

DECEMBER 2014

JENNIFER CAFARELLA

# MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 25

## JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN SYRIA

AN ISLAMIC EMIRATE FOR AL-QAEDA



*Cover: Members of al Qaeda's Nusra Front drive in a convoy as they tour villages, which they said they have seized control of from Syrian rebel factions, in the southern countryside of Idlib, December 2, 2014. REUTERS/Khalil Ashawi. Reproduced with permission.*

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### JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN SYRIA AN ISLAMIC EMIRATE FOR AL-QAEDA

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# GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 25 | JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN SYRIA | JENNIFER CAFARELLA | DECEMBER 2014

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Acronym	Name
AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
ASC	Aleppo Shari'a Court
BMP	Boyevaya Mashina Pekhoty (Infantry Fighting Vehicle)
COA	Course of Action
CW	Chemical Weapons
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HASI	Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IF	Islamic Front
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
JAM	Jaysh al-Mujahideen
JMA	Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar
JN	Jabhat al-Nusra
JU	Jaysh al-Umma
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOC	Military Operations Command
MSC	Mujahideen Shura Council
OPSEC	Operational Security
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
SMC	Supreme Military Command
SOHR	Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
SRF	Syrian Revolutionary Front
SVBIED	Suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device
TOW	Tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided missile
TTP	Tactics, techniques and procedures
VBIED	Vehicle-borne improvised explosive device

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) is not the only Salafi-Jihadist threat emanating from Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), al-Qaeda's (AQ) affiliate in Syria, has also developed into a serious and expanding threat both to the West and to the future of Syria. JN is not less dangerous than ISIS. Rather, JN shares al-Qaeda's aims and is working to achieve them. JN is gaining control of terrain in Syria even as U.S. forces target ISIS with airstrikes.
- JN is a threat to American national security in three ways. First, JN is a successful al-Qaeda affiliate whose victories support the overall mission of the global terror organization including the establishment of a caliphate. Second, JN actively facilitates the Khorasan group, which is developing imminent plots on behalf of al-Qaeda to attack the West from safe havens in Syria. Lastly, JN's success in embedding itself within the Syrian opposition threatens the U.S. mission to field a counter-ISIS force in Syria that is not influenced by AQ or vulnerable to its aggression.
- JN is pursuing an Islamic emirate in Syria as a component of a future al-Qaeda caliphate. The differences between JN and ISIS are not in objective, but rather in methodology.
- JN follows a more gradualist approach to state-building than that of ISIS. JN adheres to AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's methodology, which prioritizes social outreach and proselytization over direct conquest of terrain and the immediate declaration of a state. JN does so as a part of its long-term strategy to gain popular acceptance. This strategy seeks to avoid popular backlash, characteristic of the Awakening movements that undermined the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006-2007. JN's approach is increasing its traction with the Syrian population.
- JN is engaged in a nuanced and carefully formulated state-building effort in Syria that is targeted to secure the long-term establishment of Shari'a law in a post-Assad state. If allowed to continue, JN is likely to succeed in developing a proto-state in Syria's rebel-held spaces that is responsive to al-Qaeda.
- JN brings important military capabilities to the fight against Bashar al-Assad. JN's unequivocal commitment to fighting the Assad regime attracts rebel groups that do not necessarily share its vision for the future of Syria as an al-Qaeda emirate.
- JN's strategy of working through networks of partnered or affiliated rebel groups obscures the true extent of its activities in Syria and its aggregate level of influence throughout rebel ranks.
- JN serves as a force multiplier for other rebel groups. JN leverages small units of highly skilled fighters to contribute an essential special forces-like capability to rebel military offensives. JN provides highly effective capabilities such as the deployment of suicide bombers to produce asymmetric effects against the regime.
- JN's military operations are targeted to produce influence within rebel ranks. JN complements this influence with a nonlethal campaign for local support within rebel-held Syria.
- JN leverages both lethal and non-lethal approaches to influence Syria's armed opposition in ways that may translate into long-term power within rebel-led governance structures. These structures are at risk of becoming responsive to JN, and therefore AQ.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- Not all rebels are radicalized, nor are they all pro-JN in practice. There are tiers of pro-JN rebel relationships, and some of these relationships are transactional. Therefore, there is a moderate opposition in Syria that can be split from JN if conditions are properly set.
- While a moderate opposition exists within Syria, its continued reliance on JN as a partner against Assad will degrade the possible mechanisms whereby those rebels can reject JN's influence in the long-term. The United States has months, not years, to begin counterbalancing JN's leverage.
- In order to deny al-Qaeda safe-haven in Syria, the United States must neutralize JN's campaign to influence the population. This requires engagement with opposition forces, not simply airstrikes against JN. A strategy limited to targeted airstrikes to disrupt ISIS and the Khorasan Group will not achieve this goal.
- The U.S. must actually adopt an anti-Assad strategy in order to prevent JN from subsuming the moderate opposition. Opposition to Assad drives the recruitment and radicalization of jihadists. JN is ostensibly committed to fighting the regime, making them more attractive than both ISIS and the U.S. Furthermore, JN is capitalizing on a feeling of betrayal and resentment from the Syrian population toward the international military coalition against ISIS to penetrate more deeply into rebel ranks and the fabric of Syrian society.
- It is still possible for the United States and the West to contest control of institutions and split JN from the population and moderate opposition. If the U.S. makes it easier for the opposition to defeat the Syrian regime by bringing more asymmetric capabilities to the battlefield, most rebel groups are likely to follow along with the U.S. rather than preferring JN or fighting on its behalf.
- JN is an insurgency competing for popular support and winning it. JN must be separated from the population. It will be necessary for to compete for the trust and allegiance of the Syrian population and its moderate rebels in order to secure U.S. interests in the region, defeat ISIS, and mitigate the threat to the U.S. homeland posed by AQ in Syria.
- JN can become more dangerous over time. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are in a competition for leadership of the global, violent jihad. Its foreign fighter networks into Syria are robust. JN can further support the development of plots against the West and the U.S. homeland in order to prove al-Qaeda's capacities and relevance.
- In the longer term, JN would also become more dangerous if it reconciled with ISIS, even at the unit level rather than the leadership level. JN leaders are pursuing such negotiations under the guidance of AQ leader Zawahiri. The combined military power of JN and ISIS would constitute a large and lethal force.



Figure 1. SYRIA OVERVIEW

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# MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 25

## JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN SYRIA

### AN ISLAMIC EMIRATE FOR AL-QAEDA

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By Jennifer Cafarella

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is not the only Salafi-Jihadist threat emanating from Syria. Its prominence in U.S. policy has overshadowed a threat of similar magnitude from Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), the official al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliate in Syria. JN rivals ISIS as a sophisticated, intelligent, strategic actor in the region and continues to enjoy a dangerous freedom to operate in Syria. The two groups share common goals, including a revived Islamic Caliphate. JN, however, is pursuing its aims through a distinct, more patient methodology that is highly threatening despite its low signature. Whereas ISIS has announced its state and tried to legitimize it by conquest, JN is following AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's method of fomenting a religious and social revolution by embedding itself within an indigenous insurgency. The Syrian war has provided JN a nearly ideal environment within which to implement this strategy on behalf of al-Qaeda, and JN has enjoyed worrying success to date.

JN is more subtle and insidious than ISIS, and is therefore more difficult to contain or defeat. While ISIS pursues direct, overt, and top-down control, JN leverages an elite military force to win allies among the Syrian armed opposition and to sponsor locally tailored governance in ungoverned areas of Syria. JN has benefitted from the lack of effective Western intervention in Syria. It has further benefitted from the radicalization of the Syrian opposition after September 2013, when the decision by the U.S. not to intervene in Syria demoralized large segments of the opposition. JN has a flow of foreign fighters and contributes asymmetric "special forces" capabilities to opposition forces, securing prominent victories for rebel campaigns through its contributions to wider military efforts. The significance of this contribution increased in late 2013 and throughout 2014, as a lack of international engagement in Syria increased the relative importance of JN's contribution to the fighting. As such, JN's military campaign has earned it significant leverage with other rebel groups. At the end of 2014, the rise of ISIS changed the Syrian wartime environment and forced meaningful shifts in JN's disposition in Syria. These shifts, over time, may begin to impact its network of rebel allies. However, JN's success in establishing influence within rebel ranks has kept JN from losing popular support in the short-term, despite an increasingly aggressive stance. It is therefore unlikely that JN's embedded position within rebel ranks will unravel without additional outside pressure.

JN originated as a Syrian offshoot of the former al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) organization. It has evolved into a separate and robust al-Qaeda affiliate, recognized by AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in the first half of 2013.<sup>1</sup> The group's membership includes both Syrian and foreign fighters, and draws upon

the resources of the al-Qaeda core.<sup>2</sup> JN never downplayed its Salafi-Jihadist orientation prior to its formal incorporation into the al-Qaeda movement. However, in the early years of the revolution it refrained from disclosing its AQ affiliation and its actual goals in Syria. This allowed JN to avoid alienating the local Syrian population, which was unlikely to tolerate its long-term objectives and hardline religious beliefs in the early months of the war. JN instead propagated an image of a nationalist Syrian opposition force, recruiting heavily to establish a base of Syrian fighters and securing the support of other rebel groups. The success of this strategy became apparent in December 2012, when the U.S. designation of JN as a terrorist organization provoked protests in support of JN from within Syria's moderate opposition.<sup>3</sup> Twenty-nine Syrian opposition groups signed a petition condemning the U.S. designation of JN as a terrorist group. They went so far as to announce "we are all al-Nusra" and urged rebel supporters to raise the JN flag.<sup>4</sup>

JN is a military, religious, and political organization pursuing an armed campaign against the Syrian government in the interest of the global al-Qaeda movement. As an avowed al-Qaeda affiliate, JN's extensive penetration of Syria's rebellion directly challenges U.S. efforts to support a moderate opposition against ISIS and Assad. JN will fight against any rebel group that it sees as a threat. Its growth also directly threatens U.S. national security because it facilitates AQ cells such as the Khorasan group that are engaged in active plots against the West. As this report will demonstrate, JN's efforts are not limited to armed opposition to Assad. JN is developing robust grassroots governance structures across ungoverned Syria. Through these structures, it gradually cultivates its vision of a post-Assad Syria governed by its own

strict interpretation of Shari'a law. Given JN's success to date, al-Qaeda may dominate Syria's future landscape, unless Western countries actively shape a legitimate, moderate post-Assad Syria.

This paper will examine JN's strategic engagement with the Syrian conflict in order to assess the prospects for splitting JN from the Syrian opposition base and for neutralizing its social influence. It will outline JN's ideological foundations within the al-Qaeda movement and assess JN's short- and long-term strategy for Syria. It will then examine JN's relationships with rebel groups. It will discuss the military tactics, techniques, and procedures that have uniquely enabled JN to carve out influence within rebel ranks, making it a dangerous AQ affiliate in its own right. By analyzing JN's military campaign in 2014, this paper will then demonstrate how JN wins Syrian allies through its asymmetric contributions to the Syrian revolution. The paper will assess the extent to which JN's governance efforts and social outreach enable it to participate in – and in some cases direct – the administration of territory. Finally, this study will discuss JN's future calculus for its engagement in Syria.

## IDEOLOGY AND GRAND STRATEGY

As an official AQ affiliate, JN activity in Syria is closely linked to global AQ objectives. JN views its war in Syria as the direct extension of a broader jihad against the West as envisioned by Osama bin Laden and represented by the global AQ movement. JN leader Abu Mohammed al-Joulani refers to this lineage in public statements, and JN social media propaganda occasionally reinforces this imagery.<sup>5</sup> As it crafts its engagement in Syria, JN draws inspiration from al-Qaeda's intellectual foundation, especially from influential Jihadi theorist Abu Musab al-Suri. Al-Suri laid the groundwork for a nuanced campaign that prioritizes popular support above all other objectives.<sup>6</sup> JN has implemented this methodology with care in Syria, and its success represents a dangerous advance for AQ as a whole.

Like the rest of the global Salafi-Jihadist movement, JN envisions as its end-state an Islamic Caliphate that encompasses, at the very least, the broader Muslim world. "We don't have a Caliphate, even though we are working toward this goal," stated Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, a senior member of JN's Shari'a Committee, in an interview on April 12, 2014.<sup>7</sup> This Caliphate will reverse what Salafi-Jihadists view as the decline of the Muslim community, challenging an "anti-Islamic alliance" of "'Crusaders,' 'Zionists,' and 'apostates.'"<sup>8</sup> Jihadi scholars consider this goal so important

that fighting to establish this Caliphate becomes a duty incumbent upon every Muslim. This Caliphate, however, is a long-term goal for the AQ organization as a whole.<sup>9</sup> In the intermediate term, JN is pursuing a regional Islamic Emirate in Syria – a localized state that will later be part of a larger Caliphate – as a component effort of the global AQ campaign that complements similar efforts by other affiliates.<sup>10</sup>

JN is influenced by a trend within the global jihadist movement that pursues a gradualist methodology during the intermediate stages of jihad. Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's successor, long favored this paradigm for the conduct of a paced, global insurgency. This paradigm prioritizes the support of local populations over opportunities for direct control, in order to set the conditions for the Muslim community to embrace an Islamic State in the long-term.

Zawahiri articulated the need for popular support in al-Qaeda's 2005 insurgency. "In the absence of this popular support, the Islamic mujahed movement would be crushed in the shadows," he wrote. "This is precisely what the secular, apostate forces that are controlling our countries are striving for. These forces don't desire to wipe out the mujahed Islamic movement, rather they are stealthily striving to separate it from the misguided or frightened Muslim masses. Therefore, our planning must strive to involve the Muslim masses in the battle, and to bring the mujahed movement to the masses and not conduct the struggle far from them."<sup>11</sup> The primary post-Iraq War mechanism for achieving this goal is *Da'wa* [Call], or

outreach, in which interaction with and support to civilian populations is regarded as a highly valuable and forward-leaning investment.

JN deliberately kept a low public profile in Syria in its early stages. JN entered Syria in late 2011, as an expeditionary cell for the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI),

formerly al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). JN officially announced its existence in a video distributed through social media on January 23, 2012.<sup>12</sup> JN sought to conceal or downplay its AQ ties while carving out a base of operations in Syria. It initially succeeded in presenting itself as primarily a nationalist group, gathering momentum and growing independent from its parent organization in Iraq. JN thereby preserved its growing popularity at a time in Syria's revolution when outright AQ affiliation was likely to have been unpopular. However, it was forced publicly to acknowledge its connections to AQ in April of 2013. ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi claimed to subsume JN back into AQ's own organizational structure. JN resisted the move, likely due to the strength and momentum it had established independently in Syria.<sup>13</sup> The re-absorption of its successful offshoot would have allowed ISI, then re-branded as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), to formalize its expansion into Syria. In the process of rejecting ISIS's

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*JN is more subtle and insidious than ISIS, and is therefore more difficult to contain or defeat.*

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claim, JN outwardly acknowledged its full AQ affiliation and pledged allegiance to AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

JN sought direct intervention by Zawahiri, who mediated the conflict in JN's favor after soliciting statements from both groups, and acknowledged JN as the official affiliate in Syria. Zawahiri further ordered ISIS to confine its operations to the Iraqi theater in an attempt to avoid competition between two AQ affiliates.<sup>14</sup> Zawahiri dispatched senior AQ operatives to Syria in mid-2013 to serve as advisors to JN leader Joulani, and sent senior AQ leader Abu Khalid al-Suri to serve as his personal representative in mediating the emerging schism between ISIS and AQ.<sup>15</sup> In April 2014, top JN Shari'a figure Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir complained in an interview that JN "tried as much as we could to keep it in house, but ISIS left us no choice."<sup>16</sup> JN attempted to de-escalate the *fitna* [strife] with ISIS in the ensuing months. It maintained its commitment to this aspect of Zawahiri's vision despite direct ISIS escalation against JN. By refraining from all-out warfare against ISIS, JN conserved its resources to pursue its long-term goals in Syria.

Joulani affirmed that JN's allegiance to al-Qaeda extends beyond an arrangement of convenience. He presented his strategy for Syria in a long interview with al-Jazeera in late 2013. The interview comprised the most significant and comprehensive communication of JN's activity in Syria to date: JN positions itself both as an invaluable partner in the fight against Assad and as the latest frontier for the global jihad.<sup>17</sup> Many AQ supporters had been disillusioned by the JN-ISIS infighting and, in some cases, were unsure whether to support ISIS or JN as the legitimate AQ affiliate. Joulani's interview positioned JN as a part of the wider AQ movement, appealing to the global base of international AQ supporters.

Joulani's stated objective for Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria is "...that the Shari'a rules, justice prevails, injustice is removed, and a judicious Islamic government is established following the course of the prophet. It shall be a government that seeks to liberate the Muslim land, apply the Shari'a of God, treat people equally, and remove injustice. This is what we seek to achieve."<sup>18</sup> This is consistent with al-Qaeda's overarching strategic objectives and makes JN as dangerous as ISIS in the long-term.

JN and ISIS differ on the methodology for achieving a caliphate rather than the desired end-state. JN's navigation of the schism with ISIS is a prime example of its commitment to Zawahiri's methodology. Zawahiri had recommended a gradualist approach most prominently during the height of the Iraq War, arguing vociferously against a strategy of sectarian

mobilization and overt declaration of an Islamic state by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of ISIS forerunner AQI.<sup>19</sup> ISIS rejects Zawahiri's gradualist concept and continues to follow Zarqawi's strategy of active, overt mobilization. JN is implementing its strategy in Syria somewhat differently in late 2014 in response to the rise of ISIS and its declaration of an Islamic Caliphate. In particular, JN has more aggressively challenged potential rivals and sought to hold territory in some areas. Yet JN has consistently followed Zawahiri's core methods of conducting social outreach and establishing ostensibly grassroots structures to achieve the grand strategic objectives of AQ.

## JN STRATEGY FOR SYRIA

JN's strategy for Syria is a direct outgrowth of its identity as an AQ affiliate. JN seeks the long-term establishment of an Islamic Emirate in a post-Assad Syria that is responsive to AQ and a future component of its global Caliphate. Analysis of JN in Syria from 2012 to 2014 shows that JN has successfully implemented many of the principles espoused by Abu Musab al-Suri and the global AQ organization.

Joulani explained his concept of military operations from 2011 to 2013 in his December 2013 interview with al-Jazeera. "As a military strategy, we divided the enemy into three main parts. There was a strong emphasis on three main parts in attacking the enemy. The first part was the security [intelligence] branches, which are

considered the backbone of this regime. The second part was some divisions of the army. The third was some of the ruling heads."

The first phase of JN's military operations in Syria therefore consisted of targeted attacks on the Syrian security services in order to shock the regime ("like a thunderbolt," according to Joulani) and neutralize its critical capabilities. JN entered Syria during Ramadan in August 2011 and initiated military operations across the country in a matter of months. According to Joulani, JN began with a spectacular attack against a regime intelligence branch in Damascus on December 27, 2011. JN quickly escalated against carefully selected regime targets across multiple provinces, prioritizing security services.<sup>20</sup> "We started everywhere simultaneously," recalled Joulani in his al-Jazeera interview. "If you review the past two years where the action started in al-Sham [Syria], you will see that there were successive blows everywhere... Our strategy was that if we attack the enemy in one place, these groups would be besieged, and it would be easy for the regime to capture those groups and put them in prisons." The group

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*JN's strategy for Syria is a direct outgrowth of its identity as an AQ affiliate. JN seeks the long-term establishment of an Islamic Emirate in a post-Assad Syria that is responsive to AQ and a future component of its global Caliphate.*

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quickly established a reputation for its spectacular suicide attacks against hardened military targets at a time when the Syrian opposition was just beginning to formalize.

These early JN attacks placed the regime on the defensive in securing and defending its own critical urban terrain, thus creating an opening for JN to recruit in the Syrian countryside, conducted in cooperation with other groups. Joulani notes, “For example, when Damascus was attacked, the regime began to focus its attention on it and ignored the rural areas. Therefore, we started recruitment and developing recruits into brigades and things like that in the rural areas. Subsequently, we enter those cities, one after another ... Therefore, there must be an agreement with the other groups and factions in the recruitment process [an agreement was required].” JN also provided operating room for Syria’s nascent rebel forces to grow, facilitating the evolution of the armed Syrian opposition from protest movement to full civil war in early 2012.

JN began to pursue more complex attacks with participation from rebel forces against hardened military objectives as this opposition formalized in mid-2012.<sup>21</sup> Military activity on all of Syria’s major battlefronts during this time indicated JN’s successful diffusion throughout all of Syria’s earliest rebel strongholds.<sup>22</sup> Through this effort, JN created inroads with local rebel groups and prominent commanders, including Free Syrian Army (FSA) leaders such as Jamal Ma’arouf.<sup>23</sup> JN leveraged this influence alongside a growing social outreach campaign to establish a solid position within rebel ranks. When the U.S. designated JN as a terrorist organization in December 2012, many people and groups conducted pro-JN protests, demonstrating JN’s early success in this campaign to gain legitimacy with other rebel groups.<sup>24</sup> Even at a time when Syria’s moderate opposition was strong, JN was able to leverage its military effectiveness to secure support within rebel-held Syria.

