



The Khorasan Pledge – Up-Date

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Executive Summary

The challenge of the “Khorasan Pledge” could not be ignored by the Jihadist supreme leadership. On 2 May, Ayman al-Zawahiri personally intervened and issued a 24-minute long recorded message. Although Zawahiri’s message focused on the Emir of DI’ISH – Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Qurashi – in person, the primary audience was the entire Jihadist milieu throughout the Middle East. Incapable of excommunicating the Takfiris, Zawahiri instead urged DI’ISH to leave the fighting in Bilad al-Sham to the Jihadists of the Al-Qaida affiliates and return to Iraq and resume their Jihad against contemporary challenges – that is, the prevention of the Shiite regime in Baghdad from controlling Sunni areas.

Zawahiri’s message was circulated all over the Jihadist media on 3 May. The leadership of DI’ISH remained silent. However, on 4 May, the leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra formally accepted Zawahiri’s instructions and set its conditions for cessation of hostilities with DI’ISH. In reality, however, the cease-fire Jabhat al-Nusra offered reflects more its military defeat in the hands of DI’ISH along the Euphrates Valley since late-April. DI’ISH consolidates hold over disputed areas of their Euphrates Valley Emirate at the heart of Syria. DI’ISH shows no inclination to follow Zawahiri’s order to move to Iraq. Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra and their Jihadist allies meet growing grassroots popular resistance. Frustrated, they evict growing numbers of Sunni Arabs from their homes and, depending on their location, into the fold of either DI’ISH or the Assad administration. Thus, the primary victims of the Jabhat al-Nusra crackdown are the local population that chose to escape the marauding Jihadists. By May 3, about 60,000 people already fled the main towns in the Deir ez-Zor province.

Meanwhile, the dramatic changes in southern Syria – between Israel’s Golan Heights border and the Jordanian border on the Yarmouk River – continue to unfold to the detriment of all rebel forces and their foreign sponsors. Rather than acknowledge the collapse of the southern front, the US sponsors a new moderate Al-Jabha al-Janubiya (the Southern Front) as the force that can defeat Damascus. Syrian protégés of Jordanian Intelligence ridicule any notion of an offensive on Damascus – with or without heavy weapons from the West. Meanwhile, petrified about being caught between the Jihadists arriving from Damascus and the “moderate Jihadists” unleashed by the US and its allies from Jordan to the south, the commanders of the local self-defense militias surged to fill the regional vacuum before more Jihadists arrived. Despite claims to preeminence, Al-Jabha al-Janubiya played no role in these fighting. Jabhat al-Nusra, however, proved it is the dominant force in southern Syria by announcing the capture and arrest of several moderate rebel commanders known for their close cooperation with Jordanian Intelligence. Local commanders now cooperate with Jabhat al-Nusra fearing that the Jihadists are the rising and prominent forces in southern Syria while the prospects of defeating Assad’s Damascus are nil.

So far, the Spring and early Summer of 2014 are not boring indeed.



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Yossef Bodansky



ANALYSIS

The challenge of the “Khorasan Pledge” could not be ignored by the Jihadist supreme leadership. After hesitant challenges to the “Khorasan Pledge” on religious grounds by Syrian and other Middle Eastern Imams had no impact on the growing number of signatories – the upper-most leaders had to attempt to stall the erosion of their stature. On 2 May, Ayman al-Zawahiri personally intervened and issued a 24-minute long recorded message. Although Zawahiri’s message focused on the Emir of DI’ISH – Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Qurashi – in person, the primary audience was the entire Jihadist milieu throughout the Middle East. Incapable of excommunicating the Takfiris, Zawahiri instead urged DI’ISH to leave the fighting in Bilad al-Sham to the Jihadists of the Al-Qaida affiliates and return to Iraq and resume their Jihad against contemporary challenges – that is, the prevention of the Shiite regime in Baghdad from controlling Sunni areas. On the personal level, Zawahiri called Baghdadi “Al-Qaida’s rebellious soldier.”

