# PREVENTING THE FALL OF ALEPPO

A Strategic Analysis of Regime Barrel Bombings and ISIS Influence in Aleppo Province.



URGENT ACTION is needed to prevent the ascendancy of both the Assad regime and ISIS in Syria's most populous province.


Syrian American Council

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# Executive Summary

As Syria peace talks deadlock at Geneva, forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad have unleashed a potentially decisive offensive around Aleppo City that may eliminate the possibility of a peaceful settlement. Since December 15th, the Assad regime has killed over 1200 Aleppo civilians in aerial attacks using barrel bombs, or explosives-packed containers that rain shrapnel on their surroundings upon impact. Aleppo City's eastern half is now near-empty of residents due to escalated barrel bombings there. Both the regime and the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), which claims allegiance to Al-Qaeda, are poised for unprecedented advances that will give them ascendancy over the Syrian opposition.

The Syrian American Council has undertaken a detailed examination of Arabic news reports, accounts from on-the-ground activists, and other sources detailing the barrel bombings that have pummeled Aleppo City during two distinct periods: the first three weeks of the attacks (December 15th-January 4th), and the three weeks after rebels announced their attendance at Geneva II talks (January 19th-February 8th). Our team has mapped the locations of each targeted area, with over 80 distinct locations in Aleppo City identified, to better understand the broader strategic purpose behind the bombing raids. We combine this mapping with an analysis of the intricate supply line network around Aleppo City, and with an accounting of the complex, rapidly-evolving battlefront between rebel forces and ISIS.

We conclude that Assad forces are now successfully replicating in Aleppo the "starve and surrender" strategy they have employed since the Battle of Qusair. If this strategy is successful, a peaceful settlement will be all but impossible, as the regime will have a realistic chance at outright victory. If the City of Aleppo falls, both a Srebrenica-scale massacre and a new ISIS haven that forces foreign intervention are possible.

The "starve and surrender" strategy began in earnest in May 2013--during the previous iteration of Geneva II talks--when thousands of Hezbollah fighters flooded into Syria's Homs Province to seize Qusair on behalf of the Assad regime. This unprecedented escalation allowed Assad forces to sever rebel supply lines, achieve domination in the province, and tip the balance across Syria. Since Qusair, Assad forces have starved numerous Damascus suburbs into bogus "ceasefires" in which rebel fighters surrender their heavy weapons. Using "starve and surrender" methods, Assad forces by late 2013 had managed to neutralize the most dangerous potential launch points for an offensive on the capital.

Assad forces since September 2013 have brought "starve and surrender" to the main rebel stronghold of Aleppo. Regime forces captured the Safira Road southeast of Aleppo City in November, establishing a ground supply route to Aleppo and severing rebel access to the crucial Aleppo Airport Road. With the capture of Naqqarin village on January 11th, regime forces obstructed access to Bab Road, then the last rebel route east from Aleppo. Syrian American Council's analysis of bombing patterns shows that regime barrel bombings were an integral part of this offensive. From December 15th-January 4th, bombings were most heavy near the Bab Road, and most likely softened the way for its capture.

From January 19th-February 8th, barrel bombings were at more than double their previous

intensity by Syrian American Council tallies. Bombings were concentrated in eastern Aleppo, explaining why the vast majority of eastern Aleppo residents had fled by early February. Our mapping of bombing patterns shows that the barrel bombs fell heaviest on areas around the Aleppo Airport Road, and were again probably designed to prepare for a regime offensive. On January 28th, the regime pushed west along the Airport Road for its first-ever capture of rebel territory in Aleppo City proper. The regime is now within striking distance of defeating rebel forces in their main stronghold.

Even in these dire circumstances, rebel forces since early January have opened a second from against the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). While there are many Islamist groups in Syria, it would be a mistake to conflate ISIS with groups such as the Islamic Front or Tawhid Brigade. ISIS was formed for the explicit purpose of conducting transnational terror operations, and it is the only group in Syria currently conducting such operations. After its foundation in April 2013, the ISIS rapidly acquired a wide arc of territory spanning the majority of the Syrian-Turkish border, prompting Director of National Intelligence James Clapper to say he feared the rise of "a new FATA" (Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas) in Syria. ISIS unleashed a wave of kidnappings and assassinations against Syrian opposition figures, and attempted to monopolize control of crucial supply lines to Aleppo City.

Starting on January 3rd, rebel forces fought back, in the context of massive popular protests against ISIS abuses across opposition areas. The rebels' anti-ISIS offensive was spearheaded by the Mujahideen Army and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, two new rebel coalitions formed to unify the ranks of moderate Free Syrian Army forces. After the main rebel grouping Islamic Front joined the fight, ISIS was quickly routed from Idlib Province south of Aleppo and Deir Ezzor Province in the east. By January 9th, ISIS forces had completely withdrawn from most key towns along rebel supply routes to Aleppo. However, ISIS soon initiated a fierce counterattack. They routed rebel forces from Raqqah Province, ISIS's stronghold just east of Aleppo, and were able to recapture many Aleppo supply lines.

Today, the Syrian opposition is engaged in a fierce two-front war for control of Syria's largest city and its main rebel stronghold. If the Syrian opposition loses on either of these fronts, a regional crisis of sufficient scale to force foreign intervention is possible. The fall of Aleppo to Assad forces would prompt a massive refugee wave that would shake the stability of neighboring states, while residents left behind would face a potential Srebrenica-scale slaughter. However, if ISIS is able to eliminate the opposition in Aleppo, a new launchpad in Syria for transnational terrorism is possible.

# Policy Recommendations

More detailed policy recommendations can be found at the conclusion of this document.

1. Demand an approach combining diplomacy with the creation of ground conditions conducive to talks. Introduce a bill to <u>provide Syrian rebel forces with the tools they need to defend Aleppo.</u>

   - The bill should directly support the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, Tawhid Brigade, and other moderate rebel factions now fighting a two-front war in Aleppo.

   - In the absence of such support, the U.S. should refrain from blocking the Saudi transfer of anti-aircraft weapons to rebel forces, because weapons are needed urgently to stop the barrel bombs.

2. Pressure the State Department to <u>spend money Congress has already allocated</u> toward nonlethal support to the Syrian opposition. In particular, ask that State use the money in order to <u>bolster Syrian civilian activists</u> and to <u>set up a fund for potential defectors</u>.

   - The ISIS infiltration strategy fails when grassroots civilian structures are strong.

   - A defectors' fund would provide moral and practical support for potential regime defectors.

3. Pass legislation to <u>declare Assad a war criminal</u> and to <u>hold Iraq and Lebanon accountable</u> for the entry of Iranian-backed foreign militias. Demand a <u>more forward-leaning diplomatic posture</u> and a <u>travel ban on regime foreign minister Bashar Jaafari</u>.

   - Condition future aid to Iraq and Lebanon on their efforts to curb Iranian-backed foreign forces.

   - Declare Assad a war criminal based on evidence of systematic, deadly torture in Assad prisons.

   - The State Department must send clear messages on the unacceptability of Assad's rule in Syria.

   - Assad's foreign minister should not be allowed to freely spread regime propaganda in the U.S.

4. Demand that the UN and US <u>require the Assad regime to meet humanitarian preconditions</u> to diplomatic talks, and that they <u>place a clear timetable on negotiations</u>.

   - If talks continue without humanitarian preconditions or a timetable, they provide de facto political cover for Assad's continued violations under the "starve and surrender" strategy.

5. Raise the alarm regarding the possible impending rebel defeat in Aleppo.

   - Encourage fellow lawmakers and government officials to take <u>urgent and proactive steps</u> in support of rebel forces in Aleppo, before the situation worsens and U.S. policy options narrow.

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# Graphics

The basic premise of deadlocked Syria transition talks at Geneva is that neither the Syrian opposition nor the Assad regime can attain outright victory. In other words, Assad forces maintain their grip on the capital Damascus, but have no hope of reclaiming northern or eastern Syria. While Syria's opposition holds its weight in northern and eastern Syria, it is in no position to march into the capital Damascus. So long as these conditions obtain, both sides have incentive to enter political negotiations in order to end the fighting, and diplomacy becomes the best option to achieve a peaceful democratic transition.

