

SYRIA JABHAT FATEH AL-SHAM

Party Portrait

Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, is a radical Islamist salafi-jihadist group operating in Syria, particularly in Idlib province. It is an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq (now known as ISIS), and, until recently, was the Syrian affiliate of the global al-Qaeda organization. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham aspires to forge an Islamic emirate and, eventually, a caliphate governed under sharia law. The group has also pursued a policy of presenting itself as Syrian, rather than global jihadi, movement, with the specific goal of leading the Syrian revolution and overthrowing the Assad regime.

Key Interests

- Create an Islamic state in Syria, governed under sharia law
- Destroy Western influence in the Middle East
- For some members: Wage a global jihad against western interests – including carrying out attacks in North America. Such aspirations have been absent from its rhetoric but, considering its close ties to al-Qaeda and transnational Islamic terrorism, it is likely that this goal has not been jettisoned.

Sources of Leverage

Military - The group maintains 5,000 - 10,000 fighters and military capabilities in the war against the Assad regime
Geography - Jabhat Fateh al-Sham controls areas in the North-West of Syria in and around Idlib province
Political - Although its ideology and links to al-Qaeda will continue to make it unacceptable to Western powers, Gulf nations and Turkey may begin to view the group as the only one capable of thwarting an outright regime victory, and thus as a potential proxy.

Regional Strategy

Jabhat Fateh al-Sham has worked to become a dominant player in the Syrian opposition, with a primary strategy of gaining control of large tracts of territory from the Syrian government and winning the support of the Sunni Syrian populace in the areas its governs. The group cooperates militarily with other opposition groups, both moderates and radicals, and uses moderate public rhetoric to appear more acceptable to Syrians. It recently changed its name to distance from al-Qaeda and attempt to appeal to a broader range of partners. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham maintains opposition to participation in internationally-negotiated peace-talks.

Powerful Individuals

Abu Muhammad al-Julani (emir), Abdul Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh (senior strategist), Sami al-Oreidi (senior religious figure and second in command)

Potential Negotiation Moves

Continue to Oppose Political Negotiations - Negotiation moves are constrained both by its own hostility towards international efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement to the Syrian conflict, and by international players' refusal to engage with the terrorist group. Furthermore, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's support amongst the Syrian populace has generally benefitted from ongoing conflict, which binds civilians more closely to an armed group that can protect it militarily (but is less capable of protecting it politically in times of peace).
Build Coalition - Build negotiated political coalition among other opposition groups to gain power and create vision for negotiations with Assad regime.

Internal Conflicts

Jabhat Fateh al-Sham comprises both foreign and Syrian fighters. While both are committed to the same salafi-jihadist cause, it is likely that some more pragmatic Syrian fighters will be more amenable to limiting the group's medium-term aims to establishing an Islamic state in Syria than foreign jihadists, who harbor a more global vision. However, the more 'moderate' faction of the group is small and an ideological minority. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham is now formally separated from al-Qaeda, but is part of battlefield alliances with a shifting array of other opposition groups.

Memberships

N/A

Allies

N/A

Partners

AQAP

Rivals

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS, SYRIA Other Opposition Groups

Adversaries

LEBANON Hezbollah, IRAN, UNITED STATES

Active Armed Opponents

ISIS, RUSSIA, SYRIA Government

Proxy

N/A

External Sponsor

N/A

Aid Recipient

N/A

Aid Donor

Individuals in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey.