

Syria Situation Report: May 27-June 2, 2015

1 May 27 – June 1: YPG forces continued to advance west from Ras al-Ayn towards the ISIS-held border crossing of Tel Abyad, seizing over two dozen ISIS-controlled villages with support from U.S.-led coalition airstrikes. Meanwhile, YPG and FSA-affiliated rebels in the Euphrates Volcano Operations Room in Ayn al-Arab canton announced the start of an offensive targeting Tel Abyad. The YPG denied accusations by the opposition Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and local activists claiming that the YPG conducted executions and forced displacements against Arab civilians during recent offensives west of Ras al-Ayn and on Abdul Aziz Mountain southwest of Hasaka city.

2 May 30 – June 2: ISIS launched an offensive against Hasaka City from three axes, heavily shelling the Kawkab Military Base east of the city and detonating at least two SVBIEDs against regime positions in Hasaka's southern outskirts. ISIS also penetrated the city itself, detonating IEDs targeting the Military Security Branch and regime vehicles. ISIS reportedly beheaded at least twenty pro-regime fighters and killed thirty others during the ongoing clashes, including two alleged Hezbollah and Iranian commanders. In response, regime warplanes struck a market in the ISIS-held town of Shaddadi south of Hasaka City, killing at least 65 civilians.

3 May 25: U.S. CENTCOM confirmed an airstrike in northwestern Syria targeting a tactical unit of members of the 'Khorasan Group' which destroyed a vehicle. Local sources reported the strike killed a commander with Jund al-Aqsa, a Salafi-jihadist group closely linked with Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra.

4 May 27: Pro-regime forces repelled an ISIS attack on the village of Ithriya located along the regime's supply route from Hama City to Aleppo.

5 May 28 – 29: JN, Ahrar al-Sham, and other rebel groups in the Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room seized the regime stronghold of Ariha as well as three villages southwest of the city after regime forces withdrew following several hours of clashes.

