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In our June 14, 2016 paper, "Jabhat al-Nusra at Crossroads," a backgrounder for the Herzliya Conference Simulation: The Middle East after the Territorial Demise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, we evaluated that on the backdrop of the Russian involvement in Syria, the negotiations for a solution to the Syrian conflict, the threat of cooperation between Russia and the U.S against the group and the military blows that ISIS suffered in Syria and Iraq, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN - Al-Nusra Front) had to choose between three opposing options.¹

The foundation of a new Emirate: would represent a significant shift in Al-Qaeda (AQ) and JN strategy, would be a severe challenge for the caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi but could put the organization on a collision course with other rebel groups fighting the Assad regime.

In a May 2016 audio message the AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri said he was "proud" of Jabhat al-Nusra's work and announced his support to an "emirate" in Syria under the leadership of Abu Mohammad al-Julani.²

Leave Al-Qaeda: AQ has been concerned Jabhat al-Nusra could be persuaded by Gulf states like Qatar to sever ties with them and disband in return for aid, so al-Zawahiri may have felt the need to reassert central control.³

The two major armed Islamist groups fighting in Syria - Ahrar al-Sham and JN - worked together under the banner of Jaish al-Fatah, a coalition of Islamists groups who overran most of the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib in May 2015, but failed to merge into one group which could more effectively fight the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic State.⁴

The commander of Ahrar al-Sham called on JN to disengage from AQ as "any merging including al-Qaeda is just damage to the revolution, it harms the Syrian people and revolution."⁵ JN had been inquiring on whether its disengagement from AQ would halt operations against its militants and whether the attacks targeting the opposition would come to an end.

Jabhat al Nusra - ISIS alliance. The two jihadist groups share some goals but differ on their methods as JN present itself as a domestic Syrian group. Despite reports of a possible rapprochement between JN and ISIS, most of their actual fighting until the end of 2014 in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon has not been coordinated, and in fact these groups see each other as rivals.⁶

In April 2016, AQ leader al-Zawahiri urged militants in Syria to unite, despite his continued rejection of the rival ISIS and its proclaimed caliphate. Hamza, the son of AQ late founder Osama bin-Laden, has also urged jihadi militants in Syria to unite in an audio message posted online, claiming that the fight in the war-torn country paves the way to "liberating Palestine."⁷

The two groups could cooperate in terror attacks along the border with the Israeli Golan Heights in order to open up a new front and possibly move away from regional rivalry to bringing the fight to Western cities.

Jabhat al-Nusra at the Herzliya Conference Simulation game

ICT researchers Dr. Ely Karmon and Dr. Michael Barak played the role of JN at the simulation game.

In their evaluation JN's main goal is the demise of President Assad's regime, the implementation of the sharia law in Syria and the gradual attainment of a Syrian emirate in coordination with other jihadist and Islamist partners.

In case ISIS will be defeated militarily, JN will not unite with its decimated forces but would call its local fighters and individual militants to join JN ranks to continue the fight.

JN will refuse to negotiate under any condition with the Assad regime, will not participate at any international conference sponsored by the great powers and will fight Hezbollah, Iranian forces and Shia militias until their complete expulsion from Syria.

For JN, Syria is the gate for the conquest of Palestine and therefore there is need to keep the unity of the jihadist and Islamist forces.

The choice of Jabhat al-Nusra - Jabhat Fateh al-Sham

The head of JN Abu Mohamad al-Julani, declared on July 28, 2016, that his organization was breaking ties with al-Qaeda and changing its name to **Jabhat Fateh al-Sham** (Front for the Conquest of Syria) and expressed his gratitude to the "commanders of Al-Qaeda for having understood the need to break ties."⁸

Al-Julani made the announcement in a video, the first public pronouncement to show his face. "We have stopped operating under the name of Nusra Front and formed a new body ... This new formation has no ties with any foreign party," he said.⁹

He explained the step was being taken "to remove the excuse used by the international community -- spearheaded by America and Russia -- to bombard and displace Muslims in the Levant, that they are targeting the Nusra Front, which is associated with al-Qaeda".¹⁰

In his brief recording Al-Julani said the split from AQ was aimed at "protecting the Syrian revolution". He also pledged to unite ranks with other fighters in order to "liberate Syria from the oppressors". "We hope to form a unified body, based on the shariah (Islamic law), uniting the masses of the people of Al-Sham, liberating their lands, giving victory to their faith and upholding their testimony of faith," he said.¹¹

