

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
March 15-21, 2018

During the reporting week, pro-government forces once again took significant territory from the remaining opposition pockets in Eastern Ghouta. Ahrar al-Sham forces located in Harasta have agreed to an evacuation, along with 6,000 civilians. Despite the deal, other opposition forces have continued fighting. A major rocket attack on a Damascus market originating from one of the nearby opposition controlled areas, killed at least 35 civilians. Humanitarian aid deliveries to the area remain hindered, and aid groups are struggling to find sufficient shelter for the growing number of IDPs. Operation Olive Branch, the Turkish-led offensive for northwestern Syria, took the city of Afrin from defending Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a Kurdish-led organization in northern Syria).

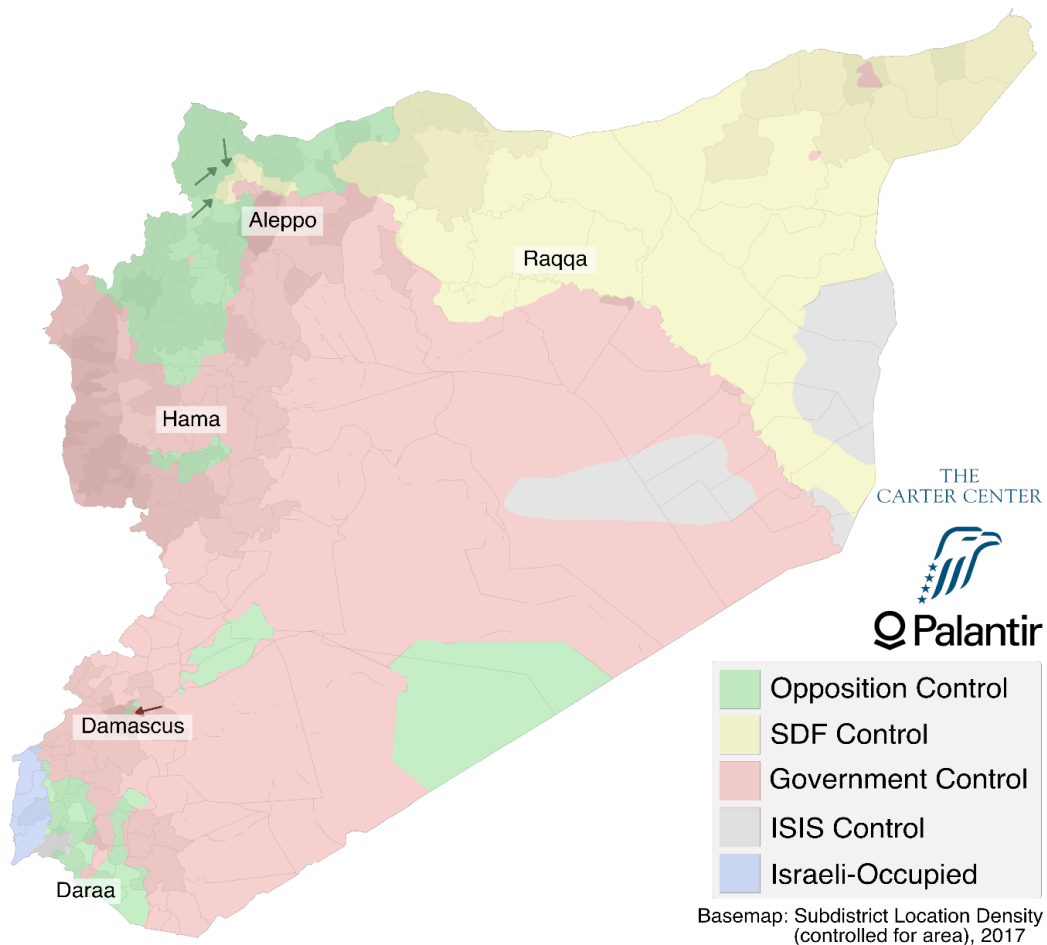


Figure 1 - Areas of control in Syria by March 21, with arrows indicating fronts of advances during the reporting period

Eastern Ghouta

Pro-government forces advanced into Hammouriyeh (east of Arbin) on March 15, after overnight airstrikes targeting the area. In the preceding days, pro-government forces also took Saqba and Kafr Batna (east of Ain Terma). As many as twenty thousand people evacuated from opposition-held areas of Eastern Ghouta in two days as pro-government forces continued their offensive to retake the pocket. According to UN OCHA, more than 50,000 people have been displaced due to fighting and shifting front lines, and more than 1,600 civilians have been killed (including due to opposition shelling of Damascus city, which has persisted throughout the past few weeks). OCHA’s statement emphasizes an urgent need for more shelters for the increasing rate of civilian displacement.

