

THE
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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 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.



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.

Glossary of Acronyms

ATGM	Anti-tank guided missile
JAN	Jabhat al-Nusra
MOC	Military Operations Center
NDF	National Defense Forces
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
SOC	The National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, commonly referred to as the Syrian Opposition Coalition
SRF	Syrian Revolutionaries' Front
YPG	People's Protection Units

Executive Summary

After four years of crisis, the Syrian conflict still shows no signs of ending. Opposition movements, both political and military, still suffer from crippling divisions, which are exacerbated by divisions among supporters in the international community. The Friends of Syria group of pro-opposition countries has yet to develop a cohesive vision regarding how best to respond to the crisis, leading member states to continue to implement their own, often competing, initiatives. Exacerbating this phenomenon is the poorly controlled – or not controlled at all – borders with Turkey and Iraq, which allow the multitude of factions to maintain contact with international supporters, including non-state entities and actors.

In response to persistent and ultimately debilitating divisions, opposition groups have made repeated efforts to unify under a centralized leadership. While all past attempts at unification have eventually fallen prey to conflicting personalities, foreign influence, or the ambitions of individual member groups, each subsequent attempt has endured longer and has presented a more cohesive vision than its predecessor. Today, the largest attempt to coordinate armed opposition forces is the formation of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), which aims to establish a unified court system and civilian police force in addition to a national army under a single command. With broad support among Syria's armed opposition, the RCC has momentum in its favor, but whether or not it will be able to overcome the divisions that have plagued past coalitions will depend largely on whether its members can transcend their personal ambitions and whether it receives backing from the various supporters of opposition forces.

The difficulties of multiple actors and competing ideologies are not unique to Syria's opposition. The backbone pro-government Alawite community has been particularly hard-hit by the conflict and has become gradually more vocal in their opposition to a seemingly never-ending war. With an increasing number of military deserters, those who do serve often do so at the behest of a particular commander or opt to join one of the many pseudo-governmental paramilitary groups. Meanwhile the government has increasingly relied on foreign forces, including Hezbollah and external, Shia militias to shore up front lines throughout the country, raising significant questions about the level of control leadership in Damascus maintains over its supporters in the field.

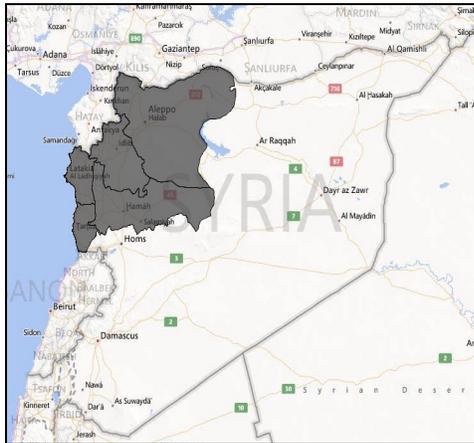
The Islamic State has continued to expand throughout Syria, despite the International Coalition's efforts against it. Although it suffered defeat in Kobane (Ain al-Arab) and the surrounding area, the Islamic State's total area of control has actually expanded since the Coalition entered the conflict. This growth is in part due to the spike in recruitment that resulted from the Coalition's engagement, which is perceived as yet another western-driven military intervention that is widely believed to have strengthened the Syrian government at the expense of Sunnis. With nothing but a vast desert separating the eastern strongholds of the Islamic State from the population centers of Syria's central corridor, recent months have seen increased Islamic State activity around Homs, Hama, and the Damascus countryside.

Adding to Islamic State advances, Jabhat al-Nusra's (JAN) expansion in the northwestern Idlib governorate has resulted in the expulsion of numerous Friends of Syria-backed armed opposition groups from northern Syria, including the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (SRF), with ongoing

clashes against Harakat Hazm. While it is uncertain that this will lead to further clashes with the broader opposition throughout northern Syria, tensions remain high among armed groups.

A negotiated solution to the conflict remains elusive in the face of intransigent hardliners – on all sides – who still hold on to the delusion that a military solution is possible. Realities on the ground have proven them wrong. The frontlines between the government and opposition forces have changed little for the better part of a year. If the current impasse continues, extremist forces, including the Islamic State and JAN, will present an even greater threat to Syria and the international community at large. Such extremist forces will continue to thrive so long as large parts of Syria are ungoverned. Without a change in policy from the international community and the Syrian parties to the conflict, no side is likely to go to the negotiating table any time soon, and Syria is likely to continue its present destructive path, with civilians paying the price.

Northwestern Syria



Northwestern Syria, including the governorates of Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Latakia, and Tartous, encompasses the largest area of opposition control. It remains a locus of opposition activity and is the focus of the majority of fighting in the country. The north is currently embroiled in a four-way conflict between the Syrian government, the armed opposition, the Islamic State, and JAN. While opposition groups in the area have gradually consolidated their forces into a handful of umbrella coalitions, the latter half of 2014 saw JAN move against the Friends of Syria-backed coalitions,¹ including the SRF, Harakat Hazm, and others, leading large segments of the opposition to view their ally with growing suspicion.

This tension comes at a time when the opposition can ill afford further divisions. With Islamic State forces positioned in eastern Aleppo governorate, and government forces (with assistance from Hezbollah and pro-government militias) attempting to encircle opposition positions in Aleppo city, the state of the armed opposition in northern Syria is increasingly precarious.

The majority of fighting in northern Syria has been concentrated in and around Aleppo city. Despite the high intensity of fighting between the Islamic State and Kurdish and allied armed opposition forces in Kobane (Ain al-Arab), Aleppo city still saw three times more conflict incidents (clashes, air raids, artillery bombardments) than Kobane or any other city in northern Syria. For the past three months, fighting has been focused on two areas – the Handarat area northeast of the city, and the neighborhoods surrounding the Air Force Intelligence branch on the northwestern edge of the city.

In mid-December, government and pro-government forces broke through opposition lines and engaged opposition positions in Handarat Camp. The push placed government forces within 3 km (2 mi) of the last opposition-controlled highway into Aleppo city, and approximately 6 km (4 mi) from government positions on the eastern side of Aleppo city. In response, the opposition has succeeded in slowing the government's advances, and has even succeeded in re-taking some territory while attempting to flank government positions. Currently the situation on the northern edges of Aleppo city is in constant flux, with each side initiating a series of offensives and counter offensives in very close quarters to one another. In late February, government forces nearly reached the besieged pro-government cities of al-Zahraa and Nubul in a blitz offensive, but were turned back in the cities of Raytan and Hardatnein.

¹ The "Friends of Syria" is an international diplomatic collective, which focuses on supporting the Syrian opposition.

² Reports of Iraqi involvement began emerging as early as mid 2013.

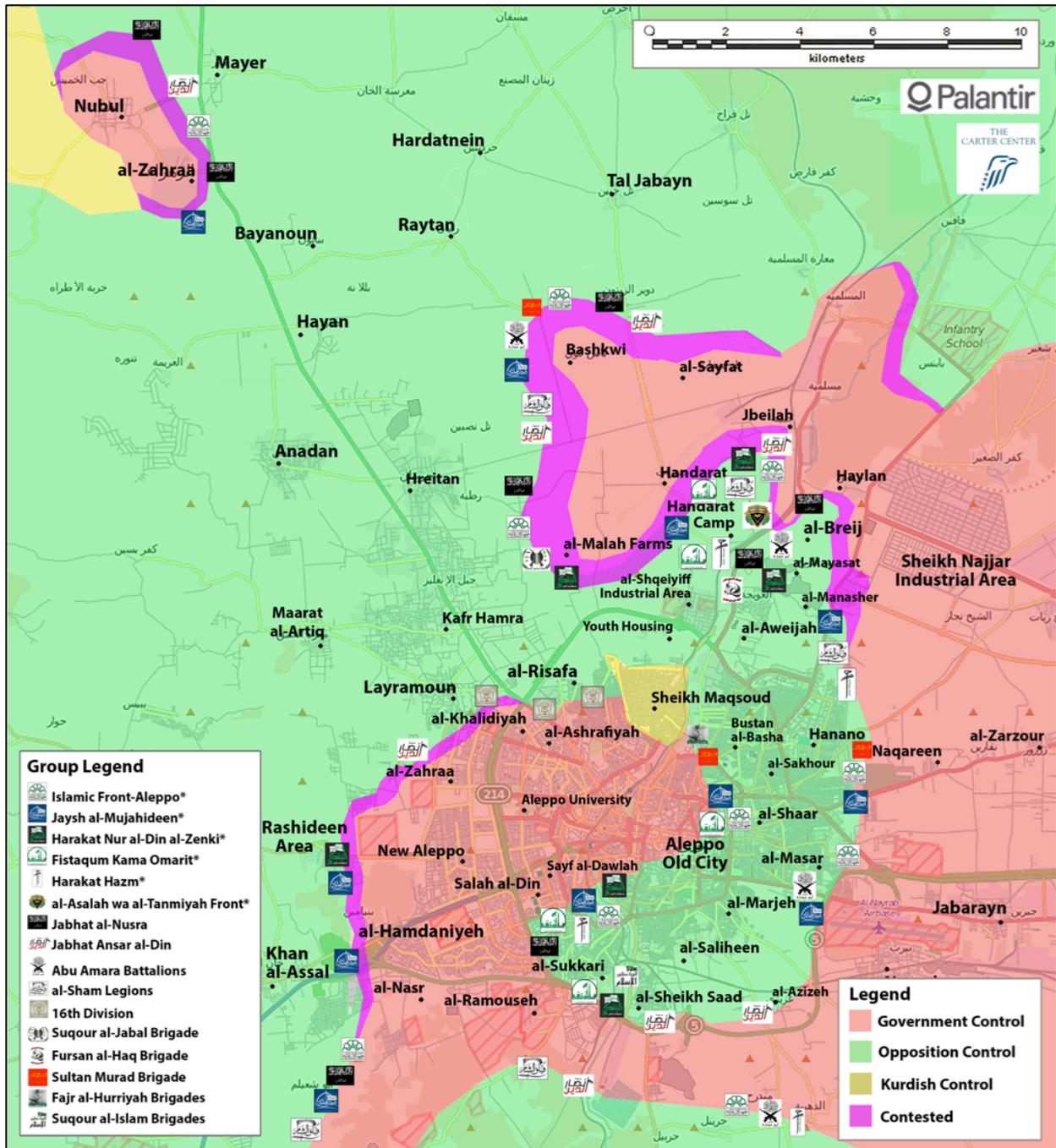


Figure 1: Areas of control and distribution of armed opposition groups in and around Aleppo city as of February 27, 2015. *Members of the Levantine Front.

