

The Nusra Front in Syria becomes the Fatah al-Sham Front

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News

At the end of July, the Nusra Front (*Jabhat al-Nusra*), one of the major armed factions fighting in the Syrian conflict and al-Qaida's branch in Syria, announced the cancellation of its operations under the name of the Nusra Front and the formation of a new entity called "Fatah al-Sham Front" (*Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*). The statement was read by its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jaulani, who for the first time, revealed his face publicly. The timing and meticulously staged setting of this public statement sparked a debate among Western Middle East experts in the media about the Front's motives and the consequences on its relationship with al-Qaida.

Summary

On 28 July 2016, Abu Muhammad al-Jaulani, the leader of the Nusra Front, one of the major factions fighting in Syria and al-Qaida's Syrian branch, announced the cancellation of operations under the name of the Nusra Front in a video statement televised simultaneously by Aljazeera Arabic television channel and the pro-Syrian opposition Orient News.¹ At the same time he introduced the formation of a new entity called "Fatah al-Sham Front" (*Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*), which literally translates as "Conquest of the Greater Syria Front". The move was sanctioned by the senior al-Qaida leadership and accompanied by intense consultations within the Nusra Front's highest decision-making body, the *Shura* Council. In the video clip Abu Muhammad al-Jaulani for the first time revealed his face publicly.

In this contribution, I will present a summary of the debate among Western Middle East experts in the social and online media around the Nusra Front's motives and future strategy in Syria.

Key Words

Syrian conflict, Jabhat al-Nusra, Nusra Front, al-Qaida, social media, Middle East, Twitter

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Analysis:

Contextualizing the Nusra Front's Announcement

The cessation of the Nusra Front and the creation of the “*Fatah al-Sham* Front” within the ranks of the armed opposition in Syria come at a time of turmoil. In September 2015, the European Union’s border regulations were temporarily put on hold under the pressure of migrants trying to cross illegally into Europe from Turkey, thus questioning major pillars of EU architecture. Since October 2015, Russia has stepped up a brutal military intervention against the Syrian opposition, helping the Syrian regime gain lost territory and reverse the overall military balance. In July 2016, details of a new proposal by the Obama administration on a joint US-Russian military and intelligence cooperation were leaked to the media. It aims at coordinating the bombing campaigns in Syria against the Nusra Front with a new joint military command-and-control-headquarters near Amman in Jordan, expanding the US counterterrorism mission in Syria.¹ An expanded agreement on a plan for a nationwide cease-fire and a new framework for a political transition in Syria is foreseen.²

Al-Jaulani’s announcement of the cessation of the Nusra Front is in line with these military developments and the result of consultations with the senior al-Qaida leadership as the timing and the sequence show. Bits of information were leaked days before to Western analysts, who transmitted them through their Twitter accounts and blogs.³ By 28 July a general Twitter account of the Nusra Front, *al-Manara al-Bayda*, published an audio-statement by Shaykh Ahmad Hasan Abu al-Khayr, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri’s deputy, underlining the importance of safeguarding the *jihad* in Syria by uniting the fighters.⁴

Later in the evening, the Nusra Front’s leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jaulani, appeared in a short video sitting at a table flanked by two veteran jihadis and *Shura* Council members, Ahmad Salama Mabruk, alias Abu Faraj al-Masri, and Abd al-Rafhim Atun, alias

¹ “Terms of Reference for the Joint Implementation Group” *Washington Post* 13 July 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2016/07/13/Editorial-Opinion/Graphics/terms_of_reference_for_the_Joint_Implementation_Group.pdf?tid=a_inl

² Josh Rogin “Obama’s Syria Plan Teams Up American and Russian Forces,” *Washington Post* 13 July 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/obamas-syria-plan-teams-up-american-and-russian-forces/2016/07/13/8d7777cc-4935-11e6-acbc-4d4870a079da_story.html

³ See Pieter van Ostaeyen on his blog: *Jabhat an-Nusra rebrands as Jabhat Fath al-Sham*, 4 August 2016; online: www.pietervanostaeyen.com.

