

Syria Situation Report: May 21-26, 2015

1 May 22 – 25: Regime security forces allegedly arrested over five hundred men in the towns of Baniyas in northern Tartus Province and Jableh in southern Latakia Province for conscription into the military. These mass conscription events followed rumors of an upcoming Jaysh al-Fatah offensive into Latakia Province. Unknown individuals distributed 100 leaflets in Jableh on May 24 warning regime “loyalists” of a coming offensive, and on May 25 dozens of civilians held a demonstration in northeastern Latakia Province calling for Jaysh al-Fatah to launch combat operations in the province.

2 May 24 – 26: JN, Ahrar al-Sham, and other rebel factions seized terrain from alleged ISIS-affiliate Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk in Dera'a Province, including the town of Salem al-Golan, and mobilized large numbers of reinforcements to the area amidst ongoing clashes between the two parties. Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk condemned the attack as a violation of recent reconciliation attempts between the parties.

3 May 24: Ahrar al-Sham detonated a targeted IED after planting it on a vehicle in central Damascus, killing regime Brigadier General Bassam al-Ali Muhanna and six of his bodyguards. An Ahrar al-Sham spokesperson stated that these operations send “a strong message to the regime and its officers that the state of security...in Damascus is an illusion.”

4 May 22 – 24: ISIS militants seized the al-Tanaf border crossing with Iraq after regime forces withdrew from their positions. ISIS later seized the Iraqi side of the crossing at al-Waleed following clashes with Iraqi Security Forces.

5 May 20: ISIS conducted an SVBEST attack targeting an YPG training camp near the village of Jawadiyah in eastern Hasaka Province, killing six YPG fighters and injuring dozens of others.

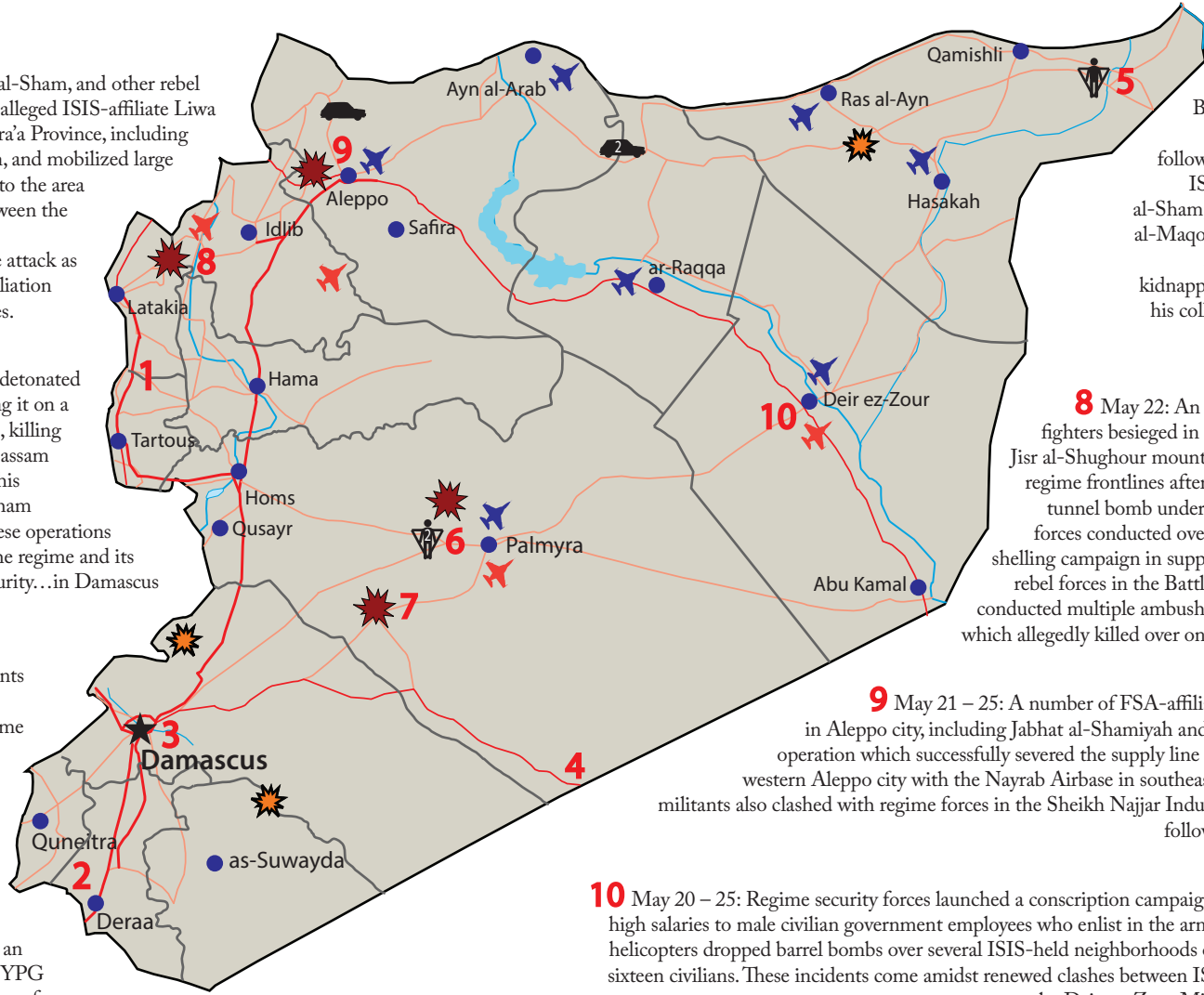
6 May 21 - 26: ISIS claimed to seize the Jazal oil field northwest of Palmyra and began to position around the strategic T4 Airbase west of Palmyra, with unconfirmed reports of two SVBEST detonations targeting the base on May 23. Meanwhile, regime-appointed governor of Homs Province Talal Barazi and other pro-regime sources stated that “hundreds” of pro-regime fighters are being deployed to eastern Homs in preparation for a counteroffensive against ISIS forces near Palmyra.

