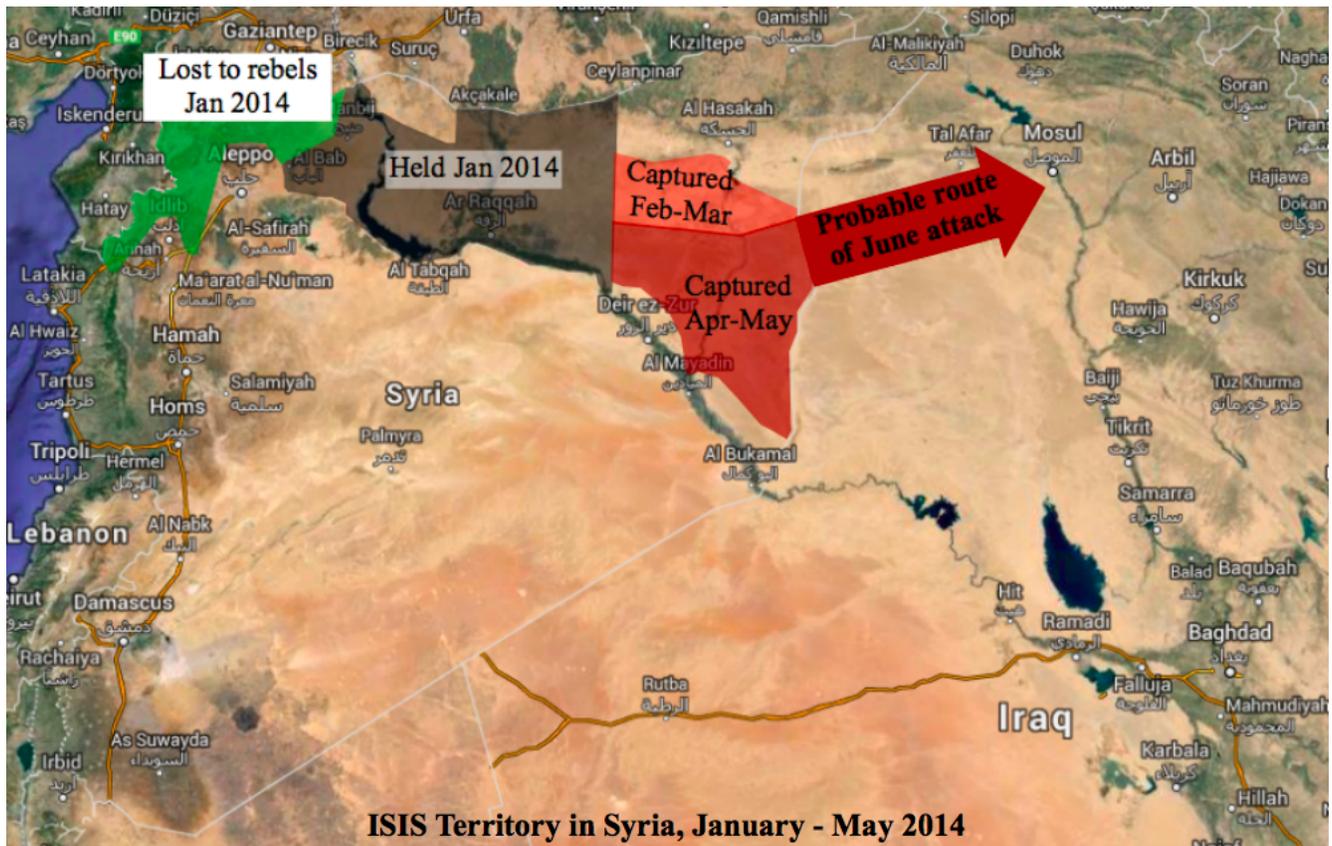


COALITION *for a* DEMOCRATIC SYRIA



IT STARTED IN SYRIA

Why Stopping ISIS Requires Action in Syria
-- And Why We Can Not Wait Another Day



