

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
May 11-17, 2017

This reporting period, intra-opposition strife rattled paramilitary forces in Idleb, Daraa, and Rural Damascus, though much of the conflict has now been resolved. Pro-government and Kurdish-aligned forces advanced significantly against ISIS in Syria's north, and opposition forces continued operations against ISIS in Daraa governorate. A new round of evacuations began this reporting period, including an opposition reconciliation deal in a city in Daraa governorate. The Rukhban camp on the Jordanian border saw renewed conflict this period, with ISIS detonating two car bombs.

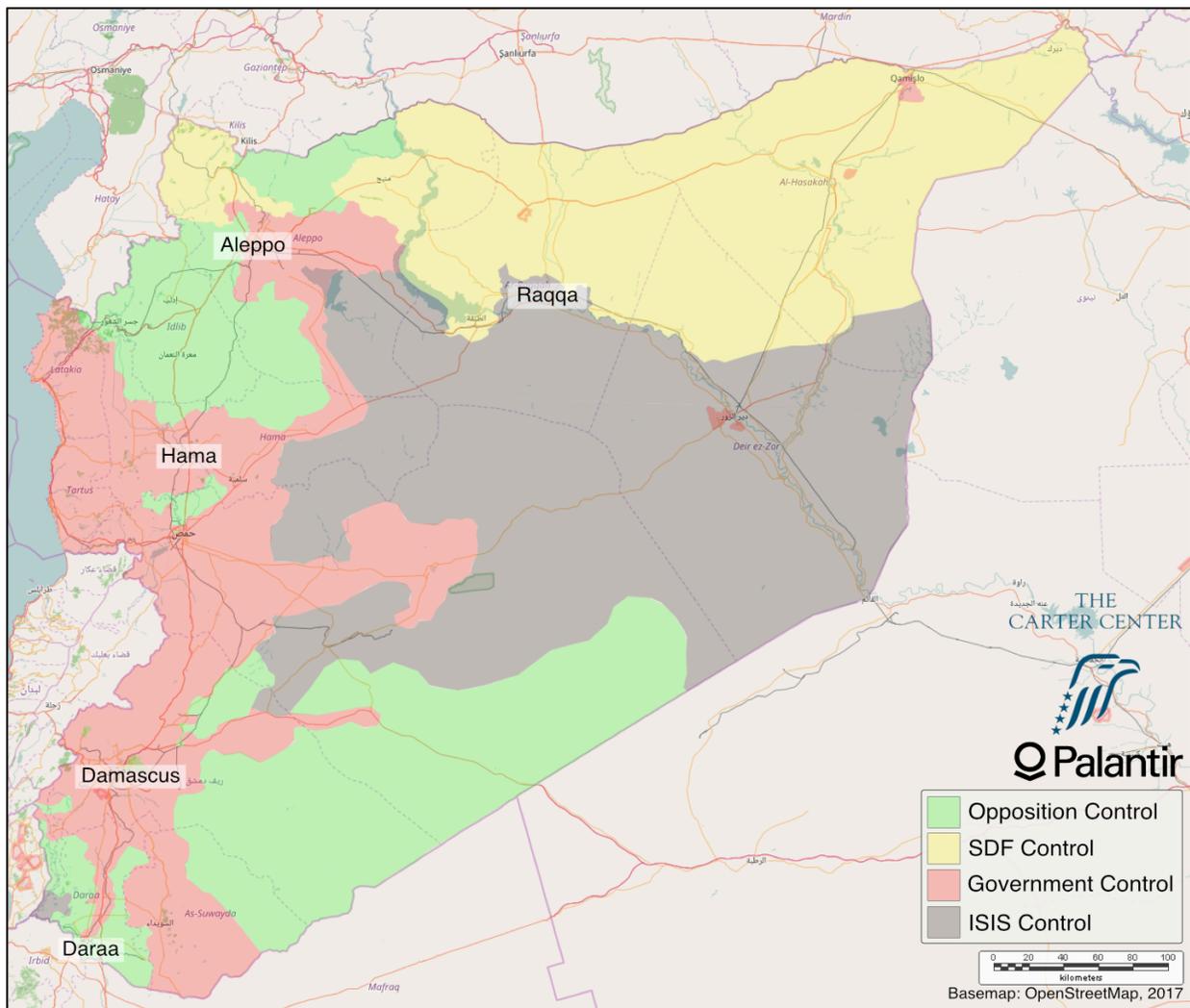


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by May 17

Clashes between opposition groups

This reporting period, clashes erupted between Ahrar al-Sham and the Fastaqem Union. Combat took place on May 12 in Babsiqqa, a small town on the main border crossing between Idlib and Turkey. In the previous reporting period, Ahrar al-Sham feuded with the northern branch of Jaysh al-Islam in the same area. Both the northern branch of Jaysh al-Islam and the Fastaqem Union are ostensibly sub-units of Ahrar al-Sham, having announced their merger with the group during a period of intense clashes with Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) earlier this year.

