The Battle for al Qusayr, Syria

Purpose

- To inform the Army training community of real world example of Hybrid Threat capabilities in a dynamic operating environment

- To illustrate current tactics for Hybrid Threat insurgent operations

- To illustrate Hybrid Threat counterinsurgency operations using a current conflict

- To provide a short history of the conflict in the al Qusayr and the al Assi basin

- To describe the importance of the lines of communications from Lebanon to Syria

Executive Summary

- The al Qusayr area of operations is a critical logistics hub for the rebel forces fighting against the Syrian government known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

- A number of external actors and international terror organizations have joined the fight in the al Assi basin on both sides of the conflict.

- The al Assi basin and the city of al Qusayr can be considered critical terrain and key to the future outcome of the conflict in Syria.

- Conventional and unconventional as well as irregular forces are all present in this area and are adapting tactics in order to achieve a decisive outcome for their cause.

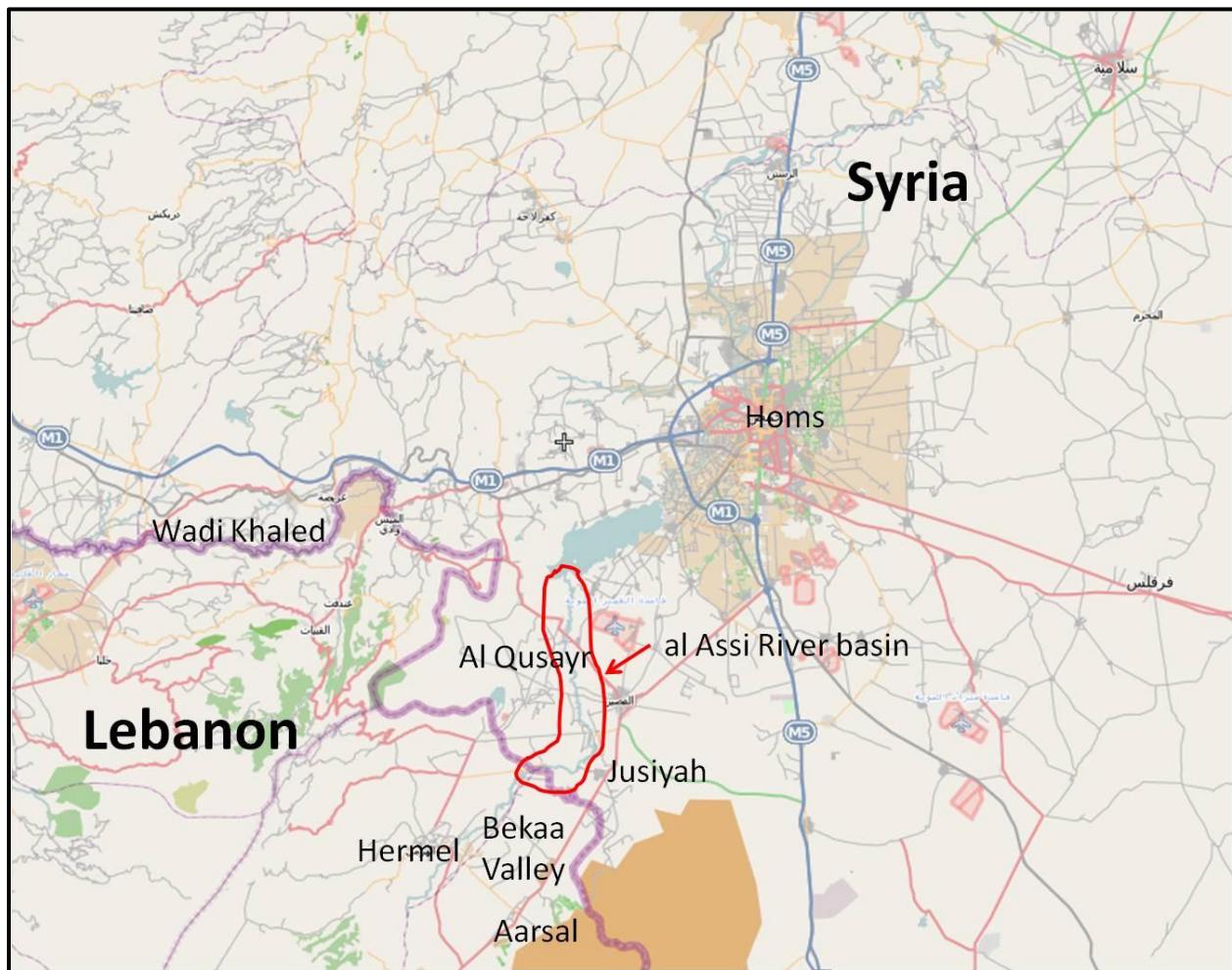*Cover photo: Pro [Regime Leaflets Dropped on al Qusayr During the Second Offensive](), 21 MAY 2013.*

