

Al-Qaeda-Syria (AQS): An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study

Zack Gold

With contributions from Pamela G. Faber

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Schrodin'.

Dr. Jonathan Schrodin, Director
Center for Stability and Development
Center for Strategic Studies

Abstract

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states: “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.

In order to conduct this assessment, CNA used a comparative methodology that included eight case studies on groups affiliated or associated with Al-Qaeda. These case studies were then used as a dataset for cross-case comparison.

This document is a stand-alone version of the Al-Qaeda-Syria (AQS) case study used in the *Independent Assessment*. CNA is publishing each of the eight case studies separately for the convenience of analysts and others who may have a regional or functional focus that corresponds to a specific case study. For the context in which this case study was used and for CNA’s full findings, see *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.

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Glossary

AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
AQS	Al-Qaeda-Syria
ASD (SO/LIC)	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict
CT	Counterterrorism
FF	Foreign Fighter
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GEC	Global Engagement Center
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
ISI	Islamic State in Iraq
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JFS	Jabhat Fateh al-Sham
JN	Jabhat al-Nusra
KG	Khorasan Group
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Reform

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Introduction

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.¹

Section 1228 specified that the independent assessment should include these topics:

1. An assessment of Al-Qaeda core’s current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.
2. An assessment of the current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time.
3. An assessment of the operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.
4. An analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.
5. Recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

¹ Julia McQuaid, Jonathan Schroden, Pamela G. Faber, P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Alexander Powell, Zack Gold, David Knoll, and William Rosenau, *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

In order to answer the first four questions posed by Section 1228, CNA conducted eight case studies on groups affiliated and associated with Al-Qaeda.² The case studies were then used to conduct a cross-case comparative analysis.

This document is a stand-alone version of the Al-Qaeda-Syria (AQS) case study used in the *Independent Assessment*. CNA is publishing each of the eight case studies separately for the convenience of analysts and others who may have a regional or functional focus that corresponds to a specific case study. For the context in which this case study was used and for CNA's full findings, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.³

The present case study is organized as follows: First, we introduce AQS by highlighting its leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. Second, we explain the evolution of the group by phases, from its origins to the present day. Third, we outline the security vulnerabilities in the areas of Syria where AQS operates. Fourth, we outline the U.S. approach to countering AQS. We conclude the case study with a discussion on whether the U.S. has, at any time, effectively defeated, dismantled, or disrupted the group.

² These groups include: Al-Qaeda "core," Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shebab, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda Syria (AQS), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

³ McQuaid et al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.

Overview

Leadership and structure

Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate—previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra (Support Front, JN), and now known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Levant Conquest Front, JFS)—was formed during 2011 and 2012. In August 2011, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of Al-Qaeda in Iraq/Islamic State of Iraq (known today as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) sent Syrian national Abu Muhammad al-Jolani into Syria. Al-Jolani's mission was to exploit jihadist ties and take advantage of the ongoing Sunni uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad.⁴ Al-Jolani, whose real name is Ahmed Hussein al-Shara'a,⁵ had fought with Al-Qaeda in Iraq during the U.S. occupation.⁶ He remains the leader of JFS.

JN announced its existence in January 2012, and initially denied that it had ties to either the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) or Al-Qaeda (AQ) core.⁷ The group formally broke ties with ISI in 2013 amid a broader dispute between JN and ISI, and later between ISIL and Al-Qaeda. Seeking to broaden its appeal among other armed Syrian opposition groups, JN formally broke ties with Al-Qaeda core in July 2016, renaming itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Most analysts continue to view JFS as a covert Al-Qaeda affiliate, although key pro-Al-Qaeda ideologues are unhappy with what they see as

⁴ Carla E. Humud et al., *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, Congressional Research Service, R43756, 2014, <http://www.cq.com/pdf/crsreports-4562581>, p. 10; and Jennifer Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership: The Case of Syria's Abu Mohammed al-Jolani*, Institute for the Study of War, 2015, <http://post.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Threat%20of%20New%20Al-Qaeda%20Leadership.pdf>, p. 2.

⁵ Martin Chulov, "Al-Nusra Front cut ties with al-Qaida and renames itself," *The Guardian*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/28/al-qaida-syria-nusra-split-terror-network>.

⁶ Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 2.

⁷ Charles Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 9 (2015): 13-18, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-plays-a-long-game-in-syria>.

JFS's "dilution" of the jihad in Syria.⁸ In January 2017, JFS helped form a coalition of jihadist-leaning Syrian rebel groups called Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Group for the Liberation of the Levant, or HTS). HTS is led by veteran Syrian jihadist Abu Jabir Hashim al-Shaykh, who resigned from the Syrian jihadist group Ahrar al-Sham to join HTS. Al-Jolani serves as HTS's military commander.⁹ HTS has upwards of 30,000 fighters, of whom an estimated 18,000 are JFS members.¹⁰ Ultimately, JFS—one of the most formidable Al-Qaeda affiliates—is best understood not as a unitary organization, but as an ad hoc coalition of militant groups working against a common enemy of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Relationship with Al-Qaeda Core

Al-Qaeda core leader Ayman al-Zawahiri saw the Syrian civil war as an opportunity for the global jihadist movement, an opportunity that paralleled the one Iraq had offered a decade earlier.¹¹ He was initially content with JN operating as a covert affiliate of Al-Qaeda. Yet the question of JN's chain of command precipitated the break between Al-Qaeda and ISIL and brought JN's allegiance to Al-Qaeda into the open. In April 2013, ISI unilaterally declared that JN was subordinate to it.¹² To counter ISIL's claims, al-Jolani publicized JN's ties to Al-Qaeda, pledging loyalty directly to al-Zawahiri and requesting his mediation.¹³ In June 2013, al-Zawahiri responded that the Iraq- and Syria-based affiliates should maintain their organizational and geographic separation.¹⁴ ISI's al-Baghdadi rejected the order, even

⁸ Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi," *Jihadica*, March 29, 2017, <http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad/>.

