IDEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF JABHAT AL-NUSRA
IN AL RISĀLAH MAGAZINE

Ioannis E. Kotoulas
Senior Research Fellow
Faculty of Turkish and Modern Asian Studies,
University of Athens

Abstract: This paper shall examine the basic ideological tenets of the Salafist jihadist organization Jabhat al-Nusra, a militant oppositional group active in Syria during the Syrian Civil War and also in Lebanon, as expressed in Al-Risalah magazine, its official publication. Jabhat al-Nusra attempts to differentiate itself from the extremism of the Islamic State and to present itself as the rightful descendant of the jihadist tradition of al-Qaeda.

Keywords: Jabhat al-Nusra, Jabhat Fateh ash-Sham, Syrian Civil War, al-Qaeda, Salafi jihadism, Al Risalah Magazine

1. Historical Outline and Ideology of Jabhat al-Nusra

Jabhat Fateh ash-Sham (‘Front for the Conquest of the Levant’), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra li-ahli ash-Shām, ‘The Victory Front for the People of the Levant’) is a Salafist jihadist terrorist organization active since January 2012 in the Syrian Civil War (2012-present).

Jabhat al-Nusra over the course of the intra-state conflict in Syria has proven to be the most successful among the opposition groups, as it is based on a disciplined force on a military level and a considerable degree of support among the civilian population. The organization has established networks among the local communities and the general population that shall in all probability allow for its continued existence over the next period.

The organization was established by Abu Mohammad al-Julani (b. 1974) un-
der direct orders and with logistical support in personnel, weaponry and funds offered by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Al-Julani assumed the title of general emir of the organization. Jabhat al-Nusra announced its establishment on January 23, 2012 with a video message properly titled 'For the people of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Fields of Jihad'. Its foundation aimed at creating a front to support a presumably repressed Sunni population against its Alawite and Shia enemies, the latter being represented by the Assad regime and Iran. By its reference to having been founded by people that belong to the ‘fields of jihad’ (fi sahat al-jihad), Jabhat al-Nusra declared in an explicit way and from the beginning its global jihadist outlook.

Jabhat al-Nusra developed initially as a branch of al-Qaeda and of the Islamic State of Iraq in Syria, with limited activity during the early months of 2012. As the crisis and conflict in Syria deepened turning into a civil war Jabhat al-Nusra succeeded in being transformed from a small terrorist group to a major actor of the jihadist insurgency. Close cooperation on a political and military level with various opposition groups in conflict zones all over Syria led to the solidification of formal and informal networks of alliances, both ideological and operational. In the late months of 2012 and in 2013 Jabhat al-Nusra successfully rose to be a unifying actor for various opposition groups that were mainly localized and often lacked internal unity and tactical coherence. In this way it was able to draw considerable numbers of supporters and further expanding its Salafist jihadist agenda.

Tensions with the Islamic State of Iraq escalated in April 2013, when the leadership of the Islamic State personified by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi actually demanded that Jabhat al-Nusra made public its ties and allegiance to the Islamic State. Al-Julani refused to acknowledge Baghdadi’s authority and in an attempt to strengthen its position in the Jihadist landscape repeated his allegiance to al-Zawahiri, leader of al-Qaeda. Al-Julani proceeded to adopt a pragmatic strategy in Syria strengthening its operational ties with various jihadi factions active in the country, so as to counteract the ideological appeal of the Islamic State of Iraq and maintain its demographic base.

2014 marked an outright confrontation with the Islamic State of Iraq for control of the jihadist organizations in Syria; this rivalry amounted to open clashes between the two major Salafist jihadist groups. The impressive successes of the Islamic State in Iraq increased its popularity vis-à-vis al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra.

2. Available at: goo.gl/Q9IjVL/.
In the early months of 2015 Jabhat al-Nusra embarked on a project of internal consolidation and widening of its influence in Idlib and Aleppo. A secret letter from al-Zawahiri in early 2015 directed to Jolani laid out the strategic priorities of the organization. Jolani was ordered to “better integrate his movement within the Syrian revolution and its people; to coordinate more closely with all Islamic groups on the ground; to contribute towards the establishment of a Syria-wide Sharia judicial court system; to use strategic areas of the country to build a sustainable Al-Qaeda power base; and to cease any activity linked to attacking the West”.

