THE
CARTER CENTER

Syria

Countrywide Conflict

Report #3

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About the Project:

The Syria Conflict Mapping Project is an initiative launched by The Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program. Funded jointly by The Skoll Global Threats Fund and The Carter Center, the initiative examines the massive amounts of citizen-generated information related to the Syrian conflict that is available online. Specifically, the project:

1. Details the growth of opposition groups in each governorate within Syria;
2. Illuminates the evolution of armed opposition hierarchies at the local, regional, and national levels;
3. Shows the current geographic delineation of the multitude of armed networks throughout the country; and
4. Provides up-to-date analysis on the current status of the conflict.

For best viewing, it is strongly recommended that these reports be viewed online or printed in color.

For more information on the Syria Conflict Mapping Project, previous reports, or The Carter Center's other initiatives in Syria and worldwide, please visit the Center's website at www.cartercenter.org.

Acknowledgements:

Palantir

Palantir Technologies' software tools have been instrumental in integrating, analyzing, and visualizing the large amounts of information used in the Syria Conflict Mapping Project. In addition to providing the mapping and visualization tools displayed in this report, Palantir's unparalleled data analysis tools have greatly facilitated the Center's analysis.

Syria Conflict Monitor
مرصد الصراع السوري

Archives of armed group formations kept by researchers of the Syria Conflict Monitor have been an enormous help to The Carter Center's Syria Conflict Mapping Project. These detailed records have facilitated research and provide an unparalleled historic record of the progression of the Syrian conflict.

The Syria Conflict Mapping Project – and indeed much of The Carter Center's work – would be impossible without the hard work of our dedicated team of interns, whose valuable insights, excellent research skills, and tireless work ethic have greatly contributed to the success of this project. For additional information about our internship program, please visit The Carter Center website.

Additionally, special thanks go to Russell Shepherd, whose programming skills and expert knowledge of network analysis tools have greatly facilitated the Center's analysis.

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Executive Summary

Over 5,546 armed opposition groups and military councils have been formed in Syria over the course of the conflict. Beginning in late 2012, these units and organizations have gradually been consolidating into large, collaborative "fronts" and "armies." The most significant groups operating in Syria today formed at the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014, namely the Islamic Front and the relatively smaller (though growing) Syrian Revolutionaries' Front and Jaysh al-Mujahedeen. Despite the increase in collaboration and strengthening of centralized command, these new conglomerate organizations should still be seen as networks rather than rigid hierarchical structures – though this appears to be slowly changing.

Three major obstacles remain that are blocking further consolidation of opposition groups. First, the component groups of the newly-emerged conglomerate organizations are nearly all established organizations in their own right, with established leadership structures, organizational philosophies, and goals. Negotiating a unified vision that has network-wide appeal will take time and no small amount of charisma on the part of new leaders. Secondly, many of the larger armed groups throughout Syria have their own set of local and international supporters. Internal difficulties aside, the competing interests of the foreign backers of the armed opposition may prove serious enough to block further unification. Lastly, and most pressing, ongoing fighting with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has opened a new front in the war and forced the nascent conglomerate organizations to postpone further integration while they deal with the more pressing threat posed by ISIS.

Relations between ISIS and the broader opposition have deteriorated markedly over the past four months. Increased clashes and tensions with a handful of opposition units, combined with public outrage over the ISIS's extreme methods, led to a broad rejection of the organization and even a disavowal by al-Qaeda leadership. Open confrontation followed, with nearly all opposition groups initiating a collaborative offensive to re-take territory held by ISIS. Despite an initial lackluster display, opposition forces ultimately forced the retreat of ISIS to its strongholds in eastern Aleppo, Raqqa, and Deir Ez-Zour governorates.

The break between ISIS and opposition forces has opened up yet another front in Syria's already complex war, contributing to the cantonization of the country. Northern Syria is now divided between various opposition forces, ISIS, and the newly formed Kurdish administrative zones along the Turkish border. To the south, opposition forces in Deraa and Damascus are largely isolated from both each other and the rest of Syria by government forces. Despite this infighting and fragmentation, government forces have been largely unable to re-take territory, suggesting that the present stalemate will persist for the foreseeable future.

The gradual unification of opposition forces is ultimately a positive development. Though most groups have publicly denounced the Geneva II round of negotiations, including the Islamic Front, others are quietly open to engagement, and some increasingly powerful groups have been directly involved, including the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front. Further consolidation of opposition forces on the ground will foster a more unified political vision and thus improve the prospects for success in high-level negotiations such as Geneva II.

Major Developments

The Carter Center has documented 5,546 opposition armed groups and military council formations throughout Syria since the beginning of the uprising, representing at least 100,000 fighters.[1] With only a handful of formations in 2011, both the total number of formations and frequency of new formations rose – almost exponentially – throughout most of 2012, reaching a total of 2,680 groups by the end of the year. Peaking in November of 2012, the frequency of new formations began to diminish throughout the 2013; a trend that continues to the present day.

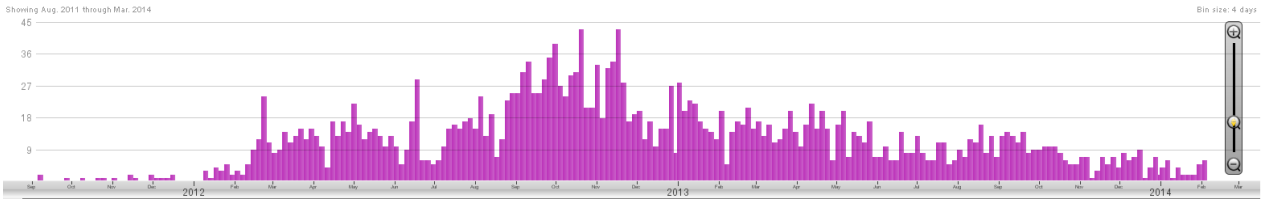


Figure 1: Timeline showing frequency of new armed group formations from September 2011 until February 2014.

In addition to a shrinking population of potential new recruits, much of this downward trend can be attributed to the establishment, and growing power of larger conglomerate organizations throughout the country. The rise of these increasingly large, collaborative unions of armed groups has meant that – despite an increase in the total number of organizations throughout the country – the number of unique networks has gradually diminished since its entropic peak in late 2012.

This, in essence, has been the story of the armed opposition's structural evolution over the course of the past six months. Beginning with the short-lived Islamic Alliance in August, 2013, armed opposition groups throughout the country officially rejected the illusion that was the Supreme Military Council and began a process of integrating large networks of established military organizations into new "fronts" and "armies."

This integration, which has ultimately resulted in the formation of the Islamic Front, Jaysh al-Mujahedeen (or the Mujahedeen Army), and the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (all detailed in the following section), is not a novel effort. Multiple "meta-networks" of armed units have emerged over the course of the conflict - notable among them are the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, the Syrian Islamic Front, the Body for the Protection of Civilians, the Ansar al-Islam Gathering, and a handful of regional military councils and fronts (to name a few). Each of these organizations enjoyed varying degrees of centralized command, sharing of resources, collaboration on operations, and (in some cases) longevity. The new meta-networks that have formed over the past several months, however, are fundamentally different from their predecessors in two key ways.

[1] The Carter Center's estimates of troop size are based upon the number of fighters present in each armed group formation. Only those fighters who are present in formation videos are recorded, meaning the Center's estimates should be seen as a baseline estimate. These estimates do not account for attrition, troops who may have been killed over time or may have abandoned the fight.

First, they are larger - and substantially so. The formation of the Islamic Front subsumed the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front and the Syrian Islamic Front, which included Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, Liwa al-Tawhid, and many more of the largest organizations throughout the country. Jaysh al-Mujahedeen and the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front did the same with many of the remaining armed groups throughout the country, leaving relatively few unaffiliated armed groups.

Secondly, these new organizations have demonstrated a more credible commitment to integration than previous efforts. Many component groups of the newly-formed entities have formally dismantled their previous organizational structures in order to integrate command structures and units with one another. As a sign of this dissolution, component groups of the Islamic Front have been coordinating their imagery and public outreach via their various social media outlets. These groups now coordinate their Twitter hashtags, use a uniform profile picture for all Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube pages, and share each other's posts. In order to facilitate the integration of their many component groups, leaders of these new collaborations claim to be splicing together new companies and battalions with fighters from multiple units in order to build integration at the lowest level.

True unification, however, will prove to be much more difficult than coordinating Twitter handles and integrating a few fighting units. Many of the component groups of these new collaborations have fundamentally opposing views on how they should operate - let alone how a future Syria should look. Some groups, for example, operate like states in the territories they control - complete with a judicial system, medical councils, food and aid distribution networks, police forces, and more. Other groups within the same network operate principally as an army and support separate civil society institutions where possible or when needed.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to structural and ideological unification of these newly created entities, however, has nothing to do with organizing command structures or debating operational paradigms, but rather with the existential threat posed by the latest front to open up on the Syrian conflict - the war with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS.

War with ISIS

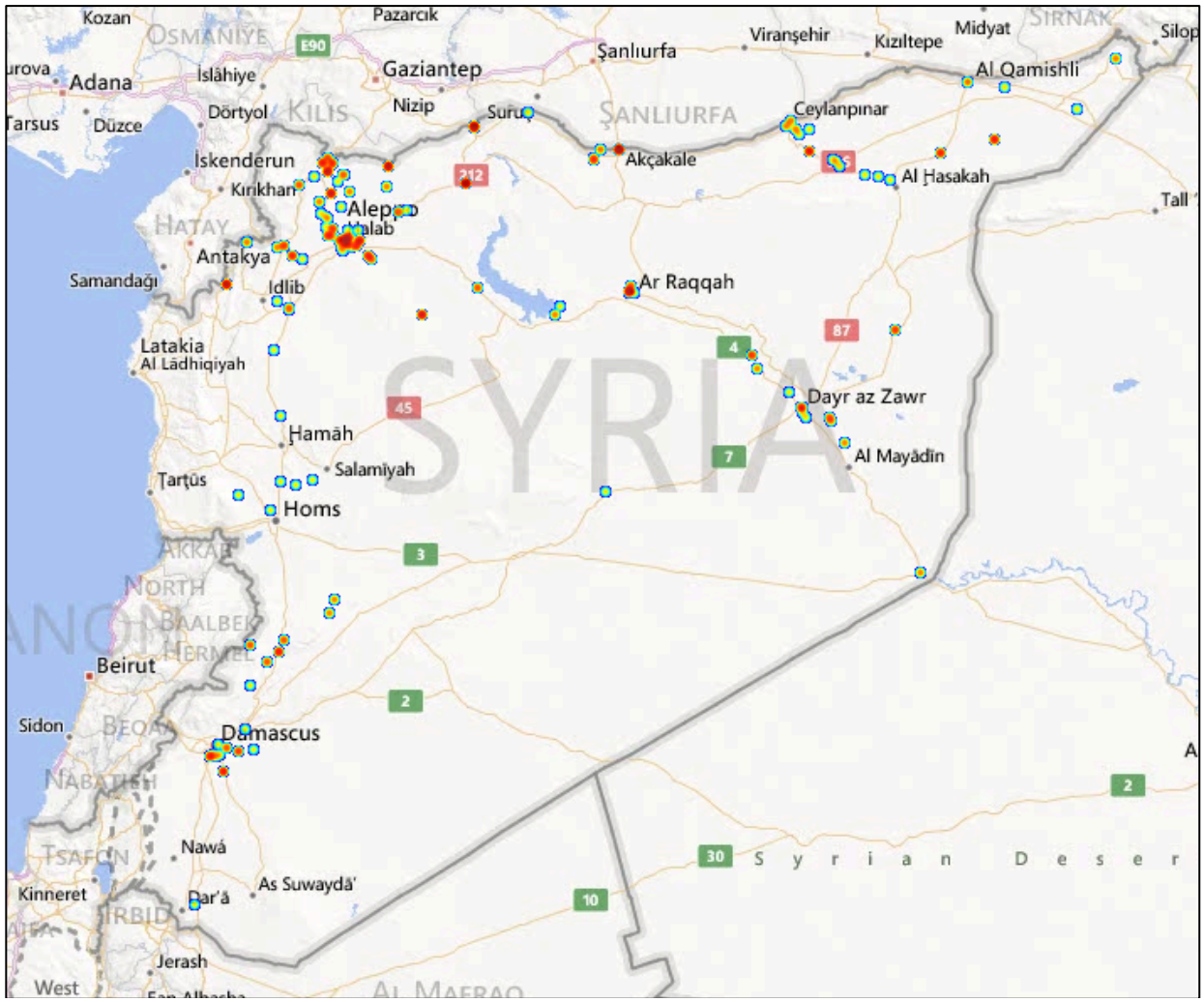


Figure 2: Heatmap showing areas in which ISIS has engaged in fighting between November 1, 2013, and March 1, 2014.

