



# Why the Most Dangerous Group in Syria Isn't ISIS

By Jennifer Cafarella  
February 26, 2016

(CNN) Hardly a day goes by without news of the progress being made in the war on ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In recent months, American-backed forces have secured much of the Syrian-Turkish border, recaptured Ramadi, and stemmed the flow of fighters and supplies to the terror group's capital cities of Raqqa and Mosul.

But momentum is not the same as winning, and the U.S. has fallen into a number of traps in Iraq and Syria -- the most deadly of which has been set by al Qaeda.

Jabhat al-Nusra, al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, is more dangerous than ISIS -- and while the two groups share the common goal of establishing a global caliphate, they are using different means to achieve it.

ISIS may be better at generating headlines, but its headline-grabbing seizures of key Iraqi and Syrian cities -- not to mention its ruthless attacks on Western targets -- have made it the focus of American military efforts in those countries.

Al Qaeda, meanwhile, has been quietly playing the long game. America's focus elsewhere has played directly into the group's hands, allowing the group to exploit its time out of the spotlight and set up a return to the global stage once ISIS is defeated.

While ISIS is ruthlessly presiding over the territory it controls, Jabhat al-Nusra is cultivating local relationships, building capabilities it intends to use against the U.S. in the future.

Jabhat al-Nusra is capable and effective, providing support to the opposition's fight against the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in ways that offset the regime's disproportionate battlefield advantages.

Jabhat al-Nusra is leveraging its battlefield contributions to create relationships with civil society, civilian populations and other Syrian opposition groups. It then manipulates those relationships in order to achieve dominance. And it directly targets U.S.-backed groups, and defeats them when it can, in order to ensure that moderate forces do not find footing in a new Syria.

Jabhat al-Nusra will use the legitimacy gained by fighting alongside the opposition to transform Syrian society until it accepts al Qaeda. The group is creating structures of governance, like courts and social services, and using them to transform the religious views of Syrian opposition groups and populations.

The group already governs parts of Syria with a form of religious law akin to that used by ISIS; women in both ISIS-held Raqqa and opposition-held Idlib are forced to wear the burqa. Meanwhile, through military and religious training camps for children, it is indoctrinating a new generation of fighters to wage a future war against the West.

Jabhat al-Nusra is also more adaptive than ISIS. It intentionally does not control terrain; this makes it difficult to target, as it cannot be attacked directly without destroying the more moderate Syrian opposition groups with whom it is embedded. And it has safe-guarded itself against tribal uprisings by prioritizing local support.

Not only is the U.S. failing to recognize Jabhat al-Nusra as a threat, our policies in Syria are inadvertently driving support and recruitment for it.

American acquiescence to Russia's air campaign in Syria allows Russia to harm viable opposition groups that are facing simultaneous pressure from Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. The U.S. is meanwhile supporting a diplomatic process that Russia is clearly manipulating in the regime's favor. Russia is using the negotiations over a cessation of hostilities to drive the U.S. to accept the designation of mainstream Syrian opposition groups as "terrorists" so that Assad can continue to target them.

The U.S. still has potential allies against both Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. But the Russian targeting of the opposition will drive these groups into al Qaeda's hands, not because they wish to do so but because they have nowhere else to turn for help.

U.S. policymakers must act immediately to preserve the opposition groups that will be critical to securing a future Syria that is not an Islamic Emirate for al Qaeda. In order to do that, we must abandon our fixation on ISIS and recognize Jabhat al-Nusra as the bigger threat.

---

**CNN Editor's Note:** Jennifer Cafarella is the Evans Hanson Fellow and a Syria Analyst at the Washington D.C.- based Institute for the Study of War, where she focuses on the Syrian civil war and opposition groups. The views expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author.