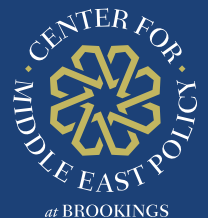




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Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra

BY CHARLES LISTER



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Playing it smart: A long-term threat

Late one night in August 2011, seven jihadi commanders crossed from Iraq into north-eastern Syria seeking to take advantage of that country's increasing instability to establish a new Syrian wing of the recovering Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Acting secretly on the orders of ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a Syrian known as Abu Mohammed al-Jolani led his six companions—one Palestinian, one Iraqi, two Palestinian Jordanians and two Syrians—over the porous border and quickly set about connecting themselves with the ISI's long-established Syrian jihadi networks.¹ Weeks later, the necessary foundations had been laid for the creation of Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahidi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad, or The Support Front to the People of the Levant by the Mujahideen of the Levant on the Fields of Jihad.

Jabhat al-Nusra has come a long way since those early days. It has transformed itself from being an unpopular outsider accused of introducing alien ISI-like brutality into a nationalist revolution in early 2012, towards being something close to an accepted or even leading member of the Syrian revolutionary opposition from late 2012 onwards.

Having initially accepted secret financial and logistical assistance from its ISI leadership in Iraq,² Jabhat al-Nusra broke out from under Baghdadi's command in April 2013 and ended up in a state of full-scale hostilities with its expanded structure, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in 2014. ISIS's dramatic advances in both Syria and Iraq and its proclamation of a self-styled Caliphate later that summer sparked international military intervention in Iraq, and shortly thereafter in Syria. By September 2014, this had come to include U.S. airstrikes against Jabhat al-Nusra com-

manders in northern Syria accused of plotting attacks on the West on behalf of al-Qaida's central leadership.

Jabhat al-Nusra is now one of the most powerful armed actors in the Syrian crisis. Through a largely consistent strategy of embedding itself within revolutionary dynamics and rooting its existence and activities into opposition societies, Jabhat al-Nusra can now be said to have established concrete roots in a country that looks likely to suffer from horrendous instability for many years to come. By adopting a strategy of gradualism, through which the theological conservatism of Jabhat al-Nusra's engagement with Syrian communities is systematically limited but slowly and methodically expanded, the group has sought to socialize populations into first accepting and eventually supporting and defending an al-Qaida-like movement within their midst.

Consequently, despite its overt limitation of harsh behavioral norms, Jabhat al-Nusra is at its core and particularly across its senior leadership, an avowed proponent of the al-Qaida cause, which seeks to gradually build localized bases of influence in which eventual zones of territorial control will present opportunities for launching far reaching attacks against the Western world. This gradualist and localist approach to transnational jihad was something developed within top levels of al-Qaida's strategic thinking in the late-2000s and then formalized within al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's September 2013 'General Guidelines for Jihad.' Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria has emerged as its first successful test case. Unsurprisingly, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is now attempting to replicate Jabhat al-Nusra's successful model in Yemen, with evidence to suggest the two movements maintain open channels of communication.³

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1. Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 56–59.
 2. "Dangerous Merger of Syrian and Iraqi Jihadist Groups," *Quilliam Foundation*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/press/dangerous-merger-of-syrian-and-iraqi-jihadist-groups/>.
 3. Katherine Zimmerman, "The Khorasan Group: Syria's Al-Qaeda Threat," *American Enterprise Institute*, September 23, 2014, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/alqaeda/zimmerman-khorasan-group-syrias-al-qaeda-threat-september-23-2014>.

Four-and-a-half years after its formation, Jabhat al-Nusra has demonstrated the potential value of this ‘long game’ approach. Notwithstanding the alleged activities of its external attack cells labelled by U.S. intelligence as ‘The Khorasan Group’, Jabhat al-Nusra’s strong Syrian domestic focus, its ideological restraint, and its powerful if not unmatched reputation on the battlefield have ensured that an ultimately transnationally-minded jihadi movement will almost certainly have an invaluable launching pad for attacking Europe and the United States in the years to come.

The group is not only a danger to the Western world though; its exploitation of Syria’s revolution and its controlled pragmatism has trapped the opposition into a relationship of short-term tactical convenience but long-term danger. Syria’s armed opposition, often in particular its more Islamist components, have not been unaware of the consequences of this quandary, with conservative elements telling this author as early as January 2015 that Jabhat al-Nusra was leading their revolution “down the wrong path.”⁴

Russia’s intervention on behalf of Bashar Assad’s regime in Damascus in late September 2015 introduced a new and far more urgent source of concern for Syria’s border opposition. It also sparked an intensification of international efforts to solve the conflict in Syria through political means. The initiation of a nationwide cessation of hostilities in late February 2016 gave space for portions of Syria’s mainstream opposition to re-assert the moderate ideals of their revolution and to overtly challenge Jabhat al-Nusra’s growing prominence. Most importantly, it revealed the al-Qaida affiliate’s most glaring vulnerability: its position as an accepted member of the revolution was inherently dependent on being able to demonstrate its military value in fighting the Assad regime. With conflict dramatically reduced, Jabhat al-Nusra became virtually impotent overnight, re-empowering the vast majority of the opposition, which uphold values diametrically opposed to al-Qaida’s extremist interpretation of Islam.

In short, reduced levels of conflict in Syria threatened to erode the relationship of interdependence that Jabhat al-Nusra had sought to establish between itself and the Syrian revolution. The political process, however, is inherently fragile and the breakdown of the cessation of hostilities from April 2016 was inevitable. In the time since, the re-assumed urgency of battle has seen Jabhat al-Nusra retain its prominent position, which in all likelihood, it will sustain for some time to come. In other words, al-Qaida’s future in Syria appears secure.

In that regard, Jabhat al-Nusra set about heavily recruiting from within increasingly disenfranchised opposition communities in Aleppo and Idlib in early 2016, exploiting widespread and seething perceptions of abandonment by the international community. According to three Islamist sources based in the area, Jabhat al-Nusra successfully recruited at least 3,000 Syrians into its ranks between February and June 2016—nothing short of a remarkable rate of local recruitment. That it has done so at the same time as leading figures have initiated discussions around the potential establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Idlib, while issuing calls to the Syrian people to embrace a genocidal posture towards the country’s Alawite population, should be of serious concern.

Since mid-2014, the world’s attention has been predominantly transfixed on the more aesthetically shocking actions of ISIS and its immediate threat to international security. However, it is arguably Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria—and perhaps al-Qaida more broadly—that looks more likely to sustainably survive in order to threaten our long-term security.

That the U.S. government issued a proposal in July 2016 to coordinate operations against Jabhat al-Nusra alongside the Russian military underlines the legitimate—though late—emergence of a sense of concern about the jihadi group’s rising stature in Syria. However, most importantly, it reveals

4. Charles Lister, “Are Syrian Islamists moving to counterbalance Al-Qaeda? Will it last?” *The Brookings Institution*, March 23, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/03/23-syrian-islamists-balancing-with-alqaeda-lister>.

how poorly the militant movement is understood. External intervention alone will do nothing but empower Jabhat al-Nusra's increasingly accepted narrative within an already bitter Syrian opposition population that contributed 3,000 fighters to Jabhat al-Nusra's ranks in northern Syria between February and June 2016.⁵

The threat of external intervention against Jabhat al-Nusra has however, sparked an intense internal debate within the group's senior leadership regarding the overt nature of its relationship to al-Qaida. Beginning in late June, a high-level track of dialogue sought to encourage those within Jabhat al-Nusra less dedicated to al-Qaida's transnational ambitions to break away and form a new, independent faction—potentially named al-Harakat al-Islamiya al-Souriya, or the Syrian Islamic Movement.⁶ As pressure built within Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership-level Majlis al-Shura, it initiated its own discussions on the subject of whether or not its long-term interests were best served in continuing to be an avowed affiliate of al-Qaida. Some proposed a split from al-Qaida, followed by a broad merger with Syrian opposition groups under 'Jaish al-Fateh al-Sham,' or the Front for the Conquest of the Levant. The potential imminence of U.S.-Russian strikes no doubt lent a certain urgency to such discussions.

At the time of publishing, the outcome of this dual-track of debate was reportedly imminent. Whatever the outcome, it remains hard to fathom how the majority of Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership could truly renounce and give up their decades-long devotion to al-Qaida's global vision. Ultimately, while symbolically of very great significance, any potential decision to break ties from al-Qaida should be read more as a politically smart maneuver aimed at further trapping Syrians into their relationship of interdependence with the group and thus furthering the viability of Jabhat al-Nusra's long game. It would also place the international community in a

troubling bind, as regional states seeking to legitimately support the group could potentially pitch a credible defense for doing so, while any U.S.-Russian intervention against it would spark even more ire within opposition circles. As al-Qaida leader al-Zawahiri commented in May 2016, a re-evaluation of Jabhat al-Nusra's relationship with the international jihadi movement should not be seen as an obstacle to "the great hopes of the Islamic nation."⁷

Consequently, it is now urgent that the policymaking community seeks to understand the unique nature of Jabhat al-Nusra as a jihadi movement rooted deeply within Syrian revolutionary society. Only this will allow genuinely effective counter-measures to be developed.

This paper therefore seeks to provide a digestible profile of a highly significant jihadi movement, from its evolution since 2011, to its ideology and strategic vision; organization and structure; sources of finance; military tactics and strategy; recruitment and foreign fighter policy; and its approach to governance. Its invaluable military alliance with Syrian Salafist group Ahrar al-Sham is also covered, in so much as it has thus far provided Jabhat al-Nusra with an enabling security blanket within which to operate and expand in Syria. It is only through such an in-depth and comprehensive analytical approach that one can most accurately determine what the existence of Jabhat al-Nusra means for the future of Syria, the Middle East, and international security, and thus what policy options are most prescient in combating the extensive influence and potential of al-Qaida's powerful Syrian affiliate.

5. Charles Lister, "Al Qaeda Reaps Rewards of U.S. Policy Failures on Syria," *The Daily Beast*, July 6, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/07/06/al-qaeda-reaps-rewards-of-u-s-policy-failures-on-syria.html>.

6. Charles Lister, "Under pressure, Syria's rebels face al-Nusra quandary," *Huffington Post*, July 18, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/under-pressure-syrias-rebels-face-al-nusra-quandary_us_578bbd07e4b0e7c8735055e4.

7. "Zawahiri: Syria's Nusra free to break al-Qaeda links," *Al Jazeera*, May 8, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-al-qaeda-chief-urges-rebels-unite-160508082236883.html>.

PART I

History

March–December 2011: Covert development

As protests against Bashar Assad's rule proliferated and grew in scale across Syria through the spring of 2011, and as the state security apparatus began employing increasingly indiscriminate violent tactics to suppress dissent, the first signs of armed resistance began to emerge. Minimally reported but significant attacks had begun targeting regime security forces in the governorates of Homs, Idlib, and Hama by May. Meanwhile, facing orders to fire on their own people, Syrian officers and foot soldiers under their command began to defect. Many of them ended up joining Harakat al-Dubbat al-Ahrar (the Free Officer's Movement), which had been formed by Colonel Hussein Harmoush in June 2011 in order to coordinate defected officers in military action against the Assad regime.⁸

While this indigenous nationalist resistance was beginning to openly emerge, a more sinister jihadi trend was also beginning to coalesce. Buoyed by a series of prisoner releases in March, May, and June 2011—presented as concessions to protesters, but actually a cynical regime attempt to shape its opposition as extremist—hundreds of Syrian Islamists were converging into cells and looking for opportunities to activate their own opposition to the regime. While many went on to form nationally-focused Islamist movements like Liwa al-Islam (now Jaish al-Islam) and both Suqor al-Sham and Kataib Ahrar al-Sham (now combined within Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya), dozens of others converged into more extreme Salafi-jihadi networks.

It was these networks that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his deputy Haji Bakr had in mind in Iraq as building blocks when they decided in July 2011 that they would seek to establish their Syrian wing. As ISI emir for Iraq's northern Ninawa

province—arguably its most strategically valuable region, incorporating the financially valuable city of Mosul and the logistical hubs of Tel Afar and Sinjar—Jolani's selection as the Syrian wing's leader-to-be signified the importance given to his mission. His six co-conspirators were similarly experienced jihadi figures.

Most prominent was Iraqi national Maysar Ali Musa Abdullah al-Juburi (Abu Mariya al-Qahtani), who had been with al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) since its earliest days in 2003–2004, and who would soon become Jabhat al-Nusra's deputy and religious chief. There were two Jordanian-Palestinians, namely Mustafa Abd al-Latif al-Saleh (Abu Anas al-Sahaba), a prominent ISI facilitator and foreign fighter recruiter, and Iyad Tubasi (Abu Julaybib), who had been a close aide and brother-in-law of AQI founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Alongside them was a Palestinian, Abu Omar al-Filistini, and two Syrians: Anas Hassan Khattab, who had been a key regional ISI facilitator, and Saleh al-Hamawi.

Together, these seven ISI powerhouses arrived in Syria's northeastern Hasakah governorate during Ramadan in August 2011 and set about linking up with years-old networks of safe houses established by AQI and the ISI in Homs, northern Damascus, and Aleppo.⁹ Much of this infrastructure was being re-activated at the time—thanks to Assad's recent prisoner releases—and had been in place since the outset of the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, when the full weight of Syria's state apparatus had been heavily involved in encouraging jihadi resistance across its borders. With the acquiescence and often assistance of Syrian intelligence, AQI and later ISI operatives had at the time welcomed, recruited, trained, and transported to Iraq thousands of Sunni foreign fighters¹⁰ to combat what Syria's state-appointed Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Kaftaro labelled in 2003 “the Zionist American and British invaders.”¹¹

8. Rania Abouzeid, “In Blow to Opposition, a Dissident Syrian Army Officer is Captured,” *TIME*, September 15, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2093441,00.html>.

9. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 56–59.

10. M.J. Barout, “Al-aqd al-akhir fi tarikhi Souriya; jadaliyyat al-jumud wal Islah,” *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, April 2011.

11. Hamza Mustapha, “The al-Nusra Front: From Formation to Dissension,” *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, February 2014, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/file/get/9dd86818-7314-40ec-bf8e-be4a0db226c0.pdf>.

Once in Syria, Jolani led a series of secret meetings in September and October 2011 in which it was agreed to establish Jabhat al-Nusra, literally as a ‘front’ to ‘support’ a repressed Sunnah from its Alawite and Shia enemies—represented by the Assad regime and Iran, respectively. In so explicitly labelling itself as being founded by those from the ‘fields of jihad’ (*fi sahat al-jihad*), Jabhat al-Nusra was making clear from the outset its international jihadi foundations. Although it did not announce its establishment until January 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra spent late 2011 subsuming dozens of small jihadi cells across the country, thereby making good on its self-presentation as a ‘front.’¹²

Jabhat al-Nusra’s earliest months were therefore spent as a cellular structure focused on consolidating itself into an organized movement whilst occasionally carrying out small raids and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against regime security forces. Its first formal and official attack, however, took place on December 23, 2011, when two suicide bombers detonated their explosives outside military intelligence facilities in Damascus’ southwestern Kafr Souseh district, killing at least forty people. Such attacks fit the early *modus operandi* of targeting the regime’s security structures at their core, like a “thunderbolt” as Jolani later explained to Al-Jazeera in December 2013.¹³

January–July 2012: An unpopular emergence

Jabhat al-Nusra announced its establishment on January 23, 2012, in a video uploaded onto al-Qaida-linked internet forums. Entitled ‘For the people of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Fields of Jihad,’¹⁴ the video saw Jolani declare war on the Assad regime and demand the eventual introduction of Islamic Sharia law as the governing system

of the country’s future. As much as Jolani was keen to stress Jabhat al-Nusra’s domestic Syrian focus, visual references to Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock and vitriolic condemnations of the West, Turkey, the Arab League, and naturally, Iran, made clear that he viewed jihad in Syria as part-in-parcel of a global struggle. Beyond this, Jolani also presented Jabhat al-Nusra as a single component in a long historical battle between foreign imperialism and the Islamic world.¹⁵

This internationalist self-presentation combined with the bloody nature of Jabhat al-Nusra’s early attacks—its second operation was a suicide bombing adjacent to several buses of policemen in Damascus, killing 26—was something anathema to Syria’s protest movement and popular uprising. Urban suicide bombings and videos tinged with jihadi nasheeds released onto al-Qaida internet forums brought with them the fear that the notoriously brutal ISI had come to town. A stream of public statements of support for the group coming from famed jihadi ideologues like Abu Mundhir al-Shinqiti, Abu Zahra al-Zubaydi, Abu Sa’ad al-Amili, and Abu Mohammed al-Tahawi did not help Jolani’s cause.¹⁶

Consequently, Jabhat al-Nusra’s first months of public operation in Syria were a challenging time. While its attacks continued to demonstrate the kind of tactics most Syrians feared, Jabhat al-Nusra’s propaganda materials increasingly sought to stress its Syrian focus. This shift was an attempt both to assuage Syrian concerns but also to bolster the movement’s jihadi credibility, by extolling the virtues of fighting jihad in Bilad al-Sham, the much prophesied land where the prophet Issa bin Maryam (or, Jesus) will return immediately prior to the end of the world, to lead one final battle against the enemies of Islam.¹⁷

12. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 56–59.

13. “Syria’s Al-Nusra Front leader interviewed on conflict, political vision,” *BBC Monitoring*, December 22, 2013.

