

SEPTEMBER 2012

ELIZABETH O'BAGY

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 6

JIHAD IN SYRIA



Photo Credit: A funeral for rebel martyrs in Homs, Syria, March 26, 2012. Photo courtesy of Ziad Homsy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- This report examines the presence of jihadist groups within Syria, explains where various Syrian rebel groups and foreign elements operating in Syria fall along the spectrum of religious ideology, and considers their aggregate effect upon the Islamification of the Syrian opposition.
- The Syrian conflict began as a secular revolt against autocracy. Yet as the conflict protracts, a radical Islamist dynamic has emerged within the opposition. There is a small but growing jihadist presence inside Syria, and this presence within the opposition galvanizes Assad's support base and complicates U.S. involvement in the conflict.
- Internally, Assad has used the threat of jihadists within the opposition to build support for the regime among the Alawite and Christian communities. It has also served to discourage middle and upper class Sunnis from joining the opposition. Externally, Russian and Iranian leadership have consistently pointed to the presence of radical Islamists as a critical rationale for their support of the Assad regime.
- Compared to uprisings in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, the opposition in Syria faces a much greater threat of jihadist infiltration. Many jihadi elements now operating in Syria are already familiar with the terrain, having been sponsored by the Assad regime for over three decades. These jihadi elements turned against their former regime allies in 2011 and are now cooperating with local jihadists.
- Moderate political Islam is not incompatible with democratic governance. However, ultraconservative Sunni Islamists, known as Salafists, envision a new world order modeled on early Islam that poses a significant threat to both democracy and the notion of statehood. Salafi-jihadists are those who commit to violent means to bring about the Salafi vision.
- It is difficult to distinguish between moderate Islamists and Salafi-jihadists in the context of the Syrian civil war. Assad's security solution transformed the largely peaceful uprising into an open civil war, and now even political Islamists and Syrian nationalists are engaged in violent means. Additionally, the mainstream use of jihadi iconography by non-Salafist rebel groups distorts perceptions about their ideologies and end-goals. It is significant to draw the distinction in order to understand which Islamist opposition groups are willing to work within a state system.
- The vast majority of Syrians opposing the regime are local revolutionaries still fighting against autocracy; while they are not Islamists, in the sense that their political visions do not depend upon Islamic principles, they espouse varying degrees of personal religious fervor. There are also moderate Islamists operating within the Syrian opposition, including those who comprise rebel groups like Suqor al-Sham and the Umma Brigade, who are typified by a commitment to political Islam that is compatible with democracy.
- On the more extreme end of the spectrum are groups like Ahrar al-Sham, which is comprised of conservative Islamist, and often Salafist, member units. Ahrar al-Sham's leadership espouses a political Islamist ideology, though it is clear that the group has attracted more radical and extreme elements of the opposition including many Salafi-jihadists. The brigade also has notable ties to Syria's indigenous jihadist organization, Jabhat Nusra.
- Al-Qaeda's direct involvement in Syria has been exaggerated in the media. However, small al-Qaeda affiliated networks are operating in the country, including elements of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Fatah al-Islam and Jordanian Salafi-jihadists. Rather than sending large numbers of operatives, these networks are providing operational support, including trainers and bomb makers, in order to capitalize on the instability in Syria and expand their influence in the region.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- Jabhat Nusra, Syria's homegrown Salafi-jihadist group, has important links to al-Qaeda affiliates and demonstrates a higher level of effectiveness than many other rebel groups. Jabhat Nusra has demonstrated sensitivity to popular perception and they are gaining support within Syria. The emergence of indigenous Salafi-jihadist groups such as Jabhat Nusra is far more dangerous to the long-term stability of the Syrian state than foreign jihadist groups because it represents a metamorphosis of a Salafi-jihadist ideology into a domestic platform that is able to achieve popular resonance.
- The U.S. cannot afford to support groups that will endanger Syria's future stability. However, if the U.S. chooses to limit its contact with Islamist groups altogether, it may alienate a majority of the opposition. Identifying the end goals of opposition groups will be the key to determining whether their visions for Syrian governance are compatible with U.S. interests.
- The U.S. Government has cited concern over arming jihadists as a reason for limiting support to the Syrian opposition. However, U.S. allies are already providing material support to the Syrian opposition, and competing sources of funding threaten Syria's future stability by enhancing the influence of more radical elements. The confluence of jihadist interest with that of the Gulf states raises the possibility that these states may leverage jihadists for their own strategic purposes, while simultaneously limiting Western influence.
- In order to counter this effect, the U.S. should seek to channel this support in a way that bolsters responsible groups and players while ensuring that Salafi-jihadist organizations such as Jabhat Nusra are unable to hijack the opposition movement. If the U.S. hopes to counter this threat and stem the growing popularity of more radical groups, it must clearly identify secular and moderate Islamist opposition groups and encourage the international community to focus resources in support of those groups alone. Such focused support would increase the influence of moderate opposition groups and undercut the appeal of Salafism in Syria.



MAP 1 | SYRIA

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 6

JIHAD IN SYRIA

By Elizabeth O'Bagy

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, President Bashar al-Assad and other regime officials have emphasized the role of foreign-backed terrorists and radical jihadists. In an interview on August 29, Assad denied the existence of civil protests in Syria and spoke of the “foreign backed conspiracy” threatening his country.¹ “Many people were misled in the beginning, thinking that what is happening is a state of excitement, a wave of the ‘Arab Spring’... [But it] isn’t a revolution or a spring; it is terrorist acts in the full meaning of the word,” he proclaimed.² This refrain has been a critical component of the regime’s propaganda campaign, and its primary justification for its harsh crackdown of the Syrian opposition.

The regime’s insistence that jihadist radicals and terrorists instigated and perpetuated the Syrian conflict is indefensible. The Syrian uprising began as a popular resistance against autocracy. Yet as the conflict drags on, a radical Islamist dynamic has emerged within the opposition, and it warrants further scrutiny. The vast majority of Syrians opposing the regime are local revolutionaries who espouse varying degrees of personal religious fervor. However, there is a small but growing Salafi-jihadist presence inside Syria. The Syrian Salafi-jihadists have been aided by foreign fighters, some with significant capabilities and connections to al-Qaeda (AQ) and other international jihadist networks. Their presence among the opposition galvanizes Assad’s support base and complicates U.S. involvement in the conflict.

The jihadist elements now operating inside Syria are not starting from scratch. The Syrian government’s history of sponsoring terrorism over the last three decades contributed to the jihadist foothold in the country. The Syrian intelligence apparatus has long cultivated ties with these groups; moreover, it has solidified robust logistics networks that facilitate jihadist activity. As Syrian intelligence services became preoccupied with the Syrian uprising in 2011, these jihadist elements turned against their former regime allies and are now cooperating with local jihadists.

In Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, jihadist elements and extremists did not have major networks on the ground where they could exploit their own authority and influence in those revolutions. In Syria, however, they do have those networks. Due to Syria’s long-standing policy of supporting terrorist networks, these dangerous elements have built robust logistical lines that they have built up over the past decades. Moreover, these networks could allow more radical groups to infiltrate the mainstream Syrian opposition and use it as a platform to prop up their own ideological objectives.

Local revolutionaries have maintained control of the current opposition movement, and these jihadists have not assumed a dominant role in the conflict. This does not mean that the Syrian opposition movement is entirely in the hands of secular revolutionaries; a great proportion of Syrian opposition forces wish to institute political Islamist reform in the wake of the Assad regime. This has led to growing concerns about the Islamification of the opposition movement and fears that revolutionaries have lost sight of the democratic and pluralistic principles that once defined the core of Syrian civil protests.

While the U.S. has traditionally been distrustful of Islamist movements, political Islam is not incompatible with democratic governance within a state-based system. However, ultraconservative Sunni Islamists, known as Salafists, envision

a new world order modeled on early Islam that poses a significant threat to both democracy and the notion of statehood. Their presence within the opposition is a worrying sign of the potential course of the conflict.

The distinction between political Islamists and Salafi-jihadists is difficult to make in the wake of the 2011 uprisings known collectively as the Arab Spring. The civil unrest that occurred during this time changed beliefs regarding the use of force to achieve political reform. When popular uprisings overthrew governments in Egypt and Tunisia, many Salafi clerics started to preach peaceful democratic means to achieve their religious-political objectives.

Yet in Syria, the Assad regime's violent repression of the opposition transformed a largely peaceful uprising into an open civil war. Assad's use of overwhelming force blurred the line between proponents of peaceful reform and proponents of armed struggle, which in turn has blurred the line between political Islamists who have resorted to violence and Salafi-jihadists who espouse a global Islamist agenda. Many now see armed struggle as necessary within current circumstances, and both sides are advocating for *jihad bil sayf*, or armed jihad.

In order to manage increasing U.S. involvement in the Syrian conflict, it will be critical to understand the diverse makeup of the opposition movement. Identifying the end goals of opposition groups will be the key to determining whether or not visions for Syrian governance are compatible with U.S. interests. If the U.S. chooses to limit its contact with Islamist groups altogether, it may alienate a majority of the opposition. On the other hand, the U.S. cannot afford to support groups that will endanger Syria's future stability.

This report introduces a framework for understanding Islamist opposition groups on the basis of their willingness to work within a state system. A brief review of the history of the Assad regime's struggle against internal Islamist opposition groups and subsequent support for regional terrorist organizations provides context to understand how jihadist groups have infiltrated

the Syrian revolution in 2012. The second section will introduce key terms and constructs by which to categorize Syrian opposition groups along a spectrum of Islamic ideology. In particular, it will draw a distinction between groups that espouse the goal of an Islamic caliphate under Sharia law and those whose vision is compatible with modern democratic principles.

The body of the report examines prominent Islamist groups active in Syria and places them along the spectrum of religious ideology. Foreign fighters who have converged upon Syria to fight the Assad regime alongside Syrian rebels also fall along this spectrum, and should not be immediately categorized as extremist. In both cases, secular groups fight alongside Islamist groups, and collectively they form the majority of the opposition movement. Yet there is also a small but growing presence of local Salafi-jihadists making inroads within the opposition and gaining popular support.

One such organization is Jabhat Nusra, Syria's homegrown Salafi-jihadist group, which maintains important ties to al-Qaeda affiliates and demonstrates a higher level of effectiveness than many other rebel groups. Although al-Qaeda and its affiliates have active networks in Syria, these trace elements are not nearly as threatening as the emergence of Jabhat Nusra, which has shown an ability to derive support from important pockets of the Syrian population.

ISLAMISM AND TERRORISM IN SYRIA—A RECENT HISTORY

Insurrection against the Assad regime has occurred in Syria before, namely in the 1976-1982 Islamic Uprising. While Islamic opposition groups have played an important role in both the historic and the contemporary cases, those roles have differed. In the historical case, radical factions of the opposition were responsible for the escalation of the conflict, which contributed to the movement's failure to gain widespread support. However, in the current conflict the Assad regime has escalated violence, causing secularists and moderate Islamists to take up arms alongside the radical elements.

It has established a schism between moderate and conservative Islamists that continues to affect the opposition today.

It is also important to understand additional violent influences upon the Syrian opposition in 2012 that may distinguish the Syrian experience from that of other Arab Spring states. Namely, the Syrian regime's historical sponsorship of terrorism entrenched a network of jihadist groups operating within its borders to recruit, train, and facilitate attacks across the region. Some of these groups have shifted to support the Syrian opposition in 2012, and they contribute a robust logistics network, operational experience, and inside knowledge of the Syrian regime's intelligence apparatus to the opposition's aggregate capabilities. This history has fundamentally altered the course of Syria's revolution. The historical parallel has played into the Assad regime's willingness and ability to paint the uprising as a movement of extremists.

The Islamic Uprising 1976–1982

The 1976–1982 Islamic uprising parallels today's crisis, and sheds light on the strategy, operations, and tactics of the Syrian opposition. In particular, more extreme factions have used this historical precedent to insert themselves into the conflict and compete in Syria, complicating the types of groups and individuals likely to emerge in Syria as the conflict continues.

Islamic political groups, of which the Muslim Brotherhood is most prominent, have represented the strongest opposition to the ruling power since the 1963 Baathist coup. At its inception, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood sought to instill Islamic values in society and politics through education and peaceful reform. However, the Syrian government, led by former president Hafez al-Assad, contributed to the radicalization of the Muslim Brotherhood by outlawing the organization in 1964 and helped fuel a series of strikes and mass demonstrations that eventually led to the 1976 Islamic uprising.³

In 1972, an important split in ranks over policy occurred within the Muslim Brotherhood, leading to two different factions: the milder Damascus wing

led by Issam Attar and the more radical Aleppo-Hama wing led by Abdel Fattah Abu Ghuddah.

The younger radical members of the Aleppo-Hama wing agitated for a continuance of the policy of confrontation with the regime, while the leaders of the Damascus wing opposed such a policy. In the end, the Damascus wing was able to assert its position over that of the Aleppo-Hama wing due to a larger constituency base and better funding.⁴

This is an important divide as the more hawkish stance of the Hama-Aleppo wing versus that of the Damascus wing continues today, not only within the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood but among the population as a whole. The northern and northwestern provinces in Syria are historically much more conservative than Damascus, and they have served as a stronghold for socially conservative Sunni Muslims since this time. Much of the variance in behavior within the current opposition movement may be viewed in terms of this same fault line.

