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“Jabhat al-Nusra under the spotlight”

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Introduction.

The following research paper will investigate the most significant organizational developments of the terrorist organization known as Jabhat al-Nusra (recently rebranded into Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), the second largest jihadi faction currently fighting in the Syrian civil war against the Assad regime. To better discern how the structure of such a group has evolved from its birth in 2012 to its most recent progresses in the current year, this paper will be built on the attempt to answer the following research question: “what accounts can be made from al-Nusra Front’s organizational developments since 2012?”. As the above research question puts forward, the ultimate attempt of the following paper will be to assess how the group’s internal dynamics, relationships with al-Qaeda central, the Islamic State, and the various opposition forces of the civil conflict, can best clarify al-Nusra’s strategic goals, and most likely behaviours when faced with different decision junctions.

In order to best accomplish the research objective mentioned above, the following paper will be structured as follows: the first section will be dedicated to analysing al-Nusra’s changing structure and alliances from its birth in 2012 to the latest rebrand in July 2016; built on the various insights provided in the first section, this paper will then discuss what are the specific accounts that can be made when discussing al-Nusra’s internal dynamics as shaped according to the group’s objectives and strategical priorities. In the third and final part, three different scenarios will be put forward along with al-Nusra’s most likely decision processes as understood from the analysis of both its internal dynamics, and what said dynamics have to be accounted for.

1. The organizational development of Jabhat al-Nusra

The following section, will provide the first background information concerning Jabhat al-Nusra' birth and internal dynamics starting specifically from 2011, year when the group's leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani was dispatched in Syria by al-Baghdadi to organize a jihadi stronghold in the on-going civil conflict. The ultimate goal of the paragraphs to come, will be one of providing a general framework of how and by whom al-Nusra was firstly founded, its internal processes in the following years, and the crucial splits and alliances made by its jihadists; providing said framework, will help the reader to better grasp the power and influence that al-Nusra is currently exercising within the Syrian insurgency.

Birth under the Islamic State in Iraq's banner

In a video called “For the People of Syria from the Mujahidin of Syria in the Fields of Jihad”¹, and published on January 23rd, 2012, in the al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production owned by al-Qaeda, Abu Muhammad al-Julani announced the birth of the group known as Jabhat al-Nusra. During the 16 minutes of said video, the Syrian-born jihadist al-Julani declares war against two main enemies guilty for having poisoned both the Syrian country and its people; the first and main enemy being the Assad regime, and the other being the coalition of imperialist powers occupying the Middle East. By calling for the return of the pureness of the Sharia law throughout the land of “bilad al-Sham”² (Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Western Iraq), al-Julani clearly framed Jabhat al-Nusra’s commitment to both defeat the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and to free the people of the Middle Eastern region from the perjuries that have nourished against the Sharia doctrines.

As of 2012, the Syrian revolution had already turned into an armed struggle, and while the Assad regime committed sectarian massacres among proponents of the revolution, Syria started to witness different calls for the “jihad proclamation”³. Said calls were answered by no less than Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi⁴, who decided to take matters into his own hands, and under the suggestion of his

deputy Haji Bakr, he sent to Syria 6 trusted men (among them al-Julani) for the establishment of an Syrian faction of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

Made up of Syrian jihadists, Iraqi experts and top lieutenants of guerrilla warfare, the newly born Jabhat al- Nusra received much of its strategical and ideological leadership from ISI for a period of almost one year. Past said year, the alliance between ISI and its Syrian offshoot came to an end; in fact, when in April 2013 al-Baghdadi publicly announced that Nusra and ISI had combined together into the new Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS), thus attempting to take advantage of the successes of al-Nusra in the civil conflict and to expand ISI's leadership in Syria, al-Julani surprisingly issued his own media statement and rejected al-Baghdadi's authority, pledging instead his "bay'a" to al-Zawahiri⁵.

Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria.

As of July 2013, al-Nusra had broken every tie with ISIS and had officially become al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria⁶. Through the contribution of several "old guard" leaders sent by al-Zawahiri, Nusra managed to rise in Syria as a successful model of al-Zawahiri's strategy of localized controlled areas⁷: from 2012 to 2016, Nusra was able to grow the number of its fighters from an estimated 300 to 7000 units, 70% of them being Syrian fighters and 30% foreign⁸; the group is considered to have been carrying out military campaigns, assassinations, hostage missions and "lone wolf" operations, possibly being responsible of 57 out of 70 suicide bombings from 2011 to 2013⁹; lastly, by 2016 Nusra successfully secured strongholds in the Idlib and Aleppo provinces, and conducted campaigns in Latakia and Quneitra¹⁰.

While effectively building a military campaign that targeted selected top-men of the Assad regime, Nusra was carrying out also a "civil" component of its jihadi strategy, by gradually embedding itself within the Syrian population and the rebel forces. Al-Nusra's active role within the first major battlefields of the civil conflict¹¹ is considered both to have instigated the escalation of the protest movements into a full civil war, and to have established crucial links between rebel groups commanders – such as Jamal Ma'arouf of the Free Syrian Army¹² – and the other jihadi leaders.

Furthermore, Nusra's military capacity and effectiveness have secured cooperation and support within the rebel ranks, thus helping the jihadi group to emerge as a crucial asset in negotiating alliances and tactical plans to the often-disunited opposition forces. At the same time, where it managed to retain territorial control, Nusra made sure to set up various dawa infrastructures¹³ which provided daily sustenance, security and healthcare¹⁴ to the majority of the population; while presenting itself as a benefactor supporting the war-torn population, Nusra's dawa activities were also injecting the group's strict vision of Islam, thus setting grounds for the people's adherence to al-Qaeda's (AQ) cause. The deeper the help provided to the population, the deeper the jihadists' recognition as bearer of a legitimate alternative to the Assad regime, thus allowing al-Nusra to set up administrative and governmental structures guided by the principles of the Sharia law. From the takeover of bakeries, and the supply of water and gas, to the set-up of Sharia courts, Nusra gradually developed a love for power typical of insurgent actors, who span their control on military, political and humanitarian aspects of seized territories. Following some of the most recent literature¹⁵ regarding terrorist actors displaying insurgent-like behaviours, one can see how al-Nusra has evolved in the use of its weapons - from suicide-bomb attacks to the deployment of sophisticated artillery and chemical weapons -, the choice of its targets – from civilian casualties to the regime's military strongholds -, and the ever-stretching attempt to build alternative sources of governance for the Syrian population. All of the above, are some of al-Nusra's internal dynamics showing how the group has developed into a more composite entity than simply a faction of violent terrorists who only wish to convert the world to Islam, and to witness the return of the Prophet's golden era. By all means, al-Nusra's role in the Syrian conflict is far more complex than just a "jihadi call".

