



Jabhat al-Nusra

Jabhat al-Nusra li-ahl al-Sham min Mujahedi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad.

A Strategic Briefing

Acknowledgement

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Executive Summary

Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) is a Syrian jihadist group fighting against Bashar Al-Assad's Ba'athist regime, with the aim of establishing an Islamist state in Syria. With approximately 5000 members JN is by no means the largest group fighting in the conflict, although it has often been described as the most effective. There are a number of similarities between JN and al-Qaeda In Iraq (AQI), which serves as evidence of their shared history beginning in the early 2000s. The short-term strategy of JN is primarily military focused, although preparations are being made for long-term sustainability of the group, including the organisation of a humanitarian support group and the procurement of heavy weaponry.

Background

The Arab Spring in Syria began in March 2011 as a series of peaceful demonstrations which escalated in response to the savage reaction of Bashar Al-Assad's Ba'athist regime. Syria's geographical position makes its security an international priority, wedged as it is between Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel, and with the last three of these countries having particularly tense security situations of their own. Indeed, violence from Syria has already spilled over into all three of these volatile countries, and the threat of further regional destabilisation is very real.

In the 22 months since the Syrian Arab Spring began in earnest, the conflict has turned into something of a war by proxy, with the foreign policy objectives of various countries being fought out on the ground. A number of separate rebel groups have emerged and preparations are being made for a post-Assad Syria as these groups vie for dominance and international support.

JN is one such rebel group, and one of the few which is fighting in the revolution on ideological, jihadist, grounds; the majority of rebel groups are concentrating primarily on the matter of a political change in government. Although all of the rebel groups have the same immediate objective of fighting the regime, it seems likely that following the anticipated fall of Assad, serious discrepancies in long-term aims will emerge.

Many pro-democracy rebels are in favour of asking the international community for help to create a democratic state in Syria. However, the lack of international intervention has left many of the country's citizens feeling that the rest of the world has abandoned them, or that the coalition plan is not producing the correct results. This is leading to an increase in public support for jihadist groups, such as JN, as they are seen as an effective force.

JN reject the concept of asking the international community to intervene in their struggle against Assad, since this is seen as encouraging 'Western imperialism'. They also fear that international intervention would subvert their long-term plan for an Islamist state in Syria.

Origins

Many cadres of JN come from the jihadist network of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, which was built during the 2000s and solidified in Hai al-Jami'a, Baghdad, in 2002, following Al-Zarqawi's arrival from Afghanistan via Iran. Syrians who had been with Al-Zarqawi in Herat, Afghanistan, in 2000 were sent to build branches of his network in Syria and Lebanon, with Al-Zarqawi exercising control from Iraq. These jihadists established 'guesthouses' in Syria to channel would-be fighters to Iraq, and the infrastructure flourished. During this period, Syria acted as the main channel for funding for the network, with Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) jihadists in the Levant securing financial support from sympathisers in their home countries.

In 2007 however, the Syrian government adjusted its policy towards Iraq, retracting its tacit tolerance of jihadist activities, and began to crack down on the Syrian members of the Al-Zarqawi's network. One casualty of this policy change was Sheikh Abu al-Qaqa, who was assassinated by the Syrian intelligence services in late 2007 for his part in channelling foreign fighters to Iraq through Syria. Despite incidents like these, the network was never destroyed and many jihadists in Syria escaped arrest by relocating to Iraq and returning to Syria in 2011. One such jihadist is Abu Mohammad al-Julani, JN's leader.

Al-Julani's leadership is uncontested because of his experience in Iraq; his long absence from Syria is irrelevant given the group's ideological rejection of borders within 'Muslim lands' where they wish to establish a 'caliphate'. Although the GCC jihadist presence in the Levant faded in 2007, it too began to re-emerge in late December 2011, as word spread of the new jihadist group, Jabhat al-Nusra.

When the Syrian Revolution began, members of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) came to a collective agreement to send Syrian jihadists, Iraqi experts and top lieutenants of guerrilla warfare into the country. It is not clear whether this agreement outlined this new force, JN, as a branch of AQI or as a separate entity, al-Qaeda in the Levant (AQL). According to our sources, JN are still receiving strategic and ideological guidance from the Islamic State of Iraq, and their development is still being monitored by AQI today. In time, JN may define itself as AQL, an autonomous structure ideologically affiliated with, but not taking orders from the ISI.

