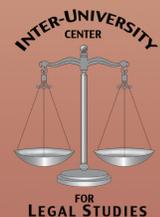


Syria: Quo Vadis?



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THE INTER-UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR TERRORISM STUDIES

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Profile of Selected Opposition Groups	5
Jabhat al-Nusra.....	5
Jaysh al-Fatah.....	9
Jaysh al-Islam.....	15
Southern Front.....	20
Appendix: “Timeline Charts of a Syrian Civil War”	24
Selected Bibliography.....	29

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Syria



The World Factbook. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2015.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

Introduction

Professor Yonah Alexander
Director, Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies

Contemporary Syria (formally the Syrian Arab Republic) is a United Nations member state under the regime of President Bashar Assad. Tragically, it ranks as one of the most brutal dictatorships in the history of mankind. As the country's raging war grinds through its fifth year, a total of an estimated 300,000 citizens, including women, children, and elderly, have been killed and thousands more wounded. The gravity of the humanitarian crisis is demonstrated by the four million Syrian refugees who fled the unbearable costs of the unending battles, into Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq and, with hundreds of thousands even journeying from the Middle East towards safety in Europe and elsewhere.

With intensifying fighting on the ground in wide areas of the destroyed country, the key question for both the short- and long-term outlook is whether Syria will survive as a distinct nation-state. If history is any guide for attempting to predict the future of the "cradle of civilization," the chronological record provides perhaps a seemingly realistic context and guide for assessing the likely potential strategic developments, with critical regional and global implications.

According to Middle Eastern historians and archaeologists, the area known as "Syria" has undergone several dozen different historical phases of civilizations and political control, from the Halaf period (from 4500 BC to 2500 BC) to the establishment of the Syrian state in 1946.

As a context for understanding modern Syria it is therefore important to detail the appearances and disappearances of peoples and cultures during the following periods:

Sumerians (2900 BC-2500 BC), Akkadians (2500 BC-2050 BC), Eblaïtes (2400 BC-1850 BC), Babylonians (2000 BC-539 BC), Canaanites (1900 BC-538 BC), Hurrians (1800 BC-1276 BC), Assyrians (1700 BC-1276 BC), Egyptians (1700 BC-1276 BC), Hittites (1440 BC-1190 BC), Arameans (1200 BC-732 BC), Chaldeans (612 BC-561 BC), Palmyrians (600 BC-272 AD), Persians (538 BC-333 BC), Hellenists (333 BC-64 BC), Nabateans (169 BC-106 AD), Ghassanides (100 BC-635 AD), Romans (64 BC-330 AD), Byzantines (330 AD-635 AD), Sassanids (540 AD-635 AD), Ummayyads (661 AD-750 AD), Abbasids (750 AD-1258 AD), Ikhchidid (933 AD-968 AD), Hamdanids (944 AD-1001 AD), Fatimids (968 AD-1075 AD), Saljouks (1075 AD-1174 AD), Crusaders (1096 AD-1187 AD), Ayyoubids (1174 AD-1259 AD), Mamelouks (1255 AD-1516 AD), Ottomans (1516 AD-1918 AD), the Great Arab Revolution (1918 AD-1920 AD), and the French Mandate (1920 AD-1946 AD).*

* This chronology was provided by Hani Zaroura, a Syrian archaeologist, who also dealt with "The Ancient Alphabets" such as Ugarit in Syria (1400-1300 BC).

Modern Syria

It is against this turbulent historical background that modern Syria has emerged. To be sure, the French mandate that was established formally in 1920 resulted from the initial political arrangement of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between Britain, France, and Russia. Furthermore, the 1920 San Remo Conference assigned to France the mandate over Syria. This political reality was endorsed by the League of Nations in 1922. During the Second World War, the French officials in Syria supported the pro-German Vichy government; therefore, Britain invaded Syria and Lebanon jointly with the Free French forces in 1941. By mid-1946, France withdrew its garrisons from Syria and the country became fully independent.

Several key developments are significant in the history of modern Syria, including the defeat of the army in the Palestine War in 1948; the 1958 union between Egypt and Syria forming the United Arab Republic (UAR); the coup of the Syrian officers in 1961 that resulted in the withdrawal from the UAR and the restoration of full independence; the Six Day War of June 1967 and the occupation by Israel of Syria's Golan Heights; the nomination by the "People's Council" in 1971 of the Alawite General Hafez al-Assad as President of the Republic, a position that he has held for nearly 30 years; the Soviets' vast supplying of modern weapons to Syria in 1972; the October 1973 Yom Kippur War during which Syrian forces crossed the cease-fire lines, leading Israel to recapture the Golan Heights and subsequently to annex the area in 1981; the takeover of Lebanon by Syrian troops in 1976 in an attempt to "restore peace"; the 1982 attack on the Islamic opposition in Hama, killing 20,000 civilians and destroying the city; and, following the death of President Hafez al-Assad in 2000, the assumption of power by his son Bashar al-Assad in an uncontested election.

Although the new government initially began to introduce some reforms such as enabling broader public participation in politics, this effort, labeled the "Damascus Spring," ended in 2001 when the regime resumed its authoritarian control. When Assad funneled fighters to combat American forces in Iraq, the United States imposed economic sanctions on Syria in 2004. Following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, Damascus, under international pressure, withdrew its forces from its neighboring country and thus ended nearly three decades of occupation. And in 2007, Israel attacked a Syrian nuclear reactor under construction in the province of Deir-Ezzour.

The Current Civil War (2011-2015)[†]

Syria erupted into a state of civil unrest in March 2011 after President Bashar al-Assad's security forces opened fire on protestors, killing five in the city of Daara. From the outset, these uprisings have been met by the iron fist of Assad, who has followed in the footsteps of his father Hafez al-Assad by crushing dissent with brutal force.

The Syrian government initially enacted reforms to appease the protestors, which included lifting longstanding Emergency Rule and allowed rival parties to participate in

[†] For an early publication see, "Arab Spring: A Year Later and Beyond Special Report" by Yonah Alexander, Michael S. Swetnam, and Don Wallace (March 30, 2012). Some material is adopted from this report.

upcoming elections, but these measures did little to quiet the calls for regime change. Assad has employed tanks, snipers, and bands of armed thugs to maintain his rule. In March 2012, the UN estimated that over 9,000 Syrian civilians had been killed since the beginning of the protests.

As the government's response has deteriorated into a wholesale slaughter, Syria's neighbors have roundly rejected Assad's extreme use of violence to counter the protests. The Arab League suspended Syrian membership in November 2011, and subsequently placed financial sanctions on the regime. Human Rights Watch declared that the Syrian government's "unlawful killings, arbitrary detention, disappearances and torture" amount to crimes against humanity, and the UN Human Rights Council has listed over 50 Syrian officials who could be prosecuted by the International Criminal Court.[‡] The European Union and the United States have both launched their own sanctions against Syria, and President Obama has publicly called for President Assad to step down.

In the summer of 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed by defectors from the Syrian Armed Forces hoping to topple the Assad regime. In November, an intelligence base and a Baath party office on the outskirts of Damascus were attacked. It is unclear whether this was the act of the FSA, the work of al-Qa'ida, or a collaborative effort between the two groups. Regardless, the situation in Syria has since escalated into conditions of civil war, with both sides launching major attacks against one another. The FSA has even had successes in cities such as Zabadani, where Syrian armed forces were temporarily forced to retreat in January 2012.

In spite of this, the Syrian Armed Forces under President Assad have not relented in brutal attacks against their own citizenry including the resort to chemical weapons. An international coalition has agreed to supply the FSA with communications equipment and financial assistance, but was still unwilling to provide direct military help. In April 2012 UN Arab League Envoy Kofi Annan claimed that he had reached a deal with President Assad for a ceasefire, but reactions from diplomats abroad signaled that Assad was only trying to stall the international community from deeper involvement in the crisis.

