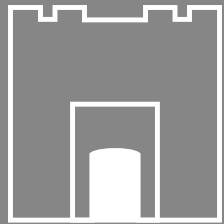


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

2014

ALEPPO CONFLICT TIMELINE

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

MAY 2016

2014

JANUARY TO MARCH

THE REGIME ADVANCES WHILE ISIS WAGES WAR AGAINST THE REBELS

BOX 6: Geneva II Conference

In August 2012, the experienced Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi took over Kofi Annan's task of getting Syrians to a peace agreement. After months of diplomatic efforts, Ministers Kerry and Lavrov, on 7 May 2013, jointly announced that "all sides" involved in Syria should come together for a conference.¹ After several delays, mainly due to Russian-U.S. disagreements, the meeting was finally scheduled for 22 January 2014.

Damascus confirmed its participation on 27 November 2013. The military and political oppositions were divided over the question of whether to attend. The National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (National Coalition) refused to participate before receiving guarantees that at the end of the conference Assad would leave. They confirmed their participation on 18 January despite receiving no guarantees about Assad's departure. The National Council boycotted the talks as it had opposed discussion with the regime since its birth in 2011. The Damascus-based National Coordination Committee announced on 16 January that it would not attend Geneva. Although the Kurdish Democratic Union Kurdistan (PYD) expressed its willingness to attend, it was not invited.² The conference did not receive much support from military factions either. The Supreme Military Council (SMC) stated it would support Geneva II only if Assad was forced out.³ Hardliners like Ahrar ash-Sham described the conference as illegitimate and said it would not be bound by the outcome.⁴

Delegations from 30 countries were invited to Geneva II to support the peace talks. Iran did not attend because the Syrian Coalition under Saudi and Qatari pressure threatened to withdraw from the conference if it did.⁵ At the same time, without Iran, a solution would be hard to reach or implement.

First round 22-31 January

The first round of direct negotiations did not produce significant results. Brahimi said that at least the sides had agreed in principle to follow the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012 and had set the ground for a national dialogue, constitutional change and elections. Syrian Foreign Minister al-Muallem described the opposition as "immature," as it thought the government would come to Geneva and hand over everything. The coalition, on the other hand, accused the government delegation of trying to buy time.⁶ Despite little progress, a second round was scheduled for February.

Second round 10-15 February

This round was shorter than the first and ended with Brahimi apologizing to the Syrian people for his inability to facilitate peace. In a press interview he said that the government had refused his agenda to discuss an end to violence and the specifics of a transitional government.⁷

On 2 January 2014, the armed opposition's patience ran out after an intense campaign of assassinations and intimidation by Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) that had started in summer 2013. By early January 2014, ISIS had established a strong presence in Aleppo and controlled 10 districts in the east of the city.⁸ Jaish al-Mujahedeen, the Syrian Revolutionary Front and the Islamic Front issued statements condemning ISIS activities. Jaish al-Mujahedeen accused ISIS of fighting the rebels rather than the regime, creating tensions and destabilizing "liberated" areas.⁹ In the first week of January, the Revolutionary Front pushed ISIS out of Talmsan in Idlib countryside and Kafar Zeta in Hama countryside. In a statement, it asked ISIS fighters to hand over their weapons and renounce the group.¹⁰ The Islamic Front condemned ISIS activities in Atarib, western Aleppo province and asked them to leave the city.¹¹

In response, ISIS reshuffled its cards. It tactically withdrew from several towns to the west of Aleppo such as Atmeh and ad-Dana. At the same time, it sent reinforcements from al-Bab to near the Azaz-Aleppo corridor in preparation for a fight.¹² On 4 January, ISIS released a video threatening that if the rebels did not stop attacking ISIS positions and intimidating its soldiers, it would withdraw from key frontlines positions, allowing the regime access to the city.¹³

The rebels did not respond to ISIS threats and the fighting continued. Opposition groups jointly drove ISIS out of the city, northwestern Aleppo province and from areas in the Idlib countryside.¹⁴ ISIS setbacks continued. In late February, ISIS narrowly avoided decimation in Azaz and withdrew to east of the Azaz-Aleppo highway. The battles were intense; around 2,300 fighters from both sides were killed in January.¹⁵ During February and March, fighting continued at a lower level.

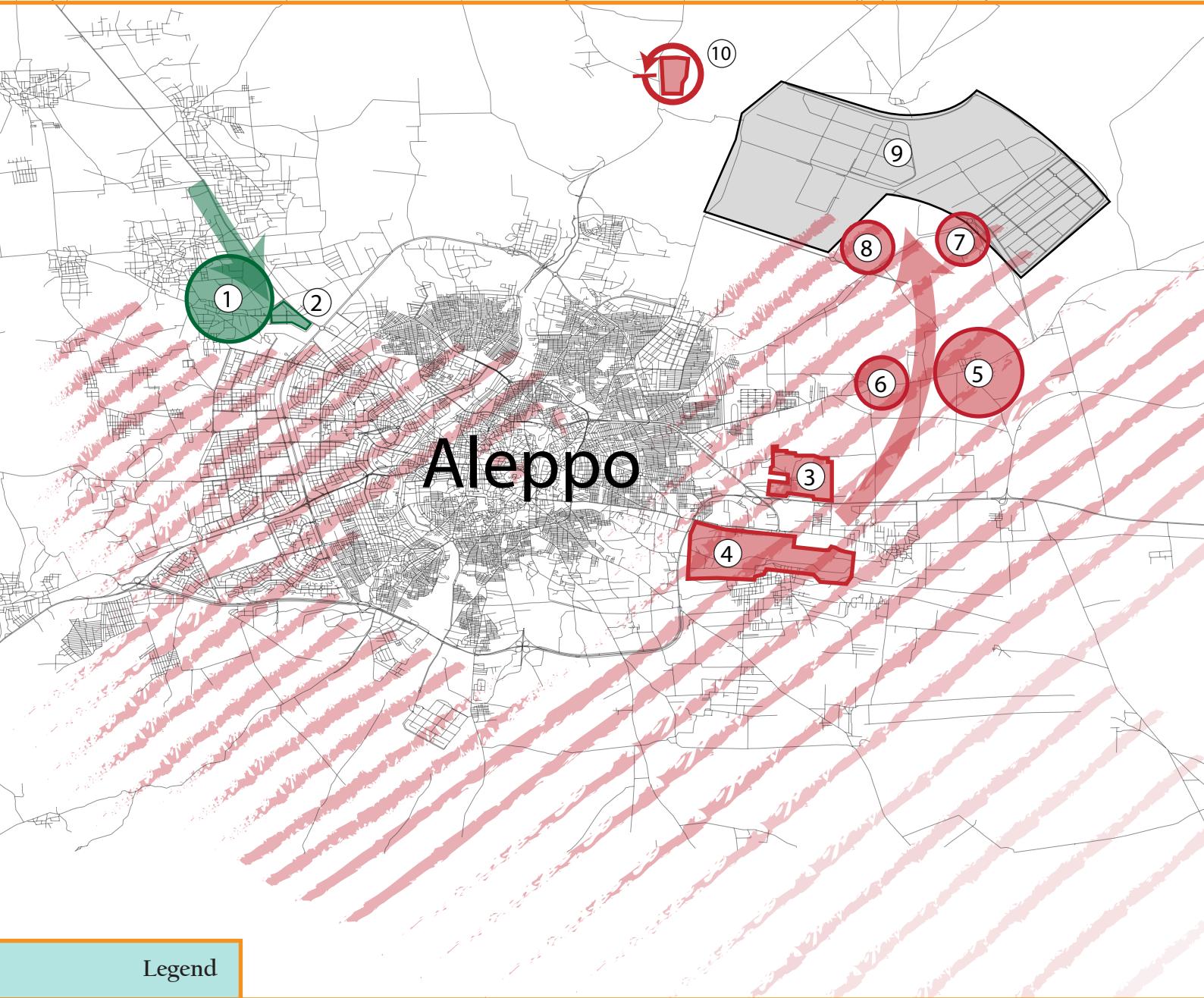
The biggest beneficiary was the government, which broke the siege in Aleppo and started its own effort to blockade the eastern half of the city. After securing the southern axis and gaining Base 80, regime forces marched north. On 11 January, the government took control of an-Nakkarin and al-Zarzour, north of the Brigade 80 Base and an important step towards the Sheikh Najjar Industrial City.¹⁶ The Syrian official news channel reported the liberation of Sheikh Najjar town near the industrial complex.¹⁷ Over the next month, the government advanced towards the industrial complex,¹⁸ but could not impose full control. (See Map 21)

