

## SYRIA 90-DAY FORECAST: THE ASSAD REGIME AND ALLIES IN NORTHERN SYRIA

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*The expanded interventions of Russia and Iran into the Syrian Civil War have shifted the trajectory of the conflict in favor of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, granting him the strongest position on the battlefield as of February 24, 2016. Regime forces bolstered by Iranian ground troops and Russian air support have achieved major gains against both the Syrian armed opposition and ISIS in Northern Syria since September 2015, marking a fundamental shift in battlefield momentum following a compounding series of regime losses in the first half of 2015. President Assad now sits within reach of several of his military objectives, including the encirclement and isolation of Aleppo City and the establishment of a secure defensive perimeter along the Syrian Coast.<sup>1</sup> The regime and its allies will likely retain their battlefield gains if there is no intervention by the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or the UAE. Russian campaign designers have clearly planned the ongoing operations in northern Syria, introducing to the Syrian battlefield signature Russian doctrinal concepts such as frontal aviation, cauldron battles, and multiple simultaneous and successive operations. These have made the joint Syrian-Russian-Iranian military operations more effective for a longer duration than previous operations. The offensive operations conducted by the regime and its allies may nevertheless culminate over the 90-day timeframe, as pro-regime forces attempt to advance deeper into core opposition-held terrain and take high casualties. Regular reinforcement of ground capabilities by Iran and Russia will therefore remain necessary over the next three months in order to maintain this level of momentum in the face of continued manpower shortages, attrition, and opposition military actions designed to slow and divert the campaign.*

*Although an uncontrolled collapse of the Syrian regime seemed feasible in June 2015,<sup>2</sup> Russia's intervention into the Syrian Civil War has ultimately reset the military balance in Syria. ISW published its last forecast in September 2015 based upon six fundamental assumptions, one of which did not hold for the entirety of the forecasting period. The forecast assumed that Russia would maintain a defensive posture in Syria in order to prevent regime collapse rather than prioritize offensive operations.<sup>3</sup> This assumption remained true in the first few weeks after the start of the Russian air campaign on September 30, 2015. Russia later shifted its air campaign in mid-October 2015 in order to provide direct support to joint Iranian-Syrian counteroffensives on the ground. The aggressive operations undertaken by Russia and Iran in Syria have precluded many of the previously-forecast courses of action by the regime, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al Nusra, and ISIS.*

*The conflict in northern Syria will likely remain dynamic over the next three months despite the so-called "cessation of hostilities" announced on February 22. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has previously falsely claimed that Jabhat al Nusra and other "illegal armed groups" control western Aleppo and in its environs, even though Western-backed opposition groups remain a dominant force on the ground.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore likely that Russia will continue to target Aleppo despite the cessation of hostilities, claiming that it is simply continuing the campaign against Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS. Meanwhile, the opposition High Committee for Negotiations announced that its participation in the cessation of hostilities would be "conditional" upon the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions calling for the release of all detainees as well as the end of bombardments and sieges in civilian areas.<sup>5</sup> Violence in northern Syria will continue despite the agreement to cease hostilities. Even U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry expressed pessimism regarding the deal, noting that the U.S. is already considering "Plan B" options in the event that internationally-backed negotiations fail to gain traction in three months.<sup>6</sup>*

*The interventions of Iran and Russia have changed the battlespace in Aleppo and Latakia Provinces in ways that ultimately increase President Assad's staying power over the medium-term. Pro-regime forces and Russian-enabled Syrian Kurds will maintain some operational momentum over the coming ninety days. The regime has not won, however, and ISW forecasts some tactical and even operational reverses. The courses of action currently available to the regime and its allies in Northern Syria could result in numerous outcomes that will intensify the conflict, spread regional disorder, and ultimately threaten U.S. interests in the Middle East. For example, Russia possesses unique opportunities to escalate tensions with Turkey through future operations in Aleppo and Latakia Provinces along the Syrian-Turkish border. Meanwhile, Turkey has already begun to message its own desire to deepen its intervention in northern Syria, including the possible establishment of a contiguous safe zone or alternative zone of control in Aleppo Province. Its actions have remained within previously established behaviors thus far.*

*The following sections detail the most likely courses of action (MLCOAs) and most dangerous courses of action (MDCOAs) available to the regime and its allies over the next three months in northern Syria. This report largely draws upon a study of open source material from pro-regime, Iranian, and opposition sources.*

*It is possible to forecast these trajectories to help policy- and decision-makers anticipate the actions of adversaries such as ISIS and avert the potential pathways that could be most damaging to the U.S. or its allies. The following forecast applies the traditional techniques of intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) to actors and conditions in Syria. IPB is a process of analyzing enemy forces, terrain, weather, and civilian considerations in order to anticipate their effects upon friendly forces and their planned or ongoing operations. IPB involves analysis of the possible courses of action of the primary actors on the ground, given existing knowledge about their capabilities, tactics, and intent. Courses of action are ranked from most to least likely and evaluated for the dangers that they potentially pose to friendly force operations. The purpose of this course of action projection is to inform decision-makers with accurate forecasts that adequately account for a range of possibilities as well as the outside risk of most dangerous courses of action. Most dangerous courses of action are designated as such because they are not most likely, but they are nevertheless plausible. Illuminating them allows commanders to mitigate risk while planning in the context of most likely courses of action.*

