

The Khorasan Group

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The threat posed by the Islamic State to many nations has led to the formation of an international coalition whose forces have been bombing Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria. Some of the bombings in Syria have targeted the strongholds of the Khorasan group. Very little is known about this group. It appears to be an international terrorist cell that settled in Syria under the cover of the country's chaos in order to plan attacks against the West and train its members to carry them out. In September 2014, the United States labelled the Khorasan group an imminent security threat that is even more dangerous than the Islamic State. The aim of this essay is to shed light on the Khorasan group, its members, and their capabilities, and based on our analysis of this group, determine whether or not it poses a potential threat, which, assumingly, could be aimed at the West and also at Israel and the Jewish diaspora.

Keywords: terrorist, al-Qaeda in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, Khorasan group, Islamic State

The Khorasan Group in Syria: The New Jihadist Threat?

At a conference held on September 19, 2014 in Washington, DC, James Clapper, the director of the US National Intelligence, said that an unknown organization called the Khorasan group was posing a challenge to the United States and was perhaps even more dangerous to national security than the Islamic State.¹ Four days later, President Barack Obama said that the United States had targeted the Khorasan group in its airstrikes in Syria, with the objective being "to disrupt plotting against the United States by seasoned al-Qaeda operatives in Syria who are known as the Khorasan group."² The

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US airstrikes were in the Aleppo region, an area controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian extension of the international terrorist group al-Qaeda.³

In the weeks that followed, the media portrayed the Khorasan group as a special forces unit of al-Qaeda, presenting an imminent threat to Europe and the United States.⁴ At the beginning of November 2014, the United States carried out additional airstrikes against the group. According to reports, the airstrikes were intended to eliminate a French national named David Drugeon, an expert in sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IED), that are capable of passing through airport security and screening mechanisms without detection.⁵ A third attack targeting the Khorasan group was carried out several days later.⁶ Despite the portrayal of the Khorasan group as a clear and present danger, the media ceased to show interest in the group in the following months.

Drugeon, who has also been called Abu Hamza al-Faransi (the French Abu Hamza), survived the attack on his life,⁷ but only briefly; in July 2015, it was reported that he had been killed together with another senior Khorasan group member named Muhsin al-Fadhli.⁸ Following the assassination, FBI Director James Comey said that the danger posed by the Khorasan group had been significantly reduced and that the Islamic State was, from that point onward, a greater risk.⁹ Despite Comey's declaration, US authorities still continued to consider the Khorasan group a threat, evident by its addition in September 2015 to the US list of terrorist organizations.¹⁰

A year after the world became aware of the Khorasan group and two months after Comey issued his statements, the death of the French fighter Abu Hamza al-Faransi (Drugeon) was announced.¹¹ It appears that the commander who relayed Drugeon's death was Ibrahim al-Sharah,¹² a Saudi citizen and a senior member of al-Qaeda, who was later killed in the American airstrikes in October 2015.¹³ Assumingly, there were additional fighters under al-Sharah's command who were not hurt and who still intend to carry out attacks in the West; in other words, the group, which reportedly ceased to be an imminent danger in July 2015, continued to exist after that date, and that the danger continued to be quite real.

The key questions underlying this essay are: What is the connection between the Khorasan group and Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda? Is the Khorasan group a separate organization or a part of Jabhat al-Nusra? If the Khorasan group is, in fact, part of al-Qaeda's Syrian branch – how and from whom do its adherents get their orders: from Jabhat al-Nusra commanders or from al-Qaeda's central leadership, which found

refuge in the mountains on the Afghani-Pakistani border? Furthermore, what are the operative capabilities of the Khorasan group? And what is the difference between the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Khorasan group in terms of the threats that they pose to the West?¹⁴

According to senior sources in the US intelligence and security community, the main difference between the Khorasan group and the Islamic State is their ability to carry out their threats against the West. The US intelligence and security community believe that the Khorasan group is capable of carrying out an attack on American and European soil while the Islamic State is incapable of doing so. In other words, according to those sources, the Islamic State only has the desire to carry out mass-casualty attacks in the West whereas the Khorasan group has both the desire and the ability to do so.¹⁵ Despite this assessment, terrorist infrastructures identified with the Islamic State have planned and, at times, have succeeded in carrying out attacks in the West since September 2014. In contrast, as far as we know, Khorasan group operatives have not managed to carry out any attacks. Nonetheless, the United States continues to describe them as an imminent threat.¹⁶ Does the Khorasan group really pose as severe a threat as the United States claims? If so, how and why? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to clarify the meaning of the word “Khorasan.” This clarification may help understand the connection between the Khorasan group and the war in Syria, which has become fertile ground for training terrorists to undertake attacks in the West.

