

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
January 18-24, 2018

During this reporting period, a new Turkish-led offensive (dubbed Operation Olive Branch) began attacking territory controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led organization in Syria's north). Pro-government forces and ISIS forces at the southwestern frontiers of the opposition-held Idleb pocket once again took significant territory from opposition forces in the area. Bombardment on opposition-held Eastern Ghouta by pro-government forces also continued, though there have been no advances on these fronts.

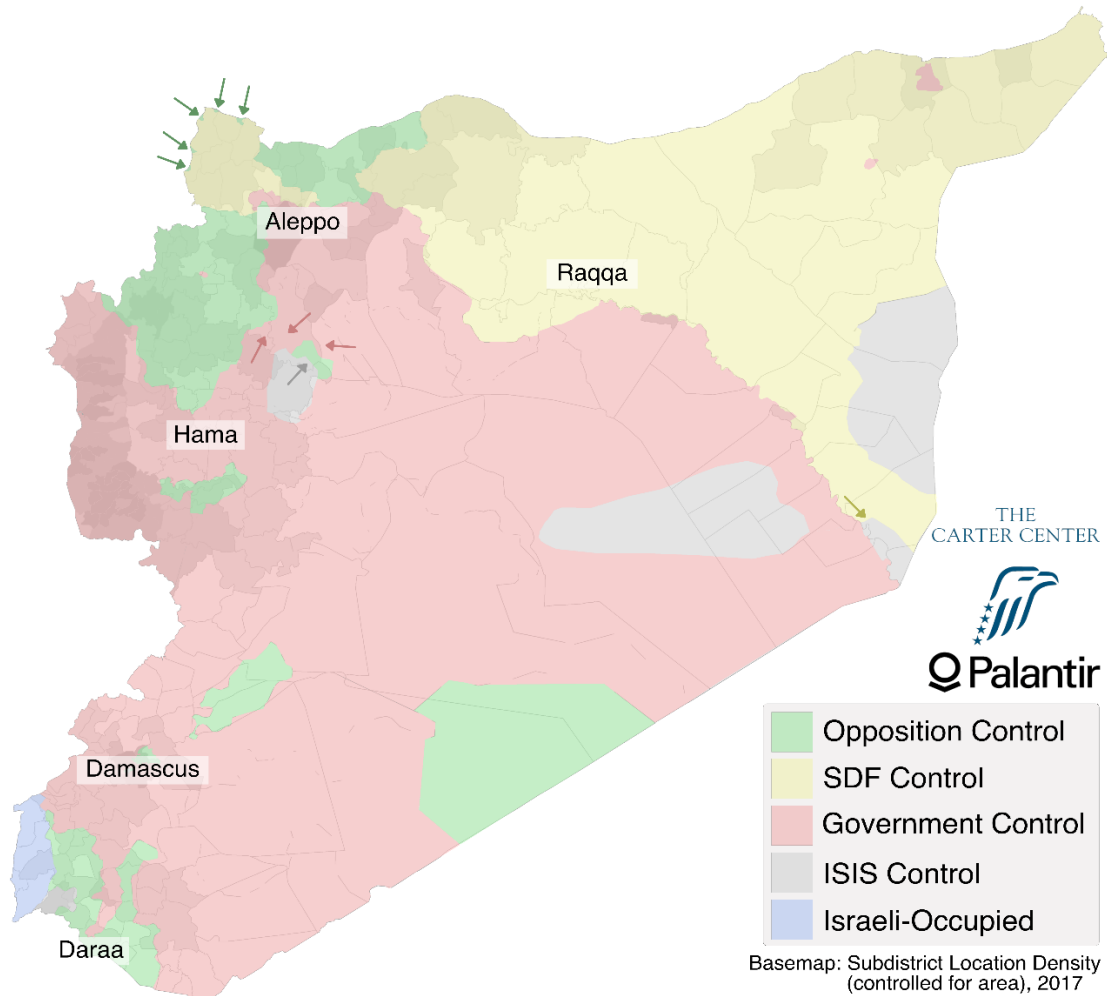


Figure 1: Areas of control in Afrin canton as of January 24, 2018. Turkish advances have been made on five points on the northern and western fronts.

Operation Olive Branch

On January 20, Turkish forces and Turkey-aligned FSA units started an offensive into Afrin, a canton controlled by the SDF in northwestern Syria. The offensive began shortly after a meeting between Turkish and Russian officials that was quickly followed by a withdrawal of Russian forces from the Afrin canton. The offensive initially advanced on seven fronts, though after numerous offensives and counteroffensives, the Turkish military now controls approximately six villages on five fronts. Some key tactical locations, including a mountain peak on Afrin’s northern border, have been retaken by SDF fighters since January 22, though fighting remains intense and positions still appear to be in flux.

