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The New “Lions of Syria”

Salafist and Jihadist Groups Dominate Insurgency

Guido Steinberg

Almost three years into the Syrian uprising, Islamist groups of various colour have established themselves as the dominant force among the rebels. The jihadists of the Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria represent two especially powerful groupings. Their growing strength has led international donors to reduce their support, and has sown violent conflict among the rebel groups. This has strengthened the position of President Assad, who has been arguing ever since 2011 that his adversaries are terrorists. Today there are indeed Islamist terrorists on the ground, enormously complicating the West’s search for a Syria strategy. Neither the continuation of the Assad regime nor a take-over by the insurgents would be in the German interest. As long as this dilemma continues, Germany should concentrate on humanitarian aid and counter-terrorism, and to that end improve cooperation with Turkey.

Late 2013 and early 2014 saw heavy fighting in Syria pitting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) against the Nusra Front and an alliance of Islamists calling itself the Islamic Front. This drew the West’s attention to the Islamist and jihadist forces that have come to dominate an uprising that began as a peaceful and unideological protest movement against the Assad regime.

Four Phases of Insurgency

The strengthening of ISIS is the most important characteristic of the latest phase of the Syrian uprising, which began in April 2013 with the proclamation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria by the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This

marked the provisional high point of the rise of Islamist and jihadist groups, a process which had been observed since 2012.

First Protests (February to mid-2011)

The first significant protests in Syria occurred in March 2011, initially in rural areas and small towns in the country’s largely Sunni-populated regions in the north and east. Although the demonstrations were peaceful, the regime cracked down brutally. Army deserters and armed civilians responded by attempting to protect demonstrations, firing at advancing security forces to delay or stop them.

From Protest Movement to Insurgency (mid- to late 2011)

By the end of 2011 the protests had developed into an armed insurgency, whose protagonists were organised in local groups without central control. The rebellion spread to the cities of Hama and Homs in the centre of the country, and by late 2011 Homs had become its first major stronghold.

Nascent Civil War and the Rise of the Islamists (early 2012 to spring 2013)

By early 2012 the uprising had reached large parts of the country and was turning into civil war. The rebels now took to the offensive from their rural strongholds, attempting to cut the regime's lines of communication in the east, north and centre and capture its military bases there. By summer 2012 they were also attacking Aleppo, where the outcome was a stalemate with regime forces continuing to hold parts of the city and its airport.

The situation at the end of 2012 was mixed. The regime had recaptured large parts of Homs and stopped the rebel advance in Aleppo. But the insurgents were now on the offensive in Damascus too, and it was becoming increasingly apparent that Islamist groups were growing in strength.

Regime Recovery and Rebel Infighting (April 2013 to spring 2014)

In the latest phase the regime has been able to further consolidate its position through territorial gains in the centre of the country. In August the first larger-scale use of chemical weapons by the regime represented a major escalation. An autonomous force of jihadists calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria quickly grew to become a major challenge to all other rebel organisations, leading to clashes between insurgent groups. In November a number of groups joined to form the Islamic Front, which has since launched massive operations against ISIS.

The Insurgent Groups

The local insurgent organisations have established themselves as the central opposition actors and are impervious to any political control. The exile opposition organised in the Syrian National Coalition has little influence on the situation in the country.

The biggest current problem for the insurgents is their lack of central coordination. Their movement is a conglomerate of at least several dozen groups of different sizes and strengths, entering into changing alliances and subject to frequent splits. Yet despite sometimes considerable ideological and strategic differences, for a long time the rebels succeeded in pursuing their common goal – toppling the Assad regime – without major confrontations.

Most estimates put the total number of insurgents at 80,000 to 100,000; at the beginning of 2014 this included at least 8,000 foreigners, most of them Arabs (other estimates claim up to 17,000). The rebel movement comprises three currents: the Free Syrian Army, the Islamists and Salafists, and the jihadists.

Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) emerged in July 2011 as an umbrella organisation for the resistance groups that were forming in most parts of the country that summer. Most of its fighters are army deserters or civilians with experience of military service. The FSA has no strong ideological profile, even if its leaders are secularist officers, and its affiliated groups belong to a broad spectrum that until 2012 also included many more moderate Islamists.

