

Al-Nusra Front: Islamic State's Breakaway Faction in Syria's Idlib

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During the eight-year proxy war in Syria, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the leader of al-Nusra Front, has emerged as the second most influential militant leader after the Islamic State's [alleged] chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In fact, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in August 2011 to April 2013, the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front were a single organization that chose the banner of Jabhat al-Nusra.

Although the current al-Nusra Front has been led by Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, he was [appointed](#) [1] as the emir of al-Nusra Front by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Islamic State, in January 2012. Thus, al-Jolani's Nusra Front is only a splinter group of the Islamic State, which split from its parent organization in April 2013 over a leadership dispute between the two organizations.

In August 2011, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was based in Iraq, began sending Syrian and Iraqi jihadists experienced in guerrilla warfare across the border into Syria to establish an organization inside the country. Led by a Syrian known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the group began to recruit fighters and establish cells throughout the country. On 23 January 2012, the group announced its formation as Jabhat al-Nusra.

Image on the right: Abu Muhammad al-Jolani (Source: Newsweek)



In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released an audio statement in which he announced that al-Nusra Front had been established, financed and supported by the Islamic State of Iraq. Al-Baghdadi declared that the two groups were merging under the name "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria." The leader of al-Nusra Front, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, issued a statement denying the merger and complaining that neither he nor anyone else in al-Nusra's leadership had been consulted about it.

Al-Qaeda Central's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, tried to mediate the dispute between al-

Baghdadi and al-Jolani but eventually, in October 2013, he endorsed al-Nusra Front as the official franchise of al-Qaeda Central in Syria. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, however, defied the nominal authority of al-Qaeda Central and declared himself as the caliph of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Keeping this background in mind, it becomes abundantly clear that a single militant organization operated in Syria and Iraq under the leadership of al-Baghdadi until April 2013, which chose the banner of al-Nusra Front, and that the current emir of the subsequent breakaway faction of al-Nusra Front, al-Jolani, was actually al-Baghdadi's deputy in Syria.

Thus, the Islamic State operated in Syria since August 2011 under the designation of al-Nusra Front and it subsequently changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April 2013, after which it overran Raqqa and parts of Deir al-Zor in the summer of 2013. And in January 2014, it overran Fallujah and parts of Ramadi in Iraq and reached the zenith of its power when it captured Mosul in June 2014.

Image below: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Source: Ariana News)



Excluding al-Baghdadi and a handful of his hardline Islamist aides, the rest of Islamic State's top leadership was comprised of Saddam-era military and intelligence officials. According to an informative [Associated Press report](#) [2], hundreds of ex-Baathists constituted the top and mid-tier command structure of the Islamic State who planned all the operations and directed its military strategy.

More to the point, it is an indisputable fact that morale and ideology play an important role in battlefield, and well-informed readers must also be aware that the Takfiri brand of most jihadists these days has directly been inspired by the puritanical Wahhabi-Salafi ideology of Saudi Arabia, but ideology alone is not sufficient to succeed in battle.

Looking at the Islamic State's astounding gains in Syria and Iraq in 2013-14, a question arises that where did its recruits get all the training and state-of-the-art weapons that were imperative not only for hit-and-run guerrilla warfare but also for capturing and holding large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq.

According to a revelatory December 2013 [news report](#) [3] from a newspaper affiliated with the UAE government which supports the Syrian opposition, it is clearly mentioned that along with AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades and other military gear, the Saudi regime also provided machine gun-mounted Toyota pick-up trucks to every batch of five jihadists who had completed their training in the training camps located in Jordan's border regions along southern Syria.

Once those militants crossed over to Daraa and Quneitra in southern Syria from the Jordan-Syria border, then those Toyota pickup trucks could easily have traveled all the way to Raqqa and Deir al-Zor in eastern Syria, and thence to Mosul and Anbar in Iraq.

Moreover, it is clearly spelled out in the report that Syrian militants got arms and training through a secret command center known as the Military Operations Center (MOC) based in the intelligence headquarters' building in Amman, Jordan that was staffed by high-ranking military officials from 14 countries, including the US, European nations, Israel and the Gulf states to wage a covert war against Damascus.

