

ASSESSED REBEL PERSPECTIVES ON CHALLENGING JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN SYRIA

This study provides an assessment of how different rebel groups perceive Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in the context of ongoing military cooperation against both the Assad regime and ISIS. This assessment seeks to inform the development of policy to separate the Syrian opposition from Jabhat al - Nusra in Syria. Russia's intervention in Syria may drive Syrian opposition groups closer together rather than separating moderates and extremists, because Russia considers all opposition groups illegitimate and is likely to target them indiscriminately. Such actions would contravene U.S. stated policy goals and interests.

A majority of Syrian rebel groups cooperate closely with Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al- Nusra out of military necessity. These groups would in many cases succumb to the Syrian regime or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) without Jabhat al-Nusra's support. Many Syrian rebel groups also collaborate with Jabhat al-Nusra on governance, providing a vehicle for Jabhat al-Nusra's agenda to transform Syrian society into an Islamic Emirate that is responsive to the broader goals of al-Qaeda. Syrian rebel groups are therefore generally both unable and unwilling to challenge Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria in the near term. Jabhat al-Nusra's influence enables it to shape the battlefield against U.S. interests, for example by attacking moderate Syrian rebel groups that partner with the U.S. Some groups are likely willing to challenge Jabhat al-Nusra, however. Others will require an incentive to do so. Still others will resist attempts to separate them from Jabhat al-Nusra, and some of these are genuinely irreconcilable. The following assessment examines major rebel groups in each of Syria's provinces and categorizes them based on their assessed perspectives on Jabhat al-Nusra.

Rebel "perspectives" on challenging Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria

Willing to Challenge: Groups that already constrain Jabhat al-Nusra's behavior in Syria and/or are motivated to do so in the near term in the absence of increased outside support

Requires Incentive: Pragmatic groups that require increased support or other enabling assistance in order to be willing to challenge Jabhat al-Nusra

Requires Coercion: Groups that are ideologically aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra's interim objectives in Syria or that are known to collocate with Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria

Irreconcilable: Groups that desire the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate and will reject any Western support or involvement in Syria, to include negotiated settlement of the Syrian civil war

Methodology

The categorization of rebel groups is based on the following parameters:

Willing to challenge: These groups are motivated by fear, ideology, or ambition and include, for example:

- Likely targets of Jabhat al-Nusra aggression in the near term
- Groups that openly denounce Jabhat al-Nusra's objectives in Syria
- Groups that currently act to contain Jabhat al-Nusra's influence

Requires incentive: Groups that are relatively strong that have a different desired end state from Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria but are unlikely to risk antagonizing Jabhat al-Nusra in the near term. They include, for example:

- Nationalist Islamist groups
- Groups that intervene to de-escalate following aggression by Jabhat al-Nusra against moderates

Requires coercion: groups that share interim objectives with Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and are unlikely to act against Jabhat al-Nusra in the near term. These groups include, for example:

- Close ideological allies of Jabhat al-Nusra
- Groups that regard Jabhat al-Nusra fighters as a core component of the Syrian revolution against Bashar al-Assad

Irreconcilables: Groups that will fight alongside Jabhat al-Nusra and resist a negotiated settlement in Syria. These include, for example, groups that:

- Oppose Syria as a nation-state
- Desire the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate that confronts the West
- Are linked to the global al-Qaeda network
- Consist mainly of foreign fighters

Challenging Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria

This assessment characterizes “challenging” Jabhat al-Nusra as lethal or non-lethal rebel group activity including but not limited to the following:

Non-lethal

Withdrawing from structures currently linked to Jabhat al-Nusra

Refusing to accept the involvement of Jabhat al-Nusra or other irreconcilable groups in new military, governance, or administrative structures

Interrupting Jabhat al-Nusra’s freedom of movement by blocking Jabhat al-Nusra at checkpoints

Restricting the delivery of resources to structures free of Jabhat al-Nusra involvement

Lethal

Defending moderate rebel groups from attacks by Jabhat al-Nusra

Providing targeting information to the U.S. and its allies

Forcibly removing Jabhat al-Nusra from terrain

Seize infrastructure controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra

Identifying Powerbrokers

The following chart indicates assessed powerbrokers in addition to groups that

could become powerbrokers in the near term upon the receipt of sufficient outside support.

