



**Abu Mohammad al-Julani, leader of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, tried to justify the recent military steps against Turkish-affiliated rebel organizations in the Idlib region**

January 20, 2019

## Overview

**Abu Mohammad al-Julani, leader of the jihadi organization the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (HLS), granted an interview to the Amjad Video Production Agency (affiliated with the HLS). The interview (a 23-minute video) was given as part of the Dialogue talk show and was entitled **The Internal War and the Future of the Arena**. The video (January 14, 2019) is high quality and very professional. During the interview, Al-Julani tried, with a prominently apologetic tone, **to explain why the HLS recently took military steps against other rebel organizations in the Idlib region (which are affiliated with Turkey)**.**



**Abu Mohammad al-Julani (right), leader of the HLS (formerly the Al-Nusra Front). In the background are the HLS flags (the HLS-affiliated Amjad Video Production Agency, January 14, 2019)**

- The background of the interview was **the latest developments in the Idlib region**: The HLS, Al-Julani's organization, took control of various areas which had been controlled by rebel organizations affiliated with Turkey. According to the Syrian media, **the HLS now controls most of the Idlib enclave, neutralizing the power of other rebel organizations, especially those affiliated with Turkey.**

► The HLS's takeover of most of the control areas of pro-Turkish rebel organizations **strengthens its status as the dominant organization in the region, improves its readiness to fight against the Syrian army and weakens the status of other rebel organizations affiliated with Turkey.** However, Al-Julani's interview may indicate that the HLS is forced to cope with internal criticism that his organization is taking aggressive steps against the other rebel organizations rather than focusing on the common Syrian enemy. In the interview, Al-Julani explains why these steps were taken, while using cautious language towards Turkey (suggesting that it take over the territories east of the Euphrates River). Al-Julani also makes a suggestion (whose seriousness is doubtful) to transfer the Idlib area to civilian administration and to unite the various organizations in advance of the campaign against the common enemies: the Syrian regime, Russia, and the Iranian regime.

## Key issues raised in Al-Julani's interview

### The military steps taken by the HLS against rebel organizations operating in the Idlib region

**In the beginning of the interview, Abu Mohammad al-Julani discussed at length the recent steps taken by the HLS against other rebel organizations operating in the Idlib region (Turkish-affiliated organizations).** At first, Al-Julani referred to an attack by his organization (early January 2019) against the **Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, a rebel organization belonging to the Turkish-supported National Liberation Front<sup>1</sup>** (an attack that ended with the announcement of the disbanding of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement). Al-Julani later referred to steps by the HLS against the rebel organizations **Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham** (two Islamist rebel organizations affiliated with Turkey).

### Military steps taken by the HLS against the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement

► The Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement was established on November 1, 2011, shortly after the start of the Syrian civil war. This rebel organization operates mainly in the Aleppo Governorate. **The organization now belongs to the Turkish-supported National Liberation Front.** It is reported that following the HLS's recent attack against it, the

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<sup>1</sup> The **National Liberation Front** is an umbrella organization of rebel organizations established by Turkey in early August 2018. The establishment of this framework was announced in Ankara after a meeting of the commanders of the various organizations, before the start of the tenth round of the Astana talks (Enab Baladi, August 5, 2018).

movement's commanders fled to Turkey and to the areas under the control of the forces operating within the Turkish Operation Euphrates Shield in northeastern Syria (Arabi Al-Youm, Syrian news website, January 5, 2019).

► Al-Julani began by listing some of the violent clashes between the HLS and operatives of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, who allegedly killed HLS operatives and molested their bodies. However, Al-Julani added, **the main reason for the conflict between the organizations is that many organizations with different agendas were operating in the same geographical area and this led to differences of opinion and conflicts.**

► Al-Julani later listed some of the clashes with the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement:

◆ According to Al-Julani, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement began a process of merging with the HLS, but changed its mind at the last moment. The movement did not stop there, and acted against the HLS, killing 10-15 of the organization's commanders. It also attempted to incite other rebel organizations to put an end to the presence of the HLS in the rural area west of Aleppo. Therefore, fighting ensued between it and the HLS in 2018.

◆ Al-Julani added that after the campaign in southern Syria (the Daraa campaign), Syrian army forces and Iranian and Russian forces were concentrated in northern Syria. According to him, the same system of local reconciliation agreements that (the Syrian regime and Russia) had adopted in southern Syria was adopted in the Idlib region. In this manner, the Syrian regime wanted to penetrate the "liberated north" (i.e., the Idlib region) through the rebel organizations operating there. According to him, **the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement held talks with Russia on the administration of the Idlib region and, at the same time, held talks with local dignitaries (implicitly, in order to undermine the dominance of the HLS in the Idlib region).**

► According to Al-Julani, detainees from various organizations who were held by the HLS have been released to their homes and are no longer being persecuted. According to him, most of the operatives of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement are still operating in the Idlib area. Al-Julani added that most of the weapons confiscated from the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement would be returned to the movement's operatives to be used on the confrontation lines against the Syrian army and the forces supporting it.

