

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary

March 29-April 4, 2017

Surrender deals for all of Eastern Ghouta have been reached, though evacuations of fighters and some civilians continue from the city of Duma. The future of US involvement in areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led organization in Syria's north) has been struck with further uncertainty this week, as the Pentagon and President Trump have disagreed publicly on the operations. Attacks against Coalition forces as well as Iraqi forces indicate that the fight against ISIS in Syria is not yet over.

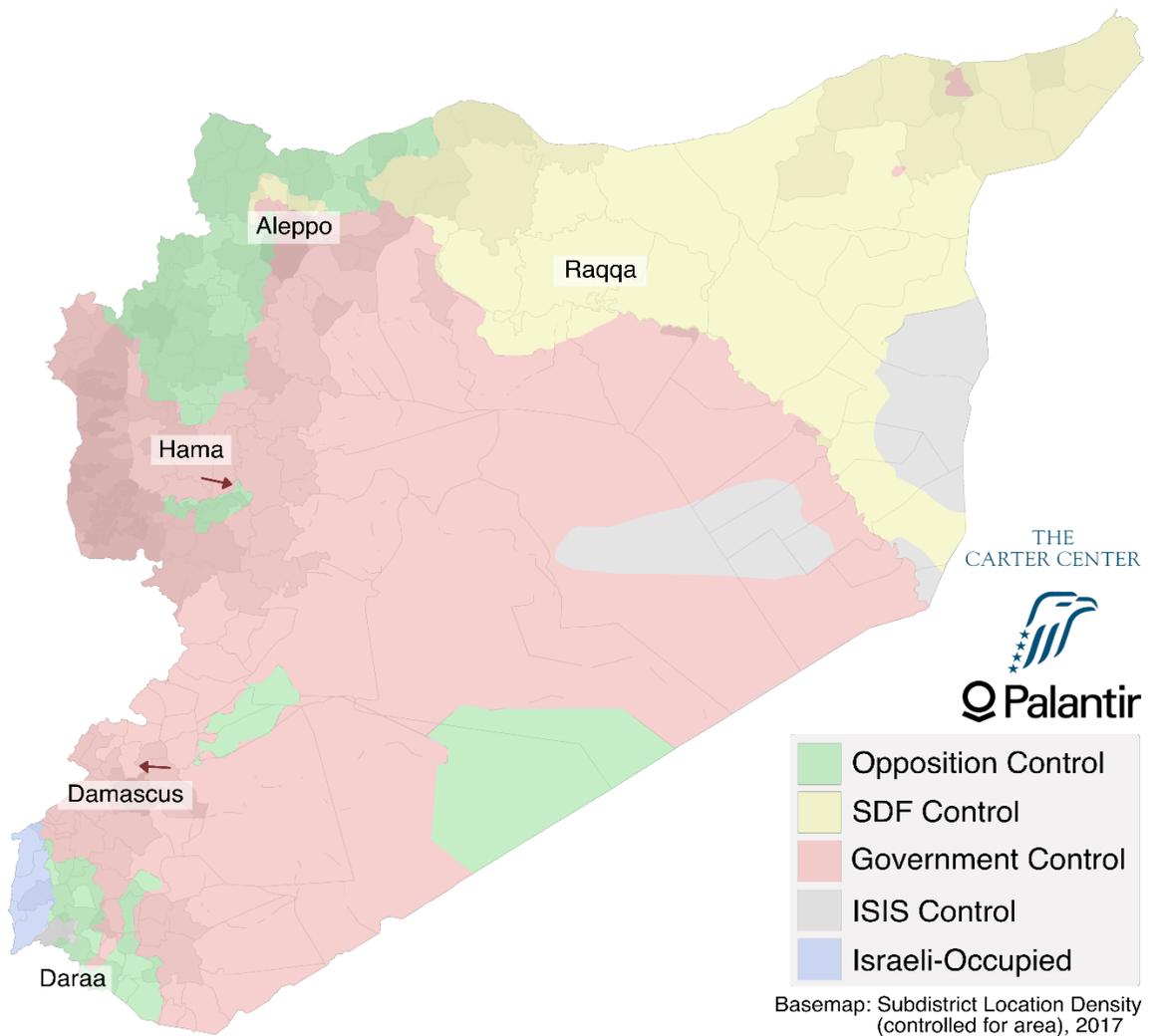


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by April 4, with arrows indicating advances during the reporting period

