

# POLITICOMAGAZINE



## WASHINGTON AND THE WORLD

### **The Jihad Next Door**

The Syrian roots of Iraq's newest civil war.

By RANIA ABOUZEID | June 23, 2014

**T**he eight men, beards trimmed, explosive belts fastened, pistols and grenades concealed in their clothing, waited until nightfall before stealing across the flat, porous Iraqi border. They navigated the berms and trenches along the frontier, traversing two-way smuggling routes used to ferry cigarettes, livestock, weapons — and jihadis to enter the northeastern Syrian province of Hasaka. It was August 2011, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, and Syria was five months into a still largely peaceful uprising against President Bashar al-Assad.

Their leader was a Syrian emissary from the al Qaeda affiliate forged in the bloody conflict next door. He called himself Abu Mohammad al-Golani, and the young fighter, about whom little is known for sure except that he is a veteran of that war against the Americans in Iraq, had been authorized by his boss, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,

and al Qaeda's central command to set up a Syrian offshoot of the notorious group. His mission, made clear in subsequent public statements, was nothing less than to bring down the Assad regime and establish an Islamic state in its place. No one knew it at the time, but that trip across the border would turn out to be a crucial turning point in the Syrian civil war, a key factor in the metastasizing of an internal conflict into a regional conflagration that now threatens the regime in Iraq as well as Syria.

Before Golani's nighttime trek from Iraq into Syria, al Qaeda was looking increasingly like a spent force. Osama bin Laden had been killed a few months earlier. His successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had bin Laden's passion but little of his charisma, and the Middle East was still in the throes of the so-called Arab Spring, experimenting with peaceful protests rather than violence as a means to bring about change.

But over the next few years, at times even aided by the cynical Assad regime, Golani would rejuvenate the al Qaeda brand and establish a firm base in Syria. His group, called Jabhat al-Nusra l'Ahl as-Sham (meaning Support Front for the People of the Sham, an Arabic term encompassing Damascus, Syria and the Levant), would create a whole new generation of jihadists from around the Islamic world, fighters who have become a crucial force in a Syrian civil war that has claimed well over 140,000 lives and displaced nine million Syrians, both internally and into neighboring countries.

Just as dangerously, Nusra's very success would create a massive rift with its jihadist parent organization, the al Qaeda affiliate known as the Islamic State of Iraq. By April of 2013, that group would rebrand itself as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, a new name that indicated its transnational ambitions. By this June, ISIL (also known as ISIS) had become so powerful that it would brazenly undertake a blitzkrieg-like advance across northern and western Iraq, rapidly capturing the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit and underscoring the seeming irrelevance of Zawahiri and the old al Qaeda leadership, somewhere in hiding off in South Asia, far from the newest jihadi battlefields.

Now, as a result of ISIL's victories, U.S. President Barack Obama, a man who campaigned on extricating the United States from "dumb" wars in the Middle East, finds himself potentially embroiled in another one. He is sending a small contingent of special forces to work with the Iraqi military, but many in Washington are urging him to take more decisive action against the ISIL militants sweeping across Iraq, seizing territory and oil facilities and threatening to sow chaos in Baghdad and beyond.

This was not inevitable. The Syrian revolution—and the hesitant, confused international reaction to it—paved the way for the resurrection of a militant Islam that would turn vast regions of Iraq and Syria into borderless jihadi strongholds and inch closer to redrawing the map of the Middle East—in practical terms if not on paper. This is the story, pieced together over several trips into Syria and rare interviews with highly placed jihadi commanders on the front lines, of how it happened.

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**It began, in mid-2011, with the Syrian regime's** suspicious release of hundreds of jihadis from prison—a move that served Assad's strategy of presenting the uprising at once as a plot by Islamist extremists, agents of Israel and the West and a small number of disillusioned citizens with legitimate gripes who had fallen prey to “foreign conspirators.” It also played, unwittingly or not, into Golani's hands.

The truth was that al Qaeda had never really been an established presence in Syria. Historically, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and its more violently sectarian offshoot, the Fighting Vanguard, were the country's most prominent Islamist organizations. In the mid-1970s, they were at the forefront of a radical Sunni insurgency against the secular government of Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad. But by 1982 they had been effectively extinguished in Syria, after the February massacre of as many as 20,000 people in the central city of Hama. Membership in the Brotherhood was made a capital offense, prompting most of those who survived the purge to flee overseas. Several hundred were tossed into the notorious Sednaya military prison, some 20 miles north of the capital Damascus, and forgotten.

