Isabel Nassief

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 17

THE CAMPAIGN FOR HOMS AND ALEPPO

THE ASSAD REGIME'S STRATEGY IN 2013

ISW
INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY OF WAR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Assad regime's military position is stronger in January 2014 than it was a year ago and remains committed to fighting for Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo. Nonetheless, the conflict remains at a military and political deadlock.

In the spring of 2013 the regime lacked the necessary manpower to conduct simultaneous operations on multiple fronts against rebel groups that were quickly making gains throughout the north, south, and Damascus countryside. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) had sustained more losses than it could replenish. It relied on air assets to resupply besieged troops in its Aleppo and Idlib outposts because it lacked overland logistical lines connecting those outposts. The regime had contracted its military footprint to Damascus and Homs in order to its secure supply lines while rebels contested Homs, the lynchpin of the regime's logistics system that connected Damascus to Aleppo and to the coast.

The Syrian regime has since been resuscitated by infusions of men and materiel from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia and from the formalization of pro-regime militias under the National Defense Forces. This report will lay out the changes in the regime's strategy and conduct of the campaign that allowed it to regain some of its strength. It will also lay out how opposition movements have attempted to conduct multiple, sometimes competing campaigns of their own against the regime.

Beginning with the al-Qusayr offensive in 2013, the regime demonstrated the capacity to overcome its manpower deficit and inability to fight simultaneously on multiple fronts. It also illustrated the regime's strategy to defeat the opposition by isolating rebel systems from their supply lines, attacking by fire, then clearing and holding terrain. The government offensive at al-Qusayr in April 2013 highlights these principal characteristics of the regime's new campaign with the clear orientation of regime assets to support a decisive battle at al-Qusayr.

Meanwhile, the opposition did not unite under the direction of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The SMC struggled to maintain authority over a host of rebel groups, to direct the allocation of resources to strategic priorities, and to orient the opposition to achieve operational goals. After the United States decided not to intervene in the wake of the chemical weapons strike in Damascus, many powerful groups denounced the SMC and formed new alliances.

Despite a lack of national-level command and control on the part of the rebels, the resilience of rebel systems, guerilla tactics, and effective attacks by groups such as ISIS have prevented the regime from uprooting the armed opposition from the country or even from major cities, including Damascus and Aleppo. The resiliency of the opposition stems largely from its decentralization. Rebel support and attack zones have created multiple centers of gravity for the opposition, thus diversifying the risk of systemic collapse faced by rebel groups when the regime attacks on any given front. Rebel infighting, which escalated in January 2014, diminishes the advantages gained from this dispersion.

The regime's growing strength and the growing extremism of the al-Qaeda affiliates has pushed the Syrian opposition to evolve, leading to a drive for unification among the internal fighting forces, independent of the political leadership-in-exile, which has failed to provide the amount

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

of support that the fighting groups have needed. Smaller, scattered, local rebel brigades have continued to announce mergers throughout 2013, particularly in the months since the August 21st chemical weapons attack – most notably the formation of the Islamic Front was announced on November 22. By promising to pull together some of Syria's most effective fighting forces under one banner, the new Islamic Front has the potential to effectively coordinate rebel groups on the ground.

In 2014 the regime has the ability to wage campaigns on multiple fronts nearly simultaneously or in quick succession. This capacity is first and foremost the result of additional manpower from Hezbollah and National Defense Forces. In addition, the regime has gained the ability to design as well as execute multiple, sequential and simultaneous operations, aided perhaps by the increase in reliable command and control elements including advisors. This requires the regime to consider the priorities of its coalition partners in designating priority efforts.

Despite the regime's apparent resurgence and the opposition's enduring challenges, the Assad Regime is not winning the Syrian civil war, and it does not have the strength to win decisively in 2014. Lacking that ability, the regime continues to use tactics that contravene the law of armed conflict, such as the deliberate mass killing of civilians in the August chemical weapons strike; the use of barrel bombs to kill civilians in December in Aleppo; and the deliberate starvation of populations in Damascus.

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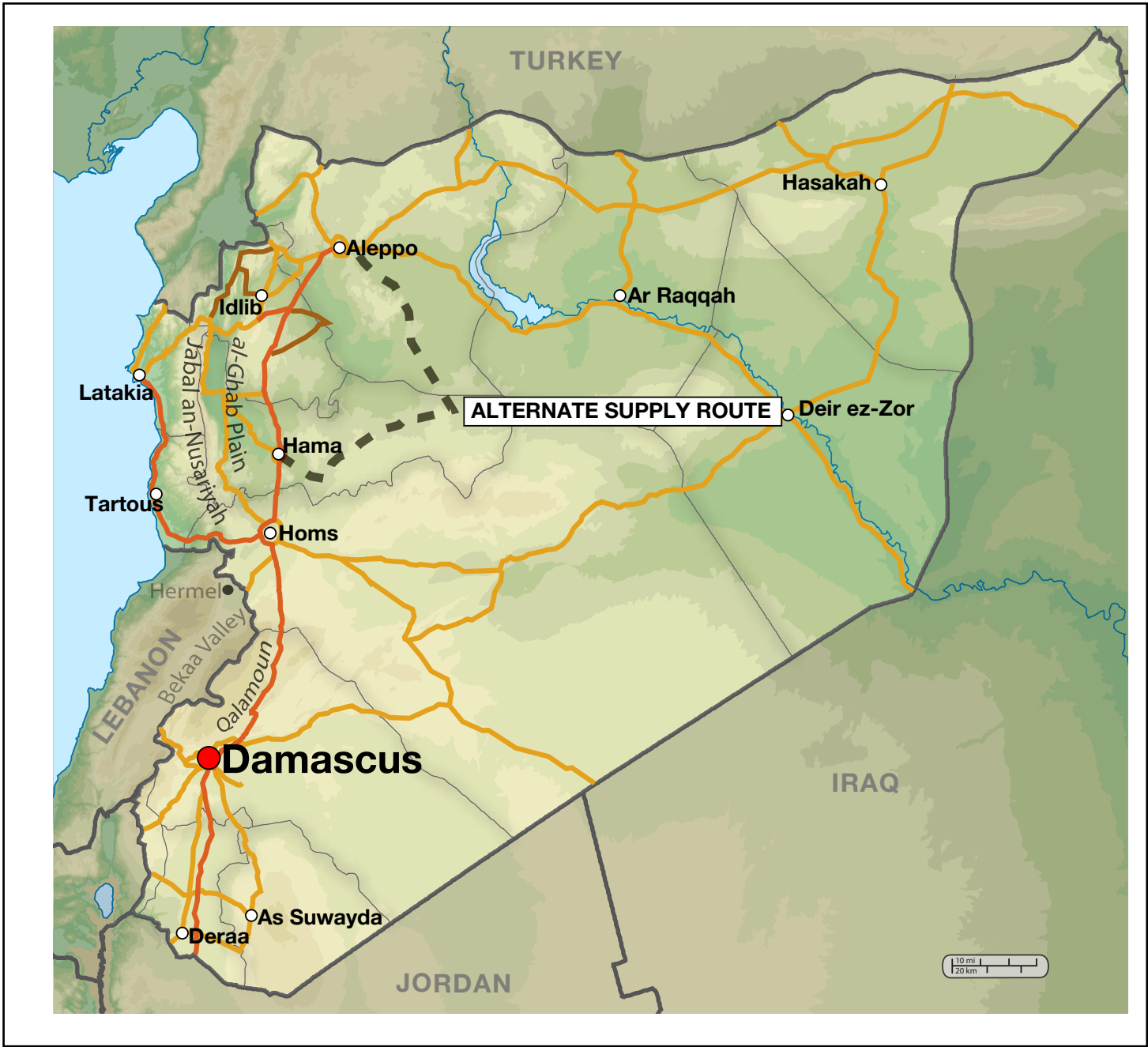

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The Assad regime's military position is stronger in January 2014 than it was a year ago. In the spring of 2013 the regime lacked the necessary manpower to conduct multiple, simultaneous operations against rebel groups that were quickly making gains throughout the north, south, and Damascus countryside. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) had sustained more losses than it could replenish. It relied on air assets to resupply its troops surrounded in outposts in Aleppo and Idlib because it lacked ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to those outposts.[1] The regime had contracted its military footprint to Damascus and Homs in order to its secure supply lines. Rebels contested Homs, the lynchpin of the regime's logistics system that connected Damascus to Aleppo and to the coast.
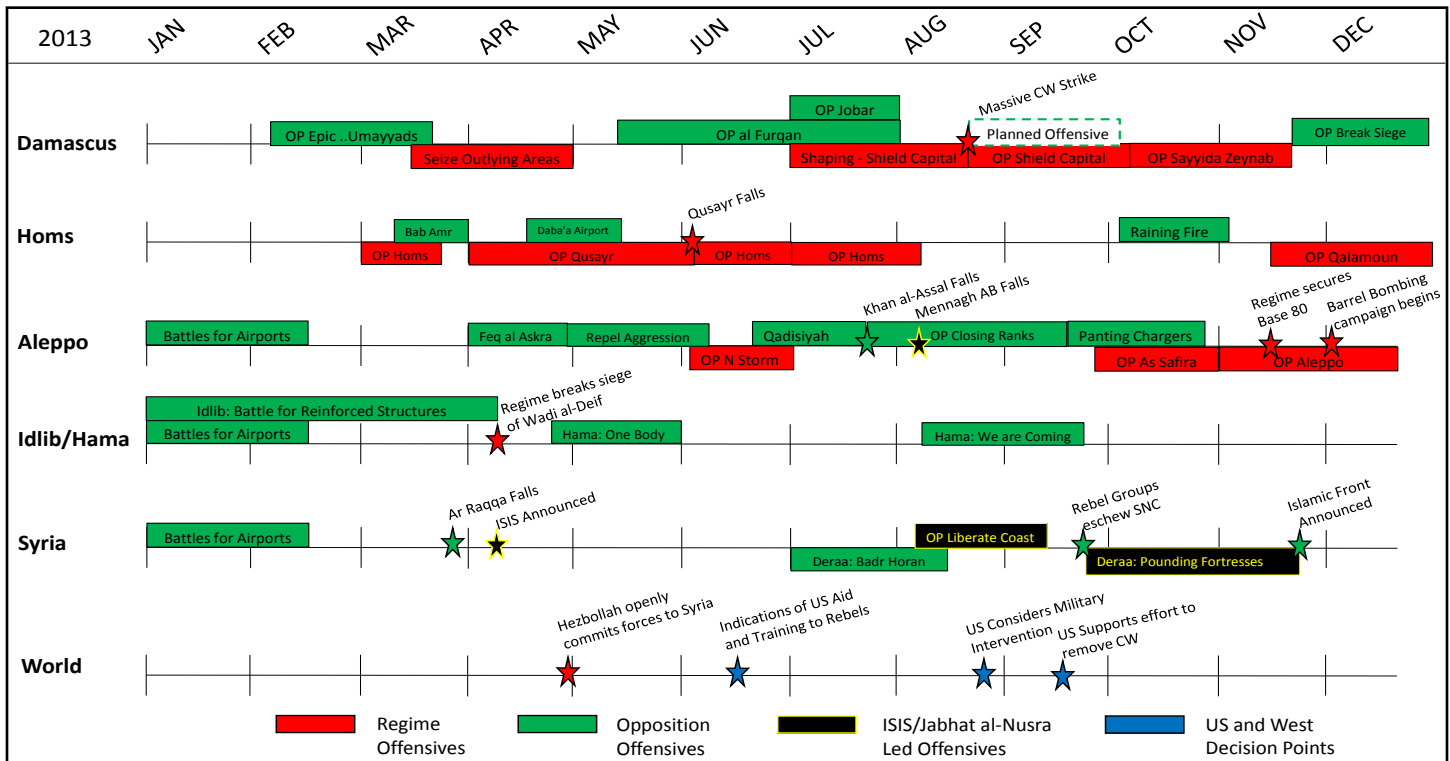
The Assad regime has replenished its combat power by bringing Hezbollah into the war to serve as trainers and as reinforcements. It has formed and formalized a National Defense Force comprised of local volunteers. Iran has provided full-spectrum support to the regime, including senior advisors from the regular Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the IRQC's Quds Force. Iraqi Shi'a militants are fighting in offensive operations away from the Sayyida Zeinab shrine to which they had initially deployed in 2012.[2]

The Syrian army, with its allies, launched a series of campaigns in 2013 that aimed not only to rout rebels out of key urban areas in multiple provinces, but also to seize and hold surrounding villages and towns. The pro-Assad forces seek to cut the rebels' major lines of communication and eliminate their support zones. The regime has gained Homs and Qusayr, and is no longer dependent on aerial resupply in isolated outposts, having relieved the siege of Wadi al-Deif, for example. It has besieged rebel support zones in Damascus. It has fought to reopen ground lines of communication into Aleppo along the as-Safira route, although it was expelled from Menagh airbase by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) on August 6, 2013 and no longer holds that position.

Meanwhile, the opposition has not realized the goal to professionalize and fight synchronously under the direction of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The SMC struggled to maintain authority over the host of rebel groups, to direct the application of resources according to strategic priorities, and to orient the opposition in meaningful ways to achieve operational goals. After the United States decided not to intervene in the wake of the chemical weapons strikes on Damascus, many powerful groups denounced the SMC framework and created new alliances as many rebel groups participated in the SMC with the expectation of American support.

The opposition has entered a season of competing priorities and resource deficiency coinciding with the regime's offensives and new territorial gains. These hardships underscore the enduring challenge that many rebel groups are small and do not deploy away from their home provinces. In early 2013, the exceptions were groups in large rebel coalitions, such as Suqour al-Sham and the Tawhid Brigades, part of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF), and Ahrar al-Sham and the al-Haqq brigade in the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF).[3] These coalitions have since disbanded, but the groups continue to organize and lead attacks involving multiple rebel groups under the banner of the Islamic Front. Even more capable, however, are the al-Qaeda affiliates Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), also known as al-Qaeda in Iraq. ISIS in particular has focused its effort on carving out territory for itself in northeastern Syria, which is not entirely aligned with the opposition's goal to defeat

2013 — JAN · FEB · MAR · APR · MAY · JUN · JUL · AUG · SEP · OCT · NOV · DEC

Damascus: OP Epic ..Umayyads; Seize Outlying Areas; OP Jobar; OP al Furqan; Massive CW Strike; Planned Offensive; Shaping – Shield Capital; OP Shield Capital; OP Sayyida Zeynab; OP Break Siege

Homs: Bab Amr; Daba'a Airport; Qusayr Falls; OP Homs; OP Qusayr; OP Homs; OP Homs; Raining Fire; OP Qalamoun

Aleppo: Battles for Airports; Feq al Askra; Repel Aggression; Qadisiyah; Khan al-Assal Falls; Mennagh AB Falls; OP Closing Ranks; Panting Chargers; Regime secures Base 80; Barrel Bombing campaign begins; OP N Storm; OP As Safira; OP Aleppo

Idlib/Hama: Idlib: Battle for Reinforced Structures; Regime breaks siege of Wadi al-Deif; Battles for Airports; Hama: One Body; Hama: We are Coming

Syria: Battles for Airports; Ar Raqqa Falls; ISIS Announced; OP Liberate Coast; Rebel Groups eschew SNC; Islamic Front Announced; Deraa: Badr Horan; Deraa: Pounding Fortresses

World: Hezbollah openly commits forces to Syria; Indications of US Aid and Training to Rebels; US Considers Military Intervention; US Supports effort to remove CW

Legend: Regime Offensives (red); Opposition Offensives (green); ISIS/Jabhat al-Nusra Led Offensives (black); US and West Decision Points (blue)

Assad's military. Although discussed here in the broader context of the battle for Syria, ISIS and its competition with other rebel groups will be discussed in more detail in an upcoming ISW report.

Despite the regime's apparent resurgence and the opposition's enduring challenges, the Assad Regime is not winning the Syrian civil war, and it does not have the strength to win decisively in 2014. Lacking that ability, the regime continues to use tactics that contravene the law of armed conflict, such as the deliberate, mass killing of civilians in the August chemical weapons strike; the use of barrel bombs to kill civilians in December in Aleppo; and the deliberate starvation of populations in Damascus. The regime still lacks the ability to hold all of its gains in urban areas, even with the NDF. It has also relinquished control over ar-Raqqa and the Kurdish areas, most of the eastern desert, and much of the area south of Damascus to Deraa. It struggles to maintain a position in Aleppo. Since regime activity has focused on Damascus, Homs, Idlib, and Aleppo this report will be constrained to those areas and will describe the contest between rebel and regime forces.

This report will lay out the changes in the regime's strategy and conduct of the campaign that allowed it to regain some of its strength in 2013. It will also lay out how opposition movements have tried to conduct multiple, sometimes competing, campaigns against the regime.

THE OPPOSITION'S DISPOSITION

In late 2012 there were a number of changes in the oppositions' organizational structure and concept of operations. The Supreme Military Command (SMC), created in December 2012 under the command of General Salim Idris, marked a significant step in the unification of rebel forces with the intent of establishing a unified command and control structure as well as creating a central coordination body through which Western aid to the Syrian rebels could flow. The SMC's military campaign focused on targeting the regime's asymmetric capabilities in order to set conditions for a decisive effort against the regime.[4] The SMC described a phased campaign which would first target regime airbases, then the regime's artillery, and finally Damascus.[5] In early 2013, The SMC demonstrated command and control capabilities as rebels laid siege to a number of airbases in Aleppo and Idlib provinces, seizing two regime airbases in January and February of 2013.[6] In addition

NORTHERN REBEL SUPPLY LINES
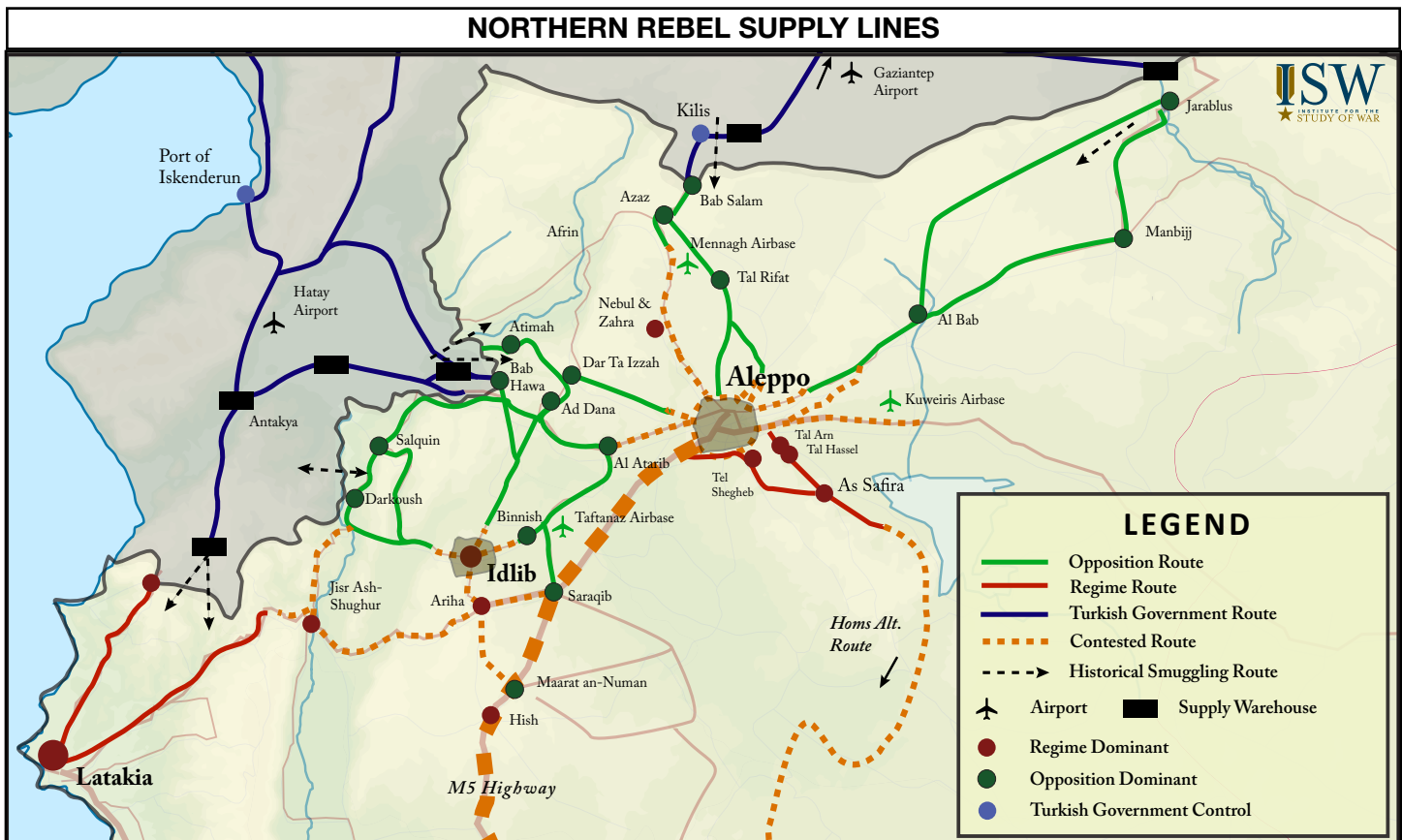
This map estimates northern supply lines based upon available reporting of node support zones and attack zones. Roads that are assessed to be partially available to either side are depicted as contested routes. Research by Jennifer Cafarella.

to the SMC's attempt at national-scale coordination, rebel groups had developed robust support zones within provincial country-sides and leveraged these positions to conduct offensive operations on regime positions in urban centers and along major regime supply routes. Regime strongholds in the capital cities still held, but rebel control of the countryside forced the regime to rely upon aerial resupply to the north.[7]

Throughout 2013, rebel offensives sought limited objectives and demonstrated rebel groups' capacity for operational and tactical planning without strategic level design. Rebel offensive are therefore often characterized as localized and the opposition as uncoordinated and decentralized. Even without the ability for strategic planning on a national level, the consistent execution of offensives throughout the country implies rebels have developed coordination mechanisms, though inconsistent, across mutually reinforcing support zones and attack zones. A support zone is one in which insurgent groups exercise combat support functions such as logistics to facilitate offensives. An attack zone,

on the other hand, is one in which insurgent groups deliberately execute offensive operations.[8] A rebel system is a coherent zone in which the combatant has an ecosystem of supply, staging, and operating areas: an ecosystem of human terrain, physical features bounding their operating areas, etc.

For the purposes of the regime's 2013 campaign the most significant rebel support zones were located around the Killis corridor in the northern Aleppo countryside system, the Maarat an-Numan axis in southern Idlib province, and the town of al-Qusayr in Homs province. It is important to note, however, that this list is not exclusive and, by early 2013, multiple rebel systems had formed throughout Syria which transcended provincial boundaries and displayed varying degrees of sophistication.

Killis Corridor

Since 2012, rebel groups have had a strong presence in the

Killis Corridor, a string of outlying towns that straddle the Aleppo-Gaziantep highway connecting Turkey to northern Syria.[9] The support zone traverses northern border villages such as Azaz, Marea, and Tal Rifat and centers on the Bab Salam border crossing. Azaz, which lies south of Bab Salam, has long been characterized as one of the most prominent smuggling networks within Syria, with influential families smuggling guns and drugs into Syria from the Turkish Border. These families are affiliated with the Northern Storm brigade as of January 2014.[10] Over the course of the conflict, the crossing has become one of the primary conduits for humanitarian and illicit supplies entering Syria.[11] Rebel groups, namely Jabhat al-Nusra, the Northern Storm Brigade, and the Nour ad-Dine az-Zenki battalion, protect this northern supply route, conducting offensive operations against regime strongholds in the predominantly Alawite towns of Nebul and Zahra, Menagh airbase, and to a lesser extent the Layramoun district of northwestern Aleppo city. The rebel support zone oriented on Bab Salam is isolated from other rebel systems south and west of Aleppo by Kurdish towns and the pro-regime support zone at Nebul and Zahra. In early 2013, the locally-based Northern Storm Brigade was among the most dominant groups in this system.

Maarat an-Numan Axis

The Maarat an-Numan axis incorporates a large section of the regime's Hama-Aleppo supply route and is likely an expansion of the rebels' Jebel az-Zawiya stronghold which became an important area of control after the regime began to push rebels out of Idlib city in late 2011.[12] The support zone extends to the north and west of Maarat an-Numan including the towns along the M5 highway, such as Saraqib, as well as villages in Jebal az-Zawiya. The attack zone focused on the M5 between Hish and Wadi al-Deif (a.k.a the "road of death") as well as the Wadi al-Deif and Hamadiya military bases. The main objective of rebel operations in this zone was to block the M5 and isolate Wadi al-Deif and Hamadiya in order to cut off the regime's ability to conduct ground resupply to these bases from Hama. Control of Idlib city was not a priority and rebel groups did not indicate the intent of disrupting regime access to Aleppo.

The support zone for this system likely centered on the areas around unofficial border crossings with Turkey such as Darkoush and Atmeh, as well as the official border crossing at Bab al-Hawa.[13] Both Darkoush, which was a prominent smuggling route before the uprisings began, and Bab al-Hawa, were controlled by the FSA in early 2013.[14] During this time, the dominance of the FSA in controlling these border areas likely bolstered the ability of SMC-affiliated groups such as Suquor al-Sham to plan and conduct operations. The main rebel groups in this area were Suquor al-Sham, Grandsons of the Prophet (FSA-affiliated), al-Fajr al-Isam, Ahrar al-Sham, JN, and the FSA's Idlib Military Council.

Al-Qusayr

In central Homs province, rebels established support zones in the countryside to the north and southwest of the city, constraining regime maneuver at a major crossroads of its supply lines.[15] The regime's northern supply route and its western route connecting Damascus to coastal Latakia overlap in Homs city and transverse rebel-held villages and neighborhoods throughout the province. This rebel system was sustained by a resupply route through Lebanon that emptied into Qusayr and, to a lesser extent, through smuggling routes near Tal Kalakh which connect pro-rebel communities in Tripoli, Lebanon to rebel groups operating in Homs. The attack zone of this system included regime positions in Homs city and along the Homs-Latakia highway adjacent to the Lebanese border. Increasingly throughout 2013, this attack zone incorporated Hezbollah positions in the Beqaa valley and Hermel.

The rebel systems in the central corridor were disrupted over the course of 2013. It is clear that an additional, distinct rebel system formed near the Lebanese border southwest of Homs city. Among rebel groups, it is most likely that the Farouq battalions and al-Haqq brigade were the principal actors in this system.[16] These systems may have diminished in 2013 as a result of regime offensives to isolate this system from the Lebanese border.[17] Rebel groups operating north of Homs and in Hama are otherwise dependent upon indirect access to other supply lines along the Lebanese border, namely Qalamoun, as well as the northern and western supply

lines. Rebel alliances across fronts have likely formed in part to diversify access to supplies. Both the Farouq battalions and the al-Haqq brigade, for example, originated in Homs earlier in the conflict extended their area of operation to include other border areas.[18]

The regime's stranglehold on Hama and the coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartous caused a logistical disconnect between rebel systems in Homs and those in the north. Rebel systems in the north and along the central corridor therefore operate with a degree of independence from one another. This becomes apparent throughout 2013 when the regime operations to destroy a given system did not necessarily precipitate the destruction of another. The diversity of rebel support zones therefore gives the opposition resiliency, even as it creates fractiousness and competition. The degree to which rebel systems are interconnected changes depending on geographic proximity and the participation of groups.

In this paper, rebel systems will be used as a framework for understanding the decentralized nature of the opposition as a collection of multiple systems. This framework is practical rather than theoretical because it explains the resilience of the insurgency despite its inherent weaknesses and Assad's conventional military superiority. In these geographic regions, the regime's primary objectives have been to control Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo. The regime's limited combat power at the beginning of 2013 constrained its ability to conduct offensive operations on more than one front at a given time. In order to re-establish control of these urban centers and to defeat the opposition in the north, the regime would have to isolate multiple opposition support and attack zones from resupply, attack them by fire, and clear and hold terrain. The regime chose first to do so at al-Qusayr, in central Homs province.

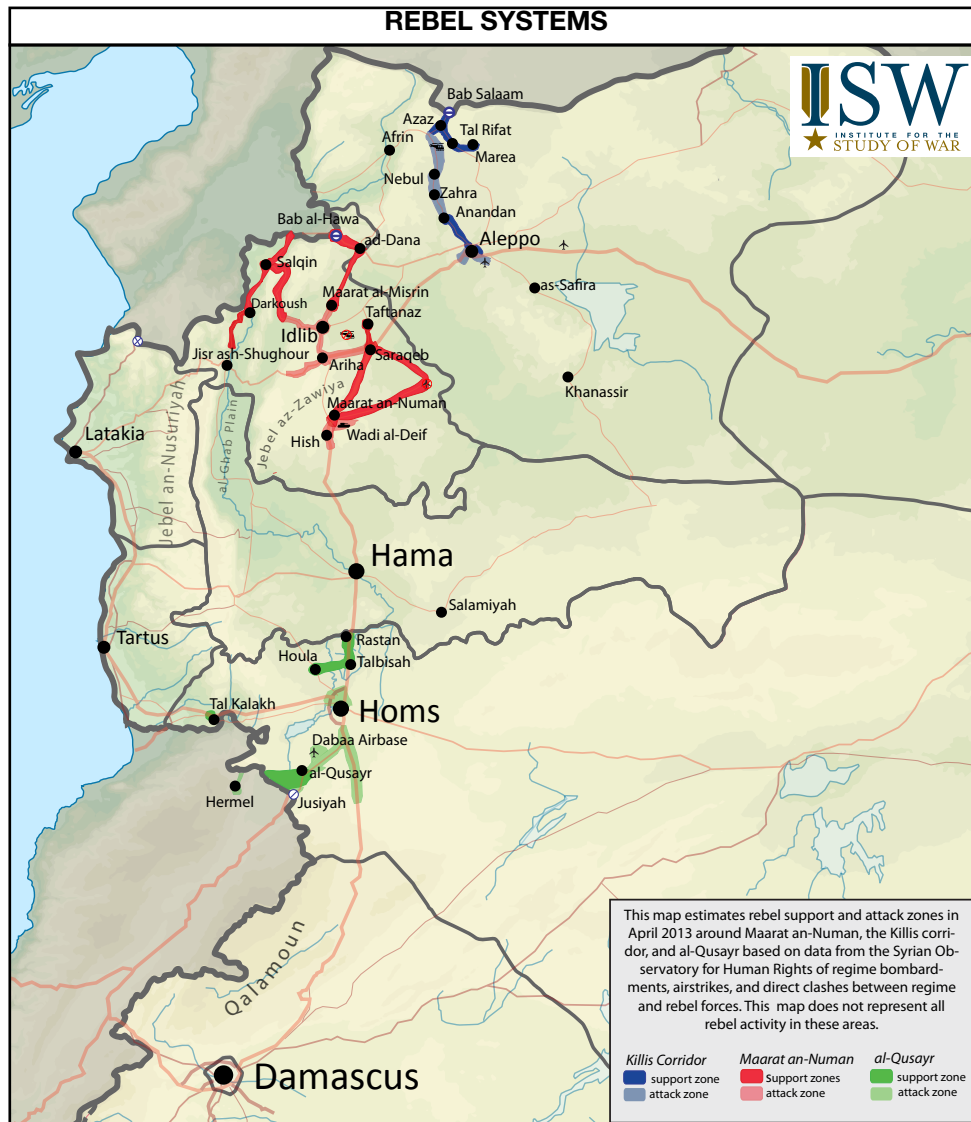## PHASE 1: FALL OF AL-QUSAYR (APRIL-JUNE 2013)

Challenges Facing the Regime

One of the regime's central challenges in early 2013 was a lack of manpower. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) had suffered large-scale attrition since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, limiting the regime's capacity to conduct troop-intensive operations throughout the country.[19] In an attempt to address this challenge, in late 2012 the regime was forced to withdraw troops from peripheral parts of the country and concentrate forces in key terrain, namely Damascus and cities along the central corridor.[20] Syria's central corridor contains the main lines of communication between Damascus and Homs and therefore is a crucial lifeline linking the capital to the Mediterranean coast as well as to Aleppo. This corridor also runs along Lebanon's eastern border, which provides opportunities for cross-border supply lines and allows pro-regime and pro-rebel Lebanese constituencies to support their counterparts in Syria. The redistribution of forces in 2013 enhanced the regime's staying power along the central corridor but weakened its position in the northern and eastern parts of the country, suggesting that the regime's intent was to consolidate control of Damascus and the central corridor before reinvigorating operations elsewhere.

The regime needed to adapt its consolidated conventional fighting force to address the guerilla tactics of Syria's rebel insurgency more fully. IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani reportedly told an Iraqi politician, "the Syrian Army is useless! [...] Give me one brigade of the Basij, and I could conquer the whole country," in reference to Iran's paramilitary force.[21] Due to troop attrition the regime also increasingly relied on pro-regime militias formed overwhelmingly by Alawite civilians who were committed to the regime's survival. In an attempt to formalize these militias, Assad announced the formation of the National Defense Forces in January 2013.[22] The NDF is distinct from former militias such as the "*shabiha*" and the *Jaysh al-Sha'abi* because they are paid by the regime and report to senior officers in the Syrian military and the regime's security and intelligence services.[23]

As the regime forces consolidated around a diminished but loyal core, the SAA's chain of command was decentralized giving "low and mid-level officers freedom to execute broad 'directives' from the regime's top leadership without having to communicate with their superiors."[24] The combined effect of troop attrition and a reliance on paramilitary forces was that the regime's

REBEL SYSTEMS

This map estimates rebel support and attack zones in April 2013 around Maarat an-Numan, the Killis corridor, and al-Qusayr based on data from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights of regime bombardments, airstrikes, and direct clashes between regime and rebel forces. This map does not represent all rebel activity in these areas.

Killis Corridor	Maarat an-Numan	al-Qusayr
support zone	Support zones	support zone
attack zone	attack zone	attack zone

security apparatus began to look more like a militia than a state's armed forces.

The Regime's Strategic Intent and Main Effort

Within this context, the government offensive at al-Qusayr in April highlights the critical changes in the regime's strategy and resources that enabled its campaign to continue in the summer and fall of 2013. The principal characteristic of the new campaign was a clear orientation of regime assets to support a decisive battle at Qusayr. This orchestration of the regime's domestic and coalition resources in pursuit of a unified objective indicates the designation of a main effort by the regime.

The decision to designate a main effort at al-Qusayr points to the regime's strategic intent to secure Hezbollah's increased involvement in the war in order to derive benefit from its reinforcement and capabilities.[25] According to U.S. officials, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah initially resisted appeals from Iranian leadership to get involved in Syria and only agreed to deploy forces after pressure from Iran's supreme leader.[26] Both Hezbollah and the regime shared strategic and operational interests in securing al-Qusayr, situated among Shi'a Lebanese communities near the border. This made Qusayr a prudent and mutually beneficial objective with which to secure Hezbollah's involvement. If the regime controlled Qusayr and kept Hezbollah in

the fight, it could offset troop attrition by opening up a corridor linking Hezbollah controlled areas in northern Lebanon to regime areas on the coast.

