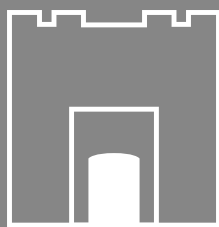


THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

MAY

2016

ALEPPO
CONFLICT TIMELINE

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

2016
MAY

A HOPELESS SITUATION

After violence claimed about 300 lives on both sides of the city,¹ on 5 May the warring parties agreed to a 48-hour ceasefire. This halted a major rebel offensive on the western edges where Kataib Fajr al-Khilafa, part of Fatah Halab, detonated a tunnel bomb in al-Zahra district. The bomb destroyed a building near the new Justice Palace used by the regime and its allied foreign and local militias.² It also temporarily ended the government's shelling of Handarat Camp and Castello Road, the only ways into rebel-held Aleppo.

In April, the United States and Russia sponsored ceasefires in Latakia and Damascus. A ceasefire in Aleppo came later because Russia had set two preconditions. First, moderate rebels who received support from the west should stop collaborating with JN. Second, Turkey should stop supporting "terrorist" groups.³ The escalation in Aleppo between 22 April and 5 May was the first major challenge to the ceasefire that had been in place since 27 February. As De Mistura put it, the cessation of hostilities reached on 27 February was in great danger.⁴ Although neither precondition was met, from the 5th to the 11th of May the city experienced a relative calm.

After the initial 48-hour truce was renewed twice, the sides resumed fighting in on 12 May.⁵ Government troops and its allies advanced in the direction of Handarat Camp. They were pushed back on the same day by several opposition groups including JN, Fastakem Kama Umirt and Nour ad-Din al-Zanki.⁶ Until the end of the month, Handarat Camp and the Castello Road remained under government fire. Even though rebels kept control of the road, it was dangerous to use due to constant shelling.⁷

On 22 May, the Syrian Observatory reported that for the first time since 27 February the Russian and Syrian Air Forces jointly bombed north Aleppo – Handarat Camp and Castello.⁸ This Russian-Syrian escalation in north Aleppo could be the result of Russia's failure to have Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaish al-Islam added to the UNSC's terrorist list. In April, Russia had drafted a resolution to include these two groups with JN and ISIS on the UN terrorist list. On 11 May, the United Kingdom, France, the United States and Ukraine blocked the resolution. They feared adding Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaish al-Islam would lead to an escalation on the ground and cause the failure of the Geneva peace process, where the two groups were part of the opposition negotiating team.⁹

This issue has become a hindrance to the continuation of the talks in Geneva. Several Russian officials have argued that terrorist-designated, i.e. JN, and non-terrorist groups should not collaborate and that "moderate groups" should abandon areas under JN control and participate in the political process.¹⁰

JN and other rebel groups, notably Ahrar ash-Sham, do cooperate on many fronts, including Khant Touman and al-Eis. Even the newly elected head of the Syrian Coalition, Anas al-Abda, has acknowledged it was not a secret that JN works with other rebel groups. Unlike ISIS, he said, there were no territories under sole JN control. In reality it would be very difficult to completely separate the groups from one other.¹¹

The dilemma is that in theory Russia and the United States agree that al-Qaeda-linked groups should be excluded from any peace talks. Since 2013, for example, the United States has not been very keen to support Ahrar ash-Sham due to its radical ideology. In practice, however, Ahrar ash-Sham is the largest armed group in Syria and its exclusion would end the peace process. Separating Ahrar ash-Sham or other groups from JN would weaken the opposition because JN is a key fighting force. It might also create infighting between JN and other groups which would ultimately serve the government's interests. Russia is aware of these complications and has used this pretext to weaken opposition groups in favor of the government. An agreement between the United States and Russia about how to resolve this dilemma is fundamental to the survival of the ceasefire and continuation of the Geneva process. As of May 2016, this had not yet happened.

