



January 5, 2014

Abu Muhammad al-Julani, head of the Al-Nusra Front, the branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria, gave a rare interview in which he tried to show pragmatism without abandoning the organization's extreme jihadist nature and objectives



Abu Muhammad al-Julani, sitting with his back to the camera, interviewed by Al-Jazeera (Al-Jazeera, December 19, 2013)

Overview

1. On December 10, 2013, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, head of the Al-Nusra Front (the branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria), gave a rare, 52-minute interview to Al-Jazeera, which gave him an exceptional platform to put forth his positions. He was photographed with his back to the camera but unlike other interviews, his voice was not distorted.
2. According to al-Julani, after the future fall of the Assad regime the Al-Nusra Front does not intend to be the exclusive ruling factor in Syria and is ready to collaborate with other groups in establishing a state governed by Islamic law (the Sharia). However, **he did not relate** to the organization's overall goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate in Greater Syria and its continuing strategy of jihad against Israel, the West and the pro-Western Arab-Muslim states. Evident throughout the interview was **his attempt to downplay its connection with Al-Qaeda** and stressing **the support the Al-Nusra Front gives the local population.**

3. The unusual interview and its pragmatic tone, targeting viewers in Syria and throughout the Arab-Muslim world, were **meant primarily to establish the Al-Nusra Front as a legitimate factor within the Syrian population and rebel organizations without abandoning its true long-range objectives, which it plans to carry out in stages.** The organization's tactical flexibility is also meant **to distinguish it from its competitor, the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (the Islamic State).** The Islamic State's approach is more rigid and violent towards the local population and other rebel networks. It was also meant as a response to Hezbollah's frequent accusations against the Al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations, which are called *takfirs*.¹

4. In effect, **the Al-Nusra Front considers it very important to support the population and to establish a governmental alternative to the Syrian regime** in the regions controlled by the rebels, the so-called "liberated zones." To bring aid to the local residents more efficiently and to operate public services, the Al-Nusra Front established designated bodies called "the Sharia authority." **They distribute food, clothing, blankets and basic necessities, and also operate legal, policing, educational and health services** (See Appendix). Western correspondents who visited the "liberated zones" reported that in most cases the local population was satisfied and that life had returned to normal after the Syrian regime in their areas had collapsed.



The first picture taken and claimed to be of al-Julani, issued on December 27, 2013, by "senior Iraqi intelligence officials." It is unknown when it was taken. According to the Iraqis, the picture was published following the detention of Al-Qaeda operatives in Iraq (Al-Safir, December 27, 2013). Whether or not it is actually a picture of al-Julani remains to be verified.

¹ Groups or individual Muslims labeled as infidels for not embracing the radical interpretation of Islam.

The Main Points of the Interview

5. The following were the main issues of the Al-Jazeera interview with al-Julani:
- a. **The establishment of the organization:** The Al-Nusra Front was created as a result of the war in Afghanistan and by the activities of Muslim clerics who promoted jihad. Its first nucleus was composed of seven or eight operatives, most of them of Syrian extraction, **who went to Syria from Iraq in August 2011**. They began carrying out attacks, first in Damascus and later in other areas. They had three main types of targets: branches of Syrian security, the Syrian army and the heads of the Syria regime. The first attack was on December 27, 2011, against the Syrian national security service.
 - b. **The regime after the fall of Assad:** After the fall of the Assad regime the Al-Nusra Front does not plan to be the only ruling factor, but is ready to include other groups in the regime ("We do not intend to rule, the Sharia of Allah [Islamic law] will rule."). Currently the organization is consulting with Muslim clerics regarding the nature of the future regime. **In any case, the country will be governed by the laws of the Sharia.** According to al-Julani, that is the common goal of all the rebel organizations and the civilians in Syrian regime..
 - c. **Links with Al-Qaeda:** Asked about the Al-Nusra Front's links with **Al-Qaeda**, **al-Julani played down the connection with Al-Qaeda and represented it as only "an ideological connection."** He admitted that there had been a dispute between his organization and the Islamic State (the branch of Al-Qaeda in Iraq from which the Al-Nusra Front was established), but it had been settled by Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who "ruled what he ruled." Al-Julani claimed that the dispute had been blown out of proportion by the global media and the Internet.
 - d. **The struggle in Syria:** According to al-Julani, for three thousand years regional forces have struggled to gain control of the area. Syria is the cradle of human civilization and lies in a particularly sensitive regional and international location. He added that the **struggle in Syria was essentially sectarian** [that is, between Sunnis and Shi'ites/Alawites]. The Alawite regime rules the entire country and "sacrificed the Sunni majority to the Jews and the international community," which want to preserve the Assad regime.

