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The Al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) is an Al-Qaeda Salafist-jihadi network, prominent in the rebel organizations in Syria. It seeks to overthrow the Assad regime and establish an Islamic Caliphate in Greater Syria, a center for regional and international terrorism and subversion.



The insignia of the Al-Nusra Front (whose full name is the Front for Assistance to the Residents of Greater Syria). It shows the map of Syria, the Islamic crescent and the silhouette of a jihad fighter (Almadenahnews.com website)

Overview

Al-Qaeda Entrenchment in Syria

1. During the Syrian civil war two branches of Al-Qaeda established themselves among the rebel organizations fighting to overthrow the regime of Bashar Assad. **The most prominent is the Al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra), directly subordinate to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.** The other is **The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, subordinate to Al-Qaeda in Iraq.** In addition, other Salafist-jihadi military organizations not necessarily affiliated with Al-Qaeda operate in Syria. **The two Al-Qaeda branches have an estimated 6,000-7,000 operatives, and in our assessment the number is growing.**

2. **This study deals mainly with the Al-Nusra Front,**¹ an organization established at the end of January 2012, ten months after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising. Initially it operated as a branch of the Islamic State in Iraq, a Salafist-jihadi umbrella network affiliated with **Al-Qaeda in Iraq**. To make its status official, in April 2012 **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**, leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, announced the union of the two organizations, to be called "The Islamic State in Iraq and in Al-Sham (Greater Syria)." **However, the union was not honored by the Al-Nusra Front and was annulled by Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in June 2013, who said the Front was the official Al-Qaeda branch in Syria.** That resulted in a split between the two branches of Al-Qaeda in Syria and **today they are antagonistic toward both each other and rivals.**

3. The Al-Nusra Front identifies with Al-Qaeda's Salafist-jihadi ideology. **It seeks to establish an Islamic Caliphate in Greater Syria**, which includes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority, **which will be ruled by religious Islamic law (the Shari'ah).** **The Al-Nusra Front is hostile to Israel and the West**, rejects Western values (among them democracy, pluralism and freedom of worship) and objects to all Western intervention in the Syrian civil war. It is also hostile to Syria's minority sects and religions, especially the Alawites and the Shi'ites, whom it regards as infidels. **The path of jihad is its proclaimed strategy for toppling the Syrian regime and realizing its other far-reaching objectives**, and it regards jihad as the personal duty of every Muslim (following the teachings of Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden's ideological mentor).

4. Both the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's representative in Syria, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria **seek to promote long-term strategies: the first stage** is to gain a hold over the rebel groups and establish a strong foundation in Syria for jihad, which will support **the overthrow of the Assad regime.** That will be done through collaboration (even if only partial and temporary) with other groups of rebels, especially those with Islamic affiliation. **The second stage will be to take over the new Syrian regime formed by the union of all the Salafist-jihadi forces** operating in Damascus, or at least to gain significant influence in it. The third stage will be for the jihadist regime established in Damascus (or for any other regime with a jihadist orientation) to establish **an Islamic Caliphate in Greater Syria, serving as the front line for Al-Qaeda and the global jihad in the heart of the Middle East.** **It will wage a terrorist**

¹ The full name of the organization is *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham*, ("the front for the assistance of the residents of Greater Syria"). The term *al-Sham* may be translated as both Syria and "Greater Syria." However, because of the global Islamic concept of the Al-Nusra Front and its goals, which go beyond the state of Syria, it should be translated as "Greater Syria." The organization is generally called the Al-Nusra Front, and that is the name that will be used in this study.

campaign against Israel from the Golan Heights, export terrorism to the West and other countries around the world and be a center for Islamic subversion and terrorism against the pro-Western Arab and Islamic countries.

Assessment of the Al-Nusra Front's Military Capabilities

5. The Al-Nusra Front is **the most prominent Salafist-jihadi organization** fighting in the Syrian civil war and is headed by a leader called an *Amir* ("leader," a common title in contemporary jihadist organizations). It refers to a leader with both political and religious authority, as was set down at the dawn of Islam. Subordinate to him are local leaders (*u'maraa*) in Syria's cities and governorates (sometimes there is more than one *amir* in a governorate). The highest body in the Al-Nusra Front is the **Majlis Shura al-Mujahedeen** (the Consulting Council of the Jihad Fighters). Within the leadership there are designated staff and operatives dealing with **military operations, fund raising, acquiring weapons and smuggling them into Syria, religious affairs, information and public relations**. The Al-Nusra Front operates military units in the various governorates. They are usually called battalions or companies. They are accompanied by **governance, religious and information networks, whose objective is to strengthen the Al-Nusra Front's influence among the people, gain their trust and fill the void created by the collapse of Syrian administration in broad areas of Syria**.

6. The Al-Nusra Front leader on the ground goes by the name of Abu Muhammad al-Julani (there are contradicting, unverified versions of his real name). He is apparently a Syrian, possibly from the Golan Heights, who gained **operational experience in Iraq** fighting the United States and its allies. In the past, he was a follower of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who led the jihad fighters sent to Iraq by Al-Qaeda after the American invasion in March 2003. After the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, Abu Muhammad al-Julani was sent there by Al-Qaeda in Iraq to establish the Al-Nusra Front. **Other Al-Qaeda operatives who gained experience in Iraq are also prominent in the Al-Nusra Front command, while the rank and file is made up of Syrian operatives and thousands of jihad fighters from the Arab-Muslim world (particularly Libya, Tunisia, Chechnya, Saudi Arabia and Egypt) and many hundreds from the West** (prominent among whom are 500-600 volunteers from Europe, mainly France and the UK). Those who survive are expected to return to their home countries when the fighting in Syria is over and spread jihad to their native countries (there are an estimated 5,000 foreign nationals fighting in Syria today, most of them in the Al-Nusra Front).

7. The Al-Nusra Front has issued **claims of responsibility for hundreds of attacks. Its operations, and those of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, focus on Damascus and its environs, and areas in northern and eastern Syria (Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Idlib and Deir ez-Zor).** The Al-Nusra Front also conducts intensive military activities in the region of Daraa, in southwestern Syria, where the uprising against the Assad regime began. In several governorates in northern and eastern Syria the Al-Nusra Front **enjoys considerable power and influence over the local population** (in collaboration with other Islamic organizations). Along the coast, however, where the Alawite population lives (Tartus and Latakia regions), or in the Al-Suwayda Governorate in southern Syria, where the Druze population is dominant, **the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations do not have a significant military presence or civil administration.** The Al-Nusra Front is also trying to obtain a foothold in the **Golan Heights**. In our assessment, it does not yet have a significant military foothold, although in one instance it carried out a **suicide bombing attack in the village of Sasa, harming an important symbol of the Syrian regime.** (The attack destroyed military intelligence headquarters of the Quneitra Governorate).

8. **In the governorates noted above the Al-Nusra Front wages a guerilla-terrorist campaign against bases, facilities and individuals affiliated with the Syrian army and regime** (especially the army and security forces, and government institutions). Its objectives are to create chaos for the regime and its supporters and to sever connections between the various governmental regions, disrupt their ability to govern, and to give the Al-Nusra Front (and other rebel groups) control over large territories, especially in northern and eastern Syria. To that end the Al-Nusra Front employs a **variety of combat tactics:** car bombs detonated by suicide bombers or remote control; suicide bombing attacks using explosive belts; attacking bases, facilities and airfields with light arms and mortars; detonating IEDs along main roads (the organization's operatives gained experience in using IEDs in Iraq); and attacking army and security force roadblocks.

9. **Suicide bombing attacks are the signature brand of the Al-Nusra Front** (the organization has claimed responsibility for most of those carried out in Syria). Suicide bombing attacks, especially those attacking Syrian regime centers in Damascus and Aleppo, **have given the Al-Nusra Front an operational bonus painful to the Syrian regime,** but successful attacks create a negative image. The West and Arab-Muslim countries have become increasingly worried about the infiltration of Al-Qaeda elements into the ranks of the rebels and in consequence are less willing to support the

opponents of the Syrian regime. In addition, the suicide bombing attacks alienate some of the Syrian public because they are sometimes **carried out indiscriminately**, killing innocent civilians who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Apparently, the use of suicide bombings was inspired by Iraq, where for many years Al-Qaeda organizations have carried out mass-casualty attacks which kill and maim many civilians.

10. The Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations **collaborate with Islamic rebel groups** that do not necessarily share Al-Qaeda's ideology. There is also ad-hoc **collaboration between them and the Free Syrian Army, the organization leading the fighting against the Syrian regime, which is Syrian nationalist and secular in character** (although many of its fighters clearly have an Islamic affiliation). In several areas there is military collaboration between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, despite their rivalry. On the other hand, there is tension between on the one hand the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations, and on the other the Free Syrian Army, which in some instances deteriorated into violent confrontations. There are also tensions within the Salafist-jihadi organizations. At this point, **as long as fighting the Syrian army, their common enemy, continues, they are willing to contain their basic differences to prevent deterioration to a general confrontation**. However, the morning after, and perhaps before, **a violent struggle is liable to break out to determine the nature and image of the future Syrian regime, in which the Al-Nusra Front is expected to play an important role**.

Assisting the Syrian Population

11. Many areas in northern and eastern Syria which fell under the influence of the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups have turned into what are known as "**liberated zones**." For the Al-Nusra Front it is particularly important to provide local Syrian residents with support and assistance and **to establish an alternative rule in areas where the Syrian regime is no longer sovereign**. To that end the Al-Nusra Front has set up designated bodies in the various zones. They distribute food, clothing, blankets and other necessary items and operate legal, policing, educational and health systems. Western correspondents who visited the liberated zones reported in most cases that **the local residents were satisfied** with their lives, which had returned to normal after the collapse of local Syrian governance. However, in some places, **complaints were heard**, especially about the **strict code of behavior that had been enforced** (the

insistence on "modest" dress for women, for example) and **acts of cruelty** (takeover of resources, execution of prisoners, maltreatment of minority sects).

12. In northern Syria **the Al-Nusra Front and its allies successfully took over vital governmental facilities**, among them oil and gas fields and pipelines, dams, power plants and grain silos. They and other rebel groups operate the facilities, sometimes in tacit agreement with the Syrian regime (delivering oil and gas to the regime they are fighting in return for payment). The profits (especially from the oil fields) **provide the Al-Nusra Front with a high monthly income** enabling it to pay its operatives' salaries, purchase weapons and assist the population.

Evaluation of Risks for Israel, the West and the Pro-Western Arab-Muslim Countries

13. **The civil war turned Syria into a magnet for Al-Qaeda and global jihad operatives, and they continue to arrive in large numbers.** Jihadist fighters who came to Syria from Iraq, other Arab-Muslim countries and the West joined the local Syrian operatives and established jihadist organizations which include the **Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria**. Some of the volunteers joined the Free Syrian Army and other Islamic military organizations not affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad. Some of them moved from one organization to another and wound up in jihadist organizations with upgraded military capabilities and strong ideological attraction. However, at this point it is difficult to predict how the civil war will end, what the relative power of the Al-Nusra Front and the other jihadist organizations will be, what the balance of power will be between the various organizations affiliated with the global jihad and the national Syrian organizations or the Islamic Syrian organizations, and how the events of the second wave of regional upheaval in Egypt will influence the power of the various organizations and further developments.

14. In any event, at this time (summer 2013), **the Al-Nusra Front, designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and a number of European countries, is one of the prominent organizations among the rebels.** That is because of its operational capabilities and influence among the population. **Its top priority is currently fighting the Syrian regime to topple it**, not, at this time, to impose Islamic religious law in Syria or promote an agenda of regional or global jihadist terrorism. To that end the organization often tries to behave pragmatically, joining with other rebel organizations (including those which have reservations about Al-Qaeda). It generally

does not enforce its radical ideology on the Syrian population in the regions it controls, and invests a great deal of effort in assisting the local population and filling the administrative vacuum in the "liberated zones."

15. However, in our assessment, for the medium- and long-term future, the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations can be expected **to make an attempt to take control of the Syrian uprising (if it succeeds) and realize their vision of an Islamic Caliphate in Greater Syria**. In our assessment, they will face many difficulties in attaining their goal, caused by Syria's political and social character as a state with many ethnic groups and religions and with a governmental and ideological tradition of secular Arab nationalism. In addition, there are many differences between the Islamic organizations operating in Syria, even those affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Thus it can be assumed that the Al-Nusra Front's chances of taking control of the Syrian revolution and establishing a Syrian regime affiliated with Al-Qaeda are low. Nevertheless, in our assessment the Al-Nusra Front has the ability to become more powerful and may be the dominant player among the rebels, even the morning after. Such a force will have to be recognized and may be difficult to suppress.

16. Today the Al-Nusra Front is prominent among the rebel organizations because of its military and financial capabilities, its effective chain of command and control, and the deep ideological commitment of its operatives. Even if it does not take control of the Syrian revolution, in our assessment it will be an important factor in shaping its religious-sectarian character, will destabilize Syria and make it difficult for any Syrian regime to govern (whether a weakened Assad regime or one that is propped up by a flimsy coalition of rebel organizations). **In the likely scenario of long-term, unstable governance by an administrative center in Damascus, the Al-Nusra Front might emerge as stronger and influence events in Syria. It will try to exploit its status to promote its (and Al-Qaeda's) end goal of turning Syria into Al-Qaeda's front-line base in the heart of the Middle East, in close geographical proximity to Israel, Europe and the pro-Western Arab-Muslim states.**

17. The Al-Nusra Front's strengthening in Syria (even without taking control of it) **has the potential to be regionally and internationally threatening:**

1) Turning Syria into a center for the global jihad of anti-Israeli terrorism:

A. **Ideologically**, for the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations operating in Syria, the State of Israel should be annihilated.

The Islamic Caliphate that will arise in Greater Syria **will include Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and "Palestine."** The first video issued by the Front after its foundation shows a picture of the **Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem** flying the flags of the Al-Nusra Front and the global jihad. On February 12, 2012, Al-Qaeda leader **Ayman al-Zawahiri** said that after the fall of the Syrian regime **Syria would become a base for jihad warfare** whose objective would be "to found a country to defend Muslim lands, **liberate the Golan and pursue jihad until the flags of victory fly over the hills of occupied Jerusalem.**" Other Al-Nusra Front operatives made similar declarations.

B. **Practically**, the Al-Nusra Front **can be expected to establish an operative terrorist infrastructure in the Golan Heights**, a continuation of the military infrastructure it is currently constructing in Daraa in southwestern Syria. In our assessment, Hezbollah and the Palestinian terrorist organizations may integrate themselves into terrorist attacks from the Golan Heights, despite the fundamental ideological differences between them, the Al-Nusra Front and other global jihad organizations. In addition, in our assessment the Al-Nusra Front will also try to join jihadist networks and organizations in the territories bordering on Israel **to attack it** (such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in the Sinai Peninsula, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades in Lebanon, and the Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem in the Gaza Strip)



Ayman al-Zawahiri in a video posted on February 12, 2012, calling for the establishment of a state in Syria which would "liberate" the Golan Heights and wage a jihad against Israel "until the flags of victory fly over the hills of occupied Jerusalem" (YouTube 2013)

2) **Taking control of advanced weapons belonging to the Syrian regime, including chemical weapons:** The Al-Nusra Front and the other global jihad organizations make an ongoing effort to take over the Syrian regime's weapons depots. As the central government loses its power and ability to rule, there is an increasing danger that **the weapons of the Syrian army, including advanced systems, may fall into jihadist hands.** They may also be able to acquire weapons supplied to the Free Syrian Army and other organizations with ties to the West.² In addition, as the Syrian regime weakens, **the Syrian army's chemical and biological weapons may fall into the hands of the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations.** They may use them for **terrorist attacks in the absence of the considerations of restraint that influence** other terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah and the Palestinian terrorist organizations. In addition, weapons from Syria may be transferred to other arenas of terrorist activity, as happened in Libya (weapons looted from the Libyan regime arsenals found their way to terrorist hotspots, including the Gaza Strip).

3) **Exporting terrorism to the West:** After gaining operational experience and skills fighting in Syria, **jihadist operatives may establish terrorist infrastructures to carry out terrorist attacks in their countries of origin.** They may do so on their own initiative or following directions from the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations (a kind of return to the model of Afghanistan in the 1980s and 90s). Bashar Assad, interviewed by the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on June 17, 2013, warned the EU that **"If the Europeans supply weapons [to the rebels], Europe's backyard would become a terrorist haven, and Europe would pay a price for this."**

4) **Emerging as a regional center for terrorism and subversion:** A jihadist center in Syria will be **a danger to the pro-Western Arab-Muslim countries.** Countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt, which, one way or another, support the anti-Assad uprising, may find themselves, on the morning after, as targets for subversion and terrorism originating in Syria. **Global jihad**

² Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov raised the concern that weapons sent to Syria would fall into the hands of the Al-Nusra Front. He said that "Jabhat al-Nusra is the most effective functioning structure of the armed opposition, and I have no doubt that the overwhelming majority of weapons that have already ended up in Syria, as well as those [weapons] that will end up in Syria, will be distributed via that structure" (<http://eaworldview.com/2013/06/syria-today-the-war-on-the-economy>). Despite his clear bias (an echo of the Syrian regime's tactic to exaggerate the jihadist threat), his statement apparently reflects a genuine concern that is not baseless (because of the presence of a Chechen military unit fighting in the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front, among other things).

operatives in Syria may collaborate with Salafist-jihadi organizations in Arab-Muslim countries to subvert their regimes. The strengthening of the Al-Nusra Front and the other jihadist organizations in Syria, and their radical Sunni Muslim nature, **have already made themselves felt in Lebanon and have led to tension and violent confrontations between Sunnis and Shi'ites throughout the Arab-Muslim world.**

18. **The United States is aware of the potential dangers inherent in the Syrian crisis.** On August 6, 2013, Michael Morell, deputy director of the CIA, was interviewed by the Wall Street Journal. **He called the crisis in Syria the "top threat" facing the United States today,** and warned that the fall of the Syrian regime, which possessed chemical and other advanced weapons, **might turn Syria into Al-Qaeda's new haven** replacing Pakistan. He added that the violence in Syria could leak into its neighbors, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq (Wall Street Journal website, August 6, 2013).

The Methodology Used in This Study

19. The main methodological difficulty in preparing this study was **the lack of historical perspective on the Syrian civil war.** The study was finished in the summer of 2013 at a time when the war was still being fought in all its fury and far from being decided. A more thorough examination of the Al-Nusra Front, its capabilities, intentions, place in Syria the morning after and its influence on Israel, the Arab-Muslim world and the West, **will have to be carried out in the future in light of the results** of the war and regional and international developments. However, even now it is possible to describe the nature of the organization, its operational methods and to make an attempt to evaluate the **variety of potential dangers it poses for the Middle East and the world at large.**

20. Another difficulty was the **lack of reliable, detailed information about the organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad operating in Syria alongside the rebel organizations.** The rival sides (the supporters and opponents of the regime) **customarily issue biased, manipulative reports whose sole objective is to further their own interests.** (Each side claims to be winning and each side slanders the other.) Another difficulty was **the nature of the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria.** They are both closed, decentralized organizations with many rivals and which are **careful to preserve their secrecy** and do not reveal, even to their own operatives, information about their leaders or about how they operate.

21. **The study focuses on the Al-Nusra Front**, the most significant organization among the jihadist organizations operating in Syria, which has an important role among the rebels. However, to complete the picture the study also relates to the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria and other Salafist-jihadi organizations, although with less detail.

22. The study is based on the analysis and cross referencing of information from open sources, **especially information from sources affiliated with the Al-Nusra Front** (videos, announcements, claims of responsibility, interviews with organization operatives). In addition, **use was made of information posted on the Internet and in the various Syrian, Arab and Western media** (note should be made of **Syria Comment**, which posts important articles about the Syrian civil war and the role the jihadist organizations play in it). Helpful information was found in reports filed by Western and occasionally Arabic correspondents who visited the regions under Al-Nusra Front control in northern and eastern Syria. Correspondents reported from the field about the governance activities of the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations, and about the mood of the local population, despite the limitations placed on reporting.³

23. This study also used a number of reports published in 2012-2013 by Western research institutes specializing in Al-Qaeda and radical Islam:

1) **The Quilliam Foundation**, a London-based think tank, issued a report, apparently in the middle of 2012, entitled "Jabhat al-Nusra: Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahedi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad, A Strategic Briefing" (without date or author's name).

2) **The International Crisis Group**, an international, organization committed to preventing and resolving deadly conflict, issued a study on October 12, 2012 entitled "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition" (no author's name given).

3) **The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR)**, a British think tank based in King's College, London, whose article by **Aaron Y. Zelin** on foreign fighters in Syria was particularly helpful.

³ Nevertheless, it can be assumed that Western and Arab correspondents visiting the areas of jihadist control are limited in what they can report and sometimes are in personal danger. An article was published in the New York Times on August 22, 2013 about an American photographer who was captured by the Al-Nusra Front. He was tortured but managed to escape after about seven months. According to the article, during 2013 there were 17 foreign nationals in Syria who were abducted or disappeared.

The Structure of the Study

Overview

1. Al-Qaeda entrenchment in Syria
2. Assessment of the Al-Nusra Front's military capabilities
3. Assisting the Syrian population
4. Evaluation of risks for Israel, the West and the Pro-Western Arab-Muslim Countries
5. The methodology used in this study

Section One: The Founding of the Al-Nusra Front and its Collaboration with Other Rebel Organizations

1. General description of the civil war in Syria
2. Entrenchment of Al-Qaeda operatives in Syria before the establishment of the Al-Nusra Front
3. Declaration of the founding of the Al-Nusra Front (January 24, 2012)
4. The split of the Al-Qaeda branches in Syria and Iraq
5. The emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria as a competitor for the Al-Nusra Front
6. Collaboration between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic rebel organizations:
 - 1) Overview
 - 2) Prominent Islamic organizations that collaborate with the Al-Nusra Front
 - 3) Founding joint military frameworks of the Al-Nusra Front and other Islamic organizations
7. The relationship between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria
8. The Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria's connections with the Free Syrian Army

9. The confrontation between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria on the one hand and the Kurds on the other

Section Two: The Al-Nusra Front's Ideology

1. Overview
2. The Al-Nusra Front's ideological identification with Al-Qaeda
3. The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria's ideological affiliation with Al-Qaeda
4. The meaning of the term "Al-Nusra Front"
5. Greater Syria as an arena for Islam's historical struggle
6. The Al-Nusra Front's overall goal
7. The Al-Nusra Front's anti-West orientation
8. Hostility to Israel
9. The concept of jihad
10. The Al-Nusra Front's worldview of *takfir* and its implementation
 - 1) Overview
 - 2) Hostility to Shi'ites and Alawites
 - 3) Attacks on Christians and other sects and religions, destruction of statues and attacks on religious facilities and symbols

Section Three: The Al-Nusra Front's Structure, Leadership and Functioning

1. The Al-Nusra Front's strength and areas of deployment
2. The Al-Nusra Front's structure
3. The Al-Nusra Front leadership
4. Security and intelligence
5. Fundraising

6. Acquiring weapons and smuggling them into Syria

Section Four: The Human Composition of the Al-Nusra Front

1. An overall description of foreign volunteers
2. The approximate number of foreign volunteers
3. Foreign operatives killed in Syria
4. Operatives from the Arab-Muslim world
5. Volunteers from the West
6. Al-Nusra Front recruitment and training
7. Indoctrination/Brainwashing and military training for children and adolescents

Section Five: Description of the Al-Nusra Front's Military Activity

1. General description of the fighting
2. Car bombs detonated by suicide bombers
3. Car bombs detonated by remote control
4. Motorcycle bombs
5. Attacks on airfields
6. Attacks on Syrian military bases in rural areas
7. Use of IEDs
8. Attacks on border crossings
9. Rocket fire
10. Attacks on roadblocks
11. Al-Nusra Front activity in southern Syria
 - 1) The environs of Daraa
 - 2) The Golan Heights

12. Execution of captives

13. The Al-Nusra Front response to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime

Section Six: Filling the Governmental Vacuum by the Al-Nusra Front and Other Jihadist Organizations

1. Overview

2. The Al-Nusra Front's civil governance of various regions

1) The Al-Raqqa Governorate

2) The Aleppo Governorate

3) The Deir ez-Zor Governorate

4) The Idlib Governorate

5) The Al-Hasakah Governorate

6) The Daraa Governorate

7) The Al-Suwayda Governorate

3. Managing the oil and gas fields in northern and eastern Syria

Section Seven: The Al-Nusra Front's Battle for Hearts and Minds

1. Overview

2. The Al-Nusra Front's media

1) "The White Minaret" (al-manara al-baydhaa')

2) Websites

3. Conduct of the Al-Nusra Front media

1) Overview

2) Preaching in the mosques

3) Distribution of CDs

Section One: The Founding of the Al-Nusra Front and its Collaboration with Other Rebel Organizations

General description of the civil war in Syria

1. The Al-Nusra Front was founded during the uprising in Syria, which broke out in mid-March 2011 in the Daraa Governorate, a tribal rural area in the country's south. Since then, the uprising has spread to all parts of Syria **to become a civil war**. The **Assad regime** (supported by Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia) **and a heterogeneous rebel coalition** (supported by the U.S. and the West, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan) are pitched against each other in a war of attrition that is raging across the country. The Syrian civil war can be viewed **in the wider context of the intense upheaval that is currently gripping the Arab world**, in which the rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have been removed from power so far.

2. Now, more than two years after the uprising first broke out, **Syria can be said to be a country in a process of disintegration**, even though **Bashar Assad's regime has shown a marked ability to survive** (and in recent months **has even had some success** in fighting against the rebels). As far as governance is concerned, **Syria should not be considered a country intact**, seeing as the Assad regime currently has no control over extensive portions of Syria. It mostly controls two regions of what it considers high-priority territory: **the Damascus-Homs-Aleppo area (which the Syrian regime is trying to cleanse of rebel forces)**, and **the Tartus-Latakia area in western Syria**, the stronghold of the Alawite sect. The Assad regime is working to establish its control in these areas and is fighting **"the state of the rebels"**, who **control about two thirds of Syria's inhabited territory**.⁴

3. Caught between the warring sides, **the Syrian population** is plagued by growing anarchy, economic and social crisis, and governmental vacuum, **all of which are exploited by the Al-Nusra Front and the other global jihad organizations to entrench themselves on the ground**. **According to various estimates, the fighting in Syria has claimed over 100,000 lives so far**. According to a report issued by the U.N. human rights office on June 3, 2013, at least 92,901 people were killed by late April 2013, a number which has since increased. The report said that November 2012 saw the beginning of a dramatic increase in the number of people killed **in the rural**

⁴ From a lecture given by Military Intelligence chief Maj.-Gen. Aviv Kochavi at the 13th Annual Herzliya Conference of the Interdisciplinary Center (March 14, 2013). According to Ahmad al-Jarba, the head of the Syrian National Coalition, the Free Syrian Army controls almost half of the country's territory (Al-Hayat, August 18, 2013).

areas of Damascus and Aleppo, where the regime is working to establish its control (www.un.org). According to the Syrian Center for Human Rights, there have been **106,423 documented fatalities** since the start of the uprising, about half of them civilians (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 11, 2013). In addition, U.N. data suggest that **1,773,586 people fled from Syria. They found refuge** in Jordan (487,000), Turkey (413,000), Iraq (161,000), Lebanon (608,000), and other Arab countries (data.unhcr.org, as at mid-July 2013).

4. **The rebel groups**, numbering approximately 100,000 fighters, are **divided and split along ideological, religious/ethnic, and regional/local lines**. Some of those groups subscribe to Syrian nationalist ideology, others are Islamist in character (running the gamut from what is considered moderate to radical Islam), others still are based on tribal or clan affiliations, and finally, there are those whose identity is Salafist-jihadi (of which the Al-Nusra Front is particularly prominent). Due to their considerable division, which compromises both the effectiveness of the fighting and the rebels' ability to obtain Arab and Western assistance, the rebels found it necessary to unite their ranks and establish umbrella networks to lead the rebellion. Under the auspices of Arab and Western countries, the **Syrian National Coalition** (SNC, led by Ahmad al-Jarba) and the **Free Syrian Army** (FSA, led by General Salim Idris) were founded. **However, the functioning of those bodies is lacking, and they have limited influence on the rebel groups and on the situation on the ground**. In addition, internal conflicts occasionally take place between them, at times deteriorating into violent clashes in which the Al-Nusra Front takes part as well.

5. As of the summer of 2013, **most of the fighting takes place in the suburbs and rural areas of Damascus, as well as in the cities of Homs and Aleppo and their surrounding countryside**. Fighting also takes place in **southern Syria** (the Daraa region) and the **Golan Heights** (from where it has spilled over into Israeli territory on a number of occasions, albeit not by the Al-Nusra Front). Along with other rebel groups, the Al-Nusra Front is actively involved in the fighting in several hotspots, particularly the Damascus region and the Aleppo and Homs regions. Even though **the Syrian regime** has made a number of achievements in recent months, it seems that its war of attrition against the rebels is **far from being decided**.

Entrenchment of Al-Qaeda operatives in Syria before the establishment of the Al-Nusra Front

6. According to a report by the British Quilliam think tank, the foundation for the establishment of a jihadist network in Syria **was laid as early as in 2000**. In that year, **Abu Musab al-Zarqawi**, who would go on to become the founder of **Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq**, dispatched a number of operatives who had worked with him in Afghanistan to Syria and Lebanon. Those operatives **established "guesthouses" in Syria to train and funnel operatives to Iraq**. In the course of the fighting against the United States and its allies in Iraq, **Syria was a transit station for Arab and Muslim jihadist operatives making their way to the Iraqi theater of operations**.

7. In March 2011, when the uprising began, **Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq** (the Islamic State of Iraq, ISI) **decided to send Syrian and Iraqi jihad operatives skilled in guerilla warfare into the country**. Early on, therefore, **the Al-Nusra Front was inseparably linked to Al-Qaeda in Iraq**. However, it later defined itself (also by name) as an autonomous organization and strengthened its direct links with Al-Qaeda under Al-Zawahiri, until formally becoming an Al-Qaeda branch.

8. According to the Quilliam report, **top Al-Nusra Front operatives held a number of meetings between October 2011 and January 2012 in the Damascus countryside and Homs**. At these meetings, **a decision was made to establish a jihadist organization** to join the ranks of the rebels. The organization's objective would be to create an Islamist state in Syria and **establish a caliphate in Greater Syria** (Bilad al-Sham). It was also decided to **build military capacity for the organization**, seizing opportunities to **collect weapons and train new recruits**, and reinforce the Syrian consciousness of the Islamist nature of the fighting against the Assad regime.

Declaration of the founding of the Al-Nusra Front (January 24, 2012)

9. **On January 24**, about one year after the uprising broke out, the Al-Nusra Front released a video in which **its leader Muhammad al-Julani announced the organization's establishment and declared jihad against the Syrian regime** (similarly to subsequent videos released by the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Julani's statement was delivered off-screen). He said that toppling the Bashar Assad regime **would only be half of the battle**, since the **ultimate objective was to implement Islamic religious law (Shari'a) and unite under the banner of Islam**. He said that it was a **crime for the rebels to accept the aid of Western countries to topple the Syrian**

regime—a crime which Allah will not forgive. He went on to say that the West and the U.S. were partners in the crimes committed by the Syrian Ba'ath regime. **Al-Julani referred to the Turkish government as a pawn in the hands of the U.S. administration,** despite calling itself Islamic. He voiced his opposition to the initiative proposed by the Arab League to resolve the Syrian crisis **and strongly condemned the Iranians,** saying that they were seeking to “**revive the time of the Persian empire**”. The video was accompanied by footage of Al-Nusra Front operatives in various battle zones in Syria (Damascus, Hama, Mayadeen, Idlib, Abu Kamal, Daraa, Deir ez-Zor).

Images from the YouTube video announcing the founding of the Al-Nusra Front



A masked gunman (center) reads a statement saying that the “brigade of truth” (katibat al-haqq, apparently affiliated with the Al-Nusra Front) from the Idlib region helps the residents of Syria by waging jihad to topple Bashar Assad’s tyrannical regime. In the upper right corner (yellow) is the logo of the White Minaret, the Al-Nusra Front’s main media channel.

A group of masked gunmen carry assault rifles; the song playing in the background glorifies jihad, a common practice in videos produced by jihadist groups.



At the beginning of the video announcing the founding of the Al-Nusra Front is a picture of the Dome of the Rock with the organization's flag planted on top (upper right). Black global jihad flags inscribed with the shahada, the Islamic creed, can be seen in the foreground.

A masked gunman addresses Bashar Assad: "To the tyrant of Syria, Bashar, you should know, enemy of Allah... you are facing soldiers better than your own, who wish to die as much as you wish to live..."

