

THE
CARTER CENTER



Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #2

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About the Project:


The Syria Conflict Mapping Project is an initiative launched by The Carter Center’s Conflict Resolution Program. Funded jointly by The Skoll Global Threats Fund and The Carter Center, the initiative examines the massive amounts of citizen-generated information related to the Syrian conflict that is available online. Specifically, the project:


1. Details the growth of opposition groups in each governorate within Syria;
2. Illuminates the evolution of armed opposition hierarchies at the local, regional, and national levels;
3. Shows the current geographic delineation of pro and anti-government forces; and
4. Provides up-to-date analysis on the current status of the conflict.


For best viewing, it is strongly recommended that these reports be viewed online or printed in color.

Acknowledgements:

The following organizations and individuals stand out in the contributions they have made to the success of this project.

 Palantir Technologies’ software tools have been instrumental in integrating, analyzing, and visualizing the large amounts of information used in the Syria Conflict Mapping Project. In addition to providing the mapping tools that are behind all maps seen in this report, Palantir’s data analysis tools have greatly facilitated the Center’s analysis.

 Lockheed Martin’s LMEnsemble has been enormously useful in automating sophisticated searches of social media content coming out of Syria. Their software platform has helped the Center stay up to date on developments in Syria and has automated much of the data gathering required to undertake this project.

 Archives of armed group formations kept by researchers of the Syria Conflict Monitor have been an enormous help to The Carter Center’s Syria Conflict Mapping Project. These detailed records have facilitated research and provide an unparalleled historic record of the progression of the Syrian conflict.

Special thanks go out to Russell Shepherd, whose programming skills and expert knowledge of network analysis tools have greatly facilitated the Center’s analysis.

Executive Summary

The ossification of most front lines in Syria has led to a further deterioration of the humanitarian situation for millions of Syrians and increased divisions and infighting among armed groups.

Despite ongoing efforts to unify opposition ranks prior to Geneva II, September and October of 2013 saw a mass rejection of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) and Supreme Military Council (SMC), as well a rise in the influence and territorial control of the Al-Qaida-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Foreign influence (particularly from private citizens and governments in the Gulf) has served to perpetuate these divisions by funding a diverse array of groups and attempting to push their own agendas. Notwithstanding these major setbacks for armed opposition unity, The Carter Center's analysis of armed group networks shows a net increase in connectivity in many areas due to the formalization of councils aimed at coordinating efforts on local and regional "fronts."

The Syrian government and military have shown a lack of willingness to retake much of the country that has been lost to the opposition. Instead, the Syrian military has focused on securing strategic depth between opposition controlled territories and the government strongholds of the coastal region, central Damascus, and the corridor between. The Syrian military has formalized the creation of, and increasingly employed, pro-government paramilitaries in many parts of the country.¹ These groups, which spontaneously arose in areas where Syrian minorities live, are quickly becoming a permanent fixture in the conflict.

Perhaps the most pressing issue facing Syria at this time is the dire and worsening humanitarian catastrophe in the country. The UN estimates that there are 9.3 million Syrians in need of humanitarian aid, and that 2.6 million of those are in areas that are difficult or impossible to access due to ongoing clashes or siege tactics. The deteriorating situation has led to an outbreak of polio, which has led to fears of a resurgence of the disease throughout the region. Additionally, with 6.5 million internally displaced persons throughout the country, the hardships of a rapidly approaching winter make the situation even more urgent.

This report is divided into three sections: 1) an overview and analysis of major conflict developments, 2) an analysis of major conflict incidents per month for Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus governorates, and 3) an analysis of armed opposition structures in each governorate, detailing the formation of 5,004 armed groups and military councils over the course of the conflict.

¹ For more information on this topic, see The Carter Center's report on pro-government paramilitary groups, published November 5, 2013.

Conflict Developments

A Fragmented Opposition

The Syrian opposition has existed since long before the 2011 protests began. For years, a limited number of nonviolent political and human rights activists have resisted the policies of the government, and have pushed for democracy. However, very few of these activists were able to develop a significant base of popular support because the government, backed by a large and far-reaching network of intelligence agencies, stifled any such political organization.

As Syrians took to the streets in 2011, many turned to these well-known figures in the political opposition, whose pro-reform stance had earned them both jail terms and a place in the public eye. As they assumed the mantle of opposition leadership, however, their shortcomings with regard to grassroots support quickly became apparent. Local coordination committees, born out of a desire to organize protest movements quickly gained comparable influence on the street to that of the then-exiled political leadership. Responding to a growth in grassroots organization, the structure of the opposition was soon revised to incorporate these emerging actors. Thus a pattern was born, in which the structure and composition of the opposition's leadership was constantly re-framed and revised as the legitimacy and influence of each new actor on the ground waxed and waned.

Similarly, when defectors from the Syrian army and civilians began taking up arms against the government's iron-fisted response, the national-level leadership structures that emerged were regularly revised in an attempt to increase the representation of local powers. The original figureheads of the "Free Syrian Army" were replaced by rival councils, which, after several iterations, eventually became the Supreme Military Council (SMC). The creation of the SMC represented the most serious attempt to create a unified opposition force in Syria by bringing together top ranking defectors with influential local commanders. This effort, however, has largely failed.

Despite the formation of national-level leadership councils, the "Free Syrian Army" (FSA) has remained little more than a franchise organization – more of an idea than a cohesive entity. Many of the thousands of groups that have announced their formations have declared themselves part of the FSA, but very few have direct ties with its leadership. Instead, as locally based armed groups have sought to support themselves, most have established their own patronage networks and leadership structures that have served to increase the factionalism of the opposition.

Alignments and alliances between these groups have been formed on occasion because of shared ideologies, shared tactical goals, due to pressures from external forces, or out of necessity due to pressure from the Syrian military. Increasingly, Syria has seen the formation of "fronts" throughout the country, in which a variety of armed groups from a particular geographic region band together (usually linked by an "operations room" or

small council of leaders) to accomplish a particular goal. Despite these collaborations, the sharing of resources is scarce, and rarely do such alliances become permanent.

In many cases, the local military powers have evolved into the semblance of a state – complete with a police force, judiciary (or Sharia council), and whatever means of income generation is available. This can take on the form of control of local resources, funds from abroad, or looting (including the dismantling of factories, theft of archeological artifacts, and theft of private property). Regardless of the extent to which armed groups have built up their own institutions, the concentration of power in the leadership of many of the larger groups is breeding organizational permanence that will be difficult for any national level integration to overcome. Indeed, the September 24 formation of the “Islamic Alliance” signals that many of the local, independent armed groups may already be here to stay and that the SMC’s efforts to unify have come too late to stave off warlordism and the creation of fiefdoms throughout opposition-controlled territory.

Signs of the increasing independence of some of the large armed groups have been growing throughout the conflict. For example, the network of connections between armed groups in Aleppo has demonstrated a clear division between Liwa al-Tawhid, one of the largest and most influential armed opposition groups in Syria, and the Military Council of Aleppo since early in the conflict.

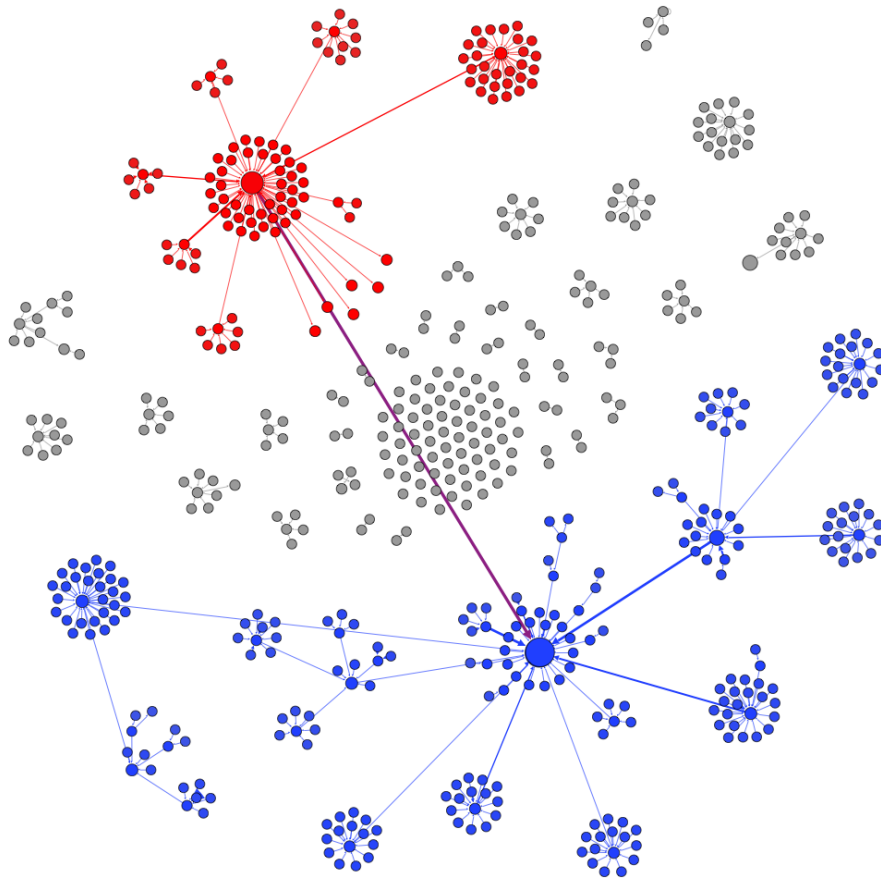


Figure 1: This image shows the relations between all armed groups known to have formed in Aleppo governorate as of January 1, 2013. Liwa al-Tawhid is shown in red, while the Military Council of Aleppo is in blue.

As can be seen from the above network diagram, Liwa al-Tawhid (represented in red) established a separate network of fighters early in the conflict that rivaled the power of the Military Council of Aleppo (represented in blue), which is directly linked to the Supreme Military Council.

Though Liwa al-Tawhid was officially aligned with the Military Council of Aleppo, very few of the groups that announced their formations under Liwa al-Tawhid made any reference to the Military Council in their formation videos. Furthermore, the relatively small number of groups that did reference the Military Council has shrunk in recent months, suggesting that members of these sub-units see themselves primarily as members of Liwa al-Tawhid, and only tangentially related to the command structure of the SMC. The invitation extended to the leader of Liwa al-Tawhid to join the High Command of the Supreme Military Council was likely as much in recognition of his independent power as of his military prowess.

The New Alignment

The September 24 declaration by the political leader of Liwa al-Tawhid rejecting the leadership of the SMC and SOC caught observers off guard. Despite the relative

independence of Liwa al-Tawhid and other large, established groups throughout Syria, many of them have maintained friendly relations with the leadership of the FSA.

The declaration, which was signed by 11 of the largest and most powerful groups in Syria should not be seen as a change in attitude toward the SMC or SOC, but rather an assertion of their own power, and an implied statement that these groups will have to be involved in any political deal that is negotiated. This argument is further supported by the fact that the declaration was made mere hours after the President of the SOC, Ahmed Jerba, announced that the opposition would participate in the next round of negotiations, dubbed Geneva II.

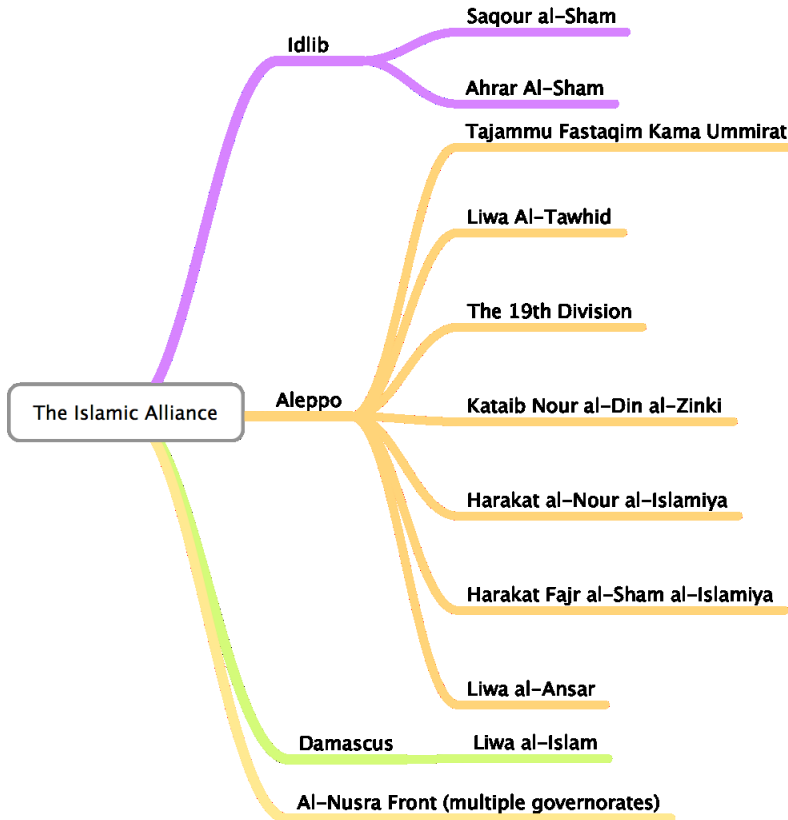


Figure 2: Component groups of the Islamic Alliance, including their primary areas of operation.

The signatories of the declaration of the new formation, known as the “Islamic Alliance,” represent approximately 60% of the units that were declaredly subsidiary to the SMC-aligned Military Council in Aleppo.

Only days prior to this announcement, a member of the Supreme Military Council based in Gaziantep, Turkey confidently stated to The Carter Center that approximately 70% of all armed groups in Syria were under its control. A large number of armed groups within Syria were indeed nominally aligned with local military councils that were themselves subsidiary to the SMC, but the fact that many of these groups held other loyalties as well, and had occasionally spoken against the SMC, suggests that their alignment with the Turkey based leadership was tenuous at best, and rarely if ever amounted to direct control.

The members of the Islamic Alliance have a large degree of control over Aleppo city and its countryside, eastern Damascus, large portions of Idlib, and a large expanse of Syria's central territories as well. This control, however, is limited by the pervasive and growing influence of the al-Qaida affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the same areas. In addition, despite the breadth of this territory, the Alliance is not likely to be very cohesive. Though member groups will cooperate at the local level, the commanders of these units appear likely to seek to consolidate power over the territories they control (including their means of income in each) rather than banding together into a larger, unified force. Distinct patronage networks also will continue to hinder true unification. And, the groups included in the alliance are dispersed throughout much of the country, suggesting that such unification, even if desired, would be difficult except for a handful of areas in northern Syria.

The groups included in the Alliance have strong ties to local councils and, in particular, emerging centers of law and policy in the areas not under government control (many of which are empowered by the groups themselves). Though these relationships vary substantially from case to case, it is likely that these nexuses of localized political and military power will grow stronger as they continue to exert their independence and consolidate their control.

Lastly, while the new alliance includes in its ranks Jabhat al-Nusra, the U.S. designated foreign terrorist organization and al-Qaida affiliate, it appears to have positioned itself against ISIS. At the time of the Islamic Alliance's formation, it was expected that the Alliance, or some members of it at least, would move to counter ISIS' operations in Azzaz (a small city north of Aleppo). In the end, Liwa al-Tawhid chose to mediate the conflict between ISIS and the local brigade in Azzaz, but tensions remain. Additionally, the fact that Jabhat al-Nusra is included in the Alliance suggests a further rift between the two al-Qaeda affiliated groups, with Jabhat al-Nusra appearing more interested in preserving the Syrian state, while ISIS is pushing for a greater Islamic caliphate, joined in part with Iraq.

Almost immediately following the formation of the Islamic Alliance, a large new collaboration of fighters was announced in Damascus under Liwa al-Islam, and apparently supported by Saudi Arabia. The new organization is now known as the Islamic Army, and represents approximately 50 armed groups – the majority of which operate in Damascus and its surrounding areas.

Even prior to this new formation, the SMC grudgingly acknowledged in discussions with The Carter Center that any opposition activity in the Damascus area had to have the approval of Liwa al-Islam in order to succeed. With the newly formed Islamic Army formally bringing the majority of armed groups in the area under its control, even the most optimistic proponents of the SMC would have to acknowledge that they now have essentially no say in determining what happens on the ground in and around Damascus.

Opposition Structural Changes

Though the Syrian government forces have made recent advances in parts of the country, the military conflict is largely stalemated. This is leading to increased infighting among opposition groups as they vie for control and influence amongst each other. The fact that the Islamic Alliance was announced by a *political* leader of an armed group is significant, and represents a growing trend of armed groups broadening their scope of operations and becoming more involved in politics, judicial systems, service provisions, and, in the case of ISIS and other fundamentalist groups, social and religious regulation.

An analysis of armed group networks as they relate to conflict incidents shows that in many parts of the country, opposition groups have unified in the face of existential threats from the Syrian military forces and their allies, but have fragmented and fought amongst each other as soon as this pressure subsided. This was true in eastern suburbs of Damascus, where besieged opposition groups under pressure from a government advance formed the United Army in May 2013, which brought together most of the opposition groups operating in the area. The formation of this group appeared to be a major development at the time, but never gained traction, did not share resources amongst member organizations, and quickly disappeared after it served its immediate purposes.

In this sense, the government's inability to advance into northern Syria may work to its advantage in the long term. If armed opposition groups in the area continue to clash amongst themselves, or, more to the point, if ISIS continues to expand and threaten opposition groups throughout the north, the opposition will be weakened by the necessity of fighting on multiple fronts. The antipathy that some groups feel towards ISIS, and the existential threat posed to liberal opposition groups and civil society structures may even lead to tacit collaboration between opposition and government forces to counter the growth of ISIS. In fact, there have already been reports of just such collaboration, albeit isolated and limited.

In recent months, the opposition has shifted in its organizational structure, with diverse groups banding together to form "fronts," which are coordinated by joint councils or "operation rooms." While this is a positive development in that any form of unification increases the prospects for attempted ceasefires and negotiations, the fronts have been weakened by infighting as groups have turned away from them to secure their positions, bases of control, and influence. It was for this reason that Colonel Abdul Jabbar Akaidi, the influential leader of the Military Council of Aleppo, and quite possibly the most powerful FSA-aligned commander, resigned from his post in early November 2013. In his resignation video, he cited a lack of support from the international community and an erosion of the opposition's military fronts, which led to the government's ability to reopen supply routes to its remaining strongholds around Aleppo.

Despite this erosion of top-level leadership, the formation of "operation rooms" throughout much of opposition-controlled territory, has led to an overall increase in armed group

connectivity. The following two images show the structure of opposition groups formed in the Aleppo governorate as of August 1, 2013 and November 1, 2013. New formations, highlighted in the second image, show a clear increase in connectivity (by approximately 10%) due to the formation of operation rooms on many of the governorate’s fronts.