Geneva Process

The peace settlement framework for Syria built by the United States, Russia and De Mistura is based on two pillars: a nationwide ceasefire and frequent talks in Geneva. After the escalation in late April and early May, talks stopped and the ceasefire was on the verge of collapse. Going back several steps, the United States and Russia called for an ISSG meeting in Vienna on 17 May to reestablish the cessation of hostilities and restart the Geneva talks.¹²

A noticeable achievement of this meeting was the group's willingness to take clear measures against parties who violated the ceasefire or did not allow the delivery of humanitarian aid. Foreign Ministers Kerry and Lavrov stated that the ISSG intended to move from local cessations of hostilities to a countrywide ceasefire. They said that if parties consistently violated the agreement, they would be excluded from the ceasefire agreement.¹³ This commitment remains to be tested in practice. One positive development was that the United States and Russia established a U.S.-Russian Coordination Cell in Geneva to monitor the ceasefire.¹⁴

The Vienna meeting concluded that if the UN was denied access to besieged areas, the ISSG would call for the World Food Program to study the feasibility of humanitarian aid air drops.¹⁵ Under pressure of these new ISSG measures, the Syrian Government named 36 areas, including 11 besieged ones, to receive aid in June.¹⁶

At Russia's request, the JN dilemma was included as part of the Vienna meeting. Judging from the press conference, the United States and Russia came to an agreement that there should be a clear separation between terrorist and non-terrorist groups. Secretary John Kerry emphasized that moderate groups should "disassociate themselves physically and politically from ISIS and JN."¹⁷ Implementing this in practice, however, remains difficult and unrealistic.

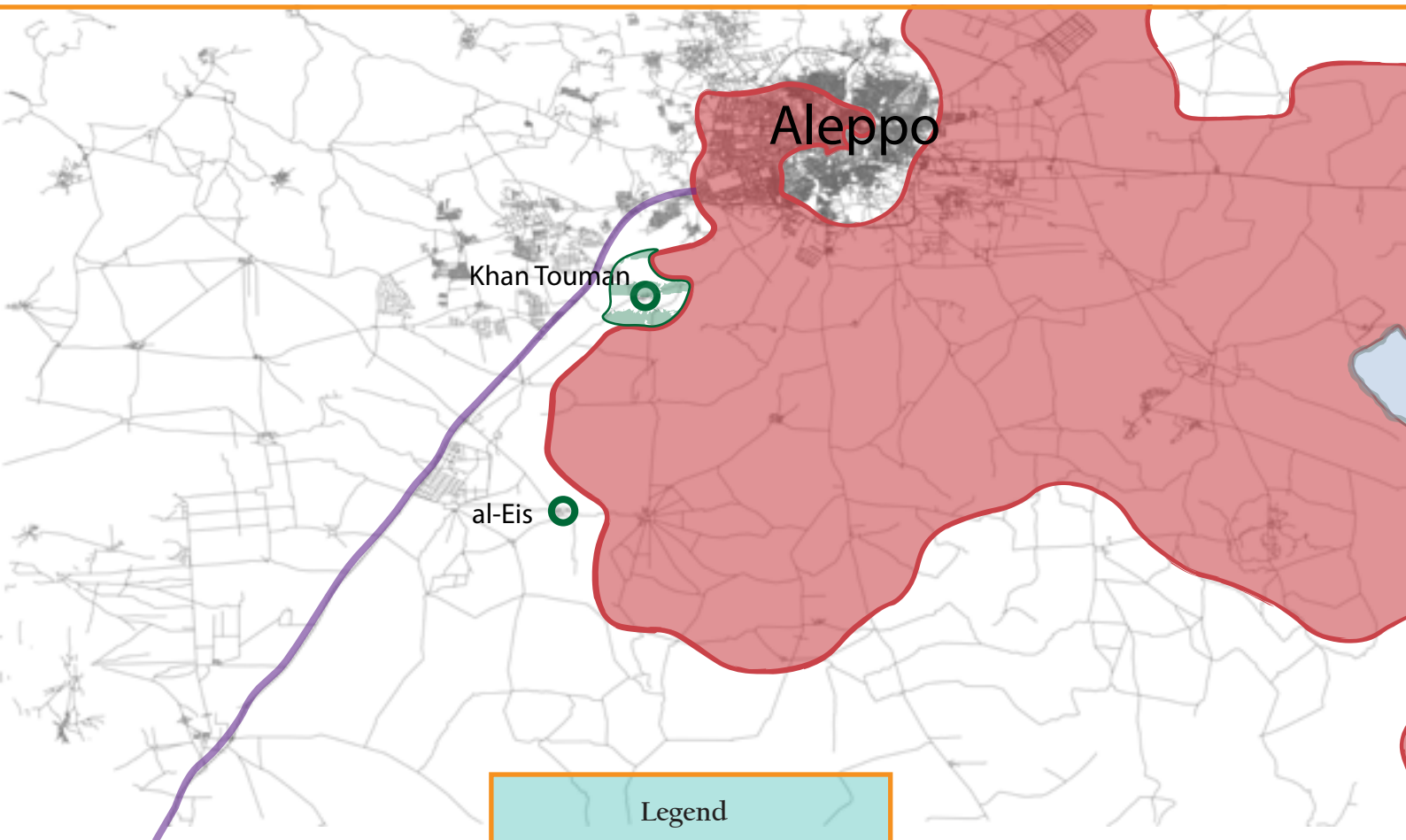
The United States, Russia and De Mistura underlined the importance of making progress on the detainee issue. Promises by both sides to release detainees have not seen any progress since the Geneva negotiations started in February 2016. Based on sources from within the regime security apparatus, the Syrian Observatory reported that since March 2011 about 60,000 detainees had died in regime detention centers. As of 20 May 2016, more than 200,000 were behind bars.¹⁸





