

The Governorate of Homs: is this the Islamic State's new fiefdom?¹

By Romain Caillet

■ Executive summary

Now considered by many experts as the primary terrorist threat, the Islamic State (IS), formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, has been able to assert its dominance over wide areas of Iraq and Syria. In Syria IS dominance can be seen in the regions of the Euphrates Valley (Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Hasaka) and in the eastern countryside of Aleppo. Apart from these areas, the Province of Homs represents a particularly interesting case study, because of the fact that the IS is expanding there, but has been unable to establish its authority over all rebel forces.

This study was conducted using data available over the Internet, including websites, social networks (Facebook and Twitter), and online video-sharing platforms. This information was later extended through interviews with university figures, European humanitarian workers and field actors, including sympathisers and sometimes even assumed IS members.

On July 17th 2014 combatants from the Islamic State (IS) announced that they had taken control of the Sha'ir gas field in the desert area of the Governorate of Homs. The takeover of this gas complex, which was retaken by the Syrian Army on July 26th, was followed by the massacre of most of the prisoners that the IS had taken – soldiers from the regular army, militia members from the “National Defence Forces”, loyalists of Bashar al-Assad's regime and some of the site's civilian workers. Beyond the emotions generated by the violent nature of this battle, where certain media sources went so far as to claim that 350 of the regime's forces had been killed (*nsnbc international*, 2014), never had any rebel group been previously able to inflict such significant losses on the Syrian regime's forces.² Apart from the human death toll and the strategic challenge represented by this gas field, which supplies a portion of Syria's electricity production (Haydar & Ali, 2014), the capture of al-Sha'ir was an

opportunity to highlight a less well-known reality, namely the increasing expansion of the IS in Homs Province, especially the eastern part.

History of the establishment of the Islamic State in Homs Province

Strengthened by its conquests in Iraq and Syria, the IS was able to liberate thousands of prisoners in the Iraq-controlled regions that it took over and was also able to recruit new Syrian fighters who were excited by the victories the IS had gained in the field. Despite the lack of reliable data on the number of its fighters, the count is currently between 25,000 and 30,000, with a significant proportion being foreigners in the Syrian part of the IS.³ However, these foreign fighters are no longer in the majority in some regions, specifically in Damascus⁴ and most likely in the regions of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, where numerous Syrian

¹ This study was translated by Garth McLeod, who has over 40 years' experience as a certified translator of material on issues of international affairs, security, management and administration.

² This was reported by Rami 'Abd al-Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, in a report on al-Hadath TV: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_xe8Edtww8>.

³ In Iraq, there have been virtually no foreign jihadists in over five years; the recent fighting has brought them back onto the scene there (Zelin, 2014).

⁴ According to Syrian journalist Musa al-'Umar, IS fighters in the Damascus region are primarily of Syrian origin [<<https://twitter.com/MousaAlomar/status/484461602016878592>>].

commanders have begun to emerge from these IS bastions.⁵ Relatively modest on the periphery of the city of Homs, the presence of the IS is, however, underestimated by most observers in the eastern part of the governorate. It is in this tribal area, located in the Badiya Desert of Syria, that the IS is most solidly established, after a year-and-a-half's presence in the region of Homs.

IS fighters are especially well-trained in the techniques of desert warfare. Starting in 2007 they survived for seven years in the desert after being chased from Iraqi towns and villages by the Sahwa militia, who were providing back-up for the U.S. occupiers. They then gradually began extending their dominance over most of the Syrian Badiya. As a result, in July 2013, three months after the proclamation of the extension of the Islamic State of Iraq into the Levant, the first large-scale operations were carried out in the town of Sukhna,⁶ which is located in the most easterly part of the Governorate of Homs, working in cooperation with Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qa'ida. This collaboration between the IS and other rebel forces, including Jabhat al-Nusra jihadists and moderate islamists with close ties to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), continued for several months. On November 7th 2013 IS fighters participated with other rebel forces in the capture of the weapons depot in Mahin in the southern part of the province, between Homs and Palmyra. While it passed relatively unnoticed by the media, the capture of this storage depot, one of the largest in Syria, undoubtedly represented the most important strategic victory by the opposition in all of 2013 due to the large number of weapons it captured. Apart from spectacular actions such as the ambushes and "martyr operations" against the Syrian regime, IS combatants carried on a pragmatic policy with the Badiya tribes of Homs. By setting themselves up in desert camps on the edges of the villages,⁷ the jihadists began by maintaining open contact with these tribes, who in return tolerated their presence, thereby allowing the IS to gradually establish dominance over most of the desert area in Homs Province.