The supreme leadership is cognizant of the growing popularity of Takfiri Jihadism throughout the greater Middle East and therefore cannot afford to alienate the Takfiris. Hence, Zawahiri’s message is a blend of religious reprimands and pleas for operational cooperation. The lengthy message, personally read by Zawahiri, was based on thorough research and study, and thus reflected the seriousness by which the establishment leadership takes the challenge represented by DI’ISH and the Takfiri camp. Moreover, Zawahiri stressed that his intervention comes at the request of a Syria-based Jihadist leader “brother Abu Karim” (real name Hani al-Sibai). Zawahiri stressed that in principle “the sedition between the mujahideen in Syria” is intolerable and self-defeating to all Jihadists. However, he elected to become personally involved solely because of “the appeals of Sheikh Hani al-Sibai, who believes that by answering his questions there might be an end to the fighting between the mujahideen.”

At first, Zawahiri analyzed the entire decade-long theological disputes with the Jihadists of Iraq who demanded theological authority in the name of Takfiri orthodoxy. Zawahiri stressed that the Jihadists of Iraq pursued this dispute even though “the Islamic State in Iraq is a division of Al-Qaidat al-Jihad” – that is, the Foundation of Jihad which is more of a theological authority than an operational command. Zawahiri acknowledged that the leaders (including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) and mujahideen of the DI’I (the Islamic State of Iraq) originally pledged allegiance to Al-Qaida and recognized Osama bin Laden’s leadership.

Moving on to the current crisis, Zawahiri conceded that the DI’ISH leadership attempted to avert a crisis with Jabhat al-Nusra and even sought his – Zawahiri’s – help and that of the Supreme Shurah in Pakistan. Most important, according to Zawahiri, is a lengthy letter he received from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 10 April 2013. In the letter, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi recognized Zawahiri as “our leader, the very generous Sheikh,” and sought his guidance about the unfolding crisis in the Jihadist ranks in Bilad al-Sham.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi warned, as Zawahiri read, that the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra had been causing immense damage through fratricidal fighting. Instead of accepting the admonition and judgment of the Jihadist leaders in country, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Jabhat al-Nusra’s leader Abu-Muhammad al-Julani sought to establish a unique place for himself by pledging allegiance directly to Zawahiri. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi explained that Abu-Muhammad al-Julani was “doing this to protect himself and those with him against the repercussions of the sins and calamities he committed. This poor fellow, and the brothers with him here in Sham, believe that our Sheikhs in Khorasan [the Jihadist Grand Shurah in Pakistan] should announce a clear and an unequivocal position to bury this conspiracy before blood is spilled and we become the cause of a new disaster for the Islamic nation.”



Going over Baghdadi's letter, Zawahiri seemed to have glossed over specific details Baghdadi provided regarding what he considered treasonous cooperation between Julani and both Iran – that is, the Quds Forces – and the Assad security services. Baghdadi warned, as Zawahiri read, of the dire consequences of tolerating this cooperation for the entire Jihadist movement. "We believe that any support for what this traitor has done, even if by insinuation, will lead to great sedition that would destroy the project for which the blood of Muslims was shed. Any delay in demonstrating the right position will seem that we are accepting the status quo that will ultimately divide the ranks of Muslims and lead to the collapse of the group's prestige, which cannot be remedied afterward except by shedding more blood," Baghdadi pleaded in April 2013 as read by Zawahiri.

The key to resolving the current crisis is in pragmatic and realistic assessment of the conditions in both Bilad al-Sham and Iraq, Zawahiri explained, and not in pure religious-theological judgments. Therefore, Zawahiri stressed, all Jihadist leaders should consider his message as "an order issued by a leader regarding a problem that emerged between his soldiers and not a verdict by a judge between two adversaries who presented before him a problem."