Objectives

JN began in earnest with a number of meetings between October 2011 and January 2012 in Reef Dimashq (Damascus countryside) and Homs. At these first meetings, the five main objectives of the JN project were decided:

1. to establish a group including many existing jihadists, linking them together into one coherent entity
2. to reinforce and strengthen the consciousness of the Islamist nature of the conflict

3. to build military capacity for the group, seizing opportunities to collect weapons and train recruits, and to create safe havens by controlling physical places upon which to exercise their power.
4. to create an Islamist state in Syria
5. to establish a 'Caliphate' in Bilad al-Sham (the Levant)

JN is engaged in a war against the government of Bashar al-Assad. The conflict in Syria represented an opportunity to establish a religiously-justified system of government, as the group believes that every regime which does not enforce sharia as law is illegitimate. In their first video statement on 24 January 2012, al-Nusra claim to be 'bringing the law of Allah back to His land'. This notion comes from an interpretation of a religious prophecy of the future found in several hadith (collections of sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad), for example: 'the centre of the realm of Islam is in al-Sham [the Levant]' and 'I see the angels of Allah spreading their wings over al-Sham [the Levant]'. A number of hadith put Syria and the Levant at the centre of Islam's prophecy, as the first JN video explains: 'the camp of the Muslims on Judgement Day would be in Damascus'. JN believe that the Syrian revolution provides a golden opportunity for them to work towards the realisation of this prophecy, and they work in the hope that they may become the people mentioned in these hadiths.

Strategy

Amongst the ranks of JN are a huge number of knowledgeable, experienced and skilful people with a clear plan. The JN strategy was clear before they engaged in the conflict, unlike the Free Syrian Army (FSA) whose chaotic mixture of civilians and ex-military men has left them with a muddled set of tactics. The leaders of JN, on the other hand, can use their experience as jihadists in other countries to plan, identify goals and strategize effectively, making them one of the most efficient groups fighting in the revolution, despite not being the biggest.

JN strategists are well-versed in a number of armed conflict and insurgency strategies, and are most notably influenced by Maoist ideas of guerrilla warfare, asymmetric warfare, and exhausting the enemy through a long, drawn-out war. The group's strategy is shaped by four distinct influences: interpretations of religious prophecy, lessons from Iraq, ideas of the Arab Spring and the complex relationship with the international community.

1. In the first instance, JN defines the Syrian revolution as an Islamic issue, supported by the religious texts. The prophecy element of JN focuses on both the Quranic notion of jihad and the virtue of the people of Bilad al-Sham (the Levant) mentioned in the Sunnah (tradition of the Prophet). This leads JN fighters to hope that they could attain the honour of being the ones mentioned in the hadith, destined to fulfil 'God's wish' for an 'Islamic caliphate'. Although the concept of nation states goes against their interpretation of Islam, they do not give the impression that they have a substantially different structure in mind. From the group's vague allusions to this issue, it seems they would use the functional structure of the nation state with an Islamised face. It does not appear that they have new ideas for the future structure of the state they are looking to build, a common problem among Islamist groups.
2. With regard to the lessons learnt by JN fighters in Iraq, much of the group's experience was gleaned in this conflict during the 2000s and many leadership ties exist with AQI. The lessons identified from these exploits have been important in guiding strategy for JN, as they tread more carefully with aspects of AQI strategy which had negative effects on their popularity. These small adjustments to neutralise the population include:

- ⤴ predominantly military rather than civic targets, with no bombing of shrines and careful use of suicide bombs to minimise civilian casualties,
- ⤴ downplaying JN's rhetoric concerning sectarianism and *kuffar* (labelling Alawites, Shiites and Sufis as non-Muslims)
- ⤴ the decision to use a different name to avoid preconceptions associated with Al Qaeda.

It seems that JN aim to introduce their ideas more slowly in the hope of maintaining popular support, as they fear an Iraqi-style *Sahwat al-Qaba'il* (Tribal Resurgence) opposition to them emerging. JN believe a backlash against them is already being planned in Syria, led by Saudi Arabia and a prominent Syrian Wahhabi cleric.

3. The Arab Spring has affected the strategy of JN, as they do not see a real change in the governments of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or Yemen. They are particularly disappointed that Libyan jihadists have been thwarted in their attempts to establish an Islamist state in the country, and consider the interference of the West responsible for this. JN considers the only path to victory to be a military defeat of the regime, followed by the introduction of an Islamist government and their interpretation of sharia as law. They will not negotiate with other players as this would be tantamount to relinquishing control.
4. Jabhat al-Nusra do not want to alienate the international community, because this would only aid Assad. At the same time they cannot accept international interference because this would preclude the establishment of an Islamist state. This is one of the most difficult balances to strike, as it is a very complicated issue. JN's ideology does not allow cooperation with pro-democracy players in the conflict, and yet while their interests converge it would be counter-productive to fragment the opposition.