ISSG members and the UN have repeatedly urged the conflicting sides not to shell civilian areas. Nevertheless, shelling has continued. In May alone, regime and opposition shelling of civilian areas killed 333 civilians in Aleppo.¹⁹

As of May 2016, it was not clear when the next round of talks would take place. Amidst the collapsing ceasefire, resuming the talks may take several weeks. Complicating the picture even more, Mohammed Alloush, a member of Jaish al-Islam and a senior HNC negotiator resigned on 29 May. He said that, “the peace talks failed to stop the bloodshed of our people, failed to secure the release of thousands of detainees or to push Syria towards a political transition without [Bashar] al-Assad and his criminal gang.”²⁰

Southern Aleppo

On 6 May, Jaish al-Fatah,²¹ which includes Ahrar ash-Sham and JN, advanced in the southern Aleppo countryside and took Khan Touman from regime forces and allies.²² (See Map 36). This gain was particularly painful for Iran and its proxies that have a large presence in the area. The IRGC announced it had lost 13 military advisors whose bodies were still with the rebels during the battle.²³ According to the



-  Territory under government control
-  Territory gained by Jaish al-Fatah (6-7 May 2016)
-  Aleppo-Damascus International Highway
-  Key towns under Jaish al-Fatah control

Map 36: Jaish al-Fatah gains in southern Aleppo

Syrian Observatory, in a week of fighting, government forces and allies lost 79 fighters, of which only 18 were Syrian. The rest included 20 Iranians, 21 Afghans, six Lebanese Hezbollah, and 14 Iraqi Haraqet an-Nujaba.²⁴

Between 5 and 11 May, 94 of the attackers died and 300 were wounded²⁵ due to the battle and the fierce air campaign that reached its peak on 8-9 May with 90 airstrikes.²⁶ The Turkistan Islamic Party, a group of Uyghur fighters from western China who are part of Jaish al-Fatah, suffered the most with 35 deaths.²⁷ These numbers clearly show that foreign fighters, especially Iranian proxies, play a significant role in the southern parts of Aleppo province.

As of May 2016, strikes on Khan Touman and al-Eis continued without gains for any side.

