

APRIL 2015

CHRISTOPHER KOZAK

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 26

“AN ARMY IN ALL CORNERS” ASSAD’S CAMPAIGN STRATEGY IN SYRIA



Cover: February 11, 2015 A fighter loyal to Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad hangs his picture as fellow fighters rest by a Syrian national flag after gaining control of the area in Deir al-Adas, a town south of Damascus, Daraa countryside February 10, 2015. Syrian government troops and their allies in the Lebanese group Hezbollah pressed a major offensive in southern Syria on Wednesday, taking new ground in a campaign against insurgents who pose one of the biggest remaining threats to Damascus. Syrian state TV broadcast live from Deir al-Adas, a town some 30 km (19 miles) south of Damascus that it said had been captured. The sound of artillery being fired could be heard. The nearby town of Deir Maker was also captured, state TV said. Picture taken February 10, 2015. REUTERS/Stringer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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U.S. policymakers in April 2015 appear to be returning to the position that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad represents the "least worst option in Syria" for American strategic interests. Assad is often compared to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) with the implication that Assad is the lesser of two evils. Senior administration officials including Secretary of State John Kerry signaled support for diplomatic negotiations with the regime in March 2015, rather than developing a committed strategy to remove Assad from power. American leaders' ambivalence reflects the limitations of U.S. policy which attempts to treat Syria as the backdrop for a narrow counterterrorism problem rather than a comprehensive national security issue. This outlook is dangerously flawed.

U.S. policymakers may be being captured by Bashar al-Assad's own narrative. Assad's political objective is to remain in power past the end of the Syrian war. However, the inability of regime forces to defeat the Syrian opposition decisively in battle has forced the regime to rhetorically embrace a negotiated solution to the conflict. The Syrian military campaign has complemented such official statements by attempting to set conditions on the ground favorable to the regime's negotiating position.

Bashar al-Assad is neither a viable partner against ISIS nor the "least worst option" for U.S. national interests in Syria for three reasons. First, the Assad regime cannot control the territory that was Syria or win the Syrian war decisively. Second, the Assad regime is Iran's strategic asset in Syria and Assad is beholden to Iran for keeping his military viable. Third, Assad's brutal tactics and humanitarian abuses have accelerated the growth of jihadist groups regionally and globally.

The Assad regime is not positioned to secure an outright military victory in 2015. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) continues to grapple with chronic problems of attrition and political unreliability which force Assad to rely upon a small core of trusted elite military units in addition to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps - Quds Force (IRGC-QF), Hezbollah, and other Iranian-aligned forces to conduct offensive operations. Meanwhile, the use of decentralized paramilitary units such as the National Defense Forces (NDF) in increasingly prominent combat roles has fragmented the regime's authority over its fighting force and caused cleavages in Assad's popular support base.

These manpower limitations have led Assad to adopt a military strategy of an "army in all corners" which involves the establishment and defense of remote regime outposts throughout Syria in order to pin the outer bounds of a contiguous post-war Syrian state. Assad likely hopes that this strategy will enable him to avoid decisive defeat while still outwardly claiming to control all of Syria, eventually translating into international political legitimacy. This approach may successfully prolong the staying power of President Assad, but it protracts violence and destruction throughout the country and allows jihadist groups to flourish. The passive posture maintained by Assad's forces effectively cedes control over large swathes of countryside to ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), and other Islamic extremist groups.

Iranian involvement is as essential to Assad's survival in 2015 as it was in 2013 when it stabilized the regime's then-losing war effort. The return of thousands of Iraqi Shi'a militia fighters to Iraq following the fall of Mosul in June 2014 prompted the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to mobilize thousands of foreign Shi'a volunteers, including Afghans, to augment Assad's military forces. The latter half of 2014 thus witnessed a surge in the involvement of Iran and its proxy forces on behalf of the Assad regime, staving off attrition once more. In a sign of its deepening influence, the IRGC conducted its own independent recruitment efforts inside of Syria and occasionally assumed direct command over field operations. These developments suggest that the Assad regime is increasingly losing agency over its own military campaign.

The growth of the Iranian presence in Syria challenges key U.S. regional allies as well as wider U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. Iran and its allies directed regime offensives in southern Syria which were likely intended in part to position Iranian-aligned forces in close proximity to the border with the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.

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Expanded Iranian influence also threatens to disrupt the calculus of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other regional powers in a way which promotes further conflict. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies have already demonstrated the willingness to counter perceived Iranian expansion through military means with the launch of Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen. The lack of U.S. action against Assad, and by extension Iran, strains relations between the U.S. and its Arab allies and erodes the credibility of the U.S. position in the region as a whole.

Assad is accelerating the growth of violent jihadist movements in Syria, the region, and globally. The tactics used by the regime to enforce his "army in all corners" strategy mark Assad as a permanent enemy to many Syrians. Assad has utilized airstrikes, barrel bombs, and chemical weapons to punish populations in opposition-held areas and to clear them comprehensively with minimal investment of manpower. The forces of the regime have employed other brutal tactics involving sieges, sectarian massacres, and torture to neutralize resistance to Assad's rule. These atrocities strengthen the sectarian narrative held by Salafi-jihadist groups operating in Syria and provide a constant stream of recruits vulnerable to radicalization.

The abuses of the Assad regime contribute to a deepening humanitarian crisis which threatens to overwhelm the region. The Syrian Civil War has already claimed the lives of over 220,000 Syrians and displaced nearly 11.5 million civilians. Millions of refugees have fled to neighboring countries, placing heavy burdens upon regional U.S. allies such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Assad is the instigator of and not the solution to this problem. Inaction on the part of the U.S. only drives a further wedge between the West and the Syrian populace. Many elements of the formerly-moderate opposition have aligned with jihadist groups such as JN which are perceived as effective partners in the fight against the regime. In turn, this shift towards extremism bolsters Assad with additional domestic and international legitimacy as the only apparent alternative to a radicalized Syria. Assad is not a capable or suitable anti-ISIS partner. Rather, his regime assures the survival of ISIS and al-Qaeda in Syria.

The current status quo trends in the Syrian Civil War are untenable for U.S. national interests. Allowing the Syrian regime to conduct its military campaign with impunity sows the seeds for generations of regional disorder to come and empowers the expansionist designs of the Iranian regime. The U.S. does possess additional cards that it could place on the table for resolving the Syrian conflict, including the imposition of a No Fly Zone over opposition-held areas or an expedited effort to train-and-equip Syrian opposition fighters alongside regional allies. If U.S. policymakers do not adopt a more forceful and focused approach to Syria, the only foreseeable outcome is a fragmented and failed Syrian state which menaces its neighbors and brutalizes its people.

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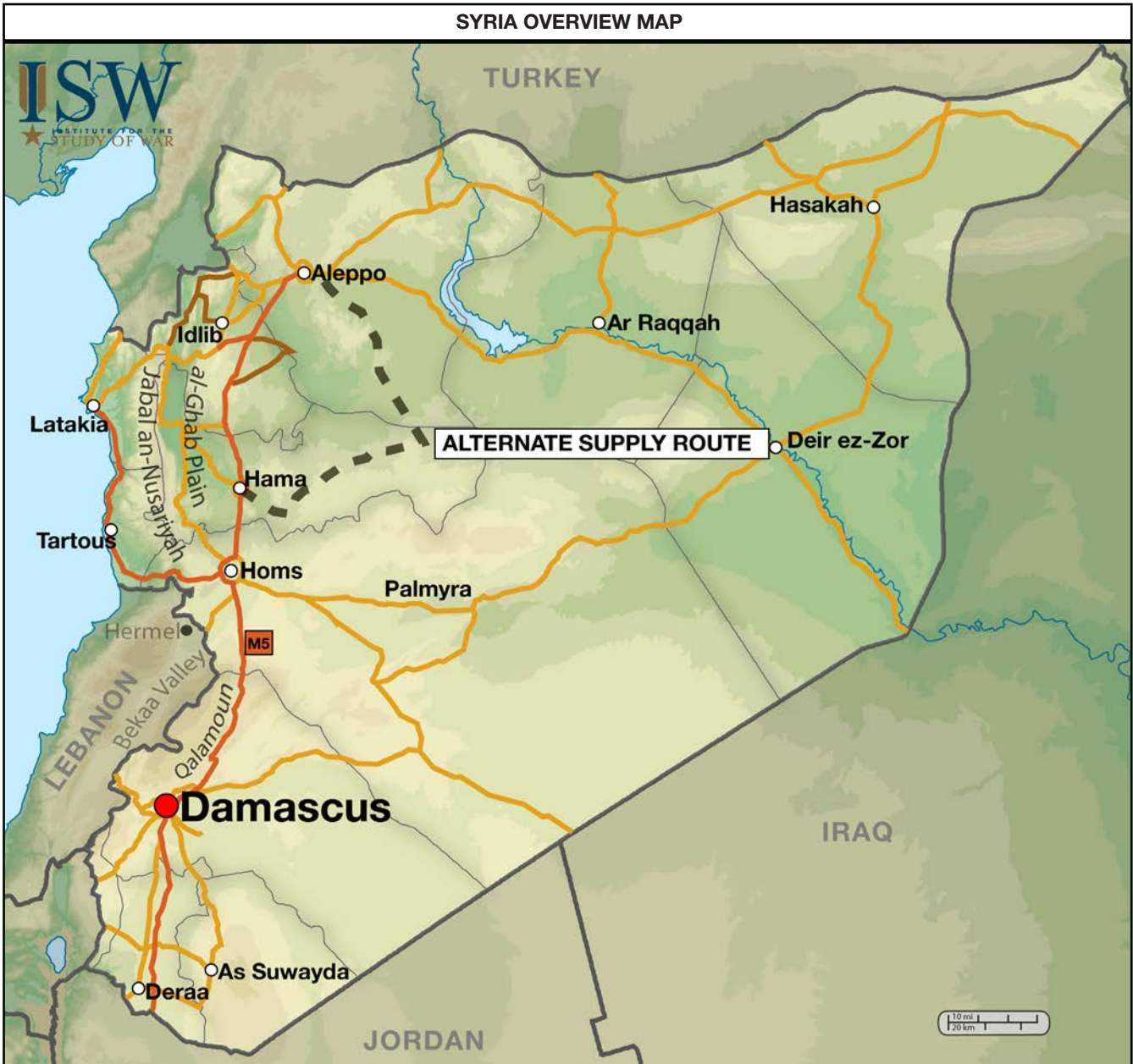
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By Christopher Kozak

INTRODUCTION

U.S. policymakers in April 2015 appear to be returning to the position adopted by some in 2013 that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad represents the “least worst option in Syria” for American strategic interests.¹ Assad is often compared to ISIS with the implication that Assad is the lesser of two evils. Senior administration officials including Secretary of State John Kerry signaled support for diplomatic negotiations with the regime in March 2015, rather than developing a committed strategy to remove Assad from power.² CIA Director John Brennan concurrently expressed “legitimate concern” regarding the potential outcomes of a post-Assad Syria,³ reflecting a growing awareness that ISIS and Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) now dominate the landscape of anti-Assad actors in Syria. This ambivalence reflects the limitations of U.S. policy which attempts to treat Syria as the backdrop for a narrow counterterrorism problem rather than a comprehensive national security issue. This outlook is dangerously flawed.

U.S. policymakers may be captured by Bashar al-Assad’s own narrative. Assad’s political objective is to remain in power past the end of the Syrian war. However, the inability of regime forces to decisively defeat the Syrian opposition in battle has forced the regime to rhetorically embrace a negotiated solution to the conflict. President Assad stated in an interview with *Foreign Affairs* in January 2015 that the war must “end with a political solution” including a “fruitful dialogue” with the Syrian armed opposition.⁴ Assad claimed in January 2015 that the “doors are open now more than any time before for reconciliation” between the government and opposition members in another overture demonstrating a desire for talks with rebel forces.⁵ The Syrian military campaign has complemented such official statements by attempting to drive negotiations in a direction favorable to the regime.

The Assad regime is not likely pursuing a strategy for outright military victory in 2015. Rather, Assad is pursuing a strategy to put an “army in all corners” by maintaining remote regime outposts throughout Syria which pin the outer bounds of a unified and contiguous Syrian state. This strategy enables Assad to assert his presence throughout Syria and preempt any call for the partition of the Syrian state. Assad has coupled this defense with sieges, airstrikes, and chemical weapons attacks in order to depopulate opposition-held terrain while reducing the combat strength and willpower of opposing forces. Assad appears to believe that maintaining this grip over the physical and human terrain of Syria will translate into political legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. Assad has therefore replaced the

large-scale maneuver operations of 2012-2013, meant to clear-and-hold population centers, with tactics designed to prolong the regime’s staying power to outlast the opposition by maintaining Syrian territorial integrity, dominating human terrain, and cultivating domestic and international legitimacy.⁶

U.S. policymakers seem to be forgetting that Assad lacks the capacity to decisively defeat his opponents on the battlefield and reassert control over all of Syria. The fall of Mosul in June 2014 led thousands of Iraqi Shi’a militiamen fighting on behalf of Assad in Syria to return to their home country, limiting the forces available to the regime at a time when Assad sought to capitalize on his momentum following the May 2014 fall of Homs. As this paper will argue, regime forces have therefore postured to maintain the status quo and avoid defeat rather than to win the war outright.

This strategy chosen by Assad is dangerous for U.S. national security interests. Assad perpetuates the local and regional conditions that allow global jihadists to prosper. The end result is a protracted and bloody conflict that directly challenges U.S. interests in the Middle East. It escalates regional sectarianism, and it exacts an enormous humanitarian toll. The Syrian Civil War has already claimed the lives of over 220,000 Syrians and displaced nearly 11.5 million civilians – roughly half of the Syrian population.⁷ Millions of refugees have fled to neighboring countries, placing heavy burdens upon regional U.S. allies such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey which threaten to destabilize

their own social, political, and economic fabrics. The Syrian War is becoming a generational problem that raises concerns about radicalization and spillover in addition to other threats. Assad is the instigator and not the solution to this problem.

The following sections will lay out the key tenets which have driven regime strategy in 2014 and into 2015 as well as notable shifts in the military capabilities the Assad regime has brought to bear against the Syrian opposition. It will also discuss the contours of the regime campaign against the Syrian opposition and explain how this campaign has been shaped by strategic and material constraints over the past year and a half. This overview of the current status of the regime military campaign will provide policymakers with the information necessary to understand the fundamental challenges to treating Assad as a potential partner against jihadist extremism.

THE REGIME’S STRATEGY

As noted above, the military campaign of the Syrian regime has been primarily driven by Assad’s core objective to preserve his rule in a post-war Syria through a negotiated “political solution.” However, Assad’s efforts to drive the situation on the ground in a favorable direction faced a number of key challenges. The geographic dispersion of regime positions and the countrywide scope of the Syrian Civil War forced the Assad regime to prioritize among military fronts in 2014, enabling opposition forces to advance in multiple locations including Idlib and Dera’a Provinces. Salafi-jihadist rebel groups also grew in strength and coordination in 2014. The regime faced new challenges on the battlefield as the consolidation of military strength among JN, Ahrar al-Sham, and other Salafi-jihadist factions in Syria throughout 2014 enabled numerous major battlefield victories over the regime in Aleppo, Idlib, and Dera’a Provinces.

However, these developments also sparked new opportunities for Assad to align with the international community by fueling the narrative that the Syrian government faces an invasion of ‘terrorists’ that poses a transnational threat. Assad promoted this framing of the conflict in order to reinforce his own political legitimacy as the only viable alternative to a failed, jihadist-dominated Syrian state. Assad likely reasons that by avoiding decisive defeat and preserving his presence throughout the country, the insurgency will eventually be depleted as opposition forces grow increasingly radicalized and alienated from their domestic and international supporters.

Maintaining Syrian Territorial Integrity

The Assad regime prioritizes maintaining Syrian Arab Army (SAA) presence throughout Syria in order to frame its claim to a united and contiguous post-war Syrian state. President Assad expressly delineated this policy in his January 2015 interview with *Foreign Affairs*, stating: “If you look at a military map now, the Syrian army exists in every corner. Not every place; by every corner, I mean north, south, east, west, and between. If you didn’t believe in a unified Syria, that Syria can go back to its previous position, you wouldn’t send the army there as a government.”⁸ The strategy of an “army in all corners” is designed to preclude a partitioned Syria or rump Syrian state from forming. The existence of SAA formations across Syria also provides President Assad with a political narrative as the leader of a sovereign and undivided country. Assad is unable, however, to use his dispersed footprint to establish security throughout the country in the face of an active armed opposition.

Assad’s remote outposts incur risk to his campaign. Their strict defensive posture and inability to project force into their surroundings makes them targetable by opposing forces. Limited options for reinforcement and resupply can leave their garrisons isolated and vulnerable in the face of concerted offensives. This risk was brutally demonstrated in July and August 2014 when ISIS militants overran a series of holdout regime military bases in ar-Raqqa and Hasaka Provinces, capturing and executing hundreds of SAA soldiers.⁹ Nevertheless, these strongholds also frequently withstand enemy attacks, providing the Assad regime with staying power at little cost. The besieged Wadi al-Deif and al-Hamidiyah military bases in southern Idlib Province, for example, fixed opposition forces for nearly two years before being overrun in a joint Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)–Ahrar al-Sham (HASI) operation in December 2014.¹⁰ Ultimately, this element of regime strategy fails when outposts are isolated and overwhelmed. This trend may accelerate in 2015 amidst increasing coordination between mainly-Islamist opposition forces.

Dominating Human Terrain

The Assad regime also seeks to maintain its control over the Syrian civilian population in order to bolster its image as the only legitimate governance structure in the country. President Assad has repeatedly stated that the most critical battle in Syria is the one for the Syrian people. Assad also detailed this policy in his interview with *Foreign Affairs*: “Before talking about winning territory, talk about winning the hearts and minds and the support of the Syrian people. That’s what we have won. What’s left is logistical; it’s technical. That is a matter

of time.”¹¹ Experts estimate that the Syrian regime controls between 55 and 72 percent of the Syria’s remaining populace as of January 2015.¹² The Syrian opposition, on the other hand, controls less than a third of the country’s population – affirming President Assad’s boast that “the communities which embraced terrorists have become very small.”¹³ Assad did not mention that the remainder of Syria’s population now lies within areas under the regime’s control as a deliberate outcome of Assad’s own punitive depopulation campaigns.

On the ground, this rhetoric translates into an extremely lethal form of population-centric counter-insurgency (COIN) in areas under opposition control. The Syrian regime inflicts mass punishment against civilians in opposition areas to force large-scale displacement. Regime ground forces besiege rebel-held neighborhoods and cities, cutting off aid supplies and spurring thousands to flee to regime zones of control in the face of starvation.¹⁴ Civilians in opposition-held zones are also subject to indiscriminate targeting by artillery, airstrikes, and crudely-devised “barrel bombs.”¹⁵ By March 2015, these barbaric methods had killed more than 220,000 Syrians and displaced over 11.5 million civilians, mainly from opposition-held terrain.¹⁶ In sum, the concentration of the Syrian population in territory controlled by Assad comes in large part as the result of a humanitarian crisis generated by the regime itself.

