



# **Is Al-Qaida in Syria?**

## **Understanding the Context of Recent U.S. Intelligence Assessments**

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## Introduction

*In the last fortnight there has been a growing media interest in whether or not al-Qaida is in Syria and may have carried out two terrorist attacks in Damascus and a more recent one in Aleppo. First an article [appeared](#) in McClatchy newspapers quoting anonymous US officials who suggest that two bombings in Damascus — one on December 23, 2011, the other on January 6, 2012 — were carried out by al-Qaida agents who had infiltrated Syria via Iraq and acted on direct orders from al-Qaida commander Ayman al-Zawahiri himself. Today, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told Congress that these Syrian attacks [bore](#) “all the earmarks [sic] of an al-Qaida-like attack.”*

It is not impossible that this is the case. Al-Qaida is, in all likelihood, already in the country and trying to exploit a spontaneous Arab uprising against the Assad dictatorship, as it has tried to do with the previous uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. The al-Qaida franchise in Iraq is still the group’s most operationally active branch, carrying out over 30 attacks a week (with a large strike every four to six weeks) and the group may be feeling confident enough to expand its operations into Syria. The indiscriminate killing on display is certainly their modus operandi.

Yet there is a gaping hole in the evaluation now being advanced by US intelligence officials and thus confirming a major point of the Syrian regime narrative that al-Qaida has successfully carried out two high-profile operations in Damascus. First, any reference in Washington to such attribution is heavily caveated. The *Washington Post* queried intelligence officials who [claimed](#) “no conclusive link” between the terrorist group and recent violence in Syria. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, in a testimony he delivered this week before the Senate Armed Services Committee, [admitted](#) there was “no confirmation” of al-Qaida setting things off in Syria. The *New York Times* followed this with an [article](#) suggesting the same but also admitting that U.S. officials have “no forensic or electronic intercept

evidence to prove” that al-Qaida bears culpability for any attacks thus far.

## No responsibility claimed

Complicating this story line further is the fact that, to date, al-Qaida has not claimed responsibility for any Syrian operation. Indeed, in his communique declaring solidarity with the Syrian revolutionaries, Zawahiri declined to mention either the December 23 or January 6 bombing — a strange omission if his agents were responsible for one or both incidents given that al-Qaida is now a severely weakened terrorist network that needs to signpost every accomplishment it can. Late last year, Zawahiri found the time to boast about al-Qaida’s kidnapping of a 70 year old American, so why would he stay silent about two high-profile Damascus bombings? Moreover, al-Qaida’s leadership has been ruthlessly expunged by Obama’s drones and intelligence estimates say that the group is financially struggling to train, recruit and pay terrorists’ surviving family members. By all accounts, Zawahiri needs a “win.” If his group really has expanded its operations into Syria, he would be more brazen about it. Second, there is sufficient evidence that the Assad regime was itself complicit in, if not solely responsible for, both Damascus bombings.

## The Kafarsouseh bombings

The December 23 attack, said to have been twin suicide car bombings, hit the State Security Administration building and a Military Security complex, both in the district of Kafarsouseh. In order to reach either of these locations, one has to pass through multiple checkpoints and, if one is driving, mandatory vehicle searches. One also requires security clearance and the relevant permits. It might be possible for a savvy al-Qaida agent to bypass such obstacles under normal circumstances: jihadists once managed to smuggle parts of a car bomb piecemeal through tough checkpoints in the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq. But if a totalitarian police state fears that “terrorists” are leading a massive uprising against it, security around sensitive government sites is bound to be highly restrictive. In fact, eyewitnesses claimed that both sites had been cordoned off by security forces and that ambulances were on hand in Kafarsouseh well in advance of any explosions. Furthermore, the regime reacted to these events in a manner both uncharacteristic and suspicious. Within a mere 15 minutes, it claimed with certitude that Al-Qaida was responsible. State media personnel were at the scene instantly. Usually any event that makes the Assad regime look vulnerable is followed by a media blackout, not media saturation: see, for instance, the 2008 assassination of lead Hezbollah operative Imad Mughniyeh (likely at the hands of Israeli Mossad), which also happened in Kafarsouseh, or the Syrian rebel strike on an Air Force intelligence complex in Harasta several months ago. Nor was any CCTV footage from the many mounted security cameras on the targeted security buildings ever aired. These would have surely shown a vehicle driving up to the detonation point.

