



April 1, 2014

Syrian Armed Opposition Coastal Offensive

The al-Anfal Campaign for the Syrian Coast

On March 21, 2014 three armed opposition groups, the Ansar al-Sham Battalions, the al-Nusra Front, and the Sham al-Islam Movement, announced the start of a high profile offensive in the northern countryside of the Latakia governorate on the Syrian coast.¹ Named the al-Anfal Campaign on the Syrian Coast, the campaign seeks to expel government forces from the Latakia countryside.

By March 24th, the al-Anfal Campaign had incorporated an additional member group, the Islamic Ahrar al-Sham Movement.² All groups participating in the campaign are particularly hard line, sharing a Salafi Islamist ideology and a high contingent of foreign fighters within their ranks. Some were previously involved in a similar offensive on the Syrian coast in late summer 2013 where opposition forces were implicated in the massacre of Alawite villages.³



1. ["Statement of the al-Anfal Campaign in the Syrian Coast"], Youtube video, posted by: "AboRyan Lattakia," March 20, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-ngB4fOZO>
2. Twitter post, posted by: "@mhesne," March 25, 2014, <https://twitter.com/mhesne/status/448517844138229761>
3. Jonathan Steele, "Syria: massacre reports emerge from Assad's Alawite heartland," October 2, 2013, The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/02/syria-massacre-reports-alawites-assad>



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Principle Members of the al-Anfal Campaign on the Syrian Coast



Ansar al-Sham Battalions (Islamic Front)



al-Nusra Front (al-Qaeda)



Sham al-Islam Movement



Islamic Ahrar al-Sham Movement (Islamic Front)

The Ansar al-Sham Battalions: Based on the Syrian coast, the Ansar al-Sham Battalions is a member of the Islamic Front but maintains a low profile.⁴ The group is led by a Syrian known as Abu Omar from Latakia city and a Chechen commander known as Abu Musa. Its rank and file members are primarily Syrian. Throughout the Syrian conflict it has been intent on maintaining neutrality amidst tensions between Islamist and non-Islamist armed opposition forces in the area despite its own Islamist leanings.⁵ Despite its membership in the Islamic Front, an armed opposition umbrella organization that rejects the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (the Coalition) and the Supreme Military Council (SMC), the Ansar al-Sham Battalions are reportedly receiving support for the al-Anfal Campaign from the SMC aligned Military Council.⁶

The al-Nusra Front: Present throughout Syria, the group is the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. The front is led by the Syrian commander Abu Mohammed al-Jolani and its forces are made up of Syrians and foreigners. In contrast to the former al-Qaeda affiliate, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the al-Nusra Front maintains good relations and coordinates with a wide range of Syrian armed opposition groups. It is known to implement strict shariah, Islamic law, in areas under its control and is one of the few opposition groups to carry out suicide bombings.

The Sham al-Islam Movement: Based on the Syrian coast, the group was formed by a former Moroccan Guantanamo inmate, Brahim Benchekroun. Consequently the group has a large number of North African and foreign fighters. Although not officially linked to al-Qaeda, it does share similar goals.⁷

Islamic Ahrar al-Sham Movement: Founded in the Idlib governorate early in the Syria conflict, the Islamic Ahrar al-Sham Movement is a leading member of the Islamic Front and one of the largest armed opposition groups in Syria. Led by Hassan Abboud, it is seen as the most hardline of the large non al-Qaeda aligned armed opposition groups in Syria. Because of its size, the ability of its forces, and its influence among the armed opposition, it can be seen as a very significant addition to the campaign.

As the al-Anfal Campaign has progressed, additional armed opposition groups have assisted the campaign. The al-Islam Army of the Islamic Front, initiated an intense shelling offensive on Latakia city to support the campaign. The al-Sh-

4. "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #3," March 14, 2014, The Carter Center, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/NationwideUpdate_march-14-2014.pdf

5. Tam Hussein, "The Ansar al-Sham Battalions," March 24, 2014, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Syria in Crisis, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55066>

6. ["The revolutionaries plan to form an operations room for military coordination"], Youtube video, posted by: ["al-Akhbar"], March 31, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ova9d2yUDn4>

7. ["Moroccan jihadis establish the "Sham al-Islam," organization in Syria close to al-Qaeda"], September 3, 2013, al-Sharq al-Awsat, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12698&article=742084#.UzHktK1dU4R>

Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Syrian rebel groups pulling in foreign fighters," December 24, 2013, BBC News, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25460397>