Mohammed Alaa Ghanem and Shlomo Bolts

SUMMARY

Syria was the launch point for the dramatic capture of Mosul, Iraq's second city, by extremist militants from the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS). Syria should also be the starting point for preventing further ISIS advances toward the Iraqi capital Baghdad. Before attacking Mosul, ISIS first had to seize eastern Syrian territory that had been under Syrian rebel control for nearly two years. Now that ISIS is flush with U.S. weapons looted from Iraqi forces, Deir Ezzor City in eastern Syria could be the next major population center to fall to ISIS. The fall of Deir Ezzor City would enable ISIS to fortify its southern supply lines, attack Baghdad from two axes, and possibly destabilize energy prices by pushing into oil-rich Iraqi Shiite areas.

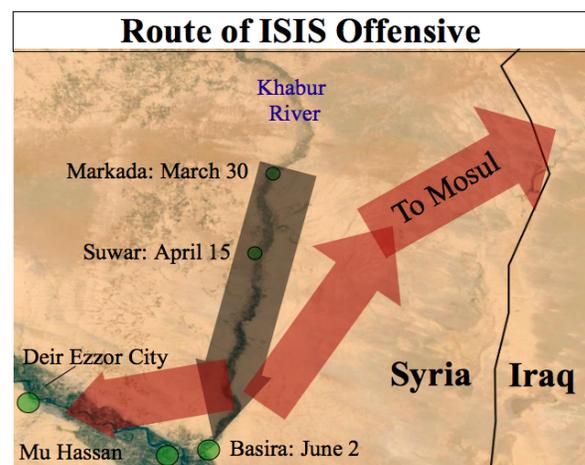
Syrian opposition fighters in Deir Ezzor Province can take the pressure off Baghdad, prevent consolidation of ISIS positions, and initiate the rollback of ISIS's pernicious influence in the region. These rebels have long been fighting a two-front war against both Assad regime forces and ISIS. Furthermore, they have already established joint operations rooms to fight ISIS, staffed by commanders who have been vetted by the U.S. and received prior American assistance. The United States should act immediately to provide the Deir Ezzor Joint Operations Rooms with heavy weapons, before ISIS uses its newfound cache of U.S.-made weapons to exterminate moderate rebel forces in Deir Ezzor Province.

BEFORE MOSUL: THE FALL OF KHABUR RIVER

Extremist militants affiliated with ISIS, the successor organization to Al-Qaeda in Iraq, have scored a series of spectacular victories in recent weeks. First, ISIS overran Iraq's second city of Mosul to seize control of vast weapons stores, armored Humvees supplied by the U.S., and some \$429 million in cash. Then, the group advanced south from Mosul to capture a second provincial capital, Tikrit, before seizing multiple Iraqi border posts with Syria. Now, the Iraqi capital Baghdad is in ISIS's sights, and many leading security experts believe the city is vulnerable.

The fall of Mosul only became possible after ISIS defeated Syrian rebels on territory near the Syrian-Iraqi border. This territory lies on the banks of the Khabur River, a north-south tributary of the Euphrates under 30 miles east of the Iraqi border (see map at right). While the Khabur had been under Syrian rebel control for nearly two years since summer of 2012, ISIS gradually expelled rebels from the area in a two-month offensive that started March 30, 2014. ISIS fighters captured the main objective of their offensive just four days prior to their assault on Mosul.

On March 30, 2014, ISIS militants killed over 50 Syrian opposition members in a surprise attack on Markada, the northernmost town abutting the Khabur River in Syria's Deir Ezzor Province. ISIS then fought their way southward until they had subdued all rebel villages on the banks of the Khabur, culminating in the fall of the Khabur's southernmost town of Basira on June 2nd. With the capture of Basira, ISIS seized the intersection



point of the Khabur and Euphrates. This afforded the group a dominant position in Syrian territory abutting the Nineveh Province of Iraq. Within a week, Nineveh's provincial capital Mosul was in ISIS hands.