State media soon took its coverage to new heights, claiming that successful suicide bombers could still be brought to justice. A news anchor for state-controlled

Addounia TV took to the air to say that thanks to swift police work, the Syrian government had “arrest[ed]... the terrorists who blew themselves up today” (here’s a [screen capture](#)). Subsequent accusations followed: Al-Qaida was now working in league with the United States and Israel, the regime clarified. Eventually, the *mukhabarat* [fabricated](#) a fake website for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood through which it issued a press release saying that one of the Brotherhood’s “Sunni brigades” executed the “kamikaze” attacks against Assad’s forces. Agence France Presse reported on this alleged confession, then had to issue a [retraction](#).

It’s not beyond the realm of plausibility that Assad, caught off-guard by a genuine terrorist attack, would respond frenetically by inventing phantom culprits. But his eagerness to erase any and all forensic evidence ought to raise eyebrows in U.S. intelligence circles. We are now asked to believe that here, at last, was confirmation of regime propaganda that required no doctoring or dissimulation, and yet the regime still behaved as if it had to hide the truth.

## The Midan bombing

The January 6 incident was even more dubious. This one involved the explosion of a Syrian police bus in the Midan district of Damascus. Yet as noted by eyewitnesses — and captured on amateur video subsequently uploaded to YouTube — [a large crew of Syrian state media](#) were stationed around the site of the blast before it took place. Many also said that the area had been [cordoned off](#) by Syrian security in advance. More bizarrely, [footage](#) of the aftermath of the bombing aired on state television, and later broadcast skeptically on Al Arabiya, strongly suggests a staged event. One [supposedly injured security officer](#) being cradled by another is spotted prematurely by the cameraman and reveals himself to have been playacting all along; he waves the cameraman off, then casually gets up and runs off (see about 0:33 into this [clip](#)). Police shields meant to have been inside the bus

before it exploded are shown being inserted into the vehicle, post-explosion (see [1:22](#)). And so on.

The author showed the footage to a ranking U.S. counterterrorism expert who has inspected the aftermath of suicide bombings in Iraq. He suspects Al-Qaida involvement in Syria, nevertheless, he agreed that what was exhibited on Syrian state media was little more than theatrics. The Guardian's Ian Black, who was then in Damascus as part of a regime-licensed foreign press tour of Syria, noted in an [interview](#) with the BBC that neither he nor any Western reporters were allowed near the scene of the Midan blast and that the whole affair had an element of surreality to it:

*"Somebody held up a glove filled with blood and said 'this is Syrian blood'. There was a sense that the Syrian authorities wanted to show what had happened.*

*What we didn't see were any other bodies of the people who are said to have been killed. We left with the sense of this is a horrific spectacle but that maybe some of the details weren't quite as one might have expected."*

## Assad regime's support of terrorist proxies

Adding to the aura of mystery is the simple fact that Syrian military intelligence has long maintained close ties a wide array of terrorist groups, ranging from Sunni Islamist to secular Kurdish. The regime was until recently both a host and financier of Palestinian Hamas. Its relationship with Lebanese Hezbollah is ongoing: Hezbollah snipers have reportedly been [brought](#) into Syria to help the mukhabarat with their crackdown; Hezbollah weapons caches are fanned out all over Syria; and the party's leader Hasan Nasrallah continues to back Assad in both word and deed.

The Kurdish Workers' Party, PKK (or PYD, as its known in Syria) is also seen as a handmaiden of

Syrian military intelligence: it was fingered for the assassination of prominent Syrian-Kurdish oppositionist Mishal Tammo several months ago, and there are reports in the Kurdish press of the PYD's intimidation of other anti-Assad Kurdish activists.

The regime also counts as likely proxies [Fatah al-Islam](#), a Palestinian terrorist cell operating in Lebanon with alleged ties to al-Qaida, and [Jund al-Sham](#), which served as a jihadist incubator for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi prior to his joining al-Qaida. Both groups have violently disrupted the international investigation into the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, a murder for which both Syrian intelligence and Hezbollah have been implicated.

