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Syrian Rebels Call for Regional Alliance Against Russia, Iran

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A fighter from the Free Syrian Army's Al Rahman legion carries a weapon as he walks towards his position on the front line against the forces of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in Jobar, a suburb of Damascus, Syria.

BEIRUT — More than 40 Syrian insurgent groups including the powerful Islamist faction Ahrar al-Sham have called on regional states to forge an alliance against Russia and Iran in Syria, accusing Moscow of occupying the country and targeting civilians.

The insurgents, including rebel groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army, said such regional cooperation was needed to counter "the Russian-Iranian alliance occupying Syria."

Last week Russian jets based in western Syria launched air strikes against targets Moscow has identified as bases of the hardline Islamic State group, but which President Bashar Assad's opponents say disproportionately hit rival, foreign-backed insurgents.

The joint rebel statement criticized what it described as the "Russian military aggression in

Syria and the blatant occupation of the country" as well as the targeting of civilians with air strikes in the Homs countryside in western Syria.

"Civilians have been directly targeted in a manner that reminds us of the scorched earth policy pursued by Russia in its past wars," the statement said, without specifying.

The statement, sent to Reuters by Ahrar al-Sham, did not name which regional states it was addressing but Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have backed the insurgency against Assad.

The 41 groups that signed the statement did not include Islamic State or al-Qaida's Syria wing Nusra Front, which is in an insurgent coalition with Ahrar al-Sham that captured most of Idlib province in the northwest.

Insurgents have renewed calls for their Arab backers to supply them with more powerful weapons such as anti-aircraft systems in light of the Russian intervention in the war but Monday's statement appeared to be the most concerted rebel call for action against Russia's move.

Dozens of Islamist Saudi Arabian clerics, not affiliated with the government, earlier called on Arab and Muslim countries to "give all moral, material, political and military" support to what they term a jihad, or holy war, against Syria's government and its Iranian and Russian backers.

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