Map

Figure 1. The al Assi River Basin and city of al Qusayr

Introduction

Al Qusayr, a village in Syria's Homs district, is a traditional transit point for personnel and goods traveling across the Lebanon/Syria border. Located in the southern half of the Orontes valley known as the al Assi basin, its proximity to northern Lebanon has made this region an important logistical area for the rebel forces of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), in what has become known as the

Homs front.[*] A typical border region, the al Assi basin's inhabitants are multinational as well as multi-ethnic with a complex makeup of Sunni, Shia, Alawi, and Christian religions that claim both Lebanese and Syrian Citizenship.[1] Due to the proximity to the border region, and the main north and south highway from Homs to Damascus, al Qusayr is a pivotal point in the Syrian conflict for both the FSA and the pro-regime SAA.

Weapons and materiel support from Lebanon to Syria moves via the Bekaa valley into al Qusayr. In order to maintain their lines of communication with Sunni sympathizers in Tripoli, Lebanon, the FSA uses a network of rural and urban inhabitants to act as couriers, scouts, and transporters to get supplies and weapons to the battle zones in Homs and Damascus and to transport wounded out of the combat zone. As the fighting continues in al Qusayr and the rest of the Homs district, Sunni families wait on the other side of the border in Lebanon to support the fight and to get news about their property. Islamic groups such as Fatah al Islam had been noted to be operating in al Qusayr providing expertise on explosives and other terror tactics.[2]
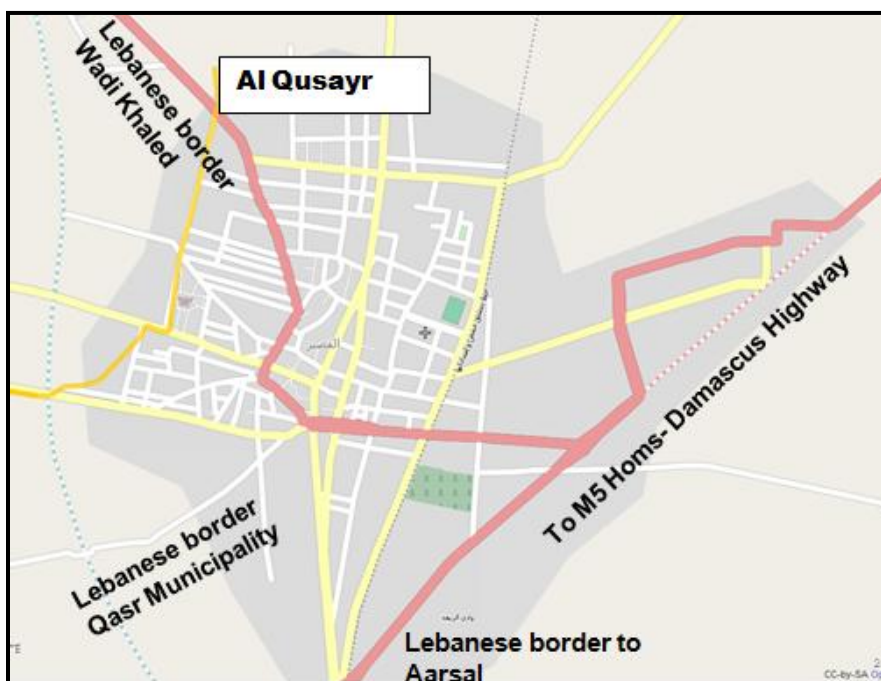