The rise of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham

One year ago, on the 16th of July 2016, al-Julani released another ground-breaking video¹⁶ announcing that the organization of al-Nusra Front had split from al-Qaeda, thus emerging as a new and independent jihadi group under the name of "Jabhat Fateh al-Sham", or the Front for the

Liberation of al-Sham. The latter, as Julani himself explains in the exclusive video leaked to al-Jazeera news, would cut ties from all operations conducted under the flag of Jabhat al-Nusra, and focus its struggles against the Assad regime in Syria.

Along with marking another crucial development in the jihadi presence in Syria, al-Julani's video sparked many debates on the consequences that the announced split would have on both al-Nusra group and its mentors within al-Qaida's ranks; indeed, by pointing out that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham would "have no affiliations to any external entity", al-Julani fuelled many questions on whether the leader himself wished to announce a formal and irreversible break between the two jihadi factions or not. Given that investigating the (intentionally) covert dynamics of terrorist organizations is never an easy and straightforward task to accomplish, interpreting terrorist behaviours and giving them a meaningful rationale, should always be a careful and thoughtful process. In this sense, the words spoken by al-Julani in the above-mentioned video and referring to Fateh al-Sham's new resolutions, should be carefully weighted; in particular, having "no affiliation" doesn't necessarily mean "breaking relations", above all when considering that some of al-Qaida's senior members have been reportedly advising and fighting within Fateh al-Sham's ranks after the alleged split had occurred¹⁷. Furthermore, the "external entity" that al-Julani has pointed out, might then either refer to any other actor not residing in Syria, such as nations like Qatar and Turkey - which have showed their willingness to help toppling Assad -, or external to al-Qaida's cause, meaning the different rebel groups fighting in the opposition. Said this, grasping the meaning of al-Julani's words when referring to a "split" between Fateh al-Sham and al-Qaida, and hypothesising the implications of such a move within the Syrian conflict, is a matter to be taken with extreme care; precipitating any kind of interpretation regarding al-Julani's move, could cause inaccurate assessments and counter strategies. To better accomplish a careful intuition of Fateh al-Sham's internal changes, and foresee the scenarios developing from such dynamics, it is first necessary to determine the goals that have motivated al-Nusra's latest rebrand.

2. The strategic goals shaping Jabhat al-Nusra's internal dynamics

Stemming from the previous section on Jabhat al-Nusra's organizational developments occurring between 2012 and 2016, the following paragraphs will attempt to elucidate what accounts can be put forward regarding the organization's strategic ambitions. More specifically, the goal of the current section is to show how the different metamorphosis and evolutions witnessed within both al-Nusra's ranks and the latter's relations with ISI, the Syrian population, and al-Qaida, can be distinctly traced back to some of the organization's strategic goals. By adopting a point of view which focuses on al-Nusra's cardinal objectives as affecting the organization's behaviours and internal dynamics, will help framing the group's past dynamics and networking, thus providing substantial insights in better discerning the future developments of al-Julani's jihadi strategy. In order to investigate the above-mentioned assumptions, the coming paragraphs will be divided in three main segments mirroring al-Nusra's evolutionary stages as analysed in the previous section of the paper: (1) birth as ISI Syrian off-shoot, (2) al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria, and (3) the split from al-Zawahiri's leadership.

A new jihadi banner in Syria

When Abu Mohammad al-Julani crossed the northern border of Iraq, and entered Syria in the August of 2011 to establish a new "front" for the "support" of the Sunni community in the Alawite-lead country (aka "Jabhat al-Nusra"), the jihadi presence in the Syrian territories had already been established long before. Al-Julani's steady and efficient assemble of al-Nusra couldn't obviously be the product of some 6 Iraqi members of ISI missioned to wave jihad in Syria; the various networks, safe houses and operational capabilities necessary to fund Jabhat al-Nusra's birth had been secured in Syria years before, and eventually made available to al-Julani in 2011, when the civil conflict had finally presented the opportunity to uncover the long and well-established jihadi existence in Syria.

The presence of jihadi combatants in Syria dates back to the 1990s, when at the time President of Syria Hafez al-Assad carried out a new policy of openness towards Islam, thus sponsoring the building of mosques and infinite Islamic centres of studies, which most of the times counted the

support of the radical Wahhabi education and ideology. By the time Bashar al-Assad inherited the Syrian Presidency, the Sunni Islamist presence had become an overt and public phenomenon which had taken deep roots in various segments of the society, especially in the cities of Deraa, Aleppo and Idlib¹⁸. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, Syria was presented with a unique opportunity to export the growing threat of radicalized cells from its national borders to the newest jihadi theatre in Iraq. By tacitly allowing both the recruitment for the front, and a free passage¹⁹ to Iraq, Syrian intelligence services secretly infiltrated the ranks of the jihadi networks to monitor the flow of combatants, and ensure that the latter would leave Syria for good. What the Syrian authorities failed to overlook, was the invaluable facilitating environment that various jihadis started to exploit to build smuggling networks of weapons and combatants, which eventually served to support al-Julani's arrival in Syria in 2011. According to the "Sinjar Records"²⁰, of particular interest was the network coordinated by Abu Ghadiya²¹, his brother, and two cousins, who were found to facilitate the flow through Syria of money, weapons, and foreign fighters to AQI commanders, between 2006 and 2008. Thanks to an efficient command and control nexus across Syria and Iraq, Abu Ghadiya and other "Syrian coordinators" provided for the development of vital logistical hubs and transit points for al-Qaida recruits and operatives in Iraq, thus establishing the future roots of ISI transnational nature²² that in the August of 2011 helped al-Julani crossing the border from Iraq, and easily fund al-Nusra's first.

Miscalculating and deliberately allowing the flow of foreign fighters between Syria and Iraq, was both one of the major strategic errors performed by Assad's leadership, and a key factor that plunged the Syrian civil conflict into a jihadi insurgency. As stated above, the roots of radical Islam had already been harboured by many of the conservative communities in Syria, long before the 2011 protests began; when the latter developed into a brutal and violent strife between the national and populist opponents and the Assad regime, religious views started to shape the political cause of the protests from a secular opposition movement to a jihadi insurgency²³. The terrorist infrastructure that had been secretly built since 2006 did the rest: the conflict in Syria turned into a "jihad bil sayf"

(armed jihad) against the Shia leader Bashar al-Assad, thus calling for the mujahedeen to fight and protect the Sunni communities in Syria from the sectarian violence operated by the apostate President. When the Islamic State of Iraq sent al-Julani as its emissary in Syria, the purpose of the fight was not the simple Islamist envision of a country built on appeased religious principles and a democratic form of government, rather the envision of an Islamic State that stretched across al-Sham and modelled according to the Salafi conception of world order.