To respond to government advances, the Levantine Front (al-Jabhat al-Shamia) was formed in late December 2014 from five of Aleppo’s largest opposition groups. Led by Abdel Aziz Salameh, the commander of the al-Tawhid Brigade and the Islamic Front-Aleppo, the Front represents itself as a complete merger of the groups. In late January, Harakat Hazm joined the Front after increasing tensions with JAN. Importantly, the Front does not include JAN or affiliated groups such as Jabhat Ansar al-Din which are active around Aleppo city.

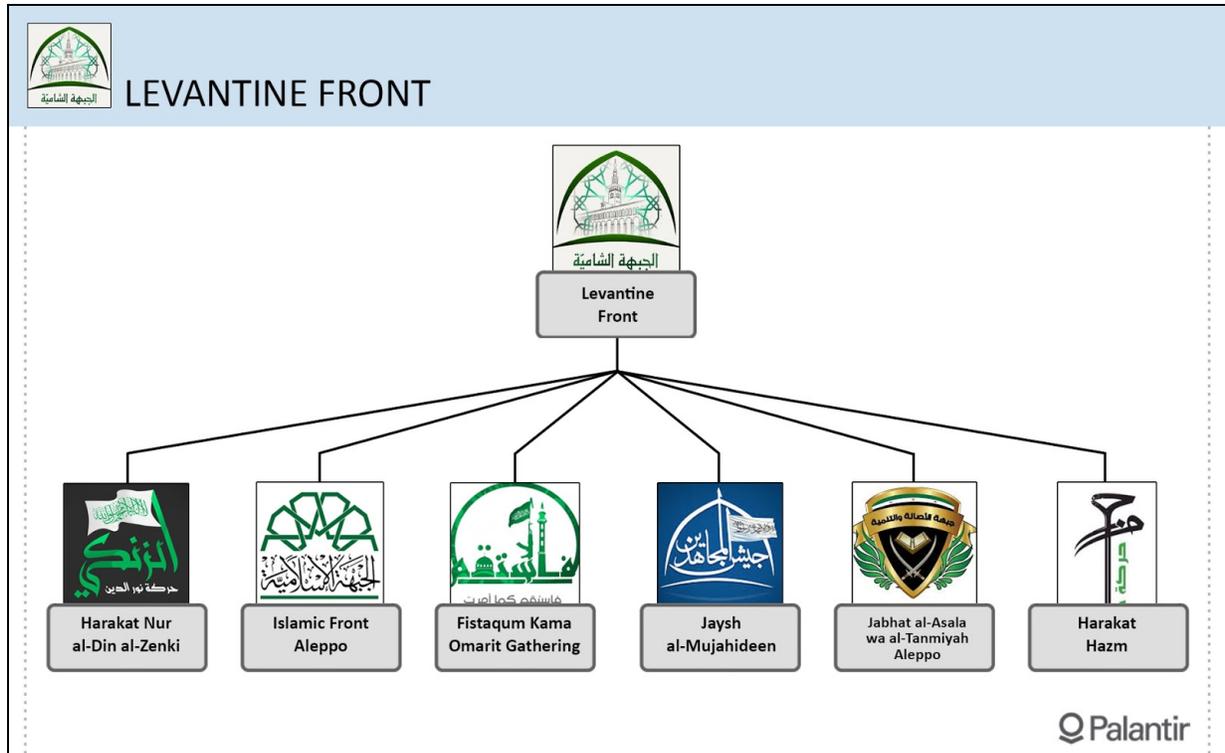


Figure 2: Organizational structure of the Levantine Front as of early February 2015.

There are questions regarding how unified the Levantine Front will remain in the months to come. While all of the member groups have collaborated with one another on a regular basis for the past year, both Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki and the Fistaqum Kama Omarit Gathering had previously split from the Jaysh al-Mujahideen coalition. Though no bad blood remains following these divisions, the failed past efforts at unification cast doubt upon the long term viability of the Levantine Front.

In addition to the continued role of domestic pro-government paramilitary forces in Aleppo, the participation of Hezbollah and other foreign Shia units has increased dramatically over the course of the past year of fighting. Activists and armed groups consistently report a growing presence of Hezbollah fighters on nearly every front line throughout Syria, with reports emerging in mid-2014 of Shia fighters from Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan joining the fight.² This trend suggests that the worrying phenomenon of foreign fighters traveling to Syria is not limited to the armed opposition.

To the northeast, the Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG), supported by local armed opposition groups, Peshmerga units from Iraqi Kurdistan, and the airpower of the International Coalition have succeeded in expelling Islamic State fighters from the city of Kobane. To date, this victory has been largely symbolic as the overall area of control of the Islamic State has continued to grow since the International Coalition became involved, but continuous advances by YPG and opposition forces place Islamic State supply routes to Aleppo under increasing pressure, and could ultimately weaken Islamic State positions throughout Syria.

² Reports of Iraqi involvement began emerging as early as mid 2013.

Jabhat al-Nusra Advances

In the Idlib governorate, recent events have been dominated by JAN advances against both government and opposition forces. Since expulsion from eastern Syria by the Islamic State, JAN has taken an increasingly aggressive stance against Friends of Syria-backed opposition groups, which have received arms and training through the Turkey-based Military Operations Center (MOC), a body of international intelligence and military advisors who vet, train, and equip a limited number of Syrian armed opposition forces.

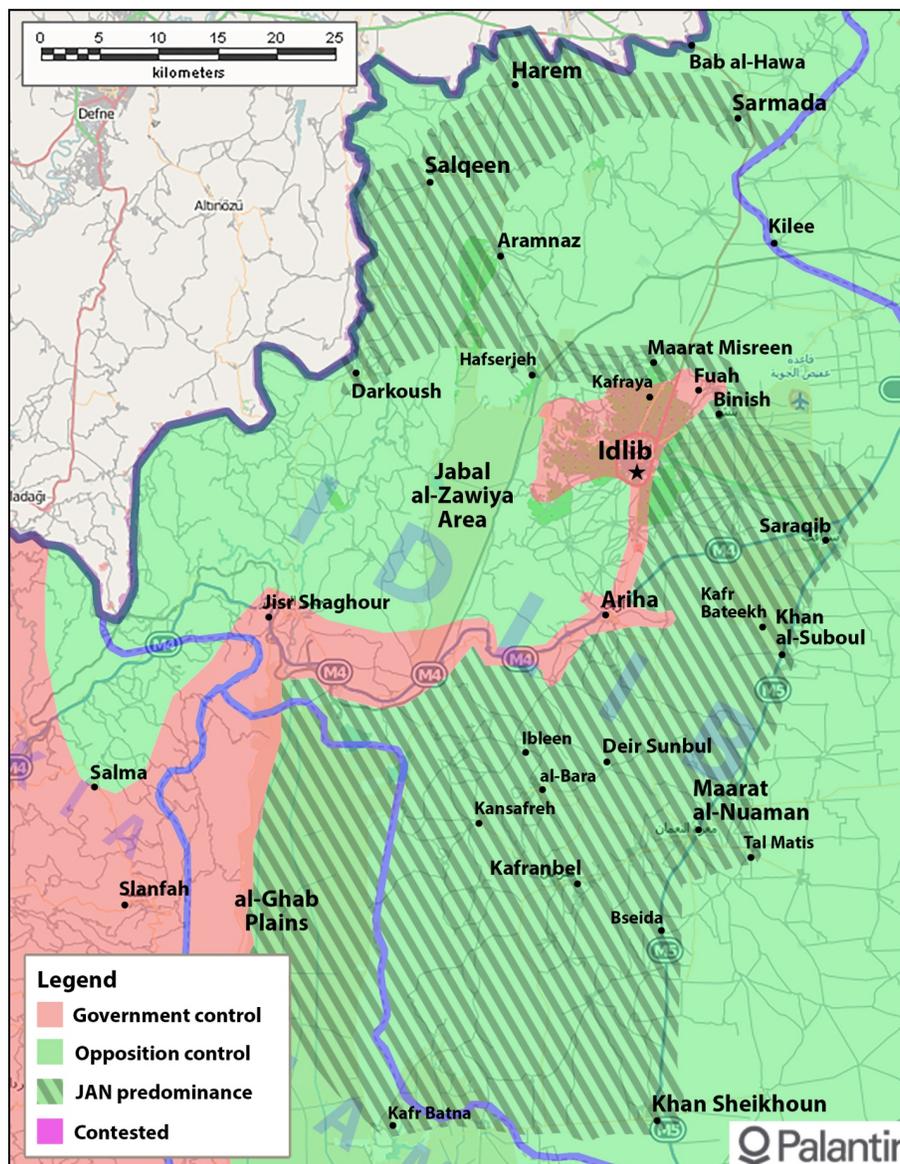


Figure 3: Areas of control in northwestern Syria as of late February 2015.

JAN chose its initial targets with care. In early July, JAN slowly took checkpoints and small towns from small member units of the SRF. These SRF members were attractive targets for three main reasons. First, some were located in strategically important border towns and informal

crossings which afforded JAN income needed following their loss of oil fields in eastern Syria. Second, the MOC-supported SRF was a potential threat to JAN, particularly following the International Coalition’s aerial bombardment of JAN positions. Third, the SRF was extremely unpopular among local populations, and had long suffered from a particularly negative public image of being self-interested and criminal. JAN was able to take advantage of this reputation, even encouraging it online, and take progressively more territory.

By December, after failed interventions by the Saqour al-Sham Brigades, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah (Ahrar al-Sham), and Jaysh al-Islam, JAN, with help from Jund al-Sham, had completely expelled the SRF, Harakat Hazm, and other MOC supported groups from Idlib, securing a small cache of US-made TOW-2B anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) in the process. Consequently northern MOC support and vetting efforts were suspended for two months. Support resumed at reduced levels by January, and the provision of TOW-2B ATGMs was limited to just four northern groups. Fighting between JAN and Harakat Hazm would spill over to Aleppo by late January, placing MOC support in jeopardy once again.