After unsuccessfully attempting to reconcile the two groups, Marwan Hadeed, the son of a small agricultural entrepreneur from Hama, established his own independent organization named *Al-Talia Al-Muqatila*, the Fighting Vanguard. The organization's main operational and training base was located in Jordan, with smaller cells located in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama.⁵ Hadeed had previously received commando training in a Fatah military camp, and sought to militarize the policy of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁶

The Fighting Vanguard was able to attract large support from both factions of the Muslim Brotherhood, and many members of the Aleppo-Hama wing joined its ranks. It also received financing from the Muslim Brotherhood under the leadership of Adnan Saadeddine, even when the two groups were officially rivals.⁷ This resulted in substantial ties between the two organizations, and many members considered the Fighting Vanguard to be the armed wing of the Muslim Brotherhood instead of an independent organization. Although Hadeed was arrested in 1975 and died in prison shortly thereafter, the organization he created

would have a lasting impact and eventually set the stage for the 1976–1982 Islamic Uprising.⁸

Following Hadeed's death, the Fighting Vanguard went underground. It was not until spring of 1979 that the group abandoned secrecy and declared open war on the Syrian regime, attacking an artillery school and killing 83 cadets. Over the next few years, the group escalated their actions and widened their scope, carrying out attacks on government buildings, police stations, and Baath party institutions. This also encompassed a series of assassination attempts against senior officials, including then-President Hafez al-Assad. Between August and November 1981, the Syrian opposition conducted four major car-bombings, one each month, aimed at the institutions of the Baathist state, including intelligence agencies, Air Force headquarters and the Prime Minister's office.⁹ The tactics employed in this campaign provide an important historical context for similar tactics seen during the 2011-2012 conflict. Today, car bombs tend to be associated with al-Qaeda. However, decades before al-Qaeda adopted the strategy, the Syrian opposition mounted an almost identical bombing campaign striking similar targets.

In 1981, the Fighting Vanguard, under the leadership of Adnan Uqlah, attempted to reconcile and negotiate with the Damascus wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in an effort to combine resources and synchronize efforts. It was at this time that both wings of the Muslim Brotherhood agreed on the principle of armed struggle and attempted to unify their forces, with the Damascus wing providing greater logistical support to the goal of overthrowing Hafez al-Assad.¹⁰

However, the Muslim Brotherhood was simultaneously working to build a political opposition coalition against the regime, made up of both Islamist and non-Islamist factions. This angered Uqlah, who accused the Brotherhood of treachery. Thus, the reconciliation attempts ultimately failed, and the Muslim Brotherhood took steps to disassociate itself entirely from the Fighting Vanguard. This led to an even wider gap between the organization's Damascus wing and the Aleppo-Hama wing – a rift that continues to divide



HAMA FOLLOWING SYRIAN REGIME SHELLING IN 1982.

the core of the Muslim Brotherhood from its more radical members.¹¹

In February of 1982, the Fighting Vanguard, aided by armed members of the Muslim Brotherhood, provoked the showdown with the regime that led to the notoriously brutal Hama Massacre. In the clashes leading up to the massacre, the Fighting Vanguard instigated a close-quarters urban battle with the regime's security forces in densely populated neighborhoods of Hama. The regime responded with overwhelming fire power that eventually destroyed entire sections of the city and killed as many as 10,000 people, a course of events that resembles the fighting that occurred in Homs in February-March 2012.

Following the Hama Massacre, the Syrian intelligence services, known as the *Mukhabarat*, disbanded and destroyed the Fighting Vanguard, with the exception of a few aimless members who managed to escape Syria. Although it was the Fighting Vanguard that may have been directly responsible for the events leading up to the Hama Massacre, it was the Muslim Brotherhood that received the blame. Many of its natural supporters inside Syria questioned the organization's overall tactics and strategy, leading to the alienation of its core membership.¹² Today, the Syrian population continues to display a distrust of the Muslim Brotherhood that stems from the belief in their culpability for the massacre.

This severely weakened the organization inside Syria, which was forced to operate in absentia and has never been able to fully reestablish its network or support base within the country.

The current divide between the Muslim-Brotherhood dominated Syrian National Council (SNC) and the majority of political and military opposition groups operating inside Syria reflect the Brotherhood's lack of ground support following their defeat in 1982.

Unlike today's opposition, which began largely as a peaceful protest movement, the Fighting Vanguard espoused a strategy of armed struggle that was necessitated by a precise political idea that "men have no right to govern themselves."¹³ This radical stance led to cleavages among the moderate political Islamists and the more Salafi-jihadist elements that were further exacerbated by the government's attempts to quell dissent. As the current conflict in Syria militarizes, similar cleavages are appearing as the opposition attempts to envision Syria's future political system.

The historical schism between moderate Islamists and radical Salafists continues within and among opposition groups today. A small but growing number of rebel groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham, are adopting a militant ideology similar to that of the Fighting Vanguard. One group has taken the name directly, calling itself the Fighting Vanguard Battalions and espousing the former organization's radical views.¹⁴ The growth of these groups has led to the perceived radicalization of the Syrian opposition, which has galvanized Assad's base of support and alienated potential allies.

Terrorism as a Foreign Policy Tool

With the exception of its domestic conflict with the Fighting Vanguard, the Assad regime has a long and established track record of working with foreign terrorist organizations inside Syria to accomplish a range of objectives: ensuring regime survival by focusing militancy outward; punishing Western countries and using the threat of terrorist attacks as political leverage; applying pressure to its Arab neighbors; and advancing Syria's interests throughout the region, with particular respect to Israel. In fact, the skillful use of terrorist organizations as a tool of foreign policy has been a hallmark of the Syrian regime to the present day.

Syria has been on the U.S. Department of State's list of designated state sponsors of terrorism since 1979, though Syria's support for political violence movements and terrorism in the Middle East can be traced as far back as the 1950s. Its history of using terrorism as a foreign policy tool is showcased in the Syrian campaign of terror against the Hashemite rulers of Jordan in 1960–1961 and in its attempts to destabilize Lebanon in the 1980s. Arguably the most blatant example is Syrian support to the Palestinian al-Saiqa Organization. Al-Saiqa was created in 1966 by the leadership of the Syrian Baath Party. The organization answered directly to the Baath party and was backed by the Syrian government with the express intent of using it against Israel. Al-Saiqa proved so loyal to Syria that it elected to fight against Yassir Arafat's Fatah Organization during the Lebanese civil war, and instead sided with its Syrian patrons.¹⁵

Under the rule of former president Hafez al-Assad, Syria institutionalized its involvement with terrorism and systematically leveraged various terrorist organizations to further its strategic objectives in the region. The Syrian government directed support to many Palestinian liberation groups, including the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO), Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), and Hamas. These groups served the Syrian regime by posing a threat to Israel; they also played an important role in the Syrian government's strategy in Lebanon. The regime also gave critical support to Hezbollah, which became an important proxy power for the Syrian government in Lebanon. Similarly, the Syrian government maintained ties to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and assisted the organization's efforts in order to exert pressure against Turkey and Iraq.¹⁶

In each case, the Syrian government provided direct funding, weapons, training, and the provision of safe haven to these organizations.¹⁷ This led to the development of sophisticated lines of support for terrorist activity, both within Syria and projecting elsewhere in the region, which made Syria a crucial support base for the proliferation

of terrorist groups. Thus, from operational bases inside Syria, terrorist organizations have been able to launch attacks across the world.

Syrian security and intelligence agencies were heavily involved in the acts of terror committed by these groups and is well documented. Arrested terrorists confessed that the Syrian intelligence apparatus was highly involved in their operations. One terrorist belonging to Abu Nidal's Organization (ANO) claimed that the Syrian Air Force's Security Directorate headed by Mohammed al-Khouli assisted the terrorists who carried out the attack against the Rome and Vienna airports in 1985. He also claimed that he had received training in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley under the supervision of Syrian military personnel.¹⁸ The attack in March 1986 on the West German Arab Friendship Association in Berlin and the bombing a month later of a German discotheque that was frequented by U.S. servicemen can be traced back directly to the Air Force Security Directorate. During the 1990s, Syria's intelligence officer in Lebanon Major General Ghazi Kanaan supervised terrorist attacks against the Christian South Lebanon Army, the Israeli Defense Forces and U.S. military and civilian targets.¹⁹

Fatah al-Islam

Among the groups sponsored by the Syrian government, its most notable ties are with the Sunni jihadist group Fatah al-Islam. Fatah al-Islam was formed on November 26, 2006 after it split from Fatah Intifada. The group gained notoriety when it took over the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon in May 2007. This led to a three month battle with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) before the group was defeated in early September. The conflict, which caused more than 30,000 Palestinian refugees to flee the camp, was considered Lebanon's worst internal fighting since the 1975-1991 civil war.²⁰

Many of the Arab fighters who joined Fatah al-Islam entered Lebanon illegally from Syria and via bases along the Lebanon-Syria border that were manned by pro-Syrian militant factions. These fighters included the group's founder Shakir al-Abssi, who

had previously been jailed by Syrian authorities in 2002 for attempting to lead a resistance operation in the Golan Heights. Al-Abssi was a close associate of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, with whom he had allegedly helped plan the assassination of U.S. diplomat Laurence Foley. Though al-Abssi denied organizational links between Fatah al-Islam and al-Qaeda, the two groups endorsed similar ideologies; furthermore, Fatah al-Islam has used tactics similar to those of AQI, namely bombing attacks targeting civilians.²¹

Many government officials and analysts have accused Fatah al-Islam of being a direct arm of Syrian intelligence. Director of the Lebanese Internal Security Force (ISF) General Ashraf Rifi accused the Syrian government of being behind Fatah al-Islam in a cable to U.S. Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. He said that the ISF had evidence of Syria's role in supporting violence in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp through Fatah al-Islam.²² Other officials and analysts echoed this accusation, pointing to Abssi's unexplained release from Syrian custody. One of the regime's known methods for recruiting proxies was to incarcerate them, before offering freedom in exchange for action on behalf of the regime. Former Fatah al-Islam members have affirmed the organization's ties to Syrian intelligence. One former member, Abu Khalid, discussed the relationship between Fatah al-Islam and the Syrian intelligence in depth. "We didn't know it [Fatah al-Islam] was part of Syrian intelligence," he said, adding that he left the group after discovering the extent to which the group was being used by the Syrian government.²³

In his article titled "The Truth about Fatah al-Islam," Syria specialist Barry Rubin documented the Syrian government's support to the terrorist organization. Rubin argued that the organization was designed to undercut the international tribunal investigating the assassination of Rafik Hariri through intimidation, in order to ensure that the tribunal did not finger Syria's leaders as the murders.²⁴ Interestingly, Rubin also discusses the Syrian government's strategy of preempting major international events with an explosion or another type of terrorist attack. The Syrian opposition has accused the Syrian government of applying the same

strategy in the context of the 2011-2012 uprising, blaming the regime for many of the large, high-casualty explosions in Damascus.

However, many of Fatah al-Islam's members became disillusioned with the Syrian government following the group's defeat by the Lebanese Armed Forces in 2007. Some of these members eventually turned on the regime, carrying out a car bombing in Damascus on September 27, 2008. Ten Fatah al-Islam members, including Al-Abssi's daughter Wafa Al-Abssi, were convicted of the attack after purportedly confessing to their involvement.²⁵

Foreign Fighters in Iraq

The Syrian government also provided support to foreign fighters traveling through Syria to participate in the Iraqi insurgency beginning in 2003. Syrian border guards abetted the passage of busloads full of fighters for Saddam Hussein's resistance against the Coalition forces and permitted them to pass the Syrian-Iraqi border despite contrary promises made to the U.S.²⁶ At the time, a top State Department official accused Syria of cooperating with terrorist groups and letting militants slip into Iraq, as well as continuing its development of weapons of mass destruction that some officials feared would ultimately be transferred to terrorist groups.²⁷

Hard evidence began to appear of extensive jihadist fighter networks in Syria during the U.S. counter-insurgency campaign of 2006-2007. Most notably, a database seized by coalition forces in Sinjar, Iraq contained details of hundreds of foreign fighters transiting into Iraq from Syria.²⁸ Moreover, it showed that around 100 different Syrian "coordinators" helped provide services to bring foreign fighters into Syria and then on to Iraq. This flow of foreign nationals into Iraq is likely to have given al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) strong institutional knowledge of how to transit through and operate in Syria.

Support to Terrorism in 2012

In early February 2012, the Syrian government released Mustafa bin Abdel Qadir Sitt Mariam Nassar, also known as Abu Musab al-Suri. Al-Suri

is an important jihadist ideologue and a top al-Qaeda operative, with experience fighting against the Assad regime during the 1979-1982 Islamic Uprising. As the alleged mastermind of the July 2005 London Bombings, Al-Suri had been in Syrian custody since he was allegedly transported there by the CIA six years ago.²⁹



ABU MUSAB AL-SURI

Releasing Al-Suri was likely meant to deter Western involvement in Syria, and demonstrate the government's willingness to resort to terrorism as its preferred foreign policy tool. At the same time that Al-Suri was released, security sources revealed that the Syrian government had also released dozens of other known militants, many with ties to Al-Suri and others to AQI. This suggests that the Syrian government was eager to provide a degree of credibility to its narrative that the uprising was comprised of armed terrorists. The extent to which al-Suri is actually involved in the current Syrian uprising is unknown.

Throughout its ongoing crisis, the Syrian government has continued to employ terrorism as its choice weapon against both internal and external opponents. On August 12, 2012, Lebanese authorities announced that they had discovered a Syrian plot to destabilize Lebanon and issued indictments against two Syrian officers, General Ali Mamlouk, who heads the Syrian National Security Bureau and his deputy, Colonel Ali Adnan. In the indictment, the two Syrians were accused of collaborating with Lebanese politician Michel Samaha to form an "armed gang that planned to detonate a series of bombs prepared by the Syrians with the aim of 'inciting sectarian fighting' in Lebanon."³⁰ Bourtros Harb, a Lebanese MP, announced that the incident "reveals the policy of the Syrian regime towards Lebanon, particularly its recourse to crimes and terrorism to realize its political goals."³¹

Another concern is Syria's history of providing weapons to terrorist organizations. Concerning

the Syrian armament of militant groups, some analysts have suggested that in exchange for services rendered, the group received “weapons directly from the Syrian arsenal.”³² In this case, the quality and quantity of weapons that may now be in the hands of militant groups operating inside Syria, and perhaps being used against the regime, is significant. While most rebels have complained generally about inadequate arms and supplies, other more radical groups have demonstrated a much higher weapons capability.

