THE
CARTER CENTER

Syria

Countrywide Conflict Report # 4

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About the Project:

The Syria Conflict Mapping Project is an initiative launched by The Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program aimed at leveraging publicly available, social media-based information to help understand the Syrian conflict. Toward this end, the Center documents:

1. the formation of armed groups throughout the country and the evolving relations they maintain,
2. conflict events (clashes, aerial bombardments, shelling, etc.) throughout the country, and
3. sightings of advanced weaponry.

Information collected is then used to produce analysis on the evolution of armed group relations, the geographic areas of control of the various antagonists involved, and the regional and international dimensions of the conflict.

While social media-based information has been shown to be a useful source of information in terms of scope and abundance, and is often easily verified, some degree of misinformation must be assumed. Recognizing this, The Carter Center holds regular discussions with conflict stakeholders in order to ensure the accuracy of information collected and gain further insights regarding conflict developments.

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For more information on the Syria Conflict Mapping Project, previous reports, or The Carter Center's other initiatives in Syria or worldwide, please visit the Center's website at www.cartercenter.org.

Acknowledgements:

Palantir

Palantir Technologies' software tools have been instrumental in integrating, analyzing, and visualizing the large amounts of information used in the Syria Conflict Mapping Project. In addition to providing the mapping and visualization tools displayed in this report, Palantir's unparalleled data analysis tools have greatly facilitated the Center's effort.

Syria Conflict Monitor
مرصد الصراع السوري

Archives of armed group formations developed and maintained by the Syria Conflict Monitor have been instrumental to the success of the Syria Conflict Mapping Project. These detailed records have facilitated research and provide an unparalleled historic record of the progression of the Syrian conflict.

Executive Summary

After three and a half years of violence, the Syrian conflict still shows no signs of relenting. The most recent estimate from the United Nations claims that over 191,000 people have been killed over the course of the conflict. Given the recent ascendency of the Islamic State and the U.S.-led international coalition's anticipated response, this number is likely to climb much higher.

The trajectory of the conflict in the near term will be decided by events in the Aleppo governorate. Home to Syria's largest city, the governorate is currently divided between all players in the Syrian conflict – the Syrian government, an array of armed opposition groups, Kurdish forces, and the Islamic State all control portions of the governorate and are locked in conflict with one another. For the past three months, opposition forces have unsuccessfully attempted to fend off a government advance along the eastern side of Aleppo city that threatens to cut vital supply lines and isolate opposition positions in the city. As government forces were advancing, however, another threat emerged in the form of the Islamic State (IS), which has begun a parallel advance in northern Aleppo, threatening to take long-held opposition strongholds and cut opposition supply lines from Turkey.

With all the various sides of the Syrian conflict converging in the Aleppo governorate, the conflict appears to be in the midst of one of its most dynamic periods in the past year. The northern opposition is at great risk of being broken by the dual advances of the government and the IS. The Syrian government, which has long benefited from the IS' fight against the opposition, has recently lost hundreds of troops and important bases as the IS turned its attention towards government forces. Kurdish forces, while broadly supported in Iraq, are ostracized by the U.S. and NATO states in Syria due to close ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and face the threat of the IS with limited resources. With little hope of success in a fragmented response to this common threat, how these various Syrian factions interact with one another now will largely determine Syria's path forward for the foreseeable future.

The political and military opposition to the government remain largely divided. The armed opposition greatly undermined the authority of the beleaguered Turkey-based political opposition by withdrawing support in mid-2013, but has so far been unable to articulate a viable alternative. Efforts at unifying the armed opposition forces throughout the country have largely failed, though individual units regularly collaborate with one another. Foreign support, while aiding the armed opposition in limited offensives and by providing small arms and some advanced weaponry, has largely contributed to the persistent lack of unity between groups.

The following report is divided into four sections. It begins by discussing the background and current status of the Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham), including information on their impact on rival Islamist organizations. Second, the report profiles key and emerging actors among opposition forces, including the Islamic Front, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, the Revolutionary Command Council, and the Supreme Military Council. Third, the report provides information on foreign involvement by detailing the provision of three different advanced weapons systems to opposition forces. Last, an overview of the current status of forces is given, focusing on the situation in Aleppo city followed by a detailed overview of the main developments over the past five months of fighting throughout the country.

The Islamic State

Background

The Islamic State (IS), formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and later as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS or ISIL), entered the Syrian conflict in early 2012 by way of Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN). Still al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, ISI provided logistical and financial support for the establishment of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, JAN. With ISI support, al-Qaeda's presence under the JAN banner continued to grow in Syria throughout 2012 and 2013. However JAN's position vis-à-vis ISI and al-Qaeda remained ambiguous and eventually became the subject of debate, and ultimately violent conflict. Despite the close relations the two groups enjoyed early in the conflict, in the past six months, JAN has engaged the Islamic State in more instances of direct conflict than any other armed group (opposition or otherwise).

In April 2013, the leader of the ISI, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, released a statement asserting that JAN and the ISI were merging under the banner of ISIS. Al-Baghdadi's statement was rejected by the leader of JAN, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, who professed JAN's direct allegiance to al-Qaeda central leadership and criticized al-Baghdadi and ISI for its past conduct in Iraq. By June, al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri ruled in favor of al-Jolani's position, marking JAN as the exclusive Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate. Despite its failure to merge with JAN in Syria, ISI retained the ISIS title. Although the two organizations were distinct by June 2013, in the period immediately following the split, it remained difficult to determine where JAN ended and ISIS began - especially in eastern Syria. Over the following weeks, units were forced to pledge loyalty to one of the two organizations.

Following the split, ISIS forces began a rapid expansion across northern Syria. By July 2013 ISIS had made significant inroads in Idlib and established its northern headquarters in al-Dana, a city close to the Syrian-Turkish border crossing of Bab al-Hawa. At the end of 2013, ISIS had a presence in Aleppo (city and governorate), Idlib, Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor, Latakia, Homs, and rural Damascus.

Since its disassociation with JAN, ISIS showed a near total unwillingness to cooperate with Syrian armed opposition groups that had not pledged allegiance to ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. ISIS' aversion meant its forces either avoided particular frontlines completely or acted independently on others. ISIS' hostility was even more pronounced in how it conducted its affairs off the frontlines. With rapacious expansion in opposition held areas, hostility towards previously established judicial, governing, and humanitarian bodies, and defiance to outside arbitration, ISIS increasingly clashed with armed opposition units. It would not be long until widespread confrontation broke out.

January Offensive

On January 3, 2014, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (SRF) released a statement openly announcing that its forces were intent on confronting and defeating ISIS.[1] Fighting broke out the same day. After two days, the Islamic Front (IF) and Jaysh al-Mujahideen (JM) had publicly begun to take part in the effort to expel ISIS, while JAN remained neutral. The offensive that started in Idlib governorate had spread to

[1] Saeed Jawdat, ["'Syrian Revolutionaries' Front' demands ISIS elements leave Syria within 24 hours"], January 3, 2014, All4Syria, http://all4syria.info/Archive/122779

Aleppo, Raqqa, Hassakah, Deir Ez-Zor, Hama, and Latakia within less than a week.

The armed opposition saw early success in expelling ISIS from Idlib, western Aleppo and Aleppo city, the power bases of the SRF and JM. By January, large swaths of these areas were cleared and would remain so through the following months. However, as areas to the west were cleared, ISIS forces recovered territory it had briefly lost in the east. By the end of January, ISIS forces were once again in control of key cities in eastern Aleppo: Minbij, Jarablus, al-Bab, and al-Maskaneh, and had cemented their grip on Raqqa city and most of Raqqa governorate.[2]

As clashes continued between ISIS and the wider opposition, by mid-February JAN leadership finally weighed in. Following the purportedly ISIS led assassination of Abu Khaled al-Suri, the alleged senior al-Qaida representative in Syria with close ties to Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, al-Jolani issued ISIS an ultimatum - submit to arbitration by an Islamic court or be forced out of Syria entirely. By February 28th, one day before the ultimatum's deadline, ISIS retreated to the eastern border of the Aleppo governorate.

Eastern Consolidation

With much of the non-Kurdish areas of northeastern Syria under its control, ISIS began to turn its sights southeast to Deir Ez-Zor. While ISIS had traditionally enjoyed a significant presence in the eastern governorate prior to January 2014, gaining complete control of the governorate was important to ISIS. With Deir Ez-Zor in its possession, nearly all of eastern Syria would be under ISIS control and a contiguous ISIS territory could be established across Iraq and Syria. Control would also afford ISIS Deir Ez-Zor's important oil and gas resources, estimated to be worth $50 million a month, which was largely under the control of two of ISIS' most formidable enemies in Syria, JAN and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham.[3]

At the start of February, coming off a bloodless victory for the oil rich town of al-Shadadi in Hassakah in which ISIS forced a local Harakat Ahrar al-Sham unit to surrender and pledge allegiance to the organization, ISIS forces began to clash with JAN and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham over control of oil fields centered in the town of al-Basira, approximately 40 kilometers southeast of Deir Ez-Zor city. Although they had not been completely expelled, ISIS had suffered losses in Deir Ez-Zor during the previous month's campaign and was not capable of taking the fields.[4] On February 10, 2014 ISIS forces completely withdrew from the governorate and consolidated forces in Raqqa.

After more than a month of quiet, ISIS began a renewed push for Deir Ez-Zor in late March. Taking al-Markadeh, one of the southern most cities in the Hassakah governorate, clashes in Deir Ez-Zor once again flared up around al-Basira and the two neighboring oil fields, Conoco-Philips and al-Jafra.[5] Over the next four months the fields would be lost and recovered by ISIS in a pattern of attrition that would be repeated in cities and towns throughout the governorate.

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[2] ["Menbij is completely under ISIS after random shelling"], January 23, 2014, Xeber24, http://xeber24.net/nuce/10811.html
["ISIS controls Jarablus….sends a convoy from Raqqa to Menbij"], January 17, 2014, All4Syria, http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/125996
["'Syrian Observatory for Human Rights': ISIS imposes control on Raqqa and expels Jabhat al-Nusra fighters"], January 15, 2014, http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/01/15/isissyria clashes

[3] David Butter, "Fueling Conflict: Syria's War for Oil and Gas," April 2, 2014, The Carnegie Endowment for International Piece: Syria in Crisis, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55195

[4] ["Fierce conflict between militant Islamist organizations over eastern Syria's oil wells"], February 9, 2014, Asharq al-Awsat, http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12857&article=760780#.U__qfGNl-Sa

[5] Soheib Anjareni, ["Jihadi civil war….the hour of oil rings"], March 28, 2014, al-Akhbar, http://al-akhbar.com/node/203494

Meanwhile in early June, ISIS forces began an offensive in northern and western Iraq. By June 9, 2014 they had gained control of the western city of Mosul, Iraq's third largest city, and much of Anbar, Ninewa, and Tikrit governorates. During the offensive, due to mass desertion by Iraqi forces, ISIS gained a windfall of military equipment, including military hardware provided by the U.S. to the Iraqi armed forces.[6] Achieving an incredible victory, on June 30, 2014 the commander of ISIS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the territory under ISIS control would be known as the Islamic State (IS) and declared himself caliph.[7]

It is important to note that the Islamic State's rapid take-over of large swaths of territory in Iraq was accomplished without any noticeable diversion of resources from Syria. Contrary to popular media claims, the Islamic State did not advance from Syria to Iraq – the organization's roots are based in Iraq, and its ranks swelled with angry, disaffected Sunni youth from across Iraq, and to a lesser extent the region and the world.

Despite the efforts of various Syrian armed opposition groups, by July the IS' consolidation in Iraq and advances along the banks of the Euphrates in Syria's Deir Ez-Zor left remaining armed opposition forces cornered in the city of al-Shuheil at the confluence of the Euphrates and Khabour rivers.[8] On July 2, 2014, representatives of al-Shuheil residents and commanders of the remaining armed opposition groups released a video pledging allegiance to the IS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[9] The majority of all other opposition forces who had not been killed in the previous four months of fighting had either pledged allegiance as well or retreated from the governorate, the majority of JAN forces fled to Daraa, and the Authenticity and Development Front and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham fled to Qalamoun.

Although the IS control of Deir Ez-Zor had been largely cemented, on July 30, 2014, the IS faced a revolt by members of the large al-Shaetat tribe. In a town of the same name on the western bank of the Euphrates, and abutting valuable oil and gas fields, members of the al-Shaetat tribe stormed an IS headquarters. IS officials inside were arrested and reportedly executed.[10] The revolt would continue over the next week and spread to neighboring al-Shaetat towns, forcing IS forces to withdraw. With limited support from armed opposition units previously active in the region and no help from surrounding IS allegiant tribes, the al-Shaetat were significantly disadvantaged.

Facing heavily armed IS forces with little more than AK-47's, the towns were stormed by IS a week later, forcing thousands to flee. Realizing the threat tribal revolts pose to the IS' longevity, IS forces responded mercilessly. Arresting 100s of men from the tribe, the IS refused to negotiate for their release, killing approximately 800 men with an unknown number still being held. Shot or beheaded, images and videos of the executions were the most graphic footage

[6] Spencer Ackerman, Martin Chulov, Fazil Hawramy, "Iraq army capitulates to Isis militants in four cities," June 11, 2014, the Guardian, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/mosul-isis-gunmen-middle-east-states
Michael Pregent, Michale Weiss, "Exploiting the ISIS Vulnerabilities in Iraq," August 12, 2014, The Wall Street Journal, http://online.wsj.com/articles/michael-pregent-and-michael-weiss-exploiting-the-isis-vulnerabilities-in-iraq-1407884145

[7] Mark Tran, Matthew Weaver, "Isis announces Islamic caliphate in area straddling Iraq and Syria," June 30, 2014, the Guardian, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/30/isis-announces-islamic-caliphate-iraq-syria

[8] ["Reuters: The Islamic State expels its competitors for Deir Ez-Zor"], July 15, 2014, TahrirSy, http://tahrirsouri.com/2014/07/15/

[9] ["Statement of allegiance of groups and residents of al-Sheil city to the Islamic State"], Youtube video, posted by:" FreeMediaSyria," July 3, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VD7rSouvrMM

[10] ["Musa al-Amr, the Islamic State responded to the al-Shaetat's treachery and did not impel them to fight"], Youtube video, posted by: "Lan Natawakaf," August 19, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRoTrDcXqnI

released by the IS to date. The warning was clear. There would be zero tolerance for revolt in the Islamic State.[11]

At the same time, IS forces had begun to push further west into opposition strongholds in Aleppo governorate. From August 13 to 15, IS forces gained control of Akhtareen, Turkman Bareh, Dabiq, and several other surrounding towns after clashes with JAN, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, the Saqour al-Sham Brigades, and other local forces.[12] Continuing to push west, IS forces were eventually stopped just east of the important opposition-held cities of Maraa and Azaz when additional armed opposition reinforcements arrived from western Aleppo and Idleb as part of the Nahrawan al-Sham campaign, including forces from the Harakat Hazm, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, SRF, IF, and Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki. JAN also sent significant reinforcements as part of a parallel campaign to defend the area. Ensuring IS forces do not push farther west is a matter of life or death for the Syrian armed opposition. Already struggling to maintain their presence in eastern Aleppo city as government forces continue their encirclement and squeeze opposition access to the north, the loss of Maraa, Tel Rafaat, and Azaz would cut the northern armed opposition's supply lines completely, likely ensuring their defeat throughout the governorate and beyond. The loss of these towns would also be a symbolic defeat as they have been an important base for key armed opposition groups.

While the tribal revolt was still ongoing to the south in Deir Ez-Zor, IS forces in Raqqa began their offensive to overtake the government's Brigade 93. Located just north of Raqqa city, the sprawling Syrian military base was one of the last remaining Syrian military positions in Raqqa and the final potential threat to IS headquarters, save for aerial bombardment.[13] Moving through the base over a period of three days, by August 7, 2014, IS forces had gained complete control and executed remaining government troops. Approximately two weeks later, they would begin their assault on the last Syrian military base in Raqqa, the al-Tabqa military airport just south of the Euphrates River. After over a week of fighting, including an intensive government campaign to resist the offensive and over 500 dead from both sides, IS forces overran the military airport on August 24. Following the assault, IS forces marched approximately 160 Syrian soldiers through the surrounding desert before executing them en masse.

