

JABHAT AL-NUSRA DEEPENS ITS FOOTHOLD IN NORTHWESTERN SYRIA

KEY TAKEAWAY

Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) seized large swaths of the Jabal al-Zawiya area of southern Idlib Province (in northwest Syria bordering Turkey) from Free Syrian Army (FSA)-affiliated groups beginning in late October 2014 (see fig. 1). JN, the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, began to carve out direct territorial control in Idlib Province beginning in July 2014, and its advance in southern Idlib has considerably extended its stronghold in the province. JN's campaign in Idlib has largely targeted terrain held by the FSA-affiliated Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF), and is therefore an important indicator of JN's strength in relation to Syria's moderate opposition and its willingness to escalate against Western-backed groups in pursuit of its own core interests. JN's ability to sideline moderate elements in Idlib challenges the viability of the U.S. "train and assist" mission for these elements. However, JN was careful to caveat its escalation by stating that it continued to support SRF affiliates that "remain focused on the fight against the regime." JN's actions in Idlib therefore do not yet rise to the level of a direct challenge to the moderate opposition in its entirety, and rather remain limited to a narrow JN campaign for consolidation in the wake of the ISIS advance. Nonetheless, JN remains likely to escalate against the full spectrum of rebel groups receiving Western aid once it assesses a certain threat level has been reached in terms of the likelihood that these groups will turn on JN in favor of securing meaningful Western support.

JN and allied rebel forces seized control of a primary stronghold for Syria's moderate opposition in the Jabal al-Zawiya area of southern Idlib province beginning in late October 2014. In so doing, JN effectively neutralized the FSA-affiliated Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) in Idlib Province in addition to targeting Harakat Hazm, a second FSA-affiliate. A leader of the January 2014 uprising against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in northwestern Syria, the SRF has been considered a potential ally in the U.S. "train and assist" mission to the Syrian opposition and is representative of the reliance of the U.S. strategy in Syria on the existence and reliability of key moderate groups through whom Western influence can be channeled.¹ Prior to the conflict with JN, SRF leader Jamal Ma'arouf had reiterated his commitment to defeating ISIS and appeared to be a natural conduit for increased Western assistance. In addition, both the SRF and Harakat Hazm appear to be recipients of a covert U.S. program supplying certain vetted groups with TOW anti-tank missiles, considered to be a flagship effort for the train and assist mission to the Syrian opposition.²

JN's rapid marginalization of these groups in Idlib is a shocking illustration of the relative strength of JN over prominent elements of the moderate opposition. It is therefore a

considerable setback in the U.S. acquisition of partnerships with reliable moderate rebel brigades that are well positioned for a future ground campaign against ISIS in Syria. It is also a crucial reminder of the highly vulnerable position of Syria's moderate rebels, who continue to suffer from critical financial and armament shortages that render them susceptible to increased JN coercion and influence in coming weeks and months. Highlighting their plight in the wake of the JN advance, General Muhammad Hallak of the SRF warned that, without increased support, the conflict with JN could force the SRF to withdraw "from the front with the Islamic State and the regime and work only to save ourselves."³ JN's swift success has threatened the viability of the train and assist mission to the Syrian opposition by challenging the assessed strength of these groups and by changing the landscape of control in Syria, making it more difficult for moderate rebels to project force to key battlefronts without JN's participation.

Significantly, JN's expansion in Jabal al-Zawiya is not its first escalation against moderate rebels in the province. Beginning in early July, JN seized control of territory along the Syrian-Turkish border in northwestern Idlib province, largely at the expense of the SRF.⁴ The recent JN advance is therefore not only threatening due to its removal of moderate rebel forces

from key terrain, but represents a large step forward in a wider JN consolidation and entrenchment in northwestern Syria. Furthermore, JN's expansion has occurred during a spate of assassination attempts against rebel commanders, including both SRF and JN commanders, as well as the defection of a number of local elements to ISIS.⁵ This is a remarkable degradation in security in Idlib Province and likely indicates increased activity by ISIS sleeper cells. While it is also possible that JN perpetrated a number of these assassination attempts, existing local support for JN and rising fear of ISIS expansion are nonetheless likely to encourage the perception that direct JN control is a positive development. It is unlikely that local resistance to JN will emerge, at least in the short term.