Syria's main association with al Qaeda came later, when it served as a key transit route for jihadis entering Iraq to fight coalition troops after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. According to a cache of al Qaeda in Iraq personnel files captured in 2007 in the Iraqi border town of Sinjar, every single one of the 600-plus foreign fighters in the records had entered Iraq from Syria. Some, including top U.S. officials, have concluded that the Syrian government was complicit in the movement of these men through its territory, and that in so doing it achieved two objectives—domestically, it (temporarily) rid itself of potential threats from homegrown Islamists, and regionally, it would help hobble an American force that might turn its attention to Syria next.

In 2004 and 2005, some of these battle-hardened Syrian jihadis started returning home. Their arrival coincided with a spate of small bombings and shootouts with security forces, which continued over the next few years. Many of those who were captured were placed in the three-story Sednaya military prison. The Brotherhood men who had been detained in the '70s and '80s were

on the second floor. The 400 or so more recent jihadis lived in isolation on the third floor, in an area the inmates termed “the black door” because the men behind it were so cut off from other inmates. Their jailers called it the al Qaeda wing. On March 15, 2011—the date widely considered the start of the Syrian revolution, when thousands took to the country’s streets to call for greater freedoms—another 300 Islamists were transferred from a detention center in Damascus to Sednaya.

Faced with what had become a burgeoning nationwide protest movement, Assad had offered some reforms, mostly cosmetic, in hopes of averting full-blown revolt—while also allowing his security forces to shoot into crowds of demonstrators, beating and detaining thousands. The Syrian regime also issued new laws to permit several general prison amnesties, including Decree No. 61 in May 2011, which covered “all members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other detainees belonging to political movements,” another in June, as well as Decrees No. 161 and 53, which ended the country’s years-long state of emergency and abolished the Supreme State Security Court, respectively. Sednaya housed pretrial detainees nabbed under the state of emergency laws, awaiting sentencing, and those on whom the court had passed judgment. Many incarcerated Islamists were released—men like Abu Othman, a senior *shari’iy*, or Islamic legal scholar.

Abu Othman is a stocky but not muscular man in his late 30s with a bulbous nose, small, honey-colored eyes and a chest-length red-tinged beard. I met him in Kassab, a Syrian border town close to Turkey, in mid-April 2014, just a few weeks after Islamist rebels had captured the town. (By mid-June, regime forces had won it back.) He is now a senior *shari’iy* in Jabhat al-Nusra. When he’s not fighting, he provides religious instruction to his unit’s men and serves as a judge in *sharia* courts.

Abu Othman was one of the 300 Islamists transferred to Sednaya in March 2011. He had been jailed since 2007 for membership on the governing council of an earlier al Qaeda-linked group and spent the last three months of his four-year detention behind that prison’s black door. He recalled the atmosphere in the prison that spring as word spread on Sednaya’s third floor about the revolution outside its gates and the prison amnesties, in snippets gleaned from family members on monthly visits. “We were told by brothers with lots of experience [in jihad], who had spent a lot of time in Sednaya, that upon our release we should sit and not work,” he recalled. “Just sit and wait.”

The Islamists were sure that the Assad regime had offered the amnesty knowing full well that they would take up arms against it, and that kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, Othman and others who were in Sednaya told me, must have been what the government wanted. “If an Islamist brother was going to act, he was going to do so with weapons to face the security [forces]. It would be jihadi,

and this would allow the regime to say to the world ‘Look at the terrorists.’ We were aware of this,” he said, but that didn’t stop them from preparing to do just that anyway. “In secret, we were working.”

Abu Othman was released on June 20, 2011. He went home to Aleppo, to his wife and two young children, but it didn’t take long before he and his fellow Sednaya “graduates,” as they call themselves, started quietly mobilizing. The prison inmates were a ready-made network. “When I was detained, I knew four or five or six, but when I was released I knew 100, or 200 or 300 [jihadis]. I now had brothers in Hama, and Homs and Daraa and many other places, and they knew me,” he said. “It took just a few short weeks—weeks—not a month, for us, in groups of two or three, in complete secrecy, to start.”

