



# Jabhat Al-Nusra in the Syrian Conflict

Mohamed-Ali Adraoui

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## **Jabhat-Nusra Front is one of the main Jihadist actors currently involved in the Syrian war. Several factors have allowed its integration into the Syrian landscape, and its evolution.**

From the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the regime has struggled to remain in power. Rather than yield to the popular demands for more justice and freedom, Asad opted for a strategy of “ideological contamination” through which Jihadist movements would overtake the rest of the opposition, appearing to be the lesser evil and gaining support from parts of Syrian society and the international community. This strategy consists of purposely allowing Jihadists to create rebellious groups to turn the conflict into a far more radical struggle and frame it according to their ultra-radical ideology allowing Asad to appear to be a rationalistic player has finally been successful.

One of the major winners in this configuration, especially since 2012, has been the Front al-Nusra (*Jabhat al-Nusra*) whose ideological affiliation is Jihadism, a religious and political narrative designed in the twentieth century to overthrow all the regimes found guilty of violating Islamic laws and solidarity that are supposed to unite the Umma. Claiming Sunni (orthodox) and Salafi (“rooted in the very beginnings of Islam”) traditions, the movement took advantage of the start of the Syrian Revolution to oust the Asad regime (seen by the Jihadists as a “renegade” entity as in the hands of a Alawi-Chi’a family) and to build on its ruins a Sharia-ruled society.

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Al-Nusra was founded as an al-Qaeda-affiliate during the Syrian conflict, but has gradually evolved towards a form of nationalized Jihadism to fit with the local realities as well as reinforce its legitimacy among the people.

Founded as the “Front of Support for the People of the Levant”, the movement wants to establish a Jihadi hub in Syria by recruiting fighters released by the Asad regime from the [Saidnaya military prison](#) in May-June 2011, after Decree 61 of May 31, 2011. Al-Nusra, in this respect, emerged from the transfer of al-Qaeda fighters to Syria who were initially operating in Iraq in the wake of the 2003 US invasion, and more specifically from the rise of [Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi](#) as a leading figure in contemporary Jihadism. A small band of seven fighters (coming from the “Islamic State in Iraq”<sup>[1]</sup> founded by Zarqawi in 2006 and led by the Syrian al-Jawlani), known as the “Khurasan Group,” came to Syria with the mission to contact released Jihadis and create sleeper cells to metastasize into a larger hub dedicated to a rebellion against the regime.

Between October 2011 and January 2012, high-level meetings chiefly in the area of Homs were organized so that fighters, mainly former members of Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s group in Iraq, starting with al-Jawlani, could return home to Syria to give birth to a military movement named “Jabhat al-Nusra li’l-Ahl al-Sham” on January 23, 2012, which formed its first local Jihadi cells in Hasakah Governorate.

Using tried and tested tactics learned during their military struggle in Iraq, al-Nusra consisted of 300-400 soldiers in 2012, and around 6,000 fighters by 2014, representing around 9% of the anti-regime forces today. Preliminary efforts by al-Nusra were reminiscent of classical terrorist attacks and fit into typical insurrectional strategies to defeat the regime and exert power over the territories they seized, as seen in January 2012 in the al-Midan district of

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Damascus, where it attacked riot police who were being ferried to an anti-government protest.

Despite al-Nusra's avowed alignment with al-Qaeda's global strategic ambitions, it has clearly struggled to establish an Islamic Emirate ruled by religious legislation in Syria, and the eventual prospect of establishing a transnational Caliphate supposedly echoing the first centuries of Islam remains moot. In fact, al-Nusra's participation in the Syrian civil war has led to it adopting a more collaborative and flexible strategy.

### **The Syrian War and Strategic Evolution**

From the beginning, al-Nusra's declared enemy has always been the regime and its allies and proxies. Unlike several other Jihadi groups whose agenda has seemed to be more ambitious, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (so renamed in 2013 after it formed in Iraq as the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006 in the aftermath of the US invasion, and today known as the Islamic State), al-Nusra was an early-adopter of a nationalization-process through which all military and political efforts were directed against the Assad regime and its supporters. Targeting this "near enemy" as a matter of priority, al-Nusra has found resonance and relevance by matching the cardinal cause shared by all Syrian rebel groups that have mushroomed over the last couple of years. This exclusive focus on toppling the Ba'athist government through the mobilization of the local population has, to some extent, transformed the Jihadi movement into a nationalist-Jihadi armed force that is directly responding and reacting to the immediate political demands coming from the locals.

