

War between ISIS, Jahbat al-Nusra splits Deir Ez-Zor tribes

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The battle for Kassab in the northern Latakia countryside is in its second week. But the Syrian army on the one hand, and “the joint operations room” consisting of Jabhat al-Nusra (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/12/syria-opposition-fails-with-jabhat-al-nusra-terrorist-label.html>), Ansar al-Sham and Sham al-Islam on the other are acting as if the battle hasn’t started yet, portending that the battles in the second week will be fiercer and harsher, especially since both sides are preparing for war and rallying their troops and reinforcements.

With the end of the first week of the battle for Kassab and its environs, many of the battles’ details have remained a mystery. The facts on the ground are changing rapidly because of hit-and-run operations, and battlefield news is contradictory. The media war between the two sides, a war that is no less fierce than the physical war, is causing uncertainty about what is happening in Kassab and its surroundings. A vast amount of misinformation and disinformation has been pumped through the media and social networking sites.

However, the “joint operations room” yesterday [March 28] issued a videotaped statement summarizing the events of last week and claimed to have made a “great conquest,” asserting complete control over Kassab and its surroundings, including the border crossing, Nab al-Murr, the Nabain area, Jabal al-Nisr, Point 45, al-Sakhra station and al-Samra village.

This is the first official statement in which the radical Islamic factions claim control of the entire city of Kassab and the surrounding villages and hills. It raises suspicions that those claims could be part of a media war; or do they illustrate the true results of the Anfal battle?

It was noteworthy that the statement announced that “what happened in the last few days is a prelude to the master plan whose echoes will be heard by [your enemies].” This means that the battle for Kassab (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/03/syria-kasab-opposition-army-battles.html>) could further escalate, especially in light of information that reinforcements have started to arrive in areas surrounding the city, whether reinforcements to the Syrian army or to the radical Islamic factions.

This information intersects with what a field source told *As-Safir*. The source said that what has happened until now is not the Kassab battle, but the preparation for the battle, and that the moves that have taken place — both in terms of evacuating sites or redeploying to other locations — were intended to prepare for the real battle, which is expected to be a key battleground in the hills surrounding Kassab. The source

stressed that the battle in that region is the battle of the hills, and that the Syrian army has proved in Qalamoun, and especially in Yabrud, its effectiveness in these kinds of battles. This comes in light of information that convoys of Syrian troops that participated in the battle of Yabrud and that have considerable experience fighting battles on hills are heading toward Kassab to participate in leading the battles.

Meanwhile, a Syrian military source confirmed that “the units of the army and the armed forces are still pursuing the remaining terrorists in the northern Latakia countryside where [the Syrian army and forces] are targeting [the terrorists] in Khirbet Solas, Bab al-Amana, around Point 45, Kassab and near the village of al-Samra, and are causing [the enemy] heavy losses.”

It seems the repercussions of the Kassab battle have reached the eastern region of Syria, specifically the city of Deir Ez-Zor, where Jabhat al-Nusra supporters accused the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/03/isis-enforces-islamic-law-raqqa-syria.html>) (ISIS) of taking advantage of Nusra being busy fighting in Kassab to attack Jabhat al-Nusra’s headquarters and centers in Deir Ez-Zor and take control of some towns and villages, in particular al-Busaira, Jadid Okaidat and Abriha, from which Jabhat al-Nusra expelled ISIS a month and a half ago.

According to a source from Deir Ez-Zor, ISIS has taken control of towns near the city of al-Shahil, while Jabhat al-Nusra recovered the al-Jafra oil field hours after ISIS took control of it. The source denied that ISIS has taken control of the Kuniko oil field. It is no secret that Jabhat al-Nusra elements are concerned about the spread of ISIS elements around al-Shahil and about the siege by ISIS around the city. The reason for concern are the rumors being spread by ISIS that Jabhat al-Nusra’s head, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, and Jabhat al-Nusra’s Sharia leader Abu Maria Al-Qahtani are present in al-Shahil and that ISIS’s ultimate goal is to arrest or kill them.

It is worth mentioning that many of Jabhat al-Nusra’s leaders and most prominently Abu Firas al-Suri and Abu Sulaiman al-Ostrali have confirmed in audio recordings made during the past two weeks that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and his deputy, Abu Ali al-Anbari have declared in front of them of the need to kill Golani and Qahtani, thus worrying Jabhat al-Nusra’s supporters about Golani’s life.

Al-Busaira, which is near al-Shahil and the oil fields, has seen, during the past two days, violent clashes between the two sides due to the death of a brother and sister by Jabhat al-Nusra’s bombing of the town. The bombing was to prevent ISIS from taking over the town after ISIS had cut the road leading to it.

A local source told *As-Safir* that the dead man was Ali Kmaz, a field commander close to ISIS’s prefect for Deir Ez-Zor Amer al-Rafdan, a member of the al-Bakkir clan, and an important specialist in booby traps and explosives. Many car bombs in Deir Ez-Zor have been attributed to him. ISIS was able to easily impose its control on al-Busaira and its surroundings because of the support it received from the al-Bakkir clan, which Rafdan belongs to.

Deir Ez-Zor is witnessing a sharp tribal split against the backdrop of the conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, and there is a serious possibility of a devastating war between the two clans. The al-Bakkir clan supports ISIS, while most of the al-Okaidat clan supports Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front, with some al-Okaidat members supporting ISIS. Since the start of the clashes, most of the dead and wounded came from those two clans.

Yesterday, the al-Shaitat clan criticized Jabhat al-Nusra's raiding of homes in al-Busaira and considered that behavior a violation of tribal norms and traditions, which bar entering the sanctity of homes in this way. But things didn't reach the point of the clan standing with ISIS against Jabhat al-Nusra.

All that is putting the city at risk, especially with the growing fears about Golani's life and the oil wealth, which has long been a source of disputes between the parties.

Read More: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/03/war-isis-nusra-deir-ez-zor-tribes-kassab.html>



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