

THE FALL OF YABROUD AND THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE LEBANESE BORDER

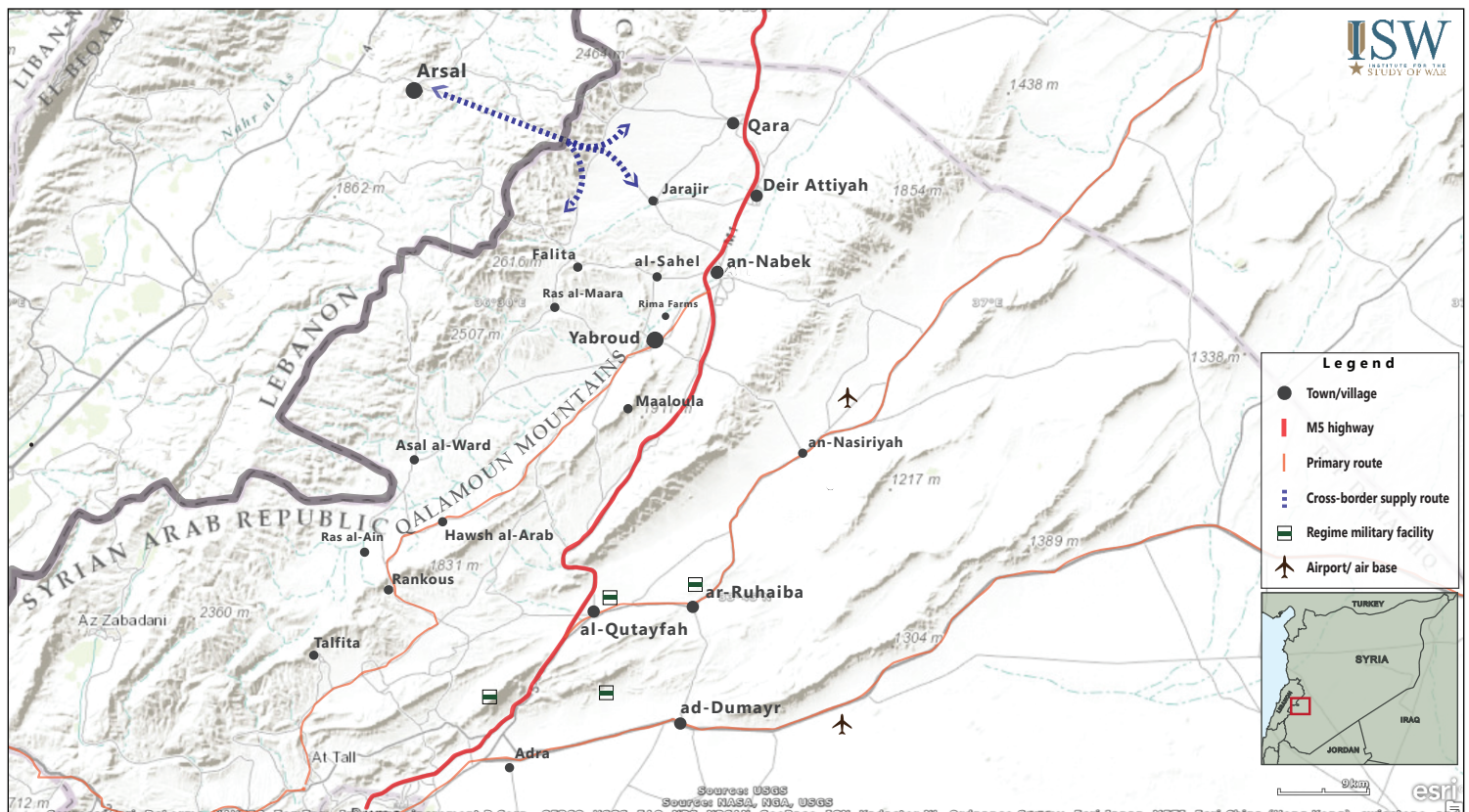
As the most significant remaining rebel stronghold in the Qalamoun region, the fall of Yabroud is an important strategic victory for the regime and demonstrates improved operational planning by pro-Assad forces.

