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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War: On the Road to Damascus?**

By Ahmed S. Hashim

### **Synopsis**

*The two-year-old civil war in Syria has taken a devastating toll on lives and its cities. The largely secular nationalist rebels have been joined by Islamist militants from Iraq and homegrown jihadists. How will the entry of the Islamists impact on the fighting and on a post-war Syria?*

### **Commentary**

THE SYRIAN civil war of the past two years has earned the dubious distinction of being one of the bloodiest and most destructive conflicts in contemporary Middle Eastern history. The country's infrastructure is in shambles and vast swathes of major cities have sustained enormous damage. The death toll, estimated at 60,000, could well reach 100,000 by the end of 2013.

The Syrian government continues to use its formidable military to bombard rebel-held cities with artillery, helicopter gunships and fixed-wing aircraft as well as surface-to-surface missiles. The rebels are fighting back as ferociously as the regime.

### **From secular armed rebellion to jihad**

When the Arab Spring came to Syria in March 2011, it had nothing to do with Islamists – moderate or militant; rather it was a call for reform of the system including more political freedoms, economic justice and jobs. These were secular demands and the protesters were mindful of referring to their demands as those of the entire Syrian people. The regime responded brutally. Bashar al-Assad either could not understand what was happening or was influenced by the call for a harsh response issued by regime hardliners and the Alawite-controlled military and security services.

The problem with Assad's hard-line was that it led the protesters to up the ante. The demonstrators moved towards armed rebellion. Poorly armed and ill-trained rebels – including military deserters – coalesced around the Free Syria Army (FSA) and began fighting a guerrilla war against the Syrian military, one of the most heavily-armed and best-trained forces in the Middle East.

The government labeled the protesters and armed rebels as militant Islamists bent on bringing sectarian violence in Syria and undermining its national cohesion. However, most of the fighters are members of nationalist anti-regime groups or fighting battalions, often loosely gathered under the umbrella FSA. Many are

pious Muslims as well; and indeed, some have claimed to be members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood which had ran afoul of 'strongman' Hafez al-Assad in the 1980s. Regime propaganda became self-fulfilling prophecy at the beginning of 2012 when militant Islamists began to play a significant role in the armed resistance.

### **How Syria became a magnet**

It was not difficult for the jihadists to infiltrate into Syria. Firstly, the infrastructure for them was already there as they had used Syria to infiltrate into Iraq and play a role in the anti-American insurgency in that country between 2004 and 2009. The intensification of the violence in Syria into a civil war provided them with a heaven-sent opportunity to infiltrate into Syria and help a floundering insurgency campaign. Some of these jihadists were Iraqis who felt that they needed to return the favour and help their Syrian brethren who had facilitated their 'jihad' in Iraq; while others were Syrians and Jordanians.

The jihadists from Iraq formed the nucleus of the Jabhat al-Nusrah combat group in Syria. Its full name is The Front for Aid to the People of the Levant from the Mujahidin of the Levant in the Battlefields of the Jihad. It is the primary jihadist group in the Syrian civil war and most likely benefiting from Al-Qaeda's blessings and possibly material support from Iraq. It is an effective fighting force as proven by its battlefield performance in Idlib, Deir al-Zor and Aleppo. Its modus operandi has all the hallmarks of an Al-Qaeda franchise or associated group: suicide bombings, car bombings, use of improvised explosive devices, and assassinations of military and security officials.

There are several other groups, two of the most important being the Brigades of the Freedom of the Levant and Falcons of the Levant Division, both formed in 2011. The first has a large following but denies any links with transnational jihadist forces. The two groups have worked together to take the huge Taftanaz Syrian Air Force base in mid-January 2013. The Falcons group is a large organisation with between 600 and 1000 fighters divided into several battalions. Its leader Ahmed Abu Issa claims that his movement is a conservative Islamist one and not a militant jihadist one. However he wants to see an Islamic state set up in Syria.

A second factor for the inflow of militants is that Syria is a perfect place to wage jihad. There was a significant element of the population – primarily the urban lower middle class – that had suffered severely from the socioeconomic crisis that has afflicted Syria for over a decade; young men from this class have provided much of the manpower of the jihadist groups in the ongoing war.

### **Regional impact of jihadist foothold in Syria**

Moreover, unlike peripheral Yemen or the remote and forbidding Sahel, Syria is in the heart of the Middle East. It is surrounded by five neighbours, four of which – Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq - allow relatively easy access, especially Iraq. It has a regime tailor-made for excoriation by the militant Islamists: secular, libertine, and run by a sect - the 'Alawites, who are not seen as Muslim by the militants. Damascus is aligned with Tehran, the capital of the Twelvers Shi'ism, whom the jihadists regard as supposedly 'polytheistic'. A jihadist foothold in Syria can affect the situation in volatile Jordan which many observers believe will be the first Arab monarchy to succumb to revolution. Last but not least, Syria borders the biggest enemy of all: Israel.

The denouement of the Syrian civil war is still way off. Bashar al-Assad seems to have rallied somewhat: the military has not collapsed and the rebels still have not gotten their act together. In fact, there has been some serious in-fighting among the rebels. While Syria may collapse, it is not likely that the jihadists would then seize power. They are not powerful enough to seize power effectively there; too many local power groups as well as regional and international forces are arrayed against them.

But just as their presence in the Syrian civil war has had a significant impact, their role in a post-Assad Syria weakened by sectarian strife should not be underestimated. They will be a significant perpetuator of violence within that unfortunate country and possibly among Syria's neighbours. In short, they will wreck the road to Damascus and Syria with it.

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