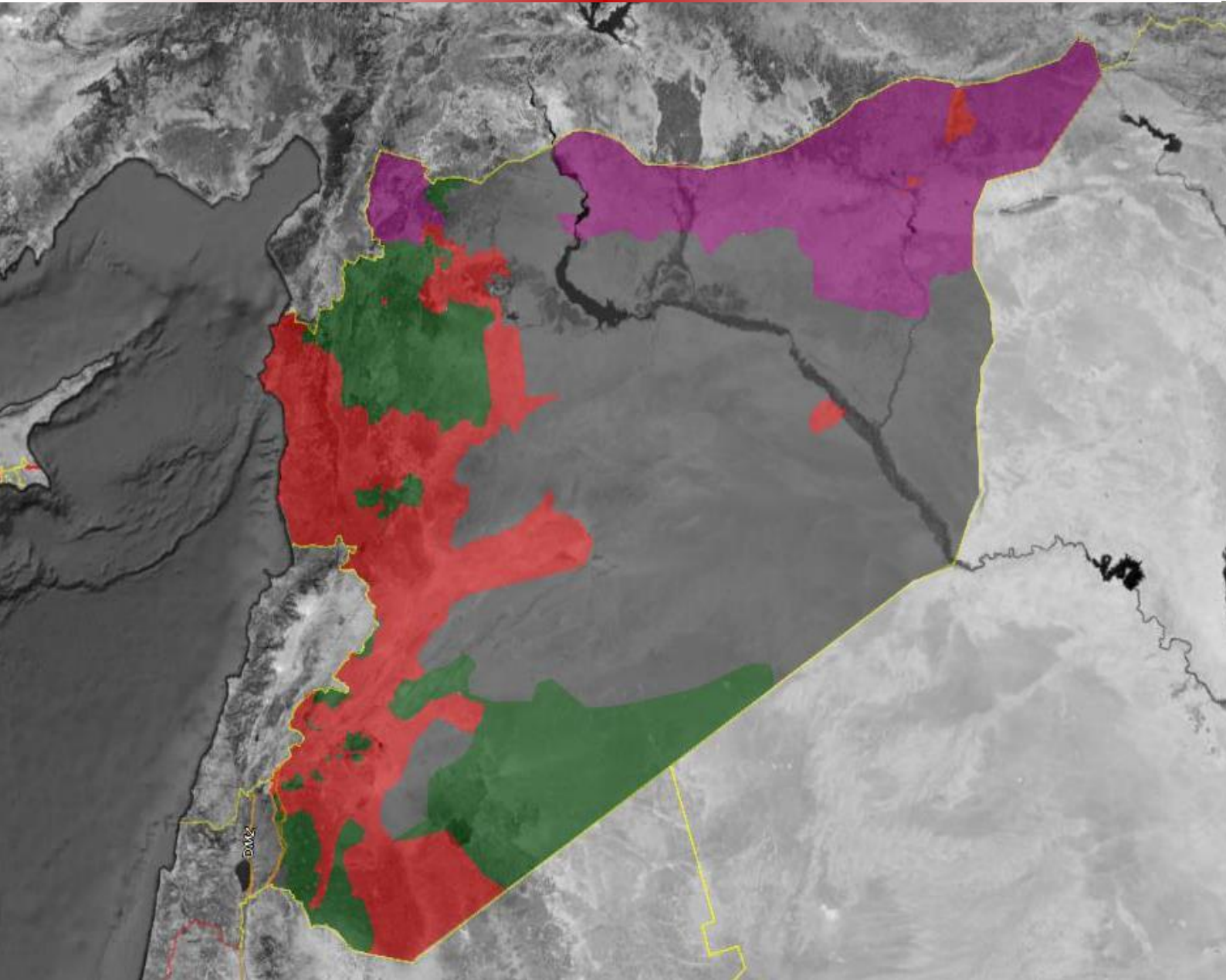




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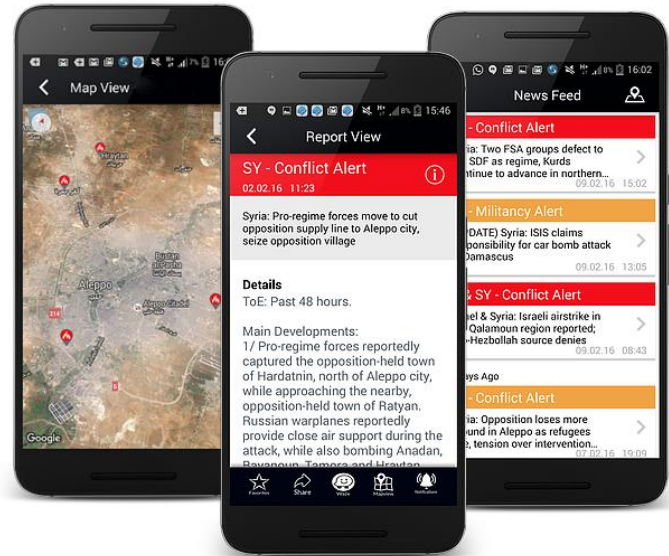
Special Report | Syria

How the Russian intervention changed the course of the Syrian Civil War

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The information, data and maps are almost exclusively drawn from **AssetSource's daily coverage of Syria**. Since the beginning of the Russian intervention, AssetSource expanded the scope of its reporting to include play-by-play coverage of Syria. Every day, Levantine Group analysts track and compile data on the Syrian civil war, from strategic shifts to more tactical incidents. Some of these reports are available on our website [here](#).



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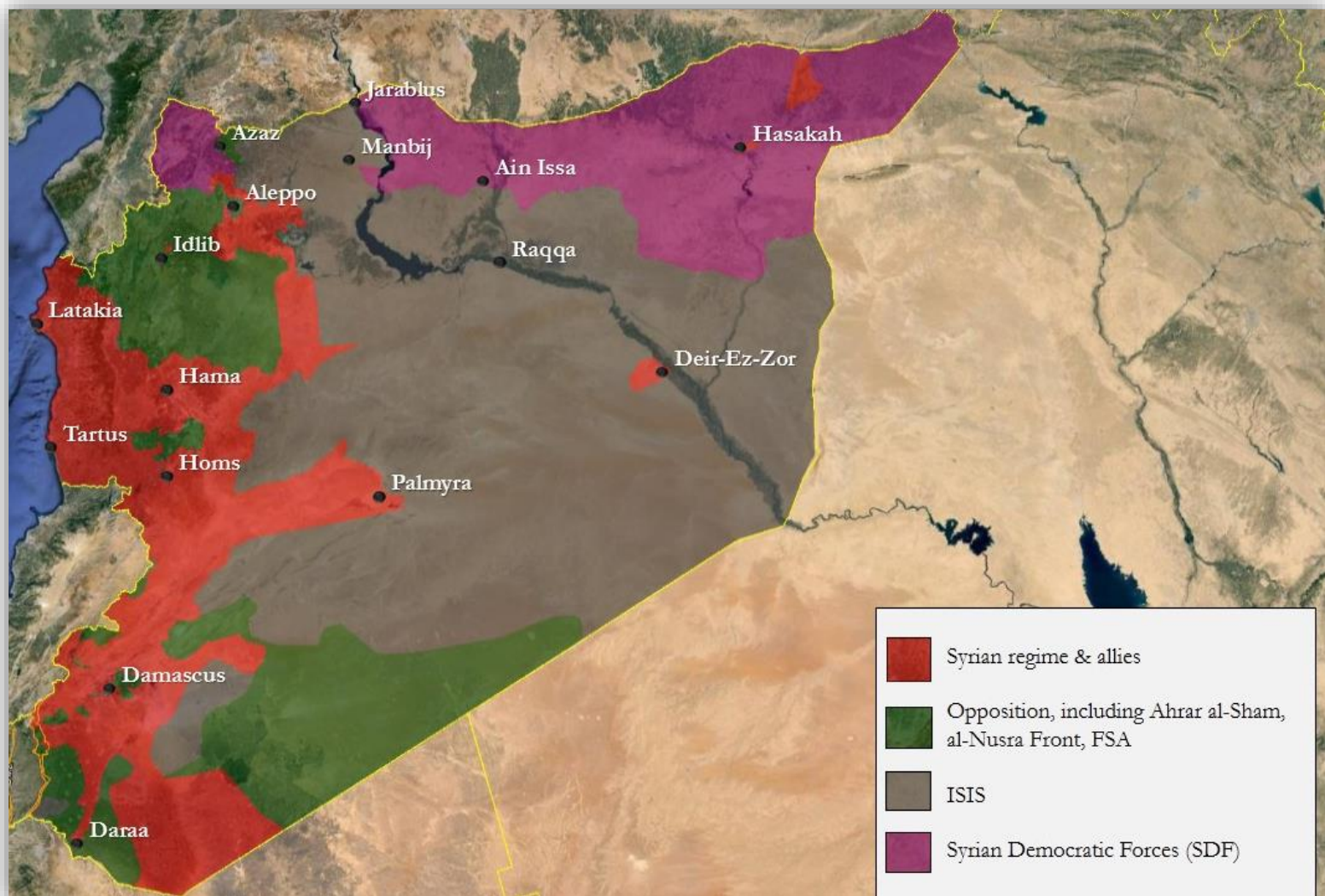
Who uses AssetSource?



A note on our methodology

Levantine Group's AssetSource security awareness application reports on hundreds to thousands of business-impacting incidents, distributed to our clients in real or near-real time. When aggregated and categorized, these incidents show underlying trends, patterns, and behaviors that can determine stability levels in each country, and help forecast major security events. The analysis and assessments in this report are made possible by the knowledge gained by our analysts, as well as the high-resolution data collected with AssetSource. Incidents are collected via:

- ☒ Major media outlets
- ☒ Local media
- ☒ Social networks
- ☒ On-ground sources



The situation in Syria as of April 2, 2016

Introduction

Without question, the Russian intervention in Syria changed the dynamic of the country's civil war, boosting Assad's position from a slowly-but-surely loss to more of a stalemate with the potential for the conflict to turn in his favor. Assad's defeats in the Idlib Province in northwestern Syria, along with intra-regime tensions and significant attrition faced by the Syrian army, likely increased concerns at the Kremlin that then triggered the intervention. While this led to the decision to dispatch a Russian contingent to Syria, the intervention simultaneously sent a broader message of deterrence to the West, hence the use of ballistic missiles and strategic bombers, which, given the scope and nature of the intervention, were unnecessary except as a show of force. The intervention is thus not simply an attempt to save a historic ally, but also the result of the Russia's military doctrine, an "aggressive defense" that may see Moscow increasingly intervening to protect its interests and increase its overall leverage.

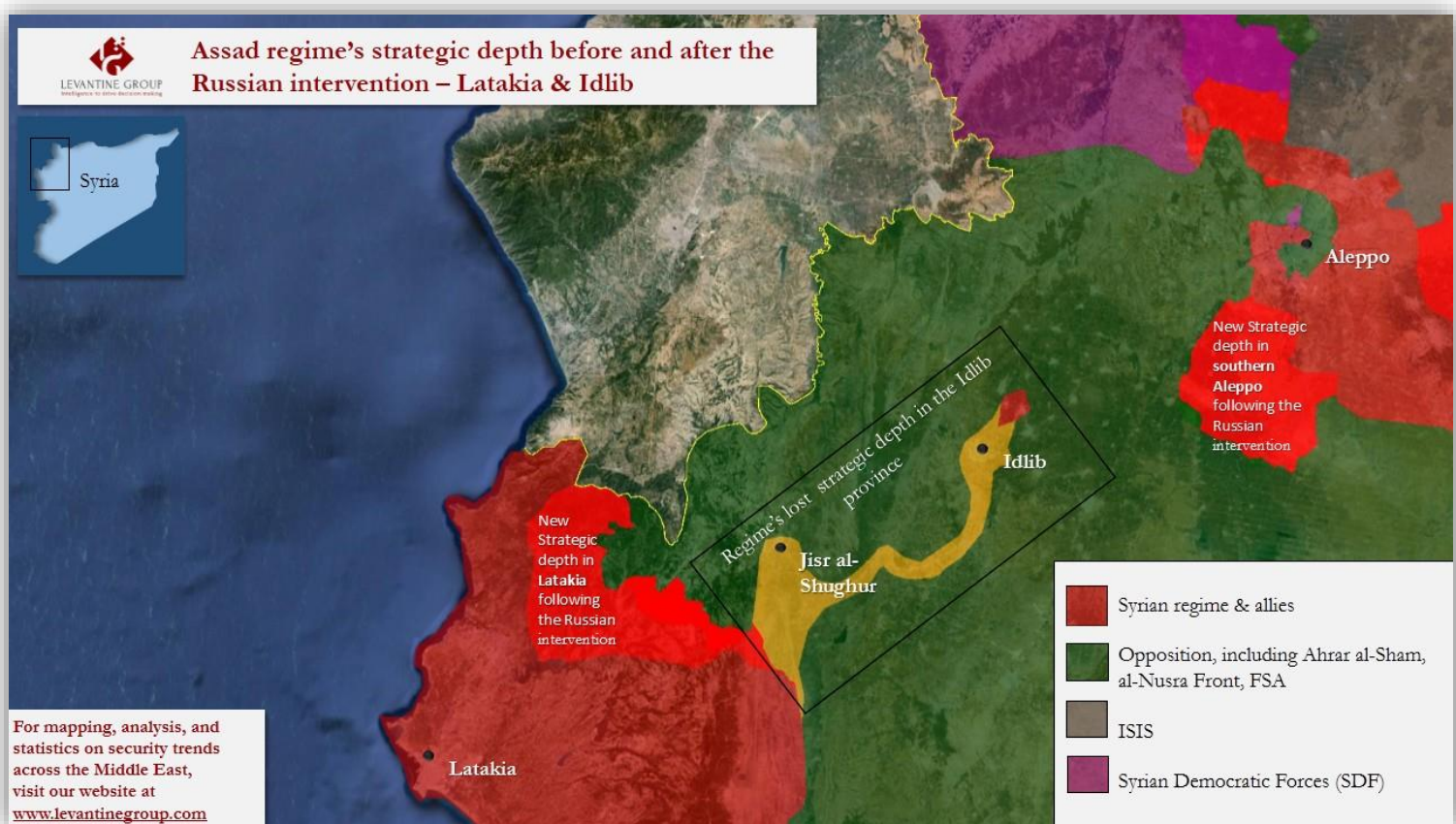
With a limited military force, Russia surprised most foreign powers involved directly and indirectly in the Syrian conflict both when it entered and later when it allegedly disengaged. By doing so, Moscow certainly left more questions than answers as to the result of this campaign: Are the gains made sustainable or do they need to be consolidated? Will the Russian "withdrawal" or, more precisely, its drawdown actually manifest in a reduction of operations over the coming months?

The fact is that Russia's success in creating a "strategic surprise" and the actual results of the intervention need to be analyzed in the broader context of Russia's apparent efforts to play a larger role in the region. The country's status as a major land power means that its attempt to both defend its naval assets and use quasi-unprecedented projection capabilities (including through what has become known as the "Syria express", its small but relatively efficient naval transport) is demonstrative of Moscow's new ambitions, a potential "Russia is back!" moment. The decision to engage in Syria also defied Western assessments that any external intervention would be swallowed by the conflict's complexity and see no net positive benefits for its undertaker.