Thus, the mission tasked to al-Julani in the August of 2011, was not only to reinforce the smuggling routes of weapons and fighters from Iraq, but to effectively penetrate the Syrian territories and build a new logistical base to achieve the establishment of the Islamic state. Furthermore, the ethical duty of violent jihad and the focus on killing Shia²⁴, was both religiously and ideologically justified by the vision of the Caliphate itself, and strategically attainable due to the outbreak of the civil conflict that has been eroding the Syrian government's ruling capacities for the past 6 years.

When it started to actively take part in the Syrian conflict at the beginning of 2012, al-Nusra's campaigns against Assad's military forces became tragically famous for involving devastating suicide attacks that killed hundreds of innocent civilians and bystanders²⁵. Although its initial modus operandi was confronted with hostility by some of the opposition forces, al-Nusra gradually built a strong reputation for its victories against Assad's militias; campaign after campaign, Nusra had been able to effectively embed its jihadists within the Syrian conflict, and to stand among the opposition forces as a new and indispensable asset in securing victory against the regime²⁶.

Al-Baghdadi, feeling mixed sentiments of pride and concern for his Syrian armed expansion, started pushing al-Julani to publicly pledge alliance to ISI, and when al-Nusra's leader refused, al-Baghdadi took the upper hand, releasing a statement through which he claimed that Nusra and ISI had combined together into the new Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS)²⁷. Following al-Julani's rejection to stand with al-Baghdadi – de facto bypassing his commander in Iraq – and pledge of allegiance to al-Zawahiri, numerous disagreements sparked among the jihadists fighting in Syria.

Both al-Baghdadi and al-Julani's independent statements were issued without either advice or permission from AQ's emir al-Zawahiri, thus forcing the sheykh to intervene in the quarrel between his two commanders, and elucidate the distribution of tasks across Syria and Iraq²⁸. At the same time, the dispute that rose between ISI and al-Nusra affected al-Qaeda's operations by stressing some of the endogenous fault lines within AQ itself²⁹; in particular, the friction that grew between al-Baghdadi and al-Julani spread controversies on the distribution of power, on the level of trust between local commanders and the core leadership, on the management of controlled territories, and on bureaucratic quarrels concerning the structure of AQ central and its affiliated organizations. However, the crucial controversy that rose from the split of al-Nusra from ISI, and that requires deeper understanding, concerns the fulfilment of goals and objectives, i.e. the means and tactics to establish the Caliphate.

“Our struggle is a long one and jihad is in need of safe bases”³⁰

The most important fault line that distanced al-Nusra from ISI, and eventually ISI itself from AQ central, resides in the choice of strategies and tactics to fulfil the vision of the Caliphate. Though both ISI and al-Nusra were born from the civil conflict in Syria, and nurtured by the same “parent”³¹, while ISI doubled its violence against both the Shias and the population falling under its control, al-Nusra sought to learn from the Iraq invasion.

When in 2006, the Mujahedeen Shura Council in Iraq released a video informing the establishment of a Sunni Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), six Iraqi tribal provinces and three smaller insurgent groups were reunited under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri³². Though ISI's statehood was justified in a lengthy publication called “Informing the people about the Islamic State of Iraq”³³, where ISI was supported based on both an alleged political capacity and promotion of the Sharia law in the territories falling under its control, the birth of ISI was a clear prelude to the future rifts between ISI and AQ on the strategies to build the Caliphate. In fact, as ISIS started to emerge in 2013 by expanding its territorial control in Syria, al-Zawahiri disapproved of al-Baghdadi's leadership for distancing his strategy to establish the Caliphate from the pre-requisites

and conditions listed by Bin Laden in 2010³⁴; more specifically, al-Baghdadi was scold for having expanded his territorial control across Sham, without effectively securing Iraq and its capital Baghdad, thus omitting Bin Laden’s requirement of “essential foundations” to protect and defend the Caliphate. Furthermore, in an audio published in 2014³⁵ al-Zawahiri openly condemned ISIS’s brutal violence against the Syrian population, arguing how AQ does not tolerate those who come to power without the consensus of the population as the legitimate recipient of AQ’s duty to build the Caliphate.

The different military campaigns and efforts to both settle and blend in the Syrian population, make al-Nusra appear as the successful model of AQ’s strategy to build the Caliphate in the territories of al Sham. More specifically, al-Nusra is carefully implementing a long-term strategy of jihad as originally designed by Bin Laden, and later developed by al-Zawahiri in a 2013 document called “General Guidelines for Jihad”³⁶. In pursuing said guidelines, al-Nusra has been securing bases of operation and attempting to build relations with the local opposition and insurgent groups³⁷, thus providing the jihadi combatants with effective networks to further spread its dawa infrastructures and disseminate AQ’s radical message. Thanks to a “civil” component of its jihadi strategy, al-Nusra is making its presence in Syria more and more indispensable for the war-torn population by acting as a quasi-government: al-Julani’s jihadists pave roads, repair electricity lines and damaged infrastructures, pump water, and organize “family fun days”³⁸. As such, al-Nusra is effectively carrying out a long-term and localized strategy³⁹, which ultimately attempts to strengthen al-Qaeda’s franchise by embedding in the Syrian insurgency, and winning the hearts and the minds of the population, in the ultimate attempt to build a Syrian stronghold against the Western occupiers. In this sense, given the success that al-Nusra is achieving in the north-western regions of Syria as al-Qaeda’ affiliate, al-Zawahiri’s long-term dream of securing a safe base for al-Qaeda in the Middle East, is turning into reality: the more al-Nusra embeds within the Syrian insurgency, the harder it will be to separate the population from its “protectors”, while al-Qaeda central is being provided with solid bases to build its Caliphate. Thus, investigating the different internal dynamics that al-Nusra has been

subject to in the past 5 years, show how the threat posed by this particular organization does not reside in its capacity to conduct terrorist attacks, rather in its ability to take advantage of Syria's power vacuum by effectively providing for both the protection and social-welfare that the civil conflict has ripped off from the Syrian people.

The “third phase of expansion”

When in July 2016, al-Julani announced the split of Jabhat al-Nusra from al-Qaeda, and the rebrand of Jabhat al-Nusra into “Jabhat Fateh al-Sham”⁴⁰, the organization that emerged from said announcement, was nothing different from al-Nusra itself; what al-Julani was rather publicly declaring, was his organization’s entry in what can be called a “third phase of expansion”.

