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US Sponsored Rebel Forces Have Taken Control of Maalula: Snipers Haunt Syrian Christian Town

By Global Research News
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MAALULA, Syria: “Maalula, city of culture and history, welcomes you,” reads a sign at the entrance to Syria’s best known Christian town. But any semblance of welcome evaporates once inside Maalula.

The army is fighting an invisible enemy, and an AFP team narrowly escaped sniper fire.

“We never see them, but we hear the shots fired by their Dragunovs,” the Russians’ favourite sniper rifle, said a soldier holding his weapon as he sheltered behind a wall.

A car is parked at the roadside, its windscreen has exploded and its driver looks dead. His belongings lie strewn on the pavement of this ghost town.

After an AFP photographer crossed one of Maalula’s streets, a sniper opened fire at the journalist. Bullets landed just metres (yards) away.

The journalist was forced to lie on the ground and hide behind a wall to escape the shots.

Every time he tried to move, the sniper opened fire immediately.

It was only as loyalist soldiers fired their own guns in the sniper’s direction that the journalist managed to escape.

An armoured vehicle arrived at the scene and opened fire, allowing the journalist to escape.

The soldier said: “It’s like this every day. We can only move without fear of sniping during the evenings.”

Maalula is nestled under a large cliff, whose summit is controlled by the rebels, making it difficult for the army to secure its grip there.

The town is strategically important for rebels, who are trying to tighten their grip on Damascus and already have bases circling the capital.

The army has “reclaimed most of the town, but the terrorists use their snipers to stop us from bringing it totally under control”, said a colonel who leads the loyalists’ operations in the historic town.

“We are continuing to make slow progress. But it is very difficult because we cannot bombard it, there are historic treasures,” the colonel told AFP.

Maalula's population of up to 5,000 fluctuates throughout the year, with Christian families flocking there each summer from Damascus and abroad.

While the majority of its winter residents are Muslim, the town is majority Christian in summer.

Rebel forces, among them Al-Qaeda-linked jihadists, took control of Maalula on September 9. Three days later, the army entered the town.

Maalula lies some 55 kilometres (35 miles) north of Damascus. It is considered a symbol of the ancient Christian presence in Syria.

Its people are among the world's last remaining speakers of Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ.

The town's name comes from the word "maala", which in Aramaic means "the entrance".

On September 14, for the first time, the town known across the Middle East for its "Exaltation of the Cross" feast day was not decorated with lights, nor did it host Christian and Muslim visitors dining and celebrating together.

The archway at the town's entrance has been damaged by a suicide attacker who detonated a car bomb at the start of the battle for the town.

But much of the rest of Maalula has been unscathed, as the army has refrained from shelling it.

Only the Saint Elias church dome has been punctured.

"This battle may be long because they (the rebels) are hiding in the hills and in the Safir hotel," perched above the town, said the colonel.

"But I think we will win in the end."

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