YABROUD OFFENSIVE

Yabroud is located in the rugged terrain of the Qalamoun Mountains and sits astride the M5 highway which connects Damascus to Homs and the Mediterranean coast. Rebel control of Yabroud had disrupted the regime's freedom of movement along the M5 highway and created a staging ground for rebel attacks against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon. In mid-November 2013, the regime intensified operations to clear the area in order to regain control of the section of the M5 highway running from Qara to Yabroud. Regime forces supported by Hezbollah and National Defense Force (NDF) fighters pushed along the main highway moving from north to south, and seized

Qara on November 15th, Deir Attiyah in late November, and an-Nabek in mid-December.¹ Pro-regime forces then pressed towards Yabroud where their advance slowed until launching a renewed offensive against the town in February 2014.²

The Yabroud offensive began with clearing operations and air strikes on the town's surrounding areas in order to isolate rebels in Yabroud from their supply lines, a tactic that was used in the battles for al-Qusayr and as-Safira in 2013. Throughout the month of February, regime forces advanced from the north, concentrating air strikes and bombardments on the Rima farms which lie in the northern outskirts of Yabroud. Air strikes and bombardments also targeted the road northwest of Yabroud to



Falita, the town of al-Sahel to the north, and the surrounding mountains of Mar Maroun.³ Hezbollah played a leading role as it has throughout the regime's Qalamoun operations, particularly in reconnaissance missions which allowed regime forces to identify and target rebel ground lines of communication between Yabroud and Aarsal in Lebanon.

In early March 2014, regime forces continued shaping operations around Yabroud, seizing the village of al-Sahel, north of Yabroud, the Kuwait and Qatari hills which overlook Yabroud, and the Rima farms on March 11th.⁴ Opposition forces claimed to have pushed back the following day but pro-regime forces launched a final attack against the town on March 14th.⁵ The attack began with Hezbollah fighters conducting a diversionary operation from the west and north before pro-regime forces launched the main attack from the east.⁶ A passage was left open for rebel withdrawal either to the south of Yabroud leading to south-western towns and village of Qalamoun or northwest into Lebanon.⁷ After the fall of Yabroud, rebels retreated to other towns in the southern part of Qalamoun, namely Falita, Rankous, Hawsh al-Arab and Assal al-Ward as well as across the border to Aarsal in Lebanon.⁸

The emergence of Qalamoun as an important rebel support zone was caused in part by the relocation of rebels from al-Qusayr to Qalamoun after Hezbollah forces negotiated a rebel withdrawal. By allowing a safe passage, however, pro-regime forces were able to minimize resistance when ground troops entered to clear and hold the area, thus maximizing available manpower resources. This highlights the regime's continued limitations on manpower. Nonetheless, the regime followed with a series of air raids on Aarsal, indicating the intent to target rebels who had been displaced from Qalamoun.⁹ This is an important development in the regime's operational objectives as it indicates that although the regime does not have the forces necessary to destroy rebels in a given area, it is attempting to prevent rebel groups from reconstituting in alternate locations.

REBEL OPERATIONS IN QALAMOUN

As the regime has made gains in Qalamoun, rebel groups in the area have struggled to mount a successful counteroffensive. In late December 2013, after seizing the Mahin arms depot in Homs province under the named operation "The Doors of God Do Not Close," rebels announced "The Doors of God Do Not Close (Phase 2)" and formed a unified operations room under Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) command for rebels fighting in Qalamoun. A number of rebel groups participated in the operations room including Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham of the Islamic Front. The unified operations room divided Qalamoun into three fronts: Yabroud, Maalula, and Rankous.¹⁰

As the regime launched a renewed offensive against Yabroud in early February, defected Col. Abdul al-Rifai established a second coordinating body called the "United Military Command of

Qalamoun."¹¹ The United Military Command sought to unite all operations rooms and "unify battalions indiscriminately under one banner." According to an official statement, it was comprised of 24 groups including Islamic Front's Ahrar al-Sham, and Jaysh al-Islam, local coordinating bodies such as the Yabroud Operations Room and the Military Council in al-Qusayr and Rif al-Qusayr, as well as a number of smaller local brigades, and JN.¹² JN, however, released a statement denying its involvement in the United Military Command but emphasizing that there was coordination between all factions in Qalamoun.¹³ ISIS also participated in the Yabroud fighting and, unlike the north of Syria where JN and other rebel groups have been fighting against ISIS, rebel groups appear to have cooperated in Qalamoun.