Turkey has coupled its ground offensive with an increase in artillery and aerial bombardment, including upon population centers. To date, the majority of strikes have targeted the periphery of the canton, near the points of advance of the Turkish military. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has claimed that they are attacking ISIS units in the Afrin pocket, a claim which has been echoed by some observers and news organizations. It should be noted, however, that ISIS has never held territory in the Afrin region.

Videos posted on January 19 and 20 showed Turkey-supported opposition units in northern Aleppo deploying to frontlines near A’zaz and Tel Refaat. Though fighting to the west of A’zaz has been intense following the redeployment of these troops, there have been no reported changes in front lines.



Figure 2: Areas of control in Afrin canton as of January 24, 2018. Turkish advances have been made on five points on the northern and western fronts.

Idleb Pocket Updates

Syrian government forces have succeeded in capturing the Abu Thuhour Airbase in eastern Idlib governorate, creating a pocket of ISIS and opposition forces to the east. This advance granted Syrian government forces full control over the rail line connecting Hama to Aleppo city. Additionally, following repairs, the Syrian government will be able to re-open the Abu Thuhour military airbase.

As the majority of opposition forces evacuated eastern Idlib, ISIS forces took advantage of the vacuum left in their wake and advanced further northward. There is currently only a small portion of eastern Idlib under

control of opposition forces, held by Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra).

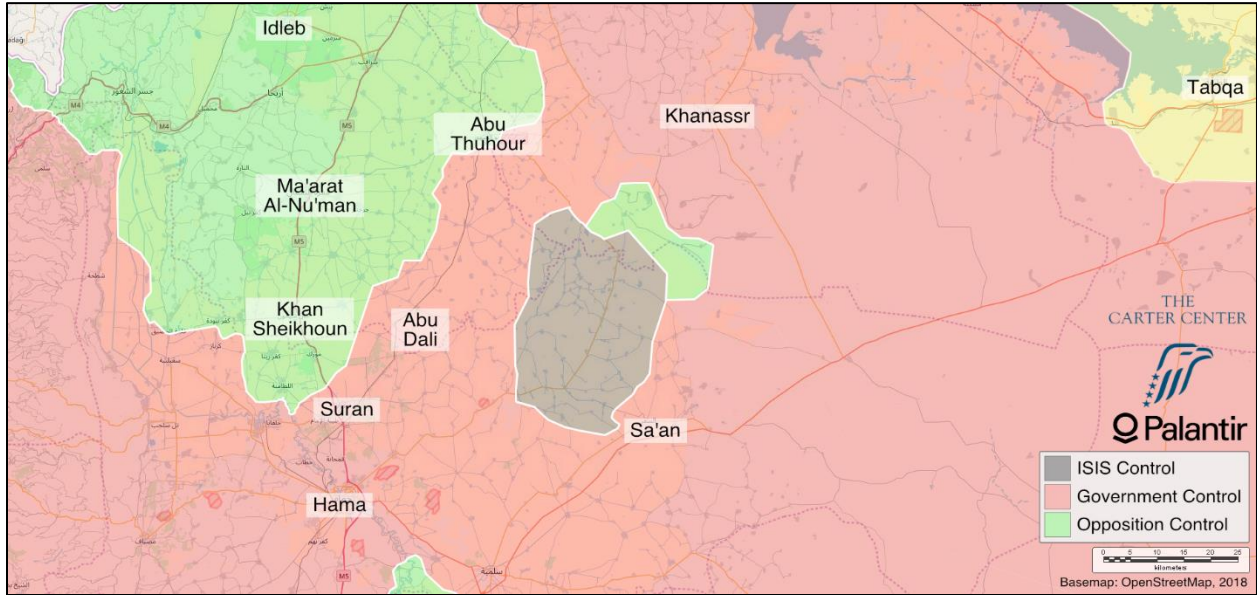


Figure 3: Areas of control as of January 24, 2018. Government forces have taken the Abu Thuhour airbase and besieged an ISIS and HTS-held pocket to the east.

Southern Syria

The East Ghouta region on the outskirts of Damascus remains under government siege, with regular reports of artillery shelling and clashes on the borders of Damascus city. The majority of clashes are centered around the district of Arbin, along the southern bypass road of Damascus city, with no new advances reported. Fighting in the district of Harasta has also remained intense during this reporting period, with opposition forces maintaining a nearly complete siege of the nearby government-held military vehicle management base.

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