In July 2016 Jabhat al-Nusra rebranded itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (‘Conquest of the Levant Front’) and split from al-Qaeda in July 2016, possibly with the external guidance of Qatar. In the Fath Al Sham Manifesto Jabhat al-Nusra reiterated its basic beliefs and stated its current creed as follows: “We derive our Aqidah, methodology and fiqh from the Quran and Sunnah as understood by the righteous Salaf from among the companions and tabi’een, may Allah be pleased with them, as well as the devoted Imams and scholars who follow in their footsteps, such as Abu Hanifa, Al Shafi’i, Malik, Ahmad and many others, may Allah have mercy on them all.

2. We fight against the enemy who aggresses religion and the sanctities of the Muslims. We see this as one of the major Fard ‘Ayn obligations and one of the most obligatory forms of establishing the religion. This is not conditioned by any condition, as the enemy has to be fought by all possible means, for nothing is more important than faith and then fighting against such an enemy.

3. We perform jihad for the sake of establishing the governorship of the Shari’ah until Fitna disappears, the religion of Allah reigns supreme across the Earth and the glory and dignity of our Ummah is restored. […] 9. We renounce divisions and quarrels and call to unity and harmony. We regard the unity of the Ummah in general, and that of the mujahids in particular, on righteousness and under one banner as an obligation that should be carried out in compliance with realistic and correct shari’ah principles. 10. We strive for the Word of Allah to be supreme and spend our most precious assets for its sake. We perform jihad by the hand and the tongue, as well as the money, body, heart and possessions until Allah makes it victorious or we die defending it”.

Jabhat al-Nusra shares the main tenets of the global jihadist movement and especially the most active of its manifestations, the Jihadi Salafist ideology (al-
Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya). Jihadi Salafism as an ideological current is a distinct radical manifestation of Sunni Islam. It includes a global network of fighters, scholars, websites and other media applications that spread its views with success. Jihadi Salafism is based on a purist and extremist understanding of the holy Islamic scriptures, the Qur’an and the hadith.8

Typical Sala fi sm constitutes a theological movement in Sunni Islam that aims to purify and restore a perceived initial form of the Islamic faith. The very term Salafi derives from al-salaf al-s. `alih, meaning “the venerable ancestors”, i.e. the first generations of believers in Islam which are seen as models of ideological and tactical emulation. In this context Salafism is typologically connected with fundamentalism, the attempt to restore an initial state of the faith.9 Salafism’s goals include elimination of idolatry (shirk), a term that can be interpreted as including Christianity and also Shi’a Islam and democrats, and affirmation of God’s Oneness (tawhid). Shi’a Muslims are deemed guilty of shirk because they lay emphasis on the family line of the Prophet Muhammad, while democrats are guilty due to their inclusion of human intervention in law making, a privilege assigned exclusively as a lawful prerogative to God according to Salafist ideologues. Salafism makes extensive use of the works of the medieval Islamic scholar Ibn Taumiyya, a major figure of reverence and inspiration for modern Islamic fundamentalism, and the Wahhabi ideological tradition that flourished in the Arab Peninsula since the 18th century.10

The main strategic and political goal of Jabhat al-Nusra is the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in Greater Syria. The latter term refers to an area which includes the modern states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the territory controlled by the Palestinian Authority. This Islamic Caliphate shall be ruled according to the principles of the Islamic law, the shari’ah, the only acceptable form of legal order.11

In a seminal text widely circulated by Jihadists in Syria since the outbreak of

the war, Abdullah bin Muhammad, an al-Qaeda theorist, describes the prevalence of the Jihadist groups among the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime: “Over the course of Syria’s bitter voyage throughout the last year, in one of the most important and sensitive revolutions that has attracted regional and global awareness, the Arab people have begun to intersect with the Jihadists’ belief, specifically al-Qaeda’s, from a decade earlier, that these corrupt regimes must be overthrown by self-sustaining military action, even if it does not serve the interests of the great powers”.12

Jabhat al-Nusra’s tactical aims include the realization of al-Qaeda’s approach, as the latter has been repeatedly expressed over the years by Ayman al-Zawahiri. In this context the organization infiltrates local communities and regional clashes, in an attempt to establish a steady and durable presence in the long run. Thus Jabhat al-Nusra aspires to create a territorial base which shall be used for the long-term creation of the Islamic Caliphate.