Powerbroker: a group that defines the success of military operations against either the Assad or ISIS, is strategically located, and/or plays a leading role in governance

Potential Powerbroker: a group that could achieve significant battlefield effects against Jabhat al-Nusra and/or ISIS in Western Syria upon receipt of increased outside support, including securing direct military gains and cohering other smaller brigades into new coalitions

Identifying Outside Funding

This chart also reflects assessments of outside funding provided by the Carter

Center and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. There are three major regional sources of funding:

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia provides direct support to Salafist and Islamist groups across all of Western Syria.

Turkey and Qatar

Turkey and Qatar support nationalist Syrian rebel groups, including Salafist and Islamist groups. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, currently based in Turkey, facilitates the provision of money and weapons provided by Turkey and Qatar to Syrian armed opposition groups based in Northern Syria.

Joint Military Operations Command

Two covert joint military operations commands (MOC), based in Turkey and Jordan, provide funding and lethal aid to moderate and nationalist Islamist groups in northern and southern Syria.

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Area of operation	Currently willing	Require incentive	Require Coercion	Irreconcilables
Cross-Front	^S Jaysh al-Islam	^{Q,T} Sham Legion ^S Originality and Development Front Ajnad al-Sham ^M Furqan Brigades	^{T,S} Ahrar al-Sham	
Damascus	^S Jaysh al-Islam *	Rahman Corps * ^S Originality and Development Front Ajnad al-Sham ^M Furqan Brigades	^{T,S} Ahrar al-Sham	
Idlib	^M Suqour al-Ghab~ ^M Suquor al-Jabal~ ^M 13th Division ~ ^S Jaysh al-Islam ~	^{Q,T} Sham Legion ~ ^M Furqan Brigades Ajnad al-Sham ~	^{T,S} Ahrar al-Sham* Jaysh al-Sunna	Junud al-Sham (Chechen) * Jund al-Aqsa (Syrian, Saudi) * East Turkestan Islamic Party (Uighur)
Aleppo	^M 16th Division ^M 101st Infantry Division ^{M,Q} Fursan al-Haqq ^M Liwa Sultan Murad ~ ^S Jaysh al-Islam	^{T,Q} Islamic Front - Aleppo * ^M Nour al-Din al-Zenki * ^{Q,M} Jaysh al-Mujahideen * Fistaqim Kama Umirat Abu Amara Brigades ^{Q,T} Sham Legion * ^S Originality and Development Front	^{T,S} Ahrar al-Sham* Jaysh al-Sunna	Fajr al-Sham (Syrian) Katiba Tawhid wal-Jihad (Uzbek) Jund al-Aqsa (Syrian, Saudi) Imarat Kawkaz fi al-Sham (Chechen)
Dera'a	^M First Army * ^M Suquor al-Janoub ~ ^S Jaysh al-Islam	^M Seif al-Sham ~ ^M Usoud al-Harb ~ ^M Furqan Brigades	^{T,S} Ahrar al-Sham*	Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk (Syrian) Harakat Muthanna (Syrian)
Quneitra	^M First Army * ^S Jaysh al-Islam	^M Seif al-Sham ~ ^M Furqan Brigades	^{T,S} Ahrar al-Sham	Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk (Syrian) Harakat Muthanna (Syrian)
Latakia	^S Jaysh al-Islam ^M First Coastal Division	^{Q,M} Jaysh al-Mujahideen	^{T,S} Ahrar al-Sham	Junud al-Sham (Chechen)* Imarat Kawkaz fi al-Sham (Chechen)

* Assessed Powerbroker within the given province

~ Potential Powerbroker within the given province

Cross Front: groups that operate in both Northern and Southern Syria; groups that are assessed to be powerbrokers or potential powerbrokers in two or more provinces.

Outside Funders

S- Saudi Arabia

T-Turkey

Q- Qatar

M- Joint Military Operations Command

According to the Carter Center and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace