

Islamic Extremists Infiltrate Syrian Opposition

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September 21, 2012

WASHINGTON — As the conflict rages in Syria, regional analysts say Islamic extremist groups increasingly are infiltrating the opposition forces fighting the government. This could radicalize Syrian rebels, causing significant problems for efforts to end the conflict and stabilize the country.

An amateur video shows fighters with Ahar al-Sham, an Islamic jihadist group, that appear to be attacking a Syrian military personnel carrier.

A fierce gun battle erupts.

Another video by the group shows an explosion under a Syrian tank.

Evidence, regional political analysts say, that groups linked to al-Qaida are involved in the Syrian conflict.

“We have seen videos come from the opposition forces of rebels with the black banner of al-Qaida,” said Malou Innocent of the Cato Institute. “We have heard Iraqi officials say that al-Qaida elements have been pouring over their border into Syria.”

Damascus long supported terrorist organizations within Syria, and they have now turned on the government.

Syria was a transit point for al-Qaida militants fighting coalition forces during the Iraq war.

Regional analyst Elizabeth O'Bagy said there is a small, but growing, jihadist presence.

“The logistical networks that were facilitated by the Syrian regime in the past are now working in the reverse direction, funneling al-Qaida in Iraq and Islamic State of Iraq operatives into Syria,” she said.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has used the threat of jihadists to build support among the minority Alawite and Christian communities.

Daniel Newman, who heads the Arabic Department at Britain's Durham University, said the arrival of extremists plays into that narrative.

"And so ironically this is, to this day, being used by the regime, particularly in their dealings with the Christian minority. 'You see this is what will happen. You see, it is what we said all along - these are Islamists and you will suffer under the yoke of the Islamists.'"

The U.S. says it will not arm the rebels because weapons could fall into the wrong hands.

Analysts say predominantly Sunni Muslim countries in the region, however, are providing money and munitions. And the increase in radical Islamists could have serious implications.

"It also poses significant problems for Syria's future stability in a post-Assad future," said O'Bagy. "If there are radical elements that are able to gain a foothold, they could seriously hurt any form of a democratic vision for what comes next."

As the Syrian government increases its use of warplanes and heavy weapons against rebels and civilians, there are fears the opposition will become more radical and that is likely to prolong the conflict.