Growing Presence in Damascus

Since the beginning of 2014, the growth of IS forces in areas adjacent to Damascus (principally Yelda to the south and Madeaa to the east) has become increasingly visible. Although the IS has maintained a presence in Qalamoun and had engaged in shelling and bomb attacks in and around Damascus since 2013, the first signs of an established ISIS presence close to Damascus came in the late February 2014. In Babila, directly east of Yelda, IS fighters stormed the town's municipal building and raised the black flag.[14] Quickly fleeing, their move came during a ceasefire between government and opposition forces which allowed for a quiet built-up of IS forces in the neighboring town of Yelda.

[11] Anas al-Kurdi, ["Syria; 'ISIS' prepares to storm 'al-Shaetat' villages in Deir Ez-Zor"], August 5, 2014, al-Araby al-Jedid, http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/68256b07-e04f-4a87-b5e3-1bc93e4c86e8
["'Al-Shaetat' tribe in Deir Ez-Zor appeals after ISIS kills their sons"], August 16, 2014, Asharq al-Awsat, http://www.aawsat.com/home/article/160801

[12] Abdel Rahman Muhammad, ["ISIS controls Akhtareen…Accusations of the temporary government failing the FSA"], August 13, 2014, Alan, http://www.alaan.tv/news/world-news/111536/isis-controls-ochteran-accusations-defend-interim-government-having-failed-fsa

[13] Muhammad Amr, ["ISIS rallying its forces in Tal Abyad to storm Brigade 93"], July 26, 2014, Alan, http://www.alaan.tv/news/world-news/110152/isis-rallying-troops-in-tal-abyad-raqqa-to-break-into-the-93-brigade-syria

[14] ["'ISIS' in the south of Damascus…the regime's winning card"], February 22, 2014, Zaman Alwsl, https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/46844.html

IS forces in the Eastern Ghouta countryside of Damascus kept a relatively low profile until June 2014, by which they had accumulated a sizable force in Madeaa and Masraba. Armed opposition groups in the area watched both the southern and eastern build-ups cautiously. All knew of the IS' track record in northern and eastern Syria and, Jaysh al-Islam, an IF member based in Eastern Ghouta, had already fought IS forces throughout Syria. Its commander, Zahran Alloush, was then (and continues to be) one of the IS' fiercest critics.[15]

By mid-June, hostilities were growing and many suspected the IS of carrying out a devastating car bomb attack in the central market of the Eastern Ghouta city of Duma, Jaysh al-Islam's stronghold.[16] Following the Duma bombing and rising tension with IS forces, local armed opposition groups including Jaysh al-Islam, JAN, and the Islamic Union, formed the United Judicial Council, an Islamist judicial body for Eastern Ghouta. The IS refused to join or recognize the council.

On June 26, two days after its formation, the United Judicial Council issued a statement giving members of the IS in Eastern Ghouta 24 hours to leave the group and repent. The following day the commander of Jaysh al-Islam, Zahran Alloush, delivered a speech in which he vowed to go to war with the IS across Syria.[17]

Fighting immediately erupted in Madeaa and Masraba and both towns were cleared of IS forces by mid-July. Surviving members fled to al-Dumayr to the northeast or surrendered and repented.[18] While the efforts to clear Eastern Ghouta of any outward IS presence proved successful, sources have reported that hostilities could likely return given that the IS forces had largely fled and were not entirely defeated.[19]

On July 17, 2014, following the IS expulsion from Eastern Ghouta, IS forces to the south of Damascus began to clash with armed opposition forces in Yelda.[20] Reports claim that fighting broke out after IS forces stormed the Yelda headquarters of Jaysh al-Islam member group, the Aisha Um al-Mumineen Battalion, and arrested the IF commander of southern Damascus and the commanders of two Islamic Union member groups, the al-Sahaba Brigades and the Shabab al-Huda Battalions.

Local armed opposition forces arrived from neighboring towns and laid siege to the IS forces in Yelda. After refusing to negotiate and sustaining significant losses, including the death of the local IS Emir Abu Dajanah, an estimated 300 IS fighters fled to the neighboring towns, where opposition forces continued their siege.[21] Despite the siege and a pledge to expel all IS forces from southern Damascus, IS forces were

[15] ["Sermon of al-Sheikh Zahran Alloush, Commander of Jaysh al-Islam, about the ISIS faction"], Youtube video, posted by: "Shada alhuria," February 25, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnNpKvt6feo

[16] Tariq al-Abd, ["Fighters in Eastern Ghouta: 'ISIS' blows up a car in Duma"], June 17, 2014, as-Safir, http://www.assafir.com/Article/63/355766/MostRead

[17] ["The commander of 'Jaysh al-Islam' criticizes 'ISIS' and the battalions of Ghouta warn the organization"], June 27, 2014, al-Hayat, http://www.alhayat.com/Articles/3232670/ قائد جيش الاسلام ينتقد داعش وكتائب غوطة دمشق تحذر التنظيم

[18] Abdel Majid al-Alwani, ["Jaysh al-Islam: Elements of 'ISIS' repented in Eastern Ghouta"], July 17, 2014, Orient News, https://orient-news.net/?page=news_show&id=79975

[19] ["Jaysh al-Islam expels 'ISIS' from its last headquarters in Eastern Ghouta"], July 2, 2014, Orient News, https://orient-news.net/?page=news_show&id=79693

[20] ["South of Damascus…'ISIS' Sharia judge killed and 'ISIS Emir'trapped with his soldiers'], July 20, 2014, Zaman Alwsl, https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/51799.html

[21] Khabib al-Amar, ["'ISIS' is hit by the revolutionaries and moves to defense south of the capital Damascus"], July 19, 2014, Alan, http://www.alaan.tv/news/world-news/109618/daish-isis-transformed-attack-defense-south-capital-damascus-syria

Jadeaa Duwareh, ["The Syrian opposition expels 'ISIS' from Yelda..'Jabhat al-Nusra' mediates"], July 22, 2014, al-Araby al-Jedid, http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/264b7551-b8d7-4a94-8c1d-9d14ad32f9db

reported to be regrouping in the Damascus suburb of al-Hajr al-Aswad in mid-August.[22]

Impact on Jabhat al-Nusra

The IS' establishment and expulsion of JAN from eastern Syria has significantly altered JAN's trajectory. Despite appearing to enjoy an upper hand in Syria vis-à-vis the organization following the January 2014 offensive, by late June 2014, JAN was financially, territorially, organizationally, and politically in disarray. Jabhat al-Nusra, while once regarded by many as a calculated, methodical organization, appears to have been driven into a position of increasingly reactionary decision-making as it struggles to regroup and determine its next move.

Evolving from a small network of fighters to one of the largest, most effective fighting forces in Syria, JAN has played a crucial role on opposition fronts throughout the country. Unlike the IS, which had shunned cooperation with the wider armed opposition in an effort to gain total control, JAN has regularly fought alongside Syrian opposition forces and has been a primary driver of collaborative fronts throughout Syria. Their contributions proved to be an important factor in maintaining the opposition's momentum against government forces. Thus, despite serious concerns from the *Friends of Syria* and sporadic disputes with various groups, even armed opposition groups dependent on external state support have spoken highly of JAN's capacity and courage on the battlefield and have continued to work with them on various fronts.

With the loss of their territorial and financial base in Deir Ez-Zor and increased international efforts to disrupt al-Qaeda funding networks, it is difficult to see how JAN will be able to support an expanded role in the Syrian conflict before finding alternate means of sustaining itself. Thus in a leaked sermon from mid-July, the leader of JAN, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, called for the establishment of a JAN emirate in Syria akin to the Islamic State. Although JAN quickly issued a retraction, it may in part explain their aggressive offensive against government forces in areas west of Hama city and increasingly aggressive territorial grabs in the north.[23]

Since mid-July, JAN forces have begun to wrestle control of financially and strategically crucial territories in northern Syria along the Syrian-Turkish border from various opposition groups. These efforts, particularly in Idleb and Aleppo, have been seen by opposition forces as especially reminiscent of earlier IS behavior, and have already brought JAN into significant conflict with other units. After weeks of deadly clashes and seizures, opposition groups issued a rare statement condemning JAN's activities.

Jabhat al-Nusra's current efforts in Syria thus speak to a desire to maintain and grow itself as an extremely hard-line, but markedly conventional Syrian Islamist force, rather than an attempt to narrow its scope and size to something more akin to its original character. Strained relations with al-Qaeda HQ may also play into this desire, with influential JAN commander, Abu Maraya al-Qahtani openly criticizing the leader of al-Qaeda, Aymen al-Zawahiri, for al-Qaeda's failure to speak out strongly against the IS and provide JAN with appropriate support.[24]

[22] ["ISIS forces congregate in al-Hajr al-Aswad in Damascus"], August 16, 2014, al-Arabiyah News, http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/syria/2014/08/16/ داعش تتمركز في الحجر الاسود بدمشق.html

[23] ["Jabhat al-Nusra denies establishing an al-Sham 'Emirate' in response to the 'ISIS' caliphate: It was our plan from the beginning…and we have not founded it yet"], July 13, 2014, CNN Arabic, http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/07/13/syria-islamic-emirate-nusra-statment

[24] ["Abu Maraya al-Qahtani surprised by al-Zawahiri's silence on al-Baghdadi"}, August 20, 2014, al-Hayat, http://alhayat.com/Articles/4212984/-أبو ماريا القحطاني يستغرب سكوت الظواهري على البغدادي

The Current Status of the Armed Opposition

Though Syria's armed opposition is often referred to as the Free Syrian Army, no such organization has truly existed. Instead, Syria has seen the formation of approximately 6,000 individual armed groups and military councils over the course of the conflict, which together have formed an ever-shifting network of well over 1,000 unique groupings.

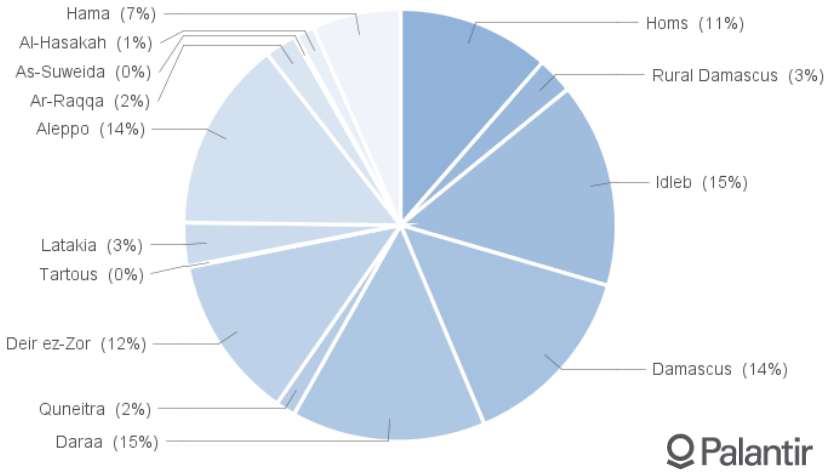

Figure 1: Armed group formations by governorate.

As the conflict has progressed, many of these collaborations have fallen apart almost as quickly as they were formed. In the eastern governorate of Deir Ez-Zor, for example, nearly every group formed in the first year of the conflict had joined with and subsequently broken ties with every other group in the area. Towards the end of 2013, however, the entropy that had existed amongst groups throughout Syria was on the decline. Fewer new armed groups were forming, and several larger, more sustainable organizations were established that have persisted to present day.

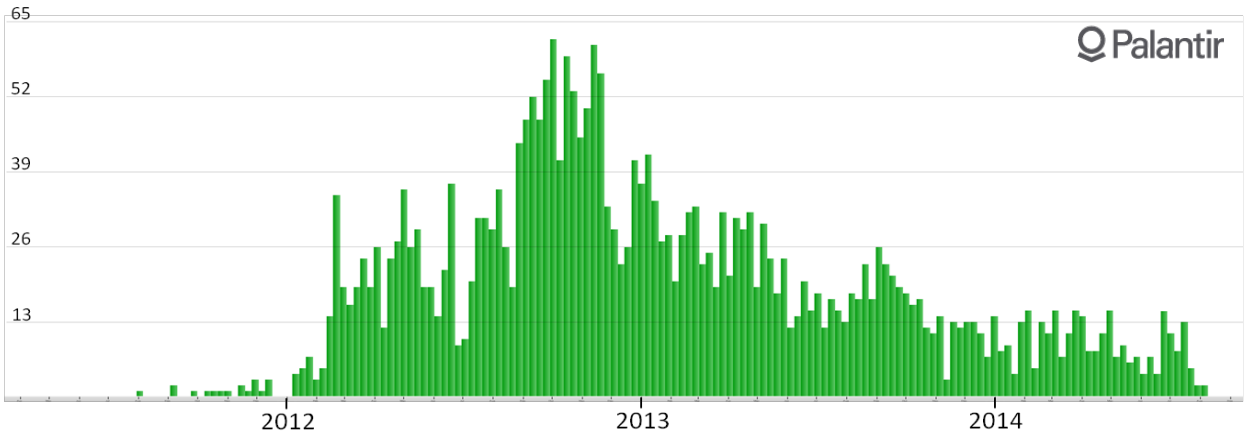

Figure 2: Armed group formations per week (July 2011 through August 2014).

The section that follows details the current status of five of the primary opposition organizations and groupings in existence today - the Islamic Front, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front, Jaysh al-Mujahideen (or the Mujahideen Army), the Revolutionary Command Council, and the Supreme Military Council.

The Islamic Front

The Islamic Front (IF) represents the largest grouping of armed opposition units to have formed over the course of the Syrian conflict. At its peak, it comprised nearly half of all armed opposition forces, though it has recently become a prominent example of the armed opposition's declining fortunes.

Established in the Aleppo governorate in mid-2013, the IF comprised seven of Syria's largest Islamist armed opposition groups and enjoyed a considerable presence in the governorates of Aleppo, Idleb, Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor, Homs, Damascus, Latakia, and Hama.[25] Upon forming, the IF rejected the Turkey based and "Friends of Syria" sponsored Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), dealing a near fatal blow to the latter by publicly and dramatically exposing the limited influence it had within Syria.

The component groups of the IF primarily came from two pre-existing organizations – the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF) and the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). While both were self-proclaimed Islamist organizations, only the SIF showed an interest in directly engaging in societal and political issues, with the SILF generally limiting its involvement to military operations against the government. This ideological difference was clearly articulated upon the founding of each organization. The SIF's main objective was to establish a modern Islamic society governed by Sharia, while the SILF stated that its primary goal was to topple the Assad regime, mentioning Sharia as a set of guiding principles for the organization.

The charter released upon its formation detailed the IF's vision of its future role in Syria as an all-encompassing Islamist organization – suggesting a disproportionate influence of SIF-aligned groups in the front's formation. The Islamist character of the charter further discredited the weakened SOC by showing just how wide the gap was between the Turkey-based political opposition and the growing Islamist tendencies of the forces on the ground.

Despite taking steps to undermine the SOC, the IF was largely unable to articulate any alternative – largely due to the ideological differences that existed within its own ranks. Recognizing this fact, the IF directed significant effort towards improving internal cohesion and unity. The media wings of component groups were unified as a first step, supply line collaboration was improved, and several other tangible steps were taken to tie the component groups together more closely, but no long-term political strategy was clearly articulated, and ideological divisions persisted. Instead of taking the lead, the IF ultimately became a reactionary organization incapable of making serious progress on its own and blocking other efforts by way of its very existence.

Militarily, the IF found itself in a similar situation. Competing personalities, various support networks, non-contiguous areas of operation, and an inability to make longer-term strategic decisions at an organizational level put the IF at a disadvantage in their fight against the Syrian government. Further complicating matters was the growing issue of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham. As the IF debated internally about what should be done to respond to growing tensions involving ISIS, the decision was ultimately made for them by the large scale outbreak of violence and the open declaration of opposition to ISIS that several other major

[25] ["Merger announcement of Syrian fighting factions under the Islamic Front"], Youtube video, posted by: ["Jaysh al-Islam"], November 22, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYRCyFei33k

armed groups made in January, 2014.[26] Though the IF ultimately followed suit and joined the rest of Syria's northern armed opposition in a direct confrontation against the growing menace of ISIS, their indecisiveness cost them dearly in the form of reputation, territory, resources, and lives.

Many component groups of the IF had previously cooperated and received limited assistance from the Supreme Military Council (SMC) of the SOC. By joining in the mass rejection of the SOC, these groups gambled their future on the hope that the IF model would ultimately result in a semblance of a national Islamist army and increased international support. Not only did the IF not deliver on creating a national Islamist army, but their own supply lines began to dwindle as international support shifted away from the organization and loss of territorial control to ISIS cost the organization crucial oil revenue.

All principle IF component groups suffered major losses over the course of 2014 including the al-Tawhid Brigade in eastern Aleppo, al-Haq Brigade in Homs city, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham in the north and east, and Jaysh al-Islam in the east and the mountains to the north of Damascus. By mid-2014, after over seven months of existence, the IF was still little more than a unified media outlet.

