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Syrian Uprising: Will Al-Qaeda Find a Foothold?

By Zulkifli Mohamed Sultan and Nathan Cohen

Synopsis

Amid growing concern among western countries about the involvement of jihadists in the Syrian uprising, Al-Qaeda has been held responsible for some recent deadly attacks. Does it pose a serious threat in Syria?

Commentary

In early July Iraq's Foreign Minister, Hashyar Zebari, stated : "We have solid information and intelligence that members of al-Qaeda's terrorist network have gone to Syria." This echoed US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta's concern expressed to reporters last May that "There is an al-Qaeda presence in Syria."

Though Minister Zebari and Secretary Panetta spoke primarily of al-Qaeda members, and not a robust organisational presence, the matter of al-Qaeda's presence in Syria weighs heavily on the question of international intervention. As it should. In Iraq, removing an effective tyrannical regime opened a Pandora's Box of sectarian divides and frustrations that al-Qaeda exploited. Is a large al-Qaeda syndicate, like the ones operating in Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere, feasible in Syria?

Al Qaeda's rise a possibility

Syria itself does not provide the most fertile ground for al-Qaeda to flourish, and in general Al-Qaeda's reputation has dropped precipitously in recent years. Nevertheless there are many good reasons why an al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) style organization could emerge.

Firstly is the issue of Syria's environment. As Minister Zebari and others have noted, in past months a steady stream of militants previously fighting under the banner of AQI have travelled to Syria. When AQI violence peaked in Iraq, the Syrian border was a main point of entry (often with Syrian compliance) so the same routes may simply be reversed. The existing infrastructure of AQI can facilitate the construction of an al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. Also, many Libyans feel a certain level of kinship with the Syrians' struggle against the al-Assad regime. According to a member of the Tripoli Military Council, "there are hundreds who want to go to fight in Syria..." It is recalled that Libyans constituted a large percentage of foreign jihadists in Iraq.

The second factor lending credence to a fear of al-Qaeda in Syria is the existence of current jihadist groups. The best known group, Jubhat al-Nusrah li-Ahl al-Sham (The Front for the Protection of the Syrian People) has already claimed responsibility for several large and sophisticated attacks. While some secular opposition

members allege that Jubhat al-Nusrah is an organ of the Syrian intelligence services, that has not been verified. In early July another jihadist group named Luwa' al-Ummah (Brigade of the Ummah) emerged.

As of now these groups remain independent and unaffiliated with al-Qaeda, but so were the Salafi Group for Combat (GSPC) in Algeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia. Under the decision of Abdelmalek Droukdel, GSPC became al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2006. Al-Shabaab officially became an al-Qaeda affiliate in 2012, by an equally controversial decision by al-Shabaab's leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane. These factors, taken into account with al-Qaeda Central Chief Ayman al-Zawahiri's own exhortation for jihad in Syria, make the development of an al-Qaeda branch in Syria certainly a possibility.

Non-Affiliated Ties with Al-Qaeda

Nevertheless, an al-Qaeda in Syria on the scale of AQI, AQAP or others, appears highly unlikely. Firstly, the current situation in Syria differs sharply from any locale where al-Qaeda has taken hold. In Iraq, al-Qaeda exploited a fearful and irate Sunni minority that had just been dispossessed of its state power. In Somalia and Yemen, state institutions were virtually non-existent and tribalism was prevalent in a way not seen in Syria. In contrast, Syria enjoys a legacy of strong governance, and the aggrieved majority of the population, the Sunnis, already have a vehicle to (violently) oppose the current government.

Although the Free Syrian Army's flaws are well documented, foremost among them the lack of organisation, with many of the battalions operating independently and subscribing to different ideologies, the FSA remains the primary vehicle to overthrow the regime.

Secondly, al-Qaeda's ability to appeal to the general Arab public and even jihadist groups has diminished over the years. A Pew poll published in May 2011 revealed a dramatic decrease in favourability of Osama Bin Laden in the Arab world. Though the Arab Spring continues to unfold in unpredictable ways, Arabs from Tunisia to Bahrain have shown little appetite for jihad, much to the chagrin of some jihadist ideologues.

Al-Qaeda's relationship with jihadist groups is already tenuous, and the two should not be conflated. While jihadists state their admiration for al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden, many also critically examine the organization's record in a rather unflattering light. Independent ideologues like Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Walid al-Masri have both excoriated al-Qaeda in their writings. Also, the lethality of American counter-terrorism operations has removed the most charismatic al-Qaeda members, particularly the now deceased Osama Bin Laden, Anwar al-Awlaki and Abu Yahya al-Libi. It remains to be seen whether al-Qaeda's current bench includes individuals with the credentials and the charisma to galvanise and organise foreign groups. Furthermore, the lethality of the US' counter-terrorism drive may deter jihadist groups from pursuing a formal relationship with al-Qaeda. Once a group brands itself as an al-Qaeda affiliate, it jumps up a few spaces on Langley's drone target list.

Of course, a jihadist group's abstention from using al-Qaeda's name does not ensure the group's innocuousness. Why then emphasize the distinction between al-Qaeda and non-al-Qaeda groups? First, "al-Qaeda" has come to connote an uncompromising ideology so pathologically hateful to anything outside its own narrow interpretation of Islam that cooption or negotiation is useless. Second, precisely because al-Qaeda is a franchise, an al-Qaeda name suggests the intention, if not the actual practice, of targeting internationals. For this reason, al-Qaeda receives paramount attention in the United States' National Strategy for Counterterrorism. As of now, no evidence has surfaced to prove that Jubhat al-Nusrah or other likeminded groups resemble al-Qaeda in these respects.

Bloodshed radicalizes, and tragically the current violence in Syria displays no signs of abating. This suggests that that chaos and carnage wrought by al-Qaeda that engulfed Iraq six years ago and that continues to wreak havoc in Yemen and elsewhere may yet materialise in Syria. However, for reasons peculiar to the Syrian situation that scenario remains unlikely, at least for now.

Zulkifli Mohamed Sultan and Nathan Cohen are both Research Analysts at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.