

HEZBOLLAH AND THE FIGHT FOR CONTROL IN QALAMOUN

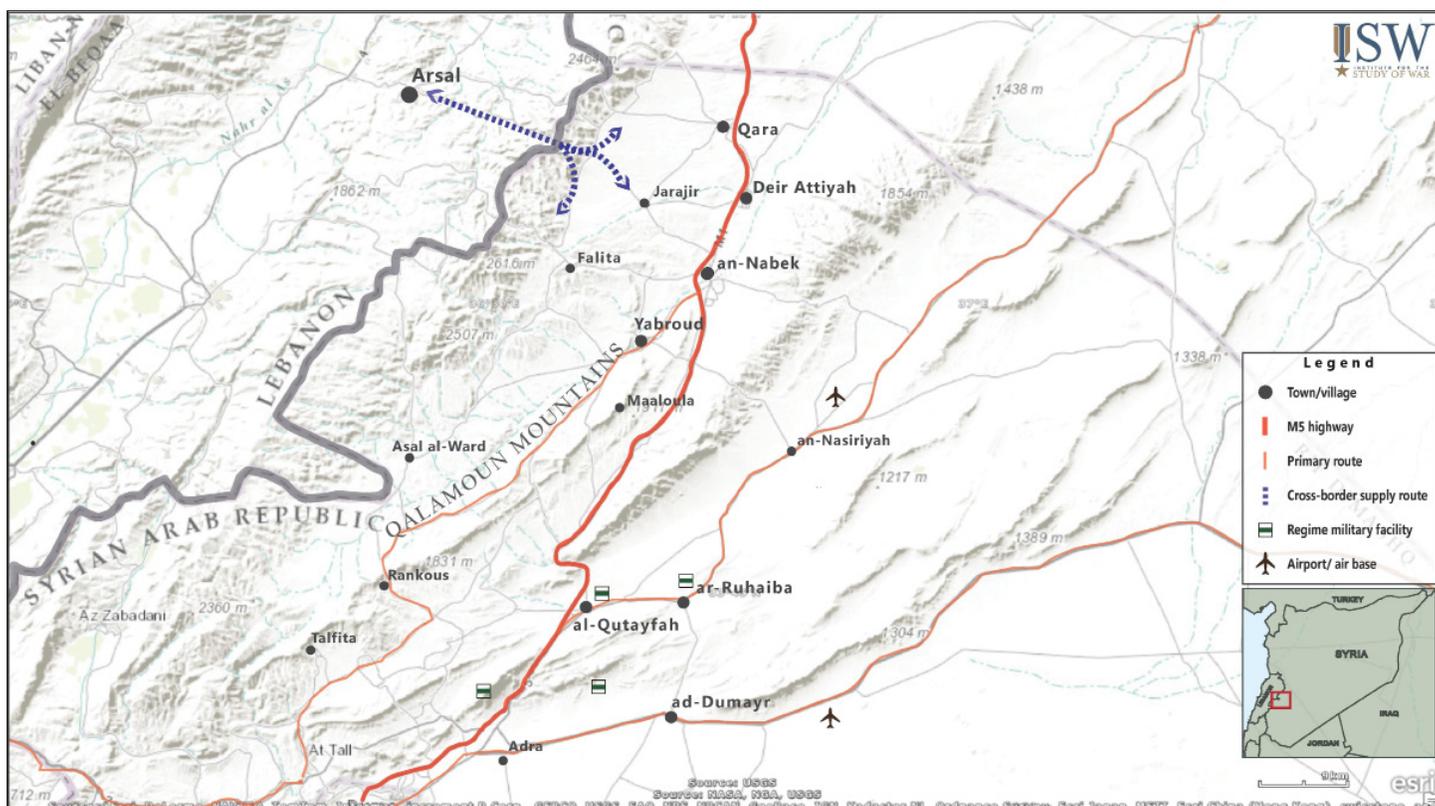
Following sporadic violence throughout the summer of 2013, fighting between pro-regime and rebel forces has begun to concentrate on the Damascus-Homs supply route running through Qalamoun. The battle, which is crucial for both regime and rebel resupply, will focus on contested sections of the M5 highway which runs through Qalamoun. Hezbollah will also focus on cutting off logistical connections between Arsal, Lebanon, and rebels in Qalamoun. Although Hezbollah and the regime share a common goal of the regime's survival in Syria, the battle for Qalamoun illustrates the potential for disparity in their strategic priorities.

