

Syrian Rebels Break With Group Over Qaeda Wing Alliance

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BEIRUT, Lebanon — A leading coalition of Syrian Islamist insurgents broke with a more radical group on Friday, sharply criticizing its announced alliance with Al Qaeda's Iraq branch as a moral and political mistake that would benefit only their common enemy, President [Bashar al-Assad](#).

"The relentless pursuit of power should not be one of our goals," said a statement by the coalition, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, referring to the alliance between [Syria's](#) Nusra Front and the Qaeda branch. "This is not the right time to declare states, or to unify a state with another state."

Expressing "surprise and dismay" at the development, the coalition statement said, "We don't need imported charters or a new understanding of the nation's religion." And in a further criticism of Nusra's loyalty to outsiders, the statement said, "We won't be doing our population, and our nation, any service if we pledge our allegiance to those who don't know a thing about our reality."

The criticisms were the most strident in a series of negative reactions to the Nusra-Al Qaeda combination by other members of Syria's armed opposition. Such a combination could further complicate the two-year-old civil war in Syria by strengthening the radical jihadist component of the insurgency, undermining efforts by other rebels to obtain weapons from Western powers.

Mr. Assad has long contended that his enemies are foreign-backed terrorists affiliated with Sunni extremist groups like Al Qaeda. The news that Al Qaeda and Nusra were joining together not only appeared to partly validate his claims but reflected the divergent paths of the insurgency against him.

Nusra members have been at the forefront of the insurgency's battlefield triumphs in recent months, admired for bravery in fighting Mr. Assad's military. But moderate compatriots consider them worrisome because of the group's intolerant and extremist views, including a disregard for civilian casualties and its call for a strict Islamist religious state to take over in Syria. Some Syrian rebels are skeptical of Nusra's ultimate motives and allegiances because most of the leaders of its units are not even Syrians. Some are Jordanians and Iraqis.

"Look, I respect their prowess and their struggle," said Abu al-Hasan, an activist in Marea, an Aleppo suburb, reached via Skype. "I respect their ideology, even if I strongly disagree with it, on one condition! They must remain one faction among many other factions of the revolution and one component of Syrian society which has many other components."

The leader of Iraq's Qaeda branch, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced the combination of the two groups on Tuesday in an Internet posting, characterizing it as a merger, saying that it would be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and that half of its budget would be committed to toppling Mr. Assad.

The Nusra Front leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, distanced himself somewhat from Mr. Baghdadi's announcement, saying that he had not been informed in advance and that Nusra would keep its own name. But Mr. Jawlani confirmed that they were working together and pledged fealty to Al Qaeda's top leader, Ayman al-Zawahri, the former second-in-command to Osama bin Laden.

Mr. Assad appears to have lost no time in exploiting the news for his own political advantage.

The Syrian delegation to the United Nations requested that the Security Council, which has long been paralyzed over how to address the conflict, pursue sanctions against the Nusra Front as a terrorist group. French diplomats said Friday that discussions were under way in a Security Council committee to explore that possibility.

The United States, which supports the effort to topple Mr. Assad, already considered the Nusra Front a terrorist group, in effect agreeing with him on that point. The Obama administration has resisted requests to supply

weapons to the array of loosely affiliated anti-Assad forces, partly out of concern that Nusra fighters would receive them.

Worried about the political implications on their requests for Western aid, other Syrian opposition figures began criticizing the Al Qaeda-Nusra combination immediately after it was announced, including Moaz al-Khatib, the leader of the National Coalition of Syrian Opposition and Revolutionary Forces, the main political group.

“The bottom line: the ideology of Al Qaeda doesn’t suit us, and the revolutionaries in Syria must take a clear stance on this matter,” Sheik Moaz wrote on his Facebook page.

Louay Mekdad, a spokesman for the Free Syrian Army, the umbrella group of armed fighters inside Syria, was less emphatic in his criticism, possibly reflecting its respect for Nusra’s combat skills. While he asserted that “no one has the right to impose any form of state on Syrians,” he acknowledged that there had been “de facto cooperation” with Nusra fighters on the ground.

Other rebel subsidiaries of the Free Syrian Army distanced themselves from Nusra while respecting their common goals. Col. Khaled al-Hbous, commander of the group’s Damascus military council, said it had “not established any contact with this faction and does not claim its mistakes.” At the same time, Colonel Hbous said, he recognized “their role in defending our oppressed population.”

The harsh criticism by the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, however, appeared to portend the potential for hostilities, possibly even armed confrontation with Nusra fighters. The front is an alliance of 20 rebel groups that are among the opposition’s most important insurgent forces. One of those groups, the Tawheed Brigade, has clashed with Nusra fighters before.

[Andrew J. Tabler](#), a Syria expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said the Al Qaeda-Nusra combination had brought further into the open the factionalism and diverging motives of the anti-Assad insurgency. “They’re important because they show the Islamist-nationalist divide,” he said. “Not all the opposition is speaking with one voice.”

He said Mr. Assad, recognizing Western fears about the possibility of Syria's disintegration, was seeking to turn that to his advantage and "trying to spin a story that we're fighting on a common front here."