



Weekly Conflict Summary
September 15-21, 2016

The September 9 cessation of hostilities began quickly unraveling last week, less than a week after its implementation. The deal came under serious strain following two airstrikes in opposite corners of Syria, sparking a rapid re-escalation of conflict. Despite being declared over by most parties to the conflict, talks continue between the US and Russia in hopes of preventing a return to full scale conflict.

As has been the case for most of 2016, the majority of conflict throughout Syria remains focused in and around Aleppo city. Though the implementation of the cessation of hostilities briefly saw a sharp reduction in the number of reported aerial bombardments, at the time of this writing, all sources indicate that the frequency of air raids have returned to pre-cessation levels.

First, on September 17, international coalition airstrikes hit Syrian government soldiers in Deir Ez-Zor on the frontlines with ISIS. Russian personnel were able to contact the American control center after the strikes started to ask them to stop, but much damage had already been done. Over 60 Syrian soldiers were reported killed in the strikes, with another 100 injured. American representatives have apologized and indicated that the strike was intended for ISIS operatives, not the Syrian military. Due to the US strikes, ISIS was able to advance on government territory. By September 21, pro-government forces had recaptured some of what was lost, but have endured new rounds of shelling on the Deir Ez-Zor Military Base as a result of the ISIS advance. The US strike on government forces comes at an especially bad time, as ISIS had announced a renewed offensive for Deir Ez-Zor city less than 10 days prior.

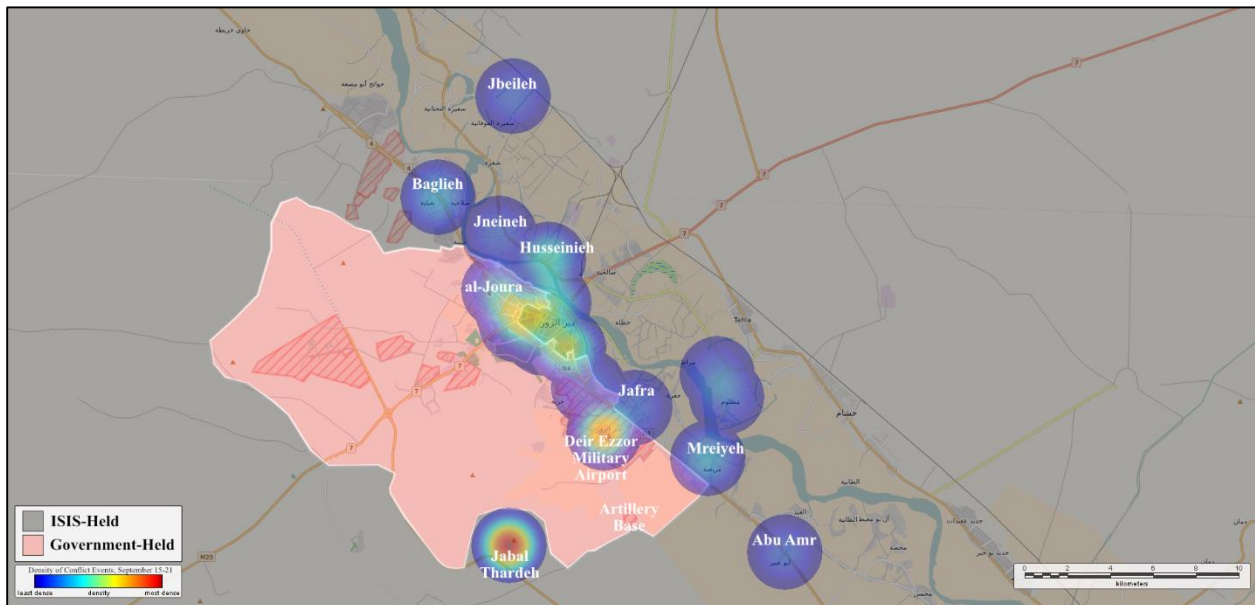


Figure 1- Heat map of conflict events around Deir Ez-Zor city, September 15-21, 2016, showing a high concentration of violence in Jabal al-Tharda (south), the location of the US airstrike. Map made using software from Palantir Technologies.

Following the Deir Ez-Zor strike, on September 19 a round of airstrikes hit an aid convoy at Orem al-Kubra west of Aleppo. The Red Crescent convoy of 31 trucks was carrying humanitarian relief for areas in the western Aleppo countryside. The strike was in opposition-held territory, though no military targets

were reported to have been hit. The strikes destroyed over half of the aid trucks and reportedly killed 21 aid workers, including the local director of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, Omar Barakat. The convoy had received prior approval from all sides in the conflict before arriving at Orem al-Kubra. It drove directly across the front lines from pro-government-controlled territory, and was over 10km from any frontline when it was struck.

Russian officials claimed that the goods in the trucks spontaneously combusted, but as footage became available of the attacks, officials instead released drone footage of a towed mortar passing the convoy on the road 6km away from the location of the eventual strike. Sources on the ground indicate that both Russian and Syrian aircraft were in the area at the time of the attack, and that shrapnel from munitions used by both actors have been found at the site of the attack.

The convoy was carrying aid from UN OCHA, WFP, UNHCR, UNFPA, WHO, UNICEF, and IOM. It was reportedly carrying flour, medicines, clothes, infant formula, and other non-food supplies.

