

**An Analysis of Two Attacks by the Al-Nusra Front
in Syria**

Liwa Al-Sham, an independent Salafi-jihadist media institution devoted to publishing information about Syria, produced two studies describing and analyzing two key attacks perpetrated by the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's arm in Syria, against targets of strategic importance to the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Both of the articles were written by Abd al-Rahman Muhammad al-Nimmer, an independent researcher at Liwa Al-Sham. Following is a brief review of al-Nimmer's findings and conclusions.



The covers of the two reports researching attacks perpetrated by the Al-Nusra Front

An Attack on the Military Intelligence Complex

On May 10, 2012, suicide attackers apparently affiliated with the Al-Nusra Front (although this has not been confirmed) drove two booby-trapped cars into the military intelligence complex in the Al-Qazzaz quarter of Damascus. The twin bombing killed 55 people and injured nearly 400 others, and was the largest attack to that point in the Syrian civil war.¹ For the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the military intelligence complex was a strategic and symbolic target.

In May 2012, Liwa Al-Sham published a study titled, "Punishment for Oppressors: An Analysis of the Destruction of the Palestine and Patrol Branches and Its Outcome".² The Palestine Branch, in addition to dealing with Palestinian matters, also engaged in interrogation and incarceration. Following is a summary of the main points arising from the study published by Liwa Al-Sham.

¹ <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/366/558.html>; <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4227259,00.html> (both in Hebrew).

² The two branches of Syrian military intelligence that were decimated in the attack on the complex.

The Target

The Palestine Branch of Syrian military intelligence was known far and wide – more, even, than the organization of which it was a part. It was notorious as the place where the Syrian regime detained and tortured its opponents. The Palestine Branch was so hated that a suicide attacker affiliated with Fatah Al-Islam, a Lebanese Sunni Islamist group established in 2006 with Syrian backing, once detonated a car bomb near the building, destroying its outer walls, in retaliation for the murder by Syrian intelligence of Shaker al-Abssi, the group's leader.

The Goals of the Attack

Symbolic meaning: The infamous Palestine Branch was the Assad regime's security fortress, a source of its psychological resilience, and the place from which it instilled fear in the hearts of its opponents. In fact, Syria's citizens saw the Palestine Branch as the apex of Syrian intelligence. In addition, the Special Operations Brigade assigned to fighting Islamist groups as part of the "war on terrorism" was located proximate to the Palestine Branch. The decimation of the Palestine Branch thus struck a severe blow to the regime's image: If the regime could not even defend itself, how were its supporters to trust its security capabilities? At the same time, an attack of this magnitude increased the prestige of the attacker, proving that it could assail the regime whenever it chose and wherever it chose – including at the most heavily guarded of regime installations.

Objective significance: As the heart of Syrian intelligence, the Palestine Branch is staffed by the highest-ranking intelligence officers. Even those who survived the attack no doubt suffered shock and injury. If such an attack does not break the spirit of Syria's intelligence cadres, it must surely heighten their anxiety.

The timing: In the Spring of 2012, the international community was trying to end the Syrian revolution through the Annan Program.³ This was distracting the public from realizing that it could not rely on international pressure and UN monitoring. Spooked by warnings of an impending civil war, many were likely to agree to anything Annan suggested, even if it meant failing to remove Assad. This attack on a key security installation was a pre-emptive strike on behalf of the rebels, and especially the mujahideen.

³ The proposal made by UN Special Envoy Kofi Annan for reaching an agreement between the Syrian regime and the rebels.

Healing the hearts of the believers: According to the report penned by al-Nimmer, impressive attacks against the regime every few days gladden the believers, fill their hearts with hope of victory against the enemies of Allah, and renew their faith in jihad.

Indirect goals: An attack against the Palestine Branch – the core of Syrian military intelligence – was meant to paralyze Syrian intelligence, even if only briefly, and to stymie its willful arrests and killing. It was meant to cow Syrian intelligence into a defensive position, and a search for (other) sources of power. In addition, the attack was one more in a series of strikes against security installations (among them the general intelligence administration, Air Force intelligence, and the police).

Modus Operandi

In this attack, two booby-trapped cars blew up in rapid succession. The first car bomb was meant to pave the way for the second car bomb. Specifically, detonation of the first car was meant to kill as many guards as possible and to destroy the building's perimeter wall, enabling the second car to drive through the wall and get as close as possible to the people inside the building. Jihadist groups have used this method many times; it has proven to be successful in killing many of the enemy's ranks and causing extensive damage. The cars were laden with 1,000kg and 850kg of explosives, respectively, indicating that the attack was also meant to spread damage over a wide area.

