

Syria Update: September 24 - October 02, 2014

1 September 24: The U.S. State Department designated two Syrian rebel groups as Specially Designated Terrorist Groups, including Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar, a Chechen-led foreign fighter group in Syria, and Harakat Sham al-Islam, a Moroccan-led foreign fighter group in Syria. These groups primarily operate in northwest Syria and are known to operate closely with JN.

2 September 25: Regime forces seized control of large portions of the Adra district, northeast of Damascus city in Eastern Ghouta, from rebel and JN forces following an alleged chemical weapons strike by the regime on the area on September 24.

3 September 26 – October 2: Since September 26, CENTCOM has confirmed U.S. and coalition airstrikes on ISIS fixed and mobile targets across al-Hasaka, Deir ez-Zour, Aleppo, and ar-Raqqa provinces, in addition to strikes on a command and control node and modular refineries in ar-Raqqa.

4 September 26 – October 2: ISIS advanced within one mile of Ayn al-Arab city, despite U.S.-led coalition airstrikes on ISIS positions and YPG attempts to launch a counter-offensive. Turkey has massed tanks and soldiers at the border but has not taken military action against ISIS forces.

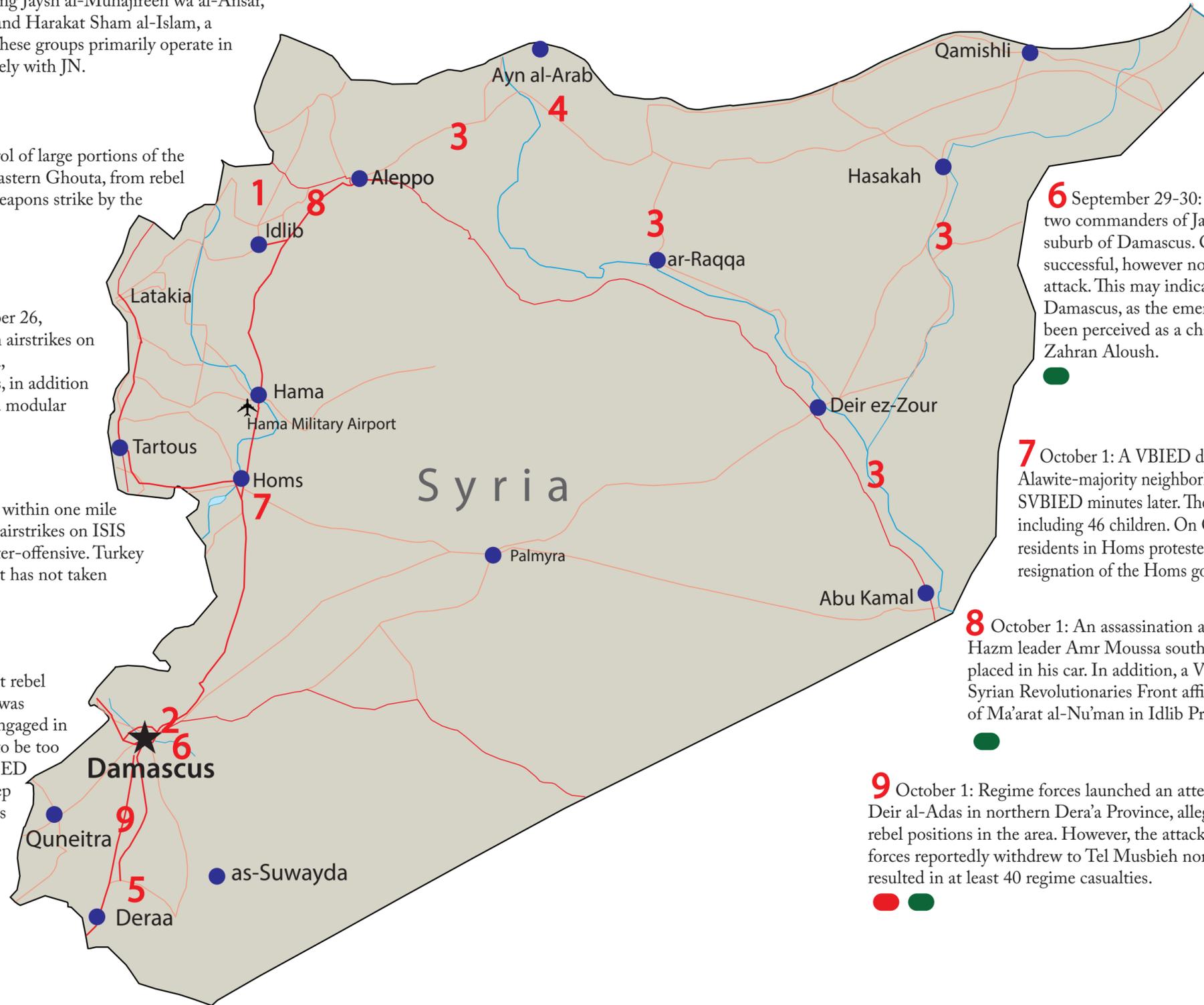
5 September 28: Three VBIEDs detonated at rebel positions in the Dera'a countryside. A fourth was reportedly discovered by rebel forces. JN has engaged in targeted attacks against rebel groups believed to be too closely aligned with the West. But a mini-VBIED wave in Dera'a, would indicate a significant step change in JN overt activity against rebel groups that it seeks to influence.