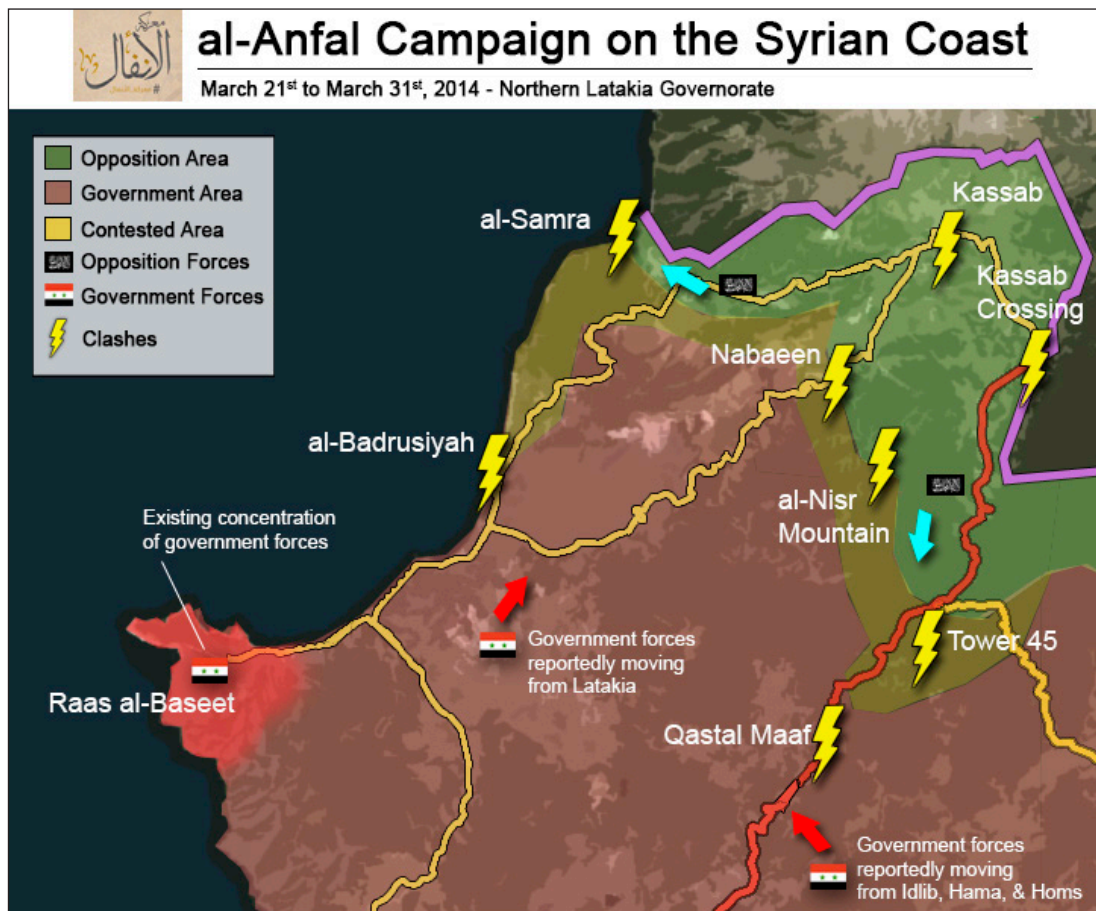
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am Legion also initiated a shelling offensive on al-Qardaha, the ancestral home of the Assad family in Latakia.⁸ Smaller, local units based in the northern Latakia countryside such as the Shamina Gathering and the Nusrat al-Mathloom Gathering have also been involved on the front-lines in the north.⁹

The Campaign

Armed opposition forces began their offensive immediately following the March 20th announcement. Approaching from the Idlib governorate to the east and allegedly from the Syrian-Turkish border to the north, opposition

forces reached the town of Kassab and the nearby Syrian-Turkish Kassab border crossing on March 20th.¹⁰ By March 21st the crossing was under opposition control after what appears to have been a government retreat. The capture of the crossing was important not only for its symbolism, but also strategically as it opened a potential supply line for opposition forces pushing south. Establishing a reliable supply line was something opposition forces had failed to do during the previous coastal offensive. Continuing their assault, opposition forces gained complete control of the town of Kassab on March 24th.



