

The Role of Terrorism and Terror in Syria's Civil War

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Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
United States House of Representatives**

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Sherman, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing, "Terrorist Groups in Syria".

Other than as a scrap of color on a map, Syria has ceased to exist—no government will be able to rule all of modern Syria in the foreseeable future.

- Syria's civil war is about whether Bashar al-Assad will continue to lead Syria's government, but the war also reflects broader sectarian undercurrents that divide the country and the region.
- After 35 months of fighting, of a population of approximately 22 million, more than 100,000 people have died in the conflict; an estimated 2.2 million have fled abroad, while another 4.5 million have been displaced internally. The United Nations anticipates that, with continued fighting, by the end of 2014, more than half of Syria's population could be living as refugees.³ These are circumstances conducive to future terrorism.
- With the support of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, Syrian government forces appear to have stalemated a fragmented rebel movement. But Assad is unlikely to be able to restore his authority throughout the country.

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² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT402.html>.

³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, November 17, 2013, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, and United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *No Country for Syria's IDPs*, July 19, 2013, <http://www.wfp.org/content/no-country-syrias-idps>.

- Rebel forces nominally control large areas of the country where government forces have withdrawn, but even if Assad falls, they too will be unable to impose their authority throughout Syria.
- While the rebellion has grown to a force of more than 100,000, it mirrors many of the divisions of the broader Muslim world.
- Moreover, the growing role of jihadist elements, with their numbers increasing through the recruitment of foreign fighters and defections from other rebel groups, has divided the rebel movement and discouraged anti-Assad governments in the West from providing significant military support.

It is against this background that the committee has asked me to address the role of Sunni and Shia terrorism in Syria. We will first look at al Qaeda's affiliates in Syria, then we will examine the role played by Hezbollah. This will be followed by a broader discussion of how terror has become a dominant feature of Syria's civil war, which will deepen sectarian tensions throughout the region.

AL QAEDA'S AFFILIATES

In the Sunni camp are the groups linked to al Qaeda—the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusrah, both of which are regarded by the United States and others as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).⁴

Jabhat al-Nusrah took the field in January 2012, a year after the first protests against the regime began. Through its ferocity on the battlefield and dramatic suicide bombings, the group has attracted support and recruits to become what many regard as the most effective rebel force.

ISIL is the latest incarnation of al Qaeda in Iraq or the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which emerged after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Since the American withdrawal, ISI has continued its terrorist campaign against the Iraqi government while expanding its area of operations to include Syria. This led to the adoption of its current name. ISIL's use of the term "Levant," or "Sham" in Arabic, encompasses not only the modern state of Syria but also Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and, of course, Israel.

⁴ Earlier comments on the terrorist threat from Syria can be found in Seth G. Jones, *The Terrorist Threat from Syria*, Testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, May 22, 2013, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2013.

In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISI, asserted that the adoption of ISI's new name reflected the merger of ISI and Jabhat al-Nusrah, which he claimed had been created and financed by ISI. Al-Nusrah's leader Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, while affirming his loyalty to al Qaeda and acknowledging ISI's past assistance, responded that there was no such merger. Al Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri supported al-Nusrah's independence, but al-Baghdadi rejected Zawahiri's decision. The dispute reflects a divisive tendency in al Qaeda, especially as it creates new affiliates.

Al Qaeda affiliates and hardline Salafists not linked to al Qaeda comprise anywhere from 25 to nearly 50 percent of the rebel forces—there is disagreement about the numbers. One must be cautious here. The rebel “army” comprises more than a thousand independent units. These are grouped into larger entities on the basis of beliefs and nominal loyalty to one or another of the major factions of the rebellion, but their numbers and loyalties are fluid. Groups coalesce and divide. Individual leaders split off to form new groups. Rebel fighters transfer their loyalty from one group to another. Given the dynamic situation, assessments have short lives. An order of battle for the rebels would last a day.

Similarly, parsing terrorist attacks from the high volume of violence generated by Syria's civil war is nearly impossible. Major car bombings and the assassinations of important officials can be discerned, but much of the violence that one could objectively qualify as terrorism is lost in the din of war. The University of Maryland's START database counts 175 terrorist attacks in Syria in 2012 with 889 deaths, admittedly a conservative number.⁵ The percentage of the 100,000 people who have died in the war who were killed in terrorist attacks, or by whom, we cannot say.

For now, it appears that the jihadists have become the cutting edge of the rebellion. Some attribute this to the considerable foreign support they are receiving, in contrast to the cautious support the more secular rebels are receiving from the West. Others attribute the jihadists' ferocity to their ideological fervor, while there are those who assert that the Western news media, eager for gruesome stories of jihadist atrocities but unable to check facts, are exaggerating the importance of the jihadists. It is hard to make an overall judgment.