Figure 2. City of Al Qusayr

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[*] The Syrian Opposition Coalition uses the Supreme Military Command (SMC) to control the FSA and other elements fighting against the Syrian government. The command is divided into five fronts. The five fronts consolidate fourteen military councils into five operational headquarters. See Elizabeth O'Bagy, Middle East Security Report 9, The Free Syrian Army, Institute for the Study of War, 31 January 2013.

Support in the area is by no means restricted to the Sunni insurgency and the FSA. The Shia population, which is thought to be mainly rural, as well as many Christians, tend to support the SAA and the regime, and may be providing intelligence on the FSA and sympathizers in the region. The highway from the large port town of Tartus to the Syrian capital of Damascus goes through Homs City and the al Assi basin, making it an important supply route for the Syrian government and government security forces. To control Homs is to effectively control the link from Damascus to the Mediterranean. Control of Homs City will hinder coordination between northern and southern Syria substantially.[3] Activities in recent months by the terrorist organization Hezbollah indicate that the area is one of the main regions for foreign support to the al Assad regime. Shia families have also fled to nearby Lebanon and are waiting to see who will win the war before going back to claim their property. Due to the importance of the region, both sides have struggled to maintain control since the beginning of the Arab spring protests in 2011.

When anti-government protests turned violent, pro-government forces relied on force to control the situation. This escalation of the conflict provided the rebel forces both a justification for their actions and a cause for foreign fighters (mainly from Lebanon) to enter into the battle. As the threat intensified, the government was able to increase its activities in the name of self-defense, and the insurgency took root in Syria. Neither side had the experience or resources to take the conflict to a culmination without assistance from their respective benefactors. The al Assi basin, with its access to Lebanon, as well as its access to the Alleppo-Homs-Damascus corridor, became a key area of interest for both sides in the conflict.

Figure 3. Pro Syrian government forces engage ground targets with ZSU-23-4 (Shilka) anti aircraft gun outside al Qusayr in Western Syria. For more information see the Worldwide Equipment Guide, Volume 2, Chapter 6, page 6-52.

Syrian Arab Army COIN Operations

Since the beginning of anti-regime protests in early 2011 known as the Arab Spring, Syrian government security forces employed a variety of means to quell unrest and potentially violent situations. Early on, local security forces and militias were employed to intimidate protestors and to control and monitor the movements of activists and armed groups.[4] These militias adopted many of the irregular tactics of other militia groups in the area, namely Hezbollah. As the confrontations continued, security forces used traditional forms of riot control such as tear gas and small arms to control populations.[5] The threat, represented by the concentration of anti-regime activists, forced government security forces to "cleanse" the most active areas in the Homs governorate, to include the city of al Qusayr.

In August 2011 Syrian forces entered al Qusayr after protests against the Syrian government occurred. According to a Lebanese report, the Army entered with more than 50 armored vehicles and isolated the area by cutting telephone, electricity, and water supplies.[6] In what was described by eye witnesses as a "full-scale military invasion," the operation resulted in an estimated 13-20 casualties in the first 48 hours.[7] More of the city's residents fled into the countryside and, in some cases, made their way over the border to nearby Lebanon, increasing the potential for a large-scale humanitarian crisis for Syria's neighbor.[8] By the fall of 2011, the city of al Qusayr was cut off and traffic was controlled by military checkpoints both on the route to the Homs-Damascus highway, and along the Lebanese border. Throughout the fall and winter, protests continued despite the increased security. Regime forces conducted counterinsurgency (COIN) operations , improved their position, and developed intelligence while occupying the town hall and turning the local hospital into an army barracks.[9]

Tactics used by Syrian forces in the Homs governorate involved the Shabiha militias to intimidate the population into giving up protesters and armed groups. Shabiha also participated in army cordon and search operations either by providing intelligence on the local population or by ensuring that regular army forces did not desert to the rebels.[10] The intimate knowledge of the terrain and the local population provided by the Shabiha militia to the government forces was important to SAA who were tasked with locating and destroying pockets of resistance. The Shabiha also supported the perception management campaign designed to sow distrust among the population and to intimidate them into withdrawing their support to the rebels.

