

THE RADICALIZATION OF SYRIA

Jihadist
rivalries in
the Levant
could
threaten
Europe

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[Photos by Reuters]



Al-Qaida, its branches and sympathizers viewed the 2011 Syrian uprising, which turned into a civil war, as a great opportunity to expand their reach. Of all of the Arab Spring countries, Syria was the most prized because of its religio-historical significance, relative closeness to the West (compared with other battlefields of jihad) and proximity to Israel with its jihadist-coveted city of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Mosque. What al-Qaida viewed as a promise, though, has turned into a nightmare because of its now existential battle with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) for supremacy of the global jihadist movement.



Fighters with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant parade through Tel Abyad, Syria, in January 2014, one month before it publicly split with al-Qaida. Deadly rivalries between competing jihadis have increased bloodshed in Syria.

AL-QAIDA ENTERS THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

When the uprising in Syria first broke out in March 2011, jihadists, specifically al-Qaida, were flat-footed in their response. Al-Qaida would recover relatively quickly, though. Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), al-Qaida's official branch in Syria and increasingly called "Al-Qaida in Bilad al-Sham" by its members, announced itself in late January 2012, but evidence suggests it was originally established in late July 2011. Abu Lokman, a senior JN commander in Aleppo, told the BBC in January 2013 that he joined the group in its infancy six months before its first public video release. This would place JN's founding at the end of July 2011, a period corroborated by other JN fighters in interviews with Western and Arab media.

Abu Lokman's date also coincides with al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahri's first video message related to the Syrian uprising, released July 27, 2011. In it, he supported the "Muslims in Bilad al-Sham, the land of ribat, jihad, glory, Arabism and nobility." Two weeks after JN's announcement, on February 11, 2012, al-Zawahri released another video message in support of the Syria jihad and hopes for what is to come: "O lions of Sham, evoke the will of Jihad in the path of Allah to support Islam, the oppressed, the tortured, the captives, and to gain revenge for the Muslim martyrs. Evoke the will of Jihad in the path of Allah to establish a state that defends the Muslim countries, seeks to free the Golan, and continues Jihad until the flag of victory is raised above the usurped hills of al-Quds, Allah willing."

It is likely that in late summer 2011, al-Qaida coordinated with its Iraqi branch at the time (in February 2014, it was officially kicked out of al-Qaida). The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi dispatched operatives to Syria to set

up JN. Among them was Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, the leader of what would become JN, which officially announced itself in late January 2012. By November 2012, al-Jawlani had built JN into one of the opposition's best fighting forces, and locals viewed its members as fair arbiters when dealing with corruption and social services.

Similarly, al-Qaida placed key operatives in senior leadership positions of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, a local Syrian jihadist group. One of the key individuals was Abu Khalid al-Suri, a longtime friend of the infamous Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, believed to be imprisoned by Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Abu Khalid was a founding member for Ahrar al-Sham and is one of the reasons why it and JN have been such close partners. Like JN, Ahrar al-Sham was originally announced in late January 2012 and has grown to become one of, if not the most, powerful rebel groups in the Syrian war.

Since 2013, al-Qaida has dispatched a number of operatives to JN, and to a lesser extent, Ahrar al-Sham. Abdul Mohsin Abdullah Ibrahim Al Sharikh, better known as Sanafi al-Nasr, is the head of al-Qaida's Victory Committee in Syria and a top leader in JN. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, al-Qaida's former head of security for counterintelligence, Abu Wafa al-Saudi, is also in Syria, as well as Abu Humam al-Suri, who heads JN's paramilitary forces; former head of al-Qaida's Iran facilitation network Muhsin al-Fadhli; founding al-Qaida member Abu Firas al-Suri; and Abu Hasan, a former al-Qaida in Afghanistan fighter and now a top leader in Ahrar al-Sham. As such, al-Qaida has been able to send key influencers to help steer the jihad in Syria as well as do what Western governments fear the most: train and prepare individuals for external operations in the West.



Members of the Syrian group Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaida affiliate, watch for warplanes loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Idlib province in May 2014.

