

ISIS losing ground in Syria to Jabhat al-Nusra

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The fighting has escalated between Jabhat al-Nusra (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/02/syria-eastern-region-harsh-front.html>), the Islamic Front (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/islamic-front-isis-rebel-clashes-syria.html>) and their allies on the one hand, and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/02/isis-islamic-rule-raqqa-syria.html>) (ISIS) on the other, as it reached an unprecedented climax in the past few days, both in terms of expansion and violence.

The battlefields expanded from the countryside of Hassakeh, to the countryside of Deir el-Zour and Maadan, which is between Raqqa and Deir el-Zour. They also covered the town of Jarablos, in the countryside of Aleppo, and the countryside of Latakia. Many killings, assassinations, suicide bombings, executions and mutilations took place during the battles, during which the injured sometimes bled to death without being treated.

One of the probable reasons behind that is that Jabhat al-Nusra has changed its view on the legitimacy of the fighting. While it once considered this fighting a form of “sedition” that must be halted and that it shouldn’t join, after ISIS attacked and gained control of its headquarters and positions in Deir el-Zour last week, Jabhat al-Nusra issued an intense speech that was more a declaration of war. Jabhat al-Nusra was not expected to stand idly by while the fighting reached the city of Deir el-Zour, which the organization considers its capital, particularly after its losses in Raqqa, Hassakeh, and Aleppo. If Deir el-Zour is lost, nothing else would be left for Jabhat al-Nusra.

Jabhat al-Nusra has succeeded in regaining control over all its headquarters and positions which were seized by ISIS last week, most importantly the Koniko oil field. It also took control over the al-Jafra field, and the industrial area. Following the counteroffensive launched by Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic Front and some of the Free Syrian Army’s factions, ISIS was forced to withdraw all of its members from the countryside of Deir el-Zour and regroup in al-Shaddadi city in the countryside of Hassakeh. Local sources said that ISIS no longer has any presence in the countryside of Deir el-Zour, except for the salt mine in al-Tabani town, where its members are under siege.

Jihadist sources told *As-Safir* that more than 170 people from both sides were killed in the fighting that took place in the Koniko and al-Jafra fields. According to the same sources, nearly 50 members of ISIS were among the victims, including its military emir in Deir el-Zour, Dujana al-Libi. The sources noted that Jabhat

al-Nusra was able to arrest many of the ISIS emirs and leaders, including Abu Zar al-Iraqi, the ISIS emir in the city of al-Mayadeen in the countryside of Deir el-Zour. Iraqi was found hiding in a house in Dhiban. In contrast, according to sources close to Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS members have executed dozens of people, especially in the al-Jafra field, where the organization had a detention center.

In the same context, media sources close to ISIS said it is gearing up to send a big military convoy from Raqqa, ISIS's main stronghold, to Deir el-Zour, to castigate Jabhat al-Nusra. For their part, Jabhat al-Nusra sources said the convoy it had sent to Homs last week has retreated and was also on its way to Deir el-Zour. This means the situation in the city is likely to escalate.

Although the battles of Deir el-Zour have been under the spotlight, many other regions also witnessed intense events. In Tal Hamis and al-Shaddadi in the countryside of Hassakeh, ISIS is working around the clock to strengthen its positions, in anticipation of any counterattack, as happened in Deir el-Zour. Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra denied the fact that its emir in Tal Hamis, Ibn Taymiyya, has pledged allegiance to ISIS, and pointed out that he was kidnapped after he refused to do so. Wilayat al-Barakah, which is close to ISIS, previously posted on Twitter that Ibn Taymiyya had pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/iraq-isis-baghdadi-mystery.html>), and that he and his men have joined the ranks of ISIS.

In conjunction with the counterattack launched by Jabhat al-Nusra in Deir el-Zour, factions affiliated with the Islamic Front, the FSA, and the Syrian Kurdish Front launched a major attack on the city of Jarablos along the border with Turkey. Yet, ISIS succeeded in blocking the attack. According to Islamic Front sources, the organization is progressing and was able to control al-Shuyoukh bridge, which serves as an entrance to Jarablos. However, activists posted pictures on their social media pages online, showing that al-Shuyoukh bridge had been heavily damaged on the side of Jarablos, after ISIS blew it up, to prevent the offensive factions from storming into the city that is under the command of Abu Hafs al-Masri.

In the countryside of Aleppo, the religious body in Tel Refat issued a statement calling on people to fight and eradicate ISIS. The statement read, "After the real face of those calling themselves ISIS was unveiled in front of the Syrian people in general, and the people of this town [Tel Refat] in particular, ... and after their betrayal, broken promises, treason, lies and the leaders' claims of piety were exposed, after they accused Muslims in general, and clerics in particular, of apostasy and infidelity, and after they judged based on suspicions and deceived and misled those who are sincere among them. ... We call for the carrying out of the hadith ordering us to fight and eradicate them, and not to have any compassion or mercy on them, with no truce or grace period. ... All shall know that those shown to have betrayed the people or to have supported such deceivers, in word or deed, will be punished sooner rather than later."

For their part, several factions in the countryside of Latakia issued a statement threatening to wage war and eradicate ISIS if it did not hand over its emir of the coast, Abu Ayman al-Iraqi “the criminal,” as he was described in the audio statement, and evacuate all its positions in the countryside of Latakia and give its members the choice of either leaving the country or joining other factions.

On another level, it was noted that some armed factions have started to show flexibility in terms of their stance toward the Geneva II conference (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/02/geneva-ii-syria-europe-officials-divided-priorities.html>). This flexibility was expected from the part of the Mujahedeen Army or the Syrian Revolutionary Front. In fact, both organizations were subordinated to regional countries that started to be involved in the peaceful solution for the Syrian crisis, despite their reservations. What is striking, however, was the flexibility shown by the Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, which signed a joint statement with the Mujahedeen Army. This represents an important detour for an Islamic faction that was considered to be closer to the Islamic Front. The latter completely refused negotiations with the Syrian regime, as declared more than once before.

Although the joint statement stressed that the signatories did not assign any one to negotiate with the “criminal” regime, it believed that the return to the Geneva conference would be acceptable if four conditions were met: the cessation of bombardment, the cessation of displacement, the release of female detainees and children and the lifting of the siege in all Syrian regions without exception.

This turn of events is represented by the fact that the conditions mentioned in the statement constituted one part of the conditions set by a joint statement issued prior to the first round of the Geneva II talks by Ajnad al-Sham, the Islamic Front and the Mujahedeen Army. In addition to these conditions, the statement requested the ousting of the regime with all its figures and their noninvolvement in the formation of the future state.

Opposition activists close to jihadist factions considered the issuance of this statement as a bad and non-reassuring sign, noting that the situation does not need more divisions among the opposition and its organizations.

Read More: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/02/isis-losing-ground-deir-al-zour-jabhat.html>



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