Though tensions had long been growing between ISIS and the broader opposition in Syria, open conflict (or war, as opposition leaders call it) did not erupt until early 2014. At this time, with tensions peaking and public outrage against ISIS on the rise, the incipient conglomerates amongst the broader opposition uniformly declared themselves opposed to ISIS and began issuing ultimatums and conducting major operations against ISIS positions throughout Syria, focusing mainly in the northwestern governorates of Idlib and Aleppo.

Following these ultimatums (or even coinciding with their announcements) nearly all opposition groups began attacking and re-capturing areas held by ISIS fighters beginning in Aleppo city, western Aleppo and northern Idlib governorates. Despite tensions between some of the larger

organizations (including intermittent clashes between the Islamic Front and the Syrian Revolutionary Front) these organizations collaborated with one another in attacking ISIS positions. By late January, Jaysh al-Mujahedeen announced that ISIS had been cleared from western Aleppo governorate. After this initial offensive, ISIS responded with force and managed to re-take some of the territory it had lost, showing that even with enhanced cooperation amongst opposition forces, ISIS still poses a substantial threat.

Notably absent from the fighting was Jabhat al-Nusra, which primarily tried to play an intermediary role. Military commanders from Syria's armed opposition asserted during this period that "everyone is against ISIS," and that everyone was collaborating in operations against them. However, when pressed, many conceded that Jabhat al-Nusra had appeared reluctant to directly engage in operations against the organization. The Carter Center's tracking of events during this time period shows that both statements were equally accurate. While Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS clashed with one another in various parts of the country, they maintained friendly relations and even collaborated on new operations elsewhere. This phenomenon, which was exacerbated by the ambiguous stance taken by al-Nusra leadership, is also indicative of the loose internal command structure of Jabhat al-Nusra and the complexities of local-level conflict dynamics.

The leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, was unable to remain neutral indefinitely. The death (allegedly at the hands of ISIS) of Abu Khaled al-Suri, leader of the Islamic Front-affiliated Ahrar al-Sham Brigades and alleged al-Qaida representative in Syria, led to al-Jolani issuing ISIS with an ultimatum - submit to arbitration by an Islamic court, or be forced out of Syria entirely. On February 28th, one day before the ultimatum's deadline, ISIS retreated to the eastern border of the Aleppo governorate.

Whether or not this conglomeration of armed opposition groups will continue to pursue ISIS into its stronghold of Raqqa remains to be seen. Should they choose to pursue, they will risk spreading themselves too thin and weakening their front against government forces to the south. The most likely scenario is that this newly opened front against ISIS will persist for the foreseeable future.

Western Kurdistan

During this chaotic period of opposition realignment, infighting, and a new front opening in the war, Syria's Kurdish population has quietly created its own autonomous region. Western Kurdistan, or, Rojava, as it is called locally, is comprised of three non-contiguous areas along Turkey's southern border. These areas, which are where the majority of Syria's Kurdish population resides, have long been held by the People's Defense Units (YPG), which forms the primary armed wing of the newly formed Kurdish administration.

Figure 3: Areas claimed as part of the newly formed Kurdish administrative zone, or Rojava.

The YPG, however, is not a creation of the newly formed Kurdish administration. Instead it is principally the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the most powerful of Syria's seventeen Kurdish political parties, which represents 50% of the Kurdish Supreme Council.[2] The PYD's influential political and military position has made it the dominant force in the formation of the new Kurdish administration. While the recently outlined framework for the election of local governors guarantees the participation of all citizens throughout the Kurdish controlled regions – including people of all religious, cultural, and political backgrounds – many worry about whether the reality of this new administration will live up to the ideals it has outlined on paper.

Tensions have risen regarding the dominant role the PYD has taken. Activists and members of other parties complain of being detained and harassed by PYD cadres, and some have gone as far as to say that they fear inter-Kurdish violence may erupt. Most Kurdish politicians, activists, and observers, however, view the possibility of inter-Kurdish violence as ludicrous, insisting that while they have political differences, and concerns of inclusion, their underlying goals – the protection of their territorial, political and civil rights – are the same.

Indeed, the primary sources of division between Syria's Kurdish political parties is not the internal politics of their autonomous areas, but rather the external dealings with the broader Syrian opposition. Though all Syrian Kurdish parties are represented in the (albeit weak) Kurdish Supreme Council, only members of the Kurdish National Council (a collection of 16 Kurdish parties) were chosen by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (the Coalition) to attend the Geneva II round of negotiations, which effectively excluded PYD participation and exacerbated tensions within the Kurdish community.

[2] A diagram showing the relations between Kurdish organizations and the broader Syrian opposition is included in the appendix.

The KNC has engaged with Syria's exiled political leadership continuously throughout the conflict, and was made a member of the Coalition in late 2013. The PYD, on the other hand, is a member of the National Coordinating Body for Democratic Change – a government-accepted reformist group based in Damascus. This fact, in addition to past YPG clashes with opposition-affiliated units, and the seemingly seamless transition to YPG control that took place when the Syrian government withdrew from Kurdish areas, has led many opposition units to believe the YPG is in league with the Syrian government.

The PYD rejects this notion, saying that they have sought only to protect their people, lands, and rights, and that their only enemies are the al-Qaeda-affiliated fundamentalist groups and a handful of tribal figures with whom the Kurdish community clashed during the 2004 uprising. The evidence over the past four months supports this claim. Over 98% of the clashes involving YPG fighters between November 1, 2013 and March 1, 2014 have been with either the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Jabhat al-Nusra. A similarly high proportion of clashes have been within the territories claimed by the new Kurdish administration, or in straight lines along the borders of these territories (as shown in the heat map of YPG activity below).

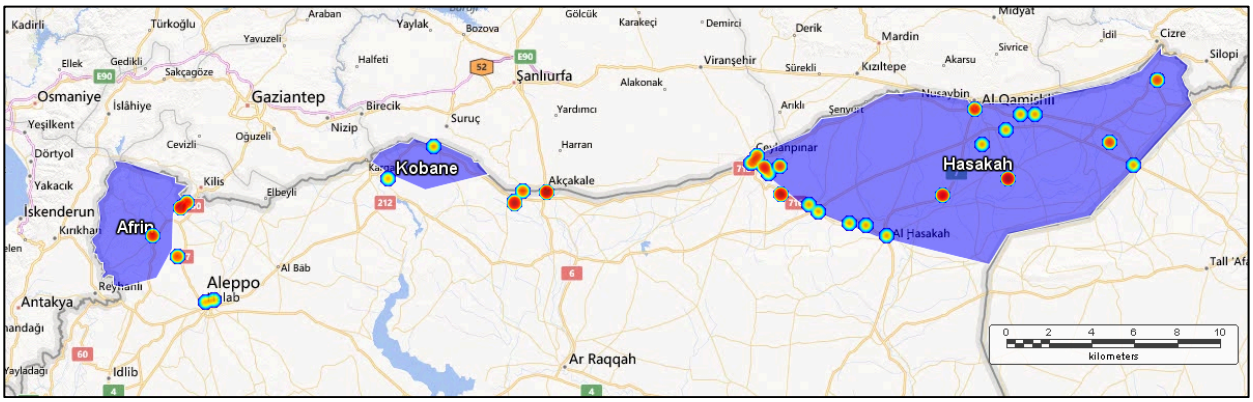


Figure 4: Areas of known operations involving the People's Defense Units (YPG).

It must be stated, however, that while the YPG has fought almost exclusively with ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, for the past four months they have come in contact with few other organizations. Now that ISIS has been pushed most of the way to the Euphrates river, Kurdish units in the Afrin area (northwest corner of Syria) will once again have direct contact with opposition units. The nature of relations between Kurdish units and the greater opposition in these areas in the coming weeks and months will provide a good indication of how the Kurds will interact with the recently consolidated Islamic Front, Syrian Revolutionaries' Front, and Mujahedeen Army.

Major Armed Units

The Islamic Front (IF)

Formation:

The main component groups of the Islamic Front have operated throughout Syria since early in the conflict. Many of them had collaborated in various operations and military councils, or had been part of larger, umbrella organizations that collectively comprised approximately half of the known opposition forces in the country. When the IF formed in Aleppo governorate on November 22, 2013, it became the largest armed opposition group to have been formed during the conflict, with sub-units operating nationwide.

At the time of its formation, it was assumed by many armed groups and observers that the IF would move decisively against ISIS. Tensions had long been growing between Ahrar al-Sham, one of IF's largest and most established component groups, and ISIS related to ISIS' killing of several members of Ahrar al-Sham. Public tensions between the two groups stretch back to September 2013, when ISIS fighters killed an Ahrar al-Sham aid worker. Ahrar al-Sham held numerous meetings with ISIS regarding the matter, but it appears the issue was never fully resolved. Also in September, Liwa al-Tawhid (which would later help found the IF) was asked to intervene in a dispute between the Aasifat al-Shamal and ISIS in the town of Azaz. Aasifat al-Shamal, a smaller organization of fighters based primarily in Azaz, north of Aleppo, endured heavy losses during clashes with ISIS and was expelled from the city – ultimately ending the group.

In both of these instances, the main groups of what would become the IF chose to attempt mediation rather than confront ISIS, but despite these efforts, relations steadily deteriorated over the course of the next two months. In November, ISIS fighters beheaded a member of one of Ahrar al-Sham's component groups in front of a crowd in Aleppo, claiming he was a Shia fighter. Tit-for-tat clashes and kidnappings continued between Ahrar al-Sham and ISIS throughout the month of December until, after yet another failed mediation effort, the newly formed IF began to openly engage ISIS throughout Aleppo and Idlib governorates.

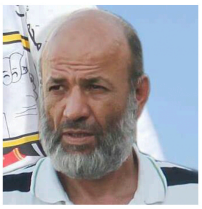
ISLAMIC FRONT (IF) LEADERSHIP

Ahmed al-Sheikh
Head of IF
Shura Council
Commander of Suqour al-Sham Brigades

Hassan Abbous
Head of IF
Political Office
Commander of Islamic Ahrar al-Sham Movement

Zahran Alloush
Head of IF
Military Office
Commander of al-Islam Army

Abu Ratib
IF General Secretary
Commander of al-Huq Brigade



Abdel Aziz Salamah
No Formal IF Post
Commander of al-Tawheed Brigade

Abu Abdullah al-Kurdi
No Formal IF Post
Commander of Kurdish Islamic Front

Abu al-Abbas al-Shami
Head of IF
Sharia Office
Islamic Ahrar al-Sham Movement
Member

Abu Omar Hreitan
Deputy Head of IF Shura Council
al-Tawheed Brigade
Member

Abu Omar
No Formal IF Post
Commander of al-Ansar Brigade

Abdel Qadir al-Saleh
No Formal IF Post
Military Commander of al-Tawheed Brigade
Deceased

Islamic Front Formation Announcement

Though many of the component groups of the IF were, at one point or another, aligned (either directly or via regional military councils) with the Supreme Military Council (SMC), the leadership role played by the SMC was nominal at best. Upon forming, the IF officially rejected the leadership of the Council and then took control of SMC weapons storage warehouses near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing on December 6.

Representatives of the Islamic Front claim to have taken control of these warehouses at the behest of the Council, but several conflicting accounts remain. The Council clearly attempted to defuse tensions, calling the IF "brothers in arms," but others responded aggressively. On December 9th, three days after the incident, a large group of opposition units incorporated themselves into the "Syrian Revolutionaries' Front" (SRF) in an apparent response to the Islamic Font. The SRF aligned themselves with the SMC, and almost immediately (December 12th) condemned the actions of the Islamic Font and requested that they return the warehouses. The IF refused and the two groups clashed intermittently throughout Idlib until a reconciliation meeting was held on December 17th to end the infighting.

