

# Syria Situation Report: April 1-8, 2015

**1** April 7: ISIS detonated two SVBIEDs against JN and rebel positions north of Aleppo City. The first targeted a joint Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and Islamic Front (IF) headquarters in the town of Mare'a north of Aleppo, killing 18 rebels including a rebel military commander and a JN Emir. The second targeted the headquarters of a Jabhat al-Shamiya affiliate in the town of Hawar Kilis north of Mare'a on the Syrian-Turkish border, killing over 40. Rebels reportedly instituted curfews between Mare'a and the border town of Azaz in expectation of a third VBIED that did not materialize.

**2** April 2-4: The JN-led Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room announced the start of the battle for al-Mastouma Camp located south of Idlib City. JN claimed to advance within the military camp on April 3, and JN and other Jaysh al-Fatah forces made gains in Mastouma village north of the camp. A supporting effort led by the rebel "Rad al-A'atib" Operations Room in Hama targeted a regime checkpoint in northern Hama in order to prevent the regime from deploying reinforcements to Mastouma.

**3** April 3: JN and the Abu Amara Brigades organized a demonstration throughout Aleppo City, providing armed escorts for demonstrators that called for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate and the "toppling" of "secularism." During the event, demonstrators reportedly assaulted activists and burned Syrian independence flags, prompting Jabhat al-Shamiya to intervene. In a meeting between HASI, the Abu Amara Brigades, Aleppo Shari'a officials, activists, and civil administrators after the incident, all parties agreed that the Syrian independence flag is a symbol of "secularism" that should not be raised. HASI and the Abu Amara brigades also agreed not to allow fighters to participate in or escort protests in the city.

**4** April 1-8: ISIS forces advanced northward into the Yarmouk Refugee Camp in southern Damascus from the Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood south of the camp, seizing control of a majority of the camp after clashes with Islamist rebels and the Palestinian group Aknaf Beit al-Maqdis. ISIS beheaded more than six Palestinian fighters during the clashes. JN intervened to prevent Islamist rebel groups from sending reinforcements into the camp, prompting activists to accuse JN of collusion with ISIS. JN issued a statement denying affiliation with ISIS and asserting its impartiality in the Yarmouk conflict, claiming to be working toward a solution "at the request of the notables of al-Yarmouk Camp and with cooperation with relief bodies in the camp." JN stated that it prevented Jaysh al-Islam from entering Yarmouk because of the group's association with Islamist group Liwa Sham al-Rasoul, which ousted JN from the southern Damascus neighborhood of Beit Sahem in early March 2015. The Syrian regime reportedly helped to evacuate 2,000 civilians from the camp, however has conducted considerable aerial bombardment including the use of barrel bombs against the camp.

**5** April 4: Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham (HASI), and other local rebel groups launched the battle of "Fatah al-Mabeen" to fight ISIS in the eastern Qalamoun region of Damascus, ambushing ISIS forces in the village of Beir al-Mahroutha amidst ongoing clashes in the area.