e. **The organization's mechanism for civilian rule:** The Al-Nusra Front established local **Sharia authorities** in the areas it rules and they include a number of clerics who decide matters of Islamic law. Every local authority is divided into departments according to the sphere of its activity (military law, civilian law, personal standing). Every Sharia authority is also responsible for the local civilian infrastructure (electricity, water, flour mills). Following the takeover of the oil fields, administrations for oil were also established. In addition, the organization operates hospitals and clinics. Sharia authorities were established in **northern Syria and to a certain extent in Aleppo.**² In the upcoming months they will begin operating in **Idlib, Hama and the suburbs of Latakia.**

f. **The Geneva Conference:** Al-Julani was critical of the Geneva Conference, claiming that it was an attempt made by the international community to pump life into the Assad regime. He said it would lead to replacing Assad with a ruler acceptable to the international community and Israel, and that in effect the Alawite regime would be preserved. **The future of Syria's minorities:** Asked about Syria's minorities, al-Julani evaded clarifying his true position. He said only that every society had its minority communities and according to the laws of Islam they had both rights and obligations, which would be dealt with in light of the laws of the Sharia. Asked if the Al-Nusra Front would allow their blood to be spilled, he said that Allah had created both the infidels and the true believers and the definition of infidel would be determined according to the principles of the Sharia. He added that only senior clerics had the authority to determine the infidel status of an individual or a group.

g. **The trickling of the war into Lebanon:** Hezbollah's admission that it was fighting in Syria in support of the Assad regime led the Al-Nusra Front to intervene in Lebanon for the sake of the Sunnis living there. Al-Julani said that it was "stupidity" on the part of Hezbollah to intervene in the fighting in Syria **because that had paved the way for the Al-Nusra Front to enter Lebanon** [i.e., al-Julani admitted that the Al-Nusra Front was involved in terrorist acts in Lebanon].

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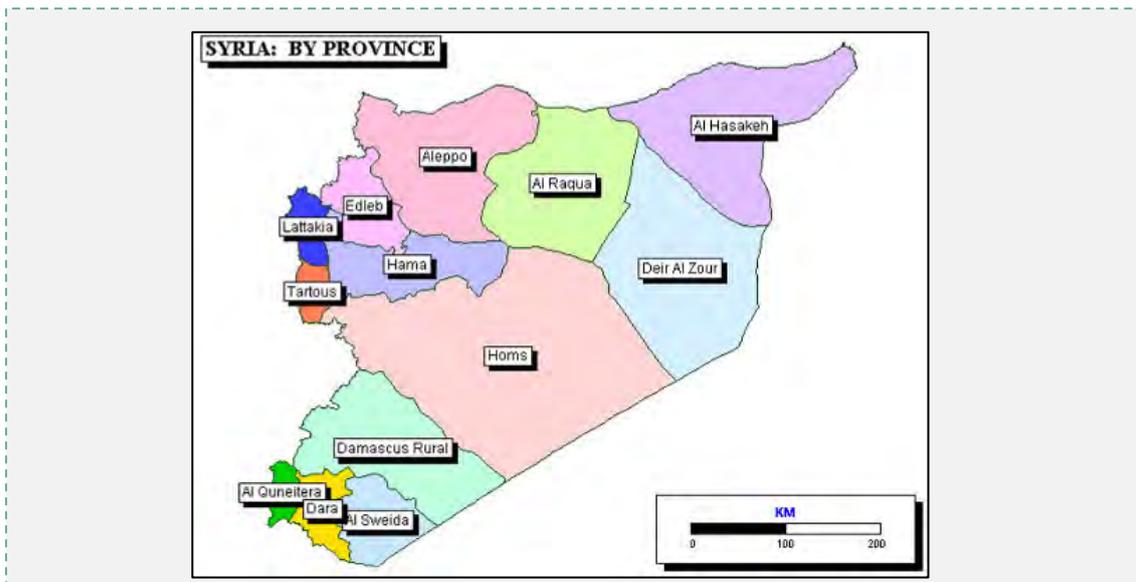
² The Lebanese daily newspaper Al-Akhbar reported that on November 10, 2012, the Al-Nusra Front had established a Sharia authority in Aleppo. The Sharia authority deals with enforcing law and order and providing local residents with services. It also collected taxes and enforced Islamization on the city (Al-Akhbar, December 28, 2012).

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Appendix

The Al-Nusra Front and Other Jihadist and Rebel Organizations Fill the Governmental Vacuum³

1. Broad swaths of northern and eastern Syria where the Sunni population lives have fallen to the rebels and become known as "liberated zones" where the central Syrian regime is not longer sovereign, (or where it finds it difficult to enforce its sovereignty). The main provinces involved are Deir al-Zour, Al-Hasakeh, Al-Raqua, Aleppo and Idlib. The resulting vacuum was filled by **the Islamic State (which enjoys the affluence of eastern Syria), the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations**. The organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda sometimes collaborate with the Free Syrian Army and nationalist rebel organizations, most of whose position is weak and which cannot create an effective governmental alternative to the Syrian regime which collapsed in their region.