Political Stance:

The Islamic Front has yet to develop a unified political stance - on either the future of Syria or its organizational philosophy. As mentioned above, this is partly due to ongoing fighting with ISIS, but is also a result of the geographic distribution of many of the IF's component groups. Each of these component groups has largely maintained the sections of the country where they have been based - Saqour al-Sham is primarily in Idlib, Jaysh al-Islam in Damascus, Ahrar al-Sham is most powerful in the north, with Liwa al-Tawhid in Aleppo, and so on. Even if fighting were to subside with ISIS, it will take a long time for these units to integrate with one another, with plenty of personalities and established power structures to complicate matters along the way.

While the IF's political stance continues to evolve, the well-known positions of its component groups and the organization's founding charter both give clear indications as to what its ultimate stance will be regarding the Coalition, the SMC, international actors, and a future Syrian state.

The IF's formation was a serious - nearly fatal - blow to the already limited power of the SMC. Despite this, the historically close relations between the SMC leadership and the leaders of Liwa al-Tawhid and Liwa al-Haqq have not entirely disappeared. Both organizations maintain close relations with SMC leadership (with al-Haqq even continuing to cast a vote in internal decision making).

Despite the long history of engagement with "Free Syrian Army" figureheads affiliated with the Coalition, the IF charter makes it abundantly clear that they are fundamentally opposed to any negotiations with the Syrian government. On January 7th, the military leader of the IF, Zahran Alloush, requested that the IF place participants of the Geneva II round of negotiations on an IF wanted list. It is unclear whether this step has actually been taken, but the fact that it was made public demonstrates the IF's eagerness to disassociate itself from the process. In private meetings representatives from the IF are less harsh in their denunciations, choosing instead to express pessimism with respect to the Geneva process and participating political representatives.

There have been quiet indications (though vehemently denied by IF representatives) that the IF has engaged in discussions regarding the possibility of their participation in Geneva II. While they are (so far) unwilling to openly participate in Geneva II, the IF is more than willing to engage in less formal, inter-opposition discussions regarding the legal and constitutional frameworks that will govern a transitional and post-violent conflict Syria. Due to the IF's position as the largest, most influential armed opposition organization, their input in this process will be crucial to the success of any proposed peace agreement in the foreseeable future.

The Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (SRF)

Formation:

The Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (SRF), formed in Idlib on December 9, 2013, has grown rapidly since, though as of March 1st does not have a nationwide presence. SRF activities have been documented in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Deraa, and al-Quneitera governorates.[3]

Syrian Revolutionaries' Front Formation Announcement

[3] A complete list of component groups, primary leaders, and a timeline of the SRF's growth can be found in the appendix.

Political Stance:

The SRF has aligned itself primarily with the temporary government formed by the Coalition. They have very close ties with the Supreme Military Council, and have participated in the Geneva II negotiation process. Though they are seen as a more moderate response to the perceived conservatism of the Islamic Front, the leader of the SRF, Jamal Maarouf, employs much of the same inflammatory religious rhetoric as the Islamic Front (and indeed most other opposition units nationwide). Maarouf has stated that he desires a democratic Syria, but as recently as January 2014, claimed in a video posted on social media that the first goal of the revolution is to raise the words "there is no god but God," followed by the fall of the government of Bashar al-Assad. Maarouf also regularly refers to the Syrian government as "*kafir*," or heretical, and is joined by many of his fellow SRF commanders and fighters in stating that the opposition is fighting *jihad* against the "*Nusayriah"* (a derogatory term for Shia Muslims).

This language alone should not be seen as hard evidence that Maarouf or other opposition commanders are actually religiously motivated. A more accurate indicator of where the SRF lies on the broad spectrum of opposition groups can be found in their stance towards ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. The SRF has been in violent opposition to ISIS since its inception, and while Maarouf calls Jabhat al-Nusra "brothers in creed," the two organizations do not appear to cooperate often (likely due to the conciliatory role played by Jabhat al-Nusra with respect to ISIS).

Like any umbrella organization, the jury is still out on the viability of the SRF. History does not bode well for umbrella organizations in Syria, and especially those without a clearly articulated ideological underpinning. Commonly, and certainly true in the case of the SRF, they are amalgamations whose raison d'être and long term success are heavily dependent on outside state funding and arms.

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In this respect, the SRF is very well positioned. By attending Geneva II and aligning themselves with the Coalition, they have gained a preferential position with the groups of pro-opposition states known as the "Friends of Syria." Additionally, the recently restructured SMC now includes Colonel Haitham A'afisi, a military commander of the SRF and an advisor to Jamal Maarouf. Prior to joining the SMC, A'afisi was very critical of the Council's response to the Bab al-Hawa incident, seeing it as a weak refusal to lay blame squarely with the Islamic Front.

This tension between the SRF/SMC and the Islamic Front could very easily lead to further clashes in the future as each group attempts to gain access to weapons and support. Complicating matters further is the fact that there are now two SMC's, with the recently dismissed leader of the SMC, Salim Idriss, refusing to recognize either his dismissal or the Coalition's temporary government.

Jaish al-Mujahedeen (JM)

Formation:

Jaysh al-Mujahedeen, or the Mujahedeen Army (JM), formed on January 2, 2014. Like the SRF, they were formed as a counterweight to an existing organization – in this case ISIS. The original composition of JM was surprising in that it included the Noor al-Din al-Zenki Battalions, which had previously been part of Liwa al-Tawhid and was a signatory to the Islamic Alliance declaration, which preceded the formation of the Islamic Front. Leaders of JM claim that they had slowly been building the new alliance, and that they decided to publicize their formation at the beginning of January because they felt the deteriorating situation with ISIS demanded they make themselves and their stance known.

JAYSH AL-MUJAHIDEEN (JM) LEADERSHIP

Sheikh Tawfiq Shahab al-Din
Commander of Islamic Nur al-Din al-Zenki Battalions

Leuitenant Colonel Abu Bakr
Commander of al-Ansar Brigade 19th Division

Captain Ali Shakirdi
Commander of Amjad al-Islam Brigade 19th Division

Saqr Abu Quteibah
Commander of Tajamuaa F'astaqum Kama Ummirat

Amr Silkho
Military Commander of Tajamuaa F'astaqum Kama Ummirat

Al-Mujahideen Army Formation Announcement

Like many other organizations before them, JM formed in northwestern Syria in the governorates of Idlib and Aleppo, and has seen limited expansion eastwards. After working with other opposition groups to clear ISIS from the western Aleppo countryside, JM worked its way through Aleppo city to expel ISIS from the neighborhoods it held on the east side of the city. Demonstrating just how intent the organization is on clearing Syria of ISIS, some JM component groups, including the Noor al-Din al-Zinki Battalions traveled as far as Deir Ez-Zour to engage ISIS positions in the area. JM now claims to be the most powerful group in Aleppo city, and is present on the western outskirts of the city, holding the front line against government positions in the area.

JM's relations with other organizations appears to be good across the board, but as they have only existed as a unified organization for a short while – with limited, non-controversial objectives – their external relations leave much to be determined. JM members have also expressed hope that, in the near future, the IF, the SRF, and JM, and the Islamic Union (which operates in Damascus) can be unified under one flag, but that these things need more time and more in-depth discussions. It is notable that JM has refrained from mentioning any relations with Jabhat al-Nusra in interviews.

Political Stance:

JM's stance on the Geneva II round of negotiations is one of pessimism rather than opposition. They have issued very critical statements about the process, but are ultimately willing to negotiate if or when the negotiations actually deliver something tangible. The leader of the Noor al-Din al-Zinki Battalions stated that since the international community has not provided them with military, logistical, non-lethal, or political support, he does not hold much optimism now, but JM is in agreement with anyone working in the best interest of Syria and its people.

Looking Ahead:

With little information on JM's reason for forming (other than the short-term, limited goal of confronting ISIS), it is difficult to determine the longer-term viability of the organization. Additionally, JM member groups appear to have a diverse support network from the international community, apparently including both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Gulf Salafi network Jabhat al-Asala wa al-Tanmiyah. Given this, and no apparent organizational growth since its inception, it appears that JM will continue to act as a coordinating body, rather than as a true integration of component groups into one entity.

Armed Units in the South

General Overview

The landscape of the armed opposition in Deraa and al-Quneitra governorates differs significantly from that of the rest of Syria. The region is relatively isolated; cut off in the north by Damascus, the west by the Golan Heights, the east by the largely pro-government governorate of al-Suweida, and the south by the Jordanian border. In short, the south has largely been isolated from the chaos caused by the unrestricted flow of weapons, funding, and fighters that poured over Syria's northern and eastern borders.

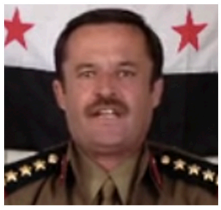
The south (Deraa governorate) has remained a relative stronghold for non-Islamist armed opposition forces. The large northern-based Islamist brigades and umbrella organizations, which have spread throughout Syria, have thus far made little progress in expanding their influence in the south (with the notable exception of an Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra contingent. Although elsewhere larger formations emerge locally, units in the south tend to be smaller and more localized and are, for the most part, loosely affiliated through a shared allegiance to the SMC and, increasingly, through the SRF.

The SMC's lasting influence in the south is due to its role, vis-à-vis Western and Arab state backing, as perhaps the largest distributor of funds, supplies, and training in the area. Reports of local units receiving support from Western and Arab government agencies operating from Jordan began to emerge in February, 2013, claiming that the U.S. was facilitating the shipment of Croatian weapons with the cooperation of the U.K., other European governments, and Saudi Arabia.[4] These units, which began receiving the weaponry in November 2012, are nearly all affiliated with the Military Council in Deraa, suggesting a long history of contact between opposition leaders in the south of the country and international backers from the "Friends of Syria."

[4] Spencer, Richard. "US and Europe in 'major Airlift of Arms to Syrian Rebels through Zagreb'" *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 08 Mar. 2013. Web. 01 Mar. 2014.

SOUTHERN ARMED OPPOSITION LEADERSHIP

Brigadier General Abdel-ilah al-Bashir al-Noaemi
Commander of the Supreme Military Council (SMC)



Brigadier General Ziad Fahad
Commander of the Southern Front (SMC)

Bashar al-Zoubi
Revolutionary Commander of the Southern Front (SMC) and Commander of al-Yarmouk Division

Colonel Ahmed Fahd al-Naama
Commander of the Military Council of Daraa (SMC)

Colonel Yasser al-Aboud
Commander of the Operations Room of the Southern Front and Falujah Hawran Brigade
Deceased

Recent Developments

The importance of southern Syria in the greater conflict has become evident through the dismissal of Brigadier General Salim Idriss as the head of the SMC and the appointment of Brigadier General Abdel-ilah al-Bashir al-Noaemi in his place. Brigadier al-Noaemi was the Commander of the al-Quneitra Military Council when he was appointed, and his newly appointed deputy, Colonel Haitham Aafisi was a founder of the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front. The SRF, although from Idlib, had notably been making significant inroads into Daraa and al-Quneitra in the months leading up to Idriss' dismissal.

The SMC shuffle was approved by Ahmed al-Jarba, President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and by all accounts encouraged by Asa'ad Mustafa, who at the time was the Minister of Defense of the temporary government formed by the Coalition.

The placement of a southern commander as the head of the SMC and the precipitous expansion of the SRF into the region suggest that the opposition may be preparing for further international support. The south's proximity to Damascus, Coalition-affiliated armed groups, and relative absence of fundamentalist or ISIS units would make it strong candidate for foreign support should it prove forthcoming.

Conflict Events

The following section details the evolution of conflict events from November 2013 to the end of February 2014, focusing on Damascus and Aleppo governorates as well as the eastern governorates of Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor.

Events in Syria over the past four months have been dominated by the ongoing fighting between ISIS and opposition forces. This infighting meant that many opposition units had to re-take bases and areas that had been previously captured from the Syrian government. Despite this distraction, government forces have not made any substantial advances against opposition positions throughout the country. Instead the government has continued its long-held strategy of bombarding opposition positions from afar.

Fighting over the past four months was largely concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo as government forces continued to lay siege to the eastern suburbs of Damascus and hold their positions in the city of Aleppo. Additionally, increased fighting between ISIS and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) contributed to the relatively high number of incidents in Aleppo governorate.

