



Jabhat al-Nusra at Crossroads

Shaul Shay and Ely Karmon

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In Syria, the Al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front and ISIS are the two most powerful groups fighting President Bashar Assad's forces. The two sides initially were a single group and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) was set up by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi but it broke apart in 2013 during a power struggle among their leaders.

Jabhat al-Nusra present itself as a domestic Syrian group and a product of the 2011 uprising against the Assad regime. While ISIS's leadership is dominated by Iraqis, JN leadership is dominated by Syrians. JN derives its strength from its intertwinement with Syrian groups that represent much of Syria's majority Sunni population. It is part of a network of armed opposition groups, civil society elements, relief organizations, and civilian populations that rely on it for support.¹

The organization has a senior Shura council comprised of military and religious figures that advises its leader, Abu Mohammed al Joulani.¹ This council includes at least three members of the al-Qaeda core sent by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri to help develop and implement the Syrian affiliate's strategy and policy.²

Jabhat al Nusra likely has a central military command that provides strategic guidance to sub-commands that operate with relative autonomy on a roughly provincial level. There are probably at least five such sub-commands in Syria, in addition to a separate command in Lebanon. In Syria, the organization's military force designs and executes operations against the Assad regime and conducts recruiting, military training, and outreach to rebel brigades. It is also involved in governance and policing functions.

JN fights alongside a number of other Islamist rebel groups in the Syrian war. So far al-Nusra has been able to work with other factions, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), by prioritizing the fight against Assad over its own long term objectives. It is one of the dominant powers in north-western Syria and has a toehold in Aleppo, the country's largest city.

In Lebanon, it recruits from refugee camps and disenfranchised Sunni populations in Tripoli and the Bekaa Valley and conducts spectacular attacks against Hezbollah and the Lebanese state.

¹ For a picture of the complex framework of fighting rebel groups in Syria, see the attached PowerPoint presentation based on several academic sources, mainly the Syrian Opposition Guide of The Institute for the Study of War in Washington (slides 3, 4) and the Syria Conflict Mapping Project Reports of The Carter Center (slides 5 – 10).

Jabhat al-Nusra attempts to apply a harsh version of Sharia law in areas where it is powerful but in less brutal ways compared to ISIS. In an audio message, the leader of Al Qaeda, Ayman al Zawahiri, condemned ISIS and compared them to the Khawarij, a seventh-century Islamic rebel group known for its brutality against fellow Muslims considered "apostates". "The Islamic nation in Greater Syria has backed [al-Nusra], realizing the difference between the correctness of its methods and the methods of the new Khawarij," he said.³

JN has weakened the moderate opposition and penetrated other Sunni opposition groups in Syria so thoroughly that it is poised to benefit the most from the destruction of ISIS and the fall or transition of the Assad regime.

JN is also a spoiler that will almost certainly cause the current negotiating strategy in Syria to fail. It opposes any negotiated settlement for both principled and practical reasons and it is influential enough with powerful opposition groups to ensure that some of them will prevent any permanent ceasefire that does not remove the Assad regime. Many powerful armed opposition groups reject a settlement that does not guarantee Assad's removal from power, so JN is pushing in a direction toward which they are already inclined.⁴

On the background of the Russian involvement in Syria, the peace process in Syria, and the military blows that ISIS suffered in Syria and Iraq, Jabhat al Nusra has to choose between opposing options.

Option 1 - The foundation of a new emirate

The creation of an emirate would represent a significant shift in Al Qaeda and JN strategy and will force other opposition groups to either back the "emirate" or fight it. The move could put the organization on a collision course with other rebel groups fighting against the Assad regime.

In his audio message Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda Zawahiri, said he was "proud" of Jabhat al-Nusra's work and its connection to al-Qaeda. He has announced his support to JN to form its own "emirate" and handed over the reins of the caliphate to al-Nusra Front leader in Syria Abu Mohammad al-Joulani. "We have repeatedly mentioned that if al-Sham people (Syrians), being brave hearted righteous jihadists, establish a Muslim government and elect their own Imam, then their choice is ours," al-Zawahiri said.⁵

The foundation of a new caliphate in Syria would be a severe challenge for the caliphate of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the (Islamic State) of Iraq and Syria.

Option 2 – Leave Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda has been concerned Jabhat al-Nusra could be persuaded by Gulf states like Qatar to sever ties with them and disband in return for aid.⁶ Gulf states like Qatar have been trying to persuade Jabhat al-Nusra intermediaries to disavow al-Qaeda and throw in their lot with other Syria-focused rebel groups in return for aid, so it may have felt the need to reassert central control.

