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## Terrorist Groups in Syria

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Chairman Poe and Ranking Member Sherman, thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade on “Terrorist Groups in Syria.” The committee’s hearings investigate key challenges to U.S. national security, which sadly now come to include the metastasizing Syria crisis.

As stated by multiple officials since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, the United States remains deeply concerned with the deteriorating humanitarian situation inside of Syria that has been a direct result of the efforts of President Bashar al-Assad to shoot his way out of the country’s largest-ever uprising, which has set off a grinding civil war. I have been asked to focus my testimony on U.S. national security interests in the region affected by the Syria conflict, what it means for Syria’s neighbors, and regional implications.

Historically, Syria’s primary importance to the United States is based on its role as perhaps the keystone in the post-Ottoman Middle East state architecture. Many, if not most of you, remember the 15-year Lebanon War, where civil strife spawned civil war, terrorism, and the destruction of the U.S. Embassy and Marine Barracks in Beirut, whose 241 killed marked the largest single day death toll for the Marine Corps since the battle of Iwo Jima. The Lebanese War was horrible, but strategically and metaphorically, Lebanon was just the small row house on the end of block of states carved out of the Ottoman Empire by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. It was hard for the fighting and sectarianism to spread, most notably because the forces of the two neighboring row houses – Israel and a demographically different and more stable Syria under Bashar al-Assad’s father, Hafez – intervened to stop and contain the sectarian nature of the conflict.

Syria, in comparison, is the big row house in the middle of the block. And while the United States does not have historic interests in Syria, and spent many years on opposite sides of the Cold War and the War on Terrorism, almost all of Syria’s neighbors are strategic U.S. allies: Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon, which is not allied with the United States but where Washington has considerable interests and challenges. What that effectively means is that what happens in Syria is not going to stay there, as it’s difficult to contain. What happened in Lebanon is also occurring in Syria much faster and on different levels. Regional sectarian rivalries are competing in Syria’s bloody fight, with the vanguard of forces coming from a laundry list of U.S.- designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Today, Hezbollah, IRGC-Quds Force, and other Iranian-backed Shia militias fight alongside the Assad regime in the west, Salafists and Jihadists, some of whom are Al-Qaeda affiliates, fight alongside (and often against) the Syrian Sunni-dominated opposition. In Kurdish areas, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), an organization closely affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), is now dominant. In a policy sense, the

Syrian Arab Republic, which was a founding member of the 1979 list of State Sponsors of Terrorism, has devolved into three Syrias in which U.S.-designated terrorist groups are not only present, but ascendant.

As a result, U.S. national security interests affected by the Syria conflict are growing in number. They include, but are not limited to:

1. **Stability of key U.S. Middle East allies.** Thus far, Syrian refugees and cross border fighting have been the primary security threats to allies such as Israel, Jordan, Turkey as well as to Lebanon. With up to half the Syrian population now on the move, up to five million in neighboring countries as unofficial and official refugees, and with no end in sight to the Syria conflict, areas where Syrians take shelter in neighboring countries increasingly become breeding grounds for terrorist groups that oppose not only their host countries, but the United States as well.
2. **Counterterrorism.** Both sides in the Syria conflict have moved to the extremes over the last year, with U.S.-designated terrorist organizations making up sizeable forces of those under arms. The United States and its allies are now facing a “convergence of threats” in Syria, with direct Iranian influence via terrorist groups at an all-time high in Syria and the Levant as a whole, and al Qaeda affiliates also spreading among the opposition. While the Assad regime has recently been able to retake a number of lost areas, it is unclear if and how the regime and allied groups can hold these areas. It seems likely that Syria will devolve into a number of “ungoverned spaces” from which U.S.-designated terrorist groups could launch operations not only in Syria, but across the globe.
3. **Energy security.** The nature of the Syrian conflict is increasingly sectarian, fuelled by each sides’ regional sponsors (roughly, Shia-associated forces backed by Iran and Sunni opposition forces backed by Sunni states and societies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and others). Should this fight spread from Syria to neighboring countries, including Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon, U.S. energy and military interests would be increasingly affected in detrimental ways. While the United States sources more and more of its energy needs from North America, the price of oil, a world commodity, remains heavily exposed to political and military developments in the Middle East. Sharp increases in energy prices would have a catastrophic effect on U.S. economic growth.
4. **Nonproliferation.** Syria has one of the region’s largest stockpiles of chemical weapons, which are currently being addressed under an international accord struck with Russia and the United Nations last September. The destruction of these materials is clearly in the interest of the United States and its allies, as their use by either the Assad regime or non-state actors/terrorist groups threatens regional and U.S. security. Whether President Assad decides or is able to follow through on his commitments to eradicate all weaponized agents and non-weaponized precursors remains to be seen.
5. **Humanitarian/health concerns.** Millions of Syrians are currently suffering under extreme conditions, with over 120,000 killed and tens of thousands or more missing. Disease, including Polio, is increasingly spreading in Syria, with implications for global health concerns.

