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The Terrorist Threat from Syria

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The Terrorist Threat from Syria²

Before the Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

May 22, 2013

Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today on this important topic.

The escalating war in Syria presents a growing threat to the United States. Led by Jabhat al-Nusrah (the Victory Front), an al Qa'ida-affiliated group, Syria is becoming a consummate training ground for foreign fighters. Over the past year, an increasing number of fighters have traveled to Syria from other areas – including the West – to fight against the Assad regime, where some have joined Jabhat al-Nusrah. Most Westerners appear to be Europeans from such countries as Belgium, France, and Sweden. Many of these fighters are gaining valuable experience in combat, bomb-making, propaganda, and counterintelligence. Most are also expanding their relationships with fighters from other regions – such as the Persian Gulf, North Africa, and South Asia – and becoming more ideologically committed. In addition, this European pipeline is used to transport money and material to the Syrian front.

While the number of American citizens traveling to Syria appears to be limited, at least at the moment, the increase in Europeans with potential access to the United States presents a serious counterterrorism challenge. It is currently unclear whether most of these fighters will remain in Syria over the long run, move to other war zones such as North Africa, or return home. And even if some return to the West, it is uncertain whether these fighters will become involved in terrorist plots, focus on recruiting and fundraising, or become disillusioned with terrorism. Still, the trend is clear: Syria is attracting a growing cadre of foreign fighters from the West, who could potentially return home with the capability to conduct attacks against the United States and its allies.

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² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT388.html>.

The information for this testimony was gathered from a range of sources, including jihadist websites and forums, Western websites that publish jihadist videos and transcripts (such as SITE Intelligence Group and the Long War Journal), interviews with government officials from the West and the Middle East, and secondary sources. Yet there are notable gaps in this analysis, as there are in most assessments of the Syrian war. It is uncertain, for instance, how many foreign fighters from the West and other areas have traveled to Syria, why and how they have radicalized, and what they will do if they leave. Despite these methodological challenges, there is still sufficient information to assess the threat from Syria with reasonable accuracy.

This testimony is divided into three sections. The first outlines the origins of Jabhat al-Nusrah and its evolution since 2011. The second section assesses Jabhat al-Nusrah's growing capabilities and presence in Syria, as well as briefly describes other militant groups operating in Syria. The third examines the threat to the U.S. homeland and U.S. allies from Syria.

The Origins of Al Qa'ida in Syria

Jabhat al-Nusrah grew out of al Qa'ida in Iraq's logistics and support network in Syria. Beginning as early as 2003, Syria became a key transit point for foreigners that wanted to fight in Iraq. According to documents captured in a raid near Sinjar, Iraq, for instance, foreign fighters in Iraq came from such countries as Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, and Syria. Most were young, averaging 24 to 25 years old. Some had been students, while others held full-time jobs.³ Virtually all of the foreign fighters entered Iraq through Syria with the aid of smuggling and criminal networks.⁴ In short, Syria became a significant transit hub for al Qa'ida and other terrorist groups.

As the war in Syria began to intensify in 2011, al Qa'ida in Iraq leaders utilized these established networks and created Jabhat al-Nusrah as their operational arm in Syria. Al Qa'ida in Iraq leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (also known as Abu Du'a) explained that "we laid for them plans, and drew up for them the policy of work, and gave them what financial support we could every month, and supplied them with men who had known the battlefields of jihad, from the emigrants and the natives."⁵ Al Qa'ida in Iraq officials chose Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, an Iraqi national, as leader (or emir). Jawlani pledged allegiance to Baghdadi before taking charge of operations in Syria in late 2011. Al Qa'ida in Iraq then sent small arms and light weapons – including rifles, light machine guns, and rocket propelled grenades – to its Syrian contingent. It also sent explosives

³ Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

⁴ Brian Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: Al Qa'ida's Road In and Out of Iraq* (West Point, NY: Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center, 2008), pp. 50, 70.

⁵ Audio Statement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, SITE Intelligence Group, April 10, 2013.

experts to augment Jabhat al-Nusrah's bomb-making capabilities and deployed fighters to boost its ranks. A growing number of donors from the Persian Gulf and Levant began to send financial support.⁶

Jabhat al-Nusrah leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani explained that the group's goal is to bring "back the rule of God's law on earth."⁷ It is a Salafi-jihadist group committed to establishing an Islamic emirate in Syria and potentially the broader region. Its leaders have established a radical interpretation of *sharia*, or Islamic law, in some areas they control in Syria. In an important development, however, al Qa'ida leaders initially decided not to publicize the group's links with al Qa'ida in Iraq, perhaps out of concern that it would undermine their support in Syria and draw unwelcome attention from U.S. and other foreign intelligence agencies.

