

Syria Situation Report: March 24-31, 2015

1 March 28: JN, Ahrar al-Sham (HASI), Jund al-Aqsa, and other rebel forces participating in the Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room seized complete control of Idlib City following a regime withdrawal. Activists accused the regime of responding with chlorine gas amidst heavy aerial bombardment of the city. HASI leader Hasim al-Sheikh issued a statement calling on residents to participate in the governance of the city and assuring residents that there will be no attempt to establish unilateral leadership or an Islamic "Emirate." In addition, JN Shari'a official Abu Abdullah al-Mohisni stated via Twitter that preparations began "some time ago" for the establishment of an Administrative Council in Idlib that would be neither a courthouse nor an "Islamic body." The establishment of this council appears to be underway, notably with participation from the Syrian National Coalition.

2 March 28: The Islamist Furqan Brigades announced the formation of an operations room in western Idlib province to seize the town of Jisr al-Shughour from the regime. The Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room also stated its intent to continue its military operations against the regime.

3 March 30: Pro-regime forces seized terrain west of Zabadani in the Qalamoun region from unspecified rebel forces. In addition, U.S. forces are reportedly operating two unarmed reconnaissance drones in northeastern Lebanon to support the Lebanese Army offensive against militants in the Beka'a Valley.

4 March 30: Jaysh al-Islam leader Zahran Alloush announced the formation of a new military council in Damascus consisting of defected regime soldiers that will fall underneath the Eastern Ghouta Unified Military Command. Alloush also called for the formation of a joint operations room similar to the Jaysh al-Fatah operations room. JN issued a statement indicating its willingness to participate in such an operations room. However, JN reiterated previous demands for changes in the existing Eastern Ghouta structures, including the subordination of the Eastern Ghouta Unified Command led by Zahran Alloush to the local Shari'a court.

5 March 28: The Ministry of the Iraqi Peshmerga announced that it will deploy a new installment of Peshmerga fighters to Ayn al-Arab in order to establish a Peshmerga military base in the city following an agreement between Turkey and the U.S. The military base will contribute to the training of Kurdish forces, as well as offer protection from further attacks on Ayn al-Arab.

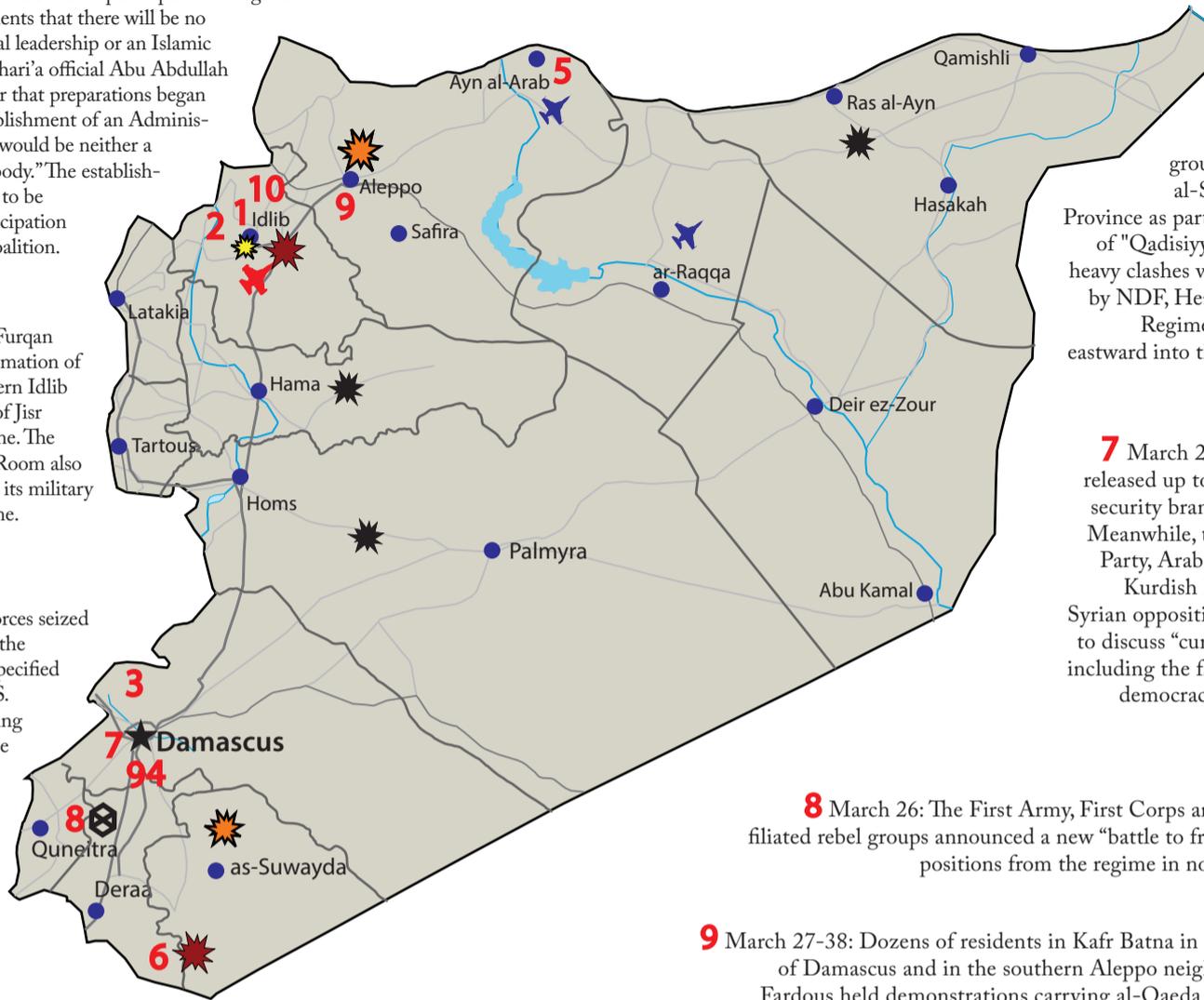
6 March 24: JN, HASI, Harakat Muthanna al-Islamiya, Jaysh al-Islam, and FSA affiliated Southern Front groups seized the town of Busra al-Sham in southeastern Dera'a Province as part of the rebel-declared battle of "Qadisiyya Busra al-Sham" following heavy clashes with regime forces supported by NDF, Hezbollah, and IRGC advisors. Regime forces reportedly withdrew eastward into the Druze-majority Suwayda Province.