The split of the Al-Qaeda branches in Syria and Iraq

10. The Iraq and Syria branches of Al-Qaeda are divided, working as competing and sometimes even hostile organizations in the Syrian civil war. The Al-Nusra Front was established in Syria by Al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch, which directed it early on. The Syrian *amir*, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, apparently took his orders from the Al-Qaeda *amir* in Iraq, **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**, who was to all intents and purposes the commander of the Al-Qaeda branches in Iraq and Syria. Apparently, to give some formality to his control over the Al-Qaeda branch in Syria, on **April 9, 2013** Al-Baghdadi released an audiotape **announcing the unification of the organizations in Iraq and Syria into the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (Al-Sham)** (youtube.com).

11. However, just one day after Al-Baghdadi's announcement (April 10, 2013), **Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the *amir* of Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, swore allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda.** Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was forced to take a stand in view of the power struggles between the two branches, announced on **June 10, 2013 that the union between the Al-Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq was no more.** In a letter he sent to Al-Nusra Front operatives in Syria, Al-Zawahiri said that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was wrong when he declared the union "without our approval, without having consulted with us, and without informing

us.” Accordingly, Al-Zawahiri called on the two branches to cooperate with each other “and stop any verbal or physical attack against the other side” (annahar, June 10, 2013, citing a letter obtained by Al-Jazeera TV from “reliable sources” in Syria).

12. In the letter sent to the Al-Nusra Front, **Al-Zawahiri recognized the organization as an Al-Qaeda branch in Syria that was not subordinate to the Iraqi branch, and thus in fact made his decision on the dispute between the two. However, instead of settling the dispute, his decision only further escalated the differences of opinion between supporters of Al-Julani and those of Al-Baghdadi, causing them to split** and weakening them both (at least temporarily). Those differences also posed a challenge to Al-Zawahiri, seeing as the leadership of the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq, under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, **publicly refused to obey Al-Zawahiri’s command**. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rejected Al-Zawahiri’s ruling, questioned its authenticity, and insisted that the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria should continue to exist as an autonomous political entity **reflecting the joint efforts of jihad** in Iraq and Syria.⁵

13. Another challenge to Ayman al-Zawahiri could be seen in a statement made by **Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami**, the official spokesman of the Islamic State in Iraq. In the statement, posted on YouTube on June 19, 2013, Al-Adnani expressed his discontent with Al-Zawahiri’s decision to rescind the union between the two Al-Qaeda branches and said that **the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq was determined to continue operating in Syria alongside the Al-Nusra Front**. Al-Shami went on to say that the split that formed between jihad warriors in Syria as a result of Al-Zawahiri’s remarks **harmed the unity and camaraderie of the jihad warriors**, since some of them went back to Iraq, some remained in their homes to avoid a civil war, and some joined other rebel groups. For the time being, it appears that **the initial shock has been overcome and both Al-Qaeda branches are entrenching themselves as independent organizations in the Syrian theater of operations**.

14. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani then gave an **ideological explanation** for the refusal of the Iraqi Al-Qaeda branch to follow Al-Zawahiri’s instructions. He said that **Islam does not recognize the artificial borders laid down in the Sykes-Picot Agreement** (1916). Accordingly, dividing the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria “contradicts our view and our faith.” Al-Adnani concluded by saying, “No one will prevent us from helping our brothers in Syria, fighting the Nusayris [i.e., Alawites], and waging jihad; no

⁵ See **Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi’s** article for **Syria Comment** (July 13, 2013): “Where Does Jabhat al-Nusra End, and the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham Begins? (hereinafter: Syria Comment, July 13, 2013). See also MEMRI report no. 983, June 18, 2013: “Jabhat Al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda in Iraq Squabble Over Leadership of Jihad In Syria”.

one will prevent us from remaining in Syria. **The lands of Syria and Iraq will remain one scene, one front with no boundaries to separate them**" (YouTube, June 19, 2013).

The emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria as a competitor for the Al-Nusra Front

15. In the wake of these developments, **Al-Qaeda's infrastructure in Syria split into two competing organizations:**

1. **The Al-Nusra Front**, headed by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the more prominent and dominant organization of the two. It is formally recognized by Ayman al-Zawahiri as the Al-Qaeda branch in Syria.

2. **The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (Al-Sham)**, under the command of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which operates as the Syrian branch of the Iraqi Al-Qaeda. That organization, which has embraced stricter methods of operation, has become a competitor for the Al-Nusra Front, with power struggles waged between them.

16. In the second half of August 2013 it was reported that **Abu Muhammad al-Adnani**, the spokesman of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, was appointed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi **as the organization's leader in Syria**. According to Iranian and Arab media reports, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani is a Syrian from Idlib who holds radical views and is well trusted by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Iran's Al-Alam TV, August 17, 2013).⁶ The main base of support of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria is in northern Syria, mainly the Aleppo and Al-Raqqa governorates (Policy Watch, September 10, 2013).

⁶ The report appeared on other websites, including the Iranian Abna website, August 19, 2013; Iraq's Ashtar TV, August 18, 2013; Middle East Panorama website, August 16, 2013.



Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the spokesman of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, who was appointed as the organization's leader (Iran's Al-Alam TV, August 17, 2013).

17. The process of Al-Qaeda's infrastructure in Syria splitting into two competing organizations was also accompanied by the formation of **separate** military-operative systems for each organization. The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria soon started carrying out its own independent military operations. The first operation for which the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria claimed responsibility was an attack on a border crossing between Syria and Iraq on March 4, 2013 and the killing of 48 Syrian soldiers and nine Iraqi guards (**Aaron Y. Zelin**, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Enters the Syrian Conflict", **Al-Wasat**, March 11, 2013).

18. **The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria subsequently expanded its operations into other areas in northern Syria.** For instance, a video released on June 17, 2013 on behalf of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria showed footage of a **suicide bombing attack in Aleppo**, with a car bomb going off at a Syrian military compound (youtube.com). Another report was released on June 17, stating that the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria fired mortar shells at Syrian tanks in the vicinity of Aleppo (halabnews.com). Prior to that, on May 15, 2013, a video was posted showing the execution of three Syrian army soldiers **in the city of Al-Raqqa** in northern Syria by the organization's operatives (youtube.com). On June 10, 2013 it was reported on YouTube that three operatives of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria executed a child who was selling water in the city of Aleppo for disrespecting Prophet Muhammad.



A child executed in downtown Al-Raqqah. The video posted on YouTube shows the Al-Qaeda flag and the caption “The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria” (youtube.com).

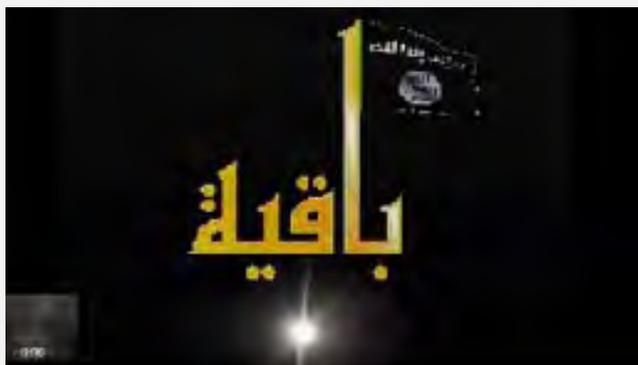
19. The Al-Nusra Front, on its part, **renounced** the killing of innocent civilians and attempted to **distance itself from the violent tactics used by the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria**. This could be seen in an interview given by Abu Idris, a top Al-Nusra Front operative, who was introduced as the *amir* of Hama, to the All 4 Syria website. In the interview Idris denied media reports according to which the Al-Nusra Front was killing innocent civilians, arguing that they were part of an American media campaign intended to besmirch the organization. Abu Idris laid the blame on the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria and the foreign operatives working for it. He also argued that the offensive attitude of the Islamic State towards civilians was one of the reasons that the organizations had split (eaworldview.com, citing an interview given to All 4 Syria on July 18, 2013).

20. The split between the two Al-Qaeda branches working in Syria is also evident in the sphere of **public relations**. The Al-Nusra Front has a media network called the White Minaret for Production of Information Materials (see Section Seven). **The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria also created its own public relations wing: the Baqiya Institution for Media Productions (*Mu’assassat Baqiya lil-Intaj al-I’lam*)**.⁷ It posted its first video online on July 12, 2013. The information wing of the Islamic State tries to gain the sympathy and support of the local inhabitants allegedly as a lesson from mistakes made in the Iraqi campaign. The following are two images from that first video (courtesy of MEMRI):

⁷ *Baqiya* is the Arabic for “staying”, meaning that the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria is **staying** in Syria.



Presenting weapons of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria



The logo of the Baqiya Institution for Media Productions, with the word "Baqiya" (in yellow) prominently featured at the center

21. An expression of the sentiments felt by Al-Nusra Front operatives in the wake of the split between the two Al-Qaeda Branches could be heard in an interview given by one of the organization's top operatives in eastern Syria to a reporter for The Guardian on July 10, 2013. According to that operative, at first there was a great deal of anger among foreign volunteers: Iraqis, Tunisians, Egyptians, and others. They were angry about the fact that the Al-Nusra Front would not take orders from the *amir* in Iraq. As a result, 80 percent of them joined the forces of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It was a severe blow to the Al-Nusra Front, whose operatives had a hard time accepting a "civil war" between the jihadist organizations. That state of affairs changed, however, and the tables turned, as described by the top Al-Nusra Front operative:

"Yes, in the beginning they [al-Qaida in Iraq] **did give us weapons and send us their leadership [...]** May Allah bless them. But now, **we have become a state. We control massive areas, and they are but a faction.** They don't control land in Iraq: **they were defeated.** We have been sending them weapons and cars to strengthen their spear against the Iraqi rejectionist government, **but now they want us to be part of them. That, I don't understand**".

Collaboration between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic rebel organizations

Overview

22. **The Al-Nusra front is not formally part of the coalition fighting against the Syrian regime.** The reason is that the organization has qualms about extensive, institutionalized cooperation with rebel groups that do not share its radical Islamic, Salafist-jihadi ideology. On the other hand, the rebel groups are loathe to cooperate with the Al-Nusra Front, both because of the substantial differences in ideology and because of concerns about undermining their relations with Western countries and pro-Western Arab/Muslim countries that assist them.

23. As a consequence, the Al-Nusra Front prefers **cooperating with Islamic military frameworks**, even those that are not necessarily sympathetic to Al-Qaeda and its Salafist-jihadi ideology. Several leaders of Islamic military frameworks belonging to the rebel forces have repeatedly stressed that they are not affiliated with Al-Qaeda and do not support the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Greater Syria. However, they have also said time and again that **this does not prevent them from cooperating with the Al-Nusra Front.** Three prominent frameworks with which the Al-Nusra Front cooperates are the **Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya** (Islamic Movement of the Free Men of Greater Syria, hereinafter: Ahrar al-Sham), **Kataeb al-Farouq** (Al-Farouq Battalions), and **Liwa al-Tawhid** (Brigade of the Uniqueness and Unity of God).



The insignia of Ahrar al-Sham

Prominent Islamic organizations that collaborate with the Al-Nusra Front

24. **Ahrar al-Sham** is an important military organization with Salafist-jihadi characteristics. It was founded in early 2013 and consists of many thousands of operatives (up to approx. 10,000). It is headed by **Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi (Hassan Aboud)**. Even though the movement seeks to establish an Islamic state in Greater Syria (similarly to the Al-Nusra Front), **it is not affiliated with Al-Qaeda**. Its main strength is in the Idlib and Aleppo governorates in northern Syria; however, **it is also present in other governorates**.

25. **Hassan Aboud**, the leader of Ahrar al-Sham, discussed his organization's cooperation with the Al-Nusra Front in an interview given to Al-Jazeera TV on June 8, 2013):

1. **Ahrar al-Sham was born from a merger of four Islamic groups**, which was announced on January 31, 2013. According to Hassan Aboud, Ahrar al-Sham is active in Aleppo, Idlib, and other governorates in Syria, with the exception of Al-Suwayda in the south and Tartus in the west. Ahrar al-Sham cooperates with other organizations in attacks on Syrian army bases and facilities and in providing social and healthcare services to Syrian citizens.

2. **Ahrar al-Sham is a movement of Islamic character** that strives to establish an Islamic state in Syria and **abolish the borders between Syria and other countries that were laid out in the Sykes-Picot Agreement**. The movement is part of an umbrella network known as Al-Jabha al-Islamiyya al-Suriyya (Syrian Islamic Front), headed by Hassan Aboud. The umbrella network consists of 11 fighting military organizations, eight of which have merged with Ahrar al-Sham.

3. **Ahrar al-Sham collaborates with the Al-Nusra Front** because, according to Hassan Aboud, "it is an organization characterized by strength, perseverance, and courage." However, when asked whether Ahrar al-Sham is affiliated with Al-Qaeda, Hassan Aboud replied that **his organization is not a branch of any other organization, group, or party** (i.e., contrary to the Al-Nusra Front, the Al-Qaeda branch).



Hassan Aboud, the leader of Ahrar al-Sham, interviewed to Al-Jazeera (youtube.com)

26. Another Islamic organization, **which has its roots in the Free Syrian Army** and cooperates with the Al-Nusra Front, is the **Al-Farouq Battalions**. Led by **Osama Juneidi**, the organization’s main strength is in the Homs Governorate; however, it has considerable presence along the Syrian-Turkish border and in other governorates. According to the organization’s spokesman, it consists of approximately 14,000 operatives (The Independent, U.K., June 17, 2013).



The insignia of the Al-Farouq Battalions. The text on the bottom reads “Jabhat Tahrir Suriya al-Islamiyya” (Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria), an Islamic umbrella network consisting of various Islamic organizations (Al-Farouq Battalions, Liwa al-Tawhid, Suqour al-Sham, Kataeb al-Ansar, and Liwa al-Islam).

27. **On June 17, 2013**, an interview with **Osama Juneidi**, the commander of the **Al-Farouq Battalions**, was posted on YouTube. In the interview Juneidi said that his

organization cooperates with the Free Syrian Army and other Islamic organizations, including the Al-Nusra Front, which has taken part in many battles alongside the Al-Farouq Battalions. Juneidi noted, however, that he is opposed to the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Syria, saying that those who strive for that objective (i.e., the Al-Nusra Front) have no understanding of Syrian reality. He added that his organization's priority is to establish an Islamic state based on the principles of Islamic religious law (Shari'ah), but noted that he will accept the choice of the Syrian people on whether or not they want to establish an Islamic state.

28. **Liwa al-Tawhid** (Brigade of the Uniqueness and Unity of God) is another Islamic organization with which the Al-Nusra Front cooperates. It seeks to establish an Islamic regime in Syria but is not affiliated with Al-Qaeda. It is headed by **Abdul Aziz Salameh**. According to the organization's spokesman, it has approximately 11,000 operatives (a figure which we believe to be exaggerated). Its main source of strength is the Sunni population in the Aleppo region (The Independent, U.K., June 17, 2013).



The insignia of Liwa al-Tawhid

29. Liwa al-Tawhid has military cooperation with Islamic rebel groups, including the Al-Nusra Front. For instance, in a video posted on YouTube on July 27, 2012, six operatives claimed responsibility for hitting a tank, an operation carried out jointly by the **Al-Nusra Front and Liwa al-Tawhid**. Another video (posted on August 13, 2012) showed an armed fighter **waving the Al-Nusra Front flag** while celebrating with **Liwa al-Tawhid** fighters and local civilians. On September 7, 2012 the **Ahrar al-Sham movement** released a video showing **Al-Nusra Front and Liwa al-Tawhid operatives** in a joint attack against a military installation in Aleppo.

Founding joint military frameworks of the Al-Nusra Front and other Islamic organizations

30. The cooperation between the Al-Nusra Front and Islamic organizations (some of them Salafist-jihadi and some of a moderate Islamic nature) has been reflected in founding joint ad-hoc military frameworks in Syria's various governorates:

1. **On May 12, 2013** it was announced that **Salafist-jihadi organizations were founding a joint military force to fight in the rural area to the east of Damascus** (Eastern Ghouta). The joint force included the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations: **Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham** (Battalions of the Free Men of Greater Syria), **Liwa al-Islam** (Brigade of Islam), **Liwa Suyuf al-Haqq** (Brigade of the Swords of Truth), and other jihadist groups. The name given to the joint force was **Al-Furqan Campaign** (Al-Furqan being a term used to refer to the Quran).



A jihadist spokesman reads the announcement on the founding of the Salafi-jihadist army in the rural area to the east of Damascus, with the Al-Nusra Front flag raised in the background (youtube.com)

2. **On November 28, 2012** it was announced that a number of jihadist organizations established a coalition (the dominant organization being the Al-Nusra Front) in the **Deir ez-Zor Governorate, eastern Syria**. The coalition's objective was to unite all jihadist frameworks in the region fighting for turning Syria into an entity governed by Islamic religious law (Shari'ah). The most prominent organization in the coalition was the Al-Nusra Front. Other member organizations included **Kataeb al-Ansar** (Battalions of the Assistants), **Kataeb**

al-Abbas (Abbas Battalions), **Liwa La Ilaha Ila Allah** (No God But Allah Brigade), **Katibat al-Hamza** (Hamza Battalion), **Katibat al-Sa'eqa** (Assault Battalion), **Katibat Jund al-Aziz** (Al-Aziz Army Battalion), **Katibat Izz al-Din al-Qassam** (Izz al-Din al-Qassam Battalion), and **Katibat Jabhat al-Da'wah wal-Jihad** (Battalion of the Front for Islamic Preaching and Jihad (source: almhajralaslamy.blogspot.com)).

3. **On November 20, 2012** fourteen Salafist-jihadi organizations fighting in the **Aleppo region** released a joint statement calling for the establishment of an Islamic state governed by Islamic religious law (Shari'ah). The organizations included the **Al-Nusra Front** (which appeared first on the list, perhaps an indication of its major role), **Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham**, **Liwa al-Tawhid**, **Ahrar Suriya**, and **Kataeb al-Islam** (longwarjournal.org).

The relationship between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria

31. The Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (hereinafter: the Islamic State) are affiliated with Al-Qaeda, both sharing a similar Salafist-jihadi ideology and striving to establish an Islamic caliphate in Greater Syria. Despite that fact, and even though the Al-Nusra Front was founded by operatives from the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq, the relationship between the two branches is hostile and has even turned violent on some occasions.⁸ The cause for such hostility and violence is the personal rivalry between the leaders of the two organizations, power struggles, and perhaps also differences of opinion as to the course of action to be pursued in the "liberated territories". In early July 2013 violent incidents took place between operatives from the two organizations. Apparently, at this point **it is still a local phenomenon**, one that the two organizations **are interested in containing and preventing from spreading further**.

32. One example of the differences of opinion between the two organizations could be seen in an article published in the Lebanese daily **As-Safir** (July 31, 2013), citing on-the-ground sources in rebel-controlled areas. According to the article, the Al-Nusra Front operates on the principle (shared by the Free Syrian Army) **that the first order of business is to topple the regime, and only then should the Islamic state be**

⁸ For instance, according to a report dated July 1, 2013, clashes broke out between the two organizations in the city of Al-Mayadeen, in the Deir ez-Zor Governorate, where a number of people were killed (almadenahnews.com).

founded. On the other hand, the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate while fighting to topple the Syrian regime.

33. **The two organizations have the bulk of their military strength in northern and eastern Syria.** In some areas in northern Syria, the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State operate as **two separate entities.** For instance, the two organizations conduct separate military activities in the city of **Aleppo**, where the Islamic State cooperates with rebel organizations that belong to the Free Syrian Army and with other military frameworks. **In the civilian sphere,** the Islamic State is not part of the Islamic religious law committees established in Aleppo by the Al-Nusra Front and rebel organizations that cooperate with it. Likewise, the two organizations work separately in the city of **Deir ez-Zor**, where they do occasionally cooperate in ad-hoc operations.⁹ In the city of **Daraa** the Al-Nusra Front has retained its own identity. In the city of **Al-Raqqa**, on the other hand, the difference between the two organizations has become blurred (Syria Comment, July 13, 2013).



Islamic State operatives; the photograph was apparently taken near Aleppo (Al-Jazeera, July 2, 2013)

⁹ For example, the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State jointly claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing attack carried out in Deir ez-Zor by an operative codenamed Omar al-Tunisi (Syria Comment, July 13, 2013).



Islamic State operatives; the photograph was apparently taken near Aleppo (Al-Jazeera, July 2, 2013)

The Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria's connections with the Free Syrian Army

34. There are fundamental differences of opinion between the Al-Nusra Front and the Free Syrian Army (a military framework that represents most of the rebel groups). Both sides agree that their immediate objective is to topple the Syrian regime. However, while the Al-Nusra Front (and its partners) seek to establish a radical Islamic jihadist caliphate in Greater Syria, the stated objective of the Syrian National Coalition is **“to establish a pluralistic democratic regime that would meet the demands of the Syrians”** (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, July 7, 2013). These two distinct objectives reflect **different fundamental views about the shape that Syria and the Syrian regime will take the morning after.**

35. Given this state of affairs, **the Al-Nusra Front’s connections with the Free Syrian Army are complex and problematic: on the one hand**, seeing as they share a common immediate objective, they maintain ad-hoc cooperation at various hotspots of fighting, based on the principle that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. **On the other hand**, both sides **realize full well** that their fundamental contrasts will come to the surface in the longer run. The Free Syrian Army is also aware of the fundamental hostility of the international community towards the Al-Qaeda branch in Syria, and the misgivings harbored by Western countries about supplying weapons to the rebels due to concerns that the weapons could find their way into the hands of jihadist organizations that will turn Syria into a hub of regional and global terrorism.

36. Despite their ad-hoc cooperation, power struggles have emerged between the Al-Nusra Front (and the Islamic State) and the Free Syrian Army (and other rebel organizations). In early July 2013 those differences of opinion escalated into violent clashes, **which have not become a full-scale confrontation so far**. One recent example is the violent clashes that took place between the organizations in the Idlib Governorate:

1. On July 6, 2013 the **Syrian damaspost website** reported that there were tensions between the Free Syrian Army and the Al-Nusra Front. The tensions first appeared in the Al-Adana region of the Idlib Governorate, sparked by an incident where girls were raped by several Al-Nusra Front operatives. This, according to the website, provoked violent clashes between the Al-Nusra Front and the Free Syrian Army, which announced that its operatives in all areas went on high alert.

2. On July 6, 2013 the **Zaman al-Wasl** website posted a report, based on sources in the town of Al-Adana, on a violent confrontation between Free Syrian Army groups and Islamic State groups. The confrontation, the sources said, lasted more than five hours, during which over 15 people were killed and dozens were injured. The alleged reason for the confrontation was an attempt by Islamic State operatives to impose their authority on the residents of Al-Adana. The Al-Farouq Battalions, an Islamic military framework operating in northern Syria, intervened to put an end to the fighting.

37. Another incident of note, which took place in mid-July 2013, is the **killing of a top Free Syrian Army officer, Kamal Hamami**. The Free Syrian Army blamed the murder on the Islamic State, argued that the officer was murdered near one of the organization's roadblocks in Jabal al-Turkman, in the rural environs of Latakia, and demanded that the murderers be turned in (Al-Jumhuriya, Al-Sharq al-Awsat, July 14, 2013). However, Free Syrian Army Spokesman Qasem Saadeddin expressed his concern that the murder would drag both sides into a civil war in which no one was interested (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, July 13, 2013). According to Arab media, on July 13 there were violent incidents between Free Syrian Army operatives and jihadist operatives in the rural areas of Idlib and in the Homs Governorate, but those incidents

ultimately did not escalate into an all-out military confrontation.¹⁰

38. At any rate, it appears that, as far as **rhetoric** is concerned, the statements made by the Free Syrian Army against the Al-Nusra Front and other organizations affiliated with the global jihad became more vehement in the summer of 2013. Evidence to that effect could be seen in the remarks of Free Syrian Army Spokesman **Fahd al-Masri**. In his statement, he demanded that the foreign fighters belonging to Al-Qaeda, the Al-Nusra Front, and similar organizations leave Syria. He stressed that the **Free Syrian Army would not let them remain in Syria, and would allow no extremist or terrorist to impose their agenda on the future of Syria** (AKI news agency, Italy, August 3, 2013).

The confrontation between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria on the one hand and the Kurds on the other

39. The Kurds, who are Sunni Muslims, currently make up the largest ethnic minority in Syria. Their number is estimated at nearly 10 percent of the country's entire population. Most of them live in northern and eastern Syria, particularly in the governorates of Al-Hasakah, Aleppo, and Al-Raqqah. They took advantage of the governmental vacuum that was formed after the collapse of the Syrian regime in extensive areas across northern and eastern Syria to strengthen themselves from the military point of view, while encouraging a process of "Kurdization" in Kurdish population centers. In this context, they created their own military force, thousands of whose members had trained in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region and in training bases along the Syrian-Turkish border (Al-Nashra, Lebanon, July 24, 2013; Al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 4, 2013).

40. The rebel organizations, including the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, have been equal parts respectful and suspicious of the Kurds. While the Kurds have claimed to support the revolt against Bashar Assad's regime, they have been accused by the rebel organizations of harboring separatist tendencies and being willing to make their own political deals with the Syrian regime. Concerns about the Kurds' separatist intentions and their connections with the Syrian regime are shared not only by the Al-Nusra Front and the jihadist organizations, but also by the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Coalition.

¹⁰ The Supreme Military Command of the Free Syrian Army asked for an Islamic court to investigate the murder and for the Islamic State to turn in the murderer to the Shari'ah court in Aleppo (Aks Alser website, July 16, 2013). In our assessment, it is highly doubtful that the Supreme Military Command had effective means to impose such a request.

41. That fundamentally suspicious attitude turned into **an overt conflict in the summer of 2013. It began with incidents that took place in July 2013 in northern Syria, involving the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria on the one hand and Kurdish militias on the other. One of the hotspots where such incidents occurred was the city of Tell Abyad, in the Al-Raqqa Governorate, northern Syria. In late July 2013 Kurdish militias took over a number of Kurdish villages in the environs of Tell Abyad as well as a border crossing between Syria and Turkey near the town of Ras al-Ein.** The violent confrontations continued in early August and even expanded into other areas in Al-Hasakah, Al-Raqqa, and the Damascus rural area. **Some of the incidents that took place in the Ras al-Ein region spilled over into Turkey** and were answered by targeted Turkish fire into Syria. Incidents also occurred near the city of Al-Qamishli, in eastern Syria, which dominates border crossings into Turkey, Iraq, and the Kurdish autonomous zone in Iraq (see detailed article in As-Safir, August 3, 2013).

42. Of the Kurdish militias that confronted the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations, **of particular note is the Democratic Union Party (PYD),** the Syrian branch of the PKK, a Kurdish organization in Turkey. In the wake of the incidents, and in light of the Turkish government's concern about Kurdish separatists entrenching themselves in northern Syria, PYD leader **Saleh Muslim** was summoned to talks with Turkish administration officials in Istanbul (July 25, 2013).

43. After his visit to Turkey on July 25, 2013, **Saleh Muslim** gave several interviews to the media trying to assuage Turkish concerns about the Kurds' separatist aspirations. In one of the interviews, given to the Zaman al-Wasl website on July 28, 2013, he noted that establishing a "temporary local administration" was a "temporary phase, just until things become more stable in Syria". According to Muslim, the idea is now being discussed with Bedouin tribes, Kurds, and other ethnic minorities. On the other hand, **Muslim said that he expected Turkey to restrain the jihadists and prevent the Al-Nusra Front from receiving weapons through its territory** (Turkish daily Taraf, August 4, 2013). On August 13, 2013 Saleh Muslim held another visit to Istanbul to discuss the issue of the assistance allegedly provided by Turkey to the Salafist-jihadi organizations operating in Syria (Al-Hayat, August 14, 2013).¹¹

¹¹ Another Kurdish spokesman, **Jafar Akash** (the PYD representative in Iraqi Kurdistan) also argued that the Al-Nusra Front received logistic assistance and weapons from Turkey. He claimed that the PYD is interested to know whether the assistance is provided by "certain organizations" in Turkey or by the Turkish administration itself (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 14, 2013).

44. When asked by a Zaman al-Wasl reporter about the violent incidents with the Al-Nusra Front, Saleh Muslim stressed that “we are protecting the Kurdish regions and the Kurds” and called on the Free Syrian Army to help the Kurds fight the “fundamentalist forces and the Al-Nusra Front”. He even demanded that the Free Syrian Army establish “a front for the deportation of Al-Nusra Front fighters”. The Al-Nusra Front, he said, **“makes Kurdish blood free for the spilling and its operatives call over loudspeakers to kill the Kurds.”** Accordingly, “this group cannot be part of Syria. We will not engage in a dialogue with it because it does not accept the other.” **Those remarks are a telling demonstration of the conflict potential that exists between the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations on the one hand and Kurdish militias on the other.**

45. In the wake of the violent clashes between the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations on the one hand and Kurdish militias on the other, **in August 2013 there started a mass exodus of Kurdish refugees into the autonomous Kurdish territory in Iraq.** On August 18 the BBC reported that tens of thousands of refugees were fleeing into Iraqi Kurdistan, and added that **the number of Syrian refugees registered in Iraq** (most of them apparently Kurds) was estimated at 150,000 (bbc.co.uk, August 18, 2013). The mass exodus gave rise to the possibility that the fighting in Kurdish regions would spread beyond the borders of Syria, as might be the case if, for example, the forces of Masoud Barzani, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, were to intervene on behalf of Syria’s Kurds.

46. A public warning with regard to that possibility was made by Masoud Barzani in an interview to the Arab newspaper Al-Sharq al-Awsat. He said that there are reports suggesting that **Al-Qaeda was attacking civilian population and slaughtering innocent Kurdish women and children.** If the reports are true, Barzani said, **“Iraq’s Kurdistan region will make use of all of its capabilities to defend innocent women and children and innocent citizens”** (aawsat.net, August 11, 2013). According to a BBC report dated August 18, 2013, Barzani said that if Kurds were “under threat of death and terrorism”, the Iraqi Kurds would be “prepared to defend them”.

Section Two: The Al-Nusra Front's Ideology



The insignia of the Al-Nusra Front: the upper line is the shahada (the testimony that “there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”), the basic tenet of Islamic faith. The bottom line reads: “Al-Nusra Front” (www.longwarjournal.org).

Overview

1. As far as we know, there is no public, detailed, authorized, and up-to-date document released on behalf of the Al-Nusra Front to present the organization’s objectives and ideology. In our assessment, this is due mainly to its interest to **conceal its ideology with the purpose of obtaining support from the local population**. This is also why the organization is calling itself “Front of Assistance” rather than “Al-Qaeda in Syria”, and why it refrained from unambiguously associating itself with Al-Qaeda until mid-2013. At this point the organization focuses on the intensive fighting against the Syrian regime and on building up its strength and status among the rebel organizations and the population, which requires it to exhibit some measure of pragmatism in its day-to-day conduct.

2. Seeing as there is no definitive, authoritative study on the organization’s ideology, we had to rely on partial information. It is based on statements made by Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani, statements by other operatives, the organization’s formal announcements, media articles about the Al-Nusra Front, and basic information on Al-Qaeda and global jihad organizations. Also of assistance was a study conducted on the Al-Nusra Front by the U.K.-based Quilliam Foundation.

The Al-Nusra Front's ideological identification with Al-Qaeda

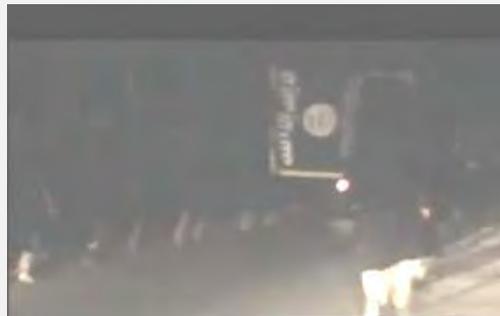
3. **It is clear that the Al-Nusra Front is inspired by Al-Qaeda's ideology.** This can be seen in statements made by its leaders and operatives and in the Salafist-jihadi terminology that appears in the announcements as well as in the videos and propaganda materials that it distributes. The Al-Nusra Front's ideological identification with Al-Qaeda goes back to the close relationship it had with the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq in its early days and also stems from the fact that it is formally and practically Al-Qaeda's official branch in Syria, directly subordinate to Ayman al-Zawahiri.

4. **However, it appears that, due to considerations having to do with tactics and reputation, Al-Nusra Front leaders usually refrain from elaborating on their ideological principles and clearly pointing out their organizational link to Al-Qaeda.** In some cases, replying to accusations made by rivals, they have even tried to argue that the organization is "Syrian" in character.¹² Even when they did admit to their links to Al-Qaeda, they did so in an ambiguous, obscure manner. For instance, in an interview given to Al-Jazeera on January 14, 2013, an Al-Nusra Front commander codenamed Abu Hassan said the following: "If Al-Qaeda seeks to establish law and justice among the people and spreads the religion of Islam in the country [i.e., Syria], then we are with Al-Qaeda" (aljazeera.com).

