REBEL GROUPS IN NORTHERN ALEPPO PROVINCE

On August 5, 2012, BBC World News reported over 20,000 Syrian troops massed around Aleppo, ready to move into rebel-occupied districts of the city in what has become one of the largest military operations of the ongoing Syrian conflict.[1] Until recently, rebel activity in Aleppo, Syria's largest city and primary commercial hub, had been largely overshadowed by clashes elsewhere in the country.[2] Despite the overwhelming media attention given to Homs and Damascus, the ongoing showdown between rebel and regime forces in Aleppo City is rooted in the months-old conflict in Aleppo's northern countryside.

The development of the major rebel units of the Kilis Corridor, a string of outlying towns that straddle the Aleppo-Gaziantep highway connecting Turkey to northern Syria, sheds light on the current battle for Aleppo. The armed opposition's willingness to come together in increasingly large and ambitious unit hierarchies has augmented rebel ability to resist the Assad regime. Between March and August 2012, Aleppo rebel groups have resisted major regime offensives and coordinated large scale counteroffensives in the Kilis Corridor and al-Bab, a town 40 kilometers east of Aleppo City. These rebel successes have exposed the limits of the regime's ability to project force outside of major urban centers.

REBEL GROUPS OF NORTHERN ALEPPO

Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade

Prior to the formation of the Tawhid Brigade, Ahrar al-Shamal was the largest rebel group operating in the northern Aleppo countryside.[3] The brigade, formed on March 9, 2012, is led by defected Syrian army Major Mohammed Hamadeen. It is not clear whether the brigade has tried to retain a single, primary base of operations within the Kilis Corridor. It is more likely that the brigade's leadership has shifted between the towns of Anadan, Azaz, and possibly Tel Rifaat along with the ebb and flow of regime offensives and rebel counter-offensives in the corridor. Like most other units in northern Aleppo, Ahrar al-Shamal is highly mobile and has appeared in rebel operations along the full 50 kilometer length of the Kilis Corridor, and some 40 kilometers to the east in Al-Bab.

Major Hamadeen has kept a low profile, appearing only to make official announcements for the Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade or the Aleppo Military Council.[4] Hamadeen's statements are devoid of personal information and ideological affiliation. Unlike rebel leaders in other parts of Syria,
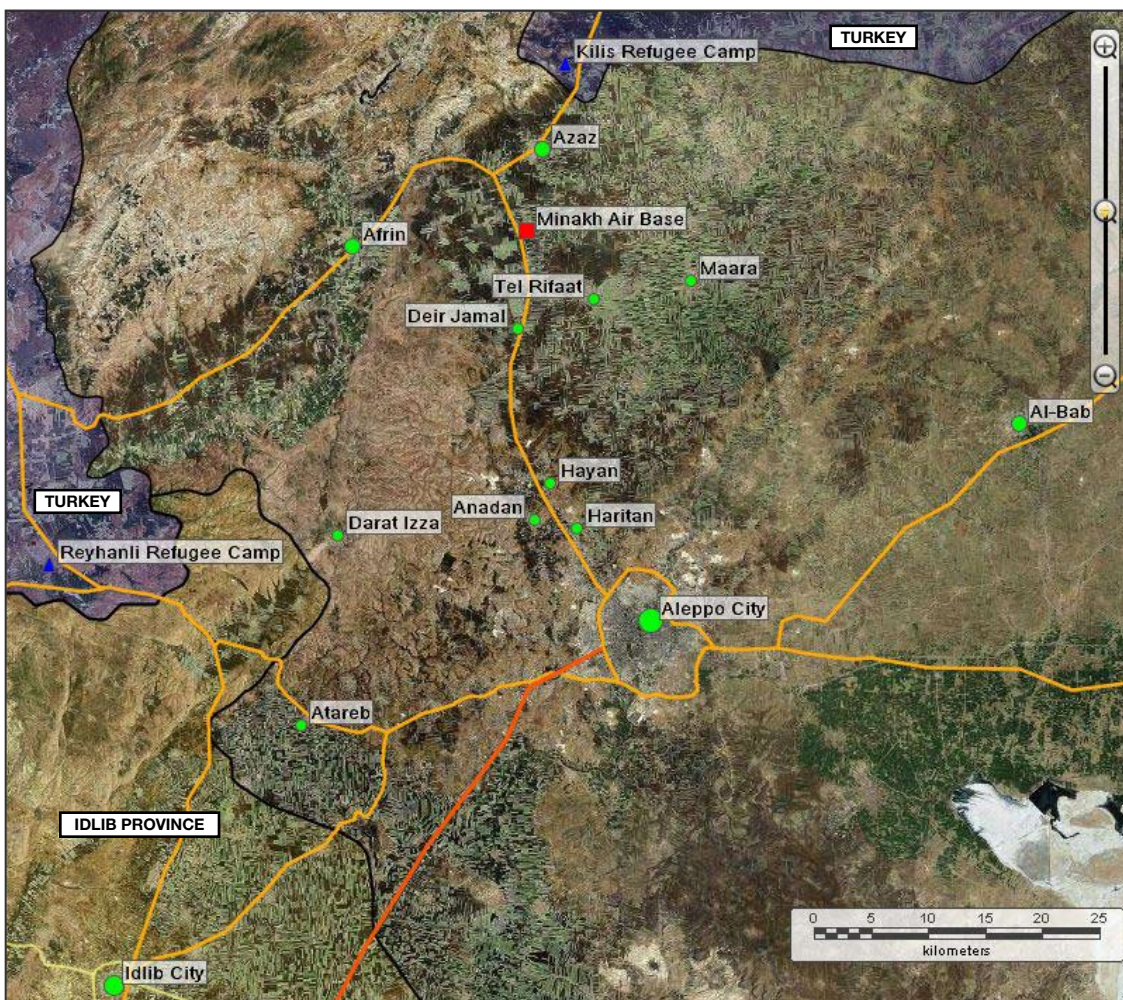

MAJOR MOHAMMED HAMADEEN, LEADER OF AHRAR AL-SHAMAL; SOURCE: YOUTUBE

whose strong personalities often occupy a central place in the public portrayal of their units' identities, this low profile is common amongst rebel leaders in northern Aleppo. For example, the former leader of the Ibraheem Afesh Battalion, a component of the Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade, promoted himself as "Captain Nimir" through a series of videos on social media channels; he was not identified as Captain Alaa Mansour Ouso until after his death in Azaz on July 17.[5] In Hamadeen's case, this may indicate professional decorum formed over a long military career, which contrasts with the charismatic showmanship exhibited by defected junior officers or rebel leaders with no military background elsewhere in Syria.[6] This low profile may also indicate that these leaders fear the regime's ability to target them and their families around Aleppo. Abdul Hakim Yasin, a rebel leader in the Kilis

