



August 4, 2016

## The establishment of the Fateh al-Sham Front in place of the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria: reasons and implications



Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani announcing the establishment of the Fateh al-Sham Front (the Front for the Conquest of the Levant) on Al-Jazeera TV. He is flanked by two senior Fateh al-Sham Front operatives who have Sharia authority. The insignia of the new organization, featuring its name in Arabic, appears above them (Al-Jazeera TV, July 28, 2016).

### Overview

1. On July 28, 2016, **Abu Mohammad al-Julani**, leader of the Al-Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria), appeared on Al-Jazeera TV and announced **the establishment of a new framework called the Fateh al-Sham Front (the Victory in Al-Sham Front<sup>1</sup>)**. The newly established framework will replace the Al-Nusra Front. Al-Julani's announcement **was preceded by an announcement of support from the leaders of Al-Qaeda** (Ayman al-Zawahiri and his deputy Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr).
2. An analysis of the announcements by Al-Julani and Al-Qaeda's leaders indicates that the Fateh al-Sham Front **was established with their prior consent and after**

<sup>1</sup> **The term Fateh** indicates victory or conquest, and is used, *inter alia*, to describe the conquests of early Islam in the days of the Prophet Muhammad and in the period after his death. **The term Al-Sham** refers to both Syria and Greater Syria. Though in practice the Al-Nusra Front operates in Syria in the narrow sense of the word, the ITIC prefers to use the term Al-Sham, which reflects the vision and aspirations of the organization, which seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate in Greater Syria.

**they had coordinated their positions.** This is reflected in **Al-Julani's praise of Al-Qaeda's leaders; the clear support of Al-Qaeda's leaders** for the anticipated move; **and their similar reasons for justifying the establishment of the new framework** (the impression created is that the content of the messages was coordinated by them in advance).

3. In the ITIC's assessment, the establishment of the new framework was designed to **blur and downplay the ties with Al-Qaeda and to disconnect from its terrorist image.** Disconnecting from the terrorist image is designed to help **promote two fundamental goals, in the international arena and in the domestic Syrian arena:**

**A. In the international arena, the move is designed to make it difficult for the US and Western coalition countries to join in the airstrikes carried out by Russia against the Al-Nusra Front.** From the outset, the campaign by the US and its allies focused on ISIS, whereas Russian attacks also included the Al-Nusra Front, perceiving it as one of the main enemies of the Syrian regime.

In the ITIC's assessment, **the timing of the announcement is related to the reports about the discussed agreement between Russia and the United States, under which the two countries will cooperate in fighting against ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front.** From Al-Julani's perspective, the new move may create an image of detachment from Al-Qaeda, thus making it harder for the United States and the West to treat the new framework as a terrorist organization (even though **the Al-Nusra Front actually refrains from carrying out terrorist attacks against the United States and the West, or against Russia,** in contrast to the terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS and its supporters).

**B. In the domestic Syrian arena, Al-Julani seeks to find the widest possible common ground with Islamic rebel organizations,** including those whose ideology is not necessarily Salafist-jihadi, **and to fight together with them against the Syrian regime.** The current move may also be **a response to the demands made by the other rebel organizations, which are worried of becoming a target for airstrikes because of the Al-Nusra Front's identification with Al-Qaeda.**

The Al-Nusra Front has tended to collaborate with other rebel organizations since its inception, making it easier for it to create coalitions and umbrella frameworks with other rebel organizations (under the name Jaysh al-Fateh), **and clearly distinguishing it from ISIS** (which prefers to conduct its wars on its own, without

coalitions and allies, and is in constant friction with other rebel organizations). Cooperation with other rebel organizations might, from Al-Julani's perspective, improve the new framework's ability to resist the Syrian Army's initiatives with the support of Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and the Shiite militias supported by Iran. **Such an initiative currently focuses on the Aleppo campaign, but in the future, the Syrian regime and its allies may target the Idlib area, the main stronghold of the Fateh al-Sham Front (formerly the Al-Nusra Front).**

**4. Does the establishment of the new framework really and truly mean that the Fateh al-Sham Front is severing its ties with Al-Qaeda? The ITIC is not of this opinion.** The new move is basically a direct consequence of the pressure exerted on the Al-Nusra Front and the fundamental ambition of Al-Julani (supported by the leadership of Al-Qaeda) **to improve his organization's survivability in the long campaign that awaits it. On the ideological level, the Fateh al-Sham Front continues to adhere to Al-Qaeda's Salafist-jihadi ideology (as reflected in the charter published by the Fateh al-Sham front). Moreover, in the ITIC's assessment, the new framework will continue to maintain its ties with Al-Qaeda's leadership, although the nature of these ties is still unclear.** The initial responses of the US and Russia clearly indicate **that they are not buying the new image that Al-Julani seeks to give the new framework** and that they continue to perceive the new framework as a terrorist organization (see Appendix D).

