

# Syria Situation Report: May 5-12, 2015

**1** May 5-9: Nine Homs-based rebel factions announced the formation of the Jaysh al-Tawhid coalition on May 5. On May 9, Jaysh al-Tawhid released a statement accusing rebel group Liwa Usud al-Islam of raiding an opposition field hospital in the town of Telbisa, kidnapping a number of wounded JN fighters, and pledging allegiance to ISIS. Jaysh al-Tawhid indicated that it will fight the Liwa Usud al-Islam until "it returns to the right way".

**2** May 6-7: ISIS detonated an SVBIED in an unsuccessful attempt to storm a Kurdish 'Asayish' internal security forces base in Hasaka city. The 'Asayish' General Command announced a new curfew inside the city following the attack.

**3** May 5-9: Jaysh al-Islam regained complete control over Maydaa in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus following a regime offensive against the town launched on May 3. Jaysh al-Islam subsequently claimed to seize several regime positions east and north of Maydaa, including the town of Tel Kurdi.

**4** May 6-10: ISIS deployed at least three SVBIEDs in an attempt to storm the regime-held Kuweiris Military Airbase east of Aleppo city. Pro-ISIS social media accounts claimed that ISIS penetrated the perimeter of the airbase, while pro-regime denied that the walls of the base had been breached. Clashes are reportedly ongoing.

**5** May 10: Turkish Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoglu visited the Tomb of Sulayman Shah in northeastern Aleppo Province along with a number of Turkish military officers. Following his visit to the tomb, Davutoglu gave a speech at a Justice and Development Party (AKP) rally near the border and stated that "Turkey will remove the border with Syria at the triumph of the true representative of the Syrian people". The Assad regime condemned the visit as "a clear act of aggression against a sovereign state".

**6** May 5-11: JN and rebel forces established the Jaysh al-Fatah al-Qalamoun Operations Room northeast of Damascus City on May 5. The operations room later released a statement vowing to "eradicate" ISIS from the Qalamoun region along the Syrian-Lebanese border following a number of ISIS provocations, including the assassination of several rebel commanders.

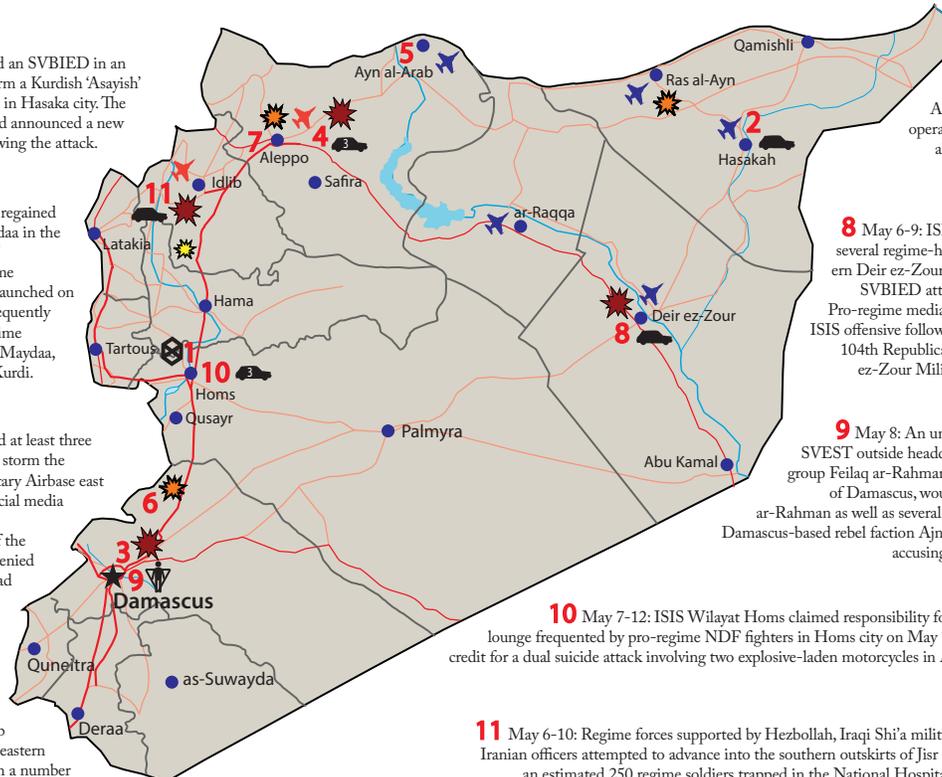
**7** May 6: The Conquest of Aleppo Operations Room announced the addition of fourteen new Aleppo-based rebel factions to the operations room in preparation for an alleged upcoming "great battle" to "liberate" the city of Aleppo.

**8** May 6-9: ISIS launched an offensive to seize several regime-held neighborhoods in southeastern Deir ez-Zour city which included at least one SVBIED attack against a regime checkpoint. Pro-regime media sources stated that the renewed ISIS offensive followed the redeployment of the elite 104th Republican Guard Brigade from the Deir ez-Zour Military Airport to Eastern Ghouta.

**9** May 8: An unidentified militant detonated an SVEST outside headquarters of Islamist-leaning rebel group Feilqa ar-Rahman in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, wounding the commander of Feilqa ar-Rahman as well as several other rebel leader. Subsequently, Damascus-based rebel faction Ajnad al-Sham released a statement accusing ISIS of perpetrating the attack.

**10** May 7-12: ISIS Wilayat Homs claimed responsibility for an SVBIED attack targeting a lounge frequented by pro-regime NDF fighters in Homs city on May 7. On May 12, ISIS also claimed credit for a dual suicide attack involving two explosive-laden motorcycles in Alawite-majority neighborhoods of Homs city.

