

# Syria Situation Report: March 9-17, 2015

**1** March 11-12: A majority of JN forces reportedly withdrew from the Beit Sahem neighborhood of southern Damascus under an agreement with local rebel forces. The withdrawal follows a statement issued by a local council in southern Damascus that denounced JN forces in the area as a “gang” and called on JN leader Abu Mohammed al-Joulani to renounce this JN faction for “offending” the name of JN.

**2** March 15: JN and rebel forces seized the area of Zarqa near Quraytayn in the Eastern Qalamoun region from ISIS-affiliated elements following heavy clashes. Meanwhile, JN issued a statement clarifying that it is concerned with Hezbollah in Lebanon, rather than the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) specifically. JN did not, however, rule out fighting the LAF if confronted. This follows an interview by local JN leader in Qalamoun Abu Melik al-Shami with a Lebanese news outlet in which al-Shami confirmed JN intent to conduct attacks in Lebanon.

**3** March 10-11: JN and rebel forces seized the town of Dorin in the Jabal al-Akrad region of eastern Latakia Province from regime forces after advancing in the area of Nabi Yunis east of the town and softening the town’s defenses with artillery fire.

**4** March 14: Second cousin of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Mohammad Tawfiq al-Assad, was reportedly shot and killed in Bashar al-Assad’s hometown of al-Qardaha in Latakia Province. While some opposition activists reported the attack as an assassination, other sources stated that Mohammad Tawfiq was killed due to a personal vendetta with another “powerful” Alawite citizen. Syrian state media reported his death during clashes in Dorin in eastern Latakia Province.

**5** March 17: Syrian regime forces claimed to have downed a “hostile” drone in northern Latakia Province. U.S. officials confirmed the loss of an unarmed U.S. predator drone, but did not immediately confirm the cause of the crash.

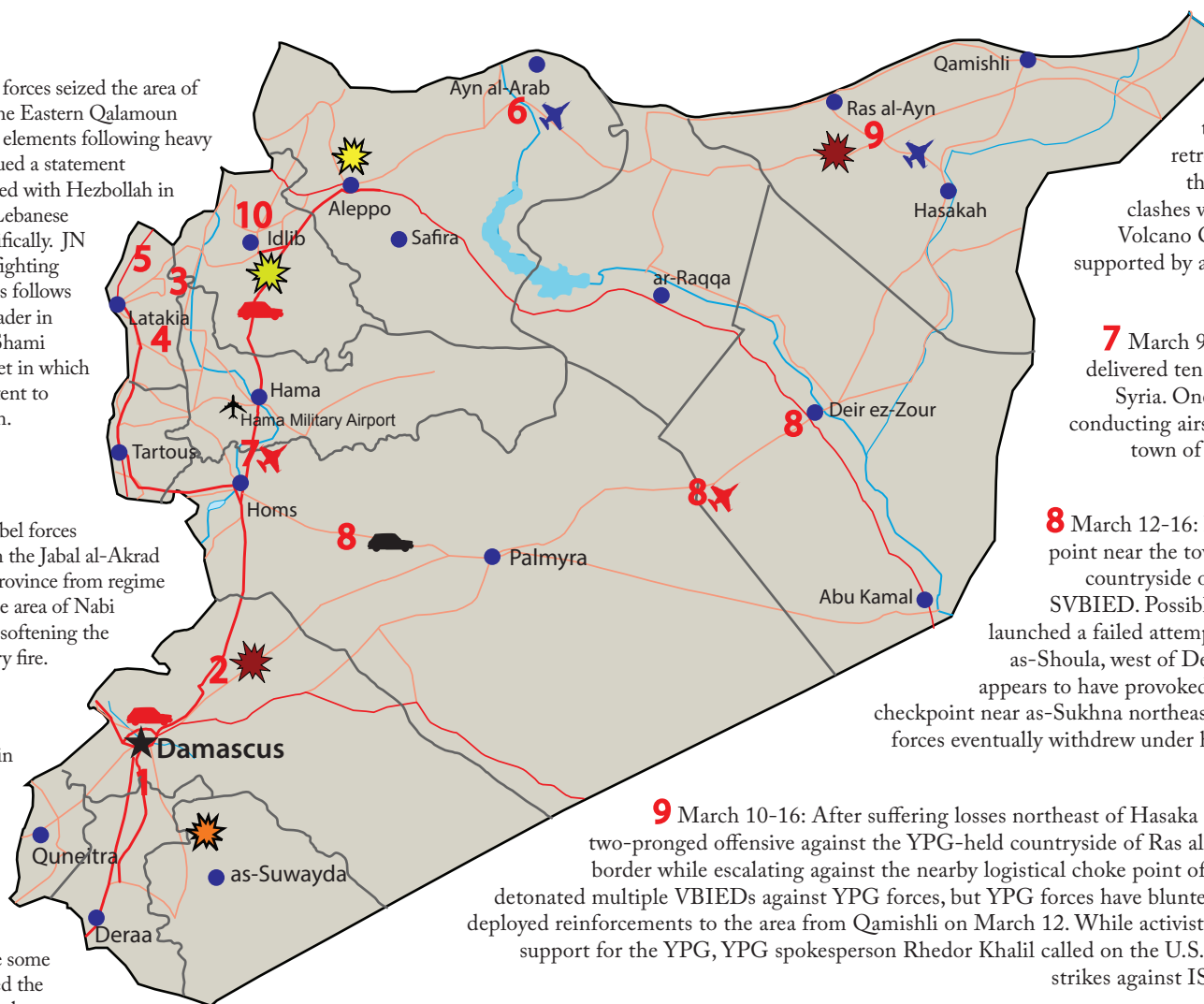
**6** March 14: ISIS destroyed several parts of the Qarah Qawqaz bridge near the former tomb of Sulayman Shah and retreated to the western bank of the Euphrates River following clashes with the YPG-led Euphrates Volcano Operations Room reportedly supported by anti-ISIS coalition airstrikes.