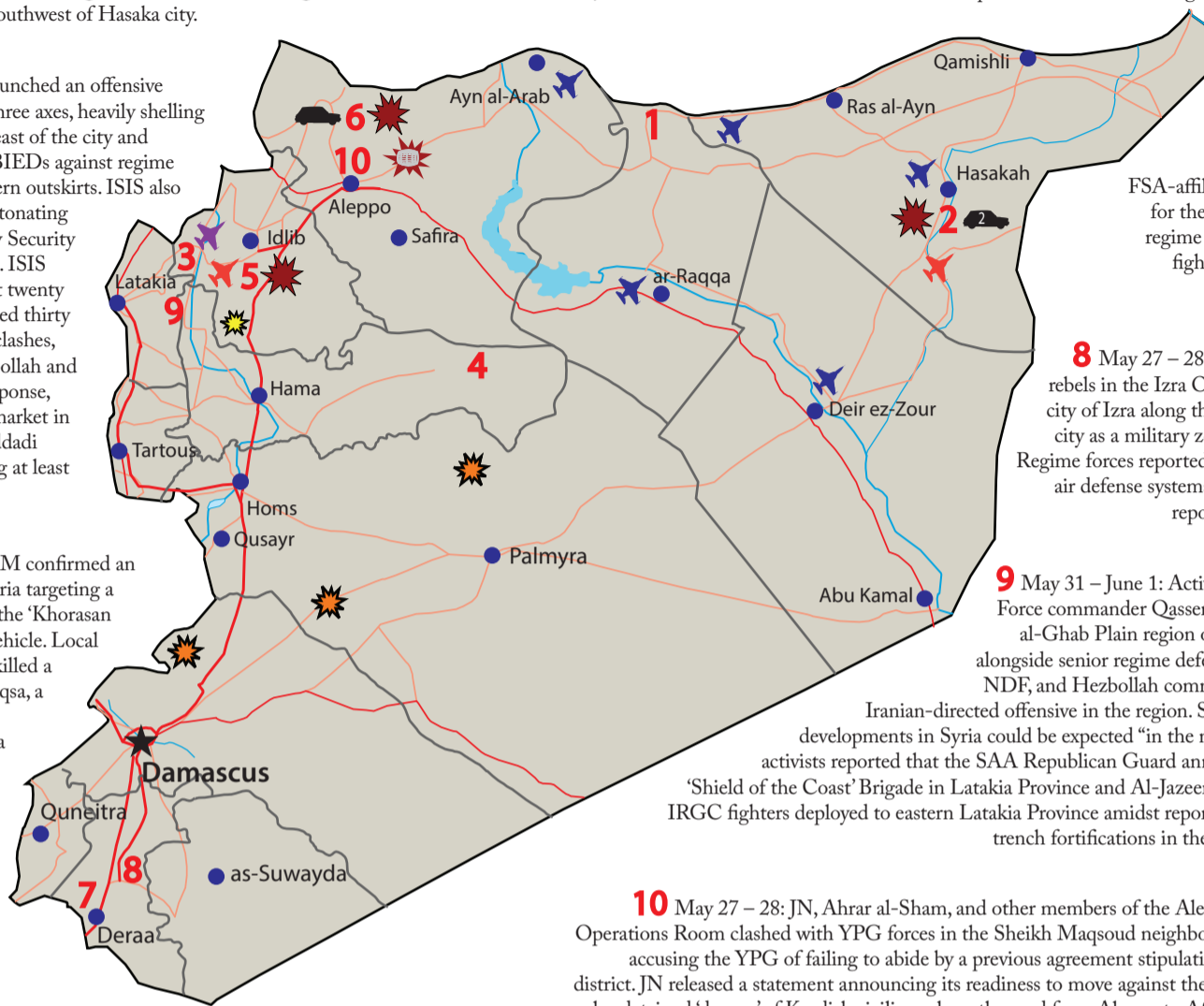
6 May 29 – June 2: ISIS launched an offensive against JN and rebel positions in the northern Aleppo countryside, seizing the town of Soran Azaz and several surrounding villages in a multi-pronged attack which included an SVBIED attack. In response, JN and numerous Aleppo-based rebel groups deployed large numbers of reinforcements to the area. Clashes are still ongoing amidst reported regime airstrikes in the area, which prompted the U.S. State Department to accuse the regime of providing support to ISIS.

7 May 27 – 30: Residents of the rebel-held portions of Dera'a City held multiple demonstrations condemning the leaders of both FSA-affiliated and Islamist rebel factions for their perceived inaction against the regime and demanding that opposition fighters launch an offensive to expel regime forces from the city.

8 May 27 – 28: FSA-affiliated Southern Front rebels in the Izra Operations Room designated the city of Izra along the regime supply route to Dera'a city as a military zone and began shelling the area. Regime forces reportedly began to withdraw radar and air defense systems from a village near Izra amidst reports of an imminent rebel attack.

9 May 31 – June 1: Activists reported that IRGC-Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani recently toured the al-Ghab Plain region of northwestern Hama Province alongside senior regime defense officials to meet with SAA, NDF, and Hezbollah commanders regarding an upcoming Iranian-directed offensive in the region. Suleimani later stated that major developments in Syria could be expected "in the next few days." Meanwhile, local activists reported that the SAA Republican Guard announced the formation of a new 'Shield of the Coast' Brigade in Latakia Province and Al-Jazeera reported on June 1 that 1,500 IRGC fighters deployed to eastern Latakia Province amidst reports of regime forces constructing trench fortifications in the eastern countryside of Latakia.

10 May 27 – 28: JN, Ahrar al-Sham, and other members of the Aleppo-based Labbayki Ya Ukhtah Operations Room clashed with YPG forces in the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood of northern Aleppo after accusing the YPG of failing to abide by a previous agreement stipulating free rebel transit through the district. JN released a statement announcing its readiness to move against the YPG "criminals" in Aleppo. JN also detained 'dozens' of Kurdish civilians along the road from Aleppo to Afrin after Kurdish security forces arrested a local JN leader. Clashes ended after the YPG agreed to implement the previous agreement.



