Al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda: Repercussions of Revoking Pledge of Allegiance

Policy Brief

Politics and International Relations Track

Omran for Strategic Studies

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Introduction

Since its establishment in early 2012, al-Nusra Front (al-Nusra) was active in the Syrian uprising and fiercely fighting against the Assad regime. It exploited organizational weaknesses of national resistance factions and benefited later from the mistakes of ISIL. It also collaborated in and coordinated some battles with some national resistance forces. However, this presence has become increasingly problematic with the continued affiliation of al-Nusra to al-Qaeda – an affiliation made public after its leader, Abu Mohamed al-Joulani, pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri on April 10, 2013.[1] This paper explores this problematic relationship and its causes by defining the "allegiance" between al-Nusra and al-Qaeda's central command in Afghanistan. Additionally, we will analyze the potential for disengagement and its consequences on both parties. Finally, we will tackle the implications on the national resistance forces and their options with the continuous growth of al-Nusra at the expense of the Syrian revolution agenda.

Tactical Allegiance and Mutual Interests

The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) emerged in October 13, 2006 without consulting the central command of al-Qaeda. After its establishment, a member of its Consultative Council, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, sent a letter to Osama Bin Laden reaffirming its affiliation to al-Qaeda, stating that the Consultative Council has witnessed the ISI leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, pledging allegiance to Bin Laden, hence, confirming ISI's allegiance al-Qaeda. After Bin Laden was killed by US forces and al-Zawahiri assumed the leadership of al-Qaeda, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was appointed as the new ISI leader based on a decision by the ISI Consultative Council. The latter appointment was however made without consulting al-Qaeda, subsequently, ISI contacted al-Zawahiri to bless his appointment, and so did the newly ISI leader renewing his pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda and its leader as evidenced in several audio recordings.[2] The pledge of allegiance was honored until al-Baghdadi declared the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and annexed al-Nusra Front to the new entity on April 9, 2013. al-Joulani, however rejected this announcement, thus creating an organizational rift between the two groups that later necessitated an Islamic legal justification to their armed conflict.

In its early months, the disagreement between al-Nusra and ISIL was a cautious one. It, however, rapidly turned to an armed conflict starting in Raqqa, fiercely escalating in Deir El-Zour and later spreading to all the territories under the control of both groups. Consequently, the dispute was referred to al-Qaeda to act as an arbitrator, which assigned Abu Khalid al-Souri to investigate the dispute and accordingly to convene a religious court to rule against one or the other. Following the assassination

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[1] See: Link to a voice recording by the Leader of al-Nusra Front, Abu Mohamed al-Joulani, announcing his pledge of allegiance to the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Posted on April 10, 2013:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FdTjm4-6Lo

[2] See: A voice message by the leader of the Qaeda of Jihad in Afghanistan, Ayman al-Zawahiri explaining the relation between ISIL and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Posted on September 15, 015.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e21OztWZfVU

of Abou Khalid Al Souri, al-Zawahiri was pushed to take things in hand and ruled in favor of ISIL dissolution, and the conservation of the original Islamic State of Iraq, on Iraqi territories and under the leadership of al-Baghdadi, hence legitimizing al-Nusra's independency and presence in Syria under the leadership of Abu Mohamed al-Joulani while preserving its affiliation to the central command of al-Qaeda.[3]

In response, ISIL rejected al-Zawahiri's decision and Joulani's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda. Moreover, it adopted a new "frowned upon" approach for trans-national jihadist groups by exposing internal disagreements in the media. Indeed, ISIL published several recordings addressed to Al Zawahiri urging him to renounce al-Nusra's pledge of allegiance, or to refute the legitimate defect he undertook. The most noticeable was a recorded audio message by ISIL's spokesperson, al-Adnani, entitled "Apologies to the Amir of al-Qaeda" which served as a foundation for revoking ISIL's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda. This public "score-settling" has undeniably revealed the true nature of ISIL's relationship to al-Qaeda, with no financial commitment or logistical support required from the later, ISIL's pledge of allegiance to Al Qaeda was nothing more than an unbinding convention for occasional consultations and religious formalities.[4]