⁹ BBC Monitoring, "Tahrir al-Sham: Al-Qaeda's latest incarnation in Syria," BBC, February 28, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38934206>.

¹⁰ Nazeer Rida, "Syria: surfacing of 'Hai'at Tahrir al-Sham' Threatens Truce," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 30, 2017, <http://english.aawsat.com/nazeer-rida/news-middle-east/syria-surfacing-haiat-tahrir-al-sham-threatens-truce>.

¹¹ Charles Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, Brookings Institution, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/iwr_20160728_profiling_nusra.pdf, p. 11.

¹² Jessica D. Lewis, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent: The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*, Institute for the Study of War, 2013, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf, p. 9.

¹³ Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "Al-Qa'ida Uncoupling: Jabhat al-Nusra's Rebranding as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 8 (2016), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-uncoupling-jabhat-al-nusras-rebranding-as-jabhat-fateh-al-sham>.

¹⁴ Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*, p. 19.

after al-Zawahiri dispatched numerous Al-Qaeda leaders to Syria in summer 2013 to attempt to mediate between JN and ISI.¹⁵

After JN broke with ISI, JN sought to implement al-Zawahiri's vision of Al-Qaeda franchises oriented toward winning popular support. When al-Zawahiri published his "General Guidelines for Jihad" in September 2013, al-Jolani was already following the Al-Qaeda leader's advice for "pragmatic moderation" in the local context.¹⁶ In early 2015, al-Zawahiri wrote to al-Jolani offering strategic guidance to JN for integrating into the local landscape. He called for al-Jolani to stop plotting external attacks from Syria—despite those plotters having been dispatched to Syria by al-Zawahiri himself.¹⁷ Al-Qaeda core provided expertise to JN, aided the flow of foreign fighters, and gave financial and military assistance.¹⁸ Al-Qaeda core also provided religious and ideological legitimacy. Many leading AQ figures held sway over JN's Shura Council, including Al-Qaeda strategist Saif al-Adel, who arrived in Syria from Iran in late 2015.¹⁹

In early 2016, JN and Al-Qaeda core began publicly discussing the possibility that JN would break ties with Al-Qaeda,²⁰ a tactical move that could advance the long-term interests of both groups.²¹ In July 2016, JN formally broke with Al-Qaeda core and rebranded itself as JFS. But the rebranding was not a complete break with Al-Qaeda. Al-Jolani's careful word choice highlighted JN's separation not from Al-Qaeda, but from any "external entity," suggesting that it would continue to work with Al-Qaeda figures inside Syria.²² The decision was sanctioned by Al-Qaeda's central command, including figures based in Syria.²³ Al-Qaeda's deputy leader, Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khair, commented, "We direct Jabhat al Nusra's central command to move forward in

¹⁵ Jennifer Cafarella, "Peace-talks between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, November 15, 2014, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2014/11/peace-talks-between-islamic-state-and.html>; Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 14; Lister, "Al-Qaida Plays a Long Game in Syria"; Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership: The Case of Syria's Abu Mohammed al-Joulani*, p. 5.

¹⁶ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

¹⁷ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*. P17.

¹⁸ Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*. P20-21.

¹⁹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*. P29.

²⁰ Al-Tamimi, "Al-Qa'ida Uncoupling."

²¹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*. P7.

²² Al-Tamimi, "Al-Qa'ida Uncoupling."

²³ Mona Alami, "Jabhat al-Nusra's rebranding is more than simple name change," Al-Monitor, August 5, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/jabhat-al-nusra-sever-al-qaeda-focus-local-syria.html>.

a way that preserves the interests of Islam and Muslims and protect[s] the jihad of the people of Syria.”²⁴ Abu al-Khair is believed to be in Syria.²⁵ JFS continues to benefit from the involvement of high-ranking Al-Qaeda operatives inside Syria, including external operations plotters.²⁶

Ideology and goals

JN seeks to dominate and reshape the armed opposition within Syria’s civil war, with the ultimate goal of toppling Bashar al-Assad and establishing a jihadist emirate in Syria.²⁷ Following al-Zawahiri’s 2013 “General Guidelines for Jihad,” JN hopes to infiltrate the opposition.²⁸ Specifically, JN hopes to embed within revolutionary forces and the Syrian people; work more closely with other Islamic groups, including by creating a nationwide sharia courts operation; and build a power base in strategic Syrian territory.²⁹ In this way, JN can embed itself within the Syrian Sunni population and over time transform society to accept Al-Qaeda’s vision.³⁰ By becoming a part of the Syrian landscape, JN can also take advantage of the void left by international efforts to roll back the Islamic State.³¹ In contrast to the Islamic State’s efforts to

²⁴ United States Institute of Peace, “The Jahadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?,” December 12, 2016, <http://www.usip.org/publications/2016/12/11/the-jihadi-threat-4-whither-jabhat-fateh-al-sham>.

²⁵ Alami, “Jabhat al-Nusra’s rebranding is more than simple name change;” Al-Tamimi, “Al-Qa’ida Uncoupling.”

²⁶ United States Department of Defense, “Statement by Pentagon Spokesman Captain Jeff Davis on US strike against al-Qaida Training Camp in Syria,” January 20, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/1055821/state-ment-by-pentagon-spokesman-captain-jeff-davis-on-us-strike-against-al-qaid>.

²⁷ Lister, Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra. P10.

²⁸ Jennifer Cafarella, “Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria,” Institute for the Study of War, October 1, 2014, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2014/10/local-dynamics-shift-in-response-to-us.html>.

²⁹ Jennifer Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership: The Case of Syria's Abu Mohammed al-Joulani*. Institute for the Study of War, 2015, <http://post.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Threat%20of%20New%20Al-Qaeda%20Leadership.pdf>, p. 4.

³⁰ Jennifer Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership: The Case of Syria's Abu Mohammed al-Joulani*, p. 2.

