

The Multiple Faces of Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fath al-Sham in Syria's Civil War

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ABSTRACT *Jabhat al-Nusra has long been one of the most militarily effective armed actors against the Syrian Ba'thist regime and it continues to play a central role in the country's civil war. With a leadership that mixes the transnational jihadi ideology of al-Qaeda with Syria-specific interests, the group is also at the forefront of battling the Islamic State in Syria. In the midst of its battlefield offensives, Jabhat al-Nusra is also busy building governing structures to control territory in different parts of the country including Idlib, Latakia, Hama, Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo governorates.*

Since its public emergence in January 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra has proven itself to be both a military asset and a complex political problem for the Syrian political opposition and other rebel groups fighting the Syrian Ba'th Party-run government of Bashar al-Assad. Organized originally by a group of Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, now the Islamic State/ISIS) members returned from Iraq together with veteran Syrian jihadis with experience in the country's Fighting Vanguard movement that fought the Syrian regime during the early 1980s and al-Qaeda's training camps in Afghanistan, Jabhat al-Nusra quickly developed significant military capabilities on the ground inside

Syria after laying the groundwork for its expansion during 2011 leading up to its public announcement of its existence in January 2012. Led by its *amir*, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, one of the Syrian ISI members dispatched back home, the group coalesced around a collective of *jihadi* veterans, such as the group's spokesman Abu Firas al-Suri, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in April 2016, and ideologues such as *shari'a* council members Sami al-Uraydi and Abu Abdullah al-Shami, bringing together both military experience and creedal puritanism.

Operating at first as an extension of the ISI, Jabhat al-Nusra proved itself

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to be a major military asset in the war against the Syrian government, successfully carrying out a number of well-planned bombings against key military, intelligence, and security forces nodes in Damascus, Idlib and Aleppo. These included attacks on the headquarters of the criminal police and a center run by the feared air force intelligence wing in March 2012, multiple attacks in October 2012 in Aleppo city, and multiple operations in Idlib and Hama governorates. As other rebel grounds began to see their victories dwindle against renewed government counter-offensives, Jabhat al-Nusra emerged as a new capable force against the regime.

These military benefits to the Syrian opposition and rebels, however, came with major political and public relations baggage. As an extension of the ISI and later directly of the original al-Qaeda organization headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Jabhat al-Nusra became the center of political and public debates among external actors, particularly in the United States and Western Europe, over what its

emergence meant for the Syrian uprising as a whole and whether or not to actively provide military support and supplies on the ground. Despite desires to see al-Assad overthrown, concerns over the expansion of Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamist rebel groups, such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam and others, came to dominate much of the discussion and debate over whether and how to support Syrian political and armed opposition groups. This concern culminated in December 2012 when the U.S. Department of State designated Jabhat al-Nusra as a foreign terrorist organization acting as an “alias for al-Qaida in Iraq” (the ISI), making it illegal to provide material support or resources to, or transacting with the group and freezing the assets of any individuals belonging to or affiliated with the group inside the U.S. In its designation, the department noted that since November 2011 the group had publicly claimed to have carried out almost 600 attacks including 40 suicide bombings that killed Syrian civilians as well as members of the government and its security forces. It also accused the ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra of attempting to “hijack” the “legitimate Syrian opposition and decried the latter’s “sectarian vision.”¹

The main Syrian political opposition groups, including the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the Syrian National Council, and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, together with many rebel groups on the ground vociferously opposed and condemned the U.S. government’s decision to black-

list Jabhat al-Nusra, which cost them dearly politically and in the realm of public relations, particularly in the U.S. where it raised significant doubt amongst many government officials and politicians about the Syrian opposition and rebels as a whole. Apart from the official condemnations by the Syrian political opposition and other rebel groups, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) umbrella, popular protests on the ground inside the country following the U.S. government's designation also showed support for Jabhat al-Nusra, further inflaming the political and public relations hits.

