

Analysis: Syria's insurgent landscape

October 2013

The conflict in Syria has facilitated the emergence and expansion of a significant jihadist insurgency, which itself has demonstrated markedly more pragmatic modes of operation. In this report IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Centre analysts examine the evolution of insurgent dynamics in Syria.

Early on 5 August, two militants from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) detonated a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) outside Minnagh airbase near the Syrian city of Aleppo, breaching the gates. Later that day, ISIL and five other militant groups captured the facility.

Minnagh had been under siege from anti-government militants, led by the moderate Asifat al-Shamal, since August 2012, but the arrival of ISIL reinforcements in July 2013 saw the deployment of at least three SVBIEDs and seven 9M133 Kornet (AT-14 'Spriggan') anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), which neutralised the base's remaining

T-54/55 and T-62 main battle tanks and breached its structural defences.

The base seizure came almost three months after ISIL's emergence as the second Al-Qaeda-affiliated group to be active in the Syrian conflict – the first being Jabhat al-Nusra, which emerged in January 2012. Since beginning in June 2011, the armed conflict in Syria has become increasingly sectarian in nature and has provided militant Islamists with a significant opportunity to establish a territorial foothold in the heart of the Levant.

This opportunity has catalysed the evolution of a more pragmatic form of jihad, involving substantial numbers of foreign fighters. Resources are divided between local governance strategies – incorporating 'hearts and minds' tactics and tightly organised systems of social control – alongside a fusion of conventional jihadist operations and co-ordinated cross-group military operations.

Protagonists

After 27 months of fighting, IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Centre analysts estimate that approximately 1,000 militant groups have emerged as operational entities across Syria and comprise approximately 100,000 fighters. These units incorporate a wide range of ideological perspectives, from apolitical nationalist groups to fighters affiliated to Al-Qaeda. As such, the extent to which the SNC and SMC impose genuine influence upon the Syrian insurgency is unclear. We will focus on four of the more prominent here.

Jabhat al-Nusra

Although Jabhat al-Nusra only announced its emergence on 24 January 2012, the first attack claimed by the group was a suicide attack in the Syrian capital Damascus that killed 26 people several weeks before on 6 January. The group's first six months of operations were dominated by such mass-casualty bombings, but it soon incorporated conventional guerrilla operations, typified by improvised explosive device (IED) and small-arms attacks, and by late 2012 Jabhat al-Nusra was leading a series of successful assaults on military bases in northern Syria. Estimated by IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Centre analysts to have approximately 5,000 to 7,000 fighters active in 11 of Syria's 13 governorates, Jabhat al-Nusra



currently represents a significant military force and plays a notable role in governing territory, most notably in parts of Aleppo, Al-Raqqah, Deir ez Zour, Deraa, and Idlib governorates.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

ISIL was formed on 9 April 2013 when Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husseini al-Qurashi announced the expansion of AQI's front group, the Islamic State in Iraq, to incorporate Jabhat al-Nusra. Jabhat al-Nusra leader Al-Fateh Abu Muhammad al-Golani issued a statement 36 hours later in which he conceded that the group had been founded by AQI but refused to be subsumed within ISIL. Nonetheless, ISIL still formed in Syria and attracted large numbers of Jabhat al-Nusra's foreign fighters.



Despite its complex beginnings, ISIL – with an estimated 5,000 fighters – has had a significant strategic impact on the conflict in northern Syria. Led in the north by ethnic Chechen Abu Omar al-Shishani, ISIL has assumed total or joint control of municipalities in the governorates of Aleppo (including Al-Bab, Aleppo city, Azaaz, and Jarabalus), Idlib (including Al-Dana and Sarmada), and Al-Raqqah (including Al-Raqqah city and Al-Tabqa). ISIL also has a notable presence in eastern Syria along the border with Iraq's Anbar and Ninawa provinces, although these forces appear increasingly interchangeable; those

in the area identify themselves as Jabhat al-Nusra fighters, but are commanded by Iraqi national Maysar Ali Musa Abdallah al-Juburi (alias Abu Maria al-Qahtani).