5. Following are the following appendices:

A. **Appendix A:** Summary of Abu Mohammad al-Julani's announcement on Al-Jazeera TV (July 28, 2016)

B. **Appendix B:** Summary of the Al-Qaeda leadership's announcement of support for Al-Julani's move (July 28, 2016)

C. **Appendix C:** The Fateh al-Sham Front's charter (July 31, 2016)

D. **Appendix D:** Initial reactions to Al-Julani's announcement

E. **Appendix E:** Milestones in Al-Julani's and the Al-Nusra Front's relationship with Al-Qaeda and ISIS

## Appendix A

### Summary of Abu Mohammad al-Julani's announcement on Al-Jazeera TV

1. On July 28, 2016, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, leader of the Al-Nusra Front, appeared on Al-Jazeera TV and announced the establishment of a new framework called **the Fateh al-Sham Front**. He appeared along with two senior operatives, who sat beside him. This was the second time since the establishment of the Al-Nusra Front that Al-Julani appeared on TV, and both times **he chose to do so on Al-Jazeera TV**. This time **he exposed his face** (last time, on May 27, 2015, he appeared with his face hidden by a scarf).



**Abu Mohammad al-Julani exposes his face for the first time while announcing the establishment of the new framework on Al-Jazeera TV (Al-Jazeera TV, July 28, 2016)**

2. Following is a summary of Abu Mohammad al-Julani's announcement (Al-Jazeera TV, July 28, 2016):

**A. Praise for Al-Qaeda's leaders:** Al-Julani begins the announcement by **thanking Al-Qaeda's leaders Dr. Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri and his deputy Sheikh Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr**. Al-Julani heaps praise on them for making the interests of the residents of al-Sham (Syria/Greater Syria), the Islamic nation, and jihad their top priority ("Your blessed leadership constituted and still constitutes a model for preferring the interests of the Muslims over the interests of each individual organization"). Al-Julani goes on to note that **the change in the organization's name was made "under the direction and on the instructions of this blessed leadership [the Al-Qaeda leadership], and out of**

**a commitment to serve the residents of Al-Sham and their jihad [...] without compromising the principles of religion [...].** The commitment **“to defend the jihad in Al-Sham”** appears several times in Al-Julani’s announcement and is a key motif in justifying the establishment of the new framework.

**B. The reasons for the reestablishment of the Al-Nusra Front and the change in the organization’s name:** Al-Julani reiterates that **the basic reason** for the establishment of the new organization is **“the need to protect the jihad in Al-Sham, and to defend it, and to continue to employ all the legitimate means to help do so.”** Another goal is to reduce the existing gaps between the new framework and the other rebel organizations (“the jihad fighter factions”) **and to create a unified body with them that will liberate the land of Al-Sham from the yoke of the tyrants (the Syrian regime) and their allies.** The move is also designed **to repel the pretexts of the international community led by the United States and Russia** which, according to Al-Julani, are attacking the Muslims on the grounds that they are operating against the Al-Nusra Front, which belongs to Al-Qaeda.

**C. Cancelling the name the Al-Nusra Front and establishing a new organization:** For the above reasons, notes Al-Julani, **“We have decided to cancel our activity under the name of the Al-Nusra Front. [We have decided] to reestablish it [the Al-Nusra Front] under the name of a new group, which will be called the Fateh al-Sham Front. [This] is being done with our knowledge that the new body [that was established] is not affiliated with any outside entity [i.e., it is not affiliated with Al-Qaeda].”**

## The two senior Al-Nusra Front operatives sitting beside Al-Julani



Abu Mohammad al-Julani (in the center) announcing the establishment of the Fateh al-Sham Front. On his right: Abu al-Faraj al-Masri. On his left: Abu Abdullah al-Shami.