Yet JN’s military operations are only one component of JN’s wider campaign to set conditions for the transformation of Syria into an Islamic state for al-Qaeda. Jabhat al-Nusra augments these operations with an equally important social welfare effort. JN leverages its “hard” and “soft” power to establish and entrench goodwill among local populations and rebel networks, enabling the gradual establishment of Shari’a law within Syria’s liberated terrain.

JN has been largely successful in portraying a humanitarian-minded face to the Syrian people. JN has acquired a role of benefactor and guardian to a war-torn population, complementing and accentuating its role as the preeminent military force against the regime. This charity work is conducted through a “Relief Department” called *Qism al-Igatha*<sup>25</sup> that manages the distribution of food and other

desperately needed goods to vulnerable populations across Syria. According to Joulani, this social welfare campaign aimed to meet three basic needs: daily sustenance, security, and healthcare.<sup>26</sup> JN seeks to publicize these efforts, and created a new media outlet in July 2013 named the “Hemm Agency” in order to broadcast them to local populations.



Figure 2. JN member administers polio vaccination in Dera’a.<sup>i</sup>

The Hemm Agency immediately began issuing frequent video reports on these activities, illustrating the breadth of JN operations in Syria and propagating JN’s humanitarian narrative (Figure 2).

Social welfare activities also serve a secondary objective of slowly cultivating support for JN’s strict interpretation of Islam. Proselytization is typically conducted alongside the distribution of supplies, allowing JN simultaneously to establish relations with the local community and take the first step in seeking to transform the religious fabric of Syrian society. JN Da’wa — or outreach — events have occurred in almost every province, targeting both urban audiences under rebel control and the many Syrian camps for internally displaced persons.<sup>27</sup> These events are complemented by the distribution of religious



Figure 3. JN member prepares da’wa materials in Dera’a.<sup>ii</sup>

propaganda through both compact disc recordings and printed media (Figure 3).<sup>28</sup> These efforts closely follow the AQ mandate of building a base of local popular support in pursuit of the eventual organic participation of those populations in building an Islamic State.

Through its social outreach and provision of humanitarian supplies to desperate Syrian civilians, JN established working relationships with civilians, local leaders, and rebel factions that facilitated a transition into more overt, formal governance structures. As JN's humanitarian efforts began to take root, it established more formalized Islamic institutes and began directly providing essential services rather than supplementing needs through charity.<sup>29</sup> JN service activities vary by locality, but typically include water and electricity provision, road construction, running flour mills, and assuring the functionality of hospitals.<sup>30</sup> Critically, JN conducts this service provision with rebel participation. JN capitalizes on this outreach, leveraging its network of rebel relationships to establish direct governance via



Figure 4. Al-Farooq Institute for Islamic Studies.<sup>iii</sup>

jointly governed Shari'a courts. Through this phased strategy of first building and later leveraging influence, JN continues to consolidate its role as an inseparable component of the opposition amid the humanitarian, political, and military dimensions of the Syrian war.

JN's actual aim in Syria is best described as a gradual ascent to power through a protracted conflict that saps the strength of Syrian secular civil society, allowing JN to reshape Syria into a component of a broader Islamic caliphate. As Joulani stated, "Dr Ayman [al-Zawahiri], may God protect him, always tells us to meet with the other factions. We are committed to this and this is a basic part of the principles of jihadist work in general, including work by [al-Qaeda]. We will not impose a ruler on the people. We seek the implementation of Shari'a and any ruler should be committed to the rules of the Shari'a and qualified for that. We will then accept him. In this context, we will accept what the people accept."

Joulani notes, "The Al-Nusra Front will not unilaterally lead the society even if we reach this phase. When Damascus is liberated, for example, when Damascus falls, or the biggest part of the city, say 80 percent of it, is liberated, then Shari'a committees, Muslim elite, clerics, thinkers, people who made sacrifices, contributions, and who have an opinion even if they are from abroad, and the ulema of Al-Sham would meet and hold consultations. Afterward, they draft a plan for running the country. Of course, it shall be according to Islamic Shari'a, where the law of God shall apply, shura [consultation] is followed, and justice is spread to the best of our ability. A council would be established according to these controls and conditions, of which God has ordered us. If things take place this way, our opinion will be one of the opinions and will be raised within this organized framework."<sup>31</sup>

JN's close adherence to al-Qaeda's *Da'wa*-centric form of jihad challenges the assertion that JN is a nationalist organization fighting alongside the opposition solely to bring down the regime and to restore peace to Syria. JN couches its pursuit of al-Qaeda's objectives within a nationalist narrative of championing the Syrian revolution. In doing so, JN has been able to maintain a considerable base of support despite clearly communicating additional objectives that contradict the original stated goals of much of the Syrian opposition. In late 2013, Joulani claimed that the norms of the Syrian society have already changed, such that JN's vision is now mainstream. "This is the current general mood in Al-Sham. People in general and all factions are now within this framework and this objective. Unlike what is being depicted, the Syrian society has indeed changed much. It is not the same pre-revolution society. There will be a historical mark of pre- and post-jihad in Al-Sham. This history will mark a new birth for this society that completely differs from the former society, in which there was great deal of goodness, but it lacked the motivator, the guide, and preachers for what is good."<sup>32</sup> Many in Syria believe that the Syrian people will be both willing and able to reject JN if it does attempt to take direct power, and therefore that JN should be treated as an ally of convenience.<sup>33</sup> Joulani's commitment to societal transformation and his success so far make it questionable that JN will be so easily outmaneuvered. If JN's trajectory is allowed to continue, it will become increasingly more difficult to foster a political transition to any semblance of a secular or democratic post-Assad government.

## PENETRATION INTO REBEL RANKS

The central component of JN's strategy in Syria is the pursuit of a network of rebel relationships. Through this network, JN can embed itself into the fabric of the Syrian opposition and use its influence to direct the evolution of rebel forces and governance activities. As will be discussed later, JN leverages

the high skill level of its own fighting force to contribute a “special forces” capacity to rebel offensives. This participation garners considerable trust for and dependence on JN, further cementing close relationships with rebel groups. Throughout the three years of conflict, JN has interwoven itself throughout much of the Syrian opposition. There are, however, important differences in the nature of JN’s interaction with rebel groups from different areas of the religious spectrum. It is therefore important to characterize the degree and nature of JN’s complex penetration into rebel ranks in order to fully understand the depth of its influence in Syria.

Rather than overtly dominating the opposition as ISIS has attempted to do, JN has developed the respect and dependence of other rebel groups. In this way, JN has become a largely silent but invaluable partner and manager of the resistance against Assad. Joulani highlighted this methodology in his December 2013 al-Jazeera interview, stating “Preserving good relations with the other groups and treating them well and turning a blind eye to their mistakes is the foundation in dealing with the other groups...as long as they don’t change.”<sup>34</sup> This statement highlighted JN’s prioritization of functional relationships with Syrian rebels as a means through which to accomplish JN objectives. Tellingly, it also foreshadowed the manner in which JN would police the activities of groups for “corruption” throughout 2014.

JN is reported to have earned a level of legitimacy and a perception of honesty that quickly outpaced the deteriorating reputations of other rebel groups. JN’s fighters are reported to have a reputation for a high level of discipline and strict code of conduct. This reputation contrasted JN against the infighting and profiteering emerging among other rebel groups in the early years of the war.<sup>35</sup> In addition to encouraging some fighters and brigades to defect to JN, this reputation for dependability has led many brigades to actively partner with JN and to rely on it to perform specialized operations. Beyond ideological grounds, many are likely to have pursued allegiance with JN in order to benefit from its protection, funds, and military expertise.

For example, a rebel commander named “Abu Zeid,” who led 420 men from his Damascus-based Syria Mujahideen brigade to JN, stated in May of 2013, “Since we joined I and my men are getting everything we need to keep us fighting to liberate Syria and to cover our families’ expenses, though fighting with al-Nusra is governed by very strict rules issued by the operations command or foreign fighters....There

is no freedom at all but you do get everything you want.”<sup>36</sup> This transactional relationship between JN and rebel forces continues to define the dynamics of allegiance within Syria, and to influence the behavior of rebel groups across the ideological spectrum.

JN’s force structure appears to accommodate the continued cohesion of groups that were formed independently and subsequently pledged allegiance to JN. Two rebel units absorbed by JN reportedly maintain single-nationality non-Syrian membership, likely in order to overcome a natural language barrier and to maintain the cohesion of fighting units accustomed to operation alongside their compatriots. This includes the “Seraya al-Tuaanisa” from Tunisia<sup>37</sup> and a Chechen battalion named Jaysh ul-Khilafa<sup>38</sup> led at the time by Sayfullah Shishani, a former ally of ISIS’s military emir for North Syria, Omar al-Shishani.<sup>39</sup> The January 2014 rebel revolt against ISIS<sup>40</sup> created a windfall of such allegiance pledges to JN, notably including ISIS commander Abu Ibrahim al-Masri, likely along with a number of fighters.<sup>41</sup> A large number of groups in the Damascus suburb of Eastern

Ghouta joined JN during this period, greatly increasing its influence in the area.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, prominent examples of Syrian rebel groups that defected to JN after close battlefield cooperation include the Latakia-based Suqour al-Izz<sup>43</sup> and the Idlib- and Hama-based Liwa al-Bitar from the Authenticity and Development Front,<sup>44</sup> which formally joined JN in

July and September 2014 following cooperation in major rebel offensives. Together, these acquired brigades likely participate in operations alongside organic JN units, and may further integrate into JN ranks as their participation in the JN war effort deepens. These pledges are critical indicators of JN’s momentum. The incremental absorption of these groups also demonstrates that close JN partners may opt for direct JN membership in the future.

### *JN’s Complex Networked Structure*

JN adjusts the nature of its cooperation with rebel groups to the unique characteristics of a myriad of actors. This produces nuanced differences in the way JN interacts with rebel groups that vary greatly in terms of their own methodologies, religious beliefs, and political objectives. It is possible to assess three general tiers of relationships between JN and rebel groups under JN’s influence. These three tiers constitute three distinct types of relationships that JN maintains with different subsets of the Syrian opposition. The discussion that follows will explain the nature of each relationship and

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*“Since we joined I and my men are getting everything we need to keep us fighting to liberate Syria...There is no freedom at all but you do get everything you want.”*

*– Rebel commander*

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provide examples of groups that fit a given model in order to exemplify JN's complex web of interactions in Syria.

For large and independently powerful groups such as those belonging to the Islamic Front, it is likely that JN performs a less command-centric military role and instead facilitates their operations and augments their momentum. The Islamist ideological foundations of these groups makes them good partners in JN's desired end state of a jointly controlled post-Assad Syria that is ruled by Islamic law. In turn, for smaller local groups with Salafist ideologies, it is likely that JN creates value by aiding in directing their military operations. JN can thereby guide the evolution of these groups to bring them deeper into the fold of its ideological agenda and methodology. While JN may seek to absorb these smaller groups, it may alternatively seek to allow these groups to retain independence of command in order to minimize the obvious extent of its influence in Syria. Finally, as will be documented, the continued reliance of moderate and Western-backed brigades on JN's participation in military operations constitutes a third type of relationship, and indicates JN's depth of penetration into rebel ranks. Taken together, JN's extensive relationships with rebel groups clearly illustrate the success of its engagement in Syria (Figure 5).

### *Tier 1*

First, a set of locally-based Salafi-Jihadist groups exhibit a natural alignment with JN's strategic vision in Syria. This subset of the opposition is defined by close ideological similarities to JN, and exhibit structural similarities having drawn on foreign fighter flows into the conflict.<sup>45</sup> It has also become increasingly unified throughout 2014 amidst ongoing close cooperation with JN across multiple battlefronts. This pattern supports the idea that JN is pursuing increased influence over these groups. A number of these groups have foreign fighters within their ranks, and some were on a short list of rebel groups cleared by the AQ core to mediate the JN-ISIS schism beginning in mid-2013. This role is indicative of their close alignment with AQ in Syria.<sup>46</sup> These groups have not directly joined JN, possibly because their strength and influence permits them to remain independent. JN may also not wish to absorb these groups into its covert, cellular organization. It is also possible that JN may seek to avoid dismantling the command structure and camaraderie that makes them effective fighting units. Nonetheless, the continued independence of these groups serves as a force multiplier, allowing JN to project influence into areas where it lacks robust and direct military presence. JN may also have the opportunity to dissolve into their ranks if JN is targeted by future Western counter-terror operations.

The most prominent "Tier 1" JN ally is Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (HASI). HASI is a significant Salafi-Jihadist element of the Islamic Front with ties to the AQ central leadership. A founding member of HASI was Abu Khalid al-Suri. A close aide to Abu Musab al-Suri, Abu Khalid al-Suri was tasked by Zawahiri beginning in mid-2013 to mediate the ISIS-JN schism and to negotiate JN's continued relationship with other Salafi elements in Syria.<sup>47</sup> In addition to its own AQ ties, HASI is widely known to "cooperate intensely" with JN,<sup>48</sup> and includes foreign fighters in its ranks that may be funneled through similar pipelines as JN.<sup>49</sup> HASI announced its withdrawal from military bases near civilian areas after the U.S. strikes against the JN-linked AQ "Khorasan" cell in northwestern Syria on September 23, 2014.<sup>50</sup> JN Shari'a official Abu Marea al-Qahtani explicitly referenced the targeting of HASI fighters along with JN forces in this set of airstrikes.<sup>51</sup> HASI targets also appear to have been hit in a second round of U.S. strikes against the "Khorasan Group" on November 6.<sup>52</sup> These incidents provide highly credible evidence of HASI's close connection to JN.

Another Salafi-Jihadist group likely to be deeply under JN influence is the Aleppo-based Jabhat Ansar al-Din. Ansar al-Din formed on July 25, 2014 as an umbrella group incorporating a number of local Salafist elements with histories of cooperating with JN.<sup>53</sup> The United States Department of State designated Ansar al-Din's leading component, Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar, as a specially designated terrorist organization alongside fellow member group Harakat Sham al-Islam in September of 2014. Harakat Sham al-Islam is a Latakia-based group made up primarily of Moroccan foreign fighters that is known to have been led by at least two former detainees from Guantanamo Bay that have since died in combat in Syria.<sup>54</sup> This designation states that the group has coordinated attacks and kidnappings alongside JN.<sup>55</sup> In addition, Sham al-Islam fighters have been seen interacting closely with JN fighters away from the front lines.<sup>56</sup>

An additional coalition made up of local brigades known to be strongly influenced by JN is the Idlib-based "Alliance of Muhajirin wa al-Ansar" (no relation to Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar), which includes Jund al-Aqsa, Liwa al-Haq, the Omar Brigade, and Liwa al-Umma.<sup>57</sup> Finally individual groups in this tier include the Dera'a based Liwa al-Qadasiyya al-Islamiyya and the al-Muthanna Islamic Movement<sup>58</sup> in addition to the Idlib- and Latakia-based Kata'ib Ansar al-Sham<sup>59</sup> and the Chechen-led Junud al-Sham.<sup>60</sup> Junud al-Sham's leader was also listed as a specially designated terrorist, likely confirming the other evidence of his ties to JN.<sup>61</sup>

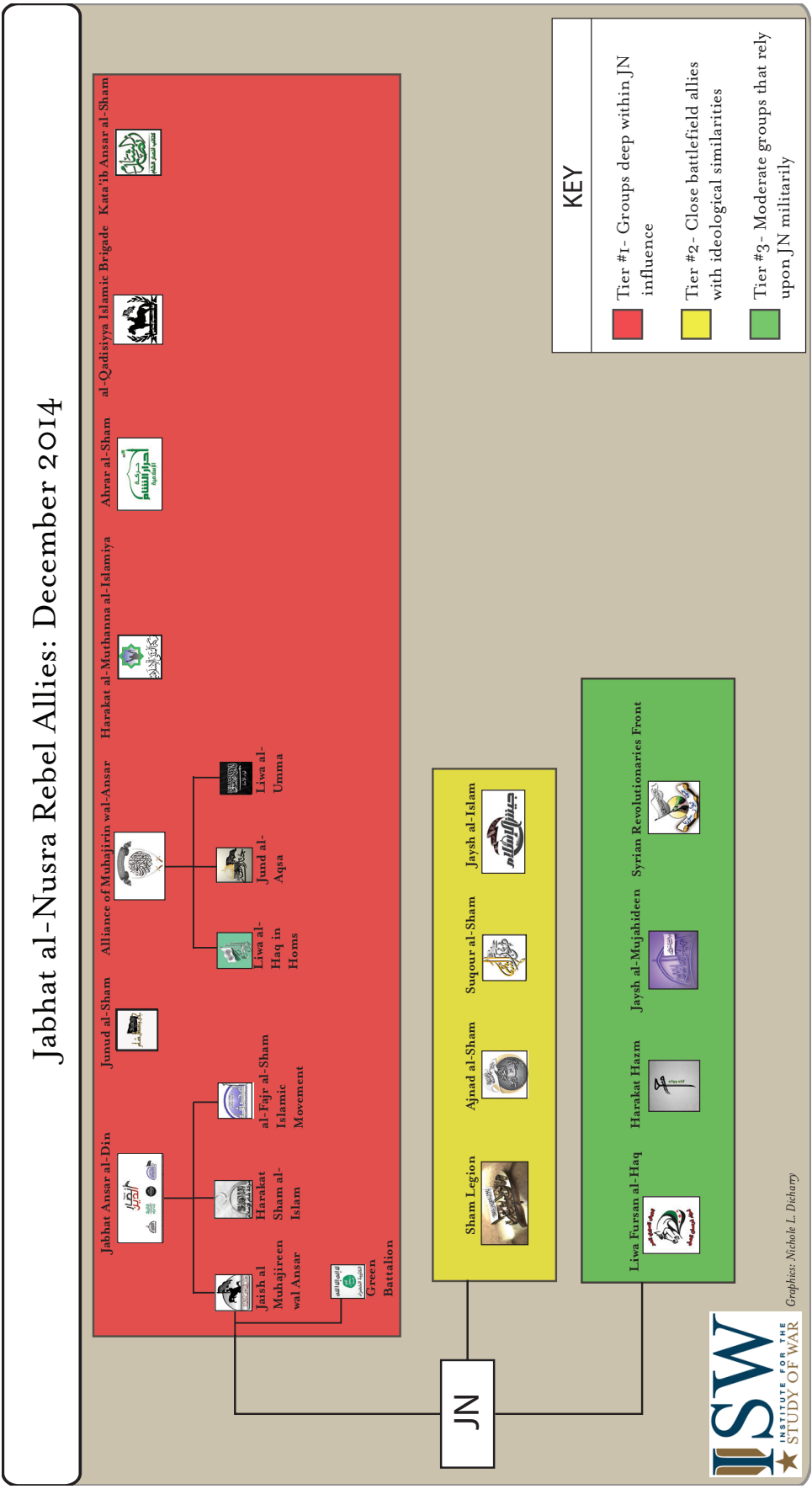


Figure 5.

*Tier 2*

JN interacts with Islamist elements such as the pan-Islamist Islamic Front (IF) in order to ensure they fall more deeply within JN's sphere of influence over time. This set of groups typically participates in joint Shari'a governance efforts alongside JN because of their broad footprint and wide local acceptance. They consist of groups with an Islamist vision for Syria's future that is not necessarily hardline, but may become so the longer they are in contact with JN. As such, they constitute the subset of the opposition JN is currently attempting to elevate into a "Tier I" status. These groups prominently include Faylaq al-Sham (al-Sham Legion) and Ajnad al-Sham, which cooperate alongside JN across multiple battlefronts. It also likely includes the large IF members Suqour al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, which are known to operate closely in military operations alongside JN.

While the depth of JN's influence in the IF coalition remains unclear, JN is known to engage with the high echelons of IF leadership in addition to partnering closely with Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Suqour al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam leaders Ahmed Aisa and Zahran Alloush are reported to have shared the same cellblock in Sednaya prison with HASI co-founder Hassan Aboud. They are therefore likely to have come into regular contact with AQ facilitators such as al-Suri. While Abu Khalid al-Suri and Hassan Aboud have subsequently been killed, JN's network of relationships was well established by the time of their deaths.<sup>63</sup> These groups in some cases also exhibit methodological similarities. Suqour al-Sham, alongside HASI, was known to conduct Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (SVBIED) attacks early in the Syrian war, a tactic both may have acquired through their relationships with JN.<sup>64</sup> Such groups are therefore likely facilitators of JN activities in the long-term, and as such are critical sources of extended JN strength.