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya

A number of slightly more moderate Salafist jihadist groups also operate closely alongside Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL; possibly most notable among such groups is Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, the leading force within the Syrian Islamic Front alliance.



The group first emerged in Idlib in January 2012 as Ahrar al-Sham. By late 2012, Ahrar al-Sham had expanded significantly and was leading several major offensives in northern Syria. As arguably the most strategically powerful militant actor in Syria, Ahrar al-Sham formed the Syrian Islamic Front on 21 December 2012, which contained 11 militant Islamist groups. In January 2013, Ahrar al-Sham claimed to operate 83 kataib (battalions) across Syria, and on 1 February it merged with three Syrian Islamic Front groups, to form Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya.

In addition to its military capabilities, the group operates a 'technical division', responsible for successful cyber attacks on pro-government targets. The group's Maktab al-Agatha (relief office) – providing subsidised and free food, fuel, and water in branded vehicles and packaging,

as well as schools and passenger bus services in the cities of Al-Raqqah and Aleppo – is the most influential militant-run provider of services in Syria.

IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Centre analysts estimate that Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya possesses a strength of 10,000 to 20,000 fighters across 11 of Syria's 13 governorates

Suqor al-Sham

Also notable as a more moderate Salafist jihadist group is Suqor al-Sham, one of several prominent groups within the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front alliance.



Suqor al-Sham was formed by Sheikh Ahmed Abu Issa in Idlib's Jebel al-Zawiya region in September 2011. Issa has linked Suqor al-Sham to the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) but simultaneously expressed its operational independence. In September 2012, Issa announced the establishment of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, a loose coalition of 19 moderate Islamist militant groups.

Although Suqor al-Sham maintains links to the SMC, it has become notably more extremist in 2013 in terms of its operational activities, appearance, and rhetoric. Suqor al-Sham currently consists of approximately 8-9,000 fighters, mostly in Idlib and Aleppo, but also in Rif Dimashq. Despite militant rumours in mid-2013 that Suqor al-Sham planned to defect from the Syrian Islamic

Liberation Front and align itself with Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, this has failed to occur. However, a hardline Suqor al-Sham faction, Liwa Dawoud, broke away and declared operational independence in July.

Protagonist aims

All four of these groups have expressed the intent to establish an Islamic state under sharia (Islamic law). Whereas ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra are categorical on this matter, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and Suqor al-Sham have adopted more subtle positions. Released in February 2013, the Syrian Islamic Front's political charter (also representing Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya) conceptually rejected democracy but indicated a willingness to utilise a voting system to elect Syria's future leaders "as long as it is regulated by sharia" and involves only candidates whose policies "are bound by sharia". Despite its Islamist objectives, Suqor al-Sham also maintains links to the Western-backed Syrian National Coalition (SNC), something the other three groups have adamantly refused to do.

Foreign Fighters

Although the first overt appearance of non-Syrian Islamist militants in the Syrian conflict followed the emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra in January 2012, the increasingly apparent role of Lebanese Shia Muslim Hizbullah militants fighting alongside Syrian government forces throughout early 2013 stimulated an increase in the flow of foreign fighters to Syria. This increased even further following the

emergence of ISIL and the Hizbullah-led capture of Al-Qusayr in Homs on 5 June. Although foreign fighters initially largely joined Jabhat al-Nusra there were several indications of a large-scale defection of foreign fighters to ISIL following its emergence.

Aided by fatwas (religious edicts) from prominent Sunni clerics such as Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi – a widely read and followed theologian – in late July, in which fighting in Syria was deemed fardh kifaya (a collective duty), foreign fighters now account for between 5,000 and 10,000 of Syria's anti-government militants, according to estimates by international officials in July and August. The same officials suggested that as many as 750 to 1,000 EU nationals have travelled to Syria for jihad. According to IHS monitoring of online jihadist materials, smaller numbers of recruits have come from the Balkans, Canada, the Caucasus, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the US.