Rural Damascus

As operations in Eastern Ghouta draw down, pro-government forces have shifted their attention to the Eastern Qalamoun region, just 15 km away from Eastern Ghouta and Yarmouk/Hajjar al Aswad, immediately south of Damascus. Pro-government delegations met with local opposition leadership in the Qalamoun area to discuss the future of the pocket and attempt to secure a negotiated settlement. Since negotiations failed, both government and opposition representatives have hardened their positions. Pro-government military representatives (a Russian colonel and a Syrian Air Force Intelligence officer) told opposition units in Qalamoun that they must accept state rule or abandon the territory. Opposition negotiators initially countered with a proposal that would allow civilians to remain while fighters withdraw to the mountains, but the counter-offer was rejected. In a statement on April 3, opposition groups in the area announced the formation of a unified military command and declared they would not be displaced from the area as other fighters and civilians had been from Ghouta.

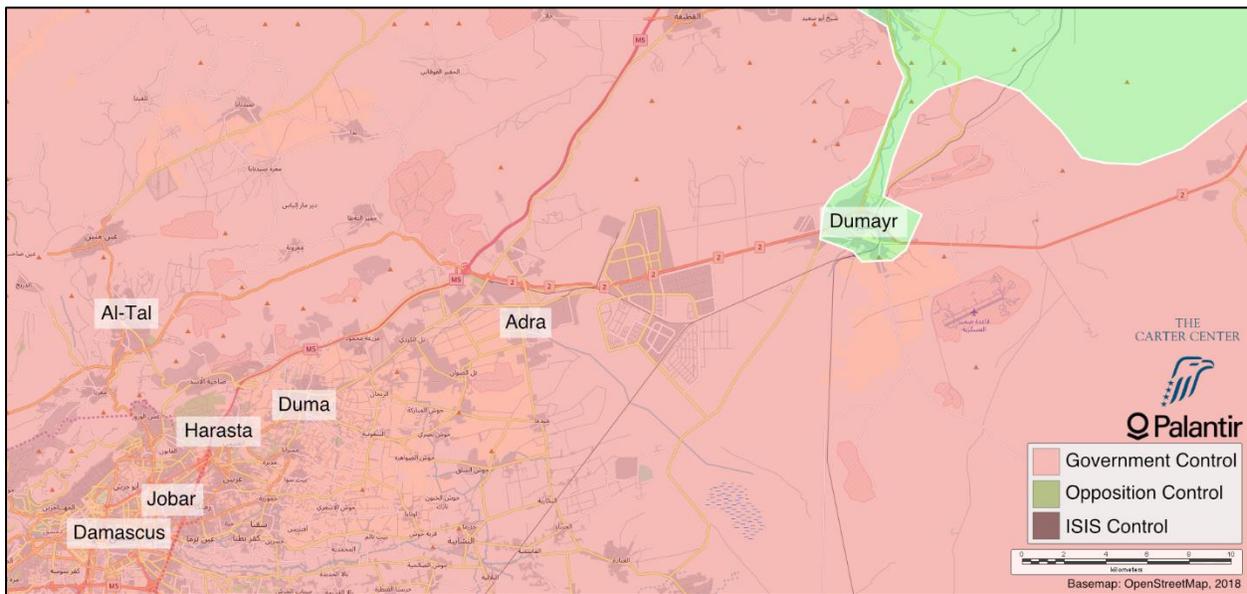


Figure 2 - Areas east of Damascus by April 4

East Ghouta

A total of 133,000 people have been displaced or evacuated as a result of fighting in Eastern Ghouta since the start of government operations in early March. Evacuations of both Harasta and Jobar were completed during this reporting period. After multiple attempts to reach a deal for the evacuation of opposition fighters from Duma, a final agreement was reached on April 1, and buses began to transport fighters and civilians from the long-besieged town on April 2.

Buses transporting evacuees from Harasta and Jobar arrived at Qalaat al-Mudiq at the southwest of the opposition-held Idleb pocket. Buses transporting Jaysh al-Islam fighters from Duma instead traveled much further north to the Al-Bab pocket. Turkish forces initially blocked buses attempting to come into Al-Bab, but by April 4 some buses entered the city.