On May 15, HTS attacked Ahrar al-Sham in the cities of Sanjar and Saraqab, Idlib, arresting fighters and confiscating their equipment and weapons. In Sanjar, after a back-and-forth exchange of territorial control, HTS forces captured positions held by an Ahrar al-Sham sub-unit. Clashes also broke out briefly between Ahrar al-Sham and Ansar al-Islam in the city of Al-Harra, Daraa, following the Ahrar al-Sham arrest of an Ansar al-Islam member. Local rebel battalions intervened to stop the fighting.

Although clashes between Jaysh al-Islam and HTS have ended in the Eastern Ghouta, unrest persists among the groups in the area as alliances shift and minor clashes break out. On May 11, Faylaq al-Rahman launched an attack on Ahrar al-Sham. Ahrar al-Sham immediately released a statement, calling the attack unprovoked and demanding Faylaq al Rahman to stop immediately. Fighting between the two groups was limited to May 11 and a resolution has been reached. Infighting has made daily life more difficult for civilians as they struggle to move around, access goods and services, and receive medical care. On the same day, a merger was announced between Ahrar al-Sham and Fajr al-Umma, a local group, claiming to work towards the goal of greater opposition unity in the area.

Since ending clashes with HTS, Jaysh al-Islam has focused on addressing the demands of the local population of Eastern Ghouta. On May 10, the group announced that trade would resume through the Wafideen crossing and would be allowed to pass through Jaysh al-Islam territory on the roads from Misraba to Hammuriyeh. Due to pro-government advances in eastern Damascus, the tunnels used to smuggle goods into the Eastern Ghouta are no longer active, leaving the Wafideen crossing as the only way for goods to enter the besieged area.

Fight against ISIS

Pro-government forces in the eastern countryside of Aleppo governorate resumed their offensive against ISIS during the reporting week after weeks of frozen frontlines. The pro-government force was able to finally take the Jirah Military Airport from ISIS and advanced to capture several villages to the southwest of the airport as well.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), largely made up of Kurdish forces, continued their march on ISIS territory north of Raqqa city, capturing villages from the group all across front lines north of Raqqa over this reporting period. The SDF has also strengthened its hold on the area surrounding Tabqa city, which it gained full control over a week prior. Additionally, efforts at developing local governance structures in advance of the offensive on Raqqa have continued, with the establishment of a security force attached to the Raqqa Civilian Council (RCC).

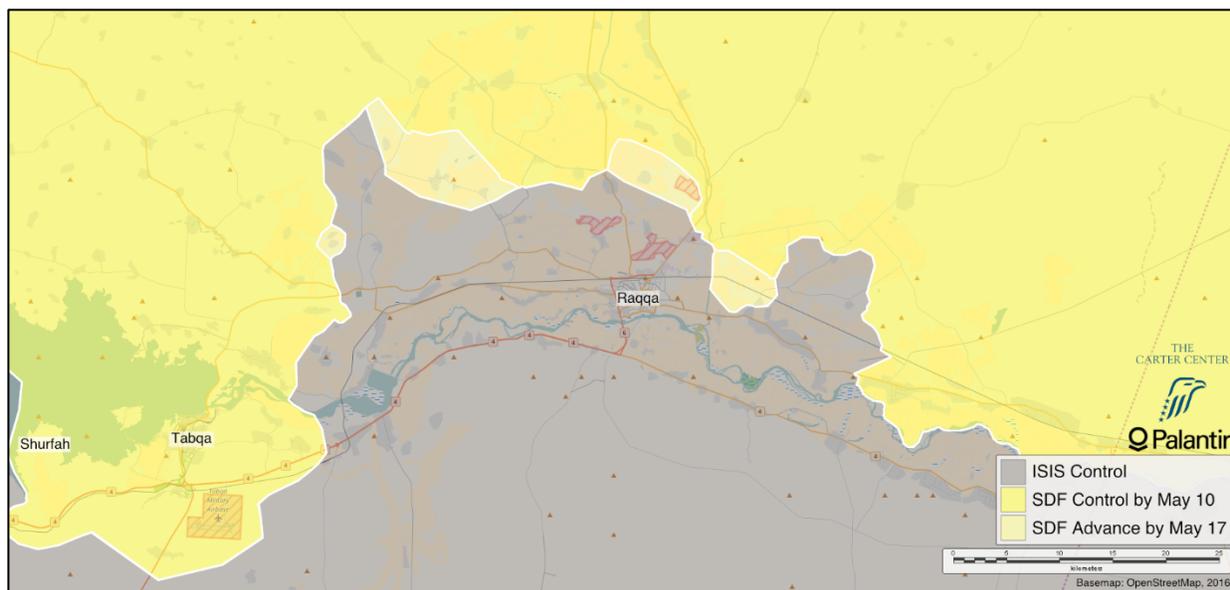


Figure 2 - Map of SDF advances around Tabqa and Raqqa, May 10-17

HTS and ISIS continued to clash in the Yarmouk Camp south of Damascus, with heavy conflict centering around May 13. Evacuation of HTS fighters and their families appears to be stalled.

