



The Jihadist Network in the Syrian Revolution A Strategic Briefing

Introduction

The Syrian rebel fighters fall into three main categories: 1) local groups of fighters such as the Kurds who are fighting to fulfill the Kurdish aspirations in Syria; 2) patriots who are represented mainly by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and 3) the jihadists. The vast majority of the opposition fighters are legitimate nationalists fighting for the country's freedom and the establishment of a democratic state, including the Kurds who control many towns along the country's northern border with Turkey. Several reports have indicated that most members within the FSA are pious rather than Islamists and are not motivated by sectarianism, but as the Syrian conflict becomes more violent, there remains a possibility of increased radicalization among fighters and the potential for a civil war based on ethnic lines.

In most conflicts of which they are a part, jihadist groups represent a small percentage of combatants – this holds true in the Syrian case, where they represent less than 10% of all fighters. For these jihadi groups, militant uprising is seen as an opportunity to exercise their influence in Syria; particularly as the peaceful revolutions of the Arab Spring rendered their role irrelevant in the nations' fight for freedom.

With the threat of sectarian violence rising, it is important that we are able to understand the main jihadist groups operating in Syria. However, these groups are not a unified force, but a collection of divided groups that differ from one another in many ways, forming a jihadist network. In this report, we will unveil the main jihadist groups fighting in Syria and discuss the main aims, strategies, origin of fighters, ideologies and leadership of the jihadist network so as to better analyze the potential of their influence on the country's future.

Origins

The jihadist network in Syria has adopted militant Islamism as its ideology and was established in two main phases:

1. A pre-revolution phase: This phase began in 2003 with the beginning of the Iraq war and was highly influenced by al-Qaeda ideology and rhetoric. Syria was the main gateway from which most of the Arab foreign fighters infiltrated Iraq. The Syrian jihadi link was led initially by Abu Musab Al- Zaraqawi who, at a later stage, appointed Lebanese jihadists to take responsibility of the logistic and military work in Syria, with some influence from neighboring countries.
2. The revolution phase: This salafi jihadist network is comprised mainly of radical Sunni members who joined various groups after the revolution had started. This phase has been characterized by low-level urban guerilla warfare, combined with several terrorist techniques. It has links in

Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as well a minor link to Western countries such as France, Belgium and the UK.

The origins of fighters who are taking part in the jihadist mission vary from group to group. A jihadist group called *Jabhat al-Nusra –or the al Nusra Front to Protect the Levant*, considered to be Syria's al-Qaeda's branch, attracts Syrian jihadists as well as other foreign fighters who have arrived in Syria after fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Another group named *Liwa' al-Ummah- or The Brigade of the Nation* consists of mainly homegrown fighters, but also attracts dozens of Libyan rebels who joined their Libyan leader Mahdi al-Harati to support the Free Syrian Army rebels in their fight against the regime. Abu Zein, a spokesman for *Sukur al-Sham- The Falcons of the Levant*, one of the most prominent emerging homegrown groups, claims that the organization includes Syrians as well as other Arabic, French and Belgian fighters. Dr. Abu Muhammad al-Suri, a veteran Syrian jihadist, is the leader of *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya* ("The Islamic State"), a small jihadi group that has enabled a handful of British Muslims to take part in the fighting in Syria. Quilliam believes that the latter group was involved in the brutal kidnapping of the Western journalists, John Cantlie (British) and Jeroen Oerlemans (Dutch), in July 2012. Whilst these different groups are comprised mainly of Syrian fighters, foreign fighters have been known to take advantage of the security chaos in Syria to infiltrate the country and join jihadi groups in the opposition.

Aims and Objectives

The Syrian jihadi groups see their struggle as a holy war against Bashar al-Assad's regime, and some of them openly express that their objective is to establish an "Islamic" state in Syria (governed by their version of Sharia), following the overthrow of the regime. On their website, the jihadi group *Liwa' al-Islam*, defines itself as "an independent jihadi group that adopts a militant strategy against the armed gangs of Assad and sees its struggle as a Jihad in the path of Allah, following strictly the rules of *Shariah*, the Quran and the *Sunnah*, based on the understanding of the righteous forefathers". The group *Ahrar al-Sham* clearly states on its website that it is working to establish, in Syria, "a just Islamic regime through Shari'a means". Similarly, the group *Liwa' al-Ummah* states, on its Facebook page, that one of its main aims is "to cooperate with everyone for the establishment of a righteous Islamic regime, chosen by the *ummah*". Furthermore, in their first issued statement, al-Qaeda affiliated group *al-Nusra Front* declared that their aim is to "bring back the law of Allah to his land".

