

THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

2015

ALEPPO CONFLICT TIMELINE

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

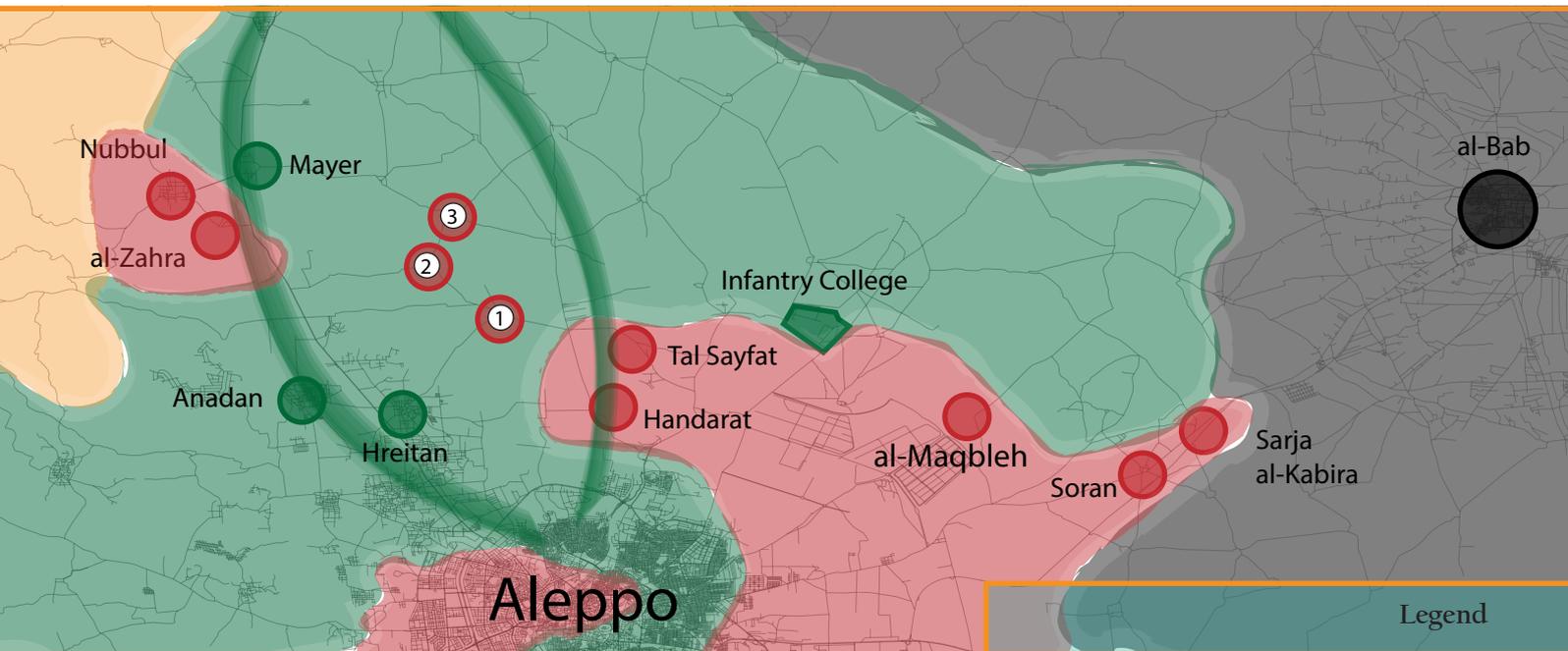
MAY 2016

2015

JANUARY - FEBRUARY

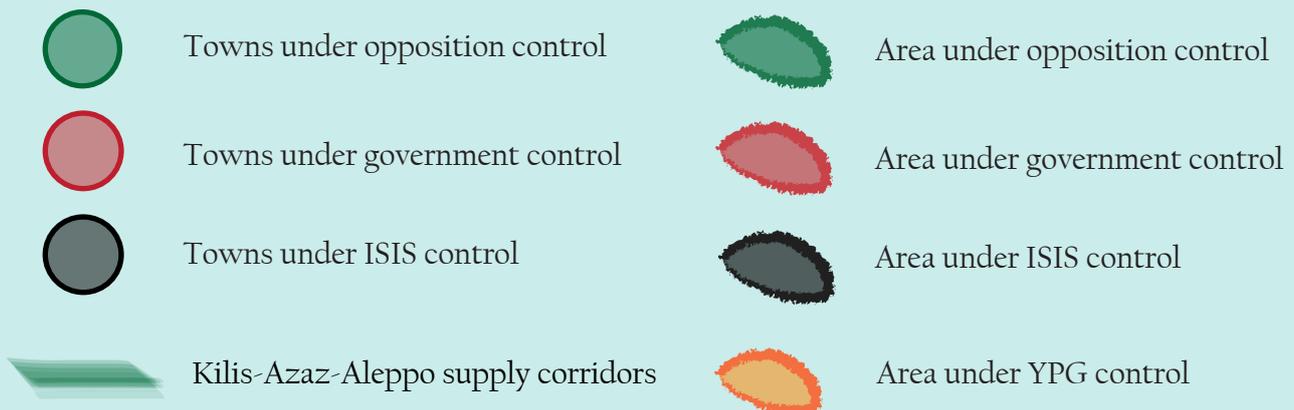
REORGANIZATION AS CEASEFIRE EFFORTS FAIL

By early 2015, the regime was focused on relieving the towns of Nubbul and al-Zahra. They had been under siege for three years. On 9 January, opposition forces advanced close to the towns under cover of bad weather that hindered air attacks.¹ The importance of these towns derives from their location. If the towns could be freed from the siege, government forces could also cut the Kilis-Azaz-Aleppo corridor, which was vital for the survival of the opposition. Throughout January and the first half of February, regime and opposition forces clashed along a semi-circle shaped frontline starting from Tal Sayfat and extending to Handarat and al-Brej. On 17 February, the Syrian Army, with the support of Hezbollah, launched an offensive towards Bashkoy, Ratyan and Hardatnin,² a major advance towards Nubbul and al-Zahra. (See Map 27)



Government targets during 17 February attack

① Bashkoy ② Ratyan ③ Hardatnin



Map 27: Government offensive, northern Aleppo (mid-February 2015)

February 18-20, opposition groups stopped the regime advance to the north of Aleppo city and pushed government forces out of Hardatnin and Ratyan. They said they killed around 130 fighters, including foreigners, and captured at least 35.³ The participation of Jabhet an-Nusra (JN) and al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh (The Levant Front) and Jabhet Ansar ad-Din illustrated their growing strength.⁴ After the regime withdrew, opposition forces accused it of massacring around 30 civilians in Ratyan and 50 in Hardatnin.⁵

BOX 8 Al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh (The Levant Front)

Al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh (The Levant Front) was the largest coalition in northern Syria with five key members: the Islamic Front in Aleppo, Jaish al-Mujahedeen, Fastaqim Kama Umirta (this group was part of Jaish al-Mujahedeen but it broke away before al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh was established), Nour ad-Din al-Zanki, al-Assala Wa Tanmiyeh front. It was established in December 2015. When the regime launched an offensive towards Nubbul and al-Zahra north of Aleppo, the Islamic Front played a key role in containing the attack. All members of the coalition were also part of the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council (Command Council). The Command Council did not object to the initiative.⁶ Despite this success, the coalition faced many internal divisions and officially dissolved in April 2015.⁷ Despite its official dissolution, some groups continued operating under this name.

In late 2014, Kurdish forces in the north moved from defense to offense and took full control of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) within a month.⁸ By 7 February, the “Euphrates Volcano” team had captured about a hundred villages around Ayn al-Arab from the Islamic State in Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS).⁹ A People’s Protection Units/Women’s Protection Unit (YPG/YPJ) spokesperson urged the United States to provide more support to help it liberate more territory.¹⁰ Increasing U.S. aid to the YPG/YPJ had been problematic because the organization was on Turkey’s terrorist list. This significant advance, however, demonstrated that YPG/YPJ was an effective force against ISIS.

The rapid Kurdish advance was also due to ISIS’s decision to withdraw from the area. In mid-February, ISIS moved troops and heavy weaponry to ar-Raqqa, Der-Zor and al-Haskie after pulling them out of al-Bab, Maben and Parables.¹¹ To prevent a total collapse, ISIS focused on defending its heartland. This was the second major setback for ISIS after its expulsion from Aleppo city in early 2014.

