

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS  
EASTERN DIVISION

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

v.

AWS MOHAMMED YOUNIS AL-JAYAB

No. 16 CR 181

No. 18 CR 721

Judge Sara L. Ellis

**GOVERNMENT'S POSITION PAPER AS TO SENTENCING FACTORS**

The UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, by its attorney, JOHN R. LAUSCH, United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, submits the following position paper as to sentencing factors. For the reasons set forth below, the government respectfully requests that this Court sentence defendant AWS MOHAMMED YOUNIS AL-JAYAB to a term of imprisonment of 180 months, a sentence well-supported by the factors to be considered under Title 18, United States Code, Section 3553(a).

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Defendant AWS MOHAMMED YOUNIS AL-JAYAB pled guilty to providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization, namely Ansar Al-Islam, and to making a material false statement to immigration authorities. Throughout his sentencing submission, defendant seeks to minimize his offense conduct by painting himself as a victim and hero, claiming he traveled to Syria to fight with his brothers against the brutal Syrian regime. The facts belie defendant's manufactured narrative and his attempts to mask the truth of the violent and dangerous nature of his conduct should not be credited. Defendant was not a hero. Defendant was a knowing and

willing member of a designated foreign terrorist organization, intent on creating an Islamic State in the Syrian land and defeating the infidel, the United States.

The goals of the foreign terrorist organizations with which defendant fought are revealing of defendant's offense conduct. As an initial matter, an organization is designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States Department of State if (A) the organization is a foreign organization; (B) the organization engages in terrorist activity (as defined in section 1182(a)(3)(B) of this title or terrorism (as defined in section 2656f(d)(2) of title 22), or retains the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism); and (C) the terrorist activity or terrorism of the organization threatens the security of United States nationals or the national security of the United States. *See* 8 U.S.C. § 1189(a).

*Ansar Al-Islam*: According to the United States Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism 2014, Ansar al-Islam, also known as Ansar al-Sunna among other aliases, is a Sunni terrorist group that has vowed to establish an independent Islamic state in Iraq. Ansar al-Islam originated in Iraqi Kurdistan and was founded by Mullah Krekar. On or about March 22, 2004, Department of State designated Ansar al-Islam a foreign terrorist organization pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 1189(a).<sup>1</sup> According to a report by the Council on Foreign Relations, Ansar Al-Islam was founded in December 2001 with funding and logistical support from al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. *See* Exhibit A (*Ansar al-Islam (Iraq, Islamists/Kurdish Separatists)*), *Ansar al-Sunnah, A profile of a militant Islamist Kurdish separatist*

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<sup>1</sup> *See* <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2004/30649.htm>.

*movement seeking to transform Iraq into an Islamic state*, Backgrounder by Kathryn Gregory, November 5, 2008). Ansar al-Islam claims the second largest number of Sunni jihadist attacks in Iraq, after al-Qaeda in Iraq. *Id.* at 4.<sup>2</sup> “Ansar al-Islam adheres to a rigid Salafi ideology. Its founding declaration states ‘jihad in Iraq has become an individual duty of every Muslim after the infidel enemy attacked the land of Islam.’” *Id.* at 3.

*Jabhat al-Nusra*: On December 11, 2012, the Department of State amended the foreign terrorist organization designation of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to include al-Nusra Front, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jabhet al-Nusra, The Victory Front, and Al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant.<sup>3</sup> According to the Department of State and the Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, from November 2011 through December 2012, al-Nusra claimed nearly 600 attacks – ranging from more than 40 suicide attacks to small arms and improvised explosive device operations – in major city centers including Damascus, Aleppo, Hamah, Dara, Homs, Idlib, and Dayr al-Zawr. *Id.* During these attacks numerous innocent Syrians were killed. Through these attacks, al-Nusra sought to portray itself as part of the legitimate Syrian opposition while it was, in fact, an attempt by AQI to hijack the struggles of the Syrian people for its own malign purposes. *Id.*; *see also* Exhibit B (Countering Extremism Project, Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham) (“In Syria, the

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<sup>2</sup> *Jihad* is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious duty.

<sup>3</sup>See <https://web.archive.org/web/20170204084405/https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/266590.htm>

group continues to profess its goal of toppling the Assad regime and establishing an Islamic state in its place.”). According to the Countering Extremism Project, “the Nusra Front adheres to a Salafist, jihadist ideology with the professed aim of establishing Islamic governance in all areas under its control.” *See* Exhibit B at 1.

Ansar al-Islam and Jabhat al-Nusrah sought to dismantle the Syrian government because they wanted the Syrian land for the Islamic caliphate. Defendant seeks to confuse this Court by conflating the violent jihad of Ansar al-Islam and Jabhat al-Nusrah with efforts by the Free Syrian Army (“FSA”) to oppose the brutal regime of Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad in order to create a secular government. According to open source information, the FSA was established in 2011 by Syrian military defectors, and it has since become an umbrella organization for various armed opposition groups fighting to depose the Syrian regime of Assad. Elements of the FSA have historically stated support for secular governance in Syria.

Defendant has never claimed any allegiance to the FSA or any interest in fighting against Assad in order to establish a secular government in Syria. In fact, he made clear his disgust and disdain for the FSA in his communications. *See infra* pp. 17-18. Instead, from at least approximately 2012 through 2014, defendant exchanged thousands of communications with his friends and family located in the United States and abroad about his jihadi ideals, his membership in and time fighting with Ansar Al-Islam, his support of Jabhat Al-Nusrah, his desire to see the establishment of an Islamic State, and his loathing of the United States.

Defendant admitted to traveling to Syria to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization, Ansar Al-Islam, and lying to immigration authorities about his travels to Syria. Defendant's efforts to now minimize his offense conduct by rebranding himself as a hero rather than a terrorist are not consistent with the facts of this case, defendant's admissions in his plea agreement, his communications, or his actions.

## II. OFFENSE CONDUCT

Defendant's offense conduct is discussed in detail in the Complaint (Dkt. 1), the Presentence Investigation Report (the "PSR"), the Plea Agreement (Dkt. 129), the Government's Version of the Offense (the "GVO"), and is summarized below.<sup>4</sup>

### A. Defendant's Ties to a Foreign Terrorist Organization Before Arriving in the United States

Defendant was born in Iraq, fled to in Syria in approximately 2011, and immigrated to the United States with his family in October 2012. During defendant's time in Iraq and Syria, defendant was a knowing and active member of Ansar al-Islam. For example, on March 8, 2012, defendant told his cousin over Facebook messaging that defendant's "platoon" while he was in Iraq was "Ansar al-Islam."<sup>5</sup> He quoted his Ansar al-Islam leader to his cousin as follows, "He used to say, 'We fight

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<sup>4</sup> Citations to the docket in *United States v. Al-Jayab*, 16 CR 181 (N.D. Ill.) are to "Dkt.," followed by the document number. Citations to defendant's sentencing memorandum (Dkt. 143) are to "D.S.M." Each is followed by a page number.

<sup>5</sup> The communications detailed in this memorandum are translations from Arabic to English performed by linguists employed by the FBI. The quoted communications are verbatim translations and the remaining references are summarizing the verbatim translation.

to rule the entire earth with what God has revealed and there is no fighting for the homeland,”” echoing the Ansar al-Islam goal of establishing a global Islamic State.

On May 5, 2012, the same cousin asked for videos of defendant’s “work,” meaning violent jihad on behalf of Ansar al-Islam. Defendant sent his cousin links to a series of videos on YouTube of other members of Ansar al-Islam engaging in terrorist acts in Baghdad, Iraq. One of the videos was an Ansar al-Islam production depicting masked mujahedin holding guns and knives training in the desert, along with violent images of men who had been executed, and which video defendant described as “marvelous.” Defendant’s cousin specifically asked for videos of defendant involved in jihad, and defendant responded that his leader, the leader of Ansar al-Islam in Iraq, did not like to tape them performing “work.”

Defendant’s communications also made clear that defendant continued to fight with Ansar al-Islam after he relocated to Syria. For example, in February 2013, defendant told Individual L about his time fighting in Syria before he moved to the United States: “Our headquarters is outside of Damascus in another province. It is away from Damascus less than an hour. At night we go and in the morning we go to Damascus to work. We stir a lot of trouble in the world and then return.”

In April 2013, defendant expounded upon his prior experience fighting in Syria to his friend and disciple, Omar Al-Hardan, who resided in Texas.<sup>6</sup> Defendant

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<sup>6</sup> On January 6, 2016, Omar Al-Hardan was charged in the Southern District of Texas with one count each of providing material support to the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (“ISIS”), in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Section 2339B, procurement of citizenship or naturalization unlawfully, in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Section 1425(a), and making false statements, in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Section 1001. *See United States v. Omar Al-Hardan*, 16 CR 03 (S.D. Tex.), Dkt. No. 1. On October 17,

explained that he had joined the mujahidin in Syria when he was 16 years old; and he fought for a group now known as Ansar Al-Islam.<sup>7</sup> During one conversation with Al-Hardan, defendant said he had previously fought in Syria during a battle against the Syrian government forces, adding, “God willing, you will have your chance to shoot . . . the most shots I made with it in my life was in the biggest battle I participated in. Seven magazines in one breathe . . . Just shooting, spraying, spraying.” Later during the same conversation, Al-Hardan asked what do “Assad’s soldiers scream when you raid?” Defendant replied “They fall silent. They stiffen. I remember once I went down together with a brother. We executed [. . .] three. As for the brother who was with me, he shot two. The third one aimed the Russian at the brother [. . .] He continued aiming and would not unlock the safety. He was so scared, he could not do it.” Al-Hardan wrote “and you silenced him?” Defendant responded, “Yes...In the chest, in the head. And when he falls, we shoot again.” Defendant continued,

Do you remember the national security headquarters building in Syria? The mujahidin, Al-Nusrah Front struck it. [. . .] Those suicide bombers they want to break in. There is a control checkpoint that would stop them. Their car is full of ammunition and suicide vests, its booby traps were visible, so they would stop them and arrest them. We got down and overran the control checkpoint and opened the way for them to raid, and we retreated.

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2016, Al-Hardan pled guilty to the Section 2339B count. *Id.*, Dkt. No. 91. He was sentenced on December 18, 2017 to 192 months imprisonment, to be followed by a lifetime term of supervised release. *Id.*, Dkt. No. 115.

<sup>7</sup> A *mujahidin* is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as an Islamic guerrilla fighter, especially in the Middle East.

Defendant's affinity for violence before he arrived in the United States was also clear. For example, on March 19, 2012, defendant told his cousin about a fight he had in Syria the day before, during which fight defendant broke a man's nose and "poured his anger at him." During the same conversation, defendant boasted about another fight he had in Syria in which he found a man who defendant believed had previously hit him with a pipe, and defendant hit the man hard, crippled him, and destroyed the man's vehicle, ripping his tires and shattering the windows.

**B. Defendant's Plans to Travel to Syria**

From the moment he arrived in the United States in October 2012, defendant began to plot his return to Syria to fight on behalf of terrorist groups there. Beginning as early as mid-October 2012, via his Facebook accounts, defendant told multiple family members and associates that he intended to travel to Syria to support violent jihad, identified Turkey as a probable transit point, and sought to arrange the finances and logistics for his travel. For example, on October 13, 2012, defendant told Individual A, an associate located in Iraq, "I want to go back . . . I'll go to Turkey and enter smuggled to Syria . . . When I come, I'll call. Don't go with anyone except the Front. [ . . . ] Go with Ansar [Ansar Al-Islam] or with the Front [Jabhat Al Nusrah Front] only."

Defendant was desperate to leave the United States and return to Syria. On November 7, 2012, he told his friend Individual Q, who was likely located in Syria, that his "soul is in Syria with the brothers...I swear to God, I am more determined here...Pray for me, to be steadfast in the face of these rotten seditions here, and most importantly the return." On December 7, 2012, he told a friend that he would even



return by “bribing, as much as it costs I will pay.” Defendant’s intention was to return to Syria to fight, as indicated by what he told his father on November 17, 2012:

I will roam all over the world. I, the jihad is in my blood. . . I will attack the whole world including America and all that is in it. When I was in Syria, I told you, no one can stop me from my path.

In January 2013, during another discussion about returning to Syria, defendant discussed weapons with Individual Q, including, “when I come, I will give you a Walther [semi-automatic pistol], God willing...By God, once I joined in a battle, I used up seven magazines with a Russian [Russian-made AK-47 Assault Rifle].”

Defendant engaged in Facebook message discussions with individuals located in Iraq, Turkey, and Syria in order to arrange for finances and travel. Indeed, in February 2013, one of these individuals sent two money orders totaling \$681 to defendant to finance defendant’s travel. On February 5, 2013, defendant told a friend that he wanted to go to Syria, and not Iraq, because there was more “work,” in Syria, referencing violent jihad. He separately told two friends that “I want to rush there. I want to die. How nice it would be if I could jump into Syria!” and “I do not want to get married. I want to die.”

In these messages and others, defendant also demonstrated his allegiance to Jabhat Al-Nusrah. For example, on February 9, 2013, he told a friend that he wanted the friend to create a Facebook page dedicated to the young men of Al-Nusrah and call it “A soldier of al-Jabhah...Soldiers of the Front.” He went on to expound upon his own work with Jabhat Al-Nusrah, “my group participates in every operation. By God we are strong and we get our strength from God. May God protect them all and

protect the Army, the Front, and all the mujahidin.” Defendant’s friend lauded defendant’s group as being clever with booby-trapping ability, and asked defendant when his group would enter Damascus, Syria. Defendant indicated they would hear “good news soon,” and that Jabhat Al-Nusrah announced that some martyrs-to-be had entered Damascus.

Later that month, on February 25, he continued his conversation with Individual Q regarding his desire to open a Facebook page honoring members of Al-Nusrah, “I told the youth that I would like to open a page and let the brothers in it, post the news . . . But not an official one for the Front. It includes news about the Front, and anything pertaining to the Front.” Individual Q asked what name he wanted the page to have, and defendant responded “Al-Nusrah Front Soldiers. Followers of Al-Nusrah Front.” The same day, defendant discussed his plans to fight in Syria with Individual Q. When Individual Q lamented his injured leg, defendant said that was no excuse, that he had a friend who fought with only one leg, and “By God, I would go to paradise limping.” Defendant praised that “the Front are formidable,” that “they are all about cars laden with explosives, vests, and suicide bombers,” that “they are terrifying and all their lives they have seen nothing but blood and destruction,” and that his friend “should be proud of the Front,” again referring to Jabhat al-Nusrah Front.

In addition to talking about violence, defendant watched and shared violent videos. For example, on February 15, 2013, defendant sent his friend Individual L, who the government believes was located in Iraq a graphic violent video which

showed deceased individuals and body parts. Defendant told the friend “Watch the video, it is important. If you catch a Shi’ite, kill him; revenge for this brother, may God welcome him in paradise.”

In February 2013 defendant was living with his uncle in Tucson, Arizona, near an Air Force military base. Defendant told Individual L about the base:

There is a military airport by us; it holds thousands of F-16 airplanes. I go and look at it daily, and I get torn apart, and then I go back home...Thousands of airplanes, I swear to God. They train many people tirelessly. May God humiliate them. They train a group daily...And the Umma [Islamic nation] is sleeping, and those are training daily to destroy it. . . .

Every Thursday a container goes in. I am following it; and sometimes on Saturday a container goes inside a small unit and it will be placed inside, and when it gets in we give them its cost. I am telling you it is a top job, really.

In March 2013, another of defendant’s associates instructed defendant on how to get into Syria from Turkey. Defendant then wrote multiple Facebook messages about his travel plans and how best to enter Syria via Turkey, and commented on his plans to work only with Jabhat Al-Nusrah. On March 23, defendant communicated with Individual H, an acquaintance from Iraq who was living in Gaziantep, Turkey near the border with Syria at the time and who defendant was asking for help to get from Turkey into Syria. Individual H asked defendant if he wanted Al-Nusrah Front, defendant stated, “I worked with them for a while before I traveled, and they arranged everything for me.” On the same day defendant told Individual G “only the Jabhat al-Nusrah group. It is impossible that we go with others.”

Because he was traveling with a U.S. travel document and needed to maintain his ability to travel legally, defendant proposed to Individual H, “I’ll go to the

American Embassy in Turkey. I will tell them that due to circumstances, I can't return now. . . I'll say tourism, or I'll tell him my grandmother is sick in Turkey and I wanted to be with her." Defendant did not have a grandmother in Turkey. However, this was not defendant's first choice of an alibi. Several months earlier, on December 19, 2012, defendant had told a different friend that he would tell immigration that he wanted to return because he got engaged and his "fiancée's parents gave him an ultimatum 'if you do not come and get her, we will marry her off.'"

In April 2013, defendant and Al-Hardan discussed their plans to travel to Syria to fight with the mujahidin. Defendant and Al-Hardan discussed firearms, referencing specific models like the PKC, Glock, M16, and Kalashnikov. In fact, Al-Hardan expressed his desire to learn from defendant's expertise with weapons, explaining that he had never "sprayed fire with a Kalashnikov." Defendant stated later in the conversation, "Brother, God willing, you will be bored of shooting with guns. I have not seen anything better than the Glock. All my work was with the Glock and a nine Tariq and also its silencer [ . . . ] Once it hits someone, you would think the person fainted right before your eyes. It does not look like you killed him." Defendant promised to train Al-Hardan when they arrived in Syria, and expressed his commitment to jihad, writing, "O God, grant us martyrdom for your sake while engaged in fighting and not retreating; a martyrdom that would make you satisfied with us." In order to further prepare Al-Hardan for jihad, defendant sent Al-Hardan links to multiple, violent videos on Youtube depicting, among others, Usama bin Laden, Ansar al-Islam, and content praising the Khost bomber.

In April 2013, defendant also engaged in a Facebook conversation with a mujahidin in Syria, who told defendant that “Do you know that we just killed ten of the Syrian militia, the Shabihah. Hahaha, with an IED [improvised explosive device].” Defendant expressed his excitement at working with the mujahidin, stating “I was told that you and I will work together.” The mujahidin individual wrote “I wish, come, let us do the killing together.” Defendant later wrote “I do not want anything in the world, just to get to Syria safely, and find you there,...I am eager to see blood.”

On April 8, 2013, defendant told his friend Individual F that “America will not isolate me from my Islamic duty. Only death will do us part. My only wish is to see you and start action.” Defendant also expressed his weapons preference, telling another friend, who is believed to have been located in Syria on April 20, 2013, that “When I come, I will take a silencer and a Glock...I like Glock.”

On July 5, 2013, defendant sent the below picture of himself holding a weapon to Individual L:



From June through August 2013, defendant continued to write to different associates about his travel preparations. On June 30, 2013, defendant said he was at a shooting club to learn long-range shooting, and shared photos of himself at a gun range in Wisconsin holding a bow and arrow, as well as photos of rifles on display.

**C. Defendant's Travel to Turkey and Syria**

In early November 2013, when defendant was residing in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area, he received approximately \$4,500 in an insurance settlement. Two days later, defendant purchased an airline ticket, and on November 9, 2013, flew directly from Chicago to Istanbul, Turkey. While in Turkey, he told his brother that he planned to enter Syria and that he would be "going with the Mujahidin soon." On November 19 he told his brother that he arrived in Aleppo, Syria. He told his brother not to tell anyone where he was and that if anything happened to him, his friends will inform his brother at once. He also told his brother that he was using the name "Anas."

From Turkey, defendant traveled to Syria, but wanted that fact to remain confidential because he knew he was committing a crime. On November 19, 2013, defendant told his brother, "I have safely arrived [...in] Syria. Don't ever tell anyone, okay?" Defendant also told multiple other associates he was in Sham or Syria, including Aleppo, Syria, specifically. On November 28, 2013, defendant's brother told defendant to avoid using his phone because it showed "that [defendant was] writing from Aleppo." His brother went on to write, "Aws, I need to you get out of Syria as soon as possible," and noted defendant's phone "will reveal that you are in Syria [...]"

and this is dangerous to your situation over there.” Defendant responded, “Sorry, I have work,” meaning he was in Syria to engage in jihad.

Additional messages revealed that defendant was armed while in Syria and preparing to enter into armed conflict. For example, on December 10, 2013, he told his brother to “forgive me. I might become a martyr.” On December 23, 2013, defendant wrote, “I have m16,” meaning an M16 assault rifle. On December 25, defendant’s brother told defendant to remove a picture that shows he was wearing a military uniform. In addition, the photo below is a photo of defendant, in military garb, holding a weapon.



On December 28, 2013, defendant told a family member, who was then located in Indonesia, according to his communication with defendant, “I am in Aleppo” and that he had joined Ansar al-Sham, which he explained was “the same as Ansar al-

Islam, just with another name.”<sup>8</sup> Defendant continued, “It is the one that leads the new Islamic Front formed after merging with Jabhat al-Nusrah,” but he noted that this alliance had not been publicly declared. Defendant further explained, “The Army of Islam and Ahrar al-Sham and Al-Tawhid Brigade became the al-Jabhah al-Islamiyyah. When they engage in battles [they are] led by Jabhat al-Nusrah and Ansar al-Sham.”<sup>9</sup> Defendant detailed the cooperation and “joint action” that existed between certain Sunni extremist groups engaged in the conflict against the Syrian regime.

Defendant also expressed his concern over conflict that was occurring among some of the Islamic groups in the area. He wrote that ISIS, which he referred to as “the State,” “have killed many from Jabhat al-Nusrah and hundreds of mujahidin [are detained] by the State[...] Brother this is the blood of Muslims shed at the hands of the State.” He continued, “If it weren’t for the State’s bloodletting, I would have been the first one to join it. [That’s] why I joined the al-Ansar even though there’s little action; the al-Ansar, at least they don’t kill Muslims[...] Brother, I’ll join al-Nusrah shortly [...] and if any sedition arises, I’ll leave my weapon and go to Turkey.”