The two major armed Islamist groups fighting in Syria - Ahrar al-Sham and JN - have failed to merge into one overall group which could more effectively fight the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic State (ISIS) group.

Ahrar al-Sham and JN worked together under the banner of Jaish al-Fatah, a coalition of Islamists groups who overran most of the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib in May 2015.

While both have a jihadi agenda, JN remains loyal to al-Qaeda's leadership and seeks global jihad. Ahrar al-Sham, on the other hand, portrays itself as a nationalist force and has joined the groups representing the opposition at the Geneva peace talks.

Commander of Ahrar al-Sham group called on JN to disengage from al-Qaeda. He said that: “Any merging including al-Qaeda is just a damage on the revolution, it harms the Syrian people and revolution, so none of the factions in Syria calls other factions to unify within the umbrella of foreign parties, but we call on our brothers of Al-Nusra for disengagement from al-Qaeda for Jihad al-Shami maintenance, and care for the benefit of the revolution, and distant from the classification, which our enemies want.”⁷

JN had been inquiring on whether its disengagement from al-Qaeda would halt operations against its militants and whether it would be enough for the international community to support the Syrian Opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA). They also queried whether the attacks targeting the opposition would come to an end.

It’s important to highlight that regional countries want JN to abandon al-Qaeda only because they want to be able to legally support it, rather than because they believe the group would abandon its beliefs.⁸

JN is persistent on keeping its global dimensions, as a part of Al-Qaeda, because it would directly stream into recruitment and armament, and help it fight ISIS. Its international presence also provides the backbone to its supply and foreign funding.

Option 3 – Jabhat al Nusra - ISIS alliance

There is a complex and long-running rivalry between ISIS and al-Nusra. The jihadist groups share some goals but differ on their methods. Despite reports of a possible rapprochement between JN and ISIS, most of their actual fighting until the end of 2014 in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon has not been coordinated, and in fact these groups see each other as rivals.

One exception, however, involved the unsuccessful attempt to free Abu Ahmad Jum’a, the leader of Liwa Fajr al-Islam (The Dawn of Islam Brigade). The attempted rescue took place just days after Jum’a had been captured in late July 2014 by the Lebanese Army near the Syrian-Lebanese border. Military cooperation among relatively small brigades comprising dozens or at most a few hundred fighters each that are alternatively allied with Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State along the Lebanese-Syrian border shows how the factional lines between the two larger groups may be temporarily blurred on the actual battlefield.⁹

In April 2015, ISIS militants entered the Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee Camp near Damascus from the Hajar Al-Aswad district and took control of 90% of it. Jaysh al-Islam claimed that its fighters were refused access to the camp by JN and that al-Nusra allowed ISIS to enter the camp. By 16 April, ISIS and JN were still holding 80% of the Yarmouk Camp. Most of the JN fighters in Yarmouk Camp defected to ISIS while the two groups were closely collaborating in the area.¹⁰

In April 2016, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri urged militants in Syria to unite, despite his continued rejection of the rival ISIS and its proclaimed caliphate.

“We have to want the unity of the Mujahideen in Sham (Syria) so it will be liberated from the Russians and Western crusaders. My brothers ... the matter of unity is a matter of life or death for you. Either you unite to live as Muslims with dignity, or you bicker and separate and so are eaten one by one,” Zawahiri said.¹¹

Hamza the son of Al-Qaeda’s late founder Osama bin-Laden has urged jihadi militants in Syria to unite in an audio message posted online, claiming that the fight in the war-torn country paves the way to “liberating Palestine”. “The Islamic Uma (nation) should focus on jihad in Al-Sham (Syria) ... and unite the ranks of mujahedeen there. There is no longer an excuse for those who insist on division and disputes now that the whole world has mobilized against Muslims,” he said. Hamza bin Laden said Syria is the “best battlefield” leading to “liberating Al-Quds, the road to liberating Palestine is today much shorter compared to before the blessed Syrian revolution.”¹²

The groups can cooperate in terror attacks along the border with the Israeli Golan Heights in order to open up a new front as part of an effort to deflect attention away from its setbacks in Syria and Iraq. This could also potentially boost recruitment of foreign fighters looking for the next frontier.

Al-Qaeda and ISIS' emphasis on lone wolf attacks, suggest that they may move away from regional rivalry to bringing the fight to Western cities.

Is there a Jabhat al-Nusra – Israel relationship?

