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Jihadis' aims go beyond toppling Assad



Mariam Karouny, Reuters, Beirut

The most feared and effective rebel group battling President Bashar al-Assad, the Islamist Nusra Front, is being eclipsed by a more radical jihadi force whose aims go far beyond overthrowing the Syrian leader. Al Qaeda's Iraq-based wing, which nurtured Nusra in the early stages of the rebellion against Assad, has moved in and sidelined the organization, Nusra sources and other rebels say. Al Qaeda in Iraq includes thousands of foreign fighters whose ultimate goal is not toppling Assad but the anti-Western jihad of al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri - a shift which could extend Syria's conflict well beyond any political accord between Assad and his foes. The fighting has already cost 90,000 lives. The break-up of an important part of Syria's opposition, already splintered into hundreds of armed groups, worsens the dilemma faced by the West as it debates whether intervention to support the rebels will result in arms being placed in the hands of hostile Islamist militants. And the if the West were to intervene, it may now be under pressure to attack al Qaeda opposition forces rather than Assad "Nusra is now two Nusras. One that is pursuing al Qaeda's agenda of a greater Islamic nation, and another that is Syrian with a national agenda to help us fight Assad," said a senior rebel commander in Syria who has close ties to the Nusra Front. "It is disintegrating from within." Others said that Nusra's Syrian contingent has already effectively collapsed, with its leader Abu Mohammad al-Golani keeping a low profile and his fighters drifting off to join other rebel groups. Nusra fighters have claimed responsibility for the deadliest bombings of the two-year-old Syrian conflict and their brigades have led some of the most successful rebel offensives against Assad's forces. The group was formally designated a terrorist organisation by the United States six months ago, a step which Washington said was vindicated by a declaration in April that Nusra was merging with al Qaeda's Islamic State of Iraq. But the U.S. move drew criticism from Syrian rebels and opposition leaders alike, reflecting the fact that Nusra was able to win grudging support beyond its core Islamist base because of its fighters' discipline and battlefield successes. Many Syrians turned a blind eye to the growing presence of foreign and Arab jihadi fighters in its ranks because Nusra fighters cooperated with other rebel brigades, worked to curb looting and provided help for displaced Syrians. By contrast the head of the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who has moved into northern Syria to take tighter control over al Qaeda operations in the country, has few admirers among Syrian fighters. They see him as a brutal figure with little time for the intricacies of Syria's struggle, focused less on toppling Assad and more on imposing a radical Islamist rule including religious courts and public executions. Many accuse him privately of hijacking their revolution. "We reject his presence here on the ground. He should take his fighters and go back to Iraq," said a Nusra source who is close to Nusra leader Abu Mohammad al-Golani. "We are not happy with the way he operates nor with his methods." Baghdadi steps in Baghdadi's announcement in early April that his Islamic State of Iraq was formally merging with Nusra to form the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant clearly took the Syrian Nusra rebels by surprise. Golani said he had not been consulted and, while swearing allegiance to al Qaeda's Zawahri, insisted his fighters would continue to operate under their own Nusra Front banner. "Golani pledged religious allegiance to Zawahri, but not political or military (allegiance)," said the Nusra source close to Golani. "It was an attempt by Golani to keep his distance from Baghdadi." But the move did not help. Soon after, in a direct challenge to Golani, Baghdadi travelled from Iraq to a town in Syria's Aleppo province, where he was joined by Arab and foreign jihadis who had formerly fought for Golani's Nusra. Rebels say the rift continued to widen and the foreign and Arab wing is now operating formally under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, while many Syrian Nusra fighters have dispersed to join other Islamist brigades. "The situation has changed a lot. Baghdadi's men are working but Nusra is not working formally anymore," said another Nusra source. "Those with Baghdadi