



## **The Armed Islamic Opposition in the Syrian Civil War**

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**Abstract:** *This article gives information about the activity of militant Islamic groups, the relations among them, and the their outcomes in internal conflict and civil war in Syria. Moreover, analytical information is given about how these groups are organized and act.*

**Keywords:** *Syrish rebellion, militant Islamic opposition, Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham), Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement (NZD), Jaish al-Islam, Faylaq al-Rahmon, Ahrar al-Sham, Hurras al-Din (HaD), Free Syrian Police.*

Many foreign researchers point out that the formation of various Islamic militant groups in Syria in the recent history of the country has always been the opposition of the majority Sunnis against the rule of a small number of Alawites in power. An example of this is the opposition and even armed resistance of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Even though it may look like a scientifically correct hypothesis at first glance, this does not represent the activity and goals of Islamic groups that emerged during internal conflicts after 2011. Because this can be justified by several arguments: for example, the fact that Salafist and jihadist groups had more damage on Sunnis than Alawites makes the situation clear for us, and from other standpoints, we can see that the goals of these groups are more political than religious and served the geopolitical interests of external forces. Furthermore, the fact that they fought with each other for leadership means that they did not have religious motives from the start. It should be mentioned that we will not dwell on ISIS ("Islamic State") here, which was the largest in terms of number and influence in Syria in 2014–2018, because, firstly, we gave more detailed information in our first lecture. Second, ISIS is not only an opposition group against the Assad regime in Syria, but it is also an international terrorist organization that aims to establish a "caliphate" on a global scale, rejects any modern governance system, and opposes the West, especially against the United States. In contrast, other Islamic armed groups in Syria inform us that they are only against the Syrian government, and this report provides information about them.

### **Syrian Muslim Brotherhood organization**

The Muslim Brotherhood is a transnational Sunni Islamic movement that theoretically tries to establish sharia (Islamic law). In 1942 Mustafa al-Siba'i founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria as a continuation of the Brotherhood in Egypt founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Since 2014, the group has been led by Muhammad Hikmat Walid. Some analysts argue that the Brotherhood has served as the ideological leader of modern violent Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The group is recognized as a terrorist organization by the governments of Bahrain, Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria”, February 01, 2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/02/01/muslim-brotherhood-in-syria>

In 1970, the Syrian "Brotherhood" began to protest against the Alawite minority led by Hafiz Assad, who seized absolute power in a coup within the Ba'ath Party. The Syrian "Brotherhoods", which claimed that they were deprived of equal opportunities in the country, organized protests mainly in the cities of Aleppo and Hama in the northern regions of the country. However, peaceful demonstrations were organized at that time. In 1975, Adnan Saad al-Din of Hama was elected the supreme leader of the Syrian "Brotherhood". Under his leadership, it was transformed into a complex hierarchical organization with operational agencies, official mechanisms and a clear division of labor. In addition, the Brotherhood developed a radical military wing and launched a "jihad" to turn Syria into a Sharia state. From the winter of 1976 to the summer of 1979, various Brotherhood-affiliated groups attacked high-ranking members of the state, representatives of the Baath Party, the Alawite community, and even individual military positions and camps. In 1979, these militant groups killed 83 Alawite students at the military artillery school in Aleppo. In June 1980, members of the Brotherhood attempted to assassinate Assad with grenades and machine guns. After these events, H. Assad's government fought hard against the group and arrested hundreds of members of the group and sentenced most of them to death. These events lead to the President Hafez Assad to issue Law 49 in 1980, which banned the Muslim Brotherhood and imposed the death penalty on its members. As a results most members of the group left the country.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990s and 2000s, while in exile, the Brotherhood tried to rebrand itself as a nonviolent, politically minded group. In March 2011, when popular protests erupted in Syria, the Brotherhood was reactivated and tried to consolidate political and military power among the opposition. As the civil war rages, the Brotherhood has called on its members in Syria's major cities to return to smaller communities and reconnect with civilians there. The Brotherhood has been successful in recruiting members from rebel-held areas of Syria, particularly in and around Aleppo. Hundreds of members of the Syrian Brotherhood begin to return to Syria from exile. The "Syrian Brothers", which fought against ISIS, served in the ranks of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army. Membership in the organization is punishable by death, but the Brotherhood operates mainly in opposition-held areas, including Aleppo, Idlib and Hama. Meanwhile, as other "jihadi" Salafist organizations increasingly dominate and dominate the Syrian opposition, the Brotherhood remains marginalized and ineffective.<sup>3</sup>

