

JANUARY 2014

VALERIE SZYBALA

# MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 16

## ASSAD STRIKES DAMASCUS

THE BATTLE FOR SYRIA'S CAPITAL



*Cover: A man walks in front of a burning building after a Syrian Air force air strike in Ain Tarma neighbourhood of Damascus. Picture taken January 27, 2013. REUTERS/Goran Tomasevic/Files*

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Valerie Szybala is a Research Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, where she focuses on the conflict in Syria. Valerie was in Damascus studying Arabic when the uprising began in 2011, giving her a unique understanding of the ensuing developments.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Damascus is the Syrian regime's center of gravity. The capital of Syria has long been viewed by the rebel forces as the key to winning the war in Syria, and its loss is unthinkable for Bashar al-Assad. Thus the struggle for Damascus is existential for the regime as well as the opposition. An operational understanding of the battle for Damascus is critical to understanding the imminent trajectory of the war. This report details the course of the conflict as it engulfed Damascus in 2013; laying out the regime's strategy and describing the political and military factors that shaped its decisions on the battlefield.

As the seat of power for the Assad regime, Damascus has always been heavily militarized and has hosted a high proportion of the Syrian armed forces throughout the war. It became a battleground relatively late in the conflict. In July 2012, rebels advanced into areas of the capital previously thought to be impenetrable. In response, the regime escalated operations in the capital in late 2012 and consolidated forces from other parts of the country. Meanwhile, rebels in Damascus worked to improve their organizational structure, and implemented a shift towards targeted attacks on infrastructure and strategic assets. In addition to redistributing forces, the regime in late 2012 began augmenting its forces with foreign fighters, namely Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a militias, and professionalizing pro-regime militias. This influx of manpower, in addition to increased levels of support from Iran and Russia, has been critical to the regime's military strategy in 2013.

In early 2013, the Syrian regime set conditions for future operations in Damascus by seizing key terrain to open its own supply lines, cut opposition supply lines, and isolate rebel support zones. In April, the regime also escalated sieges of key neighborhoods. The regime's use of blockades to restrict the flow of food, medicine, and people into and out of neighborhoods with a rebel presence was an increasingly important component of its military operations throughout 2013.

Rebel forces in Damascus fought back with a series of offensives throughout the summer. A counteroffensive named "al-Furqan" led by a coalition of rebel brigades worked to re-establish supply lines in eastern Ghouta. Another rebel coalition named "Jabhat Fatah al-Asima," made advances near the inner suburb of Jobar, bringing them close to the edge of the central al-Abbasiyyeen Square. These rebel advances, along with the use of increasingly sophisticated weaponry, presented an ever-growing threat the regime.

International developments in the summer of 2013 also heightened the regime's threat perception. In June 2013, the White House acknowledged Assad's use of chemical weapons, and announced an increase in the scope and scale of assistance to the armed opposition. Shortly thereafter, a meeting by the Friends of Syria group in Doha hinted at even greater increases in rebel support. Then in July 2013, Jordan announced it was hosting 900 U.S. military personnel. These events added to the growing fear of the regime as rumors of an imminent large-scale rebel offensive in Damascus grew.

The regime escalated. In the evening of August 20, 2013, the Syrian regime began Operation Capital Shield, its largest-ever Damascus offensive, aimed at preempting a rebel attack on the capital and decisively ending the deadlock in key contested terrain around the city. The regime launched a spectacular chemical attack on contested rebel support zones previously weakened through siege. The chemical volley was followed by ground and artillery advances on multiple fronts across the Damascus area, capitalizing on the pandemonium and disorder caused by the initial attack.

While the Syrian regime continued its military operations, it also contended with the threat of what seemed like an imminent U.S. strike. This threat prompted a reconfiguration of military assets that the regime feared might be targeted by the U.S. Between August 31 and September 9, the U.S. decided not to strike, instead opting for the

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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diplomatic solution offered by Russia for the Syrian government to give up its chemical weapons.

For the rebel fighters affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who had pinned their hopes on western support and U.S. intervention, the delay and eventual cancellation of a military strike was devastating. In the following months, rebel groups in Syria increasingly distanced themselves from the Western-backed National Coalition and the FSA's Supreme Military Council. Saudi Arabia too, expressed frustration with Western inaction, and, along with other Gulf states, is playing a significant role in the formation and realignment of rebels in Syria.

As the threat of Western intervention diminished, the Syrian regime gained renewed confidence and continued with offensive military actions and crippling neighborhood sieges into the winter months. September and October saw the continuation of Operation Capital Shield in addition to a series of complementary operations across multiple Damascus fronts.

Despite appearing to have the momentum in Damascus in early 2014, the regime is running out of options for a decisive victory. With its freedom to use chemical weapons currently curtailed, the regime has expanded the use of other methods to target civilians indiscriminately, including the use of improvised barrel bombs. Additionally, the regime's reliance on foreign and irregular forces leaves its military capacity vulnerable to events beyond its control.

Rebel forces have continued to reorganize in late 2013 and early 2014 with renewed Gulf support, and the newest wave of rebel coalitions has thus far proved more successful than previous incarnations. Renewed rebel campaigns in Damascus suggest that they will survive the winter months, and once the spring comes and the regime's sieges lose their harsh edge, may once again challenge Assad's grip on the fortress of Damascus.

Without a foreseeable end to the armed uprising, Bashar al-Assad will leverage the politics surrounding the Geneva II conference to legitimize and extend his rule. The regime intends to use Geneva II to buy time while it increases military operations in Syria and shapes conditions for summer presidential elections, which are the focus of Assad's longer-term strategy for retaining power.

Elections in Syria have never been free and fair. In the 2000 and 2007 presidential referendums, Bashar al-Assad was the only candidate and received more than 97% of the vote. Assad is already taking aggressive steps to ensure his victory in 2014 by changing laws and procedures to disenfranchise potential anti-Assad voters, pre-emptively subverting potential international attempts to enforce free elections in Syria. As the regime and its allies continue to push their intensive messaging strategy, the international community is increasingly at risk of agreeing to elections rather than a transitional government as the path to peace in Syria.



SYRIA OVERVIEW

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# MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 16

## ASSAD STRIKES DAMASCUS

### THE BATTLE FOR SYRIA'S CAPITAL

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By Valerie Szybala

The Syrian conflict has increasingly engulfed Damascus—the Syrian capital and the heavily fortified seat of power for the Assad regime. Since July 2012, the level of violence in Damascus has risen to become among the highest anywhere in the country, exacerbated by both the proliferation of sectarian foreign fighters on both sides and arms shipments from foreign governments waging proxy wars. Opposition forces have, at times, challenged the regime's grip in several city districts. The regime has gradually escalated its tactics and changed its concept of operations as it has struggled to stem an increasingly complex and sophisticated insurgency.

The situation in Syria's capital has changed significantly since January 2013, when both sides seem to have realized that Damascus was actually in play. The regime was reinforcing, the rebels were still clarifying their strategy and had not yet begun to unify their scattered fighters, and while population displacement was substantial, aid still managed to reach areas in need.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, however, Damascus emerged as the main effort in the war, both for the regime and for the opposition.

The regime's campaign for Damascus in 2013 focused on securing its own lines of communication, disrupting opposition supply lines, and besieging opposition support zones. Faced with increasing challenges from the armed opposition and fearing a rebel attack on the capital, the Syrian regime launched a major offensive, "Operation Capital Shield," that began with the August 21, 2013 chemical weapons attacks. The scale of this incident—which U.S. and French intelligence assessments have both estimated to have killed nearly 1,500 people and injured thousands more—is itself an indication of the priority that the regime puts on defending Damascus.<sup>2</sup>

Since August the regime has intensified its campaign of isolating Damascus neighborhoods, cutting their supply lines, bombarding them with missiles, and starving the populations to surrender. With the full force of winter gripping the capital, this strategy has met with a new level of success, as a handful of embattled Damascus suburbs have capitulated to truce conditions imposed by the regime at the turn of the new year.

But the armed opposition in Damascus also grew stronger in 2013. Throughout the year, the decentralized rebel brigades demonstrated their increasing capacity to form

viable fighting coalitions, and more advanced weaponry has allowed them to bring down fighter jets and disable regime tanks.

Damascus is the regime's center of gravity. Damascus has long been viewed by the rebel forces as the key to winning the war in Syria, and its loss is unthinkable for the regime. Thus the struggle for Damascus is existential for the regime as well as the opposition, and is critical to understanding the conflict in the rest of the country. This report will detail the course of the conflict as it engulfed Damascus in 2013; laying out the regime's strategy and describing the political and military factors that shaped its decisions on the battlefield.

### THE FORTRESS OF DAMASCUS

#### Orientation

Syria's capital city of Damascus sits in the southwestern quarter of the country. It is the second largest city in the country after Aleppo, and is one of the oldest cities in the world. In Syria it is commonly referred to as *ash-Sham*—the same name that is used for the country as a whole, reflecting its centrality. Most of the country's main arteries converge in Damascus. The M5 highway runs the length of Syria's western corridor—where most of the population lives—all the way from the southern Jordanian border to the northern city of Aleppo. This route connects Damascus to the provincial capitals of Homs, 162 km (approx. 100 miles) to the north, and Deraa, 101 km (approx. 63 miles) to the south. From the provincial capital of Deraa it is only an extra 6 km (just under 4 miles) to the Jordanian border.

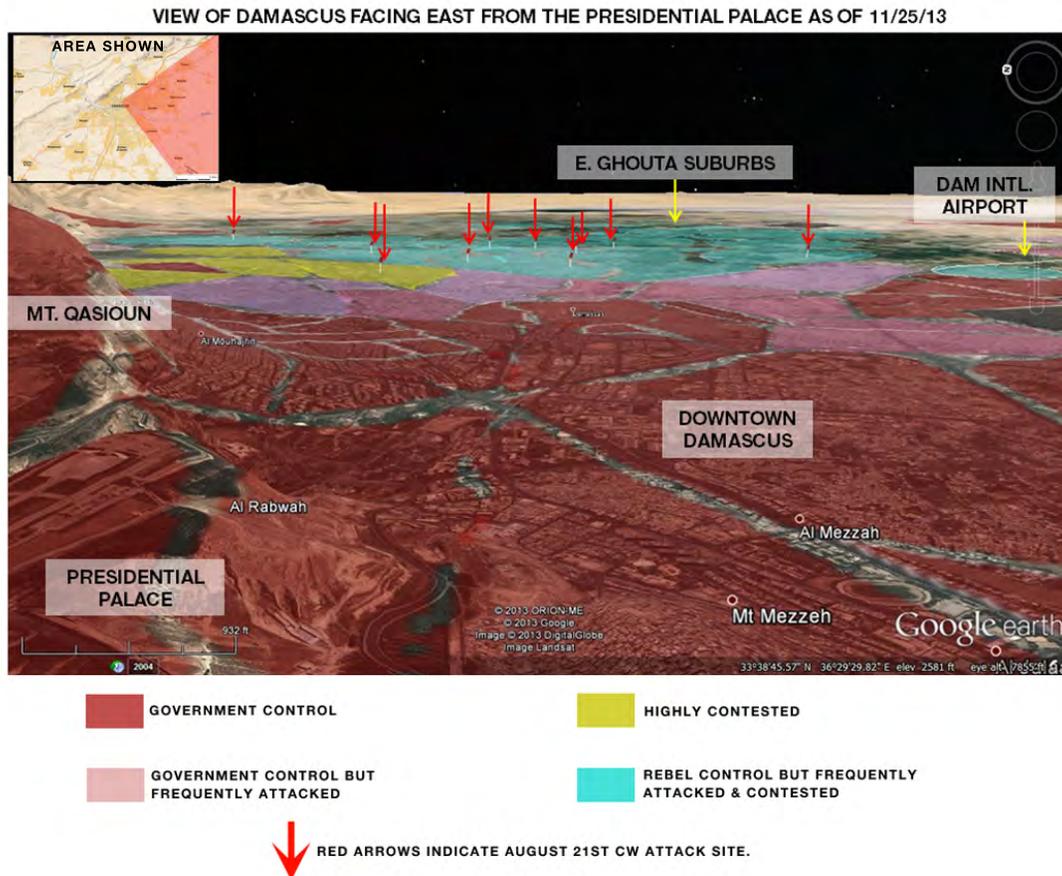
Another main highway connects Damascus to Beirut. It runs west out of the city, up through the mountains to Lebanon, and through the Beqaa Valley on its way to the coast. Damascus is quite close to the border with Lebanon, and the entire driving distance to Beirut is only around 118 km (approx. 73 miles). The M5 north of Damascus is also a mountainous route, passing through the Qalamoun Mountains on its way to Homs and Syria's central corridor. This route, and the city of Homs, connect Damascus to the Syrian coast.

While mountainous areas border Damascus to the north and west, flatter, desert terrain extends from the city to its south and east. Secondary highways connect Damascus to Quneitra and the Golan to the southwest, Suwayda to the southeast, and the desert city of Tadmur (Palmyra) to the northeast. The center of Syria, to the east of Damascus, is arid and sparsely populated. The role of Damascus in tying these parts of the country together, and in serving as a visible locus of regime strength, makes the city a clear center of gravity.

### The Regime in Damascus

As the seat of power for the Assad regime, Damascus has always been heavily militarized and has hosted a high proportion of the Syrian armed forces throughout the war.<sup>3</sup> The regime maintains primacy in most of the central, densely-populated, urban areas of Damascus. In the city center, the regime has deployed an extensive system of checkpoints, which limits the freedom of movement for opposition fighters and activists.<sup>4</sup> But even the most central of regime strongholds in Damascus cannot be considered completely safe, as rebel forces have increasingly used IEDs as a way to strike deep in the regime's strongholds, and mortar shells launched by rebels from nearby suburbs frequently hit regime-controlled areas.

The topography of Damascus plays an important role in the regime's force distribution. In addition to the upscale areas of the city center, the regime controls elevated territory on the mountain range that forms the northwest border of the city, where many of its formidable military installations are located.<sup>5</sup> It also has sprawling military installations that cover the series of smaller rolling mountains which lie



between key highways to the city's south.

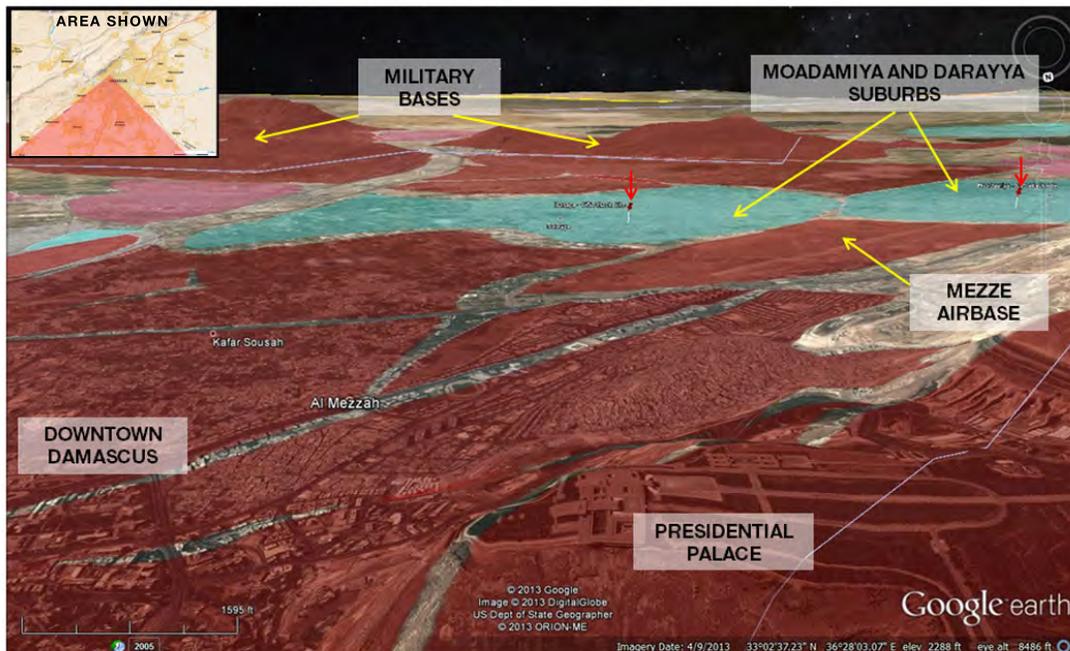
A 3D rendering from Google Earth allows us to gain a more intimate understanding of the Damascus battlefield from the regime's perspective. In the image on the previous page, we see a map of Damascus, looking eastward from the presidential palace which sits on its own elevated mesa, Mount Mezze, just south of Mt. Qasioun. The distance between the presidential palace in the bottom left corner of the map, and the highly contested suburbs of Jobar, Qaboun, and Barzeh which appear in yellow, is about 5 miles. The small outlying towns and sparsely populated farmlands of eastern Ghouta stretch into the distance, with significant rebel presence indicated in light blue. Even at the height of rebel offensives in the area, opposition fighters have failed to gain footholds in the most strategic, populated, and heavily-armed areas of the city.

The regime is also vulnerable from the southern suburbs and Western Ghouta. In the next 3D view, from the presidential palace facing south, we can see how close the contested Darayya and Moadamiya ash-Sham (Moadamiya) suburbs are to regime strongholds. The distance from the presidential palace to the Mezze Military Airbase on the

right hand side of the image is around 3 miles, and the distance to the formidable military bases on the southern mountains is around 6 miles. These bases and the outposts in the mountains to the northeast of the city house the strongest military and security installations in the country, as well as known chemical weapons storage facilities and many of the country's Scud missile launchers.