³¹ Jennifer Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership: The Case of Syria's Abu Mohammed al-Joulani*, p. 5.

fast-track the creation of a jihadist emirate, JN emphasizes its long-term, localized approach.³²

The domestic objective of JN's rebranding as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham was to merge with other Syrian Islamist rebel groups that had previously opposed doing so because of JN's ties to Al-Qaeda.³³ JFS also hoped that by entangling itself closer with other rebel groups, it would insulate itself from U.S. and Russian targeting or—more likely— increase domestic opposition to such targeting.³⁴ The rebranding also showed willingness among JN (and even Al-Qaeda) leadership to cut official ties with Al-Qaeda in order to more fully embed with opposition forces and fulfill the longer-term vision of creating an Islamic emirate in Syria and the Levant.³⁵

There are limits to JN/JFS's pragmatism. In mid-2014, Sami al-Oraydi replaced al-Juburi as JN deputy emir.³⁶ A Jordanian hardliner, al-Oraydi was now responsible for JN's religious doctrine.³⁷ The promotion of al-Oraydi and removal of other pragmatists increased the group's discourse on implementing sharia and opposing non-Islamist rebel groups—especially those aided by Western states.³⁸

JN has been inconsistent in its position on plotting attacks outside Syria. In January and February 2014, JN carried out bombings in northern Lebanon with the help of the AQ-linked Abdullah Azzam Brigades.³⁹ JN framed the attacks as retaliation for Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war.⁴⁰ However, JN also claimed to be avenging alleged wrongs against the Sunni community in Lebanon.⁴¹ In essence, JN

³² Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

³³ United States Institute of Peace, "The Jahadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?"

³⁴ Al-Tamimi, "Al-Qa'ida Uncoupling."

³⁵ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 20; and Cafarella, "Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria."

³⁶ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

³⁷ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 29.

³⁸ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 15.

³⁹ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁴⁰ Al Jazeera, "Jabhat al-Nusra claims deadly Lebanon bombing," February 1, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/al-nusra-front-claims-deadly-lebanon-bombing-201421221112955650.html>.

⁴¹ Al Jazeera, "Jabhat al-Nusra claims deadly Lebanon bombing,"

was competing with the Islamic State for which jihadist group represented the Sunni Muslims of the Levant.⁴²

As for its global objectives, JN is connected to a group of Al-Qaeda core figures based in Syria since 2013 known as the “Khorasan Group,” or the “Wolves” unit.⁴³ Led (at the time) by Kuwaiti national Muhsin al-Fadhli (d. 2015), this group of AQ military specialists relocated from the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region to Syria in order to plot external attacks.⁴⁴ JN’s external planning reached fruition in July 2014. “Credible threats,” reportedly of a cooperative plot between the Khorasan Group and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, led to tighter restrictions on US-bound flights.⁴⁵ In response to the U.S. targeting the Khorasan Group with air strikes in 2014, al-Jolani publicly threatened the West for the first time.⁴⁶ However, the US targeting of JN in response to such plots lessened other rebel groups’ willingness to work with JN. Al-Zawahiri’s 2015 letter recommended al-Jolani to halt planning attacks against the West.⁴⁷

JN also displayed willingness to negotiate over international interests. In August 2014, through Qatari mediation, the group released Peter Theo Curtis, an American journalist the group had held since 2012.⁴⁸ JN was also part of a coalition of rebels that took 45 Fijian UN peacekeepers hostage. Again through Qatari mediation, JN released the peacekeepers two weeks later.⁴⁹ Yet globally, despite JN denials,⁵⁰ US

⁴² Jennifer Cafarella, “Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength,” AEI Critical Threats Project, February 11, 2016, <http://www.aei.org/publication/jabhat-al-nusra-and-isis-sources-of-strength/>, p. 17.

⁴³ Lister, “Al-Qa’ida Plays a Long Game in Syria.”

⁴⁴ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁵ Lister, “Al-Qa’ida Plays a Long Game in Syria.”

⁴⁶ Cafarella, “Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria.”

⁴⁷ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 17; and Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 5. Al-Jawarihi’s injunction highlights the tactical and operational flexibility of the Al-Qaeda core, which appears far more willing than ISIS to recognize the importance of adapting to local conditions. In the judgment of many analysts, such flexibility also contributes to Al-Qaeda’s overall resiliency.

⁴⁸ Baz Ratner, “Syria’s Nusra Front releases U.N. peacekeepers in Golan,” Reuters, September 11, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-fiji-idUSKBN0H60C120140911>.

⁴⁹ Baz Ratner, “Syria’s Nusra Front releases U.N. peacekeepers in Golan.”

⁵⁰ Amin Nasr, “Nusra official denies group plotting foreign terror attacks,” NOW, July 21, 2016, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/567214-nusra-official-denies-group-plotting-foreign-terror-attacks>.

intelligence officials believed that JN continued to plot attacks against the United States and Europe, and that it attempted to infiltrate the refugee flow to Europe.⁵¹

Funding

Prior to JN's break with the Islamic State in Iraq, half of JN's funding came directly from ISI.⁵² After cutting ties with ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra became more dependent on funding from Al-Qaeda networks in Turkey and the Gulf States.⁵³ By one account, JFS annually receives a few million dollars or more in foreign funding;⁵⁴ one key fundraiser was Saudi national Abdallah Muhammad Bin-Sulayman al-Muhaysini.⁵⁵ JN also earned significant income from ransoming foreign hostages. Reportedly, the group has received between \$4 million and \$25 million in ransom payments.⁵⁶

JN has some local funding. Especially in Syria's Idlib province, JN established its own social services.⁵⁷ The group's collection of taxes in exchange for such governance activities provides it with a minimal supplemental income.⁵⁸

⁵¹ David Ignatius, "A new jihadist threat may be on the horizon in Syria," *The Washington Post*, July 19, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/a-new-jihadist-threat-rises-in-syria-as-the-islamic-state-recedes/2016/07/19/f9fd6ae6-4df4-11e6-a422-83ab49ed5e6a_story.html?utm_term=.ca4a639c47b0.

