

## Deciphering the Jihadist Presence in Syria: An Analysis of Martyrdom Notices

By Aaron Y. Zelin

WHEN THE SYRIAN uprising began in March 2011, the presence of jihadists in the protests was minimal at best. As the rebellion escalated, jihadists began to take advantage of the new landscape. Fighters associated with al-Qa`ida's worldview quietly entered the fight in the fall of 2011. These Salafi-jihadi fighters officially announced themselves in late January 2012 under the banner of Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front) and became one of the key fighting forces against the Bashar al-Assad regime by the fall of 2012.<sup>1</sup>

Since the Syrian protest movement turned into an armed insurrection in the summer of 2011, the jihad in Syria has become the *du jour* locale for fighters who want to topple the "apostate" al-Assad regime for a variety of strategic, geographic, and religious reasons. Similar to the Iraqi jihad at its zenith, users on al-Qa`ida's official and unofficial web forums began to post unofficial yet authentic martyrdom notices for individuals—both Syrian and foreign—who they perceived to have fought on behalf of the jihadist cause.<sup>2</sup>

This article looks quantitatively and qualitatively at these notices.<sup>3</sup> The data and biographical information collected is based on threads from jihadist web forums<sup>4</sup> dating from the

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1 For more background, see Brian Fishman, "The Evidence of Jihadist Activity in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 5:5 (2012); Aaron Y. Zelin, "Jihadists in Syria Can be Found on the Internet," *al-Monitor*, October 18, 2012.

2 Although it is impossible to prove the authenticity of all of the martyrdom notices, the forums provide images and details on the deceased fighters, and it is unlikely that this information would be fabricated for so many individuals. Furthermore, the notices can be cross-referenced with videos posted on YouTube or on other Syrian opposition sites. In some cases, relatives of foreign fighters conducted honorary funerals even if they were buried in Syria.

3 There were limitations in collecting this dataset since some notices provided far richer information than others.

4 The data was drawn from al-Fida' al-Islamiya,

start of the uprising through January 31, 2013. It is likely that some notices have been missed, but it is still useful to piece together each individual's identity, from where they are from, with whom they fought, and where they died.

It does not, however, include fighters mentioned in Jabhat al-Nusra's official statements or videos. Therefore, while the data is useful in providing clarity on the role of foreign fighters in Syria, it still suffers from many limitations and should be considered anecdotal.

**Quantitative Data: Basic Metrics**

There were discrepancies in the amount of data provided in each unofficial martyrdom notice. The quantitative data mainly focuses on city of origin, country of origin, city martyred in, and group joined. There are two levels of data compiled for these four metrics: overall, and in the past four months. Organizing the data by time period helps situate the current trajectories in the conflict.

In total, there are currently 130 individuals in the author's dataset, and 85 of the 130 have been identified in the past four months. The first recorded unofficial martyrdom notice was posted in February 2012, but this individual, the Kuwaiti Hussam al-Mutayri, actually died on August 29, 2011, fighting with the Free Syrian Army in Damascus.<sup>5</sup> Every individual in the dataset has a record of which country they were from. More than half (70 out of 130) mentioned the group with which the individual fought, while 76 of 130 locations of death were provided. Additionally, the city of origin of the martyrs was detailed 45 out of 130 times. The steep increase in individuals being reported as martyrs on the forums in the past four months, as seen in Table 1, provides circumstantial evidence that more foreign jihadists have joined the battlefield recently.<sup>6</sup>

Shumukh al-Islam, Ansar al-Mujahidin, and the al-Jihad al-`Alami forums, among other online global jihadist sources.

5 "Awal Shuhada' Jazirat al-`Arab fi Suriyya (Hussam al-Mutayri)," Shumukh al-Islam, February 17, 2012.

6 An alternative conclusion is that the rise in martyrdom notices is simply because more individuals are posting these statements than in the past. That said, because of

Country	# Overall	# in Past Four Months
Syria	45	30
Libya	14	10
Saudi Arabia	14	10
Egypt	13	8
Jordan	12	9
Tunisia	8	6
Palestine	6	5
Lebanon	6	3
Australia	2	1
Chechnya	2	1
Kuwait	2	0
UAE	1	1
Kosovo	1	1
Azerbaijan	1	0
France	1	0
Iraq	1	0
Spain	1	0

Table 1. Martyrdom notices by country of origin.

