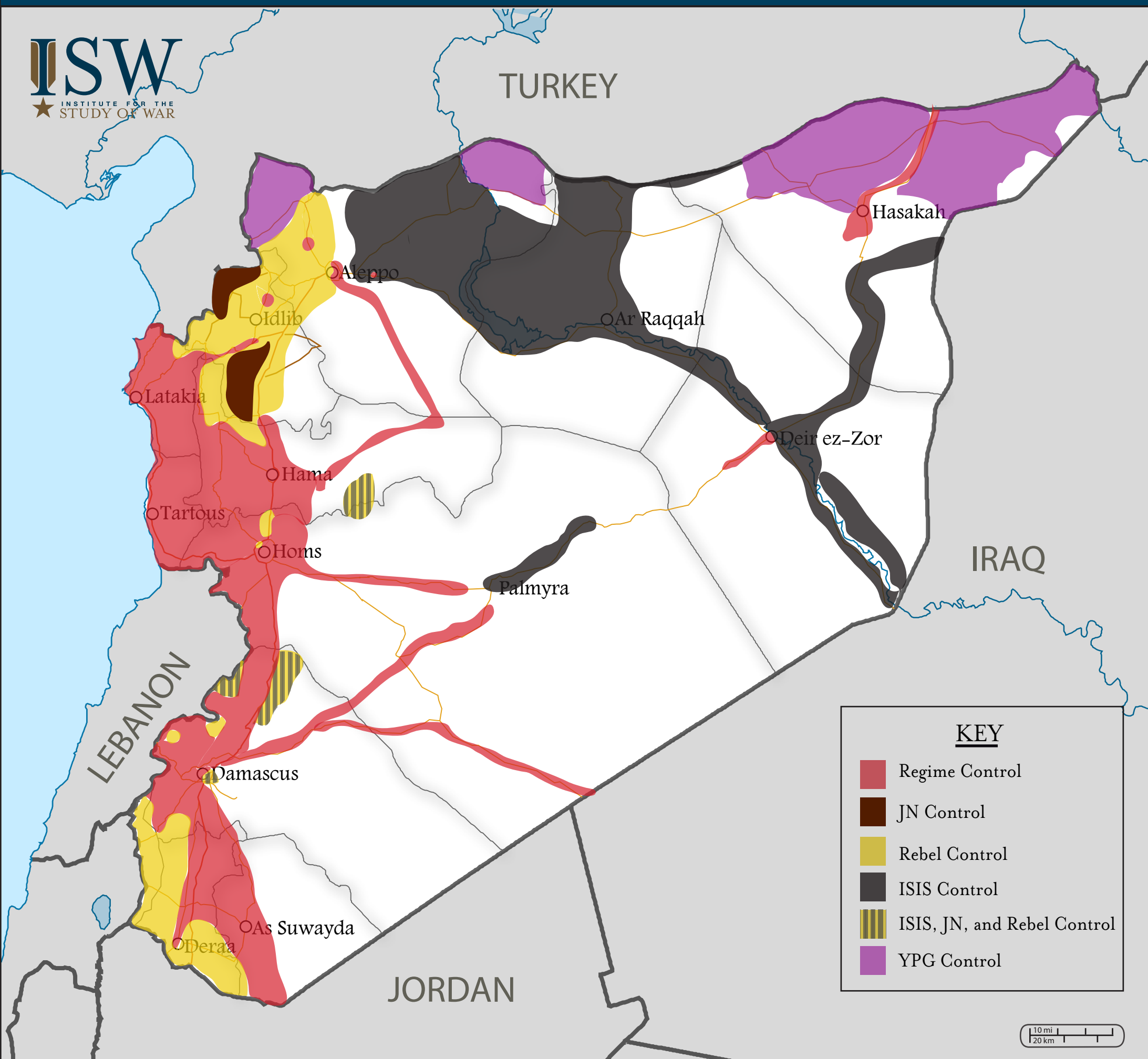


Control of Terrain in Syria: May 20, 2015



ISIS seized the regime-held town of al-Sukna west of Deir ez-Zour City on May 14, severing the regime's ground line of communication from Palmyra in the central Homs Desert to Deir ez-Zour City and effectively isolating remaining regime positions in western Deir ez-Zour. ISIS forces then seized the regime stronghold of Palmyra on May 20 after regime forces reportedly executed a full withdrawal from the city, prison, and military airbase. ISIS is in full control of the city and appears to be in control of the Palmyra military airbase and prison, although regime forces are likely to regroup and launch a counter-offensive in the near term. ISW is placing a watch on the town of al-Shoula and the Brigade 137 military base west of Deir ez-Zour City, which are likely upcoming targets as ISIS consolidates its control in eastern Syria. ISIS's advances in the Homs Desert will allow ISIS to stage for future attacks into the Syrian central corridor, which could create opportunities for other anti-Assad forces to advance on additional fronts. A redeployment of regime forces from the Central Corridor to retake Palmyra could produce similar effects. The East is not the only front on which ISIS is moving in Syria. ISIS seized two regime-held villages east of the Sheikh Najjar industrial area on Aleppo's northeastern outskirts. ISIS lost territory north of this position to rebels one week prior, which may explain ISIS's choice to attack regime positions. ISIS may use its anti-Assad fighting stance to cultivate rapport with rebels and Jabhat al-Nusra. Meanwhile, Hezbollah made notable gains against JN and Syrian rebel forces in the Qalamoun mountain range on the Syrian - Lebanon border north of Damascus, shrinking the areas of JN and rebel control along the border. These gains complement an ongoing crackdown by the Lebanese Armed Forces on the Lebanese side of the border, which together appear to have applied considerable pressure on anti-Assad forces in the border region. It will be critical to observe whether ISIS escalates against the regime or Hezbollah in this region in support of JN and rebel forces now that it holds positions in the eastern Homs desert. Tension between ISIS and anti-Assad forces north of Damascus appear to have quieted, and it is possible that ISIS will escalate against regime and Hezbollah forces in an effort to increase its standing in the border region as well as northern Syria.