

Syrian rebels pledge loyalty to al-Qaeda

9:50 AM, June 14, 2013 | 5 Comments

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In this Jan. 11, 2013, file citizen journalism image provided by Edlib News Network, ENN, which has been authenticated based on its contents and other AP reporting, shows rebels from al-Qaida affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra waving their brigade flag on the top of a Syrian air force helicopter, at Taftanaz air base that was captured by the rebels, in Idlib province, northern Syria. / Edlib News Network ENN / Associated Press

By Mona Alami
Special for USA TODAY

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BEIRUT — A Syrian rebel group's April pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda's replacement for Osama bin Laden suggests that the terrorist group's influence is not waning and that it may take a greater role in the Western-backed fight to topple Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The pledge of allegiance by Syrian Jabhat al Nusra Front chief Abu Mohamad al-Joulani to al-Qaeda leader Sheik Ayman al-Zawahri was coupled with an announcement by the al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq, that it would work with al Nusra as well.

Lebanese Sheik Omar Bakri, a Salafist who says states must be governed by Muslim religious law, says al-Qaeda has assisted al Nusra for some time.

"They provided them early on with technical, military and financial support , especially when it came to setting up networks of foreign jihadis who were brought into Syria,"

Bakri says. "There will certainly be greater coordination between

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the two groups."

The United States, which supports the overthrow of Assad, designated al Nusra a terrorist entity in December. The Obama administration has said it wants to support only those insurgent groups that are not terrorist organizations.

Al Nusra and groups like it have seen some of the most significant victories against Syrian government forces in the course of the 2-year-old uprising in which Assad's forces have killed about 80,000 people. Rebels not affiliated with al-Qaeda have pressed Washington for months to send weaponry that will allow them to match the heavy weapons of the Syrian army. They've urged the West to mount an air campaign against Assad's mechanized forces.

President Obama refuses to provide any direct military aid. Foreign radical Islamists streaming into the fight from the Middle East and Europe are making headway with the Syrian population by providing services and gaining ground in battles.

Tamer Mouhieddine, spokesman for the Syrian Free Army, a force made up of Syrian soldiers who have defected, said the recent announcements would not change his group's attitude toward al Nusra.

"The rebels in Syria have one common enemy — Bashar Assad — and they will collaborate with any faction allowing them to topple his regime," he said.

He confirmed that al Nusra is generating loyalty in Aleppo, a region battling for months with Assad, by providing financial support as well as setting up charities.

Aaron Zelin at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in Washington says al Nusra's ability to provide security and basic needs such as bread and fuel to Syrian civilians, as well as to reopen shops and restart bus services, has won gratitude from people who would not usually adhere to its strict ideology.

Zelin says some Syrian people have criticized al Nusra for banning alcohol, forcing women to wear a full veil and whipping men who are seen with women in public.

"This illustrates the need for American leadership in the Syrian conflict, particularly with regard to helping non-Qaeda-aligned rebels contain the growth of (al Nusra) and similar groups," he said. "Washington should also try to take advantage of cleavages within the rebellion and civilian population, since al Nusra is outside the mainstream and more concerned with establishing a transnational caliphate than maintaining the Syrian state."

Groups such as the Islamic Liwaa al Tawhid, which collaborates with al Nusra on military operations, worried that Assad would use the announcement from al Nusra as evidence for his claim that he is fighting terrorists, not Syrian citizens who wish an end to his dictatorship, Mouhieddine said.

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"We are willing to fight alongside any faction targeting the Assad regime, as long as it does not have a foreign agenda, which seems now the case" of al Nusra, he said.

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