In practice, JN operate an urban-rural warfare strategy, taking control of the countryside around main cities in relatively significant guerrilla attacks against government targets, while simultaneously launching low level urban guerrilla attacks inside the city. These urban attacks are based on political terrorism, designed to create chaos and insecurity, and destroy the legitimacy of the Assad regime using fear. The group uses asymmetric warfare to exploit the regime's weaknesses, planting bombs at the heart of government military and security structures, and breaking the spirit of their troops. For these ends, suicide bombs are an ideal tactic, minimising the loss of life amongst the JN's ranks whilst maximising impact on the enemy; their guerrilla tactics allow them to fight without offering up their troops to be killed, gaining a tactical advantage. JN are, however, struggling to convince other rebel groups not to be hasty, particularly in cities where the sudden removal of government structures leads to public chaos. This chaos could cause the rebels to become pitted against the Syrian population with no capacity to handle such a burden. Instead, JN believe that blockading cities from the outside is the most effective strategy, as controlling surrounding towns and villages to besiege a city will exhaust Assad's regime and leave the rebels in control.

JN strategy is primarily military in nature, concentrating most of their resources into these efforts to defeat the regime and introduce Islamist rule. This is a dangerous strategy for the group as it does not properly address the political side of the revolution. Although the group obviously understand the importance of popular support, they do not have a specific plan to encourage political mobilisation, believing it will come as a by-product of military victory. Current tactics seem geared towards neutralising rather than mobilising the population and avoiding a backlash rather than seeking active support for their political plans.

JN engage in only two aspects of non-military work:

- ⤴ religious missionary-style teaching and preaching (al-Da'wa)
- ⤴ humanitarian work, through their social wing *Qism al-Ighatha* (The Relief Department), which distributes bread, gas and blankets and regulates grocery prices to prevent exploitation of the needy.

With regard to a post-Assad strategy, JN are aware that a new phase of the conflict will begin as soon as the Assad regime falls. Their strategy for this period seems to have two parts:

- ⤴ To galvanise all the jihadist forces under one umbrella to create a 'jihadists vs. the rest' situation. Although information on the advancement of this plan is lacking, a foreign fighter source seemed to think this was inevitable.
- ⤴ To accept a possible influx of new fighters from Iraq. After processing all the available data, it appears that this new era of fighting will see JN adopt the Iraqi code of conduct from 2005, resulting in a surge in violence.

Inside the Organisation

Military Structure

Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) has around 5000 official members, with another few thousand prospective members and independent jihadists fighting with them. The structure of the group varies according to the geographical placement of the fighters within Syria. In Damascus where urban guerrilla tactics are used, the organisation is split into cells, as this lessens the chances of detection. In Aleppo, however, the group can be organised along semi-conventional military lines, with brigades, regiments and platoons all linked together in the fight against regime forces. Although these military units share names with conventional military structures, the small number of JN fighters means that their brigades and platoons are on a much smaller scale than those of a national army.

The group started as a series of cells while the government was still strong, using low level urban guerrilla warfare tactics, such as assassinations and car bombs, for reasons of security. However, since then, the group has formed into much larger platoons in certain areas, changing their structure to fit the ever-changing nature of the war. JN now have heavy weaponry, and run their activities out of 'operation rooms' in rebel-held areas. These operation rooms usually occupy old civilian facilities, e.g. a wedding hall in a neighbourhood of Aleppo used for several months as a hub of preparation. Such rooms are very useful in the planning of regional operations, allowing JN to be more effective. Other branches of the group include the heavy artillery and air defence brigades. It is unusual to have such heavy weapons in a jihadist group, and this is perhaps evidence of JN's long-term aim to form a permanent military. The group is also preparing for the long-term with its social wing, *Qism al-Ighatha* (Relief Department), which looks to alleviate some of the suffering caused by the nationwide conflict. This includes providing food and warm clothing to civilians where possible, as well as seizing wheat by force to distribute amongst the hungry in Aleppo.

JN's operations are split into two categories: *amniya* ('security') and *askariya* ('military'). *Amniya* operations take place predominantly in Damascus, and *askariya* in other areas of the country. From the group's official statements, we notice considerable cross-over in the targets and tactics of these two kinds of operation; the main difference between them being the units that carry out the operations. This seems to demonstrate that we are witnessing the building of JN security structures across the country, showing that the group are adapting to the changing conflict, and making

preparations for a post-Assad future by taking steps towards separate security service and army structures.

