



June 4, 2015

**Al-Nusra Front Leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani said in an interview that his organization's overall goal was overthrowing and replacing the Syrian regime with an Islamic regime. He elaborated its military achievements, especially in the region of Idlib. Prominent were his attempts to represent his organization as pragmatic and different from ISIS.**



**Abu Muhammad al-Julani (left) appears in a rare interview on Al-Jazeera TV (Al-Jazeera, May 17, 2015).**

## Overview

1. On May 27, 2015, Al-Jazeera TV broadcast the first part of a rare interview with **Abu Muhammad al-Julani, leader of Al-Nusra Front ("the assistance front"), Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria**. It was broadcast as a segment of Al-Jazeera's weekly news program "Without Borders," moderated by Ahmed Mansour.<sup>1</sup> The interview was held in al-Julani's hiding place, apparently in the city of Idlib in northwestern Syria, which was recently occupied by Al-Nusra Front and its allies. Al-Julani was masked and sat with his back to the camera, with a small Al-Nusra Front flag on the table in front of him.

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<sup>1</sup> The last time Abu Mahmoud al-Julani was interviewed on Al-Jazeera TV was on December 10, 2013. For further information see the January 5, 2014 bulletin, "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."

According to the daily Al-Quds Al-Arabi (May 27, 2015), **Abu Muhammad al-Julani had initiated the interview.**

2. The first part of the interview dealt with Al-Nusra Front's military goals and its relations with the various centers of power and communities groups in Syria. When the interview was over viewers were told that the second part (which has not yet been broadcast) would deal with Al-Nusra Front's relations with Iran and ISIS.

3. The interview was given while Al-Nusra Front and its allies were involved in campaigns against the Syrian army and Hezbollah in two key areas during the past month:

1) **The region of Idlib in northwestern Syria:** Al-Nusra Front and its allies (Al-Fatah Army) took control of the cities of Idlib, Arihah and Jisr al-Shughur (see map, Appendix A). Battles are currently being waged for other important populated areas lying **in proximity to the main road from Idlib to Latakia. Al-Nusra Front's objective is to gain control of the road and thereby threaten the strongholds of the Syrian regime and the Alawite population in the coastal region.**

2) **Al-Qalamoun mountains along the Syrian-Lebanese border:** In the region south of Al-Qalamoun mountains, east of Baalbek (see map, Appendix A), Hezbollah and the Syrian army were successful in the battles against Al-Nusra Front and its allies (although the campaign has not yet ended). The battles have also advanced to the northern Al-Qalamoun Mountains which dominate the Sunni town of Aarsal, the stronghold of the jihadist organizations in Lebanon.

4. The fighting in both those key areas is **accompanied by a battle for hearts and minds** in which the Syrian regime and Hezbollah represent the jihadist organizations in general and Al-Nusra Front in particular as the principle enemy and a threat to Syria and Lebanon. Abu Muhammad al-Julani, on the other hand, rejected the demonizing of Al-Nusra Front and made an attempt to improve his organization's image **within the civilian population** in a bid for its support, and to possibly for the support of the Arab and international community as well.

5. Al-Julani said **Al-Nusra Front's overall goals were overthrowing the Assad regime and defeating Hezbollah.** However, he did not state an intention to establish an Islamic Caliphate at present, thus distinguishing Al-Nusra Front from ISIS. Throughout the interview he attempted to represent Al-Nusra Front as "pragmatic:" he noted its good collaboration with other Islamic organizations (as opposed to ISIS, which generally does not enter into alliances or genuine collaborations); he claimed Al-Nusra Front intended to treat the Christian and Druze populations fairly (as opposed to ISIS's brutality); and said Al-Nusra Front **had not used Syria (so far) as a launching base from which to attack the United States or Europe.** He did not deny he took instructions from Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, but said, **"We will not use Syria as a base for attacks on the Americans or Europeans."** He added that Al-Qaeda might launch attacks against them, but not from Syria. He did, however, **send a veiled threat to the West, saying that policy might change if what he called the Western attacks against Al-Nusra Front continued.**