The Legacy of Syrian Regime Support to Terrorist Organizations

With the Assad regime under severe domestic and international pressure as the uprising becomes increasingly violent, it is critical to understand the drivers and dynamics of the Syrian government’s interactions with these groups, as well as the implications of these relationships on the emergence of jihadist activity in Syria in 2012.

Syria’s patronage of terrorist organizations allowed for the development of a logistical infrastructure including weapon storehouses, channels of communications, and access to funding. This infrastructure has historically provided these organizations with the ability to carry out sustained terror campaigns. While it is likely that the Syrian

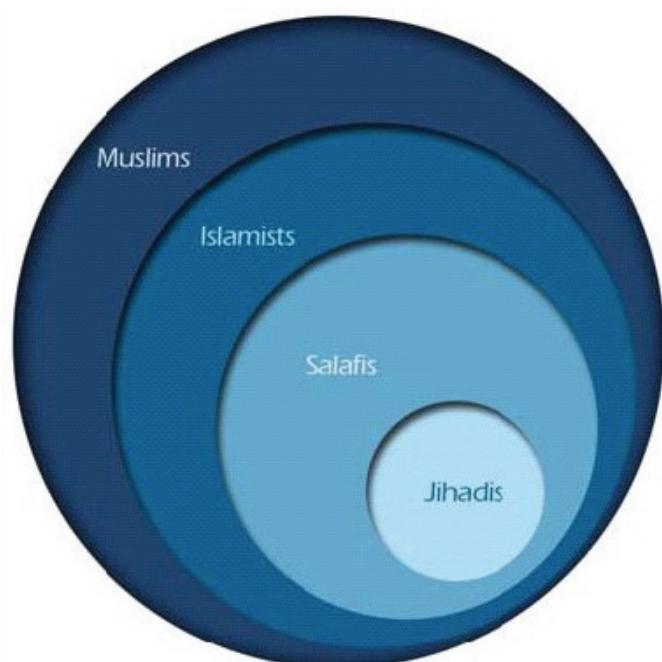
government attempted to maintain strict vigilance over this infrastructure and the terrorist networks operating in Syria, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the regime was able to maintain control over these groups prior to the 2011 uprising.

It is likely that some nodes of the various terrorist networks that developed within Syria prior to 2011 managed to retain a degree of secrecy, and the ability to operate at some level without direct Syrian government knowledge of their actions. During the course of the current uprising, the regime likely lost a significant amount of the control and leverage it once enjoyed over this infrastructure. Evidence suggests that militant groups are now using these logistical lines in reverse to facilitate attacks against regime targets.

Moreover, although the Syrian government has encouraged militant groups’ dependence on Syrian support and aid, the new generation of religiously motivated militants has demonstrated an unwillingness to serve the Syrian government at the expense of their own objectives. This has led to a number of disputes between the Syrian government and its armed proxies throughout the region, with some significant groups severing historic ties to the regime. This trend has been exacerbated by the current uprising, leading to the disintegration of many of the regime’s close connections to militant groups it had previously backed, including Hamas. In some cases, Syria’s former proxies have turned against the government, particularly Fatah al-Islam. This will be discussed more in-depth later in the report.

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING COMPLEX RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN SYRIA

Western observers tend to use terms such as Islamist, Salafist, and Jihadist interchangeably, which has handicapped observers’ understanding of the role of Islamism in the ongoing Syrian conflict. It is therefore critical to define and discuss the key terms that will be used throughout this report. Understanding these key terms is significant because they reveal specific characteristics of militant group identity and ideology that can help



RELIGIOUS IDENTITY ATLAS

predict their various courses of action at current and future phases of the conflict in Syria.

Islamism refers to a wide spectrum of political beliefs, and is thus difficult to define. Most generally, Islamism denotes the political manifestation of Islam. For purposes of this report, Islamism will thus refer to the political ideology that the precepts of Islam should not only guide an individual's personal life, but should also drive politics and serve as the foundation of society. The main characteristic of Islamism is a belief that political power and state control should be based on Islamic principles in order to be correctly implemented. Islamists generally believe that modern democratic institutions are compatible with Islam and support democratic processes, including elections and a multi-party system.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a classic example of an Islamist current within the Syrian opposition. Its political agenda supports democratic elections and many political freedoms while espousing a vision for a Syrian state that implements Sunni Islamic frames of reference for its legislation. The different factions of the Muslim Brotherhood and the varied beliefs of its members demonstrate the wide spectrum of Islamist political beliefs and values. Although the armed opposition coalition of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) generally promotes a secular agenda, some of its component battalions adhere to an Islamist ideology and are well-known Islamist brigades. One example of an Islamist group within the Syrian opposition is Suqor al-Sham in Jebel al-Zawiyah.









While many specific political agendas fall under this broad category, more germane to this report is the difference between Islamists and Salafists. *Salafism* is a Sunni school of jurisprudence most closely associated with Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal that emphasizes the *salaf*, the earliest Muslim community, as the strict model for contemporary Islamic practice. Salafists treat any divergence from this original model as heresy, resulting in an extreme enmity towards what they consider heretical Islamic sects, including Shiism and especially Bashar al-Assad's Alawite sect. According to Salafism,

the Quran, the Hadith, and the consensus of approved Islamic scholarship provide sufficient guidance upon which to establish governance and a social framework. They insist on the literal truth of the Quran and abide by a very narrow and conservative version of *Sharia*, or Islamic law. Salafists look upon the entire early Islamic political experience as religiously mandated. Thus, they tend to reject democracy since it entails putting Islam to the vote rather than mandating it, and they have historically rejected all modern political systems and ideas. Accordingly, they reject the concept of statehood and seek to establish an Islamic caliphate that would encompass the entire Umma, or Muslim community. Salafi movements go much further in restricting political and personal life than the more modern Islamist groups; in particular, they are averse to equal rights for women and minorities.

More recently, however, the Arab Spring and recent events in the Arab world have caused many Salafists to question the effectiveness of categorically rejecting participation in the modern political process. For many Salafists, the prospect of free and fair elections offered in Egypt and Tunisia held value for the first time. As a result, despite their rejection of voting and democracy in principle, many Salafists decided to participate in elections throughout the region—creating political parties, fielding candidates, and urging constituents to vote. Given this context, it is important to distinguish between Salafism as a Sunni school of jurisprudence and as a modern socio-political movement with specific leaders, political positions and spheres of influence within the Arab world.

This recent development has led to a division between two main camps within Salafism: *Salafi-Islahi* (Reform Salafism) and *Salafi-Jihadi*. Reform Salafis believe in the need to work within the existing political system in order to achieve their end goal of implementing Sharia law and establishing an Islamic state. They aim to change society through *da'wa*, or religious preaching and education. While preaching that Sharia law takes precedence, Reform Salafis conform to civil or

THE SPECTRUM OF RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY

	Secular	Islamist	Salafist
Syrians	 Free Syrian Army	 Suqour al-Sham	 Jabhat Nusra
Foreign Fighters		 Umma Brigade	 Ahrar al-Sham
			 Fatah al-Islam
			 al-Qaeda in Iraq
			 Abdullah Azzam

THIS CHART INDICATES WHERE EACH ORGANIZATION DISCUSSED IN THIS REPORT FALLS ALONG THE SPECTRUM.

state law. Although their end goal is an Islamic caliphate, they demonstrate a willingness to work within the confines of the modern state system. This camp now includes the vast majority of Salafists, and thus, members of this camp will be described in this report simply as *Salafists*.

The other camp is composed of *Salafi-jihadists*. They maintain the centrality of militant jihad in achieving their vision of an Islamic state, and they believe that their political objectives can only be achieved through violent means. Most importantly, Salafi-jihadists categorically deny the legitimacy of the modern state and are willfully engaged in militant jihad to establish an Islamic caliphate. The ideological heritage of extremist groups such as al-Qaeda is Salafi-jihadi. Syria's indigenous Salafi-jihadist movement is called Jabhat Nusra, and it will be discussed at length later in this report. Members of this camp will be described in this report as Salafi-jihadists, or simply *jihadists*.

These distinctions, however, are difficult to preserve in the context of a civil war. The militarization of the conflict in Syria has blurred the line separating typical dichotomies of political reform versus armed jihad. Assad's violent repression of the opposition has turned the uprising into an armed struggle,

propelling many Islamists and Salafists, who might normally prefer peaceful reform, to pick up arms. This has also led to an increase in jihadi discourse, which has amplified international concern about the jihadist presence in Syria.

Most Syrians opposing the regime are devout Muslims. By virtue of Syria's demography and the way the conflict has progressed, the opposition is composed of mostly Sunni Muslims who come from more conservative areas of the country, particularly the northwestern regions of Homs and Idlib. Not all of these Muslims are driven by religious ideology, however. Many are fighting for the Syrian nation as revolutionaries in a popular revolt who are motivated by religious principles and who draw on Islamic cultural constructs, including jihad. Their use of these constructs is incidental and best understood for their mobilizing effect. It does not mean that they should be viewed as jihadists, defined by a belief in a global jihadist ideology. These actors will be termed as *religious-nationalists* in this report. Although they are inspired by Islam, they are also fighting for Syria. Many of the rebel battalions who make up the Free Syrian Army (FSA) are composed of religious-nationalists.

The Syrian conflict has also attracted a plethora of foreign fighters. Unlike Iraq and Afghanistan, where the vast majority of foreign fighters were jihadists, foreign fighters in Syria fall across the spectrum. Many are simply young *revolutionaries* from the region who have been caught up in the spirit of the Arab Spring. They participated in successful revolutions in their own countries and are now looking to help their Syrian counterparts succeed. Others are *Islamic-inspired foreign fighters* who, like the Syrian religious-nationalists, believe that it is their duty to help protect their Muslim brethren in Syria. These fighters are devout Muslims, which means that it is likely they will resist the creation of a purely secular state in Syria. However, they are unlikely to seek to destroy Syrian society or dismantle the state system. The Umma Brigade, led by Irish-Libyan fighter Mahdi al-Harati, is an example of this phenomenon. The brigade follows an Islamic frame of reference, yet Harati has made it clear that he supports democratic elections in Syria and will leave with his Libyan contingent once the regime falls.

On the other hand, many foreign fighters in Syria are Salafi-jihadists committed to aiding in the establishment of an Islamic caliphate through violence. These Salafi-jihadists include members of al-Qaeda Iraq (AQI) and its affiliate the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), as well as the Abdullah Azzam Brigades led by Saudi Majid bin Muhammad al-Majid and a number of prominent Jordanian Salafi-jihadists.

The remainder of this report will discuss in detail various organizations operating in Syria and where they fit within this framework, with a focus on Jabhat Nusra.

SECULARIST AND RELIGIOUS-NATIONALIST ACTORS IN SYRIA

Syria's Grassroots Protest Movement and the Free Syrian Army

The vast majority of Syrian opposition groups have adopted a secular agenda. The Syrians participating in the grassroots protest movement who have staffed the local coordination committees

and revolutionary councils espouse a secular vision of Syria and declare their commitment to democratic processes, such as elections and a multi-party system. They avoid any specifically religious identification in order to cultivate an all-inclusive popular movement that may garner minority sympathies as well. They frame the uprising within a nationalist context as a popular revolt against a corrupt leader. Although they are mostly Sunni Muslims who derive personal inspiration from Islam, they are avowedly nationalist in their opposition activities.³³

The armed opposition coalitions inside Syria that make up the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have also adopted a secular agenda. The armed opposition is fundamentally a popular resistance movement, and the majority of rebel battalions operating under the FSA umbrella have explicitly secular motivations. Many important rebel leaders have distanced themselves from conservative Islamists and refute the sectarian nature of the conflict.³⁴ Despite these secular roots, the FSA has increasingly accommodated itself to the growth of Islamist-oriented rebel battalions by cooperating with both foreign and Syrian Islamist groups.

The Arab Spring Spirit of Revolution: A Revolutionary Youth

Contrary to popular belief, a significant portion of the foreign fighters coming into Syria are secularists and religious-nationalists. While there are some jihadists, many more are joining the conflict for other reasons, including the revolutionary spirit that has taken the Arab world by storm, and family ties within Syria. In order to better understand the role that these foreign fighters may play in the Syrian uprising, it is necessary first to recognize where Syria falls in the larger context of the Arab Spring. Within this context, certain motivators become clear which have affected the actions and behavior of the different elements now taking part in the conflict.

Youth participation in the Arab Spring should be understood as an expression of a powerful socio-economic frustration. In this sense, the Arab Spring was spurred by the demands of disenfranchised and dissatisfied youth who sought

to reclaim their rights from the governments that they believed had failed them. It was a call to their corrupt regimes to provide opportunities for social, political and economic rights that had previously been denied. Angry, and with little else to do because of high unemployment rates, these youth turned to protest—both peaceful and violent. These protests were a political manifestation of their socio-economic frustration, fueled throughout the region by early successes in Tunisia and Egypt. Lacking outlets for political participation, young people filled the streets across the Arab world to demand an end to their regimes and significant reorganization of their governments.