8. ["Shelling the regime strongholds in al-Qardaha with grad missiles"], Youtube video, posted by: "Aksalser.Com", March 31, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4H8SIkCjzc

9. ["Latakia, Tajamuaa Nusrat al-Mathloom fire grad rockets on shabihah headquarters 22/3/2014"], Youtube video, posted by: ["Latakia Coordination"], March 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFIKaTZdvPQ>

10. Fehim Tastekin, "Fall of Kassab will be costly for Turkey," March 31, 2014, al-Monitor, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/03/fall-kassab-syria-costly-turkey.html>



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Opposition forces continued to advance on March 25 taking strategic mountaintops to deprive government forces of any elevated points. Following intense fighting and a vehicle borne suicide bombing by the al-Nusra Front, opposition forces overtook an important government military outpost, tower 45, atop a strategic mountain to the northeast of the town of Qastal Maaf. That same day another contingent overtook the town of al-Samra on the Mediterranean coast to the west.¹¹

On March 26 opposition forces took the vital al-Nisr Mountain and the town of Nabaeen. As of March 31 clashes were ongoing at Nabaeen, the outskirts of al-Badrusiyah, tower 45, and Qastal Maaf.¹² The latter two are located along the key supply line from the Kassab crossing to Latakia city. Amidst the fighting in the north, the al-Islam Army also carried out the aforementioned shelling campaign on Latakia city and the town of al-Qardaha. As of March 31, 1052 fighters from opposition and government forces have been killed or injured during the offensive.¹³

On March 22 it was confirmed that President Bashar al-Assad's cousin, Hilal al-Assad had been killed.¹⁴ Hilal, AKA the President of the Coast, was the founder of the National Defense Forces (NDF), a pro-government paramilitary group composed primarily of Alawites and other Syrian minorities. At the time of his death Hilal was serving as the head of the NDF in Latakia.¹⁵

Conflicting accounts have emerged around Hilal's death. On March 23 the al-Islam Army claimed responsibility for Hilal's death after purportedly targeting him and several companions with grad missiles in the March 8th neighborhood of Latakia city.¹⁶ Their claim followed a night of unprecedented shelling of Latakia city. However the al-Islam Army has shown a pattern of taking credit for the killing of high-ranking government officials, including the July 2012 bombing in Damascus which left three high ranking government security officials dead.¹⁷

On March 24, another account emerged which claims Hilal's death resulted from government infighting. Armed opposition sources identified as the Free Syrian Army purport that following the fall of Kassab, forces from the Republican Guard, including high-ranking officers, arrived at Hilal's residence in the March 8th neighborhood of Latakia city. Hilal was held responsible for the loss of Kassab and a verbal altercation broke out which resulted in Hilal being shot and killed.¹⁸

According to the government and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Hilal was killed during clashes in Kassab.¹⁹ Reports have also circulated that two cousins of President Assad, Ali and Kefah al-Assad were killed or injured in Kassab though these claims have yet to be confirmed.²⁰

11. ["Turkish determination...the revolutionaries control Kassab and the regime uses its maritime weapons"], March 23, 2014, Zaman al-Wasl, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/47943.html>

[Latakia Countryside: Operations Room of the al-Anfal Campaign in the Syrian Coast announces the complete liberation of al-Samra and a sea port for the first time"], March 25, 2014, Aksalser, http://aksalser.com/?page=view_news&id=3428499f0212328aa5be268bb0d26511

12. ["Ten soldiers from regime forces killed during their attempt to storm tower 45 in Kassab – Akhbar Alaani"], Youtube video, posted by: "AlAanTV," March 29, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuZzK68BOW4>

13. "More than 1000 fighters killed in Lattakia clashes," March 31, 2014, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, http://syriahr.com/en/index.php?option=com_news&nid=2023&Itemid=2&task=displaynews#.UzmVA61dU4S

14. ["Hilal al-Assad cousin of Syrian president killed"], March 23, 2014, Elaph, <http://www.elaph.com/Web/News/2014/3/888687.html>

15. ["Hilal al-Assad from smuggler to president of the coast"], March 25, 2014, al-Sharq al-Awsat Arabic, <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=765946&issueno=12901#.UzGJ-a1dU4Q>

16. ["Islamic Front: Announcing the killing of the shabih Hilal al-Assad with grad missiles by mujahideen of the Islamic Army"], March 23, 2014, al-Islam Army, <http://islam-army.com/subject/show/702>

17. Ian Black and Martin Chulov, "Leading Syrian regime figures killed in Damascus bomb attack," July 18, 2012, the Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/18/syrian-regime-figures-bomb-attack>



