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MIDDLE EAST

Assad's Forces May Be Aiding New ISIS Surge

By ANNE BARNARD JUNE 2, 2015

ISTANBUL — Building on recent gains in Iraq and Syria, Islamic State militants are marching across northern Syria toward Aleppo, Syria's largest city, helped along, their opponents say, by the forces of President Bashar al-Assad.

In the countryside northeast of Aleppo on Tuesday, Islamic State fighters fought rival Syrian insurgents amid fears that the Islamic State was positioning itself to make Aleppo its next big prize. Syrian opposition leaders accused the Syrian government of essentially collaborating with the Islamic State, leaving the militants unmolested as they pressed a surprise offensive against other insurgent groups — even though the government and the Islamic State are nominal enemies — and instead striking the rival insurgents.

At the same time, the rebels complained that the United States has refrained from contributing air support to help them fend off simultaneous attacks by the government and the Islamic State. The United States has resisted calls for increased assistance to the rebel coalition because it is a muddle of groups including, most notably, the Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, even though the United States is seeking to recruit some of those insurgents to help it battle the Islamic State.

The charges and countercharges of subterfuge and double-dealing underscored the complexity of the battlefield in Syria's multifaceted war and the challenges it poses for United States policy.

Western officials have sought to play down the significance of the militant group's recent gains, including Palmyra, the strategically placed World Heritage site in Syria, and Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's Anbar Province. But the fall of Aleppo would be a critical blow to the American-led coalition that is trying to roll

back the Islamic State with a combination of Iraqi and rebel ground forces backed by a bombing campaign.

Meeting in Paris on Tuesday, the American-led coalition yielded little of significance beyond expressions of frustration and calls for increased help from Iraq's prime minister, Haider al-Abadi. The meeting ended on an indecisive note, with members agreeing only that more needs to be done as the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, outmaneuvers opposing forces to grab more land.

At stake is the survival of one of the few pockets of insurgent-held territory not dominated by the Nusra Front or the Islamic State. Northeast of the city of Aleppo, which is divided between government and rebel control, the main insurgent groups are Islamist factions not affiliated with the two most extreme groups.

Khaled Khoja, the president of the main Syrian exile opposition group, accused Mr. Assad of deploying his warplanes "as an air force for ISIS."

Echoing those claims, the Twitter account of the long-closed United States Embassy in Syria made its strongest statement yet about Mr. Assad's tactics.

"Reports indicate that the regime is making airstrikes in support of #ISIL's advance on #Aleppo, aiding extremists against Syrian population," the embassy said in a series of Twitter posts. In another post, it added that government warplanes were "not only avoiding #ISIL lines, but actively seeking to bolster their position."

Neither American officials nor Syrian insurgents have provided proof of such direct coordination, though it has long been alleged by the insurgents. The State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf told reporters Tuesday that United States officials were looking into the claims but had no independent confirmation.

What is clear is that Mr. Assad and the Islamic State reap benefits by eliminating or weakening other insurgent groups. Mr. Assad can claim he is the only alternative to the Islamic State, and the Islamic State can claim it carries the banner of oppressed Syrians and Iraqis.

But insurgents said the recent fighting around Aleppo provided by far the strongest indication of active coordination. "It was never this blatant," said Abu Abdo Salabman, a spokesman for the Sham Revolutionary Brigades, a rebel group that has sent reinforcements to the battle.

The latest attacks are part of a pattern, he said, in which Islamic State fighters have taken advantage of opportunities to attack rival insurgents when they are weak and under government bombardment.

Beginning last week, government airstrikes intensified in towns northeast of Aleppo, killing scores of civilians and rebel fighters. Shortly afterward, the Islamic State escalated a longstanding attempt to seize the area and sever the main supply route to Turkey, a lifeline for rival insurgents and the citizens living in their territory.

“The whole thing started with a combination of aerial and then long-range artillery fire from the regime on the rebels,” said Mr. Salabman, who uses a nom de guerre for his safety. “Then ISIL started their advancements. There is clear advanced coordination this time, and not just a side trying to take advantage of the other.”

Abu Yusuf, a spokesman for the Shamiyeh Front, another rebel group fighting the Islamic State, said government airstrikes had intensified over the weekend on the villages of Marea and Tal Rifaat, which the Islamic State has long been trying to seize.

“Regime fighter jets bomb these villages at night and fire heavy machine guns on the rebel supply routes at night, while ISIS shells the villages with artillery,” Abu Yusuf, who uses only a nickname for safety, said in an interview via Skype from Aleppo Province.

At the same time, Islamic State fighters could be seen, in videos posted online by supporters, vowing to take those same towns, Tal Rifaat and Marea, from rival insurgents they deride as apostates.

Mr. Salabman, the insurgent spokesman, added that government airstrikes were continuing on Tuesday on the non-Islamic State insurgents. “Until now, they are being bombed by air and ISIS isn’t,” he said.

He also said that his faction had provided coordinates of Islamic State positions to the United States, but that there was no sign the Americans would take action.

On Tuesday, Islamic State fighters were several miles from the main highway from Aleppo to the Bab Salama crossing into Turkey. Besides threatening supplies to Aleppo and the surrounding countryside, the advance could also squeeze other insurgents between the Islamic State and government forces. An Islamic State invasion of Aleppo itself would face formidable obstacles, with significant rebel forces in eastern parts of the city and government forces in the west.

Insurgents said they had been able to slow the Islamic State’s advance on Aleppo by diverting fighters, ranging from Nusra to nationalist groups, from other fronts where they had been facing government troops.

Unlike in Idlib Province, where it plays a major role in an insurgent coalition that has made major gains recently, Nusra had not, until now, been a big player near Aleppo against the Islamic State.

Abu Yusuf said reports from the field suggested that the Islamic State had sent weapons it seized from government storehouses in Palmyra, the first city it took from government troops, to the battlefield near Aleppo.

Reporting was contributed by Maher Samaan and Hwaida Saad from Beirut, Lebanon; Karam Shoumali from Istanbul; Alissa J. Rubin from Paris; and Rick Gladstone from New York.

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