Religious Structure

Jabhat al-Nusra has a hierarchy of religious bodies, with a very small *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council) at the top, making national decisions on behalf of the group. They and other rebel groups are experiencing a lack of religious scholars to lead prayers and spread their religious message, leading them to call for imams to come to Syria from abroad. The al-Nusra *Majlis al-Shura* includes the supposed *al-qadi al-a'am* (Grand Mufti) Abu Musab al-Qahtani, who some sources believe to be a Saudi national. However other more accurate sources confirm he is an Iraqi national from Mosul, named Maysar Ali Moussa, but has dozens of alternative aliases. There is conflicting evidence as to the Grand Mufti's rule, and other authentic jihadi sources insist he is only the religious leader for eastern Syria. Religious personnel also play an important role in regional JN leadership, with each region having a commander and a sheikh. The sheikh supervises the commander from a religious perspective and is known as *dabet al-shar'i* (religious commissioner). The religious commissioner of Aleppo, Sheikh Amar (nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Halabi) was a very influential figure in the city, leading Friday prayers and preaching the jihadist message until he was killed in Aleppo in December 2012.

JN have also established religious courts through which to resolve disputes between members of the group and to sentence prisoners. These courts play a large part in maintaining law and order in JN, with even commanders being asked to stand before them many times. We have received reports of a judge sentencing a commander to lashes for falsely accusing a fighter of links to the *Shabiha* (Assad's militia). The commander was punished in the presence of a small number of fighters for defamation to prevent similar occurrences. JN's sharia courts are also open to Syrian civilians, and non-members have come to ask the court's advice on personal matters. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) recently adopted a similar legal structure, with an FSA member explaining the benefits of establishing a court as a way of maintaining law and order.

The Leader of Jabhat al-Nusra

The leader of JN is a man who goes by the name of Abu Mohammad al-Julani. A jihadist source confirmed to us that his name reflects his family ties to the area of the Golan Heights not currently under Israeli occupation. Considerable doubt still exists about the identity of al-Julani, and sources tell us that his face is always covered in meetings, even with other leaders. Al-Julani is thought to be a Syrian jihadist with suspected close ties to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). His details are a closely-guarded secret, so much so that most JN members do not know much about their leader. This tactic of isolation follows the AQI model of behaviour, in which leaders keep themselves away from the media, only associate with specific military units and ensure that their movements are heavily dominated by security arrangements. Our investigation has indicated that al-Julani could be a Syrian member of Al-Zarqawi's core followers during the campaign in Iraq. Although al-Julani's identity remains unconfirmed, by investigating al-Zarqawi's old network and using the process of elimination, we have narrowed down possible candidates to one individual. This man is mysterious, having been reported killed twice, in Iraq in 2006 and Syria in 2008. There is debate over whether his nationality is Iraqi or Syrian. Both of the experts we consulted, one a journalist and the other a retired senior intelligence official in Iraq, shared our theory on the identity of al-Julani. Both spoke of the ambiguity of the fate of this man, and neither was convinced of his death. As our investigation is still on-going, we will not release the name of our suspect at this time.

Recruitment and Training

Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) is very selective about initiating new members, requiring '*tezkiyya*', or personal assurance, from two commanders on the front line stating that the recruit has the necessary skills, religious commitment and attitude to join the group. The first step of becoming a member is fighting on the front line. During this time, potential recruits are tested for bravery, dedication, and loyalty to the JN ideology. This is part of the reason JN has been so successful – other rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have a policy of mass recruitment which makes them appear strong, but actually leaves them chaotic and disunited.

The oath of allegiance taken by JN's new recruits is al-Bay'a, common to many jihadist groups. The religious nature of this oath, swearing before God to follow the jihadist leadership, makes it a stronger, more personal contract than a simple civil oath would be. Breaking this oath carries significant danger, with jihadists in Algeria killed for refusing to follow the leaders to whom they had pledged allegiance. The religious basis of this oath means that recruits have no legal recourse should they wish to leave the group, as they have made a vow to submit to jihadist leaders entirely, unless their instructions go against the will of God.

There is a strong presence of Arab fighters in JN, from many different countries. This is especially true in Reef Halab (the Aleppo countryside), in towns such as Medinat al-Bab and Jarabliss. Eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo such as al-Sha'ar, Tariq al-Bab and Maysir also have considerable numbers of foreign fighters, as does Reef Idlib. At the beginning of the conflict, North Africans made up a large portion of the foreign fighters in Syria, but in recent months, large numbers of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) residents have joined the ranks of JN.

A number of platoons (*seraya*) within JN have single nationality membership, for example *Seraya al-Tuaanisa* from Tunisia. A single-ethnicity platoon also exists for Chechens. Analysis of other jihadist groups in the past 30 years shows that single nationality units are often created to build a core jihadist group to take back to their own country. Although single-nationality units go against the Islamic notion of *ummah*, they are used to export the jihadist ideology, and thus serve the wider goals of jihadism.

