

THE  
CARTER CENTER



Regional Conflict Report # 2

Damascus

June 7, 2013

## 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 armed 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 pro and anti-government forces; and
4. provides up-to-date analysis on the current state of the conflict.

All estimates regarding the number of opposition fighters operating in any given area are based on tallies of fighters visible in online videos. While such announcements via YouTube have become common for the Syrian opposition, our estimates cannot account for individual fighters and fighting units which have not announced their establishment on the internet, and should therefore be viewed as the minimum estimates available. The data, while not exhaustive, should be seen as representative due to the fact that many of the largest and most capable armed groups operating in Syria have a strong online presence.

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

## Acknowledgements:

The Carter Center has received support for the Syria Conflict Mapping Project from a multitude of individuals, companies, and organizations. The following organizations and individuals stand out in the contributions they have made to the success of this project.



Lockheed Martin's LMEnsemble has been enormously useful in gathering and making sense of information coming out of Syria. Their platform has helped the Center stay up to date on developments throughout the world at every level of detail, and have automated much of the data gathering required to undertake this project.



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 archives have facilitated research and provide an unparalleled historic record of the progression of the Syrian conflict.

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

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**1. Introduction**

The past few months have shown a dramatic increase in the internationalization of the Syrian conflict. Though the potential for “spill-over” has been a concern since the conflict turned violent in 2011, the pace at which violence has escalated throughout the region during 2013 is troubling. Northern Lebanon has sunk deeper into conflict; with combatants in Tripoli using 80mm mortar rounds on each other’s neighborhoods, Hezbollah now openly operates in many parts of Syria, Israel has conducted three air strikes, bombs have been detonated in Turkey, violence is escalating in many parts of Iraq, and the European Union has removed legal obstacles to arming the Syrian opposition. Despite these shifts in the international arena, a close look at conflict dynamics in many parts of Syria reveals a rising power of local and regional actors – many of whom are driven by local grievances, and operate with no cohesive national strategy.

As opposition forces consolidated their control over much of northern and eastern Syria, their ability to form hierarchies among both armed and political groups increased. Though still a far cry from true cohesion, these efforts at unity have had far greater success than similar attempts in the south of the country – particularly Damascus – where allegiances still shift between a number of independent organizations and military councils.

This report couples information related to armed group formations in the Damascus governorate with a database of conflict incidents to show the current status of forces in the area as well as highlight the most influential actors.

**2. The Government’s Offensive**

Toward the end of 2012, opposition forces in and around Damascus made substantial gains. Over the course of November and some of December, they took a series of military bases throughout the eastern suburbs of the city, and pushed into the city itself. The opposition advanced with such steadfast tenacity that many believed the city would fall.

In keeping with its long-standing strategy for dealing with opposition held territory, government forces responded to this advance by raining artillery and rocket fire down upon opposition positions, forcing a retreat by way of firepower alone. The artillery bombardment was quickly followed by ground assaults that managed to push the opposition advance further into the suburbs and surrounding countryside.

Beginning in January, 2013, government forces began a campaign of encircling opposition strongholds in the eastern suburbs (known as the Eastern Ghouta, or *Ghouta Sharqiyya*). Beginning at the Damascus International Airport, government forces began a slow, counter-clockwise advance through the countryside, re-capturing towns that had long been

opposition strongholds. (Maps attached in the appendix of this report show the succession of conflict incidents from January 1, 2013 through June 1, 2013.)

In addition to this advance, government forces maintained constant pressure on the western suburb of Darayya and the northeastern suburbs of the city throughout the end of 2012 and beginning of 2013. These areas are all key to the government's grip on power in Damascus and have long been contested. Darayya (and neighboring Moadamyeh to the west) both border the Mezze military airport, which is a major government stronghold and less than 5km from the Presidential Palace. The northeastern outskirts of the city are equally vital to the government as they are bordered by the main highways leading north.

### 3. The Structure of the Armed Opposition

Geography and necessity have shaped the structure of the armed opposition in the Damascus governorate as much as ideology and strategy have. While the opposition in the north of Syria has for a long time enjoyed a high degree of freedom of movement, opposition units operating in and around Damascus and elsewhere in the south have had to deal with a much higher concentration of government bases and troops. As the Syrian military was primarily structured to respond to threats from Israel, the concentration of military establishments in the south is much higher than elsewhere in Syria.

