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Town by town, Assad regime retakes southwestern Syria

The battle for the last major rebel-held town in Qalamoun looms after a five-month campaign. A regime victory would afford it uninterrupted control of southwestern Syria.

By Nicholas Blanford,

4/8/2014

Hezbollah and the Syrian Army's five-month campaign to clear rebels from the strategic Qalamoun region is approaching its final stand.

The allies have seized one village and town after the other, gradually moving southward through the corridor between Damascus and Homs which links the Syrian capital to the Mediterranean coast.

According to Syrian state media, Syrian troops and Hezbollah fighters are set to launch an offensive against Rankous in central Qalamoun after seizing high ground overlooking the town and encircling it. Once Rankous is seized, only a tract of mountainous terrain stands in the way of the regime's final objective: Zabadani, the last major rebel-held town in Qalamoun. If Zabadani falls in the coming weeks, President Bashar al-Assad will once again have uninterrupted control of southwestern Syria, buying it time to consider how to claw back the rest of the country from rebel factions.

After losing the key town of Yabroud in northern Qalamoun last month, the surviving rebel forces retreated southward, yielding ground slowly before the overwhelming firepower of their opponents. Other rebels have fled the region to the relative sanctuary of neighboring Lebanon, hiding out in the rugged mountains near the Sunni-populated town of Aarsal.

RECOMMENDED: Do you understand the Syria conflict? Take the quiz

“We feel betrayed. It seems the whole world is with Hezbollah and the Syrian regime now and we have been dumped,” says Abu Omar, an Aarsal resident who helps Syrian rebels. His pessimism reflects the rebels' recent battlefield losses and the near certainty that the entire Qalamoun region will return to regime control in the coming months.

Yesterday Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was quoted as saying that the Assad regime no longer faces collapse.

“In the last three years, the developments have proven that the regime is not weak and has strong popular support,” he said in an interview with Lebanon’s As-Safir newspaper.

The Qalamoun operation has gone well for the Assad regime, largely thanks to Hezbollah, whose battle-hardened fighters are spearheading the ground operation with the backing of the Syrian Army artillery and air power. Their final goal is the takeover of Zabadani, a town 16 miles northwest of Damascus, at the southern end of the Qalamoun area.

No escape route

That battle, when it happens, could be a bloody one. Unlike Yabroud, which lay adjacent to a Sunni-populated area of Lebanon that offered a refuge to fleeing civilians and militants, Zabadani is wedged against a Hezbollah-controlled stretch of the border. That leaves rebels in Zabadani, which lies in a valley surrounded by mountains, without an escape route.

The fighting has swept through Sarkha, a small village midway between Yabroud and Rankous that has been heavily shelled. Abu Walid, originally from the city of Homs, was wounded in Sarkha by an exploding mortar shell.

The frontline presently runs just north of Sarkha, a small village eight miles southwest of Yabroud that has been heavily shelled. Abu Walid, originally from the city of Homs, was wounded in Sarkha by an exploding mortar shell.

“Three of us were digging graves for our friends when we were hit,” he says, lying in a bed at the recently-established Al-Rahman hospital in Aarsal. Abu Walid endured a five-hour drive along dirt tracks at night in a convoy of vehicles to reach Aarsal for medical treatment. Even though the headlights were switched off, his convoy was attacked by Syrian military helicopters.

Truce breaks down

Rebels took control of Zabadani around May 2012. Much of the Sunni population fled during initial bouts of fighting to the resort town of Bloudan, in mountains east of Zabadani. Those left were mostly rebel fighters who reached a truce with the Syrian military, ushering in a period of calm that is now ending.

“The regime made a deal with the militants. ‘Don’t shoot at our checkpoints and we won’t shoot at you’,” says Anwar, a businessman from Zabadani who works during the week in Lebanon and visits his family in Bloudan on weekends.

The calm allowed many rebels in Zabadani to slip past the Syrian Army cordon around the town to fight in battles further north. But in the past two months, the ceasefire has frayed: Rebels have attacked regime checkpoints around Zabadani and the military has fired artillery rounds and dropped barrel bombs from helicopters on the town.

The Syrian Army has reinforced its positions around the town, spurring many rebels to return to Zabadani in expectation of a regime assault.

“They think they will make a last stand in Zabadani,” says Anwar, a Sunni supporter of the Assad regime.