However, as Syria peace talks continue at Geneva, Assad forces near Aleppo City have unleashed a potentially decisive offensive that may eliminate the possibility of a peaceful settlement. Since December 15th, the Assad regime has killed over 1200 Aleppo civilians in aerial attacks using barrel bombs, or explosives-packed containers that rain shrapnel on their surroundings upon impact. Aleppo City's eastern half is now near-empty of residents due to escalated barrel bombings there. Both the regime and the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), which claims allegiance to Al-Qaeda, are poised for unprecedented advances that will give them ascendancy over the Syrian opposition.
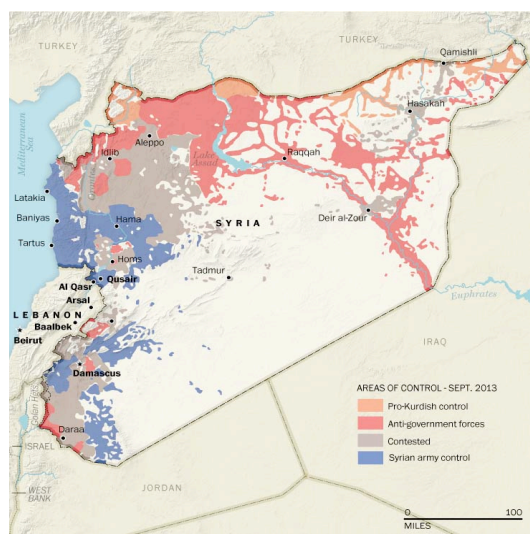


*Rebel control, denoted by red shading, is most heavily concentrated around Aleppo. Map from Washington Post, December 30, 2013.*

Prospects for a peaceful settlement will all but evaporate if the regime attains dominance in Aleppo, or even believes it can do so. Aleppo City is Syria's largest city and rests just 30 miles south of the Turkish border. Since Free Syrian Army fighters led by the Tawhid Brigade achieved rapid gains there during July 2012, Aleppo has constituted the main opposition power center (see inset).

If the regime shifts the balance in Aleppo, it will have a realistic chance of defeating the opposition outright, thereby nullifying the basic premise of Geneva talks that neither side can defeat the other. But the fall of Aleppo would reverberate far beyond Syria's borders. At minimum, the resulting displacement crisis would shake the stability of neighboring states. A Srebrenica-scale massacre or new ISIS haven are also possible, and might force foreign intervention.

This report analyzes the Assad regime's recent barrel bombing campaign in light of its overall strategy in Aleppo Province and across Syria. It is based on the daily tracking of bombing raids and clashes involving ISIS in over 80 distinct locales of Aleppo Province since mid-December, as well as an exploration of the intricate supply line network that has sustained opposition forces in Aleppo for over a year. We also provide an accounting of the complex, rapidly-evolving battlefront between rebel forces and ISIS in light of regime barrel bombings and rebel supply lines.

The report will reveal how, due to the regime's intensive barrel bombing campaign, a critical

opposition lifeline to Aleppo has been severed, jeopardizing the overall opposition presence in Aleppo. This report will also explore how ISIS has drawn to the cusp of establishing a wide arc of control spanning the vast majority of the Syrian-Turkish border. Finally, the report will suggest measures to prevent a decisive regime victory in Aleppo, and all the regional reverberations that such a victory would precipitate.

## Assad's Initial Counterrevolutionary Strategy and its Failure

*The Fundamental Constraint of the Assad Regime*

Since the start of the Syrian Revolution, the fundamental constraint facing the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad has been its utter lack of legitimacy among the vast majority of the Syrian population. This lack of legitimacy, borne of fifty years of grotesque corruption and a stifling police state, was what prompted initial protests by millions of Syrians during the Arab uprisings of 2011. This lack of legitimacy also drove tens of thousands of troops, when presented with orders to crush peaceful protesters, to defect rather than carry them out.

Today, the regime's lack of legitimacy manifests itself in a perpetual shortage of manpower, as numerous military analyses of the Syria conflict have pointed out. Brian Jenkins observes that "Because of fear of defections, Assad can deploy only about one-third of his forces. These are primarily the elite units" that are most loyal to Assad and share the Assad family's Alawite sectarian identity.[1] Jeffrey White counts this manpower shortage as the regime's primary weakness, to the extent that "the regime faces serious constraints, beginning with the limited size of its forces relative to the rebel forces."[2] Regarding the consequences of this shortcoming, Jonathan Spyer observes that "while the regime could inflict dreadful losses on its enemies, it simply lacked the sufficient manpower to wage an effective campaign of counterinsurgency throughout Syria."[3]

*The Failure of Assad's Bombardment Strategy*

As initial armed opposition to Bashar al-Assad gained momentum, the regime sought to compensate for its manpower shortage through a heavy reliance on its overwhelming advantage in firepower. It unleashed fierce bombardments on opposition-held population centers, deliberately targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure to create an unbearable humanitarian crisis that would sap rebel strength. In February 2012, the regime commenced a month-long continuous artillery assault on the densely populated Baba Amr area of Homs, then the center of the revolt, in order to rout rebel forces there. When this failed to pacify the revolt, and rebel forces registered rapid gains in Aleppo and the capital Damascus five months later, the regime was forced to begin air assaults of densely populated areas simply to prevent rebels from overrunning the capital.[4]



*Smoke rises over Baba Amr area of Homs during regime bombardments, February 2012*

Through these escalated bombardments, the regime was able to regain control of central Damascus neighborhoods that had been recently acquired by rebel forces.[5] However, regime air assaults failed to dislodge rebels from Aleppo, Syria's largest city and prewar commercial capital.

Instead, the rebels gained territory at a slower but still-significant pace for the rest of 2012.[6] Even when the regime further escalated its bombardments through Scud missiles and chemical weapons--and through more intensive conventional attacks that have accounted for the vast majority of civilian casualties--it was unable to beat back rebel momentum. By the end of 2012, it was clear that the desperate Assad regime would need a more drastic strategy to defeat the Syrian Revolution.

## The Battle of Qusair and its Reverberations

*Run-up to and Course of the Battle*

Beginning in late 2012, the Assad regime has increasingly deployed sectarian militias as a means to compensate for its manpower disadvantage. This has involved active efforts by the Assad regime to regionalize the Syrian crisis by soliciting greater involvement from Iran's sectarian proxies, who act based on religious affinities between the Assad family's Alawite sect, Iran's Shiite Muslim theocracy, and Shiite sectarian militias operating in Iraq and Lebanon.

First, in late 2012, the Assad regime established the National Defense Forces, an irregular Alawite militia whose members were trained by Iran and Hezbollah. The militia grew rapidly in size, and its membership had surpassed that of the regular regime army by August 2013.[7] Second, at around the same time, Iran's Shiite proxy militias from Iraq and Lebanon began to play a more direct role in support of Assad. Security analysts noted in January 2013 that "direct participation" of Hezbollah special forces "in combat zones nationwide has increased, and additional forces may be on the way."[8] Third, in March 2013, Iraqi Shiite fighters also entered Syria as members of the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, ostensibly to defend the Shiite shrine in Damascus's Sayda Zeineb neighborhood.[9]

Finally, in early May, Assad used preparations for the first "Geneva II" peace conference as political cover for an unprecedented escalation of his sectarian militia strategy. Thousands of Hezbollah fighters crossed the Lebanese border to attack the city of Qusair in Homs Province, which fell to Hezbollah and regime forces on June 5. In the aftermath of the battle, regime forces killed at least 100 people trying to flee the city. Hezbollah hung a Shiite banner over Qusair's mosque, and passed out sweets at checkpoints in Beirut to celebrate its victory.

*Ramifications of the Battle of Qusair*

The Battle of Qusair constituted a turning point for the Syria conflict, if not for the entire region. It marked the first major strategic defeat for rebel forces in over a year, and severed the main rebel supply line in Homs. Following Qusair, regime forces took Tel Kalakh, another strategic border town, with reports indicating a sectarian cleansing of the town.[10] In late July, Hezbollah and pro-Assad fighters pushed rebel forces out of the Khalidiya district in central Homs, after a relentless bombardment that effectively razed the entire district.

