

The Changing Dynamics of Rebel Relations

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Abstract

The Syrian Civil War began as a series of non-violent protests, which escalated through the continued violence of the Assad regime. The violence transformed the protests and a militarized opposition emerged that plunged Syria into a factionalized civil war with various groups vying for territory and power. Armed rebel groups have been one of the most prominent actors within Syria, but each group has their own ideology and goals. Throughout the conflict, the dynamics between these groups have changed rapidly. There is evidence of the creation of various fronts, prompting cooperation between multiple armed insurgency groups. However, in other instances these opposition groups are fighting each other rather than the regime. In this presentation, I ask how these various rebel groups determine, establish, and maintain relations amongst each other and what this tells us about cooperation or conflict between armed groups in the Syrian conflict. I argue that these relations are not solely determined by violence, but also by factors such as resources, territory, strategy, and ideology. To ground this analysis, I examine the Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and their relations with other armed groups within the cities of Idlib and Aleppo. The theoretical framework will be drawn from the New Wars literature, with empirical evidence from reports of armed group activity, news sources, and online material cataloging rebel relations. Drawing on this evidence, I show some of the conditions under which Jabhat al-Nusra would enter into cooperation or conflict with other groups, whether on the battlefield or in the establishment of governance institutions. In a conflict characterized by a fractured insurgency, this essay seeks to understand the dynamics shaping rebel cooperation and conflict.

Keywords: Syria, rebel relations, Jabhat al Nusra

1. Introduction

As the Arab uprisings swept across the region, it was unclear as to if or how they would manifest in Syria. Following the imprisonment and arrest of several school-aged boys in Daraa, Syrians began to mobilize forming different types of civil service organizations and protests. When members of the Syrian army defected and formed the Free Syrian Army, a space emerged for Syrians to mobilize militarily resulting in the fractionalization of the armed opposition. As the conflict has evolved, different groups have emerged that subscribe to different variations of both political and religious ideology. One of these groups is the Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN). Throughout the conflict, groups such as JAN, have established alliances and engaged in conflict with different groups depending on the geographic territory and the current political-climate of the war. The plurality of different actors within the Syrian conflict has created a dynamic and consistently fluctuating terrain for the various armed groups.

To truly understand the Syrian conflict and its ramifications for post-conflict reconstruction, it is crucial to understand the dynamics between the different armed groups and what affects them. This research asks the question: how do rebel groups determine, establish, and maintain relations amongst each other? Further, what do these dynamics

tell us about rebel coordination and conflict in the case of the Syrian Civil War? To explore these questions, the research focuses on the group JAN and explores how rebel relations are determined in the spheres of military action and governance. This paper argues that military coordination is determined by strategic decisions and shared goals, and that ideology plays no role in determining military coordination or conflict. Within the realm of governance, groups will coordinate based upon ideology. This ideology, however, does not guarantee sustainable cooperation. The paper will begin with a methodology section, followed by specific examples illustrating JAN's military relations and administrative relations within the cities of Aleppo and Idlib.

2. Methodology

In aiming to address these questions, this research chooses to understand the Syrian Civil War as a 'New War'.¹ This research explores how contemporary wars are fought and financed and the effects of these wars on relations amongst the various players. To understand the dynamics of rebel relations, the research draws on scholarly sources, social media and recent news articles to provide evidence of JAN's different rebel relations.

Due to the contemporary nature of the Syrian conflict, rebel relations are consistently fluctuating. Moreover, the continued violence of the civil war, makes primary sources scarce. The research focuses on JAN's activities within two specific geographic locations: Aleppo and Idlib. These two cities are both provincial capitals making them significant territory for all parties involved in the Syrian Civil War. To generate a collection of JAN's activities within the conflict, the research draws on various social media sites, popular news, and academic sources. These different accounts of JAN's activities provide insight into what groups JAN was coordinating with or engaging in conflict with, allowing for patterns to be discovered.