The rebel forces, busy fighting ISIS for the first few months of the year, tried to reorganize their positions in the city in order to resist the government offensive. Several new frontlines emerged.¹⁹

On 24 February, Jabhet an-Nusra (JN), the Islamic Front and Jaish al-Mujahedeen established the Ahl ash-Sham joint operation room to repel the regime advance in eastern Aleppo.²⁰ In mid-February, JN and Ahrar ash-Sham announced an operation to take the Aleppo Central Prison, which had been under siege for almost a year. Government forces successfully defended the fortress and the operation failed.²¹ East of Aleppo, jihadist groups, including ISIS, began a move against the besieged Kwaires Military Airport. This also failed and the airport remained under a siege that began in early 2013.²²

In early March, Ahrar ash-Sham, Haraket Hazem and JN set up another operation room to disrupt the east-west supply line to Aleppo city.²³ By the end of the month, JN and Jaish Muhibbin Wa al-Ansar had taken the al-Belleramoon Industrial Zone.²⁴ Located northwest of the city, it is near the Air Force Intelligence Complex. (See Map 21) The road alongside the zone is a key route into the city.

These operations were designed to hinder the regime's advance in the east and keep open the supply line



Legend

-  Area under government control
 -  Opposition advance (late March)
 -  Government advance (February-March)
 -  Towns under opposition control
 -  Towns under government control
 -  Under siege by opposition forces
- ① al-Belleramoon
 - ② al-Belleramoon Factories
 - ③ Aleppo International Airport
 - ④ Brigade 80
 - ⑤ an-Nakkarin
 - ⑥ al-Zarzour
 - ⑦ Sheikh Najjar (village)
 - ⑧ Sheikh Zayat
 - ⑨ Sheikh Najjar Industrial Area
 - ⑩ Aleppo Central Prison

Map 21: Aleppo (February-March 2014)

between the countryside and eastern Aleppo. Rebel forces were concerned the government could besiege the city by marching west from Sheikh Najjar Industrial area and joining the areas under its control. This tactic had proven effective in Homs and Damascus.

Meanwhile, the government kept up its intense campaign of barrel bombing the city. This forced residents in rebel areas to flee to the countryside where the shelling was less intense. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (Syrian Observatory), the government dropped 700 barrel bombs in Aleppo, killing an estimated 1,000 people in the first three weeks of February.²⁵

BOX 7: Rebel Coalition Against ISIS

Various armed groups and coalitions joined the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) that started on 2 January 2014. At least eight armed groups came together to establish the Jaish al-Mujahedeen (the Mujahedeen Army). Its aim was to expel ISIS from the western Aleppo countryside. Over time, other groups and coalitions joined the fight, including the Syrian Revolutionary Front, some groups within the Islamic Front and Jabhet an-Nusra (JN) after failed mediation attempts. These groups managed to displace ISIS from Aleppo, the western countryside and some key towns in the northern part of the province.²⁶ Even though this was a major loss and lesson for ISIS, it redeemed its defeat by moving its forces to occupy large areas around ar-Raqqa. The fight also cost the rebels thousands of lives and enabled the regime to regain ground in Aleppo.

Jaish al-Mujahedeen: This coalition was formed specifically to fight ISIS. Its fighters mostly came from the western Aleppo countryside. It had a significant presence in Aleppo city. The coalition consisted of ideologically distinct groups ranging from secular fighters to members of the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁷

The Islamic Front: (not to be confused with the Syrian Islamic Front which was established in December 2012). Four main coalitions formed this alliance in November 2013: Haraket Ahrar ash-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Jaish al-Islam and Suqour ash-Sham. Only the first two factions played a fundamental role in the Aleppo countryside. Liwa al-Tawhid increased the Islamic tone and openly cooperated with groups like JN. Yet, it claimed that every Syrian should have a voice in deciding the future of Syria. The group also received western support. At first, Tawhid was reluctant to join the war against ISIS.

Haraket Ahrar ash-Sham, a key player in Aleppo since July 2012, dominated the administration of the Islamic Front and was its most hardline group. It was a typical example of a Syrian-grown Salafi group. It welcomed foreign fighters and fought for the “Rule of God.” In late 2013, it was estimated to have around 20,000 fighters.

