

Syrian Jihadis: Real and Exaggerated

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May 17, 2012

Damascus may be exaggerating the strength of the Syrian jihadi group Jabhat al-Nusra.

On May 12 a video posted to YouTube purporting to be from the Palestinian branch of the Syrian jihadi group Jabhat al-Nusra (The Victory Front; JN) claimed responsibility for the May 9 twin car bombings near a security complex in Damascus that killed more than fifty-five individuals and wounded hundreds. And, while JN appears to be a genuine extremist group, it is not clear whether it was responsible for either the attack or the video. The video raises disturbing questions about the Assad regime's possible manipulation of jihadists based on its past relationships with these groups.

Jabhat al-Nusra

The terror outfit Jabhat al-Nusra first trumpeted its existence on January 24, 2012, when it released a video through its media outlet al-Manarah al-Bayda (the White Minaret). The release directly to online global jihadi forums suggested that they were a legitimate group, which was later confirmed when a few top jihadi ideologues backed JN activities. Since January, JN has claimed responsibility for the following attacks:

- February 10, Aleppo: double suicide car bombing at the Syrian security forces buildings leaves twenty-eight dead, four of them civilians.
- March 17, 2012, Damascus: suicide attack against a police building and the Syrian Air Force intelligence headquarters.
- April 20, 2012, Hama countryside (between the cities of Maardes and Tibat al-Imam): a car bomb targeting a Syrian military unit at the Qatr al-Nada restaurant that was allegedly responsible for a massacre in the town of al-Latamina.
- April 24, 2012, Damascus: bombing of the Iranian Cultural Center in al-Marjah Square.
- April 27, 2012, Damascus: suicide attack during Friday prayers in the Maydan neighborhood.
- April 20-May 5, 2012, Damascus: sticky IEDs planted on cars in a series of attempted assassinations of Syrian officials.
- May 5, Damascus: Two IEDs planted under trucks at the Syrian military headquarters on Revolution Street.

Although immediately after the May 9 double bombing, many speculated that JN was responsible, the May 12 video differed significantly from past JN announcements:

1. The video was first posted to YouTube, and to the jihadi forums via JN's media outlet.
2. The YouTube video claimed to be from Ibn Taymiyyah Media, a different media outlet run by freelance jihadis in the Palestinian territories (they too later released a statement denying they posted the video to YouTube, since they also first post its content to the forums).
3. The video stated it was JN's fourth statement, yet that same day JN released their seventh statement to the forums. JN's fourth statement was actually released a week earlier on May 5, under a different title.
4. The attack was claimed by JN's "Palestinian branch" -- which had not been mentioned previously in JN statements.

All of this suggests that someone may be trying to scapegoat the jihadis for the May 9 bombing. The Assad regime is the obvious suspect, but no evidence as yet supports their culpability. The regime has repeatedly alleged that the opposition's core is made up of is foreign terrorist jihadis, and it could be orchestrating these bombings to further radicalize the opposition and paint it as terrorist thugs. Another possibility is that elements within the regime, such as the Syrian secret police (mukhabarat), aware of the number of foreign fighters who have entered Syria, are masquerading as jihadis in order to recruit foreign fighters who are then sent on missions that target civilians. Not only would this legitimate the regime's reign of terror, it provides justification for its insistence that the West, along with Arab governments and Turkey, not supply weapons to the rebels.

Syria's Growing Relations with Sunni Extremist Groups

Contrary to accounts in many media outlets that Syria's secular state is naturally at odds with Sunni extremist groups, Bashar al-Assad has actually built long-lasting, though indirect, relationships with such groups over the last decade. Leading up to and following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Assad regime allowed Syrian "volunteers"

to gather in front of the U.S. embassy in Damascus to board busses to Iraq, where they would "wage Jihad" against U.S. forces. When it was soon clear that more organized, better experienced extremists would be necessary, the Assad regime began allowing foreign jihadi fighters to enter Syria and transit to Iraq. The best account of this flow of foreign fighter comes from the Sinjar Documents, an al-Qaeda Iraq database captured by U.S. coalition forces in the Iraqi town of Sinjar near the Syrian border. The database lists details on hundreds of Jihadi fighters from Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria (among other countries), who were able to come and go from Iraq via Syria. Around 8 percent of fighters listed in the Sinjar database were Syrian. The strict control of all points of entry by Syria's intelligence services, as well as Syrian Military Intelligence's control of eastern Syria, where Jihadi "rat lines" were set up, demonstrates the Assad regime's knowledge of, and at best malevolent neglect of -- if not cooperation with -- these groups.

The Syrian regime forged similar, murkier relationships with Fatah al-Islam, an extreme Islamist offshoot of Fatah Intifada, a Palestinian group heavily backed by Damascus. While Damascus had no official links to the organization, major questions remain about why Syrian authorities released the group's leader, Shakir al-Absi, from prison in 2006 shortly before the group broke away from Fatah Intifada. Absi had been incarcerated in Syria for the assassination of U.S. diplomat Lawrence Foley in 2002.

In a more general sense, the Assad regime encouraged extremist Sunni Islamists when convenient. For example, the regime tolerated a "spontaneous riot" by Sunni zealots outside the Danish embassy in Damascus in 2006 in protest of a Danish newspaper's publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed that they considered an offense to Islam. Eyewitness accounts show that the demonstration, which led to the burning of the building, was carried out with the full knowledge of the Syrian authorities.

Conclusion

Thus far, terrorist attacks have accounted for only a minuscule portion of the tactics used in the rebellion, although the May 9 attacks would indicate that terrorist attacks in Syria are on the rise in terms of number and scale. Yet the inconsistencies and discrepancies of the May 12 video raises the real possibility that the Assad regime could be manipulating the attack to its domestic and international advantage. Claims of responsibility for future attacks should be evaluated in light of where a video or claim is released (jihadi forums or YouTube), who produces it, and the consistency of the facts it contains.

Washington should emphasize the difference between extremist groups and the civil and armed opposition within Syria. Jihadi groups are active in Syria, though as a small part of groups opposing the Assad regime. But, more importantly, the responsibility for jihadi activities in Syria rests with the Assad regime; these groups' ability to operate in Syria has been boosted by the regime's historic relationships with extremist Sunni groups. Assad's brutal repression, combined with the meager assistance from the West for the opposition, has given a great boost to the jihadi narrative.

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