Zawahiri accused the DI'ISH leaders of creating a political confusion that played into American and Assad's hands. Zawahiri stated that "declaring the DI'ISH was a clear violation of orders of the Al-Qaidat al-Jihad leadership to not announce an official presence in Syria." In retrospect, Zawahiri observed, "declaring the DI'ISH has caused a political catastrophe for the people of Sham" just as "they were coming out in numbers to support Jabhat al-Nusra." The confusion thus "ignited a sharp dispute within the one group [of Jihadists]" that provoked the ongoing fratricidal fighting among Jihadists. "The creation of the organization provoked other Jihadist groups that believed that DI'ISH is trying to impose itself on them without the consent of, or consultation with, [the Jihadist Grand Shurah in Pakistan]," Zawahiri admonished.

Zawahiri then turned to Jabhat al-Nusra and the other Al-Qaida-affiliated Jihadist entities. He issued "the appeal" for "Abu Muhammad al-Julani and the Jabhat al-Nusra mujahideen" and "all the Jihadist groups and communities in Syria to immediately stop any fighting that involves aggression against the lives and sanctity of the mujahideen and fellows Muslims, and to devote themselves to fighting the enemies of Islam including the Baathists, the Alawites, and their Shia allies." Zawahiri then reached out to "the rest of the mujahideen throughout Sham." Zawahiri reiterated that there has been "enough spilling the blood of fellow Muslims," and that they must "stop killing the leaders and Sheikhs of Jihad."

Zawahiri sees no role and place for the DI'ISH leadership in Bilad al-Sham. Zawahiri ordered Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his lieutenants "to go back to listening and obeying your leader [Zawahiri]. Go back to the reasoning of your Emirs and those who preceded you on the path of Jihad. Devote yourselves to Iraq which needs your efforts, devote yourselves to it even if you see yourselves as wronged or not getting your due to end this bloody massacre. Heed my words for the sake of sparing the blood of Muslims, unifying their ranks and achieving their victory over their enemy, even if you consider it an injustice." Zawahiri's parting words for the "venerable Sheikh" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi were conciliatory. "Put your faith in Allah and make this decision and you will find all of the mujahideen and their supporters a source of help for you."

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the orders of ... Ayman al-Zawahiri ... to stop any attack from our side against DI'ISH, while continuing to respond whenever they attack Muslims and all that is sacred to them," the communique read. "As soon as DI'ISH announces the end of its attacks on Muslims, we will spontaneously stop firing." Jabhat al-Nusra stressed that fighting will continue "where [DI'ISH] was on the attack" against brethren Muslims.

In reality, however, the cease-fire Jabhat al-Nusra offered reflects more its military defeat in the hands of DI'ISH along the Euphrates Valley than merely accepting Zawahiri's pleas.

Starting the dawn of 30 April, DI'ISH forces launched a major offensive to consolidate their hold over northern rural areas in the province of Deir ez-Zor. The offensive was prompted by the spreading cooperation between the local Sunni Arab tribes and the Assad administration against the Jihadists. The DI'ISH leadership fears that in order to survive, the Jabhat al-Nusra would strike a deal with both Damascus and Tehran.

The DI'ISH launched a two-pronged offensive. The first surge is toward al-Soura-al-Busayra and other villages along the al-Khabur river. The second surge is toward Jadid Oqaidat al-Busayra and includes the villages located on the Euphrates River all the way to the outskirts of the cities of Deir ez-Zor and al-Shahil. DI'ISH announced that their offensive would "cleanse the villages of the northern countryside of the al-Khair province [=Deir ez-Zor] from the Sahawat-al-Julani alliance." The Sahawat are the US-created Awakening Councils that now cooperate with the Maliki government in Baghdad in the fighting against the DI'ISH and other Jihadists in Iraq. Julani is Jabhat al-Nusra's leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani. The DI'ISH therefore argues that there exists a treasonous alliance of Sunni Arabs who cooperate with both Assad and Maliki, and thus their Iranian masters as well.