To this day, rebel forces in Homs have yet to recover from the Battle of Qusair. Residents of rebel-held areas of Homs are at the mercy of Assad forces, and their access to basic humanitarian aid was a subject of political negotiations at the recent Geneva II transition talks. Despite repeated efforts and international diplomatic pressure, the Assad regime has

yet to allow substantial aid into Homs, and food shortages there grow increasingly urgent. According to World Food Program officials, the few Homs residents who were recently allowed to evacuate appeared malnourished upon exiting the city.[11]
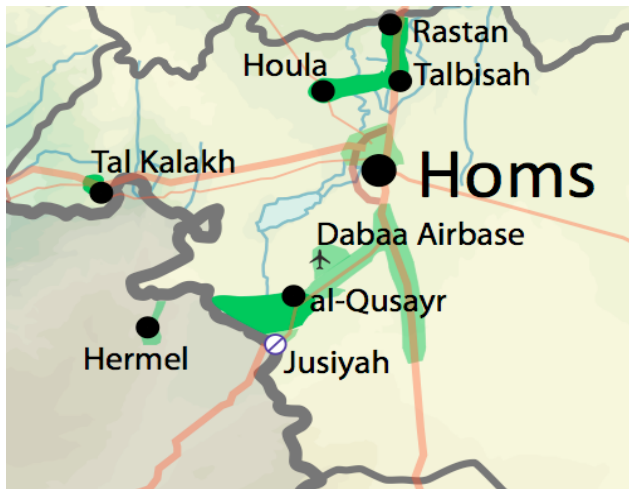


### Rebel Supply Lines in Homs, April 2013

*This map, from Institute for the Study of War, shows rebel supply lines in Homs Province on the eve of the Battle of Qusair. Lebanon and the Hermel Mountains lie to the southwest.*

*We can observe that there are two possible rebel supply routes to Lebanon: (1) The primary southwestern route running through Qusair, or (2) An alternate route running due west through Tel Kalakh.*

*With regime victories at both locations, major rebel supply routes to Homs were severed.*

For Hezbollah, the Battle of Qusair marked its official entry into the Syrian war, with victory uniting its Bekaa stronghold in Lebanon, the Syrian Alawite coastal areas, and the capital Damascus. For Iran, the Battle of Qusair facilitated the expansion of a sectarian zone of influence comprising the main Syrian ports, Hezbollah supply routes, and the border with Israel. Meanwhile, the brazen involvement of Hezbollah fighters as Assad shock troops enflamed Sunni Muslim sectarian sentiments across the region. Senior Sunni clerics with large international followings, such as Yusuf al-Qardawi and Saoud al-Shuraym, exhorted their devotees to join the fight against Bashar al-Assad. In neighboring Lebanon, sectarian violence reached its highest point since the outbreak of the Syria conflict,[12] and has continued to rise since then.[13] Neighboring Iraq saw one of its bloodiest months since 2007, but saw even higher levels of violence for the remainder of the year, fueled in part by growing spillover from Syria.[14]

## Assad Strategy Since Qusair: Starve and Surrender

Since the Battle of Qusair, the regime has sought to replicate its successes in Homs Province by employing a "starve and surrender" strategy elsewhere in the country. While continuing its vicious bombardments of densely populated civilian areas, the regime also collaborates with its sectarian foreign militias to sever crucial opposition lifelines to major population centers. It then enacts sieges upon these areas in an effort to starve them into submission. "Starve and surrender" constitutes a potentially winning strategy for Assad, because the regime's perpetual problems of manpower and overstretch are greatly mitigated. For example, the regime would have incurred enormous losses in the process of conquering Homs, Syria's third-largest city with a pre-war population of over 600,000. However, "starve and surrender" allows Assad forces to neutralize the city through the more manageable tasks of conquering Qusair (pre-war population: 30,000) and Tel Kalakh (18,500).

Since Qusair, the Assad regime has particularly applied its "starve and surrender" strategy around the Damascus suburbs, sealing their circumferences to block the flow of lifesaving food and medicine. As Valerie Szybala writes, "The regime's use of blockades to restrict the

flow of food, medicine, and people into and out of neighborhoods with a rebel presence was an increasingly important component of its military operations" around Damascus since April.[15] Among the suburbs under rebel control, Moadamiya and Yarmouk especially worry Assad as potential launchpads for an attack on Damascus. Moadamiya lies on Road 7 southwest of Damascus' Mezze District, which houses the Presidential Palace and critical security installations. The Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk adjoins Midan and Tadamon, two south Damascus neighborhoods captured by rebels during their July 2012 offensive.

Given their strategic importance, Moadamiya and Yarmouk have suffered particularly crippling sieges that have seen residents eat weeds or stray animals to survive. Multiple residents have died of malnutrition, especially in Yarmouk, where the death toll from starvation recently surpassed 100 people.[16] Against such suffocating sieges, fighters in Yarmouk and Moadamiya have agreed to "ceasefires" that benefit only the regime, forcing rebels to surrender strategic assets such as heavy weapons in exchange for basic food supplies. Once these assets are surrendered, the regime can simply re-tighten its siege and demand further concessions. In Yarmouk, at least 15 residents have perished of starvation since the ceasefire began on January 30.[17]

## Strategic Situation Before the Assault

*Assad's Improved Position Across Syria*

By late 2013, the Assad regime had successfully reversed rebel momentum in multiple areas. Homs, once dubbed the "Capital of the Revolution" due to its early prominence in the Syrian uprising, was now in firm regime control after the takeover of rebel supply lines through Qusair and Tel Kalakh. The Damascus suburbs, which had served as rear bases for multiple opposition offensives on the capital since 2012, were increasingly weakened by crippling regime sieges that forced "ceasefires" on the populations of strategic Moadamiya and Yarmouk.

In the first two years of the Syrian Revolution, Homs and the Damascus suburbs constituted the two opposition population centers nearest to Damascus. Assad's fears of being routed from the capital diminished as he began to subdue these areas though the "starve and surrender" strategy, and this reality was not lost on Western political and opinion leaders. While, as late as early 2013, their watchword on Syria was "Assad's fall is inevitable,"[18] by late 2013 many were seriously considering--or in extreme cases, even touting--an Assad victory.[19] The next step for Bashar al-Assad was to challenge rebel forces in their remaining strongholds: Aleppo in the far north of the country, and Deir Ezzor in the east. Aleppo, which contained Syria's largest city and was the country's most populous province, constituted the ultimate prize for Assad forces, and became the next regime target.
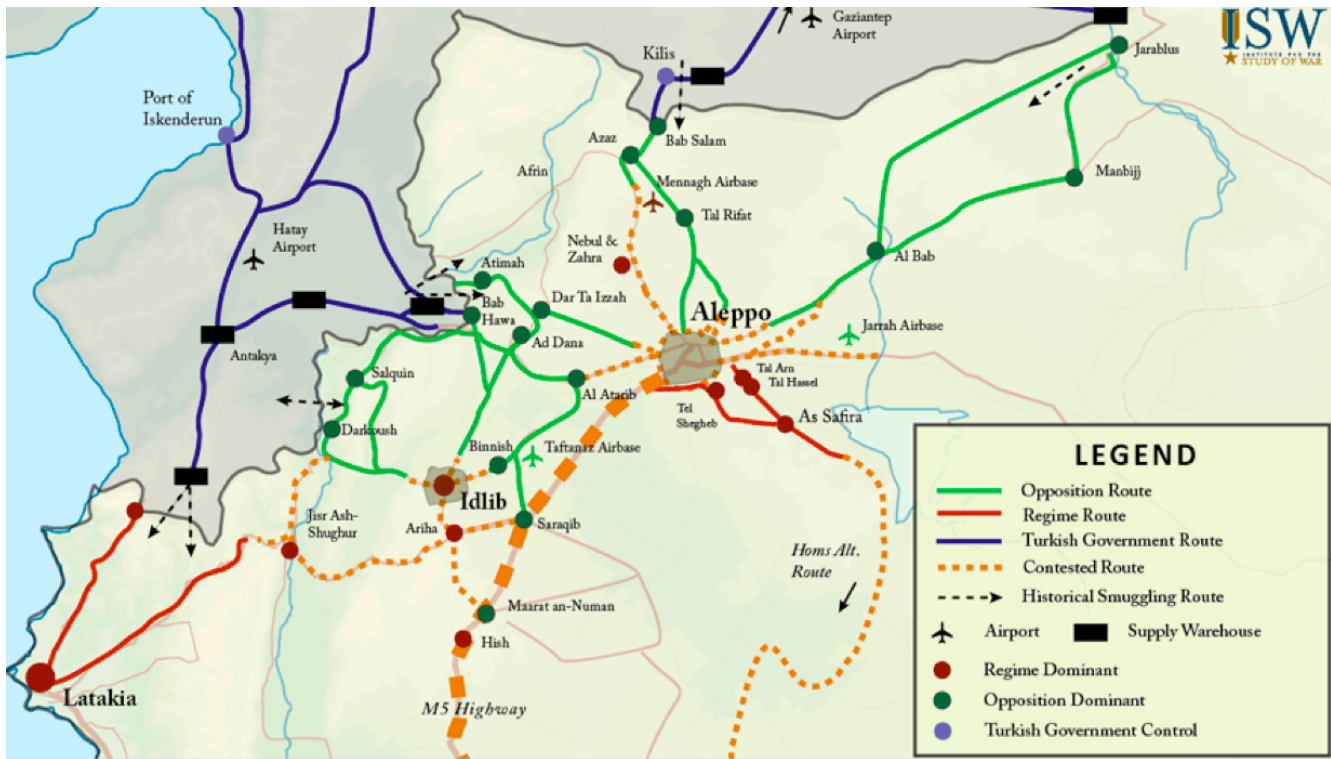
*Rebel and Regime Supply Lines to Aleppo City*