Caught up in a revolutionary spirit, many of the foreign fighters now entering Syria are youth who participated in revolutions in their own countries. They are not entering Syria to fight for a global jihadist ideology. Instead, they are coming to the aid of their revolutionary brethren and helping to push forward the spirit of the Arab Spring. Having ousted one dictator, these triumphant young men, still filled with revolutionary fervor, are keen to topple the next one. “Everyone wants to go. We have liberated our country, now we should help others... This is freedom. This is Arab unity,” stated a Libyan rebel who fought in the Fighting Village Brigade during the 2011 battle for Tripoli.³⁵

Moreover, the causes of the Arab Spring were broader and more culturally, politically, and economically entrenched in the lives of these Arab youth than any single leader. Ousting the leader only temporarily reduced tensions in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and in many cases the fundamental issues that manifest particular grievances have yet to be addressed. Thus, these youth have yet to find their place in society despite achieving regime change in their own countries. In many cases, they have decided to join in the Syrian uprising due to the continued circumstances that fueled their own revolutions and the persistent lack of opportunities to integrate at home.

Many young revolutionaries from other countries in the region have joined the fighting in Syria, including Jordanians, Tunisians, Saudis, and Algerians.⁴² There have also been reports of British

and Chechen Muslims traveling to Syria.⁴³ These foreign fighters are overwhelming young men who have little to no military training or combat experience. They describe their fight as “jihad” and discuss the religious duty they feel to help Muslims in Syria, often phrasing the conflict in sectarian terms. However, this is a rallying cry, and they should not be seen as jihadists. These young fighters do not believe in a global jihadist ideology, nor do they espouse an Islamic caliphate. Although they are religiously compelled and frame the fight in terms of jihad, they are religious nationalists in the sense that they do not seek to destroy the Syrian state.

Lebanese Proxy War

Although Lebanon did not experience its own uprising, many young Lebanese have also been affected by pervasive revolutionary fervor. They see Syria as a chance to participate in the Arab Spring. They also have an additional incentive to participate because the outcome in Syria will directly affect Lebanon. Lebanese volunteers are motivated not only by a desire to help their Syrian brethren, but also from a deep-seated sense of anger and frustration with what they regard as years of humiliation and disenfranchisement within Lebanon’s political system. In this sense, Syria has become a proxy battlefield for their war with Hezbollah.³⁶

In Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, training camps have been erected where hundreds of young Lebanese are preparing to join the fight against Assad, receiving basic training in weapons handling and guerrilla warfare skills.³⁷ These camps were initially established in 2008 in order to train Sunni militants for a possible future confrontation with Hezbollah. Now, these fighters are mobilizing to fight Assad, a known ally and supporter of Hezbollah. Many Lebanese men have already managed to slip into Syria, in most cases traveling to Homs and attempting to join rebel units from there. Some of these Lebanese recruits fought in Bab Amr and Khaldiyah during the government offensive against Homs in February 2012, providing vital reinforcements to the rebel units defending the city.³⁸ In addition to fighting within Syrian

rebel groups, there is also at least one exclusively Lebanese unit operating near the Lebanese border that has been active in fighting in Syria.³⁹

One Lebanese fighter who had just returned from Syria discussed his reasons for fighting. “This isn’t just about Syria anymore. Of course we want to help our Syrian brothers, but it’s even more important than that now. If Assad wins, Hezbollah will become even stronger. It will be like 2008 all over again—when they took over the Sunni neighborhoods. This is our chance to check Hezbollah’s power.”⁴⁰ He explained that there are many young Lebanese men who want to fight with the Syrian opposition. However, he emphasized that most of these men are only “training and preparing,” having not yet participated in the fighting. He said that he knew of at least three FSA training camps with close to 500 men, though only about 100 of them have actually fought in Syria. He also noted that the men who have fought, do so in rotational shifts – spending a few weeks in Syria and helping to reinforce the rebels before returning to Lebanon.⁴¹

Family and Tribal Ties

In the Arab region, historical tribal ties straddle today’s borders. Ancestral connections ignite sympathies among those who share tribal kinship with members of the Syrian opposition, and some foreign fighters come into Syria to fight alongside family members. A recent CNN report documented how tribal ties have impacted Saudi support for Syrian rebels.⁴⁴ Other anecdotal evidence tells the stories of young Palestinian volunteers joining the rebel units of their cousins.⁴⁵ In some cases, fighters include foreigners of Syrian descent who were born in the West and whose families previously fled persecution under Assad’s rule.

Shared tribal and family ties across the Syria-Iraq border have also affected the flow of fighters into Syria. Many foreign fighters are fighting in Syria to protect family members and tribesmen, as they did in Iraq during the 2000s.⁴⁶ Especially in the tribal areas of eastern Syria and western Iraq which are organically entwined, cross-border tribal relations are common. These fighters are not affiliated with AQ, nor are they jihadists. They have personal

motivations for participating in the fighting, and like the young revolutionaries, they will likely return home in the post-Assad era.

ISLAMISM AND THE SYRIAN UPRISING

Most participants in the Syrian uprising are devout Muslims, and a call to arms often draws upon the spiritual fervor of Islam. The names chosen for Friday demonstrations are often religious in connotation, and many rebel groups’ names refer to important Muslim figures. Chants of “God is Great” accompany revolution slogans, and songs about Muslims and infidels can be heard echoing throughout rallies and demonstrations. Many analysts have noted this as evidence of the Islamification of the conflict and its increasingly sectarian dimension.⁴⁷ This adoption of religious terms and symbols has thus complicated Western understanding of religious identity in Syria and made it more difficult to distinguish groups’ ideologies.

Religious Symbols: the Mainstreaming of Jihadist Iconography

A spate of media stories on Syria has highlighted the appearance of black flags as indications of an al-Qaeda (AQ) presence. However, the black flag is not AQ’s own – it is the historical flag of jihad that has a long tradition in Islamic history. It has recently appeared in the hands of civil protesters in Tahrir Square, Cairo and Salafist party members during the Tunisian elections. With this mainstreaming of jihadist symbols throughout the Arab Spring, the black flag now serves as a popular symbol of resistance. While this is a troubling indication of growing jihadist sentiment, it does not necessarily indicate an AQ presence. Moreover, the fact that it is often seen side by side with the 1932–1958 Syrian national flag now being raised as the banner of the Syrian opposition demonstrates a level of nationalism that is incompatible with AQ ideology.

The Al-Bara ibn Malik Battalion exemplifies this common misconception. On February 16, 2012, a group of 24 young men released a video statement on YouTube announcing the formation of a new



**AL-BARA IBN MALIK MARTYRS BRIGADE WITH ISI FLAG/
NATIONAL FLAG.**

battalion called the Al-Bara ibn Malik Battalion. Although the announcement video resembled other FSA battalion formation statements, it contained two notable differences: first, the young men announced that they were forming a martyrdom brigade while in the background hung two black flags resembling the ISI flag. The appearance of the ISI flag fueled speculation that al-Qaeda had infiltrated the uprising and was now operating in Syria. To add to fears, many analysts called attention to the fact that the group had the same name as an AQI brigade that was formed in May 2005 to fight against American troops. The battalion was quickly labeled as an AQ affiliate group, and it is often cited by analysts as an example of AQ's growing presence in Syria.

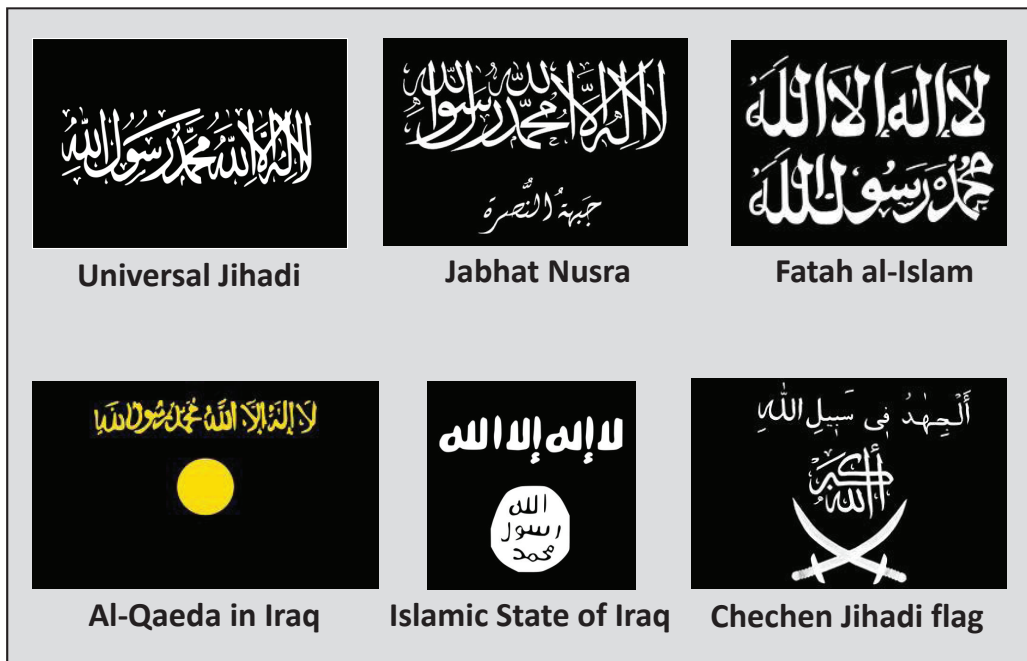
However, these flags were accompanied by the Syrian opposition flag, which demonstrates Syrian nationalism and directly contradicts al-Qaeda's global jihadist ideology. Moreover, the group pledged allegiance to the Free Syrian Army, and despite framing the conflict in terms of jihad, has said that they are fighting for a free Syrian state. Given these factors, it is much more likely that the group is composed of more conservative Islamists rather than a Syrian branch of the AQI brigade formed in 2005. While the fact that they announced their willingness to employ suicide bombers against Syrian security forces is a worrisome sign, the group is not evidence of an AQ presence in Syria. Instead, it stands as a powerful example of the growing appeal of jihadi ideology in Syria.

Since the group's formation in mid-February 2012, the Al-Bara ibn Malik Battalion has not

demonstrated an operational capacity, and there is no video evidence that directly links any attacks to the group. Although they claim to have lost many martyrs to the fighting against Assad forces, they have not taken credit for any significant attacks. In fact, the majority of attacks analysts have mistakenly attributed to the group were carried out by a battalion in Bouqras, Deir ez-Zor province that operates under the same name, though the two groups are not affiliated. It is likely that the fighters who originally formed the Al-Bara Ibn Malak Battalion were incorporated into other rebel units in the vicinity instead of continuing to operate as an independent battalion. Thus, the presence of ISI flags in their formation video, while leading to hyperbolic claims that the group was an AQ affiliate, does not correlate with available evidence.

Another frequently mentioned sign of the growing radicalization of the conflict is the increasing number of men growing long beards according to the Salafi tradition. Yet many FSA fighters have taken to wearing the Salafi-style beards without adopting its ideology. For these men, the beard has become another symbol of resistance. One young activist commented that, "It is a way to identify yourself as a revolutionary." Another Syrian was quoted in TIME magazine saying that the beard was "just a fashion." Other rebels discussed how they had family members or neighbors who had previously been interrogated by the regime for growing a beard. "We could never grow them before the uprising. This is the tough rebel look," commented Anwar, a Syrian rebel who has grown a long beard. He confirmed that it has become a defiant fashion statement, and it should not be interpreted as a purely religious or jihadi symbol.

Long beards could also serve as a marketing strategy for opposition groups. It may be advantageous for rebels to appear more conservative in order to attract religious donors in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf who specifically want to support Salafists and more conservative elements within the opposition. In this case, rebel groups would benefit from appearing more Salafi. Although they do not identify with Salafi ideology, they believe that they



JIHADI FLAGS OF THE WORLD

will receive more foreign financing and support if they appear Salafi.

This proliferation of traditionally Islamist symbols and fashions underscores the difficulty of distinguishing between al-Qaeda affiliates, Salafi-jihadists, foreign fighters, militant revolutionaries, and other combatants. There is no simple way to determine the motives behind the various opposition forces in Syria, or discern what proportion of these fighters are committed to a global jihadist ideology that seeks to destroy the Syrian state. In order to develop responsible policies towards these various actors, it will be critical to judge each opposition group on the basis of its statements and actions, rather than its unit flag or the facial hair of its members.

Islamist Rebel Groups: Suqour al-Sham & its Brothers in Arms

Islamification is often conflated with radicalization. While these two dynamics are related, they are not synonymous. Some Syrian Islamists have formed rebel groups that nominally fight under the banner of the FSA but do not share the secular vision of its other members. They have adopted an explicitly Islamist agenda and speak openly about implementing a moderate interpretation of Sharia

law. These rebel groups do not seek to establish an Islamic caliphate, but they do want to see a Syrian state established within an Islamic frame of reference.



SUQOUR AL-SHAM

Suqour al-Sham is one rebel unit that identifies itself as part of the FSA, but espouses an Islamist political agenda. Headquartered in Sarjeh, a small town in Idlib's mountainous Jebal al-Zawiya region, the group has expanded its reach and influence throughout the province and even into Aleppo. In a sermon delivered in a mosque in late April 2012, Suqour al-Sham leader Abu Issa said that the Syrian people should view politics as a vehicle for elevating God's word. He further described the conflict through an explicitly jihadist discourse, saying that Muslims had lost their honor because they had abandoned jihad. Although this sermon may have sounded radical by Western standards, Abu Issa maintains a moderate Islamist perspective. When asked about his vision for post-Assad Syria, Abu Issa said that he wanted to establish a judicious Islamic state "without imposing it on society."⁴⁸

Numerous other rebel leaders have discussed the desire to establish a Syrian state that is guided by Islamic principles. The commander of the “Strangers of the Levant” battalion said that his group wanted to see an Islamic government in power in Syria. “We won’t impose anything,” he added, “But I think most Syrians want Islamic law.”⁴⁹ An activist from the Homs Revolutionary Council noted the rise of Islamist rebel groups. “We used to be secular, and we called for democratic principle like elections and free speech. But now, more and more groups are Islamists. It is just like what you saw in Egypt and Tunisia with the Islamist parties gaining control. This is what is happening in Syria.”⁵⁰ He said a number of battalions like Suqour al-Sham have an Islamist agenda, though he added that they do not represent the majority of the opposition.