*Tier 3*

JN's third and final tier of relationship is that of battlefield allies within the moderate Syrian opposition. High military effectiveness, along with JN's extensive influence among the ranks of Syria's Islamist rebels, has made JN an unavoidable partner for moderate rebel groups. These moderate groups continue to suffer from a lack of meaningful, sustained, and coordinated external support. Moderate rebel groups that

regularly operate alongside JN include prominently Jaysh al-Mujahideen and the FSA-affiliated Harakat Hazm. Such groups may not be ideologically aligned with JN, but will work alongside it because of the asymmetric capabilities JN is able to provide to rebel military operations. This reliance on JN to contribute battlefield effects that groups themselves are unable to produce translates in many cases into an unwillingness to denounce JN as an al-Qaeda affiliate with plans for Syria that oppose those of the moderate Syrian opposition.

Jamal Ma'arouf, leader of the FSA-affiliated Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF), for example, told *The Independent* in early 2014 that the fight against AQ was "not our problem." He further explained that his fighters conduct joint operations with JN, offering the example of the battle for Yabroud in March 2014.<sup>65</sup> Ma'arouf was, however, ousted from his stronghold in Idlib province by JN in late 2014 after JN capitalized on local unrest toward Ma'arouf to expand its direct control in the province.<sup>66</sup> This fighting reflects JN's recent, more confrontational approach toward groups it perceives as too closely Western-backed. It also illustrates JN's responsiveness to local sentiment and its ability to capitalize on rifts within the ranks of Syria's opposition and its relationship to local populations. Nevertheless, Ma'arouf's early support for JN is indicative of the importance of JN's battlefield contribution to rebel military offensives throughout the 2012 and 2013 rebel campaigns.

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*JN's achievement of a tiered, networked structure of influence in Syria is a sign of the success of its strategy to date.*

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This relationship with moderate forces is not limited to JN's contribution on the battlefield, and extends to transactional relationships during war. JN is engaged in regular interactions with rebel leaders over weapons shipments, and appears to have working relationships with some groups in terms of supply distribution.<sup>67</sup> For example, Ma'arouf stated: "If the people who support us tell us to send weapons to another group, we send them."<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, there have been indicators that such relationships have historically allowed JN to purchase directly weapons sent to other rebel groups. In October 2013, the Lebanese newspaper *The Daily Star* reported that FSA and Jordanian sources, along with video evidence, confirmed that European-made anti-tank missiles had been obtained, and in some cases sold, to JN. These weapons had been supplied to FSA battalions across the Jordanian border, likely in Dera'a. According to a source from the Supreme Military Command (SMC) quoted by the *Daily Star*, JN paid \$15,000 each for anti-tank missile within days of a Saudi shipment to the FSA.<sup>69</sup> Such weapons were subsequently documented in JN hands.<sup>70</sup> Other unconfirmed sources also indicate that JN and rebel

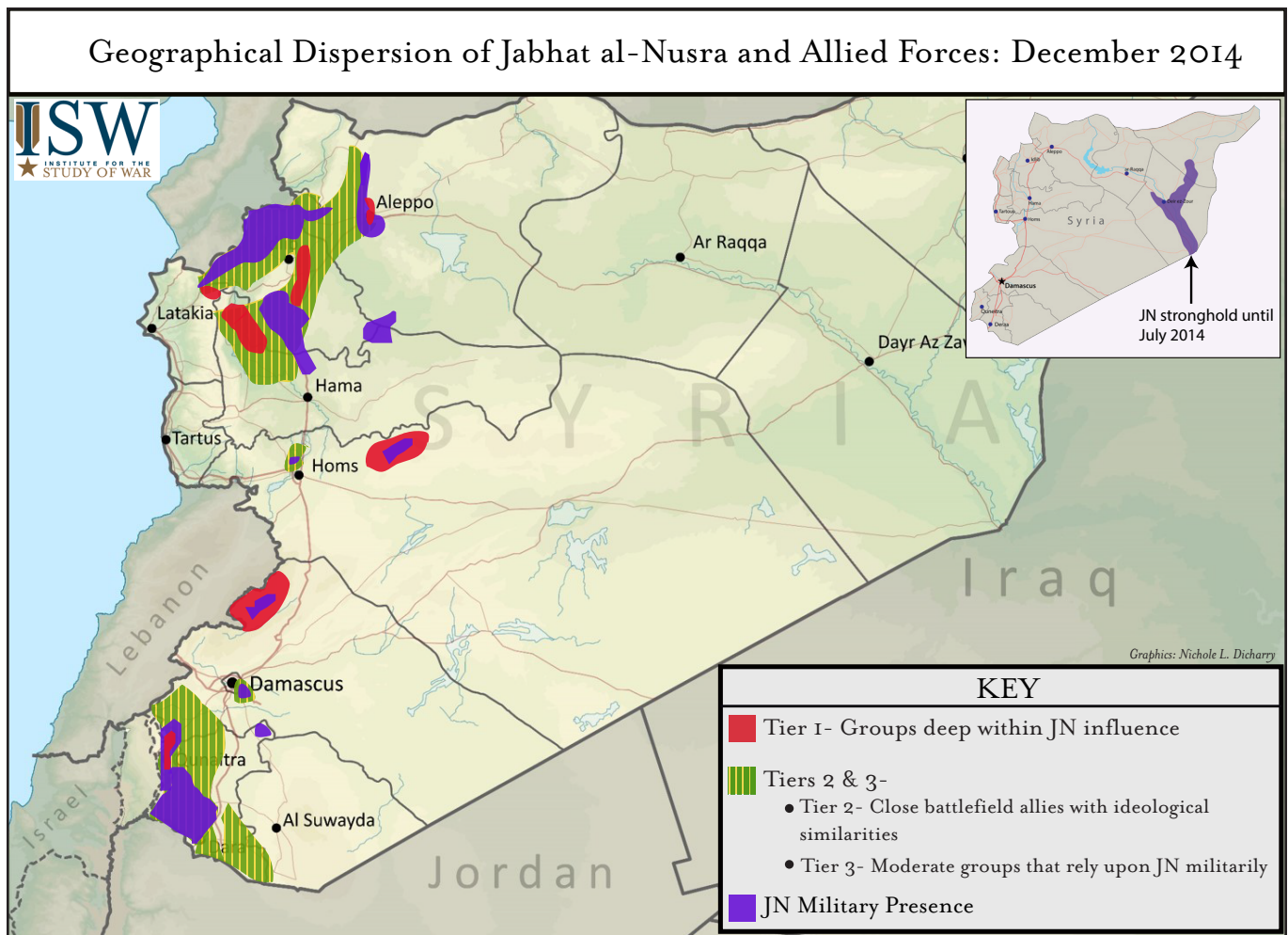


Figure 6.

groups may have working deals for parceling out weapons seizures from regime bases.<sup>71</sup>

JN's achievement of a tiered, networked structure of influence in Syria is a sign of the success of its strategy to date. The different tiers of its relationships with rebel groups is a natural outgrowth of JN's nuanced approach to the acquisition of rebel relationships and indicates JN's high adaptability. As such, the flexibility that forms the foundation of JN's methodology in Syria is a crucial indicator of the group's lethality and of the importance to understand the reasons for and objectives of its varying relationships with rebel groups. At the time of writing, JN's aggregate network is optimized to enable JN to pursue its short-term objectives in Syria without backing it into a corner from which it cannot emerge.

#### *JN Influence on Rebel Behavior*

JN reacts strongly when groups close to its sphere of influence stray too far from JN's tolerated path by accepting

Western guidance and command. JN expects a high level of commitment and loyalty from groups with which it operates closely, and acts quickly and aggressively to stifle any signs of wavering commitment or betrayal. JN's efforts to ensure the loyalty of rebel groups also extend to protection of its allies. For example, JN and the "security battalion" of Jaysh Muhajireen wa al-Ansar surrounded a Junud al-Sham headquarters in Aleppo city on March 27, 2014 and demanded the surrender of the headquarter combatants. The JN force arrested more than 70 and referred them to a court under accusations that they were planning to attack rebel forces, possibly on behalf of ISIS.<sup>72</sup> JN concern with the security of its operations in Syria and the loyalty of its military partners has increased since the rise of ISIS and the initiation of the U.S.-led air campaign in Syria, resulting in a more hardline JN disposition toward rebel forces.<sup>73</sup> The ideological similarities maintained by JN's "Tier 1" allies also make these groups potential sympathizers to the ISIS caliphate, a threat JN addresses by tightly policing the behavior of its network.

JN is likely to react quickly to contain a growing threat to its influence within rebel ranks. Typically, harsh JN reprisals

occur when JN perceives groups to be accepting too much oversight on their operations from Western backers. This aggression is likely to continue to increase if Western support to the moderate opposition increases in the context of the U.S.-led coalition campaign against ISIS. JN's relationships with rebel groups in Dera'a have been particularly reactive to the level of Western influence. Dera'a is a focal point for the small-scale covert train-and-assist mission to the FSA conducted through the U.S.-led Military Operations Command (MOC) across the Jordanian border.<sup>74</sup> The head of the SMC's Dera'a military council, Colonel Ahmad al-Na'meh, declared the formation of the FSA Southern Syrian Revolutionary Front on May 1, 2014 claiming participation from 36 rebel groups.<sup>75</sup> In the announcement, al-Na'meh declared that an "organized free army" would rule Syria and not "extremists," threatening to take on JN in the south. A Western push for further rebel unification within the province, culminating in the establishment of the Southern Front outside of the SMC structure a month prior, likely drove this development and encouraged the bold statement by Na'meh. However, a number of rebel groups quickly denounced the front's formation, likely the result of a fear of JN reprisal for association with al-Na'meh. Two days later on May 3, JN detained al-Na'meh in addition to several other commanders, referring them to the Shari'a court under accusation of surrendering the town of Kerbet Ghazala to regime forces.<sup>76</sup>

On May 6, 2014 a JN-linked Dera'a Shari'a Court published a video "confession" by al-Na'meh,<sup>77</sup> in which he admitted to cutting supply lines to rebel forces inside Kerbet Ghazala on orders from Jordanian authorities and other "supporting countries" who wanted to counteract the rising influence of JN.<sup>78</sup> He went on to state that "We have jumped from failure [sic] to the other, all because of the supporting countries who control us, carry out their agendas and do not want our Islamic vision to succeed or even for Islamic groups to exist." Na'meh's confession is highly likely to have been coerced, but reflects JN's intense disapproval of and willingness to act against groups that overtly cooperate with Western backers.

Rather than provoking defiance, JN coercive behavior toward rebel groups has largely been successful in forcing these groups to alter their behavior in order to accommodate JN demands. In May 2014, for example, HASI and Jaysh al-Mujahideen spearheaded the formation of a "Revolutionary Covenant" to unite Syria's opposition. This covenant declared the revolution incompatible with "fundamentalism and radicalism" and rejected "any type of affiliation to foreign entities," an apparent reference to foreign fighters. The signatories included seven IF members in addition to JAM, as well as the Damascus Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, Sham Legion, and the Furqan Brigades.<sup>79</sup> In response, JN issued an immediate press release rejecting the covenant.<sup>80</sup> Top

JN Shari'a official Sami al-Aridi also denounced the pact, stating that "each principle of the charter is against the rule of God and not based on the rule of Shari'a," and accused the signatories of being complicit with the West. The JN condemnation prompted leader of the IF Shura Council Abu Abd al-Malik to issue an immediate statement of clarification, defending the charter point by point against JN's critiques. Malik gave assurances that the extremism of ISIS was the sole target of the covenant.<sup>81</sup>

A second example occurred in early August 2014, after 18 Syrian rebel groups announced the formation of the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) with a stated purpose of building "the united body for the Syrian revolution."<sup>82</sup> This development followed repeated calls by the IF for a new collaborative structure to replace the Supreme Military Command, which it criticized as out of touch. After rumors circulated that the council's formation constituted an effort to sideline JN, the council issued a clarification statement on August 3, stating: "We did not mention the subject of al-Qaeda ever during our meetings to discuss the initiative nor in any part of its founding nor in our last statement and we do not refer to it explicitly or implicitly."

Furthermore, the statement added "the portrayal of the formation that it is in order to make war on fighting formations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and others is untrue, but Jabhat al-Nusra had been invited ... and we have not received a response of approval or rejection since."<sup>83</sup> The immediate clarification regarding the coalition's perception of JN indicates the continued relevance of JN within the rebel landscape and the continued prioritization of JN participation by rebel groups from across the ideological spectrum. At the RCC's formal establishment following the conclusion of a two-day conference in Turkey in late November 2014, no further clarification was offered regarding the stance of the new council on JN.

JN's continued aggression toward military commanders perceived to be too subservient to Western backers likely foreshadows future action by JN to mitigate the ability of the U.S. and its allies to leverage promised support to the Syrian opposition in return for action to sideline JN. Critically, JN's pressure on moderate rebels to date has not provoked rejection or hindered its ability to continue to partner with prominent rebel groups across the ideological spectrum in military action against the regime. The responsiveness of rebel coalitions to JN's demands indicates JN's ability to use its influence and military capacity to coerce the behavior of rebel groups. Furthermore, this penetration of rebel ranks illustrates that the level of support to the Syrian opposition necessary to disaggregate JN from within rebel ranks is likely much higher than initially visible.

## JN'S SPECIAL FORCES MODEL

JN's highly effective fighting force has played a crucial role in establishing relationships with other rebel groups. JN is a tightly controlled, formal military organization that serves as a force multiplier for other units. It is distinguished by a level of professional operational leadership that provides an efficiency in command and control that was absent from the Syrian opposition in the early years of the war.



Figure 7. “Electronic Technical Office prepares handfuls of communications for stationed brothers” in Hama.<sup>10</sup>

JN is also notable for its operational security (OPSEC), with a well-disciplined rank-and-file and controlled communications that permit operations to be planned and executed secretly. While rebel forces have adapted and professionalized since the onset of the war, JN's respected position within rebel ranks is in large part a consequence of its continued ability to contribute this capability.

JN is unique in its ability to accomplish operational objectives in pursuit of broader strategic goals against the Assad government. JN typically conducts “shaping” operations that create the conditions for success for larger rebel offensives. Unlike the conventional infantry-style operations conducted independently by the ISIS military force, JN forces exhibit characteristics of a special operations force that augments the ground forces of the Syrian opposition. JN fighters assume key frontline roles alongside other rebel groups, and provide expertise while other rebel units provide mass.<sup>84</sup> JN forces operate in small numbers and often conduct unconventional tactical missions requiring a level of professionalism and expertise lacking in the Syrian opposition. A September 2014 interview by the International Crisis Group with a leader from rebel group Liwa al-Tawhid highlighted this relationship, stating “al-Nusra isn't big enough to win battles on its own; rather groups like us provide the numbers, and they provide what you might call the elite forces.”<sup>85</sup> In doing so, JN deliberately intertwines itself with other rebel groups and leverages its position and effectiveness to cement its influence.

## Structure and Composition

The structure and composition of JN's elite military force are oriented toward JN's overall goal to transform Syrian society. JN pursues a network of rebel allies that will enable it to govern a post-Assad Islamic state in Syria from within a wider rebel structure. Although pursuing a military campaign against the regime, JN's highest priority remains its own integration into power structures and building local influence. This prioritization creates a JN military posture that focuses on maximizing JN's position within rebel ranks rather than pursuing a countrywide strategy to defeat the Assad regime.

JN uses provincial military commands that operate with relative autonomy. These commands are empowered to adjust their footprint in order to adapt to changes in the battle or composition of rebel forces.<sup>86</sup> JN has not formally declared a *wilayat*, or state, structure that subdivides Syria into local governing structures akin to that used by ISIS. However, JN's media apparatus is structured provincially and publications from these outlets have occasionally used the term *wilayat*.<sup>87</sup> JN's financial structure also allows for this provincial disposition, using a central committee called the “Muslim Treasury” to collect funds and redistribute them to various battlefronts.<sup>88</sup> This command and control structure allows JN to adapt to the specific requirements of each battlefront. This, in turn, facilitates a dispersion of JN forces across nearly all battlefronts within Syria in a manner that maximizes their economy of force. In addition, this force structure permits JN forces to coordinate their operations with local rebel groups and tailor their interactions to maximize the organization's own influence.

The extent to which Joulani himself issues commands down to regional commanders is unclear. JN senior leadership appears, however, to circulate among the various fighting fronts indicating a level of central coordination. Unconfirmed but credible reports of Joulani's presence on key battlefronts throughout the war indicate that the JN leader himself may alternate his position in order to oversee delicate operations or to boost the morale of fighters on a dangerous front.<sup>89</sup> Joulani may himself communicate more closely with certain regional commands. Evidence of this can be found in a December 2012 report in which Joulani's identity was vouched for by the JN leaders of Idlib and Aleppo in a meeting with leaders of Salafi groups HASI, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Islam (now Jaysh al-Islam), and several others.<sup>90</sup>

JN's use of military operations as a supporting effort for societal transformation creates a unique relationship between JN's military and religious leadership. Shari'a leaders reportedly serve as advisors to JN military commanders.<sup>91</sup> This allows for close integration between JN's complementary lines of effort, providing religious guidance to ensure military activity is

properly targeted to the pursuit of JN's long-term objectives. These Shari'a advisors likely provide guidance on all subjects from the conduct of military operations to JN's relationships with local rebel groups and the implementation of JN social welfare programs in rebel-held areas. High echelons of JN religious leadership also appear to perform battlefield circulation, as demonstrated by photos disseminated by JN on social media. For example, JN distributed photos of JN Shari'a official Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir on a critical battlefield in Northern Aleppo in mid-September (Figure 8), and on a

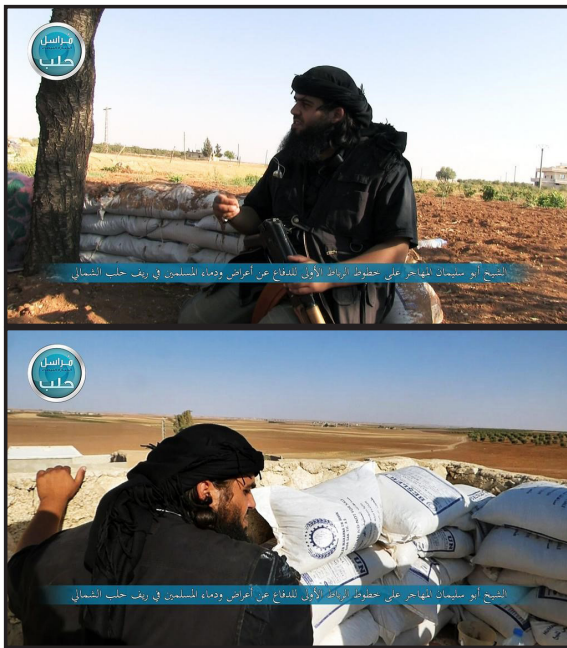


Figure 8. Top JN Shari'a official Abu Sulayman Muhajir in Sawran Azaz.<sup>9</sup>

battlefront in Idlib province weeks later.<sup>92</sup> This joint influence over JN's military campaign likely augments the adaptability of JN across Syria's different battlefronts. It further reflects deliberate planning behind JN's operations and partnerships, ensuring that these activities are aligned with JN, and AQ, long-term goals.

## JN TACTICS, TECHNIQUES, AND PROCEDURES

The tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) employed by JN forces set it apart as an uncommonly effective fighting force within Syria. JN is therefore dangerous as both a highly capable AQ affiliate embedded within the Syrian opposition and as a military threat in its own right. The training and battlefield experience gained by JN fighters in Syria are invaluable assets to the AQ organization. The security vacuum in Syria creates an opportunity for JN and for al-Qaeda as a whole to sit at the crossroads of foreign fighter, armament, and humanitarian aid flows.



Figure 9. JN commander utilizes sand table to guide fighters on upcoming operation.<sup>vi</sup>

A number of characteristic TTPs can be identified from analysis of JN self-published material regarding its military operations. JN military commanders conduct some of the best operational planning within Syria. Evidence shows plans of attack developed using reconnaissance accumulated by JN fighters.<sup>93</sup> As will be illustrated through an analysis of JN's 2014 campaign, JN's operations contribute significantly to the success of the anti-Assad military campaign in Syria. JN exhibits an advanced ability to knit together small tactical unit tasks in the pursuit of an operational objective. This planning expertise is likely shared with other groups when conducting joint operations, and JN has likely taken the lead in command and control for operations involving larger numbers of rebel forces. Commanders have used "sand tables," detailed mock-ups of terrain, to visually guide their fighters through the steps of an upcoming operation (Figure 9).<sup>94</sup> In addition, JN-produced videos and photos provide evidence that JN fighters are disciplined in their use of radio communications. In a JN video from within besieged Homs City in early 2014, a JN fighter is shown distributing the radio frequencies for use to fighters immediately prior to an operation (Figure 10).<sup>95</sup> This type of formal planning illustrates the "professional" nature of JN as a fighting force.