In fact, in the following month Assad's loyalist militias (Shabiha) massacred 108 people in the town of Houla, after which some Western countries expelled Syrian diplomats in response. By November 2012, Syrian opposition groups formed the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces to combine political and military efforts under civilian governance. Subsequently, in December 2012 President Obama declared that the U.S. would recognize the Syrian opposition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

[‡] "To All Members of the General Assembly." Amnesty International, February 15, 2012. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE24/012/2012/en/06a4b763-fd27-47aa-a420-282a6fc093de/mde240122012en.pdf>.

Purpose of the Report

The objective of this report is not to provide a detailed analysis of developments in Syria covering almost five years of a revolution that seems endless (see Appendix titled “A Graphic Timeline of Syria’s Civil War”). Our intention is not to deal with the rise of the Islamic State which the Syrian government opposes because it is perceived as a direct threat to the survival of the Assad regime. Likewise, we do not discuss the expanding grave humanitarian crisis of the Syrian refugees nor other topics such as the recent involvement of Russia in the Syrian conflict, the role of Iran and its Hizballah proxy, and the reactions of the United States and its friends and allies in the region. These and related issues are beyond the scope of this study.

Rather, the rationale for our undertaking is to focus on four case studies of Syrian opposition groups, namely, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaysh al-Fatah, Jaysh al-Islam, and the Southern Front. These groups underscore the complexity of the Syrian reality, reflecting a growing ideological divide and resulting in unpredictable political loyalties that challenge any anticipated or diplomatic resolution to the conflict.

Hopefully, this study may provide an initial impetus for other similar undertakings that are academically and practically critical for understanding the intentions and capabilities of a broad range of state and non-state actors concerned with the future of Syria.

Finally, some acknowledgements are in order. On both the personal and the academic levels I have dealt with a broad spectrum of Syrian war and peace issues for the past six decades. Relevant experiences include military service during regional hostilities, participation in second-track diplomacy efforts between the parties, teaching courses on the Middle East, and publishing extensively in the field (e.g., *The Role of Communications in the Middle East Conflict: Ideological and Religious Aspects* (1973); *Al-Qa’ida: Ten Years After 9/11 and Beyond* (2012); *The Islamic State: Combating the Caliphate Without Borders* (2015); and *NATO: From Regional to Global Security Provider* (2015).

Special gratitude is due to a number of graduate research assistants, particularly Dan Layman (Georgetown University), who prepared the profiles of selected opposition groups and the bibliographical section, and Veeravaroon Mavichak (American University), who organized the timelines charts of the revolution (2011-2015). Two attorneys, Max Stahlberg and Jon-Paul McConnell, with personal contacts in Syria provided rare insights to our study. The current group of young researchers at the Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies, administered ably by Sharon Layani (Research Associate and Coordinator), also contributed relevant data and support.

As always, Michael S. Swetnam (CEO and Chairman, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies) and Professor Don Wallace, Jr. (Chairman, International Law Institute) deserve special appreciation for their inspiration and continuing encouragement of our academic work.

October 31, 2015

Profile of Selected Opposition Groups

Jabhat al-Nusra

Areas of Operation

Der'a, Quneitra, Idlib, Aleppo, Latakia, Damascus, Rif Damascus, Homs, Hama

Ideology

Jabhat al-Nusra is al-Qa'ida's official branch in Syria. Its leadership, headed by Mohammed al-Joulani, takes orders from Ayman al-Zawahiri and adheres to the militant ideology of theorist and 2004 Madrid bombing mastermind Abu Musab al-Suri.¹ Al-Joulani has taken care to intermix practical and non-threatening dialogue along with the fundamentals of al-Qa'ida's version of radical Islam; while he has announced an Islamic emirate in Syria and while his cadre supports subsidiary groups with anti-Western goals,² he has also pledged to protect Syrian minorities, to reject takfiri practices, and to "accomplish only one mission" in Syria—fighting the Assad regime—without using the country as a base to conduct attacks on the West.³ However, this is likely a result of Ayman al-Zawahiri's gradualist focus on developing public support for the al-Qa'ida movement,⁴ a key lesson learned following the blowback to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's unpopular ruthlessness in Iraq. Al-Nusra has combined such centrist rhetoric with the provision of social services to local communities in Syria, further weaving itself into the societal cloth in areas it controls.⁵ These accommodating practices do not represent a shift to greater moderation in al-Qa'ida's ideology; rather, they form a practical strategy to expand the group's control in the region with the backing of local populations.

History and Structure

Founded in early 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra was reportedly formed by Al-Joulani, a group of "7 or 8 men" from outside of Syria, and a second group of extremists freshly released from Syria's prisons.⁶ The new organization first made a name for itself by perpetrating bomb attacks against regime targets in Damascus and Aleppo. It quickly gained a reputation as one of the most combat-effective groups in Syria, and effectively advertised its front-line activities and its rigorous training processes as recruiting tools. In the spring of 2013, more radical factions of al-Nusra and former leaders of the Islamic State of Iraq, namely Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, attempted to merge the two groups into a larger group—ISIS. When al-Zawahiri rejected the plan and al-Joulani followed suit, al-Nusra splintered along ideological lines. However, the group continues to operate with great strength throughout Syria. Until late February 2014, al-Nusra refrained from involving itself in the ongoing fight between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and ISIS, often playing the role of mediator to break up battles between the two entities. However, following several violent confrontations in Deir Ezzour, many al-Nusra units—especially those composed of mostly Syrian fighters—in Eastern Syria began engaging in active combat with ISIS. Five months later, in response to ISIS's declaration of a caliphate spanning Iraq and Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra declared its own emirate in northwestern Syria.⁷

Jabhat al-Nusra established itself as a well-funded and combat-effective force early in the conflict. Its ability to secure a steady flow of finances from Gulf donors made it an attractive

alternative to more secular or moderate Syrian fighters, whose need for weapons, supplies, and salaries overrode their ideological aversions to joining a more radical organization. By swelling its ranks with Syrian fighters and performing well on the battlefield against regime forces, al-Nusra was able to project its image as an “organic” Syrian element rather than as an al-Qa’ida franchise.⁸ This proved a considerable challenge for Western-backed rebel forces like the Supreme Military Council (SMC), whose supply chains and command capabilities were far less mature.⁹

Al-Nusra has recently begun working itself into less extremist rebel coalitions, often acting as the strongest or most influential force within them. Its participation in the Jaysh al-Fatah operations room and in joint battles alongside the Levant Front and Jaysh al-Islam has helped al-Nusra build alliances with more organically Syrian groups. However, al-Nusra has been known to strong-arm FSA elements that run afoul of it or that are ideologically opposed to it. Two examples are the Western-backed Syrian Revolutionaries Front and Harakat Hazm, which were routed by al-Nusra forces in October 2014. These groups were more or less disbanded, and their funding from the United States was reduced or cut entirely after al-Nusra’s assault.¹⁰

To the extent that Jabhat al-Nusra and its declared “emirate” draw the ire of other more moderate rebel groups operating in close proximity, it has proved proficient at using its strength to “alter the behavior” of these groups to “accommodate” to its existence and operations.¹¹ Historically, this phenomenon has been more apparent in northern and western Syria where al-Nusra has greater strength, and less apparent in southern Syria where Southern Front brigades outnumber al-Nusra.^{§12}

Capabilities and Funding

Various estimates of Jabhat al-Nusra place its troop strength as low as 5,000 or as high as 10,000-plus fighters throughout Syria.¹³ While many of these are foreign fighters, the vast majority of al-Nusra’s rank and file is Syrian. It has historically acquired its funds and equipment from al-Qa’ida’s global network of donors, covert state backers such as Turkey,¹⁴ the spoils of victory against Assad’s forces and other rebel groups, and even from the Islamic State of Iraq (later ISIS) before the two groups’ ill-fated merger.¹⁵ Some sources indicate that al-Nusra has even developed an engineering corps in order to manufacture its own weapons.¹⁶

§ Additionally, compared to northern Syria, populations in southern Syria have typically enjoyed educational and commercial advantages that render them less susceptible to extremist ideologies.