The M5 highway to the north and the Beirut highway to the west are both key supply routes for the regime. Cities and suburbs that border the M5 highway in particular are inherently key terrain, and when they host active rebel forces they create functional vulnerabilities for the regime. The airports in and around Damascus have all remained under regime control and remain critical to the regime's concept of operations, allowing for aerial resupply and troop reinforcement, and allowing advisors from Syria's international partners to move freely in and out of the city. The primary airports supporting Damascus are Mezze Military Airbase, close to the city center, and Damascus International Airport, which lies to the southeast of the city at the outer edge of the Ghouta agricultural belt. Dumayr and Marj al-Ruhayyal military air bases both lie

VIEW OF DAMASCUS FACING SOUTH FROM THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE AS OF 11/25/13



- GOVERNMENT CONTROL
- GOVERNMENT CONTROL BUT FREQUENTLY ATTACKED
- HIGHLY CONTESTED
- REBEL CONTROL BUT FREQUENTLY ATTACKED & CONTESTED

RED ARROWS INDICATE AUGUST 21ST CW ATTACK SITE.

outside of the Damascus area but still primarily provide support to Damascus.

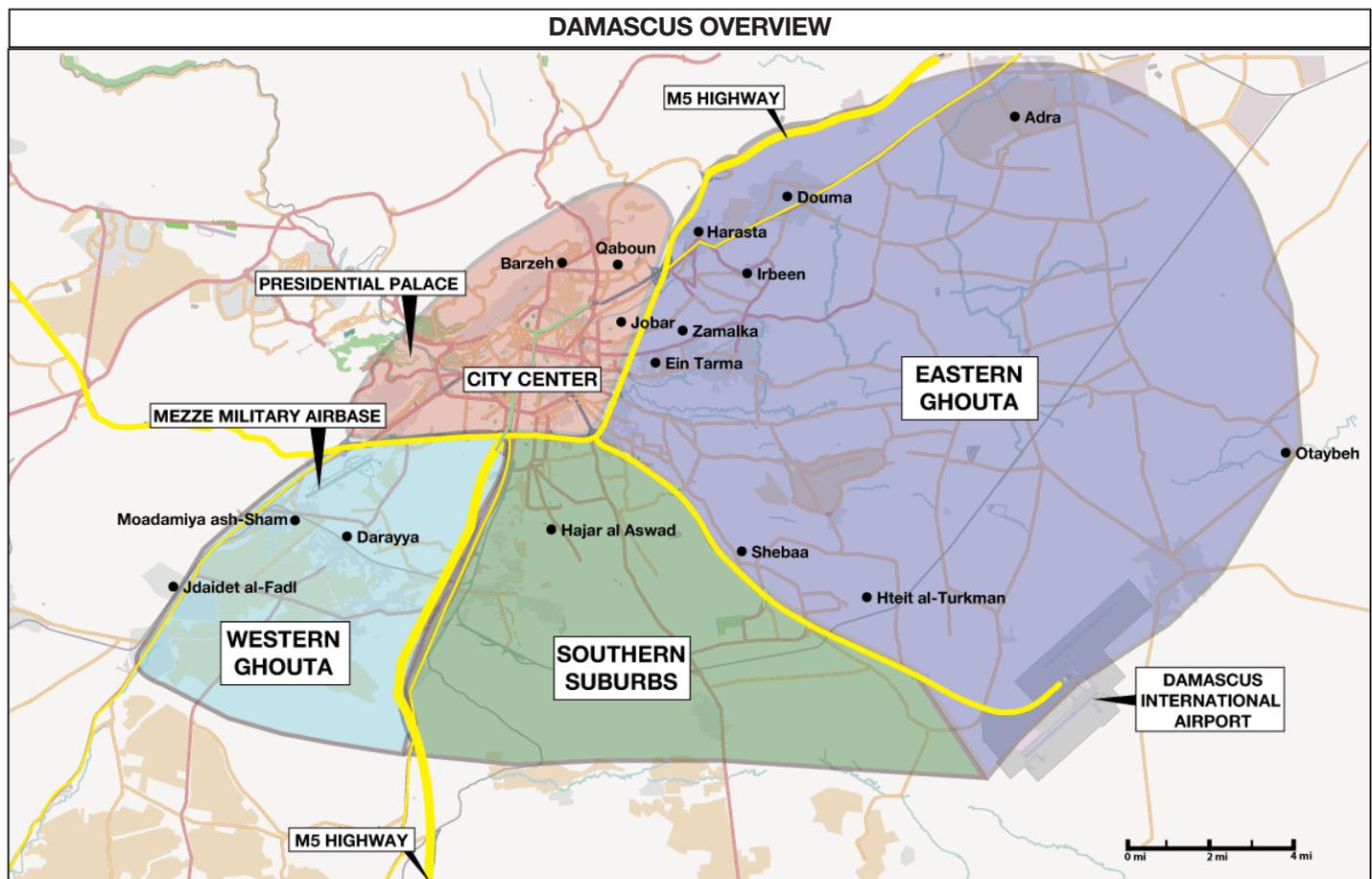
Regime efforts to control Damascus have focused largely on the towns and suburbs around the periphery of eastern and Western Ghouta, particularly where they border key highways and the regime's densely populated urban strongholds. The terrain features of Damascus combined with the layout of the city and highways point to a military command structure that most likely divides the area between four and six sectoral command headquarters subordinated under the overall command for Damascus operations. These sectors include the southern suburbs, Western Ghouta, the city center, and Eastern Ghouta. We can confidently assess that there is at least one headquarters commanding and controlling operations in each of these sectors, but there is likely more than one sector addressing the wide area of Eastern Ghouta. Viewing regime operations through the lens of this organizational schema is a useful way to understand the battle for Damascus, which is being waged as a multi-front effort.

## The Opposition in Damascus

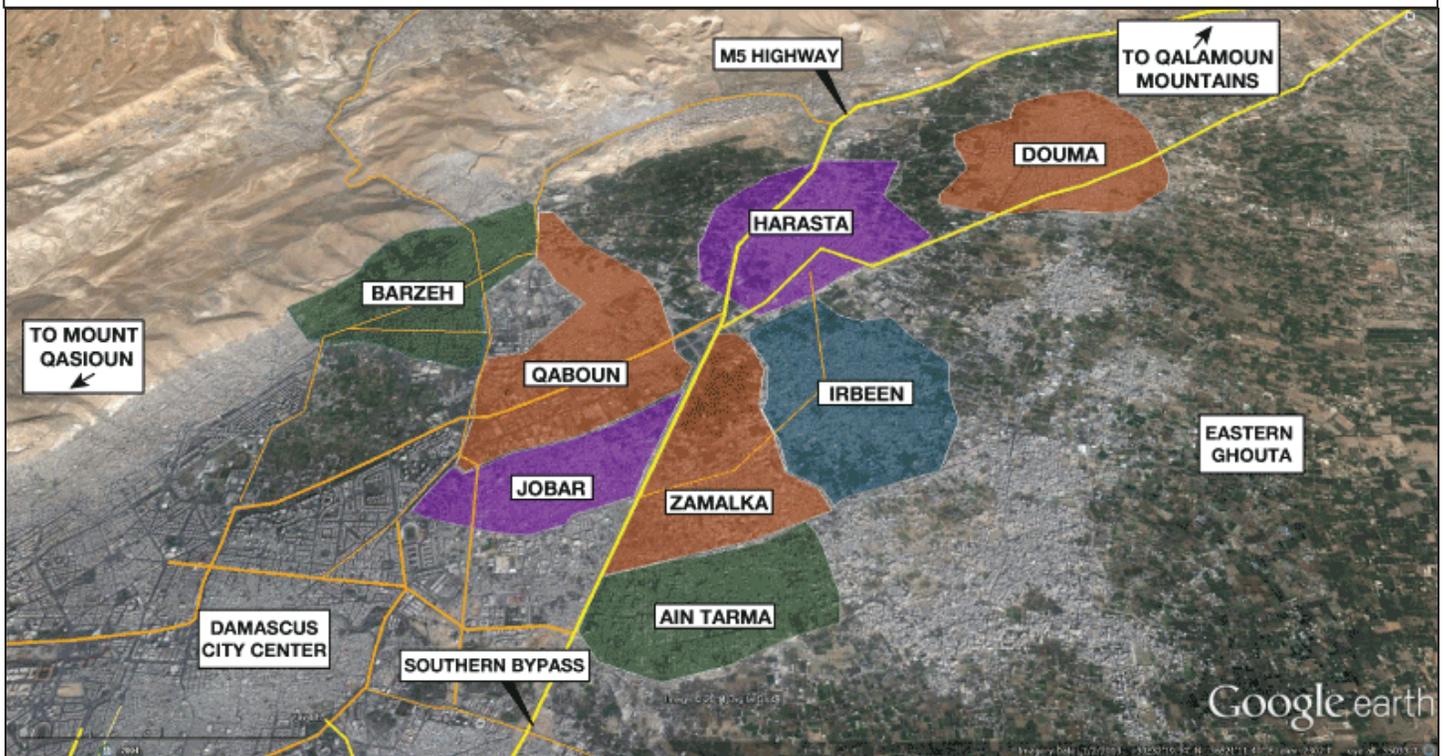
### Ghouta

Although the regime controls much of the key terrain in Damascus – namely the mountains overlooking the city to the west and south, fortified regime military installations, and the dense urban center – many of the districts surrounding Damascus are generally considered to be opposition “strongholds” or contested areas. These rebel support zones include a few of the more densely-populated inner suburbs, but are mainly peripheral farmlands punctuated with small villages. The largest swath of rebel support zones are to the east and northeast of Damascus in an agricultural region called Eastern Ghouta, with some pockets remaining to the south and southwest of the city in the southern suburbs and Western Ghouta area. Beyond the Ghouta agricultural belt lies the Syrian Desert, making Damascus an oasis.<sup>6</sup>

The Ghouta region is divided into Eastern and Western Ghouta, and consists largely of farmland and orchards punctuated with nearly 40 villages.<sup>7</sup> For the most part



## NORTHERN DAMASCUS SUBURBS



the opposition does not “control” their support zones in Damascus, but rather retains freedom of movement in them and can frequently deny freedom of movement to pro-regime forces. The Ghouta areas are too large for the Syrian military to maintain sufficient presence, which makes this countryside the primary staging and operating area for rebel forces.

The cities and suburbs of Adra, Douma, Harasta, Qaboun, Jobar, and Barzeh are all highly contested and hold strategic importance for both regime and rebel forces. They all lie on or near the key M5 highway and the parallel local Route 5, making them key terrain for regime resupply. They also contain routes that rebels use to move from Damascus to the mountains to the north. These cities and suburbs form the northern border for the Eastern Ghouta area. Consequently, they have become a “front line,” where regime and opposition forces frequently come into direct contact.

Within Eastern Ghouta proper, there are more densely populated suburbs clustered to the west, in addition to the sprawling rural farmlands which gradually fade into the outer desert region. The more urban suburbs, notably Zamalka, Irbeen, and Ain Tarma, all border the southern bypass road that rings central Damascus, creating

a potential vulnerability for the regime. Indeed, for several months in the summer of 2013 rebel forces claimed to have contested a portion of this important road, making it unpassable for regime forces.<sup>8</sup> Critically, these suburbs are the support zone for offensive rebel efforts into Jobar, Qaboun, and Barzeh, serving as a gateway through which supplies and fighters from the rural areas of Eastern Ghouta penetrate the capital. Rebel fighters’ extensive use of tunnels here (and elsewhere in the capital and Syria), has stymied regime efforts to isolate Jobar and decisively defeat ongoing rebel operations.<sup>9</sup>

Other hotly contested locations include Otaybeh, which lies on the eastern edge of Eastern Ghouta and is a critical supply route into the rebel-held suburbs. Also, the road to Damascus International Airport has been a hot zone since the rebel forces moved towards targeted infrastructure attacks in late 2012. When rebels attack the airport highway it disrupts the regime’s ability to move in supplies and reinforcements from the airport. Eastern Ghouta towns that lie near to the highway such as Shebaa and Harran al-Awamid have therefore become key contested terrain as well.

*Southern Damascus Suburbs*

The southern suburbs of Damascus represent a sub-system for opposition fighting forces in the Damascus area. This area is bounded on all four sides by barriers: the Southern Bypass road and city center to the north, expansive regime military bases in the mountainous areas to the south, and major highways to the west (stretching down to Deraa province and the Jordanian border) and east (the highway to Damascus International Airport). Despite being sandwiched between imposing military facilities on the south and the regime-controlled city center to the north, most of the towns and cities south of Damascus have had a significant rebel presence for much of the conflict. They form a belt connecting the besieged cities of Darayya and Moadamiya in Western Ghouta to the rebel support zones of Eastern Ghouta. There is no clear route for opposition forces in southern suburbs to get supplies directly from outside of Damascus, making them dependent on supplies from other rebel strongholds nearby, mainly Eastern Ghouta. This means that the southern suburbs are doubly vulnerable to the regime's siege tactics, as we shall see: they can be surrounded directly, but are also impacted by sieges that cut off supply routes to Eastern Ghouta.<sup>10</sup>

Another aspect of the southern suburbs that makes them unique is the heavy presence of foreign pro-regime fighters. Just south of the heavily contested town of Beit Sahm along the airport road lies the Qabr as-Sitt military helicopter base, which is in regime hands and, according to rebel forces, serves as a headquarters for Hezbollah.<sup>11</sup> Qabr as-Sitt sits between the highway and the suburb of Sayyida Zeinab. The neighborhood of Sayyida Zeinab is home to a mosque of the same name, which is an extremely revered site for Shi'a Muslims. A call to defend the Sayyida Zeinab shrine has been effective in drawing in significant numbers of Iraqi Shi'a militias to fight for the regime.<sup>12</sup>

*Western Ghouta*

To the southwest of downtown Damascus along the M5 and highways leading to Deraa and Quneitra lie the outlying suburban cities of Moadamiya ash-Sham and Darayya, which have been among the hardest-hit districts in the Damascus region. These suburbs are considered rebel strongholds, but have been under an extreme and long-standing siege by regime forces – ongoing in successive phases since late 2012 – which has weakened the rebels and

caused a humanitarian crisis, with vulnerable citizens in some cases starving to death. Their significance stems from their proximity to the city center, and major highways which are strategic supply lines to Quneitra and Deraa provinces in the south. Both locales also both border some of the government's most heavily fortified terrain, including the important Mezze Military Airbase, so missiles launched by rebels from these areas endanger military air traffic. Also, these two suburbs lie within mortar range of the presidential palace.<sup>13</sup>

**Damascus Becomes a Battleground-2012**

Damascus became exceedingly violent rather late in the conflict, as compared to cities such as Deraa and Homs. A clear sign of the escalation in Damascus came in late June of 2012, when regime forces reportedly used heavy artillery against Syrian rebels on the outskirts of the capital for the first time, roughly four months after the regime used artillery in the siege of Homs.<sup>14</sup> Then, in July 2012, Damascus witnessed a major inflection point with a rebel assault on the capital dubbed the "Damascus Volcano" offensive.<sup>15</sup> During this offensive, a surge of relatively well-coordinated rebel units surprised many by making inroads into heavily militarized parts of the capital. The offensive began in the southern neighborhood of Hajar al-Aswad. Reports indicate that rebels were able to gain control of a number of neighborhoods and suburbs, using them to project their power into central areas like Midan, before being routed by the more heavily-armed regime forces a week later.<sup>16</sup> This period saw one of the most notable incidents of the war when an IED was detonated during a meeting of Assad's inner circle, killing several top security officials including the Defense Minister and the Deputy Defense Minister.<sup>17</sup>

The regime hit back hard,<sup>18</sup> escalating operations against rebel strongholds in the northern, eastern, and southern suburbs of the city, using tanks and air support in the capital for the first time.<sup>19</sup> The regime maintained momentum for several months, pushing back many of the rebel gains.<sup>20</sup>

*Syrian Arab Army Force Consolidation and Expansion*

The regime's counteroffensive culminated by fall 2012, however. The regime was struggling to continue offensive operations with a military that was not operating at full strength, having been severely weakened through

defections, combat losses, and selective deployments.<sup>21</sup> The regime consistently could not fight the opposition on more than one front successfully. Assad needed a way to replenish his forces.