This disparity offers the Assad regime several distinct advantages over rebel forces. Control over the majority of the surviving Syrian population provides opportunity to tap manpower reserves to aid the regime’s fight and also restricts civilians from joining the Syrian opposition. The regime also benefits from enduring economic activity that generally no longer exists in rebel-held areas. Continuous efforts to depopulate opposition-held zones and consolidate civilians into regime-held areas feed into the narrative that “the majority of the Syrian people...support their president.” This argument manipulates Syria’s recent history and portrays the staying power of Bashar al-Assad and his government favorably in political negotiations.¹⁷ Acceptance of this statement at face value risks legitimizing mass violence against civilians as a tool which could be used in other conflicts.

Projecting Domestic and International Legitimacy

The regime uses the appearance of enduring military and social control in Syria to bolster domestic and international legitimacy in preparation to discuss political settlement. Assad regularly uses “jihadism” in Syria as an argument to curry international favor. In an interview conducted on November 28, 2014, President Assad criticized U.S.-led coalition airstrikes against ISIS in Syria by insisting that “terrorism cannot be destroyed from the air, and you cannot

achieve results on the ground without land forces.”¹⁸ Regime officials regularly promote the SAA as the only realistic force with the “experience in the field” to counter terrorist groups operating in Syria, such as JN or ISIS.¹⁹ Assad reaffirmed in a later interview on January 20, 2015 that this partner “definitely...has to be Syrian troops.”²⁰ In some cases, Assad backs his claims with force. The Syrian Air Force, for example, conducted several sorties against the ISIS “capital” of ar-Raqqa in a move clearly designed to align with the global anti-terrorism campaign following the launch of anti-ISIS coalition air raids in Syria on September 22, 2014.²¹

The regime also attempts to maintain vestiges of democratic processes in order to underscore the claims of legitimacy made by the Syrian government. The 2014 Syrian presidential elections were widely held by regime officials as an expression of mass popular support for the Syrian government despite pervasive indications of fraud and voter suppression.²² The Assad regime retains a “tolerated” internal opposition group, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCCDC), which provides a façade of political pluralism.²³ On January 26, 2015, regime officials even traveled to Moscow to hold talks with NCCDC members. The NCCDC possesses no representation from either the exiled Syrian National Coalition (SNC) opposition government or the armed Syrian opposition on the ground. The delegations unsurprisingly agreed on most of the key building blocks of the regime’s political strategy, including the maintenance of Syrian unity and sovereignty, the importance of combating terrorism, and the necessity of a political settlement.²⁴

The Assad regime’s political goals generated a military strategy which remained relatively consistent throughout 2014 and into 2015 despite shifts in battlefield dynamics which forced the regime to adapt to new circumstances. These disruptions, including unexpected rebel successes in southern Syria and the withdrawal of thousands of allied Iraqi Shi’a fighters from Damascus following the fall of Mosul in June 2014, have often sparked key inflection points in the campaign for Syria.²⁵ These shifts forced the regime to adapt its capabilities frequently, but they have rarely altered the ways in which regime forces have attempted to carry out the war. This resiliency indicates that the Assad regime possesses a coherent military strategy that has been robust enough to absorb the pressures of unanticipated events. Assad likely believes that upholding this clear plan of action while avoiding unnecessary risks on the battlefield will allow him to win the war for Syria without an outright military victory.

THE REGIME’S MILITARY CAPABILITIES

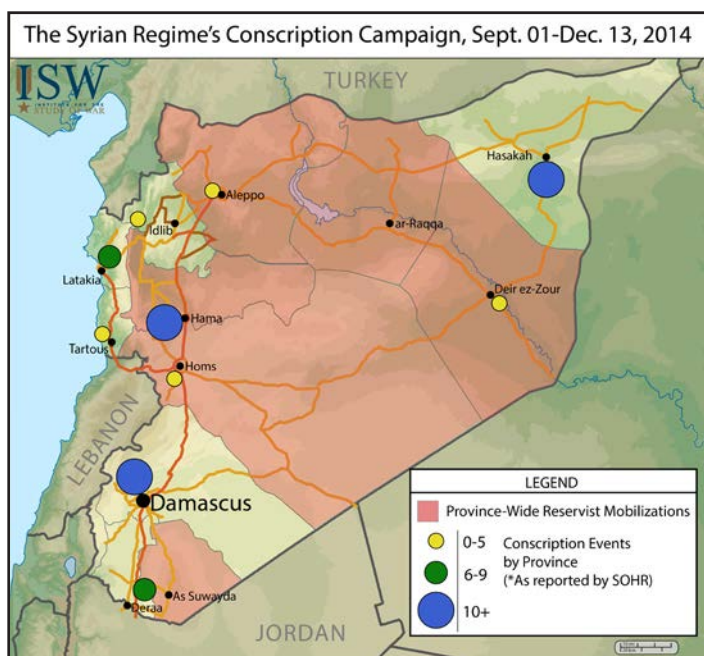
The Assad regime suffers from several limitations which have had a severe impact upon its military strategy. Regime forces operated under shortages of quality manpower due to

desertion, defection, and combat attrition. Consequently, the Assad regime relied upon a constellation of regular and irregular forces throughout 2014 in order to prosecute its offensive campaign and defend its core interests against the Syrian opposition and other threats, including ISIS. The network of pro-regime fighters lacked the capacity to deliver a clear victory over rebel forces due to deficits in manpower, morale, and battlefield acumen. However, Assad, with likely impetus from his Iranian advisors, used this time to restructure his forces in a manner designed to sustain their operations in conditions of protracted war. These developments ensure the survival of the regime at the cost of extended humanitarian suffering and deepening polarization. An examination of the ‘tools’ available to the regime is essential to understanding the conduct of the Syrian military campaign throughout 2014 and into 2015. The main components of the force coalition preserving Assad’s position in Syria include the Syrian Arab Army, pro-regime Syrian paramilitary organizations, Iranian foreign proxy fighters, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the regime’s own asymmetric military arsenal.

The Syrian Arab Army

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) functioned as a mainstay of the Syrian regime throughout 2014 and into 2015. The Syrian Army as an institution retained its loyalty to President Bashar al-Assad despite the defection of sizeable numbers of SAA soldiers throughout 2011 and 2012. Syrian forces remaining on the battlefield are battle-tested and largely committed to the survival of the regime. However, over the past year the Syrian Arab Army continued to grapple with two chronic problems that constrained the regime’s ability to effectively deploy its conventional advantage against opposition forces.

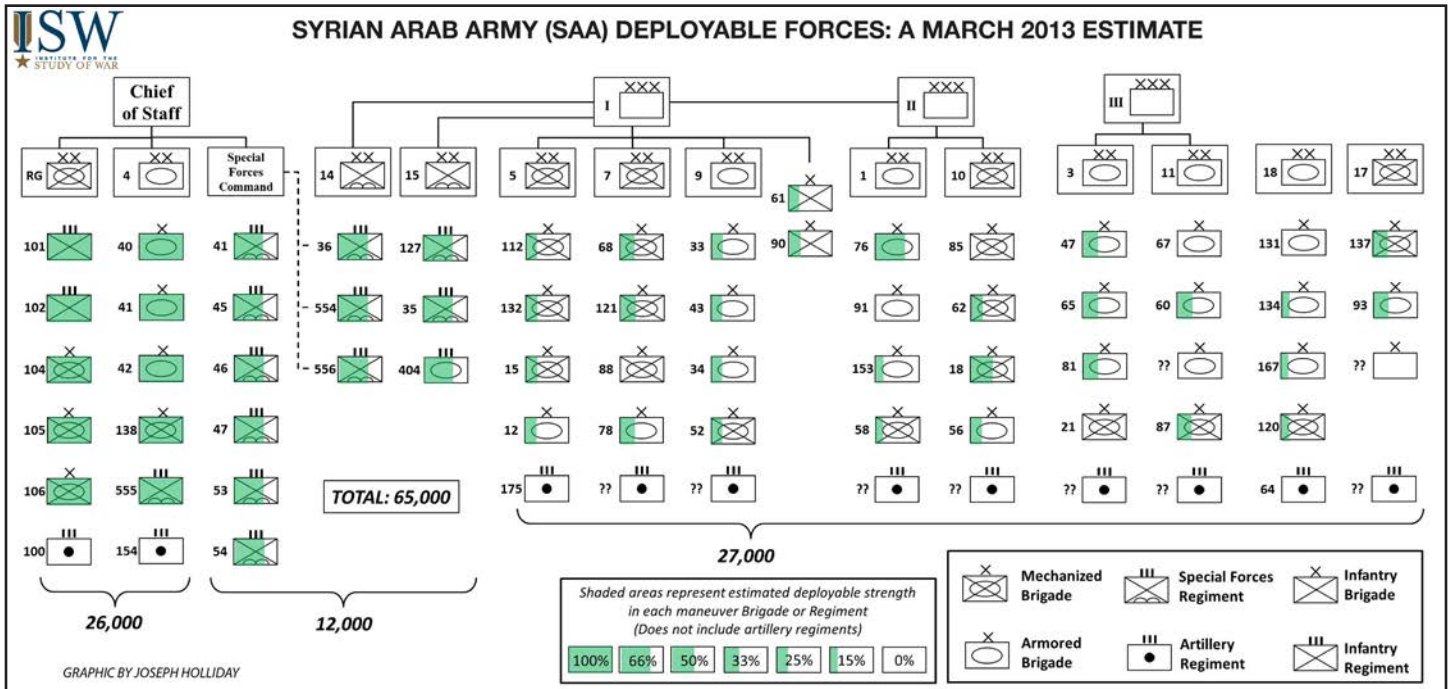
For one, the Syrian Arab Army continues to suffer severe manpower problems due to ongoing pressures of defection, desertion, and combat attrition in 2015. Three years of war have reduced the SAA by nearly half, from a pre-war high of approximately 300,000 troops to a 2014 estimate of 150,000–175,000 men.²⁶ These sharp reductions stretched the SAA’s ability to hold terrain and forced the regime to prioritize the use of its limited offensive capability. Manpower shortages also prevent the SAA from decisively defeating the Syrian opposition on the battlefield. Military analyst David Kilcullen estimated in March 2014 that pro-regime forces maintained at maximum only a 2.5-to-1 soldier-to-insurgent force ratio against the Syrian opposition at that time,²⁷ a condition which has likely deteriorated further one year later. Kilcullen also noted that the Assad regime possessed less than half of the troop-to-population ratio traditionally assessed as necessary for a successful counterinsurgency campaign.



The Assad regime launched an intensified conscription campaign in late 2014 in an effort to reinforce the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). In late October 2014, the regime announced an unprecedented series of army reservist mobilizations in six of Syria’s fourteen governorates. These mobilizations were complemented by crackdowns targeting young men attempting to avoid compulsory military service, particularly in Damascus and the Alawite-heavy Syrian ‘central corridor’.

The Syrian regime escalated its country-wide conscription campaign throughout 2014 in order to meet its pressing demand for additional manpower.²⁸ Checkpoints and security raids increasingly targeted young Syrian men attempting to avoid compulsory military service and reservists were mobilized at an unprecedented rate in six of Syria’s thirteen provinces. The Syrian Network for Human Rights catalogued over 5,400 arrests for military conscription during the first seven months of 2014, averaging almost 170 detainees per week.²⁹ The Syrian regime also passed decrees in October and November 2014 restricting the ability of military-aged males to leave the country and tightening standards regarding military service deferments provided to university students and state employees.³⁰ Even former rebel fighters participating in government offers of reconciliation, such as the May 2014 ceasefire in Homs city, have occasionally been detained and conscripted into the Syrian military.³¹ Men conscripted into military service during these arrests often receive minimal training, in some cases being deployed to frontline fighting positions within days of their detention, according to one November 2014 report.³²

The Syrian Arab Army also remained handicapped by regime suspicions regarding the loyalty and reliability of mainline SAA combat units. Analysis of the Syrian Army’s 2011–2012



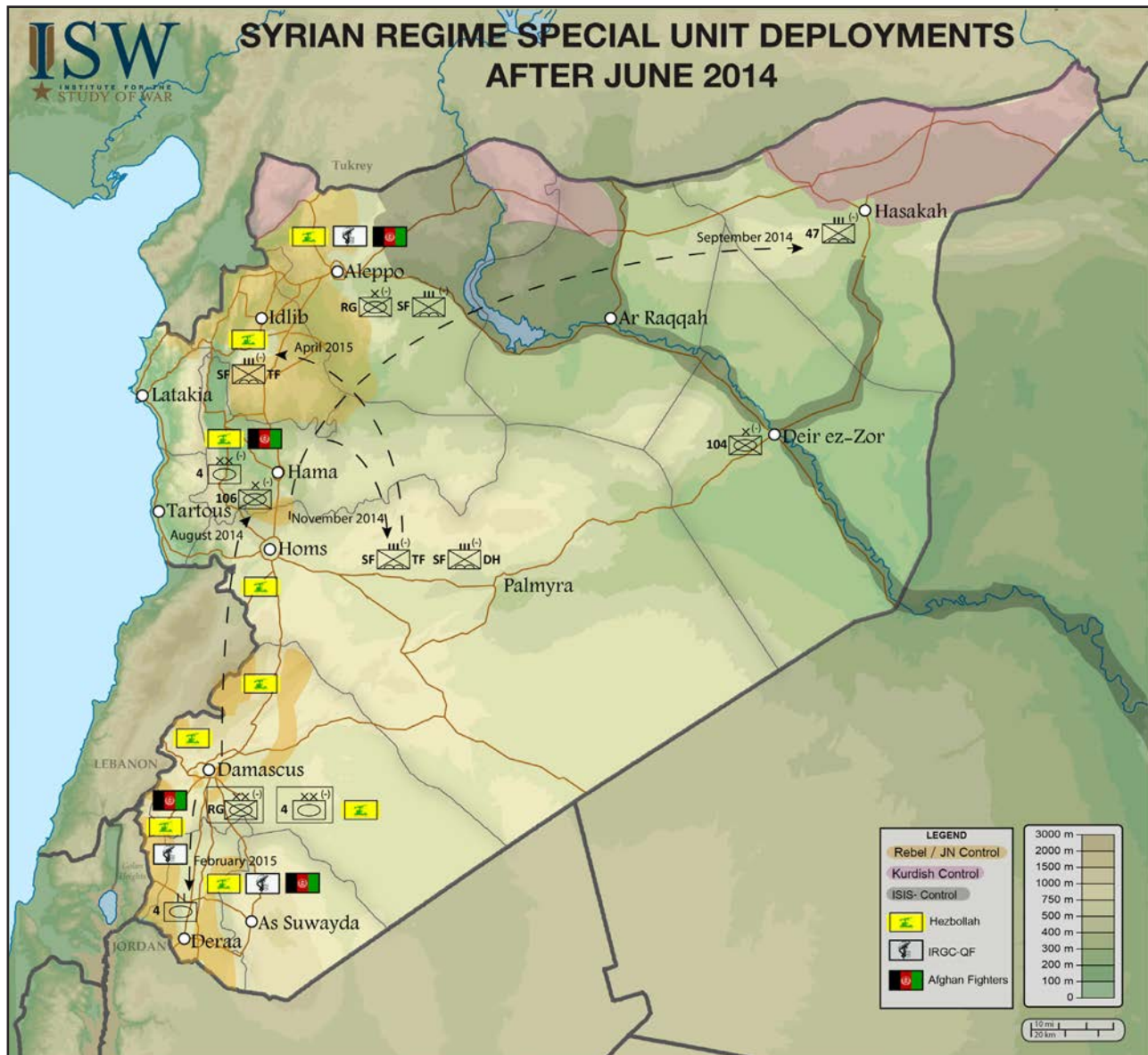
The Assad regime relied heavily upon elite forces from the Republican Guard, the Special Forces, and the 4th Armored Division since the opening days of the Syrian revolution. These Alawite-heavy units retained their loyalty to Assad and comprised the bulk of the regime’s deployable combat strength. These units still form the backbone of Assad’s current offensive capability.

military campaign suggested that the regime could only reliably deploy 65,000 to 75,000 of its troops in offensive operations, mainly elite units such as the Republican Guard, the Special Forces, and the 4th Armored Division commanded by President Assad’s brother Maher al-Assad.³³ Meanwhile, regular army units – mainly comprised of rank-and-file conscripted Sunnis deemed ‘untrustworthy’ by the regime – were confined to defensive positions or limited offensives in close proximity to their bases. In the words of one Damascus-based SAA commander in April 2013, “Most of the soldiers in my unit are Sunnis. They don’t trust me, and I don’t trust them.”³⁴ Two years later, the vast majority of regular SAA units remained bound to their assigned home stations, largely concentrated in Dera’a and Damascus Provinces as an artifact of a pre-2011 military doctrine designed to provide defense in depth against an Israeli offensive towards Damascus.

The Syrian regime continued to rely upon its trusted elite SAA units throughout 2014 as a mobile offensive force often dispatched to augment regular SAA forces along critical battlefronts. Throughout 2014 and early 2015, the Republican Guard and 4th Armored Division, units specifically designated to protect the regime, conducted most of their operations in the vicinity of Damascus targeting major pockets of opposition forces occupying the Eastern and Western Ghouta suburbs of the city.³⁵ Detachments from these units have also been deployed throughout the country in order to reinforce priority fronts. A detachment of the 104th

Republican Guard Brigade under the command of Brigadier General Issam Zahreddine deployed to Deir ez-Zour Military Airbase in early 2014 to bolster its beleaguered defenders and preserve the regime presence in Deir ez-Zour city.³⁶ Elements from the 106th Republican Guard Brigade and the 4th Armored Division also participated in repelling a rebel offensive against the Hama Military Airport in late 2014.³⁷ The Republican Guard sent multiple waves of reinforcements to Aleppo city throughout 2014 to assist the regime encirclement campaign of the city,³⁸ while the 4th Armored Division provided at least forty tanks to support a joint regime-Hezbollah offensive in Dera’a Province launched in February 2015 meant to reverse significant rebel gains.³⁹

Special Forces regiments of the SAA in particular are employed as quick-reaction forces across Syria. In an interview with the BBC in November 2014, one Special Forces commander recited his deployments: a year-and-a-half in Idlib Province, seven months in Aleppo city, and sixteen months in the Damascus suburbs.⁴⁰ The Suqour al-Sahara [Desert Hawks] Brigade of the Special Forces spent most of late 2014 and early 2015 combatting ISIS militants in eastern Homs Province with future reassignments planned to either Aleppo or Dera’a Province.⁴¹ The 47th Special Forces Regiment, typically based out of Homs and Hama Provinces, deployed to northeastern Syria in late 2014 to confront ISIS in Hasaka Province. The 2014 career of prominent Special Forces commander Colonel Suhail al-Hassan and his elite “Tiger Forces” unit serves as a suggestive case.