⁵² Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 12.

⁵³ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 31.

⁵⁴ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*.

⁵⁵ United States Treasury Department, "Treasury Designates Key Al-Nusrah Front Leaders," November 10, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0605.aspx>.

⁵⁶ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 31.

⁵⁷ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, pp. 30-31.

⁵⁸ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 32.

Evolution of AQS by Phase

Phase one: Founding and tensions with ISI (August 2011–January 2014)

In August 2011, ISI leader al-Baghdadi dispatched a delegation led by al-Jolani (then emir of ISI's Ninewa Province)⁵⁹ and Iraqi national Maysar al-Juburi/Abu Mariya al-Qahtani to Syria.⁶⁰ When JN was established, al-Jolani was its leader and al-Juburi its deputy leader and religious chief.⁶¹ Initially, al-Jolani and his delegation reached out to a network of AQI/ISI safe houses in Homs, northern Damascus, and Aleppo.⁶²

In December 2011, a month before JN announced its presence, it carried out its first formal attack: a double suicide bombing outside a Syrian military intelligence compound in Damascus.⁶³ The group had initial success as an insurgent group in Aleppo Province.⁶⁴ High-profile attacks on regime targets became JN's signature operations and raised its profile among other rebel groups.⁶⁵ The group was still a small, primarily cell-based organization, but it operated lethally and efficiently.⁶⁶ Initially, JN was unpopular among Syrian nationalist revolutionaries, who feared that it would pollute the Syrian civil war by replicating the bloody, sectarian agenda of ISI.⁶⁷

⁵⁹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁶¹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 9.

⁶² Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*.

⁶³ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁶⁵ Humud, *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Humud, *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*; and Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 11.

⁶⁷ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

The key to Jabhat al-Nusra's success in Syria was and remains its ability to serve as a force multiplier for other armed opposition groups.⁶⁸ JN's integration into the military uprising facilitated political integration when the opposition cleared the regime from areas and took over governance there.⁶⁹ By coordinating its military efforts with other armed groups, JN made itself necessary to the war effort. This tactical coordination undercut the possibility of popular opposition to Al-Qaeda's long-term political goals.⁷⁰ During 2012-2013, the group's leading role in the rebellion reversed earlier concerns that its attacks would be directed against the broader population.⁷¹ For example, in late 2012, after armed opposition groups cleared the regime out of areas of Aleppo Province, JN provided services to civilians through "relief departments."⁷²

Throughout its existence, JN has been too small a military force to defeat the Assad regime or large nonstate groups on its own.⁷³ Its integration into other forces is necessary for its own military and political successes. In the military effort, JN brings its expertise, discipline, and weapons and funding supply chain.⁷⁴ Its use of suicide bombers at the outset of military confrontations catches targets off guard and weakens their defenses, allowing for follow-on strikes.⁷⁵

By 2013, JN was becoming a larger force, growing to 3,000–5,000 fighters.⁷⁶ The group had developed from anti-regime terrorism into a full insurgent force.⁷⁷ JN also helped control territory in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zour.⁷⁸ However, its long-term goal of

⁶⁸ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁷⁰ Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, 2014, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISWBackgrounder_Jenny_JN.pdf, p. 2.

⁷¹ Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 2.

⁷² Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 11.

⁷³ Harleen Gambhir, Jennifer Cafarella, and Katherine Zimmerman, *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and Al-Qaeda, Report Three: Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, American Enterprise Institute and Institute for the Study of War, 2016, <http://post.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/PLANEX%20Report%203%20FINAL.pdf>, p. 24.

⁷⁴ Humud, *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, pp. 11-12.

⁷⁵ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 3; and Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 33.

⁷⁶ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 18.

⁷⁷ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁷⁸ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 2.

establishing an Islamic emirate in the Levant was not shared by the entire opposition.⁷⁹

Phase two: Break from ISIL (January 2014–March 2015)

In January 2014, after the split with ISIL, JN allied with other Syrian rebel groups to confront ISIL.⁸⁰ The next month, AQ leader al-Zawahiri formally expelled ISIL from Al-Qaeda.⁸¹ At the local level, ISIL and JN continued tactical cooperation throughout 2014.⁸² However, JN lost its Deir ez-Zour stronghold to ISIL after the split.⁸³ After al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph over territory that included eastern Syria, JN focused on consolidating along Syria's northeastern border with Turkey.⁸⁴ From July 2014, the group began controlling parts of Idlib Province. In October 2014, JN seized from the Free Syrian Army much of the Jabal al-Zawiya region of Idlib, on the Turkish border in northwestern Syria.⁸⁵ Turkey supported rebel efforts to overthrow the Assad regime. JN took advantage of this position to move donations and manpower into Syria from Turkey.⁸⁶

ISIL peeled off much of JN's foreign fighter manpower when the groups split.⁸⁷ Domestically, this allowed JN to present itself as a much more "Syrian" organization, as opposed to the Islamic State's regional focus. However, al-Baghdadi's caliphate was now ascendant in the global jihad, creating some incentive for JN to compete in that sphere. In November 2014, al-Jolani for the first time highlighted his group's foreign fighting force, which included Europeans, central Asians, Moroccans, and Saudis.⁸⁸ Yet in its effort to appear as a local force, JN was discriminating in its

⁷⁹ Cafarella, "Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria."

⁸⁰ Al-Tamimi, "Al-Qa'ida Uncoupling."

⁸¹ Humud, *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, p. 11.

⁸² Cafarella, "Peace-talks between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria."

⁸³ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 33.

⁸⁵ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 1.

⁸⁶ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 33.

⁸⁷ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 13.

⁸⁸ Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 3; and Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 18.

recruitment of foreigners into its ranks.⁸⁹ JN picked only the most qualified and obedient foreigners to ensure that its fighters were an asset, not a burden, to the Syrian opposition.

