

THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND AL-SHAM AND THE “CLEANSING” OF DEIR EZ-ZOUR

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has been contesting control over Deir ez-Zour, in eastern Syria, with both Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and other rebels and local tribes.
- Fighting between ISIS and JN will continue despite the May 2, 2014 statement of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, in which he called on the groups to stop the fighting and attempted to focus ISIS on Iraq.
- The oil resources of Deir ez-Zour are critical to the operations of both JN and ISIS.
- The Deir ez-Zour operations show the increasing capabilities of ISIS to design and execute complex, military operations. ISIS executed a sophisticated concept of operations that included tactical feints and deliberate misinformation to deceive its opponents, while advancing in a complex maneuver.
- ISIS is intent on regaining prominence in Deir ez-Zour, which may be a first step in regaining their other previous Syrian areas of operation. Holding terrain in Deir ez-Zour helps secure ISIS's supply lines to its primary stronghold in ar-Raqqa.
- Popular sentiment is not with ISIS. Tribal groups in Deir ez-Zour have been mobilized against ISIS's recent assaults, and their newly minted armed militias will play an important role in the battles in Deir ez-Zour.
- Regime forces in and around Deir ez-Zour have gained a boost from this ISIS offensive, which has diverted the efforts of rebels away from taking over the military airport and few remaining regime suburbs in the northern part of Deir ez-Zour city.

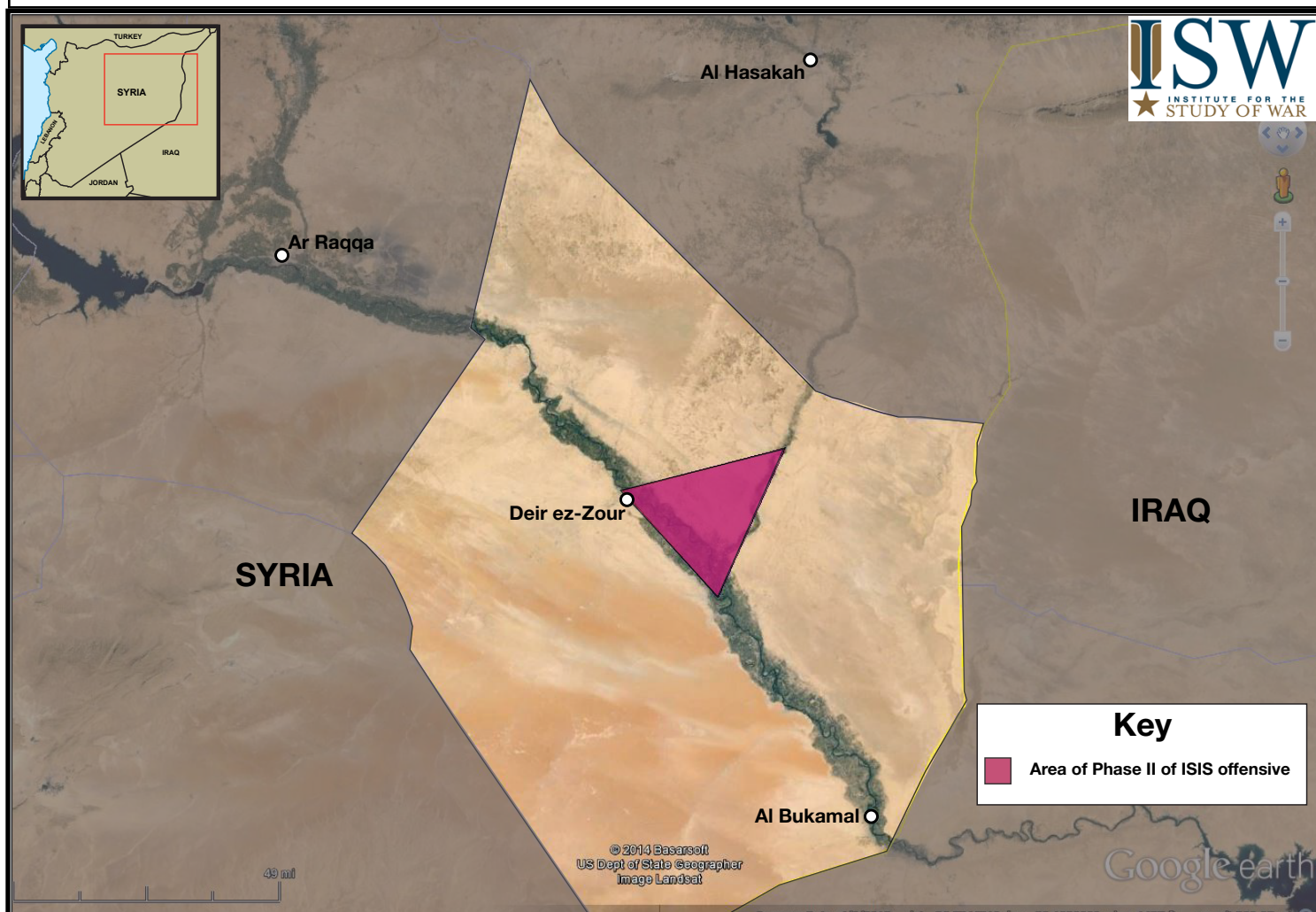
Following the January 2014 uprising by rebel groups in Syria against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), ISIS contracted its footprint in Syria. The group was pushed out, tactically withdrew, or went below the radar in cities and towns across much of Idlib, Aleppo, and Deir ez-Zour. It continued to battle the Kurds in Hasaka, but constituted most of its strength in ar-Raqqa, where it is in firm control of the provincial capital and several other towns. In Syria's eastern province of Deir ez-Zour, ISIS is attempting a resurgence. At the end of March 2014, ISIS began to move forces from the north into place for an offensive back into the heart of rebel territory in Deir ez-Zour province. This resurgence has come in the form of an offensive largely against Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front, which are predominant in the province. Local tribal militias have come to play an increasing role as well.