While more groups are now adopting an Islamist ideology, they have so far demonstrated a restraint that suggests they fall on the more moderate side of the spectrum. Many of these rebel groups have attempted to adhere to a code of conduct and limit transgressions in the midst of increasingly sectarian context. There have been no reported mass executions of minority populations and, although highly publicized, revenge killings have been kept to a minimum. These rebel groups have also said that they will protect Syria’s minorities and have attempted to provide government services to all citizens in rebel-held areas.⁵¹

Islamist Foreign Fighters

In addition to the young revolutionaries and religious-nationalists flocking to Syria, many foreign fighters are Islamists. They believe that Assad’s harsh repression of his political opposition created the conditions for jihad, and thus it is a religious duty to protect their Muslim brethren. While they fight for jihad, they do not adhere to a global jihadist ideology. They do not seek to destroy the Syrian state or establish an Islamic caliphate.

One group that has received significant media attention is a group of Libyans led by the Libyan-Irish fighter Mahdi al-Harati. Harati is a powerful militia chief who led the rebel unit that stormed

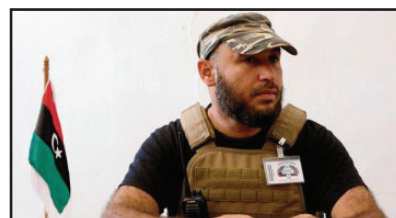
Qaddafi’s compound in Tripoli a year ago. He also has significant ties to Abdul Hakim Belhadj, head of the Tripoli Military Council and former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) leader. Harati first



UMMA BRIGADE

visited Syria in November 2011 with a delegation headed by Belhadj.⁵² He recently commissioned a group of Libyan volunteers, including twenty senior members of his own rebel unit, to fight together in Syria.

Harati’s group, called the Umma Brigade, is based in Maarat al-Numaan and includes specialists in communications, logistics, humanitarian issues, and heavy weapons. They operate training bases to teach fitness and battlefield tactics in order to augment Syrian rebel groups.⁵³ “He is not a jihadi; he sees himself as a Libyan revolutionary there to help the Syrian revolution,” noted Thomas Pierret, a lecturer in contemporary Syrian Islam at the University of Edinburgh.⁵⁴ Hussam Najjar, a Libyan fighter from the unit, confirmed Pierret’s assertion. He stated that they were “normal everyday guys” who were only there to aid their Syrian “brothers,” adding that conditions are far more dire for the Syrian rebels than it was for the Libyan rebels fighting Qaddafi’s regime.⁵⁵



UMMA BRIGADE LEADER MAHDI AL-HARATI

Harati’s Umma Brigade has gained notoriety for being highly organized and well trained. “There was a sense of increasing frustration among the Syrian revolutionaries over their lack of coordination. They asked me if I could help them train and organize, and I agreed,” Harati stated.⁵⁶

More than 3,000 Syrian rebels have joined the Umma Brigade since its establishment in May, according to Harati. He stressed that Syrians make

up over 90 percent of the brigade, with the Libyan contingent acting only to facilitate and train the Syrian rebels.

The Umma Brigade provides a useful example for understanding the composition of foreign fighters in Syria. Harati's political views favor a Syrian state led by an Islamic government and he exhibits a clear preference for political Islam. His views, compounded by the presence of foreign fighters, have led many to describe the brigade as radical Islamists or jihadists. This perception has been noted by several members of the group who are concerned by rumors of the brigade's radicalization. Many Syrian rebels have adamantly denied the presence of foreign fighters. They fear that admitting to such a presence would delegitimize their fight in the eyes of the international community. Yet as the influx of foreign fighters becomes increasingly apparent, some rebels have attempted to explain their presence and distinguish them from radical jihadists. One prominent opposition figure stated that, "We welcome foreigners if they are good people we can work with, like those in the Umma Brigade. The problem is that there are both good and bad people coming."⁵⁷

Najjar further highlighted the problems associated with foreign fighters. He complained that the Assad regime's attempts to portray foreign fighters as extremists linked to al-Qaeda have alienated many of the foreign fighters who only want to aid their Syrian counterparts. "This is not an al-Qaeda jihad," he said. "This is a people's revolution, and we want to help."⁵⁸ For his part, Harati has made it clear that his organization is merely a group of civilians that have been brought together by a cause. "When the Syrians have achieved their revolution, our job will be done," he stated.⁵⁹

The ability of the Umma Brigade to integrate foreign fighters and Syrian rebels is largely an exception. In most cases, foreign fighters face obstacles that prevent them from joining known rebel units, and many have noted the difficulties associated with joining these groups. From Kilis, Turkey, many foreign fighters have been reported mingling with Syrian rebels with the hope that Syrian rebel groups

will take them in. However, Syrian rebel groups have demonstrated a reluctance to accept foreign fighters. The rebels have emphasized the fact that they need more weapons, not more men, and they fear the impact of allowing foreign fighters to join their ranks. Syrian rebel commander Abu Bakr discussed his alarm at the prospect of radical allies joining his ranks. "These men coming fought in insurgencies like Iraq. They are too extreme, they want to blow up any symbol of the state, even schools," he said.⁶⁰

Foreign fighters have trouble gaining local support for a number of reasons. In some cases, they are seen as too big of a liability, with rebel soldiers emphasizing the inability to control foreign fighters and the fear that more radical elements may be among them. More secular-minded rebel commanders are wary of losing influence to these elements. Another important factor is that of trust and concern over loyalties. Khaled, a Lebanese man from the Bekaa Valley, stated that, "It was hard at the beginning to join because it was a matter of trust. They [the FSA] kept me under watch for three months before they could fully trust me."⁶¹ Foreigners are often suspected of being intelligence agents or "plants." Their motives are typically questioned by the Syrian rebels, who are naturally suspicious of anyone they do not know and who fear the capabilities of the *Mukhabarat*.

In cases where Syrian rebels admit to incorporating foreign fighters, they insist that it is a result of desperation, saying that they have no choice but to allow foreign fighters. As the rebels continue to struggle with inadequate arms and a lack of training, the draw of additional resources and access to funding is often too tempting to resist. The ability of more radical elements, particularly jihadists, to gain access to weapons and the fact that they have crucial expertise has strengthened their operational capacity despite their relatively small presence. "They are becoming stronger," noted one military council leader, adding that an independent group of jihadists had staged a number of significant attacks in the Idlib province.⁶² He said that his group was forced to invite them to join or risk losing its power and influence in the area. FSA commander Abu Mohammad also claimed

that his rebel unit only worked with jihadist groups out of desperation. He said that he dealt with Jabhat Nusra because he needed their “explosives, bullets and other things... They have experience that I can benefit from, and I can give them some help, information that benefits them.”⁶³

Even when these foreign fighters are incorporated into FSA rebel units, they are typically marginalized. They are not allowed to acquire leadership roles or participate in decision making. They primarily serve as reinforcements, and they are kept unaware of planned operations until they are called upon to fight. One Lebanese fighter said that he had returned from fighting in Syria after becoming disillusioned by continuing rebel suspicions. He described the alienation he and other foreigners faced within the rebel groups, noting that they were often forced to fight in separate contingents and were even excluded from fighting in many cases.⁶⁴

These young Islamists form the majority of an accelerated, though still small, influx of foreign fighters to Syria. While their numbers have increased due to relaxed border controls along the Turkish-Syrian border and a significant rebel-controlled area extending from the border, they account for only a negligible portion of those fighting against the Assad regime. Out of the estimated 50,000 rebels, they number in the hundreds—with the highest estimates being around 1000 foreign fighters.⁶⁵ They will not change the complexion of the insurgency, which will continue as an organic uprising fuelled by Syrians rebelling against their corrupt political leadership. Yet, their presence will likely alarm those who warn against an increased jihadist presence and AQ inroads into the conflict. But these young men are driven by idealism and piety, not by a desire to create an Islamic caliphate or a hatred for the West. Moreover, many of these fighters are likely to return home in the post-Assad era.

Where the Islamist components of the Syrian opposition might ultimately end up along the spectrum could determine the coming stages of the conflict. More radical or militant Sunni Islamists are most likely to see Assad's supporters, the Shiites or Alawites, as dangerous heretics, fueling their

determination to fight on or face reprisals. Nor would a prominent role for Sunni militants make Syria's Christian and other religious minorities eager to join the fight. On the other hand, more moderate or pluralistic Islamists are more likely to hold out the promise of a new government of national unity, enticing former Assad supporters to join them.

JIHAD'S NEW FRONTIER

The Syrian conflict has emerged as an attractive recruiting ground for extremist Salafi-jihadist groups, a development that has complicated Western involvement in the conflict and limited the likelihood of a peaceful solution. In February, AQ Emir Ayman Zawahiri called upon “every Muslims and every honorable and free person in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon to go to aid his brothers in Syria.”⁶⁶ This statement came just days after a U.S. official said that AQI had a hand in the two bomb attacks against Syrian intelligence facilities in Damascus, and Iraqi Deputy Interior Minister Adnan al-Assadi said that Iraqi jihadists were moving fighters and weapons into neighboring Syria.⁶⁷

Historically, AQ's extreme global jihadist agenda has had limited appeal in Syria and recent popular unrest in the Arab region has further underscored the bankruptcy of jihadist ideology in Islamic societies. However, given Syria's strategic location and the crossroads of many key geopolitical fault lines, the breakdown of the Syrian state could result in a regional conflict that would allow jihadists room to maneuver. While it is by no means inevitable that jihadists will flourish in Syria, the longer the conflict continues, the more likely it is that jihadists will be able to solidify their presence in Syria.

How the Syrian opposition groups interact with these more radical elements will determine the extent to which Syria and its environs becomes a jihadist playground. For the most part, the FSA and the majority of political opposition activists have adamantly denied a jihadist presence within their ranks. They disavow jihadist ideology and assert that there is no place for radicalism in the Syria

they look to create. That foreign fighters have faced difficulties in joining rebel units demonstrates the Syrian opposition's fear of radicals infiltrating their ranks. However, as the conflict drags on, many elements within Syria's Sunni population could be willing to align with jihadists given the constraints they face in battling the well-armed Syrian military.

Many rebel commanders have discussed increasing tension between their resistance fighters and radical jihadists. Some FSA commanders recently tried to expel a group of foreign jihadists who kidnapped a British and Dutch journalist and held them for a week. Other FSA units have competed with the jihadists for power in rebel-held towns with reports of infighting among different rebel factions. The case of Walid al-Boustani, a Fatah al-Islam member, showcases the divide between many of these radical foreign jihadist and the rebel groups and battalions associated with the Free Syrian Army. In March 2012, Al-Boustani attempted to create the "Islamic Emirate of Homs." As the leader of this self-proclaimed emirate, Boustani was responsible for kidnapping and murdering a number of Syrian citizens. Only a few weeks after its creation, a local FSA battalion held a trial for Boustani and executed him.⁶⁸ This incident is part of a larger battle between the mainstream opposition movement that espouses pluralist and democratic principles, and other more radical factions with a Salafi-jihadi agenda.

Ahrar al-Sham



AHRAR AL-SHAM

Although FSA leadership in Turkey attempts to distance itself from jihadist groups, this attitude is not necessarily shared by the fighters on the ground, some of whom have been willing to cooperate with any opponents of the regime. The Ahrar al-Sham Brigade, which operates throughout northern Syria, is an example of cooperation between Salafist rebel units and FSA units. The brigade is a loose collection of more conservative Islamist, and often Salafist, rebel units. The group's leadership espouses an Islamist ideology, although

they cooperate with the FSA and work with many secular rebel groups.⁶⁹ "They're extremely effective and secretive. They coordinate with us to attack the regime but they won't take orders from anyone. They get weapons and explosives smuggled from abroad that are much better," said a rebel in Aleppo named Anwar.⁷⁰ Overall, the group's leaders have attempted to portray a more moderate Islamist vision. Perception among opposition leadership in Syria is that Ahrar al-Sham incorporates the bulk of foreign fighters, many of whom are Salafi-jihadists.

Most troubling is the group's willingness to coordinate with the Syrian jihadist group Jabhat Nusra (JN). They are one of the few rebel units with whom JN claims to have a working relationship. Although Ahrar al-Sham has not publicly recognized this relationship, in videos posted on YouTube of Ahrar al-Sham operations there are rebels carrying JN flags.⁷¹ In early June, a number of rebel groups announced their formation and pledged allegiance to both Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Nusra.⁷² These videos demonstrate that the two groups have been popularly linked together, whether or not they are actively coordinating with one another.

Ahrar al-Sham has also gained prominence on many jihadist forums, and is one of the few FSA battalions that receives broad coverage. These forums frequently extol the operations carried out by the "virtuous Ahrar al-Sham."⁷³ The well-known Hanein forum reported that Ahrar al-Sham made an agreement with six other Salafist brigades to establish an Islamic caliphate in Syria.⁷⁴ Ahrar al-Sham leadership denied that they had been part of the agreement and issued a statement reaffirming their commitment to the Syrian national cause. The statement further outlined the group's commitment to an Islamic government, though they emphasized that such a government would ensure minority rights.⁷⁵ Ahrar al-Sham's leadership has attempted to appear moderate. However, regardless of whether or not the leadership is moderate, it is clear that the group has attracted more radical and extreme elements of the opposition and Salafi-jihadists are filling its ranks.