The Assad regime utilized both elite SAA units and Iranian proxy forces to enable its offensive operations and reinforce critical nodes in its ‘army in all corners’ strategy. The Republican Guard and 4th Armored Division remained largely concentrated in Damascus with smaller detachments serving far afield in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zour. Meanwhile, light infantry units of the SAA Special Forces deployed as rapid reaction forces to counter rebel and ISIS advances in Hama, Homs, and Idlib Provinces. Iranian proxy forces heavily focused their efforts in Damascus, Qalamoun, and southern Syria in a likely reflection of Iran’s interests in Lebanon and the Israeli border. However, Iranian proxies also augmented regime forces in the defense of the Hama Military Airbase as well as the campaign to encircle Aleppo.

Col. Hassan and his forces were redeployed to northern Hama Province in August 2014, after Hassan served as the regime commander for all of Aleppo city. These forces played a key role in seizing the town of Morek 25 kilometers north of Hama city along the strategic M5 Highway.⁴² Col. Hassan and a contingent of ‘Tiger Forces’ relocated to eastern Homs Province in early November 2014 to repel an ISIS offensive on the Sha’er gas fields.⁴³ Reports in March 2015 indicated

that the ‘Tiger Forces’ were being once again redeployed to the vicinity of Aleppo and Idlib cities,⁴⁴ the latter of which fell to rebels and JN on March 28, 2015. This rapid cycling of combat tours provides a clear indication of the regime’s reliance on a small but loyal core of elite forces and suggests limited availability of elite troops, causing Assad to continually redirect these forces against emergent threats in a reactive manner.

The rising fortunes experienced by Col. Suhail al-Hassan are also a byproduct of increasing decentralization within the Syrian Arab Army. Elite SAA units such as the Republican Guards have been consistently deployed across the country in small-scale contingents as both independent detachments and as embedded reinforcements to regular SAA units over the past several years. An unusually high number of reports emerged in 2014 regarding the deaths of regime brigadier generals and other senior officers in frontline combat positions.⁴⁵ Even regime head of political security Rustom Ghazali, one of the most senior figures in the Assad regime, allegedly directed units personally that were defending his hometown of Qarfeh along the regime supply route to Dera'a city.⁴⁶ These observations suggest that the SAA has restructured in favor of smaller military formations directed by command-and-control elements located in the field rather than in rear headquarters. This is likely an adaptation reflecting the demand for forward leadership in remote locations, possibly due to low conscript morale. This trend towards decentralization within the formal Syrian Arab Army represents a complementary process to the increasing regime reliance on paramilitary militia organizations.

Paramilitary Organizations

The Assad regime has increasingly come to rely upon the mobilization of loyalist paramilitary and militia organizations in 2014-2015 as a solution to the endemic problem of manpower in the Syrian Arab Army. Regime supporters mobilized community-level patronage networks in the early months of the Syrian Revolution in order to mobilize hundreds of disparate ‘shabiha’ criminal gangs and ‘Popular Committee’ neighborhood defense groups.⁴⁷ The Syrian regime incorporated the shabiha into an organization called the National Defense Forces (NDF) in early 2013.⁴⁸ Members of the NDF received licensing, armaments, and salaries directly from the Syrian regime according to August 2013 reporting.⁴⁹ Syrian security officials admitted shortly thereafter that assistance from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah played a key role in the formalization of the NDF along the model of the Iranian ‘Basij’ militia.⁵⁰ NDF recruits received training in urban guerilla warfare from Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah instructors at facilities inside Syria, Lebanon, and Iran.⁵¹ There are no indications that the nature of this partnership has changed as of April 2015.

The National Defense Forces functionally became a branch of the regime military by early 2014. The new organization soared in membership, with estimates ranging from 60,000 to 100,000 fighters available to hold territory, guard key supply routes, and otherwise augment SAA forces in the field by March 2014.⁵² Two Western correspondents reported in

February 2015 that every checkpoint along a long and winding 1,200 kilometer journey from Aleppo city to Damascus had been manned by NDF militiamen instead of regular SAA soldiers.⁵³ The Assad regime sought to leverage the growing strength of volunteers in the National Defense Forces throughout 2014 as an alternative to the conscripted forces of the regular SAA. Many enlistees preferred the NDF due to the organization’s emphasis on hometown service, making it an attractive alternative to service in the SAA. The regime in response turned to incentive structures⁵⁴ and pay scales⁵⁵ in order to encourage frontline duty. Regime commanders, according to a November 2014 report, retained the authority to relocate NDF units to active conflict zones if circumstances warranted.⁵⁶

Increasing regime reliance on the NDF has opened the regime to the inherent risks of providing state-sanctioned power to decentralized paramilitary organizations. The National Defense Forces, the Carter Center notes, are “still, at their core, community-based militias whose local interests may at times be at odds with national-level government strategies.”⁵⁷ Local NDF commanders often engage in war profiteering through protection rackets, looting, and organized crime.⁵⁸ NDF members have been implicated in waves of murders, robberies, thefts, kidnappings, and extortions throughout regime-held parts of Syria since the formation of the organization in 2013.⁵⁹ This tradeoff between security and lawlessness generated by the devolution of further power to local militia formations ultimately poses a threat to Assad’s ability to maintain agency over his military campaign.

Units of the National Defense Forces have also come into increasing conflict with official representatives of the Assad regime. In several cases, NDF members have engaged in armed standoffs or openly clashed with regime security services attempting to detain NDF fighters wanted for criminal offenses.⁶⁰ Hardline NDF members derailed an intended ceasefire agreement in Homs in February 2014, attacking a UN relief convoy attempting to enter opposition-held neighborhoods of the city.⁶¹ In a more recent incident, tensions between local Arab NDF militiamen and Kurdish YPG fighters in Hasaka city erupted into open clashes in January 2015, necessitating the intervention of a senior regime delegation.⁶² Regime security services detained NDF commander Fadi Khalil Hantoush as the instigator of the conflict. Hantoush later died under mysterious circumstances, the likely victim of a regime execution.⁶³

The growing excesses of the NDF forced Assad to undertake efforts to rein its irregular forces back under state control. Reports emerged in November 2014 indicating that the Assad regime intended to announce several initiatives to restructure the NDF into “National Security Committees” in order to establish greater control.⁶⁴ Members of the National Security



Notable Pro-Regime Paramilitary Groups

NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES				
				
60,000-100,000 strong Operates throughout Syria National umbrella organization for irregular pro-regime forces Receives training from IRGC-QF and Hezbollah Implicated in criminal activity Experiencing tensions with other pro-regime forces				
BA'ATH BATTALIONS  5,000-10,000 Aleppo, Idlib, Tartous, Homs, Damascus Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party led by Hilal Hilal SUNNI	WHIRLWIND EAGLES  "HUNDREDS" Homs, Damascus, Hama Syrian Socialist National Party led by Ali Haidar CHRISTIAN	POPULAR FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF ISKANDERUN SYRIAN RESISTANCE  "HUNDREDS" Latakia, Idlib, Homs, Hama Marxist-Leninist led by Mirac Ural (aka Ali Kayali) ALAWITE	LIWA AL-QUDS AL-FILISTINI  UNKNOWN STRENGTH Aleppo Nayrab Refugees led by M. al-Sa'eed PALESTINIAN	PALESTINIAN LIBERATION ARMY  UNKNOWN STRENGTH Damascus, Dera'a Eastern Ghouta led by Maj. Gen. M. Tariq al-Khadraa PALESTINIAN
POPULAR FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF PALESTINE GENERAL COMMAND (PFLP-GC)  ~1100 Damascus Yarmouk Refugees led by Ahmed Jibril PALESTINIAN	FATAH AL-INTIFADA  ~600 Damascus, Qalamoun Yarmouk Refugees led by Abu Hazim PALESTINIAN	JAYSH AL-WAFA NO SYMBOL "HUNDREDS" Damascus Eastern Ghouta RESIDENTS	SOOTORO  UNKNOWN STRENGTH Hasaka Syriac Unity Party ASSYRIAN CHRISTIAN	NATIONAL RESISTANCE IN HOURAN (HAMU)  UNKNOWN STRENGTH Dera'a poss. led by Rustom Ghazali QARFEH RESIDENTS

Committees would hold two to ten year contracts and answer directly to the Syrian Ministry of Defense.⁶⁵ Several sources also indicated that the Committees would incorporate former rebel fighters and other “dissident troops” as part of a process of “national reconciliation.”⁶⁶ Assad may have calculated that integrating former opposition members and NDF militiamen under one umbrella could entice further rebel defections with a clear demonstration of amnesty. The integration of former rebel fighters into the “National Security Committees” would also build an internal tension into the organization which would keep its constituent factions in check. However, besides isolated complaints in late 2014 that the regime had ceased paying NDF salaries on time, no further indications of this reconciliation program have emerged as of April 2015.⁶⁷

The fragmentation of authority presented by the National Defense Forces is compounded by the presence of dozens of smaller, local pro-regime paramilitary forces operating outside the bounds of the NDF structure. These actors maintain a wide variety of affiliations and dispositions, such as those detailed in the corresponding chart, and all

remain active in 2015. Dozens of other locally-focused paramilitary groups continue to exert influence in their immediate community outside the structures of the NDF. The widespread dissemination of these paramilitary organizations serves the immediate military interests of the Assad regime but ultimately constrains state power in a manner which threatens to promote the spread of further disorder.

Iranian Proxy Forces

The Assad regime relies upon the coalition of Shi'a foreign fighters referred to as the Iranian “Axis of Resistance” that is organized, trained, and equipped by Iran. Assessments released in December 2013 estimated that between 7,000 and 8,000 foreign fighters drawn from Iranian proxy groups were engaged in active combat in Syria on behalf of the regime.⁶⁸ These forces played important roles on critical battlegrounds across Syria due to their expertise in irregular combat. Lebanese Hezbollah plays a dominant role, with Israeli military officials assessing in summer

2014 that Hezbollah maintained roughly 4,000 to 5,000 fighters on rotation in Syria in Damascus, Qalamoun, Homs, Latakia, Aleppo, and southern Syria.⁶⁹ Hezbollah militants provided key training and leadership functions to pro-regime paramilitary organizations such as the NDF along with their frontline combat duties. The Syrian regime also received reinforcements from Iraqi Shi’a militias as well as Lebanese and Afghan Shi’a populations who joined front groups such as Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFAB) and Liwa Zulficar.⁷⁰ An estimated 3,000 to 4,000 Iraqi, Lebanese, and Afghan Shi’a fighters were fighting alongside the regime in Syria by June 2014, concentrated mainly in Damascus and Aleppo cities.⁷¹

The fall of Mosul to ISIS on June 10, 2014 and the rapid expansion of ISIS-held terrain inside Iraq redirected Iranian attention from Syria to Iraq. This was a major inflection point for both Iranian regional strategy and the disposition of Iranian proxy forces inside Syria. Large numbers of Iraqi Shi’a withdrew from such Syrian battlefronts as southern Aleppo city⁷² and Mleiha in Damascus in order to return to Iraq, forcing the regime to recalibrate ongoing offensives.⁷³ One rebel fighter in Mleiha stated that “we used to hear fighters with Iraqi accents on our radios, but now they have Lebanese accents...since last week, we haven’t seen as much shelling or storming of our positions.”⁷⁴ Iranian news sources reported that a large portion of Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas specifically traveled to the Balad district north of Baghdad in order to counter ISIS advances there.⁷⁵ Over 1,000 Iraqi Shi’a fighters had reportedly left Syria to fight in Iraq by June 17.⁷⁶

Hezbollah quickly expanded its combat operations to compensate for the departure of Iraqi Shi’a militias from the battlefield, as foreshadowed by the rebel fighter interviewed above. Hezbollah announced a general mobilization on June 12, 2014, two days after the fall of Mosul, and deployed more than 1,000 fighters to “defend the Sayyida Zeinab shrine.”⁷⁷ Casualties mounted as rebel forces utilized the resultant disruption to mount successful raids and ambushes against Hezbollah positions, particularly in the Qalamoun region.⁷⁸ The growing commitments in Syria stretched Hezbollah thin and forced it to adjust its recruitment standards. Hezbollah began enrolling Syrian citizens into Hezbollah-affiliated forces by June 2014 and deployed increasing numbers of young, inexperienced Lebanese fighters to the frontlines. This was a stark contrast to the seasoned fighters who had participated in the battle for Qusayr.⁷⁹ One Hezbollah veteran complained in an interview with *Foreign Policy* in January 2015 that he “barely recognized” the organization due to the lack of discipline displayed by its new recruits.⁸⁰ Hezbollah fighters have nevertheless maintained a major presence in the Qalamoun Mountains while playing a prominent role in key regime offensives in Damascus, Aleppo city, the southern provinces of Dera’a, and Quneitra near the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights over the course of late 2014 and early 2015.⁸¹



Fatimiyoun Brigade commander Ali Reza Tavassoli (right) with IRGC-Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani.

The fall of Mosul also prompted a demographic shift in the Shi’a foreign volunteers fighting alongside the Assad regime. Replacements for the dwindling number of Iraqi Shi’a in Syria came from Afghanistan’s Shi’a Hazara community, which speaks dialects of Persian and possesses close historical ties to Iran.⁸² A 2010 Stimson Center report found that roughly 430,000 Hazara refugees live inside Iran with one-third having spent their entire life within the country, comprising a ripe and vulnerable pool for Iranian recruitment efforts.⁸³ News reports as early as 2013 indicated that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps had enlisted thousands of Afghan refugees to fight in Syria in exchange for \$500 monthly salaries, school registration, and Iranian residency permits.⁸⁴ The Iranian Foreign Ministry denied reports of Iranian support for Afghan Shi’a fighters as “completely unfounded.”⁸⁵ Afghan fighters captured in Syria in October 2014 have, however, confirmed these reports, stating that Iran had also provided training in light and medium weapons.⁸⁶ Funeral notices in March 2015 for Ali Reza Tavassoli, the Iranian commander of the majority-Afghan “Fatimiyoun Brigade,” highlighted the link between Afghan Shi’a fighters and the IRGC by revealing a close relationship between Tavassoli and IRGC-Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani.⁸⁷

Afghan Shi’a fighter participation alongside the Assad regime became increasingly visible throughout the latter half of 2014 and into 2015. Opposition news sources circulated photos in November 2014 of apparent Hazara foreign fighters operating in the northern countryside of Aleppo city and at checkpoints in northern Hama Province.⁸⁸ Syrian activists reported sizeable numbers of Afghan Shi’a militants operating alongside regime forces near Aleppo in February 2015, perhaps as replacements for Iraqi Shi’a fighters who formerly operated in the same zone.⁸⁹ Large numbers of ‘Fatimiyoun Brigade’ members recently participated in a large scale regime offensive in Dera’a Province which was launched on February 9, 2015, with heavy IRGC and Hezbollah involvement.⁹⁰

Iraqi and Iranian fighters in Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas reportedly continued to conduct operations alongside regime forces in lesser numbers in the outer environs of Damascus city, particularly the towns of al-Zabadani and Darayya as of March 2015.⁹¹ A pro-regime fighter captured by rebel forces in October 2014 claimed that LAFAB was also active in the northern outskirts of Aleppo city.⁹² Other independent Iraqi formations also continued to operate throughout Syria, evidenced by the death of Iraqi Martyrs Brigade commander Haidar al-Qatarani during clashes with rebel forces in Sheikh Miskin, Dera’a Province in November 2014.⁹³ Unconfirmed reports throughout late 2014 and early 2015 also indicated that smaller numbers of fighters from other Shi’a Muslim communities, including ethnic Sham from Cambodia and Houthi tribesmen from Yemen, have been mobilized by the IRGC on behalf of the Assad regime.⁹⁴

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

Official Iranian military presence became more visible in Syria in 2014 in tandem with the growing visibility of Iranian proxy forces. IRGC-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and IRGC-Ground Forces (IRGC-GF) personnel operated inside Syria in 2012-2013, providing intelligence, paramilitary training, and senior-level advisory support to the Assad regime.⁹⁵ Direct Iranian support to Assad serves to preserve the existence of a friendly regime in the heart of the Middle East bordering the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Syria also provides Iran access to key supply routes used to deliver weapons to other regional Iranian proxies, including Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas. Heavy involvement in the organization of paramilitary groups and foreign volunteer units in Syria has allowed Iran to develop a base of support which could preserve Iranian regional influence even if the Assad regime collapsed.

Over time the Iranian advisory mission evolved to encompass IRGC trainers directly embedded with pro-regime forces.⁹⁶ The exact extent of IRGC presence within Syria remains difficult to quantify. One former senior Iranian official stated to a Reuters reporter in February 2014 that a “few hundred” IRGC-QF and IRGC-GF commanders operated in Syria, while a former IRGC commander told the same reporter that only sixty to seventy “top” Quds Force commanders were in the country at any one time.⁹⁷ Both sources also indicated that volunteers from the Iranian ‘Basij’ paramilitary formed a component of the irregular forces operating under IRGC command in Syria.

The depth and breadth of Iranian involvement in Syria grew significantly through 2014 and into 2015. Opposition sources consistently reported throughout the summer of 2014 the presence of unspecified Iranian officers and fighters on the frontlines in northern Hama Province amidst rebel offensives

which directly threatened the Hama Military Airport. Activists claimed in September 2014 that regime offensives in the area were jointly commanded by SAA Special Forces commander Col. Suhail al-Hassan and a “young IRGC officer.”⁹⁸ Rebel sources also stated in late November 2014 that IRGC advisors participated alongside Lebanese Hezbollah in an offensive on the town of Sheikh Miskin in Dera’a Province.⁹⁹ These reports raise key questions about the extent to which Assad and senior regime officials have subordinated the Syrian military campaign to Iranian interests.

Mounting reports of Iranian casualties also served as an indicator of the ongoing shift from senior-level IRGC advisement to direct IRGC field command over pro-regime forces. Rebel forces killed and beheaded IRGC-GF Brigadier General Abdollah Eskandari on May 28, 2014 near the town of Morek in northern Hama Province.¹⁰⁰ Iranian media claimed that Eskandari, the head of the Fars Province Foundation for Martyrs and Self-Sacrifice Affairs until 2013, had died protecting the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus.¹⁰¹ IRGC ‘Basij’ commander General Jabbar Drisawi was killed on the Handarat front north of Aleppo city five months later on October 16, 2014.¹⁰² Drisawi was reportedly an Arab, making it likely that he served as an Arabic-speaking trainer and advisor for Syrian NDF forces.¹⁰³ Regional news sources reported three days later that IRGC commander Hassan Hizbawi had been killed in Sheikh Miskin.¹⁰⁴ The presence of these senior Iranian officers in such close proximity to active frontlines suggests that IRGC commanders have directly embedded with pro-regimes forces on the battlefield.