⁴ Pieter van Ostaeyen on his blog: *Jabhat an-Nusra-Audio Message by Shaykh Ahmad Hassan Abu al-Khayr*, 28 July 2016; online: <https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2016/07/28/jabhat-an-nusra-audio-message-by-shaykh-ahmad-hassan-abu-al-khayr/>

Abu Abdallah al-Sham.⁵ The latter was Zawahiri's closest aide in the 1990s and has extensive military experience. The seating order is clearly an indicator for the continuous strong ties between al-Jaulani and the senior al-Qaida leadership. During the appearance, al-Jaulani showed his face, which was not the case in the two earlier interviews conducted by Aljazeera in 2013 and 2015.⁶

Al-Jaulani opens his statement thanking the Qaida leadership, namely al-Zawahiri and his deputy, "for prioritizing the Syrian people's interest, jihad and revolution over their own interests". He underlines that his move is "in accordance with the general guidelines and directives of the aforementioned blessed leadership" with the intention of reducing the burden on the Syrian people and "forming a unified body". Because Syrians suffer under relentless bombardments of the international community headed by the US and Russia pretending to target the Nusra Front, "we decided the cancellation of the organization under the name of Jabhat al-Nusra and the formation of a new group operating under the name of *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*" without any external affiliations.⁷

As mentioned earlier, the Nusra Front's announcement comes at a sensitive time, as the United States and Russia not only seem determined to continue military operations against it, but to start discussing a political future, which – from a Western perspective – leaves little room for the Nusra Front's theological and political vision. But to think that the Nusra Front directly responded to Western military and political pressure, probably underestimates the self-confident overall strategy Salafi armed groups including the Nusra Front implement in Syria.

By dissolving the Nusra Front, al-Jaulani wanted to signal to his Syrian and Islamic allies and potential partners that he was opening a new chapter towards a common future with other military and political units in Syria. Among those addressed is its closest ideological and military ally, the Islamic *Ahrar al-Sham* Movement (*Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya*), the most powerful Salafi armed coalition in Syria with deep roots in the civil administration of so-called liberated areas in Idlib and Aleppo. *Ahrar al-Sham* is much more Syrianized with fewer foreign fighters in its ranks than the Nusra Front and it is also the major component of the newly created Fatah Army (*Jaysh al-Fatah*). *Ahrar al-Sham* has always been very critical of the strong foreign ties of the Nusra Front due to the high percentage of foreign fighters and its links with the senior

⁵ Video statement of Abu Muhammad al-Jaulani of Jabhat al-Nusra, aired by *Orient News* on 28.7.2016, available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oossAtDYbrs>

⁶ The first one with the Syrian journalist Taysir Aluni was aired end of December 2013 and the second with Ahmad Mansur in May 2015.

⁷ Video statement of Abu Muhammad al-Jaulani of Jabhat al-Nusra, aired by *Orient News* on 28.7.2016; available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oossAtDYbrs>

al-Qaida leadership. At the same time, Nusra fighters are deeply embedded in the many and constantly shifting battle lines in Syria.

On the humanitarian side, the civilian population has suffered a great deal and is worn out by war. The situation is particularly unbearable in the besieged areas. Its inhabitants have been surrounded for up to four years, cut from water, electricity, food and medical supplies and barrel bombed almost daily. Hospitals and health centers are targeted and many health staff killed. This puts local armed factions under enormous civilian pressure to agree to ceasefires with local representatives of the Assad regime.

But for these battle-hardened factions, giving in to pressure by Assad or Western demands equals a betrayal of what they have fought for. They want to continue what they consider to be a confessional military campaign against an Alawite oppressor for which many of their family members and friends died. They often coordinate locally with the Nusra Front for certain military operations, even though as a result they risk being labelled and targeted as a terrorist entity. So far, despite the bombing of Nusra Front positions by the US and Russia, other Syrian armed opposition groups have resisted withdrawing from these areas. This has made it difficult for the US to market this indiscriminate bombing campaign as an anti-terrorism precision targeting.