3. Military Coordination

In January 2014, JAN was invited to join a coalition of armed groups called the Islamic Front (IF).² This coalition was composed of a variety of armed groups including: Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, Tawhid Brigade, Haq Brigade, Ansar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, and the Kurdish Islamic Front.³ In January 2014, JAN was invited but declined to join the IF.⁴ A month later, however, JAN and IF began simultaneous military action against ISIS in Deir el-Zour.⁵ The concurrent military offensives were successful, resulting in ISIS's withdrawal from the countryside of Deir el-Zour.⁶

This example provides insight into the dynamics of JAN's military relations with other armed groups. First, JAN's relations with the IF demonstrate that ideology is not a determinant for coordination. When JAN was first invited to join the IF, it declined despite the fact that the coalition subscribed to some range of Islamist ideology. By not choosing to coordinate with the IF initially, this suggests that ideology does not dictate rebel cooperation or conflict. However, this instance does highlight that military coordination is based upon shared goals. The simultaneous military action against ISIS in February 2014 demonstrated a change in perspective for JAN in terms of military strategy. At this point, many of the armed opposition groups within Syria viewed ISIS as a threat that refused to coordinate with other groups. This was the first instance of JAN engaging in physical conflict with ISIS. Until this point, JAN had avoided conflict with ISIS, but in early February the situation began to change. ISIS began targeting JAN's territory in Deir el-Zour, which led JAN to issue a statement towards ISIS to engage in conflict.⁷ Therefore, a space emerged for JAN to coordinate with other armed groups to engage in conflict against ISIS. While it is unclear whether these military offensives were coordinated, the simultaneous military action suggest cooperation due to the shared goal and the strategic advantages, such as saving on resources. This cooperation presented a chance for JAN to strategically coordinate or as Paul Stainland would argue, integrate.⁸ Becoming an integrated group allows rebels to interact more effectively with local actors. In the case of ISIS in Deir el-Zour, where the two groups successfully operated there was a fusion of a larger goal with a local one.⁹ JAN was able to continue expanding its territory within the conflict, but also target a local problem, ISIS.

The events in Deir el-Zour demonstrated to JAN the benefits of coordination with the IF. Following this unofficial coordination, JAN, the IF, and another group, Jaish al-Mujahideen, entered into a unification of operations in the city of Aleppo.¹⁰ Throughout conflict and civil war, as Christia argues there is an evolution of the relative power balance between different armed groups.¹¹ As a result, armed groups are consistently making decisions based on the group's own survival, not simply within the context of the war, but also post-conflict. Strategically, JAN found that it could advance its position, as well as expand its territory and operations by coordinating with the IF. Moreover, by cooperating with not only the IF, but also Jaish al-Mujahideen, it could obtain political leverage among other armed

groups.¹² Besides demonstrating that it was willing to coordinate with other armed groups, JAN's military alliances also allow for reinforcement of their own military strength and power, not only to the groups JAN is fighting, but also to those it's cooperating with. JAN's coordination within Aleppo demonstrates that a shared goal and self-interest, not ideology, determine rebel relations.

While Aleppo presented an example of JAN choosing to coordinate after the formation of a front, it has also been involved in the creation of different rebel coalitions. In early 2015, JAN engaged in a new type of coordination within the Idlib region. A coalition of different armed groups called Jaish al-Fatah, or the Army of Conquest, was created to liberate the city of Idlib from the regime. The coalition was composed of a variety of armed groups including: JAN, Ahrar al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaish al-Sunna, Ajnad al-Sham, and Faylaq al-Sham.¹³ On March 24, 2015, Jaish al-Fatah initiated a new assault on the city of Idlib. The military offensive started with a bombardment of the city, then progressed to three suicide bombers, one of which was a JAN soldier. After one day of fighting, the coalition entered the city and were coordinating militarily on the battlefield. JAN was leading the military battle on the city's north side, while Ahrar al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa had divided the south and the east. The rest of the coalition members were engaged on the west side of the city.¹⁴ After four days of battle, Jaish al-Fatah assumed full control of Idlib city. This capture of Idlib city from the regime was only the second instance of the Assad regime losing control of a provincial capital; the first instance being ISIS's seizure of Raqqa.¹⁵