Abu Othman began to prepare for the fight—buying four guns from the town of Sarmada in Idlib province, and “sprays that would put you to sleep” from Turkey. He started working in a jihadi intelligence cell in Aleppo, which at that point was still a firmly controlled bastion of the regime. His job was to monitor government soldiers and *shabbiha*, the paramilitary pro-regime thugs. He’d pass on intelligence to colleagues who would detain or kill those he informed on. “When we started, I have to admit, I can’t deny that al Qaeda was basically finished in Syria,” Abu Othman told me. “So when we started we did so without instructions or orders. We started to gather ourselves, to vouch for each other and for others.” In Sednaya, they had been told simply to wait for their new leader—so wait they did.

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**By the time Abu Mohammed al-Golani** and his seven colleagues—several Syrians, a Saudi and a Jordanian among them—snuck over the border that summer night in 2011, some of the Sednaya men were ready to receive them. They came into the country near the city of Hasaka, in the northeast, and spent their first night in Syria in the home of a former Sednaya inmate, according to a Nusra insider. The man, who is a member of Golani’s small inner circle, requested complete anonymity. (An interview request to speak on the record with a member of Nusra’s small governing body was declined, with an apology for the two-month delay in responding.)

Golani was still little known, and even his origins remain murky to this day. He is young, in his early 30s, the Golani insider told me, like most of his group’s inner circle: “None of us have any gray in our beards.” Those who know him say that he is a calm, confident and disciplined man who listens intently and thinks strategically. He is never unarmed. “Even when we were very safe, in a very safe place, he wouldn’t leave his pistol, or his [explosive] belt,” the Golani confidant told me.

“When he slept, his gun was under his head and his belt was by his side.” He married a few years ago in Syria, and has an infant son. Several Nusra commanders interviewed for this article wouldn’t comment on whether a leaked mug shot of a boyish young man with large, intense light-brown eyes, full lips and a closely trimmed brown beard is in fact Golani, as claimed by Iraqi intelligence officials.

Golani’s nom de guerre suggests that he is from the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights, although some say it is a reference to the Jolani neighborhood of Fallajuh in Iraq, where he fought the Americans. Regardless, he is Syrian and grew up in Damascus, the Nusra insider told me. He was captured in the Iraq war and detained at Camp Bucca, the sprawling U.S.-run detention center on Iraq’s southern border with Kuwait. The Americans classified him as an Iraqi Kurd from the city of Mosul. (His boss, Baghdadi, was also detained in Camp Bucca, but the two men did not know each other then.)

As soon as Golani made his secret trip across the border, he started reaching out to some of the cells of Sednaya men already active, and others who were waiting for an al Qaeda-linked organization to emerge, through word of mouth and handwritten letters delivered by couriers. The new group’s first unpublicized operation was a Dec. 27, 2011, attack on a State Security branch in Damascus. Almost a month later, on Jan. 23, 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra formally announced itself in an eight-minute audiotape. It made no mention of its al Qaeda ties.

“This was a plan from Golani himself,” the Nusra insider told me. Golani, the source said, told the men “we would show our values, deal with people well, and then after a while we’d tell them, ‘The al Qaeda that was smeared in the media? This is it. We are it. What do you think of us—Jabhat al-Nusra?’” Until then, the insider said, Zawahiri had given strict instructions not to reveal his involvement.

It wasn’t the first time al Qaeda’s leadership had made such a condition. According to one of the letters recovered from bin Laden’s Abbottabad hideaway after his killing in 2011, the al Qaeda chief told Somalia’s al-Shabaab to hide its ties to his organization because “once it becomes declared and out in the open, it would have the enemies escalate their anger and mobilize against you.”

Bin Laden knew al Qaeda had an image problem. In another 37-page document released after his death, he talks about starting a “new phase” to win the trust of most Muslims, whom he acknowledged despised his group. The papers also indicate al Qaeda’s dissatisfaction with its Iraqi affiliate, and its brutal methods. Whether he had read the documents or not, Golani had clearly absorbed their lessons. In his only interview to date, with Al-Jazeera Arabic in December 2013, he

said that before he entered Syria he “reviewed the history of jihad that happened in every place on Earth in order to try and avoid the mistakes that jihadi movements fell into in other places.”