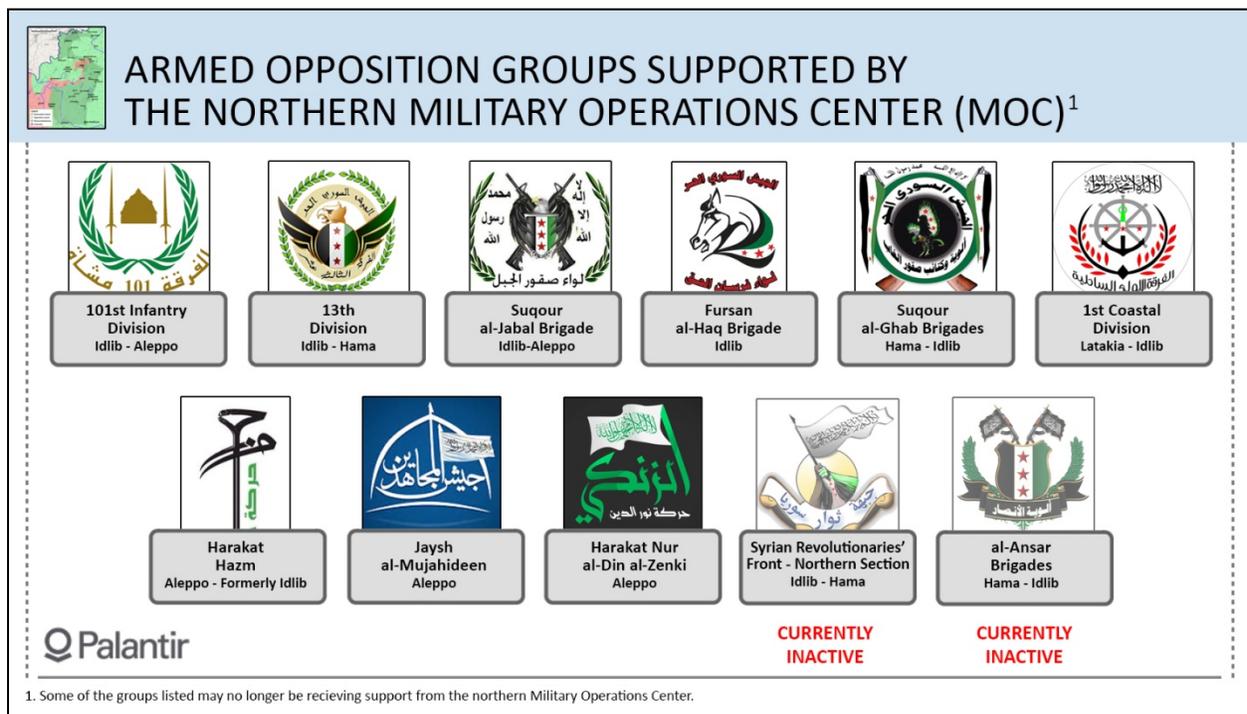


Figure 4: Armed opposition groups supported by the northern MOC as of December 2014.

Following the highly publicized expulsion of SRF forces from Idlib, JAN and Ahrar al-Sham led the capture of the Wadi al-Deif and al-Hamadiyah military bases surrounding Maarat al-Nuaman in Idlib. While these bases had been besieged for years, the government’s decision to evacuate remaining troops at the first sign of a JAN-Ahrar al-Sham offensive was likely an attempt to further discredit the MOC-supported opposition. Enabling another JAN victory further encouraged the belief that Friends of Syria countries have no viable partners among Syria’s armed opposition.

By late January, the Saqour al-Sham Brigades, Jaysh al-Islam, and Feyliq al-Sham led an offensive to take the government-controlled city of Ariha in central Idlib. The city is located along the M4 highway between Idlib city and Jisr Shaghour and is a critical supply route for government forces in Idlib city. Taking Ariha would allow opposition forces to besiege Idlib city and would help opposition forces consolidate control over the governorate. Advancing from the south, opposition forces made dramatic gains in the first week of fighting and were able to take Mount 40 overlooking the city. It remains to be seen if opposition forces will continue to advance without increased support from JAN. If they are successful, it will represent a major victory for the opposition and an improvement in their overall position. Elsewhere in Idlib, opposition and JAN forces are active around Fuah city, a peninsula of government control extending northeast from Idlib city, in addition to the Abu Dhuhur air base to the east and Jisr al-Shughour to the west.

In northern Hama, opposition forces continue to hold off government advances around Morek along the M5 highway. They have also retained control of the cities of Latamneh and Kafrzeita, despite significant government shelling and aerial bombardment. Meanwhile in Latakia, opposition forces target government positions along a 20 km frontline in the northeast corner of the governorate.

The Revolutionary Command Council

The growing antagonism of JAN against the wider opposition has threatened to amplify opposition divisions and undermine opposition efforts in the north at a dangerous time. Realizing that greater unity and significant restructuring is essential to remaining an influential force in Syria, opposition forces set out to establish the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) in late 2014.

Following the August 2014 announcement of the Waatasimu Initiative by 17 major armed groups, units from across Syria quickly signed onto the initiative and voiced their support for the creation of the RCC. Working to build support among supporters, the initiative eventually amassed more than 100 signatories and held its first formal meeting at the end of November. The meeting resulted in an outline for a comprehensive body, the RCC, which now stands as the most viable attempt to create a unified opposition force in northern Syria. Importantly, the RCC's formation was driven by internal pressure from both civilians and armed groups alike and to date has not appeared to have received substantial foreign support.

The organization's first strategic meeting outlined three branches - a judicial, civil, and unified armed force, which form the foundation of the organization. To earn one of the 73 seats on the council, member groups must contribute 100 fighters with weapons, six vehicles, and one ambulance to form the nucleus of a revolutionary army. If a member group is unable to contribute the required fighters, they may share the seat with other groups and collectively provide the required fighters and equipment. Alternately, another group may contribute on the group's behalf and earn an additional seat on the council, thus incentivizing increased contributions with increased representation. However, there is a limit of four seats per group.

Should this centralized force come to be, it would initially contain 7,300 fighters and serve as a rapid response force to be deployed in higher need areas throughout the country, a role traditionally played by JAN. This force would also likely serve as a deterrent to JAN's potential ambitions for further expansion. Overseeing this force, as well as the civil and judicial branches of the RCC is a 17 member executive council including at least two representatives from each of the fronts in the conflict – North, South, East, West, Central, and Damascus and its countryside. Though the members of this council were decided upon in early December, the full list of members has not been made public.

The civil and judicial branches of the RCC will focus on continuing efforts to form a unified court system and police force, which will adhere to the Unified Arab Code. While there appears to be a substantial amount of energy and thought behind the initiative and its implementation, the viability of the organization and its evolution is very much tied to the potential for unified foreign support.

Neither the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (hereafter referred to as the Syrian Opposition Coalition or SOC) nor its Interim Government and associated Defense Ministry and Supreme Military Council (SMC) have a working relationship with the RCC. While there is respect shared between the members of these organizations, serious differences remain that prevent collaboration. The RCC views the Turkey-based political opposition as being largely out of touch with Syrians, while the political opposition sees the RCC as being unwilling to openly declare their support for a civil state in post-conflict Syria. Additionally, members of the RCC have expressed frustration with the lack of progress, which they attribute to frequent internal disputes.

The Freeze

One of the first tests to the newly established RCC leadership came in the form of the UN's ongoing push for a "freeze" to fighting in Aleppo. In a positive sign for the prospects of unity, component groups of the RCC chose to defer to their newly elected leader, Qeis al-Sheikh, in responding to the proposal.

The RCC as a whole expressed deep skepticism about the proposed "freeze" and even suspicion at the UN for having proposed it. Despite this, it was unwilling to reject the initiative outright, and instead sought the further assurances and guarantees necessary for them to accept it. Specifically, the RCC sought international guarantees that:

- the government would be prevented from re-deploying troops to other parts of Syria,
- the ongoing campaign of barrel bombing would cease,
- detainees would be released,
- there would be clear consequences for those violating the agreement,
- the anti-Islamic State International Coalition would assist if the Islamic State sought to advance on Aleppo,
- the "freeze" would include some (or all) of the countryside in order to ensure civilians could safely return to Aleppo, and

- the “freeze” would be part of a broader political plan with comprehensive follow-up steps.

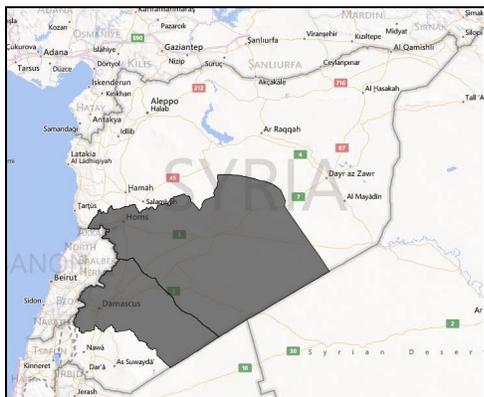
Other members of the northern armed opposition also expressed skepticism regarding the choice to focus on Aleppo city, questioning why such a freeze had not been proposed for the al-Waar district in Homs or the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus where the status of civilians is much more dire. Additionally, many found it suspicious that the proposal came at a time when the idea of a Turkey backed no-fly-zone (which enjoys broad support) was re-introduced.

Despite this skepticism and the long list of guarantees sought, the desire to build it into a more comprehensive initiative is encouraging. Such enthusiasm from groups who were previously unwilling to openly support the Geneva II round of negotiations signals a positive change that gives hope to subsequent political initiatives.

Ultimately, the list of guarantees the opposition sought were not met, and the ambitions of the “freeze” plan were tempered to focus on a single district of Aleppo city. Just as the initial plan was to start with Aleppo and work outwards, the new approach outlined by Special Envoy de Mistura on February 17 hopes to provide humanitarian relief to a single district of the city, and work to expand throughout. The Syrian government has agreed to cease aerial bombardments for an unspecified period of six weeks, with the caveat that they will continue should the opposition continue to deploy artillery or heavy weapons.

With each subsequent effort to negotiate a resolution to the Syrian conflict shrinking in ambition, the “freeze” plan represents a microcosm of negotiation efforts thus far. Many have begun to promote the idea of local ceasefires as a viable alternative to stalled comprehensive negotiations, though there are few past examples that can truly be considered successes. Ironically, this local focus comes at a time when increased unity among armed opposition groups have led them to seek avenues for more comprehensive, nationwide peace initiatives. Given this disconnect, it appears likely that the status quo in Syria will continue barring an unforeseen shift in the balance of military power or momentum-gathering local ceasefires.

Central Syria



The central governorates of Homs, Damascus, and Rural Damascus have witnessed some of the most devastating fighting of the past four years, through which the government has reduced once sprawling swathes of opposition control to small, isolated pockets. Yet despite declining fortunes and mounting siege, opposition forces in central Syria show few signs of abandoning their fight. Awaiting a shift in the conflict elsewhere in Syria or internationally, they continue to place a strain on government forces and prevent the government from consolidating control over central Syria.

