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The Southern Front, Part II



This is the second of a two-part special report on the emerging battleground in southern Syria. Part I is available [here](#).

It's usually difficult to get high-level FSA commanders to talk openly about the ideological differences, and indeed physical confrontations, that are beginning to define FSA-al-Qaeda relations in Syria. Fahad was more forthcoming than most and offered an example of what analysts are already beginning to observe as percolations of *sahwa*, or an Anbar-style "Awakening" to expel or marginalize extremists. Popular demonstrations against the Islamic State, many of which have been violently suppressed, have been ongoing for weeks. Yesterday, al-Qaeda blew up the headquarters of the widely-respected FSA-linked Ahfad al-Rasul Brigade in Raqqa, killing its commander. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, jihadists in that same province almost certainly detained and may have murdered Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, a Jesuit priest and Christian hero of the revolution. Few Syrians I've spoken to lately believe that al-Qaeda-run bakeries, much less the distribution of Teletubbies or the hosting of musical chairs during Ramadan, will keep the jihadists in good odor in the long term.

I asked Fahad for specific instances of FSA-on-al-Qaeda clashes. He recounted the following. "Three months ago, there was an operation in Rif Dimashq with 13 battalions involved. The battle was called 'The Criterion That Separates Good from Evil.' In the course of the battle, one FSA soldier got hotheaded and cursed God. So the emir of Jabhat al-Nusra demanded that the people hand him over for trial for blasphemy. At that point, the local battalions kicked al-Nusra out of the area and told them that their services were no longer required. They were fighting Bashar al-Assad because of exactly this kind of attitude. They are moderate. If they [Nusra] are going to be extremist, their services are not wanted."

According to one opposition activist in the south, stories like these are common now if still largely unknown to Western audiences. Also, not all of them are captured on YouTube videos. He gave me two examples which he himself witnessed. The first was in the village of Museifra, in Deraa, where al-Nusra had tried to establish its own court system. Fighters from the movement raided the home of a local man whom they accused of working for the regime. They killed him, then cut out his heart and then proceeded to enjoy their evening meal "in celebration." The civilians of Museifra were so revolted by this that they surrounded the al-Nusra court with heavy weapons including anti-aircraft machine guns, and forced the jihadists out of the village.

The second example took place in Medineh where another local was ordered to appear before another al-Nusra-run sharia council. Instead, he drove his car by the relevant building and threw a bomb inside, killing five Nusra militants.

I asked Fahad the question I asked all Syrian rebels: Does he suspect regime collusion with jihadist elements now ostensibly fighting the regime? Again, this is a touchy subject for someone whose umbrella structure, the SMC, consists of battalions that

partner all too easily with al-Qaeda in the north. After the fall of Minnagh airbase, for instance, Gen. Abdul Jabar al-Oqaidi, the commander of the Aleppo Military Council, and a senior officer in that province's largest FSA brigade, Liwa al-Tawhid, appeared side-by-side with an emir of the Islamic State, praising the jihadists' effort in helping to overtake a stubbornly defended loyalist stronghold.

"We know that Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State did not have any roots in Syria prior to the revolution," Fahad told me. "When the revolution broke out, we know that the regime released many of the al-Qaeda fighters who fought in Iraq and some of them were recruited at some point to work with the regime directly or indirectly so that they would give the impression to the West and internally that here is your alternative – here is what the revolution is made up of."

Jordan's role.

Ahmad Jarba, the newly "elected" (read: appointed) chairman of the Syrian National Coalition, crossed into Deraa last week to attend Eid al-Fitr prayers with rebels in Tel Shehab, which has lately become an internal refugee camp following Jordan's closure of its border with Syria to more civilians fleeing Assad's carnage. A day before, Jarba had headed a Coalition delegation meeting with Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Joudeh, the first publicized event of its kind since the uprising began and very obviously a signal from Amman, which has hitherto maintained ties with Damascus even while hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees, that it was now committed to bringing about a post-Assad order. Jarba later told CNN Arabic that he intended to establish a Syrian National Army that would bind the northern and southern fronts under a unified command and further isolate extremist fighters from the mainstream anti-regime cause. Unsurprisingly, the plan was ridiculed by al-Nusra, the Islamic State and Ahrar al-Sham, all of which stand to lose if such an undertaking ever were to succeed. But it is simply not plausible that Jarba would have mentioned this initiative unless it had been discussed and licensed at the highest level by Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

According to one source, King Abdullah's General Intelligence Directorate has been using a carrot-and-stick approach for enhancing the FSA in the south. First it runs Saudi-bought weapons, then it stops. Then it runs more, depending on the latest national security requirements, such as creating more and more internal Syrian space to host unwanted refugees. Still another motive behind this manic-depressive support system is the desire to coordinate the international "military track" with the "political track" on the conflict, i.e. ensure battlefield gains are sufficient to strengthen the "Friends of Syria" nations' diplomatic efforts with Russia, Iran and the regime. The CIA works cheek-by-jowl with the GID in this respect.

