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# Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #1

August 20, 2013

## 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 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 state of the conflict.

All estimates regarding the number of opposition fighters operating in any given area are based on tallies of fighters visible in online videos. While such announcements via YouTube have become common for the Syrian opposition, our estimates cannot account for individual fighters and fighting units which have not announced their establishment on the internet, and should therefore be viewed as the minimum estimates available. The data, while not exhaustive, should be seen as representative due to the fact that many of the largest and most capable armed groups operating in Syria have a strong online presence.

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

## Acknowledgements:

The Carter Center has received support for the Syria Conflict Mapping Project from a multitude of individuals, companies, and organizations. The following organizations and individuals stand out in the contributions they have made to the success of this project.



Lockheed Martin's LMEnsemble has been enormously useful in gathering and making sense of information coming out of Syria. Their platform has helped the Center stay up to date on developments in Syria and elsewhere 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 boon to The Carter Center's Syria Conflict Mapping Project. These detailed archives 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.

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## Executive Summary

The Syrian conflict represents a major paradigm shift in the ways in which armed conflicts emerge and evolve. The dramatic increase in interconnectivity brought by modern communication and social media technology has both empowered activists in ways never before seen, and also allowed for an unprecedented means of analyzing conflict. The use of these technologies in Syria's conflict has become nearly ubiquitous and should be seen as a tool every bit as powerful as the use of arms.

As the data created through the use of such technologies are public, structured, and plentiful, they provide an opportunity for rigorous, bottom-up analysis of many aspects of the Syrian conflict. This report analyses these data, which document the creation of approximately 4,390 armed units and military councils, representing between 68,639 and 85,150 fighters across the country.

After two years of conflict, prospects for peace in Syria remain dim. A negotiated settlement under a "Geneva II" framework remains the best hope for a resolution, but the parties – local, regional, and international – appear unlikely to come to the table soon. Though the armed and unarmed opposition to President Bashar al-Assad has become somewhat less fragmented over time, with the formation of the National Coalition and the Supreme Military Command, the control that these entities have over their locally-based counterparts is tenuous in much of the country and non-existent in some areas. However, this limited progress has been countered by a rise in other actors. Kurdish forces have carved out an autonomous zone in the northeast, pro-government paramilitary groups are steadily growing in power and influence, and Hezbollah fighters as well as other pro-regime foreign forces have become fixtures in the conflict.

The structure of the armed opposition varies greatly from region to region. These variations are due to a wide array of variables including geography, relative strength of government bases and facilities, demographics and sectarian composition, tribal affiliations, and proximity to neighboring countries.

Much has been said in recent months regarding the Syrian government's re-capture of Qusayr near the northern border of Lebanon. Despite this substantial victory, and the accompanied boost in morale amongst government loyalists, a comprehensive view of the state of affairs shows that a near stalemate persists.

## Introduction

This report is divided into two sections. The first highlights recent political and military developments in the Syrian conflict, focusing on Syria's Kurdish areas, tensions between opposition fighters, political and military restructuring within the opposition and government, and international involvement. Also included are maps showing the territories controlled by each party as of the beginning of August 2013.

The second section details the current structures of armed opposition groups in each of Syria's governorates. These structural diagrams show both the total number of opposition groups that have formed over the course of the conflict, the structures that have emerged between them, and those specific groups that have been active in 2013.

## Part I: Political and Military Developments

### 1. The Rise of Western Kurdistan

The Hassakah governorate in the northeastern panhandle of Syria has been a de facto autonomous, Kurdish-controlled territory since the majority of Syrian government forces withdrew during the summer of 2012. Since that time, the region has seen sporadic clashes between Kurdish militias, opposition fighters, and the last few remaining government troops. Much of the fighting between Kurdish and opposition forces has taken place in the town of Ras al-Ain, which, in addition to sitting on the border with Turkey, is also a key intersection between Syria's Kurdish and Arab populations.

Though there are several Kurdish militias operating in northern Syria, the largest, best structured, and most effective force is the People's Defense Units (YPG) which operates as the armed wing of the powerful Democratic Union Party (PYD). As government forces withdrew from the Hassakah governorate, it was the PYD/YPG that filled the vacuum. The PYD is closely aligned with the dominant Kurdish faction in Turkey, the PKK. After a decades-long insurgency in Turkey, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan called for a truce in March 2013.

After initial fighting, YPG and opposition fighters reached a series of ceasefire agreements, dividing the town of Ras al-Ain, and resulting in a shaky truce. The division of Ras al-Ain lasted for nearly five months, but ended in mid-July when Kurdish forces gained full control and announced the formation of an autonomous government led by PYD leader, Saleh Muslim. Muslim stated that this move was "not a call for a separation" but rather a temporary response to the administrative needs of an essentially autonomous population. Many other actors in the crisis, including the Syrian opposition expressed concern.

The Turkish state, in particular, was quick to voice its displeasure. Government officials met with Saleh Muslim in Ankara, while Prime Minister Erdogan said that Syria's Kurds "will be given the necessary warnings" regarding their "dangerous actions." Though Turkey

had previously aided opposition forces in their fight against the YPG,<sup>1</sup> and might feel inclined to do so again, any direct action taken to counter this newly-formed Kurdish authority would imperil the new ceasefire with the PKK. With the success of this historic agreement hanging in the balance, it appears Turkey has chosen to acquiesce to the realities on the ground and work with their new neighbors along the 300 km stretch of border that Kurds are now calling “Western Kurdistan.”

## 2. Islamists vs. Secularists

Tensions have long existed amongst Syria’s ideologically diverse opposition, but recent months have seen a dramatic rise in violence between rival opposition groups. Divisions have emerged regarding tactics and end goals, as well as competition for power. Enmity is growing between Islamist and more secular forces throughout the country, particularly following the death of a major secular opposition military commander at the hands of members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Even amongst the self-declared Islamist units, serious ideological differences exist between those who desire an Islamic state within Syria’s existing boundaries and those who advocate a greater Islamic nation between Syria and Iraq. Divisions between many of these groups have been on the rise since the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq announced the merger of his organization and Jabhat al-Nusra, creating the ISIL. Some Syrian-based leadership, however, appeared to distance themselves from this announcement. While it is clear that some tensions exist, more research is needed to determine the degree of unity between the two organizations. With western countries appearing hesitant to arm opposition units due to fears of increased fundamentalism within opposition ranks, it is only natural that many would begin to question whether the damage caused by the harsh tactics, and the explicit Al-Qaeda links, of the ISIL and others outweighs the military benefits of these alliances.

As the fault lines between Islamists and more secular units grow, determining the relative strength of the wide array of opposition forces becomes increasingly important. Distinguishing between armed groups based solely upon the public statements of their motivations can be difficult, as many profess to have similar goals. However, a look at tactics employed by the various groups allows for an easier and more practical means of classification.

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<sup>1</sup> See The Carter Center’s report on fighting in Ras al-Ain (from February 18, 2013) for further details.

<sup>2</sup> The three groups in this illustration were chosen because they are representative of the spectrum

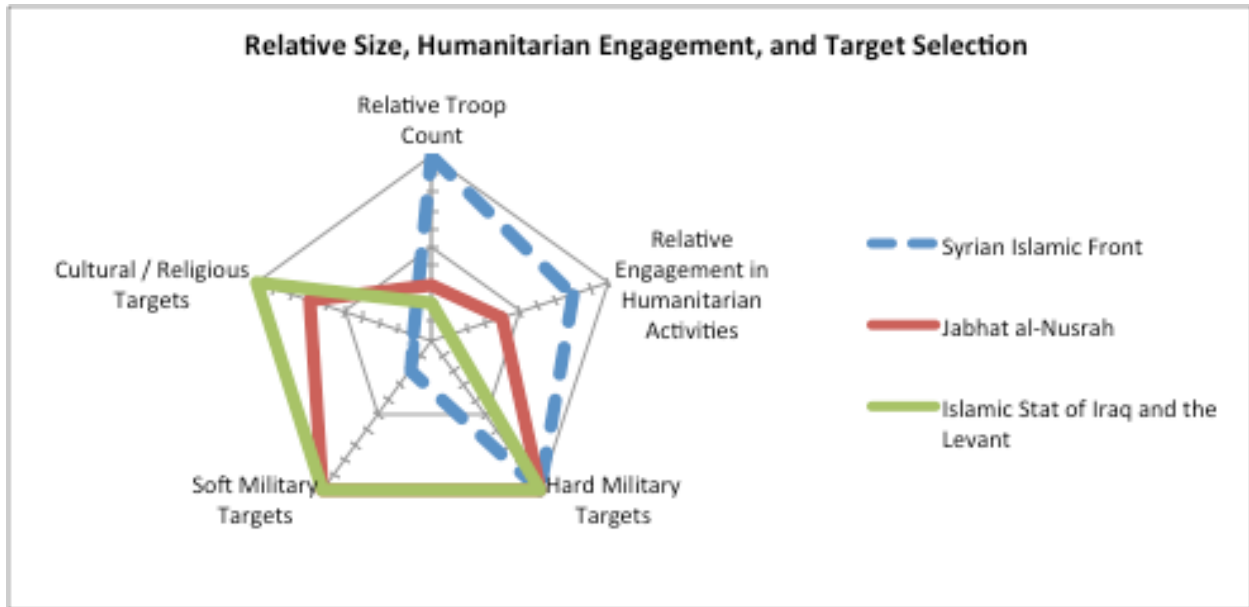


Figure 1: Relative size, relative engagement in humanitarian activities, and patterns of typical targets selected by the Syrian Islamic Front, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the ISIL. Data sources used in this visualization include media reports, analysis conducted by think-tanks, and operation videos uploaded via social media.

The above diagram shows three of the most prominent Islamist groups operating in Syria and the typical targets of each.<sup>2</sup> The Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), a large and increasingly powerful Salafist organization, is one of the most influential units operating on a nationwide level. With an estimated force of 20,000 loosely-connected fighters, it has stated a desire for an Islamic state in Syria, ruled by Sharia law. They remain Syrian nationalists and are opposed to the creation of a larger Islamic caliphate. Also, in keeping with their nationalist leanings, they appear more concerned with preserving Syria’s social fabric, and conduct large-scale humanitarian relief programs while avoiding “soft targets,” such as urban-based military or intelligence headquarters. Additionally the SIF has published statements explicitly acknowledging the rights of minority ethnic groups,<sup>3</sup> though their standpoint is unclear with respect to minority religious groups.

While much talked about, Jabhat al-Nusra is significantly smaller than the SIF, and only contains approximately 7,000 fighters, with a narrower scope of operations. Jabhat al-Nusra does not engage in charity on a large scale, though it does distribute limited amounts of food and cooking gas in some areas. In addition to attacking “hard targets” such as checkpoints or military bases, Jabhat al-Nusra is known for its propensity to conduct car bombings and suicide attacks in urban areas (such as downtown Damascus and Aleppo).

The most controversial group to have emerged over the course of Syria’s civil war is undoubtedly the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Announced by the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, the ISIL’s formation has caused concern throughout much of the political and

<sup>2</sup> The three groups in this illustration were chosen because they are representative of the spectrum of organizations operating within Syria; they should not be seen as exhaustive.

<sup>3</sup> Statements by SIF component group Harakat Ahrar Al-Sham al-Islamiyya, accessed August 2, 2013, <http://www.ahraralsham.com/?p=756>.

military opposition. In addition to attacking hard and soft military targets, the ISIL regularly releases videos of its members executing both prisoners and civilians alike. The ISIL also provides some humanitarian assistance, and has been seen distributing drinking water within its areas of influence. The fact that even the most extreme of organizations conducts some humanitarian relief efforts suggests that the hardline Islamists operating in Syria may have learned from the “awakening” that took place in Iraq between 2006-7, when the reckless targeting of civilian caused large segments of the population to turn against the insurgents.

Both the ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra often make hostile statements or conduct demonstrations against Syrian minorities or secularists. Additionally, Jabhat al-Nusra was implicated in the March destruction of a Shia shrine in Raqqa, among other sectarian attacks.

### 3. Political and Military Restructuring

Throughout the course of Syria’s civil war, much has been said about the divisions between both political and armed opposition groups. The government, however, has managed to avoid much of this scrutiny and has been seen as a relatively unitary actor. The military, initially closely watched for defections or fissures in top leadership positions, appears to have reached equilibrium, with fewer defections being reported as the conflict progresses. Likewise, the government’s political leadership has seen few major defections in recent months, and the core elements of the Assad government are still firmly in control.

Though the government’s military remains largely intact, there has been a gradual yet dramatic decentralization of military strength over the course of the conflict. Behind this decentralization is an increasing reliance on pro-government paramilitary forces that stand to weaken the power of the central government, increase the sectarian nature of the conflict, and promote a further internationalization of an already complex war.

These groups, which began as informal or semi-formal collections of pro-government civilians (broadly referred to by the opposition as *shabiha*), have incrementally become more structured and organized. Having initially been used to break up protests, the groups (which are now formally named the National Defense Forces and the Popular Army) began manning checkpoints and holding territory cleared by the Syrian military. They are now increasingly used in offensive operations as well. These paramilitary groups are often accused of being behind some of the worst atrocities recently seen in the conflict.

In addition to military restructuring, the Syrian government also has undergone notable political changes. President Assad recently replaced 16 members of the Ba’ath Party’s central committee, which now includes none of the party’s old chiefs. Syria’s Prime Minister and the speaker of the parliament form part of the new party leadership, and most of the new members are seen as being long-standing government loyalists. The most notable departure from the central committee is Syria’s Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa. Al-Sharaa, while leaving his position on the Baath Party’s central committee, still maintains the Vice Presidency.



Similarly, the opposition has seen leadership changes. Following the resignation of Moaz al-Khatib, Saudi-backed Ahmad al-Jarbaa was elected leader of the Syrian National Coalition, with Qatari-backed Farouk Tayfour of the Muslim Brotherhood as Vice President. Following the election, Ghassan Hitto resigned from his position as Prime Minister of the opposition interim government.

#### 4. International Involvement

Though Hezbollah and Iran have maintained and even increased their involvement in the Syrian conflict, Western powers have yet to intervene militarily in any substantial way. After declaring its intentions to arm opposition fighters, the United Kingdom recently backtracked and now appears unlikely to provide arms in the foreseeable future. In the United States, it appears plans to supply weapons to the opposition are still moving forward despite congressional opposition and reservations by top military brass. As of yet, no Western weapons appear to have arrived on the ground in Syria and it remains uncertain what form this aid will take should it arrive. The U.S. decision to arm rebels, while announced under the pretext of chemical weapons having been used by the Syrian government, is likely a response to the recent gains made by the Syrian military and Hezbollah.

Determining who is to receive the weapons, however, is an increasingly difficult challenge. With so many groups present, and fundamentalist Islamist forces on the ascendency, the U.S. may find it difficult to channel the distribution of arms to “moderate” opposition forces, while also ensuring that the weapons are not used against civilians.

Opposition forces around Damascus have lost ground in the countryside (including supply routes), and are in need of supplies and assistance if they are to break the siege they currently face. They are, however, unlikely recipients of Western weaponry or support due to their isolated positions, lack of communications lines, and their open affiliation with Jabhat al-Nusra fighters.

Rather, given the current status of forces throughout the country, U.S. weapons are likely to be provided to a select group of opposition armed groups in the north, with the hope that “moderate” forces will consolidate their control over the northern territories and create a de facto safe zone and seat for an opposition government.

While it is likely that the divergent armed opposition groups will be able to resist the regime’s advances more effectively with more weapons, their fragmentation and ideological diversity remain their main impediment. Also, more weapons would put the civilian populations who are supportive of the government at great risk. Thus far, the 50,000 residents of the Shia villages northwest of Aleppo have been supported and armed by government airdrops and (when possible) ground re-supply. Should the government’s control in the north be reduced or broken, the besieged towns could well be overrun. Given the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict, and recent opposition-led atrocities elsewhere in the country, the risk of large-scale violence against civilians is high.

Of equal importance, the provision of Western-supplied weapons to the armed opposition is likely to make them more intransigent against any political compromise and less likely to accept a power sharing arrangement, pressing instead for the total defeat of regime forces. And, any escalation of the conflict by the West is likely to provoke a greater increase in military assistance from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah to the government forces. This cycle of escalation could lead to deepening military involvement by the West, while making any political solution more difficult. Regardless, any negotiations between Syrian parties will need to be combined with, or preceded by, an agreement between the U.S. and Russia, ultimately also including their respective regional allies.

