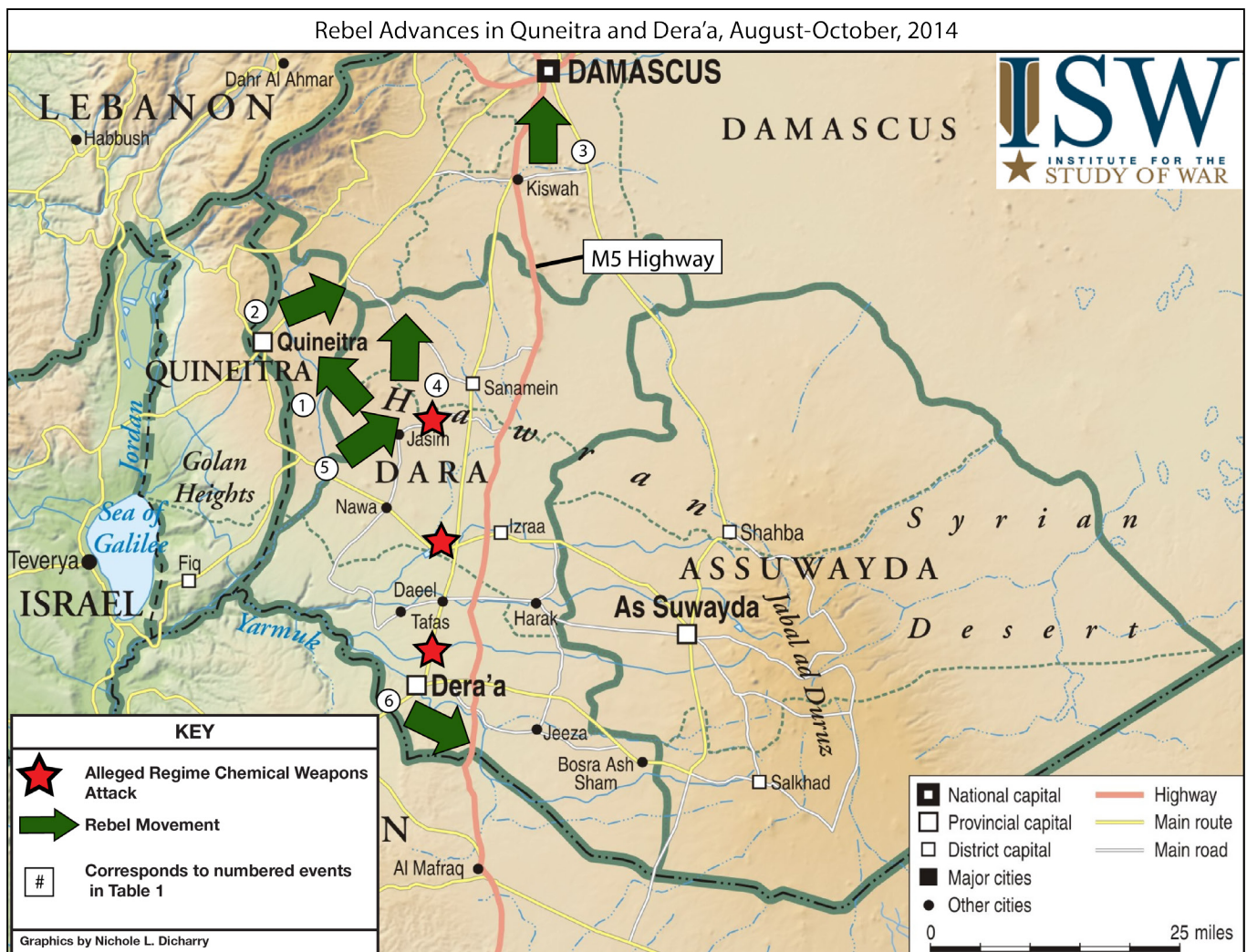


## INCREASED REBEL UNITY THREATENS ASSAD IN DAMASCUS AND SOUTHERN SYRIA

Rebel gains in southern Syria and efforts to sever regime supply routes north and south of Damascus indicate that the regime has lost momentum in the capital region. Rebel alliances show greater cohesion in this zone, as well a greater cooperation with Jabhat al-Nusra, while the regime is showing signs of severe manpower shortage. The regime is attempting to fill its ranks with new conscripts and reservists. The regime will likely need to reinforce its southern front in order to reverse rebel gains, though it is likely that the regime will need to sacrifice efforts elsewhere in order to provide sufficient support.