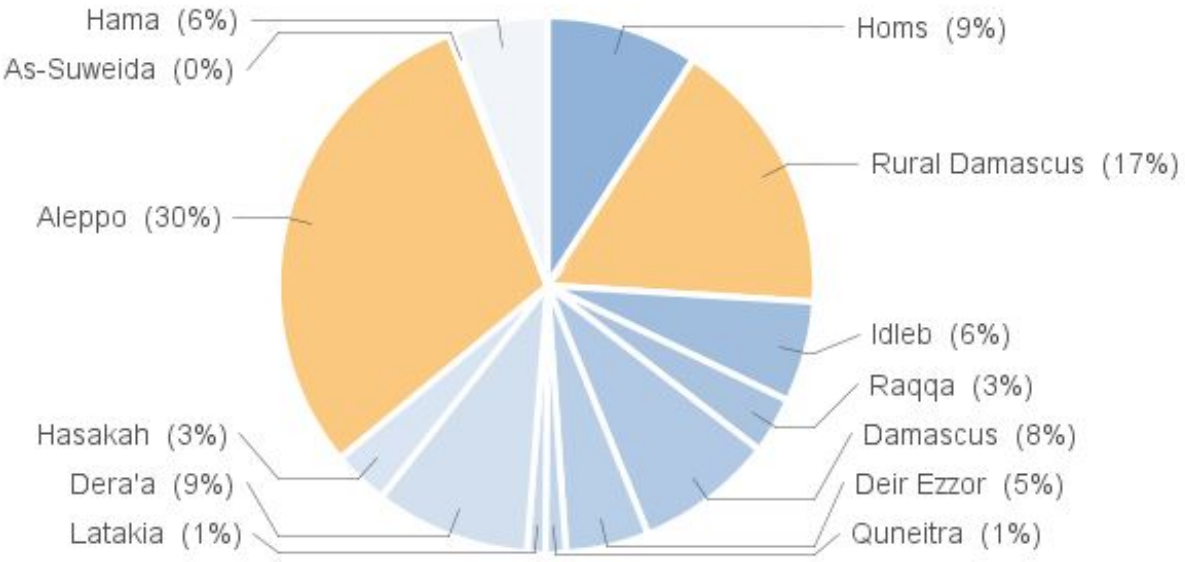


Figure 5: Conflict events by governorate from November 2013 to March 2014.

While there have been more instances of shelling than any other type of conflict incident, the number of force-on-force combat incidents and aerial bombardments increased somewhat in the past four months.

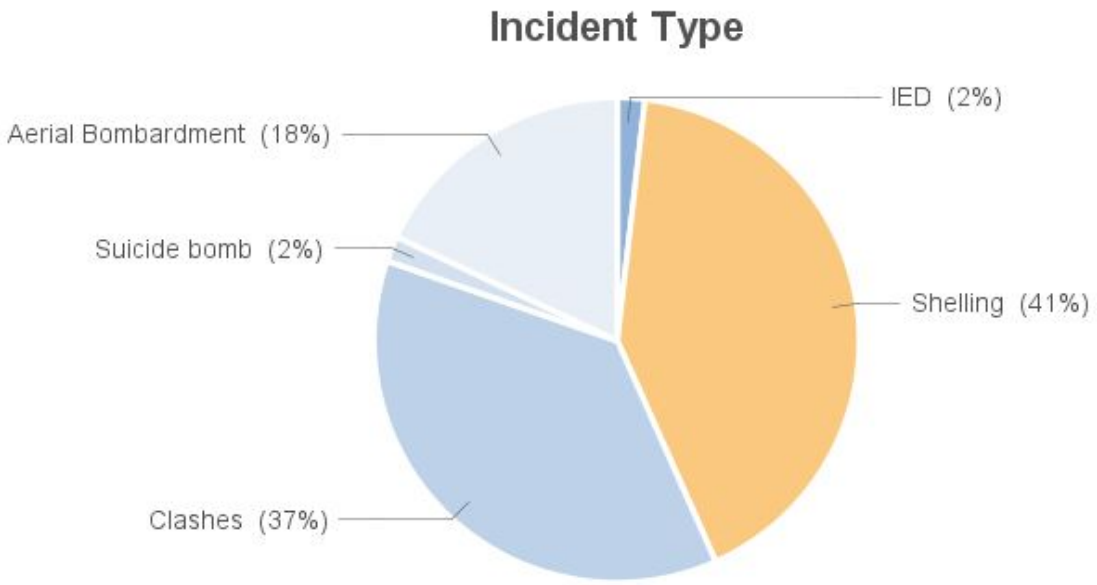


Figure 6: Frequency of conflict events by type.

Damascus

November

Fighting in the Damascus and Rif Damascus (Damascus countryside) governorates during the month of November was concentrated on the main supply routes in the Qalamoun area north of Damascus, though there were a significant number of reported events in the outlying neighborhoods of Damascus city itself.

The "Battle for Qalamoun", which began November 15, attracted fighters from across Syria due to the importance of the area for both the government and opposition forces. This led to a total of at least 37 instances of aerial bombardment by government forces, force-on-force combat, and shelling in the second half of November alone. The towns of Nabak and Yabrud – located along the Homs-Damascus highway (see map below), an essential supply route connecting the Syrian government to Homs – were focal points of shelling and force-on-force combat between government forces (including the pro-government National Defense Forces (NDF) and Hezbollah) on the one side, and Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and various other opposition battalions on the opposing side.

While Jabhat al-Nusra has fought against ISIS in other parts of Syria, and recently issued an ultimatum demanding ISIS's withdrawal from Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra forces in the Qalamoun region have publicly declared that they will stand with ISIS and continue to collaborate. Despite gains made by both sides during the month of November, no one party appears to have gained functional control of the area during the month.

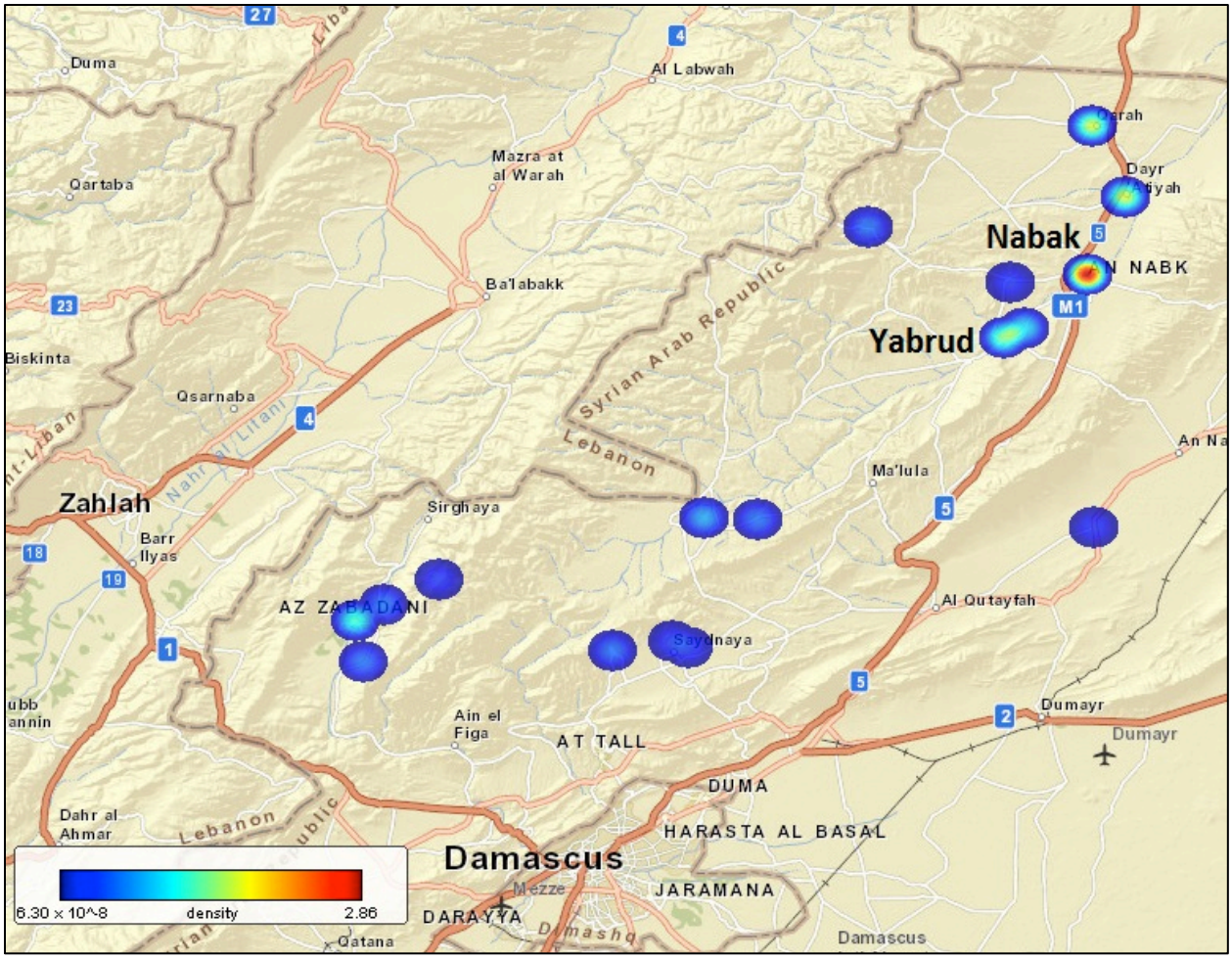


Figure 7: Shelling and force-on-force clashes centered mainly around the northern towns of Yabrud and Nabak. The concentration of fighting in this area shows the strategic importance of controlling the Homs-Damascus highway.

Southern Damascus saw significant clashes throughout the month of November, particularly focusing on the neighborhoods of al-Qadam, Tadamun, Hajar al-Aswad, Beit Sahem, and the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp.

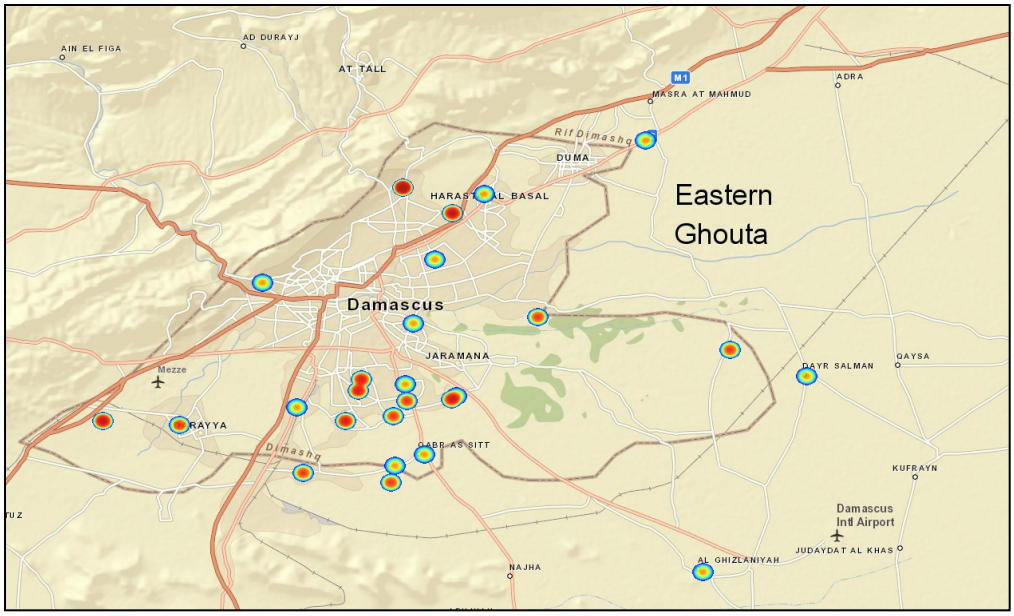


Figure 8: Force-on-force clashes in Damascus during November, 2013.

December

Fighting in the Damascus area in December turned away from the city center, and focused on the outlying neighborhoods of the Eastern Ghouta region. This was likely an attempt by opposition forces to break the siege imposed upon them and re-open supply lines to the east and north.

