

## **Jabhat Fatah al Sham's Implication on the Syrian Civil War and Beyond**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the history, organization, and activities of Jabhat Fatah al Sham, formerly the Al Nusrah Front, the official al Qaeda branch in the Syrian Civil War. This group will be analyzed through predominately economic and Western security-oriented lenses to show that ultimately Jabhat Fatah al Sham is following the larger trend of al Qaeda-led Islamic insurgencies around the world. This is important to note within the context of the competition between al Qaeda and the Islamic State, its offshoot, for the reigns of the global jihad movement.

### **About the Author**

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### **Introduction**

As the current civil war in the Syrian Arab Republic wages on with no clear end, it is important to analyze, evaluate, and speculate on the broader implications of this brutal conflict

on both current events and the current order. As it pertains to this research, it is absolutely imperative to understand the hierarchy and observed tactics of an al Qaeda branch named Jabhat Fatah al Sham (JFS). In particular, one needs to understand this terrorist group's history and attempt to project a reasonable academic and scientific picture of the path that this organization is taking to realize its Salafi-jihadi goals both nationally and globally, by highlighting what makes them such a dangerous and persistent insurgency.

### **Background on Jabhat Fatah al Sham**

It is important to recognize that Jabhat Fatah al Sham is the Syrian-based branch of the world-wide terror organization al Qaeda. Much like the Islamic State, al Qaeda is a Salafi-jihadi organization that aims to spread jihad around the globe in, hopes of destroying the decadent and overly-materialist Western culture along with replacing it with an extreme version of Islam. Currently, the Islamic State and al Qaeda are competing to determine who will ultimately shape and lead this global Salafi-jihadi movement. Despite this competition, the continual presence and action by both of these umbrella groups pose serious threats to Western values and the way of life most embodied by America and Europe.

Delving deeper into the study of JFS, that this al Qaeda branch is a very well organized and patient organization which is following a very conservative and long-run pursuit of the their endgame - replacing the Western Liberal Order with Salafism. Located mainly in the Idlib Governorate of Syria with additional cells throughout the country, the hierarchy governing JFS is currently comprised of religious scholars, seasoned military veterans, scientists, PhD holders, and other intellectuals. Thus, it is easy to see that such intellectuals, such as Emir Abu

Mohammed al Julani, Deputy Emir Sami al-Oraydi, the late Abu Firas al Suri, and Abu Maria al Qahtani, are formidable both in the field of battle and at the negotiating table.

Jabhat Fatah al Sham officially came into the scene of the Syrian Civil war in January of 2012 after branching off from the Iraqi franchise of al Qaeda. Their geographical presence does not reflect their influence: they have a relatively small land area under their control, but pose an enormous network of revolutionary groups opposing Bashar al-Assad. This key geographic difference amongst JFS and the Islamic State illustrates just how well Jabhat Fatah al Sham has permeated other revolutionary factions. Additionally, it shows how they have tried to isolate their competitor (Islamic State) by painting an increasingly “extremist” portrait of them.

A prime example of this is the extensive publicizing of the barbaric acts the Islamic State carries out against fellow Muslims, which is prohibited by the Qur’an. Consequently, it is accurate to say that JFS is an important player in the greater al Qaeda “insurgency.” Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are not mere terrorist groups, but highly organized insurgencies aiming to overthrow governments in the Muslim world in order to establish a set of home bases from which to “spread their ideology to all of humanity” (American Enterprise Institute).

## **Strategy**

Narrowing the focus of this finding, one can see that Jabhat Fatah al Sham has pragmatist this strategy effectively by occupying foothold within Syria (Idlib) and is waiting for the effective disillusionment of the current Assad regime. It is likely that from that point onward, Jabhat Fatah al Sham will be able to utilize its network in a way that will greatly benefit it in terms of legitimate governmental authority in transitional Syria. Moving past Jabhat Fatah al

Sham's long-run strategy, one can see that they are poised to be the great victor of the transitional period in Syria when (or if) it occurs.