Golani was making clear he wouldn't do what his parent organization in Iraq had done, imposing harsh Islamic dictates on local communities and antagonizing them until they rose up against al Qaeda and formed *Sahawat*, or Awakening Councils, which, with U.S. help, expelled the group by force. Syria would be the stage for al Qaeda to show how it had evolved.

The Syrian uprising quickly developed into two parallel struggles. Thousands still marched every week in largely peaceful protests following Friday afternoon prayers that mirrored other Arab revolutions, but the conflict also militarized within a few months. By the summer of 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) had formed. It was initially comprised of soldiers and other security personnel who defected, and later joined by civilians who picked up arms to defend their towns and villages against the regime, and was separate from the initially small number of jihadis also beginning to fight. The FSA was never more than an umbrella term, a loose franchise outfit with no top-down command and control. Its self-declared leaders were based in Turkey and, like their counterparts in the political opposition in exile, disconnected and widely despised by those fighting and bleeding inside the country. It was common to hear fighting men and housewives alike in rebel-held parts of Syria complain that their so-called leaders were in the *fanadik*—hotels while they were in the *khanadik*—trenches.

Golani was in the trenches. In July 2012, he left his base in Damascus and shuffled between Nusra positions in rebel-held parts of the northern provinces of Idlib and Aleppo, often using the alias Abu Abdullah and telling the local Nusra commanders he met that he was a representative of the group's top leader. He'd follow up his visits with detailed handwritten letters to the commanders, lauding a certain man or suggesting another be dismissed. He often hid in plain sight of the regime, at one point taking a public bus to the eastern city of Deir ez-Zor, and at another renting an apartment in Kafr Hamra, a town in the Aleppo countryside that was still controlled by the regime, to escape the intense bombardments raining on rebel-held territory.

As Nusra grew into a more capable fighting force, the FSA, too, was trying to get organized in a bid to convince the international community to give it meaningful support. It formed provincial councils—one for each of Syria's 14 provinces—that aimed to gather all the FSA groups in a particular province under its command. But the FSA's provincial councils soon proved to be only as strong as their main financial backers allowed them to be—the Saudis and the Qataris who provided funds or weapons and ammunition, with a nod from the Turks (whose territory the supplies would traverse) and the Americans (who wanted to vet the groups receiving the

armaments).

The FSA never got the weapons that could have turned the tide. Western governments, principally the United States, feared that advanced weapons, like anti-aircraft missiles, could make their way into the hands of extremists, and might one day be used in terrorist attacks. The fears were not unfounded. Still, it meant Assad's warplanes and helicopter gunships would continue to rain missiles and improvised barrel bombs onto civilian areas and rebel bases. The international community also refused to impose a no-fly zone over the growing arc of northern Syria held by various rebel groups. The best Syria's moderate rebels could hope for from the West and their Gulf allies were light weapons and ammunition. Those supplies, when they came, were small in number, unevenly distributed and infrequently delivered.

Rebel battalions quickly learned to rely on themselves. They bought weapons and ammunition from corrupt regime soldiers and from the regional black market (mainly in Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey). They overran government checkpoints and seized war booty, and many groups became adept at making their own armaments, rockets and improvised explosive devices. Among the array of ragtag armed groups that emerged, Jabhat al-Nusra quickly stood out as a disciplined, effective fighting force, one that often spearheaded operations and was responsible for some of the most audacious attacks against the regime, including suicide bombings, a tactic few other groups were using. Although reliable figures of Nusra's size are difficult to ascertain and verify, its impact was becoming clear. Half of its funding came from its parent organization, the Islamic State of Iraq, Golani has said. The rest came from private donors and from securing spoils of war.

Nusra's fighters battled alongside those from other groups, and even FSA-aligned fighters and civilians in rebel-held areas told me that while the Nusra battalions were religiously conservative, they didn't seek to impose their ideas on communities that fell under rebel control. They provided social services, like distributing flour to bakeries, and even made an effort—as in one video claiming responsibility for a blast on March 20, 2012, and telling local Christians they were not the target—to reassure the broader population outside their Sunni base. This was a very different al Qaeda from the organization in Iraq, which routinely bombed marketplaces full of civilians, killing Muslims as indiscriminately as it killed others.

