

Hassakeh residents fear ISIS rally in east Syria

Author: As-Safir (Lebanon)

Posted June 24, 2014

The inhabitants of Hassakeh city, Syria, feel that their safe haven is in danger after a car explosion — which is the first of its kind since the outbreak of the crisis — disrupted its calm. It claimed the lives of two civilians and wounded 20 others. Meanwhile, there was recurring news from the nearby Shadadi city about the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/syria-iraq-isis-aleppo-mosul-war-radical-terrorism.html>) (ISIS) mobilizing a large number of forces and moving various arms and vehicles confiscated in Iraq to the city, which is considered a stronghold for the organization in eastern Syria. The region is divided between the grip of the extremist jihadists, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian regime, which only controls Hassakeh and Qamishli (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/security/2014/02/syria-eastern-region-harsh-front.html>).

Several factors have allowed Hassakeh to dissociate itself from the battles and acts of violence since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis over three years ago. It is due to the absence of a popular base for the militants, and the city turning into a shelter for families who were displaced from Deir ez-Zour, including the families of some militants. As a result, local militants neutralized the region. Moreover, the Kurdish People's Protection Units and the Syrian army were deployed in the region and stood up against the militants, despite the repeated disagreements between them (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/security/2014/06/syria-iraq-isis-end-containment-policy-opportunity.html>).

A source following up on the case of Syria's eastern region said that "some people fear the recurrence of the scenario in Raqqa. Militants raided the city suddenly and tightened their grip on it, and it turned into one of the most important strongholds of ISIS." The source added that the city recently received several signs indicating that the battles are getting closer to its walls. The source recalled the scenario in Raqqa, which accommodated thousands of displaced families and was distanced from the battles as per an implicit agreement. Yet, militants broke into it thus leading to the displacement of thousands of families to other regions in Syria, including Hassakeh.

During an interview with As-Safir, a security source noted that “the recurrence of Raqqa scenario is currently not possible for several reasons, mainly the large deployment of the Syrian army in the region and its demographic nature,” in reference to the Kurdish forces taking over large areas of Hassakeh countryside. These include Rmeilan city, which contains hundreds of oil wells that the Kurdish forces invest in and process using 11 mobile refineries imported from neighboring countries. The Kurdish forces also control several neighborhoods in Hassakeh (Salahiya, Mufti, Tall Hajar, Al-Nasrah and Msheirafa).

The same source emphasized that the Syrian army is largely concentrated in Qamishli and Hassakeh, thus constituting a protective barrier to face any possible confrontation. He also clarified that “the security analysis of the situation indicates that the battles will not break out in the near future for several reasons. Notably, ISIS wants to take over all the oil regions first and expand its presence in the countryside, especially in al-Mayadin, Bukamal, Mouhsen and Shaheel, which is one of the strongholds of Jabhat al-Nusra. Besides, ISIS forces already have their hands full with the war in Iraq.” The source emphasized that “there is no need to worry at the present time. The city is safe, and these violations are just normal incidents in a city that constitutes part of a state ravaged by a bloody war for three years.”

Despite the Syrian government’s daily reassurance, the city inhabitants are carefully watching Hassakeh’s southern region, where ISIS checkpoints stand (25 kilometers [15.5 miles] away, near Sabah al-Khayr silos). They are also keeping an eye on the northern region (near Homer village, almost 20 kilometers [12 miles] away), especially after the recurrence of security incidents. The last incident was an ISIS ambush that targeted a National Defense unit around two months ago and led to the death of the National Defense leader in Hassakeh, Khaldoun Ajwad Munzer. In the same context, a source following up on the file of the eastern region in Syria said that “the arms that were moved from Iraq to Shadadi and Tal Hamis constitute the biggest threat, especially since their use and aim remain unknown.” The source recalled that ISIS targeted the surroundings of Qamishli Airport with seven Grad missiles and kidnapped several bus passengers on Hassakeh-Qamishli road. They also attacked Habwa village in Jawadiya near Rmeilan, and there were battles at the Maashouq roundabout between ISIS and the Kurdish units. The source considered these violations as “signs of a step that the organization intends to make against these two safe cities.”

Read More: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/06/syria-hassakeh-fears-raqqa-isis.html>

ALMONITOR

©2014 Al-Monitor. All rights reserved.