AHRAR AL-SHAMAL BRIGADE, MARCH 10, 2012; SOURCE: YOUTUBE

MAP | ALEPPO CITY AND SURROUNDING AREAS

Corridor, claims that the regime regularly uses arrested family members to lure rebels into ambushes.[7]

In the Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade's formation video, Hamadeen appears with roughly 120 rebels. It is important to note that while Ahrar al-Shamal has always called itself a *liwa*, translated as "brigade," this term delineates a clear hierarchy between the main unit and its subcomponents, rather than a standard unit size. Each of the brigade's subcomponents is designated as a *katiba*, or battalion. While the group depicted in this video was large for a Syrian rebel unit in March 2012, it was not a brigade by regime military standards. Ahrar al-Shamal has always maintained a close relationship with the Aleppo Military Council. The video in which Hamadeen declared the formation of Ahrar al-Shamal also announced the formation of the Aleppo Military Council. Hamadeen stated that, "Rebel groups operating in and around Aleppo have come together to form the Military Council of the Northern Sector, which will manage the operations of Ahrar al-Shamal, the new brigade that will provide the command structure of the various rebel units in Aleppo Province. The council

and the brigade will operate under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army."[8] Until the formation of the Tawhid Brigade, Ahrar al-Shamal was the Aleppo Military Council's primary fighting unit in the northern Aleppo Countryside. Hamadeen has therefore occupied a central place on the council, appearing in almost every video statement made by the group. He is not the leader of the military council, but has likely used his leadership over Ahrar al-Shamal to act as the council's operations manager for the Kilis Corridor and Al-Bab.

Hamadeen did not delineate Ahrar al-Shamal's organizational structure when the brigade was formed. Instead, it appears to have evolved as the unit undertook operations across the northern Aleppo countryside in the spring of 2012. Ahrar al-Shamal claimed responsibility for many of the brigade's operations in March and April, but rarely attributed them to its individual battalions. There was early mention of a Special Tasks Battalion, which is a generic term often applied to subcomponents of larger units.[9] Rebel groups frequently use the term to describe a squad-sized detachment undertaking anti-

REBELS FROM QABDA AL-SHAMAL BATTALION FIRE A TRUCK-MOUNTED ZU-23-2 ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF MINNAKH AIR BASE; SOURCE, YOUTUBE

regime operations, regardless of whether it occupies a permanent place in the unit. The brigade's social media posts included updates on its organizational structure over time. By mid-June, reports of kinetic activity in northern Aleppo clearly pointed to five primary battalions: the Ahfad Omar Battalion, the Qabda al-Shamal Battalion, the Qalb al-Shamal Battalion, the Shaheed Ibrahim Afesh Battalion, and the Zubair ibn al-Awwam Battalion. The structure of Ahrar al-Shamal has continued to grow in recent months, especially after its incorporation into the Tawhid Brigade, which formed in July 2012.

The camouflage-clad rebel fighters in Ahrar al-Shamal's March 2012 formation video appeared with a mix of small arms including AK-47 rifles, PKM machine guns, and RPGs. It is possible that some of these rebels defected from the Syrian military with their weapons, but Ahrar al-Shamal has found other sources of weapons. The brigade redistributes arms seized in raids on regime outposts to its fighters. A video of a June 10 raid on Haritan, the southernmost town on the Kilis Corridor and a wealthy suburb of Aleppo City, shows rebels organizing captured small arms while one reminds his comrades that, "No one is permitted to take anything! They must all go to the command center first."[10]

Since their inception, Ahrar al-Shamal's component battalions have demonstrated remarkable tactical proficiency in coordinated direct fire engagements with these basic weapons. In the aforementioned operation in Haritan, the Qabda al-Shamal, Qalb al-Shamal, and Zubair ibn al-Awwam battalions coordinated their attack on the town's police station, reportedly destroying three regime armored vehicles and killing dozens of regime soldiers.[11] A week earlier, rebels from Ahfad Omar and Shaheed Ibrahim Afesh battalions destroyed four regime BMPs on the road between Anadan and Hayan.[12]

Since then, the battalions of Ahrar al-Shamal have acquired a wider variety of weapons. Several groups have captured heavy machine guns from regime forces, usually in the form of 12.7mm DShK heavy machine guns and ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft cannons.[13] These guns have been mounted in the beds of pickup trucks. In addition to truck-mounted heavy machine guns, Ahrar al-Shamal possesses homemade rockets and mortars for indirect fire operations against the regime. The Qabda al-Shamal Battalion has repeatedly used homemade Qassam-style rockets in attacks against the Minnakh Air Base south of Azaz, while the Shaheed Ibrahim Afesh Battalion has multiple mortar tubes which they have used in operations in the Kilis Corridor.[14]

Major Hamadeen has stated that Ahrar al-Shamal's primary objective is the protection of civilians in northern Aleppo. If Hamadeen and Ahrar al-Shamal have political designs for the future of Syria, they are not apparent in any of his statements. Furthermore, in the brigade's formation statement, Hamadeen called for the protection of civilians regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliation.[15] There is no evidence that the brigade deviated from this ethic while it was the predominant military wing of the Aleppo Military Council. The incorporation of additional battalions into Ahrar al-Shamal's structure after the formation of the Tawhid Brigade may make it more difficult for Hamadeen to maintain this pluralistic ideology amongst all of the brigade's components.

Amr ibn al–A'as Battalion

The Amr ibn al-A'as Battalion formed on April 24, 2012, under the command of Colonel Abdul-Jabar Mohammed Egeydi.[16] The unit's size and armaments are similar to those visible in Ahrar al-Shamal's formation statement. Roughly 120 rebels armed with AK-47 rifles, PKM machine guns, and RPGs appear in the video.[17] Also like Ahrar al-Shamal, the battalion has incorporated captured regime military equipment. In the aftermath of the July 2012 battle for control of Azaz, Amr ibn al-A'as Battalion members appeared around a captured, operational regime T-72.[18]

The battalion conducts operations along the entire Kilis Corridor and Aleppo City, but unlike Ahrar al-Shamal, it does not appear to conduct operations as far west as Al-Bab. It appears to employ direct fire tactics similar to Ahrar al-Shamal's battalions, and regularly cooperates with other rebel groups in major operations in the Kilis Corridor. The battalion saw action alongside Ahrar al-

COLONEL ABDUL-JABAR MOHAMMED EGEYDI; SOURCE: YOUTUBE

Shamal during the July regime offensives against Azaz, and it may now be operating inside Aleppo City.[19] Unlike Ahrar al-Shamal, Amr ibn al-A'as Battalion has not developed a robust complement of subordinate units.

