



Report: Jund al Aqsa's campaign of violence

In early October, the jihadist group Jund al Aqsa swore allegiance to Jabhat Fateh al Sham (formerly Al Nusra Front), which is al Qaeda's rebranded branch in Syria.

Just weeks earlier, in September, the State Department sanctioned Jund al Aqsa as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and added it to the US government's list of Specially Designated Global Terrorist groups. Britain previously banned the group in early 2015. Both governments noted Jund al Aqsa's history as a subunit of Al Nusra that splintered off several years prior.

Despite being based in Syria and having a name that makes reference to Jerusalem, Jund al Aqsa has significant roots in the Gulf, raising questions about how seriously certain Gulf governments have tackled extremism and terror finance.

Jund al Aqsa's founder

The organization's founder and first emir was known by the nom de guerre Abu Abdulaziz al Qatari. A Palestinian citizen of Jordan, his real name was Muhammad Yusuf 'Uthman 'Abd al Salam. He was reported to have been a longtime veteran of Al Qaeda.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), al Qatari once worked for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, where it claimed he was "close to Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, and Sheikh Abdullah Azzam." After a stint in Chechnya, the Observatory asserted that he helped Abu Musab al Zarqawi found Jama'at al-Tawhid wal Jihad, the predecessor to Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Though Zarqawi died in 2006, other sources add that al Qatari continued to serve as an AQI official under Zarqawi's successors.

The SOHR reported that al Qatari eventually went on to help Abu Muhammad al Julani found Al Nusra Front in 2012. Iraqi terrorism analyst Hisham al Hashemi reports that the two were dispatched to Syria to form terrorist sleeper cells by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, after which al Qatari appears to have temporarily handled important financial matters for the Islamic State inside of Syria. According to *al-Arabiya*, an Islamic State (IS) financial official known as Muhammad Yusuf the Palestinian once oversaw the work in Syria of Abdulrahman al Qaduli, who went on to become IS's minister of finance.

Early Gulf ties

Before the Syrian revolution, however, al Qatari allegedly went from helping jihadists in Iraq to aiding them from Qatar. A propaganda outlet named Masar Media, which is considered close to Jund al Aqsa, asserted that he left Iraq “to work from Qatar in supporting the mujahideen materially and logistically.” See the screenshot below. Text displayed in the video, which includes images of “Muhammad Yusuf of the ‘Uthmans, ‘Abu Abdulaziz al-Qatari’,” reads: “And after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, he worked early on with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the organization of the mujahideen to resist the occupation, then to work from Qatar in supporting the mujahideen materially and logistically.”

Another sympathetic biography remarked that “after he participated in and supported the fighting against the American occupation [of Iraq], he traveled afterwards to Qatar, and was supporting the jihad in Iraq.”

In 2011, al Qatari purportedly traveled with the head of Saudi Arabia’s banned extremist Ummah Party to Syria, where they “supported” Syrian insurgent groups, including the jihadist Ahrar al Sham just after its founding. This account comes from the website of Hakim al Mutayri, who leads the Ummah Party’s branch in Kuwait and has reportedly lionized Osama bin Laden (quite literally) as “the lion of Islam.”

A journalist who visited Jund al Aqsa several years ago wrote that it drew inspiration from a Kuwaiti cleric named Hamid bin Hammad al Ali, who is now under US and UN sanctions on charges of funding Al Nusrah Front. However, al Ali was reportedly given his job back as a Kuwaiti prayer leader last year by state order. He still seems to be listed on the faculty of Kuwait’s top public university.

Masar Media similarly claimed that al Qatari gave material support to Ahrar al Sham. It reported that he briefly “joined” Ahrar in 2011 before moving on to become a senior Nusrah leader. This would have made al Qatari one of several al Qaeda veterans in Ahrar’s early ranks, including Ayman al Zawahiri’s envoy in the Levant.

According to the New York Times, Ahrar has also been funded by the governments of Turkey and Qatar.

Al Qatari’s sons and Al Qaeda’s Iran-based network

Abu Abdulaziz al Qatari appears to have been the father of two Qatari ID-holders under US and UN sanctions for allegedly funding the Nusrah Front and other Al Qaeda branches. Like him, the two were also citizens of Jordan, and their names are Ashraf and ‘Abd al-Malik Muhammad Yusuf Uthman ‘Abd al Salam.

This relationship would be particularly striking because ‘Abd al-Malik is reported to have wired \$4 million to his father from a Jordanian bank account before being jailed and convicted in Lebanon on charges of terror finance. He reportedly claimed to work at his father’s Porsche business in Qatar.