## 5. Conflict Developments

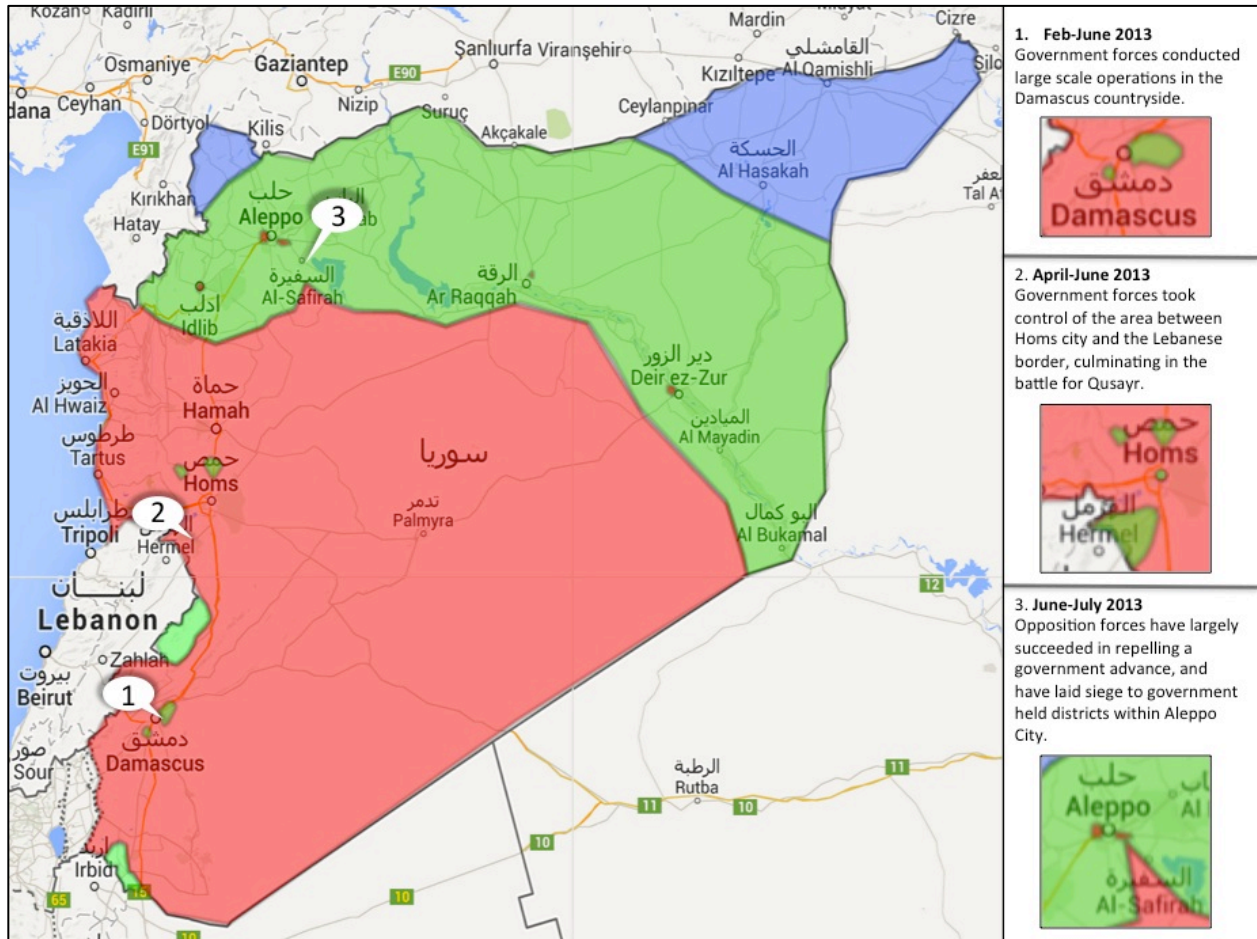


Figure 2: Areas of control as of August 1, 2013. Red = predominantly government controlled, Green = predominantly opposition held, Blue = predominantly Kurdish held.

### Damascus

Syrian government forces continued their offensives throughout much of the country over the course of May, June, and July. Building upon previous victories, government forces, along with Hezbollah, have made substantial gains in both the Damascus countryside and Homs. In Damascus, opposition forces have maintained small pockets of control in the eastern suburbs of the city.

The following three maps detail the progression of clashes in and around Damascus over the course of May, June, and July. Each outlined area shaded in yellow has witnessed clashes, with darker shading representing repeated incidents. Red arrows show the progression of government offensives in the area. Data displayed in these images are taken from reports made by activists and organizations such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which have been augmented by data from verifiable social media sources.

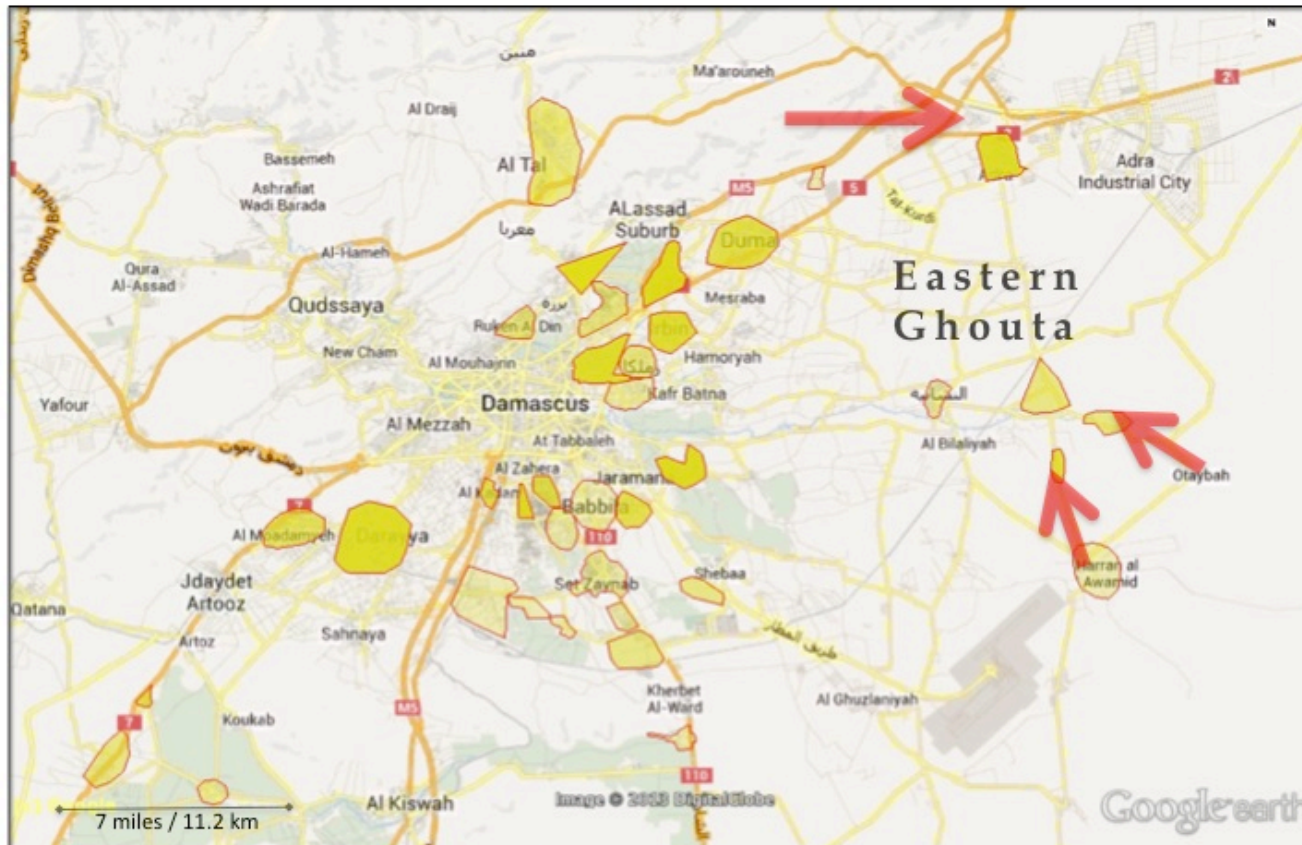
The data form part of a larger database kept by The Carter Center detailing incidents of clashes, aerial bombardments, artillery bombardments, and car bomb attacks.

Government forces have fought pitched battles against opposition positions throughout the Eastern Ghouta since February. As the maps indicate, these efforts have continued through the present day.<sup>4</sup> The continued presence of clashes in this area suggests that government forces were unsuccessful in clearing these areas. Also, and perhaps to prove this point, Liwa al-Islam, one of the largest and most effective groups operating in the region, posted a video of a parade of its tanks in the area in early August. The opposition's presence between the southern bypass highway and the city center (in the neighborhoods of Jobar, al-Qabun, and Barzeh) is a relatively new development. The fact that they have been able to encroach so far towards the city center, and entrench themselves in the eastern districts suggests that government forces may not have the ability to conduct large-scale activities in multiple parts of the country for sustained periods of time. Lastly, our data indicate that opposition forces in the area are gaining more and more anti-aircraft equipment. Should their air defense capabilities continue to increase, the government stands to lose one of its main advantages, and would likely have to substantially increase their presence on the ground in order to prevent further opposition advances in the east of the city.

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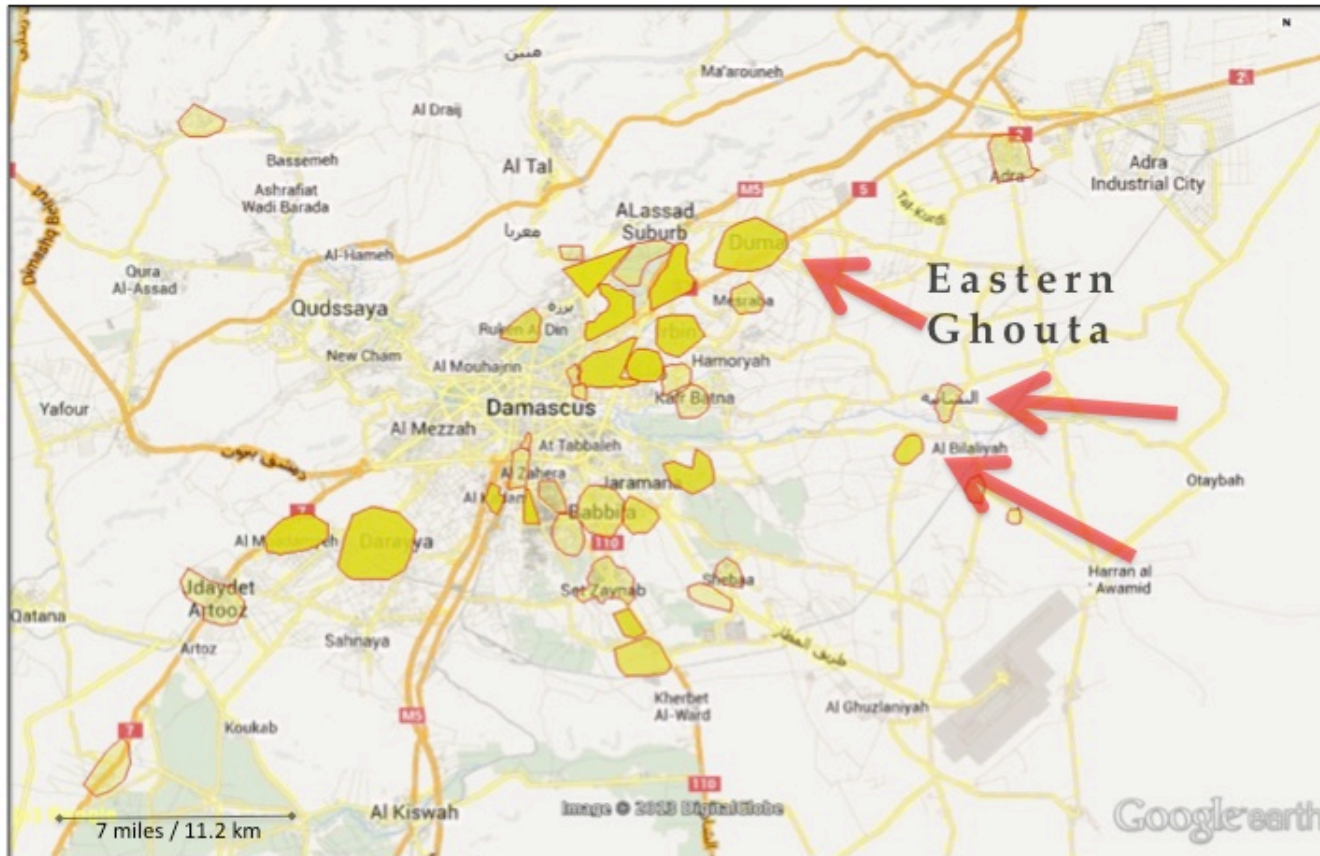
<sup>4</sup> Due to the lack of clear front lines in many parts of Damascus and the surrounding countryside, no attempts have been made to show opposition vs. government-controlled territory. Instead, by focusing on areas where direct confrontations are taking place, a more nuanced image can be provided that shows both the opposition presence as well as flashpoint areas.

## Clashes in Damascus During May



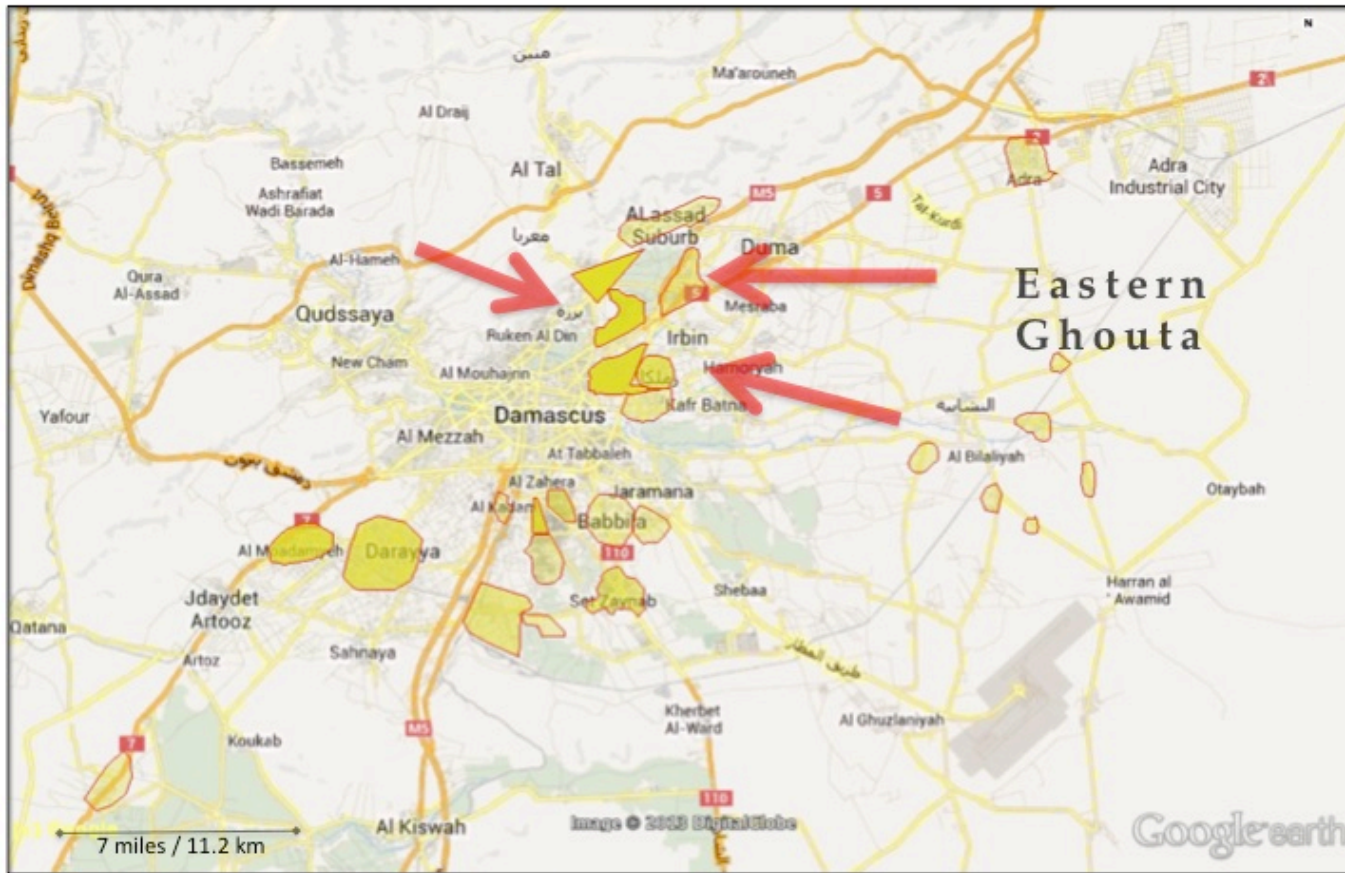
Government forces advance northward, encircling opposition units operating in the area.

## Clashes in Damascus During June



Government forces push opposition units into the eastern suburbs of the city.

## Clashes in Damascus During July



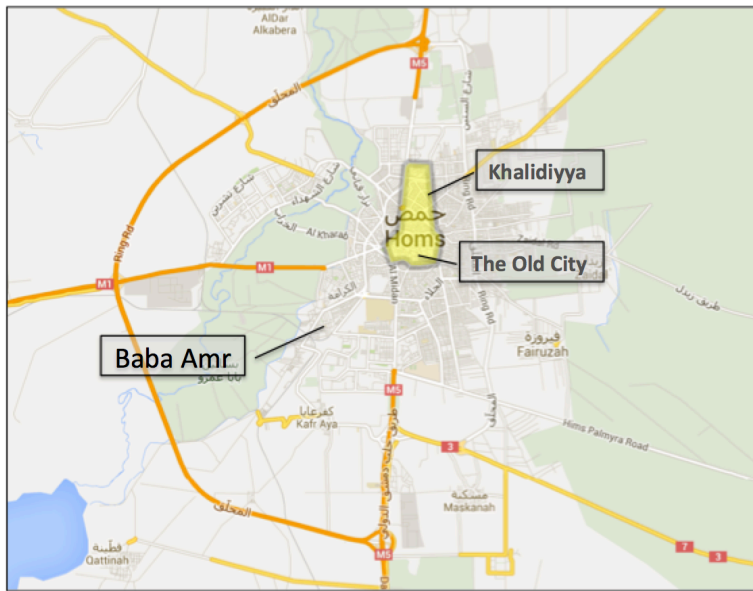
Heavy fighting is currently taking place in the eastern suburbs as government forces try to clear entrenched opposition positions.

## Homs

Government forces have made substantial gains in Homs. After victory in Qusayr, government forces pushed northwards towards Aleppo. However, heavy resistance from remaining opposition units in Homs and the surrounding area left government forces over-extended and led to a re-focusing of attention on opposition strongholds within Homs. The following maps show the progression of fighting in Homs governorate. Yellow highlighted areas in the following maps represent areas that have witnessed clashes, shelling, and/or aerial bombardments.

Opposition reports from Homs indicate that government troops initially attempted to storm the remaining strongholds of the Old City and Khalidiyya district, before resorting to heavy bombardment. By July 31, most of the Khalidiyya district had been destroyed, including the historic Khalid bin al-Walid mosque.

