

The numerical strength of al Qaeda in Syria

By Vladimir Suchan 15 June 2014

The "few" thousand people under ISIS is a lie propagated by the West that tried to minimize and conceal the strength of al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq. One does not control millions of people and so much territory with 6-7 thousand armed men. Not even al Qaeda.

Several months ago, towards the end of 2013, I published this little exercise of mine on the numerical strength of al Qaeda in Syria, which, therefore, excludes Iraq, but much of what applies to Syria is also valid for Iraq--in terms of the massive cover-up of the massive expansion of al Qaeda armies thanks to massive special forces and financial support from the US, NATO, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, and till June of 2013 also from Egypt and after September 2011 also from Libya. We can also add the Taliban to this mix. Yes, they too are part of this dangerous terror coalition of the willing, and the recruitment for these al Qaeda armies has been a vast enterprise stretching from the US, Great Britain, Europe, the Horn of Africa, Northern Africa, the Middle East to Afghanistan and Pakistan--a strange combination of highly paid special forces, local elites, and masses of the otherwise unemployed produced as a result of the so-called youth-bulge in the Muslim countries to which we can now add the new (otherwise) permanently unemployed in the West. So here is what I wrote back and what is I think useful to remember when hearing, for example, the Economist's claim that the ISIS is merely some 6-7,000 men strong:

The question about the strength and size of al Qaeda and its open associates in Syria has been one of the critical battles of the war itself. The self-declared "Friends of Syria" and its West-and-Saudi-supported "revolution" have tried to minimize al Qaeda's involvement as much as possible. Thus, one of the propagandist bloggers of the insurgency, which continues to paint jihadists as revolutionaries, writes without any proof: "[T]he fact is that there is merely one significant Al-Qaeda group [which may or may not have split in two] and together with smaller groups do not constitute more than 10% of the armed opposition in Syria. ... Qaedism is the smallest ideological minority among the armed opposition and it has taken over nothing but the TV screens and people's phobias. ... Many ordinary people of all creeds and ethnicity accepted Jabhat al-Nusra as a fighting force and did not consider them terrorists. They did not believe they were Qaedists until al-Jolani declared it to be so." According to Free Halab, al Qaeda is "the smallest of minorities in this revolution." (Free Halab, "Assad's Popular Support: 'NATO Data'" <http://freehalab.wordpress.com/2013/06/07/assads-popular-support/>, June 7, 2013)

During the Congress testimony, State Secretary John Kerry went on record: "I just don't agree that a majority are al Qaeda and the bad guys. That's not true. There are about 70,000 to 100,000 oppositionists ... Maybe 15 percent to 25 percent might be in one group or another who are what we would deem to be bad guys." Famously, this earned him a reprimand from Vladimir Putin who said ahead of Obama's arrival in St. Petersburg for the G20 summit: "It's not pleasant for me to see this. While we communicate with them and assume they are decent people, he [Kerry] lies openly. And he knows he lies." <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/09/06/322302/putin-calls-kerry-a-liar-on-syria/> During the same hearing, in which a possible World War III was hanging in balance, John Kerry went still further declaring that the alleged moderate Syrian opposition groups are growing in influence: "[The armed opposition] has increasingly become more defined by its moderation, more defined by the breadth of its membership, and more defined by its adherence to some, you know, democratic process and to an all-inclusive, minority-protecting constitution." As Reuters mildly pointed out, "[this] appear to be at odds with estimates by U.S. and European intelligence sources and nongovernmental experts, who say Islamic extremists remain by far the fiercest and best-organized rebel elements." (Mark Hosenball and Phil Stewart, "Kerry portrait of Syria rebels at

Odds with Intelligence Reports,” September 5, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/05/us-syria-crisis-usa-rebels-idUSBRE98405L20130905>)

