

Syria Situation Report: February 24 - March 2, 2015

1 February 23: JN claimed credit for the suicide attack that targeted a pro-regime checkpoint near the entrance to the Sayyida Zeinab neighborhood of southeastern Damascus city on February 23. JN claimed the attack was a double SVEST attack, and stated that the attack was “in retribution for our beloved Sham and especially the bereaved city of Douma”.

2 February 24 – March 2: YPG forces supported by local militias and U.S.-led coalition airstrikes advanced in a two-pronged offensive against ISIS in Hasaka Province. Reinforced YPG forces seized the ISIS strongholds of Tel Hamis and Tel Baraka northeast of Hasaka City in addition to ISIS terrain near Tel Tamir northwest of Hasaka City.

3 February 24: Following the initiation of a YPG-led offensive against ISIS in Hasaka Province, ISIS kidnapped hundreds of Assyrian Christian civilians from towns northwest of Hasaka City. ISIS subsequently released 19 of the captured civilians according to a verdict passed by a local ISIS Shari’a court after negotiations with tribal mediators.

4 February 24 – 27: A French Parliamentary delegation held independent talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Syrian government officials in Damascus. The talks did not receive the consent of the French Foreign Ministry, which, alongside French President Francois Hollande, immediately denounced the action.

5 March 1: YPG and rebel forces seized three villages on the eastern bank of the Euphrates river across from the ISIS-held border town of Jarablus. In response to continued YPG gains in this area, ISIS reportedly reinforced the southern and eastern fronts of its terrain in the Ayn al-Arab/Kobani countryside with forces from Raqqa in order to impede YPG progress toward Raqqa city.

6 February 25: ISIS seized three regime checkpoints in the al-Shumariyeh Mountains in the eastern countryside of Homs, killing and wounding 30.

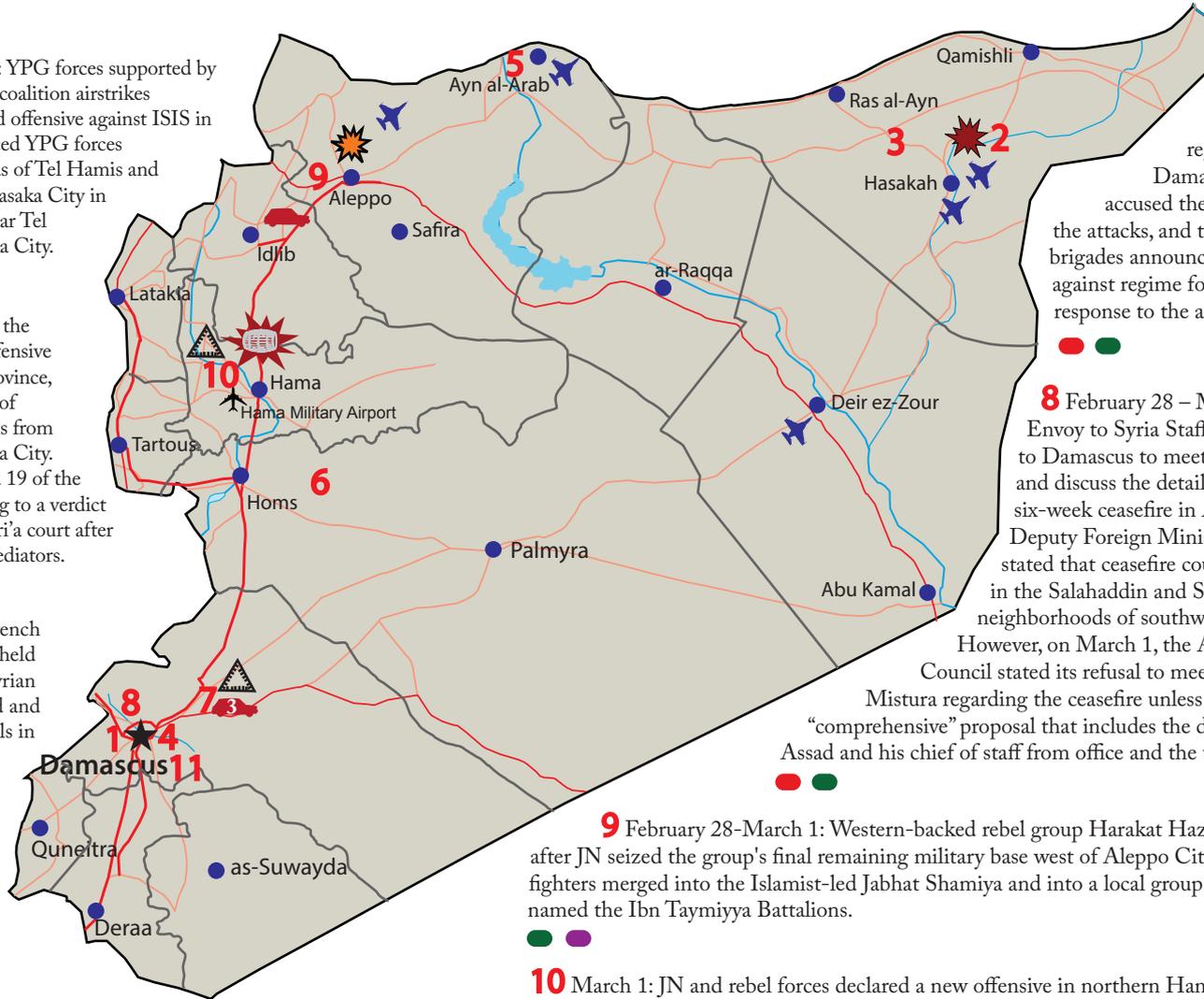
7 February 28: Three VBIEDS detonated targeting two mosques in rebel-held towns in the eastern Qalamoun region north of Damascus. Pro-rebel sources accused the regime of conducting the attacks, and thirteen local rebel brigades announced a joint operation against regime forces in the area in response to the alleged attack.

