



December 11, 2013

The rebels in Syria include a few dozen operatives from the Salafist-jihadi organizations in the Gaza Strip. Their number is increasing. Upon their return to the Gaza Strip, they are liable to become a hotbed of terrorism and subversion against Israel, Egypt and even the Hamas de-facto government



Video containing a recording of the will of Fahd Nizar al-Habbash, one of the Gaza Strip residents killed in Syria fighting alongside the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. The flag of the Al-Nusra Front is visible in the background (YouTube, October 17, 2013)

Overview

1. On November 26, 2013, the BBC's Arabic-language channel broadcast a report covering the phenomenon of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip fighting in Syria against the Assad regime. According to the report, dozens of Salafist-jihadi members of radical Islamic movements in the Gaza Strip have gone to Syria. The BBC correspondent in the Gaza Strip estimates that the phenomenon of joining the rebels stems from persecution of Salafist operatives by the Hamas security forces and from the lull policy of Hamas, which prevents Salafist operatives from attacking Israel (BBC in Arabic, November 26, 2013).

2. We estimate the number of volunteers from the Gaza Strip who have joined forces with the rebels at **several dozen** (around 20-23).¹ Seven of them were killed, including

¹ According to the BBC report (November 26, 2013), some sources in the Gaza Strip claim that there are over 70. We believe that this figure is exaggerated.

three in suicide attacks (Al-Hayat, November 28, 2013). Most of them belong to Salafist-jihadi organizations and some are former Hamas operatives. They enter Syria **via Turkey** (as do most of the foreign volunteers). Some ostensibly depart for Saudi Arabia (for example, under the guise of going on a Hajj) and from there they enter Syria via Turkey. In Syria, **they usually join the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations.**²

3. The number of Palestinian volunteers from the Gaza Strip who join the ranks of the rebels **is still relatively low, but it has been on the rise over the past year** (like the phenomenon of foreign volunteers in general). In Syria, the Salafist-jihadi volunteers from the Gaza Strip are expected to acquire military experience, ideological training and ties with groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad. **Upon their return to the Gaza Strip, they are liable to become a hotbed of terrorism and subversion against Israel, Egypt and even the Hamas de-facto government.**

4. In our estimation, besides the volunteers from the Gaza Strip there are about 10-15 Arabs from Israel in Syria, along with several dozen Palestinians from Lebanon and Syria and a small number of Palestinians from Judea and Samaria. These figures indicate that **this is still not a widespread phenomenon** among Israeli Arabs and Palestinians. Nevertheless, as aforesaid, once these volunteers return to their countries, they will represent a potential source of terrorism and subversion.

5. For a summary of information on the phenomenon of Salafist-jihadi volunteers in the Gaza Strip, see Appendix.

² A comprehensive study on the phenomenon of foreign volunteers in general is being conducted by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center and is in its final stages. This will be a follow-up to the in-depth study on the Al-Nusra Front published in September 2013.

Appendix

Volunteers from the Gaza Strip

General Characteristics

1. The number of volunteers from the Gaza Strip **is estimated at a few dozen**. The vast majority are operatives of the Salafist-jihadi organizations in the Gaza Strip and some are former Hamas operatives. On February 17, 2013, Abu al-Ghanaa al-Ansari, a senior operative of one of the Salafist-jihadi organizations in the Gaza Strip, noted that **some 20-30 young men have left the Gaza Strip for Syria in order to take part in the fighting alongside global jihad organizations, such as the Al-Nusra Front**. These are mainly young operatives of Salafist organizations, who are persecuted by the Hamas security forces (Al-Quds, February 17, 2013).

2. According to the German news agency (DPA, March 18, 2013), dozens of Salafist-jihadi operatives have left the Gaza Strip for Syria **via Turkey**. Some of them are former Hamas operatives. They joined jihadist organizations fighting the Syrian regime, led by the Al-Nusra Front (wattan.tv). A BBC report in Arabic, relying on sources in the Gaza Strip, quotes a figure of over 70 volunteers (November 26, 2013). Al-Hayat reported that the number of volunteers from the Gaza Strip is around 30. About seven of them were killed, three while carrying out suicide attacks (November 27, 2013).