The coalition itself did not have a unified leadership. While some of its battalions fought ISIS in the western and northern parts of Aleppo province, others in the eastern countryside of Aleppo and near ar-Raqqa did not.²⁸

The Syria Revolutionaries Front: Founded in December 2013, this coalition was largely non-ideological. Members had strong roots in Idlib and were key to the war against ISIS in that region. It received significant support from the United States. The coalition had a troubled relationship with the Islamic Front, especially Ahrar ash-Sham.²⁹

Jabhet an-Nusra (JN): JN was not at first keen to fight ISIS. After their April 2013 split, there were many attempts to avoid confrontation. This also aroused suspicion among other groups about JN’s intentions. In February 2014, after numerous clashes between JN and ISIS, the former issued an ultimatum giving ISIS five days to “end the fighting against the insurgents.”³⁰ ISIS accused JN of betrayal and an all-out war broke out. While JN gained ground in Aleppo province, it was expelled from oil-rich eastern Syria.

2014

APRIL - MAY

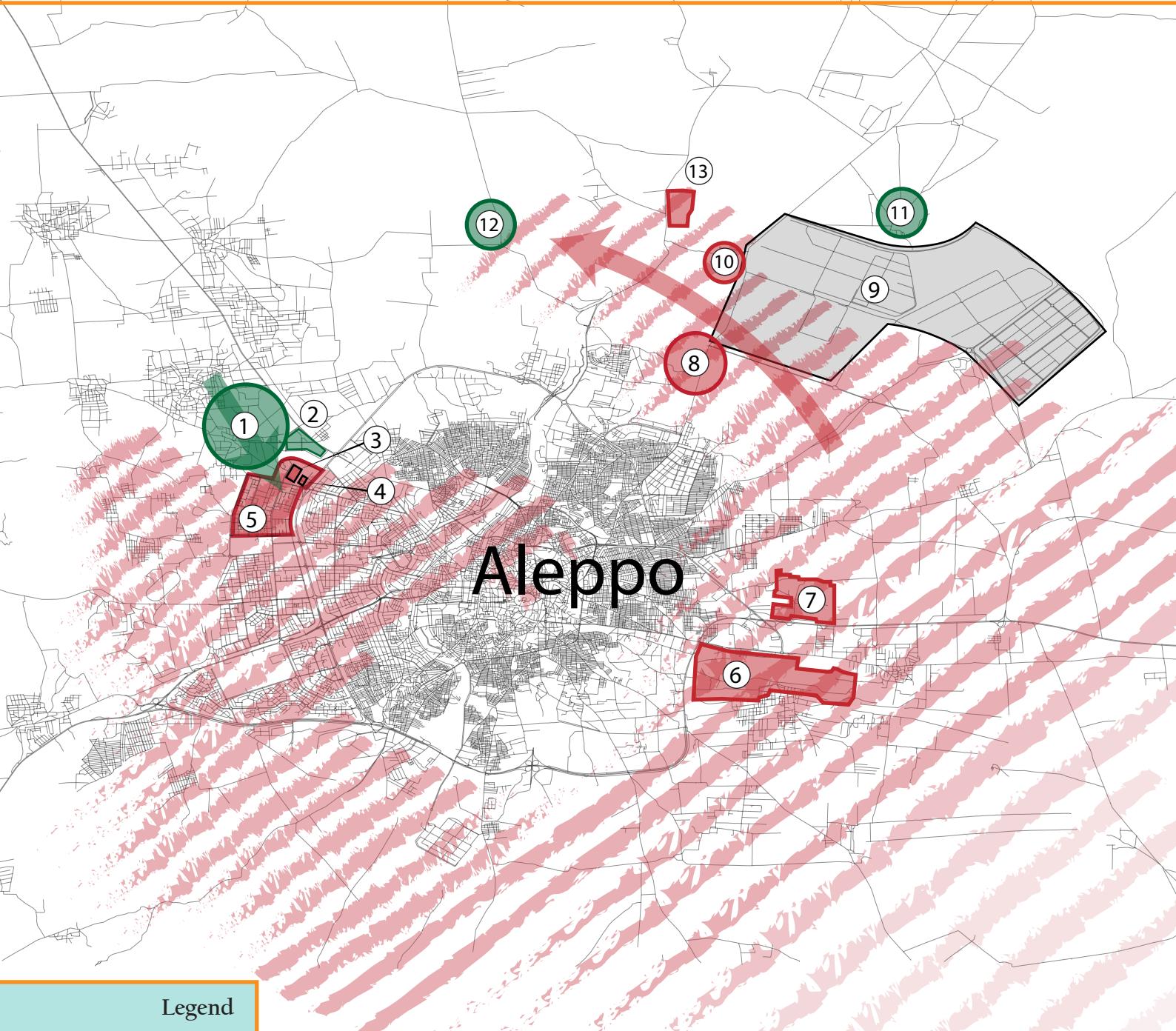
TUNNELS VS. BARREL BOMBS

The government slowly advanced towards the north of the city. It soon controlled large areas of the Sheikh Najjar industrial city. It reached Brej village in late April, getting close to the besieged Central Prison.³¹ After three weeks, government forces broke the siege.³² Conditions in the prison had deteriorated sharply with prisoners ill and starving. The Red Crescent was finally able to deliver aid.³³ The Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria reported that at least 600 prisoners had died as of February 2014.³⁴ (See Map 22)

To the west of Aleppo, the balance of power was different. After taking control of al-Belleramoon, the rebels – notably members of the Ahl ash-Sham operation room – moved towards al-Zahra district. Throughout April, the rebels pushed government forces out from western parts of the al-Zahra district.³⁵ Later that month, the two sides battled over the Palace of Justice, located next to the Air Force Intelligence Base.³⁶ (See Map 22)

On 8 May, a massive explosion destroyed the Carlton Hotel which was being used as a command center for government forces in the Old City.³⁷ The Islamic Front claimed responsibility, having said it would liberate the area.³⁸ In early May, it almost isolated the Citadel but ultimately failed. (See Map 23)

To reach the hotel, rebels dug a 75-meter tunnel, filled it with explosives and blew it up. This was a new tactic employed by opposition forces in Aleppo to target key military positions in response to government barrel bombing.³⁹ As of April 2014, barrel bombs had killed 4,693 people in Aleppo province, including about 2,600 people in Aleppo city.⁴⁰ The opposition also tried to pressure the government to stop the bombing by cutting off electricity across the city.⁴¹



Legend



Area under government control



Opposition advance (late March)



Government advance (February-March)