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- ⁴ Cafarella, Jennifer. "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for Al-Qaeda," *Middle East Security Report*, No.25 (December 12, 2014): 12, accessed October 21, 2015. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/JN%20Final.pdf>
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- ⁸ Cafarella, Jennifer. "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for Al-Qaeda," *Middle East Security Report*, No.25 (December 12, 2014): 25, accessed October 21, 2015. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/JN%20Final.pdf>
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¹⁴ Tastekin, Fehim. "Turkish Military Says MIT Shipped Weapons to Al-Qaeda," *Al-Monitor*, January 15, 2015, accessed October 21, 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/turkey-syria-intelligence-service-shipping-weapons.html#>

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¹⁶ Cafarella, Jennifer. "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for Al-Qaeda," *Middle East Security Report*, No.25 (December 12, 2014): 23, accessed October 21, 2015. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IN%20Final.pdf>

Jaysh al-Fatah

Areas of Operation

Idlib, Der'a, and Quneitra

Components

Northern Syria: Jabhat al-Nusra; Ahrar al-Sham; Liwa al-Haqq; Jaysh al-Sunna; Ajnad al-Sham; Faylaq al-Sham; Jund al-Aqsa.

Southern Syria: Tahalaf Fateh Al-Sham; Liwa Ahya al-Jihad; Tajamu Mujahideen Nuwa; Liwa Usud al-Tawhid; Liwa Ansar al-Haqq; Liwa al-Umarayn al-Islami

Ideology

Jaysh al-Fatah's component groups range on the ideological scale from conservatively to radically Islamist, and are led by the extremist Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qa'ida's official branch in Syria. Notable members include Ahrar al-Sham, which recently expanded its ranks by absorbing the smaller Suqour al-Sham Brigade;¹ both groups were members of the (now disbanded) Islamic Front, and the ranks of their leadership included al-Qa'ida sympathizers² who spent significant time in Damascus's Sednaya Prison—along with Liwa al-Haqq commander Abdul Rahman Suweis and Jaysh al-Islam commander Zahran Alloush—for their radical ideologies.³

Ahrar al-Sham is the largest and, after Jabhat al-Nusra, the most influential of Jaysh al-Fatah's components. In an attempt to publicly separate itself from its extremist foundations (the group was co-founded by a senior al-Qa'ida official),⁴ Ahrar officials have recently claimed that the group is a "mainstream" Sunni faction that wishes to protect and incorporate Syria's minorities in a future state.⁵ Ahrar's founder and previous commander, Hassan Abboud, who was killed in September 2014, made similar comments before his death.⁶ Abboud also claimed in June 2013 that Ahrar's coordination with Jabhat al-Nusra was merely a practical one, resulting from al-Nusra's strength and efficiency on the battlefield against regime forces. In the same interview he stated his preference for a future Syria governed by an Islamic Shari'a incorporative of all peoples.⁷

This apparently tolerant rhetoric is, however, overshadowed by a history of more radical statements and tendencies. Ahrar was accused of perpetrating massacres against Alawite populations in the summer of 2013 alongside ISIS—at that point in its embryonic stages—and Jabhat al-Nusra.⁸ More recently, the group issued a public statement mourning the death of Taliban spiritual leader Mullah Omar.⁹ The disjunction between Ahrar al-Sham's actions and the claims of its commanders may signal shifting ideologies, but it more likely suggests temporary strategic adjustments corresponding to changes in the conflict's landscape, or, more likely still, a desire to appease potential benefactors in the West as the Assad regime becomes weaker. It may also be explained by wide gaps in the chain of command between Ahrar al-Sham's leaders and its lower-level affiliate groups in different provinces—such ideological and operational disjunction between commanders and operators in the field is a longstanding problem for Syria's opposition groups in general.¹⁰

Of note are the unclear ideological leanings of Faylaq al-Sham, a much smaller component of Jaysh al-Fatah with branches in Homs and Hama. The group has its roots in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, on which it relied for funding throughout 2012-2013. However, current leaders claim that Faylaq became independent of the Brotherhood in 2014 and drew closer to Saudi Arabia.¹¹ While Faylaq's 2014 shift towards Saudi Arabia served as a credible indicator that the group had moved away from the Brotherhood (the former King Abdullah was staunchly opposed to the Brotherhood and its backers in Doha), the new Saudi King's more amicable stance vis-a-vis the Brotherhood could mean that Faylaq is free to re-engage with its roots.¹²

It should be noted that the extent to which a rebel faction identifies as ideologically moderate or radical is subject to change over time in response to a number of variables. Such variables include the faction's goal of receiving support from a powerful international benefactor, which may necessitate shifting its ideological image to align with the wishes of the benefactor.¹³ Ideologies may also shift due to a faction's entry into a more radical or more moderate alliance, whose own ideologies may shape the ideology of the newcomer. This latter variable has been known to affect the ideologies of groups that enter into an alliance with the radical and influential Jabhat al-Nusra.¹⁴

History and Structure

Jaysh al-Fatah is the result of existing strategic relationships between its component groups—like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra—and a joint Saudi-Turkish agreement to create a strong alliance capable of bringing down the Assad regime.¹⁵ The group announced its formation on its Twitter page on March 23, 2015. Jaysh al-Fatah is not a single combat unit, but rather an “operations room” that combines the leaders of each component group, in order to coordinate battle strategy and to receive and distribute supplies. The operations room model was first coined in 2014 by the Southern Front, a coalition of 60 rebel brigades in southern Syria that have used this joint operations strategy successfully against Bashar al-Assad's forces in Der'a, Quneitra, As-Suwayda, and Rif Damascus.¹⁶ A day after announcing its formation, Jaysh al-Fatah issued its first statement, announcing to “our people of Idlib City” to “remain steadfast in your homes through the coming days, until God grants us victory and liberation.”¹⁷ The announcement prefaced an attack on Idlib City beginning the same day, during which the group updated its Twitter page with its territorial gains. The battle ended four days later when Jaysh al-Fatah wrested control of the city center from Syrian government forces.¹⁸ Jaysh al-Fatah has since conducted successful operations in rural Idlib, taking the regime stronghold town of Ariha in late May.¹⁹ On July 15, Jaysh al-Fatah issued its second statement, announcing joint offensives in Kafariyeh and Al-Fuah.²⁰

Jaysh al-Fatah is not limited to northern Syria. On June 20, 2015, the group announced the creation of its own branch in southern Syria, adding six additional rebel units to its fold.²¹ Despite being modeled on the Southern Front's operations room format, Jaysh al-Fatah's branch in southern Syria does not cooperate with the Southern Front.²² However, both groups are engaged in combat with Assad regime forces, ISIS, and ISIS affiliates such as the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade in southern Syria.

It is important to note that operations room coalitions, like the rebel groups themselves, are fluid and inconstant. Certain groups may be a part of more than one coalition at a time, and coalitions may exist for only a few major battles. This explains Jabhat al-Nusra's and Ahrar al-Sham's simultaneous memberships in Jaysh al-Fatah, Ansar al-Khilafah, and Jaysh al-Haramun.²³

Capabilities and Funding

The Jaysh al-Fatah alliance is a product of a joint Saudi-Turkish agreement, and as such its component groups receive funding and equipment from these countries via its operations room structure.²⁴ However, each group entered the alliance with its own strengths and capabilities, and each group continues to receive support from respective private backers.