In the Business Insider, Mike Nudelman and Michael Kelley wrote in the wake of John Kerry’s notorious Congress testimony (September 3, 2013) in a similar vein. Nudelman and Kelley based their claims on the “fantastic article” by Charles Lister of IHS Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Center, which identified nearly half of the rebel forces as jihadist or hardline Islamists (Michael Kelley and Mike Nudelman, “Here’s The Extremist-to-Moderate-Spectrum of the the 100,000 Syrian Rebels,” <http://www.businessinsider.com/graphic-the-most-accurate-breakdown-of-the-syrian-rebels-2013-9>, September 19, 2013). Out of these 50% or so (and some 50,000), the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) AND Jabhat al-Nusra (and similar groups) are said to comprise 12,000 militants. Right next in terms of political and ideological extremism are listed Ahrar al-Sham and the Syrian Islamic Front (coalition) with 18,000. Ahrar al-Sham, a Salafist, jihadist group, and the Syrian Islamic Front are/were nearly the same thing. Ahrar al-Sham dominated the SIF so much that very little, if anything, was left for other groups under the SIF-dominated coalition. According to Ahrar al-Sham itself (as of December of 2013), it has 25,000 militants in its ranks. According to other sources, Ahrar-al Sham, , which fights for a “caliphate under sharia,” has some 20,000 fighters. (“Syrian rebel chief rejects Geneva Peace Talks,” <http://www.zamanalwsl.net/en/news/2984.html> December 21, 2013) That’s at any rate more than what Lister’s and Business Insider’s claimed. On the other hand, a sanitized Wikipedia article sophisticatedly suggests with a reference to the Economist that the reader think of Ahrar al-Sham’s size to be anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahrar_ash-Sham) Ahrar al-Sham (its full name in translation means quite ironically, “Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant”) is, moreover, al Qaeda —except for its official name. On November 22, 2013, Ahrar al-Sham, this right-next-to-al-Qaeda, formed a new “Islamic Front” with Liwa al-Tawhid (10,000-11,000 according to Wikipedia) and other groups. Let it be note that, this very same Islamic Front is now (December of 2013) is said to represent the largest insurgent group with at least 45,000 fighters. By virtue of this coalition, the all-but-for-the-name al Qaeda forces have thus more than doubled over the polished estimates from September, which painted the new coalition members of Ahrar al-Sham as the best moderate insurgents after the now defunct Free Syrian Army. Let it be also stressed that Ahrar al-Sham is the hegemon of this new Islamist, supposedly non-al-Qaeda coalition.

The Business Insider chart also cites 31,000 men in arms under the Free Syrian Army, which, as of December 6 when its headquarters and warehouses were physically taken over by the ISIS and the Islamic Front, no longer exists as a formation. The same chart then lists in the middle of the opposition’s political spectrum, Suqur al-Sham (9,000 strong), accompanied with a very revealing note: “Sugor al-Sham regularly fights alongside Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS in addition to rejecting democracy and embracing an Islamic state.” So, while “technically aligned with the FSA,” it is actually an ally with al Qaeda and has a program that is identical with al Qaeda’s groups. A Wikipedia article writes that its 9,000 strength is what this group also asserts. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suqur_al-Sham Thus, if we put the above together, the number of the jihadists has thus already increased to at least $45,000 + 9,000 = 54,000$ out of the approximate total of 100,000 on the side of the anti-government forces. This number still excludes the openly al-Qaeda core formation, the ISIS and al-Nusra.

War of numbers for the truth about the Syrian War II

To sum up the previous post. Throughout the conflict, the Western and pro-insurgency propaganda tried to minimize the size and the presence of al Qaeda and al-Qaeda-forces to the minimum for the sake of public consumption and in order to maintain support for a regime-change—by means of these very same forces, but misrepresented as “moderate freedom fighters” and “democratic revolutionaries.” The opposite is the truth. They are forces of neo-fascist, intolerant, highly oppressive and extremely prejudiced reaction that mask themselves in the garb of a religion. To this

effect, it has been claimed that al Qaeda forces amount only to some 10% of the insurgency or 10,000-12,000 fighters (for the 10,000 figure see, for example, Ben Farmer and Ruth Sherlock, "Syria: nearly half rebel fighters are jihadists or hardline Islamists, says IHS Jane's report," <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10311007/Syria-nearly-half-rebel-fighters-are-jihadists-or-hardline-Islamists-says-IHS-Janes-report.html>, 15 Sep 2013). Depending on the given (anti-Syrian) source, all the jihadi forces were said to anywhere between 10,000-50,000 overall.

A closer look revealed that, effectively, out of the total of 100,000 acknowledged militants, it is now impossible to identify ANY pro-democracy, moderate, or liberal armed formation. There is none. With the demise of the front umbrella/cover "coalition" deceptively called the Free Syrian Army, all the significant brigades and groups share al Qaeda's Wahhabi fundamentalist ideology and the goal of establishing an oppressive, despotic and tyrannical sharia Caliphate. The newly established Islamic Front is led and dominated by Ahrar al-Sham, which is in every aspect an al Qaedaesque army. It is an al Qaeda—just with a different name. Let's now try to look closer at the data for the ISIS and al-Nusra—two foreign-based armies that openly declare their al Qaeda identity. As indicated, Western governments, pro-insurgency NGOs and corporate media keep their total number at around 10,000-12,000. While, it is understandable that, for political and propagandist reasons, the US, other Western governments, NATO, and corporate media were trying to downplay the size of the al Qaeda army in Syria, the evident policy to consciously conceal the truth and keep the public in the dark still means that they have been covering for al Qaeda and for their own actions, which, like a vampire, does not stand the light of the day and transparency. Briefly put, the real strengths of the ISIS and al-Nusra have been handled by the key sponsors of the regime change in Syria by means of this al-Qaeda proxy is the most critical secret of the whole operation.

