

Tensions Emerge in al-Qaida Alliance in Syria
By Ryan Lucas, Associated Press
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BEIRUT (AP) — Tensions emerged Wednesday in a newly announced alliance between al-Qaida's franchise in Iraq and the most powerful Syrian rebel faction, which said it was not consulted before the Iraqi group announced their merger and only heard about it through the media.

Al-Qaida in Iraq said Tuesday that it had joined forces with Jabhat al-Nusra or the Nusra Front — the most effective force among the mosaic of rebel brigades fighting to topple President Bashar Assad in Syria's civil war. It said they had formed a new alliance called the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

The Syrian government seized upon the purported merger to back its assertion that it is not facing a true popular movement for change but rather a foreign-backed terrorist plot.

The state news agency said Wednesday that the union "proves that this opposition was never anything other than a tool used by the West and by terrorists to destroy the Syrian people."

Talk of an alliance between Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaida in Iraq has raised fears in Baghdad, where intelligence officials said increased cooperation was already evident in a number of deadly attacks.

And in Syria, a stronger Jabhat al-Nusra would only further complicate the battlefield where Western powers have been covertly trying to funnel weapons, training and aid toward more secular rebel groups and army defectors.

Washington has designated Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist organization over its links with al-Qaida, and the Syrian group's now public ties with the terrorist network are unlikely to prompt a shift in international support for the broader Syrian opposition.

Earlier this year, the U.S. announced a \$60 million non-lethal assistance package for Syria that includes meals and medical supplies for the armed opposition. It was greeted unenthusiastically by some rebel leaders, who said it does far too little.

Washington's next step is expected to be a broader package of non-lethal assistance, expanding from food and medical supplies to body armor and night-vision goggles. However, President Barack Obama has not given final approval on any new package and an announcement is not imminent, a senior administration official said.

Secretary of State John Kerry, who met with Syrian opposition leaders in London on Wednesday, hinted at the new non-lethal aid package this week, saying the administration had been holding intense talks on how to boost assistance to the rebels.



Rebels from al-Qaida affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra sit on a truck full of ammunition, at Taftanaz air base, that was captured by the rebels, in Idlib province, northern Syria. Al-Qaida's branch in Iraq said it has merged with Syria's extremist Jabhat al-Nusra, a move that shows the rising confidence of radicals within the Syrian rebel movement and is likely to trigger renewed fears among its international backers. Arabic on the flag, right, reads, "There is no God only God and Mohamad his prophet, Jabhat al-Nusra." (AP Photo/Edlib News Network ENN, File)

The U.S. opposes directly arming Syrian opposition fighters, in part out of fear that the weapons could fall into the hands of Islamic extremists such as Jabhat al-Nusra.

The apparent tensions between Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaida in Iraq emerged on Wednesday, when Nusra leader Abu Mohammad al-Golani appeared to distance himself from claims the two groups had merged. Instead, he pledged allegiance to al-Qaida's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Al-Golani said he was not consulted about the merger and only heard about it through the media. He did not deny the two groups had united, but remained vague, saying the announcement was premature and that his group will continue to use Jabhat al-Nusra as its name.

"The banner of the Front will remain unchanged despite our pride in the banner of the State and those who carried it and sacrificed and shed their blood for it," he said in a reference to al-Qaida in Iraq, formally known as the Islamic State in Iraq.

The message appeared to be, at least in part, an effort by Jabhat al-Nusra to reassure Syrians that the group remains dedicated to the uprising to oust Assad and is not beholden to non-Syrian interests despite its pledge of fealty to al-Qaida.

"What you saw from the Front of its defense of your religion, honors, and blood, and its good qualities with you and the fighting groups, will remain as you experienced it," al-Golani said in remarks addressed to the Syrian people. "The announcement of the pledge of allegiance will not change anything in its (Nusra's) policy."

Al-Golani's message was first reported by the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors extremist websites.

Earlier this week, al-Zawahiri urged Islamic fighters in Syria to unite in their efforts to oust Assad. That may have provided at least part of the impetus for the announced merger with al-Qaida in Iraq.

The purported unification was announced by ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a 21-minute audio message posted on militant websites late Monday.

In the recording, al-Golani confirmed his group's long-standing, close ties with al-Qaida's Iraqi franchise, and expressed gratitude for the money and manpower it provided to help get Jabhat al-Nusra off the ground.

The Syrian group has made little secret of its links across the Iraqi border, but until now it has not officially declared itself to be part of al-Qaida.

It was unclear what impact the apparent tensions might have on relations between the groups, although they have shown increasing cooperation in recent months, according to intelligence officials in the region.

Jabhat al-Nusra, which wants to oust Assad and replace his regime with an Islamic state, first emerged in a video posted online in January 2012. Since then, it has demonstrated its prowess — and ruthlessness — on the battlefield.

It has claimed responsibility for many of the deadliest suicide bombings against Syrian government institutions and military facilities. The group's success helped fuel a surge in its popularity among rebel fighters, although it has also emerged as a source of friction with more moderate and secular brigades in Syria.

Iraqi officials say the groups are sharing three military training compounds, logistics, intelligence and weapons, and are growing in strength around the Syria-Iraq border.

One of the most dramatic attacks by the group — and at the time the clearest indication of cross-border cooperation with al-Qaida in Iraq — came on March 4, when 51 Syrian soldiers were killed in a well-coordinated ambush. The Syrians had crossed into Iraq to seek refuge following clashes with rebels on the Syrian side of the border.

Inside Syria, the news of Jabhat al-Nusra's fealty to al-Qaida mattered little to some activists, for whom the fight against the regime is paramount.

Abu Raed, an activist in Aleppo province, said the merger "is of no interest to anyone here."

"The rebels in Syria have one common goal, which is toppling the regime of Bashar Assad and anything that comes from the outside is of no interest to us," Abu Raed said, giving only an alias because of security concerns. "There is room for different opinions in the revolution and the important thing is the common goal."

Also Wednesday, activists said at least 42 people were killed in clashes between regime forces and rebels in the villages of Sanamein and Ghebgha in the southern province of Daraa, including 16 fighters and three soldiers.

Fighting in the province has escalated in recent weeks as fighters capitalize on an influx of weapons to advance in the strategically important region along the border with Jordan.

Associated Press writers Barbara Surk and Zeina Karam in Beirut contributed to this report.

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