Consequently, in the latter part of 2012, the regime began redistributing its forces towards Damascus and parts of Syria's central corridor, making calculated withdrawals in other parts of the country.<sup>22</sup> This strategic reconfiguration, which weakened the regime's position in the northern and eastern parts of the country as well as the Golan, led some observers at the end of 2012 to proclaim that the regime was losing the war and its time was limited.<sup>23</sup> It is estimated that the regime concentrated as much as 50-60% of what remained of the Syrian army in the capital by January 2013,<sup>24</sup> demonstrating the high priority placed on retaining control of Damascus. The Syrian government gave a clear picture of what Damascus meant to it when the pro-government *Al Watan* newspaper reported in December 2012 that in response to rising violence in the capital the Syrian army "has completely opened the gates of hell before all who would even consider approaching Damascus or planning to attack it."<sup>25</sup>

In 2012 the regime also began to counter this deterioration in its manpower by augmenting regime forces with foreign pro-regime elements, namely Hezbollah from Lebanon and Shi'a militias from Iraq. This process picked up significantly in 2013. Iran has also sent in officers from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's (IRGC) elite Quds Force, which play a role in tasks as varied as coordinating attacks, training militias, and assisting in rebel surveillance.<sup>26</sup> Despite Iran's insistence that it plays only an advisory role in Syria, there is strong evidence suggesting that its IRGC forces are playing an active combat role as well.<sup>27</sup> Hezbollah's role in Syria has escalated significantly, particularly since it took a leading role in the capture of al-Qusayr in June of 2013, and it now plays a major role in the success of regime operations. Estimates of Hezbollah forces fighting in Syria range from 2,000 to more than 10,000, although given the wide range of their deployments the higher end of this estimate is most likely.<sup>28</sup>

The regime has also increasingly augmented regular Syrian military forces with pro-regime militias, which are recruited largely from the Alawite community. Signs that the regime was working to professionalize existing pro-regime militia forces – with support from Iran – became evident towards

the end of 2012.<sup>29</sup> In January 2013 the formation of the new National Defense Forces (NDF) was announced.<sup>30</sup> Unlike other pro-regime militias the NDF forces receive government salaries and training, and are more directly integrated into the command structure of the army.<sup>31</sup> NDF units are localized, generally supporting operations and holding territory within their own neighborhoods.

With this influx of manpower, the regime became better able to maintain a holding presence in peripheral districts when they made new gains. Increased levels of support from Iran, including financing, strategic guidance, training, and fighting forces, and continued financial support and weapons shipments from Russia, have also played critical roles.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Increased Opposition Organization-Late 2012*

Towards the end of 2012, opposition forces tried to unify under a larger command and control structure. This process, which was driven both by pressures from foreign backers competing for influence and internal rivalries among Free Syrian Army (FSA) leaders, played out in a series of meetings held outside of Syria in the latter half of 2012. The divide between external leadership and commanders on the ground in Syria doomed many unification attempts to failure. In September 2012 an FSA field commander announced the formation of a Joint Command for the Revolution's Military Council, which quickly fell apart. In November 2012 a Five Fronts Command was announced, but was seen as a Saudi power play and did not have widespread support among FSA leaders.<sup>33</sup>

As the opposition drove to improve its organizational structure, rebels also shifted their concept of operations on the ground towards more targeted attacks on infrastructure and strategic assets.<sup>34</sup> In Damascus, the attacks on strategic infrastructure manifested in the November 19, 2012 seizure of an air defense compound near Hajar al-Aswad to the south and the Marj al-Sultan airbase in eastern Ghouta on November 25<sup>th</sup>, and the targeting of the road to the Damascus International Airport.<sup>35</sup> This shift in strategy was reportedly the result of high-level guidance from FSA leadership, and the fact that this concept of operations was executed across different areas of Syria demonstrated a growing ability for the rebels to coordinate across theatres.<sup>36</sup> With this concept, rebels were able to extend their reach

into Damascus on multiple fronts, bringing them closer to the heart of the city in November 2012 than they had been at any previous time in the conflict. However, these gains were not taken lightly by the regime, which launched intense counterattacks, notably along the southeastern airport road.<sup>37</sup>

The creation of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) in December 2012 was an important step towards the unification of rebel forces. In addition to further improving the rebel's national chain of command and increasing coordination, it was believed that the SMC – which brought the FSA and other rebel coalitions together under one umbrella with the blessing of the U.S., Britain, France, Turkey, Jordan, and Gulf nations – would provide a better conduit for foreign aid to the rebel forces.<sup>38</sup> The Supreme Military Council prioritized depriving the regime of its asymmetric capabilities over the rebel forces, namely its airpower and artillery. SMC leaders described their phased concept of operations as targeting first the airports, then the artillery, and then Damascus.<sup>39</sup> Although ultimately the influence of the SMC would fade, at the time it was an important milestone for the opposition.<sup>40</sup>

The war in Syria is an asymmetric conflict in which the rebel forces have always been outgunned by the Syrian military.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, rebel units essentially operate as guerrilla forces, and in the Damascus area where the Syrian military is able to conduct extensive surveillance, known rebel bases and units are quickly targeted by the regime. In addition to tying up valuable forces, when rebels tried to occupy urban areas that they had wrested from the regime, the Syrian air force targeted them forcefully, leading to high casualty rates and resentment among civilians. By focusing on attacking key infrastructure and seizing strategic assets instead, rebels were able to give the impression of a series of victories all over the country as well as depriving the regime of asymmetric advantages. Even intermittent assaults on key roads and brief seizures of assets such as power plants could disrupt regime operations and make the regime appear weak.

## THE BATTLE FOR DAMASCUS 2013

### March-May 2013: Preparations for Success

Winter 2012 through spring 2013 saw a series of localized rebel offensives in areas around Damascus, including “Epic

in the Capital of the Umayyads,” during which a coalition of six rebel brigades including the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra pushed into the Jobar neighborhood. Following this offensive, the regime turned an eye on the longer game and began putting in place the pieces that it would need to regain control of Damascus.<sup>42</sup> It began to set conditions for future operations by seizing key terrain that would allow it to open its own supply lines, cut opposition supply lines, and begin to isolate rebel support zones.

Beginning on April 15, 2013, pro-regime forces captured the village of Jdaidet al-Fadl, which sits on the Damascus-Quneitra highway to the southwest of Moadamiya ash-Sham.<sup>43</sup> Because of its location on the highway it is important for the regime in order to maintain control of their own supply lines and prevent rebels from using the route to resupply Moadamiya and Darayya in Western Ghouta. To the north, Jdaidet al-Fadl is bounded by military installations on mountainous high ground, including the artillery unit of Company 100, which is known to shell the southern suburbs of Damascus frequently; and to the east the neighborhood is bordered by a military housing complex.<sup>44</sup> In a tactical pattern that is frequently employed by the Syrian military and pro-regime forces, Jdaidet al-Fadl was completely surrounded—with electricity and water being shut off—to prevent communication, resupply, or reinforcement, and bombarded heavily with artillery for 48 hours before ground forces moved in to clear the neighborhood block by block. The high civilian death count has led to accusations that pro-government forces committed a massacre in the town. It has also been reported that little armed opposition was present in the neighborhood at the time, as Jdaidet al-Fadl had not been a hotspot in the conflict.<sup>45</sup> The lack of opposition in the town is possibly the very reason that it was targeted. Further southwest along the highway, the village, farmlands, and Palestinian refugee camp of Khan ash-Sheikh have been contested by rebel groups, and would have been much more difficult for regime forces to clear completely. Jdaidet al-Fadl presented as an easier target and served the same purpose of cutting off the highway for rebel reinforcement.

Otaybeh, at the southeastern entrance to the Eastern Ghouta agricultural area, was captured by government forces on April 24, 2013, as they implemented their plan to cut off rebel supply lines by encircling the rural areas.<sup>46</sup>

Otaybeh is the most important gateway through which rebel groups bring supplies into Eastern Ghouta. One opposition fighter appropriately described the town as “the weapons tap.”<sup>47</sup> Opposition fighters have alleged that regime used chemical weapons in small amounts on two separate incidents in Otaybeh leading up to its capture, on March 19<sup>th</sup> and April 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>48</sup> Otaybeh is one of at least three critical sites in the Damascus area where chemical weapons were allegedly used by the regime during this period.<sup>49</sup> Samples tested by the French government tested positive for sarin.<sup>50</sup>

Another of these locations is Adra, the key northern route into Damascus, where chemical weapons were allegedly fired on opposition forces on March 24, 2013, and again on May 27, 2013. Evidence from the March incident was documented by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and *Le Monde*, and the May incident was assessed to be valid with “high-confidence” by the U.S. government.<sup>51</sup> These incidents indicate that by early 2013 the Syrian regime had integrated small chemical attacks into its tactical operations in Damascus, with the intention of forcing rebels out of key locations along supply routes.

As it was moving towards Otaybeh, the regime also made a push to secure a number of other outlying villages in Eastern Ghouta near the airport, starting in mid-March and going through April 2013.<sup>52</sup> The regime’s objective was to ensure that the rebels would be unable to smuggle supplies in through an alternative southern route.<sup>53</sup> By bringing the battle out to the rebel flank in Otaybeh, the regime supported an additional objective of drawing some fighters away from the front line in Jobar, where rebel fighters had nearly reached al-Abbasiyyeen Square and the inner city.<sup>54</sup> Pro-regime forces also intensified their efforts to secure the eastern side of Darayya, which abuts an important southern highway.<sup>55</sup>

During April and May 2013 the main diplomatic supporters of a peace conference, the United States and Russia, suggested that talks bringing both the regime and opposition to the negotiating table might take place in June.<sup>56</sup> Offensives by both regime and opposition forces in April and May might have been influenced by a desire to hold more territory and therefore have a stronger negotiating position at June talks. In support of its intensified efforts on the capital, the regime redeployed thousands more troops from the

Golan Heights to the Damascus area.<sup>57</sup>

### *Al-Qusayr*

While the regime was consolidating control of its supply routes and cutting key rebel supply routes in Damascus, it also launched an offensive to capture the city of al-Qusayr, part of the Homs province. Al-Qusayr lies between the city of Homs and the Lebanese border. The city had been contested throughout most of 2012, but until the spring of 2013 it had never been designated as a primary effort by the regime. As a result, rebel forces were able to use the city as a staging ground and support zone for their efforts in Homs, and the route from Lebanon became a key rebel supply route.<sup>58</sup> The spring offensive against al-Qusayr served several purposes for the regime: it helped to cut a key rebel supply line to Homs, and more importantly it helped secure a much larger Hezbollah commitment to the regime’s campaign in Syria.<sup>59</sup> Hezbollah had a strong interest in securing the city due to its proximity to Hezbollah’s strongholds in northern Lebanon.

The tactics and strategies employed in the regime’s al-Qusayr offensive were notable shifts for the regime, and would come to characterize many of its engagements throughout 2013.<sup>60</sup> In April, in concert with Hezbollah and NDF fighters, the regime began capturing strategic areas around al-Qusayr to prevent rebel reinforcement and resupply.<sup>61</sup> Then, heavy artillery bombardment and airstrikes were used to soften the town before a Hezbollah-led ground assault.<sup>62</sup> Hezbollah fighters are skilled in guerrilla warfare and have helped the Assad regime adapt to counter rebel fighters more effectively on the ground.<sup>63</sup> By June 5<sup>th</sup> the regime announced that it was in full control of the city.<sup>64</sup> The use of highly-skilled foreign fighting forces to lead ground assaults and the integration of multiple chains of command to include regular and irregular forces would become standard operating procedure in regime operations throughout 2013. Though Hezbollah forces were active in Syria prior to the fight for al-Qusayr, notably around the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus, after al-Qusayr their numbers in Syria increased significantly and they have since taken a more significant role in the planning and execution of regime operations. The battle for al-Qusayr was an important preparatory step for the regime’s Damascus campaigns in the summer and fall, in which Hezbollah forces would play an important role.

*The Character of Regime Sieges*

A first-hand account of the progression of the regime's siege on the southern Damascus suburb of Hajar al-Aswad gives some insight into how the tactic of besieging neighborhoods has been implemented all over the Damascus countryside. After a regime offensive in September 2012 caused many civilians to flee the suburb for neighboring areas, regime forces withdrew and positioned themselves around the edges of Hajar al-Aswad, creating a cordon, but still allowing supplies to pass through. In December 2012 the siege began when regime forces shut down the road that was Hajar al-Aswad's only entrance to Damascus. Vehicles could no longer pass through, but people on foot were still allowed to bring in small amounts of basic supplies. Those attempting to leave or exit the suburb from other points were shot at by snipers.<sup>65</sup>

Not all cities, villages, or suburbs that have been besieged by the regime followed this same timeline. For example, in Moadamiya ash-Sham to the southwest of Damascus, checkpoints were first set up to restrict access to the city in May of 2012.<sup>66</sup> In the Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee Camp neighborhood, residents report that following a MIG bombing campaign at the end of December 2012 – which led tens of thousands of people fleeing the area – the Syrian military began to impose its blockade and restrict the flow of goods and people.<sup>67</sup>

In Hajar al-Aswad, the regime escalated significantly in April 2013 and began arresting citizens bringing supplies in through the checkpoint. Villagers reported that during the month of Ramadan in July 2013 all entrances to Hajar al-Aswad were on complete lockdown with nothing, not even medical and relief supplies, allowed in. The strict military cordon was followed by several days of artillery shelling.<sup>68</sup> Firsthand accounts indicate that all of the southern suburbs where opposition forces operated – namely, Hajar al-Aswad, Babila, Yelda, Hujeira, Asali, Tadamon, Buweida, Yarmouk, and Husseiniya – were placed under a similar blockade in July of 2013.<sup>69</sup>

The intermittent or complete cutting of electricity was an additional part of these sieges, which meant that after fuel for generators ran out, critical infrastructure such as hospitals were unable to function. Reports from Yarmouk suggest that medical supplies were particularly restricted, as were medical professionals, and reports from Moadamiya

indicate that running water was shut off.<sup>70</sup> Random shelling by the regime exacerbated the humanitarian crisis by increasing the number of people who needed and were unable to access emergency medical treatment.<sup>71</sup>

These firsthand siege accounts, documented by the credible Violations Documentation Center, are important because they add texture and detail to our understanding of what the regime sieges actually look like in practice. Sieges of population centers – which have been reported not just in Damascus but all over Syria – severely weaken both rebel fighters and trapped civilians, particularly over the winter months.<sup>72</sup> One Syrian security official in Damascus was overheard calling this the regime's "Starvation Until Submission Campaign."<sup>73</sup>

From these accounts it is clear that the regime's military blockades were intended to cause maximum damage to the civilian population of the targeted areas, a method of collectively punishing populations believed to support the armed opposition. Other documented regime tactics include widespread arbitrary arrests and "enforced disappearances," torture, sexual violence, forced displacement, destruction and pillaging of property, and arbitrary aerial and artillery shelling.<sup>74</sup> An investigation by the UN Human Rights Council found that there "is a strong element of retribution in the Government's approach," as regime forces "conduct their military operations in flagrant disregard of the distinction between civilians and persons directly participating in hostilities."<sup>75</sup>

The firsthand account from Hajar al-Aswad also gives us clues about important points in time when the regime changed or escalated its Damascus operations. The late fall/winter of 2012, when the regime first began surrounding Hajar al-Aswad, coincides with a rebel offensive in Damascus and saw an increase of violence in the capital. April and July 2013 are described in this account as times of noticeable escalation. These periods of escalation align with other events in 2013. As this section describes, April saw the regime take aim at key supply lines into and out of the city, in what now appears to be the initial phases of operations by which it set conditions for its major August offensive in Damascus. July 2013, when the final escalation in the siege of Hajar al-Aswad was reported, the regime was about a month out from Operation Capital Shield, and was putting its final preparations in place all across the area. The regime's isolate and destroy tactic, which proved

critical in the regime's recapture of al-Qusayr, seems to have risen in correlation with the rise of Hezbollah as a strong auxiliary force.<sup>76</sup>

## The Summer of 2013

### *Cutting Rebel Supply Lines*

By June 2013 the regime's efforts to encircle the vast Ghouta areas where rebels operated and cut rebel supply lines were at full force. With a belt of military installations and captured villages stretching from the international airport up towards Dumayr, the largest supply route for rebels into the Damascus area was effectively out of business. Regime gains along the Damascus-Quneitra highway to the southwest ensured that rebels could not get reinforcements or supplies through this alternative route into Western Ghouta either. Adra to the northeast remained contested but largely under regime control. The rebels had never been able to take the imposing military installations along this route, and attempting to bring supplies in through Adra was very risky. Rebel brigades in the rural areas around Damascus made several pushes to break the increasingly dangerous siege of Eastern Ghouta. Meanwhile, the regime turned its focus to cementing its cordons and cutting internal rebel supply routes through Jobar and Zamalka.<sup>77</sup> Hezbollah fighters and foreign Shi'a militias played key roles in this regime effort.<sup>78</sup>

The regime managed to make some advances along the edges of Darayya and Moadamiya early in the summer of 2013, resulting in a rare visit by Bashar al-Assad to Darayya in August. Yet despite almost constant offensives launched at Moadamiya and Darayya for much of 2013 and the crippling siege, rebel fighters in both of these cities remarkably managed to cling to their positions for much of the year.

