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The Battle for Southern Syria Heating Up

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Recent developments indicate a credible, previously unseen rebel threat to Damascus.

While rebel militias have lately suffered serious setbacks in central and northern Syria, they are now recording significant successes in the south -- the region lying between Damascus and the Israeli and Jordanian borders. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's loyalists are on the defensive on all related fronts, risking the loss of this strategically important sector. It is becoming increasingly evident that a rebel push toward the capital from the south may be more promising militarily than an offensive from the so-far-stalemated front lines north of Damascus. The next few weeks may witness further major rebel gains on the southern front, which may ultimately pose the main threat to Assad's control.

Rebel Advantages in the South

Only a hundred kilometers separate the Jordanian and Israeli front lines from the Syrian capital, a much shorter distance than that required for a push to Damascus from the rebels' northern strongholds. For their part, Syrian army units in the south are thinly spread, often isolated, and experiencing low morale -- and they now depend on support from scattered irregular volunteers from other parts of the country. Over the past three years, the opposition had not seriously considered the option of a southern offensive toward Damascus, but the calculus has now changed given the increasing inability of Assad's troops to hold their ground in the vast area stretching from Damascus to the Jordanian border in the south, to Israel's Golan Heights in the west, and all the way to Mount Druze in the east. Should the rebels actually decide to make a push to Damascus from the south, they would need to enlist substantial reinforcements from the north. Their commanders have already issued statements proclaiming that their present campaign, the "Levant of the Prophet," is indeed based on a two-axis attack on Damascus: from Deraa and from Quneitra.

Whereas Assad's loyalists and Hezbollah have scored successes north and west of Damascus, the situation in the south -- as noted -- has proven very different. In particular, Syrian army Brigades 61 and 90, which are stationed opposite Israel Defense Forces (IDF) units, have suffered losses so great as to render them operationally ineffective. Brigade 61 has been defeated by the rebels in the strategic Tel al-Jabia military base near Nawa, as well as in other locations. Brigade 90, meanwhile, has lost control over much of the border area with Israel, including the high ground of Tel al-Ahmar (the Red Hills) and Tel Kudna.

The southern part of Deraa, on the Jordanian border, is now controlled by rebel factions, while regime loyalists -- including remaining Third Division units -- control the city's northern section. In most of the Deraa district's periphery, including the now-closed main border terminal, the rebels are in full control. In the northern sector, the rebels -- acting as a coalition of sometimes-rival factions -- have seized most of the Quneitra district, now posing an imminent threat to this provincial capital. A loss of Quneitra would be a major symbolic defeat for the Assad regime, which is making every effort to keep control over this town and the string of villages to its north. Capturing Quneitra has become a real possibility for the rebels, but it remains to be seen whether they will be able to retain control there for long.

The different rebel factions in the south comprise approximately twenty thousand fighters, and in recent operations they have managed to deploy around five hundred fighters for a single attack. According to Syrian opposition sources, the effort in the south is backed by an operations room outside Deraa led by Col. Ziad al-Hariri, while the troops attacking Quneitra are led by another Syrian army defector, Capt. Abu Haidar. Southern fighters include mainly those from the Syrian Revolutionaries Front under Jamal Marouf, now equipped with TOW antitank missiles, and fighters from other factions, including Islamists from Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) -- the al-Qaeda franchise in Syria -- and other Salafi jihadists. Islamist militia strength is found mainly in areas such as Jasim, Inkhil, and Khan al-Sheikh and reinforced by the fact that most fighters are locals -- reducing infighting and paving the way to greater cooperation. Nor has this trend been hampered by the recent JN abduction near Deraa of a Free Syrian Army colonel, Ahmed al-Naameh. The few TOW missiles employed so far have already proved efficient in destroying Syrian army tanks and deterring the regime from sending tanks to roll back rebel gains.

Regime Dilemma

In view of this growing threat from the south, the Assad regime faces a difficult dilemma. To begin with, relocating forces from the north would expose different sectors to rebel incursions. The Syrian army does not have any reserves to dispose of and, at any rate, whatever remains of the army is considered less reliable and fierce than locally recruited militias and Hezbollah forces. Yet if Assad does not manage to send fresh reinforcements to the south, he may soon confront the loss of the city of Quneitra and a direct threat to the main Ninth Division camps in al-Kiswah, Qatana, and Kanaker on the Damascus outskirts.

Israel's Role and Rebel Needs

The southern front, contrary to all previous expectations, may ultimately be the crucial one. Coalitions of rebels are proving effective against regime outposts. These groups are

making sure -- among other things -- not to provoke the Israelis across the border, although rebel-regime fighting often does occur within meters of the 1974 separation line agreed upon between Israel and Syria.

Assad does not have sufficient forces to protect the southern sector, which is proving to be the regime's soft underbelly, and he cannot raise the reinforcements necessary to block the coming offensive already promised by the rebel command. Assad is also aware of the rebels' strict avoidance of any clashes with Israel. Indeed, the rebels view Israel as "having their back" on the Golan Heights, so that the Damascus media is already accusing the IDF of "facilitating" the rebels' moves during their Quneitra offensive, explained by Israel's declaration of the Golan border area as a "closed military zone." The area is restricted for civilian movement, and both security and intelligence operations have been intensified.

If the rebels mobilize enough forces in the south, instead of their traditional concentration on the northern fronts, they may perhaps be able to change the course of the battle for Damascus. For that to happen, though, they will need to redeploy additional forces to this region. So far, this has not happened. And to aid the southern push toward Damascus, supply of more military equipment from the West or Arab states is a priority -- not only to take on Assad's troops but also to maintain the predominance of moderate rebel groups over jihadists.

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