Surprisingly, however, in late July, 2014, the Aleppo-based branches of some the IF's largest member units, including al-Tawhid Brigade, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, the Saqour al-Sham Brigades, the Islamic Kurdish Union, and Jaysh al-Islam announced the formation of the IF-Aleppo. The video announcement, which was presided over by top commanders from the al-Tawhid Brigade and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, stated that the groups in the area would shed their component names and identities and operate as a single unit.[27] The statement included no mention of how the merger would affect component groups in other areas, but two days later, on August 1st, Jaysh al-Islam and the Saqour al-Sham Brigades announced a merger between the two organizations on a nationwide level, stating that they will henceforth be known simply as the Islamic Front.[28]

While these developments could represent a major shift towards a true consolidation of forces, the confusing and seemingly unplanned manner in which they were announced is discouraging. Whatever the case may be, it is as of this writing too early to gauge the longer-term impact they may have, or even whether the declared changes are currently having any tangible effect on the ground.

[26] ["The Islamic Front of Syria: Our numbers are greater than 'ISIS' and it's not possible for them to beat us"], January 8, 2014, CNN Arabic, archive.arabic.cnn.com/2014/syria.2011/1/9/syria-civil-war/

[27] ["Merger announcement of Islamic Front factions in Aleppo and their complete fusion under one name"], Youtube video, posted by: ["Sada al-Tawheed for Media Production"], July 27, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1AOOa5t4nM

[28] ["Merger announcement of Jaysh al-Islam and Saqour al-Shum under the Islamic Front"], Youtube video, posted by: ["Free Syria News Center"], August 4, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lTTV3iHyq7o

The Syrian Revolutionaries' Front

Since its formation in early December 2013, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (SRF) has maintained its position as one of the leading moderate armed opposition groups in Syria. Led by Jamal Maarouf, who also commands the SRF member group, the Martyrs of Syria Gathering, the SRF maintains a strong presence in both northern and southern Syria. The southern contingent of the SRF, known as the SRF Southern Section, is led by Captain Abu Hamza al-Noaemi, former commander of the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades' (ARB) southern front.[29]

To date, the SRF's success can be attributed to complementary factors relating to its structure, support network, and landscape of the wider armed opposition. Structurally, the SRF constitutes a union of regional confederations made up of small to medium sized armed units. Even at the national level, the SRF's presence in northern and southern Syria are distinct, with the SRF Southern Front appearing to enjoy a certain amount of autonomy from its northern counterpart. In this way the SRF appears to be employing a similar structural model to that of the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades, which were absorbed by the SRF soon after the SRF's formation.

Unlike the large nationwide coalitions that preceded it, the SRF has thus far enjoyed consistent external state support, a critical factor for moderate groups in Syria unable to depend on private Islamist donors. The SRF leadership has cultivated close relationships with Saudi Arabia and the former President of the SOC, Ahmed Jarba, who is himself close to the Kingdom. The SRF was also one of the few armed opposition bodies to send a representative to the Geneva II conference in January 2014 (possibly at the behest of its foreign backers) and was also a key actor in the sudden overhaul of the SMC in February 2014. Backing Jarba's efforts to dismiss General Salim Idris, the SRF has gained key positions and considerable influence in the restructured SMC and has been one of the new SMC's few beneficiaries.

Adding to its success is the fact that the SRF is operating amongst a significantly weakened pool of armed opposition groups within relatively uncontested locales. Additionally, unlike earlier predecessors such as the al-Farouq Battalions and the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades, who expanded rapidly into government territory without consistent and adequate support, only to exhaust their forces or (in some cases) turn criminal, the SRF has expanded at a more measured pace and has outwardly tried to address criminality, even if these efforts have not been entirely successful.

Despite the general success of the SRF to date, the organization's longevity is not entirely assured. Witnessing a net expansion since its formation, the SRF has seen a number of important founding members expelled or leave the group, especially in the north. Just two months after the SRF's formation, the Northern al-Farouq Battalions and the Ninth Division Special Forces both left the group to become founding members of Harakat Hazm (or the Hazm Movement).[30] In late April 2014, the

[29] ["Free Syria Satellite Channel – Interview with Major Abu Hamza al-Noaemi"], Youtube video, posted by: ["Free Syria Satellite Channel "], October 11, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBP1ikIiOpY

[30] Saeed Jawdat, ["In the presence of Lieutenant Colonel Salim Idris ….The announcement of the

Ahrar Jabal al-Zawiya Gathering were unexpectedly expelled from the SRF and went on to form the Salvation of Syria Front with the Revolutionaries of Maarat al-Nuaman Brigades. Finally, by July, a founding member known as the Wolves of al-Ghab Brigade, had also left the SRF only to be targeted by Jabhat al-Nusra soon after.[31] These examples show how the decentralized, foreign-funded model employed by the SRF, while generally successful, also makes it susceptible to foreign interference and disruptive local disputes.

Another issue that faces both the SRF and opposition more generally is the growing stagnation of many front lines. In the north, the SRF enjoys territory that is largely under opposition control, but has failed to make any significant advancements against government forces. With attention turned inwards, the SRF has frequently been accused of poor administration and transgressions against the local populace. Even after witnessing marked improvement to its image following its successful efforts to expel ISIS from Idleb, the SRF and Maarouf are still considered by many to be an especially corrupt force that is more interested in personal enrichment than confronting government forces. Their perceived malfeasance, lack of progress, and high profile have already made them an important target for Jabhat al-Nusra's forces in Idleb as it tries to firmly establish itself in northern Syria.

Jaysh al-Mujahideen

The Jaysh al-Mujahideen (JM) was formed in western Aleppo at the start of the January 2014 offensive against ISIS. The organization is led by Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Jumaa Bakour, AKA Abu Bakr, commander of JM member group the 19th Division. At the time of its formation JM was made up of 15 armed opposition units concentrated in the northern and western Aleppo countryside, Aleppo city, and eastern Idleb.

While the JM's leadership draws upon Islam in their rhetoric, as an organization they have largely resisted binding members to any rigid agenda. Although JM members have been signatories to various statements rejecting the SNC, they have generally maintained good relations with the SMC, with some signaling they would support the external opposition if it was able to deliver and had a discernible platform. Lieutenant Colonel Abu Bakr also reiterated in an interview with al-Jazeera at the beginning of June 2014, that JM is not inherently opposed to a political settlement, as long as it sees the ouster of President Assad's government and an end to the violence.[32] The JM charter, released more than four months after its formation, reiterates this position in very general terms, characterizing JM as an independent military force seeking the ouster of

formation of the Hazm Movement"], January 28, 2014, All4Syria, http://all4syria.info/Archive/128369

[31] ["Idlib…Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamists arrest campaign targeting the 'checkpoint thieves'"], July 17, 2014, Zaman Alwasl, https://zamanalwsl.net/news/51660.html

[32] ["Commander of Jaysh al-Mujahideen: International conditions prevent uniting the revolutionaries"], June 2, 2014, al-Jazeera, http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/today-interview/2014/6/2/ قائد جيش المجاهدين الظروف الدولية منعت توحد الثوار

the government for the sake of an inclusive and just Syria.[33]

While the assault on ISIS was undoubtedly an impetus for its formation, JM members had enjoyed close organizational and operational connections prior to January 2014. All JM members enjoyed a loose mutual connection to Qatari support networks through their affiliations with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades. They also comprised a cadre of armed units that had long operated closely in the same locale. Both of these are confirmed by an analysis of member groups' activity prior to formation and through multiple statements from JM leadership.

Since successfully expelling ISIS from Aleppo city and the northern and western countryside of the Aleppo governorate in January 2014, JM has been active on frontlines throughout northern Syria. Despite these successes, JM significantly shrunk in size and influence following the loss of its most influential member, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki, in late May 2014.[34]

A consistently pragmatic group, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki's departure came at a time of declining Qatari influence and renewed Saudi activity in both the SMC and the newly established Turkey branch of the Military Operations Center (MOC), which is a combined U.S., UK, French, Saudi, Turkish, and Qatari effort to coordinate military aid to armed opposition forces in Syria. While JM was reportedly considered by the MOC to be a Muslim Brotherhood outfit, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki was singled out for direct support, causing tensions and Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki's eventual departure. Though this was not given as a direct cause of the split, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki's commander Tawfiq Shahab al-Din cited external interference in JM's political and military affairs, which could be a reference to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.[35]

While some questioned the Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki's move at the time, the split appears to have been congenial and Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki continues to fight alongside JM member groups in an effort to avert the opposition's total loss of Aleppo city to government forces. Two months after its departure, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki received U.S. made BGM-71 TOW anti-tank guided missiles and Croatian Rak-12 rocket launchers. JM units have received none. Lieutenant Colonel Abu Bakr has further stressed that JM is in serious need of more help from the "Friends of Syria."[36]

Without Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki, JM today looks very similar in size and influence to another Syrian Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, the Idlib based al-Sham Legion. Sill seemingly aligned with Qatar, and with the majority of their forces engaging government forces in Aleppo city, JM enjoys good relations with much of the armed opposition and has been a go-between in recent disputes between Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) and other groups in northern Syria. Additionally, remaining JM member groups have continued to enjoy good relations with Abdel Jabar al-Akeidi since he stepped down as head of the Revolutionary Military Council of Aleppo, but there has been no indication of what the nature of this relationship has been.

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[33] Amar Bakour, ["Deputy Commander of the Jaysh al-Mujahideen: Our platform is clear and our aim is to establish a just state"], May 5, 2014, Siraj Press, http://sirajpress.com/1691 : مقال/ نائب قائد جيش المجاهدين منهجنا واضح وغايتنا إقامة دولة العدل../#.U_pdDrxdU4Q

[34] ["Jaysh al-Mujahideen confirms the separation of 'Nur al-Din al-Zenki'"], May 5, 2014, Zaman Alwsl, https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/49382.html

[35] قائد "الزنكي" ل"زمان الوصل": رفضت لقاء "الجربا" وغرف عمليات حلب "شكلية" June 22, 2014, https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/50980.html

[36] ["Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki – Destroying a T72 tank in the Industrial City on the al-Sheikh Najjar front with a TOW missile"], Youtube video, posted by: ["Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki"], July 11, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8R76TLDZWE

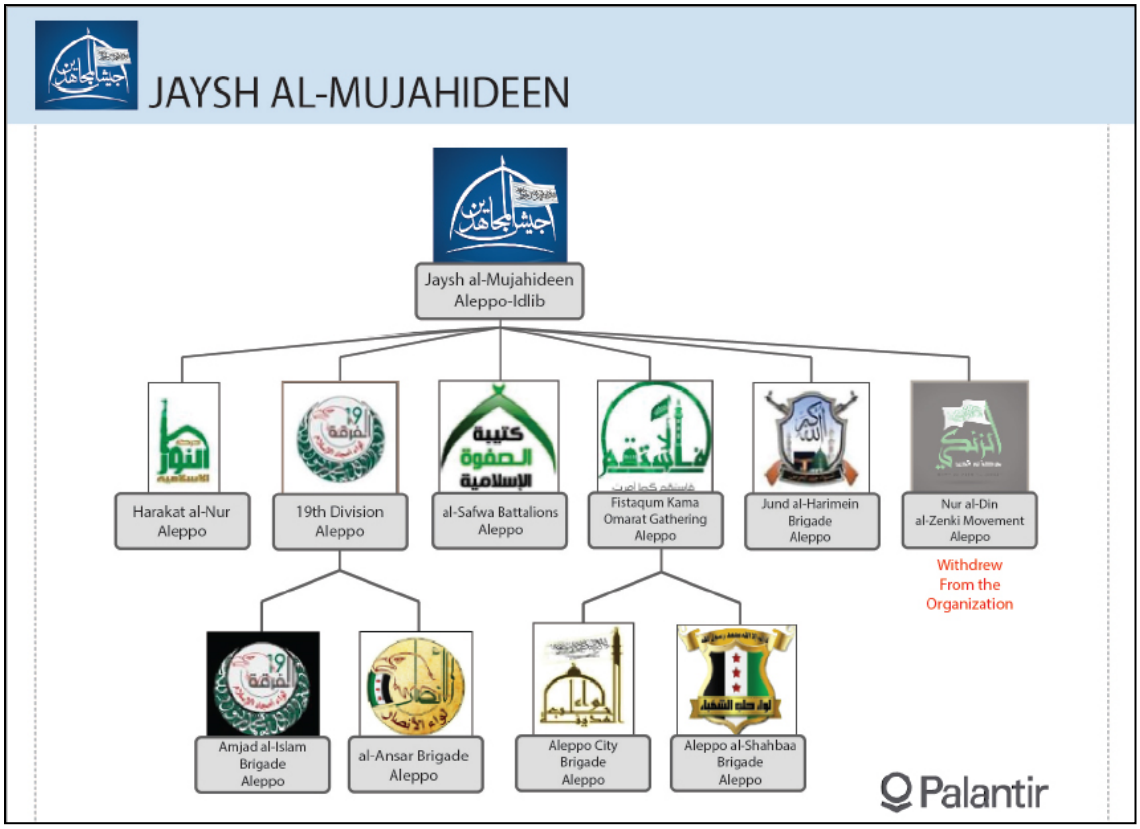

Figure 3: Organizational structure of Jaysh al-Mujahideen.

Revolutionary Command Council

On August 3, 2014, 17 armed opposition groups announced the formation of the Watasimu Initiative (or the Working in Solidarity Initiative).[37] With 17 initial signatories, including the purportedly merged Jaysh al-Islam and the Saqour al-Sham Brigades, along with the SRF, JM, Harakat Hazm, and al-Sham Legion, the statement expressed the signatories' desire to assemble a preparatory committee to work out the establishment of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), an internal body with the stated goal of improving coordination between armed opposition groups in Syria. Absent of any overt ideological or political proclamations, shying from any discussion of force mergers, and consisting of groups with varied ideologies and rival support networks, the original signatories called on all groups from the wider armed opposition to join the initiative.

Although the RCC is in part a reaction to the renewed threat of IS in northern Syria, notably absent from the initial statement were two of the IS' greatest adversaries, Jabhat al-Nusra and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham. Their absence led many to believe the initiative was not only an effort to increase armed opposition cooperation in the face of the rising threat posed by the IS, but also against a possible threat from JAN, which has increasingly clashed with other opposition groups and is toxic for those groups hoping to receive foreign support.

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, while not clashing with other opposition groups, is similarly toxic with respect to foreign state support. Their image in the international community appeared to have been of growing concern to the leadership of the organization. They began posting to social media in English, and, in an apparent step away from their historically close relationship with Jabhat al-Nusra, announced that they would take part in the preparatory committee for the RCC. However, they were keen to emphasize that the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham's Shura Council (the organization's governing body) had only agreed on participating in the preparatory committee, not the RCC itself.[38]

Within three weeks of the Council's initial announcement, a total of 23 additional armed groups from across Syria signed up to take part in the formation of the Council.[39] Unlike similar initiatives in the past, which were hastily prepared and fleeting, the Watasimu Initiative is moving at a seemingly steady, cautious pace. This, and the fact that there have been no retractions, signals that despite the various external allegiances these groups hold, all must have the tacit approval of their groups' leadership and their private and state supporters. It remains to be seen what kind of body, if any, emerges from the preparatory committee, but it could very well be a less ideological, more cooperative body than the Syrian conflict has seen before.