### *Opposition Counterattack: Al-Furqan*

The regime's capture of Otaybeh at the end of April dealt a major blow to the rebels in Damascus. With supplies dwindling, on May 12, 2013, 23 rebel brigades in the Damascus countryside announced that they would fight together in a military campaign named "Al-Furqan," with the aim of recapturing villages in Eastern Ghouta and ultimately reopening the critical route through Otaybeh.<sup>79</sup> In a pattern that would continue in future rebel offensives, the groups involved included FSA-linked battalions,

Islamic brigades such as Ahrar al-Sham, and the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. The leader of the battle was the commander of the FSA's Liwa Shuhada Douma.<sup>80</sup> After some quick success with the liberation of the town of Bahariya en route to Otaybeh, additional brigades joined this effort.<sup>81</sup> Although it cannot be independently verified, the units involved in Al-Furqan reported the heavy involvement of Hezbollah on the regime's side in their statements and videos from the battles.<sup>82</sup>

The united rebels were not able to liberate Otaybeh fully. This indicates that the regime had placed great emphasis on maintaining the integrity of the siege and sent significant reinforcements to the area. Yet the combined might of almost all of the brigades of Eastern Ghouta was considerable, and while struggling to contest the regime and Hezbollah forces in Otaybeh, they made significant gains in many other villages in rural Eastern Ghouta, leading this temporary coalition to continue to cooperate in battles for several months.<sup>83</sup> Despite failing to capture Otaybeh the brigades were partially successful in opening lesser routes that allowed some supplies into the capital.<sup>84</sup>

These battles saw rebel brigades in the Damascus areas take modest steps towards improving their ability to coordinate, which has been a major weakness. The large number of units involved was unusual at that time, and showed a growing realization that many targets – in this case the reinforced town of Otaybeh – could not be contested by any single brigade. The fact that brigades from across the ideological spectrum came together is not at all uncommon, and demonstrates the pragmatism of groups on the ground whose shared goal is defeating the Assad regime.

By August 1<sup>st</sup> Al-Furqan had reached its peak, when the brigades announced the capture of the 5<sup>th</sup> bridge on the highway to Damascus International Airport, an important regime supply route.<sup>85</sup> Yet with pro-regime forces increasing in strength and the rebels' inability to break the siege and gain a secure supply route into Eastern Ghouta, the fragile coalition started to fracture.

The tension was evident in the Battle for the Mills area. This three-day battle began on July 28<sup>th</sup> when rebel brigades stormed the mills just north of the international airport with the goal of seizing flour to supplement their dwindling food supply.<sup>86</sup> While rebel forces did manage to take some flour and inflict losses on the regime, they lost around 80 fighters, over 100 civilians were killed, and the

battle ended with rebel brigades hurling public accusations of treason at one another. A “post-mortem” analysis posted online by a rebel fighter indicated that in the heat of battle the units involved failed to act as a unified force. Once the brigades reached the flour, hungry civilians rushed in and the regime began an air and ground assault on the mills. Some brigades withdrew with their booty, while others were so enraged by the civilian deaths that they stayed to fight the attacking forces.<sup>87</sup>

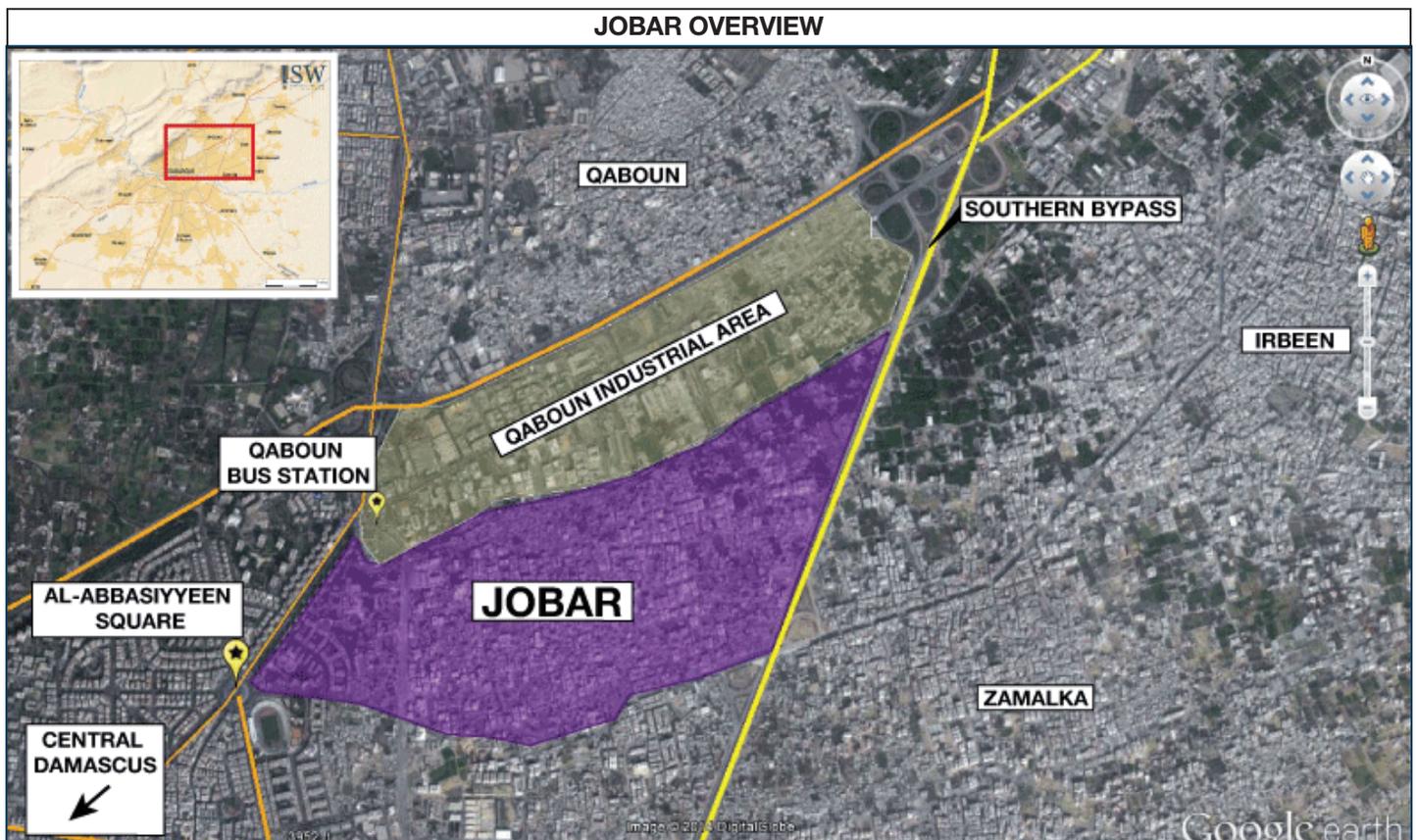
#### *Rebel Urban Advances*

While the rebels battled Hezbollah and regime forces in the rural areas, arguably the most intense battles of the summer were taking place in the inner suburbs of Damascus, where concurrent regime and rebel pushes centered on Jobar and the surrounding areas of Barzeh, Qaboun, Harasta, Zamalka and Ain Tarma. For rebels these areas were an offensive front line, as Jobar was the innermost neighborhood that the rebels had managed to penetrate en masse. Jobar is seen as the rebels’ gateway into inner Damascus, allowing them to bring in supplies and fighters from their Eastern Ghouta support zones. Due in large part to a coalition of 23 rebel brigades that came together

to form Jabhat Fatah al-Asima [the Front to Conquer the Capital] and push forward the Jobar frontline, rebel forces gained positions very near to al-Abbasiyeen Square.<sup>88</sup> Their presence there was one of the greatest threats to the regime’s grip on the capital.

In the area of Jobar, pro-regime forces had spent the end of July and early parts of August defending their positions and forward operating bases (FOBs) around al-Abbasiyeen Square, the nearby Qaboun bus station, and the industrial strip that borders the highway and separates the neighborhoods of Qaboun and Jobar. Pro-regime reporting confirms that the front line of battle had approached the edges of al-Abbasiyeen around this time.<sup>89</sup> This area is close to the heart of central Damascus and had only been contested on a handful of previous occasions.

One of the factors supporting rebel gains was a network of tunnels connecting Jobar with the several surrounding suburbs, which rebels used to transport fighters and equipment. Jobar’s location at the axis of several important highways, touching both Eastern Ghouta and the inner city of Damascus, makes it key terrain for both sides. While the rebels main supply routes were through Eastern



Ghouta, they still managed to get some supplies (medical and food) from inside of the city of Damascus itself, so the regime's efforts around Jobar were also part of its larger goal of bleeding the rebels dry by cutting all of their supply routes.<sup>90</sup> Reports suggested that on July 26<sup>th</sup> the rebel brigades had managed to take control of portion of the highway separating Qaboun and Jobar.<sup>91</sup> Coming at a time when rebels also disrupted pro-regime traffic on the southern bypass, this would have been a major blow to the regime's position in the area.

### *U.S./International Escalation*

During the summer of 2013, while the fighting raged in Damascus, international developments were taking place that heightened the regime's threat perception and would have serious impacts on its battlefield calculations.

On June 13 the White House released a statement that served as a follow-up to an April 2013 assessment by the U.S. intelligence community that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria.<sup>92</sup> The June statement reconfirmed this fact, giving details about the type of intelligence used to make the assessment and stating that "Our intelligence community now has a high confidence assessment that chemical weapons have been used on a small scale by the Assad regime in Syria." It stated that this usage would change the U.S. calculus on Syria, and that the actions of the Assad regime "have led us to increase the scope and scale of assistance that we provide to the opposition, including direct support to the SMC. These efforts will increase going forward."<sup>93</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the Friends of Syria meeting was held in Doha, attended by delegates from the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and Qatar. At the conference participants discussed methods of arming the Syrian opposition, and the countries released a joint statement agreeing "to provide urgently all the necessary materiel and equipment to the opposition," in order "to change the balance of power on the ground."<sup>94</sup> That same month, in a concrete manifestation of international attention, Jordan announced that it was hosting 900 U.S. military personnel to bolster its defenses, some of which were manning Patriot missile batteries and fighter jets deployed by the United States.<sup>95</sup> In July, debates about U.S. military action in Syria again made headlines when General Martin Dempsey sent an unclassified letter to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services

outlining options for potential U.S. military action. While this is not the first time that the U.S. Congress debated the possibility of intervention, coming in the wake of the Friends of Syria meeting and U.S. build-up in Jordan, the July debates added to the growing fear of the regime.

On August 22, 2013, the French newspaper *Le Figaro* offered what is perhaps the most tantalizing motive for the regime's late August chemical weapons attack and offensive when it reported that the first group of 300 Syrian rebels to have been trained covertly by the CIA in Jordan had crossed the border into Syria on August 17.<sup>96</sup> While it is not possible to confirm this report with open-source information, the entrance of U.S.-trained and armed rebels into Syria is plausible.

In addition to the escalating statements by the U.S. and other countries about increasing direct support to the SMC and the acknowledged placement of U.S. troops and arms in Jordan, the CIA had reportedly set up a program to vet and train small groups of carefully-selected Syrian rebels in mid-2012.<sup>97</sup> While the White House has not officially acknowledged the initiative, its existence is generally known although the details have remained appropriately shrouded in mystery. Reports citing U.S. officials began to emerge alleging that the CIA, in concert with other Western allies, had begun moving lethal arms to trained rebels in Jordan with plans to begin sending them into Syria starting in August 2013.<sup>98</sup>

### **Countering a Heightened Rebel Threat—August 2013**

Rumors of a further rebel offensive to take Damascus decisively have circulated off and on since the latter half of 2012, when rebels began making gains in the capital city.<sup>99</sup> According to Assad himself there had been 14 "zero hours" proclaimed in 2013 alone, and the army had defeated them all.<sup>100</sup> However, a series of incidents in the weeks leading up to the start of Operation Capital Shield – including increased aircraft shoot downs, an assassination attempt, defections, rebel advances into Jobar, a cluster of smaller chemical weapons attacks, and escalated international/U.S. action – point to a regime that felt increasingly threatened in Damascus and believed itself to be at unprecedented risk. In addition to possible increases in foreign arms to the rebels, rebel forces had also seized large weapons caches in the Qalamoun area north of Damascus in the first few weeks of August, acquiring a number of advanced

anti-tank missiles. In his September 10, 2013 interview with Charlie Rose, Bashar al-Assad said rebels had been “throwing rockets on Damascus for a month,” indicating that he perceived a change in the level of threat to Damascus towards the end of the summer.<sup>101</sup>

In Deraa, the southern province that borders Jordan, rebel forces had launched an offensive called “The Battle of Badr Horan” at the end of July 2013, with the intent to liberate a town called Khirbet Ghazaleh.<sup>102</sup> Khirbet Ghazaleh lies on the strategic M5 highway between the Jordanian border and Damascus. This rebel push for a key supply line, coming at the same time as speculation about Western-trained rebel forces entering Syria through this very route, led to increased speculation that the rebel forces were preparing for an advance on the capital and further increased the perceived threat.<sup>103</sup>

Regardless of the validity of the claims of an imminent rebel offensive, reporting by the Syrian state news services and pro-Assad media stations run by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, suggests that the Syrian government believed that U.S.-trained forces would be coming online in August in support of a major rebel offensive on the capital.<sup>104</sup> This conclusion is supported by the conduct of Operation Capital Shield itself. While the regime acknowledges repeated rebel attempts to take Damascus, no previous regime offensive had come close to the scale and intensity of what it unleashed on the city in late August.

#### *Chemical Weapons Attacks in Damascus in Early August*

The Syrian regime is reported to have used chemical weapons on several occasions prior to the August 21<sup>st</sup> incident that attracted widespread international attention. In fact, there were prior incidents reported in the Damascus area earlier that month, seemingly in direct response to critical opposition gains. On August 5<sup>th</sup> reports arose of chemical weapons being used in Adra.<sup>105</sup> The attack took place shortly after rebel forces declared that they had taken control of an oil and gas facility in the industrial area.<sup>106</sup> Due to prevailing wind conditions the noxious chemicals also affected the nearby city of Douma.<sup>107</sup> Videos posted by activists in the area show animals with no clear injuries lying stricken on the street, either dead or convulsing.<sup>108</sup>

The next day reports arose of a chemical attack in the more central Jobar district of Damascus.<sup>109</sup> The attack was reported near the frontline of the battle between rebel and regime

forces, which was approaching the previously-mentioned al-Abbasiyyeen Square. Both of these strategic locations have seen previous chemical weapons attacks, including several incidents in Jobar in April witnessed firsthand by reporters from the French newspaper *Le Monde*,<sup>110</sup> and later confirmed to be sarin by the French government.<sup>111</sup> The April attack also occurred during contestation for al-Abbasiyyeen Square, suggesting rebel approaches on al-Abbasiyyeen Square are a non-negotiable red line for the regime.

#### *The Rebels Attack Assad’s Convoy*

August 8, 2013 marked the first day of Eid al-Fitr, the end of the holy month of Ramadan. That morning, President Assad was reportedly en route to prayers at the Anas Bin Malik Mosque in the upscale Malki neighborhood when his convoy was targeted by rebels. The FSA-affiliated Liwa Tahrir al-Sham brigade claimed that it launched 17 120mm mortar shells at Assad’s convoy and achieved a direct hit.<sup>112</sup> Residents confirmed that at least three mortars hit the motorcade,<sup>113</sup> and videos were posted claiming to show smoke rising from the area.<sup>114</sup> Assad seems to have survived the incident unharmed and the government later denied the attack.

Since the conflict in Syria began in 2011, Assad has kept a relatively low profile and made few public appearances. Much of the time his exact location is unknown. One exception to this is Eid al-Fitr, when images of Assad at Eid prayers each year have been broadcast on state TV. Prior to the start of the uprising Assad traditionally attended prayers at Damascus’ historical Umayyad Mosque in the Old City. Since the unrest began he has prayed at a different mosque each year and each of them has been located in the neighborhoods nearest the presidential palace, the heart of his stronghold in Damascus. In 2011 he attended prayers at the Hafez al-Assad Mosque in Salhiya, adjacent to the palace.<sup>115</sup> In 2012 he attended prayers at the Rihab al-Hamad Mosque in Muhajireen.<sup>116</sup> Residents reported that security forces blocked streets and set up decoy cordons at several different mosques in the area, and sent out a decoy convoy, indicating that the regime knew this annual appearance was a moment of vulnerability for Assad.<sup>117</sup>

It is likely that the August 8<sup>th</sup> attack on the convoy originated from the Jobar or Qaboun areas where rebels had been pushing forward the frontline. Prior to the August 8<sup>th</sup> incident, Liwa Tahrir al-Sham had been one of the rebel

brigades making progress into parts of the Qaboun and Jobar neighborhoods near al-Abbasiyeen Square.<sup>118</sup> A local revolutionary committee in the Jobar area posted video from later on the day of the convoy attack claiming that the regime's aircraft were pounding the neighborhood in response.<sup>119</sup> Reporting from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) confirms that Qaboun experienced an unusually intense air bombardment, and that intensive air raids and artillery bombardments continued into the following day.<sup>120</sup>

Despite the regime's denial of this attack, the existing evidence suggests that his convoy was at least targeted and likely hit. In the best of times, an attempted presidential assassination would be taken seriously. Historian David Lesch, who knew Assad personally, describes his transformation after several years in office into a leader who had really come to absorb the cult of personality that surrounded him and believed himself to be beloved by all of his people.<sup>121</sup> No doubt the direct convoy hit was a shocking intrusion into the bubble in which Assad has been living. The August 8<sup>th</sup> attack is the first known targeting of a high level regime official since Assad's inner circle was targeted with an IED in July 2012.