Social media facilitation: In many respects, Syria is the first large-scale socially mediated war. In the past, individuals had to seek the password-protected jihadi forums to get information about groups and ideologies and discuss things among peers of online jihadi activists. Now, it is much easier to access Twitter and Facebook. These sites are relatively open and, in the case of Twitter, groups can target audiences through hashtags, potentially exposing those previously unexposed to the global jihadi movement. Twitter and Facebook unintentionally aid jihadist networking by providing recommendations for

FOREIGN FIGHTERS

In addition to placing key players in Syria and attempting to leverage influence within Ahrar al-Sham and JN, foreign fighters are a key constituency that al-Qaida hoped to meld and use for the future. Westerners are the biggest prize for al-Qaida because their passports allow them to travel to most locations relatively easily and they can more easily go back home to conduct attacks against the West. As of mid-2014, about 3,000 to 4,000 Westerners — the vast majority from Western Europe — were in Syria, many now dead, arrested or returned home.

There are eight reasons that explain why there has been such an unprecedented mobilization of individuals to join the fight in Syria:

Ease of travel: Unlike the destinations of past foreign fighter mobilizations, it is relatively easy to reach Syria. Most individuals fly or drive to Turkey and then proceed to Syria. Compared with Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia or Mali, going to Turkey does not necessarily raise any red flags since it is a huge tourist destination. Flights to Turkey, at least from Europe, are cheap, and most countries have visa waiver deals with the Turkish government. This makes travel easier, especially for those who might not be willing to risk going to more isolated locations.

Seasoned grassroots support networks: Compared to the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, today's foreign fighter networks are not starting from scratch. Rather, they are building from past efforts and tapping into established local grassroots movements and organizations. For example, in Western Europe there is al-Muhajirun in Britain, Sharia4Belgium in Belgium, Forsane Alizza in France, and Millatu Ibrahim in Germany, to name a few. In addition, in North Africa, the Ansar al-Sharia network operates in Libya and Tunisia.

other like-minded individuals to “follow” or “friend,” making such groups relatively easy to find through their algorithms.

Emotional resonance of the “cause:” A major motivation for many foreign fighters the over-the-top brutality and massacres the Assad regime has repeatedly perpetrated against the majority Sunni Muslim Syrian population. It does not help that the Assad regime is Alawite and viewed as heretical within Islam. The Shiite Iranian government, the Lebanese Hezbollah and a number of Iraqi Shiite militiamen assist the movement. Additionally, widely disseminated images of brutality evoke visceral emotions, creating a desire to help, especially given that overt responses to the tragedy, whether by Western governments or Arab regimes, are limited. Many feel it is a personal duty, in solidarity with their fellow Sunni Muslim brothers and sisters in Syria, to fight Assad.

“5-Star jihad” appeal: To many, the Syrian jihad is “cool” and a relatively comfortable activity compared to braving the wilderness in the mountains or deserts of Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia or Mali. In Syria, for example, many foreigners have lived in villas with pools and video game rooms.

Religious, historical and millenarian pull: That Damascus was once the seat of the ancient Caliphate provides a strong motivation for those who hope for its resurrection. Additionally, Islamic eschatology on end-of-times prophecies loom large since the key battles are located in the Levant, with some of the foreign fighters believing they are bringing about the day of judgment. Note that JN's media outlet is named *al-Manara al-Bayda*, the White Minaret. This refers to the minaret at the Grand Mosque in Damascus that Jesus is allegedly supposed to descend from to take on the *dajjal*, the false messiah, and hasten God's judgment.

Anti-Shiite sentiment: Such sentiment has become more prevalent as the conflict has evolved because of two key main dynamics: first, the assistance to the Assad regime by the Shiite foreign contingent of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi militiamen for the Assad regime. The second factor is the radicalization of many fighting forces within the rebel ranks into Salafism, whose doctrine is anti-Shiite.

The caliphate project: Now that ISIS controls territory from rural parts of Aleppo governorate in Syria through Anbar province in Iraq, many foreign fighters, especially Westerners, are attracted to state building. ISIS is not just talking the talk, but also walking the walk in comparison to al-Qaida/JN, which ISIS views as uncommitted to bringing forth a neo-Caliphate.