[37] ["Important statement 'Working in Solidarity Initiative' to unite the ranks of the Syrian Revolution"], Youtube video, posted by: "Edlib Now," August 3, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ry9daTPHmM

[38] ["The Harakat Ahrar al-Sham Shura Council did not decide on the Watasimu Initiative"], September 2, 2014, ElDorar, http://eldorar.com/node/58710

[39] Various posts, Facebook page: ["'Working in Solidarity' Initiative to unite the ranks of the force of the Syrian Revolution"], August 3-28, 2014, https://www.facebook.com/waitasemo?fref=photo

REVOLUTIONARY COMMAND COUNCIL
PREPATORY COMMITTEE PARTICIPANTS

Original Participants (August 3, 2014)

SMC/SOC/MOC Affiliated Units

- Syria Revolutionaries' Front — Syria Wide
- Martyrs of Syria Brigades — Idlib-Aleppo-Hama
- al-Ansar Brigades — Idlib-Hama
- 13th Division — Idlib-Hama
- Fursan al-Haq Brigade — Hama
- Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki — Aleppo
- Martyrs of Damascus Brigade — Damascus - Damascus Coiuntryside
- Suqour al-Ghab Brigades — Hama
- 101st Infantry Division — Idlib-Hama
- Harakat Hazm — Idlib-Hama-Aleppo
- Just Combat Front — Hama

Muslim Brotherhood Affiliated Units

- Shields of the Revolution Committee — Syria Wide
- Jaysh al-Mujahideen — Aleppo-Idlib
- al-Sham Legion — Idlib

Islamic Front Member Units

- Jaysh al-Islam — Syria Wide
- Saqour al-Sham Brigades — Idlib-Aleppo-Hama

Other Units

- Islamic Union — Damascus - Damascus Countryside
- al-Haq Brigade — Idlib

Subsequent Participants (Between August 3- September 1, 2014)

Islamic Front Member Units

- Ansar al-Sham Battalions — Latakia - Idlib
- al-Haq Brigade — Homs
- Harakat Ahrar al-Sham — Syria Wide
- al-Iman Brigade — Hama
- al-Tawheed Brigade — Aleppo

- Authenticity & Development Front — Syria Wide
- al-Habib al-Mustafa Brigades — Damascus Countryside
- Martyrs of Damascus Brigade — Damascus - Damascus Coiuntryside
- al-Fatah al-Mobein Brigade — Latakia - Idlib
- Sun of the North Battalions — Aleppo
- al-Thabat Front — Idlib
- al-Ezz Front — Latakia - Idlib
- Martyrs of Idlib Brigade — Idlib
- Suqour al-Fatah Brigade — Homs
- Hama Mujahideen Brigade — Hama
- al-Furqan Brigades — Damascus Countryside - Quneitra
- Salvation of Syria Front — Idlib
- al-Sham Front — Hama
- Homs Legion — Homs
- Jaysh al-Fatiheen — Hama
- Sham al-Rasoul Brigade — Damascus - Damascus Countryside
- Salvation & Liberation Front — Aleppo
- al-Rahman Legion — Damascus Countryside
- Ahfad Othman Brigade — Homs - Hama
- Companies of al-Haq 314 Gathering — Hama
- Harakat Tahrir Homs — Homs

The Supreme Military Council (SMC)

Although never a particularly effective body, since February 2014, the SMC has, by many accounts, become an overtly partisan body serving the interests of a narrow faction within the SOC and a small contingent of allied armed opposition groups. Thus, despite the high profile visit of former SOC President Ahmed Jarba and SMC Commander Brigadier General Abdel-ilah al-Bashir to Washington in May 2014, the SMC has increasingly become the subject of internal SOC disputes, leaving it isolated from the wider armed opposition.[40] Consequently, as "Friends of Syria" states deliver weapons and support to the armed opposition, they are bypassing SMC channels more and more and dealing with groups directly through the MOCs in Turkey and Jordan.

On February 16, 2014, a day after the close of Geneva II and three days after Saudi Arabia's Syria portfolio was transferred to Prince Muhammad Bin Nayef, General Salim Idris was dismissed as Commander of the Supreme Military Council (SMC). Serving since December 2012, General Idris initially labeled the move an illegitimate coup led by Saudi-aligned SOC President Ahmed Jarba and SOC Minister of Defense Asaad Mustafa.[41] Mustafa was present for the pronouncement of General Idris's dismissal and the subsequent appointment of his successor, Brigadier General Abdel-ilah al-Bashir. Jarba had visited northern Syria just a day before the pronouncement, surveying the frontlines and openly meeting with Syrian Revolutionaries' Front Commanders Jamal Maarouf and Colonel Haitham Aafisi, the latter of whom would be appointed as al-Bashir's Deputy the following day.

Maarouf and Colonel Aafisi were also known to have historically enjoyed Saudi support and had tense relations with Idris in the preceding months. Their group, the SRF, was formed as an SMC-aligned group during the lead-up to the Geneva II conference. Its formation at the time was seen by observers as an effort to reinvigorate the Idris-led SMC, which was facing growing stagnation and mounting pressure in the wake of the formation of the IF and the expansion of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.

Though the president of the SOC and the Minister of Defense announced Idris' ouster and replacement, Idris continued to assert that he was the legitimate commander of the SMC throughout the remainder of February. Two statements were released by SMC sub-commanders in support of General Idris, refusing to accept his dismissal.[42] Conflicting reports continued to surface of various agreements allegedly reached between Idris, the SMC, and the SOC, however by March it was apparent that al-Bashir was the accepted

[40] "Statement of the Syrian Opposition Coalition President al-Jarba Following Meeting with President Obama and Ambassador Rice," May 14, 2014, National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces," http://www.etilaf.us/obamameeting

[41] "Syrian Free Army names Salim Idris new chief of staff," December 10, 2012, al-Arabiya News, http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/10/254251.html

[42] ["The Syrian Committee for Media: Statement of the front and battalion commanders refusing the dismissal of ----"], Youtube video, posted by: "SMO Syria," February 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0PHcoJXdYo

commander of the restructured SMC and Idris had stepped aside.

With a newly restructured SMC and meager outcomes from Geneva II, many believed the SMC was set to receive increased support in the form of weapons, funds, and training from the *Friends of Syria*. The opposite proved to be the case. By mid-May, Mustafa Asaad had stepped down as SOC Minister of Defense, citing a complete inability to provide the opposition inside Syria with the support they deserved.[43] His resignation was followed in mid-June by the resignations of four SMC Deputy Chiefs of Staff and five SMC military council commanders.[44] The nine commanders, all officers, claimed they had not received any support for seven months and that Jarba could not guarantee them any support from the international community. The SMC had also been largely excluded from the MOCs in Jordan and Turkey and were consequently bypassed as states chose to support groups directly.

Just two weeks after the resignations, the SOC Prime Minister Ahmed Taameh unilaterally dissolved the SMC and dismissed Brigadier General Abdel-ilah al-Bashir.[45] Sources claim that prior to the dissolution, Prime Minister Taameh was increasingly worried by Jarba's role in the SMC and the mounting series of armed opposition defeats. Matters came to a head when then-acting Minister of Defense Muhammad Khaloof and SMC front commander and head of the SRF, Jamal Maarouf, refused to release funds to an Aleppo-based armed opposition group fighting ISIS.[46] President Jarba reversed Taameh's decision the following day and claimed it was outside the authority of the temporary government to suspend the SMC and dismiss its commander.[47] Various armed opposition groups nevertheless voiced their support for Prime Minister Taameh's initiative, including the Harakat Hazm. With Jarba stepping down as SOC President after serving the maximum two six month terms, his close ally and Saudi aligned predecessor, President Hadi al-Bahra reiterated his opposition to Taameh's move and his approval of Jarba's reversal. [48]

[43] ["Resignation of Asaad al-Mustafa Minister of Defense of the Temporary Syrian Government"], May 20, 2014, Orient, https://www.orient-news.net/index.php?page=news_show&id=79143 ["Names of the candidates for Interior and Defense….Asaad al-Mustafa to 'Zaman Alwasl': For these reasons I resigned and the performance of the opposition has delayed the fall of Assad"], June 14, 2014, Zaman Alwasl, https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/50790.html

[44] ["Al-Jarba denies his presidency is dismantling the Chiefs of Staff…Commander of the eastern area to 'Zaman Alwasl': The 'Chiefs of Staff,' is a broken body, we have not seen weapons in seven months'], June 14, 2014, Zaman Alwasl, https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/50823.html

[45] ["Taameh dissolves the Syrian Military Council and dismisses the President of the Chiefs of Staff"], June 26, 2014, Zaman Alwasl, https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/51085.html

[46] ["The circumstances of Taameh's decision to dismiss the Chiefs of Staff and blocking 500 thousand dollars to the revolutionaries"], June 28, 2014, Zaman Alwasl, https://www.zamanalwsl.net/readNews.php/51104.html?id=51104

[47] ["After the Prime Minister issued it al-Jarba annuls the decision to dissolve the Supreme Military Council"], June 24, 2014, 24 News, http://www.24.ae/Article.aspx?ArticleId=88368

[48] ["Hazm Movement: We support the restructuring of the Supreme Military Council and the Chiefs of Staff to serve the goals of the revolution"], July 1, 2014, Aksalser, http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=3602979235745b9136d4f6be9a96a18e ["Hadi al-Bahra: The decision to dissolve the Chiefs of Staff was wrong and not within the powers of the temporary government"], July 10, 2014, Anadolu Agency, http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=191092

Provision of Weapons to the Armed Opposition

Since the start of armed conflict in Syria, the question of state support for the armed opposition has been a central topic of conversation and debate. As an ever-growing number of opposition units raced to assemble an arsenal from disparate sources, reports began to emerge in mid-2012 of Saudi-Qatari efforts to quietly arm opposition groups.[49] Initially supplying them with light Soviet and Russian arms and munitions, by the end of 2012 the two primary Gulf state sponsors began to furnish opposition forces with both advanced and heavy weapons previously not seen in Syria.[50] Despite the significant media attention these shipments drew, evidence indicates that these and other state-led efforts to support the Syrian opposition continue today.

By all accounts Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been the two largest state sponsors of the Syrian armed opposition and have been responsible for the majority of direct weapons transfers to opposition forces. While they have each furnished armed opposition groups with material and financial support, their inability to cooperate has had serious consequences. Already seeking to undermine one another in Syria, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar's individual efforts were hampered by an inefficient and corrupt distribution network of intelligence and opposition intermediaries. Saudi-Qatari rivalry and mismanagement wasted supplies, stymied unification, and exacerbated divisions. Consequently, a growing number of armed opposition units chose early on to develop alternative, non-state sources of support through private donor networks and illicit activities. The landscape of the Syrian armed opposition today is in large part a product of the early Saudi-Qatari arming efforts of 2012 and early 2013, as well as the influence of major non-state funding initiatives (principally channeled through Kuwait).

Throughout parts of this formative period, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency secretly provided support for both Saudi Arabia and Qatar's efforts. Although the U.S. had publicly pledged non-lethal support for the Syrian armed opposition in mid-2012 and again in early 2013, it had refused to offer any lethal assistance.[51] Privately, this began to shift in July 2012, when President Obama signed a secret order authorizing U.S. agencies to support the Syrian armed opposition in their efforts to oust President Assad.[52] Following the order, the CIA ramped up support for Saudi Arabia and Qatar's activities in Syria, introducing the Gulf financiers to brokers in Eastern Europe, assisting in the establishment of the transport networks, vetting arms recipients, and establishing training camps in neighboring countries.[53,54,55]

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[49] Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who Are the Saudis and the Qataris Arming?"], September 18, 2012, TIME, http://world.time.com/2012/09/18/syrias-secular-and-islamist-rebels-who-are-the-saudis-and-the-qataris-arming/

[50] C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria With Croatian Arms," February 25, 2013, the New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&

[51] Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Steps Up Aid to Syrian Opposition, Pledging $60 Million," February 28, 2013, the New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/01/world/middleeast/us-pledges-60-million-to-syrian-opposition.html

[52] Mark Hosenball, "Exclusive: Obama authorizes secret U.S. support for Syrian rebels," August 1, 2012, Reuters, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/01/us-usa-syria-obama-order-idUSBRE8701OK20120801

[53] C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expand, With Aid From C.I.A." March 24, 2013, the New York Times http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html?pagewanted=all

[54] Greg Miller, "CIA ramping up covert training program for moderate Syrian rebels," October 2, 2013, the Washington Post, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-ramping-up-covert-training-program-for-moderate-syrian-rebels/2013/10/02/a0bba084-2af6-11e3-8ade-a1f23cda135e_story.html

The Obama administration made its first public pledge of lethal support for the Syrian armed opposition in June 2013.[56] While the shipments were delayed due to concerns raised by some in Washington, they soon began in September 2013.[57] The shipments, consisting of light Russian arms and munitions and additional non-lethal aid, were reportedly channeled through the same distribution networks the CIA had clandestinely worked to create for the earlier Saudi and Qatari arms shipments.

Following the IS' advances in Iraq, the administration once again pledged lethal support to the Syrian armed opposition, this time asking Congress for $500 million.[58] However, the plan, which aimed to train armed opposition fighters and supply select opposition units with arms and munitions, quickly faced criticism due to its lengthy timeframes and relatively small returns.[59] Jordan, who along with Qatar has hosted clandestine CIA training camps for armed opposition forces, was also apprehensive to allow the U.S. to publically train Syrian opposition forces on its soil.[60] As key distribution points, Jordanian and Turkish authorities have played integral roles in equipping and training opposition forces, but continue to remain cautious with the level of support they provide so as not to be dragged into a greater conflict with their neighbor.

While it is difficult to measure the levels of non-lethal aid, small arms, and munitions the opposition has received from state sponsors, footage of advanced and heavy weapons collected from social media sharing sites like YouTube has proven to be an invaluable resource for understanding foreign support. Through analysis of a growing database of more than 2,500 videos depicting weapons in the possession of armed groups (including over 1,000 sightings of advanced weaponry), it is possible to gain insight into the amounts, networks, timeframes, impacts, and intentions surrounding these efforts.

Three weapons in particular have illuminated the flow of weapons to the armed opposition – the Croatian (former Yugoslavia-made) RAK-12 multiple rocket launcher, the Chinese-made HJ-8 anti-tank guided missile, and the American-made BGM-71 TOW anti-tank guided missile. These three weapons have been identified in the service of Syrian opposition units, but have never been part of the Syrian military's arsenal. Evidence strongly suggests that all three have been supplied to Syrian opposition units by Saudi Arabia and Qatar with U.S. assistance. Arriving at different periods of the conflict and traveling through different networks, these three weapons represent three distinct efforts to supply Syrian opposition forces.

The three weapons are also indicative of the United States' involvement in arming the Syrian

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[55] C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria With Croatian Arms," February 25, 2013, the New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&

[56] Terry Atlas, Margaret Talev, John Walcott, "Obama Said to Order Arming Syrian Rebels Amid Setbacks," June 14, 2013, Bloomberg, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-06-14/u-s-backs-syrian-rebel-military-aid-as-chemicals-used.html

[57] Ernesto Londono and Greg Miller, "CIA begins weapons delivery to Syrian rebels," September 11, 2013, the Washington Post, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-begins-weapons-delivery-to-syrian-rebels/2013/09/11/9fcf2ed8-1b0c-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html

[58] Julian E. Barnes, Adam Entous, Carol E. Lee, "Obama Proposes $500 Million to Aid Syrian Rebels," June 26, 2014, the Wall Street Journal, http://online.wsj.com/articles/obama-proposes-500-million-to-aid-syrian-rebels-1403813486

[59] Julian E. Barnes, Adam Entous, "Pentagon Envisions 'Small' Training Program for Syria Opposition," July 16, 2014, the Wall Street Journal, http://online.wsj.com/articles/pentagon-envisions-small-training-program-for-syria-opposition-1405520641

[60] "Jordan 'cool to Syria rebel training program'," July 13, 2014, al-Jazeera English, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/jordan-cool-syria-rebel-training-plan-201471215122966940 0.html

opposition. The RAK-12, supplied by Saudi Arabia in early 2013, and the HJ-8E, supplied by Qatar in mid-2013, both travelled through networks reportedly established by the CIA in late 2012. Like previous arms shipments, Qatar and Saudi Arabia distributed the weapons amongst a limited field of their respective preferred opposition groups through various channels. The BGM-71 TOW is also likely to have travelled through the aforementioned CIA established networks.[61]

However, unlike the two previously mentioned weapons, the American made BGM-71 TOW has seen rapid, controlled dissemination across both Saudi and Qatari-supported opposition groups. The delivery of the BGM-71 TOW has also appeared to completely bypass the SMC and Syrian military councils, and is instead supplied directly to select group of vetted armed opposition groups through the MOCs. Its arrival in early 2014 also came at a time when the U.S. was reportedly seeking to expand its efforts to support the Syrian armed opposition.[62] All of these factors indicate that the U.S. is no longer simply providing logistical support for Saudi-Qatari financed arms shipments, but instead is taking a more proactive role in the distribution efforts through the MOCs along the Turkish and Jordanian borders with Syria.

Although they have gained significant attention from observers and the media, all three of these weapons have been supplied in very limited quantities. Intended for specific targets and remaining far from the armed opposition's front lines with IS, the provision of these weapons does not appear to be intended to radically alter the trajectory of the conflict. Instead, their arrival appears to be part of various efforts to empower select Syrian armed opposition forces, maintain pressure on Syrian government forces, and avoid outright opposition defeat – all in hopes of an eventual negotiated settlement between the government and the opposition.