## PRO-REGIME OBJECTIVES

### *Political Objectives:*

- *[Syrian Regime]* Preserve the rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a post-war Syria that encompasses the full extent of pre-war Syrian territory; achieve international legitimacy as ruling authority in Syria; force the full submission of the armed opposition on favorable terms
- *[Iran/Russia]* Force the surrender or negotiated submission of the armed opposition on terms acceptable to Iran and Russia
- *[Iran]* Preserve a viable Syrian regime led by President Bashar al-Assad as a key member of the 'Axis of Resistance'; achieve new strategic positioning against Israel
- *[Russia]* Preserve the Syrian state – not necessarily Syrian President Bashar al-Assad – as a foothold in the Middle East; maintain a base in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea; challenge U.S. leadership in the Middle East; break NATO and the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition
- *[Hezbollah]* Preserve a viable Syrian regime led by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a key member of the 'Axis of Resistance'; achieve new strategic positioning against Israel

### *Military Objectives:*

- *[Syrian Regime]* Besiege and ultimately secure Aleppo City; clear opposition from Damascus and its environs; maintain Syrian territorial integrity through an 'army in all corners'
- *[Iran/Russia]* Maintain the regime's superior battlefield position and momentum; preserve the regime by defending its core terrain along the M5 Highway and Syrian Coast; enable operations against strategically and operationally significant opposition-held terrain
- *[Iran]* Preserve access to supply lines from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon; develop network of proxies to maintain Iranian influence; position against Israel in southern Syria along the Golan Heights
- *[Russia]* Secure long-term basing access on the Eastern Mediterranean Sea
- *[Hezbollah]* Position against Israel in southern Syria along the Golan Heights; preserve access to Iranian supply lines from Syria to Lebanon; secure Syrian-Lebanese border against incursion by militant groups

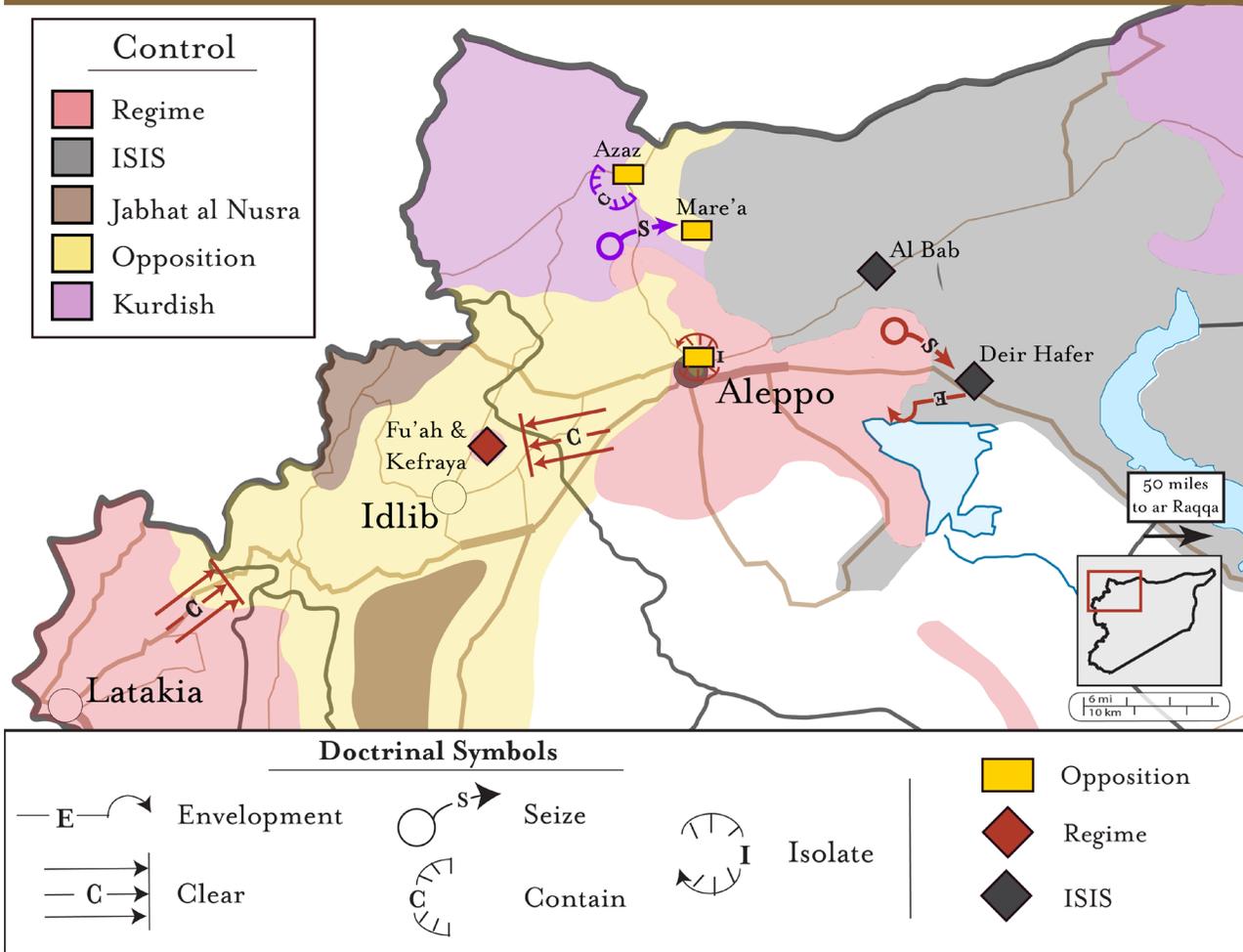
## CURRENT CONDITIONS

*The Syrian regime has reestablished its battlefield momentum. Russia began its air campaign against alleged 'terrorists' in Syria on September 30, 2015, couching its operations in the language of the global fight against ISIS. Russia nonetheless dedicated its primary efforts towards stabilizing the regime after six months of regime defeats that had brought opposition forces to the gates of the Syrian Coast. Russia has overwhelmingly used its air campaign as a tool to weaken the mainstream armed opposition rather than ISIS or Jabhat al Nusra.<sup>7</sup> Iran also redoubled its own military commitments in Syria in step with Russia, reinforcing the regime with thousands of fighters from its foreign proxies as well as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>8</sup> The lethal combination of Russian air operations and Iranian ground maneuvers severely eroded opposition defenses in Aleppo,*