Right now, Syria represents al Qaeda's best chance of proving its continuing relevance and establishing a new base in the Middle East. The longer the fighting continues, the greater the fear in surrounding countries and the West that al Qaeda-inspired elements will be able to consolidate

⁵ Data for 2012 provided to the author by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland.

their position, giving them a new stronghold from which to continue terrorist operations against the West.

Terrorist tactics are clearly part of the rebels' repertoire in Syria, but both ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra are also behaving a lot like classic guerrillas. They are reportedly running schools and providing social assistance to people in areas under their control—these are the embryos of governance. Indoctrination is part of the program, but civic action can also be a response to the Syrian government tactics of deliberately destroying food supplies, medical services, and all economic activity in rebel-held areas.

Although al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula adopted a similar role in Yemen, this is new territory for al Qaeda, whose fanaticism usually has managed to alienate populations under its temporary rule. Al Qaeda's central leadership and its affiliates in Syria may share the long-term objective of implementing Sharia worldwide, but there is an inherent tension between a religiously inspired revolutionary vanguard of a global terrorist enterprise and a local insurgency that must try hold the loyalty of the local population.

It is possible that future al Qaeda fronts will follow the path of Hamas and Hezbollah, becoming complex political enterprises rather than purely terrorist organizations. In some ways, that could make them more difficult to counter; however, it also opens up new possibilities. Might local jihadists be weaned from al Qaeda's global terrorist campaign? History suggests otherwise.

Almost none of al Qaeda's affiliates have remained local. The organization's central leadership demands adherence to its strategic line. Local affiliates attract foreign fighters who have little interest beyond fighting, and hardliners come to dominate the leadership. Attacks on the leadership and setbacks in the field caused by foreign military intervention provoke retaliation.

Foreign jihadists are causing concern. The rebel forces have attracted between 6,000 and 8,000 foreign fighters, most of them from Arab countries. There are reportedly a large number of Chechens, and volunteers from Pakistan are also said to be showing up. An estimated 500 come from Western countries, mainly the United Kingdom and France. These numbers will no doubt increase as the fighting continues.

Some of the jihadists are determined to fight, but others seem to be little more than jihadi tourists who stay out of harm's way while taking photos of themselves and boasting to their friends back home on social media. Many of the foreign fighters join Jabhat al-Nusrah, but with ISIL in the

ascendance in the eyes of jihadists internationally, they now may be moving toward that organization.

Europe is worried about what may happen when these fighters, some with military skills and combat experience, return home and possibly engage in terrorist activities. Because of their proximity and volume, Syria's foreign fighters are viewed as posing a much larger problem than that posed by the previous generation of veterans returning from Afghanistan.

Right now, some in Europe may not view the lure of Syria's civil war for jihadists as a bad thing, as it may be drawing off some of the hotheads who otherwise would cause trouble at home. Moreover, Syria's jihadist groups may not be looking for a fight with Western countries, which are also opposed to Assad. This attitude could change if the West or Western-backed rebels move against the jihadists during a post-Assad civil war.

This is not an immediate problem, as the flow of recruits is toward Syria, not the other way. However, al Qaeda operatives may recruit individuals from the pool of arriving volunteers to carry out terrorist operations in the West. Recall that Muhammad Atta originally came to fight in Afghanistan but was recruited by al Qaeda to lead the 9/11 operation.

Insofar as we know, relatively few of these foreign fighters have come from the United States, but the chatter on social media indicates aspirations.

HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah, also designated as an FTO, represents the Shia side. Hezbollah is a hybrid organization. It operates profitable criminal enterprises, while it also runs schools and provides Lebanon's Shia community with various forms of social assistance. Elected officials from its political arm participate in Lebanon's government. Hezbollah fields its own large paramilitary force, which is considered more powerful than the armed forces of Lebanon, and has engaged in open battle against Israeli forces. It is a state within a state.

Hezbollah also continues to conduct terrorist operations. In 2012, its operatives were responsible for terrorist plots and attacks on Israeli targets in Europe. These attacks coincided with an Iranian-orchestrated campaign of terrorist attacks on Israeli targets worldwide. Hezbollah was a creation of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, and Iran remains its major source of funds and supplier of weapons.

Supporting its alliance with Iran and Syria and protecting its supply routes through Syria was what led Hezbollah to openly intervene in Syria's civil war. Hezbollah's fighters came to Syria not to carry out terrorist operations but to fight as conventional forces.