Straddling Lebanon's Beqaa Valley to the west, the Qalamoun area lies on Syria's strategic central corridor connecting Damascus to Homs. Like al-Qusayr, the towns in the rugged and mountainous terrain of Qalamoun are crucial to both rebel and regime interests.¹ It is of crucial importance to the regime, connecting the capital to Assad's coastal strongholds in Tartous and Latakia. Qalamoun also provides the rebels with cross-border access to supplies from the rebel-supportive town of Arsal, Lebanon, allows rebels a place of refuge and acts as a launching point from which to attack regime positions on the northern outskirts of Damascus. Rebel groups have operated with relative impunity in the towns scattered throughout the Qalamoun mountains since the middle of 2012.² Rebels maintain key positions in towns such as Yabroud, Asal al-Ward, Rankous, and Talflita, despite the regime's heavy presence in a string of large military facilities flanking the base of the mountains in al-Qutayfa, ad-Dumayr, and an-Nasiryeh. Following the fall of al-Qusayr in June and the regime's August chemical weapons attack in Damascus, rebels have amassed in Qalamoun, rapidly increasing from some 5,000 fighters to an estimated 25,000-40,000 in the early fall of 2013.³

Like other battlefronts throughout Syria, Qalamoun has not been isolated from Salafist groups and al-Qaeda affiliates, which are increasingly dominant on the battlefield. The presence of these groups in the Qalamoun area has caused a shift in rebel operations. Previously, rebel operations in Qalamoun were restricted to disrupting regime supply lines between Damascus and Homs. As the regime launched its al-Qusayr offensive in May, for example, rebel groups from the Qalamoun area frequently targeted regime

convoys moving northwards from Damascus.⁴ Following a buildup of rebel forces throughout the summer months, however, rebel groups, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), Ahrar al-Sham, and Liwa al-Islam, began to launch more aggressive operations targeting military facilities. In early August, for example, Jabhat al-Nusra, Liwa al-Islam, Liwa al-Tawheed, Qawat al-Maghwaweer, Shuhada al-Qalamoun, Katibat al-Khadraa, and other groups stormed the Danha arms depot seizing weapons and ammunition.⁵ Similar operations took place in early September when Liwa al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham stormed the Assad regime's 81st Brigade base in ar-Ruhaiba.⁶ The shift in rebel operations can be attributed to both the irregular fighting tactics, such as car bombs, and greater fighting power of Salafist groups and al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria.

Within this larger strategic context, the key objective of a battle for Qalamoun is the contested section of the M5 highway between Qara and Yabroud. The regime intensified pursuit of this objective by concentrating bombardments, which have occurred in the Qalamoun region throughout the summer, on the town of Qara on November 15th. The offensive against Qara began with heaving shelling and regime helicopter bombardments as pro-regime forces encircled the town. Four days later, the regime seized control of the town causing large-scale displacement as 2,200 families fled across the border into Arsal.⁷ Following Qara, the regime increased operations in the neighboring towns of an-Nabek and Jarajir which lie on the M5.⁸ As rebels mobilized for a counterattack, four suicide bombs targeted regime positions in an-Nabek and Deir Attiyah on November 20th.⁹ Since then, rebels have seized control of Deir Attiyah while the regime has continued heavy shelling



throughout Qalamoun particularly on the towns of Deir Attiyah, an-Nabek, and Yabroud.¹⁰ Clashes between pro-regime and rebel forces have also converged on sections of the M5 highway near an-Nabek and Deir Attiyah.¹¹ In the weeks preceding the Qalamoun offensive, both rebel and pro-regime fighters demonstrated an understanding that the mountainous terrain would require a shift in fighting tactics from those used in al-Qusayr.¹² As the fighting continues the regime will pursue a piecemeal strategy, focused on disjoining rebel held towns in the area and besieging towns with heavy rebel concentrations.¹³ Meanwhile, rebels will rely on the heavy reinforcements and rearmament that occurred in preparation for such a battle as well as irregular tactics such as car bombs which have been a specialty of al-Qaeda affiliates JN and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

