The Duality of Syria: Civil War and The War on Terror

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/09/16/the-duality-of-syria-civil-war-and-the-war-on-terror/

SAMEERA KHALFEY, SEP 16 2013

The current situation in Syria is complex, not least because it presents a dual security challenge: the civil war and the 'War on Terror'. The known presence of al-Qaeda in Syria arguably changes the security situation of the civil war. With increasing violence, pledges to militarise both the rebels as well as Assad forces, and the use of chemical weapons, the presence of another destabilising factor in the form of al-Qaeda must be taken into consideration when attempting to facilitate the conclusion of civil war. This paper will address the unique role al-Qaeda has played and may yet play in this conflict. It will address the security implications of its involvement; and it will ask if this will (or should) change the international community's policies in Syria. Addressing these questions, this paper will suggest that the presence of al-Qaeda in conjunction with the increasing presence of foreign fighters does alter the security situation. More so, it argues that the existing chaos within the Rebel Forces[1] raises questions over the "Friends of Syria's"[2] decision to arm them.[3]

The arrest of eight Spanish citizens who were part of a network linked to al-Qaeda on June 21st 2013 highlighted the reaches of al-Qaeda in the Syrian civil war.[4] Although the involvement of foreign fighters had been noted before this point, evidence of the active recruitment of fighters for rebel forces introduced a new and dangerous element to the conflict. This development raises questions over the reach al-Qaeda possess within and outside Syria. The fear that surrounds the elusive network of al-Qaeda and its various off-shoots deepens concerns over the predictability of actions and motives of the Rebel Forces. It raises questions over the future of Syria and begs a consideration of whether the decision to aid the Rebel Forces militarily by the *Friends of Syria* was a wise one. As rebel forces face power struggle between themselves, how they use the military support they have received becomes a central concern. More so, it raises questions over the reconstruction and securitisation of Syria post-civil war. Geopolitically, the outcome of the Syrian civil war is vital to the stability of the region and the 'War on Terror'. The need to maintain a grip on possible breeding grounds for terror is vital. The links that exist with al-Qaeda are proving to be evidence of the inability of foreign governments and international initiatives to suppress terrorism. Thus, as Syria plays host to civil war and the 'War on Terror', Syria must be secured on two fronts.

The dual aspect of this discussion is focussed upon the interplay between Syria's civil war and the War on Terror. They both feed into one another and each must be considered with the other in mind. However, which war must be fought first? Is the victory of one needed to ensure the success of the other? This article considers the implications of undertaking these two "wars" simultaneously, with an eye to the securitisation of Syria.

Syria: A War on Two Fronts

As noted above, Syria is facing war on two broad fronts: civil war and the 'War on Terror'. However, the complexity of the situation means that the battle for dominance and power and the attempts to diminish an international threat are not wars against two unified fronts but a fractured war consisting of multiple parties; as Clausewitz stated: "the political object, cannot always be seen to be a single issue".[5] The ability to securitize Syria, therefore, becomes a matter of recognising the multiplicity of issues at hand, the dual doctrinal wars[6] at play and the highly entrenched hostile *feelings* and *intentions* that have accompanied them.[7] The multiplicity, complexity and intertwined nature of hostilities within Syria lead to what can be seen as a protracted conflict in development. The ability to resolve either of these wars is dependent upon one another, as will be discussed below.

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Al-Qaeda's Role In Destabilising Syria: The War On Terror

Al-Qaeda's presence in Syria was a fact waiting to be confirmed. Identified as a state sponsor of terror, Syria had a history of housing terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda from the early 70s.[8] Its use as a logistical base for Iraq's branch of al-Qaeda during the Iraq War established networks that aided in the supply of funding, weapons, and forces.[9] The Syrian border was the access point for fighters to enter into Iraq. This permeability continues to affect the security of Syria as these networks have now reversed their flow. The Al-Nusrah Front and the Syrian Islamic State are representative of al-Qaeda within Syria. Resources flowing into Syria under the banner of al-Qaeda carry with them a serious threat of destabilisation, not only for the state of Syria and the region, but for the international community as well.