A recent counteroffensive against rebel forces in southern Syria offers the most dramatic indicator of the influence currently wielded by IRGC-aligned forces in Syria. A large force of Hezbollah, Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas, and Fatimiyoun Brigade fighters supported by regime forces launched a major attack along a thirteen kilometer stretch of northwestern Dera’a Province on February 9, 2015, successfully seizing several key positions held by opposition forces.¹⁰⁵ The leading role played by the large number of Iranian proxy forces participating in this operation suggests heavy IRGC involvement in its design and execution. Notably, an Israeli airstrike three weeks prior to the start of the offensive killed several senior Hezbollah figures in Quneitra province as well as IRGC-QF Brigadier General Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, who reportedly served as the IRGC liaison to the Assad regime.¹⁰⁶ The emplacement of Hezbollah and other Iranian proxy forces along the border with the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights is likely a key strategic objective of Iran in Syria. Taken in conjunction, these incidents may thus reflect the deepening extent which Iranian interests play in directing regime military campaigns, particularly in southern Syria.

Several key indicators support reports of direct Iranian supervision over the military campaign in southern Syria. Numerous relatively low-ranking IRGC members were reportedly killed during the February 2015 offensive in Dera'a Province, including Fatimiyoun Brigade commander Ali Reza Tavassoli, IRGC 2nd Lieutenant Mohammad Ardekani, and IRGC Captain Mohammad Sahib Karam, suggesting a heightened presence of embedded Iranian advisors.¹⁰⁷ IRGC-QF commander Qassem Suleimani also reportedly visited pro-regime units in Dera'a in February 10, 2015, providing weight to claims of senior Iranian command-and-control over the operation.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, pro-opposition sources reported that Iranian officers executed up to a dozen Syrian regime personnel on charges of collaborating with rebel forces in the lead up to the offensive.¹⁰⁹ Regime Political Security head Rustom Ghazali, a resident of Dera'a Province, was sacked and reportedly beaten for his alleged opposition to the prominent role played by Iranian-aligned forces in southern Syria.¹¹⁰ These reports marked a major departure in the pattern of Iranian operations in Syria, suggesting both the depth of Iranian interest in southern Syria as well as growing regime and Iranian concern regarding opposition momentum in Dera'a and Quneitra Provinces.

The IRGC has simultaneously worked aggressively to expand its recruitment of Syrian civilians in order to build an indigenous paramilitary apparatus that would remain loyal to its interests in the event of a collapse of the Assad regime. In a speech given in May 2014, IRGC-GF Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani lauded the establishment of a so-called “second Hezbollah” in Syria.¹¹¹ Anonymous sources suggest that the Quds Forces seeks to maintain a “Syrian Hezbollah” comprised of Iraqi, Lebanese, and Syrian volunteers which could serve as a direct military liaison and Iranian proxy for the indefinite future.¹¹² Although this organization likely serves as a blanket term for the coalition of paramilitary and proxy groups organized by Iran in Syria rather than a distinct military entity, Iran almost certainly seeks to build a military structure which can continue to assert Iranian influence in Syria in the event of the severe weakening or collapse of the Assad regime.

Several reports of independent IRGC recruitment efforts in Syria in late 2014 support the notion that the formation of a Syrian proxy force directly commanded by the IRGC is an Iranian priority. An activist in Hama interviewed in February 2015 stated that IRGC officers oversee an enlistment campaign in the city which directly competes with regime Air Force Intelligence for new recruits.¹¹³ Rebel sources also claim that the IRGC conducts similar recruitment in rural Homs Province.¹¹⁴ Regional observers have also noted the presence of Syrian Shi'a paramilitary organizations modeled on Hezbollah, such as the National Ideological Resistance, which operate in coastal Syria and may form the core of the IRGC

vision of a “Syrian Hezbollah.”¹¹⁵ Iran appears to be nurturing this pool of future manpower through religious outreach. For example, Iranian-funded Shi'a theology schools have begun spreading throughout Tartous Province in a move designed to strengthen an Iranian-style Shi'a religious identity among Syrian Alawites.¹¹⁶ IRGC Brig. Gen. Hamedani has also personally praised the establishment of ‘Keshab’ youth groups in Syria meant to promote “spirituality” and the “revolutionary values” of the Islamic Republic.¹¹⁷ These developments suggest that Assad may no longer be a fully autonomous actor and ultimately threaten regime control over its own security forces.

Asymmetric Capabilities

The intricate pro-regime coalition of regular, irregular, and Iranian proxy forces fighting on behalf of Assad in Syria remains insufficient to exert the regime's influence across all of Syria. The Assad regime has thus made heavy use of the asymmetric capabilities at its disposal to gain advantages over rebel forces on the battlefield with minimal military risk. These strategic weapons systems, including a sizeable air force, a ballistic missile arsenal, and a chemical weapons program, partly compensate for the limitations of pro-regime ground forces. These weapons are ultimately insufficient to overcome opposition forces despite serving a key function in the survival of the Assad regime. Instead, they depopulate and demoralize opposition-controlled areas. The indiscriminate nature of regime airstrikes and chemical weapons attacks results in continued humanitarian disaster on a massive scale and fuels the narrative of jihadist factions which accuse the regime of conducting a systematic sectarian campaign to destroy Syria's Sunni population.

The air assets provided by the Syrian Air Force have been one of the primary advantages the Assad regime holds over rebel forces. Separate analyses of regime airstrike patterns in 2012 and 2014 concluded that the Syrian Air Force only possesses between 200 and 300 combat-capable aircraft due to maintenance requirements, poor optimization for ground attack roles, and wartime attrition.¹¹⁸ Despite losses, the Syrian Air Force has maintained an impressive cycle of operations. Analysts drawing from opposition sources estimated that the Syrian regime continued to conduct approximately fifty combat sorties per day throughout the country as of December 2014.¹¹⁹ The sustained nature of this air campaign requires a resilient resupply and logistical system. The Syrian Air Force receives heavy assistance in this task from Russia, which continues to provide pilot training, shipments of spare parts, weapons deliveries, and aircraft upgrade packages for the Syrian Air Force despite the ongoing conflict.¹²⁰ This dependence further underscores the precarious challenges facing the Syrian Armed Forces which leave Assad unable to overwhelm the opposition despite his military advantages.

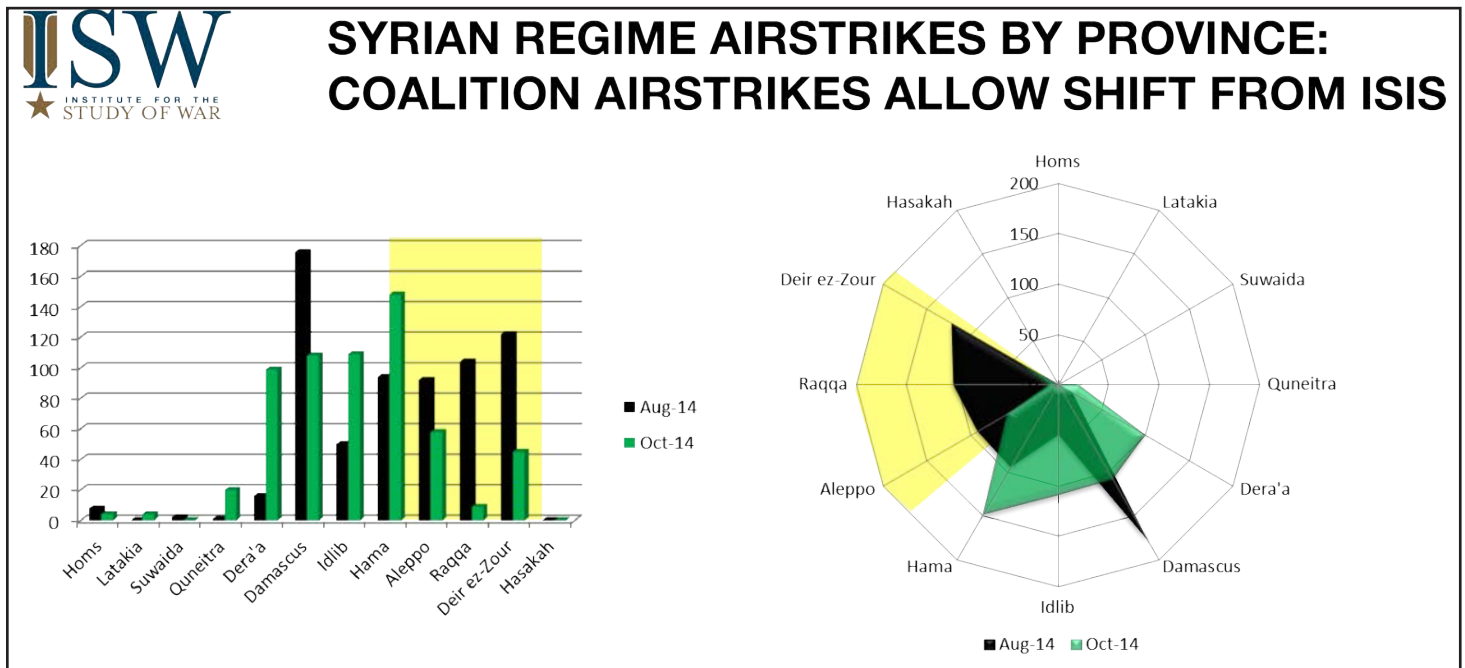
The Syrian Air Force possesses limited close air support technical capabilities and thus the majority of fixed wing strikes in Syria are “collective punishment” attacks against opposition-held areas in an attempt to deter and depopulate. Activists on the ground have reported numerous precision airstrikes against markets, schools, hospitals, bakeries, refugee camps, and other distinctively civilian targets.¹²¹ Meanwhile, Syrian Air Force helicopters continue to bombard residential neighborhoods indiscriminately throughout the country with ‘barrel bombs’ dropped from high altitudes in order to avoid anti-aircraft fire.¹²² Data from the Violations Documentation Center in Syria indicated that the combination of these aerial attacks accounted for thirty-nine percent of civilian fatalities between August and October 2014.¹²³

The fixed wing aircraft of the Syrian Air Force also demonstrate reasonable effectiveness in a close air support (CAS) role despite their limitations. Concentrated airstrikes have been used to both support regime offensive operations and blunt opposition advances throughout the country in 2014.¹²⁴ However, relatively frequent friendly fire incidents have underscored the limits of Syrian Air Force CAS capabilities.¹²⁵ Regime aircraft also conduct numerous strikes against government positions captured by opposition forces in an attempt to destroy captured military equipment. For example, the Syrian Air Force bombarded Storage Base 559

northeast of Damascus after opposition fighters captured the position in March 2014, destroying 70 out of the 105 tanks stored on site.¹²⁶ Similarly, warplanes targeted the Wadi al-Deif military base in Idlib Province with at least forty-two strikes after its capture by rebel forces in December 2014.¹²⁷

The regime also capitalized upon its previous barrel bomb tactic to maximize its destructive power against rebel strongholds in 2014. Regime specialists retooled barrel bomb designs in the first half of 2014 to feature stabilizing fins and impact fuses which greatly improved the chances of an effective blast.¹²⁸ Later, the regime also incorporated chlorine gas cylinders into their improvised aerial weapons.¹²⁹ The alleged injury of an ‘Iranian officer’ during a blast at a barrel bomb factory on November 28, 2014 in the Hama Military Airport suggests that this redesign may have been aided by Iranian technical advisors.¹³⁰ Previously confining them to Idlib and Aleppo Provinces, the regime expanded the use of barrel bombs throughout Syria in 2014, including Hama, Latakia, Damascus, and Dera’a Provinces.¹³¹ Barrel bombs have even been utilized in the remote northeastern province of Hasaka in early 2015.¹³²

The Syrian regime reprioritized its air assets following ISIS’s assault on Mosul in June 2014 to attack ISIS positions in the remote eastern provinces of ar-Raqqqa, Hasaka, and



The Assad regime has taken advantage of the coalition airstrikes against ISIS to spare its limited assets to target the opposition in other places. The Syrian Regime has reallocated its fixed wing airstrikes away from provinces under ISIS control since the international coalition against ISIS began to strike the militant group in Syria in October 2014. By October the regime had refocused its efforts on provinces where it faced the armed opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra. The regime also reduced airstrikes in Damascus after completing its primary offensive in Mleiha before October 2014. *Research by Nicolas Ball. Data sourced from SOHR reporting.

Deir ez-Zour.¹³³ Numerous analysts noted that the strikes constituted a gesture through which the Assad regime signaled its desire to partner with the international community against terrorism.¹³⁴ Assad’s airstrikes produce high civilian casualties, however, which U.S.-led coalition airstrikes have sought to minimize. The Syrian Air Force launched another wave of indiscriminate airstrikes against ISIS-controlled ar-Raqqa city in November 2014 following a lull in U.S.-led coalition airstrikes, killing nearly one hundred civilians.¹³⁵ In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, one resident of ar-Raqqa summarized Assad’s intent: “It’s as though the regime wanted to say to its constituency and support base: We’re still here, and Raqqa is still within the reach of our firepower.”¹³⁶

However, the Assad regime primarily took advantage of coalition airstrikes in eastern Syria to redirect additional air assets against opposition forces throughout the western half of the country. One anonymous U.S. official commented that “It would be silly for them not to take advantage of the U.S. doing airstrikes...essentially, we’ve allowed them to perform an economy of force.”¹³⁷ Analysis of regime airstrikes reported by SOHR between August and October 2014 confirms a dramatic shift of Syrian Air Force combat sorties from ar-Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour Provinces in favor of the opposition strongholds of Idlib, Dera’a, and Hama Provinces.¹³⁸ These strikes have hindered rebel operations against the regime and exacted a vast human toll on civilian populations behind the frontlines, sparking further resentment and radicalization which may eventually pose a threat to Western nations perceived as turning a blind eye to regime excesses.

The Assad regime has also employed its strategic stockpile of SCUDs, SS-21s, Fateh-110s, and other surface-to-surface missiles to target opposition areas since at least December 2012.¹³⁹ The regime has augmented this arsenal with a capable domestic missile industry that includes the M600 missile, which can deliver a 1,100 pound warhead to a maximum range of 150 miles.¹⁴⁰ Iran has played a large supporting role in these efforts, with IRGC Aerospace Division head General Ali Amir Hajizadeh going so far as to boast in November 2014 that “the missile production plants in Syria have been built by Iran and the missiles designed by Iran are being produced there.”¹⁴¹ Through 2014, the majority of surface-to-surface missile strikes targeted the opposition-held neighborhoods in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus.¹⁴² It is likely that these strikes originated from the 155th Missile Brigade and other regime missile sites in the Qalamoun region north of Damascus.¹⁴³ The Assad regime mainly utilizes ballistic missiles to cause widespread, indiscriminate destruction in opposition-held areas due to poor targeting abilities, producing civilian casualties, mass displacement, and psychological impact for little military gain.

Meanwhile, the Assad regime has also continued to utilize chemical weapons against rebel forces despite an ongoing

disarmament deal. The Syrian regime agreed to the total destruction of its chemical weapons stockpiles and production facilities on September 14, 2013 and on June 23, 2014, the last shipment of declared chemical weapons departed from Latakia port for disposal.¹⁴⁴ The demolition of twelve declared chemical weapons facilities is ongoing and scheduled for completion by the end of June 2015.¹⁴⁵ The Assad regime, however, quickly turned to the use of chlorine, ammonia, and other dual-use industrial chemicals in order to maintain its asymmetric capabilities against the Syrian opposition. Human rights organizations and Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) investigation teams have found “compelling evidence” that regime forces have deployed chlorine gas “systematically and repeatedly” throughout Syria.¹⁴⁶

An examination of alleged chlorine attacks in late August 2014 found that regime forces employ these chemical weapons in order to set the conditions for ground offensives against opposition strongholds or prevent opposition advances in areas where the regime cannot deploy large amounts of ground forces.¹⁴⁷ On March 6, 2015, the UN Security Council adopted UNSC Resolution 2209 directly condemning the use of chlorine gas as a weapon in Syria and threatening that parties using these chemicals will be held accountable by the United Nations.¹⁴⁸ However, international enforcement measures against such violations remain unclear and three days later regime forces reportedly used chlorine gas against the rebel-held town of Muzayrib in Dera’a Province.¹⁴⁹ The persistent regime use of chemical weapons in flagrant violation of international norms only serves to generate additional civilian casualties and increase the appeal of extremist groups which portray the Syrian Civil War as an existential struggle against the regime.