An opposition rocket attack on a Damascus shopping district led to one of the deadliest days in recent history for government-held districts of the city. The attack, which killed at least 35, took place while citizens were shopping for Mother’s Day presents. Though opposition forces have lost a significant amount of territory, frontlines within the outskirts of Damascus have changed little, meaning opposition groups remain within mortar and rocket range of much of Damascus city.

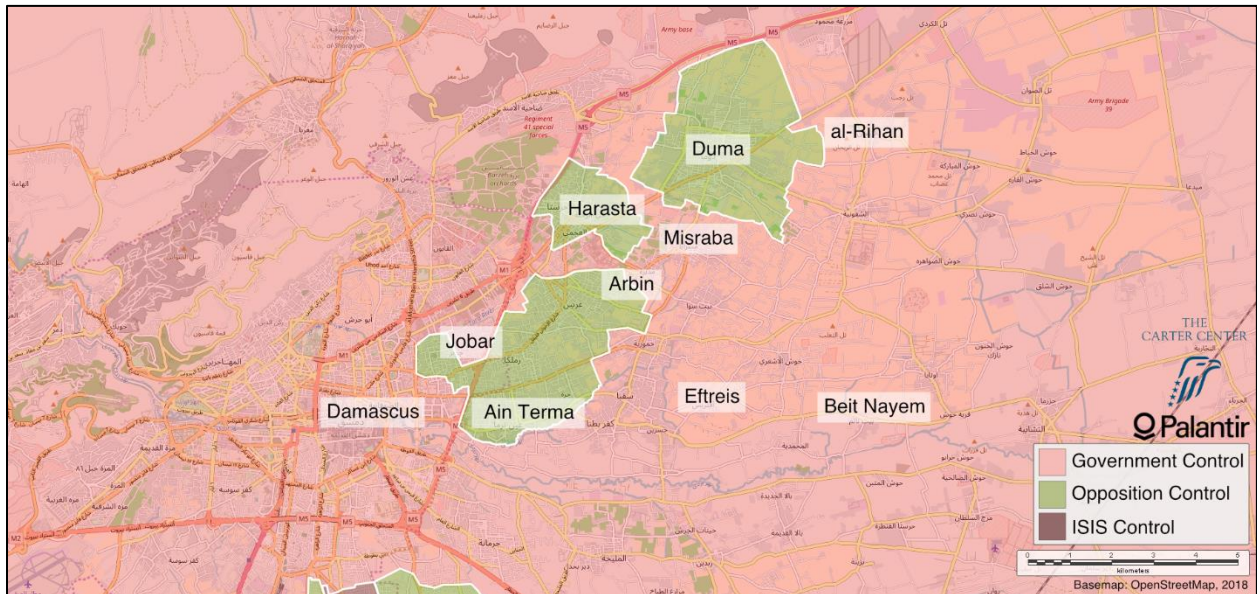


Figure 2 - Situation in Eastern Ghouta by March 21

An evacuation deal was reached between Russia and Ahrar al-Sham in Harasta in the Eastern Ghouta on March 21. Evacuations are scheduled to begin on March 22, and will include approximately 1,500 fighters and 6,000 family members. As with previous evacuation deals, all evacuees will be transported to Idlib governorate. The agreement also includes Russian guarantees that residents who stay in Harasta will not be harassed or forcibly displaced by incoming forces.

On March 18, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited pro-government forces in recently-captured Jisreen near the frontlines in Eastern Ghouta. The images and video of his visit include an interview as he drives himself to the town. After a morning of brief calm, shelling and clashes resumed across Eastern Ghouta on the afternoon of March 18.

Afrin

Exactly eight weeks after the beginning of Operation Olive Branch, Turkish armed forces and their Syrian opposition allies took control of Afrin city, where both Turkish and FSA flags now fly over the city’s center. Forces associated with Olive Branch now control all major settlements in the Afrin canton (see map below).