6 September 29-30: Two assassination attempts targeted two commanders of Jaysh al-Umma in the Eastern Ghouta suburb of Damascus. One attempt appears to have been successful, however no group has claimed credit for either attack. This may indicate competition among rebel groups in Damascus, as the emergence of Jaysh al-Umma may have been perceived as a challenge against Jaysh al-Islam leader Zahran Aloush.

7 October 1: A VBIED detonated outside a primary school in an Alawite-majority neighborhood of Homs City, followed by an SVBIED minutes later. The explosions killed at least 53 people, including 46 children. On October 2, several hundred Alawite residents in Homs protested at the victims' funeral, demanding the resignation of the Homs governor.

8 October 1: An assassination attempt successfully targeted Harakat Hazm leader Amr Moussa southwest of Aleppo City, using an IED placed in his car. In addition, a VBIED targeted the headquarters of a Syrian Revolutionaries Front affiliate in the village of Ehsim, northwest of Ma'arat al-Nu'man in Idlib Province, killing seven.

9 October 1: Regime forces launched an attempt to regain control over the town of Deir al-Adas in northern Dera'a Province, allegedly deploying chlorine gas against rebel positions in the area. However, the attack was halted by rebel forces, and regime forces reportedly withdrew to Tel Musbieh north of the town following clashes that resulted in at least 40 regime casualties.



by Jennifer Cafarella, Jessica D. Lewis, and Theodore Bell

An assassination campaign against rebel commanders appears to have emerged in western Syria, with at least 12 assassination attempts since the beginning of September 2014. Targeted commanders have ranged from the hardline Salafist Ahrar al-Sham (HASI), to the less extreme Jaysh al-Umma, and finally to U.S.-backed rebels such as Harakat Hazm. While the attacks are unlikely the work of a single actor given the diversity of attack style and targets, the series of assassinations serves to undercut rebel leadership overall. In turn, these assassinations strengthen the influence of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) over other rebel formations. The trend gives rise to several possibilities: first, JN may have decided to attack rebel commanders more overtly, including through the use of VBIEDs; second, ISIS may be activating multiple sleeper cells throughout Syria. Third, the Syrian regime may be responsible for some or all of these assassination attempts. JN and ISIS may be attacking from positions of strength to exploit recent gains and remove key nodes of Western influence within the Syrian opposition while airstrikes are ongoing. The regime may be attacking from a position of relative vulnerability, using targeted assassinations and chemical weapons to make up for its lack of sufficient ground forces.