The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria's ideological affiliation with Al-Qaeda

5. The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, the Al-Nusra Front's competitor, also **shares Al-Qaeda's ideology.** The following are jihadist themes that appear in two videos posted online by the **Baqiya Institution**, the organization's media network (youtube.com, July 15 and 18, 2013):

¹² For instance, **Abu Luqman**, a military commander in the Al-Nusra Front, was asked in an interview whether the Al-Nusra Front had anything to do with Al-Qaeda. He replied: "Every one of us uses the same language and the same terms, because we all speak Arabic. However, the Al-Nusra Front has nothing to do with Al-Qaeda. We are Syrians" (almustaqbal.com, January 19, 2013). His statement came before Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, thus unsubstantiating the false claim about the organization being "Syrian".



Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria operatives at a camp named after Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The poster reads: “The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria—the camp dedicated to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the conqueror, the jihad warrior, may Allah accept him [as a martyr in heaven]”.

Operatives belonging to the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria on a night march in the rural area to the east of Damascus. They carry the flag of Al-Qaeda and sing songs of praise for Abu Baker al-Baghdadi and for jihad. For instance: “Our job is against those who desert the faith, the tails of the Jews”. Later in the video a spokesman says that the operatives completed their training at the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi camp, and that the Alawites are worse than the Jews and the Christians.

The meaning of the term “Al-Nusra Front”

6. The organization’s full name is **Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham**, which can be translated as the Front of Support for the People of Greater Syria. The term **nusra** is taken from the Quran and means ‘to rush to somebody’s aid’, ‘to provide assistance’, ‘to support’, ‘to defend’, ‘to give cover or protection’. It is used to imply that one should come to the aid of Sunni believers wherever they are to repel their attackers, who are considered infidels.

7. When Prophet Muhammad came to Medina, he was accompanied by the “immigrants” (*al-muhajiroun*), who had been met with open arms by the “supporters” (*al-ansar*) in Mecca about one year prior to that (621 AD). Prophet Muhammad met with 70 of his future supporters, who promised him that, when he came to Medina, **they would give him nusra**, i.e., assistance and protection from his infidel opponents in Mecca, and make sure he was well-integrated into their social group. About one year later Muhammad made his journey to Medina, knowing ahead of time that he had allies waiting for him there to give him support, or *nusra*. Those supporters hence came to be known as **al-ansar**. Muslim tradition tells of speeches made by *al-ansar* about their

willingness to go as far as to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of Prophet Muhammad. **The word *nusra*, then, originally referred to a highly significant situation where Prophet Muhammad’s staunchest supporters provided him with the most considerable support.**

8. **The term *jabha* (front)** as it is used in the name “Jabhat al-Nusra” carries more significance than other words in Arabic for a group, party, or company of fighters. It refers to a specific military campaign in a particular place. In the Islamic view, opening a “front” requires the mobilization of all the necessary resources, be they military or civilian (similarly to jihad, whose scope and form of fighting are more universal). The objective is to help Sunni Muslims in need and repel their attackers, who are viewed as infidels.

9. The name of the Al-Nusra Front does not contain the terms *jihad* or *mujahedeen*, commonly used in the terminology of global jihad organizations. This is intended to **prevent the organization from being antagonized** by the residents of Syria or the Arab and Western world. By not mentioning the term *jihad* in its official name, and by making sure to provide aid to the civilian population, the Al-Nusra Front hopes to entrench itself, gain popularity, raise funds, and receive recognition and support from various Islamic elements that have misgivings about aligning themselves with a name that clearly carries aggressive or violent connotations (*al-qaeda*, *jihad*, *mujahedeen*, *salafiyya*, or *jihadiyya*).

10. **To summarize, the term Jabhat al-Nusra has a sentimental meaning for Sunni jihadists**, who feel strongly committed to come to the aid of their fellow believers to found a manifestly Islamic entity in Greater Syria. Such assistance can be seen in the military sphere (obtaining weapons for Sunni warriors engaged in fighting against their enemies) and in the civilian sphere (raising funds, rehabilitating the wounded, or providing logistical assistance), as will be specified later in the present study.

Greater Syria as an arena for Islam’s historical struggle

11. The Al-Nusra Front seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate in **Bilad al-Sham** (the organization’s full name is the Front of Assistance to the People of Bilad al-Sham). In Arab-Muslim historic geography, today’s Syria is part of a region known as **Bilad al-Sham**—that is, Land of the North, referring to its location relative to the Arabian Peninsula. The region was a separate territorial and political unit under the rule of the

Umayyad dynasty (661-750 AD). Since then and until the beginning of the 20th century, it was part of several empires that had their seats of power elsewhere. Politically, the region (hereinafter referred to as Greater Syria) includes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian territories (Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip).

12. In the early 20th century, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I, Arab nationalists sought to establish a united Arab state in Greater Syria. However, political arrangements in the Middle East, as they came into being in 1918-1923, dissected the Ottoman Empire into nation state units and paved the way for the separate development of a Syrian nationality and other national movements established in the territory of Greater Syria. Pan-Arab nationalism, whose staunch standard-bearer was Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser, as well as the Syrian Baath party and the Baathist regime, refused to acknowledge the "artificial" borders of the new states and nurtured a vision of creating a united Arab political entity.

13. The Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations operating in Syria do not recognize the artificial "imperialist" borders drawn after World War I. However, unlike the secular pan-Arab nationalist movement, what they seek to establish in the territory of Greater Syria is an **Islamic caliphate** governed by Islamic religious law as it is interpreted by **radical Sunni Islam**. One clear manifestation of that view could be heard in an audiotape posted by Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani on YouTube on July 22, 2013.

14. According to Al-Julani, since the dawn of history Greater Syria has been an arena for the struggle of foreign empires. In his statement he mentioned the Zoroastrian Empire (i.e., Persia before the emergence of Islam) and the Byzantine Empire. However, Islam conquered Greater Syria and "Allah brought down the Byzantine and Zoroastrian empires". Modern Western imperialism, Al-Julani said, implanted the Jews in the area through the Balfour Declaration and **established infidel and corrupt Arab regimes that served the "conspiracies" of the West**. In addition, a Shi'ite revolution took place in Iran, which formed an alliance with the Assad regime—an alliance also directed against (Sunni) Islam. Al-Julani's conclusion is that **those who look at the history (of Greater Syria) "can see an ongoing struggle against Islam [that continues] into our own time"**. According to Al-Julani, **"the blessed movement of jihad" has come to restore Islam to its rightful place at the center stage**.

The Al-Nusra Front's overall goal

15. A study carried out by the Quilliam Foundation specifies the Al-Nusra Front's overall goal **as set out at its first meetings**, held between October 2011 and January 2012. **The overall goal was defined as the establishment of a Sunni Muslim caliphate in Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria). The Al-Nusra Front's idea is for the caliphate to be governed by Islamic religious law (Shari'ah) and the value of jihad, thus making it a regional and global hub of violent jihad against the U.S. and the West, Israel, and pro-Western Arab countries.** The fundamental overall goal **has not changed**: in summer 2013, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the leader of the Al-Nusra Front, called on all rebels in Syria to join forces for the "sublime goal": **to establish a Sunni Muslim regime that will impose Islamic religious law on Greater Syria** by means of jihad and prevent it from **coming under "foreign imperialist control"** (YouTube, July 22, 2013).

16. Al-Nusra Front's field operatives have often made reference to that overall goal in their statements. For instance:

1. **Tayseer al-Khateeb**, the head of the Al-Nusra Front Political Bureau in Aleppo, was asked whether the Islamic caliphate that the front seeks to establish would be able to make use of the world's modern technology. In his reply Al-Khateeb stressed that there is no contradiction between modern technology **and the Islamic caliphate that the Al-Nusra Front seeks to establish**. Such a caliphate, according to him, will encourage a climate conducive to advanced intellectual creation (YouTube, January 12, 2013, reply to question no. 8 of 22).

2. **Muhammad Isma'il Saleh Jarallah**, codenamed **Abu al-Qa'qa'**, is a Palestinian from Jordan, an operative of the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq, who was sent to Syria and carried out a failed suicide bombing attack for the Al-Nusra Front. He was injured, caught by the Syrian authorities, and gave an interview from his hospital bed to Al-Mayadeen, a Lebanese TV channel that supports Hezbollah (May 31, 2013). When asked about the Al-Nusra Front's goal, he replied: "The goal of the Al-Nusra Front in Syria **is to enforce the laws of Allah through fighting**, glorifying the shahada ("there is no God but Allah"), **and establishing an Islamic caliphate**" (breakingnews.com.sy).

3. A reporter for the **English-language edition of Al-Jazeera TV** who **accompanied** Al-Nusra Front operatives **in the Idlib region** said that the

organization's members expressed their desire to **establish an Islamic state in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and "Palestine"**—that is, within the borders of Bilad al-Sham (youtube.com).

17. **The establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Greater Syria is also the goal of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, the Al-Nusra Front's competitor Al-Qaeda branch.** One of Al-Qaeda's websites (Furqan Media) posted a video shot by a French volunteer (codenamed Abd al-Rahman al-Faransi) who was killed in Syria while in service of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria. In the video **he called for jihad in Bilad al-Sham for restoring the Islamic caliphate**, urging the president of France to convert to Islam and stop fighting Muslims (Syria Comment, July 13, 2013).

18. Nevertheless, **the Al-Nusra Front currently attempts to show some pragmatism in its approach to realizing that overall goal** while trying to differentiate itself from the competing organization, the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria. The organization's goal, said Abu Idris, the *amir* of Hama, is to topple the Syrian regime by means of jihad. Only after the regime is toppled will there be talks between the Al-Nusra Front and jihad warriors (mujahedeen) from other Islamic factions to decide on an acceptable direction for the new state to take, and the opinion of anyone who has spilled their blood to topple the regime will be taken into account (interview given by Abu Idris to All4Syria, July 18, 2013, as cited by eaworldview.com).

The Al-Nusra Front's anti-West orientation



A poster that could be seen in Syria in December 2012. The text reads: “America, stay out of our revolution, stay out of our front [i.e., the Al-Nusra Front], today we are all Al-Nusra Front” (djbhet-ennosra.blogspot.com)

19. One of the main themes in the ideology of the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations **is the strong hostility towards the U.S. and Western countries, as well as the culture and values of the West:** democracy, pluralism, individual freedom, freedom of worship, gender equality, and so forth. In an audio clip uploaded to YouTube on July 22, 2013, Abu Muhammad al-Julani stressed the fundamental difference between Western culture and the culture of radical Islam. The U.S. and the West, he said, put the Al-Nusra Front on the list of terrorist organizations due to the claim that the organization wants to enforce Islamic religious law (Shari'ah). Al-Julani emphasized that **the Al-Nusra Front does want to enforce the Shari'ah, and added:**

"We as Muslims **do not believe in a [political] process, political parties, or parliament elections,** but rather in an Islamic government with a *shura* [advisory committee] whose work will be based on justice, **and our path towards the implementation of the Shari'ah is through jihad for the sake of Allah and prayer to Allah**".

20. Other manifestations of denying the U.S. and the West and intending to confront them eventually can be found in statements made by Al-Nusra Front's field operatives:

1. In an interview given on January 19, 2013, **an Al-Nusra Front military commander codenamed Abu Luqman** was asked about his stance towards the U.S. in the wake of the Al-Nusra Front's inclusion in the U.S. list of terrorist organizations. He replied as follows: "The West fears our beards... **the West is plotting against the Muslims** and gives them a reputation of wild beasts." He added that the designation of the Al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organization only strengthened its status in Syria, because "**the Syrians hate the government of the U.S.**"¹³

2. **In an interview given by an Al-Nusra Front operative codenamed Abu al-Qa'qa',** he noted that when the Syrian regime is toppled **and an Islamic caliphate is established,** the organization's goals in Syria will be realized **and it will turn against the U.S.** (breakingnews.sy, May 31, 2013).

21. **An example of denying Western values** can be found **in a document released by the Al-Nusra Front on March 14, 2013,** after it took over the city of Al-Raqqa, which listed the reasons why Islamic religious law (Shari'ah) is not compatible with

¹³ almustaqbal.com, January 19, 2013. The interview was first posted on the BBC website on January 19, 2013, reposted in the Lebanese Al-Mustaqbal newspaper on January 27, 2013, and reposted again on the Nawafek website on July 7, 2013, that being the source used for this study.

democracy. It was argued that in democracy the ruler is judged by the people, not by Allah and Prophet Muhammad; democracy means glorifying people who hold the power instead of adoring Allah; democracy means secularism, a total separation between Allah and the state; democracy means equal rights and equal responsibilities, which gives rise to a (paradoxical) situation where the opinion of a religious, God-fearing man carries equal weight to that of the greatest imbecile when it comes to deciding who should govern whom (osint.co.il). Another example of denying democracy can be found in an interview with **Abu Luqman**, an Al-Nusra Front operative in the city of Aleppo (January 2013), in which he said, “Syria is an **Islamic state that should be governed by the Shari’ah. This is not a campaign for democracy**” (syriatelegraph.com, arabic.rt).



Part of the document released by the Al-Nusra Front, explaining why Islamic religious law is not compatible with democracy (facebook.com)

22. As a consequence of its anti-West nature, **the Al-Nusra Front is opposed to any kind of direct or indirect Western involvement in the Syrian civil war** (for instance, through pro-West Arab countries). Such resistance also stems from concerns about the West taking over the revolution against the regime and eventually facilitating the emergence of a process that will challenge the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations in Syria. However, Al-Nusra Front operatives are aware that, for now, their efforts should be directed into toppling the Syrian regime while avoiding expressions of hostility towards the U.S., as an Al-Nusra Front field commander in the Al-Hasakah Governorate (eastern Syria) told a British reporter: “**I thought we shouldn’t declare our animosity to America now.** I said, we can be jihadis but raise the flag of the FSA [Free Syrian Army]” (The Guardian, July 10, 2013).

23. The abduction of Matthew Schrier, an American photographer, is an example of hostility of the Al-Nusra Front to the West. Schrier was abducted in late 2012, and was held in Aleppo by jihadist operatives, most of them from the Al-Nusra Front. He managed to escape after seven months. While in captivity, he was tortured by his captors, who accused him of being an “American spy” working for the CIA. His abduction is only one of more than 15 cases of Western citizens, most of them journalists, who were captured or disappeared in Syria during the year 2013 (New York Times, “American Tells of Odyssey as Prisoner of Syrian Rebels”, August 22, 2013).

Hostility to Israel

24. **On the fundamental ideological level, the Al-Nusra Front’s stance towards Israel is no different than Al-Qaeda’s.** In the worldview espoused by the Al-Nusra Front, **Israel has no right to exist** as an independent Jewish state. **Its territory is to become part of the Islamic caliphate that will be established in Greater Syria (Bilad al-Sham) through jihad.** However, it is our assessment that, as long as the Syrian regime exists, toppling it will remain a top priority of the Al-Nusra Front, even though the organization may carry out isolated terrorist attacks against Israel that do not fall within its overall priority list. We believe that the **Golan Heights is perceived as a future front of terrorist attacks against Israel**, which the Al-Nusra Front may attempt in cooperation with other Salafist-jihadi organizations that operate in Arab countries that border Israel.



The title sequence of the first video released by the Al-Nusra Front shows the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, with the organization’s flag planted on top. Black global jihad flags inscribed with the shahada, the Islamic creed, can be seen as well (youtube.com, January 25, 2012). The image symbolizes the ultimate victory of radical jihadi Islam over Israel.

25. That stance was clearly demonstrated in a video uploaded to YouTube on February 12, 2012, in which Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called on the Syrians to fight until the regime was toppled and an independent Islamic government was established. He said, **“If we want to liberate Jerusalem, we must remove this regime.”** He called for jihad for the sake of Allah “to establish a state that protects Muslim land, **seeks to liberate the Golan [Heights], and continues the jihad until the flags of victory are raised above the mountains of occupied Jerusalem”**.

26. Despite that fundamental stance, the routine reports released by the Al-Nusra Front deal mostly with the fighting against the Syrian regime **and make little mention of Israel**. When they do, it is in an indirect, implicit fashion. In our assessment, it is **an indication of how low Israel is on the organization’s priority list at this stage of the fighting against the Syrian regime**. The following are several statements made by Al-Nusra Front operatives or those affiliated with them about Israel:

1. **An operative close to the Al-Nusra Front said, “After toppling the [Syrian] regime we will turn to Al-Aqsa”** (youtube.com, January 10, 2013).

2. **Mark Abu Osama**, an Al-Nusra Front operative from Stockholm, Sweden, said that after the Assad regime is toppled and a Shari’ah state is established in Syria, **the jihad warriors will turn their attention to Palestine** (i.e., the State of Israel). The Swedish operative converted to Islam following the September 11 attacks and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq (youtube.com, December 30, 2012).



Mark Abu Osama, an Al-Nusra Front operative from Sweden. In the video he says that once the Assad regime is toppled, the jihad warriors will turn their attention to Palestine (youtube.com).

3. **Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi**, a prominent radical Islamic figure in Jordan with ties to the Al-Nusra Front, said in a press interview that, **for now, the option of jihad against Israel is “not applicable”**. The reason, according to Al-Tahawi, is that the Arab countries bordering Israel prevent it from happening and serve as a “defensive wall” for the Jewish state. This funnels jihad warriors into other arenas, he said, **so that eventually they can reach Palestine** (thirdpower.org, February 2, 2012).

The concept of jihad

27. **The Al-Nusra Front emphasizes jihad** as its chosen course of action to topple the Syrian regime and establish an Islamic caliphate in Greater Syria. The organization’s operatives are viewed as jihad warriors (mujahedeen) on Syrian soil. In a YouTube video posted by the organization on June 1, 2012, Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani urged his operatives to continue fighting with all their might **as part of the jihad waged by the front against the Syrian regime**. Sermons about the importance of jihad and *shahada* (martyrdom) are routinely delivered by the organization’s clerics in **mosques, military bases, and briefings that operatives receive before leaving on their missions**. In one of the organization’s videos, a local Al-Nusra Front leader (*amir*) in the city of Aleppo is seen briefing his fighters while citing **Abdullah Azzam** (Bin Laden’s spiritual mentor, who established **the concept of jihad as the personal duty of each and every Muslim**).



Al-Nusra Front operatives meet for an ideological talk on the importance of jihad before leaving on their mission (youtube.com)

An amir codenamed Abu Osama briefs his fighters while citing Abdullah Azzam, Osama Bin Laden’s spiritual mentor (youtube.com)

28. Similarly to Al-Qaeda, the Al-Nusra Front **ascribes a great deal of significance to suicide bombings**, which have become a hallmark of its activity in the Syrian civil war. To recruit a large number of operatives willing to carry out suicide bombing attacks against Syrian regime targets, the Al-Nusra Front clerics inculcate the organization's operatives with the values of jihad and stress that after dying **they will become shaheeds in paradise**.¹⁴ Examination of statements made by Al-Nusra Front operatives and last wills left by terrorists who carried out suicide bombing attacks shows that this method of operation is an **important component** in the organization's concept of jihad. Some examples follow:



The last will of a suicide bomber who blew up a car bomb at a Syrian military camp in the Al-Qusayr region. The terrorist quotes a verse from the Quran stating that Allah has bought the believers' soul and property and given them paradise. He says that he is praying for Allah to compensate his parents for his premature departure to paradise, and that they will meet him in paradise, Allah willing. He calls on jihad warriors (mujahedeen) not to relent in their struggle "until the law of Allah [Shari'ah] is established on Earth" (youtube.com).

Jordanian Al-Nusra Front operatives in the Daraa region sing a jihad song whose refrain states that "in paradise there are pretty-eyed maidens [hurriyat]". The song praises Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the Taliban movement, and Osama Bin Laden (youtube.com).

¹⁴ According to classic Muslim tradition, a shaheed is guaranteed to receive multiple benefits: he is spared the horror of Judgment Day, absolved of all the sins he committed in his life, and granted the right to recommend up to 70 of his relatives to go to paradise (an important and exceptional privilege in Muslim society), where he will marry 72 black-eyed virgins (*hurriyat*). In addition, he will live in the highest heaven with Allah, who will take care of all his needs, and with Prophet Muhammad and the righteous men of Islam.



The last will of a Muhammad Ahmad Quneita, an operative from Gaza who assisted Islamic jihadist organizations in Syria, including the Al-Nusra Front. In the will he recites a verse from the Quran according to which Allah has bought the believers' soul and property and given them paradise. He called on jihad warriors to continue their jihad, "since jihad is the shortest way to reach paradise" (youtube.com).

The Al-Nusra Front's worldview of takfir and its implementation

Overview

29. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah often refers to the Al-Nusra Front and its jihadist allies as "**takfiri groups**" (*jama'at takfiriyya*), i.e., groups that label Muslims or Muslim groups as infidels for not embracing Islam in its radical interpretation. **This makes the blood of the "infidels" free for the spilling**, which is why accusing individuals or population groups of being infidels is a **serious allegation** that leaves them exposed to violence. During the civil war in Syria, the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations have used that view to repress minority ethnic groups.¹⁵

30. **The takfiri worldview is a consequence of the Al-Qaeda ideology** adopted by the Al-Nusra Front, **which is strongly hostile to anyone who deviates from orthodox Sunni Islam**. However, the extreme intolerance towards minority groups can also be seen as **the legacy of the Iraqi operatives that founded the Al-Nusra Front**. Those operatives were influenced by the worldview of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who called for a total war against the Shi'ah in Iraq and actually implemented that policy on

¹⁵ One example of a *takfiri* terrorist group is **Egypt's Al-Takfir wal-Hijra**, an organization responsible for a wave of terrorist attacks in Egypt in the 1970s and early 1980s. For Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, calling the Al-Nusra Front a *takfiri* rather than a jihadist organization is convenient, since Hezbollah considers itself a jihadist organization and praises the path of jihad in its publications.

the ground. This was (and still is) manifested in indiscriminate mass-murder terrorist attacks carried out by the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq against Shi'ites and other sects or religions, while hitting sites considered holy by different religions.¹⁶

Hostility to Shi'ites and Alawites

31. The Al-Nusra Front portrays itself as an organization that protects **the Sunni Muslim population from the “Alawite enemy” and “its Shi'ite proxies”**. It frequently refers to the Shi'ites as *rafidah* (pl. *rawafed*), a derogatory term that means 'rejecter', i.e., one who rejects the first three caliphs in Islam and their right to power. Alawites are pejoratively referred to by the Al-Nusra Front as Nusayris.¹⁷ The hostility towards Alawites is rooted in Islamic law, **in a well-known ruling (fatwa) issued by Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328 AD) according to which “the Nusayris [i.e., Alawites] are worse than the Jews and the Christians”** (Ibn Taymiyyah, one of the most influential jurists in the history of orthodox Sunni Islam, is an important source of inspiration for Salafis). **Thus, Ibn Taymiyyah actually removed the Nusayris from Islamic faith and considered them complete infidels.** Many Salafist jihadis, **including Al-Nusra Front operatives**, rely on that fatwa and have quoted it since the beginning of the uprising against Assad's regime.

32. One example of the negative attitude towards Shi'ites and Alawites can be found in an article released on behalf of the Al-Nusra Front by the Ibn Taymiyyah Media Center and posted on a website affiliated with Al-Qaeda (July 2, 2013). The article calls on Sunni Muslims in Lebanon and elsewhere in the world to help their brothers in Syria and work against Hezbollah (alplatformmedia.com). Various **derogatory terms** are used in the article to refer to the Shi'ites: *rafawed* (those who reject the first three ruling caliphs of Islam and their claim to power), *mushrikoun* (polytheists, those who “share” other gods except for Allah in their faith), *al-firaq al-dalla* (deviant groups, those who do not follow the path of righteousness), and *ahl al-bida' wal-ahwaa* (those with forward thought, which is forbidden in Islam, and who have questionable urges). The Shi'ite Hezbollah is referred to as *rafidi* (one who rejects the first three caliphs in

¹⁶ In this context, see article by **Muhammad al-Qaysi**, who cites Iraqi researchers as well as administration and security officials (centralasiaonline.com, March 5, 2013). Among other things, the article cites **Fouad Ali**, an expert on Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and **Saadoun al-Dulaimi**, Iraq's acting minister of defense.

¹⁷ Alawites are also referred to as Nusayris, after Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, who founded the Alawite sect in the 9th century AD. Ibn Nusayr, a cleric of Persian descent, lived and worked in Samara, Iraq, and was probably close to Hassan al-Askari, the 11th Shi'ite imam. The Sunni majority viewed the Nusayris as a non-Muslim group, with some going as far as to consider them infidels and idol-worshippers. Salafist-jihadis' use of the term 'Nusayris' instead of 'Alawites' is intended to blur the association with Ali bin Abi Talib, who according to Sunni faith is one of the four righteous caliphs who led the Islamic nation after the death of Prophet Muhammad.

Islam), while the Alawite Syrian regime is referred to as “**forces of the Nusayri regime**” (Nusayri being a derogatory term for Alawites) or “**infidel Nusayris**”.

33. Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani also discussed the Shi’ah and Hezbollah in an audio clip posted on YouTube on July 22, 2013. He said that **the Iranians use the Shi’ah as a means of taking over Islam and exterminating the Sunnis**. He referred to Hezbollah as “**Hezb Iran**” (Party of Iran), **warned the organization that its actions in Syria and Lebanon will not go unpunished**, and called on the people of Lebanon to free themselves from Hezbollah’s grip.

34. **In the practical sense, the hostility towards the Shi’ites manifested itself during the fighting in massacres of Shi’ite population and attacks on holy Shi’ite sites** (in a way, the Al-Nusra Front imported the methods of operation used by Al-Qaeda in Iraq). Several examples follow:

1. Massacre of Shi’ite residents in the Deir ez-Zor Governorate (June 2013):

it was reported that on June 12, 2013 many dozens of Shi’ite residents were massacred by the **Al-Nusra Front** in the city of Hatla, eastern Deir ez-Zor Governorate. According to one report, the number of people killed was over sixty. According to another, thirty Shi’ites were killed. The houses of the Shi’ite residents and their places of prayer were set on fire. According to yet another report, most of the people killed were armed and working for the Syrian regime. The Al-Nusra Front claimed that it was revenge for the Syrian regime’s murders in Al-Qusayr (Reuters, June 16, 2013). In one video clip, one of the armed individuals who attacked the site can be heard shouting, this is a Sunni region, it does not belong to other groups (Reuters, June 21, 2013).

2. Blowing up a holy Shi’ite tomb (May 2013):

in early May 2013 Al-Nusra Front members blew up the tomb of Hujr Ibn Adi al-Kindi, a close ally of Imam Ali, situated in the city of Adra in the suburbs of Damascus. The tomb was a site of pilgrimage for Shi’ites. Al-Nusra Front operatives disposed of the bones buried there in an unknown location (youtube.com).



The tomb being blown up (YouTube, May 30, 2013)

1. **Attacks on Zainab’s Tomb (2012-2013):** Zainab was the daughter of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, the founder of the Shi’ah, and the granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad. Her tomb is the holiest Shi’ite site in Syria, attracting pilgrims from all across the Shi’ite world. Starting in the second half of 2012, the rebels, particularly Al-Nusra Front operatives, began attacking the tomb by firing mortar shells and blowing up car bombs. Salafi elements even explicitly said that the tomb must be destroyed. In the first six months of 2013 the area was attacked several times by Al-Nusra Front fighters, who haven’t been able to take control of it so far. The area is protected by a Hezbollah force and a network of militias with volunteer operatives from across the Shi’ite world (mainly Iraq) known as the **Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade**.¹⁸

2. **Blowing up the tomb of a Shi’ite saint (February 2013):** on February 16, 2013 the tomb of Hussein bin Ali’s daughter Sukaina, situated in the suburbs of Damascus, was blown up by the Al-Nusra Front and the Free Syrian Army. Sukaina was killed in the Battle of Karbala at the age of 17 or 18 and is revered by the Shi’ites.

¹⁸ For more information, see our June 4, 2013 study: “Hezbollah Involvement in the Syrian Civil War” and two other follow-up bulletins.



The tomb before and after the explosion (youtube.com)



Al-Nusra Front operatives fighting near Zainab's Tomb (facebook.com)

Attacks on Christians and other sects and religions, destruction of statues and attacks on religious facilities and symbols

35. As a consequence of the Al-Nusra Front's *takfiri* worldview, as well as its radicalism and intolerance, **during the civil war the organization's operatives have attacked statues and religious symbols of other minority sects.** For instance:

1. In December 2012 the **Lebanese Syriac Union Party** condemned the Al-Nusra Front's attacks on civilian residences and places of prayer in **Ras al-Ein, Al-Hasakah Governorate.** In its announcement the party stated that religious

symbols were violated and that an Assyrian school was attacked and vandalized (centralasiaonline.com).

2. **The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights** reported in February 2013 that Syrians from the town of Maarat al-Numan, Idlib Governorate, accused the Al-Nusra Front of cutting off the head of a statue of famous medieval poet **Abu al-Ala al-Maari**, who was born nearby. The town's residents posted a photograph of the headless statue riddled with bullet holes and lying on the ground next to its base (centralasiaonline.com).¹⁹

36. During the Syrian uprising, there was evidence of harassment of Christian citizens by the Al-Nusra Front operatives. In early September 2013, the rebels, including Al-Nusra Front operatives, regained control of the Christian town of Ma'loula, north of Damascus. Inhabitants who fled the town said that the Al-Nusra Front operatives called the Christian citizens "crusaders", shot at crosses, and forced a Christian citizen to convert to Islam at gun point by reciting the shahada (AFP, September 11, 2013). The event had traumatic influence on Christians in Syria (see AKI, September 12, 2013).

37. Reports that appeared on YouTube as well as Arab and Western media indicate that Al-Nusra Front operatives harass Christians, **particularly in the Al-Hasakah Governorate:**

1. Al-Nusra Front operatives stopped a bus en route from Damascus in the city of Hasakah and abused the passengers: they tore off a cross worn by a Christian man, ordered the women to cover their faces, and forced several passengers to recite the shahada at gunpoint (syriantelegraph.com).

2. According to a report based on sources in the Vatican and information obtained from top Christian clerics in Syria, armed groups, particularly the Al-Nusra Front, persecute Christian residents (mainly young people) in Hasakah by placing road blocks, imposing curfews, theft, abductions, and assaults (elnashra.com).

3. According to a pro-regime source, Syrian army forces prevented a massive terrorist attack in which a car bomb (or an explosive belt) was supposed to go off

¹⁹ The reason for the removal of the statue's head is not clear. Perhaps the poet is seen as an infidel, **since his work is critical of Islam**, and is considered an atheist (Al-Maari once said, "There are two kinds of human beings living on Earth: those who have brains but lack religion, and those who have religion but lack brains"). It is also possible that the attack **was due to the Al-Nusra Front's in-principle opposition to the existence of statues, a legacy of Al-Qaeda** (that organization demolished a giant Buddha statue in Afghanistan, while global jihad operatives destroyed statues in Mali and other countries).

in a Damascus neighborhood where Christians live during the 2012 Christmas vacation. The Syrian army detained three would-be suicide bombers. They said during their interrogation that they had been told that carrying out the terrorist attack **would guarantee their place in paradise** and that “it is necessary to destroy the infidels who do not belong to our community of believers” (exposingfreearmy.wordpress.com).

38. It should be noted that Al-Nusra Front operatives interviewed on Arab media **denied these reports**, arguing that the Al-Nusra Front did not harm Christians and that Christians had no reason to fear the organization (interview with **Tayseer al-Khateeb**, the head of the Al-Nusra Front Political Bureau in Aleppo, January 12, 2013; and with **Abu Luqman**, one of the organization’s military commanders, January 19, 2013).



Armed operative stands on the rooftop of a church or a monastery. The photograph appeared in a brief report where Tayseer al-Khateeb, the head of the Al-Nusra Front Political Bureau in Aleppo, said the following: “The front does not harm Christians. We are fighting those who are fighting us and our people are killing them” (aksalser.com, January 12, 2013). It is unclear whether the photograph features an Al-Nusra Front operative or is just an illustration.

Section Three: The Al-Nusra Front's Structure, Leadership and Functioning

The Al-Nusra Front's strength and areas of deployment

1. The Al-Nusra Front is a Salafist-jihadi organization. **It is Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria and is subordinate to the leadership of Al-Qaeda, headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri.** The Al-Nusra Front operates alongside other Islamic organizations that differ from one another in their ideology, military strength, and relationship with Al-Qaeda. Some of the Islamic organizations possess a Syrian political agenda, while others, such as The Al-Nusra Front, have regional or global goals.²⁰

2. It is our assessment that the Salafist-jihadi organizations in Syria have **approx. 10,000 operatives.** We believe that the Al-Nusra Front, the most prominent jihadist organization, has **about 6,000-7,000 operatives.** Most of the operatives came to Syria from Arab/Muslim countries, and some from Western countries, to fight the regime. A few of them are Syrians. The number of operatives **fluctuates** and has been **on the rise** for the past year or so.