The FSA initially set up its headquarters in Turkey, attracting criticism for staying far from the fighting until it moved into Syria in September 2012. At the same time, many groups hoped to receive access to international support channelled via the FSA. When, despite numerous announcements, little in the way of foreign aid arrived, many groups turned away in dis-

appointment to seek funding opportunities elsewhere.

Nonetheless, with probably tens of thousands of fighters still affiliated to the FSA it is too soon to proclaim its demise. Its last bastion is in the south of the country, from where there have been repeated reports of forthcoming offensives since the end of 2013.

Islamists and Salafists

From the outset many of the fighters were Islamists and Salafists. Some groups initially joined the FSA, but left again in 2012/2013. Others always rejected any collaboration with defecting officers on the basis of ideological differences.

After the FSA set up its Supreme Military Council in December 2012, the Islamists and Salafists quickly responded by proclaiming the Syrian Islamic Front (al-Jabha al-Islamiya al-Suriya), whose founding members included not only the Salafists of Ahrar al-Sham (The Free Men of the Levant), but also Suqur al-Sham (Falcons of the Levant), which had been part of the FSA until 2012. This move was the first clear sign of sharpening rivalries among the Syrian insurgents.

In November 2013 a new Islamic Front in Syria (al-Jabha al-Islamiya fi Suriya) was founded by Islamists and Salafists like Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham and Liwa al-Tawhid (Battalion of Monotheism), as well as Zahran Allush's Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam) founded two months earlier in September. It is estimated that the new Islamic Front commands 40,000 to 60,000 fighters.

The groups that make up the Islamic Front all share military objectives largely restricted to Syria itself. Their most important stated goal is to topple the Assad regime and establish an Islamic state, the details of whose political system have yet to be outlined. Groups orientated on the Muslim Brotherhood are still present, but have lost influence since 2012. Instead Salafists like Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam now dominate.

The Islamic Front is supported primarily by the Arab Gulf states. Ahrar al-Sham receives aid from Qatar and Turkey, while Jaish al-Islam is a Saudi protégé.

Jihadists

What distinguishes the jihadists from all the other rebel organisations is their conviction that the war in Syria is merely part of a larger struggle that will not end with the fall of Bashar al-Assad. The importance of the fighting in Syria to al-Qaeda is demonstrated by a widely viewed video message from its new leader Aiman al-Zawahiri, published in February 2012 under the title "Go Forward O Lions of Syria" (Ila l-amam ya usud al-Sham). The reference to the jihadist lions is a play on words, for the name of the dictator of Damascus, Assad, means "lion".

Absolutely in line with their mother organisation, the Nusra Front and ISIS hope to expand the armed struggle to the neighbouring states and above all to attack Israel. As both share the ideology of al-Qaeda, it must also to be feared that they intend to carry the armed struggle beyond the Middle East to the Western world. They also distinguish themselves from the Islamists and Salafists by their routine use of suicide bombers.

The jihadists have probably ceased to receive state support. Until 2013 Turkey and Qatar appear to have been supplying the Nusra Front with money and arms. Even if this is no longer the case, the Nusra Front continues to profit from the toleration of its fighters on Turkish soil and all the jihadists exploit the extensive freedom of movement they enjoy in Turkey.

Donations from private supporters in the Gulf region reach Syria largely via Kuwait and represent an important source of jihadist funding. They also finance themselves through taxes and levies raised in the areas they control. The number of jihadists today is probably between 10,000 and 30,000.

Al-Qaeda versus al-Qaeda

Syria is the only country where there have ever been two al-Qaeda “affiliates” operating in competition. This situation stems from a conflict between the al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan and the regional organisation in Iraq which has been festering since 2004. Al-Qaeda in Iraq is not, as often asserted, a “branch” of al-Qaeda, but an independent organisation that competes with al-Qaeda’s central leadership for control of the jihadist movement.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq has existed since 2004, when the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (killed 2006) swore allegiance to Bin Laden and renamed his Iraq-based organisation al-Tauhid wa-l-Jihad into al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (al-Qaida fi Bilad al-Nahrain). Since 2010 the group, now operating as the Islamic State of Iraq (al-Daula al-Islamiya fi l-Iraq), has been led by the Iraqi Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Despite their al-Qaeda connections, Zarqawi and his successor never submitted to the authority of al-Qaeda’s central leadership. By renaming his group in 2004, Zarqawi hoped to gain recruits and donations from the Gulf region. But he pursued his own strategy in Iraq, based on maximising casualties in headline-grabbing bombings designed to provoke the Shiites to retaliate against the Sunnis and instigate a sectarian civil war in which, he calculated, his group would assume sole leadership of the Sunni population. Al-Qaeda’s central leadership repeatedly called on its commander in Iraq to abandon that plan to avoid making enemies of the Shiites, and criticised his group’s excessive brutality. But neither Zarqawi nor his successors were to be persuaded.