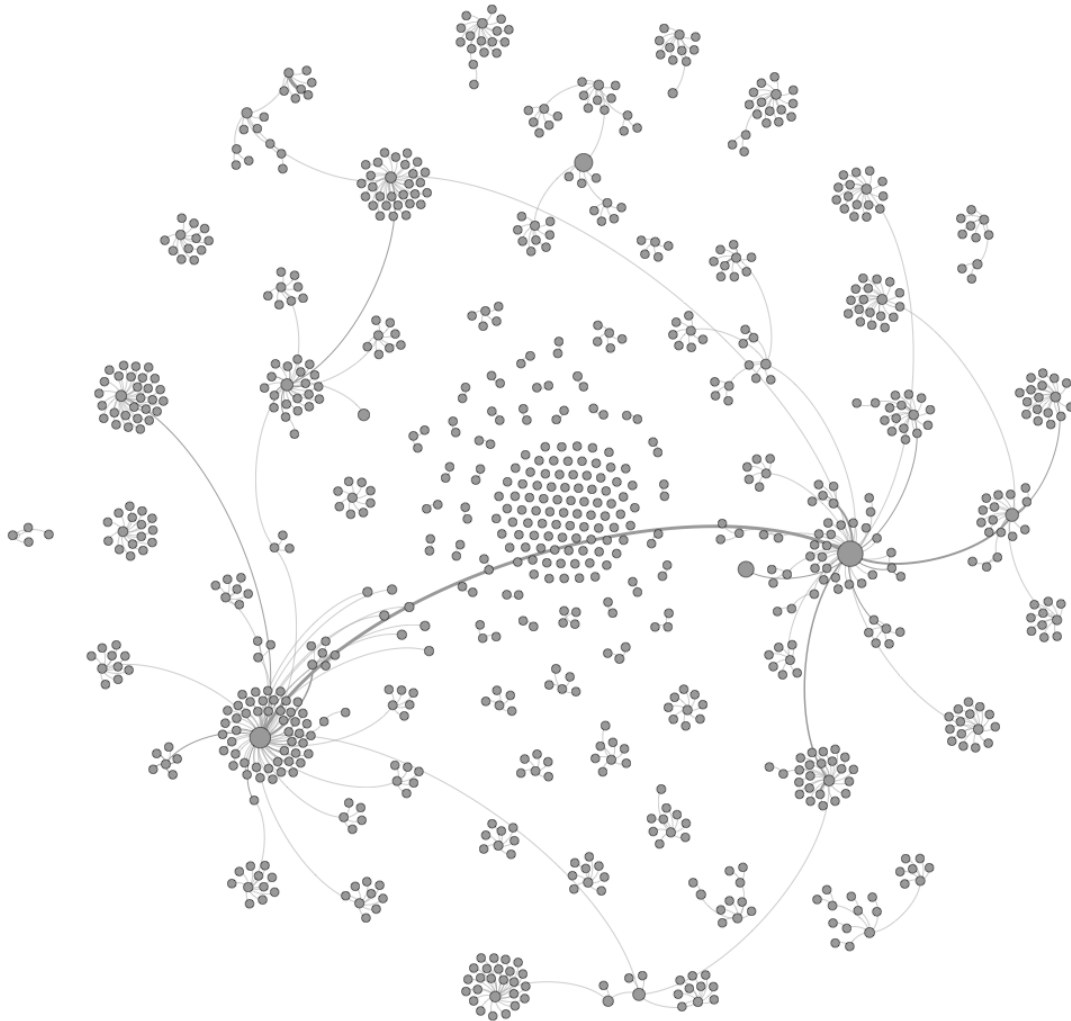


Figure 3: This diagram shows the aggregate of all armed groups formed in the Aleppo governorate as of August 1, 2013. Note the highly polarized structure, and relative lack of overlapping connections.

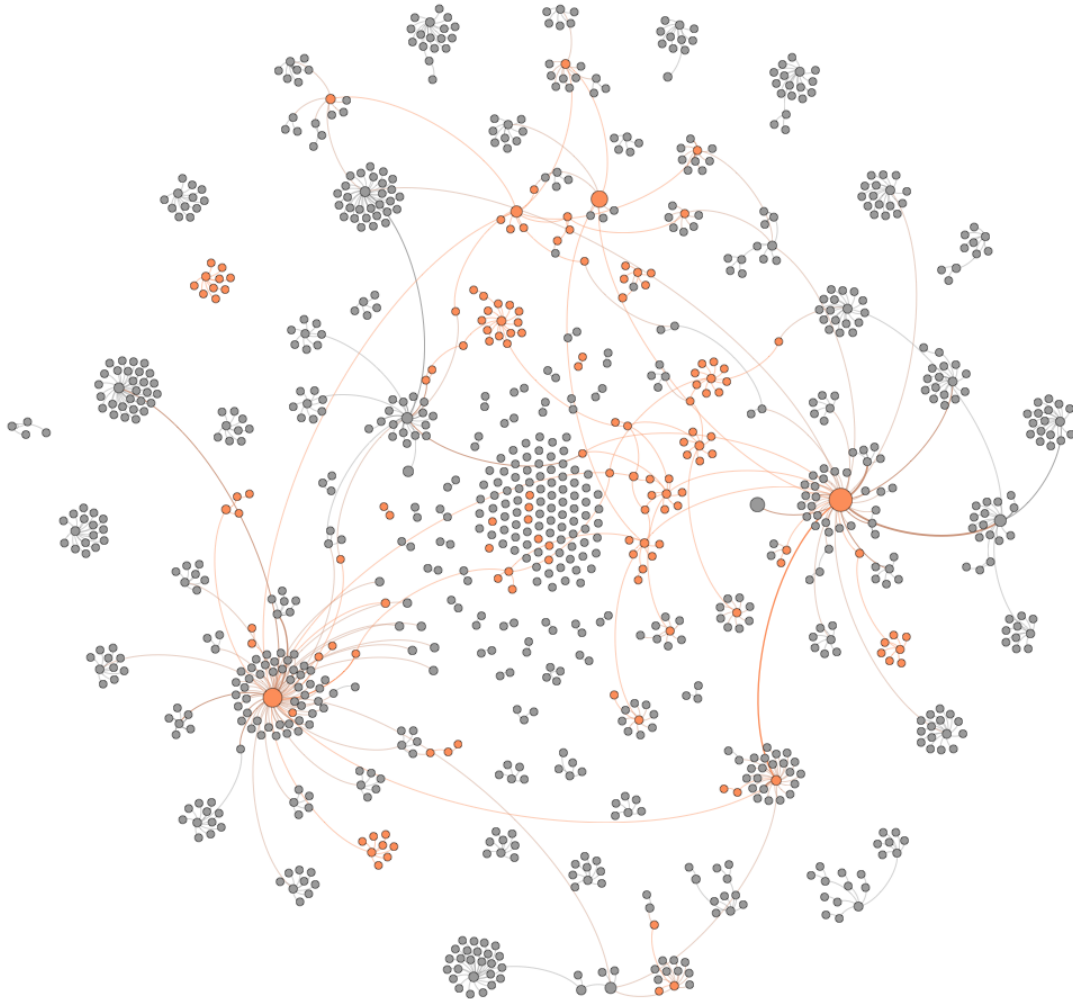


Figure 4: This diagram shows all armed groups formed in the Aleppo governorate as of November 1, 2013. Groups that were formed or restructured between August 1 and November 1, 2013 are highlighted in orange. Note the increase in overall connectivity.

As recent advances of government forces have shown, this increase in connectivity has not improved the operational capacity of the opposition. However, such increased connectivity could help lay the foundation for future leadership structures, which would continue the trend of bottom-up organization that has been apparent in both the political and military opposition.

Conflict Events

The following section details the major conflict events over the past three months in the Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs governorates. The section is divided into three subsections, detailing the progression of events for each month, with visuals and details explaining the events for each.

Damascus

August

Conflict incidences in Damascus throughout the month of August focused primarily on the eastern suburbs of the city, clearly indicating a front line stretching from Duma (in the northeast) to the eastern areas of Damascus city and south. August also saw continued fighting in the suburb of Darayya (southwest). It is important to note that this “front” does not represent a contiguous line of control for either party, but rather the focal points of fighting for the month. The image below shows the areas of force-on-force contact during August.

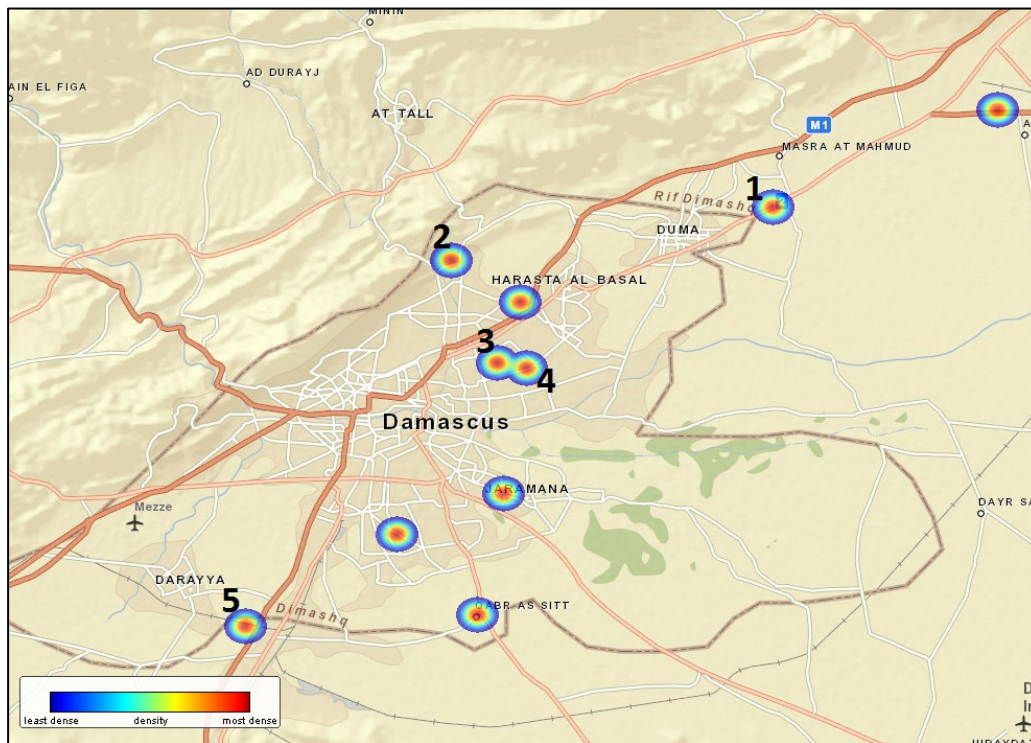


Figure 5: Locations of force-on-force clashes in Damascus during the month of August.

Five areas of Damascus saw consistent clashes between government (or pro-government) and opposition forces - Duma (1), Barzah (2), Jobar (3), Zamalka (4), and Darayya (5). This fighting generally focused around a continued push by opposition forces into the eastern outskirts of Damascus city.

Despite the consistency of these clashes, shelling accounted for the vast majority of conflict events in Damascus during August. There were a total of 177 recorded cases of shelling, 75 cases of clashes and 35 cases of aerial bombings. The incidences of aerial bombings also indicate the focal points of fighting as well as the areas in the north of strategic importance to the Syrian government, namely Zabadani (1) in the western Anti-Lebanon Mountains (Figure 6 below). Zabadani is a crucial location for both sides of the conflict, primarily because of its position along supply lines from Lebanon.

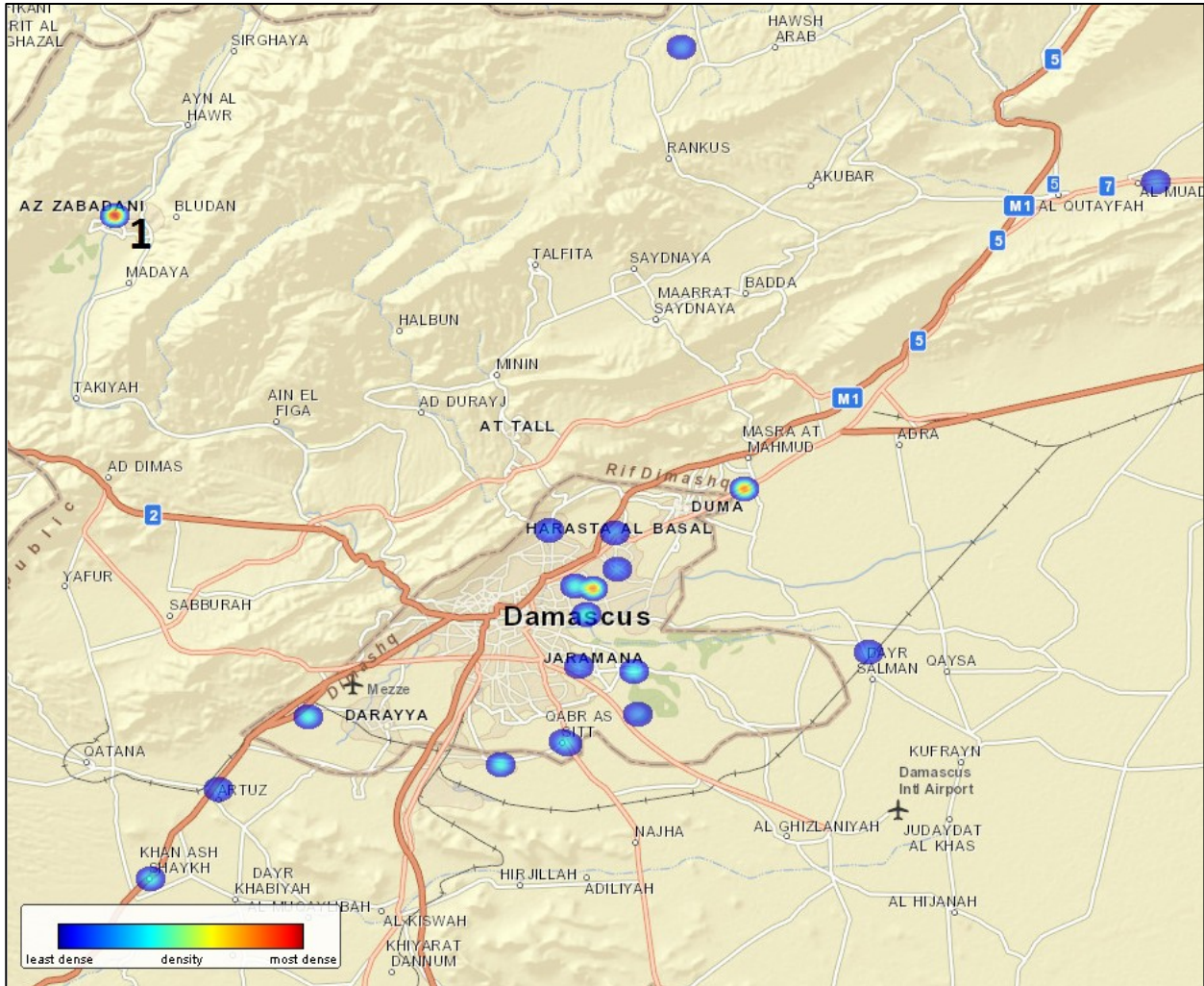


Figure 6: High incidences of aerial bombings, particularly in the northwestern town of Zabadani.

The most significant incident in Damascus during August was the August 21 chemical weapon attack. The attack targeted contested or opposition-controlled areas on the outskirts of Damascus city. By some estimates, over 1,000 people were killed in the attack that nearly resulted in an international military intervention. While much has been written on the attack, more remains unknown.

September

September in Damascus was a fierce month of fighting as government forces pushed both north and south of the city to maintain or regain strategic areas they had lost to opposition forces earlier in the month (figure 7). In the northern rural suburbs of Damascus, fighting stretched across most of the mountainous Qalamoun area. Much of this fighting centered around opposition attempts to block government supply lines along the Damascus-Homs highway. Additionally, control of the Qalamoun area would allow opposition forces to connect with and resupply opposition forces in the eastern suburbs of Damascus.

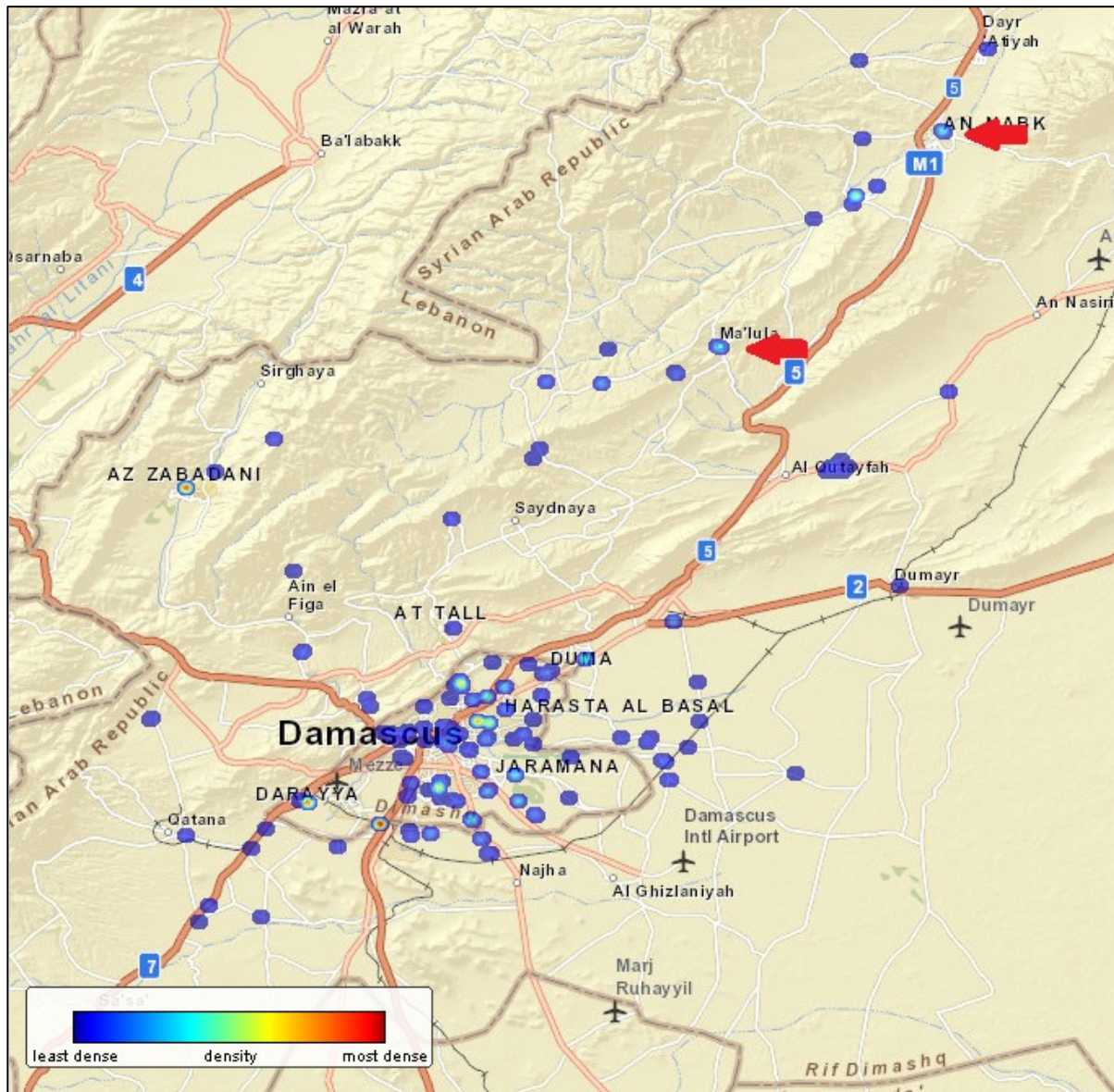


Figure 7: Heat map of conflict incidences in Damascus for the month of September clearly depicts a spread of incidences to Damascus' rural northern suburbs.

In mid-September the Syrian government launched a major offensive to push back against encroaching opposition control of the northern and southern rural suburbs. The towns of Maaloula and Nabk (indicated with arrows above) in particular faced fierce fighting after opposition forces gained control of the towns in the beginning of September. Together Maaloula and Nabak totaled 32 conflict incidences, comprised of a combination of shelling, clashes, aerial bombings, and suicide bombings.

Fighting in the south was just as fierce, with the government continuing its siege against the Moadamiya suburb (figure 8 below) and securing roads around Shebaa (2) and Sayeda Zeynab (3) leading to the Damascus International Airport around the latter half of September. The government also continued its operations in the suburb of Darayya (4), east of Moadamiya (1).

