

# Syria Situation Report: March 17-24, 2015

**1** March 22: Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (HASI) absorbed Suqour al-Sham, conducting a “complete merger” of their leadership structures and forming a “central force” under the name the “Suqour al-Sham Battalions.”

**5** March 20: ISIS launched an SVBIED and VBIED, or possible motorcycle bomb, attack against a Kurdish New Year celebration in Hasaka city, killing at least 45 civilians.

**2** March 24: JN, HASI, and other rebel groups announced a new joint offensive to seize the regime-held Idlib city, coordinated through a new ‘Jaysh al-Fatah’ operations room in the area. This declaration follows reports on March 19 that regime forces deployed reinforcements to Idlib city and erected additional checkpoints in anticipation of a rebel assault. The JN and rebel attack began with a dual SVBIED attack by Jund al-Aqsa on the southwestern outskirts of the city, a JN SVBIED attack at a checkpoint north of the city, and a HASI advance into the industrial zone east of the city. Clashes are currently ongoing with reports that rebel forces have seized numerous regime checkpoints on the outskirts of the city. According to activists, the regime responded immediately with a chlorine gas attack on the rebel held town of Binnish northeast of the city.

**3** March 22: JN and other rebels captured several members of a regime helicopter crew after their helicopter suffered a technical failure and made an emergency landing in southern Idlib Province. JN later released a photo of the regime helicopter pilot being filmed under a JN banner, ostensibly during a confession.

**4** March 18 – 20: JN and other rebel forces seized several positions in the countryside near the regime- and Hezbollah-controlled towns of Asal al-Ward and Felita in the Qalamoun region following clashes with regime and Hezbollah fighters. In response to increased mobilization of anti-regime forces in the area, Hezbollah has reportedly deployed reinforcements and ammunition to the border region in preparation for an upcoming offensive.

**6** March 21: ISIS attacked the regime-held area of Sheikh Hilal east of Hama city, killing at least 63 regime soldiers and NDF militiamen. The attack appears to have been an initial attempt to sever the regime alternate supply route to Aleppo City, which passes through the area.

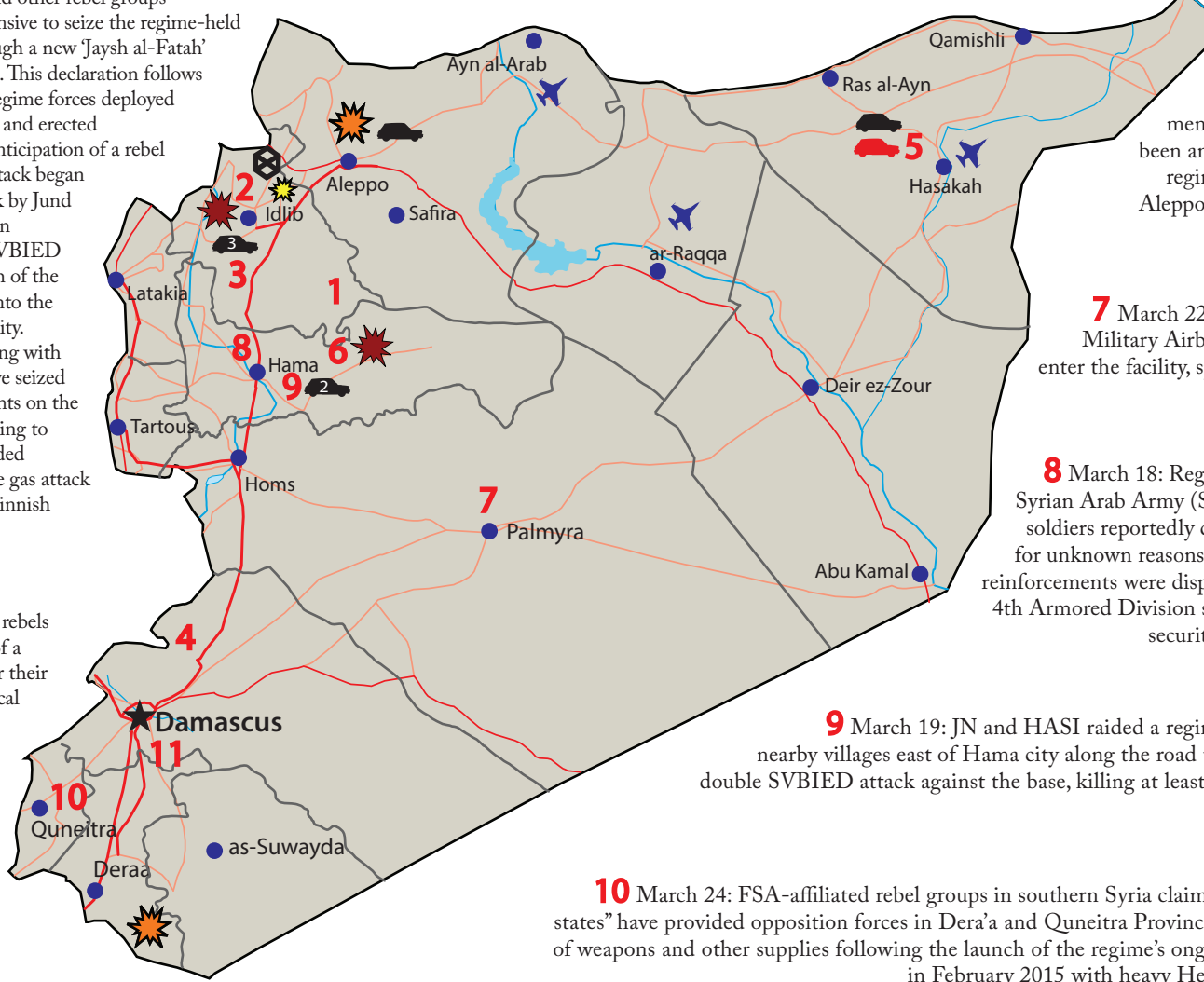
**7** March 22: ISIS attacked the Palmyra Military Airbase in a reported attempt to enter the facility, sparking clashes with regime forces.

