

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
June 22-28, 2017

Over the course of this reporting period, the conflict in southern Syria continued to intensify. Fighting remains intense in both Damascus and Daraa cities, while the complex standoff near the Iraqi border remains tense. Increasing tensions between the YPG and Arab opposition forces risks further destabilization in Syria's northwest. Intra-opposition conflict resumed this week, primarily in the Idleb pocket. The Kurdish-led offensive on Raqqa city saw more gains this week.

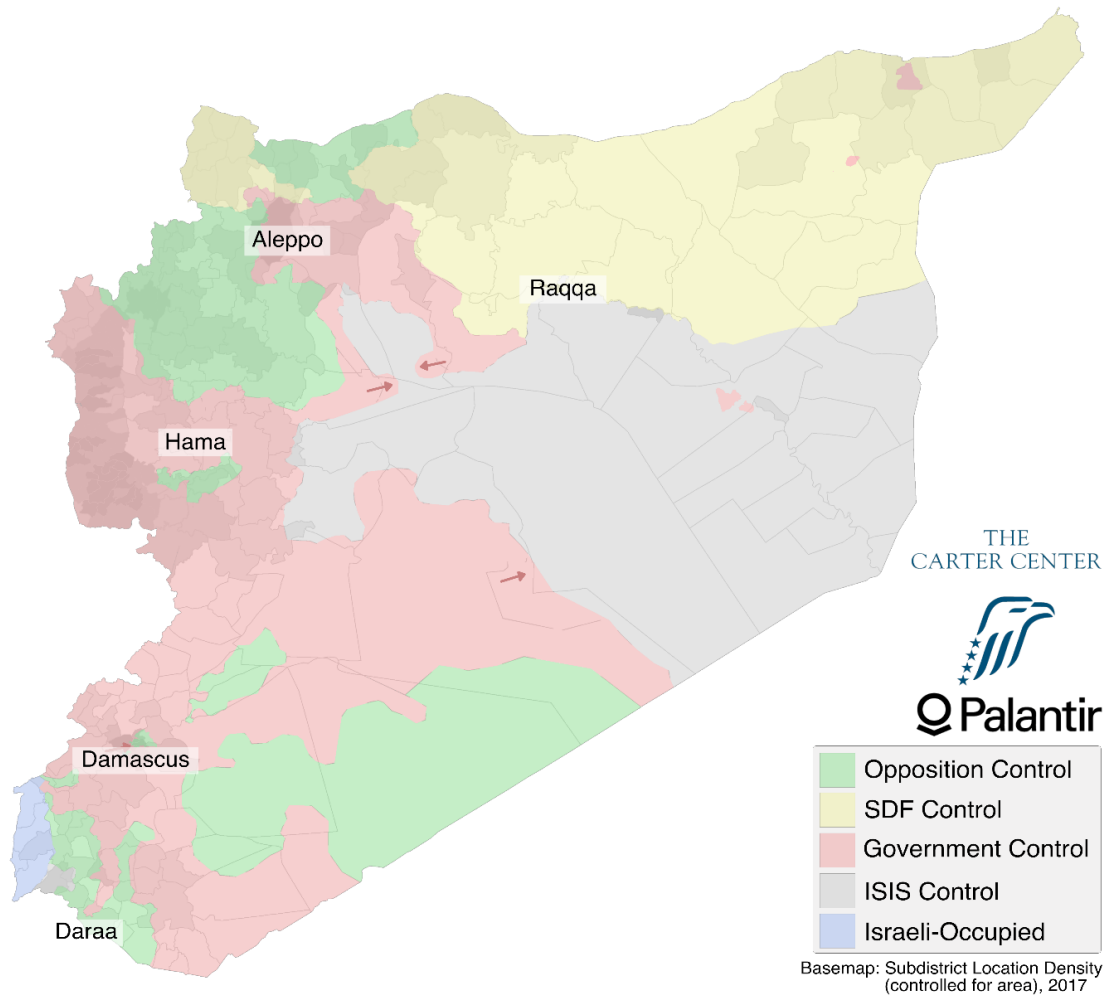


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by June 28, with arrows indicating advances since the start of the reporting period. The underlying map is shaded based upon the density of population centers, with darker areas indicating greater density.