As indicated by the map on the following page, produced by Institute for the Study of War,[20] the Syrian opposition in Aleppo receives supplies from five separate border crossings with Turkey: Jarablus, Bab Salam, Atmeh, Bab Hawa, and Darkoush. Additionally, while rebels firmly control the immediate environs of all five border crossings, delivery of supplies into Aleppo City requires the traversal of contested terrain. Rebel supply lines to Aleppo City before the offensive could be classified as follows:

1. Aleppo Airport Road (southern Bab route): This road exits due east from Aleppo along the road to Aleppo Airport/Neyrab Airbase, before turning north toward the secure rebel-hold road to Bab. From Bab, supplies can proceed to Manbij and the Jarablus Border Crossing, or directly to Jarablus.

2. Bab Road (Tariq al-Bab, northern Bab route): This road exits northeast from Aleppo and heads directly to Bab, and from there to Jarablus along secure rebel routes.

3. Tel Rifaat Road: Heads due north from Aleppo to Tel Rifaat, Azaz, and the Killis Border Crossing. The only rebel supply line that does not require the traversal of contested terrain. Two alternative routes to Tel Rifaat traverse contested territory northeast of Aleppo, before turning back west.

4. Daret Ezza Road: Runs northeast from Aleppo direct to Daret Ezza, from which secure

routes to the Atmeh, Bab Hawa, and (more circuitously) Darkoush Border Crossings are accessible.

5. Atarib Road: Runs southeast along a contested route to Atarib. However, routes from Atarib to Atmeh, Bab Hawa and Darkoush are firmly under rebel control.



*Supply Lines to Aleppo City*
*This map, from Institute for the Study of War, depicts rebel and regime supply routes to Aleppo City in late 2013. The opposition in Aleppo received supplies from the Syrian-Turkish border crossings of Jarablus, Bab Salam, Atmeh, Bab Hawa, and Darkoush. Until the regime conquered Safira Road in late November, Assad forces had no ground supply routes to Aleppo City and relied on airlifts for resupply.*

Aside from the five rebel supply routes listed above, three additional routes out of Aleppo were noteworthy as sites of heavy contestation:

1. Nabl-Zahraa Road: This road exits Aleppo heading northeast to Azaz, however, it was not a secure route for rebels due to regime control over the towns of Nabl and Zahraa. It has often been the site of heavy clashes.

2. M5 Highway: Before the war, this road constituted the quickest southern route from Aleppo to Idlib, Hama, Homs and Damascus. Today, rebel control over Saraqib and Maarat al-Nauman has blocked government use of the M5 as a path to its strongholds in Hama and further south.

3. Safira Road: This southeastern road from Aleppo, which runs through the Aleppo Airport Road and Safira town, was not a major thoroughfare for either the regime or the opposition on the eve of Assad's Aleppo offensive in September. However,

regime forces sought to open the road as an alternative supply line in light of rebel control over towns near the M5 Highway.

The above analysis indicates that, on the eve of its assault on Aleppo City, the regime lacked a single significant ground supply line to Aleppo from its southerly strongholds. To Aleppo's southwest, opposition control over the towns of Saraqib and Maarat al-Nauman blocked regime usage of the M5 Highway. To Aleppo's southeast, rebels were in firm control of the strategic Safira town and the Aleppo Airport Road. The north and east were least accessible to the Assad regime due to firm rebel control of towns and villages near the Turkish border. So weak was the regime's supply lines in Aleppo that it was forced to rely on regular airlifts for resupply of its forces.[21]

Today, the regime has reestablished a ground supply line to Aleppo through capture of the Safira route. It has blocked rebel usage of the Aleppo Airport Road, and nearly shut down the Bab Road as well. Aleppo Airport has been reopened to regime planes for the first time in over a year.[22] Rebel positions in Aleppo City itself have fallen to regime forces for the first time since rebels entered the city. All this occurred amidst an unprecedented barrel bombing campaign that has emptied eastern Aleppo of the vast majority of its population. The next section will explain how the current worsening situation arose.

## Attacks Before December: The Fall of Aleppo Airport Road

In late September, the Assad regime began its assault on Aleppo City by moving to reopen a ground supply route from Hama to Aleppo. Given rebel control over the M5, the regime carved out a circuitous alternative route that took regime forces nearly 100 miles east into the Syrian Desert, before turning north to approach Aleppo from the southeast through Safira.

Activists in late September reported seeing a massive regime military convoy of roughly 100 vehicles depart Hama. On October 3rd, the regime took Khaneser, a small village south of Safira, amidst intensive barrel bombings on the village and its environs. From there, it proceeded on to Safira itself, mounting a three-week campaign of aerial bombardments that culminated in the withdrawal of rebel forces from the town on November 1st. According to 2007 estimates, Safira's population was once roughly 100,000 and it was one of the largest cities in Aleppo Province. As a result of the regime's October offensive, 130,000 civilians fled from Safira, turning the city into a ghost town.[23]

Following the capture of Safira, the regime moved quickly to attack the Aleppo Airport area via the Safira Road running directly to the Airport. On November 8th, Assad forces attacked Base 80 north of Safira. They captured the base two days later, along with the village of Tel Aran, leaving only Tel Hasel village standing between regime forces and the Aleppo Airport Road. Rebel forces scrambled from across Aleppo Province to defend Tel Hasel, but they failed to keep the village out of regime hands. On November 15th, six weeks after initial regime attack on Khaneser, regime forces captured Tel Hasel and severed rebel supply lines through the Aleppo Airport Road.[24]

The loss of the Aleppo Airport Road constituted a significant disruption of rebel supply lines. This road had constituted the primary rebel gateway to the eastern provinces of Raqqah and Deir Ezzor, which by late 2013 was the main opposition stronghold aside from Aleppo.

Additionally, the loss of the Airport Road meant that Bab Road constituted the rebels' one remaining supply line running east from Aleppo. As we will see, the regime's intensified barrel bomb campaign on Aleppo City since December 15th has enabled it to capture that road as well.

## December 15th-January 4th: The Fall of Bab Road

On December 15th, Assad's barrel bomb campaign on Aleppo City began in earnest with 25 barrel bomb attacks on the Aleppo neighborhoods of Haydariyye, Ard al-Hamra, Sakhour, and Marjeh. At least 36 people were killed, including 17 children,[25] but this was only the beginning. One month later, the regime's intensive and vicious barrel bombings had yet to abate, and over 700 Aleppo residents were dead due to the ongoing air raids.[26]