Encircled by vast areas of government control, opposition forces in Homs remain the most isolated and static in Syria. Once the principal face of Syria’s armed opposition, they are now pinned down in two small patches of territory in northern Homs. The isolation of these outposts, and current lack of prospects for offensive campaigns, has precluded local opposition forces from receiving significant support. The effects of dwindling support have been compounded by the persistent lawlessness of the area, making it a fertile ground for JAN and even the Islamic State, both offering financial incentives and superior equipment to fighters, to expand their presence.³

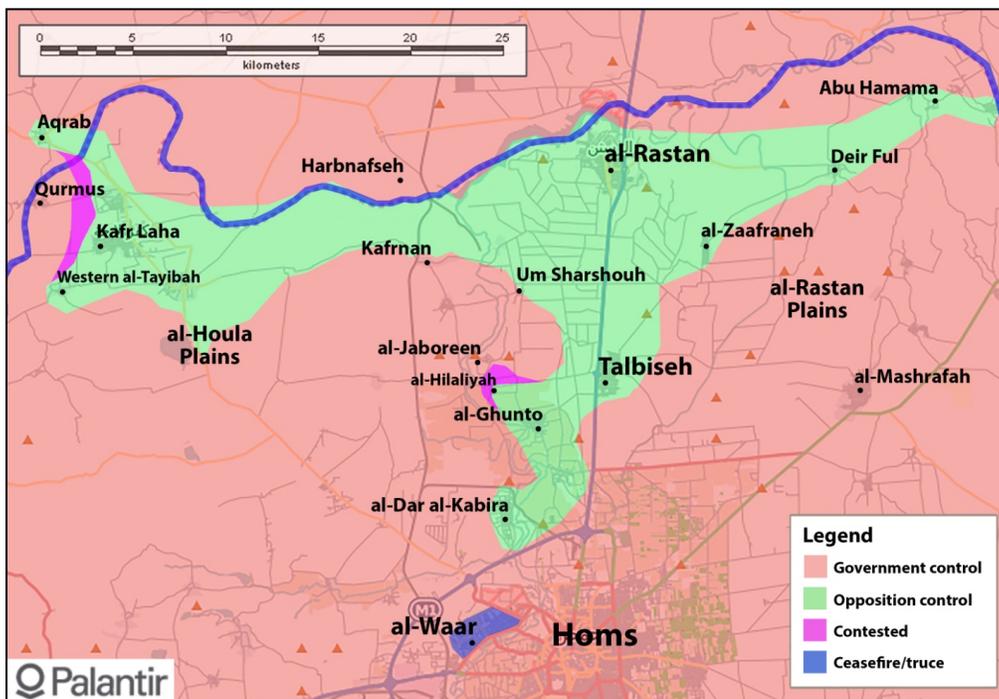


Figure 5: Areas of control along the northern border of Homs Governorate (blue) as of late February 2015.

³ [“The execution of Rastan’s tyrant al-Ashtar”], Youtube video, posted by: [“Mousa Al Omar”], December 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaZk8dgwPts>.

Of the two opposition controlled areas in the Homs governorate, the larger lies just north of Homs city, running along the M5 highway from al-Dar al-Kabira to al-Rastan and extending several kilometers east and west into the adjoining plains. Having encircled the area, government forces have used barrel bombs to drive residents from the area, conducting bombing raids on an almost daily basis from September through December.⁴ Meanwhile, fighting in the area has been concentrated on frontlines west of Talbiseh after opposition forces took the strategic town of al-Halaliyeh in September and stalled government advances from Kafraan and Jaboreen.

The second area of opposition control in Homs is al-Waar, a neighborhood in northern Homs city. Home to approximately 300,000 residents and a contingent of opposition forces, al-Waar has been under government siege since November 2013.⁵ Its residents, with the exception of students and government employees, are prohibited from leaving and have faced increasing food, fuel, and medicine shortages. Government forces have shelled al-Waar throughout the siege, with shells falling nearly every other day during November 2014. Beginning in September 2014, government and opposition representatives held several failed ceasefire negotiations, but by late December, the two sides agreed to a 10 day humanitarian ceasefire, which went into effect January 16, 2015.⁶ The ceasefire has since been broken, with occasional artillery shelling beginning anew in early February.



Figure 6: Principal armed opposition coalitions active in Homs as of February 2015.

⁴ [“Air raids on al-Rastan and al-Qaboun and the regime tries move forward in Rural Damascus”], November 5, 2014, al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2014/11/5/> غارات على الرستن والقابون والنظام يحاول التقدم بريف دمشق.

[“The Assad regime committed a new massacre in Talbiseh”], November 4, 2014, al-Arabiya News, <http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/syria/2014/11/04/تلبيسة-في-تلبيسة-جديد-في-تلبيسة>.html.

[“Clashes in Talbiseh in rural Homs between the opposition and the regime”], December 5, 2014, al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/newsreports/2014/12/5/اشتباكات-في-تلبيسة-بريف-حمص-بين-المعارضة-والنظام>.

⁵ [“Our al-Waar burns’ ... Campaign to save besieged ‘al-Waar’ in Homs”], October 20, 2014, al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2014/10/19/-و-ع-ر-نا-ي-ح-ت-ر-ق-ح-م-ل-ة-ل-ن-ق-ا-ذ-ال-و-ع-ر-الم-ح-ا-ص-ر-ب-ح-م-ص>.

⁶ [“UN assistance enters al-Waar neighborhood after a temporary truce”], January 16, 2015, al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/1/16/مساعدات-أممية-تدخل-حي-الو-ع-ر-ب-ع-د-ه-ن-ة-مؤقتة>.

Further south, armed opposition forces in western Qalamoun, an area which encompasses the Qalamoun mountain chain in Syria and Lebanon, have failed to recover from their crippling defeat in mid-2014. After being driven out of cities in the area and losing important supply lines from Lebanon, opposition forces scattered westward into the mountains and Lebanon, east into eastern Qalamoun, and south into Eastern Ghouta.

In western Qalamoun, the government and Hezbollah control the cities of Yabrud, Nabak, Deir Atiyah, and their surrounding areas. Low intensity clashes and shelling have continued in the lawless, mountainous areas around Flaytah and Asal al-Ward, while the opposition remains in control of al-Zabadani on western Qalamoun’s southern fringe. The situation has temporarily calmed in the Lebanese section of western Qalamoun following intense clashes in August 2014 between the Lebanese army and Syrian opposition and Islamic State forces. However JAN forces continue to hold a group of Lebanese officers captured in August, four of whom JAN has executed.⁷

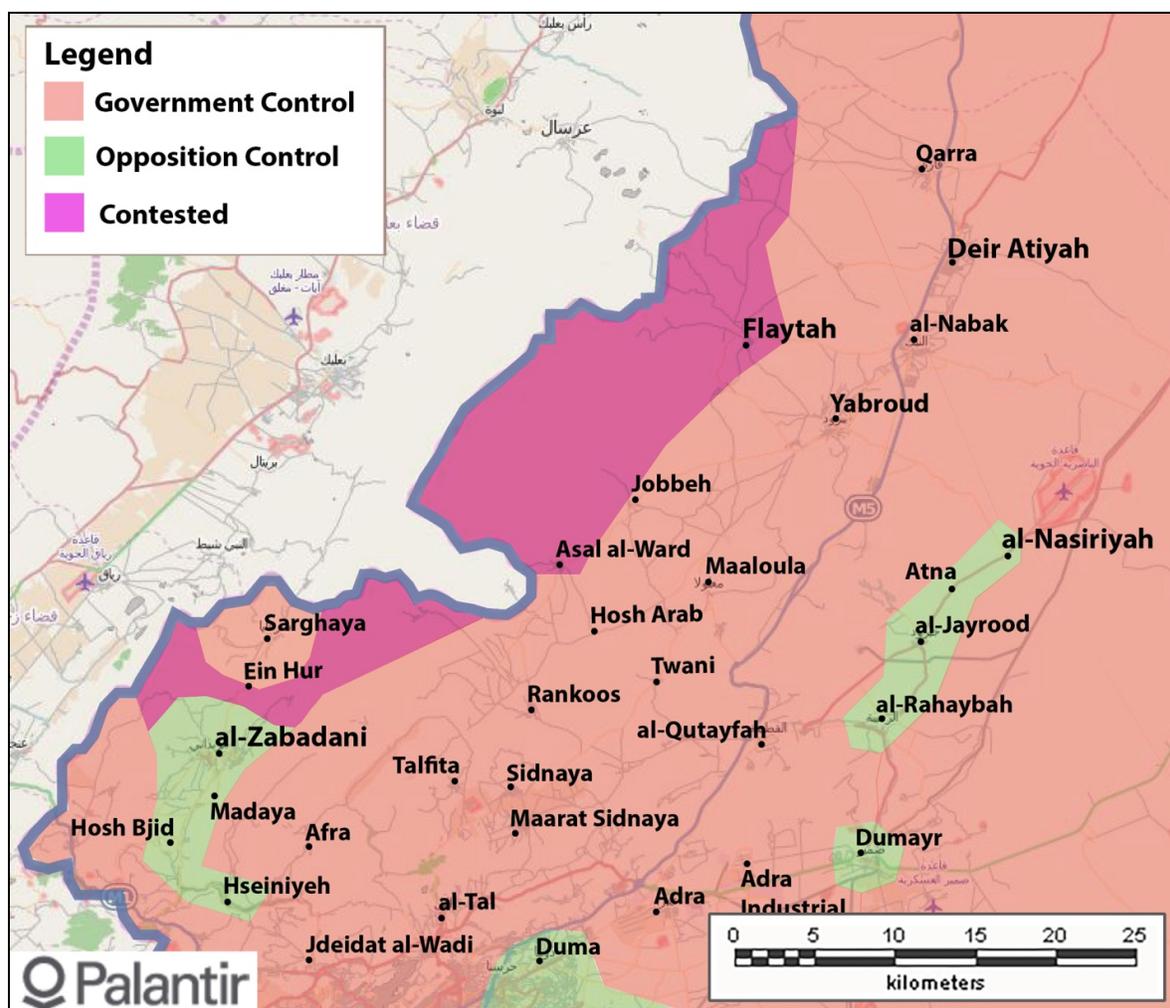


Figure 7: Areas of control in the Qalamoun region along the Lebanese border as of late February 2015.

⁷ [“Syrian gunmen capture Lebanese soldiers”], December 8, 2014, al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/12/syrian-gunmen-kidnap-lebanese-soldiers-20141280635203168.html>.