On the ground, Jabhat al-Nusra, in addition to honing its military capabilities and expanding its membership into the thousands, also established and quickly developed an impressive media capability. It began to release an increasing number of written public statements and communiqués and issue well-produced, high definition propaganda films, many of them documenting its military operations. The latter were released by the group's official media department, the White Minaret Media Foundation, which is named after a minaret of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus city that is associated in *hadith* reports and eschatological writings with the return of Jesus or the Mahdi. Previously the group had released videos on YouTube and other video-sharing web sites. As it continued to expand its media capabilities and territorial control, the group also launched a semi-official media wing that it branded as the Himam News

Agency which released multiple video reports that focused primarily on Jabhat al-Nusra's provision of social services and the group's missionary propagation (*da'wa*) activities among local populations. The group further honed its media presence with a series of interviews with Al-Jazeera Arabic and Orient News, two major Arabic satellite television news networks, between 2013 and 2015.

In April 2013, ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi unilaterally announced that Jabhat al-Nusra would be, as far as he was concerned, subsumed within an expanded ISI, which now called itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS/ISIL). As the original direct parent organization and provider of strategic advice and funding, it was only natural, according to him, that it take direct control of al-Jawlani's organization now that the latter had developed significant local presence and support on the ground inside Syria. Despite al-Baghdadi's proclamation, however, al-Jawlani and other Jabhat al-Nusra leaders and commanders resisted his attempts to forcibly re-assert control over their group. The latter countered al-Baghdadi's claims and refused to accept the ISIS amir's claims of authority. This dispute festered throughout the rest of 2013, leading to splits among segments of Jabhat al-Nusra that resulted in the desertion of some members to ISIS and the coalescing of a fully independent (of ISIS) Jabhat al-Nusra around al-Jawlani and his loyalists. Attempts to mediate the dispute between the two sides including by al-Zawahiri failed, with Jabhat



Fighters from Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Al-Nusra Front drive in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo flying Islamist flags as they head to a frontline, on May 26, 2015. Once Syria's economic powerhouse, Aleppo has been divided between government control in the city's west and rebel control in the east since shortly after fighting there began in mid-2012.

AFP PHOTO / AMC / FADI AL-HALABI

al-Nusra leaders blaming al-Baghdadi and the ISIS leadership of stonewalling mediation attempts. The ISIS leadership ignored al-Zawahiri's decision in November 2013 that Jabhat al-Nusra alone would act as al-Qaeda's official Syrian affiliate organization under the official expanded name of "the al-Qaeda Organization in Bilad al-Sham."

By early 2014 the conflict between ISIS and al-Jawhani's Jabhat al-Nusra, together with other Syrian rebel groups, erupted into full-scale warfare between the two sides after the former began to target other Syrian rebel groups such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, killing important leaders including Abu Khalid al-Suri, a former friend and confidant of the famed *jihadi* strategist and writer Abu Mus'ab

al-Suri, in a February suicide bombing in Aleppo.² In May of that year, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani excoriated al-Zawahiri in a lengthy message for "betraying" the legacy of al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden and the principles of Islam and *jihadi*, presenting a lengthy indictment that included allegedly "protecting Iran and the Rejectionists (Shi'ite Muslims)" and hindering "true *jihadi*." In an extra dig at al-Qaeda's *amir*, he referenced slain al-Qaeda leaders including bin Laden, Atiyyatullah al-Libi, and Abu Yahya al-Libi in his attacks, claiming that they represented the "true al-Qaeda," which was completely different from the corrupted organization now led by al-Zawahiri.

