

# The Carter Center Syria Conflict Mapping Project

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Regional Conflict Report # 1: Aleppo

April 25, 2013

## 1. Introduction

Though Syria's largest city and suburbs had seen intermittent violence since the beginning of Syria's uprising, the battle for Aleppo began in earnest in July 2012 when a convoy of hundreds of rebel fighters from the surrounding region advanced on the city. Their advance was announced online, and videos of the convoy of fighters were posted on YouTube.

Unlike the ongoing battle for Damascus, where the regime's superior military strength has prevented rebels from entering the center of the city, fighting in Aleppo has occurred in nearly every suburb and district, and has been particularly pitched in the old quarter as groups fight for control of the historic citadel and mosque.

Just as the rebel advance on the city was filmed and posted on online social media sites, their movement through the city has been similarly documented. These videos have been posted either by the groups themselves or by activists looking to document the events around them. This report uses a social media-based approach to 1) detail the growth of rebel groups in the Aleppo governorate, 2) illuminate the evolution of rebel hierarchies 3) show the current geographic distribution of these forces, and 4) analyze the current state of the battle for Aleppo.

## 2. Methodology

Information included in the following report is drawn exclusively from social media content. Since the beginning of the armed conflict in Syria, rebel forces have utilized online social media as a means of disseminating information, announcing activities and political ambitions, and soliciting support. When comprehensively analyzed, this online activity provides substantial information on the number of armed groups operating in the country, their relations with one another, and the territories and political motivations held by each group.

In order to mitigate the risks of misinformation, this report only includes numbers of fighters for groups that have displayed the entirety of their forces in their formation videos. In the event that a group formation is announced by commanders alone and does not show the full strength of the unit in the video, only the commanders present are counted in the unit size. While operational videos posted by these groups prove their existence, estimates on the numbers of opposition fighters, drawn from this analysis and included in this report, should be considered low-end estimates of opposition strength, as they only account for organized rebel units with an online presence. The actual number of active opposition fighters is likely to be higher than the conservative totals reported herein.

Operational videos posted by rebel groups are also used to determine location. As rebels advance through a city or capture a military base, they post videos of these areas to showcase their successful operations. Additionally, there is a large amount of video content generated by independent activists throughout the country that shows the location of roadblocks, troop

advancements, aerial and artillery bombing raids, mass demonstrations, and more. Taken in aggregate, these videos provide reliable and up-to-date information on the territories controlled by each party to the conflict.

### 3. The Structure and Composition of the Armed Opposition

The growth of rebel groups and their hierarchical structures have not been uniform throughout Syria. In southern Syria, for example, groups operating in the Damascus governorate lacked any significant hierarchical structures until relatively late in the conflict. In other parts of the country, however, limited hierarchical structures formed early in the conflict, and have had lasting effects on the evolution of armed groups.

In general, armed groups throughout Syria have become increasingly unified as the conflict has progressed. However, the fact that many of these armed groups have evolved separately and have established their own support networks, leaders, and political ideologies has made true unification (as opposed to mere collaboration) difficult.

In the Aleppo governorate, the Aleppo Military Council formed relatively early in the conflict. In the subsequent months, it became clear that the Council acted as a center of gravity, with a large portion of the groups announcing their formations declaring themselves to be affiliates of the Council.