Syria has long been important to al Qa'ida for historical, religious, and strategic reasons. Known as Bilad al-Sham, or the Land of the Levantine Peoples, Damascus was the base for the thirteenth century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, whose book, *The Religious and Moral Concept of Jihad*, is a pillar of al Qa'ida's ideology.⁸ The wider Levant region also includes al-Quds, or Jerusalem, Islam's third holiest site after Mecca and Medina. In addition, Syria is strategically important because it borders two of al Qa'ida's most hated enemies, Israel and Jordan, and the Assad government's conventional and unconventional weapons caches may become increasingly available as the Assad regime loses control of territory.⁹

By early 2013, however, Jabhat al-Nusrah's relationship with al Qa'ida in Iraq became strained, pushing Jabhat al-Nusrah closer to al Qa'ida's senior leadership in Pakistan. Jabhat al-Nusrah officials were apparently unhappy when al Qa'ida in Iraq announced in April 2013 their intention to merge the al Qa'ida's affiliates in Iraq and Syria under a common name, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. As Jabhat al-Nusrah established its own sources of funding, fighters, and material, it became increasingly independent from al Qa'ida in Iraq. A formal merger would likely have undermined this autonomy. Asserting his independence from al Qa'ida in Iraq, Jawlani declared his loyalty directly to al Qa'ida's central leadership in Pakistan. "This is a pledge of allegiance from the sons of the al Nusrah Front and their supervisor general that we renew to the Sheikh of Jihad, Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, may Allah preserve him," Jawlani announced in

⁶ Author interview with government officials from Europe and the Middle East, April and May 2013.

⁷ Video Statement by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, January 24, 2012.

⁸ Shaykh ul-Islaam Taqi-ud-Deen Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *The Religious and Moral Doctrine of Jihad* (Birmingham, England: Maktabah al Ansaar Publications, 2001).

⁹ The author thanks Bruce Hoffman for making these points.

April.¹⁰ As discussed later in the testimony, Jabhat al-Nusrah's move toward al Qa'ida's central leadership in Pakistan makes it a more dangerous enemy to the United States.

Understanding the origins of Jabhat al-Nusrah is important for two reasons. First, al Qa'ida in Iraq operatives helped establish the group, directly linking it to al Qa'ida. Unlike with other affiliates, such as al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, Syrian operatives publicly downplayed their ties with al Qa'ida. This was an important strategic decision and one that al Qa'ida-linked groups may increasingly do in the future to avoid unwanted monitoring from foreign governments. Second, this relationship gave Jabhat al-Nusrah access to money, weapons, fighters, and other material from al Qa'ida in Iraq.

Growing Capabilities

Since early 2012, Jabhat al-Nusrah has developed a robust command-and-control network across Syria, conducted a devastating string of suicide attacks, and orchestrated hundreds of car bombs and assassinations against the Assad regime. Between November 2011 and December 2012, for instance, it was involved in nearly 600 attacks in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, and other locations.¹¹ It has claimed credit for many of its attacks in announcements released on jihadist forums and its Twitter site. Indeed, Jabhat al-Nusrah has established an advanced propaganda campaign led by its official media arm, the White Minaret Group.

To organize its operations, Jabhat al-Nusrah appointed a management council, set up a headquarters, and created regional networks with military and religious leaders to run operations, manage cross-border facilitation, and procure weapons and other supplies. In addition, it has amassed an impressive arsenal of weapons, making it one of al Qa'ida's best-armed affiliates in the world. It has participated with other groups in seizing control of several Syrian military bases and acquired a vast array of armaments to enhance its firepower and endow it with capabilities more akin to a small army than a rag-tag group of guerrilla fighters. In February 2013, for example, Jabhat al-Nusrah fighters helped seize control of the al-Jarrah airbase in Thawra, as well as two dams in Raqqa. In January, Jabhat al-Nusrah and Ahrar al-Sham teamed up with the Islamic Vanguard to seize control of Taftanaz, a key Syrian air force base in Idlib. In December 2012, Jabhat al-Nusrah and allied groups took control of the Sheikh Suleiman base. In October,