### Homs City

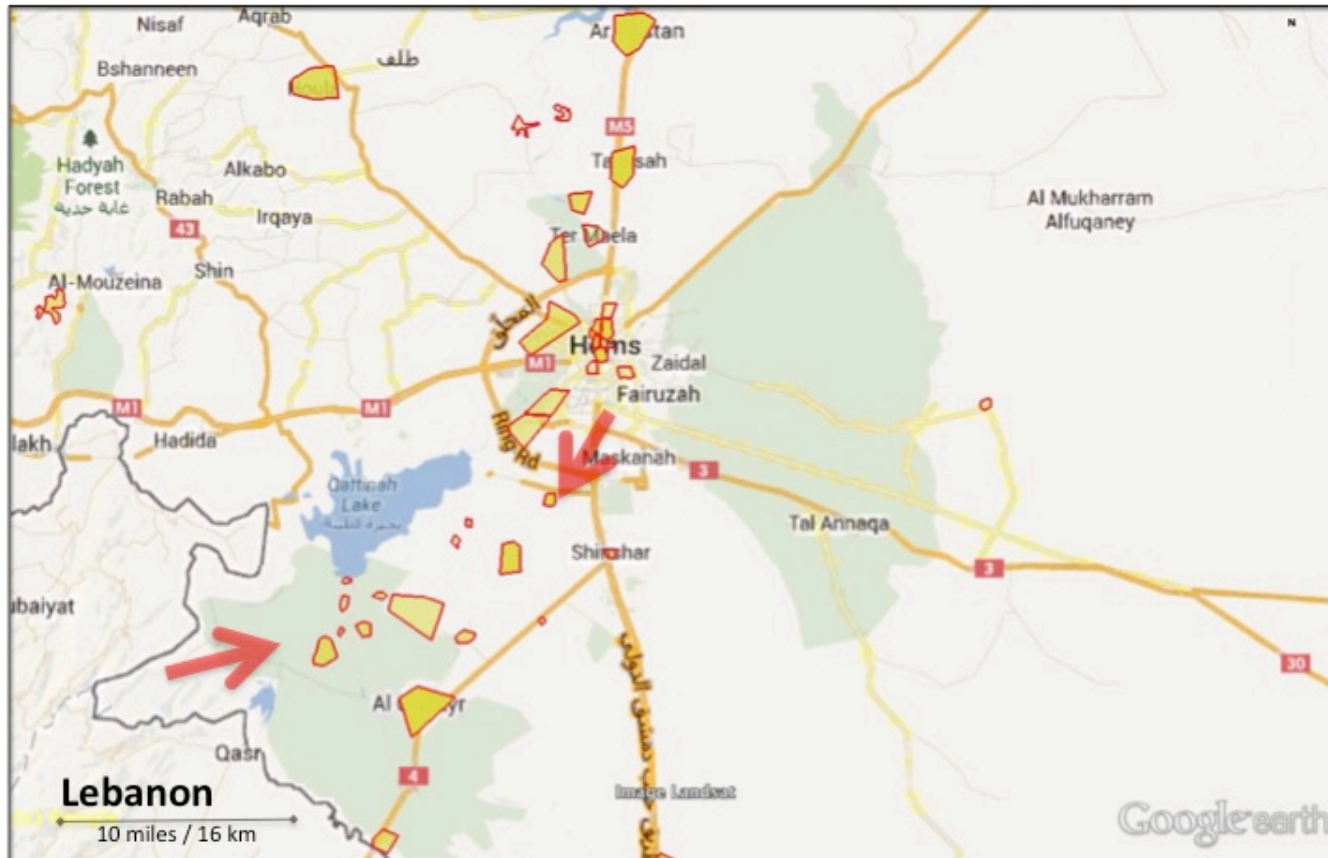


The Old City and Khalidiyya districts (highlighted above) have been almost completely re-taken by government forces.

Though scattered fighting persists, government forces have largely re-taken the bulk of central Homs, meaning they now control a nearly unbroken swath of territory from Lebanon’s Bekka Valley and northern border to Syria’s Hama province. This represents a major accomplishment for government forces, and could prove essential in stemming the flow of arms and fighters from Lebanon to positions in the north. Additionally, it allows the government access to the highway system linking Damascus to the coastal governorates of Tartus and Lattakia.

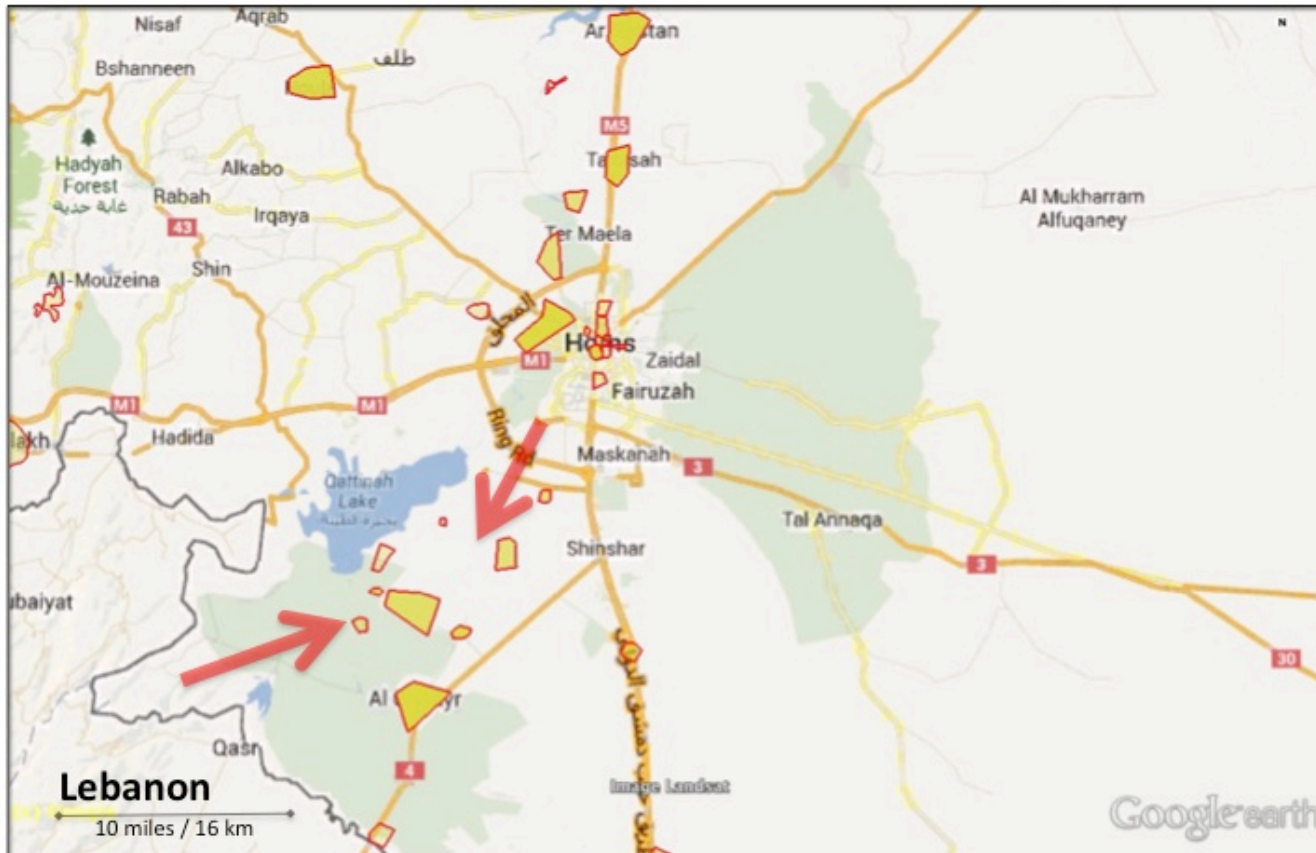


## Homs Governorate in April



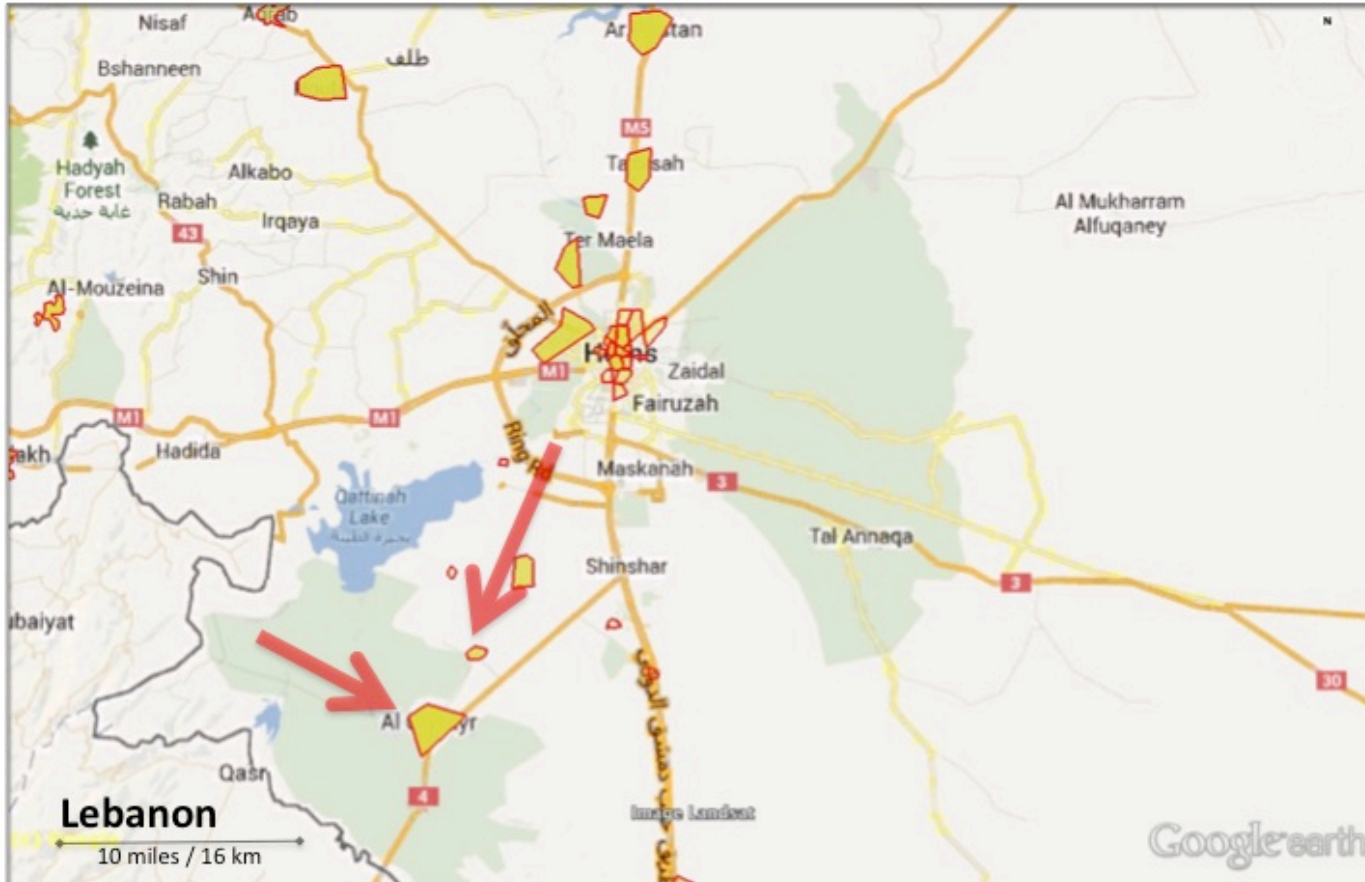
Syrian government forces made a concerted effort throughout April to clear all towns between Homs and the Lebanese border.

## Homs Governorate in May



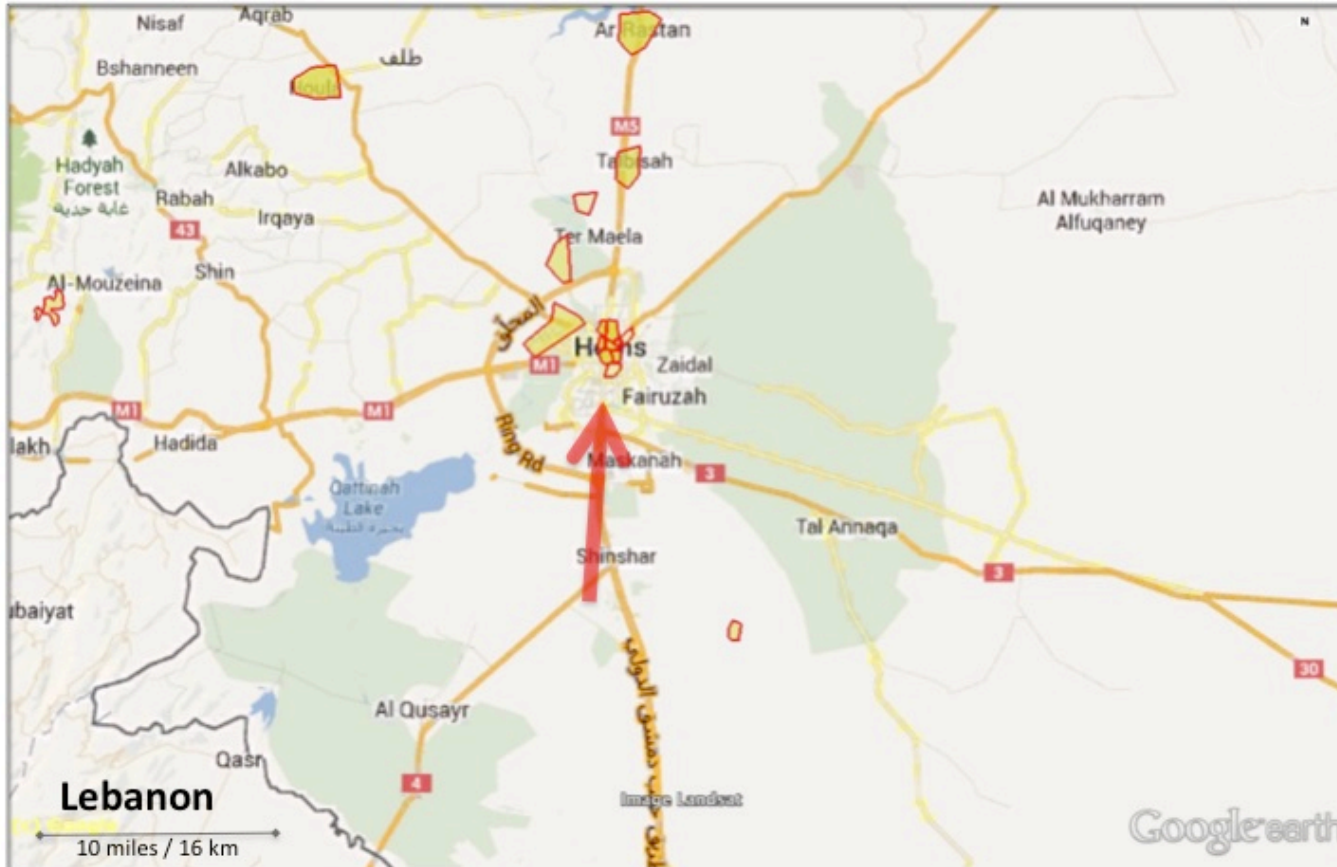
Government forces, aided by Hezbollah, continued to clear town after town, and began focusing entirely on Qusayr by the end of May.

## Homs Governorate in June



By early June, government forces and Hezbollah had fully taken Qusayr and much of the surrounding countryside.

## Homs Governorate in early July

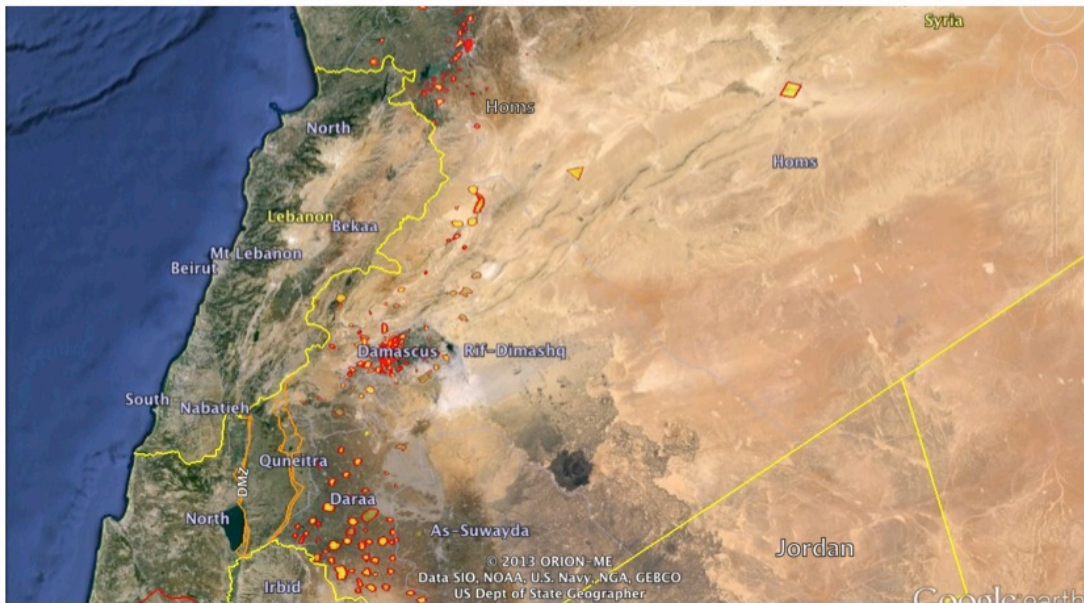


Having cleared the countryside, government forces focused their attention on remaining opposition strongholds in the center of Homs. The near complete lack of recorded clashes between Homs and the Lebanese border is indicative of the substantially reduced rebel presence in these areas.