As of October 2015, Jaish al-Fatah was the largest rebel alliance in terms of both geographic range and number of fighters.¹⁶ Within the coalition, Jaish al Fatah members subscribe to different variations of political and religious ideology. Groups such as JAN and Ahrar al-Sham aim to establish an Islamic state, while other groups within the coalition aspire to implement a secular state. The coalition was formed due to a shared goal to gain territory within Idlib city. As a result of this common goal, a variety of different armed groups joined the alliance. Jaish al-Fatah, however, is not a merger of different armed groups to create one large armed group, but rather an alliance built to share resources and strengthen military offensives.¹⁷

Based on Jaish al-Fatah's membership and goals, this suggests that JAN is not coordinating based on political or religious ideology. Rather, coordination was based on the shared goal of seizing Idlib city from the regime. Due to the fact that the creation of the organization maximized the resources of the group, JAN found this could benefit their military strategy, territory, and resources, but also could advance their position within the relative power balance of the armed opposition.¹⁸ Moreover, JAN's participation in Jaish al-Fatah allowed for the group to integrate themselves more firmly within the armed opposition, but also to garner civilian support. By liberating Idlib civilians from the control of the Assad regime, those civilians might more fully support Jaish al-Fatah and consequently JAN.

JAN's coordination with different armed groups in different territory provides insight into how rebel alliances are formed. As demonstrated by both its coordination with the IF and Jaish al-Fatah, JAN's alliances are based on the idea that these instances of cooperation maximize benefits. Military coordination is determined by shared goals, and not ideology. Ultimately, however, these decisions on coordination or conflict are determined based on survival and self-interest. Each alliance is made to strengthen the group and assure its own post-conflict survival. These independent goals of post-conflict survival demonstrate the fractionalization of the Syrian armed opposition. If each group is ultimately striving for its own survival, then the opposition is a dynamic, fluctuating entity that continuously alters the conflict.

4. Governance

While military coordination is determined by shared goals and not religious ideology, instances of JAN's administrative efforts in regards to governance present different determinants for rebel relations. In both Aleppo and Idlib, JAN has engaged in efforts to govern. In some instances, JAN has coordinated efforts at administration with other armed groups. In other instances, JAN has acted unilaterally. In Idlib and Aleppo, JAN's administrative efforts have had different trajectories.

In April 2013, reports emerged that JAN was coordinating with other armed groups to provide services within Aleppo, including a Sharia court. This coordination emerged as an alliance between JAN and other rebel groups in the form of a Sharia Commission. Soon after its creation, Liwa al-Tawhid, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Fath, and the Dawn of Islam Movement joined the Commission.¹⁹ These courts not only enforce laws and provide a type of legal system, but also engage in relief work.²⁰ JAN's administrative participation in Aleppo demonstrates two concepts. First, that administrative cooperation occurs between ideologically consistent framework. Each of the groups that JAN coordinated with has been characterized as either Conservative-Islamist or jihadist-extremist.²¹ Second, each of

these groups share a similar goal within their shared ideology. In this case, each of the coordinating groups sought to establish and enforce a sharia court.

JAN's administrative coordination in Aleppo demonstrates that rebel relations are determined differently depending on the function of the alliance. In the case of governance, JAN's administrative cooperation in 2013 occurred with different armed groups than the ones it would militarily coordinate with later in 2014. In its administrative coordination, JAN chose to cooperate with other armed groups that shared religious and political ideology. This shared belief is visible through the collaboration surrounding the creation and function of the Sharia courts within Aleppo. Moreover, through the Sharia Commission, JAN and the other groups were able to demonstrate their power. Governance efforts are one mechanism to prove territorial control.²² Moreover, governance measures are one tool used to legitimize the armed group in the eyes of the people. By providing some type of social service, JAN is able to earn social capital either with the local population or with other armed groups. However, in the case that JAN's administrative efforts do not align with the desires of the local community, administrative coordination can strengthen governance measures. By sharing ideology, these rebel groups are more devoted to certain mechanisms, such as sharia courts, which allows for successful implementation of these administrative efforts.

