

## ALEPPO WARNING UPDATE: APRIL 28, 2016

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his allies in Moscow and Tehran have set the stage for an imminent offensive to complete the encirclement of Aleppo City following the [near-total breakdown](#) of Geneva peace talks and an associated ceasefire on April 19. Regime warplanes have resumed a [campaign of aerial bombardment](#) against opposition-held districts of Aleppo City. Meanwhile, pro-regime forces and their local partners have intensified their [efforts to secure favorable terrain](#) in advance of future operations in Aleppo Province. The current confluence of strategic intent, political opportunity, and tactical maneuvers indicate that the regime and its allies will act within the coming weeks to encircle and besiege Aleppo City as [previously forecast by ISW](#). Aleppo City – Syria’s largest urban center and commercial capital – constitutes the primary nexus of opposition strength in northern Syria. If successful, pro-regime forces could deliver a decisive blow to the [powerful armed groups in Aleppo City](#) that drives the opposition towards radicalization and a merger with Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra.

### STRATEGIC INTENT

The encirclement of Aleppo City constitutes a strategic priority for each member of the pro-regime coalition arrayed on the ground. For Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the return of the largest urban center in the country to government control would bolster his claim to legitimate rule over ‘[all corners](#)’ of Syria and buttress his position at the table during any future negotiations with the international community. A successful campaign to encircle Aleppo City would also constitute a serious blow to the morale of opposition groups that have contested the city since mid-2012, opening the door to further advances against the opposition in core regime areas such as Latakia and Hama Provinces. In some ways, the urban stalemate of Aleppo City reflects the wider balance of the Syrian Civil War – and its fall would provide a bellwether of the regime’s resiliency in the face of its foreign and domestic opponents. Russia and Iran have thus dedicated their main effort towards a [multi-pronged offensive](#) in Aleppo Province since the start of their [intensified military interventions](#) in the country in late 2015.

Russia and Iran also view Aleppo City as key to the long-term preservation of their client regime. Both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei have strategic interests in preserving President Assad, including permanent basing on the Eastern Mediterranean Sea for the former and direct ground lines of communication to Lebanese Hezbollah for the latter. The Syrian Civil War provides Russia and Iran with a platform from which to assert their ‘great power’

status while challenging the U.S. and its network of global alliances. In the case of Russia, the defeat of opposition forces in Aleppo City also provides an excellent avenue to provoke Turkey and challenge the southern flank of NATO amidst strained relations following the [downing of a Russian fighter jet](#) by Turkish warplanes in November 2015. Russia has previously [targeted key cross-border supply routes](#) in northern Aleppo Province in order to undermine Turkish-backed opposition groups while strengthening Syrian Kurds viewed as terrorists by Turkey.

### RUSSIA, SYRIA, AND IRAN SEIZE A POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY

On April 10, Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi told a visiting delegation that Russia and Syria were preparing a [joint operation](#) to “liberate” Aleppo City and “blockade all illegal armed groups” that had allegedly violated an ongoing ‘[cessation of hostilities](#)’ that began on February 27. The Russian General Staff quickly issued an [unconvincing denial](#) of any intent to “storm” Aleppo City, but the statement belied the long-term preparation of the information environment for such an operation. The regime and its allies have repeatedly sought to portray their violations of the ‘cessation of hostilities’ in Aleppo Province as legitimate due to the battlefield presence of Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [dismissed accusations of pro-regime aggression](#) near Aleppo City as early as February 2016 due to the alleged local dominance of Jabhat al-Nusra and other Salafi-Jihadist groups. Russian Lt. Gen. Sergey Rudskoy [justified reports of recent military deployments](#)

near Aleppo City on April 11 as “directed at disrupting the plans of Jabhat al-Nusra” while claiming that up to 9,500 fighters from the group had massed on the outskirts of the city. Prominent regime officials also [echoed this narrative](#), asserting that Aleppo City and its environs did not fall within the bounds of the ceasefire due to the presence of “terrorist” groups.