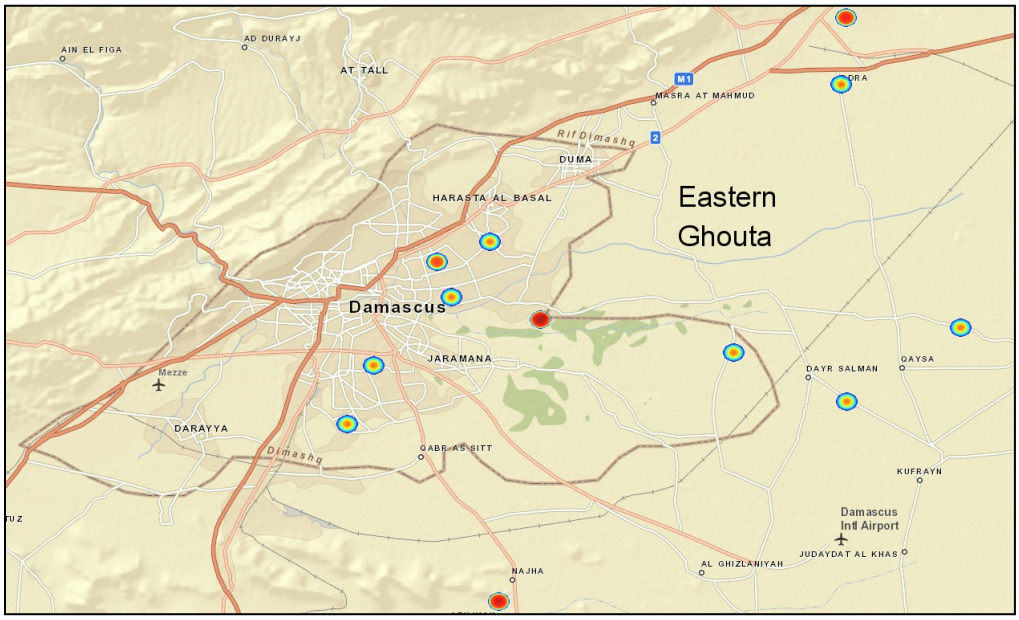


Figure 9: Force-on-force clashes in Damascus during December, 2013.

The air force increased its aerial bombardment of the northern Damascus countryside throughout the month of December. The Qalamun mountains north of Damascus have long been a stronghold for opposition forces, which have hindered government supply lines along the

strategically important Damascus-Homs highway. The government has consistently clashed with forces located close to this highway and utilized its air power to bombard opposition strongholds deeper in the mountains. Hezbollah forces have been reportedly involved in many of the clashes throughout this northern region bordering the Lebanese border.

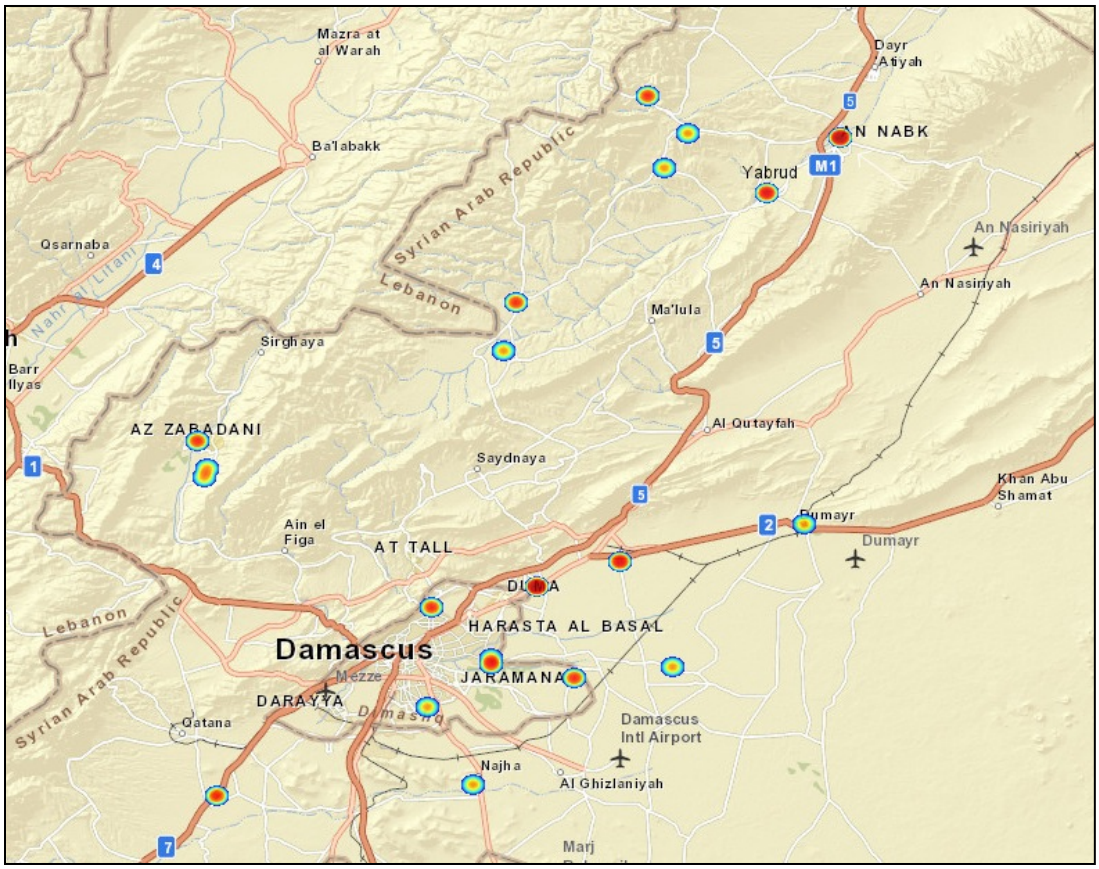


Figure 10: Aerial bombardments during December, 2013.

Note that some incidents that occurred in Eastern Ghouta, Qalamoun, or Damascus countryside were not included in the heatmaps above because precise geographic location could not be determined for these events. These unspecific incidences accounted for 24% of the fighting that took place in Damascus and Rif Damascus, majority of which was force-on-force combat. Conflict events occurring in these areas are highlighted in the histogram shown below.

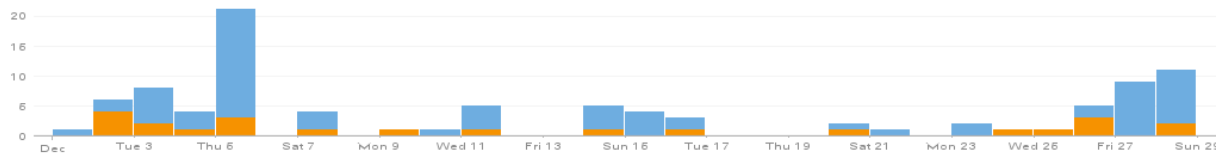


Figure 11: Histogram showing total number of events in Damascus. The highlighted sections of the graph show the portion of events that took place in the suburbs of Damascus including Eastern Ghouta and Qalamoun.

January and February

Fighting in Damascus remained much the same in early 2014. Heavy clashes continued throughout southern Damascus and on the eastern outskirts of the city, and opposition forces in Eastern Ghouta and the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in southern Damascus remained under siege for much of January and February. The areas that saw the greatest number of clashes for both months were al-Qadam (which borders Yarmouk Camp) and Jobar.

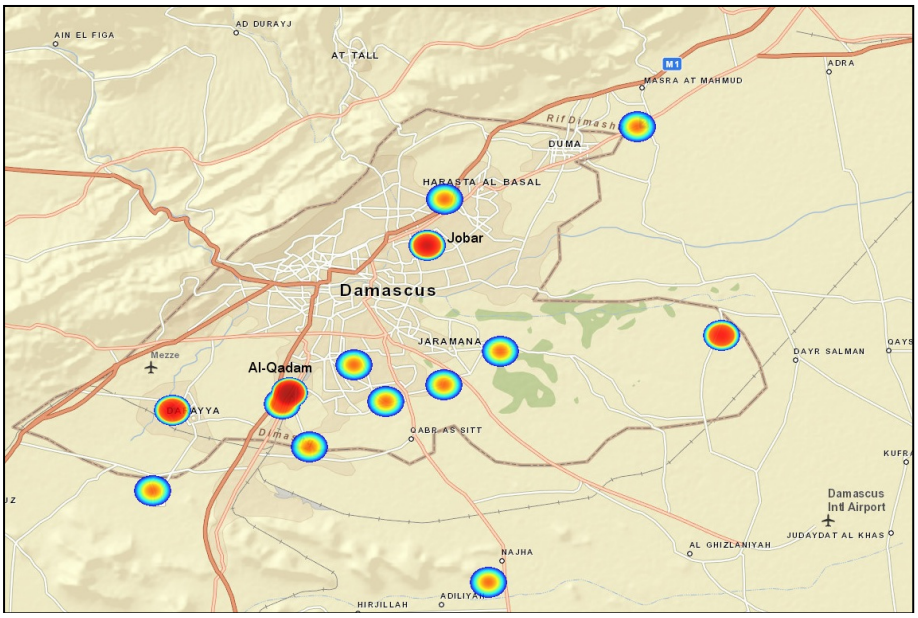


Figure 12: Force-on-force clashes in Damascus during January 2014.

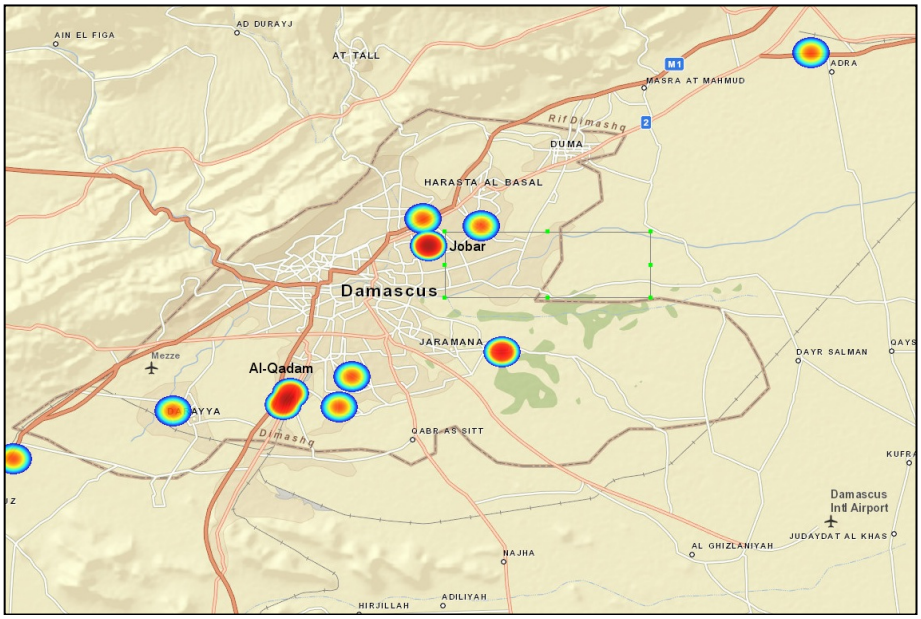


Figure 13: Force-on-force clashes in Damascus during February 2014.

Much of the fighting in southern Damascus is reported to have involved Hezbollah units and fighters from the Hezbollah-affiliated local unit the Abu al-Fadel al-Abbas Brigade, a name which evokes overtly sectarian (pro-Shia) sentiments. The Abu al-Fadel al-Abbas Brigade and Hezbollah are both primarily located around the southern town of Sayeda Zayneb, which is home to the Sayeda Zayneb Mosque, the purported burial site of Zayneb, daughter of Ali, and granddaughter of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH). The significance of this site has made it a center for Shia religious study and pilgrimage, and, since the onset of violence in Damascus, has been protected by predominantly Shia militias. The map below shows both Sayeda Zayneb, as well as areas of activity of both Hezbollah and the Abu al-Fadel al-Abbas Brigade.