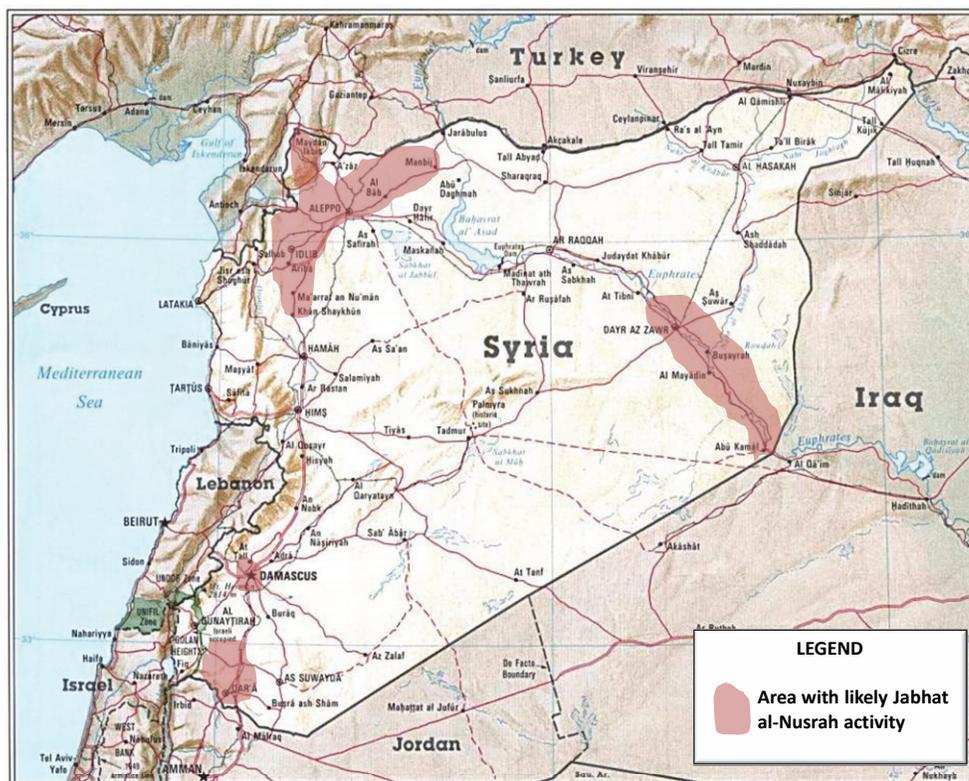
¹⁰ Audio Statement by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, SITE Intelligence Group, April 10, 2013. On the broader debate, also see Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front Leader Renews Allegiance to al Qaeda, Rejects New Name," *Long War Journal*, April 10, 2013.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, *Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, December 2012).

Jabhat al-Nusrah and allied fighters overran a Syrian air defense and Scud missile base in Aleppo.¹²

As Figure 1 highlights, Jabhat al-Nusrah has been active in several areas of Syria. Its most secure sanctuary is likely in the Sunni-dominated Dayr az-Zawr province, where al Qa'ida in Iraq's foreign fighter pipeline operated for nearly a decade. A second area is in northwestern Syria, where Jabhat al-Nusrah has moved fighters, explosives, and other material across the Turkish border into its sanctuaries in Halab and Idlib provinces. Reminiscent of groups like Hezbollah, Jabhat al-Nusrah has set up some humanitarian relief efforts in these provinces, along with religious courts and schools. Jabhat al-Nusrah has also established a sanctuary in southwestern Syria in Dar'a province, near the Jordanian border, as well as in Damascus.¹³

Figure 1: Areas of Jabhat al-Nusrah Activity



While Jabhat al-Nusrah is one of the most capable extremist groups in Syria, it is not the only one. It has conducted joint operations with over a dozen groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham, and Martyrs of Syria. Ahrar al-Sham is perhaps the largest Salafi-jihadist group

¹² See, for example, Bill Roggio, "Islamist' Factions Seize Syrian Airbase," *Long War Journal*, February 12, 2013.

¹³ Author interview with government officials from Europe and the Middle East, April and May 2013.

operating in Syria.¹⁴ In 2012, Jabhat al-Nusrah cooperated with at least nine other groups to create the Mujahideen Shura Council in Dayr az-Zawr. The council was formed to “unite the ranks of the jihadi brigades in the Cause of Allah, organize the efforts and the attacks against the soldiers of disbelief and apostasy, and distinguish the ranks of truth from falsehood,” according a statement released by the group in December 2012. “We call upon our sincere mujahideen brothers all over the strong Levant to unite their ranks in groups, pure of the filth of suspicious groups and the infiltration of people who have no qualities or faith, in order to clarify their banner and purify their path.”¹⁵ Al Qaeda in Iraq pursued a similar strategy, forming a Mujahideen Shura Council in 2006 to coordinate operations among Sunni militant groups in Iraq.

Threats to the West

At the moment, Jabhat al-Nusrah and its leaders, including Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, appear to be most interested in overthrowing the Assad regime and possibly launching attacks against Israel. But it is conceivable that Jawlani’s intentions will evolve and Jabhat al-Nusrah or splinter groups could conduct attacks in the West after – or even before – the Assad regime falls. Jabhat al-Nusrah’s access to foreign fighters, external network in Europe and other areas, and bomb-making expertise suggest that it may have the capability to plan and support attacks against the West.