Table 1 highlights jihadist forum martyrdom notices from individuals' country of origin. Predictably, it shows Syrians as having the most records.<sup>7</sup> It also tentatively illustrates that similar to the Sinjar records captured by U.S. forces in Iraq, Libyans and Saudis have played important roles in the fight against the al-Assad regime.<sup>8</sup> Due to the proximity and known links between al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) and Jabhat al-Nusra, it is somewhat surprising that the number of Iraqis is so low. It is possible that Iraqis might be in more senior positions or facilitating activities along the border and therefore not on the front lines, but that is only speculation.

The data in Table 2, which shows the jihadist martyrdom notices for the city where the individual died fighting, confirms broader assumptions about in what cities jihadists are engaged. Large portions of cities in Table 2 are located in the northern and eastern regions of Syria where many of the Salafi-jihadi groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra or Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham are based.<sup>9</sup> It

the growth in the strength of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra on the ground as well as backing by global jihadist ideologues, it is likely that there are more jihadists fighting today.

7 If one were to take into account official Jabhat al-Nusra releases, the number would be even higher.

8 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa`ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

9 Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra: A Strategic Briefing," Quilliam Foundation, January 8, 2013; "Kurd-Jihadist Clashes in North Syria," Agence

also demonstrates the growing role some jihadists have played in recent battles with the regime, such as the takeover of the Taftanaz airbase.<sup>10</sup>

City	# Overall	# in Past Four Months
Aleppo	16	8
Idlib	9	5
Deir al-Zour	7	4
Dar`a	6	4
Taftanaz	5	5
Salqin	4	4
Damascus	3	1
al-Suwayda	2	2
Eastern Region	2	2
Saraqib	2	2
Zayzun	2	2
Homs	2	1
Salah al-Din	2	0
al-Qastal	1	1
Hama	1	1
Mo`adamiah	1	1
Sidon	1	1
Talkalakh	1	1
Ma`arrat al-Nu`man	1	1
Binsh	1	1
Anadan	1	0
Ariha	1	0
A`zaz	1	0
Bosra	1	0
Bab al-Hawa	1	0
Al-Sayyidah Zaynab	1	0

Table 2. Martyrdom notices by city of death.

Table 3 confirms what is likely uncontroversial: the majority of unofficial martyrdom notices belong to individuals affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra. Furthermore, it highlights the rapid increase in fighters who have joined its cause in recent months.<sup>11</sup> Table 3 also shows that jihadists in individual capacities have not recently joined and died while fighting with brigades attached to the Free Syrian Army. This could suggest that the recruiting networks for Jabhat al-Nusra within and outside of Syria have built greater capabilities. It could also be evidence that Jabhat al-Nusra has established itself to such an extent that foreign fighters refuse to fight with any other group.

France-Presse, January 18, 2013; Martin Chulov, "Syria Crisis: Al-Qaida Fighters Revealing Their True Colours, Rebels Say," *Guardian*, January 17, 2013; "Eastern Syrian Town Lives Under al Qaeda Rules," Reuters, January 30, 2013.

10 Andrew J. Tabler, Jeffrey White, and Aaron Y. Zelin, "Fallout from the Fall of Taftanaz," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 14, 2013.

11 For more details, see footnote 6.

Group	# Overall	# in Past Four Months
Jabhat al-Nusra	37	33
Free Syrian Army	8	0
Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham	6	4
Kata'ib al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad	2	2
Katibat al-Muhajirin	2	2
Liwa' al-Tawhid	2	1
Liwa' al-Ummah	2	1
Suqur al-Sham	1	1
al-Tali`ah al-Islamiyyah	1	1
Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyyah	1	1
Kata'ib at-Tawhid	1	1
Katibat al-Bara' bin Malik	1	1
Liwa' al-Furqan	1	1
Suqur Fatah al-Islam	1	1
Revolutionary Military Council in Hama	1	1
Katibat Muhammad	1	0
Liwa' `Amru bin al-`As	1	0
Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin Fi al-Sham	1	0

Table 3. Martyrdom notices by group affiliation.