De Mistura’s plan seemed hopeless without active international support. On 18 February, De Mistura announced that the Syrian government was ready to stop air attacks on Aleppo for six weeks.¹² The rebels did not trust the government. The leadership of the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council (Command Council) issued a statement saying it would not meet De Mistura because of the envoy’s “partial stand towards the revolution of the Syrian people.”¹³ However, residents of east Aleppo seemed supportive of De Mistura’s plan. Fifty-three per cent of 975 people surveyed in eastern Aleppo accepted the “truce initiative under any circumstances.” While 89 per cent believed that binding rules were necessary and 49 per cent argued that international help was needed to guarantee the agreement, 77 per cent doubted the will of the “international community to ensure that the parties signing the truce remain[ed] committed to it.”¹⁴

Afrin, the Kurdish canton in the northwest of Aleppo province, was crowded with as many as half a

million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and faced difficult humanitarian conditions.¹⁵ In April 2013, groups including Liwa al-Tawhid and JN imposed a siege on Afrin, accusing the YPG/YPJ of cooperating with the regime after several incidents in which Kurdish authorities cracked down on anti-government protestors.¹⁶

Between 2 and 6 February the government dropped around 140 barrel bombs, mainly on the northern frontlines.¹⁷ Bombs dropped on the city caused numerous civilian casualties. Aleppo residents said they now feared sunny days and hoped for clouds because government planes could not operate.¹⁸ An as-Sukkari resident, one of the most bombed places in Aleppo, said, “After you see the barrel falling, you don’t know where to go ... sometimes we accidentally run toward the barrels. You crash into things while you are running, because you are looking up.”¹⁹

In February, the World Health Organization (WHO) appealed for 116 USD million to provide immediate medical care to 12.2 million Syrians and said there was a growing incidence of cholera with more than a thousand cases a week reported since January.²⁰ Despite fears that children were no longer being vaccinated for polio, there has not been a case since January 2014. Some 80,000 children in Syria need vaccinations for the disease, which had almost been eradicated outside war zones.²¹

The kidnapping of doctors was another problem that exacerbated the humanitarian situation. The frequency of such crimes and the absence of an authority to punish perpetrators who often remain unidentified are serious problems in Aleppo. Despite activists’ warnings that these crimes caused doctors to flee,²² the remaining few doctors in the eastern side of the city were more concerned about bombing than being kidnapped. As of late 2014, all major field hospitals in Aleppo province had been bombed at least once.²³

On top of the conflict, Syrians suffered one of the worst winters in years. A storm with winds of up to 100 km per hour hit the region during the second week of January. At least 11 refugees lost their lives in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey from exposure. IDPs without shelter in Syria were also victims. In Aleppo city alone, some 60,000 people lacked proper shelter.²⁴

BOX 9: Jabhet an-Nusra attacks Syria Revolutionaries Front and Haraket Hazem

In January 2014, **Haraket Hazem** was officially established in Aleppo.²⁵ This group attracted attention because it received military support through Turkey and Qatar with U.S. agreement and possessed U.S.-made BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles. The group was strong in Idlib and the western Aleppo countryside. In October 2014, radical groups in Idlib countryside under Jabhet an-Nusra (JN’s) leadership targeted a number of U.S. coalition-backed rebel groups including the Syria Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and Haraket Hazem. In early November, groups including JN, Jund al-Haqq and Suqour ash-Sham seized many villages in Idlib including Deir Sunbol, an SRF stronghold, and Khan Sibel, a Hazem-controlled area.

Throughout 2014, JN tried to establish its dominance in Idlib province. SRF and Hazem posed an obstacle to its aims because they were supported by the international coalition, which viewed JN as a terrorist group. JN has often attacked moderate groups with U.S. military support to capture their more advanced

weapons. In several cases, foreign-supported groups have lost much of their popular support because of poor behavior and corruption. Jamal Maarouf, SRF's leader, was one such figure who lost much of his legitimacy and thus became a victim of JN's attacks.²⁶

In late January 2015, after JN seized Sheikh Suleyman military base near Aleppo, Hazem joined the al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh (The Levant Front) because it was unable to defend its positions.²⁷ Within a month Hazem ceased to exist and its fighters joined other groups.²⁸

2015

MARCH - APRIL

EXPLOSIVES HAUNT ALEPPO

The battle over Handarat and al-Mallah continued. JN and al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh fought against government troops supported by foreign fighters and advisors, primarily from Iran and Hezbollah. This time, however, the danger of encircling the city was less pressing. The focus shifted away from the northern front after JN, Ansar ad-Din and Fajer al-Khilafeh blew up the Air Force Intelligence Building on 4 March after digging a 150m tunnel to reach it.²⁹ This complex was one of the most heavily fortified in government-controlled Aleppo city and a major symbolic victory because of its notoriety as a place of government torture.

Air Force Intelligence is one of the four intelligence agencies in Syria. The other three are the Department of Military Intelligence, the General Security Directorate, and the Political Security Directorate. Combined, these services have about 120,000 staff and 46 branches.³⁰ Air Force Intelligence is considered most loyal to the regime because Hafez al-Assad appointed his closest supporters to its top posts. It was also believed to monitor the other agencies.³¹ Hafez al-Assad relied on the agency to crush the 1976-1982 Muslim Brotherhood rebellion. Bashar al-Assad relied on the same agency to suppress the 2011 uprising.³² In capturing the area, rebels removed a key obstacle to attacking regime-held areas in the city.

On 24 March, radical groups including Ahrar ash-Sham and JN founded Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) with Saudi and Turkish support to liberate Idlib Governorate.³³ A few days later, Jaish al-Fatah gained control of Idlib city. By the end of April, it had also captured Jisr ash-Shughour. These gains almost eliminated regime presence across the governorate.³⁴ This was a major blow to the government's position in the northwest and left Aleppo even more isolated. More importantly for the rebels, it opened up the Latakia countryside. The success of Jaish al-Fatah led to the creation of the Fatah Halab (Conquest of Aleppo) operation room on 26 April with the objective of "liberating" Aleppo city.³⁵

The rebel groups' internal problems continued. On 18 April, the largest coalition of rebel forces in Aleppo, al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh, dissolved after disagreeing about who should lead it. Key members such as Nour ad-Din al-Zanki, Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaish al-Mujahedeen withdrew.³⁶ A few smaller affiliates continued to use the name, generating confusion for the media and observers.

On 5 March, an explosion in Salqin, near the Turkish border, killed an-Nusra General Military Commander Abu Humam ash-Shami during a *Shoura* meeting. Abu Humam was an experienced commander who had fought in Afghanistan and been appointed by Bin Laden to be responsible for Syrian fighters there.³⁷ Sources close to JN claimed that an international coalition drone fired on the building. The coalition denied this. The international coalition air campaign had claimed 2,078 lives as of mid-April 2015, including 1,922 ISIS fighters, mostly of foreign origin, 90 JN fighters in Idlib and Aleppo³⁸ and 66 civilians.³⁹

The war of attrition between rebel groups and ISIS continued in different forms. On 7 April, two synchro-

nized bombs planted by ISIS went off in Hawar Kilis and Mare' killing three commanders from al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh and one from an-Nusra.⁴⁰

On 11 April, the government started a seven-day campaign of barrel bombing Aleppo city. Children stopped attending classes after a bomb hit a Sa'd al-Ansari primary school killing eight children and four teachers.⁴¹ Barrel bombs and improvised mortars were the major causes of civilian deaths, with up to 83.7 per cent of civilian deaths between December 2012 and March 2015 due to explosives.⁴² Both weapons are indiscriminate and thus prohibited by International Humanitarian Law and Security Council resolutions.

Amnesty International found that civilians were the major victims in eight government barrel bomb attacks on rebel areas and eight rebel mortar attacks on government-held areas in Aleppo.⁴³ However, the government killed far more civilians than the rebels. According to the opposition Syrian Network for Human Rights, between 2012 and February 2015, 96 per cent of the 12,194 deaths caused by barrel bomb were civilians.⁴⁴ Throughout 2014, 672 people were killed in rebel mortar attacks.⁴⁵

Since the conflict started in 2011, Syrian life expectancy has dropped 20 years to 55.7,⁴⁶ in large part because of the extensive use of explosives.⁴⁷ Between December 2012 and February 2015, explosives had a dramatic effect on 5.1 million people's lives. Aleppo governorate was the worst; 1.1 million people were directly or indirectly affected. Rural Damascus was second with almost a million and Damascus city with about half a million. Fifty seven per cent of the affected were over the age of 18.⁴⁸

On 6 March, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2209 condemning the use of chlorine gas in Syria. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons found with a "high degree of confidence" that these type of weapons were used in Syria.⁴⁹ The resolution, however, did not hold any particular actors responsible because the fact-finding mission's mandate was limited to investigating whether such chemicals had been used.

