

SYRIAN ARMED OPPOSITION FORCES IN ALEPPO

The United States faces a geostrategic inflection in Syria that it has not yet fully recognized. The “cessation of hostilities” declared on February 11, 2016 permits Russia and the Assad regime to continue targeting U.S. allies in Aleppo under the pretext that the opposition in the city consists predominantly of al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra. The Russian view of the situation in Aleppo is false and deliberately distorting. There are multiple opposition groups within Aleppo that are distinct from Jabhat al Nusra, do not share its vision, and which the United States must support and strengthen. The U.S. must take steps to achieve three objectives: 1) to prevent Jabhat al Nusra from assuming leadership of the Aleppo-based opposition, 2) to avert the humanitarian catastrophe of a siege of Aleppo City, and 3) to shape the reactions of partners such as Turkey. This report assesses the opposition powerbrokers in Aleppo and their mobilization for the siege in order to help facilitate intelligent policies to achieve the first objective. It recommends that the United States, rather than pursuing a false “cessation of hostilities” that does not protect Aleppines, take three steps to secure its interests and those of the Syria people: humanitarian airdrops to Aleppo, material support to opposition groups in Aleppo distinct from Jabhat al Nusra, and a creation of a humanitarian safe-zone north of Aleppo.

The Syrian regime is positioned to encircle and besiege opposition-held neighborhoods of Aleppo City as of February 13, 2016. Pro-regime forces backed by significant Russian airpower severed one of two supply lines that sustain the opposition’s control over parts of Aleppo City on February 4, and are 5 km away from completing the encirclement of the city.¹ If successful, the regime will most likely use a “siege and starve” tactic in order to force the opposition to surrender rather than launch difficult clearing operations in the short term. The regime frequently uses this tactic to collapse local pockets of resistance, as it did in Homs City, where opposition forces surrendered to the regime in May 2014 after a months-long siege.² The threat of a similar siege in Aleppo has driven tens of thousands of civilians to flee north to the Turkish border.³ The U.N. estimates that as many as another 150,000 civilians in the opposition-held parts of the city may soon flee.⁴ Turkey is refusing to open its border to absorb the additional refugees, resulting in an unsustainable swell of internally displaced persons (IDPs) on the Syrian side.⁵ Turkey would likely respond to the situation by taking military actions in the absence of a “cessation of hostilities”. These could include unilaterally establishing a humanitarian safe zone inside of Syria north of Aleppo to protect civilians and relieve pressure on the city itself. It may still do so.

Regime advances in Aleppo can also permanently foreclose options still available to the United States to achieve its long term objectives in Syria, which include the destruction of al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra, ISIS, and the irreconcilable base of Salafi-jihadi groups that shelter them.⁶ Aleppo Province is home to numerous opposition powerbrokers that remain relatively independent from Jabhat al Nusra, and therefore offer a potential cadre of opposition fighters that could help

the U.S. achieve American objectives in Syria. A surrender by besieged opposition groups in Aleppo to the Syrian regime would eliminate this potential ground partner in Syria. It is both more likely and more dangerous, however, that the experience of a drawn out siege in Aleppo will radicalize the opposition and cement the leadership of Jabhat al Nusra in northern Syria.