*Latakia, and Damascus Provinces. The armed opposition writ large will suffer strategic losses if this pressure is sustained over the medium-term.*

*The political process continues to falter. World powers have thus far failed to reach a negotiated settlement to the Syrian Civil War despite efforts to reinvigorate the political process. The Russian intervention changed the terms on diplomatic engagement on Syria and there is now significant momentum behind a settlement that could leave President Assad in power. Current conditions offer little incentive for the armed and political oppositions to lay down arms or reach an agreement on a power-sharing transitional government. The large majority of the armed opposition maintains its position that President Assad's removal*

# ISW Most Likely Courses of Action in Northern Syria: February 24, 2016 + 90 Days



is a necessary precondition to settlement. The negotiations remain largely divorced from opposition powerbrokers on the ground, resulting in delays in internationally-brokered agreements such as the proposed cessation of hostilities agreement, the terms of which were finally announced on February 22 after days of deliberation between the U.S. and Russia.<sup>9</sup> The regime and its opponents immediately sought to impose their own conditions for participation in the cessation of hostilities, while irreconcilable elements of the opposition remain willing and able to spoil any potential ceasefire, and are likely to do so. There is also little to suggest that Geneva III negotiations between the regime and its opponents will produce tangible results, as illustrated after UN Special Envoy to Syria Steffan de Mistura announced a new deferral of the scheduled talks on February 19.<sup>10</sup>

*Current conditions threaten to draw regional actors deeper into the conflict. Regime gains in northern Syria risk prompting deeper military interventions from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other opposition benefactors that escalate the conflict and fuel regional disorder.*

Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain have all messaged their willingness to deploy ground troops into Syria as pro-regime forces moved to encircle Aleppo City in early February 2016.<sup>11</sup> Turkey remains at the forefront of the call for a ground invasion and has begun to hint at the possible establishment of a contiguous 'zone of control' in northern Aleppo Province.<sup>12</sup> Turkey has already begun to respond militarily to Kurdish gains along its southern border and began to shell Kurdish positions in northern Aleppo Province on February 13.<sup>13</sup> Turkey has also allowed at least 2000 opposition fighters to deploy to Azaz in northern Aleppo Province from Idlib through Turkey in February alone.<sup>14</sup> The persistence of high-casualty terrorist attacks inside Turkey claimed by both ISIS and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) could incentivize Turkey to escalate its cross-border kinetic activity, such as the shelling of Syrian Kurdish forces in northern Aleppo Province, or elsewhere east along the Turkish border east of the Euphrates River.<sup>15</sup> In the meantime, the ongoing offensives will further entrench the position of President Assad and his foreign backers, preserving Syria as a regional base of operations for both Iran and Russia.

## 90 DAY FORECAST

### Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)

The regime and its allies will likely pursue three main operational objectives in northern Syria in line with their military objectives over the next three months:

- Secure a defensive perimeter for core regime terrain along the Syrian Coast
- Encircle, isolate, and besiege Aleppo City
- Relieve the besieged pro-regime enclaves of Fu’ah and Kefraya

Joint Russian-Iranian-Syrian military operations currently underway in northern Syria may already be sufficient to achieve many of the political objectives set by the regime and its allies. Russia will also pursue two additional operational objectives in line with its own regional goals:

- Demonstrate engagement in counter-ISIS operations before the international community
- Limit the freedom of action available to the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition in Syria

The following chart outlines the most likely course of action (MLCOA) to be taken by the regime and its allies over the next three to six months in order to achieve these operational objectives in northern Syria.

Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA) by Pro-Regime Forces in Northern Syria as of February 24, 2016			
OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVE	RANK	February 24 + 90 Days	February 24 + 90 Days
Secure Syrian Coast	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear Jabal al-Akrad in northern Latakia Province</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure the Ghab Plain in northwestern Hama Province</li> <li>• Seize Jisr al-Shughour in southwestern Idlib Province</li> </ul>
Recapture Aleppo City	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encircle and besiege opposition-held Aleppo City</li> <li>• Sustain existing GLOC to Aleppo City</li> <li>• [Russia] Facilitate Kurdish seizure of Mare’a and Azaz</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achieve negotiated opposition withdrawal from Aleppo City</li> <li>• [Russia] Facilitate Kurdish seizure of Azaz</li> </ul>
Relieve Besieged Pro-Regime Enclaves	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish GLOC to Fu’ah and Kefraya near Idlib City</li> </ul>	
Limit U.S. and Coalition Ally Freedom of Action in Syria [Russia]	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degrade U.S.-backed opposition factions through air campaign</li> <li>• Degrade Turkish GLOCs into Syria through air campaign</li> <li>• Deepen partnership with Syrian Kurds to split U.S. and Turkey</li> <li>• Position pro-regime forces and Syrian Kurds along key frontlines with ISIS in competition with U.S.-backed opposition</li> </ul>	
Confirm Potential to Lead a Counter-ISIS Force [Russia & Regime]	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consolidate gains over former ISIS pocket near as-Safira in Aleppo Province</li> <li>• Probe ISIS flanks in western ar-Raqqa Province</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seize Al Bab in eastern Aleppo Province</li> </ul>

