

Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)

Name: Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)

Type of Organization:

- Insurgent
- non-state actor
- terrorist
- transnational
- violent

Ideologies and Affiliations:

- Al-Qaeda affiliated group
- Islamist
- jihadist
- Qutbist
- Salafist
- Sunni

Place of Origin:

Syria and Iraq

Year of Origin:

Formed 2011, declared January 2012

Founder(s):

Abu Mohammad al-Golani, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Places of Operation:

Syria and Lebanon

Overview

Executive Summary:

Al-Nusra Front is an internationally sanctioned terrorist group, one of the strongest insurgent groups in Syria, and a formerly open [al-Qaeda](#) affiliate that seeks to replace the Assad regime in Syria with an Islamic state. Operating as part of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) coalition since January 2017,¹ al-Nusra Front stands accused of serving as a base for global al-Qaeda operations.² In the years since its formation in 2011, the Front has gradually amassed and maintained control of territory throughout Syria.³ As of late 2019, the Front controlled or administered all of the Syrian opposition-held parts of Idlib, north Hama, and west Aleppo.⁴ By early 2020, Idlib was the only Syrian province still under rebel control.⁵

Originally al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria, al-Nusra Front has since claimed to have dissociated entirely from the international terrorist organization, despite the Front's long and proven history of serving as its loyal affiliate. On July 28, 2016, al-Qaeda released an audio statement giving the Front formal permission to break ties if the link was "conflicting with [the Front's] unity and working as one body."⁶ Al-Nusra Front leader [Abu Muhammad al-Golani](#) declared a formal split from al-Qaeda after thanking "our brothers, the commanders of al-Qa'eda..." and announcing the group's name change from Jabhat al-Nusra, Arabic for "the Victory Front", to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, "the Conquest of the Levant Front."⁷ Analysts had long surmised that a break from al-Qaeda, however artificial, could enable al-Nusra Front to attract more funding from Gulf states like Qatar, consolidate local support, and present itself as a legitimate insurgent group in Syria.⁸

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To these ends, al-Nusra Front announced on January 28, 2017, that it would dissolve and be subsumed under a new, larger Syrian Islamist group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (“Assembly for the Liberation of the Levant” or HTS).⁹ HTS’s initial leader was [Hashim al-Sheikh](#), the former leader of fellow Islamist faction Ahrar al-Sham.¹⁰ While al-Nusra Front continues to operate under the HTS name, Sheikh resigned from his post on October 1, 2017, and the group has suffered dozens of defections.¹¹ Analysts estimated that by September 2017 HTS had reverted back to its core of about 10,000 fighters, most of them belonging to al-Nusra Front.¹² By the end of 2018, HTS had an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 fighters.¹³ By the end of 2021, al-Nusra Front had an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 fighters.¹⁴

For years before the announced split, however, Golani had reaffirmed his group’s allegiance to al-Qaeda. Al-Nusra Front’s founder, the late ISIS leader [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), claimed he dispatched Golani and others—then al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) fighters—into Syria in 2011 in order to exploit the power vacuum stemming from the country’s civil war.¹⁵ The United States confirms this claim, maintaining that that al-Nusra Front was formed by AQI to “hijack the struggles of the legitimate Syrian opposition to further its own extremist ideology.”¹⁶ In April 2013, after Baghdadi unilaterally claimed to subsume al-Nusra Front into AQI, now known as ISIS, Golani broke ties with Baghdadi and reaffirmed his allegiance to al-Qaeda central.¹⁷

Despite the group’s origins in Iraq and historical deference to al-Qaeda, al-Nusra Front has branded itself as a native rebel group with foreign experience. In Syria, the group continues to profess its goal of toppling the Assad regime and establishing an Islamic state in its place, albeit incrementally. Trying to consolidate local support, al-Nusra Front has adopted military and outreach strategies from al-Qaeda-linked jihadist Abu Musab al-Suri: participating in numerous Syrian-based coalitions and collaborating with other Islamist, and occasionally secular, rebel groups to carry out joint attacks against Assad forces.¹⁸ Al-Nusra Front, and then HTS, also operated a civil administrative wing, called the “Public Services Administration,” which provided basic administrative needs and security and governed several rebel-controlled towns under various forms of Islamic law.¹⁹ On November 2, 2017, HTS announced the formation of the “Salvation Government,” a civilian-run administrative and political body in Idlib chaired by Mohammad al-Sheikh. HTS reportedly handed over control of its Public Services Administration to the Salvation Government.²⁰ While the two maintain they are separate from each other, HTS has described its relationship to the Salvation Government as a partnership. HTS has subsequently sought to moderate its image in a bid to convince locals and international actors it can be a responsible partner in governance.²¹

Although the group has succeeded in embedding itself in the Syrian insurgency, al-Nusra Front remains committed to employing terrorist tactics in order to secure an Islamic state. Since its founding, al-Nusra Front has conducted formal military campaigns, assassinations, hostage takings, and ‘lone wolf’ operations, including suicide bombings. By June 2013, the Front had claimed responsibility for 57 out of then-70 suicide attacks during Syria’s civil war.²² The group has since continued to carry out its signature suicide bombings in Syria and expanded its operations into neighboring Lebanon after [Hezbollah](#) joined the war in mid-2013.²³

In Lebanon, al-Nusra Front has sought to stoke sectarian divisions with suicide bombings against civilian centers like Beirut and Hezbollah strongholds like Hermel, along Lebanon’s northeastern border with Syria.²⁴ Al-Nusra Front also employs arbitrary detention and torture in order to silence its critics and opposition activists. According to a Human Rights Watch report, HTS detained more than 184 people in Idlib in the last three months of 2018.²⁵ Other human rights organizations accuse HTS of arresting at least 622 people between January 2017 and August 2019.²⁶ As of early 2022, the United Nations and human rights groups continue to accuse HTS of mass arrests without charge and torture of detainees, charges HTS denies.²⁷

The terrorist al-Nusra Front group has attracted the largest contingency of foreign fighters to Syria after ISIS, reportedly consisting of 3,000 to 4,000 foreigners as of late 2018.²⁸ The group regularly engages in violent clashes with other rebel groups in northern Syria, and conducts operations to arrest civilian protesters.²⁹

Doctrine:

Al-Nusra Front adheres to a Salafist, jihadist ideology with the professed aim of establishing Islamic governance in all areas under its control. In the group’s January 2012 inaugural video, a masked representative outlined its regional objectives. He introduced al-Nusra Front as “Syrian mujahedeen” who have come “back from various jihad fronts to restore God’s rule on the Earth [Islamic law] and avenge the Syrians’ violated honour and spilled blood.”³⁰

Years later, when Golani announced al-Nusra Front’s dissociation from al-Qaeda, he reaffirmed the group’s core objectives, saying that despite separating from al-Qaeda, the group would not be “compromising or sacrificing our solid beliefs or laxity in the necessity of the continuity of the

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Jihad of Al-Sham [Syria].”³¹ Golani reaffirmed that his group sought to use “Islamically legitimate means” to unify jihadists in Syria and the “masses of people in Al-Sham [Syria]” in order to replace the Assad government with one based on sharia (Islamic law).³² In a February 2021 interview with PBS’s *Frontline*, Golani described HTS’s “key message” as the people wanted to change a ruler and the ruler wanted to change a people—and changing a ruler is a lot easier than changing a people.³³

Despite these affirmations, al-Nusra Front has continued to struggle with its identity. On November 27, 2017, Golani ordered the arrests of [Sami al-Oraidi](#), the former head of al-Nusra Front’s Sharia Council; Abu Julaibib al-Ordoni, former Dara’a commander for al-Nusra Front; Abu Khadija al-Ordoni; and Abu Mussaab al-Libi. All four were prominent al-Nusra Front leaders with strong ties to al-Qaeda.³⁴ Following these arrests, several HTS members resigned and several large factions threatened to break away, prompting Golani to renew negotiations with al-Qaeda that ultimately led nowhere.³⁵ On December 4, 2017, HTS released Ordoni in a bid to ease tensions within the group. Ordoni immediately renewed his pledge to al-Qaeda upon release.³⁶

Following these arrests, several subgroups of devoted al-Qaeda supporters defected from HTS. On December 5, 2017, HTS faction Jaish al-Badia defected, creating a new Telegram channel devoted to al-Qaeda.³⁷ Jaish al-Malahem followed three weeks later, also indicating support for al-Qaeda in its new Telegram channel, while on February 7, 2018, a new al-Qaeda-supporting group, Jund al Shariah, announced its formation.³⁸ On February 28, 2018, these three groups, along with three other small militant factions, announced a merger under the name Hurras al-Deen (HaD), or Guardians of the Religion, and declared themselves an unofficial affiliate of al-Qaeda.³⁹ Oraidi and Ordoni both joined HaD’s Shura council and reportedly began talks with al-Qaeda leader [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) to make HaD the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria.⁴⁰ HaD is explicitly loyal to al-Qaeda and the U.S. government considers it part of al-Qaeda in Syria.⁴¹ HaD views al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri as its “defining authority.”⁴² HaD remains at odds with HTS.

While some Syria analysts argue that this chain of events proves that HTS and al-Nusra Front are no longer al-Qaeda affiliates, the U.S. government maintains that the groups are linked. On May 31, 2018, the State Department amended its classification of HTS to include it as “an official alias” of al-Nusra Front, which the State Department maintains is still “an al-Qaeda affiliate.”⁴³ Nonetheless, as HTS has sought to soften its public image, some U.S. officials have praised HTS’s role in Syria. In March 2022, James Jeffrey, who served as special representative for Syria engagement and special envoy to the global coalition to defeat ISIS during the Trump administration, called HTS “an asset” to America’s strategy in Idlib. According to Jeffries, HTS is “the least bad option of the various options on Idlib, and Idlib is one of the most important places in Syria, which is one of the most important places right now in the Middle East.”⁴⁴

On November 2, 2017, HTS announced the formation of the “Salvation Government,” a civilian-run administrative and political body in Idlib chaired by Mohammad al-Sheikh. HTS reportedly handed over control of its Public Services Administration to the Salvation Government.⁴⁵ As the war against the Syrian regime slowed down and rebel infighting increased in 2018, al-Nusra Front sought to use the Salvation Government to exert political control over territory that escaped its military control.⁴⁶ In January 2019, HTS succeeded in using its military power to force all other rebel groups in Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo to either hand direct control of their towns to HTS or to allow the Salvation Government to take over their towns’ local councils.⁴⁷ The United Nations and human rights groups continue to accuse HTS of mass arrests without charge and torture of detainees, which HTS denies. In a February 2021 interview, Golani denied HTS is detaining innocent people or those critical of the group and instead arresting thieves and other criminals. He further claimed individuals detained by HTS were “regime agents,” “Russian agents who come to place booby traps,” or members of ISIS.⁴⁸

While al-Nusra Front works to establish Islamic law in all areas under its control, it has done so incrementally in order to sustain local support. In this way, the group follows the guidelines and strategy of al-Qaeda-linked writer Abu Musab al-Suri, who sought to win the hearts and minds of locals in order to pursue his Islamist objectives.⁴⁹ In a statement posted online, Golani said, “Beware of being hard on [the locals]. Begin with the priorities and fundamentals of Islam, and be flexible on the minor parts of religion.”⁵⁰ In a December 2012 interview with the Dubai-based *National*, Golani said that his group’s “first goal is to get rid of Assad. Then we want a state where the Quran is the only source of law.”⁵¹

While al-Nusra Front has generally followed these guidelines, there are several instances where regional leaders have been quick to impose harsh interpretations of Islamic law onto local populaces and use violence to force conversions.⁵² In January 2015 in the Druze-dominated Jabal al-Summaq mountain in Idlib province, the Front’s then regional emir, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Tunisi, ordered the local Druze to convert to Sunni Islam and destroyed their shrines.⁵³ Tunisi was removed from his position after al-Nusra Front fighters under his command killed 23 Druze civilians in Qalb Lawza during a land dispute. Although al-Nusra Front reprimanded Tunisi for the massacre, the group upheld the validity of the forced conversions.⁵⁴ Al-Nusra Front has also reportedly imposed smoking bans on areas it controls, forced clothing shops to cover the heads of mannequins, and jailed men and women for socializing together in public.⁵⁵

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Although al-Nusra Front publicly emphasizes its Syrian aims, it has shown signs of a more expansionist ideology in line with al-Qaeda's brand of global jihadism. Despite the group's emphasis on its Syrian character, al-Nusra Front expanded its operations into neighboring Lebanon in response to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria.⁵⁶ The group also stands accused of plotting attacks against the West,⁵⁷ seemingly through the elusive Khorasan group, or what one Dubai reporter has exposed as al-Nusra Front's 'Wolf Unit.'⁵⁸ ⁵⁹ However, the death of Khorasan commander Said Arif in 2015 signaled the effective end of al-Nusra Front's external operations.⁶⁰ When al-Nusra Front was initially sent to Syria, one of its founding goals was reportedly to establish a safe haven for training recruits and stashing weapons,⁶¹ allegedly on behalf of al-Qaeda in Iraq (now ISIS).⁶²

Organizational Structure:

Al-Nusra Front is both hierarchical and regionalized. Historically, each region has been equipped with an overall leader, a religious leader, and a military commander.⁶³ The group as a whole has been directed by a small consultative council called *Majlis-ash-Shura*,⁶⁴ and headed by its *emir* ("commander" or "prince"), Abu Muhammad al-Golani. For years, Golani has carefully avoided showing his face in public, releasing audio statements and providing in-person interviews to news outlets with his face blurred out. In July 2016, however, Golani appeared in a video to announce his group's formal split from al-Qaeda.⁶⁵

Al-Nusra Front had previously pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda⁶⁶ and reported to the latter group's leader, [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#). On July 28, 2016, Zawahiri released an audio statement giving al-Nusra Front formal permission to break ties with al-Qaeda as needed.⁶⁷ Golani accepted the offer, thanking al-Qaeda and its leaders and announcing that the Front no longer had "any affiliation to any external entity."⁶⁸ After claiming to break with al-Qaeda, the Front attempted to merge with other large Islamist opposition groups, including Ahrar al-Sham.⁶⁹ On January 28, 2017, al-Nusra Front announced that it was disbanding as a standalone body and would operate under the banner of HTS, a coalition that combines five major Islamist factions—al-Nusra Front, Harakat Nour al Din al Zenki, Liwa al Haqq, Ansar al Din, and Jaysh al Sunna—along with dozens of smaller Islamist and secular Free Syrian Army groups under one central leadership, with Golani heading its militant branch.⁷⁰ However after a series of clashes with other rebel groups in Idlib in July 2017, dozens of factions and leaders defected from HTS, reducing the coalition to a core of al-Nusra Front supporters.⁷¹

In early 2017, Golani claimed to have stepped aside from his leadership of al-Nusra Front to defer to Hashim al-Sheikh, leader of the HTS coalition, while Golani became the military commander of the group.⁷² However, since Sheikh's resignation in October 2017, Golani has once again served as the undisputed leader of HTS.⁷³

According to multiple analyst estimates in 2018, HTS maintains approximately 12,000–20,000 fighters. In contrast, al-Nusra Front had an estimated 5,000–7,000 fighters in 2016.⁷⁴ Al-Nusra Front has also attracted the largest contingency of foreign fighters after ISIS.⁷⁵ Its militant branch is responsible for conducting coordinated attacks against the Assad regime, loyalists, thugs, and perceived colluders, as well as rival groups like ISIS and secular Free Syrian Army factions. The militant branch also conducts 'lone wolf' operations (including suicide bombings) and hostage missions targeting Lebanese and Syrian civilians.⁷⁶