The types of regular military operations common to the Homs governorate through the fall and into the winter of 2012 included population and resource control operations and a variety of offensive operations designed to locate and destroy enemy strongholds in urban and rural areas. Many operations were designed to control the movement of fighters and materiel transiting the area to support FSA forces to the north in Homs City and to the south in Damascus. Other operations included indirect fire and sniper operations, raids on suspected rebel support facilities and positions, and information warfare campaigns designed to build support for the regime. As the battle in the Homs city neighborhood of Baba Amr tipped in favor of the government forces, rebels began to reconstitute in al Qusayr and the surrounding countryside.

Foreign fighters and FSA units involved in operations in Homs City were among those who had retreated from Baba Amr, bringing their own command structure and support. For example, the al Haq brigade is a

Salafist organization aligned with the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) and Ansar al Islam. Al Haq and al Nusrah, which is said to be based out of Iraq, are included in the list of jihadist organizations fighting along the Homs front and may also be using the Homs governorate to move personnel and supplies to the Southern front around Damascus. However, the Sunni conscripts of the Syrian Army that defected to the FSA, in particular defectors from the 77th brigade and the large al Farouq brigade, make up the bulk of rebel forces in the area.

The inclusion of terrorist organizations in the FSA ranks provided the Syrian government the evidence it needed to intensify operations. Foreign aid arriving from Lebanon and the eastern part of the Homs governorate legitimized the use of roadblocks and tighter security along the border. This had a negative impact on the economic situation in the Homs governorate as trade and smuggling became an even riskier venture. Additionally the extremist views of the Army defectors assisted the regime in its information warfare campaign which relied on a self defense/anti-terrorism narrative that stressed the threat from Islamist groups such as Jubhat al Nusrah and the Muslim Brotherhood.

As FSA fighters and their foreign allies retreated from Baba Amr, loyalist forces made preparations to attack al Qusayr and the surrounding countryside once it became apparent that the region was a fallback position for armed groups leaving Homs City as well as a rebel logistical support area.[11] Some of the preparations included repositioning artillery to hit target reference points corresponding to known pockets of resistance and escape routes out of al Qusayr; ramping up intelligence and surveillance activities; increasing the number of troops, armor, and aviation assets in the area; and increasing supplies and defenses to the combat outposts in the south of the city. This series of raids and checkpoints by the loyalists produced weapons and materiel, prompting them to increase their presence in al Qusayr and the surrounding area to interdict smuggling of arms from Lebanon and to isolate the town for a new offensive in the spring. On 10 February 2012, after four members of the Syrian security forces were killed by the FSA, Syrian Army forces began a coordinated attack on al Qusayr that included increasing the number of raids on suspected rebel hideouts.[12]

FSA Offensive Operations

Reports of civilian casualties, the denial of humanitarian needs, as well as an exodus of dislocated civilians into the surrounding countryside and across the border prompted rebels to consider an attack on key SAA facilities within the city. The first of these facilities was the Syrian Air Force intelligence building on the eastern edge of the city. FSA rebels captured approximately 15 Syrian soldiers and forced them to join the fight against the regime.