The Debate by Western Middle East Experts

Within the ranks of Western Middle East experts, a consensus emerged that the Nusra Front did not break ties with al-Qaida, but that its announcement was merely a rebranding exercise without changing much of its radical Salafi-jihadi ideology or its actual ties with al-Qaida.

Sam Heller, a Beirut-based freelance journalist and expert on Syria, who tweets under his pseudonym Abu Jamajim (@AbuJamajem) described the split as “an attempt to outmaneuver the ex-Nusra Front’s enemies inside Syria and abroad”. According to him, the name change amounts to a rebranding exercise and possibly an internal bureaucratic shift, but not a change of the Nusra Front’s ideology and goals. It will complicate efforts by the United States and others to pry apart Nusra and Syrian rebel factions. Heller thinks it likely that the Nusra Front will invest new efforts into reopening negotiations with *Ahrar al-Sham* and agree on a joint commitment to form an Islamic government in Syria.⁸

Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington DC, who tweets under @Charles Lister, also described the move as a tactical maneuver embedded in al-Qaida’s longer term strategy for Syria. Qaida has been trying to implement its

⁸ Sam Heller, „Al Qaeda Quits Syria in Name Only,“ *The Century Foundation* 29 July 2016; available online: <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/al-qaeda-quits-syria-name/>

own global jihadi goals through the Nusra Front. By the end of 2015 this aim was reached and the next phase of calling for Islamic rule in Syria started. But – according to Lister – it proved deeply unpopular among Syrians. In January 2016, the Nusra Front secretly proposed a merger with other armed opposition groups in exchange for its breaking ties with al-Qaida. At the same time, it has focused on spoiling international efforts to launch a political process and a cessation of hostilities in Syria. Lister predicts the possibility that regional actors such as Turkey and Qatar could provide direct military material in support to the group.⁹

Hassan Hassan, a journalist and Syria analyst, takes a broader historic angle. According to him the speculations preceding the announcements by al-Qaida and the Nusra Front converged into a narrative around their breaking ties, which was not confirmed by the actual wording of the statements. Had it been the case, al-Qaida would have had to dissolve the Nusra Front's oath of allegiance to al-Qaida. Three of the main jihadist factions in Syria, Islamic State, *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* and *Ahrar al-Sham*, have factual links with al-Qaida, hence this cannot be the sole criterion in any Western anti-terrorism campaign for attacking them. The reconfiguration of the Nusra Front will lead to its deeper infiltration into the rebel forces and complicate the US involvement in Syria.¹⁰

Pieter van Ostaeyen's linguistically solid analysis considers al-Jaulani's move to be part of a carefully elaborated long-term military strategy inside Syria. Ostaeyen also takes into account that since 31 July a military counteroffensive has started against the siege of Aleppo imposed by Assad, Russia, Iran, the Lebanese Hizballah and a number of foreign militias. A coalition of Salafi-dominated armed groups including the Nusra Front cooperates on a massive scale in what looks like a military campaign that was planned ahead. It is in the process of breaking the siege and increasing its credibility. This could lead to unified military and political structure in Syria's north.¹¹

Conclusion

Developments in the north of Syria, namely in Aleppo, in coming weeks and months will have to be monitored closely to show if the new *Fatah al-Sham* Front's military joint venture with other Syrian Salafi armed opposition groups, namely *Ahrar al-Sham*, is eventually evolving into a closer and more successful political cooperation in Syria.

⁹ Charles Lister, „The Nusra Front Is Dead and Stronger Than Ever Before,“ *Foreign Policy* 28 July 2016; online: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/28/the-nusra-front-is-dead-and-stronger-than-ever-before/>

¹⁰ Hassan Hassan, Bassam Barabandi, *Al-Qaeda Steps Back to Let Nusra Move Forward in Syria*, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 11.8.2016, online: timep.org/commentary/al-qaeda-steps-back-to-let-nusra-move-forward-in-syria/

¹¹ Pieter van Ostaeyen on his blog: *Jabhat an-Nusra rebrands as Jabhat Fath as-Sham*, 4 August 2016; online: <https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2016/08/04/jabhat-an-nusra-rebrands-as-jabhat-fath-as-sham/>