**8** March 18: Regime military police and elite Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 4th Armored Division soldiers reportedly clashed in central Hama city for unknown reasons. In response, military police reinforcements were dispatched to conduct arrests of 4th Armored Division soldiers amidst a heightened security presence in central Hama.

**9** March 19: JN and HASI raided a regime air defense base and two nearby villages east of Hama city along the road to as-Salamiyah following a double SVBIED attack against the base, killing at least twenty regime soldiers and militiamen.

**10** March 24: FSA-affiliated rebel groups in southern Syria claimed that unspecified “foreign states” have provided opposition forces in Dera’a and Quneitra Provinces with increased shipments of weapons and other supplies following the launch of the regime’s ongoing offensive, which began in February 2015 with heavy Hezbollah and IRGC support.

**11** March 17: The Islamist-leaning Faylaq al-Rahman absorbed the local HASI affiliate in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, citing the pressure of ‘current circumstances’ which require increased rebel coordination in the area. This follows increased rebel concern over the emergence of new ISIS-affiliated brigades in the area, which prompted a ruling by the Eastern Ghouta Unified Command prohibiting the creation of new rebel factions in the area.



- YPG
- Opposition Forces
- Pro-Regime Forces
- ISIS
- Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)
- Alleged CW Attack
- Declared Offensive
- VBIED
- SVBIED
- Major Clash

### Background Kinetic Activity

- Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes
- Low-level clashes

March 23: JN detonated an SVBIED against regime positions in Durwayr al-Zeitoun before advancing to seize several points in the town during low-level clashes with regime forces.



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100km

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**Merger of Prominent Islamist Groups Provides JN Opportunity to Establish Partnership:** The absorption of Suqour al-Sham into HASI counters rising JN influence in northern Syria by consolidating the combat power of major Islamist elements of the opposition. The merger does not, however, necessarily challenge JN’s military supremacy nor jeopardize its ongoing efforts to govern. Both Suqour al-Sham and HASI served as mediating forces between clashing JN and local FSA-affiliated brigades prior to the merger, indicating both their desire to avoid an escalation of rebel infighting and their tolerance of JN aggression in the short and likely medium term. Suqour al-Sham and HASI had reportedly begun to privately express heightened concern about JN, possibly as a way of making inroads with Western benefactors. However, with international support to the opposition unlikely, these groups will likely instead cultivate good relations with JN to channel its activity into joint action against the Assad regime. HASI and Suqour al-Sham share a history of participation in joint governance alongside JN in the Aleppo Shari’a Authority, have directly supported JN-led efforts to counter corruption and punish abusive rebel commanders, and maintain similarities to JN in their vision for how to govern a post-Assad Syria. JN is therefore unlikely to regard the merger as inherently threatening, and is likely instead to use its shared history with these groups to continue shared governance and increase the effectiveness of military campaigns against the Assad regime. The ongoing joint offensive against Idlib City is likely a first step in this effort. Corresponding JN and HASI efforts to deepen their cooperation may gain further momentum if the Idlib City offensive is ultimately successful in increasing the scope of JN and rebel control in the province or possibly liberating the provincial capital.