- United States
- Pro-Regime Forces
- ISIS
- Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)
- Opposition Forces
- YPG
- SVBIED
- U.S. Airstrike on Khorasan Group
- Major Clash

Background Kinetic Activity

- Anti-ISIS Coalition Airstrikes
- Major Regime Airstrikes
- Alleged CW Attack
- Low-level clashes
- Major Barrel Bomb Attack

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INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR
by Christopher Kozak and the ISW Syria Team

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ISIS Attempts to Disrupt YPG Assault on Tel Abyad: ISIS launched new offensives in northern Syria following its seizure of the strategic city of Palmyra and other key locations in central Syria over recent weeks. In northeastern Syria, ISIS attacked defensive positions held by regime forces on the southern approaches to Hasaka city, likely in an attempt to draw YPG resources away from the ongoing YPG-led effort to seize the ISIS-held Tel Abyad border crossing. Kurdish forces supported by U.S.-led coalition airstrikes have advanced towards Tel Abyad from both the east and the west as part of an operation to deny ISIS access to the Turkish border while simultaneously securing a zone of contiguous Kurdish control connecting the Hasaka and Ayn al-Arab cantons. Although ISIS maintains cross-border routes in northern Aleppo Province, the loss of Tel Abyad would sever one of ISIS's primary avenues for smuggling oil, foreign fighters, and other necessities. The loss of Tel Abyad would also free Kurdish forces to reconsolidate their lines in preparation for any offensive south towards Ayn Issa and the self-proclaimed ISIS capital of ar-Raqqa.

ISIS Attack Against Rebels North of Aleppo City Illustrates Policy Limitations in Syria: ISIS's attack against key JN and rebel terrain in the northern Aleppo countryside illustrates the limitations of a U.S. anti-ISIS policy which fails to fully engage with the context of the wider Syrian Civil War. ISIS advances north of Aleppo threaten a vital rebel supply line that passes through the Bab al-Salama border crossing and the town of Azaz and although heavy JN and rebel reinforcement along this front line will likely blunt ISIS's advance, the attack is likely to have disrupted ongoing rebel preparations for the expected upcoming 'Battle of Aleppo'. As demonstrated by the regime's aerial bombardment of rebel-held terrain proximate to the ISIS offensive, Assad continues to prioritize rebel defeat over combatting ISIS. Thus, the resultant disruption from ISIS's attack could create opportunities for the regime to complete its encirclement of weakened rebel forces in Aleppo city. Meanwhile, numerous moderate Syrian rebel commanders in Aleppo Province have decried the lack of U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition airstrikes north of Aleppo city and some commanders claim to be reconsidering their willingness to participate in the U.S. train-and-equip program. The escalation north of Aleppo City therefore directly threatens the success of U.S. Syrian policy, illustrating the inseparability of the threat posed by ISIS from the wider Syrian Civil War and demonstrating the immediate consequences of failing to enable U.S.-allied rebels to win against ISIS by protecting them from the regime.

Early Reports Indicate Increased Iranian Deployment in Northwestern Syria: If confirmed, the deployment of large numbers of additional Iranian IRGC forces would signal a key Iranian strategic decision to increase direct military support for Assad in response to a string of recent regime losses and the continuing degradation of the regime's remaining military forces. Regardless, the statement by IRGC-QF commander Qassem Suleimani hinting at major developments in Syria "in the next few days" presents a clear indicator that Iran intends to expand its direct support to Assad. The reports suggest that this assistance may take the form of an upcoming IRGC-led offensive in northern Syria which seeks to reestablish a defensive buffer zone for core regime terrain in the coastal Alawite heartland of Latakia, possibly through an attempt to recapture the city of Jisr al-Shughour which serves as the gateway to northeastern Latakia Province. Alternatively, regime forces reinforced by Iran may instead attempt to mount a counteroffensive to recapture the strategic city of Palmyra in central Syria from ISIS. In either scenario, Assad's deepening reliance on Iran in order to mount offensive action indicates that Iranian strategic objectives will likely increasingly dictate the regime's military campaign in Syria.