Richard Spencer put the estimate higher, though he still hedged his subtle possible revelation: "Estimates of the relative strengths of the two main al-Qaeda groups, ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra, vary widely, but are almost certainly at 15,000 or more. Let us note that, in doing so, Spencer merely sets a number below which al Qaeda's combined strength does not go, while cleverly leaving up open both the true number and the highest possible figure. An assessment prepared by Gen Salim Idriss, head of the Supreme Military Council, said that ISIS could additionally call upon support from up to 20,000 allied tribesmen in the north-east, near the Iraq border." (Richard Spencer, "Leading Syrian rebels defect, dealing blow to fight against al-Qaeda," <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10498477/Leading-Syrian-rebels-defect-dealing-blow-to-fight-against-al-Qaeda.html>, 05 Dec 2013).

A Wikipedia article also marvelously hedges and fogs the truth. It presents the ISIS strength in the following way (? http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant):

Strength 12,000 in Syria (Sept. 2013)[12]
 ~1,000 "core" members (2005)[13]
 ~10,000 (including part-time fighters)(2010)[14]
 ~1,000 (2011)[15]
 ~2,500 (2012)[16][17]
 10,000–12,000 (2013)[18]

Thus, it offers a plethora of numbers, and tries to dilute the total number by a new suspiciously looking category of part-time al Qaeda, as if al Qaeda too, like much of U.S. labor force has been turned into permanently temporary employees. Yet, these numbers are an advancement even over Spencer's for what Spencer claimed to be a total number for both main sections of al Qaeda in Syria is barely enough to accommodate the strength of the ISIS alone. In November 2013, the pro-insurgency Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) allowed itself to acknowledge what has been already a well observed reality on the ground: "ISIS is the strongest group in Northern Syria - 100%- and anyone who tells you anything else is lying." (Gul Tuysuz, Raja Razek, Nick Paton

Walsh (6 November 2013). ("Al Qaeda-linked group strengthens hold in northern Syria," CNN. November 6, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/05/world/europe/syria-turkey-al-qaeda/>) Of course, the CNN cannot do otherwise than to insert quickly a PR correction: "Charles Lister, analyst at IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, said: 'Although not a numerically dominant force, ISIS is playing an increasingly pre-eminent role in the northern Syrian insurgency.'" So a reader is supposed to believe that, although the ISIS is in control of a vast territory and dominates the north and the east and a good part of the north-west, it is "not a numerically dominant force."

Nevertheless, the article does list towns which are occupied and controlled by the ISIS: Raqqa, key entry points and sections in the insurgents-controlled parts of Aleppo, Keftin, Tal Rifat, Azaz, Ad Dana, Dar Ta Izzah, Binnish, Ma'arrat Misrin, Jarablus and Al-Bab Sarmin, Salqin, Hraytan, Tabqa Dam, Hayyan, Al Eyramoon, Karm Al Meeyasir, Karm Al Qatarji, Al Atarib, Sarmada, Tal Halef, Membij, Athimah, Maarat an-Numan, Saraqib and Ariha. Besides Aleppo, the largest Syrian city of 2,200,000 people, the largest Syrian town, which the ISIS controls, is Raqqa with 220,000 inhabitants. Other towns under ISIS control include Manij (100,000), al-Bab (63,000), Maarat an-Numan (60,000), Saraqib (33,000), Azaz (32,000), Salqin (24,000), Binnish (22,000), Tell Rifaat (21,000), Harem (22,000), Ma'arrat Misrin (18,000), Sarmin (15,000), tell Abyad (15,000), Darat Izza (14,000), Al-Dana (14,000), Jarablus (12,000), Atarib (11,000), Kaftlin (2,000), Salma (2,000).