As previously described in this paper, al-Nusra was originally born to project ISI’s influence in Syria, by securing a stronghold in the new jihadi theatre provided by the break out of the civil war; the following phase witnessed al-Nusra cutting ties with al-Baghdadi, and pledging allegiance to al-Zawahiri’s envision of a Caliphate through a long-term strategy, which stresses the importance of embedding the jihadi combatants within the Syrian opposition forces, and earn the trust of the local population. The recent split from al-Zawahiri’ leadership – which is here referred to as the “third phase” – stands as the further, if not most important, step made by al-Julani in concretizing AQ’s long-term strategy of jihad within the Syrian insurgency. Ultimately, considering the aforementioned split of the same nature as the one that occurred 4 years ago from al-Baghdadi’s leadership, would indeed be fundamentally flawed, since Jabhat Fateh al-Sham will embody a stronger reflection of Jabhat al-Nusra and thus its continued ideological and strategical affiliation with al-Qaeda.

In his video announcement, al-Julani repeatedly stressed the importance of cutting ties with its parent organization AQ so to escape the US and Russian airstrike campaign that has consistently targeted rebel and “terrorist” strongholds near Aleppo⁴¹; while such statement has been spurring numerous debates about Fateh al-Sham’s attempt to distance itself from its jihadi origins to earn more

trust from the Syrian opposition forces, considering Fateh al-Sham’s birth as advocating a more “moderate” nature of an AQ’s affiliate, is indeed an erroneous assessment. The dissolution of ties between the two terrorist organizations has to be understood as a sacrifice of AQ’s core leadership for a greater good, one of greater value than simply escaping Western and Russian targeted killings, or promoting a new actor within the Syrian insurgency. Indeed, the latest rebrand and organizational development of AQ’s branch in Syria, stands as Fateh al-Sham’s expanded capacity to establish the Caliphate, as instructed firstly by Bin Laden and then al-Zawahiri. Furthermore, such understanding of al-Nusra’s rebranding, uniquely proves AQ central’s ability to overtake the concerns related to the principal agent problem⁴², and entrust its affiliate with strengthening its jihadi objective in Syria.

When analysing al-Nusra’ latest “third phase of expansion”, there is a further aspect to be taken into consideration, relating to the organization’s success in attracting the opposition forces and embedding within the Syrian population. As previously stated in this paper, al-Nusra has been successfully adopting the so-called “traditional model”⁴³, which groups like Hezbollah and Hamas has been using in the past to build the basis for an Islamic society from bottom-up, thanks to the extensive use of the dawa infrastructure. The many demonstrations of support around the theme “We are Jabhat al-Nusra”⁴⁴ directly coming from many segments of the population living under the terrorist group’s governance, and the reputation the jihadi combatants have been earning on the battlefields in joint military operations⁴⁵, are some of the clearest signs that AQ’s affiliate has clearly been bearing many successes from its dawa infrastructure, one that has been allegedly more prudent than ISIS’ thirst for subjecting as much population as possible. In this sense, the announcement of Jabhat al-Nusra ‘s rebrand does not stand as another attempt to promote the group’s ability to provide for basic social services and infrastructures, or to support another rebels’ fight, rather Jabhat Fatah al-Sham embodies al-Qaeda’s latest call for the establishment of the Caliphate. In particular, al-Qaeda’s affiliate has been reaching such a stage of organizational development in both safeguarding its territories and administering the latter’s population, that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham might stand as al-

Qaeda's best chance to unite the Umma under one and only Islamic banner in Syria. From such an understanding, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham will not only continue to "protect and serve"⁴⁶ the people of al-Sham, but it will pursue unity over disunity by gradually calling for large scale military alliances with various opposition forces; ultimately, the terrorist group could possess the necessary strength to form a unified body of military forces to better protect Islam from any neighbouring threat, eventually coupled with the likely support of many segments of the Syrian population that the jihadists have been supporting for the past 5 years.

In conclusion, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham stands as the latest success of al-Qaeda's localized strategy in Syria, where the affiliate's territorial gains and expanded popular support is best considered as the group's capacities to envision the Caliphate. Furthermore, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's successes are entirely playing against the achievement of a peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict; whether the terrorist group's grand strategy will ultimately be accomplished or not, its jihadists have been embedded within both the population and the opposition militias for far too long to hope that, in the short-run, a clear cut could occur between these different entities. The more the civil conflict will endure, the more the jihadi component of the insurgency will present itself as the best alternative to replace Assad's regime.

3. Evolving trends

Building from the previous analysis regarding Jabhat al-Nusra's evolving internal patterns as reflecting the organization's need to pursue some of its crucial strategic goals, the following section will present some of the possible decision-junctions that al-Nusra will most likely face in Syria and beyond, according to different evolving scenarios. The resources and capabilities that this organization has been storing, and its influence – both militarily and socially - within the Syrian insurgency, have shown the far-reaching efficiency of al-Nusra's jihadi strategy, one that it is ought not to underestimate any longer. As such, the following paragraphs will attempt to shed light on three of the different pathways that al-Nusra might encounter, and the ways the terrorist group might want to pursue.

The collapse of the Islamic State

When attempts are made to forecast terrorist groups' future moves, the different policy options and academic analysis that result as outcomes of said attempts, are most likely products of some "guesswork"⁴⁷ that rarely takes into account the different factors that actually affect terrorists' cost-benefit analysis. In such a rationale, when discussing Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's future pathways, the starting point of any study or inquiry on the topic, should begin considering that AQ's Syrian affiliate will behave in an "opportunistic way", so to both ensure its survival and enhance its capabilities; while relying on Crenshaw's model of terrorist groups' strategical and organizational behavioural approaches, the assumption of terrorists' "opportunistic" behaviours stems from the idea that terrorists will most likely take advantage of any available opportunity for decision-making rather than regretting losing any of such advantage⁴⁸.

The collapse of ISIS' Caliphate in its held Iraqi and Syrian territories, might provide al-Qaeda central with a unique opportunity to finally step back into action, and to rejuvenate itself thanks to the efficient performances of its affiliate Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. In a scenario where ISIS' strongholds crumble at hands of the US-led coalition, different decision junctions will be presented to Jabhat

Fateh al-Sham. As previously mentioned in this paper, al-Qaeda and ISIS disagree over strategies, and tactics; all the differences that distance al-Qaeda from ISIS have affected not only the various jihadist groups in Syria, but also factions operating in Yemen, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Somalia⁴⁹. However, the Syrian theatre is of such importance to both ISIS and AQ, that considering an alliance between the two terrorist organizations is a scenario that should not be completely discarded; more specifically, given the latest reconquer of ISIS' controlled territories in Iraq⁵⁰, and the US and Russian airstrike campaigns against JFS' strongholds in the northern Syrian province of Idlib, more and more incentives are presented to the two organizations to put differences aside and re-join manpower against their common enemies. While some members from both the organizations have been calling for a reconciliation – naming one, JFS's top cleric Sheikh Sami al-Aridi -, hardcore JFT jihadists either believe⁵¹ that a merger should occur rather than an alliance, or warn that allying with ISIS could put JFS in a weaker position and eventually risk the organization to be subsumed by ISIS' wrath. If an alliance should occur, both organizations would undergo an integrated collaboration where know-how and resources are extensively shared thanks to the high degree of ideological affinity between said organizations; on the other hand, a merger would witness both the unification of command and control, and the pooling of resources of the two jihadi organizations, with the expectation of a long-term collaboration⁵².