The Mujahideen in Syria: Foreign Salafi-Jihadists

In addition to these key figures and organizations, a small number of foreign jihadists are now in Syria. Opposition members make the linguistic distinction between themselves, the *thawar*, and these foreign elements, the *mujahideen*. These jihadists do not have organizational links to AQ, AQI, ISI or the Abdullah Azzam brigades, but have adopted a similar global jihadist ideology. As noted previously, these foreign jihadists have faced difficulties in integrating with rebel units and have been able to do so at varying degrees. Many of these jihadists have been marginalized by more mainstream rebel groups, and have attempted to form their own independent units as a result. In some cases they have even been marginalized by Syrian jihadist groups like Jabhat Nusrah. However, some FSA groups have been more willing to incorporate these jihadists, including Ahrar al-Sham.

Following the takeover of the Turkish-Syrian Bab al-Hawa border crossing, a small group of fighters carrying the ISI flag proclaimed their intent to establish an Islamic caliphate.⁷⁶ This led to rampant rumors about an increase in foreign jihadists and AQ elements in Syria. Among these rumors was the claim that these fighters were part of a Chechen Base battalion composed of jihadist fighters from Chechnya.⁷⁷ This claim was reportedly confirmed by the death of Rustam Gelayev, son of the late Chechen warlord Ruslan Gelayev, in Syria.⁷⁸ However, there is no evidence that substantiates such claims. Instead, these fighters were foreign jihadists from a range of countries that had joined the Daraa al-Thawra Brigade. In a video released



THE MUJAHIDEEN OF DARAA AL-THAWRA BRIGADE.

shortly before the proclamation was made, rebels of the Daraa al-Thawra Brigade recognized the contribution made by the *mujahideen* who have come from across the region to join their ranks. In the clip, the same fighters from the later video can be seen in the background of the clip.⁷⁹

It is likely that these “mujahideen of the Daraa al-Thawra Brigade” were also responsible for the kidnapping of two photojournalists in Bab al-Hawa. The fact that they were later “rescued by FSA soldiers” demonstrates the fractious relationship between FSA rebel units and the foreign jihadists among their ranks.⁸⁰ Rogue actions such as the kidnapping of photojournalists exemplify the type of behavior that rebel units fear. Their inability to control these foreign jihadists is the reason that they have been reluctant to integrate them. This tension demonstrates the fact that jihadists are still operating on the periphery of the opposition. While this role is likely to grow as FSA rebel groups become increasingly desperate for reinforcements and support, conflict between the two groups is also likely to increase.

Recent anecdotes suggest an emerging violent dynamic to the competition between moderate and jihadist rebel groups. In the case of the mujahideen of the Daraa al-Thawra Brigade, it was reported that clashes broke out between the secular and jihadi factions within the brigade. By early September, tensions in Bab al-Hawa led to the assassination of the mujahideen’s leader Muhammad al-Shami al-Absi.⁸¹ His death was welcomed by secular rebels who stated that they did not share al-Absi’s ideology and found his group difficult to work with.⁸² Such incidents highlight the deepening rivalries among different rebel groups and actors that must compete for resources and influence with one another.

AL-QAEDA AFFILIATES IN SYRIA

The militarization of the conflict in Syria has allowed for global jihadist elements to take root in the uprising. Although many opposition leaders are adamant that there is no global jihadist presence in Syria, new evidence of radical behavior and activities on the battlefield suggests otherwise. This is partly due to the influx of foreign jihadists now

entering Syria. These jihadists are motivated by a global jihadist ideology and seek the establishment of an Islamic caliphate encompassing all of the Levant. They join the fight against the regime within the context of a holy war against an apostate regime rather than for liberation or reform. In most cases, these are Salafi-jihadists who are part of larger Salafi movements in their home countries. It is these fighters who will pose a significant threat to Syria's stability in the wake of Assad's fall. Although their influence on Syria's opposition movement is debatable, their presence generates concern about AQ's involvement in the Syrian uprising and the ability of jihadist elements to establish a base of operations from Syria.

Al-Qaeda in Syria

"The resistance of our people in Syria despite all the pain, sacrifice and bloodshed escalates and grows," al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri announced in a video statement that surfaced on jihadi websites in early February 2012. In an eight-minute video titled "Onwards, Lions of Syria," Zawahiri called on Muslims to join the uprising against Assad's regime. At the time of the announcement, many analysts saw his words as opportunistic and an attempt to graft al-Qaeda (AQ) onto the Syrian uprising. However, a number of recent developments suggest that this message has resonated to an extent with some of the disparate elements now fighting against Assad's regime.

In early August 2012, U.S. officials announced that al-Qaeda had "advanced beyond isolated pockets of activity in Syria" and is "building a network of well-organized cells." They added that, "Once operating as disparate, disconnected units, the al-Qaida cells are now communicating and sometimes cooperating on missions, with a command-and-control structure evolving to match more sophisticated operations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan."⁸³ The officials also revealed that at least a couple of hundred AQ-linked militants were already operating in Syria, and that their ranks were growing as foreign fighters streamed into the country. Although they admitted that the number of operatives remains small compared to the larger anti-government insurgency, they

expressed concern at the ability of these operatives to insert themselves within the larger opposition movement.

The Iraqi government has also stated that it has "solid information" that AQ militants were crossing from Iraq to Syria in order to carry out attacks. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiar Zebari announced that, "We have solid information and intelligence that members of al-Qaeda's terrorist network have gone to Syria." In addition to official government statements, Iraqi forces arrested the head of Ansar al-Sunna, an Iraqi insurgent group with links to AQ, as he tried to enter the country through its border with Syria. This was reported shortly after Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified to Congress that al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was extending its reach into Syria.

Defining an area of operations that crosses the border between Iraq and Syria is a natural strategy for AQI and its affiliate the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). AQI and ISI do not respect the borders of either country, claiming that it is an artificial creation and a legacy of Western imperialism. It is likely that AQI and ISI operatives are able to use the infrastructure facilitated by the Syrian regime during the 2000s to transit between the two countries. In this way, the Syrian regime has provided the logistic capacity for these groups to move militants and materials inside Syria. Given the likelihood that AQI is capitalizing on both the instability in Syria and the infrastructure already in place, the fact that they have not announced their presence is significant. It appears that the AQI leadership has learned from many of the mistakes it made in the past, and may be attempting to employ a new strategy that includes first winning over elements of the opposition. One of the major obstacles that AQI faced in Iraq was that it was seen as an outside force that was trying to establish themselves as a ruling authority without winning over the population. In this case, AQI will likely serve as a silent partner and keep much quieter about their participation in the conflict. Such a strategy would include embedding operatives into rebel groups and battalions. This will make identifying AQ and AQI operatives extremely difficult in the long run because these operatives

are not presenting themselves as independent units.

According to estimates from an intelligence service in the region, AQ has around 200 operatives in Syria, including Iraq jihad veterans, small numbers of foreign fighters, and local recruits. The same source noted that AQI sent small arms and light weapons, as well as explosive experts to augment its operatives working in Syria. AQI and ISI support for violence in Syria is not likely to take the form of large number of fighters, who are more likely to focus their actions against the Iraqi government. Instead, they will provide operational support in the form of weapons and explosives training. As of now, the current presence of AQI is too small to have a decisive impact on the conflict and represents only a tiny portion of the regime's opponents. However, it leaves open the prospect of an expanding al-Qaeda network in Syria.

Jordanian Salafi-Jihadists

In June, Jordanian police arrested two Salafi-jihadists on their way to Syria. The security officials stated that the two Jordanians belonged to a small extremist militant organization called the Salafi Movement, adding that they fought alongside AQI in Iraq. They were reportedly carrying machine guns and other firearms to the rebels as they tried to enter Syria along the northern Jordanian border. This was the first time that Jordan publicly admitted that its own militants were looking to fight alongside the Syrian opposition. Just prior to this announcement, Tamer Smadi, a specialist on radical movements in Jordan, reported that over 30 Salafi-jihadists had tried to enter Syria. He claimed that all but seven were caught by Jordanian intelligence operatives. Among the seven that did make it into Syria was Abu Anas Sahabi, an explosives specialist. In Syria, Sahabi connected with Jabhat Nusra and has since become an important leader within the organization, with many rebels referring to the "Jordanian" who helps JN and his expertise in explosives.

Jordanian jihadists account for only a small portion of those entering Syria. The Jordanian government has severely tightened security along the Kingdom's

borders with Syria, and has targeted known jihadist cells in an effort to restrict their activities.

Abdullah Azzam Brigades



ABDULLAH AZZAM BRIGADES

On June 19, 2012 the Abdullah Azzam Brigades released a video statement naming its leader Majid bin Muhammad al-Majid and announcing its support for the Syrian revolution. In the statement, Saudi citizen al-Majid cautioned fighters against conducting attacks that "repulses people," saying that operations in major cities should be avoided. "Stay away from that which repulses people and makes them stop demonstrating and stop supporting the peaceful and the armed revolution... Avoid detonating booby-trapped vehicles, explosive belts and so forth inside the cities, even if the targets are important, because preserving the popularity of the revolution is more important and constant for the work," he explained.

This statement followed rumors of a competition between the Syrian jihadist group Jabhat Nusra and Al-Majid's Abdullah Azzam Brigades. Beginning in early May, it was reported that the AQ affiliates who had escaped from the Ain al-Hilwa refugee camp the previous month had split up in Syria, with Fatah al-Islam members joining JN and Tawfik Taha and Abu Naaj joining up with other Abdullah Azzam members. The two factions have since competed for dominance, with each espousing a different jihadist platform and strategy. According to a Saudi intelligence source, "a fierce competition is taking place in the corridors of the extremist organization, in particular because Jabhat Nusra did not follow al-Qaeda at the beginning." The timing of Al-Majid's statement suggests that it was a tactical move to counter JN's credibility and check its influence among Syrian jihadist elements. In the statement, Al-Majid is directly critical of JN's strategy, referring to the suicide bombings and IED attacks that JN has carried out, and asserts himself as the premier leadership of jihad in Syria.

The Abdullah Azzam Brigades was established by Saleh al-Qarawi in 2005 as an offshoot of AQI. Al-Qarawi fought with former AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Fallujah until he was tasked to create a new organization that would target the Levant. Since its creation, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades have demonstrated an ability to conduct attacks outside of the Levant. The organization is responsible for a number of high-profile attacks, including a failed rocket attack on a U.S. warship docked in Aqaba, Jordan; at least two instances of rocket attacks on Israel in 2009 and 2011; and an attack on a Japanese oil tanker traversing the Strait of Hormuz in 2010. Their interest is not only limited to Syria and they have important offshoots that operate in the Strait of Hormuz and the Sinai.

To date, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades have not claimed credit for any significant attacks inside Syria. They have further denied responsibility for the December 2011 suicide attack in Damascus. A member of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades inside Lebanon stated that although his organization played no role in some of the recent bombings, it had sent fighters into Syria to fight the Assad regime. Although the group has acknowledged that it is present and active in the uprising, no attacks or regime engagements can be directly attributed to the group. Thus, unlike JN, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades have not demonstrated an operational capacity.

The fact that they have a verifiable connection to important AQ and AQI leaders is significant enough to warrant concern. In addition to Al-Majid fighting alongside al-Zarqawi, Abdullah Azzam Brigade statements are released by the Al-Fajr Media Network, the distribution platform for al-Qaeda and its closely linked organizations. Participation with al-Fajr is a key indicator that the Abdullah Azzam Brigades has communication links with other core jihadist groups including AQ core leadership. In this way, they could potentially pose a significantly more dangerous threat than JN if they are able to operationalize inside Syria. However, they have not been able to do this so far.

