

# Syria Situation Report: April 14-21, 2015

**1** 17 APR: Chechen jihadist group Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal Ansar staged a demonstration in the town of Huraytan north of Aleppo city, with protestors carrying Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal Ansar flags in addition to banners supporting Jaysh al-Fatah. The protestors called for the establishment of Islamic law.

**2** April 14: The Aleppo-based Jabhat al-Shamiya quietly dissolved as a unified military entity, leaving the constituent groups to operate under their own banners. The groups agreed to maintain cooperation as independent actors.

**3** April 20: JN conducted a double SVEST attack against a gathering of regime soldiers in the city of Ariha, south of Idlib city, after infiltrating and firing on regime soldiers, allegedly killing 70.

**4** April 15-16: An elite regime unit known as the "Tiger Forces" led by prominent commander Suheil Hassan and supported by Hezbollah fighters seized the towns of Kafr Najed and Nahlaya southwest of Idlib city from JN and other rebel fighters participating in the Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room. Regime forces have successfully repelled attempts by JN and rebel forces to regain control of the towns.

**5** April 14: Monzer Jamil al-Assad, a cousin of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, was escorted to Damascus from Latakia City by Presidential Palace Special Forces under direct orders from President Assad. According to unconfirmed reports, he was arrested under allegations of conspiring against the regime after communicating with President Assad's exiled uncle, Rifaat al-Assad, regarding possible solutions to the increasing restiveness of Alawites in coastal Syria.

**6** April 16: JN detained two fighters from the FSA-affiliated Liwa Tawhid al-Janoub in Dera'a Province on charges of pledging allegiance to ISIS, sparking isolated clashes between the two groups. The umbrella group Tahalif Suqour al-Janoub, which includes Liwa Tawhid al-Janoub as a member, threatened to fight JN if the group did not release the two detainees and deliver the JN fighters who detained them to the Dar al-Adel courthouse.