8 February 28 – March 1: UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura traveled to Damascus to meet with regime officials and discuss the details of a proposed six-week ceasefire in Aleppo city. Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Muqdad stated that ceasefire could begin with a “trial” in the Salahaddin and Seif al-Dawla neighborhoods of southwestern Aleppo city. However, on March 1, the Aleppo Revolutionary Council stated its refusal to meet with Staffan de Mistura regarding the ceasefire unless de Mistura presents a “comprehensive” proposal that includes the departure of president Assad and his chief of staff from office and the trial of war criminals.

9 February 28–March 1: Western-backed rebel group Harakat Hazm completely dissolved after JN seized the group's final remaining military base west of Aleppo City. Surviving Hazm fighters merged into the Islamist-led Jabhat Shamiya and into a local group west of Aleppo city named the Ibn Taymiyya Battalions.

10 March 1: JN and rebel forces declared a new offensive in northern Hama province to seize four checkpoints from regime forces. The stated intent of the operation is to relieve pressure on Dera'a and Aleppo in addition to northern Hama.

11 February 24-25: ISIS reportedly seized Bir al-Qassab and surrounding areas in the southeastern countryside of Damascus following a joint operation by JN and the Eastern Ghouta Unified Command targeting alleged ISIS members in the town of Kafr Batna in Eastern Ghouta.



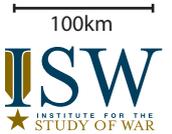
- France
- Opposition Forces
- Pro-Regime Forces
- ISIS
- YPG
- Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)

- New Operations Room
- Major Clash
- VBIED

Background Kinetic Activity

- Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes
- Major Regime Airstrikes
- Low-level clashes
- Major Barrel Bomb Attack

On February 25, Jund al-Aqsa detonated an SVBIED in the town of al-Kafriya located northeast of Idlib city, amidst a JN and rebel attempt to advance against the town of al-Fouah.



Content: Jennifer Cafarella
Graphics: John Sauerhoff

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ISIS Forces Defeated on Multiple Fronts: Continued victories by YPG forces supported by local militias, rebel groups, and U.S.-led coalition air strikes have considerably challenged ISIS in northern Syria. On the heels of ISIS defeat in Ayn al-Arab/Kobani, the YPG-led offensive in Hasaka is forcing ISIS to undertake two main defensive efforts that threatens to overtax ISIS ability to balance multiple fronts. As a result, ISIS appears to have accepted tactical losses in favor of reinforcing key terrain deeper in the ISIS “interior” in order to set a limit of advance for YPG-led forces. As it does so, continued ISIS escalation in Homs and Damascus provinces indicates that defeats in northern Syria are unlikely fully to disrupt the ISIS campaign in Syria. These defeats may actually encourage ISIS to pursue expansion west- and southward into areas where the YPG is unable to project force and coalition airstrikes are unlikely to target in the near term.

JN Achieves Success in Campaign to Neutralize Moderates in Aleppo: The full dissolution of Western-backed group Harakat Hazm cements JN gains in western Aleppo Province and neutralizes a threat to JN security in northern Syria. The lack of rebel outcry against JN in response to its escalation against Hazm is a dangerous indicator of JN ability to act against moderate actors without jeopardizing its own embedded position within rebel ranks. While Aleppo-based rebels attempted to play a mediating role as the JN escalation unfolded, they were unable to coerce JN into halting its aggression and proved unwilling to escalate against JN when intervention failed. This sustained deference to JN is a product of JN’s significant contribution to the rebel defense of Aleppo city against the regime’s attempted encirclement. This example illustrates that JN is likely to maintain its escalation potential against moderate forces in Syria as long as it continues to provide desperately needed military capabilities to the Syrian opposition on crucial front lines.

Aleppo Ceasefire Proposal Fails to Gain Traction Despite Tailoring: The reported selection of neighborhoods in southwestern Aleppo city that have a relative lack of JN presence for a trial ceasefire indicates UN effort to tailor its proposal to achieve realistic tactical success that could be built upon over time. However, the outright rejection of the proposal by the Aleppo Revolutionary Council follows similar rejections by the umbrella Revolutionary Command Council and the Aleppo Jabhat Shamiya military coalition that operates alongside Aleppo Revolutionary Council-backed groups. The Aleppo Revolutionary Council rejection therefore indicates a growing rejection of the ceasefire initiative despite its careful tailoring. JN’s consolidation of additional territorial control and influence within rebel ranks in Aleppo province following the dissolution of Harakat Hazm further decreases the likelihood that the proposal will gain traction.