It is also important to note that despite the complexity and fluid nature of relations between armed opposition groups, very few of these weapon systems appear to have been distributed beyond their intended recipients or captured by the IS during its recent offensives throughout Syria. Of the total 274 times these weapons have been seen in the possession of armed opposition groups, they have only been observed six times in the use of an organization unlikely to be a direct recipient. All six of these instances were in the Daraa and Quneitera governorates in the possession of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham.

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[61] Abigail Fielding-Smith, Roula Khalaf, "How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution," May 17, 2013, Financial Times, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de.html#axzz337h4mFGz

[62] Tom Bowman and Alice Fordham, "CIA is Quietly Ramping Up Aid to Syrian Rebels, Sources Say," April 23, 2014, NPR, http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/04/23/306233248/cia-is-quietly-ramping-up-aid-to-syrian-rebels-sources-say

The State of the Conflict as of September 10, 2014

Events in August and early September have been dominated by the rapid advance of Islamic State forces across Syria. Over the past three months, the IS consolidated its control of eastern Syria and has put pressure on central Homs, Kurdish positions along the Turkish border, and both government and opposition positions in Aleppo governorate.

Prior to this widespread offensive, the Syrian government had largely abstained from engaging the IS unless directly threatened, leading to the oft-referenced theory that the government and the IS were operating in coordination with one another. As the IS advanced during July and August, however, the Syrian government was forced to alter its strategy. Whereas previously the IS was almost exclusively interested in fighting against Syria's opposition forces (even withdrawing at times from positions that put it in direct contact with government front lines), the organization's advance over the past three months has directed its energies towards capturing government bases nearly as much as opposition positions. This shift led to a rise in Syrian government air raids against IS forces along the front lines. Prior to this IS offensive, the Syrian government had directed over 90% of all air raids against opposition positions. As the IS advances, government forces have hit back when their forces were threatened, but have left the IS relatively unchecked at its core, and have allowed IS forces to advance against opposition positions in the north of Aleppo.

While the IS has directly targeted government forces in Raqqa, Homs, and Deir Ez-Zor, in Aleppo, they appear to be intent on attacking opposition positions to the north of Aleppo city – likely in an attempt to deny the opposition its major supply lines from Turkey and delay direct confrontations with the government.

Government forces also made consistent advances throughout the month of August, succeeding in capturing the long-besieged Sheikh Najjar Industrial City to the northeast of Aleppo city. This advance leaves government forces on the brink of completely encircling opposition forces within Aleppo city.

At the time of this writing, momentum certainly favors the IS and the Syrian government, but may lead the two into direct confrontation around Aleppo city. Opposition forces, while certainly on the retreat, have amassed a substantial force in their reduced territory and are calling for re-enforcements.

The rapid advance of the IS suggests that no single party will be capable of repelling their assault, but it seems highly unlikely that the various antagonists in the conflict will be capable of setting aside their differences and cooperating (even tacitly) to counter the threat posed by the IS.

Bomb Attack on Harakat Ahrar al-Sham

In a dramatic blow to the already precarious position of the opposition was the September 9 bomb attack targeting the top leadership of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham. Being one of the most powerful armed units in the country, and a primary opponent to both the Syrian army and the IS, the fallout from the attack has the potential to dramatically change the situation on the ground.

Regardless of how quickly Harakat Ahrar al-Sham moves to establish a new leadership structure, their ability to remain at the fore on front lines across the country will be greatly at risk. Furthermore, with conflict on the rise between Jabhat al-Nusra and rival opposition forces, an exodus of units formerly associated with the historically more hard-line Harakat Ahrar al-Sham could lead to a bolstering of Jabhat al-Nusra's position vis-à-vis its rivals, notably the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front.

Regional Conflict Developments

The following section will detail major conflict events that have taken place throughout Syria between April 1st and September 1st 2014. Conflict developments are examined by region as follows:

- Aleppo Governorate
- Damascus Governorate
- Southern Syria (Daraa, Quneitra, and As-Suweida governorates)
- Central Syria (Homs, Hama, Idlib, Lattakia, and Tartus governorates)
- Northeastern Syria (Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor, and Hassakah governorates)

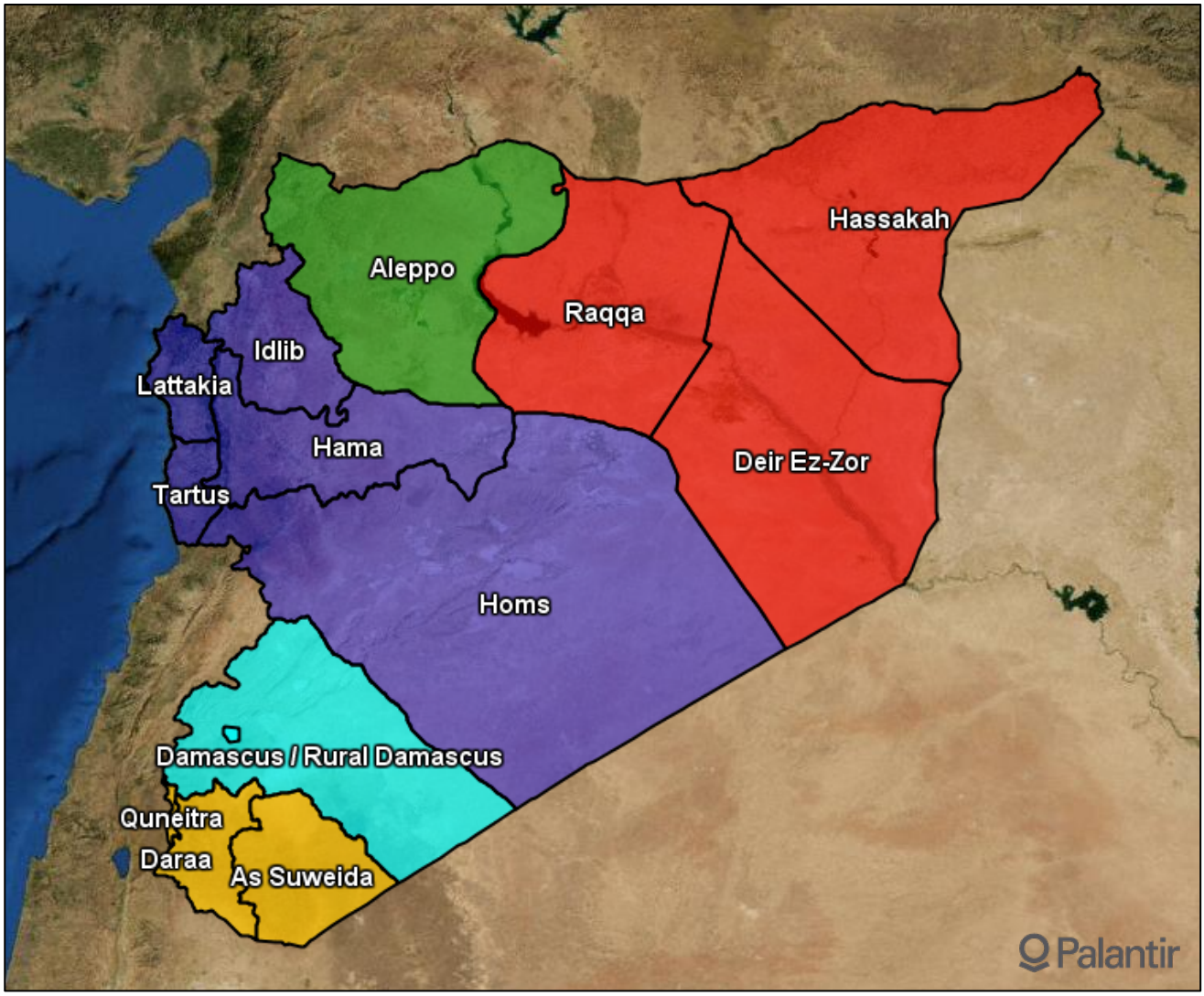
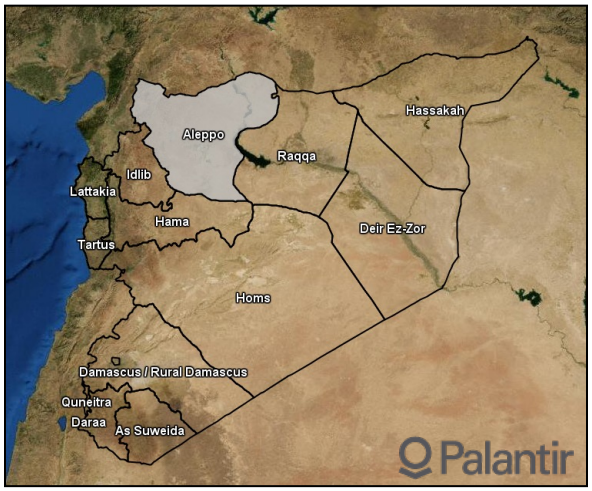


Figure 4: Governorates of Syria.

Aleppo



The Aleppo governorate is divided between all main factions in the Syrian conflict - the Syrian government, Kurdish forces, the Islamic State, and opposition forces, including the IF, JAN, and SMC-MOC supported groups. The multitude of actors and the strategic and symbolic importance of Aleppo city have meant that the Aleppo governorate has consistently seen the most intense violence since opposition forces first entered Aleppo city in July 2012. Though control of territory in Aleppo has shifted somewhat over the course of the conflict, front lines have largely stagnated, only changing substantially in the past two months. The city of Aleppo itself is divided, with the government controlling the west, various opposition groups controlling the east, and Kurdish forces holding the northern neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud. This division, which has persisted throughout the conflict, represents more than just the armed dynamics of the Syrian conflict, and is in fact an overt manifestation of latent divisions that had long existed in the city.

As the map below demonstrates, armed group formations in the city of Aleppo have been unevenly distributed. There have been no documented armed group formations in western or west-central Aleppo, while an arc of neighborhoods throughout the east and south of Aleppo have witnessed over 180 unique formations and military councils. Given this underlying division of the population, it is unsurprising that no side to the conflict has managed to gain full control of the city.

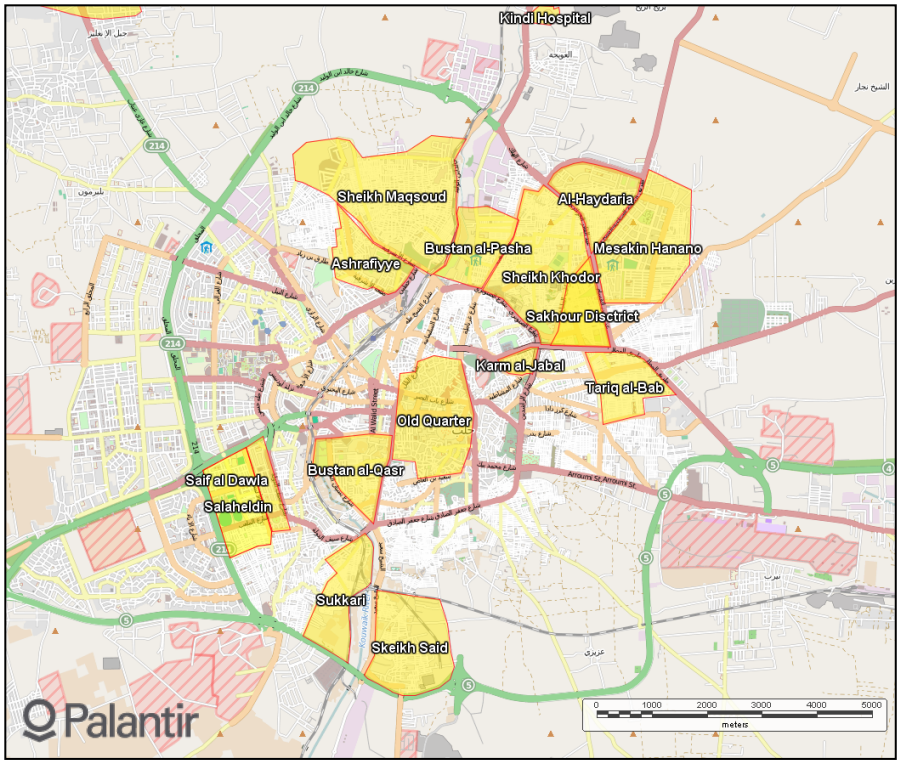


Figure 5: The distribution of areas that saw the formation of armed opposition groups over the course of the conflict.

Fighting in Aleppo governorate between April and September 2014 was primarily focused along the front lines within and bordering Aleppo city. Beginning in May, however, the Islamic State began a steady advance from their positions in eastern Aleppo governorate westward along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Within Aleppo city, fighting focused on four fronts – the Sheikh Najjar Industrial City, the northwestern neighborhoods of Layramoun and Jamiaat al-Zahra, the Aleppo Military Academy, and the Aleppo International Airport, which together make up all four corners of Aleppo city (see map below). At the beginning of April 2014, Syrian government forces moved north from their positions around the Aleppo International Airport to launch an offensive on the Sheikh Najjar Industrial City. The city has changed hands multiple times between the opposition and the Islamic State and has long acted as a gateway into the opposition's northeastern neighborhoods. Additionally, the area has served as a point from which the opposition launched attacks on the long-besieged Aleppo Central Prison to the west, and south on the Aleppo International Airport and the Syrian military's 80th Division base.

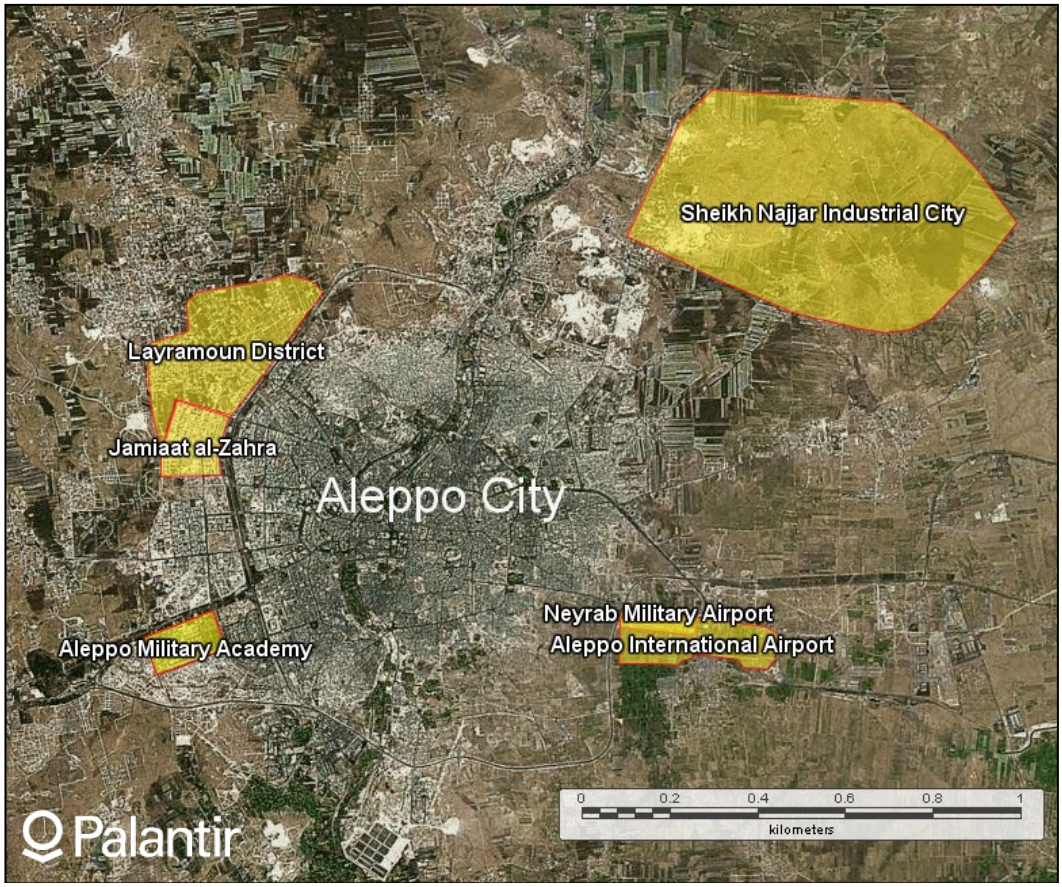


Figure 6: Detail of Aleppo city with primary areas of conflict highlighted.

Simultaneously, opposition units from the "Joint Operations Room for the People of al-Sham," and Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar, a unit primarily made up of foreign fighters from southern Russia and former Soviet republics, launched an assault on the western neighborhoods of Layramoun and Jamiat al-Zahra. Fighting in these areas was intense as opposition forces fought to take the government Air Force Intelligence building in Jamiaat al-Zahra, which has served as a base of operations for the much-feared intelligence branch. Further south, opposition units continued their persistent push to take the al-Assad Military Academy, clashing with government forces in the surrounding area regularly throughout the summer. Despite initial success, the opposition did not succeed in gaining a substantial amount of territory during these offensives.