SUCCESS LEADS TO FITNA

JN's successes, not only on the battlefield but also in gaining allies and sympathizers within the mainstream of the rebellion, suggest that it has learned from its failures in Iraq in the past decade. The future looked bright for JN since it had also started the process of outreach to non-combatants within Syria to socialize and normalize its ideas with the population. JN's hope is that as its ideas become the norm the populace would not regard the group's ideas as radical, allowing it to implement harsh sharia judgments without backlash. While this effort continues, it has slowed because of actions taken by its father organization, ISI.

In April 2013, ISIS leader al-Baghdadi changed the name of his group from ISI to ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, because of the positive vibes Syrians were giving to JN. Al-Baghdadi likely believed that it was acceptable to announce publicly what was already known: that JN and ISI were one and the same. Yet this did not work out as planned. In fact, JN leader al-Jawlani rebuffed the name change and public cannibalization of his organization. Al-Jawlani reaffirmed his *bayat*, or allegiance, to al-Qaida central chief al-Zawahri, who tried and failed to nullify al-Baghdadi's power play. In defiance, al-Baghdadi released an audio message stating ISIS would remain in Syria and would not adhere to a division (the Iraq-Syria border) based on the World War I Sykes-Picot deal or take orders from a human since he only received inspiration from God. Amid the confusion, many foreign fighters left JN for ISIS, while al-Baghdadi himself moved from Iraq and established a base in Syria, according to the U.S. State Department. Therefore, contrary to the media narrative that JN merged with ISIS, the two groups actually separated.

This was a major setback for al-Qaida and its Syrian affiliate JN. Not only were more foreign fighters interested in ISIS, but al-Qaida and JN lost prestige and strength overall within the Syrian arena. JN was relatively quiet for the next few months, attempting to recover and plot a comeback. This was also the first sign that ISIS was not just making a power play for Syria, but also against al-Qaida for supreme leadership of the future of the global jihadi movement.

While there were tensions between these two groups until early February 2014, they attempted to smooth things over and put on a good public face. There was essentially an unwritten agreement that they would not bother each other and have a de facto competition of which group could do better on the battlefield against the Assad regime and its Iranian, Hezbollah and other Shiite allies.

Things would only get worse. On the evening of February 2, 2014, al-Qaida's general command released a statement disavowing itself from ISIS: "ISIS is not a branch of the Qaidat al-Jihad [al-Qaida's official name] group, we have no organizational relationship with it, and the group is not responsible for its actions." The rift between al-Qaida/JN and ISIS at first consisted mainly of sniping between leaders. The open warfare between the rebel groups — specifically the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF), Jaysh al-Mujahedin (JM), and the Islamic Front (IF) — and ISIS since early January 2014 — widened the gap and was one of the main reasons al-Qaida finally cast ISIS away.

Since that announcement in February, there has been open warfare between JN and ISIS inside Syria, and online between grassroots activists. There have even been signs of foundation cracks in groups outside the Syrian theater in relation to the al-Qaida/ISIS split. There is now an open competition for the future of the global jihad. This, in turn, twisted al-Qaida's golden opportunity in Syria into a nightmare. While JN has recovered from the original announcement of ISIS and has been able to hold strong against open warfare between the two groups, in the eyes of many younger individuals in the movement, ISIS is the future and al-Qaida/JN is the past.

While there are indeed younger people with al-Qaida/JN, and there are older individuals with ISIS, in many ways the issue is generational. There is a fundamental difference of philosophies and when individuals came of age. Most in the al-Qaida camp came of age during the large-scale foreign fighter mobilizations in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, while those on team ISIS came of age during the Iraq jihad of the last decade and the Syrian war. While it appears the al-Qaida-ISIS battle slightly favors ISIS, that does not necessarily mean al-Qaida and its branches are completely defeated. It is still early in the struggle. Al-Qaida could conceivably regain the upper hand, though it definitely will have to work hard to regain its post-9/11 swagger.

Al-Qaida's biggest potential play now is attacks on the West emanating from Syria. This would show that it still has the ability to conduct such operations and has not been hollowed out by drone attacks. This is why so many Western officials are worried about the slew of Western foreign fighters. Desperation could bring escalation, especially if ISIS believes it needs to compete in external operations as well. The future is nearly impossible to predict vis-à-vis the Syrian jihad and the al-Qaida/JN-ISIS war. Nevertheless, jihadists being jihadists, it is likely to include a lot of blood. □