Numbers on the map correspond to numbered events in Figure 1 (page 2).

## INTRODUCTION

Rebels have recently made gains in Damascus through two separate campaigns to obstruct regime supply lines north and south of the city. The primary rebel objective is likely to break the regime's siege of rebel-held Eastern and Western Ghouta. Their success may be indicated by

the reported increase in regime use of chlorine gas to counter rebel forces in frontline neighborhoods. While the rebel operations north and south of Damascus appear to be separate efforts, the tactical gains achieved by each suggest increased cooperation among a spectrum of rebels groups in the greater Damascus area than had been previously considered isolated rebel systems.<sup>1</sup> Severing regime supply lines from

Figure 1.

Significant rebel offensives in Quneitra and Dera'a, August – October, 2014						
	Date	Offensive	Participants	Goal	Outcome	Regime response
1	August 27	al-Wa'ad al-Haq <sup>i</sup>	Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), Ahrar al-Sham (HASI), Southern Front (SF), Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF)	Capture Old Quneitra, Quneitra border crossing, and Rawadi	Successful; additional capture of Hamidiya <sup>ii</sup> , Majduliya <sup>iii</sup> , and Naba al-Sakher <sup>iv</sup>	September 2: The regime launched a counteroffensive and clashed with rebels in Majduliya and Hamidiya, the latter north of Quneitra city, but did not regain control of the Quneitra border. <sup>v</sup>
2	September 4	Chargers at Dawn <sup>vi</sup>	JN, HASI, SF, al-Muthanna Islamic Movement	Liberate parts of Quneitra province	Liberation of Deir Al-Adas, al-Mal, Kafr Nasij, Naba al-Sakher <sup>vii</sup>	October 1: The regime launched a chemical weapons (CW) attack in Deir al-Adas following a failed regime counteroffensive.
3	September 16	Piercing Meteor	JN, HASI, Jaysh al-Islam	Attack al-Midan checkpoint in southern Damascus	10s of regime soldiers killed <sup>viii</sup>	The regime bombarded rebel-held positions in the capital. <sup>ix</sup>
4	October 4	Wa al-Fajr wa Layal Asher	Ajnad al-Sham, HASI, JI, Suqur al-Sham, and others. JN unofficially participates.	Capture Tel al-Hara and Hara	Successful <sup>x</sup>	October 9: The regime launched a CW attack in Inkhil, east of Tel al-Hara. <sup>xi</sup>
5	October 6	Labayk Allahu Labayk	HASI, SF, Hamza Division	Capture Zimrin, Western Zimrin Hill, Northern Zimrin Hill, Jadiya, al-Roba'i Checkpoint, Hamada Farm, open up a route to Western Ghouta <sup>xii</sup>	Capture of Zimrin and al-Roba'i Checkpoint <sup>xiii</sup>	Artillery and rocket strikes on Simlin, Inkhil, Zimrin <sup>xiv</sup>
6	October 16	Ahl al-Azem	SF	Capture Um al-Mayathin Checkpoint, al-Ma'asara Checkpoint, al-Kazyat Checkpoint, Nasib customs station <sup>xv</sup>	Successful capture of the three checkpoints, advance on Nasib border station ongoing <sup>xvi</sup>	Regime airstrikes and barrel bombs <sup>xvii</sup>
Significant rebel offensives in Eastern Ghouta, September – October, 2014						
7	September 7	-	JN and unidentified rebels	Capture al-Dukhaniyya	Successful <sup>xviii</sup>	September 22 and 26: The regime bombarded and launched CW attacks on Dukhaniyya <sup>xix</sup> . The regime retook al-Dukhaniyya on October 6. <sup>xx</sup>
8	October 2	Al-Ata Li Ahl al-Wafa	JN, Jund Dimashq, Failaq Omar, Liwa Um al-Qura, Liwa Mujahedi al-Ghouta	Liberate parts of Eastern Ghouta <sup>xxi</sup>	Ongoing	Clashes are ongoing in Irbeen, Harasta, and Qabun.