This report is thus an attempt to gauge how – by what means and to what extent – the Russian intervention changed the course of the Syrian civil war. It will aim to address yet unanswered questions, including how it affected the proxy war that lays behind the conflict, and what Moscow's next course of action in the aftermath of its "withdrawal" may be. It is not, on the other hand, an attempt to assess the humanitarian or moral consequences of the intervention, of which there are many, with the exception of those that have clear geopolitical consequences.

Background: The military and political dynamic prior to Russia's intervention

The Russian intervention followed several notable defeats suffered by the Assad regime in the Idlib Province, namely, the loss of the provincial capital in March 2015, as well as the strategic towns of Jisr al-Shughur and Ariha in April and May 2015, respectively. While these were not critical to the regime's survival, the consolidation of the opposition's presence in the Idlib Province could have laid the ground for a broader attack against strategic areas either along the coast (including the Latakia Province where the Russian naval base of Tartus is situated), or eastward toward the city of Aleppo, "the mother of all battles". The defeat in Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur, while not fatal, meant the loss of the regime's strategic depth¹ in northwestern Syria, a strategic depth that Russia would later seek to reestablish. Similarly, the loss of Palmyra to the so-called "Islamic State" (hereafter ISIS) in May 2015 and the poor result of an Iranian-backed offensive in southern Syria raised doubts over the viability of Assad's strategy, which intended to keep advanced positions in all of the Syria's provinces. The losses also served as a wakeup call for Assad's allies: The tide was turning, and it was not in Assad's favor.



Strategic depth, in northwestern Syria, before and after the Russian intervention (as of April 2, 2016)

¹ Strategic depth refers to the distance any enemy would be required to cross in order to reach core centers of population, military, and industrial heartland, capital, etc.

Even more concerning for the regime was the shift within the opposition that led to the capture of Idlib and nearby cities: While opposition forces were plagued by their own diversity and inability to work together, the capture of Idlib was led by a new coalition of opposition forces branded the “Army of Conquest” (Jaish al-Fath). Notably, the coalition was spearheaded by the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front (hereafter “al-Nusra”) and the prominent Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham, previously known to be rivals. They attracted groups from the whole spectrum of opposition groups, from jihadist to what is generally referred to by Western media as “moderates”, who were suddenly able to efficiently work together. In that sense, the capture of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur validated a new model that was rapidly reproduced in other areas of Syria with more and less success. In Aleppo, a new coalition dubbed “The Conquest of Aleppo” (Fatah Halab) was created; in southern Syria the “Army of Conquest in Qalamoun”; while in Eastern Ghouta, located east of Damascus, calls by al-Nusra to create a similar coalition were unsuccessful.

“While the opposition was transitioning from a dysfunctional patchwork of militias toward a more efficient and cohesive force, the regime, conversely, was moving in precisely the opposite direction.”

The regime itself seemed to show signs of growing weakness and inner fragility. Most evident was the attrition faced by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA): Estimates showed that the SAA, which used to field as many as 300,000 soldiers, had withered down to just 150,000, with some lower estimates placing it at 80,000. Assad himself referred to such a manpower shortage in a July 2015 speech. The significant losses among Assad’s Alawite community, due to the regime’s distrust of the Sunni majority, was also the source of growing unrest

among Alawites, the religious minority that forms the core of Assad’s supporters. This resulted in heightened levels of draft evasion and sometimes immigration. In response, the regime looked to mobilize other minorities within Syria, such as the Druze community in the south, with little to no success. The weakening of Assad’s regular ground forces also led to the systematic use of “irregulars” and pro-government militias, some of them more loyal than others. The regime was becoming over reliant on these irregulars, including the powerful National Defense Forces (NDF, which was largely financed and sometimes trained by Iran), Iranian auxiliaries (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp, or IRGC’s Fatemiyoun Brigade comprised of primarily Afghan recruits and, to a lesser extent, the Zaynabiyoun Brigade made up of Pakistani recruits), Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, and the Lebanon-based Hezbollah group. As a consequence of such a clear dependence, the SAA appeared to have lost control over the battlefield, which in the long-term could have meant a shift in Assad’s strategy to prioritize Iran’s interests rather than that of the regime’s. In other words, while the opposition was transitioning from a dysfunctional patchwork of militias toward a more efficient and cohesive force, the regime, conversely, was moving in precisely the opposite direction.

Lastly, the murky Syrian deep-state also showed some signs of dissension and turbulence, with the unprecedented dismissal of Rustum Ghazaleh, the head of the Political Security Directorate, allegedly after a dispute with Lieutenant General Rafiq Shehadeh, the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, another of the four powerful intelligence agencies that used to control Syria. The dismissal, and later death of Ghazaleh, was followed by numerous and never confirmed rumors, some suggesting that the dispute was over Syria’s dependence on Iran. Shehadeh himself was later dismissed by Assad, after rumors emerged that an encounter

with Ghazaleh ended with Shehadeh's body guards beating up the former head of the Political Security Directorate to the point that Ghazaleh lost consciousness and later died. While the extent of the tensions within the Assad regime has never been confirmed (and probably never will), these were likely an additional source of concern.

Overall Russian strategic and tactical goals

The strategic & tactical goals* of the Russian intervention in Syria:

- **Strategic goal:** Protect naval assets in Tartus; maintain and expand Russian military presence in Syria
 - Push opposition forces out of the Latakia Province
 - Expand current military assets in Syria; reduce redeployment time for possible future operations
- **Strategic goal:** Ensure the viability of the Syrian regime; prevent the replacement of a strategic ally by a pro-Western/US government
 - Restore the regime's strategic depth in northwestern Syria
 - Shift the diplomatic dynamic to prepare for a more favorable outcome for the Assad regime
 - Weaken and divide Western-backed opposition forces: Sever ties between the various groups, as well as those between some of these groups and their foreign supporters
- **Strategic goal:** Solidify current alliances; act as a deterrent for any future attempts to forcibly disrupt Russia's key alliances by demonstrating Russia's projection capabilities and overall heightened military readiness
 - Increase overall battle-readiness: Decrease the time between the deployment phase and first military operations
 - Use multiple strategic military assets to showcase Russia's far-reach
 - Appear as a dependable and hence valuable ally
 - Maximize the effect of a tight-knit force while limiting the timeframe of the main operation and the risk of getting bogged down in a foreign country

*Assessed strategic and tactical goals as opposed to the official goals announced by Russia

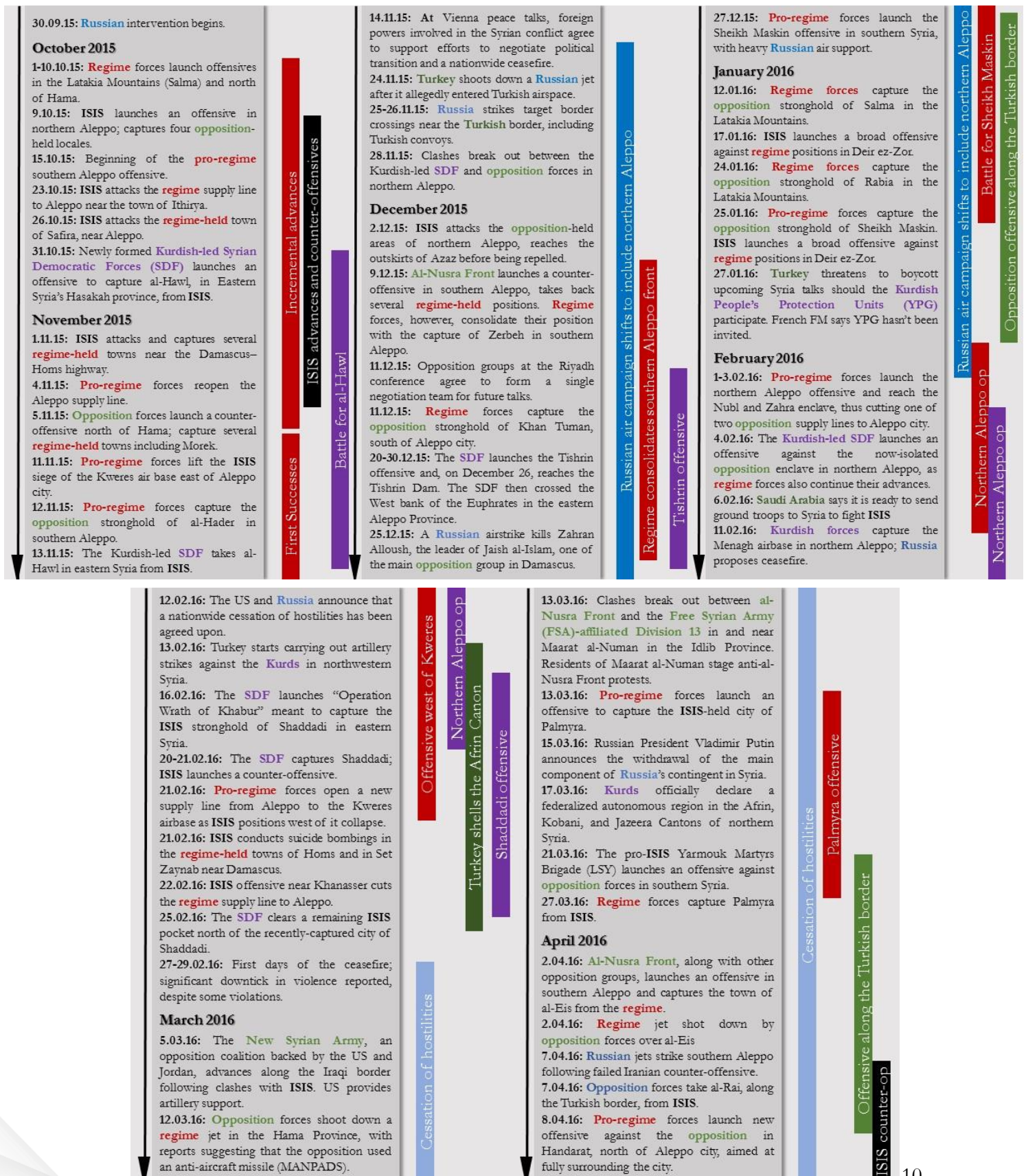
The main tactical goal of the Russian intervention was drawn from regime losses during the months that preceded it: Reestablish crucial buffer zones between the regime's adversaries and several key areas and communication lines held by the regime. In that sense, Russia did not seek to slowly roll over Syria, but rather to consolidate the regime's overall positions in order to counter-balance the gains by the opposition and ISIS during the previous year and a half. In other words, the Russian intervention was never meant to result in a military victory for Assad, but rather to make sure that Assad would never be defeated.

Aleppo and Latakia were, for different reasons, the focus of the Russian air campaign. The Syrian coast, namely, the provinces of Latakia and Tartus are both critical for Russian interests in light of the presence of the only Russian naval base in the Mediterranean Sea. From its inception to the recent conflict in Ukraine, Russia has always been drawn to intervene forcefully when its maritime access was threatened. The two provinces are also the backbone of the Syrian economy and the home base of the Alawite community, which represents Assad's main base of support. The Russian air force thus immediately focused on the opposition rather than ISIS (see [Appendix 4 – Map of Russian airstrikes, October 2015](#)), given their presence in the Latakia and Tartus Provinces. As a result, hours after Putin's statement in front of the UN and pledge to fight ISIS, Russian warplanes were seen striking opposition forces.

The Russian military particularly focused on the opposition's supply and communication lines, main strongholds, and strategic entry points to the various fronts, such as Aleppo city, the Latakia Mountains, and the northern Hama Province/southern Idlib Province. This strategy took several months to fully impact the opposition, largely because the Syrian military wasn't combat ready and needed to be revitalized. Moreover, the opposition still possessed a large stockpile of advanced anti-tank missiles that proved deadly to advancing regime forces, but later dried up. A series of ISIS counter-offensives against particularly weak points along the regime's fragile supply line to Aleppo and, to a lesser extent, a similar counter-offensive near the Homs–Damascus Highway, also contributed to hinder regime advances. Yet, coupled with a massive influx of Iranian-backed foreign forces, Russia's focus ultimately did significantly affect the ability of the opposition to react to the regime's offensive.

The course of the Russian intervention

Timeline: Main incidents



Deployment: Factors behind Russia's strategic surprise

For most actors directly or indirectly involved in the Syrian war, the deployment of the Russian military to Syria during the month of September 2015 came as a strategic surprise. The West was seemingly stunned by the ease with which Russia secretly planned and, in relatively orderly manner, implemented its decision to intervene. A week after the intervention, the Select Committee on Intelligence of both the US House of Representatives and Senate launched an investigation into intelligence gaps that caused the failure to anticipate Russia's intervention and correctly gauge its scope. Western diplomatic sources that Levantine Group spoke to in the aftermath of the Russian intervention also expressed their genuine surprise. The reasons behind the West's failure to predict Russia's plans are indeed interesting; however, it is the factors behind Russia's *ability* to surprise them and quickly deploy to Syria that are more important to this subject and the Syrian civil war more generally.

The Russian military engaged in significant reforms during the past decade that have largely improved its flexibility, coordination, and projection capabilities. While most analyses have focused on the military equipment used during the operation, which indeed showed the use of modern equipment (see below) and precision-guided munitions (but also mostly outdated aircrafts and dumb bombs), it's the shift in the very core of the Russian military that explains Putin's ability to dispatch its expeditionary force so rapidly.

"Russia had, without firing one single missile, accomplished two of its goals: Appear as a dependable ally and demonstrate its overall military readiness and projection capabilities."



A [three-step](#) reform plan, which stemmed from the relatively poor performance and inability to swiftly advance toward Tbilisi during the Georgia intervention in 2008, significantly improved the Russian military's "speed", versatility, and ability to coordinate between various units. Among others, the reform led to a significant reduction in the number of officers, sometimes misinterpreted as a sign of weakness; the creation of an equivalent to the Western concept of Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs, often referred to as the backbone of the US military); higher salaries and education for the remaining officers; as well as more coherent military units that are not reliant on time-costly mobilization, which would defeat the purpose of mounting discreet operations.

This particularly fits the needs created by Russia's military [doctrine](#) of "aggressive defense", which sees Russia's increasingly willingness to operate beyond its traditional borders to protect its interests. In that sense, the intervention in Syria was better than any major exercise the country could organize, and served a far greater purpose than simply saving Assad: After the war in Ukraine, it proved that Russia was able and willing to intervene overseas, and could swiftly use its naval assets. This is significant even within the scope of Russian history, given its overreliance on railway to mobilize its military, as well as the fact that, and particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union, it is generally seen as a land power with limited projection capacities at best. In that sense, Russia was returned to the world scene in an almost physical way. Beyond that, at the very beginning of the operation Russia had, without firing a single missile, accomplished two of its goals: Appear as a dependable ally and demonstrate its overall military readiness and projection capabilities.