In Phase I of the offensive ISIS moved south along the Khabur River towards al-Basira, where the Khabur and Euphrates Rivers meet. In Phase II, ISIS activated a second fighting force just south

of Deir ez-Zour city to push south along the Euphrates, thereby attacking al-Basira from two different axes. The main goal of the ISIS offensive in Deir ez-Zour is to capture and control al-Basira, which is a critical supply route junction. Controlling al-Basira will support ISIS in consolidating control in Eastern Syria and give it additional routes to resupply and reinforce ar-Raqqa for an eventual push back into northwestern Syria. The area of the as-Suwar – Deir ez-Zour – al-Basira triangle that is the ultimate focus of the offensive also indicates that ISIS wants control of the local oilfields and facilities. Some of the most important oil production areas in Syria including the al-Jafra oil field, the Conoco plant, and the al-Omar oilfield are accessed from this area.

While it is possible that ISIS hopes to establish a second regional capital in Deir ez-Zour as it has in ar-Raqqa, it is not currently well-positioned to do so, making it more likely that securing supply routes and oil are the short-term goals of the offensive. The loss of significant Syrian territory in the north and east of

Deir ez-Zour Overview Map



the country in January and February means that ISIS would be stretching itself thin if it were to establish governance structures in Deir ez-Zour at this time. The effort to govern Deir ez-Zour would be a more complicated effort than it was in ar-Raqqa due to the presence of regime forces in northern Deir ez-Zour city and the military airport, as well as unfriendly, militarized tribal militias in the area.

BACKGROUND

Deir ez-Zour is important for several reasons. First, it contains the main supply routes between ISIS's stronghold in ar-Raqqa, and its Iraqi forces. The province of Deir ez-Zour is covered by desert and bisected by two major rivers. The Euphrates River runs through the province from northwest to southeast, connecting the Iraqi border town of Albu Kamal with ar-Raqqa. The Khabur River runs from the northeast where it flows from Hasaka (its northern tributaries reach all the way to Turkey), to the center of the province where it joins the Euphrates. The

town of al-Basira lies at the confluence of these two rivers, and all of the major cities and towns as well as major roads in the province are located along their banks. The province is relatively sparsely populated. The Assad regime's control in Deir ez-Zour has been reduced to the military airport to the west of the city, from which it continues to launch air raids, and a handful of existing security facilities in neighborhoods in the northern part of the city. All of these factors combine to make the area an ideally lawless staging ground for ISIS.