### Significant regime advances in Damascus, August – October, 2014

	Date	District	Current status
9	August 14	Mleiha <sup>xxii</sup>	Regime controlled
10	September 25	Adra <sup>xxiii</sup>	Regime controlled
11	October 6	Dukhaniyya <sup>xxiv</sup>	Regime controlled

Damascus to the southern provinces of Quneitra and Dera'a would greatly limit the regime's ability to project force south of Damascus. Similarly, severing regime supply lines north on the M5 highway would greatly complicate the regime's ability to resupply its forces in Homs, Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo. The fight for Damascus is therefore pivotal to the national campaign. As of October 2014, the regime has fewer options to overcome rebels in the capital.

As rebel cooperation has inflicted losses on the regime in Damascus and southern Syria in 2014, the latter has increasingly employed unconventional tactics to offset military setbacks. Throughout 2014 the regime has continued to besiege rebel-held neighborhoods and attack rebel-held territory from the air using improvised barrel bombs and, increasingly, chlorine gas.<sup>2</sup> The regime's air campaign is intended to support and bolster the capabilities of the regime's ground forces, which the regime continues to augment with Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps advisors.<sup>3</sup> In a sign of emerging manpower shortages, the regime has also begun to conscript young men and mobilize reservists as of October 14-15, despite the danger of further inflaming the regime's coastal powerbases.<sup>4</sup> In recent weeks, loyal populations along the coast have demonstrated against the heavy burden, further indicating that the pro-regime base may be weakening.<sup>5</sup>

As a string of rebel offensives launched between August 27 and October 2 threaten Damascus and regime supply lines out of the capital on multiple fronts, the regime may have to reprioritize its national campaign in order to reinforce the capital. While the regime will continue airstrikes, including barrel bomb and chlorine gas attacks, recent conscription and reservist mobilization indicates a potential new phase in the regime's campaign to free up manpower for new counter-offensives.

## QUNEITRA AND DERA'A

Rebel offensives in Quneitra and Dera'a between August and October 2014 have successfully captured strategic ground and regime supply routes, most recently the M5 highway linking Damascus to Amman on October 20.<sup>6</sup> While these offensives are not necessarily part of a well-ordered campaign, many of the same actors have participated in multiple offensives. On October 16 the FSA-affiliated Southern Front announced an offensive to capture three checkpoints on the Damascus-Amman highway, cutting off a major regime supply route and uniting the southern Houran plains.<sup>7</sup> Following the Southern Front's successful capture of the three checkpoints on October 20, on October 27 the group announced its intention to take the Nasib customs station on the border with Jordan.<sup>8</sup> This rebel push illustrates how rebel forces are consolidating a southern front in Quneitra and Dera'a as they advance to Damascus.<sup>9</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra's (JN) merging of its own Quneitra, Dera'a, and Western Ghouta Twitter accounts into a single Southern Front account in September 2014 further suggests that the southern fronts cohere from the perspective of forces on the ground.