Locally, JN pursued direct territorial control. In Idlib, the group's direct control gave it more freedom to act in a less compromising manner toward other rebel groups.⁹⁰ JN established "judicial houses," which implemented a stricter version of Shari'a than previous courts.⁹¹ From mid-2014, JN began fighting against U.S.-backed rebel groups in Aleppo and Idlib.⁹²

After the split from ISIL, JN continued trying to integrate itself into the civilian population.⁹³ JN was assisted by Ahrar al-Sham, another Al-Qaeda-linked indigenous armed group that served as a key interlocutor between JN and other rebel groups.⁹⁴ This relationship strengthened JN's military capabilities, since Ahrar al-Sham has a larger fighting force.⁹⁵

JN's information campaign was imperative to its ability to embed itself into opposition forces. After U.S. airstrikes against the Khorasan Group, JN framed the targeting of its external operations as a strike against the revolution.⁹⁶ This effort prompted public demonstrations in rebel-controlled areas, with protesters equating U.S. airstrikes with those by the Assad regime and Russia.

⁸⁹ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁹⁰ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 2.

⁹¹ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*.

⁹² Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 5; and Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁹³ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 2.

⁹⁴ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 26.

⁹⁵ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 24.

⁹⁶ Jennifer Cafarella, "Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria, ISW blog, October 1, 2014, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2014/10/local-dynamics-shift-in-response-to-us.html>.

Phase three: Jaish al-Fateh coalition and Syrian ceasefire (March 2015–July 2016)

In March 2015, JN and Ahrar al-Sham led the formation of the Jaysh al-Fath (“Army of Conquest”) coalition with five other Islamist-oriented rebel groups.⁹⁷ The move was a step back for JN: a return to its prior willingness to accommodate other rebel groups—at least those with an Islamic orientation—to allow for near-term integration into the revolutionary landscape. JN’s moderation was apparent from the coalition agreement, which focused on the Syrian civil war and rejected external operations.

The coalition provided JN an official coordination platform with local Islamist forces—and through them with other nationalist rebel groups, including Western-backed ones.⁹⁸ Some saw in this effort the moderating effect Ahrar al-Sham had on JN, noting a reduction in the latter’s belligerence against other rebel groups. However, the coalition agreement was confined to specific areas of Syria (mainly Idlib, Hama, and Latakia Governorates), so JN could decide where it was in the group’s best interest to cooperate with the other rebel groups, and where it was not. JN tightened its control of Idlib throughout 2015, with seizures from Western-aligned rebel groups.⁹⁹

This was a period of growth for JN. Whereas in 2013 it had three thousand to five thousand fighters, by the end of 2015 JN likely had more than doubled in size.¹⁰⁰ The group recruited at least another three thousand Syrians from February to June 2016.¹⁰¹ The group’s fighting force was consistently around 60 to 70 percent Syrian.¹⁰² That recruitment drive coincided with inconclusive negotiations to create a lasting ceasefire between the regime and the rebels. JN was excluded from the talks, and it was well-placed to take advantage when the Assad regime violated the ceasefire.

⁹⁷ Lister, “Al-Qa’ida Plays a Long Game in Syria”; and Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 19.

⁹⁸ Lister, “Al-Qa’ida Plays a Long Game in Syria.”

⁹⁹ Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 18.

¹⁰¹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 6.

¹⁰² Lister, “Al-Qa’ida Plays a Long Game in Syria.”

JN continued to pursue its long-term domestic goal of an Islamic state in Syria. The group worked to empower Islamic-oriented rebel groups.¹⁰³ In the near term, JN deemphasized its own role in order to more broadly promote other domestic voices in support of Islamic governance.¹⁰⁴

Locally, JN moved to consolidate its rule in Idlib.¹⁰⁵ Regionally, the group sought to compete with the Islamic State for prominence in the Levant.¹⁰⁶ In Lebanon, JN recruited in Tripoli and the Bekaa Valley, where some Sunnis were concerned by Hizbullah's dominant position in the Lebanese state.¹⁰⁷

The Syrian ceasefire of February 2016 exposed the limits of JN's popular support. When fighting the regime, JN cooperated militarily with a broad range of rebel groups, many of which reject JN's long-term vision.¹⁰⁸ They tolerated JN's outlook because they needed JN's military capabilities. When the fighting stopped, so too did mainstream Syrian support for JN.¹⁰⁹

During this period JN was also more vocal about its Al-Qaeda affiliation and global jihadist vision. In June 2015, the group released a 43-minute video called "The Heirs of Glory," which tied the group to historical Islamic conquests in the region, as well as to Osama Bin Laden and the 9/11 attacks.¹¹⁰ In August, JN spokesman Abu Firas al-Suri said, "Our goals are not limited to Syria, but our current battle is."¹¹¹

In 2015 and 2016, JN also asserted itself against non-Islamist rebel groups. For example, JN attacked the U.S.-trained New Syrian Force in northern Aleppo, kidnapping its leader and overrunning the group's base.¹¹² In information operations,

¹⁰³ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Lister, "The Nusra Front is Dead and Stronger Than Ever Before," *Foreign Policy*, July 28, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/28/the-nusra-front-is-dead-and-stronger-than-ever-before/>.

¹⁰⁵ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁶ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁸ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

¹⁰⁹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 19.

¹¹⁰ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

¹¹¹ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

¹¹² Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

JN framed such efforts as part of a “counter-corruption” campaign.¹¹³ This attribution limited the negative impact on JN’s relations with other rebel groups.¹¹⁴

JN remained too small to carry out major operations without local support from the population and other rebel groups.¹¹⁵ However, JN’s advantage is its command and control, which allows it an operational perspective and the ability to move fighters and equipment to other fronts as necessary.¹¹⁶ JN’s effective fighting provides it a leading role in nearly half of the opposition’s “joint military operations rooms” as well as in governance of territory that the militant coalitions clear.¹¹⁷

Phase four: Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, a “break” from AQ core (July 2016–November 2016)

In July 2016, JN rebranded itself as Jabhat Fath al-Sham (Levant Conquest Front, or JFS). JN had spent 2015-2016 both asserting its association with Al-Qaeda’s vision and questioning whether its association with the organization hindered unity in the Islamist rebel ranks. Al-Jolani soon announced that JFS had “no affiliation to any external entity.”¹¹⁸ Along with the intention of subsuming Islamist rebel groups that had shunned JN for its Al-Qaeda ties, the move came in the wake of discussions between U.S. and Russian policymakers to jointly target the Islamic State and JN in Syria.¹¹⁹

At its establishment, JFS had between five thousand and ten thousand fighters.¹²⁰ At the end of 2016, another estimate suggested that the group had around ten thousand fighters.¹²¹ The group continued to focus on domestic recruitment, with Syrians

¹¹³ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 4.