Towns under opposition control

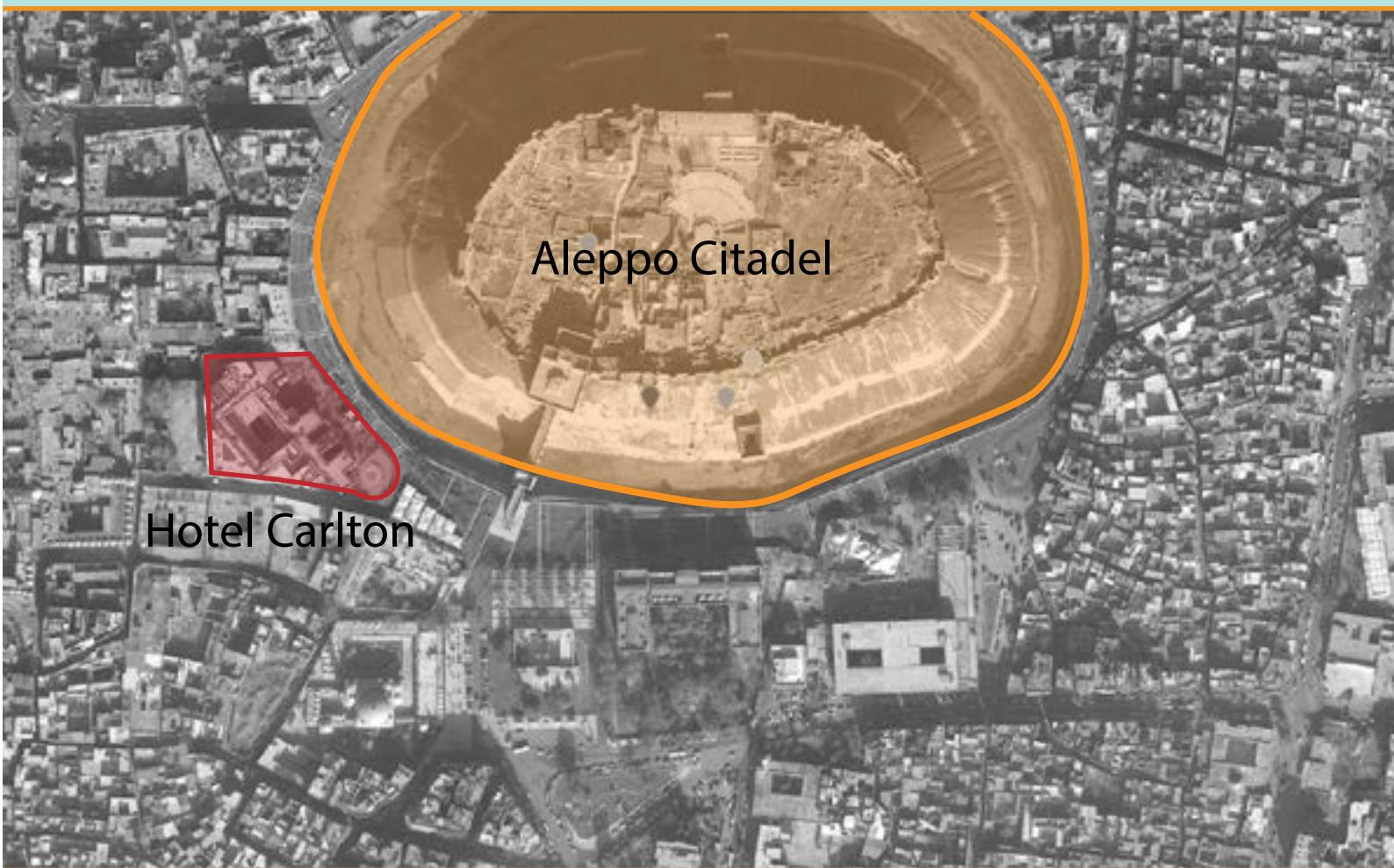


Towns under government control

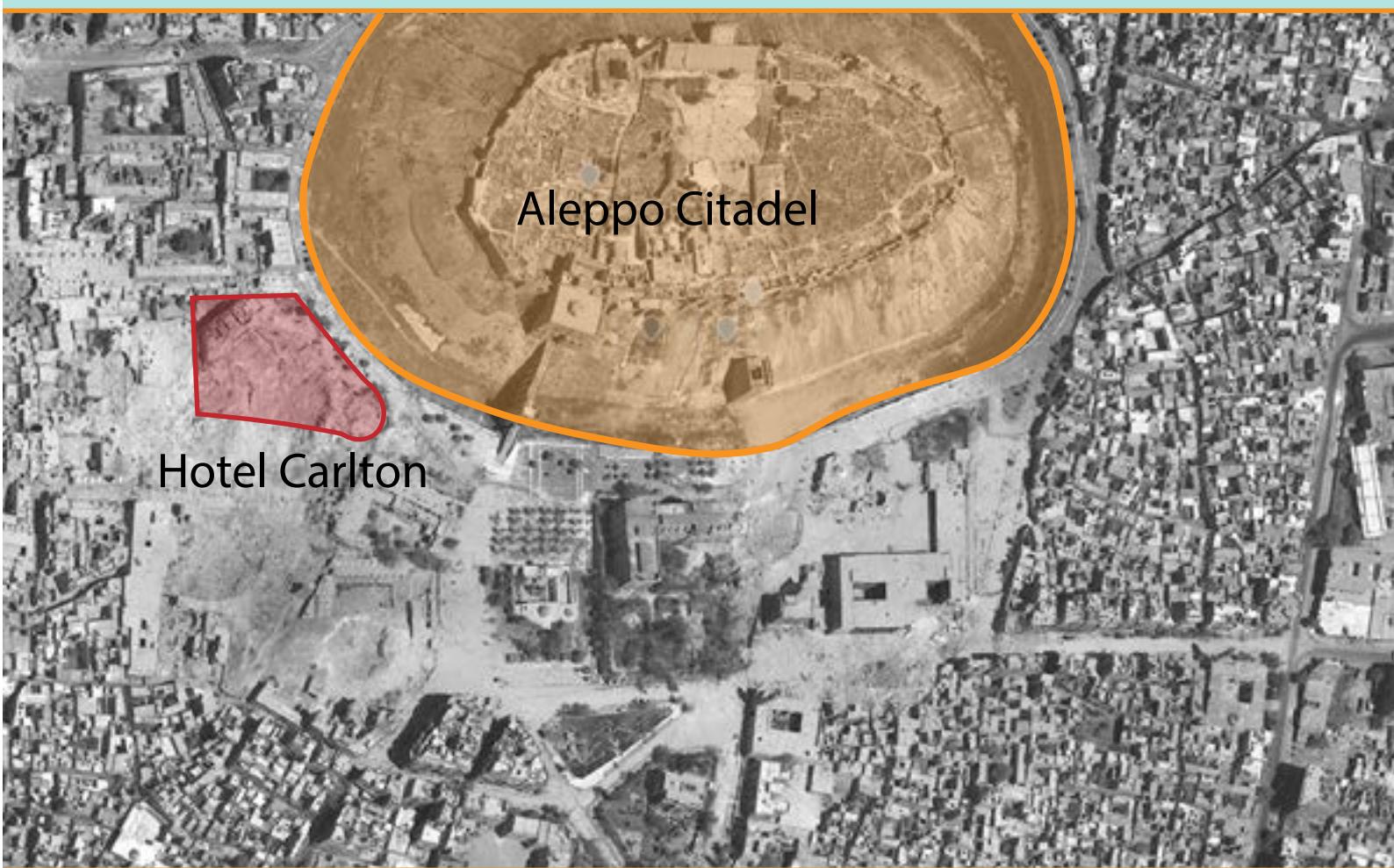
- ① al-Belleramoon
- ② al-Belleramoon Factories
- ③ New Justice Palace
- ④ Airforce Intelligence
- ⑤ al-Zahra District
- ⑥ Aleppo International Airport
- ⑦ Brigade 80
- ⑧ al-Brej
- ⑨ Sheikh Najjar Industrial Area
- ⑩ Haylan
- ⑪ Kafar al-Saghir
- ⑫ Handarat
- ⑬ Aleppo Central Prison

