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Al-Qaeda in Syria: implications for Middle Eastern Security and U.S Foreign Policy.

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Al-Qaeda in Syria: implications for Middle Eastern Security and U.S Foreign Policy.

by

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Submitted to Prof. Ilai Saltzman

For

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1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of violence in Syria, the civil war has claimed well over 100,000 lives, with some estimates putting the current figure nearer to 150,000.¹ The amount of refugees created as a result of the war is now over eight and a half million.² The situation in Syria represents not only the most disastrous contemporary humanitarian crisis, but is also the most dangerous in terms of its potential long-term spillover effects in the region. Located in the heart of the Middle East, an unstable Syria with a large and ever growing jihadist presence is the sum of all fears for not only Israel and Europe but also pro-Western Arab countries. Syria's most prominent jihadist organization, the Nusra Front, also known as Jabhat-al-Nusra, is in the process of creating a base for Al-Qaeda in Syria to use as a launching pad for the export of terrorism. Today the Al-Nusra Front is prominent among the rebel organizations because of its military and financial capabilities, its effective chain of command and control, and the deep ideological commitment of its operatives. The successful long-term entrenchment of this group in Syria poses one of the most serious threats to both regional and global security.

The Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, when longstanding tensions between the ruling Alawite minority and the Sunni majority were exacerbated by the revolutionary atmosphere that had taken hold over the Middle East. With uprisings taking place in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, small amounts of Syrians initially began protesting against the Baathist 'Nizam', or 'system' in Arabic. While these initial, localized protests

¹ *AP Online*, "Syria death toll from rebel infighting," April 11, 2014.

² Perriello, Tom. "A New Start To U.S. Policy in Syria Can Save Lives." *The Daily Beast*. Newsweek/Daily Beast, 17 Feb. 2014 Web. 28 Apr. 2014

took root in the underdeveloped rural areas of Syria, they were aggravated by Bashar-al-Assad's disproportionately heavy handed response, and soon spread throughout the country. Assad's specific usage of exclusively Alawite crack squads in quelling the protests stoked the sectarian flames of the conflict and made the economically disenfranchised Sunni majority feel existentially threatened. Within a period of months, protests had turned to violence, and violence into a full-fledged civil war.

More than three years since the Arab Spring began in Syria the conflict has turned into a proxy war, with the foreign policy objectives of various countries being fought out on the ground. Syria can no longer be considered a country intact; the Assad regime has lost effective control of large parts of the country and many of its vital supply lines, particularly in the North. Various rebel groups, numbering over 150,000 fighters in total, have emerged all over the country. These rebel groups are split along ideological, religious, ethnic and regional lines. Due to their considerable division at the outset of the war the rebel groups were unable to form a centralized, legitimate and representative command structure, resulting in their cooperation being characterized by a complex web of shaky alliances and ad-hoc relationships. Western hesitancy to intervene in Syria was fueled by this fact along with the growing presence/prominence of hardcore Salafi Jihadist groups within the opposition.

Of these Jihadi rebel groups, one group in particular has risen to the ranks of prominence by virtue of its effectiveness in fighting the regime; the Al-Nusra Front. As Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, the Nusra Front is Al-Qaeda's way of making inroads into the Arab Spring at large; popularizing Salafi Jihad in a region overflowing with potential recruits. Throughout the majority of the armed conflict, it has been Jabhat al Nusra that

has led insurgent attacks on key Syrian military installations; air-defense bases, coastal and major highway routes in attempts to block supply lines; the vast majority of suicide attacks in civilian areas; and assassinations on key Government security officials. JN has distinguished itself from other outfits by being the best equipped, most organized, consistently well-funded and most importantly, by far the most successful on the ground. Having been described as the revolution's 'elite commando troops', the Nusra Front boasts of a dangerous cadre of fighters that are highly experienced, disciplined, ideologically committed and tactically efficient³. These fighters are gaining valuable experience in combat, bomb-making, propaganda and counter-intelligence. Most are developing relationships with fighters from other regions – such as the Persian Gulf, North Africa and South Asia. In addition, these ties are being used to transport greater amounts of money, lethal aid and non-lethal material to the Syrian front.⁴ It is undeniable that the Nusra Front currently is and will continue to be one of the more significant players in Syria. Understanding the origins, goals, composition, structure, strategy and tactics of the Nusra Front is thus important for a number of reasons, most of all because of the danger the group presents by way of its unique status; the Nusra Front has managed to somehow maintain ultimate allegiance to Al Qaeda's transnational jihadist ideology while acquiring widespread popular support and/or acceptance within Syrian anti-government society.

The primary focus of this paper is a group named Jahbat-Al-Nusra, also known as the Al-Nusra Front, a Salafi-Jihadi Syrian opposition group that is Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. This paper will assess the influence of Salafist Jihadi groups linked to Al-Qaeda

³ "[Syria revolt attracts motley foreign jihadi corps](#)". Agence France Presse. 18 August 2012

⁴ Jones, Seth. "IISS." *Syria's Growing Jihad*. International Institute for Strategic Studies, 01 Aug. 2013. Web. 26 Apr. 2014.

within the Syrian opposition as regional actors. By way of this assessment this paper will further seek to extrapolate the resultant impacts that Al-Qaeda's influence in Syria will have in the future on Middle Eastern Security. The paper will use its analysis of the growing prominence of Jihadist groups in Syria to highlight the incoherent and oft self-contradictory nature of U.S Syria policy up till now, and will conclude with some recommendations for U.S policy in the region.

The civil war and uprising in Syria has made it an ideal nesting ground/battlefront for Al-Qaeda. While Syria's strategic location at the heart of the Arab world is one reason for this, the creation of an environment (*vis-à-vis* the conflict) that is conducive to Al-Qaeda infiltration and operations is another. The war in Syria has eroded the foundation of Syrian society in particularly war-torn areas; governance has broken down, populations have been displaced and the provision of basic needs to the population has ceased altogether in some cases. All this has had the effect of creating a vacuum that is particularly conducive to the absorption of extremist views and behavior. Evidence for this is found not only in the growing presence of Salafi-Jihadi groups within the opposition, but also in the statements of Al-Qaeda leaders; in February 2012, Al-Qaeda Emir Ayman Al Zawahiri called upon "every Muslim and every honorable and free person in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon to go and aid his brothers in Syria".⁵

In order to contextualize JN's (Jahbat-Al-Nusra) presence and growing influence in Syria, it is important to identify the reasons as to why the opposition was receptive to Salafist influence in a country in which the majority has historically tended to reject extremist views. Emphasis will be laid on the fact that it is a combination of existent Shia-Sunni tensions and the socio-economic conditions of Sunni's living in rural areas (as

⁵ Jason Burke, "Al-Qaida leader Zawahiri urges Muslim support for Syrian Uprising," *The Guardian*, February 12, 2012.

opposed to Sunni and Shia mercantile classes living in cities) that allowed for Salafist ideology to gain momentum in the immediate aftermath of the uprising in Syria

2. The Syrian Sectarian Dynamic: Reasons for Receptiveness of Opposition to Salafist Influence

Before delving into analysis of individual groups it is important to understand the core reasons because of which Salafist groups such as JN were able to gain a foothold within the opposition. It is pertinent to grasp the causes of this particular phenomenon as its occurrence is counter-intuitive given the historically moderate and Sufist religious outlook that is characteristic of Syrian Muslims.

I. Syria's moderate religious history

While it may be difficult to imagine at this juncture, Syria has historically been a successful example of peaceful religious co-existence in the Middle East. Home to ancient Christian communities, a variety of Muslim sects, and several indigenous and heterodox religions, Syria's culture has always been more heterogeneous than Arab lands in the Gulf and North Africa. As fellow 'People of the Book,' Christians and Jews (prior to 1948) lived easily alongside their Muslim neighbors, while the country's deserts and mountains provided geographic sanctuary to less protected religious and ethnic minority groups. Though sectarianism always lurked in its different forms somewhere beneath the surface, prior to the 2011 uprising, more than 87 percent of Syrians 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they always treat members of other faiths with respect according to Gallup data. Meanwhile, in 2009, another 78 percent of Syrians said that they had a positive opinion of Christians, while 5 percent said they had a negative opinion. In pre-conflict

Syria, it was common for friends of other religions to attend each other's weddings and funerals, and it was considered rude to inquire into someone's religious background⁶

Thus the radicalization of Syrian society today does not have the kind of historical precedent that is typical of such phenomenon. In other countries where Islamic fundamentalism is rampant (Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan) extremist elements had long since been entrenched within their societies/cultures, thus making Syria somewhat of an anomaly in this sense. The sudden and drastic wave of fundamentalism that has accompanied the uprising in Syria is telling of the amount of frustration that existed within the country under the economically unimpressive rule of Bashar-al-Assad.

II. Salafism: A Brief introduction

In order to do assess the causes of the oppositions receptiveness to hardcore Salafism (such as that advocated by JN and ISIS), a definition of the term 'Salafi' is required. It is also important at this point to make the distinction between 'Salafi', Salafi Jihadi, and Islamist. Considering the irresponsibility/inaccuracy with which these terms are thrown around in the Western media, it is essential to be able to distinguish between them and the respective ideologies they subscribe to. While members of the FSA may invoke jihad as a motivator in their fight against the regime, this does not make them Salafi, or Salfi-Jihadi for that matter. While both Salafi-Jihadis and Islamists are committed to the establishment of an Islamic state and the revival of political Islam, they are not the same in that they subscribe to totally different methodologies in the achievement and actual practice of an Islamic state.

⁶ Loschky, Jay. "5 Faith Facts on Religion in Syria - OnFaith." *OnFaith*. N.p., 25 Sept. 2013. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.

The name ‘Salafi’ originates from the word ‘Salaf’, which means predecessors or ancestors. What the term is meant to invoke is a harkening back to the earliest Muslims who are considered the best examples of Islamic practice. The contemporary term ‘Salafi’ has its roots in a nineteenth century movement of Islamic modernist reform. It is now used to refer to conservative Muslims who seek to apply literalist interpretations of scripture based on the example set by the Prophet and his companions⁷.

The following is an excerpt from a study on Jihad in Syria done by Elizabeth O’Bagy, and provides a brief but comprehensive description of Salafism; “*Salafism* is a Sunni school of jurisprudence most closely associated with Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal that emphasizes the *salaf*, the earliest Muslim community, as the strict model for contemporary Islamic practice. Salafists treat any divergence from this original model as heresy, resulting in an extreme enmity towards what they consider heretical Islamic Sects including Shiism and especially Basharal-Assad’s Alawite sect. According to Salafism, the Quran, the Hadith, and the consensus of approved Islamic scholarship provide sufficient guidance upon which to establish governance and a social framework. They insist on the literal truth of the Quran and abide by a very narrow and conservative version of *Sharia*, or Islamic law. Salafists look upon the entire early Islamic political experience as religiously mandated. Thus, they tend to reject democracy since it entails putting Islam to the vote rather than mandating it, and they have historically rejected all modern political systems and ideas. Accordingly, they reject the concept of statehood and seek to establish an Islamic caliphate that would encompass the entire Umma, or Muslim community. Salafi movements go much further in restricting political and personal life

⁷ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°104, *Radical Islam in Gaza*, 29 March 2011.

than the more modern Islamist groups; in particular, they are averse to equal rights for women and minorities.”⁸

There is also a distinction between traditional Salafis, such as those described above, and Salafi Jihadis, with the former advocating political activism as the primary means of enacting social change and the latter being a small subset of the former who embrace an Islamist ideology that is heavily committed to the ‘rationalization of the existence and behavior of militants’⁹. The term Salafi-Jihadi was coined by French scholar Giles Kepel to describe the beliefs of Salafis who became interested in violent Jihad. French scholar Giles Kepel coined the term Salafi-Jihadi to describe the beliefs of Salafis who became interested in violent Jihad. Salafi Jihadis typically reject democracy on the basis of it being a human encroachment on God given law, and consider the violent targeting of democratic Muslim governments as legitimate for this reason. Muslims of divergent schools of thought are also considered ‘apostates’ by hardcore Salafi Jihadis, and are thus also legitimate targets in the enacting of Jihad.

There are essentially three types of Salafist groups operating in Syria ;(1) the moderates, who are represented by the ‘Believers Participation Movement’ led by Sheikh Louay-al-Zabi, (2) the traditional Salafis represented by the ‘Syrian Islamic Front (SIF)’ which is a coalition of armed Salafist groups who lean towards the philosophy of Mohammedal-Sarror, (3) the radical jihadists represented by the JN and led by Abu Mohammed al-Golani. Moderate Salafists generally belong to a school of thought which does not advocate revolutionary and violent jihad in their native countries after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. They are also typically supportive of political democracy.

⁸ Bagy, Elizabeth O' "Jihad In Syria." *Middle East Security Report 6* (2012): 16-17. *Understanding War*. Web. <<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Jihad-In-Syria-17SEPT.pdf>>.

⁹ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge,2002), pp. 219-220

In this sense they are more similar to the Muslim Brotherhood than to either the SIF or the JN. The moderate Salafists belong to a school of thought that seeks the downfall of the Assad regime and the establishment of a government based on Islamic principles. The fighters of the SIF are considered moderate in the sense that their philosophy is more tempered than that of their radical jihadi cousins in the ISIL and the JN. These radical jihadis tend to espouse the revolutionary spirit of Egyptian scholars Sayed Qutb and Ayman-al_zawahiri and strongly advocate the use of violence to bring Sharia law to Islamic countries to bring about their eventual goal of recreating an Islamic Caliphate.¹⁰

III. Why Salafism Was Able to Take Root in Syria

The reasons as to why Salafism was able to gain momentum in Syria are primarily (but not solely) related to the socio-economic conditions affecting the Sunni majority in the country. After the accession of Bashar al-Assad to power in Syria, in the summer of 2000, some political and economic reforms were enacted. Of these reforms, the most significant were those pertaining to the regimes relaxation of control over the media and embrace of modern communications technology. This allowed for gulf-funded TV stations and the internet to become the primary purveyors of Salafist propaganda, while the significant Syrian labor migration to Saudi Arabia helped consolidate the migrant class's ties to Salafism¹¹. In addition to these economic reforms, the Assad regime began to grant non-political Islamist groups the space to organize social and humanitarian activities. This was in stark contrast to Syria's historical repression of non-state sponsored Islamist activity. While these reforms were presented as a

¹⁰ Rawi, Waleed Al, and Sterling Jensen. "Syria's Salafist Networks: More Local than You Think." Web.

