

Syria Situation Report: February 10-17, 2015

1 February 10: Twenty-eight FSA-affiliated rebel factions announced the battle of 'Expel Them From Where They Expelled You' targeting the towns of Namer, Qarfeh, and Khirbet Ghazalah located southeast of Sheikh Miskin on the strategic M5 highway supply line to Dera'a city. The announcement occurred on the same day as a visit by regime head of political security Rustom Ghazali to his hometown of Qarfeh.



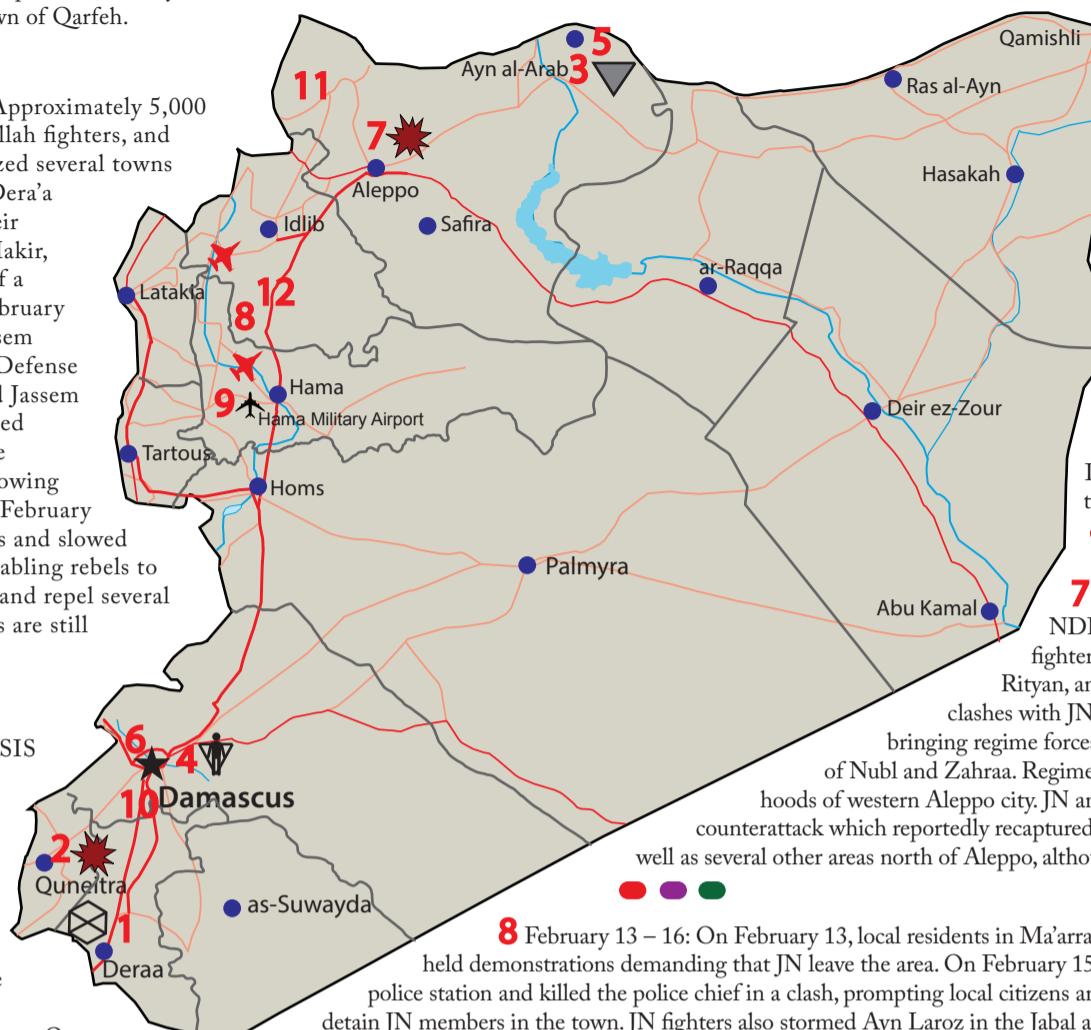
2 February 10 – 16: Approximately 5,000 Syrian soldiers, Hezbollah fighters, and Iranian militiamen seized several towns and hills in northern Dera'a Province, including Deir al-Adas and Deir al-Makir, following the launch of a regime offensive on February 9. IRGC General Qassem Suleimani and Syrian Defense Minister General Fahd Jassem al-Freij separately visited regime forces along the frontlines over the following days. A snowstorm on February 12 prevented air sorties and slowed the regime advance, enabling rebels to consolidate their lines and repel several regime attacks. Clashes are still ongoing.



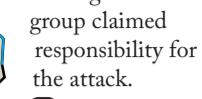
3 February 10 – 16: ISIS allowed hundreds of civilians to evacuate Sarrin and several nearby towns south of Ayn al-Arab as the group prepared defensive lines along the eastern bank of the Euphrates and the Aleppo-Hasakah highway. On February 15 YPG forces seized Baghdak Hill, southeast of Ayn al-Arab inside the boundary of ar-Raqqa Province, following clashes with ISIS militants.



4 February 12: Islamist rebel group Faylaq al-Rahman killed the ISIS emir for the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus during a raid on his headquarters in the town of Saqba. The ISIS emir attempted to detonate an SVEST before being shot by a rebel fighter.



5 February 13: Turkey declared the border area near Tel Abyad east of Ayn al-Arab to be a "closed military zone" following clashes between YPG and ISIS forces in the area. Meanwhile, a car bomb detonated near a Turkish police checkpoint in the Turkish town of Suruc, north of the border city of Ayn al-Arab, wounding three. No group claimed responsibility for the attack.



