

SYRIA 90-DAY STRATEGIC FORECAST: JABHAT AL-NUSRA (JN)

JABHAT AL-NUSRA'S OBJECTIVES

Grand strategic objectives:

- Establish an Islamic Emirate in Syria that is a future component of the envisioned al-Qaeda Caliphate
- Unify the global jihadist movement

Strategic objectives:

- Destroy the Assad regime
- Transform Syrian society from secular nationalism to an Islamic theocracy
- Establish locally-accepted governance as a precursor to an eventual Islamic Emirate
- Build an army to protect the Islamic Emirate by partnering with Syrian rebel groups
- Resolve the fitna, or schism, with ISIS
- Counter U.S. influence in Syria

CURRENT CONDITIONS AFFECTING JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN SYRIA

Jabhat al-Nusra is relatively unconstrained in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra tailors its approach within each of Syria's rebel-held regions to local conditions in order to maximize its effect without alienating local populations. Local conditions therefore factor heavily into Jabhat al-Nusra's calculus. Conditions in Syria that shape Jabhat al-Nusra's options and requirements include:

Condition		Impact
U.S. airstrikes targeting Khorasan-linked Jabhat al-Nusra members	→	Heightened operational security requirements in Idlib and Aleppo; opportunity for anti-U.S. propaganda
U.S.-trained rebels entering Syria; Syrian rebel forces seeking partnership with the anti-ISIS coalition	→	Incentive to attack rebel forces that partner with the U.S., especially in northern Syria
Increased assassinations of Jabhat al-Nusra members and associated Shari'a officials, likely attributable to ISIS, in Idlib and Dera'a Provinces	→	Requirement to secure institutions in areas of operation in Idlib and Dera'a Provinces against ISIS
Unrest within pro-regime populations regarding regime's military strategy	→	Opportunity for maximized psychological effect of military operations against pro-regime forces

CONDITIONS SETTING BY JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN THE NEXT 90 DAYS

Jabhat al-Nusra will continue to set the following conditions for its longer-term campaign:

- prevent a negotiated solution to end the Syrian war;
- counter U.S. influence in Syria;
- prepare for an ISIS military offensive against Western Syria.

Jabhat al-Nusra's operational objectives, explored in the next section, support the creation of these conditions.

Prevent a Negotiated Solution in Syria

Jabhat al-Nusra pursues the full destruction of the Syrian regime as an ideological imperative and a necessary condition for the complete transformation of Syrian society. To preserve time and space to set this transformation, Jabhat al-Nusra obstructs a negotiated solution to the Syrian war, which would likely leave the Assad regime intact. Jabhat al-Nusra does so in part by protecting and expanding its network of military and governance structures, which Jabhat al-Nusra uses to influence the opposition strongly against the cessation of hostilities. Jabhat al-Nusra also exploits opportunities to increase the overall sectarianism of the war in an attempt to undermine dialogue between pro- and anti-regime populations. Unrest among pro-regime populations and the behavior of Syrian regime international supporters may increase the requirement for Jabhat al-Nusra to reinforce its measures to influence rebel groups to eschew negotiations.

Counter U.S. Influence in Syria

Jabhat al-Nusra develops strategic positioning against the U.S. in Syria on behalf of the global al-Qaeda movement. Jabhat al-Nusra does so in part by leveraging widespread disillusionment with the U.S. within Syrian civilian populations to increase local support for al-Qaeda. This outreach contributes to Jabhat al-Nusra's effort to undermine a negotiated solution to the Syrian war, but also generates social change by creating a permissive environment for Jabhat al-Nusra's religious outreach. Jabhat al-Nusra also attacks and defeats moderate rebel groups that begin to threaten its influence or provide the U.S. with direct nodes of influence in Syria. Increased activities by the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition in August 2015 will increase the requirement for Jabhat al-Nusra to reinforce anti-U.S. sentiment among rebels.

Prepare for an ISIS Offensive in Western Syria

Jabhat al-Nusra has prioritized the deconfliction its operations with ISIS in an attempt to avoid an escalation of the fitna, or schism, between the two groups. This prioritization stems in part from Jabhat al-Nusra's strategic objective of unifying the global jihadist movement, and in part from a pragmatic desire to avoid a costly war with ISIS. Jabhat al-Nusra's commitment to resisting U.S. involvement in Syria is shared by ISIS. However, ISIS began to escalate against Jabhat al-Nusra in Western Syria in July 2015, forcing Jabhat al-Nusra to adopt a defensive posture. Jabhat al-Nusra's intent to confront the U.S.-backed coalition in Syria is therefore increasingly undermined by its need to defend itself against ISIS. Jabhat al-Nusra will likely tailor its response to ISIS within each of Syria's rebel-held regions in the next twelve weeks, avoiding escalation against ISIS where possible but adopting an offensive posture where necessary.