ISIS in Northern Aleppo

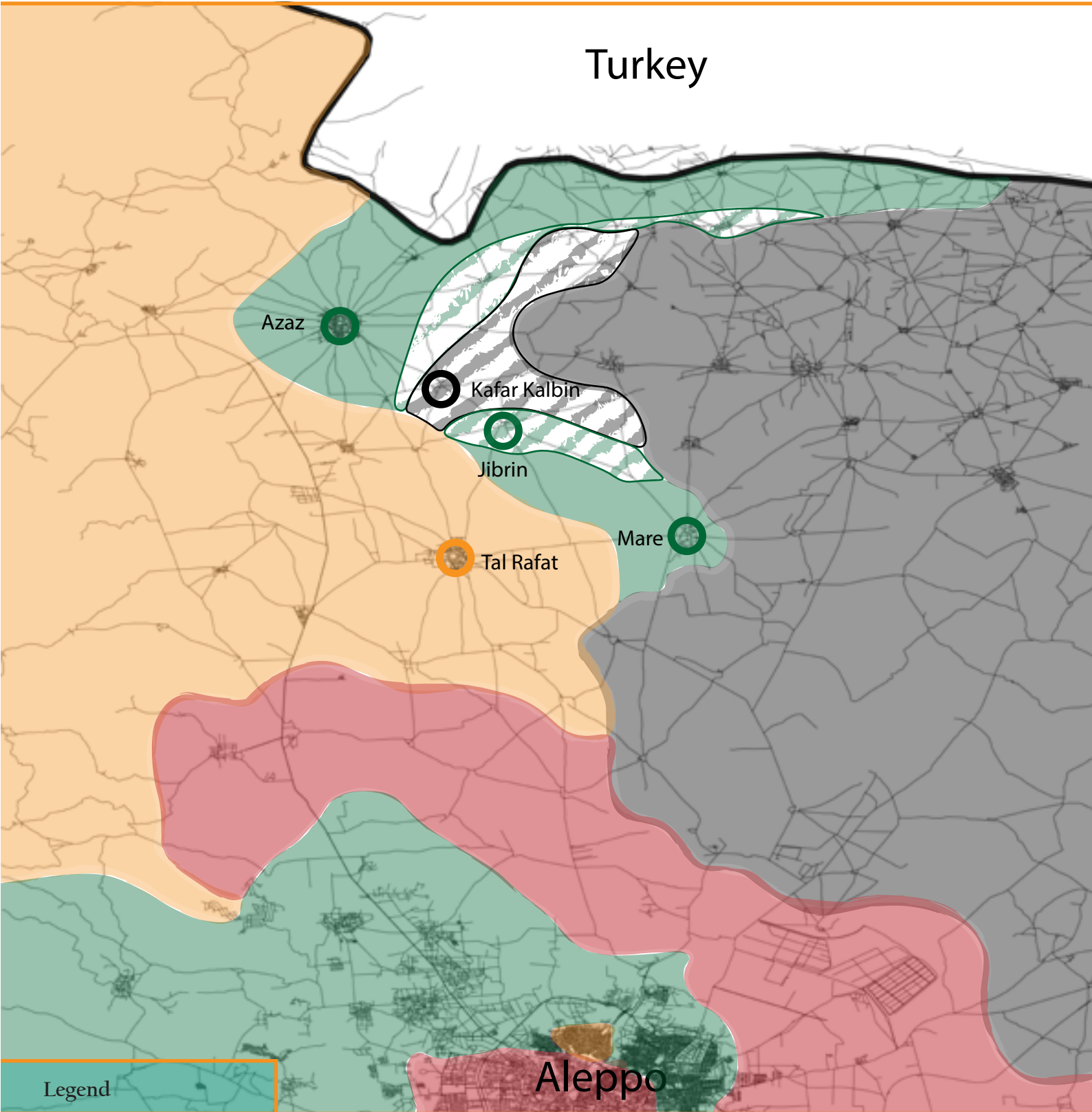
On 20 May, the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS dropped leaflets on ar-Raqqah urging civilians to leave the city. This was a preparatory move before the Syrian Democratic Forces started marching towards the ISIS capital.²⁸ To divert attention and boost its fighters' morale, on 27 May, ISIS launched a surprise attack against the rebels near the Azaz-Aleppo corridor. After occupying Jibrin and Kafar Kalbin, two villages between Azaz and Mare, ISIS managed to cut communications between the two rebel-held cities (See Map 37). This sudden ISIS advance exacerbated the already deteriorated humanitarian situation and forced more people to leave their homes. According to Human Rights Watch, there were about 165,000 IDPs trapped in opposition-held areas of northern Aleppo in late May.²⁹

On 29-30 May, the SDF opened another frontline against ISIS in Mnbej, a western Aleppo city on the main ISIS supply route from ar-Raqqah to the Turkish border. The road is of strategic economic importance to ISIS because it is a key route for smuggling oil to Turkey.