6. For the main topics discussed by al-Julani during the interview, see **Appendix A**

## Appendix A

### The Main Topics of the Interview<sup>2</sup> (with ITIC Commentary)

#### The Fighting in the Idlib and Al-Qalamoun Regions

1. Al-Julani discussed the Al-Nusra Front fighting in the regions of Idlib and Al-Qalamoun mountains. He was first asked what the significance of the recent victories in the Idlib region was (the "liberation" of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur, the takeover of al-Mastumah military camp south of Idlib and the takeover of the hospital in Idlib, a pocket of Syrian army resistance which had held out until recently).
2. Al-Julani replied that the areas recently occupied by Al-Nusra Front were **the Syrian army's "first line of defense" for the coastal regions**. He said the highway linking Idlib and Latakia had many military bases and roadblocks. He claimed **the "hard core" of the Assad regime was centered along the coast** but, he said, **"the campaign for Syria will not be won in Al-Qardaha (where the Assad family comes originates from) but rather in Damascus," since the objective of his organization is to overthrow the Assad regime.**



Circled in red, Idlib, Arihah and Jisr al-Shughur on the road from Idlib to Latakia. Below Jisr al-Shughur are the Nabi Younes mountains, which overlook the area where the fighting between Al-Nusra Front and the Syrian army took place (Google Maps).

3. Regarding **the campaign for Al-Qalamoun Mountains**, al-Julani said that for Al-Nusra Front the region would **be a springboard for attacking Damascus (from the**

<sup>2</sup> According to the interview as broadcast by Al-Jazeera TV

**west)** when the battle for the city began. He admitted the campaign in Al-Qalamoun Mountains was complex and difficult because the region was mountainous, and he expected **the campaign to be drawn-out** [Note: Hezbollah customarily emphasizes the strategic importance of the Al-Qalamoun region for Lebanon, while al-Julani refers to it as a springboard for Damascus.]



**The battle areas south of Al-Qalamoun Mountains (Google Maps)**

4. Al-Julani disputed the Hezbollah claim that the Al-Qalamoun region was a danger to Lebanon. He said Hezbollah was in danger, not Lebanon. He added that the campaign in Syria **was fateful for Hezbollah, because it was defending itself and its survival, since its fate was tied to that of the Assad regime** [Note: Hassan Nasrallah himself described the campaign in Syria as "fateful and important" for Hezbollah, saying that the organization would fight in Syria as long as required.] Al-Julani claimed **Assad's disappearance would mean Hezbollah's disappearance**, because Hezbollah had many rivals in Lebanon and they would become stronger as soon as Bashar Assad was out of the picture. He said Hezbollah was fighting Al-Nusra Front mainly in the Al-Qalamoun region, but the organization also had a presence in the villages east of Damascus (al-Ghoutha al-Sharqia) and other locations in Syria.

## **Al-Nusra Front's Treatment of the Alawites**

5. The interviewer noted that Al-Nusra Front forces were at a distance of no more than 30 kilometers (about 18.5 miles) from Al-Qardaha, "the capital of the Alawites and the Assad family seat." He asked al-Julani what Al-Nusra Front's next campaign would

be, and **if it were true it was planning "a historic massacre" of the Alawites in Latakia and along the coast.**

6. Al-Julani replied that the Alawites had massacred Sunnis (the massacre in Hama in 1981). He claimed Alawite massacres had cost a million Syrian Sunnis their lives and had left the Sunnis "very greatly wounded." The Alawites along the coast, who were "the hard core" of the Assad regime, had spent the past four years [of the Syrian civil war] in safety, and the war had not touched them. However, he said, **"now the campaign will reach the forward areas of the Alawites," but "the campaign for Syria will not be won in Qardaha, but rather in Damascus," and therefore the goal of his organization was to overthrow the Assad regime.**

7. Al-Julani said that **"according to religious law, the Alawites are not considered part of Islam."** However, the justification for fighting against them was that "the Alawites fought us and turned there turned their weapons against us." The religious justification for fighting them was "self-defense against an attacker" and not conquering territories to establish a state. [Thus al-Julani differentiated himself from ISIS and the Islamic State it established.] According to al-Julani, there were Shi'ite villages in the Idlib region that were besieged by Al-Nusra Front, but "they were and still are military bases of the regime" [i.e., justifying Al-Nusra Front's attacks on the villages].

