Al-Qaeda's Patient Approach in Syria May Be Paying Off

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Jan 6, 2017
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/alnhj-almtany-ltnzym-alqadt-fy-swrya-qd-ywty-thmarh)

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Brief Analysis

By advising its Syrian affiliate to coopt other armed groups, avoid alienating the locals, and (for now) eschew international terrorism, al-Qaeda is laying the foundation for a permanent base in the heart of the Levant.

Given the Islamic State's PR strategy of grabbing headlines in the most shocking ways, the world's attention is understandably focused on the group's declining fortunes in the region and its growing tendency to lash out abroad via mass-casualty terrorist attacks. Yet for all of its highly publicized brutality, IS may not be Syria's most dangerous actor in the long run. That distinction likely falls to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), the al-Qaeda affiliate that is trying to establish a durable presence in the country by integrating itself into the local scene and seeking (or forcing) mergers with various opposition groups, including recently renewed talks with the major rebel faction Ahrar al-Sham.

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS(ROOTS)

When IS declared its "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria, it imposed itself on local populations by sheer force. This strategy of terrorizing civilians into submission was the group's preferred method as early as the mid-2000s, when it was led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and known as al-Qaeda in Iraq. Since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, however, al-Qaeda's core leadership has sought to avoid alienating locals in order to facilitate a sustainable, long-term paradigm of Islamist governance, advising its affiliates to act accordingly. This caused friction between al-Qaeda and earlier iterations of IS, culminating in their formal split in 2014.

Today, al-Qaeda may have an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of its grassroots approach. Although its Syrian affiliate changed its name from Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) to JFS and disavowed ties to "any external entity" last July, it did not explicitly break with al-Qaeda, and most analysts believe the rebranding was merely cosmetic. For all intents and purposes, JFS remains the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda and retains the organization's strategy and philosophy.

A key aspect of JFS's localization efforts is to establish relationships with Syrian rebel factions. When the war began,

al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri initially sought to mask his organization's ties to JN, allowing it to build its Syrian credentials among the opposition. Today, much of the JN/JFS leadership remains foreign, but the group has been careful to prioritize the recruitment of Syrians. As described in a July 2016 Brookings Institution report, this enables it to present as a local Syrian rebel group, facilitating cooperation with other factions and fostering acceptance among the people. For example, when the United States began its air campaign in Syria in September 2014, the targeting of a JN base angered other rebels, who saw the group as a valuable partner against Bashar al-Assad. Similarly, they had the group's back when Washington designated it as a terrorist entity in December 2012.

JFS is not the first al-Qaeda affiliate to attempt this strategy of local integration, but it has been the most successful by far. The group is part of the major Islamist coalition Jaish al-Fatah and has been a key participant in many rebel operations. Ultimately, however, these alliances are simply a means to the long-term goal of establishing a caliphate, which JFS and its al-Qaeda parent are willing to pursue more patiently than IS did. JFS therefore has no qualms about cannibalizing rebel groups whenever the opportunity presents itself. Some factions were attacked after a previous alliance went south; others suffered mass defections, while a few voluntarily merged with JFS. This predation dates back to at least mid-2013, and it is especially worrisome now that the rebels have been staggered by the loss of Aleppo, one of the war's worst blows yet.

MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS

In May 2013, the *Guardian* warned that JN was leeching fighters and entire units from the Free Syrian Army, the main rebel coalition at the time. Many of those who had joined the FSA in 2011 were Syrian army defectors who were drawn to the coalition's ideology. Yet others joined simply because the FSA gave them a means to fight the regime, so their loyalty was never certain. Thanks to its connections with al-Qaeda's financing and logistical networks, JN had reliable sources of weapons and money, so it quickly became an attractive alternative to the FSA, whose factions had inconsistent outside support at best. By 2013, FSA commanders were lamenting the loss of thousands of fighters in the space of a few months, with one estimate putting attrition as high as a quarter of the coalition's total manpower. Although the FSA survived and remains a relevant actor, its frontline units are often compelled to partner with JFS, which continues to boast far better resources.