3. When he made the announcement on Al-Jazeera TV, Abu Mohammad al-Julani appeared with **two senior Al-Nusra Front operatives with authority in Islamic law [Sharia]**. In the ITIC's assessment, their presence was intended to demonstrate **that the decision to establish the new framework was in line with Islamic law and possibly also to neutralize inside opposition to the new move.**

4. Following are details about the two operatives who appeared with Abu Mohammad al-Julani (Al-Rai, July 30, 2016; Saham Al-Ikhbariya, July 30, 2016):

A. **Ahmed Salama Mabruk (Abu al-Faraj al-Masri)**, on Al-Julani's right: He was imprisoned in Egypt following the assassination of President Sadat, from 1981 to 1989. After his release, he moved to Afghanistan, and in the 1990s he moved to Yemen. He is very close to Ayman al-Zawahiri, and operated with him in Afghanistan. He was reportedly arrested by US intelligence in Baku in 1999. He subsequently went to Egypt, where he was arrested, and was released from prison in 2011 following the coup against Mubarak. He moved to Syria, joined the Al-Nusra Front **and became one of its senior Sharia authorities.**



Abu Al-Faraj al-Masri in a video distributed by Al-Manara al-Baydaa, the media arm of the Al-Nusra Front (Al-Waqt, July 30, 2016)

B. **Abd al-Rahim Atun (Abu Abdullah al-Shami)**, on Al-Julani's left: one of the Al-Nusra Front's senior Sharia authorities and a member of its Shura Council and its Sharia Committee.



Abu Abdullah al-Shami in a video, attacking the involvement of the United States in Syria (Orient, May 26, 2016)

## Publication of a leaflet by the Fateh al-Sham Front

5. On July 29, 2016, the day after Al-Julani's announcement, **the Fateh al-Sham Front published a leaflet in English**. The leaflet contains a summary of Abu Mohammad al-Julani's announcement in order to disseminate it among foreign target audiences outside Syria.

6. The leaflet stresses that the organization [i.e., the Al-Nusra Front] has always fought alongside other [rebel] organizations, and the establishment of the joint

framework, Jaysh al-Fateh, is a good example of this. The leaflet states that “unifying our efforts and ranks is imperative to meet the goals of the Syrian revolution. With this in mind, dissolving unnecessary affiliations may hinder a real merger or be used as a premise to weaken our revolution under the pretext of ‘targeting a terrorist organization’ is essential. Therefore, we have decided on the following: **1. the complete cancellation of all operations under the name of Jabhat Al-Nusra; 2. the formation of an independent new group, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, that has no external affiliations**”.



**The English-language announcement on the establishment of the Fateh al-Sham Front (Twitter, July 29, 2016)**

## Appendix B

### Summary of the Al-Qaeda leadership's announcement of support for Al-Julani's move

1. On July 28, 2016, Al-Qaeda's leadership distributed an audiotape on social media **congratulating Al-Julani on the [expected] move**. The tape was apparently distributed a very short time before Al-Julani's announcement on Al-Jazeera TV. In the announcement, **Al-Qaeda leader Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri and his deputy Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr** call for unity among the Islamic organizations in Al-Sham as a preliminary step towards the establishment of a Sunni Islamic state ("the establishment of an entity for the Sunni Muslims that will represent their ways and demand their rights"). Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr also stresses the need not to give Russia and the United States a pretext to attack the Al-Nusra Front and the other rebel organizations ("the Syrian jihad fighters"). **Both of these motifs also appeared (in greater detail) in Abu Mohammad al-Julani's announcement on the establishment of the new framework, and there was apparently prior coordination between Al-Qaeda and Al-Julani regarding the content of the announcements.**

2. Following are the main points of the announcement (YouTube, July 28, 2016):

A. Al-Zawahiri's deputy **Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr** starts by saying: "**Today we welcome a [new] blessed stage in the awakening of jihad [...]**," after "we studied the military and political aspects of the situation in Al-Sham and the challenges and difficulties that the residents of Al-Sham are undergoing." This [new] stage is intended to **refute all the pretexts raised by the enemies [i.e., Russia, the United States and the countries of the international coalition] in order to attack the Syrian jihad fighters.** Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr does not specify the nature of the new stage, but **the timing of Al-Julani's announcement on Al-Jazeera TV indicates that this refers to the intention to establish the Fateh al-Sham Front.**