JN is also actively engaged in weapons manufacture and appears to have established a form of engineering corps as a specialized unit. This corps appears to be responsible for both the production of indirect fire munitions and the construction of Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs). References to such a unit have appeared numerous times, largely in the southern province of Dera'a. For example, in an interview broadcast on an FSA-affiliated YouTube channel, a JN leader in southern Dera'a described how a JN engineer corps was instrumental in placing explosives in order to breach an exterior wall of a regime building.<sup>96</sup> In addition, in a set of photos posted to Twitter in late May 2014 by JN's Dera'a account, members of what are referred to as the "engineering team" unearth and examine an unexploded barrel bomb in Northern Dera'a.<sup>97</sup>

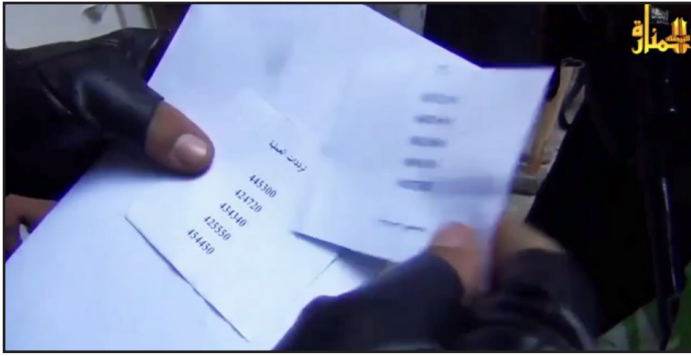


Figure 10. JN fighter receiving radio frequencies prior to mission in Old Homs.<sup>viii</sup>

On July 29, 2014 video footage uploaded by Saudi national and known JN supporter Abdullah bin Muhammad al-Muhisni revealed the creation of an improvised “Ababil” artillery piece. The weapon was reported to have a range of 12 km.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, JN announced the establishment of the Baas Foundation for Production and Military Development on May 24, 2014 and has since published at least two “how-to” guides on weapons manufacture.<sup>99</sup> At the time of writing, these appear limited to practical field manuals for the production

of requisite materials during a military campaign (Figure 11). This is in contrast to the kind of lone-wolf mimicry manuals produced by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s (AQAP) *Inspire* magazine. JN’s successful efforts at weapons manufacture and its consolidation of institutional knowledge is a key aspect of the broader military threat to U.S. interests in the region.

The deployment of suicide VBIEDs (SVBIEDs) as shaping operations against hardened military targets is a core JN tactic. The use of SVBIEDs provides for an economy of force; smaller units can cause an outsized impact on the battlefield and set the conditions for wider rebel operations. As such, it is also a prime example of the complexity of JN’s operational planning. Multiple axes of advance allow JN fighters to overwhelm the regime’s defenses quickly and efficiently. SVBIEDs are also deployed in close coordination with other attack types, as in one example in which JN used artillery fire to help cover the maneuver of an SVBIED to its target.<sup>100</sup> This proficiency in VBIED operations is a core skill likely acquired by veteran JN forces during AQI’s war against coalition forces in Iraq. While other rebel groups also developed the capability to design IEDs early on in the conflict, the scale of JN’s IED production and its contribution of suicide bombers for the deployment of VBIEDs are significant strategic assets to the opposition.

An excellent example of many of these TTPs can be found in JN’s self-reporting of its seizure of the town of Rahjan. Rahjan is located in northern Hama Province near a strategic regime supply line northward to Aleppo province. The town’s seizure is a rare example of JN conducting an operation alone, as the attack appears to have occurred without rebel participation. JN contested the town throughout June 2014, likely testing and weakening the regime defenses in the area and acquiring intelligence. On July 11, 2014, JN forces launched a significant operation to seize the town. JN detonated an SVBIED that allowed a penetration into the town, after which it quickly gained full control.<sup>101</sup>

After the attack, JN released a 15-minute video report and a formal military statement in which it reported the operation in detail. The video included a list of tactical targets inside the city and explained the strategic location of the site near the regime’s only supply line to Aleppo through Ithriya to Khanasser. The statement also details the invasion, indicating two axes of advance from the southeast and from the northeast.<sup>102</sup> While by itself the town was not a particularly significant military victory, acquiring control of Rahjan positioned JN forces to pressure regime supplies to Aleppo thereby supporting other operations.

Recruitment

After its entry into the conflict, JN capitalized on the wartime environment in Syria to build an elite, flexible

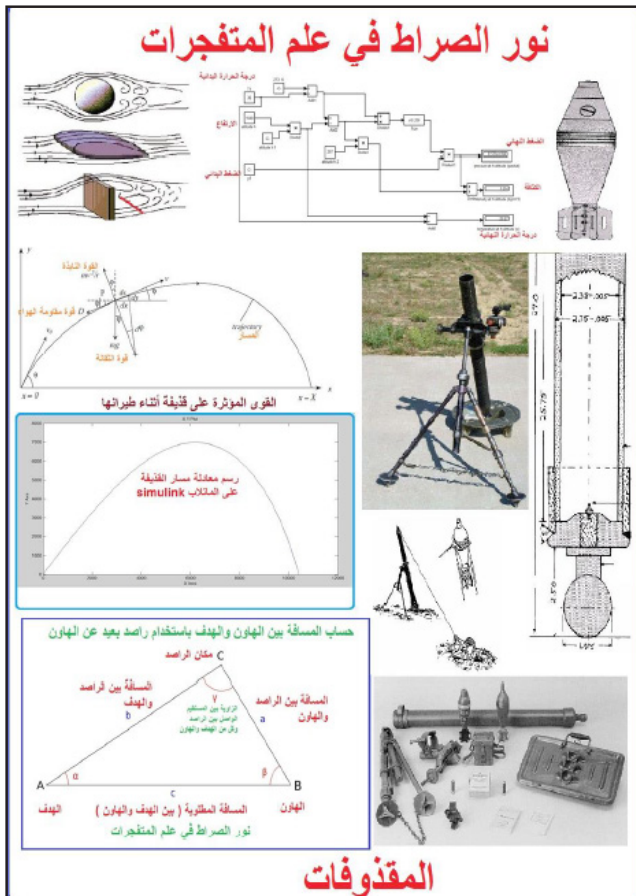


Figure 11. Screenshot of page from JN weapons manufacture manual.<sup>viii</sup>



fighting force. Strict and tightly controlled recruitment sought to augment a small initial cell of veteran AQ fighters. According to Joulani, JN entered into Syria with “no more than 7 or 8 men” in late 2011,<sup>103</sup> who were likely joined by a number of high-value prisoners that had been released by Assad from Sednaya prison in May and June 2011.<sup>104</sup> They may have joined old comrades who returned from Iraq to Syria. Additional old-guard AQI fighters may also have crossed the border after the August 2013 Abu Ghraib prison break in Iraq conducted by a resurgent AQI, now rebranded as ISIS.<sup>105</sup> These organized, disciplined, and armed AQ fighters had battlefield experience from Iraq and Afghanistan that allowed them to quickly garner prestige through successful attacks against regime targets as-yet impossible for the nascent Syrian opposition.<sup>106</sup>

JN recruiters leveraged these early successes, engaging with Syrian youth to compile a cadre of new fighters to augment its seasoned, core members. JN built its strength by drawing its rank-and-file from the Syrian population. A growing Syrian cadre of fighters allowed JN to present itself as an organic, indigenous, Syrian element of the opposition. This recruitment may have encouraged some Syrians to mobilize, but it also appears to have siphoned off fighters from emerging rebel groups. Early defections to JN from within the opposition led some to speculate that JN placed members within the ranks of rebel groups to spot potential recruits.<sup>107</sup>

JN also recruited foreign fighters, including those from the Middle East and North Africa as well as holders of Western passports. According to rebel commanders, as many as 800 Jordanians are fighting within JN ranks across Syria<sup>108</sup> and there have been cases of active JN recruitment as far away as Morocco.<sup>109</sup> A separate line of effort to recruit and train Western passport holders to conduct attacks in the West for AQ is reported to be underway by a cadre of veteran AQ fighters, known as the “Khorasan Group,” that appears to be coordinating with JN in Syria. The group, led by a senior AQ operative and close bin Laden associate Muhsin al-Fadhli,<sup>110</sup> is believed to have been dispatched by Zawahiri to capitalize on JN’s unique position in a security vacuum. From this arena, they can recruit Europeans and Americans with passports in order to develop plots to target the U.S. and European countries with support from the chief AQAP bomb-maker.<sup>111</sup> According to one U.S. official, this may include the establishment of training camps in Syria specifically to train foreign fighters holding Western passports, likely in order to deploy them to their home countries.<sup>112</sup>

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JN maintains tight operational security around its process for vetting recruits, and the recruitment of Westerners by the Khorasan cell is almost entirely opaque. However a few indicators have emerged that illustrate a rigorous physical and religious standard applied to JN fighters. JN reportedly requires *tezkiyya*, or personal assurance, from two commanders on the front line that are willing to testify to the skills and religious commitment of a potential recruit. The next step is reportedly fighting on the front line, during which time the recruit is evaluated for bravery and dedication to JN and its ideology.<sup>113</sup> In an interview with *Time*, a JN Shari’a official named Abu Adnan further illustrated JN recruitment tactics, highlighting the prioritization of physical fitness and “moral values” in potential recruits. “We pay a great deal of attention to the individual fighter,” stated Adnan, “we are concerned with quality, not quantity.” Joulani himself acknowledged JN’s prioritization of a small cadre of highly skilled fighters during his al-Jazeera interview, stating that “large numbers could have been an obstacle to us.”

JN’s style of recruitment is an important component of its military strategy, prioritizing smaller, elite units. The selectivity apparent in JN’s recruitment efforts supports a force structure tailored to perform as a specialized and tightly controlled “special forces” actor within wider rebel networks. Through its early acquisition of a Syrian-dominated cohort, JN pursued alignment with the organic Syrian and made initial inroads with the leaders of the Syrian revolution. Nonetheless, the core AQ cell that formed the nexus of JN in Syria continues to dominate the fundamental nature of the group despite its efforts to propagate an alternative narrative. JN’s continued support to the Khorasan Group is an

important indicator of JN’s commitment to the pursuit of AQ strategic objectives even while fully engaged in its Syrian campaign.

### *Training*

The rigor of JN’s recruiting supports a high average skill level of its fighting force. JN military training is designed to create soldiers whose deployment serves JN’s long-term objective of societal transformation. This training regimen seeks to maximize the ability of JN’s operations to serve both a military and a religious objective. JN is cultivating a military vanguard of a future Islamic State in Syria by diligently training recruits in JN ideology and prioritizing the adherence to JN virtues by its fighters. Furthermore, the high level of discipline and strict code of conduct promoted through its training facilitates the acquisition of relationships with rebel groups.

JN propagates the image of a benevolent and accountable actor that prioritizes the safety and security of Syria's civilian population, making it an appealing partner.

JN provides military training through a number of training camps in Syria. In these camps recruits are further indoctrinated into JN's ideology, obtain weapons training, and undergo what appears to be a rigorous physical training regimen.<sup>114</sup> According to the JN Shari'a official interviewed by *Time*, a potential JN recruit goes through a 10-day religious-training course "to ascertain his understanding of religion, his morals, his reputation," followed by a 15-20 day military training program.<sup>115</sup> While there is no credible evidence that indicates the full scope of JN training, the skill level apparent in JN operations suggests that the complete training program is likely more extensive. Videos and images published by JN of its training camps concentrate on photogenic hand-to-hand combat, clearing operations,<sup>116</sup> and physical fitness, indicated for example by footage of long-distance running.<sup>117</sup> JN's AQ ties are often highlighted in videos of these camps, with the full JN flag that reads "al-Qaeda in the Levant: Jabhat al-Nusra" displayed in the background. However, still shots of Assad and his advisors have also been included in at least one training video, indicating the continued importance of the Syrian resistance narrative to the organization.<sup>118</sup>

In addition to its regular recruitment and training, JN is pursuing a generational transformation of Syrian society

through the religious and military training of Syrian youth. JN recruits children from programs within its social outreach and governance activities. This begins with Da'wa outreach, from which children appear to be funneled into a number of formal religious schools across Syria. These schools are occasionally publicized by JN on social media, where photos of children reciting the Qur'an and taking religious examinations are distributed. In one example, JN's Idlib social media account disseminated pictures of children receiving test scores on their knowledge of Islam and the Qur'an at the "al-Farooq Institute for Islamic Studies."<sup>119</sup> A 50-minute-long video of a religious camp for children in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta was also released in February 2014.<sup>120</sup> This religious training appears to transition into military training, and JN's social media regularly distributes photos of JN training camps for children (Figure 12).<sup>121</sup> Military training is a component of a wider social engagement with children that includes activities such as outings to local nature attractions.<sup>122</sup>

JN's recruitment of children is a component of AQ's long-term and multigenerational campaign for the establishment of a global Islamic Caliphate. JN's strategic engagement with Syria's youth represents a dangerous forward investment that supplements the group's consistent efforts to integrate itself into Syrian society on both a social and a military level. Through this training, JN normalizes the concepts, tactics, and priorities of the AQ organization in the worldview of Syria's youth. Rather than funneling child soldiers onto front lines, JN's indoctrination of Syrian youth is targeted to create a future generation of latent capacity that will one day form a part of its envisioned Islamic State. A majority of armed groups within Syria use child soldiers, where the war itself is cultivating an entire new generation of fighters. The recruitment of children into the ranks of an AQ affiliate, however, poses an additional danger of the early inculcation of JN's Salafi-Jihadist ideology among Syrian youth.



Figure 12. Pictures released by JN's Dera'a twitter outlet of Ibn Tamiya child training camp.<sup>123</sup>



Figure 13. Photo of Alawite cleric Badr Ghazal's "sentencing" released by JN.<sup>124</sup>

## JABHAT AL-NUSRA'S MILITARY CAMPAIGN SINCE AUGUST 2013

This report has described Jabhat al-Nusra as a disciplined and effective fighting force that seeks to leverage its success on the battlefield to gain influence over the landscape of opposition groups in Syria. Examining JN's military campaign clearly reveals JN's increased effectiveness and success both in combat and in its mission of deeply intertwining its operations with those of the Syrian opposition. The Syrian regime's August 21, 2013 Sarin gas attack against the rebel-held Ghouta suburbs of Damascus was a turning point in the Syrian war. In the aftermath of the attack, the U.S. opted not to intervene against the regime, instead pursuing a negotiated handover of Assad's chemical weapons stockpile. This action dismayed Syrian rebels and dashed hopes for Western assistance. Thus, the events of fall 2013 created an opening for JN to further

deepen its influence within rebel ranks. JN immediately capitalized on the propaganda value of striking back at the regime at a time when the international community was refusing to act. JN spearheaded a campaign across multiple provinces titled "an Eye for an Eye" in an overt retaliation for the Eastern Ghouta massacre.<sup>123</sup> This campaign included the direct targeting of Alawite civilians in Latakia, and JN brazenly publicized its execution of a kidnapped Alawite cleric, Badr Ghazal, on August 26, 2013.<sup>124</sup> Such attacks constituted a marked escalation of JN's sectarian agenda.

Continued war crimes by the Assad regime during the chemical weapons handover increased local support for hardline elements in the Syrian opposition such as JN and deepened disillusionment with the international community. The regime, now somewhat constrained in its use of chemical weapons, began to utilize "barrel bombs," huge improvised

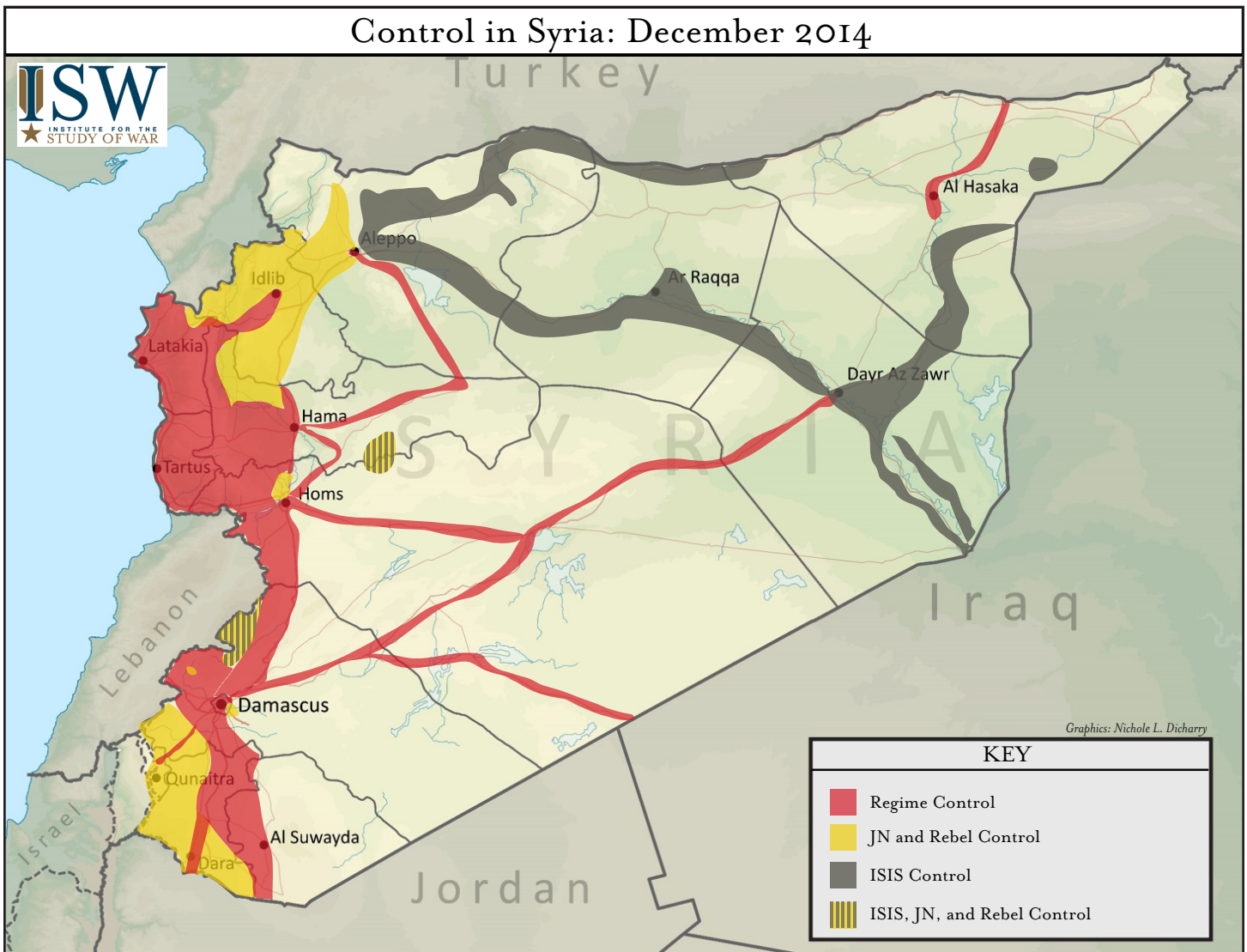


Figure 14.

explosives usually dropped from helicopters. These bombs, used against rebel-held civilian centers, were an attempt to compensate for lack of sufficient manpower. This campaign escalated in the beginning of November 2013 when the regime, with support from Hezbollah, consolidated an alternate supply line to Aleppo City through al-Safira. This operation involved the heavy use of barrel bombs to provide an asymmetric advantage to regime forces.<sup>125</sup> Barrel bomb use by the regime increased throughout 2014, with the Carter Center documenting a 450% increase in the frequency of reported barrel bombings throughout Syria between March and April 2014. Over 100 attacks per month were observed in rebel-held areas of Aleppo province from May through

August 2014.<sup>126</sup> In addition, the regime has been alleged to use weaponized chlorine gas against rebel hold-out positions throughout 2014. These attacks, alongside the continued ravages of the Syrian civil war, are likely to further civilian disillusionment with the international community.<sup>127</sup>

This trend toward increased support for hardline elements accentuated JN's ability to establish inroads with the Syrian population and to cultivate a network of close allies in Syria's Salafi Jihadist opposition. JN military activity since August 2013 has contributed to critical rebel gains against the regime in a period of low international engagement in Syria (Figure 15 and 10). JN's official Manara al-Bayda media outlet

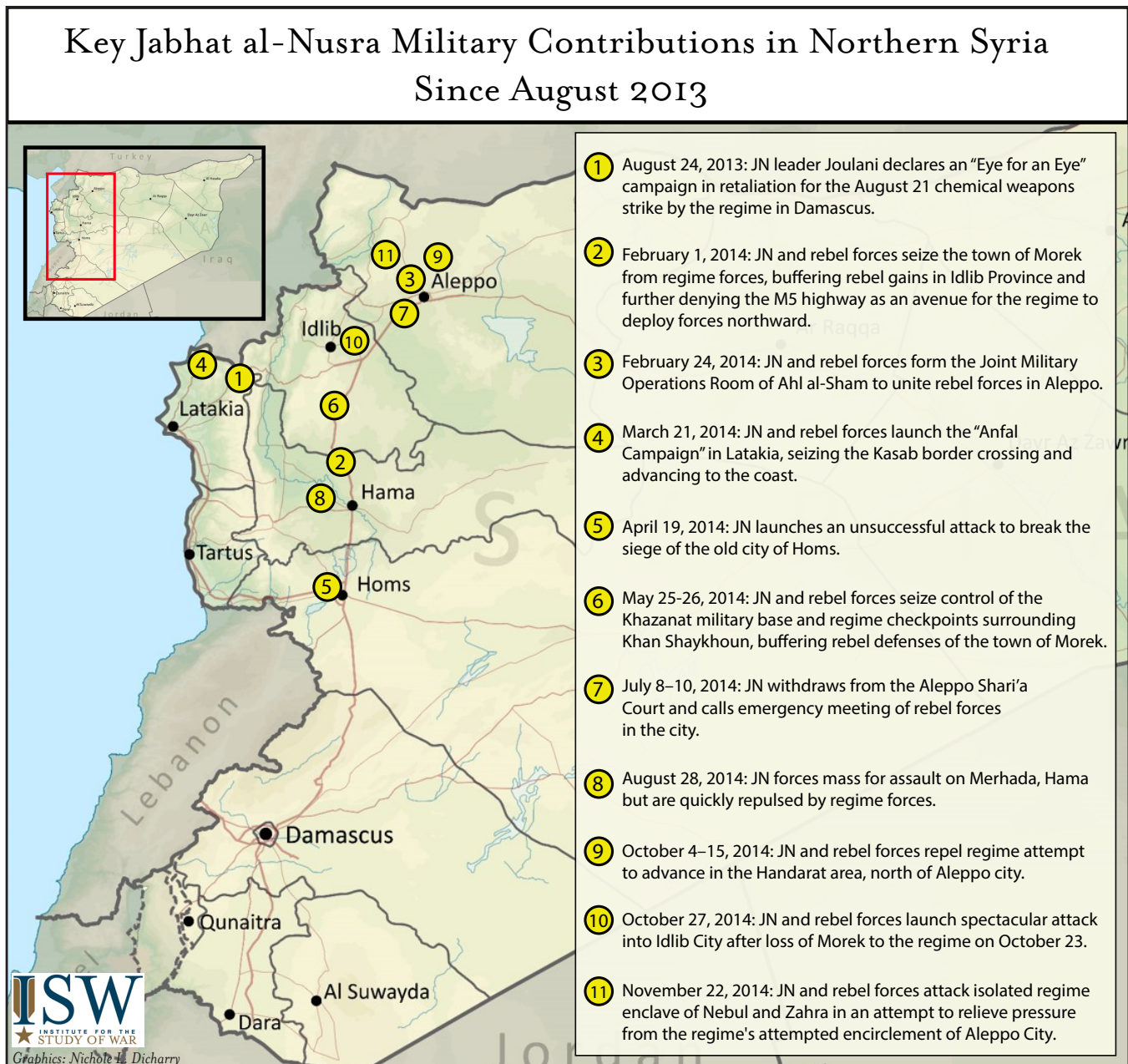


Figure 15.