¹¹⁴ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 5.

¹¹⁵ Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*. p. 24.

¹¹⁶ Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*. p. 20.

¹¹⁷ Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*. p. 19.

¹¹⁸ Carla E. Humud et al., *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, Congressional Research Service, RL33487, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf>, p. 39.

¹¹⁹ Al-Tamimi, “Al-Qa’ida Uncoupling.”

¹²⁰ “Syria War: Who are Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?” BBC, August 1, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36924000>.

¹²¹ United States Institute of Peace, “The Jahadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?”

representing up to 70 percent of its ranks. JFS also had more direct control over most of Idlib Province and parts of Aleppo Province by mid-2016.¹²²

A key partner for JN during this period was the more domestically entrenched Ahrar al-Sham, a force multiplier for JN. Ahrar al-Sham helped JN connect to and communicate with other rebel groups.¹²³ Some Ahrar al-Sham leaders have links to AQ core.¹²⁴ However, the group always resisted a formal merger with JN, likely because of JN's formal affiliation to Al-Qaeda. By rebranding itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, JN hoped to unify Ahrar al-Sham and JFS.

The JFS rebranding was primarily an information operation. The “international community,” al-Jolani said, was using JN's affiliation with Al-Qaeda as an “excuse ... to bombard and displace Muslims in the Levant.”¹²⁵ At the same time, the group's exclusion from various ceasefire attempts and its continued fighting against the Syrian regime helped its recruitment.¹²⁶ The group balances itself against the extremism of the Islamic State. Although JFS avoids sectarian attacks on other Muslims, it has discriminated against and attempted to convert Christians and Druze.¹²⁷

On the military level, JFS continues to cooperate with other rebel groups, some of which may be supported by U.S. programs.¹²⁸ JFS also cooperates with other opposition groups to control territory.¹²⁹ The group is well placed to take advantage of the Islamic State's territorial losses.¹³⁰ However, in August 2016, it suffered its own military setback when it failed to break the Assad regime's siege of Aleppo.¹³¹ Meanwhile, continued attacks against other rebel groups finally have started to damage JFS's broader position in the opposition movement.¹³² However, the group

¹²² “Syria War: Who are Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?” BBC, August 1, 2016.

¹²³ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 26.

¹²⁴ Cafarella, “Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria.”

¹²⁵ Chulov, “Al-Nusra Front cut ties with al-Qaida and renames itself.”

¹²⁶ United States Institute of Peace, “The Jahadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?”

¹²⁷ United States Institute of Peace, “The Jahadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?”

¹²⁸ Humud et al., *Armed Conflict in Syria*, p. 39.

¹²⁹ United States Institute of Peace, “The Jahadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?”

¹³⁰ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 7.

¹³¹ Thomas Joscelyn, “Jihadists and other rebels launch new offensive in Aleppo,” FDD's Long War Journal, October 30, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/jihadists-and-other-rebels-launch-new-offensive-in-aleppo.php>.

¹³² Lister, “Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria.”

reportedly gained advanced weaponry—including tanks and Chinese- and U.S.-made anti-tank missiles—from assaults against western-backed rebel groups in October and November 2016.¹³³

Phase five: HTS coalition (December 2016–February 2017)

At the end of 2016, the military balance in Syria’s civil war shifted when the Assad regime retook Aleppo. JFS and the entire Syrian opposition faced new pressures. The flight of rebels from Aleppo pushed more factions into Idlib, JFS’s power base.¹³⁴ Also in December 2016, Ahrar al-Sham rejected long-attempted efforts to merge with JFS.¹³⁵

In late January 2017, JFS merged with smaller Islamist rebel factions, which had long cooperated with JN/JFS, and rebranded again as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (The Assembly for the Liberation of the Levant, HTS).¹³⁶ Other groups joining HTS included Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zanki, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunna.¹³⁷ For the first time, al-Jolani did not serve as leader. The leader of Ahrar al-Sham resigned from that group to lead HTS.¹³⁸ The militant, known as Abu Jabir or Hashim al-Shaykh, had been part of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, according to some reports.¹³⁹

Although HTS attracted some support from Ahrar al-Sham, the two groups had serious tensions. One problem was Jund al-Aqsa, another AQ-linked Islamic rebel group that merged with JFS. Jund al-Aqsa is a more hardline group, and it reportedly attacked Ahrar al-Sham positions on multiple occasions. Ahrar al-Sham retaliated

¹³³ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 4.

¹³⁴ Alex MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels,” Middle East Eye, January 26, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/why-jabhat-fateh-al-sham-fighting-other-rebels-syria-1902636393>.

¹³⁵ “Intensive Infighting Erupts Between Commanders of Al-Nusra Front & Ahrar Al-Sham in Syria,” South Front, December 29, 2016, <https://southfront.org/intensive-infighting-erupts-between-commanders-of-al-nusra-front-ahrar-al-sham-in-syria/>.

¹³⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda and allies announce ‘new entity’ in Syria,” FDD’s Long War Journal, January 28, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/Al-Qaeda-and-allies-announce-new-entity-in-syria.php>.

¹³⁷ Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda and allies announce ‘new entity’ in Syria.”

¹³⁸ Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda and allies announce ‘new entity’ in Syria.”