¹¹ "Syria's Salafi Insurgents; the Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front." *UI Occasional Papers* #17 (2013): n. pag. Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Mar. 2013. Web.

liberalizing measure, in reality it was a concession that the regime had no choice to make in lieu of its failure to uplift the economy. This concession allowed for foreign-backed Salafi movements to enter the religious framework of Syria.¹²

In the 1990s and 2000s, the bankruptcy of Baathist ideology, the globalization of the world economy, and the redirection of regime patronage towards the urban economy all combined to bring about a dramatic downturn in rural living standards. Rural religious minorities were kept in line by their fear of Islamism, but the Sunni countryside became increasingly exasperated with the Assad regime, and began to embrace oppositional and Islamist politics.¹³ The Syrian uprising was, from the outset, rooted in the rural migrant underclass. Years of economic decline and long lasting droughts ensured a prolonged rural-urban migration, causing people to be uprooted from traditional, rural lifestyles and thrown into rough, impersonal, and economically competitive environments that were a far cry from the rural/agricultural social support networks they were accustomed to.¹⁴ Alongside with the State's continuously declining ability to provide services there was simultaneous erosion of faith in the 'system' (or the 'nizam' in Arabic) among socio-economically disenfranchised communities. This erosion in faith in the 'nizam' (amongst the rural migrant class) is in contrast to the economically liberal and socially conservative merchant class that is based in the large cities, whose identity is ingrained in long-established traditions and whose business activities demand religious pragmatism.¹⁵ Hardcore Salafi preachers looking to make ideological inroads into Syrian society found little religious space to expand within city centers, as these city centers typically

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ "TENTATIVE JIHAD: SYRIA'S FUNDAMENTALIST OPPOSITION." *Middle East Report N°131* (n.d.): n. pag. International Crisis Group. Web.

¹⁵ Ibid

comprised of a population that was well integrated with the economy and thus less receptive (by virtue of comfort and security) to extreme views. The outskirts of the main cities, on the other hand, comprised of a population that was economically disenfranchised, socially insecure, and thus ideologically more receptive to the conveniently simplistic and attractively aggressive rhetoric that is characteristic of Salafism. Thus the suburbs of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs slowly became favorable terrain for Salafi preachers.¹⁶

IV. Sectarian nature of conflict

Syria's population is roughly 23 million, of which 74% are Sunni Muslims, 12% are Alawite Shia's, 4% are either Ismaili's or Druze, 10% are made up of various Christian denominations, and the rest are comprised of Kurds and small Jewish communities. In 2010, 56% of the population lived in urban areas.¹⁷ The map shown on the next page provides an insight into Syria's ethno-religious divisions and is a useful tool for understanding not only the larger conflict but also the increased influence of Salafism on Sunni's (an exclusively Sunni school of thought) in Syria.¹⁸

Map of Syrian Ethnic Divisions

¹⁶ Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution*

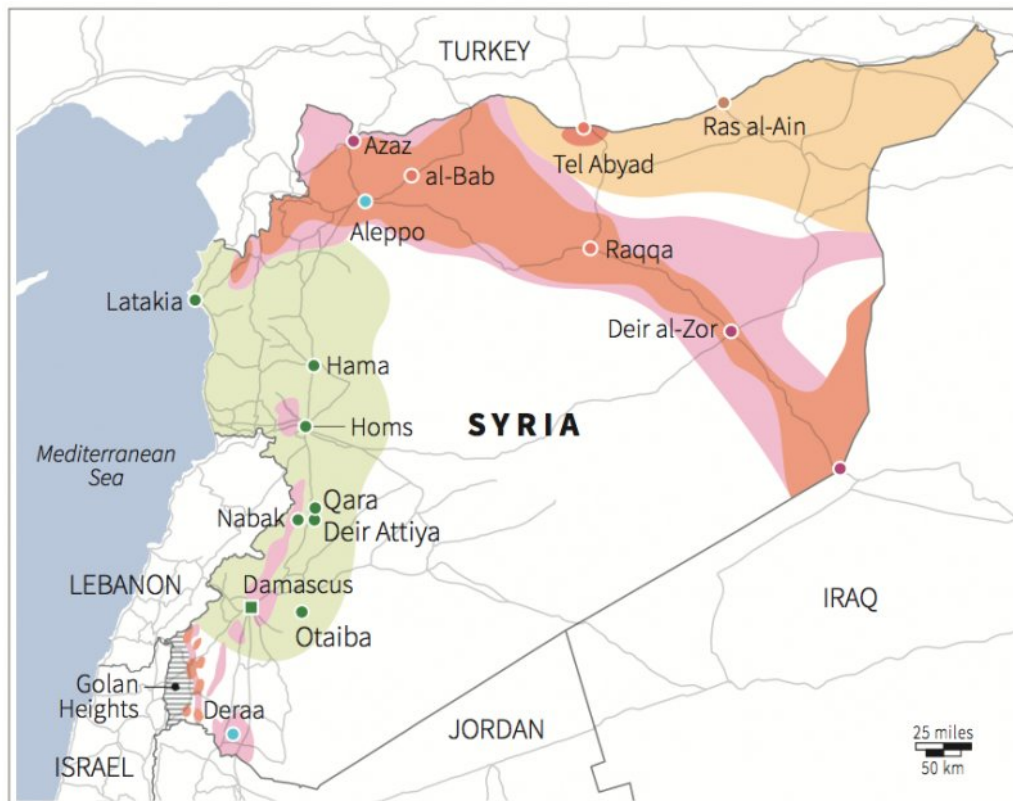
¹⁷ Syria Demographics Profile 2013." *Syria Demographics Profile 2013*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Nov. 2013. <http://www.indexmundi.com/syria/demographics_profile.html>.

¹⁸ Fisher, Max. "The One Map That Shows Why Syria Is so Complicated." *Washington Post*. N.p., 27 Aug. 2013. Web. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/08/27/the-one-map-that-shows-why-syria-is-so-complicated/>>.

Battle for control in Syria

WHO'S IN CONTROL

- Mostly government
- Mostly rebel
- Kurds
- Contested
- Islamist and jihadi groups*



Source: Reuters *Including Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Nusra Front

Staff, 04/02/2014

20 REUTERS

While the socio-economic condition prevalent in Syria prior to the onset of the uprising is one reason why certain areas have become receptive to Salafist preaching, the violent and unmistakably sectarian character of the Syrian civil war is another. Although Bashar Al Assad was not biased against Sunni Syrians in their treatment prior to the uprising, the same cannot be said for the time that has elapsed since demonstrations first broke out. By garnering support from Sunni businesses and religious establishments, marrying into Sunni families, and even occasionally appointing Sunnis to prominent and

²⁰ Map taken from Reuters

sensitive positions, Bashar-Al-Assad, prior to the uprising, had made deliberate efforts to illustrate that his power set-up was not perceived to be aligned solely with the interests of the Alawite minority.²¹

Yet the brutal response that Assad enacted against the demonstrations that broke out in 2011 changed this perception (in whatever small pockets it existed), and confirmed long-held suspicions held by the Sunni majority about the perceived ethno-centrism of the Alawite minority. It is difficult to say with certainty whether or not the Assad regime's decision to use overwhelming force to quell the demonstrations was fueled by sectarian motivations. What can be known for certain, however, is that this decision (regardless of its intentions) changed the entire dynamic of the conflict for the worse; it caused the Sunni majority to feel existentially threatened. This existential threat stemmed from a belief that spread among Sunni's following the harsh repression of Sunni majority protests by Alawite units, that the conflict was being turned into a matter of Sunni vs. Shia/Alawite rather than the regime vs. the people. It is this fear, more than anything else that is likely to have driven young Syrian revolutionaries to embrace the influence of Salafi-Jihadi preachers and recruiters. Fighters were thus drawn to Salafism because it helped them embody a Sunni identity in the most radical and defiant way possible, while also providing them with a theological explanation for the war against Shia Muslims²². Salafism, not unlike other radical schools of thoughts, provides fighters with a spiritual

²¹ "TENTATIVE JIHAD: SYRIA'S FUNDAMENTALIST OPPOSITION." *Middle East Report N°131* (n.d.): n. pag. International Crisis Group. Web.

²² Syria's Salafi Insurgents; the Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front." *UI Occasional Papers #17* (2013): n. pag. Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Mar. 2013. Web.

security that enables them to break free of the fear of death since they can be certain of their place in heaven; in their minds they are fighting on the direct command of God.²³

While hardcore Salafism's influence in Syria has definitely mushroomed since the start of the war, it is not as if it has hijacked the revolution completely. Many in the Syrian opposition are opposed to the idea of an Islamic State in a post-Assad future, a fact that is bound to spark tensions/clashes between the 'moderate' FSA and the hardcore Islamists like Nusra and ISIL. Syria's multi-ethnic, religiously diverse population and tradition of secular Arab nationalism means that al-Nusra will probably not be able to realize its dream of an Islamic empire. Nevertheless its dominant position within the rebel groups makes it an important factor in the shaping of the Syrian religious-sectarian character and the war in general.²⁴

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Al-Nusra Front forging al-Qaida base in Syria. 'What took 10 years in Afghanistan occurred in Syria in less than two years'. [Lappin, Yaakov](#). Jerusalem Post [Jerusalem] 27 Sep 2013

3. Jabhat-Al-Nusra: Core Beliefs, Origin, Structure & Strategy

Jabhat-Al-Nusra , also known as the Al-Nusra front, is a Salafi Jihadi group that emerged in Syria in the early months of 2012. Its entrance on to the Syrian scene was marked by its release of a video in 2012 that promised to wage jihad against Bashar-Al-Assad's regime. The implicitly sectarian and explicitly aggressive rhetoric initially led mainstream opposition groups to discredit it as a regime sponsored maneuver to discredit opposition fighters, yet the video won immediate online praise from Al-Qaeda supporters.²⁵ Over time, however, JN has emerged as arguably the most effective, best equipped and most motivated fighting force amongst the Syrian opposition. While FSA leaders have repeatedly warned of the dangers associated with emergence of Al-Qaeda offshoots within the opposition (they are particularly critical of the disparity that exists in funding for the FSA vs. funding that is available to the JN and ISI), they are cognizant of the undeniable military effectiveness of these groups; "In August a high-profile Liwa al-Towhid commander commended the group's contribution, and a spokesman for the Revolutionary Council of Aleppo and Countryside – a prominent activist organization linked to Liwa al-Towhid – explained that Jabhat al-Nusra's fighters were welcomed as "heroes" in the city."²⁶

JN's growing reputation for being well financed, well supplied and functionally organized has even prompted defections from the FSA to JN in recent times; "Fighters feel proud to join al-Nusra because that means power and influence," stated Abu Ahmed, a former teacher from Deir Hafer who now commands an FSA brigade in the countryside

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ "TENTATIVE JIHAD: SYRIA'S FUNDAMENTALIST OPPOSITION." *Middle East Report N°131* (n.d.): n. pag. International Crisis Group. Web.

near Aleppo. "Al-Nusra fighters rarely withdraw for shortage of ammunition or fighters and they leave their target only after liberating it," he added. "They compete to carry out martyrdom [suicide] operations."²⁷ FSA commanders told reporters from the Guardian in May 2013 that entire units had gone over to Al-Nusra while others had lost a quarter or more of their strength to JN.²⁸

JN is one of the two prominent Al-Qaeda offshoots operating in Syria, with the other being the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS). There are a number of factors that distinguish JN from regular opposition groups, the first being JN's unabashed self-portrayal as a Salafi-jihadi group that is committed to not only the toppling of the Assad regime, but also the eventual replacement of this regime with an Islamic state that follows Salafi principles. JN's open embrace of sectarian rhetoric is another distinguishing factor; the group describes itself as the Sunni community's aggressive defender against the 'Alawite enemy' and its "Shiite agents".²⁹ The group, in its communiqués, refers to Shiites as 'rawafidh' (rejectionists) and Alawites as 'Nusayri's'.³⁰ The usage of 'Nusayri' instead of Alawite is a deliberate ploy aimed at highlighting the Alawite Sect's divergence from orthodox Islam, and is one of many hardcore Salafi-jihadist tendencies that characterize JN.

The main distinguishing factor (with regard to tactics) between the JN and other *Salafi-jihadi* opposition groups is that it successfully stages the most ambitious and daring attacks, and displays a proficiency in the usage of suicide bombs as well as more conventional warfare tactics. JN regularly claims responsibility for suicide bombings/car

²⁷ Mahmood, Mona, and Ian Black. "Free Syrian Army Rebels Defect to Islamist Group Jabhat Al-Nusra." *The Guardian*. N.p., 8 May 2013. Web. 25 Nov. 2013.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ "TENTATIVE JIHAD: SYRIA'S FUNDAMENTALIST OPPOSITION." *Middle East Report N°131* (n.d.): n. pag. International Crisis Group. Web.

bombings in civilian neighborhood and in this regard (target selection and tactics) it displays similarities to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).³¹ Yet While JN has demonstrated its willingness to use suicide bombings, its target selection is usually tailored to avoid negative publicity. In this regard, it displays marked divergences from the less popular strategies typically associated with groups that are linked with Al-Qaeda, particularly ISIS. JN even renounced the killing of innocent civilians and attempted to distance itself from the violent tactics used by ISIS. In an interview on the 18th of July, 2013, a top operative of JN, Abu Ahmed, laid the blame for the killing of civilians on the ISIS and cited the aggressive attitude of the group as one of the reasons for the rift between the two³². It is also pertinent to note that while JN swears allegiance to Ayman-Al- Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda, its competing offshoot, the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (al-Sham) is under the command of Abu-Bakr al Baghdadi, the leader of AQI. Thus while the two groups may sometimes have tactical differences and disagree on strategy, it is misleading to say that they do not share the same goals and work in tandem towards their achievement.