Map 22: Aleppo (April-May 2014)

May 1, 2012



August 10, 2014



2014
JUNE - JULY

THE GOVERNMENT OPENS NEW FRONTS WHILE ISIS DECLARES ITS EMPIRE

In early June, the government expanded from the southern axis towards the International Highway. It took key positions around Azzan Mountain.⁴² On 19 June, it took over the air defense base on top of the mountain, which gave the government control over much of the area.⁴³ Skirmishes continued for a month without the regime being able to advance further. Rebel forces launched a counter-offensive.⁴⁴

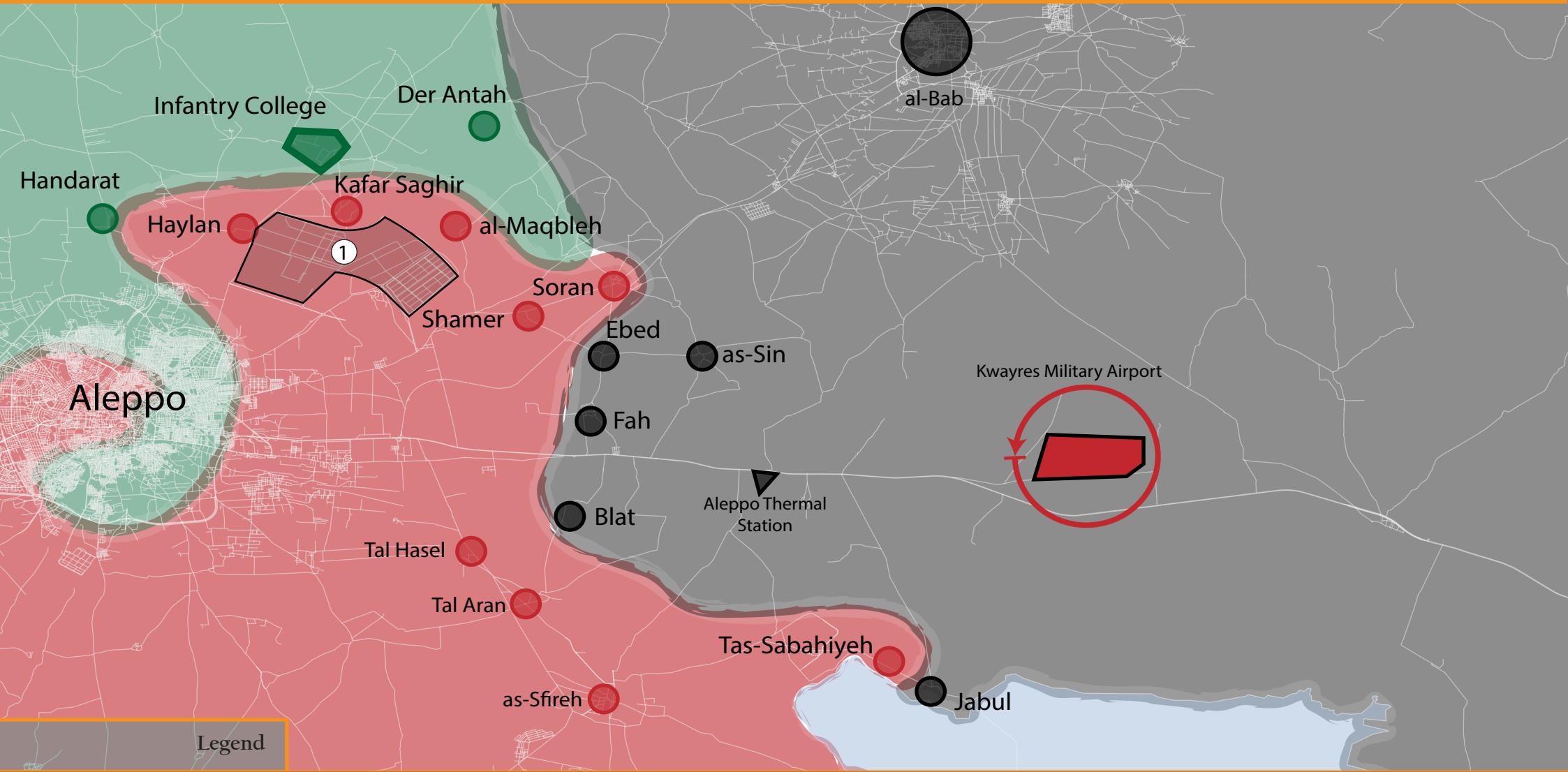
In the north, the government continued its slow advance. After a month, it took full control of the industrial area and some adjacent villages.⁴⁵ This brought it closer to the Infantry School, Liwa al-Tawhid's stronghold in the north.⁴⁶ The National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (National Coalition) warned that regime forces had almost encircled the city and the only remaining obstacle to besieging the east was the Handarat area. If that fell, there would be a humanitarian catastrophe.

