

Evolution of Al Nusra Front

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاونٹر ٹیرورزم

One of the first structures that come to mind when talking about Syria's armed opposition is the Al Nusra Front. An organization that has undergone many changes, both ideological and in name, since its inception.

Name changes are highly variable. Al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant, Ansar al-Mujahideen Network, Assembly for the Liberation of Syria, Support Front for the People of the Levant, The Victory Front, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, Levantine Mujahideen on the Battlefields of Jihad, The Front for the Defence of the Syrian People are just some examples. All of these names refer to the same organization. On the other hand, it is evident that the organization has undergone major changes throughout its history both ideologically and strategically.

The Nusra Front launched its first major attack on 23 December 2011 in Damascus, Syria. Al Nusra Front was allegedly formed as an extension of Islamic State in Iraq and was initially supported by ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi. Abu Muhammad al-Golani, the leader of Al Nusra (currently leader of HTS) was sent from Syria to Iraq. Thus, the group aimed to establish an Islamic state by benefiting from the civil war in Syria.

In April 2013, Nusra's co-operation with Syria's secular opposition made Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi angry. Following his differences with the group, Baghdadi, who did not listen to the warnings of Al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri, announced that he would enter Syria with his own army. Baghdadi asked the militants in Al Nusra to leave and join his new organization, ISIS. The fact that the leadership of al-Qaeda was close to Golani in the conflict between the two groups began to weaken the ties between ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

Ayman al-Zawahiri sent letters to Baghdadi, telling him and his allied fighters that they should stay in Iraq. The clashes between the two groups in 2013 turned into a hot war as a result of mutually assassinated orders. Iraqi Islamic State militants crossed the Syrian border and declared war on Al-Nusra and targeted Syrian opposition in areas such as Deir ez Zor and al Raqqa. Today, clashes between HTS and Islamic State continue in Syria. After the clashes with ISIS, we have been seeing an ideological war between the two organizations. The clergy close to Al-Nusra called the ISIS 'khawarij'* who killed Muslims, while the imams of ISIS called the al-Nusra 'apostates'.

Until 2016, Al Nusra did not break its official connection with Al Qaeda and continued its activities under their flag. We saw, in this case, that the ideology of Al Qaeda softened a bit, perhaps due to strategic reasons. Such a situation was not considered possible in the past in Bin Laden's Al Qaeda. Alliances with democratic administrations or secularists, and the establishment of joint courts in seized territories, was considered blasphemy according to Al Qaeda ideology during the leadership of Bin Laden.

World bodies such as the European Union and the United Nations aimed to limit Al-Nusra's list of terrorist organizations. During this period, the United States' air strikes against the Al Nusra group took place. In the air strikes, the United States Air Force targeted areas where Al Qaeda was confident. On the other hand, it was in a total struggle against ISIS. Al-Qaeda allowed Nusra to leave in Syria with political interests in mind in 2016, and after that announcing the group's name change from Jabhat al-Nusra (the Victory Front) to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the Levantine-Damascus Conquest Front). It was expected that political steps would be taken in this regard. Behind the name change was the desire to gain international recognition and legitimacy.

Abu Muhammad al-Golani did it with this move, hoping for the help of Turkey and the Gulf countries. In order to have a say in the new constitution of Syria, weapons and financial aid were determined as the main goals that needed to be achieved. However, this did not improve the situation for the group. Gulf countries and Turkey did not provide help for the Conquest of Levant Front.

During this transformation, there were also breaks from Golani's team. Al Nusra, which evolved from the Sharia substitution into political interests, became less attractive to the radical jihadis. Golani continued his policy in 2017. With the declaration of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Syrian opposition was trying to unite. With the loss of the Aleppo War, relations between Golani and the Free Syrian Army broke. Free Syrian Army in Aleppo while continuing the war, had been allied with Turkey. They had left Aleppo because of Operation Euphrates Shield against Islamic State.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has not forgotten this. Although the military transition agreement with the FSA continued, they forcibly removed them from the Idlib center. Nevertheless, opposition groups outside the FSA were brought together. Today, around 15,000 militants of the HTS remain in Idlib. On the other hand, a number of jihadis, who were uncomfortable with the political movement of the organization, declared the Huras al Deen group and swore allegiance directly to Al Qaeda. Today, Huras Al Deen is considered the main Al Qaeda group in Syria. The US described HTS as a terrorist organization. But on the other hand, attacks on HTS and the Golani team were stopped. Huras al Deen has been attacked very rarely, with the most recent US strike* against the group taking place on 30th June 2019. Perhaps the HTS is seen in Washington as a trump card against the Assad regime. Meanwhile, Russia's air strikes on HTS are continuing intensively. The attacks mainly focus on the north of Hama and Idlib.

The latest issue surrounding the organization is quite important: The military transition agreement between HTS and Turkey. Officially, there is no such agreement. Turkey describes HTS as a terrorist organization. HTS members have also been arrested in Turkey. However, as per the Astana meetings, observation points have been established by Turkey in Syria, which seem to be coordinated with HTS. Turkish troops also did not undergo an attack in the areas controlled by HTS. The unofficial relations between HTS and Turkey, because the latter is a secular and democratic state, have been causing jihadi criticism against HTS. Even among Al Qaeda's own clergy, there is controversy about Golani's team.

As a result, I think it will be difficult for the Golani team, which has continued to change its shell since the year it was founded, to hold on for very long in Syria.

The group, led by Abu Muhammad al-Golani, Anas Hassan Khattab, Abu 'Abdallah al-Shami ', Abu Marieh Qahtani, Abu Jaber al-Shami and Mostafa Mahamed, awaits hard times.

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