## Key Jabhat al-Nusra Military Contributions in Southern Syria Since August 2013

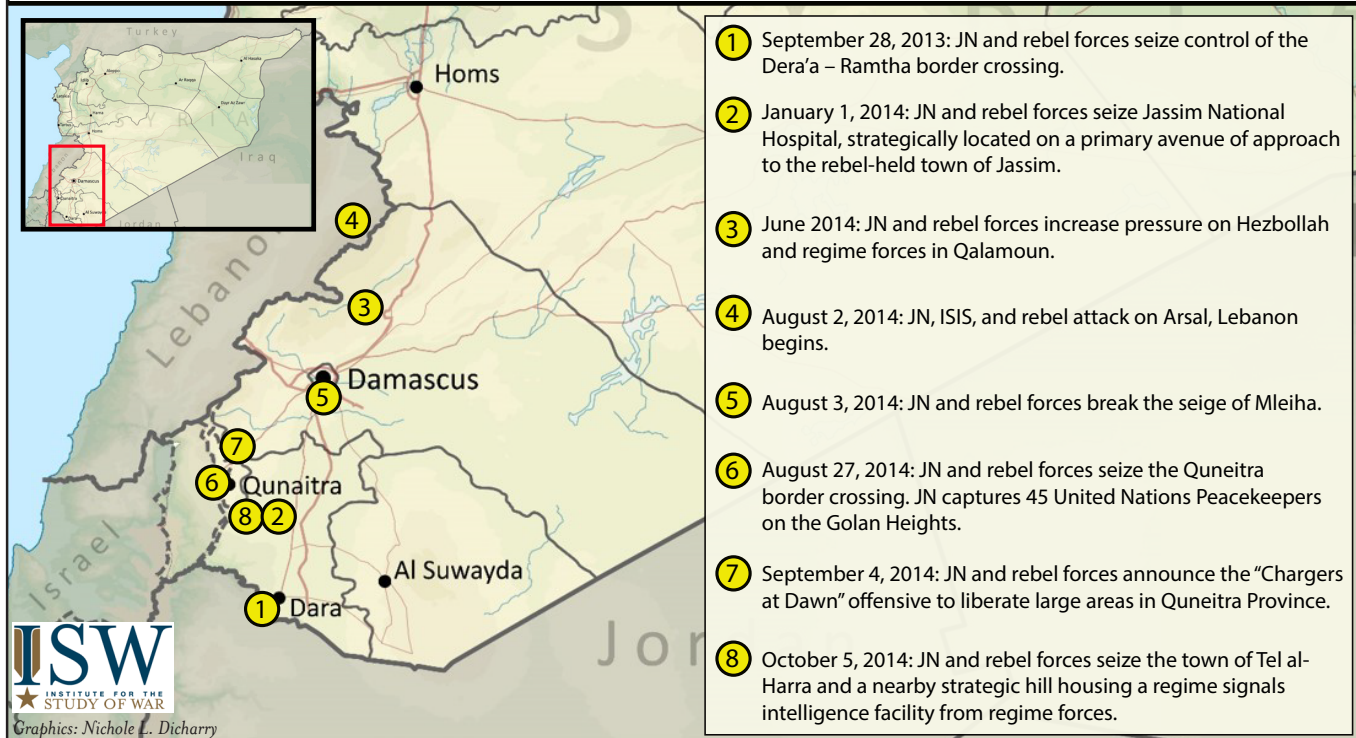


Figure 16.

releases frequent, numbered statements on major JN military operations that demonstrate JN’s contributions to rebel gains against the regime. These statements offer an avenue for researchers to track the evolution of JN’s military campaign in Syria in the aftermath of the chemical weapons attack in August 2013. While this self-reporting serves a propaganda function maximizing the visibility of JN operations against the regime, the visual evidence documents extensive activity across multiple fronts. JN support for successful rebel operations has bolstered the organization’s network of supporters during this time period.

JN’s specific form of “special forces” contribution to battlefield victories varies given the requirements of a given battle or rebel area of operations. For this reason, JN’s provincially-oriented force posture maximizes the combined economy of force of JN alongside other rebel units. Despite the differences in JN’s activities in various rebel areas of operation, careful study of JN’s self-published material as well as open source reporting on the Syrian war reveals patterns in JN contributions to rebel victories in 2014. In some cases, JN conducts shaping operations that neutralize nearby hardened regime military positions. These initial attacks set the conditions for success for wider rebel operations. In others, JN performs a penetrating function, contributing suicide attacks as an asymmetric tactic that other rebel groups are unwilling or unable to use. Yet in all

cases, JN’s activity provides a critical boost to other rebel forces, as JN cultivates influence to subvert the moderate elements of Syria’s opposition.

### *Idlib and Hama*

Syria’s “central corridor” stretches along the M5 highway in western Syria from Damascus north to Aleppo, hosting critical regime logistical lines of communication and supply. This highway is essential for the regime’s ability to project force northward into Aleppo Province. This zone also encompasses critical rebel centers of gravity and supply lines, notably in Idlib province and in the Qalamoun mountains southwest of Homs City. Throughout late 2013 and 2014, major JN lines of effort in the central corridor sought to augment rebel ability to disrupt regime lines of communication (LOCs) and to secure rebel support zones. JN’s involvement in the central corridor offers a prime example of how JN’s allocation of strategic assets increases the effectiveness of wider rebel operations. It further indicates how the sophistication of JN’s operational planning makes JN an important strategic actor within the Syrian war.

In early February 2014, JN and rebel forces seized control of the town of Morek, north of Hama city on the M5 highway and a crucial chokepoint between regime strongholds in

Hama and Idlib Provinces. The seizure of Morek served to buffer the largely rebel-held city of Ma'arat al-Nu'man from a northward offensive by the regime. It thereby protected rebel gains, severing the regime's supply line north to Aleppo. JN forces were instrumental in eliminating key regime checkpoints in the countryside surrounding the town, allowing for a wider rebel assault on the city itself.<sup>128</sup> While the regime launched immediate efforts to retake the town, rebel forces consistently repulsed its attacks, despite the regime's deployment of barrel bombs and chlorine gas against the area.<sup>129</sup> Rebels coalesced under a United Morek Operations Room to defend the town,<sup>130</sup> and JN appears to have been instrumental in reinforcing rebel defenses. JN produced a high-quality video of the clashes in Morek on April 27, 2014. The video showcased JN's heavy weaponry, including anti-tank capabilities, and indicated JN's commitment to the continued rebel hold-out in the town.<sup>131</sup>

Despite rebel efforts, regime forces continued to make gains in the Qalamoun area in the central corridor.<sup>132</sup> In response, JN and rebel forces launched a major offensive into Latakia province on March 21, 2014 titled the "Anfal Campaign." They seized the Kasab border crossing with Turkey and advanced quickly to the coast.<sup>133</sup> This penetration into previously quiet areas in Assad's Latakia stronghold succeeded in diverting regime attention away from critical rebel terrain in the central corridor. This reallocation of regime resources provided a window for rebels to consolidate both in Qalamoun and within the Idlib/Hama system. While rebel forces had been active in northeastern Latakia for some time, past rebel operations had been limited to areas proximate to Jabal al-Akrad. Increased JN and ISIS activity in this area throughout late 2013 appears to have facilitated the rise of local Salafi and Salafi-Jihadist groups, which began to overshadow moderate opposition elements throughout 2014.<sup>134</sup> The Anfal offensive included participation from Tier I JN allies such as Ansar al-Sham, Sham al-Islam, HASI, and Junud al-Sham.<sup>135</sup> The participation of ideologically aligned groups in the Anfal offensive allowed JN to open a second front in a larger operational objective. This demonstrates JN's ability to leverage its close battlefield allies as force multipliers in a distinct area of operations.

JN and rebel forces capitalized on the regime's focus on Latakia to reopen the southern Idlib battlefield in support of the continued rebel hold-out in Morek in northern Hama. In late May 2014, a successful operation to seize remaining regime outposts near rebel-held Khan Shaykhoun increased the ability of rebel forces to continue to hold Morek. It

disrupted the regime's ability to deploy southward from the Wadi al-Deif military base near Ma'arat al-Numan. In order to set conditions for the seizure of the city, rebel forces eliminated key regime checkpoints. They thereby deterred a regime deployment of reinforcements from the Hamadiya military base south of Ma'arat al-Nu'man. In addition, JN, Jund al-Aqsa, Liwa al-Ummah, Liwa al-Haq, and Farouq al-Shamal seized the Khazanat military base. The attack was initiated by the deployment of a JN SVBIED that penetrated the base. JN followed this with a remote-controlled VBIED to exploit the penetration, allowing rebel forces to seize the base.<sup>136</sup> JN deployed an additional four SVBIEDs against checkpoints surrounding the city of Ariha, located south of Idlib City, opening a second front.<sup>137</sup> The attack involved an integrated and near-simultaneous attack against numerous regime checkpoints. JN used this attack to create a multi-pronged penetration that other rebel forces, led by Suqour al-Sham, could exploit.<sup>138</sup> One of the suicide bombers was an American named Moner Mohammad Abu Salha, aka Abu Huraira al-Amriki, whose involvement in the offensive was notable for the lack of propaganda distributed regarding his American identity.<sup>139</sup>

While Suqour al-Sham and other rebel forces failed to exploit these attacks, the VBIED deployment set the conditions for battle in a manner that is the signature of JN. It exhibited the economy of force and battlefield effectiveness that define JN as a professional military force. The operation also served to split regime attention, forcing it to defend a crucial supply line to Idlib City from the coast. It is therefore likely to have been instrumental in ensuring the successful rebel seizure of Khan Shaykhoun on May 26, 2014. A significant JN convoy moved into the town on June 2, 2014,<sup>140</sup> possibly to reinforce Morek.

JN's aid to the rebel campaign along the M5 highway appears to have contributed significantly to the success of the campaign. It thus served to increase rebel ability to leverage positions on multiple fronts, redirecting regime attention away from wider rebel support zones and primary rebel objectives in areas such as Qalamoun and Aleppo. The multi-pronged nature of the rebel offensive on Khan Shaykhoun may indicate a high level of JN involvement in the military campaign's design, if not direct command and control of the offensive. JN's contribution of suicide bombers provided an asymmetric advantage for rebel forces that allowed them to penetrate hardened regime defenses. JN's deployment of resources to both the Khazanat military base and Ariha fronts is an example of JN's ability to allocate strategic assets to alternate battlefronts in support of a broader operational objective. JN documented the seizure of Khan Shaykhoun and the

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*JN's involvement in the central corridor offers a prime example of how JN's allocation of strategic assets increases the effectiveness of wider rebel operations.*

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Khazanat military base in a 40-minute video released in early September. The video highlighted JN's role in the offensive and footage directly linking JN's activities in Syria back to the AQ jihad.<sup>141</sup>

JN reprised these critical roles during later offensives, including the December 15, 2014 seizure of the Wadi al-Deif and al-Hamidiyah military bases outside of Ma'arat al-Numan which saw JN leverage its unique tactical assets – including U.S. TOW missiles allegedly obtained from Western-backed rebel groups – as well as its operational planning ability to conduct successful simultaneous offensives against two separate regime positions in close coordination with Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>142</sup> The contribution by JN to these strategic rebel victories secured its preeminence amidst rebel ranks in Hama and Idlib. The leader of the Idlib-based Fursan al-Haq Brigade acknowledged the importance of JN's role throughout early 2014. He cited the takeover of Khan Shaykhoun as a key example, highlighting that the SVBIEDs deployed by JN served a function rebel forces had been unable to accomplish on their own. “We encourage them actually,” he stated, “and if they need vehicles, we provide them.”<sup>143</sup>

#### *Failed attempt to push into NW Hama*

The success of the operations in mid-2014 is likely to have encouraged a subsequent JN and rebel offensive into regime territory northwest of Hama City. Nonetheless, despite a considerable JN contribution to the rebel offensive, regime forces quickly expelled rebel forces in early September after rapidly reinforcing its key terrain near the Hama Military Airport.<sup>144</sup> This rebel failure shows that JN combat power is not always sufficient to offset the regime's ground and air superiority when the regime commits to a battlefield in full force. The JN and rebel attempt to push into northwestern Hama therefore testifies to a continued deficit in rebel asymmetric capabilities despite a high level of JN commitment. The engagement indicates that meaningful international military support to the opposition could still provide much-needed battlefield effectiveness to rebel forces. As such, international support may succeed in incentivizing rebels to reject JN influence in the long-term.

In late August 2014, JN and local rebel forces initiated a large effort in support of the Badr al-Sham campaign, an offensive that JN and The IF had launched on July 25 against the Hama Military Airbase in northwest Hama.<sup>145</sup> The airbase is a primary source of air superiority for the regime in southwest Syria and is reportedly a main production center for barrel bombs.<sup>146</sup> The supporting effort focused on the liberation of the town of Merhada and its surrounding countryside, likely in order to disrupt regime supply lines from the coast as a precursor to a full assault.



Figure 17. JN fighters mass in preparation for attack on Merhada, Hama.<sup>147</sup>

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), an activist network that reports extensively on the conflict in Syria, reported the deployment of two JN military convoys from Aleppo to the Hama countryside on August 22.<sup>147</sup> These JN military reinforcements arrived to the Halfaya area near Merhada in preparation for the “battle of liberating Merhada,” which had been declared a military zone by JN.<sup>148</sup> On August 26, Liwa al-Bitar pledged allegiance to JN,<sup>149</sup> and is likely to have participated in a subsequent massing of JN forces in Helfaya. This example indicates that continued and consistent JN contribution to military victories against the regime may allow JN to deepen its influence over proximate rebel groups.<sup>150</sup>

SOHR reported the massing of 1,500 JN fighters on August 28, a total likely to include the Liwa al-Bitar forces (Figure 17).<sup>151</sup> Joulani is rumored to have been present during the staging of the offensive and to have given a speech to the fighters before the battle.<sup>152</sup> Together, the absorption of Liwa al-Bitar and Joulani's presence is likely to have conferred significant momentum to JN's operation. JN and rebel forces made a number of notable gains, seizing the Khattab Military Base and nearly besieging Merhada. Nonetheless, in early September regime forces began to reverse rebel gains, with apparent support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.<sup>153</sup> JN reportedly withdrew from the stronghold of Helfaya after local elders negotiated a peaceful handover of the town to the regime on September 11-12, effectively securing the success of the regime's counteroffensive.<sup>154</sup>

This regime success in Northern Hama secured critical regime supply lines and enabled a subsequent regime push north out of Hama city. On October 23, 2014 regime forces led by prominent regime commander Col. Suhail Hassan successfully recaptured the town of Morek. This threatened rebels' continued ability to disrupt the regime's preferred supply line to Aleppo along the M5 highway.<sup>155</sup> Likely seeking to deter or disrupt a regime offensive farther north against the town of Khan Shaykhoun, JN deployed four suicide bombers, likely SVBIEDs, against regime checkpoints in

Idlib City. This signature shaping operation allowed for a rebel penetration into the city on October 27.<sup>156</sup> JN and rebel forces reportedly seized the governor's mansion and police headquarters during the raid.<sup>157</sup> Rebel forces also seized the al-Mastuma hill south of Idlib city, capturing an additional 12 soldiers and severing the regime's supply line from Latakia.<sup>158</sup> However, an eruption of clashes in southern Idlib between JN and the SRF appears to have forced JN and rebel forces to abandon the front in Idlib City to address the escalating situation in Jabal al-Zawiya. This allowed the regime to reassert control over the provincial capital.<sup>159</sup> Nonetheless, the spectacular attack inside a city relatively untouched by the civil war appears to have been initially successful in diverting regime attention from the M5 highway.

With increased reports of severe regime manpower shortages in the last months of 2014,<sup>160</sup> the regime continues to prioritize key terrain in Syria's central corridor in order to solidify control over supply routes to and from Assad's coastal stronghold. As a result, northern Hama has become a crucial battlefield for rebel forces seeking to disrupt the regime in the central corridor. JN is likely therefore to continue to prioritize this military line of effort. Further escalation against regime strongholds in western Idlib province may force the regime to redirect its focus. This would allow rebel forces along the M5 highway to consolidate in preparation to retake Morek and possibly to remove remaining isolated regime positions south of Khan Shaykhoun.

### *JN carves out direct control in Idlib*

JN's withdrawal from Deir ez-Zour after the ISIS declaration of a Caliphate in June 2014 was a major turning point for the organization. Unlike JN's withdrawal from Raqqa in January 2014, the withdrawal from Deir ez-Zour compelled the leaders of the organization to recalculate their strategy. JN was forced to carve out a new stronghold in order to offset the loss of Deir ez-Zour. Shifting its force posture, JN consolidated in northwestern Syria and undertook efforts to solidify its presence within rebel ranks in the face of continued ISIS expansion. JN's new stronghold, beginning in July 2014, lay along the lucrative smuggling routes on the Syrian-Turkish border in Idlib province.<sup>161</sup>

JN's direct territorial control has since expanded, with JN seizing nearly the entirety of the Jabal al-Zawiya of southern Idlib from the SRF and Harakat Hazm by mid-November 2014.<sup>162</sup> JN's expansion in the area occurred with the participation of local Salafist rebel brigades such as Jund al-Aqsa, and maintained the rhetoric of "countering corruption."<sup>163</sup> JN appears to intend to maintain direct control of its recently-seized terrain. On November 11,

JN's Twitter account distributed images and videos of a significant JN military convoy arriving to the Jabal al-Zawiya region, possibly fighters who had withdrawn from Deir ez-Zour in July.<sup>164</sup> It appears that JN intends to use this new safe haven in northwestern Syria to reinvigorate its ability to contribute meaningfully to rebel offensives against the regime in the area. Other evidence may confirm this intent. JN reportedly began to sell off some of its heavy weapons to other rebels in late October in order to transition its force posture into a rapid reaction force that can be deployed to augment rebel positions at key locations throughout Syria's many battlefields.<sup>165</sup> In the wake of the rise of ISIS, JN likely assessed that the continuation of this campaign alongside other rebel groups was crucial to maintaining its support and thereby preserving its gains.