Fighting between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra and Syrian rebel groups

Since the autumn of 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra has continued to follow a similar strategy, that being the formation of alliances with other Islamist rebel groups and operating in concert with them in launching major offensives against the Syrian government and its allies

continued throughout the year and became increasingly bitter, taking on religious creedal overtones. Clashes between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra and Syrian rebels were particularly fierce in Aleppo, Idlib, and Deir al-Zur governorates, with ISIS being pushed out of much, but not all, of Aleppo and Idlib but snatching Deir al-Zur from Jabhat al-Nusra's commander there, Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, who has since taken a prominent role in denouncing ISIS and its attacks on Syrian rebels and rival jihadi groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. As it did in Raqqa, ISIS forcibly took over much of Deir al-Zur from Syrian rebels and began to implement its broader insurgent political program, which includes the establishment of bureaucratic structures of control and the provision of some social services together with the

implementation of a harshly black-and-white interpretation of Islamic law and legal penalties, an interpretation that is essentially boiled down to the exercising of the *hudud* or "set" legal punishments for offenses such as theft, murder, highway robbery, sexual offenses such as fornication and homosexuality, and spying under the widened rubric of "*hisba*" (regulation of the market and, more broadly, public and, under ISIS, private morals) and the Islamic creedal imperative of "commanding the right and forbidding the wrong" (*al-amr bi'l maruf wa-l-nahy an al-munkar*).

While it has also established structures of governance and control over areas it controls, increasingly now in concern with allied rebel groups and alliances such as Harakat Ahar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Fath, Jabhat al-Nusra has not placed as much of an emphasis on territorial control masquerading as claimed "statehood" as ISIS has. This is not to say that the former does not also seek to provide some social services to local populations under its control. Indeed, Jabhat al-Nusra since 2013 has sought to demonstrate and publicize its capabilities in the social sphere by highlighting the collection of *zakat* (charitable donations required by Islamic law on certain forms of wealth and properties) and its distribution to the needy, the establishment of a form of law and order, and the organization and hosting of *da'wa* outreach campaigns and communal events, such as competitions, *iftar* meals, group prayers, and celebrations during Ramadan and for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

Despite its focus on fighting the Syrian government and its allies inside Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra also maintains a transnational identity similar to that of al-Qaeda and it is this aspect of the group's makeup together with the related issue of the group's recruitment of foreign fighters, that is the most concerning to the international community

The group has not, unlike ISIS, focused more on establishing political control over territory at the expense of its military goals against the Syrian government and has continued to carry out major offensives against and attacks on it and its allies, such as Hizbullah, Iraqi Shi'ite militias, and Iranian and Russian military forces aiding al-Assad inside the country.

In early September 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra spearheaded the final push against the Abu al-Zuhur military air base in Idlib governorate, a regime stronghold that had been under siege since 2012, as part of a rebel coalition that included Ahrar al-Sham and the East Turkestan Islamic Party's (ETIP) growing branch in Syria. Strategically using suicide bombers to open its offensive followed by "*inghimasi*" (rapid-response, highly-mobile forces used to pierce enemy lines and po-

sitions), Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies succeeded in over-running Syrian regime forces and capturing the base. Influential Islamist ideologues were present, both from Jabhat al-Nusra and affiliates of other groups, the two most important being the former's Abu Abdullah al-Shami and the young Saudi religious scholar Abdullah al-Muhaysini, who was taught by senior politically activist Saudi Salafi religious scholars and is closely affiliated with the Islamic Front and Jaysh al-Fath rebel coalition umbrellas, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, and the ETIP. Al-Shami oversaw the mass execution of regime soldiers captured at the base, declaring the verdicts to be based on the legal concept of "retaliation in kind" (*qisas*).

Since the autumn of 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra has continued to follow a similar strategy, that being the formation of alliances with other Islamist rebel groups and operating in concert with them in launching major offensives against the Syrian government and its allies. During the spring of this year the group has followed this strategy in northern Aleppo governorate against ISIS and in southern Aleppo against the Syrian regime and its Shi'ite militia and Iranian allies. Major continuing offensives have, as of this writing, pushed back regime forces in areas such as Khan Tuman, Ma'rata, Khalsa, and Humaira. These offensives have been conducted by a coalition of Syrian Islamist rebel forces including contingents from Jabhat al-Nusra, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Fath, Ajnad al-Sham, and allied groups like the ETIP. Rather than

sending waves of suicide bombers, as ISIS began to do in late 2015 when faced with increasing battlefield pressures, Jabhat al-Nusra is currently using strategic suicide bombings to open up new pushes into regime-held territory as a way of softening up key positions before assaults by rebel infantry and armored units. These tactics have thus far proven quite effective and have resulted in significant casualties among regime forces and allied Shi'ite militias, which are made up primarily of Iraqis, and among Iranian officers on the ground.