In early 2015, regime-held Aleppo had become a city where "all of the people on the street [were] women and older people"⁵⁰ while opposition areas were places where "only the old and the poor"⁵¹ lived. Food was available across the city, but prices had soared due to scarcity.

Medical care was difficult to find on both sides of the divide. The situation in the east continued to be alarming. Doctors told Médecins Sans Frontières and Amnesty International they were most concerned about medicine shortages. Government areas remained better-equipped except against some chronic diseases such as diabetes.⁵² The winter of 2014-15 was colder than usual. During the winter, staying warm was the main concern of eastern Aleppo's inhabitants.⁵³

As of early 2015, the GDP of Syria had shrunk by 40 per cent.⁵⁴ On 30 April, the Syrian pound hit its lowest level yet. The official U.S. Dollar to Syrian pound exchange rate was 260 SP for 1 USD, or about 80 per cent less than its value in 2011. The black market was even worse, at 310-324 SP per dollar, or about 85 per cent less than the pound's 2011 value.⁵⁵

BOX 10: Government Forces

Syrian government forces consist of various local and foreign elements, with a range of training and commitment to the fight. The core contains the Syrian Arab Army and the four Security Directorates. The government has also organized local paramilitary groups. Since 2014, their role has increased. Hezbollah from Lebanon and other predominantly Shia militias from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan also fight. Before the Russian intervention in Syria on 30 September 2015, the main foreign officers advising the government were from Hezbollah and Iran.

Syrian Arab Army

In 2010, Syria had 325,000 active soldiers.⁵⁶ In 2011, this number decreased to 295,000 active soldiers with 314,000 in reserve.⁵⁷ Its 2010 military spending was close to 2.3 billion USD.⁵⁸ As expected, when the uprising started in 2011, some personnel defected. By early 2013, the number of regular soldiers was estimated to be around 178,000.⁵⁹ By the end of 2014, there were an estimated 150,000 and 175,000.⁶⁰ Opposition sources claimed that 75,000 to 100,000 members of the armed forces had defected by the end of 2011. This figure is certainly an exaggeration and many defectors did not join the opposition but left the country.⁶¹

As of 2015, some soldiers had not been deployed. Since the beginning, the government has relied mainly on 65,000 to 75,000 well-trained soldiers. The Republican Guards, the Special Forces and the 4th Armored Division constitute more than 50 per cent of this battle force.⁶² The Syrian Observatory estimated the regular army's casualties to be 44,237 by December 2014,⁶³ suggesting that the government could have lost as many as half of its best fighters.

The government has been better-equipped. Unlike the opposition, it possesses air power, which it has used to drive out the population from opposition areas and devastate cities. The opposition lacks high accuracy anti-air defense systems. By 2014, however, it had halved the government's air power by shooting down or destroying aircraft on the ground. In early 2012, the Air Force had 610 aircraft.⁶⁴ By 2014, it was believed to have 200 to 300 combat capable aircraft.⁶⁵

Security Forces

Under the Syrian Presidential Security Council and the Syrian National Security Bureau there are four directorates: Military Intelligence, General Security, Air Force Intelligence and Political Security. Combined, these secret services have about 120,000 members and 46 branches.⁶⁶ An exiled Syrian Army General put the number of personnel as high as 200,000, but that figure could include administrators and informants.⁶⁷ Although numerous individuals have defected, there are no reliable estimates. The security forces deployed with the army during some operations from 2012 to 2014.⁶⁸

Local Paramilitaries

At the start of the conflict, the government relied on paramilitary forces to suppress protests and then counter the slowly growing insurgency. There were at least two types of paramilitary groups: *Shabbiha* and the Popular Committees. The Syrian state has a long history of working with *Shabbiha* who were mainly Alawite and controlled much of the smuggling into Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s. Both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad tried to limit the growing power of this network. Since the beginning of the

uprising in 2011, the concept has widened to include regime thugs who suppress non-violent uprisings across Syria. Popular Committees are essentially local defense units armed by the government. Their loyalty leans towards the government but are mainly motivated by guaranteeing their own security.⁶⁹

In mid-2012, these two groups merged into the National Defense Forces (NDF) and started receiving a regular salary from the government and military training from Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. NDF personnel estimates range between 60,000 and 100,000.⁷⁰ These troops are deployed to hold territories the army retakes, secure checkpoints in urban and rural areas and join the regular army in military operations.⁷¹

Small Syrian and Palestinian paramilitaries also fight alongside the government, including the Ba'ath Battalions, Whirlwind Eagles, Popular Front for Liberation of Iskenderun Syrian Resistance, Palestinian Liwa al-Quds (Aleppo, Nayrab Refugee Camp), Palestinian Liberation Army (Damascus area and Deraa) and Popular Front for The Liberation of Palestine – General Command (Yarmouk Refugee Camp). The most significant of these is the Ba'ath Battalions with 5,000 to 10,000 fighters in Aleppo, Idlib, Tartous, Homs and Damascus.⁷²

Foreign Paramilitaries

The most important foreign paramilitary is Hezbollah, which joined the war in February 2013. Hezbollah soldiers are trained to confront the Israeli Army in southern Lebanon with guerrilla tactics. In the summer of 2014, Israel estimated there were 4,000 to 5,000 Hezbollah fighters in Syria.⁷³ In 2015, estimates suggested there were 10,000.⁷⁴ Most likely, this number included volunteers and veterans in addition to active professional soldiers. There is much speculation about its number of casualties. In December 2013, official Hezbollah sources counted “fewer than 250” deaths, which was similar to the 232 deaths documented by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.⁷⁵ In December 2014, the Observatory had documented a total of 624.⁷⁶

Besides Hezbollah, there are mercenaries – mostly followers of Shia Islam –from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. These 3,000 to 4,000 fighters⁷⁷ are organized under two Iran-funded, equipped and trained paramilitary groups: Liwa Abu Fadel al-Abbas and Liwa Zulfiqar. They mostly deploy near Shia religious sites. They have also joined government offensives, including its campaign in Aleppo in late 2014 and early 2015.

2015

MAY TO JULY

ISIS ESCALATES

Throughout May, there were rumors that Aleppo city would fall to the opposition. Stories circulated that the government had emptied the Central Bank of currency and that top Alawite commanders had fled.⁷⁸ Armed groups associated with the Fatah Halab operation room spread word they would follow their success in Idlib, where government defenses had collapsed in late March 2015.⁷⁹ At first, the operation room included key players in Aleppo province such as Ahrar ash-Sham, Jaish al-Mujahedeen and Kataeb Nour ad-Din al-Zanki.⁸⁰ By mid-May, the number of members had increased to 31, including some who received direct military support from the United States.⁸¹

In early July, the Ansar ash-Sharia Operation Room also brought together mostly jihadist groups, including JN and its affiliates as well as Ahrar ash-Sham, to liberate Aleppo.⁸²

These two operations rooms cooperated, but differences remained. Unlike Ansar ash-Sharia, most Fatah Halab affiliates were considered moderate and some were supported by the United States. It excluded groups which were considered “terrorists” such as the JN, which was the key unifying element in the Ansar ash-Sharia.

Ahrar ash-Sham participated in both. Joining both jihadist and moderate operation rooms to coordinate offensives has been common for this group. Although it has a radical ideology with tacit links to al-Qaeda and seeks to establish an Islamic theocracy ruled by Sharia Law, it takes a pragmatic stance by maintaining ties with more moderate groups. As an independent armed group, it has played a major role since the beginning of the conflict. It has established itself as a key military actor and has provided services to civilians in areas it controls. Any military coalition in Aleppo without its presence would fail. Any peace process requires its participation because of its strength on the ground.