HTS's military was originally separated into four "armies": the Army of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, the Army of Omar bin al-Khattab, the Army of Othman bin Affan, and the Army of Ali bin Abi Talib.⁷⁷ On April 14, 2020, HTS's military wing announced the establishment of three new military brigades: the Talha bin Ubayd Allah Brigade, headed by Abu Hafs Binnish; the Ali bin Abi Talib Brigade, headed by Abu Bakr Muhain; and the al-Zubeir ibn al-Awwam Brigade, headed by Abu Mohammad Shura. These armies consist of anti-armored-vehicles units, machine-gun units, armored-vehicles units, air-reconnaissance units (drone operators), automatic and manual fortification-building units, mortar units, and sniper units.⁷⁸ Binnish is reportedly the son-in-law of Golani and has risen quickly throughout the group due to his family connection. HTS issued a statement claiming, "these changes are in line with the preparations of the revolutionary forces on the ground...to rise to the challenges of the revolution and defend the region against the attacks of the occupier and its militias." Since the beginning of 2020, HTS has allegedly had a growing number of defections within its ranks given massive losses in battles against the Syrian government.⁷⁹

HTS also operates a special military unit known as the "Red Bands" or "Band of Deaths" that is reportedly responsible for conducting raids behind regime frontlines.⁸⁰ The group simultaneously stands accused by the U.S. government of plotting attacks against Western targets through its small and secretive "Wolf unit."⁸¹

In addition to the group's militant branch, al-Nusra Front managed civilian services and administration programs, known as *Idarat al-Khidamat al-Ammah* (Public Services Administration) and *Idarat al-Manateq al-Muharara* (Liberated Districts Administration) respectively, to govern areas in

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northern, western, and southern Syria, alongside other rebel groups.⁸² Al-Nusra Front's civilian branch has previously operated under the direction of its reported head of civilian programs at the time, Hajji Rasoul.⁸³ In the past, the program has coordinated bread rations and enforced Islamist regulations on al-Nusra Front's de facto subjects.⁸⁴ As part of the group's governance program, al-Nusra Front—alongside its allied rebel groups—levy taxes and control the allocation of special permits to civilian vehicles.⁸⁵

On November 2, 2017, HTS announced the formation of the Salvation Government, a civilian-run administrative and political body in Idlib chaired by Mohammad al-Sheikh. HTS reportedly handed over control of its Public Services Administration to the Salvation Government.⁸⁶ According to Syrian expert Sam Heller, the Salvation government formed through “a miniature, managed version of an inclusive national dialogue,” implying that at least some non-HTS elements are present in the body. However, many analysts and activists believe that the newly formed governing bodies in Idlib are controlled by HTS.⁸⁷ In January 2019, a ceasefire between HTS and the Turkish-backed rebel alliance National Liberation Front resulted in the Salvation Government taking control of every local council previously under the control or protection of those rebel groups, making HTS the dominant force in Idlib.⁸⁸

For recruitment and publicity purposes, al-Nusra Front has maintained a media branch called al-Manara al-Bayda (“the White Minaret”), which the group has refrained from using since dissociating from al-Qaeda and merging with HTS.⁸⁹ This branch had previously maintained the group's public image and media program, disseminating videos and posting statements by the group on jihadist websites, as well as on encrypted messaging applications, video-hosting websites, and social media websites.⁹⁰ HTS has, since its formation in early 2017, begun operating accounts on Twitter⁹¹ ⁹² and Telegram⁹³ ⁹⁴ among other social media platforms, issuing statements, updates, and propaganda materials in a variety of languages including English, Arabic, and Russian.⁹⁵

On October 21, 2020, HTS announced through its Sharia Council that it disavowed Assem Barqawi a.k.a. [Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi](#). Al-Maqdisi is a prominent Salafist ideologue and was a close confidante of al-Qaeda founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Al-Maqdisi and HTS have been at odds since HTS's split from al-Qaeda in 2016. HTS has distanced itself from al-Maqdisi as they are seeking to shed their reputation as an extremist group in order to form a political representation bureau in Idlib. Additionally, according to scholars at Jusoor for Studies, a Syrian independent institution based in Turkey, by disavowing al-Maqdisi, HTS will have a better chance to persuade other military factions to cooperate in a future HTS military council project. The details of the military council project have yet to be disclosed, but will reportedly help deter the presence of the newly formed joint military operations room that includes the al-Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Din, Jamaat Ansar al-Islam, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din, as well as al-Jihad Coordination and al-Muqatileen al-Ansar Brigade, which are recent HTS splinters. The Idlib-focused operations center, “Be Steadfast” was established in June 2020 and is aimed at coordinating efforts to fight against Syrian government troops, its allied forces, and HTS.⁹⁶

Financing:

Al-Nusra Front has been well-funded since its inception in 2011.⁹⁷ By August 2016, the group received streams of funding through a variety of means, including taxation, tariffs, fines, ransoms, international donations, oil sales, looting, and smuggling.⁹⁸ In September 2019, HTS commander Abu al-Abed al-Ashida released a video statement accusing HTS of corrupt internal practices. In the video, Ashida claimed HTS had a monthly income of \$13 million.⁹⁹

The most stable source of income for al-Nusra Front is believed to have come from taxes, tariffs, and fines that the group imposes on locals within its territory. Among the taxes levied by the group are income, business, services and utility taxes, including taxes on access to electricity, water, and bread. Al-Nusra Front also reportedly receives funding by leasing out homes, and is even reported to have levied a tax on internally displaced persons within Idlib province.¹⁰⁰ As HTS came to dominate the rebel pocket in Idlib, the coalition monopolized the agricultural industry. HTS forced farmers to sell them their crops at deflated prices, which HTS then sold to the populace at market rates, allowing HTS to collect the profits.¹⁰¹ In addition to taxes, al-Nusra Front has seized assets from religious minority groups and receives funding through an arms and weaponry tariff on other rebel groups.¹⁰² In this way, al-Nusra Front is believed to receive roughly half of the ammunition and weapons sent to the Free Syrian Army in northern Syria.¹⁰³

Following the formation of the Salvation Government in November 2017, al-Nusra Front began taxing water and electricity usage in the municipalities under its control.¹⁰⁴ With HTS's complete administrative takeover of greater Idlib in January 2019, the funds provided through taxation are likely to increase substantially. HTS also captured the Bab al-Halwa border crossing between Idlib and Turkey in July 2017, providing an additional taxation source for the terror organization.¹⁰⁵

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Sources of funding for the group also reportedly include private donations from wealthy individuals in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait, who are believed to launder the funds through small money transfers, or by dispatching the money with individuals who cross state borders into al-Nusra-held territory.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, al-Nusra Front's decision in July 2016 to dissociate from al-Qaeda is widely believed to have been motivated in large part to enable Qatari-based donors to continue sending money to al-Nusra Front without being accused of providing financial support to al-Qaeda.¹⁰⁷

In addition to foreign donations, al-Nusra Front has also secured revenue from oil sales and smuggling,¹⁰⁸ as well as through cigarette smuggling and extortion.¹⁰⁹ Although governments typically deny payment for the release of hostages, al-Nusra Front is believed to have racked up millions of dollars through hostage exchanges negotiated by the Qatari government. In one such exchange, the group reportedly received \$4 million when it released four Greek Orthodox nuns in March 2014.¹¹⁰ In another exchange, al-Nusra Front reportedly received \$25 million when it released 45 U.N. peacekeepers.¹¹¹ U.S. citizen Peter Theo Curtis was believed to have been released in August 2014 in exchange for anywhere between \$3 million and \$25 million, although the circumstances of Curtis's release were not made public.¹¹²

Recruitment:

In order to join al-Nusra Front, the group has historically required its recruits to procure *tazkiyya* (a voucher on behalf of the recruit) from two commanders on the front lines.¹¹³ Once the recruit was accepted, he would swear *bay'ah* (an oath of allegiance) to the group, thereby cementing his religious commitment.¹¹⁴

Al-Nusra Front has also recruited members online and in private messaging applications through its former media branches, al-Minara al-Bayda and Fursan al-Sham media. Within Syria, the group has attracted recruits by appealing to the locals in a strategy adopted from al-Qaeda jihadist Abu Musab al-Suri.¹¹⁵ When it comes to attracting recruits, al-Nusra Front holds a financial advantage over competing rebel groups, as it has historically been able to provide members with salaries and weapons.¹¹⁶ Under HTS, a new media outlet has been created, Ebaa Agency, which produces high-quality videos, infographics, and media statements similar to those of Amaq, ISIS's media wing.¹¹⁷

In addition to recruiting guerilla fighters through online and in-person efforts, al-Nusra Front stands accused of recruiting child soldiers. The U.N. Human Rights Council's Independent Commission on Syria has issued reports on al-Nusra Front's successful recruitment of child soldiers continuing into 2017. In Idlib province, al-Nusra fighters include boys under the age of 18 and 15, with some manning checkpoints.¹¹⁸ The Commission found that al-Nusra Front specifically targets poor, uneducated boys for recruitment, paying them modest salaries used to support the boys' families.¹¹⁹

HTS operates recruitment centers in opposition held territory in Aleppo, Idlib, Jabal Zawiyah, Atmeh IDP camp, and in the towns along the Turkish border.¹²⁰ Recent HTS recruitment campaigns have stipulated that recruits must be 16 years old or older, unmarried, and in good health. Unmarried recruits reportedly receive a monthly salary of 38,000 SYP while married recruits are paid 45,000 SYP.¹²¹

Training:

The training process for a new al-Nusra recruit is believed to last for two months. This training includes a 10-day religious course followed by a six to eight military training program with religious lectures every evening.¹²² Training reportedly emphasizes small-unit tactics, close combat, assassinations, and raids with exposure to common weapons from AK variants to anti-tank missiles.¹²³ Recruits that show exceptional promise during training are selected to join the special operations groups Jaish al-Nusra and Quwat al-Nukhba.¹²⁴

Since as far back as 2016, private military contracting company Malhama Tactical has been training al-Nusra Front fighters in special-operation tactics and assisting in developing the small sub-group Quwat al-Nukhba (Elite Forces).¹²⁵ Malhama Tactical was founded by an Uzbek veteran of the Russian military known by his pseudonym Abu Rofiq and initially staffed ten trainers, all with military experience from former Soviet states. Abu Rofiq claims to have founded his organization as a for-profit private military contractor that works exclusively with Sunni-Jihadist organizations. Malhama has reportedly been hired to train and fight alongside both al-Nusra Front and the Turkistani Islamic Party in Syria.¹²⁶

Also Known As:

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- Al-Nusra Front¹²⁷
- Al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant¹²⁸
- Al Nusra Front for the People of Levant¹²⁹
- Al Nusra Front for the People of the Levant¹³⁰
- Al-Nusra Front in Lebanon¹³¹
- Ansar al-Mujahideen Network¹³²
- Assembly for Liberation of the Levant¹³³
- Assembly for the Liberation of Syria¹³⁴
- Conquest of the Levant Front¹³⁵
- Fatah al-Sham Front¹³⁶
- Fateh al-Sham Front¹³⁷
- Front for the Conquest of Syria¹³⁸
- Front for the Conquest of Syria / the Levant¹³⁹
- Front for the Liberation of the Levant¹⁴⁰
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham¹⁴¹
- Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham¹⁴²
- HTS¹⁴³
- Jabhat al-Nusra¹⁴⁴
- Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham Min Mujahideen al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad¹⁴⁵
- Jabhat Fatah al-Sham¹⁴⁶
- Jabhat Fateh al-Sham¹⁴⁷
- Jabhat Fath al Sham¹⁴⁸
- Jabhat Fath al-Sham¹⁴⁹
- Jabhet al-Nusra¹⁵⁰
- Jabhet al-Nusra¹⁵¹
- Levantine Conquest Front¹⁵²
- Levantine Mujahideen on the Battlefields of Jihad¹⁵³
- Liberation of al-Sham Commission¹⁵⁴
- Liberation of the Levant Organization¹⁵⁵
- Support Front for the People of the Levant¹⁵⁶
- Support Front for the People of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Places of Jihad¹⁵⁷
- Tahrir al-Sham¹⁵⁸
- Tahrir al-Sham Hay'at¹⁵⁹
- The Al Nusra Front for the People of the Levant¹⁶⁰
- The Defense Front¹⁶¹
- The Front for the Defence of the Syrian People¹⁶²
- The Front for the Defense of the Syrian People¹⁶³
- The Front for the Liberation of al Sham¹⁶⁴
- The Support Front for the People of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Places of Jihad¹⁶⁵
- The Victory Front¹⁶⁶

¹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda and allies announce 'new entity' in Syria," Long War Journal, January 28, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/al-qaeda-and-allies-announce-new-entity-in-syria.php>.

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Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)

Key Leaders



Abu Muhammad al-Golani

Leader, overall leader of HTS coalition



Anas Hassan Khattab

Administrative leader



Abu 'Abdallah al-Shami'

Top sharia official of HTS



Abu Marieh Qahtani

Former Emir of al-Nusra in Deir Ez Zor, leading HTS cleric



Abu Jaber al-Shami

HTS Emir of the South



Mostafa Mahamed a.k.a. Abu Sulayman

Former director of foreign media relations, former member of the General Islamic Council, former propagandist, former senior official, former senior spiritual advisor, former top sharia official



Sheikh Bashar al-Shami

Head of HTS Shura Council



Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali

HTS jurist

Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)

History:

