

THE  
CARTER CENTER



**Weekly Conflict Summary**

January 25-31, 2018

During this reporting period, the Turkish-led offensive (Operation Olive Branch) continued to advance on Afrin, which is controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led organization in Syria's north). South of Aleppo city, pro-government forces continued their advance into opposition-held Idleb, securing the town of Abu al-Thuhour as well as about a dozen small towns to the north and west. Around Damascus city, pro-government forces continued their bombardment of opposition-held Eastern Ghouta.

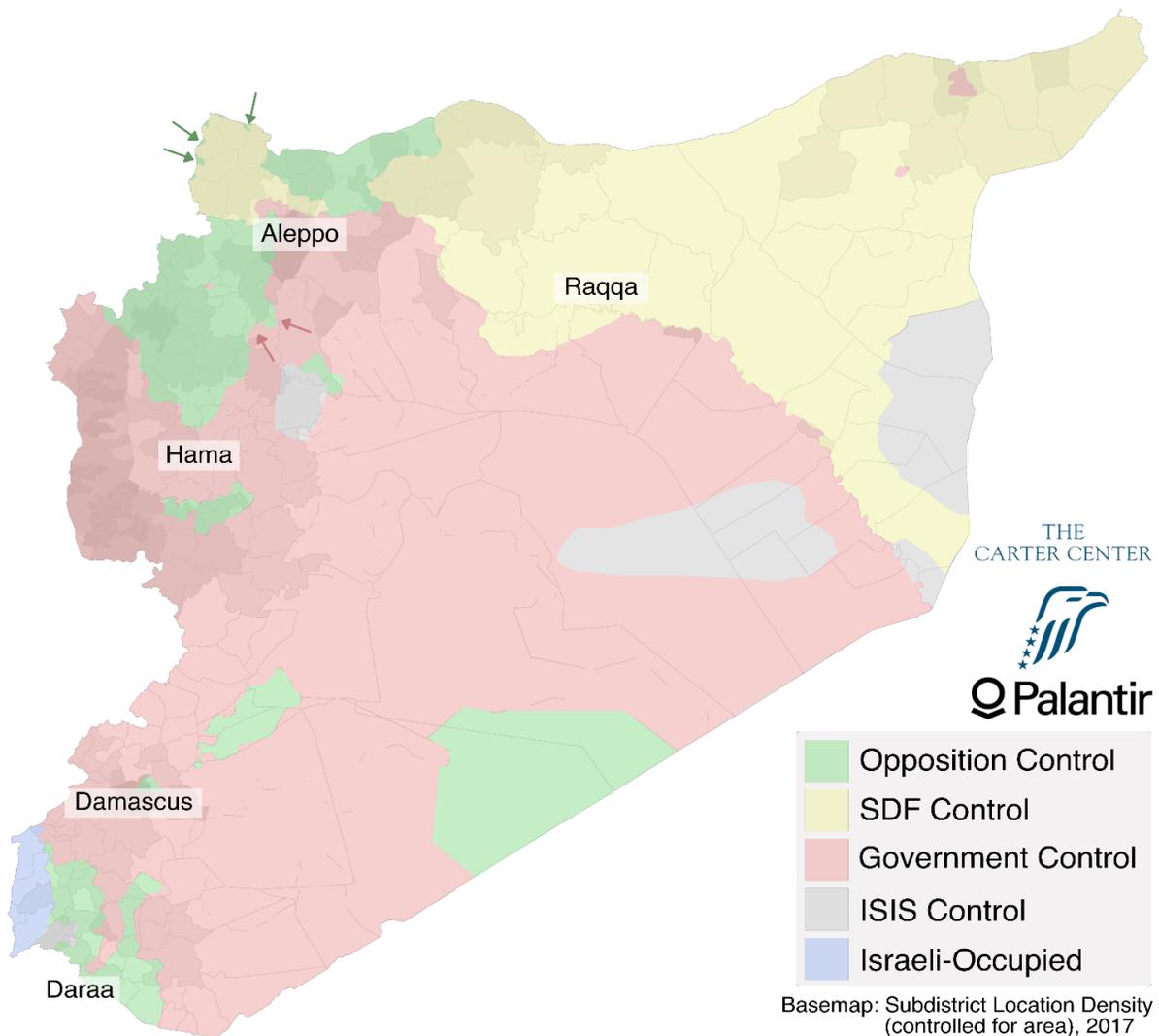


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by January 31, 2018. Arrows indicate advances during the previous week.