Sheikh Maqsoud

Amnesty International documented that since February 2016, Fatah Halab operation room members, primarily Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, have committed war crimes by shelling civilian areas in the predominantly Kurdish neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud. Amnesty found that these armed groups also used chlorine gas. Jaish al-Islam confessed to using "unauthorized weapons" during the battles.³⁰ As of May 2016, fighting continued between the YPG/YPJ, which controls the neighborhood of about 30,000 people, and the rebels.

Turkey



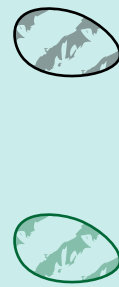
Legend



Government control
Opposition control
SDF control
ISIS control



Key towns under
opposition control
Key towns under
SDF control
Key towns under
ISIS control



ISIS gains as of
2 June 2016
Rebel gains as of
2 June 2016

Map 37: ISIS surprise attack in northern Aleppo (27 May - 2 June 2016)

Sources: Compare with [Agathocle de Syracuse \(Map1\)](#); [Agathocle de Syracuse \(Map 2\)](#)

What do the numbers say?

In the 2000s, there was a belief that “new wars,”³¹ which tend to be intra-state rather than inter-state, claim many more civilian than military lives. While this holds true for many conflicts, it should not be taken as a general rule.³² Recent statistics by the Syrian Observatory³³ of documented deaths show that in the past five years, fewer civilian than non-civilians have died.³⁴ The Syrian Observatory is generally regarded as anti-Assad and pro-moderate rebels. No counting can be entirely accurate in these situations but it is our belief that the Observatory probably has the most accurate numbers.

From March 2011 until 26 May 2016, the Syrian Observatory documented 282, 283 deaths. Of these documented deaths, there were about 81,500 Syrian civilians, 144,500 Syrian armed fighters and 53,000 foreign fighters. About 2,600 remain unidentified.³⁵ (Chart 1). This means that the ratio of Syrian Observatory-documented civilian to military deaths is over 2.4 military for every 1 civilian death, or 197,325 military deaths as opposed to 81,436 civilian deaths.

These numbers are certainly not exact because counting deaths during war is an arduous task and prone to errors. According to the same report, ISIS has abducted more than 5,000, there are 6,000 missing government and loyalist forces, and rebel groups have abducted an additional 2,000. In addition, 60,000 detainees have died in regime detention facilities since 2011. The Syrian Observatory also estimates that hundreds of non-Syrian Kurdish fighters in addition to 75,000 other foreign fighters may have died.

The civilian-military death ratio calculated above is a rough approximation at best. But, even if the majority of detainees and abductees were civilians, the number of military deaths still remains higher. This seems to oppose the conventional wisdom that more civilians than militants die in the “new wars.”