8. The interviewer asked him what message he would like to send to the Alawites. Al-Julani said that if the Alawites rejected Bashar Assad and his misdeeds against the Sunnis, and if they no longer fought in the service of Bashar Assad, and if they rejected the [Alawite] faith that excluded them from Islam, then "they will be our brothers and we will protect them and forget all the wounds and grudges from the past between us" [Note: The above conditions referred only to the Alawites and not to other sectarian minorities. In ITIC assessment it was an implied threat indicating what would happen to the Alawites if Al-Nusra Front and its allies took over the coastal region and if the Assad regime fell].

### **Al-Nusra Front's Allies: Al-Fatah Army and the Khorasan Network**

9. Asked about Al-Fatah Army, a coalition of Islamic organizations fighting alongside Al-Nusra Front, **al-Julani replied that it was composed of seven main Islamic organizations in northern Syria and had begun with a joint operations room established to liberate Idlib.** After it became clear that they collaborated well together, they decided to call the coalition Al-Fatah Army. All the organizations belonging to it have are Islamic in nature and their fundamental positions are no

different from those of Al-Nusra Front. However, there are various factions within it which made "mistakes," but in view of the difficulties of the campaign Al-Nusra Front would rather contain the mistakes and by implication, not confront the factions.

10. As to the pressure exerted on the various organizations within Al-Fatah Army to split from Al-Nusra Front as a condition for external support, al-Julani said that Al-Nusra Front was not a marginal factor in the arena, but **rather the spearhead of the rebels**. Therefore, Al-Nusra Front could not be pushed to the sidelines. He reminded the viewers of Daraa, Homs, Hama, Idlib, Aleppo and Al-Qalamoun,

11. Asked about the **Khorasan network**, which was attacked by the United States at the beginning of the anti-ISIS campaign,<sup>3</sup> al-Julani stressed that the claim Khorasan was an independent organization was false. He called it "only a Western invention" whose objective was to justify the air strikes of the international coalition. He said **there were in fact Khorasan operatives in Syria** [by implication Khorasan as a geographical entity] who in the past had fought in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and had moved to the Syrian arena. However, he claimed, **they were part of Al-Nusra Front and not a separate, independent organization**.

## **Al-Nusra Front's Enemies: the Syrian Regime, Iran and Hezbollah**

10. **Al-Julani said a coalition of the Syrian regime, Iran and Hezbollah was fighting Al-Nusra Front, and it was supported by regional powers**. There was also, he said, **an international coalition fighting Al-Nusra Front and trying to weaken it**. He claimed the United States was supporting the Syrian regime and wanted it to remain in power, despite the fact it publicly represented itself as opposed to the Assad regime. Al-Julani said one of the ways the United States supported the Syrian regime was through air strikes targeting Al-Nusra Front. He claimed there was no doubt but that the United States coordinated with the Syrian regime, adding that he had proof **[Note: The American-led international coalition attacks focus on ISIS. Al-Nusra Front is not a prime target for the United States.]**

11. Al-Julani **admitted he took orders from Ayman al-Zawahiri** [thereby refuting rumors of his severing ties with Al-Qaeda]. **He said that according to orders**

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<sup>3</sup> **Khorasan** is the name of a terrorist network operating in Syria based on several dozen jihadist operatives who went to Syria from Afghanistan and Pakistan, some of them via Iran. The operatives, who had previous operational experience, **joined Al-Nusra Front and operated in Syria under its aegis**. At the beginning of the campaign against ISIS (December 23, 2014) the United States attacked Khorasan targets in the area around Aleppo. The network, which is considered a threat by the United States, was a target for American aerial strikes during November 2014. It is unclear if since then other Khorasan targets have been attacked and what the status of its activity is today.

received from Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al-Nusra Front currently focused on defeating Syria and Hezbollah. Al-Nusra Front's overall objective in Syria was to overthrow the Assad regime of Assad, and to reach an understanding with the other organizations to institute an Islamic regime.

