

Testimony

United States Senate Committee on Armed Services

By

General John M. Keane, USA (Ret)

on

Russian Strategy and Military Operations

0930 hours, 08 October 2015

Hart Senate Office Building

Room SH-216

Chairman McCain, ranking member Reed, distinguished members of the committee, am honored to be back testifying today on Russia and the crisis in Syria and the Ukraine. It's a privilege to be here with my panel colleagues, particularly General Jones, who I served with in the Pentagon and have known for years. Please refer to the maps provided by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) which I will reference in my remarks.

1. RUSSIAN STRATEGY AND MILITARY OPERATIONS IN SYRIA:

Russia began air strikes in Syria about a week ago after rapidly establishing a forward operating air base at Al Assad airfield in Latakia province, some 36 miles north of their Naval base at Tartous. Establishing an out of region air base, that is isolated from the heartland of Russia, in a war zone, is quite unprecedented, particularly for a non expeditionary military.

To establish and sustain this airbase you can see on the map labeled 'Russian Deployment to Syria', the air bridge routes over Iran and Iraq and the sea bridge route through the Black Sea taking approximately 4 days to transit. The air base consists of combat aircraft, helicopters, drones, logistics support infrastructure, and a battalion plus of armor, infantry, artillery and air defense for protection of the base.

Approximately 2K to 3K personnel make up the base which also houses a joint operations center consisting of Russian, Syrian, Iranian and Hezbollah military personnel.

While one can only speculate about the reason for this brazen military aggression some realities in Syria are insightful. After 4 years of civil war the Syrian military, numbers about 125K down from a high of 220K. The Army is beset with low morale, desertion and equipment problems with the Air Force losing about 1 to 2 aircraft per month due to combat or accident. During the last year the opposition force has gained steadily on the regime forces with some gains operationally significant.

Please look at the map labeled 'Control of Terrain in Syria' and you can see the regime control area in orange which is now only about 20% of Syria. Note the opposition control area to the north and south of the orange as the regime is quite confined. Particularly in the north with the fall of Idlib province recently, the opposition force is beginning to encroach on the Alawite coastal enclave in Latakia province which represents Assad's main political support. In the last several months there has been some erosion of this Alawite support. To the east of Homs and Damascus in central Syria ISIS seized Palmyra city and a nearby regime airbase opening up the east-west transportation corridor from Homs to the Iraq border. We at ISW suspect that the Iranians who are in Syria in far greater number than the Russians (7K to 100 plus) and have very good situational awareness, raised the alarm to the Russians during multiple visits to Moscow by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) leaders to include a much reported visit by Qasem Soleimani.

Russia has a 60 plus year relationship with Syria dating back to post WWII as the former Soviet Union. Syria is Russia's foothold in the Middle East (M.E.) and as such the Tartous Naval base is a strategic asset that is much valued. It seems apparent that Russia believed the Assad regime survival was in a more precarious position and needed to be propped up. As such if you look at the map labeled 'Russian Airstrikes in Syria', you can see the focus of the airstrikes are against the opposition forces threatening the regime from the north in Idlib, Hama and Homs province. The moderate opposition forces, many trained by the CIA and Jabhat al-Nusra, an AQ affiliate, are the main focus with the ISIS targets at Raqqah and near Palmyra are far less significant and likely mere 'window dressing' for the exaggerated narrative that ISIS is the major reason for the Russian presence. Russian cruise missiles were introduced yesterday striking 11 targets in western and eastern Syria.

The purpose then of the airstrikes are twofold: one to stop the advance of the opposition forces threatening the regime and two to begin to set conditions for a ground counter-offensive to retake lost territory with the main effort in the north in southern Idlib province and northern Hama province. Syrian Army limited ground shaping operations began in Idlib province yesterday supported by Russian air. A supporting effort may be launched to retake Palmyra and the military airbase if the regime can generate sufficient forces. Recapturing the ancient city would be a PR victory for Syria and Russia. The counter offensive would likely be jointly planned

by Syria and Iranian generals and consist of the Army, the National Defense Force, which are local militias, some actually led and most advised by the IRGC, and the Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militia. Of course Russia and Syria air power will play a large role in supporting the ground offensive.