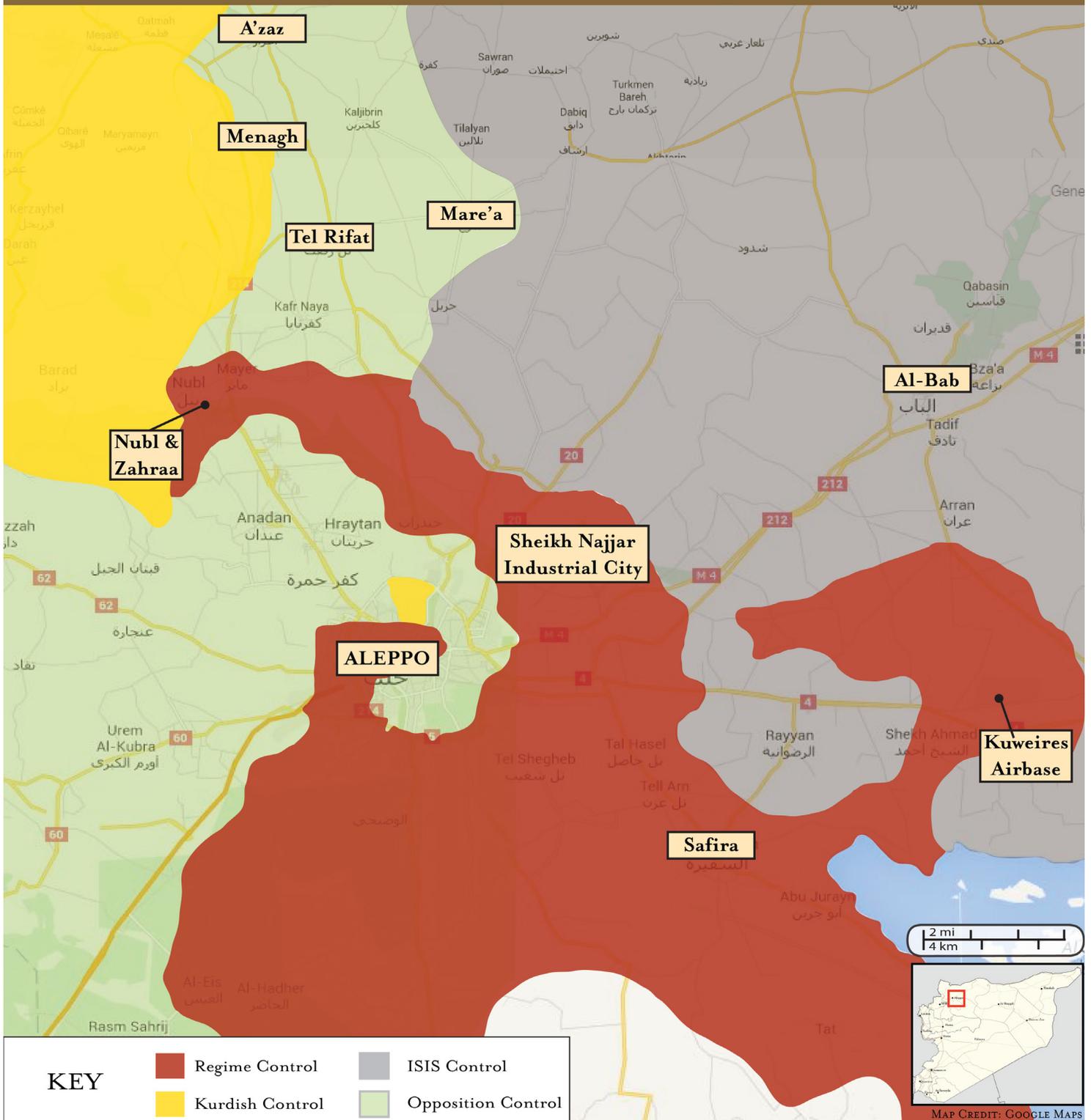
Russia and the Assad regime are still pursuing a victory in Aleppo despite a diplomatic agreement between great powers over humanitarian aid delivery and the theoretical case of a “cessation of hostilities.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov specifically excluded Aleppo when he announced the cessation of hostilities, claiming it is held by “illegal armed groups.” Russian airstrikes will in fact likely continue to target a broad category of opposition groups that Russia accuses to be Jabhat al Nusra, including groups that receive U.S. support. He stated on Feb 12 at a press conference after signing the agreement:

*“As for Aleppo, John [Kerry] said that he is worried by recent aggressive actions of the government. Well, if liberation of the city that has been taken by illegal armed groups can be qualified as aggression, then, well, yeah, probably. But to attack those who have taken your land is necessary – is a necessary thing. First of all, this has been done by Jabhat al-Nusrah, and also the western suburbs of Aleppo are still being controlled together with Jabhat al-Nusrah by Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham”.*⁷

The Russians have constructed a “cessation of hostilities” in Syria highly reminiscent of the Minsk II ceasefire now in place



Aleppo Control of Terrain: February 13, 2016



in Ukraine, which the Russians have used to continue escalating and de-escalating violence in order to pressure the Ukrainian government without fulfilling their own obligations.⁸ Neither the Assad regime nor any element of the Syrian armed opposition were included in the discussions over a ceasefire in Syria, providing Russia with an easy way to skirt the agreement. Assad declared his continued intent to retake “all of Syria” in an interview on February 12, demonstrating that Assad will only use the construct of a “cessation of hostilities” to set conditions in his own favor.⁹

THE U.S. DILEMMA

The U.S. has not recognized that it faces a fundamental policy decision in Aleppo. Despite Russian claims that pro-regime operations in Aleppo harm Jabhat al Nusra, the group provides only a fraction of the opposition’s combat power in the city and thus stands to lose little. Continued regime operations in Aleppo will likely accelerate radicalization and strengthen Jabhat al Nusra rather than stifle its growth. They will most likely cement Jabhat al Nusra’s leadership over a hardened core of committed fighters. Jabhat al Nusra will likely emerge from the Aleppo fight with considerable credit for its role supporting the opposition in Aleppo’s defense regardless of the outcome. A failure by Western countries to show strong support in this decisive moment will embolden this narrative.

The regime’s advance in northern Aleppo would not have been possible without the support of Russia’s air campaign, Russian Spetsnaz special forces, and significant reinforcements from Iran and Iranian-backed Shi’a militias. Russia is also providing international cover for the regime as it moves forward to implement the siege. Russian propaganda is casting the regime’s advance as a victory against Jabhat al Nusra and other jihadists in an attempt to stymie Western action to halt the campaign.¹⁰ The result is a policy crisis for the U.S. and Western countries that desire to assist the humanitarian crisis but fear an escalation with Russia. U.S. State Department Spokesperson John Kirby reaffirmed the U.S.’s policy to prioritize diplomatic engagement in a press conference on February 6, 2016, stating that “in many respects a siege of Aleppo has, in fact, happened.” Kirby noted that the U.S. would continue to pursue “assertive diplomacy” to find a political resolution to achieve a ceasefire.¹¹ The notion of protecting the Aleppo-based Syrian armed opposition in order to preserve American options in Syria over the long term has not yet surfaced in the public policy debate.