Zarqawi’s strength was what led the al-Qaeda leadership to continue tolerating his organisation within its network. The activities of al-Qaeda in Iraq gave the world the impression that it was dealing with a global network capable of bringing the American superpower to the brink of defeat in Iraq. Also, as well as Iraqis, Zarqawi also tied in particular Jordanians, Palestinians,

Syrians, and Lebanese to al-Qaeda – nationalities from which until 2004 it won few recruits because they felt it was not fighting for their interests, especially the struggle against Israel. There was in fact much truth in that complaint, in the sense that al-Qaeda was fighting first and foremost to drive the Americans out of the Middle East and then to topple the regimes in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Accordingly, until 2004 al-Qaeda was frequently seen as an Egyptian and Gulf Arab organisation, which it indeed was in terms of its personnel structure: it consisted largely of Saudis, Yemenis, Kuwaitis and Egyptians.

The Jordanian Zarqawi in contrast aimed to follow victory in Iraq by carrying the struggle to Syria, Jordan and Lebanon and then “liberate Jerusalem”. To the al-Qaeda leadership, the new recruitment pool appeared attractive compensation for its lack of control over Zarqawi’s activities, so they allowed him to carry on.

After lying dormant for years, the conflict between Zawahiri (believed to be in Pakistan) and the new leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Baghdadi, exploded in 2013 over the question of the correct strategy for Syria. The Nusra Front stood for Zawahiri’s approach of avoiding excessive violence, winning over the population and cooperating closely with other insurgents. ISIS under Baghdadi remained true to his uncompromising stance already known from Iraq, and pursued a strategy of massive violence, terrorising the population and fighting against any group that refused to submit to his command.

The Nusra Front

The Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham) is one of the strongest insurgent groups in Syria, and until April 2013 was by far the most important jihadist organisation. While its main areas of operations lay in the north (Aleppo and Idlib), along the Euphrates Valley (Raqqqa) and in the east (Deir ez-Zor), it was also (and remains) present in Damascus and in the south of

the country. In March 2013, jointly with Ahrar al-Sham, it succeeded in capturing the major city of Raqqa on the middle Euphrates.

The involvement of jihadists in the Syrian uprising first became apparent around the end of 2011, with the first major suicide car bombings in Damascus and Aleppo. The group must have still been very small at that point, but it grew steadily until spring 2014 and could number between 5,000 and 15,000 fighters today. Its attacks quickly earned it a name that attracted volunteers from Syria and abroad, and it also profited from its reputation as one of the few armed groups to protect the population effectively against Assad's government forces. The weaker the FSA became, the more recruits the Nusra Front gained.

The leader of the Nusra Front, Abu Muhammad al-Jaulani, is a Syrian who fought with al-Qaeda in Iraq and received permission in 2011 to take some of his followers to Syria to establish a jihadist organisation there. When Jaulani arrived in Syria in August 2011 he profited from the well-developed infrastructure that al-Qaeda in Iraq already possessed there. During the post-2003 Iraqi insurgency against the US occupation Syrians represented the largest foreign contingent alongside the Saudis, and Syrians organised the transit of thousands of volunteers from elsewhere through their country into Iraq. From 2011 the Nusra Front was able to draw on these networks in eastern and northern Syria. It grew quickly after its official founding in January 2012, and the number of attacks it conducted rose from April.