The DI'ISH emphasized that their offensive was conducted in a manner that would minimize the suffering of the civilian population. "The operation went without widespread clashes, especially in the village of al-Hurayja, east of al-Khabur, and the town of al-Jadid al-Oqaidat on the Euphrates," the DI'ISH noted. Subsequently, DI'ISH forces evicted joint forces of Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Jabha al-Islamiya and the FSA from all areas to the outskirts of the Kuniko gas field and the al-Jafra oil field. Fearing sabotage and carnage, DI'ISH forces decided not to enter these fields. The fiercest clashes were between DI'ISH forces and the Liwa Dir al-Ansar, which is affiliated with Jaish al-Islam, in the village of al-Fadain. Both sides suffered casualties including a few notable DI'ISH commanders. A Sharia official of Jabhat al-Nusra was killed in the fighting with DI'ISH in al-Jadid al-Oqaidat.

By May 2, the DI'ISH was consolidating control over the key triangle of al-Sour/al-Busayra/Deir ez-Zor. DI'ISH forces closed in on the city of al-Shahil – the main stronghold of Jabhat al-Nusra leaders. Panicked, the local Jabhat al-Nusra decided that the advance of DI'ISH was made possible by tacit cooperation of the local population. They ordered a fierce crackdown against anyone suspected of links with the DI'ISH. Fighting erupted in the town of az-Zir, on the approaches to al-Shahil, where the tribal population has long refused to cooperate with Jabhat al-Nusra. Fearing the crackdown by Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic Taliban Movement decided to join the forces blocking the DI'ISH advance near al-Busayra. After a brief clash in which two Taliban commanders were killed, the Islamic Taliban pulled out of the fighting.

The primary victims of the Jabhat al-Nusra crackdown were the local population that chose to escape the marauding Jihadists. By May 2-3, about 60,000 people fled the main towns in the Deir ez-Zor province. Most refugees come from the towns of al-Busayra (population 35,000), Abriha (population 12,000), and az-Zir (population 15,000). The flight began when Jabhat al-Nusra mujahideen burnt down several houses in al-Busayra after demanding access to the buildings and then accusing the inhabitants of pro-DI'ISH tendencies. Most people were displaced by Jabhat al-Nusra mujahideen fighting in their areas. Most refugees sought shel-



ter in the villages throughout the Deir ez-Zor province already in the hands of the Assad government or the D'I'ISH.

On 4 May, fighting between the D'I'ISH forces and the coalition of Al-Qaida-affiliates led by the Jabhat al-Nusra continued. The D'I'ISH forces were consolidating their hold on disputed areas of their Euphrates Valley Emirate at the heart of Syria. The D'I'ISH forces show no inclination to follow Zawahiri's order to move to Iraq. Meanwhile, the Jabhat al-Nusra and their Jihadist allies meet growing grassroots popular resistance. Frustrated, they evict growing numbers of Sunni Arabs from their homes and, depending on their location, into the fold of either the D'I'ISH or the Assad administration.

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Meanwhile, the dramatic changes in southern Syria – between Israel's Golan Heights border and the Jordanian border on the Yarmouk River – continue to unfold to the detriment of the Jihadist forces and their foreign sponsors. Starting 20 April, a growing number of Jihadist units from the greater Damascus area – spearheaded by the Syrian Liberation Army, the Brigade of the Beloved Mustafa, and the Imprisoned Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman Brigades – started making their way south in accordance with their understandings with the emissaries of Syrian Intelligence. The Jihadists took with them the surplus weapons accumulated in preparation for the major offensive against Damascus that never came. As instructed, they deployed mainly in the area stretching from Daraa to Quneitra while not approaching the Syrian-Israeli border.