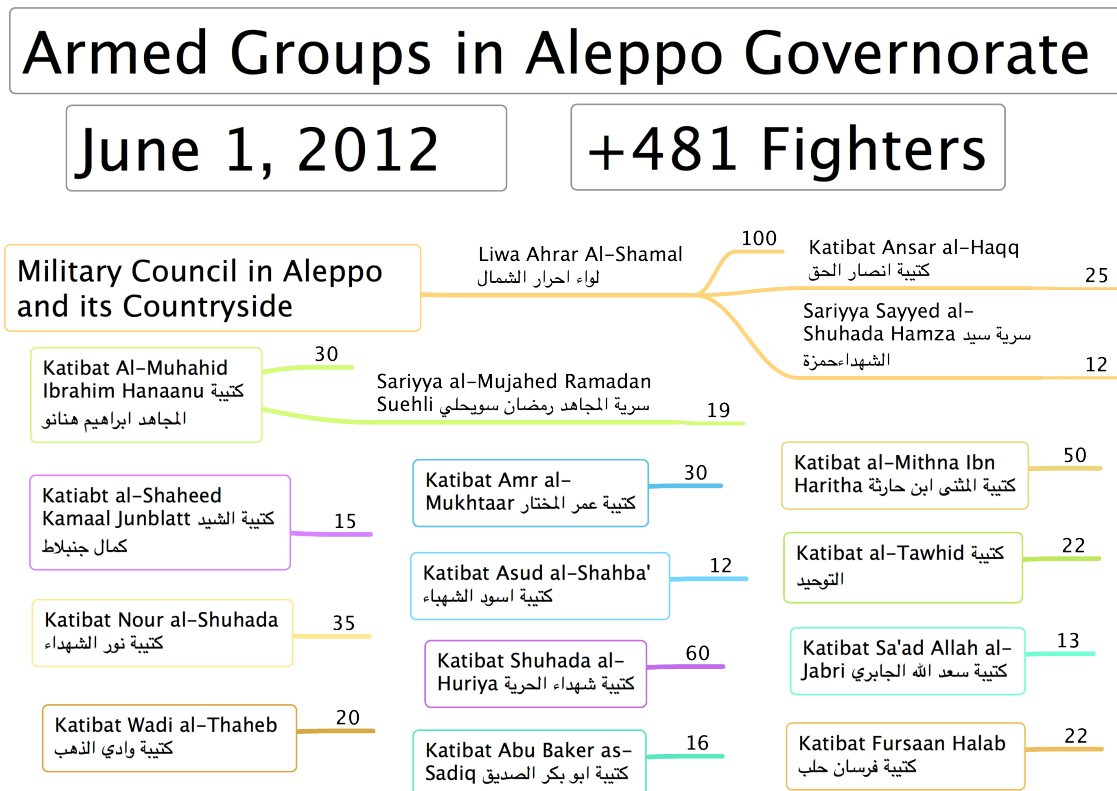


Figure 1: Armed Groups in the Aleppo Governorate as of June 1, 2012, including the number

The largest of these groups to be formed, Liwa al-Tawhid, brought together a large number of independent units operating throughout the area while announcing its affiliation with the Military Council of Aleppo. Prior to the creation of Liwa al-Tawhid (which literally translates to “The United Brigade”), the largest rebel group in the area was Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal, which then became an affiliate of the newly formed Liwa al-Tawhid.



Figure 2: Liwa al-Tawhid formation video. Source: YouTube, July 18, 2012.

Despite the apparent drawing power of this newly organized union, many groups continued to form independently throughout the Aleppo governorate. The following diagrams show the evolution of armed groups from August, 2012 to April 16, 2013. It should be noted that the formation of a group itself is not an accurate determinate of that group’s effectiveness or relevance in the area. For this reason, groups that were formed independently and have not grown will be shown as a cluster to the left of each diagram.



# Armed Groups in Aleppo Governorate

September 1, 2012

+2,122 Fighters

## Independent Battalions

719 Fighters



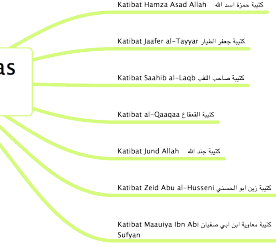
## Military Council in Aleppo and its Countryside