“We are forging a new path – a path for all Syrians, and all Muslims,” said Abu Mohammed Al Urdoni, the nom de guerre of a Jordanian operative within JN. “We are here to serve the people, protect the people, and liberate the people – not to rule them.”¹²

Actually, Julani’s wording in his announcement was nuanced and he never explicitly renounced or truly broke from al Qaeda. He praised al-Qaeda’s “blessed leadership” for faithfully following in the footsteps of Osama bin Laden. He mentioned his organization’s desire to lighten “the weight upon the shoulders of the people,” but “without compromising or sacrificing our solid beliefs.” Julani’s exact description of the split was that Jabhat Fath Al-Sham would have “no affiliation to any external [or foreign] entity.”¹³

Jabhat al-Nusra adopted the “traditional model” that Islamic groups like Hezbollah and Hamas used in the past in the Middle East. With its break from AQ, Nusra looks to win the hearts and minds of the Syrian people, building an Islamic society from the bottom -up through *dawa* activities providing basic services to earn residents’ trust. JN’s decision to stick to its grass-roots approach stands a better chance of embedding the organization into Syrian society for decades to come.

JN is also working to build coalitions with a number of other rebel groups in the Syrian war. So far it has been able to work with other factions such as Ahrar al-Sham and even Western-backed rebel groups like the Free Syrian Army, by prioritizing the fight against Assad over its own long term objectives. It is one of the dominant powers in north-western Syria and has a toehold in Aleppo, the country’s largest city.

Al-Qaeda and the parting

In April 2016, Ayman al-Zawahri urged militants in Syria to unite, despite his continued rejection of the rival ISIS and its proclaimed caliphate. “We have to want the unity of the Mujahedeen in Sham (Syria) so it will be liberated from the Russians and Western crusaders. My brothers ... the matter of unity is a matter of life or death for you. Either you unite to live as Muslims with dignity, or you bicker and separate and so are eaten one by one,” he said.¹⁴

In July 2016, AQ prepared the ground for the split in an online audio message. “We direct the leadership of al-Nusra Front to go ahead with what preserves the good of Islam and the Muslims, and protects the jihad of the Syrian people... We urge them to take the appropriate steps towards this matter,” Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr, a deputy of al-Zawahiri said.¹⁵

Finally, Ayman al-Zawahri told in an audio statement directed to JN that it could break organizational ties with al-Qaeda to preserve its unity and continue its battle in Syria. “You can sacrifice without hesitation these organizational and party ties if they conflict with your unity and working as one body....The brotherhood of Islam among us is stronger than any organizational affiliation ... Your unity and unification is more important to us than any organizational link.” al-Zawahri said.¹⁶

Conclusion

Since its emergence in January 2012 Jabhat al-Nusra is the most powerful faction in Syria's five-year conflict opposing both President Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic State militant group. Originally supported by ISIS, which controls swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq, it split from the hardline group in 2013.

Syria's opposition has always demanded JN to leave al-Qaeda, and its decision to break ties with AQ should lead to closer ties with other fighting factions in Syria. A larger coalition between the JN and other groups would then quickly and easily dismantle many of the U.S.-backed groups among the Syrian rebels.

Some in the Syrian opposition argue that U.S and Russian coordinated bombings against JN in Syria ultimately affect civilians and only boost Julani's appeal. The rebels face a hard choice: They may be worried about provoking U.S. air strikes if they defy its efforts, but Washington itself has done little to protect them against Russian strikes or jihadi groups.¹⁷

The powerful Ahrar al-Sham congratulated JN on the split and urged it to take measures to bring together all revolutionary groups into one structure. Ajnad al-Sham, another group fighting along al-Nusra as part of Jaish al-Fateh coalition, stated the split is in favor of the Syrian revolution and the group is willing to merge with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Islam Aloush, Jaish al-Islam spokesperson, another powerful Islamist group, stated that splitting from al-Qaeda is a good first step but not enough. "Unity between armed groups is a military necessity to achieve victory; however, there are many domestic and external obstacles which prevent such a step," he said.¹⁸

The exact nature of the relationship between Al-Qaeda and JN had been disputed. Al-Nusra has received significant funding, arms, and fighters from abroad. It has retained significant independence from central AQ leadership but still respected its word. It remains unclear what type of future relationship the new Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham will have with Al Qaeda.¹⁹

The split between Al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra is part of the competition between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri on the future and the leadership of the global jihad. It reflects a decentralized strategy of AQ's central leadership.