As part of their surrender deal, Jaysh al-Islam released five prisoners on April 3. The four women and one man were previously abducted from the nearby town of Adra.

Video evidence shows that household goods, including refrigerators and furniture, were for sale in Damascus during the reporting week. These goods were being sold by men in pick-up trucks in Dahiyet al-Assad, an area of high loyalist support. The goods were reportedly taken from the Harasta district.

According to Russia's Ministry of Defense, more than 40,000 civilians who fled Eastern Ghouta returned to their homes.

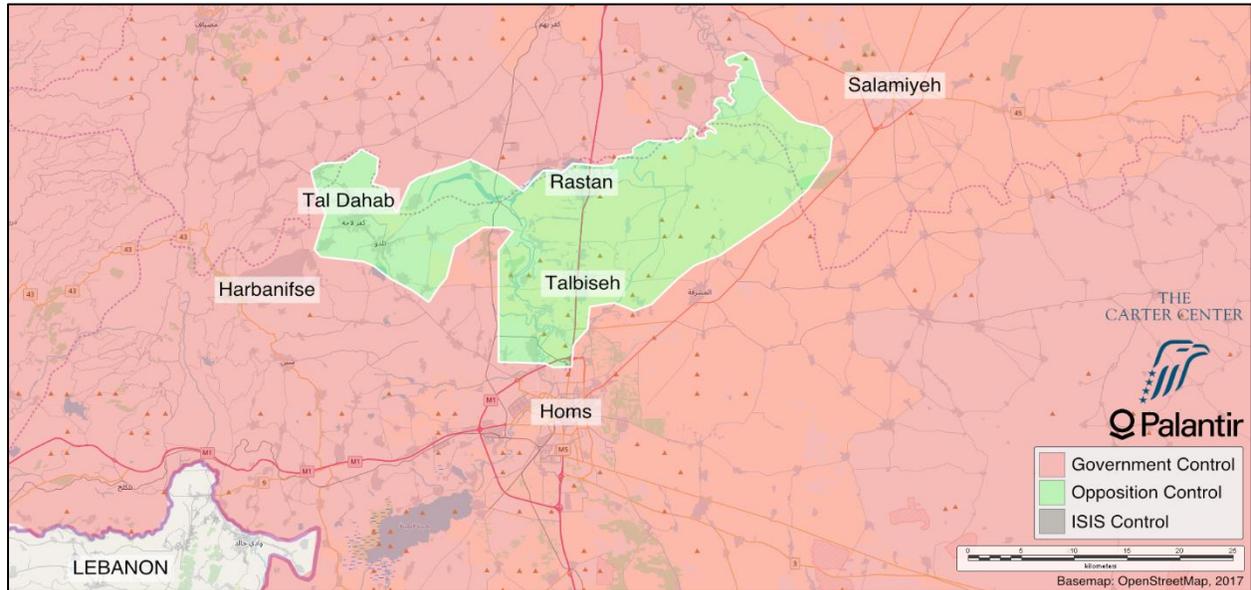


Figure 3 - Situation around the Rastan pocket north of Homs by April 4

Homs Pocket

To the north of Homs city, pro-government forces advanced on the northeastern tip of the opposition-held Rastan pocket, securing control over some locations to the west of the Orontes River by April 4. This pocket has been relatively stable for months, with only intermittent military activity in the area. As with the opposition-held enclave in eastern Qalamoun, it is likely that northern Homs will see an increase in military pressure in the near future as government forces redeploy from Eastern Ghouta.

The International Coalition

Despite statements from US President Donald Trump indicating that the US may withdraw its military forces from Syria, International Coalition activity appears to be increasing. The Coalition finished construction of a new base during the previous reporting week, and the Pentagon confirmed that US operations in northern Syria are not yet complete. Also, the US deployed an additional 300 soldiers to Menbij during the reporting week.

A small pro-government insurgent group was announced in the northeastern frontier of Syria, declaring their plans to fight occupying US forces. The group, using an edited logo of a SDF-aligned opposition group operating in the same area, claimed to have launched mortar shells at a US base. No further engagement with the group has been reported and their size is unclear.