

Will Syrian al-Qaeda punish Druze massacre perpetrators?

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate is seeking to distance itself from the killings of 20 Druze villagers last week and allay fears in the minority community.

At stake is the painstakingly crafted image of Jabhat al-Nusra, or Nusra Front, as a more moderate alternative to the self-declared Islamic State, one that can coexist with other anti-regime groups that do not share its beliefs or hard-line ideology.

"Everyone involved in this incident will be presented to a Shari'a court and held to account for blood proven to have been spilt," Jabhat al-Nusra said in a statement circulated on Twitter. "The people of the village are still safe and under our protection in areas we control."

Last Wednesday, 20 Druze villagers were gunned down in Qalb Lawze in northern Idlib Province after an altercation with a Tunisian Nusra Front commander that escalated and ended in massacre, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The jihadist group did not put forward its own version of events, saying only that it had "received with deep sorrow news of the incident that occurred." The fighters had not consulted their commanders and their actions were "clear violations" of Nusra directives, the statement said.

"The killings highlight how al-Qaeda often walks a fine line in waging jihad," wrote Thomas Joscelyn in the *Long War Journal*. "While the Islamic State, al-Qaeda's rival, routinely celebrates its fighters' brutality, al-Qaeda has attempted to position itself as a more moderate alternative."

Effective fighting force

Nusra Front has established itself as one of the most effective factions fighting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, sometime in concert with U.S.-backed rebels, other times coming into conflict with them. It enforces a strict interpretation of Islamic Law in areas under its control but, unlike Islamic State, it hasn't engaged in the wholesale slaughter of religious and ethnic minorities. IS, which controls around half of Syrian territory, has viciously targeted minorities in Syria and Iraq, and taken responsibility for the slaughter of Christians in Libya.

In the past few years, Nusra has gone to great lengths to present itself first and foremost as an organization serving the Syrian people, noted Yezid Sayigh of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, one that could be "tolerant of the diversity of Syrian society while holding on to its own Salafist ideology." The Druze are a sect whose belief system draws on Ismaili Shi'ism, animism, and Greek philosophy, as well as Jewish and Christian mysticism. Their population in Syria is concentrated in the south.

In a recent al-Jazeera interview, Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani said there was no fight against those who did not fight against Nusra and suggested the group would protect Syrian minorities, including the Druze.

"There are Druze villages located in liberated areas that have neither supported Bashar [al Assad] nor fought him, and they have not been harmed," he said.

Moderate alternative to Islamic State

While IS is both expedient and draconian in its application of Islamic law in captured territory, Nusra has taken a more gradual approach. It has slowly rolled out Shari'a in the areas it controls and not interfered in the affairs of other rebel groups. On the topic of minorities, however, it has sent mixed messages, vowing to protect them if they renounce Assad but also pushing for their conversion.

Since the end of 2014, the group's commanders have engaged in an internal debate about distancing themselves from al-Qaeda in order to "emphasize its Syrian nationalist and moderate face," Sayigh said. "There has been a clear attempt to portray an image that they can coexist with people that they disagree with while applying their own Shari'a rule in areas that they control exclusively." Last week's killing of the villagers make it harder for Syria's opposition to persuade Druze to remain neutral in the conflict or abandon the regime. It "serves to confirm the

regime narrative that the opposition is made of extremists, jihadists who will impose their own religious views on everyone who is different and will use violence to impose those views,” Sayigh said.

'Will there be punishment?'

While Nusra may like to establish that its fighters didn't carry out a pre-meditated attack against a sectarian minority, many doubt that it will hold its members accountable.

“It has been a pattern—Jabhat al-Nusra never punishes its members in public and it doesn’t want to be punished by others,” said Hassan Hassan, a fellow at Chatham House and the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. “Unless [Nusra] shows that they have done that, there will be an escalation and there will be increased paranoia among the Druze. . . . They know the extremists are coming and they know they have to stand up to them.”

Analysts say the Druze are unlikely to mobilize against Nusra and are trying to stay above the fray in Syria's civil war. In their southern bastion of Sweida, where the Syrian regime has military control, Druze have resisted recent attempts to conscript young Druze into the army and send them to fight elsewhere.

“The regime has been trying to get them to understand that when they fight for the regime, they are fighting for their survival,” Hassan said. “They don’t buy that. They want to fight in their own areas and defend their own areas.”