

Al Qaeda Central, Al-Nusra and ISIS: The Al Nusra Front Was Originally Part of the Islamic State

By [Nauman Sadiq](#)

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*Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in August 2011 to April 2013, Islamic State and al-Nusra Front (currently Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, JFS) were a single organization that chose the banner of "Jabhat al-Nusra." Although the current al-Nusra Front is led by **Abu Mohammad al-Julani**, he was appointed as the emir of al-Nusra Front by **Abu Bakr al Baghdadi**, the leader of Islamic State, in January 2012.*

Thus, the current al-Nusra Front is only a splinter group of Islamic State which split from its parent organization in April 2013 over a dispute between the leaders of the two organizations.

In March 2011, protests began in Syria against the government of **Bashar al-Assad**. In the following months, violence between demonstrators and security forces led to a gradual militarization of the conflict. In August 2011, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was based in Iraq, began sending Syrian and Iraqi jihadists experienced in guerrilla warfare across the border into Syria to establish an organization inside the country.



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Led by a Syrian known as **Abu Mohammad al-Julani**, the group began to recruit fighters and establish cells throughout the country. On 23 January 2012, the group announced its formation as Jabhat al-Nusra.

In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released an audio statement in which he announced that al-Nusra Front had been established, financed and supported by the Islamic State of

Iraq. Al-Baghdadi declared that the two groups were merging under the name “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.” The leader of al-Nusra Front, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, issued a statement denying the merger and complaining that neither he nor anyone else in al-Nusra’s leadership had been consulted about it.

Al-Qaeda Central’s leader, **Ayman al Zawahiri**, tried to mediate the dispute between al-Baghdadi and al-Julani but eventually, in October 2013, he endorsed al-Nusra Front as the official franchise of al-Qaeda Central in Syria. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, however, defied the nominal authority of al-Qaeda Central and declared himself as the caliph of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Keeping this background in mind, it becomes amply clear that a single militant organization operated in Syria and Iraq under the leadership of al-Baghdadi until April 2013, which chose the banner of al-Nusra Front, and that the current emir of the subsequent breakaway faction of al-Nusra Front, al-Julani, was actually al-Baghdadi’s deputy in Syria.

Thus, the Islamic State operated in Syria since August 2011 under the designation of al-Nusra Front and it subsequently changed its name to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April 2013, after which it overran al-Raqqa in the summer of 2013, then it captured parts of Deir el-Zor and fought battles against the alliance of Kurds and the Syrian regime in al-Hasakah. And in January 2014 it overran Fallujah and parts of Ramadi in Iraq and reached the zenith of its power when it captured Mosul in June 2014.



Al-Nusra Front

Moreover, many biased political commentators of the mainstream media deliberately try to muddle the reality in order to link the emergence of Islamic State to the ill-conceived invasion of Iraq by the Bush Administration in 2003. Their motive behind this chicanery is to absolve the Obama Administration’s policy of nurturing militants against the Syrian regime, since the beginning of the Syrian civil war until June 2014, when the Islamic State overran Mosul and the Obama Administration made a volte-face on its previous policy of indiscriminate support to Syrian opposition and declared a war against a faction of Syrian opposition: that is, the Islamic State.

Additionally, such Syria “experts” also try to find the roots of Islamic State in al-Qaeda in Iraq; however, the insurgency in Iraq died down after “the Iraq surge” of 2007. Al-Qaeda in Iraq became an impotent organization after the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006, and the subsequent surge of troops in Iraq by the Bush Administration.

The re-eruption of insurgency in Iraq has been the spillover effect of nurturing militants in Syria against the Assad regime, when the Islamic State overran Fallujah and parts of Ramadi in January 2014 and subsequently captured Mosul in June 2014. The borders between Syria and Iraq are quite porous and it’s impossible to contain the flow of militants and arms between the two countries. The Obama Administration’s policy of providing money, arms and training to Syrian militants in the training camps located in the border regions of Turkey and Jordan was bound to backfire sooner or later.

Regarding the rebranding of al-Julani’s Nusra Front to “Jabhat Fateh al-Sham” in July 2016 and supposed severing of ties with al-Qaeda Central, it’s only a nominal difference because al-Nusra Front never had any organizational and operational ties with al-Qaeda Central and even their ideologies are poles apart.



Al-Qaeda Central’s leader Ayman al Zawahiri

Al-Qaeda Central is basically a transnational terrorist organization, while al-Nusra Front mostly has regional ambitions limited only to fighting the Assad regime in Syria and its ideology is anti-Shi’a and sectarian. In fact, al-Nusra Front has not only received medical aid and material support from Israel, but some of its operations against the Shi’a-dominated Assad regime in southern Syria were fully coordinated with Israel’s air force.

The purpose behind the rebranding of al-Nusra Front to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and supposed severing of ties with al-Qaeda Central was to legitimize itself and to make it easier for its patrons to send money and arms. The US blacklisted al-Nusra Front in December 2012 and pressurized Saudi Arabia and Turkey to ban it too. **Although al-Nusra Front’s name has been in the list of proscribed organizations of Saudi Arabia and Turkey since 2014, it has kept receiving money and arms from the Gulf Arab States.**

Notwithstanding, excluding the western Mediterranean coast and the adjacent major urban centers controlled by the Syrian regime and the Kurdish-controlled northeastern Syria, I would divide the Syrian theater of proxy wars into three separate and distinct zones of influence:

Firstly, the northern and northwestern zone along the Syria-Turkey border, in and around

Aleppo and Idlib, which is under the influence of Turkey and Qatar. Both these countries share the ideology of Muslim Brotherhood and they provide money, training and arms to Sunni Arab jihadist organizations, such as al-Tawhid Brigade, Nour al-Din Zenki Brigade and Ahrar al-Sham, in the training camps located in the border regions of Turkey in collaboration with CIA's MOM (a Turkish acronym for military operations center).

Secondly, the southern zone of influence along the Syria-Jordan border, in Daraa and Quneitra and as far away as Homs and Damascus. It is controlled by the Saudi-Jordanian camp and they provide money, weapons and training to the Salafist militant groups, such as al-Nusra Front and the Southern Front of the so-called "moderate" Free Syria Army (FSA) in Daraa and Quneitra, and Jaysh al-Islam in the suburbs of Damascus.

Their military strategy is directed by a Military Operations Center (MOC) and training camps located in the border regions of Jordan. Here, let me clarify that this distinction is quite overlapping and heuristic, at best, because al-Nusra's jihadists have taken part in battles as far away as Idlib and Aleppo.

And finally, the eastern zone of influence along the Syria-Iraq border, in al-Raqqqa and Deir al-Zor, which has been controlled by a relatively maverick Iraq-based jihadist outfit, the Islamic State, though it had received funding and weapons from Turkey and the Gulf Arab States before it turned rogue and overran Mosul and Anbar in Iraq.

Thus, leaving the Mediterranean coast and Syria's border with Lebanon, the Baathist and Shi'a-dominated Syrian regime has been surrounded from all three sides by hostile Sunni forces: Turkey and Muslim Brotherhood in the north, Jordan and the Salafists of the Gulf Arab States in the south and the Sunni Arab-majority regions of Mosul and Anbar in Iraq in the east.

***Nauman Sadiq** is an Islamabad-based attorney, columnist and geopolitical analyst focused on the politics of Af-Pak and Middle East regions, neocolonialism and Petroimperialism.*

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