Early on, al-Zawahiri was quick to realize that al-Baghdadi was a rather more extreme version of Abu Mosab al-Zarqawi and eventually he will disobey al-Qaeda's orders regardless of how al-Qaeda will handle al-Nusra's pledge of allegiance. ISIL's one-sided commencement left a bitter taste in al-Qaeda's higher ranks as most of al-Zawahiri's recordings have revealed, he realized that ISIL has attracted a large segment of Jihadi circles away from al-Qaeda. The flowing pledges of allegiance to al-Baghdadi from jihadist groups in Yemen, Tunisia, Libya and Africa, in addition to large numbers of European immigrants was a clear manifestation of this new reality.[5] It was just a matter of time before ISIL succeeds in completely outgrowing al-Qaeda. In the end and as expected al-Baghdadi finally seized the opportunity created by the circumstances and declared the Islamic Caliphate in June 29, 2014 declaring himself "the Caliph of Muslims". Weary and desperately clinging to any form of continuity al-Qaeda decided to favor Abu Mohamed al-Joulani over al-Baghdadi, as he offered a niche to be invested in the Levant.

Al-Nusra was not strong enough, being a rather nascent group. Moreover, it was suffering an identity crisis as it started to fight with ISIL. Additionally, it didn't successfully attract jihadi leaders and scholars as ISIL did. Al-Nusra's al-Joulani was confronted with the necessity of justifying to his group the dissent from ISIL and to convince them with the reasons behind rejecting the merge. Faced with these challenges, al-Joulani was only left with pledging allegiance to al-Zawahiri to escape

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[3] See: a voice recording by the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, annulling the declaration of ISIL on December 27, 2013.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cax1C6ETCp0
[4]See: link to a voice recording entitled "Apologies, Leader of al-Qaeda" by the spokesperson of ISIL, Abu Mohamed al-Adnani declaring the revoking of the pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda and calling on al-Qaeda to reject the pledge of al-Joulani. Posted on September 17, 2014.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CABdG63z87k
[5] See: Jihadist groups from around the world pledging allegiance to ISIL since declaring the Caliphate:
http://raseef22.com/politics/2014/10/03

yielding to the smaller branch entity -ISIL- by resorting to the original and broader umbrella group – al-Qaeda.

It is evident that in addition to the structural and organizational relationship between al-Nusra and al-Qaeda, the relationship was further solidified through mutual interests. While al-Joulani was seeking a legitimate umbrella other than ISIL, al-Qaeda was in need for a new popular base – overtaken by Baghdadi's declaration of the Caliphate.

Repercussions of Revoking Pledge of Allegiance on Syria

Al-Nusra's role in the many battles fought during the Syrian revolution in addition to its growing authority, encouraged many to support it and overlook its affiliation with al-Qaeda. Many fighting factions further claim that al-Nusra would be widely accepted and its relationship with the revolutionary forces naturalized in case it revokes its pledge of allegiance with al-Qaeda. However, this position does not take into consideration the consequences of such a move if it materializes. Al-Nusra is by default a power hungry group linked to a trans-national project, and given the current situation of the Syrian revolution, the consequences of revoking the pledge and its impact on national resistance forces, must be analyzed. These impacts can be illustrated further in this paper.