Only the Afghan insurgency against the Soviet Union in 1979-89 compares with Syria in terms of the number of foreign fighters. An in-depth study by Norwegian scholar Thomas Hegghammer in the journal *International Security* in late 2011 estimated that 5,000 to 20,000 foreign fighters had travelled to Afghanistan between 1980 and 1992. As such, the arrival of 5,000 to 10,000 foreign fighters into Syria in only 18 months appears highly significant.

Foreign fighters seem primarily drawn to Syria due to the perception that the repression of the Sunni population by the Alawite Shia-led government makes aiding anti-government forces mandatory. Moroccan ISIL militant Abu Anas al-Maghrebi told IHS in August, “It was not easy leaving my family behind but every day my brothers in Bilad al-Sham [the Levant] were being murdered before my eyes on TV – what else could I do? It was my duty.” Abu Mohammed al-Hamawi, a Syrian Jabhat al-Nusra militant, told IHS in August, “I know many muhajireen [literally immigrants, a term used for foreign fighters]... They are among the bravest in the mujahideen.”

Foreign fighters are also attracted to Syria by the Islamic significance of the Levant, as it was prophesied in the Quran as the site where the prophet Isa Ibn Maryam (Jesus) would return to earth via the Manara al-Bayda (the White Minaret – also the name of Jabhat al-Nusra's media wing) at Damascus's Umayyad Mosque on the day of judgement. Entering Syria – primarily via the Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salam, or Jarabulus border crossings in Aleppo and Idlib – is comparatively simple, normally involving bus travel from Ankara or Istanbul in Turkey towards the southern border, where goods smugglers are known to facilitate cross-border travel into Syria. Once inside Syria, most fighters join ISIL or one of several smaller groups primarily active in the northern Idlib-Latakia region, such as Katibat al-Muhajireen and Harakat Sham al-Islam. Smaller numbers of foreign fighters enter Syria's Deraa governorate via Jordan, while Iraqis and existing AQI militants cross illegally via the Al-Qaim

border crossing between Anbar in Iraq and Deir ez Zour in Syria, and the Al-Yaroubiya crossing between Ninawa in Iraq and Al-Hasakah in Syria.

The attraction of jihad in Syria has not been limited to ordinary foot soldiers. Several well-known Salafist figures have joined the fighting for periods of time, including Ahmed al-Assir, a highly prominent and influential cleric in Lebanon. Most recently, former German rapper and Muslim convert Denis Cuspert (alias Abu Talha al-Almani or Abu Malik) appeared fighting in Latakia in August.

Hearts and Minds

Another notable aspect of jihadist strategy in Syria has been the widespread employment of ‘hearts and minds’ tactics designed to generate lasting popular support by both directly entertaining civilians and, crucially, providing governance and humanitarian assistance. Jabhat al-Nusra's Hamawi told IHS, “Yes, we do a lot for the people, it is all part of our project.”

Although groups such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and Suqor al-Sham provided basic levels of security and political order in areas under their control during the first six months of 2012, the dispersal of financial and physical resources by Islamist groups in this way increased greatly in late 2012. Jihadists in Syria seem to view this as part of their duty. Abu Musab, a non-Syrian ISIL militant, told IHS in August 2013, “I left my wives and daughters to help the honourable people of al-

Sham and Syria. My life is now devoted to their safety and welfare.”

Since July 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra's Qism al-Agatha (department of relief) has been involved in providing subsidised and often free food, fuel, and water to civilians in Aleppo, Deraa, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Rif Dimashq. Jabhat al-Nusra has also issued footage of its members providing other services, such as a rubbish collection service in the Deraa al-Balad area of Deraa city; health clinics in Al-Hasakah, Deir ez Zour, and Idlib; bridge and infrastructure repair services in Deir ez Zour; and, in conjunction with Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, the operation of the Al-Tabqa Dam and its connected water-pumping system in Al-Raqqah, which is critical for the provision of water across northern and eastern Syria.