The battle for al-Qusayr also demonstrated the regime's ability to overcome the deficiencies of its conventional style of warfare in the unconventional fight it faced. The coordination of separate chains of command of both conventional and unconventional forces allowed the regime to use guerilla tactics in conjunction with more conventional uses of firepower and maneuver. This adaptation was an aspect of the regime's strategy in 2013 and an advantage of Hezbollah's decisive involvement in the war.[27]
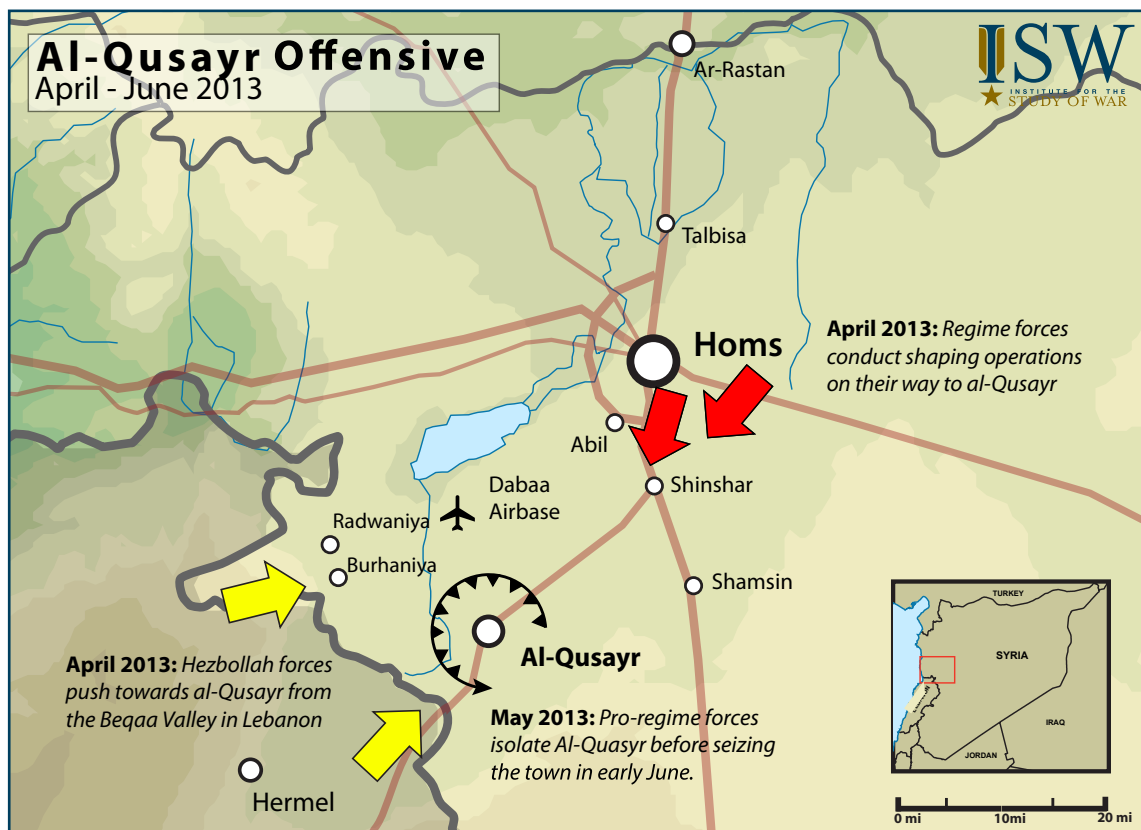
The Battle for al-Qusayr: Regime Operational Intent

Al-Qusayr is located in the Homs gap, a relatively flat and arable space in the Orontes river valley between the an-Nusuriyah and Anti-Lebanon mountain ranges that separate Syria's internal lands from the coast. Homs province hosts an intersection of the M5 highway which runs from north to south and the M3 highway which connects Damascus to the coastal provinces of Tartous and Latakia. Homs is therefore important to the regime

as a node for various lines of communication, connecting Damascus to the regime's coastal strongholds as well as northern Syria. The Homs gap is known as the "gateway" into central Syria.[28]

The town of al-Qusayr sits adjacent to the Jusiyeh border crossing with Lebanon and is approximately 10 miles from the M5 highway. It is particularly important because of its proximity to the intersection of the regime's Damascus-Homs and Homs-Latakia supply lines and its logistical connections to Hezbollah's strongholds in Hermel and the Beqaa valley. Al-Qusayr also epitomizes the importance of the Homs front for rebels, as its proximity to cross-border supply routes with Lebanon made it the primary support zone for rebel systems in Homs in early 2013.

Before the regime had designated al-Qusayr as a main effort, government forces attempted to launch an offensive in March 2013 to take control of the remaining rebel strongholds in Homs city, particularly the Khaldiyeh neighborhood in Homs' Old City.[29] Districts of the Old City such as Bab Houd and Hamidiya, which lie off the ring road, were the center of the rebel-controlled area

Al-Qusayr Offensive
April - June 2013

Ar-Rastan

Talbisa

Homs

April 2013: *Regime forces conduct shaping operations on their way to al-Qusayr*

Abil

Shinshar

Dabaa Airbase

Radwaniya

Burhaniya

Shamsin

Al-Qusayr

April 2013: *Hezbollah forces push towards al-Qusayr from the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon*

May 2013: *Pro-regime forces isolate Al-Qusayr before seizing the town in early June.*

Hermel

TURKEY

SYRIA

IRAQ

JORDAN

0 mi   10mi   20 mi

in Homs city. Rebels also had strongholds in al-Qusour, and Jouret as-Sayeh which flank the M5 highway at the northern entrance to Homs city. By March, the regime had secured the vast majority of Homs city and controlled the ancient Citadel of Homs in the city's center.[30] Rebels, however, were able to push back government forces and launch a surprise raid on the neighborhood of Baba Amr that halted the regime's gains.[31] In a video posted on YouTube, fighters from *Katiba Thuwar Baba Amr* [Baba Amr Revolutionaries Battalion], *Katiba Mughawir Baba Amr* [Baba Amr Commandos Battalion], and *Katiba Ussud Baba Amr* [Lions of Baba Amr Battalion] announced the battle saying, "We announce the 'great victory battle' to liberate neighborhoods [controlled by the army], namely Baba Amr, and ease the pressure on our comrades and on besieged Homs districts."[32]

In early 2013 the regime controlled approximately 80% of Homs city and had placed rebel-held districts under siege for over a year.[33] Rebels' continued ability to fight the regime in Homs, however, was due in large part to access to reinforcements and supplies which came from support zones along the Lebanese border, namely

al-Qusayr, where groups such as the Farouq Battalion operated.[34] The requirement to rout rebels from the area and deny their access to reinforcement and resupply in Homs city therefore frames the regime's operational objectives for the al-Qusayr offensive. In order words, the regime sought to isolate and destroy the support zone on which rebel systems in Homs depended in order to consolidate its control over Homs. The regime required Homs in order to interdict rebels' access to cross-border supply lines from Lebanon into Homs and to secure its own supply lines between Damascus and the coast.

The regime began setting conditions for the battle for al-Qusayr in April 2013. In coordination with Hezbollah and the NDF, regime forces began clearing rebels from the countryside between Homs city and al-Qusayr. With support from Syrian aircraft, Hezbollah moved northwest from the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon towards al-Qusayr, taking villages such as Radwaniyeh and Burhaniyeh.[35] Meanwhile, the regime pushed down from Homs city, seizing villages such as Abil on April 17th in order to interdict rebel movement between Homs city and al-Qusayr.[36] At this time in Damascus, the

CENTRAL SYRIA
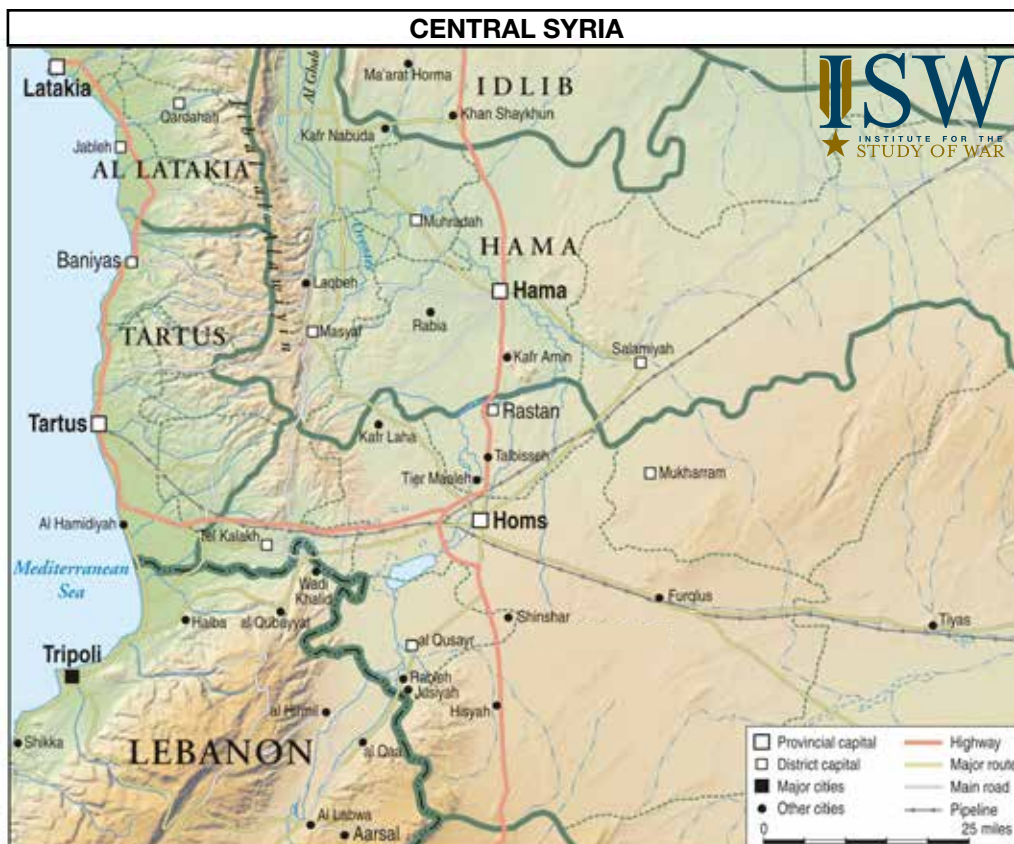
regime began a similar series of preparatory operations by cutting off major rebel supply lines into the city.[37] By mid-May, pro-regime forces had gained control of most of al-Qusayr's surrounding areas, thereby isolating rebels within the town to prevent resupply, reinforcement, and withdrawal.[38]

In response, a number of opposition groups, including the Farouq Battalion, the al-Haqq Brigade, the Mughawir Battalion, the Wadi Brigades, the Qassioun Battalion, the Ayman Battalion, and Jabhat al-Nusra, came together to organize operations and repel the regime's offensive.[39] In a maneuver to counteract the regime's tactical isolation of al-Qusayr during April, rebel groups affiliated with the FSA and the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) launched the "Operation to Liberate Dabaa Military Airport."[40] Dabaa airbase is located on the road which links Qusayr to the M5 and has similar strategic qualities as the town of Abil, which the regime took to block rebel movement between Homs and al-Qusayr in order to isolate rebels in al-Qusayr. On April 18th, the Farouq Battalion and Liwa al-Islam seized the Dabaa military airbase, which was being used as a base for regime ground troops.[41] The collaboration of these opposition elements to support a tactical maneuver that could have operational effects on Qusayr indicates a coordinated campaign design to counteract the regime's isolation of al-Qusayr. Although tactically successful, the rebel maneuver did not achieve its operational objective. The isolation of Qusayr continued. Throughout the month of April, rebel groups also increased rocket attacks against Hezbollah's stronghold in Hermel, and both Jabhat al-Nusra and the FSA vowed to escalate attacks against Hezbollah in Lebanese territory.[42]

On May 19, pro-regime forces stormed al-Qusayr and launched major clearing operations on the town.[43] Hezbollah fighters backed by SAA troops and NDF fighters entered al-Qusayr from the south, east, and west and advanced northwards, clearing districts of the town block by block.[44] These ground clearing operations were accompanied by SAA air and artillery support, snipers, RPG-7s, and other explosives. In early June, pro-regime forces launched a final assault against remaining rebel positions, seizing control of al-Qusayr on June 5.[45] Although the regime objective had likely been to destroy the rebels present in al-Qusayr, an agreement between rebels and Hezbollah brokered by Lebanon allowed the withdrawal of rebel forces from the city. Lebanese political actors, fearing repercussions on Lebanon in the event that the regime destroyed opposition forces, precipitated the negotiated withdrawal. The agreement highlights one of the ways in which considerations of Lebanese security affect Hezbollah's operational calculus, important for understanding the constraints that the organization places on the Assad Regime.[46]

Hezbollah exercised almost complete tactical control of the operation in al-Qusayr to the extent of issuing orders to Syrian officers.[47] Hezbollah's degree of command and control at Qusayr was exceptional and not continued to that degree after the city fell. The coordination of separate chains of command between conventional and unconventional forces and execution of combined arms operations nevertheless demonstrates the capabilities that Hezbollah brought to the fight in an enduring fashion as an "advise and assist" force.[48]

Rebel coordination in al-Qusayr

Though rebel factions have struggled to unite and consolidate authority on a national level under the SMC, the battle for al-Qusayr demonstrates a national-scale effort by rebel groups under the umbrella of the SMC. Throughout May, reinforcements arrived in al-Qusayr from as far away as Aleppo, which is over 142 miles to the north. Colonel Abd al-Jabar Mohammad Akidi, the former Aleppo-based regional SMC leader, and Abdulqader Saleh, former head of the SLF-affiliated Tawhid Brigade, led a reinforcement mission to Qusayr from Aleppo.[49] The Farouq Battalion, which operates primarily in northern and central Syria, pledged reinforcements for al-Qusayr, suggesting that it recognized the significance of defending the town.[50] In late May, then-acting head of the SOC George Sabra also called on opposition fighters to send arms and men to al-Qusayr. He said, "Everyone who has weapons or ammunition should send them to Qusayr and Homs to strengthen its resistance. Every bullet sent to Qusayr and Homs will block the invasion that is trying to drag Syria back to the era of fear."[51] Although the regime was able to block many of these reinforcements entering al-Qusayr,

rebel fighters massed in surrounding areas and played a role in targeting regime resupply and reinforcement convoys.[52]

Despite this attempt at nation-wide mobilization, the lack of coordination among groups on the ground in the battle for al-Qusayr foreshadows the weakening of SMC's command and control throughout the later parts of 2013. In an interview after the fall of al-Qusayr, Col. Akidi describes his reinforcement mission from Aleppo:

> "We arrived at Qarah Mountains in Qalamoun area and we set up a camp. The initial plan was to enter Qusayr through Jusiyah or al-Abboudiyah or through Shamseen [all located on the Lebanese border] in order to lift the siege of the town and relieve our comrades there… Unfortunately, the military council of Qalamoun did not cooperate with us and we found that many fighters there are smugglers and not true revolutionaries. We stayed there a period of three or four days during which we reconnoitered the area and set up plans. Unfortunately, the fighters in Jusiyah and Sheikh Ahmad Ammon denied us support. We decided to enter Qusayr at all costs and though we do not know the area very well."[53]

This reflection illustrates the absence of coordination between two local military councils under the command and control structure of the FSA, signaling the continued weakness in General Idris' ability to exercise command and control over grass roots military councils. The FSA's loss at al-Qusayr was a blow to its credibility as a national structure.[54]

Although the regime and assisting forces including Hezbollah did not destroy rebel forces in al-Qusayr, it was effective in that they successfully cleared the city, thus denying rebels a once-vital support zone. Debilitated but not destroyed, rebels were able to move their base of operations to other areas along the Lebanese border that had previously been less prominent, namely Tal Kalakh and the Qalamoun mountain range.[55]

Other Fronts During al-Qusayr (April–June)

As the regime fought for a decisive victory in al-Qusayr, rebels continued to execute "named" operations in other theaters of the war. Assigning a name to an operation, such as "Operation One Body," indicates a degree of advanced planning and intent, and therefore can be considered more significant than unannounced movements. The emergence of rebel systems around distinct supply hubs allows these systems to operate with a degree of independence from one another. Therefore, the regime's targeting of the rebel system at al-Qusayr relieved pressure on the regime's central corridor, but it did not defeat the opposition. These concurrent operations serve to illustrate both the autonomy and interconnectedness that may exist among rebel systems.

Damascus

Operations in Qusayr did not preclude rebel counter-offensives in Damascus. In Damascus rebels came together for Operation al-Furqan in May 2013 to recapture villages in eastern Ghouta and reopen critical supply lines. Al-Furqan demonstrates improved ability of particular rebel groups to coordinate for shared objectives. The groups involved in al-Furqan included FSA-linked battalions, Islamic brigades such as Ahrar al-Sham, and the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. The leader of the battle was the commander of the FSA's Liwa Shuhada Douma.[56]

Aleppo

Aleppo province consists in undulating farmlands in the north and west which turn into desert in the eastern part of the province. The province contains a large portion of Syria's border with Turkey.[57] As Syria's "second city" and commercial center, Aleppo has important symbolic significance for both rebels and the regime.[58] Though Aleppo city did not become a major battle ground until June 2012, rebel support zones in Aleppo province are among the most developed, using the permissive Turkish border to access resources.[59] Additionally the proliferation of camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees along the Syrian-Turkish border has created ideal grounds for rebels to recruit additional forces.[60] At the time of the al-Qusayr offensive, the regime

maintained positions in the north at Menagh as well as the towns of Nebul and Zahra, a large military facility in Hamdaniya, as well as other western neighborhoods and suburbs such as Khan al-Assal, and in the east at the Nayrab airbase as well as Aleppo Central Prison and the Kindi Hospital. Rebels controlled many of the eastern neighborhoods and towns along the south-eastern entrance to city namely, as-Safira, and controlled large swaths of the northern countryside.

For these reasons, the rebels need to control Aleppo for its many support zones and the regime needs to control the city and in addition to its environs in order to defeat rebel forces. The regime chose not to concentrate significant forces in Aleppo when it redistributed forces in late 2012.[61] Subsequent attempts to control Aleppo, however, are a key indicator of the extent to which the regime's end-state encompasses the entire central zone of Syria.