A Strategic Shift in al-Qaeda's Structure

The latest events in the Levant and Iraq forced al-Qaeda to rethink its international and regional positioning and to redraw its transnational project borders. Indeed, the group had no choice but to act in accordance with the deteriorating popular support to its transnational outlook in favor of more national local political projects necessitating the relocation of the central jihadi command from Afghanistan to the Levant resulting in a dramatic shift in al-Qaeda's narrative and politics. An initial review of statements and communiques by al-Qaeda's leaders and theorists indicate a shift from global and transnational jihad to national jihad within local communities.[6] The transnational approach al-Qaeda adopted has proven catastrophic to its existence and more alarmingly it bred more extreme and out-of-control offshoots. Local jihad, on the contrary, offers the opportunity of creating a social base for its ideology and avoid isolation it used to fall prey to. In this context, al-Nusra's experience could be a new one for al-Qaeda and the main paradigm to test the success of such a shift in strategy. Consequently, it would not come as a surprise if al-Nusra's pledge is revoked by al-Qaeda without an endeavor from al-Joulani. Al-Zawahiri had previously stated in a televised interview that the main point of disagreement between al-Qaeda and ISIL was declaring the existence of the group in the Levant and announcing the Caliphate. Al-Baghdadi's solo move offered a valuable opportunity for Bashar Assad to invoke al-Qaeda in his fight against the Syrian people, he added. "The sole guarantee for the

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[6] See: a televised interview with al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, confirming that the basis of jihadist work is mixing with societies, providing al-Nusra as an example. Posted on: March 6, 2015.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giHUgIbXBmc

success of any jihadi experience is jihadists mixing with the social base", he affirmed – referring to the experiences of Taliban and al-Nusra in the Levant.[7]

Therefore, it is safe to argue that the developments in the Syrian scenery and the current reality forced al-Qaeda to reconsider its organizational structure and to redefine its relations with its offshoots, granting them flexibility and autonomy. This shift in politics, however, needs to be initiated by al-Qaeda in order to guarantee a smooth transition. In the case of al-Nusra for example, al-Qaeda extends political legitimacy to its leadership, protecting the group from disintegrating and joining ISIL. For the pledge of allegiance between al-Nusra and al-Qaeda to be "harmlessly" revoked, al-Nusra must acquire rooted local support to provide an alternate source of legitimacy.

Flexible Accession

Despite its affiliation with al-Qaeda, al-Nusra managed to recruit numerous Syrian youth due to various reasons and in complete disregard of the local, regional and international burden this affiliation created on the Syrian revolution. Revoking al-Nusra's allegiance to al-Qaeda removes the main barrier stopping members of other fighting groups in Syria from joining the ranks of al-Nusra. This allegiance is seen as the cause for al-Nusra being listed internationally as a terrorist entity and its dissolution will lead to an influx of fighters without a significant shift in its ideological outlooks. Moreover, several reasons may push the youth to join al-Nusra if it succeeds in getting larger grassroots support such as its track record of victories in fiercely fighting the Assad regime in addition to having a Salafist project that intersects with a large number of Islamist factions. Moreover, it possesses an organizational advantage over other national groups that gives it a wider appeal especially with weakening mainstream religious education and the lack of Syrian-based counter-extremism programs. Therefore, revoking al-Nusra's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda would remove the last obstacle preventing the group from gaining nationwide accession and recognition.

Local Entrenchment of al-Qaeda's Ideology

When the question of revoking the pledge of allegiance with al-Qaeda is raised, not all members within al-Nusra are concerned with it but more discussed among a certain faction within it referred to as the "reformers" or "al-Ansar" represented by Abu Maria al-Qahtani and Mazhar Alwess vis-à-vis the hawkish old guards represented by Samy al-Areedi. Dependence on the former, however, requires great prudence because they represent a rooted segment within Syrian society that embraces al-Qaeda's ideology. It should be noted that revoking the pledge does not mean political denouncement of al-Qaeda's ideology, but rather a public maneuver for tactical purposes. In other words, the dissolution of alliance lead by the reformers within al-Nusra comes at the

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[7] Ibid.

risk of further naturalizing, entrenching and rooting al-Qaeda's ideological outlooks in Syrian society.