3. Most of the volunteers came to Syria via Turkey, some after traveling to Saudi Arabia to perform the Hajj. They were smuggled into Syria from Turkey. Before their departure, the vast majority of volunteers led a devout Muslim lifestyle and belonged to the Salafist-jihadi organizations operating in the Gaza Strip. Upon arrival in Syria, they joined the Al-Nusra Front and other organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad.

4. The Salafist movement in the Gaza Strip has expressed public support for the fighting in Syria against the Assad regime. On January 20, 2013, the Jihad Forum released a speech recorded by **Abu Abdullah al-Ghazi**, a senior **Jaish al-Ummah** operative.³ In his speech, he claims that **the Middle East must become an “open market” of jihad**. A few days earlier, **a video on behalf of Jaish al-Ummah**,

³ Jaish al-Ummah (“the Army of the Nation”) – an organization in the Gaza Strip that is affiliated with the global jihad, whose establishment was announced in January 2008. Its commander is Ismail Hamid, a.k.a. Abu Hafs al-Maqdisi, who was arrested twice by Hamas.

dedicated to the fighters in Syria, was posted. The video contained detailed instructions on how to make a 107 mm homemade rocket, including details of materials and quantities required for production (www.longwarjournal.org, August 28, 2013).

5. **The Ibn Taymiyyah Center of the Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem** (the most prominent Salafist-jihadi organization in the Gaza Strip) and other jihadist forums, tend to document the Palestinians from the Gaza Strip who were killed during the fighting in Syria (see posters below).⁴ On September 28, 2013, the Ibn Taymiyyah Center published a poster stating that between July 28, 2012 and September 17, 2013, five Palestinians were killed in the fighting in Syria (www.longwarjournal.org, October 1, 2013).

Palestinians from the Gaza Strip who were killed in Syria

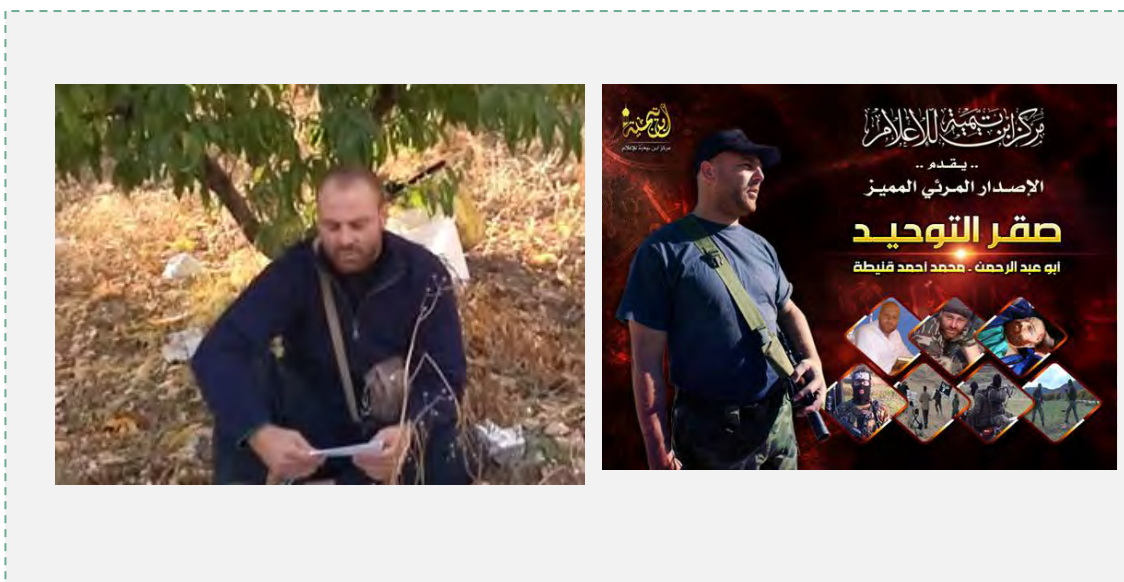
6. **Saad Harb Shaalan** – 23, from Beit Lahia, was associated with the Salafist movement and apparently joined the ranks of the **Al-Nusra Front**. He was killed on June 18, 2013, in the fighting against the Syrian army in Idlib (or in Aleppo, according to a different report). Approximately a month after his arrival in Syria, his brother **Khaled** was killed during the course of his activity in the military wing of the Palestine Islamic Jihad (www.facebook.com) (Al-Quds, June 19, 2013).



