



## Fierce dispute between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and Al-Qaeda

December 6, 2017

### Overview

- ▶ Recently, harsh words have been exchanged between Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front), indicating a **widening rift between the two organizations**. In the ITIC's assessment, **the core of the dispute is the question of the nature of the relationship between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and Al-Qaeda**: is the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham allowed to conduct its own independent "Syrian" policy **that takes into account the major constraints affecting it**, or is it subject to the orders of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, **whose view of the situation and whose set of considerations are completely different**.
- ▶ In the ITIC's assessment, the series of arrests of operatives affiliated with Al-Qaeda carried out by Muhammad al-Julani, leader of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, and his response to the accusations made by Al-Qaeda's leader, indicate that **Al-Julani has chosen to follow his own independent "Syrian" path**, although he has not yet completely burned his bridges with Al-Qaeda.

**The fierce dispute between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and Al-Qaeda is taking place in the shadow of the increased risk facing the main outpost of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the area of Idlib. In the ITIC's assessment, in the wake of the collapse of the Islamic State, the strategic attention of the Syrian and Russian forces is expected to be diverted to the rebel enclave in Idlib, where the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham is the dominant force. Abu Muhammad al-Julani understands very well that the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham may become the main target of Syria, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. This risk requires the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham to behave pragmatically and adopt a "Syrian" set of considerations aimed at preserving its survival, and to avoid the global or ideological considerations that guide Ayman al-Zawahiri.**<sup>1</sup> The pragmatic conduct of the Headquarters

<sup>1</sup> **For example**, in a speech on that was disseminated on April 23, 2007, Ayman al-Zawahiri called on his people in Al-Sham (Syria or Greater Syria) not to treat Al-Sham as a local or national problem, since

for the Liberation of Al-Sham is expressed, inter alia, **in finding the widest possible common ground with other Islamic rebel organizations, in order to constitute a united front against the many forces that it will have to deal with** (Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, Turkey).



**Abu Muhammad al-Julani: pragmatic “Syrian” considerations intended to preserve the survival of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and not global and ideological considerations that drive Al-Zawahiri (Al-Jazeera, July 28, 2016)**

## **Milestones in the establishment of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham**

- ▶ **The Al-Nusra Front** (“the Support Front”), the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda’s branch in Iraq, which had been called **the Islamic State in Iraq** up to that time, was established **in January 2012** (nearly a year after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria). A **fierce dispute** soon developed between the parent organization and its Syrian branch, leading to a split and a change in the Iraqi organization’s name to the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). **Al-Qaeda, headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri, announced its support for the Al-Nusra Front and renounced ISIS.**
- ▶ **On July 28, 2016,** the Al-Nusra Front announced the establishment **of a new framework to be called the Fateh al-Sham Front.** Al-Julani’s announcement was preceded by the announcement of support from the leaders of Al-Qaeda (Ayman al-Zawahiri and his deputy Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr).

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this would lead to a reduction in the scope of the problem and to its eventual disappearance. Al-Zawahiri called on the entire Islamic nation to participate in the jihad in Al-Sham through its sons, its funds, its resources and its capabilities. **This call was disconnected from reality** because it was made at a time when it was becoming more and more difficult for foreign jihadists to travel to Syria and Iraq.

- ▶ From Abu Muhammad al-Julani’s perspective, the establishment of the new framework was designed to **blur and downplay the ties with Al-Qaeda and to disconnect from the organization’s terrorist image**. This is in order to make it difficult for the US and the coalition countries to join the airstrikes against it **and to make it easier to find the widest possible common ground with Islamist rebel organizations in Syria**, including those whose ideology is not necessarily Salafist-jihadi.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ Six months later, **on January 28, 2017, five rebel groups in northern Syria set up a new umbrella organization called the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** (Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham). The new framework comprised five Islamist organizations: the Fateh al-Sham Front (formerly the Al-Nusra Front); the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement; Jaysh al-Sunna; the Ansar al-Din Front, and the Al-Haqq Brigade (Liwa al-Haqq). **In effect, the Fateh al-Sham Front constituted (and still constitutes) the dominant force among the rebel organizations included in the new framework**. Statements issued by the new umbrella organization defined the goals of its establishment, including **toppling the Syrian regime and imposing Islamic law (Shari’ah) on the residents of Syria** (Twitter, January 28, 2017).