When regime airstrikes and counteroffensives have failed to reverse rebel gains in the south, such as during its stalled but ultimately successful attempt to retake Dukhaniyya in September to October, the regime has resorted to chlorine gas attacks to maintain its supply routes, as it has similarly done in Damascus, Hama, and Aleppo.<sup>10</sup>

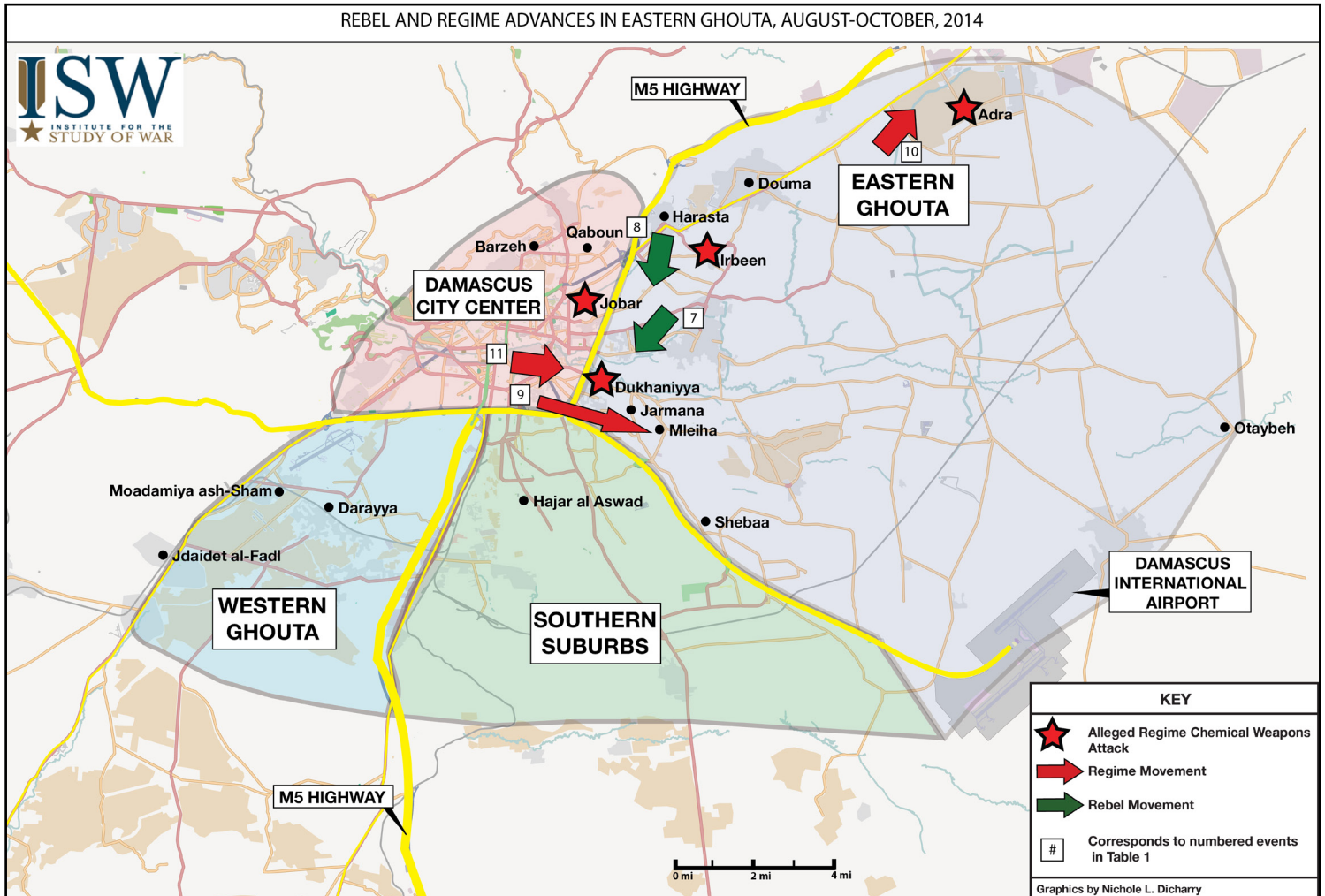
In a further sign of desperation, on October 23 Bashar al-Assad reportedly ordered the execution of several Syrian Arab Army officers as punishment for the strategic loss of the high ground of Tel al-Hara and ordered the minister of defense south to personally oversee a counteroffensive, ordering him to return only when he had done so.<sup>11</sup> The regime's loss of access to southbound supply routes, vital in resupplying its forces and for launching a counteroffensive, threatens the regime's ability to reestablish control over southern Syria.