90 Day Forecast

Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)

Jabhat al-Nusra is pursuing six operational objectives in order to set these conditions as of September 11, 2015:

- Secure defensible perimeter in Idlib Province
- Expand network of military alliances
- Compete with and eliminate Western influence within rebel ranks
- Protect gains from ISIS
- Expand Jabhat al-Nusra-linked governance structures
- Generate schisms within the regime's support base

The chart on the following page outlines JN's most likely courses of action (MLCOA) in the next 90 days in order to advance its operational objectives and set favorable conditions.

If successful, this course of action would extend Jabhat al-Nusra's network in Syria and protect the group's core gains from ISIS predation in the near term. In addition, it would set conditions that obstruct a negotiated settlement to the Syrian war by increasing Jabhat al-Nusra's influence over rebel structures. Jabhat al-Nusra's offensive operations against Sahel al-Ghab, south of Jisr al-Shughour, and against regime positions northwest of Hama City would set back the Syrian regime, but they would not independently produce major asymmetric battlefield effects. Jabhat al-Nusra's exploitation of tensions within the pro-regime camp will likely remain at low levels over the next 90 days, but could produce asymmetric

Jabhat al-Nusra's MLCOA for September-December 2015

September 11, 2015

Operational Objective	Conditions Set	Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)
Establish defensible perimeter in Idlib Province	Counter U.S. Influence in Syria; Prepare for ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seize Sahel al-Ghab, south of Jisr al-Shughour, from pro-regime forces (ongoing)
Expand network of military alliances	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hama and Homs: Create a new military operations room to launch offensive against pro-regime forces, likely NW of Hama City Damascus: formalize partnership with Afnad al-Sham in order to undermine Jaysh al-Islam's power Damascus: foster unrest toward Jaysh al-Islam in Eastern Ghouta in order to undermine Jaysh al-Islam's power (ongoing)
Compete with and eliminate Western influence within rebel ranks	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attack U.S.-trained rebels after insertion into Syria (ongoing) Reinforce defensive lines in Aleppo City IOT offset rebel deployments to fight ISIS north of Aleppo City Escalate against groups receiving covert Western aid in Idlib Province^c
Protect gains from ISIS	Prepare for ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure its institutions in Idlib and Dera'a Provinces Defeat alleged ISIS affiliate Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk in Dera'a and Quneitra (ongoing)
Expand Jabhat al-Nusra-linked governance structures	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resolve disputes with the HASI-led Islamic Commission of the Idlib Countryside (ongoing) Establish joint governance structure in the Homs Countryside
Generate schisms within the regime's support base	Prevent a negotiated solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct low-level attacks targeting civilians in Latakia Province (ongoing) Exploit the assassination of Druze leaders in Suwayda Province in order to facilitate a schism between the Druze and the Syrian regime

effects over a longer timeframe if they succeed at generating schisms within the pro-regime camp.

Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA)

Jabhat al-Nusra's most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) under current conditions is to launch as its main military effort a ground offensive into Latakia Province targeting pro-regime Alawite population centers. Jabhat al-Nusra may pursue this objective in order to produce maximized psychological effects that weaken the regime's support within minority populations and potentially generate asymmetric effects against the regime's war effort. To do so, Jabhat al-Nusra would likely have to abandon seizing the Sahel al-Ghab region south of Idlib in

order to control Idlib Province because it would need to allocate increased resources to Latakia.

This MDCOA is more likely under current conditions than the MDCOA forecasted by ISW in June 2015. Jabhat al-Nusra is not likely to escalate against Hezbollah in both Syria and Lebanon in September 2015. Hezbollah's offensive in the Qalamoun mountain range along the Syrian-Lebanese border has successfully forced Jabhat al-Nusra and allied groups to go to ground. Meanwhile, a crackdown by the Lebanese Armed Forces and Lebanese General Security appears to have sufficiently disrupted Jabhat al-Nusra's networks in Lebanon to prevent major escalation as of September 2015.