## Southern Syria

As the following map indicates, nearly all of the fighting in southern Syria has been concentrated around the Lebanese border and the central highway system. Though the Syrian government controls the majority of southern Syria, the proximity of much of the fighting to Lebanon means that it will be difficult to prevent fighters and arms from entering Syrian territory. Similarly, the intensity of fighting surrounding Lebanon underscores the fragile situation faced by the Lebanese state and society.

### Conflict Incidents in Southern Syria from April-August 1, 2013



**Figure 3: Red outlined areas denote locations of conflict incidents (including clashes, shelling, aerial bombardment, and bombings). Darker yellow shading corresponds to repeated incidents in the same location.**

## Aleppo

Despite the substantial gains made by the government in the south of the country, Syria's north and east remain largely under opposition control. In Aleppo, despite a fierce offensive that succeeded in reestablishing supply lines to besieged government forces in western districts of the city and surrounding the Aleppo international airport, opposition forces ultimately repelled government advances in both the city and surrounding countryside, and have made substantial gains of their own. This is in part due to the Syrian military being unable to conduct major operations on multiple fronts, but also due to the opposition's sustained war of attrition waged against remaining government strongholds. Additionally, opposition units have blockaded many government held districts of Aleppo city, and have prevented even basic humanitarian aid from entering.

The opposition’s gains in Aleppo and the surrounding countryside since the beginning of 2013 have led government forces to repeatedly resort to ballistic missile attacks on opposition-held populated areas. The inaccuracy of these attacks has caused hundreds of civilian casualties and represents a continuation of the Syrian military’s longtime strategy of indiscriminately bombarding territory it does not control.

Additionally, the battle for Aleppo represents another example of the government’s increased reliance on paramilitary forces. In an attempt to bolster the government’s offensive in Aleppo, Brigadier General Mohamad Khadour, a commander in the elite Republican Guard, traveled to two Shia villages (Nubl and Zahraa) approximately 24 km (15 miles) northwest of Aleppo to recruit additional fighters. In a leaked video, General Khadour asked residents of the village to raise a force and push southward in exchange for promises of government jobs and concessions. Also, there are increasing reports of a large number of Hezbollah fighters participating in fighting around Aleppo, suggesting the government’s continued reliance on the organization, even far beyond Lebanon’s borders.

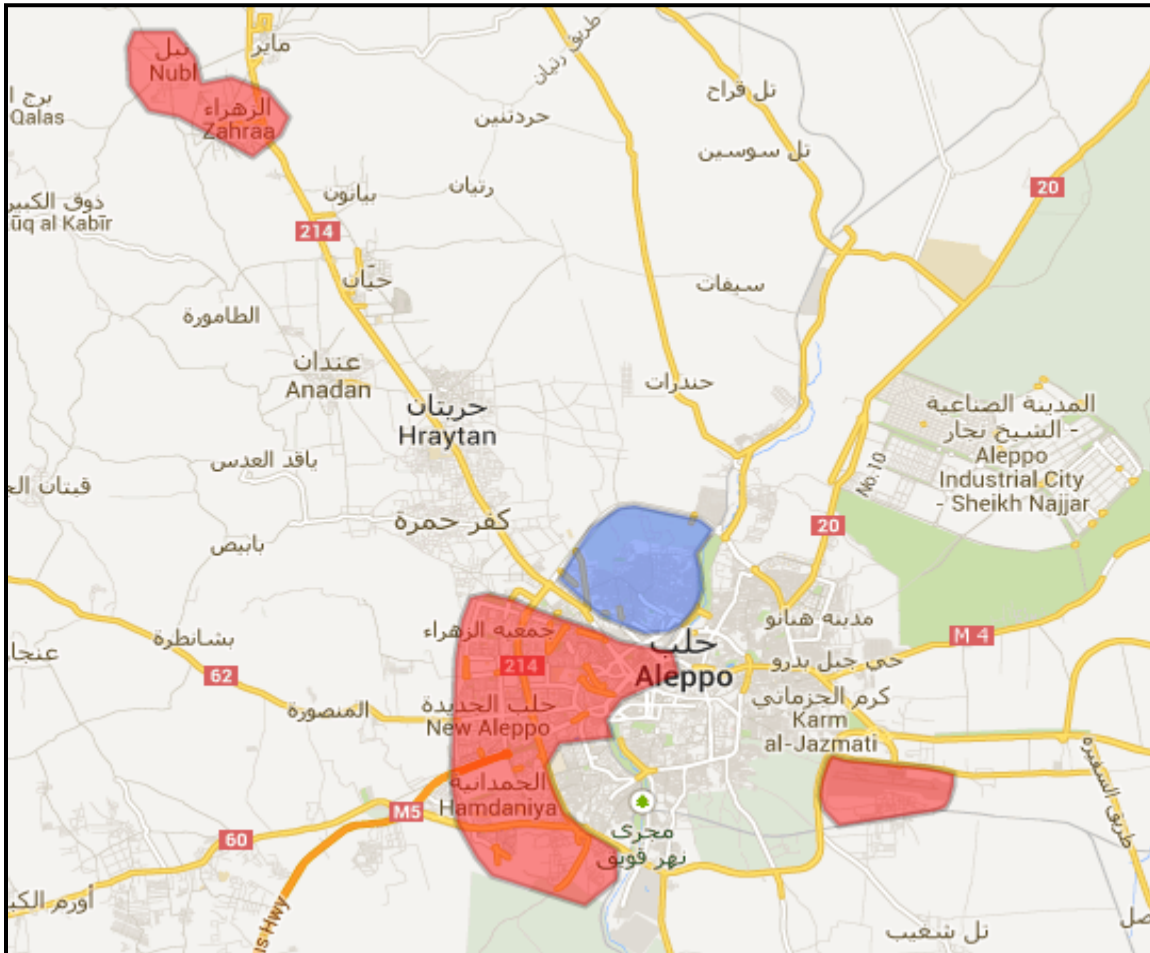


Figure 4: Government (red) and Kurdish (blue) positions in and around Aleppo as of August 7.

The above map shows government and Kurdish areas of control in Aleppo and its northern countryside. Government forces have been prevented from extending their area of control between Aleppo city and the outlying towns of Nubl and Zahraa.

With government forces besieged and largely isolated in the western districts of Aleppo city, the Syrian military has relied in large part on the power of their air force. With several air bases remaining throughout the north of the country, government forces have been able to air lift supplies to isolated positions, and conduct repeated air raids against opposition held territory. The power of the government's air force, however, was seriously challenged on August 6 when opposition forces finally managed – after an extremely prolonged siege – to capture the Minigh airbase north of Aleppo.

With opposition and government forces advancing and retreating in turn, it is clear that after more than two years of conflict, the military balance on the ground remains broadly stalemated.

## Part II: The Structure of the Armed Opposition

The following diagrams detail the structure of the armed opposition in each governorate of Syria.<sup>5</sup> They are drawn based upon data available via social media. Represented in the diagrams is information from videos posted online which chronicle approximately 4,390 unit formations over the course of the conflict, representing between 68,639 and 85,150 fighters. Of this number between 22,694 and 28,218 fighters have been seen in formation videos since January 1, 2013. The 4,390 units include umbrella organizations that group together smaller units, with varying degrees of control between local, regional, and national-level leadership. At the local level, approximately 3,250 “battalions” and “companies” have been created that often (but not always) operate beneath a total of 1,050 “brigades.” It should be noted that though opposition units use standard military terminology, these unit names should be understood as labels that in most cases represent hierarchical relationships rather than units of set sizes.



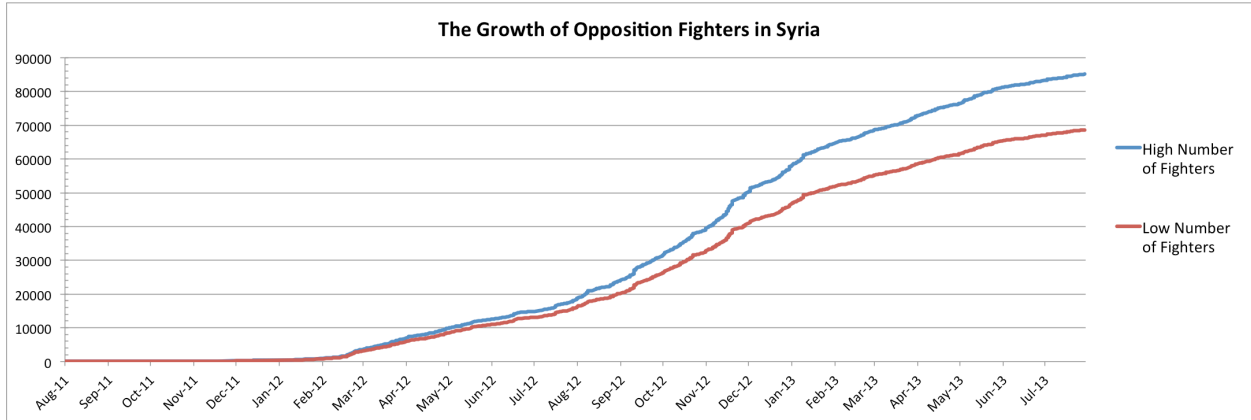
Though many of the groups operating throughout Syria are independent collections of fighters, many of them claim fealty to larger organizations that operate throughout the country. In addition to the Supreme Military Command, which purports to represent the formal leadership of the “Free Syrian Army,” a handful of other networks have risen to prominence throughout the conflict. Notable among these are the Syrian Liberation Front (also known as the Syrian Islamic

Liberation Front), the Syrian Islamic Front, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. These groups operate with a varying degree of cooperation with each other and with units affiliated with the formal leadership of the Free Syrian Army.

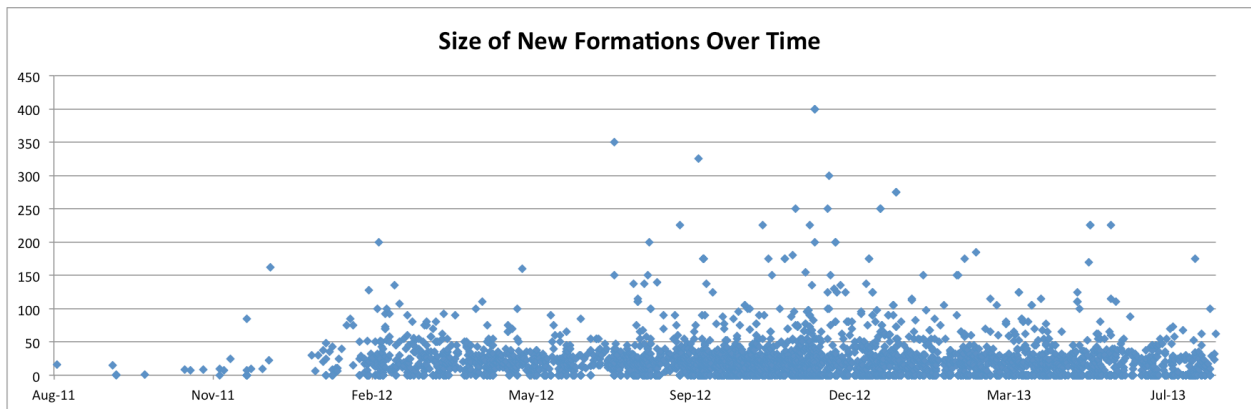
Troop counts are reached by simply counting the number of fighters present in each formation video, and tallying the total. When calculating exact numbers of individuals is impossible due to the high number of fighters present and the low quality of some videos, high and low estimates are made. Additionally, when unit formations are announced by a handful of leaders only, *only* those individuals present in the formation are counted towards the unit size – regardless of the size claimed by the unit.

<sup>5</sup> Damascus, and Rif Damascus, which are technically separate governorates, have been grouped together for the purpose of this analysis.





The majority of groups formed throughout the country have contained less than 50 fighters at the time of their establishment (33 fighters to be precise), with the largest single formation numbering approximately 450 men. After forming, these groups have generally, but not always, incorporated themselves into larger networks of fighters. The majority of formations took place in the governorates of Idlib, Aleppo, and Deir Ez-Zour.

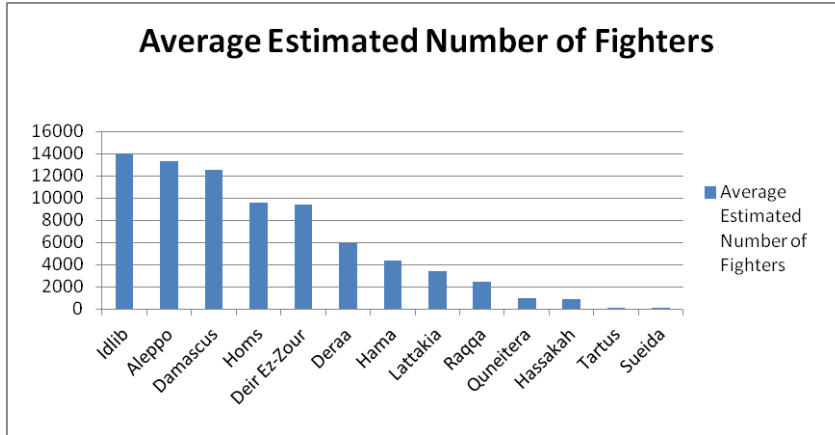


As previously mentioned, the number of fighters and fighting units included in this report is based solely upon information made available via social media. As suggested by the sheer amount of data available via social media, this approach offers functional estimates of opposition strength and structure, but cannot account for fighters and units that have not been seen online.

Once a group has formed, tracking its continued existence, or continued relevance poses a problem. In order to account for groups that have either been killed or disbanded, this report will provide information on both A) the total number of groups formed in each governorate in the course of the conflict, and B) the subset of groups that have been formed or have grown during 2013.<sup>6</sup> By tracking group formations and connections over time, this

<sup>6</sup> Due to the relatively small number of units formed in the Tartus and Sueida governorates, only one structural diagram showing the aggregate of groups formed throughout the conflict is provided for each.

report hopes to not only provide information on the structure of the opposition, but also on what elements of the opposition are currently increasing or decreasing in influence.

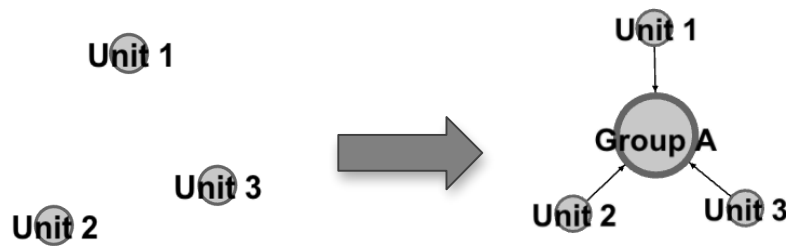


The following structural diagrams are presented in order of relative number of fighters, with the governorates that have seen the most fighters join being presented first. The table to the left details the number of opposition fighters seen in each governorate.

**A note on interpreting network diagrams**

The following diagrams represent all unique formations recorded via social media over the course of the Syrian conflict. Each group is represented by a node, with the size of the node corresponding to the number of units directly subsidiary to that group. The color of each node corresponds to the number of fighters seen in the group’s formation video (the darker the color, the more fighters present). Labels in the diagrams have been re-sized and translated for visibility based either on node size or a mathematical ranking of the group’s importance to the overall 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.

### 1. Idlib Governorate

Between 12,628 and 15,332 fighters have been seen in formation videos from Idlib governorate throughout the conflict, with between 2,367 and 2,974 fighters joining since January 1, 2013. The Military Revolutionary Council in Idlib formed early in the conflict, and quickly became an influential force in unifying the various groups throughout the governorate. While many groups have joined this loose collection of fighters, others, including more Islamist-leaning organizations, have not. More research is needed to determine the level of cooperation between these groups.

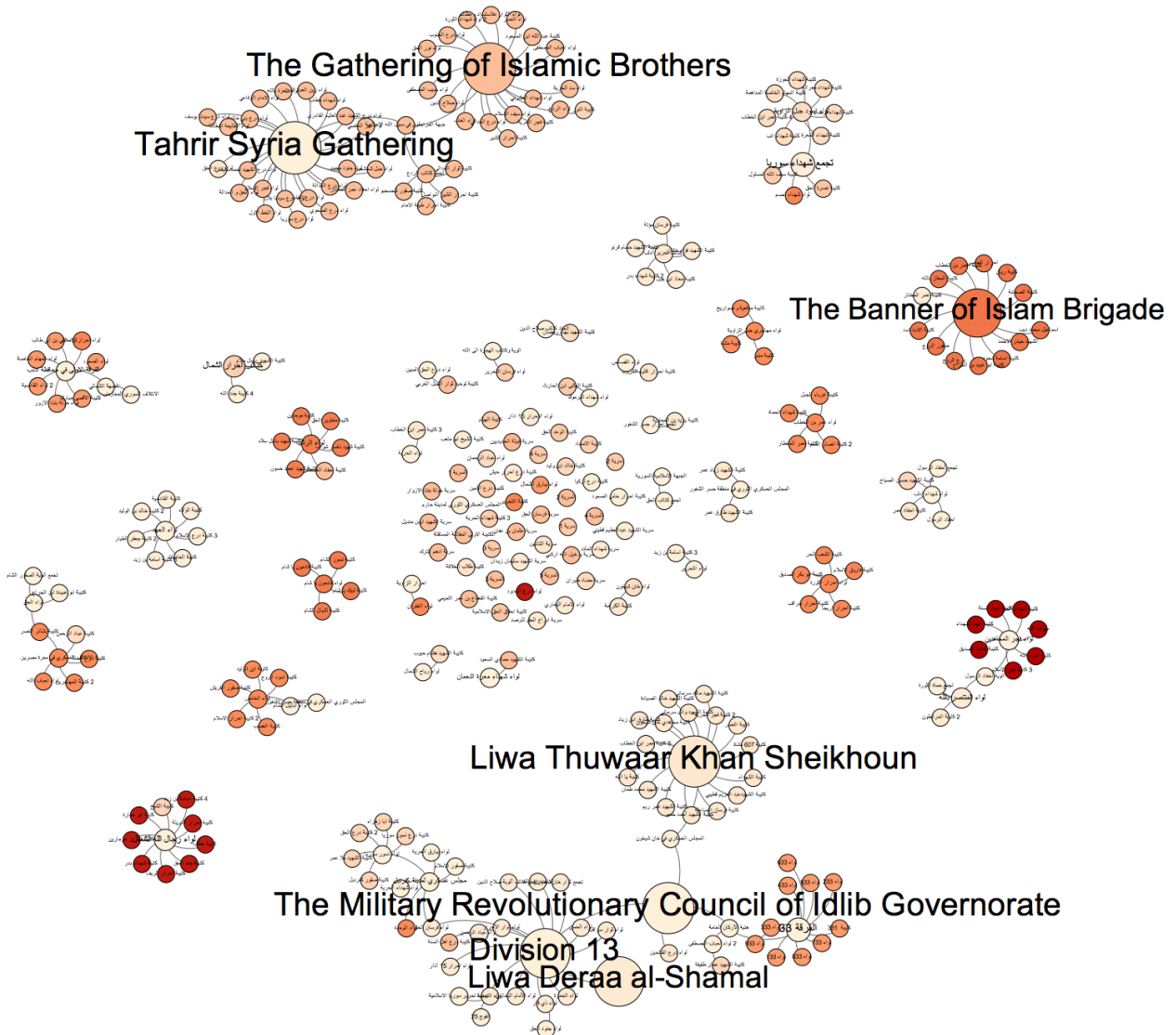


Figure 5: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Idlib governorate during 2013.