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<sup>8</sup> Ansar al-Sham has not been designated by the United States Government as a foreign terrorist organization.

<sup>9</sup> According to open-source information, Al-Jabhah al-Islamiyyah is an Arabic phrase that translates to “the Islamic Front.” The Islamic Front was an umbrella organization of Sunni Salafist groups fighting to depose the Syrian regime. In late 2013, founding members of the Islamic Front included Ansar al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, the Tawhid Brigade, and the Army of Islam.



On December 28, 2013, defendant sent the following Ansar al-Sham related images to the same family member:



Despite his concerns about ISIS, defendant still expressed an interest in joining ISIS. In January 2014, he wrote, “I have been thinking of joining the State and abandon[ing] the al-Ansar.” Defendant explained that he was in “Haritan, Aleppo, a fighting zone [between] the State and the Free Army. When asked if he was with “the Free now,” meaning the Free Syrian Army, defendant replied, “No. Ansar al-Islam.”

While in Syria defendant expressed his disdain for the U.S. supported Free Syrian Army. For example, on January 7, 2014, he wrote to Individual P,

The Free Army are SOBs. They are killing the brethren from the Islamic State. They killed many...Look, we will neither fight Nusrah nor State...We will fight the Free Army because they detained women.

Our headquarters is next to the State [ISIS] exactly and we are against the Free Army. We have prevented the Free Army from entering the area and attacking the State's headquarters. And if the Free Army advances, we will fight it. [...] We installed the Doshkas [a Russian machine gun widely used in the Syrian conflict] in the street and spread among all of our headquarters because we are at the entrance of Aleppo. The Free Army is under the control of our forces.

Ultimately, as a result of these internal conflicts between the terrorist organizations, defendant began to communicate his intention to return home.

I swear that the State is killing [members of] al-Ansar and al-Nusrah. They are our brothers, but they are making a mistake. And we are going to stand with the State against the [Free Syrian Army]. . . I might withdraw. . . When the seditious acts are over, I will return. . . I did not come to fight for the sake of sedition.

When Omar Alhefawy suggested he join the Free Syrian Army, defendant responded "No, I do not want the SOBs of [the] Free Army.

Defendant recognized that his conduct was a crime in the United States. He told his brother "I am afraid of being imprisoned in America. The government is alert for everything [...] my trip here constitutes a charge."

#### **D. Defendant's Return to Turkey and the United States**

On January 17, 2014, defendant traveled from Syria to Turkey. Soon thereafter, on January 23, 2014, defendant flew to Sacramento, California (where his family had moved while he was in Syria) via London and Los Angeles. Upon his return to the U.S., defendant made no mention of his travel to Turkey and Syria on

his Customs Declaration Form; “Jordan” and “U.K” were the only entries listed in the form’s “countries visited” field. At the time he returned, he indicated to Individual N his intention to return to Syria. “I am not in Turkey, neither in Syria. I will return in one month and a half.” He told Individual N that he will “renew my residency, extend the passport and then return in forty days...Every six months I return for 40 days.”

**E. Defendant’s Lies to the USCIS and FBI**

On July 29, 2014, defendant was interviewed by employees of USCIS as part of his application for adjustment of his immigration status. During that interview, defendant said that he had traveled to Turkey and returned to the United States about six months earlier, which was January 2014.

On October 6, 2014, defendant was interviewed by USCIS employees a second time, during which interview defendant falsely represented that he traveled to Turkey to visit his grandmother. Defendant does not have a grandmother living in Turkey. Defendant also falsely claimed (1) he had only visited Turkey and the United Kingdom; (2) he had never been a member of or assisted any rebel group, militia, or insurgent organization; (3) he never solicited membership or funds for any terrorist group or organization; (4) he had never provided any type of material support to any person or group engaged in terrorist activity; (5) he had never called for, helped with or committed the killing of any person or the intentional and sever injury of any person; (6) he had never been a member of a group in which he used or threatened to use any type of weapon against any person; and (7) he had never assisted a group where other people use a weapon against any person. Based upon the facts detailed above, each of these statements, made under oath, was a lie.

On June 18, 2015, defendant was interviewed by FBI agents, during which interview defendant stated that he had traveled to Turkey for a vacation to visit his grandmother in 2013. He denied traveling to Syria since his arrival in the United States in 2012.

### **III. THE GUIDELINES CALCULATIONS**

#### **F. The Guidelines Enhancements**

##### **1. Providing Material Support to a Foreign Terrorist Organization (18 U.S.C. § 2339B)**

The base offense level is 26, pursuant to Guideline § 2M5.3(a). PSR. 9.

The offense level is increased by 2 levels because the offense involved the provision of material support with the intent, knowledge, or reason to believe that the support was to be used to commit or assist in the commission of a violent act, pursuant to Guideline § 2M5.3(b)(1)(E). *Id.*

The offense level is increased by 12 levels, pursuant to Guideline § 3A1.4(a), because the offense is a felony that involved a federal crime of terrorism as defined in Title 18, United States Code, Section 2332b(g)(5), namely, the offense: (1) was calculated to influence or affect the conduct of government by intimidation and coercion, and to retaliate against government conduct; and (2) was a violation of Title 18, United States Code, Section 2339B. *Id.*

The total offense level for the violation of 18 U.S.C. § 2339B is 40. *Id.*

**2. Material False Statement (18 U.S.C. § 1001(a)(2))**

The base offense level is 14, pursuant to Guideline § 2J1.2(a), because the offense involved obstruction of justice of a matter related to international terrorism. PSR. 8.

Pursuant to Guideline § 2J1.2(b)(1)(C), the offense level is increased by 12 levels because defendant was convicted under 18 U.S.C. § 1001, and the statutory maximum term of 8 years of imprisonment applies because the matter relates to international terrorism. *Id.*

The total offense level for the violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1001(a)(2) is 26. *Id.*

**3. Grouping**

Pursuant to Guideline § 3D1.2(c), the offenses are grouped because the § 2339B charge embodies conduct that is treated as a specific offense characteristic in the guideline applicable to the § 1001(a)(2) conduct, namely because the offense involved a matter related to international terrorism. *Id.*

Pursuant to Guideline § 3D1.3(a), the offense level applicable to the Group is 40, because it is the offense level for the most serious of the charges comprising the Group. PSR. 8-9.

**4. Acceptance of Responsibility**

Pursuant to Guideline § 3E1.1, the total offense level is reduced by three levels because defendant has clearly demonstrated a recognition and affirmative acceptance of personal responsibility for his criminal conduct. PSR. 9.

**5. Total Adjusted Offense Level**

The total adjusted offense level is thus 37. *Id.*

**G. Criminal History**

Pursuant to Guideline § 3A1.4(b), defendant's criminal history category is VI because the offense is a felony that involved a federal crime of terrorism. PSR. 10.

**H. The Guidelines Range**

An offense level of 37, when combined with the anticipated criminal history category of VI, results in an anticipated advisory guidelines range of 360 months to life imprisonment. PSR. 19. Because the statutory maximum term of imprisonment is 23 years, pursuant to Guideline § 5G1.1(a), the advisory guidelines sentence is 276 months. *Id.* However, pursuant to the Plea Agreement, the parties agreed under Rule 11(c)(1)(C) that the maximum term of imprisonment will not exceed 180 months. Dkt. No. 129 at 12.

**IV. THE SECTION 3553(A) FACTORS SUPPORT A SENTENCE OF 180 MONTHS OF IMPRISONMENT**

A sentence of 180 months of imprisonment is warranted under the Section 3553(a) factors. Further, such a sentence is sufficient, but not greater than necessary, to comply with the Section 3553(a) factors.

**A. Nature and Circumstances of the Offense**

The nature and circumstances of the offense are detailed above, and are significant. Notably, in his sentencing submission, defendant wholly fails to address any of his actual offense conduct. Instead, he paints himself as a victim of his circumstances, ill-equipped for his life due to his youth, naiveté, and poor development of executive function. Defendant's own words and actions paint a very different picture.

**1. Providing Material Support to a Foreign Terrorist Organization (18 U.S.C. § 2339B)**

Defendant pled guilty and admitted to providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization, namely Ansar Al-Islam, knowing that organization was a designated foreign terrorist organization. Defendant now seeks to minimize that offense conduct by making a series of arguments that are belied by the facts.

Defendant now claims that his travel to Syria was for the sole purpose of fighting with his brothers against the brutal and dictatorial regime of Bashar Al-Assad. D.S.M. 12-15. 33-35. Defendant goes so far as to claim that but for the Syrian war, he would never have left the United States (D.S.M. 15), and that he discussed returning to Syria soon after his arrival in the United States because of the “escalation of the humanitarian crises and civilian deaths,” which drove his desire to return (D.S.M. 34). However, defendant did not (and cannot) cite to one of his own thousands of communications to support this conclusion.

In fact, as detailed above, from the moment he arrived in the United States, defendant began to plan his return to Syria to fight with terrorist organizations. *See, e.g.*, (October 13, 2012: “I want to go back . . . I’ll go to Turkey and enter smuggled to Syria . . . When I come, I’ll call. Don’t go with anyone except the Front . . . Go with Ansar [al-Islam] or with the Front [Jabhat al-Nusra Front]”; March 23, 2013, defendant explained that he wanted to travel to Turkey to enter Syria and asked Individual H to pick him up at the airport, and Individual H asked if defendant “want[ed] Al-Nusra Front,” and defendant responded, “that’s for sure.”).

Defendant further claims that it was the escalation of the humanitarian crises after Assad's chemical weapons attack in August 2013 that "steeled his desire to return" in November 2013. As his communications in 2012-13 make clear, defendant was ready to return Syria upon his arrival in the United States in 2012, well before the August 2013 chemical attacks, further undermining his current efforts to mitigate his conduct. Nevertheless, defendant fails to cite to any messages or other evidence in which defendant articulates a desire to return to Syria due to the Syrian war or the attendant humanitarian crisis.

Instead, his communications are replete with his longing to return to Syria to get away from the United States and return to violent jihad. *See, e.g.*, (October 24, 2012: when defendant expressed a desire to return to Syria, a friend told him to "Sit still!!! Syria is ablaze! Why do you want to go back?" and defendant responded, "I know. I want to return. . . . I want a solution . . . I want them to deport me. I am getting extremely fed up."; October 28, 2012: when asked about America, defendant responded "Garbage to the truest sense of the word . . . it is an animal's life here," and further stated that he wanted Allah to return him to Syria and that the Muslims in America were "worthless," because they married outside the religion; November 17, 2012: defendant stated to his father: "The hell with money, and the hell with women, and the hell with America, and the hell with Obama. May God burn America! . . . the jihad is in my blood. And the greatest tyrant, America, and I do not care about anything whatever it may be. The commandment of God is greater! . . . I swear, I will bring out all of my anger on America."; April 8, 2013: defendant stated



“When I arrive, I’ll arrange with [Individual C]. [...] America will not isolate me from my Islamic duty. Only death will do us part.”).

Moreover, defendant’s travel schedule was more clearly driven by his finances and not his purported desire to address the humanitarian crises. Indeed, after months of seeking funds sufficient to travel, and without any regard or reference to Assad, defendant used an insurance settlement he received in November 2013 to travel to Syria. Even while in Syria, defendant’s messages did not reference humanitarian concerns or his efforts to fight against Assad, and instead are focused on his efforts to make jihad with Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Sham, and Jabhat al-Nusrah.

Defendant’s efforts to ground his travel to Syria in a purported humanitarian crusade is further undermined by his own history of fighting with foreign terrorist organizations. As detailed above, defendant told Al-Hardan that he joined Ansar Al-Islam as a teenager, fought in a number of battles, and even participated in a high profile bombing of the national security headquarters in Syria.

Finally, defendant attempts to wipe away the entirety of his thousands of messages expressing his support of terrorist organizations and violent jihad by characterizing those statements as nothing more than “naïve and misguided teenage braggadocio.” D.S.M. 2. This Court should reject any notion that defendant was a misguided youth bragging about his history of violence. The breadth and extent of defendant’s messages, the details contained in those messages, and his conviction in describing his history of fighting as a member of Ansar al-Islam, as well as his

consistent and arguable support for violent jihad, Jabhat al-Nsura, and Ansar al-Islam, among other terrorist organizations, cannot be ignored.

Ironically, defendant wants this Court to take as fact his “auto-biography” written primarily while defendant was in custody on this case (D.S.M. Exhibit A), rather than the *thousands* of messages he wrote to his friends and family when he did not know or expect those messages would be intercepted by the government and presented to this Court. As is always the case, the words spoken or written when a criminal believes no one else is listening are the most likely to be true.

The nature and circumstances of defendant’s offense of providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization are significant and defendant’s efforts to minimize that conduct should be rejected.

## **2. Material False Statement (18 U.S.C. § 1001(a)(2))**

Defendant lied to immigration officials about the nature and circumstances of his travel abroad in November 2013 through January 2014, claiming he travelled to the United Kingdom and Turkey in order to visit his grandmother. These statements were knowing and intentional lies to which defendant admitted when he pled guilty. But he now also seeks to minimize his false statement offense conduct by characterizing it as akin to a “perjury trap.”<sup>10</sup> D.S.M. 11. Again, his efforts to minimize and mitigate should be rejected.

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<sup>10</sup> A perjury trap is most commonly defined as a form of prosecutorial misconduct in which a prosecutor calls a witness to testify, typically before a grand jury, with the intent of coercing the witness into perjury. See Gershman, Bennett L. (1981), “The ‘Perjury Trap.’” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*. 129 (624).

In arguing that the government created a “perjury trap,” defendant asserts that because the government knew of his travels to Syria during the October 2014 interview, the government knew that defendant would lie. In other words, according to defendant, the government set defendant up to commit a crime. This argument is belied by the facts.

First, defendant premeditated these lies. On March 23, 2013, approximately eighteen months *before* defendant lied to the United States immigration authorities (October 2014), and one year *before* the government began its investigation of defendant (February 2014), defendant clearly stated that in order to maintain his ability to travel legally, defendant planned to “go to the American Embassy in Turkey. I will tell them that due to circumstances, I can’t return now. [...] I’ll say tourism, or I’ll tell him my grandmother is sick in Turkey and I wanted to be with her.” Defendant had a different lie in mind several months earlier, when on December 19, 2012, he planned to tell immigration that he wanted to return to Turkey because his “fiancée’s parents gave him an ultimatum ‘if you do not come and get her, we will marry her off.’” Defendant’s calculated plans to lie to immigration authorities were planned well before the government’s investigation and interviews.

Second, it was defendant who lied *over and over again*. Upon his return from Syria on January 23, 2014, defendant indicated that he visited Jordan and the United Kingdom on his Customs Declaration Form, falsely omitting both Syria and Turkey. On July 29, 2014, when interviewed by immigration authorities, he revealed he had travelled to Turkey, but falsely omitted his travel to Syria. On October 6, 2014, when

again interviewed by immigration authorities, defendant continued in his lies. During this interview, defendant clearly and affirmatively *chose* to omit his travel to Syria, to falsely state that he traveled to Turkey to visit his grandmother, and to falsely deny having ever been a member of and having ever provided any type of material support to any person or group that engaged in terrorist activity. Finally, on June 18, 2015, during an interview with the FBI, he claimed he had vacationed in Turkey, continuing his denial of having been in Syria.

Third, defendant knew full well that his travel to Syria was a crime, because he knew he had been fighting with a foreign terrorist organization. While in Syria in late 2013, when Individual O warned defendant multiple times that defendant's communications revealed that he was in Syria, defendant acknowledged that he knew his travel to Syria was a crime and that he feared imprisonment. *See, e.g.*, (December 17, 2013: defendant told Individual O that he was "afraid of being imprisoned in America [because] the government is alert for everything, [and] my trip here constitutes a charge."). As traveling to Syria was not, in and of itself, a crime, defendant knew that his participation in violent jihad with foreign terrorist organizations in Syria was a crime. It was that knowledge that drove his fear of being caught and imprisoned, and culminated in defendant's affirmative decisions to lie over and over to the United States immigration authorities.

Defendant's offense of making materially false statements to immigration authorities was not the product of a purported "perjury trap," or any conduct by the government, and was instead defendant's knowing and intentional efforts to conceal

his travel to engage in violent jihad in support of a foreign terrorist organization. This is the offense conduct to which he admitted and pled guilty and his efforts to now minimize that offense conduct should be rejected.

Taking into account the nature and circumstances of the entirety of defendant's offense conduct, the requested sentence of 180 months is appropriate.

**B. History and Characteristics of the Defendant**

Defendant is 27 years old, was born in Iraq, and came to the United States with his family as a refugee from Syria as a result of the Iraq war. There is no dispute that the majority of defendant's life has been filled with tragic and devastating circumstances, including the loss of his mother and experiencing his teenage years amidst the devastation of the Iraq war.

While this history is extraordinary and provides some measure of mitigation to defendant's conduct, it does not exculpate his serious offense. Indeed, his two biological brothers suffered much of the same childhood as defendant, and did not travel to Syria in order to fight with a foreign terrorist organization. Moreover, it was his own family who sought to prevent him from traveling back to Syria. *See, e.g.*, (October 14, 2012: Defendant's uncle said "My dear Aws, let me give you advice, for God's sake. You may be able to do good work in America. The West needs you more than our countries," to which defendant replied, "I cannot live here.").

Moreover, contrary to his position in his sentencing submission, defendant is a jihadist, as evidenced by his membership and time fighting with foreign terrorist

organizations, his own words decrying the infidels in the United States, and his published support of jihad. *See, e.g.*

May 5, 2012: Defendant sent a link to a YouTube video to a friend entitled “Shaddo Al-Withaq #5, Presented by Al-Ansar Media,” which describes the death of jihadis in 2006 at the hands of the U.S. Army and threaten retaliation.

May 9, 2012: Defendant sent a link to a YouTube video to a friend entitled “Lions Anthem,” which describes a collage of Jihad pictures from Somalia, Iraq, Syria, North Africa, Chechnya, with music in the background.

September 23, 2012: Defendant publically posted the following photo on his Facebook Account with a title stating that this is the photo of the martyr Shamil LNU who is now in heaven. The title states that the earth is for cowards.



March 23, 2013: Defendant publically posted the following photo on his Facebook Account, which is a photo of Emir Khattab, a Chechen fighter in the first and second Chechen wars who died in 2002 following exposure to a poison letter, who had no connection to Syria or the Syrian conflict.



May 7, 2013: Defendant reposted the following on his Facebook status, “People live and die, but martyrs live and go on living! People live to die, but martyrs die to live. There is a shortcut for everything: the shortcut to heaven is jihad.”

June 30, 2013: Defendant publically reposted the following on his Facebook status, “The sons of Iraq don’t need advice: they are the lions of jihad in all the lands. They took an oath that only death will end their battle with you, O’Persian Magi [Iranians]. Watch your necks.”

September 2, 2013: Defendant publically posted the following on his Facebook status: “Every drop of blood that quenches the earth in Sham [Syria] is a source of life for it. The nation will rise to establish an Islamic Caliphate. The evil plans of the infidel nations will be thwarted by the promise of the Prophet. Aws”

September 28, 2013: Defendant publically shared a YouTube link on his Facebook Page to a video of Sheikh Muhammad Al-Arifi inciting listeners to conduct jihad in Syria.

Defendant also preached his jihadi idealism to others, further indicating his identification of himself as a jihadist. *See, e.g.*, (February 4, 2013: defendant told a friend already in Syria that “all infidels are the same,” that “in religion, there is no your country or my country, it is all one land,” that his friend should not abandon jihad, and that his friend should “not blow himself up, but blow up his enemies instead.”; April 2013: the messages between defendant and Al-Hardan (*supra* 6-7, 12) indicate Al-Hardan was a disciple of defendant’s, including defendant’s promise to train Al-Hardan on how to fight when they arrived in Syria).

While the circumstances of defendant’s life warrant mitigation, the government has taken that mitigation into account in agreeing to a cap of 180 months in this case rather than seeking a sentence at the full statutory maximum of 23 years. Defendant’s history and characteristics warrant a sentence of 180 months.

**C. Seriousness of the Offense and the Need to Promote Respect for the Law, Provide Just Punishment, To Afford Adequate Deterrence, and Avoid Unwarranted Disparities.**

Material support of a foreign terrorist organization is an extraordinarily serious offense. This is not a case in which defendant sent money or weapons as the support. Instead, he provided himself. He traveled to Syria in order to engage in violent activities as a knowing member of a foreign terrorist organization, Ansar Al-Islam. He expressed his excitement in April 2013 to Al-Hardan in anticipation of his travel of doing “the killing together,” and that he was “eager to see blood” after delighting over the IED used to kill Syrian militia. He did this after having previously associated himself with Ansar Al-Islam, with which he participated in a range of violent encounters involving using a variety of weapons to kill enemy soldiers. He also hailed Jabhat Al-Nusra’s suicide bomber attack on the Syrian national security headquarters, for which he and his fellow Ansar al-Islam members provided support both prior to and during the attack. Further, defendant further established himself as a jihadist with his efforts to train others on how to engage in violent jihad, such as Al-Hardan, who he promised to train on the use of weapons when they fought together in Syria.

There is no doubt that the Syrian conflict is a complicated war with a range of parties engaged in violence. However, the complex contours of the Syrian conflict are essentially irrelevant to defendant’s offense conduct. The crux of the analysis is instead grounded in defendant’s own stated desires to join a foreign terrorist organization in order to engage in violent jihad, and his own admissions to this Court



that he successfully acted upon these desires by traveling to Syria to fight with Ansar al-Islam.

