

# Inside Baseball on Syrian Rebel Infighting

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**The weeks-long internecine clashes are expected to continue hampering the rebel struggle against the Assad regime, with ISIS fighting on despite being ostracized by al-Qaeda and other jihadists.**

A month ago, major fighting broke out between the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (nationalist), Jaysh al-Mujahidin (Islamist), the Islamic Front (Salafi) and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS; global jihadi). For the first time, there was a concerted military effort to push back against the ISIS reign of terror that has been tyrannizing the Syrian population as well as the other groups. While there were major successes in the first week, ISIS was able to recover and went on a counteroffensive. Similar to the fight between the rebels and the regime, the fight among the rebel groups has become indecisive and stalemated. The infighting illustrates that the rebels are now in an active two-front war, which could in the medium to long-term severely degrade their capabilities and resources against their original enemy, the Assad regime.

## Background

While fighting continues between the Islamic Front and ISIS, it is a lot more complex than reported in the media; though, as the fighting heads into a second month, positions are becoming hardened (more on this below). Further, the bulk of the anti-ISIS fighting has been conducted by the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and Jaysh al-Mujahidin. While it appears that there is a unified backlash against ISIS, there are two different dynamics going on with the bulk of the infighting occurring between the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, in coalition with Jaysh al-Mujahidin, and ISIS. The Syrian Revolutionaries Front–Jaysh al-Mujahidin alliance is more based on differences in ideology and potentially a demonstration to outside backers that they can fight against jihadis, whereas the Islamic Front offensive is more a response to abuses perpetrated by ISIS against it along with an attempt to act as a sovereign state in liberated areas. Although in the first few days of infighting ISIS was dealt blows and kicked out of a number of areas, the group has not been defeated. In fact, it has been able to recover in spite of its isolation among

the rebels.

Many within the jihadi camp have framed any fighting between ISIS and the Islamic Front as merely fitna (discord), while the fight with the Syrian Revolutionaries Front–Jaysh al-Mujahidin is seen as more akin to a second sahra movement (similar to what occurred in Iraq last decade). Though, some diehard ISIS activists view Islamic Front as part of the sahrat as well. Originally, when the fighting first began, there were hopes within the jihadi movement that the more complicated dynamics between the Islamic Front and ISIS could to be resolved through mediation, especially with Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda's preferred branch in Syria) as a potential interlocker. In addition to Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, calling for a cease-fire, key global jihadi ideologues such as Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Shaykh Abu Qatadah al-Filistini, Shaykh Abu Basir al-Tartusi, Iyad Qunaybi, and Shaykh Sulayman al-Ulwan have criticized ISIS' excessive use of force. It should be noted that there have also been small skirmishes between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, but in a very limited capacity.

In response to the offensive, ISIS wanted to show that its real enemies were only in the Supreme Military Council and its civilian arm. On January 7th, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani pronounced takfir on the Supreme Military Council, stating, "[it is a] sect of apostasy and kufr ... everyone who belongs to this entity is a legitimate target for us everywhere."

And, ISIS in Saraqib posted a statement noting that "we have no problems with our brothers in the Islamic Front, our war is with Jamal Maruf [the leader of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front]."

Further, a couple of weeks later, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi said, "Here the [Islamic] State is extending an arm to you to stop fighting it and it would stop fighting you, let's be free to fight the Nusayris and Rafidha [derogatory terms for Alawis and Shi'a respectively]." While this appeal rationally makes sense, those in the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, Jaysh al-Mujahidin, and Islamic Front are not buying it.

## ISIS Remains

**W**hile the offensive by the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, Jaysh al-Mujahidin, and Islamic Front was a shock to ISIS, they have been able to recover. There are five main reasons for why this occurred.

