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THE
CARTER CENTER



Syria Conflict Update

June 1 – July 10, 2018

Countrywide Developments June 1-30

- The Syrian government has made major military advances in southern Syria. Beginning in mid-June, Syrian and Russian airstrikes began bombarding the southern governorate of Daraa, followed quickly by swift ground offensives, capturing by early July approximately half of opposition-held territory in the south.
- More than 270,000 people have been displaced due to fighting in southern Syria, per UN OCHA.
- Both the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Syrian military made advances against ISIS positions in eastern Syria, further diminishing the group's limited holdings.
- Following a deal between the US and Turkey, Turkish security forces entered the SDF-held canton of Manbij for joint patrols with US forces in the area. SDF forces have reportedly withdrawn, but the local Manbij Military Council remains. There have been conflicting reports about the extent of this deal (whether it extends to the east of the Euphrates or not), but so far, it appears only to cover Manbij.
- Opposition infighting continued in the northern Syrian governorate of Idlib as did the regular exchange of artillery and mortar fire along frontlines between opposition and government forces.

Quantitative Updates

The month of June began with relatively low levels of conflict throughout Syria. With opposition forces having been cleared earlier from Eastern Ghouta, Eastern Qalamoun, and northern Homs, much of the remaining violence was concentrated along opposition-government front lines in northern Hama and Idlib governorates. Additionally, low levels of infighting continued between rival opposition factions in the Idlib governorate.

By mid-June, however, Syrian government forces, aided by Russian air power began an offensive in southwestern Syria. Beginning in the second half of June, reported conflict levels per week jumped five times higher than what had been seen in recent memory, with air strikes and artillery shelling targeting nearly every community within 5km of any government-opposition frontlines.

Governorate	May 29 - June 4	June 5-11	June 12-18	June 19-25	June 26-30
Aleppo	4.00	4.43	3.43	3.29	4.20
Damascus	0.29	0.00	0.00	0.14	0.00
Daraa	4.57	4.14	4.43	22.57	21.20
Deir Ezzor	5.00	2.71	2.29	3.57	1.60
Hama	4.43	6.86	5.86	4.29	6.20
Hasakah	2.29	2.57	2.43	0.71	0.40
Homs	0.29	0.43	0.57	1.00	0.00
Idlib	4.57	6.29	5.57	3.00	5.00
Lattakia	1.29	1.00	0.86	0.71	0.40
Quneitra	1.43	0.57	1.57	1.43	0.60
Raqqa	0.86	0.29	0.14	0.71	0.00
Rural Damascus	0.00	0.29	0.00	0.57	0.20
Suweida	0.14	0.43	0.29	2.86	0.40
Tartous	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