### Encirclement and Isolation of Aleppo City

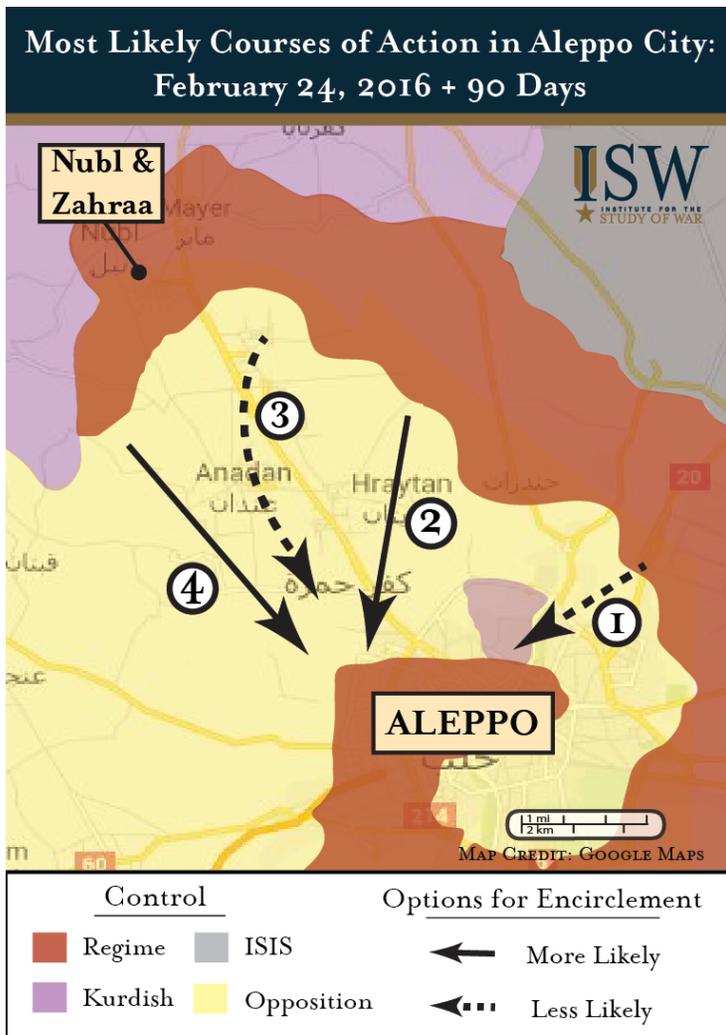
Pro-regime forces will likely seek to complete the full encirclement of opposition-held Aleppo City over the next ninety days in order to isolate and besiege the forces within it.<sup>16</sup> The regime and its allies maintain a robust garrison of elite Syrian Arab Army (SAA) units and local National Defense Forces (NDF) militiamen heavily augmented by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) fighters and Iranian-backed proxies including Lebanese Hezbollah as well as Iraqi and Afghan Shi'a militias.<sup>17</sup> These forces successfully severed the primary opposition ground line of communication (GLOC) into Aleppo City from Turkey via northern Aleppo Province in early February 2016 with significant support from Russian airstrikes. These forces now hold suitable positions from which to complete the encirclement of Aleppo City along multiple potential axes.<sup>18</sup> These avenues of approach will likely avoid the dense urban terrain of opposition-held Aleppo City, allowing pro-regime forces to exploit the comparative advantage of their airpower and armored units in open terrain. Russian warplanes have already begun to set conditions for this encirclement operation through heavy airstrikes to soften opposition positions in Anadan, Huraytan, and Kafr Hamra.<sup>19</sup> If successful, pro-

regime forces will likely follow their envelopment of Aleppo City and its northwestern suburbs with follow-on operations to fragment the resultant pocket. The regime and its allies could attempt to divide Aleppo City from its northwestern suburbs by linking with the Kurdish-held Sheikh Maqsoud District. This second envelopment would confine the armed opposition to an isolated series of neighborhoods. The regime and its allies will likely pursue a slow siege-and-starve campaign against Aleppo City in order to force the surrender of opposition forces with minimal casualties. The siege of Aleppo City would likely be a prolonged operation that lasts far beyond the next three months.

Any urban fight within Aleppo City nonetheless favors the opposition due to the high levels of attrition that the regime and its allies will suffer as an expected part of any advance into fortified urban terrain. The regime continues to suffer from severe manpower shortages that preclude it from replenishing its ranks as it suffers combat casualties, leading regime forces to rely increasingly upon Iranian-backed proxy forces as well as actual IRGC combat formations.<sup>20</sup> It nonetheless remains unclear whether Iran will be willing or able to sustain such high levels of support amidst high levels of reported casualties in the ongoing operations in northern Aleppo Province.<sup>21</sup> Iranian-backed proxy forces such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a militias also remain ill-equipped to conduct urban clearing operations. The opposition thus holds a significant advantage if it can design its defense of Aleppo City in order to pressure the pro-regime forces' manpower vulnerability and diminish pro-regime ranks faster than Iran would be willing or able to replenish them. Meanwhile, Russian air support will likely also prove insufficient to break the stalemate in Aleppo City. Russia does not maintain the capabilities to conduct sustained close air support for pro-regime forces in contact with the opposition, limiting the effectiveness of its air campaign inside urban terrain. The difficulty of identifying and targeting specific opposition defenses inside the dense neighborhoods of Aleppo City will reduce Russia to inflicting widespread structural damage on opposition-held terrain rather than conducting targeted strikes that set conditions for future operations.

