

Testimony of Mr. Barak Barfi, Research Fellow, New America Foundation

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about al-Qaeda's operations in Syria. After the organization was stripped of its Afghan sanctuary following the 9/11 attacks, and its core leadership decimated in Pakistan, the group decided to embrace a more decentralized model that focused on regional affiliates. These branches have succeeded in keeping al-Qaeda relevant even as it absorbs lethal hits around the world.

The Middle East revolutions known as the Arab Spring have posed new dilemmas for the organization. As the frustrated youth that was to fuel the al-Qaeda revolutions flocked to the streets in Egypt and Libya to overthrow long ruling leaders, the jihadist narrative the organization parroted seemed increasingly irrelevant. With dreaded security services neutered, Arabs could control their destinies without resorting to violence.

But as has consistently happened in the decade since it rose to international prominence, al-Qaeda has been able to take advantage of events in the Middle East to reassert its importance. Today a Syrian civil war that has descended into urban anarchy has provided the organization a new theater to stage its operations. In a nation where the government controls less than a quarter of the country's territory, internal and external actors have been able to carve out spheres of influence.

One of those is al-Qaeda. The organization's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has released several videos offering encouragement for Syria's revolution, while urging foreign jihadists to fight there. His appeals seem to be working. In March, British Foreign Minister William Hague said that 'Syria today has become the top destination for jihadists.'

AL-QAEDA IN SYRIA

Al-Qaeda created the organization *The Support Front for the People of the Levant*, known locally as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), to front its activities in Syria. The late al-Qaeda founder Usama bin Laden recommended that the organization establish groups that did not bear its name because of the negative connotation associated with it in the aftermath of its Iraqi debacle.

Despite its recent emergence, JN has a long history. It evolved from the networks the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi established when he moved his operations from Afghanistan to Iraq following the American invasion of Kabul. He established cells in Levantine countries to funnel foreigners to Iraq. Following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate sent between 150-200 operatives to Syria to establish a local infrastructure.

JN emerged in January 2012 when a suicide bomber targeted Syrian security officials. Since then the group has carried out a number of suicide bombings, reaching into the regime's innermost sanctums. But it also has embraced conventional military tactics such as ambushes and assaults. Today, JN is considered one of the most effective rebel fighting forces numbering between 1,500-5,000. Though the group has drawn members from Iraq, Jordan and the Caucasus

Mountain states, the majority of its foot soldiers are nevertheless Syrians. In April, its leader known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, an act which has sown some divisions within the organization.

WHY SYRIA?

Al-Qaeda thrives on instability and establishes its presence in ungoverned spaces. Such factors have become basic staples in a country that inches closer to Somalification with every passing day. The government has receded, armed groups control much of the countryside and social welfare no longer exists outside a handful of cities and regions.

Nevertheless, other indigenous geo-religious factors particular to Syria have drawn al-Qaeda there. Syria is ruled by a small Shi'i offshoot known as Alawis to which President Bashar al-Asad belongs. Pre-twentieth century Islamic scholars decreed the sect's members heretics. Al-Qaeda's ideology has historically prioritized fighting Shi'i infidels to combatting Jews and Christians. Moreover, by highlighting the sectarian nature of the conflict, JN can depict itself as protecting Sunnis from a Shi'i onslaught.

Syria is located at a strategic crossroads to which no other Arab nation can lay claim. It borders several key countries including Saudi Arabia and Israel, jihadists' arch foe. While other al-Qaeda affiliates are located in remote areas on the periphery of the Middle East, a Levantine branch would have the ability to expand out in several directions.

Syria will have no government for years as it increasingly becomes a Middle Eastern Somalia. JN's successes will allow al-Qaeda to carve out a sphere of influence unimpeded by a regime's attempts to neutralize it.

Syria has an eschatological significance. Medieval Islamic literature predicts many apocalyptic battles will occur there, thus convincing jihadists seeking the ultimate martyrdom to flock to Syria.