Moreover, the need for both specific and general deterrence is significant. In light of defendant's own stated desires to be a martyr and his historical commitment to jihad, a significant sentence will send the appropriate message to defendant that supporting a foreign terrorist organization should no longer be part of his life plan. Likewise, a significant sentence is critical to send the same message to other would-be martyrs and jihadists bent on traveling to fight with a designated foreign terrorist organization.

In order avoid unwarranted sentencing disparities, this Court can take into account the sentences issued in similar cases involving foreign nationals who immigrated to the United States and returned to their native region in order to fight with foreign terrorist organizations, as follows:

- *United States v. Abdiraham Sheikh Mohamud*, 15 CR 95 (S.D. Ohio): Mohamud was a Somali native and naturalized United States citizen, who traveled to Syria to fight for Jahbat Al-Nusrah. Mohamud was sentenced to 22 years of imprisonment.
- *United States v. Omar Al-Hardan*, 16 CR 03 (S.D. Tex.): Al-Hardan was an Iraqi-born Palestinian and legal permanent resident of the United States, who attempted to travel to Syria in an effort to join ISIS. Al-Hardan was sentenced to 192 months of imprisonment.
- *United States v. Mohamed Rafik Naji*, 16 CR 653 (E.D.N.Y.): Naji was a Yemeni native and legal permanent resident of the United States, who traveled to Turkey and Yemen in an effort to join ISIS. Naji was sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment.
- *United States v. Laith Waleed Alebbini*, 17 CR 71 (S.D. Ohio): Alebbini was a Jordanian native and legal permanent resident of the United States, who attempted to travel to Syria in an effort to join ISIS, but was turned away at the Turkey border. Alebbini was sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment.

Notably, the 180 month sentence sought in this case is at the low end of these similarly situated cases.

For all of these reasons, a sentence of 180 months of imprisonment is an appropriate sentence in this case.

**V. SUPERVISED RELEASE**

The government agrees with the Probation Office's recommendations for the conditions of supervised release to be imposed in this matter as the facts underlying the offense and detailed in the PSR support the imposition of those conditions. *See* PSR at 20-27.

**A. Mandatory Conditions**

The government respectfully requests that defendant be required to comply with the following mandatory conditions set forth in 18 U.S.C. § 3583(d) and Guideline § 5D1.3(a):

1. Defendant shall not commit another federal, state or local offense.
2. Defendant shall not unlawfully possess a controlled substance.
3. Defendant shall submit to the collection of a DNA sample from the defendant at the direction of the U.S. Probation Office pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 14135a(a).
4. Defendant shall refrain from any unlawful use of a controlled substance and submit to one drug test within 15 days of release on probation and at least two periodic drug tests, and up to a maximum of 104 tests thereafter, for use of a controlled substance.

**B. Discretionary Conditions**

In addition, the government respectfully requests that defendant be required to comply with the following discretionary conditions permitted by 18 U.S.C. § 3583(d) and Guideline § 5D1.3(c), which serve to facilitate supervision by the probation officer, support defendant's rehabilitation and reintegration into society, and serve to promote deterrence and protect the public, and are appropriate in this case:

1. Defendant shall seek, and work conscientiously, at lawful employment or pursue conscientiously a course of study or vocational training that will equip defendant for employment, unless excused by the probation officer.

2. Defendant shall refrain from knowingly meeting, communicating, or otherwise interacting with any person whom he knows to be engaged, or planning to be engaged, in criminal activity.

3. Defendant shall refrain from excessive use of alcohol (defined as having a blood alcohol concentration greater than 0.08%), or any use of a narcotic drug or other controlled substance, as defined in § 102 of the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. § 802), without a prescription by a licensed medical practitioner.

4. Defendant shall refrain from possession a firearm, destructive device, or other dangerous weapon.

5. Defendant shall participate, at the direction of a probation officer, in a mental health treatment program, which may include the use of prescription medications.

6. Defendant shall remain within the jurisdiction where defendant is being supervised, unless granted permission to leave by the court or a probation officer.

7. Defendant shall report to the probation officer as directed by the court or the probation officer.

8. Defendant shall permit the probation officer to visit the defendant at home, work, school, community service location, or other reasonable location specified by a probation officer at any reasonable time, and permit confiscation of any contraband in plain view of the officer.

9. Defendant shall notify the probation officer promptly, within 72 hours, of any change in residence, employer, or workplace and, absent constitutional or other legal privilege, answer inquiries by a probation officer.

10. Defendant shall notify the probation officer promptly, within 72 hours, if arrested or questioned by a law enforcement officer.

11. Defendant shall be surrendered to a duly authorized official of the Homeland Security department for a determination on the issue of deportability by the appropriate authority in accordance with the laws under the Immigration and Nationality Act and the established implementation regulations. If ordered deported, the defendant shall not reenter the United States without obtaining, in advance, the express written consent of the Attorney General or the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security.

12. Defendant shall submit his person, property, house, residence, vehicle papers [computers (as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 1030(e)(1)), other electronic

communications or data storage devices or media,] or office, to a search conducted by a United States Probation Officer. Failure to submit to a search may be grounds for revocation of release. Defendant shall warn any other occupants that the premises may be subject to searches pursuant to this condition. An officer may conduct a search pursuant to this condition only when reasonable suspicion exists that the defendant has violated a condition of his supervision and that the areas to be searched contain evidence of this violation. Any search must be conducted at a reasonable time and in a reasonable manner.

**C. Special Conditions**

Finally, the government respectfully requests that defendant be required to comply with the following special conditions permitted by 18 U.S.C. § 3583(d), which further support defendant's reintegration into society:

1. If defendant has not obtained a high school diploma or equivalent, participate in a GED preparation course and seek to obtain a GED within the first year of supervision.
2. Defendant shall participate in an approved job skill-training program at the direction of a probation officer within the first 60 days of placement on supervision.
3. Defendant shall provide a probation officer with access to any requested financial information necessary to monitor compliance with conditions of supervised release.
4. Defendant shall not enter into any agreement to act as an informer or special agent of a law enforcement agency without the permission of the court.

5. Defendant shall attend violent extremism counseling from providers as directed by the Probation Office, and agreed to by the Probation Office, the United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Illinois, and the defendant. Defendant shall also authorize the release of any mental health and/or violent extremism counseling records to the probation officer.

6. Defendant shall not possess or use at any location (including his place of employment), any external storage device without the prior approval of a probation officer.

7. Defendant shall comply with the requirements of the Computer and Internet Monitoring Program as administered by the United States Probation Office. Defendant shall consent to the installation of computer monitoring software on all identified computers to which defendant has access. The software may restrict and/or record any and all activity on the computer, including the capture of keystrokes, application information, Internet use history, email correspondence, and chat conversations. A notice will be placed on the computer at the time of installation to warn others of the existence of monitoring software. Defendant shall not remove, tamper with, reverse engineer, or in any way circumvent the software.

a. The cost of monitoring shall be paid by defendant at the monthly contractual rate, if defendant is financially able, subject to satisfaction of other financial obligations imposed by this judgment.

b. Defendant shall not possess or use any device with access to any online computer service at any location (including place of employment) without the

prior approval of a probation officer. This includes any Internet service provider, bulletin board system, or any other public or private network or email system

8. Defendant shall be required to submit to periodic polygraph testing at the direction of the probation office as a means to ensure that defendant is in compliance with the requirements of his supervision or treatment program.

## VI. CONCLUSION

For all of the foregoing reasons, the government respectfully requests this Court sentence defendant to a term of imprisonment of 180 months to be followed by a period of supervised release of life. Such a sentence will reflect the seriousness of the offense, promote respect for the law, and provide a just punishment for the offense as set forth in Section 3553(a)(2)(A).

Dated: August 19, 2019

Respectfully submitted,

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# **EXHIBIT A**



**COUNCIL *on*  
FOREIGN  
RELATIONS**

## **Ansar al-Islam (Iraq, Islamists/Kurdish Separatists), Ansar al-Sunnah**

A profile of a militant Islamist Kurdish separatist movement seeking to transform Iraq into an Islamic state.

Backgrounder *by* Kathryn Gregory

*Last updated November 5, 2008*

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*This publication is now archived.*

### **Introduction**

Ansar al-Islam (Supporters of Islam) is a militant Islamic Kurdish separatist movement seeking to transform Iraq into an Islamic state. Mullah Krekar, also known as Faraj Ahmad Najmuddin, reportedly founded Ansar al-Islam in December 2001 with funding and logistical support from al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. The group has ties to Iran and the U.S. State Department in 2003 asked a UN Security Council sanctions committee to add Ansar al-Islam to its list of entities and individuals are linked with al-Qaeda (PDF), the Taliban, or Osama bin Laden. Such a move obligates UN member states to freeze the group's assets. It initially operated under the name Jund al-Islam (MEIB) (Soldiers of Islam), but has since dropped the name. The group continues to target secular Iraqi Kurds-particularly members of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Since the beginning of the war in Iraq, U.S. officials have accused Ansar al-Islam of training and deploying suicide bombers against U.S.-led coalition troops in Iraq.

Ansar was named a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the U.S. Department of State on March 22, 2004 and is considered an active force in northern and central Iraq today.

## Origins of Ansar al-Islam

The roots of Ansar al-Islam extend back to the mid-1990s. The group consists of Islamist groups that splintered from the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) in northern Iraq. Michael Rubin, a resident scholar in foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, said the Islamist splinter organizations included various groups (MEIB) called Hamas, Tawhid, and the Second Soran Unit, along with others. Ansar al-Islam announced its official inception a few days before the September 11 attacks. One month before, leaders of several Kurdish Islamist groups reportedly visited the al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan seeking to create a base for al-Qaeda in northern Iraq (*MERIA*). In late 2003, Abu Abdullah al-Shafii (a.k.a. Warba Holiri al-Kurdi) reportedly took over leadership of Ansar from Mullah Krekar, who has been in exile in Norway for allegations of terrorism in his home country and links to Ansar al-Islam as the organization's leader.

Al-Shafii claimed in September 2003 the organization's name had changed from Ansar al-Islam, but he had not disclosed the new name. Experts have speculated he may have been referring to an offshoot

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of Ansar al-Islam called Ansar al-Sunnah (Supporters of Sunni) or Defenders of the Tradition. The name change meant a shift in strategy aimed at Ansar al-Islam's appeal beyond its Kurdish origins. Ansar al-Islam adheres to a rigid Salafi ideology. Its founding declaration states "jihad in Iraq has become an individual duty of every Muslim (MEIB) after the infidel enemy attacked the land of Islam" and its members "derive their jihad program and orders from the instructions of the holy Koran and the Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah (tradition)." The goal of Ansar al-Sunnah is to achieve in Iraq an Islamic country where Islam and its people are "strong," without the influence of Western cultures, and to expel Western influence from the homeland. Ansar al-Islam and Ansar al-Sunnah members still operate inside of Iraq, but are largely based in predominately Sunni Arab areas in central Iraq.

## **Mullah Krekar and Ansar al-Islam**

Mullah Krekar, who is believed to have started Ansar al-Islam, has been living as a refugee in Norway since the 1990's. Krekar has been accused of financing terrorist organizations within Iraq and sending money to them from Norway. In 2002, his refugee status was revoked because Norwegian officials claimed Krekar had traveled to Iraq and had helped fund and orchestrate various terrorist organizations, which he denied. In 2003, the Norwegian government ordered Krekar to be deported to Iraq, but the order has not been implemented due to the security environment in Iraq.

Norwegian law also prohibits the country from exporting a refugee back to a country where the death penalty will be inflicted upon the accused.

In December 2006, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Krekar as an individual who was providing financial support to terrorist organizations, including allegations linking him to Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Sunnah and al-Qaeda. The department's press

release said the designation "freezes any assets the designees may have under U.S. jurisdiction and prohibits all financial and commercial transactions by any U.S. person with the designees."

On November 7, 2007 the Supreme Court of Norway ruled that Krekar is a threat to Norway's national security, upholding the February 2003 decision by the government to deport him to Iraq. It is still unclear when Krekar will be deported due to Iraq's death penalty laws.

## **The emergence of Ansar al-Islam as threat**

Ansar al-Islam operates primarily in northern and central Iraq and claims the second largest number of Sunni jihadist attacks in Iraq after Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The group targets coalition forces, Iraqi government and security forces, and Iraqi political parties. Ansar al-Islam made headlines in September 2001 when it ambushed and killed forty-two PUK fighters. Ansar al-Islam continued to organize small terrorist threats (*CSMonitor*) in the war era of Iraq, but their major terrorist attack came three years after the occupation in Iraq started. On February 1, 2004, during Eid al-Adha, the Muslim festival that celebrates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son Ishmael to Allah, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan were celebrating the holiday in Erbil, Iraq, when suicide bombers entered the PUK and KDP headquarters and killed 109 (MEIB) people, including KDP Deputy Prime Minister Sami Abdul Rahman.

In January 2005 the group assassinated Sheik Mahmoud Finjan (Mahmoud al-Madaeeni), an assistant to senior Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, in the Salman Park area of Baghdad as he was returning from evening prayers.

## **The transformation into Ansar al-Sunnah**

On September 1, 2001, al-Tawhid, Hamas and Soran Forces announced the formation of Jund al-Islam. The group declared *jihad* (holy war) against secular and other political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan deemed to have deviated from the "true path of Islam," according to a report by the U.S.-based rights monitor Human Rights Watch.

Jund al-Islam, led by al-Shafii, seized control of several villages near Halabja, Iraq in September 2001 and established a local administration governed according to *Sharia law*. Mullah Krekar formed Ansar

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al-Islam as a merger of Jund al-Islam and a splinter group of the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan. In the area then under its control, Ansar barred women from education and employment, confiscated musical instruments, and banned music both in public and private, banned televisions, and threatened the use of Islamic punishments of amputation, flogging, and stoning to death for offenses such as theft, the consumption of alcohol, and adultery, said Human Rights Watch. The off-shoot group has continued to be a threat, but acknowledged in September of 2007 that it was formally derived from Ansar al-Islam, and changed its name back to the original. "Given our responsibility in maintaining the principles of Islam, the unity of Muslims, and to deal with existential issues that shall determine our survival, we have decided to continue our work under the name of the Ansar al-Islam organization," read a statement issued by Ansar al-Sunnah's leader al-Shafii in 2007.

## **Where does Ansar al-Islam operate?**

Originally based in an enclave wedged between Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran, it has been active throughout northern Iraq. While Ansar is not known to have operated outside Iraq, it was suspected of involvement in a plot to attack a NATO summit (BBC) meeting in Istanbul in June 2004, though the attack was unsuccessful. Police in Turkey seized guns, explosives, bomb-making booklets and over 4,000 compact discs with training advice from Osama bin Laden. Some analysts say Ansar has received logistical support from Iran and Syria and recruited members in Italy. Some analysts say Iran assists Ansar, harboring its militants within its borders and providing a route for foreign fighters to enter Iraq and join Ansar's ranks. "It's very clear that there are fighters streaming in over the Iranian border tied to this group," says Jonathan Schanzer, an expert on militant Islam at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Iran has denied reports of links to the group.

## **Targeting 'Collaborators'**

The victims of targeted assassination by Ansar have included government officials, politicians, judges, journalists, humanitarian aid workers, doctors, professors, and individuals thought to be collaborating with foreign forces in Iraq, including translators, cleaners, and others who perform civilian jobs for the U.S.-led Multi-National Force in Iraq (MNF-I). Insurgents have directed suicide and car bomb attacks at Shi'a mosques, Christian churches, and Kurdish political parties with the purpose of killing civilians.

These attacks started to take place in the context of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the ensuing military occupation. During the occupation, tens of thousands of civilians died, which caused the emergence of many more insurgency groups and the subsequent attacks on public officials. Head members among Ansar, as well as other groups such as al-Qaeda and the Armed Islamic Group, justify their actions by saying that the U.S. illegally invaded Iraq and killed thousands of Iraqi civilians since March 2003.

## **Future of Ansar al-Islam in Iraq**

In May 2007, an agreement was announced between some members of Ansar al-Sunnah, Ansar al-Islam, the Islamic Army in Iraq and the Army of the Mujahadeen to form a united group called "The Jihad and Reformation Front." The group is trying to adopt a moderate approach to the Islamic doctrine and urges Islamic militants to avoid side battles at the expense of the main battle against the American occupation.

Kara Driggers, who monitors jihad web sites for the Terrorism Research Center, said that the groups who formed the Jihad and Reformation Front did so in response to the cruel practices of al-Qaeda in Iraq, and are challenging the authority of al-Qaeda.

"The important difference between them and al-Qaeda is that they are nationalist groups," Driggers says. "They are fighting for Iraq, and solely for Iraq."

# **EXHIBIT B**





## ***Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)***

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**Name:** Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)

**Type of Organization:**

- Insurgent
- non-state actor
- terrorist
- transnational
- violent

**Ideologies and Affiliations:**

- Al-Qaeda affiliated group
- Islamist
- jihadist
- Qutbist
- Salafist
- Sunni

**Place of Origin:**

Syria and Iraq

**Year of Origin:**

Formed 2011, declared January 2012

**Founder(s):**

Abu Mohammad al-Golani, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

**Places of Operation:**

Syria and Lebanon

**Overview**

*Also Known As:*

# COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

## *Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)*

- Al-Nusra Front<sup>1</sup>
- Al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant<sup>2</sup>
- Al Nusra Front for the People of Levant<sup>3</sup>
- Al Nusra Front for the People of the Levant<sup>4</sup>
- Al-Nusra Front in Lebanon<sup>5</sup>
- Ansar al-Mujahideen Network<sup>6</sup>
- Assembly for Liberation of the Levant<sup>7</sup>
- Assembly for the Liberation of Syria<sup>8</sup>
- Conquest of the Levant Front<sup>9</sup>
- Fatah al-Sham Front<sup>10</sup>
- Fateh al-Sham Front<sup>11</sup>
- Front for the Conquest of Syria<sup>12</sup>
- Front for the Conquest of Syria/the Levant<sup>13</sup>
- Front for the Liberation of the Levant<sup>14</sup>
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham<sup>15</sup>
- Hayat Tahrir al-Sham<sup>16</sup>
- Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham<sup>17</sup>
- HTS<sup>18</sup>
- Jabhat al-Nusra<sup>19</sup>
- Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham<sup>20</sup>
- Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham Min Mujahedin al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad<sup>21</sup>
- Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham Min Mujahideen al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad<sup>22</sup>
- Jabhat Fatah al-Sham<sup>23</sup>
- Jabhat Fateh al-Sham<sup>24</sup>
- Jabhat Fath al Sham<sup>25</sup>
- Jabhat Fath al-Sham<sup>26</sup>
- Jabhet al-Nusra<sup>27</sup>
- Jabhet al-Nusra<sup>28</sup>
- Levantine Conquest Front<sup>29</sup>
- Levantine Mujahideen on the Battlefields of Jihad<sup>30</sup>
- Liberation of al-Sham Commission<sup>31</sup>
- Liberation of the Levant Organization<sup>32</sup>
- Support Front for the People of the Levant<sup>33</sup>
- Tahrir al-Sham<sup>34</sup>
- Tahrir al-Sham Hay'at<sup>35</sup>
- The Al Nusra Front for the People of the Levant<sup>36</sup>
- The Defense Front<sup>37</sup>
- The Front for the Defence of the Syrian People<sup>38</sup>
- The Front for the Defense of the Syrian People<sup>39</sup>
- The Front for the Liberation of al Sham<sup>40</sup>
- The Support Front for the People of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Places of Jihad<sup>41</sup>
- The Victory Front<sup>42</sup>

### *Executive Summary:*

The Nusra Front—also known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (“the Levantine Conquest Front”)—is an internationally sanctioned terrorist group, the second-strongest insurgent group in Syria after [ISIS](#) [1], and a formerly open [al-Qaeda](#) [2] affiliate that seeks to replace the Assad regime with an Islamic state. Operating as a part of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham coalition since January 2017,<sup>43</sup> the Nusra Front stands accused of serving as a base for global al-Qaeda operations.<sup>44</sup> In the years since its formation in 2011, the Nusra Front has gradually amassed and sustained territory throughout Syria.<sup>45</sup> As of early 2019, the Nusra Front controls or administers all of the Syrian opposition-held parts of Idlib, north Hama, and west Aleppo.<sup>46</sup>

Originally al-Qaeda’s formal affiliate in Syria, the Nusra Front has since claimed to have dissociated entirely from the international terrorist organization, despite the Nusra Front’s long and proven history of serving as its loyal affiliate. On July 28, 2016, al-Qaeda released an audio statement giving the Nusra Front formal permission to break ties if the link was “conflicting with [the Nusra Front’s] unity and working as one body.”<sup>47</sup> Nusra Front leader [Abu Muhammad al-Golani](#) [3] declared a formal split from al-Qaeda after thanking “our brothers, the commanders of al-Qa’eda,” and announcing the group’s name change from Jabhat al-Nusra (“the Victory Front”) to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (“the Levantine Conquest Front”).<sup>48</sup> Analysts had long surmised that a break from al-Qaeda, however artificial, could enable the Nusra Front to attract more funding from Gulf States like Qatar, consolidate local support, and present itself as a legitimate insurgent group in Syria.<sup>49</sup>

The Nusra Front continued to pursue this strategy when, on January 28, 2017, it announced that it was dissolving its organization to be subsumed under a larger Syrian Islamist merger, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (“Assembly for the Liberation of the Levant” or HTS), initially led by [Hashim al-Sheikh](#) [4], the former leader of fellow Islamist faction Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>50</sup> While the Nusra Front continues to operate under the HTS name, Sheikh resigned from his post on October 1, 2017, and the group has suffered dozens of defections.<sup>51</sup> Analysts estimated that by September 2017 HTS had reverted back to its core of about 10,000 fighters mostly belonging to the Nusra Front.<sup>52</sup> By the end of 2018, HTS had an estimated 12,000 to

