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Russian Air Strike Kills Top Syrian Rebel Leader — Rebel Sources

By The Moscow Times

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BEIRUT — The head of the most powerful Syrian insurgent group in the rebel-held suburbs of Damascus was killed on Friday in a Russian air strike on the secret headquarters of his group, rebel sources said.

The Syrian army confirmed the death of Zahran Alloush, whose Jaysh al Islam grouping has thousands of fighters and is the biggest rebel faction in the area.

Several rebel group leaders have been killed since Russia launched its air campaign on Sept. 30 in support of President Bashar al-Assad, whose troops had suffered a series of setbacks in a civil war now nearing the end of its fifth year. No immediate comment was available from the Russian defence or foreign ministries.

Alloush's removal dealt a major blow to rebel control of the eastern rural suburbs of Damascus, known as al-Ghouta.

It came as around 2,000 Islamist fighters, including members of Islamic State and al Qaeda's Nusra Front, prepared to be evacuated by bus from a rebel-held part of southern Damascus that has been besieged by government forces for years.

They are due to leave under a United Nations-brokered deal that marks another success for the Assad government, increasing its chances of reasserting control over a strategic area just 4 km (2.5 miles) south of the centre of the capital.

Separately, the Syrian army said on Friday it had fought its way close to the strategic, rebel-held Aleppo-Damascus highway — its latest gain in a major offensive supported by Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias and Russian air power.

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