Rather than acknowledge their Faustian deal with Syrian Intelligence, Jihadist leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra and other Al-Qaida affiliates claimed major victories in the southern front. On 24 April, Jabhat al-Nusra announced breaking into the ostensibly besieged city of Nawa and seizing the headquarters of the 61st Brigade on the strategic Tal al-Jabiyah fortified zone. The communique specified that "the lions from Jabhat al-Nusra in participation with other factions" occupied Tal al-Jabiyah. The communique issued by Jabhat al-Nusra stressed the importance of the battle. "Tal al-Jabiyah has great importance to the Nusayri regime, where it includes the 61st Brigade Headquarters, and it is one of the biggest brigades. The hill also includes very important reconnaissance stations in which are based Iranian and Russian stations, and jamming and advanced communication stations are present on the Tal. ... Through the liberation of Tal al-Jabiyah, the last stronghold of the 61st Brigade was finished and considered terminated, and all praise is due to Allah." In the coming days, Jabhat al-Nusra also led a joint force with the Islamic Front, the Yarmouk Brigade, and other local Jihadist forces and captured the nearby Tal al-Jamu.

Alas, the vast majority of these heroic offensives never took place. The entire Tal al-Jabiyah fortified zone was evacuated by the Syrian military in mid-2012 as part of the withdrawal of quality forces from the Israeli border for the battles for Damascus. The headquarters of the 61st Brigade and the intelligence facilities were dismantled and evacuated at that time. In late-April 2014, the Jihadist forces entered the deserted facilities as part of their new Damascus-facilitated deployment to the south. Fighting did take place in the Nawa area – but these were between the arriving Jihadists and local tribal self-defense militias objecting to the presence of the Jihadists in their midst. The Syrian military and security forces stayed out of these clashes.

Nevertheless, on 1 May, the representatives of US Intelligence ("Mukhabarat Amriki") and the Saudi Arabian and Jordanian Intelligence Services decided to reinforce the chimera of a viable military option against Damascus from northern Jordan. They arranged a special briefing to Western security officials in Amman with the full knowledge, and tacit encouragement, that the content be leaked to friendly and supportive Western media.



The Western officials were introduced to Ibrahim al-Jabawi – a former Police Brigadier General who is now a commander of, and spokesman for, the Al-Jabha al-Janubiya (the Southern Front).

Jabawi claimed that the Al-Jabha al-Janubiya was established in early March 2014 as a coalition of “more than 55 mainstream rebel groups” deployed “from the Jordanian border to the outskirts of Damascus and the Golan Heights.” Al-Jabha al-Janubiya now controls some 30,000 fighters – none of them Jihadist. “The objective is to unify fragmented factions to topple the Assad regime and work on creating a democratic state that would preserve the rights of all segments and minorities,” Jabawi explained. He claimed that the forces of Al-Jabha al-Janubiya were the dominant rebel forces in southern Syria. “These factions have led significant battles against Assad’s forces and achieved victories” throughout southern Syria. “In recent days for example, fighters from more than 16 factions liberated a strategic position that belonged to the 61st Brigade,” Jabawi briefed.

In response to a question regarding the claim of Jabhat al-Nusra that they had captured Tal al-Jabiyah and the 61st Brigade headquarters, Jabawi conceded that “moderate Jihadist” forces participated in the fighting in the ranks of Al-Jabha al-Janubiya. The inclusion of these Jihadists was done in the name of ensuring the unity of all legitimate anti-Assad forces in southern Syria. “Division does not lead to positive results. That is why we worked to unify moderate factions under one umbrella,” Jabawi explained. Moreover, even the “moderate Islamist groups” in the south do not constitute a threat. “In the southern region, in Quneitra and Daraa and Damascus, there is no danger from any Islamic group, because they are not growing.”