Filling the Political and Religious Vacuum

Salafist jihadi movements invoke distorted parts of cultural heritage in marketing their authoritarian cause, while in fact they make use of an existing political vacuum. The lack of capable and moderate Islamic and national political projects by the opposition contributes to the sustenance of political vacuum and leaves the scene open for other ideologies to hijack local political and social initiatives. This leaves al-Nusra with an opportunity to seize the moment and present itself as an Islamist opposition group that fights both Assad and ISIL, given the lack of a unified national vision and agenda. Most national and Islamist fighting and civil society groups on the ground are yet to develop a unified national agenda that appeals to the aspirations of the population and does not ignore prevailing religious sentiments. Besides, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), due to the nature of its structure and the regional and international dynamics of the situation in Syria, failed to develop an appealing and clear political vision. Considering this political vacuum, presenting al-Nusra as a genuine Syrian faction, with no relations to al-Qaeda may transform it to become an indigenous Syrian project.

Options for National Resistance Forces

Direct confrontation between national resistance forces and al-Nusra may push large segments within it to forge tactical alliances with their worst enemy i.e. ISIL, as the latest events in the Yarmouk camp and several other locations in Syria have proven. On the other hand, holding off any action to counter al-Nusra's local and cross-border agenda may have adverse consequences on local national projects and allows al-Qaeda ample time to plan to carefully craft the dissolution of al-Nusra's alliance with it at the same time as al-Nusra is further rooted in Syria. Nevertheless, national forces still have a margin to strategically and tactically approach the issue of al-Nusra's presence, avoid direct confrontation, and contain and scrutinize its grandiose ambitions in Syria.

A Strategic Option

It is hard to overlook the role of al-Nusra as an active and influential player in the military and political scenery in Syria. However, it draws strength from the lack of a national project capable of filling the vacuum overtaken by its religious discourse and military performance. Forming a unifying national political agenda with a moderate Islamic discourse to be adopted by the revolutionaries and is a viable alternative to al-Nusra's agenda is an urgent need, especially with the deteriorating performance of other alternatives. Such an agenda must be empowered with the military means that can deter any military confrontation with al-Nusra and thus protect national forces and

put an end to claims by al-Nusra of being the only alternative to ISIL. This approach should have a strategic plan for confronting al-Nusra or other groups with clear Syrian-based guidelines and provisions in order to succeed in countering any transnational and extreme movements.

Tactical Options

At the military level: support the merger of national forces based on strategic needs rather than tactical reasons or regional and international interests. These groups should assemble around a clear political agenda to make coherent and encouraging for other factions to join, and individuals to defect from groups such as al-Nusra. Subsequently, if military operations require joint operations between these groups and al-Nusra, the latter must then be prevented from leading. Al-Nusra selects frontlines and battles that suit its purposes and avoid operations that potentially can drain it. It also uses victories to feed its media propaganda and often performs individual military operations that entail negative political repercussions for the national forces.

At the religious level: al-Nusra should not be allowed exclusive authority over religious courts, which entail legitimate control over local communities. This requires religious rehabilitation for judges to establish the religious foundations of the differences between transnational and national projects. Salafists jihadi scholars, who advised against joining al-Nusra such as Abu Baseer al-Tartousi,[8] should be promoted and supported and be part of such efforts. Moreover, it is also imperative to prohibit non-bias positioning during battles, to prevent the repetition of al-Nusra practices against Syrian Revolutionary Front and Hazm Movement when they discarded clear court orders and were encouraged to act accordingly when they witnessed other groups' reluctance to reinforce the court ruling.