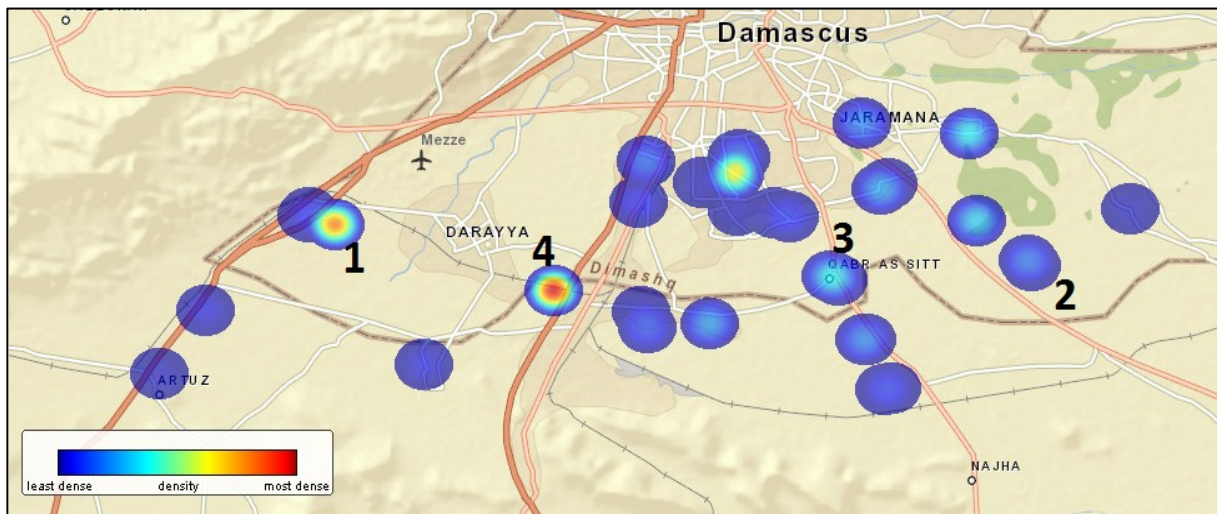


Figure 8: The beginning of a government offensive against the southern suburbs can be seen in this heat map depicting incidences in the area for September.

The frontlines of fighting within the city of Damascus remained relatively unchanged despite a significant increase in opposition shelling of government controlled areas of central Damascus. There were a total of 294 conflict incidences in and around Damascus during September, 84 of which were face-to-face clashes at the beginning of September occurring along the city frontlines and the southern suburbs as opposition forces attempted to push closer into Damascus.

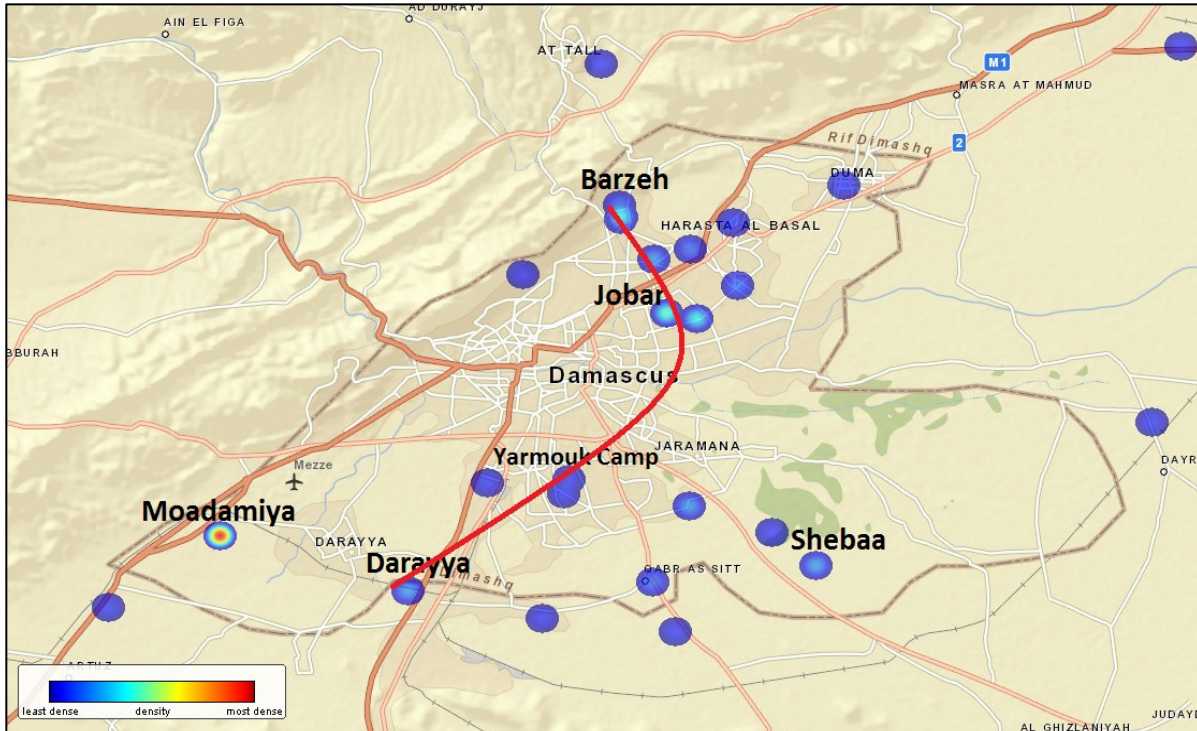


Figure 9: The areas of Damascus that witnessed force-on-force clashes remained relatively unchanged during September.

While the beginning of September saw a push by opposition fighters to solidify their control of the northern and southern rural suburbs of Damascus and essentially cut Damascus off from its supply routes, the latter half of September was witness to a fierce government push back. By the end of September, the government had regained control of a wedge of the rural northern suburbs—including Maaloula and Nabak—and made headway into the southern suburbs, recapturing Shebaa. Fighting for control of the strategic towns of Moadamiya in the southwest, Zabadani along the Lebanese border, and Yabroud in the northeast continued.

October

Damascus in October witnessed fierce government attacks on opposition controlled areas both north and south of the city. To the south, government forces placed particular emphasis on the town of Darayya and Moadamiya (figure 10 below), whose proximity to the Mezzeh military airport makes them critically important.

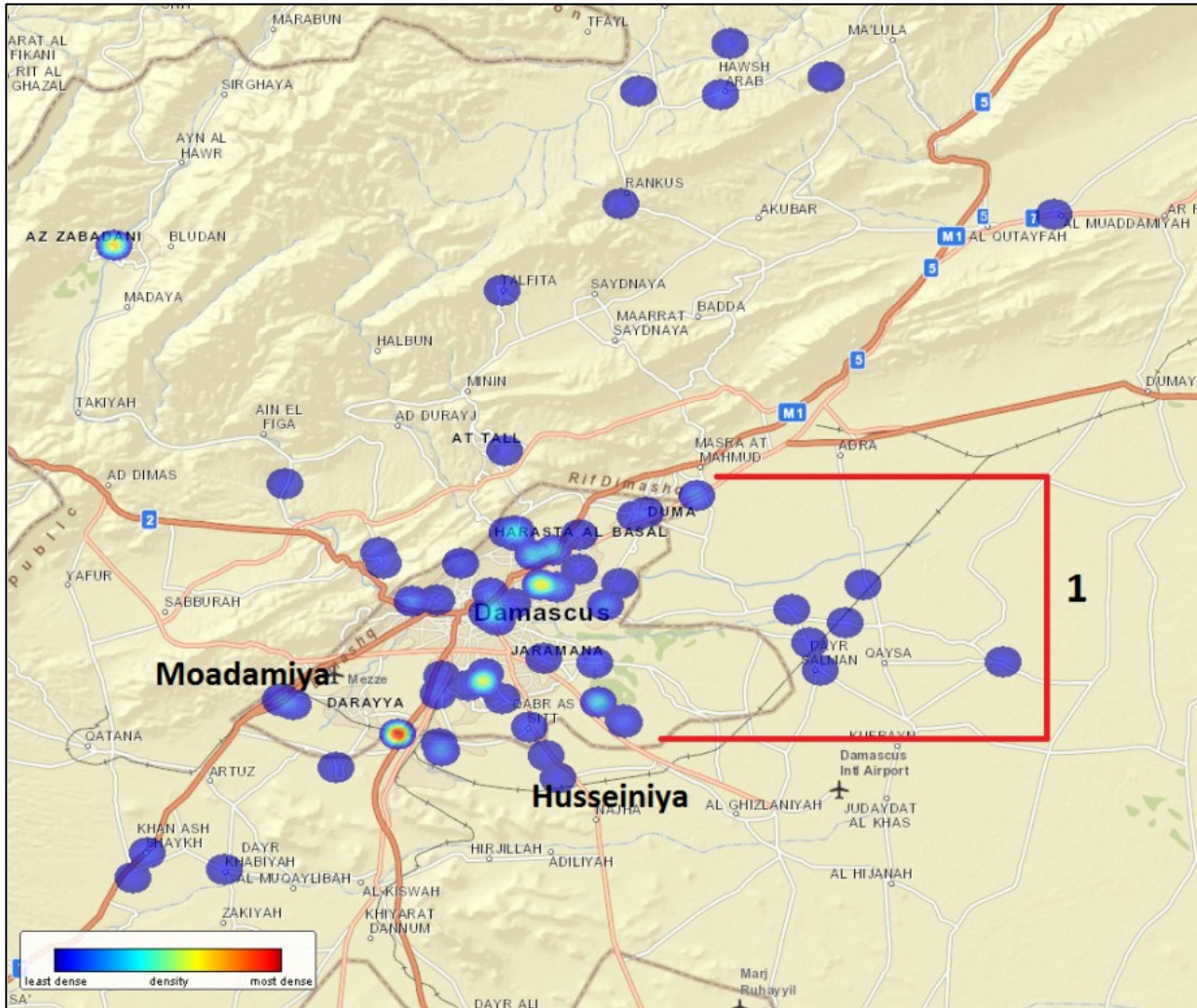


Figure 10: Fighting in the south and north intensified as Syrian army pushes to regain control of key areas.

The Syrian army also pushed south, sparking fierce fighting around the neighborhoods of al-Thiyabiya and Husseinia, ultimately capturing them. Overall, fighting in and around Damascus increased during the month of October. Despite a ceasefire in the town of Moadamiya, which enabled the evacuation of a large number of civilians, clashes and shelling continued throughout the southern rural suburbs. Clashes and shelling also spread to the eastern suburbs of Damascus, intensifying in the large district of Eastern Ghouta (1). Additionally, a larger number of opposition shelling attacks were able to reach the government districts within the center of Damascus including the Umuyyad Square, home to several government and military facilities.

Aleppo

August

After intense fighting in the beginning of August, fighting was essentially stalemated for the remainder of the month. The division of Aleppo, which has remained constant for months can still be clearly seen in the distribution of conflict events for August (figure 11). While opposition forces control most of the city of Aleppo, there are absolutely no incidences in the western areas of the city where government forces maintain control.

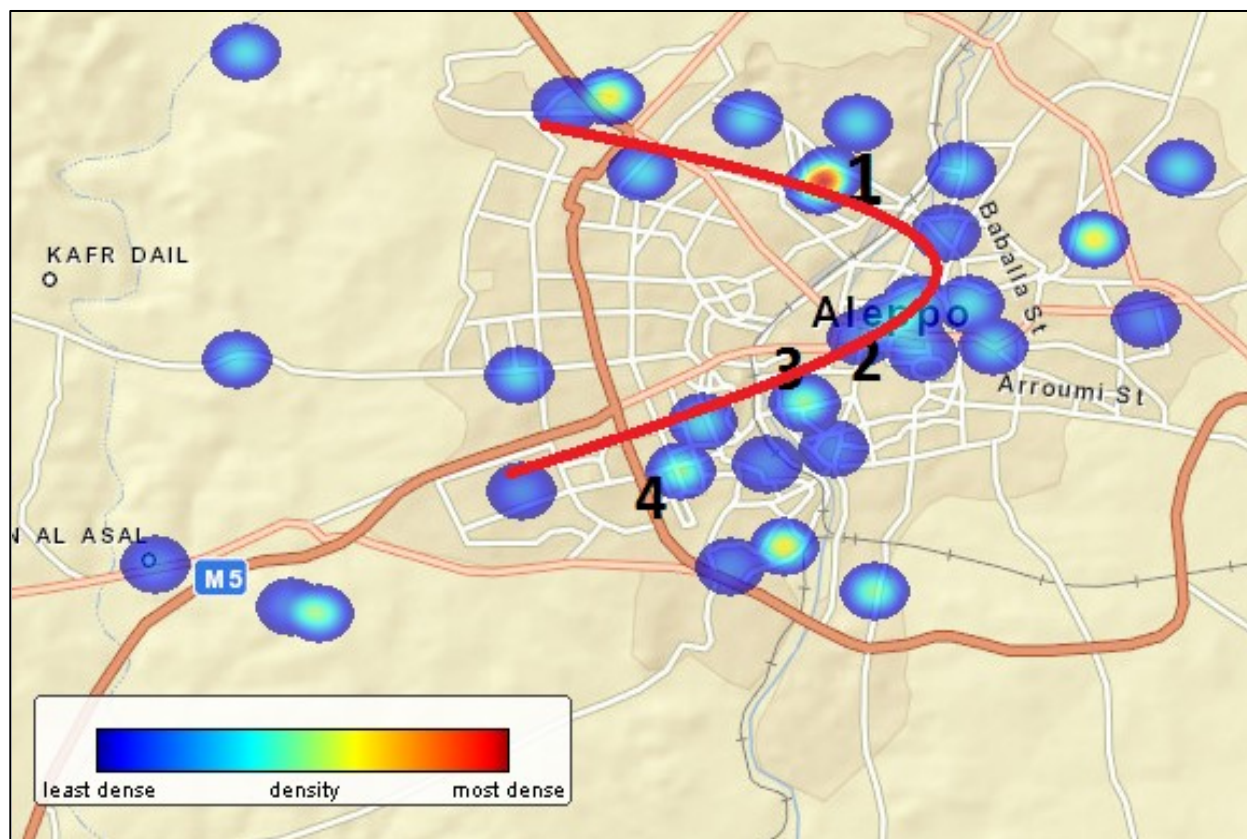


Figure 11: A heat map of incidences in the city of Aleppo in August clearly depicts the division between the opposition-controlled and government-controlled portions of the city.

In the month of August, Aleppo witnessed a total of 157 conflict incidences, broken down into 64 cases of shelling, 59 cases of clashes, 33 cases of aerial bombardment, and 5 improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Within the city, the majority of incidents were concentrated along the front line between the government and opposition-controlled areas, particularly the districts of Ashrafiyye (1), Bab al-Faraj (2), Bustan al-Qasr (3), and Salah al-Din (4).

Outside of the city, government and pro-government forces (including Hezbollah) focused on the contested pro-government, Shia villages of Zahra and Nubul (locations 2 and 1,

respectively in figure 12 below). Zahra and Nubul are strategically important to the government’s forces due to their location on Highway 214, which connects Aleppo with the Turkish border further north. According to some reports, they are also central to a planned military operation to take back control of Minningh Military Air Base, to the north. Following fierce clashes and aerial bombardments in the first week of August, the area was shelled sporadically for the remainder of the month. A total of 21 conflict incidences occurred in Zahra and Nubul in the month of August.

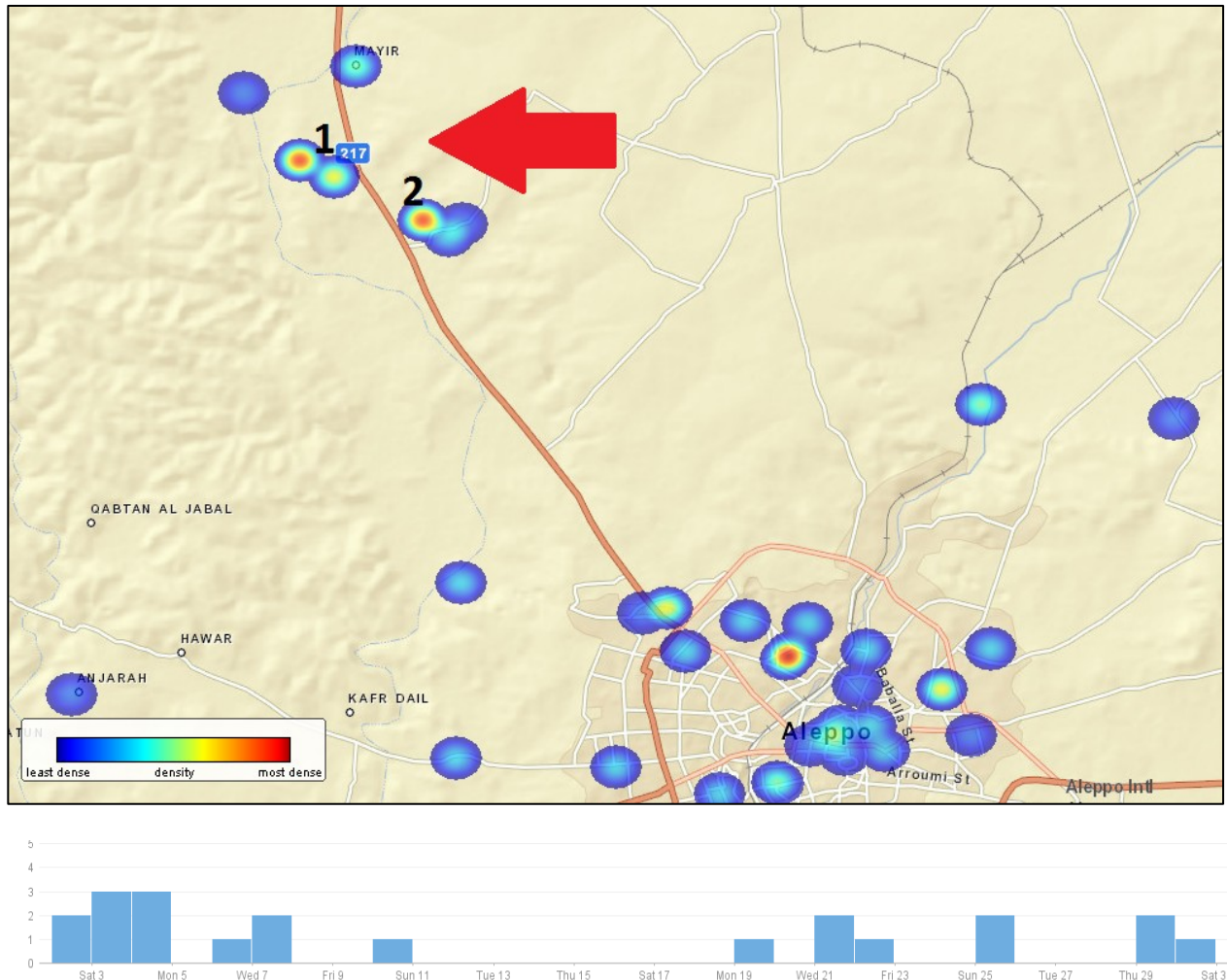


Figure 12: The northwestern towns of Zahra and Nubul experienced high rates of aerial bombings at the beginning of the month, then sporadic shelling campaigns for the rest of the month.

In the far northeast region of Aleppo governorate near the Turkish border, clashes erupted between Kurdish fighters from the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and opposition fighters affiliated with Al-Nusra Front and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These clashes centered mostly around the villages of Qanaya and Qordini, next to the Euphrates river, and stretched from the border town of Jarablus to the village of Kharous. The clashes totaled 17 conflict incidences for the month of August in that area (figure 13 below). This indicates the

growing discord between opposition fighters, particularly ISIS, and the YPG as ISIS attempted to impose strict rules of Islamic law in Kurdish-majority areas.