### *Homs and Damascus: JN resistance to the regime's "siege and starve" campaign*

In early 2014, the Assad regime escalated a "siege and starve" campaign that cut off rebel hold-out positions, primarily in Homs and Damascus, and attempted to force the local surrender of rebel forces by starving rebel populations.<sup>166</sup> JN's role in the resistance to the regime's brutal siege in one of the hardest-hit districts in Homs City in early 2014 generated considerable support for JN among rebels. There appears to have been a formal JN cell within Old Homs that conducted numerous military operations against regime forces besieging the district. Some have reported the JN presence in Homs was not official, but rather a group of fighters inspired



Figure 18. JN fighters preparing for mission in besieged district of Old Homs.<sup>xiii</sup>

by and pledging allegiance to JN from within the siege.<sup>167</sup> Nevertheless, JN's self-reporting emphasized the objective of bolstering other rebel groups' means and will to resist the continued siege. Despite the overall military loss represented by the fight in Homs City, this operation is likely to have improved JN's reputation amongst the besieged fighters in Homs as well as demonstrating more widely JN's commitment to resistance against the Assad regime.



A considerable JN operation against the regime from within the besieged districts of Homs city began in April 2014. A military statement and video report released by JN that detailed the attack stated that JN forces augmented by “several factions” pursued four objectives: (1) to achieve access to the adjacent neighborhood of Jeb al-Jandali, to control an area within the neighborhood and to place it under control



Figure 19.

by emplacing snipers to cover the streets; (2) to establish momentum; (3) to “torture the enemies of god;” and (4) to raise the morale of the mujahideen in Homs in spite of the extreme hunger and low morale. According to the statement, JN planned to detonate an SVBIED in order to penetrate the regime’s defensive line and allow a group of JN fighters to seize control of the adjacent buildings and break into a pre-dug tunnel underneath. JN fighters from outside the blockade planned to hit the regime’s supply routes to the Jeb al-Jandali neighborhood as a supporting effort. This would in turn facilitate supply and evacuation from within the siege and set the conditions for future penetrations into the neighborhood.

JN forces detonated an SVBIED on the outskirts of the Jeb al-Jandali neighborhood on April 19, allowing JN and rebel forces to seize buildings in the immediate vicinity.<sup>168</sup> According to SOHR, either a defection or a desertion of regime soldiers at

a checkpoint allowed the SVBIED to enter the neighborhood. JN claimed to have killed over 70 regime fighters, destroyed 2 armored BMPs, initiated a civilian displacement out of the nearby Zahra neighborhood, and dealt a psychological blow to the regime while raising morale in besieged areas. This JN operation, however, proved insufficient to overcome the regime’s siege on the city. By April 24, regime forces succeeded in reasserting control over the neighborhood,<sup>169</sup> and on May 7 a truce between rebel forces and the regime, overseen by UN representatives, allowed civilians and fighters to exit the besieged neighborhoods.<sup>170</sup>

In late 2014, JN continues to support rebel efforts in Homs Province. A JN foothold near Homs remained after the negotiated withdrawal of rebel forces, and continues to conduct operations against the regime. This has included prominently activity against regime forces in Um Sharshouh, a strategically-located town near the M5 highway north of Homs City.<sup>171</sup> JN’s continued operations against the regime in this zone are a crucial supporting effort for rebel forces stationed in Telbisa, where rebel control effectively severs the M5 highway and prevents regime reinforcements to and from Hama into Homs. In addition, since the evacuation of rebel forces from Homs City, a JN VBIED campaign continues to target majority Alawite neighborhoods within the city. This campaign of attacks demonstrates that rebels are still able to access the city and signifies JN’s intention to punish regime supporters for the effects of the siege. Many of the fighters that evacuated Old Homs after surrendering to the regime relocated to the still-besieged northwestern neighborhood of al-Wa’er. Al-Wa’er may be the staging area for a portion of continuing JN operations against regime supporters in and near Homs City.<sup>172</sup>

In addition to its involvement in rebel resistance from within besieged Homs, JN forces continue to resist the regime’s siege in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus alongside rebel forces. JN continues to perform a special operations role, augmenting wider rebel offensives to break through the siege into the wider Damascus countryside. For example, a JN SVBIED in the Damascus suburb of Mleiha in Eastern Ghouta on August 3, 2014 allowed rebel forces to break through the regime line and effectively ended the longstanding siege.<sup>173</sup> While the regime subsequently seized the town, this attack is characteristic of critical but small-scale JN contributions to a wider rebel main effort.

JN is also reported to have established a sophisticated spy network in the capital.<sup>174</sup> This network provides JN military planners high value information and likely increases JN’s importance as a battlefield ally. JN appears to operate independently of primary rebel coalitions in the capital, having declined to participate in the Eastern Ghouta General Command led by Zahran Alloush.<sup>175</sup> Alloush’s forces and command are strongest in this area, providing an important

counterweight to JN strength in the capital. JN continues, however, to cooperate militarily with nearly all rebel factions in the capital. Furthermore, the emergence of alternative structures to the Eastern Ghouta General Command may indicate JN's involvement in consolidating its own network of allied rebel groups in the area. On October 9, six Islamist rebel groups coalesced into a group titled Junud al-Haq, and rumors have emerged of an additional splinter group called al-Ansar that is reported to consist of JN and possibly ISIS defectors.<sup>176</sup> While JN's relationship to these groups remains unclear, JN is likely to prioritize the establishment of structures over which it can exert a higher level of influence.

JN is also highly active in the Qalamoun region northwest of Damascus City, a crucial zone for supply and armament from Lebanon to rebels in the Damascus countryside and elsewhere. Rebel forces suffered significant losses in the Qalamoun area beginning in late 2013, and the fall of Yabroud to regime forces in March 2014 severed a primary rebel supply route.<sup>177</sup> A low commitment of JN assets to the rebel defense of Qalamoun throughout late 2013 and early 2014 appears to have facilitated initial regime advances. These regime gains reportedly drove many rebels across the border into the Aarsal region of the Bekaa valley, where they appear to have successfully regrouped.<sup>178</sup> JN increased its operations in the Qalamoun area in the second half of 2014, interacting with rebel and local ISIS forces to re-establish momentum against the Assad regime.<sup>179</sup> In particular, JN and rebel forces have continued to pressure Hezbollah and regime forces in the countryside surrounding the key towns of Yabroud, Rankous, and Zabadani near the Lebanese border, impacting Hezbollah's freedom of movement.<sup>180</sup> This increased pressure appears to have resulted in friction within pro-regime ranks, and therefore may continue to be prioritized by JN and rebel forces in the area.<sup>181</sup>

Strengthened JN and rebel positions in the Qalamoun region facilitate a heightened level of aggression against Hezbollah in Lebanon, which has increasingly been the target of JN attacks and rhetoric in late 2014.<sup>182</sup> Joulani highlighted this line of effort in an interview released by JN's al-Manara al-Bayda media foundation on November 4, 2014. He stated that JN forces led by Sheikh Abu Malik al-Shami "took the battle to the locations where Hezbollah is found in Lebanon" in order to punish Hezbollah for its support to the Assad regime and to retaliate for regime gains in Qalamoun.<sup>183</sup> JN and rebel forces from Qalamoun launched an operation to seize terrain connecting Aarsal to the Syrian border in response to an increased campaign of arrests by the Lebanese Armed Forces against Syrian Sunni refugees in the Aarsal area in July 2014, including the arrest of a prominent Liwa

Fajr al-Islam commander.<sup>184</sup> During the operation, JN propagated a humanitarian narrative, capitalizing on the desperation of Syrian Sunni refugees in the area to escalate its campaign against Hezbollah. This campaign had the additional soft-power objective of reinforcing support from Sunni populations in the border region.<sup>185</sup> JN took numerous Hezbollah and Lebanese Armed Forces prisoners over the course of the fighting, and conducted follow-on operations against the town of Brital.<sup>186</sup> Joulani claimed to have further operations in Lebanon planned during his November 4 interview, stating that "the true battle in Lebanon has not actually begun."<sup>187</sup> JN Shari'a official Abu Marea al-Qahtani has advocated for unity within Lebanon's Sunni community, including the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, against Hezbollah forces. It is possible that JN actively seeks to deepen its inroads with Lebanese Sunnis in order to foster a wider internal resistance to Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>188</sup>

### *Aleppo*

In January 2014, Jaysh al-Mujahideen and the Syrian Revolutionary Front initiated an anti-ISIS uprising in northern Syria. This uprising greatly supported JN's efforts to insulate itself from the rising tide of resentment toward ISIS's uncompromising methodology. JN stood to benefit from a quiet relocation of ISIS forces out of primary spheres of JN's influence. JN forces therefore negotiated the withdrawal of ISIS forces from a number of locations in Idlib and Aleppo in January and February of 2014.<sup>189</sup> This facilitation extended to the direct protection of ISIS fighters from rebel attack and the sheltering of ISIS families within the homes of JN supporters, according to JN Shari'a official Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir.<sup>190</sup> Although JN elements in Raqqa clashed with ISIS fighters during this time,<sup>191</sup> JN executed a withdrawal in January ceding the provincial capital to ISIS. ISIS reportedly withdrew some fighters from Deir ez-Zour province in order to consolidate in Raqqa, temporarily halting its contest with JN in the area.<sup>192</sup> Taken together, this phase in the Syrian conflict produced an effective separation between ISIS and JN. ISIS likely wished to avoid protracted direct conflict that would prevent it from consolidating in Syria. This separation therefore benefited both JN and ISIS, and allowed JN to remain focused on the fight against the regime.

The SMC, the formal FSA command structure, slowly disintegrated within Aleppo from a lack of resources over the course of 2014. JN's opportunity to gain influence within the province therefore increased throughout 2014 and heightened the reliance of local rebels on JN's asymmetric power. The SMC-linked Aleppo Military Council suffered from ongoing disputes over the distribution of supplies because of a recurrent monopolization of power by individual groups and leaders within the council.<sup>193</sup> Furthermore,

internal problems within Syria's rebel political leadership exacerbated the effects of the ineptitude of its military wing. For example, the City Council of Aleppo suspended work with the Interim Government on civil projects on May 20, 2014 due to "outstanding problems."<sup>194</sup> JN's ongoing provision of services likely increased in importance. JN's commitment to the rebel defense of Aleppo City has remained constant, providing rebel forces a key source of resolve and command presence even as the regime reinvigorated its attempt at encirclement of the city.

JN continued to participate in meaningful rebel coalitions within the province. Two rebel joint operations rooms formed outside the SMC structure, and JN participated directly in them. On February 24, 2014 JN, IF, and JAM announced the formation of the Joint Military Operations Room of Ahl al-Sham.<sup>195</sup> According to SOHR, the statement invited all battalions, brigades, and fighters to join and was signed by JN's local leader in Aleppo, the leader of JAM, and the IF vice-president of the Aleppo Shura Council.<sup>196</sup> JN also participated in the formation of the "al-Fath al-Mubeen" operations room on March 2, 2014 alongside Liwa Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiyya, HASI, and Harakat Hazm. This operations room had the objective of liberating the southern front of Aleppo.<sup>197</sup> In early June, rebel groups from both operations rooms declared the start of the "Raid of the Age of the Honest" in Aziza,<sup>198</sup> with participation from JAM, JN, JMA, HASI, and Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiyya.<sup>199</sup> JN likely played a command and control role within the Raid of the Age of the Honest operation, as Aziza is a stronghold for JN in Aleppo.<sup>200</sup> Together, these operations meaningfully challenged regime forces in Aleppo at a time when the official SMC structure began to fragment as an effective military coalition.



Figure 20. JN military convoy sent to Sheikh Najjar, Aleppo.<sup>xiii</sup>

By mid-2014, JN's strategy in the province appears to have shifted in response to an increase in regime momentum in Aleppo. On May 22, regime forces broke the rebel siege on the Aleppo central prison that had begun in April 2013. This regime gain effectively cut off rebel supply lines between

Aleppo city and the Turkish border.<sup>201</sup> The withdrawal of pro-regime Iraqi Shi'a militias in June 2014 to support the Iraqi government against ISIS briefly disrupted regime operations near Aleppo until the regime replenished its forces.<sup>202</sup> On July 3, regime forces seized large swaths of the Sheikh Najjar industrial neighborhood in northern Aleppo city after conducting 20 air raids in a one-day period accompanied by heavy use of barrel bombs.<sup>203</sup> As the regime made gains, JN changed its posture in the city. JN withdrew from the Aleppo Shari'a Court, a joint rebel governance structure, on July 8<sup>204</sup> and reportedly called for an "emergency meeting" with other rebel groups to discuss the situation and transfer control of its fighting positions to local rebels on July 10.<sup>205</sup> Rumors emerged that JN was preparing to abandon the city after it declined involvement in the formation of a rebel quick reaction force meant to reinforce the city.<sup>206</sup> JN has continued to play a role in the defense of the city. The Ahl al-Sham operations room appears to have been abandoned as a joint operations room for rebels in the city. JN posted photos online of a convoy of military reinforcements deployed to the al-Brejj area of Sheikh Najjar on September 13, 2014 (Figure 20).<sup>207</sup>

JN remains highly active in Aleppo at the time of writing and maintains the defense of rebel-held districts in the city as a primary line of effort.<sup>208</sup> JN has continued to fight alongside Jabhat Ansar al-Din and other rebel groups against the regime's attempt to encircle the city.<sup>209</sup> In early October 2014, JN, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and rebel forces repulsed a regime attempt to advance in the Handarat area of the northern Aleppo countryside seeking to sever a crucial rebel supply line into Aleppo City. While regime forces made initial gains, rebel forces succeeded in reversing regime momentum and re-establishing their defensive line.<sup>210</sup> JN's role in reconsolidating rebel forces in the area appears to have been instrumental in securing the rebel ability to retake Handarat. In a statement released on October 4, JN highlighted the rebel disunity on the Handarat front as an element that had facilitated regime advances.<sup>211</sup> As rebel forces pushed back the regime between October 13–15, 2014 JN's Aleppo Twitter account actively broadcasted JN's role in forming a joint rebel force to reassert control. On November 22, 2014 JN launched an offensive against the besieged pro-regime towns of Nebul and Zahra north of Aleppo city along with Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Ansar al-Khilafa, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, and another group named Jama'at Ansar al-Islam.<sup>212</sup> JN and rebel forces made initial gains and continue to contest the area at the time of writing. Although regime forces have been successful in resisting the rebel advance, the attack by JN and rebels likely relieved pressure on the rebel supply line through Handarat. This defense of key rebel terrain indicates JN's continued deployment of its military assets in order to maximize its popular support and the strength of its rebel networks.

*Dera'a*

FSA-linked forces in Dera'a and Quneitra provinces, south of Damascus, have served as a primary outlet for Western and Gulf aid to the Syrian Opposition throughout 2014. As a result, JN has been confronted with an increased effort by international actors coordinated through a clandestine military operations command (MOC) in Jordan to consolidate the command structure and military operations of moderate rebel forces in the south. According to a logistics support officer attached to a rebel brigade in the south, the shift in focus to southern rebel groups occurred in mid-February 2014. At that time, foreign intelligence liaisons convened a meeting with leaders from nearly 50 factions and directed them to create a new umbrella coalition.<sup>213</sup> JN has been largely successful in adapting to this operational environment, and continues to experience success in its campaign for influence within rebel ranks in the province. JN has contributed prominently to rebel victories against the regime since August 2013, continuing to serve as a crucial source of asymmetric power despite the Western-backed flow of support to moderate rebels in the south.

The "Southern Front" was formed on February 13, 2014, and has since been regarded as a testament to the possibilities for rebel unification within Syria.<sup>214</sup> The front spans the provinces of Damascus, Dera'a, Quneitra, and Suwayda and includes most notably the SRF and Jaysh al-Yarmouk. Yet despite accommodating the outside demand for reorganization in the hope of receiving significant military aid, the Southern Front has not proven to be a highly effective fighting force capable of distancing itself fully from JN. FSA units reportedly often refrain from approaching the MOC for support, preferring to carry out operations independently using the resources they have.<sup>215</sup> A former regime brigadier general who defected to the opposition stated in May 2014: "Frankly, all of the successful operations recently in the south aren't because of the Southern Front. It's because of Jabhat al-Nusra ... The military groups who are doing the successful operations in the south are not in this new structure."<sup>216</sup> If true, the flow of support to moderate rebels in Dera'a has fallen short of providing the level of aid necessary to obviate the need for JN as a battlefield ally in southern Syria.

JN's importance on the battlefield has shown little sign of decline. In March 2014, FSA commanders in Dera'a stated that JN maintained 17 headquarters and several thousand fighters within the province.<sup>217</sup> This footprint is likely to have grown as JN operations in the province have increased, helping to fuel large rebel gains against the regime. JN military statements from the province refer to a southern military command, which likely coordinates JN activities in both Dera'a and Quneitra provinces.<sup>218</sup> Testament to JN's perceived safety in Dera'a, JN Shari'a judge Sami al-Aridi was recently photographed in Dera'a with local rebel commanders, posing with his face uncovered.<sup>219</sup> JN's

continued operations in the province have led some to conclude that "Jabhat al-Nusra [is] the largest and most capable armed group in the south."<sup>220</sup>

A number of JN contributions to rebel offensives in Dera'a appear to have been decisive in securing rebel victories in the province and therefore highlight JN's continued importance despite the flow of support to moderate elements from the MOC. In September 2013, JN forces with support from the al-Haramain brigades, HASI, and others seized control of the Dera'a-Ramtha border crossing with Jordan in an operation titled "Pounding of the Fortresses."<sup>221</sup> In the attack, JN forces were reportedly instrumental in breaking through the hardened facility in order to allow rebel forces to seize control.<sup>222</sup> A prominent show of JN strength, this operation laid the groundwork for future influence within the province. The visible success is also likely to have gained JN an important measure of respect and deference within the province. In addition, on January 1, 2014 JN used an SVBIED to break through regime defenses at the Jassim National Hospital, allowing rebel forces to seize the facility. The hospital is strategically located on a primary avenue of approach to the rebel-held town of Jassim, and its seizure was therefore an important gain that served to solidify rebel advances and allow them to consolidate the defense of key terrain. This prominent victory initiated rebel momentum in the province that would carry throughout 2014.<sup>223</sup>

At the time of writing, JN appears to be spearheading a rebel offensive to unite rebel terrain northwest out of Dera'a Province into Quneitra, and finally penetrating into the Western Ghouta Suburbs of Damascus. In a symbolic reflection of this objective, JN announced the merger of its Quneitra, Dera'a, and Western Ghouta Twitter accounts into one named "*Murasil al-Janub*" [Reporter of the South] in mid-September 2014.<sup>224</sup> JN and rebel forces established momentum after seizing control of the Quneitra border crossing with the Golan Heights and quickly made gains against regime forces deeper within the province.<sup>225</sup> JN immediately raised its flag on the border crossing, taking hostage dozens of Fijian UN peacekeepers stationed in the demilitarized zone bordering the Golan Heights.<sup>226</sup> Afterwards, JN, the al-Muthanna Islamic Movement, HASI, and a number of Southern Front brigades announced the "Chargers at Dawn" offensive on September 4, 2014. "Chargers at Dawn" had the stated intent to liberate large areas of Quneitra province.<sup>227</sup> The participation of JN, along with its Tier I allies, in this campaign is a crucial indicator of the continued importance of Syria's Salafi-Jihadist rebel groups in the success of rebel offensive operations. In addition, JN participated on October 5, 2014 in the rebel liberation of the strategic hill and town of Tel al-Har'a in northwestern Dera'a Province along with a regime signals intelligence facility. This success was portrayed in the media as a success of moderate rebel forces and The FSA, despite JN's role in the operation.<sup>228</sup>

JN's exact tactical contribution to this offensive is unknown; however, JN's Dera'a Twitter account posted heavily regarding JN's participation, which appears to have been a primary JN effort. For example, JN's Twitter activity surrounding the attack communicated the deployment of strategic artillery assets.<sup>229</sup> In addition, a video posted to Twitter by the same account a few days after the JN and rebel victory shows a JN unit of twelve fighters participating in the attack as a discrete unit, possibly advancing through one avenue of approach to complement a rebel advance elsewhere.<sup>230</sup> While at the time of writing reports have emerged that JN may be faltering under resource constraints in southern Syria after withdrawing from Deir ez-Zour, its level of influence acquired to date indicates that it is unlikely to become sidelined in the province in the short-term.<sup>231</sup>

## JN'S GOVERNANCE STRATEGY

JN is engaged in a nuanced and carefully formulated state-building effort in Syria that aims to establish Shari'a law over the long-term in a post-Assad state. If allowed to continue, JN is likely to succeed in developing a proto-state in Syria's rebel-held spaces that is responsive to al-Qaeda. JN's operations in Syria extend beyond military effectiveness and "hard power." JN also undertakes "soft power" operations to establish governance in its areas of operation. JN's concept of governance deliberately masks its overt involvement, almost exactly the inverse of ISIS's strategy. Instead, JN actively pursues the establishment of Shari'a courts in which other rebel groups will participate. JN's strategy for governance therefore directly grows out of its strategy for integration with Syria's wider opposition: JN uses its military prowess to build relationships with rebel groups, capitalize on their local connections, intertwine covertly with their existing structures, and translate its social programs into local governance.