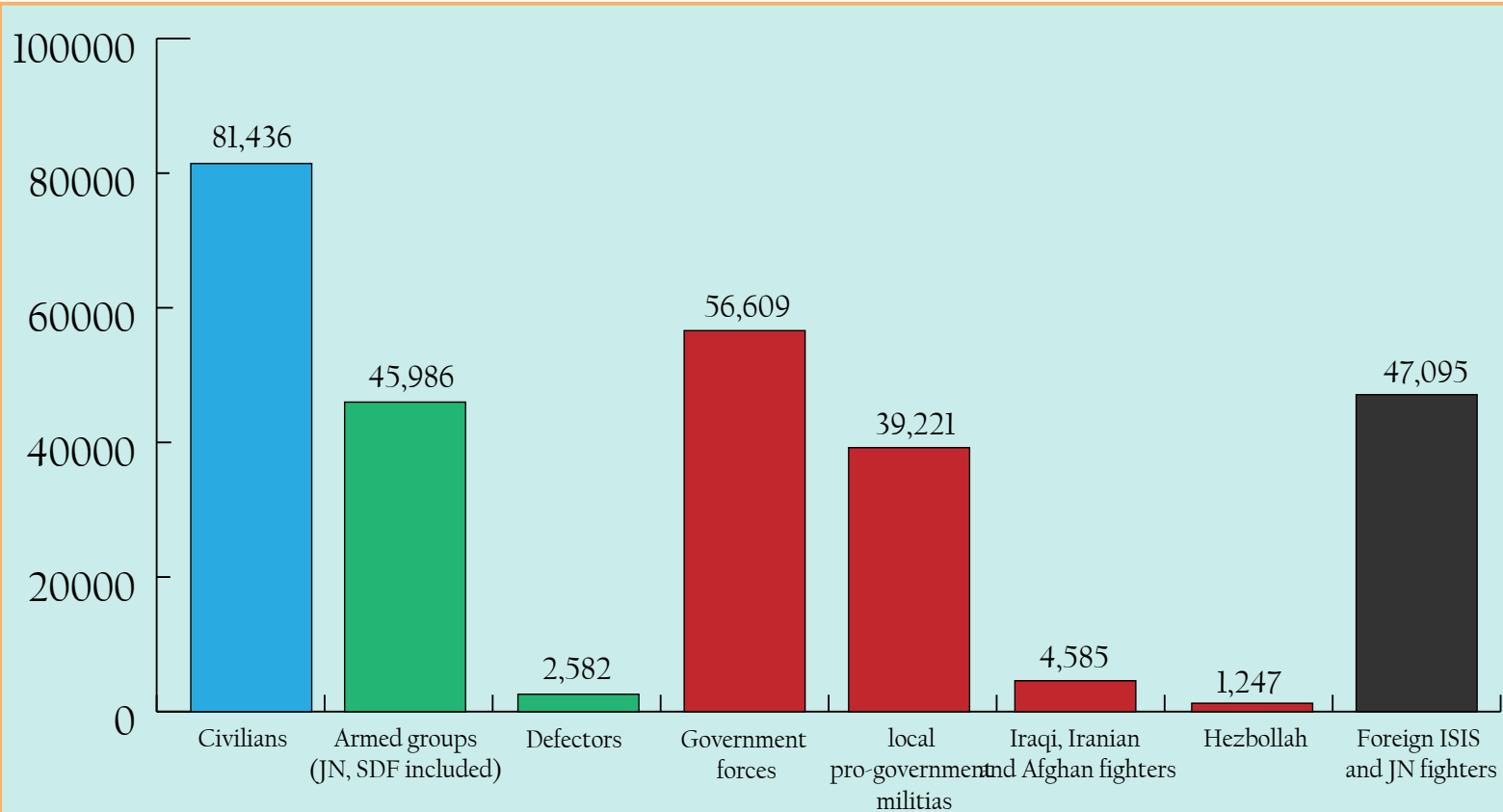


Chart 1: Death Toll, March 2011 until 26 May 2016

Source: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

Air campaigns and casualties

Comparing the number of Syrian Observatory documented deaths caused by the Syrian Air Force, the Russian Air Force³⁶ and the U.S.-led coalition³⁷ shows that the Syrian Air Force, on average, not only killed the most civilians, it also killed the highest percentage of civilians compared to militants.

In the 18-month period between 20 November 2014 and 20 May 2016, the Syrian Air Force killed 8,362 civilians and 4,651 militants, or about 1.8 civilians for every militant. (Chart 2).

In the 8-month period between 30 September 2015 and 20 May 2016, the Russian Air Force killed 2,046 civilians and 4,161 militants, or about 2 militants for every civilian. (Chart 2.1).