The Islamic State seized expansive swathes of territory in both Syria and Iraq, making it prone to attacks mainly by the United States and other actors such as Turkey. Thus, one can see that maintaining too great of a profile may lead to much greater resistance and opposition from one's enemies – something that JFS has not yet have to deal with. From this, it can gleaned that in the longrun, it is more important to win hearts and minds rather than expansive territory, merely because territory can be acquired later once a stronger foundation of popular support has been built.

Even more important than an expansive network and a modest international profile is the fact that Jabhat Fatah al Sham is strategically attacking the West in unprecedented ways. JFS's strategy indicates that it sees the benefit in attacking its opponents on a philosophical and moral front in addition to traditional political and military avenues. This is clear in that this group openly applauded physical terrorist attacks such as the San Bernardino attack and Paris attacks. Given this, one can clearly posit that JFS is clearly at odds with Western values, and that they are plotting to use political and military means to achieve their respective vision.

Thus, through its sporadic attacks, JFS et al systematically attempts to force the West to disassemble its civil rights and liberties, to fear its partners, and act in a xenophobic and oftentimes irrational manner during the most trying of times. Frankly, JFS seeks to neutralizing their "decadent" opponent as threat by provoking a slow, yet consciously, relinquishment of liberties in hopes of being "more secure." This is reflected in the all too current debate regarding the balance of liberty and security.

JFS's stated goal has been to "fight the near enemy" and replace the Assad regime with an institutionalized Sharia-based judicial system, ultimately culminating in a fundamentalist Islamic state. In early 2015, al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri told the Jabhat Fatah al Sham Front to pursue a set of goals including: 1) To achieve even greater integration among local inhabitants and the Syrian revolution, 2) To coordinate more closely with other militant groups (non-Islamic State aligned), 3) To contribute to a nation-wide sharia legal system, 4) To build systemic al Qaeda strongholds within strategic parts of Syria, and 5) To temporarily pause activities and attacks aimed at the West as to allow for what al Zawahiri believes will be a further legitimization of JFS and a prime opportunity to network with forces that may prove to be influential in a post-Civil War-Syria. Once that occurs, as one can deduce from both the studies done by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute, a greater expansion and diversified style of globalized jihad will follow. It is this phenomenon that will be most threatening to the current global order and way of life.

## **Structure**

Regarding the structure, motives, and style of operation of Jabhat Fatah al Sham, one can infer that Jabhat Fatah al Sham is in fact much more dangerous than its more famous counterpart Islamic State. Through setting up strategic strongholds within Syria, Jabhat Fatah al Sham's plan is to effectively utilize these areas as training grounds and indoctrination camps for its fighters and their affiliates. It seems that they plan to use these strongholds not only as a bargaining chip in the local Syrian Civil War but also as bases of terror exportation and radicalization. A prime product of these types of bases include Jabhat Fatah al Sham special sniper divisions and its

explosives-manufacturing operations, which undoubtedly affect their efficiency, lethality, and influence altogether.

This organizational structure called a “threat node” by many scholars further highlights JFS’ organizational complexity. These nodes also serve an integrative function, in that they allow the group to further embed themselves into the local population - in a distinctly al Qaeda-like fashion - making them much harder to target and root out than groups such as the Islamic State.

### **Implications for the West**

An important question must be raised: How does the West protect itself, its values, and its way of life embodied by the current order when groups such as Jabhat Fatah al Sham are trying to replace them with their own perception of radical Salafi-jihadi values? In the American case specifically, it is important to note that the United States is not just a geographic polity inhabited by a group of culturally-Western individuals; America is much more. Much like Europe and other regions that hold democratic and enlightened values dear, America needs to view the Salafi-Jihadi threat as embodied by Jabhat Fatah al Sham, as something greater than a guerilla-style military campaign.