Liwa al-Tawhid  
لواء التوحيد

+758 Fighters

Liwa Amro Bin al-Aas  
لواء عمرو بن العاص

+225 Fighters



## Liwa Ahrar Al-Shamal كتيبة احرار الشمال

Liwa Darat I'zah  
لواء دارة الزاه عزة

Liwa Qataa' al-Jabal  
قطاع الجبل

Liwa Tariq bin Ziad  
لواء طارق بن زياد

Katibat Shuhada Biyanoun  
كتيبة شهداء ببيانون

Katibat al-Tiaat al-Muqaatla  
كتائب الطاعة الاقاتلة

## Liwa al-Fatah لواء الفتح

+150 Fighters





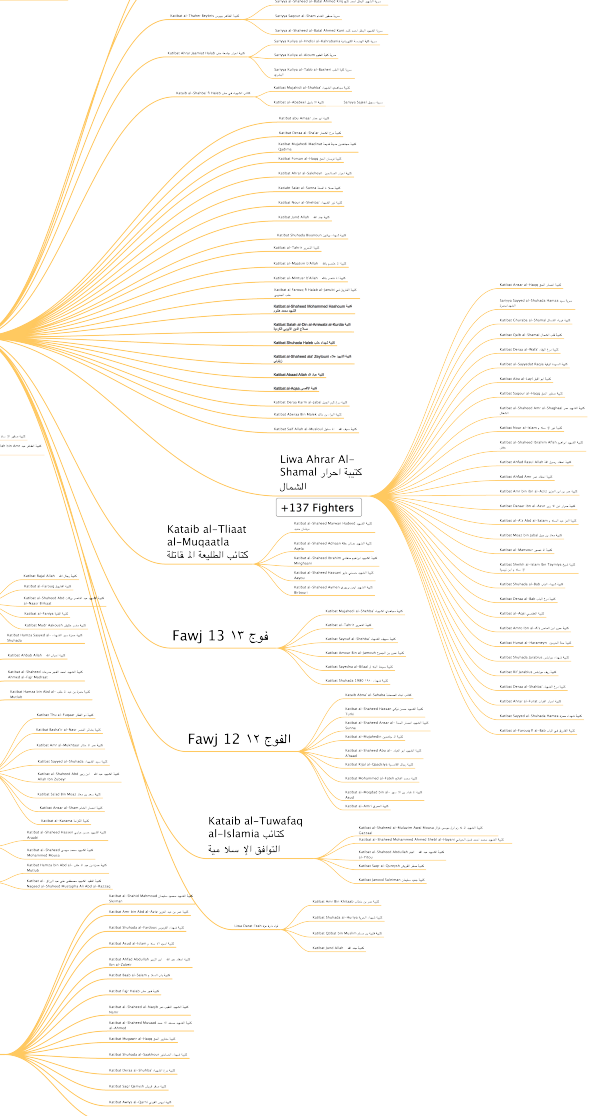
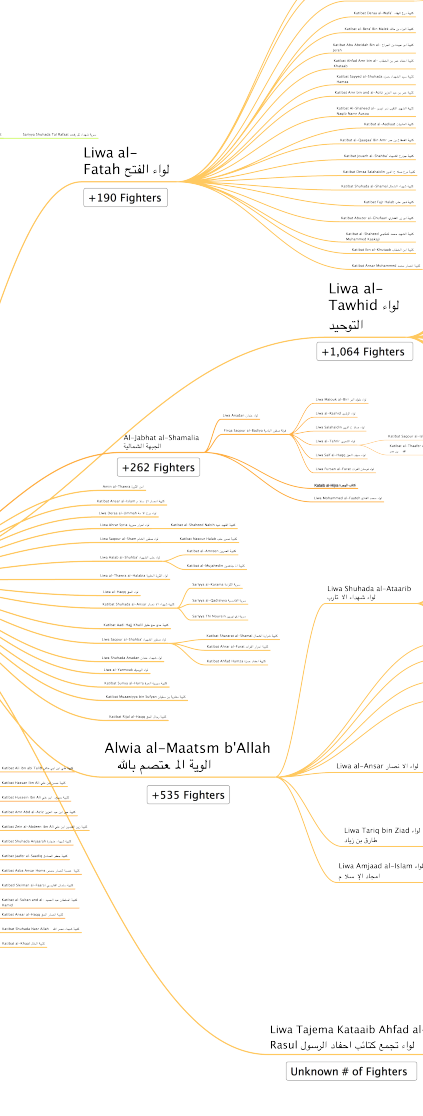
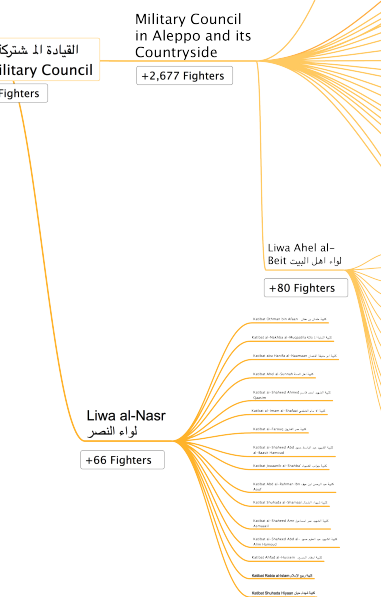
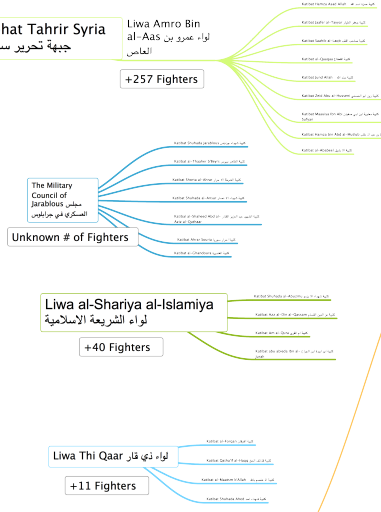
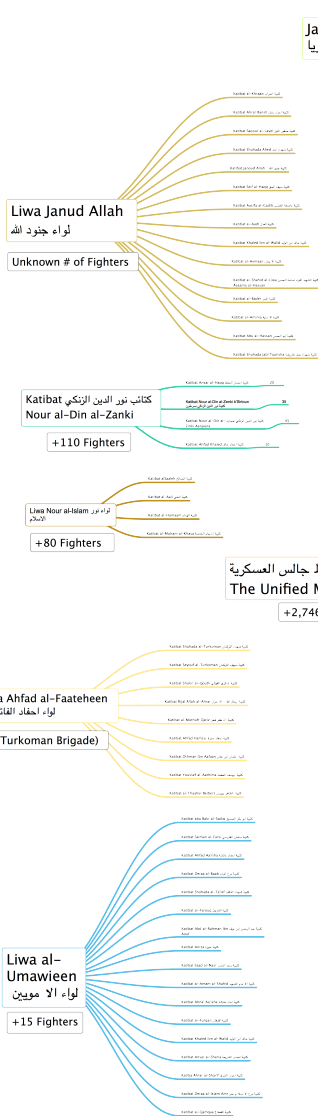
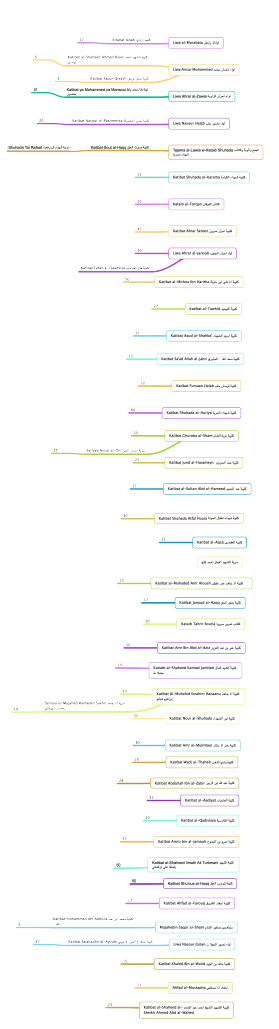