- **February 23, 2022:** HTS's so-called electronic jihad army announces the closure of multiple Telegram channels run by opposing jihadists. According to the Telegram post, the group's "efforts are ongoing, and we will continue our work until the closure of the last channel of any extremists, spoiler, and criminals." Source: Khaled al-Khateb, "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham fights opponents on social media," Al-Monitor, March 4, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-fights-opponents-social-media>.
- **June 2, 2021:** Nine Syrian refugees file a lawsuit in the United Kingdom alleging a conspiracy by a group of Qatari officials and businessmen, two banks, and multiple charities conspired with the Qatari government, in coordination with the Muslim Brotherhood, to launder money for al-Nusra Front in Syria.
The complaint charges Doha Bank and Qatar National Bank with facilitating the transfer of funds raised through significantly overpriced construction contracts, the purchase of property at inflated prices, and overpayments to Syrian migrant workers. Allegedly, funds were sent from the Qatari bank accounts either directly into Syria or to banks in Turkey, where they were withdrawn and taken across the border to al-Nusra. Source: Andrew Norfolk, "Qatar 'funnelled millions of dollars to Nusra Front terrorists in Syria,'" *Times* (London), June 4, 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/qatar-funnelled-millions-of-dollars-to-nusra-front-terrorists-in-syria-x5mbsr3l>.
- **November 13, 2020:** More than 330 Syrian refugees in the U.K. seek legal action against Qatar at the High Court in London.
The refugees claim they were tortured at the hands of the Nusra Front, which they also claim is allegedly funded by Qatar's state-run Doha Bank. Court papers claim the refugees were "victims of terrorism perpetrated by Al Nusra Front in Syria and have been victims of a range of grave human rights violations including torture, summary and arbitrary execution and other violations of the right to life." Doha Bank allegedly worked with Moutaz and Ramez Al Khayyat—wealthy businessmen—to operate a clandestine route for the funding of al-Nusra Front on behalf of the emir of Qatar. The next hearing is scheduled for 2021. Sources: "Qatar faced with legal action from UK court over allegations of Syria militia torture," Middle East Monitor, November 13, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201113-qatar-faced-with-legal-action-from-uk-court-over-allegations-of-syria-militia-torture/>; Owen Bowcott, "Qatari officials intimidated claimants in terror case, high court told," *Guardian*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/nov/11/high-court-hears-claims-qatar-officials-intimidated-terror-case-witnesses>.
- **October 21, 2020:** HTS announces through its Sharia Council that it disavows prominent Salafist ideologue Assem Barqawi, a.k.a. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who was a close confidante of al-Qaeda founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.
Al-Maqdisi and HTS have been at odds since HTS's split from al-Qaeda in 2016. HTS has distanced itself from al-Maqdisi as they are seeking to form a political representation bureau in Idlib so that they can participate within the Syrian political system. Additionally, according to scholars at Jusoor for Studies, a Syrian independent institution based in Turkey, by disavowing Maqdisi, HTS will have a better chance to persuade other military factions to cooperate in a future HTS military council project. The military council project will reportedly help deter the presence of the newly formed joint military operations room that includes the al-Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Din, Jamaat Ansar al-Islam, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din, as well as al-Jihad Coordination and the al-Muqatileen al-Ansar Brigade, which are recent HTS splinters. The Idlib-focused operations center, "So Be Steadfast" was established in June 2020 and is aimed at coordinating efforts to fight against Syrian government troops, its allied forces, and HTS. Sources: Sultan al-Kanj, "Syrian extremist group in Idlib breaks with jihadist ideologue," Al-Monitor, October 21, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/syria-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-relations-al-qaeda-jihadis.html#ixzz6bcn6ts00>; Sirwan Kajjo, "Jihadists in Syria's Idlib Form New 'Operations Room'," *Voice of America*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/jihadists-syrias-idlib-form-new-operations-room>.
- **August 13, 2020:** HTS detains American journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem in Atmeh, northwest Syria.
For the past eight years, Kareem has reported from Syria's north, where HTS has a shrinking presence. According to media sources, Kareem was arrested due to an interview he published on the case of Tauqir Sharif—an aid worker who was detained by HTS in June 2020—which insinuated the group tortured and arbitrarily arrested Sharif. Sources: "Jihadists Detain American In NW Syria: Monitor," *Defense Post*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/08/14/jihadists-syria-detain-american/>; "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham militants abduct US journalist Bilal Abdul-Kareem and driver in Syria," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, August 17, 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/08/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-militants-abduct-us-journalist-bilal-abdul-kareem-and-driver-in-syria/>.
- **July 13, 2020:** German federal prosecutors arrest Khedr A.K. and Sami A.S. in Naumburg, eastern Germany, for their involvement in the killing of an army officer in Syria in 2012.
Khedr A.K. is allegedly a member of al-Nusra Front, and Sami A.S. is reportedly a supporter of the group. The 2012 execution was filmed and prepared as footage for propaganda. Source: "Germany arrests 2 Syrians over 2012 killing of army officer," *Associated Press*, July 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/germany-arrests-2-syrians-over-2012-killing-of-army-officer/2020/07/13/b2d87006-c506-11ea-a825-8722004e4150_story.html.
- **June 28, 2020:** HTS launches a military campaign against rival jihadist groups in Idlib.
According to the war monitor group, Syrian Observatory, HTS fighters have raided villages in Idlib and have arrested multiple jihadist militants, including a leader in HaD. Source: Sirwan Kajjo, "Powerful Islamist Group Intensifies Crackdown on Jihadists in Syria's Idlib," *Voice of America*, June 28, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/powerful-islamist-group-intensifies-crackdown-jihadists-syrias-idlib>.
- **June 22, 2020:** HTS bans all opposing factions not under its control and bars its members from defecting and forming independent factions.
The move makes the recently formed So Be Steadfast—a joint operations room of Hurras al-Din (HaD), Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Deen, Tansiqiyat al-Jihad, and Liwa al-Mouqatileen al-Ansar—illegal. In response, So Be Steadfast accuses HTS of acting on behalf of Assad and foreign occupiers. Violent clashes erupt between HTS and So Be Steadfast and last until June 27, leaving more than 100 dead. Sources: Elizabeth Tsurkov, *Twitter* post, June 12, 2020, 2:58 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1271517276307697668>; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham vs. 'So Be Steadfast' Operations Room: An Account of Events," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog, June 30, 2020, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/06/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-vs-so-be-steadfast>; "Striving for Hegemony: The HTS Crackdown on al-Qaida and Friends in Northwest Syria," *Jihadica*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.jihadica.com/striving-for-hegemony-the-hts-crackdown-on-al-qaeda-and-friends-in-northwest-syria/>.
- **June 22, 2020:** The Cairo Criminal Court sentences 13 defendants to life imprisonment and three others to 15-year terms on charges of joining al-Nusra Front and participating in its operations.
According to investigations, two of the defendants joined al-Nusra Front in Syria where they received military training and carried out attacks. Source: "Egypt sentences 13 to life for joining terrorist group," *Middle East Monitor*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200622-egypt-sentences-13-to-life-for-joining-terrorist-group/>.
- On March 2, U.N. Human Rights Council investigators find that HTS committed war crimes, namely, at least one execution.
On March 5, Russia and Turkey agree to a ceasefire in northwestern Syria, including HTS-ruled Idlib, the last holdout of rebel control. The deal requires Turkey to reduce the power of HTS. HTS thanks Turkey for its "clear support for the Syrian revolution," but says the agreement is "tainted by ambiguity and unclear statements that allow the Russian occupier to make use of it for new aggression. It also contains provisions that cannot be applied at all, but are rather an insult to the blood of martyrs and the

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sacrifices made over ten years.”Sources: Associated Press, “Report: War Crimes Committed by Almost All Sides in Syria,” *U.S. News & World Report*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2020-03-02/report-war-crimes-committed-by-almost-all-sides-in-syria>; Ann M. Simmons and David Gauthier-Villars, “Putin, Erdogan Agree to Cease-Fire in Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/putin-erdogan-agree-to-cess-fire-in-syria-11583431207?mod=article_inline; Sirwan Kajjo, “How Far Can Russia-Turkey Deal over Syria’s Idlib Go?,” *Voice of America*, March 8, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/how-far-can-russia-turkey-deal-over-syrias-idlib-go>; Mohammad Abdulsattar Ibrahim, “International, Regional and Local Reactions to the March 5 Russian-Turkish Agreement on Northwest Syria,” *Syria Direct*, March 12, 2020, <https://syriadirect.org/news/international-regional-and-local-reactions-to-the-march-5-russian-turkish-agreement-on-northwest-syria/>.

- **February 17, 2020 - February 23, 2020:** Syrian government forces make further advances against HTS and other opposition fighters in northwest Syria.
In a February 20 interview with the International Crisis Group, Golani, seeking to legitimize HTS as a moderate, responsible actor and build support for its continued presence in Idlib, portrays HTS as a purely local group whose Islamist agenda is limited to Syria.Sources: “Weekly Conflict Summary: 17–23 February 2020,” Carter Center, February 23, 2020, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly_conflict_summary_17to23feb2020.pdf; “The Jihadist Factor in Syria’s Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani,” International Crisis Group, February 20, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/jihadist-factor-syrias-idlib-conversation-abu-muhammad-al-jolani>.
- **February 15, 2020:** In a media interview, Golani paints HTS’s jihad in Syria as a “the battle of the Sunnis in general in the entire region” and that an HTS loss in Syria could result in Sunnis becoming the minority in the Middle East.
Turkey increases its provision of sophisticated anti-tank and anti-aircraft arms to the Idlib rebels. At the same time, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar vowed to crack down on extremist rebels in Idlib, saying they would be “dealt with by force” and “all measures” would be considered against them. Sources: “As Syrian Rebels Lose Territory, Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) Leader Al-Joulani Provides Interviews Defending Turkish Presence In Idlib, Responding To Criticism By Rival Rebel Factions,” MEMRI, February 20, 2020, <https://www.memri.org/reports/syrian-rebels-lose-territory-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts-leader-al-joulani-provides-interviews>; Dorian Jones, “Turkey Continues Military Buildup in Syria, Seeking Diplomatic Solution from Moscow,” *Voice of America*, February 15, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/turkey-continues-military-buildup-syria-seeking-diplomatic-solution-moscow>.
- **February 3, 2020 - February 11, 2020:** Syrian regime forces capture the entirety of the M5 highway between Aleppo and Khan Sheikun from HTS and other opposition groups. The regime last controlled the whole highway in 2012.
On February 5, Ambassador James Jeffrey, U.S. special representative for Syria engagement, states that the U.S. has “not seen [HTS] planning or carrying out international terrorism attacks. We’ve seen them focusing on basically maintaining their position in Idlib.”Sources: “Weekly Conflict Summary: 3–9 February 2020,” Carter Center, February 11, 2020, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary_3to9feb2020.pdf; James Jeffrey, “Special Briefing: Ambassador James Jeffrey On the Situation in Syria,” U.S. Department of State, February 5, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/ambassador-james-jeffrey-on-the-situation-in-syria/>.
- **January 30, 2020:** Ambassador James Jeffrey, U.S. special representative for Syria engagement, makes comments about HTS that Russia views as signaling the possibility of U.S. engagement with HTS.
“We recognize that there are terrorists in Idlib,” Jeffrey said. “There’s also a very large group, the al-Nusra or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, HTS, that is an al-Qaida offshoot. It is considered a terrorist organization, but it is primarily focused on fighting the Assad regime. It itself claims – we haven’t accepted that claim yet, but they do claim to be patriotic opposition fighters, not terrorists. We have not seen them generate, for example, international threats for some time.”Source: “US’ Statements on Possible Dialogue with Jabhat al-Nusra Unacceptable, Says Lavrov,” *Russian News Agency TASS*, February 24, 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1123333>; James Jeffrey, “Live At State Briefing with Ambassador James Jeffrey,” U.S. Department of State, January 30, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/live-at-state-briefing-with-ambassador-james-jeffrey/>.
- **January 13, 2020:** American photojournalist Matthew Schrier, whom al-Nusra Front kidnapped and held hostage for seven months in 2012–13, sues the Qatar Islamic Bank for facilitating donations by individuals and charities to al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham.
A German court sentences an unnamed former al-Nusra Front fighter to life imprisonment for double homicide and 17 counts of being an accessory to murder.Sources: “Matthew Schrier v. Qatar Islamic Bank,” *Complaint*, 1-3 (S.D. Fla. 2020), <https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/qatar-islamic-bank-1.pdf>; “Germany Jails Jihadi for Syrian Massacre,” *Deutsche Welle*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-jails-jihadi-for-syrian-massacre/a-51989399>.
- On December 10, Nordic Monitor reports that a 2016 classified Defense Intelligence Agency report claimed Qatar and Turkey provided “logistical, financial and material assistance” to al-Nusra Front.
On December 12, the HTS-aligned Salvation Government is reshuffled, with Ali Keda named as prime minister. Keda promises to resolve the displacement crisis and eliminate temporary camps and tents. On December 18, the U.S. Department of State designates al-Nusra Front as an “entity of particular concern” under the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 for “having engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.” HTS begins a drive to recruit youth on December 30 that lasts through January 5, 2020. It is the group’s second recruitment drive since September 2019.Sources: Abdullah Bozkurt, “US Defense Intelligence Agency Says Turkey, Qatar Supported al-Nusra Front,” *Nordic Monitor*, December 10, 2019, <https://www.nordicmonitor.com/2019/12/us-defense-intelligence-agency-says-turkey-qatar-supported-al-nusra-front/>; Khaled al-Khateb, “Reshuffle of HTS-Linked Government Fails to Bring Hope in Idlib,” *al-Monitor*, December 29, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/12/syria-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-government-protests.html>; U.S. Department of State, “Secretary of State’s Determination under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, Public Notice 10987,” *Federal Register* 84, no. 247 (December 26, 2019): 71064-71065, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/12/26/2019-27787/secretary-of-states-determination-under-the-international-religious-freedom-act-of-1998-and-frank-r>; “Weekly Conflict Summary: 30 December 2019–5 January 2020,” Carter Center, January 5, 2020, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-30dec2019to5jan2020.pdf.
- **November 7, 2019:** Previously classified documents reveal that the HTS stole laptops and cellular phones from an international non-profit organization.
The stolen goods were paid for by the Canadian government. HTS besieges and bombs the town of Kafr Takharim in Idlib, killing five, after popular demonstrations against the group and the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government earlier in the month. Protesters take to the streets in other Idlib towns to show solidarity with those in Kafr Takharim.Sources: Stewart Bell, “Canadian Aid to Syria Stolen by Al Qaeda-Linked Terrorist Group, Documents Show,” *Global News*, November 7, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6133582/canadian-aid-stolen-by-terrorist-group/>; “Five Killed as HTS Bombs Syrian Town which Protested against Its Rule,” *New Arab*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/11/7/hts-bombs-syrian-town-following-protests-against-its-rule>.
- **November 2, 2019:** Hundreds of people in Idlib demonstrate against the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government, protesting the government’s repressive actions, including an increase in the price of fuel and a new tax on olive oil.
Demonstrators storm olive oil presses and police stations and throw out officials aligned with HTS.Source: “Hundreds Protest against HTS-Affiliated ‘Government’ in Syrian city of Idlib,” *New Arab*, November 3, 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/11/3/hundreds-protest-against-hts-in-syrias-idlib>.