WHY STOPPING ISIS REQUIRES ACTION IN SYRIA

The capture of Mosul left ISIS flush with American-made weapons and military hardware meant for the Iraqi Army. According to General Najim al-Jabouri, former mayor of the Tel Afar town near Mosul, the capture of Mosul placed ISIS in possession of "helicopters, Humvees, cargo planes and other heavy machine guns, along with body armor and uniforms." ISIS also looted over \$400 million from Mosul's central bank, which will allow the group to further swell its ranks and weapons stores. Today, fighters from ISIS are deploying their new weapons to dramatic effect in both Iraq and Syria.

In Iraq, ISIS has advanced south from Mosul to the town of Baquba, which lies just 37 miles north of the capital Baghdad. ISIS is also consolidating its position in Iraq's westernmost Anbar Province, where it already controls the town of Fallujah just 43 miles west of Baghdad. If ISIS is able to fortify its supply lines to both Baquba and Fallujah, the group will be able to mount simultaneous assaults on Baghdad from two axes. ISIS would also be able to threaten oil-rich Shiite territories south of Baghdad, potentially re-igniting Iraq's sectarian war and disrupting world energy prices.

Syrian rebels in Deir Ezzor still control the bulk of Syrian territory abutting Anbar Province, and they can thwart ISIS ambitions for further expansion. Through their strong presence in Deir Ezzor City, Bukamal town and other areas along the Euphrates River, the rebels of Deir Ezzor inhibit supply lines between Anbar Province in Iraq and the ISIS's stronghold of Raqqah Province in Syria (see map on title page). In the event that ISIS attacks Baghdad from the west, rebels in Deir Ezzor can reduce pressure on Baghdad by opening a second front against ISIS on the rear of the offensive. That is one reason why ISIS fighters in Deir Ezzor appear dead-set on eliminating the moderate rebel presence from Deir Ezzor Province.

A PLAN TO STOP ISIS IN DEIR EZZOR

Moderate rebel commanders in Deir Ezzor have established three joint operations rooms for the specific purpose of fighting ISIS. Each operations room coordinates activities in a specific region of the province, with Bukamal Operations Room in the southeast, Western Front Operations Room in the northwest, and Eastern Suburbs Operations Room in the center. A commander and a deputy commander have been appointed to lead each operations room, and commanders from each of three leading moderate rebel fighting coalitions in Deir Ezzor participate in the operations rooms. The leading moderate rebel fighting coalitions behind the operations rooms are Jabhat al-Asala w'al-Tanmiya, Harakat al-Binaa, and Jaish al-Haq. **Nearly all of the 22 commanders participating in the operations rooms have already been vetted by the U.S. government, and have already received some form of American assistance.**

The Coalition for a Democratic Syria has spoken with Lieutenant Colonel Mohannad al-Talaa, the top Free Syrian Army commander in Deir Ezzor, and Major Riad Shamsi, who heads the Jabhat al-Asala w'al-Tanmiya rebel coalition that helped found the joint operations rooms. They presented a plan for halting the rise of

ISIS in their province by harnessing the power of the anti-ISIS operations rooms. They also detailed the types of U.S. assistance needed to put their plan into full effect. A full presentation of the plan, translated from their own words in Arabic, is available at the conclusion of this document, alongside a listing of all participating commanders in the three joint operations rooms.

TIME IS RUNNING OUT

The United States is rapidly running out of time to prevent a full ISIS conquest of Deir Ezzor, because Syrian rebels have no answer for the U.S.-made advanced weapons currently in ISIS's possession. Within a day of the ISIS conquest of Mosul, photographs circulated of Chechen ISIS commander Umar al-Shishani (right) inspecting U.S. Army Humvees in Deir Ezzor. The two weeks since then have marked the lowest point of the entire conflict for rebels in Deir Ezzor.