SYRIA'S SALAFI-JIHADISTS: JABHAT NUSRA

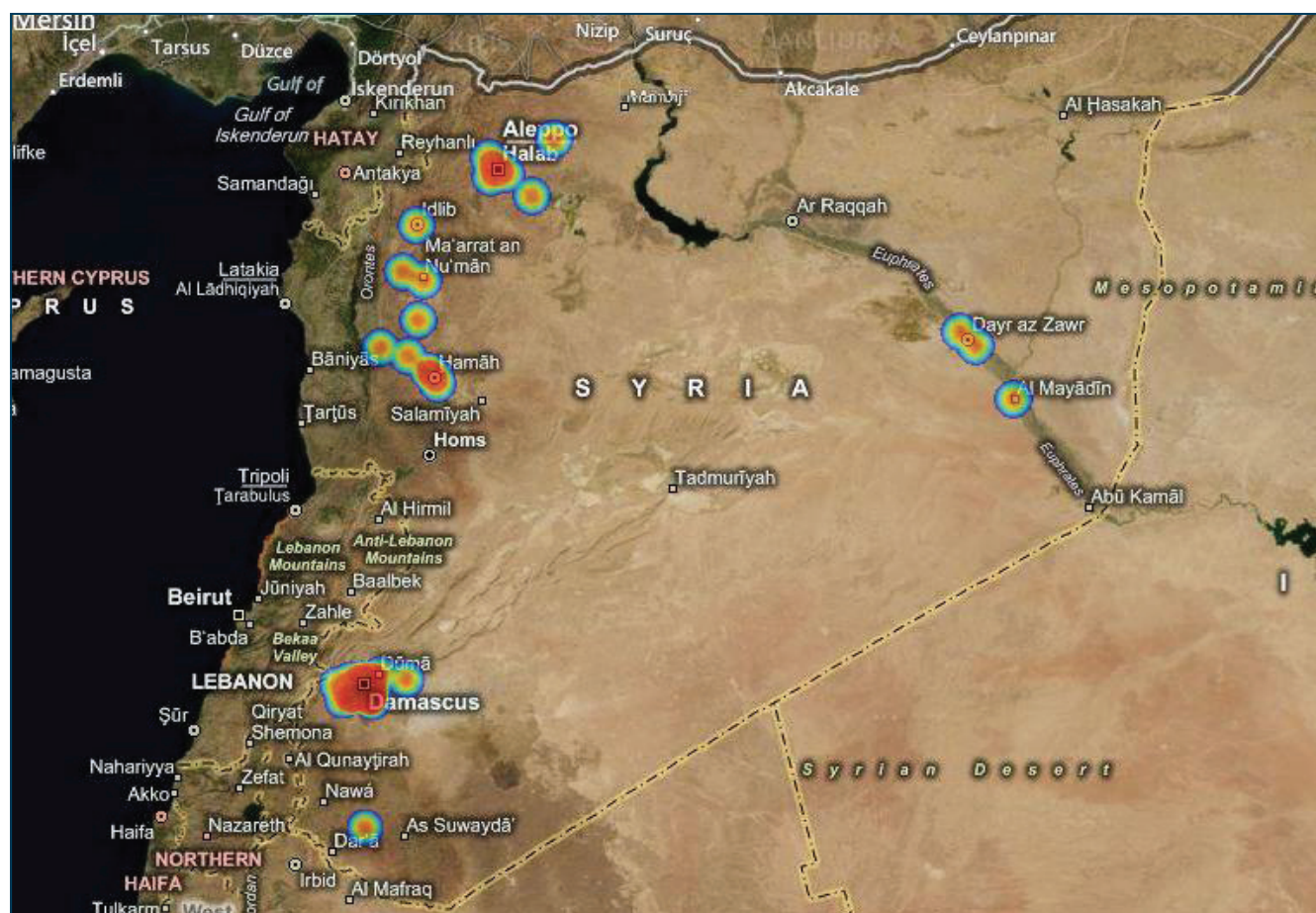


JABHAT NUSRA

On January 24, 2012, a video released on prominent jihadi forums by the previously unknown Al-Manara al-Bayda media wing claimed to be the first statement of a newly formed Syrian jihadist group called *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham Min Mujahideen al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad*, or the Support Front for the People of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Places of Jihad. In this video, the group announced that its formation was in response to growing calls for jihadists to defend the Syrian people against the regime's forces. The group's leader, "Al-Fateh" (The Conqueror) Abu Mohammed al-Golani, stated that the group was part of the Muslim uprising to "avenge the honor and the spilled blood of those who have been wronged," espousing a vision of a global Islamic caliphate and implementation of strict Sharia law. This jihadist ideology is similar to that of other known AQ affiliates. He also announced that its fighters were "back from the various jihad fronts" alluding to the fact that its members have fought in other countries, most likely referring to Iraq.⁸⁴

Initially, analysts questioned the new group's legitimacy. Following the release of the video, some forum commentators speculated that the video was forged. They argued that the tone of the message, the way the militants were dressed, and the lack of information provided was uncommon for a jihadist group's first message. Experts also noted that there were a number of irregularities in the video including attempts to hide the identity of a suicide bomber, which is highly unusual for a martyrdom video.⁸⁵ One forum member who claimed extensive knowledge of Syrian jihadist groups stated that he had not heard of the group in the underground.

Even the senior Syrian Salafi-jihadist Sheikh Abu Basir al-Tartousi doubted the authenticity of the organization.⁸⁶ These irregularities led to accusations that the government was behind the video, and that JN was a front for Syrian intelligence. Instead, these irregularities point to



MAP 2 | JABHAT AL-NUSRA ATTACKS SINCE JANUARY 2012.

the fact that JN began as a small organic jihadist group that sought to imitate AQ ideology and strategy. They sought to capitalize on AQ strength and influence by using its iconography, but lacked the in-depth knowledge that ultimately led to some discrepancies.

Yet the fact that the video was released on a well-known global jihadist forum suggested that it was a legitimate organization. The group has since gained approval from key jihadi ideologues including Sheikh Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi, and Sheikh Abu al-Zahra al-Zubaydi. It has also demonstrated a high-degree of popularity within the online jihadist community. Their support lent JN credibility and the group was quickly hailed as the AQ front in Syria. However, neither AQ nor Jabhat Nusra (JN) have mentioned one another in their propaganda, suggesting that if there is indeed a link it is deliberately being played down.

Despite initial reservations, JN has established a presence inside Syria, and it has had a notable impact both internally and externally. Since its formation, Jabhat Nusra has claimed responsibility for a string of attacks across Syria.

The timeline on the following page does not include the May 9 bombing near a military intelligence branch in Damascus that killed 55 people.⁸⁷ A video published by a group claiming to be the Palestinian branch of JN claimed responsibility, but JN's media wing released a statement denying that it was behind the video. The forged video led to more speculation that the Assad regime was manipulating the media to strengthen its claims that it is fighting foreign jihadists. This would help legitimize the regime's reign of terror and create doubt within the opposition's allies. Given the Syrian government's history of cooperating with jihadist networks, some argued that the regime was responsible for the attacks. A video uploaded to YouTube by antigovernment activists showed how some Assad loyalists may be trying to foment

January 6, Damascus - suicide attack in al-Midan neighborhood.

February 10, Aleppo - double suicide car bombing at the Syrian security forces building.

March 17, Damascus - suicide attack against a police building and the Syrian Air Force intelligence headquarters.

April 20, Hama - car bomb targeting a Syrian military unit at the Qatr al-Nada restaurant.

April 24, Damascus - bombing of the Iranian Cultural Center in al-Marjah Square.

April 27, Damascus - suicide attack in the al-Midan neighborhood.

May 5, Damascus - two IEDs planted under trucks at the Syrian military headquarters.

May 29, Deir ez-Zor - the capture and killing of 13 men who they accused of being Syrian security officials.

June 1, Idlib - bombing of government security offices.

June 27, Damascus - raid and bombing of Ikhbariya headquarters, a pro-government Syrian TV channel.

July 19, Damascus - kidnapping and murder of a Syrian television presenter Mohammed al-Saeed.

July 29, Hama - car bombing of pro-government militia base.

August 10, Hama - suicide attack in Muhraheh near the city of Hama targeting a military security detachment.

A series of IEDs planted on cars in attempted assassinations of Syrian officials that occurred between April 20 and May 5.

TIMELINE | JABHAT AL-NUSRA ATTACKS SINCE JANUARY 2012.

the idea of jihadists in the midst of opposition. In a short clip, Ahmad Mustafa, a young defector dressed in black military fatigues, says that he and others in his Republican Guard unit were given black uniforms bearing al-Qaeda insignia. Shortly after receiving the uniforms, the Syrian press released photos showing him walking alongside a U.N. monitor. “Nobody is surprised to see a photo of an international observer chatting with a member of al-Qaeda on the outskirts of Homs,” wrote the article that accompanied the photo.⁸⁸ The same picture then appeared in countless media venues as evidence of AQ presence in Syria.

In an interview with *Telegraph* correspondent Ruth Sherlock, Nawaf Fares, former Syrian ambassador to Iraq who defected to the opposition in July 2012, accused the government of being behind some of the recent bombings in Syria. “All these major explosions have been perpetrated by al-Qaeda through cooperation with the security forces,” Fares stated.⁸⁹ According to Fares, “Jihadi units” carried out the attacks on the direct orders of the Assad

regime in order to put blame on the opposition. He added that the regime had even set up some of the bombings and then cleared out its personnel minutes before the explosions occurred, directly referring to the May 9 bombing.⁹⁰ Fares gave no concrete evidence to support his accusations. However, given the regime’s history of using terrorist groups to further its own strategy, such claims are not too farfetched. Some analysts have suggested that JN is the “jihadi unit” created and now sponsored by the regime.

What is more likely is that JN is an amalgamation of individuals with similar jihadist backgrounds from groups and organizations that were at one time sponsored by the Syrian government. These individuals received training in weapons and insurgency tactics from the Syrian government and gained experience using them in Iraq and Lebanon. They also have knowledge of and connections to the Syrian intelligence and security apparatus, which has given them a level of access to the regime that the rebels do not have.

The core group of members that first came together under the leadership of Abu Mohammed al-Golani were at the time mostly Syrian jihadists. They established their primary cell in the vicinity of Homs and carried out the majority of their operations in Damascus. In late March and April, they were joined by some important Lebanese and Palestinian jihadists, including prominent members of Fatah al-Islam with links to both Syrian intelligence officials and al-Qaeda affiliates.

An activist working with the Homs Revolutionary Council confirmed the influx of foreign jihadists to JN. He stated that in late May some important Council leaders convened in order to discuss the issue of “the foreigners that had come into the area.”⁹¹ He also suggested that the Council knew about a small group of radical jihadists who were calling themselves JN and had set up a headquarters in the area. “At first, we weren’t worried about them [Jabhat Nusra]. They were a very small group and had no power or influence. But then they started getting outside help from Lebanon and were joined by jihadists from there—and these men did have power.”⁹² Another activist, who goes by the name Abu Leila, explained that, “We knew they [Jabhat Nusra] were there so we kept our distance, but we weren’t concerned. They were just a bunch of kids that had seen some bloody stuff and got carried away with the idea of Jihad but then some Fatah al-Islam members came and helped them, and then we got scared.”⁹³ Abu Leila was very clear that it was Fatah al-Islam specifically that was reinforcing JN and helping support their capabilities.

In late April, the Syrian government announced that Fatah al-Islam member Abdel Ghani Jawhar died in the Syrian town of al-Qusayr when a bomb he was preparing exploded prematurely. Other reports stated that he died in a clash with Syrian security forces in Homs. Jihadist and Palestinian security sources in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp confirmed that he had died in Syria, though it was unclear how.⁹⁴ Around the same time that Jawhar’s death was reported, the Lebanese Armed Forces announced that AQ operative Tawfiq Taha and four other members of Fatah al-Islam had escaped the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp in Lebanon and left for Syria. Palestinians Haitham Shaabi, Ziad



AHMAD MUSTAFA IN HIS AQ UNIFORM.

Abu Naaj, Mohammad Doukhi, and Lebanese Abdel Rahman Arefi were among the escapees listed.⁹⁵ It was also reported that Ziad Abu Naaj had received the order to leave the camp directly from a prominent AQ member over the internet. He was ordered to head to Tripoli in preparation to travel to Syria in order to carry out “special operations.”⁹⁶ Shortly after, a leading Fatah al-Islam authority, Osama Shihabi, called on jihadists to “join Jabhat Nusra to strengthen it and to avoid fragmenting its efforts.”⁹⁷ Around the same time as the announcement was made, it was reported that he had moved to Syria in order to train militants.⁹⁸ The fact that the number of JN attacks rapidly increased after April confirms that the group received a substantial boost in their capabilities, likely through these new capable recruits.

A rebel soldier who briefly joined JN before opting to join with the rebel Suqour al-Sham Brigade stated that, “Most of the young men I worked with were Syrian revolutionaries who joined JN because they were stronger and more effective. Yes we are mujahideen, but we didn’t think of it as al-Qaeda.”⁹⁹ He added, “There was a lot of secrecy surrounding the leadership. I left JN when I discovered that many of the leaders were not Syrian but Lebanese or Palestinians that used to work with the Syrian intelligence agencies.”¹⁰⁰ Other rebels confirmed that JN’s central leadership was heavily influenced by foreign jihadists who provided the group with the expertise and knowledge gained through their experience fighting in other jihad fronts as well as their intimacy with the Syrian intelligence apparatus. They described how JN tactics had the earmarks of the *Mukhabarat*, because in most cases

they were not suicide bombings but car bombs left in populated areas. Despite suspicions over JN's leadership, rebels noted that operations were typically carried out by young Syrian jihadists.¹⁰¹

At the same time that JN's central cell was growing through support from Lebanese and Palestinian militants, it was also growing in the east. The eastern Deir ez-Zour province is well known for being a staging camp during the 2000s for jihadists fighting in Iraq, particularly the training camps in Abu Kamal. Many insurgents took refuge in the villages and deserts of Deir ez-Zor. The logistics channel that once took fighters from Syria into Iraq is now working in the reverse, with fighters coming from Iraq into Syria.

Reports indicate that some of these fighters, particularly those associated with AQI and its offshoot the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), are joining JN. "Even though they say they carry out all these attacks in Damascus, JN is actually much stronger in the east. They have an important headquarters in Mohassen where they get help from al-Qaeda and their brothers in the Islamic Army [ISI]," said Mohammad Khalid, an activist in Aleppo who is responsible for liaising with rebel groups.¹⁰² Khalid discussed the multiple complaints about JN's growing network he had received from rebel groups in Deir ez-Zor. "Tactically, they are just better. They know what to do and they have the supplies to do it. We just can't compete so we lose men to them," he added.¹⁰³

In June 2012, JN released a statement claiming responsibility for the killing of thirteen men whose bodies were found in Deir ez-Zor. In the statement, the group announced, "God enabled our lions of the east in Deir ez-Zor to get the necks of a group of dogs." "Our lions of the east in Deir ez-Zor" confirms that there is a group in the Deir ez-Zor region that is affiliated with JN. Moreover, it appears as though the cells share a leadership and closely communicate with one another. A JN member in Idlib said that the two cells worked in coordination with one another and were attempting "to create two axes of action – an eastern and western one" that would one day be able "to cut off and surround Assad in Damascus."¹⁰⁴

While the extent to which the two cells cooperate is questionable, anecdotal evidence suggests that they at least pledge loyalty to the same group and its ideology. Abu Khuder, a fighter operating in Mohassen in the Deir ez-Zor province, said that he joined JN after becoming disillusioned with the rebel army's disorganization and inability to strike at the regime. "Al-Qaida has experience in these military activities and knows how to deal with it," he stated.¹⁰⁵ Another young jihadi in Abu Khuder's unit said that he was disappointed with bickering amongst FSA rebel groups and decided to "join the others." According to him, the village of Shahail, 50 miles west of Mohassen, has become an important JN base in Deir ez-Zor where many of its most important religious scholars reside. From this base they are able to recruit and train fighters, especially those coming from Iraq. Their unit, which fights under the battalion name "Al-Ghuraba," a name commonly used by AQ operatives, is known for its experience in bomb making.¹⁰⁶ "We help them [FSA] with IEDs and car bombs. Our main talent is in the bombing operations," Abu Khuder noted, adding that his men had experience in explosives from Iraq.¹⁰⁷

While there has been an increase in IED (improvised explosive device) attacks overall, they account for only a small portion of rebel engagements with the regime in Deir ez-Zor. Out of 105 documented attacks against regime forces only fourteen of those were IED attacks.¹⁰⁸ The nature of these attacks suggests that although JN has been able to establish a base of operations in the region, they have not been able to dominate the rebel groups operating there. Thus, they have been able to recruit a small fringe constituency, aided by



THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION, JN, AND AHRAR AL-SHAM FLAGS FLOWN TOGETHER DURING DEMONSTRATIONS.