This rhetorical groundwork obscured the role played by the regime and its allies in the breakdown of the ‘cessation of hostilities’. The regime and its allies violated the ceasefire on a daily basis, [conducting indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas with mortars, airstrikes, and ‘barrel bombs’](#) under the pretext that their activities targeted Jabhat al-Nusra and other extremist groups. Pro-regime forces engaged in numerous clashes and ground attacks against opposition-held positions across northern Syria. The regime also continued to [enforce sieges that denied food and medical care](#) to tens of thousands of civilians in opposition-held terrain. These repeated violations ultimately erupted into several weeks of [escalating clashes](#) in southern Aleppo Province after Jabhat al-Nusra and a coalition of opposition groups – including several U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA)-affiliated factions – [seized the strategic town of Al-Eis](#) on April 1. The mounting violence also strained the political process. On April 19, the opposition High Negotiations Committee announced an [indefinite suspension](#) of its “formal participation” in the Geneva III Talks, citing repeated ceasefire violations by pro-regime forces as well as [unjustified constraints on humanitarian access](#) throughout the country.

The regime and its allies immediately seized upon these events to portray opposition groups in Aleppo Province as hostile and irreconcilable actors. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova warned on April 21 of an imminent [“return of total armed conflict”](#) in Syria driven by “terrorists...desperately trying to disrupt the political process” at the behest of Turkey. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov later accused the U.S. on April 25 of failing to “fulfill its promise” to [spur physical separation](#) between mainstream opposition groups and Jabhat al-Nusra in northern Syria. This disinformation campaign has achieved such resonance that even Operation Inherent Resolve spokesperson U.S. Army Col. Steve Warren [claimed](#) that Jabhat al-Nusra constitutes the bulk of opposition fighters in Aleppo City. Nonetheless, this narrative is misleading. The armed opposition in Aleppo Province consists of a diverse and fractious mix of over fifty groups from across the ideological spectrum. Several of the most powerful factions in Aleppo City are [local](#)

[powerbrokers](#) that have retained relatively-high levels of independence from Jabhat al-Nusra and other Salafi-Jihadist groups. In comparison, Jabhat al-Nusra provides only a fraction of the opposition’s combat power in Aleppo City. The breakdown of the ceasefire nonetheless plays into the narrative that the only reliable defender of Sunni Arabs is Jabhat al-Nusra rather than the international community. Jabhat al-Nusra has leveraged this mounting pressure to [advocate for a “full merger”](#) of opposition factions in northern Syria under its own leadership. The encirclement of Aleppo City could further strengthen the case for such a merger, accelerating radicalization and bolstering the position of Jabhat al-Nusra.

## TACTICAL INDICATORS OF THE UPCOMING ALEPPO OFFENSIVE

An imminent offensive to seize Aleppo City also appears likely given a number of key indicators that have been witnessed over the past several weeks.

**Concentration of Forces:** Pro-regime forces have conducted a notable buildup in the vicinity of Aleppo City, with local media outlets reporting [large numbers of personnel, armored vehicles, and artillery systems](#) deploying to the area since at least April 11. Russia has also [redeployed its own artillery units](#) to Aleppo City from eastern Homs Province, where the systems had played a key role supporting the operation that [seized Palmyra from ISIS](#) on March 27. At the same time, Iran has allegedly conducted [twice-daily flights](#) into the Aleppo International Airport over the past two weeks in order to deliver supplies and reinforcements from the 65<sup>th</sup> Airborne Special Forces Brigade of the Iranian Army. Meanwhile, Iranian-backed proxy forces remain concentrated in southern Aleppo Province near the [expected route of advance](#) for any operation to lift the siege of the Shi’a-majority towns of Fu’ah and Kefraya in Idlib Province. Pro-regime forces have mobilized for [several attempts to recapture the town of Al-Eis](#) in southern Aleppo Province (**Point 1 on map**) after its fall to the opposition on April 1 despite high casualties.