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20,000 fighters.<sup>53</sup>

For years before the announced split, however, Golani had reaffirmed his group's allegiance to al-Qaeda. The Nusra Front's founder, current ISIS leader [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) [5], claims to have dispatched Golani and others—then al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) fighters—into Syria in 2011 in order to take advantage of the power vacuum stemming from the civil war.<sup>54</sup> The United States confirms this claim, maintaining that the Nusra Front was formed by AQI to “hijack the struggles of the legitimate Syrian opposition to further its own extremist ideology.”<sup>55</sup> In April 2013, after Baghdadi unilaterally claimed to subsume the Nusra Front into AQI, now known as ISIS, Golani broke ties with Baghdadi and reaffirmed his allegiance to al-Qaeda central.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the group's origins in Iraq and historical deference to al-Qaeda, the Nusra Front has branded itself as a native rebel group with foreign experience. In Syria, the group continues to profess its goal of toppling the Assad regime and establishing an Islamic state in its place, albeit incrementally. In its effort to consolidate local support, the Nusra Front has adopted military and outreach strategies from al-Qaeda-linked jihadist Abu Musab al-Suri: participating in numerous Syrian-based coalitions and collaborating with other Islamist, and occasionally secular, rebel groups to carry out joint attacks against Assad forces.<sup>57</sup> The Nusra Front, and then HTS, also operated a civil administrative wing called the “Public Services Administration” which provided basic administrative needs and security and governed several rebel-controlled towns under various forms of Islamic law.<sup>58</sup> On November 2, 2017, HTS announced the formation of the “Salvation Government,” a civilian-run administrative and political body in Idlib chaired by Mohammad al-Sheikh. HTS reportedly handed over control of its Public Services Administration to the Salvation Government.<sup>59</sup>

Although the group has succeeded in embedding itself in the Syrian insurgency, the Nusra Front remains committed to employing terrorist tactics in order to secure an Islamic state. Since its founding, the Nusra Front has conducted formal military campaigns, assassinations, hostage takings, and ‘lone wolf’ operations, including suicide bombings. By June 2013, the Nusra Front had claimed responsibility for 57 out of 70 suicide attacks conducted during Syria's civil war.<sup>60</sup> The group has since continued to carry out its signature suicide bombings in Syria and expanded its operations into neighboring Lebanon after [Hezbollah](#) [6] joined the war in mid-2013.<sup>61</sup> In Lebanon, the Nusra Front works to stoke sectarian divisions, conducting and attempting suicide bombings against civilian centers like Beirut and Hezbollah strongholds like Hermel, along Lebanon's northeastern border with Syria.<sup>62</sup> The Nusra Front also employs arbitrary detention and torture in order to silence its critics and opposition activists. According to a Human Rights Watch report, HTS detained more than 184 people in Idlib in the last three months of 2018.<sup>63</sup>

The terrorist Nusra Front group has attracted the largest contingency of foreign fighters to Syria after ISIS, reportedly consisting of 3,000 to 4,000 foreigners as of late 2018.<sup>64</sup> The group regularly engages in violent clashes with other rebel groups in northern Syria, and conducts operations to arrest civilian protesters.<sup>65</sup>

***Doctrine:***

The Nusra Front adheres to a Salafist, jihadist ideology with the professed aim of establishing Islamic governance in all areas under its control. In the group's January 2012 inaugural video, a masked representative outlined its regional objectives. He introduced the Nusra Front as “Syrian mujahedeen” who have come “back from various jihad fronts to restore God's rule on the Earth [Islamic law] and avenge the Syrians' violated honour and spilled blood.”<sup>66</sup>

Years later, when Golani announced the Nusra Front's dissociation from al-Qaeda, he reaffirmed the group's core objectives, saying that despite separating from al-Qaeda, the group would not be “compromising or sacrificing our solid beliefs or laxity in the necessity of the continuity of the Jihad of Al-Sham [Syria].”<sup>67</sup> Golani reaffirmed that his group sought to use “Islamically legitimate means” to unify jihadists in Syria and the “masses of people in Al-Sham [Syria]” in order to replace the Assad government with one based on sharia (Islamic law).<sup>68</sup>

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Despite these affirmations, the Nusra Front continues to struggle with its identity. On November 27, 2017, Golani ordered the arrests of [Sami al-Oraidi](#) [7], the former head of the Nusra Front's Sharia Council, Abu Julaihib al-Ordoni, former Dara'a commander for the Nusra Front, Abu Khadija al-Ordoni, and Abu Mussaab al-Libi. All four were prominent Nusra Front leaders with strong ties to al-Qaeda.<sup>69</sup> Following these arrests, several HTS members resigned and several large factions threatened to break away, prompting Golani to renew negotiations with al-Qaeda that ultimately led nowhere.<sup>70</sup> On December 4, 2017, HTS released Ordoni in a bid to ease tensions within the group. Ordoni immediately renewed his pledge to al-Qaeda upon release.<sup>71</sup>

Following these arrests, several subgroups of devoted al-Qaeda supporters defected from HTS. On December 5, 2017, HTS faction Jaish al-Badia defected, creating a new Telegram channel devoted to al-Qaeda.<sup>72</sup> Jaish al-Malahem followed three weeks later, also indicating support for al-Qaeda in its new Telegram channel while on February 7, 2018, a new al-Qaeda-supporting group, Jund al Shariah, announced its formation.<sup>73</sup> On February 28, 2018, these three groups along with three other small militant factions announced a merger under the name Hurras al-Deen, or Guardians of the Religion, and declared themselves an unofficial affiliate of al-Qaeda.<sup>74</sup> Oraidi and Ordoni both joined Hurras al-Deen's Shura council and have reportedly begun talks with al-Qaeda leader [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) [8] to make Hurras al-Deen the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. Hurras al-Deen remains at odds with HTS.<sup>75</sup>

While some Syria analysts argue that this chain of events proves that HTS and the Nusra Front are no longer al-Qaeda affiliates, the U.S. government maintains that the groups are linked. On May 31, 2018, the State Department amended its classification of HTS to include it as "an official alias" of the Nusra Front, which the State Department maintains is still "an al-Qaeda affiliate."<sup>76</sup>

As the war against the Syrian regime slowed down and rebel infighting increased in 2018, the Nusra Front sought to use its recently created Salvation Government, a civilian-run administrative and political body in Idlib chaired by Mohammad al-Sheikh, to exert political control over territory that escaped its military control.<sup>77</sup> In January 2019, HTS succeeded in using its military power to force all other rebel groups in Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo to either hand direct control of their towns to HTS or to allow the Salvation Government to take over their towns' local councils.<sup>78</sup>

While the Nusra Front works to establish Islamic law in all areas under its control, it has done so incrementally in order to sustain local support. In this way, the group follows the guidelines and strategy of al-Qaeda-linked writer Abu Musab al-Suri, who sought to win the hearts and minds of locals in order to pursue his Islamist objectives.<sup>79</sup> In a statement posted online, Golani said, "Beware of being hard on [the locals]. Begin with the priorities and fundamentals of Islam, and be flexible on the minor parts of religion."<sup>80</sup> In a December 2012 interview with the Dubai-based *National*, Golani said that his group's "first goal is to get rid of Assad. Then we want a state where the Quran is the only source of law."<sup>81</sup>

While the Nusra Front has generally followed these guidelines, there are several instances where regional leaders have been quick to impose harsh interpretations of Islamic law onto local populaces and use violence to force conversions.<sup>82</sup> In January 2015 in the Druze-dominated Jabal al-Summaq mountain in Idlib province, the Nusra Front's then regional emir, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Tunisi, ordered the local Druze to convert to Sunni Islam and destroyed their shrines.<sup>83</sup> Tunisi was removed from his position after Nusra Front fighters under his command killed 23 Druze civilians in Qalb Lawza during a land dispute. Although the Nusra Front reprimanded Tunisi for the massacre, the group upheld the validity of the forced conversions.<sup>84</sup> The Nusra Front has also reportedly imposed smoking bans on areas it controls, forced clothing shops to cover the heads of mannequins, and jailed men and women for socializing together in public.<sup>85</sup>

Although the Nusra Front publicly emphasizes its regional aims, it has shown signs of a more expansionist ideology in line with al-Qaeda's brand of global jihadism. Despite the group's emphasis on its Syrian character, the Nusra Front expanded its operations into neighboring Lebanon in response to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria.<sup>86</sup> The group also stands accused of plotting attacks against the West,<sup>87</sup> seemingly through the elusive Khorasan group, or what one Dubai reporter has



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exposed as the Nusra Front's 'Wolf unit.'<sup>88</sup> However, the death of Khorasan commander Said Arif in 2015 signaled the effective end of the Nusra Front's external operations.<sup>89</sup> When the Nusra Front was initially sent to Syria, one of its founding goals was reportedly to establish a safe haven for training recruits and stashing weapons,<sup>90</sup> allegedly on behalf of al-Qaeda in Iraq (now ISIS).<sup>91</sup>

### ***Organizational Structure:***

The Nusra Front is both hierarchical and regionalized. Historically, each region has been equipped with an overall leader, a military commander, and a religious leader.<sup>92</sup> The group as a whole has been directed by a small consultative council called *Majlis-ash-Shura*,<sup>93</sup> and headed by its *emir* ("commander" or "prince"), Abu Muhammad al-Golani. For years, Golani has carefully avoided showing his face in public, releasing audio statements and providing in-person interviews to news outlets with his face blurred out. In July 2016, however, Golani appeared in a video to announce his group's formal split from al-Qaeda.<sup>94</sup>

The Nusra Front had previously pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda<sup>95</sup> and reported to the latter group's leader, [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) [8]. On July 28, 2016, Zawahiri released an audio statement giving the Nusra Front formal permission to break ties with al-Qaeda as needed.<sup>96</sup> Golani accepted the offer, thanking al-Qaeda and its leaders and announcing that the group no longer has "any affiliation to any external entity."<sup>97</sup> After claiming to break with al-Qaeda, the Nusra Front attempted to merge with other large Islamist opposition groups, including Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>98</sup> On January 28, 2017, the Nusra Front announced that it was disbanding as a standalone cell and operating under the banner of HTS, a coalition that combines five major Islamist factions—the Nusra Front, Harakat Nur al Din al Zenki, Liwa al Haqq, Ansar al Din, and Jaysh al Sunna—along with dozens of smaller Islamist and secular Free Syrian Army groups under one central leadership, with Golani heading its militant branch.<sup>99</sup> However after a series of clashes with other rebel groups in Idlib in July 2017, dozens of factions and leaders defected from HTS, reducing the coalition to a core of Nusra Front supporters.<sup>100</sup>

In early 2017, Golani claimed to have stepped aside from his role as the leader of the Nusra Front to defer to Hashim al-Sheikh, leader of the HTS coalition, while Golani became the military commander of the group.<sup>101</sup> However, with Sheikh's resignation in October 2017, Golani once again serves as the undisputed leader of HTS.<sup>102</sup>

According to multiple analyst estimates in 2018, HTS maintains approximately 12,000-20,000 fighters. In contrast, the Nusra Front had an estimated 5,000-7,000 fighters in 2016.<sup>103</sup> The Nusra Front has also attracted the largest contingency of foreign fighters after ISIS.<sup>104</sup> Its militant branch is responsible for conducting coordinated attacks against the Assad regime, loyalists, thugs, and perceived colluders, as well as rival groups like ISIS and secular Free Syrian Army factions. The militant branch also conducts 'lone wolf' operations (including suicide bombings) and hostage missions targeting Lebanese and Syrian civilians.<sup>105</sup> HTS also operates a special military unit known as the "Red Bands" or "Band of Deaths" that is reportedly responsible for conducting raids behind regime frontlines.<sup>106</sup> The group simultaneously stands accused by the U.S. government of plotting attacks against Western targets through its small and secretive "Wolf unit."<sup>107</sup>

In addition to the group's militant branch, the Nusra Front managed civilian services and administration programs, known as *Idarat al-Khidamat al-Ammah* (Public Services Administration) and *Idarat al-Manateq al-Muharara* (Liberated Districts Administration) respectively, to govern areas in northern, western, and southern Syria, alongside other rebel groups.<sup>108</sup> The Nusra Front's civilian branch has previously operated under the direction of its reported head of civilian programs at the time, Hajji Rasoul.<sup>109</sup> In the past, the program has coordinated bread rations and enforced Islamist regulations on the Nusra Front's de facto subjects.<sup>110</sup> As part of the group's governance program, the Nusra Front—alongside its allied rebel groups—levy taxes and control the allocation of special permits to civilian vehicles.<sup>111</sup>

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On November 2, 2017, HTS announced the formation of the Salvation Government, a civilian-run administrative and political body in Idlib chaired by Mohammad al-Sheikh. HTS reportedly handed over control of its Public Services Administration to the Salvation Government.<sup>112</sup> According to Syrian expert Sam Heller, the Salvation government formed through “a miniature, managed version of an inclusive national dialogue,” implying that at least some non-HTS elements are present in the body. However, many analysts and activists believe that the newly formed governing bodies in Idlib are controlled by HTS.<sup>113</sup> In January 2019, a ceasefire between HTS and the Turkish-backed rebel alliance National Liberation Front resulted in the Salvation Government taking control of every local council previously under the control or protection of those rebel groups, making HTS the dominant force in Idlib.<sup>114</sup>

For recruitment and publicity purposes, the Nusra Front has maintained a media branch called al-Manara al-Bayda (“the White Minaret”), which the group has refrained from using since dissociating from al-Qaeda and merging with HTS.<sup>115</sup> This branch had previously maintained the group’s public image and media program, disseminating videos and posting statements by the group on jihadist websites, as well as on encrypted messaging applications, video-hosting websites, and social media websites.<sup>116</sup> HTS has, since its formation in early 2017, begun operating accounts on Twitter<sup>117</sup> and Telegram<sup>118</sup> among other social media platforms, issuing statements, updates, and propaganda materials in a variety of languages including English, Arabic, and Russian.<sup>119</sup>

***Financing:***

The Nusra Front has been well-funded since its inception in 2011.<sup>120</sup> By August 2016, the group received streams of funding through a variety of means, including taxation, tariffs, fines, ransoms, international donations, oil sales, looting, and smuggling.<sup>121</sup>

The most stable source of income for the Nusra Front is believed to have come from taxes, tariffs, and fines that the group imposes on locals within its territory. Among the taxes levied by the group are income, business, services and utility taxes, including taxes on access to electricity, water, and bread. The Nusra Front also reportedly receives funding by leasing out homes, and is even reported to have levied a tax on internally displaced persons within Idlib province.<sup>122</sup> In addition to taxes, the group has seized assets from religious minority groups and receives funding through an arms and weaponry tariff on other rebel groups.<sup>123</sup> In this way, the Nusra Front is believed to receive roughly half of the ammunition and weapons sent to the Free Syrian Army in northern Syria.<sup>124</sup>

Following the formation of the Salvation Government in November 2017, the Nusra Front began taxing water and electricity usage in the municipalities under its control.<sup>125</sup> With HTS’s complete administrative takeover of greater Idlib in January 2019, the funds provided through taxation are likely to increase substantially. HTS also captured the Bab al-Halwa border crossing between Idlib and Turkey in July 2017, providing an additional taxation source for the terror organization.<sup>126</sup>

Sources of funding for the group also reportedly include private donations from wealthy individuals in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait, who are believed to launder the funds through small money transfers, or by dispatching the money with individuals who cross state borders into Nusra-held territory.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, the Nusra Front’s decision in July 2016 to dissociate from al-Qaeda is widely believed to have been motivated in large part to enable Qatari-based donors to continue sending money to the Nusra Front without being accused of providing financial support to al-Qaeda.<sup>128</sup>

In addition to foreign donations, the Nusra Front has also secured revenue from oil sales and smuggling,<sup>129</sup> as well as through cigarette smuggling and extortion.<sup>130</sup> Although governments typically deny payment for the release of hostages, the Nusra Front is believed to have racked up millions of dollars through hostage exchanges negotiated by the Qatari government. In one such exchange, the group reportedly received \$4 million when it released four Greek Orthodox nuns in March 2014.<sup>131</sup> In another exchange, the Nusra Front reportedly received \$25 million when it released 45 U.N.





## ***Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)***

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peacekeepers.<sup>132</sup> U.S. citizen Peter Theo Curtis was believed to have been released in August 2014 in exchange for anywhere between \$3 million and \$25 million, although the circumstances of Curtis's release were not made public.<sup>133</sup>

### ***Recruitment:***

In order to join the Nusra Front, the group has historically required its recruits to procure *tazkiyya* (a voucher on behalf of the recruit) from two commanders on the front lines.<sup>134</sup> Once the recruit was accepted, he would swear *bay'ah* (an oath of allegiance) to the group, thereby cementing his religious commitment.<sup>135</sup>

The Nusra Front has also recruited its members online and in private messaging applications through its former media branches, al-Minara al-Bayda and Fursan al-Sham media. Within Syria, the group has attracted recruits by appealing to the locals in a strategy adopted from al-Qaeda jihadist Abu Musab al-Suri.<sup>136</sup> When it comes to attracting recruits, the Nusra Front holds a financial advantage over competing rebel groups, as it has historically been able to provide members with salaries and weapons.<sup>137</sup> Under HTS, a new media outlet has been created, Ebaa Agency, which produces high-quality videos, infographics, and media statements similar to those of Amaq, ISIS's media wing.<sup>138</sup>

In addition to recruiting guerilla fighters through online and in-person efforts, the Nusra Front stands accused of recruiting child soldiers. The U.N. Human Rights Council's Independent Commission on Syria has issued reports on the Nusra Front's successful recruitment of child soldiers continuing into 2017. In Idlib province, Nusra fighters include boys under the age of 18 and 15, with some manning checkpoints.<sup>139</sup> The Commission found that the Nusra Front specifically targets poor, uneducated boys for recruitment, paying them modest salaries used to support the boys' families.<sup>140</sup>

### ***Training:***

The training process for a new Nusra recruit is believed to last for two months. This training includes a 10-day religious course followed by a six to eight military training program with religious lectures every evening.<sup>141</sup> Training reportedly emphasizes small unit tactics, close combat, assassinations, and raids with exposure to common weapons from AK variants to anti-tank missiles.<sup>142</sup> Recruits that show exceptional promise during training are selected to join the special operations groups Jaish al-Nusra and Quwat al-Nukhba.<sup>143</sup>

Since as far back as 2016, private military contracting company Malhama Tactical has been training Nusra Front fighters in special operation tactics and assisting in developing the small sub-group Quwat al-Nukhba (Elite Forces).<sup>144</sup> Malhama Tactical was founded by an Uzbek veteran of the Russian military known by his pseudonym Abu Rofiq and initially staffed ten trainers, all with military experience from former Soviet states. Abu Rofiq claims to have founded his organization as a for-profit private military contractor that works exclusively with Sunni-Jihadist organizations. Malhama has reportedly been hired to train and fight alongside both the Nusra Front and the Turkistani Islamic Party in Syria.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF SPECIALLY DESIGNATED NATIONALS AND BLOCKED PERSONS ('SDN List')," U.S. Department of the Treasury, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/sdnlist.txt> [9].

<sup>2</sup> "Islamist Group Claims Syria Bombs 'to Avenge Sunnis'," Agence France-Presse, March 21, 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/03/21/202177.html> [10].

<sup>3</sup> "ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF SPECIALLY DESIGNATED NATIONALS AND BLOCKED PERSONS ('SDN List')," U.S. Department of the Treasury, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/sdnlist.txt> [9].

<sup>4</sup> "Office of Foreign Assets Control, U.S. Department of the Treasury," U.S. Department of the Treasury, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/terror.txt> [11].

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*Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)*

**Key Leaders**



**Abu Muhammad al-Golani**  
Leader, overall leader of HTS coalition



**Anas Hassan Khattab**  
Administrative leader



**Abu 'Abdallah al-Shami'**  
Top sharia official of HTS



**Abu Marieh Qahtani**  
Former Emir of Nusra in Deir Ez Zor,  
leading HTS cleric



**Abu Jaber al-Shami**  
HTS Emir of the South



**Mostafa Mahamed a.k.a. Abu Sulayman**  
Former director of foreign media relations,  
former member of the General Islamic  
Council, former propagandist, former senior  
official, former senior spiritual advisor, former  
top sharia official



**Sheikh Bashar al-Shami**  
Head of HTS Shura Council



**Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali**  
HTS jurist

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### *Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)*

Among the arrested men is the president of the humanitarian aid NGO Fukara Der. Source: Menekse Tokyay, "Turkey crackdown on Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham network," Arab News, January 13, 2019, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1434976/middle-east> [93].