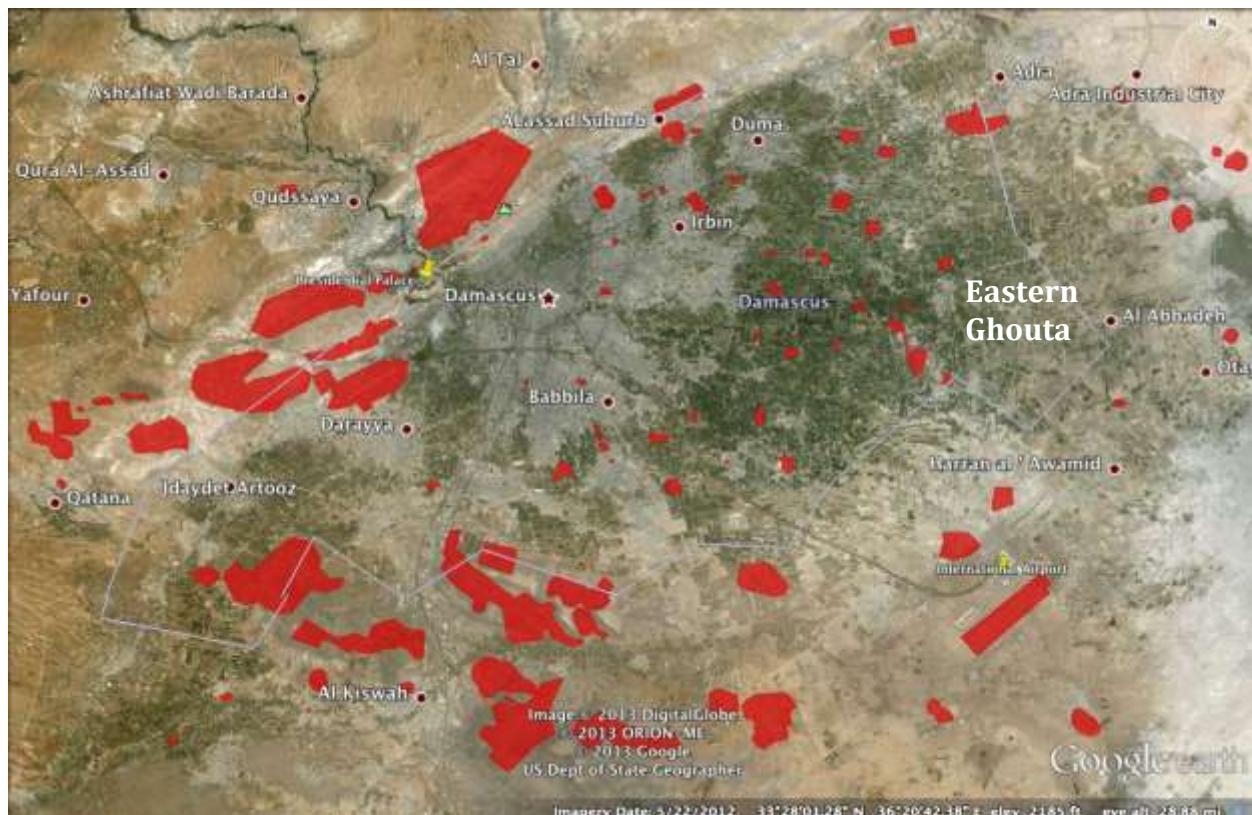


Figure 1: Government military facilities surrounding Damascus.

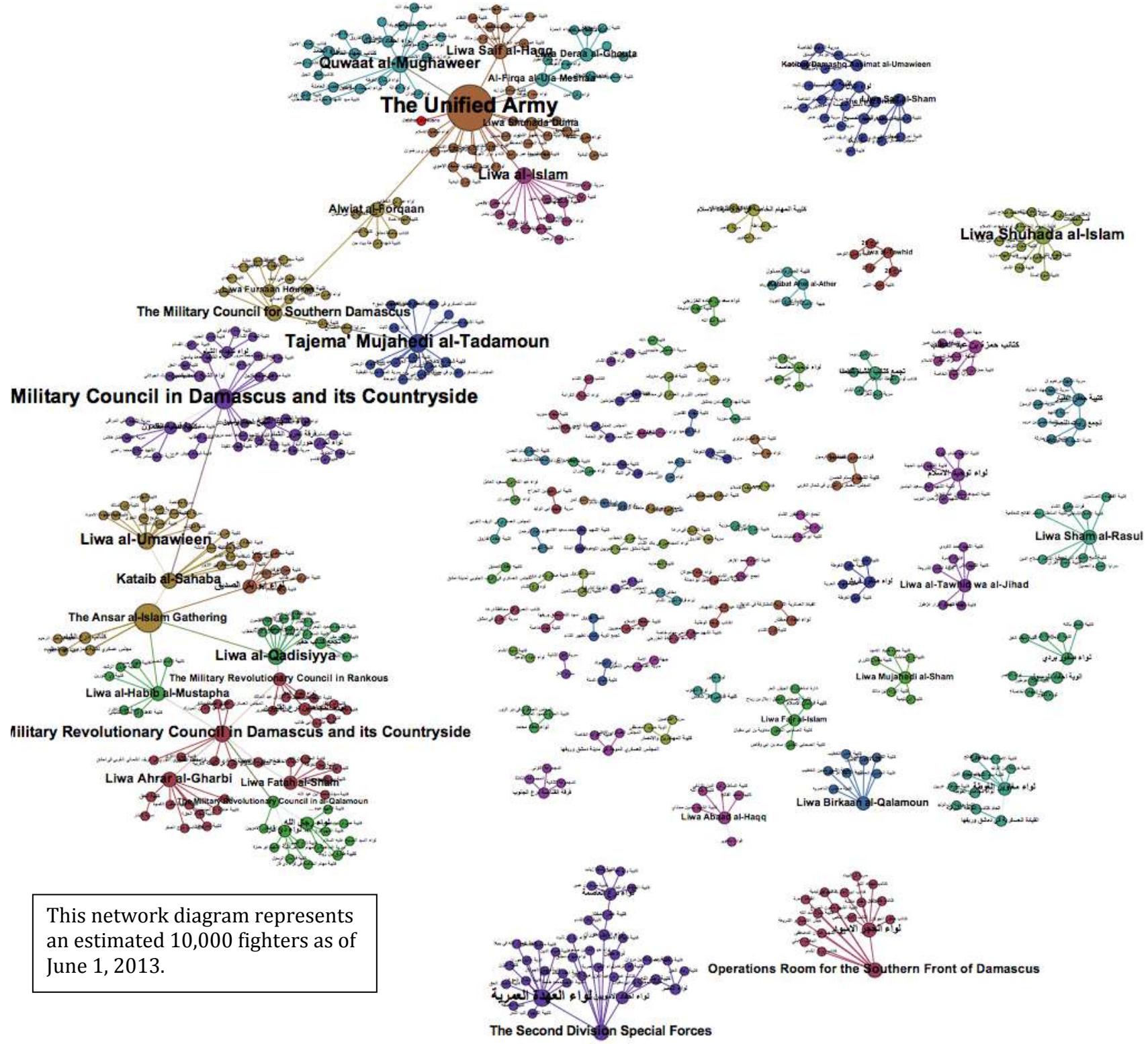
Furthermore, the military units operating in the Damascus governorate are from either the elite Republican Guard or the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, which are comprised of the best equipped, most extensively trained, and most loyal units. This fact, coupled with the heavy concentration of government military establishments, has meant that opposition units have been relatively isolated from one another. Despite this isolation, there have been several hubs of power that have emerged among groups in the governorate.

The following diagrams show the full network of all armed groups formed in the Damascus governorate over the course of the uprising. Due to the fact that many of the groups operating in the area have multiple affiliations, a network diagram has been used in place of a more traditional hierarchical diagram in order to more effectively represent the sometimes overlapping relationships between groups. An analysis of opposition networks also allows for a more comprehensive understanding of groups in the region, by showing power derived from a group's connections with other armed groups and organizations as well as from troop strength and weaponry.

Many of the groups that have been formed in Damascus announced their formation, and have never been heard from since. While many of these groups have disbanded, been reincorporated into different units, or have been killed, they are still represented in the following diagram as individual, unconnected nodes in order to show the full extent of networked and independent group formations over the course of the conflict.