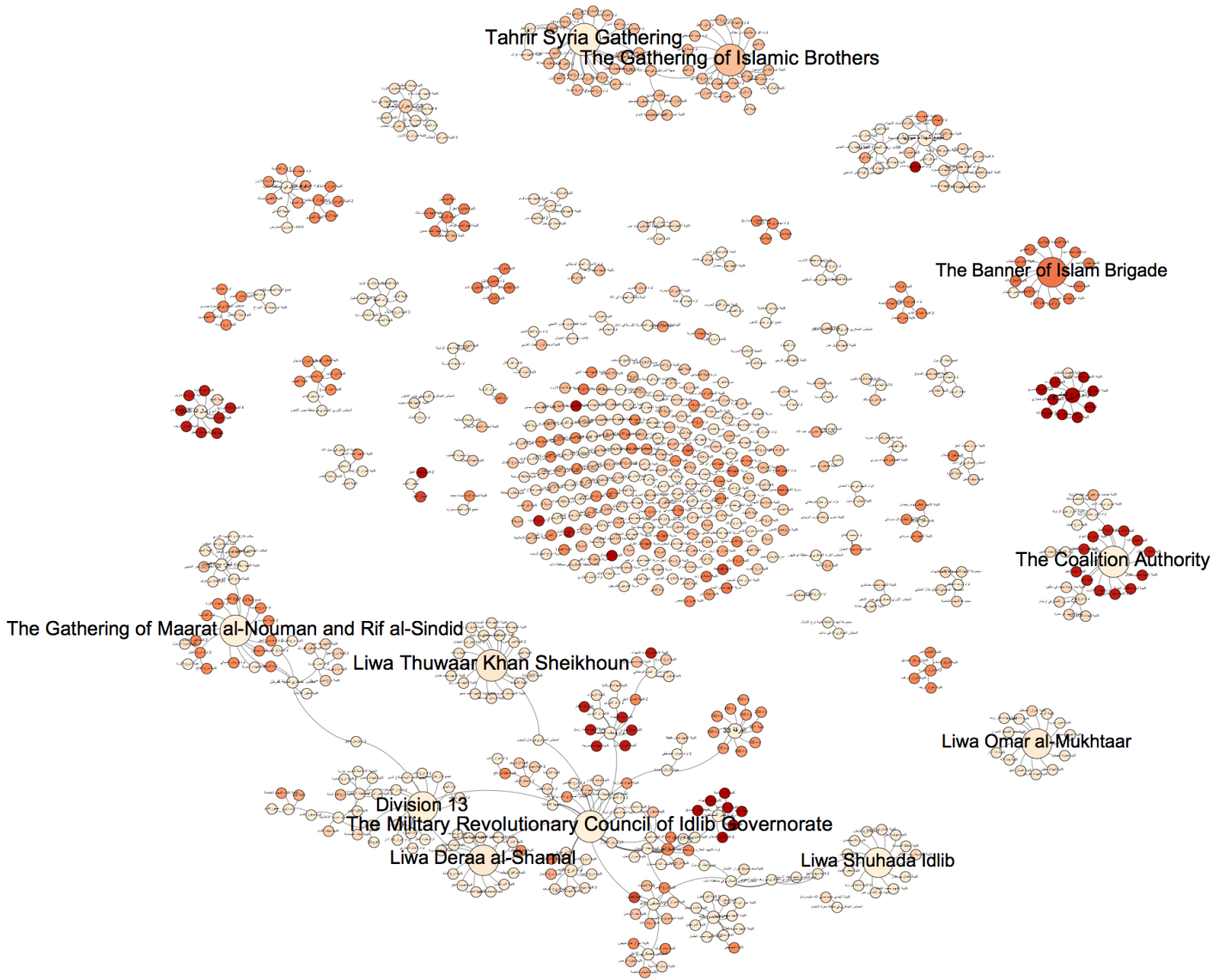


Figure 6: Aggregate of all armed opposition groups that have formed in Idlib governorate since the start of the conflict.

## 2. Aleppo Governorate

Between 11,824 and 14,826 fighters have been seen in formation videos in the Aleppo governorate since the beginning of Syria’s civil war. Of this number, between 3,697 and 4,672 fighters have joined since January 1, 2013.

Aleppo remains one of Syria’s most heated battlegrounds. Due to the high degree of control over the surrounding northern countryside, the proximity to safe havens, supplies, and high ranking opposition leadership in Turkey, fighting units in Aleppo have seen a higher degree of unification and coordination than elsewhere in the country. Despite this, fighters operating in Aleppo represent not only the formal hierarchy of the Free Syrian Army, but also major elements of most of Syria’s largest independent formations as well. The Syrian Islamic Front, the Syrian Liberation Front, and Jabhat al-Nusra (to name a few) have established a strong presence in the city and alternately cooperate with and vie for control amongst each other. Additionally, Aleppo is a very ethnically diverse city, and has seen the formation of large Kurdish and Turkomen units, as well as the presence of the PKK-affiliated People’s Defense Units (YPG) – particularly in the northern district of Sheikh Maqsood. As units continue to form and reform during 2013, the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), which is a powerful nationwide network of Islamist fighters, stands out as a rising force amongst units in Aleppo.

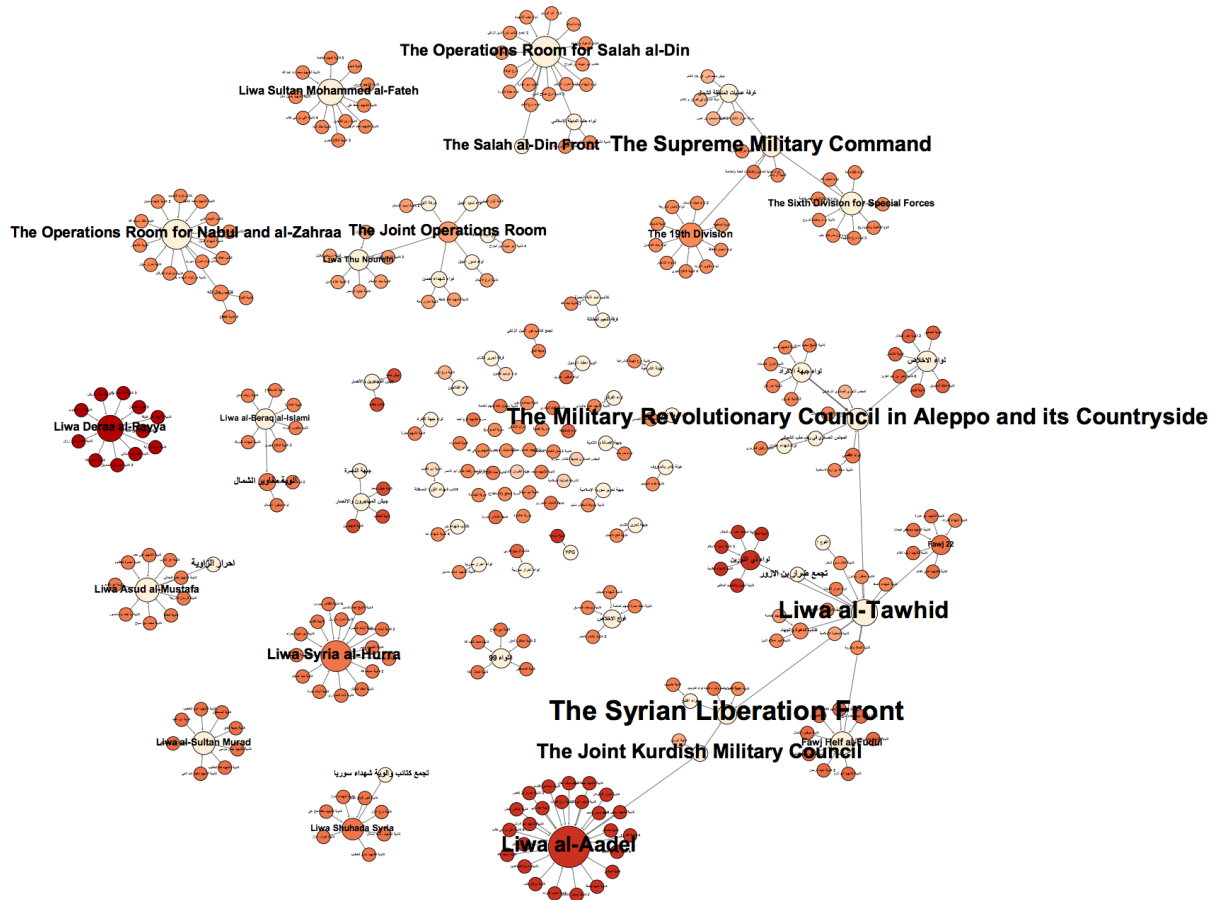


Figure 7: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Aleppo governorate during 2013.

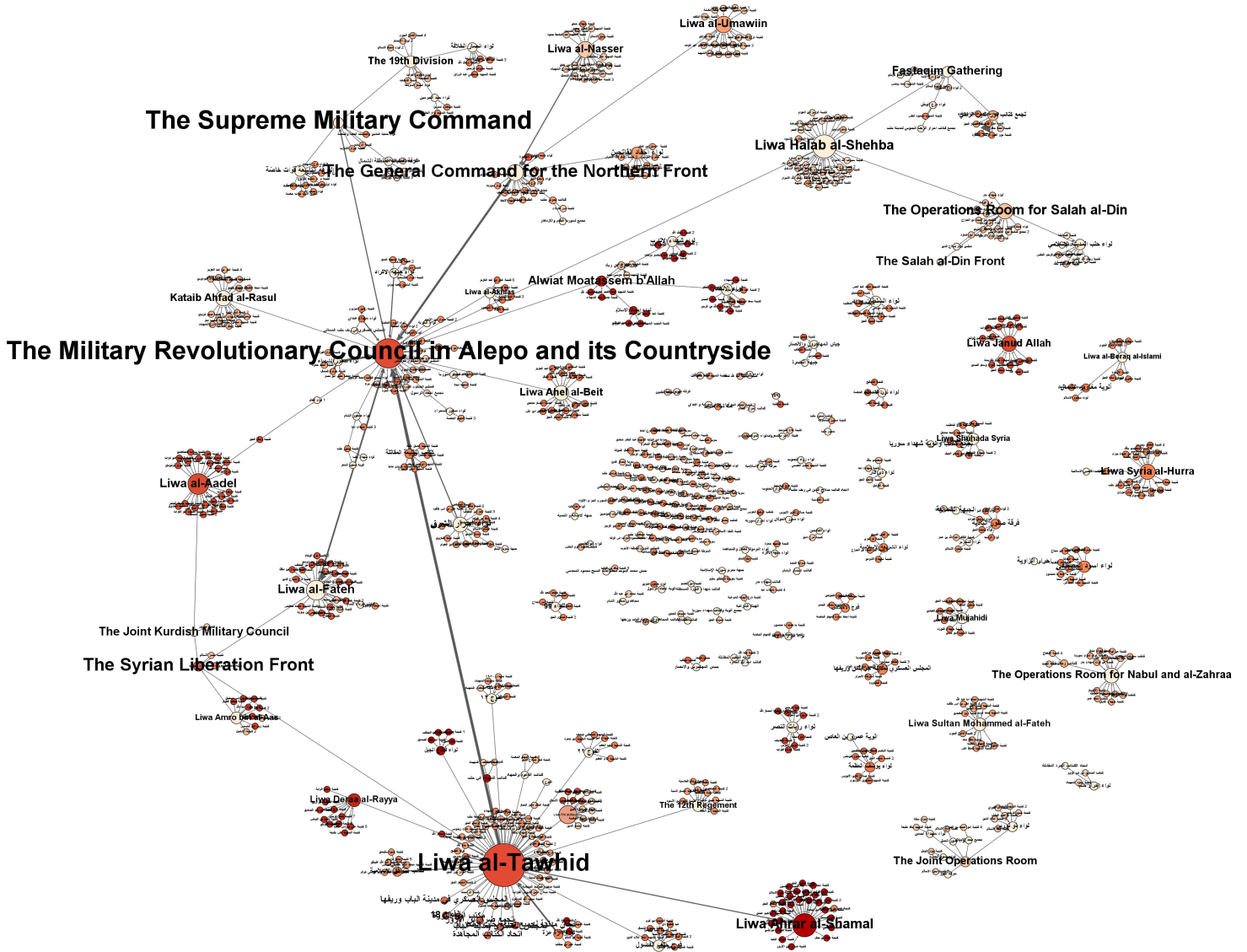


Figure 8: Aggregate of all armed opposition groups that have formed in Aleppo governorate since the start of the conflict.







### 4. Homs Governorate

Between 8,543 and 10,509 fighters have taken part in online formation announcements since the start of Syria’s conflict. Of this number, between 1,233 and 1,495 have been seen since 2013. Homs has been an important city throughout Syria’s civil war, and was the location of the opposition’s first major stand against government troops in the neighborhood of Baba Amr. More recently, the front line returned to Homs City following the battle for Qusayr (27km / 17mi. southwest of the city). The first major group to appear in Homs was the Khalid ibn al-Walid Brigade, closely followed by Liwa al-Haqq and Katibat al-Farouq – itself an offshoot formed by former members of the Khalid ibn al-Walid Brigade. While the Khalid ibn al-Walid Brigade eventually faded and disbanded, Katibat al-Farouq went on to form an extensive and far reaching network of units under the Syrian Liberation Front (bottom center of the aggregate diagram on the following page) as did Liwa al-Haqq under the Syrian Islamic Front (bottom right).

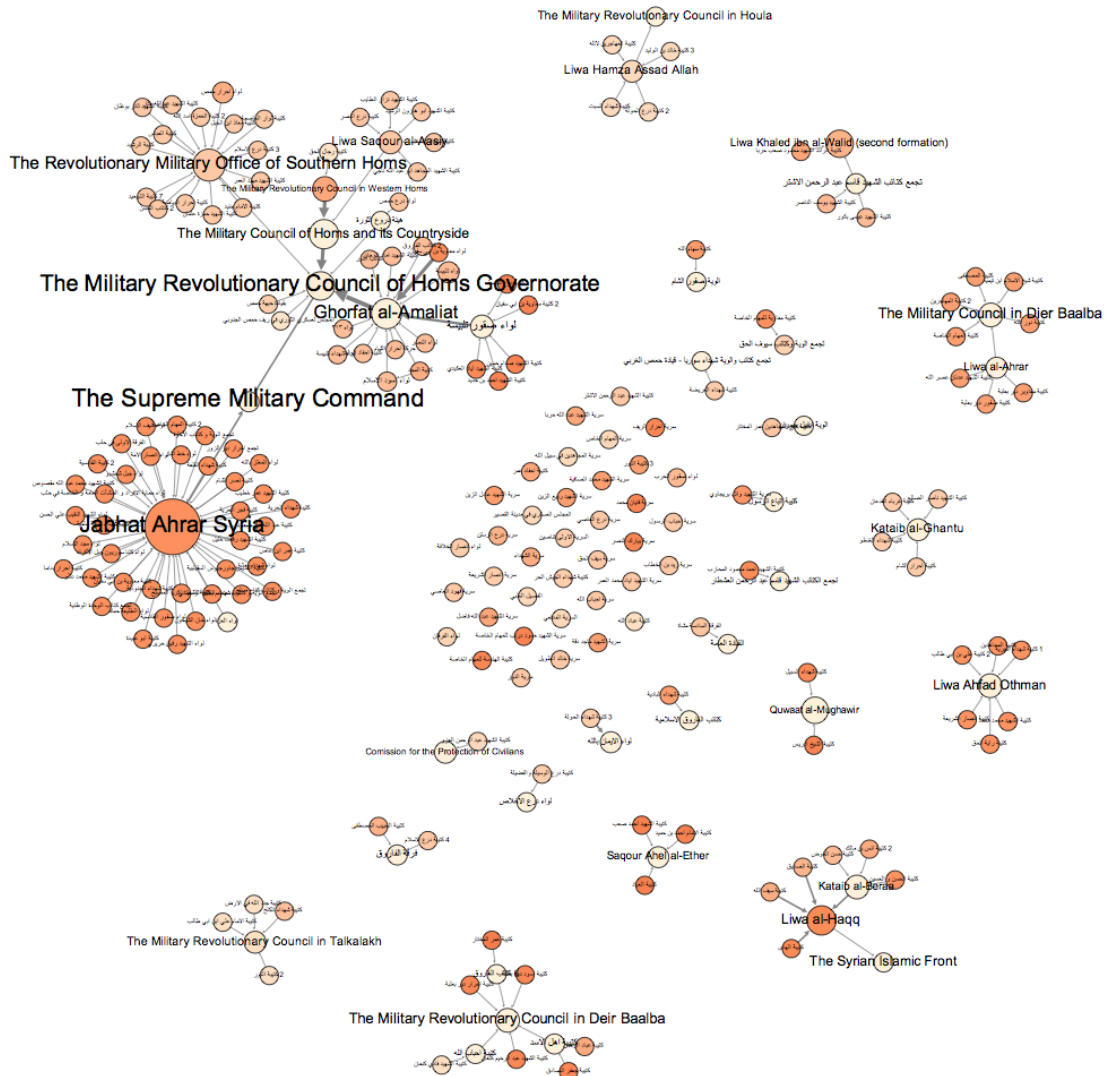


Figure 11: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Homs governorate during 2013.