HEZBOLLAH AND QALAMOUN

While strategically important for both the regime and Hezbollah, the battle for Qalamoun demonstrates a distinction in the interests and priorities of these actors. Speculation of a joint Hezbollah-Syrian regime operation to gain control of Qalamoun first emerged following the regime’s victory in al-Qusayr. Hezbollah fighters reportedly began preparing for an offensive by

conducting reconnaissance operations in the Qalamoun area.¹⁴ Regime forces, however, quickly shifted attention to Aleppo in a failed attempt to force a decisive victory against the rebels in the northern city. In October, despite another wave of reports on the imminent battle for Qalamoun, the regime focused military resources on campaigns in Damascus and the north. Pro-regime forces conducted operations to regain control of southern Damascus, cutting off an important rebel supply route when they captured Sbeineh on November 7th.¹⁵ Pro-regime forces also launched a large offensive to reopen supply routes in southern Aleppo, and eventually took control of as-Safira, clearing a path into Aleppo.¹⁶ Until recently, the regime appears to have prioritized other battlefronts over Qalamoun, suggesting that this battle is not the regime’s primary strategic objective.

Hezbollah fighters, on the other hand, have been particularly vocal about their intention to fight for Qalamoun. A recent propaganda video about Hezbollah’s preparations for Qalamoun demonstrates this prioritization with the refrain, “After Al-Qusayr it will be Qalamoun.”¹⁷ For Hezbollah, Qalamoun’s strategic significance transcends Syria’s border with Lebanon and has important domestic implications for Hezbollah in Lebanon. While levels of violence in Qalamoun have been consistent, the number

and nature of kinetic incidents have escalated on the Lebanese side of the border in Arsal; what was initially localized spillover which consisted of kidnappings and cross border airstrikes has become a staging ground for attacks against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon.¹⁸

The strategic importance of cutting off cross-border connections between Arsal and Qalamoun is most evident in the case of Omar al-Atrash, who was killed in early November when a rocket hit his vehicle in the valley between Arsal and the Qalamoun Mountains. In late October, a leaked memo, sent to the Lebanese chief of airport security from the head of airport security at Rafik Hariri International Airport, stated that four car bombs had been sent into Lebanon through Arsal under a Jabhat al-Nusra operation.¹⁹ Atrash was implicated in this operation as well as the July and August car bombings against Hezbollah strongholds in Beirut and the rockets which hit Dahiyeh following Nasrallah's al-Qusayr speech in May.²⁰ Following Atrash's death, residents of Arsal prevented the Lebanese police from examining his body or investigating his death.²¹ Atrash's connection to the attacks on Hezbollah strongholds in Beirut as well as his relationship to Arsal illustrates the strategic significance of Arsal and, by extension, Qalamoun, to Hezbollah.

Arsal's proximity to the border and connection to Qalamoun have made it an ideal staging ground for launching attacks against Hezbollah on their home turf and smuggling weapons and supplies between Lebanon and Syria. Therefore, as the regime forces focus operations on the Damascus-Homs highway, Hezbollah will focus on cutting off cross-border access between Arsal and the towns of Qalamoun.²² Due to the terrain, Hezbollah fighters have indicated that they will adapt guerilla tactics, operating in small squads; as one Hezbollah fighter said, "the strategy is one of reconnaissance, air power, artillery, and special forces."²³ Some reports also suggest that Hezbollah and Syrian Intelligence have established assassination squads with the goal of targeting rebel figures in order to disrupt coordination and planning among armed groups operating in the area.²⁴ This suggests that Hezbollah's tactics in Qalamoun will focus upon damaging the logistical connections between rebels in Qalamoun and their supporters in Arsal rather than clearing and holding territory as they did in al-Qusayr.

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NOTES

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