The regime’s advance has also jeopardized American efforts to clear ISIS from the Syrian-Turkish border north of Aleppo City by pinning a large number of opposition forces south of the new regime forward line of troops (FLOT). Opposition groups have historically been forced to shift manpower between the fights against ISIS north of Aleppo City and against the regime inside the city and its environs, based on which front line is most at risk. U.S.-backed forces fighting ISIS north of Aleppo City are now isolated from opposition forces in the city and cannot receive reinforcements from them. They are vulnerable to a renewed ISIS offensive to seize the Syrian-Turkish border town of Azaz if they cannot receive this additional manpower. These forces are likely to survive in the near term with the support of highly precise air support from the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition.¹² Operation Inherent Resolve Spokesman Colonel Steve Warren asserted that these forces are not impacted by the regime’s operations farther south in a press conference on February 10, 2016.¹³ They are not likely able to clear the Syrian-Turkish border with their current numbers, however. The Syrian Kurdish People’s Defense Force (YPG) is attacking this opposition-held terrain from the west, exacerbating their manpower challenge.

Opposition forces inside Aleppo City retain combat capabilities but are unlikely to prevent the regime from completing a siege without outside support. Preexisting additive pressures from the Russian and regime aerial campaigns, Syrian Kurdish forces, ISIS, and Jabhat al Nusra on these opposition forces have degraded their capabilities and will prevent them from mounting a sufficient defense.

THE ADDITIVE PRESSURES ON OPPOSITION FORCES IN ALEPPO

There are seven additive sources of pressure on armed opposition groups in Aleppo that have threatened the survival of these groups and have facilitated the advance of pro-regime forces around Aleppo. These pressures will further undermine the opposition’s ability to prevent or reverse the upcoming siege of opposition-held neighborhoods of Aleppo City.

Armed opposition groups are over-extended militarily. Opposition groups in Aleppo do not have sufficient manpower to defend against more than one major attack simultaneously. This forced them to redeploy between the city and countryside to meet each major attack over the course of 2015. As a result, the opposition

maintained numerous front lines that were susceptible to attack by reinforced regime forces and could not mass sufficient combat power.

Russian airstrikes have intensely targeted key lines of communication (LOCs). Russian warplanes began to focus strikes against armed opposition positions along the key LOC north of Aleppo City following the downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkish warplanes in late November 2015.¹⁴

ISIS north of Aleppo City has focused on seizing one of the supply lines Russia has targeted with airstrikes. ISIS regularly launches operations to sever the armed opposition supply line from the Turkish border to northern Aleppo City. The group often timed its operations amidst renewed opposition military activity against the regime inside Aleppo City in order to exploit the opposition's overextension.¹⁵ ISIS also uses its control over resources to weaken opposition-held areas; the group halted oil sales to the armed opposition in Aleppo for example, causing a significant strain to both armed opposition forces and the civilian population under their control.¹⁶

Syrian Kurdish YPG forces are seizing Arab-held terrain on another flank, the Ifrin canton. The YPG was largely contained within the Ifrin canton during 2015 but has sought to expand its territorial control eastwards since November 2015.¹⁷ U.S. backing for the YPG has made such gains possible inadvertently under the umbrella of the anti-ISIS fight. The U.S. helped establish a joint Kurdish-Arab force known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2015 as a new partner in the anti-ISIS fight. The YPG leads the SDF, which includes tribal forces called the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) in addition to numerous local Free Syrian Army affiliates. One such affiliate, Jaysh al Thuwar, has worked with the YPG to exploit the Russian-enabled regime gains north of Aleppo City and seize opposition-held areas near the Turkish border, including the Menagh Airbase on February 11.¹⁸ The majority of the opposition in Aleppo is deeply opposed to Kurdish expansion in the province. As such, the U.S. risks reigniting the conflict between the bulk of the Aleppo-based opposition and U.S.-allied Kurdish forces in Aleppo by empowering the YPG and allied opposition factions.

Regime and Russian forces have targeted civilian infrastructure. Regime and Russian warplanes regularly strike civilian targets in portions of Aleppo City held by the armed opposition, including hospital and bakeries.¹⁹ The destruction of hospitals and bakeries raise the cost of providing for the civilian

population for armed opposition forces. Combined with the increased Russian air campaign targeting armed opposition LOCs, the pressure this applies on armed opposition forces – and civilian populations – is acute.

Jabhat al Nusra has destroyed moderate groups whenever possible. Jabhat al Nusra targets moderate opposition groups in order to deter them from accepting too high a level of Western or regional support. Jabhat al Nusra successfully destroyed two U.S. backed groups in Northern Syria in 2014 and early 2015, and has recently initiated a campaign against Nour al Din al Zenki. Other smaller U.S.-backed groups remain vulnerable.