7 March 25-29: The regime reportedly released up to 700 detainees from various security branches in Damascus Province. Meanwhile, the PYD Democratic Union Party, Arab Socialist Movement, Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party, and other Syrian opposition parties met in Damascus to discuss "current political developments" including the framework for a transition to democracy and the importance of the upcoming talks in Moscow.

8 March 26: The First Army, First Corps and other Southern Front-affiliated rebel groups announced a new "battle to free Jadiya battalion" to retake positions from the regime in northwestern Dera'a Province.

9 March 27-28: Dozens of residents in Kafr Batna in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus and in the southern Aleppo neighborhoods of al-Marjeh and Fardous held demonstrations carrying al-Qaeda style flags and calling for an Islamic revolution against "Assad and the secularists."

10 March 29: After participating in the JN and rebel seizure of Idlib City, the leader of Druze in Idlib Province, Sheikh Saleh Hassan, declared his intent to fight the regime until the fall of Damascus, calling on the Druze population in Suwayda to also take up arms against the regime. Sheikh Hassan participated in the rebel seizure of Idlib City alongside a contingent of Druze fighters.



Background Kinetic Activity

- Major Regime Airstrikes
- Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes
- Low-level clashes
- ISIS clashes
- Declared Offensive
- Alleged CW Attack
- SVBIED
- Major Clash

For more on ISIS activity in Syria from March 24 - 31, 2015 see ISW publication: ISIS in Syria Campaign Update: March 31, 2015



100km

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JN and Rebel Forces Seize Provincial Capital in Idlib, Militia Headquarters in Dera'a: JN and rebel forces made two crucial gains against regime forces that threaten the continued viability of the regime's Syria-wide war effort in 2015. In northern Syria, the seizure of Idlib City by JN-led forces is a considerable blow to the regime that represents the greatest anti-Assad victory since the fall of Raqqa City to JN and rebel forces in March 2013. The involvement of the moderate SNC in ruling the city is likely to facilitate the delivery of international aid to the city as JN and rebels move to consolidate their control and implement governance. The SNC's participation is unlikely, however, to define the conditions of governance or negate the ability of JN and Islamist forces to link Idlib City with Shari'a courts in Aleppo and Hama to integrate Shari'a governance across rebel-held terrain. Affecting the trajectory of the Syrian war, Assad must now defend remaining regime enclaves in Idlib from a weakened force posture, and is increasingly vulnerable to JN and rebel penetrating attacks into Latakia Province. In addition, the JN and rebel seizure of Busra al-Sham in southeastern Dera'a Province eliminated the remaining regime stronghold east of Dera'a City, pushing the front line eastward to the historically neutral, Druze-majority Suwayda Province. Busra al-Sham was an important training ground and staging area for irregular pro-regime forces such as Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a militias, and its fall to JN and opposition forces therefore disrupts this crucial support to the regime's southern campaign. In addition, the pro-regime withdrawal into Suwayda may exacerbate rising tensions between Druze populations and pro-regime forces in Suwayda that have emerged in recent weeks. This could create opportunities for JN and rebel groups to make inroads with the Druze community after a series of past attempts at outreach to this population.

Regime Prepares for Moscow II Negotiations: The release of hundreds of prisoners by the Assad regime in Damascus appears to be a goodwill gesture prior to the start of the Moscow II negotiations on April 6. The meeting of a number of opposition parties in Damascus to discuss a framework for the negotiations indicates that the talks will move forward, likely with a focus on the humanitarian crisis inside the country. The only opposition party with meaningful influence on the ground that attended the meeting, however, is the PKK-linked PYD, which is the political wing associated with the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia. The PYD may pursue a renegotiation of the party's relationship with the regime in northern Syria, where PYD-liked YPG fighters act in close proximity to pro-regime forces. The PYD could demand the regime recognize the de-facto autonomy of Syrian Kurdish areas in northern Syria in return for the continued detente between regime and YPG forces. However, due to the lack of participation from rebel power brokers in the Moscow negotiations, the outcome of the talks is unlikely to contribute to an eventual political solution to the war.