This dominance of Badiya by the IS was verified at the start of the inter-rebel war between the IS jihadists and a piecemeal alliance that included pro-Western groups, Salafists who were supported by Gulf regimes and moderate Islamists. As a result, on January 13th 2014 close to 50 Ahrar al-Sham Salafists – a Salafist anti-jihadist faction – were caught in an ambush by IS fighters in the Badiya between the Raqqa and Hasaka sectors. Three weeks later, on February 1st, Abu Husayn al-Dayk, commander of the Suqur al-Sham rebels in the Homs Badiya, was also caught in an ambush by the IS jihadists near al-Sha'ir. Pinned in

the desert by IS fighters, leaders from Suqur-al Sham decided three days later to agree to negotiate an accord that would allow their men to withdraw from al-Sha'ir under IS protection⁸ in return for a promise to never fight against the jihadists.⁹

Aware of the strategic importance of the Badiya and keen to recruit members locally, especially from the tribes, IS leaders proclaimed the establishment of the Province of Badiya (Wilayat al-Badiya), which covered most of the territory of the Governorate of Homs; a part of Hama, Deir ez-Zor, Hasaka and Raqqa; and a limited part of south-east Aleppo, essentially around the town of al-Maskana. This administrative rezoning affected all provinces of Syria, with the IS even going so far as to rename certain provinces. As a result the governorates of Deir ez-Zor and Hasaka became the provinces of al-Khair ("the good") and al-Baraka ("the blessing"), respectively, while the Governorate of Latakia, from which the IS has now withdrawn, was renamed the Province of the Coast (Wilayat al-Sahil). The name "Province of Badiya" was, however, later abandoned by the IS, which was beginning to enjoy the allegiances of the tribes in the eastern part of the Governorate of Homs beginning in January 2014 in the very early stages of the inter-rebel conflict. Among the tribes whose support the IS was seeking in the eastern part of the Province of Homs (Wilayat Homs),¹⁰ the first included the al-'Umur tribe based near the towns of Sukhna and Palmyra, and the allegiance of most of the clans was confirmed by an anti-IS source. However, the same source cast doubt on the allegiance of the al-Mawlawi and al-Khalidi (Bani Khalid) tribes, formally contesting the allegiance of the latter, despite claims by the IS to the contrary.¹¹ This allegiance-related dynamic in support of the IS is not limited to the tribes or to the eastern zone, but includes even the city of Homs and surrounding areas, where there are now IS sympathisers, including among the leading activists of the Syrian revolution.

Growing IS popularity among the Sunni population of the Homs region

It would be impossible to list all the "martyr operations" carried out by IS jihadists in the Homs region because for a very long period the organisation fought in Syria under the cover of Jabhat al-Nusra (Caillet, 2014a). However, one that can be identified is that by the French national convert Nicolas Bons (Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Firansi), who died in a kamikaze attack launched on December 22nd 2013 against a position held by a Syrian militia in the Shia town of Um 'Amad near the village of Deir al-Ful, which has now become an IS bastion in northern Homs. Two months later,

5 In the region of Deir ez-Zor there are Abu Dujana al-Zur (Khamis Mar'i), who is the region's amir; Amir al-Rafdan, a member of the 'Ugaydat tribe; and Saddam Jamal, a former Free Syrian Army commander.

6 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B403fdu0K6U>>.

7 Author Skype interviews with a humanitarian aid worker from a European NGO who travels regularly to Syria, July 27th, 28th and 30th 2014.

8 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUrLDn4g9uw>>.

9 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZKTrRgLEq>>.