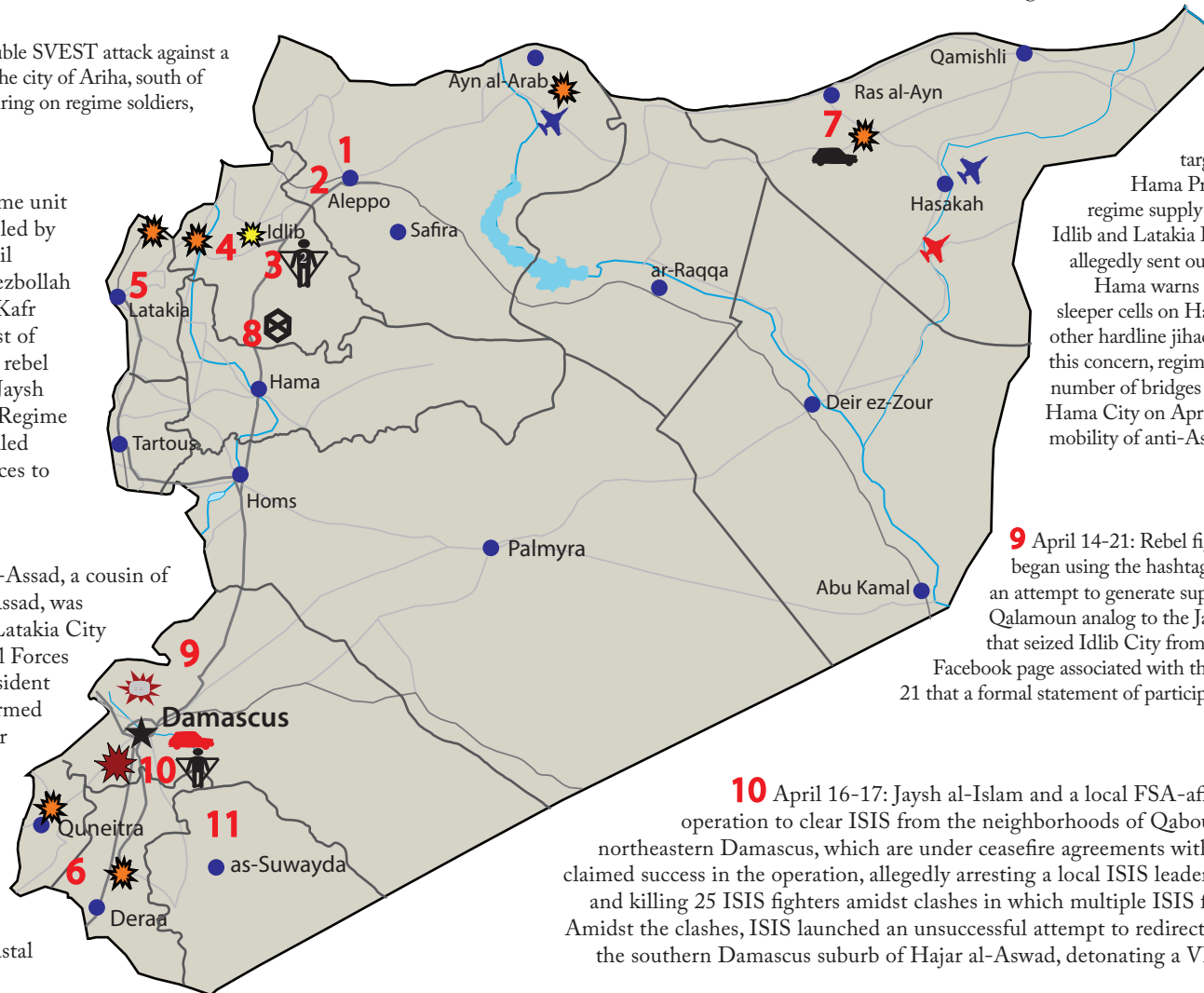
**7** April 18: The regime deployed hundreds of reinforcements to the border town of Ras al-Ayn, northwest of Hasaka City, to support YPG forces fighting ISIS in the area. The deployment followed a meeting between the head of the Hasaka Military Security Branch, Brig. Gen. Ali Diab, and YPG representatives to discuss the fight against ISIS, in which Diab reportedly promised 700 ground troops, air cover, and weapons and ammunitions to the YPG. The deployment also follows meetings between Syrian Minister of National Reconciliation Haider Ali and Kurdish, Christian, and Sunni leaders in Hasaka province to communicate the regime's intent to "dispel fears of estrangement" and build "bridges of communication."

**8** April 17-19: Eighteen Islamist and FSA-affiliated rebel groups announced the battle of "Shafa' al-Sodour" targeting three towns in northern Hama Province with the aim of cutting regime supply lines connecting Hama city to Idlib and Latakia Provinces. Meanwhile, a notice allegedly sent out by the police headquarters in Hama warns of an imminent attack by ISIS sleeper cells on Hama City supported by JN and other hardline jihadist groups. Perhaps indicating this concern, regime forces reportedly destroyed a number of bridges on the Orontes River south of Hama City on April 14 in an attempt to limit the mobility of anti-Assad forces in the southern and eastern Hama countryside.

**9** April 14-21: Rebel fighters in the Qalamoun region began using the hashtag "Jaysh Fatah al-Qalamoun" in an attempt to generate support for the establishment of a Qalamoun analog to the Jaysh al-Fatah military coalition that seized Idlib City from regime forces on March 28. A Facebook page associated with the campaign indicated on April 21 that a formal statement of participating brigades may be released soon.

**10** April 16-17: Jaysh al-Islam and a local FSA-affiliated brigade launched an operation to clear ISIS from the neighborhoods of Qaboun, Barzeh, and Tishreen in northeastern Damascus, which are under ceasefire agreements with the regime. Jaysh al-Islam claimed success in the operation, allegedly arresting a local ISIS leader named Munther al-Karmi and killing 25 ISIS fighters amidst clashes in which multiple ISIS fighters detonated SVESTs. Amidst the clashes, ISIS launched an unsuccessful attempt to redirect Jaysh al-Islam attention to the southern Damascus suburb of Hajar al-Aswad, detonating a VBIED in the neighborhood

**11** April 19: ISIS seized the villages of al-Asfar and al-Qasr in northern Suwayda Province following violent clashes with pro-regime forces.