Outside of Aleppo city, the Islamic State began expanding westward from its long-held stronghold of al-Bab city in May. Towards the end of June, IS forces took a little more than a week to capture the villages of Abla, Tal Jijan, and al-Baruza. After a prolonged siege of the Kweiris Military Airport in eastern Aleppo, IS forces finally gained entry into the area immediately surrounding the airport by the end of July, sparking force-on-force combat between IS fighters and government forces. The IS also captured the area of Moqbela and village of Rahmaniya, just northeast of Sheikh Najjar Industrial City. This formed a half circle around government positions to the east of Aleppo city. Despite the close proximity of these forces to one another, reports of clashes have been very limited.

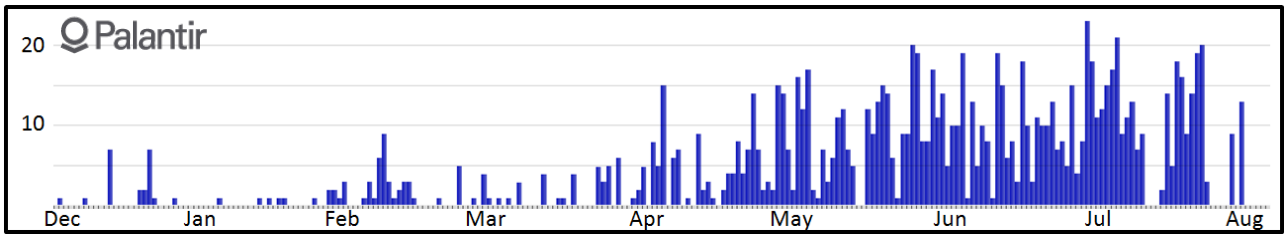


Figure 7: Nationwide reports of barrel bombings per day from December 2013 through September 1, 2014.

Beginning in April, Aleppo city (and much of the rest of Syria) witnessed a sharp rise in the number of barrel bombs employed by Syrian government forces. Between March and April, there was a 450% increase in the frequency of reported barrel bombings throughout Syria, with opposition-controlled areas in Aleppo governorate being hit more than 100 times per month from May through August.

Aleppo International Airport remained a site of intense fighting between government and opposition factions throughout the months of April and May as the opposition fought to take the airport in hopes of easing the government's aerial bombardment and disrupting government supply lines. Despite this push, government forces were slowly able to move northwards and succeeded in taking Sheikh Najjar Industrial City in August.

Islamic State forces continued their advance north towards the border with Turkey throughout July and August, engaging in clashes against the Kurdish YPG in the border city of Ain al-Arab (known in Kurdish as Kobane), using its control of the nearby Jarablus as a launching point. In May, Kurdish forces announced the creation of military operation rooms in the area in order to better combine their efforts to counter the IS advance, and succeeded in re-taking the towns of Khalfati al-Ahmadiya and Tal Sha'ir near the predominantly Kurdish city of al-Ra'i. In a rare collaboration, Jabhat al-Nusra aided the Jabhat al-Akrad group of Kurdish fighters in their attempts to resist the IS' advance. Despite the limited success of the Kurdish counter-offensive, in August, IS forces took the strategic city of Akhtreen and a cluster of towns surrounding it (marked in map below). Akhtreen, a longtime opposition stronghold, is seen as a gateway to opposition strongholds along supply lines further west.

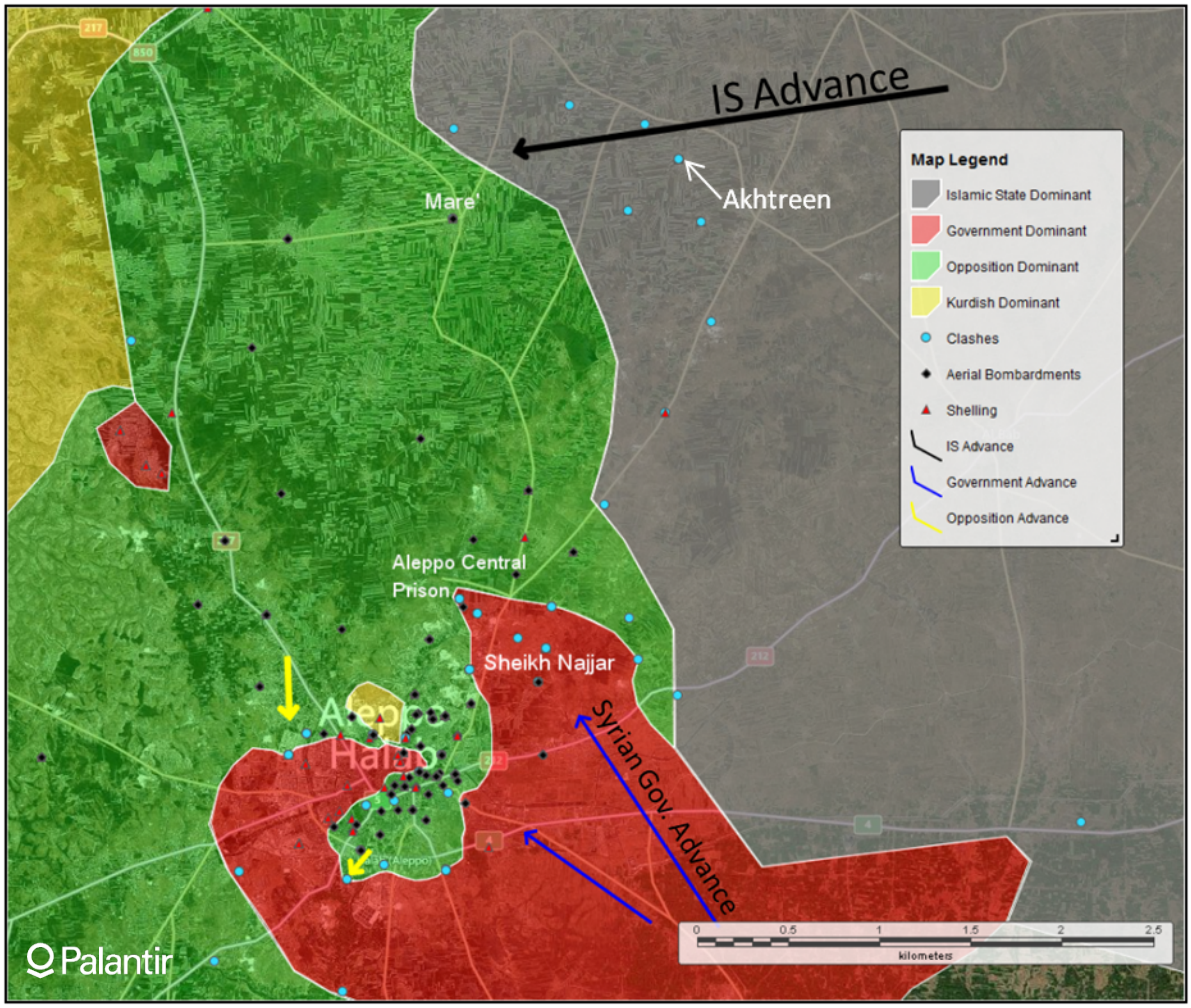
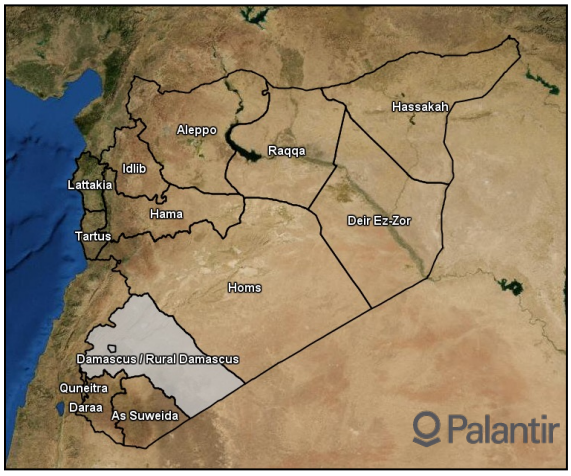


Figure 8: Conflict events and areas of control in Aleppo governorate in August 2014.

Damascus and Rural Damascus



Fighting in Damascus and Rural Damascus between the months of April and September continued much as it has throughout the conflict, with government and opposition forces clashing in the suburbs of Damascus city and throughout the Anti-Lebanon mountains to the north. Opposition forces in the area remain largely pinned down in the Eastern Ghouta countryside, with fighting focusing on a string of towns positioned along the southern bypass road of Damascus (see map below).

Most notable of the fighting in this area was in the southern town of Maliha. Long held as an opposition stronghold, the Syrian government announced the "Battle for Maliha" in early April leading to intense daily fighting for the following five months. The government's advance was hindered somewhat in June when Iraqi Shia militia forces withdrew to confront the Islamic State's advance in Iraq, but despite this setback, the Syrian military celebrated victory on August 14.[63]

The month of July also saw major clashes between opposition groups and the IS in the eastern and southern suburbs of Damascus city. By July 10, Jaysh al-Islam forces had driven the IS out of Masraba in Eastern Ghouta, and Jaysh al-Islam, the Islamic Union, and others clashed with the IS in the southern suburbs of Beit Sahem, Babila, and Yelda between July 17 and 18. The presence of IS fighters in Damascus and its surroundings represents a growing problem for opposition forces in the region.

In northern rural Damascus, after the loss of the opposition stronghold of Yabrud in the Qalamoun region in March 2014, government forces continued their pursuit of opposition forces in the area. Fighters fleeing Yabrud were either pushed west to the northeastern Lebanese town of Arsal or fought their way south towards Eastern Ghouta in the Damascus suburbs.[64] Forces in this area are comprised of a unique collaboration between JAN and the IS, along with a few regional units from the Qalamoun and Eastern Ghouta regions. Though the two organizations are at war with one another throughout the rest of Syria, the JAN and IS forces in the area have vocally defended their cooperation in the Qalamoun region. Furthermore, reports from the towns during the time of their occupation claim that both groups generally allowed local Christian populations to continue daily life, suggesting that, despite the ideological leanings of the fighters in this area, they are also pragmatic.

[63] NDTV, "Syrian Soldiers Celebrate Fall of Rebel Stronghold," August 15, 2014, http://www.ndtv.com/article/world/syrian-soldiers-celebrate-fall-of-rebel-stronghold-576536

[64] Syria Deeply, "Syria: The Executive Summary, 4/9", April 9, 2014, http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/04/5071/syria-executive-summary-49/

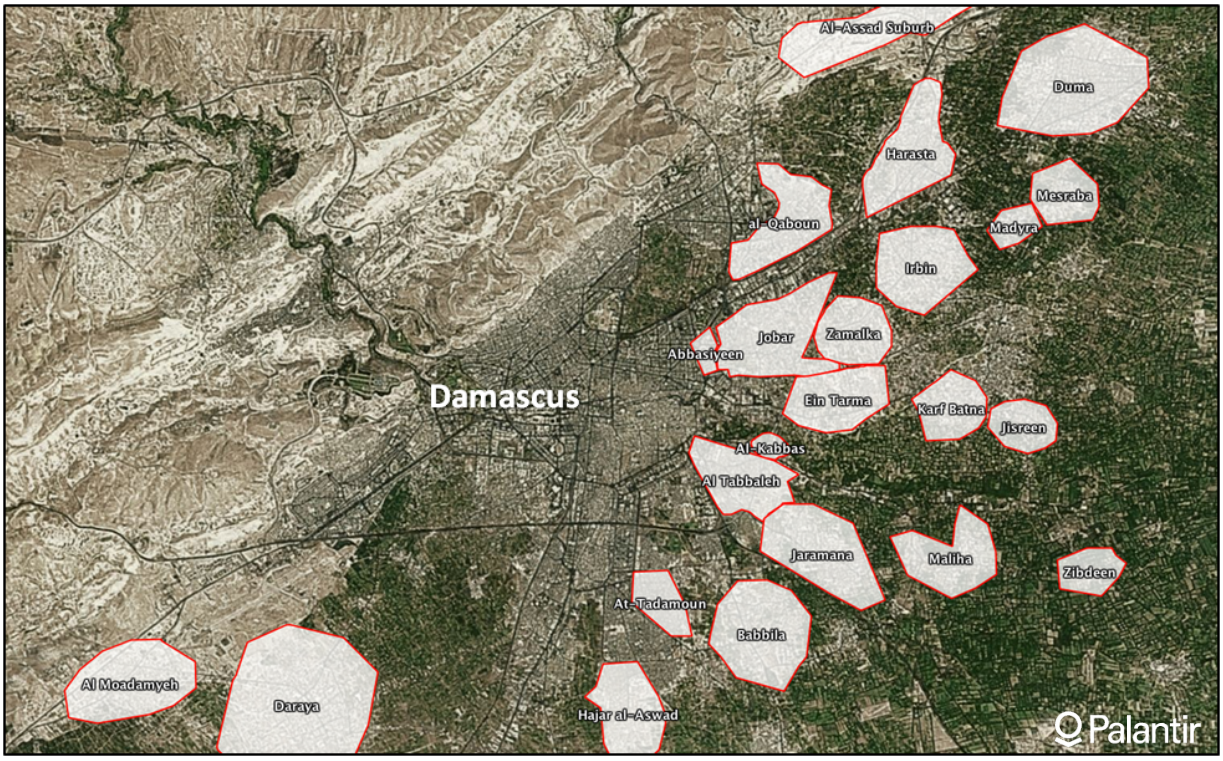
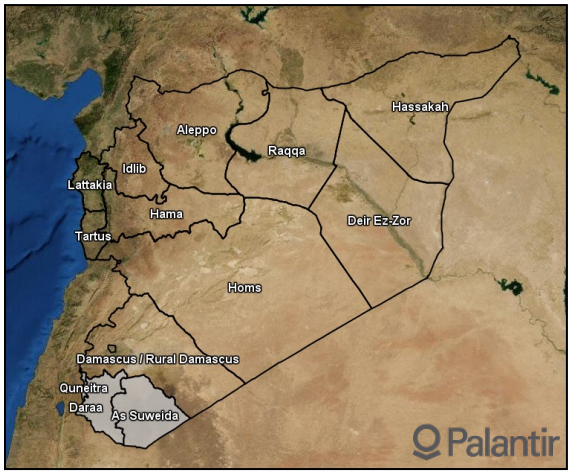


Figure 9: Areas of greater Damascus that witnessed force-on-force clashes during the months of April through August, 2014.

Hezbollah, which has steadily worked to secure the Lebanese border over the course of the past year, was heavily involved in the fighting for Nabak and Yabrud. Their push to clear the two towns led opposition fighters through the last remaining unsecured portion of the Lebanese border and into the relatively isolated pro-opposition town of Arsal. Clearing and wholly defeating the opposition units in this mountainous region would have cost Hezbollah and supporting Syrian forces heavily - particularly if they were able to re-supply via Arsal, across the Lebanese border. However, by pushing these forces across the border into Lebanon, Hezbollah not only succeeded in isolating them, but also in securing some much-needed reinforcement in the form of the Lebanese military intervening in Arsal during August. Furthermore, Hezbollah was able to avoid engaging in large-scale fighting within Lebanese territory – a move that would have been sure to further enflame sectarian tensions. It cannot be stated with certainty that this was Hezbollah's intention from the outset, but it is clear that the much reported "spill-over" into Lebanon would more aptly be described as a push into a problematic border town as a means of fully securing Lebanon's borders.

Southern Syria



Southern Syria is the only region in which opposition forces have made consistent advances in recent months. The bulk of the fighting during April and May focused on cities in the Izraa district to the northwest of Daraa city, which is home to several important Syrian government bases and is bisected by two main roadways. While most of the fighting remained within Daraa governorate, limited fighting took place in the narrow Quneitra governorate along the Golan Heights and in as-Suweida governorate to the east.

In the northwest of Daraa, opposition activity focused on taking control of several major Syrian military bases near the cities of Nawa and Inkhil, notable among them Army Base 61 located at Tal al-Jabiya and a cluster of smaller military outposts near Kherbet al-Fadi. After several days of fierce clashes and relentless aerial bombardment, by May 6 a collection of opposition forces including Jabhat al-Nusra, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, the Hamza Regiment, and seven other groups captured the military bases at Matouq al-Saghir hill, and the Kherbet al-Fadi area (see map below).