Even more significant than Russia entering the Syria civil war is their recent strategic alliance with Iran which will impact every country in the region and further diminish U.S. influence and U.S. interests in the region.

Russia certainly recognizes that the M.E. is experiencing one of the most tumultuous periods in its history with the old order challenged by the aspirational goals of the Arab Spring, Islamic terrorists taking advantage of the political and social upheaval and Iran using proxies to gain influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Furthermore, Russia observed, probably somewhat in disbelief, as the U.S. abandoned Mubarak in Egypt, abandoned Iraq and retreated from Yemen and Libya as part of an unstated policy to disengage from the M.E. to avoid the strategic mistake of another M.E. protracted war. For a year now, Russia has been leveraging this reality to their own advantage by entering into arms deals with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Egypt. Also, there are Russian counter terrorism experts advising the Egyptian military in their fight against ISIS. A country the U.S. had a mil to mil relationship with for 35 years. These countries purchasing Russian weapons who normally buy U.S. and European weapons are not driven by the desire to have Russian equipment but by the harsh reality of the changing geopolitical landscape

and their desire to have a relationship with Russia as leverage against their strategic enemy, Iran. Iraq is also purchasing Russian weapons as the promised U.S. flow of weapons has been slow to nonexistent at times and have recently welcomed Russian generals and their staff to join their coordination center in Baghdad to share intelligence with the Iraq Army, the IRGC and the Iraq Shia militia. Russia is also in preliminary discussion to build nuclear power plants in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia, with all their inherent problems of corruption, fraud, criminality to say nothing of the major security challenge of nuclear power plants. The relationship with Iran and its proxies matters to Russia because it provides them greater influence in the M.E. while also acting as a strategic buffer to their south against radical Islam, a threat which is of great concern to them now in southern Russia.

2. RUSSIAN STRATEGY AND MILITARY OPERATIONS IN UKRAINE/EUROPE:

Vladimir Putin came to power after the economic, political and social chaos of the 1990's following the collapse of the Soviet Union and ending the decade with their own military in shambles and suffering the public humiliation of his Serbian ally, Milosevic, not only losing all 4 wars he fought but being bombed into oblivion by the Americans in a 78 day air campaign.

Putin certainly shaped, in part, by these events and his life as a KGB officer tightens internal security and control, crushes the Chechens, represses political opposition, takes control of the media, and puts Russia on a path to be a world power

with global influence. Most historical world powers have strong economies and strong militaries, Russia, the former Soviet Union was never prosperous but certainly had a strong military. Putin was on a path to do just that again with his military when the economy tanked, leaving him with a military that is no match to the U.S. and NATO but with about 1/3rd good units with some select excellent capabilities. This is a land centric force with good combat aircraft, bombers, submarines, and a limited power projection Navy with only one aircraft carrier.

Russia's strategy in Europe is influenced by the Napoleonic and Nazi invasions and the strategic buffer that existed in eastern Europe as part of the Warsaw Pact, protecting the heartland of Russia for almost 50 years. These buffer countries are now a part of NATO, which Putin sees as a security risk.

As such Putin saw Ukraine, which is a food breadbasket for Russia, being threatened by the desire of many Ukrainians to politically, economically and militarily align with the European Union and potentially NATO. After Putin lost his political stooge, Yanukovich who he thought would stop the Ukraine movement to the West, he immediately annexed Crimea, correctly believing the Europeans and Americans would be stunned into compliance, thus recovering at home from the embarrassment of Yanukovich's departure. Encouraged by success, Putin moved on eastern Ukraine introducing hybrid warfare, a combination of SOF and intell officers to help create popular unrest, organize sympathizers into fighting units and when the

host country Army moves to put down the movement, bring in Russian disguised conventional military to defeat the Army.

Russia's use of military force in Ukraine is very revealing as it relies heavily on drones to detect Ukrainian military units with target information relayed to artillery batteries and within a few minutes, massive artillery is landing on the target, some with thermobaric shells creating a fire incendiary on the unit, which is quite devastating. As such, the separatists supported by Russian military have consolidated Luhansk and Donetsk provinces but denied the land bridge to Mariupol.