According to the detainee rights group Alkarama, which was co-founded by a Qatari national who is himself now under US and UN terror finance sanctions, ‘Abd al Malik was freed and deported to Jordan in February and held for several months by Jordanian intelligence. Alkarama says he now has been released and had his passport taken, but the ‘Abd al-Salam family has purportedly been known to use forged passports before.

Remarkably, ‘Abd al Malik, Ashraf, and Jund al Aqsa all appear to have intersected at some point with leaders from Al Qaeda’s network in Iran. While in Iran, senior al Qaeda figures ran the organization’s core financial pipeline from the Gulf to South Asia and went on to lead the so-called Khorasan Group in Syria, which plotted terror attacks in the West.

According to the US Treasury Department, ‘Abd al Malik delivered funds in 2011 to Muhsin al Fadhli in Iran, who oversaw that pipeline and later led the Khorasan Group’s external operations arm – that is, its unit responsible for plotting against the West. Fadhli’s deputy in Iran, Adel al Harbi, had a \$5 million US bounty on his head and was killed last year in Syria. As the Long War Journal reported at the time, Jund al Aqsa revealed that he was both a commander in its ranks and a Khorasan leader.

As for Ashraf, the US accused him of helping to transfer hundreds of thousands of dollars in 2012 “intended for Al Qaeda in Pakistan” from Khalifa al Subaiy, another Qatari under US and UN sanctions. According to the UN, Subaiy funded Pakistan-based Al Qaeda leaders that year by colluding with “Iran based facilitators.”

Other Qatar-based individuals have also been accused by America of funding Al Qaeda’s Iran cell, namely Salim al Kuwari and Abdullah al Khawar. Former Deputy National Security Adviser Juan Zarate has written that Kuwari, Khawar, and three other individuals sanctioned by the US in 2011 constituted “the most significant Al Qaeda terrorist financing network that had been revealed in the past five years.”

While Doha has finally pressed charges against some unnamed terror financiers, there is still no proof any of these particular men have faced Qatari charges.

Al Qatari's successors

In January 2014, Abu Abdulaziz al Qatari was killed in northern Syria. Since then, it seems one of his sons became a top leader in the group.

The Syrian opposition paper Enab Baladi reported several weeks ago that Jund al Aqsa was led by several key individuals, most notably Abu Dharr al Jazrawi and Abu Ahmed al Qatari, the latter of whom it identified as a son of Abu Abdulaziz. It stated that Abu Ahmed has helped Jund al Aqsa attract new recruits and buy up independent militias. The paper was one of several different outlets that described him as Jund al Aqsa's main financial official.

An article on the website of Al Sakina, a counter-extremism program launched by the Saudi state, reports that Abu Ahmed al Qatari "possesses direct links with Qatari and Kuwaiti businessmen who undertake funding the organization under the name of charity." It also identified his colleague al Jazrawi as a Saudi national.

Furthermore, a 2015 statement attributed by some to the Islamic State described Abu Ahmed al Qatari as "connected to the governmental institutions and state of Qatar" and as receiving unimpeded support. Abu Abdulaziz had even once been accused by a pro-Hezbollah news site of receiving support from Qatari intelligence. Another Lebanese news page cited an Al Qaeda official accusing Abu Ahmed and Abu Dharr of letting Jund al Aqsa be penetrated by intelligence services.

Given the sources, these claims should be viewed with some skepticism. However, it may be worth noting that the al Sakina article, coauthored by Mona Alami, a nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council, characterized Jund al Aqsa as under the sway of Qatar.

Likewise, Reuters reported that Qatar led an effort in 2015 "to rebrand Nusra and to provide it with new support." It stated that Qatar and others met Julani, Nusra's chief, several times to urge such a move. The Long War Journal previously warned that Nusra's rebranding could lead to increased outside aid for the group.

Battleground developments

In the last three years, Jund al Aqsa helped Al Qaeda demolish two pivotal Western-backed organizations in Syria, the Syria Revolutionaries Front and the Hazm Movement, and seriously weaken a third, known as Division 13. As The Long War Journal reported at the time, Jund al Aqsa also aided Al Nusrah Front in an assault on regime positions in Idlib, sending suicide bombers identified with names suggestive of Saudi and Kuwaiti origins.

A journalist who visited Jund al Aqsa reported in 2014 that it continued to receive funding from private Gulf donors who valued its refusal to attack the Islamic State.

Jund al Aqsa even left an alliance last year that was dominated by Al Nusrah Front and Ahrar al Sham, purportedly over their pressure to confront the Islamic State. Still, the group signaled its continued loyalty to Ayman al Zawahiri, describing him as “the sheikh of the mujahideen of today” and “his eminence.” However, Jund al Aqsa has finally been forced to take sides.