- **January 10, 2019:**HTS signs a ceasefire with the National Liberation Front (NLF) in which NLF factions Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham agree to hand over administration in all of their remaining areas to the HTS-controlled Salvation government.  
As a result, HTS controls or administers all of rebel-held greater Idlib. Sources: "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Takes Over Idlib After Ceasefire Deal," Ashawraq al-Awsat, January 10, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1540261/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-takes-over-idlib-after-ceasefire-deal> [24]; Josko Baris, "Syrian War Daily - 10th of January 2019," Syrian War Daily, January 10, 2019, <https://syrianwardaily.com/2019/01/10/syrian-war-daily-10th-of-january-2019/#more-10029> [25].
- **December 28, 2018:**HTS accuses rebel group Nour al-Din al-Zenki of killing five of its fighters in western Aleppo and uses this as an excuse to move fighters and weapons to its frontline with al-Zenki during the last days of December.  
Source: □□□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□, Twitter Post, December 28, 2018, 7:53 a.m., <https://twitter.com/jisrty/status/1078635017981566978> [94]; Breizhman, Twitter Post, December 20, 2018, 8:12 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Breizhman1983/status/1079364649588572160> [95].
- **October 14, 2018:**Under a negotiated deal between Turkey and Russia, Turkey agrees to create a demilitarized zone in Idlib, from which HTS and other armed groups will withdraw.  
In exchange, Russia agrees not to launch an offensive with Syrian forces in Idlib against HTS forces. HTS releases a statement accepting the deal for Idlib while emphasizing that they will not hand over weapons or abandon Jihad. Hurras al-Din rejects the proposal. Sources: Putintin, Twitter Post, October 14, 2018, 1:30 p.m., <https://twitter.com/putintintin1/status/1051525565889597440> [96]; Mariya Petkova, "After the Sochi agreement, HTS is facing internal divisions," Al Jazeera, September 27, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/turkey-idlib-180924191442969.html> [35].
- **May 10, 2018:**Italian police arrest 14 people in Sardinia in connection with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.  
Of those arrested, 10 are accused of money laundering and fundraising for the group while the other four are accused of being members of a "support cell" for the group. Source: "Italy breaks up Syrian jihadist funding ring," BBC, May 10, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44057652> [97].
- **April 24, 2018:**HTS signs a peace agreement with the rebel alliance known as Jabhat Tahrir Suriya (JTS) ending 63 days of intense fighting between the two groups in greater Idlib.  
Source: Qal Qal, Twitter post, April 24, 2018, 3:35pm, <https://twitter.com/Alqalqal/status/988863912924925953> [98].
- **January 4, 2018:**FSA political chief Liwa al-Mutasim blames Golani for the rapid fall of rebel positions in Idlib, stating that Golani prevented Turkey from establishing checkpoints to monitor the previous ceasefire.  
Source: Cody Roche, Twitter post, January 4, 2018, 2:55 p.m., [https://twitter.com/badly\\_xerxed/status/949006468078071808](https://twitter.com/badly_xerxed/status/949006468078071808) [99].
- **January 1, 2018:**HTS joins 11 other rebel factions in forming a joint operations room to counter the ongoing regime offensive toward Abu Duhur airport in Idlib.  
Source: Josko Baric, "Syrian War Daily - 1st of January 2018," Syrian War Daily, January 1, 2018, <https://syrianwardaily.wordpress.com/2018/01/01/syrian-war-daily-1st-of-january-2018/> [100].
- **December 2017:**On December 5, HTS faction Jaish al-Badia defects, creating a new Telegram channel devoted to al-Qaeda.  
The Jaish al-Malahem faction follows three weeks later, also indicating support for al-Qaeda in its new Telegram Channel. Source: Tore Refslund Hamming and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "The True Story of al-Qaeda's Demise and Resurgence in Syria," Lawfareblog, April 8, 2018, <https://lawfareblog.com/true-story-of-qaedas-demise-and-resurgence-syria> [55].
- **December 2017:**On December 7, the Salvation Government disbands Jericho's local council, making it the 82nd local council that the Salvation Government is in the process of taking over.  
Six days later, the Salvation Government gives the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) until December 15 to cease all actions and shut down all of its local offices. While the Salvation Government does not follow through on its threat, on December 19, HTS security forces shut down SIG offices in at least three towns and arrest several SIG officials. On December 27, the Salvation Government attempts to take over the Free Aleppo University, sparking two weeks of schoolwide protests. The Salvation Government replaces the university's president and issues stamps and signatures required for all documents to be considered legal. Sources: Aymenn a-Dasuqi, "□□□□□□...□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□", al Modon, December 7, 2017, <http://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2017/12/7/%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B0-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A3%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A7-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87> [101]; "HTS-backed civil authority moves against rivals in latest power grab in northwest Syria," Syria Direct, December 13, 2017, <http://syriadirect.org/news/hts-backed-civil-authority-moves-against-rivals-in-latest-power-grab-in-northwest-syria/> [102]. "Weekly Conflict Summary December 14-20, 2017," Carter Center, December 20, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.12.14-20.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.12.14-20.pdf) [103]; "HTS continues its attempt to suffocate Free Aleppo University, and the students continue their peaceful struggle against it," Aleppo 24 News, December 5, 2017, <http://en.aleppo24.com/hts-continues-its-attempt-to-suffocate-free-aleppo-university-and-the-students-continue-their-peaceful-struggle-against-it> [104].
- **December 3, 2017 - December 4, 2017:**Following the arrests of four prominent Nusra Front leaders, several HTS members resign and several large factions threaten to break away, prompting Golani to renew negotiations with al-Qaeda that ultimately lead nowhere.  
On December 4, HTS release Ordoni, who immediately renews his pledge to al-Qaeda. Source: "Weekly Conflict Summary November 30-December 6, 2017," Carter Center, December 6, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.11.30-12.05.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.11.30-12.05.pdf) [54].
- **November 2017:**On November 7, HTS and the local rebel faction Nour al-Din al-Zenki violently clash in Idlib along the 12-town border between the two factions.

## COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

### *Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)*

Fighting continues for a week as multiple armed factions side with Zenki against HTS until a ceasefire takes hold on November 15. On November 27, HTS arrests Sami al-Oraidi, the former head of the Nusra Front's Sharia Council, Abu Julaihib al-Ordoni, former Dara'a commander for the Nusra Front, Abu Khadija al-Ordoni, and Abu Mussaab al-Libi. All four were prominent Nusra Front leaders with strong ties to al-Qaeda. By the end of November, more than 35 HTS members, including at least 10 high-profile foreign and local leaders, have been assassinated in Idlib since September 2017. Sources: "Weekly Conflict Summary November 2-8, 2017," Carter Center, November 8, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.11.02-08.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.11.02-08.pdf) [105]; "Weekly Conflict Summary November 9-15, 2017," Carter Center, November 15, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.11.09-15.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.11.09-15.pdf) [106]; Mona Alami, "HTS Continues to Evolve," Syria Source, December 1, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/hts-continues-to-evolve> [53]; Haid Haid, "Who Is Assassinating Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's Leaders?" Chatham House, November 2017, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/who-is-assassinating-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-leaders> [107].

- **November 2, 2017:** HTS forms the "Salvation Government," a civilian-run administrative and political body in Idlib chaired by Mohammad al-Sheikh. HTS reportedly hands over control of its Public Services Administration to the Salvation Government. Sources: Sam Heller, "Turkey Through the Syrian Looking Glass," Century Foundation, November 28, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/turkey-syrian-looking-glass/> [41]; "الهيئة الإدارية للبلديات في إدلب تتسلم إدارة الخدمات العامة من قوات HTS .. فيديو," YouTube video, 16:29, posted by [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5orACzyc\\_G8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5orACzyc_G8) [42].
- **October 2017:** On October 1, Hashim al-Sheikh resigns as general leader of HTS and takes over the leadership of the Shura Council, while Golani takes over his role as overall emir. Between October 7 and 12, HTS forces partially withdraw from the region around Daraat Izza as Turkish forces move in to establish de-escalation monitoring points along the Afrin-Aleppo border. Throughout October an additional 10 factions defect from HTS. Sources: "الهيئة الإدارية للبلديات في إدلب تتسلم إدارة الخدمات العامة من قوات HTS .. فيديو," Huffington Post Arabic, October 2, 2017, [http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2017/10/02/story\\_n\\_18159996.html](http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2017/10/02/story_n_18159996.html) [31]; "Weekly Conflict Summary September 28 - October 4, 2017," Carter Center, October 4, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.09.28-10.04.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.09.28-10.04.pdf) [32]; "Weekly Conflict Summary October 5-11, 2017," Carter Center, October 11, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.10.05-11.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.10.05-11.pdf) [108]; "Weekly Conflict Summary September 28 - October 4, 2017," Carter Center, October 4, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.09.28-10.04.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.09.28-10.04.pdf) [32]; "Weekly Conflict Summary October 12-18, 2017," Carter Center, October 18, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.10.12-18.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.10.12-18.pdf) [109].
- **September 11, 2017:** Saudi cleric Abdullah al Muhaysni and Muslih Al Ulyani, both members of the HTS Sharia Committee, announce their resignations following leaked audio of several Nusra Front commanders expressing their loyalty to Golani and disdain for the Sharia Committee and Hashem al-Sheikh. More than eight factions defect from HTS following the leaked recordings. Source: "Weekly Conflict Summary September 7-13, 2017," Carter Center, September 13, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.09.07-13.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.09.07-13.pdf) [110].
- **April 2017 - July 2017:** HTS clashes with other rebel coalitions and attempts to expand its presence in Damascus, Idlib, and in southern Syria. In April and July, the group engages in fierce clashes with competing rebel faction Jaish al-Islam in the East Ghouta pocket of Damascus. During this time, HTS also engages in efforts to expand their presence in the south, including in Dara'a and Quneitra governorates, near the Golan Heights. In July, war breaks out between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib. After initial gains by Ahrar al-Sham, HTS captures several towns and encircles the crucial Bab al-Hawa border crossing before a ceasefire takes hold. Sources: Aron Lund, "Syria: East Ghouta Turns on Itself, Again," Century Foundation, May 1, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/syria-east-ghouta-turns-on-itself/>; Jaish al Islam, Twitter post, July 8, 2017, 2:15pm, [https://twitter.com/Islamarmy\\_eng3/status/883751346909966337](https://twitter.com/Islamarmy_eng3/status/883751346909966337); Ahmed Abazeid, "Infighting Continues in Eastern Ghouta as the Regime Advances," Atlantic Council, May 5, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/infighting-continues-in-eastern-ghouta-as-the-regime-advances#.WRB8OussNHE.twitter>; "Weekly Conflict Summary May 11-17," Carter Center, May 20, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weeklyconflictsummary-may-11-17-2017.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weeklyconflictsummary-may-11-17-2017.pdf); Charles Lister, Twitter post, July 19, 2017, 12:58pm, [https://twitter.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/887658278074818561](https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/887658278074818561).
- **February 2017 - April 2017:** The Nusra Front launches or participates in three offensives against government positions in North Hama, Damascus, and Dara'a. During these attacks, the Nusra Front conducts more than a dozen suicide bombings and kills hundreds of pro-regime fighters and dozens of civilians. Sources: Paul Antonopolous, "Al-Nusra led offensive against the Syrian Army in Daraa spectacularly fails," al-Masdar News, February 12, 2017, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/al-nusra-led-offensive-against-the-syrian-army-in-daraa-spectacularly-fails/>; "Syrian rebels launch attack near Hama," Reuters, March 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-hama/syrian-rebels-launch-attack-near-hama-idUSKBN16S2DC>; Abu Summiyah al-Khalidi, Twitter post, March 23, 2017, 9:28 a.m., [https://twitter.com/river\\_orontes/status/845130252640645122](https://twitter.com/river_orontes/status/845130252640645122). Qalaat al-Mudiq, Twitter post, March 21, 2017, 9:40am, <https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/844227259535900673>; Ebaa Agency, YouTube, March 22, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKERh37fvEk>; Abu Summiyah al-Khalidi, Twitter post, March 23, 2017, 9:28am, [https://twitter.com/river\\_orontes/status/845130252640645122](https://twitter.com/river_orontes/status/845130252640645122); "Former Nusra Front says it carried out Damascus bombing," Reuters, January 18, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra-idUSKBN1522WI>; World on Alert, Twitter post, February 12, 2017, 7:06am, <https://twitter.com/worldonalert/status/830795241628241921>; "Syria Conflict: Weekly Conflict Summary," Carter Center, March 3, 2017, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.02.23-03.01.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.02.23-03.01.pdf); "Syria Situation Report: March 9 - 17, 2017," Institute for the Study of War, March 17, 2017, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/03/syria-situation-report-march-9-17-2017.html?m=1>; "Dozens killed in double suicide attack in Syrian capital," Reuters, March 15, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-blast-idUSKBN16M1J0>; Ellen Francis and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syrian forces and rebels fight fierce clashes in northeast Damascus," Reuters, March 19, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jobar-idUSKBN16Q09X>.
- **January 28, 2017:** The Nusra Front releases a statement claiming to unite with four other rebel groups under the name Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The other rebel groups are Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaish al-Sunna, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din. Dozens of smaller rebel groups join in the ensuing weeks. Sources: "Syria Islamist factions, including former al Qaeda branch, join forces: statement," Reuters, January 28, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels-idUSKBN15COMV>; Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "New Syrian jihadist alliance vows to step up attacks against army," Reuters, February 9, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jihadists-idUSKBN15O2IV>.



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### ***Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)***

- **August 2016 - December 2016:**The Nusra Front works alongside other militant groups in an effort to break the government's siege on Aleppo.  
In early August, around 7,000 Nusra Front militants gather outside the city with a variety of weaponry, including armored vehicles, rockets, tanks, and artillery. Despite gaining some ground south of the city and temporarily breaking the siege, the attempt ultimately fails. Sources: Lidia Kelly, "Russia Announces Daily Ceasefires in Syria's Aleppo to Let in Aid," Reuters, August 10, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-idUSKCN10L1WL>; Lisa Barrington and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Jets Pound Rebels After They Break Aleppo Siege," Reuters, August 7, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKCN10I0M2>.
- **July 28, 2016:**Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Golani declares a formal split from al-Qaeda after thanking "our brothers, the commanders of al-Qa'eda," and announcing the group's name change from Jabhat al-Nusra (the Victory Front) to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the Levantine Conquest Front).  
Source: Nusra Front, Abu Mohammed Joulani commander officially announced the disengagement from al-Qaeda and the establishment of a new entity," YouTube video, posted by "Orient News," July 28, 2016, (video no longer available) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oossAtDYbrs>.
- **March 2016 - July 2016:**The Nusra Front launches attacks on both government positions and civilians in Aleppo city, including shelling the Kurdish neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud and killing nine civilians.  
The Nusra Front continues to publicly reject international cease-fires, conducting three suicide bombings on April 1 alone. The Nusra Front continues seizing weapons from moderate rebel factions in Idlib throughout July. Sources: "At least 9 dead, dozens injured in attacks against Kurdish quarter in Aleppo," Reuters, March 6, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKCN0W80RU>; "Islamist fighters attack Syrian government forces south of Aleppo: Syrian Observatory," Reuters, March 7, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-nusra-idUSKCN0W91Y8>; Nusra Front, Syrian rebels attack government forces near Aleppo, gain ground," Reuters, April 2, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKCN0WZ0O5>; "Rebels shoot down second Syrian jet in a month," Reuters, April 5, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jet-idUSKCN0X214E>; "U.S. behind strike that killed Nusra Front's Abu Firas: officials," Reuters, April 4, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKCN0X11R3>; "UPDATE 1-Russia blames Nusra Front for wrecking planned truce in Syria's Aleppo," Reuters, May 4, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-russia-syria-aleppo-idUSL5N1814MD>; "Nusra captures leader, fighters of Western-backed rebels in northern Syria," Reuters, July 3, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra-idUSKCN0ZJ0F3>.
- **March 2015 - February 2016:**The Nusra Front continues to expand in Syria as part of the Jaish al Fatah (Army of Conquest) coalition, capturing all of the Idlib province by mid-May and calling for intensified attacks against the Syrian regime after rejecting a ceasefire in February 2016.  
In June, Abu Muhammad al-Golani releases an audio statement mourning the death of al-Qaeda deputy leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi who was killed in a drone strike in Yemen. After the Nusra Front attacks U.S.-trained rebels in early August, the United States expands its bombing campaign against the Nusra Front, killing the high-ranking Sanafi al-Nasr on October 15. Sources: "AFP, "Syria rebels seize key regime base," *Guardian* (London), May 19, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/19/syria-rebels-seize-key-regime-base-mastouma-idlib>; "Nusra Front rejects Syria truce, urges stronger attacks: audio statement," Reuters, February 26, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra-idUSKCN0VZ1ZZ>; "Syria's Nusra Front underlines Qaeda link in audio message," Reuters, June 24, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/06/24/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-yemen-idUKKBN0P41DP20150624>; Patrick J. McDonnell and W.J. Hennigan, "Pentagon ramps up airstrikes in Syria to help U.S.-backed rebels," *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-us-syria-20150803-story.html>; "U.S.-led air raid kills 15 al Qaeda fighters in Syria: monitor," Reuters, May 20, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/20/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra-idUSKBN0052B120150520>; Agence France-Presse, "US-led air strikes kill seven Al-Nusra members in Syria: monitor," Yahoo News, July 8, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/us-led-air-strikes-kill-seven-al-nusra-225008264.html>.
- **March 9, 2015:**The Nusra Front reaffirms its allegiance to al-Qaeda, after rumors that the Nusra Front may break away from al-Qaeda in an effort to appear more moderate.  
Source: Agence France-Presse, "Qaeda in Syria denies plan to break away," Yahoo News, March 9, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/qaeda-syria-denies-plan-break-away-194745608.html>.
- **October 2014 - February 2015:**The Nusra Front begins targeting moderate rebel forces in Idlib and Aleppo, capturing several villages and killing dozens of U.S.-backed rebels.  
On November 15, 2014, the United Arab Emirates designates the Nusra Front as a terrorist organization. Sources: "Al Qaeda Seizes Territory from Moderate Rebel Group," Reuters, October 28, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/28/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idlib-idUSKBN0IH1KW20141028>; Tom Perry, "Al Qaeda in Syria attacks Western-backed rebels," Reuters, January 29, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/29/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKBN0L21ZF20150129>; Agence France-Presse, "Dozens dead as Nusra takes US-backed Syria rebel base: activists," *Daily Star* (Beirut), February 28, 2015, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/feb-28/289135-dozens-dead-as-nusra-takes-us-backed-syria-rebel-base-activists.ashx>; "UAE Cabinet Approves List of Designated Terrorist Organisations, Groups," Emirates News Agency, November 15, 2014, <http://www.wam.ae/en/news/emirates-international/1395272478814.html>.
- **February 2014 - June 2014:**After a month of fighting between ISIS and the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda severs ties with ISIS.  
Despite al-Qaeda's demands at a ceasefire, violence continues between the two groups and many Nusra Front leaders and fighters defect to ISIS. In June 2014, Turkey designates the Nusra Front as a terrorist organization. Sources: "Al Qaeda Says Has No Link with Syrian Militant Group ISIL," Reuters, February 3, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/03/us-syria-crisis-qaeda-idUSBREA1207L20140203>; Yousuf Basil, Mohammed Tawfeeq and Ray Sanchez, "Al Qaeda boss Ayman al-Zawahiri calls for halt to jihadist infighting," CNN, May 3, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/03/world/meast/ayman-al-zawahiri-message-syria/>; "Syria Islamists Challenge ISIL Control of Town on Iraq Border," Reuters, June 28, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/28/us-syria-crisis-iraq-border-idUSKBN0F30B420140628>; AFP, "Al-Qaeda Merges with Isis at Syria-Iraq Border Town," *Telegraph* (London), June 25, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/10925602/Al-Qaeda-merges-with-Isis-at-Syria-Iraq-border-town.html>; AFP, "Turkey Blacklists Al-Nusra Front as Terror Group," Al-Akhbar English, June 3, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20011>.
- **January 29, 2014:**U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper tells the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee that the Nusra Front has aspirations to attack the United States.  
Source: Patricia Zengerle and Mark Hosenball, "U.S. Spy Chiefs Say Number of Foreign Militants in Syria Rises," Reuters, January 29, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/29/us-usa-security-syria-idUSBREA0S1XL20140129>.

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***Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)***

- **May 2013 - November 2013:**The Nusra Front expands its violent activities to Lebanon and continues to expand in Syria as tensions with the Free Syrian Army arise.  
The U.S. Treasury Department designates the Nusra Front's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Golani, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. On May 30, the U.N. Security Council amends its designation of al-Qaeda in Iraq to include the Nusra Front as an alias. Several other countries, including the United Kingdom and Canada, later add the Nusra Front to their lists of terrorist organizations. Sources: Dominic Evans, "Syrian Rebels, Hezbollah in Deadly Fight in Lebanon," Reuters, June 2, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/02/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE95105O20130602>; Mitchell Prothero, Al Qaida-linked Nusra Front Rebels Blamed for Bloody Fight against Lebanese Army in Sidon," McClatchy DC, June 25, 2013, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/06/25/194944/al-qaeda-linked-nusra-front-rebels.html#storylink=cpy>; Oliver Holmes and Erika Solomon, "Syria Rebels Reinforce Key Suburb in Damascus Battle," Reuters, July 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/16/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE96F0EK20130716>; "Syria's al-Nusra Front Claims Assassination of Hama Governor," Al Arabiya, September 7, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/09/07/Syria-s-al-Nusra-Front-claims-assassination-of-Hama-governor.html>; "Syrian State TV: Hama Province Governor Assassinated in Car Bomb Blast," Al Arabiya, August 25, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/08/25/syria-car-bomb.html>; "Gaining Ground: The Spread of Iraqi al Qaeda groups in Syria," *New York Times*, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324807704579082924138453120>; "Syria Designations; Syria Designations Removals; Counter Terrorism Designations; Iran Sanctions Designations and Identifications," U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 16, 2013, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20130516.aspx>; "Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends Entry of One Entity on Its Sanctions List," United Nations Security Council, May 30, 2013, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc11019.doc.htm>; "UK bans Syria's Al-Qaida-Linked Nusra Front," Associated Press, July 19, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/uk-bans-syrias-al-qaeda-linked-nusra-front>; "Currently Listed Entities," Public Safety Canada, accessed December 21, 2014, <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrtr/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-eng.aspx#2049>.
- **April 9, 2013:**Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announces a merger with the Nusra Front to form the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).  
The following day, Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Golani releases a statement rejecting the merger with AQI and officially pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri. Source: "Syria Crisis: Al-Nusra Pledges Allegiance to Al-Qaeda," BBC News, April 10, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22095099>.
- **February 2012 - December 2012:**The Nusra Front carries out nearly 600 attacks in major cities across Syria, killing Syrian government and military personnel as well as civilians.  
By the end of 2012, the group has proven itself to be the most effective fighting force among the opposition and concerns begins to rise among moderate rebels that the Nusra Front will continue to overtake Free Syrian Army groups throughout the country. The United States designates the Nusra Front as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in December of 2012. Sources: "UPDATE 1-Obama: U.S. Now Recognizes Syrian Opposition Coalition," Reuters, December 11, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/12/syria-usa-idUSL1E8NBIMN20121212>; David Ignatious, "Al-Qaeda affiliate playing larger role in Syria rebellion," *Washington Post*, November 30, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/al-qaeda-affiliate-playing-larger-role-in-syria-rebellion/2012/11/30/203d06f4-3b2e-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/al-qaeda-affiliate-playing-larger-role-in-syria-rebellion/2012/11/30/203d06f4-3b2e-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680_blog.html); "[Billing Code: 4710-10] DEPARTMENT OF STATE [Public Notice 8104]," National Archives and Records Administration, December 11, 2012, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2012-29870.pdf>.
- **January 23, 2012 - January 24, 2012:**The Nusra Front releases a video announcing its formation.  
Source: AFP, "Unknown Islamist Group Claims Suicide Attacks in Syria," Al Arabiya News, February 29, 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/29/197781.html>.