Regarding the Syrian opposition, a small fraction of it was comprised of defected Syrian soldiers who went by the name of Free Syria Army, but the vast majority was comprised of Islamic jihadists and armed tribesmen who were generously funded, trained, armed and internationally legitimized by their regional and international patrons.

The Islamic State was nothing more than one of numerous Syrian militant outfits, others being: al Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, al-Tawhid brigade, Jaysh al Islam etc. All the militant groups that operated in Syria were just as fanatical and brutal as the Islamic State. The only feature that differentiated the Islamic State from the rest was that it was more ideological and independent-minded.

The reason why the US declared war against the Islamic State was that all other Syrian militant outfits simply had local ambitions that were limited to fighting the Syrian government, whereas the Islamic State had established a global network of transnational terrorists that included hundreds of Western citizens who became a national security risk to the Western countries.

Regarding the dominant group of Syrian militants in Syria's northwestern Idlib Governorate, according to a May 2017 [report](#) [4] by CBC Canada, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which was formerly known as al-Nusra Front until July 2016 and then as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) until January 2017, had been removed from the terror watch-lists of the US and Canada after it merged with fighters from Zenki Brigade and hardline jihadists from Ahrar al-Sham and rebranded itself as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in January 2017.

The US State Department was hesitant to label Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) a terror group, despite the group's links to al-Qaeda, as the US government had directly funded and armed the Zenki Brigade, one of the constituents of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), with sophisticated weaponry including the US-made antitank missiles.

Although after the report was published in CBC News, Canada added the name of HTS to its terror watch-list in May 2018, Turkey designated it a terrorist organization in August 2018 and Washington came up with the excuse that since HTS is a merger of several militant outfits, and one of those militant groups, al-Nusra Front, was already on the terror watch-list of the US, therefore it too regards HTS a terrorist organization.

Nevertheless, the purpose behind the rebranding of al-Nusra Front, first as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) in July 2016 and then as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in January 2017 and purported severing of ties with al-Qaeda, was to legitimize itself and to make it easier for its patrons to send money and arms.

Washington blacklisted al-Nusra Front in December 2012 and persuaded its regional allies Saudi Arabia and Turkey to ban it, too. Although al-Nusra Front's name had been in the list of proscribed organizations of Saudi Arabia and Turkey since 2014, it kept receiving money and arms from its regional patrons.

It's worth noting that in a May 2015 [interview](#) [5] with Qatar's state television al-Jazeera, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani took a public pledge on the behest of his Gulf-based patrons that his organization simply had local ambitions limited to fighting the Syrian government and that it had no intention to mount terror attacks in the Western countries.

Although al-Jolani announced the split from al-Qaeda in a video statement in 2016, the

persistent efforts of al-Jolani's Gulf-based patrons bore fruit in January 2017, when al-Nusra Front once again rebranded itself from Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which also included "moderate jihadists" from Zenki Brigade, Ahrar al-Sham and several other militant groups, and thus the jihadist conglomerate that now goes by the name of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was able to overrun the northwestern Idlib Governorate in Syria, and it completely routed the Turkey-backed militants in a brazen offensive in Idlib last month.

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Notes

[1] Al-Jolani was appointed as the emir of al-Nusra Front by al-Baghdadi:

<http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/16689>

[2] Islamic State's top command dominated by ex-officers in Saddam's army:

<http://www.dawn.com/news/1199401/is-top-command-dominated-by-ex-officers-in-saddams-army>

[3] Syrian rebels get arms and advice through secret command center in Amman:

<http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/syrian-rebels-get-arms-and-advice-through-secret-command-centre-in-amman>

[4] Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate escapes from terror list:

<http://www.cbc.ca/beta/news/canada/terror-list-omission-1.4114621>

[5] Al-Jolani's interview to Al-Jazeera: "Our mission is to defeat the Syrian government":

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/nusra-front-golani-assad-syria-hezbollah-isil-150528044857528.html>

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