Jabhat al-Nusra's MDCOA for 90 Days

September 11, 2015

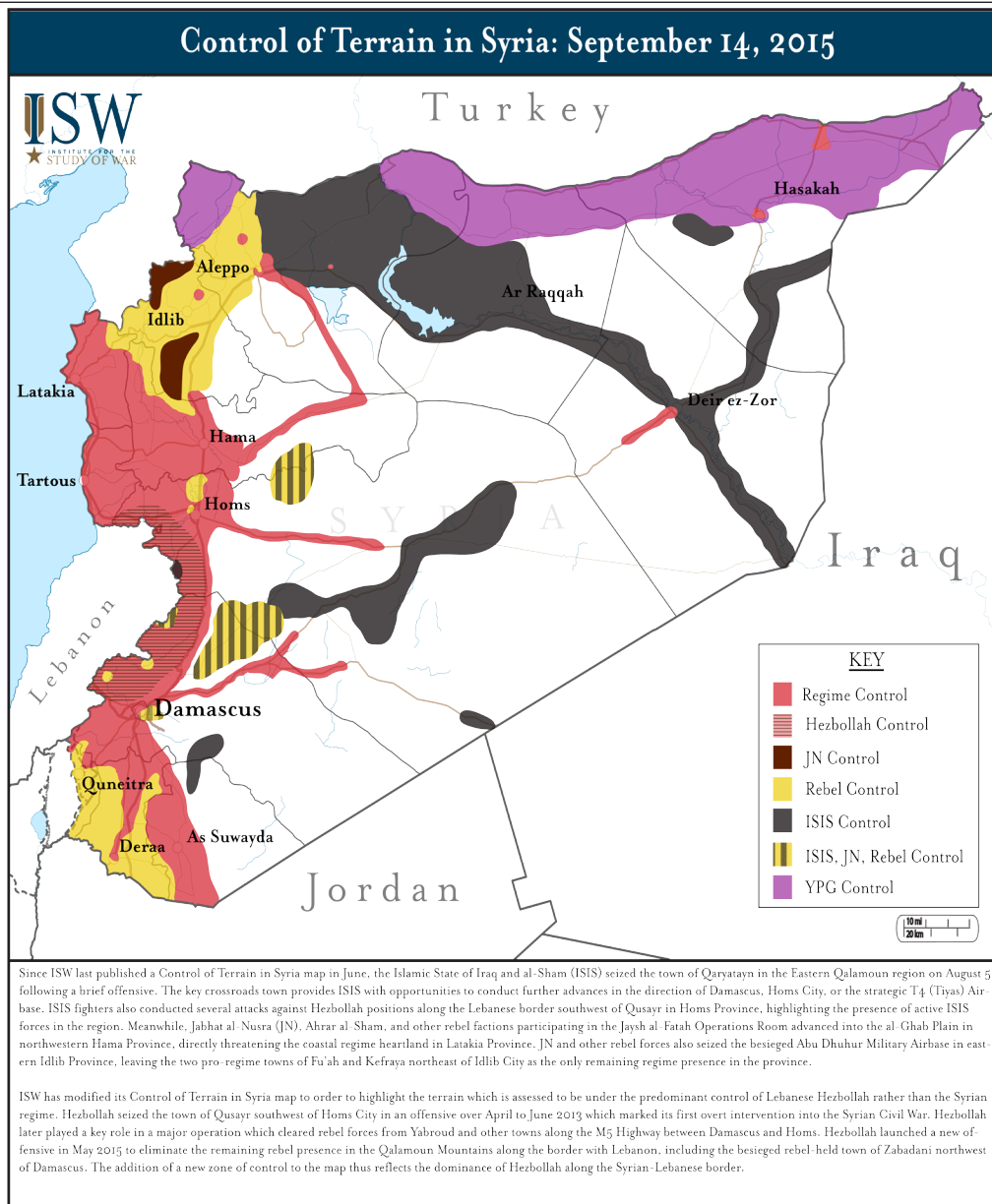
Operational Objective	Conditions Set	Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA)
Expand network of military alliances	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for an ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hama and Homs: Create a new military operations room to launch offensive against pro-regime forces, likely NW of Hama City • Damascus: formalize partnership with Ajnad al-Sham in order to undermine Jaysh al-Islam's power • Damascus: foster unrest toward Jaysh al-Islam in Eastern Ghouta in order to undermine Jaysh al-Islam's power (ongoing)
Eliminate Western influence within rebel ranks	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for an ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack U.S.-trained rebels after insertion into Syria (ongoing) • Reinforce defensive lines in Aleppo City IOT offset rebel deployments to fight ISIS north of Aleppo City • Escalate against groups receiving covert Western aid in Idlib Province
Protect gains from ISIS	Prepare for an ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure institutions Idlib and Dera'a Provinces • Defeat alleged ISIS affiliate Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk in Dera'a and Quneitra (ongoing)
Expand Jabhat al-Nusra-linked governance structures	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for an ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resolve disputes with the HASI-led Islamic Commission of the Idlib Countryside (ongoing) • Establish joint governance structure in the Homs Countryside
Generate schisms within the regime's support base	Prevent a negotiated solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct major ground offensive into Latakia Province • Assassinate Syrian Druze leaders in Suwayda Province IOT facilitate a schism between the Druze and the Syrian regime