### **Dealing with Syria’s Rebels and the Extremist Threat**

Reports are growing of a sharp increase in the number of extremist groups operating in rebel-dominated areas of Syria. This has raised eyebrows in Washington, where policymakers continue to grapple with the question of

how to support the opposition without inadvertently helping jihadists expand their destabilizing impact across the Middle East. These concerns are growing among Syria's neighbors as well.

During a recent visit to Syrian border regions from southern Turkey, I spoke with armed and civilian opposition leaders about the extent to which extremist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) have penetrated their ranks. I also asked them what kinds of measures the opposition should take to prevent these groups from gaining a permanent foothold or exploiting the current crisis over the regime's use of chemical weapons (e.g., by disrupting international efforts to destroy those weapons). As enumerated below, their answers indicate that mainstream rebels have a number of options for reining in extremism while bolstering the overall effort to force Bashar al-Assad's departure. And many of these options offer good opportunities for U.S. engagement.

1. **Accept the extremist problem.** Unlike in the past, opposition leaders now recognize that extremism is a growing problem in "liberated areas" under their control. Their main beef with groups such as ISIS and JN lies in their increasingly foreign nature and their methods of governance and operation; the only reason the rebels tolerate these factions is that they are effective fighters. At the same time, opposition leaders point out that the majority of rebels are not al-Qaeda, and that JN is more nationalist in orientation than ISIS. Yet the groups are better viewed as two heads of the same threat.
2. **Develop a national political and military strategy.** Both civilians and armed groups are adamant that they need to formulate a political and military strategy to deal with the growing extremist threat. Planning has been the Achilles' heel of the opposition (and the Assad regime) for decades, but the rise in extremism has convinced many rebels that ISIS and similar groups are a foreign threat that does not have the Syrian people's best interests at heart. The extremists counter that ISIS and JN are the country's best option given the West's recent decision not to follow through on threats to punish the regime militarily for using chemical weapons. Thus, if mainstream opposition groups want to maintain the uprising's nationalist bent, they should develop a coherent national plan for containing extremism among their ranks and drawing clearer lines between themselves and the jihadists. In return, the United States and its allies would be much more willing to fund the rebellion.
3. **Don't join multiple groups.** The Syrian opposition historically sees no conflict of interest in joining multiple alliances at the same time. On September 24, for example, a number of groups whose leaders are in or linked to the Western-backed Supreme Military Council (SMC) announced the formation of an "Islamic coalition," atop which is al-Qaeda affiliate JN, which aims to establish an Islamic state in Syria based on *sharia*. Opposition members' tendency to join multiple alliances at once may perhaps be seen as a way to keep options open with an array of patrons, but it also reinforces the view that the Syrian opposition has no foundation and is therefore not worth investing in. All the same, if these groups adopt principled stances, the United States and its allies could be in a position to back them.
4. **Go local, hold elections.** Many, if not most, oppositionists openly admit that their desperate situation makes them ripe for manipulation by outside patrons with agendas too extreme for most Syrians. These patrons take advantage of ego-related and ideological rivalries among opposition members, creating a cycle that only leads to more fragmentation and subnational agendas. To counter this trend, opposition leaders should accept the criticism by actual fighters who argue that local leaders should have much more authority. To avoid manipulation in the choosing of local leadership, opposition members should emphasize the relative success of elections in selected areas of Syria as a mechanism for establishing authoritative leadership structures. These votes would be held in Syrian *nahawi* (districts equivalent to town-

