
ISLAMIC STATE DESERT BASES STILL A HEADACHE FOR IRAQ

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As Iraqi forces continue cleansing the western desert to keep the Syrian-Iraqi border region calm, Islamic State counterattacks in Syria are posing a new risk across the border.

With police being targeted in their homes near Ramadi, and with the Islamic State (IS) still in possession of bases in the vast Iraqi desert, counterattacks on forces across the border in Syria are of growing concern to the Iraqis.

Security sources deployed to the area told Al-Monitor that with the recent military campaign launched by Turkey in northern Syria against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), there is a risk that the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), dominated by the YPG, might withdraw from their positions in nearby eastern Syria to assist their fellow Kurds to the north. Such a development could make it easier for remaining IS forces in Syria to slip across the border and cause trouble.

Despite a Dec. 7 Russian declaration that IS had been defeated in Syria, some villages and areas in the east near the Iraqi border remain under the extremist group's control. The former rapper and IS convert known as Deso Dogg was reportedly killed Jan. 17 in an airstrike on Gharanij, one of the three main towns of the Shaitat tribe now under SDF control, but where clashes with IS continue to be reported. IS still holds the areas of Hejin and Soussa.

Local intelligence is likely to be key to preventing the remaining IS members in sleeper cells and in the desert, estimated at a few thousand, from conducting major attacks in the near future, as well as preventing fighters from slipping across the border into Iraq from Syria.

The al-Qaim-based Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU) Kataib al-Hamza has been active as an anti-insurgent group since late 2003. It regrouped in 2014, its commander, who goes by Abu Aya, told Al-Monitor in an interview at his base in al-Qaim in early January. Prior to western Anbar's liberation from IS in late 2017, his fighters had stayed with locals in Haditha during the 18-month

siege of the city, helping to defend it against IS.

Abu Aya is also a member of the Anbar SWAT forces and receives a salary from the Interior Ministry. He said that IS jails in Hejin and Soussa have both Iraqi and Syrian former security officials in them.

[An estimated] 900-1,000 prisoners are being held in that area, Abu Aya said. I have been trying to convince the government to send intelligence operatives across the border [to get more information]. Some days later, he claimed that some of the prisoners had been executed.

The Euphrates River cuts through northeastern Syria to enter Iraq near al-Qaim. The SDF holds most of the territory north of the river, while south of it, the Syrian regime and its allies, including pro-Iran Iraqi militias, are largely in control.

According to a security source working in the area who spoke on the condition of anonymity, a Jan. 21 attack in the town of Baghouz, north of the Euphrates in the Soussa subdistrict, led to Iraqi forces providing support in the form of limited direct fire, but IS nevertheless overran two SDF checkpoints before later withdrawing.

The IS fighters may have wanted to reach the vast desert spanning Anbar, Salahuddin and Ninevah provinces, long a largely lawless territory. Some analysts believe that this is where IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is likely to be hiding.

IS has a number of underground bases in the Anbar desert, Abu Aya said. The closest one is about 93 kilometers [58 miles] from al-Qaim.

We know of at least three IS bases in the western Anbar desert, one of which was targeted by a coalition airstrike near [former airbase] H1. But I think there are at least five or six, Abu Aya further remarked. One is large enough for cars to go underground and is located in the area between Anbar and Salahuddin.

In early January, Col. Moussa Hamad al-Karbouly, commander of the local PMU Liwa Aaly al-Furat, told Al-Monitor during a visit to his base in the Karableh area of al-Qaim that they were expecting IS to make a push toward the Iraqi border. We are prepared for it, he added.

Members of Liwa Aaly al-Furat, consisting of local fighters trained by Danish Special Forces, receive salaries from the government, but most fighters with Kataib al-Hamza do not. Abu Aya was visibly upset about this lack of support when Al-Monitor interviewed him. We have had 51 martyrs and about 70 or 80 injured in the fight against IS since July 2014, and most of them have not got justice, he said. By "justice," he was referring to salaries or any other form of compensation.

About 70-80% of Abu Aya's fighters are from the Albu Mahal tribe, he revealed. The rest are from others, Abu Aya said. Most of them have a family member who was killed by IS or by al-Qaeda or had their homes burned by them. The Albu Mahal had conducted a major uprising against al-Qaeda in 2005, a year prior to the more well-known Sunni Awakening.

Abu Aya asserted, Most of the verified intelligence on the area used by the Falcon Intelligence Cell came from Kataib al-Hamza, as did the intelligence of other Baghdad-based security forces in the fight against IS in recent years.

Anbar Governor Mohammed al-Halbusi, in an interview at his home in Baghdad, told Al-Monitor that local Sunni PMU members who had taken part in the fighting against IS numbered approximately 16,000 — 10,000 with salaries and 6,000 without — and that there are plans to further reduce those receiving pay. Halbusi, however, wants to prevent a halt to salaries as he sees these forces as useful in protecting the region.

About Kataib al-Hamza, Halbusi said, [They] are good fighters against IS. I cant help them with a salary, but with food, health centers, a bit of money for them in the camps, I can, a bit. But I have 6,000 [others].

Some of Abu Ayas men have had arrest warrants issued against them, he and other sources have told Al-Monitor. One security official working in Anbar said the warrants were due to political and tribal reasons.

About those said to be wanted by the authorities, Abu Aya said, The 8th Division [of the Iraqi army] put the names of Kataib al-Hamza heroes, [including] ones killed in the fight against IS, [on the list].

On tribal grievances between the Albu Mahal and others, Abu Aya nevertheless said, Our main problem is IS. All issues with others are minor in comparison.

The most recent attacks in Ramadi have occurred in different tribal areas north of the city and have targeted the homes of men working with the security forces, sources in the city told Al-Monitor. What happens in Anbar and the porous border area will likely have repercussions across the rest of Iraq, with IS still frequently claiming attacks in Baghdad and elsewhere.

Shelly Kittleson is a journalist specializing in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Her work has been published in several international, US and Italian media outlets.

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