10 See official Twitter account for the Province of Homs: <https://twitter.com/homs_is>.

11 Exchange of correspondence, July 30th 2014, via the intermediary of a European humanitarian aid worker with a member of the FSA from the region of Palmyra.

in February 2014, Abu al-Qa'qa al-Tunisi, an IS commander, was killed by the Syrian Revolutionary Front in the town of Rastan to the west of the IS positions. As in other regions, the jihadists were therefore fighting rebels, but the crushing dominance of the Syrian regime in Homs limited the scope of these inter-rebel clashes, with the principal enemy remaining regime forces, both for the jihadists and for all activists in the Syrian revolution.

Before leaving the central part of Homs, which was besieged by the Syrian army, 'Abd al-Basit Sarut, the goalkeeper for the national football team nicknamed the "icon of the revolution" by Syrian activists, had called on Jabhat al-Nusra and the IS to come to the revolutionaries' assistance.¹² Several days later, despite the fall of Homs, Sarut raised the IS flag on a visit to the organisation's camp, which distinguishes him from the other jihadist groups.¹³ While one should not over-interpret this incident, nevertheless it shows a radicalisation of a part of the Syrian revolutionaries, who were feeling abandoned by Western democracies, the Gulf monarchies and moderate rebel groups. So for those who suffered defeat at Baba 'Amru, the siege of Homs and the town's fall into the hands of the regime, there was the temptation to join with those who seemed to embody the growing strength of the Syrian insurrection, despite the IS's radicalism.

A close associate of 'Abd al-Basit Sarut, the militant Badawi al-Mugharbil, more famously known as Abu Ja'far, is also one of the key figures in the revolution in the city of Homs. Highly critical of most rebel bands, he now feels that the IS is the only coherent armed force that is capable of conducting large-scale offensives either in Iraq or Syria:

I am not a member of the Islamic State, nor have I shown any allegiance to the Caliphate, but one must recognize the truth: IS is the most highly organised force, with a truly unified command, unlike all the other groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra.¹⁴

According to Abu Ja'far, the IS currently now enjoys a certain level of popularity among the Sunnis in Homs, which can apparently be explained by its victories in Syria and Iraq, and also by the harshness with which it treats its combatants whenever they transgress its version of Islamic law:

Recently IS executed [crucified] one of its members for oppressing civilians in Raqqa. Do you know of any other

band that applies this type of justice to its own men? No, and so let's say that the Syrians pay attention to this type of thing.¹⁵

This reputation for integrity enjoyed by the IS is confirmed by other sources, specifically an humanitarian aid worker working for a European NGO who travels regularly to the area around Idlib, from which the IS withdrew several months ago.¹⁶ While the inhabitants he met were very hostile to the IS, they nevertheless recognised that the only positive element in its presence was precisely its Islamic courts. What had originally been appreciated in the way the IS courts operated was their implacable nature, because they never hesitated to condemn members of the powerful, influential families from the region, which other courts, whether Islamic or non-Islamic, had never done.

Another revolutionary figure, activist Abu Bilal al-Homsi, a member of the Syrian Revolution Council in Homs, who appeared regularly last year on Al Jazeera,¹⁷ Al Arabiya¹⁸ and other media outlets, swore allegiance to the IS Caliphate in early July, along with a dozen militants.¹⁹ When asked what motivated his action, Abu Bilal al-Homsi stated that he had long been an IS sympathiser and had wanted to show his allegiance to it for several months:

It's been for a while now that I have wanted to show allegiance to the Islamic State, but I could not when I was in Homs, surrounded by *sahawat* [pro-Western rebels funded by the Gulf countries],²⁰ who were executing all members of the IS.²¹

This radical stance taken by Abu Bilal al-Homsi is not recent: as early as December 2013 he had declared that ever since it began, the revolution had been to enforce Islamic law or sharia in Syria.²² As incontestable as Abu Bilal al-Homsi's commitment to the Syrian revolution was, his jihadist ideology nevertheless remains in the minority among activists in Homs, even though there is a feeling of sympathy toward the IS. For Abu Mu'adh, a member of one of the FSA brigades in Homs opposed to the radical jihadists, who works to convince those close to him, including three of his cousins, to loosen their ties to IS, its popularity among a large part of the youth in Homs is a reality.²³ According to him, this popularity can be explained above all by the fact that these youths are not aware of the authoritarian methods used by IS, because it has never ruled any of the important areas around Homs. So it was perhaps out of naiveté, or even ignorance, that these Homs

12 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dY5Wv-YLlx4>>.