14. Available on jihadology.com, here: <http://jihadology.net/2012/01/24/al-manarah-al-bayda-foundation-for-media-production-presents-for-the-people-of-syria-from-the-mujahidin-of-syria-in-the-fields-of-jihad-jabhah-al-nusra-the-front-of-victory/>.

15. “The Al-Nusra Front,” *Meir Amit Intelligence & Terrorism Information Centre*, September 23, 2013, 19.

16. Aaron Zelin, “Syria’s New Jihadis: Meet the Terrorist Group that’s Ruining the Syrian Revolution,” *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/05/22/syrias-new-jihadis/>.

17. Aaron Zelin, “International Jihad and the Syrian Conflict,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 7, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/international-jihad-and-the-syrian-conflict>.

Throughout early 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra was still a small, largely cell-based terrorist organization operating at a low tempo. For example, by March 1 it had conducted only three attacks, from which casualties included 40% civilians. While locally rooted Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions were fighting conventional warfare against regime forces in hotspots like Homs, Deraa, and Idlib, Jabhat al-Nusra was carrying out suicide attacks, IED ambushes, and occasional assassinations. It was growing though, thanks to financial support from the ISI in Iraq and from external financiers abroad, as well as several statements by al-Qaida leader al-Zawahiri calling on “every Muslim and every honorable and free person... to go aid his brothers in Syria.”¹⁸

By the summer, Syria’s crisis had become a civil war according to the Red Cross,¹⁹ and Jabhat al-Nusra was adapting internally to enter a new phase of its existence. Buttressed by steadily increasing numbers of recruits, Jabhat al-Nusra had begun reaching out to Syrian armed opposition groups, seeking out theater-specific operational allies. Some small jihadi groups composed largely of foreigners like Kataib al-Muhajireen led by Tarkhan Tayumurzovich Batirashvili (Omar al-Shishani) would become close allies, as would more Syrian Islamist-oriented groups like Kataib Ahrar al-Sham.

August 2012–March 2013: Revolutionary integration

As conflict in Syria intensified and a conventional opposition insurgency solidified around the revolution’s core principal of removing Assad and his regime from power, Jabhat al-Nusra began its

crucial evolution from terrorist organization to insurgent actor. Through a concerted strategy of engagement with opposition groups in active conflict zones in which Jabhat al-Nusra had built a solid following, the group negotiated the formation of formal and informal operational alliances in which combined force could be brought against the regime. As the level and scope of conflict steadily expanded in Syria, alliance-building assumed strategic importance and Jabhat al-Nusra represented a viable force multiplier to the often disunited and localized opposition.

From Deir ez Zour in the east, to the capital Damascus, and Syria’s largest city Aleppo, these alliances and Jabhat al-Nusra’s often superior fighting capabilities ensured that by the end of the winter of 2012–2013, Jolani’s jihadis had become an indispensable force for Syria’s more mainstream opposition.²⁰ As an illustration of this point, the Assad regime suffered a series of strategic defeats across Syria between September 2012 and March 2013, and Jabhat al-Nusra took a frontline role in securing opposition victory in each of them.²¹

In concert with its military rise in prominence, Jabhat al-Nusra also used the outbreak of intense conflict in Aleppo to begin the civil component of its jihadi project. The establishment of a Qism al-Ighatha (or Department of Relief) signified the beginning of attempts by Jabhat al-Nusra’s leaders to provide services to civilians living in areas within their influence or control. The onset of winter weather in Aleppo in late-2012 saw the group assume control over bakeries and the production of subsidized bread,²² as well as the de-

18. Jason Burke, “Al-Qaida leader Zawahiri urges Muslim support for Syria uprising,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/12/alqaida-zawahiri-support-syrian-uprising>.

19. “Red Cross declares Syria conflict a civil war,” *Al Jazeera*, July 16, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middle-east/2012/07/2012716231913738.html>.

20. “Mainstream opposition” should be taken to refer to armed opposition groups that are explicitly nationalist in terms of a strategic vision; local in terms of membership; and those who seek to return to Syria’s historic status as a harmonious multi-sect nation in which all ethnicities, sects, and genders enjoy an equal status before the law and state. Ahrar al-Sham should be considered on the outer periphery of the “mainstream opposition,” as it unquestionably represents a significant support base, but its hardline ideological attitudes place it in some areas of conflict with the broader opposition’s political platform.

21. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 85.

22. Kelly McEvers, “Jihadi fighters win hearts and minds by easing Syria’s bread crisis,” *NPR*, January 18, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/01/18/169516308/as-syrian-rebels-reopen-bakeries-bread-crisis-starts-to-ease>.

livery of heating gas, water, cleaning and health-care services, and other civil assistance. Due to the efficiency and non-corrupt nature of Qism al-Ighatha's services, Jabhat al-Nusra quickly carried favor with civilians, especially in key battlegrounds like Aleppo.²³

Exploiting its newfound influence and the consolidation of its cooperative relationships with Aleppo's mainstream armed opposition groups, Jabhat al-Nusra also led the establishment of the al-Hay'a al-Sharia (Sharia Commission) as the city's principal source of opposition governance. This was the opposition's first experiment with municipal administration; the fact that it involved Jabhat al-Nusra illustrated the extent to which the group had sealed its status as an accepted opposition actor. A similar model was later replicated in eastern Deir ez Zour, where Jabhat al-Nusra had developed particularly close relationships with opposition groups and perhaps more importantly, with tribes, including the Shai'tat and al-Shuheil branches of the Oqaidat.

The U.S. December 2012 designation of Jabhat al-Nusra as an alias of AQI and thus a terrorist organization was met with widespread opposition protest and a week of demonstrations around the theme of "We are all Jabhat al-Nusra," demonstrated just how quickly Jolani's year-old jihadi movement had risen.²⁴

Importantly, Jabhat al-Nusra's rise to prominence came amid the decline of the FSA as a single discernible organization. Instead, the FSA had come to represent an umbrella under which several hundred small and localized armed groups chose to identify themselves. This undermined the capacity for a genuinely 'moderate'

and nationalistic armed opposition²⁵ to coalesce as a single powerful body. Meanwhile, expanding Syrian Islamist opposition groups were going from strength to strength, and it was arguably this trend that contributed most towards helping facilitate Jabhat al-Nusra's revolutionary integration in Syria. The formation of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) in December 2012 and the associated rise of Kataib Ahrar al-Sham saw Jabhat al-Nusra gain a powerful Syrian ally alongside whom it would continue to grow in the months to come.

In reality, Jabhat al-Nusra was not the only jihadi benefactor of intensified fighting and the rise of Syria's Islamists. Throughout the summer of 2012, increasing numbers of foreign fighters had begun arriving into northern Syria seeking to exploit the uprising for their own international and apocalyptic worldview. The visible role of Iran and Hezbollah, as well as other smaller Shia militia factions in backing the Assad regime additionally framed the conflict in Syria in the kind of sectarian terms that jihadis could so easily exploit. The arrival of multiple former Guantanamo Bay detainees and other al-Qaida veterans signified that Syria had become home to a major new jihadi front.

April–December 2013: The ISI-al-Qaida split

By late 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra's successful integration into the Syrian conflict had become clear. As the U.S. designation had suggested, the group was still structurally a part of the ISI, and indeed, it continued to receive 50% of its funding from Iraq. However, ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had begun as early as November 2012 to fear his Syrian subordinate had become a

23. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Phillip Smyth, "How Syria's Jihadists Win Friends and Influence People," *The Atlantic*, August 22, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/08/how-syrias-jihadists-win-friends-and-influence-people/278942/>.

24. Bill Roggio, "Syrian National Coalition Urges U.S. to Drop al-Nusra Terrorism Designation," *Long War Journal*, December 12, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/12/syrian_national_coalition_urge.php.

25. "Moderate" opposition should be taken to refer to armed opposition groups that are explicitly nationalist in terms of a strategic vision; local in terms of membership; and those who seek to help engender a democratic or otherwise liberal system of government based on the principal of a consistent rotation of power. Members of a moderate opposition also seek to re-establish Syria's historic status as a harmonious multi-sect nation in which all ethnicities, sects, and genders enjoy an equal status before the law and state.

power of its own and was no longer a force truly under his command.

The first sign of this concern came in a secret letter Baghdadi sent to Jolani in November or December 2012, in which he urged the Jabhat al-Nusra leader to publicly announce his links with the ISI. The request was discussed in a meeting of Jabhat al-Nusra's Majlis al-Shura, but rejected in fear that doing so would jeopardize the progress made in embedding within the Syrian revolution. Having been rebuffed, Baghdadi sent his deputy, Haji Bakr—nicknamed at the time as the Knight of the Silencers, for his role in coordinating a large-scale assassination campaign of ISI commanders suspected of potential disloyalty—to Syria to make the point more forcefully to Jolani.

Setting up camp in the northern Aleppo town of Tel Rifaat, Haji Bakr began meeting with ISI loyalists within Jabhat al-Nusra's military and religious command structures. Securing the allegiance of 'movers and shakers' like Amr al-Absi and Omar al-Shishani, as well as significant portions of Jabhat al-Nusra's foreign fighter contingent, Haji Bakr set about undermining Jolani from within. He even sent loyalists to spy on Jolani in meetings.

When Jabhat al-Nusra foiled an apparent series of ISI plots to assassinate FSA leaders and to bomb the headquarters of Syria's political opposition in southern Turkey, Jolani had finally crossed the line. Baghdadi sent one final letter demanding that Jabhat al-Nusra publicize its ISI links, or otherwise face dissolution. In an apparent admission that threats were unlikely to change Jolani's mind, Baghdadi then travelled to northern Syria in person in February 2013 and held several meetings with prominent Jabhat al-Nusra leaders and other influential foreign fighters.

Baghdadi's presence and Haji Bakr's months of preparation meant that when Baghdadi finally released an audio statement on April 8, 2013,

announcing Jabhat al-Nusra's links to the ISI and that from then on it would be subsumed within an expanded ISI (ISIS), he immediately secured the allegiance of a considerable portion of Jolani's manpower.

Thirty-six hours later, Jolani publicly refused to submit to Baghdadi's authority and instead repledged his bay'a to al-Qaida leader al-Zawahiri. Jolani's stoic response notwithstanding, Jabhat al-Nusra had clearly been dealt a severe blow—a majority of the group's foreign fighters had left to join ISIS and its principal source of income had been cut. Although it remained active on the battlefield, Jabhat al-Nusra was subsequently publicly silent for several months after the April split while it sought out al-Zawahiri's leadership support.²⁶

Despite being ordered by al-Zawahiri to return to Iraq and leave Jabhat al-Nusra as the sole al-Qaida-linked movement in Syria, Baghdadi and his spokesman Taha Sobhi Falaha (Abu Mohammed al-Adnani) repeatedly refused to submit to al-Qaida's orders. Similarly, calls by veteran jihadi ideologues like Mohammed Tahir al-Barqawi (Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi) and Omar Mahmoud Othman (Abu Qatada al-Filistini) went spurned by ISIS, whose tempestuous tone also extended onto the battlefield, with its fighters increasingly coming to blows with opposition forces from the late-summer of 2013 onwards. Jabhat al-Nusra meanwhile retained a comparatively more pragmatic and cooperative approach, deepening its relationships with supportive jihadi factions and Syrian Salafists.

It was within this context that over 1,400 people were killed in a sarin gas attack in northeastern Damascus. Widely blamed on regime forces, the attack sparked fury within the opposition and provided Jabhat al-Nusra with an opportunity to demonstrate its allegiance to the opposition. It quickly announced *Qisas* ('eye for an eye') offensives across Syria,²⁷ and executed a prominent Alawite sheikh,

26. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 122-127.

27. "Syria's Nusra threatens to rocket Alawites over alleged chemical attack," *Reuters*, August 25, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-nusra-idUSBRE97006120130825>.

Badr al-Ghazali, captured earlier in Latakia.²⁸ It also carried out several bombings in coordination with al-Qaida's Abdullah Azzam Brigades against pro-Hezbollah areas of Lebanon.

Amid these very public developments, Jabhat al-Nusra was also in the midst of covertly welcoming at least two dozen senior al-Qaida leaders from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and even Europe. Reportedly ordered to Syria by al-Zawahiri,²⁹ jihadi figures like Ahmed Salameh Mabruk (Abu Faraj al-Masri), Abdel Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh (Sanafi al-Nasr), Mohsen al-Fadhli, Said Arif, Abu Firas al-Suri, and Abu Hammam al-Suri bolstered Jabhat al-Nusra's jihadi credibility amid ISIS's arrival.

Up until this point, a majority of Jabhat al-Nusra's senior leadership had some extent of historical connection to ISIS and its predecessors in Iraq, but the arrival of core and 'old guard' al-Qaida veterans with decades of experience from other jihadi zones represented an invaluable source of jihadi credibility in differentiating Jabhat al-Nusra from its dangerous competitor, ISIS.

The emergence of Mabruk in particular pointed to al-Zawahiri's own attempts to empower al-Qaida's Syrian affiliate as the most valued new front for the global movement's leadership. Mabruk's involvement in jihadi militancy dated back at least to the 1970s and to Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, the Russian North Caucasus, and Azerbaijan. In the 1990s, Mabruk had been al-Zawahiri's "closest political confidant," and when his computer was captured and cloned by the CIA in Baku, it was described as the "Rosetta Stone of Al-Qaeda."³⁰ Tied with Sharikh (a senior al-Qaida strategist and leader of its Victory Committee), Fadhli (al-

Qaida's former leader in Iran), Abu Firas al-Suri (Bin Laden's former envoy in Pakistan) and others, there was no denying the scale and symbolic significance of such a transfer of leadership resources to Syria.

January–August 2014: War with ISIS

By the end of 2013, ISIS had become an overtly hostile adversary of Syria's opposition, including Jabhat al-Nusra's long-time Salafist ally Ahrar al-Sham. Consequently, as 2014 began, Syria's opposition launched a wholesale offensive against ISIS positions across northern Syria, eventually forcing the group to withdraw from four-and-a-half governorates by mid-March 2014. Inevitably, despite its best attempts at facilitating mediation and a ceasefire, Jabhat al-Nusra was drawn into fighting against ISIS and consequently into a phase of outright competition with ISIS for 'true' jihadi credibility in Syria.

Meanwhile, despite publicly calling for a cessation of *fitna* (infighting), al-Zawahiri remained consistently on Jabhat al-Nusra's side and by early-February 2014, the al-Qaida leader had renounced any and all organizational links to ISIS and its leadership.³¹ By the end of the month, an ISIS suicide squad had assassinated Mohammed Bahaiah (Abu Khaled al-Suri)—a veteran jihadi figure closely linked to al-Qaida and its famed strategist Abu Musab al-Suri, who had been a senior commander in Ahrar al-Sham in Aleppo.³² That effectively cemented the state of hostility between the world's two great jihadi powers.

Jabhat al-Nusra—and indeed Syria more broadly—thus found itself at the heart of a major international struggle for supremacy within the

28. "Syria rebels seize strategic town, execute Alawite cleric; activists," *Reuters*, August 26, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-rebels-idUSBRE97P0FG20130826>.

29. Abu Jarir al-Shamali, "Al Qaida of Waziristan: A Testimony from Within," *Dabiq*, Issue 6, 40–55.

30. Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 268–269.

31. Liz Sly, "Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical ISIS group in Syria, Iraq," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html.

32. "Syria rebel leader Abu Khaled al-Suri killed in Aleppo," *BBC News*, February 24, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26318646>.

jihadi world. Jabhat al-Nusra continued attacks against Hezbollah inside Lebanon and helped lead a high-profile offensive into the regime's Latakia heartlands, reaching the Mediterranean for the first time. ISIS meanwhile was unilaterally fighting for and controlling territory to achieve its Islamic State project. It frequently accused Jabhat al-Nusra of having betrayed the Salafi-jihadi cause by siding with 'unbelievers.' ISIS's dramatic gains in Iraq in the summer of 2014 and its subsequent proclamation of a Caliphate laid down a formidable gauntlet to al-Qaida, whose gradualist approach towards Islamic rule could not compete with ISIS's spectacular claimed results.

Faced with this challenge, Jolani retained Jabhat al-Nusra's comparatively pragmatic stance by remaining embedded within Syrian revolutionary dynamics, while also initiating a gradual parallel process of hardening his group's ideological mores vis-à-vis the opposition and civilian populations. This latter process of gradually revealing al-Qaida's face in places like Idlib and Aleppo in northern Syria and in areas of Deraa in the south was not so much a sign of confidence, but an illustration of the need for Jabhat al-Nusra to demonstrate its theological standing to those watching ISIS building a 'state' project in Syria.

Despite the challenge posed by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra's preeminent position within the Syrian opposition dynamic remained firmly in place, thanks in large part to the urgency of battle with the Assad regime. However, while the establishment of a number of prominent Western-backed FSA alliances across Syria in late 2013 and early 2014 had already raised some eyebrows within Jabhat al-Nusra circles, the arrival of American-made BGM-71 TOW anti-tank guided missiles in April 2014 had represented an unprecedented message of U.S. insertion of influence.³³ All groups receiv-

ing these TOWs had been vetted by the CIA and received their support through multinational 'operations rooms' in Jordan (the "MOC") and Turkey (the "MOM"). That all these groups and all of Syria's major Islamist opposition factions then signed up to a broader unity initiative known as Wa'tasimo and signed a 'Revolutionary Covenant' that excluded any call for Islamic law³⁴ painted, at the time, a new and threatening picture to al-Qaida's Syrian affiliate.³⁵

By the end of the summer, Jabhat al-Nusra had effectively lost control of its core financial stronghold in Deir ez Zour to an ISIS onslaught accelerated thanks to its gains in Iraq and the Caliphate announcement. Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, who had run operations in eastern Syria as Jolani's de facto deputy, was forced to flee along with his cohort to southern Syria. Shortly afterwards, he was demoted and replaced by Jordanian hardliner Dr. Sami al-Oraydi,³⁶ who himself maintained close contact with senior al-Qaida-linked ideologues in Jordan, including Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada al-Filistini.

