

CRS Insights

The "Khorasan Group" in Syria

Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs (cblanchard@crs.loc.gov, 7-0428)

September 24, 2014 (IN10155)

On September 22, U.S. military forces launched strikes against Syria-based terrorists referred to by U.S. officials as the "Khorasan Group," whose members President Obama has described as "[seasoned Al Qaeda operatives in Syria.](#)" According to Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, the group "[includes some former al Qaeda operatives](#), core al Qaeda operatives from Afghanistan and Pakistan [a region historically known as Khorasan] who made their way to Syria." Rhodes added that the Administration views the Khorasan Group as "an extension of the threat posed by al Qaeda and their associated forces. These are individuals who have their origin, their history serving in al Qaeda." Other U.S. officials and independent observers report that the group's members may hold leadership roles in the Al Qaeda-affiliated Syrian insurgent organization known as *Jabhat al Nusra* (the Support Front), which the United States has [designated](#) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). [Former CIA Deputy Director Mike Morell](#) has described the "Khorasan Group" as "the external operations arm" of *Jabhat al Nusra*, saying its members "came from Pakistan" and "focus on attacks in the West." Despite this reported affiliation, some observers believe the approximately [50 to 100 members](#) of the "Khorasan Group" focus primarily on planning international terrorist acts, rather than aiding *Jabhat al Nusra's* efforts to topple the Asad regime.

Official accounts of the targets and purposes of some of the September 22 strikes correspond with descriptions of the origins and intentions of the "Khorasan Group" ascribed in recent press reports to unnamed U.S. officials. Unnamed U.S. officials told the [New York Times](#) on September 20 that an experienced Al Qaeda operative named Muhsin al Fadhli served as a "Khorasan Group" leader until his apparent [death](#) in the strikes. The U.S. government first named Al Fadhli as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in [February 2005](#) in connection with his alleged financial and material support for the network of Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq and several Al Qaeda operations. According to Treasury Department notices, Al Fadhli was [based in Iran](#), where he allegedly directed a [network](#) that transferred funding and fighters to Syria and to and from South Asia. A 2012 State Department profile of Al Fadhli [stated](#) that,

Al-Qaida elements in Iran, led by al-Fadhli, are working to move fighters and money through Turkey to support al-Qaida-affiliated elements in Syria. Al-Fadhli also is leveraging his extensive network of Kuwaiti jihadist donors to send money to Syria via Turkey. Additionally, he has assisted al-Qaida in moving multiple operatives from Pakistan via Iran and Turkey to destinations in Europe, North Africa, and Syria... .

U.S. Threat Assessments of the "Khorasan Group"

In early 2014, U.S. intelligence officials [told Congress](#) that Syria had "become a significant location for independent or Al Qaeda-aligned groups to recruit, train, and equip a growing number of extremists, some of whom might conduct external attacks." Director of National Intelligence James Clapper [stated](#) that "we're seeing now the appearance of training complexes in Syria to train people to go back to their countries, and, of course, conduct more terrorist acts." Until recently, Administration public statements did not mention the "Khorasan Group" or attribute these activities to it. However, Clapper [said](#) in January 2014 that *Jabhat al Nusra* did "have aspirations for attacks on the homeland."

Reports from Syria suggest that U.S. forces targeting the "Khorasan Group" struck and destroyed *Jabhat al Nusra*-associated [facilities](#) in Idlib Province, including buildings in the town of [Kafr Deryan](#). According to [Rear Admiral John Kirby](#), the strikes "were undertaken to disrupt imminent attack plotting against the United States and western targets. These terrorists have established a safe haven in Syria to plan external attacks, construct and test improvised explosive devices, and recruit westerners to conduct operations." [Lt. Gen. William Mayville](#) cited intelligence reports that the Group "was in the final

stages of plans to execute major attacks."

On September 13, the [Associated Press](#) reported that unnamed U.S. officials had described attempts by "Khorasan Group" members to collaborate with Al Qaeda-affiliated bomb makers in Yemen and Syria-based Western foreign fighters to place explosives aboard commercial aircraft. Attorney General Eric Holder [acknowledged](#) that enhanced aviation security measures imposed earlier this year were a response to "Khorasan Group" activities.

Outlook

As of September 24, U.S. officials were assessing the effects of the September 22 strikes and refused to speculate about the potential disruption of any imminent plots. Some Syrian opposition groups welcome pledges of new U.S. support and U.S. military strikes against the Islamic State organization. Opposition forces appear to have mixed views of U.S. strikes against "Khorasan Group" targets, which some [criticized](#) because of reported civilian casualties and others view as strikes against *Jabhat al Nusra*, which fights alongside some opposition forces against the Syrian government and the Islamic State. One group welcomed the strikes, but [warned](#) of "the need to be cautious of inflicting civilian casualties or targeting the moderate Islamic groups."

While the U.S. government [considers](#) *Jabhat al Nusra* to be an Al Qaeda affiliate and terrorist organization, U.S. officials have so far not referred to *Jabhat al Nusra* as the target of the September 22 U.S. military operation. *Jabhat al Nusra's* popularity among some Syrians and its partnership with other insurgents against the forces of the Islamic State organization may account for this semantic choice, given U.S. hopes for encouraging Syrian rebels to support U.S.-led coalition operations.

U.S. strikes in Syria against formerly or currently Al Qaeda-associated individuals in the "Khorasan Group" raise questions about the applicability of the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), its geographic scope, and its duration. It remains unclear whether other groups—in Syria or in other countries—with members fitting the same profile may be targeted in future U.S. military operations. In May 2014, Department of Defense General Counsel Stephen Preston [declined](#) to publicly comment on whether the 2001 AUMF applied to *Jabhat al Nusra*. The "Khorasan Group" was mentioned in [President Obama's September 23 letter](#) to congressional leaders regarding strikes in Iraq and Syria.