The second reason that Deir ez-Zour is important is that it contains most of Syria's oil reserves. The Syrian regime had withdrawn from all of the oil fields of Deir ez-Zour by early 2013. Since then, the province's oil resources have been a source of funding and conflict for the area's tribes, local rebel groups, and national/transnational terrorist organizations including ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN).¹

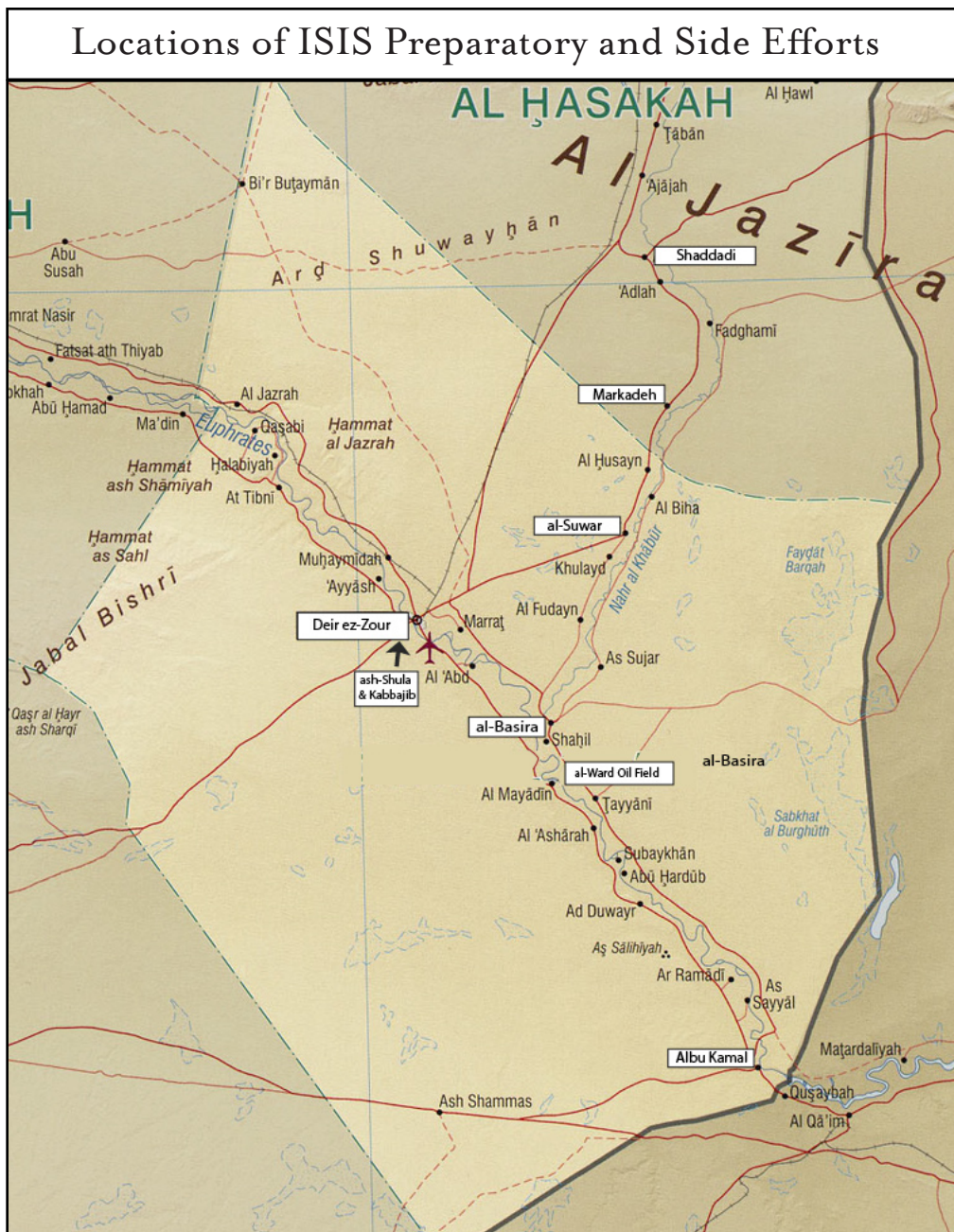
Signs that ISIS was planning a return to Deir ez-Zour were evident in March 2014 in "Phase I" when ISIS started moving its Hasaka forces down the Khabur River, contesting villages