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- **October 21, 2019 - October 27, 2019:** HTS lays a 5 percent tax on olive harvests in northwest Syria and arrests three media activists and two alleged members of Hurras al-Din.
Source: "Weekly Conflict Summary: 21–27 October 2019," Carter Center, October 27, 2019, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly_conflict_summary_21to27oct2019.pdf.
- **September 10, 2019:** HTS dismisses Abu al-Abed Ashida, commander of its Umar bin al-Khattab army, after he releases a video criticizing the group for corruption and administrative failures.
HTS also refers Ashida to its military judiciary for disciplinary action. HTS had arrested Ahmed Rahal, the local journalist who published Ashida's statements, the day prior. Sources: Khaled al-Khattab, "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham loses third leader in Syria this year," al-Monitor, September 19, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/09/syria-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-corruption-defection.html#ixzz60BQgTWQ6>; "Tahrir al-Sham Arrests Journalist Interviewed Senior Member in Idlib," Zaman al-Wasl, September 11, 2019, <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/47481/>.
- **September 1, 2019 - September 2, 2019:** Anti-HTS protests take place in the Idlib towns of Maarat al-Numan, Saraqib, Kafr Takharim, and Killi.
Source: "????? ??? ???? ?????? ???? ???? ?? ?????? (?????)," Orient News, September 3, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2J1xXgZ>.
- HTS arrests media activists and local HTS-affiliated council members in Idlib.
Source: "Weekly Conflict Summary: 9–15 September 2019," Carter Center, September 15, 2019, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly_conflict_summary_09to15sep2019.pdf.
- **August 31, 2019:** Hundreds of people demonstrate in Saraqeb, east of Idlib, against the Syrian regime, Russia, and HTS, calling on HTS to leave Idlib.
Source: "Protests against Syrian Regime and HTS Held in Idlib," New Arab, September 2, 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/9/2/protests-held-in-idlib-against-syrian-regime-and-hts>.
- **August 28, 2019:** Either Syrian or Russian Jets strike Maarat al-Numan, a rebel-held city in northwest Syria, trying to target jihadists linked to al-Nusra Front
At least nine civilians are killed. Source: "Air strikes hit rebel-held northwest Syria, nine killed," Reuters, August 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey/air-strikes-hit-rebel-held-northwest-syria-nine-killed-idUSKCN1V116B>.
- **August 27, 2019:** HTS arrests activist Abdullah Mardikhi in Idlib city.
Source: Alaa Nassar, "Hijacking of the 'freedom revolution': HTS imprisons activists in northwest Syria (interactive map)," Syria Direct, September 15, 2019, <https://syriadirect.org/news/hijacking-of-the-%E2%80%9Cfreedom-revolution%E2%80%9D-hts-imprisons-activists-in-northwest-syria-interactive-map/>.
- **August 23, 2019:** HTS arrests a reporter and cameraman in Idlib city.
Source: "Hay'at Tahrir al Sham arrested two media activists in Idlib city, on August 23," Syrian Network for Human Rights, August 25, 2019, <http://sn4hr.org/sites/news/2019/08/25/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-arrested-two-media-activists-idlib-city-august-23/>.
- **August 21, 2019:** Syrian regime forces capture Khan Sheikhoun from HTS and its allies.
Source: "Syria regime forces take full control of Khan Sheikhoun: monitor," Zaman al-Wasl, August 21, 2019, <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/46780/>.
- **August 19, 2019:** Syrian forces capture the al-Nimr checkpoint from HTS and cut off the M5 highway linking Khan Sheikhoun to the rebel stronghold of Ma'arat al-Nu'man.
The Syrian air force targeted a convoy of insurgents waiting for a Turkish army convoy near Ma'arat al-Nu'man. Source: Joško Bari?, "Syrian War Daily – 19th of August 2019," Syrian War Daily, August 19, 2019, <https://syrianwardaily.com/2019/08/19/syrian-war-daily-19th-of-august-2019/>.
- **August 18, 2019:** The Syrian Army captures the strategic hilltop of Tell al-Nar from HTS.
Source: Joško Bari?, "Syrian War Daily – 18th of August 2019," Syrian War Daily, August 18, 2019, <https://syrianwardaily.com/2019/08/18/syrian-war-daily-18th-of-august-2019/>.
- **August 17, 2019:** Syrian forces backed by Russia launch airstrikes over two days in the villages of Deir Sharki and al-Haas in northwestern Syria.
The strikes kill more than two dozen civilians. HTS militants are the intended targets of the airstrikes, but no insurgent casualties are reported. Source: "Civilian death toll mounts as Syrian offensive widens," Reuters, August 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-northwest/civilian-death-toll-mounts-as-syrian-offensive-widens-idUSKCN1V709P>.
- **August 11, 2019:** Syrian forces backed by Russian warplanes seize the town of al-Hobeit, reclaiming the town from HTS.
The number of casualties and injuries is unreported, but forces managed to damage the equipment of HTS. Sources: "Regime Forces Control Strategic Town in Idlib's Southern Countryside," *Asharq Al-Awsat* (London), August 12, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1853926/regime-forces-control-strategic-town-idlib%E2%80%99s-southern-countryside>; "Syrian army takes strategic town from rebels in new advance," Reuters, August 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-northwest/syrian-army-takes-strategic-town-from-rebels-in-new-advance-idUSKCN1V1074>.
- **August 7, 2019:** The Syrian army captures al-Zakah and al-Arbaeen, two key towns in the countryside of Hama.
Al-Zakah holds great importance because it is one of al-Nusra Front's major strongholds and was a launching pad for the group's attacks on Syrian military positions. Capturing al-Zakah is key for the army advancement to the towns of Kafr Zita and al-Lataminah, the biggest rebel strongholds in Hama. Source: Mu Xuequan, "Syrian army captures key towns in Hama province, closing in on al-Qaida strongholds," Xinhua, August 8, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/08/c_138291773.htm.
- **August 7, 2019:** According to a report by the *Times* of London, two wealthy brothers, Moutaz and Ramez al-Khayyatare, are alleged to have used accounts at Doha Bank to channel extensive funds to al-Nusra Front during the Syrian civil war.
Large sums of money are alleged to have been sent via the bank to accounts in Turkey and Lebanon, where the cash was withdrawn and taken across the Syrian border for delivery to the jihadists. Source: Andrew Norfolk, "Qatari bank accused of funding jihadist," *The Times* (London), August 7, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/qatari-bank-accused-of-funding-jihadis-v3kbrmmqv>.

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- **August 5, 2019:** Al-Nusra Front refuses to withdraw from the de-militarized zone in northwestern Syria as planned in recent Syrian talks. Abu Muhammad al-Golani declares his rejection to withdraw the 20 km regardless of whether the request is made by “friends or enemies.” By saying friends, Golani refers to Turkey, which is backing and negotiating on behalf of the rebels. Source: “Al-Qaida-linked group refuses to retreat in Syria’s de-militarized zone,” Xinhua, August 5, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/05/c_138285568.htm.
- Human rights organizations accuse HTS of arresting 182 people since the beginning of 2019, including political activists and local journalists. Source: Alaa Nassar, “Hijacking of the ‘freedom revolution’: HTS imprisons activists in northwest Syria (interactive map).” Syria Direct, September 15, 2019, <https://syriadirect.org/news/hijacking-of-the-%E2%80%9Cfreedom-revolution%E2%80%9D-hts-imprisons-activists-in-northwest-syria-interactive-map/>.
- **June 22, 2019:** HTS raids the home of journalist Ma’an Bakkur in Ariha, arresting him for an unspecified reason. Source: Alaa Nassar, “Hijacking of the ‘freedom revolution’: HTS imprisons activists in northwest Syria (interactive map).” Syria Direct, September 15, 2019, <https://syriadirect.org/news/hijacking-of-the-%E2%80%9Cfreedom-revolution%E2%80%9D-hts-imprisons-activists-in-northwest-syria-interactive-map/>.
- **June 17, 2019:** HTS arrests the director of the al-Hekma hospital, Mazen Ghazal, after summoning him to court. Source: Alaa Nassar, “Hijacking of the ‘freedom revolution’: HTS imprisons activists in northwest Syria (interactive map).” Syria Direct, September 15, 2019, <https://syriadirect.org/news/hijacking-of-the-%E2%80%9Cfreedom-revolution%E2%80%9D-hts-imprisons-activists-in-northwest-syria-interactive-map/>.
- **June 9, 2019:** HTS arrests Abdul Rahmin Turki al-Najjar, the director of a media office in Idlib, when they raid his work. Source: Alaa Nassar, “Hijacking of the ‘freedom revolution’: HTS imprisons activists in northwest Syria (interactive map).” Syria Direct, September 15, 2019, <https://syriadirect.org/news/hijacking-of-the-%E2%80%9Cfreedom-revolution%E2%80%9D-hts-imprisons-activists-in-northwest-syria-interactive-map/>.
- **May 21, 2019:** Dutch police arrest a Syrian man suspected of committing war crimes as a commander of al-Nusra Front. Ahmad al Khedr, was detained in Kapelle in southwestern Netherlands. He was arrested based on information provided by German police, where six homes belonging to suspected members of the same battalion were raided. German police “provided witness testimonies against the suspect,” the Dutch prosecutor said. Sources: “Netherlands arrests suspected Syrian Al Nusra Front commander,” Defense Post, May 2, 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/05/21/netherlands-arrests-suspected-al-nusra-front-commander/>; “Dutch police arrest alleged commander in Syrian Nusra Front,” Reuters, May 21, 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-netherlands-prosecutors-syria/dutch-police-arrest-alleged-commander-in-syrian-nusra-front-idUKKCN1SRING>.
- **May 12, 2019:** HTS arrests media activist Muhammad Summaq from his home in Binnish after he criticized HTS on Facebook. Source: Alaa Nassar, “Hijacking of the ‘Freedom Revolution’: HTS Imprisons Activists in Northwest Syria (Interactive Map).” Syria Direct, September 15, 2019, <https://syriadirect.org/news/hijacking-of-the-%E2%80%9Cfreedom-revolution%E2%80%9D-hts-imprisons-activists-in-northwest-syria-interactive-map/>.
- **April 30, 2019:** Syrian regime forces backed by Russian ground troops and air support begin a four-month offensive in northern Hama and southern Idlib. HTS bears the brunt of the attacks alongside the non-ideological Free Syrian Army faction Jaish al-Izza. At least 1,000 HTS fighters are killed during the offensive. Sources: “Syrian troops resume offensive on rebel stronghold in Idlib,” Associated Press, August 5, 2019, <https://apnews.com/2421afa362ff4feca181b3429e5630f3>; “Barrel bombs target the area of Kabana in Latakia countryside in conjunction with the continued ground escalation within the sectors of ‘Putin –Erdogan’ area raising to 230 shells and missiles during this day,” Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 18, 2019, <http://www.syriaohr.com/en/?p=141087>.
- **April 24, 2019:** An explosion occurs in front of an office belonging to HTS in Idlib. The cause of the blast is unknown and the attack kills at least 15 people. HTS commanders have blamed previous bombings on President Bashar al-Assad’s intelligence services and ISIS. Source: “Syria war: Unexplained blast kills 15 in rebel-held Idlib,” BBC News, April 24, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48039190>.
- **April 23, 2019:** SANA, Syria’s state news agency, claims that HTS as well as the White Helmets group are preparing to launch a chemical attack in Idlib to frame the Syrian army. SANA further claims that the groups have evicted the town of Jurjanas in the southern countryside of Idlib as a prelude to launching the attack in order “to justify a pretext for U.S. aggression on Syria.” Source: “Syria accuses rebels of preparing chemical attack in Idlib,” Xinhua, April 23, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-04/23/c_138002218.htm.
- **January 12, 2019:** Turkish police arrest 13 HTS members in Adana, Turkey accused of providing financing and logistics for HTS. Among the arrested men is the president of the humanitarian aid NGO Fukara Der. Source: Menekse Tokyay, “Turkey crackdown on Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham network,” *Arab News* (Riyadh), January 13, 2019, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1434976/middle-east>.
- **January 10, 2019:** HTS signs a ceasefire with the National Liberation Front (NLF) in which NLF factions Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham agree to hand over administration in all of their remaining areas to the HTS-controlled Salvation government. As a result, HTS controls or administers all of rebel-held greater Idlib. Sources: “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Takes Over Idlib After Ceasefire Deal.” *Asharq al-Awsat?* (London), January 10, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1540261/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-takes-over-idlib-after-ceasefire-deal>; Josko Baris, “Syrian War Daily – 10th of January 2019,” Syrian War Daily, January 10, 2019, <https://syrianwardaily.com/2019/01/10/syrian-war-daily-10th-of-january-2019/#more-10029>.
- Human rights organizations accuse HTS of arresting 257 people in 2018, including many political activists and local journalists. Source: Alaa Nassar, “Hijacking of the ‘Freedom Revolution’: HTS Imprisons Activists in Northwest Syria (Interactive Map).” Syria Direct, September 15, 2019, <https://syriadirect.org/news/hijacking-of-the-%E2%80%9Cfreedom-revolution%E2%80%9D-hts-imprisons-activists-in-northwest-syria-interactive-map/>.
- **December 28, 2018:** HTS accuses rebel group Nour al-Din al-Zenki of killing five of its fighters in western Aleppo and uses this as an excuse to move fighters and weapons to its frontline with al-Zenki during the last days of December. Source: ????, Twitter post, December 28, 2018, 7:53 a.m., <https://twitter.com/jisrtv/status/1078635017981566978>; Breizhman, Twitter post, December 20, 2018, 8:12 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Breizhman1983/status/1079364649588572160>.
- **November 23, 2018:** HTS kills journalists Raed Fares and Hamoud Jneed in Kanfrandel, Idlib governorate, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) later concludes. SNHR also claimed that during this period, HTS “carried out a number of raids on different villages, arresting dozens of individuals in the process at a time when the Syrian people were hopeful that a truce would contribute to completely eradicating the presence of extremist groups.” Source: “Hay’at Tahrir al Sham Was Most Likely Behind the Assassination of Raed Fares and Hamoud Jneed in Kafranbel City,” Syrian Network for Human Rights, November 29, 2018, <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2018/11/29/52887/>.

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- On November 7, HTS and the local rebel faction Nour al-Din al-Zenki violently clash in Idlib along the 12-town border between the two factions.
Fighting continues for a week as multiple armed factions side with Zenki against HTS until a ceasefire takes hold on November 15. On November 27, HTS arrests Sami al-Oraidi, the former head of al-Nusra Front's Sharia Council, Abu Julaibib al-Ordoni, former Dara'a commander for al-Nusra Front, Abu Khadija al-Ordoni, and Abu Mussaab al-Libi. All four were prominent al-Nusra Front leaders with strong ties to al-Qaeda. By the end of November, more than 35 HTS members, including at least 10 high-profile foreign and local leaders, have been assassinated in Idlib since September 2017. Sources: "Weekly Conflict Summary November 2-8, 2017," Carter Center, November 8, 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.11.02-08.pdf; "Weekly Conflict Summary November 9-15, 2017," Carter Center, November 15, 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.11.09-15.pdf; Mona Alami, "HTS Continues to Evolve," Atlantic Council SyriaSource, December 1, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/hts-continues-to-evolve>; Haid Haid, "Who Is Assassinating Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's Leaders?" Chatham House, November 2017, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/who-is-assassinating-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-leaders>.
- **November 2, 2017:** HTS forms the "Salvation Government," a civilian-run administrative and political body in Idlib chaired by Mohammad al-Sheikh.
HTS reportedly hands over control of its Public Services Administration to the Salvation Government. Sources: Sam Heller, "Turkey Through the Syrian Looking Glass," Century Foundation, November 28, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/turkey-syrian-looking-glass/>; "???? .. ?????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????? ??????" YouTube video, 16:29, posted by ????? ?????, November 2, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5orACzyc_G8.
- On October 1, Hashim al-Sheikh resigns as general leader of HTS and takes over the leadership of the Shura Council, while Golani takes over his role as overall emir.
Between October 7 and 12, HTS forces partially withdraw from the region around Daraat Izza as Turkish forces move in to establish de-escalation monitoring points along the Afrin-Aleppo border. Throughout October an additional 10 factions defect from HTS. Sources: "Weekly Conflict Summary September 28 – October 4, 2017," Carter Center, October 4, 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.09.28-10.04.pdf; "Weekly Conflict Summary October 5 – 11, 2017," Carter Center, October 11, 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.10.05-11.pdf; "Weekly Conflict Summary September 28 – October 4, 2017," Carter Center, October 4, 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.09.28-10.04.pdf; "Weekly Conflict Summary October 12 – 18, 2017," Carter Center, October 18, 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.10.12-18.pdf.
- **September 11, 2017:** Saudi cleric Abdullah al Muhaysni and Muslim Al Ulyani, both members of the HTS Sharia Committee, announce their resignations following leaked audio of several al-Nusra Front commanders expressing their loyalty to Golani and disdain for the Sharia Committee and Hashem al-Sheikh.
More than eight factions defect from HTS following the leaked recordings. Source: "Weekly Conflict Summary September 7-13, 2017," Carter Center, September 13, 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.09.07-13.pdf.
- - : HTS clashes with other rebel coalitions and attempts to expand its presence in Damascus, Idlib, and in southern Syria.
In April and July, the group engages in fierce clashes with competing rebel faction Jaish al-Islam in the East Ghouta pocket of Damascus. During this time, HTS also engages in efforts to expand their presence in the south, including in Dara'a and Quneitra governorates, near the Golan Heights. In July, war breaks out between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib. After initial gains by Ahrar al-Sham, HTS captures several towns and encircles the crucial Bab al-Hawa border crossing before a ceasefire takes hold. Sources: Aron Lund, "Syria: East Ghouta Turns on Itself, Again," Century Foundation, May 1, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/syria-east-ghouta-turns-jaish-al-islam/>; Twitter post, July 8, 2017, 2:15pm, https://twitter.com/Islamarmy_eng3/status/883751346909966337; Ahmed Abazeid, "Infighting Continues in Eastern Ghouta as the Regime Advances," Atlantic Council SyriaSource, May 5, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/infighting-continues-in-eastern-ghouta-as-the-regime-advances#WRB8OussNHE.twitter>; "Weekly Conflict Summary May 11-17," Carter Center, May 20, 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/WeeklyConflictSummary-May-11-17-2017.pdf; Charles Lister, Twitter post, July 19, 2017, 12:58pm, https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/887658278074818561.
- - : Al-Nusra Front launches or participates in three offensives against government positions in North Hama, Damascus, and Dara'a.
During these attacks, al-Nusra Front conducts more than a dozen suicide bombings and kills hundreds of pro-regime fighters and dozens of civilians. Sources: Qalaat al-Mudiq, Twitter post, March 21, 2017, 9:40 a.m., <https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/844227259535900673>; "Syrian rebels launch attack near Hama," Reuters, March 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-hama/syrian-rebels-launch-attack-near-hama-idUSKBN16S2DC>; "Former Nusra Front says it carried out Damascus bombing," Reuters, January 18, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra-idUSKBN1522WI>; World on Alert, Twitter post, February 12, 2017, 7:06 a.m., <https://twitter.com/worldonalert/status/830795241628241921>; "Syria Conflict: Weekly Conflict Summary," Carter Center, March 3, 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/weekly-conflict-summary-2017.02.23-03.01.pdf; "Syria Situation Report: March 9 - 17, 2017," Institute for the Study of War, March 17, 2017, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/03/syria-situation-report-march-9-17-2017.html?m=1>; Suhail AlGhazi, Twitter post, March 12, 2017, 4:04 a.m., <https://twitter.com/putintintin1/status/840881130240909316>; "Dozens killed in double suicide attack in Syrian capital," Reuters, March 15, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-blast-idUSKBN16M1J0>; Ellen Francis and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syrian forces and rebels fight fierce clashes in northeast Damascus," Reuters, March 19, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jobar-idUSKBN16Q09X>.
- **January 28, 2017:** Al-Nusra Front releases a statement claiming to unite with four other rebel groups under the name Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).
The other rebel groups are Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaish al-Sunna, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din. Dozens of smaller rebel groups join in the ensuing weeks. Sources: "Syria Islamist factions, including former al-Qaeda branch, join forces: statement," Reuters, January 28, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels-idUSKBN15COMV>; Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "New Syrian jihadist alliance vows to step up attacks against army," Reuters, February 9, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jihadists-idUSKBN15O2IV>.
- - : Al-Nusra Front works alongside other militant groups in an effort to break the government's siege on Aleppo.
In early August, around 7,000 al-Nusra Front militants gather outside the city with a variety of weaponry, including armored vehicles, rockets, tanks, and artillery. Despite gaining some ground south of the city and temporarily breaking the siege, the attempt ultimately fails. Sources: Lidia Kelly, "Russia Announces Daily Ceasefires in Syria's Aleppo to Let in Aid," Reuters, August 10, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-idUSKCN10L1WL>; Lisa Barrington and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Jets Pound Rebels After They Break Aleppo Siege," Reuters, August 7, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKCN10I0M2>.
- **July 28, 2016:** Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Golani declares a formal split from al-Qaeda after thanking "our brothers, the commanders of al-Qa'eda," and announcing the group's name change from Jabhat al-Nusra (the Victory Front) to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the Levantine Conquest Front).