3. **The following are a number of estimates from Western and Arab sources about the size of the Al-Nusra Front.** According to an estimate of the British Quilliam Foundation, the organization had about **5,000 operatives** in late 2012 (in our assessment, since then it has been joined by several thousand more). An estimate by the Free Syrian Army puts the number of Al-Nusra Front operatives at **6,000-10,000** (Washington Post, November 30, 2012). An Arab website quoted Abu Muhammad al-Atawi, one of the organization's leaders, as saying that the Al-Nusra Front has **8,000 operatives** and their number is still increasing (alwakaai.com). **These estimates do not take into account the split that has taken place in the Al-Nusra Front.**

4. **The Al-Nusra Front carries out most of its military and governmental activity in northern and eastern Syria, particularly the governorates of Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Damascus, and Idlib.** The organization's military presence in other governorates is lesser. A report compiled by the Free Syrian Army and delivered to the U.S. State

²⁰ Unlike the Al-Nusra Front, some Islamic organizations do not intend to establish a radical Islamic Caliphate in Greater Syria and turn it into a center of regional and global jihad. Those Islamic organizations have no ideological, operative, and personal connections such as those that tie the Al-Nusra Front to Al-Qaeda and global jihad.

Department gave the following estimates of the Al-Nusra Front's force in different governorates (Washington Post, November 30, 2012):²¹

1. **Aleppo region: approx. 2,000 operatives**, most of them in Al-Bab, to the northeast of Aleppo.
2. **Idlib region: approx. 2,500-3,000 operatives.**
3. **Deir ez-Zor region: approx. 2,000 operatives.**
4. **Damascus region: approx. 750-1,000 operatives.**
5. **Homs, Daraa, and Latakia regions: approx. 1,000 operatives.**

5. In addition, the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (hereinafter: the Islamic State), the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq and the Al-Nusra Front's competitor, plays an important role in combat and civilian activity in northern and eastern Syria. In several areas it enjoys the support of the population, while in others its presence provoked negative reactions by local citizens.

6. In an article for the **Syria Comment**²² (July 18, 2013), **Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi** argues that **the strength of the Islamic State in northern Syria is on the rise**. He says that the Islamic State plays an important role in the **fighting on the outskirts of Aleppo** and in the surrounding countryside. The organization is trying to expand its influence and consolidate its control over outlying towns in both the Aleppo and Idlib governorates, **particularly important cities and towns along the Turkish-Syrian border**. Al-Tamimi analyzes a series of events in several cities (Azaz, Jarabulus, Al-Bab, Manbij, Ad-Dana) where the Islamic State was engaged in civilian activity (operating courts, running school bus services and schools). In some cities its conduct (enforcement of the Islamic code, executions) provoked counter-reactions by local residents, such as protests and demonstrations.

The Al-Nusra Front's structure

7. The organization is headed by a leader referred to as **amir**, a commonly used title in Islamic-jihadi organizations.²³ Since the founding of the Al-Nusra Front, its *amir* has

²¹ We believe these numbers to be slightly exaggerated. However, in the time that has passed since the report was released, the number of Al-Nusra Front operatives has grown and the areas of their military deployment and operations have changed.

²² The article is titled "The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham Expands Into Rural Northern Syria".

²³ The *amir* that heads the Al-Nusra Front is also referred to as the "general supervisor" (*al-mas'oul al-'aam*).

been **Abu Muhammad al-Julani** (see details below). In addition, there are local commanders in Syria's various governorates, **who are also known as *amirs*** and have pledged allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the chief leader (*amir*), Abu Muhammad al-Julani. Al-Nusra Front publications indicate that there is a local *amir* (sometimes more than just one) in every big city. Each governorate also has *amirs* in charge of the countryside surrounding the big cities.

8. Al-Nusra Front publications also indicate that the governing body of the Al-Nusra Front is called **Majlis Shura al-Mujahedeen** (Shura Council of Jihad Warriors, or Majlis Shura in short). The Al-Nusra Front's military and governmental frameworks that operate across Syria are subordinate to the Shura Council. The Al-Nusra Front leadership consists of designated committees and operatives involved in operations, fundraising, purchasing weapons and smuggling them into Syria, religious affairs, as well as public and foreign relations.

9. **The chief leader (*amir*) and local *amirs* are the commanders that direct the Al-Nusra Front military units.** For instance, the Al-Nusra Front forces in the city of Al-Qusayr were headed by an *amir* who was killed in March 2013. Another local leader, the "*amir* of the Al-Qusayr countryside", was detained either by the Syrian regime or by Hezbollah (alkhabarpress). **It was this *amir* who authorized a suicide bombing attack on a Syrian army base on January 23, 2013 using a truck laden with a large quantity of explosives.** It appears that at least in some governorates (such as Daraa) there is also a **military council (*majlis 'askari*)** operating alongside the *amir* (almhajralaslamy.blogspot.com).

The Al-Nusra Front's amirs (examples)



A video clip showing the suicide bomber who drove a truck laden with 20 tons of explosives into a Syrian military camp in Al-Qusayr on January 23, 2013 and blew it up. He says, "I told the amir [of the Al-Qusayr countryside] to give me a 5-ton truck, but he was generous and gave me a 20-ton truck" (youtube.com).

The Al-Nusra Front amir in Al-Qusayr, killed in March 2013 (youtube.com)



Muhammad al-Ma'jari, the amir of the Al-Raqqa Governorate, killed on June 30, 2013 near the town of Ein Issa (documents.sy)

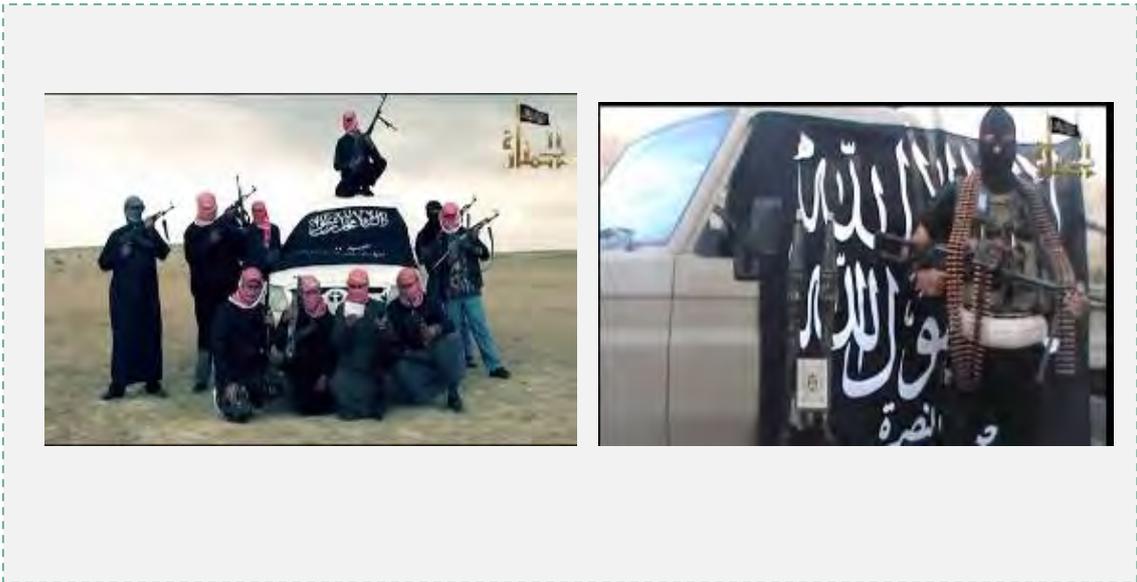
An amir in the Al-Suwayda Governorate, southern Syria (youtube.com)



One of the amirs of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate, killed when an IED attached to his car blew up on June 27, 2013 (alhadathnews.net)

10. The military frameworks of the Al-Nusra Front (as well as other rebel organizations) **are often named “brigades”, “battalions”, or “companies”**. In practice, however, these are not established, organized military frameworks such as those one may find in a regular army. According to some reports, some of the Al-Nusra Front's “companies” are made up of a single nationality (“Tunisian company”, “Chechen company”). In our assessment, this is both convenient and may help the organization in the long run by creating jihadist core networks that will go back to their home countries having acquired operative experience in the Syrian civil war.

“Battalions” and “companies” in the Al-Nusra Front



A background image used in the declaration of the establishment of Katibat al-Quds (Jerusalem Battalion) in the countryside to the east of Aleppo, May 22, 2012. The operatives swear allegiance (bay'ah) to Abu Muhammad al-Julani. On the upper right is the logo of the White Minaret, the Al-Nusra Front's media network.

A masked spokesman, presented as the commander of Syria's eastern region, says in this video that the Kata'eb al-Istishhadiyin (Suicide Martyrs Battalions) in eastern Syria claim responsibility for a suicide attack in the headquarters of the Syrian regime (youtube.com).

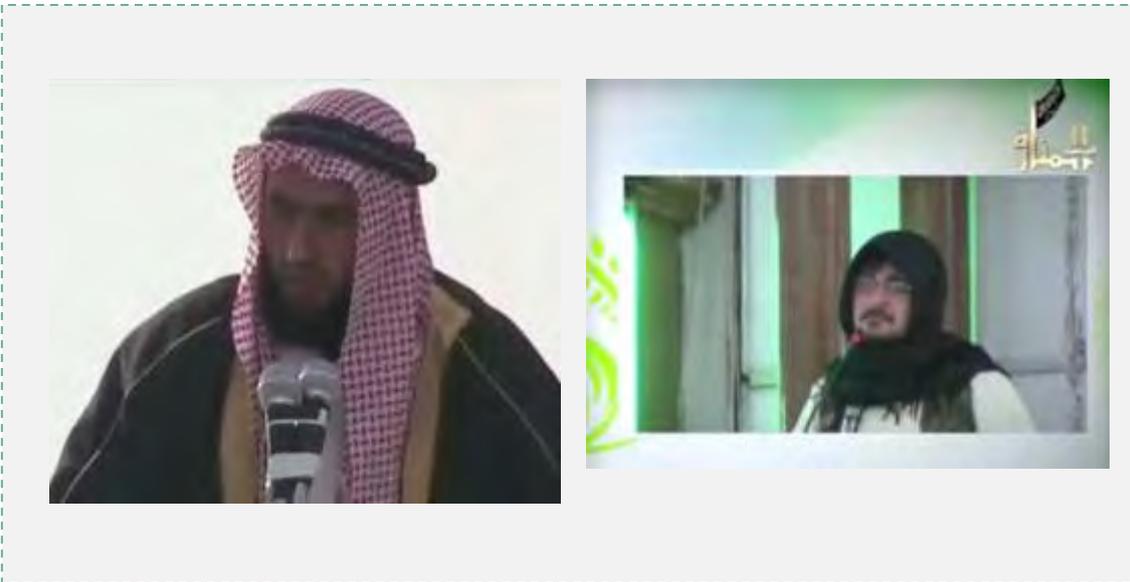


The Al-Nusra Front's memorandum of opinion no. 290, being a claim of responsibility for the killing of an Assad loyalist by a company in the Aleppo region

Operatives belonging to the Katibat al-Muhajireen (Emigrant Battalion) in Damascus warn the Assad regime against using chemical or biological weapons against the rebels (youtube.com).

11. The Al-Nusra Front directs its military operations in Syria's various governorates from **local command rooms** (also referred to as "ops rooms"), situated in rebel-controlled areas. These command rooms are usually located in civilian facilities that have been converted to military needs. Some of the command rooms are **shared by the Al-Nusra Front and the Free Syrian Army**. For instance, a television crew for Hezbollah's Al-Manar channel visited the Al-Nusra Front's destroyed communications center after Al-Qusayr was seized. The crew reported that the communications center had a 6-meter (or 20 foot) deep tunnel where they found documents labeled "Al-Nusra Front Communications Center in Al-Qusayr". It was also reported that a wide selection of telecommunications equipment used by the Free Syrian Army was found there (moqawama.org, June 6, 2013).

12. **The Al-Nusra Front has a hierarchical religious establishment** that supervises the military commanders' adherence to Islamic religious law. The Al-Nusra Front's religious establishment is headed by a **grand mufti** (*al-qadi al-'aam*). There are **Shari'ah supervisors** (*al-mas'oul al-shar'²⁴*) serving in Syria's various governorates. Among other things, **the Shari'ah supervisors monitor the religious conduct of the commanders and operatives, and inculcate them with the organization's Islamic ideology.**



The Shari'ah supervisor of Daraa, Sheikh Abu Umar al-Farouq, killed in an attack by the Syrian regime forces while delivering a sermon at a mosque (archive.org)

Sheikh Umar Abu Muhammad, the former Shari'ah supervisor in the city of Aleppo, killed by a sniper (youtube.com)

²⁴ The Shari'ah supervisor is sometimes referred to as "Shari'ah officer" (*al-dabet al-shar'i*).

13. In the so-called “liberated areas” where the Al-Nusra Front has filled the power vacuum, it has created, along with other jihadist organizations, a **system of justice and law enforcement called the Shari’ah Authority**” (*Al-Hay’ah al-Shar’iyyah*). The Shari’ah Authority operates its own **police force** called the **Shari’ah Authority Police** (*Shurtat al-Hay’ah al-Shar’iyyah*). In the various governorates there are also **Shari’ah courts** where local disputes can be resolved. **The Shari’ah authority is involved in assisting local residents, such as distributing food products and running infrastructures and public authorities** (see below).



A show of strength of the Shari’ah police, responsible for law enforcement (youtube.com)

A signboard of the Shari’ah Authority in eastern Syria (Deir ez-Zor and its environs) (youtube.com)

The Al-Nusra Front leadership

14. The information we have on the Al-Nusra Front leadership is **incomplete**. The organization is headed by **Abu Muhammad al-Julani, who carries the title of *amir***²⁵ (given to leaders of Islamic organizations). We have no knowledge of his real name. There have been various unconfirmed reports on the Syrian and Arab media about his name. **It can be estimated that he is of Syrian descent, possibly from the Golan Heights** (‘Julani’ means ‘from Golan’—operatives belonging to global jihad organizations often name themselves after their places of origin).

²⁵ Abu Muhammad al-Julani is also referred to as **al-mas’oul** (the person in charge), **al-mas’oul al-‘aam** (the chief person in charge), and **al-sheikh al-fateh** (the conquering sheikh).



A video posted on YouTube shows the above image while Abu Muhammad al-Julani can be heard speaking off-screen (youtube.com, April 10, 2013). There is no evidence that the person seen in the photograph is in fact Abu Muhammad al-Julani.

15. The study carried out by the U.K.-based Quilliam Foundation about the Al-Nusra Front states that Al-Julani **was formerly one of Al-Zarqawi's staunch supporters**, who had come to Iraq following the U.S. invasion in March 2003. According to the study, **the organization's members accept Al-Julani's leadership due to the considerable experience he gained in Iraq** (it is possible that in the meantime his leadership has been somewhat compromised due to the split between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State). According to the study, Al-Julani closely guards his privacy. He is surrounded by a handful of close allies, comes to meetings with his face covered, is always masked and has his voice distorted in videos, and refrains from exposing personal details about himself, both in the media and in meetings with Al-Nusra Front operatives.

16. **Al-Julani's worldview is based on that of Al-Qaeda, with several adjustments to the particular nature of the Syrian arena.** In a video posted by the Al-Nusra Front on January 24, 2012 to announce its founding, Al-Julani said that toppling the Assad regime was only half the struggle, **since the organization's goal was to have the entire regime toppled and replaced by an Islamic state governed by Islamic religious law (Shari'ah).** He argued that the rebels' accepting Western assistance to topple the Syrian regime was a crime which Allah would not forgive (youtube.com). In another video, posted in late December 2012, Al-Julani said that the Al-Nusra Front became the main force fighting against the Syrian regime. **He warned his supporters and the Syrian people about "attempts to replace the Syrian**

regime with a Western regime” and called on his supporters to help the local citizens.

17. On May 16, 2013 the U.S. State Department designated Abu Muhammad al-Julani as an international terrorist (state.gov). Explaining its decision, the State Department stated that Al-Nusra Front leader Muhammad al-Julani was appointed by Al-Qaeda in Iraq to topple the Syrian regime and enforce Islamic law. Al-Julani publicly swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Al-Zawahiri. Under his leadership, the Al-Nusra Front carried out multiple suicide bombing attacks that killed innocent Syrian civilians. According to the U.S. State Department, the violent, radical, and sectarian vision of Al-Julani’s Al-Nusra Front is at odds with the aspirations of the Syrian people, who are opposed to radicalism and the ideology of terrorism.



A statement released by the U.S. State Department on May 16, 2013, designating Abu Muhammad al-Julani as an international terrorist. The statement did not mention his real name.

18. **The following are details on other senior operatives in the Al-Nusra Front:**

1. **Mustafa Abd al-Latif Salih (Abu Anas al-Sahhaha):** a top military operative in the Al-Nusra Front who fought for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq. Worked as a recruiter into the Al-Qaeda network in Syria and was responsible for transferring the operatives from Iraq to Syria. According to an Al-Jazeera report from December 13, 2012, he is a Jordanian citizen (according to other sources, he is a Palestinian from Jordan). According to that report, he was appointed as commander (*amir*) of the Daraa Governorate to replace Iyad al-Tubasi, who was killed in the fighting (longwarjournal.org).



Mustafa Abd al-Latif Salih (Abu Anas al-Sahhaba) (onlinejihadexposed.com). According to another source, this is not his photograph but that of Al-Tubasi, the former commander of the Daraa Governorate.

2. **Maysar Ali Musa Abdallah al-Juburi:** an operative who gained combat experience in Iraq while fighting against the U.S. and the allied forces. Suspected of involvement in a terrorist attack in the Ninawa Governorate in 2004. In late 2011 he relocated to Syria via Mosul, Iraq, to spread Al-Qaeda's ideology and form a military terrorist infrastructure like that in Iraq. In mid-2012 he became the top military and ideological commander in eastern Syria, where he ran a training camp for the Al-Nusra Front (treasury.gov).
3. **Anas Hassan Khattab:** according to the U.S. Treasury Department, Khattab was involved with the formation of the Al-Nusra Front for Al-Qaeda in Iraq. After coming to Syria he worked closely with Al-Qaeda in Iraq to obtain assistance in weapons and funding (U.S. Treasury Department website).
4. **Abu Hassan:** one of the Al-Nusra Front's commanders (*amirs*) in Idlib.



Abu Hassan, one of the amirs in Idlib (youtube.com)

5. **Abu Muhammad al-Kurdi:** a field commander in eastern Syria.



Abu Muhammad al-Kurdi, referred to on Al-Jazeera TV as an Al-Nusra Front field commander in eastern Syria (youtube.com). It is the same person who appears in the video where Abu Muhammad al-Julani's voice can be heard.

6. **Abu Bakr:** a top Al-Nusra Front operative in Aleppo. Formerly worked as a high school teacher.



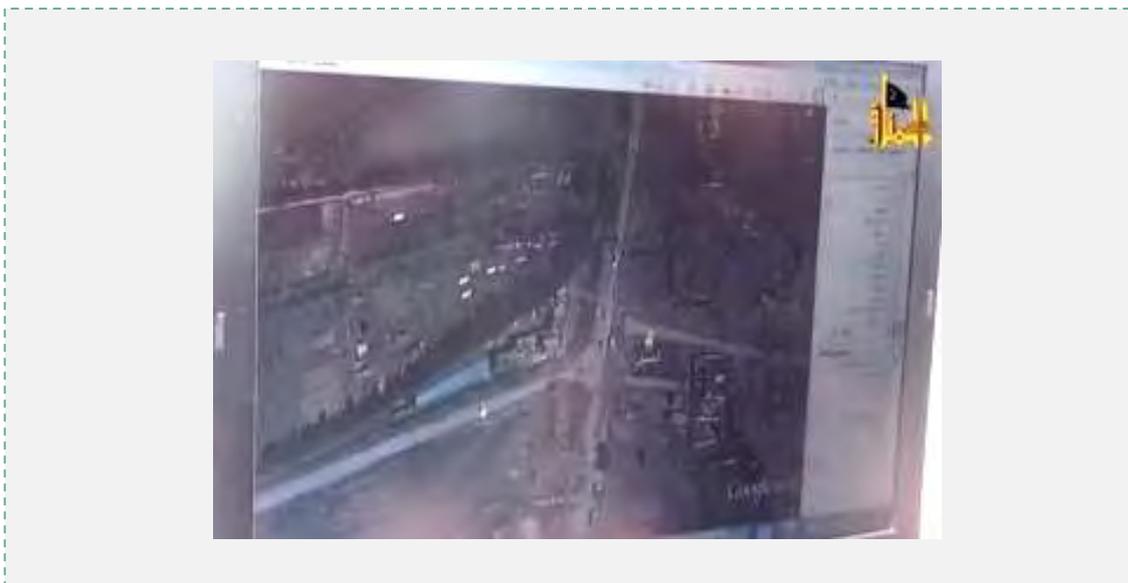
Abu Bakr, a top operative in the Aleppo region (youtube.com, from a television show on France 24)

Security and intelligence

19. **The Al-Nusra Front maintains strict security procedures**, violating which may be punishable by death. That policy draws its legitimacy from a religious doctrine, based on the principle that betraying the organization is the same as betraying Islam and the Muslims. True to its security policy, the Al-Nusra Front avoids any open discussions on issues that concern the organization, and releases no reliable reports on the organization's structure, chain of command, and functioning (it does, however, release propaganda reports as part of the battle for hearts and minds).

20. Al-Nusra Front members have very **compartmentalized** access to information on its structure, leadership, and methods of operation. The Al-Nusra Front's organizational culture rests on the idea that every individual must attend to their own responsibilities and protect the organization by maintaining secrecy. Most Al-Nusra Front operatives use codenames and many have more than one (fighters with operative experience are offered to choose a new codename so as not to expose information about their past).

21. The Al-Nusra Front runs an intelligence network for operative needs in areas where it fights against the Syrian regime. A video released by the Al-Nusra Front about a suicide car bombing at a Syrian army camp in Al-Qusayr (January 23, 2013) shows that the **organization uses Google Earth photographs for its military operations**.



A laptop computer with a Google Earth view of the route to the destination (in this case, the Syrian army camp near Al-Qusayr where a truck laden with explosives blew up)

Fundraising

Overview

22. **Early on, the Al-Nusra Front relied on financial assistance from Al-Qaeda in Iraq**, from which it branched out. In Abu Muhammad al-Julani's oath of allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Al-Zawahiri, which marked the beginning of the Al-Nusra Front's split from the original Iraqi organization, he thanked Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq, for "giving us some of the funds of the [Islamic] State [of Iraq] despite the difficult situation it was in."

23. Following the split between the two branches, **the Al-Nusra Front started to establish its own apparatus for fundraising and purchasing weapons and equipment**. It is likely that those efforts were coordinated with the leadership of Al-Qaeda, headed by Al-Zawahiri. Our impression is that, in the course of its existence, the organization has been able to establish its own support network, which, in our assessment, relies on **Salafist-jihadi charitable societies, Salafist clerics, and wealthy Al-Qaeda supporters in Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and possibly**

Egypt.²⁶ However, we believe that the organizations and individuals sponsoring the Al-Nusra Front **prefer not to mention that explicitly** to avoid becoming identified with Al-Qaeda and being exposed to pressure from local authorities. In some cases it was said that funds and weapons were being collected for **“jihad warriors” in Syria**, without any further details. It is our assessment that in other cases the donors and supporters attempt to **create the false impression of helping other rebel groups** (such as the Free Syrian Army and Islamist groups that are not affiliated with Al-Qaeda).

24. The Al-Nusra Front also receives **donations from sympathetic Syrians** (who live in Syria and elsewhere). **The organization also exploits natural resources in the areas it controls** (particularly oil and gas fields) and promotes “business initiatives” in those areas for **financial gain**. The money thus earned is used to fund assistance to Syrian residents, pay operatives’ salaries, and purchase weapons (see below).

Fundraising in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait

25. The following Salafist figures in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are some of those involved in raising funds for the so-called “jihad warriors” in Syria:

1. **Dr. Muhammad al-Arifi**, a Saudi sheikh
2. **Shafi al-Ajmi**, a Kuwaiti sheikh
3. **Dr. Waleed al-Tabtabaie**, a former Kuwaiti MP
4. **Abd al-Rahman al-Naimi**, a Qatari businessman
5. **Ali al-Suwaidi**, director of a Qatari charitable society

Sheikh Muhammad al-Arifi

26. **Dr. Muhammad al-Arifi is a Saudi sheikh** affiliated with radical Salafism. According to Al-Arifi, since the beginning of the uprising in Syria numerous Islamic

²⁶ According to Syria’s Information Minister **Omran al-Zoabi**, the Al-Nusra Front obtains weapons from the Qatari official establishment, as well as from sources inside Syria and along the Syrian-Turkish border. Most fighters in Syria, he said, are funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar (aljarida.com). The Lebanese newspaper As-Safir reported on May 31, 2013 that the Al-Nusra Front receives financial assistance from Saudi Arabia and wealthy individuals in the Persian Gulf. According to **Reuters**, U.S. and European officials believe that the Al-Nusra Front is funded by wealthy families from Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Reuters, June 22, 2013). In an article from July 24, 2013, Le Figaro said that funds are sent from Qatar by the couriers of the sheikhs Abd al-Rahman Na’imi and Ali Suwaidi (see below) without the formal involvement of the Qatari administration.

conferences have convened to raise funds “for the fighters in Syria”. The largest conference **convened in Egypt on June 12, 2013**. It was attended by Muslim clerics from various schools of thought and potential donors **who donated to the “jihad warriors” in Syria (youtube.com)**.

27. It may be assumed that a considerable proportion of the donations collected by those Islamic conferences is sent to rebel groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army and the Muslim Brotherhood,²⁷ or to other Islamic groups that are not necessarily affiliated with Al-Qaeda. However, the term “jihad warriors” **could also refer to operatives belonging to Salafist-jihadi organizations, including the Al-Nusra Front**, who may find themselves on the receiving end of donations and weapons.



Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Islamic conference in Egypt: an interview with Saudi Sheikh Dr. Muhammad al-Arifi, affiliated with the radical Salafi school of thought, who has often called for jihad against the Syrian regime. At one point he expressed his support for Al-Qaeda, for which he apologized later, apparently due to concerns about the Saudi authorities.

Sheikh Shafi al-Ajmi

28. Another individual involved in raising funds for Islamic organizations, including those of Salafist-jihadi character, is **Shafi al-Ajmi, a radical Salafist sheikh from Kuwait**. In the first half of 2013 a **campaign took place in Kuwait to enlist “jihad**

²⁷ On July 6, 2013 the Muslim Brotherhood Shura Council posted a statement on its official Facebook page expressing its appreciation to the scholars of the Islamic nation for coming to the aid of the Syrian revolution at their Cairo conference. The council says that the Free Syrian Army and “revolutionary popular elements” should be provided with money, high-quality weapons, know-how, and other assistance. The council asserts that the Muslim Brotherhood will continue adhering to moderate Islam. However, the announcement does not state that no weapons should be supplied to the Al-Nusra Front and Salafist-jihadi elements.

warriors". It was called **"Journey to Train 12,000 Jihad Warriors for the Fighting in Syria"**. The campaign participants included Sheikh Shafi al-Ajmi and other Muslim clerics from various schools of thought, some of them affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Once again, the term "jihad warriors" may be a veiled reference to the Al-Nusra Front, even though Sheikh Shafi al-Ajmi **does not explicitly admit it**.



Fundraising campaign to train 12,000 "jihad warriors" in Syria (syrianarmyfree.com)

29. A video posted on YouTube in June 2013 featured Sheikh Shafi al-Ajmi, who called on viewers to donate funds that would be used to purchase arms and ammunition for the fighters in Syria (without clearly mentioning the organization to which those fighters belonged). In our assessment, his appearance was part of the campaign to train 12,000 jihad warriors. The following are the main points he brought up:

1. **"We are planning to purchase missiles, [including] anti-aircraft missiles, explosive charges, and RPG [launchers]. We are already purchasing [these weapons] and will continue to do so.** Any country that tries to stop us is a conspirator and a traitor that will meet the same fate as the Syrian regime".
2. **"The assistance that the fighters in Syria require first of all is heat-seeking missiles and [other] guided missiles, which cost \$8,000 [each]. In addition they need fragmentation charges that cost \$1,000 [each] and RPG rockets that cost \$800 [each].** They also need 23-mm anti-aircraft machineguns." The sheikh stressed, "We are collecting the money to purchase these weapons."



Sheikh Shafi al-Ajmi and Sheikh Nabil al-Awadi (who is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood) raise funds for the fighters in Syria while mentioning account numbers and contact phones

30. Sheikh **Shafi al-Ajmi** did not mention the identity of the “jihad warriors” for whom the weapons were being purchased, and neither did he state the final destination of the donations. However, he is a Salafist, the terminology he uses is Salafist-jihadi, and he is clearly sympathetic with the jihadists fighting in Syria. It can be assumed, therefore, that at least some of the missiles, explosive charges, RPG launchers, and anti-aircraft machineguns discussed by the sheikh in his speech are destined, at least in part, for Salafist-jihadi groups, including the Al-Nusra Front.

Dr. Waleed al-Tabtabaie

31. Another individual involved in raising funds, purchasing weapons, and transferring them to Syria is **Dr. Waleed al-Tabtabaie**, a former Kuwaiti MP from the Salafi school of thought. On December 31, 2008 he took part in a rally of sympathy with Gaza, held in Kuwait under the auspices of the Salafi movement. In a speech delivered at the rally he **praised jihad warrior (mujahed) Isma’il Haniyah** and held up his shoe in defiance of Mahmoud Abbas, chairman of the Palestinian Authority. **He took part in the Mavi Marmara flotilla** in May 2010 and, according to the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Ra’i, wrote a will before boarding the vessel (as was done by Turkish radical Islamic operatives who took part in the fighting against the IDF).

32. **Dr. Waleed al-Tabtabaie took part in the campaign to train 12,000 jihad warriors in Syria.** He also illegally crossed into Syrian territory and gave an interview

to Al-Jazeera from Aleppo (June 21, 2013). In the interview he said, “Today 3,000 warriors have completed their preparations for the fighting [in Syria]. One thousand [of them] will be stationed in Aleppo, tomorrow a thousand more will be stationed in Idlib, and later another thousand [will be stationed] in northern Hama. **This is the first part of the campaign to train 12,000 fighters in Syria**” (youtube.com). He refrained from mentioning the names of the organizations which the jihad warriors would join or the destination of the money raised in the campaign; however, **he was filmed on the backdrop of the flag of Liwa al-Tawhid**, an Islamic military framework that has operative cooperation with Al-Nusra Front.



Waleed al-Tabtabaie, a former Kuwaiti MP from the Salafi school of thought, in an interview to Al-Jazeera from Aleppo (June 21, 2013, youtube.com). Clearly visible behind the sheikh is the flag of Liwa al-Tawhid, an Islamic organization that has operative cooperation with the Al-Nusra Front.

33. According to an article published in the French newspaper Le Figaro on July 24, 2013, which cites, among other things, a Syrian opposition source, Dr. Waleed al-Tabtabaie is the head of the Kuwaiti Committee for Supporting the Mujahedeen. The article states that couriers from Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia deliver funds to radical rebel groups via Turkey, Jordan, or Lebanon.

Abd al-Rahman al-Naimi

34. According to an article published in Le Figaro on July 24, 2013, messengers working for the Qatari sheikhs Abd al-Rahman Naimi and Ali al-Suwaidi transfer funds to jihad fighters in Syria. Hezbollah’s Al-Ahd website said that Abd al-Rahman al-Naimi is a Qatari businessman affiliated with the Salafi school of thought who is close to

Waleed al-Tabtabaie. Both are closely involved with Kuwaiti Sheikh Shafi al-Ajmi, mentioned above. According to Al-Ahd, Shafi al-Ajmi dispatches armed operatives to Syria using funds raised by Al-Tabtabaie and Al-Naimi. Both run Wasal, a TV station of Salafist-jihadi character that broadcasts from Saudi Arabia (Al-Ahd website citing the Al-Ahd newspaper, June 12, 2012).

Ali al-Suwaidi

35. Ali al-Suwaidi is the director of a Qatari charitable society called *Mu'assasat 'Eid bin Muhammad Aal Thani al-Khayriyya* (the Eid bin Muhammad Aal Thani Charitable Society). The society conducts a variety of humanitarian activities in Syria and elsewhere. Among other things, the society is involved in establishing and running eight field infirmaries in Syria, as well as providing food and shelter to refugees (al-watan.com). According to the Shia Rights Watch, it is an organization that spreads the Salafi school of thought in Syria and fans hatred against the Shi'ites (ar.wikipedia).