**Insignia of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham**  
(Twitter)

### **Blatant attack on the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham by Ayman al-Zawahiri**

- ▶ **On November 28, 2017, Al-Qaeda’s media arm Al-Sahab** released an audiotape of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri **blatantly attacking** the Headquarters for the Liberation of

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<sup>2</sup> For details, see the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from 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-Sham. **The main points that he made are as follows** (Al-Durar al-Shamiya, November 28, 2017; Enab Baladi, November 29, 2017)<sup>3</sup>:

- ◆ Al-Zawahiri **accuses the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham of fighting anyone who displays its ties with Al-Qaeda**. He says that he gave the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham more than a year to amend the situation, but the organization ignored his demands **and increased its aggressiveness**.
- ◆ Al-Zawahiri accuses the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham of **breaking away from the Al-Nusra Front’s pledge of allegiance to Al-Qaeda**. He stresses: “We have not released anyone from our pledge of allegiance, neither the Al-Nusra Front nor anyone else.” He adds: “**We did not consent to the pledge of allegiance of the Al-Nusra Front being secret. We saw this as a grave error. The pledge of allegiance between us and anyone who pledges allegiance to us is a binding contract that must not be violated and must be fulfilled**” (this implies that **the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham suggested keeping its ties with Al-Qaeda secret** and not displaying them in public, **in order to avoid being identified as a branch of Al-Qaeda**).
- ◆ Al-Zawahiri called on Al-Qaeda operatives in Al-Sham **to cooperate with all “loyal elements” and with all the jihad fighters** in order to heal the rift. **He stressed the importance of unity among the jihad fighters in Al-Sham**.

### **The immediate background of Al-Zawahiri’s speech: a series of arrests of operatives affiliated with Al-Qaeda**

► The background of Al-Zawahiri’s speech was a **series of arrests in the areas of Idlib, Aleppo and Hama, carried out by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham among dozens of operatives, including senior commanders affiliated with Al-Qaeda and opposed to Abu Muhammad al-Julani’s independent line**. Most of the junior operatives arrested were Jordanians. Following are highlights about the detentions (Al-Mudun, November 28, 2017; Enab Baladi, November 29, 2017):

- ◆ **The prominent commanders** who were arrested are: **Abu Hamam al-Suri**, the military commander of the Al-Nusra Front; **Sheikh Abu al-Qassem al-Urduni**, former deputy to Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, founder of the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq (from which

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<sup>3</sup> The ITIC does not have the original wording of the announcement as published by Al-Sahab. In the absence of the original wording, the ITIC relied on Syrian websites.

ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front emerged); **Iyad al-Tubasi** AKA **Abu Julaybib al-Urduni** and **Sheikh Sami al-Uraydi**, senior Al-Qaeda officials in Syria who left the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front (Note: Sheikh Abu al-Qassem al-Urduni has apparently been released, and possibly several of the others).

- ◆ **Abu Julaybib and Sami al-Uraydi were arrested at a checkpoint of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham near the Syrian-Turkish border.** The two men were on their way to meet with Abu Muhammad al-Julani, who had summoned them to discuss a solution to the growing conflict between supporters of **Al-Qaeda and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. They were the commander and deputy commander of a jihadi organization called Ansar al-Furqan, which considers itself a branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria.**

- ◆ The security apparatus of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham also raided the headquarters and homes of **other Ansar al-Furqan commanders.** In addition, lower-ranking Ansar al-Furqan operatives were arrested, **mainly Jordanians** (who were arrested along with their bodyguards, mainly Syrians).

- ▶ On November 27, 2017, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham announced that **its organization contained “short-sighted and narrow-minded people”** who were working to undermine the organization on false pretexts. The organization’s attempts to hold a dialogue with those people failed. Therefore, the organization announced **that charges had been filed against these people and that the matter would be handled by the legal system.**

### **The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham’s response to Ayman al-Zawahiri**

- ▶ **On December 1, 2017, Sheikh Abd al-Rahim Attoun, the Shari’ah official of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham,** gave a detailed reply to Al-Zawahiri on Telegram. He claimed that **the Al-Nusra Front had not violated its pledge of allegiance,** since Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani had announced its affiliation with Al-Qaeda **but had not pledged allegiance to it.** At the time, Al-Julani had approached Al-Zawahiri’s deputy Abu al-Khayr, suggesting that he change the name of the Al-Nusra Front to the Fateh al-Sham Front and inform the media that the organization was breaking off ties with Al-Qaeda, **but to remain committed to Al-Qaeda in secret** (a suggestion that Al-Zawahiri rejected out of hand). According to Abd al-Rahim Attoun, there were subsequently

**breakdowns in communication** between Al-Julani and Al-Zawahiri, and Al-Zawahiri's messages never reached Al-Julani (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, December 2, 2017).

► However, it appears that **both sides are not yet interested in breaking off ties with each other**. On December 2, 2017, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham reported the existence of a reconciliation initiative whose declared goal was **to find a solution that would serve the interests of the jihad fighters in Al-Sham and preserve the principles of religion and Shari'ah [Islamic law]** (Twitter, December 2, 2017).



**Sheikh Abd al-Rahim Attoun, AKA Abu Abdullah al-Shami, a prominent official in charge of Shari'ah [arbiter on matters of Islamic law] at the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (December 1, 2017)**