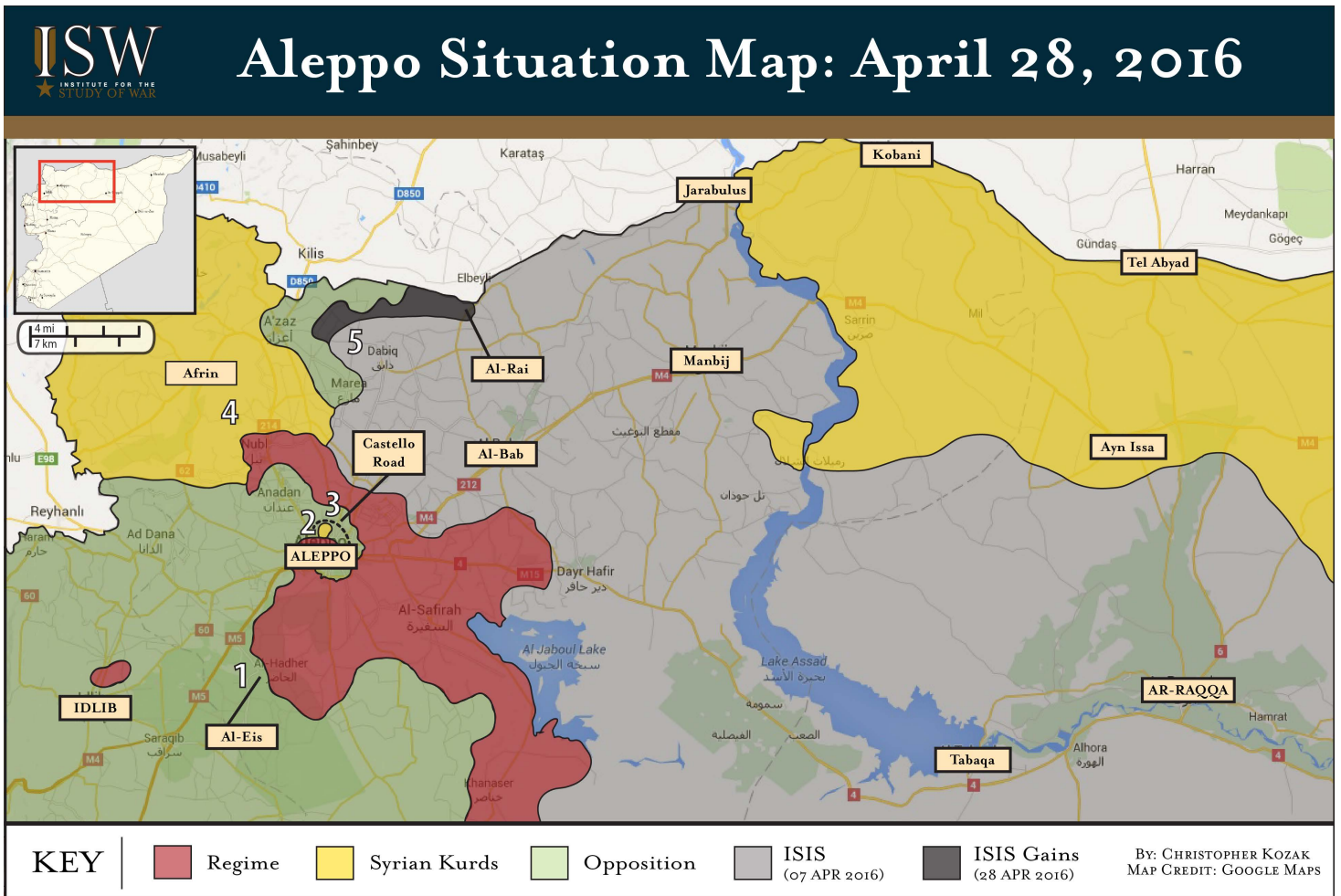
**Condition-Setting Efforts:** Russia [resumed its air campaign](#) against the opposition as early as February 28, one day after the start of the ‘cessation of hostilities’, concentrating its strikes against the opposition-held northwestern suburbs of Aleppo City. Meanwhile, pro-regime forces have leveraged a deepening partnership with the Syrian Kurdish YPG in order to pressure the Castello Road – the only remaining ground line of communication to opposition-held Aleppo City. The Syrian Kurdish

YPG clashed with opposition factions along the Castello Road near Sheikh Maqsoud District (**Point 2**) on [multiple occasions](#) through March and April 2016, threatening to isolate the opposition-held districts of Aleppo City. On April 14, pro-regime forces supported by alleged Russian airstrikes [launched a failed attack](#) against positions held by Jabhat al-Nusra and other opposition groups in Handarat Camp and Mallah Farms, located in the northern outskirts of Aleppo City (**Point 3**). These clashes likely aimed to probe opposition defenses along one potential route of advance for pro-regime forces attempting to encircle the city. More recently, regime warplanes [intensified their air campaign](#) against opposition-held districts of Aleppo City beginning on April 22, killing at least forty-five civilians in some of the worst violence since the breakdown of the ‘cessation of hostilities’.