In addition to promoting the basic principles and tactics of al-Qaeda Jabhat al-Nusra is also connected to the Syrian version of Jihadi Salafism, as manifested in the teachings and activities of Marwan Hadid and Abu Musab al-Suri. Marwan Hadid (1934-1976) was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who maintained ties with Sayyid Qutb.13 Hadid is actually the founder of modern Syrian jihadism, being the mastermind behind the 1964 Hama Riot against the secular Assad regime and declaring unconditional armed struggle against the non-Islamic Baathist regime.14 Abu Musab al-Suri (b. 1958), a leading theorist of al-Qaeda, has influenced the strategic vision of Jabhat al-Nusra with his emphasis on the role of Syria for the expansion of the global jihadist insurgency. Al-Suri has stated characteristically that “from the blessed Syria in the 1960s was the beginning of the movement of Jihad; in Syria, [jihad] has prospered during the 1980s, and to Syria, [it] returns today, God willing, al-Nusra! Al-Nusra! Oh, brothers of Jihad!”15

The special place of Syria in the propaganda of the organization can be attested in both its affiliation with the Syrian version of Jihadi Salafism, as noted above, and its continued emphasis on the value of waging jihad in the land of Bilad al-Sham. Bilad al-Sham in apocalyptic Islamic tradition is the region where the prophet Issa bin Maryam (Jesus) shall return at the end of times, prior to the

end of the world, so as to lead the faithful armies of Muslim believers against the enemies of Islam.\textsuperscript{16}

Jabhat al-Nusra’s strategy in Syria is based on a long-term perception of the conflict against the secular Baathist regime of Assad. The emphasis laid by the organization on the region of Syria has been manifested already since 2012. At that period Jabhat al-Nusra presented itself as an Islamist movement dedicated to \textit{nusrat ahl al-sham} (support for the people of the Levant). Jabhat al-Nusra adapts to temporary localized circumstances in order to expand its sphere of influence among the Sunni population and steadily pursue its long-term strategic goals, i.e. the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate. In this context of oppositional dynamics Jabhat al-Nusra resorted to careful recruiting of local communities mainly in Aleppo and Idlib in early 2016. Estimates of its success amount to at least 3,000 Syrians that joined the ranks of the organization between February and June 2016.\textsuperscript{17}

2. Ideological Principles of Jabhat al-Nusra in its official publication

The \textit{Al Risalah} Magazine, published since July 2015, is the official publication of Jabhat al-Nusra, part of its media network, which is used to disseminate information on the activities of the organization and to promote its ideas among the Islamic population of Syria.\textsuperscript{18} So far three issues of the magazine have been published, in July 2015, October 2015 and August 2016.\textsuperscript{19}

The publication is characteristic of the more pragmatic and realist approach adopted by Jabhat al-Nusra in relation to the maximalist outlook of the Islamic State on both a tactical and strategic level. In the first issue of Al Risalah a statement by the leader of the organization, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, reads as follows: “The groups in Jaish al Fath are all Muslims, even if they differ somewhat with us. There are some groups which have some mistakes; we overlook these mistakes, because of the enormous severity of the battle”.\textsuperscript{20}

This approach is repeated in a fundamental introductory text of the first issue of Al Risalah published under the title ‘Jaish al Fath, Army of Victory’. The author emphasizes the need for a defensive perception of jihad against the infi-

\textsuperscript{18} The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ed.), The Al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra), September 23 2013, 159-62.
\textsuperscript{19} The issues can be found at the website Jihadology of Aaaron Y. Zelin: http://jihadology.net/category/al-risalah-magazine/.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Al Risalah} 1 (7/2015), 5.