### *Defections*

Throughout the Syrian conflict, defections have been a serious concern for the Assad regime. The Syrian military has compulsory service for males, which meant that to an extent its composition reflected that of Syria, with Sunnis making up a large part of the conscripts. One way that the regime has coped with this fact is by placing Alawites in most of the leadership roles and sensitive military units, which were then relied upon to handle domestic conflicts. This strategy, first developed by Hafez al-Assad and used effectively to put down the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in 1982, has helped prevent mass defections or a military coup.<sup>122</sup> After a significant number of defections early on in the current conflict, estimated at 20-30% of the armed forces, the number of defections has decreased in 2013.<sup>123</sup> Not all of this is because the remaining forces were loyal to the regime. Reports indicate that tens of thousands of Syrian soldiers have been held in a sort of "functional imprisonment" since the start of the conflict.<sup>124</sup>

In July and August of 2013, opposition sources reported several military defections in the Damascus area. On July 28<sup>th</sup>, there was a report of a number of officers and soldiers

defecting from the Army's 7<sup>th</sup> Division in the Western Ghouta area.<sup>125</sup> Then at the beginning of August, a "mutiny" was reported in the Jaramana district of Damascus, when several hundreds of Druze militiamen abandoned their posts.<sup>126</sup> On August 8<sup>th</sup> a video emerged on YouTube, purportedly showing 58 soldiers in the Damascus suburbs defecting to an FSA brigade.<sup>127</sup>

### *Increased Threat to Regime Air Power*

Air power is a capability in which the Syrian regime maintains absolute supremacy, and it has been a pillar of its campaign since late summer 2012.<sup>128</sup> Reports of rebels shooting down aircraft in the Damascus area can be found almost as far back,<sup>129</sup> pointing to fact that the rebels have long had various types of anti-aircraft weaponry in their arsenals.<sup>130</sup> In the summer of 2013, however, the rebels' capacity to target and shoot down regime aircraft seems to have noticeably increased. In Eastern Ghouta, FSA-linked rebels had claimed three MIG shoot downs between August 1 - 17 alone, in addition to numerous reports of reconnaissance drones and helicopters being brought down in July and August.<sup>131</sup> On top of the increased number of shoot downs, the regime was facing a new type of threat.

In late 2012, Liwa al-Islam – arguably the most powerful rebel brigade in the Damascus area, and until recently linked to the FSA – captured one or more 9K33 Osa/SA-8 Gecko units from the regime after taking over an air defense site near the town of Autaya in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>132</sup> This mobile, radar-guided surface-to-air missile system is a tremendous step up from other types of rebel air defenses.<sup>133</sup>

In the early morning hours of July 30<sup>th</sup>, Liwa al-Islam reportedly used the Osa for the first time to shoot down a regime helicopter in the Damascus area, near the international airport. The video they released shows what the shoot-down looked like from inside the Osa behind the controls.<sup>134</sup> The radar-guidance of the Osa allowed them to track and engage the regime's aircraft in the dark of night, and with much higher accuracy. Liwa al-Islam reported that it had spent the months after capturing the Osa trying to break the encryption of its computer systems,<sup>135</sup> a task which they most likely could not have achieved without former Osa operators or foreign assistance. In a show of bravado, Liwa al-Islam declared Eastern Ghouta a no fly zone, threatening to shoot down all regime aircraft.<sup>136</sup> While there is no evidence to suggest that they had multiple

Osa units in operation or sufficient missiles to back up this threat, the fact remained that the Damascus airspace was much more dangerous for the regime with Osa systems in even limited use. Rebel sources indicated that regime aerial raids on Eastern Ghouta declined following this attack.<sup>137</sup>

The second reported Osa shutdown came several weeks later, and its timing is notable. Two separate websites that report rebel and military actions in Damascus noted that Liwa al-Islam shot down a second helicopter in Eastern Ghouta in the early hours of the morning of August 21.<sup>138</sup> Twenty to forty minutes later, both feeds published news of a chemical weapons attack.<sup>139</sup> The video released by Liwa al-Islam again shows the attack as seen from the radar screen of the Osa, and lists the names of the crew members killed.<sup>140</sup> The timing of the second Osa shoot down, if in fact it occurred shortly before the chemical warheads were launched, may help answer remaining questions about the exact timing of the chemical attack. While the scale and coordinated execution of the August 21<sup>st</sup> chemical weapons attack indicate the regime's advance planning – confirmed by a U.S. intelligence report<sup>141</sup> – it is possible that this Osa shoot down acted as a trigger.

### OPERATION CAPITAL SHIELD

By late August the regime had set the stage for its counter-offensive. On August 18, the same day that international weapons inspectors arrived in Damascus to investigate chemical weapons incidents from earlier in the year, Iran's

PressTV ran a report indicating that the pro-regime forces had almost completely encircled Eastern Ghouta and a large offensive was imminent.<sup>142</sup> In the video the reporter speaks to “army personnel” in the field, but the mismatched uniforms, scruffy beards, and non-military accessories of the fighters indicate that these are actually members of the NDF. These forces, along with Hezbollah and Shi'a militias, played a key role in augmenting the Syrian military manpower to enable intensive fall operations in the capital.

### Phase I: Chemical Weapons

On August 20<sup>th</sup> the Syrian military began Operation Capital Shield, their largest-ever Damascus offensive, aimed at decisively ending the deadlock in key contested terrain around the city.<sup>143</sup> As previously discussed, the regime was on high alert due to recent rebel gains, the introduction of more sophisticated weaponry, and worries of an imminent Western-backed rebel assault on the capital.<sup>144</sup> The plan was to launch a spectacular chemical attack on contested rebel support zones that the regime had previously weakened by cutting off supply routes, but had repeatedly failed to secure. The initial attack would be followed by more traditional ground and artillery advances on multiple fronts across the Damascus area in order to capitalize on the pandemonium and disorder caused by the chemical weapons attack and make unprecedented gains.



9K33 OSA/SA-8 GECKO | IMAGE FROM LIWA AL-ISLAM YOUTUBE CHANNEL

While the exact timing of the chemical attacks may or may not have been a snap decision, it is clear that the chemical weapons launched at numerous neighborhoods in the Damascus suburbs in the early morning of August 21<sup>st</sup> served as the opening volley of a well-planned and well-executed regime counter-offensive in Damascus. The twelve suburbs targeted in the initial attack were all contested rebel support zones. The massive scope of the offensive, designed to hit rebel forces across all major axes in the Damascus area, give insight into just how threatened the regime truly felt. In all of the neighborhoods where chemical-filled warheads landed, the regime had previously tried and failed to root out rebel forces. The August 21<sup>st</sup> chemical weapons attacks and their devastating consequences have been covered in the media and by numerous institutions and governments, and will therefore not be detailed here.<sup>145</sup>

The initial part of Operation Capital Shield was focused primarily on rebel strongholds in Eastern and Western Ghouta, with smaller components in the southern suburbs and the mountains to the city's northern side. In most of these contested suburbs, military operations had been

ongoing prior to Operation Capital Shield, in some places such as Jobar, Qaboun, and Moadamiya ash-Sham, the operations had been essentially non-stop for months. Still, Operation Capital Shield and subsequent Damascus operations that were conducted in phases throughout September, October, and November represented an inflection point for the regime. In addition to the large chemical attack, the offensive was notable for the heavy reliance on Hezbollah and other irregular pro-regime forces in ground operations and the tightening of sieges on individual neighborhoods within a larger siege of the entire Ghouta countryside. It was also more complex than other regime operations, necessitating the planning of sustained, coordinated operations across multiple parts of the wider Damascus area.

*The Regime's Tactical Use of Chemical Weapons*

While chemical weapons are an international taboo, the Syrian regime had incorporated chemical weapons into its playbook. Like Scud missiles and barrel bombs, chemical weapons are indiscriminate in their choice of victims,

Syria: Damascus Areas of Influence and Areas Reportedly Affected by 21 August Chemical Attack

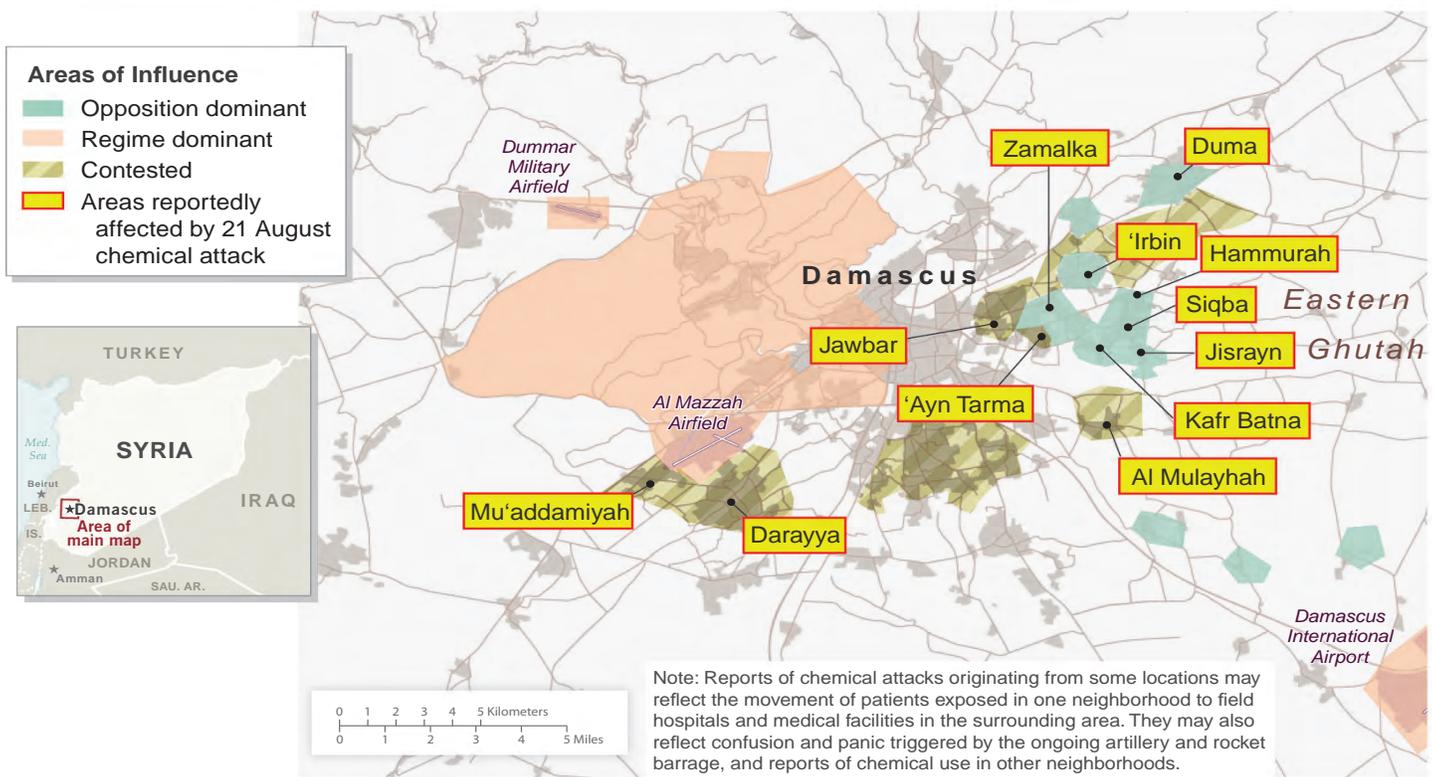


IMAGE FROM DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

particularly when launched in an urban area. One tactical feature of chemical weapons over more conventional arms is their unique psychological impact. The invisible threat of chemical warfare spreads panic and evokes terror in a way that traditional weapons do not, particularly in a city where the sound of falling missiles has become commonplace.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, even the sounds of the chemical-filled missiles being launched on August 21<sup>st</sup> were unusual, as video and eyewitness accounts from the early morning hours show.<sup>147</sup> Eyewitness testimony also demonstrates the deep impacts – both psychological and physical – that chemical weapons leave behind.<sup>148</sup>

It follows that the large chemical attack launched in the early morning on August 21<sup>st</sup> served as a “shock and awe” campaign, overwhelming the city of Damascus with its unprecedented ferocity. It also had the potential to deprive local fighters of some of their support base by convincing terrified civilians in contested suburbs that the price of supporting the opposition fighters was too high.<sup>149</sup>

Interestingly, the only other direct clashes between pro-regime and opposition fighters that day were reported in the one stretch of Damascus Ghouta suburbs that were not hit with any chemical weapons on the 21<sup>st</sup>, the southern suburbs.<sup>150</sup> The southern suburbs contain the headquarters for Assad’s foreign fighters from Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi’a militias, and possibly the IRGC; and their fighters are most active in the surrounding suburbs. A phone call intercepted by German intelligence between a high-ranking member of Hezbollah and an official at the Iranian embassy suggests that Hezbollah was not notified of the attack before it happened.<sup>151</sup>

The timing of the August 21<sup>st</sup> chemical attacks, which occurred while UN chemical weapons inspectors were actually in Damascus on a mission to investigate three earlier alleged chemical attacks, has led some to draw the conclusion that that this attack may not have been committed by the regime, since it would seem like a particularly inopportune moment. The regime and its supporters have made this point several times in Assad’s defense.<sup>152</sup> They have also denied that the attack happened at all.<sup>153</sup> But the chemical attacks on August 21<sup>st</sup> did happen, the vast preponderance of available evidence implicates the regime, and much of the “evidence” to the contrary has been demonstrated to be falsified information concocted by pro-regime sources.<sup>154</sup> Among the disinformation

were allegations – accompanied by quickly discredited videos – that the rebel brigade Liwa al-Islam was behind the chemical attacks. Ironically, Liwa al-Islam was much quicker than the regime to release a statement calling for UN access to the attack sites, and offering full protection and assistance to international inspectors in this effort.<sup>155</sup> Given the context of rebel advances over the preceding months, a different picture of what might have happened begins to emerge.

According to an analysis conducted by Human Rights Watch, the trajectories of the chemical-filled missiles launched on August 21<sup>st</sup> indicate that they originated from within the Republican Guards 104<sup>th</sup> Brigade Base, which sits atop Mt. Qasioun overlooking the city.<sup>156</sup> This analysis implicates Maher al-Assad – Bashar’s younger brother and commander of the Republican Guards – as the possible triggerman who gave the signal to launch the prepared chemical warheads.<sup>157</sup> Even if the chemical munitions were fired from forward positions near Jobar, as Syrian weapons expert Eliot Higgins has proposed, Maher al-Assad’s control of two of the regime’s praetorian units – the Republican Guard and the 4<sup>th</sup> Division – suggests that he maintains operational control over the Damascus campaign and was in charge of the troops in this area.<sup>158</sup> His elite units were reportedly in charge of Operation Capital Shield.<sup>159</sup> A Russian news crew reporting on the progress of troops they were embedded with shows that regime forces had secured much of the industrial strip of Qaboun, on the edge of Jobar during preceding operations. Just one day before the chemical attack, on August 20, 2013, they posted a video to YouTube of regime forces inspecting the neighborhood that they had cleared.<sup>160</sup>

Maher al-Assad has played a key role in the regime’s survival, leading his elite forces in some of the most brutal assaults of the conflict.<sup>161</sup> He was also highly sensitized to the dangers of rebel forces in Damascus, having reportedly been severely injured in the IED attack on Assad’s inner circle in July of 2012.<sup>162</sup> The sparse open-source information that exists on Maher al-Assad paints him as a being “emotionally volatile and violence-prone.”<sup>163</sup> His forces have been previously fingered by activists as launching prior alleged chemical attacks from the same Republican Guards base,<sup>164</sup> and his area of command includes the Jamraya chemical weapons research center on the northern edge of Damascus that was targeted in January by an Israeli strike.<sup>165</sup> The delegation of release authority for weapons of mass description to this

level of command is not unprecedented. In 1986, Saddam Hussein delegated chemical weapons release authority to the corps level so that the chemical weapons could be better integrated into battle plans.<sup>166</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Kerry has also made the assertion that Maher al-Assad had the authority to order the use of chemical weapons.<sup>167</sup> The launching of chemical weapons earlier than originally planned helps to explain the fact that they were used with UN inspectors in the city and intelligence reports of a panicked phone call between regime officials being intercepted in the aftermath of the attacks.<sup>168</sup>

#### *Assad's Chemical Weapons Precedent*

The Syrian regime had been escalating step by step towards increasingly deadly and indiscriminate tactics, from shooting at protestors, to artillery shelling, to airstrikes, to Scud missiles, and finally to chemical weapons. A general reticence on the part of the international community to become involved, combined with the diplomatic efforts of Syria's allies, particularly Russia, to forestall international response, has led the Assad regime to escalate further.<sup>169</sup>

In August 2012, months before the first allegations arose of chemical weapons deployment against opposition and civilians in Syria, reports surfaced that the Syrian army was testing missile systems for chemical weapons delivery at a desert site called Diraiham, which is near the country's largest chemical weapons production facility in as-Safira, Aleppo. There are unconfirmed reports that members of the IRGC were flown in to take part in the testing, and previous evidence indicates that Iranian and North Korean scientists have worked in the as-Safira facilities.<sup>170</sup> The IRGC has confirmed that it does have members in Syria for "intellectual and advisory help."<sup>171</sup> Additionally, Iran has long played a role in the development of Syria's chemical weapons program.<sup>172</sup> Alongside this delivery method testing ran a parallel effort to develop ways to stabilize sarin in short-range munitions.<sup>173</sup>

The use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime against the Syrian opposition began in 2012 with much smaller attacks. Intelligence assessments by a number of Western governments including the U.S., France, and the U.K. confirmed this limited chemical usage.<sup>174</sup> By escalating slowly the regime was able to test the waters, and it found that the international community was slow to respond.<sup>175</sup> Despite upwards of 14 alleged chemical attacks prior to the August 21<sup>st</sup> attacks,<sup>176</sup> international chemical weapons

inspectors were only allowed into Syria in late August, after months of negotiations, were limited to visiting three sites, and traveled only under the supervision of regime military and government minders.