Still, some of its sectarian language was extremely harsh, especially against members of Assad's minority Alawite sect. Nusra considers non-Muslims infidels, but as one commander told me, “that doesn't mean that if he's an infidel I should kill him.” It does, however, afford the person a form of second-class citizenship. Many Syrian rebel groups, especially those allied with the FSA, didn't share Nusra's ultraconservative ideology and were suspicious of its plans for Syria, but said they



needed them on the battlefield.

In December 2012, the United States designated Nusra a terrorist organization, rightly identifying it as an alias of al Qaeda in Iraq. If the terrorist label was meant to isolate the group, however, it seemed to do the opposite. On Dec. 14, the first Friday after the designation, Syrians across the country marched under the slogan, “The only terrorism in Syria is Assad’s,” a clear rebuke to the U.S. decree. Dozens of rebel groups publicly declared, “We are all Jabhat al-Nusra,” while even the leadership of the political opposition in exile—which Nusra didn’t recognize—condemned the terrorist label. Just a year after it had announced its presence in Syria, the Nusra Front had achieved what the Abbottabad papers show bin Laden had dreamed of: a formidable force with strong popular support. It had not yet revealed its al Qaeda ties. That information would be abruptly and publicly announced on April 8, 2013, in an audiotape from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq.

Baghdadi’s speech was a bombshell. He not only announced that his outfit had spawned Jabhat al-Nusra, but that he was now merging them into one entity—ISIL—under his command. Golani publicly rejected the merger and pledged allegiance to Zawahiri, requesting the al Qaeda leader’s mediation.

It took Zawahiri two months to respond to the feud, in a private letter leaked to Al-Jazeera. When he did, he rejected the merger and told Baghdadi to stick to Iraq, Golani to stay in Syria, and decreed that Jabhat al-Nusra was the official branch of al Qaeda in Syria. Baghdadi ignored him. His supporters argued that they weren’t bound by such a decree since Zawahiri’s division between Iraq and Syria effectively recognized a colonial border, and they pounced on it as proof that the al Qaeda leader had gone soft.

Nusra soon split up. Some stayed with Golani, while others, especially the foreign fighters or *muhajiroon* as they are called, followed Baghdadi’s edict and joined ISIL, leaving Nusra more Syrian almost by default. The effect was profound: “All of Nusra became [ISIL], and we were few in number,” Golani’s confidant told me. The Nusra leader, he said, had expected trouble within the organization, “like drones, deaths of commanders, but not that we would fall into a dispute with Iraq.”

ISIL is known in Arabic as ad-Dawla, “the state,” which is exactly how it viewed itself—as a sovereign state and not a faction among the many groups fighting against the Syrian regime. (Its detractors call it by its Arabic acronym, Daeesh, a term the group considers derogatory.) In theory, the leader of an Islamic state is considered *emir al mo’mineen*, the commander of the faithful,

whose authority extends to all Muslims and is senior to that of organizations like al Qaeda. Baghdadi was saying that he was not merely on par with, but superior to, Zawahiri, and in the coming months he would set out to prove it.

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**ISIL started to set up its state** in territory that it controlled, most notably in Raqqa in the northeast, the only one of Syria's 14 provincial capitals to have fallen from the regime's grip. In May 2013, ISIL wrested it from the rebels, including Nusra, who had won it in March. By August, it had consolidated its grip and made the 220,000-person city its capital, filling its jails with anyone who opposed or questioned it or was perceived as engaging in anti-Islamic activities. It detained activists, civilians and FSA rebel commanders and even others who belonged to hard-line Islamist groups. In Raqqa, it detained and would later kill the local emir of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Saad al-Hadrame.

ISIL seemed to have learned little. Its state looked a lot like the one its earlier incarnation had tried to set up in Sunni parts of Iraq after the U.S. invasion. In Raqqa, the rules were clear. Women were required to don the face-covering *niqab* and were banned from wearing trousers. Daily prayers were obligatory, and *hudud*, punishments under sharia, were enforced, like cutting the hands of thieves. It was ruthless, even crucifying some of its enemies in a public square in Raqqa, and was also quick to pronounce other Muslims infidels. Its fighters wore explosive suicide belts and were gravely feared by rebels and civilians alike.