This marked an extremely consequential pivot point for the ideological nature of Jabhat al-Nusra's senior leadership. Building on the gradual revelation of Jabhat al-Nusra's al-Qaida 'face,' leadership figures became more willing to overtly call for Islamic law and to censure anyone with links to the West, while relative pragmatists like Abu Mariya and Saleh al-Hamawi were sidelined. This overt leadership shift and increasing assertiveness was operationalized most clearly in Idlib, where Jabhat al-Nusra chose to invest substantial resources in order to revitalize its long-term project in Syria.

It was in Idlib that tensions began brewing between Jabhat al-Nusra and several U.S.-backed FSA fac-

33. Charles Lister, "American Anti-Tank Weapons Appear in Syrian Rebel Hands," *Huffington Post*, June 9, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/charles-lister/american-anti-tank-weapon_b_5119255.html.

34. "Syria Document: Insurgents Issue 'Revolutionary Covenant,'" *EA Worldview*, May 18, 2014, <http://eaworldview.com/2014/05/syria-document-insurgents-issue-revolutionary-covenant/>.

35. Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front rejects Syrian rebels' revolutionary covenant," *Long War Journal*, May 22, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/05/al_nusrah_front_reje.php.

36. Charles Lister, "An Internal Struggle: Al-Qaeda's Syrian Affiliate is Grappling With Its Identity," *Huffington Post*, May 31, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/charles-lister/an-internal-struggle-al-q_b_7479730.html.

tions, including the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF). Meanwhile, an audio recording of Jolani speaking in rural Aleppo calling for the eventual establishment of multiple Islamic Emirates in Syria was leaked,³⁷ almost certainly on purpose. The group also helped capture a UN-controlled border crossing with the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, where they briefly took United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) peacekeepers hostage. For a time at least, and despite the very real and damaging defeats dealt to it by ISIS, the ‘real’ Jabhat al-Nusra appeared to be confidently re-emerging into the open.

September 2014–September 2015: Jabhat al-Nusra rises

As September 2014 began, the world’s attention was focused once again on ISIS, which was seeking to exact revenge on the West for its intervention in Iraq by publicly beheading Western hostages in Syria in darkly choreographed videos. Intriguingly, the now well-established relationship of hostile rivalry between ISIS and al-Qaida saw itself realized by way of several cases where Jabhat al-Nusra commanders and al-Qaida ideologues abroad attempted—ultimately unsuccessfully—to intervene and secure the release of these hostages, specifically British national Alan Henning³⁸ and American citizen Peter Kassig.³⁹

By the end of September, however, the United States had begun airstrikes in Syria, against both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. With regards to the latter, the United States claimed to be targeting an al-Qaida external operations unit led by Fad-

li and known as the “Khorasan Group.” On the ground and in practical reality, the distinction from Jabhat al-Nusra mattered little. Fadhli and other experienced al-Qaida veterans were part and parcel of Jabhat al-Nusra’s structure. The air strikes against them were perceived by the group and indeed by the broader mainstream Syrian opposition as strikes against Jabhat al-Nusra, and thus, as against the revolution.

In deference to Jabhat al-Nusra’s still largely positive reputation within the armed opposition, and in denial of U.S. accusations that it was involved in plotting external attacks, Syria’s opposition protested aggressively against the strikes.⁴⁰ This included groups vetted and supported by the United States, like Harakat Hazm who labelled the strikes as “an attack against our national sovereignty” and Jaish al-Mujahideen who claimed they were “a conspiracy against the revolution.”⁴¹ Once again, the world was faced with insurmountable evidence of the success of Jabhat al-Nusra’s consistent strategy of embedding itself within opposition dynamics and the revolution in Syria.

The existence of the so-called “Khorasan Group” was important, in so far as it signified the expansion of al-Qaida’s operational objectives in Syria. The deployment of highly experienced figures like Fadhli, as well as Abu Waf’a al-Saudi (a former al-Qaida counterintelligence chief), Abu Yusuf al-Turki, and Abu Hajar al-Masri (both specialist military trainers), and French-Algerian national Said Arif (a former Algerian army officer & Afghanistan veteran) signified the addition of

37. Thomas Joscelyn, “Leaked audio features Al Nusra Front emir discussing creation of an Islamic emirate,” *Long War Journal*, July 12, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/leaked_audio_of_al.php.

38. Tom Harper, “Alan Henning: Al-Qaeda appealed to ISIS to release British aid worker following kidnap,” *The Independent*, September 15, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/alan-henning-al-qaeda-appealed-to-isis-to-release-british-aid-worker-following-kidnap-9734598.html>.

39. Shiv Malik, Ali Younes, Spencer Ackerman, & Mustafa Khalili, “The Race to Save Peter Kassig,” *The Guardian*, December 18, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2014/dec/18/-sp-the-race-to-save-peter-kassig>; Ruth Sherlock & Richard Spencer, “Senior Al-Qaeda Jihadist Asks ISIS To Spare The Life Of Peter Kassig, The Former Army Ranger Taken Hostage,” *The Telegraph*, October 22, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/al-qaeda-jihadist-peter-kassig-2014-10>.

40. Siobhan Gorman & Maria Abi-Habib, “Syria airstrikes roil rebel alliances,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 27, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/airstrikes-in-syria-roil-rebel-alliances-1411773506>; Tom Perry, “US-led air strikes pose problem for Assad’s moderate foes,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels-insight-idUSKCN0HPOBE20140930>; Clarissa Ward, “Fighting ISIS: US counting on moderate rebel force,” *CBS News*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/fighting-isis-u-s-counting-on-moderate-rebel-force/>.

41. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 292.

a particular skill set into Jabhat al-Nusra's ranks in northern Syria. Western intelligence officials involved in monitoring the group's activities throughout 2014–2015 remain insistent that this cell had been dedicated to external operations, specifically revealing “concrete attack planning” that had taken place in Idlib and Aleppo through the summer of 2014 and in loose coordination with figures within AQAP in Yemen.⁴²

Ultimately however, the brief emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra's transnational foundations, the assertion of its emirate intentions for Syria, and its increasingly self-assertive behavior in Idlib and Aleppo sparked an internally-driven partial re-moderation to ensure the group's long-held prominence. A secret letter from al-Zawahiri in early 2015 first revealed by this author specifically ordered Jolani to “better integrate his movement within the Syrian revolution and its people; to coordinate more closely with all Islamic groups on the ground; to contribute towards the establishment of a Syria-wide Sharia judicial court system; to use strategic areas of the country to build a sustainable Al-Qaeda power base; and to cease any activity linked to attacking the West.”⁴³

Those instructions made their way to Fadhli and his “Khorasan” cohorts, most of whom obeyed and re-integrated themselves into major offensives in Idlib starting in mid-March 2015. However, several others—including Said Arif, who split to take on the military command of Jund al-Aqsa—refused and continued to face U.S. airstrikes into the summer.⁴⁴ Whether he was still plotting or not, Fadhli's death in early July 2015 signified the effective dissolution of Jabhat al-Nusra's first Syria-based external operations wing.

Although very real, Jabhat al-Nusra's re-moderation was only partial. The decision to cease

external attack plotting was undertaken solely for strategic reasons—so as to avoid any deleterious backlash. While al-Zawahiri's secret letter ultimately forced the cessation of such plotting, Jabhat al-Nusra had already received a similar instruction through senior al-Qaida leader Abu Yahya al-Libi in late 2014 that suggested foreign attacks would give the West an excuse to intervene in Syria and to attack Jabhat al-Nusra, destroying its plans for the country.⁴⁵ At the same time, however, other senior Jabhat al-Nusra leaders were proclaiming their eventual intent to attack the West as part of al-Qaida's international strategy. But as Idlib spokesman Abu Azzam al-Ansari explained, it would be Jabhat al-Nusra's decision to “decide when and where.”⁴⁶

Guided by its more theologically-focused conservative leadership, Jabhat al-Nusra continued to confidently assert its beliefs and expectations, albeit at a more gradual pace. In line with al-Zawahiri's orders, Jabhat al-Nusra established a new Sharia court system, known as Dar al-Qadaa, which emerged as competition for pre-existing mainstream opposition “revolutionary commission” structures. Frequently acting on the orders of Dar al-Qadaa judges, Jabhat al-Nusra fighters began arresting FSA leaders accused of corruption, having already militarily defeated two major U.S.-backed FSA groups—the SRF (in late October 2014) and Harakat Hazm (in March 2015)—whom it had accused of similar charges. One unit of Jabhat al-Nusra gunmen massacred 20 Druze civilians in Idlib in June 2015, while the first batch of the ill-thought-out \$500 million U.S. Department of Defense Train and Equip Program were attacked by Jabhat al-Nusra within 24 hours of their activation in mid-July 2015. As if to underline this new conservative and assertive face, Jabhat al-Nusra's Majlis al-Shura also expelled founding member Sheikh Saleh al-Hamawi in

42. Discussions with Western intelligence officials, 2014–2015.

43. Lister, “An Internal Struggle,” May 31, 2015.

44. Ibid.

45. Yasir Abbas, “Another ‘State’ of Hate: Al-Nusra's Quest to Establish an Islamic Emirate in the Levant,” *Hudson Institute*, April 29, 2016, <http://www.hudson.org/research/12454-another-state-of-hate-al-nusra-s-quest-to-establish-an-islamic-emirate-in-the-levant>.

46. Ibid.

July 2015 for too openly questioning the group's increasingly aggressive practices.

Within this broader context of Jabhat al-Nusra's authoritative emergence, the group's lead military role in the Jaish al-Fateh coalition's all-out conquering of Idlib governorate from March to September 2015 presented significant opportunities. Despite Jolani's insistence at the time that Idlib would not be ruled by any single party,⁴⁷ within the scope of the group's long-term strategy, it was clear to all concerned that Idlib had undoubtedly become of critical importance to the group.

On the more conservative end of the Syrian opposition spectrum, Ahrar al-Sham thus set about asserting its own intent to influence the governance of 'liberated' areas of Idlib, while intensifying its public outreach to the West, through a series of high-profile op-eds.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the mainstream FSA continued to benefit from a steady flow of U.S.-made TOW missiles and received a quiet green light from the MOM in Turkey to engage indirectly in assisting Jaish al-Fateh gains in Idlib.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, while Syria's opposition was becoming discernibly more conscious of and privately concerned with Jabhat al-Nusra's growing influence and long-term intentions, so long as military matters remained a priority, Jabhat al-Nusra's battlefield prowess and strategic smarts ensured it would remain indispensable.

October 2015–present: Russian intervention & emerging tensions

Russia's military intervention in Syria in late September 2015 came to dramatically transform the

balance of power in Syria, rescuing the Assad regime from what officials in both Moscow and Tehran feared were the grips of defeat.⁵⁰ Although its airstrikes focused on specific conflict fronts rather than certain groups, Jabhat al-Nusra's prominence and its 'marbling' within broader opposition dynamics saw it frequently targeted, particularly in Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo. By early February 2016, pro-regime forces had won some victories in northern and southern Aleppo, as well as in southern Syria's Deraa governorate and in northern Hama. Sustained and intensely heavy bombardment from both ground and air placed opposition forces definitively on the back foot.

Although a threat to its territorial interests, Russia's intervention and the resulting political process launched in Vienna, Munich, and Geneva initially presented an opportunity for Jabhat al-Nusra. The absolute immediacy of battle and the poor prospects for political progress meant Jabhat al-Nusra's consistent message that politics could not solve an existential war for the protection of Sunni Muslims in Syria would presumably eventually ring true within opposition circles. Moreover, the entrance of Russian military assets into the Syrian conflict had brought back to life the anti-Russian jihad that al-Qaida's 21st century foot-soldiers looked back on as a foundational development in inspiring their movement's birth. The arrival of senior al-Qaida figure Saif al-Adel in Syria in late 2015⁵¹ after his release from Iran added further to the sense within Jabhat al-Nusra that its fight in Syria was inherently linked to Sunni jihad's famed past. This had already been a theme of Jabhat al-Nusra's extensive "Heirs of Glory" video in June 2015 and was later built upon further in a second installment released in March 2016.

47. Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front leader preaches jihadist unity in Idlib," *Long War Journal*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/04/al-nusrah-front-leader-preaches-jihadist-unity-in-idlib.php>.

48. Labib Al Nahhas, "The deadly consequences of mislabeling Syria's revolutionaries," *Washington Post*, July 10, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-deadly-consequences-of-mislabeling-syrias-revolutionaries/2015/07/10/6dec139e-266e-11e5-aae2-6c4f59b050aa_story.html; Labib Al Nahhas, "I'm a Syrian and I fight ISIL every day. It will take more than bombs from the West to defeat this menace," *The Telegraph*, July 21, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11752714/Im-a-Syrian-and-I-fight-Isil-every-day-We-need-more-than-bombs-from-the-West-to-win-this-battle.html>.

49. Charles Lister, "Why Assad is Losing," *Foreign Policy*, May 5, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/05/why-assad-is-losing-syria-islamists-saudi/>.

50. Author's discussions with senior Western political and security officials, January–March 2016.

51. Discussions with senior Salafist military commanders, March 2016.

Seeking to take advantage of this apparent opportunity, Jabhat al-Nusra entered into secret talks with Jaish al-Fateh members in Idlib, calling for a large-scale merger. At an initial meeting of the group's respective leaders in mid-January 2016, Jolani proposed the merger and suggested Jabhat al-Nusra would, if necessary, be willing to cede both its name and leadership. Ahrar al-Sham's insistence upon Jolani breaking entirely his ties to al-Qaida brought the meeting to a close and prompted a long-drawn out deliberation. By mid-February, sources within the secret discussions reported to this author that Jolani had revealed that he would potentially consider breaking his *bay'a* to al-Zawahiri, in exchange for a full-scale merger and integration into broader opposition forces and an assurance that his *muhajireen* (foreign fighters) would be protected from any future threats. The sources claimed the deal had a 50-50 chance of success at the time.⁵²

However, Jabhat al-Nusra's opportunism was overtaken by the international community's investment in the political process, which resulted in the initiation of a cessation of hostilities in late February 2016. Once it had gained traction, this significant reduction in conflict re-empowered the mainstream opposition and civilian activists to return to the streets and trumpet the revolution's moderate demands for freedom. In Idlib, these protests and their overt expressions of support for local FSA groups undermined Jabhat al-Nusra's authority and provoked occasional aggressive reactions.

Simply put, the cessation of hostilities had revealed that Jabhat al-Nusra's inter-dependent relationship with the opposition and with civilians was inherently linked to military conflict. The absence of fighting meant that mainstream Syrians lost any reason to turn a blind eye to the presence and behaviors of extremist elements. By

late March, tensions continued to rise between Jabhat al-Nusra and the FSA, especially in the town of Marat al-Numan, where the U.S.-backed 13th Division provoked the wrath of Syria's al-Qaida affiliate and sparked well-over 120 days of continuous protests by mid-July 2016.⁵³

Nevertheless, as the cessation of hostilities gradually broke down and conflict re-assumed 2015 levels of intensity, Jabhat al-Nusra ensured it retained its influence and leverage over Syria's opposition. Through March 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra convened talks with opposition groups in Latakia, Aleppo, Idlib, and northern Hama, and by early April, multi-group offensives were launched in all four locations. In Aleppo's southern countryside, Jabhat al-Nusra coordinated a series of substantial territorial gains against the Assad regime in May and June 2016. It also resumed discussions with Islamists across northern Syria regarding the feasibility of an eventual establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Idlib, although these discussions provoked more backlash than support.⁵⁴

Focus thus shifted back to the military sphere, with Jabhat al-Nusra exploiting the apparent failure of international attempts to sustain a political process by recruiting at least 3,000 Syrians into its ranks between February and June 2016. Little appeared to stand in the way of a jihadi movement on a continued upward trajectory.

In July 2016, however, the U.S. government issued a proposal to Russia to establish a Joint Implementation Group (JIG) in Amman, Jordan, which would be ultimately responsible for coordinating air operations against Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. That the Obama administration had elevated Jabhat al-Nusra into a high-profile policy priority was a wholly justified—though highly overdue—calculation. However, the rapid deterioration of conditions on the ground in Syria and the Assad

52. Discussions with senior Syrian Islamists, February 2016.

53. Zuhour Mahmoud, "Maarat al-Numan: the thorn in al-Nusra's side," *Syria Deeply*, June 24, 2016, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/06/24/maarat-al-numan-the-thorn-in-al-nusras-side>.

54. Charles Lister, "Al Qaeda is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria," *Foreign Policy*, May 4, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/04/al-qaeda-is-about-to-establish-an-emirate-in-northern-syria/>.

regime's de facto imposition of a siege on Aleppo city meant external intervention against Jabhat al-Nusra was highly likely to be perceived by Syria's mainstream opposition as a hostile move against their revolution. Moreover, a military alliance between the United States and Russia had the potential to cripple any hope of the United States retaining any viable influence over even the most moderate opposition elements.