### **Jabhat al-Nusra (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham)**

The internationally sanctioned terrorist organization Jabhat al-Nusra (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or al-Sham since 2017) was formed in 2011 in Syria as a branch of al-Qaeda in opposition to the Assad regime. Al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani (al-Golani in English) quickly found donors in the Persian Gulf, and formed an organization that has been growing stronger that collects revenue from taxes and confiscation of property, and is adept at launching insurgent attacks. Abu Muhammad al-Jolani was one of the leaders of the branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq until 2011, and at the time of increasing internal conflicts, was sent by al-Baghdadi (the founder of ISIS, killed in 2019) to create a "jihadi" group in Syria.<sup>4</sup>

Jabhat al-Nusra continued its ties to al-Qaeda even after al-Qaeda split with ISIS. However, in late July 2016, al-Jolani announced the dissolution of Jabhat al-Nusra and the formation of a new group, Jabhat Fath al-Sham, and denied that the group had any external ties to al-Qaeda. However, many analysts believe that although al-Jolani has officially cut public ties with al-Qaeda, the group has theoretically continued its clandestine ties and cooperated with al-Qaeda and took strategic and operational guidance.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, al-Jolani's speeches cause disagreement and conflict with al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri (killed in August 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center, "No More 'Hama Rules'", September 19, 2016, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64609>

<sup>3</sup> Raphaël Lefèvre, *The Muslim Brotherhood Prepares for a Comeback in Syria*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda and allies announce 'new entity' in Syria", *Long War Journal*, January 28, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Hassan Hassan, "Jabhat Al Nusra and Al Qaeda: The Riddle, the Ruse and the Reality," *The National*, November 1, 2017.

In late January 2017, Jabhat Fath al-Sham merged with several other groups - Harakat Nuriddin al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haq, Jaysh al-Sunna and Jabhat Ansar al-Din -and renamed once again to form Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Statements and messages from al-Qaeda leadership view HTS as an independent Salafi-jihadi organization that illegally broke away from al-Qaeda and violated the oath of allegiance.<sup>6</sup> A number of prominent "jihadists" have left HTS altogether, plotting within the group and openly criticizing al-Zawahiri for breaking their allegiance. Al-Zawahiri himself has made several statements against the merger, saying that due to the "breach of the covenant" they "failed to achieve unity" and were never authorized by al-Qaeda leadership to form.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, HTS, still known as al-Nusra, fought against ISIS in January 2014, namely against its one-time "leader" al-Baghdadi. Interestingly, al-Baghdadi himself was the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, and later formed ISIS and fought against al-Qaeda.<sup>8</sup>

Today, HTS remains under the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, but the group's goals have changed somewhat since it declared independence from al-Qaeda. Verified information on Al Qaeda is almost absent from HTS publications today. Instead, the group is focused on the local level, with its primary goal of establishing Islamic rule in Syria by "overthrowing the Assad regime and driving out its Iranian-sponsored militias".<sup>9</sup>

For this purpose, al-Jolani put forward a multifaceted strategy. The first phase, which HTS claimed to have completed in August 2018, was "the withdrawal of Iranian-backed (Basij, Hezbollah) militants from the cities of Fua and Kafriya, which are a threat to the entire region and have fueled sectarian mobilization, which the regime used to achieve its goals." The second phase, ongoing as of October 2018, is the campaign against ISIS ("Islamic State") and its allies in Syria, whom al-Jolani denounced as "destabilizing." The third phase is to consolidate or secure northern Syria, mainly Idlib, to prevent additional territorial losses".<sup>10</sup>

According to the CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) Transnational Threats Project's latest report on Salafi-jihadi groups, HTS has around 12,000 - 15,000 fighters as of October 2018.<sup>11</sup> Although the group is mainly located in Syria's Idlib province, it has also been carrying out terror and subversive activities in Syria's Aleppo, Hama, Deraa and Damascus provinces. Although HTS is known as a terrorist organization, the majority of "violent incidents" attributed to the group come from its wars against the government, Iranian forces and ISIS: 1,786 incidents were classified as such. In addition, HTS killed an average of one civilian per day, with the highest number in November 2017, when it killed 338 innocent people in a single month.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout 2018, HTS has faced several setbacks, including the aforementioned rejection by Al-Qaeda's central leadership, as well as a large-scale loss of territory of control, weakening local support, assassinations of key leaders, and significant divisions among them and others.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, by the end of 2018, it was able to attract the largest number of foreign fighters to Syria after ISIS, consisting of 3,000-4,000 foreigners. For this, they carried out strong da'wah work through the Internet. In order to finance these activities, in November 2017, it formed the "Salvation" government in Idlib and began imposing taxes on the use of water and electricity in the