¹³⁹ Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda and allies announce ‘new entity’ in Syria.”

against Jund al-Aqsa and JFS.¹⁴⁰ To calm tensions with Ahrar al-Sham, JFS/HTS expelled Jund al-Aqsa from its coalition in January 2017.¹⁴¹ By this point, however, Ahrar al-Sham had organized a coalition of its own to fight JFS.¹⁴² Ahrar al-Sham accused JFS of being anti-revolutionary and said that JFS attacked innocents no differently than the Islamic State.¹⁴³ JFS decried a “conspiracy” and claimed that Free Syrian Army-aligned rebel groups provided targeting coordinates to Syrian, Russian, and U.S. forces.¹⁴⁴ In response, JFS overran the Free Syrian Army (FSA)-aligned Jaish al-Mujahideen and attacked Ahrar al-Sham and other rebel groups in Aleppo Province.¹⁴⁵ Each of the groups that JFS attacked were involved in the Russian- and Turkish-supported peace conference in Kazakhstan.¹⁴⁶ HTS and the Ahrar al-Sham coalition are at an impasse so long as the civil war remains unsettled. Ahrar al-Sham and the other groups may be strong enough to confront HTS directly. Yet they will still need HTS on their side if they have any hope of defeating the regime.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

¹⁴¹ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

¹⁴² MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

¹⁴³ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

¹⁴⁴ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

¹⁴⁵ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

¹⁴⁶ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

¹⁴⁷ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

Security Vulnerabilities in Syria

The independent assessment involved analyzing the security environment in which each affiliate or associate operated. We conducted the environmental analysis on the assumption that the success of an Al-Qaeda affiliate or associate is based not solely on resources, funding and leadership structure, but also on a permissive environment with security vulnerabilities.

Table 1 below summarizes the vulnerabilities present in Syria in 2014. These vulnerabilities include internal conflict, a history of violent jihadism, partial/collapse of the government, government illegitimacy, demographic instabilities and security sector ineffectiveness.

Table 1. Security vulnerabilities in Syria (2014)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since 2011, Syria has experienced an extremely violent and destabilizing civil war that, as of June 2017, has killed more than 400,000 Syrians, displaced more than 6 million Syrians internally, and caused more than 5 million Syrians to leave the country. • Syria's civil war involves hundreds of domestic, regional, and global combatants.
History of Violent Jihadism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From roughly 1978 to 1982, Syrian president Hafiz al-Assad, father of current Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, faced a violent, sectarian-tinged uprising from Syria's Sunni Islamist opposition, among other opposition elements. • This uprising culminated in the 1982 "Hama Massacre," in which the Assad regime killed some 20,000 to 40,000 Syrians over an approximately one month period in order to put down the uprising.
Partial/Collapse of Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since the start of the uprising the Syrian government has lost large amounts of territory to Syria's Kurds, ISIS, and Sunni opposition elements. The Syrian military is over-burdened and relies heavily on outside support, including from Russian, Iranian, and Lebanese Shiite allies. • The Syrian government controlled approximately one-third of Syrian territory, containing approximately 65% of Syrian citizens, as of January 2017, according to the Associated Foreign Press. Since the Russian intervention in fall 2015, the Syrian government has gained momentum against its enemies, though it is unlikely to regain full control of Syria anytime in the near future.

Government Illegitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging potential challenges in quantifying and measuring government legitimacy, numerous factors indicate that large numbers of Syrian nationals no longer recognize the Assad regime’s right to govern, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is not democratically elected; ◦ countless Syrians have raised arms against the Assad regime; ◦ the Assad regime has killed and/or displaced millions of Syrians; ◦ the Assad regime no longer governs over all Syrian territory and citizens; and, ◦ the Syrian civil war has devolved into a highly sectarian conflict that pits the regime and its Alawite base, which makes up approximately 13% of Syria’s population, against a Sunni population that makes up 70-74% of the Syrian population.
Demographic Instabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syria is a heterogeneous country. Prior to the 2011 civil war, key communities included the Alawites (12%), Kurds (8-10%), and Sunni Arabs (60%). Christians, Druze, Ismaili and others make up the remaining percentage of Syrians. • The current civil war has generally divided the country along ethnic and sectarian lines: Kurdish armed groups dominate the north and seek to exploit the instability to increase their autonomy; the Alawite regime controls key areas of the center and northwest; and, Sunni Arabs dominate the opposition, including through jihadist groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ), as well as among the moderate political and military opposition. • The Syrian regime has been accused of systematically targeting Sunnis in order to alter Syria’s demographic character.
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Syrian government has lost approximately two-thirds of Syrian territory to opposition militants.

U.S. Approach to Counter AQS

This section captures the U.S. approach to countering AQS during two separate points in time, 2017 and 2014. Collecting data through two temporal ‘snapshots’ facilitated the comparison of U.S. approaches over time.

U.S. government approaches

Table 2 below describes the approaches the U.S. is currently taking to countering AQS, while Table 3 describes the U.S. approach in 2014.

Table 2. U.S. approaches to Al-Qaeda-Syria (2017)

U.S. Approach	Details
Attack the Network- Unilateral Direct Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The United States initiated airstrikes against AQ elements in Syria on September 23, 2014, the same date that it initiated operations against ISIS in Syria. U.S. airstrikes are relatively infrequent compared to the larger U.S. effort against ISIS. • Initial airstrikes targeted AQS elements described by DoD as the Khorasan Group (KG), as opposed to the larger AQ-affiliate inside Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). KG included AQ operatives reportedly ordered to Syria by AQ leadership in Pakistan in order to organize attacks against western targets and to support JN. • In late 2016, President Obama ordered the expansion of U.S. strikes against AQ in Syria to explicitly include the JN due to its increasing strength and the likelihood that U.S. military success against ISIS will leave a vacuum in Syria that JN could exploit.
Security Cooperation / Building Partner Capacity (Train and Equip)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The US strengthens the defense capabilities of regional partners Jordan and Lebanon, against various terrorist groups inside Syria, including but not limited to AQ. • DoD activities include increasing security assistance funding, improving border security, and building partner capacity, among other activities.
Establish U.S. Posture in Theater to Support Persistent Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The US CT posture in the Middle East, primarily structured to support Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) against ISIS, indirectly supports counter AQ missions in Syria. U.S. military assets at Turkey’s Incirlik air base, for example, can support airstrikes against AQ in Syria just as they can support airstrikes against ISIS targets.
Messaging/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In March 2016 the United States established the Global