The groups that have persisted, however, have emerged as central hubs of activity, and have accumulated a number of subsidiary units and network connections over the course of the conflict. We will begin with a diagram of all the armed groups that have formed in the Damascus governorate over the course of the conflict, before moving to more detailed breakdowns of the four largest opposition networks, giving as detailed information as possible regarding the troop counts of each. Troop counts are based on the number of individuals who have been seen in formation videos. If, for example, a battalion formation is announced by a commander alone, only the commander is included in the troop count for that unit. All estimates should therefore be seen as the *lowest* estimate of troop strength.

Only the names of the largest units have been rendered in English. The nodes representing affiliated groups have been colored the same to help illustrate their connectedness. Node size corresponds to the number of subsidiary units an organization has.



### The Ansar al-Islam Gathering

At the beginning of 2013, the largest armed group in the Damascus governorate was the Ansar al-Islam Gathering. This organization brought together many of the largest and most accomplished groups in the area, and coordinated a number of successful attacks on government installations. However, in early 2013, factions began to appear in the organization, and on May 13, 2013, it was all but superseded by the formation of the United Army (further details below). The Ansar al-Islam Gathering currently has five known subsidiary groups, but shares command of three of these groups with two separate military councils.

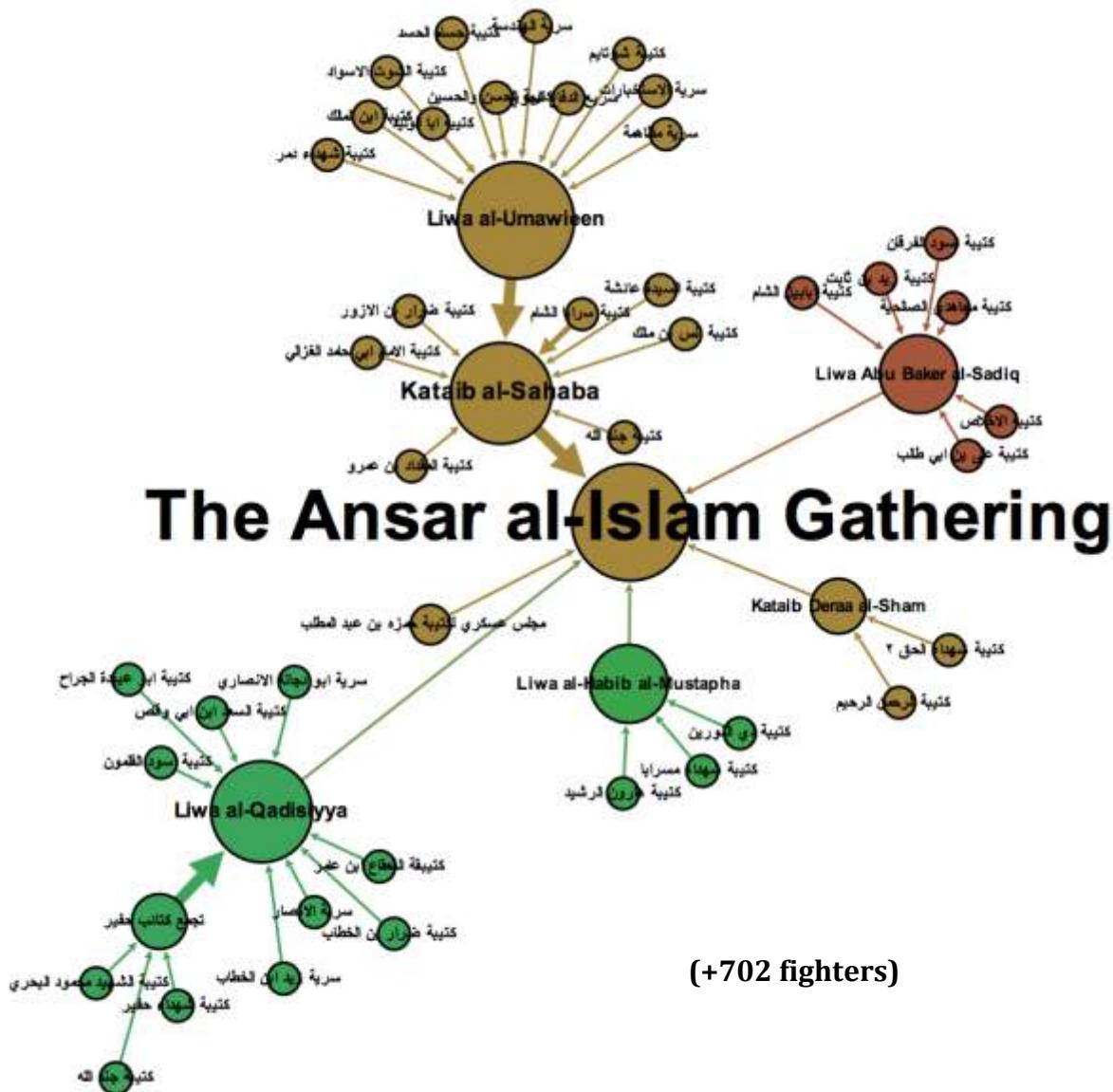


Figure 2: The Ansar al-Islam Gathering and its affiliates as of May 17, 2013.

The two military councils with which the Ansar al-Islam Gathering shares its battalions are the Military Council of Damascus and its Countryside and the Military Revolutionary Council of Damascus. The two groups, while seemingly very similar, have not joined with one another and each maintains its own network of loosely connected battalions. These councils do not appear to exercise much authority over their nominally subsidiary groups. While claiming loyalty, subsidiary groups remain relatively disconnected from one another.

### **The Military Council in Damascus and its Countryside**

The first of these two groups to form was the Military Council in Damascus and its Countryside, which announced its formation on March 21, 2012. The Military Council of Damascus and its Countryside is a predominantly local military council with limited reach to other regions. They claim to strive for a democratic state with religious freedoms for all, yet regularly issue fatwas on their website and have connected with many of the more islamist-leaning battalions in the region.