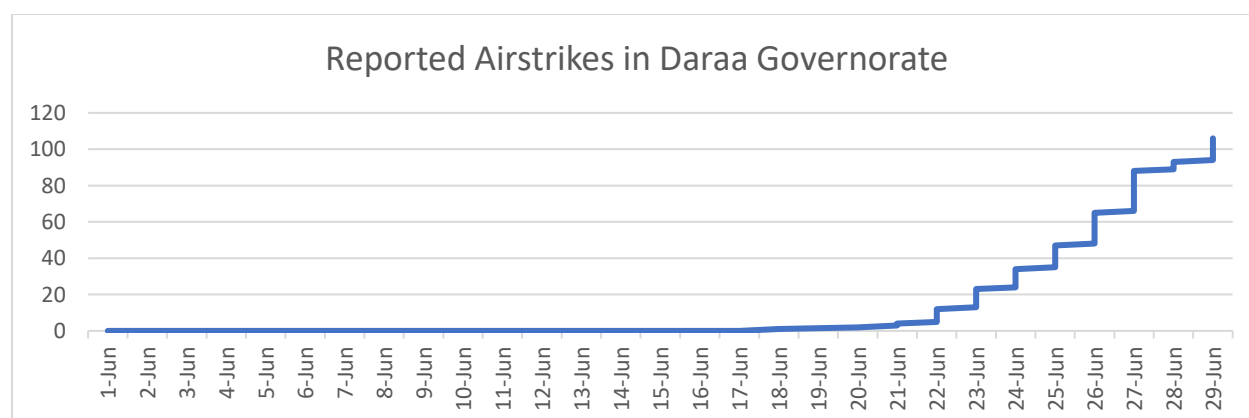


Figure 1 and 2: Levels of reported conflict over time per governorate. Reported airstrikes in Daraa governorate during June. Source: ACLED. Conflict events include instances of remote violence, clashes, location captures, and violence against civilians. For more information on ACLED data visit <https://www.acleddata.com/about-acled/> and for sources used on Syria <https://www.acleddata.com/syria-partner-network/>

Territorial Changes

With the swiftly moving offensive in southern Syria, government forces have continued to make significant gains against opposition forces. The swift progress made in June has only accelerated into the beginning of July (see maps below). The territories taken by government forces have largely been surrendered by opposition forces who have accepted “reconciliation deals” brokered by Russian intermediaries. These deals call for the handover of heavy weapons, the integration of willing opposition fighters, and provisions for the evacuation to Idlib of those unwilling to reconcile.

In addition to territorial changes in southern Syria, both government and Kurdish forces have taken territory from ISIS, who’s holdings in eastern Syria continue to shrink.