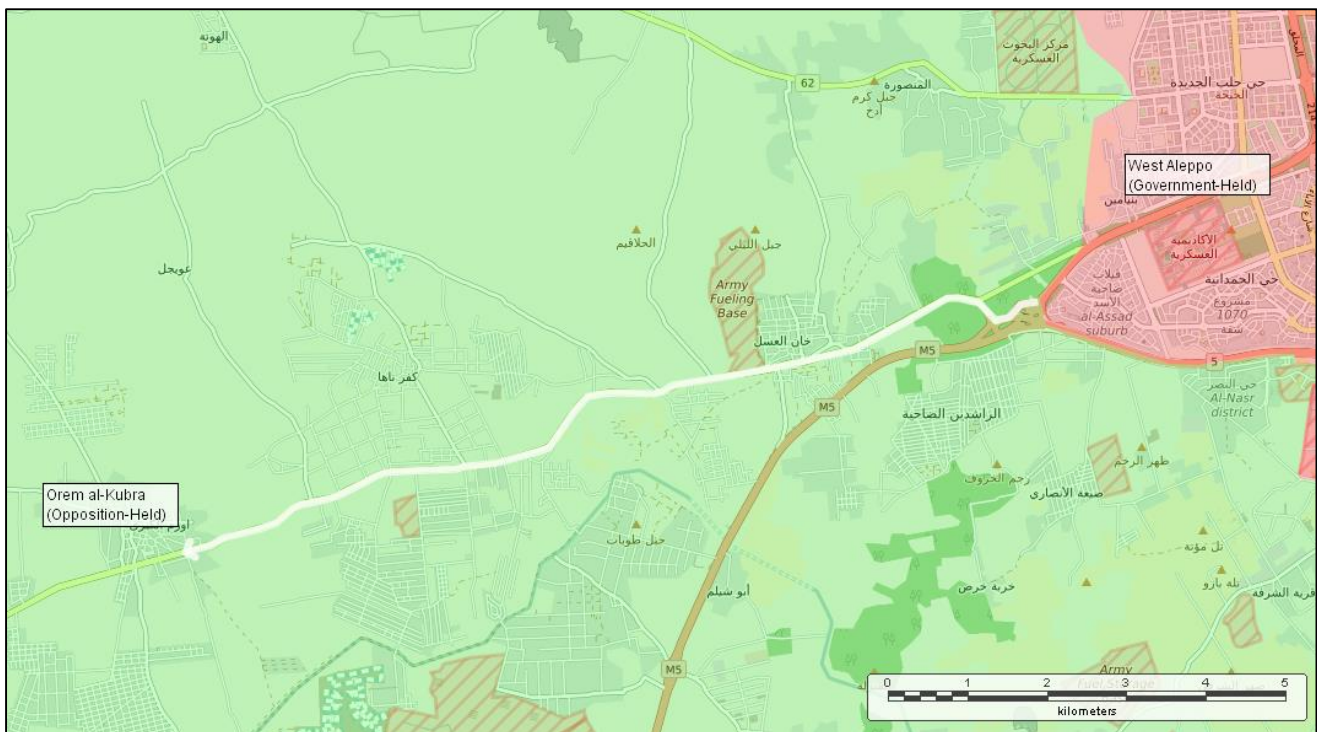


Figure 2- Path of aid convoy and distance from frontlines. Map made using software from Palantir Technologies

During the ceasefire, almost no aid reached besieged areas even though these distributions were indicated as a key component of the cessation of hostilities. Anti-government protests broke out across Syria against the withholding of aid, and demonstrators blocked Castello road to slow resupply to government-held West Aleppo. Some aid packages reached the besieged rural Damascus town of Moadamiya, but was reported to have been tampered with by pro-government forces, making it useless to its recipients.

During the ceasefire, incendiary munitions were again dropped on Teir Maalah in Homs on September 17. On September 21, more incendiary bombs were dropped on opposition-held East Aleppo. These weapons are indiscriminate and their continued use remains cause for great alarm.

The opposition offensive, Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), saw no new gains against ISIS forces in the area, and small territorial losses near ar-Rai'i near A'zaz, Aleppo. On September 16, US special forces and some opposition counterparts were expelled from Ar-Rai'i by opposition forces who protested their presence in the area. Though they returned soon after, the incident is indicative of high tensions surrounding the presence of US special forces in the area.

More families have left IDP camps near A'zaz to migrate eastwards towards Jarabulus on the Turkish border. Turkey is currently sending a significant amount of aid to the territory OES forces have taken in the past few weeks. Other families are also moving towards Menbij, which is held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

In Idleb, the White Helmets HQ in Tamanaah was struck with a vacuum missile on September 15, putting it out of service. The White Helmets HQ in Kafr Takharim also closed after airstrikes on September 21.

Conflict has heated up around Abtaa and Da'el in Daraa, primarily in the form of airstrikes and barrel bombs on the cities. Up to 20% of the current population of Da'el has fled the city for the western countryside. They are not receiving any type of food aid in their new location. Another significant population has fled the eastern part of Da'el and is seeking refuge in the west of the city.

The Jordanian border crossing is still closed and continues to impact Syrians who require immediate medical attention. Medical resupply is also limited by this border closing.

On September 18th, government forces targeted the field clinic in Jabata Al Khashab which is the only medical facility serving the population in the northern Quneitra countryside.

An opposition surrender in besieged al-Wa'er has been negotiated, but evacuations have been delayed.

Conclusions:

The current ceasefire may not be salvageable at the moment, but all attempts should be made to ensure that the humanitarian provisions of the agreement are adhered to. The humanitarian toll of the ongoing conflict remains high, and international actors should not be contributing to the pain of the war by striking non-combatants and humanitarian operations.