**7** March 9: According to activists, Iran delivered ten Sukhoi Su-22 fighter jets to Syria. One Su-22 was allegedly filmed conducting airstrikes against the rebel-held town of Talbisa north of Homs City.

**8** March 12-16: ISIS seized a regime checkpoint near the town of Furqlus in the eastern countryside of Homs after detonating an SVBIED. Possibly in response, regime forces launched a failed attempt to advance in the town of as-Shoula, west of Deir ez-Zour city. This in turn appears to have provoked an ISIS attack on a regime checkpoint near as-Sukhna northeast of Palmyra, although ISIS forces eventually withdrew under heavy regime bombardment.

**9** March 10-16: After suffering losses northeast of Hasaka City, ISIS forces launched a two-pronged offensive against the YPG-held countryside of Ras al-Ayn on the Syrian-Turkish border while escalating against the nearby logistical choke point of Tel Tamir. ISIS forces have detonated multiple VBIEDs against YPG forces, but YPG forces have blunted the ISIS attack. The YPG deployed reinforcements to the area from Qamishli on March 12. While activists have reported coalition air support for the YPG, YPG spokesperson Rhedor Khalil called on the U.S.-led coalition to increase its strikes against ISIS in Hasaka on March 13.

**10** March 12-16: Regime forces closed off Idlib city and the neighboring regime-held towns of Kafriya and al-Fouah, preventing residents from entering or exiting. The regime is reportedly preparing to transfer command centers from Idlib city to Jisr al-Shughour, where regime forces are digging trenches around the city. This follows clashes between NDF units inside Idlib City on March 12, which reportedly prompted the Idlib governor to temporarily close all entrances to the city. The area from Qamishli on March 12. While activists have reported coalition air support for the YPG, YPG spokesperson Rhedor Khalil called on the U.S.-led coalition to increase its strikes against ISIS in Hasaka on March 13.



## Background Kinetic Activity

- Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes
- Alleged CW Attack
- Low-level clashes
- VBIED

March 10: A VBIED detonated in the rebel-held town of al-Tal north of Damascus, killing one and wounding others. Activists accused the Assad regime of conducting the blast.

March 14: A VBIED detonated in Ma'arrat al-Numan in southern Idlib Province with no reports on casualties

- YPG
- United States
- Opposition Forces
- Pro-Regime Forces
- ISIS
- Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)
- Regime Airstrikes
- SVBIED
- Major Clash



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**U.S. Drone Lost in Syria; Syria Disregards UN Resolution on Chlorine Gas use:** The regime’s claimed downing of an American predator drone may signify regime intent to assert its sovereignty in the context of U.S.-led coalition airstrikes. It is also possible, however, that the drone was targeted by accident, possibly mistaken for a Turkish aircraft, or simply that it crashed. The state-run SANA news agency reported the plane as “hostile” without identifying it as American. If indeed the drone was shot down, the incident would mark the first altercation between coalition and regime forces since the start of the anti-ISIS air campaign, and may jeopardize the tacit de-confliction of air operations ongoing in Syria. Meanwhile, the regime’s closure of Idlib city and neighboring villages to the northeast occurred amidst a regime chlorine gas attack against rebel-held towns to the southeast. This complex maneuver may seek to enable pro-regime forces in Idlib City and Jisr al-Shughour to alter their dispositions in order to reconsolidate regime control and security in the area following indicators of internal disruption. The maneuver indicates the calculated use of a chemical weapon against a civilian population by the regime as a military tactic targeted to create freedom of movement for pro-regime military forces. It is therefore a clear violation of the recently passed UN Security Council Resolution 2209, which threatened the use of force in response to confirmed chlorine gas attacks by any actor in Syria.

**ISIS under Additional Pressure in Eastern Homs, Qalamoun:** ISIS has come under pressure on four fronts in Syria, and it is unclear how ISIS will shift in response. YPG forces supported by local rebels and militias in Aleppo and Hasaka continue to make gains against ISIS. They have placed ISIS under considerable pressure along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River in Aleppo Province, and have blunted an ISIS attempt to advance near Tel Tamir northwest of Hasaka city and against the Syrian-Turkish border town of Ras al-Ayn. In addition, regime forces have increased their pressure on ISIS in the eastern Homs desert in an apparent attempt to clear ISIS from crucial terrain from which ISIS can threaten regime staying power in Deir ez-Zour city. Finally, the JN and rebel attack against ISIS-affiliated elements in the eastern Qalamoun Mountains may furthermore stress ISIS in western Syria if JN and rebels continue to pressure the ISIS power base in the area.

**JN Declares Intent to Attack Hezbollah in Lebanon:** JN’s clarifying statement regarding its intent in Lebanon is an important indicator of its strategy. JN explicitly stated its desire to attack Hezbollah in Lebanon, but carefully nested this within JN’s war effort in Syria. By denying any interest in pursuing other objectives in Lebanon, such as the establishment of an emirate, JN sought to reinforce its singular commitment to the Syrian revolution at this time. JN therefore likely targeted this statement to JN’s support base and to wider rebel ranks in Syria in an effort to reconsolidate JN’s position as the spearhead of the Syrian revolution despite increasingly aggressive JN action toward rebels in the north.