Saad Harb Shaalan in posters published in his memory by the Ibn Taymiyyah Center (left) and Facebook (right)

⁴ The Ibn Taymiyyah Information Center began operating in December 2011. Its publications deal with Salafist and jihadist activity among the Palestinians.

7. **Muhammad Ahmad Quneita**, a.k.a. **Abu Abd Al-Rahman** – married with three children. Jihadist operative and **former Hamas operative**. He was killed in Syria in a rocket attack in December 2012 **while fighting in the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front** near the airport in Aleppo. Muhammad Quneita grew up in a religious home and was raised to hate Israel. At the age of 12, he was wounded while throwing stones. He joined the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, served as a guide and fought against the IDF during Operation Cast Lead. After the operation, he joined the ranks of Salafism and trained groups of Salafist combatants. He attempted to travel to Chechnya, failed, and went to Mecca and from there to Syria. In Syria he supervised the training of the Al-Nusra Front and joined in the fighting. He was buried in Syria (www.longwarjournal.org, March 15, 2013).



Left: Muhammad Ahmad Quneita reading his will (YouTube); right: Muhammad Ahmad Quneita (<http://www.longwarjournal.org>, March 15, 2013)



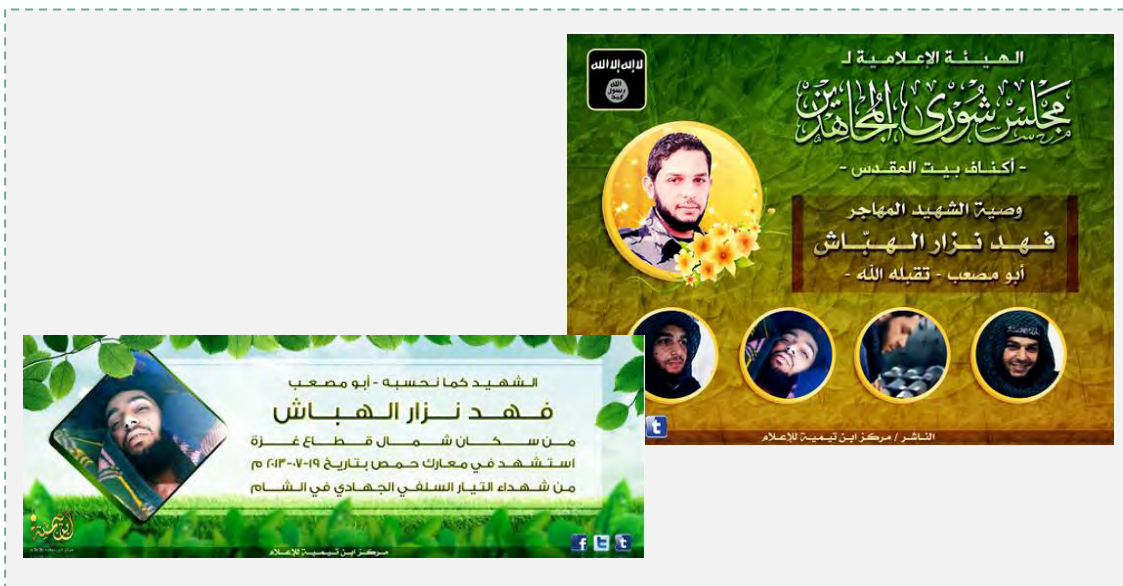
Muhammad Ahmad Quneita in a poster published in his memory by the Ibn Taymiyyah Center