## The steps taken by the HLS against other rebel organizations

► Al-Julani then proceeded to explain the reasons for the battles waged by the HLS against two other rebel organizations. Following are highlights about them (according to the ITIC):

◆ **Ahrar al-Sham**, an Islamist rebel organization **supported by Turkey and constituting part of the National Liberation Front**. The organization was established at the start of the civil war and its center of power is in the Idlib area. In July 2017, the HLS carried out military activity against Ahrar al-Sham, positioning itself as the dominant organization in the Idlib area. In January 2019, the HLS began harassing the operatives of Ahrar al-Sham and the latter’s operatives were forced to leave some areas under their control (on the Al-Ghab Plain and in the mountains to its east).

◆ **Suqour al-Sham (“the Hawks of al-Sham”)** is a rebel organization that also belongs to the **Turkish-affiliated National Liberation Front**. The profile photo of the organization’s Twitter account includes characteristics associated with the Free Syrian Army, which operates under the sponsorship of Turkey.

► According to Al-Julani, **Ahrar al-Sham** and **Suqour al-Sham** participated in the clashes between the HLS and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement. Therefore, after the HLS “solved the problems” with the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement (i.e., defeated and dismantled the organization), **it turned to the southern part of the Idlib region in order to “solve the problems” with Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham**. A meeting took place between the sides but proved unsuccessful. Clashes ensued, and then an agreement between them was reached.



**HLS Commander Abu Mohammad al-Julani, during the interview (the HLS-affiliated Amjad Video Production Agency, January 14, 2019)**

## Civil administration of the Idlib region (“the liberated north”)

► According to Al-Julani, there are many organizations operating in the Idlib area, with different agendas, **and therefore there is no single policy regarding the civil administration of the area, which has 5 million residents.** Thus, for example, the Idlib region has a university with 12,000 students, nearly 50 hospitals, and nearly 2,000 schools. The Idlib region also has agricultural institutions, courts, a bar association, a pharmacists association and a medical association.

► Therefore, Al-Julani added, if each organization wanted to control part of Idlib’s territory, this would lead to corruption and a heavy hand on the population, thus negatively affecting the “liberated north.” Al-Julani points out that the solution is to exempt the various organizations, including the HLS, from [civil] administration of the “liberated north.” He added that the administration should be handed over to civil and scientific bodies, such as engineers and doctors, who are capable of managing it properly. According to him, the HLS is working to advance the matter and has received several initiatives from academics and politicians abroad in connection with the administration of the “liberated north.”

► At the end of the interview, Al-Julani noted that the first and most important step to be taken was for **the mission of the organizations operating in the Idlib area to be purely military, with no bearing on the civil administration of the “liberated” areas.** These organizations must operate **within a united military framework**, regardless of whether it is called a “military council,” an “advanced operations room” or a “military headquarters.” This is so that they can unite their efforts to defend the “liberated [north]” and continue [the fighting] until the [Syrian] regime is overthrown.

## Rhetorical support for the Turkish army’s takeover of the area east of the Euphrates River

► While consolidating the HLS’s control in the Idlib region and attacking Turkish-backed rebel organizations, **Al-Julani expressed his support for the “liberation” of the area east of the Euphrates River (controlled by the Kurdish forces) by Turkey.** According to him, the HLS considers the Kurdish forces (which he refers to as the PKK, a derogatory nickname used by the Turks) as “an enemy of the [Syrian] revolution.” According to him, the Kurdish forces took control of areas inhabited by many Sunni Muslims, some of whom were fighters in the ranks of the HLS. **Al-Julani reiterated the need for the Kurdish forces (which he again referred to as the PKK) to cease to exist.**

## Call to unite the ranks against the common enemies

► **Al-Julani called on the various organizations to unite the ranks in order to confront the common enemies, the Syrian regime, Russia, and the Iranian regime** (note: Al-Julani refrained from including Turkey among the “enemies”). According to him, these enemies do not need an excuse to enter the Idlib region since they see no difference between “moderate” rebel organizations and those that are not “moderate.” Al-Julani provides evidence of this: rebel organizations considered “moderate,” such as Jaysh al-Islam (an Islamic rebel organization) and Faylaq al-Sham (a Turkish-backed Islamic rebel organization) controlled the eastern Ghouta area of Damascus at one time. **The fact that they were considered “moderate organizations” did not prevent the Syrian army from attacking them.** He added that the Ghouta area had been bombed with chemical weapons and the Daraa area had been completely abandoned [even though both were controlled by “moderate” organizations]. **According to Al-Julani, this is why it is important to unite the efforts against the various enemies that are threatening to take over the Idlib area (implicitly, the jihadi organizations and the “moderate” organizations should join forces).**