12. He claimed Syria would not serve as a base for an attack on the Americans or Europeans [i.e., would not become a base for Al-Nusra Front terrorist attacks]. However, he said, "Al-Qaeda may attack them, but not from Syrian territory" [Note: That is, Al-Qaeda attacks against the West would not originate in Syrian territory]. However, al-Julani also said that if the coalition force attacks continued, "all options are open" because "everyone has the right to defend himself." He added that "the current directive is not to attack the United States and Europe from Syrian territory, and we are committed to directives from Ayman al-Zawahiri. However, he added he was of the opinion that if the air strikes continued, "the consequences may not be good for the United States and the West" [Note: Possibly a threat that Al-Nusra Front would participate in attacks on America and the West].

13. As far as ISIS, the rival jihadist organization, is concerned, al-Julani claimed it had attacked Al-Nusra Front in several locations, for instance Hasakah, Deir al-Zor, Al-Qalamoun and Aleppo. He claimed ISIS exploited the fact that the regime attacked it at one location to attack Al-Nusra Front at others. He claimed the confrontations between the two organizations were based on a conflict of interests [Note: Al-Julani does not often dispute with ISIS. He may deal with the issue of Al-Nusra Front's relations with ISIS in the second part of the interview.]

### Al-Nusra Front's Relations with the Local Population

14. Al-Julani attempted to present a sanitized version of how Al-Nusra Front treats the various populations in the areas it controls [with the exception of his veiled threats to the Alawites. In that way as well he attempts to differentiate himself from ISIS, which is brutal in its treatment of the non-Muslim population.].

15. Al-Julani said the following about the Druze and Christians:

1) **The Druze:** According to al-Julani, there were Druze villages in the territories occupied ("liberated") by Al-Nusra Front whose inhabitants did not support the Assad regime and did not fight against Al-Nusra Front. In those villages no one was mistreated. The organization did not destroy their houses or their places of worship, but did prevent them from carrying out some of their rituals, such as visiting gravesites, because, he said, such rituals were contrary to Islamic law. Al-Nusra Front used preaching (the *da'wah*) in the Druze villages to

"teach them" how they had deviated from the religion of Islam and what the "mistakes of their faith" were. He claimed "we sent them our preachers, and the Alawites told them they were rejecting the mistakes of their faith."

2) **The Christians:** Al-Julani said the **Christians could live under Islamic rule without the imposition of Islam**. While many Christians had fought on the side of the Assad regime, Al-Nusra Front did not fight the Christians or coerce them in any way, as long as they did not fight against Al-Nusra Front. Al-Nusra Front did not blame them for the American attacks. In the future, after a state based on Islamic religious law had been established, the Christians would have the right to live in it, both those who could pay the head tax (the *jizya*) and those who were too poor to pay it [**Note:** Al-Julani repeatedly attempted to differentiate himself from ISIS using the example of Al-Nusra Front's treatment of the Christian population. While ISIS destroys churches and attacks the Christian population living in the territories under its control, al-Julani represents Al-Nusra Front's position towards them as less brutal.]

## **Al-Nusra Front's Sources of Financing**

16. According to al-Julani, while it was true that some of the organizations in Al-Fatah Army did receive external financing, **he absolutely denied that his organization received funding from any foreign agency** (country or intelligence organization). He claimed that **his funding and arming his organization was based on weapons looted from Assad's army, local commerce and donations from private Muslims sources outside Syria that supported Al-Qaeda**. He claimed Al-Nusra Front did not agree to support from governments or any organization because it might mean having to accept dictates, which might lead to ending its ability to make independent decisions.