The regime and its allies must also meet several defensive requirements that could undermine their offensive operations in Aleppo City. The regime must continually defend against opposition counteroffensives that will likely originate from both Aleppo City and its western countryside. Opposition forces announced at least three separate joint military 'operations rooms' in the aftermath of recent regime advances, marking initial preparations for an organized counterattack. The fortifications held by pro-regime forces in western Aleppo City in particular constitute fixed targets vulnerable to tunnel bombs and other forms of prepared shaping operations conducted by Jabhat al Nusra and other armed opposition groups.

The regime and its allies must also defend their vulnerable GLOC to Aleppo City against attacks by both ISIS and the armed opposition in order to sustain their military operations

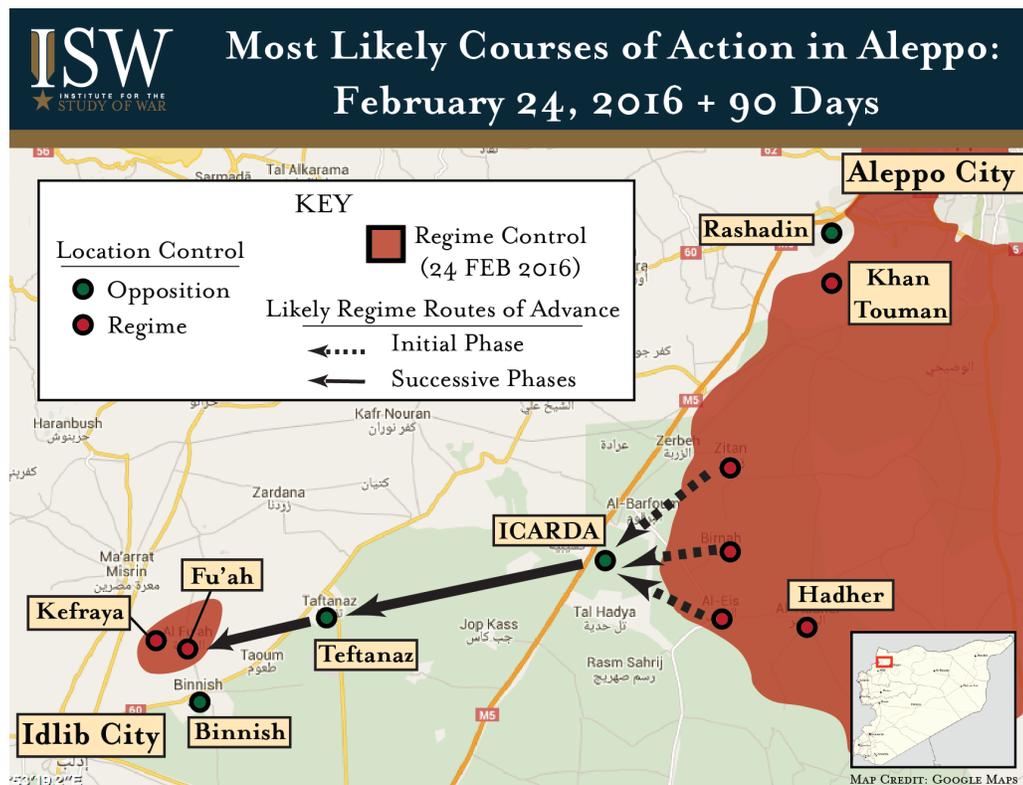


and provide sufficient resources for the pro-regime civilian population of the city.<sup>22</sup> The regime reportedly opened a new front against ISIS near Ithriya in far-eastern Aleppo Province in mid-February 2016 in a likely effort to establish blocking positions to protect the supply route as well as nearby oil fields.<sup>23</sup> The advance could also aim to ultimately contest major ISIS supply lines between Turkey and ar-Raqqa City in order to demonstrate effectiveness as a counter-ISIS force. A combined ISIS-opposition attack nonetheless severed the regime's GLOC to Aleppo City on February 22.<sup>24</sup> ISIS later expanded its control along the supply route, seizing the town of Khanasser, a key transit point along the GLOC, on February 23. The advance prompted the regime to deploy the elite "Tiger Forces" Special Forces unit away from anti-ISIS operations in eastern Aleppo to launch a counteroffensive to reopen the supply line.<sup>25</sup> The severing of the GLOC will impede the ability of the regime to resupply its operations against the opposition and ISIS in Aleppo. The deployment of elite regime units will likely obstruct pro-regime operations elsewhere.

Pro-regime operations remain at risk of culmination over the next three months. There are early indicators that one can observe. The deployment of "Tiger Forces" away from frontlines from which they were intended will inevitably setback regime operations in Aleppo Province. The regime appears to have paused its ground operations in the vicinity of Aleppo City, which may inevitably present the opposition with enough time to reset itself and regain initiative. Chronic problems of attrition coupled with the high rate of Iranian casualties may be forcing the regime to take an operational pause after relieving the pocket of Nubl and Zahraa in northern Aleppo on February

3.<sup>26</sup> The operation was likely more costly than imagined given the high rate of Iranian casualties and the regime's underlying issues of attrition.