# Armed Groups in Aleppo Governorate

## December 1, 2012 +4,415 Fighters

### Independent Battalions

#### +1,156 Fighters



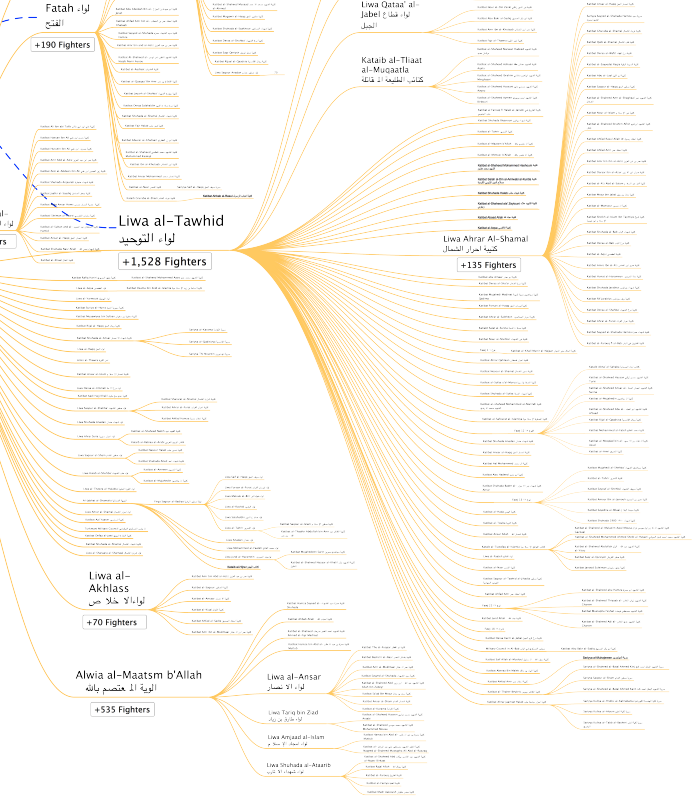
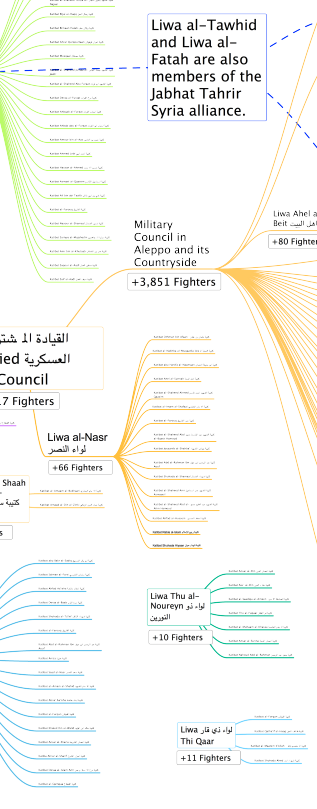
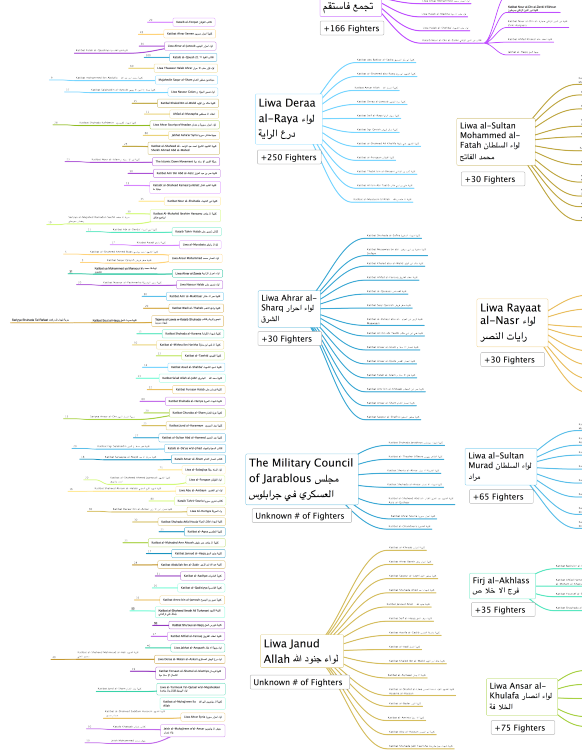






**Armed Groups in Aleppo Governorate**  
**April 16, 2013 +7,260 Fighters**

**Independent Battalions**  
**+1,816 Fighters**



The above structural diagrams clearly indicate that Aleppo's military council, along with its largest subordinate group, Liwa al-Tawhid have continued to grow throughout 2012 and the beginning of 2013. While it would seem that the military council and its affiliated groups are the dominant actors in the area, a closer look must be taken at some of the smaller, disconnected groups operating in the area, particularly the Syrian Liberation Front (Jabhat Tahrir Syria). Though allied to the formal hierarchy of the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) has brought together a large number of Islamist groups, operates independently, and is growing in strength. In fact, in early 2013, both Liwa al-Tawhid and Liwa al-Fatah – the two most powerful subordinates to the Military Council of Aleppo – joined the SLF.