The situation is different in eastern Qalamoun, an area that encompasses the desert hills around the cities of al-Rahaybah, al-Jayrood, and al-Nasiriyah. Opposition forces have found sanctuary in the sparsely inhabited, but strategically important area, from which they continue to wage a low intensity campaign to reopen supply lines to Eastern Ghouta and western Qalamoun.⁸

With the northern opposition on the defensive and forces in Homs and Qalamoun pinned down, it is the opposition forces in and around Damascus that remain the most direct threat to the government. These groups, however, continue to be hindered by their own disunity. Progress has been made towards further unity through the development of joint military and judicial bodies, but little has changed with respect to support from abroad as the Friends of Syria remain unwilling to increase direct pressure on Damascus without a viable alternative to the current government.

Opposition forces in Eastern Ghouta have continued to suffer setbacks since their loss of Maliha in August 2014. Concurrent government offensives on multiple fronts and the effects of a crippling siege have placed opposition forces under tremendous strain. Repelling repeated government attempts to take the eastern district of Jobar, the opposition's efforts to defend other strategically important areas have proven unsuccessful. Opposition forces lost Adra in September and al-Dukhaniya in October, and continue to endure losses as government forces draw closer to Duma in the north and encircle Zibdeen in the south.⁹ Faced with continuous aerial bombardment, opposition forces in Eastern Ghouta, notably Jaysh al-Islam and the Islamic Union, implemented a standing policy of retaliatory shelling of central Damascus. Beginning in January, at times the groups have launched more than 100 rockets per day against the capital.

In isolated pockets along the capital's southern fringes, opposition forces have been confronting continued besiegement, government shelling, and a growing Islamic State presence. Al-Yarmouk Camp has been under siege since truces fell apart earlier in 2014, as has al-Tadamoun where the opposition has refused negotiations.¹⁰ In al-Hajr al-Aswad, besieged opposition forces are too weak to expel Islamic State forces, resulting in a tenuous truce between the two groups after two months of hostilities.¹¹

⁸ Hidar Mustafa, ["Eastern Qalamoun battle everyone!"], December 16, 2014, al-Akhbar, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/222013>.

⁹ Ahmad Hassan ["Army to Adra after 'union': eye on Duma"], September 26, 2014, al-Akhbar, <https://www.al-akhbar.com/node/216439>.

["Syrian Army controls al-Dukhaniya and the opposition progresses in Daraa"], October 6, 2014, al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2014/10/6/الجيش السوري يسيطر على الدخانية والمعارضة تتقدم بدرعا/>.

¹⁰ ["Collapse of the Yarmouk truce and fighting intensifies in Yabroud"], March 2, 2014, <http://www.skynewsarabia.com/web/article/582143/>.

["Conditions of the residents in al-Tadamun neighborhood which refused to negotiate with the Assad regime"], November 7, 2014, Orient News, http://orient-news.net/index.php?page=news_show&id=82453.

¹¹ ["Truce between the opposition and Islamic State in southern Damascus and fighting in Duma and Aleppo"], September 12, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2014/9/12/هدنة بين المعارضة و الدولة بدمشق وقتلى بدوما وحلب/>.

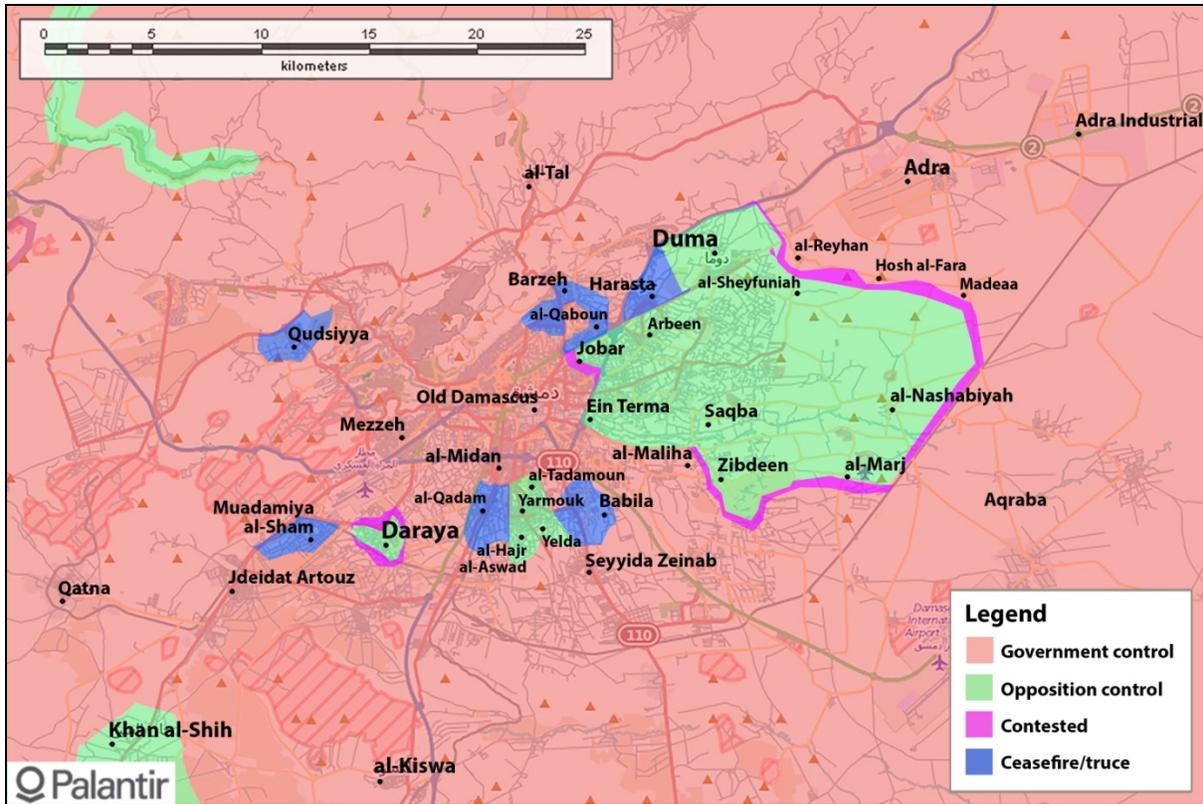


Figure 8: Areas of control in Damascus and Rural Damascus as of late February 2015.

To the southwest of the capital, the besieged suburb of Daraya has continued to endure shelling and aerial bombardment as government forces make repeated attempts to advance on the periphery. While government and opposition representatives have explored a truce in Daraya, the government’s aversion to concessions has stalled negotiations. Further afield the opposition territories of Khan al-Shih, Saasaa, and surrounding towns have escaped government besiegement, but remain targets of government aerial bombardment. Unable to advance, opposition forces in the area hold their lines in hopes of eventually connecting with opposition advances in Quneitra and Daraa to the south.

Around the capital, controversial local truces between the government and opposition forces in the towns of Muadamiyah al-Sham, Babila, Harasta, al-Qaboun, al-Qadimoun, Barzeh and Qudsiyya have remained intact since established in late 2013 and early 2014.¹² However over the past five months only one additional truce has been established, in the southern Damascus neighborhood of al-Qadam.¹³ Truce negotiations began recently in Arbeen, but were denounced by opposition forces, harming their prospects for success.¹⁴ While local truces are seen as greatly

¹² [“Muadamiyah al-Sham truce is ink on paper”], December 26, 2014, al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2014/12/26/هدنة معضمية الشام حبر على ورق>.

[“Truce in Qudsiyya between opposition and Syrian regime”], September 23, 2014, al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2014/9/23/هدنة في قدسيا بين المعارضة والنظام السوري>.

¹³ [“After a year and three months, truce in al-Qadam neighborhood south of Damascus enters into force”], November 12, 2014, All4Syria, <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/178395>.

¹⁴ [“Jaysh al-Islam: We disassociate from the Arbeen truce and threaten the regime’s army with fire”], January 22, 2015, All4Syria, <http://all4syria.info/Archive/189516>.

beneficial to the government, they have also proven useful to opposition forces as truce zones can serve as lifelines to surrounding besieged opposition neighborhoods.

Islamic State Inroads

As a result of acute desperation and continuing division, opposition forces in central Syria have become increasingly vulnerable to Islamic State expansion. In exchange for support, growing numbers of opposition forces have sworn allegiance to the Islamic State's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. These recent Islamic State inroads have embittered area armed opposition forces as the Islamic State has increasingly worked to undermine old rivals and those it has failed to co-opt.

In southern Damascus, the Islamic State has been entrenched in the neighborhood of al-Hajr al-Aswad since early 2014. Just eight km away, Eastern Ghouta stands as a reminder of the ability of the Islamic State to pose a serious threat even without a significant presence, as clandestine IS cells have continued to carry out targeted assassinations in the opposition stronghold, despite having been expelled in July 2014.

In Qalamoun, a gateway to Damascus and southern Syria, fighting between Islamic State and opposition forces began in December 2014.¹⁵ In eastern Qalamoun, the Islamic State and JAN resolved issues between local branches through mediation, but tense relations between the two persist.¹⁶ In western Qalamoun, opposition forces expelled a small group of Islamic State fighters in January, after they targeted area opposition forces and seized a TOW-2B ATGM system that was later recovered.¹⁷ Islamic State forces are likely to return to western Qalamoun as the area is key to the southward expansion of the group.

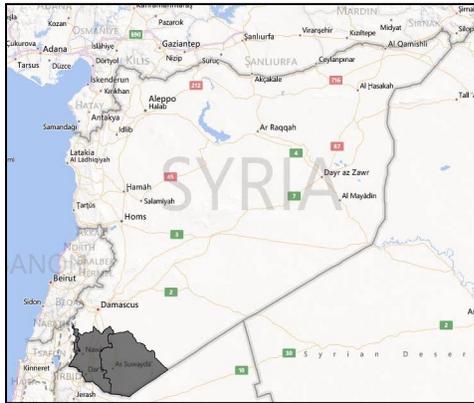
The Islamic State has also established a small foothold between the Rural Damascus and Suweida governorates. Though the organization's presence in the area is limited, it has the potential to disrupt supply lines through the area, and is yet another sign of the group's growing influence in the south.

¹⁵ ["Statement of the liberation of the entire area in eastern Qalamoun in battle and returned with good tidings of killing"], posted by: ["Orient News"], December 19, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gdufh1bw0dI>.

¹⁶ Carol Malouf and Ruth Sherlock ["Islamic State fighters mass on Lebanon border and threaten to launch attacks across it"], January 18, 2015, The Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11354038/Islamic-State-fighters-mass-on-Lebanon-border-and-threaten-to-launch-attacks-across-it.html>.

¹⁷ ["Jaysh Aswad al-Sharqiya burn Daesh headquarters in Bir al-Maharootha"], posted by: ["Asood alshrqia"], January 2, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siSBLEkq6Hw>.