Experts are concerned that if the struggle continues in the same violent momentum, there is a possibility that the aims of these groups will become highly influenced by al-Qaeda's objectives, globalizing their current national agenda and turning it into Jihad against the West instead. It is also likely that the ongoing fighting in Syria could lead to sectarian civil war, increasing the level of cooperation between the different jihadist groups operating in the country and fuelling them further.

Ideology

Although they are driven by a prevailing Islamist force, not all groups share the same ideology. *Al-Nusra Front* for instance, is largely influenced by al-Qaeda's rigid jihadi ideology. Although its primary target remains the Syrian government and army, it has referred to the US as the enemy of Islam, and has attacked the beliefs of other religious groups in Syria, including the Alawites. Likewise, the group *Liwa' al-Islam* sees the struggle in Syria as a sectarian war against the Alawites, using al-Qaeda's jihadi rhetoric. Both groups have their own Sharia panel of experts who provide religious advice for the groups' operations. Other groups such as *Liwa' al-Umma* and *Sukur al-Sham* view their struggle as an attempt to defend the *ummah* (Muslim peoples) from the atrocities of Assad's

regime. The leader of *Liwaa al-Umma* claims that the group is working to refine its political ideology to accept all factions, religions, and sects in Syria including Alawites, whilst maintaining “an Islamic frame of reference”.

One striking similarity is found between the groups *Ahrar al-Sham* in Syria and *Ansar al-Sunnah* in Iraq - despite being ethnically Kurdish, both groups follow a salafi-jihadist ideology.

Leadership

Most of the jihadist groups in the network are making an effort to conceal the identity of their leaders or any information about their background, especially in these early stages of the struggle. However, some of these groups’ leaders can be fully or partially identified: as in the case of *Liwaa al-Umma* or *Sukur al-Sham*.

Each group has its own central leadership in addition to the leaders of the battalion. *Al-Nusra*, for example, is believed to be led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, who released a video statement calling on the Syrian people to unite in a holy war against the Syrian authorities. In the video, al-Julani urged the Syrians to join in to fight against the Assad regime and defended jihad as the only hope for Islam. He has also rejected any possibility of relying on the international community or the Arab states. Ahmad Issa al-Sheikh was jailed by the regime in 2004 and established the group *Sukur Al-Sham*, of which he is the leader, in 2011 – in line with the beginning of the Syrian uprising. *Liwaa al-Umma* is led by Mahdi al-Harati, a Libyan who served as an Arabic and Quran teacher at a Dublin mosque and later become a prominent commander of the 2011 Libyan revolution before moving to Syria to join the rebels and form his group.

Structure

The jihadi groups do not have a unified leaders’ body – such as the *Shura* Council which was established in Iraq in 2005 as a main body that unifies the jihadist groups in the country - nor have they made any attempts at this stage to establish one.

Each group consists of two kinds of members:

- 1) Hard core jihadists - those with some previous experience and organizational affiliation, who enjoy having the greatest influence possible due to their high profile and experience.
- 2) Amateur jihadists – those who lack real fighting experience, but are inspired by the call of jihad and have accepted the Syrian situation as a platform to achieve their Islamist aspirations.

The organizational structure of the network is also divided into different groups. According to Quilliam’s sources and investigation, we are comfortable in concluding that the overwhelming majority of fighters in the network are Syrian, with the number of foreign fighters varying between 1200-1500 members. The structure of the jihadist groups is characterized by: “[l]imited command and control, very poor communications, lack of offensive capability. Arming and Funding influence the structure of the network”.¹

Recruitment patterns differ across groups. Whereas *al-Nusra* is characterized by a strict recruitment pattern based on tough security measures, other groups have an open system of recruitment. *Sukur*

¹ Dorsey, James 2011: “Syrian Uprising: Arab League acts on Damascus”, available at: <http://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/handle/10220/8050/RSIS1672011.pdf?sequence=1>

al-Sham's members are officers and soldiers who defected from the Syrian army, as well as citizens who joined the group. This group began operating as a battalion, which was divided into military and civil branches, which due to geographical expansion and an increase in the number of fighters joining it, developed into a brigade consisting of 10 battalions operating in Idlib region and other battalions in Aleppo, Rif Dimashq and Latakia. All jihadi groups in Syria have a central command and several brigades or battalions, and this has become a common structure amongst them. *Liwa al-Islam* is comprised of battalions that are named after the companions of the Prophet and famous battles that took place during his time. *Liwa al-Ummah* brigade is comprised of 6000 fighters across several battalions. *Ahrar al-Sham Brigade* is a Kurdish group of several brigades operating across various areas of the country, but predominantly in Idlib where the group has fought the Syrian army in the battles of Jericho, Jabal Zawiya and Saraqib.