13 <<http://3arabionline.com/?page=article&id=16831>>.

14 Author Skype interview with Abu Ja'far (Badawi al-Mugharbil), July 3rd 2014. This and translations that appear below are by the author.

15 Ibid.

16 Author Skype interviews with a humanitarian aid worker from a European NGO who travels regularly to Syria, July 27th, 28th and 30th 2014.

17 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUyWATJgal>>.

18 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7KenzpcPns>>.

19 Abu Bilal al-Homsi appears in this video at 1:45: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZJStk_jNh8&feature=youtu.be>.

20 Originally, the term *sahwa* referred to anti-jihadist militias trained by U.S. forces in Iraq from 2007 onwards. Regarding the relevance of the comparison between Iraqi and Syrian *sahwas*, see Caillet (2014b).

21 Author Skype interview with Abu Bilal al-Homsi, July 3rd 2014.

22 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryWB4Q5QRsk>>.

23 Author email interview with Abu Mu'adh, July 3rd 2014.

youths apparently supported IS, rather than on account of an anti-Alawite sectarianism exacerbated by the commitment to the regime by most of the members of the Alawite community, which is estimated to account for one-third of the city's population.

This anti-Alawite sectarianism is, however, a reality on the ground and explains the radicalisation of large numbers of young revolutionaries. As they see it, it is justified by the massacres that have reportedly been carried out by the Alawite militias against the Sunni population of Homs. Paradoxically, some jihadists even feel that the IS is not sufficiently engaged in the "fight against the Alawites", like Abu Hudhayfa al-Ansari, the former media chief of the jihadist group Jund al-Sham, which operates in the area near Krak des Chevaliers, situated to the west of the city of Homs:²⁴

The Islamic State is increasingly popular with people, but some are asking why its combatants don't attack more of the Alawite villages, preferring instead to focus on oil wells, gas deposits and the Free Army, even despite its many mistakes.²⁵

Intent on establishing a viable state with the capacity to be economically self-sufficient, the IS has concentrated on conquering territory that is useful, either north-east of Aleppo, which is regarded as the breadbasket of Syria, or the oil fields to the east, especially in Deir ez-Zor Province. In the Homs region the gas fields represent the most important natural resource, particularly those in al-Sha'ir and Elba (Syria Report, 2011), which are located inside the IS area of influence. In addition to what is in the eastern zone, there are other natural gas fields closer to the city of Homs than those in Badiya, principally in Furqlus, the scene of recent clashes between the Syrian army and the IS,²⁶ which obviously wants to take control there.

Conclusion

Apart from the Syrian army's military dominance of Homs Province, the primary limitation on any further IS expansion there remains the presence of an important Alawite minority that was encouraged to settle there by Hafiz al-Assad because he was eager to see the Alawites, who are considered to support the regime, settle throughout the

territory. As far as the Sunni population is concerned, it is heavily invested in the rebellion, even though a number of moderate elements are alarmed by the jihadists' level of radicalisation. Among Sunnis, it is the accusation of collusion with the Assad regime that represents their primary objection to the IS. This narrative of complicity, which the West has a tendency to underestimate, has nevertheless enjoyed less and less credibility since the capture of Mosul and IS advances in Iraq, which were followed in Syria by the capture of the bases of the 17th Division, the 93rd Brigade in Raqqa and the 121st Artillery Regiment at Hasaka. So the capture of the al-Sha'ir gas field, even though it has been retaken by the regime after sustaining heavy damage, is part of an IS expansion dynamic in Syrian territory, and the Badiya Desert could eventually become a point of entry for the IS into Homs and Hama as it seeks to extend its dominance over these supposedly conservative towns.

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24 Led by Lebanese from Tripoli, the Syrio-Lebanese group Jund al-Sham should not to be confused with the Palestinian organisation of the same name based in the 'Ayn al-Hilwa refugee camp. It no longer appears to be active since the death of its amir, Abu Sulayman al-Dandashi, who was killed by the Syrian forces during the capture of Krak des Chevaliers on March 20th 2014.

25 Author Skype interview with Abu Hudhayfa al-Ansari, July 23rd.

26 <<https://twitter.com/stateless77/status/495264401235386368>>.

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