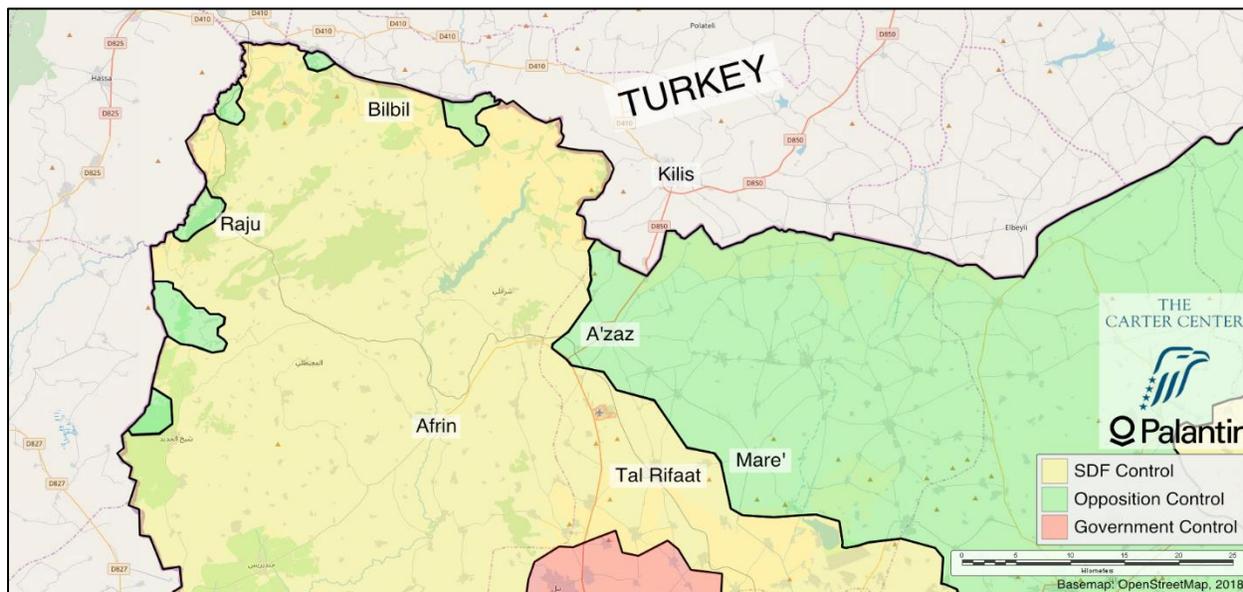


Figure 2 - Areas of control around Afrin canton by January 31. Turkish-backed advances continued this week. Opposition held areas are heavily mixed with Turkish military forces.

Operation Olive Branch, the Turkey-backed offensive into Afrin, saw minor advances at the end of the reporting period after a series of back-and-forth territorial shifts on nearly every front. The operation has involved continuous shelling by both artillery and warplanes from the Turkish side of the border as well as from within Syrian airspace. In addition to the six fronts from the Turkish borders with Afrin, opposition units stationed north of A'zaz have clashed with SDF units often since the start of the operation.

The Turkish border town of Reyhanli was struck on January 31 by a missile launched from Afrin. The strike resulted in one death and one wounded among civilians in Reyhanli. Fighting along the southwestern border of Afrin has been ongoing as Turkish forces attempt to advance into Syrian territory.

Over the course of the incursion into Afrin, extensive damage has been inflicted upon the first-century BC Ain Dara temple, located in Kurdish-held Afrin. Over half of the temple has been destroyed by the bombardment.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Syria war: Turkish air strikes damage ancient Afrin temple." BBC News. January 29, 2018. Accessed February 01, 2018. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42858265>.