The Amr ibn al-A'as Battalion and its leadership has played an important role in the Aleppo Military Council and joined with Ahrar al-Shamal under the leadership of the Tawhid Brigade. A video published by the Aleppo Military Council suggests that Colonel Egeydi left the battalion to take a greater leadership role at the provincial council in late April 2012, after transferring command of the battalion to First Lieutenant Abdul-Malik Saiyada.[20] Since mid-July, the Amr ibn al-A'as Battalion has been part of the Tawhid Brigade, operating as a component of Ahrar al-Shamal.[21]

Since May, Colonel Egeydi has maintained a relatively high profile as the leader of the Aleppo Military Council, a position he shares with Colonel Obaid Mohammed Obaid, and appears in most of the council's video statements. He has even spoken with western media since the start of the battle for Aleppo City in early August.[22]

Muthanna ibn Haritha Battalion and the Fateh Brigade

The Muthanna ibn Haritha Battalion, formed in mid-May 2012, is another prominent rebel battalion in the northern Aleppo Countryside. The unit is in many ways similar to the individual battalions of Ahrar al-Shamal. These units are of similar strength in both manpower and equipment. Muthanna ibn Haritha's initial formation video contained a contingent of approximately 120 rebels armed with AK-47 rifles, PKM machine guns, and RPGs.[23] Since late July they have been able to equip their forces with captured armor and truck-mounted heavy machine guns.[24] The battalion also operates in the same areas as Ahrar al-Shamal, including the Kilis Corridor and areas to the east of Aleppo City. Most importantly, the battalion has repeatedly demonstrated tactical proficiency alongside Ahrar al-Shamal in coordinated direct fire engagements.[25] The battalion commander, First Lieutenant Rifa'at Khaleel, has also kept a low profile. Despite initially revealing his true identity, he now uses the alias Abu al-Nassir.[26]

FIRST LIEUTENANT RIFA'AT KHALEEL, AKA ABU AL-NASSIR; SOURCE: MUTHANNA IBN HARITHA FACEBOOK PAGE

The Muthanna ibn Haritha Battalion has a complicated relationship with Ahrar al-Shamal and the Aleppo Military Council, but ultimately affiliated with the council in July 2012 through its membership in the newly-formed Fateh Brigade. In practice, the battalion has coordinated closely with subordinate elements of the Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade in the past.[27] However, the battalion expressly dissociated itself from the Aleppo Military Council in its formation video, and has been notably absent from the Tawhid Brigade. The reasons for this dissociation from the council are not clear, but the battalion has since demonstrated its willingness to be part of a larger organization.
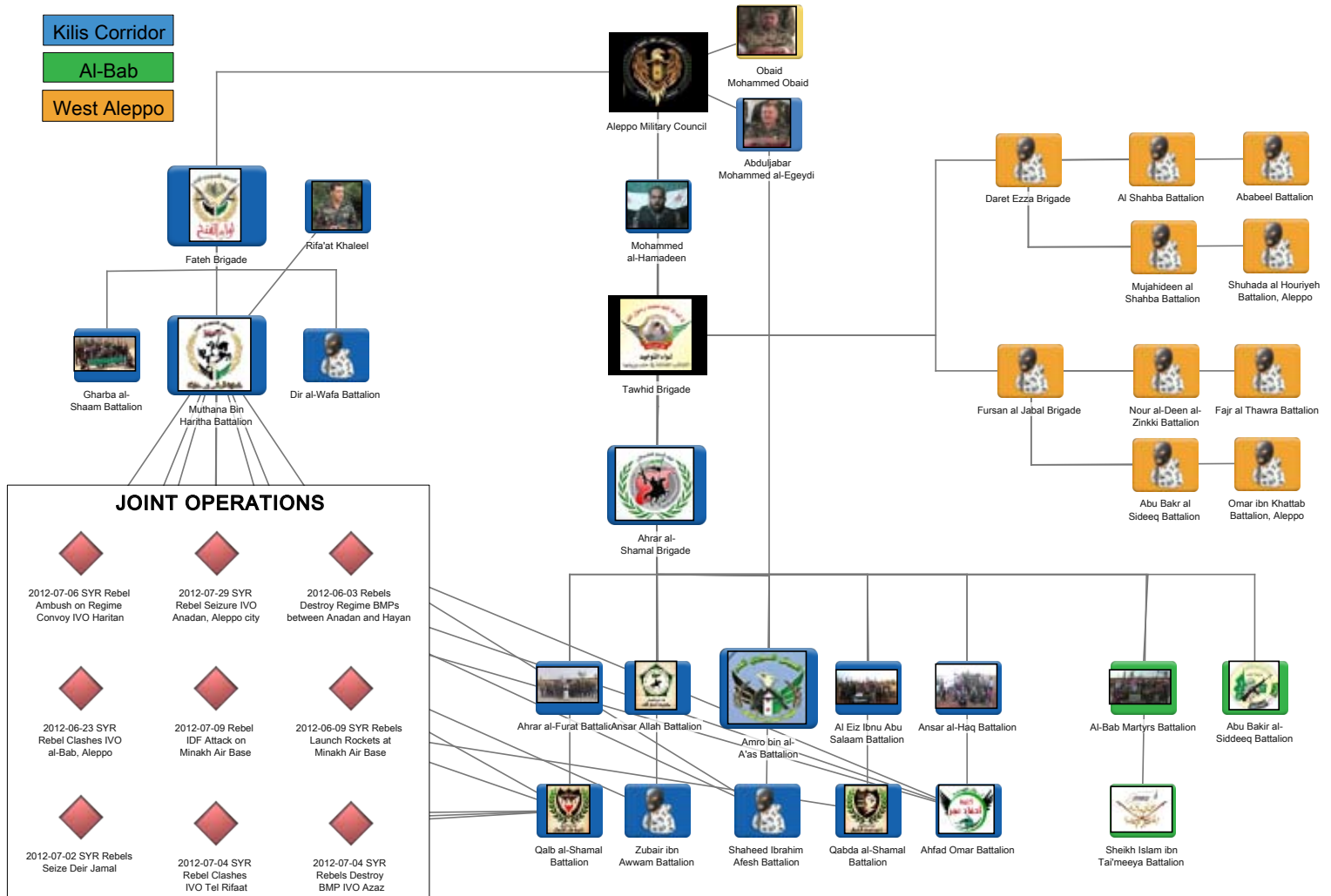
At the end of July, the Fateh Brigade unified a number of battalions in a manner similar to Tawhid Brigade, albeit on a smaller scale in both numbers and geography.[28] Fateh's units operate almost exclusively in northern Aleppo. Only a select few of these units claimed in the formation video have an extensive record of kinetic activity, and Muthanna ibn Hartiha has been the most active battalion within this new brigade. [29] Because Fateh Brigade claims direct affiliation with the Aleppo Military Council, Muthanna ibn Haritha seems to have reversed their earlier position.[30] The battalion's apparent rejection of council affiliation in May might not have actually been aversion to council authority, but rather a rejection of a chain of command which would have placed them under the command of Major Hamadeen.