There is also data for martyrdom notices by city of origin, but it is of a limited scope.<sup>12</sup> That said, similar to the Sinjar records, some cities such as Zarqa in Jordan and Derna in Libya were responsible for the most recruits. This could anecdotally suggest that some of the older facilitation networks during the time of the Iraq war are still operational or were reactivated in the past year. More information is needed to reach a definitive conclusion.<sup>13</sup>

12 The full list of individuals martyred by city of origin is as follows: Aleppo, Syria: 5; Zarqa, Jordan: 3; Derna, Libya: 3; Tripoli, Lebanon: 3; al-Ahsa, Saudi Arabia: 2; Deir al-Zour, Syria: 2; Benghazi, Libya: 2; Tunis, Tunisia: 2; Damascus, Syria: 2; Gaza, Palestine: 2; Alexandria, Egypt: 1; Ariana, Tunisia: 1; Ayn Shams, Egypt: 1; Binsh, Syria: 1; Dhiban, Syria: 1; Ha'il, Saudi Arabia: 1; Irbid, Jordan: 1; Ma'an, Jordan: 1; Melbourne, Australia: 1; Pristina, Kosovo: 1; Mahdia, Tunisia: 1; Arar, Saudi Arabia: 1; Ceuta, Spain: 1; Fayyum, Egypt: 1; Homs, Syria: 1; Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: 1; Damietta, Egypt: 1; Kufr al-Shaykh, Egypt: 1; Upper Egypt, Egypt: 1. The number of individuals martyred in the past four months by city of origin is as follows: Aleppo, Syria: 1; Zarqa, Jordan: 3; Derna, Libya: 2; Tripoli, Lebanon: 2; al-Ahsa, Saudi Arabia: 2; Deir al-Zour, Syria: 2; Benghazi, Libya: 1; Tunis, Tunisia: 1; Damascus, Syria: 1; Gaza, Palestine: 1; Alexandria, Egypt: 1; Ariana, Tunisia: 1; Ayn Shams, Egypt: 1; Binsh, Syria: 1; Dhiban, Syria: 1; Ha'il, Saudi Arabia: 1; Irbid, Jordan: 1; Ma'an, Jordan: 1; Melbourne, Australia: 1; Pristina, Kosovo: 1; Mahdia, Tunisia: 1; Arar, Saudi Arabia: 0; Ceuta, Spain: 0; Fayyum, Egypt: 0; Homs, Syria: 0; Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: 0; Damietta, Egypt: 0; Kufr al-Shaykh, Egypt: 0; Upper Egypt, Egypt: 0.

13 Ibid.

The records yielded a number of other details. Of the 130 individuals in the dataset, 10 noted that they previously spent time in prison. A different grouping of 14 showed that they had experience fighting in other conflicts, three of which stated they had fought in two prior jihads. Seven of the 14 individuals fought during the Libyan uprising against the Mu`ammar Qadhafi regime, three during the Iraq war, two in Yemen, two against Israel, and one each in Afghanistan, the Sinai, Chechnya, and Kosovo. This suggests that the fight in Libya provided a starting point for Libyans, Egyptians, and Palestinians to fight in Syria. This is not surprising when taking into account that there are known training camps in Libya that provide skills to fighters before they depart for jihad in Syria.<sup>14</sup>

**Qualitative Data: Martyrs' Stories**

There were two themes among the martyrs' biographies where details on the individual's life were provided: involvement with jihadist activism online, and those who became commanders or religious officials in different rebel groups. Additionally, there were other distinctive stories from the martyrs.

*Online Jihadists*

Over the years, self-described "jihadists" have moved from non-violent online activism to play a direct role in fighting on behalf of al-Qa`ida-affiliated Salafi-jihadi groups. The Syrian war is no different. Seven of the biographies in the dataset included details on the individual's online activism.