Meanwhile, the National Coalition elected a new president, Hadi al-Bahra, whose top priorities were deterring ISIS and preventing the siege of Aleppo. His predecessor, Ahmad al-Jarba, had failed to unify the opposition and the Syrian Military Council (SMC) lost legitimacy on the ground compared to other rebel armed coalitions.

In mid-June, JN and the Islamic Front launched an operation to take villages from ISIS.⁴⁷ Under intense pressure, ISIS brought in reinforcements from Mosul, Iraq.⁴⁸ A 45 km frontline between JN and ISIS starting from the Turkish border ran all the way south to near Aleppo city.⁴⁹ In the second half of July, ISIS took three villages from the government near the Sheikh Najjar Industrial Complex and opened new frontlines with the People's Protection Units/Women's Protection Unit (YPG/YPJ) in Kobani in north-eastern Aleppo province. These battles proved to be very costly for both the rebels and ISIS. Between January and June 2014, fighting between ISIS and the Islamic Front killed about 5,000 military and 2,000 civilians.⁵⁰

On 29 June 2014, ISIS declared it had established a caliphate stretching from northern Syria to western Iraq, breaking the Sykes-Picot border imposed in 1916 by France and the United Kingdom. ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself the new Caliph of what he called the Islamic State. ISIS saw itself as a state with a territory, population, army, currency and other institutions. This was part of an effort to separate itself from Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda and a way to undermine other jihadi organizations in Syria.

In July 2014, the National Coalition documented that the war had killed 23,000 people and caused 26,000 children to become orphans in Aleppo province since the beginning of the conflict, indicating the severity of the situation.⁵¹ Already in March 2013, UNICEF assessed that Aleppo was the most affected province in terms of schooling. Some 38 per cent of the schools in Aleppo had been damaged or were being used as shelters for internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁵²



Towns under opposition control



Towns under government control



Towns under ISIS control



Area under opposition control



Area under Government control



Area under ISIS control



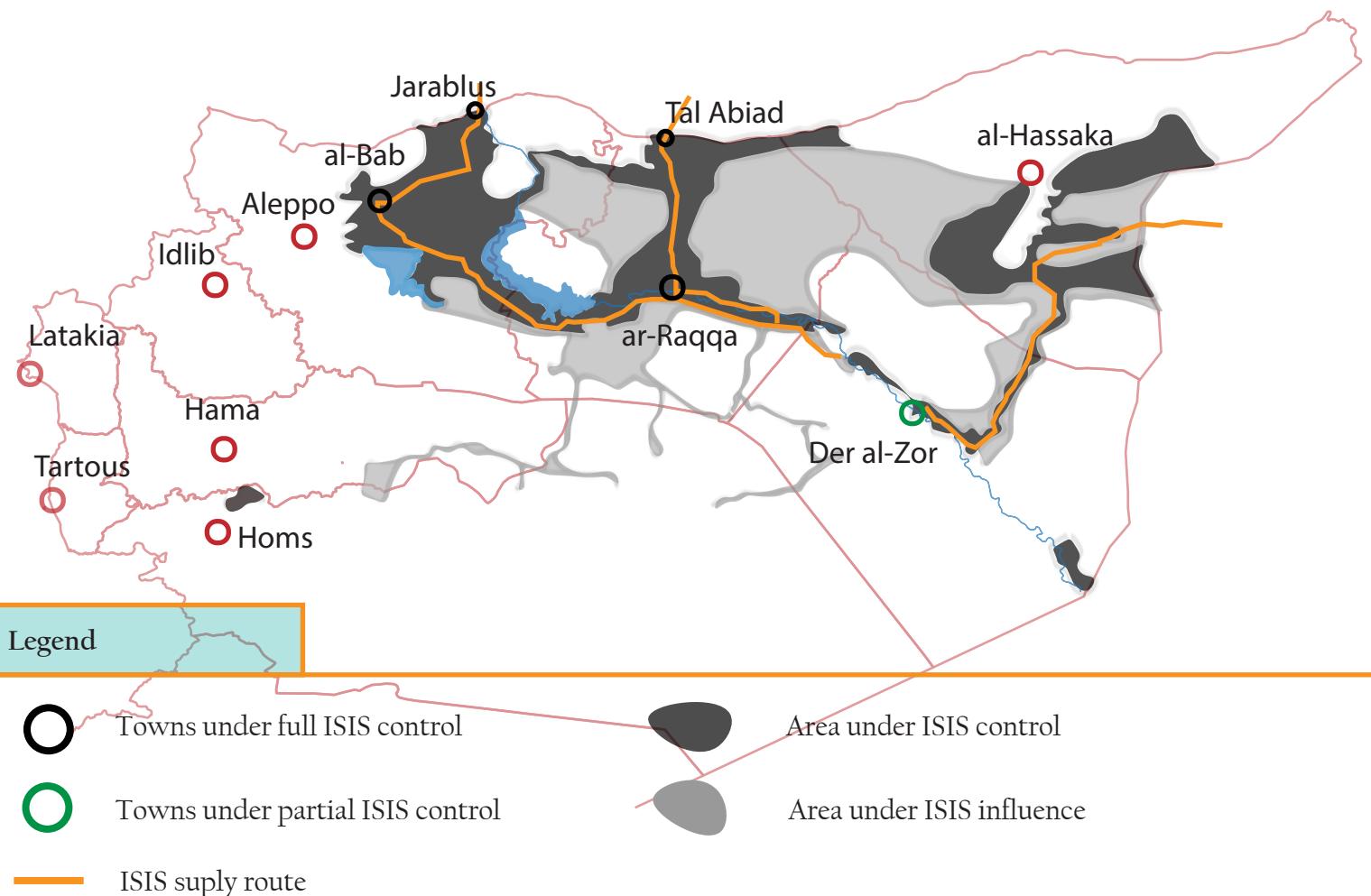
Under siege by ISIS



① Sheikh Najjar Industrial Area

Map 24: Eastern Aleppo countryside (mid-July 2014)

Source: compare with [Syrian Perspective map](#)



Map 25: Area under ISIS control (6 June 2014)

Source: [Aghathocle de Syracuse](#)

Many educated Syrians had left. By February 2014, the war had destroyed 70 per cent of the health centers in the governorate.⁵³ Since July 2012, the city has been without a blood bank.⁵⁴ As of May 2014, the eastern part of the city had just 40 doctors, including only 15 surgeons to treat 1,500 patients a week.⁵⁵ After the October 2014 destruction of the Ibn Khaldun Psychiatric Hospital, there was not a single mental health specialist left in opposition controlled Aleppo.⁵⁶

