



The Islamic State in Southern Syria

May 15, 2015

This report was compiled from open source information and information reported to The Carter Center. The brief is not meant to be comprehensive but rather to serve as a reference guide and summary of what information is available at present time.

Overview

The southern governorates of Daraa and Quneitra have recently witnessed a spate of local armed groups aligning themselves with the Islamic State (IS). While this pattern of IS expansion is not unique to southern Syria, recent fighting indicates southern forces, notably members of the Southern Front, are hesitant to proactively engage local IS affiliates due to fears of inciting larger familial or tribal conflict. They will need to develop a coherent strategy to collectively confront this threat. Such a strategy will necessitate increased consensus among its state backers of southern groups on key interrelated issues: how to confront the IS in Syria, how to confront Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) in southern Syria, and how to create a unified southern force.

Without such a consensus, the IS will be a recurrent threat to sensitive areas of southern Syria and Southern Front member groups will continue to rely on JAN and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah to lead offensive operations against IS elements. This continued reliance on JAN will work against the Southern Front's longstanding goal of reducing JAN's influence in the south. Although JAN's strength in southern Syria has decreased, this has not been matched by increased cohesion, equity, and inclusivity within the Southern Front. Consequently, JAN remains the most powerful single group in the south and smaller armed groups, unaffiliated with either JAN or the Southern Front, have been left isolated and vulnerable to IS co-option.

This report highlights the IS' growing presence in southern Syria, noting the obstacles faced by those seeking to counter it; provides a backgrounder on groups alleged to have joined the IS; and discusses the implications that these recent developments may have in the near future.

A Growing Presence in Southern Syria

Over the past six months, the IS has established a limited presence in southern Syria through three armed groups in the Daraa and Quneitra governorates. These groups, including the Shuhada al-Yarmouk

Brigade, Harakat al-Muthana al-Islamiyah, and Jaysh al-Jihad, are not openly affiliated with the IS, but have refused to denounce the organization and have recently undertaken coordinated military action against rival opposition groups in the area. Local opposition members have accused all three groups of IS affiliation, citing extremist views and statements, symbolism, and widespread allegations of financial support from the IS.

In late 2014, the Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade became the first group accused of affiliation with the IS. Following a series of low intensity clashes between the Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade and JAN, in December JAN launched offensive operations against the brigade. Southern Front member groups intervened, separated the two forces, and sequestered the Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade to its base in the towns of Jumlah and al-Shajarah, near Sham al-Jolan in southwest Daraa. This intervention was accompanied by the signing of a “mutual self-defense” pact by several key members of the Southern Front. While the pact was meant to protect against all threats, it was understood by many as a pact to protect against IS incursions in southern Syria.

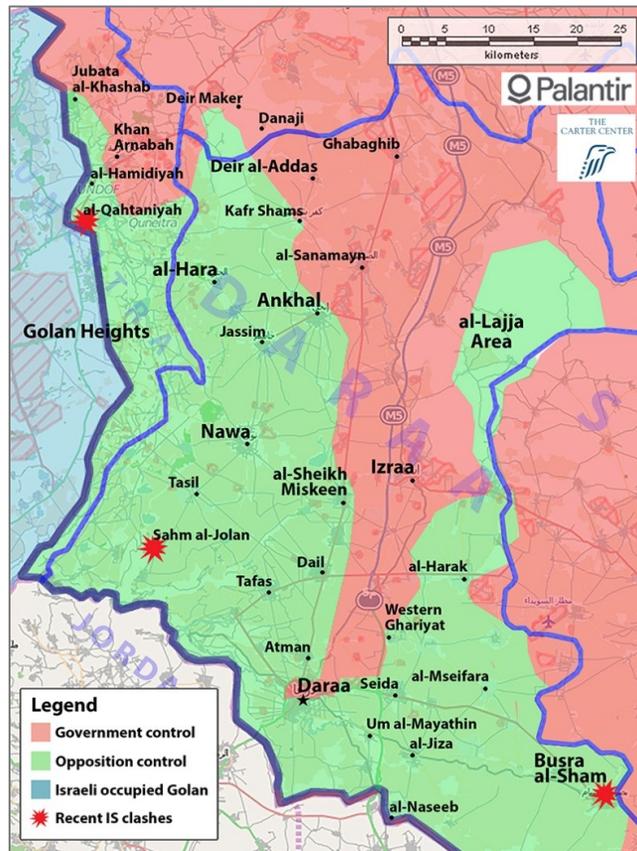


Figure 1: Areas of control and recent opposition and JAN clashes with Suspected IS affiliates in southern Syria

In February, the longtime JAN affiliate Harakat al-Muthana al-Islamiyah announced that it was not opposed to the IS. Given the wording and timing of the unexpected statement, many groups saw the pronouncement as tantamount to Harakat al-Muthana pledging allegiance to the IS. A month later, following the seizure of Busra al-Sham by Southern Front member groups, JAN, and Harakat al-Muthana, the latter sought to establish a headquarters in the town. Given Harakat al-Muthana’s possible motive to

carve out territory on behalf of the IS, and given Busra al-Sham's sensitive location along the Daraa-Suweida border, the Shabab al-Sunnah Division (a member of the Southern Front), refused the request. This refusal was followed by clashes, which Southern Front member groups quickly sought to diffuse by submitting the issue for adjudication. A joint arbitration body was established between the two parties to resolve the dispute.