Jabhat al Nusra controls service provision, which it uses to gain support. Jabhat al Nusra's control over the provision of basic goods and services in areas of Aleppo City held by the armed opposition provides it with coercive power that compliments its direct military strength. Jabhat al Nusra acquired control over the main water and power plant in Aleppo City following negotiations with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent on July 18.²⁰ Jabhat al Nusra can leverage this influence in order to extract concessions from armed opposition groups, but also uses it as a tool to acquire social support. Jabhat al Nusra's soft power campaign stresses armed opposition ability to maintain their own local support.

These pressures affect some elements of the Aleppo-based opposition more than others. The combined effect of these pressures is asymmetric on this set of groups overall, however. The groups most likely to withstand these pressures in addition to a regime siege are groups with sufficient preexisting strength and resources to prevent immediate collapse. The following section examines the powerful elements of the opposition in Aleppo and assesses their sources of strength.

ALEPPO'S ARMED OPPOSITION

Aleppo's armed opposition consists of a diverse and fractious mix of groups from across the ideological spectrum. Over 50 opposition groups are active in Aleppo, most of which operate on highly local levels. The most powerful opposition groups in Aleppo are Islamist or moderate groups that have been able to retain relatively higher levels of independence from Jabhat al Nusra than their counterparts in Idlib Province, for example. This report characterizes powerful opposition groups as "powerbrokers" or "potential powerbrokers" based on their capabilities.

Powerbroker: Groups that define the success of military operations against either the regime or ISIS, occupy strategic terrain, and/or play a leading role in governance. These groups typically have large military forces, organized leadership, and/or formalized command structures.

Potential Powerbroker: Groups that could achieve significant battlefield effects against the regime, Jabhat al Nusra, and/or ISIS in Western Syria upon receipt of increased outside support. These groups could secure direct military gains and/or cohere smaller brigades into new coalitions.

There are five powerbrokers and three potential power brokers in Aleppo Province. Jabhat al Nusra plays an important role on the battlefield and in governance in the province, but does not yet meet the threshold of a powerbroker. The group is a potential powerbroker in Aleppo, and it is setting conditions for its rise as a powerbroker in the province.

The following sections provide an assessment of the relative strengths and unique characteristics of each of the opposition powerbrokers and potential powerbrokers in Aleppo Province. An upcoming ISW report will provide a complete characterization of the ideological spectrum of armed opposition groups in Syria and will sort opposition powerbrokers and potential powerbrokers by ideology across most of western Syria.

SYRIAN ARMED OPPOSITION GROUPS IN ALEPPO

STATUS	OPPOSITION GROUP	IDEOLOGY	US SUPPORT*
POWER BROKERS	Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya (Ahrar al Sham)	Salafi-jihadi	--
	Al Jabhat al Shamiya	Islamist	Current
	Jaysh al Mujahideen	Islamist	Current
	Feilaq al Sham	Islamist	--
	Fawj al Awl	Islamist	Current
POTENTIAL POWER BROKERS	Jabhat al Nusra	Salafi-jihadi	--
	Nour al Din al Zenki	Islamist	Former (2015)
	Firqat Al Sultan Murad	Moderate Secularist	--
OTHER NOTABLE GROUPS	13th Division	Moderate Secularist	Current
	16th Division	Moderate Secularist	Current
	Northern Division	Moderate Secularist	Current
	Suqour al Jebel	Moderate Secularist	Current
	Jaysh al Izza	Moderate Secularist	Current
	Al Firqat al Wasta	Moderate Secularist	Current

*The assessment of U.S. support is based on demonstrated use of TOW anti-tank missiles by the group via YouTube.

POWERBROKERS

The five Aleppo powerbrokers define the success or failure of military operations in Aleppo Province. They also play major roles in governance, and often coordinate their positions on political issues such as the question of a negotiated settlement of the Syrian Civil War. The ability and willingness of these groups to coordinate is a defining characteristic, and a core strength under conditions of high military pressure. Three of these groups (Jaysh al Mujahideen, Al Fawj al Awal, and al Jabhat al Shamiya) are U.S. supported and remain relatively independent of Jabhat al Nusra, while Ahrar al Sham is a close Jabhat al Nusra ally. The status of these groups in coming weeks will indicate the relative strength of the opposition in Aleppo and the likelihood that Aleppo-based groups will retain their independence from Jabhat al Nusra in the medium term.

Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya (Ahrar al Sham)

The Salafi-jihadi group Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya (Ahrar al Sham) is one of the largest armed opposition groups in Syria. It operates across all of Western Syria, with a core powerbase in Idlib and Hama Provinces that it uses to assert itself as a powerbroker inside Aleppo. It controls the Bab al Hawa border crossing located in Northern Idlib Province, West of Aleppo City, which supplies the last remaining armed opposition line of communications (LOC) into Aleppo. Control of this crossing provides Ahrar al Sham with influence over the flow of supplies from Turkey into Western Aleppo City, and likely enables the group to generate tax revenue.²¹ Ahrar al Sham began to absorb smaller longstanding groups in Aleppo Province after the start of the Russian air campaign, indicating that it is growing strength in the province.²²



Ahrar al Sham is also an influential political and religious actor in Aleppo Province. It established an office for its political wing in Aleppo City in early 2015, and has been active in governance in the province since at least 2012.²³ Ahrar al Sham's General Command appears to be reprioritizing the group's political activities inside Aleppo Province in 2016. It deployed the head of its political wing to develop an "action plan" to reform its governance in the province on December 31, 2015.²⁴ Ahrar al Sham maintains its own "Islamic police" force in Aleppo City

and its Shari'a Office is known to impose religious rulings on local populations in the province including the wearing of *burkas*.²⁵ These governance efforts have typically occurred alongside Jabhat al Nusra and other groups. Ahrar al Sham is active in the Jabhat al Nusra-led Dar al Qada'a courthouse in Huraytan, northwest of Aleppo City, and a local shari'a court dominated by Salafi-jihadi groups called the District Courthouse for the Western Aleppo Countryside.²⁶

Al Jabhat al Shamiya (U.S. Supported)

Al Jabhat al Shamiya is the newest incarnation of one of Aleppo's oldest Free Syrian Army Affiliates, Liwa al Tawhid.²⁷ Al Jabhat al Shamiya likely maintains the Liwa al Tawhid's connections to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, although the formation of Al Jabhat al Shamiya reportedly followed months of negotiations between Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, which may have

included a new funding agreement for the group.²⁸ The group's influence appears to be growing in 2016. The group publically declared its merger with prominent U.S.-backed, TOW anti-tank missile recipient Thuwar al Sham Brigades on January 27, 2016.²⁹

The merger appears to have transferred the TOW missiles, as Al Jabhat al Shamiya demonstrated its first use of the weapon on January 26, 2016.³⁰ Al Jabhat al Shamiya controls the Bab al Salameh border crossing with Turkey north of Aleppo City, which feeds the GLOC pro-regime forces severed on February 4, 2016.³¹ The group is therefore now likely split between the Northern Aleppo countryside, where it retains access to the border, and the city, where it is at risk of siege.

Al Jabhat al Shamiya is a major anti-ISIS opposition group, and increased its anti-ISIS messaging in late 2015. It released a mock execution video styled after ISIS propaganda on December 9, 2015, in which fighters staged an execution of ISIS fighters and walked away from the detainees, asserting "Muslims are not criminals" and demanding that ISIS repent for its violent actions.³²

Al Jabhat al Shamiya is also a major political and religious actor in the province. The group maintains specialized units for activities behind the front line, including a Security Commission, which is responsible for internal security measures on behalf of the Shari'a Court of Aleppo and its Countryside. Its activities include policing, managing checkpoints,³³ and conducting arrests and executions.³⁴ The Security Commission also claims



to provide services such as maintaining electricity and water infrastructure in Aleppo, although this appears to function at a more localized level;³⁵ Jabhat al Nusra maintains control over the main water and power plants in Aleppo city.³⁶ Al Jabhat al Shamiya also manages several “monitoring centers” in Aleppo Province to assist other opposition factions with surveillance and command and control.³⁷

Jaysh al Mujahideen (U.S. Supported)

Jaysh al Mujahideen is a powerful ground force in Aleppo that draws strength primarily from the Aleppo countryside. Its fighting force is made up of a reported 5,000 fighters who are active across nearly every frontline in Aleppo.³⁸

The group is one of the most prominently anti-ISIS groups in the province; it was formed in January 2014 in order to coordinate an uprising against ISIS by armed opposition groups in Aleppo.³⁹ In November 2014, the group displayed the receipt of TOW anti-tank missiles, indicating that the group passed a western vetting process.⁴⁰



Jaysh al Mujahideen actively participates in local governance efforts and was a founding member of the Shari'a Court of Aleppo and its Countryside. The group has also demonstrated a unique willingness to engage in negotiated settlement with the Assad regime. Jaysh al Mujahideen leader Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Jumaa Bakour attended the Riyadh opposition conference in December 2015 that selected the opposition's High Negotiations Commission (HNC) delegation to attend indirect talks with a regime delegation in Geneva on January 30 – 31.⁴¹ Bakour maintained support for the delegation throughout the commission's meetings with UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura in Geneva in late January and early February prior to the commission's withdrawal from the process on February 3.⁴²

Feilaq al Sham

Feilaq al Sham is a powerful cross-front actor in Northern Syria with an estimated 4,000 fighters drawn from 19 local affiliates across Homs, Hama, Idlib and Aleppo Provinces.⁴³ The group manages to leverage this diffuse force posture to deploy reinforcements across fronts, demonstrating a relatively

high command and control ability. This capability grants it the status of powerbroker in Aleppo as Aleppo-based groups



are increasingly dependent on deployments from Idlib to reinforce critical frontlines both north and south of Aleppo City. Feilaq al Sham began to occupy leadership roles in major armed opposition coalitions in mid 2015, likely as a result of this capability and effective military leadership.⁴⁴ Feilaq al Sham

is connected to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and receives funding from both Turkey and Qatar.⁴⁵