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Source: Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Nusrah Front Rebrands Itself as Jabhat Fath Al Sham," Long War Journal, July 28, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/analysis-al-nusrah-front-rebrands-itself-as-jabhat-fath-al-sham.php>.

- - : Al-Nusra Front launches attacks on both government positions and civilians in Aleppo city, including shelling the Kurdish neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud and killing nine civilians.
The Front continues to publicly reject international ceasefires, conducting three suicide bombings on April 1 alone. Al-Nusra Front continues seizing weapons from moderate rebel factions in Idlib throughout July. Sources: "At least 9 dead, dozens injured in attacks against Kurdish quarter in Aleppo," Reuters, March 6, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKCN0W80RU>; "Islamist fighters attack Syrian government forces south of Aleppo: Syrian Observatory," Reuters, March 7, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-nusra-idUSKCN0W91Y8>; "Nusra Front, Syrian rebels attack government forces near Aleppo, gain ground," Reuters, April 2, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKCN0WZ005>; "Rebels shoot down second Syrian jet in a month," Reuters, April 5, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jet-idUSKCN0X214E>; "U.S. behind strike that killed Nusra Front's Abu Firas: officials," Reuters, April 4, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKCN0X11R3>; "UPDATE 1-Russia blames Nusra Front for wrecking planned truce in Syria's Aleppo," Reuters, May 4, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-russia-syria-aleppo-idUSL5N1814MD>; "Nusra captures leader, fighters of Western-backed rebels in northern Syria," Reuters, July 3, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra-idUSKCN0ZJ0F3>.
- - : Al-Nusra Front continues to expand in Syria as part of the Jaish al Fatah (Army of Conquest) coalition, capturing all of the Idlib province by mid-May and calling for intensified attacks against the Syrian regime after rejecting a ceasefire in February 2016.
In June 2015, Abu Muhammad al-Golani releases an audio statement mourning the death of al-Qaeda deputy leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who was killed in a drone strike in Yemen. After al-Nusra Front attacks U.S.-trained rebels in early August, the United States expands its bombing campaign against al-Nusra Front, killing the high-ranking Sanafi al-Nasr on October 15. Sources: Agence France-Presse, "Rebels take largest remaining army base in Syria's Idlib: Monitor," Straits Times, May 19, 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/rebels-take-largest-remaining-army-base-in-syrias-idlib-monitor>; "Nusra Front rejects Syria truce, urges stronger attacks: audio statement," Reuters, February 26, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra-idUSKCN0VZ1ZZ>; "Syria's Nusra Front underlines Qaeda link in audio message," Reuters, June 24, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/06/24/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-yemen-idUKKBN0P41DP20150624>; Patrick J. McDonnell and W.J. Hennigan, "Pentagon ramps up airstrikes in Syria to help U.S.-backed rebels," *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-us-syria-20150803-story.html>; "U.S.-led air raid kills 15 al Qaeda fighters in Syria: monitor," Reuters, May 20, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/20/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra-idUSKBN0O52B120150520>; Agence France-Presse, "US-led air strikes kill seven Al-Nusra members in Syria: monitor," Yahoo News, July 8, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/us-led-air-strikes-kill-seven-al-nusra-225008264.html>.
- **March 9, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front reaffirms its allegiance to al-Qaeda after rumors that the Front may break away from al-Qaeda in an effort to appear more moderate.
Source: Agence France-Presse, "Qaeda in Syria denies plan to break away," Yahoo News, March 9, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/qaeda-syria-denies-plan-break-away-194745608.html>.
- - : Al-Nusra Front begins targeting moderate rebel forces in Idlib and Aleppo, capturing several villages and killing dozens of U.S.-backed rebels.
On November 15, 2014, the United Arab Emirates designates al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organization. Sources: "Al Qaeda Seizes Territory from Moderate Rebel Group," Reuters, October 28, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/28/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idlib-idUSKBN0IH1KW20141028>; Tom Perry, "Al Qaeda in Syria attacks Western-backed rebels," Reuters, January 29, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/29/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKBN0L21ZF20150129>; Agence France-Presse, "Dozens dead as Nusra takes US-backed Syria rebel base: activists," *Daily Star* (Beirut), February 28, 2015, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Feb-28/289135-dozens-dead-as-nusra-takes-us-backed-syria-rebel-base-activists.ashx>; Emirates News Agency "UAE Cabinet Approves List of Designated Terrorist Organisations, Groups," Internet Archive, November 15, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170101084756/http://www.wam.ae/en/news/emirates-international/1395272478814.html>.
- Turkey designates al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organization.
Source: Agence France-Presse, "Turkey Blacklists Al-Nusra Front as Terror Group," Internet Archive, June 3, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180228163500/http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20011>.
- **May 15, 2014:** The U.S. Department of State designates al-Nusra Front as a distinct Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), instead of its previous status as an alias for the designated FTO al-Qaeda in Iraq.
Source: U.S. Secretary of State John F. Kerry, "In the Matter of the Designation of Al-Nusrah Front Also Known as Jabhat al-Nusrah Also Known as Jabhet al-Nusra Also Known as The Victory Front Also Known as Al Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant Also Known as Al-Nusrah Front in Lebanon Also Known as Support Front for the People of the Levant Also Known as Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahedi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad as a Foreign Terrorist Organization Pursuant to Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as Amended, Public Notice 8734," Federal Register 79, no. 94 (May 15, 2014): 27972, <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/08/28/fr15may14b.pdf>.
- - : After a month of fighting between ISIS and al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda severs ties with ISIS.
Despite al-Qaeda's demands for a ceasefire, violence continues between al-Nusra and ISIS, and many al-Nusra Front leaders and fighters defect to ISIS. Sources: "Al Qaeda Says Has No Link with Syrian Militant Group ISIL," Reuters, February 3, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/03/us-syria-crisis-qaeda-idUSBREA1207L20140203>; Yousuf Basil, Mohammed Tawfeeq, and Ray Sanchez, "Al Qaeda boss Ayman al-Zawahiri calls for halt to jihadist infighting," CNN, May 3, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/03/world/meast/ayman-al-zawahiri-message-syria/>; "Syria Islamists Challenge ISIL Control of Town on Iraq Border," Reuters, June 28, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/28/us-syria-crisis-iraq-border-idUSKBN0F30B420140628>; AFP, "Al-Qaeda Merges with Isis at Syria-Iraq Border Town," *Telegraph* (London), June 25, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/10925602/Al-Qaeda-merges-with-Isis-at-Syria-Iraq-border-town.html>; AFP, "Turkey Blacklists Al-Nusra Front as Terror Group," Al-Akhbar English, June 3, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20011>.
- **January 29, 2014:** U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper tells the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee that al-Nusra Front has aspirations to attack the United States.
Source: Patricia Zengerle and Mark Hosenball, "U.S. Spy Chiefs Say Number of Foreign Militants in Syria Rises," Reuters, January 29, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/29/us-usa-security-syria-idUSBREA0S1XL20140129>.
- - : Al-Nusra Front expands its violent activities to Lebanon and continues to expand in Syria as tensions with the Free Syrian Army arise.
The U.S. Treasury Department designates al-Nusra Front's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Golani, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. On May 30, the U.N. Security Council amends its designation of al-Qaeda in Iraq to include al-Nusra Front as an alias. Several other countries, including the United Kingdom and Canada, later add al-Nusra Front to their lists of terrorist organizations. Sources: Dominic Evans, "Syrian Rebels, Hezbollah in Deadly Fight in Lebanon," Reuters, June 2, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/02/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE95105O20130602>; Mitchell Prothero, "Al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front rebels blamed for bloody fight

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against Lebanese army in Sidon,” McClatchy, June 25, 2013, <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24750418.html>; Oliver Holmes and Erika Solomon, “Syria Rebels Reinforce Key Suburb in Damascus Battle,” Reuters, July 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/16/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE96F0EK20130716>; “Syria’s al-Nusra Front Claims Assassination of Hama Governor,” Al Arabiya, September 7, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/09/07/Syria-s-al-Nusra-Front-claims-assassination-of-Hama-governor.html>; “Syrian State TV: Hama Province Governor Assassinated in Car Bomb Blast,” Al Arabiya, August 25, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/08/25/syria-car-bomb.html>; Nour Malas, “Rebel-on-Rebel Violence Seizes Syria,” Wall Street Journal, September 18, 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/rebelonrebel-violence-seizes-syria-1379547732?tesla=y>; “Syria Designations; Syria Designations Removals; Counter Terrorism Designations; Iran Sanctions Designations and Identifications,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 16, 2013, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20130516.aspx>; “Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends Entry of One Entity on Its Sanctions List,” United Nations Security Council, May 30, 2013, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc11019.doc.htm>; Associated Press, “UK bans Syria’s Al-Qaida-Linked Nusra Front,” Internet Archive, July 19, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160919070708/http://bigstory.ap.org/article/uk-bans-syrias-al-qaida-linked-nusra-front>; “The Government of Canada Lists Jabhat Al-Nusra and al-Muwaqfi ‘un Bil Dima as Terrorist Organizations,” Public Safety Canada, November 8, 2013, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/nws/nws-rlss/2013/20131108-en.aspx>; “Currently Listed Entities,” Public Safety Canada, accessed March 8, 2020, <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntrl-scrnt/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrmt-lstd-ntts-eng.aspx#2049>.

- **April 9, 2013:** Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announces AQI and al-Nusra Front will merge. The following day, al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Golani releases a statement rejecting the merger with AQI and officially pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Source: “Syria Crisis: Al-Nusra Pledges Allegiance to Al-Qaeda,” BBC News, April 10, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22095099>.
- **December 31, 2012:** The Front kidnaps American photojournalist Michael Schrier in Syria and holds him hostage until he escaped on July 29, 2013. Source: “Matthew Schrier v. Qatar Islamic Bank,” Complaint, 1-6 (S.D. Fla. 2020), <https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/qatar-islamic-bank-1.pdf>.
- **November 20, 2012:** The United States amends its designation of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) on the State Department’s list of designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations to include al-Nusra Front as an AQI alias. Source: “Public Notice 8104,” U.S. Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration, December 11, 2012, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2012-29870.pdf>.
- **- :** Al-Nusra Front carries out nearly 600 attacks in major cities across Syria, killing Syrian government and military personnel as well as civilians. By the end of 2012, the group has proven itself to be the most effective fighting force among the opposition and concerns begins to rise among moderate rebels that al-Nusra Front will continue to overtake Free Syrian Army groups throughout the country. Sources: “UPDATE 1-Obama: U.S. Now Recognizes Syrian Opposition Coalition,” Reuters, December 11, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/12/syria-usa-idUSL1E8NBIMN20121212>; David Ignatius, “Al-Qaeda affiliate playing larger role in Syria rebellion,” *Washington Post*, November 30, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/al-qaeda-affiliate-playing-larger-role-in-syria-rebellion/2012/11/30/203d06f4-3b2e-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680_blog.html; “[Billing Code: 4710-10] DEPARTMENT OF STATE [Public Notice 8104],” National Archives and Records Administration, December 11, 2012, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2012-29870.pdf>.
- **January 23, 2012 - January 24, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front releases a video announcing its formation. Source: Agence France-Presse, “Unknown Islamist Group Claims Suicide Attacks in Syria,” Internet Archive February 29, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120330180650/http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/29/197781.html>.

Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)

Violent history:

Al-Nusra Front conducted its first attack on December 23, 2011, detonating two car bombs outside a government security office in Damascus and killing 44.¹⁶⁷ In the following months the Front drastically increased the frequency and types of attacks carried out against the Assad regime, setting itself apart from other rebel groups with the large number of suicide bombings it conducted. As al-Nusra Front seized and held territory, it began to attack civilians, minorities, and other rebel groups. After Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime in mid-2013, al-Nusra Front expanded its operations into Lebanon.¹⁶⁸ While the Front’s attacks in Lebanon largely ended by mid-2015, the group still conducts violent activities in Syria’s southern governorates of Dara’a and Quneitra, in the Eastern Ghouta pocket of Damascus, and in the rebel-held areas of Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo

- **May 30, 2022:** HTS reportedly fires at least five rounds of shells toward the Idlib de-escalation zone over a period of 24 hours.¹⁶⁹
- **August 13, 2020:** HTS detains American journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem in Atmeh, northwest Syria. For the past eight years, Kareem has reported from Syria’s north, where HTS has a shrinking presence. According to media sources, Kareem was arrested due to an interview he published on the case of Tauqir Sharif—an aid worker who was detained by HTS in June 2020—which insinuated the group tortured and arbitrarily arrested Sharif.¹⁷⁰
- **June 2020:**
 - June 12: HaD, Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Deen, Tansiqiyat al-Jihad, and Liwa al-Mouqatilin al-Ansar announce the establishment of a new joint operations room in Idlib called “So Be Steadfast” (Fa-thbutu), which claims it seeks to confront only aggression from Russians, Nusayris, and the Iranian militias, not HTS. The groups form checkpoints around Idlib.
 - June 17: HTS security officers arrest Sirajuddin Mukhtarov, a.k.a. Abu Salah al-Uzbeki, the founder of the mainly Uzbek Katibat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad who had recently defected from HTS to join Ansar al-Deen.
 - June 22: HTS arrests former HTS and al-Nusra Front commander Abu Malik al-Tali, who had defected to form Liwa al-Mouqatilin al-Ansar, affiliated with So Be Steadfast. HTS issues a declaration forbidding its members from leaving the group without permission and barring all former members from forming new groups. In response, So Be Steadfast accuses HTS of acting on behalf of Assad and foreign occupiers.
 - June 22-27: Violent clashes erupt between HTS and So Be Steadfast. On June 24, Oraidi calls for HTS and So Be Steadfast to cease their fighting and begin a judicial process to settle their disputes. That same day, al-Qaeda issues a statement condemning HTS for targeting fellow mujahideen and calling on HTS to remember the necessity of unity among the mujahideen. The fighting results in more than 100 killed and an unknown number of wounded.¹⁷¹
- **February 1, 2020:** HTS carries out suicide car bombings targeting pro-Assad forces in Aleppo.¹⁷²
- **November 17, 2019:** Unidentified gunmen shoot to death Amir al-Shaiti, a judge at an HTS prison.¹⁷³
- **November 7, 2019:** HTS besieges and bombs the town of Kafr Takharim in Idlib, killing five, after popular demonstrations against the group and the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government earlier this month. Protesters take to the streets in other Idlib towns to show solidarity with those in Kafr Takharim.¹⁷⁴
- **September 3, 2019:** Rebels launch two unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) in Latakia province where Russia’s Khmeimim Air Base is located. Air defenses intercept and down the drone. No casualties, injuries or damages are reported. Though the drones are often crude-looking, the Russian Defense Ministry has previously said that the UAVs used by jihadists are GPS-guided and the bomblets attached to them carry potent explosives. In Idlib, HTS militants shoot and take into custody Othman al-Hassan at a checkpoint. Othman, a local doctor, is released several hours later after the Idlib Doctor’s Union announces it is ceasing all medical treatment in the governorate.¹⁷⁵
- **September 2, 2019:** Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, a journalist who went missing in the Maldives five years ago, was reportedly killed at sea by members of al-Nusra Front. Rilwan was long known to the al-Qaeda-linked group because of his blog posts about its presence in the Maldives and his participation in a 2011 protest calling for freedom of belief in the Maldives.¹⁷⁶
- **August 30, 2019:** HTS beats and fires live rounds at protestors in the Atmeh IDP camp as people protest Turkey’s closure of the border and inaction against the Syrian regime’s bombing campaign of Idlib.¹⁷⁷
- **August 14, 2019:** Rebels shoot down a Syrian warplane in Idlib near Khan Sheikhoun, capturing the pilot. The Syrian state news agency SANA claims the warplane had been hit by an anti-aircraft missile fired by militants while on a mission “to destroy the headquarters of al-Nusra Front.”¹⁷⁸

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- **July 21, 2019:** HTS arrests Zaman al-Wasl journalist Juma'a Haj Hamdo from his house in Aleppo over his coverage of anti-HTS sentiment. Hamdo is released one week later.¹⁷⁹
 - **July 21, 2019:** HTS arrests Zaman al-Wasl journalist Juma'a Haj Hamdo from his house in Aleppo over his coverage of anti-HTS sentiment. Hamdo is released one week later.¹⁸⁰
 - **July 2019:** HTS is accused of arresting 11 activists and civil society members in July, forcibly disappearing four of them.¹⁸¹
 - **June 3, 2019:** HTS members arrest and beat schoolteacher Yasser al-Deddo in Kafr Owayed after he posted anti-HTS messages on Facebook.¹⁸²
 - **May 21, 2019:** HTS opens fire on residential areas in the northern city of Aleppo. At least six civilians were wounded.¹⁸³
 - **May 13, 2019:** HTS, the National Liberation Front, and other rebels mount a counterattack against government forces in Hama. The fighting hits parts of a buffer zone agreed to in September 2018 under a Russian-Turkish deal that spared the region and its 3 million residents from an assault. Over 120 civilians are reportedly killed in the attacks and counterattacks.¹⁸⁴
 - **May 8, 2019:** After hours of shelling and airstrikes, the Syrian army captures the city of Kafr Naboudeh in Hama province after battles with HTS. The day prior, the army also captured the strategic Tal Othman area.¹⁸⁵
 - **May 2, 2019:** Al-Nusra Front rebels claim that they have mounted several rocket attacks on army positions in northern Hama. One mortar attack in particular at the Breideej army base, injures and kills at least four Russian soldiers who were stationed in their vehicle.¹⁸⁶
 - **March 2, 2019:** HTS executes 10 men in Idlib, who are accused of belonging to ISIS.¹⁸⁷
 - **January 18, 2019:** HTS releases a video showing the execution of four men accused of belonging to ISIS.¹⁸⁸
 - **January 10, 2019:** The Free Idlib Police announce their dissolution after HTS raids one of their headquarters in the village of Al-Ghadafa.¹⁸⁹
 - **January 9, 2019:** Ahrar al-Sham surrenders all of its land in the Sahl al-Ghab to HTS and evacuates its fighters to north Aleppo.¹⁹⁰
 - **January 8, 2019:** HTS attacks Ahrar al-Sham in the Sahl al-Ghab area of north Hama and takes control of 16 villages and towns in north Hama and south Idlib.¹⁹¹
 - **January 7, 2019:** HTS seizes the village of Hazano, Idlib, from local factions and places it under the control of its Salvation Government.¹⁹²
 - **January 6, 2019:** HTS captures the town of Atarib, expelling members of the local armed factions to northern Aleppo, and closes three of the border crossings between Idlib and Afrin. HTS now controls all of rebel-held west Aleppo.¹⁹³
 - **January 5, 2019:** HTS captures the final Nour al-Din al-Zenki stronghold in western Aleppo as the remnants of the group evacuate to Turkish-held Afrin. HTS also besieges the neutral town of Atarib, shelling it intensely, and captures three localities from NLF in southern Idlib.¹⁹⁴
 - **January 4, 2019:** HTS captures the important Regiment 111 base along with seven major towns in western Aleppo from NLF. Fighting between HTS and NLF continues in southern Idlib and HTS arrests two commanders from the FSA Jaish al-Nasr in Khan Sheikhoun.¹⁹⁵
 - **January 3, 2019:** HTS continues to advance on al-Zenki-held towns in western Aleppo, successfully splitting al-Zenki's territory in two. Fighting between HTS and NLF factions in Idlib intensifies, especially around the Jabal Zawiyah area.¹⁹⁶
 - **January 2, 2019:** HTS captures the rest of Daraat Izza and four more towns from al-Zenki in western Aleppo while other members of the NLF engage in clashes with HTS in southern Idlib, capturing one town from HTS.¹⁹⁷
 - **January 1, 2019:** HTS seizes most of Daraat Izza and at least three other towns from Nour al-Din al-Zenki as tensions escalate between the two factions. Two civilians are killed by HTS gunfire during the capture of the city.¹⁹⁸
 - **December 22, 2018:** HTS fighters kill a child when they fire on a passenger bus in northern Idlib.¹⁹⁹
 - **December 14, 2018:** HTS attacks and kills a groups of regime soldiers with an anti-tank guided missile in southern Aleppo.²⁰⁰
 - **December 4, 2018:** HTS seizes the village of Zeizoun, west Hama, from Ahrar al-Sham.²⁰¹
 - **December 3, 2018:** HTS fighters kill a child while storming the Ahrar al-Sham-controlled villages of Jadriyat and Ibn Gharbi in Idlib.²⁰²
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- **November 24, 2018:** HTS security forces fire on protestors in Idlib City with live bullets. There are no fatalities.²⁰³
 - **November 23, 2018:** HTS kills journalists Raed Fares and Hamoud Jneed in Kanfrandel, Idlib governorate, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) later concludes.²⁰⁴
 - **November 22, 2018:** HTS arrests several protestors in Saraqib, Idlib, who are angry with the quality of education provided in the city. On the same day, HTS arrests several members of the Idlib City local council and raids their homes.²⁰⁵
 - **November 13, 2018:** HTS launches rockets at regime positions in Khan Touman, south Aleppo. HTS also raids the house of an FSA Free Idlib Army fighter in Kafr Bel, seizing his weapons and ammunition.²⁰⁶
 - **November 2, 2018:** HTS joins the National Liberation Front (NLF) in retaliatory shelling of regime positions around Idlib after regime shelling kills 10 civilians.²⁰⁷
 - **October 5, 2018:** HTS attacks Nour al-Din al-Zenki's headquarters in the west Aleppo town of Kaffar Halab and then shoots at civilians protesting their actions, killing three. Officials from Zenki and the National Liberation Front condemn HTS's actions and withdraw from the town "to prevent further clashes."²⁰⁸
 - **September 22, 2018:** HTS arrests two activists and a third unknown man in southern Idlib.²⁰⁹
 - **September 18, 2018:** HTS arrests three activists in al-Dana, Idlib. HTS also arrests two ISIS commanders hiding in Idlib. These arrests follow a series of HTS raids on ISIS hideouts that led to the executions of more than 80 ISIS fighters.²¹⁰
 - **August 8, 2018:** HTS arrests 30 people accused of promoting reconciliation with the Syrian regime in southern Idlib.²¹¹
 - **August 3, 2018:** HTS arrests 17 people in Idlib accused of promoting reconciliation with the Syrian regime or supporting ISIS.²¹²
 - **July 30, 2018:** HTS arrests three people in Idlib accused of being regime spies.²¹³
 - **July 13, 2018:** HTS finds and arrests the head of security for ISIS cells in Idlib and beheads him.²¹⁴
 - **June 24, 2018:** HTS arrests Syrian journalist Mohammed Fadl al-Janoudi in northern Latakia.²¹⁵
 - **June 5, 2018:** HTS attacks regime forces in Tel Sultan, Idlib, alongside al-Qaeda affiliate Hurras al-Din.²¹⁶
 - **May 29, 2018:** HTS kills one and arrests eight men it accuses of being ISIS members in Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib.²¹⁷
 - **April 15, 2018:** HTS launches a new wave of attacks against JTS, capturing the strategic towns of Murek and Khan Sheikhoun along with 11 other villages in southern Idlib.²¹⁸
 - **April 7, 2018:** HTS and JTS reach a one-week ceasefire under mediation from Faylaq al-Sham, ending the 49-day bout of infighting.²¹⁹
 - **April 6, 2018:** HTS and JTS attack each other with heavy weapons in the areas of Ariha and Maarat al-Nu'man, Idlib.²²⁰
 - **April 1, 2018:** HTS temporarily detains the negotiating committee of JTS as its convoys enter Idlib city to negotiate a ceasefire between the two groups.²²¹
 - **March 22, 2018:** HTS renews its attacks on JTS held towns in west Aleppo countryside with heavy weapons, including tanks and artillery, wounding several civilians.²²²
 - **March 11, 2018:** HTS renews attacks against JTS towns following a 48-hour ceasefire. Several civilians are killed and wounded as HTS shells Basrtan, Saadia, and A'jel in west Aleppo.²²³
 - **March 1, 2018:** HTS kills several JTS fighters and takes control of the towns of Maaret Misrin, al-Tawame, Kafer Halab, Miznaz, al-Qanater checkpoint, reef al-Mouhandeen, Telaad, Termanin, Zaradna, Hazre, Deir Hasan, and Kafer Yahmoul in Idlib. The group is accused of releasing recently captured ISIS fighters to fight against JTS.²²⁴
 - **February 20, 2018:** HTS launches wide-scale attacks on Jabhat Tahrir Suriya (JTS), the new rebel group formed two days prior through the merger of Nour al-Din al-Zinki and Ahrar al-Sham. On February 23 HTS seizes two villages in Idlib while losing one village in Aleppo.²²⁵
 - **February 3, 2018:** HTS shoots down a Russian Su-25 plane over Idlib and kill the pilot after he opens fire on them with his sidearm.²²⁶
 - **February 2-3, 2018:** Civilians in the rebel-held town of Binnish protest against HTS, tearing down the group's flag and replacing it with the Free Syrian Army flag after accusing the group of not doing enough to deter regime advances. HTS fighters kill one civilian in the ensuing
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clashes.²²⁷

- **January 31, 2018:** HTS executes two individuals accused of assassinating HTS fighters in Daraat Izza, north Syria.²²⁸
- **2017:** Human rights organizations accuse HTS of arresting 183 people in 2017, including political activists and local journalists.²²⁹
- **December 2017:** In Damascus, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham launch “Phase 2” of their offensive against regime forces stationed in the vehicle management base in Harasta. The rebel forces manage to besiege the base for several days, killing seven generals in the fighting.²³⁰
- **December 26, 2017:** HTS arrests anti-HTS activist Samer al-Saloum on charges of speaking against the militant group. Saloum is executed by HTS sometime around April 2019.²³¹
- **November 2017:** On November 7, clashes renew between HTS and Nour al-Din al-Zenki in Idlib along the 12-town border between the two factions.²³² Fighting continues for a week as multiple armed factions side with Zenki against HTS until a ceasefire takes hold on November 15.²³³ On November 27, HTS launches another counter-offensive against ISIS in north Hama after ISIS reinforcements arrived from Deir Ez Zor through regime territory. On the same day, the regime expands its ongoing offensive against the rebels by seizing two towns from HTS near Khanasir, Aleppo.²³⁴ These positions are recaptured by HTS in a counter-attack launched on November 29.²³⁵
- **October 2017:** On October 9, ISIS fighters backed with heavy armor enter rebel-controlled Hama from regime-controlled Hama sparking clashes with HTS. Over the next two weeks HTS uses artillery, tanks, and SVBIEDs to counter the ISIS offensive, reversing most of ISIS’s gains.²³⁶ At the same time, the Syrian regime launches a new offensive against HTS in Hama, targeting the villages the group had recently recaptured from ISIS. HTS launches a new counter-offensive against the regime in response, utilizing at least two SVBIEDs.²³⁷
- **September 19, 2017:** HTS units and fighters from the Turkistani Islamic Party launch an attack against regime positions in northern Hama using at least one SVBIED, briefly seizing control of the villages of Ma’an and Tulaysiyah.²³⁸
- **September 6, 2017:** HTS Elite Forces and the PMC Malhama Tactical raid regime positions in the Air Force Intelligence complex of Aleppo.²³⁹
- **August 28, 2017:** Sayyed Barsha, commander of the rebel group Nour al-Din al-Zenki is assassinated by unknown agents. Zenki accuses HTS of carrying out the assassination amid ongoing clashes and kidnappings linked to familial disputes within the Barsha clan, whose members are split between HTS and Zenki.²⁴⁰
- **July 19 – July 23, 2017:** HTS and Ahrar al-Sham engage in clashes across Idlib and North Latakia, with HTS ultimately seizing control of all of the border crossings with Turkey. On July 23, the two factions reach an agreement temporarily ending hostilities. While part of the ceasefire allows militias which had been forcibly conscripted into HTS as it captured new territory to defect, HTS is not required to return any of its captured towns.²⁴¹
- **July 14, 2017:** HTS and Ahrar al-Sham clash near the Idlib city of Tal Touqan.²⁴²
- **June 24, 2017:** HTS launches an offensive against al-Baath City, Quneitra.²⁴³
- **June 23, 2017:** HTS kills several Hezbollah fighters in raids along the Lebanon-Syria border in late June.²⁴⁴
- **June 19, 2017:** HTS assassinates the commander of the First Brigade of the Golan Regiment, a pro-government militia in Quneitra.²⁴⁵
- **June 13, 2017:** HTS kidnaps two FSA commanders in Idlib, Nidal Haj Ali and Ahmed al-Mousa.²⁴⁶
- **June 8, 2017:** HTS attacks FSA and Faylaq al Sham units in the town of Maraah al-Numan, killing FSA Colonel Tasyeer al-Samahi.²⁴⁷
- **March 21 – 24, 2017:** HTS launches an offensive in Northern Hama, carrying out four suicide bombings over the course of the offensive.²⁴⁸
- **March 18 – 23, 2017:** HTS claims responsibility for three suicide bombings targeting regime positions in Jobar, Damascus.²⁴⁹
- **March 11, 2017:** Al-Nusra Front’s HTS coalition claims responsibility for two suicide bombings in Damascus, killing at least 74 people. HTS claims it targeted Iraqi militiamen while local activists stated that those killed were Shiite pilgrims.²⁵⁰
- **February 26, 2017:** Al-Nusra Front’s HTS coalition claims responsibility for five suicide bombings at the Homs City Military Security Headquarters.²⁵¹
- **February 12, 2017:** Al-Nusra Front’s HTS coalition claims responsibility for two suicide bombings in the city of Dara’a.²⁵²