After several days of ill-fated clashes with Ahrar al Sham in October, Jund al Aqsa’s men fled for safety by joining up again with the relaunched Nusrah Front, which changed its name in July to Jabhat Fateh al Sham (JFS). The text of their agreement – signed in the names of Jund leader Abu Diab al-Sarmini and JFS leader Julani – proclaims that “we in Jund al-Aqsa pledge our bay’ah [allegiance] to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.”

The next day, JFS signed a separate deal with Ahrar al Sham that seems to have sealed Jund al Aqsa’s fate. The document, which was posted on the Syrian opposition website All4Syria, was again signed in Julani’s name and promised that Jund al Aqsa’s bay’ah means its “dissolution” and “complete incorporation” into JFS, thus “preventing its independent reconstitution” under any name or form.

Postscript

Al Nusrah Front’s 2016 rebranding, Jund al Aqsa’s original separation from it, and their recent reunification are all reflections of Al Qaeda’s strategy of diversifying its investments and downplaying its formal ties to such groups.

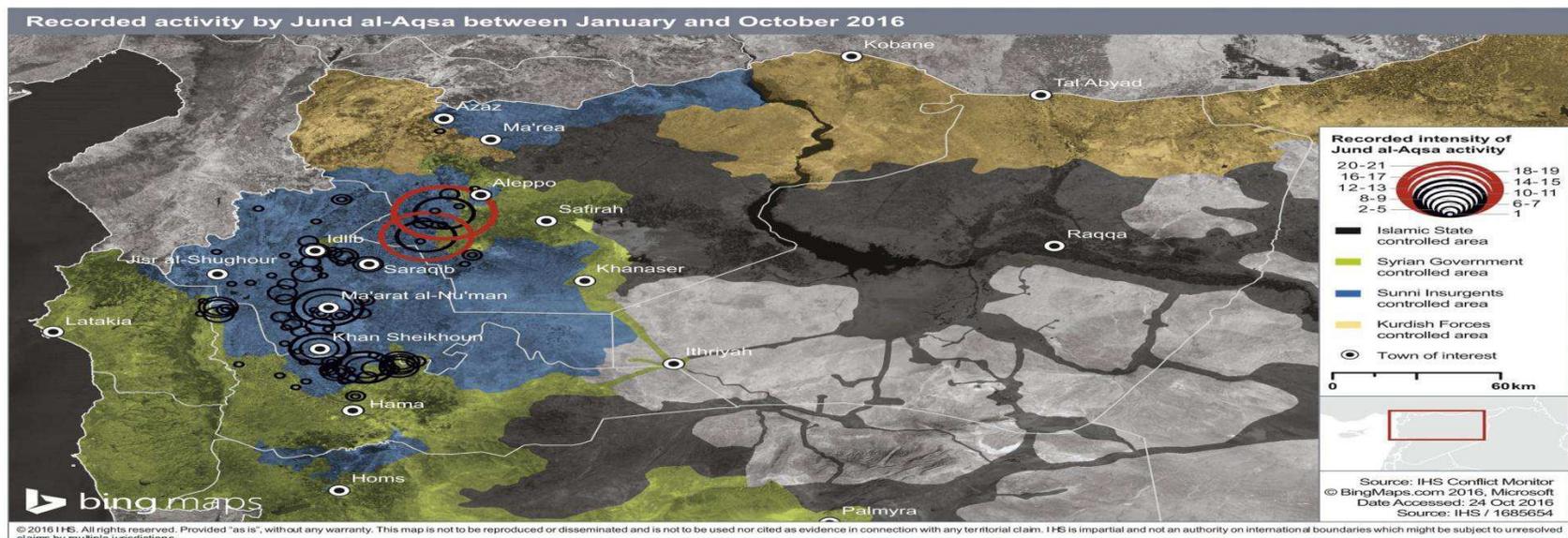
The Treasury Department’s Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Adam Szubin has called Al Nusrah Front’s “purported” split with Al Qaeda “transparently misleading” and warns that it “will not change our approach to combating the group’s financial and

logistical support networks.” Last month, Szubin added that “we still see in some cases a lack of political will” in Qatar and Kuwait “to effectively enforce their combating financing terrorist laws against all threats regardless of their organization or affiliation.”

Now that Jund al Aqsa is under US sanctions, the administration will also want to keep an eye on this terrorist faction’s deep financial links to the Gulf, as well as how those ties may benefit al Qaeda’s renamed paramilitary army.

Source: /Long War Journal

Sample Question: Where is the Jund al-Aqsa rebel faction active?



Available Data: 670+ geocoded events for Jund al-Aqsa reaching back to January 2014. Similar data is included for hundreds of pro-government and rebel factions.

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