While shared ideology provides common ground to build a cooperative alliance, it does not guarantee sustainable cooperation. This was demonstrated by JAN's administrative conflict in Idlib city. Idlib presented an opportunity for a variety of armed actors to interact in various ways both militarily and administratively. After Jaish al-Fatah coordinated militarily to seize Idlib, a space emerged for the coalition to govern. While different institutions were established by the coalition, conflict began to emerge between different groups over power. Within Idlib, the largest governance authority was the Sharia Authority.²³ Amongst the Sharia Authority one armed group, Ahrar al-Sham, became the leading power. Reports began to emerge describing tensions between JAN and Ahrar al-Sham over governance.²⁴ JAN began targeting the Sharia Authority's leadership and its various institutions. With the assistance of another group, Jund al-Aqsa, JAN stormed a series of Sharia court buildings as well as police stations within Idlib province.²⁵

JAN's tensions with the Sharia Authority, and in effect Ahrar al-Sham, occurred due to survival concerns. Previously, JAN and Ahrar al-Sham had coordinated both militarily and administratively. As aforementioned, the two groups coordinated to establish Sharia courts in Aleppo. Further, the Sharia Authority subscribes to many of JAN's ideological values. In other cities, JAN has used Sharia courts as a mechanism for governance and reinforcement of their authority. JAN chose conflict in this instance due to its position within the relative power balance.²⁶ Ahrar al-Sham was demonstrating more power and influence within the Sharia Authority than JAN. Ahrar al-Sham's position challenged not only JAN's authority within the coalition, but also its survival. Therefore, not only did Ahrar al-Sham pose a threat, but consequently the Sharia Authority did as well. Further, if JAN lacked authority within the coalition, it also lacked the ability to control how its ideological goals would be implemented. Therefore, JAN saw a challenge to its authority, its position, its survival, and its ultimate goal to implement an Islamic state.

As a result of these threats, JAN decided to engage in conflict with a group it had frequently coordinated with. The attack against the Sharia Authority was a way to compete for administrative territory, but also to assert its own legitimacy to control the Sharia Authority.²⁷ In other words, JAN will resort to conflict if it believes its individual power is threatened.²⁸ In spite of ideological similarities, JAN aimed to guarantee not only its own long-term survival, but also its position and power.

These examples of JAN's relations illustrate that administrative coordination occurs within ideologically consistent framework. JAN seeks these types of ideologically-consistent alliances so that it will be easier in the post-conflict period to transition to an Islamic state.²⁹ Ultimately, however, these ideological administrative alliances are unsustainable, due to the fact that these alliances are not synonymous with a group's own long-term survival. While JAN will coordinate if it appears beneficial, the top priority of the group is its own survival and its own power. If either of those are threatened, JAN will not coordinate but rather engage in conflict with other groups.

5. Conclusion

Jabhat al-Nusra is only one of hundreds of different armed groups operating on the ground within the Syrian Civil War. All of these groups are interacting with other armed groups in different ways, whether it be cooperative or conflictive. This research has attempted to explore how rebel relations are determined, established, and maintained within the context of the Syrian Civil War. Through examination of several instances of JAN's relations with other armed groups in Aleppo and Idlib, it is evident that JAN determines rebel relations differently based on whether it is meant to facilitate military or administrative coordination. In terms of military alliances, coordination is based on

shared goals, and not ideology. In regards to governance, administrative coordination is based upon ideology, but is unsustainable. Ultimately, in both military and administrative action, each decision is made to protect the survival of the individual group.

Rebel relations provide an essential tool for understanding the Syrian conflict. The rebels are not a centralized opposition fighting against the regime. Rather, it is a collection of different identities competing for territory and control within the war-torn state. Moreover, rebel relations present a layer to the Syrian Conflict that will have drastic ramifications on the post-conflict reconstruction that will one day happen within the country. Each of the armed groups competing for territory will transition from fighting for territory to competing for space to politically participate within those reconstruction efforts. While rebel relations are shaping the contemporary conflict within Syria and could play a role in post-conflict reconstruction, these dynamics could also affect further changes in the region. The actions of these rebel groups can influence not only individuals, but also other states. Rebel relations present insight into a complex conflict that will continue to affect thousands of people, and will come to shape the creation of a post-conflict Syria.

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