During its tenure in the Islamic Front, Ahrar al-Sham gained a reputation as one of the most battle-hardened factions in Syria's opposition, having consistently shown great strength in Idlib, rural Hama, the Latakia mountains, al-Raqqah, Hasakeh, and Deir Ezzour. As of mid-2014, its numbers were estimated at 14,000-16,000, though the group later lost considerable strength in eastern Syria due to the rise of ISIS. Its recent merger with Suqour al-Sham, estimated to include 6,000 fighters in late 2014, again strengthened its ranks. While June 2015 reports estimated that the whole of Jaysh al-Fatah incorporated 12,000-15,000 fighters,²⁵ local sources now estimate that Ahrar al-Sham alone controls 12,000 fighters, with Jaysh al-Fatah as a whole incorporating no less than 35,000 fighters throughout Syria.²⁶ Ahrar al-Sham has historically received state financing and materiel from Qatar, Kuwait, and more recently Turkey, in addition to funding from private donors elsewhere in the Gulf.²⁷

Less is known about Jaysh al-Fatah's smaller components, whose ranks include only a few thousand fighters. Some, like Liwa al-Haqq, have been absorbed into larger groups like Ahrar al-Sham.²⁸ The Saudi-backed Faylaq al-Sham claimed that it controlled 2,000 fighters in May 2015. It was reportedly receiving funding from Muslim Brotherhood backers in 2012, and from Saudi Arabia as of April 2014, prior to the formation of Jaysh al-Fatah.²⁹ A statement released by Faylaq al-Sham on May 15, 2015 expressed strong support for Saudi Arabia's efforts in Yemen, suggesting the group still maintains close ties with the Kingdom.³⁰

Jaysh al-Fatah and component groups on Twitter

Jaysh al-Fatah: @alsdq1

Liwa al-Haqq: @lewaa_al_haq

Ajnad al-Sham: @ajnad11alsham

Faylaq al-Sham: @shamlegion

Jabhat al-Nusra: @JabhatAlNusraEN

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Jaysh al-Islam

Areas of Operation

Rif Damascus, Damascus, Der'a, Idlib, Aleppo

Ideology

Jaysh al-Islam is a powerfully influential Salafi brigade that calls for Islamic governance in Syria. It is led by Zahran Alloush, the son of a well-known Salafi cleric based in Medina, Saudi Arabia.¹ Alloush's leadership in the Damascus-based Liwa al-Islam helped him gain national recognition as a capable commander. His Salafi activism and Sednaya Prison sentence won him the respect of his fighters, and his ties to Saudi financing helped him maintain firm control over his units.² Alloush has publicly issued polemics against Syria's religious minorities and has acknowledged his cooperation with extremist groups. In July 2013, shortly before the creation of Jaysh al-Islam, Alloush stated that "to cleanse Syria from the filth of the Magi (a pejorative term for Shias), who fought the religion of God," is a duty of Syria's mujahideen.³ Later that year, he claimed that his "brother" Mohammad al-Joulani and his fighters in Jabhat al-Nusra were partners in the fight against the "Nusayri (a pejorative term for the Alawite branch of Shia Islam, of which Bashar al-Assad is a member) Regime."⁴

Similar to the recent changes in Ahrar al-Sham's public rhetoric, Alloush has recently recognized the benefits of appearing moderate and diplomatic for Western media. In a May 2015 interview with McClatchy—his first interview with U.S. media—he claimed that "we are not seeking to impose our power on minorities," and that a system of governance chosen by the Syrian people was the preferred outcome after the fall of the Assad regime.⁵ When asked why Alloush's attitude had changed from his previous anti-democratic and anti-Alawite stances, Jaysh al-Islam spokesman Islam Alloush explained that his more radical and provocative speeches were meant to "rally fighters" and deter them from joining the more radical ISIS.^{**} Syria analysts opine that this sudden shift is yet another example of a radical rebel faction seeking to "be acceptable to the West and to the international community" as the Assad regime's control of the country wanes.⁶

In December 2013 Jaysh al-Islam was accused of participating in a sectarian massacre during a military campaign to retake control of Adra, an industrial city in the eastern outskirts of Damascus. During the event 15-40 civilian workers of the Alawite and Druze sects were reportedly killed in their homes by Jaysh al-Islam and Jabhat al-Nusra fighters, though the veracity of these claims is contested.⁷

History and Structure

According to local opposition sources, Jaysh al-Islam competes only with Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Fatah as a whole for the title of largest and most powerful rebel unit in Syria.⁸ Based in Eastern Ghouta, Jaysh al-Islam was created in September 2013, combining 43

^{**} In December 2013 correspondence with the author, Jaysh al-Islam spokesman Islam Alloush claimed that "a decision has not yet been made regarding coordination [with ISIS]." By January 2014, the group was engaged in combat with ISIS in northern Syria.

rebel groups in and around Damascus.⁹ Alloush was placed in command due to his leadership in Jaysh al-Islam's strongest faction, Liwa al-Islam, and due to his familial ties to the Saudi religious community. Like Jaysh al-Fatah, the group's origins were the result of coordination between the Saudis, the Turks, and to some extent the Qataris, though the group's primary backer was—and remains—Saudi Arabia.¹⁰

Contrary to the wishes of his Saudi benefactors, Alloush and the units under his command have historically been opposed to the Syrian opposition's governments in exile and Western-backed rebel groups. In September 2013 Liwa al-Islam joined Jabhat al-Nusra in rejecting the Syrian National Coalition, instead in favor of establishing a "clear Islamic framework" of governance and rejecting "formations established outside the country."¹¹ This disdain for foreign-backed elements extended to the Free Syrian Army's Supreme Military Council (SMC) as well. Despite Saudi and U.S. desires for Jaysh al-Islam to fall under the command of the SMC, personal and professional differences between Alloush and SMC commander Salim Idriss over ideological and command chain issues tainted negotiations between the two groups.¹² The result was that Alloush and Jaysh al-Islam joined with Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, and Suqour al-Sham to form the Islamic Front, which, within weeks, coordinated with Jabhat al-Nusra to overthrow the SMC command.¹³

In 2015 Jaysh al-Islam has confronted both Assad regime forces and ISIS on several fronts. Throughout April and May, the group utilized Jaysh al-Fatah's operations room method to take control of Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and several smaller brigades.¹⁴ In the Qalamoun Mountains of western Damascus, where fighting has raged between regime forces, Hezbollah, ISIS, and FSA groups for over a year, Jaysh al-Islam engaged ISIS throughout the spring and even pursued the group across the Lebanese border.¹⁵ More recently the group has coordinated with elements of the Southern Front, a Der'a-based operations room of 60 moderate-nationalist rebel brigades. Jaysh al-Islam intends to utilize its own strength in the Damascus outskirts against regime elements as Southern Front forces march north into the capital's southern suburbs.¹⁶ Its smaller northern components are also involved in the Fatah Halab operations room, fighting against regime and ISIS forces north of Aleppo City.¹⁷

In July, the group filmed the execution of 18 ISIS militants who were killed in retaliation for ISIS's beheading of three Jaysh al-Islam fighters earlier in the year.¹⁸ The high quality production values of the video were on par with some of the short films released by ISIS's infamous Al-Hayat Media Center, perhaps suggesting a new trend in the propaganda of the Syrian conflict.¹⁹ The group also maintains a sophisticated website.

Capabilities and Funding

While part of the Islamic Front, Jaysh al-Islam incorporated between 20,000 and 40,000 fighters from approximately 50 rebel brigades throughout Syria, and captured a considerable number of tanks and armored vehicles from regime installations. Since the Islamic Front's quiet dissolution in 2014, the strength of its former component groups' rank and file has fluctuated. According to Alloush, Jaysh al-Islam now controls 17,000 fighters throughout Syria, with the heaviest concentration in the Damascus suburbs.²⁰ In May 2015 the group held a large military parade in Eastern Ghouta, complete with 1,700

recent graduates of its “17th Jihadi Preparation Course” and columns of self-propelled anti-aircraft guns, armored personnel carriers, trucks, and tanks outfitted with reactive armor.²¹

Thanks to the efforts of the former Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Jaysh al-Islam enjoyed Saudi state funding immediately upon its formation.²² Intending to use the group to combat both the Assad regime and extremist groups like ISIS, the Saudis began “pressing the US to drop its objections to supplying anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles” to Jaysh al-Islam.²³ When the United States continued to balk at the idea of arming a greater number of rebels, Saudi Arabia declared its impatience and its intention to “go it alone” without the approval of Western allies.^{††24}

As of April 2015, diplomatic meetings held in Turkey suggested that Alloush and his cadre might soon begin enjoying more joint support from the Saudis, Turks, and Qataris in an international attempt to “unite the efforts of revolutionaries on the ground in all of Syria, not just in the Damascus countryside.”²⁵