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***Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)***

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**Violent history:**

The Nusra Front conducted its first attack on December 23, 2011 when it detonated two car bombs outside of a government security office in Damascus, killing 44.<sup>146</sup> In the following months the Nusra Front drastically increased the frequency and types of attacks carried out against the Assad regime, quickly setting itself apart from other rebel groups with the number of suicide bombings it conducted. As the Nusra Front seized and held territory it began to attack civilians, minorities, and other rebel groups as well. After Hezbollah's intervention on behalf of the Assad regime in mid-2013, the Nusra Front expanded its operations into Lebanon.<sup>147</sup> While the Nusra Front's attacks in Lebanon largely ended by mid-2015, the group still conducts violent activities in Syria's southern governorates of Dara'a and Quneitra, in the Eastern Ghouta pocket of Damascus, and in the rebel-held areas of Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo

- **December 23, 2011:** Two car bombs explode outside government security offices in Damascus, killing at least 44 people. The Nusra Front later claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>148</sup>
- **January 6, 2012:** A suicide bomber detonates bus bombs in Damascus, killing 26 people and wounding 63 others. The Nusra Front later claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>149</sup>
- **February 10, 2012:** Two car bombs explode in Aleppo, killing 28 people. The Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack on February 27.<sup>150</sup>
- **March 17, 2012:** Suicide bombers attack two government facilities in Damascus, killing 27 people and wounding nearly 100 others.<sup>151</sup> The Nusra Front later claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>152</sup>
- **April 27, 2012:** A suicide bomber attacks a mosque in Damascus, killing at least nine people. The Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>153</sup>
- **May 2012:** The Nusra Front carries out twin bombings in Damascus, killing 55 people.<sup>154</sup>
- **May 29, 2012:** The Nusra Front captures and kills 13 Syrian security officials, according to a statement released by the group.<sup>155</sup>
- **June 24, 2012:** Syrian state TV says that security forces arrested a would-be suicide bomber and member of the Nusra Front who was planning to detonate a bomb in a mosque the following day.<sup>156</sup>
- **June 27, 2012:** The Nusra Front attacks a pro-Syrian government TV building, killing seven people.<sup>157</sup>
- **July 19, 2012:** The Nusra Front kidnaps and ultimately kills Syrian state TV presenter Mohammed al-Saeed, according to a series of statements released by the group on August 3.<sup>158</sup>
- **August 2012:** The Nusra Front launches a joint operation with the Sahaba Battalion against a police station in the countryside of Damascus, according to a statement released by the group.<sup>159</sup>
- **September 26, 2012:** A suicide bomber detonates a car bomb near a military command center in Damascus, killing 14 people. The Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>160</sup>
- **October 3, 2012:** Three suicide bombers detonate car bombs in Aleppo, killing dozens of people. The Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>161</sup>
- **October 9, 2012:** Suicide bombers attack a Syrian intelligence complex outside Damascus. The Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>162</sup>
- **October 12, 2012:** The Nusra Front captures a Syrian missile base near Aleppo, killing 92 government soldiers.<sup>163</sup>
- **November 2012:** Over the course of 18 statements on jihadist forums, the Nusra Front claims responsibility for 45 attacks that reportedly kill dozens of people, including 60 in a single suicide bombing. Nusra militants clash with Kurds in the border town of Ras al-Ain.<sup>164</sup>
- **November 1, 2012:** Rebels kill 28 soldiers in attacks on three army checkpoints on Syria's main highway. After

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storming the checkpoints, soldiers are rounded up and executed, according to video footage of the attack. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a pro-opposition monitoring group, claims that the Nusra Front is responsible for the attacks and executions.<sup>165</sup>

- **November 5, 2012:** A Nusra Front suicide bomber detonates a car bomb in Syria's Hama province, killing at least 50 people, according to SOHR.<sup>166</sup>
- **November 29, 2012:** Footage of a man shooting 10 unarmed prisoners is uploaded to YouTube. The gunman is heard saying, "God is great. Jabhat al-Nusra," referring to the Nusra Front.<sup>167</sup>
- **December 9, 2012:** The Nusra Front is among armed groups that clash in Tripoli, Lebanon, leaving four people dead.<sup>168</sup>
- **December 9, 2012:** The Nusra Front, leading other rebel groups, violently seizes a government army command center in northern Syria.<sup>169</sup>
- **December 12, 2012:** Clashes between the Syrian regime and rebel forces, including the Nusra Front, take place by the Wadi al-Deif military base and the Za'lana checkpoint.<sup>170</sup>
- **December 12, 2012:** Explosions outside Syria's interior ministry leave seven people dead and 50 others wounded, including Syria's Interior Minister. The Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>171</sup>
- **December 21, 2012:** A video published by the Nusra Front shows dead bodies on a highway in Hama province. The speaker on the video says that 50 men, allegedly fighters for the Assad regime, were killed in an ambush.<sup>172</sup>
- **December 31, 2012:** Nusra operatives capture American photographer Matthew Schrier.<sup>173</sup>
- **January 2, 2013:** The Nusra Front and other rebel groups attack a military airport near Taftanaz, according to pro-opposition monitoring group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.<sup>174</sup>
- **January 20, 2013:** The Nusra Front clashes with pro-government forces near the Wadi al-Deif military base.<sup>175</sup>
- **January 24, 2013:** Masked men believed to be affiliated with the Nusra Front raid the headquarters of two secular civilian organizations in Saraqib.<sup>176</sup>
- **January 24, 2013:** A car bomb allegedly planted by the Nusra Front kills eight members of Syria's military intelligence.<sup>177</sup>
- **January 29, 2013:** Sixty-five people are found bound and shot dead in Aleppo by Syrian opposition activists, who blame Assad loyalists for the executions. The government blames the Nusra Front.<sup>178</sup>
- **February 2013:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for 17 attacks around Damascus in the first half of February, including at least seven bombings.<sup>179</sup>
- **March 7-23, 2013:** The Nusra Front and other rebel groups battle against Assad's forces for control of Syria's 38th division air defense base. The rebels gain control of the base on March 23.<sup>180</sup>
- **April 12, 2013:** Rebel groups, including the Nusra Front, battle Syrian forces in the city of Qamishli, bordering Iraq.
- **April 22, 2013:** Two Nusra Front suicide bombers detonate car bombs in the countryside of Damascus, and other operatives launch mortar and rocket attacks, according to a statement released by the group.<sup>181</sup>
- **May 16, 2013:** A video released on May 16 shows Nusra Front militants executing 11 men for allegedly taking part in massacres on behalf of the Assad regime. The video is believed to have been taken sometime in 2012, according to SOHR.<sup>182</sup>
- **June 2013:** Nusra militants are blamed for wracking the Lebanese coastal city of Sidon in a battle with the Lebanese army.<sup>183</sup>



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- **June 2, 2013:** A Nusra Front suicide bomber detonates a car bomb near a police station in Damascus, according to SOHR.<sup>184</sup>
- **July 15, 2013:** The Nusra Front attacks a Kurdish patrol and takes a gunman hostage, according to SOHR. Clashes between the Nusra Front and Kurdish fighters erupt in Ras al-Ain, near the border with Turkey.<sup>185</sup>
- **August 25, 2013:** The Nusra Front assassinates the governor of Syria's Hama province in a car bomb attack.<sup>186</sup>
- **September 10, 2013:** Nusra Front militants shoot 16 Alawites and six Arab Bedouins after storming a village in central Syria.<sup>187</sup>
- **October 17, 2013:** The Nusra Front executes 10 Syrian government soldiers from the Rashidiyah district, according to SOHR.<sup>188</sup>
- **November 20, 2013:** Four suicide bombers detonate car bombs in northern Damascus. The Nusra Front and ISIS take credit for the attacks.<sup>189</sup>
- **November 26, 2013:** The Nusra Front executes of two government soldiers and three "collaborators," according to a statement published by the group's media branch.<sup>190</sup>
- **December 2, 2013:** After several days of fighting, the Nusra Front captures the old city of Maaloula and hold several nuns hostage in a monastery, according to SOHR. Thirteen Greek Orthodox nuns are captured by the Nusra Front and held until March 2014.<sup>191</sup>
- **December 6, 2013:** Fighting breaks out between the Nusra Front and ISIS in the rebel-held city of Raqqa.<sup>192</sup>
- **December 10, 2013:** The Nusra Front executes six members of the Free Syrian Army rebel group for engaging in violent crimes.<sup>193</sup>
- **December 11, 2013:** The Nusra Front and affiliated groups invade Adra Oumaliyah in the Damascus countryside, kidnapping Alawite men, women, and children.<sup>194</sup>
- **December 12-13, 2013:** The Nusra Front is implicated in an attack that kills at least 15 Syrian civilians from the minority Alawite and Druze sects.<sup>195</sup>
- **January 16, 2014:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for a car bomb attack in the Lebanese town of Hermel that leaves four people dead and more than 40 others wounded.<sup>196</sup>
- **January 17, 2014:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for launching rocket fire into the Lebanese town of Aarsal, killing seven people and wounding 15 others.<sup>197</sup>
- **January 21, 2014:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for a suicide bombing in Beirut that leaves at least four people dead and 34 others wounded.<sup>198</sup>
- **January 27, 2014:** A Saudi-born Nusra Front operative blows himself up at a Syrian army checkpoint in the central Hama province, killing 13 people.<sup>199</sup>
- **January 30, 2014:** Syrian state television claims the Nusra Front fired on UN workers as they delivered food to people in parts of rebel-held Damascus, where thousands were trapped by a Syrian army siege.<sup>200</sup>
- **February 1, 2014:** A Nusra Front suicide bomber detonates a car bomb in eastern Lebanon, killing four people and wounding 18 others.<sup>201</sup>
- **February 8, 2014:** A Nusra Front operative detonates a car bomb at a checkpoint in al-Jalma village, Hama province, killing 20 members of the security forces and the National Defense Force, according to SOHR.<sup>202</sup>
- **February 22, 2014:** A suicide bomber detonates a car bomb in Lebanon, killing two Lebanese soldiers and one civilian. The Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>203</sup>



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- **March 5, 2014:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for firing three rockets in Lebanon, near the border with Syria.<sup>204</sup>
- **March 5, 2014:** U.N. human rights investigators release a report holding the Nusra Front and other rebel groups responsible for besieging 45,000 people in two Shiite towns in Syria's Aleppo province.<sup>205</sup>
- **March 9, 2014:** The Nusra Front releases 13 nuns held hostage since December 2013 in exchange for 150 female prisoners.<sup>206</sup>
- **March 15, 2014:** The Nusra Front fights the Syrian army to defend the former's hold on Yabroud, a city north of Damascus near the border with Lebanon.<sup>207</sup>
- **March 16, 2014:** A suicide bomber detonates a car bomb in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, killing two people and injuring 14 others. The Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>208</sup>
- **March 27, 2014:** The Nusra Front releases a video showing the group preparing to execute two Saudi fighters.<sup>209</sup>
- **May 5, 2014:** The Nusra Front and allied rebel groups gain control of the Syrian village of al-Sabha, killing five civilians. Clashes continue between the Nusra Front and ISIS in the outskirts of Deir el-Zour.<sup>210</sup>
- **May 25, 2014:** Four suicide bombers attack targets in Syria's Idlib province, reportedly on behalf of the Nusra Front. One of the suicide bombers is a U.S. citizen.<sup>211</sup>
- **Late May 2014:** The Nusra Front briefly kidnaps and tortures three teenagers in eastern Lebanon over an incident linked to trading cigarettes.<sup>212</sup>
- **June 5, 2014:** The Nusra Front kills a 14-year-old Syrian boy and throws his body onto the side of the road in east Lebanon, according to security sources.<sup>213</sup>
- **June 20, 2014:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for a car bomb attack in Syria's Hama province that leaves at least 34 people dead and more than 50 others wounded.<sup>214</sup>
- **August 24, 2014:** The Nusra Front releases a U.S. hostage kidnapped in 2012.<sup>215</sup>
- **August 27, 2014:** The Nusra Front takes control of the Quneitra border crossing with Israel from Syrian forces.<sup>216</sup>
- **August 28, 2014:** The Nusra Front kidnaps 45 U.N. peacekeepers from the Syrian side of the Golan Heights.<sup>217</sup>
- **September 19, 2014:** The Nusra Front kills one of 10 Lebanese soldiers held captive, according to a Twitter statement by the group.<sup>218</sup>
- **October 5, 2014:** The Nusra Front attacks Hezbollah bases in Lebanon, killing 10 of its fighters.<sup>219</sup>
- **December 5, 2014:** The Nusra Front kills a captured Lebanese soldier.<sup>220</sup>
- **January 8-9, 2015:** Nusra militants fight to capture two Shiite villages in Syria but are repelled.<sup>221</sup>
- **January 10, 2015:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for a double suicide attack in Tripoli, Lebanon, killing at least seven people and wounding more than 30 others. Lebanon's interior minister attributes the attack to ISIS.<sup>222</sup>
- **January 12, 2015:** After a raid targeting Islamists in Lebanon's prisons, the Nusra Front threatens captive Lebanese soldiers.<sup>223</sup>
- **January 18, 2015:** The Nusra Front claims to have shot down a Syrian army plane, killing 35 people. The cargo plane was carrying food and ammunition.<sup>224</sup>
- **January 29, 2015:** The Nusra Front attacks a Western-backed Syrian rebel group west of Aleppo.<sup>225</sup>
- **February 1, 2015:** A bomb explodes on a bus carrying Shiite Lebanese pilgrims to shrines in Damascus, killing at least

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six and wounding 27. The Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>226</sup>

- **February 28, 2015:** The Nusra Front kills dozens of U.S.-backed rebels as it captures a military compound in northern Syria.<sup>227</sup>
- **March 12, 2015:** Fifty are left dead when the Nusra Front rebels clash with the Assad regime in Latakia province, northwest Syria.<sup>228</sup>
- **March 27, 2015—March 28, 2015:** The Nusra Front makes advances in Idlib city in northwest Syria, clashing with regime forces. Dozens of militants and four regime soldiers die as a result of the clash, according to SOHR.<sup>229</sup> By March 28, the Nusra Front has seized almost all of Idlib city from regime forces.<sup>230</sup>
- **April 1, 2015:** The Nusra Front joins a rebel coalition to seize Nasib crossing, the only functioning border crossing with Jordan, as well as three military posts nearby.<sup>231</sup>
- **April 24, 2015:** The Nusra Front and other Islamist groups take control of Jisr al-Shughur, the last major regime-held town in Idlib province.<sup>232</sup>
- **May 4, 2015:** Nusra Front fighters, including a suicide bomber, launch an attack in Damascus.<sup>233</sup>
- **May 19, 2015:** The Army of Conquest coalition, including the Nusra Front, captures the Assad regime's largest remaining military base in Idlib province.<sup>234</sup>
- **May 22, 2015:** The Nusra Front is part of an offensive that seizes a hospital from government forces in Idlib province.<sup>235</sup>
- **June 2, 2015:** The Nusra Front announces that it has attacked two Hezbollah outposts in eastern Lebanon, killing several Hezbollah members.<sup>236</sup>
- **June 10, 2015:**

Members of the Nusra Front kill 23 Druze Syrians in the village of Qalb al-Lawzi in the north of Idlib's province.<sup>237</sup> Three days later and after international outcry, the Nusra Front releases an official statement acknowledging that its members attacked Druze but saying that they did so "in clear violation of the leadership's views."<sup>238</sup>

- **July 2, 2015:** Nusra Front and other rebel groups, including Ahrar al-Sham launch a major offensive to gain control of the divided city of Aleppo, Syria.<sup>239</sup>
- **July 3, 2015:** The Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham announce the formation of a new coalition—Ansar al-Shariah—as they and other rebel groups fight government forces in Aleppo.<sup>240</sup>
- **July 10, 2015:** After being held captive for a week—allegedly by Nusra Front members—a priest in Idlib province, Syria, is released by his captors.<sup>241</sup>
- **July 15, 2015:** The Army of Conquest coalition—to which the Nusra Front belongs—announces its offensive against the towns of Fuaa and Kafraya, reportedly the last two Shiite localities held by the regime in Idlib.<sup>242</sup>
- **July 31, 2015:** The Nusra Front attacks the U.S.-trained Division 30 (a.k.a. New Syrian Forces) rebel unit, killing five of its fighters, wounding 18, and kidnapping 20.<sup>243</sup> According to multiple rebel sources who spoke to McClatchy, the Nusra Front was tipped off by Turkish intelligence.<sup>244</sup>
- **August 1, 2015:** The Nusra Front releases a video of the July 31 attack and kidnapping operation against Division 30 rebels. In the video, one member boasts that the Nusra Front has "cut of the hands of the West and Americans."<sup>245</sup> Meanwhile, a religious court run by the Nusra Front executes 10 people in Aleppo, two on charges of adultery and eight on charges of collusion with the Syrian government, according to SOHR.<sup>246</sup>
- **September 9, 2015:** The Nusra Front seizes the Abu al-Duhur airbase from Assad regime forces, thereby capturing

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the final regime position in Idlib province.<sup>247</sup>

- **October 12, 2015:** The Nusra Front calls for attacks against Syrian Alawites in retaliation for Russian airstrikes.<sup>248</sup>
- **November 16, 2015:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for a suicide bombing that it says killed top commanders in the ISIS-affiliated Yarmouk Martyrs Brigades.<sup>249</sup>
- **Late February 2016:** The Nusra Front rejects a cease fire and calls for intensified attacks against Bashar al-Assad and his regime.<sup>250</sup>
- **Early-Mid March 2016:** The Nusra Front and other Islamist insurgent groups launch at least 100 rockets on a Kurdish residential area of Aleppo, killing at least nine civilians and wounding dozens of others, according to SOHR.<sup>251</sup> The Nusra Front later attacks government forces and briefly captures the village of al-Ais before government forces retake the village.<sup>252</sup> The group later seizes bases and weapons, including anti-tank missiles, from Western-backed rebel groups in northwest Syria.<sup>253</sup>
- **March 16, 2016:** The Nusra Front releases a video of Japanese hostage Jumpei Yasuda on Yasuda's birthday, March 16.<sup>254</sup>
- **April 1, 2016:** The Nusra Front carries out three suicide bombings targeting Assad forces near a hillside south of Aleppo.<sup>255</sup>
- **April 5, 2016:** The Nusra Front shoots down a Syrian warplane, capturing the pilot.<sup>256</sup>
- **Early May 2016:** Russia highlights increased violence in Aleppo by the Nusra Front, and claims that the group is responsible for the thwarting of an extended truce.<sup>257</sup>
- **June 2016:** The Nusra Front continues its offensive against Assad forces, reportedly killing dozens of military and civilian targets in Aleppo. In early June, a Russian ceasefire monitoring agency claims that the Nusra Front shelled down 40 people in Aleppo using rocket launchers, canons, mortars, and anti-aircraft missiles.<sup>258</sup>
- **Early July 2016:** The Nusra Front reportedly captures and takes hostage the commander of the Western-backed Jaish al-Tahrir rebel group as well as "scores" of the commander's aides and fighters, according to reports.<sup>259</sup>
- **Mid-July 2016:** The Nusra Front is blamed for launching two rocket attacks in the southern Syrian town of Baath City, killing civilians.<sup>260</sup>
- **January 18, 2017:** The Nusra Front claims responsibility for a suicide bombing attack in Damascus, killing seven people.<sup>261</sup> The following week, the group launches an attack against several Free Syrian Army rebel groups in northwestern Syria.<sup>262</sup>
- **February 12, 2017:** The Nusra Front's HTS coalition claims responsibility for two suicide bombings in the city of Dara'a.<sup>263</sup>
- **February 26, 2017:** The Nusra Front's HTS coalition claims responsibility for five suicide bombings at the Homs City Military Security Headquarters.<sup>264</sup>
- **March 11, 2017:** The Nusra Front's HTS coalition claims responsibility for two suicide bombings in Damascus, killing at least 74 people. HTS claims it targeted Iraqi militiamen while local activists stated that those killed were Shiite pilgrims.<sup>265</sup>
- **March 18 - 23, 2017:** HTS claims responsibility for three suicide bombings targeting regime positions in Jobar, Damascus.<sup>266</sup>
- **March 21 - 24, 2017:** HTS launches an offensive in Northern Hama, carrying out four suicide bombings over the course of the offensive.<sup>267</sup>
- **June 8, 2017:** HTS attacks FSA and Faylaq al Sham units in the town of Maraat al-Numan, killing FSA Colonel Tasyeer