## Background Kinetic Activity

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

*April 20: ISIS launched an unsuccessful attack against YPG forces in the village of Tel Midan southwest of Ras al-Ayn using an SVBIED in an attempt to advance*

- YPG
- Opposition Forces
- Pro-Regime Forces
- ISIS
- Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)
- SVEST
- Declared Offensive
- VBIED
- Major Clash



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**Regime Fears Coup from within Alawite Community; Deploys Reinforcements to Support PKK-linked Syrian Kurds in Hasaka:** The arrest of Monzer Jamil al-Assad by the Assad regime after his alleged communication with exiled coup attempt leader Rifaat al-Assad indicates heightened regime concern over the emergence of challenges to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime from within the Alawite community. The report that Monzer was in contact with Rifaat al-Assad prior to his arrest may be untrue, but nevertheless indicates that the regime perceives a high threat of rising dissidence within Alawite communities. This trend emerged prominently in late 2014 following a widespread conscription campaign by the regime to replenish its overstretched forces. Meanwhile, the regime's deployment of reinforcements and promise of air support to assist Syrian Kurdish YPG fighters combatting ISIS in Hasaka Province indicates regime intent to deepen its cooperation with Syrian Kurds in northern Syria as an avenue to cement regime influence in the province. The regime reinforcements likely consist of pro-regime militia fighters, which are drawn heavily from Sunni Arab tribes in the province and may serve as an ideal seam between Syrian Kurds and largely Alawite regime fighters. This move is likely also targeted to neutralize opportunities for the anti-ISIS coalition to deepen its own partnership with the YPG without acting in support or directly against the regime.

**Regional Actors Explore Options for Intervention in Syria:** The dissolution of the Jabhat al-Shamiya military coalition is an immediate setback in the consolidation of rebel combat power in Aleppo Province. It may, however, signal a wider renegotiation of rebel coordination in Aleppo province with the possible support and encouragement of regional actors such as Turkey. The dissolution occurs amidst ongoing negotiations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, mediated by Qatar, to conduct joint military action to oust the Assad regime. One option reportedly on the table calls for Turkey to provide ground troops supported by Saudi airstrikes to assist Syrian opposition forces against the Assad regime. Turkey has consistently called for the imposition of no fly zones in areas near the Turkish border as an avenue to pressure the Assad regime, and is therefore likely to prioritize Aleppo as the starting place for combat operations, if they occur. Turkey may already be setting conditions for this course of action by influencing a reshuffling of rebel ranks in the province that could facilitate this partnership. The Jabhat al-Shamiya coalition's dissolution followed a major splinter from leading Islamist group Liwa al-Tawhid in March to form a new group named the First Regiment, possibly supported by Turkey. The numerical title given to this group is similar to other Western-backed groups in Syria, which have complied with specific requirements for their organization and orientation in return for military assistance. The options under consideration by Turkey and Saudi Arabia may be more extensive, however, and may not limit action solely to Aleppo Province. Commander of Jaysh al-Islam, a major Saudi-funded Islamist group in Damascus, Zahran Alloush is reportedly in Turkey along with other unidentified Syrian rebel leaders to engage in a series of meetings that may be related to this ongoing exploration of options for military intervention in Syria. The U.S. may be engaged quietly in these negotiations as well. The long-term success of the anti-ISIS mission in Syria is likely to be defined by whether and how the U.S. and its coalition allies position the fight against ISIS in the context of the requirements to end the Syrian war. A regional initiative to pursue the fall of the Assad regime may be a viable avenue to secure rebel support to and participation in anti-ISIS efforts such as the ongoing Syrian opposition train and assist mission.