Most recently on April 26, 2015, a convoy including forces from JAN and the Ahrar Nawa Division, a Southern Front member, was ambushed near the town of al-Qahtaniyah in the Quneitra governorate. The convoy was ambushed by Jaysh al-Jihad, a group believed to have secretly pledged allegiance to the IS in early 2015. During the ambush, four members of the convoy were killed and others were taken prisoner. The following day, armed opposition forces from JAN, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah, Jaysh al-Islam, Jaysh al-Yarmouk, al-Furqan Brigades, and the Islamic Union responded by announcing the start of operations against Jaysh al-Jihad. By May 6, JAN and opposition forces announced they had cleared al-Qahtaniyah and Quneitra city of Jaysh al-Jihad forces; however it is unclear whether elements of the group remain in the surrounding countryside, and whether civilians who had fled the fighting have been able to return.

As fighting continued in al-Quneitra, on April 29, the Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade launched an attack on a JAN compound in the southwestern Daraa town of Sahm al-Jolan. Following the expulsion of JAN forces from the town, the Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade continued operations against JAN forces in the neighboring town of Heet, Rasm al-Shuli, and Beit al-Araa. The Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade offensive was believed to be an attempt to divert JAN forces in support of Jaysh al-Jihad, and an opportunistic move to settle old scores. The majority of Southern Front member groups in the area have abstained from fighting and issued a statement calling for a cessation of hostilities, which have left thousands of civilians in the aforementioned towns under siege. On May 11, after local arbitration, the Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade agreed to withdraw its forces from Heet to Sham al-Jolan.

The Southern Front led court, Dar al-Adel, has issued statements on the two most recent incidents in April, but has had little impact on the course of events. Initially it called on all groups in southern Syria to "strike... [Jaysh al-Jihad] with an iron fist," and to surrender members to Dar al-Adel for arbitration.¹ Despite the statement, the majority of Southern Front member groups abstained from participating in the offensive. As many local groups have strong familial and tribal affiliations, fighting with local IS affiliates risks inciting larger conflicts within the community. Meanwhile, JAN's independence and respected expertise in judicial matters have enabled it to openly confront IS-affiliates with relatively less fear of its actions inciting tribal or familial conflicts.

Background on Suspected IS Affiliates in Southern Syria

The Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade was formed in August 2012 and is based in the towns of Jumlah and al-Shajarah in southwest Daraa, where it is amongst the most powerful opposition forces in the area. While the brigade appears ideologically similar to JAN and the IS, it is based largely on local and familial ties, rather than ideology, and was previously connected to the Supreme Military Council and the

¹ Following JAN's role in the Naseeb Border crossing, JAN is no longer a leading member of Dar al-Adel but retains seats in the court. It is unclear if most of their representatives in Dar al-Adel were expelled or left voluntarily.

Southern Front. The brigade has suffered poor relations with Jordanian authorities since it kidnapped 22 UN peacekeepers in early 2013, but has been able to offset the lack of international support with sources of local income and access to private Jihadist funding networks. Prior to falling out with JAN, the two organizations cooperated closely.

Following accusations of IS affiliation and the December 2014 clashes, a video was released online showing the brigade’s commander, Abu Ali al-Baridi AKA al-Khal, being sung an ode to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the IS during a Shuhada al-Yarmouk Brigade gathering. The incident, along with the use of IS symbols on various social media accounts related to the brigade, are the only evidence that has been presented publically to substantiate claims the group is affiliated with the IS.

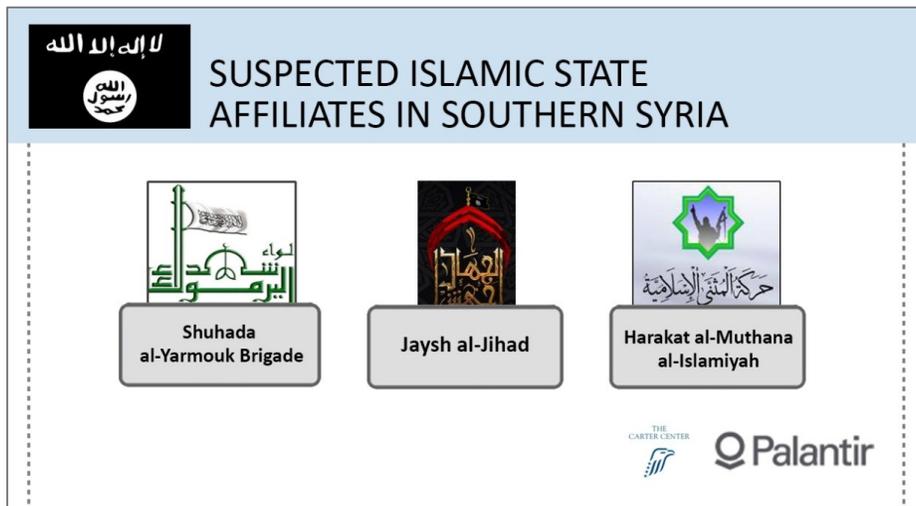


Figure 2: Armed groups in southern Syria suspected of pledging allegiance to the IS.