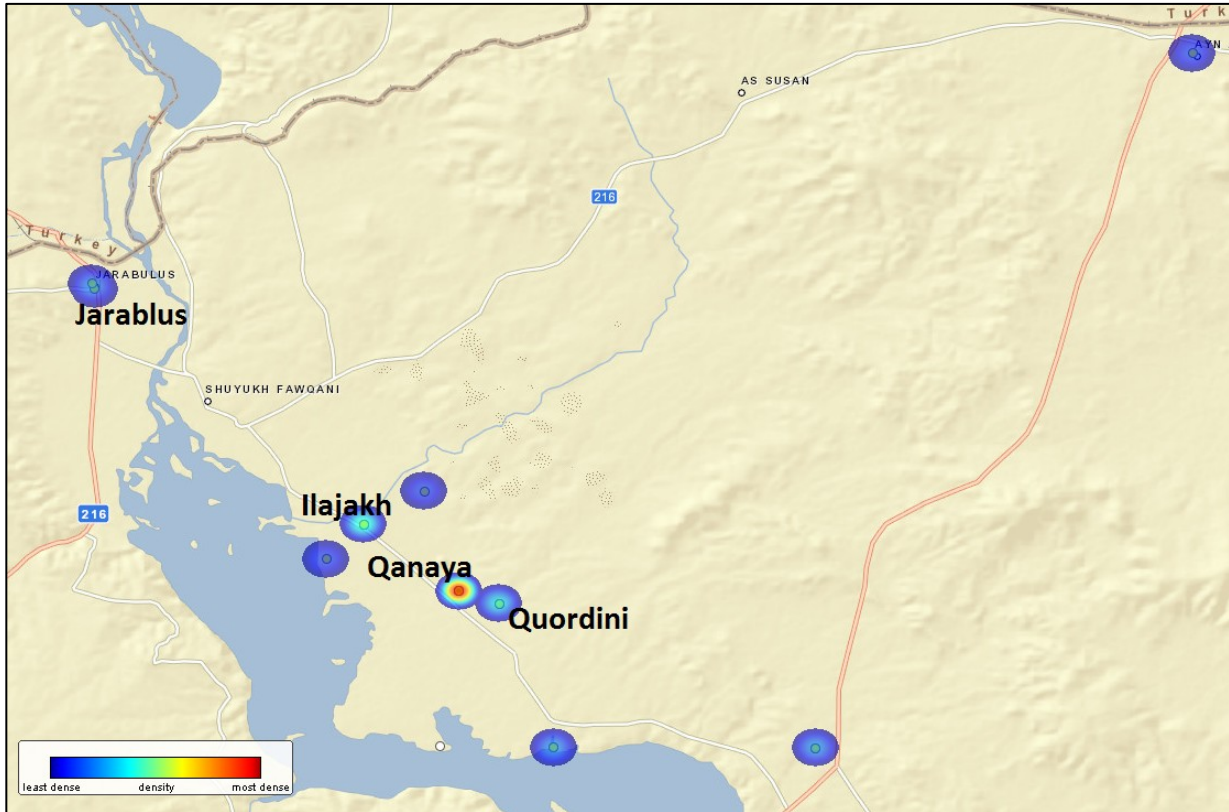


Figure 13: Clashes between YPG and ISIS fighters erupted in Kurdish majority towns northeast of Aleppo.

The opposition fighters achieved a few major wins during August, namely capturing the Minningh Airbase as well as gaining control of the southern town of Khanaser, cutting off the only government land supply route from Hama into Aleppo. Otherwise, fighting between government and opposition forces remained constant with no major battles after the first week of August.

September

The stalemate in the city of Aleppo continued during the month of September, despite attempts by opposition forces to drive back government control in the western parts of the city. At the beginning of the month, an opposition offensive to gain more control of the southern Salah al-Din district and increased shelling and clashes around the neighborhoods of Saif Dawla (1) and Salah al-Din (2) in figure 14 below. Otherwise, little changed on the front lines of division between government and opposition sides within the city of Aleppo.

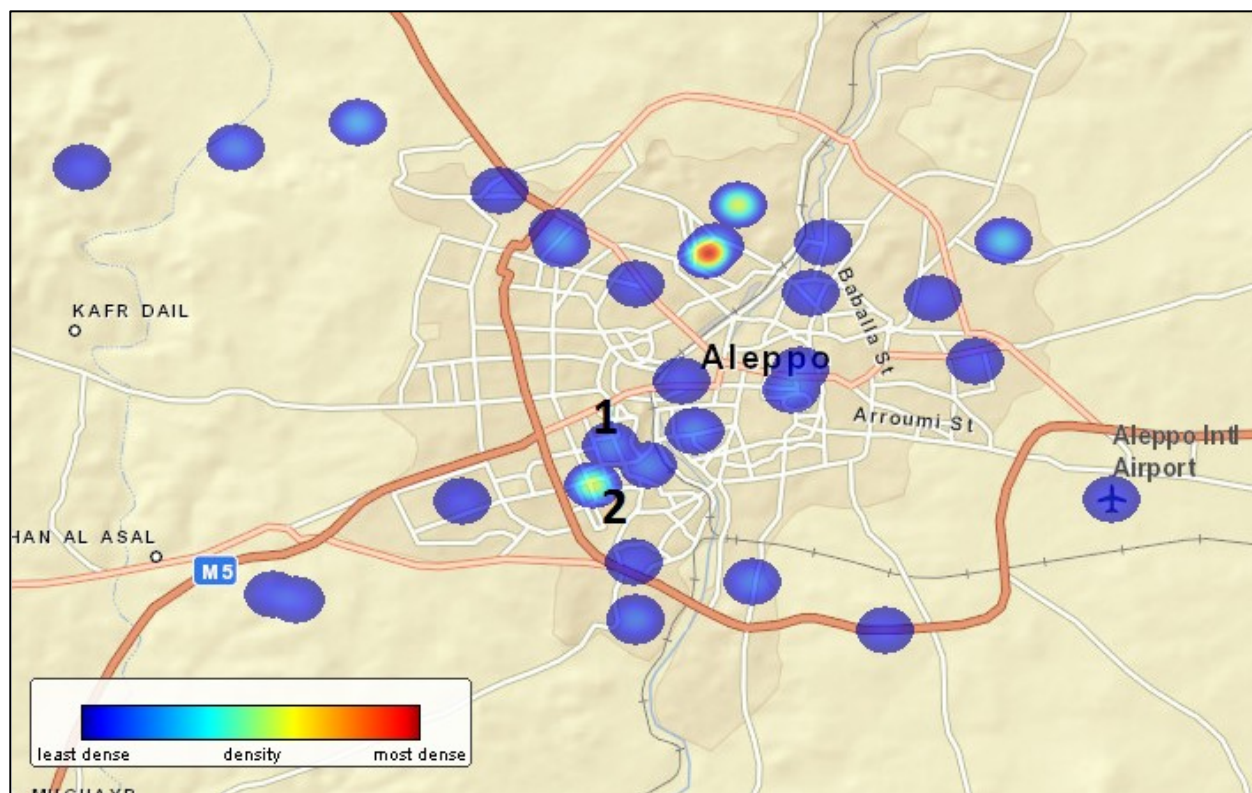


Figure 14: There was little change in the division of the city of Aleppo during the month of September.

Instead, government forces worked on gaining control of locations essential for launching an offensive against the opposition stronghold of the rural north or securing supply routes from Hama, south of Aleppo. In the Aleppo rural suburbs, clashes continued in the northern towns of Zahra and Nubul while fighting around the recently acquired Minningh Military Air Base subsided. In the south, a map of conflict incidences clearly illustrates a southern offensive by government forces (figure 15). Near the middle of the month, the government launched a shelling and aerial bombardment campaign to take control of Safira, a win that would open a major road to the besieged Aleppo Airport and Nayrab Military Base as well as open a vital supply route from Hama. Fighting also continued around the Kuweiris Military Airport, east of Aleppo, as opposition forces attempt to take control of the base.

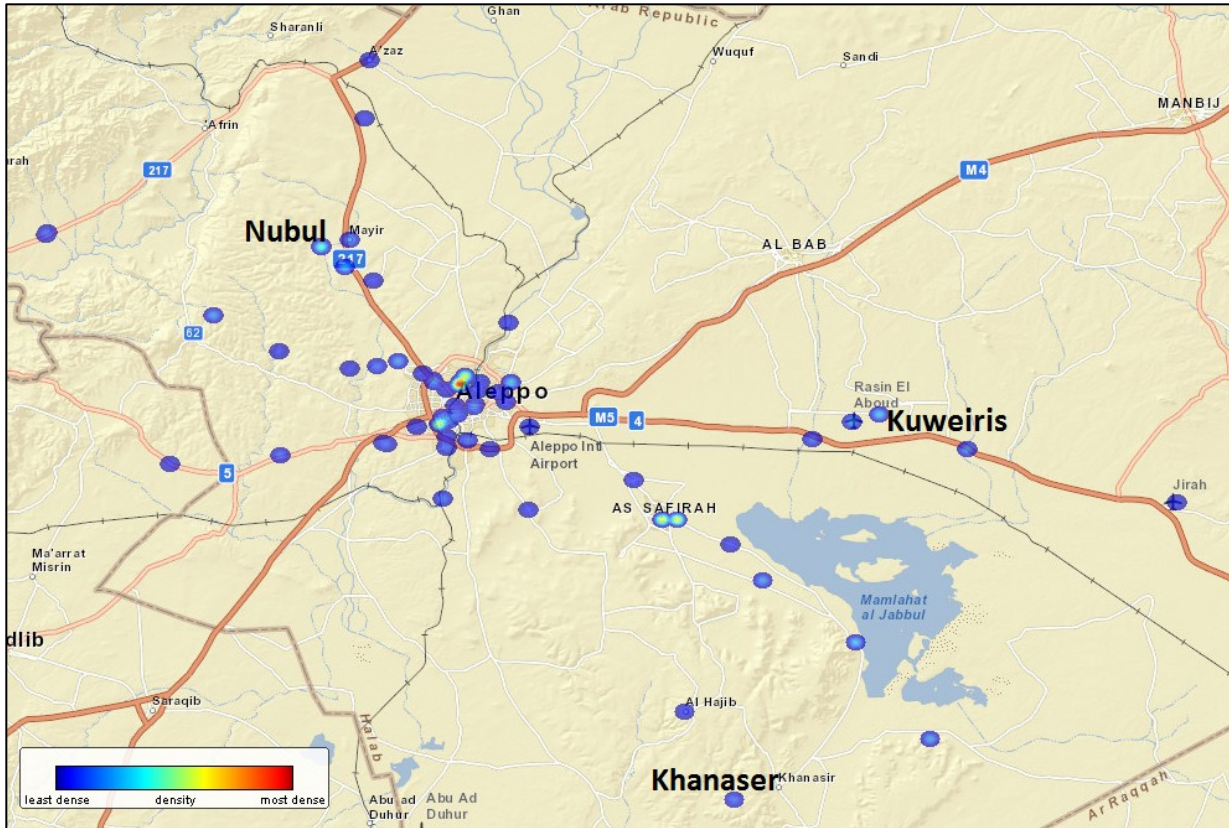


Figure 15: Fighting spreads both north and south as the government attempts to regain its southern supply lines and break the opposition's hold in the rural north.

Within the city, the major center of fighting focused around the Kurdish-majority neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafiyye. This was due to government attempts to gain a stepping stone into the rural north of Aleppo. Conflict incidences in these districts totaled 23 for the month, 14 of which were face-to-face fighting (figure 16 below).

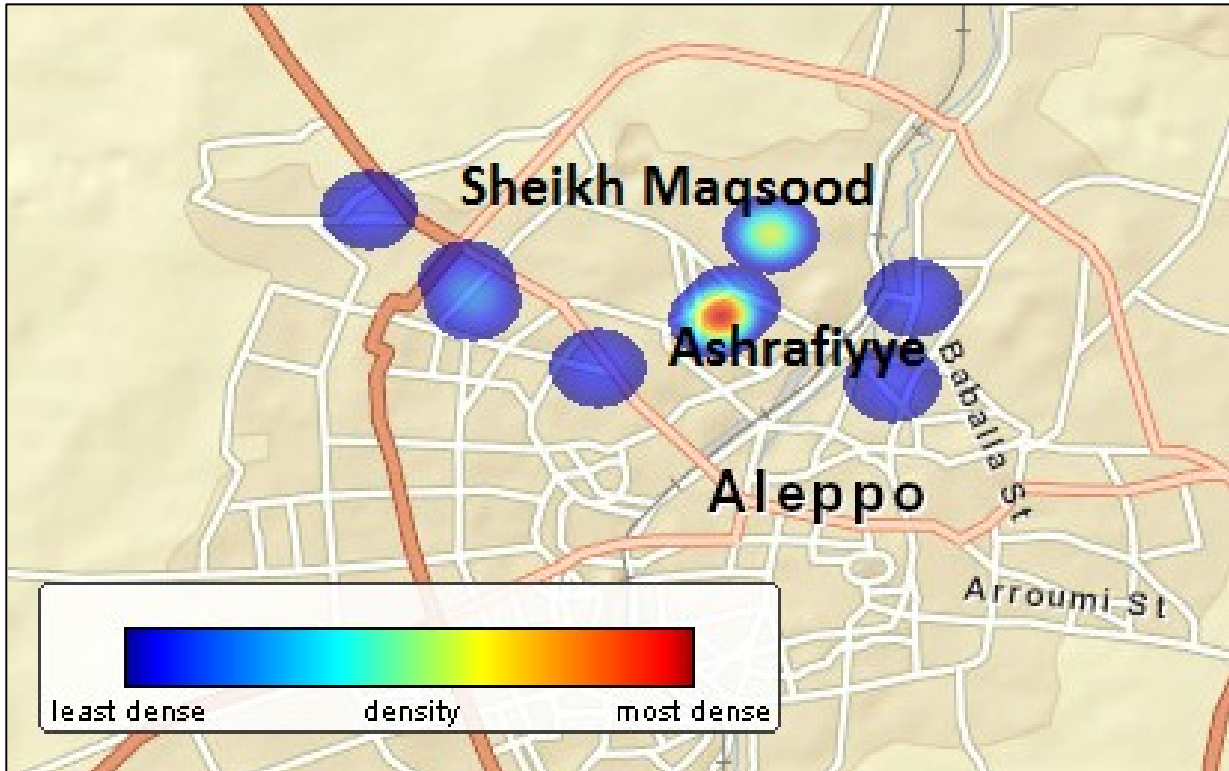


Figure 16: Intense fighting in the Kurdish majority districts of Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafiyye (northern Aleppo city) in September.

Despite the continued stalemate within the city of Aleppo, the government began to push both north and south in order to reopen its supply lines in the south and block the opposition's supply lines from the north.

October

The frontlines of the divided city of Aleppo changed little during the month of October. The heat map below (figure 17) displays conflict incidences within Aleppo at the beginning of October.

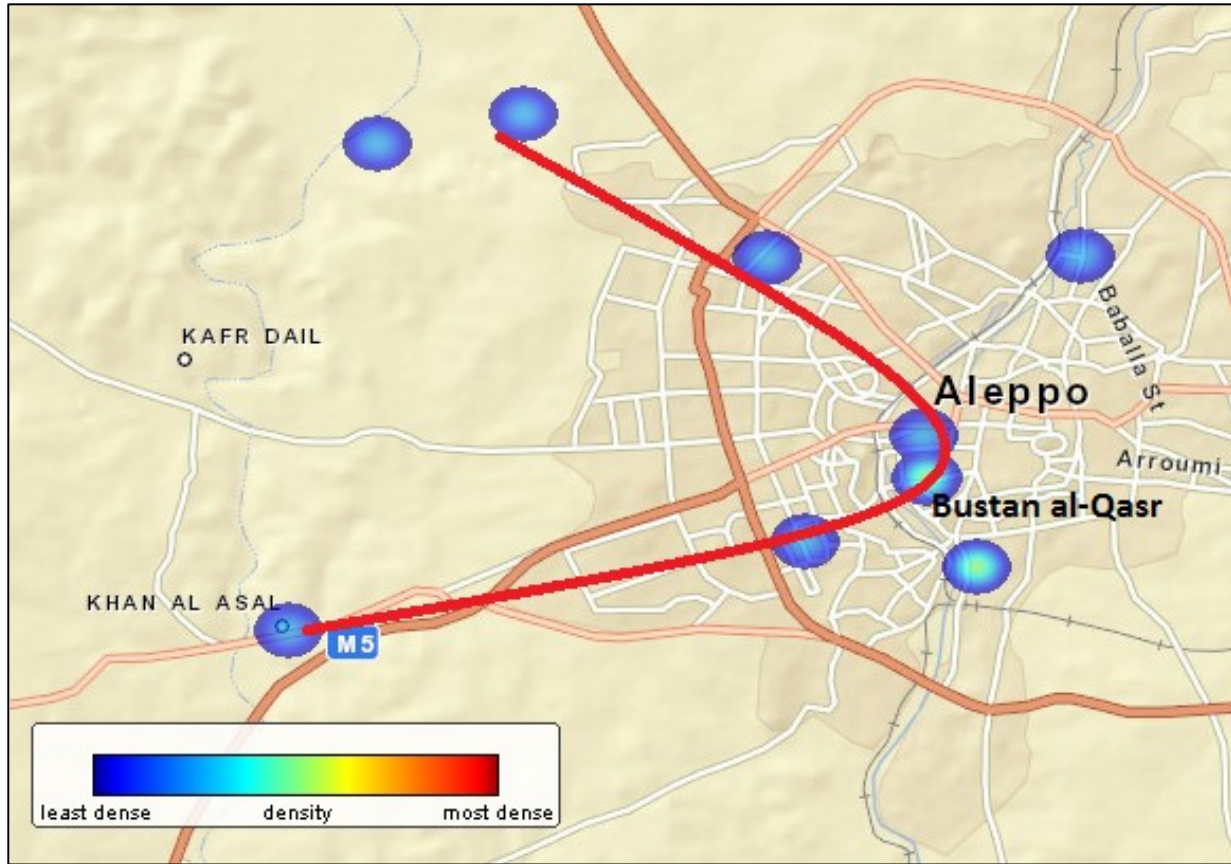


Figure 17: The division of the city of Aleppo in October remains mostly unchanged.

Outside of Aleppo city, the Syrian army launched fierce offensives on all sides to regain control of opposition-held areas. In October, the Syrian government started a military campaign focusing on the southern rural suburbs of Aleppo in order to reopen its supply route, ultimately capturing the opposition held towns of Khanasar and Safira as well as villages between Khanasar and Aleppo. This is demonstrated by a large number of clashes and shellings around the rural southern suburbs, particularly around Safira. Syrian army control of Khanasar and Safira ended the siege on the government-side of Aleppo by reopening its land supply route from Hama.

Homs

Little has changed in the central city of Homs since government forces, aided by Hezbollah, recaptured Qusayr to the south and cleared most of Homs city itself. The capacity of the armed opposition in Homs city consistently waned during the months of August through October. Figure 18 below shows a composite heat map of the conflict incidences in and around the city from August to October.