While the Tawhid and Fatah Brigades have maintained their connections to the formal FSA (and even serve on military councils), their simultaneous affiliation with the SLF has the potential to become a source of conflict in the future as the Assad regime weakens and the question of Syria's political future becomes more salient.

Clear examples of this incipient conflict can be seen in the disparate ways in which rebels have attempted to establish government in rebel held zones. Liwa al-Tawhid, for example, established a police force in at least one area while other, independent groups have established Sharia councils complete with armed groups to protect the sheikhs.

Another clear example of this incipient conflict can be found in relations between the al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) and other rebel movements. Though Jabhat al-Nusra has cooperated with a great number of armed groups throughout Syria, they have also clashed with other opposition groups and diverted fighters from some of the main battlegrounds in Aleppo province to fight Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) in the al-Hassakah governorate.

Jabhat al-Nusra is notably absent from the above structural diagrams due to the fact that, unlike many battalions and brigades, Jabhat al-Nusra does not announce the formation of fighting units online, preferring to post only announcements or videos of its successful operations. These videos clearly show the organization participating in operations around Aleppo and elsewhere in the country, but provide less information about the size of the organization. Notable operations that Jabhat al-Nusra has participated in include the attack on the Taftanaz air base, the Khan Tuman artillery depot, and the Furat Dam in al-Raqqa.

#### 4. Status of Forces

In recent months, rebel forces have made significant gains throughout the country. Rebels control large swaths of the eastern governorate of Deir el-Zor as well as Al-Raqqa to the north. Additionally, Kurdish militias control much of the northeastern al-Hassakah governorate. In Aleppo, however, no party has been able to consolidate control over the city.

Though rebels have made significant gains in the areas around Aleppo, and have succeeded in taking control of a police academy and besieging the airports nearby, in the past 4-5 months, the front lines in the city itself have remained relatively stagnant. As evidence of this, rebels have posted videos of the no man's land between front-line positions that show unrecovered bodies in the later stages of decomposition. Rebels filming the video claim that no one has been able to enter the area for three months.