Harakat al-Muthana al-Islamiyah was formed in mid-2013 and was previously made up of two branches, the eastern Syria branch in Deir al-Zor and Hassakeh and the southern branch in Daraa and Quneitra. While the group fled eastern Syria during the IS’ expansion, it has continued to be an active, powerful force in the south. Harakat al-Muthana is ideologically similar to JAN, and in southern Syria it continues to cooperate with elements of JAN. To support itself, Harakat al-Muthana has built up significant sources of local income, notably in agricultural activities, and retains access to private Jihadist funding networks.

Jaysh al-Jihad was formed in February 2015 and is based in al-Qahtaniyah where it enjoys a significant presence. Consisting of an estimated 500 fighters, it is made up of seven groups from Quneitra and western Daraa. Its component groups are ideologically similar to JAN and the IS. Prior to the formation of Jaysh al-Jihad, many of its component groups cooperated closely with JAN via the JAN operations room and played a role in advances against government forces in Quneitra.

Since Jaysh al-Jihad’s formation, members of the southern armed opposition have accused the group of secretly pledging allegiance to IS and receiving support from the organization. To date, no evidence has been presented publically to substantiate the claims, however given the ideological character of Jaysh al-Jihad’s component groups and its deteriorating relationship with JAN it is reasonable to believe Jaysh al-Jihad is an IS affiliate in southern Syria.

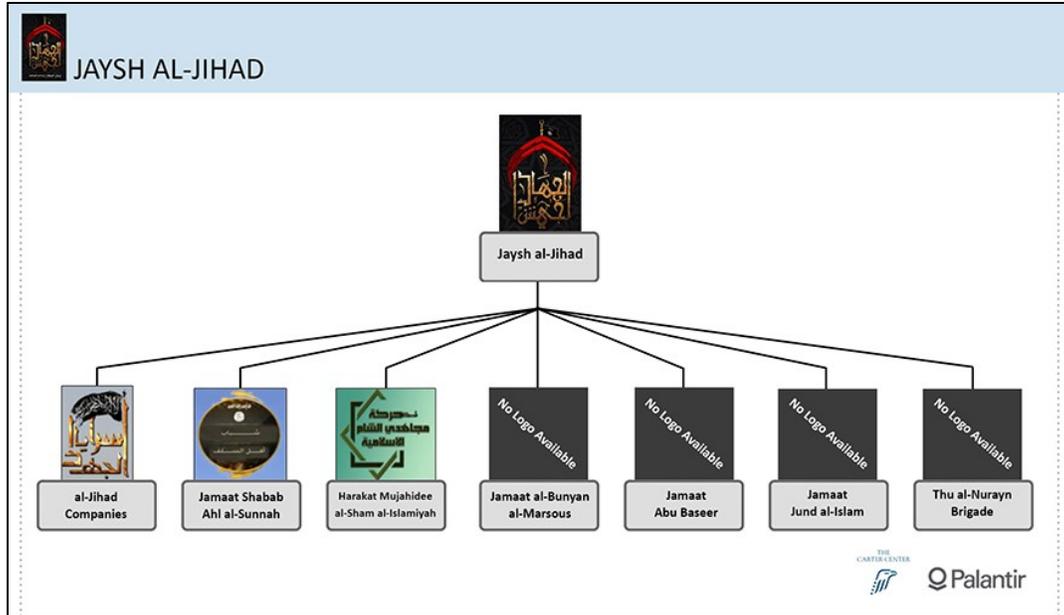


Figure 1: Organizational structure of Jaysh al-Jihad as of April 30, 2015.

While these three groups are the only ones actively involved in fighting at the present time, other units, such as Jund al-Malahim, have defected or distanced themselves from JAN in protest of JAN’s aggressive stance towards IS and IS-aligned groups and should be closely watched.

Conclusion

Recent developments demonstrate that greater consensus is needed amongst Southern Front member groups and their international backers if members are to successfully counter recurrent IS threats in southern Syria. In the absence of consensus, strategies of individual Southern Front members will be determined by the local needs of their community and the specific directives of their state backers, at the expense of collective Southern Front objectives. Without collective mechanisms to confront the rise of the IS in the most sensitive opposition controlled areas of southern Syria, the IS will continue to complicate the Southern Front’s positive narrative, disrupt opposition operations against government forces, and complicate efforts to isolate JAN.