Given the “high end”⁵³ nature of both strategic alliances and mergers, the decision to side or merge with ISIS on behalf of JFS, will most likely come from al-Zawahiri himself, given the ongoing ideological affinity between AQ central and its affiliate, and the evidence of JFS's role in accomplishing its parent long-term strategy in Syria. If that was the case, then the question rises of whether the patient and cautious al-Zawahiri will be willing to risk his successful affiliate in Syria to side with the formerly banished ISIS' fighters. This paper argues that the best scenario for JFS to align with ISIS would occur whether al-Baghdadi's leadership comes to an end, or ISIS is definitely expelled from the territories of its alleged Caliphate. If one of the two above-mentioned incidents

should occur, both the ideology sponsored by ISIS and its fighters will not cease to be, but be best subject to an adjustments at hands of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham itself; more specifically, AQ's resilient ideology of embedding in local insurgencies as promoted by JFS, and the latter's military successes in the province of Idlib, will most likely appeal to the dismantled ISIS fighters, who will be given the opportunity to continue their battles in Syria under a jihadi banner. In the long-run, the former ISIS fighters would embed in JFS's ranks, adopt its tactics and follow its strategic guidelines, thus providing crucial manpower to prolong the struggle against the Assad forces; ultimately, the cohesive factor would be provided by the shared goal of building the Caliphate in greater Sham, a goal important enough to push ISIS fighters to disavow their former banner, and fight within JFS' militias. Effectively readjusting ISIS' wrath and rebranding the fighters under the civil component of JFS jihadi strategy, would not only enhance JFS' operational capabilities, but also significantly boost the terrorists' image of a "moderate" organization when compared to ISIS, one that was able to both dominate over the violence perpetrated by the Islamic State, and effectively pursue its goals, while providing the local population with safety and basic needs. Thus, this paper argues that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's capability to eventually annex ISIS and rule over its fighters, would eventually result in drawing AQ central closer to the realization of its Caliphate, one that day by day is likely to be accepted by the Syrian population.

Considering the harsh counter terrorism campaigns that have been targeting the Islamic State in the past months, it has been estimated that the Islamic State' alleged Caliphate will not survive its fourth year⁵⁴. As of November 2016, the Islamic State lost almost 60% of its originally held territories in Iraq, and 30% in Syria⁵⁵, thus significantly causing damages to its internal revenues – local taxes and control over natural resources –, and disrupting the waves of foreign fighters willing to leave their home countries to join the battle for protecting the Caliphate. Though the Islamic State's collapse of its military strongholds has been repeatedly addressed by various members of the anti-ISIS coalition in the past few months, dissolving the threat that the organization poses, extends far beyond

Syrian and Iraqi territories, and will require the international community to address said threat on different operational levels – the efficient media outlet of the Islamic State’s “IT-terrorists”, a globally recognised brand, and a powerful jihadi ideology⁵⁶. Said this, the collapse of al-Baghdadi’s Caliphate should not be interpreted as the demise of the Islamic State as a terrorist organization, rather it should be limited to the exhaustion of al-Baghdadi’s military offshoot for the time being; for the latter reason, it is necessary to explore further patterns of events that could evolve from the collapse of the Islamic State in Syria.

Among the scenarios that the resilient nature of the Islamic State’ fighters will contribute to create in Syria after collapse of the Caliphate, two will most likely affect Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. In the advent of the fall of Raqqa and the last jihadi strongholds in Syria, the Islamic State would find itself deprived of its territorial safe havens, thus eventually lacking shelters, weapons, and logistical bases where to effectively reorganize the remaining on ground forces. In such a scenario where both communications and travel routes in Syria would be heavily undermined by US and Russian airstrikes campaigns, the Islamic State’s leadership will hardly exercise any type of command and control relations with its local chiefs, de facto being unable to put into action any strategic plan to coordinate the surviving fighters. The response to such an on-ground crisis in Syria, could result in the Islamic State leadership’s issue of an official statement to all its Syrian fighters to abandon the battle and scatter in various ISIS “wilayats”⁵⁷ spread across the globe. Such an unfolding scenario would most likely serve Jabhat Fateh al-Sham’s interests at best, if not resulting in a new idyllic environment for AQ’s Syrian affiliate to step up in the civil conflict as the biggest jihadi faction fighting in the civil conflict. By all means, the departure of the Islamic State’s remaining fighting forces from Syria, would result in a significant jihadi vacuum within the Syrian conflict, especially in terms of both territorial control and population submission by a jihadi faction; the only jihadi organization established and authoritative enough to saturate such vacuum is precisely Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. In particular, one of the first consequences linked to the retreat of al-Baghdadi’s fighters from Syria

could result in many Syrian neighbourhoods successfully liberated by anti-ISIS forces, but eventually left isolated and without functioning infrastructures; in such a scenario, anti-ISIS coalition's strikes would successfully eradicate ISIS fighters from their last strongholds, but also risk leaving behind ungoverned territories and unsecure cities, easy targets for Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to capture and gain control of, given the former's extensive knowledge of Syria's territories and conditions of the population. Thus, a scenario as described above, while depicting the successful fall of the Caliphate in Syria, it also illustrates how the fall of the Caliphate itself might provide AQ's affiliate with a major opportunity to further strengthen its role in the civil conflict, and take advantage of its jihadi rival's retreat to take control of key neighbourhoods most likely near Raqqa.

The departure of al-Baghdadi's surviving fighters from the wreckages of the falling Caliphate in Syria, should not be assessed as the Caliph's unique "plan B"⁵⁸ to save the Islamic State; given the ferocity of its fighters, and the resilience of the ideology preached for almost 4 years, it is widely doubted that al-Baghdadi has planned one and only big finale to salute his alleged Caliphate. In this sense, a further scenario should be considered when assessing the Islamic State's moves in the aftermath of the fall of its Caliphate, one that - for the purpose of this paper - will once again affect Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. However, while in the previous paragraphs it has been discussed how the departure of ISIS' last fighters would benefit the battling grounds for AQ's affiliate, the following arguments will instead present a scenario where Jabhat Fateh al-Sham would have to struggle to maintain its control in Syria, given al-Baghdadi's decision process. The second scenario here discussed is one where the Islamic State's jihad in Syria would transform itself from a proto-state into a more flexible insurgency⁵⁹, thus adopting cheaper guerrilla tactics and increasingly financing itself from the criminal world⁶⁰; given the above-mentioned circumstances, al-Baghdadi and his inner circle would most likely go underground, and among other available options, the falling Caliph could decide to carefully plan a major attack in Syrian territories to demonstrate the Islamic State's resilient will to fight its enemies. This paper argues that if al-Baghdadi and his close circle of core-hearted ISIS