On the state level, Al-Qaeda's unmapped networks are an unpredictable element. They hold the ability to heavily influence the direction of interactions within Syria and the shape of post-conflict reconstruction. They hold the key to instability and the possibility of a fundamentalist future. Al-Nusrah as an organisation have declared their allegiance to al-Qaeda's central command in Pakistan, contradicting the claims of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, that a merger had occurred forming the *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*.[10]

While the link to Iraq was vital to strategic success, al-Nusrah has become increasingly independent, securing its own funding, fighters and materials.[11] As such, in a bid to distance itself from al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Nusrah declared its allegiance to al-Qaeda's global leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Assurances were given to the Syrian people that the "Al-Nusra Front is an independent branch of al-Qaeda"[12] and that "the 'good behaviour' they had experienced from the front on the ground would continue unchanged."[13] Al-Nusrah expressed no interest in becoming dissolved into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant; its interests lie in its own development and appropriation of power.

This (purely ideological?) break from a substantial source of resources is an interesting turn of events and emphasises the desire for dominance that drives actions. While motivations from the Islamic State have been billed as "simpl[y] [a] way of returning the favour to our Syrian brothers that fought with us on the lands of Iraq",[14] the simplicity of such assertions must be questioned, especially with the recent split of al-Nusrah and the formation of the Syrian Islamic State. By establishing links with the Islamic State in Iraq, the threat of direct al-Qaeda involvement rises. The Syrian Islamic State would find easier access to forces and an abundance of disillusioned individuals who could be potential forces in al-Qaeda pursuits. Al-Qaeda would find a replacement for its breeding grounds in Afghanistan and it would gain a substantial foothold within the region.

To date, al-Nusrah has made gains in small regional areas. Some of these regions include Dayr az Zawr (a small area in the North West of Syria where resources can come across the border from Turkey into Halab and Idlib provinces) where a pipeline to Iraq's al-Qaeda exists, and in the south-western province of Dar'a near the Jordanian border. Al-Nusrah is known to be one of the most successful Rebel Forces in Syria. As a conservative group promising to " restore God's rule on the Earth and avenge the Syrians' violated honour and spilled blood",, it has attracted more funding than its secular or less religious counterparts.[15] However, its links with al-Qaeda have led to its categorisation as a terrorist group in the United States.[16] The progress it has made within Syria has been building to the current play for dominance, although the links it may hold with the Syrian Islamic State are questionable. This highlights the fact that branches of al-Qaeda are playing a role in the civil war and causing further instability.

The inability to constrict terrorist groups within Syria not only poses a serious threat to the internal stability of the state (elaborated upon below) but also to the global 'War on Terror'. The international networks that exist threaten the security of the international community. The international community has attempted to undermine the role that terrorist groups within Syria currently play by attempting to arm rebels that are not associated with terrorist groups. However, the ability to ensure that the arms and supplies provided remain in their intended hands is highly questionable and risks exacerbating the problems in the form of inter-fighting between rebels. Yet, we are then left asking: what action can be taken in the 'War on Terror' without exacerbating problems in the Syrian civil war?

The allies in the 'War on Terror' are severely restricted in the actions available to them, which are often limited to

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directing interactions through the supply of resources and attempting to force an outcome. However, it is on the basis of crimes against humanity that an action may be taken to stabilise and securitise Syria. With reports of chemical weapons being used against the Syrian people, the international community has an opportunity to take action. Although Russia and China's pro-international protocol dictates that crimes against humanity must be averted by the international community, the possible actions that may be taken remain limited, even in cases where chemical weapons have been used, as is now being seen.

Concerns lie not only with the increasing forces within Syria and its instability, but also with the likely radicalisation of foreign fighters and the return of these individuals to the West. The arrest of eight individuals in Spain and Northern Morocco uncovered an Al-Qaeda network linked back to Syria. According to Gilles de Kerchove around 500 Europeans have left to fight in Syria.[17] These foreign fighters are not just being trained but have contributed to the number of casualties in the war in Syria, which highlights the risks involved in losing the 'War on Terror' in Syria.

Internal Instability and Civil War

The assassination of Kamal Hamami (spokesperson of the Free Syria Army), reportedly by the Syrian Islamic State, has serious repercussions on the internal dynamics of war-torn Syria. It is the most visible link between the 'War on Terror' and the Syrian civil war, as it is the circumstance of civil war that allows groups to undertake such[M1] acts as assassination, extreme violence and terrorism. The rising influence and power of al-Nusrah and the Syrian Islamic State are central to the current instability within the rebel forces and will be a vital aspect of the reconstruction of Syria. Further, while the groups have split their association with one another and al-Qaeda at large, there remain serious questions over the stability of Syria and the speedy conclusion of the civil war. Desire for power and dominance may direct their actions to prolong instability, hostility and violence.

