
Control of Terrain in Syria: December 23, 2015



The direct intervention of Russia into the Syrian Civil War has shifted battlefield momentum in favor of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad since ISW published its last Control of Terrain in Syria Map in mid-September. Russia began its air campaign in Syria on September 30, enabling the regime to mount renewed offensives against opposition-held terrain throughout Western Syria. In Aleppo Province, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and associated proxy forces launched a multipronged offensive on October 15 that has seized large swaths of rebel-held terrain in the southern countryside of Aleppo City, threatening to sever the strategic M5 Highway. Meanwhile, pro-regime forces relieved the besieged Kuweires Airbase in Eastern Aleppo Province on November 10 in a key symbolic victory that positioned the regime to exploit future U.S.-led coalition operations against ISIS along the Syrian-Turkish border. The regime also achieved tactical gains against the opposition in Northeastern Latakia Province and parts of Northern Hama Province as well as the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus.

The regime nonetheless suffers from chronic shortages of manpower that render it unable to fully capitalize upon the expanded support provided by Russia and Iran. Rebel factions seized the town of Morek in Northern Hama Province on November 5, securing a strategic position directly north of Hama City. Regime forces have also struggled to repel repeated incursions by ISIS into Central Syria despite the presence of Russian airpower. ISIS temporarily severed the vulnerable regime ground line of communication to Aleppo City in October, disrupting ongoing operations in Southern Aleppo Province. ISIS also engaged in back-and-forth battles over the town of Mahin in the Eastern Qalamoun Mountains over the past two months, threatening to disrupt the M5 Highway between Damascus and Homs City. ISIS currently retains its position in Mahin despite the deployment of Russian helicopter gunships to the region.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition continued to enable further gains against ISIS in Northeastern Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – a U.S.-backed force composed primarily of Syrian Kurds – seized control over Al-Hawl along the Syrian-Iraqi border on November 13. The operation occurred on the same day as the seizure of Sinjar in Northern Iraq, restricting ISIS's freedom of movement between Mosul and ar-Raqqa City. The SDF are currently advancing towards the key ISIS-held crossroads town of Shaddadi in Southern Hasaka Province. Initial mobilizations have also been reported for future operations to seize the ISIS-controlled Tishreen Dam along the Euphrates River as well as the northern outskirts of ar-Raqqa City.

ISW also modified this map in order to highlight a new zone of control for ISIS in Southwestern Dera'a Province reflecting new confidence in reports that Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk constitutes an unofficial ISIS affiliate in Southern Syria. ISW also instituted minor changes to the zones of control along the M20 Highway between Palmyra and Deir ez-Zour City after assessing that ISIS previously seized several regime checkpoints in the region. Finally, ISW adjusted the borders of the Afrin Canton in Northwestern Aleppo Province in order to more accurately depict the territory controlled by the Syrian Kurdish YPG and its allies.