Strategies and Tactics

Jihadist group members aim at fighting the entire Syrian regime through a comprehensive plan that constitutes mainly guerilla warfare and terrorist tactics. Currently, the groups' objective is to continue fighting the Syrian army in a war of attrition. The next stage would be moving from attrition to balancing their operational capability against the regime.

The jihadi groups in Syria use mainly guerrilla warfare tactics and, more specifically, urban guerrilla warfare. It is clear that they are in the process of creating their own infrastructure and organizations independent of the fighting, since they plan to become independent organizations following the regime's overthrow. Abdelmajid al-Khatib, the political organiser of *Liwa al-Ummah*, stated, in an interview with Foreign Policy Magazine, that his plan is "to transform into a political party to accomplish the goals of Liwa al-Ummah," and added that his groups "want to be part of any transitional government. The end of the regime is close, so it is necessary for us to get organized politically to ensure that such a government is not created from the outside but from here inside Syria."

Many groups mobilize foreign fighters as added political value to gain support from Muslim-majority nations, who have been funding several Islamist groups in Syria as well as sending them military hardware equipment. *Al-Nusra* for example, whose main strategy includes bombings and suicide attacks, seeks to recruit potential suicide bombers from other countries. The group has claimed credit for two suicide attacks in Aleppo on February 10, 2012; suicide strikes against a police building and the Syrian Air Force's intelligence headquarters on March 17, 2012; a suicide attack on a Syrian military unit supposedly responsible for a massacre in the town of al-Latamina on April 20, 2012; a bombing at the Iranian Cultural Center in Damascus on April 24, 2012; a suicide attack near an Alawite mosque in the Maydan neighborhood of Damascus on April 27, 2012, and a series of attempted assassinations against Syrian officials primarily utilizing so-called "sticky" bombs affixed to vehicles. US *National Director of Intelligence, James Clapper* said that the modus operandi used in the attacks in Syria mimicked attacks in Iraq, and that al-Qa'ida in Iraq was, in all probability, responsible for the suicide attacks in Syria.²

Liwa al-Islam has claimed responsibility for several attacks that took place in Syria, the most notable of which was the bombing of the national security compound in Damascus on July 18, 2012 leading to the death of Syria's defense minister, at the same time that the Free Syrian Army claimed its responsibility for the attack. The group's military strategy relies on suicide and front line attacks. *Sukur al-Sham* Brigade uses guerilla warfare tactics, including suicide and car bombings that target the Syrian army, while "attempting to avoid killing civilians" according to the group's statements.

² AFP, "New Islamist Militant Group Al-Nusra Front Claims Responsibility for Damascus Bombings in January, Calls for Jihad Against Regime," 29 February 2012

Ahar al-Sham and *Liwa al-Ummah* battalions operate mainly by attacking military check-points and compounds using improvised explosive devices.

Strategic position is a strategy used by several groups to control governing points. *Al-Dawla al-Islamiya* group controls the strategic Bab el-Hawa crossing. Most of al-Nusra's group operations are concentrated either inside Damascus or around it. This is a clear strategic tool aiming to strengthen their position as a group in the capital.

The jihadi groups' strategies have two main dimensions: military and media. Militarily, they depend on guerrilla warfare and terrorism tactics and their media strategy is based on propaganda. Social media is a tool that has been increasingly used by most of these groups as an attempt to master their propaganda by using videos, songs and statements.

Unlike the other Syrian groups fighting for freedom, the jihadist groups do not take part in any forms of civil and/or political resistance.

What Lies Ahead

The increasing evidence of jihadist activism in Syria in recent months indicates that the uprising is moving towards a new and more radical phase. Jihadist groups are playing a larger role in the country, raising concerns about al-Qaeda's actual influence in the increasing Syrian chaos. The infiltration of weapons and funding to these groups, as well as the ethno-religious component of the Syrian uprising is likely to continue to serve as a source of attraction for many fighters, some of whom are ex-Free Syrian Army soldiers and many of whom are from foreign countries.

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