Black Flags from Khorasan

Khorasan is a large region in Central Asia, covering Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. The name “Khorasan” in Islamic lore is linked to the end of days and the coming of the Mahdi, a sort of Messiah-like figure who is supposed to conquer the world in the name of Islam.¹⁷ According to Muslim oral tradition (hadith), the Prophet Muhammad was attributed as saying that “an army of black flags” will rise from the Khorasan and head for Jerusalem to conquer it. In 1996, Osama bin Laden found refuge in the Hindu Kush of the Khorasan, where he put into practice the theory of global jihad. It was there, too, that he flew the black flag and turned it into the flag familiar to us today.¹⁸

Contemporary terrorists drawing their inspiration from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State view the theory of global jihad, its ideologues, and adherents as an indication that the Muslim prophecy is being realized. For

example, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who together with his brother Dzhokhar, bombed the Boston Marathon in April 2013, shared on his YouTube channel a video clip called “The Rise of the Prophecy: The Khorasan’s Black Flags,” which describes jihadists from Afghanistan and other fronts, such as Iraq and Chechnya, as the holy warrior emissaries of the “army of black flags.”¹⁹ Thus, it seems that al-Qaeda operatives view the Khorasan group as representing a historic mission of theological importance, which may be realized on the Syrian battlefield.

The Khorasan Group: Poised Between Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda

Aaron Y. Zelin, an expert in jihad studies at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, does not consider the Khorasan group a new entity, but rather an assembly of al-Qaeda activists from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran who have joined the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, i.e., Jabhat al-Nusra. In a series of tweets on Twitter, Zelin wondered why the Pentagon does not explicitly state that the threat emanates from Jabhat al-Nusra, and instead prefers to blame this supposedly new organization.²⁰ An article published in the *Washington Post* claims that the United States may prefer not to stress that Jabhat al-Nusra is the real threat because it would be tantamount to admitting that the American declarations of having defeated al-Qaeda and being victorious over global terrorism were overestimated, if not outright fallacious.²¹ This leads to the next question: Is the United States currently exaggerating when it speaks of the severity of the dangers posed by the Khorasan group?²²

Dr. Matthew Levitt, an Islamic terrorism researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, claims that the Khorasan group is, in fact, part of Jabhat al-Nusra, and that it has a specific mission of planning attacks against the West; according to Levitt, this mission grabbed the attention of the American intelligence community and led to the airstrikes on the group’s targets in Syria.²³ Prof. Bruce Hoffman makes a similar claim that Jabhat al-Nusra is a “local or regional power and the Khorasan is the international strike force” of al-Qaeda.²⁴ Dr. David Gartenstein-Ross, an American researcher, claims that the minimal information available about the Khorasan group does not shed any light on the group as a whole, but rather only on its operational branch. In this context, he asserts that that group seems to be more than a terrorist cell for foreign operations.²⁵ This assertion is congruent with media reports according to which Khorasan

members have not participated in the fighting against Assad's army, but rather have concentrated on planning and training for attacks in the West.²⁶

Media reports indicate that US authorities have known about the Khorasan group since 2009, when jihadists from al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban, and the Haqqani network²⁷ formed an underground group called the Association of Holy Warriors of Khorasan (*Ittihad al-mujahidin Khorasan*). In 2012, apparently at an explicit order issued by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the group's members began to move to Syria where they contacted Jabhat al-Nusra operatives and settled into areas under Jabhat al-Nusra's control.²⁸ Researcher Thomas Joscelyn believes that the United States knew about the Khorasan group's intentions to attack western targets since the beginning of 2014.²⁹

