

ISIS returns to Aleppo

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In a new twist regarding the battles between jihadist factions in Aleppo, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has returned to the city by gaining control of the Halak neighborhood. The group had lost influence in Aleppo after Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front made advances.

The move to control Halak was ISIS's first reaction in the city since the factions declared war on the group. This development may reopen the battle fronts in the city's neighborhoods that are outside government control. Those neighborhoods have repeatedly suffered from wars between rival factions.

In this context, a field source told *As-Safir* that ISIS jihadists entered the Halak neighborhood, which lies northeast of the city and near the front line with the Syrian army, almost without a fight. Islamic Front fighters withdrew from the neighborhood as soon as ISIS fighters got there. Then ISIS raised its banner and started distributing leaflets calling on people to hand over their weapons before the launch of an inspection campaign in the neighborhood in search of persons wanted by ISIS.

ISIS's control of Halak comes as part of a series of developments in the war among the factions in Aleppo. In the latest development, al-Qaeda leader Abu Khaled al-Souri was killed, after which he was mourned by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham for being a main al-Qaeda pillar in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic Front (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/islamic-front-isis-rebel-clashes-syria.html>) and the Army of the Mujahedeen (which is the most prominent faction fighting ISIS) announced their unification of operations to "repel the regime's attack." But a jihadist source told *As-Safir*, "The aim of this step is to confront ISIS," pointing out that the move "came quickly after ISIS returned to the city and started operating in areas that were thought to have been outside its control." This indicates that the war between these factions in the city will intensify. Many Aleppo neighborhoods that are outside government control are split between the Islamic Front and Jabhat al-Nusra.

The source played down the importance of the new "joint operations room" for these organizations on the ground, especially in the battles against the Syrian army, which have continued for a long time. The source said, "This new announcement is nothing more than a direct message to ISIS, which seems to be returning to the city of Aleppo in force after it gained control of the Halak neighborhood." The source cited the last words by Jabhat al-Nusra's leader Abu Mohammad al-Golani (

monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/al-nusra-syria-jihadists-divisions.html), who gave ISIS a five-day deadline to stop its war before a big war breaks out between these factions, which have been already fighting each other, but on multiple and non-competing fronts.

In the same context, a field source told *As-Safir* that the city of Mare north of Aleppo has witnessed large security measures and is considered one of the most important strongholds of Liwa al-Tawhid and the Islamic Front. Those security measures appear to be preparations for an impending attack that ISIS may launch on the city, which is close to Azaz and which is a strategic point in the countryside north of Aleppo. Also, it includes a large prison holding people who the army and security forces had abducted and who were transferred from al-Rahi prison after ISIS took control of the city about a month ago.

On the other side, following the Syrian army's slow progress on several fronts, most notably in east Aleppo, the army was able to control the important "airport node," where the army has reached the outskirts of the "scientific research area" east of the city. If the army controls this area, it would reach the outskirts of new neighborhoods: Mount Badro, the Hanano housing project, al-Haidariyya, al-Bab Road and Maysar. Meanwhile, helicopters are intensely bombing sites within these neighborhoods, which are almost empty of residents. They have been displaced to the government-controlled west Aleppo neighborhoods, to other cities or to the north countryside. (Several camps were set up in the north countryside of Aleppo to receive the displaced. The most notable of those camps is the Mare camp.)

The Syrian army is also advancing on the important fronts of the industrial city in Sheikh Najjar, where there are fierce battles with Jabhat al-Nusra fighters stationed there and who are surrounded by the army on two axes. Meanwhile, the Aleppo Central Prison (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/02/syria-aleppo-prison-attack-armed-opposition.html>) has witnessed some calm in the past two days as Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic Front fighters retreated from some posts near the prison. A source in the prison said there's a shortage of food and medicine, and that they are awaiting the arrival of the army and the lifting of the 10-month-old siege on the prison, during which nearly 600 prisoners and one guard were killed.

On the Old City front in the center of Aleppo, a field source told *As-Safir* that army soldiers, assisted by Baathist troops, are in fierce battles near the Umayyad Mosque and in Milih Square. During those battles, two soldiers and seven gunmen were killed, without any change in the map of control in these areas.

In the section under government control in Aleppo, or what has become known as west Aleppo, mortar fire has returned after a hiatus of about a month. Three mortar shells fell in the al-Mokambo neighborhood. They were fired by gunmen in the Bani Zeid district. Five civilians were killed and nine were injured.

Read More: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/02/isis-return-aleppo-syria-islamic-front-jabhat-nusra.html>



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