Battles in southern Syria

Pro-government forces led by the 105th Brigade of the Republican Guard continued an offensive in the Damascus district of Jobar this week, with near-constant clashes against Faylaq al-Rahman, advancing in the area around Ain Terma in Rural Damascus. Ain Terma is adjacent to Jobar, the last opposition-controlled neighborhood in Damascus. Tensions remained between Faylaq al-Rahman and Jaysh al-Islam within the Eastern Ghouta pocket, but no open conflict was reported during the reporting week. On June 24, Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) hit a government tank with an anti-tank guided missile and on June 22, Faylaq al-Rahman claimed that pro-government forces used chlorine gas in their offensive.

The short-term goal of pro-government operations in this area is to cut off the last remaining opposition supply lines from Eastern Ghouta to opposition fighters in Jobar. Jobar is included in a de-escalation zone as stipulated in the last round of talks in Astana.

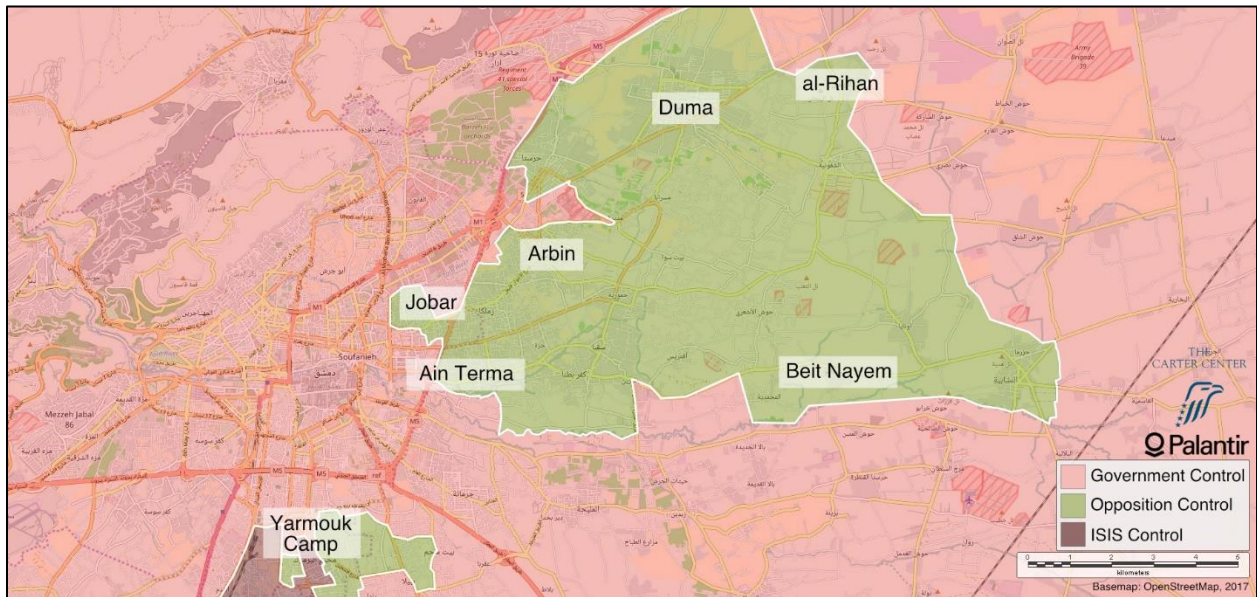


Figure 2 - The situation in Eastern Ghouta by June 28

Prior to Eid al-Fitr, Daraa city witnessed intense ground fighting. On June 22, the opposition’s al-Bunyan al-Marsous and Ras al-Sufouf operation rooms worked jointly in an offensive against Hezbollah and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-supported 4th Division on the frontline between the Palestinian refugee camp and Tariq al-Sad. Opposition forces reported successful operations near Khibret al-Ghazalah, the Daraa-Damascus highway, and elsewhere in Daraa city. On June 22, Bunyan al-Marsous Operations Room blew up a building in which a large number Fourth Division forces had been surrounded.