**Russian-Iranian High-Level Meetings:** Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – Quds Force Commander Maj. Gen. Qassem Suleimani [reportedly arrived in Moscow](#) on April 15 in order to hold talks

with senior Russian military officials. Although the discussions ostensibly focused upon the potential delivery of the S-300 surface-to-air missile system to Iran, an anonymous source claimed that the two delegations also discussed ways to support a regime-led offensive to seize Aleppo City. Gen. Suleimani conducted a [similar visit](#) to Russia in July 2015 – also allegedly regarding the S-300 – in order to [make arrangements with Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) regarding a joint military intervention on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

**Russian Advisors and Materiel to Kurds in Afrin:** Russia reportedly deployed ground forces as well as shipments of weapons and ammunition to [support the Syrian Kurdish YPG](#) in the Afrin Canton of Aleppo Province (**Point 4**) in April 2016, according to anonymous Russian officials. The outreach suggests that pro-regime forces may intend to cooperate with the Syrian Kurds in order to complete the encirclement of Aleppo City from the north. The Syrian Kurds previously engaged in similar battlefield coordination with Russia in early February 2016 in order to





[sever the primary opposition supply route](#) between Aleppo City and Turkey. This military cooperation presented the Syrian Kurds with an opportunity to advance their ultimate objective of linking their isolated cantons into a single contiguous zone of control along the Syrian-Turkish border. Russia has also expanded its political support for the Syrian Kurds over the past three months, calling for their [inclusion in the Geneva III Talks](#) and hosting their [first foreign mission](#) in Moscow. This cooperation will tend to drive the opposition closer to Jabhat al-Nusra and other irreconcilable actors in northern Aleppo Province.

## THE U.S. AND COALITION FIGHT AGAINST ISIS

The imminent operation to seize Aleppo City will generate unique interactions with the U.S.-led anti-ISIS campaign. The U.S. currently remains fixated on operations to expel ISIS from its last remaining foothold along the Syrian-Turkish border in the so-called ‘Manbij Pocket’ of Aleppo Province. Manbij is a major hub for cross-border flows of foreign fighters and supplies, and thus represents a key objective for efforts to isolate Ar-Raqqa City. Nonetheless, current efforts to seal this border region have proven less than effective. The Hawar Kilis Operations Room - a coalition of opposition groups backed by the U.S. and Turkey - [seized](#) the key border town of Al-Rai on April 7 before losing the town in a [major ISIS counter-offensive](#) that erased over two weeks of gains along their frontline with ISIS - the so-called ‘Mare’a Line’ (Point 5). ISIS also began a [daily shelling campaign](#) against the town of Kilis in southern Turkey, prompting Turkey to [reinforce its border](#) and [weigh additional assistance](#) from the anti-ISIS coalition. Turkey later announced that the U.S. will [deploy a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System](#) (HIMARS) to southern Turkey in May 2016 to provide cross-border indirect fire support.

The slow progress of the campaign against the ‘Manbij Pocket’ stems in large part from the narrow field of view adopted by the U.S. that frames current operations as a series of linear tactical advances against ISIS rather than as one piece of the larger strategic context shaping the fight for Aleppo Province. The campaign against ISIS has thus relied almost exclusively upon the Syrian Kurdish YPG due to its willingness to cooperate with the U.S. and its demonstrated effectiveness on the battlefield. This [over-reliance on the Syrian Kurds](#) nonetheless presents immediate challenges for the fight against ISIS as well as long-term risks for regional stability. For one, the deepening association between the U.S. and the Kurds fuels resentment among potential Sunni Arab partners

given historic grievances between the two groups as well as recent accusations of [ethnic cleansing](#) and [direct collusion](#) against the opposition north of Aleppo City. There are signs that the U.S. recognizes these risks. On April 25, U.S. President Barack Obama announced that the U.S. will [deploy an additional 250 Special Operations Forces](#) to aid the recruitment of Sunni Arab fighters into the Syrian Democratic Forces - a U.S.-backed coalition dominated by the Syrian Kurdish YPG. These efforts will nonetheless likely prove insufficient to attract wider support from opposition factions that remain focused on the imminent defense of Aleppo City rather than the pursuit of additional advances against ISIS.