along the way. Markadeh is the last major town in Hasaka before the Khabur enters Deir ez-Zour. There were scattered clashes between ISIS and JN in and around Markadeh throughout March.² Then ISIS launched a surprise attack on JN, the Islamic Front (IF), and allied tribal forces, which ISIS calls the “Coalition of Jolani and the Sahwat,” in Markadeh on March 30. More than 50 were killed.³ While there are conflicting claims about the results, and small clashes continued,⁴ it seems that ISIS was successful in taking control of most of the town, which it has since renamed to Misrah.⁵ ISIS has recently begun issuing “reforms” in Misrah and undertaking reconstruction efforts.⁶ ISIS continued pushing south along the river, making it to Western Ghariba village (or slightly further north around

Jina, depending on which side is reporting) by April 5.⁷ This put ISIS right on the edge of Deir ez-Zour province.

SETTING THE STAGE

Just before the first phase of ISIS’s offensive in Deir ez-Zour was about to begin – before it moved down the Khabur River towards al-Basira – two other smaller ISIS offensives occurred elsewhere in the province. Based on the way in which these attacks were conducted, they appear to have been designed to confuse other rebels, distracting them away from the main line



of ISIS's attack. This concept of operations is one that ISIS has used continuously throughout its current offensive.

On April 10, a small contingent of around 200 ISIS fighters stormed Abu Kamal, the southernmost Syrian city on the Euphrates River right on the border with Iraq.⁸ The force was repelled by rebels that same day after a bloody fight in which ISIS killed nearly 50 rebel fighters.⁹ Rebels involved include Jabhat al-Nusra, Jabhat al-Asala wal-Tanmiya,¹⁰ several other local brigades, and local tribal defense militias. Considering the size of the attacking force and the relatively light weaponry, it is unlikely that this offensive was intended to take control of the city of Abu Kamal. Instead it was most likely intended to draw attention and reinforcements away from the main targets of ISIS's offensive further north. Rumors of additional looming ISIS attacks on Abu Kamal – none of which materialized – further strengthen this assessment.¹¹

On the same day that the small ISIS contingent launched its one-off attack on Abu Kamal to the south, there were reports of ISIS setting up checkpoints and initiating clashes to the west of Deir ez-Zour in the tiny village of Kabajib.¹² The ISIS convoy was quickly repelled by the local Islamic Front-affiliated Jaffar al-Tayyar brigade.¹³ The only strategic importance of Kabajib is its location on the main highway running east to west between Damascus and Deir ez-Zour. Slightly more important is a town called As-Shulah about 12 miles east of Kabajib on the same highway. Shulah also abuts an oil processing center on the T2 pipeline. Following the ISIS clashes, the Islamic Front sent reinforcements to the area, presumably drawing them away from the city of Deir ez-Zour.¹⁴ Though neither Abu Kamal nor Kabajib/Shula were the main effort of the ISIS offensive, ISIS units have continued to launch intermittent small-scale attacks near both of these strategic locations, forcing other rebels to maintain significant force strength in these areas.¹⁵

PHASE I: ISIS MAIN EFFORT BEGINS

On April 11, what ISIS termed "Phase I" of its main effort began in earnest as forces pushed into Deir ez-Zour from Hasaka. ISIS forces headed south along the Khabur River, attacking JN and its coalition forces in al-Huseen, Muweila, and Eastern Ghariba villages.¹⁶ After several days of fighting it managed to take control of these and other nearby villages in its press southward.¹⁷ While this main push was starting from the north, local ISIS units that had been quietly embedded as "sleeper cells," according to several local opposition reporting sources, arose in a coordinated manner in several villages along the Euphrates and caused widespread alarm by claiming control of the areas.¹⁸ This confusion was compounded by a series of defection videos to ISIS and rumored defections posted online simultaneously.¹⁹ This stage of the ISIS offensive is notable for its integration of the manipulation of social media into its military offensive