The political result is more significant because the Kiev government has given up on any economic or certainly military alignment with Europe or NATO. Putin wants the Kiev government to fail and be replaced by a more friendly Russian government. Putin will continue the pressure, see the map labeled 'Current/Proposed Russian Bases Near Ukraine,' with the two new permanent ground force bases that are under construction across from the Ukrainian border in Russia and the air base Putin is building in Belarus.

3. U.S. OPTIONS

- Overall:

U.S. strategy should be to assure our allies and friends, deter Russian aggression and defeat ISIS initially and, long term, as a part of a global alliance to

defeat radical Islam. Putin believes that European and American leadership is weak and has consistently out-maneuvered and out-bluffed the U.S. and its allies. Putin is counting on the U.S. fear of escalation and fear of confrontation to stop any thought of retaliation. Aggression unanswered, historically, has led to more aggression.

- Syria Options:

- - Recognize the anti ISIS strategy in Iraq and Syria is failing and we are certain to lose the war unless there is major and comprehensive change to build an effective and decisive ground force in Syria and Iraq while removing restrictions on the air campaign to dramatically increase airstrike capability. Continue U.S. policy to force Assad from power, but understand that Russia, as Assad's protector will now play a decisive role.

- - Deter: Putin has begun a proxy war with the U.S. when Russian combat aircraft struck, continuously, moderate rebel forces trained by the CIA. This was no accident, targets were provided by the Syrian regime and they were accurate. How can the U.S. stand by and do nothing? U.S. military should have been given the mission to retaliate. Options likely to be considered among others: crater the Al Assad runway, establish free zones that are sanctuaries for refugees, strike Assad's helicopter fleet that is barrel bombing, just to name a few.

- - Deter: Advise Russia that the U.S. and the coalition will conduct air operations anytime, anywhere in Syria and that they should stay out of our way if they want to avoid confrontation. Believe U.S. aircraft are rarely flying now against ISIS targets in Syria.

- - If we continue to wring our hands and continue to be dominated by fear and opposed to instilling fear, the Russian aggression will not just advance in the M.E. but most likely it will escalate in the Baltics and eastern Europe.

- Ukraine / Europe Options:

- - Deter: Recognize further that Russia is not finished in Ukraine as the new military bases across the border suggest. There is still time in addition to the U.S. military, training Ukraine battalions, which is an effective program and providing non-lethal aid, to provide defensive weapons and capabilities that would definitely make a difference. Such as: anti tank missiles, non-missile air defense to counter the drones, counter fire radar to detect the artillery, downloaded intelligence from U.S. all source capabilities etc

- - Deter: The Atlantic Resolve U.S./NATO rotational troop deployments to the Baltics, Poland, Romania and Hungary are a helpful but a small deterrence to Russian aggression. Russia is pounding the Russian speaking minorities in the Baltics with continuous propaganda to create unrest

and to foment a split with the nation's majority. Department of Defense must re-evaluate its stationing plan for the Combatant Commands in view of a revisionist and aggressive Russia. The Pacific is the largest Combatant Command with over 400K troops while Europe is considerably smaller and less than adequate with about 50K. (The Cold War stationing in Europe was approximately 600K).

Larger force commitments permit larger unit rotational deployments and a permanent base structure in the Baltics and eastern Europe. All deployed forces assigned to bases in central Europe no longer makes sense. Obviously, NATO must adjust its priorities as well as the U.S.

In conclusion, Russia is clearly challenging U.S. influence and interest in the M.E. as the dominant outside regional country while also seeking to challenge NATO in eastern Europe and possibly its very existence. While at times this demands a firm hand the U.S. should not close off communications with Russia but continue to pursue opportunities when there is mutual self interest. Such an interest is radical Islam. Russia was and is consumed with radical Islam and its threat which is the primary reason for the war in Afghanistan and prior to 9/11 it fought two major battles with the Chechens. The U.S. and Russia could partner on this issue as both countries have the most experience and could help organize together a global alliance. Another area is partnering on nuclear power plant development and security in the M.E. to the

