Jihad in Syria: The Penetration of Radical Islam in the Syrian Conflict

Jonathan Robinson, Tal First, and Einav Yogev

Recent reports of dozens of Kuwaiti jihadists traveling to fight in the Syrian conflict further highlight the stronger foothold radical Islamic groups are gaining in Syria. Since January 2012, Syria has been transformed into a major battleground of the jihad world, with a number of foreign and Syrian jihadist groups surfacing to participate in the conflict. This development not only poses a serious threat to the present Syrian government or any government that may follow, but also threatens the armed opposition in Syria, headed by the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

At present, at least ten different notable foreign and Syrian groups with varying ideologies are waging militant jihad in Syria. In spite of these differences, a useful distinction becomes apparent when comparing each group's mode of operation, which can be categorized as one of three types: The first type are "support" groups that predominantly assist the flow of arms and fighters into Syria. The second type are the "guerilla" groups that carry out small scale but regular attacks on security forces, and the third type are the "terror" groups that carry out high profile bombings outside the usual fighting areas. Through this distinction, it quickly becomes evident that the "terror" groups have had the most significant contribution to the conflict in Syria.

These groups have carried out at least twelve high profile attacks since January 2012, including suicide car bombings in Damascus, Aleppo, and Idlib. In addition to helping escalate the violence in Syria, the attacks leveled a major psychological blow against the Syrian regime by highlighting the weaknesses of the Syrian security apparatus. Primarily carried out by two Syrian Salafist groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and its Idlib based offshoot, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, these "terror" groups have been inspired and assisted by al-Qaeda in Iraq to become two of the most prominent Syrian groups currently operating in the conflict. Despite this, "terror" groups in Syria do not receive widespread support within

---

Jonathan Robinson and Tal First are interns at INSS. Einav Yogev is a research assistant in the INSS Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict Program.

Syria and have not attempted to forge links with the FSA. Nonetheless, outside Syria these groups have gained wide support, including receiving small numbers of foreign Salafist fighters from Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, and most recently Kuwait.

This external support has also been extended to a number of the "guerilla" groups operating in the Syrian conflict and can be linked to the increased violence around Homs as well as the 134 percent increase in improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against Syrian security forces since January 2012. Despite different ideologies, many of the Syrian and foreign groups in this category have forged loose ties with the FSA and are assisting them in their fight against the Syrian security apparatus, through the use of guerilla warfare tactics based on experience gained in other jihad arenas. Two examples of groups that work with the FSA are the Syrian group Dhu al-Nurayn and the Lebanese based group Fatah al-Islam.

The "support" groups, which constitute the third category, remain a key link in supplying arms and fighters into Syria along preexisting smuggling routes, mainly from Iraq and Lebanon. These groups, though remaining at the sidelines, are important in helping feed the conflict in Syria and have indicated they may join the conflict at a later date. One example is the group called "The Free Army of Iraqis."

With the pressure of the internal conflict already straining the current Syrian government's authority over the country, these radical Islamic groups only add to this pressure. With the small size of these groups, the unpredictability of their attacks, and their increasing capability in fomenting unrest, it makes it difficult for Syrian security forces to effectively combat these groups as well as the FSA. In the long term, this prolonged pressure helps continue to weaken the Syrian government. For the main Syrian opposition, the radical Islamic elements are currently a necessary but problematic partner in its fight against the Syrian government: By keeping these radical Islamic groups at arm's length, making alliances with some, and denouncing others (especially al-Qaeda), they are hoping to utilize these groups' fighting power without damaging their credibility in the eyes of the Syrian people and the international community. Yet in the long term, with these radical Islamic groups gaining more support and competence, this uneasy relationship may waver and the opposition, especially the FSA, may find it faces an additional challenge to its rise to power in Syria. The ability of any future Syrian government to control the impact of these radical Islamic groups is a key question, as a possible repeat of events in Iraq after the American-led invasion of 2003 demonstrated. In the Iraqi case, radical Islamic elements took advantage of the power vacuum left from the disintegration of the security apparatus and established a strong presence there that is still felt today.

Outside Syria, radical Islamic elements in Syria could, in the long term, affect two key regional actors: Hizbollah and Israel. With the conflict already disrupting Hizbollah's vital long term support from Syria and Iran, the emergence of openly hostile radical Sunni

groups on its doorstep in Syria challenges Hizbollah's previously unrivaled dominance. For Israel, the conflict in Syria has largely been beneficial, helping destabilize Syria's government, and by extension, two of its key allies, Iran and Hizbollah. However, with the emergence of several radical Islamic groups in Syria strongly hostile towards Israel, Israel's northern border may begin to see attacks from these groups in the future. With the situation in Syria growing more sectarian and chaotic, the radical Islamic groups in Syria are sure to profit, but to what extent is an open question.