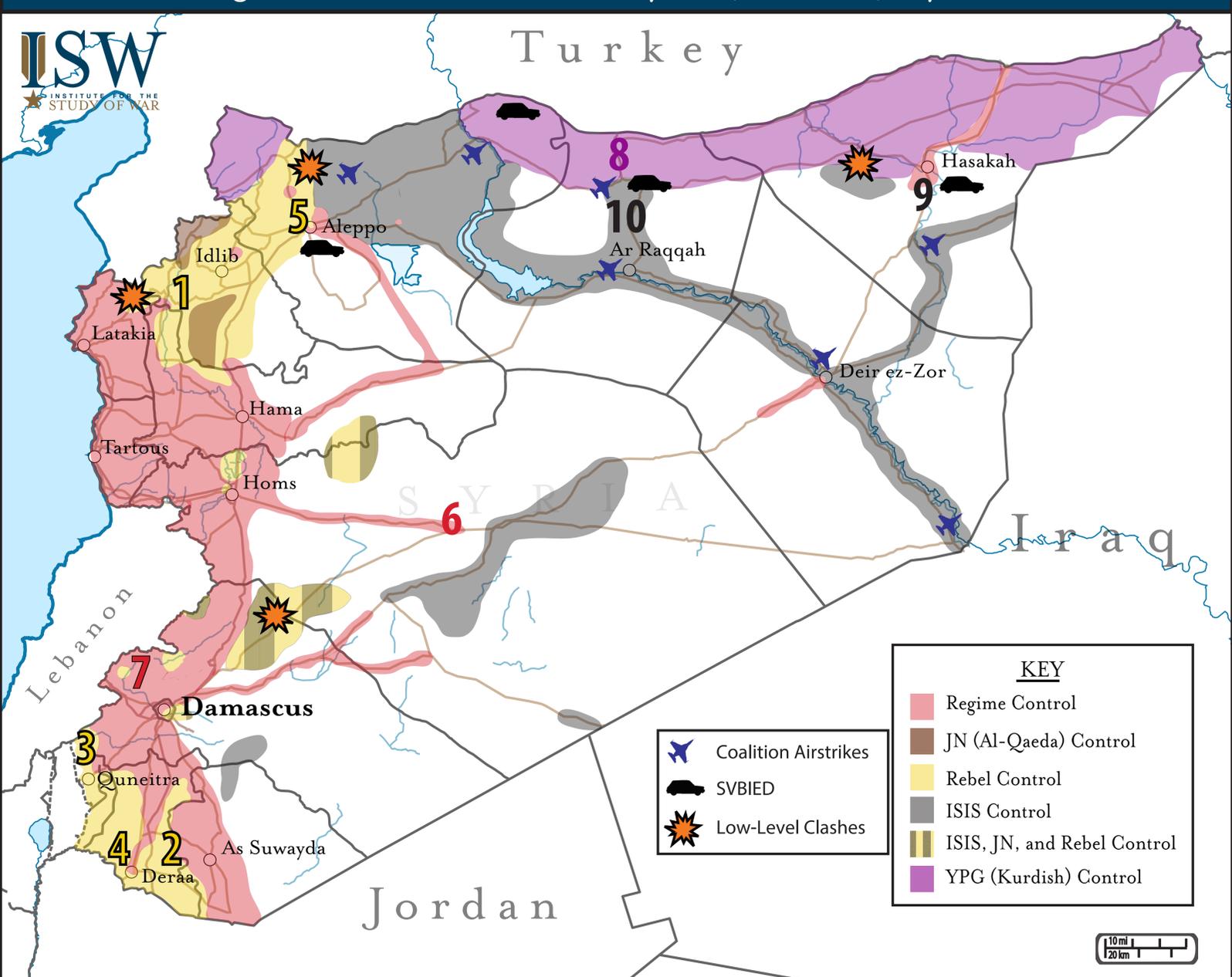


Significant Offensives in Syria: June 6 - July 9, 2015



REBEL:

1 June 5 - 17: The JN-led Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room launched an offensive on June 5 which successfully seized the town of Mahambel and seven other villages along the Latakia – Idlib Highway, largely eliminating the remaining regime-held salient in Idlib Province. Rebel forces with the Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room have since experienced difficulty in seizing remaining regime positions south of Jisr al-Shughour in southwestern Idlib Province or along the al-Ghab Plain in northwestern Hama Province.