Tawhid Brigade

In mid-July 2012, rebel groups in Aleppo Province came together to form the Tawhid, or Unity Brigade (*Liwa' al-Tawhid*). The brigade, formed in order to coordinate the Battle of Aleppo City, has facilitated province-wide coordination of rebel groups.[31] The Tawhid Brigade's second video statement, recorded on July 18, 2012, delineated a large structure encompassing rebel units from across Aleppo Province. Major Hamadeen of Ahrar al-Shamal listed 35 individual battalions under the brigade's command.[32] A leader within the brigade claimed that it was 3,500 strong as of the beginning of August.[33] While these claims may be exaggerated, the Tawhid Brigade includes well over

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a thousand rebel fighters. At least half of the battalions named in the formation statement were rebel groups that had participated in some form of combat against the regime prior to joining the Tawhid Brigade. Since the brigade's formation, rebel units not listed in this original structure have also joined, with some claiming to have formed their relationship with Tawhid during combat.[34]

The relationship between the Tawhid Brigade and the Aleppo Military Council has not been outlined in either group's statements, but their connection is clear. Major Hamadeen, whose Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade was closely linked to the council throughout the summer of 2012, assumed a central role in the Tawhid Brigade in July. Additionally, the Tawhid Brigade incorporated a unit that once fought under the leadership of Aleppo Military Council leader Colonel Egeydi. These relationships suggest that the Tawhid Brigade has replaced Ahrar al-Shamal as the primary military wing of the Aleppo Military Council.

The Tawhid Brigade is comprised of three primary subunits, also labeled using the Arabic term *liwa*, each with its own component battalions and assigned area of operations. The Fursan al-Jabal Brigade operates in southwest Aleppo province, near the border with Idlib province and the city of Atareb.[35] The Daret Izza Brigade most likely operates to the west of Aleppo City due to the brigade's name and its component battalions' previous activity.[36] Ahrar al-Shamal retains its preeminence over the Kilis Corridor, and has assumed authority over several additional units in al-Bab, to the east of Aleppo City.

The formation of the Tawhid Brigade has neither diminished nor significantly altered the preeminence of Ahrar al-Shamal among the rebel groups of northern Aleppo. Within the Tawhid Brigade, Ahrar al-Shamal still claims the largest number of battalions and the largest area of operations. Additionally, Hamadeen serves as one of the brigade's primary spokesmen, and he presumably retains a prominent place within its leadership. Ahrar al-

TAWHID BRIGADE, JULY 18, 2012; SOURCE: YOUTUBE

Shamal's original component battalions remain the most militarily active and effective rebel groups in the Kilis Corridor and Al-Bab areas. Ahrar al-Shamal's battalions under the Tawhid Brigade have continued their operations with their traditional partners. In the Kilis Corridor and Al-Bab areas, the Tawhid Brigade has rebranded the Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade but has not changed much of the organizational structure of rebel groups in these areas.

The Tawhid Brigade plays an important role in coordinating rebel activity across Aleppo province, organizing units into a single armed wing under the Aleppo Military Council. Before July, rebel groups along the Kilis Corridor were tied to the council through Ahrar al-Shamal. When Tawhid formed in mid-July, the brigade claimed to lead rebel units to the south and southwest of Aleppo City, which were already identifiable and effective rebel units. For example, two of the battalions under the Daret Izza Brigade stormed the Samaan Mountain Air Defense Outpost on Mount Sheikh Barakat in late June.[37] The geographic span of influence exercised by the Tawhid Brigade makes it one of the most credible provincial-level chains of command in Syria.

The leaders of the Tawhid Brigade laid out a number of principles in the brigade's formation statement, which included defeating the Assad regime, protecting civilians and private property, and ensuring justice for those who had harmed civilians.[38] Tawhid Brigade's leadership has gone to great lengths to standardize the brigade's rules of engagement and its role in bringing members of the regime and *shabiha* to justice. In their first statement, the leaders of the Tawhid Brigade established the following rules of engagement:

> Brigade commanders will make sure not to destroy any residence or business place. Those who blackmail or harm innocents will be punished like shabiha. Rebels are not permitted to act by themselves and judge civilians by their own hands. No rebels are allowed to kidnap civilians and accuse them of being Shabiha. There will be official judges [for this matter]. If we act like the

regime, why should we fight it? We are fighting against 40 years of heinous acts, so why allow our members to do the same?[39]

Shortly thereafter, the brigade leadership established two prisons. One is located in Daret Izza in the hills to the west of Aleppo City; the other is in Maara, in the middle of Aleppo's northern agricultural countryside, roughly 30 kilometers north of Aleppo City and 15 kilometers east of the Aleppo-Gaziantep Highway.[40] Tawhid's leadership also called for the formation of a judicial committee for managing captured regime soldiers, whose parents will purportedly receive the opportunity to visit their sons and inquire about the charges they face.[41] The establishment of official prisons and formal judicial committees is an important development that underscores the discipline and maturity of Aleppo's rebels. These systems could become critical mechanisms for mitigating sectarian violence and lay the groundwork for functioning systems of justice in a post-Assad Syria. The establishment of a unified system of justice in Aleppo, if employed thoroughly and across the entirety of the province, would mark the Tawhid Battalion as a forward-thinking revolutionary front, rather than a simple armed insurgent group.

However, Tawhid Brigade has not successfully ensured prisoners' rights in all of its battalions' conduct of war. The brigade is too large and too diverse to establish a unified code of conduct, especially with regard to *shabiha* militants. This limitation was underscored when members of the Tawhid Brigade violently executed ten members of the Berri family, which has been a strong supporter of the Assad regime and supplier of its *shabiha* militias in Aleppo Province, representing the gray area between civilians and militants in the battle for Aleppo.[42]

The Tawhid Brigade incorporates a broad spectrum of political and religious ideologies, including Islamic extremists. Any effort to assess the Tawhid Brigade's overarching ideology must also consider the actions and rhetoric of its individual component battalions. Religious affiliation appears to vary from battalion to battalion. On the one hand, Ahrar al-Shamal's original formation statement in March emphasized protecting civilians of all religions.[43] However, one of Tawhid's battalions in Al-Bab, the

ZAINO BERRI CONFESSING TO HIS INVOLVEMENT WITH THE SHABIHA BEFORE HIS SUMMARY EXECUTION BY TAWHID BRIGADE FORCES; SOURCE: YOUTUBE

Sheikh ibn al-Taimeeya Battalion, has clear links to a salafist media organization, Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyya, which regularly releases statements containing extremist language and even publishes its own jihadist magazine, *The Islamic Levant (Al-Shaam al-Islamiyya)*.[44] One rebel group fighting in Aleppo City has claimed to work with both the Tawhid Brigade and Jabhat al-Nusra, an overtly jihadist organization with suspected ties to al-Qaeda. The commander claimed that his unit, which included foreign jihadists from Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, and Lebanon, was part of Jabhat al-Nusra, but coordinated closely with the Tawhid Brigade.[45] Tawhid Brigade's central leadership has not denied this relationship, and does not appear to take an interest in limiting its membership to battalions of a specific religious affiliation.

