

The Rise of Al Qaeda in Syria

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Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate began as an offshoot of the same Iraqi branch with which it has now merged. How did Jabhat al-Nusra rise to prominence within the Syrian rebellion?

President Barack Obama's administration is reportedly planning to designate the Syrian jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra ("the Support Front") as a terrorist organization. The group, which was first announced in late January 2012, has become a growing part of the armed opposition due to its fighting prowess -- perhaps no surprise, as many of its fighters honed their skills in battlefields in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. As a result, Jabhat al-Nusra has carved out an important niche in the fight to oust the Syrian regime even as it remains outside of the mainstream opposition.

The U.S. administration, in designating Jabhat al-Nusra, is likely to argue that the group is an outgrowth of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). While there is not much open-source evidence of this, classified material may offer proof -- and there is certainly circumstantial evidence that Jabhat al-Nusra operates as a branch of the ISI.

There's no denying that Jabhat al-Nusra is deadly: It has claimed responsibility for more than 500 attacks since its creation, including a series of suicide bombings. Unique among rebel groups operating in Syria, it has also earned the legitimacy of top global jihadist ideologues, who have called for grassroots supporters across the world to help fund or join up with the group. And foreign fighters have answered the call: Based on data from al Qaeda's online forums, of the 46 individuals for which the forums have provided "martyrdom" notices and announced their group affiliation, 20 fought with Jabhat al-Nusra. Since Oct. 1, almost all of the notices that mention affiliation have reported that the fighter was aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra.

Jabhat al-Nusra is also plugged into al Qaeda's transnational online media echo system. Its official media outlet, al-Manara al-Bayda ("the White Minaret"), maintains ties with al Qaeda's web forums Shamukh al-Islam and al-Fida' al-Islam. On Shamukh, there is even a dedicated section for Jabhat al-Nusra's releases -- a status only shared with the

ISI.

The Obama administration may try to nip the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra in the bud by issuing a terrorist designation now, prior to an attack on U.S. interests or its homeland. This would represent a break from past behavior, when jihadist organizations such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were only designated following the large-scale -- though both failed -- 2009 Christmas Day and 2010 Time Square plots, respectively.

The unique circumstances in Syria might be the reason for the differing approach. Syrians have been demonstrating and fighting for more than 21 months to shed President Bashar al-Assad's yoke of tyranny. The rebellion has been radicalized over time by the brutal tactics of the regime, creating a more Islamist fighting force than when the armed rebellion first started gaining steam.

Getting Syria's rebels to disavow Jabhat al-Nusra may not be an easy task, however. As in Iraq, jihadists have been some of the most effective and audacious fighters against the Assad regime, garnering respect from other rebel groups in the process. Jabhat al-Nusra seems to have learned from the mistakes of al Qaeda in Iraq: It has not attacked civilians randomly, nor has it shown wanton disregard for human life by publicizing videos showing the beheading of its enemies. Even if its views are extreme, it is getting the benefit of the doubt from other insurgents due to its prowess on the battlefield.

So can the Obama administration isolate Jabhat al-Nusra? While some in the Syrian opposition would welcome a U.S. decision to slap a terrorist designation on the group, many will likely view this as another case of the U.S. government actually acting in support of Assad -- demonizing an element of the insurgency while simultaneously offering little assistance itself to topple the regime.

As a result, designating Jabhat al-Nusra could backfire on the United States. In the short term, it might galvanize more support for the group as Syrian rebels look to spite the Obama administration for its lack of support. A terror designation could also provide even more legitimacy for the organization amongst global jihadi supporters, leading even more foreigners to join up with its cause.

In the long run, however, marginalizing Jabhat al-Nusra and its ideology is a fight that the United States -- and ordinary Syrians everywhere -- must win. Once the Assad regime falls, the rebels' shared military goals will disappear, and it will be the job of the Obama administration and mainstream rebel groups to isolate extremist groups. The outcome of this future fight is inextricably related to the Obama administration's efforts to help the rebels now. But without a swift end to the Assad regime and more engagement with the opposition, the United States won't have much leverage to shape Syria's future -- no matter what it decides to call Jabhat al-Nusra.

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