The KSO: The elite within the elite

Along with these reforms, the creation of the **Special Operations Command (KSO)** Headquarters, which became operational in 2013 and was battle-tested in 2014 following the capture of Crimea, also played an important role and demonstrated efforts to better use special forces. The creation of the KSO, largely inspired by other structures in the US, UK, France, and Germany, led to the centralization of transportation, intelligence, and fighting capabilities into one entity able to coordinate with other branches of the Ministry of Defense via the Senezh special-purpose center, which answers directly to the minister. Units under the KSO have been made independent, with their own SIGINT (signal intelligence) capacities and dedicated transports. The KSO also stemmed from an effort to recreate a small (less than one thousand soldiers) elite force within the Russian military separated from the massive Spetsnaz units (more than 10,000).

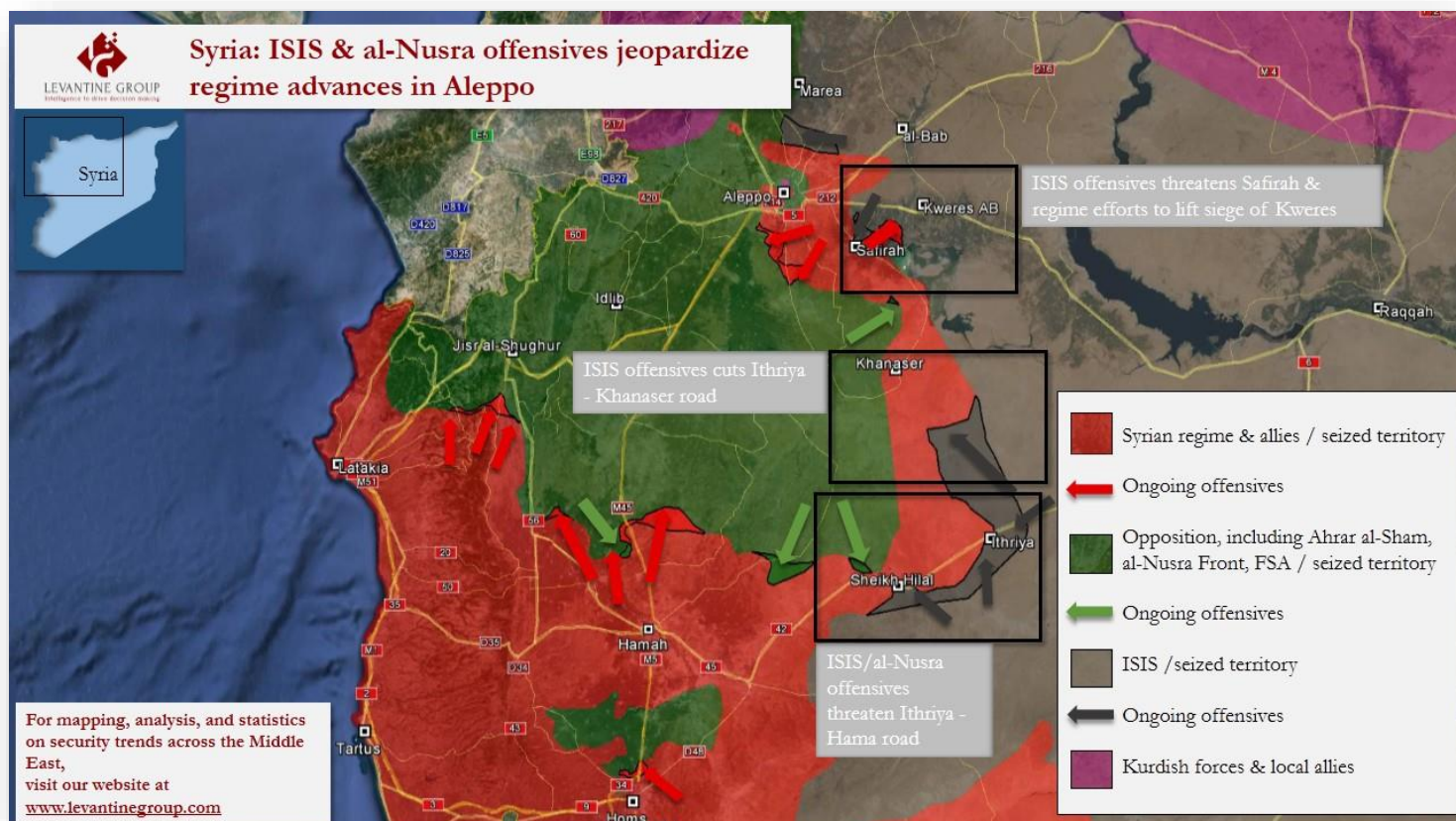
First month of the Russian intervention (October 2015): Incremental advances

The Russian intervention almost immediately revitalized regime forces and changed the dynamic of the Syrian conflict, with the regime launching several offensives in northwestern Syria, particularly in the Latakia, Hama, Idlib, Homs, and southern Aleppo Provinces. The arrival of Russian warplanes and show of force were cheered in the coastal cities that are the backbone of the regime's support. On the various front lines, however, the situation was different: Although the regime was indeed on the offensive, these were costly and incremental that also demonstrated the fragility of the SAA. The number of SAA armored vehicles destroyed by advanced tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) anti-tank missiles skyrocketed, almost all of which were documented on [YouTube](#) in a likely effort to convince suppliers of their efficiency (see [Appendix 3: TOW Missile launches](#)).

The offensives in the Latakia Mountains, south of Jisr al-Shughur in the Idlib Province, as well as in the opposition enclave between Homs and Hama, were particularly unsuccessful. In Latakia, the regime managed to draw closer to the strategic city of Salma by taking Kafr Dublah, yet was rapidly bogged down in this particularly difficult mix of urban and mountainous terrain.

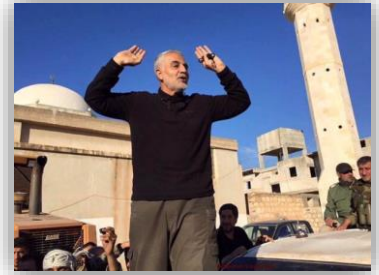
Russian Ballistic Missiles: A message to NATO

In addition to the rounds of airstrikes, which showcased Russia's increased logistical capacities, 26 **ballistic missiles** were launched from the Caspian flotilla allegedly toward ISIS-held territories (some of them landing in Iran, others in opposition-held areas of Aleppo). The ballistic missile launches were part of the broader attempt to showcase Russia's ability to breach its perimeter and strike deep within enemy territory, in what was a rather clear message to NATO.



ISIS & al-Nusra Front offensive against the regime supply line to Aleppo (map [released](#) on October 27, 2015)

The regime had more success in its offensive north of Hama, taking several towns, including the village of Atshan, and setting up a heavy firing position in the village of Morek. More importantly, in southern Aleppo, an offensive spearheaded by Iran and Iranian-backed forces managed to disrupt the opposition's defensive lines and reach the outskirts of the opposition stronghold of al-Hader, albeit at high human cost for Iranian forces. Here also, Russia's air force and Iranian ground forces demonstrated their ability to work together, underscoring the establishment of efficient coordination structures.



IRGC-QF General Qassem Suleimani gives a speech in al-Hader

Yet Assad's inability to defend these new territories at a time of greater military stress would be later exploited by his adversaries, and serve as a persistent weakness. In an attempt to disrupt the pro-regime offensive toward the then-besieged Kweres air base, ISIS launched a broad offensive against the fragile regime supply line to Aleppo near the regime-held city of Ithriya, and later toward the strategic town of Safirah, an important node along the road and the home of significant military infrastructure. The opposition itself participated in this offensive, with the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front and its ally threatening to cut the supply line near Sheikh Hilal. This offensive ultimately did hinder regime operations in the area, with forces redeployed from other fronts in order to reopen the road.

November 2015: Expansion and first strategic successes

The month of November saw the regime's first success. The deployment of significant Iranian reinforcements, including the IRGC Quds Force's General Qassem Suleimani, along with Iraqi Shiite militiamen enabled the continuation of several offensives in the Aleppo Province. More than a week after it was initially captured by ISIS, the supply line to Aleppo was reopened following clashes with the militant group and intervention by the pro-regime Palestinian militia, Liwa al-Quds. Despite the ISIS offensive, likely meant to disrupt another ongoing offensive toward the Kweres air base, which threatened to sever an important ISIS line of communications, the pro-regime forces continued to push toward the besieged base. On November 11, the first regime units broke the ISIS's last line of defense in the area and reached the air base. Beyond the symbolism of the success, which served to revitalize the regime and its core base of support, the regime gained a new buffer zone in eastern Aleppo, shut the Raqqa-Aleppo highway to ISIS, and acquired a potential launching pad for attacks against the ISIS stronghold of al-Bab, an important chokepoint near the Turkish border.

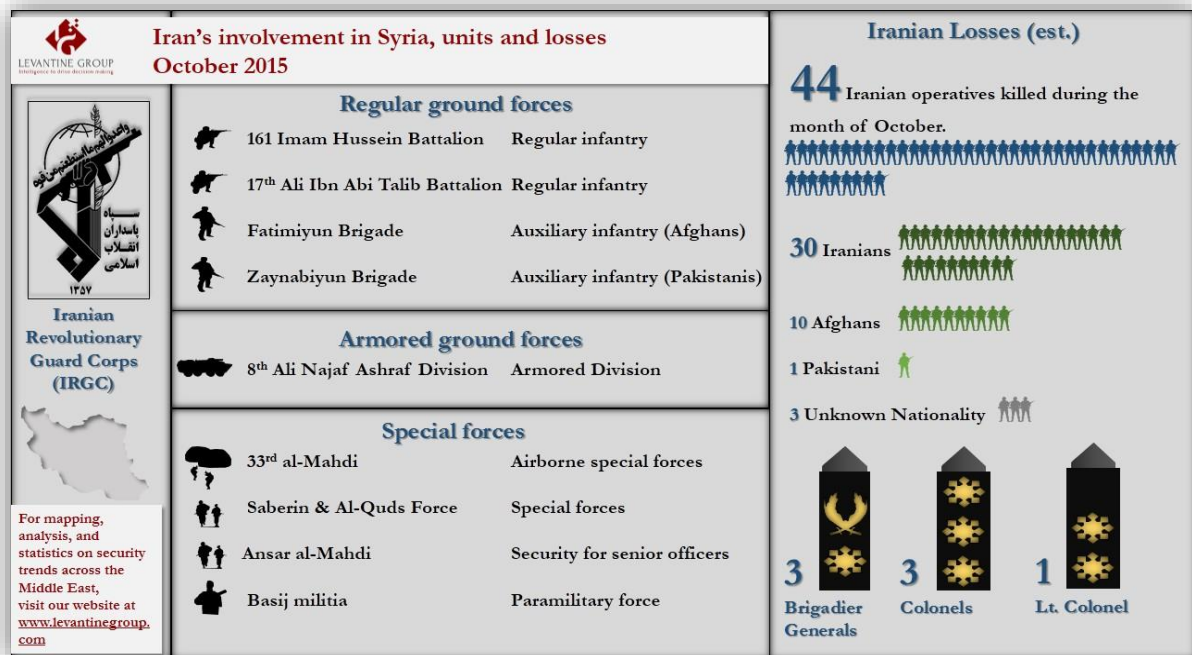
"The southern Aleppo offensive and subsequent Iranian losses also showed just how much Iran was committed to Assad's survival."

The city was one of the main strongholds of the opposition, located along the strategic M5 highway and used as a communications line between the provinces of Aleppo, Idlib and northern Hama. During the weeks that followed, an additional offensive along the highway secured a new line of defense despite a counter-offensive led by al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham. Like the Kweres offensive, the one in southern Aleppo both served to broaden the

A day later, on November 12, the city of al-Hader in southern Aleppo was captured by an Iranian-led force.

regime's strategic depth while opening the door for new, long term possible operations, such as a broader offensive toward the besieged Shiite villages of Fuah and Kafraya north of Idlib. The southern Aleppo offensive and subsequent Iranian losses also showed just how much Iran was committed to Assad's survival. During the months of October and November, Iranian officers were killed at an almost unprecedented rate and included senior figures like Hossein Hamdani, a high-ranking IRGC member who helped plan the southern Aleppo offensive.

Despite these successes, to this day the pro-regime camp continues to be plagued by its inability to defend both the territories captured and those already held. While its offensive capacities have been boosted by Russia's air force and artillery, as well as the deployment of Iranian-backed ground forces, the manpower issue within the SAA remains a major challenge when it comes to Assad's defensive capabilities. An opposition offensive north of Hama that recaptured most of the territories seized in October 2015, along with ISIS's counter-offensive in the central Homs Province, show that, while regime achieves gains, albeit at a heavy human and material cost, they can also be swiftly reversed.



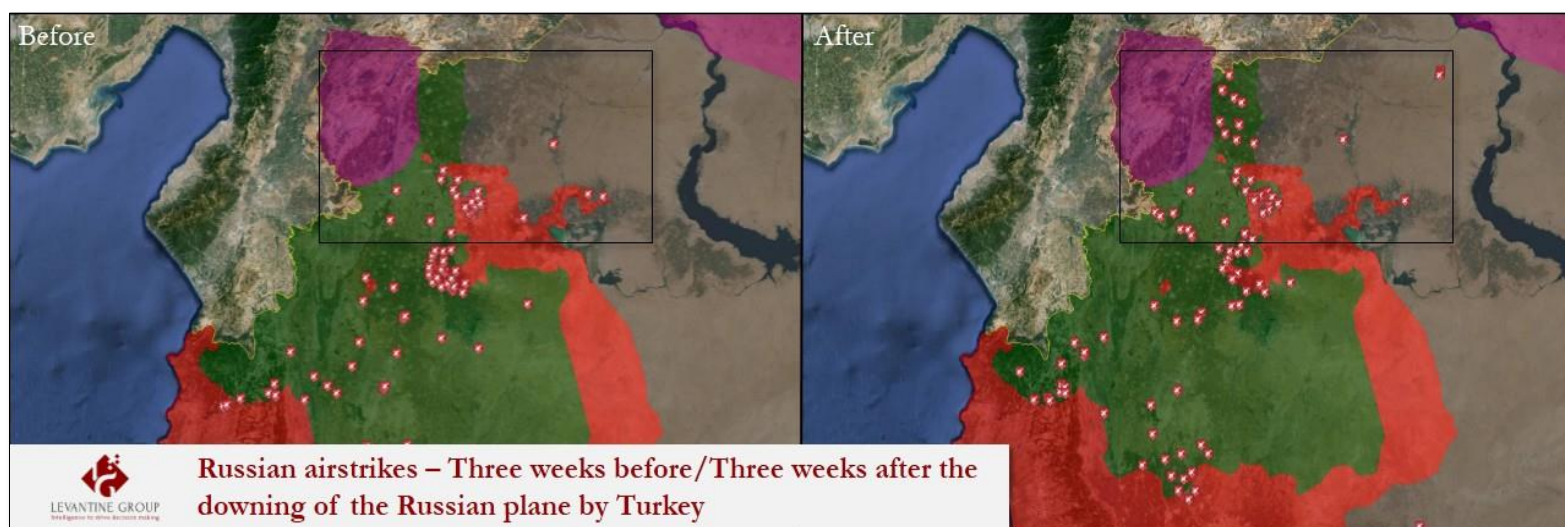
Turkey's downing of the Russian fighter jet

On November 24, a Turkish F-16 shot a Russian Sukhoi 24M that was flying near the border between Turkey and Syria. Turkey claimed that the Russian warplane was warned multiple times after it crossed the border with Syria, while the Russian Ministry of Defense denies that the aircraft entered Turkish airspace. The downing of a warplane by Turkey on November 24, 2015 likely came as a surprise to Moscow. Regardless of whether the plane indeed entered Turkish airspace, the decision to shoot down the plane showed that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was prepared to take incredible risks to hinder the advances of pro-regime forces in northwestern Syria. This would be remembered by Russian President Vladimir Putin later during the intervention, when rumors emerged regarding a possible Turkish intervention.