#### **Phases II & III: Artillery and Ground Assaults**

Sarin is a non-persistent chemical agent, meaning that in the right conditions it could dissipate within minutes of being released.<sup>177</sup> The UN report on the attacks noted that the weather conditions in Damascus in the early hours of August 21<sup>st</sup> were ideal to generate the maximum number of casualties, as falling temperatures meant that the chemicals would stay close to the ground.<sup>178</sup> It remains unclear whether this was intentional, or if the regime itself was actually surprised by the death toll, which far surpassed any previous chemical weapons attack. Eyewitness reports indicate that many residents moved downwards towards basements thinking they were about to be hit with conventional weapons, which further increased the death toll.<sup>179</sup>

In either case, by using sarin the regime ensured that it would be able to enter the impacted areas later that day with ground forces. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi military had a special chemical unit which would monitor wind speed, atmospheric conditions, and chemical concentrations in order to let offensive units know exactly when they were safe to enter the affected areas; it is likely that the Syrian regime was operating with similar procedures that day.<sup>180</sup> In fact, intelligence officials have indicated that Syria's elite chemical weapons squad, Unit 450, was ordered close to the front lines in the days before August 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>181</sup>

While artillery shelling and airstrikes were reported in many parts of Damascus on the 21<sup>st</sup>, the districts of Jobar and Moadamiya ash-Sham, already among the most heavily contested in Damascus, were attacked with "unprecedented ferocity," in the hours following the chemical strikes, indicating that they were the primary targets of the initial phase of the operation.<sup>182</sup> Opposition reports from those neighborhoods describe relentless air assault and indirect fire combined with advancing ground forces on areas still in disarray from the chemical attacks.<sup>183</sup> Regime reinforcements were reported heading to Jobar from Aqraba, an area where Hezbollah has a heavy presence.<sup>184</sup> The preceding siege imposed by the regime meant that

medicine was in short supply to treat the flood of injuries.

The districts bordering Jobar and Moadamiya respectively – serving as their support zones – were also targeted with ballistic missiles, air strikes, and troops on the ground.<sup>185</sup> Rebels reported heavy fighting over the next few days as they attempted to repel the regime offensive, indicating that pro-regime forces had used the counteroffensive and artillery barrages to take over strategic points in rebel support zones such as Harasta, Zamalka, and Ain Tarma, all of which would stem the flow of support to embattled fighters in Jobar.<sup>186</sup>

#### *Operations in Jobar*

Shortly after the launch of Operation Capital Shield, the Syrian forces began a series of military maneuvers with the goals of securing the highways, and cutting Jobar off from the surrounding neighborhoods.<sup>187</sup> Video of these operations was captured by the Abkhazia News Network (ANNA) – a fringe group of Russian “reporters” who have been allowed to embed with Syrian troops in the area.<sup>188</sup> The first push was an advance northward from the industrial strip, reclaiming control of the highway and attempting to clear a buffer zone into Qaboun. Subsequent movements from late September through early November include attempts to secure a buffer zone on the southern side of the Qaboun industrial strip, and a major push to the southwest to secure the areas along the southern bypass highway which ANNA calls “Splitting Jobar and Zamalka.”<sup>189</sup> There are indications in pro-regime reporting that the regime’s push towards Zamalka had been intended for an earlier stage, indicating that the regime may have overestimated its ability to make advances in contested territory in the days after the chemical attack.<sup>190</sup>

While the Syrian forces did make some gains during these operations, their ultimate success is questionable, as heavy fighting continues in Jobar and the surrounding neighborhoods. Rebel forces had managed to reach this area near al-Abbasiyyeen Square on several previous occasions during the war, and were met with similar military responses.<sup>191</sup> In effect, rebel fighters are forcing the regime to retake the same territory time and again. In a detailed analysis of the ANNA videos, Open Source IMINT noted that some of the buildings captured by pro-regime forces in their northward push into Qaboun had in fact been “liberated” before in prior ANNA videos.<sup>192</sup>

#### *Operations in Moadamiya*

The city of Moadamiya in the southwestern outskirts of Damascus was another prime target of Operation Capital Shield. In the days following the chemical weapons attack the Syrian military and NDF moved south out of Mezze Military Airbase in between Moadamiya and neighboring Darayya and attacked from the east, reporting territorial advances.<sup>193</sup> By launching the attack primarily from this direction they prevented rebel fighters in Darayya from reinforcing Moadamiya, which was already cut off from the highway on its western side. While the major ground push was from the east into Moadamiya, there were also forces clashing with rebels along the western side of the city, forcing the rebels, still reeling from the chemical strikes, to fight on multiple fronts.<sup>194</sup> They also kept up continuous artillery bombardment of Darayya in support of this effort. The NDF was reported to play a central role in this offensive.

The regime’s primary focus on Moadamiya during this operation suggests that it feared a rebel advance into Damascus on the Damascus-Quneitra highway which Moadamiya borders. Similarly to the situation in Jobar, despite some gains, the overall success of the regime subsequent offensives in Moadamiya is questionable due to continued fighting in the area.<sup>195</sup> The longstanding siege seems to be a much more effective tactic, recently forcing starving residents and rebels to negotiate a truce in exchange for food.<sup>196</sup> The tenuous ceasefire in Moadamiya has prompted other besieged neighborhoods to follow suit.<sup>197</sup>

#### *Operations in Sbeineh*

While not hit with the opening chemical attack or the regime’s heavy air campaign, portions of the southern suburbs were also under heavy attack in the early phases of Operation Capital Shield, with numerous clashes reported on the ground in neighborhoods, particularly Sbeineh.<sup>198</sup> Sbeineh lies to the east of Darayya and is part of the support zone for rebel forces in Moadamiya and Darayya. At that time, opposition forces controlled much of Sbeineh, and a series of small towns to its east that formed the southern suburb belt between Eastern and Western Ghouta. Sbeineh also directly borders the M5 at the point where it enters Damascus from the south. As the regime feared a rebel military offensive coming from several different axes, the targeting of Sbeineh suggests that the possibility that

rebels could breach the southern defenses and come up the M5 through Kisweh seemed plausible to the regime. While opposition reporting from this time period is limited, based on the composition of forces in that area it seems likely that these ground clashes were led by pro-regime foreign fighters or NDF forces. Pro-regime forces reported some gains in the neighborhood, but as with other locations failed to gain complete control.<sup>199</sup>

## The Threat of U.S. Intervention

### *Regime Preparations for a U.S. Strike*

While the Syrian regime continued operations to capture parts of Moadamiya, Jobar, and surrounding districts in the days that followed the chemical attack, it also had to contend with the threat of what seemed like an imminent U.S. strike.<sup>200</sup> This threat prompted a reconfiguration of military assets by the regime, which feared that its military bases and airports would be targeted.<sup>201</sup> As the U.S. weighed intervention and positioned military vessels in the Mediterranean within striking range of Syria, the regime was packing up its missile launchers, scattering its chemical arsenal to around the country, evacuating personnel from military bases, and moving equipment into civilian buildings including mosques and hospitals.<sup>202</sup> Opposition sources reported that the Ministry of Education handed over its keys to the military, and the schools in Damascus were quickly filled with military equipment.<sup>203</sup> Diplomatic delays gave the regime time to prepare.

Regime preparations for a possible U.S. strike were not only occurring in Damascus. In Homs there were reports that the Homs Military Academy was being evacuated and security forces were moved into the university nearby.<sup>204</sup> And in multiple cities, Syrian activists took to social media to alert the world that they believed the regime was moving prisoners (who were mainly activists) out of prisons and into the evacuated military bases that the U.S. might strike, even forcing them to wear military uniforms.<sup>205</sup> In Homs this situation led to a riot when prisoners fought back against the authorities trying to relocate them, causing regime forces to storm the prison.<sup>206</sup>

Heavier equipment such as Scud missiles and launchers that could not be easily moved into civilian buildings were moved to unknown locations. Rebel sources near the military's sprawling 155<sup>th</sup> Brigade base north of Damascus reported seeing missiles and equipment draped with tarps

being hauled away on the beds of trailer trucks. Similar scenes were also witnessed near military airports to the south of Damascus.<sup>207</sup> The lights in the Republican Guard barracks on Mt. Qasioun were extinguished and civilian air traffic at Damascus International Airport was temporarily halted.<sup>208</sup>

One possible explanation for the halt to civilian air traffic comes from an opposition analyst who alleges that the regime was smuggling some of its chemical weapons out of the country, flying them from Damascus International Airport to Iran.<sup>209</sup> While it is not possible to verify this claim, the idea of Syria sending sensitive materials to Iran to avoid detection has a firm basis in reality. In 2005 Syria and Iran signed a strategic mutual defense accord "meant to protect either country from international pressure regarding their weapons programs." This pact reportedly contained a chapter in which Syria committed to store Iran's sensitive and hazardous materials in times of international sanctions or military crisis.<sup>210</sup> At the time the Iranian nuclear program was making headlines, hence the focus on Iranian storage, but it stands to reason that this "hiding weapons clause" goes both ways. Similarly, reports have suggested that the regime sent some of its chemical arsenal to Lebanon to avoid detection.<sup>211</sup> Additional reports arose suggesting that the regime was scattering its chemical weapons stockpiles to as many as 50 locations around the country, not all of which are known.<sup>212</sup>

People living in areas known to be pro-regime were also afraid and opposition reports described an atmosphere of confusion and panic accompanying the exodus of citizens from these parts of Damascus.<sup>213</sup> Interestingly it was not only pro-regime forces that feared a U.S. strike. Al-Qaeda affiliates in northern Syria suspected that the U.S. would use the pretext of a strike against the regime to attack their strongholds. Opposition activists claimed that al-Qaeda groups in some areas abandoned their bases and tried to blend into society, even taking down their flags and replacing them with FSA flags instead.<sup>214</sup>

Although the Syrian military and pro-regime forces continued to maintain some of their offensive momentum, it is likely that this significant reconfiguration of military assets had an impact on the regime's ability to take full advantage of the aftermath of its spectacular August 21<sup>st</sup> attack. The military bases and positions that were partially or entirely evacuated around Damascus were located

largely on strategic high ground in the mountainous terrain to the northwest and south of the city. While the military continued to operate from its temporary civilian facilities, the regime had come to rely on the tactic of using artillery support from hardened bases on high ground to prepare areas prior to assault and to cover ground forces during their operations. It follows that the temporary pause or decrease in their ability to use this tactic caused some disruption in their operations.

#### *Regime Blocks Access*

While the UN received more than a dozen reports of chemical weapons usage throughout the country during the conflict in late 2012 and in 2013, the Syrian regime refused to allow the team to visit all but one site, Khan al-Assal in Aleppo.<sup>215</sup> With a fact-finding team from the UN on standby in Cyprus, the regime refused repeatedly to comply with the UN's demand for unfettered access to alleged sites, resulting in months of delay.<sup>216</sup>

The UN chemical weapons inspectors in Syria had permission to visit only three agreed-upon sites of previous alleged chemical weapons use, but after the attack in the Damascus suburbs they sought access to the newly hit areas. For days the Syrian government delayed the inspectors' access to the impact sites and continued its military campaign, leading many to allege that the regime was trying to destroy evidence of the chemical attack before issuing permits to the UN team.<sup>217</sup> Denying the team official access was very likely a delay tactic, but the regime's bombing campaign appears to have been part of its previous operation design rather than an attempt to destroy evidence. Kinetic event reporting from opposition activist sources such as Shaam News Network and SOHR show that not all of the areas hit with chemical weapons on the 21<sup>st</sup> were attacked with the same intensity in the following days. As previously described, the attacks on Jobar and Moadamiya were extremely intense, with their support zones also being hit quite hard. Other impacted areas such as Douma that were not critical for this first phase were hit relatively infrequently in the days after August 21<sup>st</sup>. Also, while sarin does dissipate quickly, traces of its use can be detected for months, which means it would be unlikely that the regime believed it could erase all evidence of an attack.<sup>218</sup>

While the regime delayed access, Syrian activists tried to smuggle tissue samples of chemical weapons victims to the

UN inspection team just a few miles away. But the team, located in a hotel deep within the government strongholds of inner Damascus, was heavily guarded by the regime.<sup>219</sup> Instead, while the UN team waited in their hotel, victims were smuggled out of the country so that tissue samples could be tested.<sup>220</sup>

#### *The U.S. Backs Down*

After more than a week of flurried consultation, analysis, and planning, on August 31<sup>st</sup> President Obama announced that he would put a plan to strike Syria before Congress for a vote.<sup>221</sup> This move followed a serious blow to strike plans two days earlier when the British Parliament rejected military action in Syria, forcing Prime Minister David Cameron to back down from supporting any action that the U.S. might take.<sup>222</sup> Then on September 9<sup>th</sup> Secretary of State John Kerry made a seemingly off-handed remark about Assad giving up all of his chemical weapons, and Russia seized upon it as a potential diplomatic path to avert a U.S. strike.<sup>223</sup> The next day in a televised address, President Obama asked Congress to delay its vote on Syria while the U.S. instead tried out the diplomatic solution offered by Russia.<sup>224</sup>

For the rebel fighters affiliated with the FSA, who had pinned their hopes on Western support and U.S. intervention, the delay and eventual cancellation of a military strike was devastating. "The revolution is dead. It was sold,"<sup>225</sup> one FSA commander was quoted as saying, in an echo of what many Syrians felt.<sup>226</sup> The fact that Russia, which arms the regime and has blocked multiple UN Security Council actions, is playing such a central role in the chemical weapons disarmament and Geneva II negotiations is a strong signal to the opposition that their grievances are not being taken seriously.<sup>227</sup> Beyond the tremendous blow to morale, there were on-the-ground consequences as well. Rebels in Damascus had adjusted battle plans in order to take advantage of what seemed like imminent U.S. intervention, leaving other fronts vulnerable.<sup>228</sup>

Civilians and activists in Damascus, even those opposed to Assad, had mixed feelings towards the threat of a U.S. strike. Undoubtedly, many people were eager for the U.S. to help advance their goals of bringing down the Assad regime, but there were also many opposed. Some of their concerns stemmed from doubts about the U.S.'s true intent. Since the U.S. abstained from taking action for

so long, some Syrians had come to believe that the U.S. sought to prolong the conflict and did not actually want the Assad regime to fall. Others worried that it would be impossible for U.S. missiles to hit only military targets and not civilians. One Imam alleged that the U.S. wanted to also target Islamic opposition factions. But for many the reaction was confusion; they wanted help to defeat the regime, but were still afraid of the unknowns.<sup>229</sup>

After the Russian initiative was confirmed and the threat of a U.S. strike had completely faded, many of the military bases that had been evacuated under threat of U.S. strike became operational once more.<sup>230</sup> Once these bases were back in action the regime could again push its offensive plans forward at full steam. Rebel forces in different parts of the country reported a noticeable uptick in regime airstrikes following the announcement of the Russian deal.<sup>231</sup> Interestingly, reports from that time also suggest that there was a similar lull in offensive actions by the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) while it laid low to avoid being targeted by the U.S.<sup>232</sup>

#### *Rebels Distance Themselves From the West*

On September 24<sup>th</sup>, the Aleppo-based brigade Liwa al-Tawhid issued a statement on behalf of 13 different rebel groups, eschewing the leadership of the National Coalition and the Syrian opposition government in exile.<sup>233</sup> The signatories to the statement included moderate Islamic groups, including Damascus' strongest brigade, Liwa al-Islam, but also included Ahrar al-Sham which is one of Syria's most radical indigenous movements, and the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. The inclusion of this hardline element caused immediate worry in the West and among Syria's political opposition-in-exile, but ultimately this "coalition" never went beyond the first statement and Jabhat al-Nusra quickly renounced its connection to the statement at all.<sup>234</sup>

There are two main factors that influenced the decision to make this unified statement. First was the seizure of the northern Aleppo town of Azaz by ISIS. ISIS seized the town after driving out the FSA-affiliated Asifat al-Shamal brigade in several days of fighting that lasted from September 18–23.<sup>235</sup> During the conflict, the Aleppo-based Liwa al-Tawhid responded to a call from Asifat al-Shamal for assistance, and had attempted to mediate a ceasefire with ISIS. Tensions were running high when ISIS failed to implement the terms of the truce, and the unified

statement by rebel brigades a day later in some ways can be interpreted as a show of force against ISIS.

The second factor was failure of the U.S. to intervene after the August 21<sup>st</sup> chemical weapons attack. This inaction was the final straw for many rebel fighters who had been continuously disappointed by the U.S. after months of broken promises and half-hearted assistance.<sup>236</sup> Rebel brigades that had hoped for materiel to flow from their involvement in the SMC saw the lack of U.S. intervention as an indication that additional assistance would not be forthcoming.