During the regime's al-Qusayr offensive there were three focal points for rebel operations in Aleppo province: Menagh airbase, Aleppo's north-eastern suburbs and the regime's positions at Aleppo Central Prison, and the Safira defense factories at the south-eastern entrance to the city. On April 1, 2013 Ahrar al-Sham, Tawhid Brigade, and Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA) announced operation "Liberation of the Prisoners."[62] According to a report from Al-Jazeera, the attack represented the first time rebels had used heavy weapons inside the city.[63] The operation was aimed at taking military assets on Aleppo's northern boundary and, most notably, targeted the Aleppo Central Prison, which contained 4,000 prisoners at the time according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.[64] The prison had become the subject of humanitarian efforts after reports surfaced that prisoners were malnourished and being executed by regime forces.[65] The offensive continued into May, achieving a string of small victories at northern military installations around Aleppo Central Prison, including the seizure of an Air Defense Base in the northern suburb of Handarat. On May 15, rebels conducted a major offensive against Aleppo prison involving two simultaneous Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (SVBIEDs) which they detonated against the compound walls.[66] By nightfall

the regime had responded, Syrian state news denied the compound's walls had been breached, and warplanes had bombarded the areas around the prison.[67] The offensive was ultimately unsuccessful, as no prisoners were freed. The operation was important, however, as a milestone establishing the tactical leadership of JMA's Abu Omar al-Shishani, who would soon be named head of ISIS's northern operations.[68] The prison would continue to be the target of JN VBIEDs throughout the summer.[69]

At the south-eastern entrance of Aleppo city, rebels announced "Operation Repel Aggression" on April 29th in which Tawhid Brigade, Ahrar al-Sham, the FSA, and other small brigades would target the Safira defense factories in order to disrupt "regime convoys moving back and forth between the Safira defense factories and Aleppo [city]."[70] The statement also announced the formation of a new Aleppo Central Operations Room, which would feature prominently in subsequent named operations. During the announcement both Col. Akidi and former Tawhid Brigade leader Abdulqader Saleh appear at the center of the room, demonstrating the involvement of two leading figures of the Aleppo front in both the offensive and the operations room.

Meanwhile, in the northern Aleppo countryside a series of videos released a day later on April 30th place Colonel Akidi alongside Gen. Salim Idris as well as the leaders of the Northern Storm Brigade and the Suquor Shuhada Brigade on the front lines at Menagh airbase.[71] Five days later, these groups launched a large attack against Menagh airbase during which rebels reported storming and seizing section of the base.[72] The Northern Storm brigade (affiliated with the FSA) had been at the forefront of the siege of Menagh in early 2013. The presence of Gen. Idris and Col. Akidi, speaks to the importance of the attack on Menagh, indicating that it was a primary focus for the FSA at this time.[73]

These concurrent operations occurred in three distinct areas of Aleppo province which were logistically disconnected from one another; regime strongholds in Nebul and Zahra as well as in western Aleppo disconnected the fight for Menagh from the Safira and Aleppo prison offensive. Regime control of Nayrab airbase also served as an impediment to logistical connections between these offensives. The overlap of groups such as Ahrar al-Sham

and the Tawhid brigades as well as Akidi's participation in two out of the three offensives suggests a degree of operational coordination at a provincial level.[74]

Idlib

Idlib lies to the east of the an-Nusariyah mountain range which separates central Syria from the Mediterranean coast and contains the rural hills of az-Zawiya mountains.[75] Idlib contains a significant portion of the M5 highway, which has functioned as the regime's primary Aleppo-Hama supply line.[76] It also contains the majority of the Latakia-Aleppo section of the M4 which runs north-east from Latakia and converges with the M5 in Saraqib. The cross section of these two supply lines frames Idlib's importance to the regime. While the regime focused on urban centers, border regions, and coastal province in 2012, rebels developed robust support, staging, and attack zones in Jebel az-Zawiya, with cross-border supply lines that run through Idlib's 30 km border with Turkey.[77] Idlib also hosts a number of rebel systems with robust support zones in which rebels have access to supplies from the Turkish border and exercise a relatively high level of freedom of movement.[78]

In the first half of 2013, rebel operations in Idlib focused efforts on their siege of regime positions in Wadi al-Deif and the disruption of regime's resupply to these bases from its strongholds in Hama.[79] The "Battle for Reinforced Structures," a named rebel offensive launched in December 2012, targeted check points on the section of the M5 between Wadi al-Deif and the town of Hish.[80] The offensive lasted until the regime broke the rebel siege of Wadi al-Deif on April 14th, one of the first instances in 2013 of the regime overturning the rebels' early momentum.[81] A number of groups participated in the offensive including Suquor al-Sham, al-Fajr al-Islam (now part of Suquor al-Sham), Liwa Daoud, Ahrar al-Sham, and JN.[82] The rebel groups' ability to block this supply line in early 2013 led the regime to open the alternate Hama-Aleppo supply line in March 2013, thereby bypassing Idlib province.[83] Immediately after the end of the "Battle for Reinforced Structures," Abu Mohammad al-Amr, the leader of the operation, announced the beginning of "Battle to Defeat the Enemy out of Maarat an-Numan" in a video uploaded onto YouTube on April 13th.[84] In the video, Al-Amr also

announced the formation of a joint operations room lead by Suquor al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, and the Idlib Military Council. Although the exact objectives and tactical tasks under the "Battle to Defeat the Enemy out of Maarat an-Numan" are unclear, rebels continued to conduct operations to reestablish the blockade of Wadi al-Deif and Hamadiya with limited success, led by Suquor al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham.[85]

Rebel groups' operational objectives in Idlib during al-Qusayr centered on securing supply lines from Turkey and disrupting regime supply lines within the province. Unlike rebel operations in Aleppo, those in Idlib did not demonstrate rebels' intention to affect battlefronts in other parts of the country. For the regime Idlib served as a transit zone, rather than an area to be cleared and retained in the manner of Homs or Aleppo.

Hama

Historically, Hama province has been an important agricultural and industrial center. It contains the al-Ghab plain, 160 square miles of arable land with road and rail networks connecting Latakia to Syria's northern and central provinces.[86] Hama also contains a portion of the M5 between Homs and Aleppo and a secondary supply route running east through Salamiyah between Hama and Aleppo.[87] For the regime, securing the al-Ghab plain is essential to isolating its Latakia stronghold from rebel advances. Control of Hama is also important to the regime's ability to send resupply and reinforcement to its positions in Aleppo using either the primary or secondary supply lines. Rebel forces are limited in their ability to conduct operations in Hama due to the regime's stranglehold on the province. The regime's control of Hama also disrupts logistical connections between rebels in the northern and central parts of Syria from rebels in Damascus and the south. In 2013, a number of named rebel operations targeted the regime's alternate supply route which runs through northern Hama, demonstrating Hama's connection to both the Aleppo and Idlib fronts.

In the midst of the regime's campaign to clear al-Qusayr's surrounding villages, a rebel coalition including Suqour al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham announced a new operation called "One Body" in late April 2013.[88] According to the official video announcement, the campaign would

focus on barracks and military points in the region from Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib to northern Rif Hama down to the Salamiya Highway in order to disrupt the regime's ability to use its alternate supply route and impede access to Aleppo.[89] Though it was not explicitly stated in the announcement, it has been implied in media coverage of the operation that the objective was to take pressure off rebel fighters on the Homs battlefront by forcing the regime to engage rebels in Hama.[90] Whether or not this was the intent behind "One Body," the operation was ineffective in diverting regime troops from Qusayr or at disrupting regime operations in Hama permanently.

PHASE II: OPERATION NORTHERN STORM (JUNE 2013)

Regime Moves to Aleppo

In the days before the fall of al-Qusayr, reports indicated that pro-regime forces had begun a swift advance towards Aleppo in lieu of regime force consolidation in positions surrounding al-Qusayr. In operation "Northern Storm," the government's named offensive (not to be confused with the rebel group by the same name) which was officially announced on June 9th, the regime would change its defensive posture in Aleppo to an offensive one.[91] Preparatory steps of the operation involved flying in reinforcements in order to set up forward operating bases at the Shi'a majority towns of Nebul and Zahra, both of which house large contingents of National Defense Forces that have successfully held off invading rebel forces.[92] These reinforcements consisted of regular forces as well as Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a militia fighters.[93] The goal of the new offensive was to attack rebel support zones in order to reestablish the regime's presence in Aleppo. A Hezbollah commander reaffirmed the intent to launch an offensive on Aleppo against rebel support zones saying, "We are going to go after strongholds where they think they are safe. They are going to fall like dominoes."[94] Leading up to the offensive, the number of Hezbollah fighters in Aleppo province was said to be between 2,000, according to a Hezbollah commander, and 4,000, according to FSA political and media coordinator Louay al-Mokdad.[95]

The regime's decision to shift to Aleppo in June 2013 is contrary to the logical progression of military activity which would have been to consolidate its control of Damascus and the central corridor before further extending itself to the north and east. There are a number of possible explanations for the regime's recalibration. First, the regime may have wanted to capitalize on its own strength and exploit rebel weaknesses following al-Qusayr. The decision to move to Aleppo could have been based on the regime's perception that it could carry the initiative farther north, taking advantage of fractured rebel forces still reeling from their recent defeat. Given that rebels from the FSA and Tawhid Brigade had moved from Aleppo to reinforce rebels in Homs, the regime may have felt it could take advantage of diminished rebel forces in the north. The regime was also well suited for a military push into Aleppo following Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's pledge on April 30th to enter the war in Syria decisively.[96]

A second factor which could have influenced the regime's move is the need to check rebel gains in Aleppo. In Northern Aleppo, rebel groups, namely Northern Storm, had besieged Menagh airbase. They had effectively isolated it from other government controlled areas, limiting the regime to aerial resupply via parachute because it had become too dangerous for regime helicopters to land at the base as at least two helicopters where downed during resupply efforts.[97] In May 2013, rebels captured significant portions of the Menagh base. In eastern Aleppo, rebels had besieged Nayrab and Kuweiris airbases, and JN and Ahrar al-Sham regularly targeted the Safira defense companies.[98] Meanwhile, rebels in Idlib had made significant progress in disrupting regime supply routes along the M5 and M4 highways in the first half of 2013. Although rebel groups focused on specific tactical targets such as the Wadi al-Deif military base and checkpoints on the Ariha-Latakia road, these fights in southern Idlib along the Maarat an-Numan axis and western Idlib cumulatively had the operational effect of making regime resupply into Aleppo city via the M5 challenging.

In addition to disrupting the regime's ability to resupply and reinforce its positions in Aleppo by attacking airbases and GLOCs into Aleppo, rebels increasingly targeted supply lines linking regime positions to one another within Aleppo. In early February 2013, rebels took
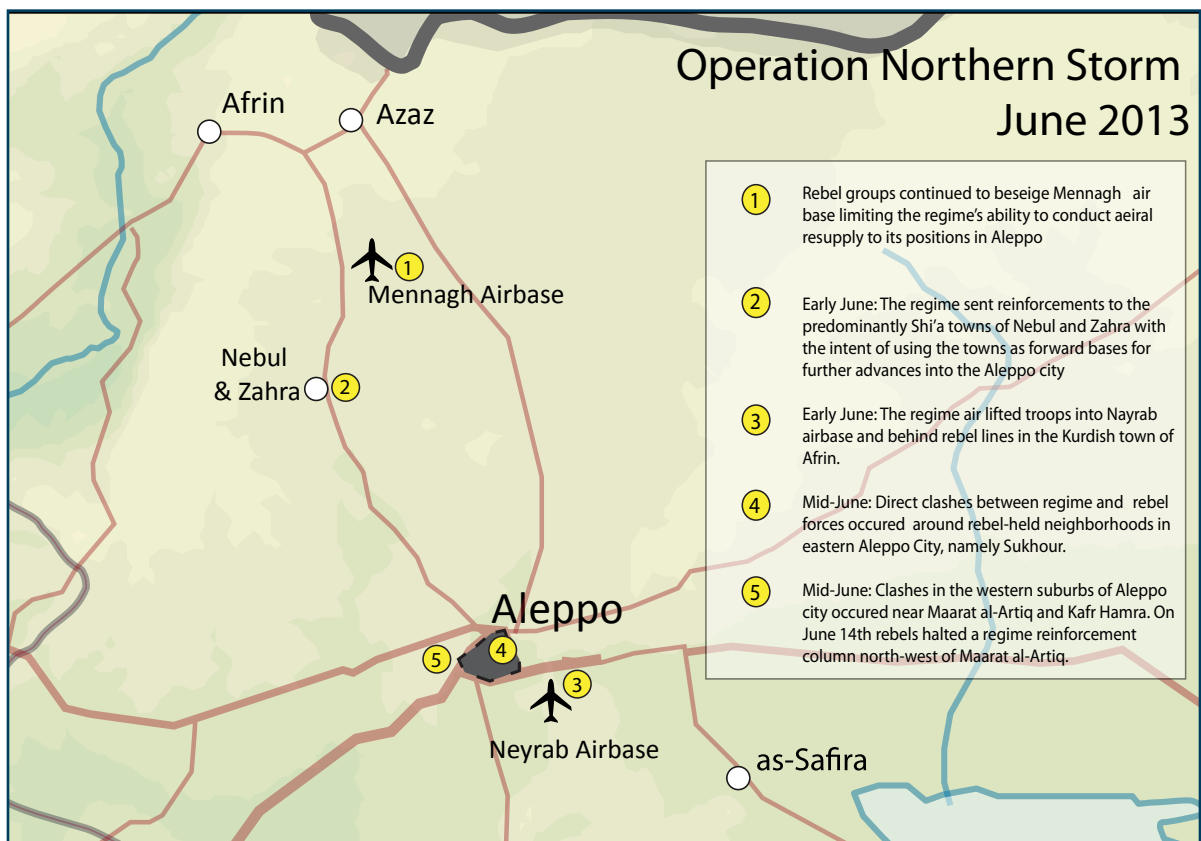
control of the Sheikh Saeed neighborhood in Aleppo city allowing them to cut off regime supply lines between Nayrab and other regime controlled areas in the city.[99] Regime resupply to bases within Aleppo city required heavy ground maneuvers with air support as summer of 2013 approached. For example, the regime had to bombard six different neighborhoods in Aleppo city amidst clashes with rebel forces in May in order to move a convoy from regime strongholds (either in western Aleppo or Nebul and Zahraa) trying to reinforce and resupply Aleppo central prison.[100] In aggregate, by June 2013, rebels had enhanced their control of major regime supply lines into and within Aleppo, thus compelling the regime to check the opposition's gains.

As an additional consideration for the regime, immediately after the fall of al-Qusayr President Obama announced that the U.S. would begin supplying lethal aid to the rebels. This announcement almost certainly affected the regime's calculus and desire to disrupt rebel freedom of maneuver in northern Aleppo, especially since they controlled the supply lines emanating from Turkey.[101]

Regime Offensive: Operation Northern Storm

As of June 2013, the regime's strong points in Aleppo were neighborhoods around the Old City such as Maysaloun and al-Midan and areas of western Aleppo city, primarily the Hamdaniya neighborhood.[102] The regime maintained forces in Menagh, Nayrab (co-located with Aleppo International Airport), and Kuweiris airbases, all of which were under siege by rebel forces.[103] Within Aleppo city, rebels operated out of areas east and north east of the city such as al-Sukhour and Jebel Badro; and al-Rashdin and the suburbs of Maarat al-Artiq in the west.[104] Northern parts of the city were largely controlled by Kurds.

In preparation for operation "Northern Storm," regime forces took positions in the north-western outskirts of Aleppo city near Layramoun and Maarat al-Artiq, sent reinforcements into Nebul and Zahra, and air lifted troops into Nayrab and the Kurdish-controlled town of Afrin which is behind rebel lines.[105] According to one rebel commander and former senior officer in the Syrian military, the aim of the regime's tactics was to "use [Nebul and Zahra] as forward bases to make

Operation Northern Storm
June 2013

1. Rebel groups continued to beseige Mennagh air base limiting the regime's ability to conduct aeiral resupply to its positions in Aleppo

2. Early June: The regime sent reinforcements to the predominantly Shi'a towns of Nebul and Zahra with the intent of using the towns as forward bases for further advances into the Aleppo city

3. Early June: The regime air lifted troops into Nayrab airbase and behind rebel lines in the Kurdish town of Afrin.

4. Mid-June: Direct clashes between regime and rebel forces occured around rebel-held neighborhoods in eastern Aleppo City, namely Sukhour.

5. Mid-June: Clashes in the western suburbs of Aleppo city occured near Maarat al-Artiq and Kafr Hamra. On June 14th rebels halted a regime reinforcement column north-west of Maarat al-Artiq.

advances in Aleppo and its countryside."[106]

Clashes between regime and rebel forces during operation "Northern Storm" in the first half of June took place in Aleppo's north-western farmlands, on the western outskirts of the city, and in the rebels' eastern city strongholds. In Aleppo's north-western countryside, government forces reinforced defenses at Menagh Airbase, and started to deploy on a large scale in the surrounding countryside. At the time of the regime offensive, Menagh was already partly overrun with rebels, and daily clashes were reported in Nabul and Zahra.[107] To make the transition from defense to offense, however, would require a massive regime effort.