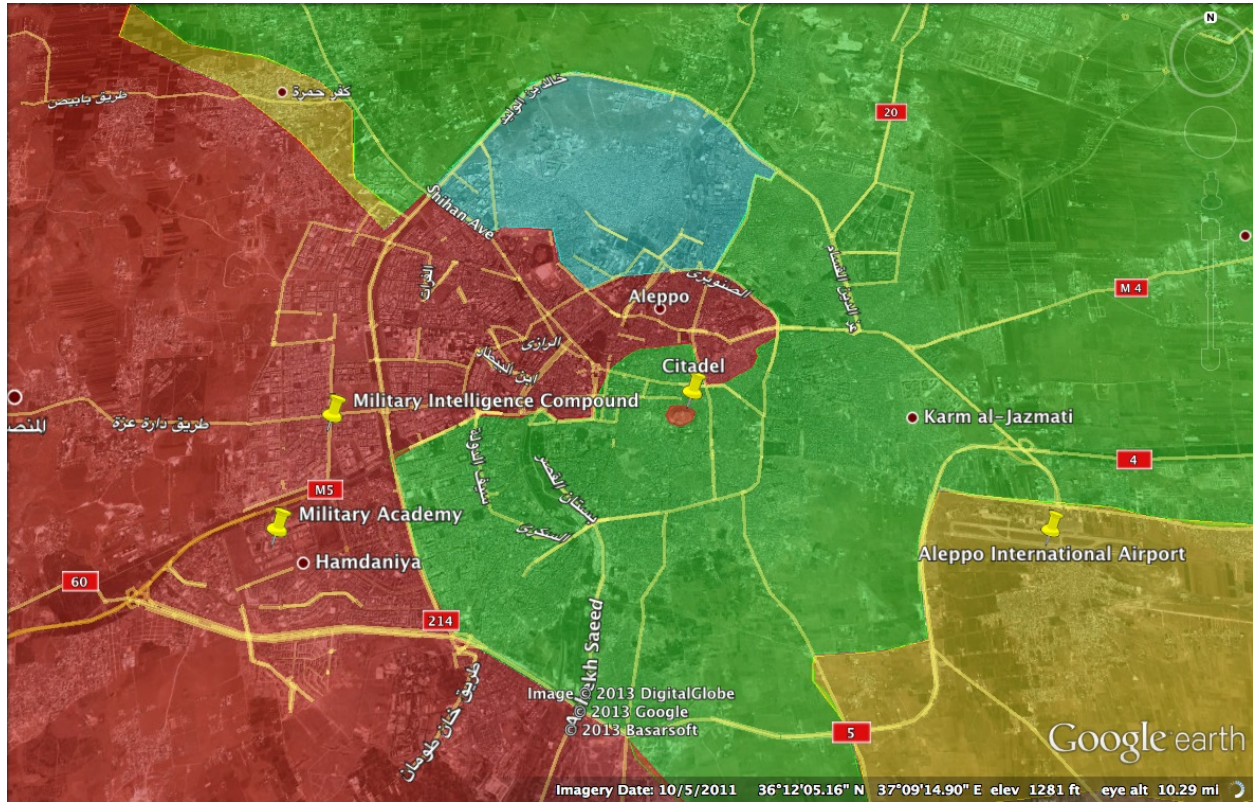


Figure 3: Battle lines in Aleppo as of April 15. Red = regime held, Green = rebel held, Blue = Kurdish held, Yellow = contested area

While battle lines in the city have remained static, rebels have made substantial gains in the surrounding countryside. Rebel strength in rural areas has led to regime supply routes being repeatedly cut since late 2012, leaving regime troops in the west of the city essentially stranded. Also, in March 2013, rebels gained control of a massive ammunition depot to the southwest of the city. This victory not only re-supplied rebel armaments, but also provided rebel units (particularly the Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra brigade) with medium range surface-to-surface rockets.

The regime has responded to rebel gains with heavy-handed shelling of rebel held areas including, on several occasions, with ballistic missiles. These attacks have resulted in significant civilian casualties. Rebels, on the other hand, appear to have restricted their shelling to military areas, including the Military Intelligence Compound and Military Academy. The following map highlights districts and areas that have witnessed shelling and clashes during March and April 2013.