## 5. Deir Ez-Zour Governorate

Between 8,330 and 10,511 fighters have been seen in formation videos from Deir Ez-Zour, with between 3,140 and 3,881 joining since January 1, 2013.

Like in many other areas of Syria, the Revolutionary Military Council in Deir Ez-Zour has proven to be a center of gravity for groups operating in the region. Though the Council has brought together a large number of fighters, tribal networks still remain supreme in Syria's east, and have been an important force in unifying many units. After the withdrawal of most government troops from the eastern territories of Syria, fighters from Deir Ez-Zour travelled to Aleppo, Raqqa, and Hassakah to participate in front-line fighting.

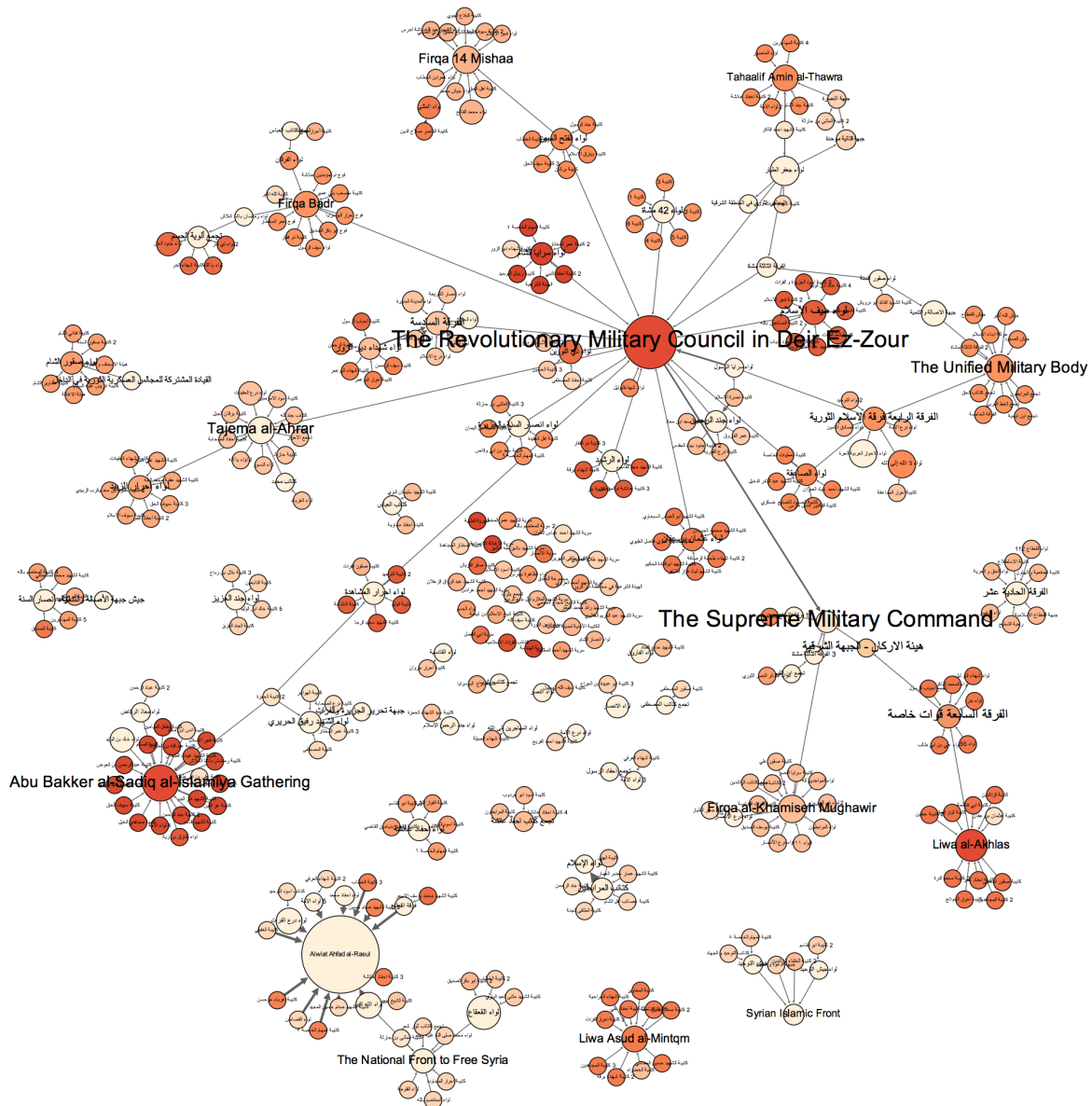


Figure 13: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Deir Ez-Zour governorate during 2013.



## 6. Deraa Governorate

Between 5,424 and 6,483 fighters have been seen in formation videos from Deraa over the course of the conflict. Of that number, between 2,635 and 3,172 have been involved in unit formations since January 1, 2013.

The Military Revolutionary Council of Deraa formed early in the conflict and has helped draw in most groups in the area. Though many unaffiliated smaller battalions have formed over the course of the conflict, many of the largest groupings of fighters formed in Deraa have joined with the Council. Groups affiliated with the Council in Deraa, and therefore the formal hierarchy of the FSA, have greatly outnumbered independent units throughout the conflict.

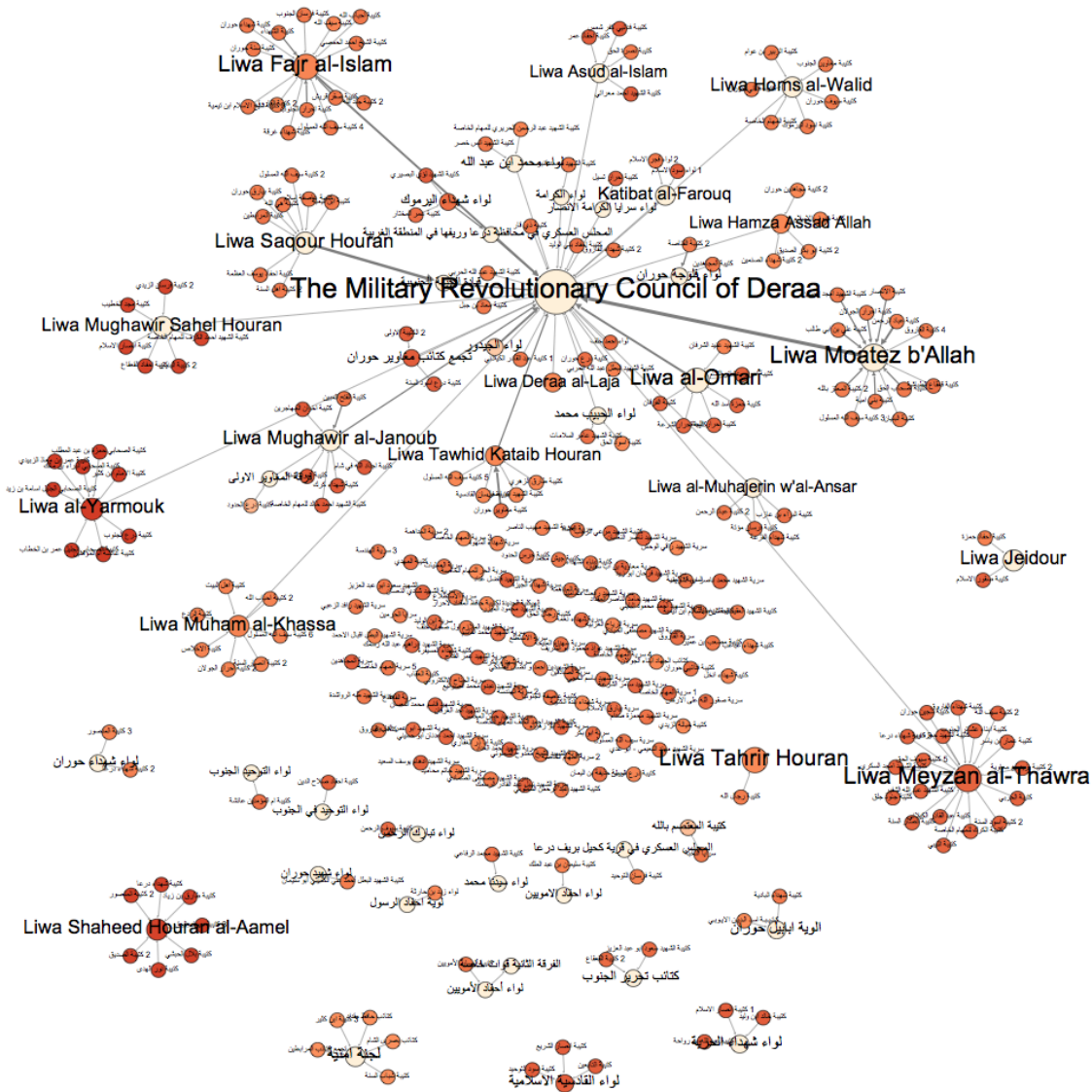


Figure 15: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Deraa governorate during 2013.

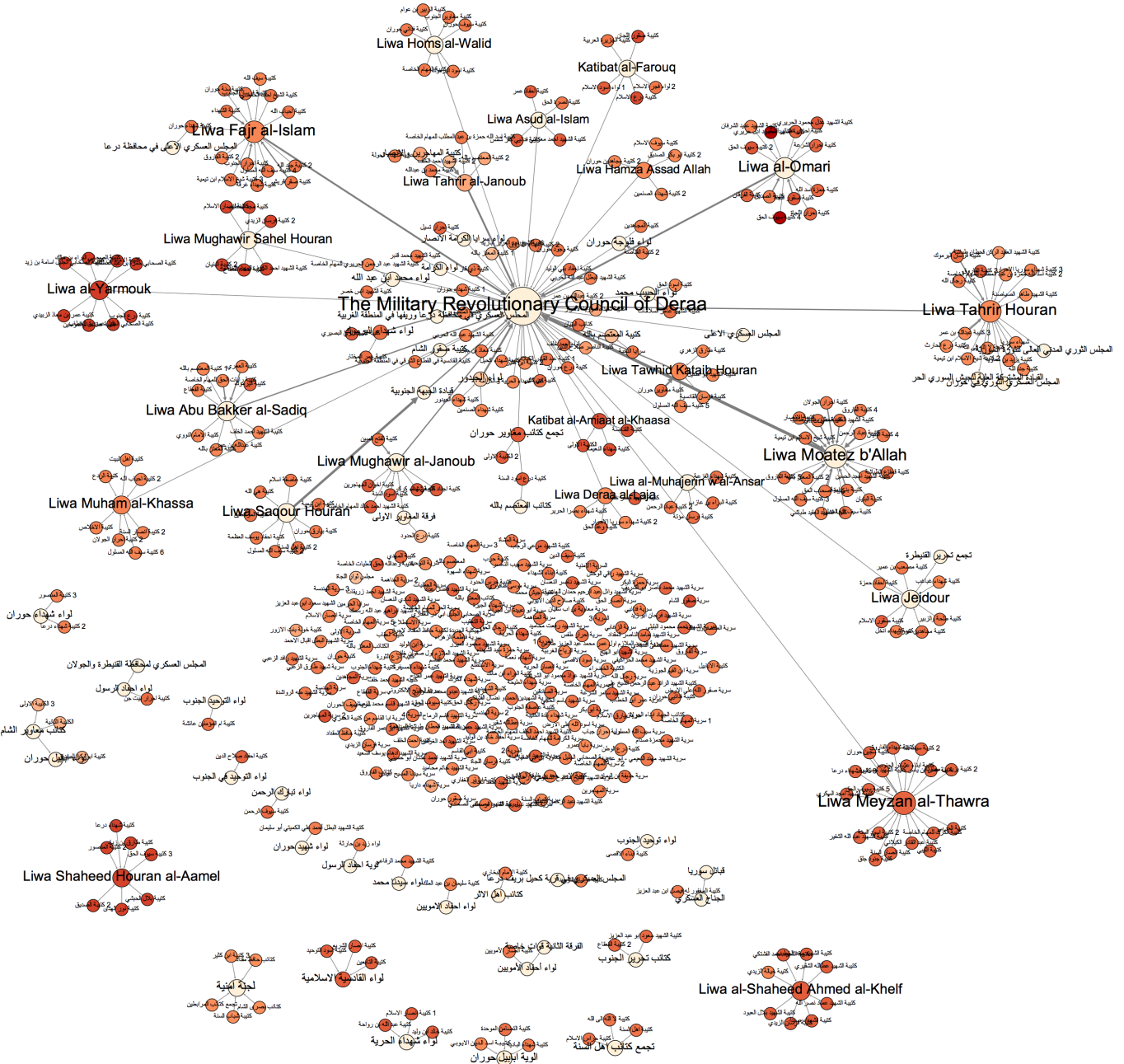


Figure 16: Aggregate of all armed opposition groups that have formed in Deraa governorate since the beginning of the conflict.

### 7. Hama Governorate

Between 3,848 and 4,789 fighters have been seen in formations of opposition fighters in the Hama governorate. Of that number, between 928 and 1,113 fighters have been seen since January 1, 2013.

Though early to form, the Military Council in Hama remained fairly static while a large number of independent units formed throughout 2012. In 2013, however, the Military Council began to draw more units into its fold, and currently stands as the largest collection of fighters to have formed in Hama governorate.

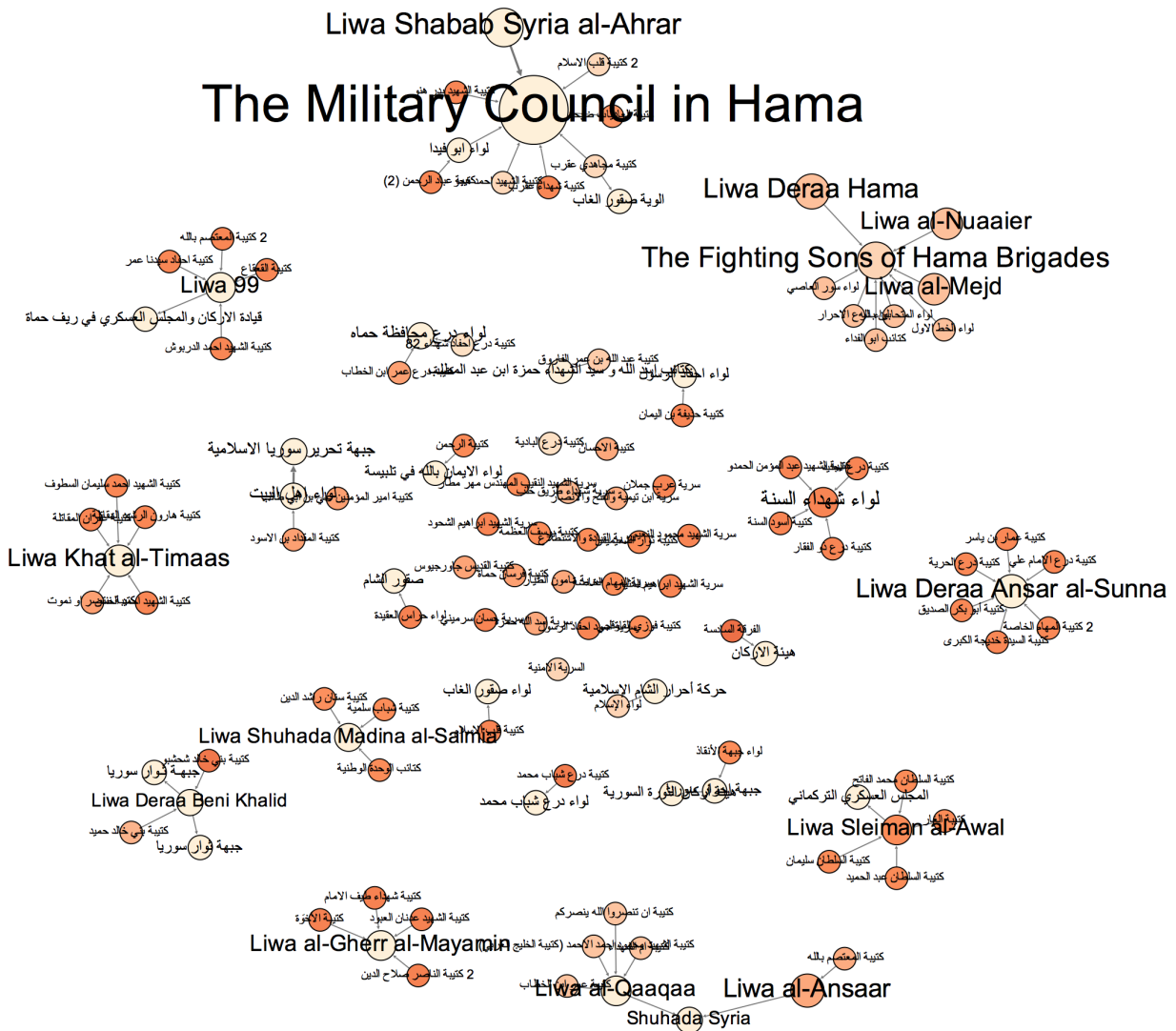


Figure 17: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Hama governorate during 2013.