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Other accusations that have arisen during this campaign include the alleged involvement of the Turkish government on the side of the opposition. First hand accounts have been aired on pro-government media outlets and the BBC.²¹ According to witnesses, Turkish authorities pulled back from the Kassab crossing allowing opposition forces to enter freely from the Turkish side. While there is no significant evidence of this at the time of the assault, videos filmed after the fall of the crossing into opposition hands show opposition forces walking through the deserted Turkish side of the crossing.²²

Subsequent Campaigns

On March 21 the Middle West Front of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) announced the start of the Mothers of the Martyrs Campaign. It included 11 groups and targeted the countryside northeast of Latakia city and south of the al-Anfal Campaign frontlines. Forces began the offensive around a number of government military towers near al-Bahlawiyah, a town approximately 20 km northeast of Latakia city. Though opposition forces held their initial positions, they were unable to advance.²³ On March 25, the SMC-aligned forces shifted their focus north, appearing on the al-Anfal Campaign frontlines of al-Samra and tower 45.²⁴

On March 24, the commander of the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (SRF), Jamal Maarouf, announced that the SRF would be involved in a coastal offensive as well, initiating their own campaign named the Storm of the Coast Campaign.²⁵ The SRF is a moderate, Coalition aligned armed opposition umbrella group centered in the Idlib governorate with a growing presence in southern Syria. While there is no evidence that SRF forces have begun an offensive in Latakia, SRF forces have been seen engaging government convoys heading to Latakia from Idlib.²⁶

The formation of these two campaigns is noteworthy as they not only represent moderate answers to the al-Anfal Campaign, but also opposing ends of the leadership dispute which emerged last month within the SMC. The Middle West Front of the SMC and the Mothers of the Martyrs Campaign is led by Colonel Mustafa Hashim, who remains aligned with the officially dismissed head of the SMC, Brigadier General Selim Idriss.²⁷ The Syrian Revolutionaries' Front and the Storm of the Coast Campaign are led by Jamal Maarouf, who is aligned with Brigadier General Abdel-ilah al-Bashir al-Noaemi, Idris' replacement. Maarouf himself is also seen as playing an instrumental role in the dismissal of Idris.

18. ["Commander in the Free Syrian Army: Hilal al-Assad was killed by gunfire in front of his home"], March 25, 2014, Aksalser, http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=426611f2213b2f78b339d95715ce6abe

19. "Islamic battalions kills NDF leader "Hilal al-Assad" in Lattakia countryside," March 23, 2014, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, http://syriaahr.net/en/index.php?option=com_news&nid=1982&Itemid=2&task=displaynews#_UzHprq1dU4R

["Hilal al-Assad leader of the National Defense Forces in Latakia killed during military operations in the Kassab area"], March, 24, 2013, Russia Today, <http://arabic.rt.com/news>

20. ["Ali and Kefah al-Assad killed in Kassab on the border with Turkey"], March 25, 2014, Elaph, <http://www.elaph.com/Web/News/2014/3/889089.html>

21. ["Kassab from tourist resort to battlefield"], Youtube video, posted by: "RT Arabic," March 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmcvQBVN91I>

"Newshour: First-hand report from Syrian Armenian town of Kassab," Soundcloud audio, posted by: "BBC World Service Radio," March 26, 2014, <https://soundcloud.com/bbc-world-service/newshour-first-hand-report>

22. ["Latakia stroll of the mujahideen of Ansar al-Sham inside the Kassab border crossing 23 3 2014"] Youtube video, posted by: ["Latakia Coordination"], March 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBkY3riR--w>

23. Hisham Haj Suleiman, ["The Mothers of the Martyrs Campaign in the Latakia Countryside"], March 24, 2014, Akhbar Alaan, <http://akhbar.alaan.tv/news/post/29069/syria-battle-army-free-mothers-scenario-plan-latakia>

24. ["Commander of the Middle West Front sends a final call to the Nusayris and al-Assad in al-Samra village"], Youtube video, posted by: ["Media Office of the Middle West Front"], March 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgz07379b04>



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Government Response

The quick advance of opposition forces in an area considered to be a government stronghold has surprised many. However, videos of combat in the area appear to show a relatively light government presence despite the area's symbolic significance.

