

# Syria Situation Report: March 2-10, 2015

**1** March 2: According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a new pro-regime political organization was established in Hasaka province using the slogan “al-Jazira is Arab and Syrian.” The organization aims to “maintain the Arab and Syrian nature” of Hasaka province under the banner of the Syrian Arab Republic.

**2** March 8: Pro-regime forces established a new Shi'a militia in Homs after recruiting from primarily Shi'a villages in the northern and eastern Homs countryside. Twenty percent of the new brigade allegedly consists of Iranian and Afghan Shi'a fighters, and the brigade is expected to receive support directly from Hezbollah and Iran. Reports indicate the brigade will participate in upcoming military operations in Northern Homs.

**3** March 8: JN formally denied rumors that alleged it intended to break away from al-Qaeda and that it had met with Qatari officials in order to negotiate a possible funding stream from the Gulf.

**4** March 4: JN, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Jabhat Shamiya, and other rebel groups destroyed the Air Force Intelligence branch in the Jamiyat al-Zahraa district of northwestern Aleppo city, detonating a large tunnel bomb to collapse the building.

**5** February 4: Regime and pro-regime militia forces from the Palmyra military camp attacked the ISIS-held T2 pumping station southwest of Abu Kamal in Deir ez-Zour province, killing 50 ISIS militants. ISIS subsequently reinforced the position and began mining the roads leading to the oil field. In addition, ISIS attacked five major regime oil sites in the Eastern Homs desert.

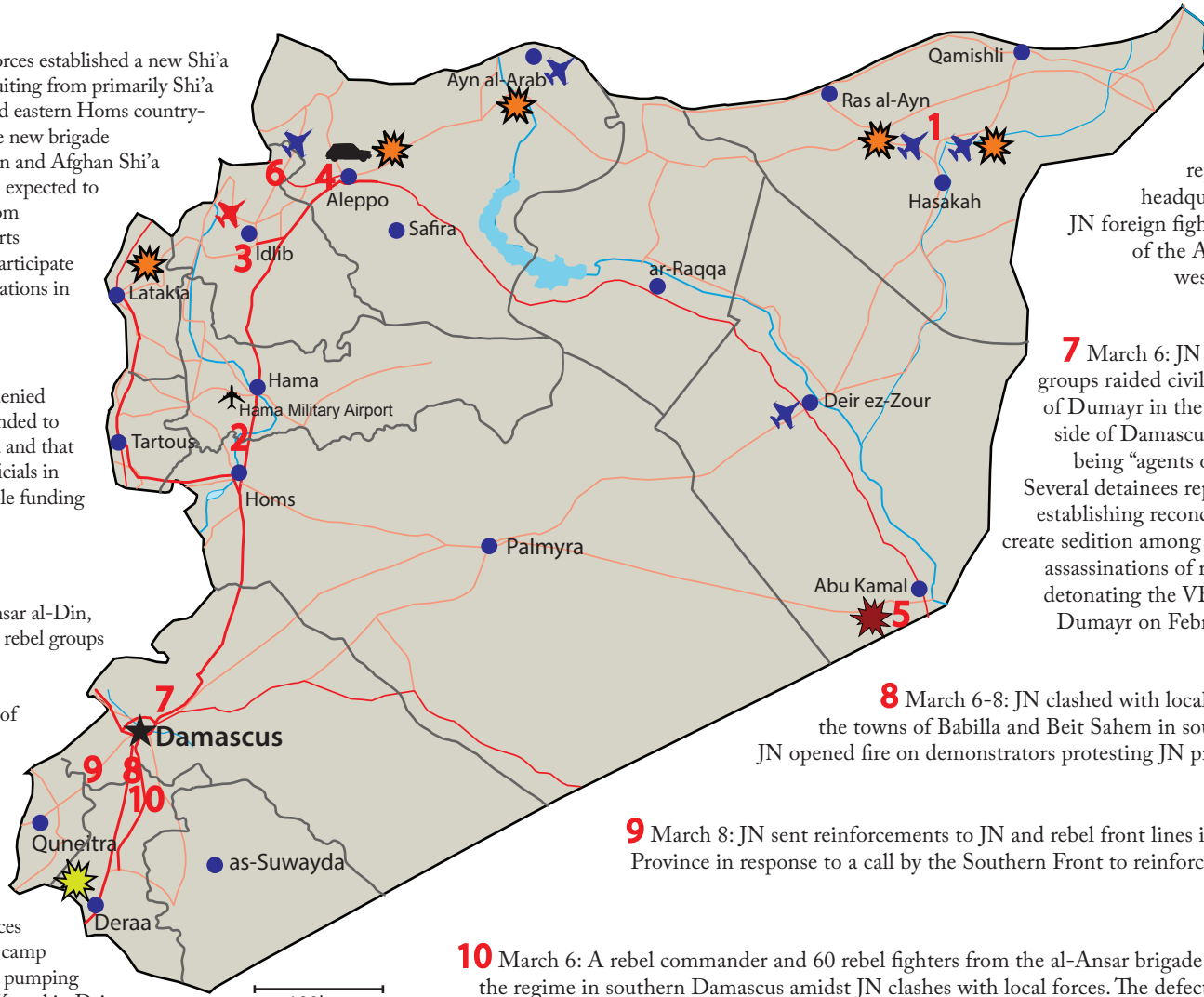
**6** March 5-8: An unknown explosion on March 5 targeted a meeting of JN senior officials in the town of Salqin near the Turkish border in Idlib Province, allegedly killing JN General Military Commander Abu Humam al-Shami and possibly wounding JN leader Abu Mohammed al-Joulani. In addition, on March 8 a set of six unknown coalition airstrikes reportedly targeted a JN headquarters in Atmeh and a JN foreign fighter training camp east of the Atmeh refugee camp in western Aleppo Province.