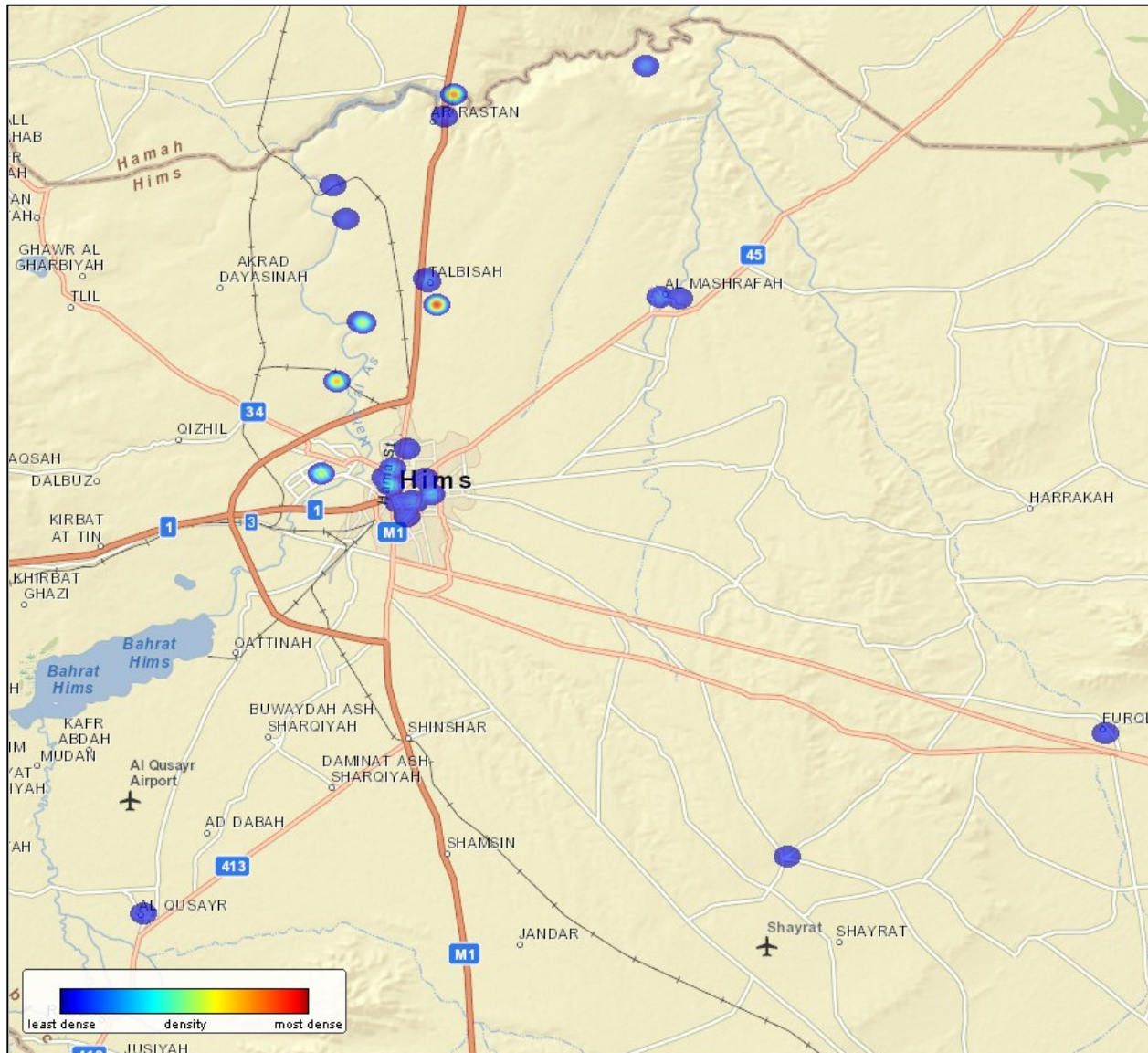


Figure 18: Overview of incidences in and around Homs (Hims) from August to October

The heat map below (figure 19) depicts conflict incidences within the city of Homs for the month of August. It clearly shows the pockets of opposition held districts, particularly in Jourat al-Shiyah and al-Qusour, which were subject to persistent clashes, shelling, and aerial bombardments.

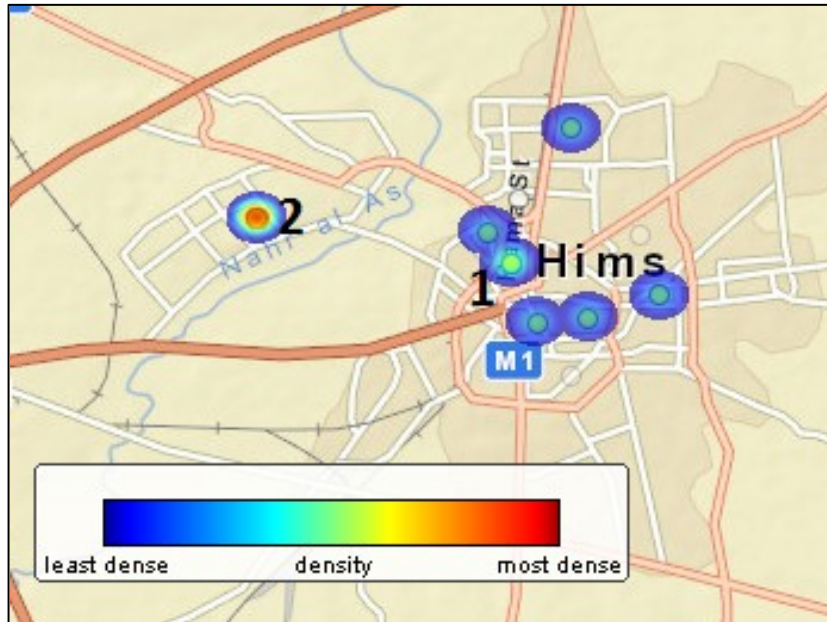


Figure 19: Incidences during the month of August within the city of Homs (Hims) depicting areas held by opposition fighters.

A similar heat map of conflict incidents for the month of September shows decreased control of the city by opposition forces, with only the districts of al-Qusour, Jourat al-Shiyah, and Zara consistently active (figure 20).

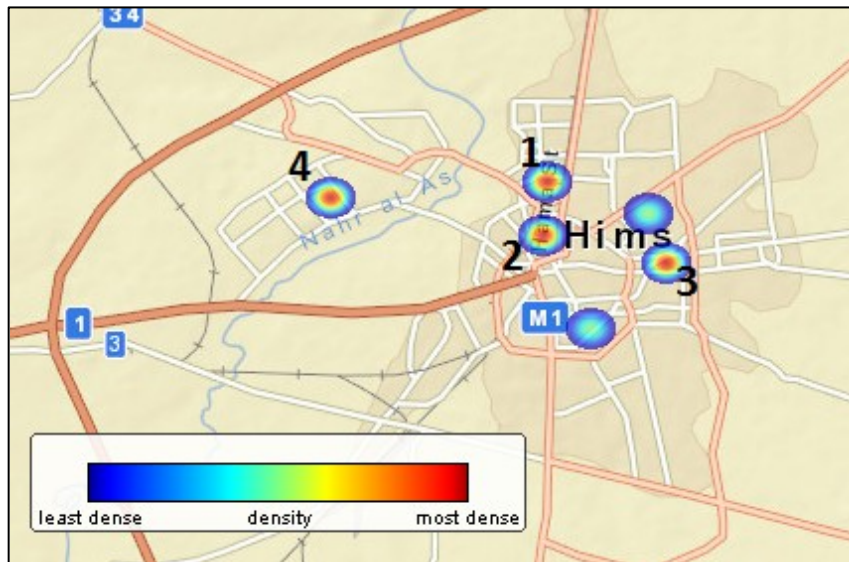


Figure 20: Incidences during the month of September within the city of Homs (Hims), depicting the weakening of the opposition's presence in the city center.

While fighting in the rural northern suburbs of Homs was minimal during August, these areas erupted in September. In particular, there was a substantial increase in aerial

bombardments and shelling in the northern towns of Dara al-Kabira, Ghanto, Talbiseh, and al-Rastan. Figure 21 below illustrates the increase in activity in these areas.

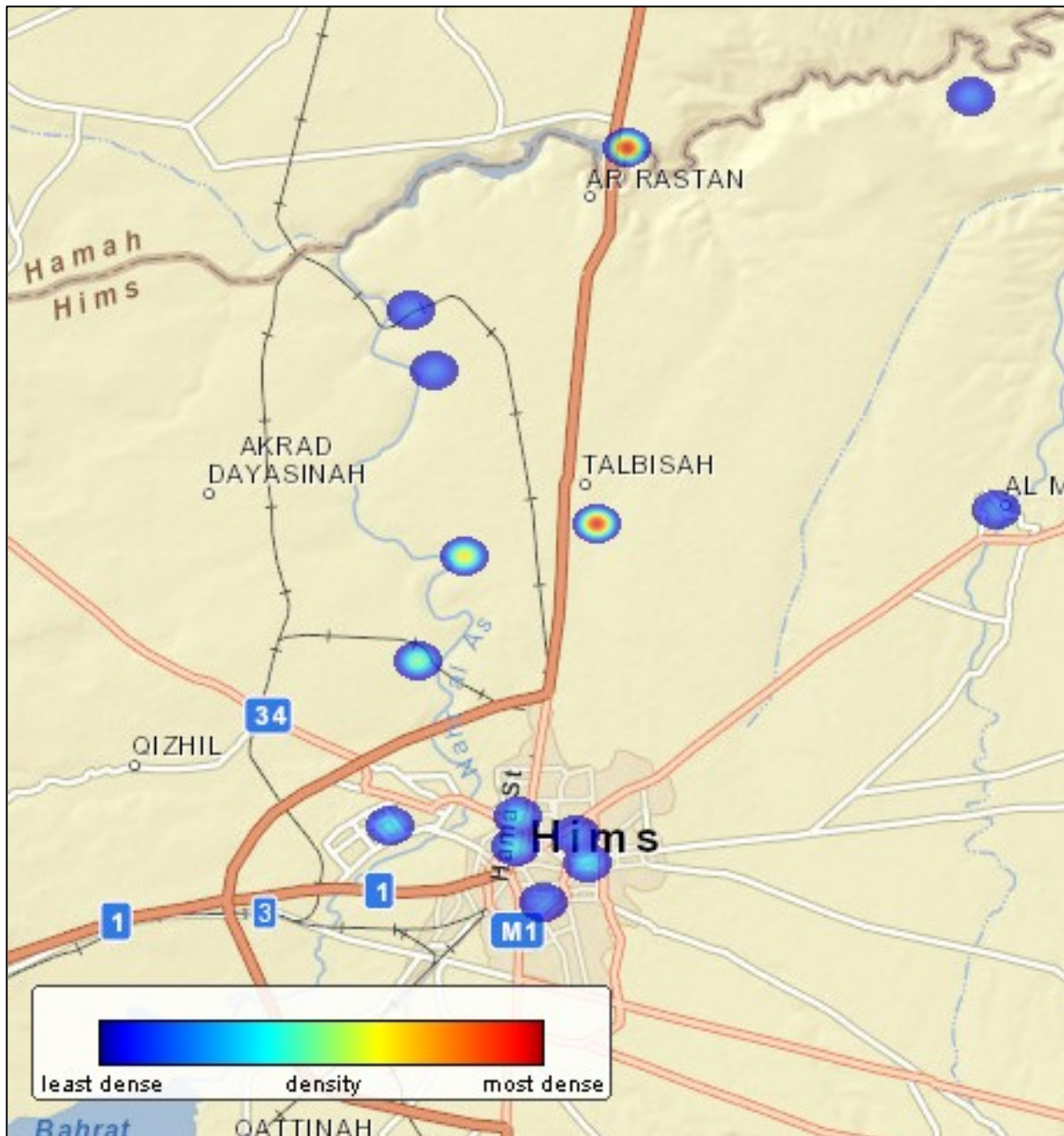


Figure 21: Areas of conflict incidents north of Homs (Hims) during September.

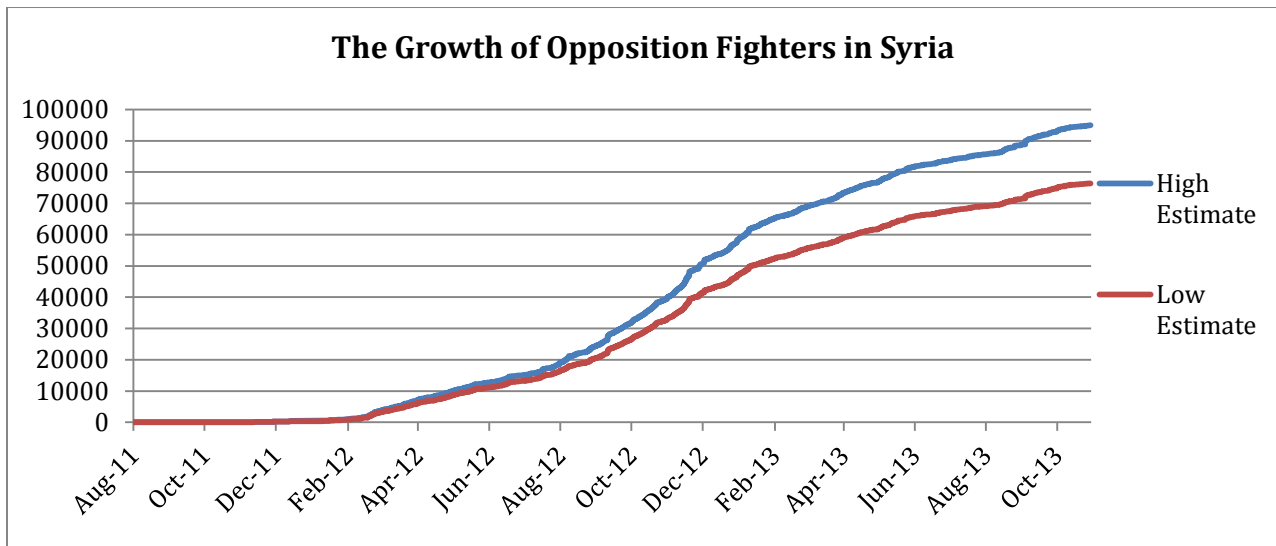
Other than intensified aerial bombardment and shelling by Syrian army forces against towns in the north recently, little changed in Homs during the month of October. Repeated attempts by the armed opposition to gain further ground in the city of Homs resulted in the successive change-of-hands of several districts along the dividing line in Homs.

Armed Opposition Structures

The following series of diagrams detail the structure of Syria’s armed opposition in each governorate. The data used to create these diagrams are extracted exclusively from social media sources. Each time a group of fighters or military council is formed, its name, size, location, date of formation, etc. (a total of 70 attributes each) are recorded and used to generate time-scalable network diagrams of armed groups in each region of Syria.

Troop counts are reached by tallying the number of fighters present in each formation video. Due to the difficulty of counting large numbers of individuals in low-quality videos, high and low estimates are made.

Using this methodology, 5,004 armed group and military council formations have been recorded over the course of Syria’s conflict, representing between 76,410 and 94,950 fighters. Troop counts for some groups that have not announced their formations online (such as ISIS) are not included in this total estimate.

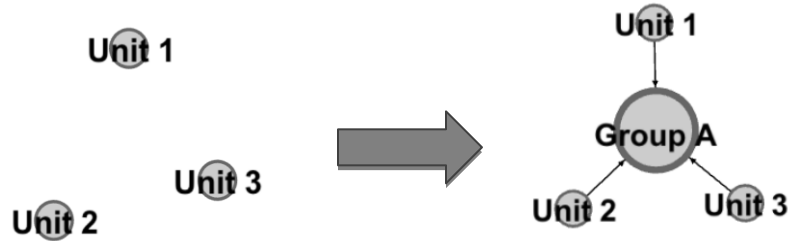


A note on interpreting network diagrams

Each node in the following diagrams represents an armed group or a military council, with the size of the node corresponding to the importance of that unit in the network.² In these diagrams, groups that have formed or restructured between June 1, 2013 and November 1, 2013 have been highlighted in orange. Labels in the diagrams have been re-sized and translated for visibility based on a mathematical ranking of the group’s importance to the overall network.

² A node’s importance in the network is determined by a number of network analysis algorithms that rank it in accordance with its centrality, number of connections, and “betweenness” in each network.

Connections between groups are represented by lines or arrows. For example, if three units form separately of one another, they will be represented as three separate nodes. If they eventually join another organization, their relationship is shown with either lines or arrows indicating the nature of the relationship.

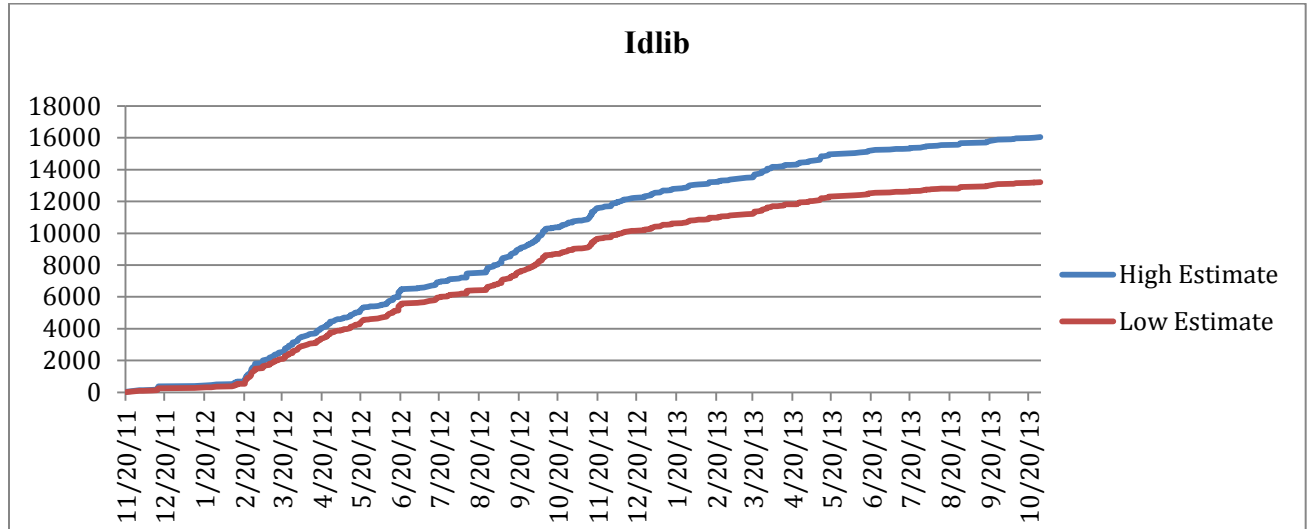


The distribution of units and clusters of units throughout each diagram is based on the size of each network of connections. Larger networks are shown on the periphery of each diagram, while units that have formed but have not subsequently declared an affiliation with larger networks are clustered in the center of each diagram. The relative number of independent vs. networked units for each governorate is significant because it is an indication of the degree of control and influence (or lack thereof) exercised by higher-level opposition leadership.