THE REGIME’S OFFENSIVE CAMPAIGN

Taken as a whole, Assad’s military campaign has largely succeeded only in generating further disorder. The strategy of defensive protraction adopted by the Assad regime resulted in a grueling and destructive stalemate across most of the battlefields of Syria through 2014 and into 2015. Limited manpower and resupply options constrained the offensive capabilities of pro-regime forces, forcing Assad to prioritize a small number of fronts while maintaining a reactive stance throughout the remainder of the country. This force posture has entrenched a state of persistent conflict in Syria which exacerbated humanitarian ailments, deepened polarization among the populace, and provided space for jihadist forces to expand their social and military control relatively unchecked. An increasing reliance on paramilitary and Iranian proxy forces along the most critical frontlines in Aleppo, Damascus, and the Alawite heartland failed to secure decisive victories against opposition forces and fueled sectarian narratives of

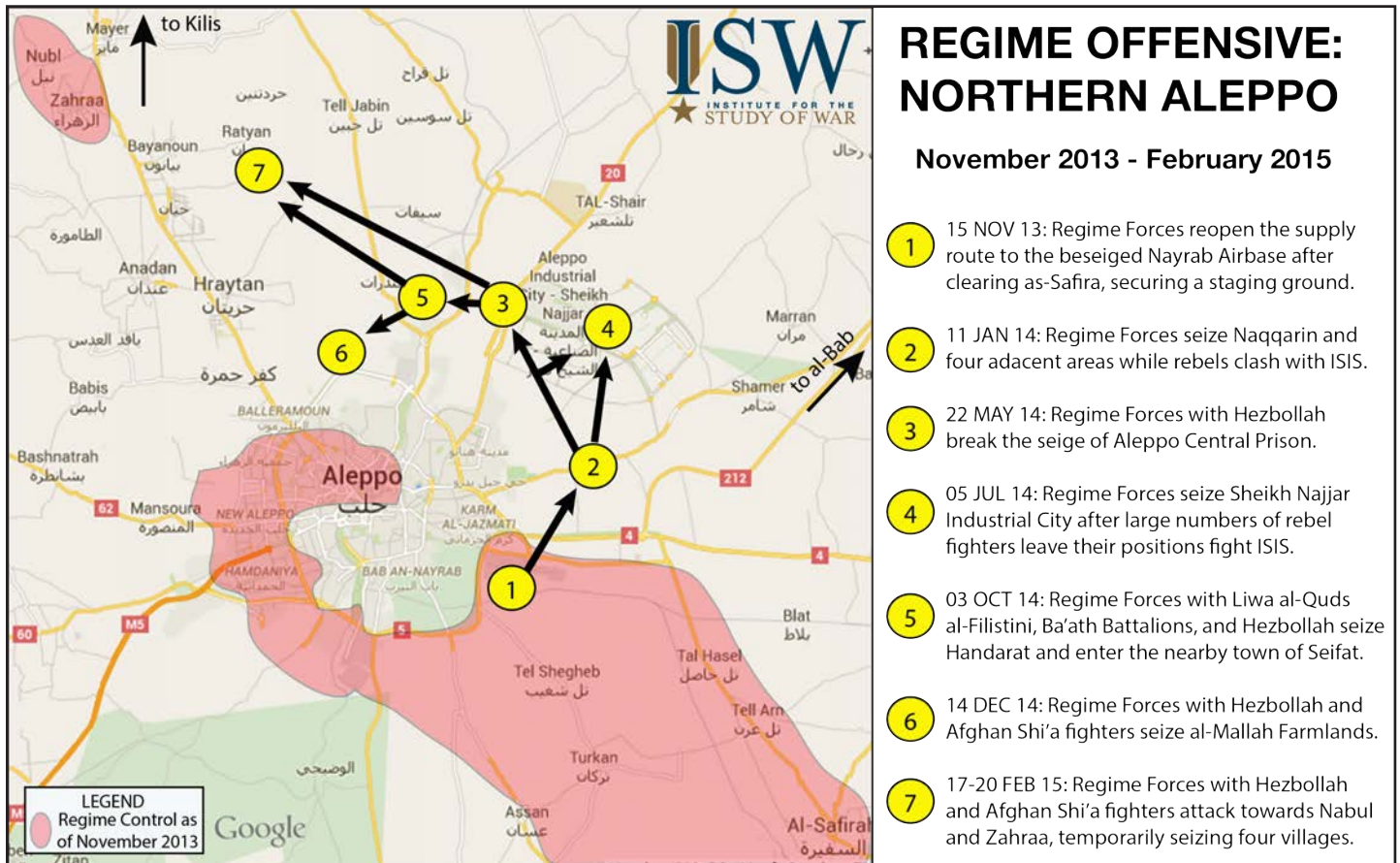
conflict promulgated by extremist actors. An examination of the frontlines in Aleppo, Damascus, and central Syria where Assad chose to go on the offensive demonstrates how Assad balanced his available resources in order to achieve some battlefield success while preserving the ongoing stalemate across the country.

Aleppo

One of the keys to Assad's military strategy has been the campaign for Aleppo, a major commercial capital in northern Syria and Syria's second-largest city. A continuous military presence in the city is essential to Assad's claim to control all of Syria, though rebels have contested the city since 2012.¹⁵⁰ Full control of Aleppo would strengthen the negotiating position of the regime in any future political settlement. It holds equal value to the opposition. The frontlines between regime and

rebel forces within Aleppo city proper have remained relatively static for over two years as both sides lack the necessary manpower and equipment to clear and hold the dense urban terrain of the city. The regime decided to lay siege to rebel positions in the city in late 2013, shifting the relevant battlespace to the rural outskirts of the city where the regime's superiority in armor and air assets could be maximized in support of offensive maneuver operations largely unseen in the rest of Syria. This 'siege-and-starve' strategy also followed the model of similar sieges by the regime throughout the country, most notably in Homs city and the suburbs of Damascus.¹⁵¹

The regime campaign for Aleppo provides a rare example of a long-term phased offensive in the Syrian conflict. Major regime operations began in September to November 2013 when a large convoy of SAA and NDF troops secured the only remaining regime supply route to Aleppo as well as the as-



The area east of the regime positions at as-Safira fell under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in January 2014. Prior to this, ISIS had operated alongside rebel positions throughout Aleppo. Rebel groups and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) drove ISIS from their positions west and north of Aleppo in January 2014. The regime seized this opportunity to launch an offensive against opposition forces in northern Aleppo, beginning with towns east of the city. JN and rebels faced ISIS again in July 2014 when ISIS began to attack opposition positions north of Aleppo city. The regime again seized this opportunity to capture the Sheikh Najjar Industrial City. The regime's campaign culminated in February 2015 but fell shy of its objectives to encircle Aleppo city and link with the pro-regime villages of Nubl and Zahraa in the northern countryside.

Safira Defense Factories southeast of the city, a facility reported to play a key role in the production of chemical weapons and barrel bombs.¹⁵² Regime forces reached the besieged Nayrab Airbase by November 15, 2013, securing a firm staging ground in southeastern Aleppo for future operations to encircle the city.¹⁵³ Meanwhile, the Assad regime relied upon a series of fortified strongpoints as well as a punishing barrel bomb campaign to secure its remaining positions in Aleppo city proper with minimal investment of manpower.¹⁵⁴ These tactics successfully prevented significant opposition advances inside Aleppo but locked the city center in a deadly impasse which ultimately fell upon the civilian population.

The regime began the first phase of its encirclement campaign by seizing the heavily defended urban terrain of the Sheikh Najjar Industrial City northeast of Aleppo on July 5, 2014.¹⁵⁵ The advance by the regime took advantage of advances made by ISIS north of Aleppo city which threatened rebel supply lines crossing into Turkey and spurred confusion among opposition ranks. Clashes throughout Aleppo city receded to a relative lull from July to September 2014 as regime forces in northern Syria redirected their attention to counter a major rebel offensive targeting the Hama Military Airbase as well as several ISIS attempts to overrun the Sha'er Gas Fields in eastern Homs Province. Pro-regime forces likely used this pause to receive and integrate Iranian proxy reinforcements from Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas and Afghan Shi'a militias.¹⁵⁶ Regime forces, augmented by this range of pro-regime irregulars, launched a second phase of advance and seized the villages of Handarat north of Aleppo city on October 3, 2014, in a direct threat to the only major rebel supply line into Aleppo city, the Castello Road.¹⁵⁷ This same coalition of pro-regime forces entered the al-Mallah farmlands west of Handarat village on December 14, 2014.¹⁵⁸ The growing delays between these advances, as well as an increasing reliance on Iranian proxy fighters staging through the Nayrab Airbase, suggested that the year-long operation to encircle Aleppo had come under increasing stress by late 2014.¹⁵⁹

As regime forces came within reach of encircling Aleppo, the city became the key fixture of a United Nations ceasefire plan. On October 30, 2014, UN Special Peace Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura proposed the creation of "freeze zones" throughout Syria to provide humanitarian protection to Syrian civilians and singled out the divided city of Aleppo as a "good candidate" for the implementation of the plan.¹⁶⁰ The office of President Bashar al-Assad soon announced that the proposal was "worth studying" and in mid-February 2015 indicated a tentative willingness to cease airstrikes and artillery shelling targeting the city as the first step towards a potential ceasefire.¹⁶¹ However, the regime campaign to encircle Aleppo continued unabated over this timeframe. This positioning indicated that the Assad regime only desired a deal which left regime forces in a favorable position on the ground.

President Assad himself reinforced this line of thinking by directly comparing the de Mistura initiative to the regime 'siege-and-starve' campaign in an interview, stating: "We implemented that before de Mistura was assigned to his mission. We implemented it in another city called Homs, another big city...so the idea is very good, but it depends on the details."¹⁶² A lack of faith in the Assad regime led opposition leaders from both the Syrian National Council and the Revolutionary Command Council as well as major rebel groups to reject the Aleppo 'freeze zone' proposal on March 1, 2015.¹⁶³ Nonetheless, UN-directed negotiations to implement the plan are still ongoing as of April 2015. These negotiations also allow Assad to portray himself as a reasonable actor willing to come to the table to reach a settlement, regardless of the hollowness of this gesture on the ground.

In a sign of the pressures placed upon pro-regime forces, the regime encirclement of Aleppo suffered its first significant setback in February 2015. On February 17, 2015, regime forces supported by fresh NDF, Hezbollah, and Shi'a Afghan reinforcements seized large portions of the villages of Bashkuy, Rityan, Duwayr al-Zeitun, and Hardatnin north of Aleppo following a rapid westward advance.¹⁶⁴ The regime likely sought to break the siege of the Shi'a-majority towns of Nubl and Zahraa northwest of Aleppo, linking their forces in an arc of control dominating almost all opposition supply lines in the northern countryside of Aleppo. However, the scale and speed of the advance apparently overextended regime forces, leaving their positions vulnerable to rebel counterattack.

Rebel forces recaptured the villages north of Aleppo within four days after clashes which killed over 150 pro-regime fighters.¹⁶⁵ JN, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and other allied Salafi-jihadist groups also captured the al-Mallah farmlands on February 20, 2015 and portions of Handarat village on March 10, reducing regime gains to the October 2014 status quo.¹⁶⁶ This reversal demonstrated the difficulties that the regime faces in completing the encirclement of Aleppo while operating at the end of an extended supply line. However, despite these setbacks, regime forces still pose a dire threat to opposition-held Aleppo. Aleppo is a key northern "pin" on the map of Syria and Assad remains unlikely to abandon his campaign for any reason. The arrival of further regime reinforcements or an escalation of rebel infighting in Aleppo could enable the regime to complete the encirclement of the city. The end result of this operation would be a protracted siege of Aleppo which subjects the rebel-held districts of Syria's commercial capital to starvation and punishing aerial bombardment in a powerful symbolic and strategic blow to the Syrian opposition.

Securing Damascus

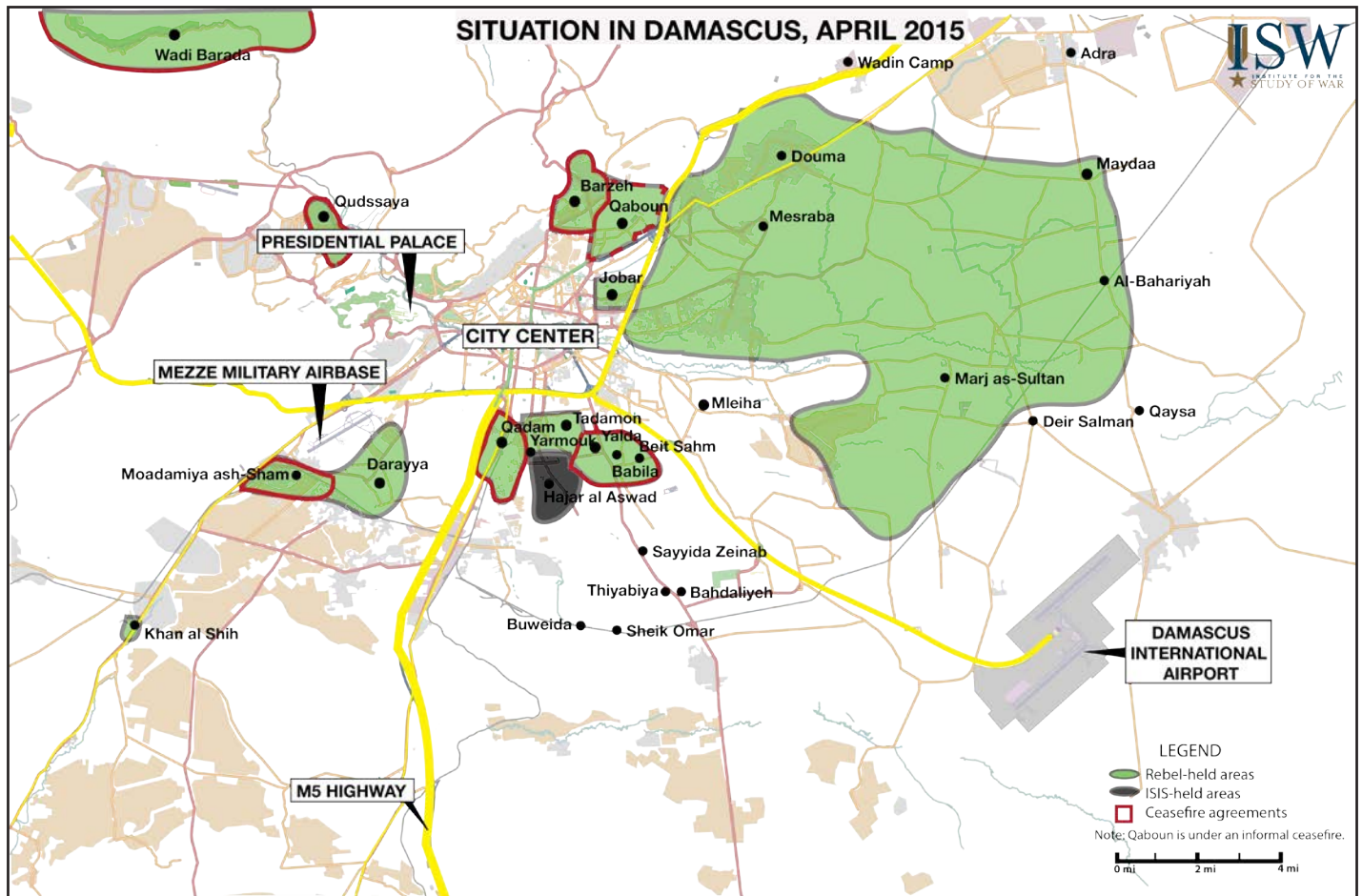
The elimination of the opposition threat to the Syrian capital of Damascus formed the second core component of the Assad regime’s military strategy. Durable control over the formal seat of government and the home of several million Syrian citizens provides the Syrian regime with a solid claim to domestic and international legitimacy. Damascus is also key terrain from a military perspective due to the high number of airbases, military installations, and elite SAA units present in the vicinity of the city. Damascus also serves as a key transit route for shipments of Iranian weapons and equipment to Lebanese Hezbollah and other proxy forces via the Damascus International Airport. Rebel forces began actively contesting the capital in early 2012 and currently hold large swathes of the eastern and southern suburbs of the city.

The regime’s campaign for Damascus can be broken into two distinct lines of effort. The first primary focus is the battle to reduce and eventually eliminate the strong rebel pocket in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs, a mixed rural-urban region which holds an estimated 160,000 civilians and opposition fighters.¹⁶⁷ Eastern Ghouta has been the scene of some of

the fiercest urban fighting in the capital, including the August 21, 2013 chemical weapons attacks targeting several opposition-held districts in the area. Meanwhile, the regime has also conducted a systematic effort to neutralize other opposition-held neighborhoods through sieges, starvation, and ceasefire agreements, preserving its combat power for other battlefronts. Assad has heavily relied upon his elite ‘praetorian guard’ units – including the Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division – as well as Iranian proxy forces in order to prosecute his campaign in Damascus. Regime forces concentrated their offensive capacities against Eastern Ghouta in an attempt to neutralize and compress the largest pocket of opposition fighters in the capital. In contrast, the Assad regime utilized siege-and-starve tactics to neutralize rebel forces in the denser urban terrain of southern Damascus with minimal military effort.

Eastern Ghouta

The regime directed its main efforts in early 2014 towards driving rebel forces from Jobar and Mleiha, two districts of eastern Damascus which formed part of the western defensive line for opposition-held Eastern Ghouta. Jobar represented



the furthest line of opposition advance into Damascus city proper and its heavily-developed urban environment provided rebel forces with a decisive advantage which the assaulting forces of the elite SAA 105th Brigade Republican Guard were unable to overcome.¹⁶⁸ Regime forces targeted Jobar with heavy artillery, airstrikes, and ballistic missiles on a daily basis, while both rebel and regime fighters have constructed complex networks of tunnels used to facilitate troop movement and ferry food and other supplies. In some cases, both sides have used 'tunnel bomb' attacks to burrow explosives underneath opposing strongholds.¹⁶⁹ Under these conditions, the situation in Jobar remains a virtual stalemate as of April 2015.

Forces from the elite SAA 4th Armored Division supported by NDF, Iraqi Shi'a fighters, and Hezbollah launched an offensive against Mleiha on April 3, 2014.¹⁷⁰ Although the town was subjected to a constant barrage of airstrikes and ballistic missiles, regime ground troops proved unable to make significant initial gains.¹⁷¹ By the end of May 2014, pro-opposition media claimed that the clashes in Mleiha had killed over eight hundred pro-regime fighters.¹⁷² The withdrawal of Iraqi Shi'a militias from Syria following the fall of Mosul in June 2014 slowed the regime's push for Mleiha. Activist sources reported that the majority of Iraqi fighters along the Mleiha front had departed by June 19, 2014, forcing the regime to ease its assault on the area.¹⁷³ However, the mobilization and deployment of over 1,000 Hezbollah fighters to Damascus in order to "defend the Sayyida Zeinab shrine" quickly revitalized the regime's offensive.¹⁷⁴ On July 12, 2014, SAA supported by NDF and Hezbollah advanced around the eastern perimeter of Mleiha, placing the town and several hundred opposition fighters under siege.¹⁷⁵ Although JN fighters used an SVBIED attack to successfully break the siege on August 3, 2014, pro-regime forces reestablished the cordon one week later.¹⁷⁶ "The regime forces now wrap around the perimeter of the town," the opposition Mleiha Local Council reported.¹⁷⁷

Under siege and faced with punishing bombardment from the air, rebel fighters withdrew from Mleiha on August 14, 2014 in a major victory for regime and Hezbollah forces.¹⁷⁸ An activist interviewed by Syria Deeply stated that Mleiha had been struck by 786 airstrikes, 790 surface-to-surface missiles, 7,000 artillery shells, and 12 barrel bombs, leaving over 70% of the town destroyed. In sum, the activist asserted that "the loss of Mleiha is considered as important as the loss of the Qalamoun" region along the Lebanese border to a similar joint regime-Hezbollah operation in early 2014.¹⁷⁹

Regime forces capitalized on momentum gained from the capture of Mleiha as well as the arrival of reinforcements drawn from the nearby Qalamoun region to secure several additional victories against the Syrian opposition in Eastern Ghouta.¹⁸⁰ A spokesperson for prominent rebel group Jaysh

al-Islam warned on August 14, 2014 that "occupying Mleiha is the beginning phase of occupying the towns inside the besieged Ghouta...[Assad] will attack piece by piece."¹⁸¹ This prediction was rapidly proven correct. SAA and NDF forces seized the village of Adra and the adjacent Adra Industrial City after a series of clashes from September 25 to 27, 2014, restricting rebel freedom of movement towards the Qalamoun region to the northeast.¹⁸² Meanwhile, Republican Guard units and rebel forces traded possession of the Dukhanyah suburb located northwest of Mleiha multiple times in September 2014 in heavy clashes which included several alleged chlorine gas attacks before regime fighters finally secured the district on October 6, 2014.¹⁸³

The Assad regime next turned its attention towards the town of Douma, a major rebel stronghold in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs dominated by prominent Islamist faction Jaysh al-Islam. On November 6, 2014, SAA forces seized the Wafidin Camp north of Douma, severing the last remaining opposition supply line into Eastern Ghouta.¹⁸⁴ Within a month, local residents reported that the price of rice per kilo jumped from \$1.90 to \$7.00 and the price of flour from \$2.15 to \$4.00.¹⁸⁵ Civilians accused merchants, traders, and rebel forces of collaborating to hoard limited supplies, sparking tensions and public protests.¹⁸⁶ Over subsequent months, the Syrian Air Force sharply intensified its bombardment of Douma and other towns in Eastern Ghouta, causing hundreds of casualties.¹⁸⁷ Mosques in Eastern Ghouta began cancelling Friday prayers in order to avoid presenting tempting targets to regime pilots.¹⁸⁸ The severity of these airstrikes prompted Jaysh al-Islam to announce a retaliatory campaign of rocket attacks targeting Damascus city in late January to early February 2015 in a move publically portrayed as an attempt to deter further regime bombardment.¹⁸⁹

The Assad regime leveraged illegal tactics of collective punishment in order to encourage the depopulation of rebel-held areas. On November 24, 2014, regime forces opened the Wafidin Camp crossing to permit "dozens" of families to flee Eastern Ghouta.¹⁹⁰ In late January 2015, Syrian state media claimed regime forces evacuated over 2,000 additional civilians from the area.¹⁹¹ On March 19, 2015, opposition sources reported that another 1,000 civilians were allowed to flee Eastern Ghouta via a checkpoint in Harasta.¹⁹² These mass evacuations served a clear propaganda purpose by highlighting the cleavages between rebel forces and the populace under their control. The policy of evacuations also fuels suspicions and infighting amongst rebel forces in Eastern Ghouta regarding potential reconciliation agreements with the regime.¹⁹³ In mid-January 2015, al-Jazeera reported the formation of the pro-regime Jaysh al-Wafaa militia drawn from evacuated residents of Eastern Ghouta.¹⁹⁴ Jaysh al-Wafaa has since supported the SAA in several minor offensives attempting to seize positions in Douma.¹⁹⁵ Overall, however, the regime campaign against

Eastern Ghouta appears to have stalled amidst a shift in regime focus towards countering rebel gains in Dera’a and Quneitra Provinces to the south.