The downing came as pro-regime forces were advancing in the Latakia Mountains along the Turkish border. Progress was slow, but any advancement in this particularly rough terrain was significant. The plight of the Turkmen, a Turkic minority living in the Latakia Mountains area, may also have played a role, while the cutting of smuggling routes in the area was another concern for Turkey.

“Down the line, the shooting down of the Russian jet sealed the fate of the opposition in northern Aleppo by encouraging a local alliance between the Kurds and Russia”

Regardless, the gamble proved disastrous for the Turkish-backed opposition and accelerated the weakening of these forces, particularly in northern Aleppo. While Russia avoided a direct confrontation with a NATO member in Syria, it responded in another way by dramatically expanding its aerial operation to northern Aleppo. Far from deterring Russian warplanes from bombing opposition-held territories and border crossings, the downing of the jet did the opposite, triggering intense airstrikes on the opposition-held border crossings in northern Idlib and Aleppo, meters away from the Turkish border. More importantly, the incident either led to or accelerated the formation of de facto alliance between the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Russia, as Russian warplanes began systematically bombing the Azaz corridor – the vital supply line that runs from Turkey to the disputed city of Aleppo – in support of a Kurdish-led offensive against the opposition.



Russian airstrikes three weeks before / after the downing of the Russian jet (territory shown as of November 24, 2015)

In other words, the shooting down of the Russian jet sealed the fate of the opposition in northern Aleppo by encouraging a local alliance between the Kurds and Russia. Turkey also used its likely one-time “get out of jail free” card, as another similar incident would most probably anger its NATO partners. In Syria itself, each group in northern Aleppo was now targeting the Turkish-backed opposition. Such a dire situation left little alternatives for Turkey: Ankara either had to pass, leaving the opposition to its fate, or go all in, that is, directly intervene in Syria to back its allies within the opposition.

December 2015: Consolidation of regime advances, preparation of future key operation

The month of December saw the consolidation of regime gains in southern Aleppo with the capture of an additional swath of land along the M5 highway. The opposition, however, launched a counter-offensive that hindered regime progress, while pro-regime forces also encountered staunch resistance in the Khan Tuman village, which it had been attacking for weeks.

The Russian air campaign intensified in northern Aleppo where clashes continued to be reported between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and other opposition groups, despite attempts to broker a ceasefire. In addition to such clashes, the opposition was confronted with an ISIS offensive along the Turkish border. The militant group saw the weakening of the opposition as an opportunity to make up for its loss of part of the Turkish border during the past months, which followed a Kurdish offensive that led to the successful capture of Tel Abyad. During the jihadist offensive, ISIS almost reached the strategic town of Azaz, which controls the border with Turkey, prior to being pushed back. While both the SDF and ISIS offensives did not result in the complete collapse of these opposition forces, they contributed to the weakening of their defensive lines in the area.

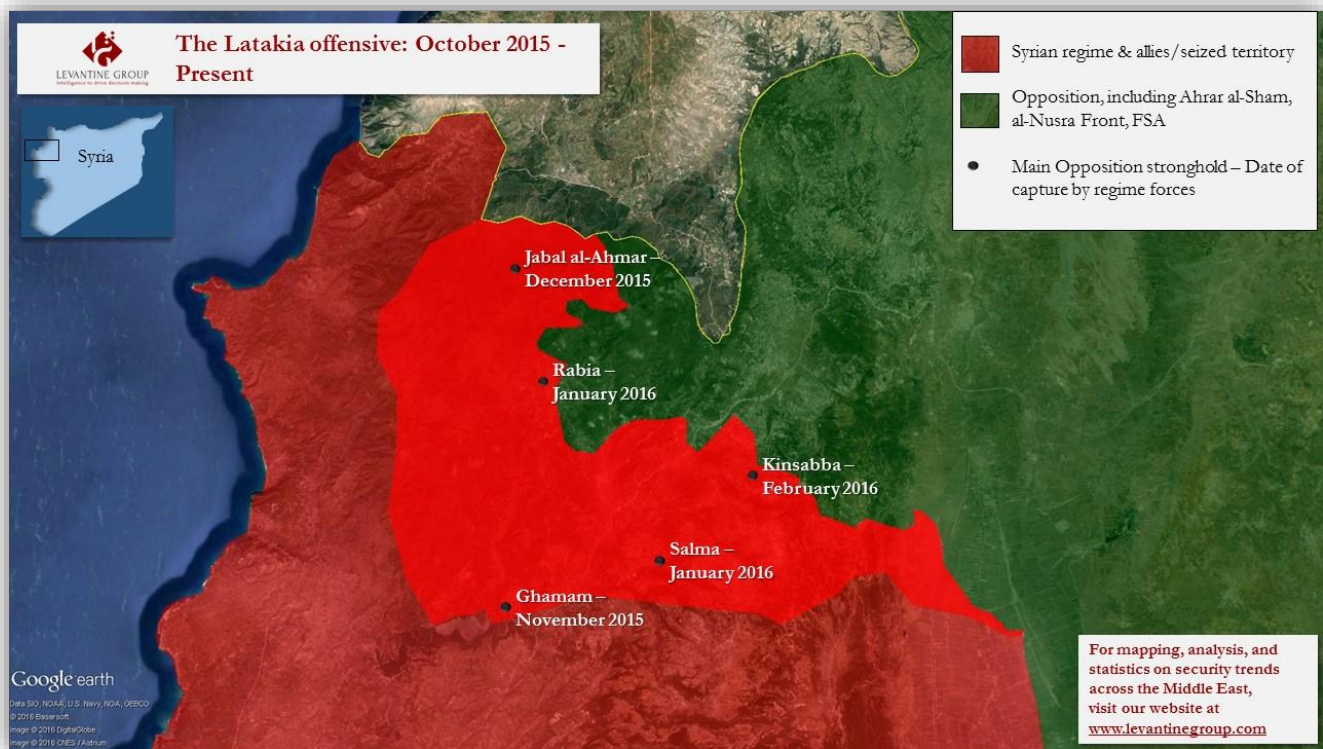
At the end of the month, the launch of the Tishrin offensive by the SDF that led to the capture of ISIS-held territories south of Ain Issa, along with the Tishrin Dam and some territory west of the Euphrates, further raised concerns among the opposition (and Turkey) that the Kurds are seeking to create a single autonomous entity from northwestern Aleppo to Hasakah. This places the aforementioned clashes between the SDF and opposition forces in northwestern Aleppo in a different context: Rather than resulting from localized tensions, they stemmed from a broader effort to link Kurdish territories, a long-term goal that increasingly seemed within the Kurds' grasp. Albeit indirectly, Russia did support the SDF advance west of the Euphrates with a series of airstrikes against the ISIS-held city of Manbij, while the US provided close air support to the offensive. The move was likely also meant to encourage such an attack on Manbij and infuriate the Ankara, which was already showing signs of discontent following the Tishrin offensive. The entry of a new actor in eastern Aleppo also set the stage for the upcoming "race for northern Aleppo" (see [Appendix 5](#)) that saw three rival forces, namely, the SDF, the opposition, and the regime, compete for the ISIS-held parts of the Turkish border in northern Aleppo. This race also weakened the opposition, which, likely at Turkey's demand, attempted to push through ISIS's defense at a time when it should have preserved its strength for what was coming.

Diplomatic efforts

During the months of December and November, diplomatic efforts to end the Syrian conflict significantly increased. In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, the Vienna conference on November 14 led to the signing of a final declaration supporting a political process, which includes the resumption of talks, the formation of an interim unity government, and elections within 18 months. More importantly, the conference saw both the opposition and the regime's foreign allies sitting at the same table, representing an acknowledgement that **the Syrian civil war cannot be resolved without a parallel effort to tackle the Syrian proxy war** between several Middle Eastern countries. In December, these diplomatic efforts led to the regime's acceptance of the talks, a UN endorsement of a road map for a peace process in Syria set to start in January, and the creation of a new opposition negotiation team following a conference in Riyadh.

January – February 26, 2016: The tipping point

The Latakia offensive

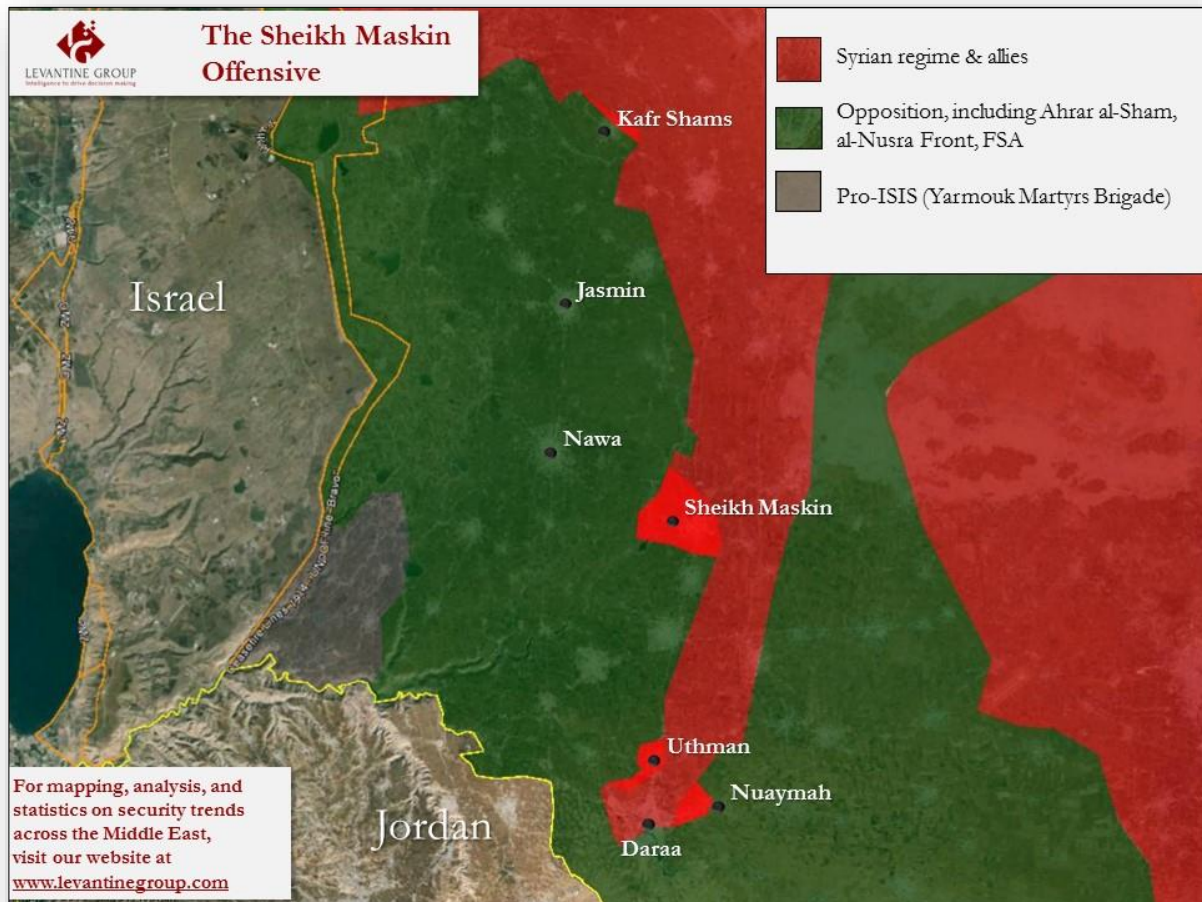


The Latakia offensive (as of April 2, 2016)

While the regime did achieve some tactical successes during the first three months of the Russian intervention, it was events in January and February that significantly tipped the balance in Assad's favor, largely in northern Aleppo and in Latakia, but also in southern Syria. In Latakia, while advances had thus far been incremental, the capture of the opposition stronghold of Salma sealed the latter's fate. The opposition had thus far managed to relatively successfully maintain its defensive lines in the Latakia Mountains, with the exception of Ghamam, despite daily Russian airstrikes and heavy artillery fire by pro-regime forces. However, the launching of a two-pronged offensive, both against the opposition supply line along the Turkish border and the main defensive line near Salma, proved fatal. A notable decline in TOW missile launches (see [Appendix 3: Tow Missile launches](#)) despite the threat posed by the offensive suggests that the Russian bombardment of opposition supply lines were successful, or that there was a decrease in foreign support, or both. With regard to the latter, some opposition sources claimed that the US may have been attempting to pressure the opposition into participating to the Geneva talks, which continued to be delayed.