BACKGROUND: JN'S CONSOLIDATION IN IDLIB, JULY – OCTOBER 2014

JN undertook a full strategic reevaluation of its campaign in Syria after the ISIS declaration of a Caliphate on June 29, 2014. Withdrawing from its previous stronghold in Deir ez-Zour Province, JN pursued a campaign for direct territorial control of areas along the Syrian-Turkish border in northwestern Idlib province, as both an alternative source of revenue to supplement the loss of Deir ez-Zour's oil fields and as an operating space within which JN forces could regroup.⁶ As JN seized direct control of this critical rebel terrain, it utilized the perceived legitimacy of a "counter corruption" campaign against allegedly self-serving moderate rebel forces operating in the border region to justify its incursion. JN also leveraged the participation of a number of other rebel groups to avoid alienating the civilian population or creating strife within wider rebel ranks, ensuring that JN's consolidation did not come at the expense of the bulk of its rebel relationships. The primary target was territory held by the SRF, which surrendered most of its bases along the Turkish border to JN in July and withdrew, likely either deeper into Idlib province or to Aleppo. While JN expansion eventually provoked resistance from a local SRF affiliate in Hasfarjah, a local reconciliation committee successfully mediated a truce on September 15 after SRF leader Jamal Ma'arouf issued a plea for JN to agree to Shari'a mediation so that his forces could refocus on the fight against the regime.⁷

JN's acquisition of territorial control in Idlib was accompanied by a shift in its strategy for governance. As JN withdrew from Deir ez-Zour, it abandoned past efforts at concession-based governance through both the Deir ez-Zour and Aleppo Shari'a Courts in favor of pursuing direct governance in newly acquired territory in Idlib. In an interview conducted with JN's al-Manara al-Bayda media foundation on November 4, JN leader Abu Mohammad al-Joulani stated that this new model of governance involved the establishment of a set of "judicial houses" that implement stricter laws than had been implemented by the Shari'a courts of Aleppo and Deir ez-Zour. These bodies allegedly have participation from rebel groups, however Joulani highlighted that "those who participate with

us in the judicial houses must agree with us in the goals and the means of reaching these goals." Testifying to JN's increasingly uncompromising interaction with rebel groups, this form of governance is distinct from JN's past methodology in which JN frequently made concessions to other rebel groups within shared Shari'a courts regarding the implementation of JN's interpretation of Islamic law.⁸ Joulani also highlighted JN's implementation of governance solely in areas in which it had acquired direct control.⁹ "We did not establish the judicial houses in places in which there are Shari'a commissions," he said, "instead, we did so in areas in which we have wide influence, in which we have almost complete control, so there is no clash." This indicates JN's desire to carve out a direct sphere of influence in Idlib without challenging or negatively impacting ongoing rebel governance elsewhere. This was likely crucial in maintaining JN's support from within rebel ranks, and highlights JN's careful strategic adjustments in the aftermath of ISIS's successes in Iraq and Syria. In addition, JN's heightened level of control in Idlib likely allowed it to safely regroup without pulling additional manpower from active fronts it shares with other rebel groups.

While the distribution of these "judicial houses" remains unclear, initial reports indicate JN has initiated similar efforts in Homs, Hama, and Latakia provinces.¹⁰ In Idlib, JN's direct governance began shortly after its seizure of terrain along the Turkish border in July, after which it released a set of economic and social laws in towns under its control. JN posted announcements requiring shops to close for prayer in the border town of Harem on October 19, and has arrested at least one man on charges of "sorcery" since that time.¹¹ In addition, recent evidence indicates the activities of JN's new judicial bodies throughout the province. A JN-led Shari'a court reportedly based in the Saraqib area has engaged in summary punishments of alleged adulterers, for example stoning a man to death on October 21.¹² Three days later, an Islamic court, with reported participation from JN, the Sham Legion, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (HASI), the Battalion of the Martyr Ahmed Hassoun, and local civil defense, and local representatives, issued a set of regulations for media activity in all rebel-held areas of the province.¹³ Finally, rumors also emerged in mid-October that local SRF affiliates had joined JN-led Shari'a courts alongside HASI in both Hama and Idlib Provinces.¹⁴ These recent events appear to indicate that JN's acquisition of territorial control in Idlib Province has conferred success in the implementation of a more direct form of governance in which rebel participation nonetheless remains important. Joulani boasted this success in his November 4 interview, stating that soon the al-Manara al-Bayda media foundation would be invited to take a tour of these new judicial houses.