Reporting from embedded *New York Times* journalist C.J. Chivers offers unique insight into the chain of command mechanism that governs the Tawhid Brigade, and sheds light on both the discipline and the excesses of a specific battalion in Tel Rifaat. Chivers reports that the Usoud al-Tawhid Battalion, a component of the Qalb al-Shamal Battalion, gathers intelligence for complex attacks against targets assigned by the provincial military council and issues munitions through a designated armory.[46] The battalion, according to Chivers, "mixes paramilitary discipline, civilian policing, Islamic law and the harsh demands of necessity with battlefield coldness and outright cunning."[47] The report confirms the existence of the Tawhid Brigade prison and provisional revolutionary court in Maara. However, Chivers describes a plan to execute a former *shabiha* who was sentenced by the court. The rebels deceived the 'convicted' into believing he was being released, but packed his truck with 300 kilograms of explosives that they attempted to detonate remotely as he drove through a regime checkpoint.[48]

REBEL ACTIVITY IN NORTHERN ALEPPO

April–June 2012: Rebellion in the Kilis Corridor

Rebel operations concentrated in two key areas of northern Aleppo during the spring and early summer of 2012, in the southern and in northern sectors of the Kilis Corridor. The southern sector is a three-mile stretch of road straddled by the towns of Haritan, Anadan, and Hayan. It is the primary gateway between Aleppo City and the province's northern countryside. By controlling this area, rebel forces disrupt regime access to Azaz, the Minnakh Air Base, Tel Rifaat, Deir Jamal, and the northwestern Kurdish areas around Afrin. Given their proximity to Aleppo City's northern limits, any one of

HARAKAT AL-FAJR AL-ISLAMIYYA BANNER. SOURCE: HARAKAT AL-FAJR AL-ISLAMIYYA FACEBOOK PAGE

these towns could also serve as a base for rebel operations inside the city.

The northern sector of the Kilis Corridor includes Azaz and the nearby Minnakh Air Base. Azaz, a city of 35,000, is located less than six kilometers from the Turkish border.[49] The regime considers Azaz one of the most important cities in the province, and claims that rebels regularly use the Kilis border area as a safe zone for staging attacks and arms trafficking.[50]

Minnakh Air Base is important to the Assad regime's operations in northern Syria. While Minnakh's runway is long enough to accommodate fixed-wing activity, the air base is used primarily for the rotary wing operations of the Syrian Air Force's 4th Flying Training Squadron. In an interview with the *London Times*, a former regime crew chief claimed that 23 of the base's 47 Mi-8 Hip C helicopters were kept armed with S-5 unguided rockets.[51] The regime has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to use these assets against towns in northern Aleppo. Despite occasional mortar and rocket fire from nearby rebel groups, the base remains operational as of late July.[52] Videos of regime rotary wing activity in the vicinity of Azaz in early July suggest that the regime may have transferred several Mi-24 Hind helicopters from bases in southern Syria to support operations in Aleppo.[53] While the effectiveness of unguided rockets on rebel operations is debatable, one thing is clear: Minnakh is a highly visible regime foothold which became a focal point of the first major battle in the northern Aleppo countryside.

In early April, rebel groups launched offensive operations in Anadan and Haritan. In a raid on the police station in Haritan, rebel forces under Ahrar al-Shamal purportedly killed over 40 regime personnel and destroyed four armored vehicles.[54] Small, direct fire engagements occurred throughout the area until the end of April, when rebel activity moved into Aleppo City itself. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported multiple roadside bombs and direct fire attacks in districts across the city.[55] Videos posted online by two units suggest that

the Amr ibn al-A'as Battalion and the Halab al-Madina Brigade, an independent rebel group operating primarily in Aleppo City, were both involved in a number of these attacks.[56]

On May 23rd, the regime launched an assault on Azaz.[57] As their armored columns approached the city from the west supported by helicopters and artillery, they encountered stiff rebel resistance from the combined forces of Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade and the Muthanna ibn Haritha Battalion. Over the next three days, regime forces attempted to take rebel-held neighborhoods. By the evening of May 26, rebels pushed the regime out of the city, destroying five armored vehicles in the process.[58] The defeat at Azaz in May marked the end of the regime's first major offensive in northern Aleppo. The same rebel forces that had defeated the regime in Azaz turned their attention back to the Anadan-Haritan area, where the five primary battalions of Ahrar al-Shamal undertook a string of joint offensive operations in early June alongside Muthanna ibn Haritha Battalion.[59] In response, regime forces launched limited operations against Anadan and Haritan and shelled other northern Aleppo towns in mid-June.

Kinetic activity inside Aleppo City, which had all but ground to a halt with the exception of sporadic assassinations and small arms fire, resumed its previous frequency by the third week of June.

June–August 2012: The Second Azaz Offensive

At the beginning of July the Assad regime began its second major offensive operation in northern Aleppo. Once again, the focus of this offensive was Azaz, which the regime began to shell on July 2.[60] A week later, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported heavy clashes in several of the city's neighborhoods.[61] The struggle for Azaz continued until July 19, when rebel groups finally re-established control of the city. The regime retreated to Minnakh Air Base, which remained operational.[62]

Video and photographic evidence of the aftermath of the battle suggest that during the course of the fighting, rebel forces surrounded and destroyed at least seven of the regime's main battle tanks in the courtyard of the city's mosque.[63] There is no video evidence of the battle itself to explain the mechanism of the rebels' success against regime armor in this battle. However, a number of factors may have contributed to their success. One account of the clashes indicated that rebels used rocket-propelled grenades against the tanks.[64] If this is the case, then rebels in Azaz have cultivated substantial anti-armor tactical proficiency. RPGs are not typically capable