ships), *manatiq* (areas equivalent to counties), and *muhafazat* (governorates equivalent to states). Such a step would help solidify Syrian regional and national identities, making opposition members less susceptible to foreign patronage.

5. **Start by peeling off extremists.** Given the relative strength of extremist groups in Syria today, clashing with them openly only strengthens Assad's hand. So while nationalist/nonextremist groups should always defend themselves in the face of aggression by extremists, the former probably should wait before going on the offensive. Instead, opposition members should develop plans to peel off members of extremist groups with incentives, such as financial and other support. Many civilian oppositionists believe that dialogue programs between members of nationalist or moderate Islamist battalions and Salafist groups further right on the spectrum will help peel away members and undermine the overall support of extremists. This approach to undermining extremists, of course, would require progress on item two of this list: the development of a national military and political strategy. Still, for international donors, such a program would likely be much more attractive than first providing weapons. And increased support in other forms -- including weapons -- could follow from the United States and other Western countries.
6. **Emphasize that extremists only benefit the regime.** The opposition uses *cui bono* arguments to assess who benefits from the fighting and who actually supports extremist groups. Many in the opposition thus believe that ISIS is actually supported by the Assad regime. In a strategic sense, ISIS actions to capture areas such as Azaz play into the regime's hands. The opposition should emphasize the cumulative negative effect of ISIS and other extremist groups on both the opposition's effectiveness and its efforts to gather support from abroad.
7. **Use clerics to undermine extremists' religious authority.** Many extremist and al-Qaeda-linked groups follow equally extremist clerics who are not widely followed inside Syria. As such, the mainline opposition should work with well-known national clerics to undermine those followed by al-Qaeda and other extremists, as part of an overall effort to control the religious message within the opposition.
8. **Take a hard look at the SMC.** At present, the SMC encompasses both nationalist and Islamist brigades, with their ideological orientations often much more divergent than the range within Salafist and jihadist/extremist brigades on the far right. Therefore, opposition leaders need to look closely at the SMC, with the goal of identifying which groups remain aligned with the national agenda and which have lurched toward the extremists.
9. **Think through the assassinations dilemma.** Some opposition leaders maintain that extremist groups can be so ideological that only dramatic steps, such as assassinations, will work to displace them from Syrian and nearby territory. While assassinations may be necessary in some cases, they can end up strengthening the hand of extremists if used at the wrong time.
10. **Accept that chemical weapons make the situation much worse.** One might conclude that the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians could justify their seizure by opposition groups and use at key times against the regime and its supporters. A number of extremist groups operating in Syria even claim chemical weapons use is justifiable as an act of revenge. But the reality is much more difficult, ultimately strengthening the regime's hand and possibly drawing punitive measures from the international community. Enhancement of conventional weapons capabilities represents a much more productive approach for the opposition.

While implementing these measures will take time, starting now will help the Syrian opposition maintain its national character and create an environment conducive to containing the influence of extremist groups. Drawing clear lines between al-Qaeda affiliates and the mainline nationalist opposition will also make the latter much more attractive to the international community if and when a military or political settlement to the crisis emerges. Perhaps most urgent, however, is the need to remove the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile from the scene. This will help avoid the killing of more Syrians and prevent the conflict from widening any further than it already has.