



Al-Qaeda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part II)

by [Aaron Y. Zelin](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

This two-part PolicyWatch discusses how the jihadist group ISIS has gained a foothold in Syria. [Part I outlined the group's recent successes](#); this installment describes how it could face popular discontent if it attempts to enforce its socially conservative agenda or commit high-profile abuses.

Despite its successes in Syria so far, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has shown signs of past tendencies -- such as killing individuals in cold blood -- that alienated many supporters during the height of the Iraqi insurgency. This raises the question of whether popular resistance to ISIS could emerge in Syria along the lines of the Iraqi *sahwa* (awakening) movement.

PAST JIHADIST ABUSES

The excesses that followed the 2003 invasion of Iraq taught the global jihadist movement many lessons about the importance of properly selecting targets, avoiding Sunni bloodshed, and cultivating local ties. Even so, the basic nature of the movement's ideology usually leads to abuses that make a population reject jihadist groups. This has occurred in Somalia, Yemen, and Mali in recent years, and it could happen in Syria too.

In Somalia, for example, many civilians have turned against jihadist group Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahedin (better known as just al-Shabab), and some of its own foreign fighters have actively rebelled and left the organization. The arbitrary killing and jailing of foreigners spurred some of this backlash, as did the group's systematic abuse of civilians. Al-Shabab also kicked out international aid organizations at a time when Somalia was suffering its worst drought in more than sixty years, exacerbating the country's problems. That decision stemmed from the group's ideological aversion to any activities conducted within the framework of the nation-state or international system. Such actions have led many to side with the UN-backed government in Mogadishu.

In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its front group Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen (ASY) went on a reign of terror after gaining control over parts of the south in spring 2011. For example, some members crucified a

man in response to alleged spying; other abuses included summary killing, amputations, and torture. AQAP and ASY also intimidated and violently suppressed community activists, health workers, and educators who challenged their implementation of strict social and religious mores. Eventually, some locals created *al-lijan al-shabiya* (popular committees) to fight the jihadists and help the Yemeni military clear them from villages in summer 2012.

More recently, a coalition of jihadist organizations controlled northern Mali for months, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqi, and Ansar al-Din. Similar to al-Shabab and AQAP/ASY, these groups were involved in rampant abuses, such as flogging and stoning individuals for smoking cigarettes or listening to music on a cellphone. Similar to the Taliban in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, jihadists forced locals to watch these punishments in order to strike fear into them.

Unlike Somalia, Yemen, and Mali, but similar to Iraq, Syria lies in the heart of the Arab world. Therefore, regional and outside powers will likely attempt to exploit local aversion to restrictive jihadist control in order to turn the populace against ISIS. This is why many of the group's online partisans are paranoid about a *sahwa* movement emerging in Syria. Thus far, there is no proof that such a movement exists, but there are signs that one could be simmering.

SAHWA IN SYRIA?

Both in the West and among the Syrian opposition, some observers are pining for a repeat of Iraq's *sahwa* phenomenon in Syria. ISIS members have been embedding themselves within local communities and building ties that may not be easily broken. Yet the group could see pushback in certain areas due to its actions thus far and its potential for future abuses.

For example, in mid-May, ISIS summarily executed three Alawites -- followers of the same sect as the Assad regime -- in the main square of Deir al-Zour. A month later, ISIS killed two "apostates" in the city for supposedly straying from Sunni Islam. More recently, group members murdered two boys from Zahra and Nubl in Aleppo governorate due to alleged heresy. ISIS has also been involved in blowing up Shiite and Sufi shrines. In addition, it has targeted commanders from the opposition Free Syrian Army, most notably in Latakia in July.

On top of these vigilante activities, ISIS has attempted to push its social program onto the populace. In Raqqa, for example, one can find at least one ISIS billboard that shows a woman wearing a veil alongside the slogan "My modesty...the secret of my beauty." Members also distributed flyers at the beginning of Ramadan warning that they would imprison any residents caught not observing the fast. And in Aleppo, ISIS has blocked the passage of tobacco products through the Bustan al-Qasr checkpoint.

These and other areas have seen some civilian backlash over the past few months, though not necessarily in direct response to the above abuses. The largest has been in Raqqa, where protesters have demonstrated in front of ISIS headquarters since mid-June, calling for the group to leave the city. Demonstrations have also been seen in Manbij and Marea villages in Aleppo governorate. At most, however, only a few hundred people have participated in these protests at a time, and none of them appear to be militant.

Meanwhile, fighting broke out in early August between the Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades (ARB) and ISIS elements in Raqqa, leading certain jihadist and Islamist activists to believe that foreign powers were using the brigades to spark a *sahwa* in Syria. Some ISIS sympathizers have derisively called ARB "Ahfad Fransa," since the group admitted to receiving funds from France, spurring mistrust about its intentions. Whatever the case, the situation was quickly defused when protesters in Raqqa called for ARB to leave town; ISIS then forcibly ejected the group on August 15.

The ARB situation shows that recent protests have arisen not necessarily because ISIS is jihadist, but rather because civilians do not want militants occupying their city. It also shows that ISIS is prepared for a potential *sahwa*. The group is better positioned in Syria than it was in Iraq, in part because it has been so involved with proto-governance and social services. In addition, a Syrian "awakening" would not have the U.S. military backing enjoyed by the Iraqi

sahwa movement.

CONCLUSION

Although ISIS has shown that it wants to avoid the mistakes that its predecessors made in Iraq, some Syrians are already dissatisfied by the group's presence and have expressed this sentiment through limited, nonmilitant demonstrations. And while mainstream Syrian rebels have not taken action against ISIS, this does not necessarily indicate sympathy for the group's goals. At this juncture, non-jihadist rebel factions cannot afford to turn on ISIS because they are already too weak compared to their Salafist and jihadist rivals. Indeed, one of the biggest ironies of the conflict is that the deeply fractured opposition has become deeply interconnected on the battlefield, since no one faction is strong enough to strong-arm the others. Because they need each other, non-Islamists and jihadists have been willing to work together against regime forces.

Nevertheless, well-established jihadist patterns indicate that at some point, ISIS will try to implement more of its theocratic social agenda in the areas it controls. If the group forcibly pushes this agenda on the populace, it will likely face strong backlash.

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