

JIHADIST ORGANIZATIONS IN SYRIA

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House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade
November 20, 2013

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about the various jihadist groups operating in Syria. Before I begin, I want to give a quick shout out to my advisor, Columbia University Professor Richard Bulliet who schooled me in the nuances of Islam. Syria has emerged as the number one destination of foreign jihadists. Pipelines from the Arabian Peninsula, Europe and North Africa funnel fighters to Syria.

Some of these fighters have allied with homegrown extremists to create the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate, known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Today, ISIS is the strongest brigade in Syria with a robust presence in many of the country's provinces. However, although media attention has largely focused on ISIS, there are a number of other Salafist and jihadist organizations that also espouse anti-modern and anti-Western ideologies.

ISIS' roots date back to the January 2012 creation of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) when al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), sought to exploit the Syrian revolution to establish a regional branch there. On April 8, 2013, ISI's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that JN had been absorbed into ISI to create the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). JN's leader rebuffed the merger and received the support of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Nevertheless, within days many JN fighters defected to ISIS. ISIS also took over a number of JN's compounds. Moderate members deserted for the rebel-led Free Syrian Army (FSA) units. It appeared that JN was on the brink of disintegration.

But shedding outliers who enflamed internal dissent led to a more unified membership and a more cohesive ideology. The issue of takfirism, or declaring other Muslims to be non-believers, was bitterly contested within JN. The leadership was never comfortable with the extremists who advocated it, and were pleased when they jumped ship for ISIS. In addition, most of the radicals who left were foreigners, allowing JN to present itself as authentically Syrian.

Tensions between ISIS and JN are illustrated by events in the city of Raqqa. After the April merger, JN's leader, Abu Sa'd, chose not to join ISIS. Instead, he abandoned JN's compound, now under ISIS' control, with about thirty fighters. After keeping a low profile for several months as it reorganized, JN reemerged in September. In the interim, it absorbed units from the rebel-led Free Syrian Army (FSA), who felt threatened by ISIS' consolidation of power. A number of units from the 11th Division such as Thuwar Raqqa and Muntasir Billah joined JN. But JN's comeback vexed ISIS, which responded by incarcerating Abu Sa'd. In other areas, such as Aleppo, ISIS members have defected back to JN.

Other factors have brought the intra-al-Qaeda conflict to the fore. On November 8, al-Zawahiri announced the disbanding of ISIS, restricting al-Baghdadi's theater to Iraq and appointing JN as al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. Given ISIS' independence from al-Qaeda's Pakistan-based leadership, and its autonomous financial resources, al-Baghdadi has no need to accept al-Zawahiri's diktats. He has previously rebuffed al-Zawahiri's Syrian directives and will do so again.

As smaller brigades such as Asifa al-Shamal and Ghuraba al-Sham are squeezed out of the revolution by their larger counterparts, it is likely that rebel groups will consolidate into pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS blocks led by JN. Such mergers portend a future battle where JN will play an

important role as the bulwark against ISIS expansion.

ISIS is able to act with impunity because of its predominance in the Syrian arena. It has a qualitative superiority over other FSA units. Foreign jihadists brought with them combat skills learned in other conflicts. In addition, its ideological dedication to the revolution, often lacking in other FSA brigades, reflects a commitment that is admired by Syrians of all stripes.

It is not only the organization's martial prowess that assures its popularity. In a war that has devastated state institutions, Syrians have few options for judicial arbitration. Because ISIS' leaders are mainly foreign, they are neutral mediators. The organization also provides municipal and social services, such as supplying grain to bakeries and establishing schools and summer camps for youth.

Local circumstances often dictate its relationship with the civilian community. In areas where corrupt FSA units or inefficient administrators operated prior to its arrival, ISIS has been welcomed. But in regions where local officials had created a modicum of government, ISIS has received poor grades.