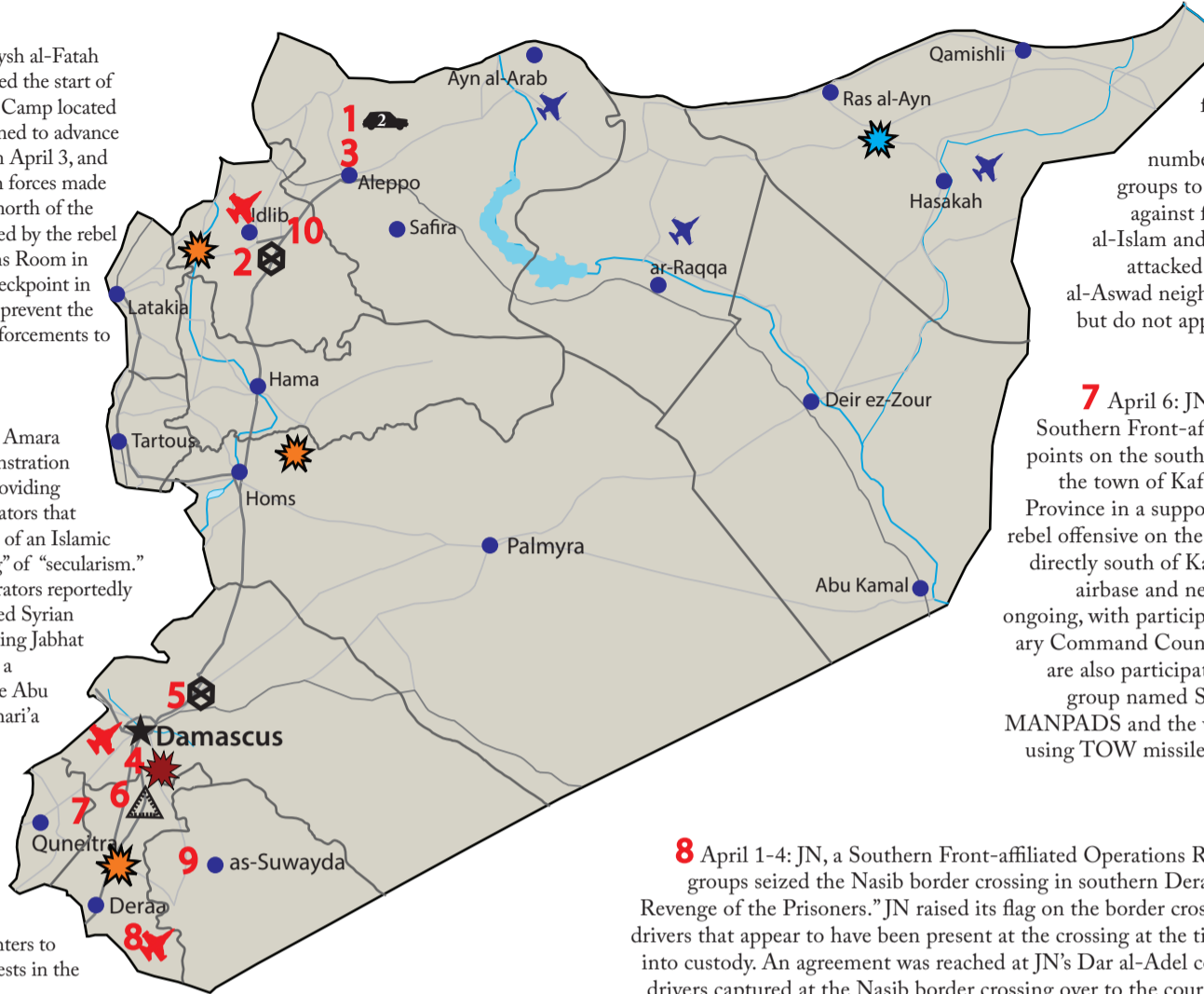
**6** April 4-6: Jaysh al-Islam announced the formation of "The Victory for the People of the Camp" operations room with a number of other Damascus-based groups to defend southern Damascus against further ISIS advances. Jaysh al-Islam and other Islamist rebel groups attacked ISIS positions in the Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood south of Yarmouk but do not appear to have made advances.

**7** April 6: JN, the First Army, and other Southern Front-affiliated rebels seized checkpoints on the southern and eastern outskirts of the town of Kafr Shams in northern Dera'a Province in a supporting effort for the ongoing rebel offensive on the regime-held Jadiya airbase, directly south of Kafr Shams. Clashes near the airbase and neighboring Jadiya village are ongoing, with participation from the Revolutionary Command Council. Western-backed groups are also participating, with a western-backed group named Seif al-Sham Brigades using MANPADS and the western-backed First Army using TOW missiles to target regime positions during clashes in the area.

**8** April 1-4: JN, a Southern Front-affiliated Operations Room, HASI and other rebel groups seized the Nasib border crossing in southern Dera'a province in the "Battle in Revenge of the Prisoners." JN raised its flag on the border crossing and over a dozen truck drivers that appear to have been present at the crossing at the time of its seizure were taken into custody. An agreement was reached at JN's Dar al-Adel courthouse to hand the truck drivers captured at the Nasib border crossing over to the court and to subject the crossing to direct civil management with Southern Front policing. The crossing remains closed for the transport of goods.

**9** April 6: The regime commissioned retired Brigadier General Nayef Sapiens to form a new pro-regime popular mobilization militia in Suwayda Province, with the aim of defending the borders of the province against "terrorist attacks."

**10** April 5: JN handed two of its members over to the Idlib Shari'a court to be tried for their treatment of Christians in Idlib City.