Siege-and-Starve

The Assad regime has relied on a system of sieges to force the submission of opposition-held neighborhoods throughout Damascus without diverting valuable combat resources from Eastern Ghouta. Regime forces also employ these blockades to depopulate rebel-held terrain, draining the pool of opposition support while bolstering the legitimacy of the Syrian government. One internal UN World Food Program document noted that increasing amounts of reported aid distributions were to a “large extent a result of large population movements from non-government controlled areas as people sought refuge” – implicitly acknowledging that civilians can only receive food if they relocate to regime-held areas.¹⁹⁶ The widespread use of deliberate starvation as a tool of war prompted the UN Security Council to pass UNSC Resolution 2139 on February 22, 2014, underscoring that “starvation of civilians as a method of combat is prohibited by international humanitarian law” and demanding that “all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities, promptly allow rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access” to all areas of Syria.¹⁹⁷ Despite this rebuke, the Assad regime has continued its siege-and-starve campaign in southern Damascus unabated through 2014 and into 2015, particularly in the southwestern suburb of Darayya and the Yarmouk Camp district of Damascus.

The Assad regime has utilized the siege-and-starve strategy to coerce several opposition-held neighborhoods of Damascus into ceasefire and ‘normalization’ agreements. These deals serve to deescalate scattered fronts throughout Damascus, enabling the regime to redirect its limited military resources towards high-priority areas such as Eastern Ghouta. The ceasefires also provide the Assad regime with a narrative of “national reconciliation” which bolsters its claim to political legitimacy by demonstrating a willingness to forge peace. President Assad has consistently underlined in interviews that ceasefire agreements are “something concrete” which provide a “measure of confidence” for a political settlement. On February 5, 2015, he established a high committee on reconciliation staffed by five cabinet ministers, three provincial governors, and the head of the National Security Bureau.¹⁹⁸ These reconciliation agreements provoke distrust on the ground, however, from both the opposition and the regime. An opposition activist in a Damascus neighborhood under one such agreement expressed this sentiment stating that “this isn’t a reconciliation...this is a ceasefire until circumstances play in the revolution’s favor.”¹⁹⁹ Meanwhile, an anonymous official in the regime Ministry of Reconciliation Affairs noted: “We have reservations; we do not see it as

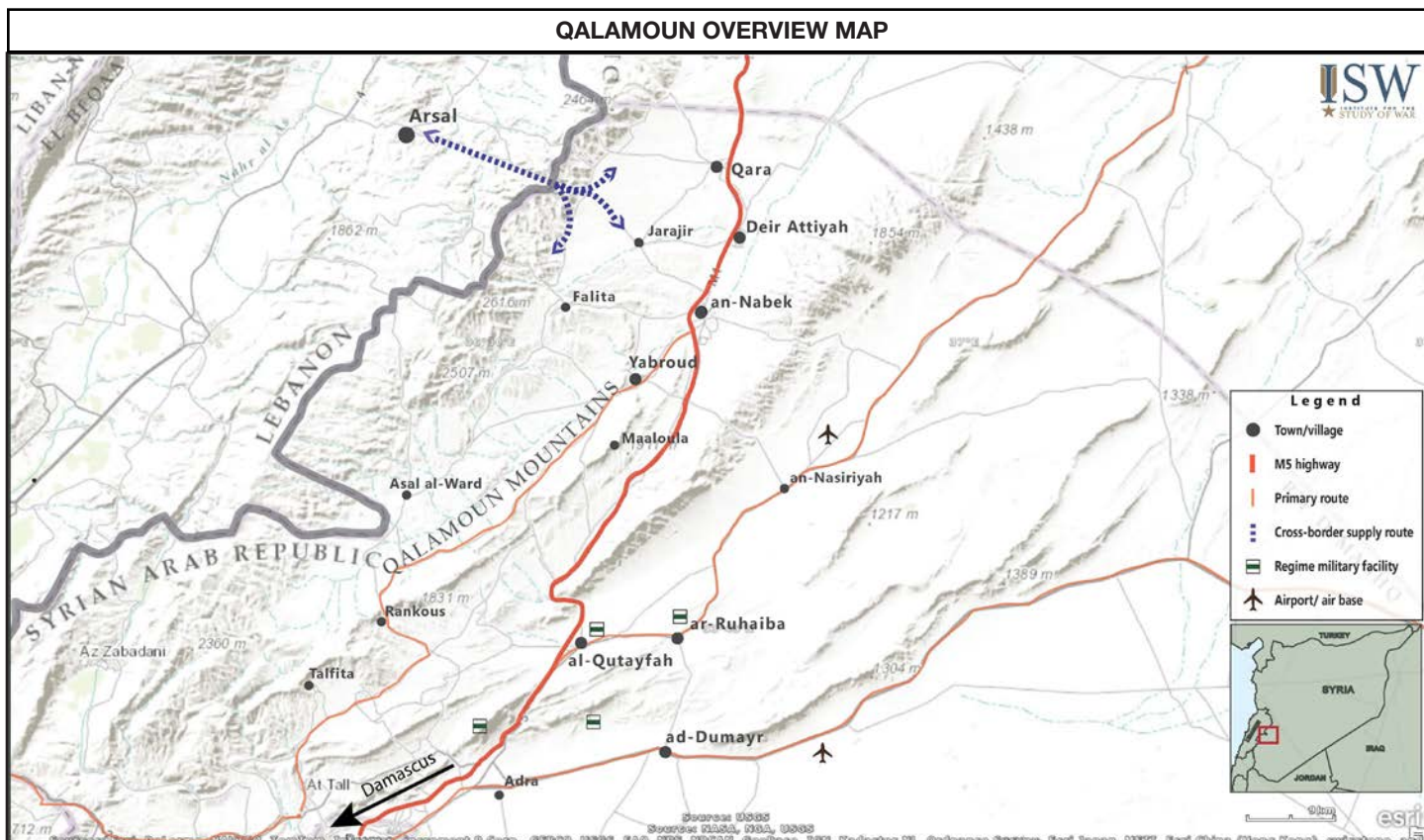
reconciliation, just a cessation of hostilities as weapons remain with both sides.”²⁰⁰

The examination of two prominent Damascus ceasefire deals provides a reflection of these tensions. The southwestern Damascus suburb of Moadamiyah concluded a local ceasefire agreement with regime forces in December 2013 after a punishing siege.²⁰¹ The ceasefire was promoted as a sign of ongoing “national reconciliation;” however, the Assad regime delayed in meeting its obligations and only partially lifted its siege. Reflecting upon the ceasefire agreement over a year later in February 2015, an activist from Moadamiyah wrote in the *Washington Times*: “The regime continues to cut off power, gas and other basic services to Moadamiyah. Some humanitarian aid is allowed to enter, but not nearly enough for the town’s residents...Most egregiously, bombardments continue and the regime has resumed arrest raids on civilians.”²⁰²

Regime and opposition officials concluded a similar ceasefire agreement in the southern Damascus neighborhoods of Yalda, Babbila, and Beit Sahem in February 2014 to lift the regime siege on the districts, conduct a prisoner release, and normalize the status of several hundred rebel fighters.²⁰³ Local government and security officials held a celebration broadcast over state television to mark the “reconciliation” reached in the three towns.²⁰⁴ Despite this positive façade, however, regime forces continued to restrict access to the districts and Syrian activists compared their situation to an “open-air prison” with no freedom of movement.²⁰⁵ The Assad regime leveraged its control over the Babbila – Sidi Miqdad crossing in order to force continued concessions, including the withdrawal of JN from Beit Sahem and Babbila on March 12, 2015, following public protests spurred in part by regime threats to reestablish a complete siege if ‘terrorist groups’ do not leave southern Damascus.²⁰⁶ The continuing use of these tactics allows the Assad regime to further sap opposition support in southern Damascus while still preserving its manpower for other fronts.

Qalamoun

The Assad regime sought to clear and hold the Qalamoun Mountains, a strategic region northeast of the capital running along the Lebanese border, in order to defend the northern approaches to the capital and maintain access to the M5 Highway connecting Damascus to Homs, Hama, and the Syrian coast. The establishment of a strong regime presence along the border region also served to sever cross-border rebel supply lines based out of eastern Lebanon. Thus, regime forces launched a major operation to clear the Qalamoun on November 15, 2013.²⁰⁷ The timing of this offensive coincided with the end of major regime combat operations to clear the supply line to Aleppo city in an indication of the military advantage enjoyed by the Assad regime in late 2013. Lebanese



Hezbollah fighters played a key role in the offensive, providing strained and inadequately equipped regime units with large amounts of manpower skilled in mountain warfare.²⁰⁸

Regime forces supported by Hezbollah and the NDF rapidly advanced south along the M5 Highway towards Damascus, seizing a string of rebel-held towns including Deir Attiyah in late November 2013, an-Nabek in mid-December 2013, and the opposition stronghold of Yabroud on March 16, 2014.²⁰⁹ As thousands of rebel fighters fled into Lebanon or further southwest towards Damascus, the regime offensive continued to move along the Lebanese border. Regime and Hezbollah forces seized the town of Ras al-Ayn on March 19, 2014.²¹⁰ The regime coalition seized the nearby towns of Ras Ma'ara and Falita as well, ten days later.²¹¹ Hezbollah and NDF forces seized the towns of Rankous, Asal al-Ward, and Maaloula by April 15, 2014, removing the last notable rebel positions in the northern Qalamoun.²¹² President Assad praised the Syrian Arab Army's "achievements in the war against terror" in a speech delivered at Damascus University and labeled recent gains as a "turning point in the crisis."²¹³ However, rebel and Hezbollah sources indicated that Hezbollah fighters led most of the ground offensives in the Qalamoun while the SAA restricted itself to providing air and artillery support.²¹⁴ This deep reliance on foreign proxy forces to achieve battlefield success illustrated the declining agency of the Assad regime on the battlefield.

Regime and Hezbollah forces proved unable to clear rebel presence from the rural regions of the border despite holding most urban centers in the Qalamoun and maintaining unrestricted use of the M5 Highway. One Hezbollah fighter noted in an interview the difficulties in securing the rugged terrain of the region, stating that "It's impossible for us to control all the mountains along the border, but we have enough people to do reconnaissance and ambushes."²¹⁵ These limitations forced Hezbollah and regime forces to man static defensive positions in unfriendly terrain, leaving their fighters vulnerable to attack. Rebel forces exploited the disruption caused by the withdrawal of Iraqi Shi'a militiamen from Syria in mid-June 2014 to launch a wave of deadly raids against Hezbollah and NDF checkpoints located on the outskirts of Rankous, Asal al-Ward, Hawsh al-Arab, Ras Ma'ara, Deir Attiyah, and Yabroud.²¹⁶ Meanwhile, Hezbollah and NDF fighters continued to bear an increasing share of the combat burden in the northern Qalamoun as the Syrian regime redeployed its regular SAA units in the area to reinforce frontlines in Damascus city and Zabadani in the southern Qalamoun.²¹⁷ This pressure sparked open clashes on several instances between Hezbollah fighters and local NDF militiamen rooted in accusations that Syrian forces rarely participate in fighting, leaving their Hezbollah partners unsupported.²¹⁸

Primary regime efforts in Qalamoun shifted in the summer of 2014 to the town of Zabadani located northwest of Damascus near the Jdaydet Yabous border crossing, a primary supply route used by Lebanese Hezbollah to transport fighters and weapons between Syria and Lebanon. The Assad regime first focused on isolating Zabadani from rebel reinforcement and resupply.²¹⁹ Regime forces established a cordon around Zabadani and subjected the town to heavy shelling with artillery and barrel bombs throughout the summer and fall of 2014.²²⁰ However, in late December 2014 Ahrar al-Sham, JN, and other opposition forces launched an offensive which seized several checkpoints and military installations northwest of Zabadani, loosening the regime siege over the area and threatening Jdaydet Yabous.²²¹ SAA forces supported by Hezbollah and Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas seized the nearby town of Kfar Yabous on January 27, 2015, relieving the pressure against Jdaydet Yabous, and on February 15, 2015 the regime replaced the commander of military operations in the Qalamoun for his failure to adequately defend against the rebel advance.²²² Clashes to reassert the cordon around Zabadani are still ongoing as of April 2015 with regime forces unable to secure a decisive advantage.

Deraa/Quneitra

Dera'a and Quneitra Provinces in southern Syria formed a major source of opposition strength which directly threatened the southern approaches to Damascus. Nonetheless, regime forces in the two provinces operated in a relatively passive defensive stance throughout 2014, appearing content to slowly trade territory in the heavily-militarized region in order to devote limited reinforcements to other fronts. SAA units based in Dera'a and Quneitra Provinces were rarely reinforced, while pervasive anti-regime sentiment among the local population resulted in low NDF recruitment.²²³ Most SAA formations in southern Syria remained in close vicinity to their bases despite the spread of the Syrian civil war due to both pragmatic concerns over the political reliability of conscript soldiers as well as strategic concerns regarding the fears of an Israeli incursion.²²⁴ The Assad regime also likely remained confident that opposition forces could not breach the Damascus 'military zone,' a belt of strongpoints and army facilities south of the city originally designed to shield the capital against an Israeli armored thrust from the Golan Heights.

Increasing rebel unification and a series of successful opposition offensives in summer and fall 2014 increasingly challenged the regime disposition in southern Syria.²²⁵ Rebel fighters had seized a series of hills and military facilities in southern Quneitra Province by May of 2014, enabling opposition forces to form a continuous zone of control along the Jordanian border.²²⁶ At least two SAA units –

Brigades 6I and 90 – suffered heavy losses in these clashes which reportedly rendered them combat ineffective.²²⁷ Rebel momentum continued unabated, despite asymmetric response by the Syrian regime including large numbers of barrel bomb attacks, air raids, and heavy artillery shelling. JN, Ahrar al-Sham, and the FSA-affiliated Southern Front seized the Quneitra border crossing with the Golan Heights on August 28, 2014, striking a powerful symbolic blow to the regime.²²⁸ Tel al-Hara, a key military position overlooking much of Dera'a and Quneitra Provinces and the location of a joint Russian-Syrian signals intelligence facility, fell to the opposition on October 5, 2014.²²⁹ JN and other rebel forces later seized complete control over the town of Sheikh Miskin on January 25, 2015 despite the reinforcement of regime units by Hezbollah fighters and IRGC officers, threatening the regime's supply line to isolated forces in Dera'a city.²³⁰

This rapid succession of rebel gains threatened to bring Syrian opposition forces to the southern gates of Damascus city, forcing the regime to re-evaluate its strategy. Regime forces responded by launching an offensive against rebel positions in northwestern Dera'a Province on February 9, 2015 with support from at least forty tanks of the elite 4th Armored Division.²³¹ NDF and 'shabiha' militiamen were also reported by activists to have been transported by air from Hama Province to Damascus International Airport in order to reinforce the battlefield in southern Syria.²³² Iran reportedly played a key role in the planning, organization, and execution of the offensive, with activists claiming that a large proportion of involved ground forces were composed of fighters from Lebanese Hezbollah, Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, and the 'Fatimiyoun' Iranian-Afghani Shi'a militia.²³³ Over the subsequent weeks, Iranian media announced large numbers of funerals for IRGC officers and Afghan Shi'a volunteers including 'Fatimiyoun' Brigade commander Ali Reza Tavassoli.²³⁴

Multiple sources claimed that overall leadership for the operation was provided by 'Iranian commanders' with Syrian officers being transferred away from the front or executed for alleged collaboration with rebel forces.²³⁵ In support of this claim, IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani reportedly made a public appearance along the frontlines on February 11, 2015.²³⁶ In another notable indicator, this offensive followed the aforementioned Israeli airstrike in the al-Amal Farms area of Quneitra Province on January 18, 2015 which killed several prominent Hezbollah commanders, including Jihad Mughniyeh, as well as IRGC ground forces commander General Mohammad Ali Allahdadi.²³⁷ This delegation of senior Hezbollah and IRGC figures was likely conducting final preparations for the upcoming offensive. The degree of Iranian leadership and coordination witnessed in this offensive was unprecedented and signalled a willingness



by Iran to adopt a more overt posture in Syria in order to protect its interests in the country.

Within days, the pro-regime coalition made significant gains – seizing the rebel-held towns of Deir al-Adas, Deir Makir, and al-Danajah in northwestern Dera’a Province while threatening the towns of Kafr Nasij, Kafr Shams, and Masharah.²³⁸ Rebel commanders stated that pro-regime forces employed a number of unfamiliar tactics which initially overwhelmed opposition units, including nighttime advances, hit-and-run operations designed to deplete rebel ammunition supplies, and combat reconnaissance missions which enabled armored forces to strike the weakest sections of opposition defenses.²³⁹ These novel tactics once again underscore the notion that Iran and its proxy forces took lead over the SAA and regime military commanders in this offensive.