According to a study carried out by the British Qulliam foundation³³, many cadres of the JN originate from the jihadist network of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi, a Jordanian by birth, was the founder of the jihadist group al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, that first operated in Afghanistan and later became allied with Al-Qaeda in 2004 and was subsequently responsible for many suicide attacks and acts of violence against US forces and Shia's in Iraq. Syrians who had been part of Zarqawi's network in Herat, Afghanistan, were sent in 2000 to Syria and Lebanon, ostensibly to expand the reaches of

³¹ Ibid

³² "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

³³ Benotman, Nathan, and Rosin Blake. "Jahbat-Al-Nusra : A Strategic Briefing." *Qulliam Foundation* (n.d.): n. pag. *Qulliamfoundation.org*. Qulliam Foundation, May 2013. Web.

the network. These fighters were charged with the responsibility of establishing 'guesthouses'/launching pads in Syria from which to channel jihadists into Iraq.³⁴ Despite the pressure Syrian intelligence mounted on these jihadis, the networks initially established by Zarqawi's delegates in Syria were never destroyed and continued to exist under the radar in Syria. Thus, when the revolution began, leading members of the ISI (Islamic State of Iraq) decided to send Syrian Jihadists and Iraqi veterans of guerilla warfare into Syria, although whether they intended for JN to be a branch of AQI or an independent organization based in the Levant is a matter of some debate.³⁵

II. Core beliefs and objectives

In order to be able to understand the effectiveness and dangers of any fighting force it is vital to understand what motivates them. To understand Jabhat-al-Nusra's place within the Syrian quagmire, it is necessary to take stock of their ideology and goals. It is a given, at this point, that JN and other Salafi Jihadi organizations are committed to make an attempt to take control of the Syrian uprising and actualize their vision of an Islamic Caliphate. In the likely event that the Assad regime loses further its ability to govern, the Al-Nusra Front will use its status to promote Al-Qaeda's end goal of transforming Syria into Al-Qaeda's frontline base in the Middle-East, in close geographical proximity to Israel, Europe and pro-western Arab states.³⁶

The conflict in Syria represented an opportunity to establish a religiously justified system of government for JN, as JN believes that every regime, which does not enforce sharia as law, is illegitimate. In their first video statement on 24 January 2012, JN claim

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web

to be ‘bringing the law of Allah back to His land’. This notion comes from an interpretation of a religious prophecy of the future found in several hadith (collections of sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad P.B.U.H), for example: ‘the center of the realm of Islam is in al-Sham *the Levant’ and ‘I see the angels of Allah spreading their wings over al-Sham *the Levant’. A number of hadith put Syria and the Levant at the center of Islam's prophecy, as the first JN video explains: ‘the camp of the Muslims on Judgment Day would be in Damascus’. JN believe that the Syrian revolution provides a golden opportunity for them to work towards the realization of this prophecy, and they work in the hope that they may become the people mentioned in these hadiths.”³⁷

One of the essential tenets of JN’s ideology has been its uncompromising (and vocal) adherence to its opposition to western assistance for the rebels. One of the reasons the group stood out amongst the Syrian opposition is because they appeared at a time when the FSA was making attempts to attract Western assistance. JN’s warnings against seeking Western help and its attacks against the Turkish government for being insufficiently Islamist and a Western pawn struck a chord with many a rebel in Syria, particularly because the FSA had become disillusioned with hollow and inconsistent Western promises of assistance.

According to reports garnered by the Qulliam foundation, JN was established during a number of meetings between October 2011 and January 2012, and its five main objectives were charted out during these meetings. These objectives were aimed at (1) the establishment of a group that coordinates the efforts of existing Salafi- Jihadis in Syria, (2) the reinforcement of the Islamist nature of the conflict, (3) the expansion of the groups military capability vis-à-vis weapons seizures and the creation of physical safe

³⁷ Ibid

havens from where to recruit, train and operate, (4) the creation of an Islamist state in Syria that follows Salafi principles, (5) the establishment of a greater 'Caliphate' in Bilad-al-Sham (the Levant).³⁸

In stark contrast to the structurally disorganized and tactically incoherent nature of the FSA, JN is a well-organized group of fighters with a smooth functioning command structure and an experienced host of leaders. Whereas the FSA is comprised of a chaotic mixture of ex-military servicemen, civilians, and would-be Jihadists, JN is selective in its recruitment and its leadership is made up of a cadre of experienced Jihadists who are practiced in their execution of insurgency operations. Molded from the invaluable experience their commanders gained in Iraq fighting a relatively much stronger enemy (US forces), JN's fundamental doctrine of warfare is one aimed at exhausting the enemy through a long, drawn-out war.³⁹

JN's strategy is also heavily influenced by their religious motivations; they view the Syrian conflict as an Islamic issue supported by not only religious texts but also by the prophecy they cite. The framing of the issue in this particular context is significant as it is what provides their fighters with the dogged determination and fearlessness that they are known for. Another significant influence on JN strategy that is observable is the lessons their leadership has garnered from experience in Iraq. The avoidance of operations that incite mass unpopularity with the population is one example of the kind of lessons the leadership is acting upon. In an attempt to gain widespread popularity and credibility amongst the Syrian population, JN has made it a point to predominantly target military rather than civic targets. In stark contrast to AQI strategy that has been

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

previously demonstrated in Iraq, the Nusra front's usage of suicide bombers is careful, selective and aimed at minimum loss of civilian life.⁴⁰ In a similar vein JN has downplayed its sectarian rhetoric since its inception, adjusting for the initial unpopularity it bought them with both the international community and the rest of the opposition.

Al-Nusra's Battle to Win Hearts and Minds

The Al-Nusra Front ascribes a great deal of importance to the battle for hearts and minds. Its media network is used as a means of disseminating information on its operations, views, and messages to broad target audiences in Syria and the Arab-Muslim world. The battle for hearts and minds is also intended to aggrandize the organization's abilities in the fight to topple the Assad regime, strengthen its position among the rebel groups, encourage fighters from Syria and the Arab-Muslim world to join its ranks, raise funds, inculcate operatives with the ideological messages of radical Islam, and extend the legitimacy the organization enjoys with the Syrian population.⁴¹

JN is unusual in that, out of the groups associated with Al-Qaeda, it is ostensibly the most motivated in garnering and maintaining popular support, to the extent that it will adjust not only its rhetoric but also its military tactics so as to minimize the damage to its public image. This marked departure from past, known AQ strategies is likely to have been influenced by the 'Sahwat-al-Qaba'il' (Sunni tribal resurgence) that AQI faced in Iraq⁴². This particular aspect of JN's behavior within the conflict has boosted its reputation a significant amount. Another aspect of JN strategy is the amount of emphasis

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ "The Al-Nusra Front's Battle for Hearts and Minds." Crethiplethi.com. <http://www.crethiplethi.com/the-al-nusra-front-s-battle-for-hearts-and-minds/intelligence-terrorism-information-center/2013/>.

⁴² Ibid

the leadership places on the maintenance of non-military work; missionary-style preaching (Da'wa) and humanitarian work through their social wing 'Qism al-Igatha', which distributes basic provisions to the needy and regulates grocery prices so as to prevent war-time exploitation of those affected by the conflict.⁴³ Such strategies seemed to have evolved out of a strong desire to remain popular with the local population; many of JN's fighters are foreigners and the group leadership's decision is likely impacted by the alienation that was experienced by foreign Al-Qaeda fighters at the hands of local Sunni's in Iraq.

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Media and Propaganda

JN operate their own media network called 'al-manara al badya' (The White Minaret). The significance of this name lies in the reference it makes to the white minaret of al-Sham which is mentioned in the hadith, beside which the Messiah is supposed to descend at the end of the world according to Islamic prophecy. This network is used to make documentary-style propaganda videos that often feature interviews with suicide bombers

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

and car-bomb attacks, in true Al-Qaeda fashion. This network is also used to disseminate information to the outside world through the most legitimate jihadi forum (in the eyes of jihadis), called ‘Shumukh al-Islam’⁴⁵. JN display a certain maturity of strategy in the way they handle dissemination of information, be it with regard to the claiming of responsibility for attacks, the timing of such claims, the deliberate ambiguity with regard to future plans for Syria, the absence of direct statements regarding Sharia law and lastly, the actual existence of a media team within JN. The rhetoric on the subject of long-term goals is deliberately left very soft-worded and ambiguous, which is not to suggest that these long-term goals are flexible in nature, but rather that JN leadership does not want to draw unnecessary attention to the group, preferring a strategy of silence that embeds them subtly as nothing more than another component of a larger, more powerful opposition.⁴⁶

The general behavior of JN’s media wing is reminiscent of past Jihadi organizations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan; interviews of suicide bombers, videos of attacks, and a preference towards disseminating information only through respected jihadi forums. Yet two areas in which their media behavior differs from other Jihadi groups is, (1) the amount of ambiguity that the JN leadership is willing to tolerate in the public realm and (2) the fact that they do not prioritize the press as other Jihadi outfits do and often do not claim responsibility for all of their attacks. There have been multiple instances in which Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya news have credited attacks perpetrated in actuality by JN to other opposition groups and JN has done nothing to challenge the claim in the media. This strategy of silence is typically a collective behavior more closely associated with intelligence agencies than with jihadi groups and is meant to create fear

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

and notoriety via ambiguity and silence. The logic is that if you claim responsibility for something you are displaying a need for validation and acknowledgment, whereas if you deny something you are displaying a need for the particular act to be disassociated from you, which in itself is a need for validation. The strategy of silence is effective as ambiguity leaves people guessing; it makes an individual or a group's behavior unpredictable and therefore causes that individual or group (particularly when it is an intelligence agency or jihadi organization) to be feared. This behavior lends credence to the unsubstantiated reports that Lebanese intelligence officers are involved with the JN leadership. On the other hand this behavior can be attributed to JN's wish not to antagonize other rebel groups by contesting claims on attacks, as this is a common source of conflict between opposition groups in Syria.⁴⁷

One area in which JN's behavior differs from other opposition groups within Syria is the timing of their messages and claiming of responsibilities for attacks. While other groups provide real-time updates, JN provides delayed reports of its operations that cover multiple attacks in a particular time period. It is only when particularly fruitful attacks are completed that the JN media reports focus on any one particular attack.⁴⁸ Although this aspect of their media behavior often allows for less powerful public impact, it is telling of the professionalism of its leadership; real time updates have negative ramifications for security as they can point to locations of operatives as well as give away strategy in the short term.

JN also maintains its own online message board website, under the domain name 'www.jalnosra.com' which was created in January 2013. The website, which is still

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

active, contains videos and announcements released by the organization and has some amount of informational collaboration with the White Minaret. JN had previously maintained a Facebook page, which in January 2013 had 10,000 likes.⁴⁹ Although their Facebook presence has been retracted, the group still maintains a Twitter account which can be accessed at twitter.com/JbhatALnusra. Although the account has not tweeted since April 2013, at the time the website was accessed for the purposes of this paper, the account had 79,235 followers.⁵⁰ JN's announcements, be it on their website, twitter account or on the White Minaret, have tended to downplay sectarian rhetoric and generally steer clear of ideological messages that may dampen their support among the local populace. The organization does not typically engage in ideological debates with other groups, although there have been exceptions to this rule; when JN condemned the actions of the ISIS in July 2013, citing their aggressive nature and their targeting of civilians as a reason for the rift between the two, and when the group, in an attempt to deal with criticism, released videos and statements denying its responsibility for a suicide bombing attack that took place in a Damascus neighborhood in October 2012 in which women and children were killed.⁵¹

Recruitment Strategy

JN, in trying to maintain the quality and effectiveness of its fighting capability, is selective in its recruitment of fighters. This selectivity is manifested in the 'tezkiyya' (personal assurance) that is required from two commanders on the front line that verifies

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ See twitter.com/JbhatALnusra

⁵¹ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

a recruit's skill, religious commitment and overall ability to join the group.⁵² JN often embeds recruiters in the front lines of FSA units to vet for potential recruits, and these recruits are subsequently tested for bravery, dedication and loyalty to the JN ideology.⁵³ These recruits must take a religious oath swearing to Allah their absolute allegiance to their jihadist leaders, which has the effect of creating a functional command structure; recruits have no legal recourse should they wish to either leave or disobey an order. This kind of oath is designed to mimic the function of 'Army acts' in regular armies, which are legal clauses that make desertion and insubordination punishable by law in regular militaries. Another reason that Nusra is able to not only maintain a sizable force of effective fighters, but also to induce large defections from the FSA to itself is because of the higher pay it offers to its fighters.⁵⁴

Leadership

The leader of Jabhat-al-Nusra is allegedly a man named Abu Mohammad al-Julani. Very little is known about Julani to the point where there still exists a significant amount of doubt about his identity. According to investigations by the British Qulliam think tank, Julani has family ties to the area of the Golan Heights and was formerly a staunch supporter of Abu-Musab Al Zarqawi of AQI fame in Iraq.⁵⁵ The investigation

⁵² Benotman, Nathan, and Rosin Blake. "Jahbat-Al-Nusra : A Strategic Briefing." *Qulliam Foundation* (n.d.): n. pag. *Qulliamfoundation.org*. Qulliam Foundation, May 2013. Web.

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

⁵⁵ Benotman, Nathan, and Rosin Blake. "Jahbat-Al-Nusra : A Strategic Briefing." *Qulliam Foundation* (n.d.): n. pag. *Qulliamfoundation.org*. Qulliam Foundation, May 2013. Web.

also revealed that Al Julani's identity is closely guarded by the organization, to the point where his face is usually covered in meetings and his voice always distorted in audio releases. Al Julani carries the title of 'amir' which is a title used typically to denote the heads of Islamic organizations around the world. Abu Muhammad al-Julani is also referred to as al-mas'oul (the person in charge), al-mas'oul al-'aam (the chief person in charge), and al-sheikh al-fateh (the conquering sheikh).⁵⁶

Julani has displayed a mature understanding of Syrian society and politics, carefully and skillfully weaving his organization into its fabric. While JN's competitor ISIL has created enemies everywhere through its attempts at domination by force and force alone, Al Nusra has won friends and/or grudging acceptance, opening itself to dialogue, compromise and cooperation with other factions, and, ostensibly at least, respecting local cultural sensitivities more.