ISIS seeks to create an Islamic state guided by the harshest interpretations of Islamic law that have little grounding in Islamic history. The organization has declared that its struggle will not end with the toppling of the Syrian regime. It plans to take the fight to other Arab countries in its quest to create a nebulous caliphate.

ISIS cooperates with many FSA and Islamist brigades. They sponsor joint operations and divide the spoils. But the organization has also clashed with other rebel groups. When ISIS sought to consolidate its control over Raqqa, it dispatched a suicide bomber to destroy the compound of the FSA unit Ahfad al-Rasul. In July, ISIS killed Kamal Hamami, a senior FSA leader in Latakia. His death sparked FSA promises of a military riposte that never materialized. Indeed, various FSA units often boast that they will take on ISIS only to back down later. In some provinces such as Raqqa, the FSA is no longer in a position to challenge it. In others such as Aleppo, the most powerful brigade, Tawhid, has no desire to do so.

Last week, ISIS decapitated a fighter from the Islamist brigade Ahrar al-Sham. The latter has demanded that the killers be tried. ISIS will likely seek to reach an accord. Because it knows that if it does not, Ahrar, unlike the fainthearted FSA, will respond in kind.

Ahrar al-Sham is one of the most powerful brigades in Syria. It has a presence across several regions. Like ISIS, it advocates a puritanical Islamist creed known as Salafism. But unlike ISIS, it does not espouse radical doctrines such as takfirism and the indiscriminate killing of minorities. Ahrar advocates the creation of an Islamic state with limited citizen rights. It cooperates with Western journalists. It has often stated that its struggle will end with the revolution. Most of its members are Syrian, but there are some foreigners in its ranks. Like other brigades, Ahrar cooperates with ISIS, with some commanders enjoying strong ties with their al-Qaeda counterparts. But its main allies are in the Syrian Islamic Front which joins together eleven Salafi brigades.

Jaysh al-Muhajrin wa al-Ansar (JMA) is another jihadist organization active in Syria. Led by Chechans, its rank and file is largely foreign. JMA has pledged allegiance to ISIS, but nevertheless differs with ISIS on a number of ideological points. Its leadership has sometimes stated that the organization does not seek to use Syria as a launching pad for other regional campaigns, but merely seeks the overthrow of the Syrian regime. And whereas ISIS leader al-Baghdadi has obscured his real identity and lives in anonymity, JMA believes a caliph must reveal himself and openly interact with the masses. JMA is particularly active in the northern provinces of Aleppo and Idlib.

The FSA has never been - as some of its American backers claim - a secular organization whose units fight for democratic freedoms and a chance to emulate Western society. Most brigades are Islamists. But as the Syrian conflict descends into a maelstrom of daily massacres and mass carnage, fighters are increasingly drawn to the most extreme ideologies. As a result, jihadist organizations will only get stronger as the fighting drags on.

The United States' primary objective in Syria should be to deny al-Qaeda the establishment of a new safe haven. Though Washington has successfully disrupted the organization's activities in the Arabian Peninsula and Pakistan, it is neglecting the emergence of its newest theater of operations. Al-Qaeda has proved in the past that such inattention will only result in a lethal blowback with wide-ranging repercussions. The chaos in Syria has magnified this threat. Al-Qaeda has exploited the political and security instability to take control of large cities. It has established everything from schools to social welfare bureaus. As the Syrian civil war inches endlessly on, al-Qaeda is able to indoctrinate a generation of youth in its extremist ideology. It will be difficult to reverse these trends as they become further entrenched.

The collapse of the Syrian state and the proliferation of heavy weapons such as tanks and surface-to-air missiles have transformed the country into a jihadist Elysian fields. They have poured into the country from three continents. Hundreds of Europeans, if not a thousand, have flowed into Syria. These fighters can return to their homelands and easily move around other European countries to plot attacks. New transnational networks have emerged to funnel fighters and funds to ISIS.

These factors make combatting ISIS a chief priority. It remains to be seen whether Washington will confront the challenge.