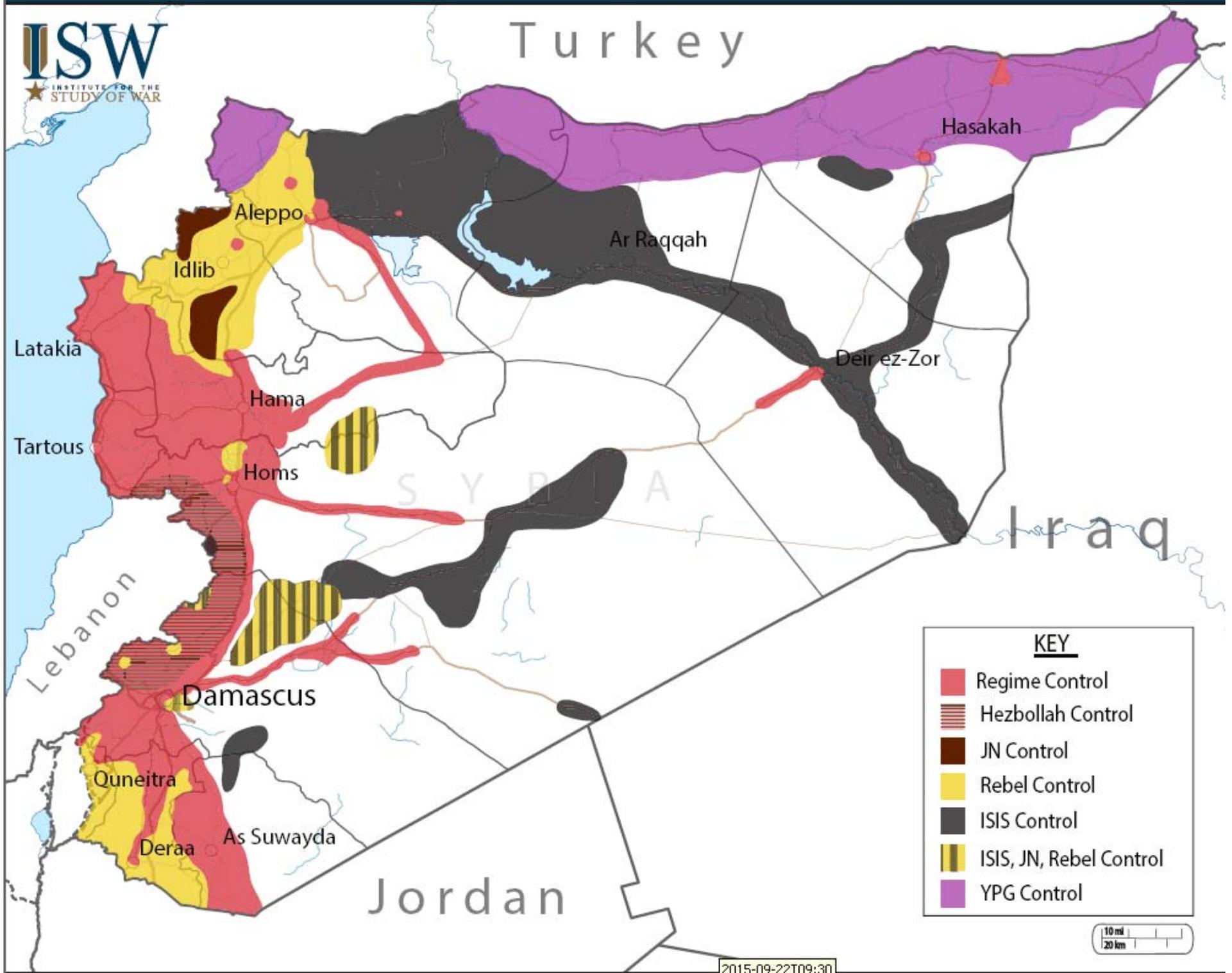
economic benefit of the M.E. while controlling uranium enrichment and plant security. Clearly Russia and the U.S. are in a renewed strategic competitive relationship which still has opportunities for positive engagement for mutual benefit.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