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al-Samahi.<sup>268</sup>

- **June 13, 2017:** HTS kidnaps two FSA commanders in Idlib, Nidal Haj Ali and Ahmed al-Mousa.<sup>269</sup>
- **June 19, 2017:** HTS assassinates the commander of the First Brigade of the Golan Regiment, a pro-government militia in Quneitra.<sup>270</sup>
- **June 23, 2017:** HTS kills several Hezbollah fighters in raids along the Lebanon-Syria border in late June.<sup>271</sup>
- **June 24, 2017:** HTS launches an offensive against al-Baath City, Quneitra.<sup>272</sup>
- **July 14, 2017:** HTS and Ahrar al-Sham clash near the Idlib city of Tal Touqan.<sup>273</sup>
- **July 19 - July 23, 2017:** HTS and Ahrar al-Sham engage in clashes across Idlib and North Latakia, with HTS ultimately seizing control of all of the border crossings with Turkey. On July 23, the two factions reach an agreement temporarily ending hostilities. While part of the ceasefire allows militias which had been forcibly conscripted into HTS as it captured new territory to defect, HTS is not required to return any of its captured towns.<sup>274</sup>
- **August 28, 2017:** Sayyed Barsha, commander of the rebel group Nour al-Din al-Zenki is assassinated by unknown agents. Zenki accuses HTS of carrying out the assassination amid ongoing clashes and kidnappings linked to familial disputes within the Barsha clan, whose members are split between HTS and Zenki.<sup>275</sup>
- **September 6, 2017:** HTS Elite Forces and the PMC Malhama Tactical raid regime positions in the Air Force Intelligence complex of Aleppo.<sup>276</sup>
- **September 19, 2017:** HTS units and fighters from the Turkistani Islamic Party launch an attack against regime positions in northern Hama using at least one SVBIED, briefly seizing control of the villages of Ma'an and Tulaysiyah.<sup>277</sup>
- **October 2017:** On October 9, ISIS fighters backed with heavy armor enter rebel-controlled Hama from regime-controlled Hama sparking clashes with HTS. Over the next two weeks HTS uses artillery, tanks, and SVBIEDs to counter the ISIS offensive, reversing most of ISIS's gains.<sup>278</sup> At the same time, the Syrian regime launches a new offensive against HTS in Hama, targeting the villages the group had recently recaptured from ISIS. HTS launches a new counter-offensive against the regime in response, utilizing at least two SVBIEDs.<sup>279</sup>
- **November 2017:** On November 7, clashes renew between HTS and Nour al-Din al-Zenki in Idlib along the 12-town border between the two factions.<sup>280</sup> Fighting continues for a week as multiple armed factions side with Zenki against HTS until a ceasefire takes hold on November 15.<sup>281</sup> On November 27, HTS launches another counter-offensive against ISIS in north Hama after ISIS reinforcements arrived from Deir Ez Zor through regime territory. On the same day, the regime expands its ongoing offensive against the rebels by seizing two towns from HTS near Khanasir, Aleppo.<sup>282</sup> These positions are recaptured by HTS in a counter-attack launched on November 29.<sup>283</sup>
- **December 2017:** In Damascus, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham launch "Phase 2" of their offensive against regime forces stationed in the vehicle management base in Harasta. The rebel forces manage to besiege the base for several days, killing seven generals in the fighting.<sup>284</sup>
- **January 31, 2018:** HTS executes two individuals accused of assassinating HTS fighters in Daraat Izza, north Syria.<sup>285</sup>
- **February 2-3, 2018:** Civilians in the rebel-held town of Binnish protest against HTS, tearing down the group's flag and replacing it with the Free Syrian Army flag after accusing the group of not doing enough to deter regime advances. HTS fighters kill one civilian in the ensuing clashes.<sup>286</sup>
- **February 3, 2018:** HTS shoots down a Russian Su-25 plane over Idlib and kill the pilot after he opens fire on them with his sidearm.<sup>287</sup>
- **February 20, 2018:** HTS launches wide-scale attacks on Jabhat Tahrir Suriya (JTS), the new rebel group formed two days prior through the merger of Nour al-Din al-Zenki and Ahrar al-Sham. On February 23 HTS seizes two villages in Idlib while losing one village in Aleppo.<sup>288</sup>

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- **March 1, 2018:** HTS kills several JTS fighters and takes control of the towns of Maaret Misrin, al-Tawame, Kafer Halab, Miznaz, al-Qanater checkpoint, reef al-Mouhandeen, Telaad, Termanin, Zaradna, Hazre, Deir Hasan, and Kafer Yahmoul in Idlib. The group is accused of releasing recently captured ISIS fighters to fight against JTS.<sup>289</sup>
- **March 11, 2018:** HTS renews attacks against JTS towns following a 48-hour ceasefire. Several civilians are killed and wounded as HTS shells Basrton, Saadia, and A'jel in west Aleppo.<sup>290</sup>
- **March 22, 2018:** HTS renews its attacks on JTS held towns in west Aleppo countryside with heavy weapons, including tanks and artillery, wounding several civilians.<sup>291</sup>
- **April 1, 2018:** HTS temporarily detains the negotiating committee of JTS as its convoys enter Idlib city to negotiated a ceasefire between the two groups.<sup>292</sup>
- **April 6, 2018:** HTS and JTS attack each other with heavy weapons in the areas of Ariha and Maarat al-Nu'man, Idlib.<sup>293</sup>
- **April 7, 2018:** HTS and JTS reach a one-week ceasefire under mediation from Faylaq al-Sham, ending the 49-day bout of infighting.<sup>294</sup>
- **April 15, 2018:** HTS launches a new wave of attacks against JTS, capturing the strategic towns of Murek and Khan Sheikhoun along with 11 other villages in southern Idlib.<sup>295</sup>
- **April 28, 2018:** HTS arrests media activist Ahmed al-Akras in Darkoush, Idlib for unknown reasons.<sup>296</sup>
- **April 30, 2018:** HTS releases Ahrar al-Sham's commander, Abu Azzam Saraqib and six others after holding the men for eight months.<sup>297</sup>
- **May 28, 2018:** HTS arrests 30 internally displaced persons (IDPs), who recently arrived in Salqin, Idlib, accusing them of being ISIS members. The IDPs arrived from formerly ISIS-held neighborhoods in southern Damascus.<sup>298</sup>
- **May 29, 2018:** HTS kills one and arrests eight men it accuses of being ISIS members in Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib.<sup>299</sup>
- **June 5, 2018:** HTS attacks regime forces in Tel Sultan, Idlib, alongside al-Qaeda affiliate Hurras al-Din.<sup>300</sup>
- **June 24, 2018:** HTS arrests Syrian journalist Mohammed Fadl al-Janoudi in northern Latakia.<sup>301</sup>
- **July 13, 2018:** HTS finds and arrests the head of security for ISIS cells in Idlib and beheads him.<sup>302</sup>
- **July 30, 2018:** HTS arrests three people in Idlib accused of being regime spies.<sup>303</sup>
- **August 3, 2018:** HTS arrests 17 people in Idlib accused of promoting reconciliation with the Syrian regime or supporting ISIS.<sup>304</sup>
- **August 8, 2018:** HTS arrests 30 people accused of promoting reconciliation with the Syrian regime in southern Idlib.<sup>305</sup>
- **September 18, 2018:** HTS arrests three activists in al-Dana, Idlib. HTS also arrests two ISIS commanders hiding in Idlib. These arrests follow a series of HTS raids on ISIS hideouts that led to the executions of more than 80 ISIS fighters.<sup>306</sup>
- **September 22, 2018:** HTS arrests two activists and a third unknown man in southern Idlib.<sup>307</sup>
- **October 5, 2018:** HTS attacks Nour al-Din al-Zenki's headquarters in the west Aleppo town of Kaffar Halab and then shoots at civilians protesting their actions, killing three. Officials from Zenki and the National Liberation Front condemn HTS's actions and withdraw from the town "to prevent further clashes."<sup>308</sup>
- **November 2, 2018:** HTS joins the National Liberation Front (NLF) in retaliatory shelling of regime positions around Idlib after regime shelling kills 10 civilians.<sup>309</sup>
- **November 13, 2018:** HTS launches rockets at regime positions in Khan Touman, south Aleppo. HTS also raids the

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house of an FSA Free Idlib Army fighter in Kafr Bel, seizing his weapons and ammunition.<sup>310</sup>

- **November 22, 2018:** HTS arrests several protestors in Saraqib, Idlib, who are angry with the quality of education provided in the city. On the same day, HTS arrests several members of the Idlib City local council and raids their homes.<sup>311</sup>
- **November 24, 2018:** HTS security forces fire on protestors in Idlib City with live bullets. There are no fatalities.<sup>312</sup>
- **December 3, 2018:** HTS fighters kill a child while storming the Ahrar al-Sham-controlled villages of Jadriyat and Ibn Gharbi in Idlib.<sup>313</sup>
- **December 4, 2018:** HTS seizes the village of Zeizoun, west Hama, from Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>314</sup>
- **December 14, 2018:** HTS attacks and kills a groups of regime soldiers with an anti-tank guided missile in southern Aleppo.<sup>315</sup>
- **December 22, 2018:** HTS fighters kill a child when they fire on a passenger bus in northern Idlib.<sup>316</sup>
- **January 1, 2019:** HTS seizes most of Daraat Izza and at least three other towns from Nour al-Din al-Zenki as tensions escalate between the two factions. Two civilians are killed by HTS gunfire during the capture of the city.<sup>317</sup>
- **January 2, 2019:** HTS captures the rest of Daraat Izza and four more towns from al-Zenki in western Aleppo while other members of the NLF engage in clashes with HTS in southern Idlib, capturing one town from HTS.<sup>318</sup>
- **January 3, 2019:** HTS continues to advance on al-Zenki-held towns in western Aleppo, successfully splitting al-Zenki's territory in two. Fighting between HTS and NLF factions in Idlib intensifies, especially around the Jabal Zawayah area.<sup>319</sup>
- **January 4, 2019:** HTS captures the important Regiment 111 base along with seven major towns in western Aleppo from NLF. Fighting between HTS and NLF continues in southern Idlib and HTS arrests two commanders from the FSA Jaish al-Nasr in Khan Sheikhou.<sup>320</sup>
- **January 5, 2019:** HTS captures the final Nour al-Din al-Zenki stronghold in western Aleppo as the remnants of the group evacuate to Turkish-held Afrin. HTS also besieges the neutral town of Atarib, shelling it intensely, and captures three localities from NLF in southern Idlib.<sup>321</sup>
- **January 6, 2019:** HTS captures the town of Atarib, expelling members of the local armed factions to northern Aleppo, and closes three of the border crossings between Idlib and Afrin. HTS now controls all of rebel-held west Aleppo.<sup>322</sup>
- **January 7, 2019:** HTS seizes the village of Hazano, Idlib, from local factions and places it under the control of its Salvation Government.<sup>323</sup>
- **January 8, 2019:** HTS attacks Ahrar al-Sham in the Sahl al-Ghab area of north Hama and takes control of 16 villages and towns in north Hama and south Idlib.<sup>324</sup>
- **January 9, 2019:** Ahrar al-Sham surrenders all of its land in the Sahl al-Ghab to HTS and evacuates its fighters to north Aleppo.<sup>325</sup>
- **January 10, 2019:** The Free Idlib Police announce their dissolution after HTS raids one of their headquarters in the village of Al-Ghadafa.<sup>326</sup>
- **January 18, 2019:** HTS releases a video showing the execution of four men accused of belonging to ISIS.<sup>327</sup>
- **March 2, 2019:** HTS executes 10 men in Idlib, who are accused of belonging to ISIS.<sup>328</sup>

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**Designations:**

**Designations by the U.S. Government:**



December 10, 2012: The Department of State designates the Nusra Front as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (under Executive Order 13224).<sup>329</sup>

May 14, 2014: The Department of the Treasury designates the Nusra Front as a Specially Designated National.<sup>330</sup>

May 31, 2018: The Department of State amends its listing of Nusra Front to include Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as an alias.<sup>331</sup>

**Designations by Foreign Governments and Organizations:**



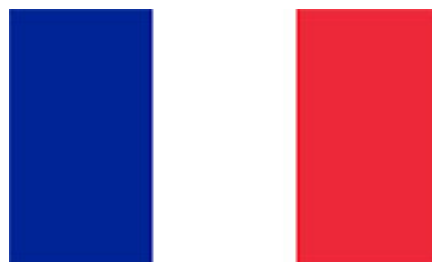
European Union— listed the Nusra Front as a sanctioned group of persons, groups, and entities on May 28, 2014.<sup>332</sup>



Australia— listed the Nusra Front as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on June 23, 2013.<sup>333</sup>



Canada—listed the Nusra Front as a terrorist entity on November 7, 2013.<sup>334</sup>



France—listed the Nusra Front as a terrorist entity on May 30, 2013.<sup>335</sup>

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New Zealand—listed the Nusra Front as an organization associated with Al-Qaeda on May 15, 2013.<sup>336</sup>



Russia—listed the Nusra Front as a terrorist group on December 29, 2014.<sup>337</sup>



Saudi Arabia—listed the Nusra Front as a terrorist group on March 7, 2014.<sup>338</sup>



Turkey—listed the Nusra Front as a terrorist organization on June 13, 2014.<sup>339</sup>



United Arab Emirates—listed the Nusra Front as a terrorist organization on November 15, 2014.<sup>340</sup>



United Nations—listed the Nusra Front as an entity associated with Al-Qaeda on May 30, 2013.<sup>341</sup>



United Kingdom—listed the Nusra Front as a foreign terrorist group on July 19, 2013.<sup>342</sup>

<sup>329</sup> Department of State, Public Notice, "In the Matter of Amendment of the Designation of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, aka Jam'at al Tawhid wa'al-Jihad, aka The Monotheism and Jihad Group, aka The al-Zarqawi Network, aka al-Tawhid, aka Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad alRafidayn, aka The Organization of alJihad's Base of Operations in Iraq, aka al-Qaida of Jihad in Iraq, aka al-Qaida in Iraq, aka al-Qaida in Mesopotamia, aka al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka al-Qaida of the Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka al-Qaida of Jihad Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka al-Qaida Group of Jihad in Iraq, aka al-Qaida Group of Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka The Organization of Jihad's Base in the Country of the Two Rivers, aka The Organization Base of Jihad/ Country of the Two Rivers, aka The Organization of al-Jihad's Base in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka The Organization Base of Jihad/ Mesopotamia, aka The Organization of al-Jihad's Base of Operations in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka Tanzeem qa'idat al Jihad/Bildad al Raafidaini, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization pursuant to Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act; To include the aliases Al-Nusrah Front, Jabhat al-Nusrah, Jabhet al-Nusra, The Victory Front, Al Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant, Public Notice 8104," Federal Register 77, no. 238 (December 11, 2012): 73732, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-12-11/pdf/2012-29870.pdf> [302]; Department of State, Public Notice, "In the Matter of the Amendment of



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the Designation of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, aka Jam'at al Tawhid wa'al-Jihad, aka The Monotheism and Jihad Group, aka The al-Zarqawi Network, aka al-Tawhid, aka Tanzim Qa'adat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, aka The Organization of al-Jihad's Base of Operations in Iraq, aka al-Qaida of Jihad in Iraq, aka al-Qaida in Iraq, aka al-Qaida in Mesopotamia, aka al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka al-Qaida of the Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka al-Qaida of Jihad Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka al-Qaida Group of Jihad in Iraq, aka al-Qaida Group of Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka The Organization of Jihad's Base in the Country of the Two Rivers, aka The Organization Base of Jihad/Country of the Two Rivers, aka The Organization of al-Jihad's Base in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka The Organization Base of Jihad/Mesopotamia, aka The Organization of al-Jihad's Base of Operations in the Land of the Two Rivers, aka Tanzeem qa'adat al Jihad/Bildad al Raafidaini, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity pursuant to Executive Order 13224; To include the aliases Al-Nusra Front, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jabhet al-Nusra, The Victory Front, Al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant, Public Notice 8105," Federal Register 77, no. 238 (December 11, 2012): 73732, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-12-11/pdf/2012-29870.pdf> [302].

<sup>330</sup> "Kingpin Act Designations and Updates; Counter Terrorism Designations and Updates; Kingpin Act Designations Removals - Special Designated Nationals Update," U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, May 15, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20140514.aspx> [303].

<sup>331</sup> "Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of al-Nusra Front," U.S. Department of State, May 31, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/05/282880.htm> [304].

<sup>332</sup> "Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 583/2014 of 28 May 2014," Official Journal of the European Union, May 29, 2014, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014R0583&rid=2> [305].

<sup>333</sup> "Jabhat al-Nusra," Australian National Security, accessed on January 29, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Jabhatal-Nusra.aspx> [306].

<sup>334</sup> "Currently Listed Entities," Public Safety Canada, accessed December 21, 2014, <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrtr/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-eng.aspx#2049> [307].

<sup>335</sup> "Liste Terroriste Unique au 23 Décembre 2014," Trésor Direction Générale, accessed on December 25, 2014, <http://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/File/409144> [308].

<sup>336</sup> "Designated Individuals and Organisations," New Zealand Policy, November 26, 2014, <http://www.police.govt.nz/sites/default/files/publications/designated-entities-26-11-2014.pdf> [12].

<sup>337</sup> "Supreme Court bans Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in Russia as terrorist organizations," Tass Russian News Agency, December 29, 2014, <http://itar-tass.com/en/russia/769731> [309].

<sup>338</sup> "Saudi Arabia Designates Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Group," Reuters, March 7, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/07/us-saudi-security-idUSBREA260SM20140307> [310].

<sup>339</sup> "Turkey lists al-Nusra Front as terrorist organization," Hurriyet Daily News, June 3, 2014, <http://www.hurriyettailynews.com/turkey-lists-al-nusra-front-as-terrorist-organization.aspx?pageID=238&nID=67322&NewsCatID=359> [311].

<sup>340</sup> "UAE Cabinet Approves List of Designated Terrorist Organisations, Groups," Emirates News Agency, November 15, 2014, <http://www.wam.ae/en/news/emirates-international/1395272478814.html> [312].

<sup>341</sup> "Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends Entry of One Entity on Its Sanctions List," United Nations Security Council, May 30, 2013, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc11019.doc.htm> [313].

<sup>342</sup> "UK bans Syria's Al-Qaida-Linked Nusra Front," Associated Press, July 19, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/uk-bans-syrias-al-qaida-linked-nusra-front> [314]; "Proscribed Terrorist Organisations," Britain's Home Office, last modified January 23, 2015, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/380939/ProscribedOrganisations.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380939/ProscribedOrganisations.pdf) [315].



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### *Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)*

#### Associations:

#### Ties to Extremist Entities:



Al-Qaeda [2]

The Nusra Front has a long and proven history of serving as al-Qaeda's loyal affiliate in Syria. In July 2016, however, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri released an audio statement giving the Nusra Front formal permission to break ties with al-Qaeda if the link was "conflicting with [the Nusra Front's] unity and working as one body."<sup>343</sup> Hours later, Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Golani formally severed ties with al-Qaeda's central command.<sup>344</sup> Analysts have long surmised that a formal, or at least artificial, break from al-Qaeda could allow the Nusra Front the opportunity to attract more funding from Gulf states, consolidate local support, and present itself as a legitimate insurgent group in Syria.<sup>345</sup> Even as the Nusra Front formally declared its independence from al-Qaeda, the group thanked al-Qaeda's leadership for giving "priority to the interests of the people of Al-Sham, their Jihad, [and] their revolution."<sup>346</sup>

Yet recent insights have brought into question the artificiality of the Nusra Front's break from al-Qaeda. According to al-Qaeda scholar Cole Bunzel, there has been a "profound controversy in jihadi circles surrounding the nature of [HTS], which some argue has lost its way."<sup>347</sup> Among the many critics of HTS is al-Qaeda propagandist [Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi](#) [316]. In November 2016, Maqdisi withdrew his support for the Nusra Front's break from al-Qaeda, stating that his and Zawahiri's approval came only on the condition that any such break would be a "superficial step."<sup>348</sup> Instead, Maqdisi claims that the Nusra Front's leadership continued to deviate from al-Qaeda's central tenets, stating that they "stayed the course till they made it a real breaking of ties" from al-Qaeda.<sup>349</sup> Maqdisi and other al-Qaeda hardliners have denounced HTS's outreach to secular and moderate Islamist rebel factions.<sup>350</sup>

For years before the announcement, however, the Nusra Front had reaffirmed its allegiance to Zawahiri, even in the face of competing claims to its leadership. In April 2013, after Baghdadi unilaterally claimed that the Nusra Front answered to his al-Qaeda in Iraq group (now ISIS), Golani broke ties with ISIS and affirmed its allegiance to al-Qaeda central.<sup>351</sup>



ISIS [1]

The Nusra Front was allegedly formed as an extension of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI, now ISIS), and received a monthly salary from AQI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>352</sup> The relationship between the groups deteriorated in April 2013, when Baghdadi unilaterally announced a merger between the two groups.<sup>353</sup> The two have since engaged in violent clashes, vying for control over rebel-held territory.

<sup>343</sup> Reuters, "Al Qaeda tells Syrian branch Nusra Front it can drop links," Thomas Reuters Foundation News, July 28, 2016, <http://news.trust.org/item/20160728110801-og117> [26].

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<sup>344</sup> Orient News, "Nusra Front, Abu Mohammed Joulani commander officially announced the disengagement from al-Qaeda and the establishment of a new entity," YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oossAtDYbrs> [28]; Dania Akkad, "Nusra confirms split with al-Qaeda 'to protect the Syrian revolution,'" Middle East Eye, July 28, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/nusra-front-announces-official-split-al-qaeda-520293064> [16].

