



“With friends like these...” Is Syria seeing a spill over from Iraq?

ICT Database Team

On 24 April 2012, Abdel-Ghani Jawhar, head of Fatah-al-Islam, Lebanon's most wanted militant Islamist terrorist, was reportedly killed assisting the Syrian rebels in Qusayr, close to the embattled city of Homs.¹ Jawhar allegedly detonated himself accidentally whilst preparing an explosive device for the rebel groups to be used against the Syrian Army, raising questions about who is training the rebels in their armed struggle.² Authorities believed Jawhar arrived in Qusayr in mid April, along with a group of 30 Lebanese fighters who called themselves mujahedeen seeking to help fellow Muslims under attack by the Syrian regime. Jawhar, who was wanted by Lebanese authorities for masterminding multiple bomb attacks against U.N. security forces in Lebanon, was an expert bomb-maker and had been implicated in over 20 other unsolved cases.³

Attacks against Syrian forces have become increasingly sophisticated in recent months. The al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant, a previously unknown Syrian-based Sunni Islamist group founded in January 2011, have claimed responsibility for several suicide bombing attacks.⁴ It is unclear however if Jawhar had a direct influence on training the perpetrators of the attacks, but Syrian authorities are fearful that if the likes of militants like Jawhar are training the rebels, the attacks will become even more deadly.⁵

1 AFP, "Lebanese Islamist killed in Syria: reports", 24 April 2012;

2 Telegraph. "Lebanon's most wanted Islamist terrorist 'killed planting bombs for Syrian rebels'", 24 April 2012

3 Time, "In Syria, Lebanon's Most Wanted Sunni Terrorist Blows Himself Up", 24 April 2012;

4 AFP, "New Islamist Militant Group Al-Nusra Front Claims Responsibility for Damascus Bombings in January, Calls for Jihad Against Regime," 29 February 2012;

5 Time, "In Syria, Lebanon's Most Wanted Sunni Terrorist Blows Himself Up", 23 April 2012;



Profile: Al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant

Little is known about the Al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant, or *Jabhat al-Nusra Li-Ahl ash-Sham*, but authorities believe the group originated in the city of Homs.⁶ According to jihadi monitoring organization SITE Intelligence Group, the group became known to the public on 23 January 2012. In February, they claimed responsibility for the 6 January car bombing in Damascus that killed 26 people and wounded 63, and for twin car bombings in Aleppo on 10 February that killed 28 people and wounded 235.⁷ In a statement submitted to various Islamist websites, the group claimed that its militants had carried out several armed operations to avenge Sunnis killed by the Alawite-led regime.⁸ On 17 March, an attack on a Syrian Air Force Intelligence building and criminal police headquarters in Damascus killed 27 people and wounded 140 others.⁹ The attack was also attributed to the Al-Nusra Front. The group said that the attacks were in response to continued shelling of the Syrian cities of Homs, Idlib, Hama, and Daraa.¹⁰ On 30 April, the group claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing outside the Zain al-Abideen mosque in the Midan district of Damascus on 28 April that killed 10 people and wounded 30 others. A statement by the Al-Nusra Front named the perpetrator as Abu Omar al-Shami and claimed he detonated his explosives amidst 150 members of the Syrian security forces who were gathered outside mosque.¹¹



On 11 May, a video was released on the Internet claiming to be from the Al-Nusra Front. The video said the group was responsible for a twin suicide attack in Damascus the previous day, in which 55 people were killed and 372 injured. In the video, the spokesman said the

⁶ Ibid;

⁷ BBC, "Syria unrest: Aleppo bomb attacks 'kill 28'", 10 February 2012;

⁸ AFP, "New Islamist Militant Group Al-Nusra Front Claims Responsibility for Damascus Bombings in January, Calls for Jihad Against Regime," 29 February 2012;

⁹ Reuters, Twin bombings in Damascus kill at least 27, almost 100 hurt, 17 March 2012;

¹⁰ AFP, "Islamist Group Claims Syria Bombs, 'to Avenge Sunnis'," 21 March 2012;