A large number of Iraqi jihadists with links to Al Qaeda can be found in the Deir Ezzor region, including some commanders. Iraqis and Jordanians constitute the main body of foreigners fighting with al-Nusra. The special privileges often awarded to Iraqis in JN are testament to the special bond between Syrian and Iraqi jihadists, stemming from their old relationship forged while fighting in Iraq. All of these foreign fighters are referred to as *al-Muhajiroun*, 'the Emigrants', a reference to the first Muslim societies which were started by the Prophet's companions, when they emigrated from Mecca.

Security and secrecy

Jabhat al-Nusra has a security policy largely based on silence. Any breach of the group's security is punishable by death, supported by a sophisticated religious justification - betrayal of JN is presented as a betrayal of Islam and of all Muslims.

This policy of silence also manifests itself in their avoidance of open debate on any topic, as JN refuse to be drawn into discussions of their objective, preferring to make statements on their own terms. When JN attacks are attributed to other groups, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), JN do nothing to refute this, not wishing to be drawn into unnecessary discussion. This is not the case however with the May 9th car bombings in Damascus, which were initially attributed to JN but publicly refuted by

them, and now thought to have been carried out by the Assad regime to discredit the group. Regime operations in the name of JN actually represent one of the most pressing security issues for the group because of the potential for damage to JN's reputation, as the regime has previously successfully copied the group's branding e.g. in the May 9th car bombs mentioned above.

This system of silence is also employed within the group – most members do not know anything about the leadership or structure of the organisation, and do not have much understanding of the fighting methods of the group. Trust therefore plays a large part, with members not wanting to put the leaders of JN in danger by asking questions. Members of local brigades also do not talk much about their own backgrounds, as the culture is one of minding one's own business and protecting the group through discretion. Most JN fighters use noms de guerre, and many have more than one. One source mentioned that fighters with experience of jihad in Iraq are recommended to choose a new nom de guerre to avoid detection.

JN do not use technology to pass messages, preferring long messenger chains and physical contact between members to sidestep issues of electronic security breaches. Much of the group's communication takes place outside of Syria, and the process is very secretive and sophisticated.

Silence aids JN in one other way: if civilians become aware of JN activities in their area, they rarely report them. This is because of the widespread hatred for the Assad regime, and the good reputation JN have as an effective force against al-Assad and the Shabiha.

A random raid which led to the arrest of a senior JN figure in April 2012 threatened to derail the whole group, as it culminated in several other members being implicated and arrested. JN took two months to recover fully from this stumbling block, having to completely reorganise their security structure, although they learned much from the episode.

JN appears to be the only rebel group in Syria which has members inside a number of government institutions, including the government security apparatus and military units. Particularly in Damascus, spying systems are sophisticated. Many members of the group in Damascus are ordinary citizens – teachers, mechanics, merchants and professionals. Information gathered through the work of these individuals is put to use when carrying out urban guerrilla warfare. The main security challenge for JN is in Damascus because of the nature of the conflict in this area, based on terrorist tactics, as opposed to the conventional warfare occurring in other towns, such as Aleppo.

There is no truth in the notion that JN is an elaborate scheme developed by the Syrian government to frighten the international community into supporting the Assad regime over al-Qaeda. We have heard from their rivals, however, that the group has possibly been infiltrated by the Syrian security services, the *mukhabarat*. The secretive nature of the group does not help their case in this regard – the lack of transparency about their membership and operations makes it easy for rumours of *mukhabarat* involvement in their actions to catch hold. In 2003, the *mukhabarat* gathered significant intelligence about jihadists in Syria as they facilitated trips to Iraq to wage jihad against the foreign intervention. This provided the key for the *mukhabarat* to infiltrate JN, as the information gathered on key jihadists at this time can now be used to connect with JN leaders.

Another event which aids these rumours is the release of approximately 200 jihadist prisoners from Saidnaya prison in 2011, confirmed to us by an Arab jihadist source. These prisoners were arrested during the Iraq war for suspected involvement with al-Qaeda. Although this looks like cooperation between the Assad regime and JN, the reasons behind this move seem to be more complex, with the regime releasing these jihadist prisoners in order to create conflict amongst opposition groups and hoping to justify a violent crackdown on rebels by presenting them to the international community

as al Qaeda-led. These two issues are shadowy enough for JN to be exploited by their enemies and spread mistrust of the group, although it seems likely that the *mukhabarat* infiltration is no more extensive in JN than in Syria's other jihadist groups.

