



Insight

The Rise of Syria's Jihadists Co-authored by Yelena Altman

JANUARY 23, 2013

January 23rd will mark the one-year anniversary of the official establishment of Syria's al-Nusra Front, also known as Jabhat Al-Nusra. In just twelve months, al-Nusra has become one of the most visible revolutionary groups in Syria, as well as a major foreign policy problem for the U.S. As the conflict in Syria continues, the U.S. must take a more active role in strengthening Syria's moderates to ensure this jihadist group does not wreak havoc in a post-Assad Syria..

Al-Nusra is one of many armed groups dedicated to the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Unlike the more mainstream Free Syrian Army (FSA), al-Nusra seeks the establishment of an Islamic state governed by a strict form of Sharia, Islamic law. Al-Nusra's unconventional tactics, including spectacular terrorist bombings, also differ from the FSA's conventional warfare. While Syrian nationals dominate the FSA, al-Nusra contains many foreign fighters, many of whom fought in Iraq. Despite their significant differences, evidence suggests the FSA and al-Nusra have worked together towards their shared short-term goal of ousting Assad.

The U.S. considers al-Nusra to be an offshoot of Al Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Clearly Al-Nusra has imported ISI's weapons and tactics. They rely on explosives and suicide bombings to target security buildings and high profile officials. Al-Nusra made its mark by claiming [responsibility](#) for a suicide bombing outside a police station in Damascus last January that killed 26 and injured 63, and a February car bombing at a security compound in Aleppo that left 28 dead and 175 injured. The group took responsibility for some [43 suicide attacks](#) during 2012. Al-Nusra's attacks may not be as consequential militarily as the FSA's slogging fight against Syrian troops, but they have grabbed headlines and elevated the group's profile.

Initially, most Syrian civilians and rebel fighters opposed al-Nusra, but support for the group has grown over time. Many Syrians came to appreciate their commitment, often contrasting it with the lack of tangible support from the West. Al-Nusra also has benefitted from its media savvy, producing YouTube videos and disseminating its message over social media. And so far it has refrained from pushing Sharia on the population, perhaps having learned from the backlash against ISI during Iraq's "Sunni Awakening."

On December 11, the Obama Administration [designated](#) al-Nusra a terrorist organization and subsidiary of Al Qaeda in Iraq, which placed sanctions on the group's property and assets. The Administration also levied

sanctions against two of the group's senior [leaders](#), Maysar al-Juburi and Anas Khattab. These actions coincided with the Administration's recognition of the Syrian National Coalition as the "sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people."

Many in the Syrian opposition were taken aback by the move. [Protesters](#) took to the streets with slogans like "There is no terrorism in Syria except that of Assad," and "We are all Al-Nusra Front." Leaders of the Syrian National Coalition urged the U.S. to reconsider. "The decision to blacklist one of the groups fighting the regime as a terrorist organization must be re-examined," [said](#) Coalition President Moaz al-Khatib.

By any reasonable standard, al-Nusra is a terrorist organization, and its ascendancy in a post-Assad Syria would be counter to the interests of the Syrian people and the United States. Still, Obama's designation of the group raises eyebrows. The Administration has been notoriously slow in designating other groups as terrorist – consider the many years it took to finally designate the [Haqqani](#) network as terrorist even as they killed Americans in Afghanistan. If the Administration's intent was to curtail Syrian support for al-Nusra, it backfired terribly. Not only did Syrians leap to the defense of the organization, but its legitimacy beyond Syria's borders grew as well.

More likely, the Administration intended to use the designation to justify its own policies. Distancing itself from radical elements of the revolution gave the Administration more political cover to officially back the National Coalition. At the same time, the designation highlighted the presence of terrorists, which the Administration uses as a pretext to withhold aid to Syria's rebels.

The Administration likely believed that finally recognizing the National Coalition would offset any negative reaction to designating al-Nusra as a terrorist organization. They were wrong. A better approach would have been to couple the terror designation with meaningful support, such as a safe zone or lethal assistance to the FSA. Without such support, it was all too easy for al-Nusra to assert that the U.S. was deliberately trying to keep Assad in power by marginalizing them.

Looking ahead, the U.S. must build consensus inside Syria and beyond on the threat of al-Nusra and give more practical assistance to Syria's moderates. Understanding the opposition's reluctance to publicly disavow al-Nusra at this point in the fight, the U.S. should work behind the scenes with the National Council on a plan to neutralize al-Nusra and other radicals after Assad falls. Preventing a sectarian bloodbath, similar to what happened in Iraq, will be crucial.

America's failure to provide decisive leadership in Syria helped created an opening that foreign jihadists were all too willing to fill. If the United States continues to sit on the sidelines, al-Nusra and other extremists may

succeed in pulling post-Assad Syria in a very dangerous direction.