Southern Syria



In the governorates of Deraa, Quneitra, and al-Suweida, thanks in large part to better coordination and support, the southern armed opposition has continued to advance, building upon the steady progress made since the outset of 2014. Today, the armed opposition has managed to restrict government forces to an increasingly shrinking swath of territory along the strategic M5 highway. Consequently the conflict in the south enjoys a markedly different trajectory than seen elsewhere in Syria. What impact this will have on the conflict as a whole remains to be seen, especially as the gap between north and south continues to widen.

The Southern Front

In early 2014, following the collapse of the Geneva II round of negotiations, a more concerted effort emerged from the Friends of Syria to train, equip, and direct segments of the Syrian armed opposition. Implemented through the northern and southern Military Operations Centers (MOC), support efforts proved decidedly more beneficial for recipients in the south. The north-south disparity must be attributed in part to the role of the Jordanian authorities. In contrast to Turkey, Jordan has consistently maintained tight control over its border with Syria and has remained extremely weary of all external efforts to support the Syrian opposition from Jordanian soil. The southern opposition has been well served by the MOC's monopoly over support to southern groups during the past year, and has largely avoided the toxic mix of Gulf state rivalries and private donors that devastated armed groups operating in the north between 2012 and 2013. While Idlib governorate saw more than 300 armed group formations or restructurings during 2012 (the primary growth period of the armed opposition), Deraa governorate saw only 120.

In the south, recipients of MOC support are collectively known as the Southern Front.¹⁸ Formed in February 2014, the Southern Front has maintained a membership of approximately 50 armed opposition groups, including the First Legion, the SRF - Southern Division, Jaysh al-Yarmouk, al-Hamza Division, and Ansar al-Islam Front (see figure 9 below). The Front's combined area of activity remains concentrated in the Deraa and Quneitra governorates, but extends as far north as the Damascus suburbs and the Qalamoun region.

¹⁸ ["49 factions of the Free Army create 'The Southern Front'"], February 13, 2014, All4Syria, <http://all4syria.info/Archive/130995>.



Figure 9: Principle members of the Southern Front as of early February 2015.

Without any centralized leadership or organizational structure, the Southern Front is not an organization but rather a loose union of self-described moderate armed opposition groups. Despite this, however, cohesion between members of the Southern Front has increased steadily, with members discussing the possibility of electing a central leader and representative in the near future.

In the absence of a centralized leadership structure, Southern Front campaigns are developed jointly by member groups and the Friends of Syria through consultation and cooperation in the MOC. Once proposed campaigns are reviewed and approved, they are executed through a shifting set of Southern Front operations rooms. Despite the fact that these operations rooms coordinate campaigns, they do not direct the distribution of material aid to participating groups. Instead, each individual group within the Southern Front maintains its own relationship with the MOC and receives financial and material support on an individual basis.

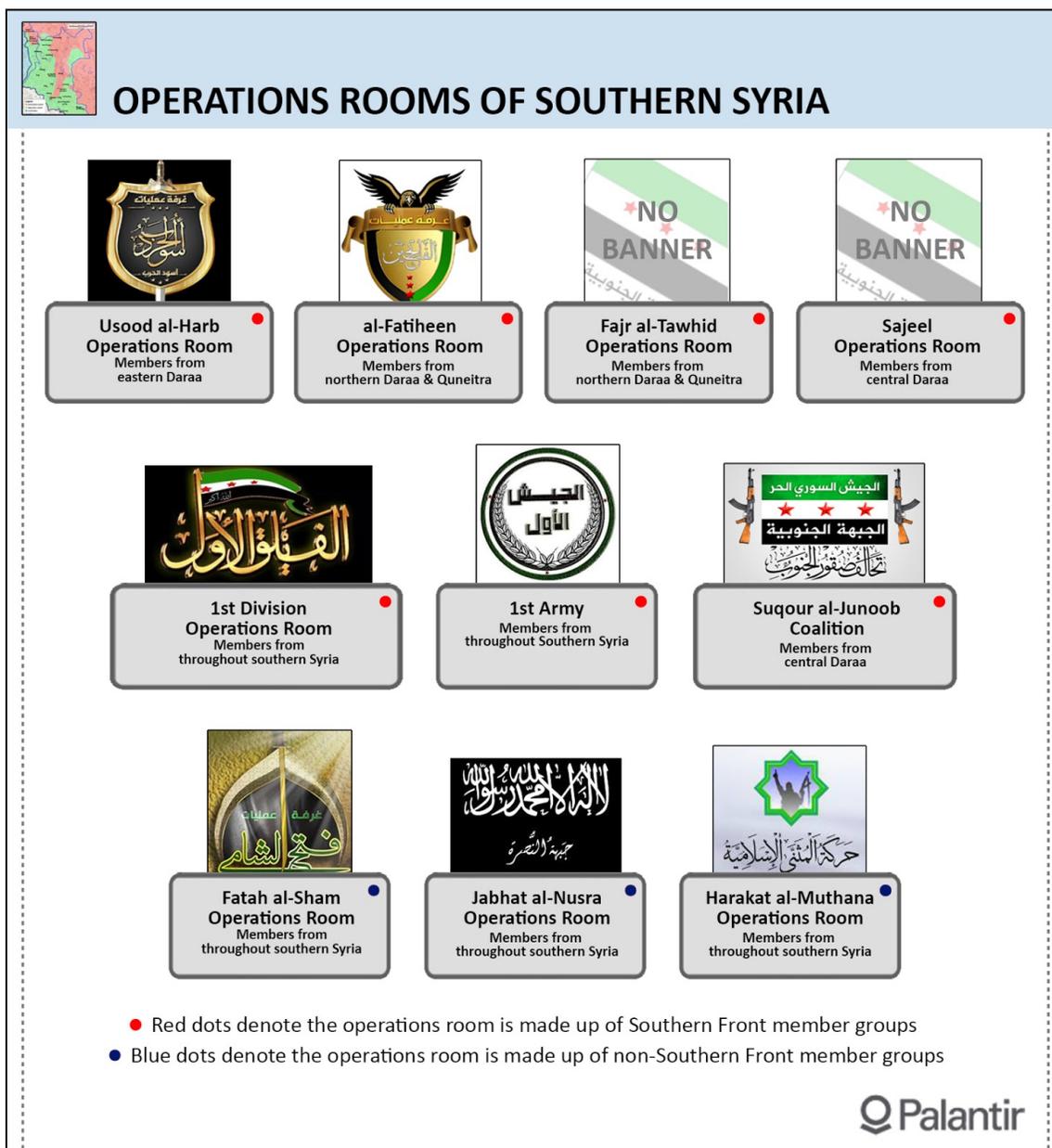


Figure 10: Principal operation rooms active in southern Syria as of February 2015.

Since its formation, the Southern Front has worked to avoid engaging in political discussions regarding the future of Syria. The Front’s February declaration presented the group as a military body only, stating that its only goal is “to overthrow the Assad regime and give Syria a chance

for a better future.”¹⁹ The Front is certainly encouraged to maintain neutrality by the MOC and Jordanian authorities, who have little tolerance for member groups engaging in political or ideological discussions, but even without this external urging, there is a common perception among Southern Front members that the chronic politicization of armed opposition forces elsewhere has exacerbated the conflict and led to harmful divisions that distract from the overarching objective of overthrowing the present government.

Despite greater cooperation, increased unity, and growth towards a collectively apolitical armed opposition force, the Southern Front is not immune to the local and international dynamics of the conflict. Within the MOC, preferential treatment for certain groups persists. Members are critical of the MOC’s lack of support for humanitarian and institutional initiatives, support which they claim is key to combating JAN’s influence. Personalities also abound amongst Southern Front’s member groups, and while members speak of a desire to transform the Front into a unified body – which would include an elected centralized leadership, fixed operations rooms, and a unified system of courts – there is no clear timeframe or plan for its development, and doubts remain over whether the Friends of Syria would approve and support such initiatives.

Jabhat al-Nusra in the South

JAN, and its close ally Harakat al-Muthana al-Islamiyah, have played an important role in the opposition’s advances in the south. Involved militarily in all major opposition victories, both groups have played preeminent roles in southern judicial matters and have entrenched themselves in the local economy by investing in local industry.

JAN in the south has proven markedly different than its northern counterpart in terms of its ability and desire to consolidate territorial control and defeat opposition groups who pose a potential threat to the organization. While JAN has carried out targeted kidnappings and assassinations of commanders affiliated with the Southern Front without drawing significant reaction, their shift to open confrontation with the controversial but powerful former Southern Front member Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk in December 2014 was met with a strong response from the Southern Front, and JAN eventually acquiesced to Harakat al-Muthana al-Islamiyah’s mediation.

Unable to expand its control territorially, JAN’s main influence in the south comes through the system of courts it has set up. Up until December 2014, there were three courts in the south – an eastern, “grand” court run by JAN, a northern court run by Harakat al-Muthanna, and a weaker, centrally located court run by Southern Front members. The influence that JAN and Harakat al-Muthana exercised through these courts was substantial. Both organizations regularly went to great lengths to enforce sentences passed down by the courts, making them both respected (if somewhat feared) institutions.

In December, these courts were unified into a single court, known as the Dar al-Aadl, which is currently run jointly by both JAN and Southern Front members. Southern Front members hoped

¹⁹ [“49 Divisions in the Free Army Form the Southern Front”], February 13, 2014, All4Syria, <http://all4syria.info/Archive/130995>.

the unification would grant them more influence in judicial matters, which had long been monopolized by JAN and Harakat al-Muthana. Despite this hope, however, JAN continues to exert a large degree of influence over judicial proceedings, and will continue to do so unless Southern Front groups deem it worthwhile to invest their limited resources in establishing an alternative judicial system.