2 June 9 - 12: A number of FSA-affiliated and Islamist rebel factions announced the “Battle of Retribution for the Martyrs” on June 9 and seized the regime-held Brigade 52 base in eastern Dera’a Province following heavy clashes with regime forces. The same rebel forces later announced the “Battle of Crush the Tyrants” targeting the Tha’lah Airbase in western Suwayda Province, making initial gains before being repulsed following the arrival of Druze reinforcements.

3 June 16 - 29: Four separate rebel coalitions, including the newly-formed JN-led Jaysh al-Fatah al-Mintaqa al-Janoubiyah and two distinct operations rooms led by elements of the FSA-affiliated Southern Front, launched offensives targeting regime military positions in northern Quneitra Province in the vicinity of Druze-inhabited Mount Hermon. The stated goals of the offensives included a desire to open supply lines leading to rebel forces in the Western Ghouta suburbs of Damascus. Nonetheless, the offensives ultimately achieved only limited gains in the area as rebel forces came under pressure from clashes against alleged ISIS-affiliated rebels in western Dera’a Province, the joint Hezbollah–regime offensive on Zabadani northwest of Damascus, and Israeli warnings of a possible military intervention in the event of an attack against the pro-regime Druze of Mount Hermon.

4 June 25 - 30: Rebel forces with the FSA-affiliated Southern Front announced the "Battle of Southern Storm" on June 25 directed at seizing Dera'a City as the next phase of an effort to consolidate control over southern Syria and set conditions for an eventual assault against the Syrian capital of Damascus. Although rebel forces initially made limited tactical gains within Dera'a City, the offensive largely quieted by June 30 due to a rumored operational reassessment following high casualties and poor coordination between rebel forces. Rebel commanders nonetheless continue to insist that the “Battle of Southern Storm” will not be called off.

5 July 2 – 8: The Fatah Halab Operations Room announced the start of the “Battle of Fatah Halab” on July 2 to seize full control over regime-held portions of Aleppo City. Combined moderate and Islamist rebel forces later seized control of the regime-held Scientific Research Center on the western outskirts of Aleppo City on July 3 amidst ongoing clashes as rebels attempted to break into the New Aleppo and az-Zahraa neighborhoods of northwestern Aleppo City. Meanwhile, JN and a number of Salafi-jihadist rebel factions also announced the formation of the Ansar al-Sharia Operations Room on July 2 and launched a parallel offensive against regime positions in the az-Zahraa district which has included at least one JN suicide attack against regime forces.

REGIME:

6 June 20 - 23: The regime reportedly deployed reinforcements including the elite ‘Tiger Forces’ Special Forces unit to the western countryside of Palmyra, sparking clashes with ISIS west of the city as well as in the nearby Sha’er and Jazal Gas Fields. Although regime officials have messaged an intent to recapture the city of Palmyra from ISIS forces, no notable offensive action has yet occurred.

7 July 2 - 7: Lebanese Hezbollah and Syrian regime forces announced the start of an offensive to seize the rebel-held town of Zabadani northwest of Damascus near the Lebanese border on July 2. Zabadani occupies a key position near supply routes connecting Damascus to Hezbollah positions in Beirut and the Bekaa Valley. Clashes are currently ongoing as Hezbollah and regime forces attempt to enter the town from the west amidst clashes with JN, Ahrar al-Sham, and other rebel factions.

YPG (KURDS):

8 June 6 - 23: Kurdish YPG forces supported by FSA-affiliated rebel factions and U.S.-led coalition airstrikes continued offensive operations to seize ISIS territory in northern Syria, seizing the ISIS-held border crossing of Tel Abyad on June 15 before moving south to capture the town of Ayn Issa and its associated Brigade 93 military base on June 22-23. These gains provided a ground link between the Kurdish Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) and Hasaka Province (Cizire) cantons while placing joint YPG-FSA forces thirty miles north of the ISIS stronghold of ar-Raqqah City. Nonetheless, the YPG advance also elevated tensions with Turkey, which deployed military forces to its border amidst heightened concerns over “border security”.

ISIS:

9 June 24 – July 7: ISIS launched a major offensive against regime positions in Hasaka City on June 24, seizing several of the city’s southern districts after heavy clashes which included a series of SVBIED attacks against both regime and Kurdish security installations. Regime forces reportedly began to reverse ISIS gains by the end of June following the deployment of Republican Guard reinforcements from Deir ez-Zour City, the arrival of SAA and NDF reinforcements from Qamishli, and the limited assistance provided by YPG forces in the eastern neighborhoods of the city. Nonetheless, local reports indicate that ISIS has secured additional advances against the regime in southern Hasaka City following a renewed wave of SVBIED and VBIED attacks beginning on July 1.