The government has responded to the opposition offensive with aerial bombardments of the frontlines and areas under opposition control. Government and pro-government paramilitary convoys have also been seen moving north from Latakia city and west from the Hama and Idlib governorates towards the frontlines.²⁸

In addition to the mobilization of Syrian Army forces, it is reported that Hezbollah and Iranian forces are present. A small pro-government force known as the Syrian Resistance has also emerged to assist government forces.²⁹ The Syrian Resistance is a Marxist-Leninist guerilla group led by Ali Kayali, an Arab Alawi with Turkish nationality who has ostensibly fought for Alawi-Shiite-Arab rights in the formally disputed region of Antakya-Alexandretta in Turkey. The Syrian Resistance has historically enjoyed support from the Syrian government.

Importance

The al-Anfal Campaign has dealt a series of strategic defeats to the government: the loss of its last border crossing with Turkey, the death of Hilal al-Assad, and armed opposition advances in a perceived government stronghold. The offensive has also thus far served to undermine the Syrian government narrative that it's winning the conflict following its recent victory in the town

of Yabroud along the crucial Damascus-Homs highway.

The opposition's ability to continue their push south through the mountains and into more exposed pro-government territory will determine the true impact of the recent gains. If the opposition is able to continue, how its forces conduct themselves will be important. While many civilians have already fled, last summer a coalition very similar to the al-Anfal Campaign, conservative with a high number of foreigners, made advances in the Latakia countryside. Given the very limited involvement of SMC-aligned forces, similar acts would further call into doubt the broader opposition's ability to mobilize and ensure the safety and security of minorities throughout Syria.

Thus far, signs of avoiding a repeat of last year's violence are mixed. Opposition forces have voiced their intention to protect residents, property, and places of worship unlike the previous coastal offensive. Additionally, ISIS is not present amongst opposition forces as it was during the previous offensive. However ISIS was not the only force implicated in massacres last year and the current opposition contingent has already been marked by displays of extreme violence, provocative ideologues, foreign leadership, and significant attention from Gulf fundraisers. While none of these are unique to the Latakia offensive, few parts of Syria sit along such acute sectarian fault lines, placing both pro-government and pro-opposition populations, or perceived pro-government and pro-opposition populations, at a high risk of violence and retribution.

25. Osam al-Masri, ["Syrian Revolutionaries' Front joins the battle for the coast... Maarouf to al-Sharq: We must strike Assad in his own house"], March 25, 2014, al-Sharq, <http://www.alsharq.net.sa/2014/03/25/1107353>

26. ["Syrian Revolutionaries' Front target with B9 mortars one of the buildings which the convoy is centered in"], Youtube video, posted by: ["Syrian Revolutionaries' Front"], March 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9F0O-9qMRuQ>

27. ["President of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Brigadier General Selim Idris delivers a statement of his meeting with the leadership of the military fronts and councils"], Youtube video, posted by: ["Media Office of the Chiefs of Staff"], February 19, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Modr_UXqxo0

28. Various posts, Facebook page: ["Freemen of Baniyas Gathering"], March 21-24, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/t.a.banias.a>

29. ["Operation to rescue a groups of survivors of the explosion that happened at point 45 the Syrian Resistance"], Youtube video, posted by: ["The Syrian Resistance"], March 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pa6JRz7Cc9I>



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**3 أشهر من نصرة
مناطق الساحل**

الاسم	عدد	ريال سعودي	التاريخ
القمي	1260	16500	صواريخ هراد
الذهبي	200	2600	وقود صواريخ الطورون
الطهي	100	1300	قنابل يدوية
البرقاني	50	650	50 قطعة قماش

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**حملة كفالة أسر الشهداء
والجرحى منريف اللاذقية**

40 دولار	30 دولار
40 ريال	400 ريال
390 درهم	380 ريال

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The government’s response will be equally important. Facing a threat to its stronghold for the second year in a row, if the government does not decisively defeat the opposition in Latakia, it risks losing support and emboldening opposition efforts. Because the opposition has thus far been confined to the governorate’s northern mountains, clearing the area could prove extremely challenging. Diverting forces to the coast could also threaten to overextend the government, leaving its forces elsewhere in Syria vulnerable to armed opposition gains. Overextension will become more acute if opposition forces are able to advance and the imperative to defend pro-government heartlands grows. While it will be important to see how the government goes about clearing the area, it remains to be seen if the government is able to establish a more secure firewall to protect one of its remaining relatively uncontested bastions of control.

30. Twitter post, posted by: “@jahd_bmalk,” March 26, 2014, https://twitter.com/Jahd_bmalk/status/448968847941718016/photo/1
Twitter post, posted by: “@hamlah_syria,” March 22, 2014, https://twitter.com/hamlah_syria/status/447587750188171264/photo/1