As rebels make advances across the south, JN is increasingly fighting alongside a variety of groups in the region, including the U.S.-backed Syrian Revolutionaries Front. This may reflect greater JN presence in the area after withdrawing from Dier ez-Zour in July 2014 and after the September 23 U.S. airstrikes against JN positions in Idlib and Aleppo. This cooperation also raises the question of changing rebel perspectives on JN, and how these perspectives are shaped by regime activities, ISIS activities, and U.S. airstrikes. JN-rebel cooperation has been observed in several instances over the August – October 2014 time period. JN participated in the August 27 "al-Wa'ad al-Haq" battle to seize the Quneitra border crossing with Ahrar al-Sham (HASI), the FSA-affiliated Southern Front, and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front.<sup>12</sup> This event also indicates that some southern-based groups may have overcome previous tension with JN observed in May when JN detained an FSA commander in an event that almost sparked intra-rebel fighting in the region.<sup>13</sup>

On September 4, JN, al-Muthanna Islamic Movement, HASI, and Southern Front brigades announced the "Chargers at Dawn" offensive with the goal of liberating parts of Quneitra province.<sup>14</sup> Over the following week, rebels seized the regime's 90<sup>th</sup> Brigade base and villages in the Quneitra countryside. On September 16, HASI published a map claiming rebel control over 85% of Quneitra province in an unprecedented loss of much of the southern province by the regime. On September 18 rebels also claimed to seize the village of Deir al-Adas in northern Dera'a province near the regime's main supply line to Damascus.<sup>15</sup> On October 4, rebels, with JN support, launched a new offensive and successfully captured the strategic high ground of Tel al-Hara, Quneitra, including a regime signals intelligence facility.<sup>16</sup> Rebels have successfully held their ground, reportedly repelling a regime counteroffensive on October 21.<sup>17</sup> Following significant rebel gains in Quneitra, rebels will likely increase operations in Dera'a, extending and consolidating the southern front, encircling Damascus from the south, and cutting regime supply lines.

The regime responded to the strategic losses of Deir al-Adas and Tel al-Hara with chlorine gas attacks, mirroring regime responses to threats to supply routes out of Damascus and through Hama. The regime's loss of Um al-Mayathin, Kazyat, and al-Ma'asara checkpoints on the Damascus-Amman highway, in the vicinity of the Nasib border crossing with Jordan, on October 20 presents a further strategic setback to the regime. The regime responded to this latest loss with heavy aerial bombardment, including barrel bombs, but may yet resort to more desperate measures, such as chlorine gas, if it perceives its control over the border crossing to be threatened.<sup>18</sup> A redeployment of forces south would threaten the regime's recent gains along the M5 highway in Morek and is an example of the calculations that may have





Numbers on the map correspond to numbered events in Figure 1 (page 2).

forced the regime to begin conscripting soldiers in October. In the short term, the regime’s emerging manpower shortages may force it to continue to rely on airpower, to include barrel bombs and chlorine gas.<sup>19</sup>

However, increased JN presence in the south has reportedly unsettled some rebels, likely out of fear that Western and Gulf aid flowing through Amman would be shut down because of JN-rebel relations.<sup>20</sup> This is especially the case at a time of renewed engagement with the Military Operations Command, an unconfirmed but reported hub of international support in Amman, which may be proving fruitful.<sup>21</sup> JN’s May 2014 kidnapping of a rebel commander after JN deemed he had grown too close with international backers at the Military Operations Command in Amman, as well as a recent fatal dispute between a rebel commander and an opposition activist,<sup>22</sup> illustrate the actions that JN has taken to enforce its control in the south.<sup>23</sup> As U.S.-backed rebels continue to advance north, JN will therefore likely maintain its engagement with southern-based rebel groups and remain a key factor in joint rebel operations.