The regime will likely retain the momentum around Aleppo City if its offensive ground operations in the North resume within three weeks from the time of their last major advance, which occurred on February 16, when the regime seized the two opposition-held villages of Ahras and Misqan north of Aleppo City.<sup>27</sup> Pro-regime forces typically use reset periods lasting anywhere from one to three weeks, as seen in the regime's push to clear areas of southern Aleppo from October - November 2015.<sup>28</sup> The regime similarly was forced to launch a counteroffensive to reopen the regime's southern supply line into the city during these operations after ISIS severed the GLOC on October 23.<sup>29</sup> The regime was nonetheless able to launch a simultaneous phase of its operations in the southern Aleppo countryside, while pro-regime forces reestablished control over the supply route. Therefore, the pro-regime forces can overcome three week pauses in ground operations without undue risk, particularly if it opens another front. The cessation of hostilities agreement could provide pro-regime forces with the space necessary to complete their reset period. Pro-regime forces may use air operations in Aleppo and ground operations elsewhere in ways that mitigate the risks of culminating operations by diverting the opposition to other fronts such as Latakia or Idlib, the latter of which does have areas controlled by Jabhat al Nusra. It will therefore remain important to observe indicators such as the redeployment of pro-regime elite units or the shifting of the ground campaign, keeping in mind that



any lone setback does not mean that the regime has reached its furthest limit of advance in Aleppo.

Pro-regime forces have not completed the encirclement of Aleppo prior to the cessation of hostilities. The operations may have culminated, but they also could have been designed to leave a corridor open to allow for opposition forces and civilians to leave the city amidst heavy Russian aerial bombardment. In this case, the pro-regime forces are not looking to isolate Aleppo itself, but rather encircle the military forces that remain there. The depopulation of the urban pocket would make its collapse much easier and would likely diminish any adverse reaction from Turkey and the internal community. Pro-regime forces have used this tactic elsewhere, including most recently in eastern Aleppo against ISIS and during clearing operations in the Qalamoun Mountains north of Damascus.

Meanwhile, Russia has already opened a second front against the opposition in northern Aleppo Province through air support for the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) north of the city. YPG gains enabled by Russia have positioned the Kurds and their allies to seize two key opposition-held towns: Mare'a and Azaz.<sup>30</sup> The two towns hold operational significance to the opposition, as Azaz is located along a major supply route from Turkey and Mare'a acts as an anchor for the opposition frontline with ISIS north of Aleppo. Pro-regime forces have effectively secured their northern flank through these YPG gains, effectively buffering regime advances in the northern Aleppo countryside from opposition counterattack. Iranian media sources have described these gains as an "unspoken cooperation" between the YPG and the regime with the "strong support" of Russian airstrikes.<sup>31</sup> The seizure of either Azaz or Mare'a would likely prompt a violent reaction from Turkey, which has already begun an extensive shelling campaign against Kurdish-held towns in northern Aleppo Province. The continued

expansion of the Kurdish YPG into formerly opposition-held terrain increasingly incentivizes Turkey to conduct a direct military intervention into the Syrian Civil War, including the establishment of a safe zone along the Syrian-Turkish border. The reinforcement of Azaz by 2,000 opposition fighters from Idlib via Turkey may allow the Turks to retain Azaz and force the YPG attack to culminate without the deployment of Turkish forces to the safe zone, averting also the Turkish provocation that the Russians have been courting.<sup>32</sup>

*Lift Sieges of Regime Enclaves*

The regime also likely intends to relieve the besieged pro-regime enclaves of Fu'ah and Kefraya northeast of opposition-held Idlib City. Iranian media sources and Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militia commanders have both highlighted future operations to establish a GLOC to the two besieged towns.<sup>33</sup> The relief of the majority-Shi'a populations of Fu'ah and Kefraya would in particular serve as a major symbolic victory for Iran and its proxies. Calls to lift the siege on the two towns began as early as November 2015 amidst major gains by pro-regime forces south of Aleppo City that brought the regime within 18 kilometers of the enclave.<sup>34</sup> A successful effort to clear the opposition-held terrain between the enclave and Aleppo Province would nonetheless be exceedingly difficult. Pro-regime forces would be required to seize several key opposition strongpoints, including the town of Teftanaz along a route of advance that spans deep into core opposition-held terrain in Idlib Province. These clearing operations would generate high casualties among pro-regime forces.<sup>35</sup> Russian airstrikes have begun to soften opposition defensive lines along this potential future supply route since at least November 4, 2015 and continue to target the area on a regular basis.<sup>36</sup> This front, however, remains liable to be deprioritized if the regime continues to face setbacks in Aleppo Province.