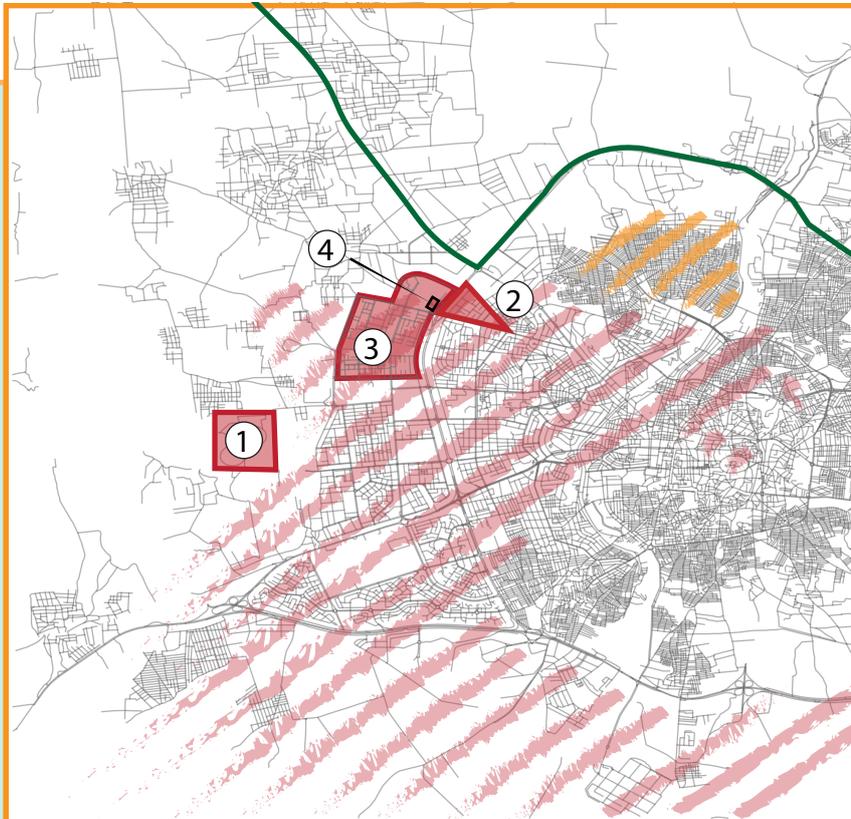
In mid-June, Fatah Halab launched its first major operation. This led to a slight advance on Aleppo’s western frontline in the northern part of the ar-Rashidin district. Further north, the armed opposition clashed with regime forces in al-Khalidiyeh district near the Air Force Intelligence Building.⁸³ This was important for the opposition because the complex is adjacent to Castello Road, the opposition’s only route into eastern Aleppo.

On 2-3 July, the two operation rooms began a large offensive in western Aleppo and captured the Military Scientific Research Center, a vital defense line for the regime.⁸⁴ As frontlines have not changed that often in Aleppo, this was a significant development. On 7 July, JN, as part of the Ansar ash-Sharia operation room, carried out a suicide attack near the Research Center and killed about 25 government soldiers. This was part of a new offensive against the al-Zahra District that was repelled by regime forces. The rebels accused the government of using chlorine gas shells.⁸⁵

Legend

-  Area under government control
-  Area under YPG/YPJ control
-  The Castello Road

- ① Military Research Center
- ② Al-Khalidiyeh District
- ③ Al-Zahra District
- ④ Air Force Intelligence



Map 28: Government-controlled western Aleppo (early July 2015)

ISIS escalated its attacks against the government and the armed opposition following its defeat by Kurdish forces. In the first half of May, it carried out offensives against the Kwaire besieged military airbase and in the nearby villages of Sheikh Najjar industrial city. Reportedly, it managed to break the airbase's first defense line but failed to overrun it.⁸⁶ The government redeployed fighters from north of Aleppo to confront ISIS near Sheikh Najjar.⁸⁷ In late May, ISIS advanced towards Azaz and Mare' and the Infantry School. It occupied nearby villages. In this way, the Kilis-Azaz-Aleppo corridor and supply line, which had previously been targeted by ISIS, came under threat from the group.⁸⁸ ISIS continued its protracted war until the end of July without capturing any major cities.

During this period, the armed opposition condemned international coalition strikes for only targeting ISIS along the northeastern frontline but not closer to Aleppo city where opposition forces were battling ISIS. The coalition also targeted positions in northern Idlib and western Aleppo provinces held by JN, which was fighting ISIS. At the same time, government planes continued to target opposition forces, including those fighting ISIS. This situation certainly helped ISIS advance. On 5 June, the coalition eased pressure on the opposition just north of Aleppo city by targeting ISIS in Soran.

Conflict between ISIS and the rebels had a direct impact on civilians. ISIS cut fuel supply lines from Der al-Zor to rebel-held Aleppo province. "We will make you [rebels] carry your tanks and vehicles on donkeys," the Emir of ISIS in al-Bab said.⁸⁹ The price of a barrel of diesel rose from 17,000 SP (62 USD) to at least 55,000 SP (200 USD) if it could be found at all. The opposition responded by cutting food supplies to ISIS areas.⁹⁰

The regime escalated its barrel bomb campaign, not just in Aleppo, but also in other towns such as al-Bab, Mnbej and Anadan. From April to July 2014, in Aleppo city alone, the regime dropped an average of 107 barrel bombs a month. This number decreased to 17 a month between September 2014 and March 2015.⁹¹ The surge in May, the deadliest month in Syria,⁹² and June prompted more than 70 countries to write a letter to the UN Secretary General condemning the use of indiscriminate weapons.⁹³ On 17 June, Stefan De Mistura said the use of barrel bombs was "unacceptable" and condemned the opposition's use

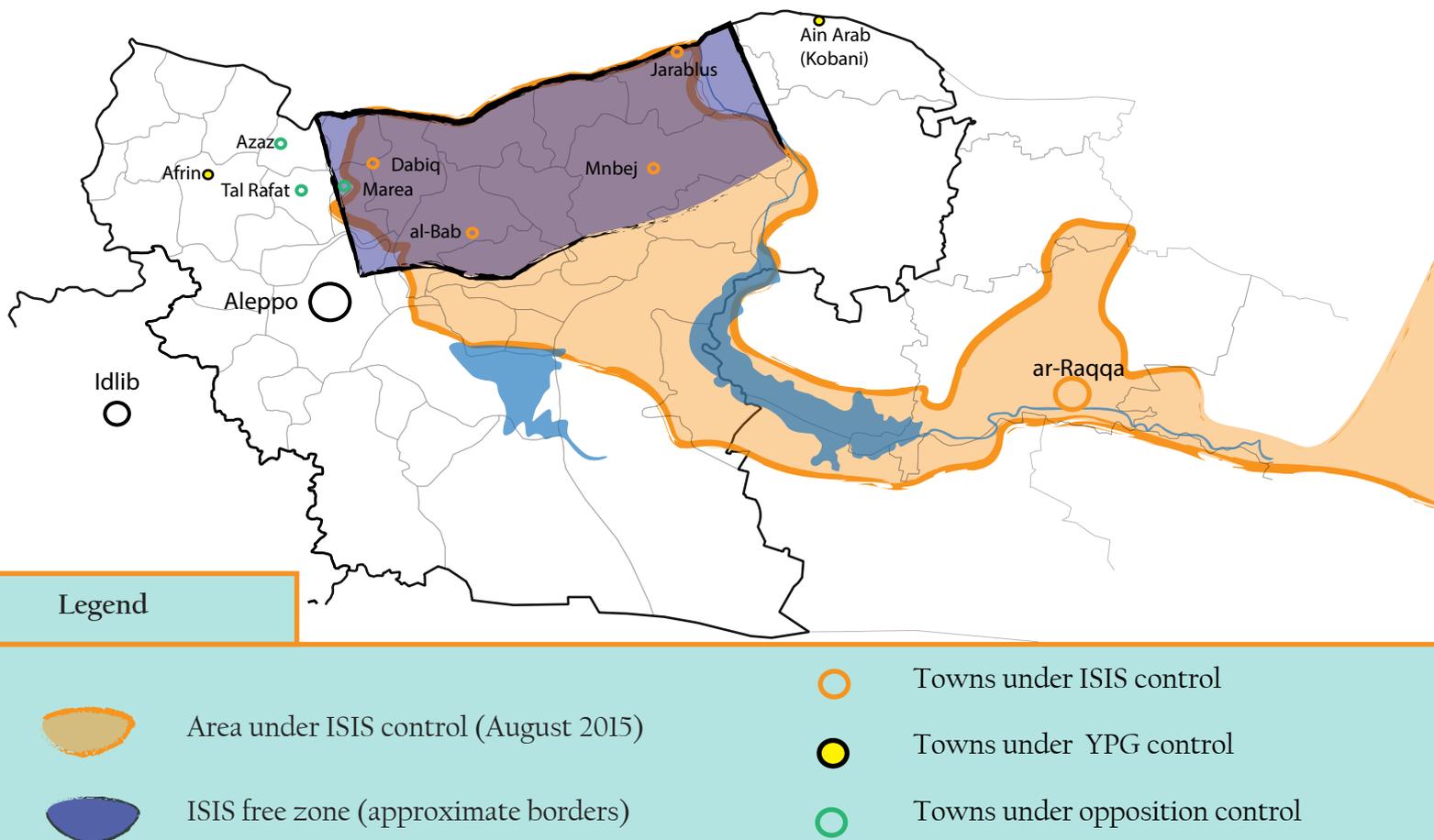
of indiscriminate weapons against civilians in Aleppo city.⁹⁴