Recent pushes by Jabhat al-Nusra, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, and other Syrian rebel groups in May and June 2016 in northern Aleppo, which initially made rapid advances against ISIS, have since been turned back due to fierce counterattacks by al-Baghdadi's group, including multiple suicide bombings, and shifting of reinforcements to the area. However, as pressure on ISIS grows in other parts of northern Aleppo, particularly in and around Manbij, and northern Raqqa governorate, it is likely that Jabhat al-Nusra and other Syrian rebel groups will begin to succeed in once again pushing back ISIS' territorial holdings to the north of Aleppo city. Heavy fighting also continues between Jabhat al-Nusra, along with other Syrian rebel groups including Jaysh al-Islam and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, with ISIS in Eastern and Western Ghouta and in the Dar'a region in southern Syria. A particularly bitter contest continues between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra over the Yarmouk Refugee Camp to

the south of the center of Damascus city and in other districts in southern Damascus where two groups allied to ISIS, the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade and Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiyya (which recently merged to form a new group, Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid), have been pushed back by an alliance of anti-ISIS rebel forces that includes both Jabhat al-Nusra and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham alongside local FSA groups.³ In the midst of its conflict with ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra also continues to target Syrian government forces and their allies in Latakia, Homs, and Hama governorates, launching in June a major offensive alongside Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Fath, the East Turkestan Islamic Party, Ajnad al-Sham, and other Syrian Islamist rebel groups against the Syrian regime in Jabal al-Akrad.

Despite its focus on fighting the Syrian government and its allies inside Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra also maintains a transnational identity similar to that of al-Qaeda and it is this aspect of the group's makeup together with the related issue of the group's recruitment of foreign fighters, including individuals from Western Europe and North America, that is the most concerning to the international community. In its media output and statements from its senior leaders and chief ideologues, Jabhat al-Nusra is clear about belonging to a transnational jihadi current that includes al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates in Yemen, North Africa, Somalia, and South Asia. Like al-Qaeda groups and ISIS, the group's leadership promotes the notion of the "golden age" of Islam

An image released on July 28, 2016 by Al-Manara al-Bayda, the official news arm of Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, allegedly shows the group's chief Abu Mohammad al-Jolani at an undisclosed location, in the first ever picture to be released of him.

HANDOUT /
AL-MANARA
AL-BAYDAA / AFP



and for Muslims during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad and under the Rashidun caliphs and the glorious expansion of Islam and Muslim rule under the Umayyad Caliphate in the seventh and eighth centuries. The beginnings of Muslim servitude, division, and decline began, according to Jabhat al-Nusra's narrative, during the age of European colonialism and rule in Muslim-majority regions such as the Levant, North Africa, Iraq, and Central, South, and Southeast Asia. It is only through armed struggle (*jihad al-askari*), following strategic guidelines provided by jihadi leaders such as bin Laden and strategists including Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, that Muslims will be able to return to glory and self-respect in the world of nation states. In short, despite its bitter conflict with ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra also endorses the idea that ultimately what is needed is a single unified Islamic state that is capable of defending the rights of Muslims in the contemporary world of nation-states.