10 June 25 - July 6: ISIS launched a number of counterattacks against Kurdish-held terrain following the YPG successes at Tel Abyad and Ayn Issa in early June. A group of ISIS infiltrators equipped with at least two SVBIEDs entered the town of Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) on June 25, sparking two days of clashes which left over two hundred civilians dead. ISIS militants launched similar infiltrator attacks against two towns on the east bank of the Euphrates River on June 26 and against the recently-seized town of Tel Abyad on June 30. ISIS later launched a counterattack against joint YPG-FSA forces in Ayn Issa north of ar-Raqqah City on July 5 which included at least two SVBIED detonations; clashes are ongoing.

KEY TAKEAWAY: Syrian rebel factions have launched long-awaited offensives against the isolated provincial capitals of Dera’a and Aleppo Cities, located in southern and northern Syria respectively. These two cities represent key lynchpins in the regime’s ‘army in all corners’ strategy which allows Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to claim control over all of Syria. The fall of either city to rebel forces including Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra would overturn the stalemate that has long characterized the Syrian Civil War, opening the door to further offensives against core regime terrain in Damascus and the Syrian Coast. Rebel forces have thus far achieved limited success in both cities, however, amidst reports of high casualties and poor coordination between rebel factions – in part due to friction between moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA)-affiliated rebel factions and more extreme groups led by Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). If the rebel campaigns to seize Aleppo and Dera’a Cities stall over the coming weeks, JN and other Salafi-jihadist groups could seize the opportunity to expand their leadership role within the Syrian opposition by emphasizing the gains previously achieved in Idlib Province when rebel factions united under JN’s leadership. Rebel efforts in Aleppo and Dera’a Provinces have also been handicapped by the need to respond to the threat posed by ISIS and ISIS-sympathetic rebel brigades, which have encroached upon opposition-held terrain in both the northern countryside of Aleppo City and the southwestern countryside of Dera’a Province.

The regime’s successful defense of Aleppo and Dera’a Cities thus far belies that fact that the continued dedication of valuable combat resources to outlying “corners” of Syria risks overextending the defensive capabilities of regime forces. The regime appears particularly vulnerable to an offensive by ISIS against the Syrian central corridor while regime forces are fixed in northern and southern Syria. Although ISIS has directed its main effort in Syria over the past month against Kurdish YPG forces in northern Syria in a likely effort to protect ar-Raqqah City, ISIS remains a critical threat to both the regime’s core territory and its remaining remote outposts in eastern Syria. ISIS continued to launch probing attacks against rebel forces in the Eastern Qalamoun Mountains and regime positions in eastern Hama and Homs Provinces in a likely bid to seek opportunities for further territorial advancement in the vicinity of against Homs, Hama, and Damascus Cities meant to balance losses in northern Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, a major offensive by ISIS against Hasaka City in northeastern Syria forced the regime to deploy valuable elite Republican Guard units away from Deir ez-Zour City in a move possibly designed to weaken the regime’s defenses there. The combined effects of these pressures taken in conjunction with ongoing rebel offensives could ultimately force the Syrian regime into an unwilling contraction, generating additional opportunities for ISIS to expand.

The initiatives undertaken by the Syrian regime and its foreign backers during this reporting period suggest that the regime may be preparing for such an outcome. Regime forces have reportedly begun large-scale fortification efforts along the approaches to Damascus and Latakia in order to protect the regime’s core terrain in western Syria. Meanwhile, Hezbollah and regime forces have directed offensive operations to clear the remaining rebel presence in the Qalamoun Mountains along the Lebanese border – a necessary precondition for the formation of a loyalist rump state with connectivity to Hezbollah-dominated regions of Lebanon. In light of these observations, the deployment of elite regime combat units to regions west of Palmyra in central Syria may also constitute a defensive maneuver to buffer the Syrian central corridor against further ISIS advances rather than a decisive effort to recapture the city as hinted by senior regime officials. Overall, the limited offensive maneuvers conducted by the Syrian regime in recent months suggest that the regime’s capacity to set the terms of battle and dictate the trajectory of the Syrian Civil War may have been significantly degraded by the concurrent pressures of rebel and ISIS offensives.