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- **January 18, 2017:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for a suicide bombing attack in Damascus, killing seven people.²⁵³ The following week, the group launches an attack against several Free Syrian Army rebel groups in northwestern Syria.²⁵⁴
 - **Mid-July 2016:** Al-Nusra Front is blamed for launching two rocket attacks in the southern Syrian town of Baath City, killing civilians.²⁵⁵
 - **Early July 2016:** Al-Nusra Front reportedly captures and takes hostage the commander of the Western-backed Jaish al-Tahrir rebel group as well as “scores” of the commander’s aides and fighters, according to reports.²⁵⁶
 - **June 2016:** Al-Nusra Front continues its offensive against Assad forces, reportedly killing dozens of military and civilian targets in Aleppo. In early June, a Russian ceasefire monitoring agency claims that al-Nusra Front shelled down 40 people in Aleppo using rocket launchers, canons, mortars, and anti-aircraft missiles.²⁵⁷
 - **Early May 2016:** Russia highlights increased violence in Aleppo by al-Nusra Front and claims that the group is responsible for thwarting an extended truce.²⁵⁸
 - **April 5, 2016:** Al-Nusra Front shoots down a Syrian warplane, capturing the pilot.²⁵⁹
 - **April 1, 2016:** Al-Nusra Front carries out three suicide bombings targeting Assad forces near a hillside south of Aleppo.²⁶⁰
 - **Early-Mid March 2016:** Al-Nusra Front and other Islamist insurgent groups launch at least 100 rockets on a Kurdish residential area of Aleppo, killing at least nine civilians and wounding dozens of others, according to SOHR.²⁶¹ Al-Nusra Front later attacks government forces and briefly captures the village of al-Ais before government forces retake the village.²⁶² The group later seizes bases and weapons, including anti-tank missiles, from Western-backed rebel groups in northwest Syria.²⁶³
 - **Late February 2016:** Al-Nusra Front rejects a ceasefire and calls for intensified attacks against Bashar al-Assad and his regime.²⁶⁴
 - **November 16, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for a suicide bombing that it says killed top commanders in the ISIS-affiliated Yarmouk Martyrs Brigades.²⁶⁵
 - **October 12, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front calls for attacks against Syrian Alawites in retaliation for Russian airstrikes.²⁶⁶
 - **September 9, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front seizes the Abu al-Duhur airbase from Assad regime forces, thereby capturing the final regime position in Idlib province.²⁶⁷
 - **August 1, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front releases a video of the July 31 attack and kidnapping operation against Division 30 rebels. In the video, one member boasts that al-Nusra Front has “cut of the hands of the West and Americans.”²⁶⁸ Meanwhile, a religious court run by al-Nusra Front executes 10 people in Aleppo, two on charges of adultery and eight on charges of collusion with the Syrian government, according to SOHR.²⁶⁹
 - **July 31, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front attacks the U.S.-trained Division 30 (a.k.a. New Syrian Forces) rebel unit, killing five of its fighters, wounding 18, and kidnapping 20.²⁷⁰ According to multiple rebel sources who spoke to McClatchy, al-Nusra Front was tipped off by Turkish intelligence.²⁷¹
 - **July 15, 2015:** The Army of Conquest coalition—to which al-Nusra Front belongs—announces its offensive against the towns of Fuaa and Kafraya, reportedly the last two Shiite localities held by the regime in Idlib.²⁷²
 - **July 10, 2015:** After being held captive for a week—allegedly by al-Nusra Front members—a priest in Idlib province, Syria, is released by his captors.²⁷³
 - **July 3, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham announce the formation of a new coalition—Ansar al-Shariah—as they and other rebel groups fight government forces in Aleppo.²⁷⁴
 - **July 2, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups, including Ahrar al-Sham launch a major offensive to gain control of the divided city of Aleppo, Syria.²⁷⁵
 - **June 10, 2015:** Members of al-Nusra Front kill 23 Druze Syrians in the village of Qalb al-Lawzi in the north of Idlib’s province.²⁷⁶ Three days later and after international outcry, al-Nusra Front releases an official statement acknowledging that its members attacked Druze but saying that they did so “in clear violation of the leadership’s views.”²⁷⁷
 - **June 2, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front announces that it has attacked two Hezbollah outposts in eastern Lebanon, killing several Hezbollah members.²⁷⁸
 - **May 22, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front is part of an offensive that seizes a hospital from government forces in Idlib province.²⁷⁹
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- **May 19, 2015:** The Army of Conquest coalition, including al-Nusra Front, captures the Assad regime's largest remaining military base in Idlib province.²⁸⁰
 - **May 4, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front fighters, including a suicide bomber, launch an attack in Damascus.²⁸¹
 - **April 24, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front and other Islamist groups take control of Jisr al-Shughur, the last major regime-held town in Idlib province.²⁸²
 - **April 1, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front joins a rebel coalition to seize Nasib crossing, the only functioning border crossing with Jordan, as well as three military posts nearby.²⁸³
 - **March 27, 2015—March 28, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front makes advances in Idlib city in northwest Syria, clashing with regime forces. Dozens of militants and four regime soldiers die as a result of the clash, according to SOHR.²⁸⁴ By March 28, al-Nusra Front has seized almost all of Idlib city from regime forces.²⁸⁵
 - **March 12, 2015:** Fifty are left dead when al-Nusra Front rebels clash with the Assad regime in Latakia province, northwest Syria.²⁸⁶
 - **February 28, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front kills dozens of U.S.-backed rebels as it captures a military compound in northern Syria.²⁸⁷
 - **February 1, 2015:** A bomb explodes on a bus carrying Shiite Lebanese pilgrims to shrines in Damascus, killing at least six and wounding 27. Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.²⁸⁸
 - **January 29, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front attacks a Western-backed Syrian rebel group west of Aleppo.²⁸⁹
 - **January 18, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front claims to have shot down a Syrian army plane, killing 35 people. The cargo plane was carrying food and ammunition.²⁹⁰
 - **January 12, 2015:** After a raid targeting Islamists in Lebanon's prisons, al-Nusra Front threatens captive Lebanese soldiers.²⁹¹
 - **January 10, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for a double suicide attack in Tripoli, Lebanon, killing at least seven people and wounding more than 30 others. Lebanon's interior minister attributes the attack to ISIS.²⁹²
 - **January 8-9, 2015:** Al-Nusra Front militants fight to capture two Shiite villages in Syria but are repelled.²⁹³
 - **December 5, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front kills a captured Lebanese soldier.²⁹⁴
 - **October 5, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front attacks Hezbollah bases in Lebanon, killing 10 of its fighters.²⁹⁵
 - **September 19, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front kills one of 10 Lebanese soldiers held captive, according to a Twitter statement by the group.²⁹⁶
 - **August 28, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front kidnaps 45 U.N. peacekeepers from the Syrian side of the Golan Heights.²⁹⁷
 - **August 27, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front takes control of the Quneitra border crossing with Israel from Syrian forces.²⁹⁸
 - **August 24, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front releases a U.S. hostage kidnapped in 2012.²⁹⁹
 - **June 20, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for a car bomb attack in Syria's Hama province that leaves at least 34 people dead and more than 50 others wounded.³⁰⁰
 - **June 5, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front kills a 14-year-old Syrian boy and throws his body onto the side of the road in east Lebanon, according to security sources.³⁰¹
 - **Late May 2014:** Al-Nusra Front briefly kidnaps and tortures three teenagers in eastern Lebanon over an incident linked to trading cigarettes.³⁰²
 - **May 25, 2014:** Four suicide bombers attack targets in Syria's Idlib province, reportedly on behalf of al-Nusra Front. One of the suicide bombers is a U.S. citizen.³⁰³
 - **May 5, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front and allied rebel groups gain control of the Syrian village of al-Sabha, killing five civilians. Clashes continue between al-Nusra Front and ISIS in the outskirts of Deir el-Zour.³⁰⁴
 - **March 27, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front releases a video showing the group preparing to execute two Saudi fighters.³⁰⁵
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- **March 16, 2014:** A suicide bomber detonates a car bomb in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, killing two people and injuring 14 others. Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.³⁰⁶
 - **March 15, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front fights the Syrian army to defend the former’s hold on Yabroud, a city north of Damascus near the border with Lebanon.³⁰⁷
 - **March 9, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front releases 13 nuns held hostage since December 2013 in exchange for 150 female prisoners.³⁰⁸
 - **March 5, 2014:** U.N. human rights investigators release a report holding al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups responsible for besieging 45,000 people in two Shiite towns in Syria’s Aleppo province.³⁰⁹
 - **March 5, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for firing three rockets in Lebanon, near the border with Syria.³¹⁰
 - **February 22, 2014:** A suicide bomber detonates a car bomb in Lebanon, killing two Lebanese soldiers and one civilian. Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack.³¹¹
 - **February 8, 2014:** An al-Nusra Front operative detonates a car bomb at a checkpoint in al-Jalma village, Hama province, killing 20 members of the security forces and the National Defense Force, according to SOHR.³¹²
 - **February 1, 2014:** An al-Nusra Front suicide bomber detonates a car bomb in eastern Lebanon, killing four people and wounding 18 others.³¹³
 - **January 30, 2014:** Syrian state television claims al-Nusra Front fired on UN workers as they delivered food to people in parts of rebel-held Damascus, where thousands were trapped by a Syrian army siege.³¹⁴
 - **January 27, 2014:** A Saudi-born al-Nusra Front operative blows himself up at a Syrian army checkpoint in the central Hama province, killing 13 people.³¹⁵
 - **January 21, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for a suicide bombing in Beirut that leaves at least four people dead and 34 others wounded.³¹⁶
 - **January 17, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for launching rocket fire into the Lebanese town of Aarsal, killing seven people and wounding 15 others.³¹⁷
 - **January 16, 2014:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for a car bomb attack in the Lebanese town of Hermel that leaves four people dead and more than 40 others wounded.³¹⁸
 - **December 12-13, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front is implicated in an attack that kills at least 15 Syrian civilians from the minority Alawite and Druze sects.³¹⁹
 - **December 11, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front and affiliated groups invade Adra Oumaliyah in the Damascus countryside, kidnapping Alawite men, women, and children.³²⁰
 - **December 10, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front executes six members of the Free Syrian Army rebel group for engaging in violent crimes.³²¹
 - **December 6, 2013:** Fighting breaks out between al-Nusra Front and ISIS in the rebel-held city of Raqqa.³²²
 - **December 2, 2013:** After several days of fighting, al-Nusra Front captures the old city of Maaloula and hold several nuns hostage in a monastery, according to SOHR. Thirteen Greek Orthodox nuns are captured by al-Nusra Front and held until March 2014.³²³
 - **November 26, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front executes of two government soldiers and three “collaborators,” according to a statement published by the group’s media branch.³²⁴
 - **November 20, 2013:** Four suicide bombers detonate car bombs in northern Damascus. Al-Nusra Front and ISIS take credit for the attacks.³²⁵
 - **October 17, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front executes 10 Syrian government soldiers from the Rashidiyah district, according to SOHR.³²⁶
 - **September 10, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front militants shoot 16 Alawites and six Arab Bedouins after storming a village in central Syria.³²⁷
 - **August 25, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front assassinates the governor of Syria’s Hama province in a car bomb attack.³²⁸
 - **July 15, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front attacks a Kurdish patrol and takes a gunman hostage, according to SOHR. Clashes between al-Nusra Front and Kurdish fighters erupt in Ras al-Ain, near the border with Turkey.³²⁹
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- **June 2, 2013:** An al-Nusra Front suicide bomber detonates a car bomb near a police station in Damascus, according to SOHR.³³⁰
 - **June 2013:** Al-Nusra Front militants are blamed for wracking the Lebanese coastal city of Sidon in a battle with the Lebanese army.³³¹
 - **May 16, 2013:** A video released on May 16 shows al-Nusra Front militants executing 11 men for allegedly taking part in massacres on behalf of the Assad regime. The video is believed to have been taken some time in 2012, according to SOHR.³³²
 - **April 22, 2013:** Two al-Nusra Front suicide bombers detonate car bombs in the countryside of Damascus, and other operatives launch mortar and rocket attacks, according to a statement released by the group.³³³
 - **April 12, 2013:** Rebel groups, including al-Nusra Front, battle Syrian forces in the city of Qamishli, bordering Iraq.
 - **March 7-23, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups battle against Assad's forces for control of Syria's 38th division air defense base. The rebels gain control of the base on March 23.³³⁴
 - **February 2013:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for 17 attacks around Damascus in the first half of February, including at least seven bombings.³³⁵
 - **January 29, 2013:** Sixty-five people are found bound and shot dead in Aleppo by Syrian opposition activists, who blame Assad loyalists for the executions. The government blames al-Nusra Front.³³⁶
 - **January 24, 2013:** A car bomb allegedly planted by al-Nusra Front kills eight members of Syria's military intelligence.³³⁷
 - **January 24, 2013:** Masked men believed to be affiliated with al-Nusra Front raid the headquarters of two secular civilian organizations in Saraqib.³³⁸
 - **January 20, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front clashes with pro-government forces near the Wadi al-Deif military base.³³⁹
 - **January 2, 2013:** Al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups attack a military airport near Taftanaz, according to pro-opposition monitoring group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.³⁴⁰
 - **December 31, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front operatives capture American photographer Matthew Schrier.³⁴¹
 - **December 21, 2012:** A video published by al-Nusra Front shows dead bodies on a highway in Hama province. The speaker on the video says that 50 men, allegedly fighters for the Assad regime, were killed in an ambush.³⁴²
 - **December 12, 2012:** Explosions outside Syria's interior ministry leave seven people dead and 50 others wounded, including Syria's interior minister. Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility.³⁴³
 - **December 12, 2012:** Clashes between the Syrian regime and rebel forces, including al-Nusra Front, take place by the Wadi al-Deif military base and the Za'lana checkpoint.³⁴⁴
 - **December 9, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front, leading other rebel groups, violently seizes a government army command center in northern Syria.³⁴⁵
 - **December 9, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front is among armed groups that clash in Tripoli, Lebanon, leaving four dead.³⁴⁶
 - **November 29, 2012:** Footage of a man shooting 10 unarmed prisoners is uploaded to YouTube. The gunman is heard saying, "God is great. Jabhat al-Nusra," referring to al-Nusra Front.³⁴⁷
 - **November 5, 2012:** An al-Nusra Front suicide bomber detonates a car bomb in Syria's Hama province, killing at least 50, according to SOHR.³⁴⁸
 - **November 1, 2012:** Rebels kill 28 soldiers in attacks on three army checkpoints on Syria's main highway. After storming the checkpoints, soldiers are rounded up and executed, according to video footage of the attack. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a pro-opposition monitoring group, claims that al-Nusra Front is responsible for the attacks and executions.³⁴⁹
 - **November 2012:** Over the course of 18 statements on jihadist forums, al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for 45 attacks that reportedly kill dozens, including 60 in a single suicide bombing. Al-Nusra militants clash with Kurds in the border town of Ras al-Ain.³⁵⁰
 - **October 12, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front captures a Syrian missile base near Aleppo, killing 92 government soldiers.³⁵¹
 - **October 9, 2012:** Suicide bombers attack a Syrian intelligence complex outside Damascus. Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility.³⁵²
 - **October 3, 2012:** Three suicide bombers detonate car bombs in Aleppo, killing dozens of people. Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility.³⁵³
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- **September 26, 2012:** A suicide bomber detonates a car bomb near a military command center in Damascus, killing 14 people. Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility.³⁵⁴
- **August 2012:** Al-Nusra Front launches a joint operation with the Sahaba Battalion against a police station in the countryside of Damascus, according to a statement released by the group.³⁵⁵
- **July 19, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front kidnaps, and later kills, Syrian state TV presenter Mohammed al-Saeed, according to a series of statements released by the group on August 3.³⁵⁶
- **June 27, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front attacks a pro-Syrian government TV building, killing seven.³⁵⁷
- **June 24, 2012:** Syrian state TV says that security forces arrested a would-be suicide bomber and member of al-Nusra Front who was planning to detonate a bomb in a mosque the following day.³⁵⁸
- **May 29, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front captures and kills 13 Syrian security officials, according to a statement released by the group.³⁵⁹
- **May 2012:** Al-Nusra Front carries out twin bombings in Damascus, killing 55.³⁶⁰
- **April 27, 2012:** A suicide bomber attacks a mosque in Damascus, killing at least nine people. Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility.³⁶¹
- **March 17, 2012:** Suicide bombers attack two government facilities in Damascus, killing 27 people and wounding nearly 100.³⁶² Al-Nusra Front later claims responsibility.³⁶³
- **February 10, 2012:** Two car bombs explode in Aleppo, killing 28 people. Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack on February 27.³⁶⁴
- **January 6, 2012:** A suicide bomber detonates bus bombs in Damascus, killing 26 people and wounding 63 others. Al-Nusra Front later claims responsibility.³⁶⁵
- **December 23, 2011:** Two car bombs explode outside government security offices in Damascus, killing at least 44 people. Al-Nusra Front later claims responsibility for the attack.³⁶⁶

