Syria Update: November 25 - December 2, 2014

Rebels Formalize New Command Structure: The formation of a new joint military command for the Syrian opposition has somewhat offset the setback suffered by moderate rebels due to JN’s continued consolidation of direct control in northwestern Syria. 72 rebel groups including prominent members of the Islamic Front, the Free Syrian Army, and several groups believed to receive western backing in the form of U.S. TOW missiles formally established the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) on November 29. The new body is independent from the defunct Free Syrian Army Supreme Military Command, and may prove effective in reconsolidating rebel forces, albeit with an increased role of Islamist groups such as Jaysh al-Islam that have a history of hardline positions. Statements by the council’s founding leaders after the initiative was first declared in August indicated that the RCC did not constitute an attempt to sideline JN or counter its role within the opposition.

ISIL Reinvigorates Ayn al-Abad Offensive: ISIL launched two significant attacks against YPG forces in Ayn al-Abad/Kobane. Although neither attack made concrete gains, the deployment of valuable resources such as multiple SVBIEDs and Chechen fighters believed to comprise an elite ISIL unit indicates that ISIL may still view Ayn al-Abad as a primary line of effort despite recent tactical setbacks and the ongoing coalition air campaign.

Iranian Support Allows Regime to Advance in Dera’a: The visible role adopted by IRGC, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shi’a militia fighters in the regime’s offensive against Sheikh Miskin in Dera’a province signals a deepening reliance by the regime on Iranian support to its military campaign. Reported tensions in Qalamoun between Hezbollah and regime NDF militias indicate that there may be a limit to Hezbollah’s willingness to deepen its involvement in the regime’s campaign, and it is possible that IRGC or Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi’a militias would be leveraged to fill manpower requirements. Hezbollah is unable or unwilling to fill. A statement by a U.S. defense official on December 2 shed light on Iran’s deepening regional involvement, confirming that Iran is conducting airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq within the same airspace used by the U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition. It is possible this cooperation could extend to Syria, where coalition airstrikes against ISIL in Raqqa have occurred in close proximity to strikes ostensibly conducted by the regime on the same day on at least two occasions. Iranian support to the regime’s air campaign would likely greatly assist in offsetting the regime’s considerable manpower shortages, especially in eastern and southern Syria.