Although multiple suicide bombers have been used before to attack Syrian security services (usually, and admittedly, by the Al-Nusra Front), until this attack, only one booby-trapped car had been used to get as close to the target as possible. Yet with each such attack, the regime enhanced its security protections. This explains the need for the use of two cars in this instance.

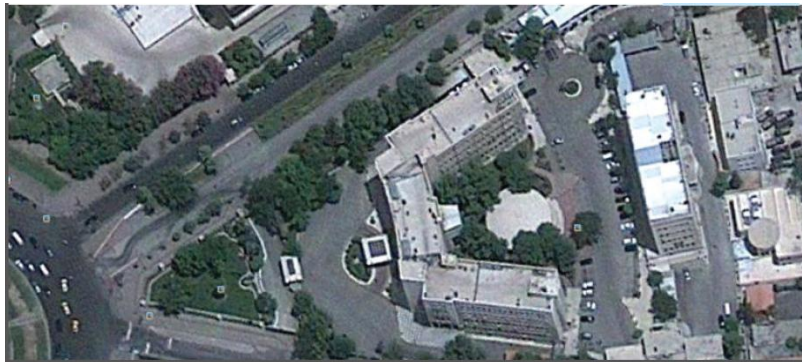
This twin bombing had another aim: After inflicting the initial harm on the enemy, the attackers waited until more people had gathered to attend to the dead and wounded before detonating the second explosion, causing even more victims among the expanded number of people at the site. The use of a second explosion shortly after the first was also meant to strike panic in people's hearts and deter them from rushing to aid the wounded at an attack site in the future.

The Attackers

Although it is not known for certain who was behind this attack, its characteristics indicate that the perpetrators were affiliated with the Al-Nusra Front. Of all of the rebel and jihadist groups in Syria, only the Al-Nusra Front has dared to conduct terrorist attacks of this magnitude and quality in the past (and has taken responsibility for doing so). Moreover, the modus operandi used in this attack is similar to that used in previous attacks of the Al-Nusra Front.

An Attack on Military Headquarters

On September 26, 2012, two suicide bombers affiliated with the Al-Nusra Front blew themselves up at the Syrian military headquarters in Damascus, killing four guards and injuring 14 military personnel, according to Syrian television. In addition, a correspondent for Iranian television who had been reporting on events from the site was also killed in the attack.⁴ The building that was attacked was one of the most closely-guarded sites in the Syrian capital, a symbol of the army and the regime.



Military headquarters in Damascus

In October 2012, Liwa Al-Sham published a study titled, "The Devastation and Infiltration of Military Headquarters: An Analysis of the Destruction and Its Outcome". The following is a summary of the main points made in that report.

The Target

Military headquarters is home to all those who are responsible for determining the strategy of the armed forces; they are the most senior and experienced of Syria's officers. From

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/27/world/middleeast/syria.html>;
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/26/syria-military-hq-damascus-bombs> (both in English);
<http://news.walla.co.il/?w=//2570604> (Hebrew).

military headquarters emanate the commands that govern the regime's war against the rebels.

As the rebels grow stronger and liberate more areas, the regime's intelligence network disintegrates, in part because it can rely less and less on collaborators. This is changing the nature of the fighting from a battle of security and intelligence into a full-fledged military conflict. As intelligence agencies lose their most experienced people and hence their status and importance, Syria's military leadership, which has the support of Russia and Iran, gains primacy. In effect, it is now the military that is responsible for defending the regime. The attack on military headquarters is thus an important link in a chain of attacks by the Al-Nusra Front against strategic regime installations. This attack, in particular, embarrassed the regime and exposed its helplessness.

The Location

Although the regime continues to trumpet its strength in the media and claim that the military has "cleansed" Damascus and taken custody of hundreds of terrorists around the country, an attack of this type leaves the regime powerless, at least for several hours, and exposes its weakness. President Bashar al-Assad does not dare appear in public unless he is surrounded by his supporters. And in fact, this attack was perpetrated only a few kilometers from the presidential palace, the prime minister's office, the ministry of defense, Air Force intelligence headquarters, and other prominent seats of power.

The Timing

Some two and a half months before this attack, a spate of devastating attacks in Damascus led the regime to declare an all-out war against the armed rebels in the capital, to which it devoted extensive resources. The apparent success of the regime in routing the rebels from Damascus led its supporters to hope that it could do the same across the country. That was just when this attack was deployed, destroying the regime's hopes and proving that the opposition is still strong, even in the heart of Damascus.