On June 16th, ISIS captured the Siyaseh Bridge, which constituted the last ground supply route to opposition-held areas of Deir Ezzor City. As a result, rebels and civilians in Deir Ezzor City are now under a joint siege by ISIS militants north of the Euphrates River and Assad regime forces to the south. ISIS has also captured longtime rebel strongholds southeast of Deir Ezzor City on the Euphrates, most notably Mu Hassan town, which was one of the most important power centers in the province for the Free Syrian Army (see map on page one).

ISIS has particularly targeted Free Syrian Army groups and battalions that have received U.S. assistance in Deir Ezzor. From June 20th-21st, the bodies of four Free Syrian Army commanders were found floating down the Euphrates River: Yasir al-Mutlaq, Lu'ay al-Zurair, Tha'er al-Hamad, and Captain Hassan Awad al-Hafez. In addition, the Ibn al-Qayam Brigade of the anti-ISIS Eastern Suburbs Operations Room has suffered devastating losses in recent days. If moderate commanders and brigades like these are not soon empowered with game-changing assistance, the moderate rebel presence in Deir Ezzor will be in grave danger.

President Obama and his allies, in both the State Department in Congress, have claimed on multiple occasions that the U.S. supports the Free Syrian Army and is ready to provide it with lethal assistance. Most recently, President Obama promised to "ramp up support" to the Syrian opposition, a statement closely followed by National Security Advisor Susan Rice's remark that both "lethal and non-lethal" support is being provided to Syrian opposition members.

The Coalition for a Democratic Syria has extensive contacts among moderate rebel commanders inside Syria, including commanders who have received U.S. assistance. As such, CDS has sought to verify each previous Obama Administration claim of expanded lethal assistance. On each previous occasion, we have found that lethal U.S. assistance to moderate Syrian rebels was far too limited to have a substantive impact on the battlefield. This time must be different, or moderate rebels in Deir Ezzor Province will soon be exterminated with the same American weapons that were denied them, but are now in plentiful supply within the ranks of ISIS.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. SUPPORT THE DEIR EZZOR OPERATIONS ROOMS

- The **Obama Administration** should act immediately to **transfer advanced weapons to the anti-ISIS joint operations rooms in Deir Ezzor Province**. This will preserve moderate rebel strength in Deir Ezzor and impede an even more calamitous ISIS offensive in the future.
- **Members of Congress** should **request hearings on ISIS attacks against Syrian rebels** and **raise the situation in Deir Ezzor in future hearings on ISIS**, on the grounds that ISIS is now attacking rebels favorable to the U.S. with U.S.-made weapons.
- **Members of Congress** should **appropriate expanded funding to the joint operations rooms**. In light of ISIS's \$429 million windfall, Deir Ezzor rebels have requested financial aid to maintain the operations rooms and siphon recruits from hardline groups.

2. EXPAND TRAIN-AND-EQUIP FOR MODERATE REBELS

- The **Obama Administration** should **present an expanded train-and equip program to Congress**, in line with the President's pledge at West Point to "ramp up" support for moderate Syrian rebels. No such plan has been received by Congress to date.
- **Department of Defense officials** should **comment publicly on the program** to demonstrate their commitment to carry out Obama Administration directives regarding expanded assistance.
- **Members of Congress** should **ask the Obama Administration to elaborate its plan for "ramped up" support**, especially members of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees.
- **Members of the House of Representatives** should **add language on arming the opposition to the FY 2015 Defense Authorization Bill**, mirroring the Senate version that "Authorizes the Secretary of Defense to provide equipment, training, supplies, and defense services to assist vetted members of the Syrian opposition."