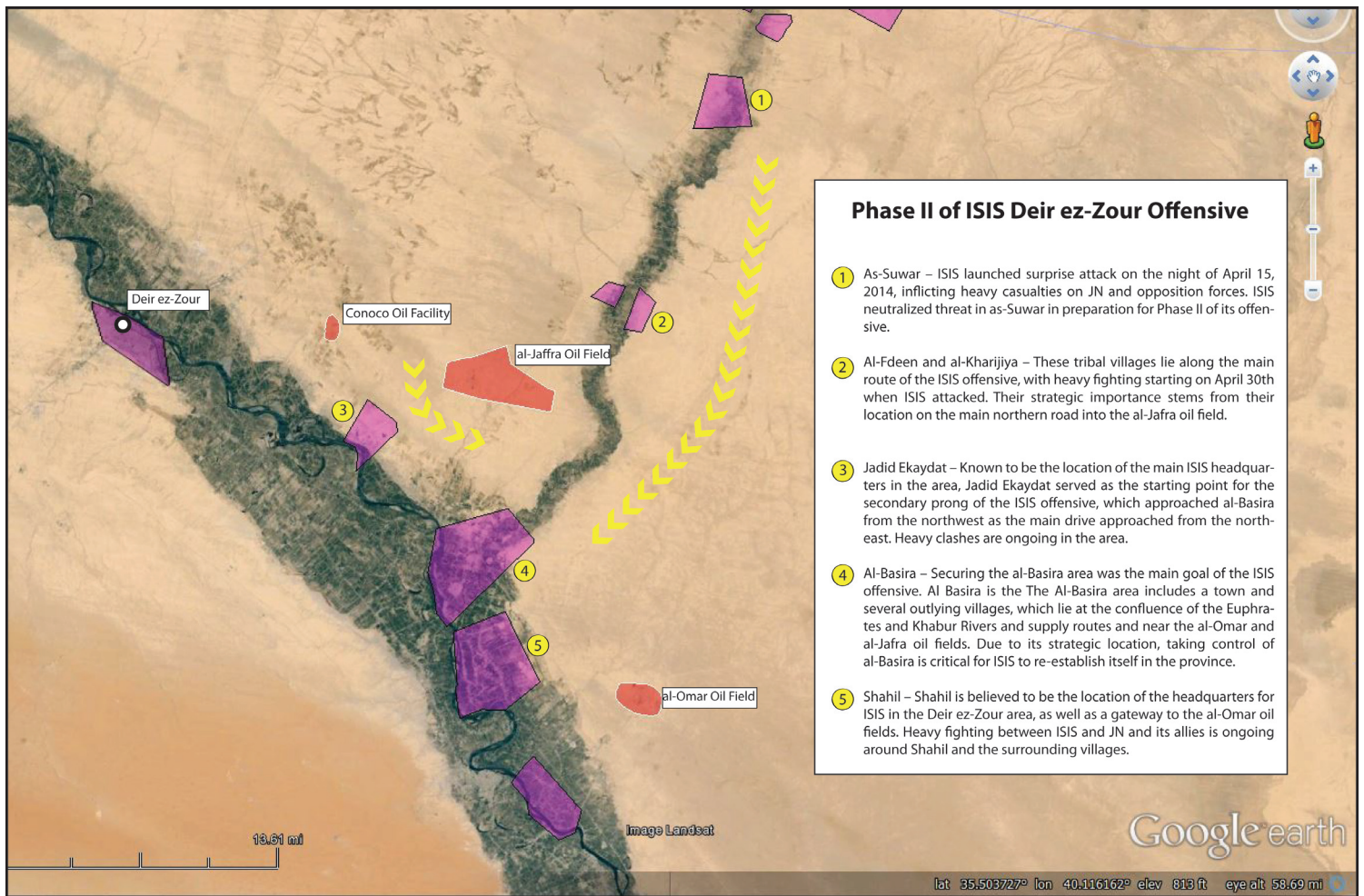
in order to amplify its military impact. Indeed, ISIS splintered rebel brigades fighting in Deir ez-Zour.