In an audio track released on January 24, 2012, Al-Julani said that the overthrow of the Assad regime was only half the struggle considering that his organizations goal was to replace the regime with an Islamic State governed by Sharia law. He warned against the ills of accepting Western assistance and in December 2012 proclaimed the Al-Nusra Front as the main fighting force against the regime.⁵⁷ Al-Julani's mindset and worldview are likely very similar to those held by Al-Qaeda; this can be extrapolated from Al-Julani's association with Zarqawi and his public vow of allegiance to Ayman-al-Zawahiri.

Al-Julani made a rare and unexpected appearance on Al-Jazeera on December 10th, 2013. Though his back was to the camera and his face remained covered, Julani

⁵⁶ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

⁵⁷ Ibid

spoke at length about the goals, vision and position of JN within Syria. The interview, targeting viewers throughout Syria and the Arab-Muslim world, was aimed at establishing the Nusra Front as a legitimate factor within the Syrian population without having to abandon its long-term objectives. Julani played down the connection with Al-Qaeda, calling the affiliation merely ‘ideological’, warned against Hezbollah entering the war, and pledged commitment to the establishment of a state governed by Sharia law.

⁵⁸With regard to post-Assad plans Julani treaded carefully, stating that ‘al-Nusra wants consultations with Muslim scholars and thinkers who supported the Syrian uprising, to draft a plan for running the country according to Sharia.’⁵⁹ Joulani also stated that he had no intentions of monopolizing power and was open to the idea of an alliance with secular rebels.⁶⁰ This offer, rather than being interpreted as a sign of weakness, should be seen as further evidence of the mature pragmatism that governs the decision making of JN’s leader. Much of JN’s success can be attributed to Julani’s cautious, pragmatic and forward thinking strategies.

It is interesting to note that the interviewer, Al-Jazeera’s Tayseer Allouni had previously interviewed Bin Laden and said that the security measures taken prior to the interview by Al-Joulani’s team far exceeded those of Bin Laden’s, a fact that is testament to the extreme precautions JN undertakes in keeping the identity of its leader a secret.⁶¹

Structure

⁵⁸ “Al-Qaeda Leader in Syria Speaks to Al Jazeera” *Middle East*. Al Jazeera, 19 December. 2013

⁵⁹ *Ibid*

⁶⁰ Habib, Maria Abi. “Syrian Al-Qaeda Says It is Open to Alliance With More Secular Rebels.” *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 December. 2013

⁶¹ “Ultimatum from Syrian Al-Qaeda Group.” *Al Jazeera America*. Al Jazeera International, 25 February. 2014

The structure of JN is similar to that of other Jihadi organizations with an ‘amir’, Abu Mohammad al-julani, at the helm of the organization, and a number of local commanders, also known as ‘amirs’, presiding under the ‘al-mas’oul al-‘aam’. These local commanders are responsible for the command and governance of Syria’s various governorates in which JN are active. JN publications allude to the existence of a ‘Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen’ (Council of Jihadis), which functions as a governing body and to which JN’s various military and governmental bodies are subservient and answerable to.⁶²

With regard to military structure, the JN military units are divided into brigades, battalions and companies. Although the naming of these units suggests a strict and regimented compartmentalization of fighters within the organization, jihadi groups tend to be fluid and flexible in their military structure, particularly in the wake of the need for constant adaptation in the context of asymmetrical guerilla warfare. According to reports garnered by the Meir Emit Intelligence Information Center, some of JN’s companies are made up of single nationalities; Tunisian companies, Chechen companies, Jordanian companies etc.⁶³ The logic behind the creation of such units is two folded; it allows for the individual companies to function more efficiently (absence of language barriers and better unit morale) and it also allows for these companies to evolve into core jihadist networks that can expand the Salafi jihadist network in the long run, once they return to their home countries after having gained guerilla warfare experience in Syria.⁶⁴

The military structure of JN is flexible in that it varies across Syria’s various regions and according to the state of the conflict in those regions. In the outskirts of

⁶² "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013); Web.

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

Aleppo, for example, the units are organized on conventional military lines; companies, battalions, brigades, and platoons that operate in tandem as a fighting force. In Damascus, however, where most of the fighting is done on the streets, urban guerilla tactics are followed and the structure of the units is tailored so as to maximize the effectiveness of these tactics; instead of companies, units are split into cells to lessen chances of detection.

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There are conflicting reports as to what the actual number of active JN militants in Syria is; according to reports garnered from the FSA by David Ignatius for the Washington Post in November 2012, JN fighter strength ranged from anywhere in between 6000 to 10'000 fighters.⁶⁶ The British Qulliam Foundation's assessment of JN fighter strength in late 2012 was 5000 operatives.⁶⁷ The Meir Emit Intelligence and Information Center, which published its study in September 2013, estimates that these numbers have grown by at least a couple of thousand fighters since late November 2012⁶⁸. This estimate is consistent with the recent reports of FSA desertions to JN. Given the recent fame, or infamy (depending on the perspective) that JN has gained within the Syrian conflict it is entirely possible that current strength of their numbers has exceeded 10'000.

Foreign Fighters

The number of foreign fighters joining the ranks of the Syrian opposition is a major concern as these fighters will later return to their home countries and spread

⁶⁵ Benotman, Nathan, and Rosin Blake. "Jahbat-Al-Nusra : A Strategic Briefing." *Qulliam Foundation* (n.d.): n. pag. *Qulliamfoundation.org*. Qulliam Foundation, May 2013. Web.

⁶⁶ Ignatius, David. "Al-Qaeda Affiliate Playing Larger Role in Syria Rebellion." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 30 Nov. 2012. Web. 01 Dec. 2013.

⁶⁷ Benotman, Nathan, and Rosin Blake. "Jahbat-Al-Nusra : A Strategic Briefing." *Qulliam Foundation* (n.d.): n. pag. *Qulliamfoundation.org*. Qulliam Foundation, May 2013. Web.

⁶⁸ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

jihadist networks using the links they establish. The total number of foreign fighters in Syria is estimated at 8,000. Of these 8,000, 2,000 are from Western countries, 600-700 are from non-Arab Muslim countries, and the rest are from Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Palestine etc.⁶⁹. These foreign fighters are drawn to groups like JN because of their eminence amongst the opposition.

That such a large number of foreign fighters have joined the ranks of the opposition in such a short time period is testament to the emotional pull that the Sunni cause in Syria invokes in Sunni's around the world. It took nearly a decade for similar amounts of foreign fighters to amass in Pakistan's tribal regions and Afghanistan, a fact that is telling of the attractiveness of the Syrian Jihad. Most, but not all of these foreign fighters share a Salafi-Jihadist ideology while some are simply motivated by a sense of empathy with the Syrian people, a desire to be part of the overthrow of Assad or merely a desire for adventure.⁷⁰ These individuals tend to be particularly susceptible to ideological indoctrination; Western European Muslims often harbor the greatest feelings of frustration against their home countries, making them ideal candidates for suicide bombing missions. The use of foreign suicide bombers by JN is widespread; some 53 suicide bombers participated in suicide missions in Syria in 2013. Of these, 23 were foreigners.⁷¹ One such example is the suicide attack carried out on a prison in Aleppo by a British national of Pakistani descent on behalf of al-Nusra, on February 6th, 2014.⁷²

Understanding JN's Relationships with Other Players

Islamic State of Iraq-Levant

⁶⁹ Foreign Fighters in Syria" *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

⁷² "Foreign Fighters in Syria" *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

Though JN originates from AQI and relied on them initially for both financing and direction, once JN began gaining popularity its leader, Julani, who had previously taken orders directly from ISIL leader Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi, began to distance JN from ISIL. In April 2013 Baghdadi released a statement announcing the grand unification of organizations in Iraq and Syria into the ISIL.⁷³ This statement was immediately countered by Julani who swore allegiance to Zawahiri in a deliberately defiant move aimed at unequivocally establishing that JN was Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria and hence not subservient to Baghdadi's organization. The establishment of this link beyond any shred of doubt was cemented by a statement from Zawahiri in June 2013 which announced officially the disunion between JN and AQI/ISIL.⁷⁴ This statement had the effect of aggravating tensions between the two groups and lowered the morale of many of the foreign volunteers within JN ranks (some of whom deserted) who took issue with JN refusing to take orders from the 'amir' in Iraq⁷⁵. The split began manifesting itself in the establishment of separate media outlets, independent (disunited) conduction of operations, and more recently, direct clashes between the two groups. JN leadership cited the brutal tactics towards civilians as one of the reasons behind the split. The statement is in keeping with JN's overarching goal of winning hearts and minds and establishing long term roots in Syria.

The fundamental ideological contention point between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is that of long-term vision; ISIL is committed to establish an Islamic Caliphate that fundamentally rejects the Sykes-Picot border agreements, and is committed to establishing this while it fights the regime. JN, on the

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Ibid

other hand, has presented itself narrowly as a branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria and has always espoused the toppling of the regime as the primary objective, only after which the establishment of an Islamic state could be pursued.

Since April 2013 conflict between JN and ISIL in Northern and Eastern Syria have led to significant bloodshed and have had the overall effect of weakening the insurgency as a whole. Total deaths caused by the clashes between Nusra, other groups and ISIL number close to 2'000.⁷⁶ The tactics, brutal punishments, and harsh governance methods used by ISIL have made them highly unpopular with the Syrian population and have caused other rebel groups, including JN, to publically distance/disassociate themselves from ISIL. The Al-Qaeda high command too has long since been exasperated by the conduct of ISIL and officially disassociated itself from ISIL on the 3rd of February 2014 through an official statement that carried the weight of Zawahiri's personal opinion on the matter.⁷⁷ The implications of the feud between ISIL and JN are having interesting effects on the kinds of people whom are willing to work with either of them. In the aftermath of the split ISIL is picking up all the exclusionary hardliners, while Nusra is left with the people arguing for pragmatism and winning hearts and minds and striking roots for the long run.⁷⁸

Other Salafi Jihadi Groups

JN's split with ISIL, however wise in the context of maintaining local popularity, caused the organization some significant setbacks; a number of foreign JN volunteers either went back home or joined ISIL, JN no longer received funds from ISIL and neither

⁷⁶ "Ultimatum from Syrian Al-Qaeda Group." *Al Jazeera America*. Al Jazeera International, 25 February. 2014

⁷⁷ Lund, Aron. "A Public Service Announcement from Al-Qaeda." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 February. 2014

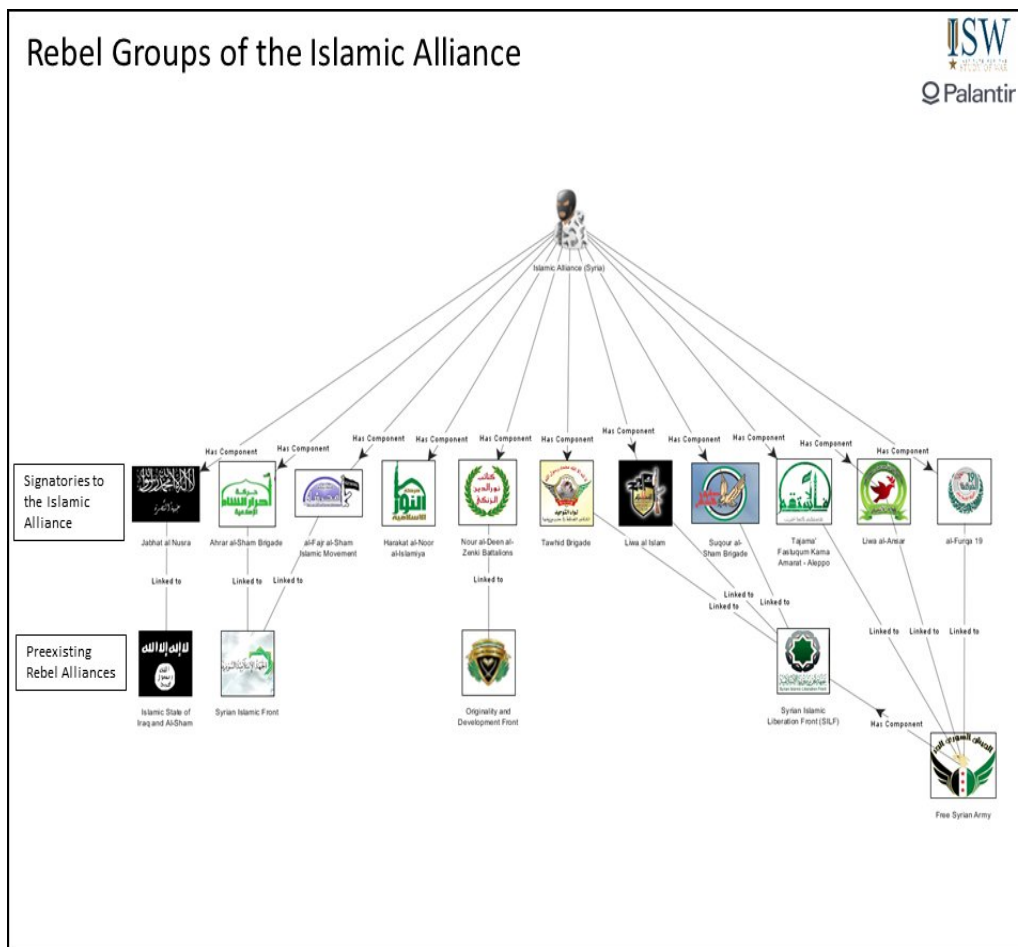
⁷⁸ *Ibid*

did it enjoy the tactical benefits of collaborating with another large, well trained and effective rebel group. As a consequence of all this, JN sought to increase its operational cooperation with other likeminded Jihadi groups.