## Appendix B

### A Portrait of Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's Branch in Syria

1. During the Syrian civil war **two prominent jihadist organizations are trying** to overthrow Bashar Assad's regime. The first is Al-Nusra Front ("the assistance front"), headed by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, subordinate to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. **The other is ISIS**, which, having declared its split from Al-Qaeda, operates as an independent jihadist organization in Iraq and Syria, with branches in various other countries in the Arab-Muslim world.

2. Al-Nusra Front was officially established at **the end of January 2012**, about ten months after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. **It was initially a branch of the Islamic State in Iraq**, a jihadist network of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> In a formal declaration, in April 2013 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq, announced the union the two organizations under the name the **Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria**. However, the declaration was not accepted by Al-Nusra Front and **was formally renounced by Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in June 2013, when he stated that Al-Nusra Front was the official Al-Qaeda branch in Syria**. That created a split between the two organizations and today the **two rival jihadist organizations operate in Syria, conflicted with and dissociating themselves** from one another, and at times fighting each other.

3. **Ideologically** Al-Nusra Front is affiliated with Al-Qaeda and has adopted its **Salafi-jihadist worldview**. In principle, in the future it aspires to establish an Islamic caliphate in Greater Syria (*balad al-sham*, the territory that includes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority), where it will institute Islamic religious law (the *sharia*). **However, as opposed to ISIS, the caliphate is a vision for the future and not a current operative reality**. Unlike ISIS, Al-Nusra Front does not establish caliphates in the territories it controls. **Rather, it focuses on fighting to overthrow the Syrian regime and establish an Islamic state in Syria, which Al-Nusra Front would control** (according to al-Julani's Al-Jazeera TV interview).

4. **Al-Nusra Front collaborates with other Islamic organizations**, as opposed to ISIS, which usually prefers proxies to genuine collaboration. That could be seen by the establishment of a united front of a number of organizations headed by Al-Nusra Front called Al-Fatah Army. During the past month the front was victorious In the Idlib region

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<sup>4</sup> The Islamic State in Iraq was an umbrella network of Salafist-jihadi organizations in Iraq affiliated with Al-Qaeda, which eventually turned into ISIS. For further information see the November 26, 2014 bulletin, "ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization."

and is current fighting Hezbollah and the Syrian army in Al-Qalamoun region. Areas under Al-Nusra Front control or influence are spread throughout northern and northwestern Syria (the Idlib region), southern Syria (including the central and southern Golan Heights) and the outskirts of Damascus and Al-Qalamoun mountains (as opposed to ISIS, which established its control in contiguous territories in eastern Syria and western Iraq).<sup>5</sup>

5. Al-Nusra Front was established and is headed by **Abu Muhammad al-Julani** (there are conflicting versions of his real name). He is a senior field operative, apparently comes from Syria, and gained operational experience in Iraq fighting the United States and its allies. In the past he supported Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who led the Al-Qaeda mujahedeen in Iraq after the American invasion in March 2003. After the Syrian civil war broke out he was sent to Syria by the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq to establish Al-Nusra Front. His worldview is based on Al-Qaeda ideology adapted and represented as tending towards pragmatism, based on the special nature of the Syrian arena in which he operates.



**The first picture purportedly issued of al-Julani, revealed on December 27, 2013, by senior figures in Iraqi intelligence. It is not clear when it was taken or how reliable it is. According to Iraqi intelligence the photograph was made public following the apprehension of Al-Qaeda operatives in Iraq (Assafir.com, December 17, 2013). In his rare appearances, such as the Al-Jazeera interview, Al-Julani does not expose his face to the cameras.**

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<sup>5</sup> For the circumstances surrounding the establishment of Al-Nusra Front, see the September 2013 bulletin "The Al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) is an Al-Qaeda Salafist-jihadi network, prominent in the rebel organizations in Syria. It seeks to overthrow the Assad regime and establish an Islamic Caliphate in Greater Syria, a center for regional and international terrorism and subversion."