B. **The need for unity:**

1) Another reason for the establishment of the new framework, according to Abu al-Khayr, is **the need for unity among the Muslim and jihadi rebel organizations in Syria** ("the jihadi Islamic groups"). Such unity requires a **transition from an "elite group" (i.e., the Al-Nusra Front) to**

**large-scale jihad to be carried out by many organizations without unnecessary splits.** This unity is necessary to promote the next stage, which is **“the establishment of an entity for the Sunnis that will represent their needs and demand their rights.”**

2) Therefore, Abu al-Khayr notes, **“We call on the leadership of the Al-Nusra Front to progress in a manner that will defend the interests of Islam and the Muslims, and defend the jihad of the residents of Al-Sham. We urge them [i.e., the Al-Nusra Front leadership] to employ the necessary measures in this regard.** This is a step on our behalf which includes a call on **all the jihad fighter factions on the soil of Al-Sham to unite under the will of Allah [...] [Please] unite the ranks to defend our residents and our land,** and strive for an honest Islamic government that will defend the rights and disseminate justice among Muslims. **We, Allah willing, will be the first to support it and help it. Our Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri [...] confirms this with his words.”**

**C. Sacrificing the organizational tie between the Al-Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda for the sake of unity:** At this point, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is heard saying: **“Fraternity between us on the basis of Islam is stronger than any ephemeral organizational ties between organizations. Your unity is more important and [more] precious to us than any organizational ties. We are sacrificing the organizational and party ties [i.e., the relationship between Al-Qaeda leadership and its branch in Syria] if this runs counter to your unity [...]”** Al-Zawahiri ends by expressing his hope that unity between the various organizations **will help them fight against their “secular and sectarian” enemy** [i.e., the Syrian regime] that is assisted by the Shiites [“the rejectionist power”], the Iranians [“Safavids”], Russia and China, and with those behind the “modern crusade” [a reference to the United States and the coalition].

## Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr, deputy of Al-Qaeda's leader



Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr (Al-Hiwar, July 29, 2016)

3. The audiotape expressing support for Al-Julani's move includes statements by **Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr** (also called **Abu al-Khayr al-Masri**), the deputy of Al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Abu al-Khayr's real name is **Abdullah Mohammad Rajab Abd al-Rahman**, and he was born in 1957. He comes from northern Egypt and is very close to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri (who is also Egyptian). Abu al-Khayr is in charge of the organization's logistics and finances and is also responsible for logistical arrangements and payments for Al-Qaeda operatives sent to carry out operations around the world.

4. In the early 1990s, he traveled to Sudan with Al-Zawahiri and from there they went to Afghanistan, where they joined Osama bin Laden's men. In 2003, Abu al-Khayr was arrested in Shiraz by Iran and was released in 2015 (Al-Masriyun, July 29, 2016; As-Safir, August 2, 2016). According to a Lebanese newspaper report, Abu al-Khayr is now in an Al-Nusra Front stronghold in the Aleppo Province (As-Safir, August 2, 2016).

## Appendix C

### The Fateh al-Sham Front's charter

1. The Fateh al-Sham Front, the new framework established in place of the Al-Nusra Front, published a charter<sup>2</sup> on July 31, 2016, detailing its basic ideology and principles (Twitter account of the Fateh al-Sham Front, July 31, 2016). An analysis of the charter shows that the new framework is clearly affiliated with the ideology of Al-Qaeda: it continues to **adhere to the Salafist worldview**, to strive to **impose Islamic religious law (Sharia) around the world**, and to **adhere to jihad**. However, in order to **distinguish the Fateh al-Sham Front from ISIS**, the charter emphasizes that it will conduct itself **peacefully**, taking the population's needs into account and with the aim of uniting the Muslim nation, and in particular the jihad fighters, "around the truth [of Islam]."



