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EXECUTIVE INTELLIGENCE BRIEF

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The Nusra Front: Rebranding Efforts Mixed So Far

The Nusra Front—al-Qa’ida’s affiliate in Syria—this summer changed its name to the Levant Conquest Front, or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, as part of a rebranding strategy to improve its image among local Syrians, participate in future Syrian peace talks, and decrease the number of US-led airstrikes against its positions in Syria. In July, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the head of the Nusra Front, stated the organization would no longer associate with groups outside Syria, including al-Qa’ida. However, Julani did not revoke the organization’s allegiance to al-Qa’ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, suggesting communication between the groups will continue.

- Since 2012, the Nusra Front has focused on building an Islamic emirate in Syria, with the top goal of winning support from the Syrian people, according to the Institute for the Study of War. This rebranding has probably been somewhat successful because the group’s membership has increased since August, according to press reporting.
- At the behest of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russia, the Nusra Front did not participate in the last rounds of peace talks in Syria in September. Nonetheless, the group’s expansion of ties with moderate Syrian opposition factions and control of major portions of the key Syrian city of Aleppo now place it in a position to be a part of future talks.
- In June, US officials petitioned the Russian Government to not conduct airstrikes against the Nusra Front, as they may mistakenly strike moderate opposition forces. The Nusra Front will likely leverage the decrease in airstrikes to formalize ties with more moderate anti-Syrian government forces.



Julani (center), Ahmad Salama Mabruk (left), a longtime Zawahiri ally now deceased, and Abu Abdullah al-Shami, a Shura Council member (right)

Contact Information

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NUSRAH FRONT'S REBRANDING: UNLIKELY TO CHANGE RELATIONSHIP WITH AL-QA'IDA

The Nusra Front's rebranding will likely have minimal impact on its relationship with its parent organization, al-Qa'ida. In July, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the head of the Nusra Front, declared the group's rebranding and stated the organization would no longer associate with groups outside Syria. However, Julani did not revoke the organization's pledge of allegiance to al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, suggesting communication between the groups will continue.

Through a scenarios-based analysis,* we evaluated three possible ways in which the Nusra Front will change in the next year.

Key Assumptions

- Syria's civil war continues.
- The Nusra Front remains focused on battling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces.
- US-led coalition airstrikes continue in Syria.

Key Intelligence Gaps

- Will any Nusra Front fighters defect because of the rebranding?
- How will rebranding impact the Nusra Front's funding?



Scenarios	Indicators: The Nusra Front will...
<p>Status Quo</p> <p><i>No change in the Nusra Front's coordination with al-Qa'ida</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue coordination with al-Qa'ida's senior leadership, including messaging that is consistent with al-Qa'ida propaganda • Persistent in its public messaging
<p>External Operations</p> <p><i>Shift to conducting attacks outside Syria aimed at Western countries</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift propaganda messaging from recruitment to calling for attacks on the West and outside Syria • Receive pledges of allegiance and support from other terror organizations • Experience an increase in international recruits
<p>Expand Strategic Relationships</p> <p><i>Evolution from terror organization to moderate-leaning militia force that partners with Western and Arab governments</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue public statements against al-Qa'ida • Receive and act on guidance from a joint military council that includes members of moderate rebel groups • Coordinate with US-led coalition forces
Leading "Wildcard" Variables	
Syrian government collapses.	Western allies engage in ground combat operations in Syria.
	Russian Government engages in ground combat operations.

*Scenarios analysis identifies multiple ways in which a situation may evolve. It is most useful when a situation is complex or when the outcomes are too uncertain to trust a single prediction.



AL-QA'IDA: LEVERAGING THE NUSRAH FRONT IN SYRIA



Al-Qa'ida's central leadership will continue to support and leverage its affiliate in Syria, the Nusra Front, to build its global influence, despite Western media reports indicating a split between the two groups. In July, the Nusra Front rebranded itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to gain new popular support, recruit rebel groups and new or disillusioned Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters, and obtain international support. These goals reinforce al-Qa'ida's long-term strategy of attacking the "near enemy" – apostate regimes in predominantly Muslim countries – in preparation for war with the "far enemy," or the West.

	One to Two Years	Two to Five Years	Five to Ten Years
	Continued al-Qa'ida presence in Syria	Al-Qa'ida defeat of ISIS and the Syrian military	Al-Qa'ida influence in a new Syrian government
Civilians	Avoid alienating locals by focusing the Nusra Front on the Syrian conflict, not global <i>jihād</i> .	Gain popular support for the Nusra Front against ISIS and the current Syrian regime.	Garner support for a Nusra Front-run government, influenced by al-Qa'ida.
Fighters	Continue temporary partnerships between the Nusra Front and other Syrian rebel groups.	Recruit disillusioned local and ISIS fighters and permanently absorb Syrian rebel groups.	Transition Nusra Front fighters into a new Syrian military, shaped by al-Qa'ida.
International Community	Open the door for state donors to the Nusra Front, primarily from Qatar.	Initiate financial and military support from the West and Middle East for the Nusra Front.	Gain de facto acceptance with the Nusra Front acting as at least part of Syria's new government.

**This product reflects al-Qa'ida's likely strategy in Syria, not the likelihood of this strategy succeeding.*

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