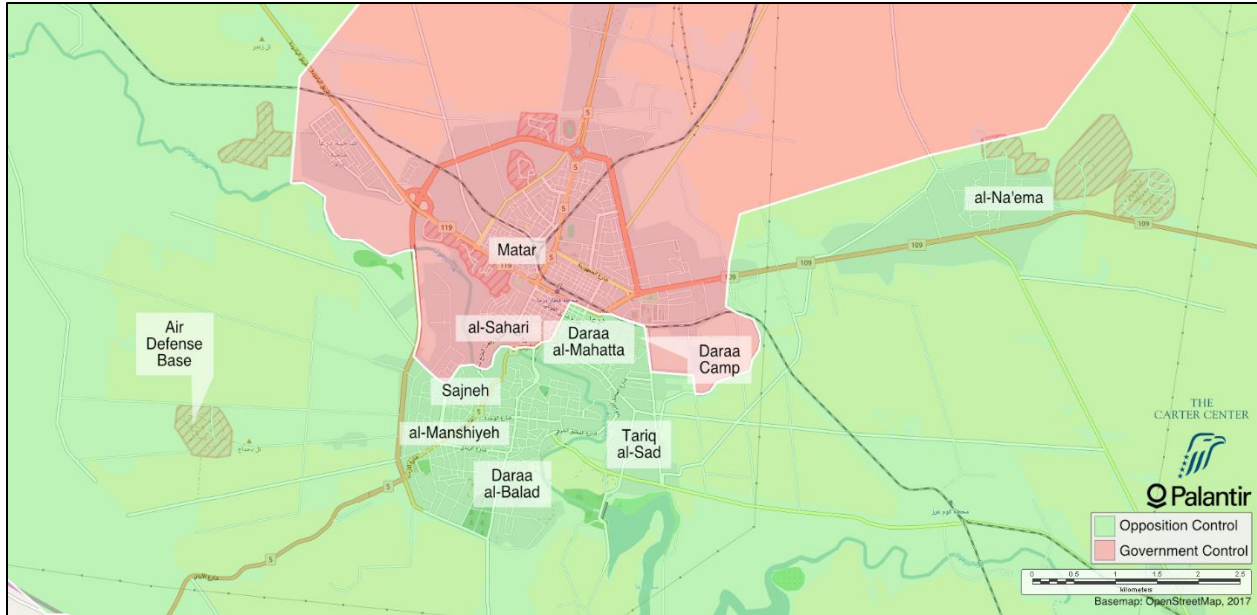


Figure 3 - The situation in Daraa city by June 28

Operations also continued against ISIS-affiliate Jaysh Khalid ibn Walid in al-Hayt in the Yarmouk Basin, where ISIS affiliates launched a large attack on al-Hayt. Pro-government warplanes bombarded opposition points along the frontlines with ISIS in the aftermath.

During the Eid holiday, a newly formed opposition operations room called “Jaysh Muhammad” (The Army of Muhammad) launched an offensive they call “Road to Damascus” targeting pro-government forces in Baath City, Quneitra. In the context of the new offensive near the occupied Golan Heights, off-target shells landed in Israeli-controlled territory on June 24. In response, Israel launched airstrikes against pro-government positions and assets. Despite modest gains by the 24th, opposition forces led by HTS lost much of their newly-gained territory in Baath City, leaving areas of control largely unchanged from the previous week. An advancing counter-offensive by pro-government forces in the area is underway.