Essentially, JFS’s opponents will need to realize that Jabhat Fatah al Sham is pursuing a broader goal of replacing the enlightened liberal democratic order with its own constructed reality. Once this is realized, an amalgamation of solutions and strategies may develop, which all need to be considered to ultimately counter this fundamentalist threat. This by no means is an excuse for the United States to press forward with the notion that other countries and regions of

the world must conform to its standards; it is a wake up call in order to defend and uphold the enlightened and democratic ideals shared by most of the developed world.

As one can effectively glean from various news articles as well as the reports aforementioned by working groups of the American Enterprise Institute, as well as the ISW, in order to defeat this blatant plot against their way of life, countries that are characterized by the liberal democratic order will need to reevaluate the threats posed by JFS et al. Without identifying too closely with the demeanor of many, it seems that a patient, passive, and indifferent attitude will ultimately increase the propensity of these attacks and the rate of our collective demise.

### **Ideology**

Although no one has a complete plan of how to effectively defeat this threat, it seems logical that those who oppose JFS should start at the root of the problem. Salafi-jihadi insurgencies emerge and gain strength in an environment of internal chaos, seen in failed states such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya. These insurgencies win the hearts and minds of the locals by operating schools, hospitals, food banks, and libraries as well as offering social services. If these insurgent groups are denied such a desperate population they will be unable to obtain a foothold in their respective localities.

Another point worth mentioning is the wide array of Salafist groups. Strategically, it may be more than appropriate to divorce militant salafi-jihadists from other factions of the Salafist umbrella – mainly the Quietist and political Salafists. By doing this, Jabhat Fatah al Sham could potentially be denied access to various political opportunities and much needed funding.

In order to further unpack this concept, one must understand what basic Salafism is. Generally speaking, Salafism is the belief in a pure and Orthodox version of Islam. Salafists believe that Islam became decadent over time and that it has “strayed off the righteous path.” The aim of general Salafism is to return to a more authentic version of Islam, in which the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his closest companions are strictly followed. Although Salafism itself does not include violent tendencies many radical Islamists seize opportune moments to bend and fold Salafism into a more jihadi-centered movement.

There are three distinct factions of Salafism. These include the Quietists, the political Salafists, and the jihadi Salafists. Of these three, Fredrick W. Kagan and Kimberly Kagan identify only the jihadi faction to be a great danger to citizens and military installations around the globe. The other two factions are typically peaceful and focus on the interpretation of geopolitical events, philanthropic activities, and political activism when it is deemed necessary. A prime example of this may be found in the Egyptian political party the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) - although it was formerly openly violent and it is likely that the MB may be related to the recently formed and violent Liwa al Thowra and Hasam organizations.

Given this clarification, one can see that it is important to keep the Quietist/political faction of Salafism separate from the violent jihadi faction of Salafism. If allowed to merge, they may feed each other and fuel violence and radical fundamentalism. This merger would allow for the exploitation of the greater Salafist network and would direct it toward serving extremist purposes. However, the continued separation of these different factions of the Salafist umbrella is not the only strategy needed to effectively neutralize jihadi efforts.

## **Conclusion**



Equally important is the effective recognition of jihadi “threat nodes” and their systematic removal. Strategic actions such as these - although admittedly difficult to carry out - can prove to be enormous setbacks for insurgent activities while effectively saving a large amount of lives in the short to medium run. By targeting these “nodes,” bases from which these various militant cells operate, the Salafii-jihadi threat in its most current form can be combatted. As events continue to unfold, one can see that the fight against Jabhat Fatah al Sham and the greater Salafi-jihadi umbrella will not be easy. In the interim, there will be continued chaos, fear, and distrust. Moving forward, however, JFS’s adversaries will be able to evolve and improve the situation against these threats.

To win both on paper and in reality, the specific opponents JSF are plotting against may need to reinforce their democratic and free-market foundations. If the Salafi-jihadi threat - or any other for that matter - succeeds in coercing them to give up freedoms, opportunities, and their ways of life JFS will have ultimately achieved their objectives. This concept is important regardless of whether one lives in a nation that is traditionally Western, or in a region of rural Syria.

### References

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