Idlib

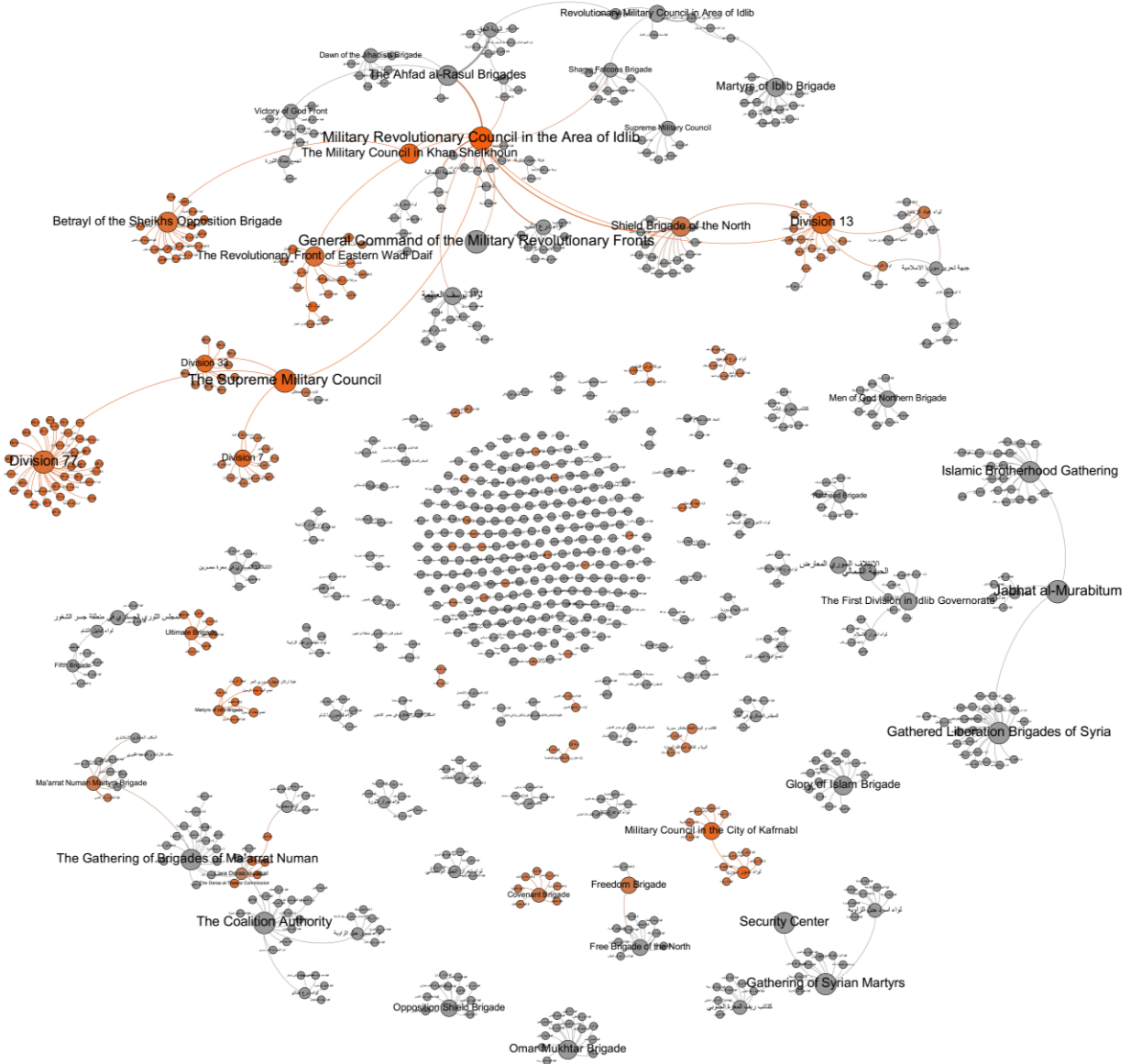
High estimate: 16,051

Low estimate: 13,218



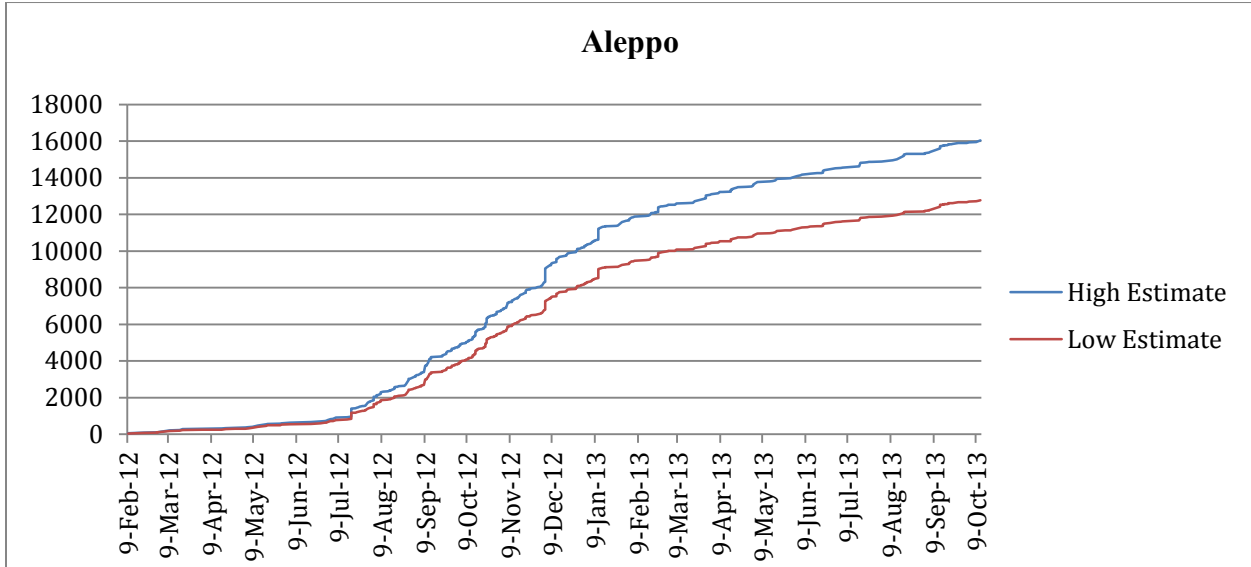
Opposition structures in Idlib have largely been centered around the Military Revolutionary Council of Idlib and the Supreme Military Command. During the past five months, these networks have been more active and have grown more than other opposition structures in the governorate. The armed opposition emerged earlier in Idlib than in most other governorates in Syria. This early emergence, combined with the governorate’s proximity to Turkey and external military leadership is likely a main reason for the success that top-level leadership has had in unifying fighting forces in the governorate.

The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Idlib governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.



Aleppo

High estimate: 16,040
 Low estimate: 12,773



As mentioned earlier in this report, opposition structures in Aleppo have undergone major changes in the past three months. With the formation of the Islamic Alliance, the split between Liwa al-Tawhid and the Military Council of Aleppo, the resignation of General Akaidi, and the death of the leader of Liwa al-Tawhid, there has been a dramatic disruption in top-level leadership structures. While these developments are still underway, the ultimate result is difficult to determine as of yet. Concurrent developments involving an increase in organization along the various fronts throughout the governorate indicate that grassroots organization is still increasing. The formalization of leadership structures to coordinate between armed groups on the fronts is the most significant development in the past three months.

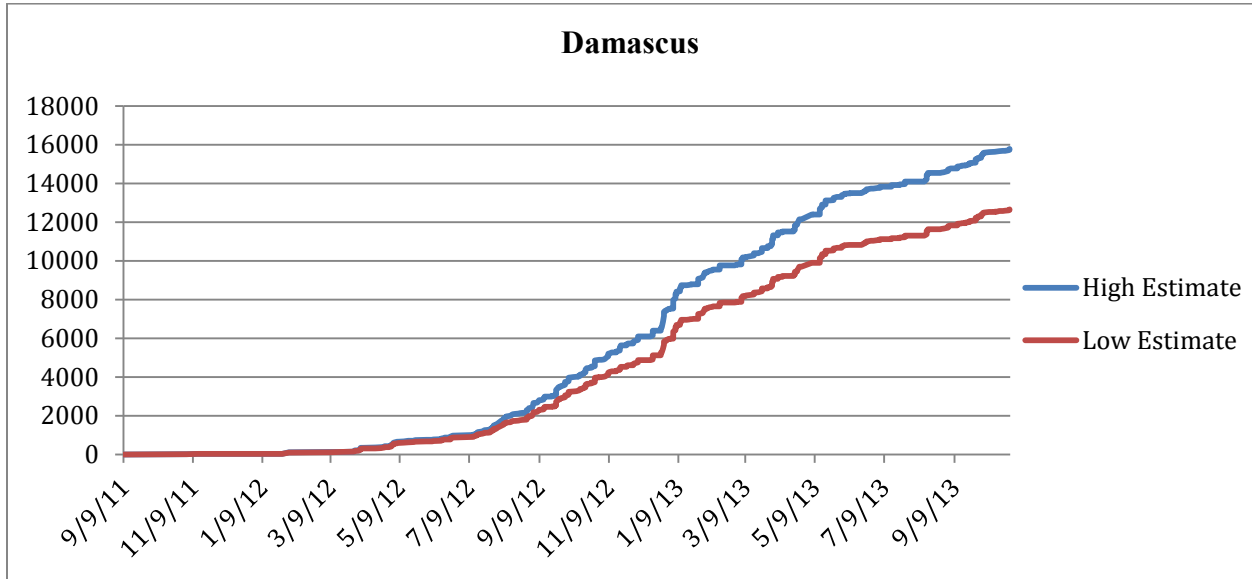
The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Aleppo governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.



Damascus

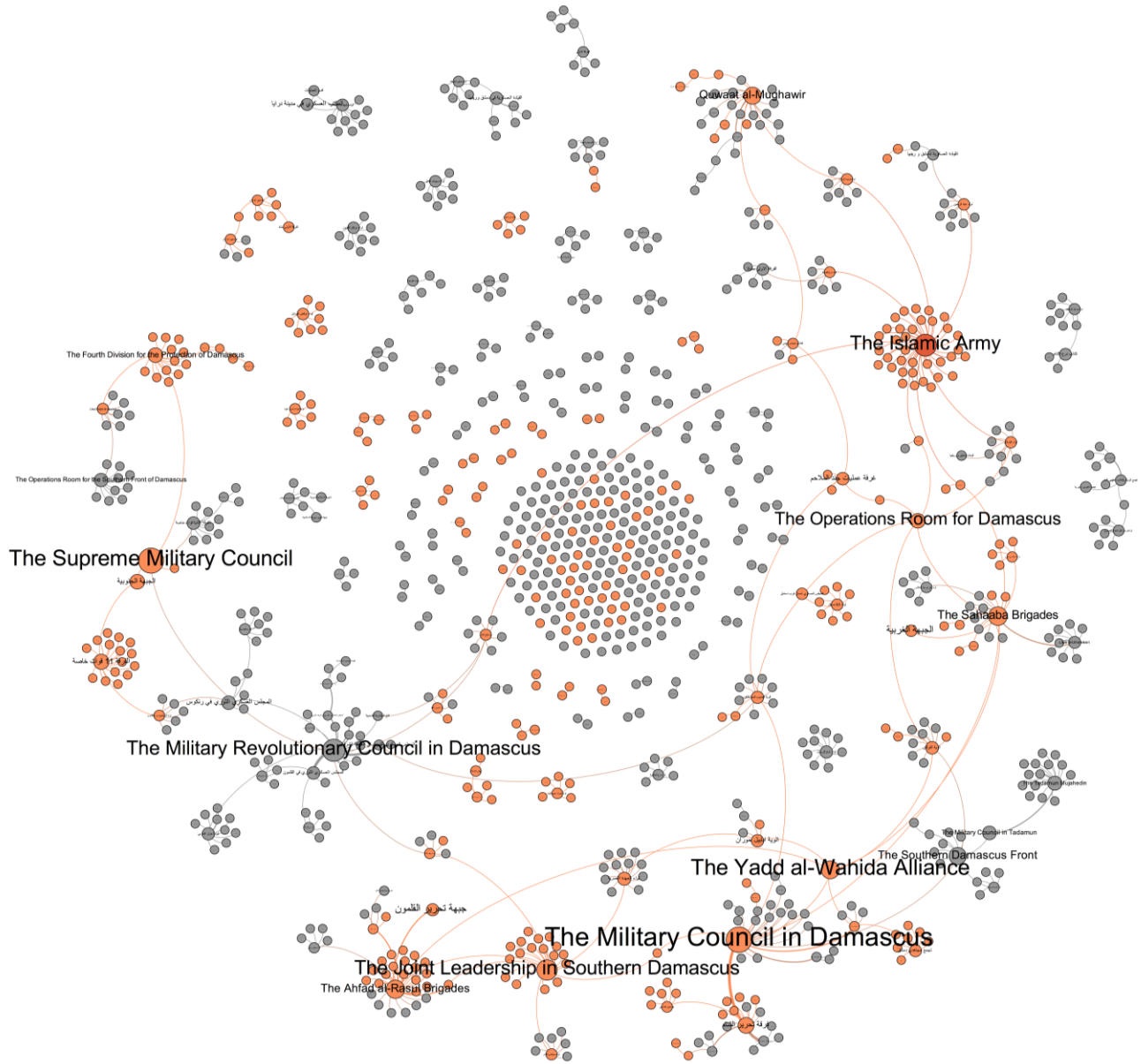
High estimate: 15,780

Low estimate: 12,665



The most significant development regarding armed group structures in Damascus is the formation of the Islamic Army. While Liwa al-Islam, which formed the Islamic Army, was already the largest, best equipped, and most influential group in the Damascus governorate, the formation of the Islamic Army unified many of the previously independent groups operating in the region.

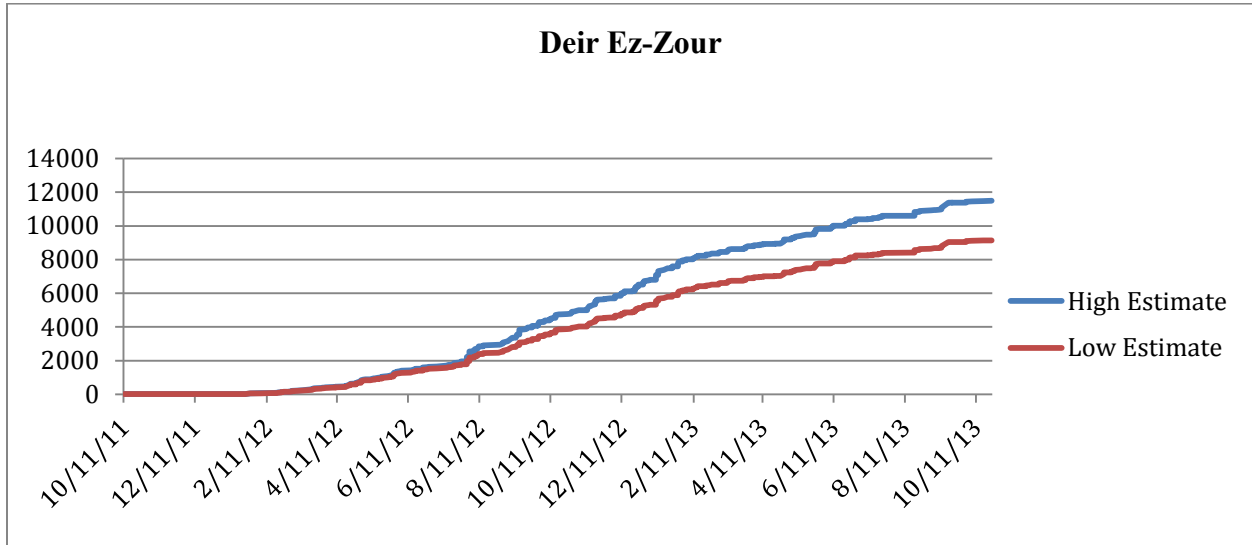
The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in the Damascus governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.



Deir Ez-Zour

High estimate: 11,496

Low estimate: 9,146



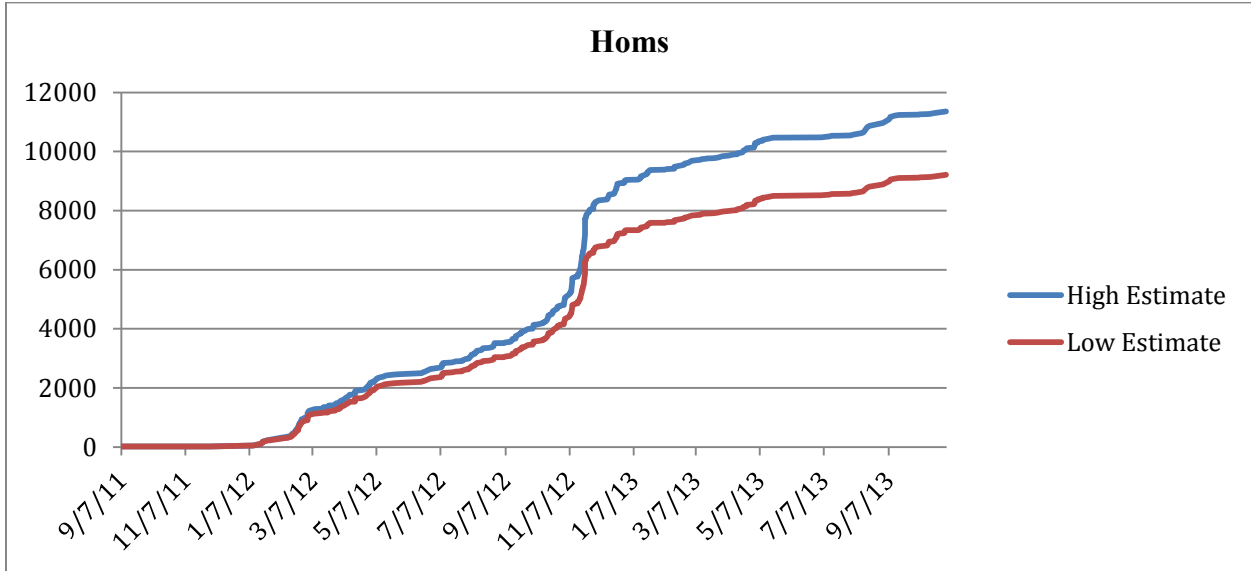
Deir Ez-Zour governorate is home to some of the most complicated opposition networks in all of Syria. A large portion of the groups operating in the area have changed affiliations as many as four separate times, making it extremely difficult to determine the strength of current relationships. Additionally, as a result of the seemingly ephemeral relationships between groups, the “center of gravity” between these armed groups has shifted numerous times. The armed groups in Deir Ez-Zour that have maintained a high level of activity throughout the conflict and continue to grow today are Liwa al-Qaaqaa, Liwa Jaafer al-Tayyar, Liwa Ahel al-Ether, Liwa Ahfad al-Rasul, Liwa Allahu Akbar, and several of the brigades and battalions affiliated with the Military Council for Revolutionaries in Deir Ez-Zour. It is important to note that many of the opposition networks in Deir Ez-Zour governorate and greater eastern Syria are influenced by tribal affiliations.

The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Deir Ez-Zour governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.

Homs

High estimate: 11,362

Low: 9,211



Opposition structures in Homs governorate have largely stagnated following the government’s recapture of Qusayr and much of Homs city in June and July. The remaining networks of fighters operate mainly in the towns north of Homs city such as Ar-Rastan, Talbisyeh, and Ghanto. Additionally, several armed groups united to form a front in the central city of Palmyra.

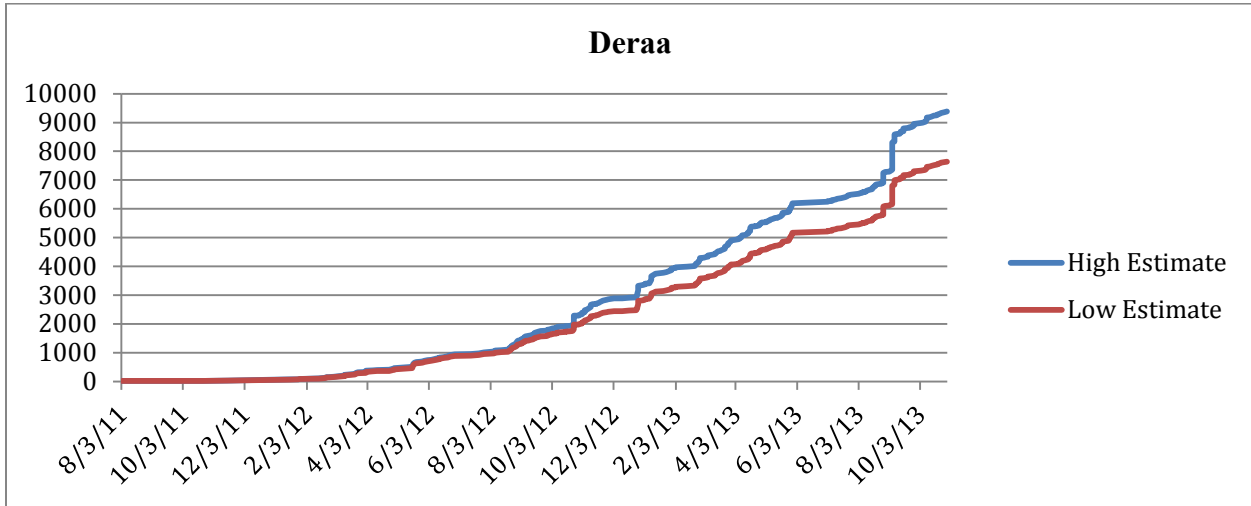
The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Homs governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.