On June 23, HTS fighters raided Hezbollah positions on the Lebanese border, causing Hezbollah casualties.

Developments in the eastern desert

Pro-government forces advanced eastward from their locations on the Tadmor (Palmyra) front towards Sokhneh, where they secured a road from Tadmor to areas southeast of the T3 oil pumping station in the east. Russian, Syrian, and Coalition aircraft all bombarded nearby Al-Mayadin, where remaining ISIS leadership is believed to have fled. The city has been mentioned as a likely de facto capital for a shrinking ISIS since the start of the battle for Raqqa. On June 26, International Coalition warplanes destroyed a home in Al-Mayadin that ISIS had converted into a prison, killing dozens of Syrians. A Coalition spokesperson confirmed the event and promised an imminent investigation into the matter.

The opposition’s Jaysh Osoud al-Sharqiya and Quwat al-Shaheed Ahmad al-Abdo have launched continuous assaults on government-held locations around Bir Qasab in the desert east of Damascus city since June 21. On the 21st, opposition forces also destroyed a government-operated armored personnel carrier.

Two separate pro-government forces continued to advance towards each other along the Resafa-Ithriya road, quickly gaining control over territory in the Hama-Aleppo-Raqqa triangle, and threatening to isolate a pocket of ISIS-controlled territory east of Khanaser-Ithriya road. On June 26, the pro-government force

coming from the Resafa intersection and Raqqa, led by the Tiger forces, captured the Syriatel Checkpoint, located just over 3km inside of Aleppo governorate west of the administrative line with Raqqa.

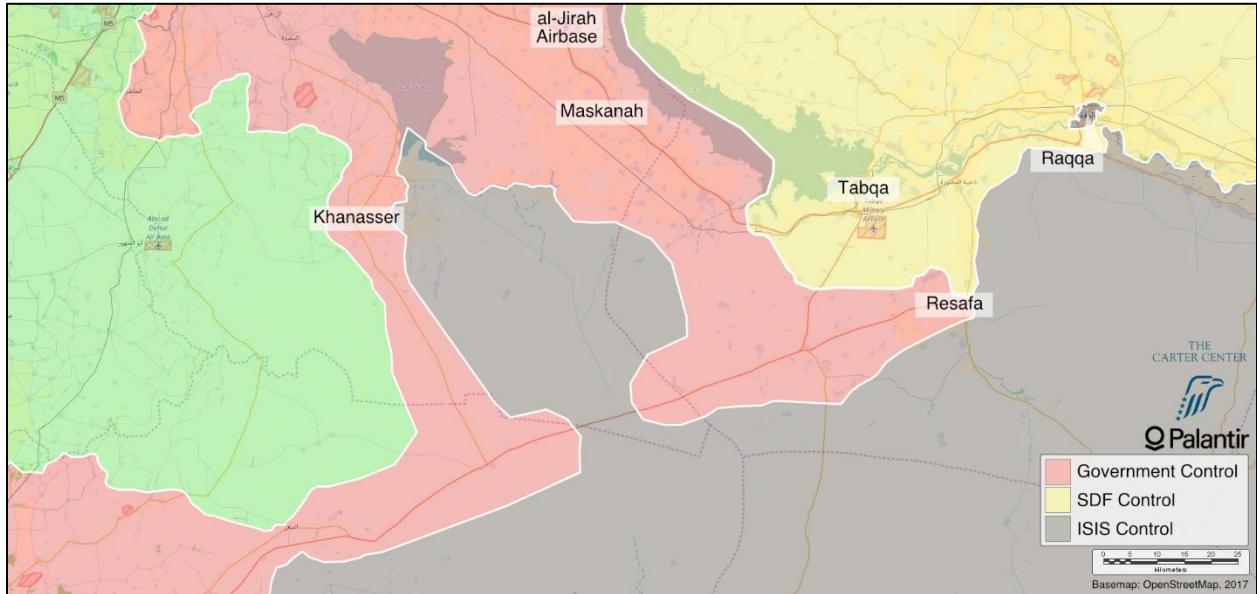


Figure 4 - Frontlines in the western countryside of Raqqa/eastern countryside of Aleppo by June 28