Al Fawj al Awal

Al Fawj al Awal is a relatively small but powerful splinter faction from the Tawhid Brigade, made up of a reported 1,500 fighters.⁴⁶ The reason for the splinter is unclear; rumors of involvement from the Turkish Military Operations Command Center (MOC) could indicate that the group's formation reflects an effort by regional actors to develop a new ground partner in Northern Syria. The group has since displayed the use of a single TOW anti-tank missile in the Eastern countryside of Hama Province, possibly confirming this theory.⁴⁷ The election of Al Fawj al Awal's most recent leader was also allegedly on orders from a foreign power, likely indicating Turkey's increased involvement with the



group.⁴⁸ The group's military commander is a notorious tunnel bomb expert named Abu Assad, a longstanding figure in armed opposition operations in Aleppo City.⁴⁹ Tunnel bombs are an effective offensive measure against entrenched regime positions in Western Aleppo City, and as such this group is a key military ally for any armed opposition group.

POTENTIAL POWERBROKERS

Potential powerbrokers in Aleppo are groups that have an impact on the battlefield but do not have the weight to influence governance or dictate the division of resources. These groups could become powerbrokers if provided with significant outside backing, either by the U.S. or a regional actor. On their own,

however, they are vulnerable to defeat or absorption into larger groups such as Ahrar al Sham in the near term.

Harakat Nour al Din al Zenki (U.S. Supported in 2015)

Harakat Nour al Din al Zenki is one of Aleppo's longest standing armed opposition groups and was once a leading force inside the province. Nour al Din al Zenki was a characteristically independent group with approximately 1,500 fighters at its founding in July 2012.⁵⁰ The group received TOW anti-tank missiles and therefore had passed the U.S.'s vetting process, although the group's last use of the weapon was on October 30, 2015.⁵¹ The group seems to have cultivated deeper ties with Turkey despite the apparent loss of access to TOW missiles. Nour al Din al Zenki merged with a local Syrian Turkmen group and immediately replaced its leader with a Turkmen commander on November 15, 2015, likely



demonstrating Turkish involvement.⁵² The group continued to expand its ties to Turkmen fighters north of Aleppo, where a small Turkmen group Liwa Ahfad al Hamza merged under Nour al Din al Zenki on December 12.⁵³

Nour al Din al Zenki demonstrates the risk that relatively independent opposition groups face of direct assault by Jabhat al Nusra. Jabhat al Nusra attacked the group's headquarters in Aleppo City on October 6, 2015, possibly in retaliation for deepening ties between the group and Turkey.⁵⁴ Thirty-five members of the Turkmen component of Nour al Din al Zenki later pledged allegiance to Jabhat al Nusra on November 11, demonstrating Jabhat al Nusra's high coercive capability.⁵⁵ Local reports in late November indicated that tensions were still high between the group and Jabhat al Nusra. The group was eventually forced to withdraw from its positions along frontlines in Aleppo on January 28, 2016, reportedly due to its lack of funding and support.⁵⁶ Jabhat al Nusra appears to have assumed control of at least part of Nour al Din al Zenki's positions. Nour al Din al Zenki remains active in the fight to defend Aleppo City from besiegement, but now appears to play an auxiliary role to other groups.⁵⁷

Nour al Din al Zenki is not a major political actor in the province, which likely helped enable Jabhat al Nusra to sideline the group. It has maintained specialized units, however, that enabled it to play a role in civilian life behind defensive lines. These units include a "security regiment" responsible for policing and an "advocacy company" for religious outreach.⁵⁸ Nour al Din al Zenki's advocacy office advertised hanging

banners quoting prominent Salafi Jihadist figures, including Abdullah Azzam, in early 2016.⁵⁹ The group had not previously demonstrated significant signs of Salafi Jihadist figures, and the advertisements in early 2016 could indicate that the group has submitted to Jabhat al Nusra's pressure to change its ideological stance.

Firqat al Sultan Murad (U.S. Supported)

Firqat Al Sultan Murad is the most prominent Arab Turkmen group in Aleppo Province. As such, the group likely retains close ties to Turkey. The group is a current TOW-anti tank missile recipient, indicating that the group passed a Western vetting process.⁶⁰ It leads efforts to consolidate the Aleppo-based Turkmen armed opposition and recently merged with three other major Turkmen groups on December 8, 2015.⁶¹



Following the merger, the group elevated its name from Brigade to Division, likely indicating a significant increase in the group's fighting force. Firqat Al Sultan Murad is well integrated into opposition

structures inside Aleppo and was a member of the two strongest opposition groups in Aleppo during 2015. It became a member of the joint opposition political structure Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) in August 2015.⁶²

OPPOSITION GROUPS REORGANIZE COMMAND AND CONTROL STRUCTURES

How the opposition organizes to defend Aleppo City will impact its ability to prevent or survive the regime's upcoming siege. The opposition has developed mechanisms to endure high levels of organizational stress over the first five years of the war, and is well conditioned to adapt to this new threat. The ability to coordinate militarily is a critical capability of the opposition in Aleppo that has ensured its survival under sustained regime pressure since 2012. Opposition powerbrokers often lead the coordination of dozens of smaller groups through "military operations rooms" that serve as a command and control mechanism as well as a means to distribute resources in the province. Jabhat al Nusra acquires a leadership role in these operations rooms when opposition groups are weak; the structure and composition of the operations rooms therefore indicate the relative strength of the opposition in the province as well as Jabhat al Nusra's penetration of opposition ranks.