Jabawi insisted that Al-Jabha al-Janubiya did not cooperate with the main Jihadist entities such as Jabhat al-Nusra and DI’ISH. “Al-Jabha al-Janubiya doesn’t include extremist groups linked to Al-Qaida, such as Jabhat al-Nusra or its DI’ISH rival.” Jabawi noted that “Jabhat al-Nusra’s role in Daraa is limited and not like in the rest of the provinces.” He reiterated that “Nusra, which has limited influence in the south, does not have any role in Al-Jabha al-Janubiya.” However, throughout the briefing, Ibrahim al-Jabawi went out his way not to criticize the Jabhat al-Nusra as a viable opposition force. The Jabhat al-Nusra, he stressed, “is working to overthrow the regime alone and in its own way.” Despite keeping to itself, Jabawi stressed, Jabhat al-Nusra’s “work doesn’t conflict with that of the FSA” and any other legitimate rebel force. Jabawi denied that Jabhat al-Nusra was fighting other rebel forces – either Jihadists or locally based. The Jabhat al-Nusra, Jabawi stated, “is only fighting the regime and has not imposed anything on the people.”

Jabawi concluded by emphasizing anew that only the absence of heavy weapons and Western support prevents Al-Jabha al-Janubiya from defeating the Assad forces and occupying Damascus. “We have enough light weapons but we need weapons that would help us deal with air-strikes and tanks,” he said. “We hope that Syria’s friends would help us and provide us with such weapons, particularly anti-aircraft guns ... to help liberate all southern parts until we reach Damascus.” After the briefing, representatives of US Intelligence (“Mukhabarat Amriki”) and the Saudi Arabian and Jordanian Intelligence Services assured the attending Western officials that Ibrahim al-Jabawi and the Al-Jabha al-Janubiya are “the real thing” and merit all support.

While official Amman did not dare to openly contradict the above claims of US Intelligence (“Mukhabarat Amriki”), they did quietly present the pertinent Western security officials with contradictory data. The Jordanians arranged a briefing by Abu al-Majd, a spokesman for the Liwa Shouhada al-Yarmouk (Martyrs of the Yarmouk Brigade), at a refugee camp near the Syrian border. The greatest threat to the opposition forces and population in southern Syria is the surge of the Jihadist forces – starting with Jabhat al-Nusra, DI’ISH and their affiliates and proxies. This ascent, Majd stressed, has already led to clashes between Jihadist forces and local militias. Local leaders dread the escalation of fratricidal fighting. “We do not want the situation of the south to



reach the situation of the north,” Majd emphatically stated. Therefore, an alliance of southern Imams established a Sharia Court in Daraa’s central prison in order to resolve disputes between the local forces and the Jihadists. “When there is a problem between groups, they can go to the Court to solve it. We have judges and lawyers who are working there. We are recruiting even guards and other employees,” Majd said. “At the same place we are planning to build a big hospital.”

Abu al-Majd ridiculed any notion of an offensive on Damascus – with or without heavy weapons from the West. The Syrian military forces based in the south are the most formidable in Assad’s military and cannot be compared to other parts of Syria. “The regime keeps one of the most important concentrations of forces in the south. It is not easy to move around.” The Syrian forces in the south are the strategic reserves of Damascus as well as the key to the protection of the Assad inner-circle. The mere thought of defeating them by a small force “from a neighboring country” is impractical. Instead, the ultimate objective of all viable forces in the south should be protecting and saving the grassroots populace, Majd stressed.

Meanwhile, petrified about being caught between the Jihadists arriving from Damascus and the “moderate Jihadists” unleashed by the US and its allies from the south, the commanders of the local self-defense militias surged to fill the regional vacuum before more Jihadists arrived. Several armed groups from the east and west of the Daraa area were mobilized. Significantly, among the units were Kitaeb (Battalions) “that have a relationship with Jordan.” The first step was a surge to control Tal al-Jamu al-Askari in the western Daraa region coveted by Jihadists arriving from Damascus.