The chart on the following page outlines JN's MDCOA in the next ninety days.

Jabhat al-Nusra's propaganda began to foreshadow an incursion into Latakia Province after Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel forces seized the town of Jisr al-Shughour in April 2015. The seizure of the town connected the Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel stronghold in Idlib Province with previously isolated positions in Eastern Latakia Province, setting conditions for future operations in Latakia. Efforts by pro-regime forces to consolidate a new defensible perimeter at Sahel al-Ghab in Eastern Latakia, involving reported Iranian and Russian military support, have also largely failed. A recent build up of Russian military presence in Latakia Province, if sustained, could increase the effectiveness of pro-regime forces at defending Latakia in the medium term. It is unclear, however, whether Russia will commit deployable ground forces to Syria

that could supplement pro-regime forces in the defense of Latakia province or in a counter-offensive.

Growing unrest within pro-regime populations along the Syrian coast regarding the regime's inability to protect besieged pro-regime populations may incentivize Jabhat al-Nusra to launch a ground offensive into Latakia Province in the near term in order to maximize the psychological effect of anti-regime operations. The growing threat of ISIS in Idlib Province may furthermore encourage Jabhat al-Nusra to launch an offensive in Latakia Province in order to prevent the defection of foreign fighter groups in Idlib and Latakia to ISIS by committing them to offensive operations led by Jabhat al-Nusra. Direct Russian involvement through ground forces might increase the incentive of Chechen foreign fighter groups, which are active in Idlib Province, to conduct such an offensive.



A ground offensive into Latakia is most dangerous because, if large enough, it could produce an uncontrolled regime contraction. An abrupt toppling of the regime would produce even more power vacuums in Syria, accelerate lethal competition among opposition groups, and escalate attacks against Alawite civilians. At minimum, a ground offensive into Latakia would increase the sectarianism of the war, and potentially undermine emerging efforts by the United Nations to foster renewed negotiations. This offensive is also dangerous because because the Syrian regime will likely escalate in retaliation, possibly including the use of remaining chemical weapons. Latakia Province is core regime terrain, which the regime must defend in order to retain social control and likely the continued allegiance of other minority groups such as the Syrian Druze. The regime's demonstrated inability to secure a defensible perimeter around Latakia indicates that the regime will likely respond out of desperation if challenged.

This is a relatively high probability MDCOA, but it is unlikely to occur within the 90 day timeframe. Jabhat al-Nusra will likely chose instead to consolidate control of Sahel al-Ghab before launching a major offensive into Latakia in order to remove a vulnerability to Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel forces in Idlib Province. Furthermore, this COA risks producing a spiraling escalation of disorder in Syria, should the Syrian regime fall precipitously, that Jabhat al-Nusra cannot control. One dangerous possibility for Jabhat al-Nusra is that such escalation jeopardizes its ability to secure Idlib Province against ISIS's predation. Jabhat al-Nusra is therefore unlikely to assume the risks of this MDCOA in the next 90 days under current conditions, though it will likely continue to set conditions in Latakia Province as part of the MLCOA outlined in the previous section.

ENDNOTES

1. For more, see: Jennifer Cafarella, Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for al-Qaeda, December 2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/JN%20Final.pdf>
2. An ongoing assassination campaign targeting Jabhat al-Nusra members and affiliated Shari'a officials is likely attributable to ISIS. For more, see upcoming appendix: Assassination Campaigns in Syria January 2014 – present.

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