The FSA used small unit tactics to raid pro-government positions. Many of the fighters were former members of the 77th brigade, a Syrian special purpose force, and used weapons they brought with them after their defection to the rebels. Since weapons are in demand, volunteers and other fighters extended their lines of communication through the traditional smuggling towns, such as Aarsal across the Lebanese border, to Sunni backed suppliers in the coastal town of Tripoli.[13] Relying on mostly small

arms, rebel operations consisted mainly of hit and run tactics designed to keep pro-government forces in a constant state of vigilance. When targets of opportunity arose, rebels took advantage of lax security to conduct raids designed to destroy enemy positions and capture weapons. Successfully executed raids were filmed and uploaded to the Internet as part of the perception management campaign designed to obtain sympathy and support for their cause from the greater Sunni community. Al Farouq brigade became known for its use of the Internet to gain international support for operations in al Qusayr and the Homs governorate.

SAA Push into the City Center

After the attack on the air force facility, SAA forces brought in reinforcements to maintain momentum and expel the rebels from the city once and for all. The opposition forces proved more resilient than expected. Additional heavy weapons, including tanks from nearby tank divisions, penetrated the city and were used to man checkpoints. Military assets, such as artillery and unmanned aerial vehicles, were deployed to cover known areas of unrest and to provide support to government offensive operations[14].

Snipers, shelling, and raids similar to the ones in the neighborhoods in Homs intensified in al Qusayr as security forces tightened control on rebel strongholds.[15] Civilians reported multiple casualties in the month of March due to snipers which were particularly effective in controlling movement of insurgents and civilians. Typical threat preparations for offensive operations included an increase of intelligence activities and a hardening of logistical lines of communications to reduce vulnerable supply routes and to mitigate security risks to planned operations. Offensive operations included mortars and other forms of indirect fire as well as coordinated ground assaults into the northern part of al Qusayr to dislodge and destroy rebel forces and their sympathizers. Additionally, 81-mm and 120-mm mortars and artillery attacks coincided with times of the day when traffic was heaviest to prevent armed groups from repositioning under the cover of commuters. The effect of these operations tended to have the opposite of the intended effects, decreasing compliance with government directives. Al Qusayr became more restive than before and rebel groups ramped up operations designed to dislodge the government forces and maintain freedom of maneuver.

Integrated Attack – Opposing Force (OPFOR)

Integrated attacks are characterized by—

◆ Not focused solely on destruction of ground combat power but often targets on enemy C2 and logistics.
◆ Fixing the majority of the enemy's force in place with the minimum force necessary.
◆ Isolating the targeted subcomponent(s) of an enemy's combat system from the enemy's main combat power.
◆ Using complex terrain to force the enemy to fight at a disadvantage.
◆ Using deception and other components of INFOWAR to degrade the enemy's situational understanding and ability to target OPFOR formations.
◆ Using flank attack and envelopment, particularly of enemy forces that have been fixed.