Finally, Damascus has for the last decade facilitated the importation of innumerable jihadists, including al-Qaida affiliates, into Iraq to fight U.S. and coalition troops. Almost certainly the traffic will move the other way now, as Adnan al-Assadi, the Iraqi Interior Minister, [said](#) last week, although whether or not al-Qaida operatives from Iraq are pouring into Syria remains unclear.

## The al-Bara' ibn Malik Martyrs Brigade

A recent [report](#) by The Independent suggests that the bulk of Iraqi Sunnis rushing to the aid of their coreligionists in Syria are in fact members of the "Anbar Awakening," the nationalist-sectarian movement that assisted coalition forces during the surge and helped vitiating al-Qaida's capabilities in Iraq. Indeed, one apparent newcomer to the Free Syrian Army — the "al-Bara' ibn Malik Martyrs Brigade" — was said to be the first definitive sign that al-Qaida had established a foothold amongst the Syrian rebels. In a YouTube video circulated last week, these fighters are shown standing on front of a black-and-white flag (the "shahahda") which is eerily similar to the one used by the Bin Ladenists in Mesopotamia. And

yet, as al-Qaida specialist Aaron Zelin [pointed out](#), they're also standing in front of the pre-Ba'athist Syrian flag, "show[ing] direct support of a nationalist project, which is contrary to al-Qa'ida's worldview." This group may simply consist of Sunni sectarians who not long ago were liaising with General Petraeus' counterinsurgents.

## Al-Qaida exploited by regime?

Two questions remain: to what extent are al-Qaida elements infiltrating the Syrian opposition and to what extent are they still in contact with or being manipulated by their former patron in Damascus? Even at this late stage, Assad appears willing to toy with al-Qaida either as a proxy for the regime's dirty work as a warning against Western intervention in Syria. This is why he's lately released from prison [Abu Musab al-Suri](#), the 7/7 mastermind and a [dozen or so](#) other members of al-Qaida and Fatah-al Islam. Assad seems to be mirroring in this respect Saddam Hussein's "Blessed July" campaign, which envisaged a wave of "martyrdom" operations against Western targets in event of imminent regime collapse.

One source at the U.S. Department of Defense told the author that the running al-Qaida-in-Syria story now being propagated in the media is "patently false". He added that Syrian intelligence, if not itself responsible for the two Damascus bombings, might have facilitated erstwhile jihadist allies into carrying out terrorist operations by feeding them misinformation or even luring them to normally secure locations and then turning a blind eye to what happened next. After all, it's easy enough to exploit terrorism once you've abetted it. And it is by no means beyond the ken of the

Assad regime to cover up or fabricate evidence in the interest of a longstanding propaganda narrative.

## The Iran connexion

Still another complicating wrinkle in the U.S. intelligence assessment is that, by James Clapper's own admission, al-Qaida have formed a "shotgun marriage, or marriage of convenience" with Iran, which Clapper suggested might be the actual vehicle through which the terrorist group is entering Syria. Because Iran is a staunch ally of Assad (the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp's elite Qods Force is also helping the regime's repression by bringing in arms, snipers and cash), it stands to reason that if Iran is using al-Qaida as a proxy in Syria, then it is not to help the revolution but to destroy it by creating a Western-credible pretext for Assad's scorched-earth military campaigns. Before the regime only said it was fighting terrorists, now it might really be doing so.

## Conclusion

Whatever the case, U.S. intelligence on Syria thus far has not risen above the level of speculation, at least not publicly. The deployment of U.S. reconnaissance drones over the skies of Syria, said to want to track regime atrocities, is no doubt also meant to gather intelligence on cross-border traffic and the activity of jihadist cells in the country. However, given the strong countervailing evidence about the first two Damascus bombings, coupled with the Syrian regime's demonstrable history of falsification and its ongoing alliance with jihadist groups, there is ample room to doubt a coalescent thesis that just because it seems like al-Qaida, it probably is al-Qaida.