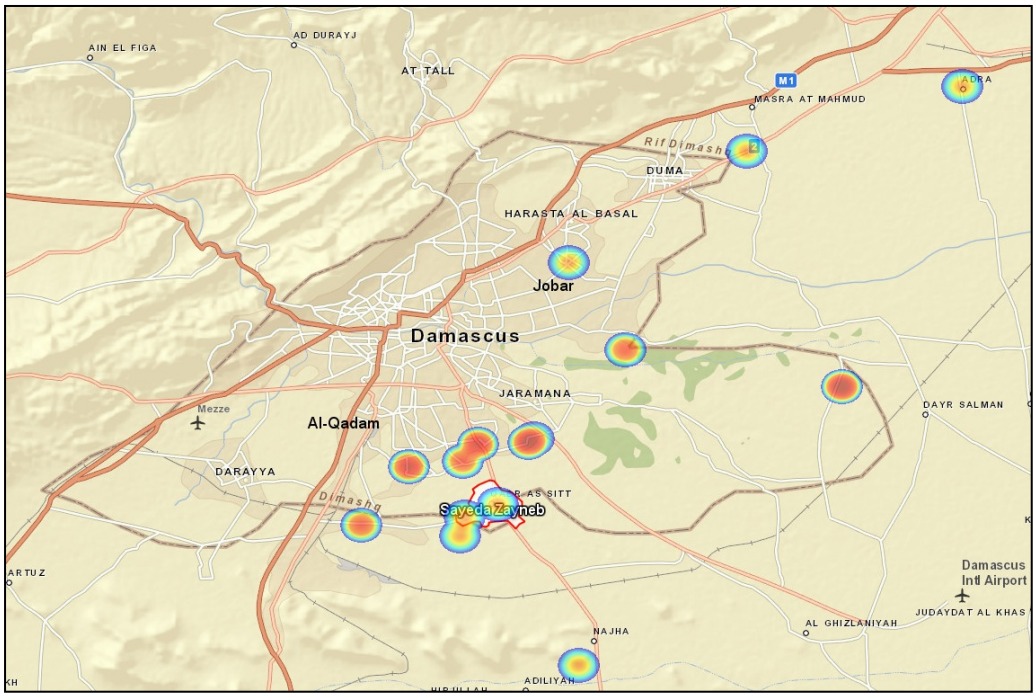


Figure 14: Conflict incidents around Damascus city involving Hezbollah or the Abu al-Fadel al-Abbas Brigade.

Aerial bombardments have continued to play a major role in fighting around Damascus. The figure below compares the number of aerial bombardments (in orange) to the overall number of events in Damascus over the course of January and February. The towns of Darayya and Zabadani as well as Yarmouk camp were subjected to a nearly unprecedented level of bombardment with barrel bombs, with Darayya being hit more than 12 times over the course of a single day.

Figure 15: Frequency of conflict incidents during January and February 2014 that saw higher-than-usual aerial bombardment (highlighted in orange).

Aleppo

November

A combination of inter-opposition fighting and a continued push by the government to regain the territory in and around the city dramatically increased the number of conflict events in Aleppo city and its governorate. By the beginning of November the government had summoned both Hezbollah and the National Defense Forces (NDF) fighters to the city to aid the fight for control of the southern suburbs. The government also began using barrel bombs to target opposition held areas of the city. Despite these reinforcements the government continued to fiercely fight opposition forces in the southern towns and suburbs of Aleppo city with only modest progress.

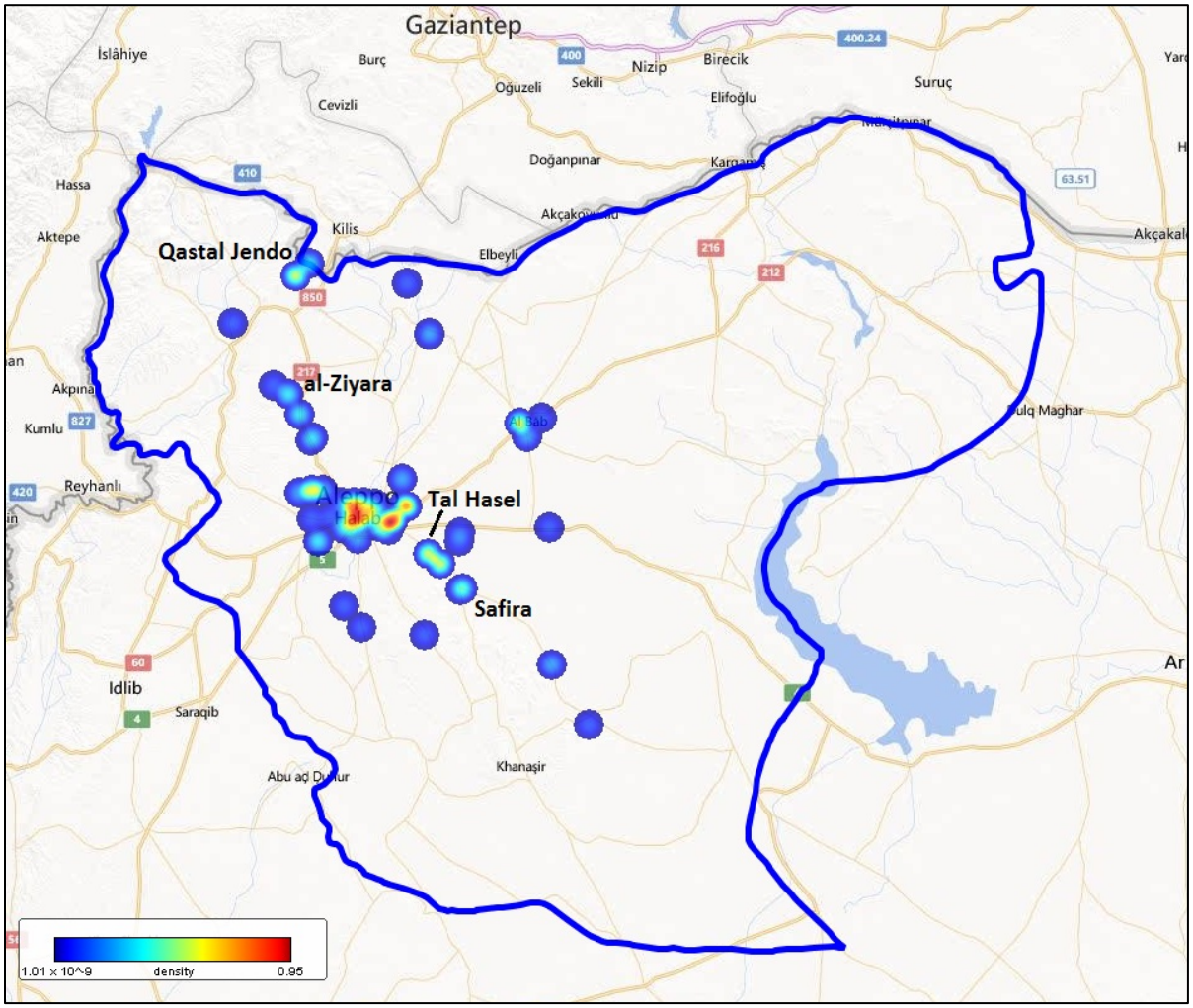


Figure 16: Heatmap showing conflict events in Aleppo governorate (outlined) during November 2013.

The combination of reinforcements and the start of near daily use of barrel bombings allowed the government to secure towns along the road leading to the Aleppo International Airport, namely Tel Hasel, Tel Aran, and Safira.

While the division of Aleppo city remained unchanged during November, the number of events involving force-on-force combat along the dividing line between the government-controlled side of the city and opposition-controlled side increased, signaling an upsurge in the intensity of fighting. Despite this, the majority of fighting within Aleppo centered on the vital 80th division military base near the Aleppo airport, pitting Hezbollah, NDF, and government forces against ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and additional opposition battalions. The town of Maaret al-Artiq, controlled by opposition forces, also received high numbers of aerial bombardments and shelling from government forces during the month, as depicted in the heatmap below.

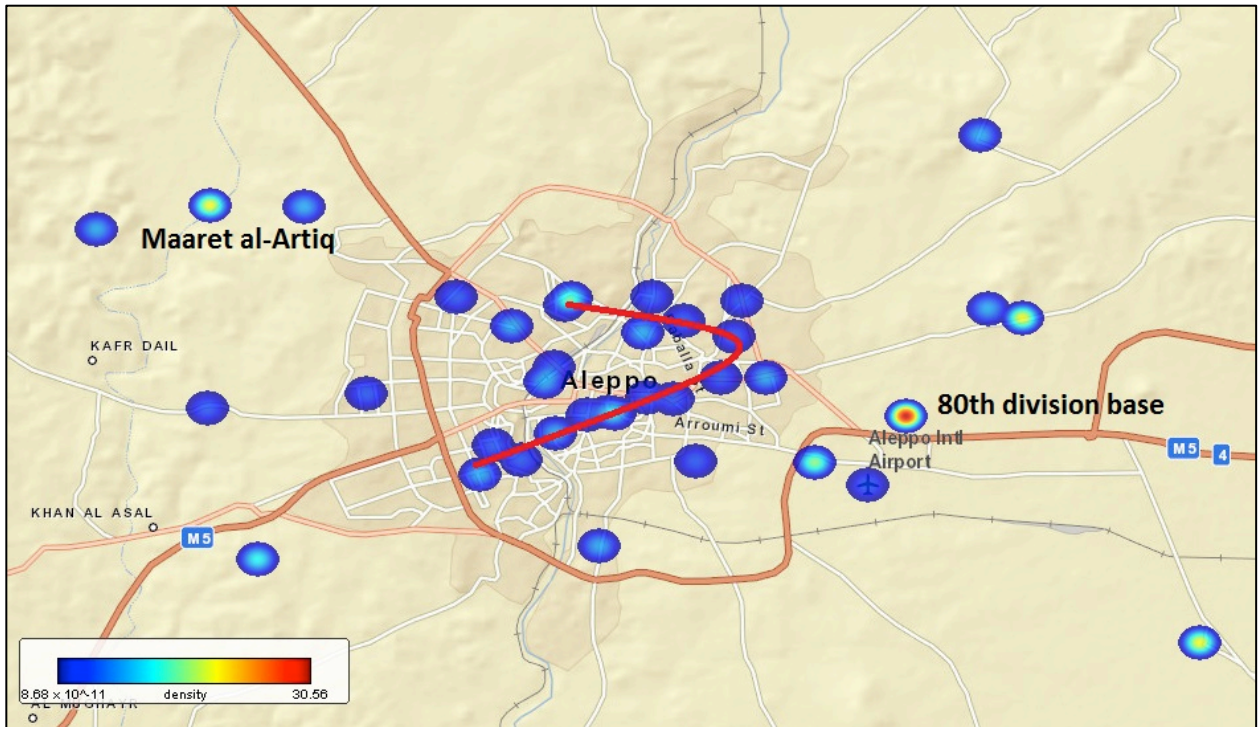


Figure 17: Heatmap of conflict events in Aleppo city during November 2013. The pattern of events clearly shows the front lines through the city center.

December

During December the government further increased its use of barrel bombs on the eastern, opposition-controlled side of the city, consequently forcing civilians to flee the city or seek refuge in the western, government-controlled side of the city. Out of the 93 events that occurred in Aleppo province during December, 64 of those were aerial bombardments, and mostly barrel bombs, carried out by government forces on opposition areas. The map below depicts instances of aerial bombardment during the month of December, denoting areas of opposition control.

