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THE JIHADIST ELEMENT IN SYRIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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Summary

This briefing analyses the growing significance of the foreign and home-grown jihadists in Syria. There may be over 1,000 foreign fighters in Syria now as the war becomes more violent and may continue for some time. Even if the regime falls soon, the jihadist element will have influence in a post-Assad era. If, however, the regime endures, the longer it goes on the more likely the jihadist element will gain in influence. Against all expectations, the al-Qaida idea could increase in significance. This could have disastrous consequences beyond Syria and makes the need to seek a negotiated solution a top foreign policy priority.

Introduction

When the Arab Awakening began in 2011, it was welcomed by the al-Qaida leadership. But it was in reality a dangerous development for the movement since it promised change that did not stem from a radical Islamist world view. For the weakened al-Qaida movement to regain significance in the Middle East, the Awakening had to fail, preferably by social movements being violently repressed by elites. Al-Qaida activists would then contribute to uprisings. There is evidence that this is now happening in Syria.

Al-Qaida's Status and its Consequences

The al-Qaida movement has been greatly weakened in the past three years, partly by the extensive use of armed drones, especially in north-west Pakistan, partly by the death of Osama bin Laden and partly by its failure to have any sustained opportunity to put its ideological foundations into practical political effect. At the same time, al-Qaida is an unusual revolutionary movement rooted in a religious world view and eschatological in the sense that it looks beyond this life and therefore has a very long time-span for action. It has also evolved beyond a single movement into a range of groups that have only limited interconnections, even if united by a shared fundamentalist religious outlook. They include what remains of the movement in Pakistan and, to a very limited extent, Afghanistan, as well as more active groups operating in Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Nigeria, Mali, and to a lesser extent, Indonesia.

As a consequence of the wars of the past ten years, movements such as al-Qaida have benefited from several significant developments in insurgency tactics. None of these are new, but all have been enhanced by recent experience, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq:

The widespread use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The initial burst of development came in Iraq and was aided by the existence of many arms dumps, combined with the technical capabilities of some of the Saddam Hussein regime's elite security units. IEDs were also progressively used in Afghanistan, where explosives were frequently manufactured from basic ingredients, including ammonium nitrate fertilisers. At their peak, IEDs in Afghanistan were being detonated in their thousands each year, recent figures being 9,304 explosions in 2009, rising to 16,554 for 2011. In the latter year, nearly a third of over 2,500 civilians killed in the country died as a result of IED use (figures from IISS London).

Martyr/Suicide actions. Martyr attacks have figured in the region over many years and have also been prominent in other conflicts including the LTTE insurgency in Sri Lanka. They have increased markedly in intensity since 2001, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also as part of attacks in other countries, including London in July 2005. Such attacks are particularly difficult to counter and sometimes involve extreme measures. One reason for the Israeli construction of the security barrier with the occupied territories was the growth of these attacks in Israel.

Trained paramilitary cohorts. In Afghanistan in the 1980s, many members of the mujahidin insurgents gained extensive combat experience against low morale Soviet conscripts in a largely rural environment. For Afghans in the mujahidin this experience was particularly valuable during the civil war in the 1990s, and later for the Taliban, in their actions against coalition forces. For the foreign jihadist fighters in the country towards the end of the 1980s, this combat experience helped form what became a distinctive cohort of young men, some of whom were influential in the evolution of al-Qaida. Furthermore, the role of that movement in aiding the Taliban against the Northern Alliance of warlords in the 1990s further added to combat capabilities.

In the Iraq War from 2003 to 2009, many young men joined the insurgents fighting against the US-led coalition and also took part in actions against the Shi'a majority. In fighting the US forces, many of these young men were killed in combat, but others survived and now constitute a markedly dispersed cohort with combat experience against well-trained and heavily-armed US Army and Marine Corps units.

Thus, one of the effects of the wars has been to give rise to a combination of extensive IED capabilities, a great commitment to martyr attacks and paramilitary combat experience.

The Syrian Uprising

Following the initial development of the Arab Awakening in early 2011, there were rapid political changes in Tunisia and Egypt, some degree of reform in Morocco and Jordan, and an uprising and regime termination in Libya that required considerable intervention from NATO. From March 2011, a popular movement against the Assad regime in Syria developed but this was repressed with force by the regime. This slowly led to an insurgency which started with very limited coordination and few armaments. Within three months there was considerable aid forthcoming, principally from Saudi Arabia, and by September last year, there were predictions that the Assad regime would not last out the year.