1. The original attacks were a surprise and ISIS did not expect them. Therefore, the group quickly lost territory and was pushed out of a number of areas. Once it realized what was going on and was able to come up with a counter to it, ISIS was able to retake some territory and remain a player in the north.
2. There are signs that local groups did not want to take orders from their commanders and some of their brigades even refused to fight ISIS. For example, Katibat Ansar al-Islam and Katibat Salah al-Din of Liwa' al-Tawhid refused to fight. Additionally, Ahrar al-Sham in Manbij refused to fight ISIS and instead went south to fight the regime.
3. The ceasefires that ISIS was able to secure in certain areas allowed it to shift resources to other areas instead of getting bogged down in a number of fronts. In Maskanah, the ISIS commander in the north, Umar al-Shishani, reached an agreement with Ahrar al-Sham's Abu Khalid al-Suri (who is believed to be Ayman al-Zawahiri's emissary in Syria) to stop all fighting. However, Abu Khalid would later admonish ISIS for starting this fitna and its overuse of takfir. The two groups also came to an agreement in Deir Hafer. A tentative agreement has been signed with ISIS, Ahrar al-Sham, and Suqur al-Sham in Idlib and Hama as well. The Islamic Front and ISIS came to an agreement in Saraqib, handing over the city to Jabhat al-Nusra and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front.

Therefore, agreements such as these provided ISIS the daylight it needed to recapture some of its lost clout. It began by retaking Jarabulus and Manbij. After retaking al-Bab, ISIS released a statement locally calling for all that fought the group to repent and hand in weapons. ISIS also opened a "complaints office." Further, ISIS published a statement in Aleppo saying that anyone who wants to fight the regime can coordinate with the group without having to join. However, although ISIS was able to reclaim a number of areas where it had been strong previously, it lost ground

to the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and Jaysh al-Mujahidin in Aleppo (including Darat al-'Izzah, Urum al-Kubra', and Urum al-Sughra', among others) and Idlib, highlighting the inconclusive nature of the battle among these factions.

4. ISIS was able to gain a number of bay'at (pledges of allegiance) since the infighting first began, not only from rebels groups, but also from local tribes (or clans within them), such as the al-'Umur and al-Mawali tribes in Badiyya, al-Ghanim tribe in rural eastern Aleppo, and the clan al-Bu 'Izz al-Din from the al-'Akidat tribe. These along with the pledges below are significant because they highlight that while isolated, ISIS still has been able to carve out its own powerbase.

Two Ahrar al-Sham brigades joined ISIS. Katibat al-Sadiq, formerly of the Islamic Front's Jaysh al-Islam, also pledged ba'ya. The commander of Katibat Dhu al-Nurayn decided to defect. Five groups in Deir al-Zour also pledged. All of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups in Tel Hamis, al-Hasakah pledged allegiance to ISIS. Liwa Ahrar al-Furat of Ahrar al-Sham in eastern rural Aleppo joined, too. In the Sahel region, Katibat al-Husayn bin 'Ali al-Sanayah pledged bay'a to ISIS along with Ahrar al-Sham's shari'a official in al-Barkah.

5. Lastly, besides Jabhat al-Nusra, which has attempted to stay out of the fighting, others have also tried not to take sides all together. On January 12th, Shaykh Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sarmini, a shari'a official in Suqur al-Sham, resigned from the group and called for an end to infighting. Similarly, a week later, Liwa' al-Dawud, which had previously been aligned with ISIS, decided to unaffiliate itself and stopped taking part in any of the infighting. Likewise, Liwa' 'Umar al-Mukhtar of Abu Kamal refused to fight ISIS and moved on to the sidelines.

Although ISIS gained new groups and followers, Jabhat al-Nusra also benefited from the infighting. Due to its neutral stance, some have come to believe that Jabhat al-Nusra is above the politics and pettiness of the infighting and therefore the more trustworthy and legitimate actor. For instance, al-Idarah al-Islamiyyah Li-l-Khidmat al-'Amah, a services organization that was originally affiliated with ISIS, pledged bay'a to Jabhat al-Nusra. In eastern Ghouta, 'Isa bin Maryam, Saraya Salah al-Din, Katibat Dar'a al-Sham al-Islamiyyah, Katibat'Asimat al-Ghutah, Katibat Nur al-Ghutah, and Katibat Junud al-Rahman gave bay'a to Jabhat al-Nusra. Farther south, Katibat Mus'ab bin 'Umayr of Dar'a pledged bay'a to Jabhat al-Nusra. Additionally, the Saudi-led foreign fighter group Katibat Suqur al-'Izz joined Jabhat al-Nusra. Even in Deir al-Zour, which is an ISIS stronghold, Harakat Abna' al-Islam joined Jabhat al-Nusra. An ISIS religious cleric named Haydrah al-Qasim decided to leave and join Jabhat al-Nusra as well.