¹¹ Reuters, "Islamists claim responsibility for Syria suicide bomb attack", 30 April 2012;



bombings that targeted a security building, was in retaliation for regime attacks of residential areas. The authenticity of the video was not independently verified.¹² On 15 May, a second statement was released by the group denying responsibility for the attack and claiming that the video was fabricated. In the new statement, the group provided reasons as to why the video was not made by them. They claimed that the speaker's voice is electronically modified and that the video was titled "Communique No. 4," however, the group has posted seven previous statements. They also said that any claims of responsibility previous attacks were always produced by their media department, al-Manara al-Baida and this video was not attributed to them. In previous statements, the group posted videos to official jihadist, social media and video-sharing websites, however this video was only found on YouTube.¹³ It remains unclear, who was responsible for the 10 May attack, but some authorities, including the Russian foreign ministry blamed al-Qa'ida.¹⁴

Ideology

Al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant is a Sunni Islamic organization with a Salafist jihadi ideology. Their overall objective has been to wage a holy war against the Syrian government.¹⁵ Initial reports by the Syrian government, as well as US officials, suggested that the group was linked to al-Qa'ida in Iraq.¹⁶ US *National Director of Intelligence, James Clapper* said that the modus operandi used in the attacks in Syria mimicked attacks in Iraq, and that al-Qa'ida in Iraq was, in all probability, responsible for the suicide attacks in Syria.¹⁷ Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of al-Qa'ida, openly urged Muslims to assist the Syrian opposition in targeting the Assad regime, although there has yet to be an officially-recognized association between al-Qa'ida and al-Nusra Front.¹⁸

12 AP, "Al-Qaida-linked group says it was behind Damascus bombings", 12 May 2012;

13 AFP, "Jihadist group denies claiming Damascus bombings", 15 May 2012;

14 BBC, "Al-Nusra Front denies Damascus bombings claim", 15 May 2012;

15 AFP, "New Islamist Militant Group Al-Nusra Front Claims Responsibility for Damascus Bombings in January, Calls for Jihad Against Regime," 29 February 2012;

16 Reuters, Twin bombings in Damascus kill at least 27, almost 100 hurt, 17 March 2012;

17 AFP, "New Islamist Militant Group Al-Nusra Front Claims Responsibility for Damascus Bombings in January, Calls for Jihad Against Regime," 29 February 2012;

18 Times of India, "In complicating move, al-Qaida backs Syrian revolt", 13 February 2012;



Organizational Structure and Leadership

While it is unclear how many members the Al-Nusra Front has, the identity of its leader is believed to be Abu Muhammad al-Julani. In a video statement in January announcing the formation of the Front, he called on the Syrian people to unite in a holy war against the Syrian



authorities.¹⁹ Al-Julani stated that al-Nusra Front were *mujahideen* fighters with combat experience on several fronts, and especially in Iraq. He urged the Syrian people to join in to fight against the Assad regime and defended jihad as the only hope of Islam. He dismissed the possibility of relying on the international community, including Turkey, other Arab states, and the West. The included footage of protests and violence throughout Syria as well as training exercises by the organization's militants²⁰ The al-Nusra Front operative who carried out the 6 January Damascus attack was identified as Abu al-Baraa al-Shami. He appeared in the 27 February video, which showed footage of the attack. In the video he said that the attack was in retribution for a woman who was allegedly raped by the forces of the Syrian regime. Al-Shami called on Syrians to join the holy war, declaring that jihad had arrived in Syria.²¹ Abu Omar al-Shami was identified as the perpetrator of the 28 April suicide bombing in Damascus.²²

The group's primary modus operandi is bombings and suicide bombings targeting government buildings and security establishments.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Memri, "The Global Jihad Regime versus the Assad Regime," 16 March 2012;

²¹ AFP, "New Islamist Militant Group Al-Nusra Front Claims Responsibility for Damascus Bombings in January, Calls for Jihad Against Regime," 29 February 2012;

²² Reuters, "Islamists claim responsibility for Syria suicide bomb attack", 30 April 2012;



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2. Memri, "The Global Jihad Regime versus the Assad Regime," 16 March 2012;
3. Washington Post, "Fears of extremism taking hold in Syria as violence continues", 22 April 2012;
4. Telegraph, "Lebanon's most wanted Islamist terrorist 'killed planting bombs for Syrian rebels", 24 April 2012;
5. Strafor, "Jihadist Opportunities in Syria", 14 February 2012.