What was the strategy behind these initial bombardments on Aleppo City? Syrian American Council has undertaken a detailed examination of Arabic news reports of barrel bombings on Aleppo City during the first three weeks of the attacks. Our team has mapped the locations of each targeted area, with over 80 distinct locations identified, to better understand the broader strategic purpose behind the bombing raids. To synthesize our data, we counted the number of days that each neighborhood saw bombardments over two three-week
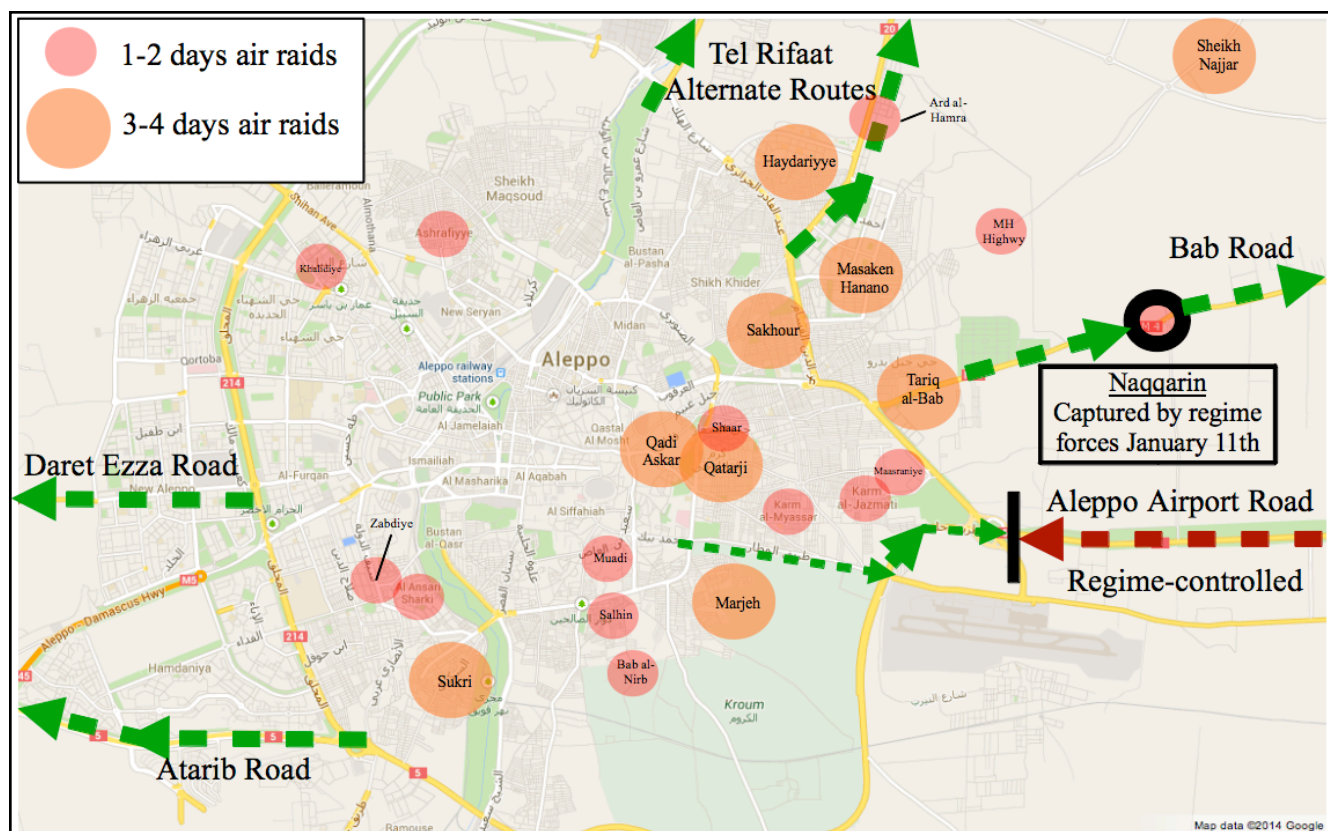


*Barrel Bombings on Aleppo City, December 15th-January 4th*
*This map depicts the first three weeks of intensified regime barrel bombings on Aleppo City, along with rebel supply routes (green dashed lines) and regime supply routes (red dashed lines). The map reveals that regime bombings most heavily targeted areas adjacent to the Bab Road. On January 11th, the regime captured Naqqarin village on the Bab Road, obstructing the last major rebel supply route to eastern Syria from Aleppo.*

periods: December 15th-January 4th, and January 19th-February 8th. While this method is not exhaustive, it is strongly indicative in that the most bloody assaults of the day are most likely to be reported. Therefore, this method allows us to judge the regime's relative targeting of various neighborhoods in Aleppo City.

The figure above maps reported instances of aerial bombardments on specific neighborhoods of Aleppo City from December 15th-January 4th, the first three weeks of the barrel bomb assault. Smaller red circles over a given neighborhood denote 1-2 days of reported air raids on that neighborhood, while larger orange circles denote 3-4 days of reported air raids. The supply routes most salient to the current study--Aleppo Airport Road, Bab Road, the alternate Tel Rifaat routes, Daret Ezza Road, and Atareb Road--are also depicted with dashed green arrows, with the exception of the dashed red arrow denoting regime control of the Airport Road. The approximate battlefront between rebel and regime forces on the Airport Road is denoted by a thick vertical black line. In this way, the figure facilitates the analysis of Assad bombing raids with reference to the locations of critical rebel supply lines.

The figure shows that the first three weeks of barrel bombings were concentrated on the eastern portion of Aleppo City. These neighborhoods include Tariq al-Bab, Sheikh Najjar, Masaken Hanano, Sakhour, Qatarji and Qadi Askar, each of which saw 3-4 days of reported air raids. Multiple neighborhoods located near the alternative Tel Rifaat route also saw 3-4 days of reported barrel bombings. These neighborhoods included Sheikh Najjar, Masaken Hanano, Sakhour (each adjacent to both Bab Road and the Tel Rifaat route) and Haydariyye. Finally, neighborhoods near the Aleppo Airport Road faced significant fire, with 3-4 days of air raids reported on Qadi Askar, Qatarji (each adjacent to both the Airport Road and Bab Road) and Marjeh.

Within eastern Aleppo, the regime's pattern of assault in the first three weeks of barrel bombings was especially focused on Aleppo's northeastern quadrant, where the Bab Road is the most direct rebel supply route. Indeed, the regime also launched ground assaults on the Bab Road, culminating in its capture of Naqqarin on January 11th. After capturing Naqqarin alongside the smaller nearby villages of Zarzur, Te'aneh and Sabihieh, regime spokesmen proclaimed that their conquest of Naqqarin brought them on the cusp of shutting down Bab Road entirely. The loss of Naqqarin was a major blow to rebel forces that significantly inhibited opposition usage of Bab Road. Rebels now had no route to securely transport supplies into Aleppo from eastern Syria or from the Jarablus Border Crossing. After severing rebel supply lines east of Aleppo, the regime moved to press its advantage in the city itself.

## January 19th-February 8th: The Regime Reenters Aleppo

On January 18th, the Syrian Opposition Coalition voted to attend upcoming "Geneva II" Syria transition talks, after heavy pressure from Western states and bitter debate among its members. Secretary of State John Kerry hailed the decision, calling the talks the "best opportunity to achieve a negotiated political transition." However, in Aleppo City, the weeks since January 18th have witnessed an unprecedented escalation of barrel bomb attacks. On some days, a full 25 neighborhoods in Aleppo have experienced fierce air raids. Four hundred Aleppo residents have perished due to barrel bombings just between February 1st-13th.[27] Since Geneva II talks began, the daily death toll across Syria has climbed to its

highest point yet, and Assad's escalated barrel bombings are the primary culprit.[28]

Eastern Aleppo has been hit especially hard. Over 80% of eastern Aleppo residents have fled their homes since January 19th, and the graphic below shows why.

The map depicts reported aerial assaults on Aleppo City from January 19th to February 8th, based on Syrian American Council's analysis of news accounts over that time period. Graphical denotations are identical to those of the previous map, with the exception that large yellow circles with red linings have been introduced to denote reported barrel bombings for 5-7 days. During the three-week period from December 15th to January 4th, no Aleppo neighborhoods experienced barrel bombings so intense that they were reported for 5-7 days. However, eight neighborhoods--all of them in eastern Aleppo City--experienced this intense level of barrel bombings in the three weeks between January 19th and February 8th. In total, Syrian American Council tallied 45 reported bombardments from December 15th-January 4th, as compared to 108 cases from January 19th-February 8th.



### Barrel Bombings on Aleppo City, January 19th-February 8th
*This map depicts three weeks of intensified regime barrel bombings since January 19th, the day Syria's opposition decided to attend Geneva II. The map reveals heavy air raids along the Aleppo Airport Road. Regime ground troops pushed forward along that road into Karm al-Qusr on January 25th, marking the first regime conquest of a rebel-held neighborhood in Aleppo. Barrel bombings of unprecedented intensity along the Airport Road prepare the ground for the regime to push further into Aleppo City.*

Our most salient finding, as revealed in the map, is that every neighborhood subjected to 5

or more bombings lies adjacent to either the Bab Road or the Aleppo Airport Road. Muadi, Salhin and Marjeh lie south of the Airport Road; Maysar, Shaar and Qadi Askar are in the vicinity of both the Airport Road and Bab Road; and Masaken Hanano and Sheikh Najjar lie just north of Bab Road. The regime's ferocious air assaults in these regions enabled it to register strategic gains on the ground. Attacking from the Aleppo Airport Road, regime forces pushed forward into the Karm al-Qusr neighborhood on January 28th, marking their first entry into Aleppo City proper since it came under rebel control 18 months ago.

