

Battle for Qusair raises threat of Syria partition

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has lost control of northern and southern Syria and is focused on a strategic corridor linking the Mediterranean coast to Damascus. Will this accelerate the fragmentation of Syria?

More than two years after the conflict began, Syria today is totally transformed. While experts discuss the threat of partition, on the ground, Syria is effectively a divided country.

"What the country is experiencing today is in fact a real partition - even if it's not official," said Syrian anthropologist Randa Kassis – who is also a member of the opposition Syrian National Council – in an interview with a French radio station. "The Kurdish area (in the north) enjoys partial autonomy. The (western) coastal zone and the heart of Damascus is under regime control, and if we go south, in the Druze areas, the situation is ambiguous."

Fabrice Balanche, a Syria expert at the Lyon-based thinktank Gremmo (Groupe de recherches et d'études sur la Méditerranée et le Moyen Orient) notes that northern and southern Syria have effectively been divided since July 2012 with the fall of the northern province of Raqqa.

'Liberated' north slips from regime control

Over the past few months, northern Syria has not been under President Bashar al Assad's control and is considered "liberated territory" by the rebels. Almost all border crossings with Turkey fell to opposition control during the spring and summer of 2012. Rebel fighters, who have long used Turkey as a rear base, are now able to move weapons, supplies and fighters – including jihadists - to the combat zones in Syria, including the commercial capital of Aleppo.

Most cities in the north are also managed by local rebel councils, which receive financial assistance from Western nations such as France. For nearly a year, the Syrian army has only sporadically bombarded rebel positions in the north, while the battle for Aleppo continues.

"The Kurds have benefited immensely from the current situation in the north of the country," said Balanche. "They have always fought to establish a Kurdish area and enjoy relative autonomy." The conflict has also impacted Syria's Kurdish community based near the Syrian-Turkish border, sparking what has been called the "[Kurdish awakening](#)".

For the moment, the Assad regime seems willing to let the north slip from government control. "From the beginning, the (regime's) strategy has been to focus on the big cities," said Balanche, noting that the Assad regime has focused on strategic areas, including the capital of Damascus and the [western coastal stronghold of the Alawite community](#).

Assad belongs to the Shiite Alawite sect that constitutes about 12 percent of Syria's 22 million-strong population. A predominantly Sunni Muslim country, Syria has been ruled by the Assad family for more than four decades - a period that has seen Alawites dominate the political and military establishments.

In the south, arms across the Jordanian border

The regime strategy of focusing on Damascus and the Alawite coastal heartland helps explain why forces loyal to Assad have lost ground in the south. "The regime was overwhelmed in the south in early 2013, losing control of the Jordanian border," said Balanche.

The loss of control of the Syrian-Jordanian border has enabled the rebels to open a new front in southern Syria - with the help of Saudi Arabia.

"The open border is clearly a Saudi front," said Frédéric Pichon, a Middle East historian, noting that the oil-rich Gulf kingdom has taken advantage of the opening to enter the Syrian fray as a counterweight to Qatar's influence in northern Syria.

The Gulf kingdoms of Qatar and Saudi Arabia have a historic rivalry and a relationship defined by mutual distrust, which has increased since the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The Saudi funneling of weapons to Syrian anti-government fighters over the Jordanian border was documented by a February report in the [The New York Times](#), which noted that the shipments contributed to the small tactical gains by rebel forces this winter.

As the brutal Syrian uprising enters its third year, several fronts have appeared across the country, running along communal lines. Pichon however doubts there will be formal splits along these battle lines. "There won't be different states formed, but in fact different communities will control different zones - like in Iraq."

But Syrian anthropologist and opposition figure Kassis believes the division of the country "is still very likely." She noted that, "even if Assad falls, the Alawite community will never leave the coastal area to the Syrian rebels, it's impossible."

All eyes on Qusair, the new battlefield

In recent weeks, a new battlefield has opened up, with the conflict focused on the corridor linking the coastal Alawite heartland to Damascus.

On Sunday, Syrian troops backed by Lebanese Hezbollah militias [entered the rebel-held southern town of Qusair](#) after an intensive military campaign.

The intensity of the latest fighting underscores the importance of Qusair for both sides. An overwhelmingly Sunni town located on the route connecting the Mediterranean coast with Syria's interior cities – including Damascus - Qusair has served as a key post through which weapons and supplies have been smuggled across the Lebanese border.

According to Balanche, the Syrian army is currently conducting a "strategic counterinsurgency in which it wants to focus on the strategic parts of the country even if it means temporarily withdrawing from some regions such as the north or the south."

As the Assad regime's struggle for survival drags on, the focus has been shifting in this long, brutal war that has already claimed around 80,000 lives. Last year for instance, the two sides were locked in a battle for control of the Damascus-Aleppo highway, connecting Syria's two major cities.

Using Hezbollah to 'feed Damascus'

There are several reasons for the latest shift of focus to the Damascus-coastal corridor.

But the corridor linking Damascus to the coastal cities of Tartus or Latakia passes through Homs, the western Syrian province that has put up a strong resistance against the regime. "Therein lies the difficulty," said Balanche. "The Syrian authorities were forced to deploy substantial forces on the routes around Homs and Qusair in particular to secure the convoys." "First, we must feed Damascus," said Balanche, noting that the regime still holds the heart of the capital, which is a predominantly middle-class Sunni area. "But," he added, "supplies to Damascus, whether food, goods or weapons, come from the coast."

Since the early days of the Syrian uprising, Homs has put up a strong resistance against the Syrian army. But this time, to be sure of winning, the Assad regime has called for reinforcements.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has acknowledged receiving "[game-changing weapons](#)" from Assad's regime and has hinted that members of his movement are fighting alongside the Syrian military in the regions near the Lebanese border. "We will not leave the Lebanese Shiites, who live around Qusair, helpless," he said in a televised speech on the Hezbollah TV station, Al Manar, last month.

The strategy seems to be working with Syrian troops pushing deeper into Qusair on Monday. According to a British-based opposition group, at least 28 Hezbollah fighters were killed in the latest fighting.

"Today, Qusair has become symbolic – like Baba Amr," said Balanche, referring to the Baba Amr neighbourhood of Homs, which put up a historic resistance before it was seized by the Syrian army in December 2011. "The regime needs victories to feed its propaganda."

<http://www.france24.com/en/20130520-syria-country-divided-qusair-alawite-sunni-mediterranean-damascus>