REBELS FROM AHRAR AL-SHAMAL STAND IN FRONT OF DESTROYED TANKS IN THE AZAZ MOSQUE COURTYARD; SOURCE: YOUTUBE

of penetrating the thick armor of main battle tanks. As such, rebels would have had to utilize complex tactics, carefully employing their anti-armor assets to achieve mobility kills before striking against weak points in the tanks' armor. The same account also points to the regime blunders in the employment of its tanks, explaining that the regime positioned its armored elements in a courtyard surrounding the mosque, pointing their guns outward towards the city in a defensive stance without infantry support aside from sniper over-watch from inside the mosque.[65] Also critical to the rebels success was the quantity of ammunition they possessed. Thanks to Azaz's proximity to the Turkish border, rebels there could easily access weapons, ammunition, and reinforcements via the Kilis Border Crossing. The Tawhid Brigade claims to receive support from foreign states. A Tawhid Brigade spokesman in Azaz by the name of Abdulaziz Salama recently reported that the brigade received some 700 RPG rounds, 300 rifles, and 3,000 grenades in two shipments coordinated by the US and Turkey.[66]

Rebel forces followed up their victory by turning southward to resume attacks in Anadan and Haritan, just as they had after their initial victory in May. This time, however, rebel forces dealt the regime two additional blows by seizing the border town of Jarabulus, and more importantly, the eastern city of Al-Bab.[67] Until April, Al-Bab had been relatively unscathed by the conflict in Syria. On April 20, regime forces opened fire on protesters in the city, sparking the growth of the rebel movement in al-Bab. Between mid-May and mid-July, some 15 rebel groups formed within the city.[68] At least two of these groups, the Abu Bakr al-Siddeeq Battalion and the Al-Bab Martyrs Battalion, claimed to be part of Ahrar al-Shamal.[69] The fight for Al-Bab included a series of raids and assaults on government offices over the course of two months, finally culminating on July 18 when rebels seized the final regime stronghold within the city limits. Rebel forces pushed the regime from this garrison on the south edge of town on July 29, and subsequently celebrated the fall of al-Bab as a

major victory.[70]

With the seizure of Azaz and al-Bab, the armed opposition in northern Aleppo gained considerable momentum. By the end of July, rebel forces controlled major towns along the northern half of the Kilis Corridor including Deir Jamal and Tel Rifaat, they had renewed their assault on Anadan and Haritan, and they occupied a strong position from which to launch an assault on Aleppo City. On July 30, multiple battalions within the Tawhid Brigade seized the town of Anadan in a joint operation, capturing at least eight main battle tanks and five armored personnel carriers in the process.[71] With Anadan under their control, the rebel groups of northern Aleppo secured a position from which to launch operations inside the city while simultaneously disrupting any regime attempt to reinforce remaining garrisons in the Kilis Corridor.
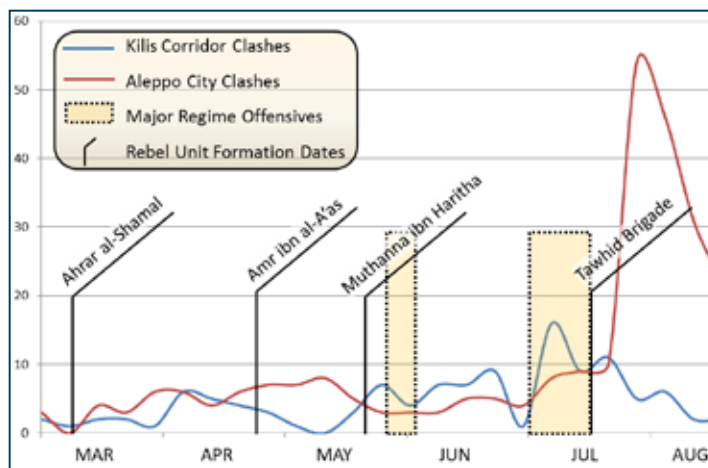
It is not clear whether the Tawhid Brigade's ability to coordinate rebel groups contributed to this victory, as the battalions involved in the attack were the components of Ahrar al-Shamal, which typically carried out operations in the Anadan area. The effectiveness of Tawhid Brigade as a coordinating body will be defined by its ability to synchronize effects in Aleppo City.

CONCLUSION

The fighting in Aleppo provides another example of the Assad regime's inability to secure the Syrian countryside and demonstrates how attempts to do so can weaken the security forces' grip on key urban centers. In May and July, rebels defeated regime offensives along the Kilis Corridor and gained a foothold from which to launch a major offensive in the city. Rebel forces have proven their ability to seize parts of Aleppo City; recent Tawhid Brigade claims of holding sixty percent of the city may be only slightly exaggerated.[72]

The emergence of the Tawhid Brigade marks a definitive development in Aleppo's armed opposition movement, establishing an important precedent for Syria's armed opposition. For the first time in the Syrian uprising, a unit has established a province-wide chain of command and is capable of coordinating operations between ideologically diverse battalions in conjunction with a provincial military council. Additionally, the Tawhid Brigade's decision to develop rules of engagement, prisons, and provisional justice committees reflects the rebels' concern for establishing order when the Assad regime can no longer project force in Aleppo province. Tawhid's experimentation with a framework for a post-

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conflict system of justice is particularly noteworthy. Tawhid Brigade is transforming from a large group of armed insurgents into a revolutionary army that could seriously influence the outcome and aftermath of the Syrian conflict.

Despite the Tawhid Brigade's unprecedented organizational scale and ambition, holding Aleppo City for an extended period of time will be difficult, and the rebels are unlikely to deny regime forces access to the majority of the city's neighborhoods. The Assad regime has demonstrated its willingness to employ overwhelming and indiscriminate artillery and aerial bombardment in order to root rebel forces out of contested neighborhoods. In February 2012, regime forces used this tactic against rebel groups in the Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs City.[73] While these rebel units were able to withdraw from the neighborhood, they were unable to deny the regime access to Baba Amr in the face of overwhelming firepower. A similar narrative may be emerging in the rebel-controlled districts of Aleppo. Rebels holding the Salaheddine and Hanano neighborhoods of the city faced intense bombardment from regime air and artillery forces in August, and ultimately withdrew from parts of Salaheddine as a result.[74] If the security forces continue to use these tactics against rebel-held neighborhoods, they will prevent rebels from holding Aleppo City, even if that victory comes at a high cost.

A withdrawal from the city would not be a strategic defeat for Aleppo's armed opposition. The failed regime assaults against Azaz in May and July reveal that rebel groups will likely hold the Kilis Corridor despite the regime's best efforts. If rebel groups withdraw from Aleppo City, the regime will face a province-wide stalemate in which a heavy garrison might hold the provincial capital, but not the countryside. The security forces are likely to continue suffering casualties and defections, while rebel

groups will have time and burgeoning numbers on their side. Furthermore, Idlib-based rebel groups capable of disrupting Aleppo's supply lines will significantly raise the logistical cost of resupplying such a garrison. If the Assad regime cannot retake the Kilis Corridor, the rebels of northern Aleppo will continue to enjoy the space to organize and uncontested access to the Turkish border, a functioning safe zone.