Evacuation deals in Damascus

On May 7, an evacuation deal was reached for the East Damascus neighborhood of Barzeh. However, the evacuations stopped on May 11 as pro-government elements failed to release detainees. An evacuation deal was also reached for the neighborhood of Qaboun, which had been under an intensive pro-government assault for weeks. The first wave of evacuations, including over 2,200 opposition fighters and civilians, began on May 14 and pro-government forces now claim full control over the neighborhood. The evacuees were taken by bus to Idleb.

While the establishment of de-escalation zones has led to a reduction in violence, violations continue. On May 15, pro-government forces shelled the town of Otaya in Rural Damascus. On May 16, they also bombarded Sabqa and Hammuriyeh with airstrikes. All three towns are contained within the “de-escalation zone” of the area.

Developments in Daraa

Approximately 30 high-ranking members of HTS have been sent to southern Syria (Daraa/Quneitra) to restructure HTS in the south, recruit new members, and to establish a southern branch of their special operations force, Quwat al-Nukhba. Abu Jaber al-Shami was announced as the Emir for HTS forces in the south. HTS appears to be seeking to reestablish itself as a prominent force in southern Syria, where it has been relatively weak.

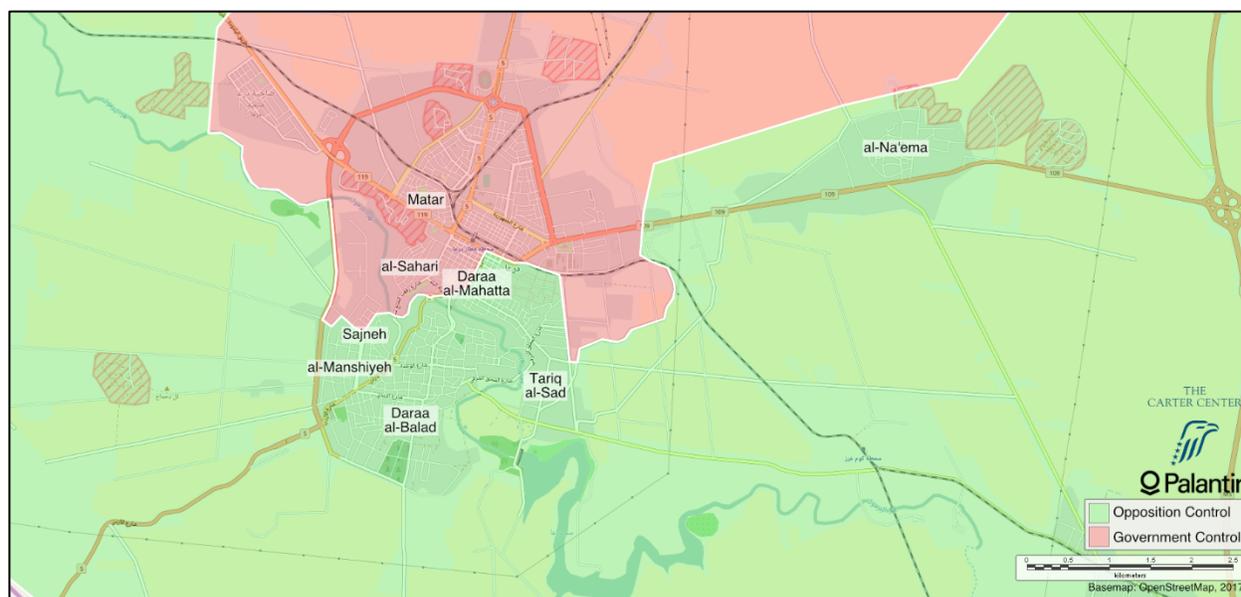


Figure 3 - Map of areas of control in Daraa city by May 17

After a period of relative calm, violence escalated in al-Manshiyeh in Daraa city on May 17, as pro-government forces attempted a counterattack against the opposition's Bunyan al-Marsous operations room. Bunyan al-Marsous repelled the attempt and is now targeting the remaining government-held points in al-Manshiyeh. Pro-government efforts in the city have included aerial bombardment, despite the area's designation as a "de-escalation zone."

In addition to its ongoing assault on ISIS in the southwestern town of Adwan, the opposition's Ahrar Nawa targeted ISIS at Tal Jamo', though no territorial gains have been reported.

Rukhban Camp troubles

The Rukhban Camp on the Jordanian-Syrian border was targeted twice in the past week by ISIS car bombs. The first attack occurred on May 14 and the second on May 17. On May 15, an aid shipment arrived at the camp, and when residents swarmed the delivery area, Jaysh Ahrar al-Asha'ir opened fire, wounding one woman. Jordan would not allow the woman to cross the border for medical treatment and she died from her wounds.

Conclusions:

Intra-opposition strife threatens the stability of opposition-held territory and continues to plague opposition groups in Syria. Breaches of the de-escalation agreement are also concerning, with the initial reduction in violence appearing promising. Finally, as has been the case over the past several weeks, ISIS continues to lose territory to other factions in Syria and was attacked by all major forces this week.