Opposition forces were filmed looting stores and homes after the capture of Afrin city. After widespread condemnation of the actions, leadership of the battalions responsible for the looting have announced they would be investigating the actions and would punish those individuals responsible. Additionally, within 24 hours, Olive Branch forces announced the formation of an internal security force to prevent any further unrest.

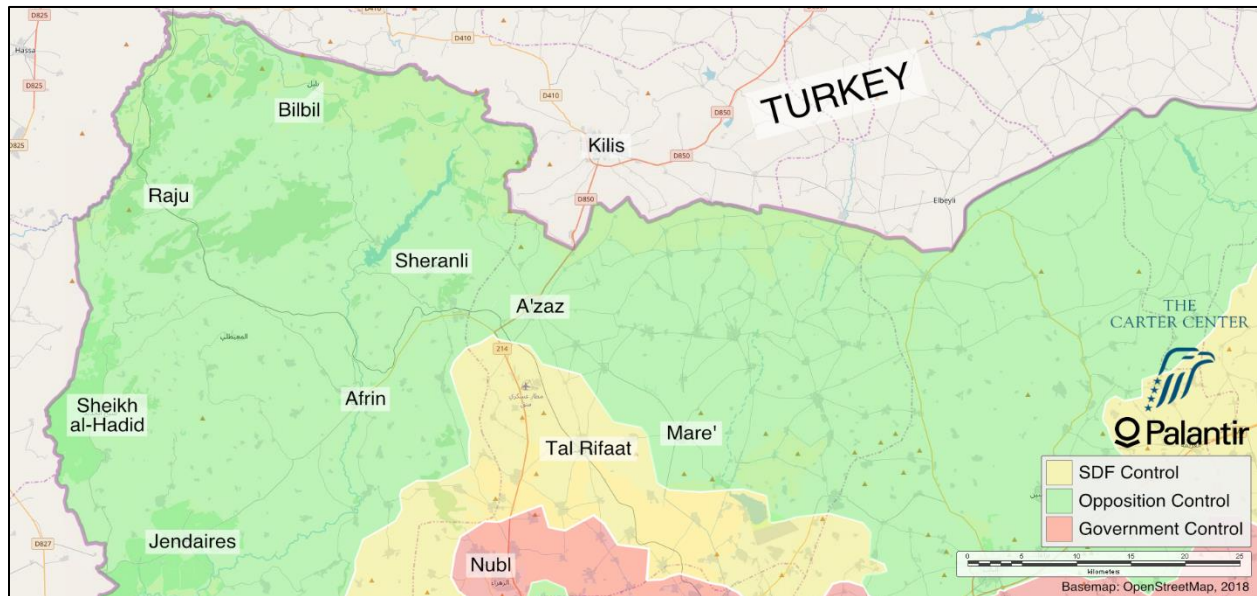


Figure 3 - Situation in northwestern Syria by March 21

A British woman has died fighting alongside Kurdish forces in Afrin. The 26-year-old, Anna Campbell, died in the city of Afrin after a Turkish airstrike. Campbell initially joined the all-female YPJ militia in May of last year to help Kurdish fighters battle ISIS.

The YPG have called the capture of Afrin an occupation and vow a new phase of guerrilla tactics against Turkish Troops and their allied Syrian fighters. Turkish deputy Prime Minister Bozdog told reporters that Turkish forces are not permanent in the Afrin area. Other Turkish reports and statements indicate an imminent advance towards Tel Rifaat, which the SDF captured from FSA units in the area in February 2016. Reports of Russian and Syrian military presence in the area cannot be independently verified, but if true, may complicate such an advance.

Opposition Developments

In the opposition-held Rastan pocket north of Homs city, a new corps of the opposition’s “National Army” was formed this week. The 4th Corps, was formed in a merger between Faylaq al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham units in the area. This new division is the first unit of the National Army to be stationed outside of the Turkish-dominated northern Aleppo region.

Clashes continue between Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) in northern Idlib and western Aleppo. Much of the fighting appears to be centered around the border between Afrin and Idlib, seemingly in a struggle to gain control over commerce routes moving through the area. There are currently no indications that fighters from the Operation Olive Branch will redeploy south to engage in this fight, though evacuated fighters from Eastern Ghouta could potentially tip the military balance in favor of the anti-HTS union of Ahrar al-Sham and Noor al-Din al-Zinki.