

THE
CARTER CENTER



Weekly Conflict Summary
March 15-22, 2017

This reporting period, opposition forces launched four (nearly simultaneous) offensives. On March 19, an offensive led by Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Ahrar al-Sham, and FSA affiliates in Eastern Ghouta saw gains on the eastern outskirts of Damascus city. The advancing groups took territory between the isolated Eastern Ghouta and Qaboun pockets, surprising government security forces in their advances. In Syria's southeastern desert, opposition forces advanced against ISIS on two fronts, taking territory along Syria's border towards Suweida and advancing northeast from the long-held Dumayr pocket.

In the northern countryside of Hama, opposition forces including HTS and Jaysh al-Nasr took a large amount of territory over 24 hours ending March 22. They captured the key town Souran as well as many villages southwest of previous frontlines, advancing about 4km southwards from a 10km-wide frontline. This puts opposition fighters within 5km of Hama city (within mortar range) and within 25km of the opposition pocket north of Homs. See Figure 1 below for map details.

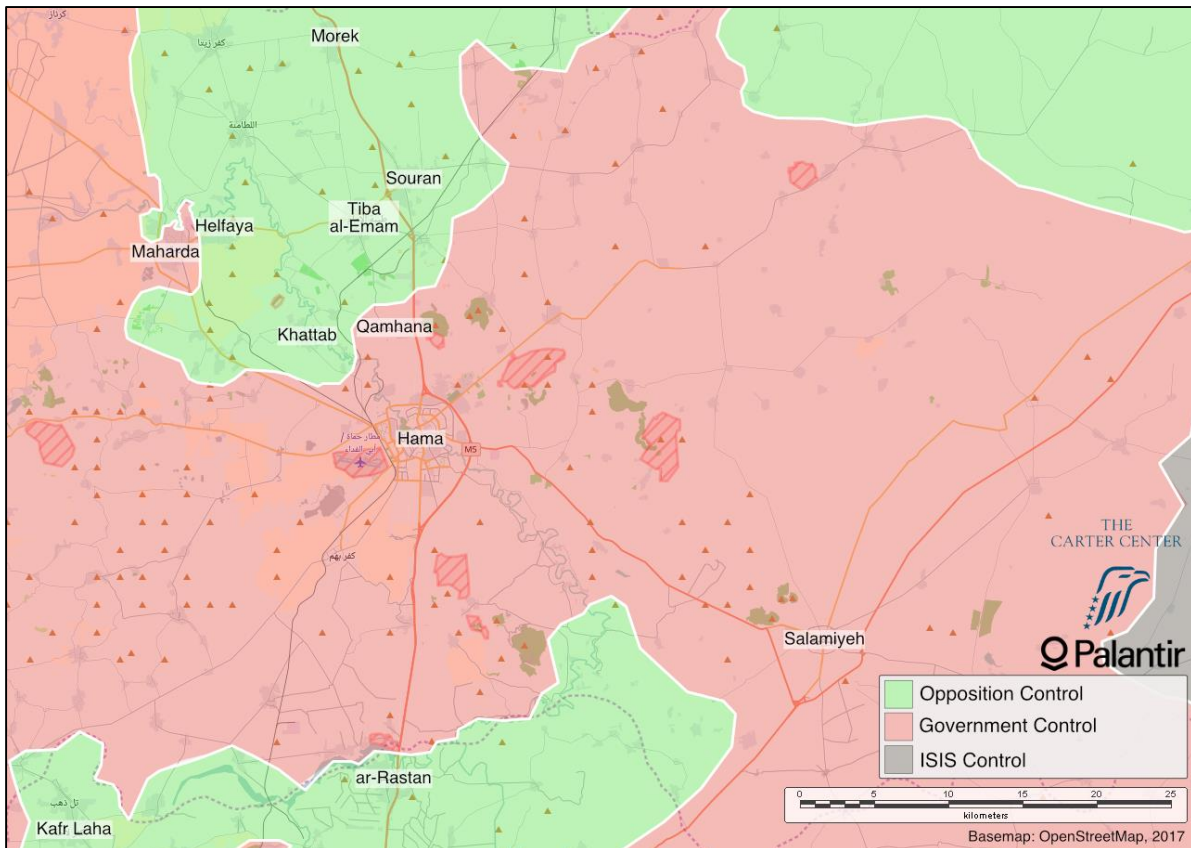


Figure 1 - Frontlines around Hama by March 23

The opposition's Hama offensive forced a redeployment of the government's Tiger Forces, who were deployed previously in the eastern countryside of Aleppo, fighting ISIS forces. By March 22, Tiger Forces had almost completely cut off the ISIS-held town Deir Hafr in their advances. Pro-government forces also advanced in the fields north of Tadmor, recapturing areas from ISIS after securing the ancient city.