8. **Muhammad Jihad al-Zaanein**, a.k.a. Abu Anas, from Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip. He was previously arrested several times by Hamas. According to a report in a jihadist forum on September 17, 2013, he was killed fighting alongside the **Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham**, the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. He apparently blew himself up at a Syrian army checkpoint (BBC in Arabic, November 26, 2013). A mourning tent was set up in his memory in Beit Hanoun, in the northern Gaza Strip (www.longwarjournal.org, October 1, 2013). His family said that he went on the Hajj in Saudi Arabia and from there to Turkey, where he told them he would be studying. He actually joined the rebels in Syria. According to his family, he was arrested three times by Hamas. Family members who spoke with him said that he told them they would “meet in heaven” (BBC, November 26, 2013).



Muhammad Jihad Al-Zaanein in a poster published in his memory by the Ibn Taymiyyah Center

9. **Fahd Nizar al-Habbash** – previously served in the Hamas police force, killed in the fighting alongside the forces of the Al-Nusra Front in mid-July 2013. Al-Habash was born in 1985 in the northern Gaza Strip. After graduating in 2006, he married and fathered two children. After the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, he was determined to fight in Syria (www.longwarjournal.org, October 1, 2013). He was killed on July 19, 2013. A videotape with his will was released by the Ibn Taymiyyah Media Center (www.longwarjournal.org, August 28, 2013).



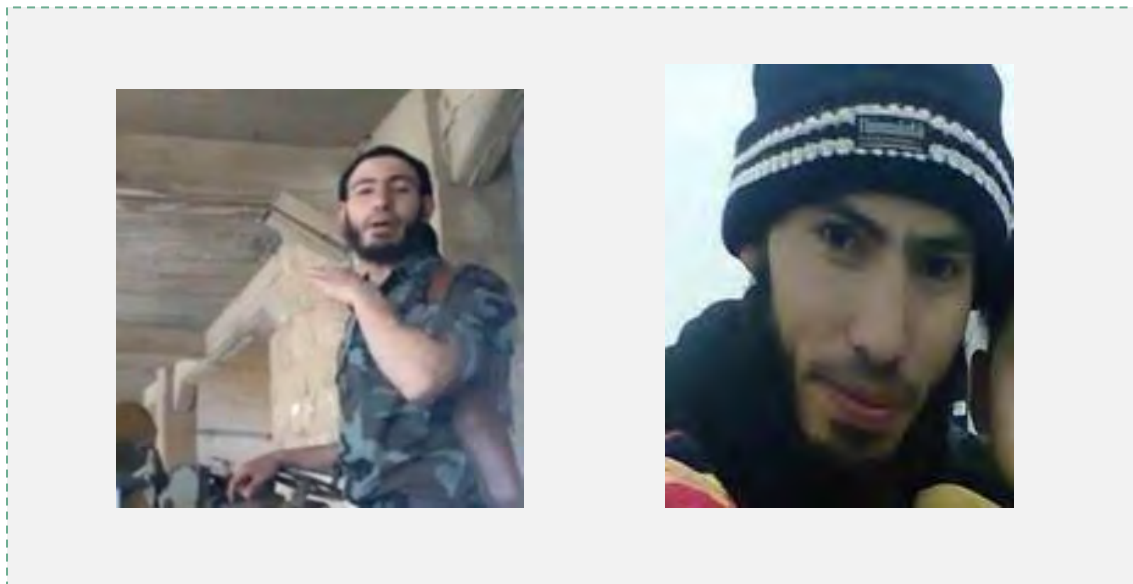
Left: Fahd Nizar al-Habbash in a poster released by the Ibn Taymiyyah Center; right: Fahd Nizar al-Habbash, who was killed in Syria (<http://www.longwarjournal.org>, August 28, 2013)

10. **Nidal al-Ashi**, a.k.a. **Abu Huraira al-Maqdisi** and **Abu Omar al-Shami**, who belonged to a jihadist organization in the Gaza Strip called the **Army of Islam**. He was killed in July 2012 in Aleppo (www.longwarjournal.org, July 28, 2012). In a statement issued at the time of his death by the Army of Islam it was said that he was held by Hamas after harassing Christians in the Gaza Strip and then fled to Syria (www.longwarjournal.org, October 1, 2013).