3. LAUNCH STRIKES ON ASSAD REGIME AIRFIELDS

- **Members of Congress** should **introduce a bill authorizing standoff strikes on regime airfields** known to be launch points for regime barrel bombings.
 - Barrel bombings weaken mainstream rebels fighting ISIS by decimating rebel-held civilian areas.
 - Assad's air force will not be helpful in the fight against ISIS. Assad rarely bombs areas under ISIS control.
 - Moderate rebels have already suffered 4,000 fatalities fighting ISIS. They are better U.S. partners against ISIS.

ANTI-ISIS OPERATIONS ROOMS IN DEIR EZZOR

Joint rebel operations rooms in Deir Ezzor have been established **specifically** to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham. The three main rebel fighting coalitions behind the operations rooms are:

1. Jabhat al-Asala w'al-Tanmiya (Front for Authenticity and Development)
2. Harakat al-Binaa (Construction Movement)
3. Jaish al-Haq (Army of Justice)

All commanders listed below have been vetted and have received U.S. assistance before.

BUKAMAL OPERATIONS ROOM

Operations room commander -- Mohammed Aziz al-'Aran, head of Omar Mukhtar Brigade.

Deputy commander -- Khez'al Sirhan al-Mahmoud, head of Allahu Akbar Battalions.

Allahu Akbar is a nickname for Bukamal and the battalion is in Asala w'al-Tanmiya.

Other brigades and their commanders:

- Qadisiyyah Brigade (Qadissiyyah is a historic city southwest of Hilla) -- Salman al-Matar
- Al-Zubayr Ibn al-Awam Brigade -- Abd el-Salam Mohammed. Member of Asala w'al-Tanmiya.
- Ansar al-Suna Brigade -- Mahmoud al-Hamad. Member of Asala w'al-Tanmiya.
- Al-Fatih al-Mubeen Brigade -- Mahmoud al-Matar.
- Freeman of Majawda Battalion (Majawda are a prominent tribe) -- Mohammed Obaid al-Mez'al.

WESTERN FRONT OPERATIONS ROOM

Operations room commander -- Mahmoud Ali Jadr, head of the Badr Division.

Deputy commander -- Najm al-Salama, a member of the Jaish al-Haq.

Other brigades and their commanders:

Ramadan Shlash Brigade -- 3 commanders: Hassan al-Salama (eastern sector), Duhaim al-Hayaya (Deir Ezzor City), Ahmed Shlash (western sector).

A'isha Force -- Abu Zhib.

Martyrs of Muwazafin Battalion (from Muwazafin District) -- Ahmed al-Nasr. Part of the Fursan al-Shahada Brigade, which is a member of Asala w'al-Tanmiya.

Ahfaz al-Sahaba Brigade -- Abu Askar.

Qaryet al-Hawayish Battalion -- Ibrahim al-Haj.

EASTERN SUBURBS OPERATIONS ROOM

Operations room commander -- Tlas al-Salama (AKA "Abu Faisal"), head of Basha'ir al-Nusr.

Deputy commander -- Maj. Mahmoud al-Salman, head of the Binaa Movement.

Other brigades and their commanders:

- Hamza Brigade -- Saleh al-Ja'ila.
- Ibn al Qayam Brigade -- Abu Ritaj.
- Mu'ta Army -- Abu al-Haitham.
- Ikhlas Brigade -- Mohammed al-Bash.
- Al-Athar w'al-Fatih Coalition -- Abd el-Aziz al-Sawadi.
- Haq Army -- Lt. Col. Maher al-Alaawi.