The transnational/globalist jihadi aspects of Jabhat al-Nusra's identity and creed, in addition to leading the U.S., Russia, and other international actors to target it militarily and financially, have also led to, at times, tensions between the group and other Syrian rebel groups including various rebel militias under the loose FSA umbrella and even close allies such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, which seeks to improve its relations and reputation with the United States and other international powers. Serious discussions about a merger between Jabhat al-Nusra and the latter eventually broke down over the refusal of al-Jawlani and other senior leaders to disassociate their group from al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda. Internal debates over whether to remain affiliated with al-Qaeda have reportedly led to fissures within the group itself, with some leaders, such as Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, advocating a split and a more Islamist-nationalist approach and others continued

ties to the transnational/globalist jihadi current of al-Qaeda while also maintaining a local/regional focus on fighting the Syrian regime and its allies in the Levant. While the group remains unified, in the future under certain circumstances on the ground it is possible, though perhaps not immediately likely, that internal debates among the group's membership and leaders could result in certain segments of the group breaking away to either ally with other existing groups or to form new, independent groups.

Jabhat al-Nusra plays multiple roles in the Syrian civil war and presents more mainstream Syrian opposition and rebel groups with a dilemma. On the one hand, Jabhat al-Nusra is a powerful and capable military force against the regime and has been involved in handing al-Assad's forces with a number of its most significant defeats and losses since 2012. However, on the other hand, the group's affiliation with al-Qaeda and the more puritanical creedal impulses of at least some of its leadership and ideologues is concerning to some segments of the Syrian opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra's attempts to implement its own interpretation of Islamic law in areas under its control have led to tensions between it and other Syrian rebels, particularly FSA militias, and some locals.

The presence of Jabhat al-Nusra has also negatively impacted the Syrian opposition and rebels as a whole because it has resulted in the hesitancy of international powers such as the United States from more actively

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aiding Syrian rebels, even so-called "vetted" groups, out of fear that any weapons given will be captured or otherwise fall into the hands of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. The desertion of fighters from these vetted groups with some of their weapons has done nothing to ward off this concern. The presence of the group and ISIS has also been used as a cover by Russia in justifying its air strikes across Syria, regardless of whether or not either group is even active in areas under Russian attack.

In a public relations move in late July, Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda Central coordinated the announcement of the former's official dis-affiliation, at least in name, with the latter. Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani announced that his group's new name would be Jabhat Fath al-Sham (Conquest of Sham Front) and that the group would continue striving to unify the disparate strands of the Syrian armed opposition. The dis-affiliation was blessed by al-Qaeda representative Ahmad Hasan Abu al-Khayr, who did so in the name of Ayman al-Zawahiri. The move by the Nusra leadership was

warmly welcomed by a number of important Syrian rebel groups including Ahrar al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa, and the Jaysh al-Fath coalition as well as by influential religious and ideological voices among Islamist Syrian rebels such as Shaykh Abdullah al-Muhaysini and Abd al-Razzaq al-Mahdi. Jabhat al-Nusra's dis-affiliation with al-Qaeda has been a major hurdle for closer unity between al-Jawlani's group and Syrian Islamist rebels and the recent move was primarily taken for public relations reasons and to take away an excuse used by the Ba'th regime and Russia for bombing areas controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra and claiming they are only attacking "al-Qaeda." It remains to be seen, though it is unlikely, that ideology of the new Jabhat Fath al-Sham will differ significantly from Jabhat al-Nusra.

The major dilemma posed by Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fath al-Sham to those opposed to the Syrian government and its allies is unlikely to go away. The group's military power, which is bolstered by its working relationships and battlefield successes with powerful Syrian Islamist rebel groups such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham and other anti-government armed factions such as the ETIP,

guarantees that Jabhat Fath al-Sham will continue to play a major role in the Syrian conflict for the foreseeable future. If dynamics shift, particularly on the ground inside Syria, it is possible that the group or at least some segment of it may eventually disassociate from al-Qaeda and the global jihadi current it represents, but this too seems to be unlikely in the near term. Thus, the Syrian opposition and other rebel groups will continue to simultaneously benefit and suffer from the presence of Jabhat Fath al-Sham as a major player in the country's civil war. ■

Endnotes

1. U.S. Department of State, "Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusra Front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq," (December 11, 2012), retrieved June 3, 2016, from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/12/201759.htm>.
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