Gaining acceptance by and participation from local rebel groups is therefore a core tenet of JN's strategy for ideological as well as practical reasons. JN's leader Joulani envisions a full transformation of Syrian society which itself will usher in the proper the form Shari'a rule in Syria in the long-term. JN sees its role as facilitating that societal transformation, thus negating the need to enact direct control itself. Joulani has personally articulated this long-term strategy, stating "The al-Nusra Front will not unilaterally lead the society...We do not seek to rule the country, but to have the Shari'a applied in the country. Whether we are rulers or not, we do not care about that."<sup>232</sup>

JN takes a phased approach to building influence with other rebel groups and local populations in order to incrementally construct a post-Assad Syria governed by Shari'a law. As stated by Joulani, "What we care about is that the Shari'a rules, justice prevails, injustice is removed, and a judicious Islamic government is established following the course of the prophet."<sup>233</sup> It is AQ's interpretation of the correct path, or methodology, for the resurrection of the Caliphate that distinguishes JN's methodology in Syria and defines its intent toward governance. This approach is a direct outgrowth of its adherence to Zawahiri's methodology for a Da'wa-based jihad, in which gaining the acceptance of local populations is prioritized over taking direct control by jihadist forces. An important indicator of the effectiveness of JN's strategy is that Shari'a courts with JN participation generally enjoy local acceptance. The popular acceptance of these courts is therefore a significant success for the global al-Qaeda movement.

JN achieves this success by relying on existing rebel networks and leadership to provide legitimacy to shared Shari'a structures. JN even allows the local environment to shape how courts are organized and disposed. JN participates in courts that reflect local traditions, leaders, and preferences, thus ensuring that the form of governance is sufficiently tailored to the local context to avoid civilian discontent. JN's Tier 2 allies typically participate actively in these courts. These groups are predominantly Islamist in orientation, but do not share the same hardline stances and sometimes foreign composition of JN's Tier 1 allies. Furthermore, JN appears willing to compromise on

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*JN is engaged in a nuanced and carefully formulated state-building effort in Syria that aims to establish Shari'a law over the long-term in a post-Assad state.*

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imposing the ideal form of Shari'a law in order to ensure the acceptance of the local population. For example, JN-linked courts in Dera'a appear to have been effective in gaining a degree of local acceptance because they include local figures and because locals perceive the pragmatism of their judgments, which appear to be a mix of Shari'a, civil law, and local customs. One member of the Dera'a Free Lawyers Association who opposes Islamic courts on principle was quoted as saying, "I want civil courts and Syrian law but the Hay'at al-Shari'a [Shari'a courts] are much fairer and less corrupt than the old regime-run courts ever were, and people respect them, they listen to the judgments."<sup>234</sup>

In Syria to date, JN has successfully established such courts in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zour, Dera'a, and the Eastern Ghouta suburb of Damascus (Figure 22).<sup>235</sup> JN converted influence acquired through military collaboration into governance in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zour provinces beginning in late 2012. By the start of 2013, JN had established its significance to the

Syrian opposition. JN was deeply entrenched in Damascus and Aleppo because it had prioritized these zones early on. JN carved out an important safe-haven in Deir ez-Zour in 2012 by capitalizing on the relative weakness of regime forces in the province, seizing large swaths of terrain from the regime with help from local rebel and tribal elements.<sup>236</sup> These groups coalesced under JN leadership in an umbrella organization called the Mujahideen Shura Council on November 9, 2012. The organization committed to liberate the province fully and implement Shari'a law.<sup>237</sup>

JN also appears to have prioritized the southern province of Dera'a, where the opaque Shari'a court mentioned above was listed by Joulani as a success for JN, alongside its influence in Deir ez-Zour and the Shari'a court in Aleppo.<sup>238</sup> The assassination of a military judge with reported ties to the AQ core in the Dera'a countryside on November 11, 2014 indicates that AQ-linked JN members overtly participate in the Dera'a Shari'a court. This incident therefore provides evidence of JN's presence, despite their overall silence about the court's operations.<sup>239</sup> In addition, JN top Shari'a official Sami al-Aridi has been photographed in the province on a number of occasions, and is likely to be involved in JN's governance efforts in the province.<sup>240</sup>

### *Aleppo Shari'a Commission*

JN governance activities in Aleppo province have been some of the most visible within Syria. JN established the Aleppo Shari'a Commission (ASC) on November 10, 2012 with participation from Liwa al-Tawhid, Ahrar al-Sham (HASI), Liwa al-Fateh, Harakat Fajr al-Islam, and Suqour al-Sham as a counterbalance to the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Shari'a Council of Aleppo Province.<sup>241</sup> The ASC quickly sidelined the Shari'a Council of Aleppo, fully absorbing it in February 2014.<sup>242</sup> JN subsequently withdrew from the court in July 2014 in favor of establishing its own direct governance in previously ungoverned areas in Syria's northwestern countryside. Its successful nearly two-year involvement in the Aleppo Shari'a Commission, however, is an important example of its pursuit of influence within shared rebel structures throughout the conflict.

According to a spokesman, the law applied at the ASC is "derived from the Islamic religion," but the most strict *hudud* punishments, such as cutting off the hands of thieves, are suspended during "wartime."<sup>243</sup> However, activists have reported that the Commission nonetheless conducts executions of prisoners found guilty of certain crimes,<sup>244</sup> and it is likely that the court's interpretation of Islamic law was strongly influenced by JN despite notable exceptions targeted to maintain support from the local population.

The ASC presidency reportedly rotates between the major factions that established it, and it appeared that JN accepted the presidential position on its rotation. In September of 2013, an English-subtitled French documentary on the practices of Islamic courts in Aleppo examined the ASC, identifying the president at the time as a JN member that had been appointed by Abu Sulayman, also identified as a JN member.<sup>245</sup> In practice, some of the ASC's branches reportedly operated relatively independently of the main ASC body, with the strongest branches operating in the southern countryside. Each branch of the commission has a president and a deputy, both of whom are nominated by the ASC president and a governing "Shura Council" but who are not allowed to issue general public announcements, notifications, or decisions without referring to the presidency of the main Commission.<sup>246</sup> The jurisdiction of the ASC over Aleppo province was not complete, however. In the western countryside, where the ASC claims jurisdiction but where more moderate actors are strong, another Shari'a court network, the Shari'a Court in the Western Countryside of Aleppo, appears to have more sway.<sup>247</sup>

According to an ASC document detailing its own structure, four bureaus exist below the ASC Office of the President:<sup>248</sup>

1. Administrative Bureau: includes the Finance Office, the Maintenance Office, the Human Resources Office, and the IT Office.
2. Civil Bureau: includes the Endowments (*Waqf*) Office, the Services Office, the Education Office, the Medical Office, the Office of the Economy, the Aid Office, and the Civil Affairs Office.
3. Judicial Bureau: includes the Office of Judges, the Conciliation Office, the Office of Investigations, the Registry, and the Office of Prisoners' Property.
4. Bureau of the Police: responsible for security installations (*nuqat amniyya*) and the detention facility.

An office of public administration and services appears to have been consistently run by JN, initially headed by JN's Sheikh Abu Yasin.<sup>249</sup> Using this control, JN worked to ensure the provision of supplies and services to the city, posting frequent photo reports of its activities on its Aleppo Twitter account.<sup>250</sup> JN exhibited a high degree of influence over the Aleppo "General Management for Services" which became active in rebel-held areas of Aleppo by late 2013 and which likely served as the formal service office of the ASC.<sup>251</sup> In addition, a main source of JN service provision stemmed from its control over Aleppo's major grain compounds. JN appears to have acquired these compounds from rebel groups after bread

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الإدارة العامة للخدمات  
مديرية التخطيط والتنظيم

قسم الإعلام

يوماً بعد يوم تزداد كميات استهلاك المياه لدى المواطنين كافة لأغراض الشرب والغسيل والاستحمام والوضوء وغيرها من الاستخدامات اليومية الضرورية. والماء عنصر ضروري للحياة وبدونه لا يمكن العيش وهو نعمة من نعم الله عز وجل وجاء في قوله تعالى: (( وجعلنا من الماء كل شيء حي )) وقد حثنا سبحانه وتعالى على الحفاظ على هذه النعمة وعدم هدرها لأن في وجود المياه حياة للبشرية ولا ينبغي علينا الإسراف في استعمالها حيث جاء في قوله تعالى: (( وكلوا واشربوا ولا تسرفوا إنه لا يحب المسرفين )) ترشيد استهلاك المياه :

يعتبر ترشيد استهلاك المياه من المواضيع التي تشغل الرأي الإسلامي في العالم ولا ينبغي تجاهلها وهي مسؤوليتنا جميعاً للحفاظ على الموارد الطبيعية في التعامل مع المياه وتكييف عاداتنا اليومية مع الحلول العملية التي تقدمها الدراسات العملية في هذا المجال.

والترشيد : هو الاستخدام الأمثل للمياه بحيث يؤدي إلى الاستفادة منها بأقل كمية وبأرخص التكاليف المالية الممكنة في جميع مجالات النشاط.

وعندما عن الترشيد فإننا نهدف إلى توعية المسلمين بأهمية المياه باعتبارها أساس الحياة وتنمية الموارد المائية الذي أصبح مطلباً حيوياً لضممان التنمية المستدامة في كافة المجالات الصناعية والزراعية وذلك عن طريق العمل على تغيير الأنماط والعادات الاستهلاكية اليومية بحيث ينسجم السلوك الاستهلاكي للفرد أو للأسرة والمتعلق بالاعتدال والالتزان والرشاد.

Figure 21. Contact information for the JN General Management for Services (top), and the organization's first publications (bottom).<sup>250</sup>

shortages led residents to believe the FSA was stealing flour, prompting JN to assume control. One JN officer reportedly boasted to the BBC that JN's "reputation for discipline and honesty" prompted Syrians to want the group in charge of services.<sup>252</sup> JN reportedly also attempted to stabilize the price of bread within the province in order to ensure civilians could afford much-needed supplies.<sup>253</sup> Finally, JN's service wing was regularly involved in repairing damage to electricity and water infrastructure caused by the regime's barrel bomb campaign.<sup>254</sup>

The declaration of the ASC in Aleppo early in the war indicates JN prioritized its involvement in the province early. It indicates the strength of JN and Islamist elements in the province despite its historical status as a stronghold for the moderate opposition. JN's strategy for translating social welfare activities into influence at the centers of rebel governance is evident in its involvement in the provision of goods and services as a member of the ASC. Aleppo was

therefore a key example of the efficiency with which JN is able to integrate itself into local structures. JN appears to have recalculated its participation after the rise of ISIS, withdrawing from the ASC in July 2014. Nevertheless, the successful administration of services during its two-year participation likely facilitated its current activities in the province.

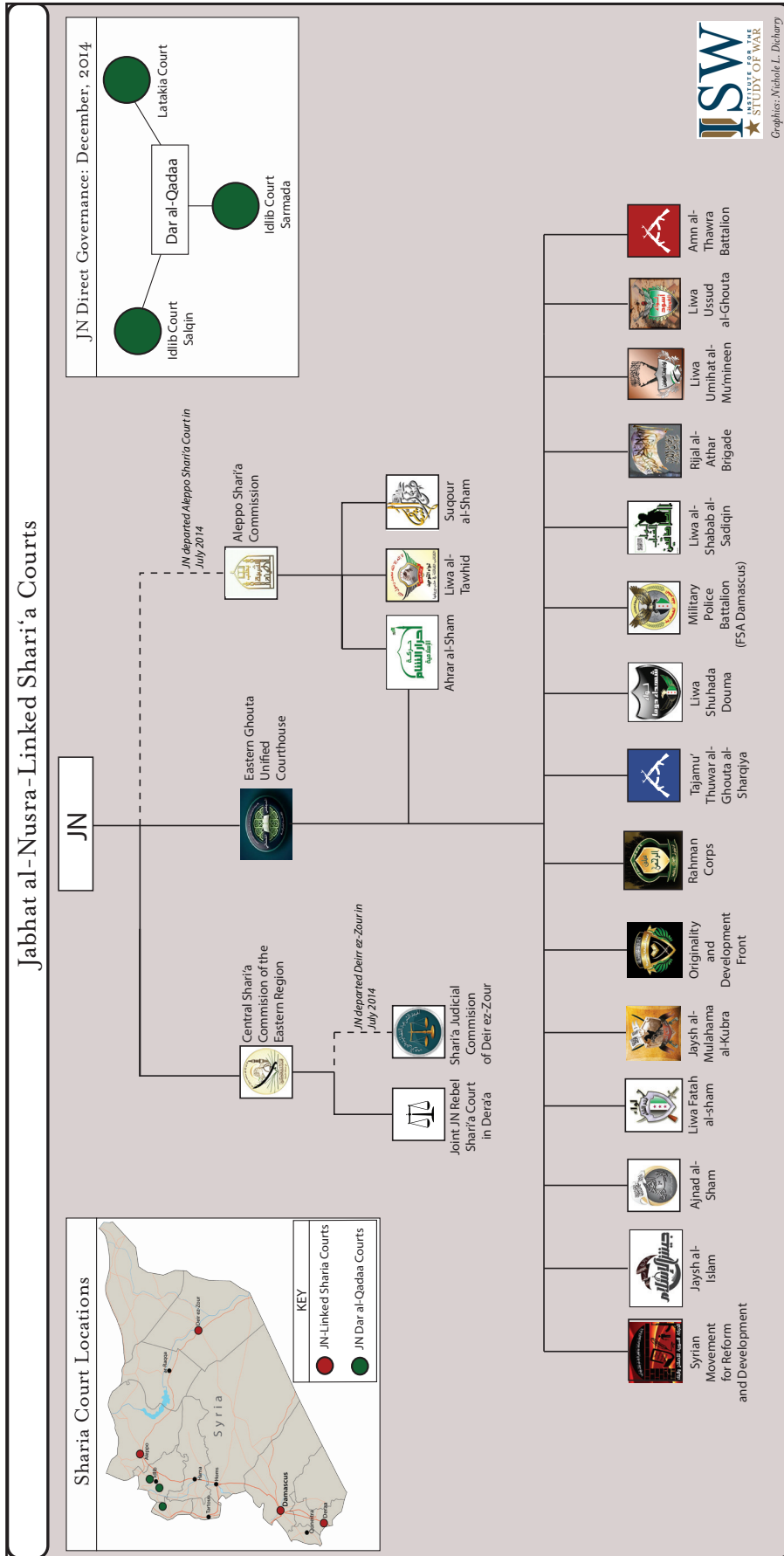
### Eastern Shari'a Committee

The tribal structure and relatively sparse urban centers in Deir ez-Zour province created a unique set of conditions for governance that allowed JN to quickly acquire influence without a preceding long period of battlefield cooperation. On December 12, 2012 JN and nine local brigades announced the formation of the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), a coalition of anti-Assad forces that committed to continued cooperation against the regime within the province. The council formed the backbone of JN's governing coalition in eastern Syria and represents a successful JN rebel network.<sup>255</sup> The MSC did not initially include the Deir ez-Zour Revolutionary Council, the group linked with the Free Syrian Army, indicating the relatively weak status of more moderate rebels in the province.

With the support of the MSC, JN began instituting governance activities. JN and local groups from the MSC announced the formation of the Shari'a Board in the Eastern Region on March 9, 2013.<sup>256</sup> Joulani stressed the broad participation within this Shari'a court in his al-Jazeera interview, emphasizing its acceptance by local tribes.<sup>257</sup> Following its formation, the Shari'a court immediately conducted a military/police parade throughout the province in a show of strength and unity,<sup>258</sup> later opening a training camp for Islamic police as it began to formalize its governance.<sup>259</sup> Interestingly, the Shari'a court appears to have been given a high level of autonomy, issuing a condemnation of a JN fighter accused of manslaughter shortly after the court's formation.<sup>260</sup>

JN released a video titled "Visit to the Eastern Shari'a Board" on November 3, 2013 depicting the departments and interviewing each department head.<sup>261</sup> Similar to the Aleppo Shari'a Commission, the court in Deir ez-Zour consisted of a number of component bureaus, including an office of Da'wa, a police service, and offices of local services and aid provision.<sup>262</sup>

JN governance and service provision in the province began before the formation of the Shari'a court, and continued after the court's formation. In early January 2013 in al-Mayadin JN removed all alcohol from shops, banned women from wearing trousers, and began daily religious teaching for children in addition to weekly Da'wa sessions.<sup>263</sup> A range of services were provided in the town of al-Shaddadi,



JN withdrew from Deir ez-Zour and the Aleppo Shari'a Court in July 2014. While maintaining its role on the Dera'a and Damascus courts, JN carved out a new area of direct territorial control in Idlib Province. This allowed JN to regroup after withdrawing from its previous stronghold in Deir ez-Zour and emboldened it to implement a new, direct form of governance in areas under its direct control. According to Joulani, local rebel groups are welcome to participate, but only if they abide by the rules laid out by JN. Critically, however, Joulani stated that these new courts, labeled "Dar al-Qadaa," or "judiciary" houses, do not stand as a challenge to the legitimacy or functioning of shared Sharia' structures elsewhere. They rather constitute an effort by JN to implement Shari'a governance in areas outside of the reach of other rebel structures. As such, the establishment of Dar al-Qadaa courts in Idlib and Latakia does not signify a full abandonment of the shared approach to governance that defines JN's long-term vision for Syria. Furthermore, JN's continued participation in such structures in Dera'a and Damascus indicate that JN continues to value the participation in joint governance in areas in which its strength and force posture enable it to do so without jeopardizing its ability to continue to fight the regime at its fullest capacity.

Figure 22.





later to become an ISIS stronghold in southern Hasaka Province. According to a JN commander in mid-2013, JN provided bread baked by special neighborhood teams, free electricity and water, and healthcare, provided by a small clinic that was reported to treat anyone regardless of affiliation.<sup>264</sup> While it is unlikely that JN replicated this exact model consistently throughout the province, this anecdote provides a lens into governance under the MSC and likely indicates the kinds of services rendered elsewhere throughout the province.

### *An interim shift in JN's governance in Syria*

JN's joint implementation of Shari'a law in Syria, manifested prominently in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zour, is a successful implementation of JN's strategy in Syria. It illustrated the effectiveness of JN's joint military and social campaign at that time, and demonstrates the possibility of long-term JN success in the implementation of its vision for a post-Assad Syria. The differences in the structure and disposition of the courts in each locality illustrate a nuanced and phased approach pursued by JN across different systems within Syria's war. The long-term goal, however, remains the establishment of Islamic law throughout Syria. Therefore, the local pragmatism and flexibility of JN governance structures should not be construed as a testament to the moderate nature of JN in relation to ISIS. Rather, this discipline and restraint in the short-term is an indicator of JN's patience in pursuing its long-term goals.

JN involvement in these courts appears to have been insufficient to neutralize continued infighting amongst rebel groups. JN withdrew from the Aleppo and Deir ez-Zour courts in July of 2014, citing corruption and continued dissent as its reasons for withdrawal. In an interview with JN's Manara al-Bayda media outlet in mid-November, Joulani stated that JN was abandoning its attempt to accommodate factional quotas at the Shari'a court as it encouraged corruption, stating that "those who participate in Dar al-Qadaa [courts] must agree with JN on the goals and the means to achieve those goals."<sup>265</sup> This shift is a strong indicator of JN's strategic adjustments in the wake of the rise of ISIS in the summer of 2014, including an increasingly uncompromising disposition toward rebel groups.

At the time of writing, JN has initiated a new method of governance within territory directly under JN control in Idlib and Latakia provinces, with reports of its expansion to Dera'a.<sup>266</sup> The new form of governance, known as "Dar al-Qadaa" was formally announced on September 15, 2014<sup>267</sup> and appears to have been spearheaded by AQ ideologue Abdullah Bin Mohammed Mohisni.<sup>268</sup> Joulani highlighted that JN did not seek to challenge the legitimacy of other rebel Shari'a courts and is rather engaged in a

campaign to initiate Shari'a in areas now under direct control that had been absent from the Shari'a structures of Aleppo. JN's general administration for services appears to remain active in the province, posting regularly to Twitter, evidence of JN's continued commitment to the population governed by the ASC.<sup>269</sup> While it is possible that JN transferred control of this administration to local authorities, JN released assurances that its Shari'a authorities would continue their work in Aleppo despite its formal withdrawal from the ASC "until the completion of the issues entrusted to us in order to preserve the interests of the Muslims."<sup>270</sup> JN therefore continues its methodology of building popular legitimacy and is still pursuing the same strategic objectives that informed its initial approach to governance in Syria. New structures that JN sets up will likely absorb some of the legitimacy garnered by its previous governance activities.