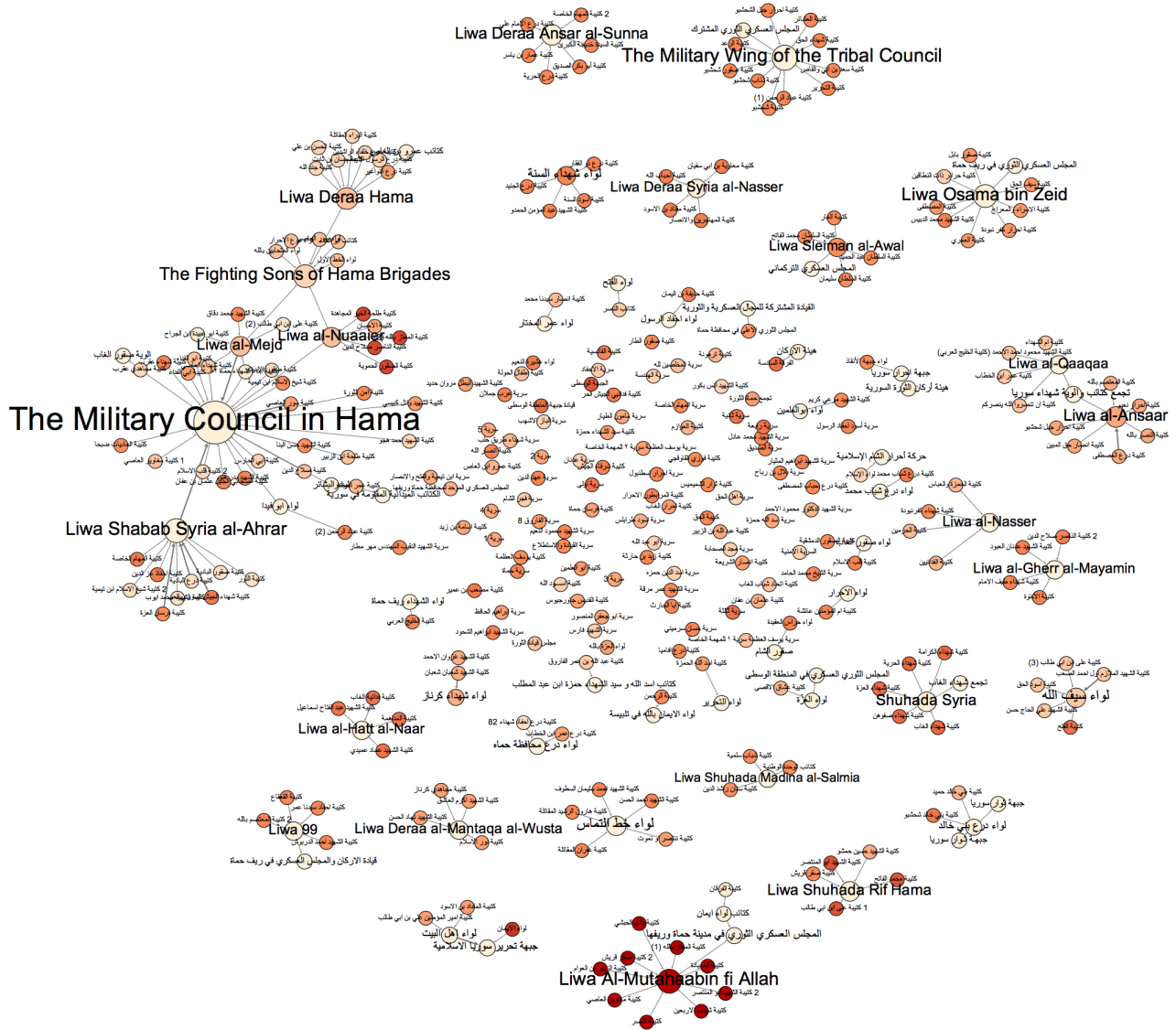


Figure 18: Aggregate of all armed opposition groups that have formed in Hama governorate since the beginning of the conflict.



### 8. Lattakia Governorate

Between 2,993 and 3,820 fighters have formed in Lattakia over the course of the conflict, with between 747 and 954 present in formation videos during 2013.

Initially, the majority of fighters in Lattakia were divided between two groups: Liwa Ahbab al-Rasul and Liwa Ahrar al-Saahel. Both of these groups joined the Military Revolutionary Council in al-Saahel in the summer of 2012, forming an alliance that eclipsed all other independent groups for a short time. Between the fall of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, however, three large networks of fighters emerged that equaled the Council in terms of number of subsidiary units. While many of these units are still active, only a handful of them (pictured below) have continued to grow throughout 2013, the largest of these being Liwa al-Sadiq and Liwa al-Fatah al-Mubien, which joined forces in February 2013 under the Commission for the Protection of Civilians (a nationwide umbrella organization).

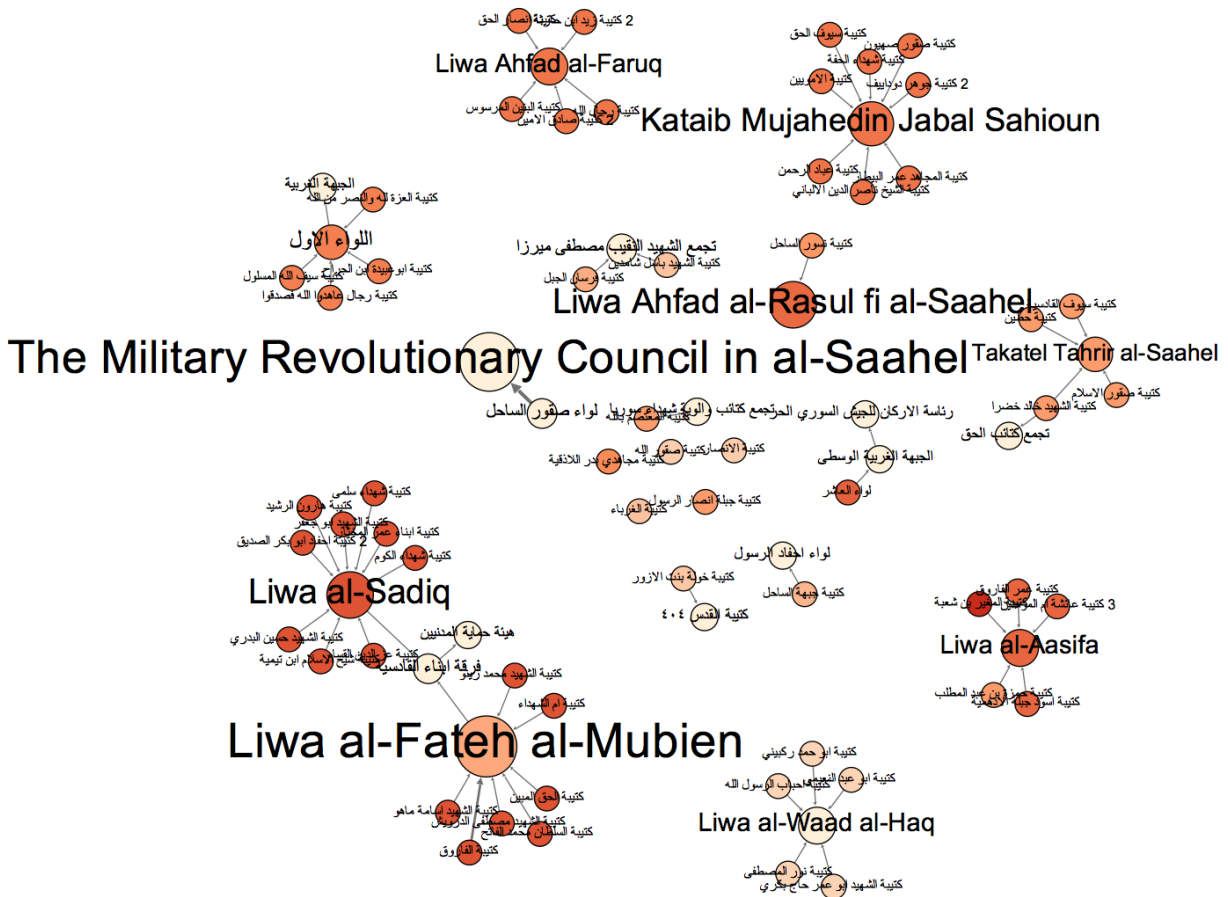


Figure 19: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Lattakia governorate during 2013.

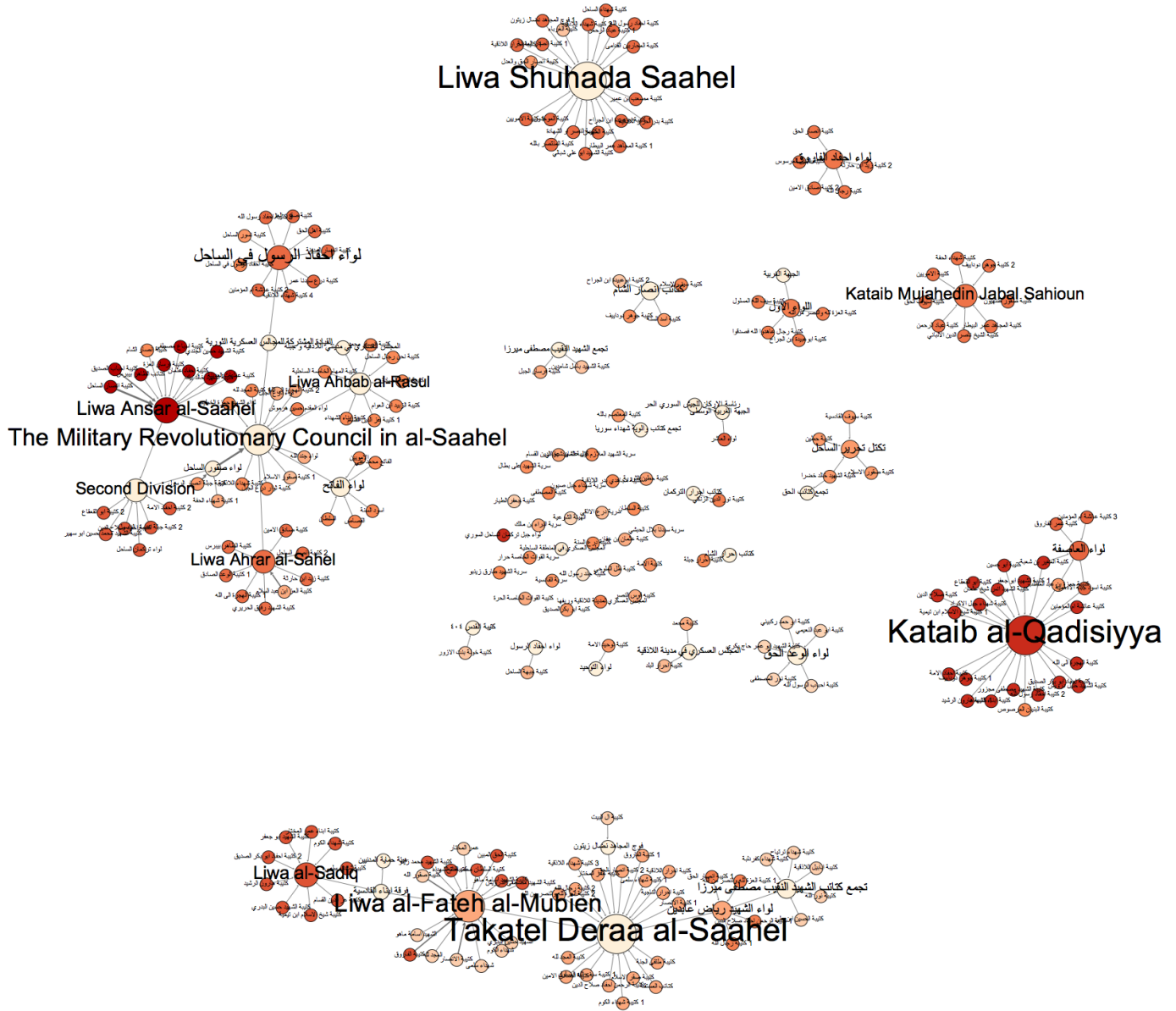


Figure 20: Aggregate of all armed opposition groups that have formed in Lattakia governorate since the beginning of the conflict.

### 9. Raqqa Governorate

Between 2,160 and 2,757 fighters have been seen in formation videos from Raqqa governorate throughout the conflict. Between 1,222 and 1,584 of these fighters have joined units in the governorate since January 1, 2013.

The evolution of armed groups in Raqqa has been atypical in that a number of larger gatherings of units have been formed at various times throughout the conflict, with the end result being a high degree of overlapping affiliations between groups. Further research needs to be conducted to determine whether the Military Council of Raqqa and the Military Revolutionary Council of Raqqa are in fact separate entities. The Military Revolutionary Council of Raqqa announced its membership in the FSA’s Supreme Military Command in early June, 2013, under the leadership of Mohammed Moatez al-Salam, who had previously formed the Military Council of al-Tabqa (also known as al-Thawra).

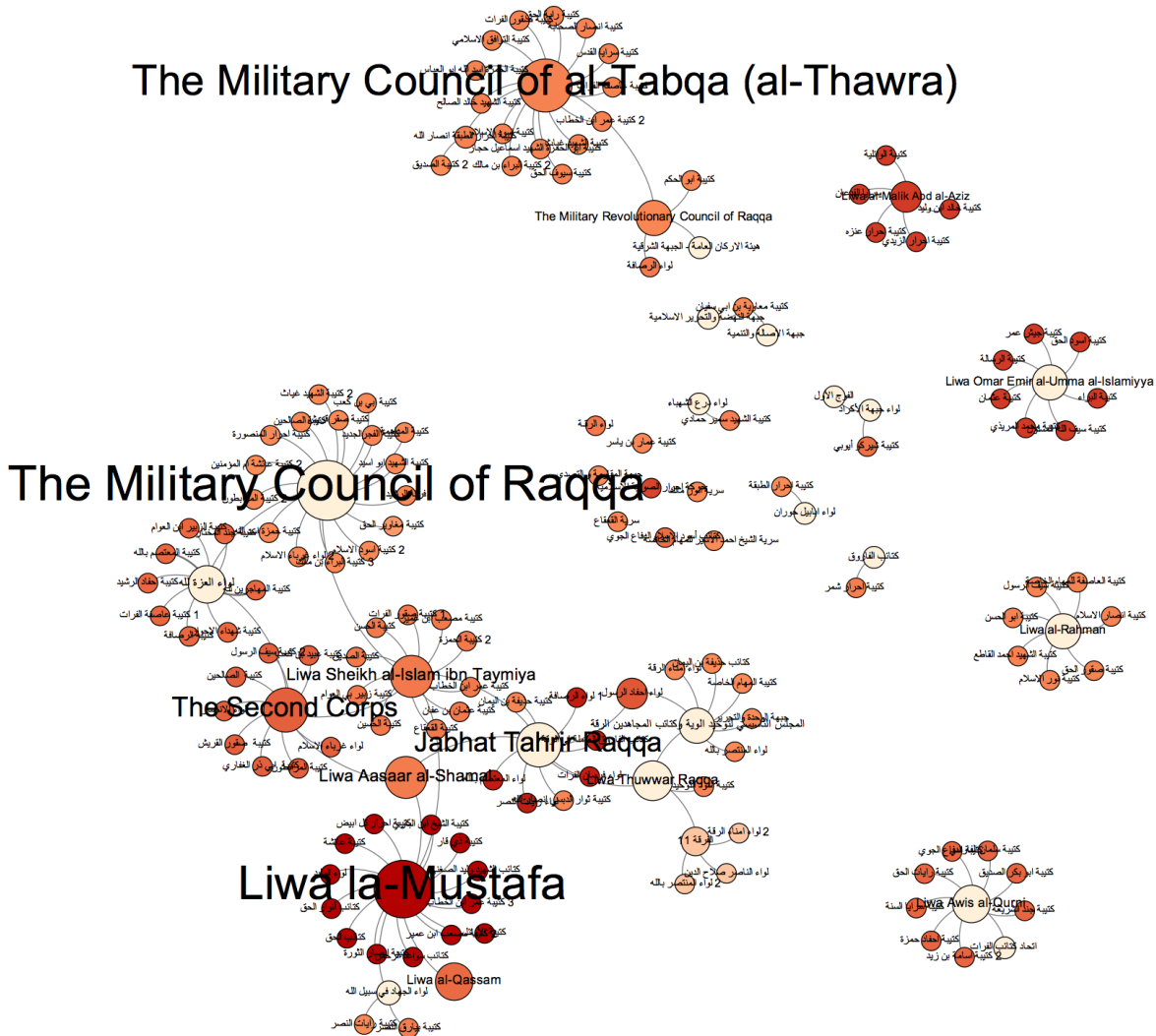


Figure 21: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Raqqa governorate during 2013.