A lack of visible resistance to these governance efforts from the civilian population indicates that JN's increase in overt activity has not greatly alienated the local population. This indicates

the success of JN's considerable social outreach efforts to date. In the aftermath of the airstrikes that unsuccessfully targeted a JN and al-Qaeda cell identified as the "Khorasan Group" on September 23, JN capitalized on public disapproval of the U.S.-led air campaign to increase its local support.¹⁵ Civilian protests in Idlib province included some with a distinct JN character, with civilians carrying JN banners and reaffirming their support to a perceived ally in the fight against Assad. As a result, entering into October 2014, JN was in a position of strength in the province, and had successfully implemented a large-scale transition of its force posture in the country without sacrificing its support base or making concessions in the fight against the Assad regime.

JN ATTACKS IDLIB CITY

Following months of consolidation in the province, JN's escalation in Jabal al-Zawiya represents the expansion of an ongoing and successful campaign to carve a JN military stronghold deep within rebel-held Syria. However, while the seizure of Jabal al-Zawiya was a large step forward in JN's consolidation, it is not clear that it was actually JN's intent to do so at this time. As clashes broke out between JN and the SRF, JN forces were heavily engaged in an operation against regime forces in Idlib city launched the same day. Regime forces had made large advances on October 23 by seizing the town of Morek and appeared to be staging for an advance farther north.¹⁶ In response, JN launched an attack against the regime stronghold of Idlib city on October 26 in an apparent attempt to force a reallocation of regime forces to its critical terrain and forestall a regime attack on Khan Shaykhoun, north of Morek. The operation began with a signature JN attack utilizing four suicide bombers targeting regime checkpoints in Idlib city to allow a penetration by rebel forces,¹⁷ which included a local Salafi-Jihadist group named Jund al-Aqsa, the FSA's Hamza Division, and the SRF-affiliated Suqour al-Ghab.¹⁸

JN and rebel forces made immediate gains within the city and captured a number of buildings including the governor's mansion and the police headquarters, allegedly with assistance from local police forces.¹⁹ However, the eruption of clashes in southern Idlib appears to have forced JN and rebel forces to abandon the front in Idlib city in order to address the escalating situation in Jabal al-Zawiya, allowing the regime to quickly reassert control over the provincial capital.²⁰ In his interview with JN's Manara al-Bayda media foundation on November 4, Joulani asserted that JN was forced to withdraw from its operation in Idlib city in order to respond to the SRF's aggression against JN and other rebels, highlighting JN's assertion that it prioritized the fight against the Assad regime despite the outburst of intra-rebel violence in Jabal al-Zawiya.

JN SEIZES JABAL AL-ZAWIYA

On October 26, clashes erupted between JN, supported by Jund al-Aqsa, against the SRF in the village of al-Bara, northwest

of Ma'arat al-Nu'man in southern Idlib Province.²¹ Fighting quickly escalated, and JN and Jund al-Aqsa seized full control of eight villages in two days of clashes, in addition to ousting the SRF from its checkpoints in Ma'arat al-Nu'man city.²² Harakat Hazm stepped in immediately to mediate, setting up checkpoints in Idlib and Aleppo Provinces to stop JN and the SRF from mobilizing reinforcements. This provoked initial localized clashes between JN and Hazm forces, predominantly in the area between Ma'arat Dibsah and Khan al-Sibel along the M5 highway north of Ma'arat al-Nu'man.²³

The SRF immediately released a statement that called for arbitration at the Shari'a court, claiming that SRF forces acting with a warrant from the local Shari'a court were attacked by JN fighters while attempting to arrest JN members accused of attacking civilians.²⁴ Appearing to validate this claim, the Islamic Commission for the Liberated Areas of Idlib Province, a group with an unclear relationship to JN's Judicial Houses, stated that after the clashes erupted Jund al-Aqsa immediately detained the President of the Court of Appeals of the Shari'a Court in Idlib, Mohammed Izz al-Din Khattab, in addition to a lawyer and a clerk in the court, on charges of being affiliated with the SRF.²⁵ However, JN immediately denied the SRF's claim and asserted