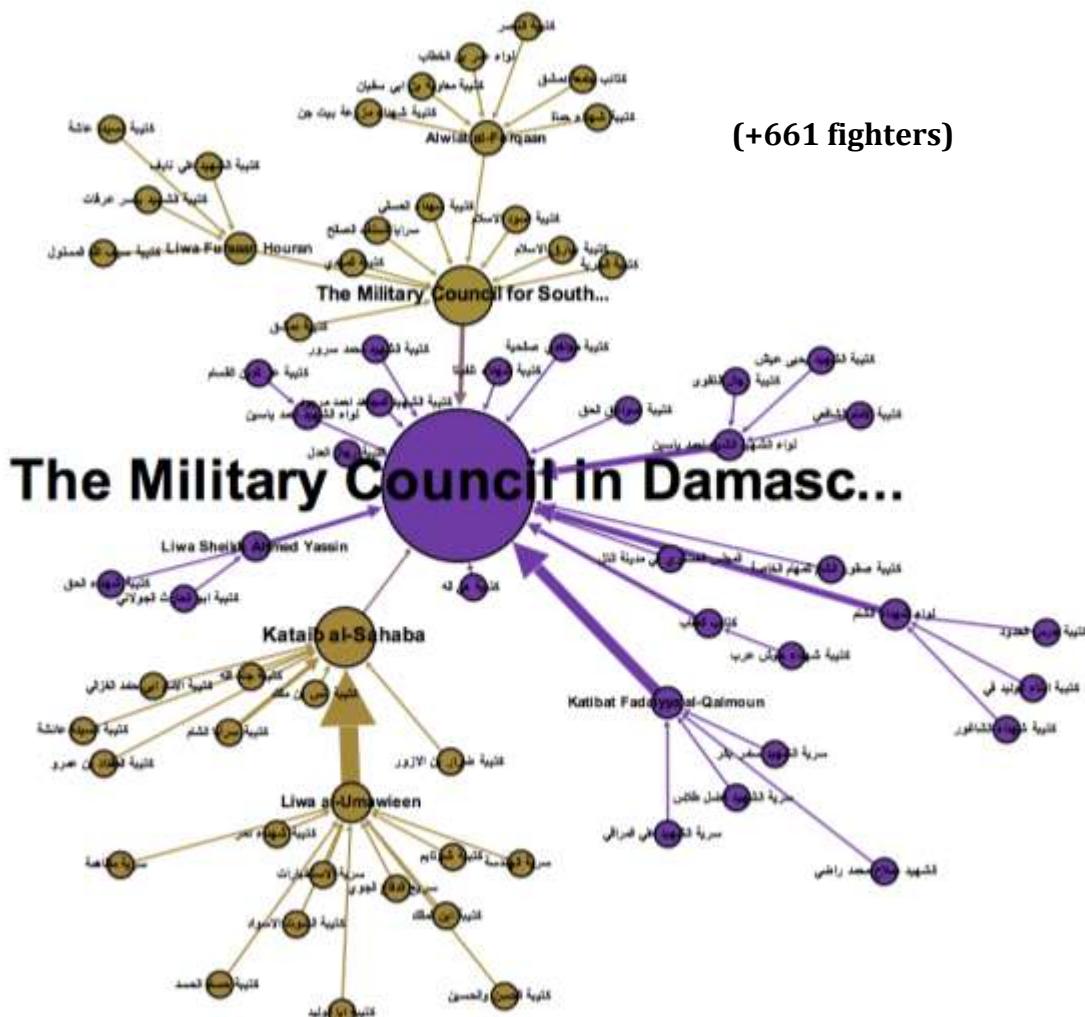
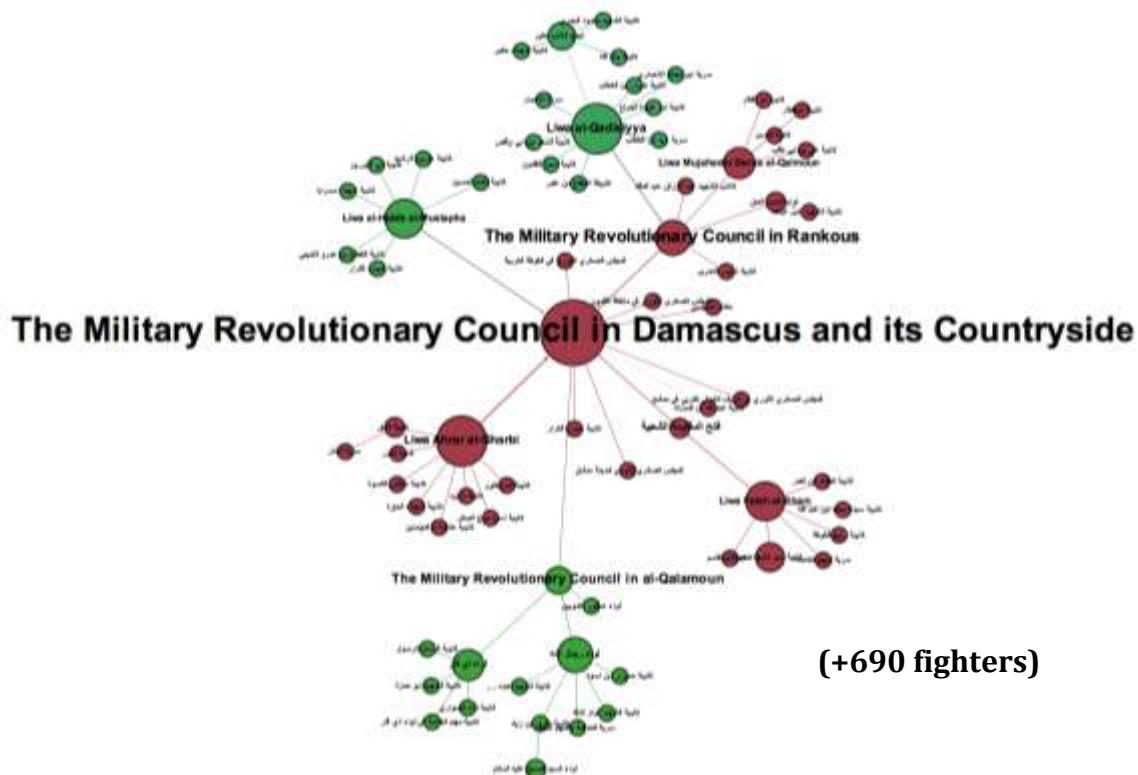


Figure 3: The Military Council in Damascus and its Countryside and its affiliates as of May 17, 2013.

### **The Military Revolutionary Council in Damascus and its Countryside**

The second military council, known as the Military *Revolutionary* Council in Damascus and its Countryside, enjoys more connections with national-level opposition leadership than does the Military *Council* in Damascus – including with the Joint Command of the Military Revolutionary Councils in the Interior. When the Revolutionary Council formed in October 2012, it brought together a large number of military councils in the region under one command.



