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## Still Nothing New in Syria

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In recent years, the conventional wisdom about the Syrian civil war has been that no resolution was in sight, as neither Bashar al-Asad and his allies, nor the regime's numerous, albeit fractious opponents possessed the ability to triumph over the other side. This assumption has led some to conclude that Bashar will continue to hold onto the heart of the Syrian state -- a narrow strip of territory that stretches from Damascus, the capital, to Aleppo and the Alawi coastal area in the north and perhaps even to Dar'a and Jabal Druze in the south. A corollary of this conclusion is that the main rebel groups<sup>1</sup> will find it difficult to prevail because of their inability to unify and create an effective military and political leadership.

However, since the summer of 2014, the course of the war in Syria has tilted in the rebels' favor. At the same time, it continues to be a war of attrition involving hundreds of local battles scattered across the country. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of the rebel achievements may have important implications in the broader struggle for Syria.

The Asad regime is now bleeding and its available manpower is shrinking. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) is exhausted and tired, and morale is low. Hence, the regime has been forced to rely more heavily on Asad's Alawi community, which is still willing to send its sons to fight and be killed for the regime, and on Hizballah's fighters that transit into Syria from Lebanon to support it. However, these two groups are not sufficient to defeat all of the rebel groups that have taken up arms against the regime.

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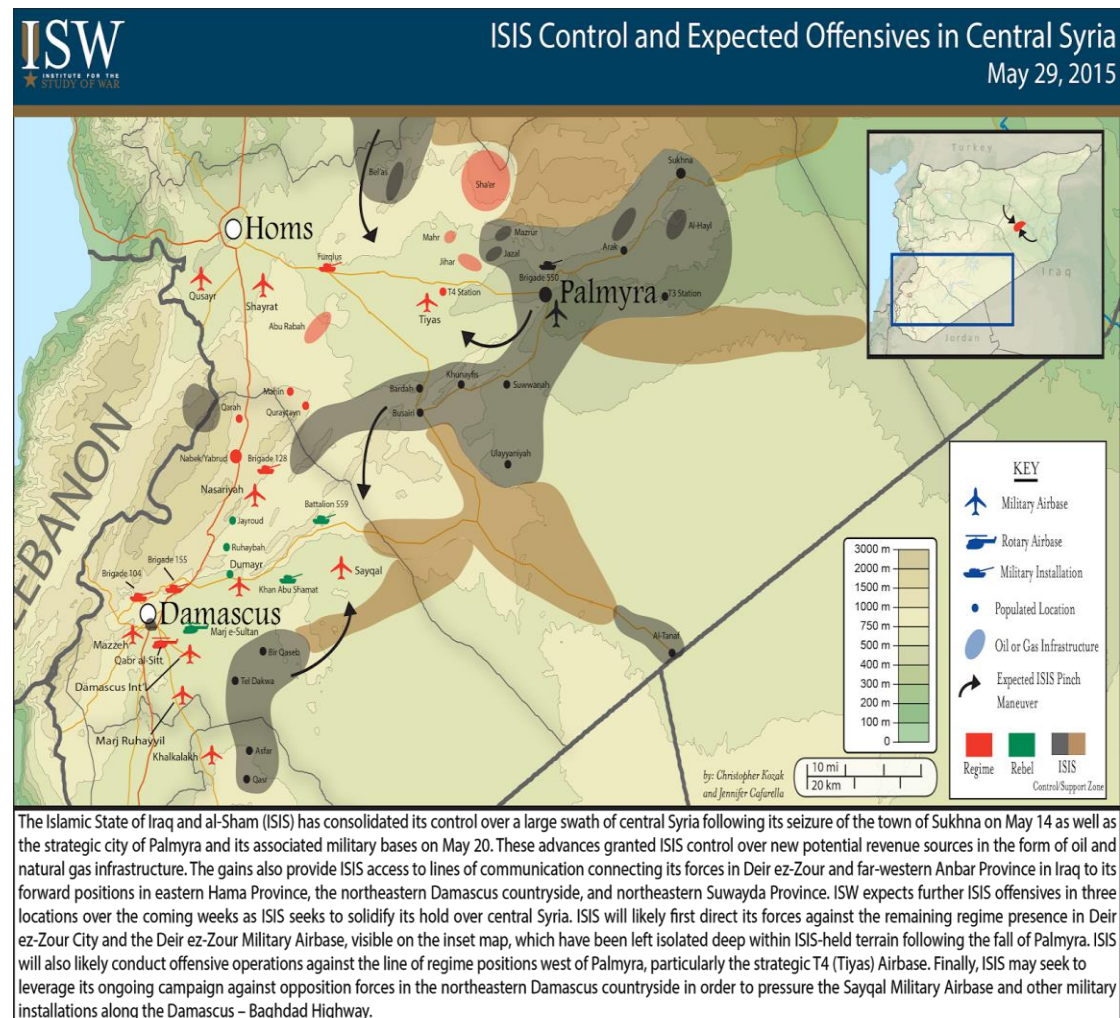
<sup>1</sup> Principally the jihadist groups that immediately hijacked the revolution, but also the same Syrian masses that initially rose up against the regime in 2011 and that have led the fight against the Asad regime since then, as well as opposition groups in Syria's villages and rural periphery.