From 20 June to 18 July, all of Aleppo city was without water because the pump station in Suleyman al-Halabi district, under JN's control, stopped working.⁹⁵ According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (Syrian Observatory), JN cut supplies to pressure the government to provide electricity to the city. The manager of the station, a JN member, passed the preconditions to the regime for resuming water to the city via the Red Crescent. The requirements included supplying fuel to the station and providing electricity to the city.⁹⁶ Both water and electricity supplies gradually resumed in the city after 18 July, indicating that JN and the regime came to some kind of an agreement.⁹⁷ At the time, UNICEF was bringing in 2.5 million liters of clean water a day from Turkey to meet needs, the largest amount since the war began.⁹⁸

2015 AUGUST - SEPTEMBER SAFE ZONE

ISIS carried out two suicide attacks against al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh in Mare', north of Aleppo on 8 August.⁹⁹ By the end of August, ISIS had captured three towns around Mare', but had not reached the town itself.¹⁰⁰ This setback was partly due to JN's withdrawal from the region and the fight against ISIS in early August, fearing that Turkey and the United States might impose a safe zone that excluded jihadists from the area. In a statement, JN said that a safe zone would not help the fight against Assad and only served Turkish interests because of its fears of growing Kurdish influence in the area.¹⁰¹ Rebels accused ISIS of using mustard gas during these attacks,¹⁰² an accusation supported by U.S. officials.¹⁰³

The idea of a safe zone has been put on the table several times but never realized. This time, the main question was: who would drive ISIS out of the area? Turkey opposed any role for Kurdish fighters and rebel groups had not been effective in confronting ISIS, especially without JN. The United States attempted to train Syrian fighters to confront ISIS, but this plan failed at the hands of JN.



Map 29: Proposed ISIS-free zone, northern Syria

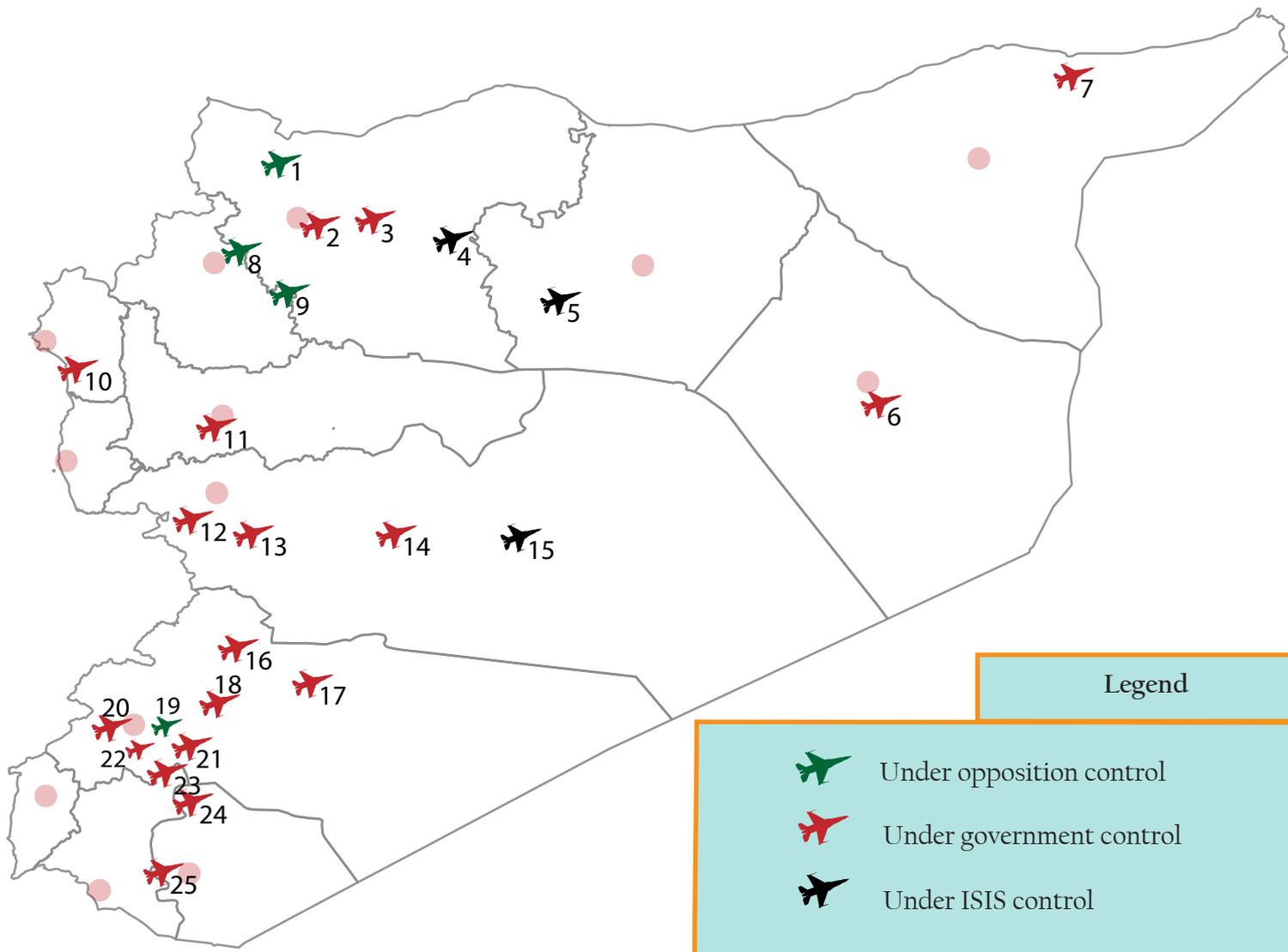
On 31 July, JN kidnapped or killed several U.S.-trained rebels known as the Division 30 Infantry who were headquartered in Azaz. A few dozen were trained to fight ISIS. When they arrived in Syria from Turkey, JN attacked their headquarters, killed five and wounded 18.¹⁰⁴ The same day, JN released a statement condemning U.S. actions in Syria and announcing the kidnapping.¹⁰⁵ U.S. forces then bombed some JN positions.¹⁰⁶ Seven of those kidnapped were released on 16 August.¹⁰⁷ JN obtained its objective by sending a message to the coalition that forces on the ground fighting jihadists rather than the regime would face intense opposition.

In September, the head of U.S. Central Command General Lloyd James Austin III said that “only four or five Syrian fighters remain[ed] from the 54 that the U.S. trained.”¹⁰⁸ Central Command had spent 500 million USD on this program.¹⁰⁹ JN made it clear that any plan for establishing a safe zone would not be tolerated.

In early July, the Association of Syrian Economists and the Aleppo City Council in the rebel-held part of the city suggested replacing the Syrian pound with the Turkish lira in northwestern parts of Syria.¹¹⁰ A committee was formed to review the proposal. In August, the Association released a study explaining the benefits of this change, which included the Syrian pound’s declining value, the regime’s strong interconnection to the state economy and that the opposition’s use of the Syrian pound helped the regime finance its war. The Turkish lira was chosen because it was not an international currency and would not benefit the regime.¹¹¹

In August, the Aleppo Council paid its employees in Turkish lira. The council was on the list of 20 political and military groups who supported this initiative, including the Legal Court in Aleppo, al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh (The Levant Front) and Jaish al-Mujahedeen.¹¹² An organizer of the move said the replacement would be gradual.¹¹³ Critics of the initiative argued that it would increase the opposition’s already heavy dependence on Turkey.¹¹⁴

Throughout September, reports circulated that Russia was preparing to intervene militarily in Syria in cooperation with Iran. These reports followed visits of Iranian officials to Moscow.¹¹⁵ Satellite images showed that at least since late August 2015, Russian forces had been rehabilitating the Basel al-Assad (Hmeymim) airport in Latakia to receive Russian soldiers, aircraft and air defense systems.¹¹⁶ Russia claimed that it received an invitation from the government and its aim was to prevent the collapse of the Syrian state.¹¹⁷ It said its military role would be to provide air support to fight ISIS and other terrorists without deploying ground forces. Many countries including the United States, Turkey and Saudi Arabia condemned the intervention. They accused Russia of saving Assad and doubted its stated intention to fight ISIS. Russian airstrikes started on 30 September.



