



INSS Insight No. 419, April 18, 2013

Global Jihad in Syria: Disputes Amidst a Common Goal

Yoram Schweitzer and Gal Toren

Various assessments about how and when the Assad dynasty will come to an end and what reality will reign in Syria thereafter continue to be published, joining the numerous predictions of the past year and anticipating the assessments that will no doubt continue to emerge until the struggle in the divided country is concluded. At the same time, the indecision of the Western countries, headed by the US, about which policy should be pursued, what type of aid would be most effective for the Syrian opposition elements, and how it should be given, also continues. These opposition elements include Islamic factions whose religious affiliation ranges between identification with the Muslim Brotherhood and global jihad factions identified with the Salafi-jihadist movement.

Recent statements by global jihad factions inside and outside Syria reflect not only a joint vision of making post-Assad Syria part of an Islamic caliphate, but also differences over the struggle to free Syria and what constitutes appropriate behavior toward the local population.

The joint vision was expressed by Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda Central, in an April 7, 2013 statement calling on fighters who identify with his organization to strive toward the establishment of a state in Syria governed by Islamic law. Al-Zawahiri emphasized the important and special contribution by al-Qaeda in Iraq to this effort in Iraq, and the chance for fighters to take advantage of this opportunity to right an historic wrong by establishing the Islamic caliphate in the heart of the Arab Levant. Two days after this statement, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State of Iraq organization (ISI), a roof organization of global jihad factions in Iraq dominated by al-Qaeda in Iraq, announced the extension of the Islamic caliphate in Iraq to the al-Sham region (Syria), and implied that the Iraqi organization had united with Jabhat al-Nusra, a local al-Qaeda affiliate. Until now, the organization in Iraq was responsible for transferring new recruits from around the world to Syria who volunteered to take part in

Yoram Schweitzer directs the Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict Program at INSS. Gal Toren is an intern in the program.

the campaign there, and for delivering armaments by way of Iraq. The Iraqi organization also shaped Jabhat al-Nusra's policy of terrorist attacks. Al-Baghdadi asserted that his organization had not previously announced these links for security reasons, and because he wanted Syrians to get to know Jabhat al-Nusra as an organization in its own right fighting for the Syrian people, without being influenced by the distorted perception of anyone linked to al-Qaeda deliberately created by the international media.

The day after al-Baghdadi's declaration, an announcement in the name of Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, took issue with the announcement from Iraq of a merger between Islamic State of Iraq and his organization. Although he made clear that he and his organization remained proud of the Islamic state of Iraq, they had no intention of making it their cause. He added that he and his men learned of the merger only through the media, and were not a part of it. At the same time, al-Julani quickly renewed his oath of loyalty to Ayman al-Zawahiri, but added that this oath would not affect the political actions of his organization in Syria.

An examination of the declarations by global jihad organizations in recent days clearly reflects the existing tension between two trends. On the one hand, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra wants to support the ideals of his ideological associates, particularly given the necessity of preserving channels for aid from his global jihad partners in Iraq and in the al-Qaeda Central leadership. On the other hand, he wishes to maintain his organization's ability to act independently, and recognizes the need to preserve channels of cooperation with other powerful factions operating in Syria and with the local civilian population. His statements were also designed to soothe anxiety among Western countries supporting the Syrian opposition about the possibility that support in money and war-related supplies sent to Syria could fall into the hands of global jihad factions, and might be used by al-Qaeda fighters in future operations against Western interests. Note that the cautious behavior of the Jabhat al-Nusra leader is based on the lessons learned from the bitter experience of al-Qaeda in Iraq, whose forces made a policy of imposing their way of life on the local population, thereby arousing the opposition of the local tribes, who eventually cooperated with the US in fighting against al-Qaeda. Al-Julani's statement is also in line with Bin Laden's instructions to his partners in Hejaz, as reflected in his letters captured in the Abbottabad compound, which called for consideration for the local population and efforts not to alienate it. Obscuring the affiliation between Salafi jihadist organizations and al-Qaeda is accomplished by omitting the al-Qaeda label from their names, as practiced by Ansar al-Sharia and other organizations that operate with al-Qaeda to promote their joint agenda in the Middle East, the Maghreb, and the Persian Gulf. And despite the verbal polemics currently employed in the internal dialogue among the Salafi jihadi organizations acting to win the campaign in Syria, exposing splits and tactical disputes among those often portrayed in the global media as a monolithic bloc, their

shared goals should not be doubted. Practically all regard the campaign in Syria as an opportunity to institute an Islamic regime enforcing Islamic law, or at the very least, to take over parts of Syria and turn them into a base for a regional jihad campaign.

The presence of young militants from different nationalities, including dozens of volunteers from Western countries, does not augur well, given the potential for terrorism developing in Syria over many months. The concentration of young Muslims from all over the world in a single region, trained in warfare, accumulating combat experience, and harnessed for action on behalf of a common Islamic goal occurred in the past in Afghanistan and Iraq, and led to the creation of a reserve of new cadres of fighters who can be sent anywhere in the world for jihad activity. For al-Zawahiri, seeking to map a path for al-Qaeda and its affiliates toward global jihad and channel their actions under his leadership, this is good news, and he clearly does not intend to miss his opportunity. Therefore the policy of the Western countries to refrain from intervention in Syria will likely end if and when Syria is on the verge of becoming a Salafi jihadist state under hard line sharia law. In this case, in addition to active opposition from various groups in Syria currently cooperating with anyone fighting against Assad, external military intervention can also be expected to prevent a central country in the Middle East from becoming a center for subversion in the region and beyond.