With most neighborhoods in Aleppo City near the Airport Road now empty of civilians, the regime is poised to continue its advances and threaten rebel control of Aleppo as a whole. Regime control of Karm al-Qusr allows for a possible pincers movement on neighborhoods north of the Airport Road, attacking from Karm al-Qusr in the southeast and Naqqarin in the northeast. Additionally, Aleppo Airport can also now be used to resupply regime forces, as it reopened for flights three days before the capture of Karm al-Qusr.

Finally, the regime can replicate its barrel bomb strategy to cut rebel supply lines in other areas of Aleppo. The regime's bombing pattern suggests that the Haj Bridge area, which connects to the opposition's main western supply lines through Atarib and Daret Ezza, are now particular targets. From January 19th-February 8th, Syrian American Council tallied 27 cases of reported bombardments in this area (the crescent between Muadi and Salhin in the east to Salah-Din, Saif aDawla and Rashid in the west). This is comparable to the 30 cases that we tallied for the Bab Road area between December 15th and January 4th, just before the road fell out of rebel hands.

## Consequences of a Regime Victory in Aleppo

If the current military situation continues, the regime may within weeks achieve a replication of its tactics at Qusair, and implement its "starve and surrender" strategy against Syria's largest city. Given the dramatic and region-wide reverberations of the Battle of Qusair, regime dominance over Syria's largest city would be truly catastrophic. If Aleppo fell, millions of residents would stream into neighboring states at an unprecedented pace, likely straining the resources of Syria's neighbors past the breaking point. Millions more would be unable to leave and would face the possibility of systematic slaughter, as occurred following regime victories in Qusair and elsewhere.

Just as the Battle of Qusair transformed the Syria conflict from one in which "Assad's days are numbered" to one in which an Assad victory was possible, the fall of Aleppo would make victory for Assad inevitable without foreign intervention. Even if the international community chose to stand idle in the face of a Srebrenica-scale massacre, it would eventually be forced to intervene--quite possibly with "boots on the ground"--to address the growing strength of transnational terrorists in Syria, especially those affiliated with the rapidly-rising militant group Islamic State in Iraq and Sham.

## U.S. National Security Priorities

As rebel fortunes in Aleppo have flagged, the fortunes of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) have soared. Formerly called Al-Qaeda in Iraq or Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, ISIS was formed in April 2013 as a vehicle for Al-Qaeda-affiliated extremists to conduct transnational operations, particularly in Iraq and Syria. It emerged because the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced a merger with Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Nusra that was quickly denounced by all Syrian Islamist factions. Jabhat Nusra itself rejected the merger, while declaring allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zwahiri. ISIS therefore formed as a separate and second Al-Qaeda affiliate operating in Syria.[29]

Given the plethora of Syrian rebel brigades with Islamic-sounding names, some analysts have developed a tendency to lump these brigades with ISIS and Jabhat Nusra as "Islamic extremists." When it comes to United States security policy, this label obscures more than it reveals by failing to differentiate between threats and non-threats to global security. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently expressed concern that Syria is becoming "a new FATA" (Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan), from which extremists might launch "terrorist attacks emanating from Syria to the West." The emergence of such a terror base requires control on the ground by fighting groups amenable to transnational terror operations. ISIS is the only fighting group in Syria currently engaged in transnational terrorist operations, and it was founded for this explicit purpose.

This becomes clear if we examine the reactions of other Syrian Islamic factions, which are sometimes erroneously conflated with ISIS, to the announced merger between Jabhat Nusra and Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, an umbrella group of Syrian Islamist fighters, dismissed the announcement with the statement "We have no need for imported ideologies or a new understanding of Islam."[30] Liwa al-Islam, a powerful Islamic brigade in Damascus, criticized the merger on the grounds that Syria should be liberated "without any foreign ties or agendas."[31] Ahrar al-Sham, often considered the most Islam-oriented brigade in the opposition, particularly blasted the move: "The principle is not to expand the scope of the conflict but to concentrate on fighting the Assad regime...we ask both parties to get a sense of the magnitude of the event, the danger of regionalizing the conflict in this way."[32]

The U.S. national security priorities identified by Director of Intelligence Clapper require that we acknowledge varying degrees of Islamism within the Syrian opposition. While Americans as well as  many Syrians might disagree with the political programs of some opposition Islamist groups, these groups do not threaten national security, because they do not support transnational extremist operations. However, as rebel groups more favorable to U.S. interests have lost ground, ISIS has emerged as a force to be reckoned with in northern Syria that may threaten global security for years to come.

## The Surging Strength of ISIS in Syria

In March 2013, a coalition of opposition fighters led by Ahrar al-Sham routed Assad forces

from Raqqah City in March 2013, marking the first rebel capture of a provincial capital during the Syrian Revolution. Liberation initially brought a surge in civil society activities, and youth activists talked of turning the city into an "icon of freedom." However, ISIS infiltrated the city after rebel fighters returned to the front. In early June 2013, ISIS executed a bloodless coup to seize power from Syrian rebel factions, and promptly suppressed all forms of civil society or protest activity. Local political leaders were arrested or assassinated, leaving Raqqah as an ISIS stronghold near-empty of civil society activity.[33] After consolidating itself in Raqqah, ISIS turned its sights on Aleppo Province.

As late as August 2013, the ISIS presence in Aleppo Province was fairly limited. In Aleppo City itself, ISIS clashed intermittently with rebel brigades,[34] but its public outreach activities during the Ramadan holiday suggest that it was still in the early stages of infiltration. On Aleppo's outskirts, Binnish in the southwest and Azaz in the north saw rallies both for and against ISIS, indicating ISIS influence without sufficient control to suppress civil society activities. Only Adana in the west and Manbij in the northeast, where ISIS had routed rebel Free Syrian Army fighters from the area, could have been considered under firm ISIS control.[35] By December, however, the picture looked very different.
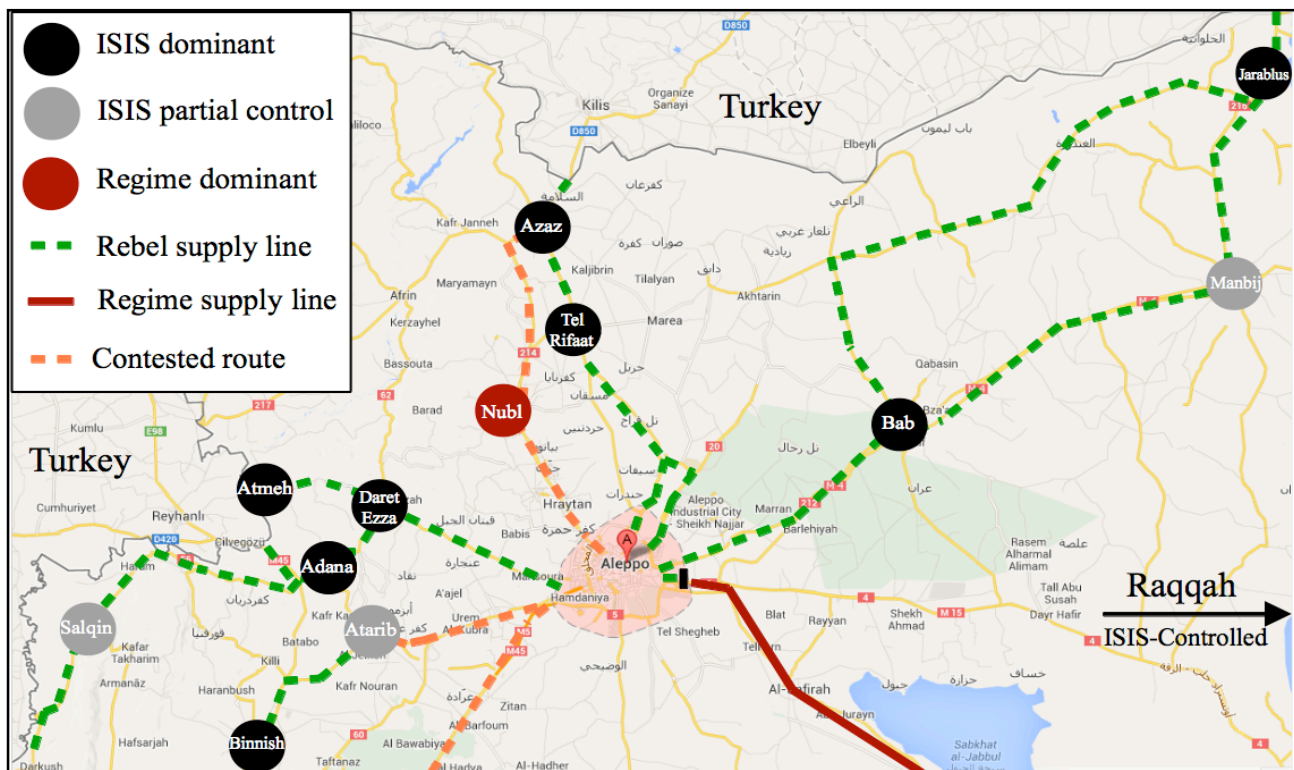