Meanwhile, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya's Maktab al-Agatha (relief office) is arguably the most influential militant-run provider of services in Syria. In addition to providing subsidised and free food, fuel, and water – all in branded vehicles and packaging – throughout large areas of, Aleppo, Al-Raqqah, Deraa, Hama, Idlib, and Rif Dimashq, the group also operates a passenger bus service in Aleppo city and several schools in, Aleppo, Al-Raqqah, Idlib, and Rif Dimashq. During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan – 9 July to 7 August 2013 – Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya provided free meals for iftar (the breaking of the daily fast) throughout opposition-held districts of Aleppo city, which had been cooked in restaurants identifying themselves as loyal to the group.

The provision of such services has proven an invaluable tool for maintaining localised popular support for jihadist groups. Throughout 2012, similar micro-level attempts at providing basic services by groups linked to the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) led to civilian accusations that FSA fighters were exploiting local industry for their own benefit. At the height of winter in January 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra forcefully seized control of Aleppo's bread-making industry (a total of four factories) from the FSA after civilians complained that FSA fighters were taking as much as two-thirds of the bread for themselves, forcing bakeries to charge unaffordable prices for the remaining third. According to local activists at the time, within two days Jabhat al-Nusra had shipped in flour from Turkey and provided finance, allowing bread to be sold at subsidised prices and establishing the group as a major power in the city.

During Ramadan, ISIL introduced a novel jihadist tactic in the holding of family 'fun days' in Aleppo. Led by a Tunisian national identified as Abu Waqas, the events – held on each of the four Fridays of the holy month – involved tug-of-war and musical chairs competitions for men, ice cream and watermelon eating contests for children, and the giving of gifts, including sweets and toys. Combined with the provision of dawa (Islamic outreach), these 'fun days' garnered considerable attention and served to underline ISIL's very public role in Syria and the apparent acceptance of its presence, at least locally.

Military strategy

Islamist militants, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra and later ISIL, have also demonstrated a qualitative evolution in military strategy in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra's initially predominant use of mass casualty suicide attacks in early 2012 to attack government and security force targets resulted in considerable civilian casualties, generating a negative image of the group. The group's last such operation was a co-ordinated triple SVBIED attack targeting security force buildings in Aleppo city on 3 October 2012, which killed 48 people.

By August 2012, however, Jabhat al-Nusra's military operations had expanded towards those more akin to an orthodox military force. Ground assaults involving large numbers of fighters became the norm while operations exclusively targeted government and military sectors. Between October 2012 and January 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra forces were involved in capturing at least four major military bases in Aleppo, Al-Raqqah, and Idlib, and although VBIEDs were employed in these operations their use on military facilities ensured minimal civilian casualties.

Other militant Islamist groups with more local foundations, such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and Suqor al-Sham, were predominantly involved in large-scale multi-group offensives and sieges from the same period onwards. Crucially, however, large numbers of localised FSA groups – many linked to the SNC –

planned, co-ordinated, and fought alongside militant Islamist groups on a daily basis. The fostering of such pragmatic, co-operative relationships across the Syrian insurgent theatre has been decisive in maintaining anti-government effectiveness and in consolidating Islamist control in the north and east of the country.

Between late 2012 and early 2013, all such groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra, periodically released videos purporting to reveal how pre-prepared attacks had been cancelled at the last minute in order to avoid civilian casualties. However, the conflict assumed a notably more intense sectarian tone from around April/May 2013 – when Hizbullah's role in the conflict was both beyond doubt and significant in scale. Militant Islamists and even many moderates have since referred to the 'enemy' using derogatory sectarian terms, and attacks against Shia and Alawite Shia civilian targets have increased notably.

ISIL has been prominent for its occasional targeting of Shia and Alawite civilians and other controversial targets. In mid-June, ISIL and a local group, Harakat Taliban al-Islami, destroyed several Shia mosques in the village of Hatlah in Deir ez Zour, where at least 60 pro-government militiamen and civilians had been killed the week before. ISIL has also carried out executions in Deir ez Zour and Al-Raqqah during May and June, and others in Aleppo during August, and was blamed for killing senior SNC commander Kamal Hamami (alias Abu Basir) in Latakia in July.