PLAN OF ACTION FOR THE EASTERN REGION IN SYRIA

Prepared by Major Riad Shamsi, President of Jabhat al-Asala w'al-Tanmiya

Following the recent developments in Iraq, a great fear for the future of the Eastern Region [eastern Syria] has gripped the region here. The so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Sham has increased in strength. It now possesses both advanced weapons and ammunition in extremely large quantities, and these weapons have begun to arrive in the Eastern Region. It is therefore incumbent upon us to initiate a counter-attack to defend our area from the ISIS threat and remove Assad's gangs, according to the following guidelines:

1. In partnership with friends, we must work to sever ISIS supply lines from Iraq and to monitor the Syrian-Iraqi border crossings of: Yaarabiya, which is currently under ISIS control; Abu Safuk, which is across from Shadadi; and Tanif, which is controlled by the Assad regime.
2. ISIS is characterized by its superb capabilities for quick maneuvers and movements. Therefore, we must cut their supply routes and disrupt their lines of communication in and out of Syria.
3. We must work to attack and besiege the "T2 Oil Field," advancing from southwestern Bukamal in Deir Ezzor Province.
4. We must work to besiege and encroach upon the Tabni Salt Mine in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ezzor City and the town of Shola, so that we can drive a wedge between ISIS territory in Deir Ezzor Province and Raqqah Province.
5. The Free Syrian Army forces should concentrate their efforts on the eastern suburbs of Deir Ezzor from Jadid Akidat, Bakara and Basira up to Markada in Hasaka so as to control the Deir Ezzor-Hasaka road.
6. Free Syrian Army groups should establish a special force to combat ISIS sleeper cells behind our front lines.
7. We must coordinate to open supply lines to the Eastern Region, including through Tel Abyad. This includes supply lines from the Turkish border, from the south, and, if possible, from the east [Iraqi border].
8. We must work to support the Free Syrian Army's relief offices, so that they can consolidate the people's trust and undercut the services and humanitarian portfolios of ISIS.
9. We must concentrate on guiding and teaching our society by bringing the moderate voice to them, and by bringing them ideas that benefit the Syrian society. This can be done through awareness-raising sessions, teaching, the printing of pamphlets, and the empowerment of silent members of society. We must elevate Free Syrian Army groups, to ensure that we do not allow radical groups with particular ideologies to influence any aspect of society.

The aforementioned points should be carried out by specialized officers in the Free Syrian Army.

Jabhat al-Asala w'al-Tanmiya
Major Riad Shamsi

ASSISTANCE NEEDED FOR LIBERATING DEIR EZZOR AND REMOVING ISIS

Prepared by the following commanders:

1. Lieutenant Col. Mohannad al-Talaa, head of Deir Ezzor Revolutionary Military Council of the Free Syrian Army.
2. Major Riad Shamsi, President of Jabhat al-Asala w'al-Tanmiya

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Following the dangerous developments that unfolded in Iraq today, and their catastrophic consequences that will engulf the region; in light of the rise of ISIS and the resultant impact on Deir Ezzor Province; and capitalizing on widespread popular resentment against ISIS; we present the following plan:

A. Support the 3 operations rooms that have been formed in Deir Ezzor.

- The Bukamal Operations Room should liberate Kam and protect the borders of Bukamal.
- The Western Front Operations Room should liberate up to Maadan, on the border of Raqqah.
- The Eastern Suburbs Operations Room should liberate the area between Deir Ezzor City; Markada; the Deir Ezzor-Hassake-Tadmur Highway up to Al-Kam; and Abu Hamam.

B. The three operations rooms cover the entire province, protecting its borders with Iraq and safeguarding the border crossings. Urgent financial assistance should be provided to cover the expenses of all three operations rooms.

C. The following types of advanced weapons are urgently required in light of the ongoing battles taking place in Deir Ezzor:

- 12.5mm and 14.5mm sniper rifles
- Anti-personnel and thermobaric RPGs
- Ammunition of various types, and especially of the 23mm variety
- Draganov sniper rifles
- PKS machine guns
- Night vision goggles
- Range finders of 5km minimum
- Konkurs, TOW, and Grad rockets.

D. Urgent financial and military assistance will also enable the three operations rooms to begin fulfilling the following objectives:

- Establishment of a supply route to the eastern region [Tel Abyad, where ISIS has partial control].
- Luring fighters away from hardline groups.