

The campaign on Wadi Barada the manner and possible Scenarios



Situation
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Introduction

Wadi Barada in western countryside of Damascus, was bombarded by the Syrian regime since 19.12.2016, in conjunction with ground operations by the regime and members of Lebanese Hezbollah to control the region.

Wadi Barada includes 12 villages which are: (Bassema, Ain Al-Khadra, Ain Alfeja, Deir Mouqren, Kafr Alzaet, Deir Qanoon, Kafr Al-Awameed , Brahela , Al-Nahlah and Huraira) in addition to some small villages .

The Syrian regime dominated the villages of Al-Nahlah and Huraira, while the other villages are under control of the armed opposition since 2012.

The factions which dominate the region currently are: Ahrar Al-Sham Movement, Fateh Al-Sham Front, the factions in gathering of (Wa Aatasemou Behabllellah which includes Al-Ghourabaa brigade, Al-Saif Al-Omari battalions, Nousor Dimashq brigade and Rijal Men Al-Qalmoun brigade) in addition to the Army of Qalmoun.

The northwest of Wadi Barada is connected to Al-Qalmoun by Huraira village which is located about 4 km away from the course of Barada River, and 3 km away from Madaya in the mountains of Qalmoun in the east. the city locates about 1600 meters above the sea level.



The Syrian regime and the militias of Hezbollah isolated the region of Wadi Barada from al-Qalmoun through a Series of operations which led to control the area around the plain of zabadani and Madaya in the mountains of Qalmoun.

Wadi Barada became besieged from all sides, and the brigades 13,104,105 which follow the regime can throw it by fire, in addition to the air defense base in Abel mountain which overlooking the valley¹.

These forces stationed on high place which overlooking the valley and facilitate targeting the valley by shelling, missiles and the air strikes, and that is what is currently happening in the villages and towns of the valley.

¹ Hot summer waits Wadi Barada: the regime and Hezbollah are preparing to resolve " Al Hayat newspaper, 21.7.2016 <https://goo.gl/aH4hj8>

operation of Wadi Barada: waiting for post-Huraira, Al Hayat newspaper , 25.7.2016 <https://goo.gl/G0O2tj>

The military campaign in Wadi Barada

Since the Syrian regime's control and militias of Hezbollah on the villages of Efra and Huraira in July 2016, Wadi Barada which was controlled by the armed opposition, became besieged. Anxiety prevailed in their midst which led to blowing up a main water pipe which feeds the capital Damascus by drinking water to stop a potential extension for the regime and Hezbollah's militias, and therefore the two sides started negotiation resulted to repair the pipe and open the road leading to the valley partially.

Damascus is relying on Alfeja spring and Barada River for water supply, and the spring is located 18 km northwest of the capital.

The Syrian regime has started a strategy to neutralize the places controlled by the armed opposition around Damascus.

This strategy led to agreements which enabled the regime to control these places, and it forced the fighters to accept truces by using shelling and siege in Qudsaya, Al-Haama and Al-Tal between October and November 2016 which gave it the full time for Wadi Barada.

The Syrian regime and militias of Hezbollah attacked the road of Efra in Wadi Barada by missiles intensely, and then escalated its attack through more than a point especially in Bassema, Ain Alfeja and Deir Mouqren.

This escalation led to outage water from Damascus and its countryside as a result for damaging the spring of Alfeja after the bombing by the explosive barrels, which caused a crisis for the regime in addition to the use of this issue by the opposition to put pressure on the regime through any potential negotiation.

The escalation of regime and Hezbollah on the fronts of Wadi Barada was after the full control on Aleppo, which helped the regime to bring military supplies to the area to support the expected operation, especially that Hezbollah militias supposed to be involved in this operation, which was widely fighting in the fronts of Aleppo.

The regime has intensified its bombardment on the cities of Wadi Barada to push towards the settlement, which caused heavy losses in the region, where the field hospital and media center were destroyed in conjunction with a ground offensive from several points, especially from Bassema.

Although the Syrian regime has not launched a formal initiative for the opposition as expected to exit with their families to Idleb as the other agreements, but the governor of Damascus, Alaa Ibrahim said that the opposition factions were negotiating on some conditions without mentioned them, and the reply of the regime was that the conditions which will be applied in Wadi Barada are the same applied in Qudsaya and Al-Tal².

Because of the possibility of expansion the military campaign by the Syrian regime and militias of Hezbollah in Wadi Barada, the civil institutions in the region rushed to appeal the international organizations and commissions to confront the military campaign and stop it , and demand all international commissions and organizations in a statement to protect the rest of Alfeja spring's foundation , after destruction of large parts as a result for the bombardment of regime by explosive barrels which led to low the water level to less than one-third and destruction of the water pumps which transfer water for Damascus.

And also, stressed the need to pressure on the supported forces of the regime to stop the attack that threats live of more than 100 civilians, and to refuse any form of demographic change and working to find a suitable agreement to ensure safety of civilians and allow maintenance workshops to repair the spring³.