Other jihadi groups have fully subordinated themselves to JN/JFS. In September 2015, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar publicly declared its oath of allegiance; that same month, an article in the *Long War Journal* described how the brigade was a close and longstanding ally of JN, noting that its leader appeared to be well-known in al-Qaeda circles. An Uzbek group and a Tatar group swore fealty around the same time. And in October 2016, Jund al-Aqsa -- a faction that analyst Thomas Joscelyn had previously described as "an al-Qaeda front group" -- declared its allegiance as well. In keeping with the goal of minimizing friction with other groups, the latter merger was partly a JFS attempt to placate the major faction Ahrar al-Sham, which had accused Jund al-Aqsa of sympathizing with IS. Yet while the loyalties of some lower-ranking fighters may have been hazy, Jund al-Aqsa's leadership had steadfastly supported al-Qaeda, and the merger solidified that impression.

In contrast, other groups have abruptly found themselves in JN's crosshairs despite previous cooperation. In September 2014, a member of the FSA-affiliated nationalist rebel group Harakat Hazm told the *Los Angeles Times* that his organization had fought alongside JN, saying, "We like Nusra." A few weeks later, however, JN began attacking Harakat Hazm bases, mainly because the group had been receiving training, funding, and weapons from the United States, including TOW antitank missiles. In January 2015, JN accused the group of killing civilians and torturing prisoners. Within two months, the Daily Beast and other outlets were reporting that JN had forced Harakat Hazm to disband and seized some of its U.S.-supplied materiel, while surviving fighters scattered to other Islamist groups.

Similarly, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front worked closely with JN as late as September 2014, with commander

Jamal Marouf admitting that they had shared weapons. Like Harakat Hazm, the SRF benefited from U.S. aid (albeit humanitarian rather than military supplies). That October, JN suddenly accused the group of attacking civilians, then launched a targeted offensive against SRF territory in the northwestern province of Idlib. As the *Washington Post* reported at the time, the unpopular Marouf fled to Turkey in a matter of days, and half of his forces defected to JN.

JFS has continued to seek closer ties with influential rebel groups ever since. In September, NOW Lebanon reported that the group had renewed its efforts to merge with the powerful faction Ahrar al-Sham, following up on previous talks toward that end in early 2016. The first merger effort failed in large part because many rebels objected to forming open ties with al-Qaeda; this failure further motivated JN to change its name a few months later. Although the most recent talks failed as well, Ahrar al-Sham's internal cohesion is at risk due to divisions between members who favor closer ties with JFS and those who prefer more distance.

CONCLUSION

Jabhat Fatah al-Sham's conduct and public statements over the past few years indicate that al-Qaeda has been prioritizing jihadist unity in Syria while taking care to ensure that this unity occurs under its own banner. Changing the name on that banner has not changed the organization's approach. While Syrian rebels remain focused on overthrowing Assad, al-Qaeda's institutional patience suggests that JFS will likely be satisfied to live and let live for a time so long as it maintains control over its own territory, mainly based in Idlib province. The current situation in Syria may be conducive to such an arrangement; now that Aleppo has fallen, the regime **may head for Idlib next (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-assad-target-idlib-after-aleppo)** , but its capacity and timetable for retaking the province are unclear.

Barring a significant change in fortunes, JFS's prospects for establishing a long-term Syrian base look positive. Although the group briefly attempted to branch out into foreign terrorist attacks, U.S. airstrikes cut that idea short, with Zawahiri explicitly instructing JFS leaders to keep their focus local. Yet this focus could just as quickly change back to international terrorism down the road. And even without active plotting from Syria in the near term, al-Qaeda would benefit from a training and logistics base that is far more accessible than Afghanistan and Yemen.

Whatever the case, if JFS is left to its own devices, it will further consolidate its position by coopting or neutralizing its opponents. Unfortunately, there are no good options left for the United States to push back against the group's influence. Nationalist and secular rebels have largely been discredited, and battle-proven Islamist groups might not accept Western aid. President-elect Trump has so far concentrated his rhetoric on IS, but it would be unwise to neglect the al-Qaeda affiliate currently sinking its roots into Syria, even if Washington's available means of confronting the group are limited and problematic.

Kelsey Segawa, a former research associate at The Washington Institute, has just begun Officer Training School with the U.S. Air Force. ❖

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