According to American officials, the Khorasan group is an entity operating in tandem with al-Qaeda branches all over the world,³⁰ but very little else is known about the group and its operatives. According to the same sources, the dearth of information about the group has raised many questions about the group and the danger it poses.³¹ The uncertainty prompted a Centcom spokesperson to say that "this network was plotting to attack in Europe or the homeland, and we took decisive action to protect our interests and remove their capability to act."³² Centcom defines the Khorasan group as "a term used to refer to a network of Nusrah Front and al-Qaeda core extremists who share a history of training operatives, facilitating fighters and money, planning attacks against American and Western targets."³³

All the reports about US airstrikes in Syria indicate that the United States bombed targets identified with the Khorasan group and that it did not carry out any general assault on Jabhat al-Nusra, even though the American forces have been striking at training camps associated with that group. In other words, the United States has tried to differentiate between the Khorasan group and Jabhat al-Nusra. One reason may be that the Syrian opposition groups, who are opposed to President Bashar Assad, consider Jabhat al-Nusra as one of the key rebel organizations. Indeed, after the United States declared Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist organization,³⁴ the slogan "We are all Jabhat al-Nusra" has been heard in the streets of Syria.³⁵ This slogan is meant to show to the United States that the organization operates on behalf of the Syrian people, which is manifested in the organization's full name, *Jabhat al-Nusra lil-ahl al-Sham* (The Support Front for the People of Syria). Moreover, many Syrian Sunnis feel that Jabhat al-Nusra is a local

entity, even though it is the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda; this is in contrast, for example, to the Islamic State.³⁶

While researchers disagree about the essence of the Khorasan group, jihadist sources claim that no such group exists or has ever existed. They assert that the group was fabricated and is used as an excuse for the American airstrikes in Syria; those killed are not operatives representing a radical faction of al-Qaeda, but rather members of Jabhat al-Nusra.³⁷ This claim is supported by American journalists Glenn Greenwald and Murtaza Hussain who assert that the American media networks directly and indirectly serve the United States' war propaganda against Syria by reporting on the Khorasan group. The invention of a new group that poses an imminent danger to the United States, even worse than that of the Islamic State, is meant to justify American intervention in Syria in the form of airstrikes.³⁸

Active Members of the Khorasan Group

Social media, especially Twitter, which has evolved into the jihadists' preferred communications platform, reveals information about the Khorasan group.³⁹ Twitter accounts associated with the Khorasan group can be identified openly by connections to Pakistan-Afghanistan (the Hindu Kush), identification with al-Qaeda in general and its Syrian branch in particular, and of course, by the use of or reference to the name "Khorasan." Twitter accounts as well as media reports indicate the Khorasan group includes al-Qaeda operatives with extensive battlefield experience, and even some who were trained in western armies, such as the French and Australian armies. According to media reports, the Khorasan group consists of forty to sixty operatives – Chechens, Palestinians, Afghanis, Syrians, and even Westerners.⁴⁰ One of the key operatives was Muhsin al-Fadhli, a Kuwaiti national and close associate of Osama bin Laden, and one of the few who knew about the 9/11 attacks before they were carried out. Al-Fadhli was a senior al-Qaeda member who, after the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, fled Afghanistan for Iran where he found refuge, until al-Qaeda's senior command sent him to Syria to set up an international terrorist network for preparing and training operatives to carry out attacks in Western nations.⁴¹

Another senior Khorasan group operative is Abed al-Muhsan Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharah, an al-Qaeda operative from Saudi Arabia and relative of bin Laden; like others in the Khorasan group, al-Sharah also found refuge

in Iran. According to Sami Moubayed,⁴² a Syrian analyst associated with the regime, al-Sharah – also known as Snafi al-Nasr – is one of the founders of Jabhat al-Nusra. He had been responsible for the transfer of money, arms, and men from Iran – through Afghanistan and Pakistan – to Iraq. Al-Nasr’s Twitter account provides information about other Khorasan group operatives who were apparently killed in Syria, such as Idris al-Baluchi,⁴³ the nephew of Khaled Sheikh Muhammad who had been a member of Osama bin Laden’s inner circle and one of the planners of the 9/11 attacks. Iranian authorities have said that al-Sharah and al-Fadhli had been under house arrest in Iran and that they do not know how they ended up in Syria.⁴⁴