Map of the Syrian provinces (Umich.edu website)

2. The "liberated zones" often suffer from a lack of food and other basic necessities, and vital services do not function. In some instances the situation is the result of the collapse of national institutions, and in others of the fierce fighting which prevents supplies from reaching civilians. In the various battle zones civilians find themselves trapped between the forces of the Syrian regime and the rebel militias, including the Al-Nusra Front. Civilian distress is relieved through mechanisms organized by the

³ For further information see the September 17, 2013 bulletin "[he Al-Nusra Front \(Jabhat al-Nusra\) is an Al-Qaeda Salafist-jihadi network, prominent in the rebel organizations in Syria.](#)"

rebels and by ad hoc arrangements making it possible to bring humanitarian aid to trapped civilians.⁴

3. For the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations, it is important to establish a governmental alternative in the "liberated zones" by providing aid to the civilian population, which they regard as a way of acquiring local support. Early on (January 24, 2012), Abu Muhammad al-Julani issued a video announcing the establishment of the Al-Nusra Front, in which he called on his supporters to protect the civilians, arrange a legal system to settle disputes and provide fuel, medicine and other necessities. The Al-Nusra Front's intensive governmental activity required a substantial financial investment, which proved **it could also be turned to profit.**

3. To establish a governing alternative to the Syrian administration and to acquire the support of the local populations which came under their rule, **the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations took various governmental functions upon themselves.** They distribute vital food products, impose a common Islamic legal system, enforce the law and bring order and security. In some zones they have managed to overcome the local anarchy and chaos and have restored a certain measure of law and order, sufficient (so far) to serve as an alternative for the previous regime. Western correspondents who visited to the "liberated zones" reported that in most cases the local population was satisfied. However, in other locations complaints were heard and the local residents protested the extremist type of Islam practiced by the rebel organizations and the rigid governing methods of the Islamists. In our assessment, at this stage the complaints and protests are not enough to seriously challenge the Al-Nusra Front and its allies. **In some of the "liberated zones" the Al-Nusra Front's Sharia authority oversees the distribution of supplies.**

4. In northern and eastern Syria the Al-Nusra Front succeeded in taking control of vital sectors of the governmental infrastructure, including oil fields, oil and gas pipelines, dams, power stations and grain silos. The organization exploits its control by providing aid to the population and by paying salaries and purchasing weapons for its forces. Particularly profitable are **the oil fields in eastern Syria,** whose products are marketed to the Syrian regime by means of silent agreements which **bring the Al-Nusra Front a large monthly income.** It was also reported that the Al-Nusra Front

⁴ For example, an arrangement in Aleppo between Syrian regime forces and the rebel militias for trucks carrying food to enter the city, which was besieged by the militias. The first shipment reached the city via the Damascus-Aleppo road after the rebels opened it. It was reported that additional shipments were supposed to arrive (Al-Safir, Lebanon, and DamasPost, July 15, 2013). The Syrian regime accused "rebels" from Aleppo, among them operatives belonging to the Islamic State, of preventing the food from being delivered to the western side of the city (Al-Watan, July 15, 2013).

itself produces fuel in improvised refineries and markets it to northern Syria and Turkey, and the profit from the sales also support the organization's growing strength. Members of the Free Syrian Army and Al-Nusra Front operatives recently claimed that on November 23, 2013, they took over the Al-Omar oil field in Deir al-Zour.⁵

5. At this stage it would seem that in most regions the Al-Nusra Front and its allies **have won the support of the local population**. That was done by restoring order and security, rehabilitating the infrastructure, distributing food and acting pragmatically in daily life, in most cases. The Al-Nusra Front is characterized by pragmatic behavior more than the Islamic State. That has been manifested by not imposing the harsh punishments of Islamic religious law and not enforcing its more brutal aspects. However, it would also seem that while they so far remain covert, **there are fundamental contradictions between Al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations and other rebel organizations**, between the desire to impose radical Islamic rule and the slogans of freedom and liberty for which some of the opposition groups are fighting. **Those fundamental contradictions are liable to become rise to the surface and erode** the population's support for the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist organizations as the Assad regime weakens, and **harm the common denominator which at this point unites all the rival factions**.

⁵ For further information see the December 3, 2013 bulletin [“Operatives from the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda’s branch in Syria, together with other rebel organizations, have taken over the large oil field in Deir ez-Zor.”](#)

Local Support for the Al-Nusra Front



Pro-Al-Nusra Front at a demonstration (apparently in a Damascus neighborhood). It reads, "To the jihadist Al-Nusra Front, continue and may the eye of Allah watch over you. We are all with you, lions of the uniqueness and unity of Allah" (Djebhet-enossra.blogspot.com)

March in support of the Al-Nusra Front in Idlib on December 7, 2012. The marchers chanted "Al-Nusra Front, may Allah support you" (YouTube)



Children hold a sign reading "We are all Al-Nusra Front" (Djebhet-enossra.blogspot.com)

Sign in support of the Al-Nusra Front carried at a march. It reads, "The Al-Nusra Front represents us." The symbol of Al-Qaeda appears in the lower left corner (the circle and the words in bold face above it) (Djebhet-enossra.blogspot.com)