The Fateh al-Sham Front's charter (Twitter account of the Fateh al-Sham Front, July 31, 2016)

#### 2. Following is a translation of the Fateh al-Sham Front's charter:

A. Our belief, perception and religious interpretation derive from the book [i.e., the Quran] and from the tradition [of the Prophet Muhammad] according to the perception of the first generation of the straight path [of Islam] that includes the Prophet's Companions [*Al-Sahaba*] and their successors, Allah's will on them; And the religious sages who followed in their footsteps, such as Abu

<sup>2</sup> Mithaq Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, i.e., charter of the Al-Sham Liberation Front.

Hanifa, Al-Shafi'i, Malik [bin Anas] and Ahmad [bin Hanbal] and others, Allah have mercy on the souls of everyone<sup>3</sup>.

B. We repel the enemy who attacks the religion [of Muslims] and the things that are sacred to Muslims. We consider this one of the most important personal commandments and one of the proper ways to practice the religion. This is not dependent on anything, but is promoted according to ability, and there is nothing except faith that should be promoted more.

C. We are struggling [the Arabic word used here is *nujahed*, which means making an effort, struggling, and carrying out jihad] **for the sake of the application of Allah's Sharia** until there is no civil war [among Muslims], **until every religion is the religion of Allah and is implemented on the ground** [*al-ard* - which means both the ground and the planet earth. The choice of the term here is apparently ambiguous] and until our nation reclaims its glory and splendor.

D. In our jihad, we implement the laws of Sharia [Islamic law], taking existential laws [the Laws of the Prophet] into consideration, in order to convey our intentions [i.e., our message]. This is according to our perception of Sharia and the reality that we live in. We adhere to religious principles that satisfy [the will of Allah] and political Sharia principles derived from the biography of our Prophet Muhammad, Allah's prayers for him and His blessing of peace.

E. We will remove the injustice of all the disadvantaged, both Muslims and infidels, and we will stop the act of the oppressor [vis-à-vis the oppressed] by various means depending on ability.

F. We pray to Allah, may He rise up in wisdom and good preaching, **and we behave kindly toward the people** and give them the message of Allah **pleasantly, in a considerate manner and with kind words.**

G. We respect the sages of the [Islamic] nation, and we recognize their right and mercy. We bring them closer to us and follow their ways, but do not consider them infallible. We will take the various Sharia approaches into consideration.

H. We maintain close ties with other Muslims around [our shared] faith. We are hostile to the infidels and renounce them. If, in a Muslim there is good and evil, obedience and insubordination, conduct according to the tradition of the Prophet

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<sup>3</sup> Abu Hanifa, Al-Shafi'i, Malik bin Anas and Ahmad bin Hanbal are the fathers of Sunni Islamic law.

and adoption of obscene innovations – we will develop a close relationship with him based on his good qualities and his following the tradition of the Prophet and we will be hostile toward him based on his evil qualities and his adoption of the obscene innovations that guide his conduct.

**I. We abandon factionalism and differences of opinion and call to unify the message and become united. We see it as a duty to unite the [Islamic] nation in general and the jihad fighters in particular,** around the truth [of Islam] and under one flag, according to the correct, healthy and stable elements of Sharia.

J. We strive for the words of Allah to be supreme. We invest our all in this. We carry out jihad with our hands and our tongues, with our property and our fingertips, in heart and soul, until Allah allows it [i.e., for His word to be supreme] or until we are exhausted without it [i.e., without being able to achieve it].

## Appendix D

### Initial reactions to Al-Julani's announcement

1. Based on the initial reactions of the US, Russia and Iran - the three main power centers operating in Syria, it is clear that **they are not buying the new image that the Al-Nusra Front seeks to display and they do not believe that it has really cut off its relations with Al-Qaeda:**

A. In response to a question, **US Department of State Spokesman John Kirby** says that the new organization is no different from its predecessor: “We certainly see no reason to believe that their actions or their objectives are any different, **and they are still considered a foreign terrorist organization**” (US Department of State website, July 28, 2016).

B. According to a **statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry**, the Al-Nusra Front's attempts to change its image by changing its name are useless. This is because, according to the statement, **the organization has been and remains an illegal terrorist organization and therefore the war against it will continue** (TASS News Agency, July 29, 2016).

C. **Bahram Qassemi, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, says that the change in the name of the Al-Nusra Front is a “play on words” and that the organization's terrorist activities will continue** (Fars News, July 28, 2016).