Outlook

The sheer scale of the conflict in Syria and the country's particular religious importance to Sunni Muslims have resulted in the emergence of a qualitatively evolved jihad. From Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL to jihadist groups such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and Suqor al-Sham, the jihadist struggle in Syria has been one in which militants are extensively socially engaged and aware of civilian concerns. ISIL has gone so far as to establish 'complaint departments' in Al-Raqqa and Aleppo, where civilians are free to submit objections to ISIL policies. Public relations and information campaigns promoting group-provided services and advocating religiously acceptable behaviour are widespread in northern Syria, and jihadist groups maintain comprehensive co-operative relationships with more moderate anti-government groups.

A precedent has previously been set for such an exploitation of social engagement and 'hearts and minds' tactics by Islamist militants, particularly by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) front group Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen in 2011. Moreover, an awareness of the importance of such social engagement and popular support was demonstrated in two letters, dated 21 May and 6 August 2012, sent by AQAP leader Nasir Abd-al-Karim al-Wuhayshi to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader Abdelmalek Droukdel (alias Abu Musab Abdelwadud). In these, he advised the group's militants in northeast Mali to "be kind" to locals, to provide electricity

and running water to people living under AQIM control, and other such social policies. However, the comprehensive nature of the militant approach to such matters in Syria is unprecedented and represents a substantial evolution.

AQI's reputation for brutal tactics in Iraq led to an initially negative reaction to ISIL's emergence in Syria. However, ISIL's adoption of previously existing Syrian militant strategies of social engagement and political-military pragmatism led to a decline in this concern. In an audio statement issued on 30 July, senior ISIL spokesman Sheikh Abu Mohammed al-Adnani even conceded previous AQI errors. He said in the statement, "As for our mistakes we do not deny them. We will continue to make mistakes as long as we are humans, but Allah forbid that we commit mistakes deliberately." Jabhat al-Nusra has shown similar awareness, for example when senior Egyptian commander Abu Ubayda al-Masri issued a 20 August statement providing advice to prospective jihadists in Egypt, in which he emphasised the importance of developing local relationships and presenting foreign fighters as positive influences within the local arena.

Nonetheless, the increasingly vitriolic sectarianism prevalent in recent militant Islamist discourse suggests that a devolution of strategy and tactics is possible. The 21 August alleged chemical weapons attack on Damascus's Ghouta region sparked a serious escalation of Islamist rhetoric. On 25 August, Jabhat al-Nusra leader Golani announced the start of Operation An Eye for An

Eye; the operation's first attack killed the governor of Hama, Anas Abdul-Razzaq Naem, later that day. Also on 25 August, ISIL named its retaliatory operation as Operation Volcano of Revenge, which notably included several barrages of mortars and Grad rockets targeting central Damascus early on 26 August, including the Four Seasons Hotel, where United Nations chemical weapons inspectors were staying.

The potential for such escalation to spread beyond jihadists was underlined in a 22 August video when the leaders of the SNC's north, east, central, and Homs fronts threatened to resign and begin attacking Syrian chemical weapons facilities – in contravention of a previous purported ban by the SNC's external backers – and to launch revenge attacks on Alawites. Later that day, a multi-group offensive involving at least 10 groups – including Jabhat al-Nusra, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, and several small SNC-linked units – was launched, targeting the town of Khanasser in Aleppo (which was later seized on 26 August), with the main objective reportedly being the capture of a suspected chemical weapons research facility in nearby Al-Safira.

The situation has been further complicated by reports that the US was planning a limited series of strikes against the Syrian government and security forces in retaliation for the alleged use of chemical weapons on 21 August. Although it is unclear what the impact on the nature and outcome of the conflict would be from a course of action remains unclear, it seems likely that

Islamist militants would seek to capitalise even further in such an eventuality and extend their control over additional areas of the country.

This analysis is abridged. The full analysis is available within [IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Centre](#).



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