

Syria: ISIS tightens grip, Nusra takes losses

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Continuous escalation of Quneitra to Daraa ... amid military progress by the gunmen ... and expectations of continuing confrontations on more than one axis.

That's how the image looks on the southern front (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/04/syria-jordan-halts-opposition-attack-southern-front.html>) in Syria, with armed groups announcing "The battle of Yarmouk, the glorious road to the camp of the Muslims" to control Tall al-Jumu al-Askari in the western Daraa countryside.

Opposition sources in the field said, "A large number of armed groups have been mobilized, both from the east and west countryside, in addition to the battalions of the military council and [battalions] that have a relationship with Jordan." But Jabhat al-Nusra (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/04/jordan-jihadist-risk-spillover-syria-iraq.html>) was absent from the battle.

The sources added, "The clashes are aimed at securing large sections near the town of Nawa, where there are several sites for the Syrian forces, such as the Concourse Battalion, the military security branch, and the Rahba Battalion. In the western Daraa countryside, the army is present in Tall Ashtara in the town of Adwan, in addition to other military locations, which are confronting the gunmen's attack. The Syrian forces also have sites on the southern side, the biggest of which is near Azraa."

A source in the field said, "The matter is more difficult for the international road to Damascus. The same goes for the south at the Nasib border crossing, which Jordan wants to keep open and prevent Jabhat al-Nusra (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/05/jabhat-nusra-isis-branch-iraq.html>) from controlling it. In fact, Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups have been pressured to prevent Jabhat al-Nusra from advancing there."

"Jordanian intelligence is not interfering in this battle," the field source said. "The same goes for what recently happened in Tall al-Sharqi and Tall al-Jabiya, especially since Jabhat al-Nusra did not participate in the last battle in Nawa because of its increasing human and military losses, despite [Jabhat al-Nusra's] role at the beginning of the confrontation, in which participated more than eight factions from the FSA and the military council, such as the Yarmouk brigade, Liwa Shouhada al-Yarmouk, Liwa Ahrar Nawa, Bani Umiya, the first artillery regiment, and Liwa Tasil, as well as al-Muthana Islamic movement, Liwa al-Umari and Ansar al-Sunna, which belong to Jabhat Thuwar Suria. The latter has become one of the most prominent actors in the southern military map."

The source expected that “new and quality weapons will be used in the battles in Nawa, where there were reports about the arrival of sophisticated missiles (unnamed) to groups affiliated with Jabhat Thuwar Suria,” expressing belief that “a number of American TOW missiles (Tube-launched, Optically tracked, Wire-guided anti-tank) has been delivered to the military council and the FSA in the area.”

To the west, toward Quneitra, activists said, “The southern countryside, as well as the western part of the Houran plain, have come under the control of gunmen affiliated with the Islamic Front, especially Ahrar al-Sham, in addition to FSA brigades.”

It was interesting what the spokesman of al-Jabha al-Janubiya, Ibrahim al-Jabawi, said to AFP in Amman, “Al-Jabha al-Janubiya doesn’t include extremist groups linked to al-Qaeda, such as Jabhat al-Nusra or its ISIS rival (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/europe-jihadist-isis-syria-qaeda-terror-france-germany.html>)).”

He said, “Jabhat al-Nusra’s role in Daraa is limited and not like in the rest of the provinces. [Jabhat al-Nusra] is working to overthrow the regime alone and in its own way. ... Until now, [Jabhat al-Nusra’s] work doesn’t conflict with that of the FSA. [Jabhat al-Nusra] is only fighting the regime and has not imposed anything on the people. ... In the southern region, in Quneitra and Daraa and Damascus, there is no danger from any Islamic group, because they are not growing.”

Deir ez-Zor

For weeks, ISIS has been taking over areas little by little to take control of towns and villages in the northern countryside in the province of Deir ez-Zor (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/03/war-isis-nusra-deir-ez-zor-tribes-kassab.html>). Yesterday [April 30] at dawn, ISIS launched a major offensive on two axes. The first was al-Soura-al-Busaira, and includes the villages along the al-Khabur river. The second was Jadid Oqaidat al-Busaira, which includes the villages located on the Euphrates River and down to the outskirts of the city of Deir ez-Zor and the city of al-Shahil.

A media source close to ISIS said that the attack aimed to “cleansing the villages of the northern countryside of the al-Khair province (i.e., Deir ez-Zor) from the Sahawat-al-Joulani alliance,” in reference to Jabhat al-Nusra’s leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani. He added, “The operation went without widespread clashes, especially in the village of al-Huraija, east of al-Khabour, and the town of al-Jadid al-Oqaidat on the Euphrates,” where ISIS managed to expel Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic Front and the FSA groups from the targeted areas, until it reached the outskirts of the Kuniko gas field and the al-Jafra oil field (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/02/isis-losing-ground-deir-al-zour-jabhat.html>). He stressed that ISIS didn’t enter into these fields and has not cleansed them. He denied reports that ISIS had withdrawn from the two fields after it controlled them.

The fiercest clashes have occurred in the village of al-Fadain, where ISIS elements clashed with Liwa Dir al-Ansar, which is affiliated with Jaish al-Islam. Fifteen were killed in the clashes, mostly from Liwa Dir al-Ansar. ISIS lost several fighters, including Ali al-Rafdani (who is close to the ISIS “governor” in Deir ez-Zor, Amer al-Rafdani) and Nazem al-Abboud, the ISIS official responsible for arming in this battle. In al-Jadid al-Oqaidat, the Sharia official of Jabhat al-Nusra, aka Abu Osama, was killed.

What was remarkable in yesterday’s events was that the Islamic Taliban movement has decided to fight ISIS. The first clash between the two sides happened in the vicinity of al-Busaira, where a number were killed, among them two Taliban elements, Jaber Ahmed al-Tamer and Riad Manna Khalaf al-Bukhit.

Thus, ISIS (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/isis-iraq-expands-activities-baghdad.html>) has tightened its grip on the triangle of al-Sour/al-Bousaira/Deir Ez-Zor. ISIS has moved closer to the city al-Shahil, which is considered the main stronghold of Jabhat al-Nusra leaders. This raised Jabhat al-Nusra’s concerns, prompting the group to crackdown against anyone suspected of links to ISIS. The crackdown caused violent clashes between Jabhat al-Nusra elements and the people of the village of al-Zir, which is close to al-Shahil, after the inhabitants refused to comply with the sudden crackdown. After the clashes, Jabhat al-Nusra deployed a large number of checkpoints near al-Shahil.

Elsewhere, Ghorfat Ahl al-Sham threatened in a statement to target the villages of Nabal, al-Zahra and al-Fawaa in Aleppo’s countryside “in response to the regime’s attempt to invade the old city of Homs.” The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, “More than a hundred people were killed by the two bombings in Homs, most of them civilians. Jabhat al-Nusra claimed responsibility [for the two bombings].”

In a statement, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, “18 people were killed, including 10 children, in an Syrian air raid targeting the Ain Jalout school in the al-Ansari neighborhood, east of the city of Aleppo.”

Read More: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/05/isis-expands-control-syria-clashes-nusra.html>