Russian Deployment to Syria: September - October 2015



Control of Terrain in Syria: October 7, 2015



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Turkey

Hasakah

Aleppo

Ar Raqqa

Idlib

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Latakia

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Tartous

Homs

S Y R I A

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Lebanon

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Deraa

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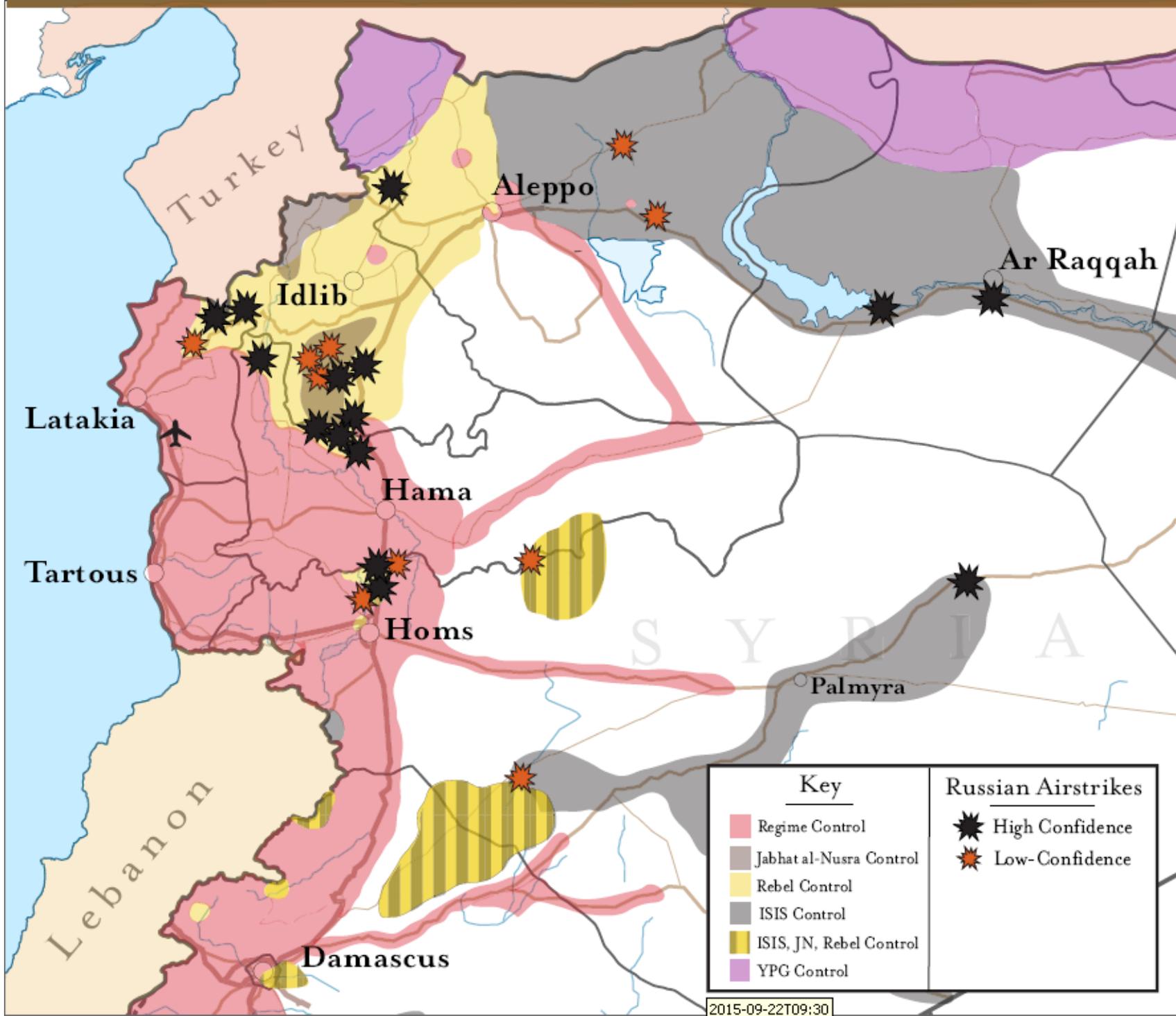
Jordan

KEY

- Regime Control
- Hezbollah Control
- JN Control
- Rebel Control
- ISIS Control
- ISIS, JN, Rebel Control
- YPG Control

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Current/Proposed Russian Bases Near Ukraine