The Opposition Advances

In early September, with southern Quneitra already under opposition control, opposition forces began a series of offensives in northern Quneitra, with the aim of securing control of the entire governorate. An opposition-held Quneitra would not only help opposition forces in neighboring Daraa, but would provide the strategic depth needed by the opposition to launch offensives northward towards Damascus. By mid-September, opposition forces had taken control of five towns and multiple strategic hills along the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.^{20, 21}

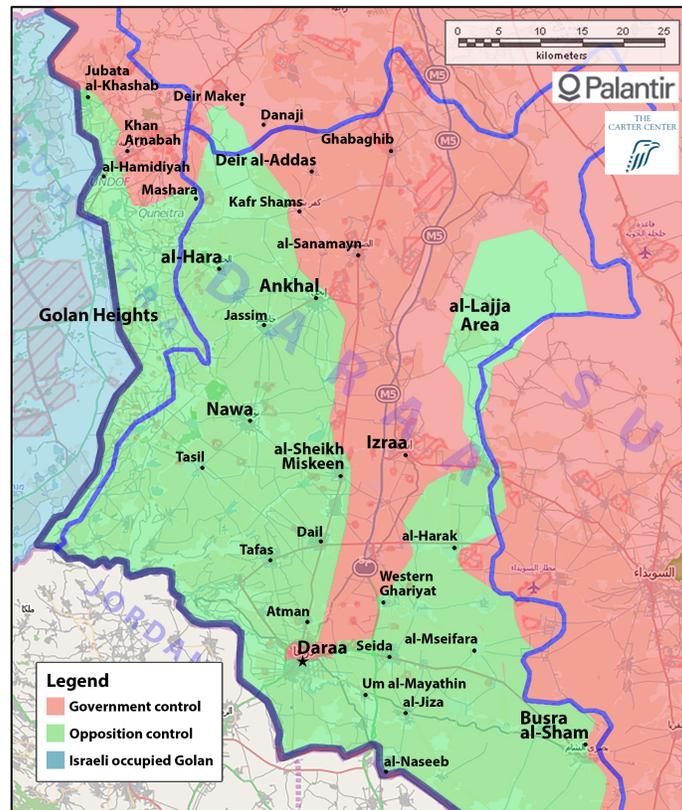


Figure 11: Areas of control in Southern Syria as of late February 2015.

²⁰ [“Firqat al-Hamza First Lieutenant Abu al-Farouq Announces the Liberation of Tal Mashara”], posted by: [“فرقة الحمزة”], September 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3b0gI5IC0w>.

[“Firqat Fajr al-Tawhid: Announcement of the Liberation of Nabaa al-Sakhr”], posted by: [“فرقة فجر التوحيد”], September 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJyDFDqjREM>.

[“Liwa al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar Announcement of the Liberation of Tal al-Mal in the Chargers at Dawn Battle in the Quneitra countryside”], posted by: [“لواء المهاجرين والانصار القطاع الجنوبي”], September 9, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YHN_856Iks.

²¹ [“Liberation of Jubata al-Khashab town in Quneitra countryside”], September 15, 2014, al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.net/reportslibrary/pages/363ade2a-0b31-4dbf-90f7-a1e58371408b>

The September victories placed the Syrian side of the border entirely under opposition control, a source of potential concern for Israel and its western allies and an issue that could complicate opposition efforts in the south. Although Israel has provided medical and (allegedly) military support to members of the Southern Front and has struck government and Hezbollah positions in the area, it is worried about the presence of JAN along its border.²² While the August 2014 capture of 45 UN peacekeepers by JAN did not seem to slow opposition advances in Quneitra or draw a reaction from Israel, Southern Front members understand the importance of maintaining calm along the strip and the possible ramifications if they do not.²³

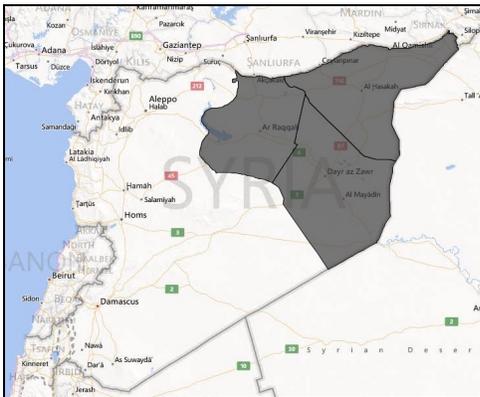
Emboldened by gains, opposition forces moved eastward to take control of Sheikh Miskeen, a government military base, and advance toward the governorate’s main artery – the M5 highway. Despite a significant government counter-offensive and bombing campaign, opposition forces have managed to retain much of their recent gains, and appear well positioned to continue to advance in the governorate.

The Southern Front’s close cooperation with the MOC will likely ensure continued support for the opposition’s advance. Should their momentum continue, a strong opposition presence in southern Syria could place significant pressure on Damascus, particularly if additional advances allow opposition forces to secure safe passage into the besieged suburbs of the capital. Such an eventuality, while still a long way off, has the potential to dramatically alter the trajectory of the conflict by forcing the government to reallocate resources to protect the capital.

²² Ruth Eglash and William Booth [“Israel worries as al-Qaeda affiliates gain control of Syrian side of Golan frontier”], September 22, 2014, The Washington Post, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-worries-as-al-qaeda-affiliates-gain-control-of-syrian-side-of-golan-frontier/2014/09/21/8803714c-ee24-47fd-85b7-f88145eff86a_story.html

²³ Baz Ratner [“Syria’s Nusra Front releases U.N. peacekeepers in Golan”], September 11, 2014, Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/11/us-syria-crisis-fiji-idUSKBN0H60C120140911>

Eastern Syria



Eastern Syria, including the Deir ez-Zor, Raqqah, and al-Hasakah governorates, remains a stronghold for the Islamic State. While International Coalition airstrikes have weakened the group, no domestic force or alliance is currently capable of unseating it. Even if a domestic force were capable of such an endeavor, most armed opposition forces believe any efforts to uproot the Islamic State must be subordinate to efforts to unseat the government.

Armed opposition forces have been largely absent from eastern Syria since their expulsion in mid-2014. The Islamic State’s eight-month campaign to consolidate control in non-Kurdish areas of eastern Syria forced remaining local opposition forces to renounce previous affiliations and swear allegiance to the Islamic State. Those who refused were forced to flee eastern Syria after incurring significant losses.

Evidence suggests that some area opposition groups active around the Deir ez-Zor airbase have been allowed by the Islamic State to remain in the area without swearing allegiance.²⁴ These forces, and clandestine opposition cells meant to carry out assassinations of Islamic State members, represent the only remaining armed opposition forces in eastern Syria, and pose little threat to the organization.²⁵

²⁴ [“Deir al-Zor Airport mother of all battles”], posted by: [“Al Ghad Al Arabi”], December 10, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eiLfd-uHHAE>.

²⁵ [“‘The White Shroud’ announces its arrival to the city of Deir al-Zor”], October 22, 2014, Orient News, http://orient-news.net/index.php?page=news_show&id=82076

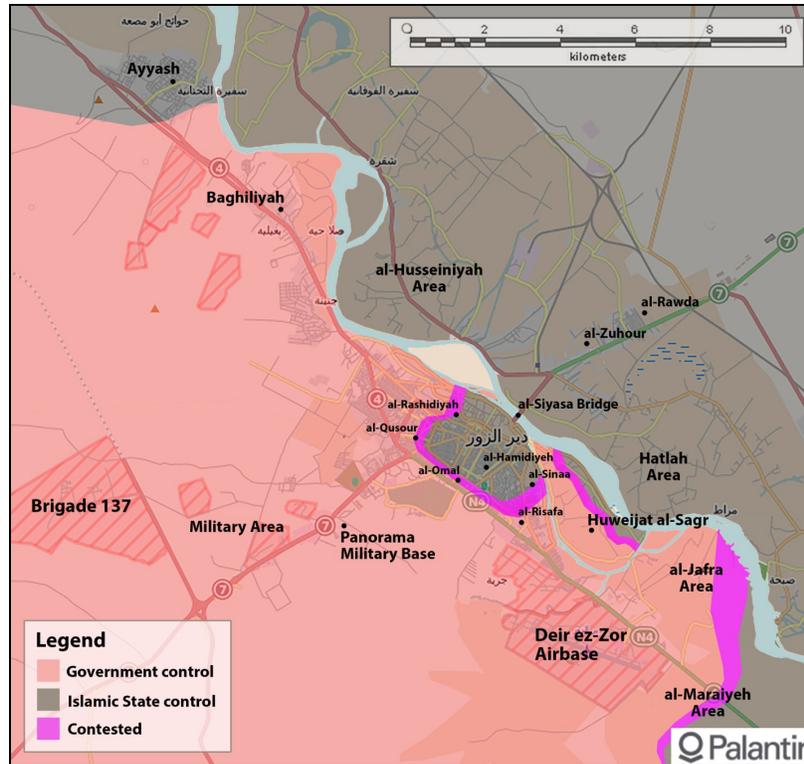


Figure 12: Areas of control in and around Deir el-Zor city as of early February 2015.

Fighting in eastern Syria has been concentrated around a stretch of towns and neighborhoods adjacent to the government-controlled Deir ez-Zor airbase. Home to anywhere from 1,500 to 8,000 government fighters, the airbase sits on the southern edge of Deir ez-Zor city and is one of the government’s last strongholds in the governorate. Many believed the airbase would fall after the Islamic State’s August capture of al-Tabqa airbase, the government’s final position in Raqqa. However, the government has held off Islamic State forces and continues to use the base to shell surrounding neighborhoods and towns outside of its control.

Since September the area has witnessed sustained heavy clashes and a gradual Islamic State advance. In central neighborhoods of Deir ez-Zor city, Islamic State and armed opposition forces have continued attempts to push southward towards the airbase but are surrounded by government forces and pinned against the Euphrates river.²⁶ Meanwhile, Islamic State and opposition forces have gradually pushed northward from al-Jubeilah into the towns of al-Maraeah, al-Jafra, and Huweijjat al-Sagr, in an attempt to connect with forces in the city and pressure the airbase’s eastern perimeter.²⁷

²⁶ [“The bombing of a strategic bridge in areas under ‘Daesh’ control in Deir al-Zor”], September 16, 2014, al-Arabiya News, <http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/syria/2014/09/16/تفجير جسر استراتيجي في مناطق سيطرة داعش بدير الزور>.html.

²⁷ [“Raids targeting the Islamic State following its progress in Deir al-Zor”], December 5, 2014, al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2014/12/5/غارات تستهدف تنظيم الدولة بعد تقدمه بدير الزور>. [“Daesh takes control of the village (Jafra) first line of defense for the Deir al-Zor airport”], December 5, 2014, Orient News, http://orient-news.net/?page=news_show&id=83164. [“ ‘The State’ organization has tight grip on ‘Huweijjat al-Sagr’ in Deir al-Zor”], December 4, 2014, el-Dorar, <http://eldorar.com/node/64719>.

Government air strikes have played a pivotal role in its ability to retain control of the airbase. During the second half of 2014, the government carried out more than 350 bombing raids in the governorates of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and al-Hasakah, a seven fold increase from the first half of 2014. During the second half of 2014, more than two thirds of these airstrikes targeted Islamic State positions around the Deir ez-Zor airbase.

