

Syria's New Jihadis

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Amid the chaos in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusrah represents a spoiler in a conflict with no foreseeable end.

Syrria suffered its worst terror attack in decades this month when two car bombs exploded near a military intelligence branch in Damascus, killing 55 people and wounding hundreds more. Syria's state-run news agency was quick to publish gruesome pictures of the victims of the attack, which President Bashar al-Assad's regime pinned on "foreign-backed terrorist groups."

At first, the Syrian regime seemed to have evidence to back up its case. On May 12, a video was distributed on YouTube, purportedly from a Palestinian branch of the jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusrah ("The Victory Front" or JN), claiming credit for the attack. But the release turned out to be a fake: On May 14, JN released a statement denying that it was behind the video. At the same time, it did not deny conducting the attack. Rather, JN's media outlet said it had yet to hear from JN's military commanders if they perpetrated the bombings.

Whether or not JN was involved in the Damascus attack, the organization has become a real force in recent weeks -- and one that threatens to undermine the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the loose network of defectors and local militia fighting the government. Its main goals are to awaken Muslims to the atrocities of the Assad regime, and eventually take control of the state and implement its narrow and puritanical interpretation of Islamic law. To that end, in the past month alone, JN has perpetrated a series of suicide bombings and IED strikes -- and the pace of attacks seems to be growing.

JN originally announced its existence on Jan. 23 in a video released to global jihadi forums, featuring the group's spokesperson, al-Fatih ("The Conqueror") Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani. In addition to repeating the usual jihadi platitudes, Jawlani accused the United States, the Arab League, Turkey, Iran, and the West in general for collaborating with the Assad regime against (Sunni) Muslims. The video shows tens of individuals training with AK-47s in unknown desert and wooded locations and posing with large flags similar to the banners used by Sunni

fundamentalists across the Middle East, featuring the *shahadah* (the Muslim testament of faith).

While JN's attacks might pack punch, they represent a miniscule portion of the Syrian rebellion and have no known association to the FSA. But members of al Qaeda's premier online forums have been elated over the creation of a new jihadist organization in Syria. In addition to its online grassroots supporters, JN has gained the stamp of approval from key jihadi ideologues, including Shaykh Abu Sa'd al-'Amili (a prominent online essayist), Shaykh Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti (one of the most influential ideologues worldwide), Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi (a prominent Jordanian Salafi), and Shaykh Abu al-Zahra' al-Zubaydi (a popular Lebanese jihadi). All have called on Muslims to support JN's cause by aiding them financially or joining them on the battlefield.

This level of excitement, which has not been seen in jihadi circles since the height of the Iraq war, can partly be attributed to the sectarian nature of the struggle: Jihadis do not see the Assads as true Muslims because they are Alawites -- members of a heterodox version of Shiism. As such, jihadis view their role in repressing a Sunni Muslim majority as particularly reprehensible. "Oh Allah made it possible for our brothers in Jabhat al-Nusrah, and bless them and make the hearts of the people join them," one online jihadi enthused.

Unable to quell Syria's domestic uprising, Assad still maintains that Syria is fighting foreign terrorists. And, although Syria's homegrown protest movement clearly makes up the overwhelming majority of the opposition, there are a multitude of reports -- see here, here, here, here, and here -- of non-Syrian Muslims going off to fight Assad. Fighters from al Qaeda in Iraq have also reportedly crossed the border to assist their Sunni compatriots -- presumably by way of the same networks they have long used to smuggle people and goods from Syria into Iraq.

Although there is no hard evidence that these fighters are joining up with JN, there is circumstantial evidence to suggest new recruits -- either foreign or local -- are bolstering its capabilities. While JN only conducted three operations from January through mid-April, the pace of its attacks in the past month has raised the specter of fresh support. On April 20, it conducted a suicide attack on a Syrian military unit allegedly responsible for a massacre in al-Latamina, a village outside Hama. A few days later, on April 24, JN bombed the Iranian Cultural Center in Damascus. Then on April 27, JN claimed responsibility for a suicide attack during Friday prayers in the Midan neighborhood of Damascus. And those aren't the only attacks that JN has attempted: From April 20 to May 5, it planted sticky improvised explosive devices to cars in a series of attempted assassinations against Syrian officials, and also detonated two IEDs under trucks at the Syrian military headquarters on Damascus's Revolution Street.

JN has also released three other videos since the message announcing its existence. The first video, which was posted on jihadist forums on Feb. 26, claimed responsibility for a twin suicide car bombing at a Syrian security forces building in Aleppo earlier that month, as well as an attack in early January in central Damascus. Appealing to the broader Syrian society, JN explained that it executed the attacks to safeguard the women of Syria, who have been brutalized and raped by Assad's security forces. The next video, which was uploaded in mid-April, contained a sermon exhorting individuals to join the jihad against Assad and his Alawite followers.

JN's most recent video was published in late April and provided yet another emotional appeal for individuals to take up arms to join its cause. It showed anti-Assad demonstrations in the cities of Deraa and Homs, the Assad regime's brutal destruction of Homs, and widows and mothers wailing over the deaths of their sons and husbands. JN spokesman Jawlani claimed responsibility for a "revenge" attack against the Syrian forces in Homs, and the video showed "martyrdom" messages from two of its suicide bombers. Jawlani linked JN's cause to that of 'Omar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph, who completed the conquest of Syria that the Prophet Muhammad started in the 7th century. Jawlani's mention of 'Omar is notable because Shiite tradition considers him a traitor to Muhammad and a usurper of the right of Ali, Muhammad's cousin, to become caliph. Jawlani undoubtedly understands this, and his words are sure to stoke more sectarian tensions.

Syria's nascent jihadist organization has also bitterly opposed Kofi Annan's attempts to orchestrate a ceasefire between rebel and government forces, calling his efforts "deception" and a "magician's trick." JN called out Annan for his failure to prevent massacres in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and it said the proposed truce with the Assad regime was merely a way for Western countries to undermine the Syrian people's ability to defend themselves while allowing the Assad regime to continue to shell its citizens. As a result, its argument goes, one cannot trust the West to provide assistance in the fight against the regime. Rather, it is imperative that Muslims join JN's battle, since it is the only true defender of Syrians and the Sunni community.

It is noteworthy that JN has focused solely on military targets in its insurgency against the regime. Perhaps it has learned from the experience of AQI, which found that killing civilians alienates potential supporters. Nevertheless, even if JN may be recruiting individuals at a higher rate, its vision for Syria's future remains far outside the mainstream. As such, it will continue to be a nuisance not only for the Syrian regime, but also to the FSA, which is attempting to bolster its international legitimacy in order to gain supplies and weapons from supporters of its cause. Amid the chaos in Syria, it represents a spoiler in a conflict with no foreseeable end.

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