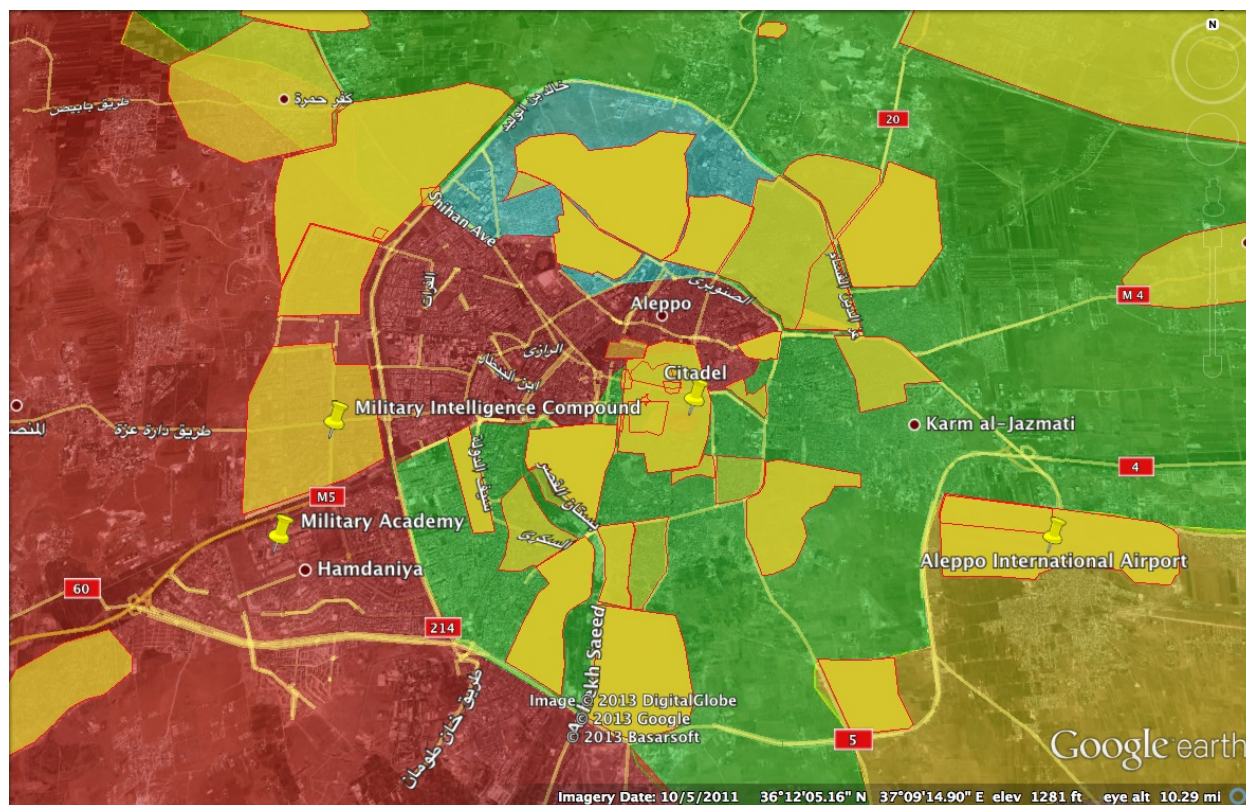


Figure 4: Aleppo battle lines overlaid with areas where shelling and clashes have taken place. Darker yellow indicates repeated incidents.

## 5. Conclusions

As the battle for Aleppo enters its 11<sup>th</sup> month, there still appears to be no clear end in sight. Rebels continue to make slow gains throughout the countryside, but so far been unable to decisively block regime supply lines. With both sides having dug-in to their respective districts, it is likely that the battle for Aleppo will become a slow paced war of attrition. While major changes in the status of forces are unlikely, the trajectory of the conflict to this point suggests that there are two slow-moving trends that will have enormous impact on the battle for Aleppo and status of the conflict as a whole.

First and foremost among these is the growing influence of powerful sectarian forces throughout the country. As the evolution of forces in Aleppo has demonstrated, the coalition of rebel forces is only held together by the shared goal of toppling the Assad regime. Even within the formal hierarchy of the Aleppo Military Council, some of the subsidiary groups have joined pan-national, independent Islamist networks, while others have reportedly clashed with said forces. As rebel governance structures are created in “liberated” zones, the ideological differences expressed by these groups regarding their visions for the future of Syria are brought to life. If the conflict continues in this way, then barring any unexpected major developments in the conflict, Syria could devolve into disparate fiefdoms – each with its own governing council and affiliated armed groups.



The second evolving trend is the incremental increase in the use of heavy weapons. This evolution has followed a similar pattern throughout the conflict. For example, the first time the regime used heavy weapons, it was against military targets away from civilian areas, though slowly this evolved into the indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas. Next, the regime used limited air power – also against military targets away from civilian areas. This again evolved into bombing raids on civilian areas. Recent months have shown increased use of ballistic missiles, and presently there are serious accusations of one or both sides having used chemical weapons. As the above maps of conflict incidents demonstrates, the regime has responded to rebel territorial advancements with a heavy use of artillery and air power. Should the rebels continue to receive heavy weaponry for use in their fight for Aleppo, the city could be completely destroyed before any side “wins.”