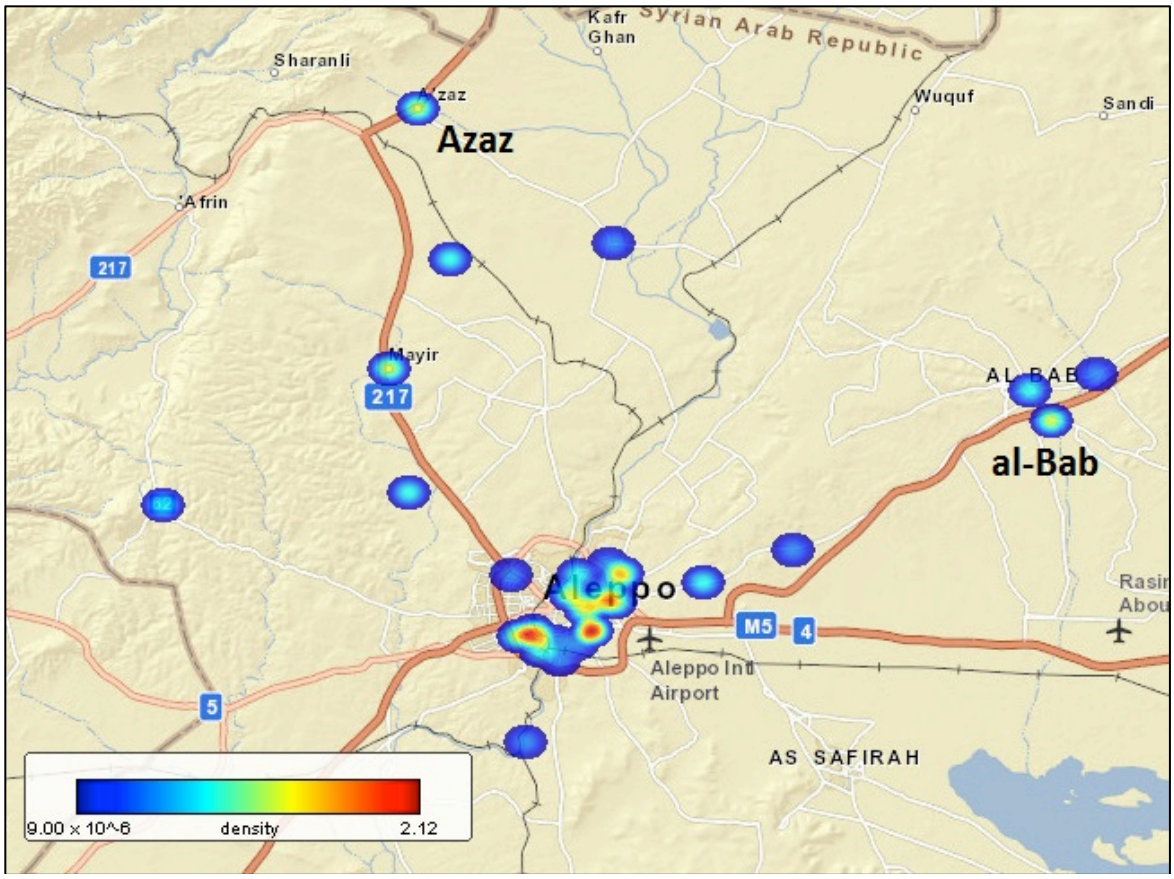


Figure 18: Heatmap of instances of aerial bombardment during December 2013. Events focus mainly on opposition-held areas of eastern Aleppo city as well as the ISIS strongholds of al-Bab and Azaz.

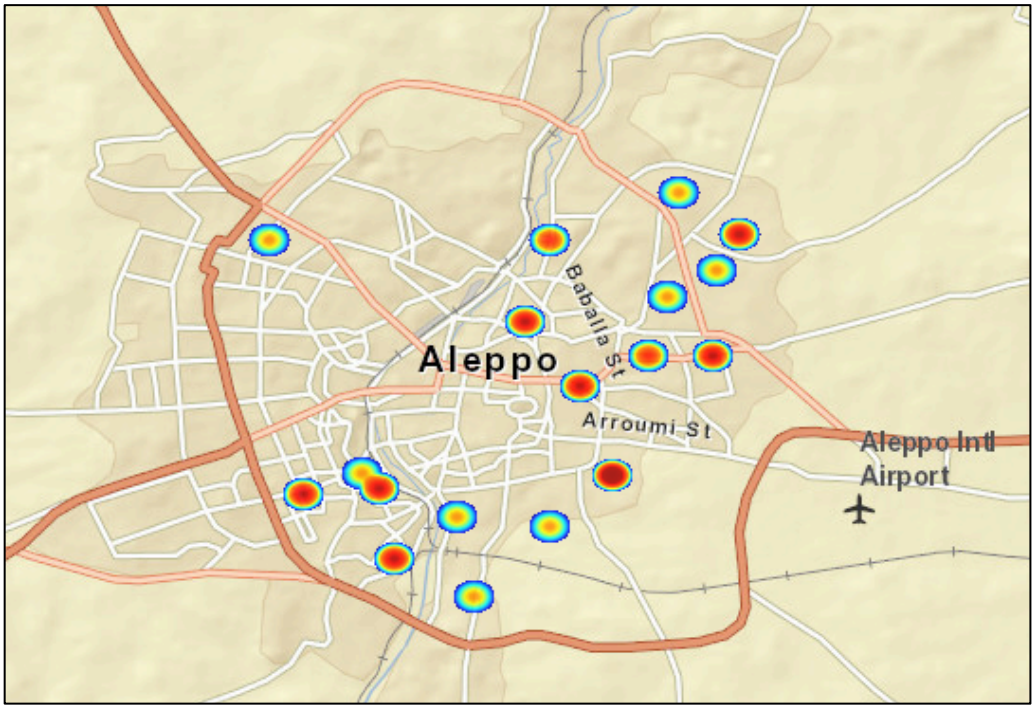


Figure 19: Detail of aerial bombardments of Aleppo city during December 2013.

January and February

Inter-opposition fighting reached a peak by January 2014. As government forces increased their use of barrel bombing in the city of Aleppo, the newly formed Islamic Front, Jaysh al-Mujahedeen, and Syrian Revolutionaries' Front declared war against ISIS and began attacking ISIS positions throughout Aleppo governorate and in eastern Aleppo city. The map below illustrates incidences involving ISIS during the months of January and February. These incidences are mainly composed of clashes between ISIS and opposition forces as they drive ISIS east, in the direction of Raqqa province. Notably, Jabhat al-Nustra did not take part in fighting against ISIS for most of January and the beginning of February. Rather, it acted as mediator between ISIS forces and opposition battalions.

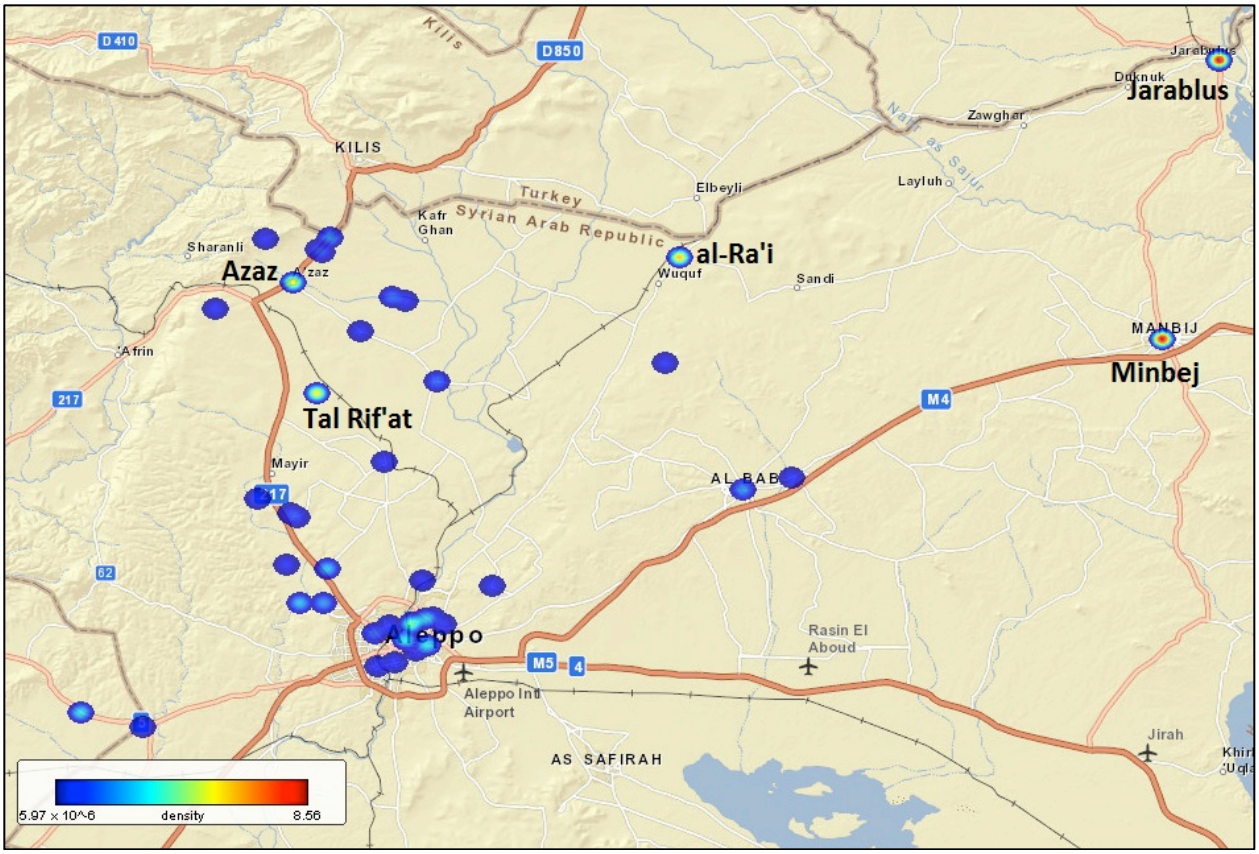


Figure 20: Clashes involving ISIS units during the month of January and February 2014.

Despite the neutral stance taken by Jabhat al-Nusra towards ISIS, tensions rose between the two following the December abduction of a Jabhat al-Nusra Emir in Raqqa. The organization, however, was unable to maintain its neutrality following ISIS' execution of Emir Abu Saad al-Hadrami in mid-January, and began engaging ISIS positions with the broader opposition. As previously mentioned, however, the decision to turn against ISIS was not a nationwide decision. Jabhat al-Nusra units in the Qalamoun region of Damascus continue to cooperate, as they do in isolated areas elsewhere in the country. The abduction and killing of Jabhat al-Nusra's Emir, as

well as the inconsistent relations between the various sub-units of each organization suggest that neither ISIS nor Jabhat al-Nusra – similar to much of Syria's armed opposition – operates under a rigid command structure, but rather as a network of ideologically aligned, jointly-funded and supplied, troops with loose ties to formal leadership.

Fighting against government forces was largely relegated to Aleppo city and its immediate vicinity. Fighting was dispersed throughout Aleppo city along the front lines between government and opposition controlled areas, but was strongest in the Old City of Aleppo near the central citadel. On the outskirts of Aleppo city, the majority of conflict incidents involving government forces centered on the industrial city of Sheikh Najjar, Aleppo Central Prison, and Base 80, which has changed hands a number of times throughout the conflict. These areas are highlighted in the map below.

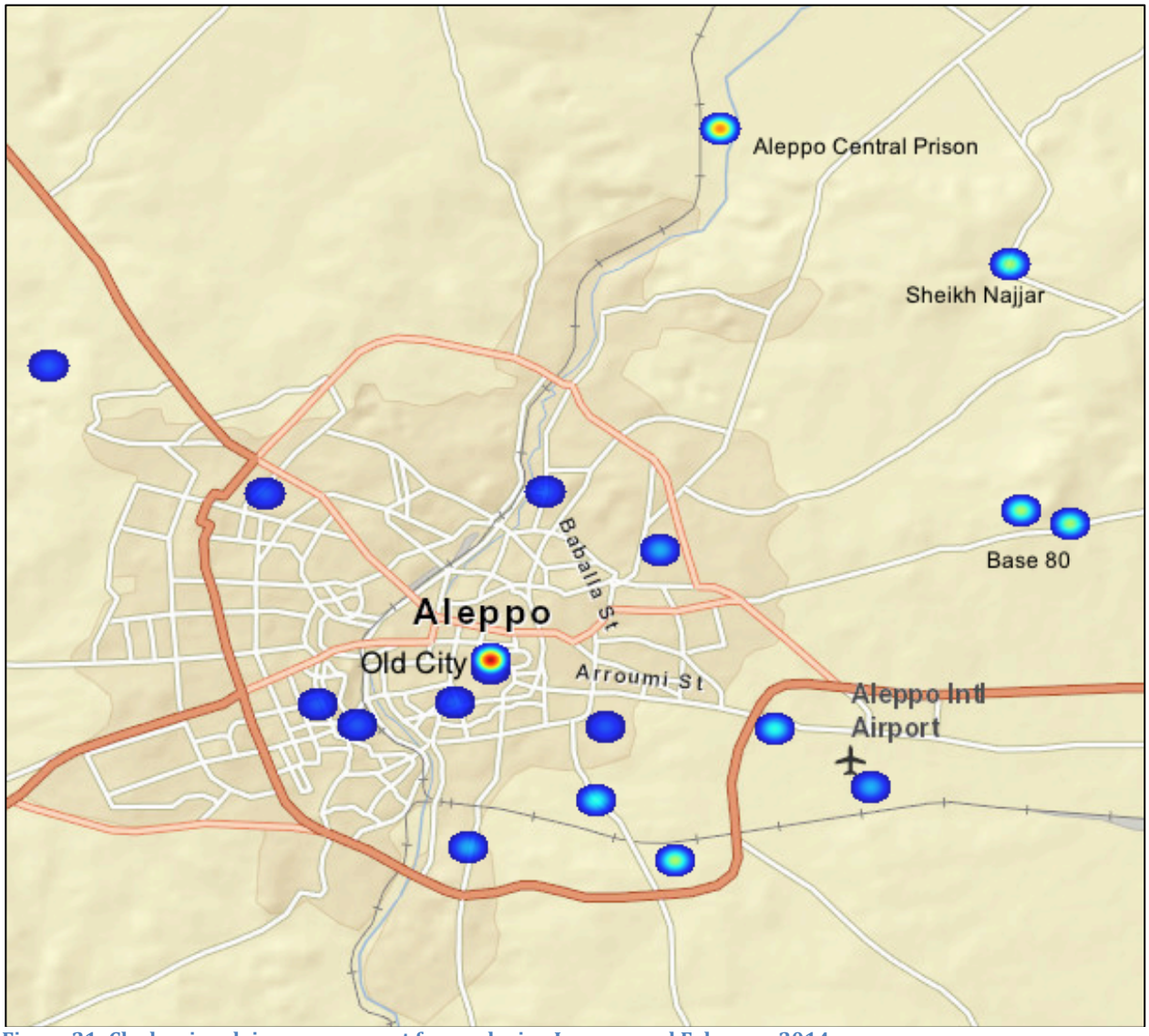


Figure 21: Clashes involving government forces during January and February 2014.