WHY JN APPEALS TO SYRIANS

While Syria has provided al-Qaeda a new haven, Syrians have proved receptive to its message. It should be stressed that much like in other theaters, it is not the organization's ideology which is drawing its admirers. As the international community has abandoned Syrians to face a regime prepared to use all the weapons in its arsenal, they are increasingly willing to accept a lifeline from anyone willing to offer them one.

For much of the revolution, Syrians believed the rebel led Free Syrian Army (FSA) would provide it. But as the armed struggle has stalled, the largely nationalist FSA has stumbled. Its units are making little progress on the battlefield. Worse, they have drawn the ire of a population exhausted by their abuses. Theft, kidnappings for ransom and torture have become their motto.

Everyday JN attracts new supporters dissatisfied with the FSA. They are drawn to its discipline, organization and squeaky clean image. JN's propensity to assist Syrians solve their problems,

whether through mediation or aid, have also contributed to its popularity. It runs a social welfare division that provides goods and services to a war torn population. These networks are much more efficient and responsive than ones managed by FSA units.

The organization's battlefield successes have won it admiration as well. JN is the most effective rebel unit. Its fighters are known for their bravery and dedication to the cause. During my latest visit to Syria, Syrians beamed about JN's contribution to the revolution. These factors make JN the most admired rebel unit in the field. And as the revolution spirals into a cauldron of chaos, the organization will only win over Syrians to its cause.

MODUS OPERANDI

JN has established a hierarchical organization that comprises military, political and religious committees. It is highly compartmentalized with members often not knowing those in other cells. It subjects prospective candidates to a rigorous initiation process, imbuing its members with a sense of duty and belonging.

JN's operational influence in Syria is mixed. Though it pioneered the use of suicide bombings, most FSA units have eschewed such attacks. JN has been more successful in persuading rebel groups to embrace improvised explosive devices.

Though JN has refused to join the FSA or other more Islamist orientated organizations, it nevertheless cooperates with rebel units. It participates in joint operations and amicably divides the spoils between them.

Like other FSA units, JN operates in the open, hanging its shingle on the door. During a recent visit to Aleppo, I lived in the building next door to the one JN was occupying. Its fighters buzzed around the complex. Though it maintains operational secrecy and largely avoids the international media, it nevertheless maintains an open presence throughout Syria.

TURNING A NEW PAGE

Al-Qaeda's widespread bloodletting in Iraq tarnished the organization's image. The organization and other jihadists have sought to draw lessons from their failed Iraq experience. Their treatises are full of exhortations to avoid killing individuals from Syrian minorities allied to the regime. JN has heeded this advice. It has not targeted Alawi civilians, instead focusing on those who work for the regime. And unlike in Iraq, JN focuses exclusively on military targets, thus minimizing civilian casualties

The organization's religio-political program is purposefully vague to avoid alienating certain constituencies. It has not delineated a vision for a post-Asad Syria. In contrast, other puritanical groups known as Salafis have been much more explicit about the type of state they plan to build on the rubble of the one being destroyed. JN has nevertheless employed some vice squads in areas under its control.

In embracing this middle path, JN seeks to avoid the pitfalls that sank its Iraqi sibling. The

organization is cognizant that its success depends on ingratiating itself with the local population rather than ensuring its grip on society through a reign of terror. It remains to be seen if this is a short term tactical shift or a permanent turn. Once JN has accomplished its transitional goal of overthrowing the regime it may seek to impose its views on its subjects.

THE DAY AFTER

Unlike the FSA, JN's ultimate goal is not the overthrow of the Syrian regime. It seeks to carve out a new haven for al-Qaeda where the organization can operate in the heart of the Arab world. It is also bent on taking the fight to neighboring Israel. But any attempt to do so will likely be met by resistance from FSA units sensitive to Western appeals. As a result, JN will have to combat other FSA units to ensure its freedom of mobility. For these reasons, JN does not currently pose a threat to the American homeland. The organization needs to focus on consolidating its local position before it can focus on the far enemy.

JN nevertheless poses problems for American interests in the Middle East. For Syria is not Las Vegas. What happens in Syria will not stay in Syria. The violence there is bound to spill over into neighboring countries, some of which are American allies. As such, containing JN should be a national interest.