Inside Aleppo city, regime forces, possibly including Hezbollah and Iranian fighters, attempted to storm the al-Sukhour neighborhood on June 12th from the adjacent Sheikh Khudur neighborhood. [108] The rebels in control of the neighborhood, including Tawhid Brigade, dug a tank trap and successfully repelled the regime advance, reportedly destroying one regime tank.[109]

Fighting in the western suburbs of the city concentrated on Maaret al-Artiq and Kafr Hamra as the regime tried to storm the rebel-held neighborhoods likely in an attempt to open up supply routes between Menagh and Hamdaniya.[110] On June 14, 2013 rebels halted a regime armored reinforcement column northwest of Maaret al-Artiq that may have been headed for Nebul and Zahra or Menagh. [111] At this time, rebels fighting in Maaret al-Artiq were strengthened after receiving at least 50 Russian-made Konkurs anti-tank missiles. The weapons were obtained either through a Saudi arms shipment or were seized from regime bases.[112] With this success, the tide turned in favor of the rebels, who had been on the retreat for the past week.[113]
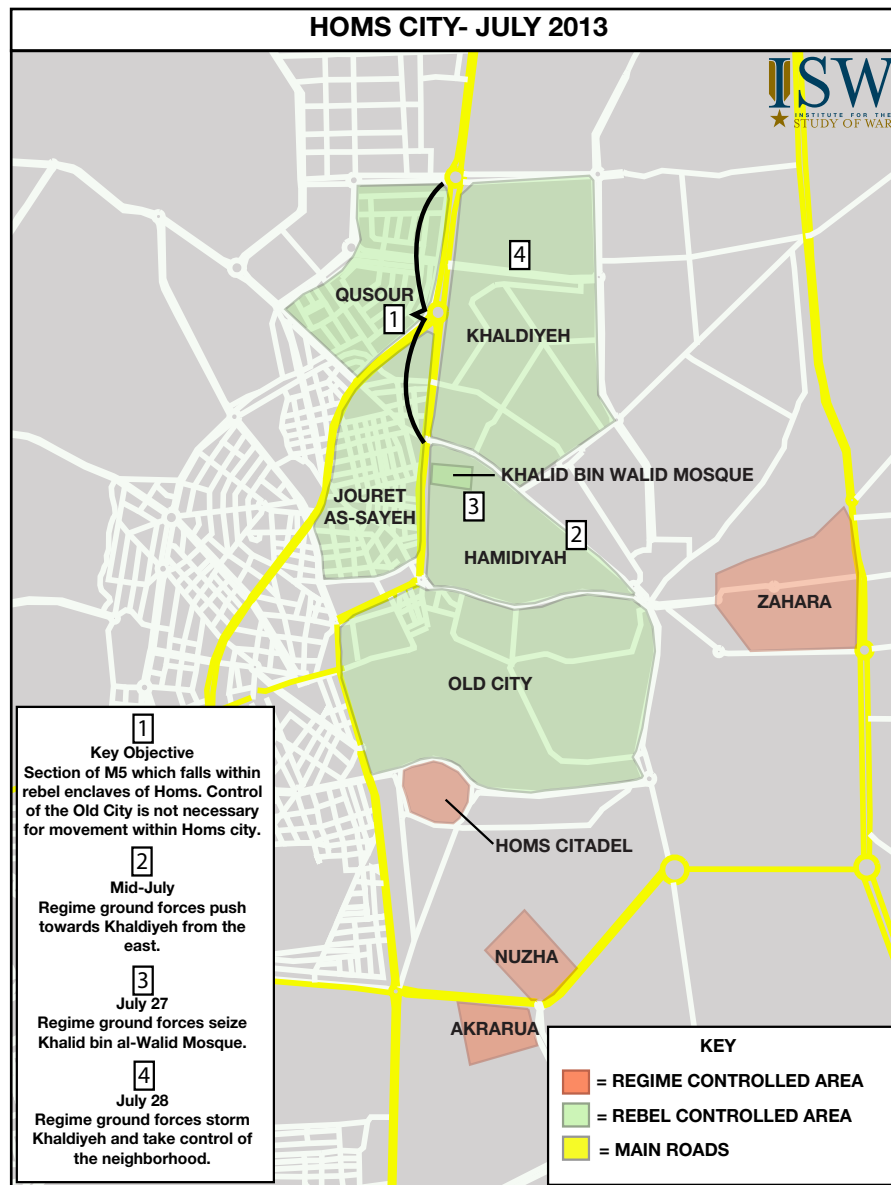
On June 22, 2013 the FSA command announced a new offensive inside Aleppo called "Qadisiyia," to liberate western neighborhoods.[114] The regime began to withdraw. Colonel Akidi said on June 25 "they [regime forces] went back to their bases."[115] Operation Northern Storm culminated before achieving its objective, and the Qadisiya counteroffensive bore further fruit in July 2013.

PHASE III: REGIME RETURNS TO HOMS (END OF JUNE-JULY 2013)

As the regime prepared for operation Northern Storm in Aleppo, regime forces in Homs, remaining since the fall of al-Qusayr, continued the fight for Khaldiyeh in Homs city, which was originally launched in March 2013. Regime airstrikes and bombardments concentrated on rebel support zones in the Qal'at al-Husun, the Houleh region, Rastan and Talbisseh, and Homs' Old City. Meanwhile, clashes occurred between regime and rebel forces in Rastan, Qalat al-Husun, and Homs' Old City. The regime also made at least two attempts to storm Khaldiyeh and other parts of the Old City.[116] Kinetic activity in Homs province began to escalate in the last week of June as activists inside Homs city reported that the regime had begun bringing in reinforcements.[117] The simultaneous intensification of regime activity in Homs province and the de-escalation of operation Northern Storm in Aleppo suggest these reinforcements came from the Aleppo front.

The regime had decided to move forces from Homs to Aleppo without consolidating its gains after the fall of al-Qusayr for one of two reasons: either the situation in Aleppo (due to rebel activity, geopolitical considerations, or a combination of the two) *compelled* the regime shift its focus or, buoyed by Hezbollah's decisive entry into the war, the regime *chose* to pursue an operational objective of fighting on two fronts. Regardless, the regime's return to Homs in late June demonstrates its inability to launch sequential campaigns without operational pause in the summer of 2013.

The regime's renewed attention to the Homs offensive in late June 2013 began in Tal Kalakh where clashes erupted after pro-regime forces, following similar tactics used in al-Qusayr, encircled the town to cut off rebels from resupply and reinforcements. Tal Kalakh, which is located near the Homs-Tartous highway on the Lebanese border, provides similar opportunities for rebels as al-Qusayr did. Its proximity to the Lebanese border and access to cross-border supply lines from rebel-supportive Sunni communities in northern Lebanon makes it an ideal support zone for rebel forces. Following initial clashes, however, 39 local FSA leaders agreed to give up control of the town and surrender their weapons to the regime.

HOMS CITY- JULY 2013

1
Key Objective
Section of M5 which falls within rebel enclaves of Homs. Control of the Old City is not necessary for movement within Homs city.

2
Mid-July
Regime ground forces push towards Khaldiyeh from the east.

3
July 27
Regime ground forces seize Khalid bin al-Walid Mosque.

4
July 28
Regime ground forces storm Khaldiyeh and take control of the neighborhood.

KEY
= REGIME CONTROLLED AREA
= REBEL CONTROLLED AREA
= MAIN ROADS

That the regime opted to occupy the town rather than destroy the rebels, suggests the regime's primary intent was limited to preventing rebel access to resupply.[118]

After occupying Tal Kalakh, the regime forces reinvigorated the Homs city front. According to one SAA officer, "military operations never stopped in Homs, but their pace increases according to priorities." Rebels are heavily entrenched in the central Old City of Homs as well as the neighborhoods at the northern city entrance of Khaldiyeh, Hamidiyeh, al-Qusour, and Jouret as-Shayeh.

The regime's objective was to take Khaldiyeh in order to regain control of the section of the M5 at

the northern entrance to Homs city. On June 30th regime bombardments and air raids intensified on the neighborhoods of Homs' Old City which had been under siege by regime forces since 2011.[119] Clashes between pro-regime forces and rebels fighters took place on the edges of the Old city, Jouret al-Shayeh, and al-Qusour as regime forces fire mortar shells at buildings in the neighborhoods.[120] On the 9th day of the offensive, following airstrikes and artillery bombardments, ground units began to advance into the rebel-controlled districts.[121] After a failed attempt at storming Khaldiyeh, regime forces began to push toward the Khalid bin al-Walid mosque in order to separate Khaldiyeh from the rest of the old city.[122] Throughout

the offensive, Hezbollah used the predominantly Alawite neighborhood of az-Zahra, located to the south-east of Khaldiyeh, as a rear base.[123] Hezbollah's involvement in Homs, however, was reportedly more limited that than it was in al-Qusayr.[124]

By the second week of July 2013, government forces had captured the area surrounding the Khalid bin al-Walid mosque and had made advances into the Khaldiyeh neighborhood.[125] An opposition activist described the regime's offensive saying, "the war here is now from building to building … they are trying to take the area a block at a time."[126] These sectional clearing operations in order to control and retain an urban center, which were most prominently used in al-Qusayr, are an example of the regime learning tactics from Hezbollah.

Throughout July regime forces continued to push in from the east into Hamdaniya in order to isolate Khaldiyeh from rebel enclaves in the old city. Only July 27th regime forces seized the Khalid bin-al Walid mosque which is located along the northern entrance to Homs city and at the southern edges of Khaldiyeh, effectively severing Khaldiyeh from rebel enclaves. The regime eventually gained control of Khaldiyeh on July 29, 2013.[127]

As the regime sought to destroy rebel forces in Homs city, rebels targeted civilian centers in predominantly Alawite pro-regime neighborhoods such as Akrama, az-Zahra and al-Nuzha, and Wadi al-Dahab.[128] On July 8, 2013 as the regime advanced into Khaldiyeh, a suicide car bomb and another unidentified blast targeted the predominantly Alawite neighborhoods of Akrama and al-Nuzha.[129] In early August, the al-Haqq Brigade also sent waves of rockets into Akrama, and targeted a weapons depot in Wadi al-Dahab.[130] According to some reports, rebels targeted Alawite neighborhoods in order to turn the population against the regime with the hope of forcing the regime to agree to a ceasefire.[131]

The rebels' tactics in Homs city illustrate dynamics which are particular to the Homs front. According to one resident of Homs, the city "divides into three areas: the rebel enclaves; pro-regime strongholds, often with large communities of Alawites; and areas with pro-regime sympathies…which are also tentatively controlled by the regime."[132] In Homs city, there is a high

correlation between regime supportive neighborhoods and predominantly Alawite neighborhoods, suggesting that the regime has been able to depend on demographic factors to neutralize rebel support in predominantly Alawite neighborhoods.[133] Some reports state that the regime has intentionally tried to replicate this demographic advantage by repopulating towns such as Tal Kalakh and Qala'at al-Husun with Alawite civilians.[134] Reports have also surfaced of the regime destroying property records in Homs so that Sunni residents can no longer enforce a claim to their land and homes.[135] In an open letter to the United Nations, General Idris emphasized this regime strategy, stating that regime forces were using barbed wire fences, barricades, and wide zones of landmine fields to seal the occupied areas and eliminate the possibility that the former, largely Sunni inhabitants would return to their homes.[136] As one NDF fighter explained during shaping operations leading up to al-Qusayr, "our tactics have changed — we are destroying [tunnels], so that they cannot make use of them in case they return to the area, as they've done elsewhere."[137]

Through the end of 2013, airstrikes and bombardments have continued in Homs city with no major gains by either side. The regime continues to besiege the remaining rebel-held neighborhoods in Homs, using its siege and starve tactic to defeat rebels within the city and neutralize their ability to mobilize. Denying the rebels access to al-Qusayr and Tal Kalakh and separating their area of control in Homs' Old City had effectively disrupted rebels' ability to launch large operations in Homs province. As an International Crisis Group report states, "the regime has if not entirely neutralised this front at least limited the danger from it."[138]

Rebels in the city sought to compel the regime to lift its siege through the named operation "Raining Fire." The operation, carried out by al-Haqq Brigade, Saraya al-Haqq, and JN, was first announced in early October 2013, threatening retribution against pro-regime installations and neighborhoods for the siege in Homs.[139] Under this operation, rebels have bombarded the Homs oil refinery and blown up two oil pipelines near the Homs-Tadmur highway, which is a major regime oil supply route to the country's northern and eastern cities.[140]

Rebel Gains in Aleppo During Operation Qadisiya (late June–July)

As the regime conducted operations in Homs city, rebels continued to fight for control of supply lines, making the most notable gains in Aleppo. The rebels' separate systems gave them the ability to continue multiple, simultaneous operations along different fronts.

The FSA's Operation Qadisiya, launched on June 21, 2013 in response to the regime's Northern Storm Offensive, targeted regime strongholds in western Aleppo.[141] The opposition planned to advance into the western neighborhood of Rashidin with the aim of removing military targets occupied by the regime, including a military research facility.[142] By July 3rd, the FSA reportedly held about eighty percent of Rashidin and had successfully severed the road between Khan al-Assal and Hamdaniya as well as the Aleppo-Damascus highway.[143] Fierce fighting persisted in Salahedine as rebels attempt to push into Hamdaniya from the east. On July 22, the FSA announced the capture of Khan al-Assal, blocking off the regime's primary supply route into Aleppo.[144] Khan al-Assal was the last government stronghold west of Aleppo, and in seizing it the rebels had significantly increased their control of western Aleppo countryside and the M5 supply line.[145] JN also released a statement on July 26th claiming to have taken control of Khan al-Assal.[146] JN had been fighting in the same areas of western Aleppo city as other rebel fighters throughout operation Qadisiya, but it is unclear to what extent the groups coordinated their operations.[147] This shared area of operation and similar operational goals makes it likely that JN and the FSA coordinated, even if covertly or informally.

The fall of Khan al-Assal allowed rebels to consolidate control of the regime's primary supply line into Aleppo city. The regime had to switch its logistical routes, and the opposition pursued them in order to disrupt the creation of alternate supply lines. In August Ahrar al-Sham announced the first phase of Operation Closing Ranks which focused on targeting regime convoys on the desert highway on the eastern Aleppo front. On July 23 Jabhat al-Nusra warned civilians not to use the Aleppo-Salamiya road due to JN's placement of improvised explosive devices along the highway. [148]A month later,
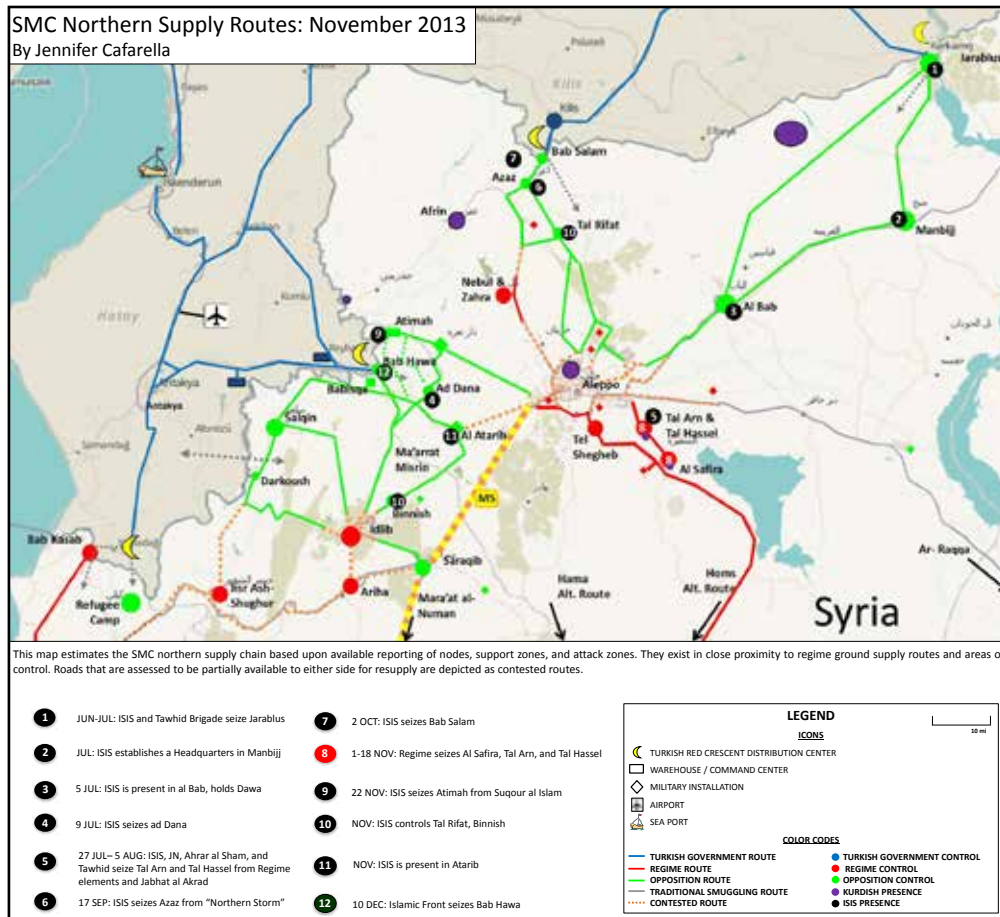
Ahrar al-Sham announced the second phase of Operation Closing Ranks with the stated objective of taking Khan al-Assir in order to cut off the regime's alternate supply lines to Aleppo city. The operation was successful, as rebels took Khanassir on August 27th and thereby closed the regime's secondary supply route. Another later rebel operation called "Battle of the Panting Chargers" [a reference to Sura al-'Adiyat of the Qur'an] led by Ahrar al-Sham and Tawhid Brigade targeted regime-held towns south of Aleppo city in order to consolidate control of this supply line.[149]

PHASE IV: RISE OF ISIS AND DECLINING SMC COMMAND AND CONTROL (AUGUST 2013)

The Rise of ISIS

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) emerged in April 2013 as a merger between JN and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the al-Qaeda's Iraq affiliate. The leader of JN, Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, quickly rebuffed the merger, claiming direct allegiance to al-Qaeda core. Since Baghdadi's announcement in 2013, ISIS has emerged as a second al-Qaeda-affiliated group in Syria. With an estimated 3,000-8,000 fighters, ISIS's tactical proficiency through its use of suicide VBIEDs and access to resources has made it a dominant force on the battlefield.[150]

Complementing its tactical proficiency, throughout the summer ISIS established areas of control in key terrain in northern and eastern Syria along the Turkish border, with a significant presence in towns such as Atmeh, al-Bab, Azaz, Manbij, and Jarablus. ISIS reached as far west as ad-Dana in Idlib.[151] According to one reporter who conducted interviews with Syrian rebels, aid workers, and civilians, ISIS uses such key terrain "to control who and what can move in and out of Syria."[152] ISIS's aggressive encroachment of border areas throughout 2013 affected the support zones of rebel systems throughout Idlib and Aleppo by disrupting their supply routes in many cases. ISIS's tactical capabilities initially improved rebels' ability to fight the regime but ultimately weakened rebel systems by seizing control of these crucial support zones.

SMC Northern Supply Routes: November 2013
By Jennifer Cafarella

This map estimates the SMC northern supply chain based upon available reporting of nodes, support zones, and attack zones. They exist in close proximity to regime ground supply routes and areas of control. Roads that are assessed to be partially available to either side for resupply are depicted as contested routes.