*Confirm Potential to Lead Counter-ISIS Force*

Pro-regime forces have set initial conditions for future operations to seize the ISIS-held town of Al Bab in eastern Aleppo Province since the relief of the hitherto-besieged Kuweires Airbase in November 2015. In the months following the establishment of a new GLOC to the airfield, pro-regime forces led by the elite "Tiger Forces" Special Forces unit have conducted operations to encircle and reduce the remaining pocket of ISIS fighters located near the key logistical hub of as-Safira southeast of Aleppo City.<sup>37</sup> Regime forces seized the Aleppo Thermal Power Plant from ISIS on February 16<sup>38</sup> and then proceeded to collapse the pocket fully on February 21.<sup>39</sup> Pro-regime forces likely have aimed to conduct a second phase of operations against ISIS in eastern Aleppo Province during the last week of February. Pro-regime forces may attempt to seize the ISIS-held town of Deir Hafer east of Kuweires Airbase, providing an anchor for a new envelopment maneuver targeting a second pocket of ISIS-held terrain south of the town.<sup>40</sup> The consolidation of control over the eastern countryside of Aleppo Province will buffer core regime positions such as as-Safira



from future attacks by ISIS. Iranian media describes these operations to “lift the threat to Aleppo City and the establish security support lines” as the priority effort prior to seizing Al Bab.<sup>41</sup>

Pro-regime forces also advanced to new staging positions south of the major ISIS-held town of Al Bab over recent months. A potential future operation to seize of Al Bab would present a unique opportunity for the regime and its allies to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Russian-Iranian-Syrian alliance against ISIS. The regime and its foreign backers seek to present President Assad as the legitimate ruler of Syria and the sole effective provider of security to the civilian population. The regime and its allies could time such an operation to take advantage of anti-ISIS operations conducted by the U.S.-led coalition in the region, disrupting the strategic intentions of the U.S. and its allies. Russia desires to demonstrate sufficient effectiveness against ISIS to justify its continued military engagement in Syria and to assume leadership of the anti-ISIS fight.

### *Buffering the Syrian Coast*

The regime will continue to prioritize its efforts to secure its core terrain along the Syrian Coast over the next three months. The regime will likely continue its clearing operations to expel the opposition from its last remaining positions in the Jabal al-Akrad Mountains in northeastern Latakia Province as the culmination of an offensive which began in mid-November 2015.<sup>42</sup> Russia has provided extensive support to these operations in the form of heavy airstrikes, military advisors, artillery, and armored vehicles.<sup>43</sup> Jabal al-Akrad remains operationally significant to the opposition as it houses supply routes from Turkey necessary for the supply and transport of fighters into Syria. Regime forces collapsed large parts of the opposition defensive line in January 2016 and seized the opposition strongholds of Salma and Rabi'ah.<sup>44</sup> Pro-regime forces later seized the opposition-held town of Kinsaba on February 18, bringing regime forces within ten miles of the opposition stronghold of Jisr al-Shughour in southwestern Idlib Province.<sup>45</sup> The regime likely intends to seize Jisr al-Shughour in the next six months in order to secure a fortified anchor for regime defenses around Latakia Province and prevent future incursions into the Syrian Coast by opposition forces. The mountainous terrain of northern Latakia Province nonetheless remains difficult to clear. Jabhat al Nusra, Ahrar al Sham, other Salafi-jihadi groups, and even U.S. TOW missile recipients are present and will likely preserve their ability to conduct limited operations against the regime from behind these frontlines.<sup>46</sup>

### *Most Dangerous Courses of Action (MDCOA) by Pro-Regime Forces*

#### MDCOA #1: Kurdish-Turkish Cross-Border Conflict

The most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) available to the regime and its allies in the next 90 days is an extension of Russian support to the Syrian Kurdish YPG that sparks a

cross-border conflict between the Kurds and Turkey. Russia retains numerous escalatory options in Syria that could be executed within a short period of time. Russia could provide Special Operations Forces, intensified air support, or other direct military aid in order to enable the Syrian Kurds to seize Azaz, Jarabulus, or other terrain near the Syrian-Kurdish border. Russia could also elect to challenge the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition by flying more frequently over a wider airspace in Syria, potentially forcing the coalition to restrict its anti-ISIS air operations in the name of deconfliction or by claiming that it has proven that the anti-ISIS campaign can and will be conducted under its auspices.

Syrian Kurds maintain the long-term objective of linking the three Kurdish-majority ‘cantons’ in northern Syria by seizing the last remaining ISIS-held terrain along the Turkish border in Aleppo Province. Turkey considers the unification of the Kurdish cantons an existential threat on its borders. Both Russia and the Kurds hold some incentives to pursue escalation with Turkey. Russia has been punishing the current Turkish government following the downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkish warplanes on November 24. These incentives could drive Russia to enable an operation by Syrian Kurdish YPG fighters to complete the connection between the Kobane and Efrin Cantons in Aleppo Province. Turkey would likely retaliate against the Kurds. Should Turkey do so in northern Syria, it could spark a cross-border conflict that would draw in the Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and possibly even factions within Iraqi Kurdistan. These tensions have already been elevated after the Syrian Kurdish YPG moved into position to seize the opposition strongholds of Azaz and Mare'a in northern Aleppo Province in February 2016. Erdogan's careful handling of the Azaz situation, including the shifting of opposition reinforcements rather than the direct deployment of Turkish forces, suggests that he is trying to avoid this most dangerous course of action while he can.

A direct conflict between Turkey and armed Kurdish groups would challenge the U.S., which maintains delicate relations with two key components of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS campaign. The U.S. would be forced to choose between its cooperation with the Syrian Kurdish YPG – the most effective local ground partner against ISIS in Syria – or to sacrifice its relations with Turkey – a key NATO ally. Russia likely intends to force this decision in order to drive strategic splits within NATO. Meanwhile, Turkey would likely limit its cooperation in the anti-ISIS fight in order to focus its resources against the Syrian Kurdish YPG and the Turkish PKK. The conflict would likely allow ISIS to resurge in northern Syria and secure additional border access with Turkey, reversing months of effort in the international anti-ISIS campaign. The violence would ultimately fuel regional disorder that would undermine the pursuit of U.S. strategic objectives in Syria and Iraq.