The rebel groups have demonstrated motivation, determination, persistence, and the capacity to survive. They enjoy the support of the local population, primarily in the rural areas that contain clusters of Sunni villages. What's more, they are reinforced by a steady stream of fighters from both within Syria and abroad. They have succeeded in uniting their forces, consolidating hundreds of rebel groups active across Syria. Nearly all of the remaining groups raise the banner of radical Islam, and many of them were formed from the remains of other less successful groups of rebels. In the east, the Islamic State destroyed its opponents and became the only power in the area. The Kurds, who are led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), are active in the primarily Kurdish enclaves in the northeast, which is adjacent to the territories controlled by the Islamic State. In the west, *Jabhat al-Nusra* stands out as the leading power, one that displays pragmatism and a readiness to collaborate with other Salafi groups, such as *Jaysh al-Islam*, led by Zahran Alloush, and *Ahrar al-Sham*, led by Hashim al-Shaykh ("Abu Jaber").

The rebels have also increased their cooperation with Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. The three countries are increasingly coordinating their efforts, which include enhanced financial and logistical support to the rebel groups. They have even helped train some of the rebels. But perhaps their most important contribution has been pressuring their Syrian allies to cooperate with one another. Bent on toppling Asad's regime, these neighboring Sunni states have sought to demonstrate the same determination displayed by Asad's supporters, Iran, Hizballah, and Russia.

During the past year, the rebels have recorded a string of military successes that are beginning to have a cumulative effect. The Islamic State has emerged from the desert to control a broad swath of territory that extends from northern Iraq to eastern Syria. The group has established itself in the Al Jazira area (the Syrian governorates of Dir al-Zur, Hasakah, and al-Raqqa), where it has worked to eliminate the remaining regime enclaves. For example, by the summer of 2014, the group managed to control al-Tabqa and Abu Kamal, and consistently targeted Dir al-Zur and Hasakah, albeit without success. The Islamic State also attempted to expand in the direction of Homs, which sits astride the axis that connects northern and southern Syria. In November 2014 they won control over the al-Sha'er oil and gas fields, which lie 110 kilometers from Homs, after having been defeated there two months earlier by Asad's forces. In May 2015, the Islamic State conquered Palmyra, the gateway to central Syria from the east, lying 155 kilometers from Homs and 210 kilometers from Damascus. At the beginning of April 2015, Islamic State fighters gained a foothold in the suburbs of Damascus, in the neighborhoods of al-Hajar al-Aswad and the Yarmuk Palestinian refugee camp. In southern Syria, the Islamic State advanced to the eastern foot of Jabal