It is pertinent to note that up until September 2013 JN was not formally a part of the coalition fighting against the Assad regime, the reason being that the group leadership wished to avoid entrenching itself in institutionalized alliances with rebel groups of differing composition and ideology.⁷⁹ JN leadership instead preferred to cooperate within Islamic military frameworks that do not necessarily espouse Al-Qaeda ideology. In September 2013, however, a total of eleven rebel brigades including JN formally entered into an Islamic alliance on the basis that they were all fighting for a common cause; the establishment of an Islamic State under Sharia law. To what extent JN orchestrated the formation of this coalition, and whether it was done in an effort to recuperate from the split with ISIL is difficult to ascertain. The inclusion of JN in a formal Islamic coalition that includes brigades from the FSA and other ‘moderate’ cadres is a symbolic victory for Al-Qaeda. Their inclusion grants the Nusra Front more legitimacy and is reflective of the acceptance that the group enjoys within the opposition. The graph below represents the groups that were a signatory to this alliance and also plots the preexisting alliances of these groups.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

⁸⁰ Map taken from the Institute for the Understanding of War.



Three groups; Ahrar-Al-Sham (Islamic Movement of the Free Men of Syria), the Al-Farouq battalions, and Liwa-al-Tawhid (Brigade of the Unity of God) are JN's preferred partners in conducting joint operations. Of these groups, none are directly affiliated with Al-Qaeda and all have fighter strengths nearing or exceeding 10'000 men⁸¹. Military cooperation between these groups has been effective, particularly in the fight for control for border crossings in Northern Syria along the Turkey-Syria border.

Free Syrian Army

⁸¹ Ibid

The relationship between JN and the FSA is one of ad-hoc cooperation; the groups cooperate in the pursuance of the same primary objective, which is the toppling of the Assad regime, but disagree over long term visions for Syria. The Syrian National Council (SNC) has stated publically that it intends to pursue the establishment of a democratic regime pandered to the interests of Syrians, while JN (along with its affiliates) seek to establish an Islamic state based on their literalist/radical interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. While this ad-hoc cooperation will likely continue so long as the Assad regime remains intact, it is difficult to imagine any scenario in a post Assad future in which the larger and more politically ingrained FSA and SNC ever embraces JN as a legitimate political entity and partner. The FSA are only too cognizant of the fact that the main reason that weapon supplies from the West have been primitive and slow to arrive is because of the fear of the proliferation of these weapons into the wrong hands, such as those of JN.⁸² Absent the existence of Al-Qaeda affiliates, the prospect of arming the Syrian rebels with advanced weaponry, such as MANPAD's, would be considerably less risky for Western countries-a fact that the FSA hold against groups like JN despite their undeniable military effectiveness against the regime. JN and the FSA are decidedly wary of one another, as they are vying for popularity amongst the Syrian population. Both sides acknowledge that it will be hard for the groups to work together after the fall of the regime, as they are essentially rivals in the long term.

JN's decision to distance/disassociate itself from ISIS, augmented by Zawahiri's public disassociation from ISIS, has benefitted JN in the way FSA commanders began publically admitting to working with JN. Jamaal Maarouf, head of the Western backed Syrian Revolutionary Front not only admitted to fighting alongside JN in an interview

⁸² Ibid

with The Independent but also stated that while he would continue to commit to fighting ISIS, he would fight against JN because they (Al-Qaeda) 'are not our problem'.⁸³

JN's position within the Syrian rebels is not as insecure by way of their association with Al-Qaeda as many Western analysts would like to believe. Contrary to the widespread assumption that the FSA resents JN and its affiliates for the Jihadi stigma (and hence Western hesitancy to support the rebels) that they bring, FSA commanders have gone as far as to call the Nusra Front 'brothers'. In a YouTube video uploaded in March 2013, founder and (one of the) top commanders of the FSA, Colonel Riyadh-al Assad referred to members of JN as 'Sunni brothers' whom the FSA had provided direct support to on a number of occasions.⁸⁴ When the US designated JN as a terrorist organization in late 2012, none other than the head of the Syrian Opposition Council himself (Moaz al Khatab) urged the US to reconsider its designation citing the widespread admiration that JN evoked amongst the rebels as one of the reasons.⁸⁵

Funding & Foreign support

A large portion of the initial funding/financing of the Al-Nusra Front was provided directly by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the same group from which it originated from. Evidence for this can be found in a statement of Abu-Muhammad al Julani (leader of JN) in which he thanks the leader of AQI for their financial assistance.⁸⁶ Since its inception, however, JN has established its own methods of financing, reaching out to

⁸³ Hunter, Isabel. "'I Am Not Fighting Against Al-Qa'ida...It's Not Our Problem' Says West's Last Hope in Syria." *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media. 2 April. 2014

⁸⁴ Roggio, Bill. "Free Syrian Army Commander Praises Al Nusrah Front as 'brothers'" *Long War Journal*. 30 March. 2013

⁸⁵ *Ibid*

⁸⁶ "Ultimatum from Syrian Al-Qaeda Group." *Al Jazeera America*. Al Jazeera International, 25 February. 2014

networks of clerics, charitable organizations and wealthy individuals sympathetic to their cause and impressed by their military effectiveness. It was reported in a Reuters article on June 22, 2013 that according to U.S and European intelligence officials, JN was being funded by wealthy (unnamed) families in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.⁸⁷

Since the start of the Syrian civil war, many pro rebel Islamic conferences have been held in the Middle East to collect money for fighters in Syria. How much of this money finds its way to JN is unverifiable, yet it can be safely assumed that the Syrian opposition's Special Forces equivalent is likely receiving a significant portion of these funds as well. Much of JN's funding had been taken care of by ISIS, thus when the ideological rift occurred in early 2013, it had the effect of 'orphaning' JN. This financial slashing may have been part of the reason Nusra engaged in an effort to unify Islamist groups such as Ahrar-al Sham, Al-Tawhid and Liwaa al Islam with itself in an agreement.⁸⁸

Turkish assistance to Salafi Jihadi groups is more tacit than it has been overt, but it cannot be denied that actions taken by the Turkish government have benefitted groups like the Nusra Front. While no substantiated evidence of Turkish financial assistance to JN can be found, there are many that allege that Tayyip Erdogan's hardcore Islamist supporters provide reason enough for Turkey to turn a blind eye to the weapons and other materials flowing from Turkey into the hands of Salafi Jihadist groups such as JN⁸⁹. In an article published in the New York Times in March 2013, it was reported that far from

⁸⁷ Holmes, Oliver and Dziadosz, Alexander. "Special Report: Syria's Islamists Seize Control as Moderates Dither." *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, 19 June. 2013

⁸⁸ Mortada, Radwhan. "Syria: ISIS Orphans Al-Nusra Front, Cutting Its Funding." *Al Akhbar Englishi* October-November. 2013

⁸⁹ Idiz, Semih. "Turkey Reconsiders Support For Jabhat Al-Nusra" *Al-Monitor: The Pulse Of the Middle East*. The Monitor: Turkey Pulse, 13 August. 2013

turning a blind eye, Arab governments and Turkey have expanded their military aid to Syria's opposition through a series of airlifts overseen by the C.I.A. The Turkish government was given the biggest role to play in this military logistics operation, but the Qatari, Jordanian and Saudi Air Forces were all involved in transporting a large amount of infantry weapons bought by Saudi Arabia from a Croatian controlled stockpile in Zagreb to Esenboga airport in Ankara.⁹⁰ The New York Times investigation revealed that eighty-five military planes flew from Qatar to Turkey between January 2012 and March 2013, delivering a cumulative payload of 3500 tons of weapons.⁹¹ The C.I.A, playing a 'consultative' role, allegedly setup clandestine offices to shop for weapons and vet on ground commanders to determine whom to distribute to upon arrival.⁹² The fact that the C.I.A has aided and abetted the armament of the opposition is curious considering the U.S designates JN, widely regarded as the spearhead of the opposition, as a terrorist organization and has even placed a bounty on the head of its leader.

U.S officials have attempted to validate this ostensibly incoherent policy with the logic that since other countries were going to arm the rebels anyway, it was in the U.S's interests to oversee the armament so that they could make sure that it was the moderates, and not the jihadists, that were being armed⁹³. This logic/narrative does not stand up to on-ground realities since regardless of whom the weapons were initially provided to it can be assumed that JN's popularity, influence and proficiency in acquiring weapons would allow for them to attain at least some portion of these arms. The statements of a commander of Ahrar-al-Sham interviewed by the New York Times in March 2013

⁹⁰ Chivers, C.J. and Schmitt, Eric. "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From. CIA" *The New York Times*. 24 March. 2013

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Chivers, C.J. and Schmitt, Eric. "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From. CIA" *The New York Times*. 24 March. 2013

⁹³ Ibid

indicated that some of these weapons were being acquired by fake revolutionary groups that were then selling them in the open market.⁹⁴ If this is true then it is safe to assume that the C.I.A has played a part in indirectly arming an organization that is inextricable from Al-Qaeda. Evidence for the proliferation of these Saudi purchased Croatian weapons into the hands of JN can be found in a YouTube video posted by Al-Jazeera Arabic on March 27, 2013, which clearly shows an M79 Osa, a90 mm portable anti-tank weapon, in the hands of a Nusra Front operative fighting to capture a military base outside of Al Sahweh, Daraa in mid- February, 2013.⁹⁵ The fact that the U.S and other European countries are hesitant to provide higher quality weapons to the rebels is telling of the widespread fear of proliferation of weapons to jihadist outfits.

Turkey's stance towards involvement in Syria took a notable turn when in June 2012 a Turkish F-4 was shot down on the Turkey-Syria border. Northern Syria in June 2012 was still largely dominated by the Syrian military, but when the Turkish government responded to the shooting with an announcement that it would fire on Syrians units that so much as approached the border, the Syrian Army relaxed their presence in parts of the North, creating a de-facto buffer zone. This change in Turkey's rules of engagement benefitted groups like JN who used this buffer zone to hunker down in the Northern parts of Syria.⁹⁶ Turkey also provides safe border passage for opposition fighters seeking haven in Turkey, where it has been alleged that there are training camps and safe houses frequented by Salafi Jihadists. Groups like ISIL, Ahrar-al Sham and Jabhat-al Nusra are all heavily dependent on the usage of Turkish border crossings for

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Video link : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feJLPu10kfc#t=26s>

⁹⁶ Cubukcu, Mete. "Has Turkish Foreign Policy Created a 'Syrian Taliban'?" *Al-Monitor: The Pulse Of the Middle East*. The Monitor: Turkey Pulse, 27 September. 2013

supplies, recruits and the ability to reach safety. The telegraph reported in May 2012 that according to its sources Turkish Intelligence was going as far as training Syrian rebels in Istanbul.⁹⁷ Evidence for the fact that Turkish-Syrian border crossings are logistical priorities for JN and affiliated groups can be found in the fact that some of the heaviest intra-rebel fighting took place over control over these crossings⁹⁸. Circumstantial evidence for Turkey's outright support for Jabhat-al-Nusra and its affiliates can be garnered from the fact that it downed a Syrian Mi-17 on March 23rd, 2014 on the grounds of airspace violation. The Syrian plane in question had been charged with performing airstrikes on rebels who had been waging a three day long pitched battle in an (eventually successful) effort to gain control of the Kasab border crossing, which was at the time, the last border crossing in the North not to be held by the rebels. Damascus has accused Turkey of providing tank and artillery cover fire for the rebels operating in the same area in the aftermath of the downing of the Syrian jet.⁹⁹ If these allegations are true, a decisive and aggressive change in Turkish policy towards Syria has occurred, and it can be assumed that Istanbul will continue, if not upgrade, its level of support towards the opposition and by extension, the Al-Nusra Front.

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Weiss, Micheal. "Syrian Rebels Say Turkey is Arming and Training Them." *The Telegraph*, 22 May. 2012

⁹⁸ Cockburn, Patrick. "M16, the CIA and Turkey's Rogue Game in Syria." *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, 13 April. 2014

⁹⁹ Butler, Daren. "Turkey Shoots Down Syrian Plane It Says Violated Air Space" *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, 23 March. 2014