The high instances of clashes, aerial bombardment, and shelling signal an intensity of fighting not seen in Aleppo for months. Despite reinforcements for both opposition and government parties, no decisive victory has pushed the fighting in favor of one side or the other.

Raqqa, Hasakah, and Deir Ez-Zour

Despite numerous attempts, ISIS has been unable to make substantial gains into heavily populated areas of Hasakah, clearly seen in the below heatmap of incidences in Hasakah from November 1 through February 2014.

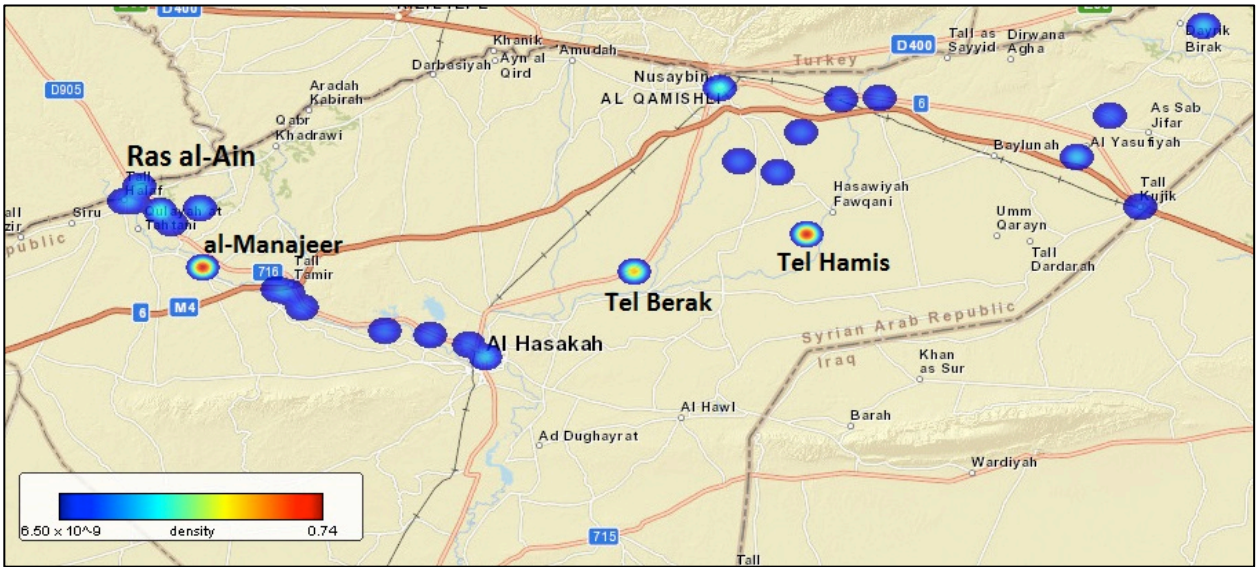


Figure 22: Heatmap of conflict incidents in the northeastern Hassakah governorate from November-February 2014.

The two notable exceptions to this are the towns of Tel Berak and Tel Hamis, which have seen some of the heaviest fighting in the northeastern governorate. Clashes in this area have been almost exclusively between YPG fighters on one side, and ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra on the other.

Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS are also the dominant opposition forces in Deir Ez-Zour. Fighting in this governorate has been limited to the narrow strip of populated land along the Euphrates river.

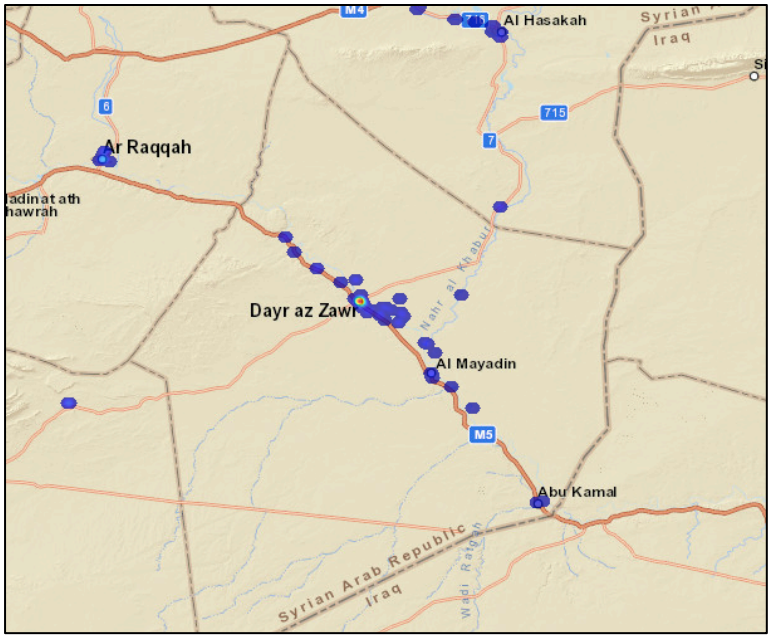


Figure 23: Conflict incidents in Deir Ez-Zour governorate from November 2013 through February 2014.

Fighting in the city of Deir Ez-Zour itself, has been intense throughout the conflict, leaving relatively few neighborhoods untouched. Two areas have seen a higher number of reported incidents than others – Al-Huweiqa on the northern edges of the city, to the north of the river, and the Rashidiyeh and al-Jubeila districts towards the city center (indicated by the brighter points in the heatmap below).

Over the course of the past two months the city has been largely divided between government forces, ISIS, and Jabhat al-Nusra, with some opposition groups, including the Noor al-Din al-Zinki Brigade of Jaysh al-Mujahedeen entering the area to clash with ISIS forces in January 2014.

Figure 24: Detail of conflict events in Deir Ez-Zour city.

Conclusions:

The consolidation of opposition forces is ultimately a positive development. A more unified opposition improves the prospects for nationwide mediation efforts and represents a strengthening of grassroots organization on the part of the armed opposition. Furthermore, this process of unification appears to be fostering moderation of some of the more hardline elements of Syria's armed opposition. The broad based rejection of ISIS – which can be seen as both enabled by and the impetus for further consolidation – is a positive development for the armed opposition's relations with both civilians and foreign backers.

Additionally, having such an enemy in common could ward off future clashes between Kurdish groups and the broader opposition, which will have broader contact with one another once again. The main determiner, however, of opposition-Kurdish relations will be how the two parties engage each other at the negotiating table rather than on the ground. The Coalition's continuing refusal to engage all Kurdish parties, whether due to foreign pressure, suspicion, or ideological differences, will risk fragmenting Syria more than any steps towards autonomy taken by Kurdish authorities.

The current power struggle underway within the Supreme Military Council appears to be indicative of both relations on the ground amongst the various opposition factions and regionally between the various backers of Syria's opposition. It is unclear what exactly is behind the recent changes in leadership, but it is likely that they were made with an eye towards improving the prospects for external support. Regardless of the reasons for the changes, for the first time in the history of Syria's opposition, the military wing of the exiled political opposition has a tangible and growing connection to armed groups in many parts of Syria.

Despite the divisions and infighting between Syria's armed opposition, government forces, aided by Hezbollah in many areas, have largely been unable to recapture significant amounts of territory. The result is a de facto four-way partition of the country between the government, armed opposition, ISIS, and Kurds, with no one party being capable of a military "victory."

Appendix:

Composition of consolidated armed formations

The Islamic Front – Original Component Groups

Original Component Groups:

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah – Hassan Aboud
Jeish al-Islam – Zahran Alloush
Al-Tawheed Brigade – Abdel Aziz Salameh
Suqour al-Sham Brigades – Ahmed Aissa al-Sheikh
Al-Haq Brigade – Sheikh Abu Ratib
The Kurdish Islamic Front – Emir Sheikh Abu Abdullah al-Kurdi
The Ansar al-Sham Battalions – "Abu Omar"

The Syrian Revolutionaries' Front Component Groups

Original Component Groups & Leaders:

The Idlib Military Council (Colonel Afif Suleiman)
The Syria Martyrs' Brigade (Jamal Maarouf)
The Ahrar al-Zawiya Brigades (Ahmed Yahia al-Khatib)
The Ansar Brigades (Mithqal al-Abdullah)
The al-Nasr al-Qadim Brigades (Rabie Hajjar)
The Seventh Division (Colonel Heitham Afisi) – Bashir SMC
The Ninth Division of Aleppo (Murshid al-Khaled Aboul-Moutassem)
The Farouq al-Shamal Battalions (Abdullah Awda Abu Zeid)
The Thi'ab al-Ghab Brigade (Mohammed Zaatar)
The Idlib Martyrs' Brigade (Mohannad Eissa)
The Ahrar al-Shamal Brigade (Bilal Khebeir)
The Riyad al-Salehin Battalions of Damascus
The Farouq Battalions of Hama
The Special Assignments Regiment of Damascus (Abdel-Ilah Othman)

Additions:

The Sayf Allah al-Maslool Brigade
The 45th Regiment
The Tajamu'a Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades in Southern Syria

The al-'Omri Brigades
The Shaheed Salih al-Jolani Brigade
The Ansar al-Sunnah Brigade
The Saraya al-Murabiteen Brigade
The al-Maghaweer Battalion
The Zeid Bin Haritha Brigade
The al-Nasr Salah al-Din Brigades
Idlib/Eastern M'arat al-Nuaman Countryside: Sayf Allah al-Maslool Brigade
Idlib: 45th Regiment
Southern Syria/Damascus/Daraa/al-Quneitra: Tajama'a Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades in Southern Syria
Dara'a: al-'Omri Brigades
Southern Syria: al-Shaheed Salih al-Jolani Brigade
Southern Syria: Ansar al-Sunnah Brigade
Southern Syria: Saraya al-Murabiteen Brigade
Idlib/Maarat al-Nuaman/Sinjar: Al-Maghaweer Battalion
Southern Front/Syria: Zeid Bin Haritha Brigade
al-Quneitrah: al-Nasr Salah al-Din Brigades

Groups Expelled:

The Ninth Division of Aleppo (Murshid al-Khaled Aboul-Moutassem)
The Farouq al-Shamal Battalions (Abdullah Awda Abu Zeid)
Amin al-Amr Battalion of Tajamua'a Ahrar al-Zawiya

Jaysh al-Mujahedeen – Component Groups

Original Component Groups:

The Islamic Nur al-Din Zenki Battalions – Sheikh Tawfiq Shahab al-Din
The 19th Division:
- The al-Ansar Brigade – Lieutenant Colonel Abu Bakr
- The Amjad al-Islam Brigade - Captain Ali Shakirdi
- The al-Quds Brigades
- The Khan al-Asal Free Brigade
- The al-Shuyukh Brigade
- The al-Muhajireen Brigade

The Tajamuaa Fa-staqim Kama Ummirat - Saqr Abu Quteibah
- The Aleppo City Battalion
- The Halab al-Shahba Brigade
- The al-Islam Brigade

The Islamic Freedom Brigade (Idlib)
The Harakat al-Nur al-Islamiyah
The Jund al-Harimayn Brigade

Relations Between Kurdish Parties and Armed Groups