

What's in a Name?

Jabhat al-Nusra's reasons for 'disassociating' from al-Qaeda

Erika Holmquist

The most famous al-Qaeda affiliated group in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, suddenly announced its independence from al-Qaeda in July 2016, after previously rejecting such rumours. The group also decided to change its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS; The Front for the Conquest of Syria). The move was endorsed by al-Qaeda central and was intended to signal that JFS is serious about limiting its jihad to Syria. Although JFS is an influential military actor within the opposition, it is struggling to convert its military influence into political capital. This is an integral part of JFS's Syria strategy. Many opposition groups have been reluctant to cooperate more closely with JFS, because of its link with al-Qaeda and the global al-Qaeda agenda. The decision to break with al-Qaeda is aimed at the opposition, and should be seen as an attempt to maximise JFS's ability to play an influential political role in the ongoing war and in its aftermath.

Objectives, strategy and sources of tension

JFS has fought the Assad regime since 2011 and is active in the Syrian provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus, and Dera'a and Quneitra. JFS's stated goals are to remove the Assad regime and shift the ideology of Syrian society from secularism to Islamism, in preparation for the future establishment of an Islamic emirate. The strategy for achieving these goals is first to make JFS militarily indispensable to the wider Syrian opposition, and secondly to convert the popular support garnered from its military and social contributions into ideological conviction.

The leader of the organisation, Abu Muhammad al-Joulani (whose real identity was recently revealed as Ahmed al-Sharaa), is a Syrian national and former member of al-Qaeda in Iraq/ Islamic State of Iraq (AQI/ISI, the precursor of Daesh). He joined AQI/ISI following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. JFS was formerly a branch of Daesh, but the ties were cut in 2013 after Daesh attempted to subsume the entire al-Qaeda insurgency in Syria under its command.

Having previously concealed its connection to al-Qaeda from the rest of the opposition for fear of being stigmatised, JFS was compelled to openly announce its allegiance to al-Qaeda central when the fight with Baghdadi, the leader of Daesh, unfolded. The announcement underlined that JFS, in contrast to Daesh, shared the al-Qaeda ideology and accepted the guidance of its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. At the time of the Daesh/JFS split, members were forced to take sides, with many international jihadists siding with Baghdadi and many Syrians siding with Joulani, which enhanced JFS's Syrian orientation.

The schism with Daesh is mainly a conflict over method. Ultimately, Daesh, al-Qaeda and JFS are striving towards similar goals. However, Baghdadi and his followers believe that the establishment of an Islamic state can be immediately achieved through indiscriminate violence, while al-Qaeda and JFS see the need for a slower, long-term operation that includes convincing populations ideologically.

Following the very brutal AQI/ISI campaign in Iraq from 2004 to 2006, public support for al-Qaeda declined sharply. This led the al-Qaeda leadership to conclude that a softer approach was necessary. Prior to Baghdadi's renunciation of al-Qaeda, its leadership urged Daesh and JFS to avoid killing Muslims. The degree of adherence to this tenet has since become one of the main dividing lines between Daesh and JFS.

Since JFS's affiliation with al-Qaeda became common knowledge in 2013, it has caused problems for the organisation. JFS became a frequent target of US and Russian airstrikes that killed many members of its leadership. For example, in April 2016 the JFS Majlis al-Shura¹ member and al-Qaeda envoy Abu Firas al-Suri was killed in a US airstrike while attending an operational meeting with representatives of other al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in north-western Syria.

In its targeting of JFS, the US distinguished between JFS and al-Qaeda, claiming that there was a cell of 50-100 al-Qaeda veterans, known as the Khorasan group, embedded within JFS and pursuing operations against the

¹ Majlis al-Shura means consultative council, and here refers to JFS's top leadership council.

West (rather than the Syrian regime). The US succeeded in killing several key Khorasan figures during 2015, including the cell's rumoured leader Muhsin al-Fadhli and the senior al-Qaeda strategist Sanafi al-Nasr. JFS leader al-Joulani has denied the existence of the Khorasan group. In a likely attempt to dispel arguments for targeting JFS, he gave an interview in 2015 in which he said that JFS "...doesn't have any plans or directives to target the West" and that the Khorasan group is a "fabrication". The US remains steadfast in its description of the Khorasan group.

There is speculation amongst analysts that the US made the distinction between the Khorasan group and the JFS to avoid causing more disruption in the precarious balance of Syrian opposition groups on the ground, where JFS plays an important military role and enjoys some popularity. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, his American counterpart asked Russia to refrain from strikes on JFS because there were other opposition groups mixed in with them. If true, this request illustrates that JFS and other similar groups are succeeding in exploiting the conflict to expand their political power, to the detriment of other more moderate actors. However, another underlying thought in the US decision to target JFS's al-Qaeda veterans was likely that it could represent an opportunity to weaken the organisation by exploiting differences of opinion, i.e. that targeting hardliners would strengthen the fraction primarily focusing on Syria.