TC 7-100.2 *Opposing Force Tactics*

The crisis that ensued in Syria in February and March of 2012 prompted the special envoy to the Arab League and the United Nations, Kofi Annan, to propose a six-point peace plan for Syria and send observers to monitor the ceasefire.[16] The ceasefire was not adhered to by either side in much of the country including al Qusayr. Government forces moved armor into position to solidify their hold on the city center. Meanwhile, rebel forces moved out of the city to obtain supplies and conduct reconnaissance on enemy positions for a counterattack on key checkpoints and command and control (C2) facilities.[17] In June of 2012, members of the 77th brigade conducted a raid on the municipal building.[18] This operation further consolidated the rebels' control of al Qusayr and denied the SAA access to an important C2 facility. SAA forces moved out into the surrounding area and routinely attacked al Qusayr with indirect fire and aviation. Improvised "barrel bombs" containing explosives and scrap metal were dropped from helicopters in the summer of 2012 and produced psychological effects on the civilians as well as casualties from shrapnel and burns.
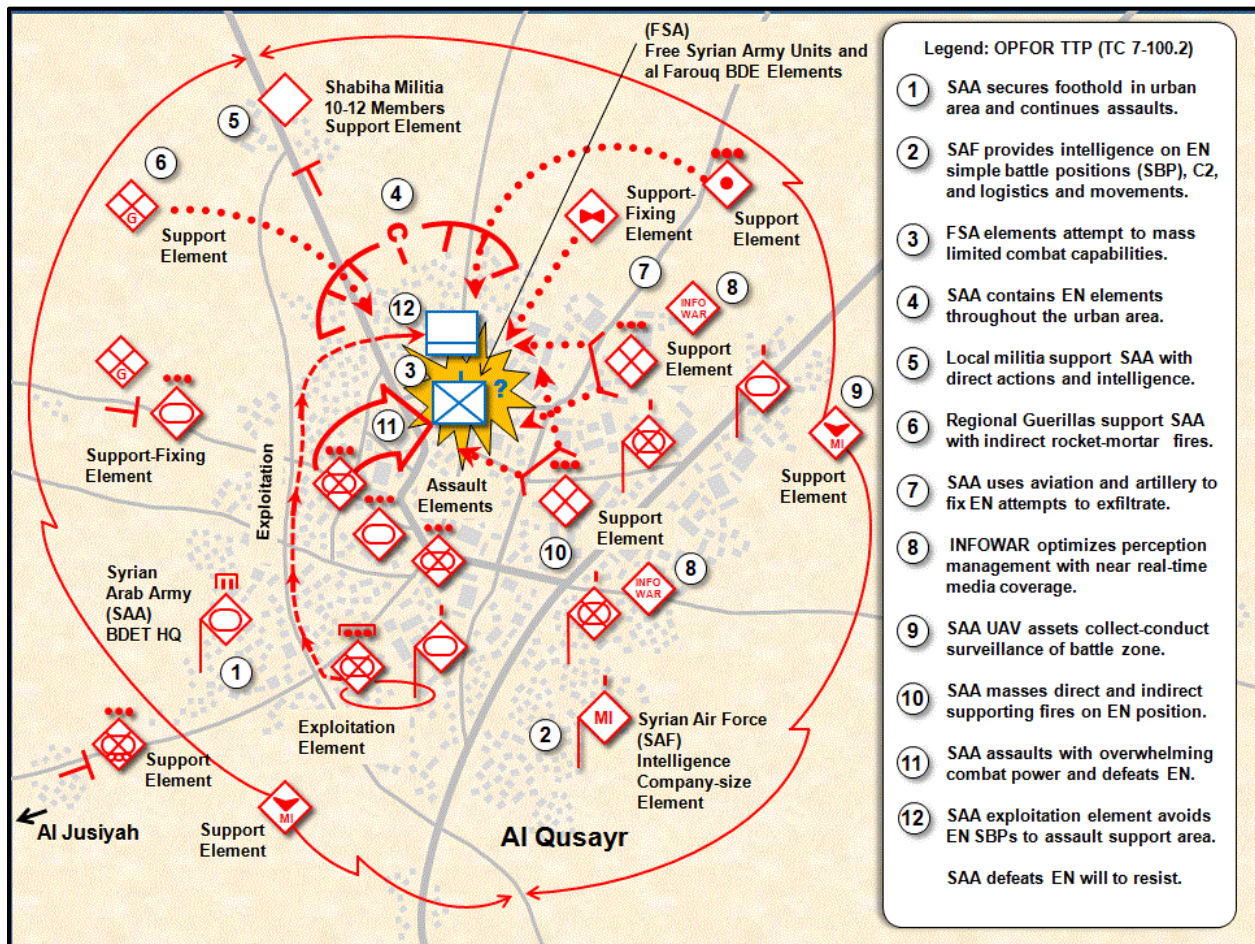
Figure 4. Integrated Attack on al Qusayr (estimated)

Stalemate and Second SAA Offensive

The situation degraded to a stalemate with al Qusayr remaining mostly under rebel control throughout much of 2012. The SAA continued to man checkpoints and shell the city in an effort to dislodge the rebels. Additionally, Hezbollah increased its presence in the Shia-dominated areas west of the Orontes River. By providing technical support to offensive operations, training, and organizing militias, Hezbollah was able to achieve effects by conducting raids and by launching rockets into al Qusayr from the safe havens in the Lebanese district of Hermel. The creation of the Syrian National Defense Forces allowed the SAA to hold ground around al Qusayr while they prepared for another offensive in the Spring.