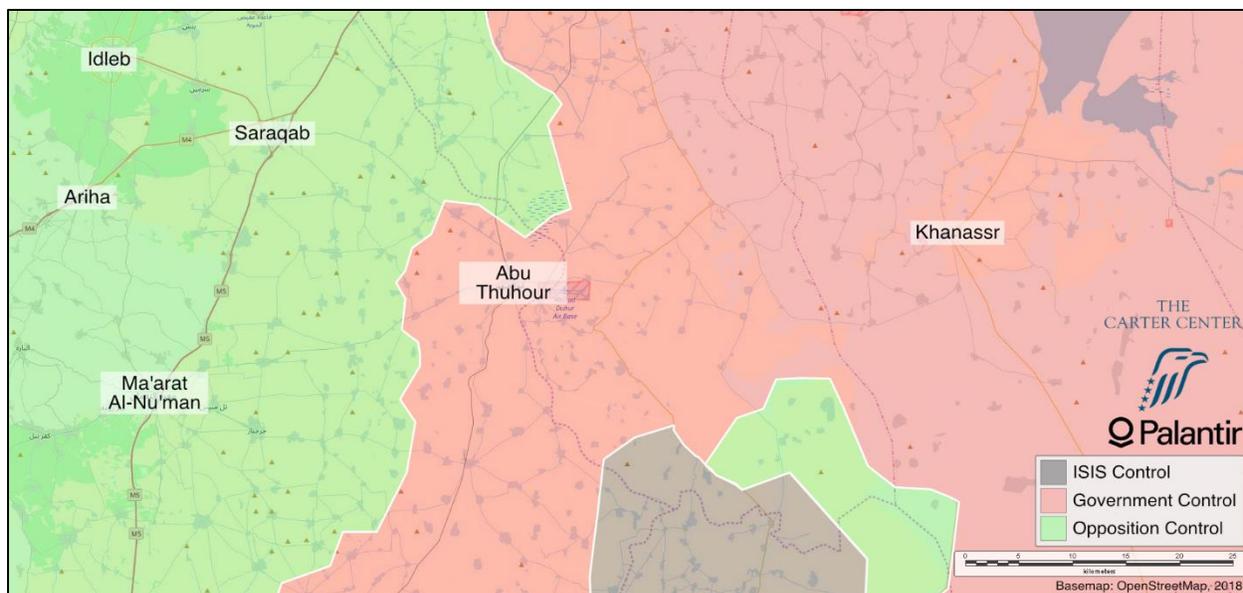


Figure 3 - Areas of control at the southeastern frontier of the opposition-held Idleb pocket by January 31. Pro-government forces took territory around Abu Thuhour during this reporting period, and are continuing to advance north along the rail line.

Pro-government forces continued to advance on the eastern edge of the opposition-held Idleb pocket, capturing Abu Thuhour city and locations to its west and north by January 31. Abu Thuhour and its accompanying airbase were the initial targets of the ongoing offensive, though it is expected that government forces will continue to advance until they have taken control of the entire railway leading to Aleppo city, with a significant buffer zone to the west.

Turkey sent a convoy into Idleb to set up de-escalation zone along the highway that runs through Saraqab and Ma'arat Al-Nu'man, in accordance with a previous agreement on safe zones in the area. The convoy was escorted by Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) and other opposition fighters stationed in the area. Along the way, the convoy came under attack, forcing the convoy to reverse 2km and turn its lights off before deciding to return to the area around Atareb in the western countryside of Aleppo. After arriving in Atareb, the convoy was hit by an IED, causing the death of a Turkish soldier.

On January 30, a crowded market in opposition-held Ariha was struck by warplanes, leading to the death of at least 15 civilians. Activists and observers have attributed the attack to Russian warplanes based on footage of high-flying aircraft, though Russia forces deny that its warplanes attack market places, medical centers, and residential areas away from front lines.

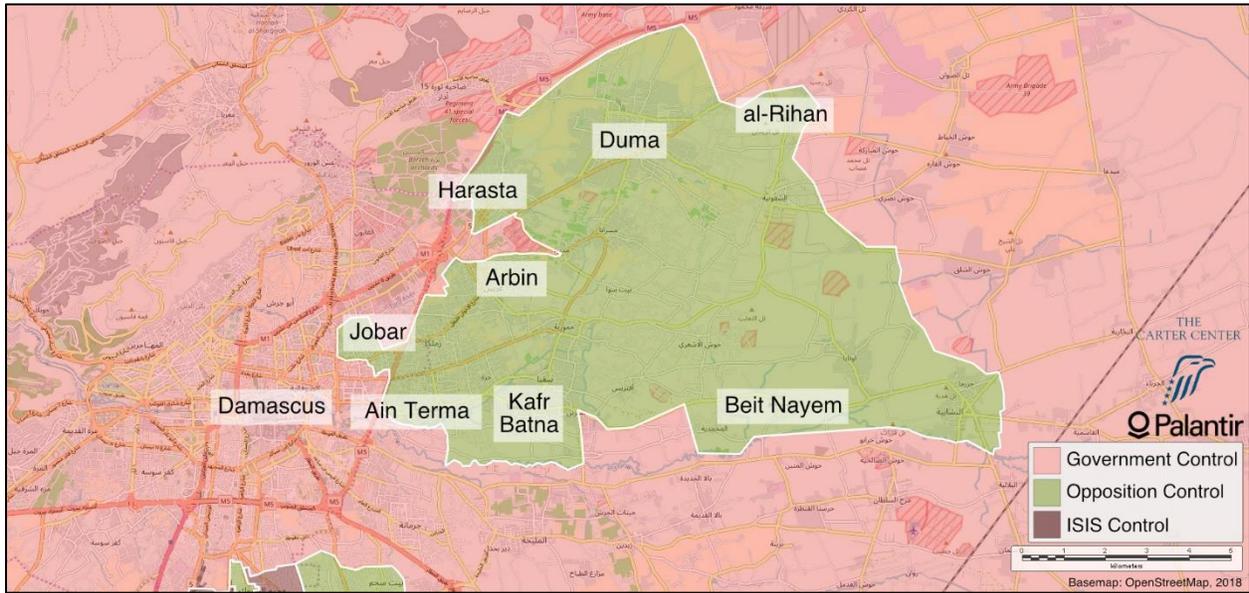


Figure 4 - Areas of control east of Damascus by January 31.

Pro-government forces continued to bombard the besieged region of Eastern Ghouta throughout this reporting period. Government forces are still attempting to break the partial siege of a vehicle management center just north of Arbin. Eastern Ghouta has been under siege for months, with the humanitarian organizations reporting dire conditions for civilians. Additionally, incendiary munitions were dropped on residential areas of opposition-held Eastern Ghouta. The strikes resulted in several homes burning in Harasta.