Pro-government forces have continued to redeploy to the As-Salamiyeh front in Eastern Hama. The newest convoy is largely comprised of forces belonging to the pro-government Desert Hawks. Desert Hawks have been mostly absent from major pro-government operations during 2017 following prominent roles in pro-government campaigns in Eastern Homs and Eastern Aleppo in 2016.

Continued clashes between YPG and opposition

On June 24, new clashes broke out between Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and opposition forces near Daret Azza in the western countryside of Aleppo, following an uptick in clashes between opposition and Kurdish forces during the last reporting period and increasing rumors of plans for Turkish-backed operations against the SDF in Afrin canton. On June 27, Turkish-backed forces shelled multiple areas along the frontlines in northern Aleppo governorate near Tel Refaat and Maranaz amidst reports of clashes between SDF and opposition forces in Maranaz and Barasaya.

On June 22, Turkey deployed troops, armored vehicles, and heavy artillery to the opposition-controlled towns of A'zaz and Mare', along the border with SDF-controlled Afrin. On June 25, additional Turkish artillery reinforcements were transported towards the Syrian-Turkish border, presumably for deployment along the Tel Refaat front. The establishment of a unified military entity to lead the assault on Afrin city continued to be mentioned as a possibility brokered by Turkey in the coming weeks.

Russian forces have withdrawn from frontlines they were protecting in Afrin and pro-SDF activists have started a social media campaign using the hashtag #saveAfrin due to fears of an impending Turkish-led offensive.

US officials this week renewed a pledge to take back weapons from the Kurdish YPG forces after the defeat of ISIS. This statement was well-appreciated by Turkish officials.

There have been several reported water shortages in Aleppo city and surrounding areas, largely blamed on a reduction in the flow of water along the Euphrates River coming from Turkey. The governor of Aleppo stated this week that the water flowing along the river was less than one-third of the expected volume by

the time it flowed over Tishreen Dam. Similar water shortages are reported in the SDF-controlled Kobani canton that also relies on water flows through Turkey.

Developments within the opposition as tensions continue

A dispute over electricity between the affiliated public service organizations of Ahrar al-Sham and HTS continued into this week. The public service organizations control and maintain key electrical infrastructure and are responsible for the provision of electricity throughout Idleb. Disagreements between the two groups began in early June and have led to the cutting of electricity to multiple towns and villages in Idleb after Ahrar al-Sham sabotaged a key electrical line in protest of HTS electricity supply pricing.

On June 24, Ahrar al-Sham and HTS clashed in the center of the city of Salqin. The violent dispute began between HTS local security forces and a resident family. Ahrar al-Sham later intervened to restore order, but ended up directly clashing with HTS forces.

There are continued rumors of possible Nur al-Din al-Zenki defections from HTS. The appearance of HTS political chief Mohammed al-Said, formerly of Nur al-Din al-Zenki, alongside Ahrar al-Sham commander Al-Farouk Abu Bakr at a June 23 Atareb demonstration has intensified these rumors, though there is little hard evidence to support these assertions.

On June 22, Ahrar al-Sham released a video statement by leader Abu Ammar which featured the FSA flag. This appearance confirms previous statements by Ahrar al-Sham of its plan to adopt the flag and incorporate the revolutionary symbol into its own emblem. Abu Ammar also announced Ahrar al-Sham's universal adoption of the Unified Arab Code, a compromise between civil and Sharia law. The Unified Arab Code is already implemented in opposition territories in Daraa and in those secured during the Operation Euphrates Shield offensive. On June 23, a prominent Ahrar al-Sham military commander, Al-Farouk Abu Bakr, was seen carrying the FSA flag while taking part in demonstrations against the Syrian government in the city of Atareb, Idleb. Ahrar al-Sham's decision to adopt the Unified Arab Code and the FSA flag were praised by the Syrian Islamic Council.