2014

AUGUST - SEPTEMBER

OPPOSITION FORCES BETWEEN ISIS AND THE REGIME

In August, the balance shifted in favor of ISIS as it reclaimed territory lost to the opposition in the beginning of 2014.⁵⁷ It occupied several villages and came close to closing the key rebel supply line along the Kilis-Azaz-Aleppo route. By mid-August, it had captured the towns of Dabeq and Akhtarin within 10 km of the rebel stronghold of Mare', which later came under ISIS shelling.⁵⁸ (See Map 26)

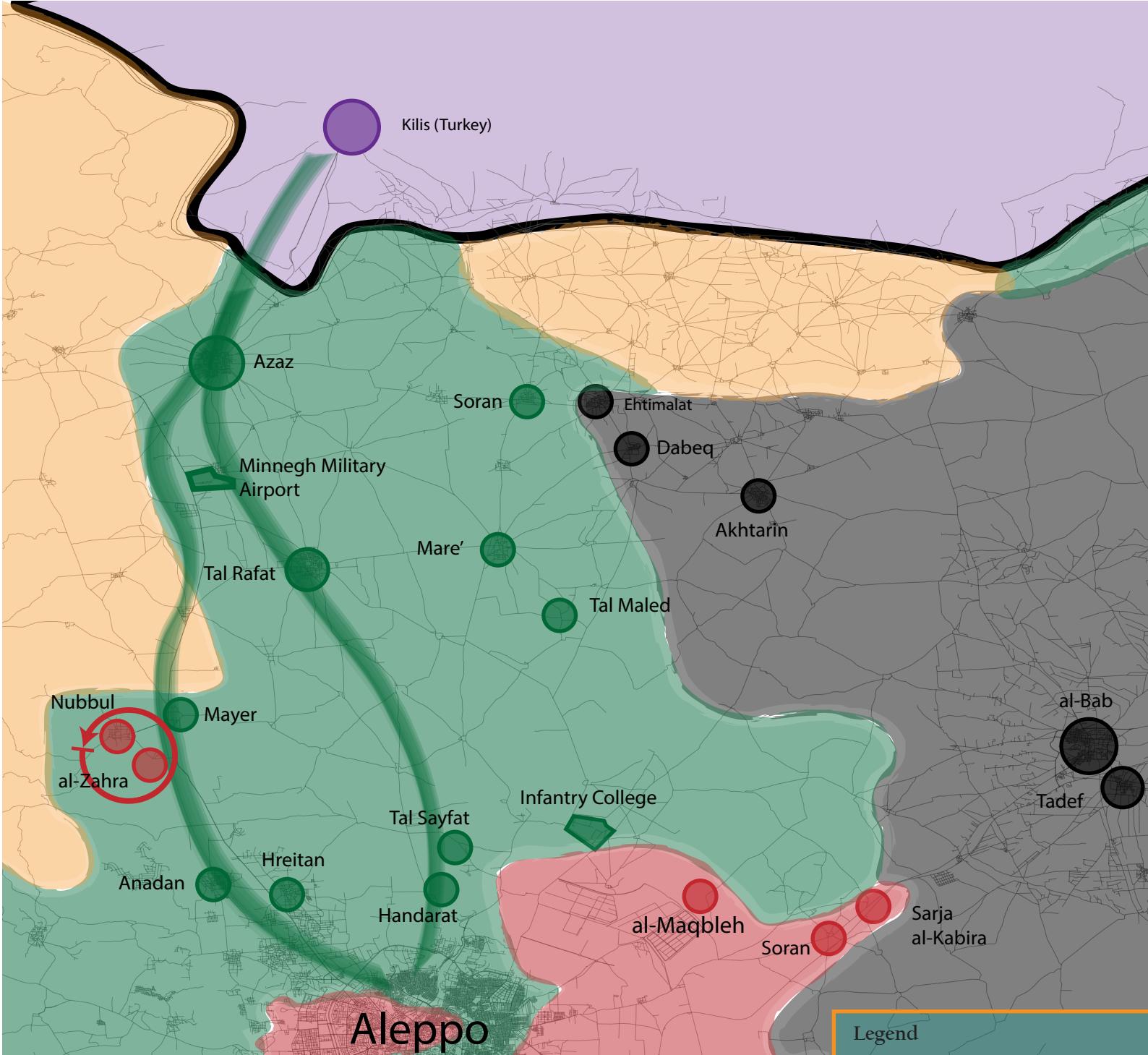
Despite opposition setbacks, it did little to respond to ISIS's efforts to take territory. Only in late August did the Islamic Front, JN, Jaish al-Mujahideen, Haraket Hazem and Kataeb Nour ad-Din al-Zanki begin the "Nahrawan ash-Sham" offensive to repel ISIS. A field commander explained that these groups had to send reinforcements to the northern frontlines, which undermined the fight against the government.⁵⁹ Keeping ISIS from closing their main supply line had become a priority for the rebels.

Other targets of this major ISIS offensive were Kurdish forces around Kobani (Ain al-Arab), located on the Turkish-Syrian border. YPG/YPJ and ISIS had fought over the area at least since spring 2014. This offensive seemed more effective than the previous ones. As of mid-September, ISIS had taken dozens of villages and stood 35 km away from the city.⁶⁰ The ISIS offensive led to the creation of the Euphrates Volcano Joint Operation Room on 10 September, which brought together Arab and Kurdish fighters in an alliance against ISIS.⁶¹ On 22 September, the U.S.-led international military coalition carried out its first strikes against ISIS positions.⁶² Increased coordination between ground forces and the coalition around Kobani was noticeable.⁶³ Strengthening this coordination would be vital to stopping ISIS from taking the city.