Jaysh al-Islam on Twitter: @IslamArmy01

Jaysh al-Islam website: <https://www.jaishalislam.com/subject/292>

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Southern Front

Areas of Operation

Der'a, As-Suwayda, Quneitra, Damascus, Rif Damascus,

Components

Jabhat Thiwar Souria al-Janoubieh; Liwa al-Qalamoun al-Tahtani; Liwa al-Yarmouk; Liwa Fallujah Hawran; Liwa al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar; Liwa Aswad al-Sunnah; Firqah 18 Athar; Liwa Hamza Asad Allah; Firqah al-Mughawir al-Oulah; Liwa Fajr al-Islam; Liwa Shabab al-Sunnah; Liwa al-Ghaz bin Abdelsalam; Liwa al-Karameh; Firqah Tahrir al-Sham; Fouj al-Madfaieh al-Oulah; Al-Liwa al-Ouwal; Liwa Shuhada Douma; Liwa Mujahideen al-Ghouta; Liwa Ababil Hawran; Liwa Tawhid Kataib Hawran; Al-Firqah 11 al-Qalamoun al-Fouqani; Liwa al-Moutaz Billah; Liwa al-Muham al-Khasa; Majlis Quneitra al-Askari; Liwa Seif al-Sham; Liwa Tahrir al-Sham; Liwa Shuhada Damashq; Liwa Shuhada al-Islam; Liwa Shuhada al-Huriyeh; Liwa al-Qasyoun; Liwa Aamoud Hawran; Liwa Der'a al-Lijah; Liwa al-Harmein al-Sharifein; Liwa Habib; Katibah al-Banyan; Liwa Ahrar Nawa; Katibah Aswad al-Islam; Liwa Salah al-Din; Liwa Asifah Hawran; Katibah Tabarik Rahman; Katibah Tawhid al-Lijah; Liwa Tawhid al-Janoub; Liwa al-Furqan; Katibah Mou'tesim Billah; Liwa Homs al-Walid; Liwa Ahdad Ibn al-Walid; Liwa al-Shahid Ahmad al-Khalf; Liwa Mughawir Sahel Hawran; Liwa Shahid Hawran; Katibah Ahrar al-Rif al-Gharbi; Fouj Haras al-Hadud; Liwa Ahbab Amr; Liwa Ahrar al-Janoub; Katibah al-Shahid Nabil Amyan; Liwa al-Oumry; Liwa al-Asha'ir; Liwa al-Qudsiyeh; Katibeh al-Handasah wa al-Sawarikh; Liwa Tahrir Hawran; Liwa Jisr Hawran

Ideology

The Southern Front is a large moderate-nationalist conglomerate of rebel groups, arguably making it the country's best alternative, ideologically speaking, to more radical formations like Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaysh al-Islam, Jaysh al-Fatah, and of course ISIS. The majority of the Southern Front's component brigades existed under the SMC (the vetted, Western-backed, moderate command structure that was overrun by extremists in 2013). The founding statement of the Southern Front in early 2014 included language promoting "a new government that reflects the wishes of the Syrian people and respects minorities [...] regardless of religious or ethnic differences."¹ These same sentiments seem to remain true at present; in response to a question about the freedoms of minorities after the fall of the regime, Joint Command Council member Abu Ousama Al-Joulani (Hassan Ibrahim) responded, "We will allow for nothing but that freedom is achieved for everyone, without exception."²

Southern Front forces conducted joint operations with Jabhat al-Nusra until April 2015, when a disagreement between the two groups led the Southern Front to announce that it would not allow extremist forces to establish "a base for jihad" in Syria.³ Activists affiliated with the Southern Front say that al-Nusra forces have since tried to undermine the Southern Front's influence and have even targeted some Southern Front leaders with assassination attempts.⁴

History and Structure

The Southern Front operations room emerged from the ashes of the SMC's Military Councils in southern Syria, which, at the time of the SMC's December 2013 collapse, contained approximately 48 rebel brigades and 28,000 fighters, according to documents obtained from the SMC. In January 2014, 49 brigades totaling 30,000 fighters announced their membership in a new entity, the Southern Front, specifying that battlefield coordination would be organized through the free will of each brigade's commander in an operations room structure rather than as a single unit.⁵ According to affiliated activists, since the 2014 unification some of the original brigades have left while others have joined, leaving the 60 rebel formations listed above as the current component groups of the Southern Front.⁶

Prior to December 2013, The SMC's southern Military Councils had historically maintained a considerable amount of autonomy from the SMC command structure, primarily due to the inability of the SMC to distribute supplies south of regime strongholds in Homs and Damascus. From this autonomy was born the very operations room structure the Southern Front would adopt in 2014. In May 2015, the Southern Front elected a new Joint Command Council of seven members—including an official tasked with overseeing brigade cooperation, who publicly declared the importance of bringing the Southern Front component brigades together as one unit.⁷ While this may signal a future attempt to merge all Southern Front groups into a single entity, affiliated activists doubt the viability of such a complete unification. These activists claim that the election of the new joint command council under the idea of complete unification is equivalent to “building the head and forgetting the body,” and fails to appreciate the history of ill-fated attempts at major coordination between rebel groups.^{##8} At the time of writing, the Southern Front's component groups continue to act in coordination, but as independent units with independent commanders and supply lines. This will likely remain the case until a steady stream of international support increases the command and control (C2) capabilities of the new joint command structure.

From late 2014 until the present, the Southern Front has been credited with a steady stream of victories against Assad regime forces. In the fall and winter of 2014, Southern Front groups coordinated with Jabhat al-Nusra to take major swaths of territory around the Golan Heights and along the Jordanian border, stopping just short of the regime stronghold of Der'a City. In January, fighters took over the regime's Brigade 82 base on the outskirts of Sheikh Miskin, eventually overrunning the majority of Sheikh Miskin itself and giving rebel groups a strategic base close to the M5 artery between Damascus and the Jordanian border.⁹

In the biggest gain of 2015 thus far, Southern Front forces followed by Jabhat al-Nusra took control of the Nasib border crossing, the last government-controlled crossing in southern Syria. It was at this point that Southern Front forces broke their ties with Jabhat al-Nusra

^{##} The new Southern Front joint command council, elected in May 2015, includes: Khalid Nabulsi (Head of Operations Office), Sabr Safr (Head of Armaments), Bakour al-Salim, Hassan Ibrahim (General Coordinator), Said Naqrish, Ahmad al-Oudeh (Head of Supply Office), and Samr Mouhidin Haboush

after the latter claimed control of a portion of the border. Southern Front forces rejected al-Nusra's move, and Southern Front spokesman Essam Reyes announced that the group would not allow Syria to "become a base for jihad."¹⁰ In early June 2015, Southern Front forces made another enormous stride, taking the largest remnant regime base in the province of Der'a "in only several hours, thanks to successful military planning."¹¹