This reporting period also saw increased Israeli engagement in the Syrian conflict. On March 16, the Israeli air force struck locations near Tadmor. Syrian anti-air missiles were deployed in response, though they did not hit the Israeli aircraft. On March 19, an Israeli drone struck pro-government militiamen from the National Defense Force (NDF) in Khan Arnabeh, Quneitra. On March 20, an Israeli Skylark surveillance drone was shot down by Hezbollah in Quneitra.

Also on March 16, a pair of US reaper drones struck a mosque in Idleb province, unleashing heavy payloads. US military officials said the targets were prominent extremists, though the attack killed dozens of civilians.

The predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued to advance east of the ISIS capital of Raqqa, making incremental gains towards Raqqa and along the northern banks of the Euphrates. On March 22, SDF fighters were deployed (reportedly via US helicopters) across the Euphrates on the Shurfah peninsula overnight. SDF and US military personnel moved to secure the surrounding area, advancing in the west of Tabqa and severing the main highway leading into the city. More fighters and heavy equipment arrived the next day via barge. The US military indicated that capture of the Tabqa dam is a key objective for SDF and US soldiers. See Figure 2 for map details.

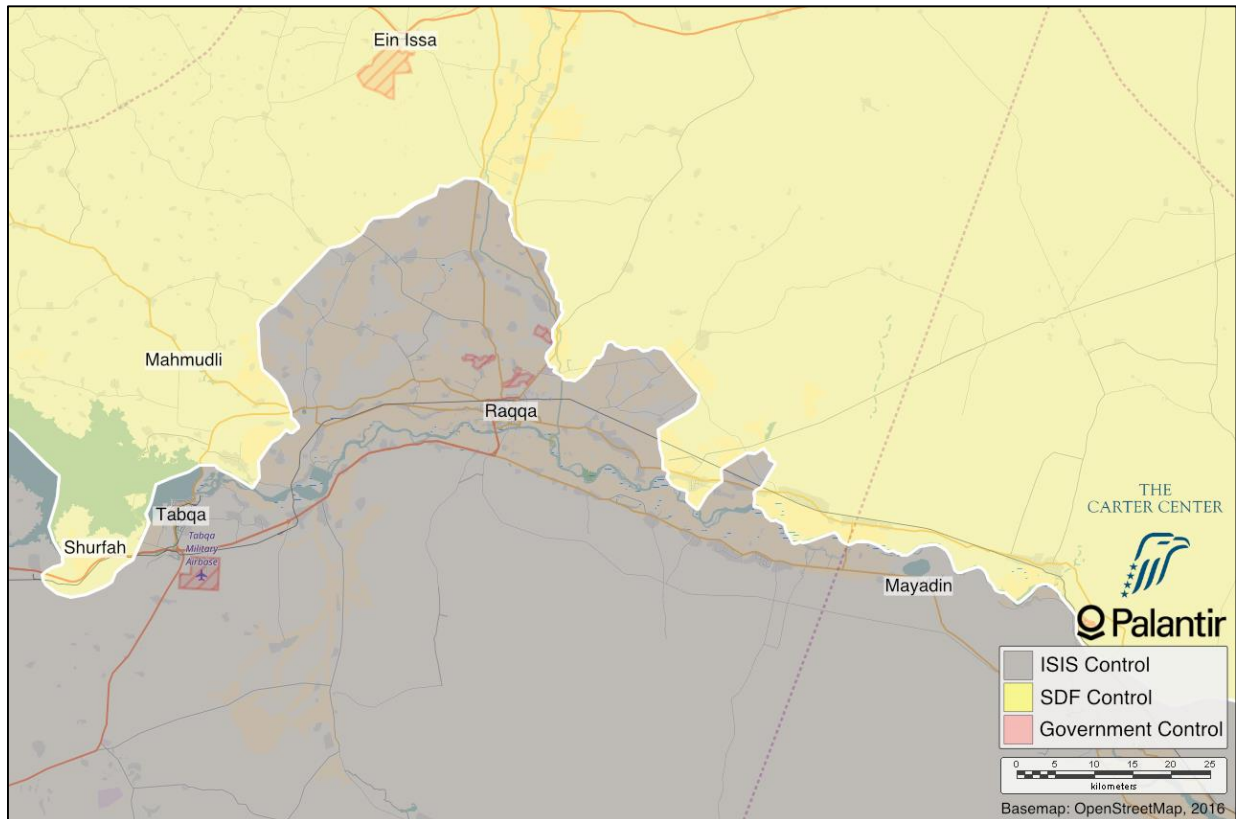


Figure 2 - Frontlines around Raqqa by March 22

Conclusions:

Opposition forces advanced on four fronts during this period, indicating that with some level of unity they remain a fighting force capable of waging multiple battles. ISIS continued to lose territory to the three other stake-holding military powers in Syria, and the effects of increased US support for the SDF are beginning to show as fighters were transported to new fronts south of the Euphrates.