Legend

-  Under opposition control
-  Under government control
-  Under ISIS control

- | | |
|--|---|
|  1 Minnegh Military Airbase (Aug. 2013) |  13 Mastouma (Shayrat) Airbase |
|  2 Aleppo International Airport |  14 Tays (T4) Airbase |
|  3 an-Nayrab Military Airbase |  15 Tadmor Airbase |
|  4 Kwairees Military Airport |  16 Tays (T4) Airbase |
|  5 Jarrah Military Airbase (Aug. 2014) |  17 Nasariyeh Airbase |
|  6 Tabqa Military Airbase (Aug. 2014) |  18 Saiqal Airbase |
|  7 Der al-Zor Airport |  19 Dumayr Airbase |
|  8 Qamishli Airport |  20 Marj as-Sultan Airbase (Nov. 2012) |
|  9 Taftanaz Military Airbase (Jan. 2013) |  21 Mazzeh Military Airbase |
|  10 Abu ad-Duhur Military Airbase (Sept 2015) |  22 Damascus International Airport |
|  11 Bassel al-Assad (Hmaiyim) Airport |  23 Aqraba Airbase |
|  12 Hama Airport |  24 Marj Ruhail Airbase |
|  13 Al-Qusayr (Dabaa) Military Airbase |  25 Khalkhalakh Airbase |
| |  26 al-Thu'la Airbase |

Map 30:

Government controls 18 of Syria's 25 most important airports and airbases (September 2015)

2015

OCTOBER - NOVEMBER

RUSSIA STEPS IN

During the first week of its military intervention, Russian airstrikes concentrated on Idlib, north Hama and Homs provinces where there was a mix of al-Qaeda related groups, local Salafis and more moderate groups. ISIS's presence in these areas was negligible. Russia demonstrated some of its newest military capabilities. According to the Russian Defense Ministry, on 7 October, four battleships from its Caspian Sea fleet fired 26 cruise missiles against 11 ISIS targets in Aleppo and ar-Raqqa. The missiles flew about 1,500 km and crossed Iranian and Iraqi airspace.¹¹⁸

BOX 11: Russian Forces in Syria

Russian-Syrian military relations date back to Hafez al-Assad's era. Its presence was limited to the 720th Russian Navy Material and Technical Support Facility in Tartous that had been established in 1984. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the facility was hardly used.¹¹⁹ In August 2015, it gained more significance. Its technicians started rehabilitating the Basel al-Assad (Hmeymim) commercial airport in Latakia and turned it into a military airbase.

According to the Russian Defense Ministry, by early October, the airbase hosted about 50 fixed-wing and rotary aircraft and fewer than 3,000 military and technical personnel. The main air arsenal used by Russia included: four Su-30SM multirole fighters with air-to-air and air-to-surface combat capacity; 12 Su-25SM attack planes; 12 Su-24 supersonic attack fighters; six brand-new Su-34 fighter bombers; a dozen helicopters.¹²⁰

To protect the base from ground and air attacks, Russia deployed tanks, howitzers, and an air-defense system.¹²¹ After Turkey downed a Russian Su-24 bomber on 24 November, Russia deployed its latest air defense system, S-400. It also brought the Moskva warship with advanced air defense systems from the Black Sea to near Latakia.¹²²

In addition to its arsenal in Syria, the Russian Navy has also been part of the campaign. As early as 7 October and again on 20 November, Russian warships fired cruise missiles from the Mediterranean and Caspian seas to strike targets in Aleppo, ar-Raqqa and Der al-Zor.¹²³ Russia has also deployed its latest strategic bombers such as the Tu-160 and released videos showing the bomber flying in Syrian airspace.¹²⁴

The military intervention came after the Russian *Duma* (parliament) approved the overseas operation.¹²⁵ Russian officials claimed that the intervention was based on a call from the legitimate government of Syria, which still has international recognition and a seat at the United Nations. The intervention agreement does not have a termination date.¹²⁶

In mid-October, the government launched two new offensives near Aleppo city: south towards the International Highway and east towards the Kwaire Airport, which had been besieged by ISIS for about two years. These two areas, especially the southwest front, were central to the regime's military strategy in Aleppo. What differed this time was the structure of the operations.

Two new factors played a key role: Russian airstrikes and the increasing role of foreign militias. This changed the equation. Now the government could use Russian planes from the air and Syrian forces on the ground supported by Iranian proxies and Hezbollah. Sophisticated Russian aircraft replaced old Soviet-made Syrian aircraft. With Russian advisors and monitors on the ground, aircraft could support troops—something the Syrian Air Force did not have the capacity to do.

On the ground, the use of Iranian-sponsored proxies increased. The role of foreign militias directed by high-ranking Iranian generals including Major General Qasem Suleymani, the commander of the Quds Force, the Republican Guard's elite extra-territorial Special Forces, was evident from the early days of military escalation in Aleppo.

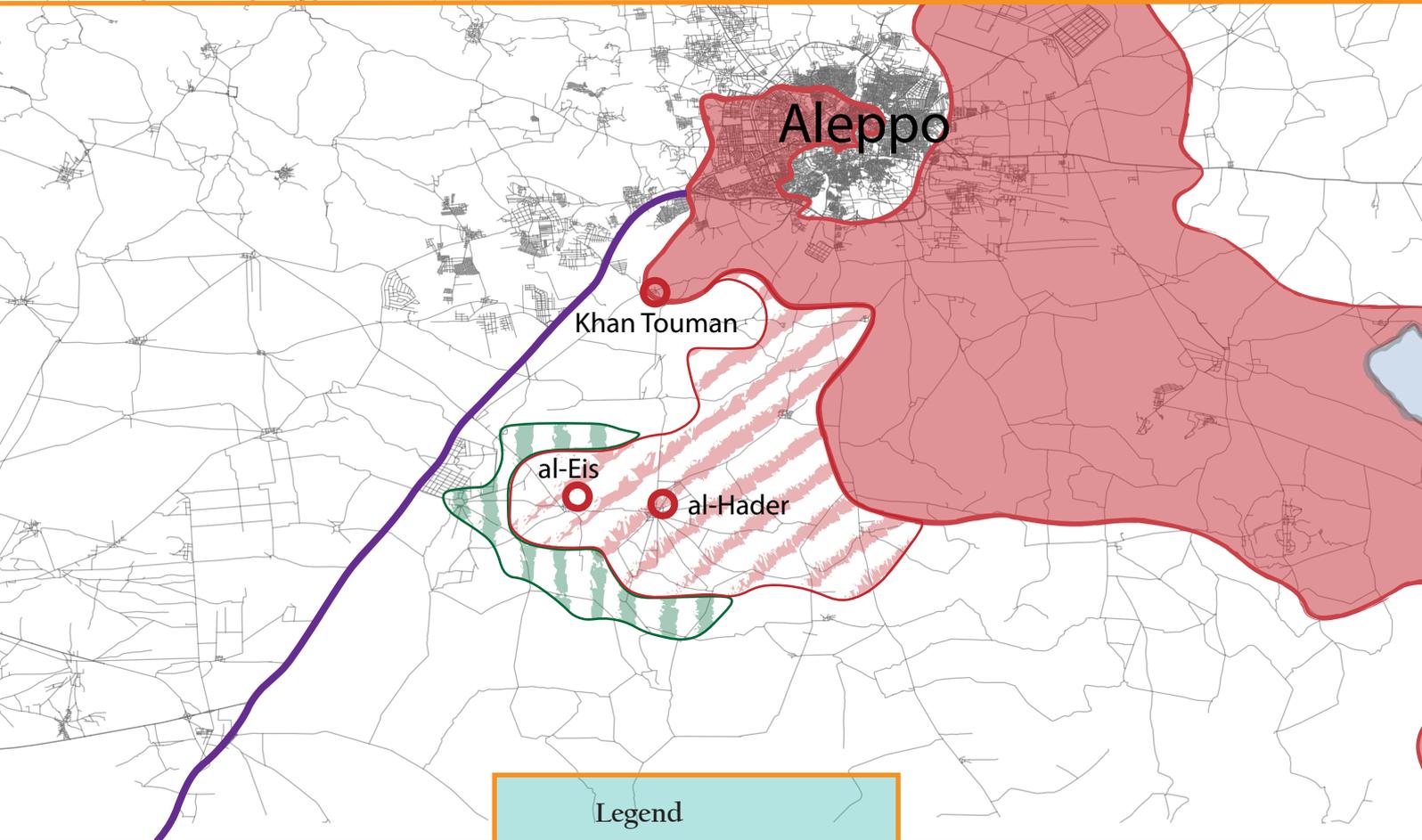
Southwestern Front

Between 9 and 10 October, Russian airstrikes in the south of Aleppo province increased¹²⁷ accompanied by a government ground offensive. In October and November, government forces slowly advanced north towards the city despite JN and Ahrar ash-Sham's defense of the frontlines. The government's immediate goal was to take control of al-Hader, a rebel stronghold 25 km south of Aleppo, and the nearby village of al-Eis which neighbors a highland overlooking the International Highway.¹²⁸