## EASTERN GHOUTA

As the regime battles to maintain its supply routes south of Damascus, renewed rebel attacks in September 2014 have attempted to break the siege of Eastern Ghouta. These attacks have advanced westward in the suburbs adjacent to the M5 highway, bringing the fight to previously-quieter districts.<sup>24</sup> In Damascus the regime has reacted to setbacks similarly, with heavy aerial bombardment and chlorine gas strikes, at times reversing rebel gains, and has largely maintained its siege of Eastern Ghouta.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, rebels have established new governing and military alliances in the rebel-held suburb with the goal of breaking the regime siege.

Since June 2014, Jaysh al-Islam (JI), under the command of Zahran Alloush, has emerged as a key actor in Eastern Ghouta and in rebel advances toward Damascus. On June 24, amid increasing tension between JI and ISIS, JI joined with JN, HASI, Ajnad al-Sham, and 12 other Islamic rebel groups to form the Judicial Council of Eastern Ghouta to govern the rebel-held district.<sup>26</sup> On June 26 Zahran Alloush issued an ultimatum giving the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) members 24 hours to disband and announced JI’s intent to kill ISIS leaders in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the summer, JI and JN



A map distributed on September 16, 2014 by Ahrar al-Sham (HASI). The green area shows alleged rebel gains in Quneitra province.

clashed with ISIS, raided ISIS sites, and expelled the group's members from Eastern Ghouta to the southern Damascus neighborhood of al-Hajar al-Aswad.<sup>28</sup> While overt ISIS operational capabilities were degraded in Eastern Ghouta, fears and reports of ISIS sleeper cells in the suburb remain.<sup>29</sup>

Speaking to these reports, JI has put up Wanted posters for ISIS commanders in Eastern Ghouta, promising financial rewards for information on the individuals.<sup>30</sup> JI further established its position in Eastern Ghouta on August 27 by establishing the Eastern Ghouta General Command, a military command comprising all major rebel groups in Eastern Ghouta: Ajnad al-Sham, Rahman Corps, al-Habib al-Mustafa Brigades, and HASI.<sup>31</sup> While JN declined to join this military alliance, it has fought alongside JI in Eastern Ghouta, highlighting JN's desire to exert influence on rebel forces that still maintain an independent command and control structure.<sup>32</sup>

Cooperation among rebels, including the establishment of the Eastern Ghouta General Command, has facilitated temporary rebel gains since August, but such gains have elicited successful counteroffensives from the Syrian regime. On September 7 rebels, including JN, seized the strategic Dukhaniyya neighborhood, adjacent to the Damascus Old City and the airport road and reportedly killed the head of the regime's local Air Force Intelligence branch on September 14.<sup>33</sup> In late September the regime launched several chlorine gas attacks on rebel-held Adra and Dukhaniyya, along the M5 highway, and retook the towns on September 25 and October 6, respectively.<sup>34</sup> These advances complement the regime's August 14 seizure of Mleiha, east of Dukhaniyya.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the summer and amid JN's "Al-Ata Li Ahl al-Wafa" campaign, clashes have also continued between regime forces and rebels along the M5 highway in Jobar, Harasta, Qabun, and Irbeen. As rebels, including JN, fight to seize the towns straddling the M5 highway, the regime has reportedly launched a total of six chlorine gas attacks and has maintained heavy aerial bombardment using barrel bombs and surface-to-surface missiles.<sup>36</sup>

Despite JI consolidation of command and control in Eastern Ghouta, new rebel alliances and groups have continued to emerge. On

September 19, 10 Eastern Ghouta rebel groups rejected Alloush's consolidation of Islamist groups and announced the establishment of Jaysh al-Umma (JU), a rival military and political organization.<sup>37</sup> On October 9 six rebel groups in Eastern Ghouta formed the Islamist-leaning Junud al-Haq alliance and on October 11 a shadowy group named al-Ansar, and reportedly consisting of JN and possibly ISIS defectors, declared its establishment with a public execution.<sup>38</sup>