Acquiring weapons and smuggling them into Syria

36. It is our assessment that the Al-Nusra Front relies on **several sources for the acquisition of weapons:**

1. **Designated Al-Nusra Front networks:** these networks are operated by Salafist-jihadi figures and organizations from across the Arab world, which purchase weapons for the Al-Nusra Front and other organizations of Salafist-jihadi character. The weapons are smuggled into Syria through Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, whose borders with Syria are almost completely wide open. In other instances the necessary equipment is sent along with jihadi operatives from the Arab/Muslim world who volunteer to join the Al-Nusra Front and come to Syria.

2. **Acquisition networks working for the rebel groups:** Saudi Arabia and Persian Gulf states, as well as Western countries, have set up arms smuggling operations for the Free Syrian Army and rebel groups that cooperate with it. **It is our assessment that some of the weapons intended for the rebels eventually find their way into the hands of jihadist rebel groups, including the Al-Nusra Front,** even when they are not the intended recipients. It is very difficult to make sure that the acquired weapons actually reach their original

destination, being a fundamental reason why the U.S. and European countries were hesitant about scaling up the assistance provided to the rebels²⁸ and arming them with high-quality weapons.

3. Seizing weapons of the Syrian Army: a top Al-Nusra Front operative in the Aleppo region said that the organization has no shortage of weapons, because a raid on a Syrian regime base gave it more weapons than it could have obtained from other countries (world.time.com). In another instance, Syrian rebels were bragging about their success in taking over a stockpile of the Syrian regime's weapons to the north of Damascus, in an assault led by the Al-Nusra Front. The rebels presented a Konkurs anti-tank missile that fell into their hands (Al-Jazeera report on YouTube, August 4, 2013).

Weapons seized by the Al-Nusra Front



Weapons seized in an attack carried out by the organization on October 5, 2012 on a border station in Daraa, in which its operatives killed all the soldiers there, looted all of their equipment, and set the station on fire (jalnosra.com)

Weapons seized by the organization's operatives after an attack on a Syrian outpost in which some 20 Syrian soldiers were killed (youtube.com)

²⁸ One example of the uncertainty that surrounds the final destination of operatives and weapons sent to Syria can be found in an article by Saleh Abu Tawila in *Al-Arab al-Youm*, July 14, 2013. According to the article, there are **smuggling networks in Jordan that send to Syria operatives who seek to join the Al-Nusra Front or the Free Syrian Army**. Those networks smuggled some 50 operatives from the city of Maan, southern Jordan. They work with similar networks in Amman, Mafraq, and Daraa to ensure the safety of the operatives, provide them with the necessary equipment, and send them to various fronts in Syria.



Weapons seized at a military camp in the Aleppo region (youtube.com)

37. The following are stills from a video showing **Al-Nusra Front operatives taking over Kobra anti-aircraft missiles and Konkurs anti-tank missiles** at a Syrian army road block in Al-Shadi, in the environs of Aleppo (youtube.com, February 14, 2013).



A crate seized by Al-Nusra Front operatives, with the word 'Konkurs' written in the upper left



Weapons crates seized by Al-Nusra Front operatives. According to the text on the crates, at least two of them contain anti-tank Konkurs missiles.



A Kobra anti-aircraft missile that fell into the hands of Al-Nusra Front operatives

38. **Purchasing weapons in Syria:** the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations purchase weapons from private traders, sometimes in shops situated in rebel-controlled territory. An Al-Jazeera reporter in Aleppo described weapons shops found in rebel-controlled areas. The story included an interview with the owner of a weapons shop in one of Aleppo's neighborhoods, who goes by the name of Abu Adi. According to the shop owner, he “**provides a service to the revolutionaries and the jihad warriors**” and sells them weapons from the Shabiha (the Syrian regime's armed militia) and the Syrian army (see details on aljazeera.net, July 23, 2013).

Section Four: The Human Composition of the Al-Nusra Front

An overall description of foreign volunteers



Photographs of 32 foreigners killed in the fighting in Syria, as they appeared on a Facebook page dedicated to foreigners fighting in Syria²⁹ (www.rightsidenews.com, April 24, 2013)

1. The Al-Nusra Front consists of a **core group of Iraqi Al-Qaeda operatives** who moved to Syria after the outbreak of the civil war and the end of the fighting against the United States and its allies in Iraq. The core group of the Iraqi Al-Qaeda operatives teamed up with **Syrian Salafist-jihadi operatives**, and together they founded the Al-Nusra Front. However, since the organization was established, it has been joined by thousands of volunteers from the Arab/Muslim world, who now make up the majority of its members. **The process of jihadist operatives joining the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front is still going on.** According to outgoing CIA chief Michael Morell, there are more foreigners flowing to Syria each month than there were **going to Iraq at the height of the war there** (online.wsj.com, August 6, 2013).

2. The Syrian civil war **attracts Muslim volunteers from across the globe**, similarly to volunteers who came to Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Iraq in previous decades. **Most of them find their way into the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations**, while some join Islamic organizations that are considered more moderate, or even the Free Syrian Army. **During their stay in Syria, in some cases, the volunteers defect** and move from one military framework to another, which in

²⁹ While these are not necessarily Al-Nusra Front operatives, it can be assumed that most of the foreign volunteers who appear in the photograph belonged to the Al-Nusra Front or to other Salafist-jihadi organizations.

many cases makes their affiliation hard to determine. The volunteers come from the Arab/Muslim world (particularly Middle Eastern countries), West European countries (mainly the U.K. and France), Muslim countries in Central Asia (notably Chechnya), and other countries across the globe where there are Muslim communities.

3. Analysis of the volunteers shows that they are a fairly **heterogeneous population**. Below is a breakdown of that population into several variables:

1. **Military skill:** some of the volunteers (those coming from Libya, for instance) are fighters **with combat experience** gained in other military hotspots of Al-Qaeda and global jihad. A significant number of members in leadership positions are **battle-hardened Al-Qaeda-affiliated Iraqi operatives** who, as already mentioned, are part of the Al-Nusra Front's founding core group. Other Al-Nusra Front members are Afghan and Chechen operatives from military backgrounds. Other volunteers, on the other hand, **have no combat experience** or military skills. They undergo "crash courses" in military skills, in Syria or in their countries of origin, and later on they gain practical experience in fighting the Syrian security forces.

2. **Motivation and ideology:** some of the volunteers who have joined the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front and other Islamic organizations are driven by a **Salafist-jihadi ideology** with which they were inculcated by radical preachers in their home countries. Some of them are motivated by religious or sectarian considerations, meaning that they perceive the fight against the Syrian regime **as a war waged by the Sunnis against the Shi'ites**, thought to be plotting to take over the Arab world (concerns about the Shi'ites are fed by Hezbollah's victory in the Al-Qusayr campaign and rumors about the use of chemical weapons). Other reasons for volunteering are a sense of adventure and the heroic image of the rebels (in the context of the regional upheaval) compared to the negative image of the Assad regime. In some cases the volunteers adopt a Salafist-jihadi ideology **only after staying in Syria, where they undergo an accelerated process of "jihadization" and radicalization.**



Foreign volunteers in Syria: on the right is a man dressed in typical Pakistani clothing, which has apparently become fashionable among foreign fighters in Syria (syriasurvey.blogspot.com, December 1, 2012). However, apparently there are only a few Pakistani operatives in Syria.

3. **Origin:** most of the volunteers in the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations **come from Arab countries in the Middle East**. As already mentioned, the organization's core group is made up of **Iraqi Al-Qaeda operatives** (veterans of the war against the United States and its allies), as well as operatives from **Libya, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt**. **Muslim volunteers from Chechnya (Russia) are prominently represented as well**. The number of volunteers from West Europe is estimated at approximately 10 percent of all volunteers. Of particular note among them are Muslim volunteers from the **U.K. and France**. There is also a relatively small number of volunteers from other countries, including the U.S., Canada, Australia, as well as countries where there are Muslim communities (such as China).

4. **Age:** some indication of the volunteers' age can be found in a list of foreigners killed between September and November 2012 submitted by Syria to the U.N. Security Council (see below). The list provided a surprising figure about the age of the casualties (based on the age of the 51 operatives listed). Contrary to popular belief that it is mostly young people who volunteer for such wars, **the average age of the operatives on the list is 39, relatively old** when compared, for example, to the average age of the foreign fighters in Iraq (24). A considerable number of the casualties were **married and had families** (syriasurvey.blogspot.com, December 1, 2013).

The approximate number of foreign volunteers

4. It is difficult to provide a precise estimate of the number of foreign volunteers in the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations or analyze their personal characteristics with any degree of precision. There are several reasons for that:

1. **Lack of systematic records:** the foreign volunteers usually attempt to cover up the fact of their coming to Syria from their home countries to fight for the rebel organizations, let alone when it comes to the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front. The volunteers usually leave their own countries as individuals, come to countries bordering Syria (particularly Turkey) pretending to be tourists or visitors, and once there, illegally cross into Syria. The overall number of foreign operatives in Syria changes from time to time: some of the volunteers died in the fighting, others have remained in Syria, and others still have come back to their countries of origin to be replaced by new operatives. This makes it difficult to keep track of the volunteers. In some cases, the volunteers take on **false identities** using passports provided to them by the various rebel organizations.

2. **Secrecy:** the Al-Nusra Front and the rest of the organizations, as well as the volunteers themselves, usually take pains not to make their true identities publicly known, using aliases or fake names. In many cases they do not inform their families about the real purpose of their trip (in some cases their families find out about their stay in Syria only after they are killed in the fighting). Al-Nusra Front operatives, including foreign volunteers, are suspicious and cautious in their dealings with Arab and Western media. The Al-Nusra Front disseminates media reports as part of the battle for hearts and minds; however, the information it releases is strictly controlled, has the tone of propaganda, and is intended to further the aims of the organization.

3. **The volunteers' dispersal between various units:** in most cases the volunteers are scattered among military networks operating in different geographic locations (with the exception of ethnic organic units, such as one consisting mostly of Chechen operatives). Each unit is a mixture of operatives from different countries.

4. **Transfer between organizations:** in some cases the volunteers become members of the Al-Nusra Front. In others they become members of other organizations, such as the West-oriented Free Syrian Army, and then transfer to

the Al-Nusra Front for any number of reasons (for instance, more attractive radical ideology, better salary and equipment, higher motivation and morale).

5. Because of these reasons, the only estimates that exist about the number of foreign operatives belonging to the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations are **approximate**. Such estimates were calculated by research institutes in the U.S. and the U.K., as well as by researchers/experts and websites that follow the phenomenon of foreign volunteers. According to most estimates, there are now **approximately 5,000 foreign operatives in Syria fighting against the Assad regime.**³⁰ **It is our assessment that there are about 500-600 operatives from Europe. Most of the foreigners belong to the Al-Nusra Front and their number is increasing.** The following are two of the estimates:

1. **According to an article published on the Washington Institute website** in July 2013, **“about 5,000 Sunni fighters from more than 60 different countries** have joined the Syrian rebels since the uprising began in 2011.” This figure, the article says, **“makes Syria the second-largest foreign-fighter destination in the history of modern Islamism.”** The Afghan jihad drew approximately 10,000 volunteers in the 1980s but over a period of ten years, not in such a short time as the fighting in Syria. In addition, there are also **foreigners fighting for the Syrian regime** (Hezbollah operatives, Iranians, Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Iraqis, and Shi’ites). According to the author of the article, there is a good chance that the number of foreign operatives fighting either for or against the regime **will exceed 10,000 fighters on either side of the war** within a year or two (Thomas Hegghammer and Aaron Y. Zelin, “How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade?”, July 7, 2013).

2. **A study carried out by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR)** in the U.K. is based on an analysis of over 450 sources and Arab media, as well as the last wills of operatives posted on online message boards. According to the study, since the beginning of the conflict **2,000-5,500 foreign operatives** have gone to Syria to fight against the Syrian regime. **“Based on this total, the European share of this total represents 135-590 individuals,** or 7-11 percent of the foreign fighter total.” The study goes on to say that **the recruitment pace of Muslims across the globe is fast** and can be compared

³⁰ Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad claimed in an interview to CBS on September 10, 2013 that there are tens of thousands fighting against the Syrian regime. He also claimed that most of the rebels are affiliated with Al-Qaeda. We believe that the Syrian president deliberately exaggerates the number of the foreigners and the Al-Qaeda affiliated operatives, seeking to increase concerns about them in the U.S. and the West.

to the conflicts in Iraq in the 2000s, Bosnia in the 1990s, and Afghanistan in the 1980s (Aaron Y. Zelin, ICSR, April 2, 2013).

6. The summer of 2013 marked an increase in the flow of foreign operatives to Syria. The main reason, in our assessment, was Hezbollah's victory in the campaign for the Al-Qusayr region, which was perceived not only as an achievement for the Syrian regime but also as a victory of the Shi'a in the fight against the Sunna. The defeat in Al-Qusayr provoked strong reactions in the Sunni Muslim world. Sunni Shari'ah jurists, including **Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi**, considered the Sunni Muslim world's top authority on Islamic religious law, called on Muslim volunteers to go to Syria and help the jihad warriors there. It is our assessment that Al-Qaradawi and other jurists did not mean for the volunteers to join the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front but rather other Muslim rebel groups, particularly those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. It is likely, however, that many volunteers eventually found their way into the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi groups, drawn by their superior ideological power of attraction and better organization and resources.

Foreign operatives killed in Syria

7. Many foreign volunteers were killed during the fighting in Syria. Their number remains **unknown, and the estimates published vary wildly:** according to recent figures released by the **Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2,219 foreigners fighting for the rebels have been killed in Syria** since the beginning of the conflict (www.newsobserver.com, June 7, 2013). According to a Facebook page documenting the foreign fighters in Syria, **approximately 300 foreign operatives have been killed in Syria**, most of them from Middle Eastern countries (as at April 2013). However, analysis of lists of foreign operatives killed in the fighting opens up an opportunity to learn about their geographic origin and in some cases makes it possible to gain information about their personal details (full name, occupation, age, ideological motivation, and more).

8. In late November 2012 the Syrian government submitted to the U.N. Security Council a list of 142 foreign fighters killed between September and November 2012. The Syrian government's aim in doing so was to make the U.N. announce that the presence of foreign forces in Syria was tantamount to support for international terrorism (meanwhile, the media published photographs of Hezbollah operatives, who are in fact foreign fighters killed in Syria while fighting for the Syrian regime). The list submitted by the Syrians included **operatives from 19 Arab/Muslim countries:**

Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Chad, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Pakistan, “Palestine”, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey, Yemen, and Chechnya (Russia). Saudi Arabs made up the majority of the operatives on the list, followed by **Libyans**. The list also contained the names of **11 Afghans** killed in northern Syria (syriasurvey.blogspot.com, December 1, 2013). The report did not include names of Western operatives or those from other countries in the world.

Operatives from the Arab-Muslim world

Overview

9. **As already mentioned, the core group of the Al-Nusra Front is made up of Al-Qaeda operatives, veterans of the war against the United States and its allies in Iraq.** They were joined by local Syrian jihad operatives. The organization was subsequently joined by many thousands of Arab/Muslim volunteers, a significant number of whom came from **Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt**, three Arab countries which had undergone revolutions during the regional upheaval. Operatives from **Saudi Arabia and Muslims from Chechnya (Russia)** are prominently represented as well. The following is a description of the foreign volunteers from a number of Arab/Muslim countries.

Libya

10. Libya is one of the most important sources of volunteers fighting against the Syrian regime. According to one estimate, over 20 percent of all volunteers from Arab countries are experienced fighters who **formerly fought against the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya** (www.rightsidenews.com, April 24, 2013). Some of them are of Libyan descent and others are foreigners, who fought against the Gaddafi regime and moved to Syria after that regime was toppled. It should be noted that not all Libyan volunteers joined the Al-Nusra Front—some of them fight within the ranks of the Free Syrian Army.

11. The Libyan recruits usually take a flight to Istanbul (Libyans do not require a visa to enter Turkey). Once there, they continue to the city of Antakya on a domestic flight and then travel overland to towns along the Turkish-Syrian border. The volunteers are usually assisted by Islamic networks and some of them have their trip to Syria paid by Islamic organizations (Der Spiegel, April 30, 2013).



Hassan Muhammad Younes Ishtawi, a Libyan operative from Benghazi, who was killed on April 17, 2013 while fighting for the Al-Nusra Front. A med school graduate, he was formerly injured while taking part in the revolution in Libya and received medical treatment in Jordan. After his recovery, he stayed in Tunisia and from there went to fight in Syria (flash-intel.com, June 2013).

Abd al-Qader al-Misrati, an operative from Libya who carried out a suicide bombing for the Al-Nusra Front on September 16, 2012 (ict.org.il)

Tunisia

12. Post-Jasmine Revolution Tunisia is notable for its considerable number of **volunteers**, starkly contrasting with the insignificant number of Tunisians in previous jihadi theaters of operations, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The number of Tunisian operatives is estimated at approx. 16 percent of all foreign fighters. Jihadist groups in Tunisia suppressed by the previous regime are now free to preach jihad to recruit operatives for the fighting in Syria (flash-intel.com, June 2013).



Muhammad Amin Abd al-Hadi, from Tunisia, was killed in an attack against the Syrian army on January 27, 2013. He worked at a telecommunications study and research center for ten years (flash-intel.com, June 2013).



Marwan Ashouri, a Tunisian volunteer who was killed in Damascus while fighting for the Al-Nusra Front (ict.org.il)



Bahaa al-Tunisi, a Tunisian volunteer who was killed during an attack carried out by the Al-Nusra Front (ict.org.il)

Saudi Arabia

13. **There are many Saudi volunteers fighting in Syria.** Even though their number is not as considerable as it was in Iraq, they still play an important role in the war. They make up an approximate **15 percent of all Arab volunteers.** Some of them have no combat experience, but a few have highly significant military experience (flash-intel.com, June 2013).

Egypt

14. The number of operatives of Egyptian descent is estimated at approx. 10 percent of all Arab volunteers. Some of them have combat experience gained in other conflicts in the Middle East. One of them, **Anas al-Masri (Abu Malek)**, was reportedly killed in Idlib on September 8, 2012 by a rocket. Before coming to Syria, Al-Masri fought alongside Al-Qaeda in Yemen under the banner of Ansar al-Shari'ah. Another Egyptian national killed in Syria in March 2013 is **Muhammad Abd al-Hallaq**, codenamed **Abu Yahya al-Masri**, who played a key role in a number of battles fought by the Al-Nusra Front and its supporters in the country's northwest (flash-intel.com, June 2013). Another Egyptian killed in Syria is **Issam Sarraj**, from Alexandria.



Issam Sarraj, from Al-Ameria, near Alexandria. Killed when fighting for the Al-Nusra Front (youtube.com)

Palestinians

15. Among those who volunteered to join the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front are **several dozen Palestinians**. On February 17, 2013, Abu al-Ghanaa al-Ansari, a high-ranking member of a Salafist-jihadi group in the Gaza Strip, said that **20 to 30 youngsters had gone from the Gaza Strip to Syria** to take part in the fighting alongside such global jihad groups as the Al-Nusra Front. **These are mostly young people belonging to Salafist groups in the Gaza Strip that were persecuted by the security services of the de-facto Hamas administration** (Al-Quds, February 17, 2013).

16. According to a report released by German news agency DPA on March 18, 2013, **dozens of Salafist-jihadi operatives had come to Syria from the Gaza Strip** via Turkey, some of them former Hamas operatives. They joined jihadi groups fighting

against the Syrian regime, particularly the Al-Nusra Front (wattan.tv). There are also several volunteers from Palestinian communities in Syria and Jordan, as well as some from Judea and Samaria.



An Al-Nusra Front operative of Syrian-Palestinian descent detained by the Syrian authorities. The man told a Sky News reporter that he had fought for Al-Qaeda in Iraq and was deeply influenced by the teachings of Abu Qatada, the Palestinian jihadi ideologue who lived in Britain and was extradited to Jordan, where he is facing trial on charges of involvement in terrorism (youtube.com).

Muntaser al-Zaitouni, a Palestinian operative from Ramallah killed in an operation carried out by the Al-Nusra Front in Idlib on September 4, 2012. A former Hamas operative, he spent 18 months in Israeli jail and was subsequently released. He left Hamas to become a Salafi jihadist. He came to Jordan in 2009 to study Islamic religious law (Shari'ah) in the University of Al-Yarmouk. When the Syrian uprising broke out, he went to Syria, joined the Ahrar al-Sham organization, and later transferred to the Al-Nusra Front (ict.org.il)



Imad al-Natour (Abu Ihsan), a volunteer from Jordan, perhaps of Palestinian descent (Al-Natour is a common Palestinian last name). He was killed in an attack carried out by the Al-Nusra Front (ict.org.il).

Israeli Arabs

17. Israeli Arabs joining the rebel groups is a well-known phenomenon. It is not, however, particularly widespread. According to several estimates, there are about 15-20 Israeli Arabs who joined the rebels in Syria, mainly the Al-Nusra Front (Israeli daily Haaretz, September 23, 2013). Nevertheless, the Israel Security Agency (ISA) considers Israeli Arabs joining the rebels in Syria as “a highly dangerous phenomenon” given the existence of elements that are hostile to Israel in the Syrian theater of operations, particularly global jihad operatives. Israeli Arabs who joined the rebels in Syria are exposed to radical anti-Israeli ideology and may be exploited by terrorist elements both as a source of information and as perpetrators of terrorist attacks against Israel (ISA website, August 21, 2013).

18. The following are details on two volunteers who went to Syria to fight for global jihad groups (ISA website, August 21, 2013):

1. **On July 14, 2013**, the ISA and the Israeli police detained **Abd al-Qader Afif Abd al-Qader al-Tilah**, 26, from Taybeh, who had studied pharmacy in Jordan and went to Syria to join the ranks of the rebels. During his studies Al-Tilah became acquainted with students who supported the Salafist-jihadi school of thought, an ideology which he embraced due to their influence. On his arrival to Syria **he joined the Al-Nusra Front**. On August 9, 2013, charges were filed against him in an Israeli court for several counts.

2. On March **19**, 2013, the ISA and the Israeli police detained **Hikmat Othman Hussein Masarwa**, 29, from Taybeh. His interrogation by the ISA showed that he had gone to Syria **to take part in the fighting alongside global jihad operatives**. He also intended to locate his brother, Hussein, who had gone to Syria several months prior to that for the same purpose. While in Syria he underwent military training at a rebel camp. He was also **offered to carry out a suicide bombing attack against Syrian regime forces**, which he refused. He was also **asked to carry out a terrorist attack in Israel**, but claimed that he refused that request as well. In addition, he was debriefed about Israel and the IDF. Hikmat Masarwa was sentenced to 30 months in prison (Israeli daily Haaretz, April 10, 2013; Reuters, July 8, 2013).

19. According to Israeli media reports on September 18, 2013, an Israeli Arab named Muayed Zaki Agbariya, from the village of Mashrafeh, died while fighting for militias

affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Agbariya, 28, an orthodox Muslim, left Israel with two of his friends, young men from the city of Umm al-Fahm. He arrived in Syria via Turkey. (Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth and ynet, September 18, 2013; Israeli daily Haaretz, September 23, 2013).

Chechnya

20. Some of the foreign operatives in the Al-Nusra Front (and other jihadi organizations) are **volunteers who came from North Caucasus and Central Asian countries, particularly Chechen volunteers**. They are notable for their high number, combat experience, considerable motivation, and their belonging to an organic Chechen unit (unlike most foreign volunteers, who are scattered among the military frameworks of the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations). According to Syrian opposition sources, **the Chechens are the second largest foreign force fighting for the rebels after the Libyans**. This is probably the first time that Chechen jihadists are fighting outside their own country. It can be assumed that most of the Chechen operatives took part in the 15-year insurgency against Russia and have **extensive combat experience**. Their coming from Chechnya to Syria was sponsored by Islamic elements in Qatar and Saudi Arabia (worldtribune.com, March 27, 2013).

21. Evidence of Chechen fighters' involvement in the Syrian civil war first appeared in August 2012, when reports surfaced that Rustam Gelayev, the son of Hamzat Gelayev, one of the leaders of the Chechen insurgency, was killed during the fighting in Syria. **The Chechen fighters formed their own unit**, the Muhajiroun, headed by "**Abu Omar of Chechnya**" (www.rightsidenews.com, April 24, 2013). The unit fights alongside the Al-Nusra Front forces and also has operatives from Libya, Tajikistan, Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia (www.rferl.org, June 19, 2013). The Chechen operatives number **approximately 100 people, at least 17 of whom** were killed in combat in the Aleppo region in February 2013.



A unit of foreign fighters consisting mostly of Chechen operatives (channel4.com, June 14, 2013).
At the center, with a reddish beard, is “Abu Omar of Chechnya”.

22. **The Chechen unit created a dedicated website** to document the unit’s fighters in combat, commemorate its fallen members, and help those interested in joining the Chechen unit.



Chechen fighters near the Turkish-Syrian border (fisyria.com, April 23, 2013).



“Abu Omar of Chechnya” (center, with a reddish beard) and other Chechen fighters in Syria. Jihadist flags can be seen in the background (www.longwarjournal.org, February 20, 2013).

23. **The Chechen authorities apparently find it difficult to deal with the phenomenon.** At first they denied that there were Chechens fighting in Syria. However, eventually they did admit to its existence but attempted to **play it down. On several occasions,** the authorities **admitted that Chechen operatives as well as operatives** from Chechen immigrant communities in Europe and Turkey were coming to Syria to fight. According to the authorities, they came from low-income families or were victims of attempts by Western intelligence agencies to recruit fighters through jihad warriors’ websites. In the second half of May 2013 Chechnya’s leader Kadyrov argued that only a few European Chechens were killed in the fighting (www.rferl.org, June 19, 2013).

24. Some have criticized the active participation of Chechens in the fighting against the Syrian regime. In October 2012 Doku Umarov, the leader of the Chechen insurgents in North Caucasus, reprimanded the Chechens fighting in Syria. He said that he considered Bashar Assad an enemy and a dictator, stating that the fighters of North Caucasus prayed for the victory of the Syrian rebels. He added, however, that he could not pray for those who would trade the Assad regime for one with pro-Western leanings. He also argued that some of the Chechens fighting in Syria did not recognize the jihad waged in Chechnya (chechen.org, November 30, 2012).

Volunteers from the West

Europe

25. **European volunteers are particularly prominent** among the foreigners in the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations. We estimate their number at 500-600 operatives. The U.K.-based ICSR estimates their number at **140 to 600**, comprising 7 to 11 percent of all foreign operatives fighting in Syria. On the other hand, the U.S. **Gatestone Institute** estimates the number of European volunteers at **nearly 1,000**. The two institutes believe that the volunteers come **from over 15 countries** (Aaron Y. Zelim, icshr.info, April 2, 2013). Some of the volunteers are sent from their countries to Syria by networks of jihadists and radical Muslims that operate in Europe.

26. **U.K and French** nationals are prominent among the Muslim volunteers from Europe. A report published in the British daily The Independent argued that **more than one hundred British nationals were in Syria**. The French Le Figaro estimated that **50 to 80 volunteers came to Syria from France**. According to another estimate, there are about 200 volunteers from France. Der Spiegel reported on **several dozen German volunteers**. According to another estimate (from July 2013), there are about 70 German operatives, radical Muslims, who left for Syria (investigative.project.org, September 6, 2013). **The Danish media reported on approximately 40 Danes**. The Dutch authorities raised their terror threat level based on an estimate that **approximately one hundred Dutch citizens went to Syria** (Aaron Y. Zelin, icshr.info, April 2, 2013).

27. **Most of the Europeans who joined the fighting are Muslims**, but some of them are converts to Islam. Few of them have any links to Syria (such as relatives or acquaintances). Some of them are fighting for the first time, while others have previous combat experience gained in Iraq or Afghanistan. European youngsters **come to Syria for various motives**: some of them have been influenced by the radical teachings of global jihad organizations and are driven by the belief that their fellow Sunni Muslims are being murdered by the Assad regime. Others are looking for adventures or seek different kinds of thrills (cbsnews.com, April 30, 2013).

28. Whatever the volunteers' motives may be, **the phenomenon of young people from Western countries, particularly such West European countries as the U.K. and France, coming to fight in Syria is hardly a surprise**. Muslims from European countries have fought on practically every jihadist front since the Afghanistan War in the 1970s. Those who volunteer belong to the second generation of Muslim immigrant

communities in Europe, who are brought up as members of a community distinct from its environment—a community that is also a hotbed for radical preachers who disseminate jihadist ideas and radicalize the youth. Another factor of influence is the jihadist preaching on the internet and other media. Such radicalization, combined with the passive reaction of the Western governments to what is happening in Syria, motivate these youngsters to volunteer to fight against the Assad regime in Syria (www.ctc.usma.edu, February 20, 2013).

29. What is the significance of volunteering to join the Al-Nusra Front and other Islamist organizations? Looking at the phenomenon's extent **and taking into consideration the size of the Muslim population living in Europe, it is a marginal issue—at least for the time being. However, great importance may be attributed to the concerns that, when the operatives come back to their countries of origin having undergone military training and a process of radicalization in Syria, they will potentially engage in radical Islamic activity or even carry out terrorist attacks in those countries** (as per the “Afghanistan model”).

30. Such concerns have given rise to an **internal discourse** in European countries **on ways of dealing with the phenomenon of European Muslims volunteering to join the fighting in Syria**. There is an approach that law enforcement authorities should not be involved in preventing youngsters from going to Syria. Some have argued that their desire to fight in Syria is a result of the difficult social and economic situation faced by the Muslim communities, which needs to be addressed first.

31. At any rate, the possibility of **effectively dealing with the phenomenon is limited**, since the rebel organizations fighting in Syria are not designated as terrorist organizations in Europe (with the exception of the Al-Nusra Front, in some countries). Accordingly, volunteering to fight in Syria is not a crime in the volunteers' countries of origin, and at times it even resonates with the calls heard in Europe to topple the Assad regime. In a number of instances, however, there have been local attempts to stop the volunteers from going to Syria: for instance, public figures from the Muslim community have been asked by the authorities to convince those volunteers not to go. Social networks have been used as well. In addition, steps are taken against activists and institutions recruiting such volunteers. Still, **such efforts seem to be insufficient, seeing as the phenomenon still persists**.

Volunteers from Europe³¹



Ibrahim al-Mazwagi, the first British fatality in Syria, who died while fighting for an Islamic group known as Liwa al-Ummah (Facebook)



I.D. card of a British national who was killed in Syria (Syrian TV, May 2013)



Hussam Najjar, a.k.a. "Irish Sam" (vice.com, May 2013)

³¹ We are unable to determine whether these volunteers fought alongside the Al-Nusra Front or other rebel organizations. It is our assessment that most of the European volunteers joined the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations, or transferred to such organizations after some time. Most of the photographs are of volunteers who died in Syria; a small number are of operatives who are still alive (as at the summer of 2013).



Nu'man Demolli, codenamed Abu A'isha, from Kosovo, fought in the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1999. Headed an Al-Nusra Front commando unit. Killed on August 12, 2012.



Abd al-Malek, a Dane who converted to Islam, killed in the fighting in Syria (www.rightsidenews.com, April 24, 2013)



A German fighter in a wheelchair who fought in Homs (YouTube, February 24, 2013)



Sheik Abu Adham (?) al-Maghrebi, killed in Aleppo on April 7, 2013, from Spanish Morocco. A businessman by trade, he took part in many battles and died in the attack on the Aleppo international airport.

A French national of Lebanese descent who was killed on the Syrian-Lebanese border (www.rightsidenews.com, April 24, 2013)



Abu Kamal, Sweden (onlinejihadexposed.com, April 17, 2013)

Abu Umar al-Albani, Albania (onlinejihadexposed.com, April 17, 2013)



Alaa Ciymeh, who was born in Jordan and grew up in Ireland (irishtimes.com, May 3, 2013)

"Russian Ali", Russia (onlinejihadexposed.com, April 17, 2013)



Raphaël Gendron, France (english.alarabiya.net, April 15, 2013)



Giuliani Ibrahim Delnevo, Italy (Secolo XIX, June 19, 2013)

Brian de Mulder, Belgium (world.time.com, May 22, 2013)



Suleiman Hajj Abd al-Rahman, Denmark, killed in February 2013 (cphpost.dk, February 19, 2013)

The U.S. and Canada

32. Several U.S. and Canadian citizens have joined the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations; however, **their number remains small**. The concern of the U.S. security services is that these operatives, who may have undergone a process of jihadization and radicalization and gained combat experience in Syria, may be involved in terrorist activities when they come back to their home countries.