More broadly, there appears to be a growing contingent of foreign fighters traveling to – and from – Syria to fight in the war. A substantial portion of these fighters are coming from the region, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. But a significant number also appear to be coming from the West, especially from Belgium, France, and Sweden. Extremists have traveled to Syria from other European countries. According to Spanish officials, for example, a network based in Spain and Morocco sent approximately two dozen fighters to Jabhat al-Nusrah over the past year. It is unclear how many of these fighters have returned to the West, but some have apparently returned to Germany, Denmark, Spain, and Norway among others. In October 2012, authorities in Kosovo arrested the extremist Shurki Aliu, who had traveled from Syria to Kosovo and was involved in recruiting and providing material to Syrian opposition groups. A small number of Americans – perhaps less than a dozen – have apparently traveled to Syria to fight with the Syrian opposition.¹⁶

¹⁴ On Syrian opposition groups see Elizabeth O’Bagy, *Jihad in Syria* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, September 2012); Aron Lund, *Syrian Jihadism* (Uppsala, Sweden: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, September 2012).

¹⁵ Bill Roggio, “Al Nusrah Front Poised to Take Over Last Major City on Euphrates River,” *The Long War Journal*, March 13, 2013.

¹⁶ Author interview with government officials from Europe and the Middle East, April and May 2013.

While Turkey is the most common transit country through which extremist foreign fighters travel before entering Syria, some use Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. As Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari acknowledged, “We have solid information and intelligence that member of al Qa’ida terrorist networks have gone in the other direction, to Syria, to help, to carry out attacks.”¹⁷ There are also indications that some al Qa’ida members have left Pakistan and traveled to Syria, including former al Qa’ida senior leader Abu Wafa al-Saudi.

These trends pose a threat to the United States. Syria is attracting a growing cadre of foreign fighters from the West, who could potentially return with the capability to conduct attacks against the United States and its allies. Some of these individuals have joined Jabhat al-Nusrah, which has developed a closer relationship with al Qa’ida’s senior leaders in Pakistan. Just as concerning, some Free Syrian Army leaders have praised Jabhat al-Nusrah. Colonel Riyad al-Assad, a founder of the Free Syrian Army, defended Jabhat al-Nusrah as “our brothers in Islam.” He continued that they “might have some ideological thoughts over which we differ, but the majority of the people are looking with admiration toward the al Nusrah Front.”¹⁸ And Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, head of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, similarly remarked that the U.S. decision in December 2012 to designate Jabhat al-Nusrah as a terrorist organization “must be re-examined” since they shared “the same goal: to overthrow the criminal regime” of President Bashar al-Assad.¹⁹ This defense of Jabhat al-Nusrah is a short-term deal with the devil. Al Qa’ida’s long-term vision of establishing a radical Islamic emirate in the Levant – and, indeed further afield wherever it can – is incompatible with the more moderate religious views of most Syrians.

While the number of American citizens traveling to Syria appears to be limited, at least at the moment, the increase in Europeans with potential access to the United States – including through the Visa Waiver Program – presents a serious counterterrorism challenge. It is incumbent on the United States and its European allies to continue to identify the names of these foreign fighters (including variations in spelling and cover names), share intelligence, ensure they are on appropriate watch lists, monitor their activities, and capture them if they return to the West. As suggested by the recent Boston bombers and several previous terrorists in the United States (such as Faisal Shahzad and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab), not all radicalized individuals flying into the United States make it onto watch lists. U.S. and European intelligence on Syrian

¹⁷ “Iraq Says al-Qaeda Flowing Into Syria,” *Al Jazeera*, July 5, 2012.

¹⁸ Riyadh made the comments in an undated YouTube video. See, for example, Bill Roggio, “Free Syrian Army Commander Praises Al Nusrah Front as ‘Brothers,’” *Long War Journal*, March 30, 2013.

¹⁹ “Syrian Opposition Urges U.S. to Reconsider Al-Nusrah Move,” *Hurriyet Daily News* (Turkey), December 12, 2012.

extremists is currently spotty, making it important to increase human and signals intelligence collection capabilities over the next year to track individuals traveling into – and out of – Syria.

In the long run, the threat to the United States from Syria will likely increase. Even if the Assad regime is overthrown, the war will almost certainly continue in a different form, as sub-state groups like Jabhat al-Nusrah compete for control of the state and attempt to spread their ideology across the region.

Again, thank you for allowing me to appear before you today, and I'd be happy to take your questions.