fighters would resolute to plan a large scale attack in Syria, said attack would not only cause numerous victims among the Syrian population, but also dramatically escalate the aftermath of the fall of the Caliphate; not only the Islamic State would prove its enduring abilities to conduct devastating terror attacks though lost its territorial safe havens, but also prove Western failed strategies to eradicate the terror organization from Syria. As a matter of fact, the effects of such a harsh reprisal from the surviving Islamic State's forces, would both destabilize previous Western measures in Syria to restore reconquered cities and villages, and harm the careful strategy put in place by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in the war-thorn country. More precisely, the alleged wave of terror caused by ISIS' major attack, would potentially cast doubts on Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's capabilities to conduct similar operations, and ultimately damage its reputation to effectively carry jihad against the Western occupiers in Syria; in the worst case scenario, the above mentioned doubts on Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's operational capabilities could develop into damaging the group's brand within its controlled territories, with the result of harming the long term strategy of building the Caliphate in Syria as instructed by al-Zawahiri himself. It is important to stress that in the event of the Islamic State's success in conducting a major reprisal to avenge the Caliphate and thus prove its unvanquished desire to fight, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham would have to prove to both its controlled population and military allies, that it possess all the skills showed by the Islamic State to resurge from its hashes, i.e. a resilient ideology and credible narrative, a well-established infrastructure to put in action a hypothesised "plan B", and the necessary abilities to plan retaliatory attacks against Western targets. If that was the case, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham would not only be asked the value of its operational capabilities, but also its willingness and motivation to confront Western-backed interventions when hit the hardest.

For how long will control be exercised?

In the attempt to degrade the group's operational capabilities, weaken its ranks, and slow down its realization of on-ground strategies and military operations, Jabhat al-Nusra has been targeted by US-led airstrikes since winter 2014, when 6 of its jihadists were killed for the first time in an

airstrike near the northern province of Idlib⁶¹; the rebranding into Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which among other reasons was framed by al-Julani as an attempt to shield the group from renewed targeted killings⁶², did not impact on Western planned campaigns, thus still exposing AQ's affiliates to continued bombings⁶³. Further complications for Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's jihadists will most likely rise in the aftermath of the Geneva peace talks of last May 2017, when Russia, Iran and Turkey have agreed on the implementation of "de-escalation zones"⁶⁴ in Syria, which will also cover some of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's controlled territories near Idlib, Homs and Deraa. Such a scenario is worthy of attention when recalling how the past cessations of violence occurred in February and September 2016, worsened Jabhat al-Nusra's hold of both the population and the rebel forces, given that its influence and added value to the Syrian insurgency was primarily witnessed on battlefields⁶⁵, thanks to the group's military tactics and manpower; thus, a scenario where "de-escalation zones" are effectively implemented in Syria, would most likely diminish Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's authority over its held territories, giving space for more moderate factions to emerge.

The threat of losing such influence and power within the military ranks of the opposition forces, and thus risking its grip on the insurgency as a whole, represents such a hazard that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's jihadists have been found to harshly coerce its military allies whenever Western operations have hampered the group's operational and motivational capabilities. For example, JFT's past behaviours have shown how it expects such high levels of commitment and loyalty from its rebel and military allies, that when it perceives defections or security threats to its operations, it has been conducting harsh reprisals against alleged deserters⁶⁶. In a more recent unfolding, infights⁶⁷ between Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham's different narratives, forced smaller militias to side with one of the two leading opposition forces out of threats of retaliatory actions or coercion; Jabhat Fateh al-Sham eventually merged with four other militia forces⁶⁸, thus creating the new Tahrir al-Sham coalition.

The question that this paper puts forward in such discussion, is whether the harsh and violent reprisals performed by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham against its military allies will ever be extended against the Syrian population, one upon which the entire long-term and localized strategy of AQ's affiliate in Syria has been built. Opposing views might argue that such an escalation of violence against the recipients of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's localized and national strategy, would discard years of the group's efforts in embedding within the population, and educating the latter for the advent of the Caliphate, thus destroying al-Qaeda's ultimate goal; however, the nature of the pressure exercised by both the continued targeted killings, and the responsibility derived by guiding AQ's jihad in Syria, might result in unprecedent and irrational moves that could hamper 5 years of a long and patiently planned strategy. Thus, the argument here develops around the assumption that the most likely recipients of such uncalculated moves and violent reprisals - along with the already targeted military allies - are those civilians and locals for whom the jihadists have been providing effective governance and rebuilding infrastructures; in particular, eventual "boomerang effects" of perceived loss of both influence and power might reach unarmed civilians, and ultimately result in the group's escalation of its most violent jihadi features on the controlled locals, meaning increased incidents of capital punishment, restrictions of civilian freedoms, and tolerance of nonreligious, nationalist, and civil opposition bodies would decline. Thus, with the international community more determined than ever to "solve" the Syrian crisis, and with the intestine fights against the Islamic State and other opposition forces, al Qaeda's long-term jihadi project in Syria might be under unprecedented challenge; the worst-case scenario that AQ central might have to face, is its Syrian affiliate loss of control of both its strategical and military allies, and more importantly of those segments of the population that for years has been nurtured for the return of the Caliphate.

Inheriting the Khorasan Group.

During the current 6th year of the Syrian civil war, while the international community struggles to set common grounds for future peace talks, and ISIS' fighters barricade themselves in their last

strongholds, al-Qaida's reverent field commander Saif al-Adel has reportedly been sent to Syria⁶⁹ as an emissary of al-Zawahiri to supervise the fight against the Assad regime; al-Adel, one of Bin Laden's inner circle members, has been recognized as one of the savviest operational terrorist of AQ central due to his key role in the 1998 US embassy bombings in Dar el Salam, Tanzania, and Nairobi⁷⁰. After being held captive in Iran till 2010, his alleged presence in the Syrian theatre to support Jabhat Fateh al-Sham fight against Assad, might turn the Syrian conflict for the worst; the presence of such a high rank member of AQ central in Syria, one who is believed to have been among Osama Bin Laden's terror masterminds and temporary leader of the organization in the aftermath of Bin Laden's death, not only questions the changing patterns within AQ's leadership, but also the impact of his presence within the ranks of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham itself.