**Figure 4: The Military Revolutionary Council in Damascus and its Countryside and its affiliates as of May 17, 2013.**

## The Unified Army

The largest group that is currently operating in Damascus, and the most significant change to opposition structures over the course of 2013, is the emergence of the Unified Army. The formation of the Unified Army (or *Jeish Muahed*) was announced on May 13, 2013, and incorporated nearly all of the armed groups operating in the Eastern Ghouta.

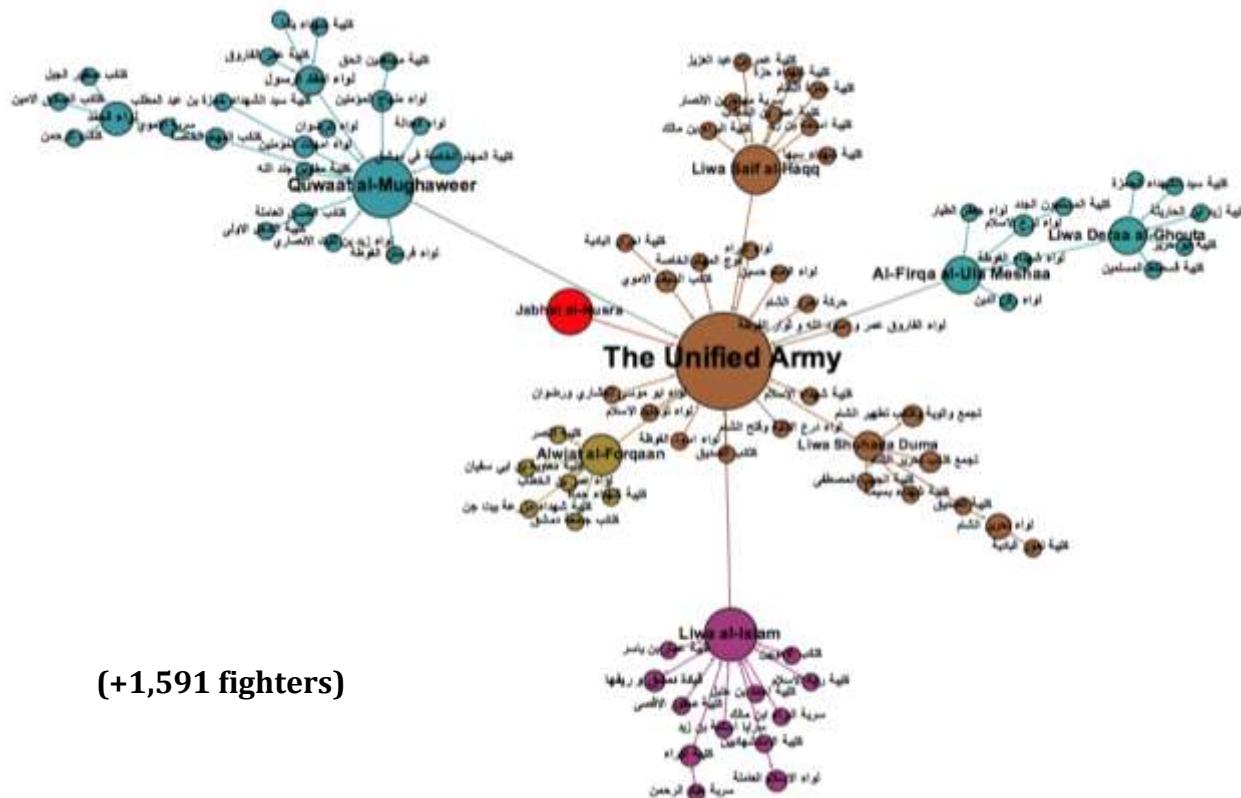


Figure 5: The Unified Army and its affiliates as of May 17, 2013.

The timing and manner in which this unit was created suggests that it is an ad hoc collaboration that was formed due to pressure placed upon the opposition by the government's recent advances. Also supporting this theory is the fact that none of the subsidiary groups have altered their statements or online profiles to reflect a change in leadership. Previous incorporations (such as that of the Ansar al-Islam Gathering) led to all subsidiary groups adopting the title and logo of the umbrella organization, and using it in conjunction with their own. In the case of the Unified Army, subsidiary groups have merely re-tweeted or re-posted information concerning the group's formation, and the Unified Army itself has not even created an online profile. This suggests that the group itself is not a stand-alone entity with its own funding and supply lines.

A noteworthy addition to the Unified Army is Jabhat al-Nusra. The group, which is often left out of online formation videos, was present for the formation of the Unified Army. It is

currently unclear, however, whether Jabhat al-Nusra operates in any other parts of Damascus or in collaboration with any other armed groups.

