



Breaking Syria's Reign of Terror

Are al Qaeda hard-liners finally on the run?

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JANUARY 9, 2014

FOREIGN POLICY

Al Qaeda's reign of terror over most of rebel-held Syria may have finally been broken last Friday. On Jan. 3, secular and religious Syrians in various rebel-held towns and cities protested against the al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The protests evolved into clashes between ISIS and two rebel groups -- the newly formed Jaish al-Mujahideen and the newly organized Syrian Revolutionaries Front. The clashes began in western Aleppo and then spread into at least three other provinces -- Idlib, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor -- and groups affiliated with the predominantly Salafi Islamic Front became involved in some of the fighting against ISIS.

This is one of the most heartening developments in Syria in months. The rise of ISIS over the past year was the worst thing that could happen to the Syrian revolution. Its brutal tactics in liberated areas forced many Syrian moderates into hiding or into joining radical groups; it deterred journalists and aid workers from operating in those areas; it deepened divisions among rebel factions; and it ultimately helped to change the narrative in favor of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

On a practical level, ISIS's policies have made it difficult for rebels to move easily in their own areas. The jihadi group had a nasty habit of confiscating other rebels' weapons, cutting their supply lines, arresting their fighters and leaders, taking over weaker groups' headquarters, and establishing smothering checkpoints in strategic areas. Just a few days before the recent fighting erupted, for example, the group had run nine checkpoints on the road from the Syrian town of Atmeh, on the border with Turkey, to the city of Maarat al-Nouman, over 120 miles away. Last November, by comparison, it only possessed two checkpoints.

Despite these abuses, many rebel brigades were reluctant to push back against ISIS. That's in part because, before this moment, it was an open question how the most significant anti-Assad groups -- the Islamic Front and Jabhat al-Nusra -- would respond in the event of a full-blown confrontation. The ideological underpinnings of these groups were still in flux, and some fighters within them are jihadi veterans who could have ended up siding with their fellow radicals. And indeed, while Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham -- two brigades affiliated with the Islamic Front -- joined in the recent fighting against ISIS, two of these brigades' subfactions -- Liwa al-Abbas and Liwa Suqour Assunna -- expressed solidarity with the al Qaeda affiliate.

When the Islamic Front was formed, many observers were quick to condemn it as a radical group that had little ideological difference with al Qaeda affiliates. But, as I wrote recently, the Front was bad news for al Qaeda from the start. The Islamic Front was an attempt to halt fighters' drift toward extremism: Its religious slogans were necessary to counter the growing influence of radical groups, as those groups were increasingly seen by the Syrian public as the most effective at fighting against the ruthless regime. The Islamic Front's most notable success has been in moderating the behavior of Ahrar al-Sham, a longtime ally of Syria's al Qaeda affiliates that has noticeably altered its behavior since it joined the alliance. Last week, for example, it apologized for the "individual acts" of some of its members who had lashed civilians for not going to the mosque to pray on Friday.

Although some members of the Islamic Front often publicly insist that it is ideologically close to groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, its members are largely religious moderates who oppose al Qaeda and its thinking. In private conversations, the alliance's fighters and ideologues commonly criticize the radicals. Even in public, some Islamic Front members have gone so far as to call on Jabhat al-Nusra to abandon al Qaeda and join Syrian groups, even as the Front's leaders publicly play down such sentiments. In addition, Jabhat al-Nusra's behavior throughout the past few days of fighting has been particularly remarkable. The group faced a true dilemma when the protests broke out: On one hand, a core part of its strategy has been to win Syrian hearts and minds, thereby preventing a falling out with more moderate Syrian rebels. The group has thus maintained warm ties with the Islamic Front and has consistently spoke out against *takfir* -- the practice of accusing a fellow Muslim of apostasy. On the other hand, statements from its supporters and leading ideologues showed that it was fearful that the fighting could spin out of control and all jihadists could be targeted, or that a protracted conflict would ultimately push them to fight other rebels.

The group stayed quiet for four days as it tried to mediate between the clashing sides. On the fifth day its leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, issued a balanced statement unequivocally criticizing ISIS's "wrong policies" -- and also highlighting ISIS's arrest, and probably killing, of Jabhat al-Nusra's commander in the city of Raqqa. He then said that fighting had to stop to prevent "the loss of a great jihadi arena."

This recent spate of fighting is a serious blow to ISIS. A major part of its strength was the cult of fear it had established: Despite its insignificant numbers in some areas, larger rebel groups were reluctant to stand up against it due to its brutal tactics. The jihadi group "mistakenly" chopped the head off of one of Ahrar al-Sham's leaders and displayed it to the public, and it drove a car bomb into the headquarters of a rival rebel group, the Ahfad al-Rasoul brigade, in the city of Raqqa. These incidents displayed a savagery that had no limits -- few could bear the cost of refusing ISIS's demands.