counter-messaging	<p>Engagement Center (GEC) to counter the messaging and influence of international terrorist organizations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In a March 11, 2017 statement, U.S. Special Envoy Michael Ratney described current AQS rival Ahrar al-Sham as “loyal defenders of the Syrian revolution,” painting AQS as an enemy of the revolution and thereby undermining AQS’s strategy of attracting allies among Syrian rebel groups.
Attack the Network - Countering Foreign Fighter Flows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> US counter foreign fighter (FF) flow efforts impact AQ among other terrorist groups in Syria. Key efforts include: U.S. leadership in passing United Nations Security Council Reform (UNSCR) 2178 regarding counter FF cooperation in September 2014 and U.S. intelligence cooperation with international CT partners on FF. The number of FF traveling to Syria has declined significantly since peaking in 2014, according to the State Department.
Attack the Network - Counter Threat Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 2012, the State Department designated JN a foreign terrorist organization, which makes it illegal for U.S. entities to conduct business with the organization. In late 2016 and early 2017, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned six individuals associated with AQ in Syria, freezing their assets and prohibiting Americans from financial transactions with them.

Table 3. U.S. approaches to Al-Qaeda-Syria (2014)

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The United States initiated airstrikes against AQ elements in Syria (AQS) on September 23, 2014, the same date that it initiated operations against ISIS in Syria. U.S. airstrikes are relatively infrequent compared to the larger U.S. effort against ISIS. Initial airstrikes targeted AQS elements described by DoD as the Khorasan Group (KG), as opposed to the larger AQ-affiliate inside Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). KG included AQ operatives reportedly ordered to Syria by AQ leadership in Pakistan in order to organize attacks against western targets and to support JN.
Security Cooperation /Building Partner Capacity (Train and Equip)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> US strengthens the defense capabilities of regional partners Jordan and Lebanon, against various terrorist groups inside Syria, including but not limited to AQ. DoD activities include increasing security assistance funding, improving border security, and building partner capacity, among other activities.
Establish U.S. Posture in Theater to Support Persistent Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The US CT posture in the Middle East, primarily structured to support OIR against ISIS, indirectly supports counter AQ missions in Syria. U.S. military assets at Turkey’s Incirlik air base, for example, can support airstrikes against AQ in Syria just as they can support airstrikes against ISIS targets.
Attack the Network - Countering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> US counter foreign fighter (FF) flow efforts impact AQ among other terrorist groups in Syria. Key efforts include: U.S. leadership in passing UNSCR 2178 regarding counter FF cooperation in

Foreign Fighter Flows	September 2014 and U.S. intelligence cooperation with international CT partners on FF.
Attack the Network -Counter Threat Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 2012, the State Department designated JN a foreign terrorist organization, making it illegal for U.S. entities to conduct business with the organization.

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQS?

Al-Qaeda-Syria has neither been **defeated nor dismantled**. Al-Qaeda's primary affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), which renamed itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) in July 2016 and then merged with other groups in January 2017 to form Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), has emerged in 2017 as one of the most powerful fighting forces among the Syrian opposition.

U.S. airstrikes beginning in September 2014 against the Khorasan Group, an AQ element in Syria described by the Pentagon as planning external operations against the West, correlate with an early 2015 JN strategy shift to prioritize operations in Syria over such external plotting. U.S. airstrikes likely contributed to this internally-driven strategy shift and, to be sure, may have thwarted some attacks. Yet JN's successful rise in the intervening years indicates that U.S. airstrikes **did not disrupt** AQS's ability to plan and execute attacks within Syria, hold Syrian territory, recruit, arm and train, communicate with AQ-core, and/or execute propaganda activities.

The above outcome is a result of two key factors:

- First, the persistence of the Syrian civil war allows for the continuation and exacerbation of conditions in which terrorist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda thrive. The international community, including the United States, has been unable to resolve the Syrian civil war and thus mitigate the vulnerabilities in Syria's security sector that these groups exploit.
- Second, the United States has largely prioritized the campaign to defeat ISIS above other missions in Syria, effectively leaving JN relatively free to gather strength.

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQS?

Jabhat al-Nusra announced its formation in January 2012, not long after the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Since that time many of the vulnerabilities in Syria's security sector that gave rise to JN have been exacerbated, including internal conflict, partial collapse of the government, government illegitimacy, and demographic instability. The worsening of these vulnerabilities indeed correlates with JN's increasing power, but JN did not cause the exacerbation of these vulnerabilities. Rather, JN is both one of many contributing factors as well because of these vulnerabilities.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

The first major shift in the U.S. approach toward AQ in Syria involved the beginning of airstrikes against AQ operatives in September 2014. These airstrikes, however, occurred relatively infrequently compared to U.S. airstrikes against ISIS and moreover targeted a particular subset of AQ entities described by the Pentagon as the Khorasan Group, an external operations element of AQ in Syria, as opposed to JN. (Note: JN insists that there was never a separate entity called the Khorasan Group.) Accordingly, the second major shift in U.S. direct unilateral action against AQ in Syria involved President Obama's fall 2016 directive to expand counter-AQ strikes to include JN targets in order to reverse JN's momentum on the Syrian battlefield.

Conclusion

In this case study, we examined Al-Qaeda-Syria's leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. We also examined how the group has evolved over time. We outlined the vulnerabilities in Syria's security environment that AQS has exploited, and the relative effectiveness of the U.S. government's approaches to counter AQS over time. For the full context in which this case study was used, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ McQuaid, et. al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

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