As the al-Nusrah and the Syrian Islamic State are the forces that are attracting the most funding, they will play a key role in the civil war and simultaneously face opposition from other rebel forces and the international community. The dominance of these groups is leading them to assert power over other rebel forces, if not over Assad's forces.. However, the groups' lack of recognition by the international community (such as that awarded to the Free Syria Army) negatively affects the relationships between the various rebel forces. Infighting has begun and could lead to the failure of Syria as a state if order cannot be restored. Abating instability, especially that propagated by terrorist and infighting groups, will aid in the ending of the civil war.

Internal division is exacerbated by the presence of al-Nusrah and the Syrian Islamic State, but it is not the sole source. The cannibalistic actions of Abu Sakr from the Omar al-Farouq Brigade[18] highlights the depraved and divisive actions being undertaken within the rebel forces. Increasing sectarian division poses a threat to concluding civil war, and will play its part in the reconstruction process that will need to acknowledge and represent all aspects of Syrian society.

As the divisions in Syrian society deepen, the ability to counter terrorism and instability weakens. Issues of sectarianism and ethnicity in war come into play and counter the ability to form cohesion, social stability and, eventually, political stability. Following Sun Tzu's principle that "no nation has ever benefited from a protracted war", Syria's ability to quickly recover from this war becomes increasingly unlikely the long it continues.[19] War has not been "swift" and as a result, Syria has seen the rise of competing powers who wish to exploit the situation for their own gain.[20] Yet, while war is "waged" for the control of Syria, the 'War on Terror' presents a more international agenda within its borders. It has the potential to lengthen this conflict. The balance between the 'War on Terror' and the civil war is, therefore, one that must be broached together, as one feeds into the other.

Victory on Two Fronts

The fate of the 'War on Terror' in Syria is dependent upon the fate of the civil war. The outcome of the civil war; i.e. who will hold the majority of power and influence within Syria post-civil war is dependent upon the internal struggles that are currently waging, which may be influenced by al-Qaeda activity within Syrian borders.. The 'War on Terror' cannot be fought first as it plays a role in the stability of the state. It is an integral part of the civil war. It is also a war

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that can never truly be won. It must be fought simultaneously working with the dynamics of the civil war. Fighting the 'War on Terror' simultaneously may aid in the undermining of terrorists and increase stability. However, direct involvement would (as in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan) potentially lead to resentment of the allies in the 'War on Terror'. The wars being fought are a precarious balance of groups and their fight for power. Allegiances will play a key role in the conclusion of civil war, of the support received from Syrian citizens and the stability of post-conflict reconstruction.

Internal instability must be addressed to ensure against continued civil unrest. From this perspective, it may be argued that the 'War on Terror' is essential to ensuring the end of the civil war, as it is playing a key role in the instability of Syria. Inversely, it may be argued that the end of civil war is needed to facilitate the collapse of terrorist networks – though this possibility seems unlikely. The success or failure of civil unrest is dependent upon the strength and cohesion of rebel forces. Internal fracturing can lead to failure and the success of the ruling regime and social cohesion. As long as the international community is aiding the rebel forces, their position is internationally sanctioned; however, arming rebel forces can just as easily further fracture forces and society.

Winning Syria

Finding a conclusion to the civil war and the 'War on Terror' is dependent upon the internal fractures that need to be addressed. It is reliant upon fulfilling the will of the Syrian people without letting them fracture to the point of continuing civil unrest. The 'War on Terror' is an international concern that can only be successfully pursued with the consent of the Syrian people. Forceful engagement (which is unlikely after Afghanistan and Iraq) would prove to be detrimental and would need to be pursued by undermining its role in the civil war.[21] It will need to be pursued through whatever form of governance is established post-civil war. This is, therefore, reliant upon al-Nusrah not playing a directing role in the reconstruction of Syria. Establishing peace in Syria is therefore dependent upon the ability to manage wars on two fronts. It is dependent upon a complex and intertwined situation that must be untangled simultaneously. However, given the protracted conflicts that Syria continues to face, it seems unlikely that that there will be any true "winners" in either conflict in Syria.