There were rumours of a split between JFS and al-Qaeda central for a long time, and Joulani denied it on several occasions. Arriving at the decision internally to actually split from the mother group cannot have been easy. The issue allegedly caused tensions within the top leadership, and several members of the Shura were excluded over related disagreements. For example, Syrian national and JFS co-founder Saleh al-Hamawi was expelled from the Shura and deposed as Emir of Hama in 2015.

He was reportedly criticised for prioritising the Syrian jihad as opposed to the global jihad. This episode, and the whole discussion on breaking with al-Qaeda or not, points to the wider problem that al-Qaeda also faced in Iraq during the mid-2000s, i.e. struggling to reconcile the global al-Qaeda agenda with that of the local insurgency. Many of the Syrian opposition groups are not interested in the global salafi-jihadist cause and their primary objective is the liberation of Syria. It is also plausible that the risk of

being targeted by the US deters some opposition groups from cooperating with JFS.

In Joulani's 2016 announcement of Jabhat al-Nusra's name change and new independent path, it is clear that he was not distancing the new organisation from al-Qaeda ideology *per se*. He showed reverence for the al-Qaeda leadership and its guidance. Instead, he framed the break with al-Qaeda as a measure to dispel international arguments that the JFS should be targeted as part of the wider al-Qaeda network. The separation is also intended to prove to the Syrian opposition, and the international community, that JFS is focused on Syria and lacks global ambitions. According to JFS's rationale, if it were still to be targeted after taking this stance, this would demonstrate to the Syrian opposition that the international community, spearheaded by the US, is not only misguided but also the enemy. If, on the other hand, JFS were to be perceived as less of a threat to the US this would have a positive impact on the long-term resilience and prospects of the group, given the havoc US drones have wrought on Daesh and, earlier, on AQI/ISI.

Capabilities, allies and assets

In its bid to become militarily indispensable to the broader opposition, JFS has thus far made considerable progress, becoming an important military actor in the war. In contrast to Daesh and others, JFS has been very selective when it comes to recruitment and has prioritised quality over quantity. As a result, the group has remained rather small (5000-10 000 fighters) compared with other opposition forces, but it has earned the reputation of being a professional, highly effective force and an asset to the wider opposition in the fight against the Syrian regime.

In joint operations with other opposition groups, it is often JFS that carries out the most challenging assignments. JFS fighters are trained in both guerrilla warfare and conventional warfare tactics. Being able to switch between the two gives JFS important flexibility. The organisation also has suicide battalions and the capability for building car bombs both of which it is known to use frequently.

Seized equipment from other opposition groups, including anti-tank missiles, has extended JFS's military capabilities further. JFS also appears to have access to either surface-to-air missiles or anti-aircraft guns, as it, or one of its allies, shot down a Syrian army jet in the beginning of

April 2016. There are some reports that Ahrar al-Sham did the actual shooting, which if true would have constituted a breach of the then ongoing ceasefire between the opposition and the regime. JFS, however, was never part of that agreement and was not very interested in a ceasefire. Likely, since as long as the majority of the opposition remains immune to JFS ideology, JFS needs the conflict to go on, in order to continue to prove its worth to the opposition. The loss of a single aircraft does not impact the broader conflict much. However, if JFS has extensive access to such weaponry, this could decisively shift battle-field fortunes in favour of the opposition.

Ahrar al-Sham is JFS's most important ally. Like JFS, Ahrar al-Sham is a salafi islamist group, but significantly larger and reportedly more moderate. Militarily, the two groups complement each other, as Ahrar al-Sham has extensive manpower and JFS has highly skilled fighters. Since Ahrar al-Sham is popular with other groups, the alliance serves as an important bridge for JFS to the more moderate parts of the opposition.

Both JFS and Ahrar al-Sham are part of Jaish al-Fateh (the Army of Conquest), a coalition of islamist groups fighting the regime created in March 2015. The Jaish al-Fateh coalition is present in the provinces of Aleppo, Latakia, Idlib, Hama, Damascus, and Dera'a and Quneitra. Shortly after its creation, the coalition successfully seized Idlib from regime control.² The coalition's work goes beyond fighting. According to the main religious authority of Jaish al-Fateh, Abdullah al-Muhaysini, the coalition administers and provides public services and Islamic courts in areas under their control (such as Idlib city, Ariha and Jisr al-Shughour). Through these Islamic courts, JFS helps uphold law and order by arbitrating disputes. The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) argues that the courts are a precursor to the formation of JFS/Jaish al-Fateh governance structures in those areas.

Consistent with the philosophy of fostering cooperation before ideology, which contrasts starkly with Daesh's practices, Joulani has said that "[t]he groups in Jaish al-Fat[e]h are all Muslims, even if they differ somewhat from us. There are some groups which have [made] some mistakes, we overlook these mistakes, because of the enormous severity of the battle." It is claimed that Joulani

² The coalition also includes Liwa al-Haqq, Jund al-Aqsa, Jaish al-Sunna, Ajnad al-Sham and Failaq al-Sham.

proposed a full merger of the groups in Jaish al-Fateh into one organisation in January 2016, on the condition that the implementation of sharia rule would not be abandoned. No merger was announced, however, allegedly because Ahrar al-Sham asked JFS to leave al-Qaeda. JFS has now reconsidered its position, so it remains to be seen whether a full merger between the groups will take place. A complete union between the groups of Jaish al-Fateh would most likely strengthen the salafi-jihadist current within the Syrian opposition.