The Rationale of NATO Founding and N.J. Spykman’s Geopolitical Example

Civitas Gentium 6:2 (2018)

55

 Ideological Principles of Jabhat Al-Nusra in Al RisÂlah Magazine

dels that according to him threaten the integrity of the Islamic ummah: “At this stage, it is appropriate to raise an important point (and respond to a misconception). In days such as these of great tyranny and the Ummah as a whole being attacked from all sides, the ruling of Jihad is that of a defensive nature, which has become Fard al-Ayn. The evidences for this are, without doubt or question numerous. Therefore in order to repel the aggression of the kuffar upon the Muslims, it is required for the Muslim Ummah as a whole to rise up and confront this great evil and fitna with force. This means Muslims from the East and the West, righteous and sinful rich and poor, young and old, educated and uneducated, the one with the correct Aqeeda, and so on. Bearing this in mind, we can see that the Mujahideen are not just the ‘elite’ of this Ummah, or the entire Ummah, but rather they are just a part of the greater Ummah”.

In general, Jabhat al-Nusra attempts to portray the Islamic State as a manifestation of Kharijism that by its extremism slanders and vilifies the very notion of jihad, a fundamental component of Islamic beliefs themselves. According to the official publication of the organization, jihad is a beautiful and essential concept that should not be vilified by the atrocities of the Kharijites of the Islamic State that target even Muslims. The propagandists of the Islamic State themselves criticize Jabhat al-Nusra emphasizing its connections to external actors of dubious intentions.

Jabhat al-Nusra’s perception of jihad is based on its Salafist ideological background. Actually continuing Al-Qaeda’s narrative of jihad as a defensive reaction against supposed secular and Western aggression Jabhat al-Nusra presents itself as promoting the notion of ‘defensive jihad’ (jihād al-daf’). This

22. As a term the Arabic fard al-‘ayn refers to the tasks every Muslim is required to perform, for example daily prayer (salat) and the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once (hajj). Islamists include jihad in these required tasks for every believer. See ‘fard’, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, edited by B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht, vol. II: C-G, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1991, 790.
forms a crucial point of differentiation from the Islamic State. The latter also emphasizes the offensive dimension of jihad \((jihād \, al-t. \, alab)\) in accordance with traditional Wahhabi ideological principles. In the Wahhabi tradition offensive jihad is a sanctioned method that contributes to the uprooting of idolatry \((shirk)\).²⁶

Facing the growing popularity of the Islamic State among Islamic populations in the Middle East Jabhat al-Nusra subsequently had to adapt its message to the declaration of the caliphate issued by al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State, in July 2015.²⁷ Jabhat al-Nusra had to actually harden its theological line, so as to adapt to the growing popularity of the Islamic State among Islamists-inclined Muslim populations of the Middle East. The spokespersons of the organization recognized that ISIS as an actor in Iraq and Syria has promoted the concept of jihad, shared also by Jabhat al-Nusra, has energized a considerable part of Muslims; still Jabhat al-Nusra explicitly condemns the notion of takfir promoted by the Islamic State, i.e. the idea that only a minority consist true believers and those deemed as untrue believers should be violently persecuted.²⁸

In an analytical message issued by Sheikh Al-Mujahid Abdullah Al Muhaysini the tactics and relevant ideology of the Islamic State are strongly condemned as being divisive for the Islamic community: “So those who carry their guns for the sake of secular or democratic agendas, they think that they are fighting for a good reason but they are truly misguided. We ask Allah for peace and health. Also, there are those who kill and make takfir on the Muslims unjustly because of a dispute between them and other groups, and they too think that they are fighting for a good cause but they are truly misguided. A clear example of this in our time is the organisation of Dawlat Al-Baghdadi. They think that they are establishing the laws of Allah and that they are on the right path. They think that they are establishing an Islamic khilafa, a khilafa, which our hearts are yearning for, and a khilafa that all the Islamic groups are fighting for. And Allah is a witness that we only fight for the establishment of His laws not only in Ash-Shaam but also all over the World. They have made their khilafa a sword, which splits the Ummah and not a khilafa, which gathers the Ummah together”.²⁹