Opposition groups are falling back on this capability to survive the upcoming siege, but they have not yet turned to Jabhat al Nusra for leadership. Fifteen groups declared the formation of the Jaysh al Halab, or Army of Aleppo, on February 6 in order to coordinate the defense of opposition-held neighborhoods in the city.⁶³ Jaysh al Halab consolidates the strength of all five powerbrokers in Aleppo and two potential powerbrokers. It is a powerful combination of groups and a promising alignment of combat power outside of Jabhat al Nusra's direct control.

Aleppo powerbrokers are also marshaling all available resources to defend opposition-held areas of Aleppo City and prepare for the upcoming siege. They are shutting down governance structures in order to shift resources and manpower to frontlines against pro-regime forces. Two of the most prominent shari'a courts active in opposition-held areas announced the suspension of their activities and called on their employees and other able-bodied civilians to join the frontlines.⁶⁴ Other local opposition governance structures are launching joint efforts to marshal their resources. Both the Local Council of Aleppo City, an administrative body, and Aleppo's Free Police announced the formation of a joint administrative body with a third shari'a court led by Aleppo powerbrokers.⁶⁵ The complete mobilization of opposition-held areas of Aleppo City demonstrates that the outcome of the next few weeks in Aleppo will be pivotal.

Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham will make crucial contributions to the fight in Aleppo. Jabhat al Nusra deployed a large convoy of reinforcements to Aleppo Province on January 28 in order to stiffen the defenses of the Syrian opposition within Aleppo City in preparation for the likely upcoming siege.⁶⁶ Jabhat al Nusra is not present in the new Jaysh al Halab, but Ahrar al Sham will most likely facilitate Jabhat al Nusra's involvement in the operations it leads as the two allied groups tend to cooperate closely on the battlefield.⁶⁷ Ahrar al Sham issued a general call for opposition groups to merge underneath its leadership in Aleppo Province shortly after the regime's advance, demonstrating that it intends to lead Aleppo's opposition.⁶⁸ The consolidation of power by Ahrar al Sham will support Jabhat al Nusra's objective to transform the Syrian armed opposition over time. The U.S. thus has an interest in blocking Ahrar al Sham's consolidation and preserving the independence of the remaining participants in Jaysh al Halab.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. has a short time frame in Aleppo to prevent the upcoming humanitarian catastrophe and preserve opposition

groups the U.S. needs in order to destroy ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra in the long term. The Aleppo-based opposition remains relatively independent and therefore offers the U.S. a promising source of ground forces against Jabhat al Nusra in Northern Syria. Opposition groups that receive covert U.S. support are still among Aleppo's powerbrokers and potential powerbrokers. The regime's advance in Aleppo poses an existential threat to these opposition forces, however. Jabhat al Nusra will use the defense of Aleppo as a vehicle to overwhelm opposition groups that are acceptable to the West and entrench itself within the civilian population. The collapse of the opposition in Aleppo, either in a surrender to the regime or in a merger with Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham during a siege, would remove options to achieve American objectives in northern Syria.

Russia is using the cover of a potential "cessation of hostilities" to set conditions for the collapse of U.S.-backed groups in Aleppo. There is very little to indicate that Russia, Iran, or the Syrian regime have any intention of halting their military campaign in northern Syria, despite this diplomatic overture. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has explicitly noted that Russia does not intend to halt its air campaign against "terrorists" in Syria.⁶⁹ Russia exploits the West's lack of understanding of the Syrian armed opposition to justify targeting a broad swath of groups that include powerbrokers that receive covert U.S. support. Russia's objective is to eliminate the opposition in Aleppo that poses the greatest threat to Assad and undermine Western support of these groups under the cover of targeting "terrorists." As such, the February 11 "cessation of hostilities" agreement is not a solution to the challenges the U.S. faces in Syria; it is a submission to Russia's agenda.⁷⁰

Syrian armed opposition groups are unlikely to agree to a "cessation of hostilities" under these conditions. No armed opposition group participated in the initial discussions. Aleppo-based groups have consistently refused to agree to localized "freeze zones" in the past on the grounds that they do not trust the Syrian regime to adhere to one.⁷¹ The current deal legitimizes this argument, as the deal is very clearly on Russia's terms. The U.S. risks jeopardizing the prospects of achieving a negotiated settlement in Syria in the long term if it does not abandon this cessation of hostilities initiative. Jabhat al Nusra and other hardline groups will use this initiative – and the regime's almost certain violation of it – as proof that Syrians should permanently abandon the negotiating table. American submission to Russia's agenda in Syria thus directly undermines the requirements for American national security.