As revealed in early 2014 by one of the top officials within al-Nusra, [Sami al-Uraydi](#), the movement seeks to make its position in Syria more acceptable and legitimate by creating the perception of leading through "people-oriented" policies. The marrow of these policies involves services and social welfare, assuring security needs, avoiding being perceived as extremists (unlike the

Islamic State which is known to exert tougher religious control and punish the populations it controls), maintaining strong relationships with local communities and other fighting groups (although divergences may exist), and putting the focus on combatting the government's forces and allies.

In 2012, al-Nusra saw a marked increase in power and influence, largely owing to its success in attracting more foreign fighters, united by the desire to protect the Syrian majority. These foreign fighters saw themselves as sharing a common religious background with the Syrian population, as they were exclusively Sunni, and became invested in the domestic struggle to overthrow the regime, whose bedrock of support is mainly 'Alawi, a fairly localized sect, affiliated, however distantly, to Twelver Shi'ism. The success in recruitment over 2012 and 2013 was integral to al-Nusra's prestige and military success on the ground. There are differing estimates across experts as to the extent of this increase in recruitment but the consensus remains that the proportion of foreign fighters has unquestionably increased over the last four years. This development is not entirely unsurprising; a significant part of al-Nusra's members come from Iraq, and used to be affiliated to the Islamic State there, and formed the core of al-Nusra's early membership, namely the former prisoners released in 2011. And yet, al-Nusra cannot be defined as a pure extension of the main Iraqi Jihadi movement in neighboring Syria.

Adding to al-Nusra's strategic advantage is its ability to participate in the regional configuration by utilizing its jihadi agenda to serve the interests of certain *de facto* sponsors. For instance, al-Nusra has benefited from Qatar's intervention and funding, especially in terms of negotiations of kidnappings, such as when Qatar facilitated discussions between the jihadi movement and foreign countries for the release of a group of Greek Orthodox nuns in March



2014. Furthermore, it has been [argued](#), that at least until 2015, the Qataris were among the main fundraisers for al-Nusra. The dual type of relationship between the Front and some regional sponsors (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Turkey, etc.) also reflects how ambiguous and vacillating interests and strategies are on the ground.

In July 2016, a crucial decision to become Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (“Front for the Conquest of the Levant”) turned out to be an essential milestone in the Syrianization process initiated by al-Nusra. This move helped the group’s efforts to become a force aiming to play a central role in the war against the regime or any contender claiming to exert primacy over the Syrian rebellion. Although connections undoubtedly still exist with al-Qaeda, al-Nusra as a social movement, dedicated to Jihadist narratives, has contributed to reinforcing its legitimacy within rebel groups and the Syrian people by becoming Jabhat Fath al-Sham. This has enabled al-Nusra to collaborate with most rebel groups while the regime has reinforced its capacities, particularly after the Russians came to its rescue in September 2015. A couple of months after the split, on January 20, 2017, several Jihadist leaders, including those of Jabhat Fath al-Sham/al-Nusra, announced the merger of their movements with the aim of being able to more effectively challenge the regime and its allies, generating The Organization for the Liberation of the Levant (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS).

It turns out that the strategy followed by al-Nusra when joining HTS was followed clearly to reinforce nationalization. This has been pushed to such an extent that very serious concerns have arisen between al-Qaeda and al-Nusra since early 2017. The divide has now become so intense that al-Qaeda is seriously considering creating a rival movement that would fully pledge

allegiance to the global brand at the detriment of HTS. Both political and military factors have indeed generated tensions between the two sides.

## Conclusion

Although it is still dedicated to the service of a violent transnational struggle in the name of religion, al-Nusra's strategy highlights how local and national circumstances impact the vision of foreign actors (even if the Jihadi actors have unquestionably played a role in the rise of sectarianism in Syria). Evolving from the status of a foreign movement to a domestic one, al-Nusra has certainly become a major force to be reckoned with, not only in the present Syrian context, but also for many years to come.

[1] The group that would become "The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" in 2013, then "the Islamic State". However, since this period, al-Nusra is an independent entity sharing the same agenda as the Islamic State whose main design was to establish "a Caliphate" in the Sunni-majority regions across Syria and Iraq.

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**Mohamed-Ali Adraoui is Marie Sklodowska Curie Fellow at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsch School of Foreign Service.**

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101 Clerkenwell Road London  
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