JN gains in Syria's southern Quneitra province and the western Damascus countryside since September 2014 have enabled it to open new infiltration routes into the Shabaa region and southern Beqaa valley of Lebanon. And in early November 2014 it played a central role in wresting the large towns of Nawa and Sheikh Miskin from the regime in northern Houran, south of Damascus.

According to a UN report covering the period from March to May 2014, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) detected contact between rebels and the Israeli army across the Golan cease-fire line, particularly during fierce clashes between the Syrian army and the rebels. The report also confirmed that the UN forces spotted rebels transporting 89 wounded across the cease-fire line into the Israeli occupied zone.

Communications increased between rebels and the Israeli army before the eruption of the southern front in Daraa and Quneitra in September 2015. "The battle to capture Quneitra on Sept. 27 was preceded by coordination and communications between Abu Dardaa, a leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Israeli army to pave the way for the attack. According to an FSA commander who partly participated in this battle, the Israeli army provided Abu Dardaa with maps of the border area and the Syrian army's strategic posts in the southern area." Communications increased between rebels and the Israeli army before the eruption of the southern front in Daraa and Quneitra in September 2015.¹³

Summary

Both ISIS and JN are Sunni Salafi-jihadi terrorist groups. ISIS has presented itself as a group that can protect Sunnis against the Assad regime, which is aligned with Iran and Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites. Once ISIS is gone, JN could step in and assume that role.

The defeat of ISIS inside of Syria is likely to increase the capability and strength of Jabhat al-Nusra, and can lead to the option of cooperation between the groups.

The "emirate" of Jabhat al-Nusra could be al-Qaeda's first sovereign state. If the plan is carried out it could see two "Islamic states" –ISIS and the new al-Qaeda emirate - competing for territory and influence within the borders of war-torn Syria.

While the US's strategy in the Middle East is heavily focused on ISIS, which is also known as the Islamic State, ISIL, or Daesh, Jabhat al-Nusra, which is also known as the Nusra Front, is spreading its influence through groups that oppose the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The United States and its western allies fear that if it establishes territorial control it could use Syria as a base for attacking the West, as Osama bin Laden did in Afghanistan.

Notes

- ¹ For example, see: "Security Council al Qaeda Sanctions Committee Adds Fourteen Individuals and Two Entities to its Sanctions List," United Nations SC/11575, September 23, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11575.doc.htm>.
- ² Thomas Joscelyn, "Head of al Qaeda 'Victory Committee' in Syria," *The Long War Journal*, March 6, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/_at_first_nasr_staye.php.
- ³ Raf Sanchez, "Al-Qaeda leader gives blessing for terror group to form own 'Islamic state' in Syria," *The Telegraph*, May 8, 2016.
- ⁴ Genevieve Casagrande with Jennifer Cafarella, "The Syrian Opposition's Political Demands," *Institute for the Study of War*, December 29, 2015, <http://understandingwar.org/backgrounders/syrian-opposition%E2%80%99s-political-demands>.
- ⁵ Nazeer Rida, "Al Qaeda Backs Al-Nusra Front on Establishing a Caliphate in Syria," *Asharq Alawsat*, May 9, 2016.
- ⁶ Matt Hunter, "Syria faces being over-run by TWO Islamic States as Al-Qaeda leader grants permission for the group to establish its own rival 'caliphate' to ISIS," *Mail Online*, May 9, 2016.
- ⁷ "A leader of Ahrar al-Sham clarifies the integration initiatives calling for "Al-Nusra" to disengage al-Qaeda," *El Dorar Al Shamia*, February 1, 2016.
- ⁸ Hassan Hassan, "Jabhat Al Nusra leader reveals his true colours." <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/jabhat-al-nusra-leader-reveals-his-true-colours>, This January 14, 2015 article about the JN – Israel cooperation, published by the "Information Clearing House" of Al-Monitor, was republished in the same form on June 8, 2016 by Gulf *The National*.
- ⁹ Joel D. Parker, "An Alliance between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State on the Lebanese-Syrian Frontier?" *Tel Aviv Notes*, Vol. 8, No. 22, Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, December 10, 2014.
- ¹⁰ Abdulrahman al-Masri, "'ISIS and Nusra are one' in Yarmouk Camp," *The Middle East Monitor*, April 19, 2015.
- ¹¹ *CBS News*, "Al Qaeda chief tells Syrian rebels: Unite or die," May 9, 2016.
- ¹² *Al Arabiya*, "Bin Laden's son Hamza urges militant unity in Syria," May 9, 2016.
- ¹³ Khaled Atallah, "Are Israel And Jabhat al-Nusra Coordinating Attacks In Syria?" June 4, 2016, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article44804.htm>