Assessing the Military/Governance Capability of JN

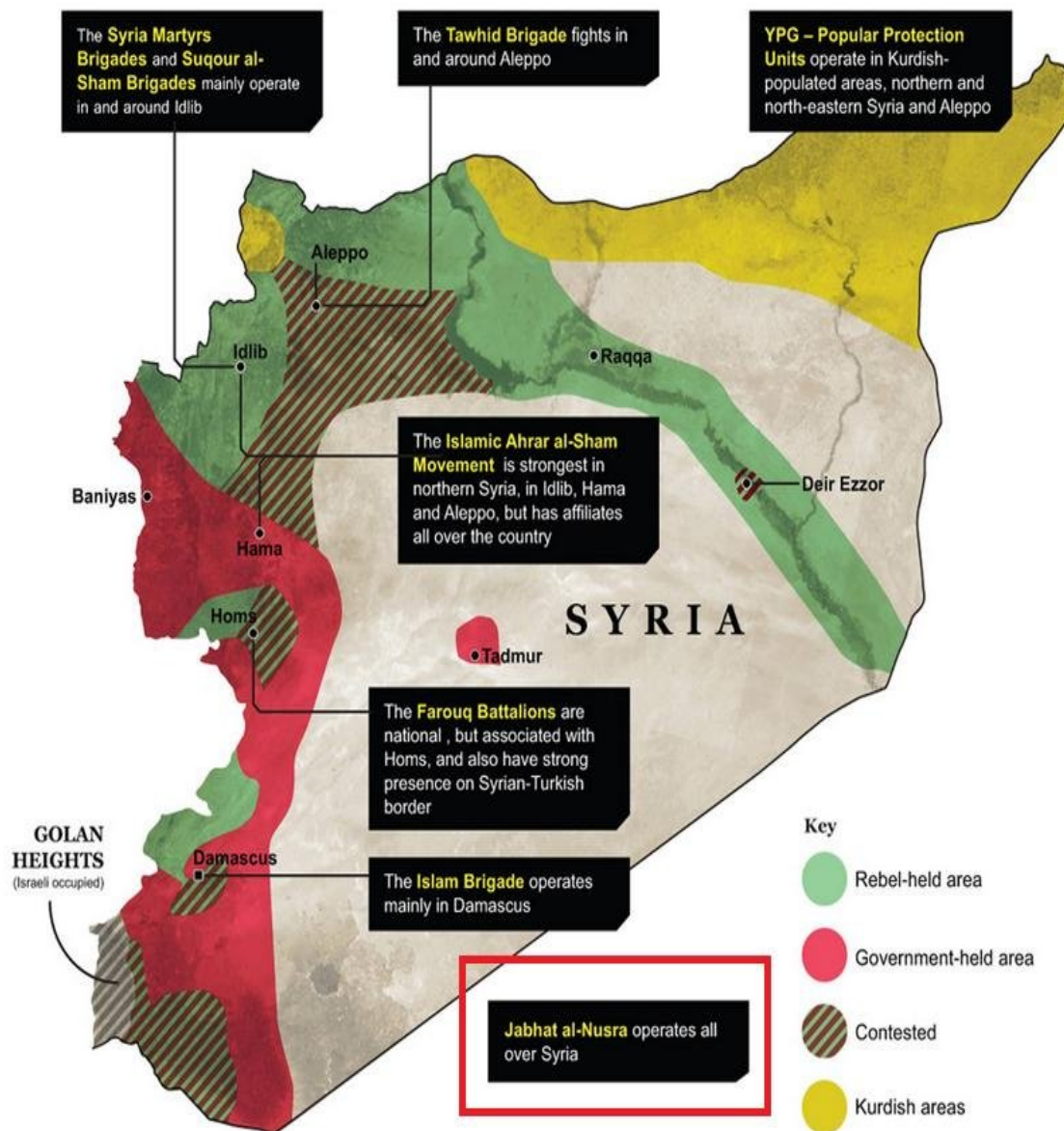
The scope of JN's operations is extensive in both a geographical and a qualitative sense. In rural areas where the writ of the government ranges from weak to completely non-existent JN engages in larger, more ambitious conventional military operations aimed at seizing military bases, infrastructure sites, and airfields. In and around the cities Nusra engages in small-scale guerilla warfare, utilizing suicide bombers and IED's. Whereas all other rebel groups have selective regions in which they tend to direct most of their activity, JN's operations and fighters are active in all thirteen of Syria's governorates. The map below illustrates where various rebel groups are most active and is useful in comprehending the comparatively superior geographical dispersion of JN operations.

What makes JN more dangerous than other groups is the consistency with which it manages to continue attacking the regime. The group carries out 3-4 assassinations weekly, targeting officers of the regime, media personalities, politicians and businessmen alike.¹⁰⁰ In November 2012 Nusra claimed responsibility in one day alone for 45 attacks in Damascus, Daraa, Hama and Homs provinces that reportedly killed dozens, including 60 in a single suicide bombing.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

¹⁰¹ Awais, Khalid Yacoub. "Al Qaeda Grows Powerful in Syria as Endgame Nears." / *Reuters*. Reuters, 20 Dec. 2012. Web. 27 Apr. 2014

Map of Syrian Rebel Strongholds¹⁰²



The style, tactics, goals and intended effect of JN's military operations vary according to region and requirement. Overall, JN displays a great deal of flexibility in the kind of warfare it can engage in, from large scale offensives designed to capture military bases to small scale suicide bombings intended to symbolically weaken the perceived strength of the regime.

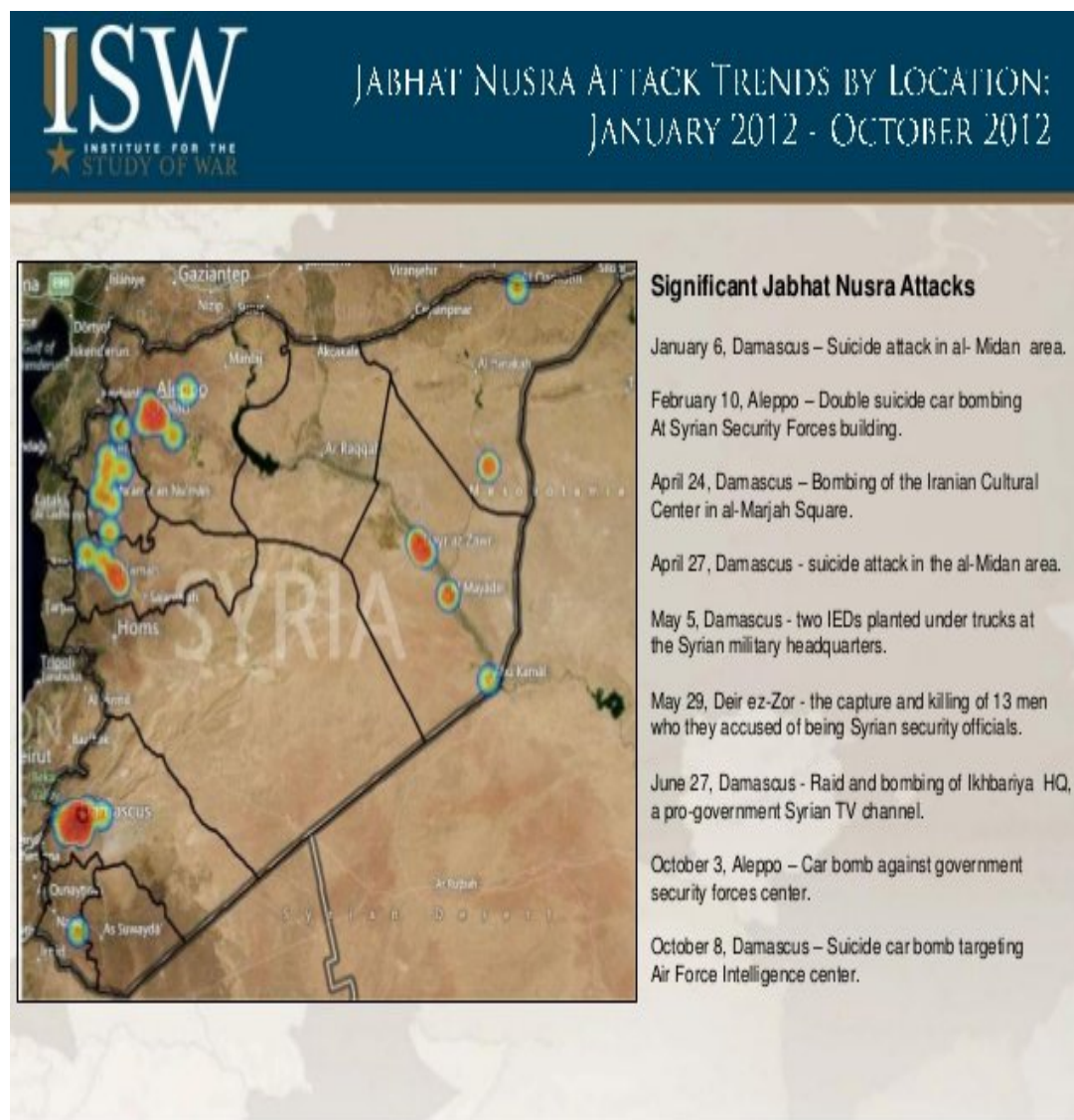
¹⁰² Map taken from polgeonow.com (Political Geography Now)

JN essentially operate an urban-rural warfare strategy; they take control of the countryside around cities and then launch low-level urban guerrilla attacks inside those cities. These urban attacks, often assisted by suicide bombers, are based on political terrorization; the aim is to create insecurity, fear and mistrust of the government's ability to endure the insurgency.¹⁰³ Asymmetric warfare is used by JN to great effect in exposing and exacerbating the regime's weaknesses by launching attacks/suicide bombings on symbolic military/intelligence institutions. JN is particularly unapologetic in its use of suicide bombers, and is responsible for an overwhelming majority of the suicide bombings (57 out of 72 in July 2013) perpetrated in Syria since the outbreak of the civil war. The tactical advantage JN gains from heavy reliance on suicide bombers is that it encounters minimal losses while delivering significant loss of life/damage to property to the regime.

JN has, since its inception, become widely regarded as the principal force against Assad because of its military successes. Nusra's first six months in action were characterized by mass-casualty bombings, such as the double suicide bombing in Damascus on the 10th of May 2012 that killed 55 and injured hundreds. The map below, compiled by the Institute For the Study of War, plots these major JN attacks for 2012.

¹⁰³ Benotman, Nathan, and Rosin Blake. "Jahbat-Al-Nusra : A Strategic Briefing." *Qulliam Foundation* (n.d.): n. pag. *Qulliamfoundation.org*. Qulliam Foundation, May 2013. Web.

Map of JN Attack Trends 2012¹⁰⁴



Since then (2012), however, the group has incorporated conventional guerrilla operations, the usage of IED's and small arms attacks into its repertoire with great effect. Some of the various types of operation in which JN are engaged include: car bombs; suicide attacks; destroying checkpoints, arson attacks on liquor shops, the execution of media professionals; and assassinations, including that of the Interior Minister and that of

¹⁰⁴ Map taken from Institute of the Study of War

the entire Khaliyat al-Azma (the Crisis Taskforce).¹⁰⁵ This Taskforce was designed to handle the regime's response to the rebels and included some of Bashar al-Assad's relatives and the Minister for Defense.

JN's modus operandi is markedly different from other rebel groups. An example is their targeting of media facilities and personalities; in June 2012 Nusra attacked a pro-government TV station and the next month they executed a government TV presenter. While assassinations are considered standard behavior for Jihadist groups, rarely do they target the media. This departure from standard behavior is telling of the way that Nusra leadership aims to expand its influence to the maximum in Syria through intimidation of the media. Media intimidation has been used to great effect by the Pakistani Taliban, to the point where even the most prominent newspapers in the country are hard pressed to condemn/criticize the Jihadists. This grants jihadists ideological space, which is the lifeblood of any guerilla strategy, a fact that Nusra leadership appears to understand well.

One area in which JN has not displayed its usual proficiency is in ability to bring down government airplanes and helicopters. Although rebels have shot down many MIGs and other helicopters, JN forces have claimed only one such attack. This would seem to demonstrate a lack of man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADs), consistent with the international effort to keep these weapons out of jihadist hands.¹⁰⁶

Notable Military Achievements

¹⁰⁵ Benotman, Nathan, and Rosin Blake. "Jahbat-Al-Nusra : A Strategic Briefing." *Qulliam Foundation* (n.d.): n. pag. *Qulliamfoundation.org*. Qulliam Foundation, May 2013. Web.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

While Nusra's arrival on to the Syrian scene was marked by a string of extremely damaging suicide bombings, it has since developed a conventional warfare capability that has borne successful results in the seizure of various Syrian military bases, checkpoints and infrastructure sites. Since October 2012, rebels have taken control of five major military installations.¹⁰⁷

On December 10th, 2012 rebel forces, spearheaded by JN, took control of the Sheikh Suleiman base, a key Syrian research facility linked to the production of chemical weapons. Two months earlier, JN, in a joint operation, assaulted and seized a Syrian air defense base in Aleppo. In mid-January 2013 JN and Ahrar-al-Sham launched a joint operation to take control of Taftanaz, a key Syrian air force base in Idlib, from where large weapons caches as well as tanks, armored vehicles and helicopters were seized by the rebels. A month later rebel forces mounted an attack on Al-Jarrah airfield, making it the fourth large military base to fall into their hands¹⁰⁸. During the same month (February, 2013) Al-Nusra fighters, working with other rebel forces, took over an army encampment in Tabqa along the Euphrates River, securing large amounts of artillery and ammunition and giving them control of a key checkpoint in the town. In early August 2013 rebels managed to gain control of the large Minakh airbase in northern Syria, seizing additional weapons and tanks. The seizure was significant as it came during a time where an influx of foreign fighters from Lebanon and an extended air campaign had caused the rebels huge losses, particularly around Homs and Damascus. The seizure of Al-jarrah was particularly significant as it contained Syrian fighter jets. Given the extreme air superiority of the regime, however, it is unlikely that the rebels will be able to

¹⁰⁷ Roggio, Bill. "Islamist Factions' Seize Syrian Airbase" *Long War Journal*. 12 February. 2013

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*

make much of an impact in the air. The rebels' lack of pilots and technical support coupled with the fact that the Assad regime possesses radars and long range missiles means that while the seizure of fighter aircraft is financially damaging to the regime, this is likely to be the extent of that damage.

In January 2013 JN showcased its geographical reach by attacking the military intelligence branch of the Quneitra governorate, killing 53 regime soldiers, including 6 officers.¹⁰⁹ The attack is significant not only because of its location in the Golan Heights, of key security importance to Israel, but also because of the symbolic effect that attacking the 'mukhabarat' (intelligence services) has in Syria.

