Hamam by ISIS forces but otherwise the frontline has remained the same.

A third front was briefly opened by opposition armed groups in Hama in the southern countryside of Latmna, capturing pro-government positions and armaments in Zellin and Zalaqit and opposite the government-controlled town of Halfaya. Pro-government forces have since recaptured both locations. Jaish al-Ahrar, Jaish al-Izza, and the Islamic Party of Turkestan were all active on the frontlines near Halfaya.

Clashes between opposition and pro-government forces continued in northeastern Hama near Jakuziyeh with no reports of change in the frontlines.