The trajectory of pro-regime forces indicated that they likely intended to recapture the strategic heights at Tel al-Hara, reestablishing dominance over a large swath of the Dera’a Plain.²⁴⁰ However, despite declarations by opposition defense minister Maj. Gen. Salim Idriss that “the balance of power is in favor of the Iranian militias” in southern Syria, regime advances slowed in the face of several counteroffensives and the arrival of large numbers of rebel reinforcements to the area.²⁴¹ Opposition groups continued to gain ground against the regime in other parts of the province despite being placed on the defensive in northwestern Dera’a

Province. Rebel forces seized the town of Busra al-Sham along the border with Suwayda Province on March 25, 2015 and the Nasib border crossing with Jordan six days later.²⁴² These victories underscore the limitations of Assad’s military forces even when augmented by Iranian proxies and advisors.

SECURING THE CENTRAL CORRIDOR

The Assad regime also devoted sizeable resources towards securing and defending the Syrian ‘central corridor’ – a stretch of terrain which includes Homs and Hama cities as well as the Syrian coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartous. Preserving firm control over this region serves multiple strategic purposes for the regime. For one, the ‘central corridor’ encompasses the ‘Alawite heartland’ of Syria, an area which provides a deep pool of loyalist manpower for pro-regime forces and functions as a strategic fallback position in the unlikely event of the collapse of the Assad regime.²⁴³ Homs and Hama cities are also key crossing points for ground lines of communication running from Damascus and the Syrian Coast to regime positions in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zour. Finally, these provinces hold a large number of military installations and airbases which remain critical for the regime’s ability to project force throughout the far corners of Syria.

Homs

The Assad regime in 2014 prioritized securing the northern Lebanese border in the central province of Homs, neutralizing opposition forces in the Old City of Homs, and containing the remaining pockets of rebel fighters operating north of Homs city. Local NDF fighters drawn from the network of Alawite villages concentrated in rural Homs Province played a major role in all of these operations and enabled the regime to conduct successful combat operations in the province without the need for heavy SAA reinforcement. Almost every military-aged male in the Alawite villages adjacent to rebel-held territory north of Homs city joined the NDF according to one account, serving as the main infantry force while the SAA provided air and artillery support.²⁴⁴

The most dramatic victory for the Assad regime in Homs Province in 2014 was the ultimately successful effort to clear rebel forces from the central district of Homs, Syria’s third largest city and the self-proclaimed “capital of the revolution.”²⁴⁵ The Old City of Homs suffered varying degrees of siege since May 2012, subjecting up to three thousand civilians as well as several thousand rebel fighters to a brutal “starvation until submission” campaign meant to avoid having the SAA engage in urban warfare.²⁴⁶ By early 2014, this policy had severely demoralized the remaining population of Homs. Regime officials, rebel leaders, and the United Nations agreed to enact a “humanitarian pause” in the clashes on February 6, 2014 in order to provide humanitarian aid deliveries and safe passage out of the Old City of Homs.²⁴⁷ Over 1,400 people evacuated from the Old City by February 13, 2014, sorely weakening the resolve and capabilities of remaining rebel fighters.²⁴⁸

Regime forces capitalized on the declining strength of remaining opposition elements in Homs to launch a ground offensive against the city center on April 15, 2014, the first time that regime forces had entered rebel-held districts since the summer of 2013.²⁴⁹ Videos of the operation posted by the Homs NDF branch showed well-equipped fighters operating in close coordination with heavy SAA armor.²⁵⁰ Rebel fighters, suffering from poor morale and reduced manpower, slowly lost ground in several neighborhoods. One Homs-based activist confirmed in an interview in late April 2014 that “many fighters left the siege and the rest are not able to fight back for long.”²⁵¹ On May 2, 2014, rebel and regime forces agreed to a ceasefire and complete evacuation of the Old City of Homs.²⁵² An estimated 1,925 remaining opposition fighters and civilians in the Old City of Homs were transported by bus over the next five days to rebel-held areas in the countryside of northern Homs Province, a major victory for the regime’s siege-and-starve strategy.²⁵³

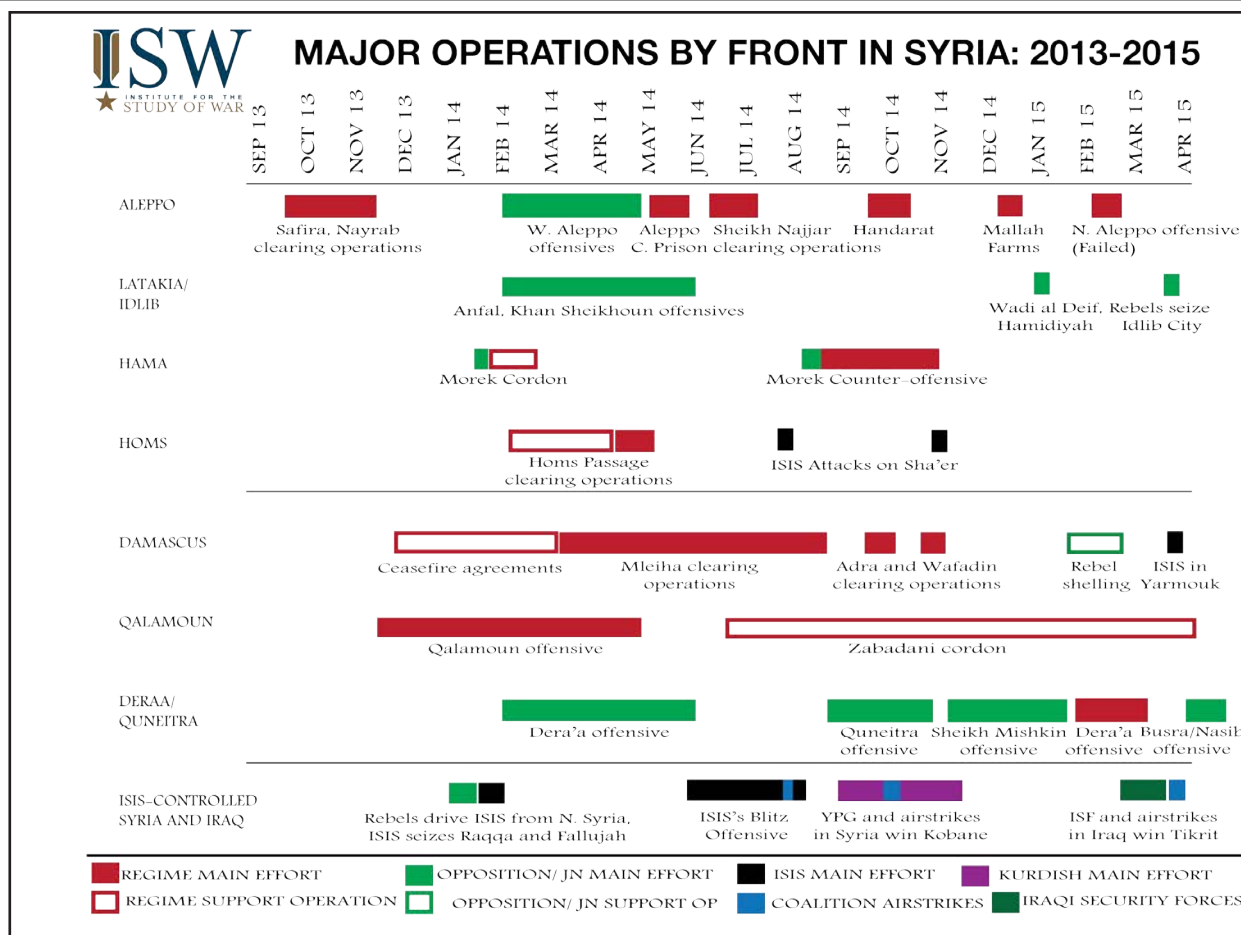
Regime forces have attempted to replicate the successful siege of Homs in order to neutralize the remaining pockets of

rebel resistance in the province. One such holdout was al-Waer, the last rebel-held neighborhood of Homs city. Regime officials limited or blocked humanitarian aid shipments to the estimated 70,000 to 100,000 civilians and opposition fighters occupying the district since October 2013 and conducted regular shelling attacks against residential areas.²⁵⁴ However, despite multiple attempts at negotiations and several ceasefires, rebel forces inside al-Waer refused to surrender as of April 2015.²⁵⁵ SAA and NDF units also maintained a loose cordon around the rebel-held countryside north of Homs city centered on the villages of Rastan and Talbisa, subjecting the enclave to shortages of food, water, and other humanitarian supplies.²⁵⁶ No major regime offensive has yet been launched against the area, although clashes and artillery barrages occurred daily. However, the formation of local sectarian militia formations such as Liwa al-Radha al-Shi’a in March 2015 with direct IRGC and Hezbollah support suggests that regime forces may be preparing to more vigorously contest the Rastan-Talbisa pocket.²⁵⁷

Hama

The primary objective of the Assad regime in Hama Province consisted of the consolidation of a line of control in the north of the province defending Hama city from rebel forces based in southern Idlib Province. The focal point of this effort for most of 2014 was the town of Morek located along the strategic M5 Highway to Aleppo. JN and other rebel forces seized Morek on February 1, 2014, isolating regime positions located further north along the M5 in southern Idlib Province.²⁵⁸ State media reported that SAA and NDF units had established a “security perimeter” around Morek by early March 2014.²⁵⁹ However, these forces proved insufficient to seize the town in the face of a vigorous rebel defense. Several months of heavy clashes cost the regime large losses in manpower and equipment, requiring frequent reinforcement via the Hama Military Airport.²⁶⁰ In order to maintain its defenses along the remainder of the lengthy Hama-Idlib provincial border, the regime relied heavily upon a high rate of airstrikes and chlorine gas attacks, particularly against the JN stronghold of Kafr Zeita.²⁶¹

Rebel forces soon exploited the weakened state of regime defenses in northern Hama Province. Opposition groups announced the ‘Badr al-Sham’ operation on July 26, 2014 targeting the Hama Military Airbase, a key regime military installation which served as a barrel bomb factory, a primary launching point for fixed and rotary wing strikes against opposition-held areas of northern Syria, and a transport hub for regime forces.²⁶² Rebel forces seized the Rahbat Khuttab weapons depot, located only seven miles northwest of Hama city, on the same day.²⁶³ Rebel fighters severed the supply lines connecting Hama city to loyalist Christian and Alawite towns



The pattern of regime main efforts depicted on this timeline illustrates several key conditions underlying Assad’s military campaign. The regime appears unable to execute more than one major campaign in Syria at a time and it generally prioritized Aleppo over this period, ceding Idlib Province almost entirely. Meanwhile, regime forces also cannot conduct major operations Damascus, Qalamoun, and southern Syria at the same time and generally prioritized Damascus and Qalamoun as main efforts, ceding the south until February 2015.

in western Hama Province over the following weeks.²⁶⁴ The serious threat posed by the Badr al-Sham offensive forced the Assad regime to withdraw its forces from Morek on July 30, 2014, ceding control of the town to rebel forces.²⁶⁵ Rebel forces had advanced to within three miles of the Hama Military Airport by late August, targeting the base with daily shelling which limited the use of fixed-wing aircraft and dropped the number of daily sorties from approximately thirty to less than ten.²⁶⁶ One activist estimated that the capacity of the airbase had been reduced by 80%.²⁶⁷

The Assad regime deployed large numbers of elite forces to Hama Province in order to counter these rebel successes. Several hundred SAA Special Forces members reportedly arrived at the Hama Military Airport via nighttime flights in civilian aircraft on August 21, 2014.²⁶⁸ Other reports indicated that regime forces in northern Hama Province also received reinforcements from the elite 4th Armored Division, Lebanese Hezbollah, Afghan Shi’a militias, and the IRGC.²⁶⁹ This potent blend of forces underscores the critical importance placed on the Hama Military Airport by both the

Assad regime and its Iranian backers. In a counteroffensive directed by Tiger Forces commander Col. Suhail al-Hassan under alleged IRGC supervision, regime forces rapidly reversed rebel gains in northern Hama Province.²⁷⁰ Regime forces recaptured the Rahbat Khuttab depot on September 9, 2014.²⁷¹ Regime forces advanced further three days later and entered the town of Helfaya northwest of Hama following negotiations with local elders, disrupting a planned JN offensive against the neighboring Christian town of Mahardeh.²⁷² The regime counteroffensive cleared at least eight rebel-held villages north and northwest of Hama by the end of September 2014.²⁷³ Emboldened regime forces seized the town of Morek one month later on October 23, 2014 in a clear demonstration of the superior battlefield capabilities brought to bear by elite SAA units and Iranian proxy groups.²⁷⁴

Wadi al-Deif and Hamidiyah military bases in southern Idlib fell to rebels in December 2014. The Assad regime then deprioritized northern Hama in favor of other battlefields. Local activists and rebel groups claimed that most elite

SAA and irregular forces withdrew from the Hama Military Airbase with large amounts of equipment, leaving behind only regular SAA units.²⁷⁵ Northern Hama settled into a quiet front for both sides, with one FSA fighter stating in an interview that fighters near Morek “do not fire at the regime now, they are simply stationed in the area.”²⁷⁶ However, on March 2, 2015, activists reported large numbers of IRGC, Hezbollah, Afghan Shi’a militiamen, and NDF massing at the Hama Military Airport and nearby installations.²⁷⁷ The next day, Col. Suhail al-Hassan and Air Force Intelligence head Maj. Gen. Jamil al-Hassan conducted an inspection tour of military facilities in Hama city.²⁷⁸ These reports suggest that regime forces may intend to launch another offensive in northern Hama Province, likely targeting the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun along the M5 Highway in southern Idlib Province.

The overall pattern of deployments exhibited across these fronts reveal the inherent limitations afflicting the regime’s military campaign. For example, regime operations to encircle Aleppo city experienced recurrent delays and setbacks in response to mounting opposition pressure against other frontlines in the Syrian central corridor. The large-scale maneuver operation utilized to clear the supply route to Aleppo in late 2013 faded in favor of small-scale opportunistic advances as emergent opportunities and challenges – including the final assault on the Old City of Homs in March to May 2014, ISIS advances in eastern Homs in July 2014, and the opposition offensive on the Hama Military Airbase from August to October 2014 – forced the regime to deploy its assets in northern Syria reactively instead of proactively. The Assad regime increasingly relied upon aerial bombardment in Aleppo throughout 2014 as a substitute for ground forces and began utilizing large numbers of Iranian proxy forces in fall 2014 in a likely attempt to restart its campaign.

The tradeoffs pressed upon the Assad regime in southern Syria are visibly starker. Regime and Hezbollah forces prioritized the campaign to clear the Qalamoun region from November 2013 to April 2014 to the detriment of regime positions in Dera’a and Quneitra Provinces. As the regime shifted to focus on offensives against Mleiha and Adra in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus in summer 2014, opposition forces exploited the resulting drawdowns to make additional gains in both the Qalamoun and far-southern Syria. Unsuccessful regime attempts to once again shift its campaign towards Dera’a and Quneitra Provinces starting in December 2014 indicated that overall regime offensive capabilities in southern Syria may be waning despite fresh influxes of Iranian proxies to the frontlines. These trends support the idea that continuing attrition has sapped the momentum of the pro-regime coalition throughout the country. Syrian forces were not able in any case to simultaneously prioritize multiple fronts, even with support, causing them to maintain

a reactive posture and prioritize asymmetric techniques such as sieges and chemical weapons.

AN ARMY IN ALL CORNERS

The Assad regime’s military campaigns to secure Aleppo, Damascus, and the Syrian Alawite heartland differed significantly from regime’s operations in the rest of Syria. In contrast to the offensive maneuvers conducted along fronts deemed a regime priority, Assad relied upon a network of isolated military outposts to pin the bounds of a unified and contiguous Syrian state throughout most of northern and eastern Syria. This ‘army in all corners’ strategy allows the regime to assert a nominal presence across the entirety of Syrian territory. These fortified strongpoints also fix large amounts of rebel forces, drawing them into long-running siege operations for minimal investment of regime manpower. However, these outposts are nonetheless vulnerable to being overrun when rebel forces succeed in organizing concerted offensives supported by heavier weaponry. Several key regime positions fell to such opposition operations throughout the course of 2014. Nonetheless, the Assad regime continues to maintain staying power in pockets deep within opposition-held terrain.