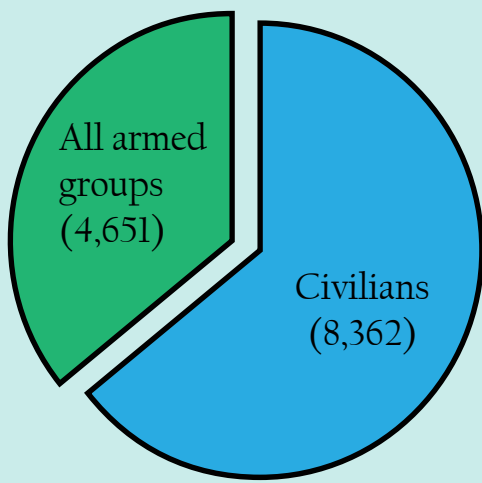
In the 20-month period between 23 September 2014 and 23 May 2016, the U.S.-led coalition killed 3,548 militants and 417 civilians or about 8.5 militants for every civilian. (Chart 2.2).

If accurate, these numbers suggest that Syria and Russia have used their air power in an indiscriminate way and caused large numbers of civilian casualties. This is unlike the U.S.-led coalition, which appears to have conducted more accurate strikes.

Russia, the United States and ISIS casualties

These numbers, if accurate, challenge the common perception that Russia targets the Syrian opposition more than ISIS. Per the Syrian Observatory, Russia killed 2,229 members of ISIS 30 September 2015 and 20 May 2016. Over the same period, it killed 1,942 rebels, including members of JN. (Chart 3)

The U.S.-led coalition killed 3,412 ISIS fighters between 23 September 2014 and 23 May 2016. (Chart 3.1) This suggests that the intensity of the Russian campaign against ISIS has been higher than the U.S.-led coalition.



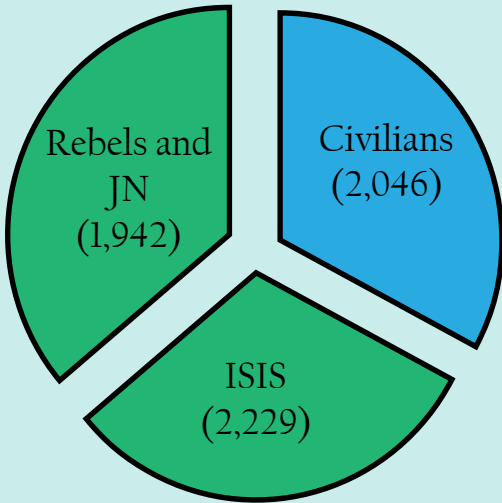
Civilians

Militants

In the 18-month period the Syrian Air Force killed 8,362 civilians and 4,651 militants.

1.8 civilians for every militant.

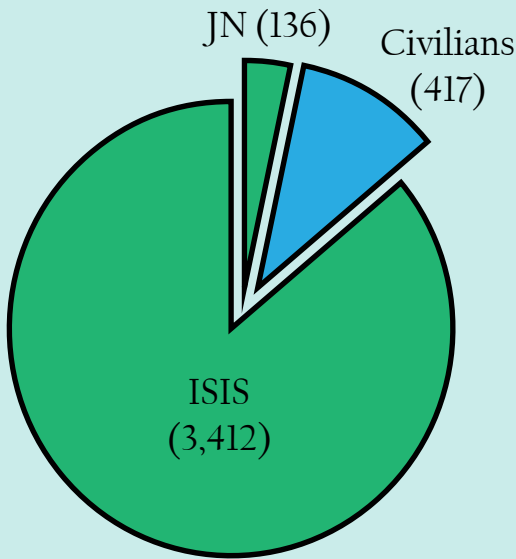
Chart 2: Regime air campaign, 20 November 2014 - 20 May 2016. (18 months)



In the 8-month period the Russian Air Force killed 2,046 civilians and 4,161 militants.

2 militants for every civilian.

Chart 2.1: Russian air campaign, 30 September 2015 - 20 May 2016. (8 months)



In the 20-month period the U.S.-led coalition killed 3,548 militants and 417 civilians.

8.5 militants for every civilian

Chart 2.2: U.S.-led coalition air campaign, 23 September 2014 - 23 May 2016. (20 months)

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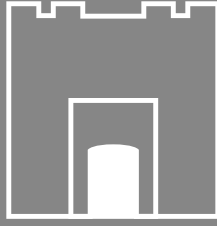
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