## Reconciliation?

**B**y the third week of the ISIS backlash, there were perceptions by some on the ground that the infighting was not as severe and potentially could have been stopped through mediation. Many in the Islamic Front, though, were still highly skeptical of ISIS. For example, Jaysh al-Islam's Zahran Alloush, the military commander of the Islamic Front, has consistently been anti-ISIS calling the faction khawarij (in reference to those who did not accept the authority of the Rashidun Caliphate), stating that they are agents of the Iranian government. In a statement, Liwa al-Tawhid of the Islamic Front also called for finishing the job against ISIS. Moreover, Suqur al-Sham's shari'a office in a statement said that ISIS is the "aggressor faction of Khawarij" and that it is mandatory to fight them. Further, the head of Suqur al-Sham Abu 'Isa al-Shaykh called al-Baghdadi and ISIS the same as Shi'a.

In addition there were other barriers to peace: the Islamic Front burned ISIS' famous shari'a court in al-Dana, and ISIS conducted a number of suicide bombings against Islamic Front forces. Hence, leading up to a push for reconciliation at the end of January, it is likely that the situation had already crossed a point of no return making the likelihood of a truce nonexistent.

The main proponent of the reconciliation was the Saudi Salafi ideologue Dr. 'Abd Allah bin Muhammad al-Muhaysini through his idea on January 23rd called "Mubadarah al-Ummah" (the Initiative of the Ummah), which he said was inspired by Ayman al-Zawahiri. The statement called for shari'a to be the foundation for resolving the conflict and was directly aimed at ISIS, the Islamic Front, Jaysh al-Mujahidin, and Syrian Revolutionaries Front. The latter three

signed onto the initiative and were endorsed by Jabhat al-Nusra and top jihadi scholars Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Shaykh Abu Qatadah al-Filistini, among other groups and ideologues.

The only group that rejected the initiative was ISIS, which retorted by wanting a clarification on groups' theological positions related to democracy and secularism, the Supreme Military Council, and relations with foreign governments Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Turkey.

In quick response, the head of Ahrar al-Sham of the Islamic Front Hasan Aboud snarkily responded by rhetorically asking if the Taliban was kufr because of its willingness to engage the international community. If so, then Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda would be kufr too since they gave bay'at to Mullah Umar, calling into question ISIS' behavior due to its relations with al-Qaeda. In a separate video address, Aboud called for ISIS to return to the true path of Islam and stated that it was holding back even in the face of "painful wounds and traitorous stabs," and if ISIS hinders the true jihad against the Assad regime then they will have to defend themselves. A week later, al-Muhaysini weighed in on ISIS' rebuff and was defiant in his criticisms of ISIS stating: "These conditions are not prescribed in the Qur'an or the traditions of Muhammad." He also called -- similar to Zawahiri in May 2013 -- for ISIS to return to Iraq and its members that want to remain in Syria to join Jabhat al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham.

## Current State of Play

On the heels of the failed reconciliation effort, al-Qaeda's general command released a statement disaffiliating itself from ISIS: "ISIS is not a branch of the Qaidat al-Jihad [al-Qaeda's official name] group, we have no organizational relationship with it, and the group is not responsible for its actions." While Jabhat al-Nusra has, on the whole, stayed out of the rebel infighting, al-Qaeda's announcement could lead to a war between it and ISIS, especially since one of Jabhat al-Nusra's senior clerics, Sultan bin Issa al-Atawi, called for members of ISIS to join JN.

Therefore, at the beginning of the second month of infighting, the stakes have been raised for all involved. Highlighting that tension will likely remain status quo for the foreseeable future, as neither side wants to back down (and maintain the potential for things to escalate again), even while many want to refocus on exclusively fighting the regime. As such, the infighting could become a larger liability for the rebels who are actively fighting on two fronts with enemies that play by their own rules. Expect more infighting, with ISIS as a leading actor trying to force ceasefires on its own terms, even if ostracized.

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*War on the Rocks*

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