According to their own claims, neither JFS nor Jaish al-Fateh receives financial or material support from any of the regional states. However, this contradicts information that Ahrar al-Sham is supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia. This means that JFS, at least indirectly, benefits from this support too. There is also persistent speculation regarding JFS's relationship with Qatar, which has acted as a middle man between JFS and its adversaries on several occasions. For example, in 2015 Qatar helped Lebanon negotiate the release of Lebanese soldiers taken by JFS in Arsal. There are also reports circulating that Qatar for a long time has tried to persuade JFS to break with al-Qaeda in return for aid. The al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri has warned against accepting support from regional powers, but with JFS now being independent it would presumably be free to ignore this advice.

Due to its currently limited state-building ambitions, JFS survives on a much smaller budget than Daesh. JFS is said to be highly dependent on foreign donations, which so far have mainly been channelled through the al-Qaeda network. This revenue is supplemented with other sources of income such as ransom from kidnappings and taxation of civilians inside Syria. Before the break with Daesh, JFS also had access to revenue from oil fields in eastern Syria.

Popular support and propaganda

Gaining popular support and thereby legitimacy is a fundamental stepping stone towards realising JFS's long-term aim of gaining broad-based acceptance for its salafi agenda in Syria. To achieve this, JFS provides social services, sometimes via Jaish al-Fateh and sometimes on its own. The organisation also performs "religious outreach", in line with its goal to convert Syrians to its ideology and win popular support. It has a media organisation tasked with spreading JFS propaganda. Continuing the intra-jihadi

feud, this propaganda often seeks to denigrate Daesh, while pointing out the merits of JFS (Daesh does the reverse in its publications).

It is difficult to assess the degree of popular support JFS holds and anecdotal evidence on this is mixed. In the areas where JFS is present, it has been able to exercise the greatest social control in Idlib city and Aleppo, according to ISW. During the ceasefire in the spring of 2016, Idlib province saw a nationalist anti-regime demonstration escalate to an armed struggle between JFS and a Free Syrian Army group called the 13th Division.

The fight caused public anger against JFS and the dispute was reportedly referred to an Islamic court for arbitration. Some media channels portrayed the whole episode as indicative of JFS's coming failure. However, in August 2016 JFS contributed greatly to the opposition's success in breaking the regime's siege of Aleppo, and was praised for this by other opposition groups. This event lends credibility to the previously mentioned notion that JFS's military prowess is a necessary conduit for garnering goodwill and forging relationships with the broader Syrian opposition.

Conclusions

Realities on the ground in Syria make it both a necessity and a strategically wise move for JFS to disassociate from al-Qaeda. Militarily speaking, JFS has managed to establish itself as an influential actor on the Syrian battleground. This is the first step in JFS's strategy for achieving its two main goals to depose the Assad regime and over time turn Syria from a secular to an Islamic state.

However, JFS has so far been unable to sell its ideology to the wider opposition. Doing so constitutes the second step of its Syria strategy. The failure to gain the cooperation of some opposition groups is probably due to a combination of their fear of being targeted by associating with JFS, and a lack of belief in JFS's brand of religion. This has prompted JFS to change course in order to remain a relevant actor.

The suggestion by Joulani to merge JFS with Ahrar al-Sham and the other members of Jaish al-Fateh shows a willingness to compromise on some of JFS's original aims. Ahrar al-Sham shares a good deal of JFS's ideology, but does not view the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria as plausible, at least not within the foreseeable future. It is possible that JFS has come to the same conclusion and is willing to accept this outcome in the short to medium

term. Shelving the realisation of a state for now could be a small but clever concession if it helps to ensure increased acceptance by the broader Syrian opposition. A successful merger with Ahrar al-Sham could provide that.

The Eid al-Adha ceasefire (Sept. 2016) negotiated by the US and Russia can be interpreted as an indication of US concern that JFS's influence might grow and that a merger with Ahrar al-Sham could happen. Having previously been reluctant to strike JFS on a larger scale for fear of undermining the opposition, the US has since proposed targeting JFS and Daesh jointly with Russia. It remains to be seen whether this becomes a reality.

With both its goals for Syria yet unrealised, it will most likely benefit JFS if the war continues. As things stand at the moment, JFS's most substantial contribution is its military skill. The absence of armed conflict would render JFS's military services obsolete, thereby negating JFS's influence within the opposition. Hence, JFS needs more time to convert its military contributions into social and political influence. It is too early to tell whether disassociating with al-Qaida will boost JFS's ability to further ingratiate itself with the opposition, but there is no doubt that this is what JFS wishes.

Erika Holmquist
Analyst