NOTES

[1] John Muir, "Syria conflict: Troops 'mass for Aleppo assault'," BBC News Online, August 5, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19137637.

2 John Muir, "Syria conflict: Troops 'mass for Aleppo assault'," BBC News Online, August 5, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19137637.

[3] Despite the similarity of their names, Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade in Aleppo Province is not affiliated with Ahrar al-Shaam, a large umbrella organization of units in Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo Provinces. There is another Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade based in Idlib, also with no apparent affiliation to Ahrar al-Shamal in Aleppo. The author has made every effort to ensure that the points in this backgrounder and the research underscoring them pertain only to Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade in northern Aleppo.

[4] Mike Giglio, "Spinmeister Ammar al-Wawi Peddles Upbeat Message of Syrian Rebellion," The Daily Beast Online, July 30, 2012, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/07/30/spinmeister-ammar-al-wawi-peddles-upbeat-message-of-syrian-rebellion.html.

[5] YouTube, http://youtu.be/p_S6gDcoYuoI, June 18, 2012; Muthanna ibn Haritha Battalion Facebook Page, http://www.facebook.com/almothana.benhartha.

[6] Examples of this include Abu Issa, commander of the Suqur al-Sham Brigade in Jebel al-Zawiya, and First Lieutenant Abdul-Razaq Tlass, commander of the Farouq Brigade in Rastan.

[7] C.J. Chivers, "Life With Syria's Rebels in a Cold and Cunning War," The New York Times, August 20, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/21/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-coalesce-into-a-fighting-force.html. Yasin is the leader of Usoud al-Tawhid Battalion, a component of the Qalb al-Shamal Battalion in Tawhid Brigade. His battalion operates in Tel Rifaat.

[8] YouTube, http://youtu.be/gfvWuAGFzA8, March 10, 2012.

[9] Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade Facebook Page, http://www.facebook.com/ahraralshamali.

[10] YouTube, http://youtu.be/wkZnU5OtrjE, June 10, 2012.

[11] YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Lr8x83VaCs, June 14, 2012; YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1xhqz6xmnQ, June 14, 2012.

[12] YouTube, http://youtu.be/I9bi5infiQU, June 3, 2012.

[13] YouTube, http://youtu.be/7-gTuWmeVI0, June 29, 2012.

[14] YouTube, http://youtu.be/QwFnApMVmDw, June 12, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/vyCXdFQjmpc, July 16, 2012. The author has encountered a greater use of homebuilt rockets in Aleppo Province than in any other province in Syria. Three battalions in Aleppo Province use homebuilt rockets: the Gharba' al-Shaam Battalion, the Qabda al-Shamal Battalion, and the Muthanna ibn Haritha Battalion. These rebels refer to their homebuilt rocket types using the terms "Nimir", or tiger, and "Sijeel." The latter is a reference to Surat al-Fil (Quran 105:4).

[15] YouTube, http://youtu.be/gfvWuAGFzA8, March 9, 2012.

[16] YouTube, http://youtu.be/QfK0kucP5wo, May 7, 2012. Alternative transliterations of Colonel Egeydi's surname include Oqaidi and Ugeydi.

[17] YouTube, http://youtu.be/QfK0kucP5wo, May 7, 2012.

[18] YouTube, http://youtu.be/ivkcOXj3s94, July 22, 2012.

[19] YouTube, http://youtu.be/ivkcOXj3s94, July 22, 2012.

[20] YouTube, http://youtu.be/lNDdlCwULPQ, April 25, 2012.

[21] YouTube, http://youtu.be/la6U5jBtHjw, July 18, 2012.

[22] Reuters, "Rebel Leader Bullish on Securing Aleppo," July 31, 2012, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/1c206b06-db20-11e1-be74-00144feab49a.html.

[23] YouTube, http://youtu.be/d5VPxKCmoxo, June 2, 2012.

[24] YouTube, http://youtu.be/45SUHpxEISU, July 30, 2012.

[25] YouTube, http://youtu.be/d5VPxKCmoxo, June 2, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/SIqSXhKgnCc, June 2, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/I9bi5infiQU, June 3, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/LqwCaFmIsWI, June 5, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/PbjqDRuSu4o, June 9, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/IftdnXtmZ8Y, July 4, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/1KNhGGcyyFM, July 7, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/ZXEoD81agHM, July 30, 2012.

[26] YouTube, http://youtu.be/ffIR7882T60, May 18, 2012; Muthanna ibn Haritha Battalion Facebook Page, http://www.facebook.com/almothana.benhartha.

[27] YouTube, http://youtu.be/SIqSXhKgnCc, June 2, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/I9bi5infiQU, June 3, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/PbjqDRuSu4o, July 9, 2012; Ahrar al-Shamal Facebook Page, http://www.facebook.com/ahraralshamali; Qalb al-Shamal Battalion Facebook Page, http://www.facebook.com/heartofnorth1; Syrian Observatory For Human Rights Facebook Page, https://www.facebook.com/pages/Syrian-Observatory-for-Human-Rights/121855461256134, June 25, 2012.

[28] YouTube, http://youtu.be/McgLKSiQuVY, July 30, 2012.

[29] This includes Gharba' al-Shaam, Dir al-Wafa', and the Al-Baraa' al-Malik Battalions.

[30] YouTube, http://youtu.be/McgLKSiQuVY, July 31, 2012.

[31] YouTube, http://youtu.be/aV4byuWfjIk, July 17, 2012.

[32] YouTube, http://youtu.be/la6U5jBtHjw, July 18, 2012.

[33] Matthew Weaver and Brian Whitaker, "Syria crisis: rebels 'execute shabiha' in Aleppo," The Guardian Online, August 1, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/middle-east-live/2012/aug/01/syria-crisis-aircraft-attack-aleppo-live.

[34] YouTube, http://youtu.be/YcvaXTrH6yE, July 23, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/BbVJ7WfS428, July 28, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/_v41MMz60Dc, July 29, 2012.

[35] YouTube, http://youtu.be/la6U5jBtHjw, July 18, 2012.

[36] Daret Izza is also the name of a town roughly 15 miles WNW of Aleppo City, where two of Fursan al-Jabal's component battalions had undertaken major operations before the formation of Tawhid Brigade.

[37] YouTube, http://youtu.be/0SRJcsL1K44, June 28, 2012.

[38] YouTube, http://youtu.be/la6U5jBtHjw, July 18, 2012.

[39] YouTube, http://youtu.be/aV4byuWfjIk, July 17, 2012.

[40] YouTube, http://youtu.be/aV4byuWfjIk, July 17, 2012.

[41] YouTube, http://youtu.be/aV4byuWfjIk, July 17, 2012.