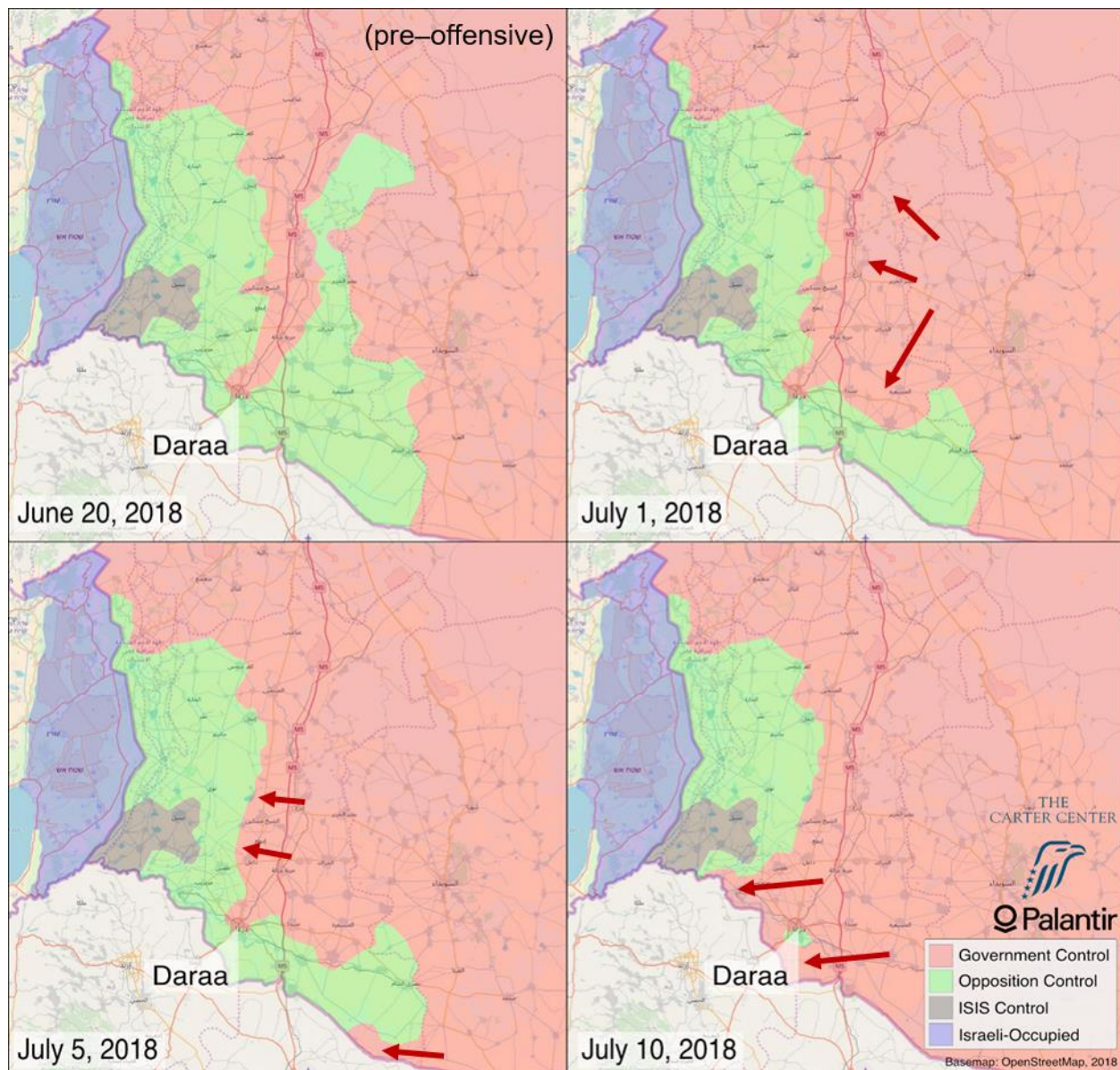


Figure 3: Areas of control changes in southern Syria from June 20 through July 10, 2018.