By the spring of 2013 Hezbollah fighters were a mainstay of the effort in the countryside outside al Qusayr. One of the first objectives included the town of Tell Qadesh, just south of Lake Homs. Tell

Qadesh the ancient location of the largest chariot battle in history between the Hittites and the Egyptians in 1274 BC, was deemed a strategic location due to its relative height, (200m above sea level)[19], and its proximity to avenues of approach into al Qusayr from the North. Hezbollah fighters led the charge with loyalists in support resulting in the capture of many of the towns in the outlying area. With the countryside under loyalist control, the last phase of the operation would be finally taking control of al Qusayr.

In late May, the second assault on al Qusayr had begun to culminate with the SAA and an expanded guerilla force led by Hezbollah. Calls for the FSA and other rebel forces to converge and "rescue" al Qusayr had gone out to the international community in the hope of maintaining control of the city.[20] However, the new strategy by the Syrian Arab Army had produced the intended results with US State Department officials recognizing both the regime's reliance on foreign fighters from Hezbollah, and a dire humanitarian crisis in al Qusayr[21]. As pro regime WebPages tracked the progress of the loyalist and Hezbollah forces on the internet, it became apparent to the international press that al Qusayr had most likely fallen to pro regime forces.
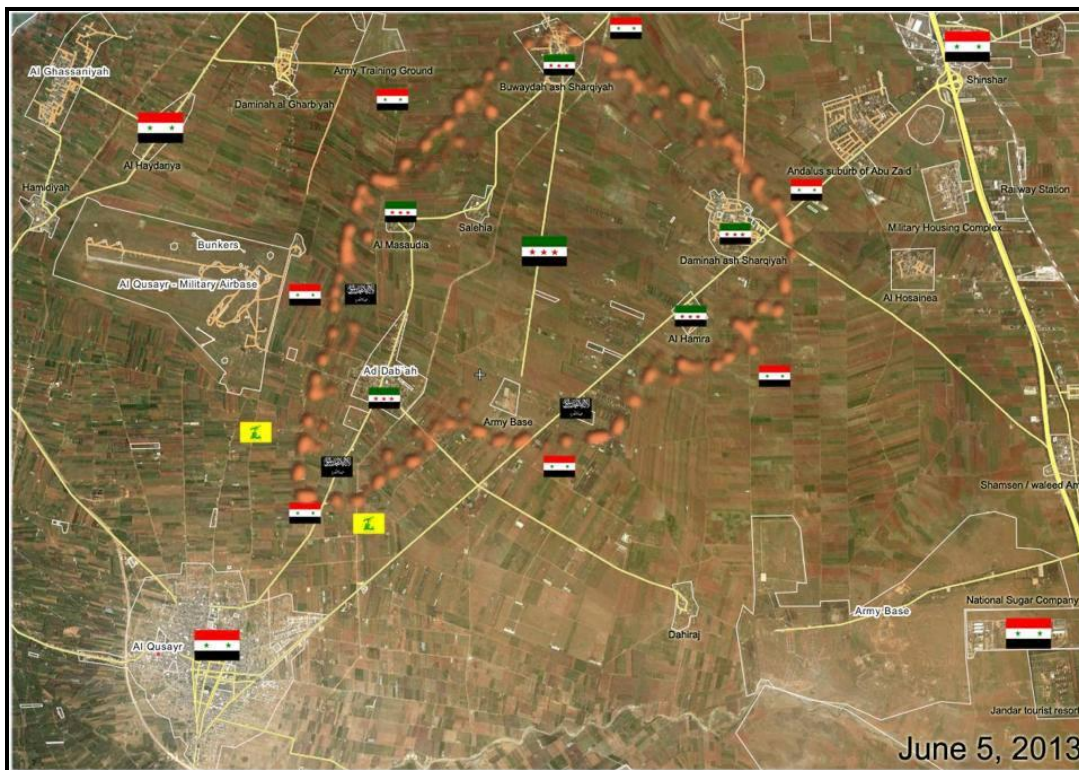

Figure 5. Situational Map from Facebook.com/ Syrian Perspective

Analyst Assessment

The conflict in the al Assi basin is an example of hybrid threat conditions including multiple regular and irregular forces. The parties involved relied on a combination of conventional and irregular forces to further their aims. Additionally, the ad hoc nature and fleeting loyalties of the forces involved ensured that the complex situation at hand in Syria would continue long after the actual fighting stopped. Outside forces in the area protecting their interests included members of Hezbollah and al-Qaeda affiliates fighting against each other.