Jordan has done one unassailably positive thing for the broader rebellion. Over the past six months, it has maintained a U.S.-run military academy which has trained vetted Syrian rebels. So far, approximately 1,000 rebels have been given courses in tactics and weaponry, and although it's hard to find any rebel who's gone through this regimen to talk on the record, I did find an activist, whom I'll call "Ahmad," whose relative graduated from the program.

Ahmad told me that his relative was shown how to fire 14-millimeter guns, how to outfit his rifle with optical scopes, even how to "sit" or "take breaths" when firing. "In the field, fighters lack ammunition, which isn't just a problem for battling the regime but also for target practice. My [relative] hit his targets maybe 10 percent of the time before receiving training in Jordan. Now his hit-rate is more like 50 percent. Having unlimited ammo to work with is essential."

Hearts and minds and Gulf financiers.

In a recent article for [Foreign Policy](#), Thomas Pierret, a scholar of contemporary Islam and the Middle East at the University of Edinburgh, argued that not only were Saudi arms reaching Syrian moderate forces but that the end game in what promises to be a long and bloody civil war does not bode well for al-Qaeda. Apart from everything else, Syria's Bin Ladenists are suffering from a very real, and very unresolved, identity crisis, one which, in addition to the already discussion popular disaffection with the movement, will lead to greater atomization and internal defections as time goes by. Pierret noted the ongoing feud between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and Abu Muhammed al-Julani, the founder of al-Nusra, is based not only in the former's arrogation to himself of supreme command over the al-Qaeda franchise in Syria, but also his advocacy of transnational jihadism. Baghdadi wants to own the world, Julani can make due with owning Syria.

According to Pierret, with whom I spoke following the publication of his essay, the extremists seem more interested in "bread-making" than in winning the war. Raqqa, he said, is the "backstage" of the conflict, no longer a major front, and, as already discussed, not exactly a secure foothold for foreign or homegrown takfiri types. "Interestingly, the Islamic State announced a few days ago that they would stop participating in the siege of the 17th division, one of the two last remaining loyalist bases in Raqqa," he said. "They want to focus on civil administration instead, in building an Islamic state, and so they've withdraw fighters from the most urgent battlefields."

Even where the Islamic State declares victory, it's often doing so on the shoulders of the FSA, as the recent sacking of the Minnagh airbase attests. For months, FSA-linked battalions laid siege to this installation, blowing up tanks with Saudi-purchased

Chinese HJ-8 guided missiles. Then the Islamic State sent in suicide bombers, and the base was finally won. “The FSA does not have many people willing to blow themselves up in front of a tank.” As for that scandalous photo op between Oqaidi and the Islamic State emir, Pierret said: “Even if they cooperate with each other, fundamentally, there are conflicting logics and agendas. The FSA is not interested in getting rid of Christians or Alawites. And if they lead, then the other guys will have to adapt or confront the FSA and hopefully be defeated.” Meanwhile, other major operations against other Syrian military bases, such as Abu Zour in Idlib, Qeras in Aleppo, are being led predominantly by FSA-linked groups.

Al-Qaeda’s main competitor in the realm of rebel extremism is the Syrian Islamic Front, a consortium led by Ahrar al-Sham, a Salafist faction mostly centered in Idlib but which has partnered with the Islamic State in Raqqa, Hasakah in civil administration and, especially, the pumping and selling of oil. “They’re torn between two strategies,” Pierret said. “In Idlib, they’re fighting the regime and part of the more mainstream effort; in the north-northeast, they’re proud partners with al-Qaeda. But in Deraa, even by their own standards of intense self-advertisement, they’re not that impressive. In Damascus, they have a branch in Zabadani, but that’s pretty much everything.”

Moreover, Ahrar al-Sham’s benefactors are widely known and therefore extremely susceptible to interdiction. As Pierret wrote in his essay: “Saudi authorities, which have banned private fund-raising campaigns in favor of Syrian insurgents, have also actively opposed attempts by politicized Kuwaiti Salafists at using their relatively liberal homeland as a hub for Saudi donations to their favorite armed factions in Syria.” Or, as one analyst put it to me recently, why can’t the U.S. Treasury Department bring as much scrutiny to this non-state financial nexus as it did on all those al-Qaeda-linked “charities” after 9/11? A joint American-Saudi pressure campaign to eliminate fundraising mechanisms based in the Gulf that bypass the SMC infrastructure would directly weaken the prowess and manpower of extremist rebel groups operating in Syria.

Pierret has already pointed to one prior instance of Saudi persuasion working: the conversion of hardline Salafist cleric Adnan al-Ar’our, a dual Syrian-Saudi national who lives in the kingdom. Ar’our formerly ran his own mini-insurgency in Syria, controlling a faction loyal to himself. Many rebels I’d spoken with over the past year or so privately complained about to me about what havoc these militants were causing. But somewhere along the line, and for whatever reason, Ar’our was prevailed upon to give up his own war and publicly back an initiative to incorporate the main FSA blocs under a single, joint command. As ever, the struggle for Syria is about money more than strength of numbers or even ideology.

North, south, east, west, the rule is still the same: Control the cash, and you control the war.