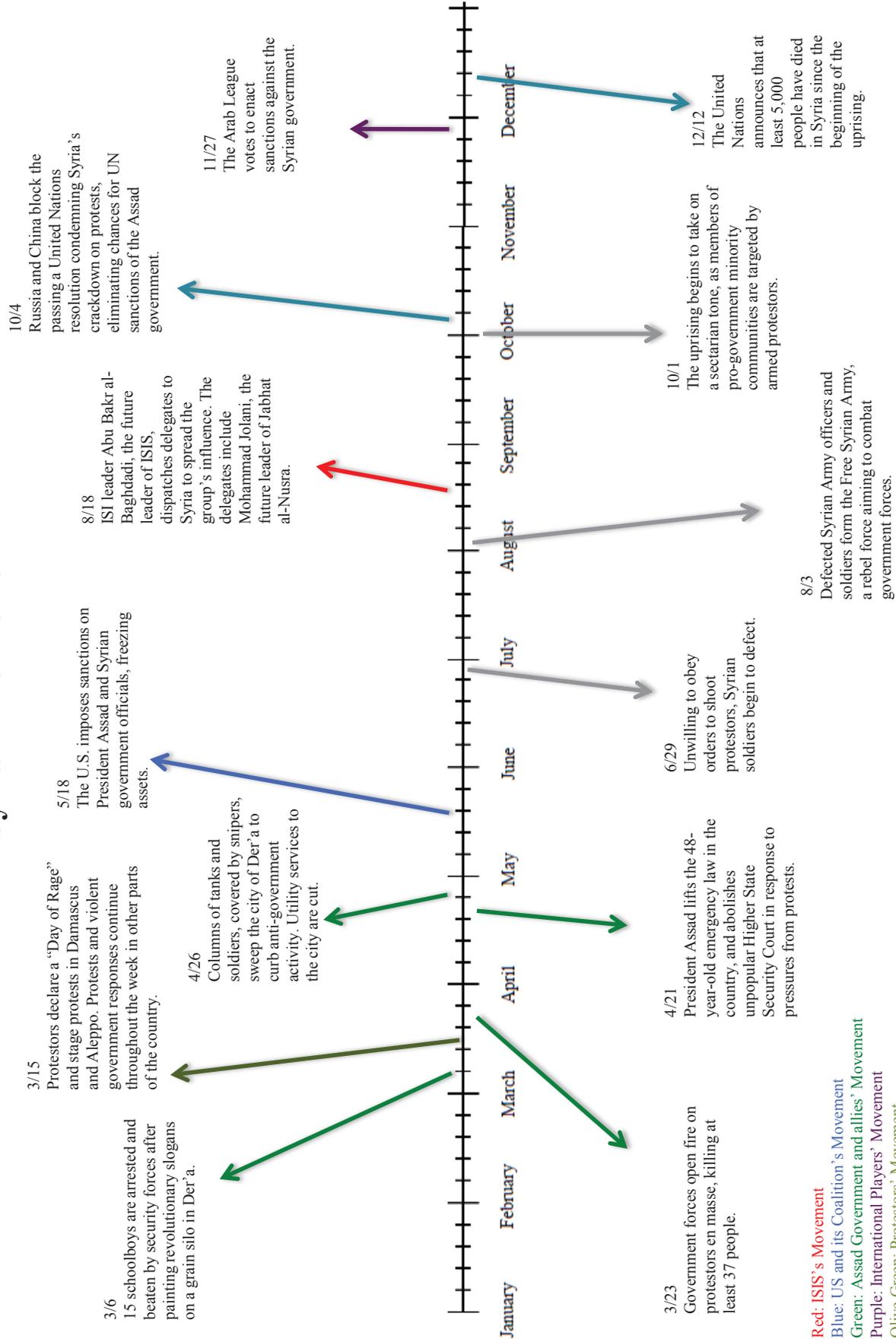
Capabilities and Funding

It is estimated that the Southern Front's total combined strength has not exceeded 30,000 fighters since its formation in early 2014. Its component brigades receive support through various means, including what has arguably become a more organized chain of international support than that which exists in northern Syria. To remedy their isolation from the SMC command chain prior to December 2013, southern brigades received direct support from Saudi Arabia via border points in Jordan, including several shipments of Croatian-made light weapons and anti-tank artillery in early 2013.¹² Following the creation of the Southern Front operations room model and the failure of Geneva II negotiations in early 2014, supply shipments from a conglomerate of international donors including Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Jordan began to flow across the border. The supply chain matured into what is now known as the Military Operations Command (MOC), a coordination center in Jordan through which weapons, funds, and supplies are moved into Syria.¹³ Rebel groups complain that the quantity of these supplies is not sufficient. However, as in northern Syria, many groups have their own private backers, and all groups benefit from the spoils of victories over regime forces. One such windfall of supplies occurred when, on June 9, 2015, Southern Front forces overran the regime's 52nd Mechanized Brigade and seized control of several armored vehicles, tanks, and various small arms.¹⁴

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- ¹ “49 Factions Announce ‘The Southern Front’ in 5 Provinces,” *Zaman al-Wasl*, February 13, 2014, accessed November 3, 2015. <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/46545.html>
- ² al-Haj, Mustafa. “Syria Opposition Forces Claim Regime Attack in Daraa Futile,” *Al-Monitor*, February 20, 2015, accessed October 21, 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/regime-syria-daraa-southern-front-opposition.html#>;
- “The Syrian Commission for Media: Special Meeting with Major Abu Ousama al-Joulani, Deputy Commander of the First Army.” YouTube video, 17:59. Posted by “SMO Syria,” April 19, 2015, accessed October 21, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQo-7P1y_7s
- ³ “Rebels in Southern Syria Split with Al Qaeda After Tensions,” *Arutz Sheva*, April 15, 2015, accessed October 21, 2015. <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/194100#.VcOz1hNVikp>
- ⁴ Author’s interview with Feras al-Hawrani [nom de guerre] (activist and former official of the SMC Military Council in Der’a) August 5, 2015.
- ⁵ “49 Factions Announce ‘The Southern Front’ in 5 Provinces,” *Zaman al-Wasl*, February 13, 2014, accessed November 2, 2015. <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/46545.html>
- ⁶ Author’s interview with Feras al-Hawrani [nom de guerre] (activist and former official of the SMC Military Council in Der’a) August 5, 2015.
- ⁷ “Statement Designating the Southern Front’s Joint General Command,” YouTube video. Posted by “Southern Front,” May 16, 2015, accessed October 21, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vzqfc3Ug1w;>
- “The Syrian Commission for Media: Special Meeting with Major Abu Ousama al-Joulani, Deputy Commander of the First Army.” YouTube video, 17:59. Posted by “SMO Syria,” April 19, 2015, accessed October 21, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQo-7P1y_7s
- ⁸ Author’s interview with Feras al-Hawrani [nom de guerre] (activist and former official of the SMC Military Council in Der’a) August 5, 2015.
- ⁹ “Syria Rebels Overtake Strategic Base in South,” *Reuters*, January 25, 2015, accessed October 21, 2015. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/01/25/Syria-rebels-overtake-strategic-base-in-south.html>
- ¹⁰ “Rebels in Southern Syria Split with Al-Qaeda After Tensions,” *Arutz Sheva*, April 15, 2015, accessed October 21, 2015. <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/194100#.VcOz1hNVikp>
- ¹¹ Author’s interview with Feras al-Hawrani [nom de guerre] (activist and former official of the SMC Military Council in Der’a) August 5, 2015; “Syrian Rebels Seize Major Army Base in Deraa,” *Al Jazeera*, June 9, 2015, accessed November 3, 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/syrian-rebels-seize-largest-army-base-deraa-150609122230185.html>
- ¹² Chivers, C.J. and Eric Schmitt. “Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria With Croatian Arms,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2013, accessed October 21, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html? r=0>
- ¹³ Hubbard, Ben. “Warily, Jordan Assists Rebels in Syrian War,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2014, accessed November 3, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/11/world/middleeast/syria.html? r=0>
- ¹⁴ “In Southern Syria, A Rebel Offensive Begins,” *Stratfor*, June 10, 2015, accessed October 21, 2015. <https://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/southern-syria-rebel-offensive-begins>