This was a mistaken view, not least because the regime did have internal support that extended beyond the Alawi minority and also because it had the backing of Iran and Russia. The Syrian conflict has now evolved into a violent and devastating civil war that is made worse by being a double proxy conflict – at the regional level the strong and well-funded Saudi support for the rebels is matched by Iranian support for the regime, and at the global level, there is a fundamental difference between Russia wanting regime survival or at least a peaceful transition that protects its interests, and the United States wanting regime termination as soon as possible.

Jihadist Involvement

It is in this context that the growing influence of young jihadist paramilitaries becomes significant, especially in relation to the legacy elements of the War on Terror discussed above. At the same time, it is difficult to assess the degree of external jihadist involvement for three reasons:

- The Assad regime has long exaggerated the involvement so as to label all opponents as terrorists.
- The Syrian rebels are deeply reluctant to admit that jihadist elements are active because of the potential loss of Western support.
- It is probable that US and other Western intelligence agencies have a reasonably accurate assessment of substantial jihadist strength but their political leaderships, too, are deeply reluctant to acknowledge this in public.

However, what is now clear is that there are substantial numbers of foreign paramilitaries active against the Assad regime, they are often operating in parallel with the Free Syrian Army, they are well-organised and competent and they number far more than recent US estimates of two hundred. Their involvement in the Syrian War appears to have accelerated since late last year and this coincides with an increase in martyr attacks and a substantial increase in the use of IEDs. In May of this year alone, there were around 700 IED detonations, and their use against the Assad regime's armoured vehicles appears to have been particularly effective given that these do not have the levels of anti-mine protection that US forces eventually developed for use in Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to reputable public domain sources, there appear to be at least a thousand foreign paramilitaries, and there may be far more as numbers are rising. They include people from Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen, as well as from non-Arab Islamic countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. For many of them the war in Syria is more important than those in Afghanistan or Iraq because Syria is closer to Jerusalem.

The al-Qaida movement and its offshoots have long regarded the House of Saud as the most important "target" within the concept of the "near enemy", because it is the entirely unacceptable Keeper of the Two Holy Places, and have sought its downfall and replacement with acceptable Islamist governance. Beyond this though, is Jerusalem, the location of the Third Holy Place, and Syria is the most important part of the Jerusalem hinterland. Syria is therefore of great importance to the jihadist/al-Qaida world view and its "cleansing" of Christians and Islamic apostates (Alawis) is a core task in the mission to establish a proper Caliphate.

The foreign (and indeed the home-grown) jihadist element in Syria may still be in a minority within the rebellion but it is growing in significance. It is one reason why CIA personnel are operating actively in Turkey and trying to direct munitions and other materiel into the "right" sort of rebels and not the jihadists. It is also the reason why the Assad regime retains more support from Christians than might be expected, because they fear the regime, however autocratic, being replaced by something that from their confessional perspective is potentially much worse.

The war in Syria is becoming more violent, and the proxy element is now deep-seated, making it difficult for either side to prevail. This suggests that the war may continue for some time. Even if the Assad regime falls soon, the jihadist element already means influence in a post-

Assad era. If it does not fall soon, then the longer it goes on the more likely the jihadist element will gain in influence. One of the most important consequences of this is that against all expectations, the al-Qaida idea could increase once more in significance. This could have disastrous consequences beyond Syria.

Conclusion

In these circumstances, there is an urgent need to encourage any initiative that seeks to bring the conflict to a negotiated settlement as soon as possible. However difficult, every effort has to be made to encourage this. In particular, it would be wise to offer support to the new UN representative, Lakhdar Brahimi, in what will prove to be a very difficult post but one for which he is certainly well-suited, given his experience. In addition, intelligence and policing efforts directed towards cutting finances to violent Islamist groups in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere should also take account of these developments in Syria at an early date. The lesson from over a decade of counter-terrorism activities in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere is that sending in overwhelming force later is counterproductive.

There is one final element that may be significant. Russia provides the most important major diplomatic support for the Assad regime, but Russia is itself experiencing an increase in Islamist violence in areas that have previously been considered peaceful and stable. The most notable of these have been incidents in Kazan, the capital of the internal republic of Tatarstan, and elsewhere in the republic. If Russian support for the Assad regime in Syria helps provide a motivation for radical jihadists to be more active within Russia, it is possible that Russia may be more willing to consider more active diplomatic cooperation towards regime transition in Syria.

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