Amid such international machinations, a group of independent and influential Syrian Islamic figures—some closely linked to Turkey—re-intensified efforts to encourage pliable portions of Jabhat al-Nusra to defect from al-Qaida. A series of meetings were held in Idlib and Aleppo through early July in which a new Islamist movement was proposed: Al-Harakat al-Islamiya al-Souriya, or the Syrian Islamic Movement. According to two figures involved in the meetings, dismissed Jabhat al-Nusra founding member Sheikh Saleh al-Hamawi was centrally involved in the debate, alongside Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, another founding member. Jabhat al-Nusra's emir in Aleppo, Abdullah al-Sanadi, was also allegedly supportive of breaking ties. Although such discussions had begun as early as late 2014, it was hard not to see the intensification of debate as linked to the threat of an external military campaign against Jabhat al-Nusra.

Faced by this threat, Jabhat al-Nusra's chief spokesman Abu Amr al-Shami commented publicly that the United States was fabricating "flimsy reasons and false claims to condition public opinion" against the group and that "in the interest of keeping the Syrian jihad ongoing and strong, all other desirable interests, including targeting the West and America, fall away and disappear."⁵⁵ The design of such comments encapsulated Jabhat al-Nusra's long game approach astutely—revealing the prioritization of succeeding in immediate revolutionary interests in order to pave a path for

a future broadening of one's strategic vision to incorporate attacking the 'far enemy.'

As Abu Amr issued his public comments, the group's Majlis al-Shura allegedly met several times to discuss again the potential breaking of ties from al-Qaida.⁵⁶ With a consequential amount of foreign airpower potentially set to bear down on its positions in Syria, some within Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership saw this as an opportune time to further embed into the Syrian revolution by way of proposing a grand merger in exchange for separating from al-Qaida, and to complicate U.S.-Russian plans to combat 'al-Qaida's' affiliate in the country. Doing so could provide regional states with a more credible excuse to provide support to Jabhat al-Nusra's role in fighting the Assad regime, making international intervention against the group that much more challenging. Perhaps most significantly, Jabhat al-Nusra would be granting Syrian oppositionists their longest-held demand of the group, thus clearing the way for potential force mergers, most notably with the powerful Ahrar al-Sham.

While it still remained difficult to imagine some of Jabhat al-Nusra's most senior figures suddenly renouncing their years or decades-long allegiances to the al-Qaida brand, the possibility that such a move could be made as part of a broader re-orientation of al-Qaida's global modus operandi was nonetheless feasible. Even al-Zawahiri himself had spoken openly of the potential value of an independent Jabhat al-Nusra further solidifying its position in Syria, such that one day its own Emirate or state project could represent the central effort of an international jihadi project founded by al-Qaida. Ultimately therefore, if Jabhat al-Nusra was eventually to choose to break its ties with al-Qaida, doing so seemed likely to only further strengthen the al-Qaida-inspired jihadist project in Syria.

55. Sam Heller, "Jabhat al-Nusra Media Official: 'A comment on David Ignatius' article in the Washington Post,'" *Abu al-Jamajem*, July 21, 2016, <https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2016/07/21/jabhat-al-nusra-media-official-a-comment-on-david-ignatius-article-in-the-washington-post/>.

56. Author interviews, July 2016.

PART II

Jabhat al-Nusra today

Ideology & strategic vision

Jabhat al-Nusra aims to epitomize the realization of al-Qaida's evolved thinking under al-Zawahiri, whereby affiliates seek to enter into local wars and to embed within popular revolutionary dynamics in order to establish a durable presence from which to realize the long-term vision of establishing Islamic Emirates and eventually, a Caliphate. Consequently, the Syrian revolution is seen as a socio-political development emerging out of failed secular rule and necessitating an Islamic solution, namely jihad and the establishment of just Islamic rule. Despite, or perhaps as a result of its roots in AQI, Jolani appears conscious of implementing lessons learned from Iraq, where brutality and a unilateral imposition of law resulted in a popular rejection of the ISI. In short, Jabhat al-Nusra is playing a long tactical game in Syria, aiming to achieve major strategic objectives.

Jabhat al-Nusra has been explicitly clear about its religio-political objectives since 2012, when it identified itself as a movement devoted to *nusra* *ahl al-sham* (support for the people of the Levant). While its earliest statements also made clear reference to its intention to impose 'God's law on Earth,' the group itself has adopted a versatile and pragmatic strategy aimed at achieving continual short-term tactical progress towards its long-term extremist goals. In other words, Jabhat al-Nusra "is able to flex and adapt to variegated local environments, often deliberately obscuring its long-term goals in pursuit of short-term strategic objectives."⁵⁷

While Jolani himself conceded in December 2013 that "Al-Sham was not prepared for our entry had it not been for the Syrian revolution,"⁵⁸ the exploitation of instability in his homeland

was seen as a God-given opportunity. Syria after all—or more broadly the Levantine region known as *Bilad al-Sham*—is the much prophesied land loved by Allah. Several hadith point to the importance of Al-Sham, which Jolani cited in Jabhat al-Nusra's founding video. In that opening statement, Jolani announced that his mission was "bringing the law of Allah back to His land."⁵⁹ As per al-Zawahiri's orders, an Islamic system of government should one day be established in Syria through consultation with other Islamic factions and the ulema, so that "the Sharia of Almighty governs."⁶⁰

In addition to abiding by tenets espoused by al-Qaida's leader al-Zawahiri, Jabhat al-Nusra also ties itself closely to a particularly Syrian brand of Salafi-jihadism, developed and taught by figures like Marwan Hadid and Abu Musab al-Suri. While the former enjoys the reputation of founding father of modern-day Syrian jihadism, having led an armed uprising against Hafez Assad in the 1960–1970s, the writings of famed al-Qaida strategic ideologue Abu Musab al-Suri can be seen throughout Jabhat al-Nusra's nuts and bolts. Even Jabhat al-Nusra's name appears influenced by al-Suri's famous line, "from the blessed Syria in the 1960s was the beginning of the movement of Jihad; in Syria, [jihad] has prospered during the 1980s, and to Syria, [it] returns today, God willing, al-Nusra! Al-Nusra! Oh, brothers of Jihad!"⁶¹

By emphasizing its 'Syria' focus, Jabhat al-Nusra seeks to placate concerns regarding the transnational goals of its al-Qaida organizational loyalties and heritage. Localism, however, is merely a temporary strategic mechanism through which Jabhat al-Nusra's more long-term objectives for multiple Islamic Emirates and ultimately an al-Qaida Caliphate can one day be realized.

57. Abbas, "Another 'State' of Hate," April 29, 2016.

58. "Syria's Al-Nusra Front leader interviewed on conflict, political vision," *BBC Monitoring*, December 22, 2013.

59. Noman Benotman & Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra: A Strategic Briefing," *Quilliam Foundation*, January 8, 2013, <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>.

60. Thomas Joscelyn, "The Al Nusra Front's 'inherited jihad,'" *The Long War Journal*, June 5, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/inheritedjihad.php>.

61. Sami Moubayed, *Under the Black Flag: At the Frontier of the New Jihad* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 69.

The pursuit of Emirates became—at least for a time—a more focused facet of Jabhat al-Nusra operations between late 2015 and mid-2016. Having secured Idlib as a significant stronghold, senior Jabhat al-Nusra figures began a quiet process of early consultation with influential Islamists in northern Syria. “The response was very negative... Syrians do not want an Emirate,” one influential Islamist figure told this author. “Since then, al-Nusra has refocused the consultation to within its own community, as that experience made some of al-Nusra’s Shura Council want to wait longer, while others say it is their right to do it now. It is a very difficult discussion.”⁶²

Jabhat al-Nusra thus refocused much of its energies on resolving internal differences regarding the timing of an Emirate formation and on intensifying conflict dynamics across Syria. The former issue has been of particular significance since the arrival to Syria of senior al-Qaida figure Saif al-Adel, a former Egyptian Special Forces officer. “Saif al-Adel is here to ensure that Zawahiri’s project in Syria is realized,” a prominent Salafist figure in Idlib told this author. “Al-Sham has become everything to al-Qaida’s global strategy.” Three other major al-Qaida leaders have accompanied al-Adel to Syria, including two Egyptians, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah (Abu Mohammed al-Masri) and Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, both of whom have been implicated in the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in East Africa. Al-Khayr is married to one of Osama bin Laden’s daughters. The third figure is Palestinian-Jordanian Khaled al-Arouri, who is married to one of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s daughters.

Since Adel’s arrival, differing strategic opinions within Jabhat al-Nusra’s leadership have been revealed and in response, a series of mediations have taken place in Idlib and Aleppo, facilitated by senior jihadis who are linked to but not formal members of al-Qaida. One such individual, Rifai Taha, was killed in a U.S. drone strike

shortly after one such mediation meeting.⁶³ Taha had also been involved in a broader effort to mediate differences of opinion between Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, not solely limited to the Emirate deliberation, but also to al-Qaida’s role within Syria, which Ahrar al-Sham remains strongly opposed to.

That dynamic surrounding Jabhat al-Nusra’s ties to al-Qaida revealed itself again in July 2016, as the group’s leadership in Syria considered the potential benefits of organizational independence in embedding further into Syrian revolutionary dynamics as a protective mechanism against international intervention. Although the outcome of such discussions remained unclear at the time of writing, the underlying strategy behind it being considered remained the same: Jabhat al-Nusra’s long game approach in Syria seeks above all else to diffuse an al-Qaida-like narrative and Islamic vision within the broader revolution and opposition. Whether strictly loyal to al-Qaida’s central leadership or not, the fundamental ideas driving Jabhat al-Nusra’s activities in Syria remain the same.

Notwithstanding such substantial consultations and deliberations, as Jabhat al-Nusra has gained in confidence in northern Syria, senior figures have had to further adapt the face of their organization to avoid stirring opposition. Non-Syrian Jabhat al-Nusra militants are frequently discouraged from serving in local religious police units and behavioral enforcement forces and instead are pushed to focus their energies on less public activities. In northern Hama, where the balance of power between opposition and Assad regime forces is delicate and territory frequently changes hands, Jabhat al-Nusra has consciously appointed Syrians into positions of operational command, situating them as the group’s public face. Foreigners, meanwhile, are promoted higher up the chain of command where they are seen less, but ultimately make the strategic-level decisions.⁶⁴

62. Lister, “Al Qaeda is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria,” May 4, 2016.

63. Ibid.

64. Abbas, “Another ‘State’ of Hate,” April 29, 2016.

While ISIS's success and proclamation of a Caliphate did pose a challenge to Jabhat al-Nusra's jihadi credibility and sparked a necessary hardening of its theological positioning in Syria, the organization remains markedly different to ISIS in terms of the scale and scope of its non-military behaviors.

Faced by the momentum and attention won by ISIS's Caliphate proclamation and subsequent expansion, Jabhat al-Nusra has repeatedly sought to emphasize its ideological and structural links to past jihadi struggles. Jolani and other senior leadership figures have frequently referred to Jabhat al-Nusra as but one component operating within an "inherited jihad" dating back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. As the group explained in a well-produced 43-minute video entitled *Heirs of Glory* in June 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra seeks to remind Muslims of Islam's renewed "resurgence"—"that if the era of our decline has lasted for almost two centuries, that once we used to lead this world for longer than twelve centuries."⁶⁵

More broadly, Jolani has shaped Jabhat al-Nusra into an organization that perceives itself as acting as a front for the Syrian people—to provide them with security, to meet their human needs, and to fight repression on their behalf. In so doing, Jolani aims to spark a rebirth in the Syrian people's thinking, towards accepting their existence in a pure Islamic society ruled by Sharia and integrally linked to the transnational Ummah. After two years of Jabhat al-Nusra operations, Jolani claimed to have already made progress in this strategy of socialization:

People in general and all factions are now within this framework and objective. Unlike what is being depicted, the Syrian society has indeed changed much. It is not the same pre-revolution society. There will be a historical mark of pre- and post-jihad in Al-Sham.⁶⁶

It is perhaps within this context that Jabhat al-Nusra's more assertive posture on the ground has begun to be translated in mid-2016 into more extreme opinions being offered to Syrian opposition society as a legitimate path forward. Most notably, Jabhat al-Nusra's religious chief and de facto deputy leader Dr. Sami al-Oraydi issued a lengthy speech on June 3, 2016, in which he appealed directly to the Syrian people and effectively called upon them to embrace an unforgivingly violent sectarian perspective against the country's Alawite population. Utilizing the words of historical Islamic ideologues, Oraydi exclaimed: "Proceed with [the Alawites] as you would with apostates... The land must be purged of them."⁶⁷

Jabhat al-Nusra's largely consistent pragmatic treatment of the mainstream opposition has also played into this strategy of populist integration. "Dr Ayman [al-Zawahiri], may God protect him, always tells us to meet with the other factions," Jolani said in late 2013. "We are committed to this and this is a basic part of the principles of jihadist work in general."⁶⁸

By providing a service to civilians (protective, military, humanitarian, etc.); by seeking positive relationships with the armed opposition; and by demonstrating effectiveness on the battlefield, Jabhat al-Nusra has made Syrians dependent on its continued constructive role in the revolution. While controversial, it unfortunately cannot be denied that for most Syrians supportive of the opposition cause, Jabhat al-Nusra is perceived as a more effective and loyal protector of their cause and lives than the United States and its allies in the West.

Jabhat al-Nusra's controlled pragmatism has its limits, however, as demonstrated by frequent attempts to undermine the Western world's capacity to acquire sources of influence, by neutraliz-

65. Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front celebrates 9/11 attacks in new video," *Long War Journal*, June 29, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/al-nusrah-front-celebrates-911-attacks-in-new-video.php>.

66. "Syria's Al-Nusrah Front leader interviewed on conflict, political vision," *BBC Monitoring*, December 22, 2013.

67. Sam Heller, "Al-Qaeda Speaks The Language of Syrian Sectarianism," *RFE/RL*, June 9, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/black-flag-syria-islamic-state-al-qaeda-sectarianism-alawites/27788931.html>.

68. *Ibid.*

ing its suspected proxies and sabotaging international political initiatives. Through this process of socialization and the manipulation of opposition mores, Jabhat al-Nusra retains the potential to spoil peace processes while genuinely claiming to “accept what the people accept.”⁶⁹

Jabhat al-Nusra’s flexible but self-assertive posture in Syria is not simply a reflection of shrewd strategizing. It is also an illustration of ideological tenets founded upon the pursuit of ‘*qital al-tamkin*,’ or a battle for the consolidation of one’s presence within territory.⁷⁰ A notable proponent of the importance of ‘*qital al-tamkin*’ is the Jordan-based jihadi ideologue Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, who has contended that as a collective action, ‘*qital al-tamkin*’ remains more important than the more individualistic ‘*qital al-nikaya*,’ or fighting to hurt the enemy and its interests.⁷¹ In other words, Maqdisi contends that jihad should focus on gradually acquiring territorial influence and support from the Muslim masses over an extended period of time, rather than seeking short-term victories in the form of limited acts of violence that bring with them only minimal strategic benefit.

Paired with the effective practice of ‘*riayat al-maslaha wa mani’ al-mafasid*,’ or minding one’s interests and avoiding spoilers,⁷² Jabhat al-Nusra acts in such a way as to advance the cause of transnational jihad within the confines of Syria, slowly enough as to sustainably grow and to avoid attracting powerful adversaries.

The internationally-mediated cessation of hostilities in Syria that began in late February 2016, however, revealed one serious flaw in Jabhat al-Nusra’s strategy—namely, the near-total reliance on intense levels of conflict to maintain its relationship of interdependence with the opposition and its civilian support base. Having slowly hardened its ideological stance since late 2014,

Jabhat al-Nusra’s governance model has steadily deviated from that of Syria’s opposition mainstream. With a sharp decline in conflict, that difference was made markedly clear. It was for precisely this reason that Jabhat al-Nusra encouraged opposition groups to re-activate their battle fronts, in order to reconstitute the mutual military interdependence that it so depends upon to attain its long-term objectives in Syria.

The Ahrar al-Sham alliance

A critically important component of Jabhat al-Nusra’s success in Syria has been its management of relations with the Syrian Salafist opposition group Ahrar al-Sham. Itself comprising ideological components variously linked to Salafi-jihadism, traditional Salafism, and a more mainstream political Islamism aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, Ahrar al-Sham has long been one of the most, if not the most powerful opposition group in Syria. Exploiting this preeminent status and the fact that Ahrar al-Sham has had within its senior command structure a number of former al-Qaida members, Jabhat al-Nusra has consistently sought to develop a particularly close and specifically *militarily* symbiotic relationship with the group.

On the battlefield, the alliance between Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham has arguably proven to be the most impactful and long-lasting cooperative relationship in the fight against the Assad regime. Perhaps the only obstacle to the two movements formally combining their forces has been Jabhat al-Nusra’s overt ties to al-Qaida. In hindsight and despite its more overtly nationalist agenda, Ahrar al-Sham has therefore proven to have been the greatest enabler of Jabhat al-Nusra’s sustained rise in influence in northern Syria, particularly with respect to the former’s positioning as an invaluable intermediary between al-Qaida’s Syrian affiliate and the more mainstream

69. Ibid.

70. Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 84.

71. Ibid.

72. Abbas, “Another ‘State’ of Hate,” April 29, 2016.

Syrian opposition. All of the most consequential opposition victories in Syria since late 2012 have included both these groups and every such victory has further solidified the broader opposition's sense of dependence upon Jabhat al-Nusra's role in their revolution.

