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US-backed forces in Syria suffer big setback

By Mousab Alhamadee and Roy Gutman

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In this Monday, Oct. 20, 2014 file photo, thick smoke and flames from an airstrike by the U.S.-led coalition rise in Kobani, Syria, as seen from a hilltop on the outskirts of Suruc, at the Turkey-Syria border. With the Syrian civil war in its fourth ruinous year, there is no end in sight, hundreds of thousands are dead, and millions have been displaced. The U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State group, after more than a month, is limited to airstrikes and has not dislodged the radical group from a single major town it controls in Syria or Iraq.

Al Qaida-backed militants Saturday stormed the base of the most prominent civilian commander in the U.S.-backed Syrian rebel force, forcing him and his fighters to flee into hiding in the Jebel al Zawiya mountains of northern Syria.

Jamal Maarouf, a contractor in private life, became internationally known for leading the successful offensive in January that forced the Islamic State from most of two northern provinces. His ouster from his own village was an enormous setback for him, the rebel forces and his international backers.

Even more ominous was that that the Islamic State, now far stronger and claiming to run a Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, reportedly had joined Jabhat al Nusra in the attack on the village of Deir Sinbul.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a London-based opposition monitoring group, said Islamic State fighters had arrived from the east of Syria to join the al Qaida affiliate in the fight against Maarouf's Revolutionaries of Syria Front.

And Mahmoud al Ugal, a commander in Marouf's force, told McClatchy that the militant fighters had deployed at least 20 heavy machine guns. He said the Nusra fighters used tanks, mortars and Chechen snipers in the battle for Deir Sinbul, Maarouf's home town.

Ugal said the fighters had traveled by convoy across the Syrian desert, an assertion that coincided with information McClatchy obtained from another Syrian rebel commander early in the week as the convoy was reportedly setting out. McClatchy contacted both the U.S. Central Command and Pentagon officials for comment on the report, but neither could confirm it.

If Islamic State fighters in fact joined Nusra in the attack, it will have major repercussions for the war in Syria, for the two groups have been divided since April 2013, when Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the Iraq-based leader, announced the creation of the Islamic State. Nusra had supported the rebel war against Assad until very recently and also was at war with the Islamic State.

The Islamic State's fighters are mostly foreign volunteers, while Nusra's forces consist largely of Syrian fighters.

The latest developments also raise the question whether the U.S., which daily bombards jihadist positions in a small Kurdish enclave in northeastern Syria, was monitoring the other fronts in the Syrian war where the Islamic State is active.

Saturday's fighting also confirmed that rebel forces, led by commanders such as Maarouf, who have been vetted by the CIA, now are fighting a three-front war against the regime, the Islamic State and Nusra, with only limited U.S. support.

Rebel leaders earlier this week pleaded in vain for U.S. help. "The war is widening now, and we are defending our existence," Gen. Muhammad Hallak of the Syrian Revolutionary Front told McClatchy Wednesday. He warned that if the U.S.-led coalition of western and Arab countries "lets us down, then we will withdraw our forces from the front with the Islamic State and the regime, and work only to save ourselves." Hallak, like Maarouf, has been vetted by the CIA and receives covert U.S. military aid.

The battle over Jebel al Zawiya, the first major stronghold controlled by the Syrian rebels fighting the Assad regime, began just a week ago. By Saturday Nusra had already captured a dozen rebel-controlled villages before reaching Deir Sinbul. In a statement on Twitter, Nusra accused Maarouf of "corruption" and "straying from the path of the revolution."

Maarouf, in a video released on YouTube Saturday, said the Islamist forces had been attacking civilians and he had withdrawn his forces from his village into the mountains in order to save civilian lives.

The rise of Nusra, and its apparent collaboration with the Islamic State, casts a harsh light on the U.S. approach to Syria, which has been to bomb the Islamic State, and ignore the internal conflict between rebel forces and the Assad regime, which gave rise to the radical Islamists.

As moderate Syrian allies have lost ground, Nusra and the Islamic State have been the major gainers. Another commander in the rebel force told McClatchy that the current situation is the worst since the creation of the Free Syrian Army, an umbrella organization uniting locally based factions throughout the country.

He said as a result of the U.S.-led International Coalition's decision to bomb the two Islamist groups but do nothing to stop the Syrian government's assault on Syrian civilians, rebel fighters are reluctant to confront Nusra. The official could not be quoted by name because he was not authorized to speak to the news media. Other rebel commanders have said that the U.S. bombing has driven Syrian fighters to join Nusra.

The rebels' severe setback Saturday contrasted with the situation in Kobani, about 90 miles to the east, where rebel units and Iraqi Peshmerga fighters, equipped with heavy weapons, arrived this past week in preparation for a drive to force the Islamic State to withdraw from the city. The U.S. led Coalition has mounted nearly 200 air strikes against Islamic State positions in Kobani, a city whose civilian population has fled to Turkey.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who's been publicly sparring with President Obama over the U.S. approach to the war in Syria, fired his latest salvo over Kobani Friday while on a visit to Paris for talks with his French counterpart, Francois Hollande. Erdogan has been extremely reluctant to support the defenders of Kobani, on the grounds that the town's rulers are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK, which Turkey and the U.S. view as a terrorist group. he's also been critical of the U.S. for turning Kobani into the central theater in the war against the Islamic State.

"Since there are no civilians in Kobani, where there only 2,000 fighters, why is that place constantly being bombed? It is impossible to understand," he said.