

Syrian air strikes, shelling batter rebels in Damascus suburbs
Reporting by Oliver Holmes; Editing by Alistair Lyon, Reuters
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The Syrian army attacked two rebel-held suburbs of Damascus with fierce air strikes and shelling on Friday, pursuing an offensive against President Bashar al-Assad's foes, residents and a monitoring group said.

Assad's forces, which have been trying to dislodge rebels from several outlying districts south and east of the capital, focused their assault on Jobar, just inside central Damascus.

The army seized the town of Otaiba on Wednesday, cutting a weapons supply route from the Jordanian border into the eastern fringes of Damascus that rebels had used for eight months.

One resident reported intense bombardment of several rebel-held districts that began at 7 a.m. (0400 GMT) on Friday.

"It was not the usual regime shelling, it sounded like rockets," said the resident who asked not to be named.

Another resident said 18 tanks had gathered in the capital's Abbasid Square, which has come to mark off army-held lines from the nearby rebel-controlled eastern areas of Jobar and Qaboun.

Rami Abdelrahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said heavy air strikes had hit both districts.

"There has also been heavy fighting there since early this morning. There is normally fighting in Jobar, but today it is very intense," said Abdelrahman, whose British-based monitoring group relies on a network of contacts in Syria.

"The regime is trying to regain control," he added.

Syria's uprising is the bloodiest and longest of Arab revolts that erupted more than two years ago. It began with peaceful protests against Assad that were met with force, sparking armed opposition and eventually a full-scale civil war.

The army appears to have made gains across Syria in recent weeks, even in northern provinces where rebels seized swathes of territory last year. It has also advanced around Damascus and the border with Lebanon, in areas that help link the capital to coastal provinces dominated by Assad's Alawite minority.

Rebels, mostly from the Sunni Muslim majority, hold chunks of southern, eastern and northern Syria, including about half of Aleppo, the country's biggest city.