Jabhat al-Nusra also opposes the strictly military idea of jihad. Jabhat al-Nusra’s intermediate views and differentiation from the tactics applied by the Islamic

²⁷. The Islamic State (ed.), *This is the Promise of Allah*, June 29 2014.
²⁸. See the poem condemning the notion of takfir, directed against Muslims, in Issue 1 of Al Risalah, p. 34. Cf. I.Th. Mazis (ed.), *Geopolitics and Geostrategy of the Syrian Crisis*, op.cit., 48-9.
State are characteristically reflected in the text ‘Khilafah: One Year On’, published in the first issue of Al Risalah. The writer emphasized the careful stance of many Islamic scholars who did not accept the proclamation of the Caliphate by the Islamic State: “As expected, the majority of the well-known and respected scholars of Islam came out and collectively rejected Baghdadi’s khilafah. […] The scholars were very clear that the newly announced khilafa was illegitimate and that Baghdadi had no right to make such a claim. However, to our great surprise, the scholars were rejected and slandered, as the ignorant youth labeled them as “old, senile men”, who were “imprisoned”, “oppressed by the tawaghit” and had no evidence for their claims”. Some even went as far as saying “we don’t need scholars, we have Qur’an and Sunnah”! Which is a rather ill-Advised statement, given that Allah, The Most High, tells us in the noble Qur’an: “So ask people who know the Scripture, if you do not know” [21:7].

The same approach is repeated in the aforementioned text ‘The Keys of Jannah’ in the first issue of Al Risalah: “So why has this khilafa killed the good scholars and their students? Why has this khilafa killed those who were amongst the first to disbelieve in false deities (kufr bit Taghut) and have Iman with Allah? What is the matter with this khilafa when it describes the scholars, who have laid the foundations and rules of Jihad, as being the leaders of misguidance? What is the matter with this khilafa when it describes the leaders of Jihad, who have sacrificed and given their lives to Jihad, as being decrepit shuyukh like Sheikh Al Mujahid Ayman al-Zawahiri, may Allah protect him and keep him firm”.

The authors in Al Risalah steadily blame the actions of the Islamic State and especially the targeting of Westerners living or working in Iraq and Syria, as a tactic that draws unnecessary attention to the Islamic world and causes Western military intervention. Referring specifically to the execution of the English hostage Alan Henning, a humanitarian aid worker, in October 2014, Al Risalah wryly observes that the “execution of Alan Henning has been of very questionable benefit to this Ummah, as it has simply reinforced this opinion amongst the kuffar, that Islam is a merciless and barbaric religion”.

Jabhat al-Nusra also condemns the use of chemicals by the military forces of the Islamic State against Muslim civilians, members of the umma. According to Jabhat al-Nusra the Islamic State claims falsely to represent and protect Muslims, as manifested by these atrocities. In this way Jabhat al-Nusra aims to discredit the Islamic State.

State among the Islamic population of Syria and Iraq and to delegitimize its appeal over a broad part of the population of these two states.34

Jabhat al-Nusra repeatedly attempts to present itself as a moderate organization that clearly does not share the extremism of the Islamic State, still is true to the Islamic scripture which it evokes: "It is a pity that many of the Muslims of toady neither believe nor want to participate in the jihad in Syria (and other places across the globe) and that the image of certain groups has been tarnished by the Western media (and sell out scholars). Therefore, it is one of our aims to repair the damage done and to set things right – to show the world that we, the Mujahideen, are largely misunderstood and that we are not whom they are made to think we are. At the same time, we’d like to make it abundantly clear that there will be no compromise. In no way, shape or form are we willing to water down our Islam or become lenient toward our enemies. Unlike the extremists and the Murji’ah we take the middle path, as Allah tells us in the glorious Qur’an: And thus We have made you a moderate nation that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you (2:143)".35