<sup>6</sup> Seth Jones et al., "Al Qaeda's Struggling Campaign in Syria", Washington, DC: CSIS, April 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/al-qaedas-struggling-campaign-syria>

<sup>7</sup> Charles Lister, "How al-Qa'ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story," CTC Sentinel 11, issue 2, February 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaida-lost-control-syrian-affiliate-inside-story/>

<sup>8</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham." Stanford University. Last modified June 2021. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/hay'-tahrir-al-sham>

<sup>9</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), TNT Terrorism Backgrounder, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/past-projects/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir-al-sham>

<sup>10</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018, that source

<sup>11</sup> CSIS Transnational Threats Project's 2018 report, The Evolving Terror Threat, 2018; Mapping Militant Organizations, 2021, that source

<sup>12</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018, that source

<sup>13</sup> Seth Jones et al., 2018, that source

municipalities under its control. HTS also captured the Bab al-Halwa border crossing between Idlib and Turkey in July 2017, providing an additional source of tax.

In September 2019, HTS commander Abu al-Abed al-Ashida accused HTS of corrupt internal practices.<sup>14</sup>

For a while, the future of HTS was uncertain. Turkey put pressure to disband the group and join it to a larger Turkish-backed opposition coalition, but HTS leaders have insisted that "issues related to the organizational structure of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham are non-negotiable."<sup>15</sup> The group is also under attack in Idlib by the Syrian regime and its allies, including Russia. In addition, HTS has many competitors within the Syrian opposition, including the National Liberation Front, which includes groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Ahrar and Suqur al-Sham.<sup>16</sup>

However, 2019 reports that the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front has joined the HTS-founded Kutkarish government. As a result, HTS will establish sole rule in Idlib. On June 22, 2020, HTS banned all opposition groups outside of its control and prohibited its members from seceding and forming independent groups. With this move, the recently established Hurras ad-Din (HaD), Ansar al-Islam, Ansar ad-Din, Tansiqiyat al-Jihad, and Liwa al-Mouqatilin al-Ansar were outlawed. In response, HaD accused HTS of acting on behalf of Assad and foreign invaders. That month, violent clashes between HTS and HaD lasted for several days and left more than 100 people dead. On June 28, HTS intensified its military campaign against rival jihadist groups in Idlib and captured the leader of HaD. Today, HTS established its de facto power in Idlib. The fact that they only declare that they are against the Assad government is causing a conflict between Assad and his allies, Russia and Iran, other international forces such as USA and great Britian are keeping a distance and it has been pointing out that HTS is being backed by Turkey.<sup>17</sup>

### **Jaish al-Islam**

Formerly known as Liwa al-Islam, the group later changed its name to Jaish al-Islam in 2013. The group joins the "Islamic Coalition" political group and fights against the Assad regime. Jaish al-Islam's central mission is to "fight against Assad and reject the Takfiri mentality of ISIS." "Jaish al-Islam" or "Army of Islam" coalition is based in Damascus and Eastern Ghouta and has an army of more than 10,000-15,000 members. This makes it the largest rebel group in Eastern Ghouta. Jaish al-Islam considers al-Qaeda and ISIS to be apostates from Islam and a threat to Islam. In addition, Jaysh al-Islam differs from al-Qaeda and ISIS in that it does not call for the elimination of the Western presence in the Middle East or the creation of a single Islamic state. Zahran Aloush, the founder of the group, attracted many members and expanded the arsenal of military equipment. Aloush was killed in a 2015 airstrike by the Syrian military. The group is now lead by Essam al-Buwaydani.<sup>18</sup>

### **Faylaq al-Rahman**

Founded in 2013, Faylaq al-Rahman (or al-Rahman Legion or al-Rahman Corps) includes more than 9,000 fighters. The organization describes itself as a "revolutionary military organization that aims to overthrow the Syrian regime," but does not want to turn Syria into an Islamic state. The military commander of the group, Abdul-Nasir Shmeir, was a former commander of the Syrian army. The group is said to be allied with Turkey, Qatar and HTS and opposes Jaysh al-Islam in Eastern Ghouta. The group is also linked to the Free Syrian Army, one of the largest rebel coalitions formed at the