[42] Matthew Weaver and Brian Whitaker, "Syria crisis: rebels 'execute *shabiha*' in Aleppo," The Guardian Online, August 1, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/middle-east-live/2012/aug/01/syria-crisis-aircraft-attack-aleppo-live.

[43] YouTube, http://youtu.be/gfvWuAGFzA8, March 9, 2012.

[44] This media organization should not be confused with the Fajr Media Front, which frequently promotes al-Qaeda; Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyya Facebook Page, http://www.facebook.com/AlfajrArmy; Sheikh al-Islam ibn al-Taimeeya Battalion Facebook Page, http://www.facebook.com/shaikhaleslam11; Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyya Facebook Page, http://www.facebook.com/AlfajrArmy; Al-Sham al-Islamiyya Magazine, http://www.mediafire.com/view/?6vqcr9ia0c1ubv9.

[45] The emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra will be discussed in detail in an upcoming report from ISW Analyst Elizabeth O'Bagy; Justin Vela and Liz Sly, "In Syria, group suspected of al-Qaeda links gaining prominence in war to topple Assad," *The Washington Post*, August 19, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-syria-group-suspected-of-al-qaeda-links-gaining-prominence-in-war-to-topple-assad/2012/08/19/c7cffd66-ea22-11e1-9ddc-340d5efb1e9c_story.html.

[46] C.J. Chivers, "Life With Syria's Rebels in a Cold and Cunning War," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/21/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-coalesce-into-a-fighting-force.html; YouTube, http://youtu.be/fs-7SWpOcrk, July 9, 2012.

[47] C.J. Chivers, "Life With Syria's Rebels in a Cold and Cunning War," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/21/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-coalesce-into-a-fighting-force.html.

[48] C.J. Chivers, "Life With Syria's Rebels in a Cold and Cunning War," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/21/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-coalesce-into-a-fighting-force.html.

[49] Jonathon Burch, "Siege broken, life stirs in Syrian ghost town," Reuters, July 25, 2012, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/07/25/uk-syria-crisis-azaz-idUKBRE86O18V20120725.

[50] Hugh Naylor, "Azzaz: inside the town that is the Syrian rebel's lifeline," The National Online, August 13, 2012, http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/azzaz-inside-the-town-that-is-the-syrian-rebels-lifeline.

[51] Martin Fletcher, "Troops Defect in Disgust as Gunship Pilots 'Boast' of Wreaking Death and Destruction," London Times Online, April 19, 2012.

[52] Piotr Zalewski, "Behind Rebel Lines in Aleppo, A Post-Assad Order Takes Shape," TIME Online, http://world.time.com/2012/08/06/behind-rebel-lines-in-aleppo-a-post-assad-order-takes-shape/.

[53] YouTube, http://youtu.be/LC81z3EjpRM, July 8, 2012; Scramble Dutch Aviation Society Syrian Air Force (Al-Quwwat al-Jawwiya al-Arabiya as-Souriya) Overview, http://www.scramble.nl/sy.htm.

[54] YouTube, http://youtu.be/GstCekxEcmE, April 9, 2012; When announcing the results of this operation, Hamadeen used the Arabic term *dababa*, which is often used interchangeably to describe both armored personnel carriers and main battle tanks.

[55] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights Facebook Page, https://www.facebook.com/pages/Syrian-Observatory-for-Human-Rights/121855461256134.

[56] Halab al-Madina Battalion Facebook Page, http://www.facebook.com/halab.almadinah; Amr ibn al-Aas Battalion Facebook Page, http://www.facebook.com/amr.alaass.

[57] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights Facebook Page, https://www.facebook.com/pages/Syrian-Observatory-for-Human-Rights/121855461256134.

[58] YouTube, http://youtu.be/SIqSXhKgnCc, June 2, 2012.

[59] YouTube, http://youtu.be/19bi5infiQU, June 3, 2012; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Lr8x83VaCs, June 14, 2012; YouTube.

[60] SANA, July 2, 2012, http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2012/07/02/428904.htm.

[61] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights Facebook Page, https://www.facebook.com/pages/Syrian-Observatory-for-Human-Rights/121855461256134.

[62] YouTube, http://youtu.be/1I8Cy63Io14, July 24, 2012; Jonathon Burch, "Siege broken, life stirs in Syrian ghost town," Reuters, July 25, 2012, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/07/25/uk-syria-crisis-azaz-idUKBRE86O18V20120725.

[63] YouTube, http://youtu.be/VplOoptpJrg, July 19, 2012.

[64] Jonathon Burch, "Siege broken, life stirs in Syrian ghost town," Reuters, July 25, 2012, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/07/25/uk-syria-crisis-azaz-idUKBRE86O18V20120725.

[65] Jonathon Burch, "Siege broken, life stirs in Syrian ghost town," Reuters, July 25, 2012, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/07/25/uk-syria-crisis-azaz-idUKBRE86O18V20120725.

[66] Hugh Naylor, "Azzaz: inside the town that is the Syrian rebel's lifeline," The National Online, August 13, 2012, http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/azzaz-inside-the-town-that-is-the-syrian-rebels-lifeline.

[67] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights Facebook Page, https://www.facebook.com/pages/Syrian-Observatory-for-Human-Rights/121855461256134.

[68] Liz Sly, "Syrian rebels seize rural territory while Assad forces focus on major cities," The Washington Post Online, July 30, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-rebels-seize-rural-territory-while-assad-forces-focus-on-major-cities/2012/07/30/gJQA13UbLX_story.html.

[69] YouTube, http://youtu.be/MBgJmcq0Rbw, July 26, 2012; YouTube, http://youtu.be/9DfNgO9-y1E, July 4, 2012.

[70] Liz Sly, "Syrian rebels seize rural territory while Assad forces focus on major cities," The Washington Post Online, July 30, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-rebels-seize-rural-territory-while-assad-forces-focus-on-major-cities/2012/07/30/gJQA13UbLX_story.html.

[71] Tawhid Brigade Facebook Page, https://www.facebook.com/leuaaltawheed.

[72] Jack Khoury and DPA, "Report: Syria rebels control 60% of Aleppo in wake of fierce clashes," Haaretz Online, August 4, 2012, http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/report-syria-rebels-control-60-of-aleppo-in-wake-of-fierce-clashes-1.455887.

[73] Joseph Holliday, "Middle East Security Report 3: Syria's Armed Opposition," The Institute for the Study of War, March, 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrias_Armed_Opposition.pdf.

[74] "Syrian rebels retreat under heavy Aleppo fire," Al-Jazeera English Online, August 9, 2012, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/08/201289731541l2979.html; "Syrian rebels retreat from parts of Aleppo's Salahuddin area," LA Times WORLD NOW Blog, August 9, 2012, http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2012/08/syria-rebels-retreat-aleppo-salahuddin.html.