33. According to available information, two American volunteers have been killed in Syria thus far: **Amir Farouk Ibrahim**, 32, who fought for the Islamic State in Iraq and

Greater Syria (an Al-Qaeda affiliated organization in Syria that competes with the Al-Nusra Front). He died in a battle between that organization and Kurdish militias on July 22, 2013. Found next to his body was his Egyptian passport (he had been living in Cairo for some time prior to his death) as well as the passports of about twelve people from the Muslim world. Amir Farouk Ibrahim is the second American killed in the Syrian civil war. The first was **Nicole Lynn Mansfield**, an American who converted to Islam and was killed in May 2013 (The Investigative Project on Terrorism, July 29, 2013).

34. On July 28, 2013, The New York Times reported that **12 U.S. citizens had joined the fighting in Syria up to that time** (The Investigative Project on Terrorism, July 29, 2013). Dealing with the phenomenon is easier in the U.S. than it is in Europe, since the Al-Nusra Front is designated as a terrorist organization by the Americans. Nevertheless, the U.S. supports the Free Syrian Army and other rebel organizations and is hostile to the Bashar Assad regime, which means that joining the rebels should not be a criminal offense as far as U.S. law is concerned. In practice, the situation is more complicated, proof of which is the case of Eric Harroun.

35. **Eric Harroun**, 30, from Phoenix, Arizona, is a former U.S. army soldier **who fought alongside the Al-Nusra Front**. He was detained upon his return to the U.S. after posting a YouTube video from the front line. Eric Harroun told FBI investigators that he had shot ten people during his military activity in Syria in January-March 2013, but was not sure whether he had killed any of them. It was reported that, according to the testimony of an FBI investigator, **Harroun joined the Free Syrian Army in January 2013 after crossing the Turkish-Syrian border**. A few days after his arrival in Syria he found himself in a battle jointly fought by the rebels and the Al-Nusra Front. After the battle **he joined the Al-Nusra Front** (timesofisrael.com, April 8, 2013). Eric Harroun is currently facing trial in the U.S. on charges of fighting alongside the Al-Nusra Front, designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. administration.



Eric Harroun, a former U.S. soldier from Phoenix, Arizona, who was detained upon his return from Syria (YouTube, Facebook)



Jamal Muhammad Abd al-Qader, a Canadian who was killed in Syria (blazingcatfur.blogspot.com)

Al-Nusra Front recruitment and training

36. The Al-Nusra Front has a **selective recruitment policy** that differs from that used by the Free Syrian Army and other rebel groups. Whereas anyone can join the Free Syrian Army and carry a weapon after a brief training period, the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations have **stricter admission standards**. They examine the volunteers' background, their motivation, and the strength of their Salafist-jihadi faith (As-Safir, July 31, 2013).

37. According to a high-ranking Al-Nusra Front operative in Aleppo, the organization puts new recruits through a 10-day **religious training course** to see how religiously committed they are. The recruits then undergo **military training that lasts 15 to 20 days**. “We put an emphasis on the single fighter,” the high-ranking operative said. “**We care about quality, not quantity**” (telegraph.co.uk).

38. **New recruits are required to swear an oath of allegiance (Bay’a) to the organization and its commanders, a practice commonly employed by other jihadist groups.** The religious nature of the oath **makes for a stronger, more personal contract between the recruit and the Al-Nusra Front.** Those who break the oath take a considerable risk and may even be killed. “The religious basis of this oath means that recruits have no legal recourse should they wish to leave the group, as they have made a vow to submit to jihadist leaders entirely, unless their instructions go against the will of God” (quilliamfoundation.org).

Training new Al-Nusra Front recruits



Training in the use of weapons (youtube.com)



Combat fitness training (youtube.com)



Shooting and assault training (youtube.com)



Firing a machinegun with a telescopic lens used in sniper rifles. Near the shooter are several motorcyclists (youtube.com). The organization apparently uses motorcycles as an effective means of transportation for guerilla and terrorism.

Indoctrination/Brainwashing and military training for children and adolescents³²

39. The Al-Nusra Front and its competitor the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria **indoctrinate children and adolescents** with the goal of inculcating them with the values of jihadist ideology as espoused by Al-Qaeda, **and bringing up a new generation of jihadist operatives in Syria**. Such exploitation of children and

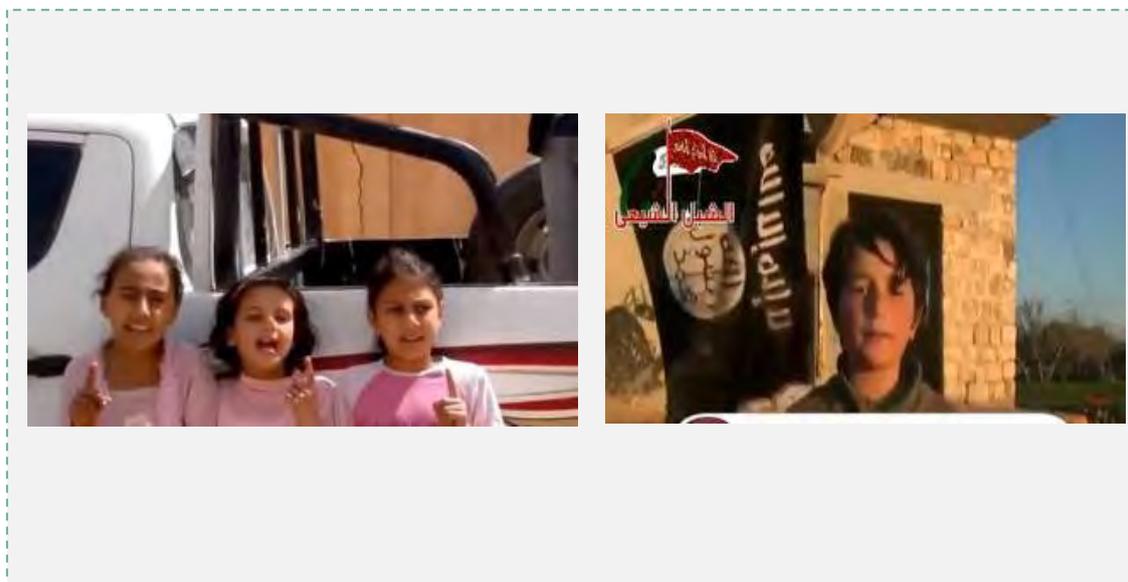
³² A video posted on YouTube shows women fighters in veils (May 8, 2013). Our examination has shown that the women belong to Islamic groups other than the Al-Nusra Front.

adolescents for the advancement of the organization's purposes is also commonly practiced by Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other terrorist organizations.

40. The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria also works with elementary school children in northern Syria. Photographs of such activities were posted on jihadist forums in early September 2013. Photographs taken in Aleppo showed children holding Islamic State flags and a girl carrying a schoolbag with the organization's logo (for details, see MEMRI report no. 5439, September 9, 2013). Other photographs documented religious activity among children in the city of Al-Tabqa (Policy Watch, September 10, 2013).

41. As part of their indoctrination, children and adolescents **are trained in the use of weapons**. We have no definitive information on whether the Al-Nusra Front has children and adolescents take part in the actual fighting. The Human Rights Watch interviewed children aged 14 to 16 who said that they had taken part in the fighting in Homs, Daraa, and Idlib. The teenagers said that they had been trained in firing rifles and throwing grenades, and that they had taken part in battles and operations against the Syrian army (nrg.co.il).

Children praise the Al-Nusra Front and its leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani



Children sing songs of praise for Abu Muhammad al-Julani (youtube.com)



Children with guns sing songs of praise for the Al-Nusra Front (youtube.com)

Children undergo military training in the Al-Nusra Front



A child practices firing a machinegun (youtube.com)



A child practices firing an assault rifle



A child carries a weapon (as-ansar.org)



A child named Islam carries a rifle in the Deir ez-Zor region (youtube.com)

Children practice at a training camp of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria

42. The following are photographs of masked children at a training camp of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (courtesy of MEMRI). The training camp is situated in Abu Kamal, eastern Syria, near the Syrian-Iraqi border. The training camp is called **Lion Cubs of the Caliphate** (Ashbal al-Khilafah). The children featured on the photographs also delivered a message about the organization's strategic objective: the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Greater Syria.



Receiving an RPG launcher



Receiving weapons and ammunition



Firing pistols



Firing assault rifles



Statements on adherence to jihad until the establishment of an Islamic state

Section Five: Description of the Al-Nusra Front's Military Activity

General description of the fighting

1. The Al-Nusra Front is engaged in **guerrilla warfare** against the institutions of the Syrian regime as well as the Syrian army and security apparatuses, **combining it with indiscriminate acts of terrorism** that harm civilians as well (such as car bombings and suicide attacks). Its attacks are carried out in Syria's **big cities** (particularly Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Daraa), **and in areas considered more remote** (particularly the governorates of Deir ez-Zor, Idlib, Al-Raqqa, and the rural environs of Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Daraa). **Even though the Al-Nusra Front does not have as many operatives as the Free Syrian Army, it is our assessment that its military capabilities, quality of command, and motivation of its operatives exceed those of the Free Syrian Army and other rebel groups.**³³

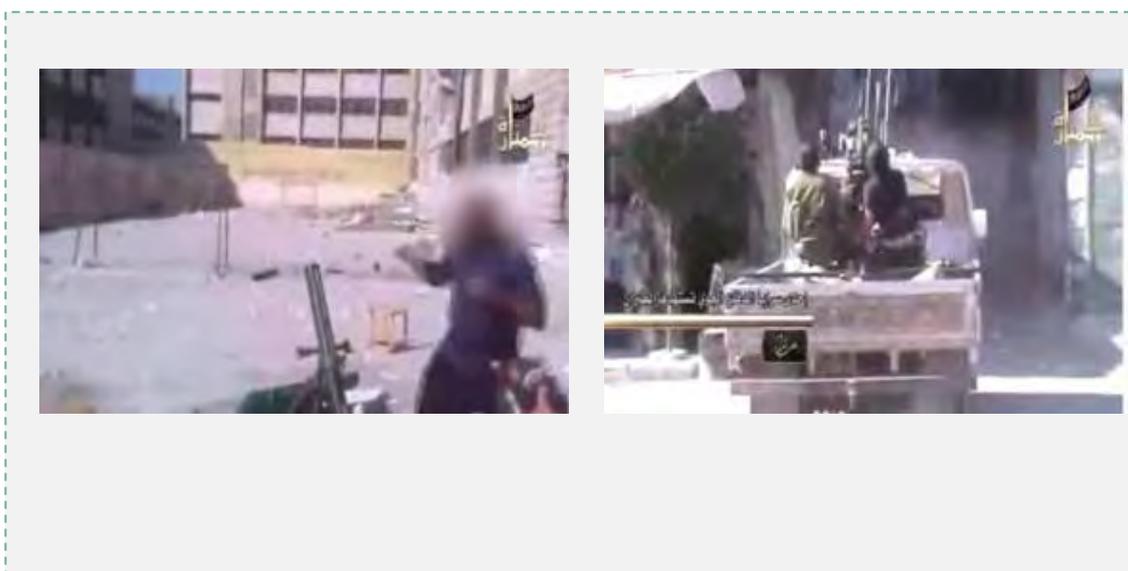
2. The Al-Nusra Front has **issued hundreds of claims of responsibility** for attacks it has carried out. Its attacks on governmental facilities in the big cities are **intended to sow chaos and create fear and insecurity** among the Syrian regime and its supporters. **The attacks in Syria's rural regions are intended to cut off administrative units from one another, hit the Syrian regime's ability to govern, and give the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups control over territories where they can entrench themselves and prepare for further fighting** (they are referred to as "liberated areas"). Using such tactics, the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist groups have been able to establish themselves in Syria's periphery, in the country's east and north, and create a situation where **they comprise the strongest military force and the governing organization in some of those areas.**

3. **As of this writing (summer of 2013), the cities of Aleppo and Homs, as well as their surrounding countryside and the rural region surrounding Damascus, are major zones of fighting between the Syrian regime forces and the rebels.** Part of Aleppo, particularly the eastern slums, is held by rebel militias whose operatives belong to the Al-Nusra Front, the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, and other Salafist-jihadi organizations (As-Safir, July 26, 2013). The Al-Nusra Front cooperates with organizations of Islamic character in **Aleppo**. According to one report, eight

³³ It appears that other rebel organizations, too, perceive the Al-Nusra Front as having higher military capabilities. On May 8, 2013 The Guardian reported that Free Syrian Army operatives were defecting to join the Al-Nusra Front, believing it was the best equipped, financed, and motivated force fighting the Syrian regime.

Islamic military frameworks established a joint operations room (Al-Ra'i, Kuwait, July 25, 2013). The Al-Nusra Front also takes part in the fighting in **Homs and its surroundings**, alongside other rebel organizations. At this point (summer 2013), it appears that the Syrian army and security forces are making achievements in those sites of fighting. In early August 2013 it was reported that the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria teamed up with rebel groups trying to capture Alawite villages **in the Latakia countryside** (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 6, 2013).

4. **The Al-Nusra Front's operations include the following combat tactics:** car/truck/motorcycle bombs detonated by suicide bombers or remote control; suicide bombing attacks using explosive belts;³⁴ attacking Syrian regime facilities with small arms, RPGs, mortars, and rockets; assassinating figures affiliated with the regime, including military and security servicemen as well as civilians (for instance, by attaching bombs to their cars); detonating IEDs along main roads to hit the regime's vehicles; attacking remote military bases and airfields with IEDs and mortars; attacking roadblocks erected by the regime's security forces; shooting anti-aircraft weapons at Syrian regime aircraft; and executing those who support the regime (including individuals taken captive during the fighting). One exceptional incident was **the battle for the city of Al-Qusayr**, where the Al-Nusra Front was uncharacteristically dragged into a frontal conflict against Hezbollah and suffered a bitter defeat.



Firing a mortar in Aleppo
(youtube.com)

Firing anti-aircraft weapons in Aleppo
(youtube.com)

³⁴ The Al-Nusra Front has also carried out attacks with terrorists blowing themselves up using explosive belts. However, it seems that the organization prefers using car bombs, which cause greater destruction and more casualties.



RPG fired at an administration building in Aleppo. A thick cloud of smoke can be seen billowing from the fourth floor (youtube.com).

Car bombs detonated by suicide bombers

5. **The use of suicide bombers against targets affiliated with the Syrian regime, a tactic “imported” from Al-Qaeda in Iraq, has become the signature brand of the Al-Nusra Front (even though it is also used by other jihadist organizations). The tactic that has had the most devastating results for the Syrian regime is detonating car bombs near regime facilities and camps,** mostly by suicide bombers and in some cases by remote control. The vehicles used in such attacks are passenger cars, trucks, and motorcycles. Some of the vehicles were laden with a few tons of explosives, and some with a large amount (up to 20 tons). In several sophisticated attacks, **two vehicles were detonated** either simultaneously or successively. In others, mortar and small arms fire was used in combination with suicide bombing.

6. **Despite being effective, suicide bombings have been quite problematic** for the Al-Nusra Front, an organization that makes efforts to win the sympathy of the local population. Even when successful, suicide bombings have sometimes killed dozens or even hundreds of people, not only members of the regime but also innocent civilians caught in the middle of the attack. This has required the Al-Nusra Front **to exercise more caution in carrying out suicide bombings—even at the cost of scaling them back—to avoid causing damage to the organization’s legitimacy in the eyes of the population.**

7. At any rate, in terms of sheer numbers, the Al-Nusra Front **is the rebel organization responsible for the most suicide bombing attacks in Syria.** Since the

organization's founding was announced in January 2012 through December 2012, **the organization claimed responsibility for 43 of the 52 suicide bombings carried out against the Bashar Assad regime** (longwarjournal.org). Since the beginning of 2013 through March 2013, there were **16 suicide bombings carried out** in Syria, of which the Al-Nusra Front claimed responsibility for 14. Since late March until the end of May 2013 the Al-Nusra Front claimed responsibility for **three more suicide bombing attacks**.

8. The following are several examples of vehicle-related suicide bombing attacks carried out by the Al-Nusra Front and jihadist organizations that collaborate with it:

1. **Suicide bombing attack next to buses carrying Syrian security servicemen**, January 6, 2012: a suicide bomber codenamed **Abu al-Baraa al-Shami** blew himself up next to buses carrying Syrian security servicemen. The suicide bombing attack took place in the downtown Damascus neighborhood of Al-Midan. Over 26 people, most of them civilians, were killed in the attack. **It was the first suicide bombing attack for which the Al-Nusra Front claimed responsibility**, three weeks before its establishment was formally announced.



Suicide bomber Abu al-Baraa al-Shami filmed for the last time before the attack (youtube.com)

The attack in the Damascus neighborhood of Al-Midan, January 6, 2012. The target: buses carrying Syrian security servicemen (youtube.com).

2. **A double suicide bombing attack using two car bombs at the military security apparatus building in Aleppo, February 10, 2012**: the attack was captured in a video posted on February 26, 2012, titled "Ahrar Syria's Vengeance

Raid". Twenty-eight people were killed, four of them civilians; 235 people were injured in the suicide bombing (youtube.com).



Scene of the suicide bombing attack at the military security apparatus building in Aleppo, February 10, 2012 (youtube.com)

3. **Two simultaneous suicide bombing attacks at the air defense building and the criminal security apparatus building in Damascus, March 17, 2012:** the attacks were carried out by two suicide bombers codenamed **Abu al-Hajer al-Shami** and **Abu al-Kheir al-Shami**, respectively. Twenty-nine people were killed and about one hundred were injured in the attacks (youtube.com).



The criminal security apparatus building in Damascus after the explosion (youtube.com)



Suicide bomber blows himself up at the air defense building in Damascus, March 17, 2012 (youtube.com)

4. **Suicide bombing of the military security apparatus headquarters in the Al-Salihyya region, east of Deir ez-Zor:** the claim of responsibility was issued in June 2012 (the date of the suicide bombing itself is unclear). The attack was carried out by a suicide bomber who was driving a car laden with explosives. The number of casualties is unknown, but photographs of the scene show substantial damage.



Announcement on the bombing of the military security apparatus headquarters in the Al-Salihyya region, east of Deir ez-Zor, June 2012 (youtube.com)

5. **Multi-pronged suicide bombing attack at the Abu Kamal airfield in eastern Syria, September 4, 2012:** the attack started when a car laden with 7 tons of explosives was detonated by a suicide bomber codenamed Abu Khattab al-Shami. A firefight then ensued in which machineguns and mortars were used. The Al-Nusra Front reported that Bashar Assad's forces sustained multiple casualties but did not provide an exact number (aljahad.com).



Multi-pronged suicide bombing attack at the Abu Kamal airfield (aljahad.com)

6. **Multi-pronged suicide bombing attack on a Syrian air force intelligence building in Harasta, a suburb of Damascus, October 8, 2012:** the attack was carried out at night by two suicide bombers. One blew himself up in a car carrying approximately nine tons of explosives; the second arrived about 25 minutes later and blew himself up in a car that carried one ton of explosives. Al-Nusra Front operatives then started firing mortar shells at the building. At least one hundred people were hit, dozens of whom were killed (no exact number was reported) (longwarjournal.org; uk.reuters.com; bbc.co.uk; youtube.com).



The first car bomb goes off in Harasta (youtube.com)

7. Multi-pronged terrorist attack in the vicinity of the Syrian army general headquarters near Damascus, September 26, 2012: the attack was carried out by a suicide bomber who detonated an explosives-laden car near the building, which was then attacked by gunmen (longwarjournal.org). Fourteen people were killed in the attack. Another organization called **Tajammu' Ansar al-Islam Dimashq wa-Rifha** also claimed responsibility for the attack (rnw.nl).



Car bomb explodes in the vicinity of the Syrian army general headquarters in Damascus
([youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), ict.org.il)

8. Suicide bombing attack at the Al-Hayaa hospital in Aleppo, which according to the Al-Nusra Front served as a headquarters for the Syrian regime, September 9, 2012: the attack was carried out by a suicide bomber in a truck carrying several tons of explosives. The Al-Nusra Front argued that 300 regime loyalists were killed. On the other hand, the Syrian regime said that two soldiers at the roadblock were killed (syriantelegraph.com, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)). The Al-Nusra Front claimed responsibility for the attack on February 23, 2013 (breakingnews.sg).



The explosion at the Al-Hayaa hospital in Aleppo (youtube.com)



Wired and booby-trapped canisters in the truck (youtube.com)

9. **Suicide bombing at a Syrian military camp in the Al-Qusayr region,** January 23, 2013: a suicide bomber drove a truck laden with 20 tons of explosives into the camp. The number of casualties was not reported. It was the largest amount of explosives used by the organization in its suicide bombing attacks (youtube.com).

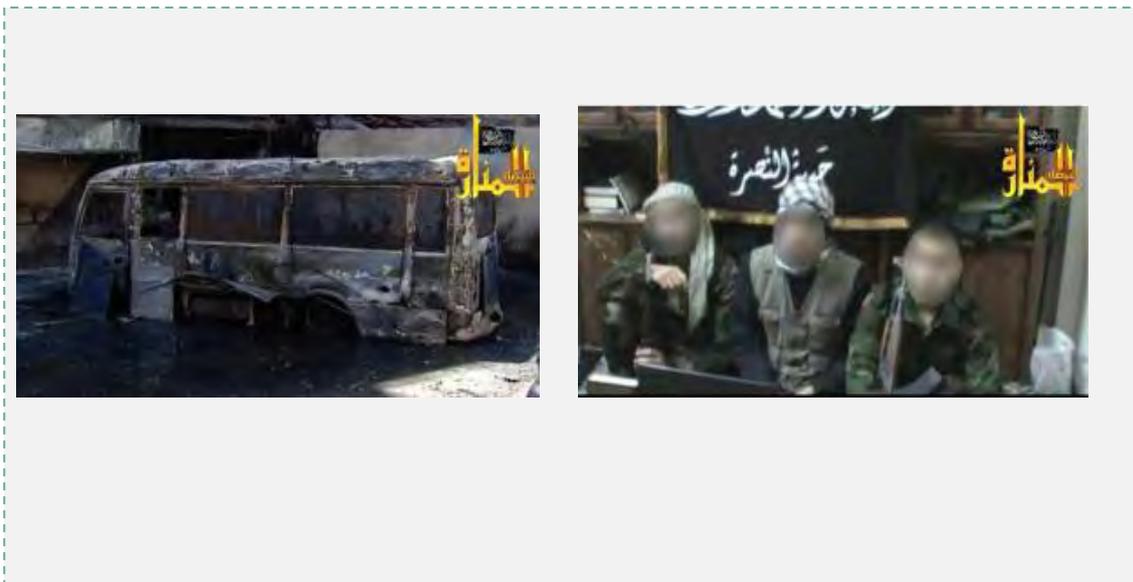


Explosion at a Syrian army camp in Al-Qusayr, January 23, 2013 (youtube.com)

10. **Suicide car bombing of a military security building in the town of Kalamoon, a suburb of Damascus,** June 8, 2013: more than 98 regime

members were hit in the attack, some were killed and some injured (eldorar.com).

11. Multi-pronged terrorist attack on police and criminal security department facilities in Damascus, June 23, 2013. The Syrian Ministry of Interior reported that **suicide bombers** blew themselves up at the entrance of the police building in the Damascus neighborhood of Ruknuddin. Other suicide bombers **with explosive belts** attempted to enter the criminal investigations building in the Bab Masli square. The terrorists were killed before they could get into the building, said the announcement released by the Ministry of Interior. Five people were killed in the attack; nine civilians and troops were injured. Considerable damage was caused to property (Syrian News Agency, June 23, 2013). It was an operation carried out jointly by the Al-Nusra Front and another organization (eldorar.com).

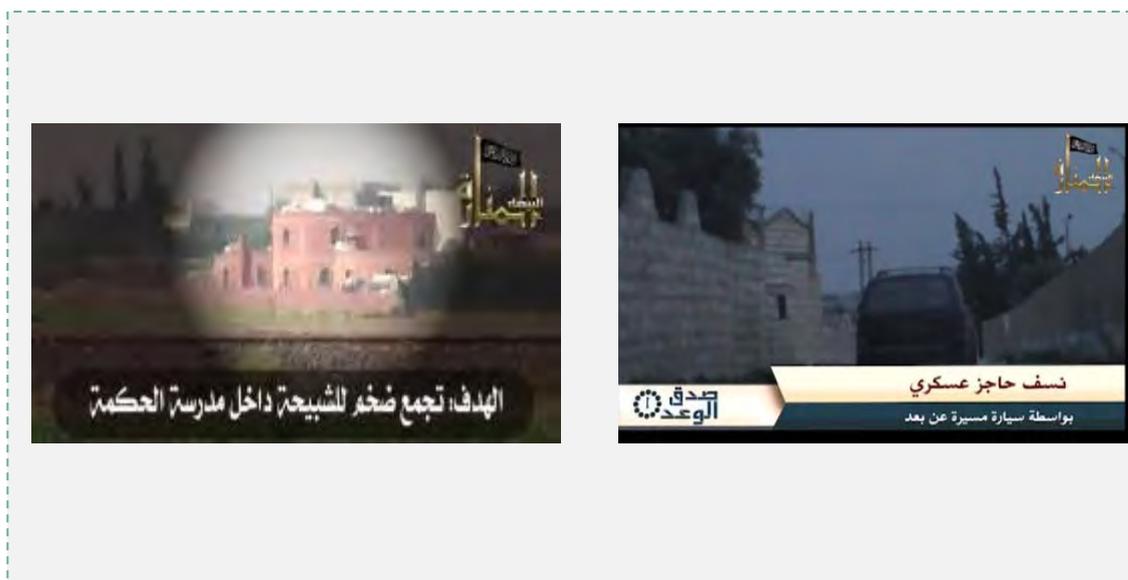


The explosion at the Al-Hayaa h
Photograph taken at the site of the attack
(eldorar.com)

The three suicide bombers before the
terrorist attack (youtube.com)

Car bombs detonated by remote control

9. The Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations use car and truck bombs that are not driven by suicide bombers but detonated by remote control. Below are some examples:



On December 23, 2012 the Al-Nusra Front released a video titled “Beginning of the End”. The video captured an attack on the Shabiha center at the Al-Hekma school, situated on the highway connecting Hama and Mahrada, using a truck bomb. According to the organization, the attack, which took place on March 19, 2012, killed at least 162 Shabiha. The truck was detonated by remote control (youtube.com).

Explosion at a Syrian army roadblock in the city of Idlib using a remote-controlled car bomb. The exact date of the incident, which took place in the first half of 2012, is unknown (youtube.com).

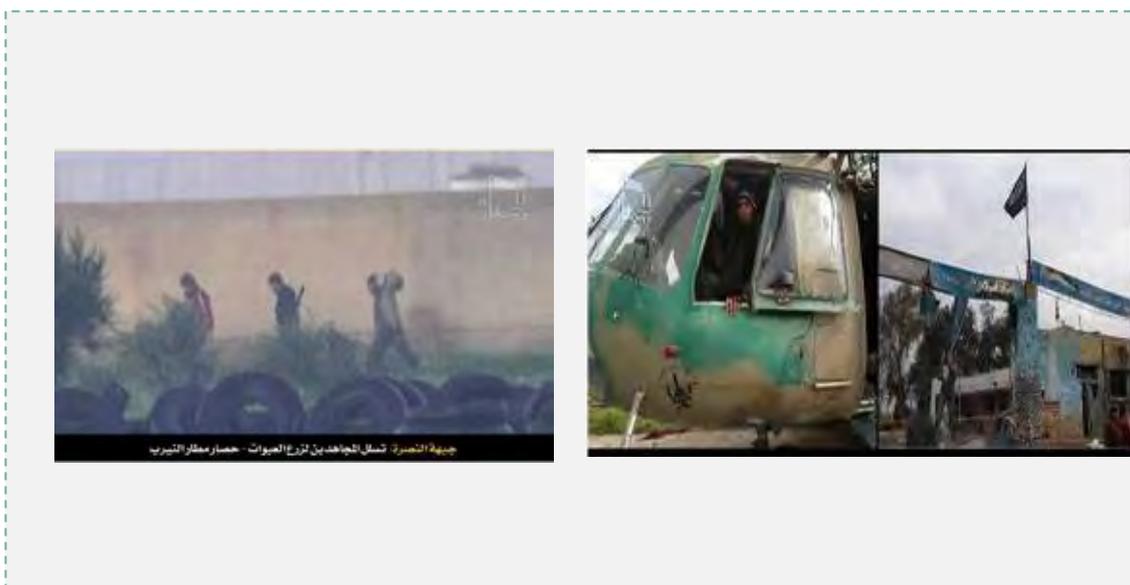
Motorcycle bombs

10. The Al-Nusra Front normally prefers to use car and truck bombs since they can carry more explosives. However, in some cases it has used motorcycle bombs, with less explosives. For instance, on April 16, 2013 it was reported on Facebook that an Al-Nusra Front operative detonated a motorcycle laden with explosives which he parked next to Syrian soldiers at a roadblock. According to the report, 5 to 8 soldiers were killed (facebook.com). On October 31, 2012 a motorcycle blew up near Zainab’s Tomb, south of Damascus. At least eight people were killed and dozens were injured (almasryfalyoum.com). It is not known which organization was responsible for the attack, but it was carried out as part of a campaign waged by Salafist-jihadi elements to take over the tomb compound, which Shi’ites consider sacred.

Attacks on airfields

11. **Syria’s military and civilian airfields are favorite targets** for the Al-Nusra Front, which usually attacks them **in collaboration with other rebel groups**. The high significance placed on such attacks stems from the air force’s loyalty to the Syrian regime as well as considerations of operative convenience. They are also targeted

because the regime makes extensive use of the air force to hit the rebels and since airfields are used for transporting weapons and troops to suppress the uprising. The following are photographs of attacks on airfields in Syria's various governorates:



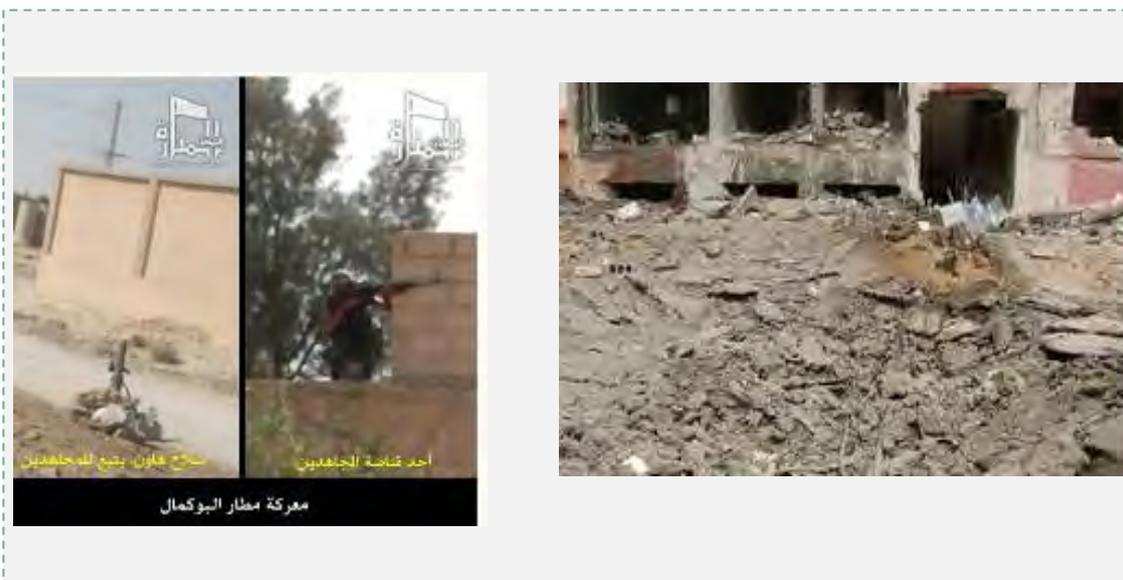
Al-Nusra Front operatives on their way to set IEDs at the Nairab airfield in Aleppo, January 17, 2013 (jalnosra.com). During the attack the Al-Nusra Front fired mortars and RPG rockets and detonated IEDs (onlinejihadexposed.com).

Attack on a military airport in the Idlib Governorate, January 2, 2013. The announcement stated that operatives from the Al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, and Al-Tali'ah al-Islamiyya took over the airport in a joint operation. The operatives infiltrated into the base after surrounding it and shelling it with rocket and sniper fire. Allegedly, soldiers and Shabiha were killed in the attack, and several aircraft were put out of operation (jalnosra.com).



After encircling the international airport in Aleppo on December 22, 2012, the Al-Nusra Front declared a “no-flight zone” for the Syrian regime in Aleppo. The image, taken from a video aired on Al-Jazeera TV, shows an Al-Nusra Front operative declaring a no-flight zone while calling on Syrian citizens not to fly on civilian aircraft (youtube.com).

The encirclement of the Aleppo International Airport, which began in December 2012 (the photograph shows the airport entrance). On January 16, 2013, Al-Nusra Front operatives began regularly firing at aircraft coming in to land there (islammemo.cc).