The rapid advance of the Nusra Front was also aided by the government's release of numerous militant Islamists in 2011 and 2012. The only plausible explanation for this step is that the regime hoped to strengthen the Salafist and jihadist forces in order to divide the rebel movement and bolster Assad's argument that the rebels were terrorists. The Syrian intelligence services have a long record of manipulating jihadist groups. As well as tolerating the

transit of jihadists into Iraq, until 2007 they themselves sent many Syrians to fight against the Americans there. In at least one case there is also evidence to suggest that the Syrian security services conducted a spectacular bombing, for which they subsequently blamed the jihadists. Nonetheless, the Nusra Front was responsible for the huge majority of major attacks between 2011 and 2014.

As well as toppling the regime and establishing an Islamic state, the Nusra Front's objectives include "liberating" neighbouring countries, although this transnational aspect has to date played only a minor role in its propaganda. To achieve its goals the Nusra Front seeks close cooperation with other insurgent groups. It concentrates on attacking Syrian government security forces and military facilities and tries to avoid civilian victims, in order to retain popular support, as well as organising supplies for the towns and quarters it controls and where possible providing municipal services. In this way the Nusra Front shows that it has learned from the experience of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which quickly lost its support among the Iraqi Sunnis after 2006 because of its insistence on exclusive leadership of all insurgents and its brutal attacks against civilians.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Like the Nusra Front, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (al-Da'wa al-Islamiya fi l-Iraq wa-l-Sham, ISIS) also emerged out of al-Qaeda in Iraq. But it was founded later, as the result of the attempt by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to regain control over his followers in Syria.

In a communiqué in April 2013 the emir of the Islamic State of Iraq declared that the Nusra Front had emerged from it, but that both organisations would now form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria under Baghdadi's command. The leader of the Nusra Front, Jaulani, responded a few days later, confirming the origins of his group but refusing to place it under Baghdadi's

authority. Instead he sought support from al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri, to whom he swore loyalty. The Nusra Front had actually hoped to avoid such an acknowledgement of ties to al-Qaeda, out of fear of losing support in Syria.

Zawahiri in turn felt forced to intervene in the conflict between the two al-Qaeda “branches”. In a communiqué in May 2013 he backed Jaulani’s position, decreeing that both organisations should operate independently of one another in their respective homelands. But Baghdadi refused to obey the orders from Pakistan and insisted that ISIS continue to operate in both Iraq and Syria. In response, in January 2014, Zawahiri declared the expulsion of the Islamic State from al-Qaeda.

To this day ISIS stands for extreme hatred of Shiites (including the Syrian Alawis), terrorist attacks of the greatest brutality, an iron fist in the areas it controls, and the vision of immanent war on Israel. To many fighters in Syria this orientation appears more attractive than the more moderate approach of the Nusra Front and consequently many of them joined ISIS from April 2013, including an overwhelming majority of the foreign fighters.

Until spring 2013 most foreign fighters joined the ranks of the Nusra Front. In the early days North Africans predominated, above all from Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. Jordanians and Gulf Arabs were also strongly represented, and the European contingent of up to 2,000 is believed to include about 300 Germans. But despite their large numbers foreigners always remained a minority in the Syrian-led groups. In ISIS the proportion of foreigners was higher. Rough estimates put their strength in its Syrian section at about 30 to 60 percent. But the rapid gains made by ISIS from spring 2013 and its staying power through 2014 suggest that Syrians continue to represent a majority. Many Syrians are also represented in the leadership alongside Iraqis. Altogether ISIS could also comprise between 5,000 and 15,000 fighters.

From May 2013 ISIS units took over many positions from the Nusra Front in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Idlib and Aleppo, and entrenched themselves in smaller towns like Azaz and Jarabulus north of Aleppo on the Turkish border. Although ISIS tried to emulate the Nusra Front’s methods of winning over the population through social services and integrating itself into the uprising through tactical cooperation, the brutality and aggressiveness of the ISIS fighters – already familiar from Iraq – quickly came to the fore. They enforced a regime of terror in the areas they controlled, executed opponents and destroyed non-Sunni places of worship and shrines. They even attacked non-jihadist rebels, as seen first in July 2013 when ISIS fighters killed a prominent FSA commander.

This and similar incidents caused growing tensions between ISIS and the other insurgents. While the FSA was already too weak to defend itself effectively, clashes with Islamist and Salafist groups intensified, especially with Ahrar al-Sham, which has a strong presence in and around Aleppo and suffered greatly under ISIS attacks.