<sup>345</sup> Bassem Mroue, "AP EXPLAINS: Why Syria's al-Qaida may be considering a split," Associated Press, July 27, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/d10d759d35824b70b47501d85f0ff8c3/ap-explains-why-syrias-al-qaeda-may-be-considering-split> [29]; Reuters, "Al Qaeda tells Syrian branch Nusra Front it can drop links," Thomas Reuters Foundation News, July 28, 2016, <http://news.trust.org/item/20160728110801-og117> [26].

<sup>346</sup> Orient News, "Nusra Front, Abu Mohammed Joulani commander officially announced the disengagement from al-Qaeda and the establishment of a new entity," YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oossAtDYbrs> [28].

<sup>347</sup> Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," Jihadica, March 29, 2017, <http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad/> [317].

<sup>348</sup> Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," Jihadica, March 29, 2017, <http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad/> [317].

<sup>349</sup> Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," Jihadica, March 29, 2017, <http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad/> [317].

<sup>350</sup> Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," Jihadica, March 29, 2017, <http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad/> [317];

Cole Bunzel, "Abandoning al-Qaida: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Sami al-Uraydi," Jihadica, May 12, 2017, <http://www.jihadica.com/abandoning-al-qaeda/> [27].

<sup>351</sup> "Syria Crisis: Al-Nusra Pledges Allegiance to Al-Qaeda," BBC News, April 10, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22095099> [38].

<sup>352</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Nusrah Front Emerge as Rebranded Single Entity," *Long War Journal*, April 9, 2013, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/04/the\\_emir\\_of\\_al\\_qaeda.php#ixzz3Mw15S2jb](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/04/the_emir_of_al_qaeda.php#ixzz3Mw15S2jb) [36].

<sup>353</sup> "Syria Crisis: Al-Nusra Pledges Allegiance to Al-Qaeda," BBC News, April 10, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22095099> [38].

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**Media Coverage:**

*Qatar and the Nusra Front*

Qatar stands accused of supporting and funding the Nusra Front.<sup>354</sup> The Qatari government helped broker the release of 13 nuns kidnapped by the group in December 2013. It brokered the August 2014 release of American hostage Peter Theo Curtis, as well as the September 2014 release of 45 U.N. peacekeepers.

On the release of the 45 U.N. peacekeepers, Qatar's state-owned Al Jazeera called the peacekeepers "Fijian soldiers" that were kidnapped and "held" for two weeks by the Nusra Front. The article emphasizes that the peacekeepers were reportedly in good condition and notes, "A UN spokesman said in New York on Thursday no ransom had been requested for the Fijian peacekeepers and none was paid."<sup>355</sup>

Nonetheless, rumors that Qatar paid the group a ransom fee soon circulated. Qatar's foreign minister denied the claims,<sup>356</sup> but Israel's Channel 2 news station released video footage allegedly showing that Qatar paid the group \$25 million in ransom.<sup>357</sup>

Al Jazeera did not cover any follow-ups to the story, including the Channel 2 report and the foreign minister's statement. The Al Jazeera article regarding the release of the peacekeepers ends by highlighting Qatar's seemingly helpful role in the hostage release process: "US officials have said that Qatar played a critical role in persuading the Nusra Front to free American journalist Peter Theo Curtis last month, whom the front had been holding hostage since 2012."<sup>358</sup>

<sup>354</sup> Jay Solomon, "U.S.-Qatar Alliance Strains Coalition Against Islamic State," Wall Street Journal, October 10, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-qatar-alliance-strains-coalition-against-islamic-state-1412983181> [318].

<sup>355</sup> "Syria Rebels Free UN Peacekeepers," Al Jazeera, September 11, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/syria-rebels-free-un-peacekeepers-201491175643793356.html> [319].

<sup>356</sup> Daniel Bases, "Qatar's Foreign Minister Denies Paying Ransoms to Militant Groups," Reuters, September 29, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/30/us-mideast-crisis-qatar-idUSKCN0HP02720140930> [320].

<sup>357</sup> "Report: UN Had Qatar Pay Off Al-Qaida Fighters for Release of Fiji Peacekeepers," Haaretz, October 11, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.620228> [87].

<sup>358</sup> "Syria Rebels Free UN Peacekeepers," Al Jazeera, September 11, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/syria-rebels-free-un-peacekeepers-201491175643793356.html> [319].

*The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on the Nusra Front*

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) is a pro-opposition monitoring group. A score of mainstream Western and Arabic media outlets rely on SOHR for on-site data. Although the monitoring group is pro-opposition, it tends to make a noticeable distinction between the Nusra Front and other rebel groups, and has acknowledged the group's links to al-Qaeda as far back as November 2012.<sup>359</sup> The group frequently uses descriptors like "radical"<sup>360</sup> and "extremist,"<sup>361</sup> in addition to "al-Qaeda-linked"<sup>362</sup> and "al-Qaeda loyalist," when describing the Nusra Front.<sup>363</sup>

<sup>359</sup> "Syria Rebels Take Swathe of East but Clash with Kurd Militia," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, November 23, 2012, [http://syriahr.com/en/2012/11/Syria\\_rebels\\_take\\_swathe\\_of\\_east\\_but\\_clash\\_with\\_kurd\\_militia/](http://syriahr.com/en/2012/11/Syria_rebels_take_swathe_of_east_but_clash_with_kurd_militia/) [321].

<sup>360</sup> "Friends of Syria Heading to Morocco to Boost Opposition," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 11, 2012, [http://syriahr.com/en/2012/12/Friends\\_of\\_Syria\\_heading\\_to\\_Morocco\\_to\\_boost\\_opposition/](http://syriahr.com/en/2012/12/Friends_of_Syria_heading_to_Morocco_to_boost_opposition/) [322].

<sup>361</sup> "Syrian Sectarian Fighting Spills into Lebanon," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 11, 2012, [http://syriahr.com/en/2012/12/Syrian\\_sectarian\\_fighting\\_spills\\_into\\_Lebanon/](http://syriahr.com/en/2012/12/Syrian_sectarian_fighting_spills_into_Lebanon/) [133].

<sup>362</sup> "Syria Rebels Hope Arms Will Flow to New Fighter Command," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 11, 2012, [http://syriahr.com/en/2012/12/Syria\\_rebels\\_hope\\_arms\\_will\\_flow\\_to\\_new\\_fighter\\_command/](http://syriahr.com/en/2012/12/Syria_rebels_hope_arms_will_flow_to_new_fighter_command/) [323].

<sup>363</sup> "Syria Rebels Take Swathe of East but Clash with Kurd Militia," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, November 23, 2012, [http://syriahr.com/en/2012/11/Syria\\_rebels\\_take\\_swathe\\_of\\_east\\_but\\_clash\\_with\\_kurd\\_militia/](http://syriahr.com/en/2012/11/Syria_rebels_take_swathe_of_east_but_clash_with_kurd_militia/) [321].

*The Nusra Front Pledges Allegiance to Al-Qaeda*



## *Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)*

On April 10, 2013, Nusra Front leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani released a statement rejecting Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claim that al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Nusra Front had merged. In the statement, al-Golani pledged his allegiance to al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

*The New York Times* covered al-Baghdadi's announcement, but did not immediately address al-Golani's response, including his public pledge of fealty to Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>364</sup> *The Wall Street Journal* covered both al-Baghdadi's claim and al-Golani's response in one article titled, "Al Qaeda Declares Stake in Syrian Rebellion." Its author, Nour Malas, predicted that al-Qaeda's now-open involvement in Syria would bring a schism to the rebel movement.<sup>365</sup>

Al Jazeera reported on al-Baghdadi's April 9 declaration,<sup>366</sup> as well as al-Golani's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>367</sup> The article on al-Golani's response seemed to cover the announcement with a number of qualifiers: "A man claiming to be the head of a key group fighting the Syrian government has purportedly pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda..."<sup>368</sup> In covering the Nusra Front's declaration of allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, CNN seemed to temper al-Golani's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda by emphasizing that al-Golani had rejected the merger with al-Qaeda in Iraq and stated his intention to continue cooperating with other rebel groups. The article opens: "A Syrian jihadist group appears to have pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda's leader—but also stressed it can achieve a Syrian Islamic state only by working with other rebels, including secularists. The group, al-Nusra Front, also denies an earlier claim that it has merged with Iraq's al-Qaeda affiliate, according to an audio message purported to be from al-Nusra general commander Abu Muhammad al-Joulani."<sup>369</sup>

<sup>364</sup> Hania Mourtada and Rick Gladstone, "Iraq's Branch of Al Qaeda Merges With Syria Jihadists," *New York Times*, April 9, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/world/middleeast/Iraq-and-Syria-jihadists-combine.html> [324].

<sup>365</sup> Nour Malas, "Al Qaeda Declares Stake in Syrian Rebellion," *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323550604578412280884558740> [325].

<sup>366</sup> "Iraqi al-Qaeda and Syrian group 'merge,'" *Al Jazeera*, April 9, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/04/201349194856244589.html> [326].

<sup>367</sup> "Syria Group 'Pledges Allegiance' to Al-Qaeda," *Al Jazeera*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/04/2013410114851988704.html> [327].

<sup>368</sup> "Syria Group 'Pledges Allegiance' to Al-Qaeda," *Al Jazeera*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/04/2013410114851988704.html> [327].

<sup>369</sup> Saad Abedine and Jason Hanna, "Syrian Jihad Group Pledges Allegiance to Al Qaeda, Denies Merger," *CNN*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/10/world/meast/syria-al-nusra-front/index.html> [328].

### *Responses to U.S. Designation of the Nusra Front*

On December 10, 2012, the U.S. listed the Nusra Front as an alias for al-Qaeda in Iraq (now ISIS). The designation was met with a mixed response from Western and Arab media outlets. In the aftermath of the designation through December 2012, Al Jazeera published 14 articles that mentioned the Nusra Front. Seven of the articles qualified the U.S. designation by putting 'terrorist' or 'terrorist organization' in quotation marks.<sup>370</sup> Three referenced the designation without the quotation marks, while the remaining four did not reference the designation at all.<sup>371</sup> In an op-ed titled "The 'War on Terror' and the Arab Spring," Al Jazeera correspondent Mark Perry claimed that the U.S. designation reflects "a profound misunderstanding" of current events in the Arab world. Perry recommends that "Instead of being afraid, we should be filled with pride: These people are so dedicated to the idea of liberty that they're actually fighting for it."<sup>372</sup> *The New York Times* did not use quotation marks to describe the terrorist designation,<sup>373</sup> nor did *The Wall Street Journal*<sup>374</sup> or *The Washington Post*.<sup>375</sup>

In Time's first article covering the terrorist designation, the author put 'terrorist' in quotation marks while describing the designation.<sup>376</sup> The article's sub-headline states, "One of the most effective anti-Assad militias has just been designated a 'terrorist' organization by the U.S."<sup>377</sup>

<sup>370</sup> "Syria Rebels 'Seize Key Aleppo Army Base,'" *Al Jazeera*, December 11, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/20121210104312760502.html> [329]; "Scores Reportedly Killed in Syria's Hama," *Al Jazeera*,

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December 11, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/20121211102930540995.html> [330]; "Friends of Syria' Recognise Opposition," Al Jazeera, December 12, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212124541767116.html> [331]; "Scores Reportedly Killed in Syria's Hama," Al Jazeera, December 11, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212124541767116.html> [331]; "Syrians Back Al-Nusra Despite 'Terrorist' Tag," Al Jazeera, December 14, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2012/12/20121214164411696160.html> [332]; "Syrians Decry US Blacklisting of Rebel Group," Al Jazeera, December 15, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212157416500378.html> [333]; Mark Perry, "The 'War on Terror' and the Arab Spring," Al Jazeera, December 17, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/12/2012121674256897741.html> [334]; "Syria 'Secures Chemical Weapons Stockpile,'" Al Jazeera, December 23, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212221532021654.html> [335].

<sup>371</sup> Zeina Khodr, "Stalemate Stokes Anger at Rebels in Aleppo," Al Jazeera, December 11, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/12/20121211125010153551.html> [336]; "UN Says Syria Conflict Is 'Overtly Sectarian,'" Al Jazeera, December 11, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012122015525051365.html> [337]; "Brahimi Meets Syria's Assad Amid Violence," Al Jazeera, December 24, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/20121224101635166809.html> [338]; "Children 'Killed' in Syria Army Tank Attack," Al Jazeera, December 26, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/20121226102221539127.html> [339].

<sup>372</sup> Mark Perry, "The 'War on Terror' and the Arab Spring," Al Jazeera, December 17, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/12/2012121674256897741.html> [334].

<sup>373</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard, "U.S. Places Militant Syrian Rebel Group on List of Terrorist Organizations," New York Times, December 10, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/11/world/middleeast/us-designates-syrian-al-nusra-front-as-terrorist-group.html> [340]; "Al Qaeda in Syria," New York Times, December 10, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/11/opinion/al-qaeda-in-syria.html> [341]; Mark Landler, Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard, "U.S. Will Grant Recognition to Syrian Rebels, Obama Says," New York Times, December 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/12/world/middleeast/united-states-involvement-in-syria.html> [342]; Mark Landler and Michael R. Gordon, "Obama Says U.S. Will Recognize Syrian Rebels," New York Times, December 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/12/us/obama-says-us-will-recognize-syrian-rebels.html> [343]; Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Syria Uses Scud Missiles in New Effort to Push Back Rebels," The New York Times, December 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/13/world/middleeast/syria-war-developments-assad.html> [344].

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**Rhetoric:**



[358]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, January 14, 2019](#) [358]

"We consider the PKK to be an enemy of this revolution. It controls areas inhabited by large numbers of Sunni Arabs...We are in favor of this region being liberated from the PKK ... We would not stand in the way of an operation against an enemy of the revolution."<sup>378</sup>



[359]

[Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali, January 15, 2019](#) [359]

"HTS can't strive to obstruct the liberation of Sunni Muslims [east of the Euphrates] from the rule of the atheists [YPG/SDF] even if that is at hands of the secularists [Turkey] less far from the religion."<sup>379</sup>



[360]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, August 22, 2018](#) [360]

"The weapons of the revolution and jihad... are a red line on which concessions are unacceptable, and they will never be put on the negotiations table...We urge our people in Aleppo to remain steadfast. The mujahideen will not fail you."<sup>380</sup>



[361]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, August 2018](#) [361]

"The red line [ceasefire deal between Turkey and Russia] is never negotiable and will never be put on the negotiating table."<sup>381</sup>



[362]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, January 2018](#) [362]

"[We must engage in] a war of ideas, a war of minds, a war of wills, a war of perseverance."<sup>382</sup>



[363]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, July 28, 2016](#) [363]

"This new organization [the Nusra Front, renamed the Levantine Conquest Front] aims to fulfill the following: 1. Work toward establishing the religion of Allah (swt), having his shariah (law) as legislation..."<sup>383</sup>



[364]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, July 28, 2016](#) [364]

"[We will continue] fulfilling the requests of the people of Al Sham to expose the deceptions of the International community, the leaders being the U.S. and Russia..."<sup>384</sup>



[365]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, July 28, 2016](#) [365]

"[In formally splitting from al-Qaeda, we are not] compromising or sacrificing our solid beliefs or laxity in the necessity of the continuity of the Jihad of Al-Sham."<sup>385</sup>

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[366]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, July 28, 2016](#) [366]

"We thank [al-Qaeda's leadership for their] proper assessment of the general benefits [of] the Jihad. Their noble stance will be recorded in the annals of history. Their blessed leadership has, and shall continue to be, an exemplar of putting the needs of the community and their higher interests before the interest of any individual group. They have practically implemented the words of Sheikh Osama bin Laden (may Allah have mercy on him)."<sup>386</sup>



[367]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, July 28, 2016](#) [367]

"We thank [al-Qaeda's leadership] for their stance, whereby they gave priority to the interests of the people of Al-Sham [Syria], their [Syrian] Jihad, their revolution."<sup>387</sup>



[368]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, July 28, 2016](#) [368]

"We would like to thank... [leader of al-Qaeda] Dr. Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri and his vice, Sheikh Ahmad Hasan Abu Al-Khayr especially, may Allah protect them."<sup>388</sup>



[369]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, July 28, 2016](#) [369]

"We would like to thank our brothers, the commanders of al-Qa'eda."<sup>389</sup>



[370]

[Abu Muhammad al-Golani, June 3, 2015](#) [370]

"We will be the first soldiers for an Islamic government that implements Shariah."<sup>390</sup>



[371]

[Abu Sulayman, May 8, 2015](#) [371]

"Jihad is not in need of us, we are in dire need of jihad."<sup>391</sup>



[372]

[Abu Sulayman, May 2015](#) [372]

"I do believe that our affiliation with a global jihad (al-Qa'ida) is more positive than negative."<sup>392</sup>



[Abu Ahmed, December 2012](#) [373]

"Our faith is very strong and we're not afraid of death, of becoming martyrs. This is what drives us, what makes us brave. We will not stop until the regime falls. And I advise all my people to be good Muslims to help win this war."<sup>393</sup>



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[373]



[Abu Ahmed, On al-Qaeda, December 2012](#) [374]

"I like them because they are mujaheddin who want to apply Sharia."<sup>394</sup>

[374]



[Abu Ahmed, December 2012](#) [375]

"We are underdeveloped now because we left the path of Allah. Perhaps this is why this war is so cruel: as a punishment for our sins."<sup>395</sup>

[375]



[Abu Ahmed, December 2012](#) [376]

"Our first goal is to get rid of Assad. Then we want a state where the Quran is the only source of law. Sharia is the right path for all humanity - all other laws make people unhappy."<sup>396</sup>

[376]



[Abu Ahmed, December 2012](#) [377]

"We don't want to leave modernity behind. We will not get out of our cars and ride donkeys from now on. We simply want our judges to apply Sharia [law] and not the civil code."<sup>397</sup>

[377]



[The Nusra Front Media Wing, January 2015](#) [378]

"As a result of the deterioration of security in Lebanon, you will hear about surprises regarding the fate of the prisoners with us."<sup>398</sup>

[378]



[Abu Lokman, Nusra Front Senior Commander, January 2013](#) [379]

"When the US placed us on their list of terrorists, it did us no harm, it elevated our reputation. The Syrian people hate the American government. Thanks be to God, we consider this a medal of honour."<sup>399</sup>

[379]



[The Nusra Front Statement, August 3, 2012](#) [380]

"Perhaps this operation [kidnapping and killing of Syrian state television presenter Mohammed al-Saeed] and others will serve as an example to all who support this tyrannical regime, so that they may repent to God. Otherwise, the swords of the mujahideen will cut off their heads and purify the Levant (Syria) from their obscenity."<sup>400</sup>

[380]



[The Nusra Front Statement, June 30, 2012](#) [381]

"Let no one condemn us for this operation [attack at Syrian state television building, killing seven] and say it is not proper to attack the media or media people, especially since we had already presented that this lying channel fights and may be even more

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[381] effective than military power, and it was the one that was glorifying the tyrant day and night."<sup>401</sup>



[Nusra Front Statement, June 2012](#) [382]

"God enabled the lions of the east in Deir al-Zor... to get the necks of a group of dogs from the security agencies and the thugs. Thirteen of those criminals were detained ... each of them faced his end in the worst killing and the very worst fate."<sup>402</sup>

[382]



[Abu Adnan, Nusra Front Shariah Law Official, Date Unknown](#) [383]

"We detained them [unarmed regime loyalists], lined them up and killed them. They were fighters fighting us."<sup>403</sup>

[383]



[Sami al-Oraidi, Tweet, June 29, 2014](#) [384]

"Whoever heard [ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-] Adnani's speech announcing the Caliphate, will actually find it to be a war announcement on the Muslim and not Annon about the Caliphitte." (Tweet)<sup>404</sup>

[384]



[Sami al-Oraidi, Tweet, June 29, 2014](#) [385]

ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad "Al-'Adnani does not know what comes out of his head." (Tweet)<sup>405</sup>

[385]



[Sami al-Oraidi, May 19, 2014](#) [386]

"God willing, we will not concede Sharia. It is either Sharia or martyrdom."<sup>406</sup>

[386]



[Sami al-Oraidi, May 19, 2014](#) [387]

"Most battalions on the ground are fighting to establish Sharia, and they are all our brothers even if their names are different."<sup>407</sup>

[387]



[Sami al-Oraidi, May 19, 2014](#) [388]

"As for those who want a secular state, they are a minority, and we kindly ask for them to return to their senses, and be wary of what has happened in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya."<sup>408</sup>

[388]



[Sami al-Oraidi, May 19, 2014](#) [389]

"Life in mountains and caves under Sharia, is better than a life in palaces under else."<sup>409</sup>

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[389]



[Sami al-Oraidi, May 19, 2014](#) [390]

“He who is too embarrassed, in writing or in speech, to admit to wanting Sharia is in no state to effectively govern such a state.”<sup>410</sup>

[390]



[Sami al-Oraidi, May 19, 2014](#) [391]

“We say only say as Sheikh Al-Joulani said ‘People of the Levant, our lives for you, will be sacrificed.’”<sup>411</sup>

[391]



[Abu Sulayman, 2014](#) [392]

“The cowardly strikes of the US, planes roaring over our heads and drones spying on the Muslims will not deter us from our path.”<sup>412</sup>

[392]

<sup>378</sup> “PKK is ‘enemy’ of Syria revolution, says jihadist leader,” Rudaw, January 14, 2019, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/140120195> [393].

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<sup>380</sup> Alex Macdonald, “Syrian militant leader slams Turkey and defends evacuations in new video,” Middle East Eye, August 22, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-hayat-tahrir-sham-leader-slams-turkey-and-defends-evacuations-new-video-91127761> [395].

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<sup>388</sup> Orient News, “Nusra Front, Abu Mohammed Joulani commander officially announced the disengagement from al-Qaeda and the establishment of a new entity,” YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oossAtDYbrs> [28].

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