**11** May 6-10: Regime forces supported by Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militias, Afghan Shi'a volunteers, and Iranian officers attempted to advance into the southern outskirts of Jisr al-Shughour and lift the siege of an estimated 250 regime soldiers trapped in the National Hospital. The operation follows a public declaration by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that the Syrian Army would lift the siege of the hospital. JN and other rebel factions launched a counteroffensive, penetrating the National Hospital following a JN SVBIED attack. Clashes are ongoing amidst heavy regime aerial bombardment.



- Pro-Regime Forces
- ISIS
- Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)
- Turkey
- YPG
- Opposition Forces
- ▼ SVEST
- ⊠ Declared Offensive
- ⚡ SVBIED
- ⚡ Major Clash

- Background Kinetic Activity**
- ✈ Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes
  - ✈ Major Regime Airstrikes
  - ☀ Alleged CW Attack
  - ☀ Low-level clashes

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100km

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**Iran's Role in Syria Expands to Idlib Front; Tensions Grow within Pro-Regime Camp:** The reported participation of Iranian-backed Afghan and Iraqi militias in clashes in Idlib Province indicates the deployment of Iranian proxy forces to support a regime offensive to lift the siege of the Jisr al-Shughour National Hospital. The arrival of these forces follows a rare public appearance by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during which he promised to send reinforcements to the hospital, and indicates that both Iran and the Syrian regime may have prioritized the battlefield around Jisr al-Shughour in order to provide a buffer for core terrain in coastal Latakia Province. Nevertheless, the failure of this pro-regime offensive to regain any significant territory suggests that these forces remain insufficient to challenge JN and rebel dominance in the province. Meanwhile, rumors of dissent amongst high-ranking regime officials regarding the expansion of Iranian involvement in Syria continue to circulate. Unidentified regime sources claimed that Syrian National Security Bureau head Ali Mamlouk was placed under house arrest on accusations of contacting Turkish intelligence as well as Rifaat al-Assad, the exiled uncle of President Bashar al-Assad. Mamlouk also allegedly expressed concerns over the deepening Iranian influence within the regime. If confirmed, the detention of Mamlouk would be the second case of a high-profile regime official allegedly facing punitive action after speaking out against growing Iranian involvement since the dismissal and suspicious death of former regime Political Security head Rustom Ghazali in March-April 2015. These reports could indicate that the increasing Iranian involvement on behalf of the regime has forced elements of Assad's inner-circle to the sidelines raising the possibility of future instability within the Assad regime.

**Regional Actors Confirm Increasing Support Provided to Anti-Assad Forces:** A perceived lack of Western resolve regarding support for the Syrian opposition appears to be provoking regional strategies for intervention likely to deprioritize the growing threat that jihadist groups in Syria pose to U.S. interests over desire to contain Iranian influence. Turkish officials confirmed an agreement between Turkey and Saudi Arabia to provide joint logistical and financial support to anti-Assad forces in Syria on May 7, confirming rumors of heavy Turkish support to the offensives led by the Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room to seize Idlib city and Jisr al-Shughour. According to unidentified Turkish officials cited by the Associated Press, Turkey plans to leverage increasing support to hardline Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham (HASI) to pressure Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) to renounce its affiliation to AQ. Meanwhile, the U.S. Secretary of Defense announced the start of formal training of 90 opposition fighters through the U.S.-led train and equip program. It remains unclear whether this training mission will succeed in affecting change on the ground in the context of an alternate and expanding pipeline to Islamist elements of the Syrian opposition. Meanwhile, the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) refused direct participation in the ongoing Geneva III consultations launched on May 5 by UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura. The Coalition instead sent letters to de Mistura and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon outlining their political vision for Syria and noting that the talks were "unimportant...at a time when the Syrian opposition is winning key victories on the ground."

**ISIS Targets Key Regime Terrain Amidst Pressure in Hasaka Province:** ISIS launched three operations targeting major regime positions throughout Syria in an apparent effort to offset a series of ISIS losses against YPG forces supported by U.S.-led coalition airstrikes in Hasaka Province in northeastern Syria. ISIS demonstrated a new level of penetration deep into core regime terrain with a series of separate suicide attacks targeting pro-regime neighborhoods in Homs city along the Syrian central corridor. ISIS also launched major offensives including SVBIED attacks targeting both the Deir ez-Zour Military Airport and the Kuweiris Military Airbase east of Aleppo city. ISIS likely seeks to reinvent its military campaign and propaganda messaging through the seizure of a major regime military facility.

**JN Responds to ISIS Overstep in Qalamoun:** The Jaysh al-Fatah al-Qalamoun declaration of direct conflict with ISIS in the Qalamoun region represents a shift from the previous JN strategy of deconfliction and limited cooperation with ISIS forces along the Syrian-Lebanese border. The announcement of hostilities threatens the staying power of both ISIS and anti-Assad forces including JN in the Qalamoun region as all groups face ongoing offensive operations by pro-regime forces. In particular, Hezbollah appears to be gearing up for a major operation along the border, with Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah warning of an impending Hezbollah spring offensive in a speech on May 5. This change in the JN-ISIS relationship in Qalamoun also occurs amidst increased ISIS belligerence throughout the Syrian central corridor as ISIS attempts to open new avenues for expansion in western Syria. JN-ISIS clashes in the border region could therefore expand to other battlefronts, such as Damascus or the Eastern Homs countryside where JN and ISIS forces have rarely come into direct conflict.