The increasing role of foreign militias was noticeable. Besides Hezbollah, the most prominent militias were the Iraqi Haraket an-Nujaba and Kataeb al-Imam Ali.¹²⁹ A new entrant since the summer of 2014 was the Fatimiun militia, composed mainly of Afghans living in Iran. Only one third of the three million Afghans living in Iran have legal status. Exploiting this situation, Iran recruited them. Some volunteered for religious or financial reasons and some were coerced to fight in Syria.¹³⁰ These militias are supervised by Iranian generals who serve under Major General Qasem Suleymani, commander of the Quds Force. By the time the tempo of military operations in Aleppo province picked up in mid-October, there were up to 2,000 of these fighters.¹³¹

Iran's increased involvement was evident from the death toll. As of 28 November, 64 Iranian generals, advisors and special forces from the Republican Guard had been killed.¹³² In late November, Tehran denied reports that General Suleymani was injured south of Aleppo.¹³³ Between October and 10 November, Hezbollah lost 46 fighters,¹³⁴ a significant number given that its death toll during all of 2015 was 378.¹³⁵

Once again, rebel internal problems contributed to regime success. On 11 October, Fatah Halab's legal committee issued a statement blaming its military commanders for recent defeats. The text condemned the corruption, money-seeking behavior, irresponsibility, internal divisions and infighting of some rebel leaders. It recommended improving pay for foot soldiers who earned much less than their commanders. It also suggested creating two groups of forces. One force would confront ISIS. The other would fight the regime and secure the supply line to Aleppo.¹³⁶



Legend

-  Territory under government control before mid-October offensive
-  Territory gained by government (mid-October-2 December 2015)
-  Territory gained back by opposition (23-28 November)
-  Aleppo-Damascus International Highway
-  Key towns under government control

Map 31: Government offensive, southern Aleppo (mid-October-December 2015)

Source: [Agathocle de Syracuse \(Map 1\)](#); [Agathocle de Syracuse \(Map 2\)](#)

In late November, rebels fighting the government in south Aleppo received support and reinforcements from Jaish al-Fatah, which was operating in Hama and Idlib. On 18 November, a commander from Jaish al-Fatah explained that they needed to come to Aleppo's aid because if the regime retook the International Highway, it would weaken their positions in Hama and Idlib.¹³⁷

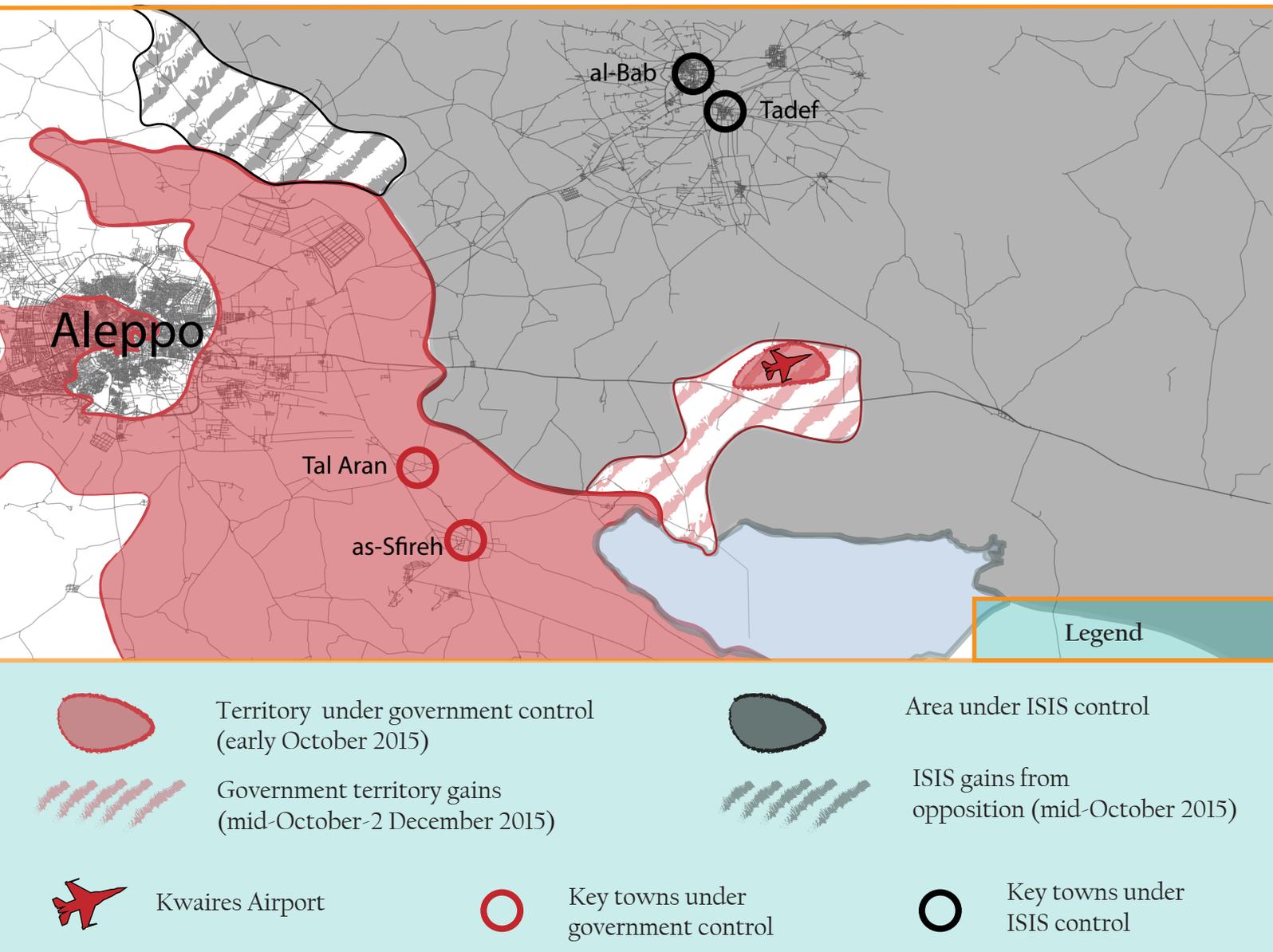
In fact, the involvement of Jaish al-Fatah halted the regime's advance. A JN leader, the leading force in Jaish al-Fatah, said that their involvement in south Aleppo created a military balance between the gov-

ernment and the rebels. Ahrar ash-Sham’s field commander explained that although they had received significant support, it would be difficult to regain al-Hader and al-Eis, two highlands on a long frontline.¹³⁸

Southeastern Front – Kwaives Airport

On 15 October, government forces launched an offensive against ISIS from southeastern Aleppo towards the besieged Kwaives Airport. At the beginning, the campaign did not go as planned. Several days into the offensive, ISIS responded by attacking the Khanasser-Asrya supply line¹³⁹ and attempted to take the regime stronghold of as-Sfireh.¹⁴⁰ ISIS failed. In early November, government forces regained the Khanasser-Asrya supply route.¹⁴¹

On 10 November, regime forces finally broke the siege of Kwaives Airport 40 km east of Aleppo and 20 km from the ISIS stronghold of al-Bab. This liberated the 800 soldiers who were trapped on the 400 hectare airbase.¹⁴² The victory was particularly important for Russia and the government to demonstrate they were fighting ISIS. While they have emphasized this in their public statements, they had actually done little real fighting against the group.



Map 32: North-eastern Aleppo (October-December 2015)

Source: [LiveuAMaps \(Map 1\)](#); [LiveuAMaps \(Map2\)](#)

North of Aleppo

On 9 October, ISIS made a sudden major advance in north Aleppo. They occupied several villages and the Infantry School, which had been under rebel control. The school and its surrounding areas were squeezed between ISIS forces from the north and east and government forces from the south. Russian airplanes and regime artillery had devastated the area. A commander from the al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh coalition, based in the school, explained that they withdrew because they feared a siege.¹⁴³ ISIS filled the gap, opening a new frontline with regime forces in north Aleppo.

