

Syria's Salafist foreign legions

By Mona Alami

A lengthy uprising and the growing radicalization of the Syrian street have fueled the rise of jihadist fighters. Over recent years, the Al-Qaeda franchise has been bolstered by the ruthless violence used by the Assad regime against what started as peaceful protests. Today, demonstrations have turned into a sectarian war, pitting in some instances a "Sunni umma" against a "Nusayri" regime. This has strong appeal for jihadist fighters from neighboring Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine.

A few months after the beginning of the uprising, bloggers on Salafist websites began asking jihadist scholars for fatwas allowing them to join the protest movement. Sheikh Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti advised bloggers to join the protests as long as they avoided calling for democracy or any other secular slogan. At the end of 2011, Ousama al-Shehabi, a commander in Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon, called for armed struggle in Syria on the Shumoukh al-Islam online forum. This was followed by a fatwa posted by Sheikh al-Shinqiti on Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, allowing for the use of violence against the Assad regime.

In February 2012, Al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called on militants in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey to rise up and support what he called "their brothers in Syria." Around the same time, Jordanian Salafist Sheikh Abou Mohammad Tahawi released a fatwa calling for jihad in Syria. "I called for any man able to go for jihad in Syria; it is the responsibility of any good Muslim to stop the bloodshed perpetrated by the Nusayri regime," the sheikh said in an interview. Tahawi was arrested a few months ago by Jordanian intelligence.

Currently, several jihadist groups feature prominently in the Syrian uprising. In January 2012, Al-Manarah al-Bayda Media touted the creation of a new jihadist organization called the Nusra Front, led by Abu Mohammad al-Joulani – believed to be a Syrian national hailing from the Golan

Heights. The Nusra Front holds particular appeal for Jordanian fighters, who lead many of its battalions, according to Al-Hayat journalist Tamer Smadi. According to Smadi, over 25 Jordanians have been killed while fighting alongside Nusra Front forces in Syria. While the Nusra Front has no public affiliation to Al-Qaeda, Joulani has sworn allegiance (bayaa) to Abu Hamza, one of the emirs of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic State of Iraq. Jihadists wishing to join the Front need to obtain tazkiyya – a personal assurance from Nusra Front commanders who can vouch for their religious commitment and military skills. Currently, however, the group is comprised of only a few thousand fighters – small when compared to the leading Free Syrian Army, which is over 100,000 men strong.

It remains that the majority of jihadists fighting in Syria are from neighboring countries, such as Jordan and Iraq, and (to a smaller extent) Lebanon. According to Sheikh Omar Bakri, a member of the Salafist community in Lebanon, there are also small contingents from Libya and Tunisia, as well as from Belgium, France and Sweden – mostly of North African descent.

Based on interviews with Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian sources, it is estimated that about 100 Lebanese fighters have participated in the Syrian conflict, along with some 40 to 80 Palestinians from Lebanese refugee camps. Not all of those are jihadists: Some are there because of affiliations with Syrian families or hatred for the Assad regime, which occupied Lebanon for over 29 years.

Tamer Smadi has noted that almost 300 Jordanians are currently waging jihad in Syria, though there is no data indicating what percentage they make up among the foreign fighters.

Jihadists from Lebanon belong to a new generation. “Most of them are comprised of youngsters from 17-year-olds to those in their late 20s, who have very little Islamist and military knowledge,” noted Nabil Rahim, a Salafist sheikh from Tripoli. Fighters recruit other fighters – as in the case of Malek Hajj Deeb and Abdel-Hakim Hajj Deeb, who were recruited by Hasan Srour, a fighter previously of the Farouk Brigade, say family members. Salafist sources in Tripoli – a city home to one of the largest Salafist communities in Lebanon – say that Syrian sheikhs also encourage local youngsters to join the conflict.

Similarly, this trend seems to be taking place in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon – particularly Burj al-Barajneh and Shatila. Sources have reported that former members of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Fatah al-Islam and Jund al-Sham – as well as some former members of Asbat al-Ansar and the Islamist Jihad Movement – have regrouped into five factions, each

comprised of five to 25 members. These groups are currently training in the Basatin region with light to medium weapons. Many of these fighters recently split from Asbat al-Ansar and Islamist Jihad because they objected to the groups' newfound "moderation" and collaboration with "apostates" – that is, the Lebanese Army and the intelligence services.

As the Syrian conflict draws in more fighters from across the region, it will facilitate the spread of Al-Qaeda's regional agenda, the goal of which has not been changed by the Arab Spring – to bring jihad to all "apostate states." Regardless of whether it has the actual means or followers to do so, this further globalization of jihad could destabilize vulnerable countries – a concern already present across the region.

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05/03/2013