

# Assad's Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



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**While most individuals involved in the rebellion are Syrian, foreign fighters now have a very real presence that should worry both the regime and the opposition.**

**W**hen the Syrian uprising first began, one of President Bashar al-Assad's justifications for his harsh crackdowns against protesters and, later, armed elements was because he considered them foreign terrorists. At the time, this claim was ludicrous. The overwhelming majority of individuals were Syrians looking to shake off the yoke of Bashar and his father Hafiz's decades-long Baathist dictatorship.

While most individuals involved with the current rebellion are still Syrian, foreign fighters now have a very real presence that should worry not only the Assad regime but also Syrians in the opposition. Most foreign fighters go abroad to defend their fellow Muslim brethren from being slaughtered. Once in the area of battle, though, many come into closer contact with hardline jihadis as well as fighters from other countries and are exposed to new ideas. Therefore, portions of foreign fighters are not fighting to help establish a future state for Syrian nationals. Rather, they hope to annex it to be part of their grander aims of establishing emirates that will eventually lead to a reestablished Caliphate, however fanciful this project might be.

At this point, on-the-ground media coverage in English, French, Arabic, German, and other languages reports between 800-2,000 foreigners currently in Syria, accounting for less than 10% of the fighters. Most have come since the beginning of the year: a large contingent comes from the states surrounding Syria: Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan, while a smaller North African contingent hails from Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria. The presence of Westerners at this point has been minimal.

These individuals are linking up with not only the Free Syrian Army (FSA) but also jihadi organizations. The Abdullah Azzam Brigades and Fatah al-Islam, both of them Lebanese jihadi organizations, have entered the fray. So, too, have less-established, but growing organizations like Jabhat al-Nusrah, believed to be the strongest jihadi actor in Syria,

as well as Ahrar ash-Sham. Another group, Liwa al-Ummah, comprising 90 percent Syrian fighters, is led by the Irish-Libyan Mahdi al-Harati, previously a commander in the Tripoli Brigade that helped topple the Qadhafi regime a year ago in Libya.

What is problematic with all of this is that although jihadis remain a small portion of the resistance, many have past experience fighting in jihads in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Libya. Therefore, they have sharper skills as well as connections to networks of funding and weapons, which the FSA has dearly needed in the face of lack of support from the international community. As a consequence, jihadi fighters can be force-multipliers as was seen in Iraq during the height of the insurgency against the United States. FSA fighters, in media interviews, explain that because of jihadi experiences, resources, and technologies they have started to begrudgingly work with them, even if they consider them extreme and do not believe in their end goals.

Online jihadis have also posted videos on their forums showing how some jihadi brigades have coordinated operations with elements of the FSA in places like Aleppo. This, however, can cause cross-pollination in ideology and radicalize factions within the FSA. It could also turn these different groups against one another once the fighting ends against the Assad regime, creating further instability in a country looking to regain normalcy and transitioning to a better future.

Unfortunately, this challenge from the jihadis will not go away any time soon. As can be seen in Iraq, although jihadis there are weak compared to a few years ago, the residue from the fighting lingers, continuing to be a spoiler. Therefore, it is imperative that the international community not only work up a plan for dealing with jihadis in Syria post-Assad, but also work with the opposition to help eject these foreign and poisonous elements, which will do more harm than good for Syria's future.

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