Deraa

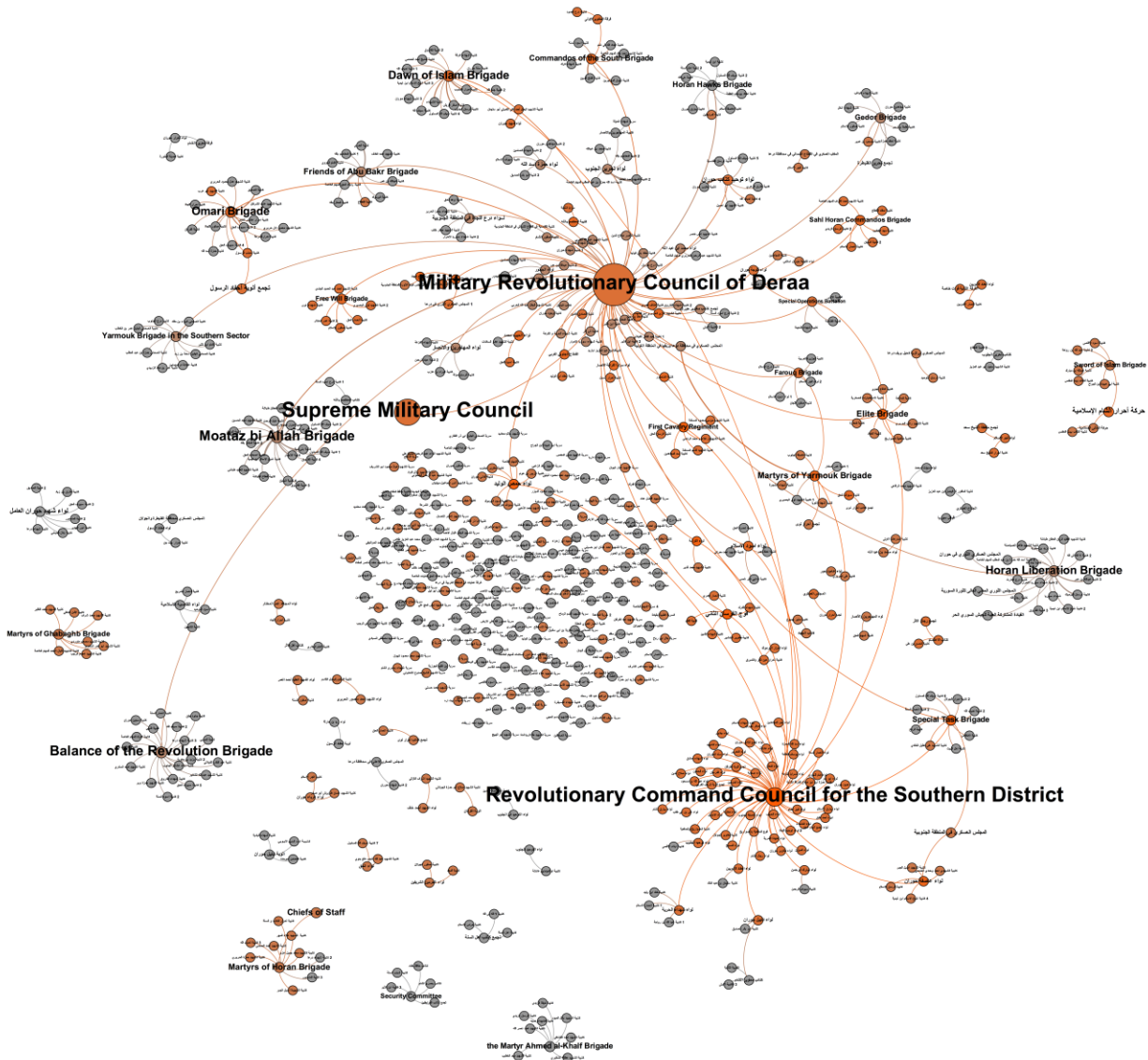
High estimate: 9,384

Low estimate: 7,642



Much of the activity in the southern province of Deraa has centered around the Military Council of Deraa, which is affiliated with the top level Syrian Military Council. Military leadership in the area oversaw the unification of armed groups into the “Southern Front,” continuing a push by top level leadership to restructure armed groups along the historic areas of operation of the Syrian military.

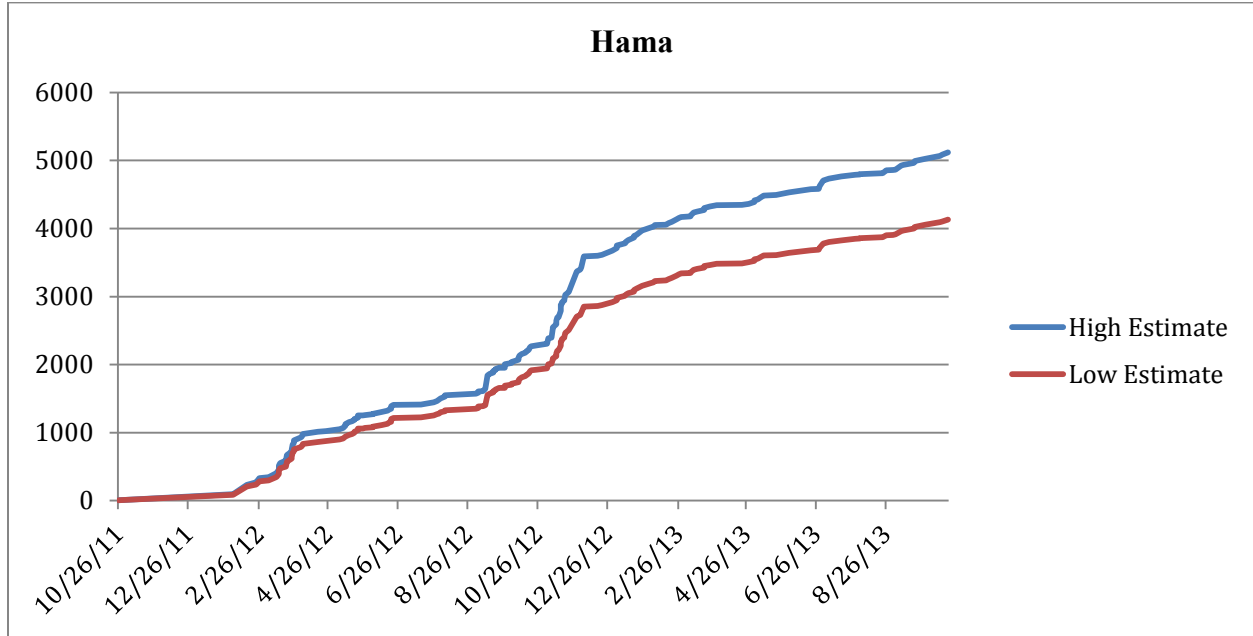
The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Deraa governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.



Hama

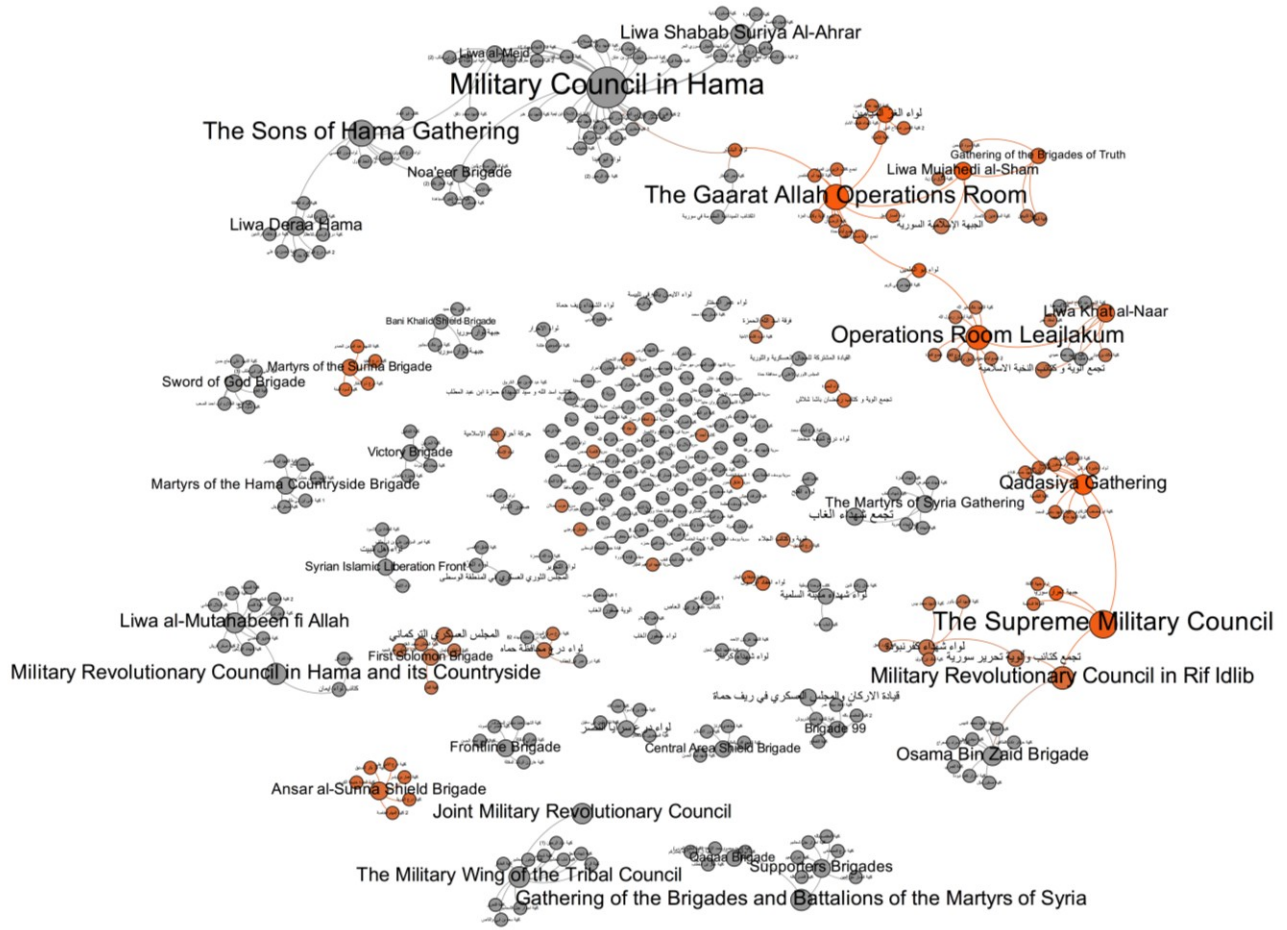
High estimate: 5,118

Low estimate: 4,130



Developments in Hama have centered around the creation of two new “operation rooms” designed to coordinate the efforts of a diverse array of armed groups along the various fronts throughout the governorate. This corresponds with a growing trend in grassroots organization throughout the country along the multitude of fronts. Despite this organization, government forces were able to break through the Hama governorate in order to re-open supply lines to besieged areas of Aleppo city to the north.

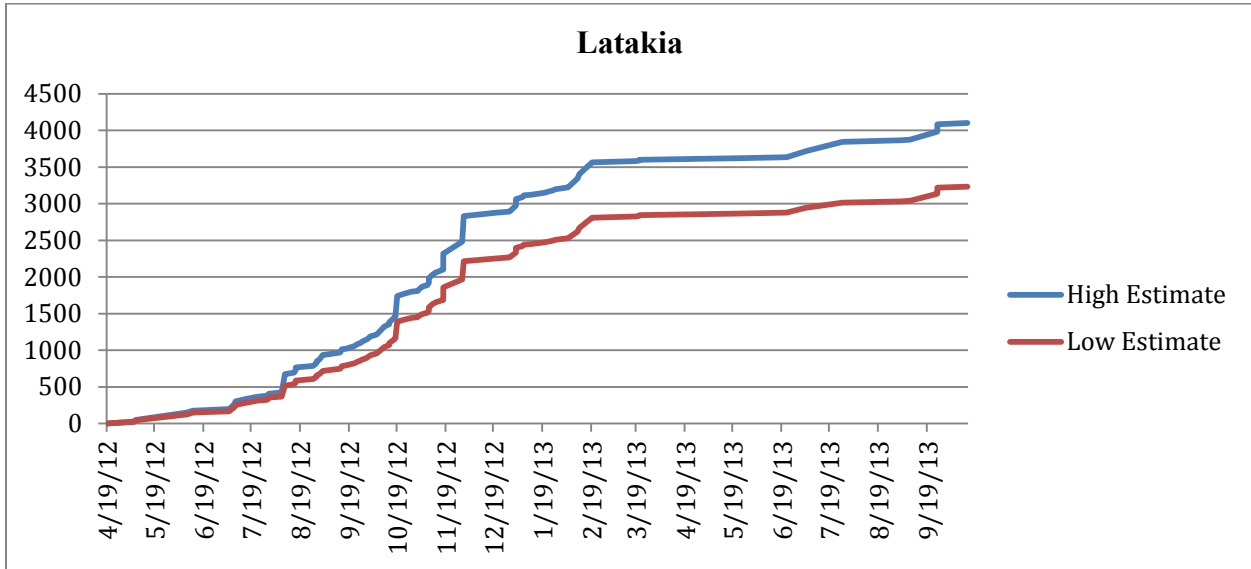
The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Hama governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.



Latakia

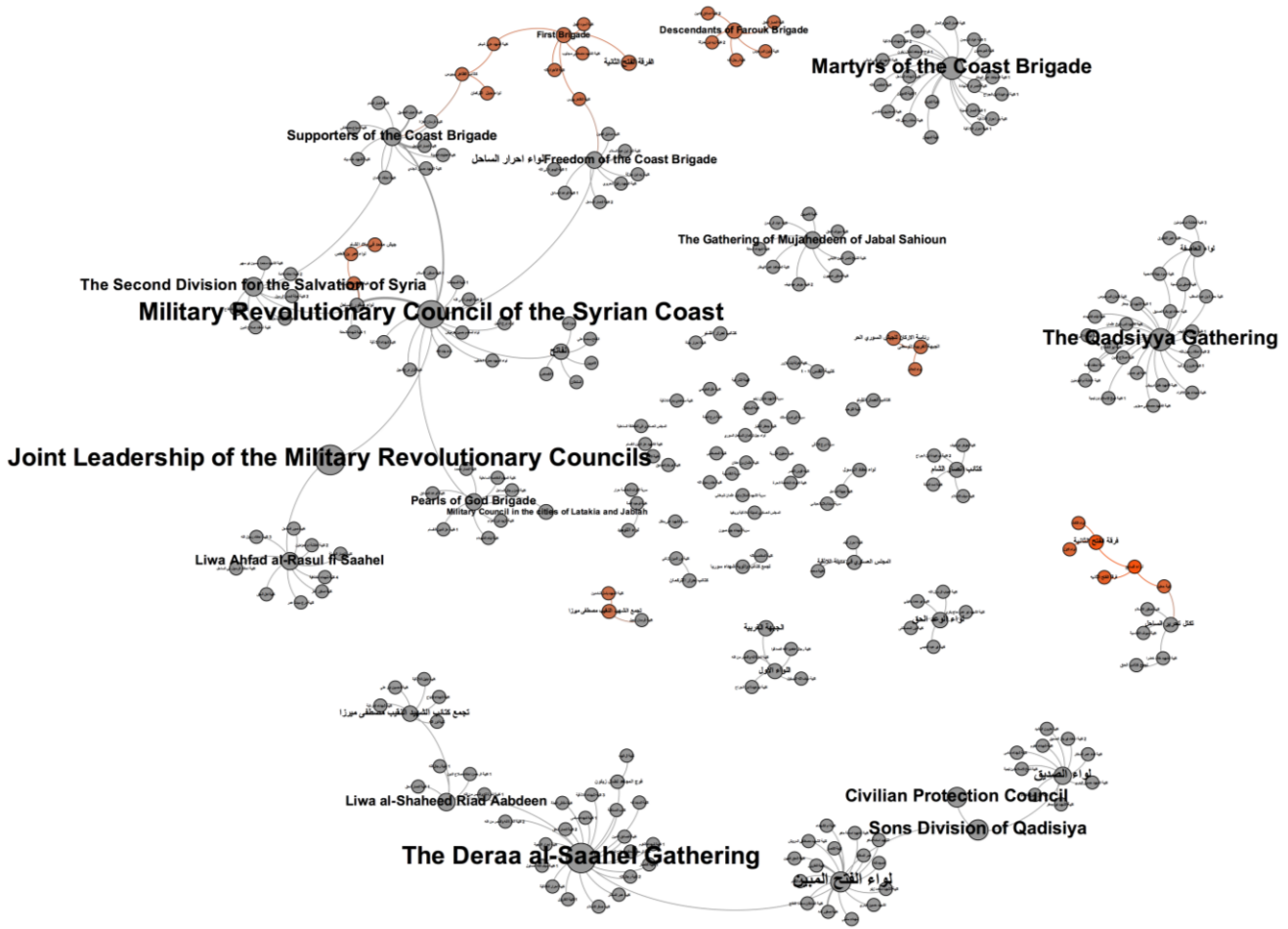
High estimate: 4,103

Low estimate: 3,233



There have been few developments regarding opposition structures in Lattakia in recent months. The few formations and restructurings that have occurred in the past five months have involved units from the Military Revolutionary Council of the Syrian Coast, and a few smaller independent brigades.

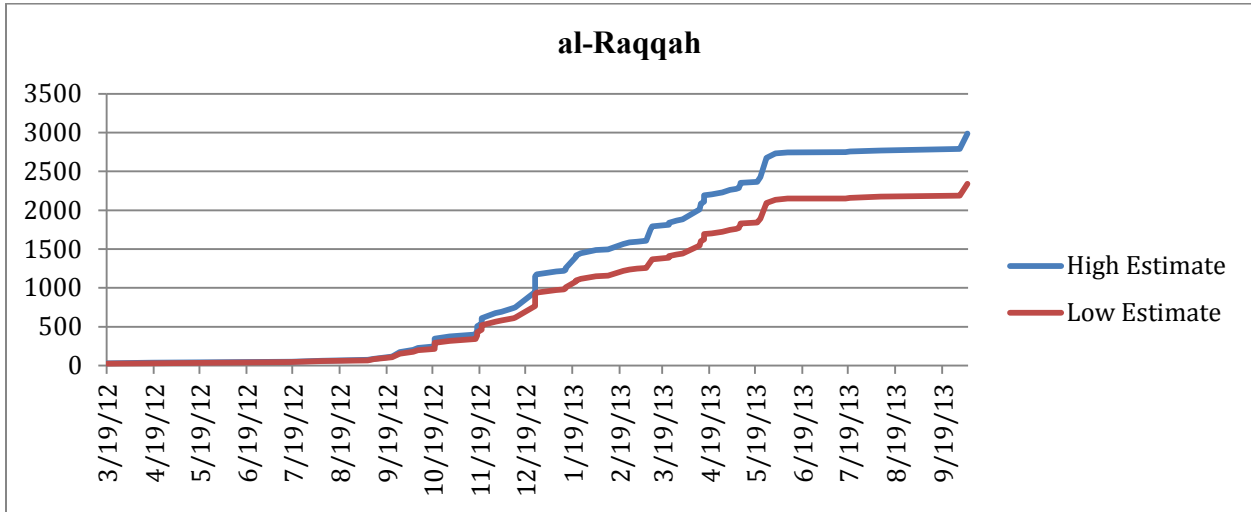
The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Lattakia governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.