<sup>14</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations, 2021, that source

<sup>15</sup> Seth Jones et al., 2018, that source

<sup>16</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018, that source

<sup>17</sup> Hosam al-Jablawi, "Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement: How a Once Moderate Group Joined Fateh al-Sham", Atlantic Council, February 17, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/nour-al-din-al-zenki-movement-how-a-once-moderate-group-joined-fateh-al-sham/>

<sup>18</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. "Jaysh al-Islam." Stanford University. Last modified March 2019. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/jaysh-al-islam>

start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The group is well-resourced as it manufactures its own weapons in artisanal factories. The group also participated in peace talks in Geneva and Astana.<sup>19</sup>

### Ahrar al-Sham

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, known as Ahrar al-Sham, aims to establish an Islamic state based on Sharia in Syria. Ahrar al-Sham, a Sunni Salafist militant group, emerged after the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011 and was HTS' main rival. The group is estimated to have more than 25,000 fighters. Although Ahrar al-Sham officials have tried to declare the group moderate, in 2016 the group's commander, Abu Yahya al-Hamawi, expressed a desire to expand ties with al-Nusra Front as part of the "re-invigoration of Islam" movement.<sup>20</sup>

Ahrar al-Sham is known for its use of improvised explosive devices as a vehicle for insurgents, as well as for targeting military bases to acquire weapons such as mobile artillery and guided missiles. Ahrar al-Sham cut ties with ISIS after ISIS leader al-Baghdadi opposed reconciliation efforts between Sunni militant groups in Syria. Given the impact of the Ahrar al-Sham attacks, the organization allegedly received funding from donors in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to fight Syrian government forces, according to analysts at Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation.<sup>21</sup> Ahrar al-Sham formed three famous umbrella organizations - the Syrian Islamic Front, the Islamic Front and Jaysh al-Fath.

### Hurras al-Din (HaD)

Hurras al-Din (Guardians of the Religion) is listed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Organization by the United States. The group is a splinter group of HTS, widely believed to be al-Qaeda's new branch in Syria. HaD is mainly composed of HTS refugees. Established in February 2018, the HaD is led by Khalid al-Aruri (alias Abu al-Qasim al-Urduni) and Shura Council members Samir Hijazi (alias Abu Hamam al-Sham or Faruq al-Surii), Sami al - Uraydi (alias Abu Mahmud al-Sham), Bilal Khuraisat (alias Abu Huzaifa al-Urduni), Faraj Ahmad Nana and Abu Abd al-Karim al-Masri. Its founding statement called for "an end to the fighting between warring factions in Syria and to save the Muslim tent." After this invitation, more than sixteen militant groups join HaD. HaD claims to have carried out more than 200 attacks since its establishment.<sup>22</sup>

HaD further strengthened its military potential by forming various combat alliances. Its allies include: Hilf Nusrat al-Islam, founded in April 2018, and Wa-Hardh al-Mu'minin, founded in October 2018. Further alliances include Jabhat Ansar al-Din and Jamaat Ansar al-Islam. The last two groups are affiliated with al-Qaeda.<sup>23</sup>

HaD spends a lot of time spreading its ideology throughout Idlib. In addition to the religious office, HaD also established the "Committee for Enjoining the Right and Prohibiting Wrongdoing". The activities of the committee include conducting "Hisb patrols" (moral police). In addition, HaD and its group Wa-Hardh al-Mu'minin have raised funds for military action locally and online as part of their "Jahizuna Campaign".<sup>24</sup>

On January 1, 2021, HaD militants detonated a car bomb in front of the Russian military base in Raqqa. No casualties were reported, but the attack showed that HaD could be expanding its attacks beyond its usual location in Idlib. The head of HaD, Muhammad Abu Khalid al-Suri, issued a statement later, saying that the aim of the attack was to target "the bases of the Syrian regime and the

<sup>19</sup> BBC News, "Faylaq al-Rahman", 22 February 2018, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1douzrw>; Bassem Mroue, "Thousands of well-armed rebel fighters are in Syria's Ghouta", Associated Press, February 28, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> "Syrian Brotherhood not seeking to form alliance with Ahrar Al-Sham", Middle East Monitor, August 26, 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20150826-syrian-brotherhood-not-seeking-to-form-alliance-with-ahrar-al-sham/>