While the September 24<sup>th</sup> statement did not materialize into a new rebel coalition, it does seem to have opened the floodgates for a wave of rebel mergers and coalitions throughout the fall and winter of 2013.<sup>237</sup> These mergers have had varying degrees of success, but for the most part all have adopted religious overtones and all reject the Syrian Coalition which operates out of Turkey. To the extent that the groups involved have rejected association with the FSA, which several have, they severely weaken the influence of the Western-backed opposition on the ground. There have also been a number of new Military Operations Rooms created, which ultimately weaken the SMC by funneling money to brigades outside of its official channels.<sup>238</sup>

On September 29<sup>th</sup> Liwa al-Islam consolidated around 50 smaller brigades (some of which were already affiliated with Liwa al-Islam) which pledged allegiance to its commander Zahran Alloush, and rebranded itself as Jaysh al-Islam.<sup>239</sup> Most of the brigades were Damascus-based, but several were from other provinces, expanding the reach of this substantial fighting force.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are playing a significant role in the formation and realignment of rebels in Syria.<sup>240</sup> With the dream of increased U.S. support effectively dead, both rebel brigades and Gulf supporters realized that this was their only way forward. Saudi Arabia in particular has been increasingly public with its anger over Western inaction. In October 2013, Saudi Arabia took several unprecedented steps, cancelling a speech at the UN General Assembly, and rejecting a two-year seat on the UN Security Council.<sup>241</sup> In a December Op-Ed entitled, "Saudi Arabia Will Go It Alone," Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the U.K. issued a scathing condemnation of the West's policies towards Syria and Iran. In the piece, he states that Saudi Arabia "has no choice but to become

more assertive in international affairs,” and is prepared to act with or without its Western partners, making specific reference to supporting the Free Syrian Army and Syrian opposition.<sup>242</sup>

#### Phase IV and Continuing Operations

Even as the fighting continued in contested areas, the regime believed that it had successfully thwarted the looming rebel attack. From this perspective, Operation Capital Shield was deemed a success, and touted as one by pro-regime reporting sources.<sup>243</sup> September and October saw the continuation of Operation Capital Shield in addition to a series of complementary operations across multiple Damascus fronts.<sup>244</sup> In the months following the initial phases of the assault, which concentrated on the most critical threats, the Syrian army and pro-regime forces expanded operations to close remaining holes in their siege of the Damascus countryside. From the regime’s perspective, it was beneficial to get these sieges securely in place before the winter months, since the extreme cold serves to significantly increase the effectiveness of the siege campaigns, which have completely stopped the flow of food, medicine, and weapons into the Damascus suburbs.<sup>245</sup>

Towards this end, pro-regime forces in Eastern Ghouta pushed northeast from an area near the Damascus International Airport, through the small villages of the Ghouta countryside, towards the rebel stronghold of Douma to the north.<sup>246</sup> This effort would complement their ongoing battles near Jobar and its support zones by drawing fighters away from the frontline. If the fighting in the Jobar area had seen quicker success it may have also enabled regime forces to converge around the Harasta area from different directions.<sup>247</sup>

Another location targeted in September were the towns of Shebaa and Hteit al-Turkman, which sit on the northeastern side of the airport road.<sup>248</sup> Because of this location they are key terrain in Damascus, and rebel forces in both towns have repeatedly used them to contest and at times briefly capture portions of the airport road, which is critical to the regime’s resupply. These villages lie near the mills area of Eastern Ghouta where rebels were active towards the end of July, and near the Hezbollah headquarters in the southern suburbs. After playing major roles in the regime’s victory in al-Qusayr and Khaldiya during the summer, Hezbollah’s elite forces in Syria were available

to spearhead the Damascus fall offensive. Supporting the idea that Hezbollah was a main combat force in the fall offensive, there was a noticeable spike in Hezbollah deaths in Syria in the fall.<sup>249</sup>

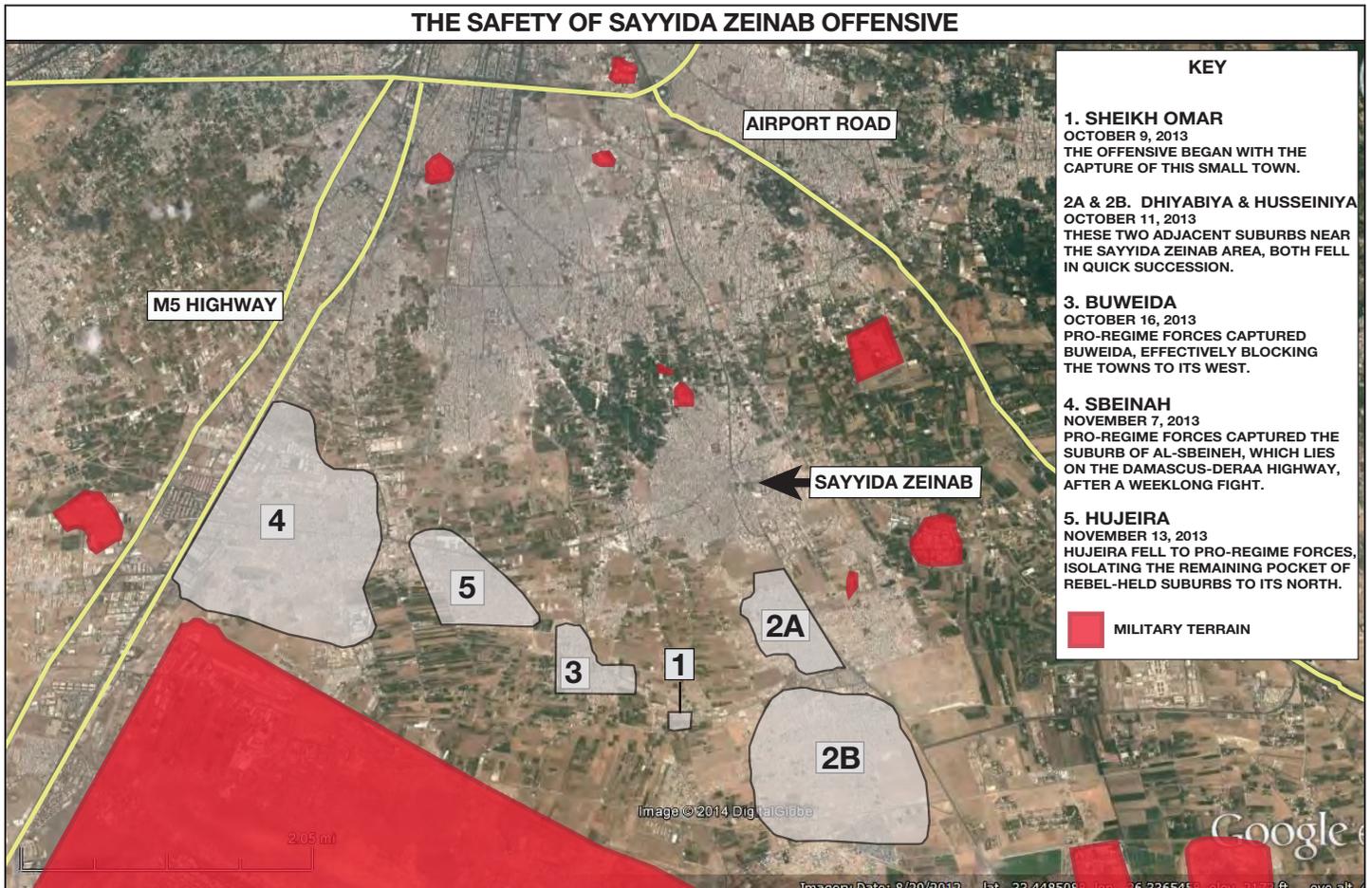
At the end of September, the regime launched an offensive to reclaim lost territory in central and northern Syria and reopen a supply route to its embattled troops near Aleppo.<sup>250</sup> While smaller operations continued in Damascus, this new offensive indicated that the major portion of Operation Capital Shield had ended.

#### *The Safety of Sayyida Zeinab – Regime Gains Control of Southern Suburbs*

A pro-regime offensive named “The Safety of Sayyida Zeinab”<sup>251</sup> led by Hezbollah and Shiite militia forces that started in early October has led to a string of victories in the southern suburbs and along the airport road, severing rebel supply lines and leaving the remaining rebel-held districts isolated.<sup>252</sup> The stated purposes of the operation were to protect the Sayyida Zeinab shrine from militant artillery attacks and to secure the critical airport road.<sup>253</sup> While this area has long been a priority for Hezbollah and pro-regime militias, the intensive operations in other parts of the capital during Operation Capital Shield required their support. As the primary phases of the main operation wound down, these forces turned their attention to the southern suburbs. The Safety of Sayyida Zeinab offensive came at a time when the regime was also launching a coordinated offensive drive from Hama towards Aleppo through as-Safira.<sup>254</sup> The ability for the regime to launch and sustain concurrent offensives on multiple fronts would not have been possible without heavy reinforcement from foreign fighters within their ranks.

While the media has given more play to the jihadi foreign fighters in the opposition, the number of pro-regime foreign fighters in Syria is significant. A December 2013 study estimated that there were 6,000-7,000 foreign fighters in the ranks of the al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria, and 7,000-8,000 Shi’ite foreign fighters on the side of the regime.<sup>255</sup> Some estimates are even higher.<sup>256</sup>

On September 16<sup>th</sup>, the regime claimed that it had taken full control of the town of Shebaa, a preparatory step to the southern suburbs campaign. Reporting by pro-regime media outlets such as the Hezbollah channel Al Manar,<sup>257</sup> Russia’s RT,<sup>258</sup> and Iranian PressTV,<sup>259</sup> purports to show



video taken inside of Shebaa, strengthening the claim that the pro-regime forces managed to retake some of the entire town at least for a period of time. Shebaa is strategically important for both sides, and rebel forces have had a presence there since the very beginning of the conflict. Its location directly next to the airport road gave rebels a location from which to disrupt movement to and from the airport. Also, as the pro-regime reporting indicates, rebel forces had dug a number of tunnels in and around the town of Shebaa.<sup>260</sup> It is very likely that some of these tunnels connected Shebaa to the orchards and farmland on the western side of the airport highway, and were therefore important supply routes for rebel forces in the southern suburbs. Rebel forces continued to contest Shebaa after the regime's claim of capture, and while it remains unclear whether the regime managed to retain full control of the town, the destruction of the rebel tunnels alone would help significantly in the regime's efforts to isolate the southern suburbs in preparation for a major offensive.<sup>261</sup>

Despite the narrative of pro-regime sources that indicate

that the rebels in Shebaa were all al-Qaeda affiliated, video evidence shows that it was largely FSA brigades attempting to defend this town.<sup>262-264</sup> On the regime side, videos indicate that an Iraqi Shi'a militia called the Imam Hassan Mujtaba Brigade took a lead role in the attack.<sup>265</sup> For several days leading up to the attack, regime forces bombarded the town with missiles and airstrikes.<sup>266</sup>

#### October 9 - Sheikh Omar

On October 8<sup>th</sup> the southern suburbs offensive began with airstrikes on Buweida and major clashes on the road between Dhiyabiyeh and Buweida. The next morning pro-regime forces made their first major gain in the southern suburbs with the capture of a tiny town known as Sheikh Omar, which lies on the embattled road. Sheikh Omar is so small that its name does not appear on any maps, and it blends almost completely into the orchards surrounding it. For the regime, its significance lies in the fact that it separates the rebel-held suburbs of Dhiyabiyeh and Buweida. In a tactical pattern that would become the signature of the October/November southern offensive, Iraqi Shi'a militias

overran the small town, backed by Hezbollah fighters and under the cover of artillery and tank fire and airstrikes by the Syrian military.<sup>267</sup>

The use of foreign fighters for ground assaults makes sense given the weak state of the formal Syrian military. Previous estimates indicated that the regime has only been able to rely on about one-third of the army's combat power from the beginning of the uprising, and this number has been further reduced through defections and casualties.<sup>268</sup> Beyond the increase in Hezbollah and Shi'a militia fighters, and the NDF,<sup>269</sup> an August presidential decree legalizing private security firms in Syria was another indication that the Syrian military was short on manpower.<sup>270</sup>

As the pro-regime forces were taking Sheikh Omar they were preparing for the next phases of their operation by "softening" the surrounding villages with heavy shelling and even tighter sieges.<sup>271</sup> There have been some opposition reports that give insight into the psychological components of the regime's operations in Damascus' southern suburbs, and elsewhere. These tactics include announcing threats through loudspeakers,<sup>272</sup> dropping threatening leaflets,<sup>273</sup> and even sending threatening text messages.<sup>274</sup>

#### October 11 – Dhiyabiya and Husseiniya

On October 11<sup>th</sup> the pro-regime forces captured two neighboring suburb/villages, first Husseiniya – which has a high Palestinian refugee population – then Dhiyabiyah, using much the same tactical pattern as in Sheikh Omar. After intensification of the siege, pro-regime forces stormed the towns under cover of constant bombardment by regime artillery. Regime forces reported no losses during the fight, which would seem unlikely given the concentration of rebel forces believed to be in the area.<sup>275</sup> But with the area's close proximity to Sayyida Zeinab, it is likely that regime troops were not heavily involved in the street by street battle. In fact, eyewitnesses reported that members of Hezbollah and Shi'a militias forces stormed the towns, chanting sectarian chants as they fought.<sup>276</sup> Locals reported a massacre of over 100 people, with the arrests of many more.<sup>277</sup>

Like the other Ghouta areas, the southern suburbs had been under an increasingly strict siege for much of 2013, weakening the opposition brigades and civilians inside. By October 2013 there were unconfirmed reports of infants dying from malnutrition.<sup>278</sup> According to pro-regime

reporting, rebels had been active in the towns since the beginning of the uprising.<sup>279</sup>

#### October 16 – Buweida

On October 16<sup>th</sup> the regime recaptured the town of Buweida, again after several months of suffocating siege and again with Hezbollah and Shi'a militia support.<sup>280</sup> Buweida sits directly between the two other remaining rebel strongholds in the belt of towns that the regime was advancing upon, leaving al-Sbeina and Hujeira in vulnerable positions.

Towards the end of October the regime forces claimed victory in a town called Hteit al-Turkman.<sup>281</sup> Hteit al-Turkman lies to the east of the southern suburbs, just across the airport road and adjacent to Shebaa. Like Shebaa, it is key terrain because it sits on the airport road and serves as a gateway between Eastern Ghouta and the southern suburbs. While claiming control of Hteit al-Turkman reports also showed that the regime was once again fighting for control of Shebaa itself, after claiming to have captured it in mid-September. According to Iranian reports, opposition fighters who escaped from Shebaa during the regime's offensive in September went to Hteit al-Turkman, necessitating the new regime push.<sup>282</sup> The fact that Shebaa was again being contested when the regime forces turned their attention to Hteit al-Turkman indicates that despite the regime's new tactics they were still struggling to hold territory against the rebel guerrilla forces.

#### November 7 – Al-Sbeineh

By the start of November reports emerged that the Syrian forces were advancing on al-Sbeineh.<sup>283</sup> As with the other southern suburbs, heavy airstrikes and shelling along with a tightening of the siege preceded the ground attack. Al-Sbeineh is strategically located on the Damascus-Deraa highways, and was the bridge between Darayya in Western Ghouta and the southern suburbs. After a weeklong fight the regime reported success in capturing al-Sbeineh.<sup>284</sup> Hezbollah, Shi'a militias, and the NDF were all present for the attack.<sup>285</sup>

#### November 13 – Hujeira

On November 13<sup>th</sup> the final domino fell. With the towns to its east and west now under regime control, the rebel positions in Hujeira were no longer tenable.<sup>286</sup> Pro-regime media reporting from Hujeira showed tunnels that insurgents had been using to move around undetected;

a tactic that had been identified in many other rebel locations across Damascus.<sup>287</sup> The tactical pattern by pro-regime forces was typical of the southern suburbs offensive. Reuters cited an unnamed Middle East security official in his description of the takeover: “The capture of Hujaira is typical. Syrian army tanks and artillery level the area. The Iraqis and Hezbollah advance and do the fighting. Assad’s troops then enter the area and pose for cameras.”<sup>288</sup>

### Analysis

While the pro-regime forces were making their sweep across the southern suburbs belt, attacks on the now-surrounded remaining rebel strongholds continued.<sup>289</sup> The constant threats in places like Hajar al-Aswad, Qadam, and Yarmouk would have prevented rebel forces in those areas from moving south to reinforce the falling towns.

The rebel forces that operated in the southern suburbs of Damascus were a diverse mix of FSA brigades, unaffiliated Islamic units, and Jabhat al-Nusra. A post-mortem report published by an FSA source following the victories by pro-regime forces during the Safety of Sayyida Zeinab offensive points to a number of issues, including the fact that the rebels there were under-armed and did not get along well with one another.<sup>290</sup> The article launches accusations that include looting the weapons of other rebels, infighting, arresting other rebels, being infiltrated by informants, treason, etc. Additionally there were accusations that some individuals committed crimes against civilians ranging from stealing private property to murder and rape. These practices alienated civilians, robbing the rebels of a crucial support base. There were also reportedly tensions between the FSA brigades and the Islamic battalions. All of these factors point to serious weaknesses in the rebels’ southern Damascus front, and contribute to an explanation of why the southern suburbs belt fell in its entirety.

The Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi’a militias, and NDF offensives in the southern suburbs suggest that this sector of Damascus is not directly commanded and controlled by the Syrian Arab Army, even if it is subordinated to an overall Damascus headquarters. The presence of high level IRGC commanders on the ground suggests that the Iranians are potentially taking the lead in planning these operations.<sup>291</sup> Likewise, while Hezbollah fighters fight on the side of the regime, they retain operational command over their own forces. Reports indicate that in Sayyida Zeinab they also command some of the Iraqi militiamen.<sup>292</sup> Its proximity to

the airport and existing tourist infrastructure both make it an ideal location to headquarter Iranian, Iraqi, and Lebanese forces.<sup>293</sup> Additionally, the southern suburbs area has well-defined boundaries since it is surrounded by key highways on three sides and mountainous regime military bases to the south. All of these factors suggest that southern suburbs battles are operated from their own command headquarters, and that the regime has abdicated control of the fight in the southern suburbs to foreign reinforcements. The idea that Iran and/or Hezbollah would be in control of the fight in the southern suburbs makes sense, since both groups are said to play an advisory role in Syrian military strategy.<sup>294</sup> The complexity and tactics of operations in the southern suburbs further support this idea.

With these regime gains, rebel strongholds in both Eastern and Western Ghouta have reportedly been completely cordoned off, leaving the rebel fighters and tens of thousands of civilians in a desperate situation with the onset of winter.<sup>295</sup> Despite indications that the pro-regime forces hoped to continue their sweep to the remaining districts, effectively routing all rebel forces from the southern suburbs, no further claims of victory have been made.<sup>296</sup> Reports indicate that opposition fighters fleeing the fallen downs are now concentrated in the remaining strongholds, particularly Hajar al-Aswad.<sup>297</sup>

### *Qalamoun*

In the fall of 2013 pro-regime forces attempted to capitalize on their Damascus gains by moving on to the mountains of Qalamoun to the north of the city.<sup>298</sup> Qalamoun is a mountainous region to the north of Damascus along the border with Lebanon. The region is crucial for both rebel and regime forces. The M5 highway runs through Qalamoun between Damascus and Homs, and also connects the capital to Assad’s coastal strongholds. For the rebels, who have operated relatively freely in the mountainous area for most of the war, Qalamoun is a key support zone, providing access to supplies from the Lebanese town of Arsal and serving as a staging ground for attacks on Damascus.<sup>299</sup> Qalamoun holds strategic significance for Hezbollah as well, since it borders Lebanon, and Syrian rebel operating in the area have launched attacks on Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon proper.<sup>300</sup> Hezbollah has the additional vested interest in maintaining lines of communication between Damascus and Lebanon so that it can continue to receive material support from Iran via

Damascus.<sup>301</sup> The rebel presence in Qalamoun jeopardizes Hezbollah's route to Damascus and presents a direct threat to their strongholds in Lebanon.

Increased tensions in the Qalamoun Mountains likely played a decisive factor in the end of the Sayyida Zeinab offensive. Talk of a "Great Battle" for Qalamoun began long before the actual offensive, with a reported build-up in forces by both sides weeks before.<sup>302</sup> The regime offensive began on November 15th with an assault on the town of Qara.<sup>303</sup> Hezbollah forces led the battles in Qalamoun, which focused on securing a string of villages along the M5 highway.<sup>304</sup> Due to the strategic significance of Qalamoun for Hezbollah's own interests it is likely that many of their units from Damascus were moved to the mountains to participate in the battles. The Battle for Qalamoun resulted in the capture of a string of villages that straddle the M5 highway between Qara and Yabroud by regime and pro-regime forces.

### Further Rebel Consolidation

On November 22<sup>nd</sup> Syria's rebels announced the formation of Jabhat al-Islamiya, the Islamic Front (IF). This merger of seven initial members unites many of Syria's strongest brigades, including the previously consolidated Jaysh al-Islam. Its members span the spectrum from groups that are moderately Islamic, with previous ties to the FSA, to Ahrar al-Sham, which is arguably one of Syria's most extreme Islamic factions outside of the al-Qaeda affiliates.<sup>305</sup> The leaders of the new Islamic Front, all with several previous coalitions under their belts, designed this new force to be a major player on the battlefield, and built it to last. Thus far they seem to be living up to their potential.



ISLAMIC FRONT LOGO

Since announcing its formation, the Islamic Front has been involved in a number of notable military actions

in Damascus. In late November they launched a sizeable offensive to break the siege on Eastern Ghouta. While not 100% successful they reportedly did make progress on two important fronts: one near Otaybeh and another to the north near Adra.<sup>306</sup> Notably, the IF brigades involved in the fighting maintained a media blackout during its initial weeks, posting a large amount of videos online all at once, presumably once sufficient progress had been made. The ability to impose a successful media blackout implies that the IF has greater command and control abilities than most other fighting forces in Syria. Outside of Damascus the Islamic Front has made headlines for its seizure of FSA warehouses near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, prompting Turkey to shut its side of the crossing and the U.S. to suspend non-lethal aid deliveries to the FSA.<sup>307</sup> Several of the Islamic Front's member units have also played a role in the recent offensive against ISIS by rebel forces across northern Syria.<sup>308</sup>

## CONCLUSION

### State of the Regime and Rebels

As this paper describes, Damascus is critical for both sides in the Syrian conflict. It is not clear that the Syrian regime could survive losing the capital city. Assad demonstrated the priority that his regime places on Damascus in the fall of 2013: when the regime perceived that the threat to Damascus rose to an unacceptable level, it launched an unprecedented chemical weapons attack on the outskirts of its own capital and followed this with a large, multi-faceted offensive. The imminent threat of U.S. intervention caused the regime to momentarily change its calculus, but as that threat diminished the Syrian regime gained renewed confidence and continued with offensive military actions and crippling neighborhood sieges into the winter months.

While Damascus became the main war effort in 2013, the situation in Damascus has been described as a "dynamic stalemate."<sup>309</sup> Indeed, despite gains for the regime in 2013, and considerable support from Iran, Russia, Hezbollah, and to a lesser extent Iraq and North Korea,<sup>310</sup> victory in Damascus has so far remained elusive. The sprawling Ghouta region is a permissive environment for the irregular rebel forces and while the regime dealt the rebels and civilians of Damascus some devastating blows in its fall offensives, it has still failed to secure the capital.

Despite appearing to have the momentum in Damascus right now, it is clear that the Syrian regime is running out of options. Earlier in the war, the strength of the Syrian military was at a low point and it demonstrated that it did not have the manpower to hold one major city and attack another at the same time. By the fall of 2013 it was maintaining successful operations simultaneously in Aleppo and Damascus, a clear indication of how much the regime's forces have actually been strengthened. Yet even as these augmented forces continue to attack, the regime is showing signs of its limitations.

With its freedom to use chemical weapons currently curtailed, the regime has expanded the use of other methods to target civilians indiscriminately. The use of barrel bombs for example, which has long been noted in northern Syria, has recently spread to the Damascus area.<sup>311</sup> A barrel bomb is an improvised weapon filled with explosives and shrapnel and normally dropped out of a helicopter.<sup>312</sup> Their deployment by the Syrian military in the north, where the regime has fewer remaining air bases and military installations, has been associated with a shortage of regular munitions and/or a shortage of airplanes. In Damascus, however, they may also be used for the extensive damage and psychological impact that they cause.

The regime's overwhelming reliance on foreign and irregular forces shows how weak the Syrian military itself has become, and leaves the regime's military capacity vulnerable to events beyond its control. Though Hezbollah has reiterated its commitment to Syria, an increasing number of attacks against its strongholds in Lebanon may force it to change its calculus in the future. For example, in January 2014, al-Qaeda affiliated groups fighting in Syria claimed several vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks against Hezbollah strongholds in Beirut.<sup>313</sup>

As noted, the regime's sieges have been effective in Damascus over the winter of 2013-2014. Without food, water, medical supplies, or electricity, the humanitarian situation has become so extreme that people in multiple suburbs – mainly children and the elderly – have died of starvation. These conditions have led residents to put pressure on local councils and armed opposition groups in their areas to accept the terms of ceasefires being offered by the regime. By mid-January 2014, the Damascus suburbs of

Babila, Beit Sahm, Barzeh, and Moadamiya had accepted ceasefires with the government.<sup>314</sup> Initial reports from those suburbs suggest that the regime has not kept its side of the agreements, jailing or opening fire on “evacuated” citizens among other violations.<sup>315</sup> Accordingly, these deals appear to be aimed at quieting contested areas to give the temporary illusion of control heading into Geneva II, rather than establishing genuine truces.

As the regime continues its “isolate and destroy” campaign, rebel groups have continued to reorganize. Freed from the constraining conditions associated with receiving potential U.S. assistance – such as not formally allying with hard-line Islamic groups and lengthy vetting procedures to receive small arms – the newest wave of rebel coalitions seem to have been more successful. The recently-formed Islamic Front has managed to make progress in breaking the siege of the Ghouta region, with advances near Otaybeh, and significant gains near Adra.<sup>316</sup> They have also reported the downing of another regime aircraft with the 9k33 Osa system.<sup>317</sup> While this does not necessarily imply that the rebel forces are strong enough to roll back Assad's late 2013 gains in Damascus, it does suggest that the armed opposition in Damascus will survive the winter, and once the spring comes the strict sieges will lose their harsh edge as some food will be able to be harvested and the lack of heating will no longer be a factor. With the increased training and weapons support from Saudi Arabia,<sup>318</sup> it is possible that the rebel forces in Damascus will be considerably stronger in the spring and will once again challenge Assad's grip on the fortress of Damascus.

## Geneva II

Without a foreseeable end to the armed uprising, Bashar al-Assad is banking on the politics surrounding the Geneva II conference to legitimize and extend his rule. While claiming that it wants a successful outcome of the Geneva II conference, the Syrian regime has also made it clear that it has no intention of abiding by the agenda and aims under which this conference was conceived. Geneva II was designed to bring the regime and opposition together in order to determine a way to implement the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué. This communiqué came out of a meeting of the UN-backed Action Group for Syria, and was supported by both Russia and the U.S.<sup>319</sup> The main objective outlined in the document is a Syrian-led political transition.<sup>320</sup> Assad has made it clear that he

has no intention of stepping down, and that he views the Geneva II talks as a platform to discuss “fighting against terrorism.”<sup>321</sup> The Syrian government has long labeled all of the opposition fighters and activists as terrorists.<sup>322</sup> In a recent press conference, the Syrian minister of information affirmed that Syria “does not open dialogue with terrorists, or anyone carrying a weapon against the government.”<sup>323</sup>

The regime’s intentions for outcomes from Geneva II are to buy time while it ramps up the intensity of its operations in Syria and shapes the conditions for summer presidential elections. The regime has made small eleventh hour concessions before the Geneva II talks which embattled Damascus residents have warned are nothing more than a means of manipulating the conference.<sup>324</sup> Secretary of State John Kerry has also criticized these moves, stating that “Nobody is going to be fooled,” by the regime’s last minute attempts to divert the discussion in Geneva.<sup>325</sup>

The invitation that the UN briefly extended, and then withdrew, to Syria’s ally Iran to join the Geneva II talks is yet another sign of these talks’ dysfunction. The decision to invite Iran was made because they are so heavily involved in the regime’s war effort that it is not clear that peace can be achieved without their buy-in. The UN withdrew this invitation to Iran at the last minute after threats that the remaining Syrian opposition representatives would not attend.<sup>326</sup> While this move may get both sides to Geneva, it does not address the underlying issue, which is the fact that the Syrian regime and opposition are going to the talks to negotiate about different things. With the regime and Russia still proclaiming that they are going to Geneva to discuss terrorism, not political transition, Iran’s presence or lack thereof may be immaterial.

The Syrian Coalition, a group of political leaders based in Turkey, has little if any sway over the armed opposition in Syria, a large portion of which has publicly stated that the Coalition does not represent them.<sup>327</sup> This disconnect means that they would be powerless to enforce the terms of any agreement, a fact that the regime is well aware of.<sup>328</sup> Beyond that, the dysfunctional Syrian Coalition has struggled to agree on a strategy for approaching the talks.<sup>329</sup> It is not difficult to imagine a scenario where the opposition makes it to Geneva II but is so divided that it hurts its own cause more than helps it.

## Elections

The Syrian regime’s longer-term strategy for retaining power is focused on holding elections in June 2014. Presidential elections are held every seven years in Syria, and Bashar al Assad has given clear signals that he intends to run in the Syrian presidential election this summer.<sup>330</sup> A number of factors contribute to making it highly unlikely that Syria would be able to hold free and fair elections in the foreseeable future. As of November 2013, there were approximately 6.5 million internally displaced persons in Syria, and an additional 2.4 million Syrians were living as refugees in neighboring countries.<sup>331</sup> This means that approximately 40% of all Syrians have been displaced from their permanent residences. Additionally, violence continues to grip many parts of Syria, and there are large swathes of the country that are no longer under government control.

Even if the Assad regime had the intention of running free and fair elections, which does not appear to be the case, it has no experience doing so. Currently, presidential referendums in Syria are held every seven years, and are designed to be rubber stamps for the regime.<sup>332</sup> Bashar al-Assad received over 97% of the vote in referendums held in 2000 and 2007, in which he was the only candidate.<sup>333</sup> In a 2011 study conducted by the Foundation for Democratic Advancement (FDA), Syria received an electoral fairness score of 0%, indicating that the laws and regulations for elections are completely undemocratic.<sup>334</sup> Even if there were some sort of internationally-mediated path to elections in June, and IDPs and refugees were included, getting citizens to register and participate would be a daunting task, as the level of trust in the process is low.

The idea of elections has played an important role in the regime’s messaging strategy. Statements from regime officials such as “The ballot boxes will decide who will lead Syria” frequently appear in the news.<sup>335</sup> The regime has also played on fears that, without its dictatorial rule, the state of Syria will cease to exist. Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad has said of Geneva II that “for us the most important is to keep the integrity of the state, not to create any vacuum and to work for the establishment of a national unity government broadly representative.” The conduct of Geneva II has shown a continuation of this strategy, with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem stating

that only “Syrians themselves” will make decisions about legitimacy.<sup>336</sup>

Syria’s foreign allies have supported this narrative by portraying the Assad regime as the legitimate government of Syria and the only viable option to lead the country.<sup>337</sup> Russia has pushed the line that the Geneva II talks should focus on “fighting terrorism,” and is reportedly preparing to propose holding presidential elections within three months under international supervision.<sup>338</sup> Russian MPs have already offered to serve as international election observers.<sup>339</sup> Russian officials have made statements that mirror those made by the regime, such as the one made by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Syria’s state news agency that affirmed: “only Syrians will decide on the future development of their government.”<sup>340</sup> Iran has also adopted these talking points. The Iranian ambassador to France has stated that Iran’s goal is Syrian sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, and independence.<sup>341</sup> Iran has likewise signaled that it is on board with the strategy to use elections to legitimize Assad, as Iran’s President Hasan Rouhani has stated, “his country will accept anyone as ruler of Syria who is elected by the Syrian people.”<sup>342</sup>

Assad has already started taking steps to disenfranchise potential anti-Assad voters to ensure his victory. A number of these measures have been aimed directly at the refugees who have fled Syria. For example, the regime has begun implementing a plan to issue a new electronic ID card for Syrian citizens.<sup>343</sup> In order for the millions of Syrians in exile to receive ID cards they will have to return to Syria, and give all of their personal information including fingerprints to a government that many of them fear.<sup>344</sup> In Damascus, internally displaced people coming from other regions have been prevented from renting houses, raising the prospect that without an address, these people may not be issued new ID cards at all.<sup>345</sup> The regime’s tactic of bulldozing homes in neighborhoods that support the opposition will have a similar effect. A new alien decree law has been drafted to strip citizenship away from any Syrian who has participated in the uprising in any way, and prevent Palestinians who have fled the country from returning.<sup>346</sup> Additionally, a July 2013 decree has made it illegal for Syrian embassies to issue or renew passports to Syrians in exile. These requests must now be sent to Damascus for security clearance.<sup>347</sup>

The regime hopes to subvert in advance any international attempts to enforce free elections in Syria and thus ensure Assad’s continued rule. The fact that the regime is taking these advance measures is a further sign that Assad will try to use Geneva II to gain time, before using the elections to gain legitimacy. As the regime and its allies continue to push their intensive messaging strategy, the international community is increasingly at risk of agreeing to elections rather than a transitional government as the path to peace in Syria.

### Takeaway

Neither side in Damascus is currently positioned for a decisive victory on the ground. It is likely that the violence and destruction will continue well into 2014. There are a number of conceivable actions that could change this trajectory and hasten the end of the war in Syria. A serious effort – most likely by Saudi Arabia – to arm the rebels with heavy weapons and train them in significant numbers could allow the rebels to finally gain the upper hand. The withdrawal of military and financial support to the Syrian regime by Russia and Iran (and its proxy Hezbollah) would very possibly end the war, as the Syrian military alone does not appear to be strong enough to go on. Military action by an international power on behalf of the opposition, even if narrowly scoped to include only missile attacks aimed at destroying the regime’s airpower and ballistic missile capabilities, would alter the regime’s asymmetric advantage and potentially change the course of the war.

The Geneva II talks hold very little potential for arriving at a political solution to the crisis, but they have been heralded by powerful players – notably the UN, the U.S. , and Russia – as the path forward. The Geneva II peace talks have diverted major actors, especially the United States, from formulating a coherent and realistic policy towards the conflict. In Damascus, neither side seems poised for a decisive victory and, while politicians meet in Switzerland, fighting on the ground continues apace.<sup>348</sup> Accordingly there is little hope among residents that Geneva II will bring peace. “Geneva?” said a merchant in the old city of Damascus, “It would take a divine miracle for it to succeed.”<sup>349</sup>

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