ISIS continued pushing south along the Khabur in its main line of attack,²⁰ encountering little resistance in most small villages on its route to the important town of as-Suwar, which JN and its associates had previously reinforced in preparation to staunch the ISIS advance.²¹ On the night of April 15, ISIS launched a sudden attack on the town. There was intense fighting and ISIS lost many fighters, but it appears to have taken the other units by surprise and succeeded in killing many fighters from JN, IF, and local units before pulling back. According to local activist reporting, ISIS committed a massacre, killing around 60 fighters.²²

ISIS claimed to have successfully secured the town, while local brigades and reporting networks reported that ISIS ended up withdrawing.²³ The reality is somewhere in between. With the significant casualties that ISIS inflicted in its surprise attack on as-Suwar, it was able to neutralize the threat temporarily, so that it could proceed with just a few units to guard lines of communications and checkpoints, allowing the bulk of its forces to push on southward towards their main objective of al-Basira. One local news network reported that when the ISIS units withdrew they emplaced landmines on the access roads to as-Suwar to prevent the movement of other forces, supporting the assessment that their goal was to neutralize as-Suwar, not capture it.²⁴

Local activist media networks reported that the ISIS units had reinforced in Deir ez-Zour from their ar-Raqqa HQ.²⁵ One local distress call cited unconfirmed reports that ISIS outposts in Raqqa appeared almost entirely empty, further supporting this claim.²⁶ Despite this relatively large ISIS force size, estimated at around 1,000,²⁷ involved in the offensive, ISIS had insufficient numbers to exert complete control and hold the towns they passed through on their way down the Khabur. Low intensity conflict continued in the towns that ISIS left in its wake. On April 16 there were reports that ISIS used VBIEDs to destroy the homes of at least 4 JN leaders in Eastern Ghariba.²⁸ There were home raids by ISIS reported in Basateen that day as well.²⁹

In response to this aggression by ISIS, JN launched an unprecedented attack on ISIS. JN sent two SVBIEDs against ISIS targets in Eastern Ghariba and as-Suwar on April 21.³⁰ While SVBIEDs are a signature of JN as well as ISIS, prior to this ISIS offensive JN had only used them against regime targets. The first known JN VBIED against ISIS was on April 4 in Markadeh further north.³¹ An additional JN car bombing was reported against ISIS headquarters in Eastern Ghariba on April 30.³²



PHASE II

After the attack on as-Suwar, ISIS maintained relative control in most of the towns between Suwar and Markadeh, so it was positioned to begin phase two of what it has termed “the process of cleansing the Eastern Region from the Sahwat” in late April.³³ Phase two, or the “cleansing of the northern countryside of the province of al-Khair” (the ISIS renaming of Deir ez-Zour) involved two separate lines of ISIS forces moving south along the Euphrates from Jadid Ekaydat, and Khabur from as-Suwar to the town of al-Basira where they converge.³⁴ These movements were not entirely straight paths along the rivers, but included attempts on the oil fields and facilities, a key goal of the ISIS offensive.

Between April 15-30, 2014 ISIS launched a number of attacks in different areas of Deir ez-Zour intended to deceive the other rebel forces about their actual tactical intent, in preparation for the main push on April 30. On April 20, a rebel brigade reported that ISIS had launched an attack on the al-Ward oil field, which lies from 50 miles further south along the Euphrates. This was most likely another redirection attack, to get rebels to mass away from the main targets.³⁵ There is no evidence that ISIS had any measurable forces positioned in that area, and the al-Ward field

has been barely operational for over a year.³⁶ On April 23, ISIS reopened the battle at Kabajib, where it fought intermittently with JN and IF fighters for several days.³⁷ It also continued its assaults on villages along the Khabur.³⁸ Also on April 23, rebel brigades unified into a new joint operations room in Albu Kamal.³⁹ Albu Kamal was not the main target of the ISIS Deir ez-Zour offensive, suggesting that their efforts to mislead rebels into reinforcing the wrong areas were in part successful.