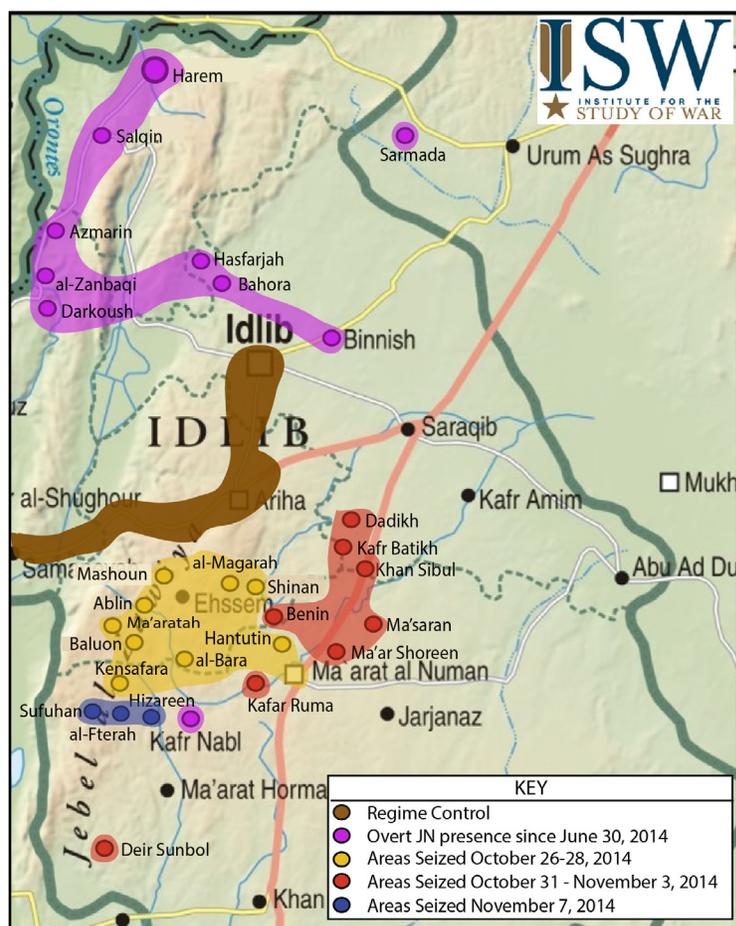


Figure 1. Jabhat al-Nusra presence in Idlib Province and areas seized since October 2014.

it had intervened to protect civilians from an unprovoked SRF offensive, releasing a video with testimonials from fighters that described how the SRF entered and vandalized the town.²⁶ The reality appears to have been somewhere in between, with Harakat Hazm stating that JN had intervened to protect a group of former SRF fighters that had been attacked by the SRF in al-Bara after they defected and traveled with their weapons to an Ahrar al-Sham (HASI) headquarters in the town.²⁷ Local activist reports appeared to corroborate this report, indicating that SRF forces had attempted to arrest a number of fighters that had defected, although indicating they had instead joined JN.²⁸

JN and the SRF enacted a ceasefire in the province on October 30, however JN immediately claimed a violation of the truce by the SRF.²⁹ In a video uploaded to YouTube the same day, Jamal Ma'arouf personally addressed JN commander Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, comparing him to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, stating that JN's actions were aiding Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and demanding that JN send its members to the Aleppo, Morek, or Wadi Deif fronts to fight the regime.³⁰ The following day, clashes resumed between JN, backed by Jund al-Aqsa, and the SRF in the SRF stronghold of Deir Sonbol, Ma'arouf's hometown.³¹ JN and Jund al-Aqsa seized full control of the town as SRF forces, reportedly including Ma'arouf himself, withdrew amidst reports of the defection of dozens of SRF members to JN and Jund al-Aqsa in the area.³² A video posted on YouTube showed Jabhat al-Nusra fighters uncovering stockpiles of weaponry at Ma'arouf's headquarters, with JN fighters reportedly acquiring a number of Chinese-made antitank missiles provided by Qatar from SRF bases in the town.³³ In a second video statement, Ma'arouf stated that his forces withdrew from the Jabal al-Zawiya region in order to prevent civilian casualties during the clashes, accusing JN of having former "shabiha" (regime militia) members and active ISIS members in its ranks and vowing to come back and liberate the area, "village by village."³⁴