Fighting between rebels and ISIS continued throughout October-November along the long frontline running from the Turkish border to Aleppo city. On 20-21 November, the Turkmen-majority Sultan Murad Brigade took Dahla and Harjala villages near the Turkish border from ISIS with help from al-Jabha ash-Shamiyeh and the international coalition.¹⁴⁴

Vienna – Back to Diplomacy

In October, Russia increased its diplomatic role. Moscow slowly took the initiative from Washington, which had remained without a clear strategy to resolve the conflict. The first attempt was on 23 October when the Russian, U.S., Turkish and Saudi foreign ministers failed to agree on common grounds. They promised to pursue active diplomacy until a solution was found.¹⁴⁵ The next meeting was set for 30 October.¹⁴⁶

The second meeting included 19 participants. Its most important achievement was to bring all key regional actors, including Iran for the first time, together at one table. The participants agreed on nine basic points. They left aside the difficult questions of a transitional government and the role of Assad.¹⁴⁷ The most worrying aspect was the absence of any Syrian representatives, a clear indication the problem was now out of Syrian hands.

In terms of outcomes, the third meeting in Vienna on 14 November was the most significant. Without overcoming the issue of whether Assad would stay or go, the sides agreed on several key points and reached a loose agreement on a “Syrian-led transition.”¹⁴⁸ Sergey Lavrov interpreted this as organizing elections for Syrians to decide whether Assad would stay or go. For John Kerry, the phrase meant that Assad would go and elections would be held under a transitional government.

They also agreed to draft a new constitution and hold new elections within 18 months. The current government and the opposition agreed to create a joint government within six months, although the time frame was not definite.¹⁴⁹ Within one month, the sides would come together to assess the situation. At the beginning of 2016, indirect negotiations between the government and the opposition would begin. A cease-fire would be in place until May 2016. UN-administered elections would be held by May 2017.¹⁵⁰

This was the most significant diplomatic progress to date, but many problems remained. The accord represented a Russian vision more than one supported by the UN, the United States or Syrians. Second, the situation on the ground did not reflect this optimism. Government forces and Russian aircraft were escalating the fight in Aleppo. The United States and regional allies were also increasing military support to the Syrian opposition.

Russian-Turkish Confrontation

On 24 November, Turkey downed a Russian Su-24 bomber in northern Latakia while it was striking predominantly Turkmen rebels backed by Turkey. Ankara claimed the bomber had crossed the border, which Russia denied.¹⁵¹ One of the two pilots who ejected from the plane was shot dead by the rebels, which further provoked the Russians.

Russian-Turkish relations dramatically worsened. Turkey stopped flying in Syrian airspace even as part of the international coalition against ISIS.¹⁵² Russia suspended communications with Turkey; sent the Moskva guided missile cruiser with advanced air defense systems from the Black Sea to Latakia; and, began to deploy air-to-air fighting jets with bombers.¹⁵³

Humanitarian Situation

In October, 123,842 people were displaced from Aleppo, Idlib and Hama provinces.¹⁵⁴ In Aleppo, the government offensive southwest of the city caused the most displacements. Towns like al-Hader, which had about 25,000 inhabitants, were completely evacuated.¹⁵⁵

Humanitarian organizations warned that the winter would be especially difficult for the displaced. Prior to the Russian intervention, there were 27,000 families living in IDP camps across Syria. The intervention added another 25,000. By October, 151,677 people lived in these camps just in Aleppo, Idlib and Latakia provinces.¹⁵⁶

According to the Syrian Observatory, between 30 September and 30 October, 1,502 people died in Russian strikes: 485 civilians, 419 ISIS fighters and 598 JN and other local fighters.¹⁵⁷

The year had the highest rainfall for a decade, somewhat easing the food crisis. Although Syria only produced 2.5 million tons of wheat, about half of what Syria produced before the war, barley production was 986 thousand tons, the best yield since 2006.

UNICEF reported that approximately eight million Syrian children faced direct or indirect threat. Since 2011, 11,000 children had been killed. Among the four million refugees and 6.5 million internally displaced, three million were children. Since the onset of the Syrian conflict, EU countries had registered asylum applications from 214,000 children. Fifty seven thousand of these children were unaccompanied.¹⁵⁸

2015 DECEMBER CAN DIPLOMACY SAVE SYRIA?

Saudi Arabia organized a meeting of the Syrian political and military opposition in Riyadh on 10 December to form a united opposition body. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia joined Russia and a long list of Syrian representatives. Under pressure from Russia, the Damascus-based Syrian National Committee for Democratic Change (NCC) and the pacifist Building the Syrian State were also invited. Turkey insisted that the Democratic Union Kurdistan (YPD), the most important Kurdish group, be excluded because of its links to the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK).

The most important difference was to include military groups. Geneva I in 2012 and II in 2014 failed to have much impact on the ground because military groups were excluded from the talks and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (National Coalition) had little influence over them. Ten groups were invited, three of which played a major role in the fighting: Ahrar ash-Sham (Turkish-Qatari ally), Jaish al-Islam (Saudi ally) and the Southern Front (seen as moderate and supported by the United States).

The conference formed a High Negotiations Committee (HNC) to lead the talks. The elected 34 members of the committee would choose 15 people to face the government. Conference participants agreed to divide the 34 seats on the HNC by affiliation: nine for the National Coalition, nine for independents, five for the Damascus-based NCC and eleven for armed groups.¹⁵⁹

They agreed that Syria would be united, have a civilian government and administrative decentralization. There would be no exclusionary policies based on religion or ethnicity. Foreign fighters would leave Syria. They said there would be no place in the future government for Bashar al-Assad and his closest associates. Before the start of negotiations, the government should stop collective punishment through indiscriminate bombing, release prisoners, and lift blockades to show its goodwill.¹⁶⁰

Including armed groups was a major step. It also created tensions. At the last minute, the Ahrar ash-Sham leadership in Syria announced its withdrawal from the conference because it did not place enough emphasis on the "Muslim identity" of the Syrian people.¹⁶¹ Some confusion arose when the group's representative in Riyadh signed the final document.¹⁶² Eventually, the group was deemed to be a signatory, but there were clearly disagreements within the group about what its signature meant.

The Riyadh initiative was a major step towards creating a representative opposition group with both political and military support. In this way, if an agreement could be achieved in Geneva, implementation would be more likely to succeed.

On 18 December, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2254 to outline negotiation principles.¹⁶³ The resolution:

- Reconfirmed the 30 June 2012 Geneva Communiqué which emphasized a ceasefire and political transition;
- Called for a new, inclusive and nonsectarian government within six months; set a schedule for drafting a new constitution and UN-monitored elections within 18 months. While the most important in terms of reaching a political solution, it was also the most disputed. Each side interpreted it differently. The Syrian government focused on what it called “terrorism” and eliminating ISIS. The opposition focused on a political transition, particularly removing Assad from office.
- Attempted to clarify the definition of a terrorist group. All parties agreed that JN and ISIS were terrorist groups. Beyond that, there was little agreement. Jordan did not write the comprehensive list of terrorist groups it was tasked to produce. For the Syrian government, everyone who took up arms was a terrorist. While some could be granted amnesty if they surrendered, many were beyond the pale. Russia considered groups like Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaish al-Islam to be terrorists in addition to JN and ISIS. The opposition did not have a unified position. The National Coalition considered the Kurdish YPG/YPJ a terrorist militia. The Damascus-based NCC did not. In short, without an agreed list of terrorist groups, it would be hard to separate the “bad guys” from the “good guys.”
- Advocated for better humanitarian access, the release of detainees, the end of indiscriminate weapons and attacks against civilians, and conditions to permit refugees and IDPs to return to their homes.

Meanwhile, in Aleppo the fighting continued with little change on the ground. The government’s advance in the southwest slowed. Although it took some villages, the rebels did not permit the government to consolidate its gains or reach the International Highway.¹⁶⁴ After a month of skirmishes, the regime also gained some territory from ISIS around the Kwaïres airport.¹⁶⁵

DEATH TOLL IN 2015

Fatalities in **Syria** in 2015 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)

Civilians	Children	2,574
	Women	1,944
	Men	8,931
	Total	13,449
Opposition fighters	Rebels	7,798
	ISIS and Jabhet an-Nusra	16,212
Regime forces	Regular army soldiers and officers	8,819
	Pro-government militias (other than Hezbollah)	-7,000
	Hezbollah	378

Fatalities in **Aleppo Province** in 2015 Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDCS)

Civilians	2,668
Rebels	1,044
Regime	358
Total	4,070

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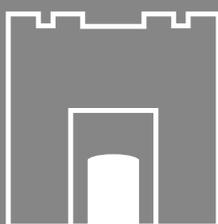
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