The conflicts increased after the establishment of the Islamic Front in November. Ahrar al-Sham now moved more decisively against ISIS under pressure from its new partners, especially the Army of Islam. December saw large-scale fighting between Ahrar and ISIS in eastern Aleppo province. After ISIS units kidnapped, tortured and killed a senior commander of Ahrar al-Sham at the end of December, the tensions erupted into large-scale fighting.

Ahrar al-Sham

The example of the “The Free Men of the Levant” demonstrates how difficult it is to distinguish between jihadists and Salafists in practice if the latter take up armed struggle.

Ahrar al-Sham is the most important member of the Islamic Front, and with 10,000 to 20,000 men probably the strongest insurgent group of all. Since it first became

clearly visible in January 2012 it has been involved in most of the decisive military clashes. The Ahrar says its aims go no further than overthrowing Assad and establishing an Islamic state in Syria. Although it is indeed more strongly focused on the local situation than the jihadists, the difference is only one of degree, as its proclamations reveal that Ahrar al-Sham rejects Syria's contemporary borders. Reflecting their ideological closeness, its leader Hassan Abbud has repeatedly spoken positively about the Nusra Front and the two groups routinely work together in the current fighting.

The relative nature of the differences to the jihadists is also reflected in personnel questions. When al-Qaeda leader Aiman al-Zawahiri appointed a personal envoy in Syria in June 2013, he chose the veteran Abu Khalid al-Suri (alias Muhammad Bahaia). Suri was not, as would have been expected, a member of the Nusra Front, but a leader of Ahrar al-Sham. The best-known religious theoretician of the Islamic Front and Ahrar, the prominent cleric Abu Basir al-Tartusi, is also regarded as a jihadist. Unlike the religious advisers of the Nusra Front and ISIS, however, Tartusi rejects suicide attacks. But in joint operations the Nusra Front will sometimes deploy suicide bombers in ways that also benefit Ahrar.

Unlike the two jihadist groups, Ahrar al-Sham also receives state support from Turkey and Qatar, as well as private donations from the Gulf states. This aid has put the organisation in a position to be able to challenge ISIS together with its allies in the Islamic Front. But the Islamists and Salafists have not been able to defeat ISIS, which had to give up important positions in winter 2013/2014 but retained control of large parts of Raqqa and other towns in eastern Syria.

Consequences for German Policies

The most important consequence of the strengthening of the jihadists is that the Assad regime is today more firmly in

the saddle than at any time since the rebellion broke out. Reality has increasingly come to resemble the regime's propaganda that from the outset branded its opponents as terrorists and advertised itself as a bastion of stability and legitimacy. Washington finds itself forced by the latest developments to approach Syria with greater caution, while the conflicts between the Islamic Front and the jihadists weaken the insurgency as a whole. For these reasons, Assad could hold on for years to come.

This conclusion is hard to bear if one considers that the Assad regime does not shrink from mass murder of civilians. Nonetheless, Germany and Europe must respond to the danger posed by the jihadists, not least because many European Islamists have gone to fight in Syria. The Nusra Front and ISIS are becoming the biggest problem, having attracted the largest numbers of foreign fighters, but Europe should also keep a close eye on Ahrar al-Sham which is close to the jihadists. Its differences with the Nusra Front in particular are so marginal that assistance for Ahrar represents indirect support for the Nusra Front and must be avoided at all costs.

The most important challenge in this connection is the difficult relationship with the Turkish government. Although representatives of Western security agencies report progress on cooperation they still see it as far from satisfactory, largely on account of the Turkish political leadership. Since the beginning of the rebellion Turkey has supported various insurgent forces including the jihadists. The latter maintain their most important rear bases in Turkey and foreign fighters transit largely unhindered through the country. Ankara only stopped giving direct support to the Nusra Front a few months ago. The most important recipients of Turkish (and Qatari) assistance are now Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic Front.

Its toleration of jihadists and promotion of Salafist groups must raise doubts about the soundness of the Turkish government's judgement on security matters. Even before

the Syrian uprising, militant Islamists were only regarded as problematic if they attacked Turkey. It will therefore be important for Germany and other European governments to convince Ankara that this line is also endangering its own security – not least because there are also several hundred Turks fighting with the jihadists.

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