For example, Muhammad Abu Yasin, a Syrian from Idlib who died in late June 2012, helped with the production and dissemination of online magazines. He went by the names of `Awasif al-Qa`ida and Jundi Dawlat al-Islam.<sup>15</sup>

14 "Libya's Terrorist Training Camps," CNN, January 19, 2013; Aaron Y. Zelin, "Jihadism's Foothold in Libya," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 12, 2012.

15 "Al-Shahid bi-Idhin Allah Muhammad Abu Yasin Jundi al-Dawla Ahad A`dha' al-Muntada," Shumukh al-Islam, July 20, 2012.

Similarly, Muhammad al-Shajrawi, a Syrian who died in mid-July 2012, and Muhib Ru'yat al-Rahman (whose real name is Jamal al-Yafi), a Lebanese foreign fighter from Tripoli who died in December 2012, were both members and contributors to al-Qa`ida's forums al-Fida' al-Islamiya and Shumukh al-Islam. Al-Yafi was prolific, posting 26,761 times on Shumukh alone.<sup>16</sup>

*Commanders and Religious Officials*

In addition to individuals joining the fight who previously had online careers, some individuals had risen to levels of power either militarily or religiously within rebel groups. For example, Abu `Abad (also known as Abu Mujahid), a Syrian from Aleppo who was affiliated with Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, a Salafi-jihadi fighting force, was a supervisor for the Shari`a court established in Aleppo.<sup>17</sup> He died in mid-September 2012.<sup>18</sup> Labib Sulayman (also known as Abu Hamza), another Syrian

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member of Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, who died in mid-October 2012, was according to a Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham official one of the first defectors from the Syrian military from Hama.<sup>19</sup> He previously had been in the al-Assad regime's military academy.<sup>20</sup> He became a commander for a Kata'ib

16 "Sur `Ars al-Shahid bi-Idhin Allah Ikhwaum -- Muhib bin Ladin ... al-Nasir Tawala -- mata Sanlahiq bi-l-Qafilah," Shumukh al-Islam, July 20, 2012; "Li-l-Tawdhiih -- Istishhad al-Shaykh -- Muhib Ru'yat al-Rahman," Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum, December 18, 2012.

17 "Istishhad al-Shaykh al-Zahid al-Mujahid wa al-Mulaqab bi-Abu `Abid al-Mushrif `ala al-Mahkamah al-Shar`iyah fi Halab," Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum, September 18, 2012.

18 Ibid.

19 "Istishhad al-Qa'id al-`Askari li-Katibat Salah ad-Din -- Abu Hamzah -- Kata'ib Ahrar ash-Sham," Shumukh al-Islam, October 11, 2012.

20 Ibid.

Ahrar al-Sham's sub-unit, Katibat Salah al-Din.<sup>21</sup>

There are also individuals who had prior religious training, such as the Syrian from Deir al-Zour, Shaykh Isma`il Muhammad al-`Alush (also known as Abu Ayman), who was affiliated with Liwa' al-Furqan and died in late December 2012, as well as the Jordanian Riyad Hadayb (also known as Abu `Umar al-Faruq), who was a member of Jabhat al-Nusra. Al-`Alush purportedly had a master's degree in Shari`a, while Hadayb was an imam before he went to Syria.<sup>22</sup> Hadayb became a mufti for Jabhat al-Nusra before his death on January 23, 2013.<sup>23</sup>

These examples show that jihadists, both Syrian and foreign, are becoming part of the budding civilian societal structure related to the establishment of Shari`a courts in Syria. These courts have helped provide a small semblance of relative law and order in some pockets of the country that have been liberated or partially controlled by rebel forces.