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Designations:

Designations by the U.S. Government:

- **December 10, 2012:** The Department of State designates al-Nusra Front as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (under Executive Order 13224).³⁶⁷
- **May 14, 2014:** The Department of the Treasury designates al-Nusra Front as a Specially Designated National.³⁶⁸
- **May 31, 2018:** The Department of State amends its listing of al-Nusra Front to include Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as an alias.³⁶⁹

Designations by Foreign Governments and Organizations:

- European Union—listed al-Nusra Front as a sanctioned group of persons, groups, and entities on May 28, 2014.³⁷⁰
- Australia—listed al-Nusra Front as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on June 23, 2013.³⁷¹
- Canada—listed al-Nusra Front as a terrorist entity on November 7, 2013.³⁷²
- France—listed al-Nusra Front as a terrorist entity on May 30, 2013.³⁷³
- New Zealand—listed al-Nusra Front as an organization associated with Al-Qaeda on May 15, 2013.³⁷⁴
- Russia—listed al-Nusra Front as a terrorist group on December 29, 2014.³⁷⁵
- Saudi Arabia—listed al-Nusra Front as a terrorist group on March 7, 2014.³⁷⁶
- Turkey—listed al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organization on June 13, 2014.³⁷⁷
- The United Arab Emirates—listed al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organization on November 15, 2014.³⁷⁸
- United Nations—listed al-Nusra Front as an entity associated with Al-Qaeda on May 30, 2013.³⁷⁹
- The United Kingdom—listed al-Nusra Front as a foreign terrorist group on July 19, 2013.³⁸⁰

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Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)

Associations:

Ties to Extremist Entities:

- **Al-Qaeda**

Al-Nusra Front has a long and proven history of serving as al-Qaeda's loyal affiliate in Syria. In July 2016, however, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri released an audio statement giving al-Nusra Front formal permission to break ties with al-Qaeda if the link was "conflicting with [al-Nusra Front's] unity and working as one body."³⁸¹ Hours later, al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Golani formally severed ties with al-Qaeda's central command.³⁸² Analysts have long surmised that a formal, or at least artificial, break from al-Qaeda could allow al-Nusra Front the opportunity to attract more funding from Gulf states, consolidate local support, and present itself as a legitimate insurgent group in Syria.³⁸³ Even as al-Nusra Front formally declared its independence from al-Qaeda, the group thanked al-Qaeda's leadership for giving "priority to the interests of the people of Al-Sham, their Jihad, [and] their revolution."³⁸⁴

Yet recent insights have brought into question the artificiality of al-Nusra Front's break from al-Qaeda. According to al-Qaeda scholar Cole Bunzel, there has been a "profound controversy in jihadi circles surrounding the nature of [HTS], which some argue has lost its way."³⁸⁵ Among the many critics of HTS is al-Qaeda propagandist [Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi](#). In November 2016, Maqdisi withdrew his support for al-Nusra Front's break from al-Qaeda, stating that his and Zawahiri's approval came only on the condition that any such break would be a "superficial step."³⁸⁶ Instead, Maqdisi claimed that al-Nusra Front's leadership continued to deviate from al-Qaeda's central tenets, stating that they "stayed the course till they made it a real breaking of ties" from al-Qaeda.³⁸⁷ Maqdisi and other al-Qaeda hardliners have denounced HTS's outreach to secular and moderate Islamist rebel factions.³⁸⁸

For years before the announcement, however, al-Nusra Front had reaffirmed its allegiance to Zawahiri, even in the face of competing claims to its leadership. In April 2013, after Baghdadi unilaterally claimed that al-Nusra Front answered to his al-Qaeda in Iraq group (now ISIS), Golani broke ties with ISIS and affirmed its allegiance to al-Qaeda central.³⁸⁹

- **ISIS**

Al-Nusra Front was allegedly formed as an extension of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI, now ISIS), and received a monthly salary from AQI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.³⁹⁰ The relationship between the groups deteriorated in April 2013, when Baghdadi unilaterally announced a merger between the two groups.³⁹¹ The two have since engaged in violent clashes, vying for control over rebel-held territory.

- **Hurras al-Din**

Hurras al-Din's (HaD) core leadership and fighters are comprised of defectors from the former Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front, now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).³⁹² The two groups have a contentious relationship, often hurling accusations at one another while also cooperating on the battlefield. According to interviews carried out by Syria expert Aymenn al-Tamimi, HaD's disputes with HTS are largely at the leadership level and center on HTS's disavowal of al-Qaeda and HaD's loyalty to al-Qaeda.³⁹³

On November 27, 2017, Nusra Front leader Abu Mohammad al-Golani ordered the arrests of Sami al-Oraidi, the former head of the group's Sharia Council; Abu Julaibib al-Urduni, former Nusra Dara'a commander; Iyad Nazmi Salih Khalil, former Jabhat Fateh al-Sham commander; Abu Khadija al-Urduni; and Abu Mussaab al-Libi. All four were prominent Nusra leaders with strong ties to al-Qaeda.³⁹⁴ Following these arrests, several members of HTS resigned, and several large factions threatened to break away, prompting Golani to renew negotiations with al-Qaeda that ultimately led nowhere.³⁹⁵ On December 4, 2017, HTS released Urduni in a bid to ease tensions within the group. Urduni immediately renewed his pledge to al-Qaeda upon release.³⁹⁶

Subsequently, several subgroups of devoted al-Qaeda supporters defected from HTS. On December 5, 2017, HTS faction Jaish al-Badia defected, creating a new Telegram channel devoted to al-Qaeda. Jaish al-Malahem followed three weeks later, also indicating support for al-Qaeda in its new Telegram channel, while on February 7, 2018, a new al-Qaeda-supporting group, Jund al Shariah, announced its formation. On February 28, 2018, these three groups, along with three other small militant factions, announced a merger under the name Hurras al-Din, or Guardians of the Religion, and declared themselves an unofficial affiliate of al-Qaeda. Oraidi and Urduni both joined HaD's Shura council and reportedly begun talks with al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to make HaD the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. HaD remains at odds with HTS.³⁹⁷

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Despite this severe ideological divide, the two groups formed a joint operations room in October 2018.³⁹⁸ HTS and HaD militants use this room to conduct offensive and defensive military actions against Syrian regime forces in Latakia, Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo.³⁹⁹

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Media Coverage:

Qatar and the Nusra Front

Qatar stands accused of supporting and funding the Nusra Front.⁴⁰⁰ The Qatari government helped broker the release of 13 nuns kidnapped by the group in December 2013. It brokered the August 2014 release of American hostage Peter Theo Curtis, as well as the September 2014 release of 45 U.N. peacekeepers.

On the release of the 45 U.N. peacekeepers, Qatar's state-owned Al Jazeera called the peacekeepers "Fijian soldiers" that were kidnapped and "held" for two weeks by the Nusra Front. The article emphasizes that the peacekeepers were reportedly in good condition and notes, "A UN spokesman said in New York on Thursday no ransom had been requested for the Fijian peacekeepers and none was paid."⁴⁰¹

Nonetheless, rumors that Qatar paid the group a ransom fee soon circulated. Qatar's foreign minister denied the claims,⁴⁰² but Israel's Channel 2 news station released video footage allegedly showing that Qatar paid the group \$25 million in ransom.⁴⁰³

Al Jazeera did not cover any follow-ups to the story, including the Channel 2 report and the foreign minister's statement. The Al Jazeera article regarding the release of the peacekeepers ends by highlighting Qatar's seemingly helpful role in the hostage release process: "US officials have said that Qatar played a critical role in persuading the Nusra Front to free American journalist Peter Theo Curtis last month, whom the front had been holding hostage since 2012."⁴⁰⁴

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on the Nusra Front

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) is a pro-opposition monitoring group. A score of mainstream Western and Arabic media outlets rely on SOHR for on-site data. Although the monitoring group is pro-opposition, it tends to make a noticeable distinction between the Nusra Front and other rebel groups, and has acknowledged the group's links to al-Qaeda as far back as November 2012.⁴⁰⁵ The group frequently uses descriptors like "radical"⁴⁰⁶ and "extremist,"⁴⁰⁷ in addition to "al-Qaeda-linked"⁴⁰⁸ and "al-Qaeda loyalist," when describing the Nusra Front.⁴⁰⁹

The Nusra Front Pledges Allegiance to Al-Qaeda

On April 10, 2013, Nusra Front leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani released a statement rejecting Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claim that al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Nusra Front had merged. In the statement, al-Golani pledged his allegiance to al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahri.

The New York Times covered al-Baghdadi's announcement, but did not immediately address al-Golani's response, including his public pledge of fealty to Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁴¹⁰ *The Wall Street Journal* covered both al-Baghdadi's claim and al-Golani's response in one article titled, "Al Qaeda Declares Stake in Syrian Rebellion." Its author, Nour Malas, predicted that al-Qaeda's now-open involvement in Syria would bring a schism to the rebel movement.⁴¹¹

Al Jazeera reported on al-Baghdadi's April 9 declaration,⁴¹² as well as al-Golani's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri.⁴¹³ The article on al-Golani's response seemed to cover the announcement with a number of qualifiers: "A man claiming to be the head of a key group fighting the Syrian government has purportedly pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda..."⁴¹⁴ In covering the Nusra Front's declaration of allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, CNN seemed to temper al-Golani's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda by emphasizing that al-Golani had rejected the merger with al-Qaeda in Iraq and stated his intention to continue cooperating with other rebel groups. The article opens: "A Syrian jihadist group appears to have pledged allegiance to al Qaeda's leader—but also stressed it can achieve a Syrian Islamic state only by working with other rebels, including secularists. The group, al-Nusra Front, also denies an earlier claim that it has merged with Iraq's al Qaeda affiliate, according to an audio message purported to be from al-Nusra general commander Abu Muhammad al-Joulani."⁴¹⁵

Responses to U.S. Designation of the Nusra Front

Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)

On December 10, 2012, the U.S. listed the Nusra Front as an alias for al-Qaeda in Iraq (now ISIS). The designation was met with a mixed response from Western and Arab media outlets. In the aftermath of the designation through December 2012, Al Jazeera published 14 articles that mentioned the Nusra Front. Seven of the articles qualified the U.S. designation by putting ‘terrorist’ or ‘terrorist organization’ in quotation marks.⁴¹⁶ Three referenced the designation without the quotation marks, while the remaining four did not reference the designation at all.⁴¹⁷ In an op-ed titled “The ‘War on Terror’ and the Arab Spring,” Al Jazeera correspondent Mark Perry claimed that the U.S. designation reflects “a profound misunderstanding” of current events in the Arab world. Perry recommends that “Instead of being afraid, we should be filled with pride: These people are so dedicated to the idea of liberty that they're actually fighting for it.”⁴¹⁸ *The New York Times* did not use quotation marks to describe the terrorist designation,⁴¹⁹ nor did *The Wall Street Journal*⁴²⁰ or *The Washington Post*.⁴²¹

In Time’s first article covering the terrorist designation, the author put ‘terrorist’ in quotation marks while describing the designation.⁴²² The article’s sub-headline states, “One of the most effective anti-Assad militias has just been designated a ‘terrorist’ organization by the U.S.”⁴²³

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Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)

Rhetoric:

Abu Muhammad al-Golani, January 14, 2019

“We consider the PKK to be an enemy of this revolution. It controls areas inhabited by large numbers of Sunni Arabs... We are in favor of this region being liberated from the PKK ... We would not stand in the way of an operation against an enemy of the revolution.”⁴²⁴

Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali, January 15, 2019

“HTS can’t strive to obstruct the liberation of Sunni Muslims [east of the Euphrates] from the rule of the atheists [YPG/SDF] even if that is at hands of the secularists [Turkey] less far from the religion.”⁴²⁵

Abu Muhammad al-Golani, August 22, 2018

“The weapons of the revolution and jihad... are a red line on which concessions are unacceptable, and they will never be put on the negotiations table... We urge our people in Aleppo to remain steadfast. The mujahideen will not fail you.”⁴²⁶

Abu Muhammad al-Golani, August 2018

“The red line [ceasefire deal between Turkey and Russia] is never negotiable and will never be put on the negotiating table.”⁴²⁷

Abu Muhammad al-Golani, January 2018

“[We must engage in] a war of ideas, a war of minds, a war of wills, a war of perseverance.”⁴²⁸

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