1	JUN-JUL: ISIS and Tawhid Brigade seize Jarablus	7	2 OCT: ISIS seizes Bab Salam
2	JUL: ISIS establishes a Headquarters in Manbijj	8	1-18 NOV: Regime seizes Al Safira, Tal Arn, and Tal Hassel
3	5 JUL: ISIS is present in al Bab, holds Dawa	9	22 NOV: ISIS seizes Atimah from Suqour al Islam
4	9 JUL: ISIS seizes ad Dana	10	NOV: ISIS controls Tal Rifat, Binnish
5	27 JUL– 5 AUG: ISIS, JN, Ahrar al Sham, and Tawhid seize Tal Arn and Tal Hassel from Regime elements and Jabhat al Akrad	11	NOV: ISIS is present in Atarib
6	17 SEP: ISIS seizes Azaz from "Northern Storm"	12	10 DEC: Islamic Front seizes Bab Hawa

LEGEND

ICONS

Turkish Red Crescent Distribution Center
Warehouse / Command Center
Military Installation
Airport
Sea Port

COLOR CODES

TURKISH GOVERNMENT ROUTE	TURKISH GOVERNMENT CONTROL
REGIME ROUTE	REGIME CONTROL
OPPOSITION ROUTE	OPPOSITION CONTROL
TRADITIONAL SMUGGLING ROUTE	KURDISH PRESENCE
CONTESTED ROUTE	ISIS PRESENCE

ISIS Takes Menagh Airbase

One of the major operations which established ISIS's battlefield dominance was its leading role in the final attack on Menagh airbase, which, as described previously, had been a significant rebel target for a number of months. By the time of the ISIS-led attack, Menagh was in an isolated position near the Turkish border, making regime resupply more difficult.[153] The airbase contained as many as 40 tanks according to opposition reporting, in addition to ammunition and other supplies.[154] Formerly a base for the regime's 4th Flying Training Squadron, Menagh also contained both MBB-223 and Mi-8 helicopters, allowing the regime to strike throughout Aleppo and northern Syria with ease.[155]

The siege of Menagh airbase had begun in August 2012, when rebel forces attacked the base with tank fire for the first time.[156] The battle intensified in late December 2012; the Syrian Observatory for Human rights reported that rebel forces advanced to the edge of the base grounds. Regime planes bombarded the area around the

base in response.[157] The FSA-affiliated Northern Storm Brigade played a leading role in the ongoing siege, under the command of a defected air force pilot named Abu Marwan.[158] In January, 2013, Abu Marwan reported that the government's logistical and supply routes to the base were threatened, and rebels interviewed claimed the "final battle" to capture the airbase was imminent.[159] However, aided by aerial resupply missions, Menagh held out against multiple attacks throughout the spring, including a large attack on May 5, 2013, during which rebels reported seizing and occupying parts of the base, and multiple VBIED attacks throughout June that destroyed large sections of the compound.[160]

Finally, on August 5, 2013, an ISIS-planned operation succeeding in breaching Menagh's walls. The formerly ISIS-affiliated Chechen jihadi group JMA provided the two suicide bombers who carried out the initial assault. The pair drove an armored BMP personnel carrier that "hardly moved due to its load" of explosives.[161] After breaching Menagh's defenses, a ground assault ensued on three axes around the base involving ISIS,

JMA, Liwa al-Fateh, and a number of FSA-affiliated brigades including the Northern Storm Brigade.[162] The ground assault on Menagh was a success, and a video uploaded to YouTube on August 6, 2013, shows rebel commanders reporting on the operation from inside the base compound. Although SMC member and head of the Aleppo Military Council Abd al-Jabar al-Akidi spoke first about the operation, ISIS emir Abu Jandal, who was standing next to Col. Akidi, also gave a statement.[163] Rebel commanders cited by the *Wall Street Journal* claimed ISIS led the final operation.[164]

The operation against Menagh airbase was one of ISIS's first major military operations in Syria and highlighted its ability to use asymmetric tactics, namely, sophisticated VBIED attacks, effectively in support of a ground offensive.

Opposition Intent and Competing Priorities

The fall of Menagh under ISIS's leadership highlights the SMC's diminishing operational relevance in the months after the fall of al-Qusayr and preceding the August 21st chemical weapons attacks on Damascus. The SMC, which was established as coordinating body for Western aid, was bound by the requirement to separate itself from Salafi and Salafi-jihadist groups. Increasingly, however, as illustrated by the rise of ISIS, these groups commanded better access to resources and tactical proficiency which allowed them to win battles against the regime, making these groups valuable partners on the battlefield.

Immediately following the fall of al-Qusayr, the Aleppo Front's Col. Akidi demonstrated the disconnect between the political considerations of the SMC leadership and the pragmatic needs of groups fighting on the ground saying, "As for the SMC they are located in Bab al-Hawa, and some of them are inside, some in Saudi, some in Lebanon … But majority are in Turkey. They're disconnected from reality. In fact I'm a member of this SMC but I don't attend their meeting and they don't matter to me." Later in the summer other rebel commanders made similar statements. The leader of Suquor al-Sham Ahmed Abu Issa defended Jabhat al-Nusra in June as an integral part of the revolution despite its AQ affiliation, and Zahran Alloush, head of the Islam Brigade, reportedly published a video welcoming

"jihadists from Iraq" to fight the regime in late July.[165]

By August 2013, the SMC's relevance on the battlefield and ability to implement campaigns through effective command and control was waning, particularly in northern Syria. It is possible that during this time the SMC focus was on Damascus. A series of incidents in the early weeks of August, including increased aircraft shootdowns, an assassination attempt on Bashar al-Assad, defections, rebel advances into Jobar, and escalated international/U.S. action, indicated a possible rebel offensive.[166] This was compounded by reporting from pro-Assad media stations run by Russia, Hezbollah, and Iran suggesting that the Syrian government believed that U.S.-trained forces would be coming online in August in support of a major rebel offensive on the capital.[167] If this was the case, the SMC likely had diverted its limited resources to planning a major Damascus offensive.

Regardless of the cause of the SMC's weakening capacity for command and control, distinct opposition campaign designs began to emerge more prominently on a national level in summer 2013. While a series of rebel alliances in the fall 2013 as well as a severe escalation in rebel infighting in January 2014 demonstrate more complex and nuanced centers of power, this competition is initially visible in the rise of simultaneous rise of ISIS and decline of the SMC's command and control. Though the rebel landscape is inundated with distinct rebel priorities and ideologies, ISIS's ability to express distinct end goals and seek to implement them on an operational level put it in competition with the SMC as a campaign designer.

Operation Liberation of the Coast

The emergence of distinct and competing campaign priorities was visible in the rebels' August Latakia offensive. As Menagh fell, ISIS showed its rising leadership in a campaign in Latakia where a coalition of rebel groups conducted "Operation Liberation of the Coast." On August 4, 2013 rebel fighters launched the operations, targeting Syrian military positions and unguarded Alawite villages in the Jebel al-Akrad area of the northern Latakia countryside. In the initial attack, up to 2,000 rebel fighters captured as many as 12 villages in the Jebel al-Akrad area of northern Latakia.[168] Rebels
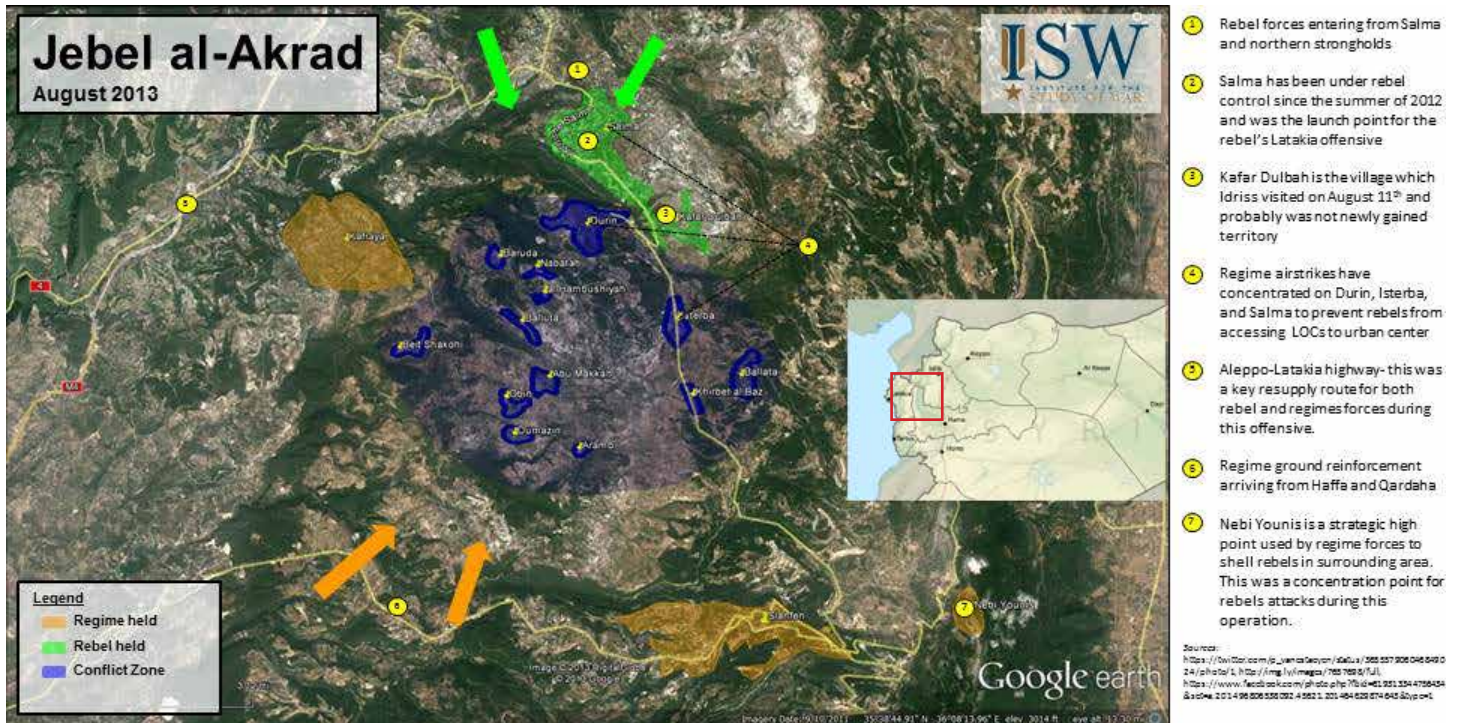
first targeted three government bases in the area and overran the facilities, taking two tanks.[169] From there rebels continued their offensive to a number of Alawite farming villages eventually seizing Barouda, Nbeiteh, al-Hamboushieh, Blouta, Abu Makkeh, Aramo, Bremseh, Isterba, Obeen, and Kharata on the same day.[170]

Of the 20 different rebel groups which participated in Operation Liberation of the Coast, a Human Rights Watch report identified Ahrar al-Sham, ISIS, JN, Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, and Suquor al-Izz (ISIS-affiliated) as the principle planners, fundraisers, and executors of the offensive.[171] The FSA also participated. Funding for this operation was facilitated through individual Gulf funders.[172] According to a military intelligence officer interviewed by HRW, the fighters had accompanying snipers and "attacked with cannons, mortars, multiple rocket launchers including grad rockets, *Shilkas* (armored vehicles that have antiaircraft cannons as their main armament), *DShKs* (heavy machine guns, typically seen mounted on the turret of a tank), and the tanks they had captured, in addition to small arms."[173] The rebel offensive demonstrated tactical proficiency of the leading groups, which were able to coordinate terrain knowledge of small local groups, namely Suquor al-Izz, Liwa al-Mujahideen, and Kata'ib Ansar al-Sham, with

the necessary logistical capabilities and resources of ISIS, JN, and the other partners in the operation.

Within two days regime forces launched counteroffensives and claimed to recapture a number of these villages, and by August 18th the regime made a major advance and claimed to have retaken all rebel positions in northern Latakia.[174] While rebels were initially able to use terrain to their advantage, the regime's advance on August 18th demonstrates its ability to leverage its air power successfully and rely on local paramilitary support to achieve its objectives without massive troop redeployment. In Latakia, the regime isolated rebel forces, thereby blocking off access to Latakia's urban center; on August 13th, for example, the regime the regime concentrated aerial bombing on the villages of Isterba, Durin, and Salma, all of which lie directly on the route to Latakia's coast.[175] Although there are isolated reports the regime may have pulled troops from the Idlib or Hama region to mount the counteroffensive,[176] it is more likely the regime was able to utilize the large number of National Defense Force members stationed farther south in Latakia. By some accounts, the NDF presence in Latakia numbers in the thousands, enough to defend the majority of the province without conventional forces.[177]

Despite an apparent military defeat, the initial rebel success in Latakia demonstrated the increasing capacity and strength of Salafi and Salafi-jihadist groups in Syria relative to the FSA and many SMC-affiliated opposition groups. ISIS and JN, in particular, which led decisive operations on Menagh airbase and the Hamidiyeh military base, two high-profile rebel offensives in August, demonstrated the ability to coordinate effectively with groups at the local level.[178] In this manner, ISIS and JN were able to use access to resources to promote coordination and exercise a leadership role. During Operation Liberation of the Coast, rebels fighters targeted Shi'a and Alawite villages and the number of extrajudicial killings reported served to showcase the sectarian nature of this offensive.[179] ISIS statements explained Operation "Liberation of the Coast" as a reprisal attack for the regime massacre of Sunni civilians (and some fighters, reportedly) in Baniyas and Bayda, further south along Syria's coast.[180] In this light, the operation aimed largely at sectarian retribution and did not seek to control key terrain or weaken the regime's military capabilities.

The highly symbolic nature of this offensive, which brought the fight to the regime's coastal stronghold and only 10 km away from Assad's ancestral village of Qardaha, endowed it with the important revolutionary significance of "bringing the fight to the regime." This dynamic is underscored by tensions between ground commanders and the FSA leadership with respect to the Latakia offensive. On August 10th the FSA was forced to deny allegations that its battalions would be withdrawing from Latakia in response to rumors that the FSA leadership ordered ground troops to stop fighting.[181] Though this order cannot be verified, in an interview with Al-Jazeera, FSA Col. Mustafa Hashim said that the western front had been starved of arms by "backer countries." Additionally, one source reported a senior FSA commander saying that the United States opposed targeting Latakia due to the possible blowback of increased sectarian violence. ISIS and JN rhetoric in this campaign had a highly sectarian tone, and the contested area is predominately Alawite. Subsequently, FSA leader General Salim Idris visited Kafar Dulbah in Latakia on August 11th and issued a statement saying that the FSA was in Latakia to fight against regime troops and not Alawite civilians.[182]

These conflicting narratives over the FSA's participation in the Latakia offensive revealed a legitimacy challenge for the moderate opposition. While the FSA's participation in "Operation Liberation of the Coast" was essential for the support of its revolutionary base, in order to maintain military significance and access to weapons the FSA was also forced to "play by the rules" of its foreign supporters who wanted to contain sectarianism. This disconnect between FSA leadership and ground forces followed by a concerted effort by the leadership to distance themselves from the sectarian connotations of the Latakia offensive illustrates the constraints in which the FSA had to operate in order to maintain western support.[183] Another consideration here is that FSA resources might have been concentrated on Damascus, where there were indications of an upcoming rebel offensive to take the city. In this light, competing priorities between the FSA and groups such as ISIS are evident.

PHASE V: REGIME BATTLES ON MULTIPLE FRONTS (AUGUST-DECEMBER 2013)

In the late summer of 2013, while various opposition factions pushed forward in Aleppo and Latakia, the regime shifted its main effort yet again to Damascus. Bombardments, airstrikes, and fierce clashes in Damascus had been constant throughout 2013. However, operations by an FSA-led rebel coalition called the "Front to Conquer the Capital" reached a high-water mark of their Damascus operations by gaining positions near inner Damascus which threatened the regime's grip on the capital at the end of July. In addition to a notable escalation in rebel attacks, the regime during this period appears to have feared an upcoming rebel offensive and begun preparing for a preemptive attack, launching chemical weapons on August 21 as the first sally in the counteroffensive.[184]

The lack of a U.S. response to the August 21st chemical weapons attacks in Damascus gave rise to the realization by both the opposition and the regime that the U.S. was unlikely to intervene in the Syrian civil war.[185] This affected the battlefield beyond Damascus as it had a profound weakening effect on rebel groups associated with SMC and significantly altered balance of power amongst rebel groups in favor of Salafi and Salafi-jihadist groups.[186]

The SMC's failure to provide resources to groups under its command weakened its credibility as a legitimate coordinating body. This was exacerbated by its inability to command Western support, which eventually led to its disintegration as a legitimate coordinating body.

On September 24, 2013 the Aleppo-based al-Tawhid brigade issued a statement on behalf of 13 different rebel groups, eschewing the leadership of the National Coalition and the Syrian opposition government in exile.[187] The signatories to the statement included moderate Islamic groups, including Damascus' strongest brigade, Liwa al-Islam, but also included Ahrar al-Sham which is one of Syria's most dominant Salafist groups, and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. The inclusion of this hardline element caused immediate worry in the West and among Syria's political opposition-in-exile. This "coalition," however, never materialized meaningfully on the battlefield and Jabhat al-Nusra quickly renounced its connected to the statement.[188]

The coalition was likely established in connection to two main factors. First, ISIS had recently seized the border town of Azaz near the Bab Salameh border crossing in Aleppo, driving the FSA-affiliated Northern Storm brigade out of the town after several days of fighting in late September.[189] In an attempt to resolve the conflict, the Northern Storm brigade called on the Tawhid Brigade for assistance. Tawhid attempted to mediate a ceasefire with ISIS which ISIS did not abide by. Nonetheless, the decision to establish a coalition was a precursor to the competing centers of power that characterizes Syria's armed opposition as of January 2014. The second factor which likely influenced this coalition, was the unfulfilled threat of US intervention. As previously mentioned, this weakened the legitimacy of the SMC and made alternatives more appealing.[190]

While the September 24th coalition failed to manifest beyond the initial statement, it precipitated a number of subsequent alliances among rebel groups, which denounced Syria's Western-backed opposition yet sought to establish a structure which was distinct from that of ISIS and JN.[191] A number of new military operations rooms, which sought to establish a tactical coordination center for rebels fighting in a certain geographic area, also undercut the SMC's authority by channeling funds and resources to brigades outside of the SMC's official channels.[192]

The Regime's Simultaneous Offensives

In lieu of U.S. intervention following the August chemical weapons attacks, a joint U.S.-Russian resolution aimed to have Syria relinquish its chemical weapons.[193] Speculation exists about whether or not the regime has genuinely given up all of its weapons.[194] Regardless of whether or not the regime maintains access to chemical weapons, the loss of these weapons did not reduce the regime's ability to wage war. In fact, during the final months of 2013, the regime appears to have overcome the challenges it faced earlier in the summer and conducted multiple simultaneous offensives in Aleppo and Qalamoun in conjunction with Operation Capital Shield in Damascus. Throughout the fall kinetic activity in Damascus was the highest in the country.[195] The ability to conduct operations on two distinct fronts, along with supporting operations in the Damascus area, shows a significant change in the regime's capabilities.