Several thousand Hezbollah troops fight alongside Syrian government forces. The organization provides experienced veterans to a regime that is worried about the loyalty of its Sunni troops. Utilizing their experience in urban warfare, Hezbollah veterans played a critical role in wresting the important town of Qusayr from the rebels. Hezbollah, along with Iran, also appears to be playing an important role in training the militias that will bear an increasing portion of the fighting.

Hezbollah's involvement has come at a cost. Once widely admired by Sunnis and Shias alike for its resistance to Israel, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria makes it a strictly Shia force. Its involvement in Syria has provoked increasingly bellicose rhetoric from al Qaeda, which considers all Shia to be heretics.⁶ Recent bombings of Shia targets in Lebanon, most likely the work of Sunni extremists, have increased tensions.

According to some public reports, Hezbollah is currently withdrawing some of its forces from Syria, but whether this is true and, if so, why, is unclear.

THE ROLE OF TERROR IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

The discussion of terrorism in Syria ought not to be confined to an administratively ordained order of battle. The emergence of contemporary international terrorism in the late 1960s prompted an international effort aimed at preventing terrorist tactics from becoming a mode of political expression or a legitimate component of armed conflict. This effort achieved a measure of success in reducing some terrorist tactics, but the fact is that terrorism has become a component of contemporary warfare, and I suspect that terrorism will be a growing feature of the Syrian conflict.

The rebels cannot seem to make the transition from a resistance movement to a field force capable of challenging the government's forces on the battlefield. For the time being, the rebels are able to take and hold smaller towns. They can infiltrate the periphery of larger cities, forcing the government to use its airpower and heavy weapons to drive them out, thereby causing heavy civilian casualties and collateral damage. The rebels can carry out spectacular terrorist attacks, principally large-scale bombings, to gain attention and demonstrate that the government cannot

⁶ In a message posted on July 31, 2013, Zawahiri denounced Hezbollah as a tool of Iranian Shi'ite expansionism.

guarantee security, hoping that these actions will create an untenable situation that eventually brings about a change of regime from within or provokes intervention from abroad. With less concern about tactics that offend Western sensitivities, jihadists thrive in this kind of warfare.

On the other side, the Syrian government's approach to counterinsurgency is informed by its own historical experience in suppressing Muslim revolts and by Soviet/Russian doctrine as displayed in the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya. It is a strategy of terror characterized by the static defense of major population centers and strategic lines of communication in Syria; this will translate into the defense of Damascus, Aleppo, and other large cities, ethnically friendly enclaves, and the major highways that connect them.

Offensive operations are marked by intensive aerial and artillery bombardment, razing entire neighborhoods and towns, the deliberate targeting of bakeries (an important component of food production) and hospitals, and the destruction of commerce in rebel-held zones. These brutal tactics serve the dual purpose of terrorizing supporters of the rebels and binding Assad's forces to the regime by making them accomplices in actions that foreclose any other future for them. Local militias, backed by airpower and armored units, root out rebel fighters and carry out ethnic cleansing. They are the now Syria's "weapons of mass destruction." These tactics generate civilian casualties and vast numbers of refugees. Over time, the Syrian army will cease to be a national institution, while militias will become the primary protectors and enforcers of the regime.

This has implications for any future foreign military intervention. Neutralizing Syria's armed forces will not end the fighting. Nor will there be any national army to subsequently maintain order—war crimes will make what remnants survive undesirable allies. Instead, the occupying forces will have to confront a host of autonomous military formations and criminal groups, defeating and disarming them piecemeal while providing protection to local communities until new security institutions are created.

AN INCREASINGLY SECTARIAN WAR

What began as a rebellion against the regime of Bashar al-Assad has become a sectarian civil war. The same underlying tensions were on display during the war in Iraq, but Syria represents a much more complex mosaic of Sunnis, Shias, Alawites (a Shia sect), Christians, Druze, Kurds, and others. As national institutions are worn away, self-defense and survival are increasingly based on ethnic and sectarian identities.

These fault lines cut across the lines in the sand drawn by colonial powers nearly a century ago. Syria's civil war already has exacerbated sectarian tensions in Iraq and Lebanon, and it increases the likelihood of a wider regional conflict, with growing sectarianism affecting diaspora communities as well. As in Syria, a wider regional conflict will have many layers—Sunni versus Shia; Jihadists versus existing regimes, whether secular, Shia, or conservative monarchies; Iran versus Jordan, Turkey, the Gulf kingdoms; even a renewal of Cold War competition. In one way or another, we will be dealing with the effluent of Syria's conflict for years to come