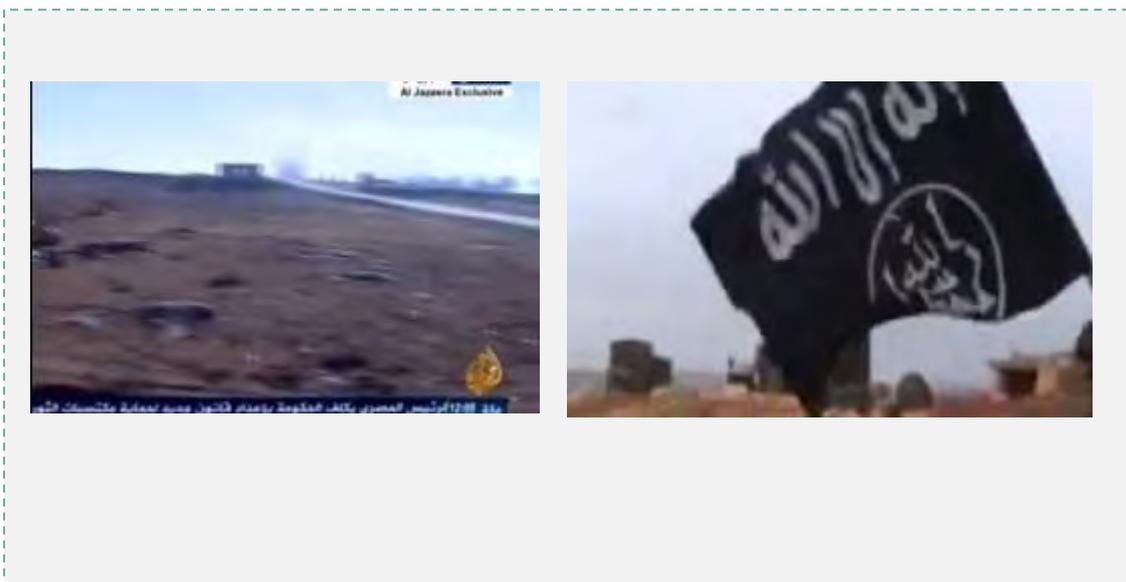


Attack on the Abu Kamal (or Al-Bukamal) airfield in the Deir ez-Zor Governorate on September 4, 2013. A car laden with 7 tons of explosives was detonated at the airfield by a suicide bomber. The airfield was also attacked by mortars, heavy machineguns, and sniper fire, causing massive casualties among the Syrian troops. The photo shows the explosive-laden car at the moment of the explosion (as-ansar.com).

Destruction caused by an attack on the Deir ez-Zor airfield, December 2012. According to one report, about one thousand Al-Nusra Front and Free Syrian Army operatives, who carried out the operation together, were killed in the fighting near the airfield (alkhabarpres.com).

Attacks on Syrian military bases in rural areas

12. The Al-Nusra Front often attacks Syrian military bases in rural areas, where the Syrian regime has difficulties defending them. Some of the attacks take place after the base has been encircled for a long time. The idea behind such combat tactics is to crush the Syrian army, take over its weapons, and make it difficult for the Syrian regime and army to function across the country. The attacks have led to a sharp decline in the Syrian regime's ability to govern remote areas.



Joint Al-Nusra Front and Free Syrian Army attack on an air force base in Ta'ana, near Aleppo, in October 2012. Hundreds of Al-Nusra Front operatives took part in the attack. It was reported that the attackers seized weapons found on the base (lonawariournal.org).

Takeover of the Al-Sheikh Suleiman Battalion headquarters, a major Syrian military base in the Aleppo region, in December 2012. An Al-Qaeda flag can be seen in the photograph. The operation was carried out by operatives belonging to the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist groups who had first encircled the base for several months.

Use of IEDs

13. The Al-Nusra Front often uses roadside charges against vehicles, patrols, and convoys of the Syrian army and security forces. In our assessment, this is an **operative legacy of Al-Qaeda in Iraq**, which specialized in using sophisticated roadside charges against the U.S. and its allies. The Al-Nusra Front has Syrian and Iraqi operatives who gained military experience in Iraq, particularly in the manufacture of improvised explosive devices.



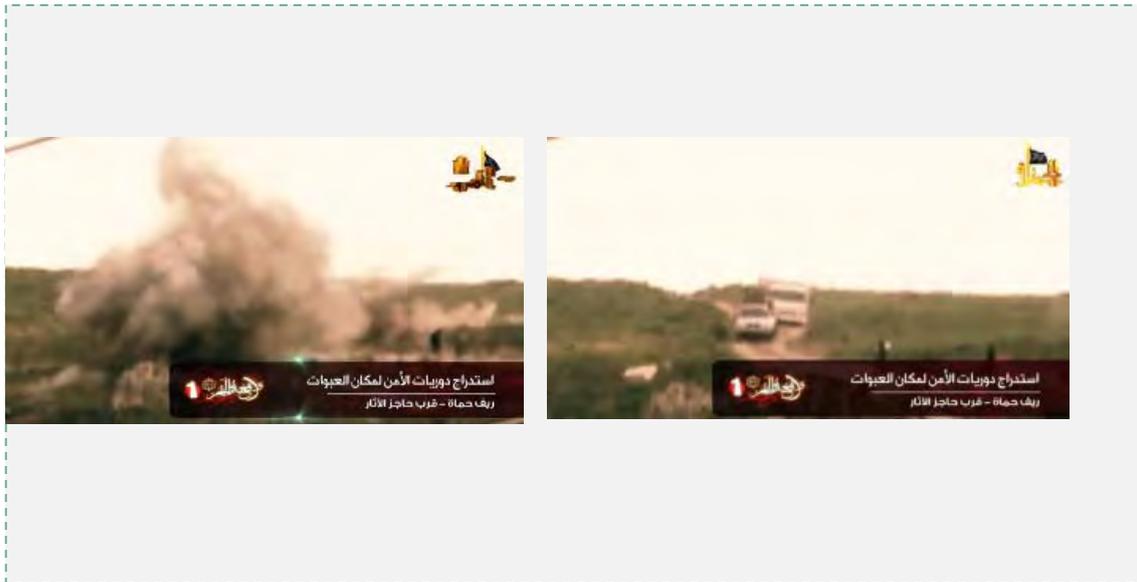
Roadside charge used against an air force patrol vehicle in the city of Idlib (youtube.com)

Tank (or another armored vehicle) blown up by the Al-Nusra Front using a roadside charge (youtube.com)



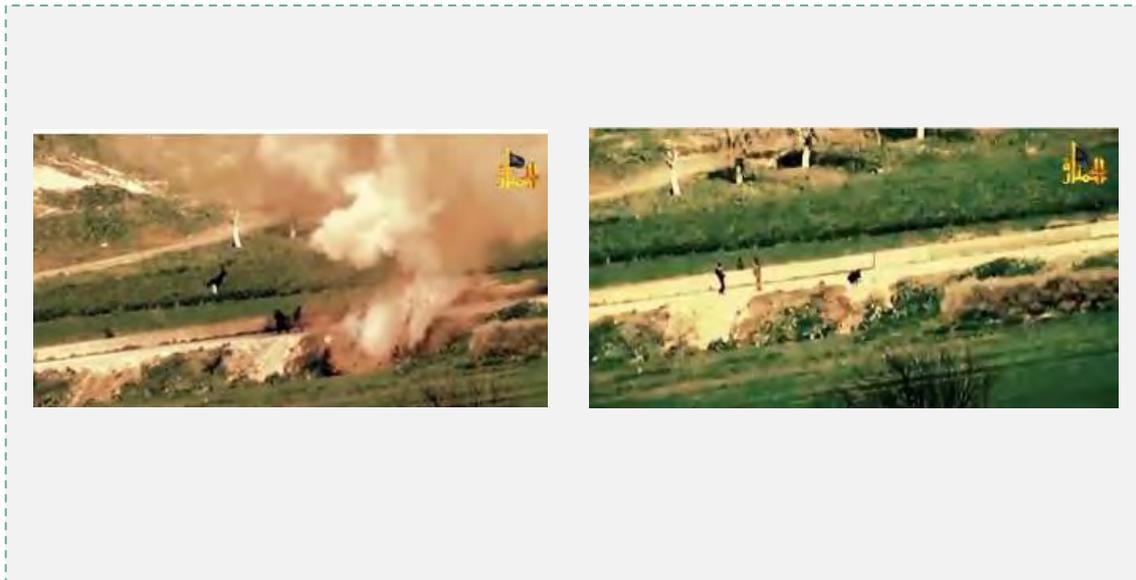
Roadside charge used against a military vehicle in the suburbs of Damascus

Detonating IEDs (from a video posted on YouTube by the White Minaret, the Al-Nusra Front's media network, on June 1, 2013)



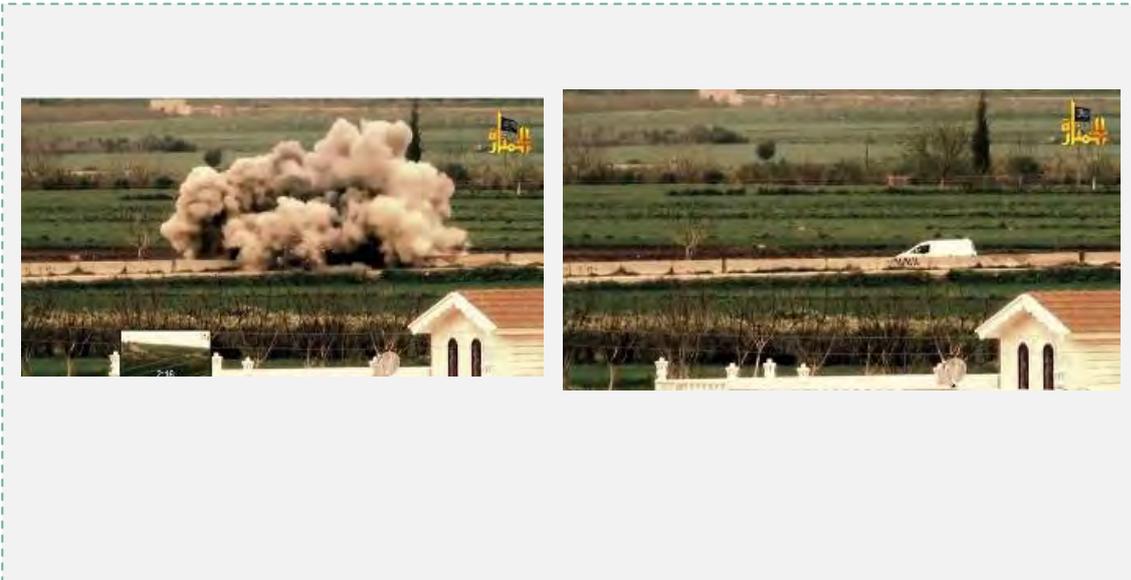
The moment of detonation

Roadside charge used against a security forces vehicle in the rural area of Hama



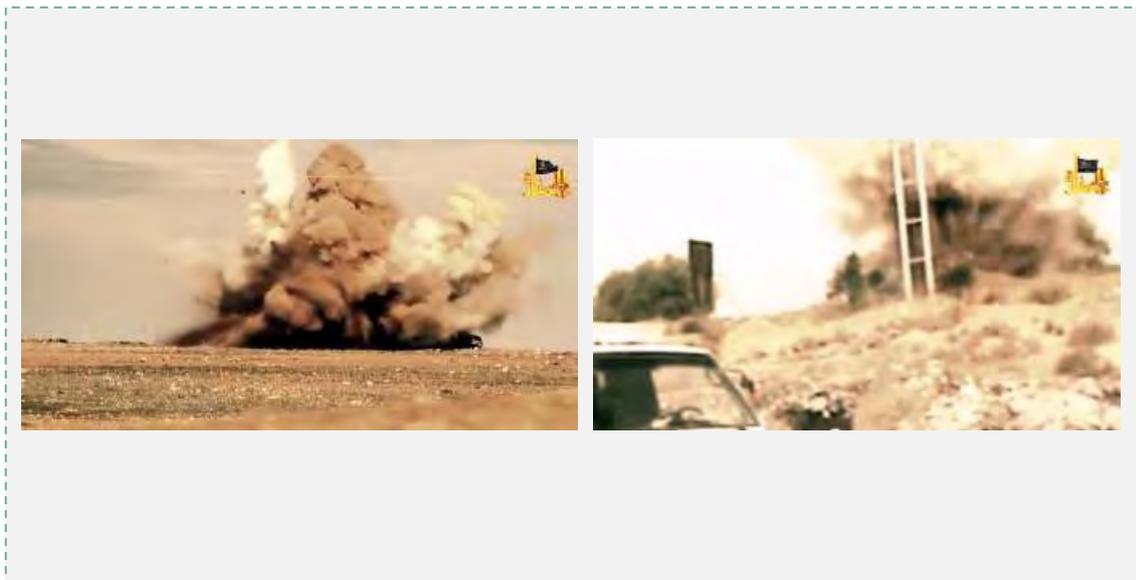
The moment of detonation. The sapper is thrown into the air due to the force of the explosion.

IED used against a sapper



IED used against a vehicle driving Shabiha personnel

The vehicle one moment before the IED goes off



Syrian military vehicle explodes in the environs of Hama

Roadside charge used against a regime truck on the Hama-Homs road

Attacks on border crossings

14. Border crossings are also first-priority targets for the Al-Nusra Front.

Controlling them provides the organization with the ability to monitor the movement of operatives, transport weapons into Syria, and disrupt the regime's ability to govern. According to a lecture delivered by Israel's chief of Military Intelligence Maj.-Gen. Aviv Kokhavi at the Herzliya Conference (March 14, 2013), the rebels control 11 of Syria's 17 existing border crossings. This means, according to Maj.-Gen. Kokhavi, that weapons and global jihad operatives flow into Syria and refugees flow from Syria to other countries.

15. The following are several examples of attacks on border crossings:

in January 2012 the Al-Nusra Front attacked the **Tell Ahmar** crossing between Syria and Turkey; on July 19, 2012 Al-Nusra Front operatives took over the **Bab al-Hawa** crossing, also between Syria and Turkey; on June 10, 2012 Al-Nusra Front operatives attacked the **Al-Waleed crossing**, in the Iraq-Syria-Jordan border triangle. They killed dozens of Iraqi soldiers and officers stationed there to prevent rebels from receiving supplies from Iraq, but were unable to capture the crossing.



Explosion at the Tell Ahmar border crossing (youtube.com)

Attack on the Tell Ahmar border crossing station, connecting Syria and Turkey, in January 2012 (youtube.com)



Al-Nusra Front operatives raise the Al-Qaeda flag at the Bab al-Hawa crossing (youtube.com)

Rocket fire

16. **The Al-Nusra Front makes use of rocket fire at targets affiliated with the Syrian regime and Shi'ite population centers in Lebanon.** It is our impression that so far the use of rockets has been rather limited, perhaps owing to a shortage of standard long-range rockets.

17. In the first half of 2013, during the campaign for Al-Qusayr, rockets were fired from Syrian territory into Shi'ite population centers in Lebanon near the city of Hermel (northern Bekaa Valley) and into the central part of the Bekaa Valley (Baalbek region). Lebanese media reported that a number of Lebanese were injured in the attacks. The attacks apparently stopped after Al-Qusayr was taken over by Hezbollah and the rebels (particularly Al-Nusra Front operatives) left the area.

18. **The Al-Nusra Front develops home-made rockets.** In January 2013 the organization reported that it was developing home-made rockets called Faysal-1 and Faysal-2, with a range of about 8 km, or 5 miles (youtube.com).



Faysal-1 rocket launch in the Hama Governorate, January 29, 2013 (muslim.org)

Faysal-1 rocket launch in the Hama Governorate, January 29, 2013 (muslim.org)



A Faysal-1 rocket is activated using a wire connected to its lower end (youtube.com, January 8, 2013)

Attacks on roadblocks

19. Roadblocks erected by Syrian security forces are an important means of control for the regime **and a favorite target** for the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups.



Suicide bomber detonates a car laden with explosives at a Syrian military roadblock near the Nairab airfield, December 2, 2012 (youtube.com)

Remote controlled car bomb detonates at a Syrian military roadblock in the city of Idlib (youtube.com)



Explosion at the Tell Othman roadblock in the environs of Hama in February 2013. The roadblock was first attacked by snipers who killed several soldiers stationed there (alboraq.info).

Al-Nusra Front activity in southern Syria

The environs of Daraa

20. We believe that the Al-Nusra Front places great importance on entrenching itself in the environs of Daraa and in southern Syria in general, in particular due to the region's geopolitical significance. Control of or influence in southern Syria may

help the organization with transporting operatives and weapons from Jordan³⁵ and obtaining a foothold in the Golan Heights, near the border with Israel. In the future, it may also become a hub for the Al-Nusra Front to export terrorism to Jordan and other Arab countries.

21. The most dominant rebel organization in the Daraa Governorate is the Free Syrian Army, which controls part of it (on July 28, 2013 Al-Arabiyya TV aired a report showing which parts of the governorate are under the control of the Syrian army and which parts are controlled by the Free Syrian Army). The Al-Nusra Front has considerable military presence in the governorate and carries out large-scale operations there, alongside other rebel organizations.

22. This past year **the Al-Nusra Front has claimed responsibility for many dozens of operations against targets affiliated with the Syrian regime in the Daraa Governorate.** They included attacks on Syrian army camps, roadblocks, convoys, and vehicles, as well as car bomb attacks combined with suicide bombings and assaults on Syrian army troops. According to a Syrian news website that operates outside of Syria, **the Al-Nusra Front has built up a sizeable military force in southern Syria** and is well on its way to becoming the most dominant organization in the region due to the considerable sums of money it pays its operatives (syriatruth, December 28, 2013). At the same time, there is some evidence to suggest that the Al-Nusra Front is also involved in civilian activity in the environs of Daraa, albeit on a smaller scale than in northern and eastern Syria (see Section Six).

³⁵ See report by Al-Hayat's correspondent in Jordan (April 21, 2013), describing how Salafist-jihadi fighters from Jordan cross the border to join the Al-Nusra Front in Daraa. **Munif Samara**, a senior Salafist leader in Jordan, met with the reporter and told him that the considerable number of Jordanian Salafists with combat skills is an important manpower pool for the Al-Nusra Front and other Islamic organizations working in Syria. According to Samara, there are at least 500 Jordanians currently fighting against the Syrian forces, 40 of whom were killed and seven of whom died in suicide bombing attacks (*istishhad*).

Al-Nusra Front military activity in the environs of Daraa



Firing rockets in Daraa (youtube.com)



Training camps in Daraa (youtube.com)



Suicide car bombing at the Al-Harak crossing in Daraa, for which the Al-Nusra Front claimed responsibility on June 30, 2012 (youtube.com)



Taking over a Syrian army tank in Daraa (youtube.com)

23. A notable act of terrorism, responsibility for which was claimed by the Al-Nusra Front in cooperation with other Islamic organizations, was **an attack on a Syrian army roadblock situated next to two thirteen-story buildings** overlooking the city of Daraa. According to a video uploaded to YouTube on July 19, 2013, titled “Announcement No. 317”, the attack began on June 6 and ended on June 27, 2013. **Two car bombs** were detonated during the attack, one by a suicide bomber (see

photograph) and the other by remote control. According to the announcement, the attackers subdued the Shabiha operating the roadblock and then took over the surrounding area and bombed the two tall buildings.



Bombing the two buildings



Attack on the Syrian army next to the two buildings



The suicide bomber who detonated the car bomb reads his will

The Golan Heights

24. **The Golan Heights region (Quneitra and the Syrian-Jordanian-Israeli border triangle) is the scene of fighting between the rebel forces and the Syrian army.** Among the rebels, **the Free Syrian Army is the dominant organization.** So far, the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist groups **have not gained any considerable foothold in the Golan Heights**, even though they are active and maintain military presence in several villages (which is often exaggerated by the Syrian regime and its supporters for propaganda reasons and for the purpose of branding all rebels as jihadists).

25. A March 22, 2013 report released by SANA, Syria's official news agency, said that on March 21 Syrian army forces captured the towns of Khan Arnabah and Khadr after a series of operations targeting the Al-Nusra Front. According to the report, Syrian army forces demolished buildings used by the Al-Nusra Front for storing ammunition and weapons. A report posted by Jordanian news website JBC on March 27, 2013 said that an Al-Nusra Front force took over Wadi Rukad, to the east of the Golan Heights, and a water reservoir near the Syrian-Jordanian-Israeli border triangle (JBC News). On June 20, 2013 the Syrian army announced that it eliminated Al-Nusra Front operatives in the environs of Quneitra, Daraa, and Al-Hasakah (albaathmedia.sg).

26. **A notable (and exceptional) showcase attack carried out by the Al-Nusra Front in the Golan Heights took place on January 25, 2013.** The organization's operatives attacked a **building in the village of Sasa** that housed the **military intelligence branch of the Quneitra Governorate, an important administrative symbol of the Syrian regime.** The building was razed with **two car bombs.** According to the Al-Nusra Front, **four suicide bombers** took part in the attack, for which it subsequently claimed responsibility. According to Syrian military sources, 53 military intelligence personnel were killed in the attack, six of them officers. Some 90 people were injured. Among those killed was **Amid (brigadier general) Adnan Ibrahim**, the chief of the Quneitra Governorate Military Intelligence Department (syriahr.net).



The aftermath of the bombing of the military intelligence building in Sasa (Al-Hadath News)



The considerable damage caused to the military intelligence building in Sasa by the car bombing (youtube.com)

Execution of captives

27. The Al-Nusra Front **often executes** captured Syrian troops and Shabiha. For instance, Al-Nusra Front operatives took several captives in an attack on a Syrian roadblock in Idlib. The operatives slit the throats of five captives and dumped their bodies to spread fear among their enemies (globalpost.com). In another instance, the Al-Nusra Front filmed the execution of twenty Syrian soldiers in Aleppo (the video was posted on October 4, 2012). A top Al-Nusra Front operative in the Aleppo region told an American reporter, “We detained them, lined them up and killed them. They were fighters fighting us. So this is terrorism, but we forget that there is an entire state that has terrorized people for 40 years?” (world.time.com).



Twenty Syrian soldiers executed in the city of Aleppo, October 4, 2012 (assafir.com)

28. **In May 2012** demonstrations took place in the city of Al-Raqqa after Al-Nusra Front operatives executed three captive Syrian officers (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, May 16, 2013). In another instance a YouTube video showed Syrian regime loyalists being executed by Al-Nusra Front operatives.



Regime loyalists executed by Al-Nusra Front operatives in eastern Syria. The date and precise location are unknown (youtube.com).

29. A video uploaded to YouTube on June 26, 2013 showed Chechen Al-Nusra Front operatives executing supporters of the Assad regime by decapitation. The victims are believed to be two or three Christian men from the Idlib region, one of them an archbishop (mepanorama.com).



The moment before the execution (YouTube, June 26, 2013)

The Al-Nusra Front response to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime

30. Preparatory measures for what seemed at the time like an imminent U.S. attack were taken not only by Syrian regime forces but also by the rebels, particularly the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria. Those two Al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations were worried that, being the "true enemy" of the U.S., they would be targeted by the attack (Reuters, August 31, 2013; The Guardian, September 8, 2013).

31. Western media reported that thousands of jihadist operatives in northern Syria, including operatives of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, took a series of measures in anticipation of a U.S.-led strike: evacuating bases, hiding weapons, putting anti-aircraft batteries on alert, and spreading operatives and cars among farms and local communities that were forced to "host" them. Security for the local leaders (the *amirs*) was increased (changing their locations and cars). A local *amir* of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, codenamed Abu Ismail, said that the measures

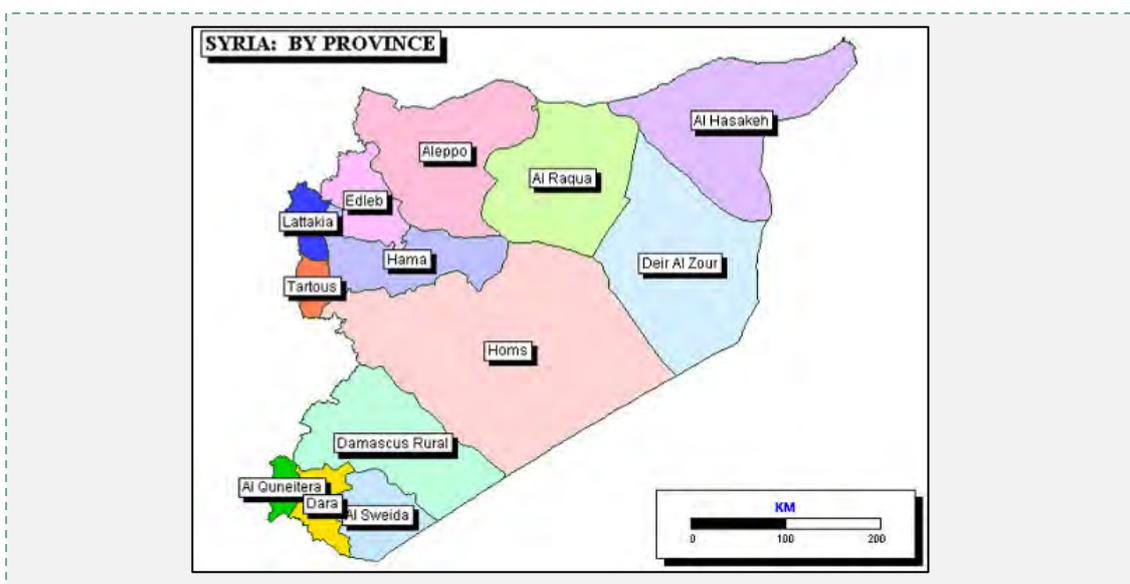
were taken due to lessons learned from the fighting in Iraq (The Guardian, September 8, 2013; Reuters, August 31, 2013).

32. Prior to that, on August 24, 2013, Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani released a YouTube audio clip calling for revenge against the Syrian regime for its use of chemical weapons. The tape accused the Assad ("Nusayri") regime of attacking the eastern suburbs of Damascus with dozens of rockets carrying chemical substances and killing hundreds of children, women, and men. Al-Julani called on jihad warriors to avenge the murder of the children by launching "eye for an eye" attacks on Alawite ("Nusayri") villages: "For every chemical rocket that landed on our people in Syria, an [Alawite] village will pay".

Section Six: Filling the Governmental Vacuum by the Al-Nusra Front and Other Jihadist Organizations

Overview

1. **Vast areas in northern and eastern Syria where Sunnis reside have fallen under rebel control, becoming so-called “liberated territories” where the Syrian regime has no sovereignty.** It is mostly true for the governorates of Deir ez-Zor, Al-Hasakah, Al-Raqqah, Aleppo, and Idlib (see map below). The governmental vacuum **has been filled by the Al-Nusra Front and other Islamic jihadist organizations which to all intents and purposes control those areas.** At times they cooperate with the Free Syrian Army and other rebel organizations that hold Syrian nationalist or secular views, **the majority of which are in a vulnerable position** and have no ability to create an effective governmental alternative to the Syrian regime, which no longer functions in those areas.



Syria's governorates (www.personal.umich.edu)

2. In the so-called “liberated territories” there are often shortages of food and basic supplies, as well as lack of functioning vital services. In some cases the cause is the collapse of the Syrian regime; in others it is the intense fighting that prevents supplies from reaching the residents. Residents in various hotspots of fighting find themselves caught between the regime forces and the various rebel militias, including the Al-Nusra Front. Helping to resolve the difficulties are relief networks created by the rebel

organizations and ad-hoc arrangements with the Syrian regime, making it possible to deliver humanitarian assistance to the entrapped residents.³⁶

3. The Al-Nusra Front and the other jihadist organizations **place considerable importance on establishing a governmental alternative in the so-called “liberated territories”** by providing aid to the local population, considering it an important leverage for gaining the residents’ trust. In Abu Muhammad al-Julani’s video on the founding of the Al-Nusra Front (January 24, 2012), he called on his supporters to provide protection to the citizens, establish a legal system to help them settle disputes, and assist them with fuel, medicines, and other supplies. The intensive governmental activity of the Al-Nusra Front required investing **considerable financial resources**; however, it later became clear **that it could also become a source of profit**.

4. To create an alternative administration to the Syrian regime and gain the support of the population in various regions that they have captured, **the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations have taken upon themselves government functions in various spheres of life**: distributing vital food supplies, operating an Islamic justice system and enforcing law and order. In some areas they have been able to overcome the anarchy and chaos and restore an adequate level of law and order, sufficient (at least for now) to function as an alternative to the Assad regime. More often than not, Western reporters who visited the so-called “liberated territories” said that the local residents were content with the situation. In some areas, on the other hand, locals have started complaining and taking issue with the radical Islam’s takeover of the rebel organizations and the Islamists’ strict methods of control. It is our assessment that, at this point, this is not enough to pose a significant challenge to the Al-Nusra Front and its jihadist allies.

5. **The Al-Nusra Front has established a civil network called the Department of Relief (*Qism al-Ighatha*)³⁷** to coordinate the distribution of aid to the population. The Department of Relief distributes food, clothing, blankets, and consumer products to citizens in Syria’s governorates. It also monitors prices to prevent profiteering that would hit those in need. In some areas the distribution of aid is controlled by the **AI-**

³⁶ One such arrangement, achieved in the city of Aleppo between regime forces and rebel militias, allowed food trucks to enter the rebel-encircled city. The first shipment arrived in the city via the Damascus-Aleppo road after it was opened by the rebels. It was reported at the time that more shipments were on their way (As-Safir, Damas Post, July 15, 2013). On its part, the Syrian regime blamed the “gunmen” from Aleppo, including operatives belonging to the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, of preventing the transport of food to the city’s western part (Al-Watan, July 15, 2013).

³⁷ It is also called the **Committee of Relief (*Lajnat al-Ighatha*)**.

Nusra Front Shari'ah Authority (*Al-Hay'ah al-Shar'iyyah*), which operates teams on its behalf in cooperation with other Islamic organizations.

6. **In northern and eastern Syria the Al-Nusra Front has been able to take over vital national infrastructure:** oil fields, oil and gas pipelines, dams, power plants, and grain silos. The Al-Nusra Front uses its control of these infrastructures to provide aid to the population as well as pay salaries and purchase weapons for its forces. Particularly profitable are **the oil fields in eastern Syria**. The oil produced there is sold to the Syrian regime **in a tacit agreement, providing the Al-Nusra Front with a high monthly income**. It has also been reported that the Al-Nusra Front independently markets fuel products from improvised distilleries to northern Syria and Turkey, and uses those profits as well to become stronger.³⁸ Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani admitted that the Al-Nusra Front's operatives took over oil wells, but denied reports about selling oil to the regime (YouTube, July 22, 2013).

7. It appears at this point that the Al-Nusra Front and its allies **have indeed been able to gain the support of the local population in most areas** by restoring law and order, repairing infrastructure, distributing food supplies, and pursuing a pragmatic line in day-to-day life. The Al-Nusra Front's pragmatism of sorts can be seen in several instances in the way it refrains from imposing severe punishments or enforcing Islamic religious law. However, **beneath the surface lie the fundamental differences** between Islamic Salafist-jihadi rebel organizations and nationalist Syrian organizations, between the desire to enforce a radical Islamic rule and the slogans of freedom and liberty used by some of the rebel organizations. **Those fundamental differences are liable to surface** and erode the population's support for the Al-Nusra Front and the other jihadist organizations as the Syrian regime grows weaker **and the common denominator that currently unites all the opposing factions loses its significance**.

³⁸ July 2013 saw a rift between the Al-Nusra Front and its allies on one hand and the Kurdish minority in northern and eastern Syria on the other. The clashes that broke out between the two sides were fuelled, among other things, by competition for control over the oil fields in Al-Ramilan, eastern Syria (As-Safir, July 30, 2013).



Pro-Al-Nusra Front poster seen at a demonstration (probably in a Damascus neighborhood): “To the jihadi Al-Nusra Front, keep going and may Allah’s eye watch over you. We are all with you, o lions of Allah’s uniqueness and unity” (djbhet-ennosra.blogspot.com)

Procession in support of the Al-Nusra Front in the city of Idlib, December 7, 2012. The participants chanted, “Al-Nusra Front, may Allah help you” (youtube.com)



Teenagers with a poster that reads, “We are all Al-Nusra Front” (djbhet-ennosra.blogspot.com)



Pro-Al-Nusra Front poster at a demonstration: “Al-Nusra Front represents us”. In the lower left is the insignia of Al-Qaeda (djbhet-ennosra.blogspot.com)

The Al-Nusra Front's civil governance of various regions

The Al-Raqqa Governorate

8. In the second half of June 2013 a team of journalists for Reuters held a 10-day visit to the city of Al-Raqqa, in northern Syria, which was taken over by the rebels in early March 2013. The journalists reported that a coalition of Islamic organizations, including the Al-Nusra Front, **was filling the governmental vacuum where the regime forces had withdrawn.** The journalists noted that **the coalition of rebels supported by the U.S. and the West had very little influence on the ground, since the residents were turning to Islamists as their best alternative to the chaos that ensued with the collapse of the regime institutions.** According to the report, the most notable group in Al-Raqqa is **Ahrar al-Sham**, an umbrella organization of Islamist organizations **which operates closely with the Al-Nusra Front.** The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, Al-Nusra Front's jihadist competitor, also participates in providing services to the citizens of Al-Raqqa.