Notwithstanding the importance of this relationship since late 2012, the intensification of international diplomatic efforts to 'solve' Syria in late 2015 and early 2016 and the resulting decline in hostilities has posed a substantial challenge to both Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham. While Jabhat al-Nusra's inherent reliance on intense conflict has been explained, failed attempts by more moderate elements of Ahrar al-Sham's leadership to demonstrate the value of reaching out to the West throughout 2015 re-empowered hardliners into early 2016, who went on to re-assert the importance of the alliance with Jabhat al-Nusra. Ahrar al-Sham's subsequent refusal to *publicly* engage with the political process pushed this state of internal affairs further, although the group's political office did maintain constant behind-the-scenes contact with the opposition's negotiating team.⁷³

By the summer of 2016, Ahrar al-Sham was effectively split down two ideological lines. On one side were those led publicly by leaders active within the Political and External Affairs bureaus—like brothers Kinan and Labib al-Nahhas (Abu Azzam al-Ansari and Abu Ezzeddine al-Ansari, respectively), Mohammed al-Absi (Abu Mustafa), Hossam Tarsha (Abu Omar al-Hamawi) and others—who continued to stress a need to demonstrate Ahrar al-Sham's overwhelming loyalty to the Syrian revolution and to sustain indirect contact with the political process. One such figure within this circle insisted to this author in June 2016 that "Ahrar al-Sham is currently the only force stopping al-Qaida in Syria, this is very important."⁷⁴

The other ideological current within Ahrar al-Sham has more subtly swayed towards furthering the alliance of military cooperation with Jabhat al-Nusra as part of a broader struggle to re-empower Islam. Ahrar al-Sham's current leader Mohannad al-Masri (Abu Yahya al-Hamawi), his deputy Ali al-Omar, and his military chief (until June 2016) Abu Saleh al-Tahhan have all represented, or failed to push back against this more hardline slant.

As the political process in Geneva struggled to acquire traction into the summer of 2016 and as conditions inside Syria continued to deteriorate, the latter more conservative 'current' assumed an increasingly vocal posture. In an hour-long lecture given in May 2016, Ahrar al-Sham deputy leader Ali al-Omar claimed that the value in engaging in political initiatives came as part of the Islamic concept of *takhtheel*, or subversion. He also praised the Taliban as a model Islamic project within its specific geographical context in Afghanistan.⁷⁵

The outcome of this Ahrar al-Sham internal struggle has the potential to have a profound impact upon Jabhat al-Nusra's future trajectory in Syria and goes some way towards explaining why the al-Qaida affiliate continued to push for a grand merger with allied groups in Idlib in March 2016 and to resume hostilities from April 2016 onwards.⁷⁶

That Ahrar al-Sham went on to announce substantial leadership changes in early June 2016 indicated that the group's internal struggle to define its own identity was not yet over. As a founding member of Ahrar al-Sham, Abu Khaled al-Shami was appointed as the group's new Political chief, taking over a post vacant since late 2015, when its former political leader Abu Abdulrahman al-Shami had moved to a new, on-the-ground political post in Aleppo city. Meanwhile, Ahrar al-Sham's hardline military leader Abu Saleh al-

73. Author interviews with three Ahrar al-Sham leaders, May–June 2016.

74. Author interview with senior Ahrar al-Sham leader, May 2016.

75. Hassan Hassan, "Jihadist Legacy Still Shapes Ahrar al-Sham," *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, June 3, 2016, <http://timep.org/commentary/jihadist-legacy-still-shapes-ahrar-al-sham/>.

76. According to discussions with Syrian Islamists based in Idlib and Aleppo, March 2016.

Tahhan reportedly “resigned,” and was replaced by another founding member, Munir al-Sayyal (Abu Abdullah). Both new appointments represented an expansion of Turkish and Qatari influence over and above individuals who had favored a more on-the-ground intensification of alliances with groups like Jabhat al-Nusra.

Ahrar al-Sham’s repeated reference to the Taliban as an example of a successful and praiseworthy Islamic project has attracted considerable attention and appears to justify concerns about the group’s hardline attitudes. Before Abu Ali al-Omar’s lengthy speech in May 2016, Ahrar al-Sham had also notoriously issued an August 1, 2015, statement mourning the death of Taliban founding leader Mullah Mohammed Omar.⁷⁷ One senior Ahrar al-Sham leader, when challenged on this point, claimed to this author:

The Taliban is the anti-al-Qaida example... The relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaida has been very misunderstood... [For Ahrar al-Sham] the appeal of what the Taliban did is to have been a nationalist movement that managed to unite a country within an Islamic project... but ideologically, Ahrar al-Sham are extremely different, while Syria and its people are also different to Afghanistan. The context is important.

Such nuanced arguments are unlikely to convince many Western policymakers of Ahrar al-Sham’s acceptability as an opposition actor, but they represent one of many subtle ideological differences that the group continues to hold with Jabhat al-Nusra.

Consequently, Jabhat al-Nusra’s prioritization of military matters as the focus of its relationship with Ahrar al-Sham is a reflection of the latter group’s internal complexities. While Ahrar al-Sh-

am has undoubtedly played a key role in empowering Jabhat al-Nusra within the Syrian context, it also remains the most vocal opponent of Jabhat al-Nusra’s ties to al-Qaida. As its then leader, for example, Hashem al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber) told Al Jazeera in March 2015 that Jabhat al-Nusra’s allegiance to al-Qaida endangered Syria’s people and the revolution’s cause.⁷⁸ Only days earlier, this author published comments from senior Ahrar al-Sham leaders complaining that Jabhat al-Nusra was leading the revolution “down the wrong path.”⁷⁹

On non-military matters such as governance and civil affairs, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham have frequently opposed each other and occasionally even violently clashed. The divergence between Jabhat al-Nusra’s gradualist approach to seeking al-Qaida-style jihadi rule and Ahrar al-Sham’s more nationally-focused blend of political Islamism, Salafism, and Salafi-jihadism has been particularly clear since late 2014 in Idlib and Aleppo.

“They have very different approaches to governance in Idlib’s liberated areas,” one opposition civil figure active in Marat al-Numan told this author. “But al-Nusra is more organized and patient, while Ahrar al-Sham is reluctant to cause problems by confronting al-Nusra’s methods.” Some suggest Jabhat al-Nusra is critical of Ahrar al-Sham’s governance capabilities and methods,⁸⁰ while senior Jabhat al-Nusra figures have openly castigated Ahrar al-Sham for its leadership makeup, links to foreign governments, and political positions.⁸¹

Following on from Jaish al-Fateh’s victories across Idlib in the first half of 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra’s gradualist approach saw itself realized in a slow infiltration of local governance activities. The town of Kafranabel was the first to fall victim to Jabhat al-Nusra’s assertion of influence, when it dismissed the town’s civil council in August 2015 and replaced it with a local majlis

77. Thomas Joscelyn, “Jihadists in Syria honor Mullah Omar, praise Taliban’s radical state,” *Long War Journal*, August 4, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/syrian-jihadists-honor-mullah-omar-praise-talibans-radical-state.php>.

78. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 392.

79. Lister, “Are Syrian Islamists moving to counterbalance Al-Qaeda? Will it last?” March 23, 2015.

80. Abbas, “Another ‘State’ of Hate,” April 29, 2016.

81. Abu Firas al-Suri, “Ana al-nadir al-arean, falnaja al-naj’a,” September 10, 2015.

al-shura manned by Jabhat al-Nusra members and loyalists. Shortly thereafter, Jabhat al-Nusra sought out the same objective in the small city of Saraqeb, but Ahrar al-Sham resisted the move, as it also had done months earlier in another Idlib town, Salqin.⁸²

Although one Idlib council member told researcher Yasser Abbas that “without Ahrar, al-Nusra would have taken over everything [in Idlib governorate],”⁸³ by early 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra and allied jihadi groups had nonetheless managed to acquire overwhelming influence over governance activities in Idlib city and in the towns of Ariha and Jisr al-Shughour, with strong influence in Marat al-Numan, Saraqeb, Salqin, Al-Dana, Darat Izza, and Darkoush.

Proceeding along its well-established gradualist approach that prioritizes *tamkin* and avoids creating challenges or rivals, Jabhat al-Nusra will seek to empower those within Ahrar al-Sham that see the most value in sustaining close and inter-dependent relations with it. Consequently, the potential emergence of Al-Harakat al-Islamiya al-Souriya (or Syrian Islamic Movement) as a Jabhat al-Nusra splinter faction founded by figures more ideologically close to Ahrar al-Sham and its regional backers (Turkey and Qatar) would signal a significant eruption of overt competition for influence. Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra will continue to spoil international diplomatic efforts to bring improved levels of stability to Syria and thus hamper the political process more broadly. By ensuring conflict prevails over peace, Jabhat al-Nusra will be weakening the influence of more moderate elements within Ahrar al-Sham and securing its long-term future in Syria, including potentially, its intended Emirate project.

Organization & structure

Jabhat al-Nusra is a tightly structured jihadi organization, led at the top by its Emir, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani and by his deputy and chief Shari'i, the Al-

Qadi al-A'am, Dr. Sami al-Oraydi. Encompassing the group's overall senior leadership is the twelve-member Majlis al-Shura, which includes several al-Qaida veterans, like Iyad Tubasi (Abu Julaybib), Abu Firas al-Suri (killed in April 2016), Ahmed Salameh Mabrak, and since his arrival in Syria in late 2015, the famed al-Qaida leader Saif al-Adel. It also includes Australian resident Mustafa Mohamed Farag (Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir), who intriguingly, rose rapidly up Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership ladder after arriving in Syria in 2013. Together, this leadership council is responsible for determining Jabhat al-Nusra's overall strategy and coordinating communications with the broader al-Qaida network.⁸⁴

Under this national structure sits Jabhat al-Nusra's seven provincial leadership commands, for Southern Syria, Damascus, Al-Badiya (Homs), Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia. Each province is run by a provincial Emir and a Dabet al-Shari'i, both of whom are responsible for Jabhat al-Nusra's activities in military, aid, Islamic, and mediation activities. They also delegate authority, especially in terms of everyday military operations, to a series of interlinked commanders deployed across the group's various fronts.

Following Jabhat al-Nusra's loss of eastern Syria to ISIS, the Emir of Southern Syria acquired a heightened level of authority. As of December 2015, the post had been filled by a Syrian commander, Abu Ahmed Akhlaq, whose roots in Damascus's al-Tadamon district and previous role in unifying southern Islamist groups into a southern Jaish al-Fateh coalition had seen him rise in stature.⁸⁵ Akhlaq's appointment followed a strategic redeployment of some of Jabhat al-Nusra's most senior leaders with veteran al-Qaida status from southern Syria to Idlib, where the group was investing in building its “safe base.” Sami al-Oraydi and Iyad Tubasi led that northward transfer, along with approximately 200 fighters.⁸⁶

82. Abbas, “Another ‘State’ of Hate,” April 29, 2016.

83. Ibid.

84. Author discussions with Syrian Islamists, January–February 2016.

85. Ibid.

86. Albin Szakola, “Nusra reshuffles leadership in south Syria,” *NOW*, December 23, 2015, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566404-nusra-reshuffles-leadership-in-south-syria>.

The subsequent appointment of Iyad Tubasi as Jabhat al-Nusra's emir in Latakia in late March 2016 symbolized the continued enhancement of its investment in bolstering its northwestern base. As an Afghanistan veteran and a former chief aide and brother-in-law to AQI founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Tubasi—better known as Abu Julaybib—added to an already heavy cadre of jihadi figures in Idlib and Latakia, including one of al-Qaida's biggest names, Saif al-Adel. Abu Julaybib had developed notoriety during his time in southern Syria, in particular for his role in plotting a series of assassinations of rival opposition figures, including al-Qaida veteran Abu Mohammed al-Masalama,⁸⁷ who had become closer to ISIS and even visited its capital in Raqqa prior to his killing in November 2014. Some well-connected Islamists even claim Abu Julaybib plotted an attack on fellow founding Jabhat al-Nusra member Abu Mariya al-Qahtani,⁸⁸ whose comparatively pragmatic stance has seen him lose favor within the al-Qaida affiliate from late 2014 onwards.

Crossing between the national, provincial, and local leadership structures are several Jabhat al-Nusra organizations with multi-level operational responsibilities. The group maintains a national Qism al-Ighatha (or Department of Relief) and Idarat al-Khidamat al-Ammah (Public Services Administration), which retain national leaders and deputies, but devolve most operations to the provincial emirs. Jabhat al-Nusra's central Treasury Council also exists on a national level, but is similarly divided into provincial departments, which oversee local financial activities and report to the national leadership. Finally, Jabhat al-Nusra also operates a special operations force known as Jaish al-Nusra, whose members are ordinarily selected out of training to operate within small rapid reaction units for the group's most strategically valuable operations.

Meanwhile, technically beyond Jabhat al-Nusra's independent structures but essentially an extension of them, lies the Dar al-Qadaa Islamic judicial system. Established in August 2014 following Jabhat al-Nusra's high-profile withdrawal from Aleppo's multi-group Al-Haya'a al-Sharia administration,⁸⁹ Dar al-Qadaa has since spread its authority throughout much of Jabhat al-Nusra's seven provincial commands, but remains heavily influenced by its own Sharia officials and thus minimally acknowledged by other opposition groups. Its formation shortly after ISIS's proclamation of a Caliphate was seen as an attempt to demonstrate Jabhat al-Nusra's Islamic credentials by way of ceasing power-sharing agreements with factions backed by the West that it deemed religiously impure, as had been the case in Aleppo.

By way of its continued integration within revolutionary dynamics, Jabhat al-Nusra also maintains a role within countless military operations rooms across Syria. However, following ISIS's dramatic public rise to prominence and the challenge this posed to Jabhat al-Nusra's jihadi credibility, the group has increasingly restricted direct military coordination in such operations rooms to groups with Islamic foundations. The largely Islamist Jaish al-Fateh coalitions in Idlib and southern Syria, as well as Jund al-Malahem and Jaish al-Fustat operations rooms in Eastern Ghouta are examples of this partial strategy shift.

On that same provincial and operational level, Jabhat al-Nusra has increasingly leveraged the activities of its Idarat al-Manateq al-Muharara (Liberated Districts Administration) as a source of attempted governance in populated areas captured from the Assad regime. Particularly in Idlib city and the nearby towns of Ariha and Jisr al-Shughour, Jabhat al-Nusra's efforts in centralizing the provision of electricity, water, and sanitation

87. According to discussions with two Salafist commanders, February 2016.

88. For example, by the well-known Islamist known as "Muzamjer al-Sham" on Twitter, here: <https://twitter.com/saleelalmajd1/status/713717364844589056?lang=en>.

89. "Dar al-Qada in its own words," *Goha's Nail Blog*, October 27, 2014, <https://gohasnaill.wordpress.com/2014/10/27/dar-al-qada-in-its-own-words/>.

as well as the collection of taxes and the management of other municipal government have been undertaken through this administrative body and independent of other opposition groups.⁹⁰

Finance

Unlike ISIS and its predecessor organizations in Iraq, which developed and now maintain nearly entirely independent sources of income originating within their territory, Jabhat al-Nusra operates as al-Qaida affiliates have traditionally done, in being heavily reliant on external sources of financial donations to sustain its operations. Also unlike ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra's activities in unilateral "state-style" governance are extremely limited, allowing it to operate on a significantly lower financial budget.

Prior to its split from the ISI in April 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra had enjoyed considerable financial support from its paternal organization, with 50% of its operating costs coming directly from Iraq. It also benefited from highly significant income streams from its control of oil fields in eastern and northeastern Syria. However, following the split and ISIS's subsequent conquering of eastern Syria and its capture of all of the group's oil and gas fields in mid-to-late 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra entered a period of major financial crisis. In a statement issued in February 2014, after sustaining early losses in the east, Jolani revealed that the loss of the Conoco gas field to ISIS earlier that month had lost it \$5 million alone.⁹¹

Consequently, Jabhat al-Nusra has been heavily reliant since late 2014 on external sources of funding from traditional al-Qaida facilitation networks based in the Gulf and Turkey. According to U.S. Treasury designations of individu-

als accused of alleged involvement in financially supporting Jabhat al-Nusra from outside of Syrian territory, the majority—seven of ten—are Kuwaitis based in Kuwait, with the remaining three being a Jordanian currently in prison in Lebanon, a Turk in Turkey, and a Qatari in Qatar.⁹² While impossible to determine accurately in open sources, information accompanying the designations would suggest such private facilitation networks are responsible for transferring currency to Jabhat al-Nusra at least in the low millions of U.S. dollars every year.

To supplement this income, Jabhat al-Nusra is widely alleged to acquire more substantial sums from the ransoming of foreign hostages. Although foreign governments have consistently denied accusations of making ransom payments to Jabhat al-Nusra, well placed media reports have cited figures of between \$4 million and \$25 million for hostage releases—almost all mediated and secured by Qatar—involving the group, from the case of 16 Lebanese armed forces personnel released in December 2015,⁹³ to the release of American journalist Peter Theo Curtis in August 2014.⁹⁴ Should allegations over ransom payments be accurate, it would suggest that kidnap for ransom represented a highly significant source of income for Jabhat al-Nusra, likely of existential importance.

Notwithstanding the preeminent role of Kuwait in hosting the most designated financiers of Jabhat al-Nusra, the government of Qatar has been widely accused of facilitating the rise of al-Qaida's Syrian affiliate. Qatar's lead role in mediating hostage releases and the alleged payment of ransoms is of particular importance. Some well-placed media reporting claimed the October 2013 release of Shia Iranian pilgrims saw

90. Borzou Daragahi, "Syria's Al-Qaeda Branch Now Wants To Rule Like ISIS," *BuzzFeed*, March 24, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/borzoudaragahi/syrias-al-qaeda-branch-now-wants-to-rule-like-isis>.

91. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 202.

92. According to data provided to the author by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 2016.

93. "Lebanon, Qatar deny paying ransom to release 16 Lebanese hostages," *Ya Libnan*, December 3, 2015, <http://yalibnan.com/2015/12/03/lebanon-qatar-deny-paying-ransom-to-release-16-lebanese-hostages/>.

94. Peter Foster, "Did Qatar pay ransom for release of US journalist Peter Curtis?" *The Telegraph*, August 25, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11055049/Did-Qatar-pay-ransom-for-release-of-US-journalist-Peter-Curtis.html>.

Qatar pay as much as \$150 million to Jabhat al-Nusra,⁹⁵ while Qatar Airways planes transported those released to Lebanon.⁹⁶ Commenting after a one-on-one meeting between U.S. President Barack Obama and Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani in April 2013, a senior Obama administration official made clear that the President had asserted that “it was very important for the Qataris to understand that Nusra is not only an organization that destabilizes the situation in Syria, it’s a national security interest of ours that they not have weapons.”⁹⁷

David Weinberg of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies has accused of Qatar of ‘negligence’ for seeking to complete hostage releases for the sake of the “international spotlight,” while managing “a panoply of unsavory characters in the world of Islamic extremists.” According to Weinberg, “Qatar’s reckless enthusiasm for mediating hostage deals with terrorists seems to be supercharging the profits that these groups receive as a result of kidnap for ransom.”⁹⁸

Private individuals present in Qatar have also been identified for their financial links to Jabhat al-Nusra and other al-Qaida-linked figures. Abd al-Rahman al-Nu’aymi was designated by the U.S. Treasury Department in December 2013, for amongst other things, “the transfer of nearly \$600,000 to Al-Qaeda” in Syria.⁹⁹ He has yet to be arrested, according to publicly available information. One Middle Eastern diplomat speaking to the Daily Telegraph also alleged that Qatar was “partly responsible for Jabhat al-Nusra having money and weapons and everything they need... it’s a fact, they did support Jabhat al-Nusra.”¹⁰⁰

Finally within Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra also collects smaller sums of continual income by taxing civilians and other commercial traffic passing through its checkpoints, especially those in close proximity to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey, which is controlled by Ahrar al-Sham. The rising profile of Jabhat al-Nusra’s Idarat al-Manateq al-Muharara and its involvement in ‘taxing’ populations in Idlib may soon come to represent an additional source of important income in 2016. The group is also quietly accused of frequently demanding a proportion of military equipment and non-lethal support provided to mainstream opposition forces in northern Syria, in exchange for allowing FSA supply routes to operate unrestricted.¹⁰¹

However, Jabhat al-Nusra’s main source of weaponry and ammunition comes from its involvement in battle. By exploiting its preeminent reputation for military prowess and its ability to deploy asymmetric capabilities that opposition forces cannot (namely, suicide bombers), Jabhat al-Nusra insists on assuming control of a majority of any ‘ghanima’ captured from enemy forces during pre-battle negotiations with cooperating groups.¹⁰² Generally, this has ensured the group remains militarily equipped without the need to purchase weaponry or acquire it en masse from external sources.

Military tactics & strategy

Broadly, Jabhat al-Nusra’s military strategy focuses upon engendering a climate of extensive intra-armed group cooperation in Syria that leads towards shared advances on the battlefield.

95. Mitchell Prothero, “Lebanese pilgrims held for year by Syrian rebels back in Beirut,” *McClatchy DC*, October 19, 2013, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24757552.html>.

96. David Andrew Weinberg, “Terrorism Financing: Kidnapping, Antiquities Trafficking, and Private Donations,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, November 17, 2015, <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/testimony/terrorist-financing-kidnapping-antiquities-trafficking-and-private-donation>.

97. Mark Mazzetti, C.J. Chivers, and Eric Schmitt, “Taking Outsized Role in Syria, Qatar Funnels Arms to Rebels,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/30/world/middleeast/sending-missiles-to-syrian-rebels-qatar-muscles-in.html>.

98. Weinberg, “Terrorism Financing,” November 17, 2015.

99. “Treasury Designates Al-Qa’ida Supporters in Qatar and Yemen,” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, December 18, 2013, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2249.aspx>.

100. David Blair & Richard Spencer, “How Qatar is funding the rise of Islamist extremists,” *The Telegraph*, September 20, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/qatar/11110931/How-Qatar-is-funding-the-rise-of-Islamist-extremists.html>.

101. Author discussions with Syrian armed opposition group commanders, January–February 2016.

102. Hussein Jammo, “Al-Nusra Front: A rough strategy for a soft takeover of the revolution,” *Al-Hayat*, January 8, 2013.

Encouraging this ‘climate’ of cooperation with an al-Qaida affiliate has come through a combined carrot and stick strategy of leveraging Jabhat al-Nusra’s demonstrated preeminent military value as compared to more moderate Syrian opposition groups, while sharply cracking down on groups deemed too close to the West and thus assessed as potential future threats. Jolani pointed to this strategy in 2013 when he declared that “preserving good relations with the other groups and treating them well and turning a blind eye to their mistakes is a foundation in dealing with the other groups... so long as they don’t change.”¹⁰³

In addition to fostering constructive relationships of dependence with Syria’s armed opposition, Jabhat al-Nusra has also sought to establish a protective ring of pro-al-Qaida support groups within its most strategically valuable areas of operation. While Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiyya had for a time played that role in southern Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra’s increased prioritization of northern Syria, and in particular Idlib, from mid-2015 onwards saw that group side more with the pro-ISIS faction, Liwa Shuhada Yarmouk. In the north, however, Jabhat al-Nusra has retained a solid support structure, both through Ahrar al-Sham and more internationally-oriented jihadi groups like Jund al-Aqsa, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal Ansar, Kataib al-Tawhid wal Jihad, the Turkistan Islamic Party, Harakat Sham al-Islam and Junud al-Sham—all of which have played an invaluable role in forming a protective blanket around Jabhat al-Nusra amid its attempt to construct durable power and influence.

Jund al-Aqsa in particular played a critically important role in facilitating Jabhat al-Nusra’s survival during its destructive split with ISIS in the Spring of 2013. After learning that ISI spokesman and senior leader Abu Mohammed al-Adnani was covertly active in northern Aleppo in January 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra leader Jolani ordered a close confidante, Mohammed Yusuf al-

Athamna (Abdulaziz al-Qatari), to rapidly split away and form a new group manned primarily by foreign fighters loyal to Jolani. Initially named Saraya al-Aqsa, the group almost certainly saved Jabhat al-Nusra from internal collapse in 2013.

More specifically within the realm of military operations, Jabhat al-Nusra has focused almost exclusively on attacking military targets belonging to the Assad regime and its various allies. Attacks on civilian targets undoubtedly occur—in Alawite districts of Homs city through 2014–2015, for example—but they remain proportionally the exception. The group has therefore differentiated itself starkly from its former ISIS umbrella, whose operations in Iraq and now in Syria frequently target civilians en masse. By focusing predominantly on military targets, Jabhat al-Nusra has sought to place its operational existence within the same realm as the mainstream Syrian opposition in their fight against an oppressive regime.

Jabhat al-Nusra’s true value to broader anti-regime operations has come in its capacity to represent a force multiplier to the mainstream opposition. Acting as a special force of sorts,¹⁰⁴ Jabhat al-Nusra’s ability to deploy highly motivated, well-armed, and tactically capable fighters onto the frontline of offensive operations has time and again spurred on multi-group attacks into victories. Of greatest importance is its consistent use of suicide bombers to break down tough enemy defenses prior to large-scale assaults, which provides an invaluable addition to an otherwise conventional insurgent attack.

Following ISIS’s Caliphate proclamation in the summer of 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra turned its attention in several particular directions. First, it focused resources into building influence on Turkey’s borders, through which it could receive financial donations, new recruits, and other supplies following its loss of control in eastern Syria.

103. Jennifer Cafarella, “Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for Al-Qaeda,” *The Institute for the Study of War*, December 2014, 16, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/JN%20Final.pdf>.

104. *Ibid.*, 22.

Added influence along the Turkish border also provided the group with a valuable source of leverage over opposition access to foreign support and the capacity to influence—and spoil—regional strategic objectives, like the once hoped-for safe zone in northern Aleppo.

Secondly, Jabhat al-Nusra increased the extent to which its ‘al-Qaida face’ was revealed, by speaking more openly about its desire to establish Islamic Emirates in Syria and beginning to more overtly and unilaterally impose its religious expectations on civilians. In particular, this resulted in the expansion of the Dar al-Qadaa judiciary structure to multiple governorates, but also the consolidation of Jabhat al-Nusra’s control of Idlib as its principal stronghold. Given its long border with Turkey, mountainous countryside, and long-established anti-regime populous, Idlib presents al-Qaida with a near-perfect long-term base, whatever circumstances the Syrian revolution faces in the months and years to come. The redeployment of much valued forces from southern Syria through late 2015, including several senior leaders and al-Qaida veterans—like Sami al-Oraydi, Iyad Tubasi and Abu Mariya al-Qahyani¹⁰⁵—into Idlib pointed to the investment being made in this durable safe haven.

Thirdly, until mid-2015, Jabhat al-Nusra’s broad military strategy was focused predominantly upon building rural capacity and territorial influence, in order to establish launching pads for urban operations. The group’s involvement in capturing Raqqa city in March 2013 and Idlib city in March 2015 demonstrated the value of such extensive rural shaping operations. In that sense, Jabhat al-Nusra is dissimilar to ISIS, in that preparing a large urban target for all-out attack—whether through siege, concerted bombardment, repeated raid-like attacks, or a combination—is given considerable priority for weeks and often months prior to the eventual assault.

Since its lead role in the capture of several major urban centers in Idlib in early-to-mid-2015, however, Jabhat al-Nusra has invested more and more into developing mechanisms for sustaining urban control. Within the scope of al-Qaida’s ‘long game’ approach, this represents a step forwards, aimed at expanding beyond rural to urban control and thus making an eventual Emirate declaration in Idlib that much more practically feasible.

Following on from Russia’s intervention in Syria in late September 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra has focused on further securing its influence in rural and urban Idlib, while minimizing the extent to which its forces have been exposed to ground and air bombardment on regime-sensitive front lines. The group’s withdrawal from northern Aleppo in August 2015¹⁰⁶ may have been to avoid involvement in a Turkish-enforced safe zone, but its return only to southern Aleppo and not to critically important opposition battles in the northern countryside in late January 2016 illustrated a rare indication of risk aversion.

Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra’s initiation of secret negotiations with potentially pliable opposition groups in Idlib in search of a grand merger in early 2016 indicated that the group is keen to take advantage of deteriorating circumstances for Syria’s more mainstream opposition. Here, Jabhat al-Nusra may be preparing itself for a new phase of the Syrian crisis, in which insurgent groups are forced to devolve into guerrilla movements, operating covertly and carrying out unpredictable raids and rapid action bomb attacks. Although a step away from its territorial ambitions, such a scenario would suit Jabhat al-Nusra’s al-Qaida-experienced command and its foot soldiers trained in guerrilla-style tactics more than it would the mainstream opposition. More simply, it also reflects an opportunistic attempt to swallow vulnerable opposition groups, or portions of their memberships, into the Jab-

105. Author discussions with prominent Syrian Islamists based in Idlib, January–February 2016.

106. Elias Groll, “Jabhat al-Nusra Abandons Fight North of Aleppo as Turkey and U.S. Plot ‘Safe Zone,’” *Foreign Policy*, August 10, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/10/jabhat-al-nusra-abandons-fight-north-of-aleppo-as-turkey-and-u-s-plot-safe-zone/>.

hat al-Nusra movement. That the al-Qaida affiliate recruited at least 3,000 Syrians into its ranks in Idlib and southern Aleppo alone between February and June 2016 underlines the advantage that Jabhat al-Nusra now holds.

Recruitment & foreign fighters

For the purpose of presenting itself as much as possible as an indigenous Syrian movement rooted into local societies, Jabhat al-Nusra places significant emphasis on recruiting from within Syrian communities. Consequently, as of early 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra consisted of approximately 70% Syrian fighters, while roughly 30% were foreign.¹⁰⁷ This points to a significant point of difference between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, in that the latter has relied heavily on sustaining a sizable and self-sustaining foreign fighter contingent. Nonetheless, although Jabhat al-Nusra may have focused less—or at least on a less overt level—on recruiting non-Syrians into its cause, those foreigners it has taken on appear qualitatively superior to ISIS’s foreign cannon fodder. Very often they have also maintained a longer-established support relationship with al-Qaida than the ‘born-again’ jihadis joining ISIS’s ranks.

As a result of this yearning for quality, all fighters brought into Jabhat al-Nusra require statements of *tazqiyya* (a personal recommendation) from at least one existing member of Jabhat al-Nusra, preferably from someone in a position of command. The only exception to that rule pertains to pre-existing members of smaller jihadi groups allied to Jabhat al-Nusra, who are permitted to apply for a transfer to the group with the mutual agreement of commanders on both sides. Recruits are also expected to speak at least a minimal level of Arabic.

Once one’s application is accepted through *tazqiyya*, a Jabhat al-Nusra recruit is generally placed

into a training regimen lasting between six-to-eight weeks. The training includes courses in religious teaching, physical training and military instruction, with the former including a two-to-three hour lecture every evening, after a day full of physical and military instruction apportioned according to the day’s five prayers.¹⁰⁸ Military training ordinarily focuses on teaching a recruit in basic weapons handling for the most commonly available small-arms and ammunition (AK-series assault rifles, RPG-7s, SPG-9 recoilless guns), as well as rudimentary training in the use of mortars, Soviet-era anti-tank missiles, and heavy machine guns. Tactical instruction typically focuses on small-unit operations, fixed target raids, close combat, assassination, and clearing operations.

Recruits who successfully graduate from their training program are expected to pledge *bay’a* to Jabhat al-Nusra’s leader Jolani, which places them into a religiously sanctified commitment of obedience to the movement’s cause.

Governance

As an integral part of Jabhat al-Nusra’s long game strategy, the group has, until recently, minimized the extent to which it unilaterally controls any populated area of Syria. Instead, and despite its ideological differences with the vast majority of the Syrian opposition, it has focused its efforts largely on pragmatically sharing power, while slowly manipulating challenging circumstances to socialize both civilians and armed groups into accepting its growing influence.

Since investing overwhelmingly in its Idlib heartlands in mid-2015 however, Jabhat al-Nusra has emerged as a dominant source of authority and sole provider of limited governance in the provincial capital and several major towns, like Jisr al-Shughour and Ariha. Although the mainstream Syrian opposition—some of which has

107. Author discussions with prominent Syrian Salafist commander, January 2016. Jolani referenced similar figures during an interview with Al Jazeera in June 2015; see “Nusra leader: No end to conflict with ISIL in Syria,” *Al Jazeera*, June 4, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/nusra-leader-conflict-isil-syria-150604021024858.html>.

108. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 104.

emerged as strongly opposed to Jabhat al-Nusra dominance—remains influential in other areas of the governorate, it seems all but confirmed that Idlib will form the basis of Jabhat al-Nusra's first attempt at establishing an Islamic Emirate in Syria.¹⁰⁹

Prior to its more assertive assumption of influence in parts of Idlib, Jabhat al-Nusra has preceded any involvement in governance activities with a focus on providing needed social services, such as the subsidized provision of food and staple household goods like gas and water, while contributing towards locally legitimate enforcers of law and order. Only once it had sufficiently embedded itself within a local community and thus faced a minimal threat of internal opposition does it choose to translate social service provision into more overt forms of governance. This gradual evolution of local influence towards the initial stages of unilateral control would appear to represent al-Qaida's best chance of acquiring durable territorial control in Syria and establishing one of al-Zawahiri's much desired 'safe bases' from which to launch attacks on the West.¹¹⁰

As with its broader strategic adoption of *tamkin* as a collective action focused upon small steps forward, Jabhat al-Nusra's slow advancement of governance efforts is similarly built upon the idea of socialization of the people. Jabhat al-Nusra leader Jolani has repeatedly explained that Syria's people cannot be expected to act immediately as pure Muslims given their decades-long experience with secular dictatorship. *Dawa*, or proselytization paired with a slow and systematic expansion of governance, is therefore Jabhat al-Nusra's favored model. As its then leader in the Qalamoun mountains explained:

From the Sunnah, tamkin is gradualism; being mindful of transforming from the easy to the difficult, from the difficult to the more

difficult, from the near-term goal to the long-term objective, and from the partial plan to the total plan.¹¹¹

The slow pace of these local policy changes began to evolve following ISIS's proclamation of its self-declared Caliphate, which laid down a gauntlet to al-Qaida's jihadi credibility. Only after being so challenged did Jabhat al-Nusra withdraw itself from Islamist-oriented multi-group judicial systems and establish its own Dar al-Qadaa structures, for example. Only after being so challenged did Jabhat al-Nusra begin posting large banners and distributing leaflets in Idlib calling on women to abide by conservative customs; demanding that all men attend the day's five prayers; and expecting local activist organizations to abide by its social and political expectations. And only once it had led the capture of a series of strategically invaluable urban centers in Idlib governorate did it begin to assume more unilateral control and government in select areas.

This emerging assertiveness of Jabhat al-Nusra's true al-Qaida roots may have been spurred on by increasing confidence in certain areas of the country, but it was also a clear reaction to a need to demonstrate an intent to implement Sharia and embed the roots of a new Islamic society and not be entirely outmatched by ISIS. With the public support of closely aligned Saudi jihadi Sheikh Abdullah al-Moheisini, the Dar al-Qadaa courts have emerged as dominated by Jabhat al-Nusra and they enjoy minimal respect from broader opposition society, which prefers pre-existing systems that are more representative of local Syrian factions.

The period immediately following Russia's intervention in Syria in late September 2015 saw Jabhat al-Nusra refocus its resources into the military arena, while its attempt at providing social services and governance activities took a back seat.

109. Lister, "Al Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria," May 4, 2016.

110. Shaikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for Jihad," *As-Sahab Media*, September 14, 2013, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf>.

111. Abbas, "Another 'State' of Hate," April 29, 2016.

Holding territory and demonstrating a capacity to push back against regime gains took priority, as the principal mechanism for asserting the value of Jabhat al-Nusra's fighting role to the opposition. After all, the military fight remains al-Qaida's biggest advantage in the Syrian context.

However, the decline in hostilities from February 2016 and re-escalation of conflict from April 2016 saw Jabhat al-Nusra by force of necessity refocus its energy on governance efforts in parts of Idlib, so as to exploit the vulnerable status of mainstream opposition groups caught between a fragile political process and challenging military circumstances on the ground.

PART III

Outlook

Russia's entrance into the already large and complex cobweb of actors militarily involved in the Syrian crisis has had a transformative effect on the conflict. The Assad regime and its struggling security apparatus went from virtual collapse in July–August 2015 to riding a wave of internal (over-)confidence arguably unseen since the early months of the uprising. To all intents and purposes, the Obama administration appeared forced to seek Russian cooperation in solving the crisis, rather than utilizing its own capabilities to do so itself. Adding to the effect of Russian airpower was a near-simultaneous expansion—in quantitative and qualitative terms—in on-the-ground assistance lent to the regime by Shia militias, Hezbollah, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. By February 2016, Russian ground forces had been spotted deployed on regime front lines; in late March they led the recapture of Palmyra from ISIS; and in June, they were involved in ground operations headed towards ISIS's de facto capital in Raqqa.¹¹²

The resulting shift in the balance of power in Syria saw pro-regime forces secure valuable gains north of Syria's largest city, Aleppo, in February 2016, cutting opposition forces south of the city off from their most valuable supply line from Turkey. Those opposition losses then sparked the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—an alliance led by the Kurdish YPG, but including a number of Arab and other ethnic militias, formed with U.S. support in October 2015 to fight ISIS—to break out for a time from their northwestern Aleppo stronghold of Afrin on a march east against moderate opposition positions in an attempt to complete the east-to-west establishment of a de facto Kurdish semi-autonomous state, 'Rojava.'

Opposition forces found themselves stuck in a three-party stranglehold, pinned down by pro-regime forces, the SDF and ISIS, with Turkey intervening in a desperate attempt to prevent Kurdish gains. A subsequent U.S.-directed SDF offensive on the ISIS-held town of Manbij in June 2016

threatened to give further impetus to YPG attempts to seal the three cantons of Rojava, thereby dealing a defeat to ISIS and a serious strategic blow to the opposition.

Although the majority of significant shifts continued to take place in Aleppo through the summer of 2016, including the regime's de facto imposition of siege on the city in July, rapidly changing circumstances there translated into broader assessments of the trajectory of the conflict. The sustainability of the political process launched in Geneva earlier in the year hinged heavily on events in the Aleppo governorate and unsurprisingly, it was Jabhat al-Nusra that led the way in exploiting Assad regime violations to spark a full-scale resumption and subsequent escalation of opposition offensive operations in southern Aleppo from April onwards.

While Syria's mainstream opposition remained within the scope of the political process, the lack of substantive humanitarian improvements on the ground made an eventual broader breakdown of dynamics throughout the country increasingly likely. The fact that the United States lent heightened levels of assistance to the YPG-led SDF in its fight against ISIS from May onwards, while the Assad regime and its allies continued to act with near-impunity against the mainstream opposition, provided bountiful advantage to Jabhat al-Nusra to further consolidate its relationships of dependence with opposition groups. The repeated nighttime dropping of cluster munitions—allegedly by Russian jets—containing the incendiary chemical thermite on opposition-held areas of Aleppo as well as the use of particularly destructive sensor-fuzed cluster munitions on areas of Aleppo and Idlib through June received shockingly minimal attention in the West. That such brazen destruction and violence could take place without any sanction from abroad played directly into Jabhat al-Nusra's hands.

In that regard, Jabhat al-Nusra set about heavily recruiting from within disenfranchised opposition

112. Frederik Pleitgen, "Syrian army on the ISIS frontline: Russian intervention called a 'blessing'," *CNN*, February 16, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/15/middleeast/syria-isis-frontline-hama/>.

communities in Aleppo and Idlib, exploiting increasingly widespread perceptions of abandonment by the international community. According to three Islamist sources based in the area, Jabhat al-Nusra successfully recruited at least 3,000 Syrians into its ranks between February and June 2016—a remarkable rate of local recruitment in an area the size of Connecticut.

Having already breached and contributed significantly towards effectively ending the cessation of hostilities in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra had by May 2016 switched its attention back to armed conflict. By securing substantial territorial gains in southern Aleppo in May–July, Jabhat al-Nusra found itself operating again within a more favorable environment in which it could return to efforts at expanding unilateral governance efforts in Idlib.

Should the internationally-mediated political process one day be declared over, Jabhat al-Nusra will likely feel itself to have successfully escaped a potentially serious threat. However, Russia remains an embedded and committed party to the conflict in Syria and is unlikely to simply withdraw its forces upon the end of peace talks. Instead, it is highly likely that Moscow will continue to push for an international military effort against both ISIS and al-Qaida in Syria, which will in all likelihood, place Jabhat al-Nusra in its crosshairs.

With the Obama administration looking towards its closing months, a proposal for coordinated action against Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS was issued to Russia in July 2016. Despite the U.S. National Defense Authorization Act prohibiting direct military cooperation between the two countries, the Obama administration's use of the national security priority could allow for such coordination to legally take place. In that scenario, Jabhat al-Nusra may eventually be forced to devolve back into a more conventional guerrilla-style insurgency in mountainous Idlib. Jabhat al-Nusra's senior command

can seek to exploit their experience in such adaptations, but transforming the group's approximately 10,000-man fighting force into a more covert networked structure will be a complex task.

Nevertheless, it is precisely these environments of uncertainty and potentially dynamic change, as well as continued civilian desperation and instability that jihadi militants thrive upon. With Syria's mainstream, moderate opposition still under intense pressure and with indiscriminate air and ground bombardment having destroyed the vast majority of services infrastructure throughout opposition-controlled territories, sparking massive civilian displacement, the trajectory of the Syrian crisis still appears potentially advantageous to an adaptable jihadi movement like Jabhat al-Nusra. Moreover, Western fatigue with trying to manage the crisis from afar and intensifying regional fury at the West's perceived abandoning of the opposition has provided Jabhat al-Nusra with a continued opportunity to present itself as a dependable opposition ally whose cynical take on the international community is coming true.

Jabhat al-Nusra has invested considerable resources into embedding itself into Syrian revolutionary dynamics and in controlling the extent to which its jihadi 'face' has been revealed to the Syrian people, in order to prepare itself for challenging circumstances like those seen today. Over time, it has evolved from a highly pragmatic al-Qaida affiliate willing to cooperate with any opposition group in order to attain tactical battlefield gains to an explicitly jihadi movement that overtly excludes irreligious factions in favor of empowering the broader Islamic movement in Syria. Nevertheless, faced with a possible multinational air campaign against its forces, should Jabhat al-Nusra decide to break ties with al-Qaida or succeed in negotiating the formation of a consequential armed group merger, the group's ability to adapt to undermine challenges to its prominence would be demonstrated yet again.

Consequently, it seems most likely that Jabhat al-Nusra will continue to pursue its strategy of gradualism, focusing on methodical expansion of military, civil, political, and religious influence towards levels it would deem sufficient to one day proclaim its first Emirate in Idlib. The extent of its unilateralism and assertiveness in Idlib in particular will expand as the group's military victories give it the confidence and grounding to do so. The collapse of peace talks and the initiation of an external air campaign against Jabhat al-Nusra will almost certainly cause even the most mainstream of opposition groups to renounce the international community altogether, thereby becoming increasingly pliable for a group like Jabhat al-Nusra.

Ahrar al-Sham can and may end up presenting the single source of competition or ultimate success for Jabhat al-Nusra's expanding influence in Idlib. So long as Jabhat al-Nusra retains its overt links to al-Qaida, Ahrar al-Sham has presented itself as a rival governance platform in several areas of the governorate, frequently clashing rhetorically and occasionally physically with Jabhat al-Nusra. As Ahrar al-Sham sought to make moderating changes to its senior leadership, at least 13 of its mid-level figures were assassinated in Idlib and Aleppo in June 2016. For many, a threatened Jabhat al-Nusra was seen as the most likely perpetrator.¹¹³ Admittedly, while both groups do have an interest in sustaining constructive military relations, the civil and political components of their respective activities continue to display significant differences. Despite its clear conservatism, Ahrar al-Sham is seen by Idlib's most moderate FSA groups as an existentially important guarantor and protector. As one FSA commander told this author:

Of course we have some differences with Ahrar, but we cannot deny they are local. Many were our neighbors. They work with al-Nusra, but they are Syrians first. That's why we are still active across Idlib. They are our brothers, and we are theirs.¹¹⁴

In potentially having to adapt to fighting a guerilla-style war in the future, al-Qaida will lose a comparatively stable environment from which future external attacks could have been planned, but it will gain from the cloak of invisibility that operating in such circumstances demands. After all, the virtual decapitation of the so-called Khorasan Group by U.S. airstrikes in 2014–2015 underlined the vulnerabilities that exist when operating within a broader civil war or insurgent framework.

Nonetheless, although the Syrian opposition has until now consistently opposed the idea of Jabhat al-Nusra ever using Syria as a launching pad for attacks on the West, intense opposition fury at the international community's perceived betrayal of their cause could eventually replace such concerns and lead to the development of fertile ground for an expansion of Jabhat al-Nusra's operational scope. Parts of northwestern Syria could then become al-Qaida's second Afghanistan, but on steroids. It is not too late to avoid such a scenario, but should joint U.S.-Russian military efforts be initiated, the negative consequences will be extraordinarily difficult to reverse.

113. Haid Haid, "Who is assassinating Ahrar al-Sham members?" *NOW*, June 21, 2016, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/567122-who-is-assassinating-ahrar-al-sham-members>.

114. Interview with senior FSA commander based in Idlib, June 2016.

PART IV

Policy recommendations

The Syrian crisis entered a period of added complexity in 2016, through which a durable political settlement and end to the conflict looked like an increasingly distant hope. The sheer breadth of sub-state and state actors involved and the scale of displacement and destruction pointed towards a conflict of years-long intractability. With the United States and Russia considering a joint counter-terrorism campaign starkly detached from on-the-ground realities, moderate opposition actors looked set to struggle in this newfound complexity. On the other hand, extremists on both ends of the conflict's spectrum looked set to benefit the most. ISIS, however, retains particularly shallow roots within the territories under its control in Syria and struggles to defend itself when faced by a similarly determined adversary with strong international backing. Meanwhile, it is Jabhat al-Nusra that has prepared its surroundings in such a way as to give it an improved chance of surviving such potential challenges.

Until it declares otherwise, Jabhat al-Nusra is an avowed affiliate of al-Qaida and even if that was to change, its transnational ambitions remain a reality, but merely something on hold for the future. A great many of Jabhat al-Nusra's leaders have veteran experience fighting in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Chechnya, Iraq, and elsewhere. Although it claims to have paused any external attack plotting, al-Qaida's ultimate strategic priority remains attacking the West and creating the best possible conditions to allow such plans to durably be realized. Jabhat al-Nusra has improved upon al-Qaida's evolved strategic thinking that began in Yemen in 2010 and represents the first successful case of the movement's long game strategy of controlled pragmatism, seeking the establishment of a durable 'safe base' and future component of its 'true' Caliphate.

That al-Qaida's central leadership has deployed such a considerable number of its senior figures to Syria is not merely a coincidence. Syria has acquired a central and pivotally important place within Al-Qaida's global strategy and Jabhat al-Nusra's relative success there should indeed make it an urgent priority for the international community. Although the group may

not pose as immediate or as broad a threat to Western security as ISIS today, Jabhat al-Nusra's sustainable foundations in Syria will allow it to pose a more durable and determined threat in the long-term. The longer the group is given the space to operate, and to manipulate and build alliances on the ground in Syria, the more durable that presence will become.

It is within this assessment that the international community must now work in countering Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaida's plans for a long-term overt or covert presence in Syria. Whether the group successfully negotiates large-scale mergers with Syrian opposition groups or not, it will remain a discernible threat to the region and almost certainly to the broader international community for some time to come. This necessitates policy recommendations focused on the one hand upon achieving immediate tactical gains against Jabhat al-Nusra and its capacity to successfully adapt to new dynamics, and on the other, upon imposing more strategic defeats on the group's ability to survive into the long-term. This latter category necessitates a much broader and less counterterrorism focused strategic thinking, covering local and regional political, diplomatic, and military activities. Crucially, these two policy components *must* be conducted at least simultaneously, if not with the latter coming first to prepare the ground for kinetic action. They are also just as applicable whether Jabhat al-Nusra claims to remain within the al-Qaida movement or not.

De-escalation & forceful diplomacy towards a Syrian settlement

Extremists exploit instability and civilian suffering to take advantage of widespread desperation and to promote their cause as both a credible and legitimate path forward. Given the extraordinary deterioration of conditions and conflict dynamics in Syria since late 2015, the international community must urgently act to continue to de-escalate the situation in order to prevent the establishment of a long-term jihadi safe haven. The breadth and scale of insurgent forces inside Syria necessitates that such de-escalatory moves are made on a geopoliti-

cal level. The cessation of hostilities witnessed since February 2016 was a step in the right direction, but an increasingly confident regime in Damascus, bolstered by victory against ISIS in Palmyra, has consistently violated its terms and a long list of subsequent “regimes of calm.” That all regime-led sieges remain in place and only marginal levels of basic aid have been delivered to a portion of in-need areas since February 2016 underlines the spoiling nature of an emboldened Assad regime.

Should conflict continue to re-escalate, the United States and allies must leverage the true extent of their political clout to ensure that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar do not act overly aggressively to counter subsequent Russian-backed pro-regime advances in northern Syria. Russia’s intervention in Syria is now a reality that must be accepted. Its transformative role in the conflict requires flexible international diplomatic adaptation and strength to ensure its effects remain controllable and potentially even reversible through diplomatic means.

It must immediately be re-acknowledged that the long-term survival of the Assad regime is of significant benefit to the recruitment capabilities of jihadis, especially those embedded within anti-regime revolutionary dynamics like Jabhat al-Nusra. Securing a politically-negotiated settlement in Syria by way of a removal of Bashar Assad and his inner circle from power and a managed transition towards representative government is the only viable path towards a possible long-term stable Syria. Since the cessation of hostilities began in February 2016, however, the regime has only become more confident and appears highly unlikely to entertain the idea of a transition in peace talks. As things currently stand, there is no reason for Assad to view any political process as anything less than a game in which to taunt and kill his adversaries, while compelling his allies to double-down in defense of his regime.¹¹⁵

Getting from today’s adverse conditions towards such a more favorable outcome will require a substantial use of both hard and soft power aimed at forcing Assad, Russia, and Iran back into the realm of responsible action. With regards to the Assad regime, the United States must acknowledge that only a discernible campaign of escalatory pressure stands a chance of convincing Assad himself to treat a political process with any seriousness. Utilizing the moral need to protect civilians, the United States should credibly threaten the use of punitive air strikes against Assad regime military assets in response to especially clear incidents of civilian targeting. Russia has no interest in engaging in direct conflict with the United States and would be highly unlikely to counter-escalate to such moves, especially if informed in advance.

Regarding Russia, declining oil prices may have had some effect on Moscow’s economy, but the costs of Russia’s Syrian military adventure appear to be sustainable, so additional pressures must be leveraged. Expanding sanctions mechanisms in place from events in Ukraine would be a worthwhile first step, as would a far more determined effort to enforce provisions set forth in the Russian-agreed UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Specifically, ensuring the further implementation of Chapters 12 and 13 of 2254—covering humanitarian provisions—would go some way towards negating jihadis’ ability to exploit the international community’s failure to enforce the chapters’ implementation and the resulting vacuums in civilian need to their own advantage. For example, several long-besieged towns and city districts remained almost entirely untouched by aid deliveries in late March 2016, despite nearly two months of cessation of hostilities.

Likewise, Russia’s frequent use of cluster bombs¹¹⁶ and repeated incidents of strikes against hospitals, schools, and other civilian infrastructure within opposition territories¹¹⁷ must urgently be curbed and

115. Lister, “Al Qaeda Reaps Rewards of U.S. Policy Failures on Syria,” July 6, 2016.

116. “Evidence mounts of Russian cluster-bomb use in Syria,” *Al Jazeera*, October 12, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/evidence-mounts-russian-cluster-bomb-syria-151012081654030.html>.