Jabhat al-Nusra seeks to appear as the legitimate continuation of al-Qaeda’s ideology and tactics.36 In a text under the title ‘This is al-Qaeda. Or Have They Forgotten?’, a rhetorical question addressed to the Islamic State, the anonymous author outlines the main principles of al-Qaeda’s strategy in distinctive contradiction to the barbaric tactics applied by the Islamic State: “Their methodology was not that of making takfir upon those who differ with them, with doubtful evidences, and after that sending cars filled with explosives and armed men who plunge in their houses! And their methodology was not that of killing women and children of the disbelievers on purpose! Let alone the killing of Muslim women and children, or even the Mujahideen on purpose! Their methodology was not that of rushing towards an Islamic state and positions and fighting over the crumbs of this world”.37 This attempt to continue the jihadist legacy of al-Qaeda is evident also in the first pages of Issue 3, where a statement by Ayman al-Zawahiri is outlined as a fundamental guiding principle of the organization.38

Jabhat al-Nusra differentiates from the fervent militarist activism of the Islamic State, demonstrating its respect for the various Islamic scholars. In the text ‘The Blood of Martyrs, the Ink of Scholars’ the anonymous author condemns the tendency displayed by followers of Islamic State to dismiss any charges of incompatibility with the holy scriptures of the Islamic tradition: “[…] it is remarkably strange that a large group of this Ummah still haven’t realized that not consulting the responsible people leads to great chaos and mischief. What’s more astonishing is that

34. ‘From the Kihlafah with Love’, Al Risalah 2, 55-6.
35. ‘Editor’s Note’, Al Risalah 2 (10/2015), 3.
36. ‘This is al-Qaeda. Or Have they Forgotten?’, Al Risalah 1 (7/2015), 27-8.
37. ‘This is al-Qaeda. Or Have they Forgotten?’, op.cit., 28.
they have decided to set aside the scholars and debate the general concerns of the Ummah among themselves on social media”.39

Copying the contents of Dabiq magazine issued by the Islamic State since July 2015,40 Al Risalah includes in the last pages of each issue a section called shahada series. This section is a tribute to Islamist activists and terrorists who are perceived as martyrs of Islam.41 According to the introductory remarks on this series: “[...] we present to you, by the permission of Allah, short biographical accounts from the land of Shaam, about those who have sacrificed their wealth and themselves in the path of Allah, seeking His pleasure, proceeding us in attaining the greatest attainment and success...Shahada”.42

3. Conclusions

Jabhat al-Nusra, now known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, has risen to become the most successful Islamist oppositional group active in Syria during the ongoing Syrian Civil War. On an ideological level Jabhat al-Nusra aims to differentiate itself from the violent practices and maximalist rhetoric of the Islamic State, by promoting a defensive perception of jihad and condemning the atrocities of the Islamic State, especially against the civilian Muslim population of the Middle East.

Jabhat al-Nusra attempts to appear as a legitimate continuation of the jihadist activist tradition of al-Qaeda and on an ideological level of traditional Salaﬁsm. Its official publication, the Al Risalah magazine, copies to a degree the outlay and contents of Dabiq, the official publication of the Islamic State. Al Risalah lays emphasis on the notion of defensive jihad, of creating and expanding local networks in Syria, attempting to present Jabhat al-Nusra as a genuine socially based movement that acts in accordance with the Islamic tradition and the modern Salaﬁst movement, as the latter is exemplified by the jihadist ideological tradition and activity of al-Qaeda.43

39. ‘The Blood of Martyrs, the Ink of Scholars’, Al Risalah 2 (10/2015), 38.
42. ‘And What Do You Know about Those Who Love Death?’, Al Risalah 1 (7/2015), 40.
Bibliographical References

Primary sources


Secondary sources


Cafarella, Jennifer, Harleen Gambhir & Katherine Zimmerman, Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength, Institute for the Study of War, February 2016


Quilliam Foundation (ed.), Jabhat al-Nusra li-ahl al-Sham min Mujahedi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad: A Strategic Briefing, 8/1/2013

The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ed.), The Al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra), Jerusalem 23/9/2013