One of the most significant victories for the rebels and JN occurred on November 5th, 2013, when a joint FSA-JN operation was launched against the Syrian army precinct in the village of Mahin, south of Homs. The arsenal at this base was considered to be one of the largest in Syria and when the rebels successfully captured it reports revealed that they had come into possession of anti-tank missiles, rocket launchers and BM-21 Grad rockets (122mm rockets fired from a portable truck mounted delivery system).¹¹⁰ JN also displays proficiency in the manufacture and usage of homemade rockets as was seen during the campaign for al-Qusayr when rockets were fired from Syrian areas into Shi'te population centers in Lebanon.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

¹¹⁰ "Al-Nusra Front plays major role in rebel takeover of a large Syrian army arsenal outside Homs" *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

¹¹¹ "Jabhat-al-Nusra" *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

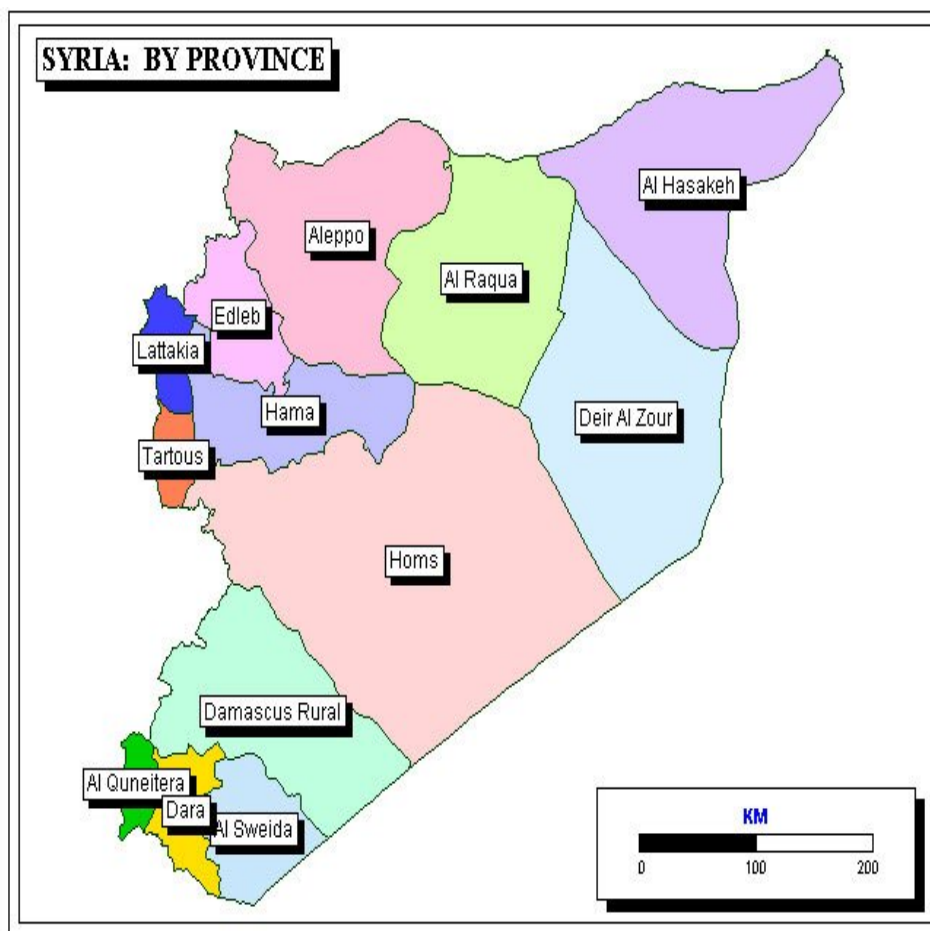
Governance of Regions and Control of Infrastructure

While JN's attacks on governmental facilities in the big cities are intended to sow chaos and create fear among the Syrian regime and its supporters, attacks in Syria's rural regions are intended to cut off administrative units from one another, hit the Syrian regime's ability to govern, and give the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups control over territories where they can entrench themselves and prepare for further fighting (they are referred to as "liberated areas").¹¹² Using such tactics, the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist groups have been able to establish themselves in Syria's periphery, in the country's east and north, and create a situation where they comprise the strongest military force and the governing organization in some of those areas. To be more specific it is the governorates of Al-Raqqa, Al Hasakah, Aleppo, Idlib, and Deir ez-Zor that Nusra and its affiliates are strongest. The group maintains a presence (but not administrative control) in the Southern provinces of Dara and Al-Sweda, where they are nevertheless engaged in various forms of social assistance and military operations. The map on the next page is provided for reference.¹¹³

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Map taken from www.personal.umich.edu

Map of Syria's Provinces



To create an alternative administration to the Syrian regime and gain the support of the population in various regions that they have captured, the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations have taken upon themselves government functions in various spheres of life: distributing vital food supplies, operating an Islamic justice system and enforcing law and order. Governance of these regions has been characterized by a notable ability to maintain law and order, an area in which the FSA has failed. Western reporters who visited liberated territories said that the local residents were content with the

situation.¹¹⁴ The FSA, on the other hand, lacking an effective centralized command structure/treasury, has been unable to prevent its troops from looting, robbing and in some cases, raping in the areas where it is dominant, a fact that has been of great help to JN in entrenching itself in regions of Syria. Having cultivated a reputation for discipline and moral righteousness, JN's ability to gain legitimate control over areas is an invaluable asset to Al-Qaeda.

Al-Nusra and its Islamist affiliates' ability to create alternative governance mechanisms in such a short period of time is both remarkable and deeply worrying at the same time. The same process in Afghanistan took the Taliban nearly ten years, and even then, their draconic rule was despised in spite of the fact that the Taliban managed to bring law and order back to a country engulfed in civil war. In attempting to analyze and pinpoint the source of the Islamist' success in this regard, it is necessary to take stock of their administrative behavior with respect to region.

Al-Raqqa

According to an investigative report by Reuters in June 2013, Islamist factions in control of the Al-Raqqa governorate manage the city's public services complete with an effective court system that handles issues ranging from petty theft to property registration, financial disputes, and even licensing for import/export to other rebel areas.¹¹⁵ The fighters launch operations to take control of grain silos which they use to supply the bakeries they manage, which in turn provide rations to the inhabitants of the area. The Islamists are also being careful not to over impose their religious ideals on the

¹¹⁴ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

¹¹⁵ Ibid

locals; women can move about freely unveiled, the acquisition of alcohol is possible, and the universities are allowed to run unhindered.¹¹⁶

Of particular importance to Nusra and the Islamic coalition in general is the hydro-electric dam near the city of Al-Thawra. JN successfully seized this dam in February 2013 after having seized a smaller dam in the area in a joint operation with the FSA.¹¹⁷ The rebels use this dam to provide water and electricity to residents, hugely magnifying their popularity in the region.

Aleppo

JN's efforts to entrench itself in Aleppo date back to late 2012 when the group embarked on an intensive relief operation, providing fuel and basic necessities to residents while also controlling bread prices and persecuting profiteers.¹¹⁸ In 2013 Nusra furthered their efforts of aid to locals, engaging in an effort to repair hit power grids and sewage infrastructure. In addition the group provided low-cost medical care, cleaning services and agricultural aid to residents.¹¹⁹ Winning the battle for hearts and minds in Aleppo is of particular importance to JN as it is a central theater for the battle between rebels and the regime. Aleppo has, since the outbreak of the war, been a hotbed for rebel activity and anti-regime sentiment, making the sentiment of the locals towards JN a key factor in the overall effort to gain popularity amongst the opposition. A particularly important rebel operation in Aleppo was the seizure of Al-Jarrah military airbase in February 2013, a day after JN and allies took control of the dam at al-Thawra in the Al-Raqah governorate.

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Ibid

Deir-ez Zor

The Deir-ez-Zor governorate, located in North East Syria, is important primarily because of the border it shares with Iraq, from where a significant amount of weapons and fighters enter Syria to join the Islamist factions. The Nusra Front is involved in intense relief activity in the region, supplying food, gas, transportation infrastructure (bridges), and medical care to residents.¹²⁰ Similar reports hold true for Al-Hasakah and Idlib, where the Nusra Front's provision of basic services has won them support for the local residents. It is pertinent to note that JN and its affiliates have exercised great restraint in meting out harsh punishments in keeping with the tenets of radical Islam through its Sharia courts. This restraint is driven by a calculated attempt at rebranding the Islamist factions; the behavior of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan makes people immediately wary of the idea of Sharia courts, thereby creating the impetus for Nusra and others to demonstrate a departure from this trend. The longevity of this restraint, however, is questionable; once these groups become well entrenched (their authority is unquestioned) they will be far less motivated to exercise restraint on severe punishments.

Control of Vital Infrastructure

Perhaps the most important of JN's operations is its successful seizure and management of key infrastructure sites, including some of Syria's most vital oil and gas fields. The vast amounts of money JN spends in paying its operatives (more than any other group), acquiring weapons, and providing relief to the various regions it governs in tandem with other Islamist factions is a result of its ability to use this infrastructure to

¹²⁰ Ibid

generate revenue. The extent of Nusra's (and allies) control over some of Syria's most important infrastructure is staggering; in 2013 almost all of the oil and gas fields in eastern and northern Syria were overrun by the rebels. While the fields are run and secured by a coalition, JN plays the most prominent and authoritative role in their management.¹²¹ The seizure of these oil fields has created a regional market; according to a report by Reuters thousands of barrels of crude oil are smuggled to Turkey daily by small tankers using primitive roads.¹²²

JN's leadership has been characterized by pragmatism in strategy, and this pragmatism holds true for their management of oil fields; according to some sources JN and the regime have reached a tacit agreement with regard to oil. The agreement entails that the rebels keep oil flowing to the Western parts of the country in exchange for monthly payments estimated at \$1.5 million.¹²³ This would put JN's annual income, solely from control of two oil fields, at \$18 million. Given that it also generates income from the sale of large weapons seizures, oil drilling machines, factory equipment, archaeological relics, vehicles and wheat it is easily the most well financed group amongst the opposition¹²⁴. JN also receives separate funding from a host of sources in the Gulf, Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, a fact that makes it one of, if not the most, well financed Jihadist group in existence today.

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Borger, Julian and Mahmood, Mona. "EU Decision to Lift Syrian Oil Sanctions Boosts Jihadist Groups." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 20 May. 2013.

¹²⁴ "Jahbat-Al-Nusra." *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

In addition to the dams seized in Al-Raqah, the oil fields seized in the north and East, and the airbases seized in various regions, JN has also managed to take control of most of the 17 important border-crossings into Syria, a fact that elevates its level of influence on the Syrian countryside from notable to comprehensive. In short, in the recent months, Al Qaeda in Syria has become an organization that governs an area with several million inhabitants, while it manages the economic activities numbering in millions of dollars monthly, and, apart from the Syrian Army, it is the “organization” that maintains the largest and strongest army in Syria.

4. Implications for Middle Eastern Security and U.S Foreign Policy

The prominence of JN within Syria poses a regional security threat like no other. The group is ideally positioned in a financial, geographical, and militaristic sense to export jihad to Lebanon Israel, Europe, and pro-Western Arab countries. Manned by thousands of well trained, highly disciplined and ideologically committed soldiers who are well versed in guerilla warfare, bomb making and counter-intelligence, Jabhat-al-Nusra and its affiliates are now the centerpieces of global jihad. Embroiled in a conflict that has taken center stage in the international arena, Al-Qaeda is no longer hiding away in the faraway caves and mountains of Afghanistan, rather it has created a political base with wide-ranging support in the heart of the Levant.

Projecting the Future Role of JN and Affiliates

The role and significance of Nusra and its affiliates in the future will depend on the course that the conflict takes from here on. As it currently stands the Assad regime and rebels are locked in a violent stalemate, with each side jockeying for marginal victories over the other. The current paralysis is driven by the simple fact that Assad will do anything to stay in power, and the opposition would never accept a peace deal that allows him to stay. Neither side is strong enough to win, or weak enough to lose.¹²⁵ With his monopoly on air power and support from the Russians and Iranians, Assad feels no pressure to negotiate with the armed opposition, making it impossible for the

¹²⁵ Perriello, Tom. "A New Start To U.S. Policy in Syria Can Save Lives." *The Daily Beast*. Newsweek/Daily Beast, 17 Feb. 2014 Web. 28 Apr. 2014

international community to facilitate a cease-fire. The Assad regime has deliberately turned the war into a polarized, existential, all or nothing battle in order to rally Syria's apolitical Alawites to the regime. The regime, contrary to popular belief, is far from the verge of collapse. It is well financed, well armed and as of late has had assistance from specialized Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon. Given that one of Assad's weaknesses was a lack of a sufficient amount of loyal soldiers, this influx does much to reinforce the regime's ability to endure the opposition. The regime also has Iran's full backing; Iran announced a credit facility for Syria in 2013 amounting to \$1 billion, which was increased to \$3.6 billion later that year¹²⁶. Iraq, in a telling sign of increased alignment with Iran, has allowed for its airspace to be used for the transport of weapons from Iran to Syria. In addition to Iraqi government support, Iraqi Shia militias are engaged on the ground in Syria.

The rebels, while unable to wrest control of major cities, have successfully entrenched themselves in the rural areas, particularly in the north. The Islamist factions control nearly all major oil and gas fields, two dams, many of the border crossings and vital supply lines. The rebels, particularly the Nusra Front, are short on neither money nor fighters, and have the advantage of unfettered access to a seemingly endless stream of new recruits created by the sectarian nature of the conflict. One area in which the rebels have no answer for Assad is in his air superiority; a lack of MANPAD's and heavy weaponry leaves even the most sophisticated of rebel groups vulnerable to air assault, a fact that Assad capitalizes on by launching intense bombing campaigns.

¹²⁶ Sajdapour, Karim. "Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point." *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point RSS* 27 August. 2013

Recent reports suggest that Assad is dependent on the Jihadists factions remaining at large as it is the greatest deterrent to the West providing other rebels with heavy weaponry. On an ideological, narrative-building level Assad needs terrorist enemies allegedly supported by foreign powers like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel and Turkey because they suit the sense of legitimacy and secular Arab nationalism he wishes to project and also help justify state repression.¹²⁷ This means that Assad is likely to concentrate the brunt of his military energy towards the FSA, as the absolute elimination (an impossibility at this point anyway) of Jihadist groups would only ease the way for the West to heavily arm the rebels. The continued presence and prominence of the Nusra Front in Syria can thus be expected, as can the growth of the group in both numbers and popularity.

Implications for Middle Eastern Security

Nusra, by virtue of its control over regions in the North, has already created safe havens for Al-Qaeda that are easily accessible through both Turkey and Iraq. It can be assumed that Syria will now be used by Al-Qaeda as a center for global jihad and a launching pad for attacks against Israel. Evidence for this can be found in the fact that on January 22nd, 2014 Israeli Intelligence announced that it had foiled an Al-Qaeda plot aimed at carrying out mass-casualty suicide bombings in Israel.¹²⁸ It is pertinent to note that while Israel has been forced to engage with Hamas and Hezbollah due to the geographical proximity of Palestine and Lebanon, the same has not held true for Al-

¹²⁷ Black, Ian. "Why Bashar Stresses Al-Qauida Narrative." Theguardian. The Guardian, 18 May 2012. Web.