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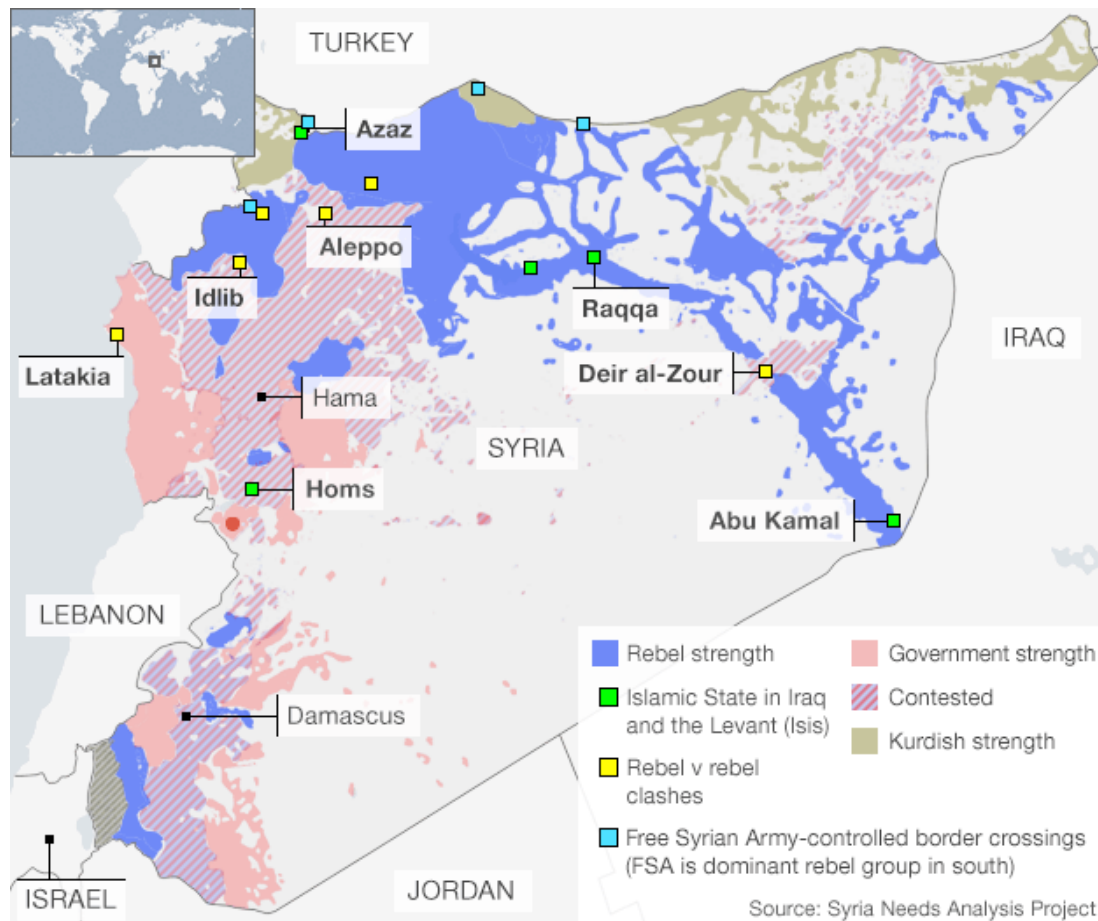
Now that the fear barrier has been broken, ISIS will not be the same -- nor will be other radical groups that have so far managed to maintain an image of tolerance. Up until now, ISIS had imposed its own rigid set of Islamic laws, meaning that other like-minded groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, did not need to interfere in how people led their lives. Now, they will no longer have the luxury of ISIS doing it for them.

Moderate rebel groups have also seen an improvement of their fortunes -- indeed, a new military council was formed this week in Idlib that includes several moderate rebel groups.

To be sure, this ideological realignment is still a developing story, and different rebel groups are still mulling which groups they should ally themselves with. There is also still a danger that Ahrar al-Sham, often described by al Qaeda sympathizers as a fellow jihadi group, could push the Islamic Front closer to al Qaeda. But so far, the opposite is happening.

ISIS will not exit the Syrian arena quietly. The jihadi group's spokesman has declared war on almost all rebels using the strongest terms imaginable -- including threatening suicide attacks and car bombs against Syrian civilians. Jihadi groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham will soon face questions about whether they intend to use similar tactics.

The fighting over the past week is a watershed moment for the Syrian uprising. The momentum against extremism can pave the way for the re-emergence of moderate groups that had been pushed to the margins under ISIS's reign of terror. The episode has proved that it is Syria's mainstream rebels who are best fit to face down extremists -- not the Assad regime.



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