Military operations

In the past three months, JN has shown itself to be the principal force against al-Assad and the Shabiha. The group has engaged with the Assad regime on the front lines from Idlib to Dera'a, including in many neighbourhoods of Aleppo and Deir Ezzor. Recent military successes include occupying army base 111, known as Sheikh Suleiman, following a siege. This is an example of JN's more conventional warfare tactics which are under-reported in the media.

The types of operation in which JN are engaged include: car bombs; suicide attacks; destroying checkpoints; arson attacks on liquor shops, as in Ras el-Ain; the execution of media professionals; and assassinations, including that of the Interior Minister and that of the entire *Khaliyat al-Azma* (the Crisis Taskforce). This Taskforce was designed to handle the regime's response to the rebels and included Asif Shawqat, some of Bashar al-Assad's relatives and the Minister for Defence. The JN operation which assassinated them was highly sophisticated and had a very powerful effect, exposing the government as unable to protect themselves, let alone stop JN from operating. Attacks like this one instil fear in the Assad regime, and raise the profile of JN amongst the people of Syria. JN's assassinations are not limited to key players, however, and they carry out three or four per week, targeting military officers and members of the Shabiha as part of their daily tactics.

Although many of the techniques of JN mimic those of AQI, (e.g. the targeting of security forces, the use of car bombs and suicide missions), the group steers clear of the AQI strategy of indiscriminate attacks at the present time, fearing negative publicity. It has even been said that JN has halted imminent attacks when they realised that civilians would be the main casualties. Despite this apparent unwillingness to harm non-combatants, JN have spoken of the sectarian nature of their mission; revenge against *al-Nusayrin* (Alawites) for their mistreatment of *ahl al-Sunna* (Sunnis).

JN often cooperates with other jihadist and Islamist groups such as Sukour al-Sham, and even with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), in a number of strategic battles. They also concentrate on taking control of towns near major highways, such as Ma'aret el-Numan, to control movement within the country and important positions. The group controls the highway between Aleppo and Hasakah and has set up checkpoints, as this is an important route to Iraq.

There are three unusual aspects of JN's military operations:

1. They target media facilities and personalities, assassinating popular figures such as state TV anchorman Mohammed Said, and filming his beheading. Although assassinations are considered standard jihadist activity, targeting the media is unexpected.
2. The lack of JN attacks on government airplanes and helicopters. Although many MIGs and helicopters have been shot down by rebels, only one such attack has been claimed by JN forces. This would seem to demonstrate a lack of man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADs), consistent with the international effort to keep these weapons out of jihadist hands.
3. They do not mount rescue operations to free captured jihadist fighters. There have been instances in which prisoners have been released as part of a larger operation with a different focus, but in no case has their rescue been the main aim of a mission. This is unusual for a jihadist group as rescue operations were a common occurrence in Iraq.

Media and Propaganda

Jabhat al-Nusra have their own media network, *al-Manara al-Bayda* (the White Minaret), which they use to make their documentary-style propaganda videos, often featuring car bomb attacks and interviews with potential suicide bombers. Through *al-Manara al-Bayda* the message of JN is publicised to the outside world via the most respected jihadist forum, *Shumukh al-Islam*. Its name is an allusion to the white minaret of al-Sham, mentioned in the hadith, beside which the Messiah will descend at the end of the world, according to Islamic prophecy.

Within JN, group spirit is maintained through religious propaganda, spread via CD recordings. CDs of the group's doctrine are distributed throughout the country, and feature sermons from al-Julani and other jihadist spiritual leaders (*Shuyukh al-Jihad*). This shared spiritual training acts as the glue of JN, keeping recruits unified in doctrine and goals. The CDs make sure that the message of JN remains constant, and that even members in remote areas can receive the religious guidance necessary to boost morale and prevent recruits from veering from the message of JN.

Although there is a media team within JN, the recruits on this team also fight on the front line. This fact is attested in the December 2012 killing of the head of JN's media team Ahmed al-Aroub (nom de guerre Abu Turab) by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Ras al-Ain.

The press strategy of JN so far has been one of positive ambiguity. They strive to not become embroiled in debate about their beliefs with other opposition groups, as jihadist groups in Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Algeria and Libya did, to their detriment. JN seem to believe that actions speak louder than words, preferring to limit their statements to the subject of their operations only. In fact, they do not claim responsibility for all of their operations, preferring a 'strategy of silence' which makes them appear as only one fragment of a much larger and more powerful opposition.