**Joint JN and Rebel Offensive Seeks to Liberate Idlib Provincial Capital:** JN and rebel forces launched an ongoing offensive against Idlib City with a declared intent to liberate the northern provincial capital. The offensive is coordinated through a new military operations room titled ‘Jaysh al-Fatah,’ indicating the important role played by joint operations rooms as vehicles to coordinate JN and rebel military operations. The creation of joint operations rooms furthermore indicates ongoing efforts by rebel forces across Syria to coordinate despite their inability to unite. The operation to seize Idlib City follows weeks of JN and rebel mobilization and preparation of the battlefield through indirect fire and operations to weaken regime defenses on the city’s outskirts, and may succeed in liberating the provincial capital. In particular, the Suqour al-Sham and HASI merger may increase the combat effectiveness of rebel forces during this offensive. However, the dense urban terrain of the city has previously proven impenetrable to JN and rebel forces. Therefore, JN and rebels may instead seek to leverage an attack against Idlib City to divert regime attention and open exploitable opportunities on other fronts, such as the town of Morek along the M5 Highway in northern Hama Province.

**Increased Iranian Command Threatens the Cohesion of Pro-Regime Ranks:** Increased Iranian involvement in generating irregular forces to augment pro-regime ranks appears to be fraying regime command-and-control structures. In addition to challenging direct Syrian state control through an alternate security apparatus controlled or highly influenced by Iran, the increased role of Iranian proxy groups in Syria has challenged the cohesion of remaining state forces. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad dismissed both Military Security head Rafiq Shehadeh and Political Security head Rustom Ghazali following an alleged violent dispute between the two men regarding the extent of Iranian involvement in the recent regime offensive in Dera’a Province. This dismissal highlights a growing dissonance in pro-regime ranks regarding the acceptability of increasingly direct Iranian control over units in Syria and the increasing reliance of Syria on those units due to insufficient manpower. Decentralization efforts within the Syrian security apparatus meant to bolster the regime’s staying power have also resulted in local tensions, as witnessed in skirmishes between the SAA and Military Police in Hama city on March 18 and reported clashes between National Defense Force (NDF) militiamen in Idlib city on March 12. While these rifts within the pro-regime camp are unlikely to directly threaten the staying power of the Assad regime in the short term, they risk limiting the effectiveness of regime offensive and defensive military operations over time while providing opportunities for JN and rebel forces to exploit pro-regime disunity.

**New ISIS Main Effort Shifts Focus South and West to Target the Syrian Regime:** ISIS appears to have shifted the main effort of its military campaign to target the Assad regime in central Syria. ISIS attacks against key regime terrain located near the Palmyra Military Airbase as well as adjacent to the alternate regime supply route to Aleppo city follow similar operations last week targeting regime defenses along the ground line of communication to Deir ez-Zour city. Numerous reports of graphic beheadings accompanying these attacks suggest that ISIS seeks to augment tactical success with psychological operations in order to establish a narrative of victory against regime forces. These attacks likely serve three objectives for the organization: punishing the regime for recent attacks against ISIS forces in the Eastern Homs and Deir ez-Zour countryside, shaping conditions to enable further expansion into central and western Syria, and bolstering ISIS morale following considerable losses to Kurdish forces in northern Syria. It remains unclear how ISIS will balance these operations against the possibility of further Kurdish advances in Hasaka and ar-Raqqa Provinces. However, spectacular attacks similar to the March 21 bombing in Hasaka City combined with low-level pressure on key YPG terrain may be sufficient to prevent further YPG penetrating operations into ISIS-held terrain, in part due to the seemingly ad-hoc nature of coalition support to YPG forces.