The International Coalition, while also conducting aerial bombardments of Islamic State positions in the Deir Ez-Zor governorate, has largely avoided areas near the government-controlled airbase. Whether the Coalition's avoiding of the area stems from fears of facilitating a government advance or simply a desire to avoid potential incidents stemming from overlapping government and Coalition air space is unclear.

The Coalition has instead continued to focus its attention on retreating Islamic State forces surrounding Kobane. Kurdish and allied opposition forces have continued to expand upon their victory in the city by pushing Islamic State forces back towards Raqqa and the Euphrates river. Additionally, Kurdish forces have made a push eastward from Kobane along the Turkish border in hopes of connecting with Kurdish territory in al-Hassakah governorate. While the victory in Kobane and the subsequent re-capture of dozens of surrounding villages has emboldened these anti-Islamic State fighters, they still remain surrounded by Islamic State forces, with the stronghold of Raqqa city only a short distance to the south.

Conclusions

With continued divisions within the Syrian opposition, increasing decentralization among pro-government forces, and a multitude of agendas being pursued by the international community, it is unlikely that Syria will see a negotiated solution in the near future. The four years of violence that the Syrian people have already endured should serve as evidence of the futility of a military “solution” to the conflict. Despite this, there is a continued resistance from all sides towards genuine support to a negotiation process, and the international community continues to ply the various parties to the conflict with weapons.

The continuation of the conflict has already wreaked havoc on the region, and will continue to do so as refugee flows continue, violence continues to spread across borders, and foreign fighters continue to flow into Syria. The international community’s strong stance against the Islamic State recognizes some of the horrors that have arisen from the chaos, but largely fails to address the violence and ungoverned spaces that are the root causes of this destructive and violent movement. Until these issues are addressed, and a political solution is found, extremism – be it from the Islamic State or yet unheard of entities – will persist.

Appendix

The following is a list of some of the most influential armed opposition organizations active in Syria today. The list, which is organized in alphabetical order, is not intended to be comprehensive and does not delve into the details of sub-units of all the coalitions mentioned.



Feyliq al-Sham
Date of formation: March 2014
Geographic scope: Idlib, Hama, Homs, Aleppo

Feyliq al-Sham is a coalition of armed opposition groups backed by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. It includes many former members of the Committee for the Protection of Civilians, a largely defunct Syrian Muslim Brotherhood backed armed opposition organization. Because of their connections with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, opaqueness, and previously positions on the Islamic State and JAN, Feyliq al-Sham is viewed with suspicion by some in the opposition.



Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah (Ahrar al-Sham)
Date of formation: Early 2012
Geographic scope: Idlib, Hama, Latakia, Aleppo, Homs, Rural Damascus, Damascus, Daraa, Quneitra

Despite losing much of its original leadership in mid-2014, the group remains the most powerful and widespread armed opposition force in Syria. Throughout the conflict Ahrar al-Sham has had poor, sometimes hostile, relations with the Friends of Syria and the external opposition. Meanwhile it has played a leading role in shaping prominent opposition bodies, including the Syrian Islamic Front and the RCC. Ahrar al-Sham has also enjoyed close relations with JAN and is seen as a bellwether of the opposition position towards JAN. However the group is not homogenous and there are a variety of opinions within Ahrar al-Sham on the sustainability and effect of its relations with JAN.



Harakat al-Muthana al-Islamiyah
Date of formation: May 2013
Geographic scope: Daraa, Quneitra, Rural Damascus

Harakat al-Muthana al-Islamiyah is an Islamist armed opposition group closely aligned with JAN in southern Syria. They have played an important role in southern advances and have a large role in judicial affairs in southern Syria. Although they previously enjoyed a presence in the eastern Syrian governorates of Deir al-Zor and al-Hasakah, they were forced to flee during the Islamic State's consolidation of control. Unlike JAN, they are believed to be an entirely Syrian force.



Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki
Date of formation: Late 2011
Geographic scope: Aleppo, Idlib

Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki is one of the largest groups in Aleppo. The group is a former member of the al-Tawhid Brigade, Jabhat al-Asalah wa al-Tanmiyah, and Jaysh al-Mujahideen. It has also been a member of numerous Friends of Syria support networks and a consistent recipient of international support. However it is unclear whether Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki's membership in the Levantine Front will have any effect on its access to state support. Importantly, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki has voiced receptivity to a legitimate political solution to the conflict.



Islamic Front (IF)
Date of formation: November 2013
Geographic scope: Syria-wide

The IF was formed in late 2013 from seven opposition groups, including some of the largest in Syria, including Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, the Saqour al-Sham Brigades, and the al-Tawhid Brigade. The organization sought to unify members into a single centralized force, but ultimately failed. While plagued by personal disputes, the IF's political activities antagonized the Friends of Syria and left some members with significantly decreased levels of support. Without any formal dissolution, today the IF has split into three distinct iterations: the IF– Aleppo, the IF – Jaysh al-Islam/Saqour al-Sham, and the IF –Ahrar al-Sham.



Jabhat al-Asalah wa al-Tanmiyah (Originality and Development Front)
Date of formation: Early 2013
Geographic scope: Aleppo, Rural Damascus, Damascus, Idlib, Latakia

Jabhat al-Asalah wa al-Tanmiyah is a coalition of armed opposition forces which receives support from the Saudi based support network of the same name. The organization saw its role in the Syrian conflict gradually shrink after incurring significant losses in eastern Syria to the IS. Jabhat al-Asalah wa al-Tanmiyah espouses a particularly conservative, Islamist ideology, but its goals in Syria remain opaque. Many armed opposition groups, including Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki, have been a member of Jabhat al-Asalah wa al-Tanmiyah, only to leave shortly after joining.



Jaysh al-Islam
Date of formation: Mid-2012
Geographic scope: Rural Damascus, Damascus, Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, Daraa, Quneitra

Led by the charismatic and controversial Zahran Alloush, Jaysh al-Islam remains an outspoken and influential force within the armed opposition. Ideological, Islamist, and occasionally inflammatory, Jaysh al-Islam is seen as the more pragmatic counterpart to Ahrar al-Sham, and like Ahrar al-Sham has played a leading role in shaping opposition bodies, including the Syrian

Islamic Liberation Front, the IF, and the RCC. Jaysh al-Islam remains weary of JAN and has enjoyed particularly varied relations with the Friends of Syria.



Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN)

Date of formation: January 2012

Geographic scope: Idlib, Hama, Latakia, Aleppo, Homs, Rural Damascus, Damascus, Daraa, Quneitra

Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) is a well-known and powerful al-Qaeda-affiliated armed group in Syria, that has played a major role in battles throughout the conflict. Ostensibly operating under a single leadership, JAN is made up of regional branches that each have a somewhat distinct ideology and approach. While active on front lines throughout Syria, they currently maintain substantial territorial control in the Idlib governorate after expelling the SRF and other groups in late 2014. JAN was itself expelled from eastern Syria by Islamic State forces in summer 2014. This fight for influence and territorial control has meant that JAN has clashes with the Islamic State more frequently than any other participant in the Syrian conflict, except the Kurdish YPG. JAN includes foreigners amongst its ranks, but primarily consists of Syrians.



Jaysh al-Mujahideen

Date of formation: January 2014

Geographic scope: Aleppo

Jaysh al-Mujahideen is made up of approximately half a dozen brigades and was formed as part of the January 2014 anti-ISIS push. The group has witnessed the withdrawal of some members, including Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki, the Jund al-Harimayn Brigade, and the Fistaqum Kama Omarat Gathering. Jaysh al-Mujahideen is considered to be a trusted mediator between JAN and opposition forces in Aleppo. Some Jaysh al-Mujahideen member units were recipients of support from the Friends of Syria via the northern MOC, however it is unclear whether their membership in the Levantine Front will have any effect on this. They have voiced their receptivity to a legitimate political solution to the conflict.



Levantine Front

Date of formation: December 2014

Geographic scope: Aleppo

Formed in response to government advances in Aleppo, the Levantine Front included six of the largest opposition groups in Aleppo. Led by Abdel Aziz Salameh, the commander of the al-Tawhid Brigade and the IF-Aleppo, the Front represents itself as a complete merger of the groups. Member groups are recipients of support from various, sometimes conflicting, networks and it remains to be seen what impact this will have on the level and continued provision of support. The Levantine Front does not include JAN or affiliated groups such as Jabhat Ansar al-Din which are very active around Aleppo city, but does cooperate with them.



Revolutionary Command Council (RCC)

Date of formation: November 2014

Geographic scope: Syria-wide

The RCC emerged from the August 2014 Waatasimu Initiative. Realizing greater unity was needed if the opposition was to remain a viable force, the Initiative collected signatures from more than 100 armed opposition groups, all voicing support for the creation of the RCC. The Waatasimu Initiative held its first official meeting in November 2014, which resulted in an outline for a comprehensive body, the RCC. Although it is unclear how many of the original signatories of the Waatasimu Initiative will actively engage in the RCC, the group currently represents the most viable attempt to create a unified opposition force in northern Syria. The formation of a unified armed force and a merger of court systems are the council's principal goals. However little progress has been made on either and it remains to be seen if members can work through debilitating personal and organizational disputes.



The Southern Front

Date of formation: February 2014

Geographic scope: Daraa, Quneitra, Rural Damascus, Damascus, al-Suweida

The Southern Front is a loose coalition of approximately 50 southern armed opposition groups. All of its members receive some form of support from the Friends of Syria through the southern MOC. The Southern Front does not have any leadership or organizational structure, and thus is not an organization but an apolitical name and vision agreed upon by a loose union of self-described moderate armed opposition groups in exchange for continued support from the Friends of Syria.



Supreme Military Council (SMC)

Date of formation: December 2012

Geographic scope: Syria-wide

The SMC is the military wing of the opposition Interim Government. Despite its leadership being well respected by many fighters within Syria, the SMC currently has little influence among opposition forces on the ground. Once a conduit for state funding and support to the armed opposition, it has been circumvented since early 2014 due to various issues. However it is currently trying to revive this role, and seeks to strengthen the connection between the Interim Government and armed opposition forces in Syria.



Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (SRF)

Date of formation: December 2013

Geographic scope: Idlib, Hama, Latakia, Damascus, Rural Damascus, Daraa, and Quneitra

The SRF was formed as part of efforts by the Friends of Syria to support amenable armed opposition forces before Geneva II. Its northern section, led by Jamal Maarouf, played a prominent role in the expulsion of ISIS from Idlib in January 2014, but failed to make many additional advances. Under increasing pressure from Jabhat al-Nusra, the northern Section of the SRF collapsed by late 2014. The SRF's southern section, which has enjoyed a better reputation than its northern counterpart, is still active and recently merged with the al-Hamza Division and the First Artillery Regiment to form the First Army.