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## **Syria: No “Situation Freeze”**

**Udi Dekel and Orit Perlov**

In a local incident in northern Syria in early July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra (Nusra Front) kidnapped the commander of Jaish al-Tahrir (Liberation Army, Mohammad al-Ghabi al-Ahmad). The Liberation Army is the major rebel unit on the northern front affiliated with the Free Syrian Army – the United States ally that the US sees as a legitimate local alternative to the Bashar al-Assad regime. There was much surprise when al-Ghabi was released by al-Nusra after reaching a deal (“reconciliation”) with it. It appears (the details of the agreement were not released) that the essence of the understandings is cooperation between the organizations in joint areas of operation against the forces of Assad's supporters, with the shared aim of overthrowing his regime. This alliance led to internal criticism by commanders in the Liberation Army, whereupon al-Ghabi quickly removed the two commanders under him. For its part, the United States had difficulty coming to terms with the fact that the major faction of the Free Syrian Army in the north made an alliance with a Salafi jihadist organization that represents al-Qaeda.

While on the surface this is an esoteric event in a prolonged and tumultuous war, in fact, it signifies clearly a reality that is gradually prompting change in US policy, out of an understanding that the lines between the many Sunni actors operating in Syria are vague and elusive. There may now be a turning point in the Obama administration's assessment of the situation, as it realizes that there are no truly moderate forces in Syria that can serve as an alternative to the Assad regime, and that at the end of the day, all of the Sunni groups, whether Salafist groups or others, will cooperate with al-Qaeda or anyone else who can aid them in forming a unified front in the struggle against Assad. This understanding is at the basis of the US initiative, led by Secretary of State John Kerry, to formulate a shared policy with Russia regarding involvement in the fighting in Syria.

In the framework under formulation, the powers aim to "freeze" the situation in Syria and divide the country into three areas: Area A, which is under the tight control of the Assad regime and its allies; Area B, which has seen activity by all of the fighting forces, except for the Islamic State but including Assad's forces; and Area C, which is under the exclusive control of the Islamic State. Currently, in Area A the situation is more stable and most of it is free of fighting, whereas in Area C no one stands in the way of those

who want to attack the Islamic State, even though there are questions as to who will control territories liberated from the Islamic State. The problematic areas are in Area B, especially two large sections – the area around Aleppo in northern Syria, and the area south of Damascus in southern Syria (along with a number of smaller areas, for example, around the city of Homs and Idlib).

The US doctrine formulated by President Obama and implemented thus far emphasized first and foremost the struggle against the Islamic State – “ISIS first.” A competing approach, however, holds that the Islamic State must be dealt with while acting to end the oppressive Assad regime. This was recently expressed in a letter from experts at the State Department, who see simultaneous action as the only way to enable the Syrian people to choose and shape their future. The Secretary of State did not accept these recommendations, and at this stage chose, along with attacking the Islamic State and pushing it out of the primary territories it controls, to focus on attacking Jabhat al-Nusra. Although al-Nusra accumulated much power and dominance among the rebel organizations, it also angered the United States when it launched targeted killings against US-backed rebel factions. Kerry may even be concerned about additional rebel groups joining forces with Jabhat al-Nusra.

The contacts between the United States and Russia also included an agreement to form a Joint Implementation Group (JIG), in order to promote the shared strategic goal of defeating the al-Nusra forces and the Islamic State. This agreement is under the umbrella of international decisions whose goal is to strengthen the cessation of hostilities in Syria and support a political transition process in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. The JIG will enable coordination of the fight against Jabhat al-Nusra, including with shared intelligence and operational information. The planned method of operation seeks to ensure that if one of the sides shares information about al-Nusra targets for attack, the sides will coordinate their operational methods. On the basis of this shared intelligence information, a list of al-Nusra targets will be prepared and the attack method coordinated, while a deconfliction mechanism for preventing confrontations between the attacking forces will be instituted. By creating the coordination mechanism, the United States also seeks to prevent, or at least minimize, the damage done by Russia and pro-Assad coalition forces to rebel organizations that are not Salafi jihadist groups, such as the Free Syrian Army.

In talks between Russia and the United States, presumably a number of central questions have arisen, including:

- a. How can the two sides identify the exact location of al-Nusra targets, when they are entangled with other rebel factions in a kind of complex mosaic that changes frequently?

- b. Will the agreement prevent Russia from attacking targets not coordinated in the framework of the JIG, and will the United States have veto power over attacking rebel targets that are not al-Nusra?
- c. How will targets that are not eligible for attack, such as hospitals and schools, be agreed upon and delineated (in the five months since the ceasefire declaration, some 1850 civilians have been killed in Syria) – taking into consideration Russia's painful experience in its air attacks on civilian targets under the assumption that the area was presumably conquered by "terrorists"?