### **JN'S FUTURE CALCULUS**

Two inflections in 2014 have forced a shift in JN's calculus resulting in prominent changes to JN's behavior and disposition in Syria. First, ISIS's declaration of a Caliphate issued a fundamental challenge to the viability of JN's methodology and the legitimacy of its Syrian agenda. It required JN to recalibrate its strategy to the reality of a "post-Caliphate" Syria. JN conducted a full strategic withdrawal from its historic safe haven and stronghold in Deir ez-Zour province and regrouped deep within rebel territory in northwestern Syria.<sup>271</sup> This represented a decision by JN to prioritize the effort against Assad over a fight with ISIS for control of Syria's east. It also served as a forward investment to enable JN to influence the ranks of Islamist and moderate rebel forces in the long-term from a position of power embedded in the rebel heartland.

In addition to reshuffling its military assets in Syria, JN partially transitioned away from a model of discreet influence within outwardly rebel-dominated structures that had characterized its activities in Deir ez-Zour.<sup>272</sup> It maintained its position on Shari'a courts in Dera'a and the Eastern Ghouta Suburb of Damascus, but withdrew from the Aleppo Shari'a court in favor of consolidating a direct form of governance in previously ungoverned areas in Idlib. In doing so, JN ensured the operational security of forces relocating to Idlib from Deir ez-Zour and created the necessary operating room for its military command to regroup and re-establish its primary efforts in the campaign against Assad.

Second, the initiation of U.S. and coalition airstrikes in Syria on September 22, 2014 altered the operating environment for both ISIS and JN in Syria. While the U.S. strikes have remained limited to targeting members of the AQ "Khorasan" cell co-located with JN, public perception inside of Syria does

not seem to recognize this distinction and has regarded the strikes as aggression against JN itself.<sup>273</sup> The strikes therefore required JN to respond and to communicate itself and its objectives more directly to the Syrian people than it had needed to in the past. JN seeks to deter a growth in popular resentment and capitalize on an opportunity to deepen its influence through opposition to the airstrikes.

JN is confident in its support within Syria. In the aftermath of the first U.S. airstrike targeting the Khorasan cell west of Aleppo City on September 22, 2014, Abu Firas al-Suri, a JN spokesman with ties to al-Qaeda, released a defiant video statement stating “We trust in the people of Sham that they will stand with the al-Nusra Front ... They will stand with us on our long path, until we achieve the Islamic State and its banner is raised high and fluttering across Sham, and across all of the Islamic countries.” A statement the following day by Joulani himself reinforced the imagery of JN as a cornerstone of the Syrian revolution itself, stating that “the airstrikes are means to suppress your effort and uprising and to return you to Assad’s lap.”<sup>274</sup> These statements by JN leaders in the aftermath of U.S.-led coalition airstrikes are an important indicator of what JN believes it has accomplished in Syria. They illustrate a high level of confidence in the results of JN’s efforts to embed itself within the fragments of Syrian society. Furthermore, they are an indicator of the success of a population-centric gradual approach as endorsed by AQ scholar Abu Musab al-Suri.<sup>275</sup>

JN activity in the new era of anti-ISIS coalition airstrikes leverages the current environment in Syria to increase the vitality of its role as a partner in the fight against Assad. The continued degradation of the moderate Free Syrian Army helps enable JN success. Despite the airstrikes, JN has acted more overtly than in the past, indicating a perception of security. Furthermore, JN has capitalized on the Syrian public’s negative opinion of U.S.-led coalition airstrikes in Syria to increase its local popularity and to propagate a narrative that the West is in fact in league with Assad and Iran against the revolution.<sup>276</sup> JN is likely to continue to benefit from civilian discontent with the air campaign in Syria to further entrench its role as a counter-Assad force. As of December 2014, JN has experienced large success in its efforts to become an integral partner for many rebel forces fighting against Assad while increasingly undermining pro-Western groups that challenge it.<sup>277</sup>

JN’s behavior has changed since the rise of ISIS and the commencement of airstrikes. But no compelling indicators have emerged that point to a fundamental change in JN’s ideology or grand strategic vision. Abu Firas al-Suri reaffirmed these core tenants of JN behavior in his September 2014 statement, defiantly reiterating JN’s commitment to the establishment of an Islamic State. The most transparent

communication of JN’s long-term goals to date, this statement highlights the continued commitment to the AQ brand of Salafi-Jihadist ideology and the ongoing pursuit of AQ grand strategic objectives.<sup>278</sup>

Rather than encouraging JN to abandon its fundamental ideology or its long-term objectives, the two recent shifts in the Syrian operating environment have forced a shift in JN’s short-term strategic calculus. The ability of JN to shift its calculus in order to redevelop its short-term strategy in Syria is a critical indicator of the group’s resilience, and therefore its lethality. A number of possible developments in Syria are likely to factor into JN’s calculus going forward:

#### 1. Increase in Western aid to the moderate opposition

JN’s historical interactions with groups operating in accordance with Western priorities in Syria, detailed in this report, are evidence of the importance of this trend to JN’s calculus. The September 9, 2014 killing of the leadership of Salafi-Jihadist rebel group Ahrar al-Sham is also likely to have heightened the perceived threat produced by this trend within Syria by seriously weakening one of its core allies in Syria.<sup>279</sup>

#### 2. ISIS sleeper cells and plans for expansion

JN’s decision to regroup in the rebel stronghold in northwestern Syria sought to deter the growth in ISIS influence by prioritizing the objective of reconsolidating JN’s wider influence within rebel ranks.<sup>280</sup> Therefore, JN is likely to engage ISIS as it encroaches on the southern suburbs of Damascus and awakens sleeper cells in the capital, in addition to northwest Syria and southern Dera’a province.<sup>281</sup>

#### 3. Expansion of the allied air campaign into anti-JN airstrikes

JN quickly capitalized on civilian opposition to the airstrikes to deepen its influence, and is therefore likely to continue to adjust its engagement with the Syrian people in response to the ongoing air campaign. The resumption of airstrikes against JN positions is likely to result in a second shift in JN’s disposition within Syria.

#### 4. Guidance from the al-Qaeda Core

Indications have emerged that the initial U.S. strike against AQ-linked Khorasan group members in Syria may not have succeeded entirely.<sup>282</sup> FBI Director James Comey stated on October 5, 2014 that the group may still be developing an attack against the West despite the strike, and that the attack may occur soon.<sup>283</sup> Further airstrikes against the group have also had inconclusive results. The Khorasan group is

comprised of members from the al-Qaeda core, while JN's level of participation is unclear. Directives from the AQ core will likely continue to factor heavily into JN's strategic calculus within Syria in terms of its engagement with Khorasan.<sup>284</sup>

There are a number of potential courses of action that JN could pursue in coming months, all of which would increase the threat level of JN to the U.S. and its regional interests.

1. Directly target the rebel leadership likely to serve as nodes for Western influence

The removal of key nodes of Western influence from within the Syrian opposition may emerge as a strategy through which JN seeks to maintain its depth of influence and to abort any attempt by Western actors to bolster a dwindling moderate current within the opposition. JN's consolidation in Idlib, at the expense of Western-backed groups, indicates the possibility that JN seeks to suppress them before they receive training and assistance. A recent spate of assassination attempts against rebel commanders throughout Syria may also indicate the overt targeting by JN of rebel groups perceived to be too subservient to the West.<sup>285</sup> The recent but unconfirmed appointment of Sheikh Sami al-Aridi as the head of the JN central Shura Council to replace Abu Marea al-Qahtani may also indicate JN's increasingly aggressive disposition. Qahtani is believed to have advocated for a more tolerant approach to interacting with rebel coalitions, whereas al-Aridi has put forth a harder line and uncompromising agenda.<sup>286</sup>

2. Disappear into rebel ranks

If strikes against JN forces occur, JN could disperse its forces to operate nominally under the auspices of its Tier I allies, concealing its activities and making targeting its operations more difficult. Meanwhile, JN is likely to ramp-up its propaganda narrative that the U.S.-led coalition opposes the Syrian revolution. This option may increase in likelihood if ISIS pushes into rebel-held terrain and begins to seize and administer new territory. JN continues to capitalize on the ability to create a positive public image by casting itself as the opposite of ISIS, for example by releasing American hostage Peter Theo Curtis in the midst of continued ISIS beheadings.<sup>287</sup> Therefore, JN may choose to integrate further with opposition forces in order to challenge the legitimacy of airstrikes against it by countering the narrative that strikes against JN are part of a campaign against ISIS.

3. Partner with ISIS

If airstrikes against ISIS (and possibly JN) continue to alienate the Syrian population and rebel leadership, the unrest may encourage and enable a consolidation of ISIS and JN efforts against a common enemy. As illustrated here, JN and ISIS forces continue to cooperate tactically in the Qalamoun region along the Lebanese border, and it is possible that the groups could decide to cooperate operationally, albeit likely without a full resolution of their differences.

4. Directly compete with ISIS

JN may alternatively compete directly with ISIS should the latter organization seek to establish itself in safe-havens within the former's area of operations. JN has moved military assets to counter ISIS's arrival in areas. In addition, an AQ spectacular attack in the West originating with a JN-trained foreign fighter or the Khorasan group could likewise boost the group's global standing.

The potential JN courses of action presented here are extrapolated from past JN behavior and are predicated on JN's continued commitment to a gradualist methodology and JN's own strategic objectives in Syria. They represent an acceleration of current

trends in JN's behavior in Syria, and likely represent future contingencies already planned by JN's leadership that may be triggered early by outside action.

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*JN's continued freedom of operations in Syria and its influence on Syrian rebel groups threaten American national security....*

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## CONCLUSION

JN's continued freedom of operations in Syria and its influence on Syrian rebel groups threaten American national security in three ways. First, failure to address JN as a component of the coalition's counter-ISIS campaign is likely to jeopardize the effectiveness of the campaign in the long-term. The United States must separate JN from the armed opposition and population in order to be successful in fielding a counter-ISIS force in Syria that is not influenced by AQ or highly vulnerable to its aggression. JN is gaining *de facto* control of territory, and has recently expanded this to include direct control of swaths of terrain. The U.S. campaign to contain ISIS may therefore result in JN's consolidation of power in ISIS's wake. Second, JN presents a direct threat to the West and the homeland. It continues to facilitate a developing AQ plot to attack the west by al-Qaeda's "Khorasan group," indicating that JN is not exclusively focused on the Syrian regime. Instead, it is an organization integrated into AQ's global jihad.<sup>288</sup> It also recruits and trains fighters from the

United States, the West, and English-speaking countries. Third, JN also constitutes a threat to the West by virtue of its nature as an official and highly successful al-Qaeda affiliate. Success in the Syrian revolution would represent a large step forward in the AQ organization's broader pursuit of an Islamic state throughout what it considers to be "Muslim lands."

JN is likely to become more dangerous over time. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are in a competition for leadership of the global, violent jihad. JN's foreign fighter networks into Syria are robust. JN can further support the development of plots against the West and the U.S. homeland in order to prove al-Qaeda's capacities and relevance. In the longer term, JN would also become more dangerous if it reconciled with ISIS, even at the unit level rather than the leadership level. JN leaders are pursuing such negotiations under the guidance of AQ leader Zawahiri. The combined military power of JN and ISIS would constitute a large and lethal force.

The current U.S. strategy to counter ISIS in Iraq and Syria is failing to address any of these threats from JN and from the global al-Qaeda movement. It is therefore likely to fail in the effort to defeat ISIS unless policymakers recalibrate the current strategy and engage local forces in Syria in an invigorated capacity that is sufficient to separate JN from the remaining opposition.

JN is an insurgency competing for popular support and winning it. JN must therefore be separated from the population from which it draws considerable strength. It will be necessary to compete for the trust and allegiance of the Syrian population and its moderate rebels in order to secure U.S. interests in the region, defeat ISIS, and mitigate the threat to the U.S. homeland posed by AQ in Syria. In contrast, current U.S. policy toward Syria seeks to strengthen more moderate and secular forces in order to contain the rise of ISIS and create conditions for political settlement of the Syrian conflict over the long-term.<sup>289</sup> However, this strategy fails to recognize that JN is heavily intertwined with militant groups rebelling against the government of Bashar al-Assad. The continuation of Assad's rule is a beacon for global jihadists and a direct driver of increasing local support to JN. Crucially, current strategy also fails to adequately address a parallel threat to the U.S. represented by the successes for AQ secured by JN in Syria. The U.S. strategy must counter JN in order to prevent the rise of an al-Qaeda influenced state in Syria.

Joulani himself sees the tightly woven relationship between JN and the population as essential to the success of jihad. "During the past decade, the West had managed to separate

the mujahideen from their incubator, but the Americans missed this opportunity in Syria. We have managed to unite with our origin and our people, who knew our truth face to face. People now see the sacrifices we are making and see the blood and the extreme tiredness and difficult life we are living. Hundreds and even thousands have been killed by this regime. I am not speaking about the Al-Nusrah Front only but the jihadist work in general. Therefore, the Sunnis in Syria have in general adopted this plan with us. The plan is serious. Ordinary people in Syria now adopt the principle of being ruled according to Shari'a and they want an Islamic government. This has become the general mood."<sup>290</sup>

The U.S. must actually adopt an anti-Assad strategy in order to prevent JN from fully subsuming the moderate opposition. Opposition to Assad drives the recruitment and radicalization of jihadists as well as the support of rebel groups. JN is ostensibly committed to fighting the regime, making them more attractive than both ISIS and the U.S. Furthermore, JN is capitalizing on a feeling of betrayal and resentment from the Syrian population toward the international military coalition against ISIS to penetrate more deeply into rebel ranks and the fabric of Syrian society.

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*...an under-equipped Syrian  
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moderate character and become  
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extreme movements.*

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The United States and the international community must do more to assist the moderate opposition in Syria. The goal of separating the moderate Syrian opposition from JN is only viable if the moderate opposition is well resourced for a fight against the Assad regime as well as against ISIS. Careful

study of JN in Syria supports the longstanding argument that an under-equipped Syrian opposition would lose its moderate character and become increasingly oriented alongside better-provisioned and more extreme movements. U.S. policy has continued to avoid engaging the complicated dynamics of the Syrian war, and JN has steadily taken advantage of an increasingly fractured opposition to consolidate its influence over Syria's rebel landscape.

A moderate opposition force must also be capable of confronting JN if and where necessary. Rebel forces are unlikely to turn on JN without the arms and training sufficient to be victorious while simultaneously engaged against both ISIS and the regime. This disparity in capabilities is a significant limiting factor for the prospects of success of the current military policy, namely, a small-scale train-and-assist mission to the moderate Syrian opposition. In order to secure its national security and ensure the success of its counter-ISIS campaign in the region, the United States must therefore adjust its strategy in Syria to realities on the ground and provide more robust advising and assistance to the Syrian opposition.

In order to deny al-Qaeda safe-haven in Syria, the United States must neutralize JN's campaign to influence the population. This requires engagement with opposition forces, not airstrikes against JN. A strategy limited to targeted airstrikes to disrupt ISIS and the Khorasan Group will not achieve this goal. Nor will leadership decapitation achieve this objective. Although its leaders are talented, its organization has put down roots that will give it resilience at this moment and over time. JN retains the ability to dissolve back into the population and reassume a network structure, rendering a decapitation strategy a dangerously counterproductive course of action. Rather, it is necessary to separate JN from the core of the Syrian opposition.

JN relies on two critical capabilities to gain popular and armed support. First, JN continues to dominate the humanitarian and counter-Assad narrative in Syria. The international community, and the United States above all, must construct a more full-fledged campaign of governance and humanitarian support in Syria and among Syrian refugees. Second, JN offers rebel forces crucial asymmetric capabilities necessary to continue the armed revolt against the Assad regime. JN has acquired great influence through the use of these forms of leverage. Nonetheless, both are vulnerable to disruption by the international community, which can outcompete JN in providing non-lethal and lethal aid. The Syrian opposition's reliance on JN as a force multiplier also offers an avenue for approach in defeating JN. By offering rebel forces an alternate source of power and asymmetric capabilities, it may be possible to force the disaggregation of JN from rebel ranks. If the U.S. makes it easier for the opposition to defeat the Syrian regime by bringing more asymmetric capabilities to the battlefield, most rebel groups are likely to follow along with the U.S. rather than preferring JN or fighting on its behalf.

A strategy to defeat JN, however, will require policy options targeted to breaking its will or destroying its capability to continue to fight. As is true with all AQ affiliates, the ideological fervor inherent in the organization is likely to preclude the former. Ultimately, it is possible to destroy JN's military capability within Syria. Time is short, however. While a moderate opposition exists within Syria, its continued reliance on JN as a partner against Assad will degrade the possible mechanisms whereby those rebels can reject JN's influence in the long-term. The United States has months, not years, to begin counterbalancing JN's leverage.

# APPENDIX : JABHAT AL-NUSRA TIMELINE OF EVENTS

## Jabhat al-Nusra Timeline

<p><b>AUG:</b> JN cell dispatched from Iraq into Syria.</p> <p><b>27 DEC:</b> JN's first attack in Damascus.</p>	<p><b>23 JAN:</b> JN announces its existence through video.</p> <p><b>08 FEB:</b> Al-Qaeda (AQ) leader Zawahiri urges Muslim support for Syrian uprising in "Lions of Syria" video.</p> <p><b>10 NOV:</b> JN participates in the formation of the Aleppo Shari'a Commission (ASC) alongside prominent Islamic Front Groups.</p> <p><b>12 NOV:</b> JN forms the Deir ez-Zour Mujahideen Shura Council along with prominent rebel and tribal groups to coordinate resistance against the regime in Deir ez-Zour.</p> <p><b>10 DEC:</b> U.S. designates JN as a terrorist organization on the grounds that it is an alias for al-Qaeda in Iraq.</p>	<p><b>09 MAR:</b> The Shari'a Body in the Eastern Region is formed in Deir ez-Zour under JN leadership.</p> <p><b>09 APR:</b> Al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declares the formation of ISIS, attempts to absorb JN.</p> <p><b>10 APR:</b> JN leader Abu Mohammad al-Joulani rejects merger with ISIS and announces formal affiliation to the AQ core and its leader Zawahiri.</p> <p><b>09 JUN:</b> Zawahiri letter encouraging a mediation of the ISIS -JN schism surfaces.</p> <p><b>12 JUL:</b> JN establishes the Hemm Agency media outlet to report on its governance and select military activities across Syria.</p> <p><b>18 DEC:</b> JN leader Joulani conducts first media appearance in interview with al-Jazeera.</p>	<p><b>JAN:</b> Anti ISIS uprising begins in northwestern Syria.</p>	<p><b>03 FEB:</b> Zawahiri formally expels ISIS from AQ.</p> <p><b>22 FEB:</b> The Aleppo Shari'a Court absorbs the Muslim-Brotherhood led Shari'a Council of Aleppo Province, becoming the sole governance structure in rebel-held areas Aleppo.</p>	<p><b>30 MAR:</b> ISIS launches offensive into JN held areas of Deir ez-Zour Province.</p>
2011	2012	2013	JAN 2014	FEB 2014	MAR 2014

## Jabhat al-Nusra Timeline

<p><b>30 MAR:</b> ISIS launches offensive into JN held areas of Deir ez-Zour Province.</p>	<p><b>20 APR:</b> First known JN SVBIEDS against ISIS deployed in Suwar, Deir ez-Zour.</p>	<p><b>06 MAY:</b> After JN arrests Free Syrian Army Colonel Ahmed al-Na'meh, a video "confession" of subservience to the west is distributed on social media.</p> <p><b>20 MAY:</b> JN rejects the Free Syrian Army and Islamic Front Rebel Revolutionary Covenant, which establishes joint military and political goals.</p> <p><b>25 MAY:</b> New iteration of the Mujahideen Shura Council formed in Deir ez-Zour in order to consolidate defenses against ISIS.</p>	<p><b>26 JUN:</b> JN participates in the formation of Eastern Ghouta Unified Courthouse in Damascus alongside a wide array of rebel groups.</p>	<p><b>Early JUL:</b> JN withdraws from Deir ez-Zour province, ceding control to ISIS.</p> <p><b>07 JUL:</b> JN withdraws from joint governance effort in the Aleppo Shari'a Court but reinforces key terrain in the city.</p> <p><b>12 JUL:</b> JN releases clarifying statement on its desire for a Caliphate.</p>	<p><b>AUG:</b> JN forms new "Dar al-Qadaa" governance structures in northwestern Syria.</p>	<p><b>22 SEPT 2014 :</b> U.S. begins strikes against the AQ and JN-affiliated Khorasan group that is plotting attacks on the West.</p>	<p><b>30 OCT -DEC 2014:</b> JN seizes and consolidates direct control in Idlib province.</p>
MAR 2014	APR 2014	MAY 2014	JUN 2014	JUL 2014	AUG 2014	SEPT 2014	OCT 2014

Graphics: Nichole Dicharry

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