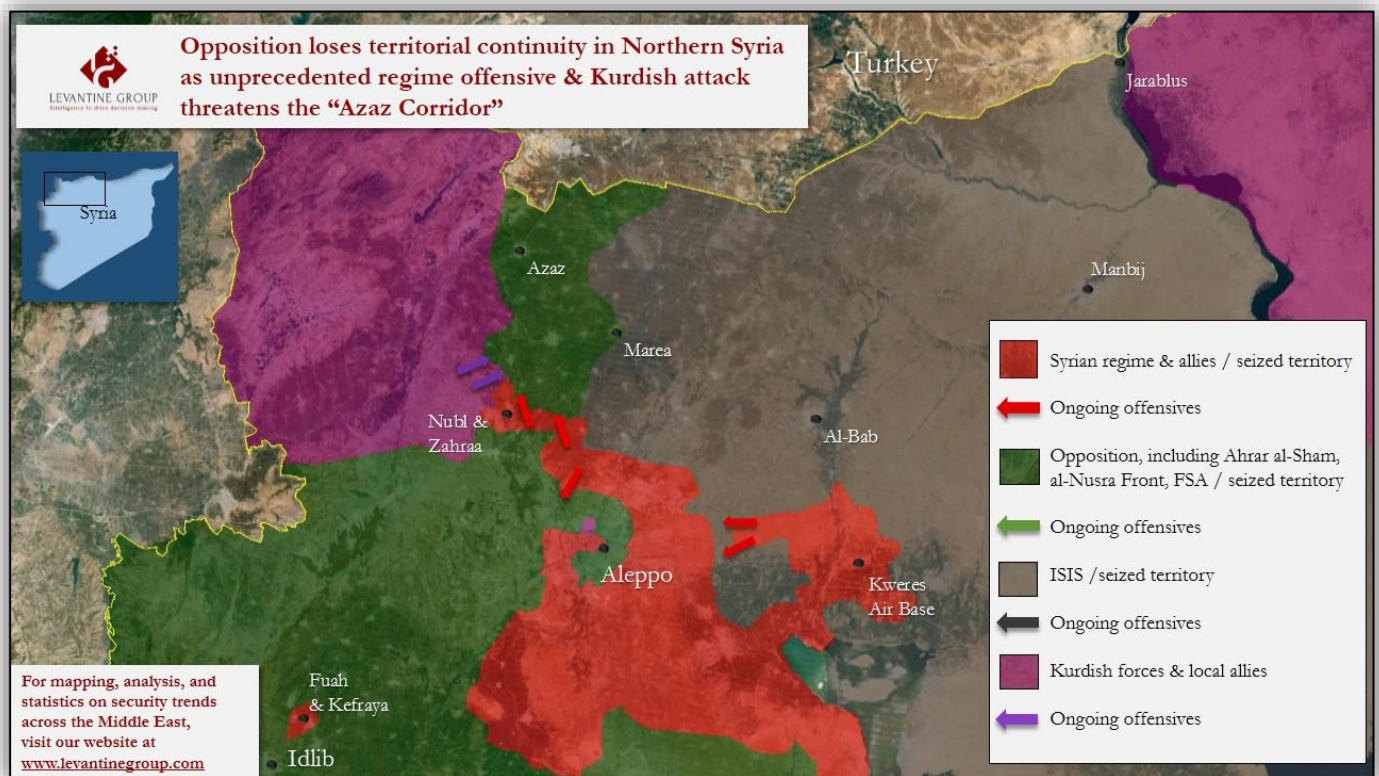
Regardless, the fall of Salma considerably weakened the opposition's defensive line and was followed by the taking of Rabia, the main opposition command center deep within the Latakia Mountains. While more than three months separated the taking Ghamam from the capture of Salma (both important defensive positions in Latakia), only two weeks separated loss of Salma from that of Rabia, hinting at a broader military collapse of the opposition in the area.

The Sheikh Maskin offensive



The Sheikh Maskin offensive (as of April 2, 2016)

Launched in December, the battle for the strategic town of Sheikh Maskin in southern Syria ended with the regime's capture of the city on January 25. This offensive was part of a broader effort to both secure the narrow supply line to the disputed city of Daraa and push toward the Israeli and, more importantly, the Jordanian borders. Despite heavy Russian airstrikes, several weeks of intense fighting were required in order to retake the city, underscoring the opposition's relative strength there, where it could count on Jordanian support while also taking advantage of its unique geographic position at the Syria-Jordan-Israel border triangle. The Sheikh Maskin offensive further demonstrated the value of Russian air support, given that it came after a previous 2014 offensive spearheaded by Hezbollah that failed to capture the city. Yet it also simultaneously highlighted the decreased effectiveness of pro-regime forces and allies in this area. Offensives in other areas of Syria proved to be much more fruitful, likely explaining why Russia rapidly shifted its attention to northern Aleppo instead of directing its attention to the Daraa Province.



Northern Aleppo offensive (map [released](#) on February 4, 2016)

The northern Aleppo offensive

The northern Aleppo offensive from February 2-3 represented the most decisive Russian-backed victory in Syria and was most probably in the works since the beginning of the intervention. In fact, the idea behind the operation was simple and had already been attempted previously by the regime, albeit unsuccessfully: Cut the opposition’s main supply line from Turkey to Aleppo (through the “Azaz corridor”) by linking the regime-held territories in northern Aleppo to the regime enclave of Nubl and Zahra. In a similar manner to the southern Aleppo offensive, the ground component of the one in northern Aleppo was largely comprised of Iranian units (the Fatimiyun Brigade) and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.

Despite a significant uptick in TOW missile launches (see [Appendix 3](#)), the weakened opposition defensive lines collapsed and regime forces were able to rapidly reach the enclave of Nubl and Zahra. A day later, the Kurdish-led SDF launched its own offensive, north of the Nubl and Zahra enclaves, and were also able to relatively rapidly arrive at the town of Tal Rifat in northern Aleppo. Thus, not only did lifting the siege of Nubl and Zahra allow the regime achieve another of those symbolic victories that served to revitalize its core supporters (note, however, that they were not fully surrounded by opposition forces), it also significantly increased its leverage: With Aleppo almost surrounded, the collapse of any ceasefire agreement or negotiations could lead to a new regime offensive capable of turning the “mother of all battles” (Aleppo) into the opposition’s most crushing defeat, given Aleppo’s centrality to the Syrian revolution.

February – March 2016: Stabilization of the conflict; Russian “withdrawal”

The swift defeat of the opposition in northern Aleppo made waves in the capitals of their foreign backers, particularly in Ankara, Riyadh, and, to a lesser extent, Amman. While the victory was indeed the most blatant sign that Russia’s intervention changed the course of the conflict, it also made drastic moves by those foreign powers more likely: Half-measures, such as an increase in Turkish artillery support against both ISIS and the SDF, were unlikely to shift the current trajectory in favor of the opposition. For Turkey and Saudi Arabia, it was time to either back down or pursue a broader intervention, either by allowing the opposition access to game-changing weapons, such as man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) or by direct on-the-ground intervention. For Turkey, the Syrian conflict had by now transformed from a nearby but external issue to one that bordered on domestic, due to the uptick in attacks by both ISIS and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) as well as the rise in violence in the southeastern parts of the country. Backing down did not seem like an option for Erdogan, yet an intervention was also a risky adventure, particularly with Russian planes and anti-aircraft missiles still monitoring the skies of Syria. Rumors, indeed, increased over the possibility of a broader Syrian intervention with involvement by multiple countries, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Jordan. The timing of these rumors clearly indicated that, while the intervention was portrayed as an anti-ISIS offensive, its main goal would be to alleviate the pressure placed

“The proxy war behind the Syrian conflict was at a breaking point and had to either enter a new, more stable phase or turn more violent and dangerous, which could jeopardize advances by the Russian-backed regime.”

Al-Nusra threatened by the ceasefire?

Amid a wave of anti-regime protests across opposition-held cities in Syria, tensions notably increased between the Free Syrian Army (FSA)-affiliated “Division 13” and the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front. Initially, tensions stemmed from al-Nusra’s attempt to limit protests involving revolutionary flags during the ceasefire. The group may also have felt generally threatened by demands coming from local residents, who requested that the group leave several of its positions in various Syrian cities, so as to prevent Russia from bombing the city (al-Nusra, by virtue of its affiliation, was not party to the cessation of hostilities). Overnight on March 12-13, these tensions turned into clashes between Division 13 and al-Nusra, with conflicting reports regarding the true trigger for the violence. This incident, although localized, shed light onto the limitations of al-Nusra’s entrenchment within the Syrian population. It also revealed that the group draws most of its legitimacy from its efficiency on the various Syrian battle fronts, and may thus be threatened by any attempts to lower the overall levels of violence.

on opposition supply lines in southern and northern Syria. And although the prospect of having Turkish or Saudi soldiers fighting in Syria with the Russian air force over their heads seemed almost unthinkable, Putin must have remembered that, a few months earlier, the downing of one of his jets by Turkey also seemed quite inconceivable. The proxy war behind the Syrian conflict was at a breaking point and had to either enter a new, more stable phase or turn more violent and dangerous, which could jeopardize advances made by the Russian-backed regime.

On an even broader level, crushing the opposition would lower Russia’s bargaining power and ability to use the Syrian conflict as a playing card in its global confrontation with the West. For the first time, Russia’s interests and those of Assad and Iran seemed to have diverged. For Assad and Iran, providing the opposition with the coup de grâce was a no-brainer, despite the risk of provoking [further] foreign intervention. On the other hand, Putin realized that defeating the opposition would diminish its ability to use Syria as leverage in other crises to establish Russia as an essential partner in the region.

These elements, alongside the fact that Russia clearly accomplished most of its objectives, likely explains Moscow's willingness to engage in negotiations with the US and others regarding a potential ceasefire, its overall respect of the truce, as well as the surprising announcement of its withdrawal. Turkey and Saudi Arabia's threats may have been a bluff, but Russia had no interest in calling them out at the risk of actually forcing their reluctant hands. Conversely, a deescalation and increased diplomatic efforts would, at little cost, allow Russia to deflect mounting international pressure, offer a much-needed alternative path to the opposition's backers, and show that Russia was now dictating the tempo of the Syrian civil war. The ceasefire, which began on February 26, further enabled the launch of an offensive toward the ISIS-held city of Palmyra: By retasking forces initially deployed in Aleppo to the eastern and central Homs Province, pro-regime forces managed to both advance toward the symbolic city and prevent ISIS from launching one of its typical counter-offensives from the city of al-Qaryatayn, which was later also captured.

“The Palmyra victory successfully placed Western governments in the uncomfortable position of either staying suspiciously quiet or awkwardly acknowledging the victory and congratulating the Syrian regime.”

The capture of Palmyra in March 2016 was more of a public relations victory than a military one: Although the city could indeed serve as a launching pad for a broader offensive toward ISIS's heartland, namely the cities of Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor, its real value was the diplomatic and symbolic impact its capture was likely to achieve. Success in retaking the ancient city from a militant group that so clearly sought to destroy it portrayed Assad as the defender of Syrian heritage and conveniently drew a veil over his initial failure to defend the city, with minimal defense put up a year before, as well as the fact that the Russian campaign had primarily focused on the opposition rather than ISIS. The Palmyra victory successfully placed Western governments in the uncomfortable position of either staying suspiciously quiet or awkwardly acknowledging the victory and congratulating the Syrian regime.

The Results of the Russian intervention

Strategic goals

The strategic & tactical goals of the Russian intervention in Syria:

- ☑ **Strategic goal:** Protect naval assets in Tartus, maintain and expand Russian military presence in Syria
 - Push opposition forces out of the Latakia Province
 - Expand current military assets in Syria; reduce redeployment time for possible future operations

- ? **Strategic goal:** Ensure the viability of the Syrian regime; prevent the replacement of a strategic ally by a pro-Western/US government
 - Restore the regime's strategic depth in northwestern Syria
 - Shift the diplomatic dynamic to prepare for a more favorable outcome for the Assad regime
 - Weaken and divide Western-backed opposition forces: Sever ties between the various groups, as well as those between some of these groups and their foreign supporters

- ☑ **Strategic goal:** Solidify current alliances; act as a deterrent for any future attempts to forcibly disrupt Russia's key alliances by demonstrating Russia's projection capabilities and overall heightened military readiness
 - Increase overall battle-readiness: Decrease the time between the deployment phase and first military operations
 - Use multiple strategic military assets to showcase Russia's far-reach
 - Appear as a dependable and hence valuable ally
 - Maximize the effect of a tight-knit force while limiting the timeframe of the main operation and the risk of getting bogged down in a foreign country

Looking at each of the [strategic goals](#) mentioned at the beginning of this document, it is clear that at least two (the first and third) have been successfully achieved. The Latakia offensive largely secured Russian military assets in Syria, while the expansion of the Hmeimim air base south of Latakia city makes it possible for Moscow to easily redeploy a significant force in a matter of days, if not hours, to the heart of the Middle East. The Russian "withdrawal" in that sense could never have meant a full withdrawal of its military force, as the intervention was, at its core, an attempt to preserve its military presence in Syria. Similarly, Russia drastically consolidated its alliance with Assad by significantly increasing its leverage with Damascus. Putin can now, at any time, threaten to withdraw its valuable support, should Assad prove to be an unreliable client state.

"Putin did exactly what he came in to do: He saved Assad from the very real possibility of a military defeat, no more, no less. The gap between this goal and guaranteeing the regime's future is wide."

As such, Russia has become an indispensable powerbroker in Syria. Beyond that and much like the intervention in Ukraine, except on a global level, the entry into Syria sent a signal that the Kremlin's threats are never empty. However, this hides what should be quite obvious, namely, the fact that Russia is no

superpower and cannot be operating at this scale in multiple theaters at once. In addition, and while it can hardly be described as a strategic objective, the fact that Syria did not become Russia's Vietnam or a new Afghanistan can itself be considered a success: Although much of the US political and military establishment warned - and somehow found comfort - in the very real possibility that Russia would get bogged down in Syria, the official withdrawal and the fact that Russia has, in fact, limited its military activities following the announcement proves them wrong.

On the other hand, the completion of the second strategic goal regarding the regime's survivability remains in question. In the short term, Assad, with Russia and Iran's support, was certainly able to shift the dynamic from a slowly-but-surely loss to a more offensive position. Yet, the Russian intervention does not by itself ensure Assad's long-term future. If that was the goal, Aleppo would surely have been surrounded by now, with Russian airstrikes supporting an offensive to retake the city. In a sense, Putin did exactly what he came in to do: He saved Assad from the very real possibility of a military defeat, no more, no less. The gap between this goal and guaranteeing the regime's survival in the longer-term is wide.

On the military level, the northern Aleppo offensive marks the regime's most significant advance and will serve as essential leverage in any future negotiations. Yet beyond that, the Kweres and Latakia offensives, along with the capture of Palmyra, were largely defensive operations, either because they only rolled back Assad's losses, or because the very goal of these offensives was to give more strategic depth to a regime that consistently failed to efficiently defend its territories. The over reliance on auxiliary and largely foreign forces has deepened, and while these forces have proven efficient on the offensive, they won't be sufficient to fill the gaps in Assad's defense: The regime's gains actually accentuate the persistent manpower issue, as Assad needs to defend a wider territory. Moreover, several weak points, particularly the supply line to Aleppo and, to a lesser extent, the supply line to Palmyra, remain at risk. In Aleppo especially, the Russian intervention has not conclusively led to the creation of a buffer zone between ISIS and the regime, despite the Kweres offensive and another short offensive along the road to the ISIS-held town of Taqbah.

On the diplomatic and political front, Russia's involvement prepared for a more favorable outcome for Assad or, more accurately, the Assad regime. The intervention made it clear that Russia would not allow the regime to fall, at least at this time, while also doing some damage to US policy (although much of this damage can be attributed to the absence of clear US policy). The Russian intervention provided a coup de grâce to the already lacking US support for the "moderate" opposition and the hope that groups such as the FSA could form the backbone of a post-Assad government with which the US would work. Yet, it is more accurate to describe Moscow's entry into Syria as a wakeup call for the State Department: The intervention forced the US to rethink its already limited policy in Syria, leading to the creation of the SDF, which it sees as a new tool to groom a democratic Sunni Arab force within a largely Kurdish-led group. This approach is surely problematic, given that the Kurds' own interests and ambitions may alienate Sunni Arab groups, but it is likely perceived as an improvement on the previous approach, where the US-backed opposition were forced to work with groups such as al-Nusra. The SDF has proven to be a potent force against ISIS and places a US-backed force within reach of ISIS's heartland (Deir Ez-Zor and Raqqa) much more so than the Russian-backed Palmyra offensive.