The reports also indicate that Ibrahim al-Asiri, an explosives expert from al-Qaeda’s branch in Yemen, is also tied to the Khorasan group.⁴⁵ Al-Asiri is the man who planned the bomb hidden in the underwear of Omar Farouk Abed al-Mottaleb, the young Nigerian who tried to blow up Northwest Airlines Flight 253 en route from Amsterdam to Detroit, Michigan on Christmas Day in 2009.⁴⁶ Another individual whose name is linked with the Khorasan group is Muhammad Islambouli, a veteran al-Qaeda operative and brother of Khalid Islambouli who assassinated former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981. Muhammad Islambouli was apparently the link that connected al-Qaeda’s central command and Jabhat al-Nusra with the Khorasan group.⁴⁷ An interview with Thomas Joscelyn on the podcast of the website Jihadology indicates that Islambouli received reports from al-Fadhli who served as the head of the operations division of the Khorasan group.⁴⁸

The imminent threat attributed to the Khorasan group may stem from the combined and extensive knowledge of its members. For example, the French Abu Hamza was, according to various publications, a former French intelligence officer who defected to al-Qaeda.⁴⁹ He converted to Islam in 2002 and traveled to Egypt to study religion and Arabic. In 2010, while in France, he told his family he was returning to Egypt; instead he traveled to the tribal regions along the Afghani-Pakistani border where he joined an al-Qaeda training camp. The French Abu Hamza is mentioned in the reports as a dangerous individual who became an expert on homemade explosive devices.⁵⁰ As already noted, he was killed in July 2015, apparently in the same attack that killed Muhsin al-Fadhli.⁵¹

After the first attack on Khorasan strongholds, reports circulated that a senior member of al-Qaeda named Abu Yusuf al-Turki (the Turk) – who had been a graduate of Afghanistan,⁵² was a trained sharpshooter, and

had helped establish Jabhat al-Nusra⁵³ – was also influential within the Khorasan group. A photograph of his corpse alongside an older photograph, supposedly taken in the Afghani mountains, were posted on Twitter by Abu Thabat al-Qasimi (@Mohager44), who identified with al-Qaeda.⁵⁴ More information on al-Turki was published on the website From Chechnya to Syria by Joanna Paraszczuk, an investigative journalist studying the connections between Chechnyan jihadists and the war in Syria. According to Paraszczuk, al-Turki was the head trainer for a sharpshooter unit called the “Wolf Unit,” which may have been none other than the Khorasan group itself.⁵⁵ Jabhat al-Nusra propaganda videos show al-Turki teaching a sharpshooting course to trainees, reminiscent of al-Qaeda’s sharpshooting unit.⁵⁶ The video was uploaded to YouTube on September 23, 2014, the same day that President Obama first mentioned the threat of the Khorasan group and the American attack on its targets and strongholds in Syria.⁵⁷

The photo of al-Turki’s corpse was retweeted by, among others, Usama Korasani (@KorasaN_1428) who noted on his Twitter account that he came to Syria from Khorasan and that he is aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra.⁵⁸ This Twitter account had more than 10,000 followers and had over 21,000 tweets. One of the people Usama Korasani followed was Mojahad Korasani (@mojhdk) who, on his account, noted that he came to Syria from the Hindu Kush and that he, too, was a Jabhat al-Nusra operative.⁵⁹ This account had more than 12,000 followers, had posted over 1,000 tweets, and followed sixty-three other accounts.

It may be that in addition to the Wolf Unit, the Khorasan group might also be called Jaish al-Nusra (the Assistance Army). This unfamiliar appellation was first published in an English-language online magazine called *al-Risalah* (The Message) produced by the Mujahidin of the Levant. Only two issues had appeared by November 2015 – one in July and the other in October. The October 2015 issue contained an interview with Hamza the Australian, who claimed to be from Australia and had served in the army there where he learned guerrilla fighting skills, converted to Islam before 9/11, went to Afghanistan, and eventually became a senior al-Qaeda operative.⁶⁰ In the interview, Hamza the Australian explains that he operates within a group called Jaish al-Nusra, which trains jihadists in various methods of fighting and that al-Qaeda’s high command sent him to help Jabhat al-Nusra.⁶¹

The Khorasan group may also have ties with al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (*Qa’adat al-Jihad fi Shaba al- Qārrah al-Hindiya*), founded in