Their rhetoric on the subject of their long term goals is very softly worded. There are no direct statements about 'enforcing sharia law', rather the prettily-worded 'bringing the law of Allah back to his land'. This was a conscious decision made at the earliest meetings of the group, to refer to their end goals in more general terms. Their intention is to reveal the short-term goals of each phase of their plan as they emerge, giving themselves the opportunity to adapt their short term goals taking into account the ever-changing situation. This is not to say that their long term goals are not fixed – no short term aims can go against the final goals of implementing their interpretation of sharia as law, establishing an Islamist 'caliphate' and supporting the Palestinian cause.

The branding of JN is very telling. The use of the black banner *al-riya* often connected with al-Qaeda, plus the documentary style of their video statements, their use of specific weapons and their statement that America is an enemy of Islam all connect them with the wider al-Qaeda network, despite the difference in their name. A letter found in Osama bin Laden's house following his death reads: 'It would help if the name is a method of delivery of our message', which explains the use of the words 'mujahedeen' and 'jihad' in the full title of *Jabhat al-Nusra li-ahl al-Sham min Mujahedi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad* (The Front for the Protection of the People of the Levant by the Mujahedin of the Levant in the Battlefields of Jihad).

A jihadist source told us that Arab satellite media, such as *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya* have attributed many JN operations to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). As this mistake is often made on routine operations, JN do not see value in breaking their silence to gain credit for inconsequential attacks. Contesting responsibility could also create dispute between rebel groups, as often happens in conflict situations, and this would be counter-productive. Although the media may make this

mistake, people on the ground in Syria are undoubtedly aware of the groups responsible for various attacks.

Relations with other key players

Inside Syria

Relations between JN and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) are mixed. Some FSA brigades threaten to work with JN if the West does not provide enough weapons, while others perceive that JN are trying to exploit the revolution for their own ends, instead of working for the good of the country. JN and the FSA are wary of one another, as they are already vying for popularity amongst the Syrian population. They both acknowledge that it will be hard for the groups to work together after the fall of the regime, as they are essentially rivals in the long term. One foreign jihadist source told us that JN have no problem with the FSA fighters, but disagree with the FSA leadership, particularly their relationships with regional and international players and their attitude towards democracy. Despite fundamental differences of opinion on the shape of a Syrian government post-Assad, JN has often worked with the FSA on operations, preferring to pool resources while their aims converge. An example of this is an attack on Assad's regime forces undertaken by JN and the FSA together in Aleppo, after which they agreed to share the loot, splitting it according to the sharia-based tradition of *al-Ghana'im* (spoils of war). This acceptance of JN's code of conduct is interesting, as it shows that Islamic traditions are acceptable to certain brigades of the FSA.

This level of cooperation between JN and the FSA is not widespread however, as JN have disagreed with the FSA's strategy on a number of occasions. An example is Aleppo, where JN consider the FSA to have inadvertently made the rebels responsible for the suffering of civilians in the city. By fighting street by street for control of the city, the FSA has created a situation similar to that of Beirut in the 1980s, one with terrible humanitarian consequences. JN sources have told us that the group's strategy would have been to put the city under siege, avoiding the destruction of Aleppo by isolating the city. Despite the level of strategic disagreement in Aleppo, recent reports of clashes between the FSA and JN are unfounded – our sources explained the reports as a case of mistaken identity, as JN were not involved.

Interestingly, JN have not yet formed a coalition with other jihadist forces, although a number of other groups including Ansar al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham and the Deir Ezzor Revolutionary Council have joined together to form the Liberation Front. JN alone has become the nucleus of the jihadist resistance, as the FSA is the nucleus of the pro-democracy rebels. Although a number of jihadist groups are taking part in the conflict, JN has been lauded as the most capable and effective, having claimed responsibility for nearly 600 attacks in the past year. It is thought that Ahrar al-Sham used to be a branch of the group, and although it is not clear what happened to cause the groups to split, relations between the two are good. America's labelling of JN as a terrorist organisation has only served to reinforce support for the group within Syria as other jihadist groups see that their own efforts will be undermined if JN is forced to withdraw from the conflict because of this designation.

JN's relationship with other groups who do not fit into their vision of Syria's future is more strained. The group ultimately does not want to create enemies in the opposition while all the groups share a goal of defeating the Ba'athist regime, as side conflicts would only serve to sap power from the main short-term focus of the opposition. However, groups such as the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), for whom a following is developing in Syria, are considered *kuffar* (infidels) by JN, and this has led to an amount of confrontation between the groups despite their shared short-term goals. Although JN have not yet implemented a country-wide onslaught against practices deemed by them as un-Islamic

in Syria, they are thought to be responsible for a number of arson attacks on liquor shops in the Christian and Kurdish areas of Ras el-Ain. There are reports of Kurds working with the Shabiha against the FSA and JN, a reaction to the relationship between the FSA and Turkey, the historical enemy of the Kurds.