Aleppo: The Regime Renews its Attack

In late September the regime launched a major operation to reopen its alternate supply route in order to secure its ability to resupply positions in Aleppo. The regime's second foray into Aleppo during 2013 came instead of a much-anticipated offensive against rebel strongholds in Qalamoun. This second offensive highlights Aleppo's importance to the regime and emphasizes the extent to which the regime's military objectives entail more than just control of a rump Alawite state.

There were a number of factors which likely framed the regime's decision to launch a second Aleppo offensive in the fall. Rebels' advances in western Aleppo under Operation Qadisiya and southern Aleppo province on the regime's alternate supply route ensured that the government's challenge of resupplying forces in Aleppo persisted. As previously mentioned, the overrunning of Menagh airbase by an ISIS-led assault in August 2013 further weakened the regime's remaining presence in the north.[196] On September 20, the Aleppo central operations room announced the "Battle of the Panting Chargers" with the stated objective of seizing control

MAP CIRCULATED BY AHRAR AL-SHAM

of major and secondary supply routes. The announcer described it as the first "joint operation between the majority of the factions operating in Aleppo province"[197] even though many of those factions had been cooperating for some time. Ahrar al-Sham, one of the most prominent partners in the operation, circulated a map showing villages south of Aleppo that the rebels wanted to wrest from regime control.[198] The operational plan, as shown on the map, depicts rebel forces advancing from the west, south, and east, near a regime defense factory, and continuing on towards southern Aleppo city and Nayrab military airbase.[199] Rebels claimed to liberate as many as 25 villages in southern Aleppo countryside.[200] Increased rebel infighting in September, however, namely a dispute between ISIS and the Northern Storm brigade over control of the Azaz border crossing, gave the regime an opportunity to attack rebel support zones.[201]

Significant augmentation of forces through support from Hezbollah, NDF fighters, and Iraqi Shi'a militia forces as well as training and logistical support from Hezbollah and Iran had improved the regime's capabilities. The regime could extend itself farther north without endangering its position on other fronts.[202] The regime

faced no constraints on its use conventional weapons to target civilians with impunity, including improvised weapons such as barrel bombs, so long as it did not use chemical weapons.[203] Thus, by September, the regime had not only the strategic imperative and force capacity to go to Aleppo, but also an enhanced opportunity due to rebel infighting and its improving standing in international politics.

In late September the regime launched an offensive to isolate then destroy rebel positions in the south-eastern countryside in order to secure the alternate Hama-Aleppo supply route which had been disrupted by rebel fighters.[204] As the regime's offensive began, Syrian activists began reporting sightings of a large military convoy with over 100 vehicles leaving the Hama Military Airport.[205] The convoy contained significant armed elements, and may have included as many as 25 T-72 tanks, in addition to personnel carriers, armored attack vehicles, and support helicopters.[206] From Hama, the convoy moved east through as-Salamiya and towards Khanassir via al-Athiriya. Regime planes and helicopters conducted preparatory bombardments on Khanassir and surrounding villages with barrel bombs. Regime forces

then seized the town on October 3rd.[207] The regime continued to as-Safira, which is located approximately 15.3 miles (24.6 km) away from the eastern entrance to Aleppo city.

In as-Safira, the regime isolated the town from its southern supply routes, and conducted a three-week campaign of air strikes and bombardments in order to clear the town.[208] During this campaign over 130,000 civilians fled from the town. By leveraging artillery and air power, the regime was able to facilitate ground clearance without committing large numbers of ground troops. The use of indirect fire to clear population centers in order to preserve ground forces has been an integral part of the regime's counterinsurgency strategy since 2012.[209] A regime spokesman proclaimed, "Our heroic armed forces gained full control over the town of Safira after a series of strategic operations … The importance of this new success for our armed forces is due to its strategic importance at the eastern gates of Aleppo."[210]

Weak rebel coordination in as-Safira

In response to the government's advances, rebel forces established the FSA-affiliated as-Safira Operations Room with the intent of massing and coordinating reinforcements.[211] The rebel forces participating in these battles include both Free Syrian Army brigades, coordinated by the as-Safira Operations Room, as well as Salafi groups including Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS.[212] The Operations Room, however, was unsuccessful in defending the city and rebels withdrew from the town on November 1, 2013.[213]

Soon after the fall of as-Safira Col. Akidi, the Supreme Military Council's top leader in Aleppo and the head of the FSA-affiliated Safira Operations Room issued a scathing video statement in which he accused the National Coalition of failing to support his command adequately and blamed a number of rebel groups for seeking to hold captured territory rather than coming to defend as-Safira itself.[214] In a Facebook post after the FSA's withdrawal, Akidi said that Safira fell "not because

REGIME AS-SAFIRA OFFENSIVE

1 Late September
Regime convoy leaves from Hama Military Airport, traveling on the alternate supply route through Salamiya and Athariya in the eastern desert.

2 Early October
Regime ground forces seize Khanasir after deploying barrel bombs against the town are surrounding countryside.

3 Mid October to Early November
Regime ground forces seize as-Safira after a 3-week isolation and bombing campaign that displaced at least 130,000

Legend
○ Town/Village
● Provincial Capital
Regime Route
Motorway
Secondary Route
✈ Airbase
Defense Factory
Areas of Engagement

a lack of ammunition – may God witness that we put all of the Revolutionary Military Council's capabilities in the hands of the operations room on the Safira front," suggesting discord among fighting groups.[215] The Safira Operations Room echoed Col. Akidi's sentiments, saying rebel groups failed to deploy enough fighters into as-Safira and singling out the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in particular as not having a single fighter inside the city. Jihadist sources pushed back against this allegation and instead blamed other groups for surrendering as-Safira, highlighting further the disunity present among the rebels.[216]

Regime Offensive after as-Safira (November- December 2013)

After the fall of Safira, the regime escalated its operations in Aleppo city concentrating its efforts on seizing Base 80 and securing the road between as-Safira and Nayrab airbase. Base 80, which is adjacent to Nayrab airbase, was responsible for securing the airbases before rebels seized it in February 2013.[217] On November 8th, regime troops launched what residents called the "heaviest barrage in more than a year" against rebel-held areas around Nayrab airbase, concentrating attacks on Base 80.[218] On November 10th, state media claimed that the

regime had taken full control of Base 80 after three days of heavy clashes.[219] According to a military source speaking to AFP, "all of the area southeast of the airport is in the hands of the army," and that reopening Nayrab airbase was "now possible."[220]

The regime's second focal point was the villages of Tal Aran and Tal Hassel located on the road between as-Safira and Nayrab airbase. The regime seized Tal Aran on November 10th.[221] From Tal Aran, the regime went after Tal Hassel, beginning by dropping barrel bombs on the town.[222] ISIS mobilized in defense of the town, detonating an SVBIED in the perimeter of Tal Hassel. Following the alleged inaction of ISIS in as-Safira, the mobilization of ISIS in defense of Tal Hassel is significant. ISIS's Abu Omar al-Shishani, framed the defense of Tal Aran and Tal Hassel this way: "this area is the most important to us, because the entry into it by the Nusayri [used as a derogatory reference to Alawites] army would lead to a great siege upon the city, where they will cut off the supply route to as-Safira, and also open up a coordination line for the Nusayri army between Kuweiris Airport and Aleppo International Airport. After that, it will focus its efforts on the northern countryside of Aleppo."[223] ISIS's mobilization against the regime can

Aleppo City
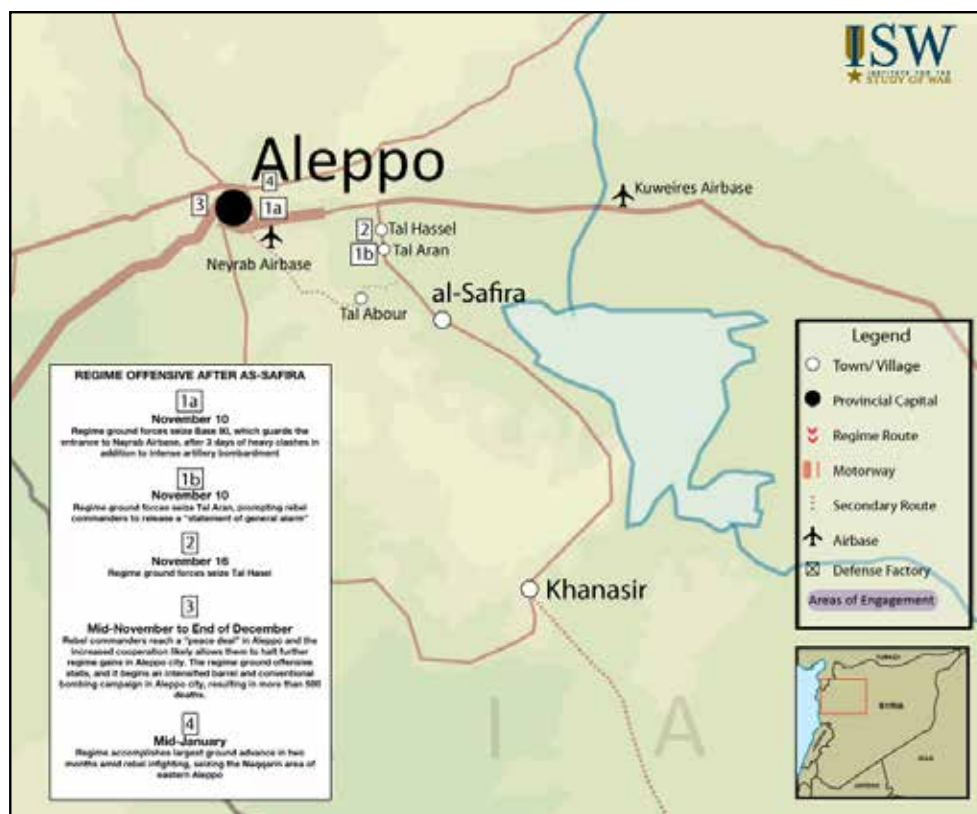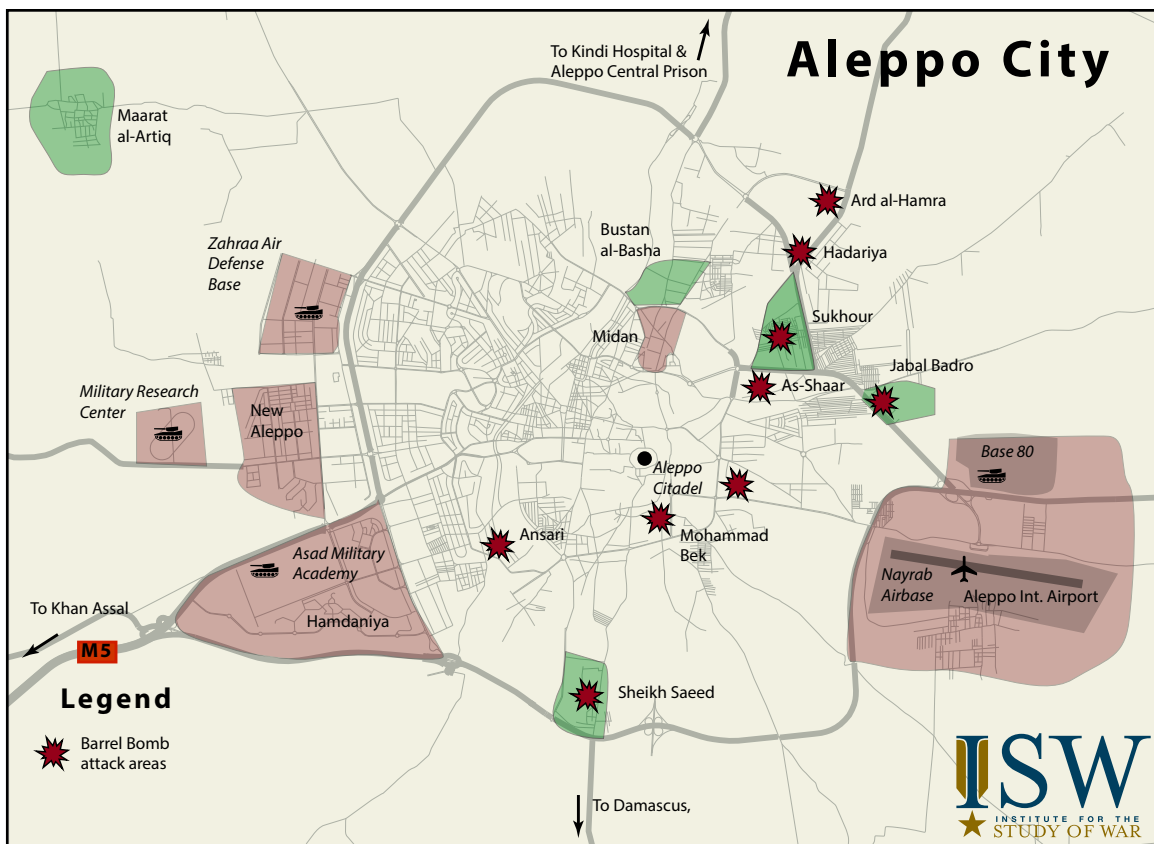
be explained by the strategic objective to maintain its supply lines and protect its northern support zone from regime incursion.

Rebel commanders were forced to recalibrate after as-Safira fell, as they realized Aleppo was threatened. On November 11th, 2013 amidst the regime's advances, rebels from Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Tawhid brigade, Ahrar al-Sham, and other Aleppo-based groups, released a "statement of general alarm" which called for all available rebel forces to come to the defense of Aleppo city.[224] ISIS also released a separate statement calling for enhanced cooperation "encouraging all brigades and Muslims to face off against the enemy."[225] Three days later, Ahrar al-Sham leader Hassan Aboud redeployed hundreds of fighters from Hama and Idlib to the Aleppo front, according to Ahrar al-Sham's website.[226] On November 18th, following a weekend meeting, commanders from ISIS, JN, FSA, and other groups reached a "peace deal" and agreed to focus their efforts against the regime in a joint counteroffensive, according to the Syrian Support Group.[227] Rebels, including ISIS, successfully merged their concept of operations by November 19th and were able to prevent

the regime from making additional advances.

While the regime was trying to secure the area around Nayrab and to seize the Safira-Aleppo supply route around the southern entrance to Aleppo city, severe regime bombardments also targeted rebel positions in northern and western Aleppo city.[228] The regime seized control of road between the as-Safira defense factories and Nayrab on November 15th thereby achieved its primary objective: opening its alternate supply line in order to maintain its ability to resupply and reinforce its positions in Aleppo city.[229] The regime, however, was unable to make additional advances into Aleppo city, suggesting that rebel defensive operations became more effective following a concerted effort to cooperate.

Regime Barrel Bombing Campaign

In mid-December 2013 the regime began a barrel bombing campaign which targeted the civilian population of Aleppo following the regime's stalled effort to advance into Aleppo city.[230] A barrel bomb is an improvised weapon filled with explosives and shrapnel and usually delivered by the Mi-8 (HIP C) and Mi-7 (HIP H) helicopters.[231] These munitions are relatively

REGIME TROOPS IN ALEPPO, JANUARY 13, 2014. PHOTO-REUTERS

inexpensive to make and are often used in northern Syria, where the regime has fewer remaining airbases and military installations. The blast of a barrel bomb is indiscriminate and they are unguided; the regime purposefully deploys barrel bombs in order to target the civilian population. In Aleppo city, the regime used barrel bombs in order to clear the city without committing large numbers of ground troops, a tactic seen repeatedly since 2012 as regime forces tried to regain city centers.[232] In the first two weeks of the campaign 517 civilians were killed in Aleppo city according to the Syria Observatory for Human Rights.[233]

The regime's mid-December barrel bombing campaign initially targeted Aleppo city but eventually included surrounding rebel strongholds in the western, northern, and southern countryside.[234] The December barrel bombing campaign further highlights the regime's strategic changes as it not only targeted the city center but also towns in key rebel support zones throughout Aleppo such as Manbij, Daret Izza, and Anandan.[235]

In 2014, the regime's Aleppo offensive continued and by January 15th the Syrian regime made the largest territorial gains in at least two months in Aleppo city, taking "complete control" over the Naqqarin, Zarzour, Taaneh and Subeihieh areas in eastern Aleppo near Nayrab Airport Base.[236] These areas, especially Naqqarin, were heavily contested in the regime's previous offensive, but rebels had managed to secure the neighborhoods against advancing regime troops.[237]

Qalamoun — Shaping the Damascus Fight

Straddling Lebanon's Beqaa Valley to the west, the Qalamoun area lies on Syria's strategic central corridor connecting Damascus to Homs. Like al-Qusayr, the towns in the rugged and mountainous terrain of Qalamoun are crucial to both rebel and regime interests.[238] For the regime, Qalamoun connects the capital to Assad's coastal strongholds in Tartous and Latakia. Qalamoun also provides the rebels with cross-border access to supplies from Lebanon. The rebel-supportive town of Arsal, Lebanon, serves as a safe haven and acts as a launching point from which to attack regime positions on the northern outskirts of Damascus. Rebel groups have operated with relative impunity in the towns scatted throughout the Qalamoun Mountains since the middle of 2012.[239] Rebels maintained key positions in towns such as Yabroud, Asal al-Ward, Rankous, and Talflita, despite the regime's heavy presence in a string of large military facilities flanking the base of the mountains in al-Qutayfa, ad-Dumayr, and an-Nusuriyah. Following the fall of al-Qusayr in June 2013 and the regime's August chemical weapons attack in Damascus, rebels amassed in Qalamoun, rapidly increasing from some 5,000 fighters to an estimated 25,000-40,000 in the early fall of 2013.[240]

Like other battlefronts throughout Syria, Qalamoun has not been isolated from Salafist groups and al-Qaeda affiliates, which are increasingly dominant on the battlefield. The presence of these groups in the Qalamoun area has caused a shift in rebel operations. Rebel operations in Qalamoun had been restricted to disrupting regime supply lines between Damascus and Homs. As the regime launched its al-Qusayr offensive in May, rebel groups from the Qalamoun area frequently targeted regime convoys moving northwards from Damascus.[241] Following a buildup of rebel forces throughout the summer months, however, rebel groups, particularly JN, Ahrar al-Sham, and Liwa al-Islam (now Jaysh al-Islam), began to launch more aggressive operations targeting military facilities. In early August 2013, for example, Jabhat al-Nusra, Liwa al-Islam, Tawhid Brigade, Quwat al-Mughawir, Shuhada al-Qalamoun, Katibat al-Khadraa (ISIS-affiliated), and other groups stormed the Danha arms depot seizing

weapons and ammunition.[242] Similar operations took place in early September when Liwa al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham stormed the Assad regime's 81st Brigade base in ar-Ruhaiba.[243] The shift in rebel operations can be attributed to both the irregular fighting tactics, such as car bombs, and greater fighting power of Salafist groups and al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria.