*ISIS Control of Rebel Supply Lines to Aleppo, December 2013*
*This map depicts the extent of ISIS control over rebel supply lines to Aleppo in December 2013, before opposition forces began their anti-ISIS offensive. The map shows that ISIS had predominant influence in at least one town of every supply route, allowing them to exert influence on Aleppo City by choking off the flow of supplies and individuals. When considered in the context of ISIS control over Raqqah Province to the east, the map shows that ISIS had acquired a wide arc of influence spanning the vast majority of the Turkish border.*

The map above replicates most of the data in the Institute for the Study of War's supply line map on page 6, while also depicting ISIS control over these crucial supply lines in December 2013. It highlights just how quickly ISIS emerged as a powerful force in Aleppo Province toward the end of last year. Between August and December, ISIS attained exclusive control over the towns of Bab and Jarablus in the northeast; Tel Rifaat and Azaz in the north; Daret Ezza and Atmeh in the west; and Binnish in the south.[36] With partial control over Salqin, Atarib, and Manbij as well, ISIS had acquired substantial influence in every major town along rebel supply lines to Aleppo. Furthermore, the ISIS had predominant influence in at least one town of every rebel supply route, meaning that it could exert control over Aleppo City itself by choking off the flow of supplies and individuals.

Given the ISIS penchant for kidnappings of peaceful activists and assassinations of moderate rebel commanders, ISIS control over supply lines to Aleppo has had severe adverse effects on pro-democracy elements of the Syrian opposition. Since December 2013, ISIS has assassinated multiple prominent rebel commanders in the Aleppo area, including Adnan Bakour of Tawhid Brigade, while kidnapping prominent Aleppo-area Free Syrian Army commander Ammar al-Wawi. Both were members of the U.S.-endorsed Supreme Military Council.[37] ISIS has also abducted Abdul Wahab al-Mulla, a famous pro-revolution and media activist in Aleppo, and attempted the assassination of Raed Fares, who originated the famed Kafranbel protest posters and has met with numerous Congressional and State Department officials. On January 1st, prominent human rights group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that its sources in Syria were being threatened, and ISIS was later identified as the source of the threats.[38]

In summary, by the end of 2013, ISIS was within striking distance of attaining a wide arc of control encompassing the vast majority of Syria's border with Turkey, from the Atmeh and Adana suburbs west of Aleppo, to Azaz and Tel Rifaat in the north, and all the way through Jarablus and Raqqah Province in the east. Through a campaign of escalated kidnappings and assassinations against opposition leaders, ISIS was increasingly replicating in Aleppo the infiltration strategy it had used to seize power in Raqqah, making ISIS control of Syria's largest city a distinct possibility. While the emergence of "a new FATA" spanning the majority of the Syrian-Turkish border had not yet arisen, ISIS appeared on pace to create such a terror launching zone given the trajectory of events in Syria at the time.

## The Ongoing Rebel Offensive Against ISIS

*Rebel Mergers Since November 2013*

When the United States backed the formation of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) in December 2012, the group--composed of over 260 Syrian rebel commanders on the ground--was intended to be a unified military command structure that would centralize the provision of weapons to anti-Assad forces. The SMC was also meant to compliment the civilian efforts of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), which the United States has recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.[39] However, neither the SOC nor the SMC received sufficient outside aid to address Syrians' dire needs for relief and protection.[40] Without sufficient or centralized support, outgunned and underfunded opposition groups lost ground to Assad forces and Al-Qaeda extremists alike.

By November 2013, rebel forces in Aleppo as well as Damascus were reeling due to recent

military defeats, and prospects for Western support appeared dim in light of the U.S.-Russian chemical weapons deal. Therefore, a week after Assad forces captured the Aleppo Airport Road despite a province-wide rebel distress call, seven of Syria's largest Islamist coalitions united to form the Islamic Front. In a veiled critique of the SMC, the Islamic Front's unification announcement promised "a full fusion" of the component groups as opposed to a coordination body. In another veiled critique of the diplomatic maneuverings associated with the SMC, an Islamic Front spokesman touted the merger as a departure from "politics and foreign agendas."[41] Based on these statements and the circumstances of the merger, it appears the Islamic Front was formed primarily to address coordination flaws of the SMC, by reducing the amount of internal and external politics required for collaboration.

At the same time, due to the size of the Islamic Front and its clear Islamist character, moderate and secular rebel groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army feared being crowded out by the Islamic Front. The formation of the Islamic Front has set off a wave of counter-mergers by more secular Syrian rebel groups. On December 9th, fourteen constituent brigades of the Free Syrian Army and the SMC united to form the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, which is active mainly in Idlib Province just south of Aleppo.[42] On January 3rd, eight rebel groups concentrated in Aleppo united to form the Mujahideen Army. It immediately pledged to remove ISIS from Syria.

*Rebel Forces Take On ISIS*

The formation of the Mujahideen Army came in the context of unprecedentedly large anti-ISIS protests across opposition areas, and what some Syrian opposition members are calling a "second revolution." These protests were held in memory of prominent rebel commander Dr. Hussein al-Suleiman, nicknamed Abu Rayan, who had been found brutally tortured to death and disfigured by ISIS fighters on January 1st.[43] Late on January 2nd, ISIS attempted to eliminate Syrian opposition militias in Atarib, only to face unusually stiff resistance from the newly-formed Mujahideen Army, which pledged to "fight ISIS, which has violated the rule of God, until it announces its dissolution."[44] The following day, the Mujahideen Army routed ISIS from Atarib and arrested the ISIS commander in the town.[45]

The Syrian Revolutionary Front and Islamic Front quickly joined the fight with their own calls for ISIS to withdraw from Syria. By January 5th, activists reported that ISIS forces had been kicked out of over 80% of the Idlib countryside and 65% of Aleppo's suburbs.[46] By January 9th, rebels had captured the ISIS Aleppo headquarters in the neighborhood of Qadi Askar. ISIS forces had completely withdrawn from the key supply line towns of Atmeh, Adana, Bab Hawa, Binnish, and Daret Ezza, meaning that rebel forces had blasted open their two main western supply lines out of Aleppo. Rebels were also close to reestablishing clear supply lines in the north, having taken Bab, Manbij and Tel Rifaat with clashes occurring in Jarablus and Azaz.[47] Rebels had even cornered ISIS fighters in their stronghold of Raqqah, expelling ISIS from multiple buildings and besieging its headquarters in Raqqah City.[48]

However, ISIS soon initiated a fierce counterattack. On the morning of the 12th, ISIS launched an offensive against Islamic Front forces in Raqqah to regain exclusive control of the city. In Tel Abyad, another town in Raqqah near the Turkish border, ISIS executed at least 100 fighters from Ahrar al-Sham Brigade after defeating the brigade's forces in the city.[49] Facing pressure across Idlib Province, ISIS was able to regroup in Saraqib town south of Binnish, and captured the border crossing of Darkoush on the 24th.[50] Further west in Aleppo, ISIS

shut down the Bab supply line by the 17th with its recapture of Bab.[51] North of Aleppo, ISIS also repelled rebel attacks on Azaz, ensuring its ability to obstruct the Tel Rifaat supply line.