After the fall of Yabroud, however, a JN spokesman in Qalamoun, Abdullah Azzam al-Shami, claimed that JN was the last opposition group to remain in Yabroud fighting regime forces. JN took to social media to accuse other rebels of abandoning Yabroud and implied that there may have been collusion between those groups and the regime.¹⁴ Despite the intent to form a local command and control structure for operations in Qalamoun, both JN's unified operations room and Col. al-Rifai's United Military Command appear to have had little success in making operational gains. Since then, a rebel operation led by Zahran Alloush of the Islamic Front's Jaysh al-Islam, has targeted towns to the east of the M5 highway, such as ad-Dumayr, in order to offset regime gains in Qalamoun.¹⁵

With the fall of Yabroud the regime has secured the section of the M5 between Qara and Yabroud, which was the key objective for its Qalamoun operations. Yabroud was also an important victory for Hezbollah, which has identified Yabroud as one of the primary staging zones for attacks against Hezbollah positions in Lebanon. Since January 2014, at least eight Vehicle-Born IEDs (VBIEDs) have struck Hezbollah and Iranian targets throughout Lebanon, many of which Hezbollah believes were assembled in Yabroud.¹⁶

In order to destroy rebel systems in Qalamoun and rebels' ability to conduct operations in Lebanon, pro-regime forces will have to continue their offensive in the southern towns of Qalamoun, namely Rankous, Assal al-Ward, Hawsh al-Arab, and Ras al-Ain, and continue to hold territory in the northern section which they have already seized. Given the mountainous terrain of Qalamoun and the large geographic area, securing the towns of Qalamoun will be more difficult than it was in al-Qusayr.

CAMPAIGN FOR THE LEBANESE BORDER

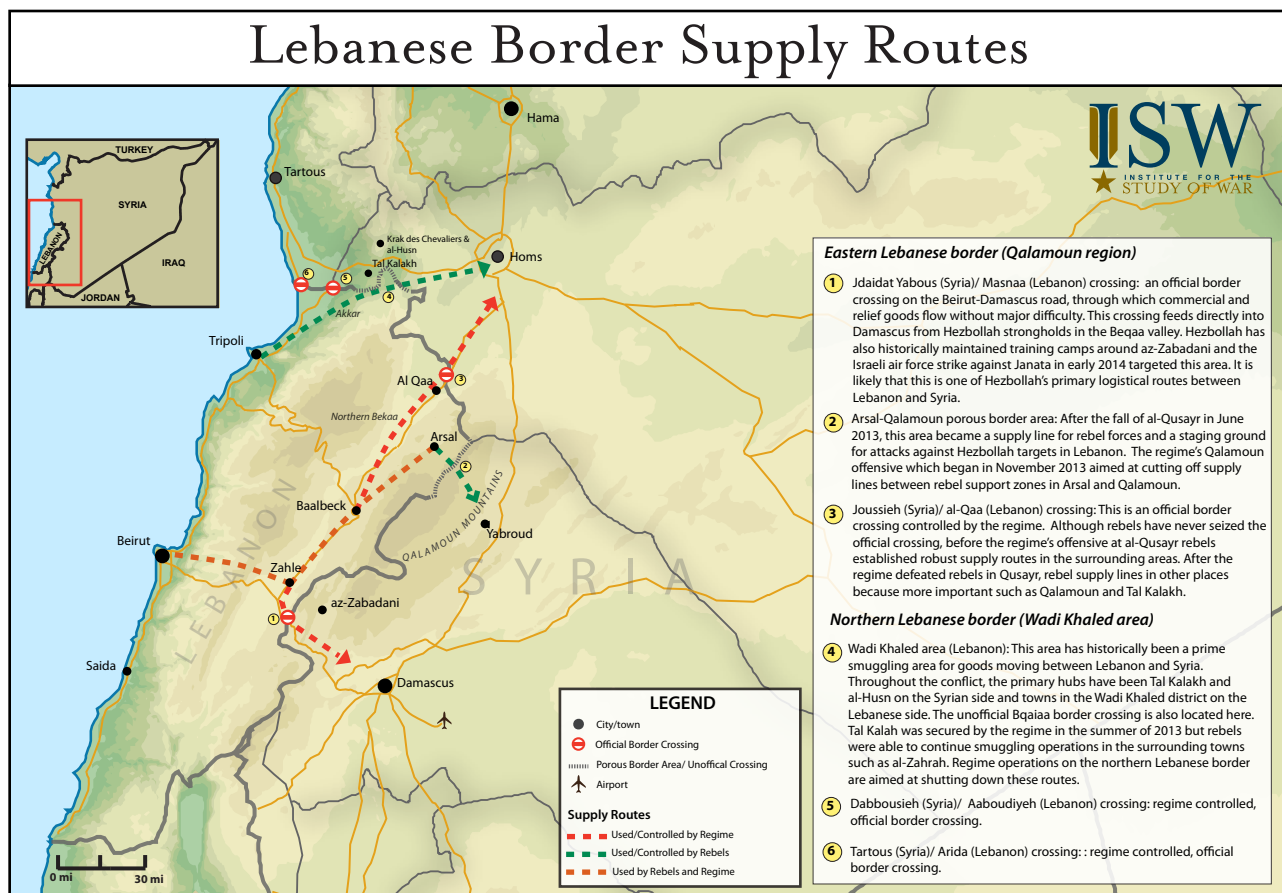
The regime's ongoing Qalamoun offensive and victory in Yabroud should be understood within the context of a larger campaign for the Lebanese border. In the last month, regime forces seized control of several towns and villages along Lebanon's northern