Once the Ba'athist regime falls, JN's opponents will become many and varied. Moderates who support the group's strong stance against Assad may grow to be repulsed at the continuing violence and increasingly extreme rhetoric which could follow the fall of the regime.

External influences

Jabhat al-Nusra's ideological reasoning precludes any engagement with foreign governments and with any peace conferences outside of Syria, as they believe that international involvement would only result in the revolution being hijacked.

The creation of the national coalition has changed the position of JN in both the national and international consciousness. Qatar's change of direction particularly, starting to see itself as the protector of the internationally-supported coalition instead of the jihadists, has affected JN, as they have lost a tacit supporter. Many jihadists believe the new coalition is made up of puppets controlled by the West for their own ends, and international disapproval of JN is only likely to aid this belief. America's attempt to de-legitimise JN when no attacks have been made against American or Western targets looks like an attempt to dampen support from Turkey and the Gulf states, pressurising governments to support the coalition instead of the more unpredictable rebel groups. However America's designation of JN as a terrorist organisation has increased their popularity inside Syria as rebels see American interference as part of an 'international conspiracy' to keep Islamists out of power. This has reinforced the group's position as the only alternative for pure struggle against Assad.

Inevitably, any support for the Syrian opposition will empower JN, as de-legitimising the regime creates a space for the group to contest control, and in a situation of such chaos, the tightly-knit and well-run JN could enjoy considerable success.

Future Challenges for Jabhat al-Nusra

Essence

The goals which JN share with all jihadist groups, those of creating an Islamist state, a 'caliphate' and waging jihad against Israel, are not practical for the group, as they do not have the capacity to implement these things in the wake of the Syrian conflict. Put simply, the goal to defeat Assad is practical but their further aims are not.

The hard-line Salafi-Jihadist ideology which JN shares with al-Qaeda makes them ultra-radical and inflexible. This belief in 'Pure Islam' will only serve to alienate the population, and cause long-term problems for the group in post-Assad Syria. JN's decision not to use AQI-style indiscriminate attacks thus far in the conflict is not due to ideological disagreement, but rather pragmatic considerations of maintaining support amongst the Sunni community. There is a possibility, therefore, that JN may employ these AQI methods in the future. This would have huge implications for their popularity.

International

The most pressing challenge facing JN is their lack of engagement with the international community. JN suffer from a serious lack of international support of any kind, in fact there are efforts from regional powers and the international community to control and eliminate JN: as penance for rejecting the coalition, America has designated them as terrorists. Their only supporters outside of Syria are other jihadist groups, leaving them with no diplomatic channels outside the country. This would make it impossible for them to run a viable country in the international arena, and so far there is no political plan to deal with this issue post-Assad. JN also face some opposition from within jihadist ranks and well-respected jihadist sheikhs, for example Adnan Arour and Abu Basir al-Tartusi, both of whom fought in Afghanistan in the late 1980s. These clerics do not respect JN for concealing their identities, believing that this makes them more difficult to trust.

If JN do seize power in Syria, they will face a dilemma over what to do about foreign fighters currently taking part in the conflict. If the group allow the foreign fighters to export the conflict and commit terrorist attacks internationally using Syria as a hub, this will further alienate both the international community and the Syrian people.

National

JN have overestimated the level of popular support for them in Syria. They see themselves as representatives of Syria's Sunni population, which is a dangerous falsehood. Even amongst the rebels, only a minority shares their ideology and goals, with many others, tens of thousands of activists, calling for a democratic system of government rather than an Islamist state. JN have not reached the critical mass of support needed for self-sustaining change. This is partly because they lack a political dimension to their actions – not enough work has been done to elicit popular support for the group politically, as they have relied largely on military action and religious preaching.

JN have also overestimated the religious loyalty (wala') of the Syrian people, just as AQI did in the 2000s. Syrian culture is not naturally conducive to Islamist governance, given its religious pluralism and history of relative religious freedom and tolerance. Real indications of popular support will only become visible post-Assad when the battle between rebel groups will begin in earnest. Following the fall of the Ba'athist regime, JN will either attack the whole opposition immediately, taking it by surprise to conquer, or use the Libyan model of occupying strategic places to negotiate for their own ends. It is likely that JN will face internal struggles as well at this stage, as fractures in their ranks are bound to appear when tactics change. Cohesion is essential for JN to remain an effective force, and fragmentation seems likely.

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