Regional Developments

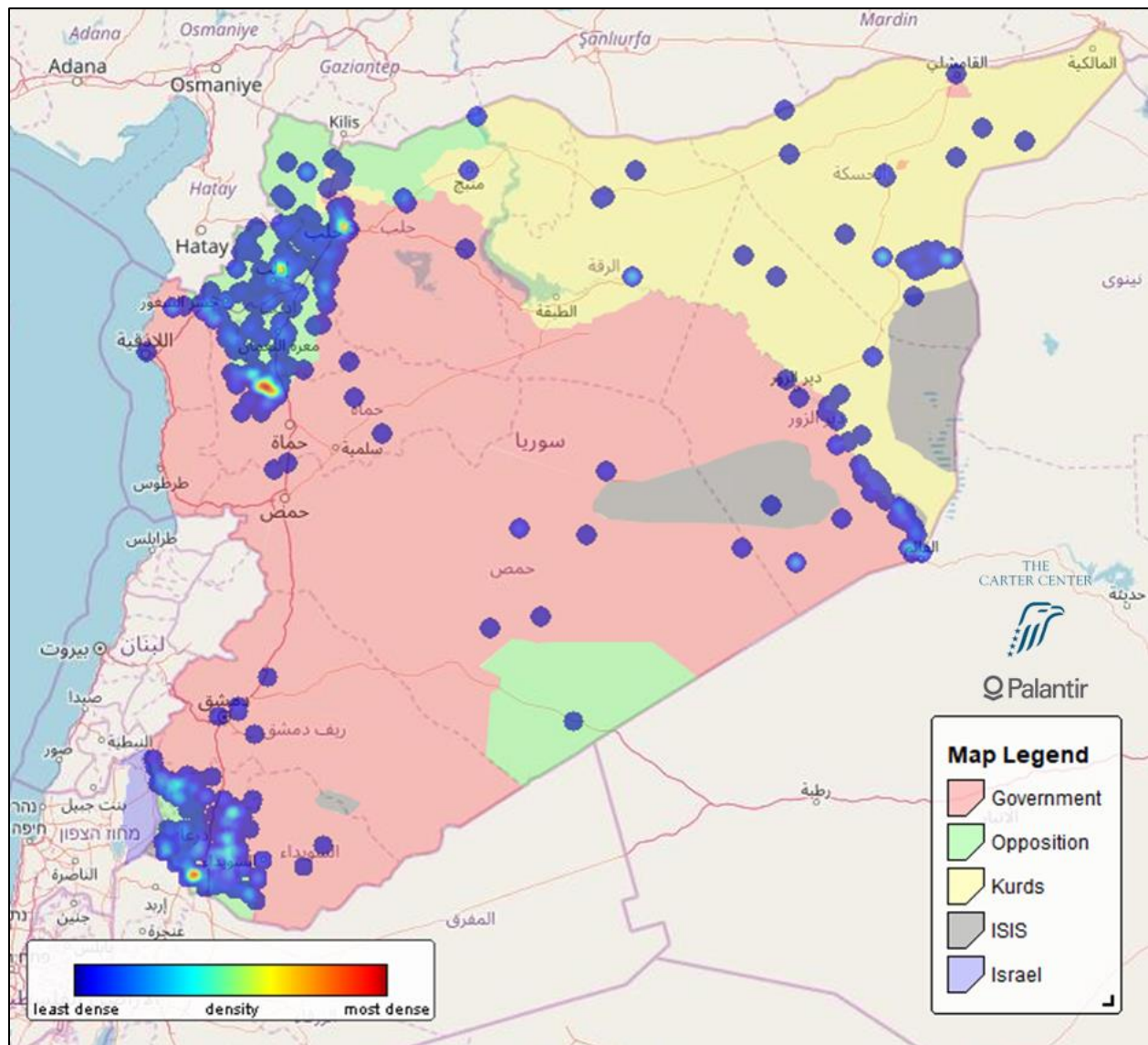


Figure 4: Heatmap of reported conflict events during June. Areas of control shown as of July 1, 2018. Event data via ACLED.

South/Daraa

The Syrian government's offensive on southern Syria began in mid-June with a rapid increase in air and artillery strikes on most population centers in the area. For the first half of the month, as talk of an impending attack was growing louder, conflict events were largely concentrated in the northwestern portion of opposition control, as well as along opposition-ISIS frontlines and in Daraa city. When the offensive began, however, government forces focused their attention on the eastern branch of opposition-held territory, making substantial gains by the end of the month (see map below). The quick shift in focus from west to east could have been an attempt at misdirection, or a recognition of the high risk associated with conducting major military operations so close to the de-militarized zone in the Golan Heights.

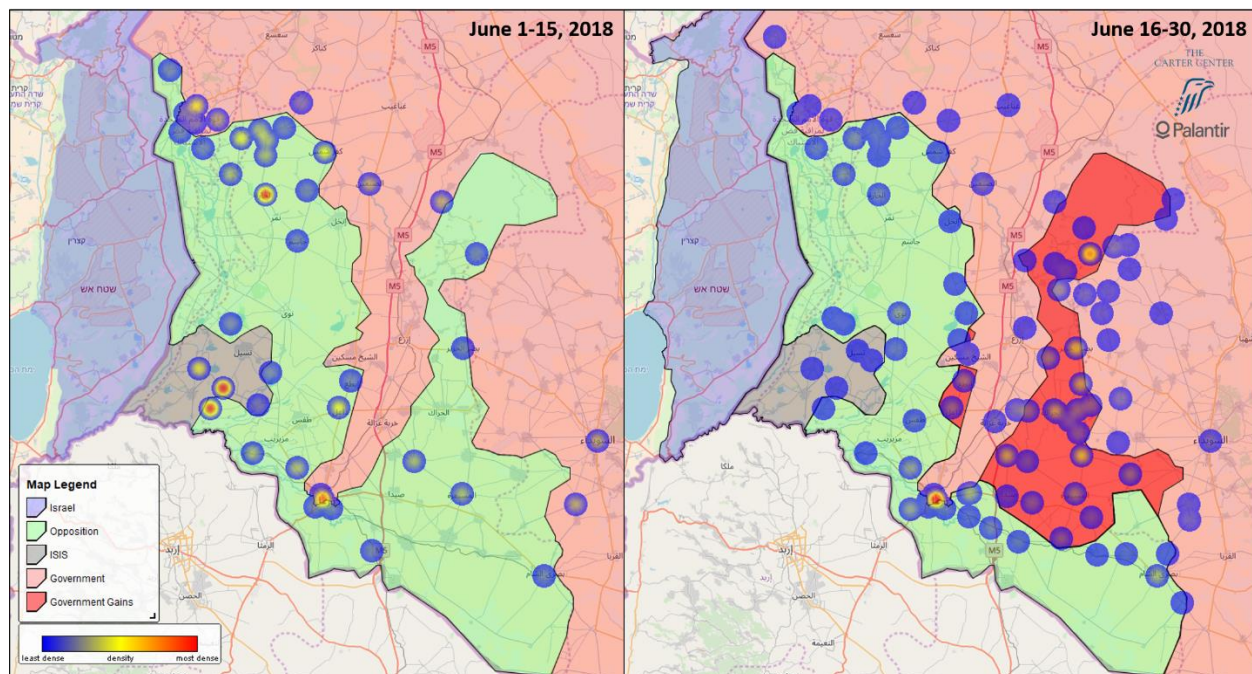


Figure 5: LEFT: Areas of control and distribution of reported conflict events from June 1-15. RIGHT: Areas of control as of July 1, 2018 overlaid with reported conflict events from June 16-30, 2018. Event data from ACLED.

Fighting in southern Syria has resulted in the displacement of an estimated 270K people (according to UN OCHA). Most of those displaced have fled from the eastern branch of opposition control south to the Jordanian border. As Syrian government forces captured the border in early July, however, cross-border aid has come to a halt. Israel has opened at least one field hospital in the Golan Heights, but as conflict has been relatively light along the border, few Syrians have fled in this direction.

The rapid advance of government forces in southern Syria is likely to continue westward, only being complicated by three factors:

- First, forces belonging to Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) maintain a relatively strong presence in some key cities and have reportedly shown some resistance to reconciliation deals.
- Second, the ISIS-affiliated Jaish Khaled ibn al-Walid, present in the southwest, will likely have to be dealt with militarily. It is possible that reconciliation deals may be reached with tribal leaders in the area, but a transfer of fighters to another location in Syria is highly unlikely.
- Third, there has been a steady increase in Israeli military activity targeting Iranian assets in Syria – particularly as conflict has increased in the south. Fighting is likely to slow dramatically as frontlines approach the Golan Heights in order to reduce the risk of further international incidents.

The plight of civilians, who have been displaced en masse, remains of concern. With the cessation of cross-border aid from Jordan, and the continuation of fighting along frontlines to the north, more needs to be done to ensure access to these civilians.

Menbij

In early June, the US and Turkey reached a deal on the northern Syrian town of Menbij, agreeing that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) affiliated security units would withdraw from the town. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, said that Kurdish YPG fighters (which form the bulk of the SDF) would be disarmed and forced to leave Menbij as part of a broader roadmap for the region agreed upon with the US.

YPG leadership in a follow-up statement said its military advisers would vacate their posts, but would be prepared to intervene should the security of Menbij require it.

Shortly thereafter, the Menbij Military Council (MMC, the SDF's governing body for Menbij) announced that it would oppose a Turkish military presence in Menbij. MMC representatives claimed they had not been fully informed of the mechanisms of the deal. Despite these statements, on June 18, Turkish military forces entered Menbij after local security forces decreased their patrols. By the end of June, Turkish forces were conducting patrols around town in conjunction with US troops.

Idleb

With the government's offensive in southern Syria progressing quickly, residents of Idleb have begun to worry that an offensive for the north will soon follow. The UN has expressed concern for the 2 million people living at risk of displacement should such an escalation occur.

Though the offensive in southern Syria has taken much of the media attention lately, Idleb and northern Hama still endure a high volume of Syrian and Russian airstrikes, including one attack that killed an estimated 44 people. UN Secretary General Guterres has called for an investigation into the strike.

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