Despite increased rebel cooperation in Eastern Ghouta, tension remains among groups, and there are indications that rebels are simultaneously fighting the regime and each other. Unknown gunmen assassinated a Jaysh al-Umma leader on September 21, after which JU implicated Jaysh al-Islam<sup>39</sup> despite the group's leader, Zahran Alloush, condemning the killing and offering condolences.<sup>40</sup> JU declared its intention to target JI and set up checkpoints in Eastern Ghouta, raising tension until a truce was signed between the two alliances.<sup>41</sup> On September 29 a JU commander survived an assassination attempt via an improvised explosive device (IED) and on September 30 a JU deputy commander was assassinated via small arms fire.<sup>42</sup> JU commander Abu Suhbi Taha has accused "treacherous hands" belonging to groups that originally captured Eastern Ghouta of the assassinations.<sup>43</sup> On October 19 a car bomb in Douma targeted Taha but killed his son, after which Zahran Alloush again offered his condolences.<sup>44</sup> JU may threaten JI for a several reasons. First, in prioritizing regime change, protection of civilians, Syrian territorial integrity, and strategic military cooperation between all rebel groups throughout Syria, JU has presented a rival national political and military strategy to JI's.<sup>45</sup> Second, following U.S. Congressional approval on September 18 to train and equip moderate Syrian rebels and following U.S.-led coalition military intervention in Syria on September 23, overtly Islamist rebel groups may fear isolation, growing irrelevance, and possible targeting by the U.S.-led coalition.<sup>46</sup> This is especially true after the U.S. struck not only ISIS targets but also those belonging to JN, with whom JI and its Eastern Ghouta Judicial Council and General Command allies have cooperated.<sup>47</sup>

As rebels reorganize in Eastern Ghouta, a series of regime advances between August 14 and October 6 east of the capital have further

divided the regime-besieged southern suburb of Western Ghouta from Eastern Ghouta, posing challenges for a rebel unification of the southern and Damascus fronts. To connect the southern front with Eastern Ghouta, rebels will need to break through the regime strongholds of Dukhaniyya, Jarmana, and Mleiha – recent strategic gains that the regime will fight to protect. JN may yet act as an enabler in a rebel push north to Damascus; JN's deployment of a Vehicle-Borne IED (VBIED) in Mleiha on August 3 that broke a regime cordon serves as an example of JN expertise providing rebels a strategic breakthrough in the capital.<sup>48</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The single greatest threat to the regime in Damascus continues to be the emergence of a stronger, more unified opposition force, potentially in receipt of Western aid, that is capable of taking and holding ground and cutting regime supply lines. As rebels increasingly cooperate and advance in Quneitra, Dera'a, and Damascus, the regime will therefore continue to use airpower, including chlorine gas and barrel bombs, to offset military setbacks, and to maintain and open supply routes, as it has done in Dera'a, Damascus, Hama, and Aleppo.<sup>49</sup> Cooperation between FSA-affiliated brigades and JN has facilitated rebel advances between August and October, with JN's role variously official, unofficial, overt, and covert. Yet FSA-affiliated brigades clashed with JN as recently as May, indicating that future cooperation cannot be guaranteed.

Airpower and chlorine gas provide stretched regime forces with a qualitative edge amid increasing indications that the regime is suffering from manpower shortages and increased frustration with military setbacks.<sup>50</sup> If rebels in Quneitra and Dera'a successfully connect the southern front with Eastern Ghouta and encircle the capital along the southeast, the regime will be forced to redouble its efforts to ensure Damascus is not cut off from the rest of the country. To do so while maintaining momentum on its other fronts throughout Syria, the regime will likely attempt to generate more troops, as it done via conscription and reservist mobilization campaigns in October. But it is unclear the extent to which the regime can re-establish momentum in Damascus and the southern front without making sacrifices elsewhere. Successful rebel cooperation in Quneitra, Dera'a, and Damascus facilitating significant rebel inroads into Damascus could therefore challenge vital regime supply lines and increasingly pressure regime power bases, potentially opening new fronts and jeopardizing the regime's grip along Syria's central corridor.

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