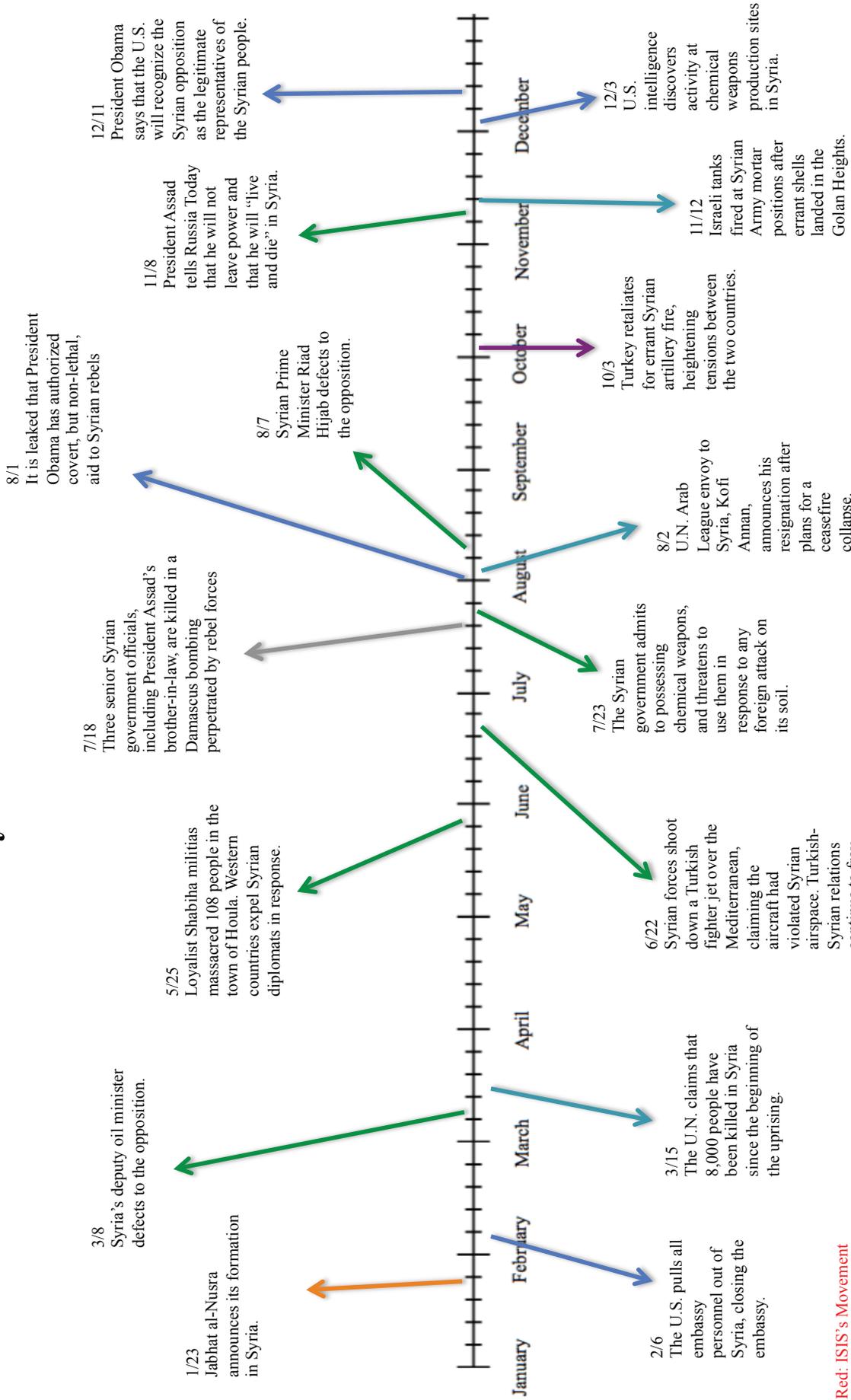
Syria Timeline 2011

Appendix: "Timeline Charts of a Syrian Civil War" (2011-2015)



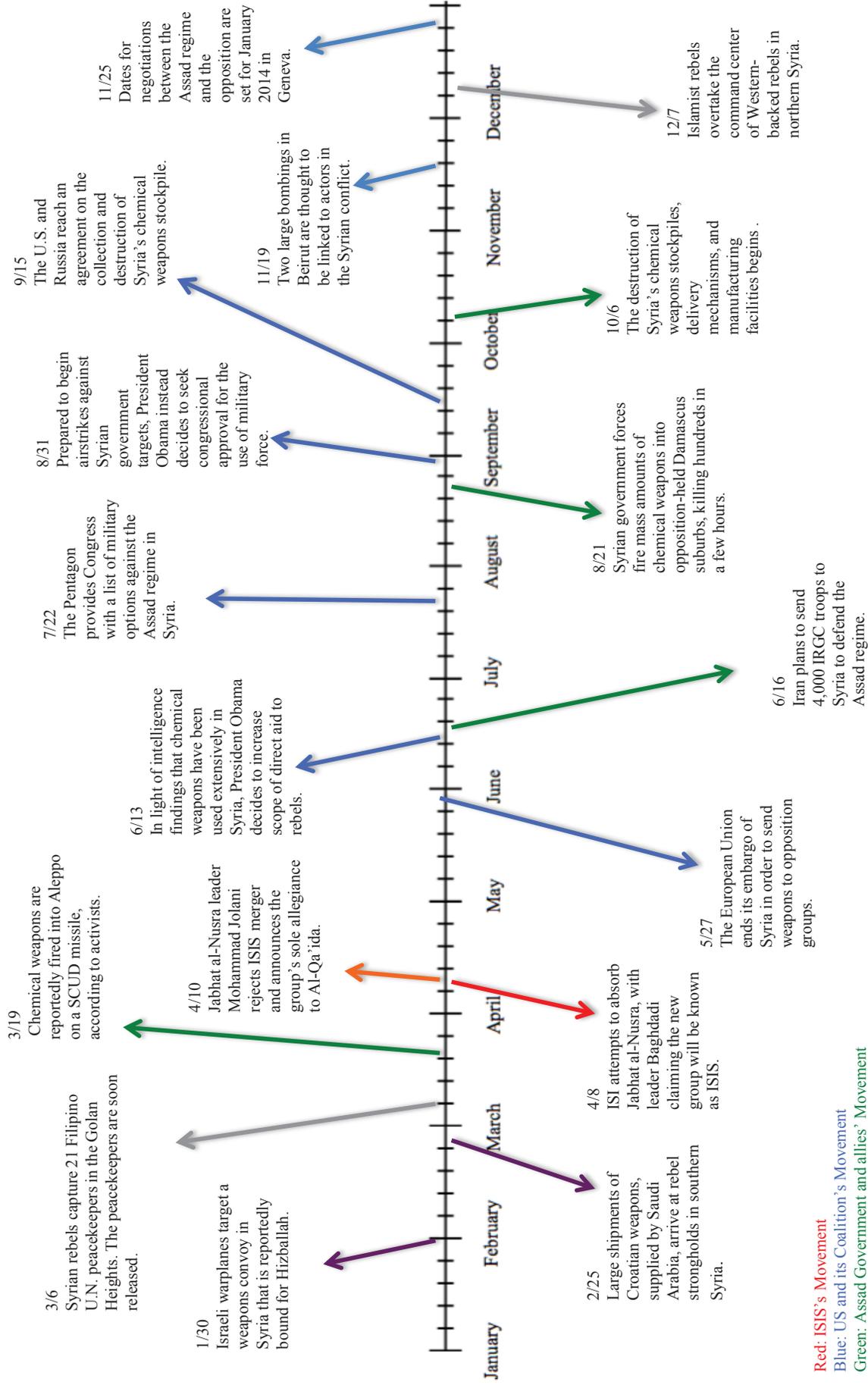
- Red: ISIS' s Movement
- Blue: US and its Coalition's Movement
- Green: Assad Government and allies' Movement
- Purple: International Players' Movement
- Olive Green: Protestors' Movement
- Ocean Blue: International Organizations' Movement
- Grey: Rebels' Movement.
- Orange: Al-Qaeda's Movement