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Sameera Khalfey received her PhD from the University of Hull. Her research focus lies in the interplay between the nature of the international system, the nature of conflict, religion and ideology, and the dynamics of interaction between 'Islam' and the 'West'. Her research seeks to provide insight into the contemporary through an understanding of the historical. Her work critically assesses and deconstructs assumptions and perceptions of interactions and explores alternative perspectives. It promotes the use of accurate terminology as a means to ensure accurate response. Sameera's Blog can be read at www.Intrigueenquirycomment.blogspot.co.uk

[1] Although the composition of the Rebel Forces are not known, the use of the term refers to the Syrian Military Council (SMC) which is the link between Rebel Forces and the Syrian National Council; the Free Syrian Army (FSA); Syrian Islamic Liberation From (SILF) – a moderate group; Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) – a more radical group. Rebel Forces are also inclusive of the al-Qaeda affiliated groups such as al-Nusrah and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Rebel Forces are seen to be fluid in nature.

[2] Friends of Syria refers to the international community that have promised to aid the Syrian people during the civil war. States include USA, UK, France, Turkey, Germany, Italy , Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE

[3] Similarly, if action is taken against the Assad regime in response to the use of chemical weapons (currently being assumed to have been used by the Assad regime and not the Rebel forces) this will add another dimension to the conflict, but ultimately add to likelihood of protracted conflict rooted in the duality of civil war and the War Against Terror.

[4] Spain Arrests 'Syria Jihadist Suspects' In Cueta, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22999619 21st June 2013, [accessed 24th June 2013]

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[5] Carl Von Clausewitz, (Michael Howard and Peter Paret Editors and Translators) Book 3, Chapter 3, The Engagement in General, *On War,* Everyman's Library, 1993, (p.268)

[6] Martin Wight, *Power Politics,* Leicester University Press, 1978, (p.139)

[7] Carl Von Clausewitz, op.cit, Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 3 The Maximum Use of Force, (p.84)

[8] Jund al-Sham a group seeking to establish an Islamic Caliphate within Syria, PIJ, the Islamic Movement for Change, and the Battalion of the Martyr Abdullah Azzam, present from the 1970s all had links to al-Qaeda according to START website.

http://www.start.umd.edu/start/data_collections/tops/terrorist_organizations_by_country.asp?id=SY [accessed 20 June 2013]

[9] Seth G Jones, *The Terrorist Threat From Syria,* California, The Rand Cooperation, 22nd May 2013 (p.2)

[10] "Syria Crisis: Al-Nusra Pledges Allegiance to al-Qaeda" 10th April 20013 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22095099 [accessed 22 June 2013]

[11] Seth G Jones, Op.cit, p.3

[12] "Iraqi al-Qaeda Chief Rejects Zawahiri Orders", *AlJazeera.com* 15th June 2013 http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/2013615172217827810.html [accessed 23rd June 2013]

[13] Quoting Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, "Syria Crisis: Al-Nusra Pledges Allegiance to al-Qaeda" Op.cit.

[14] Tim Arango, "Syrian Rebels Tied to Al Qaeda Play Key Role in War" *The New York Times,* 6th December 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-tied-to-al-qaeda-play-key-role-in-war.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 [accessed 23rd June 2013]

[15] Profile: Syria's al-Nusrah Front, BBC.co.uk 10th April 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18048033 [accessed 21st June 2013]

[16] See START website and their categorisation of groups as terrorist organisations. http://www.start.umd.edu/start/

[17] "Hundreds of Europeans Fighting in Syria, *BBC.co.uk/News,* 24th April 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22275456 [accessed 22nd June 2013]

[18] See, for example, Ian Black and Martin Chulov 2013, 'Syrian mutilation footage sparks doubts over wisdom of backing rebels', *The Guardian*, 15 May 2013, < http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/14/syria-mutilation-footage-rebels-eat>.

[19] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War,* New York, Penguin, 2002 (p.10)

[20] *Ibid*

[21] Note that this article was written prior to the US-led initiative to take action against the use of chemical weapons in Syria. However, US and allied forces involvement in Syria will undoubtedly be limited. Whilst the humanitarian reasons provide impetus for action in Syria, public opinions at home will ensure limited action.

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