A YOUNG BOY WAVES A JN FLAG.

jihadists entering from Iraq, but have not been able to garner greater support from the population.

It is difficult to give exact numbers on JN's membership. However, circumstantial evidence suggests that JN has been able to garner new recruits, both local and foreign, that have strengthened its capabilities. JN conducted only three operations from January through mid-April. Yet since April, the pace of its attacks has increased dramatically with a series of bombings and assassination attempts. Overall attacks increased from seven in March to over 60 in June, according to the group's statements. Moreover, beginning in July, videos began appearing on YouTube of attacks carried out across the country by fighters who said they were members of Jabhat Nusra.¹⁰⁹ These videos show an enlarged JN presence in Maarat al-Numaan and Khan Sheikoun. A rebel fighter from Maarat al-Numaan confirmed that there was a small JN unit operating in the town, although the Umma Brigade was the much more prominent and effective force there.¹¹⁰

There have also been increased reports of JN members operating in Aleppo and participating in the on-going clashes between the Syrian army and rebel forces.¹¹¹ YouTube videos show alleged JN members carrying out attacks in Aleppo and participating in clashes against Assad's forces in the city.¹¹² JN has also claimed that its fighters are part of the rebel Tawhid Brigade operating in Aleppo, and a number of important rebel successes in the city have been attributed to JN militants. Tawhid Brigade commander Abdel Qadir al-Salah acknowledged JN's presence among his forces, adding that they were all "brothers" in

the fight against the regime and welcoming more JN members to join his Brigade.¹¹³ In an interview with a Washington Post reporter, Abu Ibrahim claimed to be a JN commander and head of a 300 man strong JN unit operating in Aleppo. Although he distinguished his unit from other rebel groups battling under the banner of the FSA, he said there was no significant schism between his JN fighters and the more secular units.¹¹⁴

Much of the perception of JN's growth can be attributed to other rebel groups claiming affiliation, without maintaining actual organizational ties to JN central. JN has a strict recruitment process that is based on tough security measures in order to build a well-organized committee structure and maintain operational security. This vetting process results in relatively slow membership growth, and JN's core cells operating in Idlib and Deir ez-Zor have preferred to remain isolated and underground. JN members are known for maintaining a low profile and keeping to themselves. They rarely venture outside their outposts, and are said to prefer to "remain in the shadows."¹¹⁵ However, as JN's strength and effectiveness has grown, other groups are now calling themselves JN, despite using tactics that are remarkably different than JN's core cells.

For example, a number of rebel units in Aleppo that claim to be part of JN have eschewed secrecy. These units in Aleppo have aggressively sought public attention, even willingly talking to reporters and journalists. Unlike the masked figures in the JN videos released by Manar al-Bayda, these men are unafraid of publicly identifying their names and faces in YouTube videos. This suggests that the group is only loosely affiliated with JN and is not directly linked to the group's core leadership or its primary cells. It is more likely that the group is using the Jabhat Nusra name and claiming affiliation to capitalize on JN's known effectiveness and strength.

The Aleppo JN unit's willingness to integrate with the FSA is a further exception that demonstrates its loose affiliation with the JN core. Typically, JN works independently of other Syrian rebel groups. This is likely a result of internal disagreement among jihadists about how to approach the ideologically

compromised FSA. This disagreement focuses on the concept of *al-rya*, or the banner. *Al-rya* is the theological requirement that mujahideen must follow a single legitimate leadership that is fully committed to Islamic rule in order for their jihad to be genuine. There is widespread concern among jihadists about the FSA's nationalist approach and their willingness to collaborate with international actors. Since the FSA does not fight under the banner of Sharia, JN leadership prefers to work independently of the rebel coalition. Important jihadist ideologues urge "responsible mujahideen" to join JN because, unlike the FSA, JN fulfills the demand for *al-rya*.¹¹⁶

JN does participate in joint operations when the situation necessitates it, and has cooperated with other rebel groups. In an official statement, JN claimed that its fighters participated in a joint operation with the Al-Sahaba Battalion in a raid on a police station in Jdeidet Artouz, near Damascus. However, although JN and other jihadists have demonstrated a willingness to work with the FSA, the ideological divide between them has led to tension and conflict with local rebel groups. Numerous reports have documented in-fighting between FSA battalions and jihadist groups including JN.¹¹⁷ In extreme cases, this has led to violent clashes between the two sides and the FSA has carried out operations against JN.¹¹⁸

Whether or not JN is actively coordinating and cooperating with the FSA, more and more battalions are associating themselves with JN.¹¹⁹ This is a troubling sign of how the Syrian conflict may play out. Despite JN's radical jihadist ideology, the organization has gained a level of popular support. Abu Feras, the spokesman for the Aleppo Revolutionary Council, said that JN fighters are regarded "as heroes" because they "fight without fear or hesitation."¹²⁰ In June in the town of Binnish, just north of Idlib city, JN was extolled during a mass demonstration. Hundreds of the town's residents cheer on JN and commemorate its fighters in a YouTube video posted after the town was liberated from regime forces.¹²¹ Similar videos appeared of residents cheering on JN and waving the JN flag during a street parade in the Aleppo neighborhood of Salah al-Din.¹²² Many activists

from Revolutionary Councils in Homs and Idlib commented on JN's growing popularity.¹²³ These activists say that JN fighters are becoming well known for their bravery and ability to defend the Syrian people. One activist from the Homs Revolutionary Council said that their popularity stems from the fact that most of their fighters are Syrian, unlike AQI whose ranks were mostly filled by foreign fighters. He stated that although many believed JN was getting help from foreigner jihadists and many of its leaders were not Syrian, its ranks were mostly Syrian which was a very important factor in JN's increasing popularity.¹²⁴

However, their growing popularity is not reflective of popular support for their radical ideology. Many Syrians still fear the organization's motives and are afraid of its growing influence, even while extolling its effectiveness on the battlefield. Some rebel leaders believe their popularity is indicative of increasing desperation. Their growing popularity also reflects general disillusionment with the lack of international support. Rebel commander Abu Ammar recently warned the West about the need for greater support. "We don't want al-Qaeda here, but if nobody else helps us, we will make an alliance with them," he threatened.¹²⁵ Given JN's perceived effectiveness and greater access to resources, it is the type of organization that these rebel leaders will turn to in order to increase their own capabilities.

Another reason for the group's increasing popularity is a result of shifting tactics. Following a number of spectacular attacks in early 2012 in which a number of civilians were killed, JN has been more careful of civilian casualties. A recent video statement released by Manara al-Bayda highlights a number of planned operations that were not carried out due to the presence of civilians in the vicinity.¹²⁶ They are also very clear that they limit operations to military targets, and they have highlighted their participation in direct-fire engagements. Unlike AQI, Jabhat Nusra demonstrates a keen sensitivity to public perception. Whether or not this represents a lesson learned from Iraq, Jabhat Nusra has been careful not to alienate the larger population, which has allowed it to garner popular support.

Some analysts have cited the increase of attacks as evidence that JN is rapidly increasing its members and could become the most effective fighting force in Syria.¹²⁷ Yet, while the increase in attacks may seem impressive, it remains only a very small portion of the violence in Syria. Since December 2011, there have been at least 35 car bombings and ten confirmed suicide bombings, only four of which have been claimed by JN.¹²⁸ These numbers suggest that JN's operational capacity is still limited. However, popular perception holds that JN is playing a growing role in the front lines of the war for Syria's cities. While this is not entirely true, it is clear that the group is cementing a presence on the ground and expanding its reach.

Even if JN may be recruiting individuals at a higher rate, its vision for Syria remains far outside the mainstream. Ultimately, JN's political impact is much more significant than its operational capability. JN's military influence is unlikely to shift the balance of power between the Syrian regime and the opposition.

However, the specter of groups like JN in Syria will help reinforce Assad's narrative, bolster his ability to maintain loyalty from key sections of the population, and deter the U.S. and the West from greater action in Syria. They will also complicate matters for the opposition since its legitimate rebel groups will not be able to control JN's actions. Salem Abu Yassir, a commander of the FSA brigade in Shahail, stated, "They [Jabhat Nusra] are stealing the revolution from us and they are working for the day that comes after."¹²⁹

CONCLUSION

The presence of jihadist elements in Syria is a particularly worrisome development. It proves that the Syrian conflict is no longer a clear-cut situation where a pro-democracy movement is facing down a dictatorship. This jihadist presence has diminished the moral high ground of the opposition, and it has fueled doubts among its western supporters who fear that the revolution has been hijacked by more radical elements.

Although on the rise, this jihadist presence remains small. Al-Qaeda's direct involvement in Syria has been exaggerated in the media. While it is likely that AQI has activated the same networks revealed in the Sinjar Records to funnel fighters into Syria, AQI is unlikely to send them in large numbers. Instead, it is more probable that they will provide operational support, including trainers and bomb makers, while capitalizing on the instability in Syria and expanding their influence in the region.

But unlike AQI, Syrian jihadist groups like JN have demonstrated sensitivity to popular perception, which has earned them popular support. In 2006 AQI's alienation of the Iraqi population led to the "Anbar Awakening" that significantly undercut their influence in that country. In Syria, by contrast, bomb attacks targeting civilians, executions and sectarian killings have been relatively minimal. Even the most extreme Salafi-jihadist groups are showing restraint. Thus, while radicalization has occurred, it is limited by an understanding that certain types of violence only serve the regime and alienate potential supporters.

The emergence of popular Salafi-jihadist groups such as Jabhat Nusra is far more dangerous to the long-term stability of the Syrian state than a few al-Qaeda operatives working on the fringes of the conflict because it represents a metamorphosis of AQ ideology into a domestic platform that is able to achieve popular resonance.

Jabhat Nusra is well-poised to present a grave challenge to the stability of the Syrian state in the wake of Assad's fall. JN leadership ties to al-Qaeda and its affiliates have increased the effectiveness of the group and significantly enhanced their operational capacity. Partnerships with like-minded rebel groups have also helped JN expand its range and consolidate its influence. JN's growing geographical footprint is concerning because it is indicative of a level of popular support that more radical jihadist groups have had difficulty achieving in the past.

The jihadist presence in Syria clearly bolsters the regime politically and keeps the opposition divided. Russian and Iranian leadership has consistently pointed to the presence of radical Islamists as a critical rationale for their support of the Assad regime. Internally, Assad has used the threat of jihadists within the opposition to galvanize support for the regime among the Alawite and Christian communities and to discourage middle and upper class Sunnis from joining the opposition. Already, some of Syria's internal

dynamics have shifted in favor of the regime as minority groups increasingly view the conflict as an existential crisis and fear the radicalization of the opposition.

The jihadist presence also alienates potential opposition supporters on the international stage and raises the cost of direct intervention. It makes international efforts to aid legitimate opposition groups more difficult, and it hinders the work of humanitarian groups such as the International Red Cross and other human rights organizations.

Perhaps most significantly, it serves as the major obstacle to providing support to the opposition, and in particular more sophisticated weapons. One of the main reasons cited by the U.S. Government for limiting support to the Syrian opposition is that it does not want arms flowing to jihadists. The irony is that the more conservative Islamist and Salafi groups are receiving most of the foreign funding flowing into Syria. Many Syrians blame the lack of Western support for driving the rebellion into the arms of extremists. In this way, jihadists are benefiting from increasing disenchantment with the international community and increasing support pouring in from the Gulf. The confluence of jihadist interest with that of the Gulf States raises the possibility that these states may leverage jihadists for their own strategic purposes, while simultaneously limiting Western influence.

The U.S. has traditionally been reluctant to work with Islamist groups and has discouraged the rise of Islamists to positions of national power. However, political Islam is not incompatible with democratic governance within a state-based system. The Arab Spring has shown that suppressing Islamist political parties will no longer be tenable as the U.S. has been forced to build relationships with Islamist governments in Egypt and Tunisia. U.S. policymakers must understand the complexity of religious identity within the Arab world and distinguish between moderate and extremist Islamist ideologies because Islamists will play an important role in any future Syrian government.

The jihadist presence should not discredit the purpose of the Syrian uprising, which began as a popular struggle against autocracy. It should also not be the determining factor in whether or not the U.S. provides greater support to the opposition. U.S. allies are already providing material support to the Syrian opposition, but competing

sources of funding threaten Syria's future stability by enhancing the influence of more radical elements. In order to counter this effect, the U.S. should seek to channel this support in a way that bolsters responsible groups and players while ensuring that Salafi-jihadist organizations such as Jabhat Nusra are unable to hijack the opposition movement. Groups like Jabhat Nusra will pose the largest challenge to the future stability of Syria, and they threaten to undermine the legitimate goals of the opposition. If the U.S. hopes to counter this threat and stem the growing popularity of more radical groups, it must clearly identify secular and moderate Islamist opposition groups and encourage the international community to focus resources in support of those groups alone. Such focused support would increase the influence of moderate opposition groups and undercut the appeal of Salafism in Syria.

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¹²² “Heroes of Jabhat Nusra and the Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo,” YouTube, August 13, 2012.

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