The defeat of ISIS inside Syria is likely to increase the capability and strength of JN.

Julani's rebranding comes on the backdrop of an anticipated agreement between Washington and Moscow, whereby they would co-ordinate military attacks on Jabhat al-Nusra.²⁰

It is unlikely that the new name will persuade Western powers and Russia that the group should no longer be considered a terrorist organization. The United States and its western allies fear that if it establishes territorial control it could use Syria as a base for attacking the West, as Osama bin-Laden did in Afghanistan. While Western powers are unlikely to change their assessment of the group, the break with al Qaeda could pave the way for greater support from Gulf States such as Qatar.

In Washington, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said the Obama administration is not expected to change its assessment of the group. "There continues to be increasing concern about Nusra Front's growing capacity for external operations that could threaten both the United States and Europe," he told reporters.²¹

For its part, a Russian Foreign Ministry commentary stated that attempts of Jabhat al-Nusra to paint itself differently by changing its name are vain, the group remains an illegal terrorist organization and the fight against it will continue until it is fully destroyed.²²

Notes

¹ Shaul Shay and Ely Karmon, "Jabhat al Nusra at Crossroads," *Herzeliya Conference website*, June 14, 2016, at http://www.herzeliyaconference.org/eng/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/JabhatalNusraatcrossroadShayKarmon2016.pdf.

² Nazeer Rida, "Al Qaeda Backs Al-Nusra Front on Establishing a Caliphate in Syria," *Asharq Alawsat*, May 9, 2016.

³ Matt Hunter, "Syria faces being over-run by TWO Islamic States as Al-Qaeda leader grants permission for the group to establish its own rival 'caliphate' to ISIS," *Mail Online*, May 9, 2016.

⁴ Raf Sanchez, "Al-Qaeda leader gives blessing for terror group to form own 'Islamic state' in Syria," *The Telegraph*, May 8, 2016.

⁵ "A leader of Ahrar al-Sham clarifies the integration initiatives calling for 'Al-Nusra' to disengage al-Qaeda," *El Dorar Al Shamia*, February 1, 2016.

⁶ For example see: "Security Council al Qaeda Sanctions Committee Adds Fourteen Individuals and Two Entities to its Sanctions List," United Nations SC/11575, September 23, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11575.doc.htm>

⁷ "Bin Laden's son Hamza urges militant unity in Syria," *Al Arabiya*, May 9, 2016.

⁸ "Al-Nusra chief in Syria announces break with Qaeda: Media," *Ahram Online*, July 28, 2016.

⁹ "Syria's Nusra Front says it is breaking ties with al Qaeda to avert attacks," *Reuters*, July 28, 2016.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Al-Qaeda and Syria branch split up," *AFP*, July 28, 2016.

¹² Taylor Luck, "Why Al Qaeda just got jilted in Syria," *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 29, 2016.

¹³ Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Nusrah Front rebrands itself as Jabhat Fath Al Sham," *The Long War Journal*, July 28, 2016.

¹⁴ "Al Qaeda chief tells Syrian rebels: Unite or die," *CBS News*, May 9, 2016.

¹⁵ "Al-Nusra chief in Syria announces split with Qaeda," *The Times of Israel*, July 28, 2016.

¹⁶ "Al Qaeda tells Syrian branch Nusra Front it can drop links," *Ahram Online*, July 28, 2016.

¹⁷ Erika Solomon, "Al-Nusra break from al-Qaeda seen as a strategic move," *FT.com*, July 30, 2016.

¹⁸ Haid Haid, "How Syrians View Nusra's Split from al-Qaeda," Atlantic Council website, August 3, 2016.

¹⁹ Taylor Luck, *Why Al Qaeda just got jilted in Syria*.

²⁰ See a leaked document published by *The Washington Post* on July 13, 2016, "Terms of Reference for the Joint Implementation Group," of a proposal that would pave the way for the US and Russia to cooperate against JN.

²¹ Liz Sly and Karen DeYoung, "Syria's Jabhat al-Nusra splits from al-Qaeda and changes its name," *The Washington Post*, July 28, 2016.

²² "Russia: Jabhat al-Nusra still a terrorist organization despite rebranding attempt," *Al-Masdar Al-'Arabi (The Arab Source)*, July 29, 2016.