Regardless, Russia seems to have chosen a path that provides them with a diplomatic and political advantage at the expense of a military one. The decision to withdraw and limit Russian operations following the announcement suggests that Putin seeks to transform a limited defensive victory into a political one that is deeper and global. A military push after the northern Aleppo offensive would have fulfilled Assad and Iran's needs for a clear-cut military victory, but at the risk of increasing tensions further with countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Putin likely understood that, at least at this point, his interests and those of his allies no longer converged. That Putin "selfishly" is pursuing Russia's best interests by increasing its leverage and prioritizing its diplomatic stature over Assad's thirst for military success, should not come as a surprise: The intervention in Syria demonstrates that Russia was a dependable ally, not that it suddenly forgot where its interests lay.

A “manageable conflict”

It is clear by now that Moscow’s presence in Syria is not at an end: Russian helicopters were key in the recapture of Palmyra from ISIS, while a [Reuters](#) report showed that Russia was actually sending more military material to Syria than it was withdrawing. Still, the announcement of the withdrawal does signal that the conflict is entering a new phase, where Russia will continue to play an important role both politically and militarily. The withdrawal, at a time when a Russian-backed offensive could have led to the fall of Aleppo in a month’s time, signals the Kremlin’s clear intention to lower the pace of the conflict. Russia likely assessed that tipping the balance too much further in Assad’s favor could have unpredictable consequences, with a similar result attainable at lower risk.

In that sense, the withdrawal is an attempt to transform what the US clearly saw as a messy conflict capable of swallowing millions of dollars without a guaranteed net positive outcome (and significant risks of a negative one), into what can be best described as a “manageable conflict”. The Russian withdrawal opens the way for a repetitive process during which negotiations will serve to deflect international pressure created by incremental

advances against the opposition and ISIS. In other words, regime offensives will continue, but they will be spaced and the uproar they may trigger watered down by renewed negotiations. Beyond that, the fact that al-Nusra has more to lose in the ceasefire than any other party suggests that a partial resumption of hostilities can always be conveniently blamed on that group. Al-Nusra’s recent offensive in southern Aleppo, alongside the prominent Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham and, quite notably, the FSA-affiliated Division 13, is a good illustration of such a possibility.

“The Russian withdrawal opens the way for an iterative process during which negotiations will serve to deflect international pressure created by incremental advances against the opposition and ISIS.”

This repetitive process, in which the regime threatens to slowly swallows the opposition, also contributes to the broader effort to ensure that time is on the regime and Russia’s side. This “time factor” is, in a war of attrition, the key to success. Several elements do indicate that Russia may be correct in thinking that time is on its side. The ceasefire has changed the

The southern Aleppo counter-offensive

On April 1, an offensive spearheaded by al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham in southern Aleppo led to the capture of the al-Eis village, along with other localities in southern Aleppo. Al-Nusra claimed that the offensive was meant to foil an upcoming regime offensive there, a claim that was never substantiated. Notably, several opposition groups participated in the offensive, including the FSA-affiliated Division 13. Even more significantly, Russia did not respond to the attack until April 6-7, despite the fact that al-Nusra was never included in the current ceasefire, although a Russian spy plane was seen flying over the battlefield during an Iranian-led counter-offensive on April 5-6.

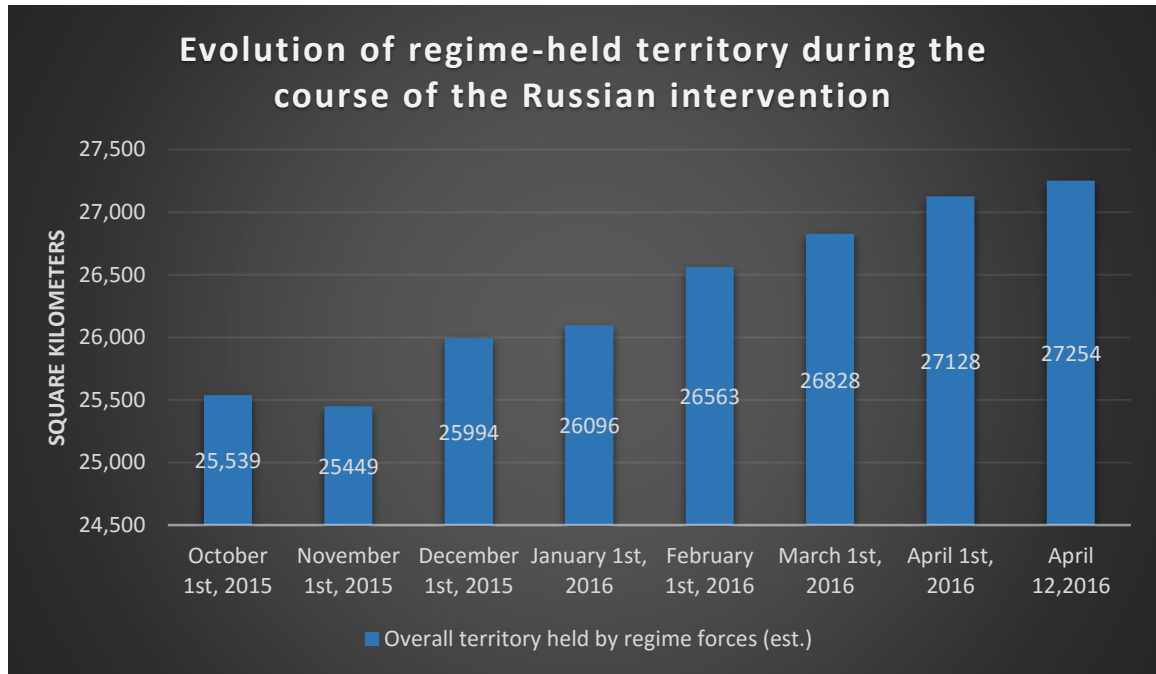
dynamic within the opposition, while al-Nusra’s attempt to federate the opposition behind them through its recent attack in southern Aleppo may prove dangerous in the long-term. A partial collapse of the ceasefire that would lead to a resumption of Russian airstrikes in northwestern Syria could erode al-Nusra’s support, especially in a scenario where the Russia-backed camp adopts a non-linear strategy by resuming airstrikes and later offering a new ceasefire. After five years of war and five months of Russian airstrikes, those Syrians remaining in and near battlefronts must surely appreciate the significant decrease in hostilities, with any party perceived as jeopardizing the situation standing to lose local support.

In-between offensives, Russia can thus hope that its enemies will move in the direction of division rather than unity. Russia's effort to make opposition-held territory a 'living hell' – for lack of a better word – by targeting hospitals, schools, water treatment plants, while also using cluster munitions², also plays an important role in that "time factor". This not only serves as a way to divide the opposition and erode its human resources, but also quite conveniently boosts Assad's legitimacy in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the US. The flow of immigrants is fueling a change in the political landscape in Europe that largely favors Russia. Far-right movements have shown a taste for Putin's assertive policies, ability to surprise "the West", and clear-cut foreign policy. Putin can also make sure that, while Assad slowly wins, he is simultaneously reminded that such gains can be undone should Russia withdraw its support, thereby slowly nudging Assad toward further compromises. Deflecting international pressure and, eventually, reaching a political deal will require several rounds of negotiations/fighting during which Assad will be forced to make additional concessions, even with the military dynamic turning in his favor. With little political cost – Russia pulling out of Syria – and the limited risks and unpredictability, this "iterative" tactic is likely seen by Moscow as its best course of action.

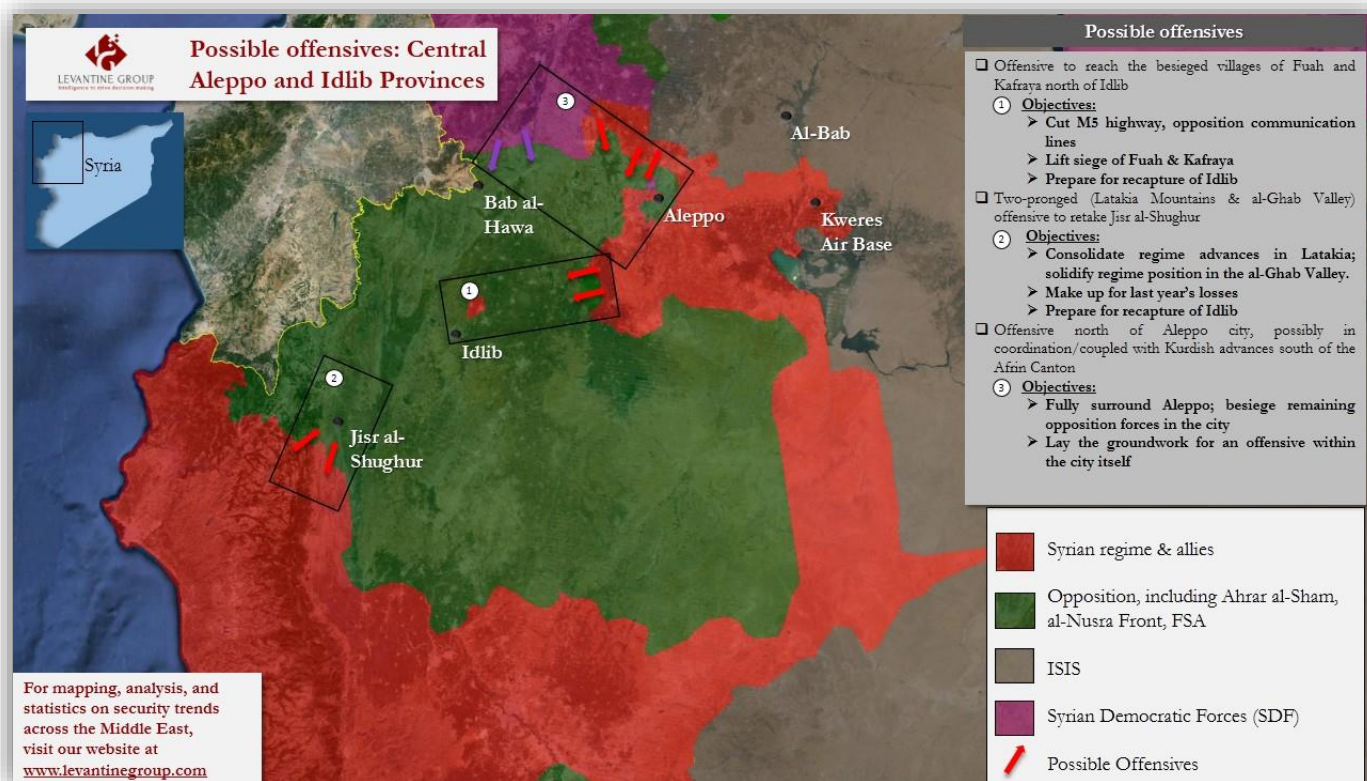
² The definition of a cluster munition, according to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, is "a conventional munition that is designed to disperse or release explosive submunitions each weighing less than 20 kilograms, and includes those explosive submunitions."

Appendices

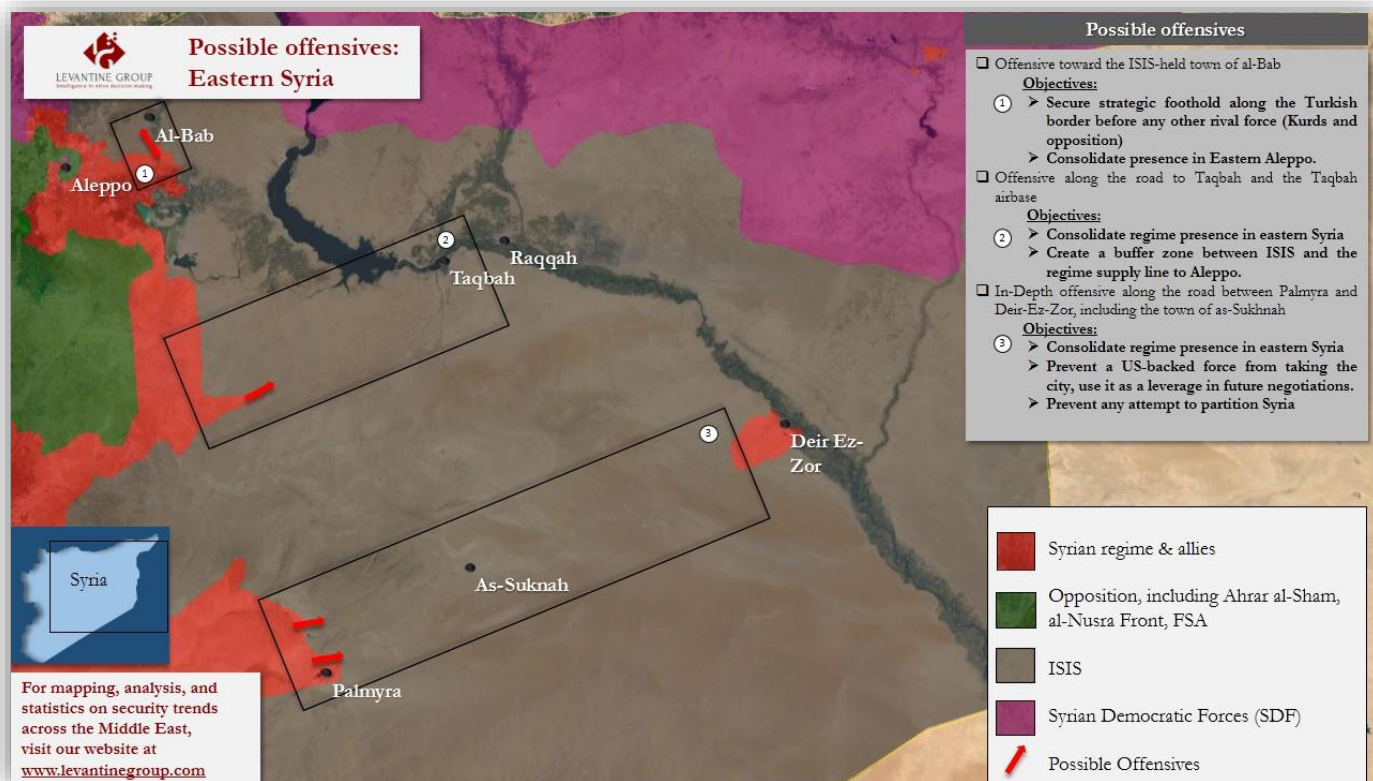
Appendix 1: Evolution of regime-held territory