On June 25, HTS once again rejected the Astana talks on the basis that they are detrimental to the cause of the opposition, declaring that the current “freeze” in fighting in Idleb will lead to more forced evacuations of civilians from Deraa, Eastern Ghouta, and northern Homs.

Despite the freeze, there has been a steady increase in aerial bombardments in Idleb governorate throughout the month of June, often targeting opposition leaders or police and with great destruction to property and loss of life amongst civilians. During this reporting period, there were two bombings in Dana on June 23, killing four persons, and in the afternoon of June 24, killing seven.

Ongoing Raqqa offensive

The SDF-led offensive for the ISIS capital, Raqqa, continued to advance steadily through the city. Over the course of this reporting period, SDF forces cut off more territory bordering the city to the south of the Euphrates River. SDF fighters also advanced further in the western neighborhoods of Raqqa, reaching new fronts in al-Nahdah, al-Barid, and Karim. On Sunday, June 25, the US-backed SDF also took control the al-Qadissiyeh district after three days of intense fighting.

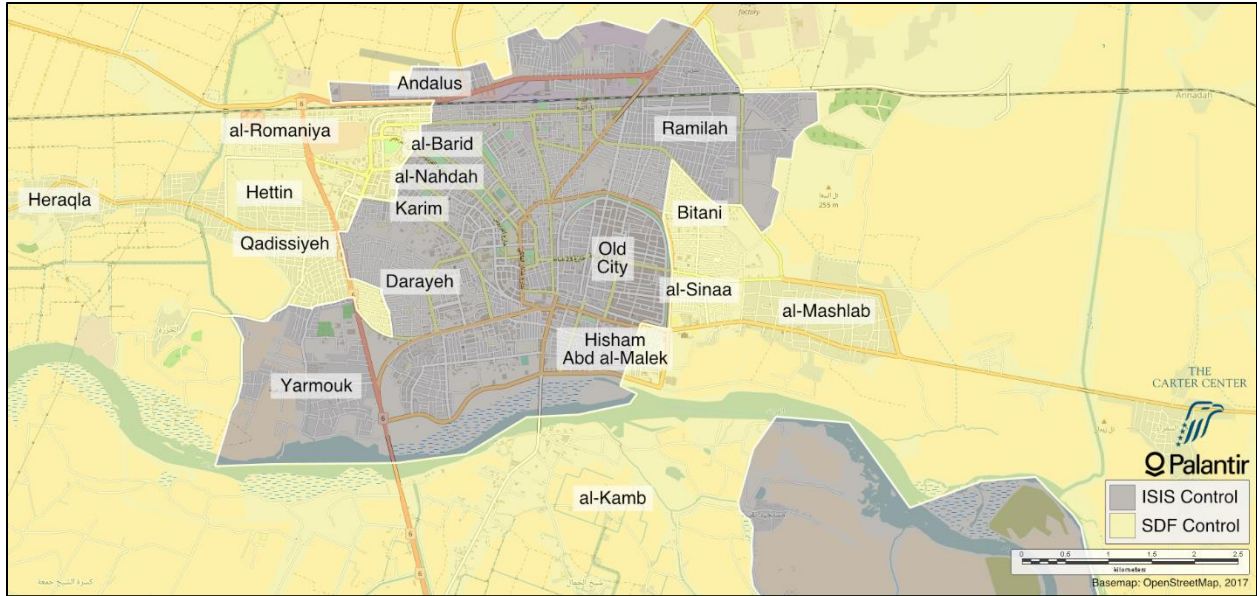


Figure 5 - Frontlines around Raqqa city by June 28