6 February 11 - 13:

Regime and NDF cut off supplies of food, fuel, and electricity to the rebel-held village of al-Hama north of Damascus city, placing the town under siege. Regime forces later attempted to advance into the village but were repelled by rebel forces. Meanwhile, a VBIED detonated in the area of Western Hrenah located east of al-Hama, killing six. JN later published a statement condemning unnamed parties who plant IEDs and car bombs in the region in order to 'discredit the mujahideen'.

7 February 17: Regime forces supported by NDF, Hezbollah, and Iranian-Afghani Shia fighters reportedly seized the villages of Bashkuy, Rityan, and Hardatnin north of Aleppo city following clashes with JN, the Sham Front, and other rebel groups,

bringing regime forces within six kilometers of the besieged towns of Nubl and Zahraa. Regime forces also advanced in several neighborhoods of western Aleppo city. JN and other rebel forces later conducted a counterattack which reportedly recaptured at least parts of Rityan and Hardatnin as well as several other areas north of Aleppo, although these reports remain unconfirmed.



8 February 13 – 16: On February 13, local residents in Ma'arrat Hurmeh in the Jabal al-Zawiya region held demonstrations demanding that JN leave the area. On February 15, JN fighters stormed the Ma'arrat Hurmeh police station and killed the police chief in a clash, prompting local citizens and FSA fighters to erect checkpoints and detain JN members in the town. JN fighters also stormed Ayn Larozi in the Jabal al-Zawiya region on February 16, seizing the headquarters of the FSA-affiliated '7th Brigade' while detaining 'dozens' of civilians and fighters.



9 February 14 – 15: Regime transport jets reportedly conducted multiple flights in order to carry pro-regime 'shabiha' and 'popular committees' militiamen by air from the Hama Military Airport to Damascus International Airport in order to reinforce battlefronts in Damascus and Dera'a Provinces.



10 February 10: Rebel factions surrounded the headquarters of Liwa al-Anfal in the town of Babbila in southern Damascus, claiming that the group had agreed to ally with the regime in exchange for aid deliveries which entered the al-Thiabiya suburb on February 6. Liwa al-Anfal issued a statement denying any involvement in negotiations with the regime.



11 February 12: The YPG are reportedly constructing a trench and fortifications stretching from Darat Izza in western Aleppo Province to Mount Barsaya along the Turkish border in order to "repel any hostile progress" toward the Kurdish canton of Ifrin.



12 February 13: JN held a demonstration in the town of Ma'arrat al-Numan in southern Idlib Province "in tribute" to the civilians of Douma and other areas in Eastern Ghouta targeted by heavy regime aerial bombardment. JN also opened a new Dawa and Guidance Office in Ma'arrat al-Numan on the same day.



Turkey

Car Bomb

Opposition Forces

SVEST

Pro-Regime Forces

Major Clash

ISIS

Declared Offensive

YPG

VBIED

Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)

Background Kinetic Activity

Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes

Major Regime Airstrikes

100km

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Content: Christopher Kozak
Graphics: John Sauerhoff

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Iran Raises its Posture in Southern Syria: IRGC Quds Force commander General Qassem Suleimani's appearance along regime frontlines validates reports of Iranian command-and-control over the ongoing offensive in Dera'a Province. Rebel forces fighting in the area also claim that Iranian proxies – including Hezbollah and Iranian-Afghani Shia volunteers – comprise a large proportion of the ground forces participating in the offensive. These indicators mark an unprecedented degree of visibility regarding Iranian ground involvement on behalf of the Syrian regime and suggest that Iran has designated Western Ghouta and Quneitra Provinces as key terrain in a departure from the previous focus upon Aleppo and Hama. In turn, the heavy Iranian and Hezbollah presence in this offensive may indicate that the regime lacks the capacity to mount offensive operations in southern Syria. Alternatively, the regime may intend to leverage the Iranian focus on Dera'a Province to direct its attention towards other battlefronts.

ISIS Reconfigures Forces in Northern Syria: ISIS evacuation of noncombatants from several villages south of Ayn al-Arab appears to indicate that ISIS intends to re-entrench its forces in northern Syria along a defensive line on the outskirts of the Ayn al-Arab/Kobani canton which roughly correspond to positions held by ISIS prior to the launch of its main offensive against Ayn al-Arab in September 2014. A successful ISIS consolidation along this line may enable ISIS to halt YPG momentum, secure remaining key terrain in eastern Aleppo Province, and potentially reallocate remaining resources to other fronts, particularly eastern Homs and Hama Provinces. Although the joint YPG-FSA forces participating in the Euphrates Volcano Operations Room have messaged their intentions to continue offensive operations against ISIS outside the boundaries of the canton, anti-ISIS forces may risk overextension with continued advances.

Rebels Declare Opposition to Aleppo Freeze Zone: On February 15 and 16, the Islamist-leaning Sham Front rebel coalition and the rebel-led Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) published statements condemning the United Nations proposal for a 'freeze' to fighting in Aleppo as favorable to the regime, effectively rendering the planned ceasefire inert. Notably, the Sham Front's declaration follows the recent consolidation of an Aleppo city operations room which included JN and Ansar al-Din, hardline Salafi-jihadist organizations which have previously denounced the 'freeze zone' proposal. Meanwhile, battlefield advances by pro-regime forces north of Aleppo city on February 17 threaten link regime units north of the city with forces besieged in the towns of Nubl and Zahraa, leaving JN positions in Huraytan and Kafr Hamra as the only obstacle to a complete encirclement of Aleppo. Although the full extent of the regime advance remains unknown amidst a rebel counterattack, these gains suggest that the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is equally uninterested in a 'freeze' in Aleppo despite positive rhetoric indicating his support for the plan.