#### Unique Backgrounds

Others in the dataset have stories that are not threaded together by any particular theme. One individual, Ahmad Raf`at (also known as Abu Bara'), an Egyptian from Kufr al-Shaykh who died fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra, had previously been imprisoned in Egypt.<sup>24</sup> He was released after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, and he swiftly went across the border to join the fight in Libya against the regime until Qadhafi's death.<sup>25</sup> Raf`at then traveled to Syria where he died in early July 2012.<sup>26</sup>

There were also cases when Syrians who were outside of the country returned to fight. Hussam al-Din al-Armanazi (also known as Abu `Umar Hussam al-Din

al-Halabi), originally from Aleppo, had been studying medicine in Germany at the outbreak of the uprising.<sup>27</sup> Al-Armanazi made it back to Saadallah al-Jabri Square in Aleppo for the protests on March 15, 2011, and was arrested the next day.<sup>28</sup> He spent two months in prison, and after his release he returned to Germany and helped with online activities for local committees in Aleppo.<sup>29</sup> He later returned to Syria to fight in Idlib and Aleppo, and he died in late July 2012.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, the 15-year-old `Umar Bakirati (also known as Abu Hamza al-Faruq), from Qudsaya, fled Syria to Turkey with his family.<sup>31</sup> He returned and became a sniper for Jabhat al-Nusra, allegedly killing 13 pro-government *shabiha* before he died in Hama in late October 2012.<sup>32</sup> Both stories illustrate the duty felt by Syrians in the face of the al-Assad regime's crackdown.

There are also those who had decades of experience in the overall jihadist movement. For instance, `Abd al-`Aziz al-Jughayman, a Saudi from al-Ahsa and former professor at King Faisal University, had been involved with some of the major fields of jihad dating back to the 1980s. According to the forums, al-Jughayman fought in Afghanistan on two different tours, as well as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kashmir, and Iraq. The al-Assad regime, however, apprehended and then imprisoned him for three years in the middle of the last decade. He died fighting against that same regime in late November 2012.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, there were individuals who followed in the footsteps of family members who had previous experiences fighting jihad. For instance, Muhammad Yasin Jarad, a Jordanian from Zarqa who died fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra in al-Suwayda in mid-January 2013,

was cousins with Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of AQL.<sup>34</sup> Even closer-linked, Jarad's father Yasin was purportedly behind the Najaf operation that killed Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, one of Iraq's most prominent Shi`a Muslim leaders, in 2003.<sup>35</sup> This highlights the familial connections that have inspired others to take up the cause as well.

#### Conclusion

With the Syrian war continuing into the spring with no end in sight, it is likely that more unofficial martyrdom stories from the jihadist forums will continue to trickle out about fighters who died waging war against the al-Assad regime. The trend of affiliation points to Syrians and foreigners who have a worldview closely aligned with al-Qa`ida and who join the Salafi-jihadi rebel group Jabhat al-Nusra.

Moreover, foreigners joining the fight will likely continue to come from Libya, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Tunisia based on current trends, proximity, and capable facilitation networks. As more data becomes available, an even clearer picture will emerge to better understand who is fighting in the conflict as part of the jihadist faction within the broader rebel movement.

*Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He also maintains the website Jihadology.net, which is a primary source archive for global jihadist materials.*

21 Ibid.

22 "Istishhadal-Shaykh Isma`il Muhammad al-`Alush," Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum, December 28, 2012; "Abu `Umar al-Faruq al-Mufti al-Shar`i li-Jabhat al-Nusra Tabat Hayan wa maytan," Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum, January 23, 2013.

23 Ibid.

24 "Bushra Istishhadal-Akh Ahmad Rif`at `ala Ardh Suriyya fi Muwajahat al-Taghut al-Nusayri," al-Jihad al-`Alami, July 11, 2012.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 "Al-Shahid bi-Idhin Allah Hussam al-Din min Halab Taraka al-Tib fi Almaniyya wa-nal al-Shahada fi al-Sham-Sura," al-Sanam Islamic Network, July 31, 2012.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 "Al-Shahid Abu Hamzah al-Faruq ma` Inshudah la tas'aluni `an Hayyati," Shabakat Ansar al-Sham, October 31, 2012.

32 Ibid.

33 "Sur # Istishhad al-Batal `Abd al-`Aziz," Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum, November 24, 2012.

34 "Istishhad Suhur Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi fi Midinah al-Suwayda' Janub Suriyya wa-l-Urdun Tarfadh Isdar Shadhad Himam al-Bilawi," Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum, January 18, 2013.

35 Ibid.