ISIL was headquartered in Raqqa's elegant, multi-arched governorate headquarters, hoisting a massive black flag in the square in front of the building. Yet the structure was not targeted in the regime's frequent airstrikes on the city, prompting the Syrian opposition's political leaders to claim that ISIL was a creation of the regime, or was colluding with it. There was little direct evidence to suggest either, but one thing was certain: ISIL was playing straight into the Assad narrative that Nusra had tried to avoid— that the regime's opponents were extremist Islamists hell-bent on imposing brutal and draconian sectarian rule. ISIL was so extreme it made Nusra look almost moderate by comparison.

I heard this firsthand in late April when I met two jihadis in the southern Turkish city of Antakya. Abu Daraa, a quiet man, had been the ISIL emir of a village near Raqqa but had left because of its feud with al Qaeda. "From what I saw I can say that ad-Dawla is bloodthirsty. To them, killing a man is like drinking water," he told me. "They make mistakes." Nusra had popular support and achievements against the regime, he said, whereas ISIL, "when it came here after the split, was like

a saw that cuts both ways. People saw that Nusra is more merciful.”

His friend, Abu Khatab, had been fighting with Nusra but told me he was now heading to Raqqa to join ISIL. Nusra was indeed more merciful, he acknowledged, because it wasn't imposing strict sharia punishments, like cutting off the hands of thieves. “Even children know that a thief's hand should be cut,” Abu Khatab insisted. “If you're not doing anything wrong, why should you be afraid?”

But this harshness backfired and ISIL antagonized the locals, armed and civilian alike, until on Jan. 3, 2014, they rose up in armed clashes that quickly spread throughout most of northern Syria. Nusra initially tried to mediate, but then, on Feb. 3, al Qaeda disavowed ISIL, saying the group had ignored its edicts. “We were not informed of its creation,” al Qaeda's statement read. “It did not await our orders, nor were we consulted. We were not happy with this. Rather, we ordered [ISIL] to stop working. Therefore, [ISIL] is not a branch of al Qaeda and there is no organizational link connecting them, and [al Qaeda] is not responsible for its actions.”

ISIL upped the ante. It countered that al Qaeda had deviated from jihad's true path. Zawahiri's al Qaeda was not bin Laden's, it said, and “if Zawahiri was to set foot in the land of the Islamic state, he should pledge allegiance to it and be a soldier of its emir, Baghdadi.” The open effrontery to Zawahiri was unprecedented, and his inability to rein in Baghdadi was making him look weak.

The foreign fighters, who tended to be more religiously conservative than the Syrians in Nusra or ISIL, bore the brunt of the anti-ISIL backlash from other rebel groups. Some joined Nusra and some tried to flee to Turkey, while others were looking to either fight or negotiate safe passage to Raqqa city. Meanwhile, ISIL was regrouping in the northeast and east, in areas around the Iraqi border.

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**As the jihadis feuded**, and the moderate rebels continued their futile pleas for help,

regime forces had consolidated their positions and pushed into some rebel-held areas. Diplomacy had failed to find a solution to a conflict that was racking up daily death tolls in the double, and sometimes triple, digits. The horrific images of death and carnage had drawn in foreign fighters from around the world, on both sides of a conflict that was becoming increasingly sectarian. There were Lebanese and Iraqi Shiites and Iranians with the regime, and a hodgepodge of nationalities I'd seen on my many trips into Syria, including Chechens, Tunisians, Libyans and Lebanese fighting with the predominantly Sunni rebels. I learned of an American ex-military convert to

Islam, Abu Osama, who was training jihadis in basic warfare. (I wasn't surprised when he declined to be interviewed.) One senior Nusra emir I know is recruiting and training a cell of Palestinians and Arab-Israelis.

Many of the muhajiroon entered rebel-held northern Syria from Turkey. There were numerous smuggling routes along the 511-mile frontier, most of which were in use well before the Syrian uprising. As broad areas of Syrian territory abutting Turkey fell from government control, it became even easier to cross. By the summer of 2012, Bab al-Hawa, an official Syrian crossing with Turkey, had been won by the rebels, enabling men, money, munitions and humanitarian aid from private donors to be ferried by vehicle into northern Syria.