#### **4. Conclusions**

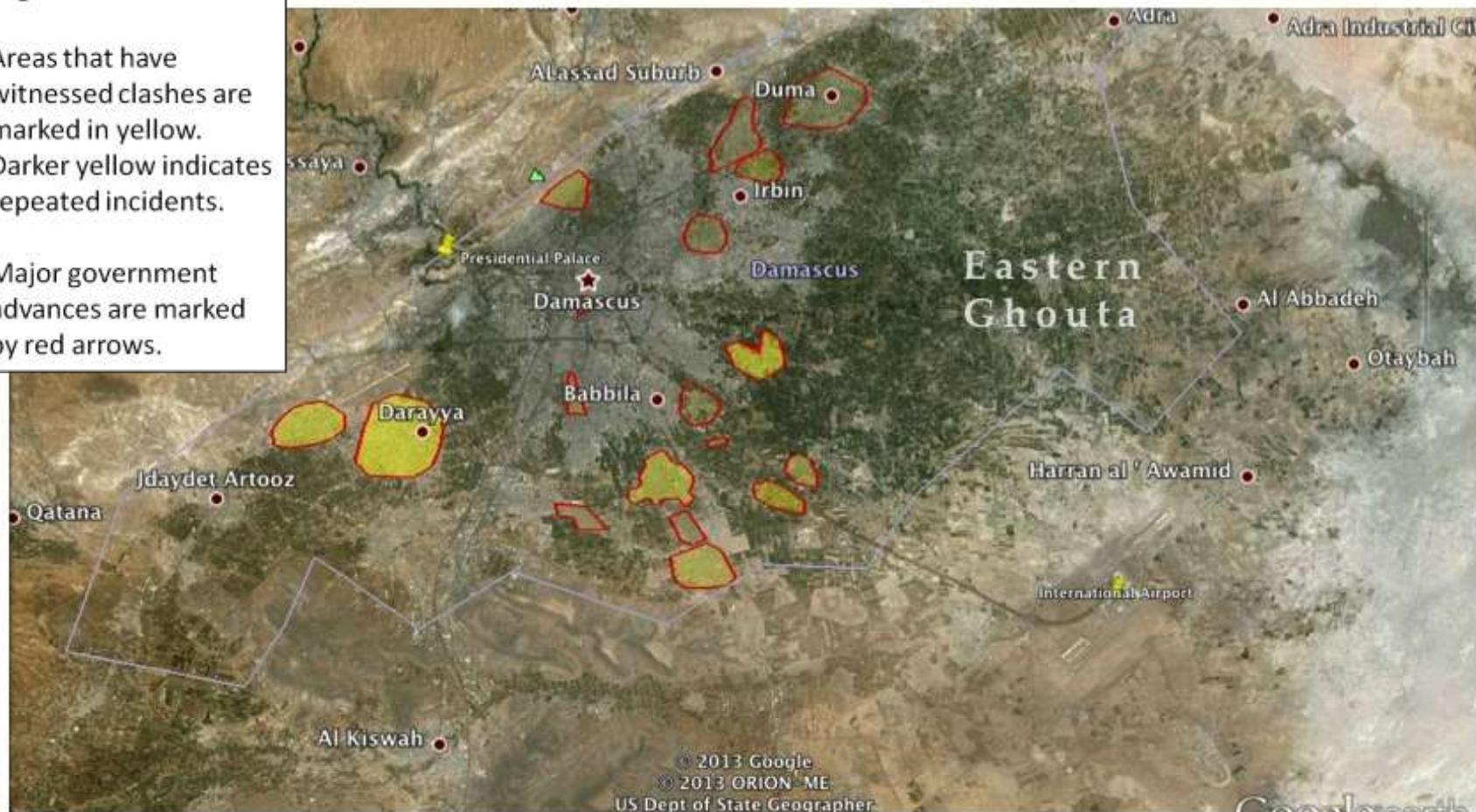
Despite substantial opposition gains at the end of 2012, it is clear that the government's offensive throughout 2013 has been largely successful. While a glance at the areas affected by the conflict might suggest that government positions are being hit from all sides, with opposition strongholds in many of the suburbs to the east and west of the city center, the reality is that the opposition is isolated in each of these areas.

The opposition, which has been divided from early in the fight between two governorate-level military councils, a dozen subordinate regional councils, and a handful of powerful independent units, is now physically divided as well. With clusters of groups isolated in a number of suburbs and the newly formed United Army surrounded in the eastern Ghouta, the armed opposition movement around the capital is in a difficult position.

Though a number of the groups fighting for control of the Ghouta have appealed for help, it is unlikely that there is anyone able to come to their aid. Even if governments supporting the opposition were to arm them, the UN's recent blacklisting of Jabhat al-Nusra (and therefore their affiliates as well) means that there are few potential candidates to receive such aid.

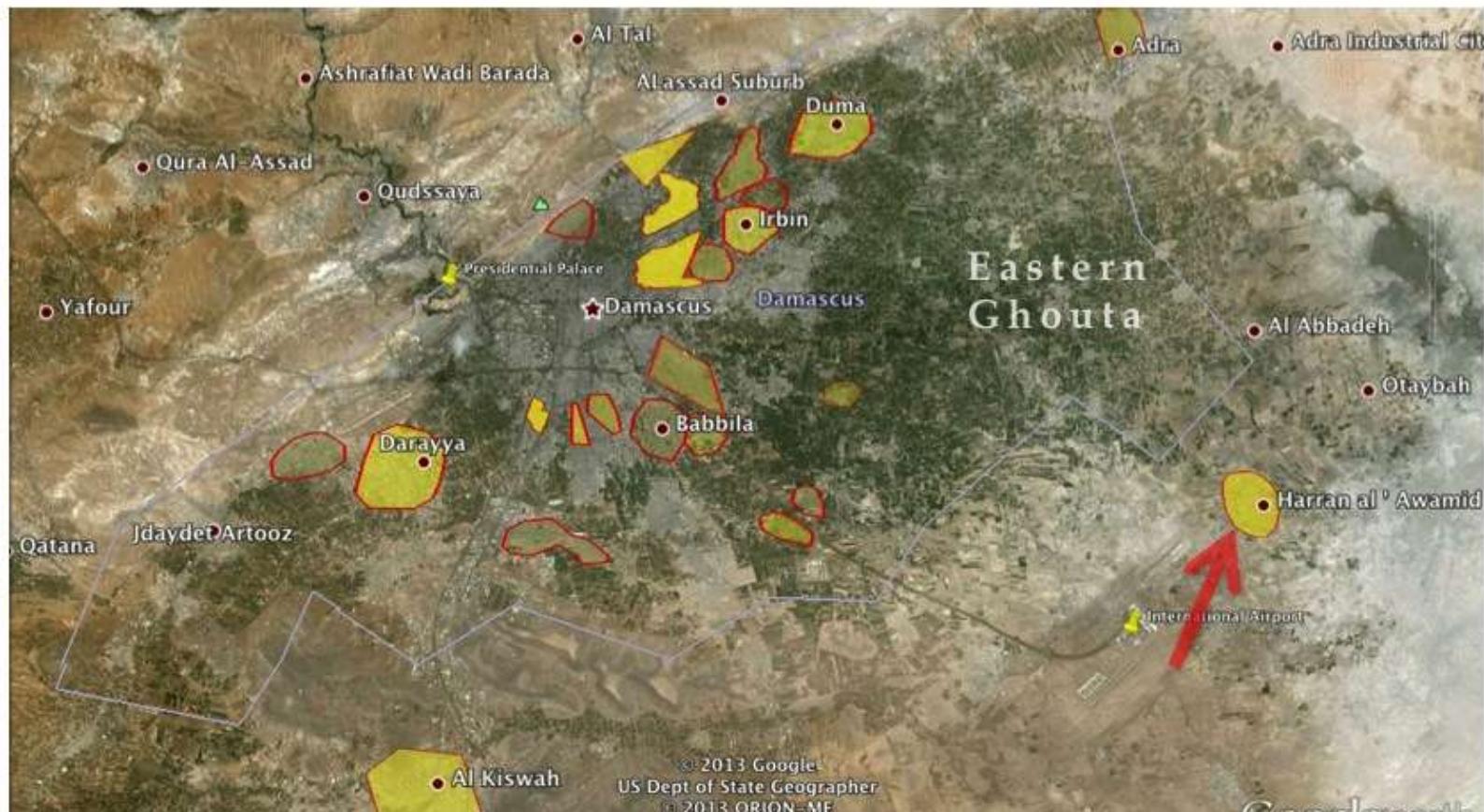
In the weeks and months ahead, the opposition's assault on the capital will depend upon the strength and unity of their newly formed United Army, and its ability to withstand the government's steady advance. Should they succeed in unifying their forces, they may be able to push back the tide. If not, then barring a major diversion of government attention to elsewhere in Syria, many of the main elements of the Damascene opposition are likely to be broken.