On April 30, ISIS launched its main effort with simultaneous attacks against nearly all strategic locations within the as-Suwar – Deir ez-Zour – al-Basira triangle.⁴⁰ The primary attacks were in the tribal villages near al-Kharijiya and al-Fdeen, Jadid Ekaydat, and al-Basira itself.⁴¹ The attack on al-Fdeen followed the same pattern that ISIS used in its other town take-overs during this offensive: forces stormed the village at night and inflicted a large number of casualties before pulling back.⁴² ISIS also set up a number of checkpoints the main roads to disrupt the ability of other rebel groups to reinforce the area.⁴³ In the nearby village of al-Kharijiya, there were reports that ISIS abducted groups of “young men.”⁴⁴ Like the villages on the Khabur, ISIS set up checkpoints around Jadid Ekaydat to make it harder for

Map circulated by ISIS showing area of Phase II of the offensive



reinforcements to arrive.⁴⁵ This attack also killed an important JN religious figure.⁴⁶ ISIS sent a force into al-Basira as well, engaging a mix of tribal groups, IF, and JN in fighting that left around 27 killed.⁴⁷ A convoy of ISIS fighters on its way to the Conoco gas plant was reportedly repulsed by JN.

While most of the ISIS attacks were initially repulsed, fighting along the villages and towns of the Khabur and Euphrates Rivers is ongoing as of May 12, 2014 and appears to be increasing in intensity,⁴⁸ leading to massive displacement as tens of thousands of civilians have fled the area. There are reports that ISIS made significant gains over the weekend of May 10-11, and now controls most of the Euphrates between Deir ez-Zour and ar-Raqqa. ISIS has also reportedly taken over the Conoco oil plant,⁴⁹ although JN set it on fire as they withdrew.⁵⁰ Both sides are sending reinforcements to the area.⁵¹ In addition to al-Basira itself, the village of Jadid Ekaydat, where ISIS is said to have a local HQ, is seeing particularly heavy clashes,⁵² as are the villages just south of Shahil. The Conoco oil field was another primary target of ISIS assaults, and now of JN counter-attacks.⁵³ The targeting of this infrastructure has led to major power outages in Deir ez-Zour.⁵⁴

THE IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF ISIS'S DEIR EZ-ZOUR CAMPAIGN

The ISIS offensive in eastern Syria has united tribal factions in arms in a way that has yet been seen in Deir ez-Zour.⁵⁵ In its statements ISIS has continued to mention that tribes have joined it in its fight, but this is largely propaganda as most tribal groups have come out in support of JN and the opposition.⁵⁶ Following an early April ISIS assault on Abu Kamal, the tribes near in the area came together and announced a formal alliance against ISIS and any group who deals with them. The tribal alliance reportedly began rallying thousands of men into armed militias to defend the villages of Deir ez-Zour against ISIS.⁵⁷

Major tribes of the Euphrates and Khabur rivers came together on April 30 to announce an initiative to stop the fighting between ISIS, JN, and other rebels in Deir ez-Zour.⁵⁸ The plan required the groups to submit to a Shari'a court led by influential al-Qaeda scholars for mediation and give a response within one week through their official media channels. It said that these tribes would put all of their men and arms behind whichever group came out ahead in the arbitration.⁵⁹ Interestingly, in the announcement, the tribal leaders took care to distinguish themselves from the tribal uprising against al-Qaeda in Iraq, rejecting the term “Sahwat” and framing their argument in clearly sectarian jihadi terms. The tribal statement says that they are Sunni tribes who want to implement Shari'a law, and requests specifically that religious figures associated with al-Qaeda should rule on the case. The one week window ran out on May 8, with no response from ISIS. JN has responded to the initiative, which closely matches the calls for mediation that it has previously approved of.⁶⁰ In the tribal announcement, JN listed a number of top al-Qaeda scholars as appropriate judges for this mediation, many of which have previously criticized ISIS and been involved in earlier efforts to bring them to Shari'a court, which were also approved of by JN and refused by ISIS.