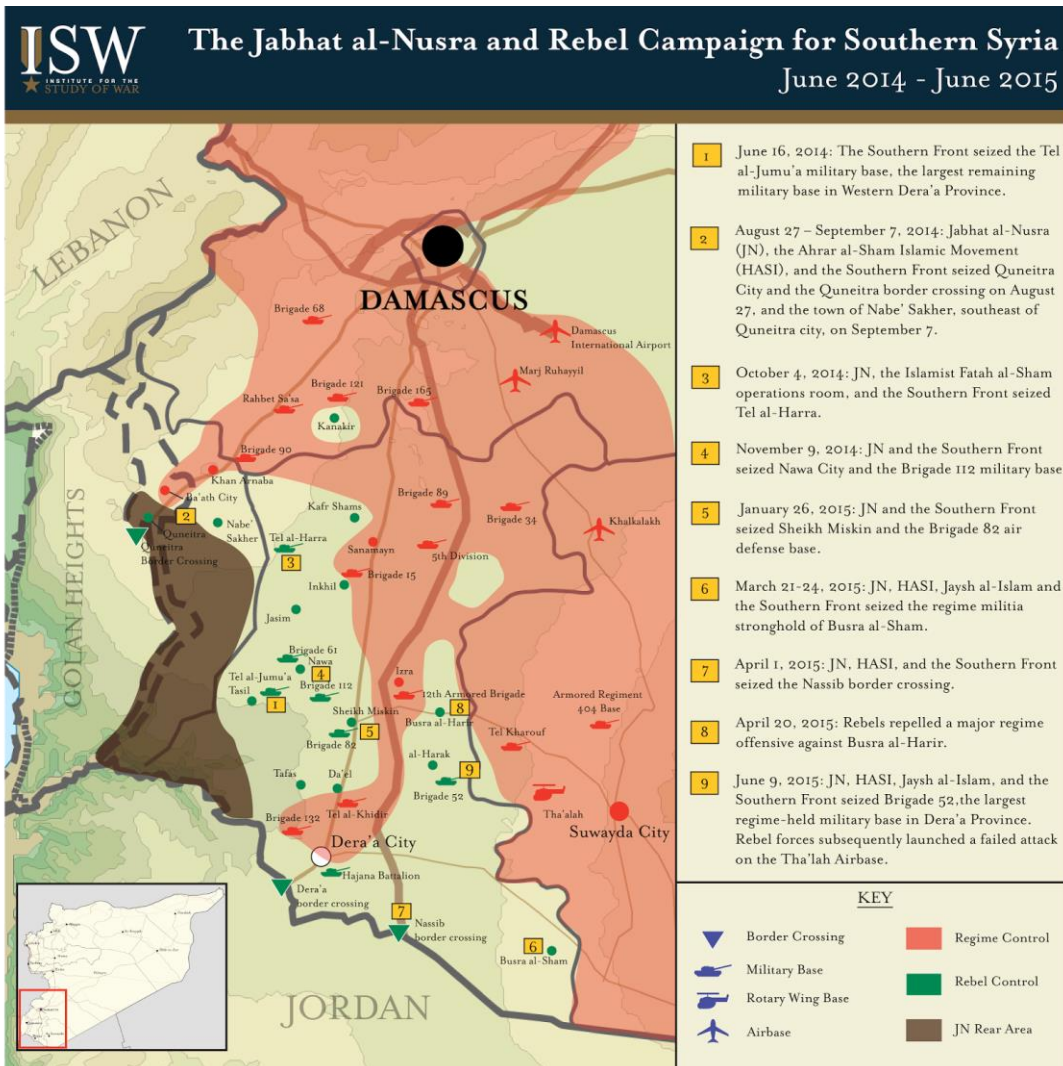
Druze in May/June 2015, and moving into the villages of Bir al-Qasab and al-Qasr. The group also assimilated several rebel groups operating on the Syria-Lebanon border, in the areas of the Qalamoun Mountains and the Golan Heights.



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In southern Syria, *Jabhat al-Nusra* and its allies have made the biggest gains. The groups control a number of villages near Der'a and Quneitra and in the rural areas surrounding Damascus. They also control most of the area adjacent to the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights,<sup>2</sup> including Quneitra, which was captured in August 2014. The rebels also seized the Nasib border crossing with Jordan in April 2015.

<sup>2</sup> This includes the strategic line of communications on the Syria side of the border. From its head at Tel al-Hara, one can command the entire expanse of the Hawran plateau.



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In the north, the rebels took most of northwest Syria, and most importantly the Governorate of Idlib. In March/April 2015, the rebels captured the city of Idlib, the provincial capital, followed by the towns of Jisr al-Shughur and Ariha, which lie along north-south road from Idlib to Latakia and the Syrian coast that is the core territory of the Alawi minority population.