¹²⁸ Lappin, Yaakov. "3 East Jerusalem Al-Queda Recruits Arrested, Planned Massive Bombings." *Jerusalem Post* 22 January 2014

Qaeda in the past. Never before has Al-Qaeda been at Israel's doorstep, a fact that is likely to induce Israel to further bolster its position in the Golan Heights.

Lebanon is also likely to suffer at the hands of al-Nusra considering that Hezbollah has entered the conflict in a big way. Having sent a couple of thousand fighters into Syria to aid the Syrian military, Hezbollah has been key to the regime successfully rooting out JN and other opposition forces from Yabrud, Al-Qasayr and regions near the Syrian-Lebanese border.¹²⁹ The Nusra Front, having suffered heavy losses at the hands of specialized Hezbollah light infantry units, has retaliated by attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon. Since August 2013 JN has launched seven attacks in Hezbollah controlled areas of Lebanon using suicide bombers and car bombs.¹³⁰ Unless there is a fundamental recalculation of policy by Hezbollah, these attacks are likely to continue which will have the effect of politically weakening Hezbollah and destabilizing Lebanon. Hezbollah's subservience to the Iranian regime is unlikely to allow for any such recalculation, making its isolation inevitable. Israel stands to benefit most the most from this development, raising questions as to whether the Mossad has anything to do with the sudden and mysterious emergence of JN in Lebanon.

The growing numbers of Westerners that are joining the ranks of the Syrian opposition is a major global security concern, particularly because more often than not, these Westerners end up fighting with JN. Considering that these individuals have Western passports, their potential radicalization presents a threat to their home countries. Of the countries in Europe Britain has the most foreign fighters in Syria, estimated at anywhere between two to three hundred. Estimates put the number of foreign fighters

¹²⁹ "The Takeover of the city of Yabrud" *The Meir Emit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (2013): Web.

¹³⁰ "Jabhat Al-Nusra Claims Deadly Lebanon Bombing." *Middle East Al Jazeera* 2 February. 2014

from Western countries at anywhere between 1600 and 2100.¹³¹ This relatively large number of fighters poses an international security risk because of their hostility to Western European values, Syria's geographical proximity to Europe, the relative logistical ease of maintaining contact with Al-Qaeda handlers and the legal, political and societal challenges associated with countering Islamic terrorism in Europe.¹³² Countries like Britain have difficulty in detaining foreign fighters for two reasons, the first being that the illegality of fighting the Assad regime is not a given unless evidence of involvement with banned jihadist groups can be found, and secondly because these foreign fighters hide their final destination, travelling either to Turkey or France before making the final trip into Syria.¹³³

Another threat posed by Nusra's presence in Syria is the possibility of advanced weapons from the regime falling into the hands of Jihadists. Of particular concern is the possibility of chemical weapons proliferating to the opposition. It is noteworthy that JN was involved in the rebel seizure of Sheikh Sulayman base, known for being a key chemical weapons research facility.

The fact that the rebels are firmly in control of the countryside in the north and east as well as many border-crossings into Iraq and Turkey means that these borders, especially the Iraqi border, will become increasingly porous over time. The Syrian regime itself now only controls one official border crossing into Iraq.¹³⁴ The Iraqi province of Anbar, host to a Sunni majority sympathetic to the Syrian opposition, has been a vital source of both fighters and weapons to the rebels. The continued presence and control of

¹³¹ Lappin, Yaakov. "3 East Jerusalem Al-Qaeda Recruits Arrested, Planned Massive Bombings." *Jerusalem Post* 22 January 2014

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ Ibid

¹³⁴ Prothero, Mitchell. "Beirut: Al-Qaeda Rebels Strike Syrian Town Seeking Access to Iraq, Oil." 10 April. 2014

Islamist factions in this region will result in the increased porousness of the border, a phenomenon that may eventually lead to its effective disappearance altogether.

Analyzing U.S Policy Toward Syria

U.S/western policy towards Syria has been an unmistakable failure. Non-interventionism in the early stages of the war created a vacuum that has been filled by Jihadists that will later threaten Western security interests. Not only did western policy permit the Assad regime to continue oppressing the Sunni majority, it also created the impetus for regional powers to support/prop up Jihadist outfits operating in the region. Having missed the window of opportunity to decisively intervene in the conflict, the U.S has now taken to sticking to an “Assad must go” policy that, more than anything else, relies on Riyadh and Ankara to continue supporting Jihadists with links to Al-Qaeda. This policy could be motivated by a combination of factors, some of which are listed below.

1. Washington is cautious. Syria is unlike either Iraq or Libya as it has powerful friends in the shape of Iran and Lebanon. Any significant U.S interventionism could lead to the widening of the war; Hezbollah and Iran could easily retaliate to U.S intervention by attacking Israel, thereby dragging it into the war and engulfing the whole region into further intensified conflict.

2. The Obama administration wishes to roll back its presence/involvement in the Middle East while safeguarding its vital interests in the region. This rollback from the

region is motivated by the domestically unpopular U.S engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan coupled with the (disastrous) aftermath of the Libyan intervention. In addition, the Obama administration wishes to redistribute its military presence/focus from the Middle East to Asia, in what is being called the Asia-pacific pivot. The U.S's remaining vital interests in the Middle East lie in keeping the flow of oil undisrupted so as to prevent shocks to the global economy and countering/containing Iran's sphere of influence in the region. In other words, the U.S is happy to take a step back and let regional powers flesh it out in a proxy war so long as oil keeps flowing and Iran's designs are being resisted (in this case through jihadist groups).

3. The U.S, cognizant of the fact that regional powers would end up arming the rebels regardless of U.S involvement, wished to place itself in a consultative role that would allow it to vet the groups receiving arms, thereby enabling it to take steps to prevent Jihadists acquiring those weapons.

As far as factor 3 is concerned, the U.S has either failed to effectively prevent jihadists from acquiring weapons intended for the FSA, or it is deliberately placing its bets on (and allowing weapons to flow to) the jihadist groups in the hope that their superior military skill will hasten the fall of the regime. The latter, if true, represents the most strategically incoherent and short sighted policy to have originated in Washington since the arming of the Mujahideen.

With regard to factor 2, if the U.S is truly experimenting with a policy based on regional powers like Saudi Arabia supporting proxy militias against Iran, then this experiment has failed because it has not at all undermined Iran's regional position. If anything, Iran's position has been elevated by the vacuum created by the U.S's decision

to grant regional powers a greater role in managing the area. The presence of Salafi-Jihadist groups in Syria and the Levant in general gives Iran license to counter these groups with their own proxies, such as Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shia militias active in Syria. While Saudi Arabian Intelligence is no stranger to proxy warfare, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which it bests the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, renowned world over for its mastery in proxy warfare. The cautious U.S approach to Syria, aimed at preventing the widening of the war, has ironically ended up doing just that; Hezbollah's entrance into the war at Iran's behest will now embroil Lebanon in the conflict, a development that will threaten the long-term stability of the region.

Implications/ U.S Policy Recommendations

U.S policy towards Syria up till now has failed on almost all counts, backfiring at every step, complicating any progress towards the resolution of the conflict. In charting out a maximalist demand for Assad's removal, the U.S and its European partners have greatly reduced, if not irreparably damaged, the prospects for a negotiated resolution of the conflict. The overwhelming prominence of Jihadi factions in Syria, which could have been prevented by the timely organization/armament of the FSA in 2012, is now a given factor that must be accounted for in the future. In formulating future policy U.S decision makers must be cognizant of another factor that has now become a given: it will be impossible to bring about a political settlement in Syria without altering the military balance to some extent, simply because the Assad regime feels no obligation to negotiate so long as it is backed by Iran and Russia and can maintain its aerial superiority over the opposition. Keeping this in mind, the U.S faces some distinct options in proceeding with its policy with regard to Damascus, listed below.

The first of these options is to decisively launch an immediate effort to arm, finance and train moderate elements of the FSA in an effort to alter the military balance and hasten the fall of the Assad regime. This would involve giving the rebels heavy weaponry and ideally, some form of air-support. This option is unviable because firstly, there are almost no 'moderates' in the FSA with the prerequisite military influence and on ground presence to effectively use any weapons that the U.S might decide to supply. In addition, the U.S would risk Iran and Lebanon deciding to upscale their involvement in the war by overtly arming the FSA.

The second option is for the U.S to wait for the Assad regime to topple, and then begin supporting the FSA. This policy avoids the risk of weapons falling into Jihadist hands, as once the common goal of Assad's removal is achieved, Jihadist groups and the FSA will very likely turn against each other, thereby providing the U.S with an opportunity to marginalize Al-Qaeda without having to put boots on the ground. This option is unfortunately contingent on the Assad regime somehow toppling without the rebels being further armed, a situation that seems highly unlikely in the wake of recent events. This option also assumes that the U.S wants to remain heavily involved in Syria beyond Assad's removal, an assumption that does not stand up to the realities of the U.S's effort to extricate itself from heavy involvement the region.

A third option is to do nothing and allow regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, and Qatar to take the reins with regard to Syria. This option most closely represents the stance currently taken by the U.S and allows the U.S much more political space with which to pursue its other geopolitical interests. The Obama Administration's hopes for improved Iranian-American relations are one of these interests, one that will be

greatly aided by a policy of detachment from Syria. Yet a policy of complete detachment from Syria will lead to regional powers continuing support for proxies against one another, thereby elongating the war and throwing into question the long-term stability of the entire region. A do nothing policy will also be perceived in the Muslim world as the U.S abandonment of Muslims in need, and will be used by Jihadist clerics as a sticking point in their vilification of the U.S.

Thus it is my recommendation that the U.S pursue a policy that is a combination of the second and third option; allow regional players a greater role in managing the opposition while preparing to engage Syrian civil society and the FSA in a post Assad future. This recommendation is based on the assumption that the military balance needs to be altered in order for the regime to topple, and that the only forces within the opposition militarily capable of toppling the regime are the Jihadists. Neither can the U.S afford to be seen as a direct supplier of weapons to Jihadist factions nor can it ignore the fact that they are the only realistic means by which to hasten the removal of Assad. To complicate matters, the U.S needs to marginalize Al-Qaeda in Syria if and when the Assad regime topples. Thus the U.S should currently assume a preparatory role that is aimed at assisting Syria's neighbors with their capabilities relating to border security and refugee relief. This will help in mitigating the negative effects of the militarization of the region, while simultaneously providing the U.S with time to identify, vet, train and politically engage legitimate members of the Syrian opposition so that when the time comes, these groups are in a position to make a difference. Rather than generate new enemies, present policy should focus on augmenting the capacity of friendly actors and if possible, seeking and training more recruits for their cause. Crucial to this effort will be a

broader engagement with Syrian civil society, planning for reform of post-conflict security institutions and the upgrading of western support to the Syrian political process.

Conclusions

The emergence of Al-Qaeda in Syria was understandable if not inevitable; Al-Qaeda has suffered significant losses in Pakistan, where the CIA and Pakistan's Inter-Services-Intelligence captured or killed 23 of its top 24 operatives (including OBL). It has been all but driven out of Iraq, where it received backlash from the local populace and has lost much of the support/acceptance it once enjoyed. In Yemen the group has been effectively targeted by the U.S through the use of drone strikes, causing further disruption to its operations. Under this pressure some Al-Qaeda members had taken to hiding/shifting to North Africa, a fact that was interpreted by western analysts as a sign of Al-Qaeda's decline.

The emergence of Jabhat-al-Nusra in Syria must thus be contextualized within Al-Qaeda's prevailing predicament; it is a deliberate attempt to create a new safe haven in the absence of those previously enjoyed and also an opportunity to rebrand itself by playing to the popular tune of a Sunni led revolution in Syria. Al-Nusra's battle to 'win hearts and mind' is evidence of this conscious 'rebranding' effort by Al-Qaeda and can be recognized in Nusra's exercise of restraint in meting out harsh punishments, high emphasis on relief/social work, and avoidance (when possible) of conflict with other groups. Engaged in battle not only with the regime but also with Hezbollah, JN has placed itself at the center of a sectarian proxy war and now acts as the lynchpin of the Sunni side. Al-Qaeda, far from having been defeated in the GWOT, is now master and

commander of swathes of territory that harbor millions of people. The sectarian nature of the conflict has allowed for it to mesh into a larger opposition that is seen by the majority of the international community as legitimate and worthy of support. This is dangerous not only because of the security risks that a jihadist network firmly entrenched in Syria poses, but also because the polarized environment in Syria, brought on by the sectarian nature of the conflict, is conducive to mass radicalization. Jihadist groups like the Nusra Front are being received with praise and admiration, their achievements lauded and popularized, and their ranks being joined by local and foreign fighters alike. Never before has Al-Qaeda been so mainstream, so acceptable or so well received. Never before has a call to jihad yielded the influx of so many Muslim fighters, from so many different countries, in such a short period of time.

The implications of this are dire; the security dynamic of the Middle East is bound to take a decisive turn for the worse with Syria serving as a jihadist hotbed. The border agreements of 1916, charted out by Sykes-Picot, are likely to come under question as the porousness of the rebel held Iraqi-Syria border crossings begins to take effect. Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey will all become victims, to some extent, of the spillover effects of the war while Iran will continue to vie for regional influence through proxy warfare. That Syria has become the central theater for Sunni vs. Shia conflict is in many ways advantageous to the U.S at a time where it is attempting to disentangle itself from the region. Considering that the U.S is at odds with both Iran and hardcore Salafi Jihadists it is strategically advisable for them to let this conflict continue indefinitely so as to maximize the weakening of both sides. From a moralistic and humanitarian point of view however, the cost of letting the conflict continue unhindered is unacceptably high.

U.S policymakers must thus strive to find an acceptable balance between realpolitik and humanistic responsibility in tackling the Syrian quagmire.

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