The muhajiroon had been coming of their own accord since at least the earliest months of 2012, but more would begin to flow. The foreign fighters were easy to spot on the domestic flights from Istanbul to Hatay, a Turkish province near Syria: men with long beards and short pants worn above the ankle in the manner of the Prophet Mohammad. They mainly joined non-FSA jihadi groups, although some became part of the FSA. By mid-September 2012, Nusra had established a more organized system of funneling foreign fighters into Syria, naming an "emir of the borders" whose job was to help facilitate their entry. Al Qaeda's central command in Afghanistan pitched in with the details of coordinators in Tunisia and the Arabian Peninsula who would send men to Turkey. "That was the mistake," said a Nusra member with knowledge of the operations, because so many muhajiroon later turned against his group. They were generally more dogmatic than their local counterparts. "I'm surprised by some of these people," the Nusra member told me. "They had little understanding and were stubborn. Their heads were as thick as walls."

Four halfway homes were rented in Hatay: two in the main city Antakya, one in Reyhanli (not far from the Bab al-Hawa border crossing) and one in Kirikhan in the northeast. The men would be picked up outside Hatay airport, not inside it with its security cameras. "On the slowest day, they'd be five. The busiest day, 15," said the Nusra insider. At first, they were sent to Atma, a village just inside Syria, to a muhajiroon camp located not far from the border, where they would be farmed out to various units across the country. But eventually the Turks dug a deep trench in the flat red earth along their border with Atma, making the once-easy crossing more difficult, and the camp became notorious after two foreign journalists accidentally wandered into it and were kidnapped. By February 2013, it was closed.

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**Foreign fighters, however,** were still streaming into Syria, and from there, some continued into

Iraq. By March, a new Nusra camp for foreign fighters had reportedly been established in Ras al-Hosn, which was one of the main reasons I travelled to the small, ancient village in Idlib province. It was March 2, and I'd come to meet the local Nusra emir, Abu Ratib, whose area of operations extended to Atma.

Abu Ratib drove up to the checkpoint outside his base, a single-story former government office across the street from a disused school, in a light gray Mitsubishi jeep with blacked-out windows. He wore a black headscarf, military camouflage pants, black long-sleeved T-shirt and a puffy black vest. He had a chest-length black beard and dark eyes. He agreed in principle to speak with me, but needed the permission of his older brother, who had overall responsibility for the province. He was traveling elsewhere in Idlib and wouldn't be back for days.

I climbed into the Mitsubishi, along with two Nusra men and with Abu Ratib behind the wheel. Two Kalashnikovs were in the backseat and another in the front. We drove the short distance from the Nusra outpost to the emir's exceedingly modest single-story home nestled among olive groves and the ancient ruins dotted throughout the village. I was to wait with his family in case he heard from his brother. That's how these groups worked. You couldn't just speak to a fighter without his emir's permission.

I stayed with Abu Ratib's wife, Um Mohammad, a harried 27-year-old mother of three with dimples and a broad smile. She led me into the room where she spent most of her day with her children; a three-year old girl, a 15-month old girl and two-month-old Mohammad. Her mother-in-law was seated on the floor rocking Mohammad in a swinging cot attached to a hook in the ceiling.

Over coffee and dates, the women and several of their neighbors lamented ISIL's harsh practices. They said an Egyptian ISIL member had killed his wife, a female doctor, because he said she was an apostate for working alongside a male doctor. "Now, who is going to treat us?" Um Mohammad asked. Abu Ratib's mother relayed a tale about a crying woman who marched into the Nusra outpost one day, took off her hijab and told the emir she no longer wanted to be a Muslim. She said seven ISIL members had "married" her, one after the other, in the same night. It was gang rape. "This is not our religion," the emir's mother said. I didn't know if the stories were true or not, but the women certainly believed them. We slept in the same room on thin mattresses—the emir's mother, wife and his three children. I left the next morning at 7 a.m.

On April 14 I crossed back into Syria with the intention of seeing Abu Ratib. The next day, I learned later, four armed men, three Tunisians and a Moroccan, knocked on Abu Ratib's door. His brother Abu Mohammad al-Fatih, the Idlib emir, was inside the house and bedridden, recuperating from a

car accident. The armed men took a few short steps from the front door into the men's room on the right. According to an account published by Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Ratib was shot in the head and killed immediately, along with one of his younger brothers. Abu Mohammad managed to injure one of his attackers before being killed by three shots to the chest. The intruders then sprayed the women's room on the left with bullets, killing Abu Ratib's young wife, his eldest daughter and Abu Mohammad's 13-year-old girl, injuring most of the other children. Abu Mohammad's mother and wife survived to tell the story.