The al Assi basin is an ethnic crossroads. The border with Lebanon is unmarked and many residents have ties to both countries. Smuggling, a historically pervasive activity in the region, creates a system of surreptitious networks that enables all parties and still remains elusive. There is a mix of both Sunni and Shia Islam adherents fighting for their own interests. Foreign fighters suspected of having ties to Salafist terror organizations are said to be aiding FSA formations, increasing the sphere of influence for Sunni regimes from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Gulf. Organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Lebanese Fatah al Islam, and groups with strong ties to al-Qaeda and the former Sunni insurgency in Iraq have been known to support all elements of the activist movements in Syria and the FSA. Conversely, reports of the terrorist organization Hezbollah supporting pro-regime forces surfaced as early as August 2011. The alliance between these elements may be less about religious unity and more about power and influence in Lebanon.

The dynamics of irregular and regular forces operating prominently in their respective roles provides lesson learned in terms of tactics, command and control challenges, and information warfare issues as each sides struggles to maintain authority while leaning on foreign forces to go into harm's way for their cause. Counterinsurgency operations by the Syrian Army have taken on a more lethal nature in recent years. The approach most likely will produce deep-seated animosity within the opposition groups for years to come; whether this contributes to enduring instability or results in an exhaustion of the will to continue the fight remains to be seen.

In the spring of 2013 Syrian forces mounted another assault on al Qusayr using a guerilla force developed from the Shabiha militias and Hezbollah. It is apparent that this area is strategically important to both sides and may be the key terrain required to achieve victory for whichever side retains it.

Training Implications

- The Hybrid Threat will use a diverse group of threat actors to scale his response during combat operations, including the use of local militias and foreign terrorist organizations.

- Insurgent forces need secure lines of communication (LOC) and safe havens to successfully fight their campaigns; the use of population resource control measures to interdict the insurgents (LOCs) and destabilize their support areas will cut off support to insurgent forces.

- INFOWAR operations designed to influence the local population may include traditional means such as media messages, but will also include direct means such as intimidation and terror tactics.

- Access routes to safe havens are key terrain and provide insurgent forces with the support needed to continue their fight. Controlling access to these areas controls the tempo of the fight.

- Culturally diverse areas are notoriously complicated when involved in a conflict. It is difficult to know where loyalties lie judging from outward appearances. Understanding the cultural significance of a conflict will help to assess how important a region is to both parties.

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See also the Red Diamond Newsletter, which contains current articles on a variety of topics useful to both soldiers and civilians ranging from enemy TTP to the nature and analysis of various threat actors.

For detailed information on weapons and equipment, see the Worldwide Equipment Guide.

AKO: https://www.us.army.mil/suite/portal/index.jsp

Threats Integration Team Threat Report

POCs

Threats Integration Team
913-684-7934 (COMM)
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TRADOC G-2 Intelligence Support Activity (TRISA)
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Figure Credits

Figure 1. City of al Qusayr, map modified by TRISA.
Figure 2. City of al Qusayr, map modified by TRISA.
Figure 3. Pro Syrian government forces engage ground targets with ZSU-23-4 (Shilka) anti aircraft gun outside al Qusayr in Western Syria. For more information see the Worldwide Equipment Guide, Volume 2, Chapter 6, page 6-52.
Figure 4. Integrated Attack on al Qusayr, created by TRISA.
Figure 5. Facebook Syrian Perspective Page https://www.facebook.com/SyrianPerspective

End Notes

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