Unlike previous escalations in southern Syria, this time Jordanian Intelligence did its best to ensure that the interests of the Hashemite Kingdom were not harmed. “The matter is more difficult for the international road to Damascus. The same goes for the south at the Nasib border crossing, which Jordan wants to keep open and prevent Jabhat al-Nusra from controlling it. In fact, Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups have been pressured to prevent Jabhat al-Nusra from advancing there,” a source in the field told Tareq al-Abed of Al-Monitor. “Jordanian Intelligence is not interfering in this battle,” the field source said. “The same goes for what recently happened in Tal al-Sharqi and Tal al-Jabiyah, especially since Jabhat al-Nusra did not participate in the last battle in Nawa because of its increasing human and military losses, despite [Jabhat al-Nusra’s] role at the beginning of the confrontation, in which participated more than eight factions from the FSA and the military council, such as the Yarmouk Brigade, Liwa Shouhada al-Yarmouk, Liwa Ahrar Nawa, Bani Umiya, the first artillery regiment, and Liwa Tasil, as well as al-Muthana Islamic movement, Liwa al-Umari and Ansar al-Sunna, which belong to Jabhat Thuwar Suria. The latter has become one of the most prominent actors in the southern military map.” Significantly, Tareq al-Abed’s source and many other local commanders did not mention the Al-Jabha al-Janubiya among the forces operating in southern Syria.

Goaded by US Intelligence (“Mukhabarat Amriki”), Saudi Arabian Intelligence showed up in the forward rebel camps in northern Jordan and pushed the commanders for attacks on the remaining installations of the Syrian military in the area. The Saudis wanted the various rebel entities, and especially the Jihadists, to attack several sites of the Syrian military and security forces near the town of Nawa. The rebel forces were to attack these sites, as well as sites of lesser importance west of Daraa, even though the Syrian forces were not intervening in the rebels’ attacks. The Saudis promised the Jihadist forces “new and quality weapons” for “the battles in Nawa” if they attacked the Syrian military. There are unconfirmed reports the groups affiliated with Jabhat Thuwar Suria received ATGMs on 1 and 2 May. The Saudis insisted that “a number of American TOW missiles” had already been delivered to the military council and the FSA in southern Syria for a march toward Damascus.



Local commanders reported to Jordanian Intelligence that the southern region and the western part of the Houran plain were now under the control of Saudi-sponsored Jihadists affiliated with the Al-Jabha al-Islamiya [the Islamic Front], especially Ahrar al-Sham, as well as emaciated FSA brigades.

On the night of 3/4 May, Jabhat al-Nusra demonstrated who is the dominant force in southern Syria. On the morning of May 4, Jabhat al-Nusra issued a communique announcing the capture and arrest of several moderate rebel commanders known for their close cooperation with Jordanian Intelligence. “Jabhat al-Nusra last night arrested the head of the Military Council of Daraa, Captain Ahmad Naameh, along with five other commanders of opposition factions,” said the communique. Naameh and his companions were traveling from Jordan to Daraa to help unite the local rebel entities and guide their operations to further Amman’s interests. Significantly, Naameh’s capture took place in the Daraa area where, according to US Intelligence (“Mukhabarat Amriki”), “the Jabhat al-Nusra has only a limited presence.” Several local commanders in the Daraa area have long claimed that Naameh was power-hungry. Jordanian Intelligence speculated that they could have cooperated with Jabhat al-Nusra in kidnaping Naameh and his companions. Either way, no local commander would have cooperated with Jabhat al-Nusra unless they were confident that the Jihadists are the rising and prominent forces in southern Syria.

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The evolution of the strategic posture throughout the greater Middle East as a result of the evolving fighting in and around Syria was articulated on May 3 by Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi – the senior military adviser to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Safavi addressed a group of IRGC senior officers in Tehran. “Now after 40 months, the political and military arena in Syria indicates the triumph of the Syrian government and this is a strategic victory,” Safavi stated. “Our frontmost line of defense is no more [in southern Iran], rather this line is now in southern Lebanon [on the border] with Israel, as our strategic depth has now stretched to the Mediterranean coast and just to the north of Israel,” Safavi explained. Throughout, the US-led forces failed to contain the ascent of Iran. “The strategy of the US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and European countries to overthrow Bashar al-Assad has failed,” Safavi stated. “This is a strategic failure for the Western, Arab and Zionist front and a big victory for the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

So far, the Spring and early Summer of 2014 are not boring indeed.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.