border with Homs province. For the regime, this campaign is significant as it demonstrates the regime's strategic interests and priorities. It will be necessary for rebels to maintain access to resources and reinforcements along the Lebanese border in order to contest key terrain along the central corridor. Rebel positions along this border are also instrumental in maintaining logistical connections between areas of control in northern and southern Syria, which is crucial for any attempts by rebel groups to form national level command and control structures.

The most significant regime victory on Lebanon's northern border was the seizure of as-Zarah on March 8th after a month-long operation.¹⁷ Az-Zarah has a majority Turkmen population and lies north of Tal Kalakh near the Homs-Tartous highway. Pro-regime forces then focused on the crusader fortress of Krak des Chevaliers, which is 25 miles west of Homs city. Regime forces entered from the adjacent town of al-Husn before seizing Krak des Chevalier on March 20th. According to an activist in Homs city, the fortress fell after rebel fighters and government forces reached an agreement to allow rebels to withdraw into Lebanon.¹⁸ Clashes and bombardments continued as at least 300 refugees fled into the northern Lebanese area of Wadi Khaled.¹⁹ Syrian troops then closed the Bqiaia border in order to block additional rebels and civilians from escaping the violence into Lebanon.²⁰

The ramifications of the regime's ongoing campaign for the Lebanese border can also be seen in Lebanon, where the aftermath of the regime's victory in Yabroud was most visible. Pro-regime celebrations erupted in Dahiyeh while Hezbollah created checkpoints to isolate Aarsal from surrounding Shiite communities.²¹ Meanwhile, Sunni protests erupted throughout Lebanon in solidarity with the residents of Aarsal and JN's branch in Lebanon detonated a VBIED in the town of Nabi Othman in the Beqaa Valley, killing a Hezbollah official.²² Hezbollah first secured itself as a target inside Lebanon after its involvement in the al-Qusayr offensive in mid-2013. After the fall of al-Qusayr, both JN and the Free Syrian Army threatened to increase attacks against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Less than a year later, the response to the fall of Yabroud indicates an escalation in the spillover into the Lebanon from the Syrian war.

Regime operations along the Lebanese border are an important indicator of Hezbollah and the regime's intent to secure the Lebanese border in order to prevent the escalation of violence in Lebanon and cut off vital rebel supply lines. On both the northern and western borders, pro-regime forces will continue to target pockets of rebel control while facing the challenge of holding previously seized territory in order to prevent rebels from reestablishing control in those areas. Rebels, on the other



This map estimates rebel and regime supply routes along the Lebanese border into Syria.

hand, will seek to establish new support and staging zones on both sides of the border. In the short-term, the regime's recent victories have disrupted rebels' ability to launch attacks against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon. In the long-term, however, groups such as the Abdullah Azzam Brigades and JN's Lebanon branch, which have built networks and infrastructure to facilitate such attacks, will likely attempt to escalate operations against Hezbollah targets and Iranian assets. Furthermore, the continued displacement of combatants and civilians into Lebanese territory, namely Aarsal and the Wadi Khaled district, will exacerbate tensions and weaken Hezbollah's ability to enforce stability in Lebanon.

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NOTES

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