

## Report

# Jabhat al-Nusraa and the End of Al-Qaeda?

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**Members of the Nusra Front walk along a street in the northwestern city of Ariha in Idlib province [Reuters]**

## Abstract

Al-Qaeda's main command has not conducted nor issued any major statements since the death of Osama bin Laden. The organisation has to a large extent depended on its franchises like Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria to carry out its activities. It is the franchises like Jabhat al-Nusra that have kept al-Qaeda relevant. The recent announcements by the leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Mohammed al-Jolani that Jabhat al-Nusra will separate from al-Qaeda has raised interesting questions about the relevance of al-Qaeda. Who will keep al-Qaeda relevant if prominent and active segments of the organisation like al-Nusra secede?

This paper will argue that the secession of al-Nusra from al-Qaeda marks the beginning of the end of the organisation. It will also highlight other impediments which continue to prevent the organisation from functioning properly. Thus concluding that if this trend continues, in other words if other franchises of al-Qaeda secede, the organisation will cease to exist.

## **Jabhat al-Nusra(al-Nusra Front ) seceded from al-Qaeda. What does this mean for the future of al-Qaeda?**

### Introduction

Al-Qaeda gained notoriety and immediate isolation from almost all countries around the world when it tacitly claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks in the United States (US). The organisation went on brazenly targeting innocent people around the world, basically rendering everyone a target of their terrorist attacks. There was a united international condemnation of al-Qaeda and most countries joined the "war on terror"

against the organisation. The leadership of the organisation was targeted and hundreds of them were subsequently killed including the organisation's founder, Osama bin Laden. The killing of Osama bin Laden who was the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks slowed down the proper functioning of al-Qaeda. According to the Time magazine, in recent years, bin Laden's chief role was to call on large donors when the organisation was undertaking a big venture. And al-Qaeda probably would still need large backers if it wanted to launch another large-scale attack(1).

Furthermore, there was a globally coordinated action, which was intended to prevent the organisation from functioning properly, making it very difficult for its terrorists to operate effectively on an international stage. Its leadership has for the better part of its existence remained banished, confined to rural places in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was also dealt a severe blow in 2010 when Pakistani forces announced the capture of the caves described as the nerve centre of militant activity on the Afghan-Pakistan border(2). The isolation and banishment of al-Qaeda have deprived its leadership of access to technology and connectivity, which is essential in running any organisation. Global organisations of any sort, without exception, require connectivity into the global grid be it financial, technological and indeed into communication-related networks. Unfortunately for al-Qaeda the cross-platform global grid is controlled by the US consequently impeding its proper functioning. This has made it difficult for the al-Qaeda to continue operating effectively. It has only managed now and then to send messages to its global audiences, using largely ineffective and archaic methods of communication.

### **Al Qaeda franchises like the al Nusra Front have given a lifeline to the organization**

The utilisation of proxies or franchises by al-Qaeda has helped proliferate its ideology and missions over the years. They have provided a lifeline to the organisation, particularly in the media. Through its franchises al-Qaeda has maintained relevance amidst a very stiff competition from 'Daesh', also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

Recently Al Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri handed over the reins of the caliphate to al-Nusra Front leader in Syria Abu Mohammed al-Jolani(3). On July 29, 2016 al-Jolani confirmed that al-Nusra Front had indeed separated from al-Qaeda and has changed its name to Jabhat Fath al Sham (The Front for the Liberation/conquest of the Levant). Al-Nusra Front has been a very effective political opposition in Syria, fighting both Daesh and the Assad regime forces. The Russian forces and the US-led coalition have also targeted the organisation. According to the Washington Post al-Nusra Front is growing in part because it has been the most aggressive and successful arm of the rebel force(4). The question is why now have al-Nusra and al-Qaeda decided on this apparent

divorce? There are varying answers to this question. Al-Qaeda may have become a burden on al-Nusra Front, which has made serious political inroads in Syria. The organisation has also gained respect from various stakeholders within Syria. The group's reputation among rebels and the Syrian population was strong enough that when the US designated it as a terrorist organisation a number of anti-government groups, including some Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters, protested the designation(5). However, its association with al-Qaeda has not led to their full recognition and full inclusion in the political process about the future of Syria "post-Assad".

In December 2012 the US State Department listed al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organisation and the United Nations (UN) followed suit in May 2014. Such listing of organisations by the UN and the US continues to cripple political progress in the region. When Hamas, another listed organisation, won the elections in 2006 it was prevented from transacting as a legitimate political organisation. The situation led to a political stalemate in Palestine, isolation of Hamas and further fragmentation of the polity. Al-Nusra is weary of a similar fate. Currently, notwithstanding its popularity and military gains it has remained outside the negotiating table. Over time criticism from within Syria and from the organisation's sponsors and backers have been growing. The message is for the organisation to disassociate itself from al-Qaeda's branding. The recent announcement, which involved creating a unique name and image, has presented new political possibilities for the organisation. The new situation will encourage the organisation to begin to think beyond armed struggle, including creating diplomatic and negotiating teams. This may prove to be a notable milestone in the political process in Syria. The manner in which al-Qaeda came into prominence was in itself an impediment, its indiscriminate bombing of civilians in many international locations created serious obstacles from the beginning. Al-Nusra has kept al-Qaeda for all intents and purposes relevant. It has maintained al-Qaeda's relevance notwithstanding the continued onslaught of its central command structure. It has also allowed for the continued lobbying and fund-raising for the organisation. Therefore the secession of al-Nusra is most likely to affect the organisation. The question is what will happen to al-Qaeda if other franchises that have kept the organisation relevant secede?

## Conclusion

Al-Qaeda was established to create chaos, never to just establish a Caliphate. It needed to proliferate the idea of al-Qaeda and allow globalisation of its operation through franchises. In multiple statements its leader Zawahiri has presented the organisation's objectives, namely: the liberating all "Muslim lands"; imposing of an Islamic law on Muslims and non-Muslims alike; implementing a Caliphate; and eventually making God's word the highest(6). These objectives seem very ambitious and lack a clear definition of what Muslims lands actually are. The lack of clarity on what actually constitute Muslim lands makes it very difficult for those seeking to evaluate the overall success or failure of

al-Qaeda. There has been an exaggeration of a centralized and united command of Al Qaeda. This exaggeration has perhaps contributed to the organisation's longevity. All indications suggest al-Qaeda may be in rapid decline -- if not on the verge of collapse. There has been a tremendous amount of pressure exerted on al-Qaeda both in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The global efforts to destroy the organisation including isolation tactics and bombardment have inflicted a great deal of damage on al-Qaeda, hampering the proper functioning of the organisation. Furthermore, the war fatigue that most people feel in places where the al-Qaeda continues to operate is affecting the organisation's fundraising capabilities. Over the years there have been sporadic 'lone wolves'-type guerrilla tactics in different parts of the world targeting innocent civilians in the name of al-Qaeda. Most of those killed have been Muslims. The real successes of al-Qaeda have over the years been coming from its franchises, particularly in Syria, Yemen and Somalia. Therefore the secession of al-Nusra Front is very significant; it is a tacit admission of the burden of association. Al-Nusra needed to distance itself from al-Qaeda in order to begin engaging in a national political dialogue in Syria. Moreover, al-Nusra also needed to be spared from the coalition forces's attacks which have heavily targeted Daesh and could easily justify continuing targeting al-Nusra. The secession has opened opportunities for increased political and financial support for al-Nusra. Ayman al Zawahiri had no choice but to make the announcement. It would have been embarrassing for the organisation if the first statement in this regard was made by al-Jolani, a leader of an al-Qaeda franchise.

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