# Clashes in January



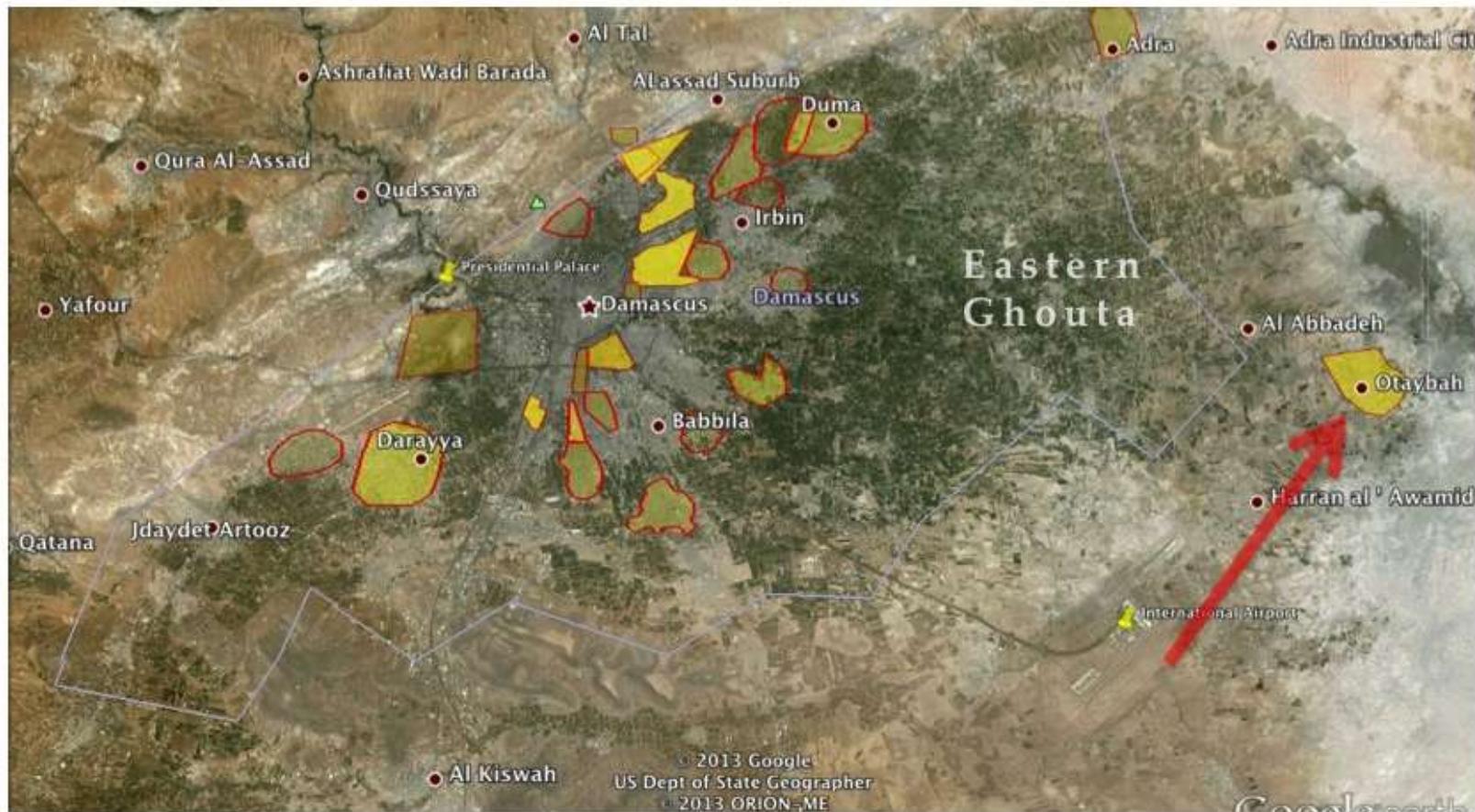
Eastern Ghouta remains almost wholly under opposition control.

