

Al-Qaeda merges with Isis at Syria-Iraq border town

Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate swears loyalty to Isis, opening way for jihadist group to control vast swathes of land on both sides of Iraq-Syria border



A picture posted on Twitter of an Egyptian Al-Nusra Front commander shaking hands with a Isis leader of Chechen origin Photo: TWITTER

By AFP

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Al-Qaeda's Syrian offshoot has issued a loyalty pledge to Isis at a remote town on the Iraqi border, a monitor said.

The merger is significant as it opens the way for Isis to take control of both sides of the border at Albu Kamal in Syria and al-Qaim in Iraq, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Isis – which aspires to create an Islamic state that straddles Iraq and Syria – has spearheaded an lightning jihadist offensive that has captured swathes of territory north and west of Baghdad this month.

After months of clashes between the two sides, al-Qaeda's official Syrian arm the al-Nusra Front “pledged loyalty to Isis” in Albu Kamal, said Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman.

“The pledge comes amid advances by Isis in Deir Ezzor province” in eastern Syria on the Iraqi border, Abdel Rahman told AFP.

An Isis jihadist confirmed the reports on Twitter, and posted a photograph showing an Egyptian Al-Nusra Front commander shaking hands with a Isis leader of Chechen origin.

Although both Isis and the Al-Nusra are rooted in al-Qaeda, the two have been rivals for much of the time that Isis has been involved in Syria's civil war since spring last year.

“They are rivals, but both groups are jihadist and extremists. This move will create tension now with other rebel groups, including Islamists, in the area,” said Abdel Rahman.

An opposition activist in Albu Kamal told AFP via the internet that “there is a lot of tension, and the situation is only going to get worse.”

Using a pseudonym for security reasons, Hadi Salameh also said the merger would “cause a big problem with the local tribes, who will not welcome this change”.

Another activist said the merger comes days after local rebel brigades who had been working with al-Nusra Front signed a declaration excluding the official al-Qaeda branch from the Islamic court, which acts as the de facto authority in many rebel areas of Syria.

“The loyalty oath [to Isis] comes after tension between al-Nusra and the local rebels,” said the activist, Abdel Salam al-Hussein.

He also said hundreds of thousands of people, including displaced families from neighbouring Iraq as well as flashpoint areas in Syria, are living in Albu Kamal, and that it would be a “catastrophe” if fighting broke out in the town.

Hussein said: “Isis fighters are now positioned at the entry of Albu Kamal, on the Iraqi side.”

He added: “The situation is very sad. We have lost everything.”

Meanwhile, the Syrian air force carried out air raids targeting Isis-controlled Raqa in the north of the country and Muhassen in the east.

President Bashar al-Assad's regime has rarely targeted Isis bastions, except in recent days after the group and other Sunni militants launched an offensive in Iraq, wresting control of Mosul and other parts of Iraq.

Isis aspires to create an Islamic state that straddles Iraq and Syria.

A Syrian government newspaper reiterated frequent regime claims that the United States and Israel are behind the rising violence, and that they are vying to “divide Syria along sectarian and religious lines”.

Edited by Andrew Marszal



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