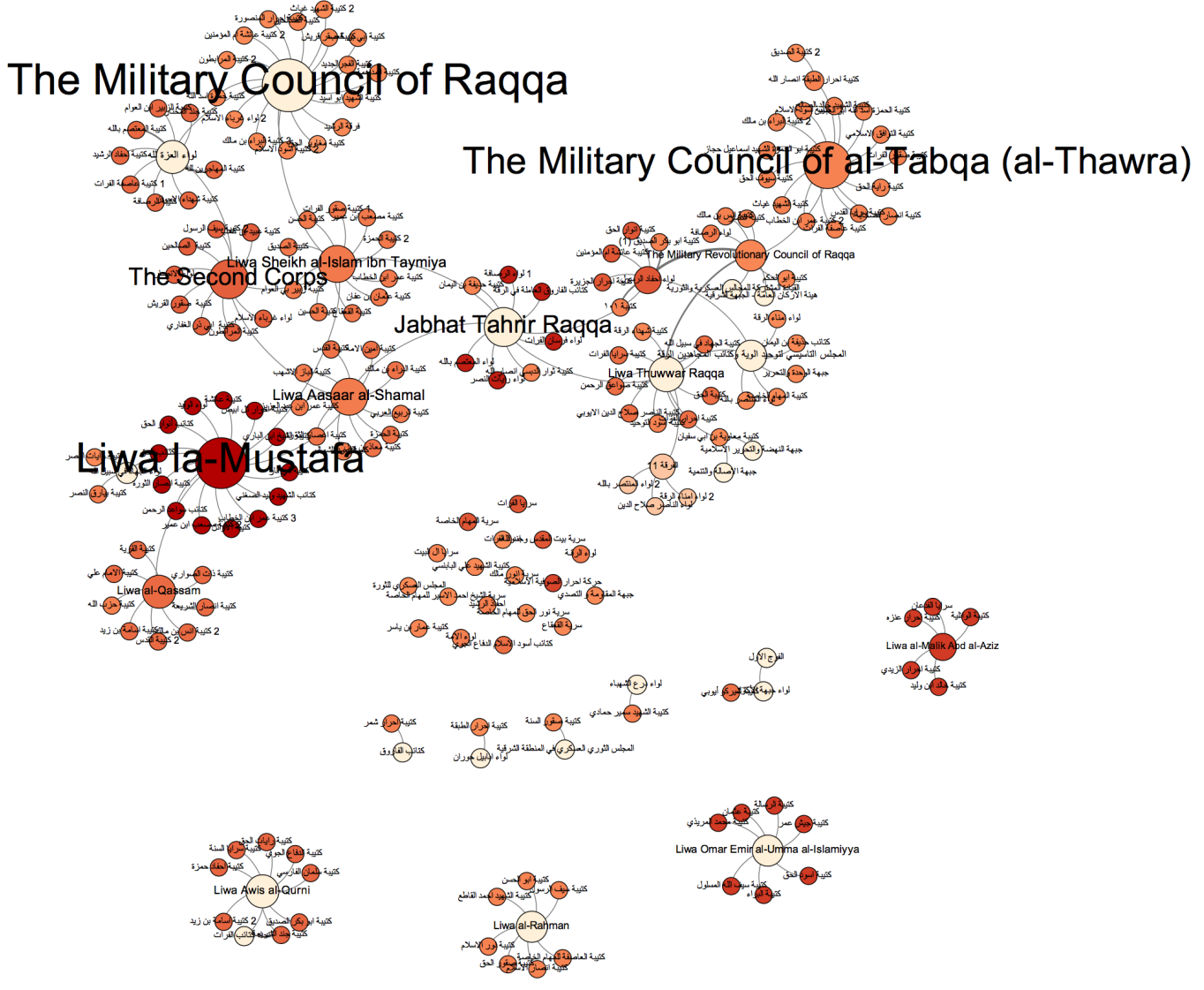


Figure 22: Aggregate of all armed opposition groups that have formed in Raqqqa governorate since the beginning of the conflict.

### 10. Quneitera Governorate

Between 817 and 1,082 fighters have been seen in formation videos from the Quneitera governorate over the course of the conflict, with between 430 and 545 of these fighters being seen since January 1, 2013.

The first large group to emerge in Quneitera was Liwa Nasur al-Golan, which, toward the end of 2012, became part of the Tahrir al-Quneitera Gathering, which linked together most established units in the area. In the beginning of 2013, the Revolutionary Military Council in Quneitera and Golan formed, bringing together both Liwa Ahrar Jabaatha al-Khosheb and the growing Alwiat Ahfad al-Rasul. The Revolutionary Military Council, which reports to the Supreme Military Command, has continued to grow throughout 2013, and has brought together most of the units operating in the Quneitera governorate.

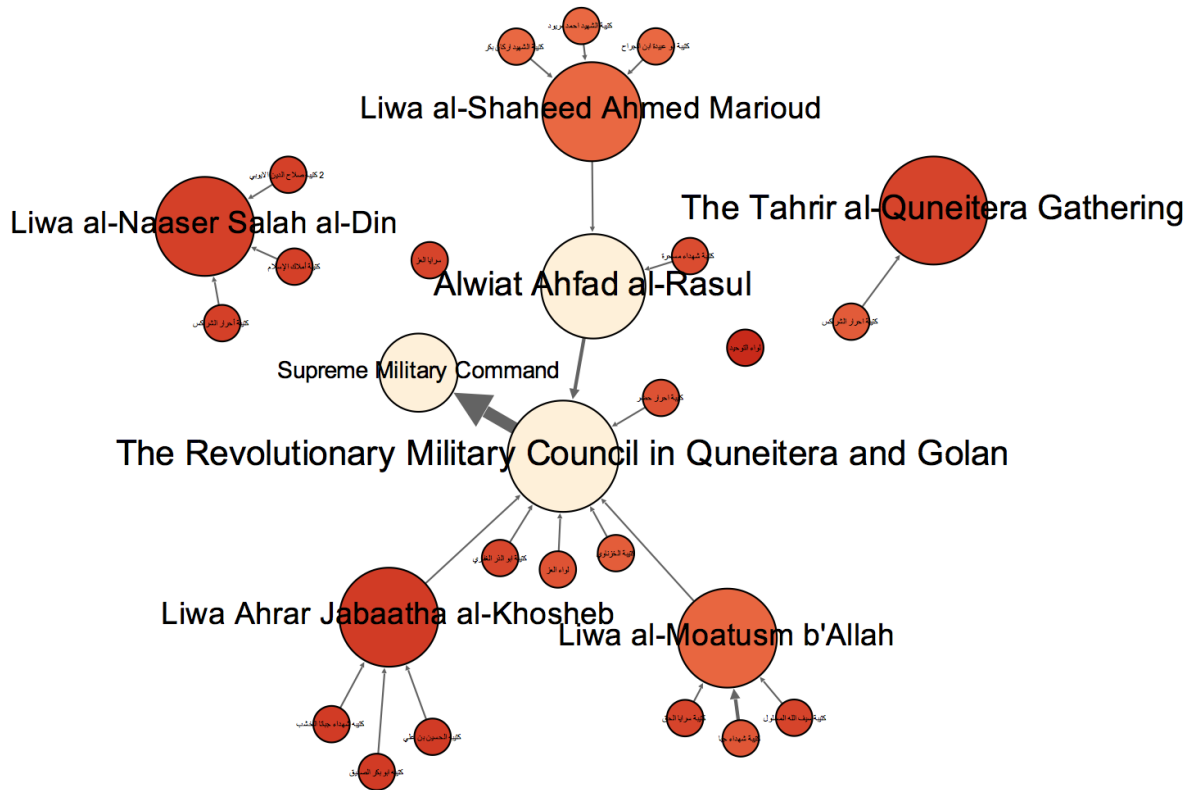


Figure 23: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Quneitera governorate during 2013.

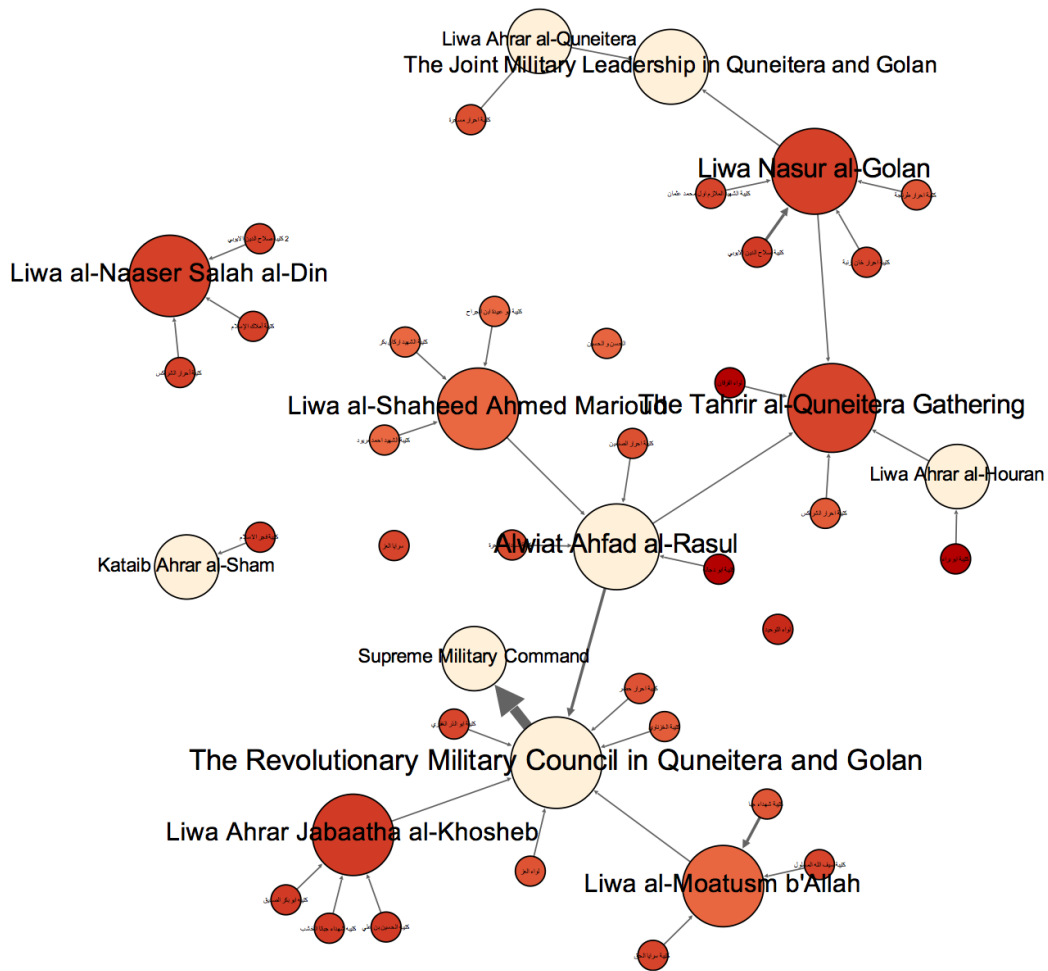


Figure 24: Aggregate of all armed opposition groups that have formed in Quneitera governorate since the beginning of the conflict.

### 11. Hassakah Governorate

Though the majority of fighting units in the Hassakah governorate are Kurdish, between 778 and 977 opposition fighters have announced their presence in the Hassakah governorate over the course of the conflict. Of these fighters, between 306 and 368 have been seen in battalion formation videos during 2013. As with many other governorates of Syria, these groups are largely concentrated around the Military Revolutionary Council of the Hassakah governorate, which formed in August 2012. Despite this formation, a number of relatively large units formed in the governorate throughout the end of 2012 and beginning of 2013.

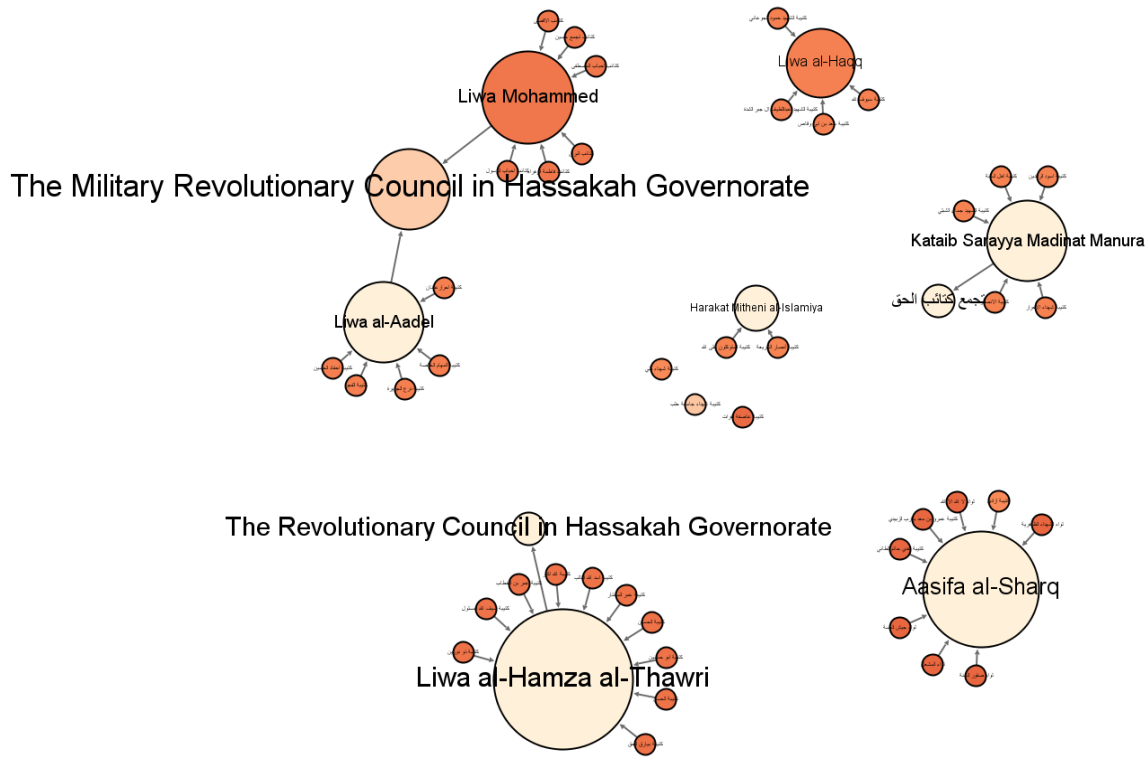


Figure 25: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Hassakah governorate during 2013.





## 12. Tartus Governorate

Only 70-88 individuals have been seen in formation videos from Tartus. While there are likely many more fighters from this area, they have most likely joined with opposition units in neighboring governorates.

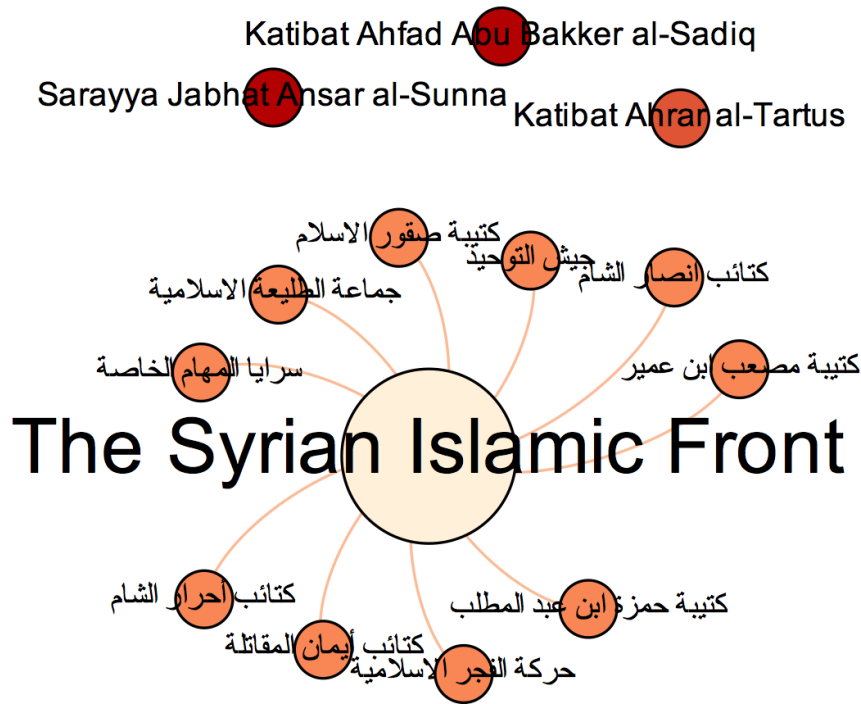


Figure 27: Armed opposition groups that have formed or grown in Tartus governorate during 2013.

### 13. Sueida Governorate

Due to the generally pro-government population of Sueida, very few opposition units have announced their formation in Sueida. It is safe, however, to assume that any individual willing to fight the regime would travel to neighboring Deraa or Damascus to join with the existing networks of fighters in those locations. Between 55 and 64 fighters have been seen in formation videos from Sueida.

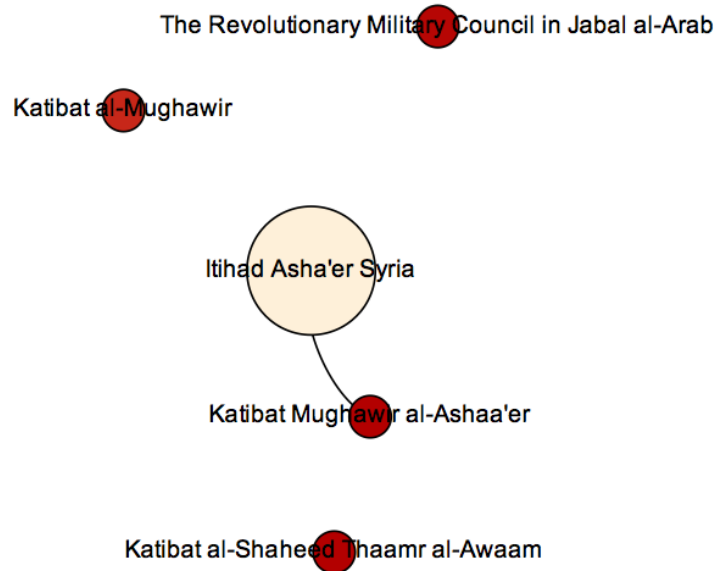


Figure 28: Aggregate of all armed opposition groups that have formed in Sueida governorate since the beginning of the conflict.