# Clashes in February



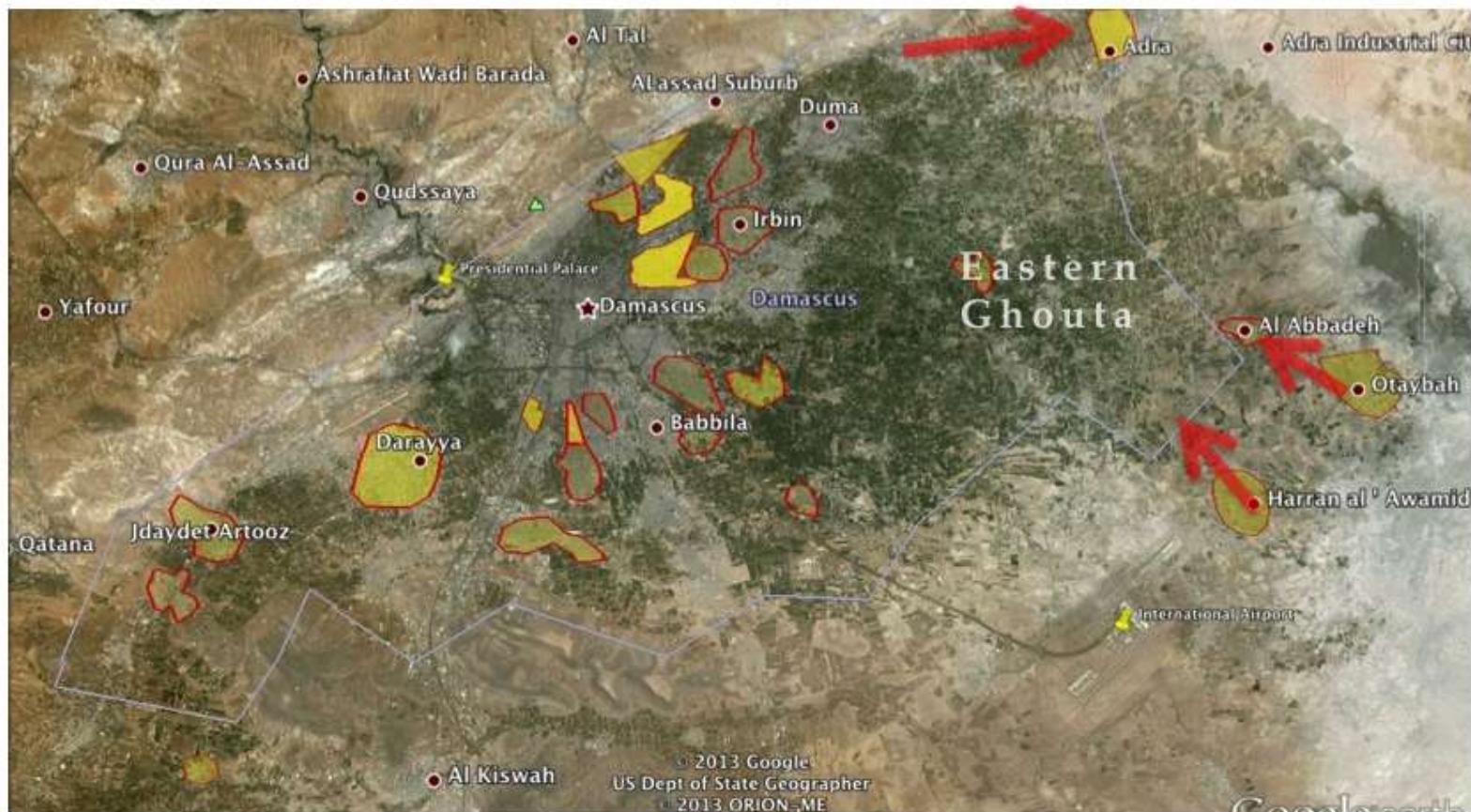
Government forces advance on the Harran al-Awamid.

# Clashes in March



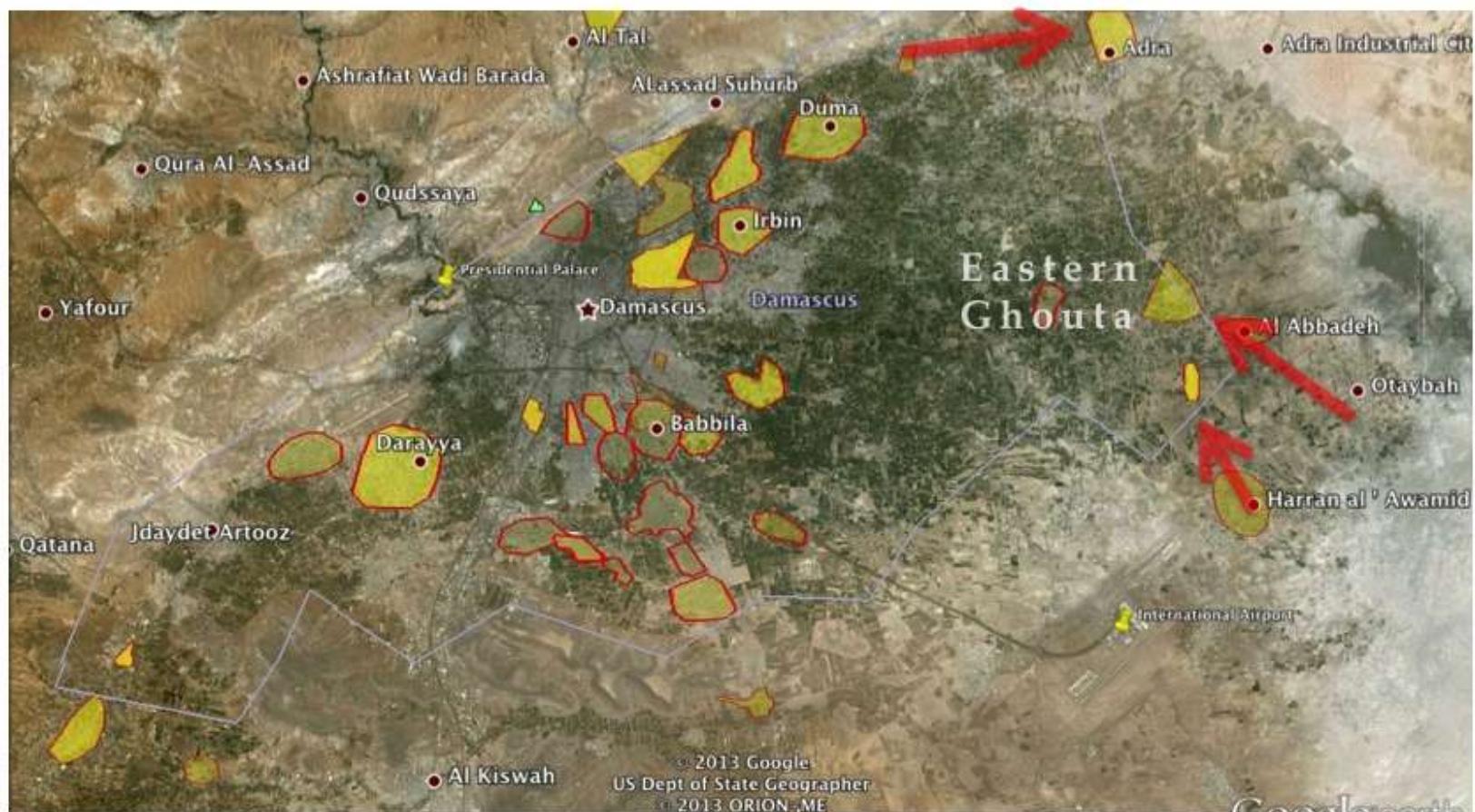
Government forces make gains through the southern countryside.

# Clashes in April



Clashes continue in the south as government forces push northward.

# Clashes in May



Government forces continue to advance northward, encircling opposition units operating in the area.