In Daraa city, fierce clashes took place in the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Mahatta, Daraa al-Balad, and Manshiya, as government fighters gradually consolidated control of the northern portion of the city. These neighborhoods are all located in the southern and western portions of the city near government military bases, including the important training ground of Brigade 132.

In the northern districts of Daraa, JAN lost and then recaptured Tal al-Jabiya and gained control of the strategic hill of Tal al-Jumuaa located between Tasil and Nawa cities near the M-5 highway leading to Damascus. Tal al-Jumuaa is considered a key military base, integral in the development of weapons for the Syrian government. Government planes also continued to bomb opposition areas of control in the northern and western portions of the governorate, including an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in the western town of al-Shajara.

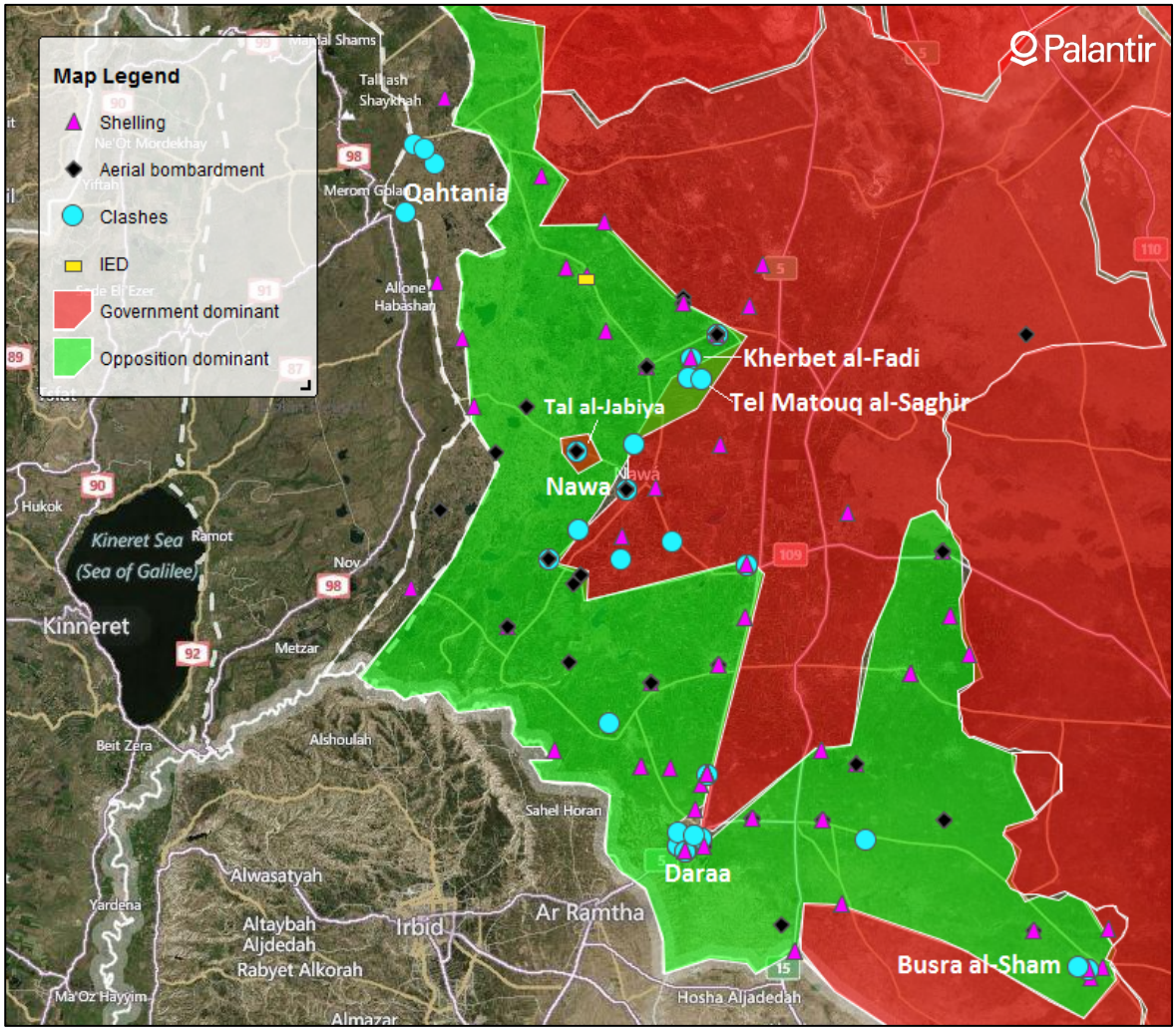
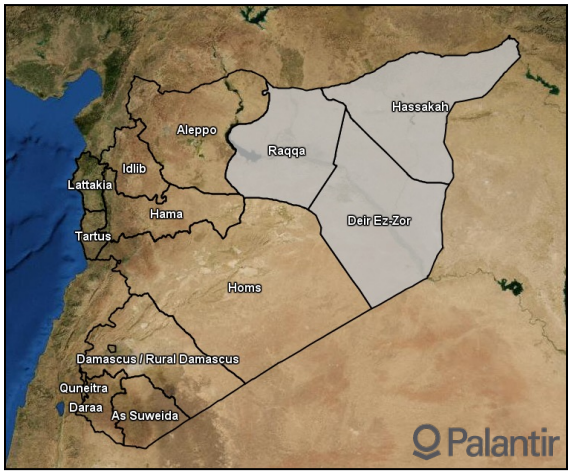


Figure 10: Conflict events and areas of control in southern Syria during July-August 2014.

Northeastern Syria



The Syrian government has long held only small portions of the governorates of Raqqa, Hassakah, and Deir Ez-Zor. In Deir Ez-Zor, the government holds much of western Deir Ez-Zor city, as well as the Deir Ez-Zor airport and a narrow strip of land connecting the enclave to government positions in the west of the country. In Hassakah, government forces hold much of the city of Hassakah as well as Qamishli along the Turkish border, however the main government military bases in both Raqqa and Hassakah all fell to IS forces in August.

Prior to the IS advance that succeeded in capturing the remaining government-held military bases in Raqqa and Hassakah governorates, the IS fought a prolonged battle against the Islamic Front, Jabhat al-Nusra, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, tribal forces, and others along the Euphrates river close to the Iraq border. Despite IS' push through much of Iraq during this time, fighting in Deir Ez-Zor continued at an almost uninterrupted pace. At the end of June, JAN withdrew from its stronghold towns of al-Shuheil and al-Mayadin after clashes with the IS supported by defected members of JAN and opposition. The IS also fully secured the border city of Albukamal for the first time on June 3, facilitating the movement of troops and equipment between Iraq and Syria (see map below)

In Deir Ez-Zor city, IS advanced from the northern countryside into opposition-held parts of the city, taking control of the Siyasiya Bridge, formerly the opposition's main supply line into the city, and Husseiniya village. Government forces maintained control of the western and southern neighborhoods of Deir Ez-Zor city, but opposition forces were expelled by the IS. However, opposition forces did not go lightly. During the IS' advance through the surrounding towns along the Euphrates, towns changed hands between the opposing forces on an almost daily basis. Opposition forces, however, faced a three-pronged attack that ultimately overcame their defenses. The following map shows the areas of control in Deir Ez-Zor immediately preceding the IS advance into the area.

Opposition forces have since been almost entirely routed from their former positions. Though Jabhat al-Nusra was able to maintain tenuous control of the Kharatta oil station in the western countryside and Deir Ez-Zor's largest oil field, including the al-Omar oil field in the eastern countryside, the IS had secured control of the rest of the governorate's oil fields by the end of June. This includes the al-Jafra oil fields and nearby ConocoPhillips field (known locally as "Conoco") that JAN had run in conjunction with tribal alliances. The Islamic State had also secured the majority of the western countryside, save the for government's main supply route into the city.

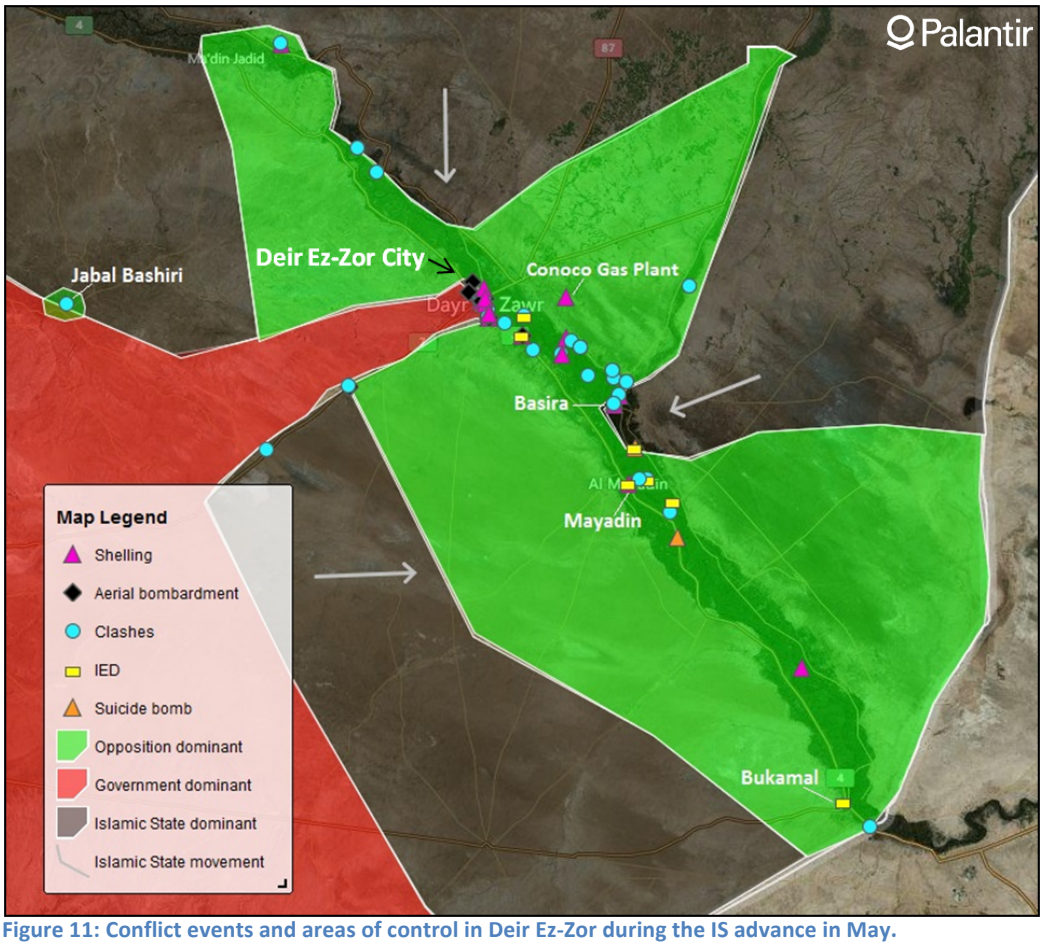


Figure 11: Conflict events and areas of control in Deir Ez-Zor during the IS advance in May.

Shortly after, in July, the IS took the al-Omar oil field (reportedly with little fighting) and Jabhat al-Nusra withdrew from the area. [65] By July 18, the IS had moved up the Euphrates river valley to villages just north of Deir Ez-Zor, where Jabhat al-Nusra, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, and other opposition battalions surrendered with little fighting. This included the villages of Masrab, Shemetiya, Kharita, and Ayyash. These moves solidified IS' control over the majority of Deir Ez-Zor governorate, with the exception of small pockets controlled by government forces, including neighborhoods in Deir Ez-Zor city and the Deir Ez-Zor military airport.[66]

[65] Sylvia Westall, Reuters, "Islamic State Seizes Oil Field and Towns in Eastern Syria," July 3, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/03/us-syria-crisis-islamicstate-idUSKBN0F80SO20140703?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews

[66] Al-Monitor, "After Takeover by IS, Deir Ez-Zor Residents Fear Next Tragedy," August 6, 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/08/syria-deir-ez-zor-living-conditions.html

Though the IS generally faced little opposition from local tribes, the al-Shaetat tribe announced an "uprising" against the IS on July 30.[67] Due to the size of the IS and the firepower it wields, the tribal uprising was quelled within two weeks. By some activist reports, hundreds of al-Shaetat fighters were reportedly captured and executed, with the IS establishing blockades and checkpoints around the villages.

In a prudent move, the IS allowed local armed units it considers loyal to patrol and manage their local affairs, thus enabling the organization to focus on the larger goal of expansion without engaging in pragmatic, local-level politics. This also indicates that the IS' expansion is not as cohesive as it may seem from afar, but is held together by a collection of co-opted, and sometimes coerced, local forces.

The northeastern governorates of Hassakah and Raqqa are almost exclusively controlled by Kurdish and Islamic State forces, respectively. Thus, the majority of incidents in these two governorates involved clashes between the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Islamic State. In the Hassakah governorate to the east, where Kurdish forces are at their

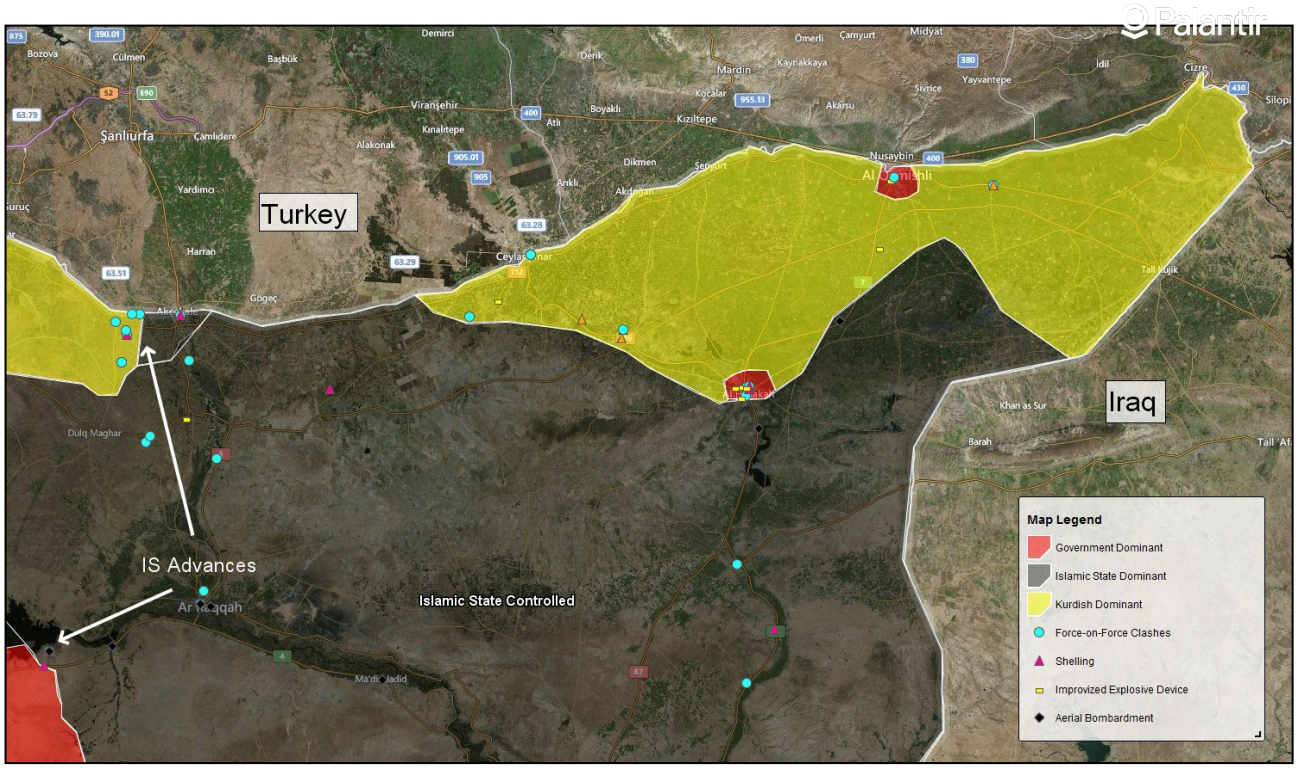


Figure 12: Conflict events and areas of control in Raqqa and Hassakah governorates during August, 2014.

spreading itself too thin.[68] This strategy has enabled the IS to expand as rapidly as it has through Syrian territory in recent weeks, and demonstrates that the IS leadership is capable of strongest, the IS has resorted to using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as opposed to direct confrontation in the Kurdish heartland.