Syria Timeline 2012



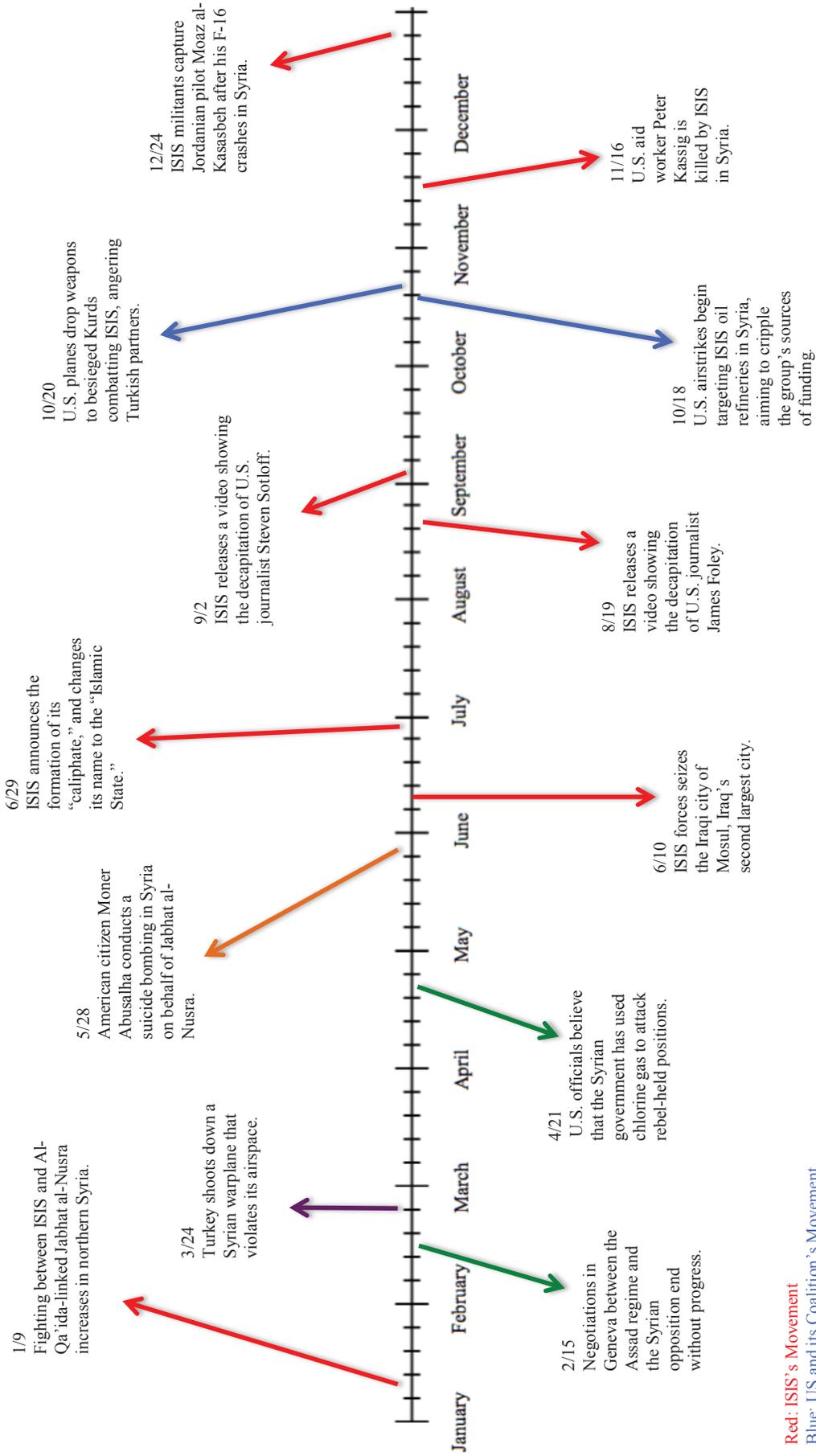
- Red: ISIS's Movement
- Blue: US and its Coalition's Movement
- Green: Assad Government and allies' Movement
- Purple: International Players' Movement
- Black: Russian Movement
- Ocean Blue: International Organizations' Movement
- Grey: Rebels' Movement.
- Orange: Al-Qa'ida's Movement

Syria Timeline 2013



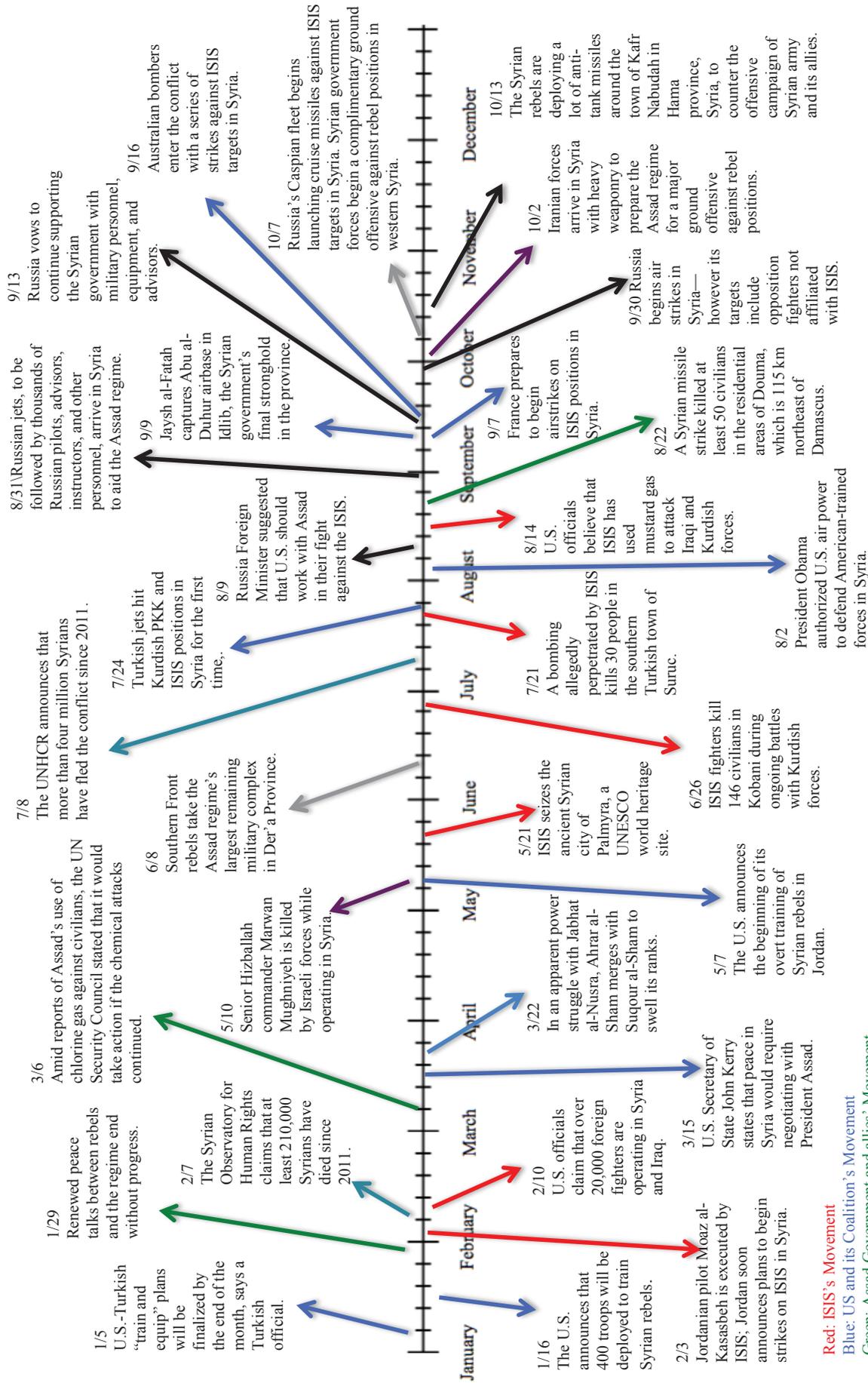
- Red: ISIS's Movement
- Blue: US and its Coalition's Movement
- Green: Assad Government and allies' Movement
- Purple: International Players' Movement
- Black: Russian Movement
- Ocean Blue: International Organizations' Movement
- Grey: Rebels' Movement.
- Orange: Al-Qaeda's Movement

Syria Timeline 2014



- Red: ISIS' Movement
- Blue: US and its Coalition's Movement
- Green: Assad Government and allies' Movement
- Purple: International Players' Movement
- Black: Russian Movement
- Ocean Blue: International Organizations' Movement
- Grey: Rebels' Movement
- Orange: Al-Qa'ida's Movement

Syria Timeline 2015



- Red: ISIS's Movement
- Blue: US and its Coalition's Movement
- Green: Assad Government and allies' Movement
- Purple: International Players' Movement
- Black: Russian Movement
- Ocean Blue: International Organizations Movement
- Grey: Rebels' Movement.

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