September 2014 – the same month in which the Khorasan group first made the headlines.⁶² It is also possible that the Khorasan group is linked to a Kashmiri terrorist cell called Brigade 313. A mutual friend of the jihadists mentioned above is Khorasan al-Bala'gh (@Khorasan313).⁶³ On his Twitter account, Khorasan al-Bala'gh posted a document in English that contains a summary of the declaration of the establishment of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. He also linked his Twitter account to a biography of Ilyas Kashmiri, who was said to have served in Pakistan's military intelligence service and its elite Special Services Group. Kashmiri also had participated in the war in Afghanistan and was an adherent of bin Laden's theory of global jihad.⁶⁴ According to his biography, Kashmiri established a branch of al-Qaeda, under the name al-Qaeda Brigade 313.⁶⁵ He was killed in an American airstrike in June 2011.⁶⁶

The document that Khorasan al-Bala'gh posted includes a call to Muslims in Kashmir, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and other nations to join al-Qaeda and the jihadi front in the fight against the regimes in their own countries and against the United States. On September 23, 2012, Khorasan al-Bala'gh published a photograph of a Boeing 747 passenger plane with the caption "Al-Qaeda Airlines."⁶⁷ The photo was accompanied by the following statement: "A reminder and message to the United States from Sheikh Osama bin Laden; if our message can reach you in words" followed by a quote of bin Laden threatening that the United States would never know peace and security until the infidel armies left the Muslim lands.⁶⁸

Khorasan al-Bala'gh's Twitter account was suspended in October 2014. Until then, it expressed support for and identification with al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, such as the Pakistani Taliban (*Tehrik-i Taliban*) and the Afghani Taliban (the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan), two groups that have also produced jihadists who formed al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. Khorasan al-Bala'gh also expressed support for al-Qaeda Brigade 313 – bin Laden's branch in Kashmir⁶⁹ – and the Syrian Islamic Front (*al-Jabha al-Islamiyya al-Suriyya*), the umbrella organization for Islamic rebel groups linked to al-Qaeda.⁷⁰

Beyond the meaning of the number 313 in Islamic theology,⁷¹ the number may also indicate ties among various jihadist factions linked to the Khorasan group. For example, there is a connection between Khorasan al-Bala'gh and the Twitter account of Jund al-Fida'a (@313jund) – a fighting brigade of the Afghani Taliban.⁷² Defined as "the official account of the Baluchi Mujahidin in the land of jihad, Khorasan Afghanistan," the Twitter account of Jund

al-Fida'a had nearly 200 followers, had posted 461 tweets and followed thirty-two other accounts, one of which belonged to Khorasan al-Bala'gh.

Conclusions

The information compiled about the Khorasan group since it first hit the headlines indicates that the group consists of just a few dozen operatives from different nations. Some of them have military training, especially in guerrilla warfare, and some have technical expertise, such as putting together sophisticated IEDs. They were trained and prepared not for fighting the war in Syria, but rather for carrying out attacks in the West – the United States, Europe, and perhaps also Israel. The group is part of Jabhat al-Nusra, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that it has ties to al-Qaeda factions throughout the world, such as the branches in Yemen and the Indian subcontinent.

The method of targeted killings that the United States has used with regard to the Khorasan group has taken out some of its operatives, albeit only the well-known ones. We can therefore assume the group still exists. The fact that the United States placed the group on its list of terrorist organizations at the end of September 2015 indicates that it may still pose an imminent danger. It is therefore important to continue following elements that might be connected to the Khorasan group as they could represent a threat not only to the United States and other Western nations, but also to Israel as well as Jewish institutions in Europe and throughout the world. The international reserve of operatives at the Khorasan group's disposal magnifies this threat.

The existence of the Khorasan group underlies the threat that is still embodied by al-Qaeda, which is fighting the Islamic State in leading the global jihad. The Islamic State may be rising in popularity among believing Muslims at the expense of al-Qaeda, but the organization that carried out the 9/11 attacks continues to operate under the radar and to prepare for future massive casualty attacks. It may well be that while western decision makers, the media, and the public at large are watching the Islamic State's beheading videos, al-Qaeda members are busy planning strategic attacks on the West, if only to remind the world that the organization is still alive and capable of inflicting a great deal of pain.

Notes

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