Idlib

The Assad regime had deprioritized its positions in northwestern Syria by mid-2014 and forfeited most of Idlib Province to opposition fighters. Regime presence concentrated along two networks of hardened checkpoints and military installations: one running along the M5 Highway in southern Idlib Province between the towns of Ma’arrat al-Numan and Khan Sheikhoun, and the other along the M4 Highway connecting regime heartland in Latakia Province to the city of Idlib. A regime garrison also remained at the Abu Dhuhur airbase in the far eastern countryside of the province. These positions enabled the Assad regime to severely limit rebel freedom of movement in northern Syria and defended the solitary supply line running to regime forces in the provincial capital. Despite limited support from external forces, these garrisons resisted multiple rebel assaults throughout most of 2014.²⁷⁹

Ultimately, however, an apparent regime stance of ‘benign neglect’ towards its outposts in Idlib Province left pro-regime forces unable to maintain the ‘army in all corners’ strategy. The garrisons at the Wadi al-Deif and al-Hamidiyah military bases located in the outskirts of Ma’arrat al-Numan collapsed under a joint rebel offensive spearheaded by JN and Ahrar al-Sham on December 15, 2014, prompting a rout which removed all remaining regime presence along the M5 Highway north of Morek.²⁸⁰ Meanwhile, in a stunning loss,

an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 rebel fighters directed by JN and Ahrar al-Sham seized Idlib city on March 28, 2015, after only four days of fighting, marking only the second provincial capital to fall to opposition forces since the capture of ar-Raqqa city in March 2013.²⁸¹ The rapid withdrawal of the primarily-NDF defenders of the city suggests that regime units in Idlib Province had been gutted by a lack of reinforcement. However, the quick deployment of elite Tiger Forces and Hezbollah fighters to regime positions south of Idlib city by mid-April 2015 signaled that the Assad regime does not intend to relinquish its remaining positions in Idlib Province.²⁸²

Hasaka

The Assad regime maintains a unique posture in the remote northeastern province of Hasaka due to its fragile relationship with the Kurdish YPG. Regular regime forces in the province consist of a relatively small contingent of 17th SAA Division soldiers reinforced by elements from the 47th Special Forces Regiment.²⁸³ The bulk of regime manpower, however, takes the form of several thousand NDF militiamen recruited from the local Sunni Arab populace, including the Tayy and Sharabia tribes, as well as the loyalist ‘Sootoro’ Syriac Christian militia in Qamishli.²⁸⁴ These troops are largely concentrated in the vicinity of the cities of Hasaka and Qamishli. The Qamishli Airport in particular serves as an aerial resupply route for regime forces in the province as well as a staging point for intermittent airstrikes or barrel bomb attacks.²⁸⁵ Regime forces have generally restricted their offensive activities towards securing neighborhoods and villages in the immediate countryside of Hasaka and Qamishli, either due to limited capabilities or concern over antagonizing Kurdish forces.²⁸⁶

Regime forces in Hasaka Province suffer tense relations with the Kurds due to both institutional regime opposition against Kurdish moves towards greater autonomy as well as personal enmities between pro-regime tribesmen and YPG fighters. YPG and NDF forces engaged in occasional minor clashes throughout 2014 regarding disputes over local lines of control.²⁸⁷ These tensions came to the fore on January 17, 2015, when a disagreement over the placement of an NDF checkpoint in Hasaka city sparked several days of fighting which killed eight pro-regime fighters and six YPG members.²⁸⁸ The conflict only ended after a regime delegation from Damascus, including Minister of Defense Fakhri Jassem al-Frej and director of National Security Office Ali Mamlouk, negotiated a ceasefire and ordered the arrest of local NDF commander Fadi Hantoush.²⁸⁹ However, pressure from ISIS advances in Hasakah Province has largely forced regime and YPG forces to find temporary common cause in the province and indirectly coordinate their activities against

ISIS. An alleged agreement reported on April 18, 2015, in which the regime agreed to provide tribal fighters and air support to reinforce YPG forces in the border town of Ras al-Ayn potentially marks a significant departure from this pattern and would likely indicate a further renegotiation of regime-Kurdish relations in Hasakah Province in the face of the ISIS threat.²⁹⁰

Nevertheless, the Assad regime appears to be receiving Iranian support to establish and train new irregular formations which can assert regime presence in Hasaka Province at the long-term expense of the YPG. Iran holds a vested interest in both subduing Kurdish separatism to preserve the integrity of an allied Syrian state and leveraging the ‘army in all corners’ strategy to erect parallel structures of Iranian influence throughout Syria. Ultimately, Iran may also seek to posture against ISIS forces in northwestern Iraq. Activist reports claimed on November 18, 2014 that approximately 200 Lebanese Hezbollah and IRGC personnel were operating inside of Qamishli city, likely as trainers and advisors for local tribal NDF militias.²⁹¹ Allegations from local sources that twenty NDF members from the province were sent to Lebanon for special training in Hezbollah camps support this claim.²⁹² A civil rights activist stated on February 18, 2015 that Hezbollah and Iran sought to “form a military force in order to strengthen the position of the Syrian regime in the region.”²⁹³ Two weeks later, an Arab tribal force named the “Al-Jazira [Hasaka Province] is Arab and Syrian” announced its formation in hostile language directed against the YPG, asserting that its fighters will preserve the “Arab and Syrian nature” of Hasaka Province as well as the political unity of Syria under its current leadership.²⁹⁴ It is likely that this new organization represents the output of Iranian, Hezbollah, and regime efforts to establish rival centers of power to the YPG.

Raqqa

At the start of 2014, the Syrian regime maintained only three strongpoints in the entirety of ar-Raqqa Province: the Division 17 military base on the outskirts of ar-Raqqa, the Brigade 93 military base near Ayn Issa in northern ar-Raqqa Province, and the Tabaqa airbase in western ar-Raqqa Province. Although these outposts preserved the Assad regime’s claim to ar-Raqqa Province in line with the ‘army in all corners’ strategy, their position deep within opposition-held territory far from potential routes of reinforcement, resupply, or retreat left regime forces in ar-Raqqa extremely vulnerable. These weaknesses were prominently exposed in the summer of 2014 as ISIS moved to secure ar-Raqqa Province as a deep rear position for its newly-founded ‘caliphate.’ ISIS militants mounted a coordinated offensive campaign which overran the three outposts in quick succession: the Division 17 base

on July 25, the Brigade 93 base on August 8, and the Tabaqa airbase on August 24.²⁹⁵ At least five hundred SAA soldiers died in the clashes or in systematic executions after being captured by ISIS forces.²⁹⁶

The quick and brutal destruction of the last remaining regime positions in ar-Raqqa Province demonstrated the inherent challenges facing the regime as it attempts to implement its 'army in all corners' strategy. In an analysis of the defeat, Washington Institute for Near East Policy defense fellow Jeffrey White noted: "This approach, which has been used extensively throughout the war, has worked where the opposition is weak, disorganized, irresolute, and lightly armed. But these conditions did not pertain in Raqqa, where ISIS massed forces and firepower, operated in a coordinated fashion, and was willing to pay the price in casualties to seize the objective."²⁹⁷ It remains unclear at this time if Assad will seek to reestablish a presence in this corner of the country, but the presence of ISIS gives a clear pretext for the Syrian government to seek common cause with, or exploit gains by, the U.S.-led coalition in the area.

Eastern Homs

The Assad regime has devoted a large amount of resources to garrison a series of military and industrial facilities spread throughout eastern Homs Province. These committed forces are an expression of the deep importance the regime places in the region. For one, regime positions in eastern Homs defend a long ground line of communication stretching from Homs city through Palmyra and the central desert to regime forces in Deir ez-Zour city. Eastern Homs Province also contains two airfields, the Palmyra airbase and the T4 (Tiyas) airbase, which house a large portion of the Syrian Air Force fighter-bomber fleet.²⁹⁸ The regime strongpoints also encompass a series of major natural gas fields and processing plants which provide a large portion of the electricity for regime-held parts of western Syria.²⁹⁹ Positions in eastern Homs Province are also intrinsically valuable as a forward line of defense protecting Homs, Hama, and the eastern flank of the Syrian central corridor against ISIS forces.

The heavy deployment of elite SAA units and paramilitary reinforcements to eastern Homs Province underscores the central importance which the regime placed on defending this region despite concerted ISIS pressure. After ISIS forces overran the Sha'er gas field on July 17, 2014, killing or executing an estimated 270 NDF militiamen, private security guards, and employees, the regime deployed the Suqour al-Sahara Brigade of the Special Forces to launch a counterattack on July 20.³⁰⁰ By July 27, 2014, the elite SAA unit had reestablished control over the field.³⁰¹ ISIS staged another complex offensive in late October which succeeded

in recapturing the Sha'er gas field while also targeting the entrances to the Tiyas airbase and Palmyra city with SVBIEDs.³⁰² In response, the elements of the reserve 18th SAA Armored Division, the 'Tiger Forces' Special Forces unit commanded by Col. Suhail al-Hassan, and a unit of 'foreign fighters' deployed to eastern Homs Province.³⁰³ The combined strength of these units soon expelled ISIS from the immediate vicinity of regime positions, although daily clashes between regime and ISIS forces on Mount Sha'er continue as of April 2015.

In order to further reinforce its defenses in the eastern Homs region, the regime is apparently attempting to build a new NDF unit in Palmyra under IRGC supervision. From January to February 2015, activists reported that several IRGC experts and Hezbollah trainers had arrived in Palmyra to discuss the construction of NDF training centers in eastern Homs Province.³⁰⁴ Opposition news sources claimed that over one hundred men had enrolled in a new militia force overseen by Iranian officers by February 16, 2015, noting that some of the volunteers had been flown to Iran for special training.³⁰⁵ These local recruits likely played a role in enabling a March 4, 2015 raid against ISIS positions at the T2 Pumping Station west of Abu Kamal which was the first regime offensive ground operation into ISIS-controlled eastern Deir ez-Zour Province since the early 2014.³⁰⁶ However, an escalating campaign of ISIS hit-and-run attacks in March 2015 which applied direct pressure to the Palmyra Military Airbase as well as regime supply lines to Deir ez-Zour and Aleppo cities will likely force the Assad regime to pull additional units from other fronts to augment its positions in eastern Homs Province.³⁰⁷

Deir ez-Zour

The Assad regime has also committed elite forces to its defense of Deir ez-Zour city, located along the ISIS-dominated Euphrates River valley in eastern Syria near the border with Anbar Province in Iraq. Regime forces in Deir ez-Zour occupy the most remote combat outpost maintained as a part of the 'army in all corners' strategy. Elements of the 104th Brigade of the Republican Guard under the command of Brigadier General Issam Zahreddine deployed to Deir ez-Zour Province in early 2014 to reinforce the NDF and SAA 137th Mechanized Brigade units stationed in the Deir ez-Zour Military Airport and the western neighborhoods of the city.³⁰⁸ These elite troops brought an array of new tactical capabilities to the battlefield in Deir ez-Zour. Regime forces in Deir ez-Zour city detonated tunnel bombs under ISIS fortifications on August 15 and September 15, 2014, marking the first instances that regime forces adapted this common rebel tactic to their own purposes.³⁰⁹ The 104th Brigade could also rely upon close cooperation with Syrian Air Force warplanes



Brigadier General Issam Zahreddine with soldiers from the SAA 104th Republican Guard Brigade in Deir ez-Zour.

operating in the Deir ez-Zour Military Airport in order to conduct precision strikes against rebel and ISIS forces.³¹⁰

However, the limited manpower available to regime forces in Deir ez-Zour has prevented Republican Guard units from making a decisive impact on the battlefield. Pro-regime news sources reported on September 5, 2014 that a convoy of 600 personnel and 90 armed vehicles from the Republican Guard arrived to reinforce Deir ez-Zour.³¹¹ Roughly one month later, on October 14, 2014, Republican Guard forces mounted an offensive to seize ISIS-held terrain on nearby Saker Island.³¹² Despite initial successes, an ISIS offensive in early December targeting the Deir ez-Zour Military Airport forced Republican Guard units to withdraw from many positions on Saker Island, erasing weeks of progress.³¹³ This reversal indicates that even the elite regime unit stationed in Deir ez-Zour lack the forces required to sustain offensive gains. Regime forces may have also been handicapped by a lack of local recruitment to replenish combat losses. One Al-Jazeera report indicated that total NDF forces in Deir ez-Zour city may number less than five hundred men due to regime difficulties in finding volunteers among the population.³¹⁴ The Deir ez-Zour garrison is thus vulnerable to weakness by attrition without continual reinforcement.

CONCLUSION

Future Outlook

The Assad regime possesses several intrinsic advantages which will likely enable Assad to secure a small number of limited additional gains against the Syrian opposition in 2015. For one, the regime military campaign is directed by

a coherent political strategy which dictates the selection and prioritization of battlefield objectives, providing pro-regime fighters with unity of purpose. In contrast, the actions of rebel forces on the ground are largely divorced from the political agenda of the exiled Syrian National Coalition (SNC) opposition government. Rebel groups are also divided by parochial spheres of influence, although increasing organization among Islamist rebel factions in Syria appears to be challenging this trend. The integrated coalition of SAA, NDF, and Iranian proxy forces fighting on behalf of the Assad regime also possesses superior unity of effort to the hundreds of independent, fractious rebel groups operating under the umbrella of the Syrian opposition. Although these advantages have been challenged throughout 2014 by the increasing decentralization of both domestic and foreign pro-regime forces, the Assad regime as a whole maintains an internal cohesion which has enabled it to more effectively apply its combat power than the Syrian opposition.

The Assad regime also gains a relative advantage through the limited nature of its military objectives. As previously noted, the regime seeks to win the political struggle for Syria by simply avoiding a clear loss on the battlefield. Regime forces do not need to eliminate the opposition completely in order to achieve victory – in this case, a favorable political settlement which acknowledges the supremacy and legitimacy of President Assad. Rebel forces striving to overthrow the regime through military means have assigned themselves a much more difficult task, namely to overthrow the regime and establish a different kind of government. Under these circumstances, the Assad regime can operate in a stance designed to preserve its combat power and consolidate control over select portions of Syria with minimal strain, forcing the opposition to conduct costly offensive operations against entrenched regime positions. This war of attrition likely favors the regime over the long term barring any dramatic event which negatively impacts regime performance, such as a grounding of the Syrian Air Force or an internally-generated ‘palace coup’ against Assad. However, this trend line does not lead to a stable Syria as an end result and over the short-to-medium term it results in a bloody and protracted near-stalemate which erodes regime combat forces, intensifies war-weariness among regime-supportive populations, radicalizes the remaining opposition, and generates waves of refugees.

Thus, in 2015 the Syrian regime will likely maintain its defensive ‘army in all corners’ stance throughout most of Syria and refuse to willingly cede ground to opposition forces. Regime forces will prioritize two fronts concurrently as the primary focus of their limited offensive capability: Aleppo and Damascus. If the regime manages to reconsolidate its defensive positions in northern Syria following the fall of Idlib city and redeploy additional manpower to Aleppo, pro-regime forces stand a chance of completing the encirclement

of Aleppo and placing the opposition-held districts of the city under a siege-and-starve campaign comparable to that conducted against the Old City of Homs in 2014. However, further advances in the northern countryside of Aleppo will undoubtedly meet stiff opposition from rebel forces and the regime will likely be unable to sustain any gains made in an initial encirclement attempt. Meanwhile, regime combat units will continue to apply intense pressure to the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus and seize additional territory on the margins of the opposition-held pocket, although a total collapse of the remaining rebel presence in the capital remains highly unlikely. Assad will likely increasingly call upon Iranian proxies including Lebanese Hezbollah and Afghan Shi'a volunteers to enable regime advances on priority battlefields or contain opposition forces on secondary fronts such as Qalamoun and Dera'a Provinces. Nevertheless, these units will almost certainly prove insufficient to comprehensively turn the tide of battle in Syria. Ultimately, regime gains in 2015 will likely be stifled by the high potential for unexpected inflections – such as a renewed rebel offensive into northern Hama Province, escalating opposition gains in Dera'a Province, or a concerted ISIS campaign against regime positions in eastern Homs Province – which force the regime to abandon its strategic designs and direct its battlefield priorities reactively.

Implications for U.S. Policy

As the Syrian Civil War moved into its fifth year with no clear end in sight, the strategy of maximized ‘staying power’ pursued by President Assad appears to be gaining traction abroad. Sharp debates emerged within the White House and the State Department over the course of 2014 regarding whether stated U.S. policy calling for the removal of Assad ought to be sidelined in favor of efforts to reinforce regional stability and security.³⁵ These attitudes reflect early success in the Assad regime’s strategy to promote itself as the only realistic partner available in the conflict. However, these deliberations risk accepting the false dichotomy within which the regime has sought to frame the conflict. A debate structured as a choice between the Assad regime and ‘extremist terrorists’ glosses over the fact that these options are two sides of the same coin.

The enduring presence of President Assad fuels the activities of ISIS, JN, and other Salafi-jihadist groups who capitalize upon the frustrations of the Syrian opposition in order to assert their own agendas. The tactics used by the regime to enforce the “army in all corners” strategy – from airstrikes, barrel bombs, and chemical weapons to sieges, sectarian massacres, and torture – mark Assad as a permanent enemy to many Syrians. These atrocities strengthen the sectarian narrative held by Salafi-jihadist groups operating in Syria, provide a constant stream of recruits vulnerable to

radicalization, and set the stage for emergent security threats which could threaten the West for generations to come. Assad does not possess the means to defeat or destroy this jihadist resurgence. Prolonging his rule only ensures that Syria will continue to serve as an incubation chamber for terrorist groups such as ISIS and JN into the foreseeable future.

The viability of treating Assad as a potential counterterrorism partner is also limited by the declining agency which Assad holds over his own military forces. An increasing reliance on paramilitary units such as the National Defense Forces (NDF) has devolved significant amounts of power to local and regional actors that are often unresponsive to the state. Meanwhile, the visible growth of Iranian involvement in Syria witnessed over 2014 challenges key U.S. regional allies as well as wider U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East, especially when taken in conjunction with similar ongoing dynamics in Iraq. Iran and its allies directed regime offensives in southern Syria which were likely intended in part to position Iranian-aligned forces in close proximity to the border with the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. Expanded Iranian influence also threatens to shift the calculus of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other regional powers in a way that promotes further conflict. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies have already demonstrated the willingness to counter perceived Iranian expansion through military means with the launch of Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen. The lack of U.S. action against Assad, and by extension Iran, strains relations between the U.S. and its Arab allies and erodes the credibility of the U.S. position in the region as a whole.

Meanwhile, the abuses of the Assad regime contribute to a deepening humanitarian crisis which threatens to overwhelm the region. The Syrian Civil War has already claimed the lives of over 220,000 Syrians and displaced nearly 11.5 million civilians. Millions of refugees have fled to neighboring countries, placing heavy burdens upon regional U.S. allies such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Inaction on the part of the U.S. only drives a further wedge between the West and the Syrian populace. Many elements of the formerly-moderate opposition have aligned with jihadist groups such as JN which are perceived as effective partners in the fight against the regime. In turn, this shift towards extremism bolsters Assad with additional domestic and international legitimacy as the only apparent alternative to a radicalized Syria. Assad is the instigator of and not the solution to this problem

Thus, any acceptance of the status quo in Syria also accepts the perpetuation of trends which are untenable for U.S. interests in the Middle East. Assad is not a capable or suitable anti-ISIS partner and the preservation of his position will render a clear victory in the international campaign to ‘degrade and destroy’ ISIS in Iraq and Syria almost impossible. The status quo perpetuated by Assad also fosters the rise of Jabhat al-

Nusra and other Salafi-jihadist groups which may possess the intent and capability to conduct direct attacks against the U.S. and European homeland.³¹⁶ Allowing Assad to conduct his military campaign with impunity sows the seeds for generations of regional disorder to come while empowering the expansionist designs and force projection capabilities of the Iranian regime. An interim diplomatic settlement which does not address the exacerbating role played by Bashar al-Assad will thus not succeed in generating stability or security.

The United States does possess additional cards that it could place on the table that have the potential to change the dynamics of the Syrian conflict dramatically. The United States could ground the Syrian Air Force and impose a No Fly Zone over opposition-held areas in order to alleviate the ongoing humanitarian disaster in Syria, neutralize one of the key regime asymmetric advantages over the Syrian opposition, and counter the narratives of ISIS, JN, and other jihadist groups which have utilized U.S. inaction to gain legitimacy amongst the populace. The United States could also expedite and enlarge the effort to train-and-equip Syrian opposition fighters alongside regional allies such as Turkey and Jordan in order to establish a credible ground partner which could legitimately contest core terrain in Syria and draw rebel forces away from further compromise and cooperation with extremist groups. At minimum, the United States must challenge the anti-U.S. messaging which malign actors use to frame the conflict in Syria by undertaking efforts which demonstrate commitment to the Syrian people, such as a meaningful expansion in the amount of aid provided to the Syrian refugee community. Indecisive or limited action intensifies disorder and anti-US sentiment among acceptable Syrian actors as well as regional Arab allies. These actions are not a panacea. Restoring order in Syria will require long-term and energetic engagement by the U.S. and the international community. But if U.S. policymakers do not soon adopt a more forceful and focused approach to Syria, the only foreseeable outcome is a fragmented and failed Syrian state that menaces its neighbors and brutalizes its people.

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