

Syria: how jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra is taking over Syria's revolution

Aleppo has been plunged into despair. Riven with war, life in Syria's most populous city has become a dog-eat-dog existence: a battle for survival in a place where the strong devour the weak.



A Syrian woman cries holding her injured son in a taxi as they arrive at a hospital in northern city of Aleppo. Photo: AFP/GETTY

By Ruth Sherlock, Aleppo

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Its luxuriant history is lost beneath uncollected litter on its pavements and streets. Feral children play beside buildings shattered by shelling and air strikes. There is no electricity, no heating; gunmen prowl the streets as night falls. Some are rebels searching for

government loyalists; others are criminals looking to kidnap for ransom. Looting is rife.

It is here, behind the front lines of the war against Bashar al-Assad that a new struggle is emerging. It is a clash of ideologies: a competition where rebel brigades vie to determine the shape of post-Assad Syria.

And in recent weeks it is Jabhat al-Nusra, a radical jihadist group blacklisted by the US as terrorists and a group that wants Syria to be an uncompromising Islamic state governed by sharia, that is holding sway.

The group is well funded – probably through established global jihadist networks – in comparison to moderates. Meanwhile pro-democracy rebel group commanders say money from foreign governments has all but dried up because of fears over radical Islamists.

The effect is changing the face of the Syrian revolution.

The Nusra Front is known for some of the bravest fighters on the front lines. But the fundamentalist movement is now focusing on highly effective humanitarian programs that are quickly winning the loyalty of Aleppo's residents.

Imbued with discipline borne of religious dogmatism it is catering to basic needs in a city that lacks everything from working factories to courts.

Chief among hardships was the languishing supply of bread. It is a staple in Syria – without it tens of thousands of the poor would starve.

When rebel fighters seized control of the grain stores around the city, the supply of flour all but ceased. Locals accused rebels of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) of raiding the stores and stealing the grain to sell. Spontaneous pro-government protests erupted outside bakeries where families queued for bread, sometimes for days.

One started within seconds of the Daily Telegraph's arrival at a bread queue: "Allah, Syria, Bashar! Everyone here loves Bashar al-Assad!" they screamed.

Then, in the past weeks, Jabhat al-Nusra – which is outside the FSA – pushed other rebel groups out of the stores and established a system to distribute bread throughout rebel areas.

In a small office attached to a bakery in the Miesseh district of Aleppo, Abu Yayha studied a map pinned on the wall. Numbers were scrawled in pencil against streets.

“We counted the population of every street to assess the need for the area,” explained Mr Yahya. “We provide 23,593 bags of bread every two days for this area. This is just in one district. We are calculating the population in other districts and doing the same there.

“In shops the cost is now 125 Syrian pounds (£1.12) for one pack. Here we sell it at 50 Syrian pounds (45p) for two bags. We distribute some for free for those who cannot pay.”

The bakery works constantly. Inside, barrows filled with dough were heaved onto a conveyor belt that chopped it into round and flat segments, before pushing the dough into a giant oven. Workers packed the steaming flatbread in bags.



Photo: Alessio Romenzi

“I am from Jabhat al Nusra. All the managers of all the bakeries are,” said Abu Fattah, the manager. “This makes sure that nobody steals.”

Civilians waited outside the office to appeal to Mr Yayha: “If it wasn’t for this bread, I would be forced to beg on the streets to feed my family. My husband is wounded and cannot work,” said one woman.

Such a scene could be found in Lebanon or Gaza where the likes of Hizbollah and Hamas have built up grassroots support by providing essential services to a neglected population.

The Daily Telegraph gained rare access to Hajji Rasoul, the senior al-Nusra commander – or “emir” – who heads the civil program. “We have enough bread to help all the liberated areas,” he said. “We have put aside enough grain to last eight months in Aleppo.

“We are subsidising farmers so that they can prepare for the harvest and replenish the stores.”

Deeply conservative, Mr Rasoul faced forward in the front seat of the car and turned the mirror to avoid an accidental glimpse of this female reporter. His words were chosen carefully. Beyond the bread project, he said, the Nusra Front was encouraging businessmen to reopen their factories – Syria’s economic engines. They were even starting a project to clean Aleppo’s streets, he said.

He painted a picture far removed from his organisation’s blood-curdling reputation. On global jihadist websites it has claimed responsibility for car and suicide bombings that have killed hundreds of civilians as well as military targets across Syria. For many Syrians Nusra is synonymous with al-Qaeda. Many of their fighters are foreign jihadists; some fought with al-Qaeda in Iraq. Mr Rasoul sought to deny that they were extremists: “There is a wrong image in the West that Jabhat al-Nusra is Scarface. Jabhat al Nusra is human and we don’t hate anyone. We don’t hate Christians.

“We are not al-Qaeda. Just because some of our members share in its ideas, it doesn’t mean we are part of the group.”

Mr Rasoul would not be drawn on the Nusra Front’s exact plan for Syria’s future. But in rebel-held Aleppo a new sharia court is fast becoming a central power in the city. It is shared with the three other hardline Islamist groups operating in rebel territory: Ahrar al-Sham, Fijr al-Islam and Liwa Tawhid, though Jabhat al-Nusra takes the lead.

It refuses to employ judges who worked under the regime, choosing religious leaders to pass judgments.

Some sharia rulings, such as cutting off a hand for theft, are not operational in wartime. But locals complain of other rigid strictures being enforced.

Several men before the court said that their charges included “drinking alcohol” or “fraternising with women”. All this has angered many Aleppo residents, most of whom are moderate Muslims.

“I was wearing a long coat, with wide jeans below it, and I was outside the mosque,” said one woman. “One told me: ‘my sister, your clothes are not Muslim clothes. You should not put on make up and you should dress in black’.”

Other rebel groups are maintaining an increasingly strained unity – at least while the battle against the Syrian regime continues. Most say the next battle is against the Jihadists.

“When we started this fight against the regime it was to transform Syria into a modern state. Al Jabhat want an Islamic revolution. But in Syria we are not radical Islamists,” said Abu Obeida, the commander of a local Aleppan brigade.

Mr Obeida said groups like his were losing popularity, unable to match the jihadists social programmes.

One resident said: “I don’t like Jabhat al-Nusra. But I am telling you that, these guys will rule – for a time. It is a matter of how long before us Syrians realise we need to take their destiny in their own hands.”