Relative to most attacks, this attack took place early: at 7:00 a.m., more than an hour before the work day begins. This suggests that the planners of the attack preferred to infiltrate the building rather than to cause extensive damage and kill countless people. There may be several reasons for this. Military headquarters is located near the central square of Damascus, which is usually clogged with people and traffic. Conducting the attack

before the work day had started, when the street was all but empty, limited the number of civilian deaths. At the early hour of 7:00 a.m., there were fewer checkpoints and security personnel to thwart the attackers. Moreover, because senior staff had yet to arrive at the building, neither had the many security guards who would have presented an obstacle to the attack.

Modus Operandi

The Al-Nusra Front has often used suicide bombers to bring explosives (a booby-trapped car, an IED) closer to a target. Until this attack, individual suicide bombers were deployed for direct attack primarily against checkpoints and patrols. This particular attack was notably complex, requiring a high level of skill and preparation. First, a car bomb exploded at the southern end of the building, with the aim of killing as many guards as possible; next, the terrorists infiltrated the building and killed as many people as they could. Once the regime's support and rescue services had converged on the scene, a second car blew up. This sophisticated modus operandi is relatively new to jihad in Syria; it is considered one of the most complex ones to employ in guerilla warfare. It may be analyzed as follows:

1. **Choosing and assessing the target:** The strategic leadership chooses the target, based on a cost-benefit analysis. Few targets in Syria are more important than this one.
2. **Learning the target:** The commanders in the field learn the target's weak points, which will lead them to conclude how best to attack it. They will strive to surprise the enemy, and circumvent any obstacles it may have erected. One particular weakness of this target was the relative lack of skill of the guards, most of whom were members of the regime recruited for the task.
3. **Establishing a plan of attack:** The best alternative is selected from among several suggested, with the aim of balancing the ability to cause maximum harm against risk, and against constraints of personnel and logistics. A margin of flexibility is left, as are secondary alternatives, so that the operatives will be able to cope with unforeseen events.
4. **Preparation:** The necessary men and equipment are assembled and trained based on the plan chosen.
5. **Implementation:** The success of the attack is ensured by precise coordination among the operatives, who maintain contact and back each other up throughout the attack; by patience – which, though not typical of guerilla fighters, enabled the attackers in this case to wait a long time at the site and time their attack; by battle experience, which enabled the attackers to avoid harming passers-by, distract the guards and enter the

building, and then guard the building to prevent regime forces from entering after them; by keeping the plan of attack secret, so that intelligence forces cannot detect and thwart it; and by documenting the attack and disseminating decisive proof that the Al-Nusra Front had indeed perpetrated it. In fact, the Al-Nusra Front took responsibility for the attack the day after it was carried out.

Summary and Conclusions

Analysis of these two attacks, which are strategically important to the Al-Nusra Front's fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, reveals key trends in the group's changing operations. The following are the main conclusions arising from this analysis of the attacks:

- The Al-Nusra Front is focusing on terrorist attacks with symbolic meaning and propaganda value, that will embarrass the regime and show it to be weak and confused. It appears that it is more important (to the Al-Nusra Front) that an attack on regime installations have symbolic value, and show the public that the regime has failed in its role, than it is to cause the regime actual damage. In other words, the Al-Nusra Front may prefer attacks in which fewer people are hurt but that clearly assert its power, relative to the regime. There are several explanations for this approach. First, the Al-Nusra Front is basically telling the Syrians that if the regime cannot even protect its strategic institutions, it certainly cannot protect them. Second, symbolic acts raise the morale of the mujahideen. Lastly, attacks of this type instill doubt and anxiety in the hearts of the regime's supporters, and may even cause them to switch sides.
- The attacks perpetrated by the Al-Nusra Front are becoming ever more sophisticated. The Front is no longer fighting a classic guerilla war, in which attacks have no strategic importance and can be brushed off by the regime. Rather, the Front is employing paramilitary attacks, which require gathering intelligence, formulating alternative plans of action, and establishing a system of checks and balances, costs and benefits for determining the best plan of action and the best response to unanticipated incidents. Moreover, there has been an escalation in the operational level of the Front's attacks. Both attacks were conducted in two stages, and used the "principle of attraction": One explosion causes people to congregate, and a second explosion decimates them. Moreover, the first explosion makes the second, more devastating explosion possible. Will the Al-Nusra Front conduct even more complex multi-stage attacks in the future, with an even larger number of explosions?
- The Al-Nusra Front wants its attacks to be noticed. It is no longer interested in sporadic tactical attacks, but rather wants to damage the regime's institutions and symbols.

Rather than carrying out random attacks in the heart of bustling cities, the Al-Nusra Front is thinking deeply about complex attacks and their impact. It thus appears that the Al-Nusra Front is trying to break the spirit of the regime's supporters – and is using psychological warfare to do so.