



The Islamic State in Southern Syria

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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.

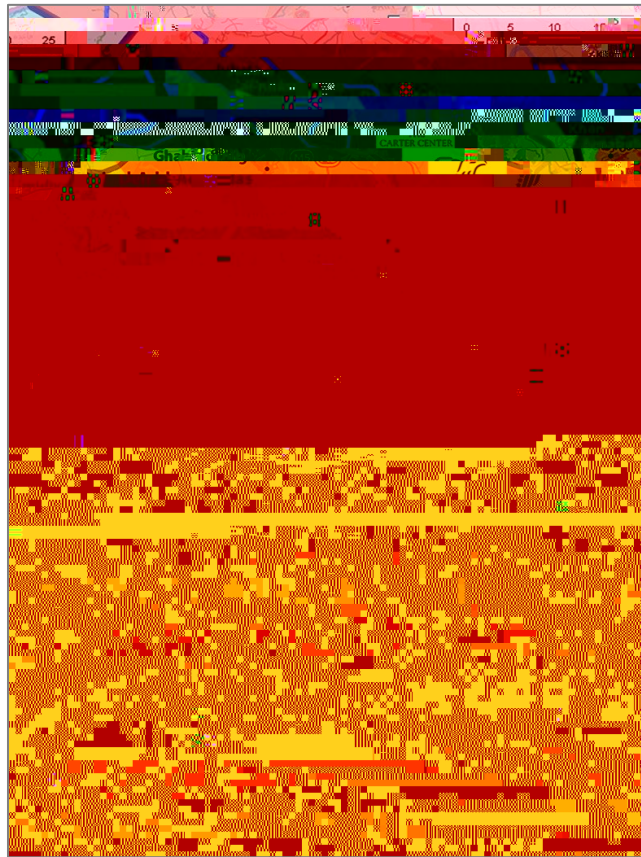


Figure 1: Areas of control and recent opposition and JAN clashes with Suspected IS affiliates in southern Syria

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),

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

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