While it seems like an attempt to enhance the role of opposition factions in any future scenario, the military factions in (Al-Qaboun, Eastern Qalmoun ,villages of Wadi Barada and Al-Harmoun Gathering) declared the formation of common defensive alliance on 26.12.2016 , aimed to unite efforts to stop the crime of forced displacement which taking place when the international community is just watching , according to the statement of factions⁴.

² Wadi Barada and Alfeja will be without armed opposition soon ... Ibrahim for Al-Watan: legal commissions to study the ownership papers of settlement's areas' people, Syrian Al Watan newspaper.25-12-2016 ,<https://goo.gl/cx6XV4>

³ appeals to save the lifeline of Damascus from the barrels of ASSAD " Baladi News , 26.12.2016 .
<https://goo.gl/nr0jmu>

⁴ A defensive alliance in Damascus countryside to face the displacement and singling, Baladi News, 26.12.2016 ,<https://goo.gl/vlkbpa>

Coinciding with the military campaign on Wadi Barada by the regime and Hezbollah, the civilian, medical and relief organizations in Madaya and Zabadani in western countryside of Damascus launched an initiative to find a solution for the besieged villages as following:

The ceasefire, stop the military operations among all parties, the need to take the wounded and Patients out of the villages, end the agreement of the four cities, in exchange for the direct agreement with the regime and its return to the positions and barracks where was stationed before 2011, return of people in two villages to their lands, activate the institutions of state, the settlement of armed and wanted people by forming local commissions, exit of those who did not want to settle their situations to the place they want, end the siege of Madaya, Buqeen and Zabadani, ensure the freedom of moving for civilians, enter the medical and food material, ensure the security of those who will stay in the villages so not to harm or arrest them even if they have opponents political opinions or opponents relatives in other areas.

But the Syrian regime did not issue any comment about this initiative, which will increase the pressure on Wadi Barada if applied⁵.

The expected scenarios, and the impacts

The Syrian regime and its allies are seeking to intensify the military offensive on Wadi Barada to secure the area around Damascus after the settlement in the cities and towns of Mouaddamya, Qudsaya and Al-Haama in Damascus countryside using the pressure of shelling and siege.

The current campaign on Wadi Barada will lead to three scenarios:

First: the steadfastness of the opposition and the return of truce

The opposition factions maybe can withstand the attacks of regime and Hezbollah, and exploitation the need of regime for Alfeja water and operate the pumps to support neighborhoods of Damascus, and thus, the attacking forces return to the agreement of truce in exchange to water of the spring.

⁵ Initiative in Madaya and Zabadani to find a solution with the regime away from displacement of people. "Syrian solution website, 26-12-2016, <https://goo.gl/CjYULK>

This scenario has opportunities to success if the regime could no longer face the crisis of water in the capital

Second: impose a new settlement on people of Wadi Barada:

According to the conditions of Syrian regime, the people of the area will displace to Idleb for those who want to leave whether civilians or armed opposition with their individual weapon, and to settle the situation for those who want to stay ⁶.

The regime tries to put pressure on the opposition in Wadi Barada by heavy shelling with all kinds of weapons.

It seems that the opposition did not want to accept the demands of regime now, and try to resist currently waiting for other better options for the area.

Third: impose a comprehensive settlement in the area:

According to this scenario, a settlement will be imposed in Wadi Barada, Madaya, zabadani because these besieged areas are close to each other, so that the regime will control all areas of the western countryside of Damascus totally.

It does not know if the initiative which presented by civilian commissions in Madaya and Zabadani was encouraged by the regime to prepare the situation for this scenario or it was driven by the internal data in the two cities.

Conclusion:

The current situation in Wadi Barada seems to be ready for more escalation, due to the limited political options of the opposition dominated the area.

the regime's relentless pursuit to secure the areas around Damascus, and focus the effort to control the Eastern Ghouta, seems to be a strategy of

⁶ Barada valley Options: Idleb or fighting or return to the homeland. "Al-Hayat, 16-12-2016. <https://goo.gl/EZpxD0>

regime to restore and secure the main cities as did in Aleppo and Homs previously.

If the regime and its foreign supporting forces control Wadi Barada, the western countryside will be actually under the control of the regime, even if there is not a settlement agreement related to Zabadani and Madaya currently.

In addition to the strategic importance which the regime gets by controlling the source of the capital's water and the western countryside, this control if it happens after a short time on controlling Aleppo, will be a political and moral achievement for the regime, and for the Iranian axis which fought the battle on the ground in Aleppo and is leading it now in the western countryside of Damascus.

If the armed opposition withstood and forced the regime forces and the foreign militias to ceasefire in return for the drinking water, they will weaken the strategy of the regime and its Iranian allies to dominate the western of the capital completely towards the Lebanese borders, and will complicate the option of any future settlement.



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