117. “Deadly air strikes hit hospitals in northern Syria,” *Al Jazeera*, February 15, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/deadly-air-strikes-hit-hospitals-northern-syria-160215090444178.html>; Arwa Damon, Margot Haddad, & Tim Hume, “Syria: At least 22 killed in strikes against 2 hospitals, sources say,” *CNN*, February 16, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/15/middleeast/syria-hospitals-strike/>.

formally investigated. Above all else, Russia appears determined to present itself as a constructive and needed partner in “solving” Syria, alongside the United States. Its key mechanism of influence in Syria remains the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). It thus follows that an escalatory imposition of financial and travel-based sanctions against SAA officers—beginning at lower command and steadily rising over time—could present a discernible source of leverage over the viability of the SAA’s reliability as a long-term Russian-influenced force. It is at least possible that such a source of targeted pressure could convince Russia to recalculate its posture to Assad individually.

Ensuring external states continue to de-escalate remains the only hope for encouraging actors involved on the ground to consider the nationwide ceasefire that the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) remains determined to introduce. By rapidly and durably ameliorating at least the very worst violations of international law and by de-escalating geopolitical tensions and on-the-ground conflict dynamics, the international community stands its best chance of ensuring that Syria’s opposition credibly remains within an international political process rather than siding with jihadis like Jabhat al-Nusra.

Expand contact & support to Syria’s mainstream opposition¹¹⁸

More than most, Jabhat al-Nusra stands to benefit from continued conflict and a growing perception among Syrians that the international community has betrayed and abandoned the mainstream opposition to defeat by Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime. That the U.S.-supported YPG and its anti-ISIS SDF alliance turned their weapons on moderate opposition groups vetted and supported by the United States and its regional allies in February 2016 encouraged this feeling

of betrayal, which must urgently be resolved. A U.S.-Russia deal to work together against Jabhat al-Nusra would seal the sense of abandonment for good. Should feelings of distrust and resentment continue to build, the United States would be faced by 100,000 incensed Syrian rebels with no will to consider talking, now or in the future. Jabhat al-Nusra could not wish for a better support mechanism to protect its investment in Syria amid more challenging circumstances.

Despite feeling immense frustration at their declining fate and apparent abandonment, however, there remains a strong desire within the mainstream Syrian opposition for serious engagement with the Western world. Though it may come as a surprise to some, this even includes a sizeable portion of Ahrar al-Sham. Clawing back trust within the opposition will require the United States to provide serious and demonstrable commitments to ensuring that whatever eventual settlement is made, Bashar Assad and his inner circle are definitively removed from power. A prolonged 18-month transition is far from the boundaries of acceptability for Syria’s opposition, as is the Russian-proposed formation of a national unity government.

Dialogue and frequent political—not security or intelligence—contact with armed opposition group political offices and military leaderships can be of significant value in building relationships of understanding. Through such relationships, the United States and its allies stand a far improved chance of acquiring a genuine understanding of the nature of Syria’s armed opposition, and determining which forces require and deserve expanded levels of military support.

While the political viability of establishing a no-fly zone in Syria all but disappeared following Russia’s intervention in September 2015, qualitative and quantitative changes in the provision of military

118. As throughout, “mainstream opposition” should be taken to refer to armed opposition groups that are explicitly nationalist in terms of a strategic vision, local in terms of membership, and who seek to return to Syria’s historic status as a harmonious multi-sect nation in which all ethnicities, sects, and genders enjoy an equal status before the law and state. Ahrar al-Sham should be considered on the outer periphery of the “mainstream opposition,” as it unquestionably represents a significant support base, but its hardline ideological attitudes place it in some areas of conflict with the broader opposition’s political platform.

supplies to vetted anti-Assad moderate opposition forces would go some way towards ensuring that the opposition remains a potential partner in political moves to end the conflict. In addition to small-arms and light weapons (SALWs), the continued provision of TOW anti-tank missiles remains of tactical importance, while more portable shoulder-launched anti-tank systems would likely prove of greater benefit in the months to come. Punitive strikes against regime targeting of civilians would have the added benefit of reducing overall levels of regime air activity, thereby freeing up opposition forces for more effective offensive operations.

Meanwhile, it remains urgent that the U.S. administration steps in to end the absurd situation in which CIA-backed anti-Assad opposition groups actively engage in conflict with components of the Department of Defense-backed anti-ISIS force, the Syrian Democratic Forces, oftentimes using weaponry provided by their respective American backers. Nothing undermines U.S. credibility in Syria more than such extraordinary policy contradictions.

Ultimately, it is also time for U.S. policy on Syria to expand beyond its preeminent focus on combating ISIS and to realize that our longer-term jihadi adversary al-Qaida has an affiliate in Syria with much deeper and more durable roots. Within current circumstances, only by emboldening and protecting Syria's mainstream opposition will we stand any chance of neutralizing al-Qaida's chance of taking advantage. Conversely, by abandoning the Syrian opposition in favor of other contradictory actors (such as Russia) and by pressuring the opposition into a settlement that crosses all of its 'red lines,' we will be handing portions of Syria to al-Qaida on a golden plate.

Assuage regional states' fears of opposition collapse

In tandem with the necessary efforts above outlined to reach out to and engage more frequently and constructively with the mainstream Syrian

opposition, the United States and allies must also move urgently to assuage regional fears of a possible opposition collapse. Regional states who have invested overwhelmingly in the opposition to the Assad regime (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar) are increasingly concerned that their investment may be under threat by shifting Western political positions with regards to the fate of Assad in Syria.

The dramatic change in the balance of power in Syria resulting from Russia's intervention has undoubtedly necessitated diplomatic recalculations over the shape of a future settlement. However, an opposition collapse is in nobody's interest. Since 2011, the conflict in Syria has increasingly been perceived within the Middle East as a proxy war between major Sunni states like Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran. Should opposition losses continue, regional states backing the opposition have the will and capacity to continue to escalate in Syria—dangerously so. Should the situation reach too critical a point, further regional destabilization would also be likely, making resolutions to conflict in Yemen, Libya, and Iraq even more challenging. Again, Jabhat al-Nusra and indeed al-Qaida more broadly would stand to benefit considerably from such a development.

Statistical analyses of civil wars have frequently demonstrated that externally pressured negotiated settlements invariably fail to prevent internal conflict from recurring. Moreover, government victory and rebel defeat statistically leads most often to repressive and authoritarian governance, which itself encourages continued instability. Only rebel victories statistically have the best chance of leading to stable outcomes, including towards the adoption of more democratic and representative governance.¹¹⁹

In Syria's case, a 'rebel victory' does not need to translate into an all-out military victory on the ground (which appears impossible), but rather the realization of the opposition's core demand for a political transition and a full transfer of executive powers to a new parliament.

119. Monica Duffy Toft, "Ending Civil Wars: A Case for Rebel Victory?" *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), 7-36, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/Ending_Civil_Wars_A_Case_for_Rebel_Victory.pdf.

Encourage opposition-Kurdish dialogue

One particularly damaging unintended consequence of U.S.-led policy on countering ISIS over and above any other objectives in Syria has been the emboldening of the Kurdish YPG at the expense of the mainstream opposition. Had support been provided on an equal level and in conjunction with the development of a more representative Syrian anti-terror force, we would not now be witnessing a new hostile front opening up in northern Syria, pitting the opposition and Turkey against the YPG and its SDF allies.

An opposition versus Kurdish YPG war (not an ethnic war, but a political one) in northern Syria risks being even more intractable and damaging to Syria's future prospects for peace than the opposition versus regime dynamic. As was the case when limited fighting began for the first time between opposition groups and the YPG in November 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra was quick to assume a prominent role. One can safely assume that should hostilities resume in northern Aleppo through 2016, an opposition offensive on the YPG stronghold of Afrin would be a strong possibility. That would almost certainly be launched from the northern Idlib towns of Darat Izza and al-Dana, where Jabhat al-Nusra and other allied jihadis retain considerable military strength.

By seeking to lead a high-profile counter-attack on Kurdish territory, Jabhat al-Nusra would rapidly win the support of much of Syria's opposition, thereby cementing its role in a broader conflict that Turkey will likely invest in maintaining for its own national security reasons. Such an eventuality could quickly become intractable and inextricably damage the already slim chances for a viable and durable political process to get started and make progress.

The United States and its allies must therefore work urgently and immediately not only to de-escalate

any such fighting, but to encourage direct, face-to-face dialogue between the predominantly Sunni Arab opposition and the Kurdish YPG and its SDF allies. This would be most valuably done at an unofficial Track II level, with international financial and logistical support. However, a more forceful Track I dialogue between both sides, supported by all key stakeholders including Turkey, aimed towards both establishing military detente and solving the issue of how to involve the YPG's political wing—the PYD—in a political process would hold the most hope of detangling ethnic Arab-Kurd tensions from broader civil war dynamics.

Turkey's recent political rapprochement with Russia combined with its necessary policy focus on combating an internal ISIS threat may provide a small opening to persuade Ankara of the need to come to a detente with Syria's PYD. With winter several months away, the scale of conflict with the PKK in Turkey's southeast will precipitously decline, which may further provide an opportunity to encourage a policy reorientation towards ISIS and away, or at least deprioritized, from the PKK and PYD/YPG.

Target Jabhat al-Nusra leadership

Jabhat al-Nusra is an extremely tightly controlled jihadi organization whose thousands of foot soldiers depend heavily upon their senior leadership for everyday orders, strategic planning, and religious credibility for their actions. Nevertheless, as a movement that has consistently focused on recruiting from within the local Syrian populous in order to be a large insurgent movement, Jabhat al-Nusra likely contains within its ranks a considerable portion of Syrians for whom al-Qaida's true transnational and often apocalyptic worldview is somewhat alien.

Jabhat al-Nusra suffered significantly following the emergence of ISIS in Syria in April 2013, as it lost a majority of its foreign fighters. Syrians however, appear to have retained their allegiance to Jabhat

al-Nusra's existing leadership, in particular to its Syrian leader, Jolani. A well-structured and carefully controlled organization like Jabhat al-Nusra depends heavily on sustaining a certain extent of leadership consistency, especially when facing adverse circumstances on the battlefield and the continued pressure of maintaining a superior level of attraction to non-al-Qaida Islamist groups within the Syrian opposition spectrum. Jolani in particular appears to have held Jabhat al-Nusra's various ideological 'currents' together, by balancing those who favor the slow, gradualist approach with those more keen to assert their al-Qaida face more forcefully.

Should the United States succeed in neutralizing significant portions of Jabhat al-Nusra's senior leadership, the group would face serious difficulties in sustaining the allegiance of a sizable portion of its approximately 7,000+ Syrian members. More conservative strains of Syria's armed opposition, most notably Ahrar al-Sham, have placed heavy pressure on Jabhat al-Nusra to break its ties to al-Qaida. One would assume that pressure would increase significantly should it lose someone like Jolani, whose own personal pledge of bay'a is the primary mechanism through which Jabhat al-Nusra remains an al-Qaida affiliate.

Since the initiation of U.S. air strikes in Syria in September 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra has been minimally targeted when compared to ISIS. This has arguably contributed towards reducing the level of immediate hostility espoused by the group towards the West. Although an intensification of U.S. strikes against Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership would bring with it the danger of a likely re-initiation of Jabhat al-Nusra external operation planning, that very consequence would reveal a side of the group that Syrians by and large have strongly opposed up until now.

Therefore, not only would senior leadership losses weaken the structural and loyalty ties between Jab-

hat al-Nusra and its majority Syrian membership, it would also encourage the kinds of activities that would further distance it from the broader Syrian opposition 'street.' In short, weakening Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership would reveal a number of additional areas to leverage against the group's capacity to sustain itself as a major force in Syria's future. As Syrians resume their weekly Friday protests—some of which still includes anti-Jabhat al-Nusra themes—challenging the group's internal cohesion could not come at a better time.

It is for this exact reason however, that broader strikes against the group's overall structure and foot soldier force are not to be recommended. A more effective kinetic strategy for countering Jabhat al-Nusra must be composed of trying to erode its tight structure and undermining its leadership credibility to the extent that impressionable Syrian members are persuaded to leave the movement before its true al-Qaida disposition melts down to all of its lowest ranks. Crucially, the longer this takes to happen, the lesser benefit awaits us at the end.

Counter al-Qaida finance

Jabhat al-Nusra's continued reliance on al-Qaida's traditional sources of finance from a disparate network of private donors and 'charitable' bodies lends it a very real vulnerability to well-developed practices of countering terrorism finance. Already, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has designated and imposed sanctions on at least 10 individuals based in the Arabian Gulf and Turkey for their alleged roles in collecting and distributing finance to Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. There are likely many more.

Such steps, when taken in conjunction with close partnership with regional governments to enforce restrictions on the activities of such people has a demonstrable impact on the capacity for groups like Jabhat al-Nusra to maintain a sustainable source of

external income. Clearly, however, further action is needed in some regional states to more definitively crack down on individuals who otherwise remain free from domestic prosecution. Kuwait in particular has emerged as a hotbed of activities linked to the financing of Jabhat al-Nusra,¹²⁰ while the case of Qatar poses additional problems.¹²¹

In addition to identifying and sanctioning individuals, the international community needs to begin a frank and open debate regarding the issue of ransom payments. Although many governments have consistently denied doing so, allegations are widespread that both European and regional governments—in particular, Qatar—may have been involved in paying ransoms to Jabhat al-Nusra in exchange for the release of foreign hostages. Whereas individuals identified by the U.S. Treasury have been accused of funneling sums of money ranging between tens of thousands of dollars to \$600,000 to Jabhat al-Nusra, widely reported—though unconfirmed—ransoms to the group have been as high as \$25 million per exchange. Consequently, although hostage releases occur only a small number of times per year, the potential monetary value of each one may be highly significant in covering Jabhat al-Nusra's expenses.

Looking more long-term, there must also be an awareness that continued Russian engagement in backing pro-regime forces in Syria will in all likelihood lead to further opposition losses. In addition to otherwise precipitating an opposition devolution towards fighting guerrilla warfare, such losses may additionally be compounded by an eventual pro-regime strategy that seeks to attack the opposition's free access to areas along the Turkish border. In such a scenario, access to supplies and other external support would dramatically decline. When combined with the consequences of the previously mentioned counter-finance measures, Jabhat al-Nusra would quickly suffer from serious deficiencies in terms of both finance and supply.

Tighten Northwest Syria border surveillance

As outlined above, as broader opposition dynamics look likely to face increasing adversity in the coming months, Jabhat al-Nusra will suffer the same consequences, one of which will be reduced access to cross-border supplies and support from Turkish territory. Consequently, Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups will seek to expand the use of unofficial crossings and smuggling routes along the Turkish border to sustain some inflow of finance and other supplies.

Considering the existential value that such cross-border support will represent for Jabhat al-Nusra—especially when compounded by the successful implementation of other mentioned policies above—the United States will need to enhance, preferably with active Turkish support, the level of surveillance along the northern borders of Aleppo, Idlib, and Latakia, to minimize the extent to which Jabhat al-Nusra is able to receive money and other supplies.

In short, efforts must be made to restrict as much as possible Jabhat al-Nusra's physical access to the 'outside world.' Should it and more mainstream opposition forces continue to struggle on the battlefield, then victories and the 'ghanima' that comes from them will be minimal in number and scale. Reliance on external support will increase, to the extent that it could come to define whether certain groups manage to survive or not.

120. Karen DeYoung, "Kuwait, ally on Syria, is also the leading funder of extremist rebels," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kuwait-top-ally-on-syria-is-also-the-leading-funder-of-extremist-rebels/2014/04/25/10142b9a-ca48-11e3-a75e-463587891b57_story.html.

121. Blair & Spencer, "How Qatar is funding the rise of Islamist extremists," September 20, 2014.

About the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World

The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World is a research initiative housed in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The Project's mission is to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public on the changing dynamics in Muslim-majority countries and to advance relations between Americans and Muslim societies around the world.

To fulfill this mission, the Project sponsors a range of activities, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and Muslim communities all over the world. The broader goals of the Project include:

- Exploring the multi-faceted nature of the United States' relationship with Muslim-majority states, including issues related to mutual misperceptions;
- Analyzing the social, economic, and political dynamics underway in Muslim societies;
- Identifying areas for shared endeavors between the United States and Muslim communities around the world on issues of common concern.

To achieve these goals, the Project has several interlocking components:

- The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together leaders in politics, business, media, academia, and civil society from the United States and from Muslim societies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The Forum also serves as a focal point for the Project's ongoing research and initiatives, providing the foundation for a range of complementary activities designed to enhance dialogue and impact;
- An Analysis Paper Series that provides high-quality research and publications on key questions facing Muslim states and communities;
- Workshops, symposia, and public and private discussions with key stakeholders focused on critical issues affecting the relationship;
- Special initiatives in targeted areas of demand. In the past these have included Arts and Culture, Science and Technology, and Religion and Diplomacy.

The Project's Steering Committee consists of Martin Indyk, Executive Vice President; Bruce Jones, Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy Studies; Tamara Cofman Wittes, Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Middle East Policy; William McCants, Senior Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Kenneth Pollack, Senior Fellow in the Center; Bruce Riedel, Senior Fellow in the Center; and Shibley Telhami, Nonresident Senior Fellow of the Project and Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland.

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Today's dramatic, dynamic and often violent Middle East presents unprecedented challenges for global security and United States foreign policy. Understanding and addressing these challenges is the work of the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. Founded in 2002, the Center for Middle East Policy brings together the most experienced policy minds working on the region, and provides policymakers and the public with objective, in-depth and timely research and analysis. Our mission is to chart the path—political, economic and social—to a Middle East at peace with itself and the world.

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