Interestingly, Saif al-Adel was not the first AQ veteran dispatched to Syria by leader al-Zawahiri. Before him, Muhsin al-Fadhli, AQ's head of the organization's network in Iran, was sent to join al-Nusra's ranks in 2013⁷¹ to oversee the dispute that rose between the two leaders al-Julani and al-Baghdadi; al-Fadhli – before being killed by a US airstrike in July 2015⁷² – was also accounted for recruiting young European Muslims to join the jihad in Syria, and planning attacks against Western targets. Along with al-Fadhli, another AQ veteran trained in Afghanistan in the 1990s arrived in Syria to join and support al-Nusra's operational grounds: Haydan Kirkan⁷³. Kirkan was a long-serving and both an experienced facilitator and courier for al-Qaeda in Syria, reportedly considered of having ties with Osama bin Laden himself, and senior planner of AQ central's external attacks in Syria, Turkey and Europe⁷⁴. The targeted killings that killed both al-Fahdli and Kirkan were best understood as part of a major US campaign conducted since 2014, and aimed at eradicating members of the so-called "Khorasan" group⁷⁵, a collection of several AQ veterans - like al-Fahdli and Kirkan themselves – dispatched in Syria to plot attacks against the West.

The implications of al-Adel's arrival in Syria, and the confirmed presence of AQ members of the rank of al-Fahdli and Kirkan, should not be understood only as an attempt to boost AQ central's

legitimacy in Syria, but also as affecting the Syrian affiliate’s operations on the ground. In this sense, when assessing Jabhat Fateh al-Sham’s future operational capabilities, the latter’s relations with AQ veterans known for their excellency in planning external terror attacks, should be duly taken into account as a further layer of the group’s threat capacity. By shielding and possibly aiding said veterans in their active recruitment and planning of attacks aimed at targeting the West, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham might have been involved in something that goes beyond the borders of the Syrian battles; given that al-Zawahiri has always expressed the importance of committing to the Syrian jihad, and the recent reshuffling of Bin Laden’s most prominent planners in Syria itself, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham’s success in conquering and administering its territories might be a small piece of al-Zawahiri’s resurrection of AQ’s “global jihad”. The argument is one where, while the international community’s efforts are concentrated in eradicating ISIS from its remaining strongholds, al-Julani’s jihadists might have received exceptional insights on AQ veterans’ experiences in planning and executing attacks against the “far enemy”; if that was the case, the battle for Syria is not only one to establish the Caliphate, but also to provide AQ central with a unique base for planning new attacks against the West. Thus, by exploiting the vulnerabilities provided by the Syrian conflict, and the authority exercised by its jihadists over the local population and some of the rebel factions, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham’s fight in Syria might provide both for a fresh recruiting network of committed fighters, and disguise for the planning of future attacks against the West.

Conclusion

This research paper has put forward some of the most relevant organizational developments characterizing the terrorist group Jabhat al-Nusra (currently rebranded in Jabhat Fateh al-Sham); stemming from such an analysis that has considered the group's internal dynamics as best shaped by its strategical priorities and objectives, this paper has attempted to elucidate the impact and influence that Jabhat al-Nusra is currently having on the on-going Syrian conflict. It has been showed how al-Nusra successfully rose from a mere Sunni banner in Syria, into the second largest jihadi group fighting against the Assad regime, while successfully merging alliances with various opposition forces and embedding within the local population.

The main argument that this paper has put forward is that al-Nusra is currently embodying al-Qaeda's most successful affiliate in the pursue of al-Zawahiri's latest "localized" strategy, one that precisely aims at winning the hearts and minds of the population, while setting the grounds for the return of the Caliphate. In light of the successes accomplished by al-Nusra in both its military campaigns and as a provider of alternative means of governance to the war-thorn population, this paper has argued that the long-term strategy that the group is currently pursuing, represents al-Qaeda's best opportunity to re-emerge in the theatre of global jihad; more specifically, this paper has successfully showed that, though al-Nusra is acting as an independent affiliate and thus autonomously deciding upon its action plans, the group has evolved itself to fit in al-Zawahiri's master plan to stubbornly prepare its fighters for the return of the Caliphate and the final confrontation with al-Qaeda's Western enemies.

End Notes

¹ The video can be accessed at jihadology.com, here: <http://jihadology.net/2012/01/24/al-manarah-al-bayd-a-foundation-for-media-production-presents-for-the-people-of-syria-from-the-mujahidin-of-syria-in-the-fields-of-jihad-jabhat-al-nusrat-the-front-of-victory/>.

² The expression literally means “land on the left hand” when looking from the Saudi region of Hejaz towards north-east. See Bosworth, Clifford E., E. Van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs, and G. Lecomte. "Encyclopedia of Islam, vol. ix." (1997).

³ Mustapha, Hamza. "The al-Nusra Front: From Formation to Dissension." *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies* (2014).

⁴ Not more than one year before, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had been appointed as the new leader of the Islamic State of Iraq. His new leadership had brought some major changes in the structure of the Iraqi group: al-Baghdadi decided to place former Intelligence Officers and Iraqi military of the Saddam regime within his closest ranks, most of them met while imprisoned in Camp Bucca. Among these deputies, there was Haji Bakr (Samir al-Khilawi), a former colonel in intel service of Saddam’s air defence forces. See Shadid, Anthony. "Iraqi Insurgent group names new leaders." The New York Times. May 16, 2010. Accessed June 11, 2017. https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/iraqi-insurgent-group-names-new-leaders/?_php=true&type=blogs&r=1.

⁵ “This is a pledge of alliance from the sons of the al-Nusra Front and their supervisor general that we renew to the Sheikh of Jihad, Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, may Allah preserve him. [...] We give a pledge of allegiance for obedience in good and bad in emigration and jihad and not to dispute with our superiors unless we see clear disbelief about which we have proof from Allah.”. See Josceylin, Thomas. "Al Nusrah Front leader renews allegiance to al Qaeda, rejects new name." FDD's Long War Journal. Accessed June 27, 2017. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/04/al_nusrah_front_lead.php.

⁶ On May 2013, Zawahiri had clearly stated that the coalition that Baghdadi had declared between ISI and Nusra (ISIS), would have not been recognised unless the former’s approval; Zawahiri thus clearly split ISI’s and Nusra’s duties, respectively in Iraq and Syria. What was a clear sign for Baghdadi to stick to the rules and regain some redemption from the al-Qaeda leadership, was instead openly rejected by ISIS’s caliph who stated that at that point “Al Qaida is gone, it’s burned out”. See Malik Shiv, Mustafa Khalili, Spencer A Ackerman, and Ali Younis. "How ISIS crippled Al-Qaida." The Guardian. June 10, 2015. Accessed June 27, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/10/how-isis-crippled-al-qaida?CMP=share_btn_fb.

⁷ Lister, Charles. "Profiling Jabhat al Nusra." *Brookings, July* (2016): 9-10

⁸ Ibidem, note number 7.