In a series of statements posted to Twitter beginning on October 31, JN condemned Ma'arouf, calling him a revolutionary fighter who "veered off the road" into the "maze of politics" after being lured by weapons and money.³⁵ JN warned SRF fighters that they were "tools" to the "personal interests" of Jamal Ma'arouf and stated that the residents of the area supported JN in the fighting against the SRF.³⁶ JN initiated a further social media campaign highlighting its participation in the liberation of the Jabal al-Zawiya area from the regime early in the revolution, posting a series of tweets and videos about early JN operations in Idlib province.³⁷

On October 30, 15 rebel brigades including Harakat Hazm, the Sham Legion, Liwa al-Haq, Ahrar al-Sham, the FSA 5th Corps, and Suqour al-Sham agreed to form a peacekeeping body called the "al-Sohl Forces" to separate the clashing JN and SRF forces.³⁸ Members of the peacekeeping force reportedly

deployed to occupy the town of Binine and advanced toward Hantutin while carrying white banners and broadcasting their appeal for JN to withdraw from Ma'arat al-Nu'man.³⁹ However, on November 1, JN seized the town of Binine from these forces in addition to the Harakat Hazm stronghold of Khan Sibel northeast of Ma'arat al-Nu'man.⁴⁰ Harakat Hazm reportedly withdrew from its headquarters in the town, and unconfirmed reports indicated the defection of a local Hazm brigade.⁴¹ JN reportedly seized at least seven tanks and 12 armored vehicles from Hazm bases in the town, amidst rumors of JN acquisition of TOW anti-tank missiles.⁴² A spokesman for Harakat Hazm refused to confirm whether American weaponry had been captured by the al-Qaeda affiliate, stating that negotiations with JN were underway.⁴³

JN and Jund al-Aqsa released statements on November 1 agreeing to a ceasefire with the SRF under four conditions, citing their desire to focus on continuing operations against the regime.⁴⁴ The following day, JN accused the SRF of rejecting the ceasefire proposal, threatening the negotiating commission, and attempting to rally rebel groups in northern Hama Province and southern Idlib Province to storm the JN-controlled Jabal al-Zawiya region.⁴⁵ This appears to have some basis in fact, as SRF forces reportedly detained 14 JN fighters in Hama province that same day.⁴⁶ On November 2, JN seized an additional 5 towns from the SRF, Harakat Hazm, and other local groups, and reportedly began to mass in Sarmada near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing.⁴⁷ During this advance, JN continued to propagate its "counter-corruption" narrative, and appears to have been successful in maintaining public support. JN launched a concerted social media campaign against the Harakat Hazm, the SRF, and Ma'arouf personally beginning on November 3, releasing a set of pictures and video evidence claiming to show mass graves left by the SRF and Harakat Hazm forces as they withdrew.⁴⁸

On November 4, Sham News Network reported that a statement was released by the SRF affiliate Suqour al-Ghab in addition to the Ansar Brigades, Jabhat al-Haq, and the "Line of Fire" Brigade calling once more for a Shari'a Court ruling to settle the dispute and demanding that JN return both former SRF-controlled territories and former SRF fighters now within JN ranks.⁴⁹ However, no JN response appears to have been issued. JN and Jund al-Aqsa reportedly seized an additional four villages on November 7, further extending their territorial control and neutralizing remaining pockets of SRF allegiance.⁵⁰

REBEL PARTICIPATION IN JN'S ADVANCE

A number of local Salafist rebel brigades supported JN in its ousting of the SRF and Harakat Hazm from southern Idlib Province. In his interview, Joulani stated that JN received support from two local Suqour al-Sham brigades and two local HASI brigades in addition to the overt participation of Jund al-Aqsa. Local activists reported these groups consisted of Liwa al-

Khanza and Liwa Safwa from Suqour al-Sham in addition to Liwa al-Abbas and a group led by Abu Saleh al-Tahhan from HASI.⁵¹ While HASI and Suqour al-Sham initially released statements calling on a cessation of the fighting and appealing for a Shari'a arbitration,⁵² HASI subsequently released a statement admitting its participation on behalf of JN.⁵³ This validates Joulani's claim of HASI participation and therefore likely validates that claim that Suqour al-Sham forces also participated. This participation highlights JN's ability to wield its influence to leverage these groups as force multipliers.