## Background Kinetic Activity

- Major Regime Airstrikes
- Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes
- Low-level Clashes
- Unknown Explosion

April 6: An unknown explosion destroyed the Sayda al-Azra church in Tel Nasri south of Tel Tamir. Activists accused ISIS of the attack.

- Opposition Forces
- Pro-Regime Forces
- Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)
- ISIS
- New Operations Room
- Declared Offensive
- SVBIED
- Major Clash



by Jennifer Cafarella

100km

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**ISIS Pushes to Reclaim Former Territory in Western Syria:** The ISIS push into the Yarmouk refugee camp signifies ISIS intent to reclaim areas of southern Damascus with a history of ISIS control. Unconfirmed reports that ISIS called for Palestinian fighters to turn themselves into JN may indicate that ISIS seeks to coerce JN into supporting ISIS in the capital, where their relationship has been characterized by coexistence and de-confliction rather than hostility. ISIS may also seek to leverage apparent seams in the relationship between JN forces in the eastern and southern outskirts of the capital to fragment JN's overall level of influence, possibly to allow ISIS to attract groups of fighters away from JN. Meanwhile, the dual ISIS SVBIED attack against JN and rebel front line positions north of Aleppo City likely indicates the start of an ISIS offensive to seize the border town of Azaz, also with a history of ISIS control. The attack follows a recent increase in ISIS messaging condemning the Aleppo-based Jabhat Shamiya coalition and the increasing partnership between rebels and the YPG in the province. ISIS may therefore be designating a main effort against Aleppo-based rebels supportive of the YPG in order to preempt joint rebel and YPG forces from attacking ISIS territory northeast of Aleppo City.

**JN Tailors Behavior to Local Dynamics:** The distinct character of JN's behavior in Damascus and Idlib indicates JN's ability to adapt to its local environment in order to tailor the pursuit of its interests to the realities of local dynamics. In Damascus, JN's nuanced role navigating the ISIS advance into Yarmouk reflects careful JN calculation regarding its own position within rebel ranks in the southern outskirts of the capital. Rather than joining a rebel counteroffensive against ISIS, JN leveraged its own position in Yarmouk to prevent an expansion of influence by a rebel group that has resisted JN presence in the area. This effectively allowed ISIS to seize the camp, yet provided JN leverage over Islamist rebels that may allow JN to acquire influence over rebel activities in southern Damascus. In Idlib city, JN's decision to try JN members for the mistreatment of Christians indicates JN's strict adherence to behavioral requirements established by rebel members of the Jaysh al-Fatah operations room, which has prioritized the protection of civilians and minorities in the "liberated" provincial capital. JN leader Abu Mohammed al-Joulani highlighted JN's commitment to continued partnership in Idlib in a speech on April 1 commemorating the JN and rebel victory the city. Joulani furthermore highlighted JN's commitment to reestablishing functional services in the city, positioning JN as a benefactor of Idlib civilians in accordance with the framework for governance established by the Jaysh al-Fatah operations room. Yet Joulani also indicated JN intent to establish a joint Shari'a court to oversee the implementation of governance in the city, which JN is likely to heavily influence. These two instances demonstrate that JN carefully scales its strategy for achieving influence over rebel behavior according to the local dynamics within which JN operates.

**Syrian Regime Continues Brutality despite Moscow Negotiations:** Assad continues to capitalize on opportunities to utilize brutality to force the submission of rebels and rebel-supportive populations despite the ongoing Moscow II negotiations, which focus in part on humanitarian issues. The regime launched a considerable aerial bombardment of the Yarmouk camp after the ISIS advance, including the use of indiscriminate barrel bombs against the civilian population. Assad has also launched heavy bombardments against Idlib City and the Nasib border crossing, resulting in dozens of civilian deaths. The regime furthermore continues to use jihadist presence in liberated areas to put forth the narrative that all armed opposition groups are actually radical Islamist terrorists and to justify the wholesale punishment of civilians in these areas. The Syrian Foreign Ministry declared that all "armed opposition" groups in Syria are terrorists in an open letter sent to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and the president of the U.N. Security Council on April 6. These trends indicate continued belligerence on the part of the Assad regime despite its declared willingness to engage in negotiations for peace, and highlight Assad's duplicitous strategy to foment radicalization in order to justify his continued brutality.