## MDCOA #2: Rapid Collapse of Aleppo City

The rapid collapse of opposition-held areas of Aleppo City poses a second most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) for U.S. strategic interests. The opposition will not likely abandon the city but could suffer a clear defeat there, doctrinally defined as losing the will or capability to fight. The armed opposition in Aleppo Province remains strong and relatively independent from Jabhat al Nusra at present, with many groups receiving covert U.S. support.<sup>47</sup> A rapid defeat would have profound consequences for these opposition factions and could spur many to turn away from the U.S. in favor of the assistance provided by Salafi-jihadist groups on the battlefield. The U.S. will quickly find itself deprived of options to engage in Syria on acceptable terms should pro-regime forces overwhelm the opposition in Aleppo City. Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham will likely place the blame for defeat upon Western-backed groups and their reliance upon irregular or absent foreign support. Jabhat al Nusra has an interest in undermining these groups in order to consolidate support among the armed opposition and local population for their Salafi-jihadi views. The complete defeat of opposition forces in Aleppo City would strengthen the narrative of Jabhat al Nusra and other Salafi-jihadist groups throughout western Syria. The rapid collapse of Aleppo City would therefore further accelerate the radicalization of the opposition across western Syria. These trends risk empowering ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and other U.S. adversaries while precluding potential future cooperation with Syrian Sunnis, constraining U.S. policy options to the fringes of the Syrian Civil War.

The abrupt collapse of the opposition in Aleppo City also risks prompting a direct and unpredictable intervention by Turkey into the Syrian Civil War. Turkey maintains a vested interest in preserving the opposition in Aleppo Province. The U.S. has attempted to deter direct Turkish engagement and shape Turkish President Recep Erdogan's policy responses in order to maintain control over the conflict and its potential escalation path with Russia. The fall of Aleppo City will likely spur Turkey to escalate rapidly in ways that the U.S. will not be able to shape or control. This potential course of actions thus stands to prove dangerous and unpredictable for the U.S., NATO, and other regional allies in the absence of U.S. action to mitigate the risks to Aleppo City.

### *Implications*

The conflict in Aleppo is transpiring rapidly and will likely continue over the next three months regardless of announced cessations of hostilities. Russia and Iran have reinvigorated the Syrian regime's campaign to consolidate control over northwestern Syria, providing Assad with much needed momentum to undermine the military capabilities of its chief rival: the armed Syrian opposition. Russia's air campaign and the influx of Iranian reinforcements have positioned pro-regime forces to complete the encirclement of the opposition in Aleppo City, Syria's largest urban center. The siege of Aleppo will result

in a large-scale humanitarian catastrophe involving hundreds of thousands of civilians, while driving further radicalization of the armed opposition in the province. The campaign underway by the Syrian regime and its allies threatens to destroy the remaining independent armed opposition factions in the province, while empowering irreconcilable jihadist groups such as Jabhat al Nusra. It is possible, however, that these pro-regime operations will culminate prematurely, resulting in a number of reactions and countermeasures by pro-regime forces over the coming months. The most likely reaction would be a shift of regime focus to areas of southern Syria, including areas adjacent to the Golan Heights, or opposition-held areas surrounding the Syrian capital, Damascus. The culmination of regime forces may also cause the Syrian regime and its allies to pause ground operations temporarily under the cover of the cessation of hostilities agreement in places like Aleppo, where the regime will be in need of recovery time and relief in place. Air operations in Aleppo will likely continue.

The precarious position of the Aleppo-based opposition is drawing U.S. allies deeper into the Syrian conflict, threatening to spark regional disorder. Turkey has ramped up violence towards the YPG, the U.S.'s most effective anti-ISIS ground partner in Syria, in direct response to Kurdish gains against the opposition in Aleppo. The Russian empowerment of Kurdish forces threatens to further escalate tensions between Turkey and the Kurds. The possibility of a cross-border conflict between Turkey and Russia along NATO's southern flank remains high as Russia continues to provoke Turkey. The U.S. must provide leadership in Aleppo, shaping the actions of its regional allies. The U.S. should support the development of a humanitarian safe zone by Turkey and provide aerial overflight to protect any future safe zone from bombardment by Russian or regime jets.

The window for the U.S. to engage in northern Syria is rapidly closing. Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS pose a direct threat to U.S. national security.<sup>48</sup> A number of U.S.-supported groups remain inside Aleppo, but are unlikely to survive a prolonged siege of the city without increasing their partnership with these Salafi-jihadi groups. The U.S. must seek options to preserve a Sunni partner in Aleppo and take measures to avoid the collapse of the Aleppo-based opposition. The U.S. will need these groups in order to defeat Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS in Syria and cannot achieve its strategic objectives should they be destroyed. The regime, Russia, and Iran are unable to deprive these two groups their safe haven in Syria.<sup>49</sup> The regime and its allies have mounted the operation to encircle Aleppo during ongoing diplomatic negotiations over the Syrian Civil War. These actors have employed the political process to obfuscate their true objectives in Syria. They will likely use the cessation of hostilities agreement as cover to prosecute their campaign against the armed opposition in Aleppo, as Russia has repeatedly claimed that the city is held by Jabhat al Nusra. The U.S. must send a clear message to Russia that its air campaign against the mainstream Sunni opposition must end and that the U.S. is willing to defend the ground partners it has already established within the opposition in Aleppo.

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