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cities_and_towns_during_the_Syrian_Civil_War;

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_in_Syria) So, according to the pro-al-Qaeda narrative,

we are supposed to believe that a force of 10,000-15,000 controls thousand square kilometers of territory and a population of perhaps several millions. A conservatively realistic estimate would suggest that, to do all this, the ISIS would need perhaps at least 40,000 fighters. Only in the east, the ISIS might rule over some one million people. (<http://www.citypopulation.de/Syria.html>)

Circumstantial evidence confirms these conclusions. Just, in an attack on Azaz in September of 2013, the ISIS task force had 7,000 fighters. (Christoph Reuter, "Masked Army: Jihadist Group Expands Rapidly in Syria," December 18, 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/isis-shadowy-jihadist-group-expands-rapidly-in-syria-a-939561-2.html>)

What about al-Nusra? A Wikipedia article states al Nusra's strength at 15,000-20,000. These numbers are based on these sources: "Syria interactive: the rebels, their weapons and funds". Channel 4. 29 May 2013. Retrieved 25 September 2013; "Al-Qaeda leader in Syria speaks to Al Jazeera". Al Jazeera. 18 December 2013. Retrieved 19 December 2013. The Wikipedia article, however, later says without any reference that, "as of early 2013 al-Nusra is estimated to have around 6,000 members." Clearly a lie.

So what to do in this thick fog of war? One has to sift through reports and hills of obfuscations and disinformation, looking for slips and leaks. One such a slip of an otherwise well guarded truth happened in September 24, 2013 when the precursor of the current Islamic Front was established with one crucial difference—the alliance comprised the current Islamic Front (established or modified on November 22, 2013) TOGETHER WITH al Nusra. In this respect, we were treated with a figure of the overall size of this Islamic Front (i.e. Islamic Alliance) provided both by the insurgents and the CIA. In both cases, the figure given was 75,000, respectively as 75% of the insurgency's total manpower. (Liz Sly and Karen DeYoung, September 25, 2013, "Largest Syrian rebel groups form Islamic alliance, in possible blow to U.S. influence,"

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/largest-syrian-rebel-groups-embrace-islamic-alliance-in-possible-blow-to-us-influence/2013/09/25/f669629e-25f8-11e3-9372-92606241ae9c_story.html;

"New Syrian alliance rebuffs West," Sydney Morning Herald,

September 27, 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/new-syrian-alliance-rebuffs-west-20130926-2ugyh.html#ixzz2ogdJ8d7F>;

"Syria Updates: The New Islamic Front And Whodunnit III,"

<http://arirusila.wordpress.com/2013/12/20/syria-updates-the-new-islamic-front-and-whodunnit-iii/>;

"Syria: Bibi and Bandar Badger Obama to Support the Islamic Front," Dec 9, 2013, Foreign Policy Journal; <http://www.syriasolidaritymovement.org/2013/12/10/syria-bibi-and-bandar-badger-obama-to-support-the-islamic-front/> check the link). And, so if the Islamic Front WITH al Nusra has

75,000 fighters or so and 45,000 WITHOUT al-Nusra, it is reasonable to assume that a more realistic number for al Nusra is somewhere around 30,000 (at least). This is again confirmed by circumstantial evidence and news. Al-Nusra Front, which represents al-Qaeda in Syria, not only tends to lead most of the joint operations between insurgent brigades, but also tends to carry the brunt of the fighting itself. On the Qalamoun front , al Nusra was also reported to be largest fighting formation present there, outmatching all the others. (Radwan Mortada, "Al-Akhbar in Qalamoun: Cave Commandos Vow to Move War to Lebanon ," <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/al-akhbar-qalamoun-cave-commandos-vow-move-war-lebanon>)

To sum up, there is no trace of any secular or democratic insurgents of any notable significance or presence on the ground in Syria. Their existence is a myth. On the other hand, the supposed 10,000 or so fighters in the openly al Qaeda army (the ISIS and al Nusra) is untenable too. Available estimates indicates that this army is some 70,000 fighters strong at least—as a very conservative estimate. As such, it is by far the largest portion of what are anyway fundamentalist, jihadist fighters and extremists whose agenda is to establish an extreme despotism and fascist-like tyranny—with the help of sizeable cohorts of their Western PR enablers, including many Facebook fan club pages, a FB page of al Nusra’s fans (which was closed just a few days ago) had 17,000 followers. Now the question is whom on earth does the US and U.S. NATO allies want to drag with them to the shores of thee Geneva Lake on January 22, 2014 as part of the non-existent “moderate,” “secular,” and “democratic” opposition (besides some of the people who are paid to present themselves as such and who live in the West)?