IMPLICATIONS

JN's relationships with moderate rebel groups in northern Syria have not considerably suffered due to the outbreak of hostilities against the SRF and Harakat Hazm. In his November 4 interview, Joulani reaffirmed JN's commitment to the Syrian revolution despite the fighting in Idlib. He was careful to state that elements of the SRF that continue to fight the regime were excluded from JN's action against the SRF, framing the escalation against Ma'arouf as an attempt to defend rebels and civilians from the "repeated attacks" of Ma'arouf's "gang."⁵⁴ Furthermore, Colonel Riad al-Asad, an FSA founding member, stated on November 5 that FSA-affiliated groups in Idlib supported the ousting of Ma'arouf, indicating the low level of local support maintained by the SRF.⁵⁵ In addition, JN's participation alongside moderate rebels in the continued defense of Aleppo city appears to have been unaffected, with JN and Harakat Hazm signing a local truce alongside prominent rebel battalions in the city on October 28 to avoid infighting and concentrate on fighting the regime despite the ongoing escalation in Idlib.⁵⁶ In addition, Harakat Hazm and JN reached a settlement in western Aleppo Province on October 30 in which Harakat Hazm turned over its checkpoints near al-Atarib to Jaysh al-Mujahideen, and JN turned over its checkpoints to the Sham Legion, with a prisoner exchange to follow.⁵⁷ This continued overt commitment to the fight against the regime by JN on a critical front line mitigated the possible backlash against JN for its expansion in Jabal al-Zawiya and portrayed the scope of its escalation against the SRF as narrow.

The lack of substantial civilian opposition to JN's expansion of territorial control is a crucial indicator of JN's ability to secure local acceptance in an area typically regarded as a stronghold of the moderate opposition. While activists and religious scholars in Idlib Province launched a "Stop the Fighting" initiative that called for an immediate ceasefire, prisoner exchange, and territorial withdrawal with a mediation council to follow, they refrained from directly condemning JN.⁵⁸ Unconfirmed activist reports even suggested that civilians fought alongside JN and Jund al-Aqsa to expel the SRF in some areas of Jabal al-Zawiya.⁵⁹ Joulani propagated this narrative in his interview, stating that "masses from the people of Jabal al-Zawiya" had risen up alongside JN against Ma'arouf. Furthermore, JN will likely be able to capitalize on a second set of U.S. strikes on JN positions

in northwestern Idlib Province that occurred on November 5, 2014 to further deepen its local support. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) was careful to state that the strikes were not in response to JN's recent acquisition of territory in Idlib and did not represent a U.S. escalation against JN itself, stating that the strikes were rather limited to targeting surviving members of the "Khorasan group."⁶⁰ However, these strikes occurred hours after regime warplanes bombarded recently acquired JN territory in southern Idlib province,⁶¹ and are likely to further enable JN to capitalize on civilian discontent with the allied air campaign to engender local support. JN immediately launched a social media campaign decrying the civilian casualties of the strikes, posting pictures to its Idlib Twitter account with text in both English and Arabic.⁶²

Despite the fact that JN accrues obvious benefits from this expansion, JN's gains in Idlib appears to have been opportunistic rather than a planned escalation against moderate rebels, and is therefore unlikely to represent the "concerted push to vanquish the moderate Free Syrian Army" assessed by some to have been JN's intent.⁶³ However, it represents a significant advance in an ongoing JN effort to entrench itself in Syria's northern rebel systems as an alternative stronghold to its past center of gravity in Deir ez-Zour province. JN's restraint from targeting the SRF in its entirety or from expanding the escalation to target other moderate groups in the area likely indicates that JN's calculus regarding its long-term response to the U.S.-led air campaign in Syria is still in development. JN's continued success in carving out a stronghold in Idlib Province is a concerning indicator of its ability to quickly and efficiently adapt to changes in its operating environment in Syria. JN is deeply interwoven with the Syrian opposition, an important dynamic within Syria's rebel landscape that will continue to present challenges in the context of the ongoing U.S.-led coalition campaign against ISIS.

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NOTES

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2. As an indication that Harakat Hazm has used TOW missiles in the past, see for example: ["Harakat Hazm destroys a T72 Tank that belongs to Regime forces in the first days of the Eid with a TOW Missile"], YouTube, October 4 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IflCSVjBLY>. For a similar indication for the Syrian Revolutionaries front, see: ["Syrian Revolutionaries'

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 8. See upcoming report, Jennifer Cafarella, “Jabhat al-Nusra,” Institute for the Study of War, November 2014.
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