

Syria Situation Report: February 17-23, 2015

1 February 17 – 24: JN, Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, the Sham Front, and a number of other rebel groups recaptured the villages of Rityan, Duweir al-Zeitoun, and Herdetnin north of Aleppo city following heavy clashes with pro-regime forces who seized the villages on February 17. At least thirty pro-regime fighters were detained after surrendering to rebel forces, while activists reported that regime forces had executed forty-nine people including women and children during their brief control over the villages. On February 20, JN and rebel fighters also seized the majority of the nearby village of al-Mallah, which had previously been held by the regime. Clashes continue along the outskirts of the regime-held villages of Bashkwi and Handarat.

2 February 18 – 19: JN and Ahrar al-Sham, along with several Islamist and FSA-affiliated rebel brigades, announced the Battle of 'Unification of the Flag' aimed at recapturing several villages and hills recently seized by the regime offensive in northern Dera'a Province. Rebel forces later announced tactical gains in the area following clashes with regime forces supported by Hezbollah and Iranian fighters.

3 February 23: An SVBIED detonated at a joint Hezbollah-NDF checkpoint near the entrance to the Sayyida Zeinab neighborhood of southeastern Damascus city, killing at least six and wounding at least 14 others. Regime security sources claimed that an SVEST also detonated during the attack. No party has claimed responsibility for the blasts.

4 February 20 – 21: JN detained a large number of 'local militiamen' in the village of Ma'arat Hurmah in the Jabal al-Zawiya region following clashes between the two parties. JN also detained ten young men in the nearby village of al-Amiriyah and burned down the house of a rebel brigade commander. Meanwhile, residents of the towns of Kafroma and Ayn Laroz in the Jabal al-Zawiya region held anti-JN demonstrations expressing support for the FSA.

5 February 19 - 24: On February 19, the Eastern Ghouta Unified Military Command announced that the formation of any new factions or organizations in Eastern Ghouta is "strictly prohibited." On February 24, 'hundreds' of JN and Eastern Ghouta Unified Military Command fighters launched a joint operation targeting alleged ISIS members in the town of Kafr Batna, resulting in the arrest of twenty-five residents and the deaths of two young men. Reports later indicated that approximately 2,000 local civilians later held a protest during the funerals of the two men demanding punishment for their killers.

6 February 20: A delegation of regime supporters from Palmyra allegedly flew from Damascus to Tehran in order to discuss unspecified 'transactions' with Iranian officials. Activists alleged that IRGC forces are using Palmyra as a 'logistical base' for the training of NDF forces.

7 February 22 - 24: YPG forces backed by the "Syriac Military Council" and anti-ISIS coalition air support advanced to within five kilometers of the ISIS stronghold of Tel Hamis southeast of Qamishli, seizing at least 30 nearby villages and prompting a civilian exodus to southern Hasaka Province. YPG fighters are reportedly providing coalition forces with the coordinates of ISIS targets, the same method used in Ayn al-Arab.

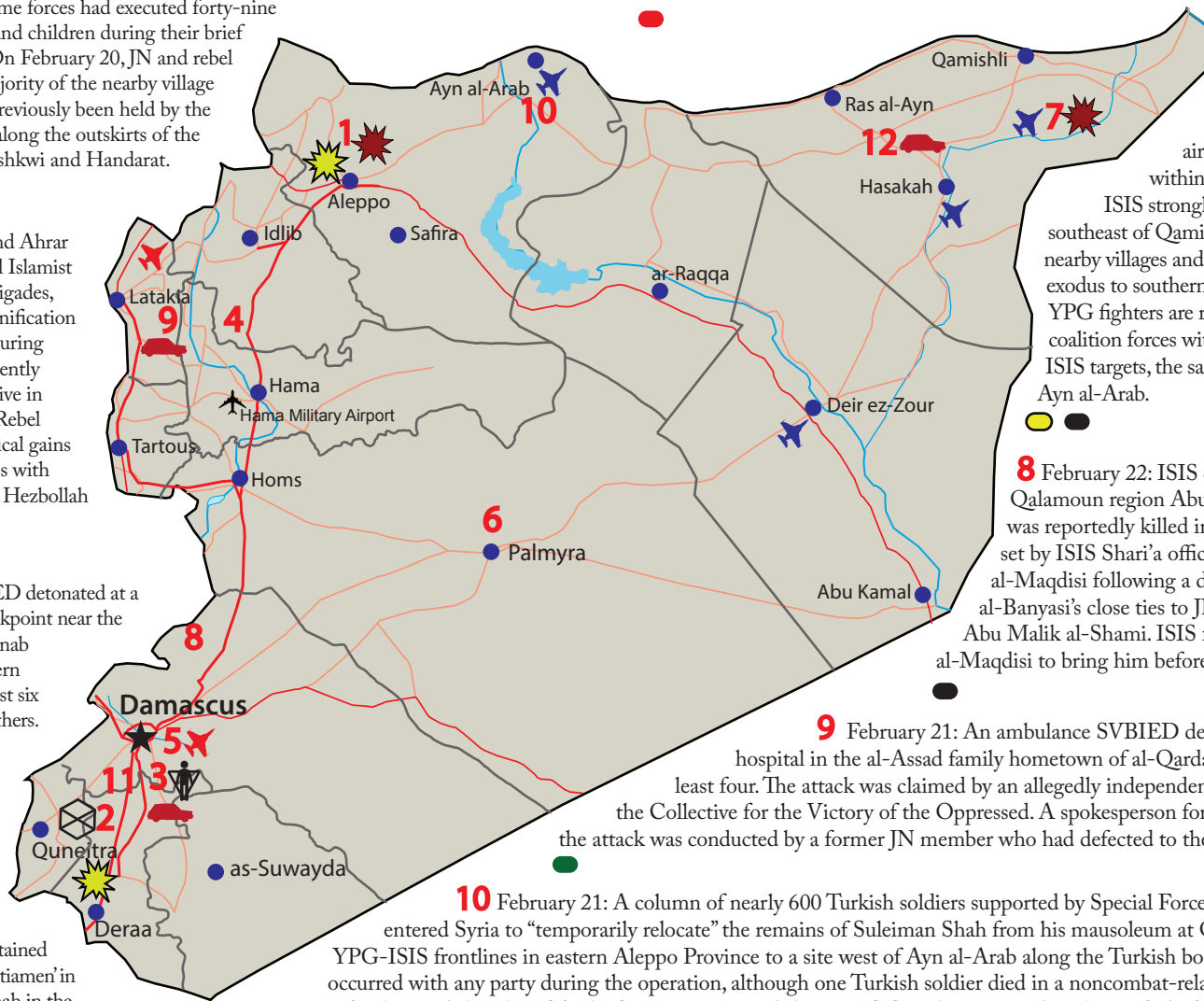
8 February 22: ISIS commander for the Qalamoun region Abu Osama al-Banyasi was reportedly killed in an ambush near Arsal set by ISIS Shari'a official Abu al-Walid al-Maqdisi following a dispute regarding al-Banyasi's close ties to JN emir in Qalamoun Abu Malik al-Shami. ISIS forces later arrested al-Maqdisi to bring him before a Shari'a court.