The fact that ISIS is making a comeback in Deir ez-Zour and the way in which it has carried out its offensive provide clues as to its strategy in Syria. After ISIS withdrew from many areas of Syria to consolidate its power in Raqqa earlier in 2014, following the widespread uprising of rebel forces against it, ISIS made threats to return. The current offensive in Deir ez-Zour suggests that these were not empty threats, and that ISIS is likely to launch similar pushes back into Idlib and Aleppo when it is in a better position to do so. Several accounts of the recent Deir ez-Zour offensive suggest that ISIS has had “sleeper cells” positioned in some of its target cities and villages beforehand, which assisted ISIS greatly in its surprise nighttime assaults.⁶¹ If true, it is likely a concept of operations ISIS will employ elsewhere.

Another interesting aspect of the ISIS offensive was the way in which it used social media to directly assist in its military advances, sowing confusion among rebels on the ground. There are many instances during the ISIS advance from Hasaka into Deir ez-Zour when reports arose online of pledges of allegiance by tribal figures to ISIS or of ISIS takeovers on towns and villages. Many of these reports turned out to be false and required rebel groups to put out statements refuting the false information. These reports often appeared just before a related ISIS attack elsewhere, suggesting that they were placed purposefully to divert reinforcements from rebel and tribal groups to the wrong location, or create confusion among those they were about to attack. For example on April 30, the day of ISIS's main assault, reports started to arise online that ISIS had taken control of the Jafra processing plant, Conoco oil field, and al-Basira.⁶² These were all locations that ISIS was targeting, but had not taken over. In the case of Conoco it appears that the ISIS convoy was repulsed while en route so no direct attack ever occurred.

Other reporting sources simultaneously reported that ISIS had withdrawn attacking forces from Conoco and Jafra to its base in Jadid Ekaydat.⁶³ JN also responded online with a denial that ISIS had taken over al-Basira,⁶⁴ and the continued battles there support JN’s version of the story. Physical infrastructure in Deir ez-Zour is very basic, and the people living there are spread out in small villages along the rivers, making the internet a primary mode of communication between armed groups in the province. For rebel groups following the news out of their local reporting networks, these conflicting reports would have caused confusion as to how to respond most effectively to the ISIS attacks.

The ISIS offensive in Deir ez-Zour has had a serious impact on the ability of rebel forces to fight against the remaining regime enclaves in and around the city. Rebel forces held most of Deir ez-Zour city, and had been making small advances on the military airport for several weeks prior. The diversion of efforts has slowed this effort, causing setbacks and leading some brigades to withdraw from the ISIS-JN fighting entirely.⁶⁵ This is an important trend to watch. Since most rebel brigades aligned with JN over ISIS, their withdrawal from the inter al-Qaeda clashes will likely weaken JN significantly.

Finally, the battle for Deir ez-Zour highlights the importance of Syria’s oil reserves for the extremist rebel brigades in Syria. Fighting in ISIS’s offensive has centered in key junction towns such as al-Basira and as-Suwar, but also on a number of small and seemingly unimportant villages along the Khabur and Euphrates. The tribal villages of al-Fdeen, Kharijiya, Jadid Ekaydat, Shahil, etc. are important to the combatants because they lie in the roads leading to the important oil fields nearby. The two small villages where ISIS and JN are rumored to be headquartered are prime examples. Jadid Ekaydat is near Conoco/Jafra, and Shahil where JN is concentrated is near al-Omar oil field.⁶⁶ Reports of clashes between ISIS and JN in the village of Kasra, near the Dero oil fields, in the northeastern part of Deir ez-Zour reinforce this point.⁶⁷ On May 10th there were reports that ISIS succeeded in taking the Conoco oil facility from Jabhat al-Nusra.⁶⁸

It is clear from the current ISIS offensive and intensifying fighting in Deir ez-Zour that the conflict between ISIS and JN is not going to be resolved peacefully in the near future, despite yet another call from Ayman al-Zawahiri on May 2 to stop the fighting, submit to Shari’a mediation, and stop slandering each other online.⁶⁹ JN responded to Zawahiri’s call, saying that it would comply to stop attacks on ISIS, submit to religious rulings, and stop slandering ISIS online, but that it would continue to respond against ISIS attacks. On the ground, however, there was no clear impact of the Zawahiri statement, as fighting between JN and ISIS has continued unabated.

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NOTES

1. This topic will be covered in more detail in an upcoming ISW report.
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