Of the 24 reported IEDs deployed by the IS in these two governorates between April and September 1, 19 of them were located in the Hassakah panhandle, predominantly in the city Hassakah itself. Elsewhere in the governorate, where Kurdish positions are relatively weak, IS forces clashed directly with the YPG, putting

[67] Syria Deeply, "As ISIS Advances in Eastern Syria, Local Tribes Stand in its way," August 1, 2014, http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/08/5883/isis-advances-eastern-syria-local-tribes-stand/

[68] Hassan Hassan, "Isis, the jihadists who turned the tables," August 9, 2014,The Guardian, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/10/isis-syria-iraq-barack-obama-airstrikes

pressure on the northern Raqqa enclave of Ain al-Arab (or Kobane, in Kurdish).

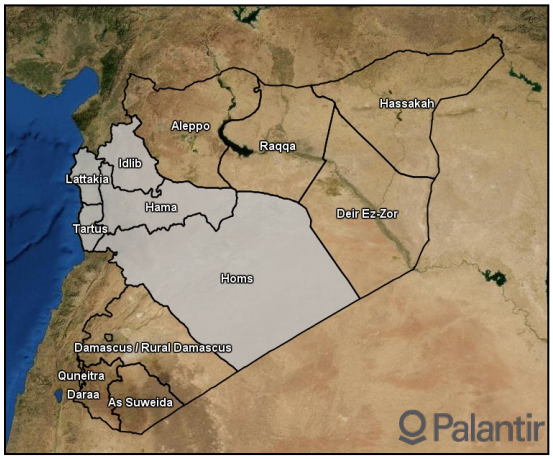
The most significant developments in the northeastern region of Syria, however, came in late July and August with the IS' capture of the last two remaining Syrian military positions in Raqqa governorate. Beginning with the capture of the Division 17 base north of Raqqa city (the long-held stronghold of the IS in Syria), IS forces turned their attention almost immediately to the al-Tabqa (also known as al-Thawra) air base to the southwest of Raqqa, which fell to the IS on August 24.

In both instances, hundreds of fighters were killed from both sides. Syrian government forces fought hard to keep the bases and, when the situation looked dire, attempted to retreat. Ultimately, the IS overcame both bases, capturing an estimated 300+ soldiers from both assaults combined.

In Hassakah IS launched an offensive July 25 to capture Regiment 121 located just south of Hassakah city, capturing the base by the end of July and solidifying its control of areas leading to Hassakah city. Regiment 121 is considered an important Syrian army base that allowed government forces to target opposition positions in southern Hassakah and Deir Ez-Zor.

The battles for these three bases, and subsequent mass executions represent some of the bloodiest fighting Syria has seen over the course of the conflict.

Central and Coastal Syria



On May 7, opposition forces in the "capital of the revolution," Homs city, surrendered to government forces in an agreement that provided for the safe passage for remaining opposition fighters north to Talbisa or Dar al-Kabira. In exchange, hostages held by opposition forces in northern Syria and along the Syrian coast were released and aid was allowed into the besieged pro-government cities of Nabul and Zahraa in the Aleppo governorate.

The fall of central Homs was a symbolic victory for the Syrian government, but did not result in a major change of territorial control as opposition forces maintain control over a large swath of territory directly north of the city (see map below). Government forces and opposition units to the north of Homs continued to engage one another following the surrender of Homs city, with most fighting centering around the town of Talbisa.

In Hama governorate to the north, regular forces supported by the National Defense Forces clashed continuously with Jabhat al-Nusra and opposition forces on the outskirts of Morek, a town the government lost to opposition forces in February 2014 that is strategically located near the highway connecting Hama and Idleb governorates. Despite the pressure, and an extensive air campaign against opposition positions in the town, opposition forces expanded their area of control south along the Orontes River towards the Hama Military Airport.

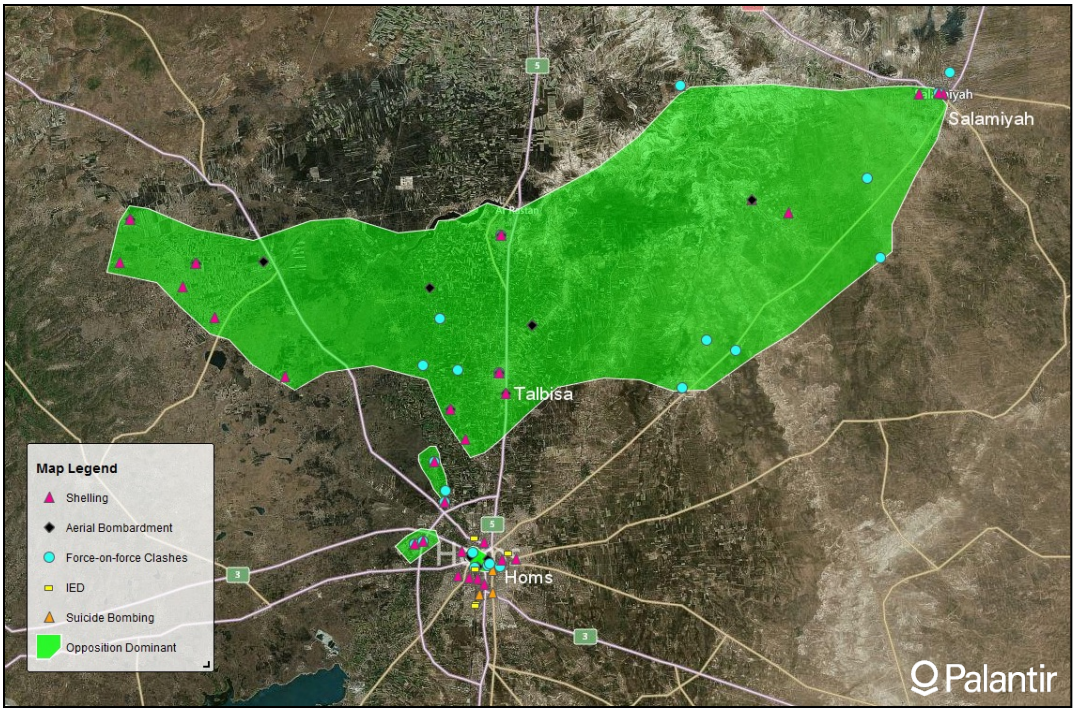


Figure 13: Conflict Events and opposition areas of control in northern Homs governorate during May, 2014.

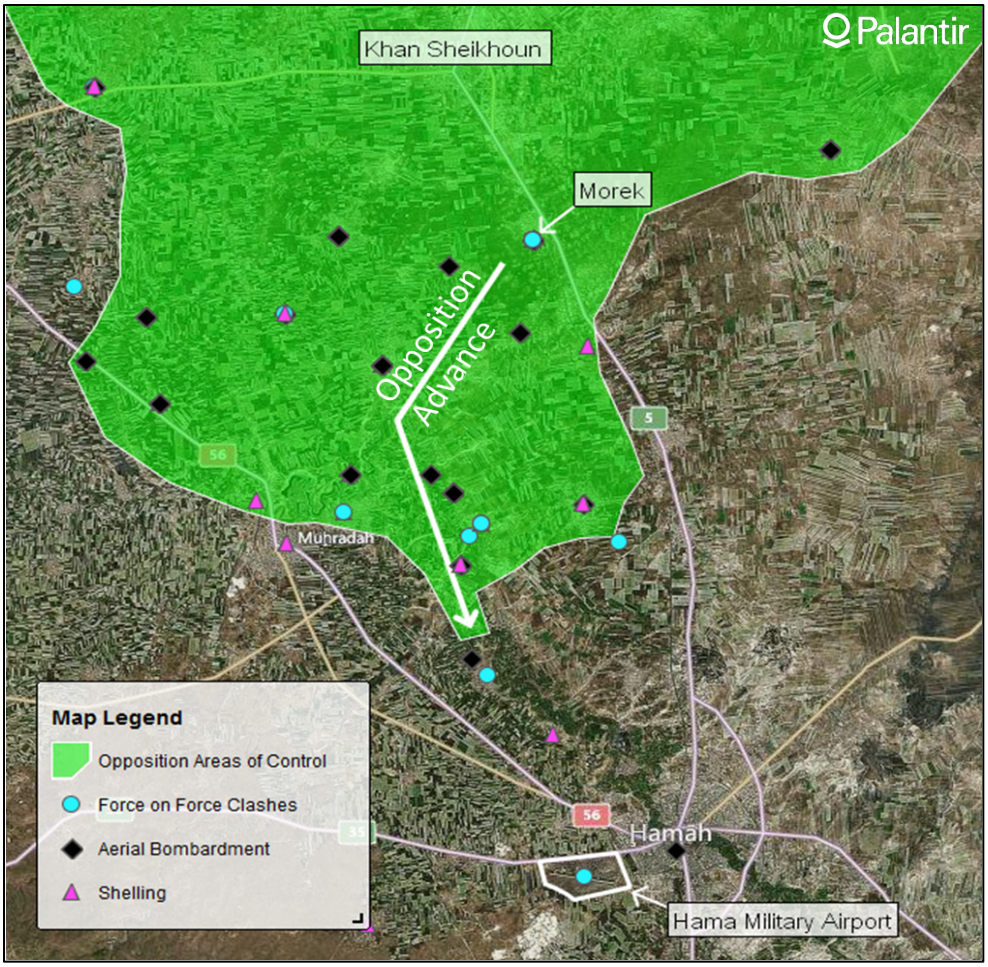


Figure 14: Conflict events and opposition areas of control during Jne-August, 2014.

The opposition's advance south was in large part enabled by the late-May capture of Khan Sheikhoun. The capture of the city marked a major victory for opposition forces as it provided a much-needed staging ground for their north-south push along the M-5 (Damascus-Aleppo) highway. Even as the city was still under government control in April and part of May, the increasing pressure meant opposition forces to the north of the city were able to advance further north along the highway past the towns of Heesh and Babuleen to reach military bases south of Maarat al-Nuaman (see map below). Although the opposition's initial offensive was quickly pushed back, opposition forces were able to maintain their hold on towns along the highway.

Throughout the months of July and August, opposition forces continued to put pressure on Maarat al-Numan and the military bases surrounding it. By late August, following consistent shelling and a large bomb attack, opposition forces succeeded in capturing most checkpoints surrounding the government enclave.

The armed opposition's success in Idleb and Hama was aided by a concurrent offensive in the government stronghold of Latakia, which drew government forces away from neighboring frontlines. Beginning in late March, Islamist opposition forces from Jabhat al-Nusra, the IF, and Harakat Fajr al-Sham launched the al-Anfal offensive in the north of the Latakia governorate and immediately took control of the Syrian-Turkish border crossing just north of the city of Kassab. From April 2 to April 7, opposition

forces moved south and west to take the city of Kassab and the surrounding villages. Through mountainous terrain, the opposition's southward push was eventually halted at the government military position, Tower 45, and to the west at the coastal town of Samraa, straddling the Syrian-Turkish border.

Despite the initial success of this campaign, by July, opposition forces saw a complete reversal of their fortunes. Government forces, supported by Hezbollah regained full control of Kassab and its surroundings and expelled remaining opposition forces to the east towards Idlib.

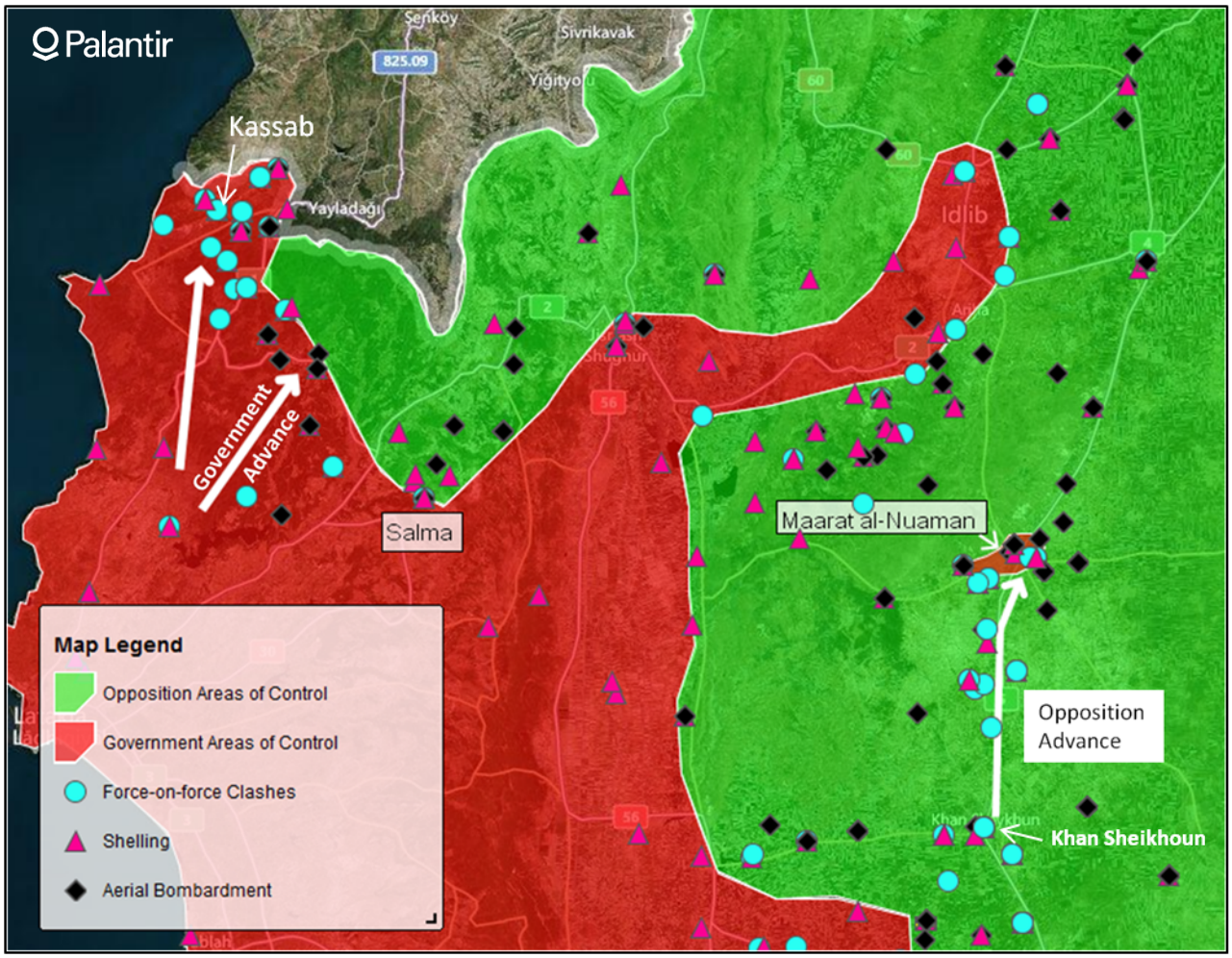


Figure 15: Conflict Events and areas of control in Lattakia and Idlib governorates during June-July, 2014.

Conclusions

With the dramatic advance of the Islamic State throughout Eastern and northern Syria, the government advance in Aleppo city, and the recent bomb assassination of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham's top leadership, the situation of Syria's armed opposition is dire. Though the opposition has shown itself capable of making consistent gains in southern Syria and in the central Idlib and Hama governorates, these limited advances, particularly in the north, will be difficult to maintain if the Islamic State succeeds in cutting vital supply routes from Turkey, and the government maintains control of the skies.

The Syrian government, while on the offensive in Aleppo, has been equally harmed by the advance of the Islamic State and – despite its best efforts – was unable to prevent the fall of its remaining bases near Raqqa city. The long sought-after victory of government forces in Sheikh Najjar, which succeeded in flanking opposition positions in eastern Aleppo city has placed government forces directly in the path of the IS' advance through Aleppo governorate. While IS forces appear to be focused on consolidating gains in the east and securing the border with Turkey in northern Aleppo, they will almost undoubtedly turn south toward Aleppo city should they succeed in this offensive.

On the political front, opposition forces appear to be in the midst of a potential major restructuring and consolidation by initiating the formation of the Revolutionary Command Council. How this effort will progress, particularly given the recent deaths of top Harakat Ahrar al-Sham leadership, is still uncertain, but the growing number of organizations signing up to participate in the initiative is certainly a new development for opposition unity.

Conversely, political division within the government and pro-government communities appears to be on the rise. The past four months have brought an increase in protests led by Syrians who are frustrated with the heavy tolls their communities have paid for the limited gains achieved. With no clear end to the violence in sight, it is likely that such internal pressure on the Syrian government will continue to increase in the near future.

Finally, the newly formed, U.S.-led, anti-IS coalition's impact on the Syrian conflict remains to be assessed at this early stage of the campaign.