The situation in Aleppo requires American leadership and action. U.S.-trained opposition forces in the Northern Aleppo countryside are not alone strong enough to secure Aleppo City, for they are unlikely able to break through the regime's new forward line of troops (FLOT) in the northern countryside. The U.S. does not need to consider drastic measures such as ground forces in order to have a major impact in Aleppo, however. It is possible to change the outcome of the fight in Aleppo and assist the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding through a few limited yet crucial steps.

First, the U.S. could conduct humanitarian airdrops of supplies into opposition-held neighborhoods of the city in order to sustain both the opposition groups and the hundreds of thousands of civilians in opposition-held areas of Aleppo City to forestall a humanitarian catastrophe.

Providing humanitarian aid to opposition groups in Aleppo increases their ability to endure the siege without submitting to Jabhat al Nusra's leadership. The U.S. has the capability to do so from airbases in Turkey currently used for the anti-ISIS campaign. Turkey would support such operations and almost certainly grant the use of its bases for them to preserve opposition groups in Aleppo, including those that already receive Turkish aid, in order to pursue regime change in Syria. Jabhat al Nusra would be able to access some of this aid, but the U.S. should not let Jabhat al Nusra's presence in the city condemn the civilian population and opposition groups at risk. Any American intervention in Aleppo, even an airdrop of humanitarian supplies, will risk provoking Russia. Russia is very unlikely willing to rise escalation over Aleppo, however, as it is not a core Russian strategic interest. U.S. policymakers are reportedly considering humanitarian airdrops, and should undertake them immediately.

Second, the U.S. should significantly increase the military and financial support to the non-Ahrar al Sham powerbrokers and potential powerbrokers examined in this report. The U.S. already provides aid on a limited scale to many of them. The U.S. should provide these groups with increased TOW anti-tank missile shipments in addition to increased shipments of light weapons, ammunition, and money to pay their fighters. The U.S. could do so from Turkey, where a covert U.S. program to provide small numbers of TOW anti-tank missiles to vetted opposition groups is already reportedly based.⁷² The U.S. can deliver these supplies quietly through the Bab al Hawa border crossing with Turkey west of Aleppo City. This is advantageous because air dropping the supplies is more vulnerable to Russian interdiction.

The provision of military supplies in addition to humanitarian aid would preserve the powerbroker status of four ideologically viable powerbrokers (al Jabhat al Shamiya, Jaysh al Mujahideen, Feilaq al Sham, and Fawj al Awal) and increase their relative strength vis-à-vis Ahrar al Sham. The increase in both military and humanitarian support could also transform all of the potential powerbrokers into powerbrokers by both providing them more access to resources than smaller Aleppo based groups have and closing the gap between powerbrokers and potential powerbrokers. It would also mitigate Jabhat al Nusra's ability to coerce or exploit the weakness of potential powerbrokers in order to absorb or transform them. It could even be sufficient to coalesce smaller opposition groups in Aleppo under the leadership of powerbrokers that are potential U.S. allies as opposed to al Qaeda-allied Ahrar al Sham.

The U.S. should not make additional support contingent upon a refusal by opposition groups to coordinate with Jabhat al Nusra, because it is not a demand these groups can meet under current military conditions. The U.S. should instead adopt an approach to incentivize and enable these groups to retain freedom of action and to withstand Jabhat al Nusra coercion over the medium term while potentially growing stronger. The severity of the situation in Aleppo will likely prevent Jabhat al Nusra from attacking these groups directly because doing so would greatly harm the group's image. The upcoming siege of Aleppo thus offers the U.S. the opportunity to build future partners against Jabhat al Nusra by exploiting conditions in which Jabhat al Nusra's freedom of action against Western clients is limited.

Third, The U.S. could also support the establishment of a humanitarian safe zone along the Turkish border. Turkey may independently do so in order to address the flow of refugees that it cannot absorb. A safe zone north of Aleppo could also provide Turkey with basing it can use to deliver additional support to opposition forces in Aleppo City, such as indirect fire. The U.S. could support this course of action with aerial overflight to prevent the regime from attacking the safe zone, and could leverage U.S.-trained forces operating near the Turkish border to help secure the zone and pressure the regime's forward line of troops (FLOT).

Preventing the regime from recapturing Aleppo does not solve the many other challenges the U.S. faces in Syria; it merely buys some time and prevents a more dangerous future from emerging. Jabhat al Nusra and opposition forces it leads will

still hold terrain in Idlib Province that is sustained by access to the Turkish border even if Aleppo falls. Pro-regime forces are unlikely to clear this terrain in the near term, particularly if Turkey sustains its support to Idlib-based groups. Jabhat al Nusra and many opposition forces in Aleppo will likely fall back into Idlib Province and launch a sustained insurgency from that terrain if they lose in Aleppo City. The U.S. therefore will have to develop options to eliminate Jabhat al Nusra in Idlib in the future regardless of the outcome in Aleppo. Preserving a core cadre of opposition fighters in Aleppo would create an option to use those forces for future operations.

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