Despite repeated attempts by Assad diplomats to derail Geneva II talks into a discussion on fighting terror, Assad forces inside Syria took no steps to aid the opposition's unprecedented anti-ISIS offensive. Quite the contrary: the regime bombed rebel units as they commenced anti-ISIS operations in Raqqah; bombed rebels in Aleppo's Saraqib town during fierce rebel-ISIS clashes in the town; then ceased bombarding Aleppo's Bab town right after it fell to ISIS. Western intelligence agents and defectors from extremist groups also believe that the regime has been providing financial support to ISIS through lucrative oil deals.[52] On its part, ISIS has launched 30 car bombings on Syria's opposition since early January by the count of Islamic Front head Zahran Alloush, or almost quadruple the number of its car bombings against Assad forces since April 2013. Activists report that during the regime's ongoing barrel bomb campaign on Aleppo, ISIS cut off the city's flour supply from flour mills in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor, thereby increasing the pressure on eastern Aleppo residents to flee the area.

The final outcome of rebel-ISIS clashes remains indeterminate. Rebels this week completely expelled ISIS from Deir Ezzor Province in the east,[53] near the Iraqi border, and have been able to retain most of their gains against ISIS in Idlib Province. On the other hand, ISIS appears to have solidified its stranglehold on Raqqah Province, and is regaining lost territories in Aleppo. Rebel-ISIS clashes over the coming months may determine whether ISIS is forced out of Syria entirely, or is able to establish "a new FATA" after defeating its Syrian rebel adversaries in northern Syria.

# Policy Recommendations

The Syrian opposition, both civilian and military, is engaged in a fierce two-front war for control of Syria's largest city and its main rebel stronghold. On the one hand, Assad forces in Aleppo are in the process of successfully applying the "starve and surrender" strategy by blocking key rebel supply lines. They have already blocked rebel access to the Aleppo Airport Road, and severed the last large rebel lifeline to eastern Syria by capturing Naqqarin village on the Bab Road on January 15th. An unprecedented barrel bombing campaign over Aleppo City has near-emptied eastern Aleppo of its civilians, and allowed regime forces to advance into the city for the first time in 18 months. Since Geneva II talks began, the regime has escalated its barrel bombings still further, preparing to push deeper into Aleppo City through concentrated attacks on areas adjacent to the Aleppo Airport Road.

On the other hand, even as rebel forces confront a possible Assad reconquest of Aleppo for the first time, they have also opened a second front against ISIS. A group so radical even Al-Qaeda disowned it, ISIS was formed in Syria primarily for the purpose of transnational terrorism, and is the only fighting group in Syria currently engaged in transnational terror operations. Reacting to rapid ISIS gains in northern Syria over much of last year, Syrian civil society since January 3rd has held massive anti-ISIS protests. Two new rebel coalitions with heavy membership from the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army--the Mujahideen Army and Syrian Revolutionaries Front--have spearheaded opposition offensives that routed ISIS from Idlib and Deir Ezzor. However, the ISIS in tacit collaboration with the Assad regime has struck back in its stronghold of Raqqah, and has regained much of its lost territory in Aleppo.

If the Syrian opposition were to lose in Aleppo on either of these fronts, a regional crisis of the scale to force foreign intervention would be distinctly possible. Just as the Battle of Qusair tipped the balance to make an Assad victory possible, the fall of Aleppo would make an Assad victory all but inevitable without foreign intervention. An exodus of millions of refugees would shake the stability of neighboring states, while millions more left behind would face a potential Srebrenica-scale slaughter.

Then the ISIS would surge to fill the vacuum. Before the recent rebel offensive against ISIS, the group controlled a wide arc of territory that spanned the majority of the Syrian-Turkish border, prompting Director of National Intelligence James Clapper to worry that "a new FATA" was being established inside Syria. In the absence of local Syrian partners willing to stop the spread of ISIS, preventing the creation of a transnational terror launchpad would most likely require foreign boots on the ground.

To prevent these dire scenarios from occurring, to ensure that a negotiated political transition in Syria remains viable, and to boost the flagging fortunes of a Syrian opposition in mortal danger, Syrian American Council proposes the following urgent actions on behalf of Congress:

1. **Demand an approach combining diplomacy with the creation of ground conditions conducive to talks. Introduce a bill to <u>provide Syrian rebel forces with the tools they need</u> to defend Aleppo.**

- Syria's opposition fighters have proven themselves to be the only Syrian forces with a real commitment to fighting ISIS. As long as they remain weak, Assad will see no need to negotiate.

- The United States should <u>directly support the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and the Mujahideen Army.</u> Both were formed for the explicit purpose of bolstering a more moderate version of Islam in Syria. These two rebel coalitions spearheaded the recent rebel offensive against ISIS.

- Congress members should issue statements that <u>back the Saudi transfer of anti-aircraft weapons</u> to rebel forces. While we do not support outsourcing of U.S. foreign policy, something must be done to stop Assad's barrel bombings that have placed all of Aleppo in jeopardy.

2. **Pressure the State Department to <u>spend money Congress has already allocated</u> for the purpose of nonlethal support to the Syrian opposition. In particular, ask that State use the money in order to <u>bolster Syrian civilian activists</u> and to <u>set up a fund for potential defectors</u>.**

- Grassroots civil society activists played a crucial catalytic role in the recent rebel offensive against ISIS. They are already establishing civilian governance structures in liberated areas, and the ISIS infiltration strategy fails as long as these civilian structures are strong.

- Congress has already allocated substantial funds for the purpose of nonlethal support to Syria's opposition, however, the State Department has yet to spend these funds. Now is the time to do so, before ISIS does in Aleppo what it did in Raqqah and eliminates its civilian rivals.

- A defectors' fund would serve a moral purpose, by showing potential defectors that the U.S. is serious about Assad's departure. It would also serve a practical purpose, by ensuring that potential defectors and their families can avoid the harsh conditions of refugee camps.

3. **Pass legislation to <u>declare Assad a war criminal</u> and to <u>hold Iraq and Lebanon accountable</u> for the entry of Iranian-backed foreign militias. Demand a <u>more forward-leaning diplomatic posture</u> from Department of State, and urge for the <u>placement of a travel ban on Bashar Jaafari.</u>**

- Since the Battle of Qusair, Iranian-backed foreign fighters from Iraq and Lebanon have tipped the balance in favor of Assad and enflamed regional sectarian tensions. Congress should condition future aid to Iraq and Lebanon on their efforts to curb the flow of these fighters.

- A recent report on torture in Assad prisons, authored by a renowned team of war crimes and forensics experts, implicates the regime in systematic war crimes prosecutable in international courts. In light of this report, Congress should pass legislation declaring Assad a war criminal.

- The State Department must make absolutely clear that the U.S. is seriously committed to an end of Assad's rule. Mixed messaging discourages defections

and is used as Assad propaganda. Relatedly, a travel ban should be placed on Assad Foreign Minister Bashar Jaafari, as he should not be allowed to spread regime propaganda throughout our country.

4. **Stop allowing Assad to buy time while his "starve and surrender" strategy does its work. Demand that the UN and US <u>require the Assad regime to meet humanitarian preconditions to diplomatic talks</u>, and that they <u>place a clear timetable on negotiations</u>.**

   - The Assad regime now seeks to starve opposition populations into "ceasefires" whereby rebels surrender critical strategic advantages for basic foodstuffs. At any later date, food supplies can again be blocked to extort a new "ceasefire" involving further concessions by the rebels.

   - If talks continue without humanitarian preconditions or a timetable, they might drag on indefinitely while besieged civilians starve.

   - As humanitarian preconditions to talks, the Syrian Opposition Coalition asked for humanitarian access to areas under longstanding sieges, but aid entry to Homs and Yarmouk has been extremely limited. In Yarmouk, at least 18 residents have starved since the "ceasefire" began.

5. **Raise the alarm regarding the possible impending rebel defeat in Aleppo.**

   - After the Battle of Qusair, rhetoric in Western capitals gradually shifted from "Assad's fall is inevitable" to consideration of a possible Assad victory. If the rebels are defeated in Aleppo, there will not be time for such a gradual reevaluation.

   - Encourage fellow lawmakers and government officials to take <u>urgent and proactive steps</u> in support of rebel forces in Aleppo, before the situation worsens and U.S. policy options on Syria  narrow dramatically.

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