**7** March 6: JN and twelve other rebel groups raided civilian homes in the town of Dumayr in the northeastern countryside of Damascus, arresting 30 men for being “agents of regime intelligence.” Several detainees reportedly “confessed” to establishing reconciliation committees to create sedition among rebel groups, planning assassinations of rebel commanders, and detonating the VBIED that exploded in Dumayr on February 27 killing eleven.

**8** March 6-8: JN clashed with local rebels and civilians in the towns of Babilla and Beit Sahem in southern Damascus after JN opened fire on demonstrators protesting JN presence in Beit Sahem.

**9** March 8: JN sent reinforcements to JN and rebel front lines in northwestern Dera'a Province in response to a call by the Southern Front to reinforce the area on March 2.

**10** March 6: A rebel commander and 60 rebel fighters from the al-Ansar brigade reportedly defected to the regime in southern Damascus amidst JN clashes with local forces. The defection allegedly occurred after months of secret negotiations with the regime, and the fighters will reportedly be incorporated into the National Defense Forces (NDF) stationed at the Sayyida Zaineb Shrine in southern Damascus.



- Pro-Regime Forces
- Opposition Forces
- ISIS
- Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)
- ★ Major Clash
- ★ SVBIED

### Background Kinetic Activity

- ✈ Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes
- ✈ Major Regime Airstrikes
- ★ Alleged CW Attack
- ★ Low-level clashes

March 7: JN detonated an SVBIED at the southern outskirts of Handarat village, allowing rebel forces to seize control of approximately 40 percent of the village after defeating a regime attempt to seize a nearby village.



Content: Jennifer Cafarella and the ISW Syria Team  
Graphics: John Sauerhoff

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**JN Designates Main Effort in Dera'a Despite Airstrike Targeting JN Leadership in Idlib:** JN appears to have designated a main effort by deploying a significant convoy of military reinforcements to front lines against pro-regime forces in northwestern Dera'a Province. This deployment may indicate either that JN's top military commander was not killed in the airstrike that reportedly targeted high-level JN leadership on March 5 or that JN is sufficiently resilient to absorb his loss. Furthermore, the deployment occurred on the heels of a formal JN rejection of rumors that JN intends to split with al-Qaeda. It is therefore likely a signal of JN's continued commitment to the Syrian revolution despite its refusal to break with al-Qaeda. Rebel groups had allegedly advocated for such a split, and may demand greater commitment by JN to rebel operations in response.

**At Odds, JN and Rebels May Unite over Security in Damascus:** A rise in civilian and rebel pragmatism toward the regime has triggered heightened JN concern over security in Damascus Province that has complicated JN's relationship with its rebel allies. JN has consistently interfered with efforts to negotiate local ceasefires that would allow civilian and rebel populations to receive desperately-needed humanitarian supplies. This has prompted a rise in local resistance to JN, which recently culminated in the eruption of clashes between JN and local forces in the southern Damascus towns of Babilla and Beit Sahem. Two events have validated rebel fears of the spread of covert regime cells with the ability to carry out deadly attacks from within areas of rebel control. In the southern Damascus countryside, dozens of rebel fighters reportedly defected to the regime, while in the northeastern countryside JN and rebel forces arrested suspected regime collaborators. These incidents are likely to provide JN and rebel forces common cause to remain united over security in rebel-held terrain despite controversy surrounding local ceasefires in the capital. JN has historically attempted to justify its aggressive stance against negotiations with the regime by “proving” that regime sleeper cells and other agents are active in the proposed cease-fire areas. JN therefore seeks to neutralize negotiations over humanitarian aid by framing its demands in terms of security to facilitate continued cooperation with rebel groups despite anti-JN protests.

**New Pro-Regime Militia May Indicate Upcoming Operations in the Central Corridor:** The creation of new pro-regime groups in Homs and Hasaka ameliorates regime manpower challenges in the central corridor and far northeast. The formation of this new unit in Homs also constitutes an expansion of Iranian support to pro-regime militias in Syria, and, along with other indicators, may suggest an upcoming regime main effort in the central corridor. Yet rebel advances against key regime terrain inside Aleppo City such as the Air Force Intelligence Base, and the JN deployment of reinforcements to the Dera'a battlefield, may deny pro-regime forces the ability to reopen battlefronts in the central corridor in the near term. New militia forces in Homs are unlikely to be capable of launching an independent operation without the oversight of the IRGC or Hezbollah, which may become too embattled in Aleppo and Dera'a in the near term to open a third front. In Hasaka, the formation of the “al-Jazira is Arab and Syrian” organization appears to be the product of months of regime and Iranian outreach to local tribal elders in the province, in an effort to cement and likely increase the regime's staying power. This organization may allow the regime to reaffirm its authority in the province despite a steady growth in YPG influence conferred by YPG gains against ISIS in recent weeks.

**ISIS – Regime Clashes Escalate over Key Oil Infrastructure:** The pro-regime attack on the T2 pumping station in southern Deir ez-Zour province is the first attack deep into the ISIS-controlled Deir ez-Zour countryside by pro-regime forces since the ISIS occupation of the province beginning in July 2014. The attack follows months of ISIS and regime clashes surrounding oil infrastructure in the eastern Homs desert, and may indicate an attempt by the regime to target sources of ISIS oil revenue in retaliation for ISIS pressure on its own oil production. ISIS is likely, however, to escalate in kind in eastern Homs, and may designate a main effort against the regime in the oil fields and other critical infrastructure near Palmyra to deter future regime attacks into the Deir ez-Zour countryside.