Jabhat al-Nusra quickly blamed ISIL for the murders and tracked the alleged perpetrators to a nearby home. One witness in a video testimony Nusra uploaded to YouTube said the four were ex-ISIL. "Two of them blew themselves up and that led to the death of the third," Nusra said in a statement. The fourth man was captured.

ISIL didn't officially comment on the murders of the two emirs in Idlib, but they weren't the only senior leaders to be killed. Abu Khalid al-Suri, a veteran of the Afghan fight against the Soviets and Zawahiri's personal emissary to heal the feud with ISIL, was assassinated in a suicide bombing Nusra blamed on the Islamic State. (ISIL denied involvement.) The feud between these two jihadi groups had them picking off each other's men in a way that Western counterterrorism operatives could only dream of doing.

ISIL today continues to control a large chunk of northeastern Syria, stretching from around Aleppo toward the Iraqi border, although it is no longer present in Idlib or Latakia provinces to the northwest. It remains firmly embedded in Raqqa city. Nusra, meanwhile, remains under Golani's leadership, and it is openly fighting ISIL, often alongside other rebel groups. The conflict among the regime's enemies has become a civil war within a civil war—just as Assad wanted.

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**Ironically, al Qaeda, Nusra and ISIL** all share a transnational ideology with the same ultimate goal: an Islamic state that spreads out from Syria into the Middle East, reestablishing a caliphate that ended in 1924 after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. They merely differ on who should lead the effort and the tactics to achieve it.

Syria provided these groups with a safe haven and enabled them to recruit fighters who can now openly move between the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields, effectively erasing the border between the two countries.

On June 10, a few hundred members of ISIL seized Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, and are now

barreling south toward Baghdad, taking other towns along the way. The group has seized huge caches of U.S.-supplied weapons, including helicopters, and snatched nearly half a billion dollars from Mosul's central bank. The West feared arming moderate Syrian rebels in case weapons wound up in the hands of extremists. Now, a group deemed too extreme for al Qaeda reportedly has Blackhawks.

ISIL isn't marching across Iraq alone. Disenfranchised Sunnis from across the political spectrum, including former Saddam loyalists, are also involved, drawn together by the increasingly autocratic and sectarian rule of the Iraqi government. This new Iraqi Sunni coalition, however, is unlikely to last. ISIL couldn't work with others in Syria, so how long before it turns on, or aggravates, its new Iraqi allies?

ISIL's code of conduct for Mosul's Nineveh province, posted just two days after insurgents seized the area, provides one indication. Its repressive rules are the same as those it has enforced in Raqqa: obligatory prayers five times a day in mosques; women must dress modestly (i.e., in a balloon-like black cloak and face-covering veil) and should only leave their homes in emergencies; and all shrines should be destroyed, among other edicts. Unlike Nusra, it hasn't learned to prioritize the importance of gaining popular support.

But the fate of ISIL is far from the only question. Will Nusra and other Syrian rebel groups try to make some sort of large-scale move against ISIL positions in Syria now that the group is preoccupied in Iraq? Will Nusra lose members to a group whose Islamic state is increasingly taking shape? How will Zawahiri react? He is unlikely to capitulate to *ISIL*, but nor can he much criticize a group that is implementing the ultimate goals of his own organization. Could al Qaeda try to prove its relevance through new attacks? Does it still have the capability?

As for the United States, President Obama is sending his 300 men to advise the Iraqi military, but what about other forms of U.S. military action, like air strikes? Will the United States hit *ISIL* in Iraq? If so, will it also strike the group in Syria? How about Assad, a leader President Obama has said "must go?" What about Nusra? It all seemed a lot easier when the main question was whether or not to arm the Syrian rebels, and which ones.

But of course, the Syrian conflict was always unlikely to remain in Syria. It has propelled millions of refugees into neighboring states, and jihadi fighters into Iraq. Both Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL have established branches in Lebanon, and the ripples may yet be felt further afield.

"There are now Farouk training *camps*, not a camp, in Syria," Abu Maria, a senior Nusra emir in

Idlib province, told me one night not long ago. “The one Farouk training camp in Afghanistan, it’s very famous. Its graduates include [9/11 hijacker] Mohmmad Atta,” he added. “If it did all of this to the world, then what do you think the many camps in Syria will do?”

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**Additional credits:**

 Lead image by Getty.

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