Left: Nidal Khaled al-Ashi in a poster published in his memory by the Ibn Taymiyyah Center; right: Nidal al-Ashi (<http://www.longwarjournal.org>, July 28, 2012)

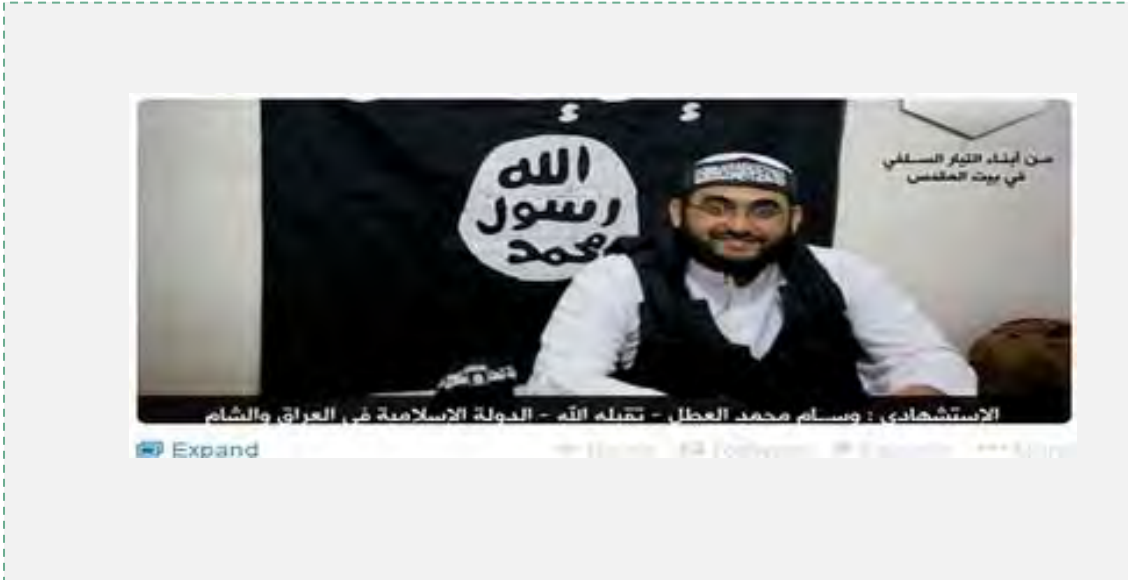
11. **Osama Abu Khattab** – operative in the ranks of the Free Syrian Army. **Former Hamas operative** in the Gaza Strip, he moved to Jordan and from there to Syria. He was killed in June 2013 (centerfordocumentation.com).



Left: Osama Abu Khattab threatening to decapitate the members of the Assad regime (www.safsaf.org); right: Osama Abu Khattab (centerfordocumentation.com)

12. **Wissam al-Atal**, from Jabaliya in the northern Gaza Strip, a.k.a. **Abu Muhammad al-Filastini**, age about 30-35. A dentist by profession, he was killed in Syria. The report on his death stated that he was killed during a “jihadist mission”; he apparently carried out a suicide bombing attack. **Al-Atal traveled from the Gaza Strip to Turkey and**

from there to Syria. His family learned that he was in Syria just two months before he was killed. Confirmation of his death was posted on the Ibn Taymiyyah Center's Twitter page (www.longwarjournal.org, November 3, 2013). A few days before his death, a picture of him with an explosive belt appeared (BBC, November 28, 2013).



Ibn Taymiyyah Center's Twitter page announcing the death of Wissam al-Atal (November 2, 2013)