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[8] Abdel Monem Moustafa Abdel Qader Khedr Mohamed Ahmed Halima, a prominent Jihadi Salafist theorist, a.k.a Abu Baseer al-Tartousi, after the town he was born in, Tartous. He was born on October 3, 1959 and fled Syria in the 1980s after persecution by the Syrian intelligence. He went to Pakistan and then Afghanistan and was among the first Arab mujahedeen. He met in Peshawar with the leaders of Afghan jihadism: Hekmatyar, Sayaaf and later with Abdallah Azzam. He returned to Jordan from Afghanistan where he met Abu Mosaad al-Zarqawi. He had many published books in Jordan until the Jordanian authorities could not tolerate him any longer. He went to Yemen and stayed for almost two and a half years until he was detained by Yemeni authorities and forced out of Yemen. He went to Malaysia, then Thailand and finally settled in the UK. He has 27 books and numerous research and articles. As the Syrian revolution broke out, Abu Baseer followed events on the ground with issuing religious rulings and guidance. Most recently, he criminalized joining al-Nusra Front since it still insists on being an offshoot of al-Qaeda, disregarding the wider interests of Islam and the Muslim nations. He advised that this relationship harms Syrians and their jihad, revolution and Islam and worries the entire world regarding Syria and its people. Linking the revolution with al-Qaeda also provides the tyrant and criminal of Syria with further strength and life and give him more justifications to commit more crimes and atrocities against the Syrian people, with the pretext that he only targets al-Qaeda with his barrel bombs. Abu-Baseer called on all mujahedeen that joining al-Nusra limits their options and they are not religiously or logically obliged to do it.

At the media level: Battle ground management should be highlighted by media outlets, and accordingly factions' spokesmen should be trained to prevent the exclusive media coverage of al-Nusra's alleged military victories and gains, as if it's the only faction who fought in the battle, hence the importance of opening communication channels between fighting groups that do not follow the extremist transnational ideologies and local and international media outlets.

At the local level: Civil society is still a safety valve that enables local societies to effectively participate in managing their daily lives, protect their rights and improve their livelihoods. Al-Nusra has repeatedly failed to deal with the civil society when they defy its authority. Therefore, empowering local administration councils and encouraging civil society organizations to provide services and conduct public awareness campaigns in the liberated areas is a safeguard for monitoring and accountability and the enforcement of minimum participation of civilians in governance.

Conclusion: A National Agenda as a Basis for Maneuver

Throughout history, many movements were designated as terrorist groups by their societies and the international community. Nevertheless, most of these movements eventually ended up being national partners. For instance, the Irish Liberation Army (IRA) emerged in Northern Ireland under UK rule and plotted bombings and other acts of terror in Britain. However, it ended up as a political party, Shinn Féin, with representatives in the Parliament and part of the British political spectrum. In Spain, ETA resorted to violence in their calls for autonomous rule of the Basque. Today, they are under political rehabilitation efforts with the Spanish government. Taliban falls within the same context through political negotiations with the Afghan government. In Turkey, the Kurdish Labor Party was close to reach a political settlement with the state. Likewise, in Iraq, the Kurdish Democratic Union, headed by Masoud Barzani, once designated as a terrorist organization, is yet another example of such experiences.

In the Syrian context, the main difference between al-Nusra and the above movements and groups is that the latter yielded to a national intra-state agenda, facilitating their merge within the state. The main condition making the merger of these groups possible is their abandonment of militancy outside the state and to resort to political and social practices to resolve their problems and achieve their political aspirations. On the other hand, al-Nusra and its likes adopt a transnational ideology that cannot be contained within one state or national agenda. Even if merged, which is possible given the changing regional and international interests, it would be more threatening to the future Syrian state.

Since its foundation, al-Nusra was known for its jurisprudential flexibility and pragmatism. It considered Syria a land of war, where religious penalties are not enforced and no direct or public infidelity rulings should be made. It also learned from the mistakes committed by ISI in Iraq. This flexibility is key in portraying al-Nusra as adaptable to the area they operate in. Al-Nusra is also pragmatic and maneuvers the political scene carefully and could easily justify its breakaway from al-Qaeda. This might be al-Nusra's justification for any act they perform after considering their interests. Accordingly, regardless of al-Nusra's options, the role of national resistance forces should be enforced to accommodate any choice al-Nusra would take.

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