Appendix 2: Possible future regime offensives

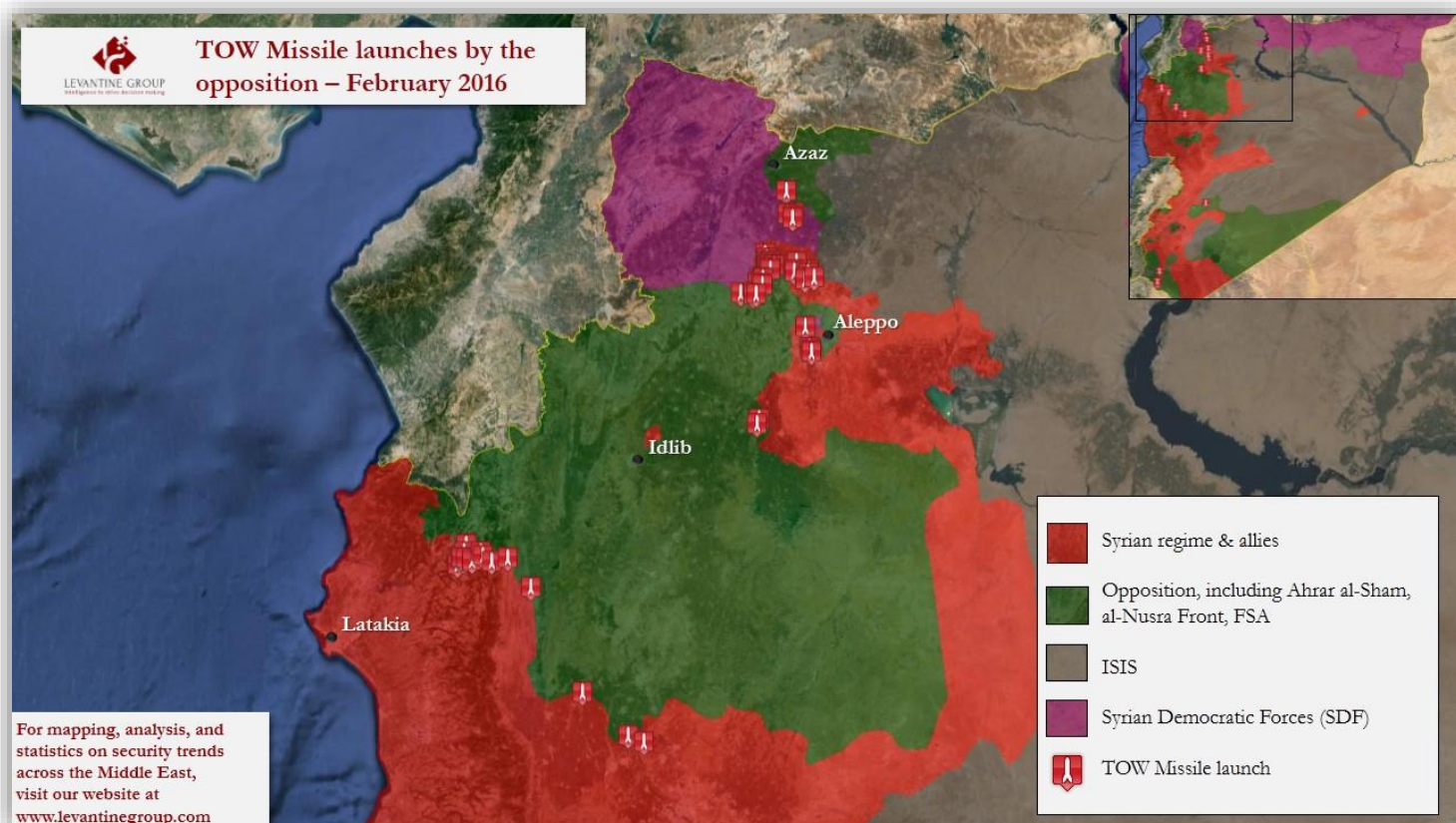
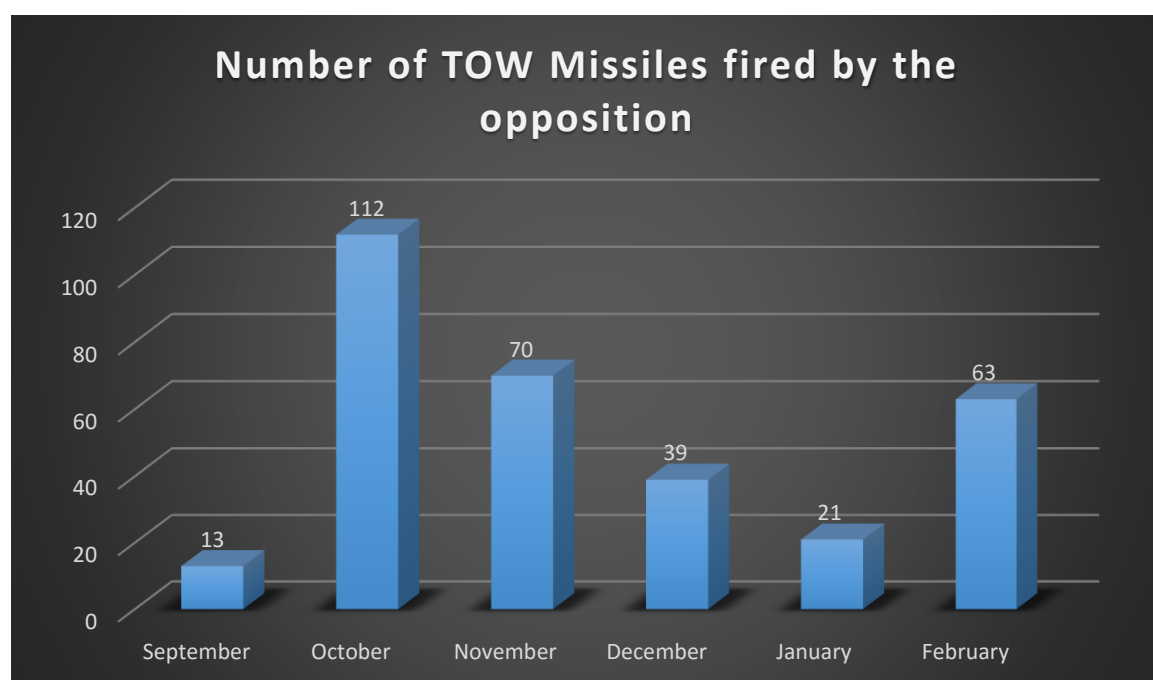


Possible offensives in the central Aleppo and Idlib Provinces (as of April 6, 2016)



Possible offensives in eastern Syria (as of April 6, 2016)

Appendix 3: Tow Missile launches

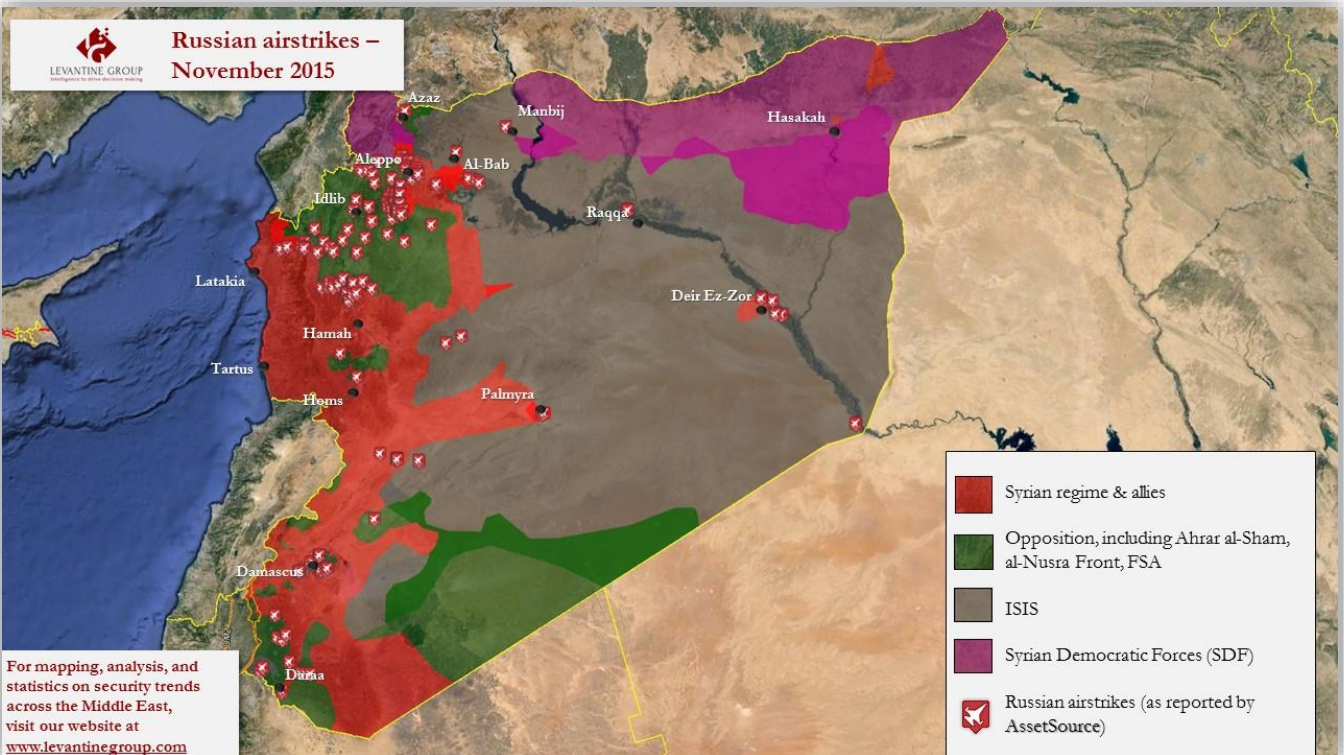
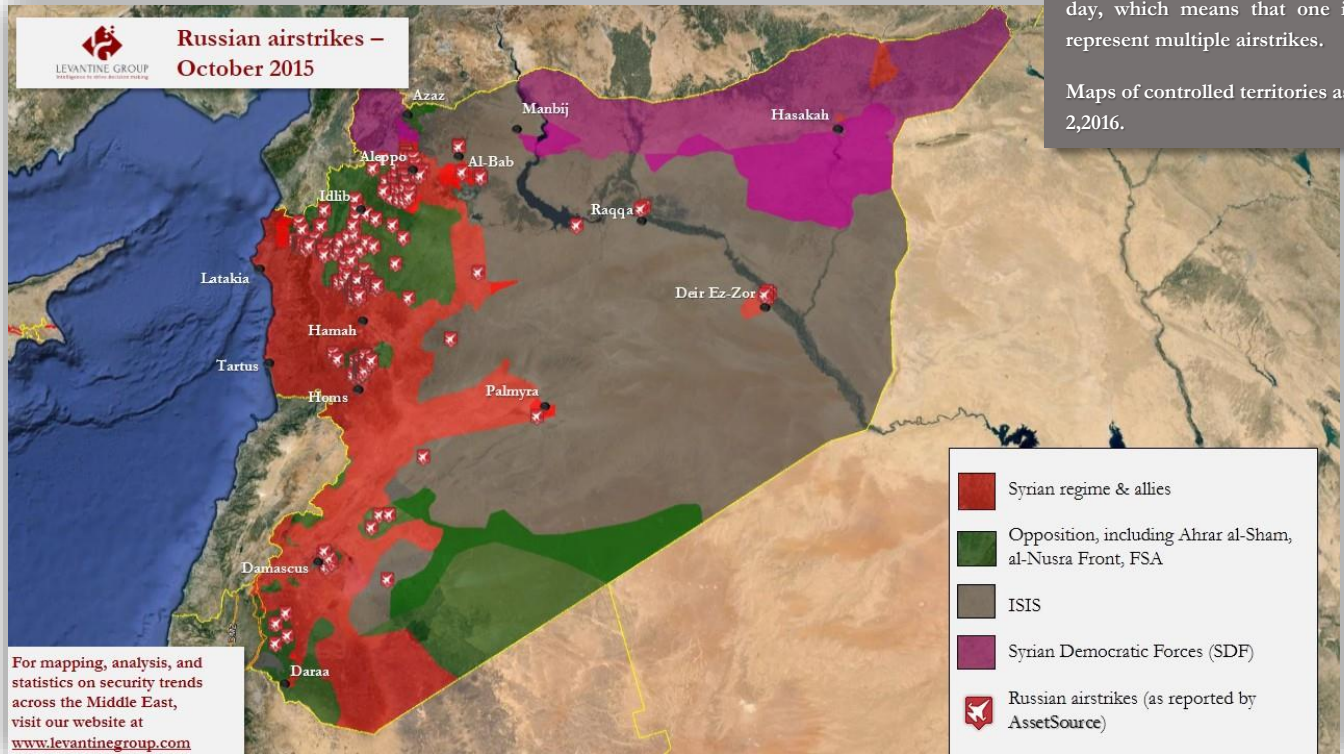