9 February 21: An ambulance SVBIED detonated in front of a hospital in the al-Assad family hometown of al-Qardaha, Latakia, killing at least four. The attack was claimed by an allegedly independent Islamist group called the Collective for the Victory of the Oppressed. A spokesperson for the group stated that the attack was conducted by a former JN member who had defected to the Collective.

10 February 21: A column of nearly 600 Turkish soldiers supported by Special Forces and armored vehicles entered Syria to "temporarily relocate" the remains of Suleiman Shah from his mausoleum at Qarah Qawkaz near YPG-ISIS frontlines in eastern Aleppo Province to a site west of Ayn al-Arab along the Turkish border. No clashes occurred with any party during the operation, although one Turkish soldier died in a noncombat-related accident. Turkish officials stated that the FSA, the Syrian regime, and the anti-ISIS coalition were directly notified of the operation, with reports conflicting regarding on whether the YPG received direct notice or an indirect warning via the FSA. The Assad regime termed the operation an act of "blatant aggression" and warned of unspecified "consequences."

11 February 22: The southern Damascus neighborhoods of Yalda, Beit Sahem, and Babbila formed a new reconciliation committee to meet with regime officials and discuss reopening the Babbila crossing to food aid. The new committee includes several rebel representatives, including the local Jaysh al-Islam commander, and replaces a prior committee which did not include rebel representation.

12 February 23 - 24: On February 23, ISIS forces launched an attack against the YPG-held town of Tel Tamer northwest of Hasaka city, seizing several neighboring villages amidst heavy shelling of YPG positions in the town. On February 24, an SVBIED detonated near the entrance to Tel Tamer with no reports of casualties. ISIS militants also kidnapped at least 90 Assyrian Christians after overrunning several Christian villages along the Khabur River valley southeast of Tel Tamer.



- Turkey
- Opposition Forces
- Pro-Regime Forces
- ISIS
- YPG
- Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)

- SVEST
- Major Clash
- Declared Offensive
- VBIED

Background Kinetic Activity

- Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes
- Major Regime Airstrikes
- Alleged CW Attack



Content: Christopher Kozak
Graphics: John Sauerhoff

©2015 by the Institute for the Study of War

Rebel Forces Repel Regime Advance North of Aleppo: The success of rebel forces in blunting and reversing the regime offensive north of Aleppo city indicates that regime forces remain unable to decisively complete the encirclement of Aleppo without the risk of overextension. Notably, JN and other Salafi-jihadist groups such as Jabhat Ansar al-Din appear to have played a key role in leading and conducting the rebel counterattack. This prominence underlines growing Salafi-jihadist influence in the vicinity of Aleppo city, blunting hopes that opposition forces will respond to appeals from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura for a six week suspension of artillery shelling in Aleppo.

ISIS Refocuses on Hasaka Province: ISIS advances targeting Tel Tamer and the Assyrian villages along the Khabur River valley suggest that the Islamic State seeks to develop momentum along a new front amidst a slowdown of the YPG offensive in the Ayn al-Arab/Kobani canton. ISIS control over Tel Tamer would sever the main highway connecting YPG positions in Hasaka city to Ras al-Ayn, potentially limiting Kurdish reinforcement to the area. Meanwhile, ISIS raids and abductions targeting the Assyrian Christian population near Tel Tamer may serve as retaliation against the participation of the Syriac Military Council in the ongoing YPG offensive against Tel Hamis or provide leverage for a future prisoner exchange.

Core Regime Terrain Targeted by Blasts: The SVBIEDs in al-Qardaha and Sayyida Zeinab targeted sites deep within regime-held terrain which possess symbolic significance to the Assad regime. In particular, the Sayyida Zeinab neighborhood serves as both a major Shi'a pilgrimage site and a crucial command-and-control node for Hezbollah, Liwa al-Fadl al-Abbas, and other Iranian proxy groups in Syria. A limited number of opposition groups possess the capability to construct effective SVBIEDs. Although JN has not claimed credit for either attack, reports of shadowy ties between JN and the allegedly independent 'Collective' as well as JN's demonstrated capacity to conduct IED and car bomb attacks within Damascus city both point to likely JN involvement in the bombings.