<sup>21</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. "Ahrar al-Sham." Stanford University. Last modified March 2022. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ahrar-al-sham>

<sup>22</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Huras al-Din: The Overlooked al-Qaeda Group in Syria", Washington Institute, Sep 24, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/huras-al-din-overlooked-al-qaeda-group-syria>

<sup>23</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, 2019, that source

<sup>24</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, 2019, that source

enemy of Russia" and "reject international agreements brought from the surface." Given the operation outside of HaD's general territory, some analysts speculate that HaD could launch other attacks outside of Idlib against Syrian regime forces and even Iranian militants.<sup>25</sup>

### Free Syrian Police

Turkey has provided significant resources and humanitarian aid to Syrian local governments through Operation Euphrates Defense. One of the results of this initiative was the establishment of the Free Syrian Police (FSP) in 2012. The FSP, funded by six Western countries, was created to ensure security and stability in northern Aleppo. The FSP had no ties to police operating in other rebel-held areas such as Idlib, Daraa, or other parts of rural Aleppo, but instead reported to the local government operating in northern Aleppo. Most of the recruits came from refugee camps in Turkey, but some were former rebel fighters. Militiamen were specially trained by the Turkish forces and provided with equipment, clothes, weapons and police cars. On January 16, 2019, the FSP ceased operations after HTS took over Idlib province. As part of the ceasefire agreement between the SDF and the rebels, all areas previously held by the rebels that were not directly supported by Turkey came under the control of the militia's National Salvation Government. According to local media, Islamic police affiliated with HTS have been deployed in areas where the Free Syrian Police has been disbanded.<sup>26</sup>

In general, there are many armed Islamist groups in opposition to the Assad government in Syria. Some are working in small groups, some are fighting together. Sometimes, because they cannot agree, a war breaks out between them and they split up. In addition, there are Islamic militant groups that defend the Assad regime: for example, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Basij, and others, which are supported by the Shia sect and Iran. There is also an ethnic Kurdish YPG organization.

As of February 2020, the Syrian conflict has yet to improve. Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS, a number of jihadist groups continue to perpetrate daily violence among the population. Active terrorist groups are Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), National Liberation Front, Hurras al-Din, People's Defense Units (YPG), Failaq al-Rahman, Jaysh al-Islam, Nuriddin al-Zenki movement (NZD), Ahrar al-Sham and others. The most powerful of these today is HTS, the latest incarnation of the al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's official branch in Syria. The group is well-equipped and is considered one of the most powerful militant groups in northern Syria. Hurras al-Din, a branch of HTS, also maintains its position in the region. Another important force is the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (NLF), which was formed in 2018 by rebel groups seeking to fight HTS. The NLF is in the form of an alliance that includes the hard-line militant Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham, as well as other groups that serve under the umbrella of the "moderate" Free Syrian Army. In 2019, the NLF lost most of the territory under its control in northern Syria to HTS after clashes broke out between the two groups. In January 2019, the NLF reached an agreement to recognize the HTS-backed administration, and since then the two groups have been fighting together against the latest attacks by the Syrian government.

The YPG, the Kurdish armed group that remains Syria's second powerhouse against the government, is the only non-Islamic ethnic group and has been heavily armed by the U.S. in its fight against ISIS.<sup>27</sup>

### Summary

In conclusion, it can be said that in the last 20 years, there have been huge internal divisions in Syria. After such divisions in the society, each social group tried to organize some kind of political or

<sup>25</sup> Khaled al-Khateb, "Is Al-Qaeda affiliate expanding attacks beyond Syrian town of Idlib?" Al-Monitor, January 11, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/01/syria-hurras-al-din-idlib-raqqa-attack-islamic-state.html#ixzz7kWGk3qkJ>

<sup>26</sup> Harun al-Aswad, "Syrian Free Police disband following HTS militant takeover in Idlib", Middle East Eye, 16 January 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrian-free-police-disband-following-hts-militant-takeover-idlib>

<sup>27</sup> Karimov, F. E. (2022). CONCEPTUAL AND PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO SOLVING ETHNIC PROBLEMS. *Journal of Social Research in Uzbekistan*, 2(05), 20-28.

military associations. Such associations caused the state to become the center of instability and conflicts from the background of the struggle for power and resources. The collapse of the unified management system from the state has opened the doors of opportunity for geopolitical forces to conduct politics within their own interests in the territory of Syria. The formation of today's Syria as a stable state is connected with putting an end to the activities of these groups and restoring the unified statehood.

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