At the same time that the two powers agreed on attacking al-Nusra forces and demonstrated that they are able to work together when they want to, the leader of al-Nusra, Mohammad al-Julani, contacted the leaders of al-Qaeda. Al-Julani asked for approval of his organization's detachment from the al-Qaeda parent organization and its joining forces with additional Salafi groups. In a statement released on July 28, 2016, al-Julani announced that the Nusra Front would sever its affiliation with al-Qaeda and reconstitute itself as the Fateh al-Sham Front. In tandem, the Nusra Front released an audio message from senior al-Qaeda leader Ahmed Hassan (Abu al-Kheir), in which he in effect blessed Julani's impending announcement.

The founding declaration of the new joint group stated that the overarching goal is to overthrow the tyrannical rule of Assad, base its strength on Syrian forces and not on external forces, and represent the citizens of Syria. It also stated that after the liberation of Syria, a just, independent Islamic government would be established, which would provide Syria's population with security and stability, and that the operational activity of Jabhat al-Nusra would cease completely.

This organizational separation presumably expresses temporary utilitarian reasoning and is not the result of an ideological change. In order to be a significant force in the domestic Syrian arena, and in the long term to create an alternative to the Assad regime, a strategic decision was likely made to change the composition of the organization by recruiting more Syrian factions, fighters, and activists, as well as minimizing the problematic appearance of external intervention, especially by al-Qaeda. In addition, in the wake of the US-Russian agreement on coordinated attacks on the organization, the goal of al-Nusra's leaders is to dismantle from within the forces supported by the Americans on the northern front, join forces with them, and make it harder for the United States and Russia to distinguish between the organizations and factions. Jabhat al-Nusra has a significant presence in the areas of Aleppo, Idlib, north of Hama, and even north of Latakia. Its integration with local forces in these areas would make it very difficult for external forces to attack it alone, to the extent of being nearly impossible to act against it from the air without hitting civilians and others. Indeed, immediately after the declaration of the

establishment of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, about 20 rebel groups announced their joining the new organization.

In this complex situation, it has become clear that it was too early to eulogize the Islamic State after the fall of Fallujah in northern Iraq, the advance of Kurdish forces toward the area of Manbij (the Islamic State enclave on the border between Syria and Turkey), and the effort to take control of al-Raqqah (the capital of the Islamic State in Syria). These latter efforts have been blocked at this stage. Moreover, the more the Islamic State is pressured, the more it turns to its doomsday weapon – mega-terrorism involving indiscriminate, high casualty suicide attacks, in Syria, in Iraq and globally, inspiring lone wolf type adherents to wake up and act.

It thus becomes clear that the "situation freeze" is an ambitious objective in the civil war and proxy war in Syria, and for several reasons. The difficulty to implement any such "freeze" is reflected in the inability to consolidate the ceasefire, particularly when each area liberated from the Islamic State is taken by a different group, sometimes no less extreme. Even if the Islamic State is defeated militarily, the ISIS ideology and idea will not disappear and will, in fact, reawaken, partly due to the continued resistance to the rule of Assad, which encourages the motivation of extreme groups – countries and individual supporters – to continue to incite chaos in Syria and its surroundings. The rebel groups adjust to new situations quickly, uniting or breaking apart under cooperation frameworks, and even undergoing organizational changes. In light of the United States policy of not attacking Assad's forces or those of the pro-Assad coalition, and designating Area A, which is controlled by the regime, as a stable area, the Sunni organizations are "pushed" to join forces with Salafi jihadist elements, and a change in the operational strategy of the powers leads to a change in the operational plans of al-Nusra and the Islamic State. These developments are significant because the powers are embarrassed as their strategies collapse, and as they fail to find the right prescription to implement the "freeze," in order to stabilize the situation in Syria.

As for Israel, Jabhat al-Nusra has a limited presence in southern Syria and the Golan Heights, after transferring the center of its activities to northern Syria. Al-Nusra has refrained from acting against Israel, and there were even claims that Israel provided medical treatment to its fighters wounded in the fighting in southern Syria. Its separation from al-Qaeda and association with other organizations creates limited opportunities for Israel to establish rules of the game for quiet coordination with the various powerbrokers in southern Syria, as long as they refrain from attacking Israel. Israel has adopted a responsible policy, refraining from intervening and influencing the balance of powers in Syria, unless it is faced with a concrete threat. Since there is no change in the level of threat faced by Israel, and it is too early to designate al-Nusra's actions as a true separation from al-Qaeda, it is too early to assess a new policy for Israel in this context.