From the regime's perspective, securing Qalamoun also became an increasingly important operational-level objective as the regime continued its main effort in the capital, since the area is part of the support zone for northern Damascus. Specifically, the operational objective of the regime's battle for Qalamoun is controlling the contested section of the M5 highway between Qarah and Yabroud. As the fighting continued the regime pursued a piecemeal campaign plan focused on disjoining rebel held towns in the area and besieging towns with heavy rebel concentrations in order to gain control over the highway.[244] Due to the terrain, Hezbollah fighters have indicated that they will adapt guerilla tactics, operating in small squads; as one Hezbollah fighter said, "the strategy is one of reconnaissance, air power, artillery, and special

forces."[245] Some reports also suggest that Hezbollah and Syrian Intelligence have established assassination squads with the goal of targeting rebel figures in order to disrupt coordination and planning among armed groups operating in the area.[246] This suggests that Hezbollah's tactics in Qalamoun focus upon damaging the logistical connections between rebels in Qalamoun and their supporters in Arsal rather than clearing and holding territory as they did in al-Qusayr.

Hezbollah and Qalamoun

While operationally important for both the regime and Hezbollah, the battle for Qalamoun demonstrates a distinction in the interests and priorities of these actors. Evidence suggests that Qalamoun was a Hezbollah priority, rather than a regime priority. Until mid-November, the regime prioritized other battlefronts over Qalamoun, suggesting that the battle was not the regime's primary objective.

Speculation of a joint Hezbollah-Syrian regime operation to gain control of Qalamoun first emerged

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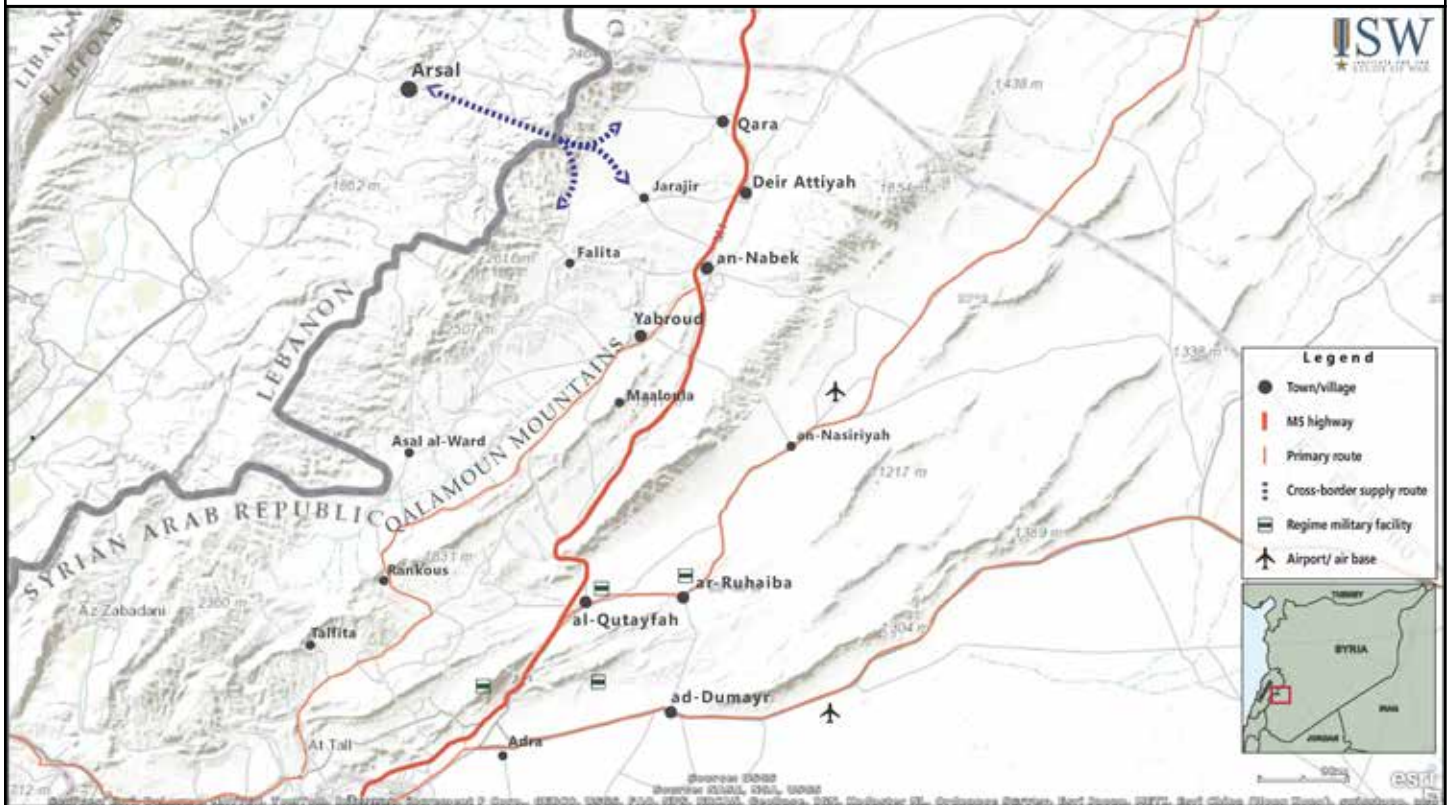
following the regime's victory in al-Qusayr. Hezbollah fighters reportedly began preparing for an offensive by conducting reconnaissance operations in the Qalamoun area.[247] Regime forces, however, quickly shifted attention to Aleppo in their failed attempt to force a decisive victory against the rebels in the northern city. In October 2013, despite another wave of reports on the imminent battle for Qalamoun, the regime focused military resources on campaigns in Damascus and the north. Pro-regime forces conducted operations to regain control of southern Damascus, cutting off an important rebel supply route when they captured Sbeineh on November 7th.[248] Pro-regime forces were also engaged in the fighting to reopen supply routes in southern Aleppo leading to the previously-mentioned capture of as-Safira.[249]

Hezbollah fighters, on the other hand, were particularly vocal about their intention to fight for Qalamoun. A propaganda video about Hezbollah's preparations for Qalamoun demonstrates this prioritization with the refrain, "After Al-Qusayr it will be Qalamoun."[250] The escalation in fighting in Qalamoun in November coincides with the culmination of operation "Safety

of Sayyida Zeinab" in which Hebzollah was more prominently involved than the Syrian Arab Army. The regime depended on Hezbollah for multiple operations, and Hezbollah could not necessarily command and control more than one offensive at a time.[251] For Hezbollah, Qalamoun's strategic significance transcends Syria's border with Lebanon and has important domestic implications. While levels of violence in Qalamoun were consistent through the summer of 2013, the number and nature of kinetic incidents have escalated on the Lebanese side of the border in Arsal; what was initially localized spillover which consisted in kidnappings and cross border airstrikes transformed into a staging ground for attacks against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon, including in Beirut.[252]

The Qalamoun offensive began in earnest on November 15, 2013, when the regime intensified its pursuit of its objective of severing rebel logistics by concentrating bombardments, which had occurred in the Qalamoun region throughout the summer, on the town of Qara. The offensive against Qara began with heavy shelling and regime helicopter bombardments as pro-regime forces

encircled the town. Four days later, the regime seized control of the town causing large-scale displacement as 2,200 families fled across the border into Arsal.[253] Following the fall of Qara, the regime increased operations in the neighboring towns of an-Nabek and Jarajir which lie on the M5.[254] As rebels mobilized for a counterattack, four suicide bombs targeted regime positions in an-Nabek and Deir Attiyeh on November 20th.[255] A joint operation led by JN called Operation "Swords of Islam" was also announced targeting the Cherubim Monastery located on the highest mountain of Saydnaya (nearly 2,000 meters about sea level), which was guarded by a small SAA unit with a tank. According to a video posted by the NDF, the attack was successfully repelled.[256]

In the first half of December, the regime seized control of an-Nabek and much of Yabroud and has continued heavy shelling throughout Qalamoun particularly on the towns of Deir Attiyeh, an-Nabek, and Yabroud.[257] In response, rebels brought the fight closer to northern Damascus suburb of Adra where most of the fighting has continued through January 2014.

CONCLUSION

In late November 2013, during a trip to Beirut President Bashar al-Assad said that the battle for control of the Qalamoun area along the Lebanese border would end in his favor. "Field operations will be terminated during the next six months," he said, and Syria "will resist the offensive it is undergoing."[258] Though Assad's public statements have demonstrated unwavering confidence throughout the conflict, his words have particular resonance at a time when the regime appears to be on the offensive on multiple fronts, and as the opposition and the regime come together at the negotiation table in Geneva.[259] As the conflict protracts into its third year, international attention has shifted from a decisive military victory to a political settlement as the means to bring an end to the violence. These hopes, however, fail to consider the facts on the grounds that make both outcomes unlikely.

By January 2014 the conflict remains at both military and political deadlock. A Syrian regime that was severely diminished in strength in January 2013 has been resuscitated by infusions of men and materiel from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia and from the formalization of pro-regime militias under the National Defense Forces. At the same time, the failure of the Supreme Military Command effectively to organize rebel battalions and deliver much-needed resources has led some of Syria's most dominant groups to disavow the nationally-organized opposition under the auspices of the Syrian Opposition Coalition and form separate alliances, most notably the Islamic Front.

Despite a lack of national-level command and control on the part of the rebels, the resilience of rebel systems as well as guerilla tactics and effective attacks by groups such as ISIS have prevented the regime from uprooting the armed opposition from the country and even from the major cities, including Damascus and Aleppo. Homs is the exception, not the rule. The resiliency of the opposition comes in large part from its decentralization. The various rebel systems of support and attack zones have created multiple centers of gravity for the opposition, thus diversifying the risk of systemic collapse rebel groups face when attacked by the regime on any given front. Rebel infighting, which escalated in January 2014, diminishes the advantages gained from this dispersion.

The regime in 2014 has the ability to fight on multiple fronts nearly simultaneously or in quick succession, and for the first time in the war it is not limited to fighting on one front at a time. This capacity is first and foremost the result of additional manpower from Hezbollah and National Defense Forces. In addition, the specialized light infantry capabilities that Hezbollah has brought have greatly mitigated the weaknesses of the Syrian Arab Army, which relied heavily on artillery and armor rather than infantry throughout 2012. Furthermore, Hezbollah and Iran have added improved advisory efforts that mitigate command and control difficulties, not just in the integration of the new forces but throughout the SAA as a whole. In addition, the regime has gained the ability to design as well as execute multiple, sequential and simultaneous operations, aided perhaps by the increase in reliable command and control elements including advisors.

Russian aid has been critical to the regime's sustainment throughout the war, and has provided critical capabilities in 2013. That support will likely increase in 2014. The Russian government increased weapons transfers to the Syrian regime from mid-December 2013 to mid-January 2014,

delivering "armored vehicles, surveillance equipment, radars, electronic warfare systems, spare helicopter parts, and various weapons including guided bombs for planes," according to an unnamed Middle East source cited by Reuters. Multiple sources also reported to Reuters that the Syrian government received weaponry and other supplies including UAVs since December, 2013, "arranged by Russia either directly or via proxies," possibly Bulgaria, Romania, or Ukraine. The weapons were delivered by "dozens of Antonov 124" Russian transport planes to Latakia airport, and by ship to Latakia and Tartous ports. In addition, the report says "Russian advisers and intelligence experts have been running observation UAVs around the clock to help Syrian forces track rebel positions, analyze their capabilities, and carry out precision artillery and air force strikes."[260] Russia is capable of supplying Syria with these weapons indefinitely; these weapons continue to give the Assad regime a significant battlefield advantage over rebel forces.

For the regime, the center of gravity is Damascus and the central corridor supply lines which connect Damascus to Aleppo and the coast. After the regime reconsolidated its forces in Damascus and Homs, its territorial control contracted temporarily. Events in 2013 demonstrate the regime's intent to fight for Aleppo as well as Damascus and the central corridor. It is likely that Assad's long term strategic end-state encompasses partial if not total territorial integrity. This is evident in the regime's multiple forays into Aleppo.

The battles for Aleppo and Qalamoun illustrate the regime's limitations and vulnerabilities. The first is its reliance on Hezbollah. Though Hezbollah and the regime share a common goal of the regime's survival in Syria, the battle for Qalamoun illustrates the potential for disparity in their strategic and operational priorities. In Qalamoun the sequence of events also demonstrates that regime still relies heavily on Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, which need to be freed up from the Damascus urban fight in order to pursue the Qalamoun fight. Opposition groups have identified this vulnerability and escalated attacks on Hezbollah positions in Lebanon, most recently with a series of car bombs in Beirut's Hezbollah controlled suburbs.[261] In Lebanon, the escalating political instability and security threats as a result of Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian war will constrain the nature if not the extent of Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime. The

Syrian Regime has incurred a long-term strategic risk by its reliance on Hezbollah as it has benefited from an immediate boost to its operational strength.

Aleppo is a persistent vulnerability for the regime. The advances by rebel forces and al-Qaeda groups in Spring 2013 posed a great threat to the regime because Aleppo is essential to the regime's desired outcome of the civil war, namely the re-establishment of regime control throughout the whole of Syria. If Assad were content merely to control a portion of Syria, including Damascus, Latakia, and the Lebanese border, he might have allowed Aleppo to slip under opposition control. Assad is unlikely to put aside his goal of wresting control of this key terrain from the opposition and al-Qaeda groups.

Although the regime can project into Aleppo, it does not have the capacity to launch a decisive operation to clear the city or destroy rebel forces, even in detail. The amount of combat power the regime requires to secure and retain territory, such as as-Safira, is so high that it is not able to do so quickly and efficiently, and retaining terrain is its greatest challenge. The barrel bombing campaign in December 2013 illustrates how the regime had to turn to inflicting mass casualties on civilians in order to relieve pressure and gain ground.

Assad's strategy seems to be playing for time. He is protracting the fight and the war of attrition, as he is better resourced than his opponents. Politically, the Assad regime has been attempting to mollify international condemnation in the wake of the August chemical weapons attack on Ghouta by declaring his stockpiles and inviting in inspectors to destroy them. Yet most of Assad's chemical arsenal remains in Syria in January 2014. Assad likely aims to retain power until the Syrian elections in spring 2014, at which point in time he can reassert his legitimacy to the international community. If he can buy time through the Geneva process, he may estimate that he will be able to retain power rather than stepping down.

It is harder, of course, to discern a coherent opposition strategy, since the opposition is decentralized and different groups often have disparate priorities. Indeed, competing campaign designs amongst rebel groups is hampering their success. This infighting has battlefield consequences, as is evident in Safira. The rebel groups are nevertheless continually reconfiguring their alliances to maximize their power, resources, effectiveness, and survivability. It should

be no surprise that Salafi-jihadist groups and Islamists are gaining power and influence relative to other components of the opposition, as they continue to have greater access to better resources. But the limits of groups such as ISIS are also apparent, in that the remainder of the opposition sees ISIS as a common threat to their control over power and resources, hence the widespread backlash against the organization in December 2013 and January 2014.

The growing strength of the regime in addition to the growing extremism of the al-Qaeda affiliates has pushed the Syrian opposition to evolve, leading to an increasing drive for unification among the internal fighting forces, independent of the political leadership-in-exile which has failed to provide the amount of support that the fighting groups have needed. Smaller, scattered, local rebel brigades have continued to announce mergers throughout 2013, particularly in the months since the August 21st chemical weapons attack, most notably Islamic Front announced on November 22.[262] By promising to pull together some of Syria's most effective fighting forces under one banner, the new Islamic Front has the potential to effectively coordinate among rebel groups on the ground.

Meanwhile, the stark disconnect between the Western-recognized opposition and fighting groups on the ground will make rebel representation at any eventual negotiations extremely challenging. The emergence of the Islamic Front compounds this problem, especially if it succeeds in gaining recognition as a nationally representative organization with grassroots appeal in competition with the SMC.

The influx of military support to both sides of the conflict precludes a decisive military victory for either regime or rebels and ensures the protraction of the war. A protracted fight, the end of which cannot be negotiated, is on hand.

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