⁹ Some footages of the aftermath of suicide attacks conducted by al-Nusra can be accessed at: Roggio, Bill. "Al Nusrah Front suicide bomber kills 16 Syrian soldiers". Read more: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/videos/#ixzz4jtCvfFBD>. FDD's Long War Journal. 2013. Accessed June 13, 2017. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/videos/>.

¹⁰ Glenn, Cameron. "The Nusra Front: Al Qaeda’s Affiliate in Syria." Wilson Center. June 17, 2017. Accessed June 13, 2017. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-nusra-front-al-qedas-affiliate-syria>.

¹¹ For a map of Nusra’s military operations across Syria in the first half of 2012, see: Elizabeth O’Bagy, *Jihad in Syria, Institute for the Study of War*, September 2012, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Jihad-In-Syria17SEPT.pdf>

¹² Isabel Hunter, “I am not Fighting against al-Qa’ida... it’s not our problem’ Says West’s Last Hope in Syria,” The Independent, April 2, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/i-am-not-fightingagainstalqaida-itsnot-our-problem-says-wests-last-hope-insyria-9233424.html>.

¹³ Nusra has established the so-called Relief Department through which it has distributed food, organized “fun days” for kids, cleaned roads and collecting trash. See GARTENSTEIN-ROSS, DAVEED, and PHILLIP SMYTH. "How Syria’s Jihadists Win Friends and Influence People." The Atlantic. August 22, 2013. Accessed June 14, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/08/how-syrias-jihadists-win-friends-and-influence-people/278942/>.

¹⁴ Atassi, Basma. "Al Qaeda leader in Syria speaks to al Jazeera." Al Jazeera: Live News | Bold Perspectives | Exclusive Films. December 18, 2013. Accessed June 14, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/12/al-qaeda-leader-syria-speaks-al-jazeera-20131218155917935989.html>.

¹⁵ Moghadam, Assaf, Ronit Berger, and Polina Beliakova. "Say terrorist, think insurgent: Labeling and analyzing contemporary terrorist actors." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 5 (2014).

¹⁶ The full video can be accessed to "Al-Nusra leader Jolani announces split from al-Qaeda." Al Jazeera: Live News | Bold Perspectives | Exclusive Films. July 29, 2016. Accessed June 29, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/al-nusra-leader-jolani-announces-split-al-qaeda-160728163725624.html>.

¹⁷ Joseylin, Thomas. "Analysis: Al Nusrah Front rebrands itself as Jabhat Fath Al Sham." FDD's Long War Journal. July 28, 2016. Accessed June 29, 2017. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/analysis-al-nusrah-front-rebrands-itself-as-jabhat-fath-al-sham.php>.

¹⁸ Lister, Charles. "Profiling Jabhat al Nusra." *Brookings, July* (2016): 9-10

¹⁹ The jihadists' passage from Syria to Iraq was further facilitated by the de-Baathification process that the US lead coalition implemented upon its arrival in Iraq; among other things, said process was responsible for the dissolution of all bodies and entities administered by Saddam's leadership in order to purge the administration and governmental bodies – see Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 2, CPA/ORD/ 23 May 2003/02. Talmon, Stefan. *The Occupation of Iraq: Volume 2: The Official Documents of the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi Governing Council*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

²⁰ A significant analysis of the so-called Sinjar Records can be accessed at Felter, Joseph, and Brian Fishman. "Al-Qaida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A first look at the Sinjar Records." Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. June 2016. Accessed July 27, 2017. <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/aqs-foreign-fighters-in-iraq.pdf>.

²¹ "Treasury Designates Members of Abu Ghadiyah's Network Facilitates flow of terrorists, weapons, and money from Syria to al Qaida in Iraq." U.S. Department of the Treasury. February 28, 2008. Accessed July 27, 2017. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp845.aspx>.

²² Roggio, Bill. "US strike in Syria "decapitated" al Qaeda's facilitation network." FDD's Long War Journal. October 27, 2008. Accessed July 27, 2017. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/10/us_strike_in_syria_d.php.

²³ Gilsinan, Kathy. "How Syria's Uprising Spawned a Jihad." The Atlantic. March 16, 2016. Accessed July 27, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/syria-civil-war-five-years/474006/>.

²⁴ Combelles, Pascal Siegel. "ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ COMMEMORATES ITS TWO-YEAR ANNIVERSARY." Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. October 15, 2008. Accessed July 29, 2017. <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/islamic-state-of-iraq-commemorates-its-two-year-anniversary>.

²⁵ "Violent Activities - Jabhat al-Nusra (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)." The Counter Extremism Project. https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/nusra-front-jabhat-fateh-al-sham#violent_history.

²⁶ See for example, Associated Press. "Syrian rebels push offensive for major airport." Ynet - ספורט, כלכלת, חדשות. February 18, 2013. Accessed June 11, 2017. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4346520,00.html>.

²⁷ Joseylin, Thomas. "Al Qaeda's general command disowns the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham." FDD's Long War Journal. February 3, 2014. Accessed June 11, 2017. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/02/al_qaedas_general_co.php.

²⁸ Joscelyn, Thomas. "Analysis: Zawahiri's letter to al Qaeda branches in Syria, Iraq." FDD's Long War Journal. June 10, 2013. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/analysis_alleged_let.php.

²⁹ Moghadam and Fishman argue that some of al-Qaeda's setbacks and incapacities to conduct terrorist attacks may be traced back to some "endogenous" factors that stress the fault lines of the organization itself; the two experts stress the importance of ideology, strategy, tactics, goals, enemy, structure and power as critically affecting the internal dynamics of al-Qaida and its affiliates. See Moghadam, Assaf, and Brian Fishman, eds. *Fault lines in global jihad: organizational, strategic, and ideological fissures*. Taylor & Francis, 2011.

³⁰ Al-Zawahiri, A. (2013). General Guidelines for Jihad. Retrieved August 07, 2017, from <http://jihadology.net/>

³¹ The Economist | International - Beirut. "The other jihadist state." The Economist. September 17, 2016. <https://www.economist.com/news/international/21707208-eclipsed-islamic-state-al-qaeda-may-be-making-comeback-more-pragmatic-and>

³² Roggio, Bill. "The Rump Islamic Emirate of Iraq." FDD's Long War Journal. October 16, 2006. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/10/the_rump_islamic_emi.php#.

³³ Bunzel, Cole. "The Ideology of the Islamic State." The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. March 19, 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>.

³⁴ "If our state is not supported by the proper foundations, the enemy will easily destroy it" – such statement can be read in one of unclassified letters that were recovered in Bin Laden's bookshelves in Abbottabad. See Rassler, Don, Gabriel Koehler Derrick, Liam Collins, Muhammad Al-Obaidi, and Nelly Lahoud. "LETTERS FROM ABBOTTABAD: BIN LADIN SIDELINED?" Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. May 3, 2012. <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined>.

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