South of Aleppo city, the government took the Khan Touman area east of the International Highway. It could not consolidate its gains. Fighting continued without major changes in control until the end of September.⁶⁴ Despite the government's gains, it was unable to reach the International Highway. Another priority for the government was to secure strategic cities like as-Sfireh which ISIS tried to take several times in September to no avail. According to a Syrian Army field commander, ISIS was located only about 10km away from the southern axis at this time.⁶⁵

As of September 2014, three out of four main water pump stations in the city had been shut down.⁶⁶

The director of monuments and museums in Aleppo said that the al-Mdeeneh Souq was the most damaged heritage site in the city.⁶⁷



Towns under opposition control

Towns under government control

Towns under ISIS control

Under siege

Kilis-Azaz-Aleppo supply corridor

Area under opposition control

Area under government control

Area under ISIS control

Area under YPG control

Syria-Turkey International Border

Map 26: The Situation in North Aleppo (8 September 2014)

Source: [Aghathocle de Syracuse](#)

2014

OCTOBER TO DECEMBER

OPPOSITION REORGANIZES WHILE GOVERNMENT HOLDS ITS POSITIONS IN AND AROUND ALEPPO

Pro-government troops in Aleppo province focused on advancing towards Handarat and al-Mallah to tighten the circle around the city. Rebel groups in the area put up strong resistance. Only by the end of the year did the government manage to win control.⁶⁸ This did not put Aleppo under siege, but it did severely hinder rebel supply lines. During the confrontation, JN killed General Jabbar Drisawi, an Iranian Basiji general, an indication of the government's reliance on foreign troops in the area.⁶⁹

On 8 October, Ahrar ash-Sham announced the Zair al-Ahrar (Free Fighter's Roar) operation to "liberate" the Defense Factories near as-Sfireh, seen by rebels as the gateway to eastern Aleppo. As a key center for producing munitions, including barrel bombs, Syrian forces had established elaborate defenses around the area.⁷⁰ Ahrar ash-Sham occupied several villages in the area but failed to overrun the factories. Rebel attempts continued until the end of the year. On 19-20 November, several groups, including JN and Ahrar ash-Sham, targeted the area after occupying nearby villages. They did not manage to overrun it.⁷¹ In late December, ISIS joined the battle. These attempts failed and the facility remained in government hands.⁷²

On the Aleppo-Damascus highway, rebels achieved a major success. On 15 December, they besieged – for the second time –the Wadi ad-Daif and Hamidiyah military bases in Idlib province and eventually overran them, preventing the government from re-opening the highway. JN led the operation. The bases were guarded by 1,000-1,500 soldiers and officers with around 50 armored vehicles and tanks.⁷³ These bases, located between Aleppo and Hama, guarded the International Highway.

In early October, ISIS captured half of Kobani. They succeeded in part because Turkey had covertly supported ISIS to balance the rise of the YPG/YPJ and the Kurdish autonomous government. After U.S. and international pressure, however,⁷⁴ Turkey agreed to permit Peshmerga forces to cross its territory to fight ISIS. This was a key turning point. By mid-November, Kurdish commanders claimed to have 80 per cent of the city under their control.⁷⁵ Kurdish forces started a counter-offensive in early 2015.⁷⁶

Despite the strong presence of the SMC in the north, it failed to create a command and control structure in the long run. The moderate groups also failed to check the rise of radicals such as Ahrar ash-Sham. In early November, the U.S.-backed Syria Revolutionary Front lost its stronghold in Jabal al-Zawiyyeh, Idlib, to JN and its leader fled to Turkey.⁷⁷ The Islamic Front, which appeared to be the strongest coalition throughout 2014, had suffered from infighting since its early days with the main dispute between Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar ash-Sham.⁷⁸ At the Bab as-Salam border crossing, two subgroups from Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar ash-Sham fought over the lucrative route to Turkey. ISIS and regime advances in Aleppo province that had started in summer 2014 exacerbated the situation. A new armed coalition was needed to confront both ISIS and the regime and to build institutions in "liberated" areas.

In early August, talks started to create a new coalition. On 29 November, 72 armed groups established the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council (Command Council) in Gaziantep. It included western-backed groups like the Syria Revolutionary Front and Haraket Hazem as well as Salafist groups like Jaish al-Islam, Ahrar ash-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid and Nour ad-Din al-Zanki. Its charter indicated the dominance of Islamic Salafi factions and underlined the diminishing power of the moderate groups. It planned to create an army of 7,000 men to operate directly under the Council's command, a more solid arrangement than being an umbrella group for independently operating armed groups. Officially, the new organization did not confront the National Coalition but it did not hide their view of its ineffectiveness. The Command Council also expressed its disappointment at the international community for its failure to provide sufficient military support.⁷⁹ By the end of 2014, the role of the SMC and the Islamic Front were much diminished.

UN Special Envoy Stefan De Mistura launched an effort to freeze the conflict in Aleppo to allow humanitarian assistance into the city and eventually lead to talks between the two sides. On 11 November, he announced that his meetings with regime officials had been “useful.”⁸⁰ Yet, the plan made little real progress because the government eventually refused to meet demands from some key opposition groups such as Jaish al-Mujahideen to release prisoners, withdraw militias and stop dropping barrel bombs.⁸¹ The government also made demands that were unlikely to be met, including handing over “terrorists” and an end to all violence.⁸² Looking at the government’s then strong position in southern Aleppo province, the city and its surroundings, it felt that the balance of power had tipped in its favor and was reluctant to let go of that advantage.

DEATH TOLL IN 2014

Casualties in Syria as of 1 December 2014
 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)

Civilians	<i>Children</i>	10,377
	<i>Women</i>	6,603
	<i>Men</i>	46,092
	Total	63,072
Opposition fighters	<i>Rebel and Islamic fighters</i>	34,838
	<i>Defected soldiers and officers</i>	2,486
Regime forces	<i>Regular army soldiers and officers</i>	44,237
	<i>Popular Defense Committees, National Defense Forces, ash-shabbiha, pro-regime informers and the Syrian Resistance to Liberate the Sanjak of Alexandretta</i>	28,974
Documented foreign fighters	<i>ISIS, Jabhet an-Nusra, Junoud ash-Sham, Jund Al-Aqsa, Jund ash-Sham Movement and al-Khadra'</i>	22,624
	<i>Pro-regime militias from Arab and Asian nationalities</i>	2,388
	<i>Hezbollah</i>	624
	<i>SOHR estimate of the real number of all foreign fighters (in addition to documented deaths)</i>	~ 80,000
Documented, unidentified deaths		3,111
Detained by the regime		20,000
Wounded		1,500,000 +

Fatalities in **Aleppo Province** between 1 January 2014 and 31 December 2014
Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDCS)

<i>Civilians</i>	5,563
<i>Rebels</i>	1,712
<i>Regime</i>	223
Total	7,498

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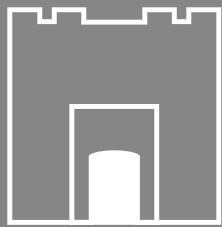
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