Al-Raqqah

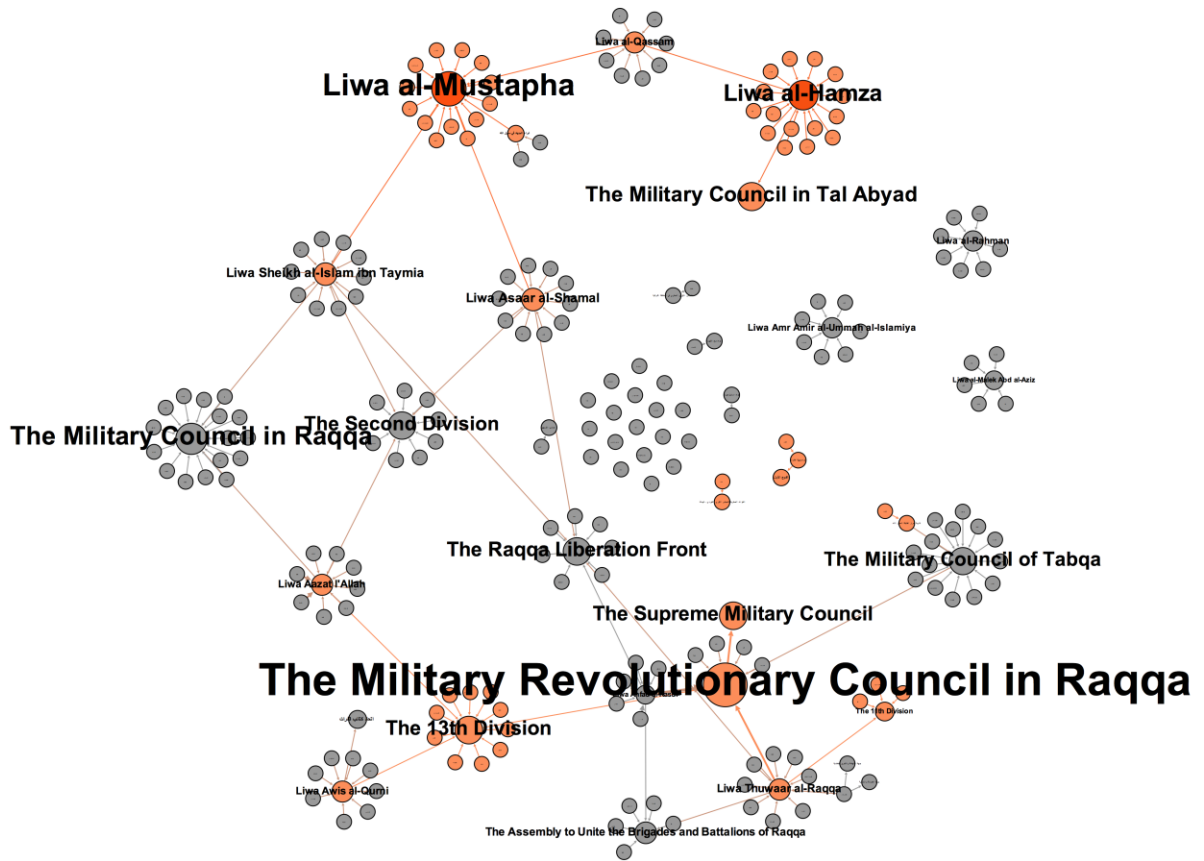
High estimate: 2,989

Low estimate: 2,340



Opposition structures in Raqqa continue to evolve without a true center of gravity. Many of the groups that have formed have been affiliated with one another at some point in the conflict, but no true center has emerged (with the possible exception of the Military Revolutionary Council in Raqqa). This lack of development or cohesion is likely caused by the commanding presence of ISIS in the region – which led to a plateau in opposition growth and structural development.

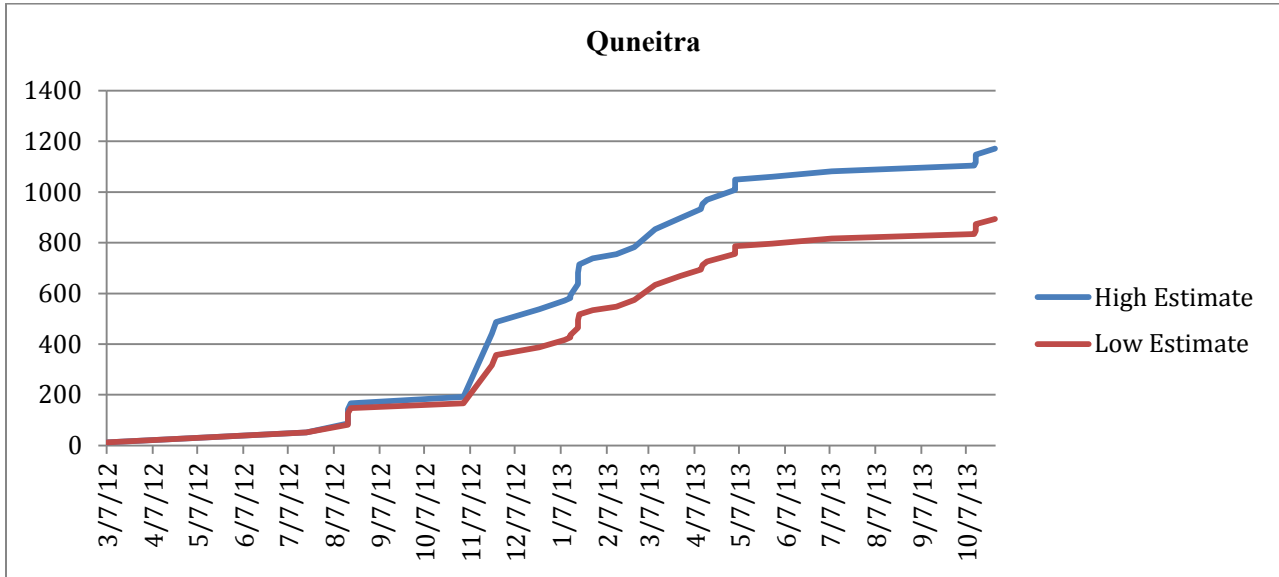
The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Raqqa governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.



Quneitra

High estimate: 1,172

Low estimate: 894



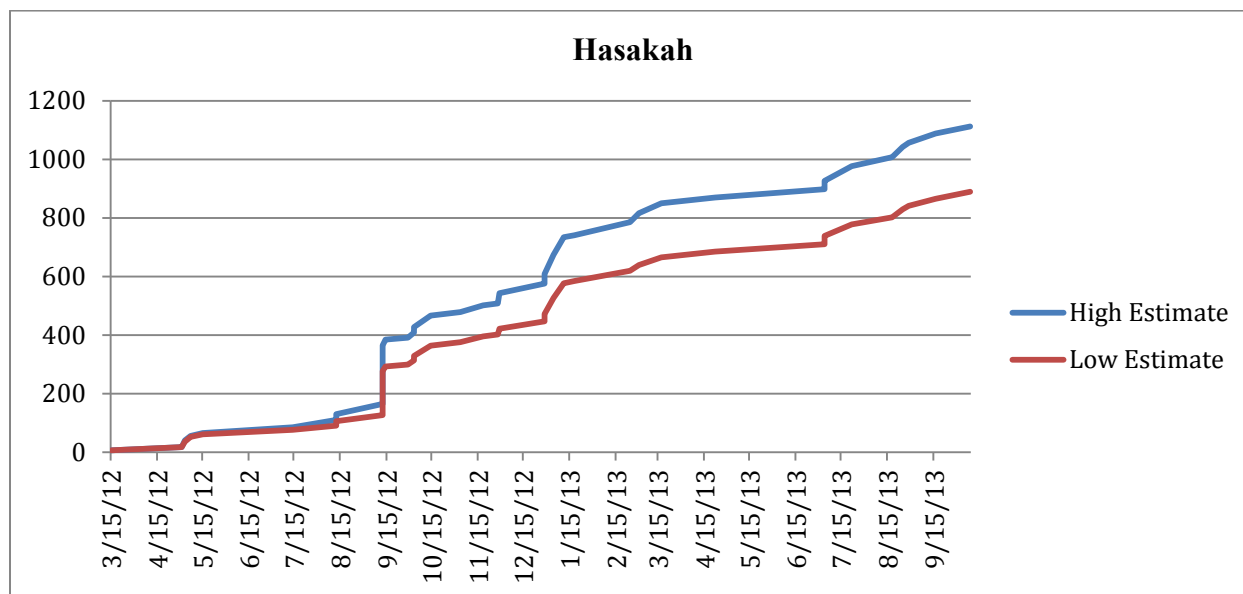
Very few groups have announced their formation from Quneitera. Instead, many of the groups operating in the south of Syria have declared their formation in and participated in operations in neighboring Deraa. Despite this, a military council in Quneitera and Golan exists and has been active in coordinating some opposition operations.

The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Quneitera governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.

Hasakah

High: 1,112³

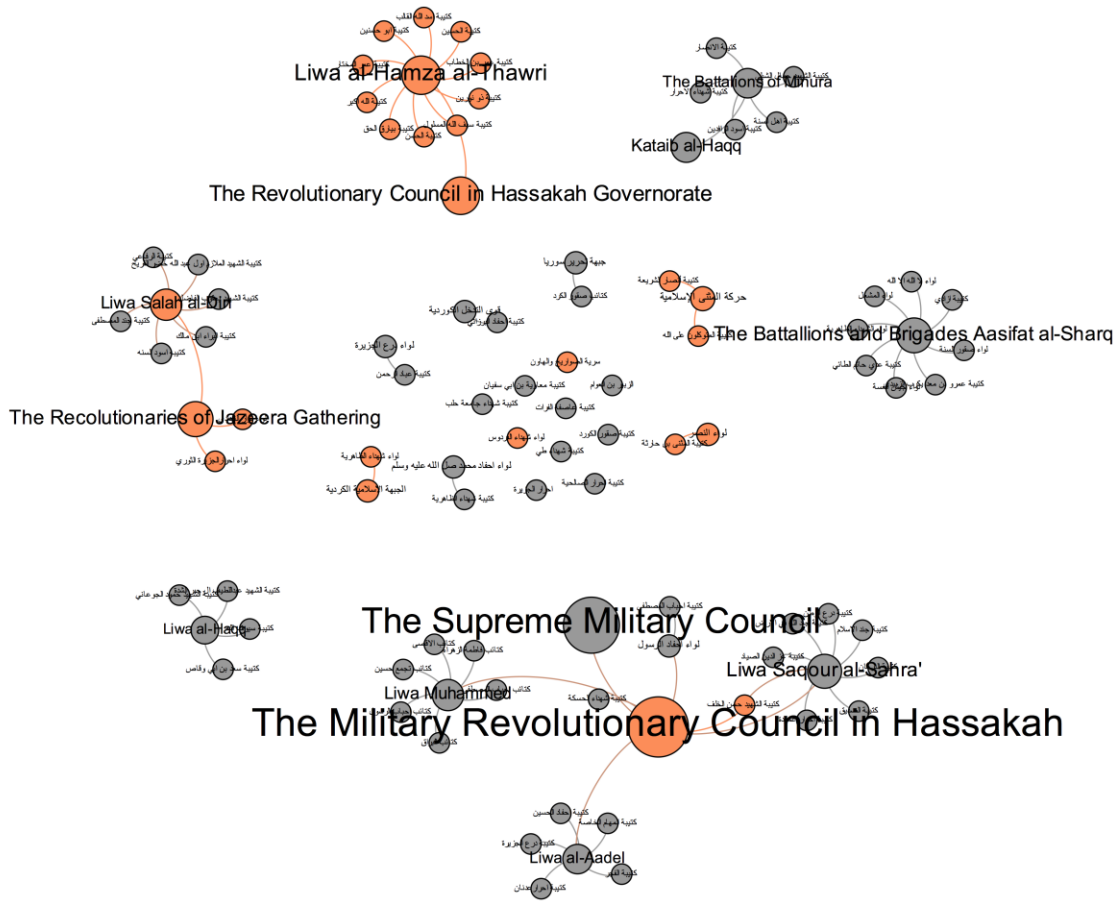
Low: 889



Opposition groups in Hassakah governorate have largely formed around the Military Revolutionary Council in Hassakah, though in recent months independent networks of fighters have seen more formations. The dominant group in Hassakah, however, is not of the greater network of the armed opposition (and is therefore not present in the below structural diagram), but of Syria’s Kurdish population. The People’s Defense Units (YPG), which is the military wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (YPD) controls most of the Hassakah governorate. Furthermore ISIS and other fundamentalist groups operating in the area have fought (often with the aid of Arab tribes from eastern Syria) against the expansion and consolidation of Kurdish control over the northeastern panhandle of Syria.

The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Hassakah governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.

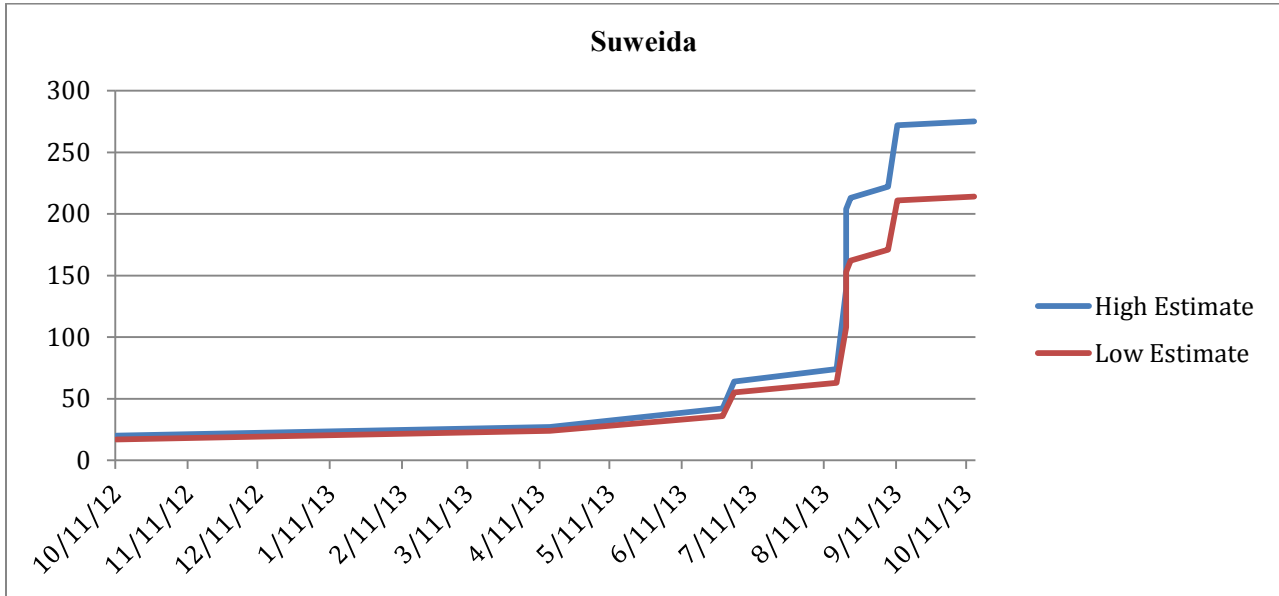
³ This estimate of opposition fighters does not include those fighters affiliated with the People’s Defense Units (YPG).



Suweida

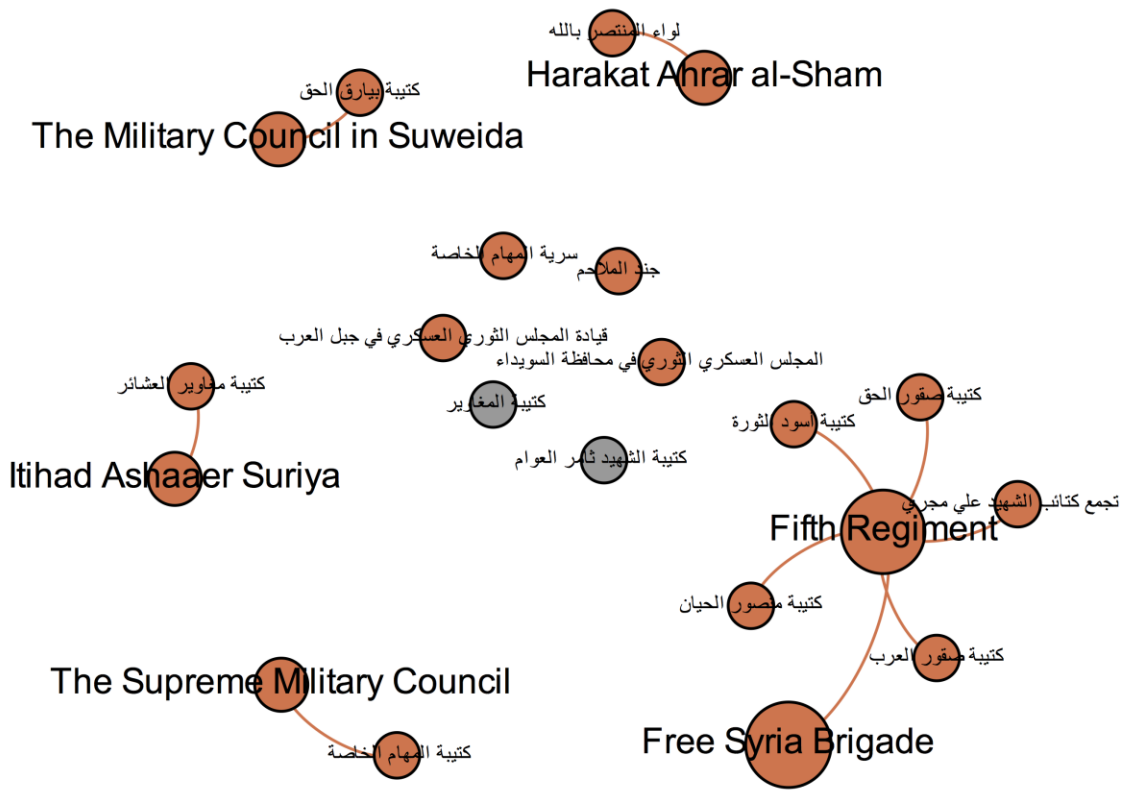
High estimate: 275

Low estimate: 214



Hardly any armed opposition groups have formed in Syria’s southern Suweida governorate. This is largely due to the fact that much of the population is generally aligned with the Syrian government (or at least opposed to much of the opposition). That said, the number of opposition groups operating in the governorate jumped dramatically in August and September of 2013, due to the formation of a “division” of some groups in the area.

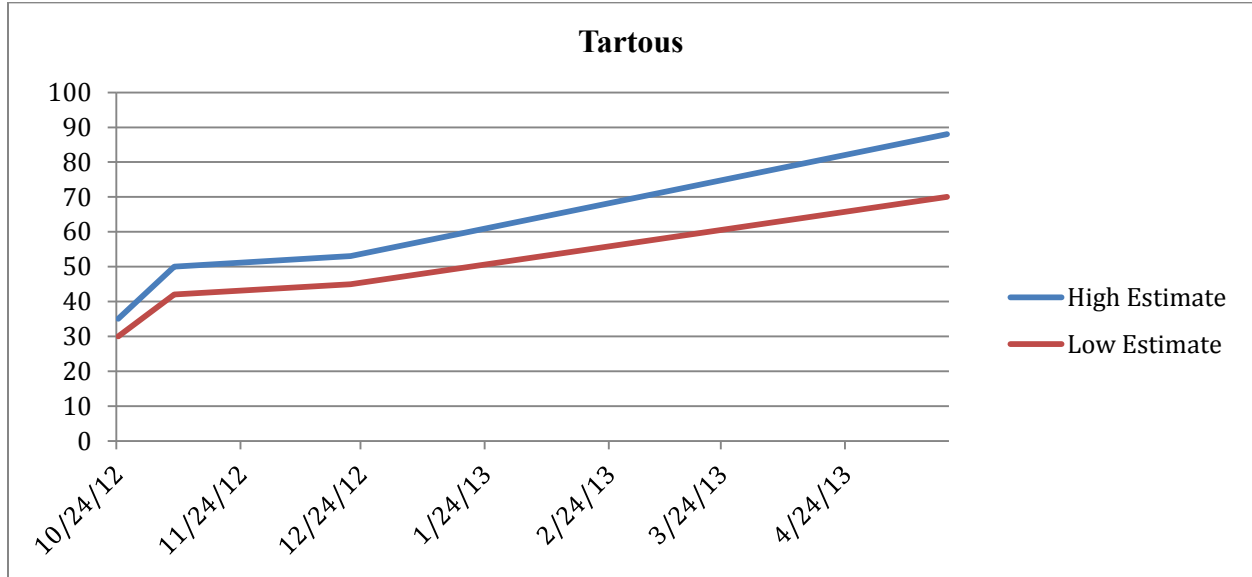
The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Deraa governorate over the course of the conflict. Those groups that have formed, grown, or restructured in the past five months have been highlighted in orange.



Tartous

High estimate: 88

Low estimate: 70



Similar to Suweida, much of Tartus’ population is sympathetic to the Syrian government, meaning that the number of fighters and fighting units that have formed in the area is largely negligible. The Syrian Islamic Front (a nationwide “franchise” network of fighters) formed a collection of fighters in eastern Tartus governorate early in the conflict, but there have been no subsequent formations since the end of April 2013.

The diagram below shows an aggregate of all opposition units that have formed in Deraa governorate over the course of the conflict.