The current approach to the anti-ISIS fight in Aleppo Province also fails to consider the strategic interests of Turkish President Recep Erdogan. President Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) desire to [reassert the influence of Turkey](#) as an independent regional power through the installation of Sunni Islamist governments across the Middle East. The upcoming battle for Aleppo City - and the potential for a major loss for the opposition at the hands of the regime and its allies - thus represents a more pressing concern than the fight against ISIS. Turkey also views the gains won by the Syrian Kurds as an existential threat given the [separatist insurgency currently being waged](#) by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in southern Turkey. The U.S. has further fueled these fears by directly enabling the Syrian Kurds to connect their isolated cantons in northern Syria and set the stage for the formation of a contiguous autonomous zone along the Syrian-Turkish border. The ‘Manbij Pocket’ represents the last stretch of terrain required to complete this project. Further cooperation with the Syrian Kurds in Aleppo Province thus places the U.S. in direct opposition to Turkey - a key NATO ally and coalition partner. Turkey has repeatedly warned against any further expansion of the Syrian Kurds along its border, instead calling for the U.S. to [support a range of opposition groups](#) in northern Aleppo Province. A failure to heed this warning could provoke President Erdogan into a dangerous escalation, including high-risk military options such as the provision of man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) to the opposition or a cross-border intervention into northern Syria.

An overly tactical campaign against ISIS in Aleppo Province also risks benefitting U.S. adversaries. Pro-regime forces have positioned themselves to leverage any successful coalition action against ISIS in Aleppo Province to their own ends. The regime and its allies remain within reach to contest Al-Bab and other key urban centers in northern

Aleppo Province in the immediate aftermath of any operation against the ‘Manbij Pocket’. The regime and its allies could even exploit the disruption to contest the ISIS stronghold of Ar-Raqqah City itself - winning significant territorial gains and symbolic legitimacy as an effective anti-ISIS actor with minimal effort. At the same time, ISIS could also exploit the intensifying conflict around Aleppo City in order to gain additional territory within both the city and its countryside, fueling its narrative of expansion and raising the bar of military action required to clear its forces from northern Syria. Turkey remains particularly vulnerable to a [wave of spectacular attacks](#) by ISIS cells inside the country targeting the West, the Kurds, and the state itself.

## CONCLUSION

The imminent siege of Aleppo City presents a critical challenge to U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. For one, current policies that focus too narrowly upon the problem posed by ISIS in northern Aleppo Province will ultimately fail to defeat ISIS and other Salafi-Jihadist groups in Syria and prevent their reconstitution. The successful encirclement of Aleppo City by pro-regime forces will entrench the position of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his foreign backers – prolonging the existence of a regime whose brutality and sectarianism fuels radicalization among Sunni Arab populations. The intense pressure being applied to Aleppo City also risks driving opposition groups to deepen their coordination with Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and other Salafi-Jihadist factions as a matter of survival, eliminating any hope of further partnership with Sunni Arabs in northern Syria. ISIS stands only to gain amidst an environment of prolonged conflict and deepening radicalization in the Syrian Civil War. The question of success or failure in the ‘Manbij Pocket’ remains immaterial if the U.S. fails to set conditions that prevent Syria from reemerging as a jihadist safe-haven over the long-term.

The competing geostrategic agendas centered upon Aleppo City also risk driving further regional conflict that empowers U.S. adversaries. If uncontested, the fall of Aleppo City to pro-regime forces would preserve Syria as a regional base of operations for both Iran and Russia for the indefinite future, providing both countries with a platform from which to assert their regional dominance and challenge key U.S. allies such as Turkey and Israel. This danger is not lost on regional actors, who remain prepared to escalate their involvement in the Syrian Civil War. The U.S. already faces mounting pressures from Turkey, Saudi

Arabia, and other regional allies to [provide anti-aircraft weapons and other advanced systems](#) to the opposition as a “Plan B” following the failure of the Geneva III Talks. These overlapping tensions risk provide the spark for a wider regional conflagration that fuels disorder along key cleavages between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, and the Kurds. The U.S. must root its anti-ISIS campaign within the wider strategic context of the Syrian Civil War in order to evade these pitfalls, avoid incentivizing further conflict, and prevent Syria from becoming a long-term arena for its adversaries.

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