7 May 22 - 26: ISIS seized the villages of Sawwanah, Khunayfis, and Buhairi southwest of Palmyra in the Eastern Qalamoun region following clashes with regime forces. ISIS also clashed with JN, Ahrar al-Sham, and other rebel factions in the al-Maoura area of Eastern Qalamoun. Meanwhile, unknown gunmen kidnapped a Syriac Catholic priest and his colleague from a monastery in the nearby town of Qaryatayn.

8 May 22: An estimated two hundred regime fighters besieged in the National Hospital south of Jisr al-Shughour mounted a breakout attempt to reach regime frontlines after rebel forces began preparing a tunnel bomb under the hospital. Although regime forces conducted over sixty airstrikes and an intense shelling campaign in support of the retreat, JN and other rebel forces in the Battle of Victory Operations Room conducted multiple ambushes on the fleeing regime forces, which allegedly killed over one hundred pro-regime fighters.

9 May 21 – 25: A number of FSA-affiliated and Islamist rebel factions in Aleppo city, including Jabhat al-Shamiyah and Ahrar al-Sham, conducted an operation which successfully severed the supply line connecting regime positions in western Aleppo city with the Nayrab Airbase in southeastern Aleppo. Meanwhile, ISIS militants also clashed with regime forces in the Sheikh Najjar Industrial City northeast of Aleppo following ISIS advances in the area.

10 May 20 – 25: Regime security forces launched a conscription campaign in Deir ez-Zour city offering high salaries to male civilian government employees who enlist in the army reserves. Meanwhile, regime helicopters dropped barrel bombs over several ISIS-held neighborhoods of Deir ez-Zour, killing at least sixteen civilians. These incidents come amidst renewed clashes between ISIS and pro-regime forces near the Deir ez-Zour Military Airport south of the city.



Background Kinetic Activity

- Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes
- Major Regime Airstrikes
- SVBEST
- Low-level clashes

May 21 - 25: ISIS conducted two separate SVBEST attacks targeting YPG forces southwest of Ras al-Ayn in northern ar-Raqqa Province.

May 24: ISIS claimed credit for an SVBEST which detonated prematurely after being identified at a rebel checkpoint near Mare'a north of Aleppo city.

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100km

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ISIS Achieves Additional Gains in Central Syria: ISIS seized the historic city of Palmyra in central Syria on May 20 and continued to advance westward towards the strategic regime T4 Airbase along the highway to Homs city as well as southwest into the Eastern Qalamoun region along the road to Damascus. ISIS also seized the al-Tanaf / al-Waleed border crossing between Iraq and Syria in a move which potentially opens the door for additional ISIS expansion toward Damascus. These advances further isolate regime forces in Deir ez-Zour, a development which promotes ISIS’s consolidation in eastern Syria. If ISIS can secure its control over remaining regime positions in eastern and central Syria, ISIS will be in position to hit a range of targets along the Syrian central corridor between Homs and Damascus, allowing ISIS to divide Syrian regime resources among different cities in a similar manner to how ISIS divided ISF resources and attention in Iraq. It may also lead to greater contact or conflict between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) in this strategic zone. ISIS will likely seek to capitalize on the regime’s apparent inability to respond on multiple fronts to escalate against the regime in western Syria, particularly in Aleppo and Hama Provinces. ISIS will also likely consider that the Syrian central corridor remains out of the reach of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS air campaign – a concern particularly relevant following the Turkish announcement on May 25 that Turkey and the U.S. had agreed “in principle” to provide air support for Syrian rebels participating in the train-and-equip program against ISIS.

Regime Struggles to Counter ISIS and Opposition Advances: A continuing streak of regime losses in Homs, Idlib, and Aleppo Provinces suggests that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is increasingly unable to generate sufficient combat power to maintain his ‘army in all corners’ strategy. Regime forces proved unable to stem further ISIS advances against key infrastructure in eastern Homs Province, and a promised counteroffensive against Palmyra has yet to materialize. Meanwhile, pro-regime forces were forced to flee the National Hospital south of Jisr al-Shughour under heavy fire following the failure of a regime offensive to relieve the hospital, which Assad publicly ordered himself. In addition, the regime suffered several casualties amongst its senior military leadership over the past week, including one brigadier general killed during the retreat from the National Hospital and another killed by a targeted assassination in central Damascus. These incidents will likely drive Iran to increase its direct economic and indirect military support to the Assad regime in order to bolster its ability to sustain the fight. In a speech delivered on May 23, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah stated that Hezbollah will fight “wherever necessary” throughout Syria; other Hezbollah senior officials released their own statements confirming that Hezbollah will continue to back the Syrian regime for “however long it takes” despite recent setbacks. These messages of defiance suggest that Hezbollah will likely increase its support to the regime. However, Hezbollah continues to face political pressure in Lebanon for its involvement in Syria, particularly following recent Hezbollah statements indicating that Hezbollah may be forced to intervene against militant groups in the eastern Lebanese town of Aarsal due to the “inaction” of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Although these messages are likely intended to coerce the LAF into conducting clearing operations in Aarsal, any unilateral Hezbollah move against the Sunni-majority town and its large Syrian refugee population could serve as a trigger for increased sectarian violence throughout Lebanon.