Among the principal rebel achievements have been the ability to threaten the regime's hold on Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, and the Alawi coastal area. In light of these rebel achievements, there are strong doubts emerging in Syria about whether Bashar's regime will be able to survive much longer. There is a sense that Bashar is increasingly facing the rebel factions empty-handed, lacking the tools to respond effectively.

The regime, for its part, has concentrated its efforts on preserving its base in the heart of the country—the city of Damascus and the narrow strip stretching

north to the cities of Homs and Hama on the way to the coast, and Aleppo. This past spring the regime asked for reinforcements from Hizballah with the goal of strengthening the regime's control over the area along the Lebanon-Syria border (the Qalamoun Mountain ridge); the western outskirts of Damascus (al-Ghouta and al-Gharbiya); and the city of Zabadani that lies between them on the road that leads north from Damascus to Homs and Hama, and west to Beirut. The regime, with Hizballah's support, won key battles during the fighting in these areas, which raised morale and bound their fate together even more tightly than before.

The Syrian regime was historically based on a broad coalition of minority groups, with the Alawis being the most prominent among them. But alongside the minorities were Sunnis from the villages in the rural periphery. In 2011, the rural Sunni sector, which makes up one-third of the population, erupted in a social protest movement that turned into a bloody civil war and jihad, resulting in the collapse of the regime's ruling coalition.

The war draws on large portions of the Sunni public living in large cities (Sunnis make up 60 percent of the total population). The typical urban Sunni in Syria and certainly the upper and middle classes are not taking part in the fighting. The urban population, which is despised by the rural villagers, fears the radical Islam that has become the driving force in the Syrian rebellion and endangers the country's existing social, economic, and political order. The regime is led by Asad's Alawi minority, but its base is the Sunni urban population that was and remains essentially secular and nationalist. For citizens of Syria's large cities, collaboration with Bashar al-Asad's regime means working in his government's offices, not enlisting to fight for the regime against the Islamic State and *Jabhat al-Nusra*.

The other components of the former Syrian ruling coalition are scattered. The Christians have emigrated *en masse*. The Kurds are confined to their cantons in the north of the country and are exploiting the civil war to establish autonomous rule there. Even the Druze are planning to battle for their homes on Jabal al-Druze, and are beginning to distance themselves from the regime. In this predicament, Bashar al-Asad has no choice but to rely on the Alawis. But enlisting the Alawis alongside a few thousand Iraqi and Afghani foreign fighters and even a few thousand Hizballah fighters can hardly tilt the balance of forces. In contrast, the opposition to the regime draws on a seemingly inexhaustible reserve of fighters. While foreign volunteers are still streaming into Syria by the hundreds each month, rebel manpower consists mainly of local Syrians.



The Syrian regime has still not collapsed. Despite the blows it has absorbed, it stands, wobbling on its two feet, succeeding in preserving the cohesion of the governing system, the military, and the security apparatus. It also continues to enjoy support from certain segments of the population. The regime still controls what is necessary for the political entity to function— Damascus, the large cities, and the coast. The task of defending this territory is far easier than maintaining effective governance throughout the country.

But the rebels are already at the gates of Damascus, and at the gates of Der'a, Homs, and Aleppo, as well. The regime's diminishing resources and lack of manpower raises the question of how much longer Bashar's regime can hang on. The regime needs a miraculous turnaround on the battlefield, which seems unlikely given the cohesion the rebels are demonstrating, as well as the level of support they are receiving from different regional and international actors. U.S., Saudi, and Turkish attitudes appear to be changing. The Saudis have met with Russia and Iran to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian war (without Bashar stepping down from power as a precondition). In the wake of the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran, there are signs of tentative cooperation between the U.S. and Iran regarding the struggle in Iraq against the Islamic State. Nevertheless, the war in Syria has a dynamic of its own.

In this context, it is important to remember the swinging pendulum of assessments about Bashar's chances of surviving in office. At the start of the Syrian revolution, it was widely held that Bashar's days were numbered. This assessment was quickly replaced with the assessment that Bashar would be the last man standing, and in one way or another emerge the winner, even if the price was the state of Syria itself. Then came the widely held assumption that the war in Syria was a war without a resolution that would last many, many years. Today, Bashar's regime is bleeding and it may very well bleed to death, but it is still advisable to wait and see upon whom lady luck will shine her light in the coming months.

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