9. The following are the reporters' main impressions from their visit to Al-Raqqa (Reuters, June 22, 2013):

1. The Islamist coalition **manages the city's public services.** It runs bakeries and distributes bread to the citizens. **The rebels operate a hydroelectric dam** near Al-Raqqa (see below). **Their fighters secure grain silos** while others ensure that supply chains, from wheat fields to bakeries, function smoothly. They have also **set up courts that impose punishments on transgressors.**

2. **The most important public service set up by the rebels in Al-Raqqa is the court system.** It is generally staffed by older men from the area. The area's Islamist groups send representatives as well. They are more heavily represented at the court system than secular groups. **The rebel-run courts handle financial disputes, property registration, and in some cases, licenses for exporting and importing goods to and from rebel-controlled territory.** Even with serious crimes, most courts do not impose harsh punishments because of an Islamic principle according to which such penalties can be suspended during wartime. Most cases are resolved by the payment of a fine or by a light jail sentence.

3. **The Islamist organizations have won sympathy from many residents in Al-Raqqa**—even those who do not share their vision of establishing an Islamic caliphate—**with their apparent restraint**. For instance, women can walk on the city streets unveiled, mingle with men, and listen to music in public. In addition, getting whiskey is not a problem, as long as one does not drink it in public.

4. **The local university**, which had shut down for about a month after the rebels captured the city, is now operating more or less normally. Young men and women could be seen chatting in the hallways and sharing meals in the cafeteria. Armed groups are not allowed to enter the campus. According to one student, 80 percent of the students were attending classes, and exams were going ahead.

5. Although there are ideological disputes between the Islamist and secular military organizations ruling the city, **it is in everyone's interests to keep them from getting out of hand**. The rival sides agree **on one thing, and that is toppling Assad's regime**. Ahmed Jaber, a student interviewed for the article, said that after the hell of the Bashar Assad regime, the current situation was excellent. Despite the chaos and the occasional disputes between the rebels, the situation is much better than before. Mohammed Shahib, member of a secular activist group, said he was skeptical of the Islamists future behavior but **saw no alternative for now**. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend", he said.

10. An article published in the Lebanese As-Safir newspaper on July 31, 2013 reported that the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria strengthened its hold over the Al-Raqqa Governorate, while Al-Nusra Front operatives were keeping a lower profile. According to the article, the Islamic state and the Salafist Ahrar al-Sham work closely in the Al-Raqqa Governorate and control most of the civilian assets. The Islamic State runs Shari'ah courts, puts up roadblocks, and controls the governorate's roads. It also tries to impose a strict radical Islamic lifestyle on the citizens, being a reflection of the experience in Iraq.

Operating infrastructure in the Al-Raqqa Governorate

11. On February 11, 2013 the Al-Nusra Front led an attack during which the rebels seized control of the largest dam on the Euphrates, near the city of Al-Thawra (The Long War Journal, February 11, 2013; Israeli daily Haaretz citing the AP, February 11, 2013). Rami Abdul Rahman, an opposition activist in London, said that the rebels took control of the dam after driving away a group of Assad's loyalists. Most of the regime

forces stopped fighting after the city of Al-Thawra was taken over by the rebels (Haaretz citing the AP, February 11, 2013). In addition, in the beginning of February human rights organizations reported that the rebels seized a smaller dam in the region, called Baath Dam, in an operation carried out jointly by the Al-Nusra Front and the Free Syrian Army (srgcommission.org). As already mentioned, the Reuters team that visited Al-Raqqa several months later reported that the rebels were operating the hydroelectric dam and providing the residents with water and electricity.



A hydroelectric dam on the Euphrates that was taken over by the rebels (forsanhaq.com)

Protests by Al-Raqqa Governorate residents

12. As noted above, Western and Arab reporters who visited Al-Raqqa after it was seized by the Islamists said that life in the city was back to normal. Young men and unveiled women could be seen walking the city streets as usual, and coffee shops stayed open until late at night. It was reported that the locals were generally satisfied with the new state of affairs; however, it appears that **beneath the surface lies animosity towards the radical Islamic organizations, at least among some residents.**

13. One example could be seen in a June 27, 2013 report by a correspondent for the Lebanese news website NOW, who visited Al-Raqqa. The correspondent interviewed a local student who complained that radical Islamic organizations—the Al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham—took over the city and intended to enforce a tyrannical regime that would impose Islamic law. The Lebanese correspondent said that the city residents were expressing their anger and frustration with the new force that took over the city.

Young people interviewed for the article said, **“This is our revolution and we will let no one steal it from us.”**

14. Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani spoke about the Al-Raqqa citizens’ protest in an audio clip uploaded to YouTube on July 22, 2013. He said that there would be an investigation of media reports about Al-Nusra Front operatives attacking residents in Al-Raqqa and other places, and that they would be brought to trial by the “Shari’ah authorities”. He added that the Al-Nusra Front denounced those events, and that there are rebels who carry the organization’s flag out of sympathy even though they are not part of the organization.

15. On August 13, 2013 it was reported that demonstrations against radical Islamists, particularly the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, had been taking place in Al-Raqqa for several days. The reason was a demand to release hundreds of prisoners and abductees who had “disappeared” in prisons operated by the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria. One of the missing people was a Christian monk from Italy, Paolo Dall’Oglio, who was trying to reconcile the Kurds and the Islamic forces. Some claim that the monk was killed by his kidnappers (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 13 and 15, 2013).

The Aleppo Governorate

16. In late 2012 it was reported that the Al-Nusra Front announced its intention to establish an Islamic state in Aleppo. The statement was denied by most rebel organizations. An American reporter who visited Aleppo said that the announcement was backed by intensive relief efforts in the neighborhoods that the organization was based in (even though its fighters were not from the city) with the purpose of gaining the support of the local population (world.time.com, December 25, 2012).

17. For that purpose the Al-Nusra Front created **a branch of the Department of Relief** in Aleppo, **whose members distributed basic food supplies—such as fuel and flour—to the residents**. The organization also **controlled prices**, as noted by one of its top operatives in Aleppo: “We are keeping the price of bread at 15 lira [about 21 U.S. cents], which was its true price.” He added that profiteers would be punished according to Shari’ah law (world.time.com).



Al-Nusra Front operatives clean the streets of Aleppo (facebook.com)



Distributing blankets to the residents of Tell Rifaat, a village near Aleppo (youtube.com)

18. Western reporters who visited Aleppo described intensive relief efforts carried out by jihadist organizations in the city itself and its environs. According to a Reuters report dated June 20, 2013, the local **Shari'ah Authority**, which locals simply call “the Authority”, is located in a state hospital from which it operates a justice system and provides assistance to residents. Abu Baraa, a 22-year-old fighter from Ahrar al-Sham, told Reuters that the courts worked in accordance with the tenets of radical Islam. Even though they refrained from harsh punishments, Abu Baraa said he hoped the Shari'ah Authority would become stricter after the war. He added that Aleppo's Authority had started with around a dozen people who “wanted to do justice”, but now had **about a dozen branches in Aleppo and several more in the entire Aleppo Governorate.**

19. The Al-Nusra Front conducts **intensive activities to aid the citizens** of Aleppo. The following are several examples from an article by Haqq, an Islamic news agency, April 9, 2013:

1. **Repairing the power grid:** repairing power lines that run from the Euphrates dam to the Deir Hafer region and seven nearby towns; repairing a low-voltage line in the Sheikh Said region that was hit in the attacks; connecting neighborhoods in the Salahin region to the power grid; providing electricity to several neighborhoods in the Al-Radus area of Aleppo; operating the Al-Helwaniya power station.

2. **Maintaining water and sewage infrastructure:** repairing a pipeline leak in the Al-Helwaniya Square region (Al-Bab neighborhood); repairing other water pipelines; laying new pipelines in various neighborhoods of Aleppo and towns in the Aleppo Governorate; maintaining wells and water sources in the Aleppo Governorate; carrying out repair works on the sewage system.

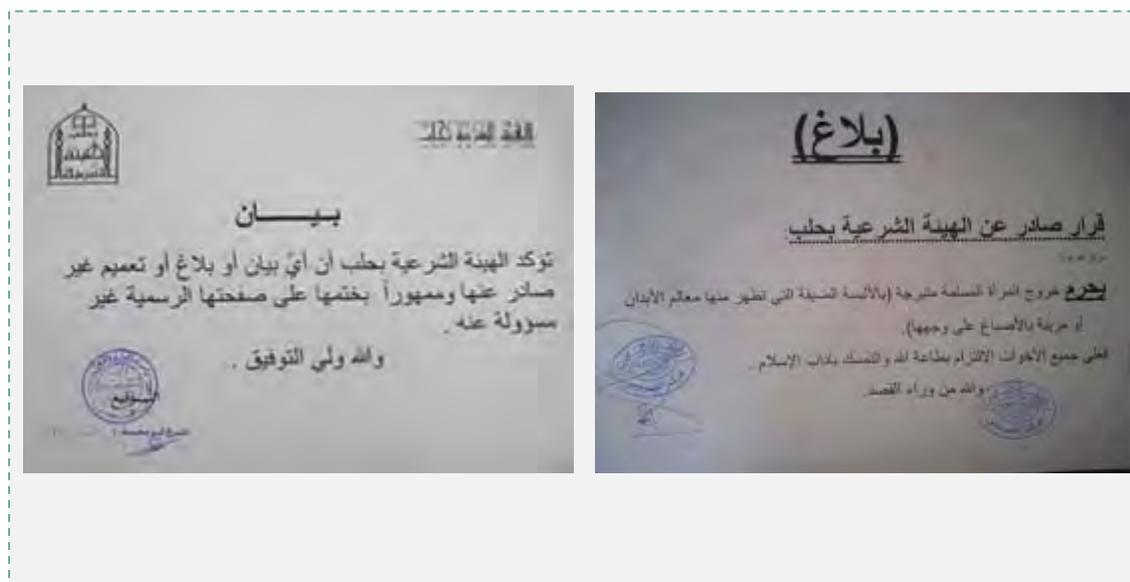
3. **Distributing food:** running bakeries; securing people standing in line at the bakeries; placing vending machines for baked goods to minimize crowds in high-risk areas; controlling the supply of food to bakeries; controlling the supply of electricity to mills.

4. **Medicine:** hospitals and clinics that provide medical treatments at symbolic costs.

5. **Cleaning services:** providing cleaning services to the people of Aleppo and the Aleppo Governorate; removing waste from the city's main streets; dispersing disinfectants to minimize the spread of diseases and infections.

6. **Agricultural aid:** building irrigation facilities in the agricultural lands in the eastern part of the Aleppo Governorate; planning (as at April 2013) to build similar facilities in the southern part of the governorate.

20. In June-July 2013 reports started to surface about stricter enforcement of radical Islamic law in Aleppo. On July 1, 2013 Reuters reported that the Islamic law council of Aleppo's Fardous neighborhood issued a fatwa (religious edict) banning Muslim women from leaving their house in immodest dress (tight clothing that shows off their bodies) or wearing makeup. The fatwa apparently sparked a public outcry and was effectively revoked in another announcement released by the Islamic law council.



A clarification released in the wake of the public outcry. The Shari'ah Authority denies any connection with the statement published on its behalf, and argues that anything that does not appear on its official (Facebook) page has no validity (aksalser.com).

The announcement of the Aleppo Shari'ah Authority banning women from leaving their house in tight clothing and makeup (alquds.co.uk)

21. Prior to that, in early June 2013, Reuters reported an incident where **operatives from the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria** executed a 15-year-old boy named Mohammad Qataa. The execution took place on June 10, 2013. The anti-Assad Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that the boy was shot in the face and neck **for making a comment regarded as heretical**. Witnesses quoted an Islamic State in Iraq member as saying that whoever made similar statements would be punished just as severely. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Al-Nusra Front denied involvement in the execution. An announcement released by the Shari'ah Authority in Aleppo condemned the act as well (Reuters, June 10, 2013).

The Deir ez-Zor Governorate

22. The Al-Nusra Front is involved in intensive relief activity in the Deir ez-Zor Governorate. Below are some examples (based on an article published by the Haqq Islamic news agency on April 9, 2013):

1. **Food:** distributing loaves of bread; distributing salt on a daily basis; distributing food baskets to refugees' families.
2. **Bakeries:** supplying flour to bakeries.

3. **Gas:** supplying thousands of barrels of gas on a daily basis; repairing a malfunction at a gas station.

4. **Transportation infrastructure:** a group of Al-Nusra Front engineers was sent to plan and monitor the construction of a wooden bridge to connect Halabia and Zalabia (two ancient fortresses separated by the Euphrates).

5. **Agriculture:** operating a station for water pumping and an electricity generator in the city of Al-Mayadeen; building transformation stations to help irrigate agricultural land.

6. **Medicine:** operating a state-of-the-art hospital in the city of Al-Mayadeen.

23. The Shari'ah Authority, which is responsible for enforcing law and order, operates in the Deir ez-Zor Governorate as well. The Lebanese newspaper Al-Hayat reported on March 13, 2013 that in the first half of March 2013 the **Shari'ah Authority police** had held a military display in the eastern part of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate.



Delivering fuel to aid the residents of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate's remote areas (youtube.com)



Delivering tomatoes and cucumbers to the residents of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate's remote areas (youtube.com)



Distributing canned food to the residents of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate's remote areas (youtube.com)

Distributing bananas to the residents of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate's remote areas (youtube.com)



Distributing pita bread in the remote areas of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate (youtube.com)

Distributing food in the remote areas of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate (youtube.com)



Distributing pita bread in Al-Mayadeen, an outlying city in the Deir ez-Zor Governorate (youtube.com)

The Idlib Governorate

24. In March 2013 the Al-Nusra Front Department of Relief started providing civil services to the residents of the Idlib Governorate's outlying areas. The services included repairs of the roads damaged in the battles, carried out by an organization known as the Public Works Brigade. It was also reported that the Al-Nusra Front intended to restore the functioning of public services, including schools, clinics, and shops (Al-Hayat, March 13, 2013).

25. A Reuters crew visited the city of **Salqin, in the northwestern Idlib Governorate**. The reporters interviewed Samer Raji, deputy head of the local police. He said that the main rebel groups, with the exception of the Al-Nusra Front, sent officers to staff the local police force. He added, however, that as a last resort, the local police sometimes has to rely on the Al-Nusra Front to enforce the law. "One call from the emir of Jabhat al-Nusra to the commander of a brigade with a wanted man and he'll show up at court", Raji added (Reuters, June 20, 2013).



Al-Nusra Front operatives distribute food and candy to children in the Idlib Governorate (YouTube, July 11, 2013)

The Al-Hasakah Governorate

26. In the Al-Hasakah Governorate, situated in eastern Syria, Al-Nusra Front operatives distribute flour on a daily basis, run bakeries, control the prices of bread, and provide fuel oil (Haqq Islamic News Agency, April 9, 2013).

27. A reporter for The Guardian who visited the city of Shadadi, eastern Al-Hasakah Governorate, described the Al-Nusra Front's operations there. According to the report, in northeastern Syria the organization has taken over massive silos of wheat, factories, oil and gas fields, as well as government cars and a large weapons arsenal looted from the Syrian regime.

28. The Guardian spoke to a local Al-Nusra Front commander, who described the services provided by the organization to the people of Shadadi:

1. **Food:** special Al-Nusra Front teams provide the population with a daily supply of bread baked from 225 sacks of wheat.
2. **Free electricity and water** to the city residents.
3. **Healthcare services** provided from a small clinic in the city.
4. **Enforcement of Shari’ah-based law and order** by newly appointed judges working for the Al-Nusra Front.

The Daraa Governorate

29. Apparently the Al-Nusra Front still does not operate an ordered, large-scale system of civilian relief as it does in the governorates of northern and eastern Syria. However, there are some initial indications that such activity does take place. According to a report from January 4, 2013, the organization was operating an agricultural association in two regions in the Daraa Governorate and provided it with generators to irrigate about 7,400 acres of farm land (syrialsham.com).

The Al-Suwayda Governorate

30. The Al-Nusra Front does not have an administrative hold over the Al-Suwayda Governorate, southern Syria, where **the Druze are the dominant sect.**³⁹ The organization’s weakness in the area has to do with its ambivalent stance towards the Druze, many of whom have supported the Syrian regime and whose religion is an outgrowth of the Shi’a, a school of thought antagonized by Salafist jihadis. This could be seen in a joint announcement released by the Al-Nusra Front and other Salafist-jihadi organizations on December 20, 2012. The announcement called on the people of the Al-Suwayda Governorate, the Druze stronghold in Syria, not to support the Syrian regime “or else [they] will find no rest” (facebook.com).

³⁹ Syria is home to some 500,000 – 700,000 Druze, most of whom live in the Al-Suwayda Governorate (from a review of Syria’s ethnic groups, Al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 14, 2013).

Managing the oil and gas fields in northern and eastern Syria

31. In late 2012 and the first half of 2013 **most oil and gas fields in eastern and northern Syria (in the governorates of Deir ez-Zor, Al-Raqqa, and Al-Hasakah) were taken over by the rebels. The fields are secured and operated by a coalition of rebels, particularly prominent among which is the Al-Nusra Front.** It cooperates with local Sunni tribes that find themselves increasingly pushed out by radical Islamic elements.⁴⁰ A top Al-Nusra Front operative codenamed **Abu al-Baraa**, who spoke to The Guardian by phone, summarized the situation as follows: “Now, we can say that **most of the oil wells are in the hands of the rebels**, only a single oil facility in Al-Hasakah is still under the control of [Kurdish fighters]. There are two other oil wells close to the Iraqi borders in the desert. The Iraqi army have surrounded them with tanks but we do not know what they are doing with them” (The Guardian, May 19, 2013).

32. According to reports in the Arab and Western media, **the Al-Nusra Front and its allies have reached tacit agreements with the Syrian regime on securing the oil fields and selling oil to Syria and other countries.** Under the arrangements, **the rebels make sure that oil keeps flowing to the western part of the country in exchange for monthly payments transferred to the Al-Nusra Front.** “The Syrian regime itself is paying more than 150m Syrian lire [£1.4m] monthly to Jabhat al-Nusra [Al-Nusra Front] to guarantee oil is kept pumping through two major oil pipelines in Baniyas and Latakia. Middlemen trusted by both sides are to facilitate the deal and transfer money to the organization,” Abu Saif, an operative for Ahrar al-Sham, told The Guardian (The Guardian, May 19, 2013).

33. A reporter for The Guardian visited an oil refinery near the city of Shadadi. He said that the refinery, the Al-Nusra Front’s most important asset, was run by a young commander (who had been a law student before the uprising began) named “the emir of gas” by the organization. According to the commander, when the rebels captured the refinery it was run by a joint committee. But then the “emir” decided to remove the rest of the partners for “petty theft” (he argued that the Free Syrian Army had no funding and stole whatever they could get) (The Guardian, July 10, 2013).

⁴⁰ See Reuters article from April 21, 2013 on violent clashes between the Al-Nusra Front and tribes in the Deir ez-Zor region for control over the oil wells. Thirty-seven people were killed in the clashes.

34. In addition, **the Al-Nusra Front and its allies independently export** various fuel products to many regions in northern Syria and Turkey. According to a Reuters report from May 10, 2013, thousands of barrels of crude oil are smuggled to Turkey daily by small tankers using farm roads. **The rebels operate local primitive refineries that cause severe air pollution**, using them to produce kerosene, diesel, and cooking oil. The oil trade has spawned a growing demand for oil tankers, as a single shipment could earn a profit of up to £6,000 (\$10,000). In addition, Al-Nusra Front operatives sell other products that fall into their hands, including wheat, archeological relics, factory equipment, oil drilling machines, cars, and more (The Guardian citing Ahrar al-Sham operative Abu Saif, May 19, 2013).

35. The large sums of money made by the Al-Nusra Front from the oil (and other) resources in areas it controls are used by the organization **to gain the residents' support**. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist. You bring in flour, you repair the bakeries, so there are big smiles in the local community. It's an incredible marketing machine", a former Syrian oil executive told The Guardian (The Guardian, May 19, 2013; see also The Economist, May 18, 2013). **In addition, the Al-Nusra Front uses its profits to buy weapons and pay its operatives** (Reuters, May 10, 2013).

Section Seven: The Al-Nusra Front's Battle for Hearts and Minds

Overview

1. Similarly to other jihadist organizations, **the Al-Nusra Front ascribes a great deal of importance to the battle for hearts and minds.** Its media network is used as a means of disseminating information on its operations, views, and messages to broad target audiences in Syria and the Arab-Muslim world. The battle for hearts and minds is also intended to aggrandize the organization's abilities in the fight to topple the Assad regime, strengthen its position among the rebel groups, encourage fighters from Syria and the Arab-Muslim world to join its ranks, raise funds, inculcate operatives with the ideological messages of radical Islam, and extend the legitimacy the organization enjoys with the Syrian population.



A masked spokesman, referred to as the Al-Nusra Front's person in charge of eastern Syria, calls on Sunni tribes living in the Iraqi-Syrian border region to join the fighting against the Syrian regime (youtube.com).

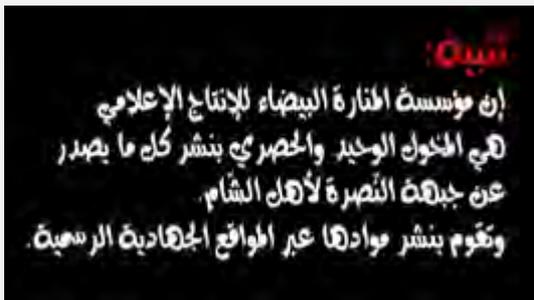
The Al-Nusra Front's media

“The White Minaret” (Al-Manara al-Baydhaa’)

2. The Al-Nusra Front has its own media channel called **Al-Manara al-Baydhaa’ lil-Intaj al-I’lami** (The White Minaret for PR Productions, hereinafter: White Minaret). The name of the media channel refers to the “White Minaret” in Damascus. Muslim tradition says that, in the end of time, Jesus, believed to be one of the Muslim prophets (rather

than the founder of Christianity), will descend from heaven on the White Minaret and announce the implementation of the Islamic religious law (Shari'ah), in a way paralleling the appearance of the Mahdi, the Muslim messiah (m-mahdi-info).

3. The White Minaret media channel has defined itself **as the only platform authorized to release information on the Al-Nusra Front**. It disseminates the organization's propaganda videos, usually filmed as documentaries and sometimes containing interviews with suicide bombers. The videos are usually posted on a major jihadist forum named **Shumukh al-Islam (Glory of Islam)**, and then reposted on **video sharing websites** (particularly YouTube), **social networks** (Facebook and Twitter) **and blogs**. The Al-Nusra Front's claims of responsibility for terrorist attacks are also posted on the jihadist forum **Ansar al-Mujahedeen**.



A warning from an Al-Nusra Front video saying that the White Minaret is the only platform authorized to release information on the Al-Nusra Front



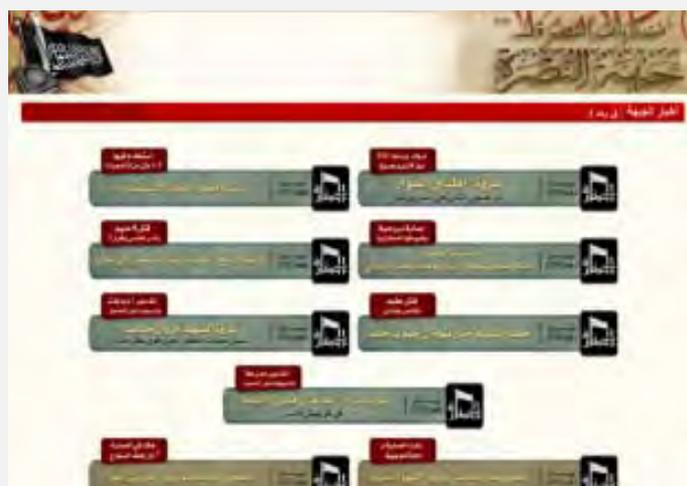
The White Minaret logo, with the black Al-Nusra Front flag on one of the letters



A claim of responsibility for a terrorist attack, produced by the White Minaret. This particular video is a claim of responsibility for an attack on the Tell Ahmar border crossing (between Iraq and Syria) and was posted on YouTube.

Websites

4. The Al-Nusra Front has its own **online message board website**. The website went online in early January 2013 and can be accessed at www.jalnosra.com. It is titled **Forums of Assistance to the Al-Nusra Front** (Muntadayat al-Nusra li-Jabhat al-Nusra) and contains videos and announcements released by the organization. The materials posted on the website are up-to-date and include real-time news flashes. The White Minaret's releases appear on the website as well.



Forums of Assistance to the Al-Nusra Front website (jalnosra.com)

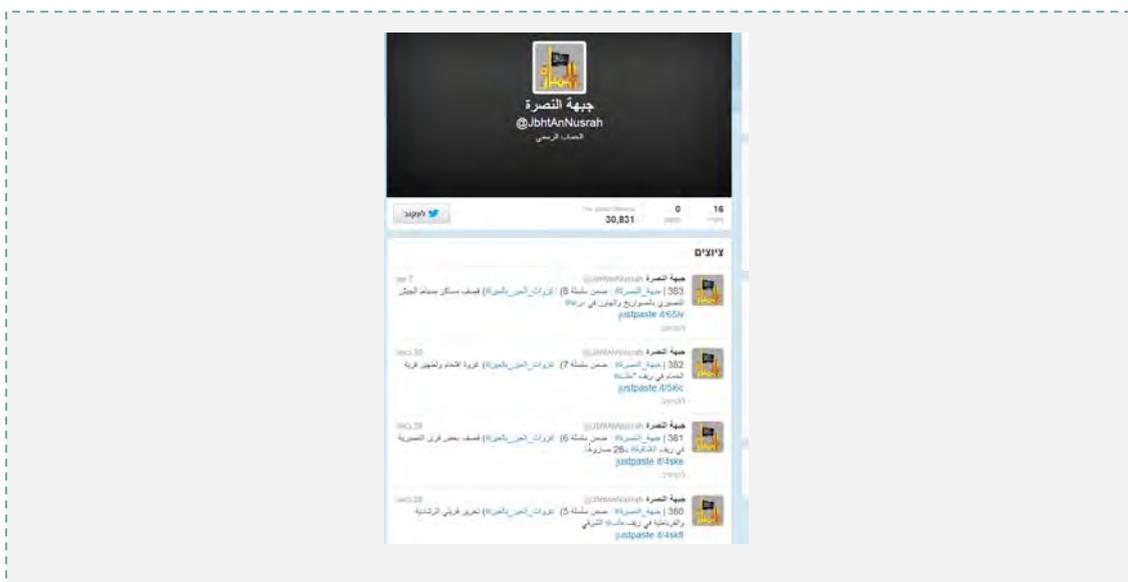
5. In the past the Al-Nusra Front had its own **Facebook** page (www.facebook.com/jalnosra). It contained releases, photographs, and videos from the fighting in Syria, eulogies for the organization's shaheeds, news on the fighting on the ground, and so forth. The Facebook page is inactive as of this writing (September 23, 2013).



The Al-Nusra Front Facebook page, which had about 10,000 “likes” on January 28, 2013. As mentioned above, the Facebook page is now inactive. The White Minaret’s Facebook page is inactive as well.

6. The Al-Nusra Front has a **Twitter account** where it posts updates from the various theaters of operations as well as propaganda releases. It could be accessed at twitter.com/JbhatALnusra and had at the time **75,434 followers**. The account was inactive since early April 2013, and its activity was renewed in late August 2013. The new account included ongoing updates on the Nusra Front activity and had about 31,000 followers.⁴¹

⁴¹ For an analysis of the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations’ use of Twitter, see: **Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher**: “Tweeting for the Caliphate: Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda”, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, June 25, 2013 (ctc.usma.edu).



Twitter account used by the AI-Nusra Front to provide regular updates on its operations

7. The AI-Nusra Front also runs a **blog** (djebhet-enossra.blogspot.com) where it posts updates on the fighting, links to videos, as well as articles and notes about the activity of the organization and its operatives (including emphasis on the public support the organization claims to enjoy).



The AI-Nusra Front's blog

Conduct of the Al-Nusra Front media

Overview

8. The way that the Al-Nusra Front disseminates information online **is usually reminiscent of other jihadist websites' patterns of media use**. However, there is one area where the Al-Nusra Front differs from other opposition organizations in Syria. While other organizations provide real-time reports on their operations, **the Al-Nusra Front is slower in that regard**, similarly to Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Instead of releasing announcements daily, the organization reports on its operations with some delay, by releasing announcements that cover some of its attacks in a particular area. **It is only in the case of exceptional showcase attacks that the Al-Nusra Front's announcements focus on a single incident**. In those cases, it usually claims responsibility within 24 hours, sometimes even later. It is our assessment that such conduct has been chosen due to security considerations, but it may compromise the media impact of the announcements.

9. Another characteristic of the Al-Nusra Front's announcements **is that they do not emphasize those ideological messages that may undermine the support of the Syrian public**. The organization also tries not to become bogged down in unnecessary ideological debates with other groups, believing that actions speak louder than words and usually preferring to limit the announcements to its operational activity. The Al-Nusra Front does not claim responsibility for all of its operations, and at times prefers silence over words. "We don't care about the press. It's not a priority to us," an Al-Nusra Front operative codenamed Abu Adnan told a reporter for Time. "Our priority is to fight the regime. If we film an operation, we film it; it's not important, but for many other groups, the filming is a priority, it helps them get funding" (world.time.com, December 25, 2012).

10. Some of the Al-Nusra Front's announcements contained replies to allegations made against it. One of the issues for which it has been criticized is the indiscriminate suicide bombings, the Al-Nusra Front's signature brand, in which not only Syrian regime loyalists but also innocent civilians have been killed. To deal with the criticism, the Al-Nusra Front public relations system tries to give the impression that the suicide bombings are carried out against Syrian regime targets, and argues that all such targets are carefully selected. The organization has even released videos arguing that it has called off operations to avoid harming innocent civilians present at the scene of the would-be attack at the time. In another instance, the Al-Nusra Front issued a press

release saying that it is opposed to harming civilians, and denying that it was responsible for a suicide bombing attack that took place in the Damascus neighborhood of Al-Zahir during the Feast of Sacrifice, in which women and children were killed (October 27, 2012).



A video showing a target which, according to the Al-Nusra Front, was not attacked due to the presence of civilians. The song playing in the background has the lyrics "we are you" (youtube.com).

Preaching in the mosques

11. The Al-Nusra Front uses mosques as a platform for preaching (*da'wah*) intended to inculcate residents with its jihadist ideology. In addition, mosques are used as distribution points of the organization's CDs and propaganda materials (moslim.org).

12. The following are several examples of preaching in mosques:

1. **A sermon in an Aleppo mosque** delivered by a preacher codenamed **Abu Hafs al-Suri**, who was carrying a sword and wearing battle gear. In the sermon he condemned any attempt at negotiations with the Syrian regime, called for jihad to continue (while waving his sword), and ended with a prayer for "Allah to protect the jihad warriors".



Abu Hafs al-Suri delivers a sermon at an Aleppo mosque (moslimyouthmedia.com)

2. **A sermon delivered at the Othman Bin Afan mosque in Deir ez-Zor on April 19, 2013 by an Al-Nusra Front preacher, who lashed out against democracy for separating religion and state and said they are inseparable. "Is it conceivable that we should allow the Crusaders [i.e., the West] and their tails [i.e., their allies] to rule [Syria] at the expense of your blood and money?" the preacher asked the audience (youtube.com).**



An Al-Nusra Front preacher delivers a sermon at the Othman Bin Afan mosque in Deir ez-Zor (youtube.com)

Distribution of CDs

13. Another tactic used by the organization to disseminate its ideology is **distribution of CDs** in Syria, particularly to Al-Nusra Front operatives. **The CDs contain religious propaganda, sermons by the organization's leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani and other jihadist spiritual leaders** (*shuyukh al-jihad*). The goal is to unite the ranks ideologically and illuminate the organization's objectives. The CDs ensure that the Al-Nusra Front's message remains consistent, and make it possible even for operatives situated in remote locations to obtain the religious and ideological instruction necessary to increase morale and prevent deviations from the organization's messages.



Distributing CDs that contain videos of terrorist attacks carried out by the Al-Nusra Front. The CDs are titled "Fulfillment of the Promise" (ict.org.il).