## Appendix E

### Milestones in Abu Mohammad al-Julani's and the Al-Nusra Front's relationship with Al-Qaeda and ISIS<sup>4</sup>



Insignia of the Al-Nusra Front ("The Support Front") or, to use its full name: "The Front for the Support of the Residents of Al-Sham (Greater Syria)." A map of Syria, the Islamic crescent symbol and the figure of a jihadi fighter appear in the background.

1. With the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in March 2011, Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq (The Islamic State in Iraq) decided to send Syrian and Iraqi jihadists skilled in guerrilla warfare to Syria. The jihadists held several meetings **between October 2011 and January 2012** in the suburbs of Damascus and Homs. At these meetings, it was decided to establish a Salafist-jihadi organization that would join the ranks of the rebels. The organization that was established was headed by Abu Mohammad al-Julani.

2. **Abu Mohammad al-Julani**, a Syrian from the Daraa Province in southern Syria<sup>5</sup>, is a veteran jihadist who fought in Iraq against the US forces alongside ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. **On January 24, 2012, Abu Mohammad al-Julani announced the establishment of the Al-Nusra Front and declared jihad against the Syrian regime.** In a video, Al-Julani announced that the overthrow of the Assad regime would constitute only half of the campaign, **since the final goal was implementing Islamic law (Sharia) and coming together under the banner of Islam.** He severely attacked

<sup>4</sup> For further information, see the ITIC's in-depth study of the Al-Nusra Front, September 17, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> According to reports on social media and on the ISIS-affiliated Haqq website, Al-Julani's real name is **Ahmed Hussein al-Shar'a**.

the rebel organizations for accepting assistance from the West and the US, claiming that this assistance was a crime that Allah would not forgive. This is because, according to him, the West and the US are party to the crimes of the Syrian Ba'athist regime.

3. In the beginning, Al-Julani received his instructions from the Emir of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who provided the new organization with financial and logistical assistance. **On April 9, 2013**, in order to formalize his control over Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi** released an audiotape **announcing the unification of the organizations in Iraq and Syria**. The united framework was called **The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS; the Arabic acronym: Daesh)**.

4. **On April 10, 2013**, the day after Al-Baghdadi's announcement regarding the unification of the organizations, **Al-Julani rushed to pledge allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri**. **On June 10, 2013**, he announced the **cancellation of the union between the Al-Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq**. He claimed that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had declared the union "without our permission, without consulting us, and without informing us."

5. **Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri acknowledged that the Al-Nusra Front in Syria was not subordinate to the branch in Iraq**. Thus Al-Zawahiri took sides and **decided the dispute between Al-Baghdadi and Al-Julani**. It led to a **rift between Al-Zawahiri and Al-Baghdadi (the leader of ISIS)**, who publicly refused to heed Al-Zawahiri's orders (and to a rift within the Salafist-jihadi movement around the world). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi insisted on the continued existence of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham as an autonomous political entity, **which is not subject to the Al-Qaeda leadership**.

6. As a result of these developments, **the Al-Qaeda infrastructure in Syria split into two separate rival organizations**. ISIS began to operate independently, which later (2014) led to the establishment of the Islamic State. **The Al-Nusra Front, which formally became Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, began to develop differently, in a more pragmatic way, which differentiated it from ISIS**: The organization **sought cooperation and the establishment of umbrella frameworks with Islamic rebel organizations**, as opposed to the (sometimes violent) friction between ISIS and other organizations; **The Al-Nusra Front renounced the brutality of the Islamic State towards civilians** and made an effort to win their support in the area under its control; **It refrained from carrying out terrorist attacks abroad and did not take part in**

**ISIS's terrorist attacks in the West and elsewhere around the world;** It stresses its Syrian identity, in contrast to the predominance of foreign fighters in ISIS.

7. **While ISIS established itself in eastern Syria** (in the areas of Al-Raqqah and Deir al-Zor, and in the area west of the Euphrates River near the Turkish border), **the Al-Nusra Front established itself in the north of the country.** It formed a joint front with other rebel organizations (Jaysh al-Fateh) **and together they took over the Idlib region, making it their main power base.** The Al-Nusra Front also has a military presence in many other areas in northern Syria, including in the rural area of Aleppo, Damascus and its surroundings, the area near the Syrian-Lebanese border (the Qalamoun Mountains) and the southern Syrian Golan Heights.