

Al Qaeda's Syria Affiliate Declares Independence

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On July 28, 2016, Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, *Jabhat al Nusra* (aka the Nusra Front), announced that it was reconstituting itself as an independent group. Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al Jawlani stated that his group would hereafter be known as *Jabhat Fatah al Sham* ("Levant Conquest Front"), and would have "no affiliation to any external entity." U.S. officials have downplayed the announcement as a rebranding effort, noting the continuing role and presence of Al Qaeda operatives within the Front.

Challenges facing the Nusra Front may have driven the timing. [Reports that the United States and Russia have considered coordinating efforts](#) against the group may have encouraged the Nusra Front to seek protection in alliances with other fighters. The announcement could also be seen as part of a broader effort to win the support of key armed groups. The Front may calculate that by renouncing its ties to Al Qaeda and continuing to focus its attacks on the Syrian government, it could eventually win the support of most Syrian opposition groups—particularly if these groups conclude that their primary goal of removing Syrian President Asad is best served through an alliance with the Nusra Front rather than with the United States.

Implications

Increased Rebel Integration

The Front's public severance of external affiliations may result in greater cooperation and integration with other elements of the Syrian opposition. Some of these groups have described the Nusra Front's ties to Al Qaeda as detrimental to the Syrian revolution, and [have called upon the group to renounce its ties](#) as a prerequisite for closer coordination. Since the announcement, powerful groups such as *Ahrar al Sham* ("Free Men of the Levant") [have welcomed the move](#) and called for greater unity among rebel groups. As of early August, the two groups were operating jointly outside of Aleppo, and appeared to represent the Syrian opposition's best chance for countering Syrian military advances in the area.

Challenge for U.S. Partnerships with Syrian Groups

Increased battlefield integration between the Nusra Front and other Syrian opposition groups could complicate efforts to strike the Nusra Front without impacting other groups with which the United States may prefer to maintain a relationship. The United States has worked to build partnerships with Syrian groups on the ground as part of efforts to counter the Islamic State, and U.S. leaders have stated that it is only local Syrian partners, not U.S. forces, that can ultimately bring long-term stability to Syria. However, expanded cooperation between the Front and other armed groups could limit the range of actors eligible to receive U.S. weapons and equipment in support of the campaign against the Islamic State.

Over time, differing interpretations over the significance of the Nusra Front's move could drive a wedge between the United States and its Syrian partners. [U.S. officials have said the announcement has not altered their view](#) of the group, which they say remains a legitimate target for military strikes. In contrast, Syrian responses have been mixed, suggesting that some groups view the Nusra Front's outward relinquishing of AQ ties as a concession that clears the way for greater cooperation. These groups may view continued U.S. targeting of the Nusra Front as weakening the opposition movement as a whole, at a time when it is under severe pressure from pro-Asad and Russian forces.

Point of Contention with Regional Allies

The rebranding also may pose challenges for U.S. efforts to dissuade regional actors from supporting the Front, whether financially or materially. U.S. objectives in Syria differ from those of its Gulf and regional allies, many of which see the removal of Syrian President Asad as their top priority. Their focus on Asad had previously muted their criticism of the Nusra Front, which is seen as one of the most effective fighting forces against the Syrian government. [Press reports state that some regional states encouraged](#) the Nusra Front to split with Al Qaeda as a precondition for sending the group financial assistance. The creation of the Levant Conquest Front could emerge as a point of contention between the United States and its regional allies, if the latter use the recent announcement as justification for providing support to the group. The United States will likely continue to discourage opposition groups from working with the Nusra Front's successor group. However, the range of states trying to shape opposition decisionmaking through the provision of financial assistance could potentially limit the influence of any single actor, including the United States.

Prospects for a Negotiated Settlement

The United States has supported the inclusion of powerful Islamist groups such as *Jaysh al Islam* ("Army of Islam") and Ahrar al Sham in U.N.-brokered peace talks, possibly assessing that the participation of armed groups will make any future political settlement both more credible and more enforceable on the ground. Jaysh al Islam, for example, holds a leadership role in the Syrian High Negotiation Committee, which represents the Syrian opposition in talks with the Syrian government. At the same time, the Nusra Front has called on the same groups to join with it in a unified military alliance, rejecting the prospect of peace talks and arguing that the opposition's goals can only be achieved through armed struggle. To the extent that the Nusra Front's recent announcement makes an alliance with other rebel groups more likely, this could increase pressure on the United States to exclude these groups from the cessation of hostilities or from future negotiations. However, the exclusion of Syria's primary armed opposition groups from talks could undermine the viability of the negotiation process.