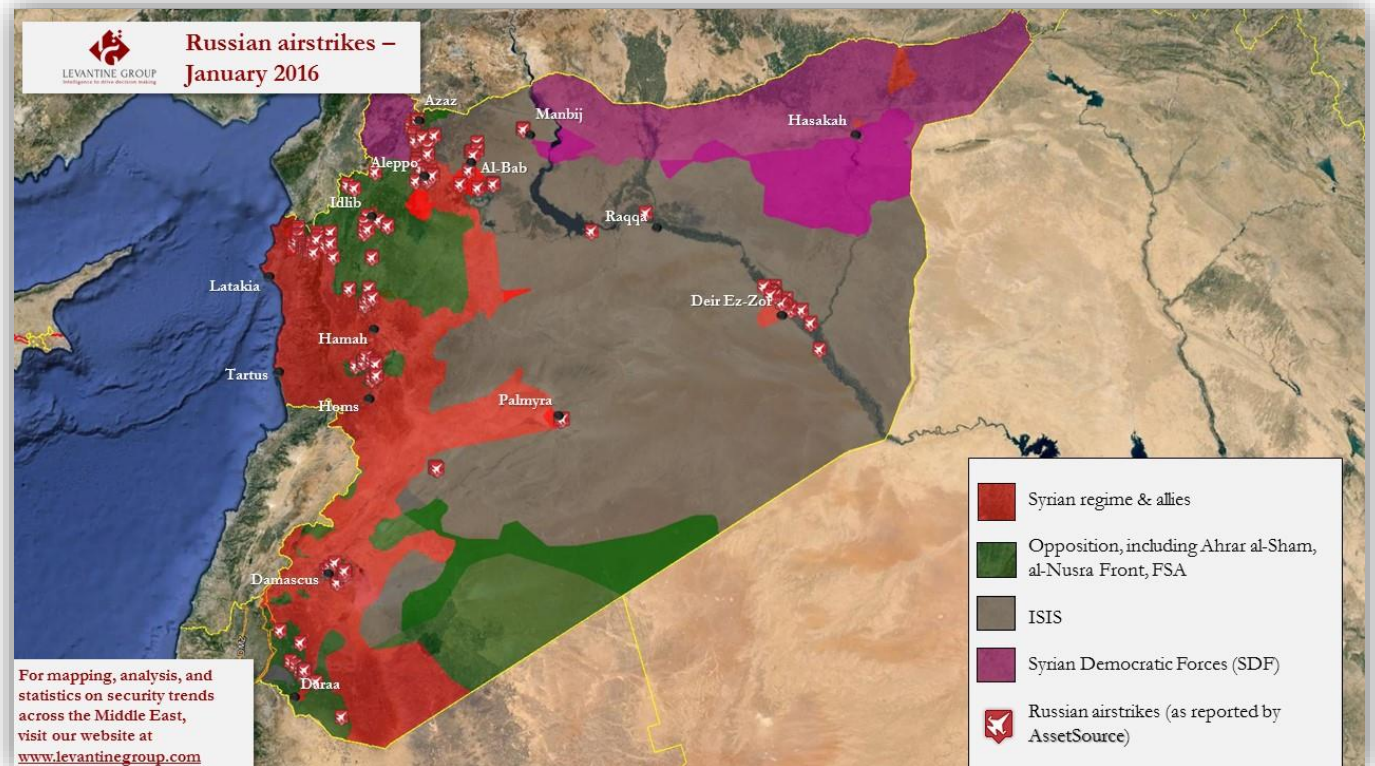
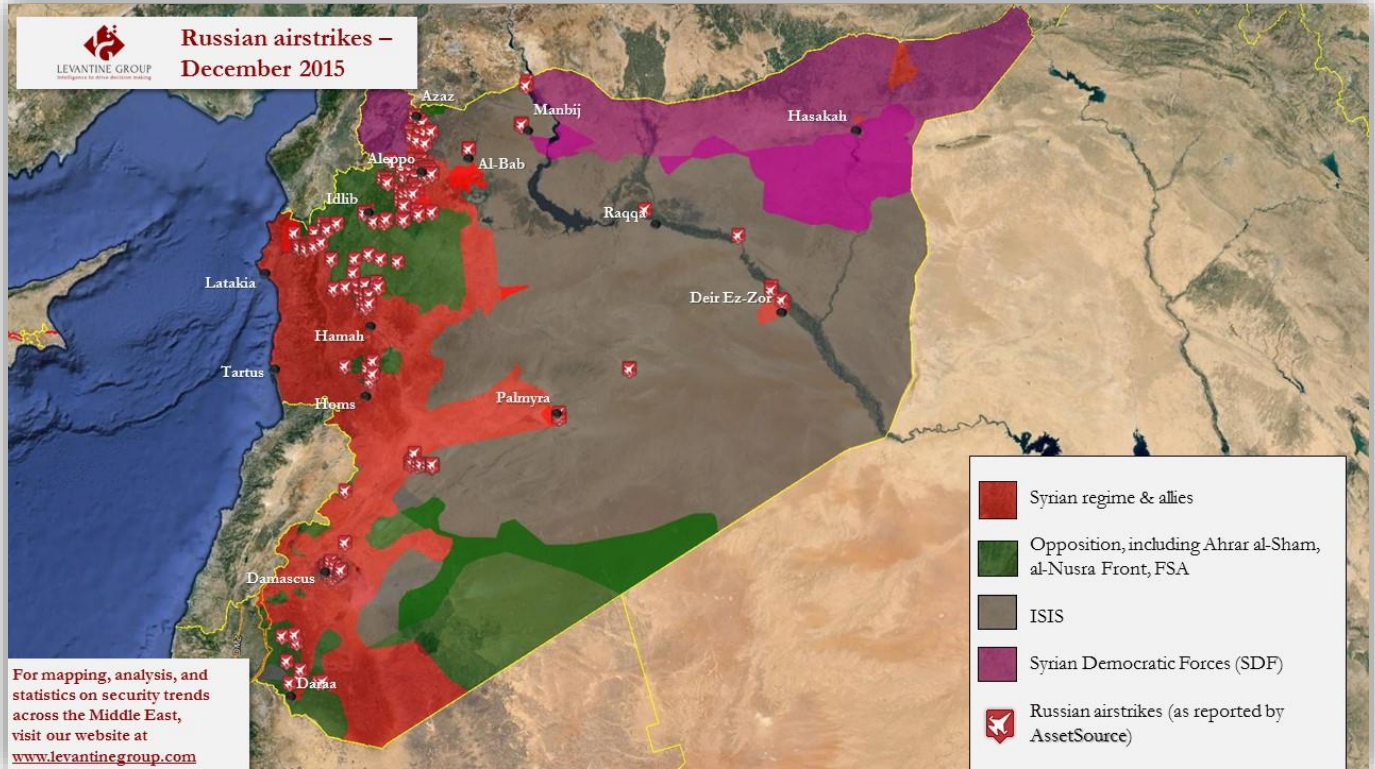
TOW missile launches in February 2016 (territory shown as of April 6, 2016)

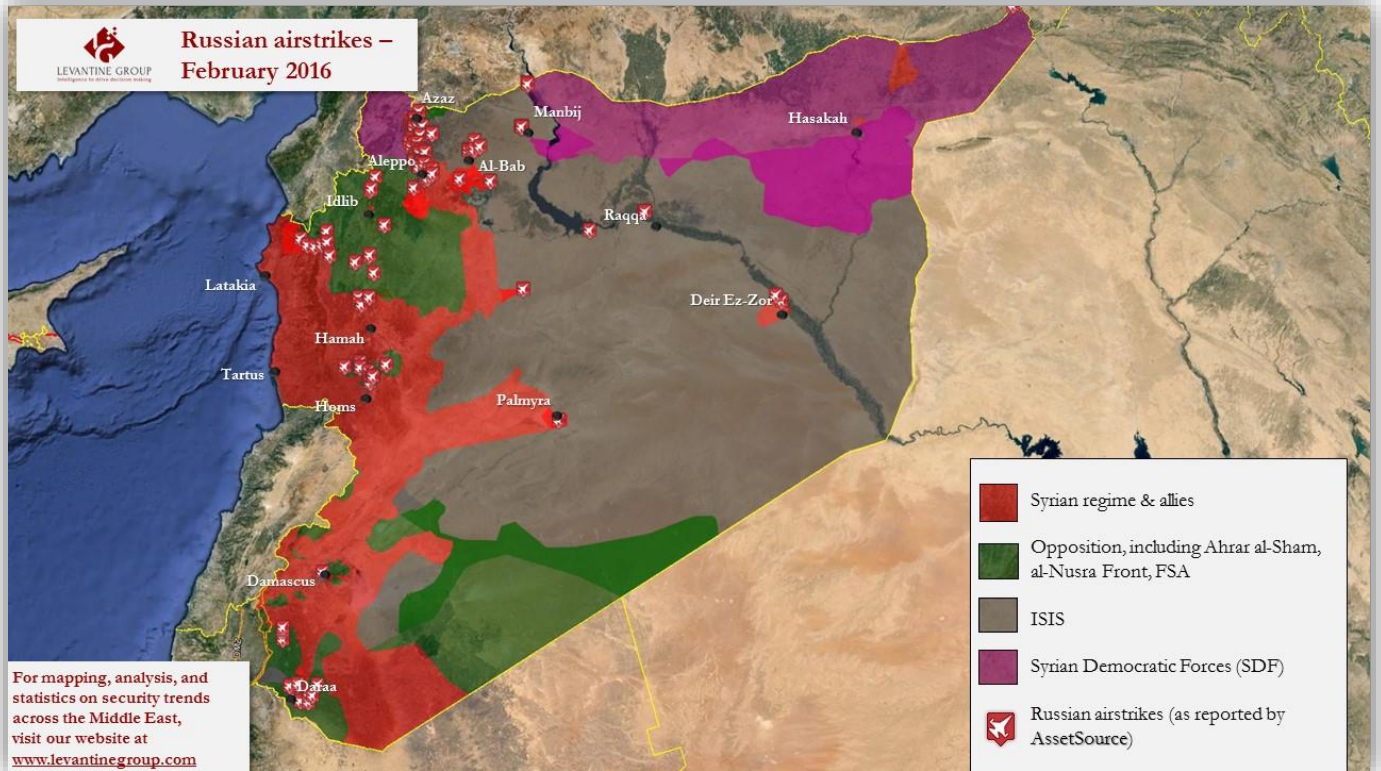
Appendix 4: Maps of Russian airstrikes*

*One icon is placed per location and day, which means that one icon can represent multiple airstrikes.

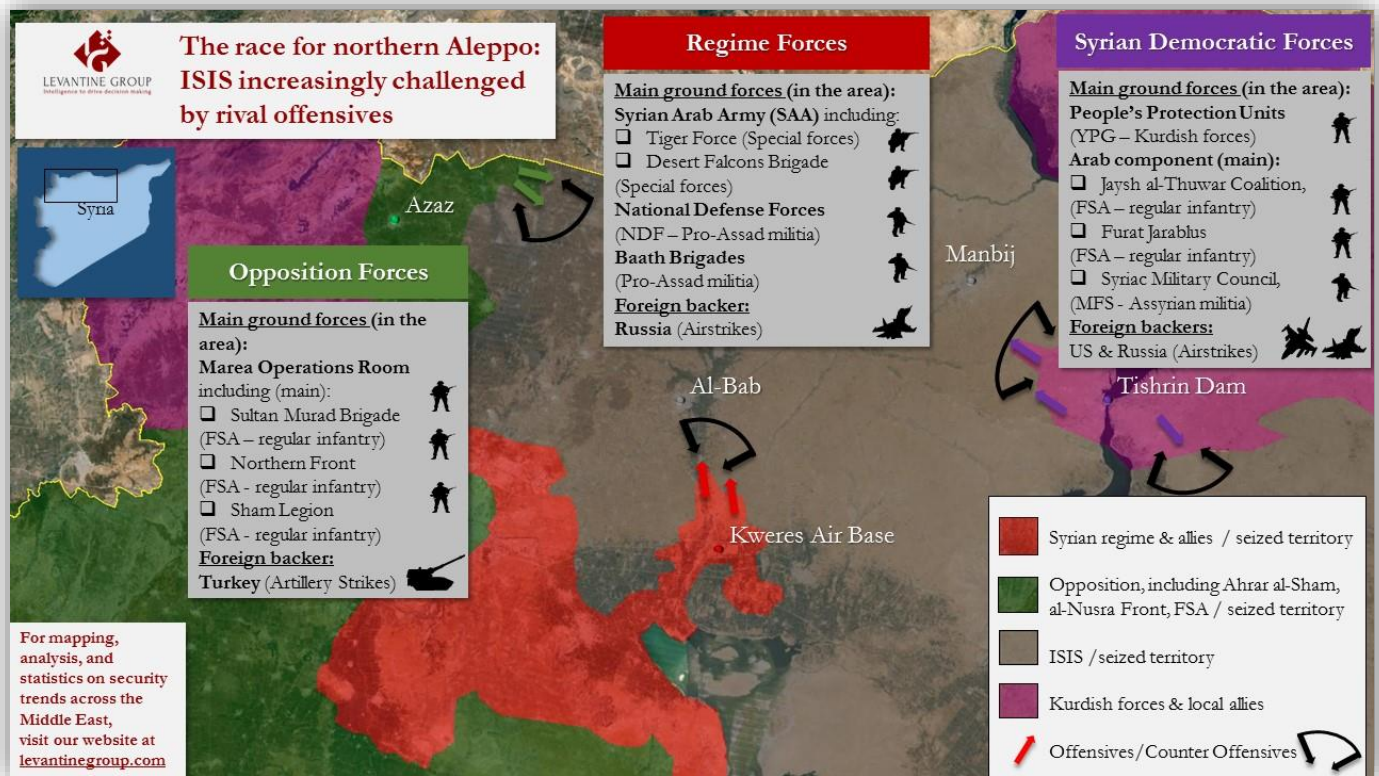
Maps of controlled territories as of April 2, 2016.





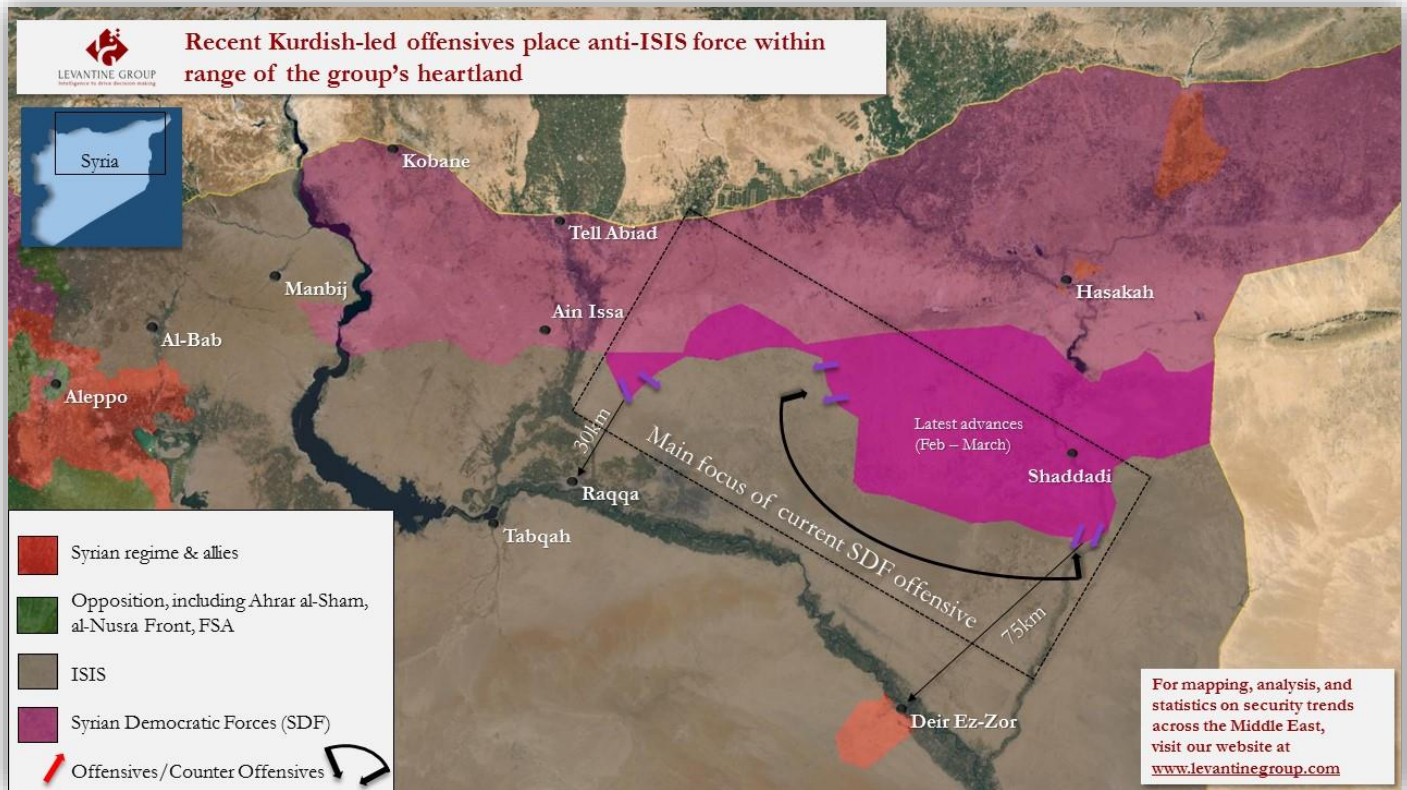


Appendix 5: The race for northern Aleppo



The race for northern Aleppo (map [released](#) on January 18, 2016)

Appendix 6: SDF draws closer to the ISIS heartland



SDF offensive in eastern Syria (map [released](#) on March 9, 2016)



LEVANTINE GROUP

Intelligence to drive decision making

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