

Alternate names: Jabhat al-Nusra (JN, JAN)
The Nusra Front
The Support Front

Flag:



Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) is a Sunni extremist armed group fighting against the Assad regime and is al-Qaeda's recognized affiliate in Syria. The group is active in almost all of Syria's governorates and is led by a secretive commander known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani. JN's stated goals are to topple the Assad regime and establish an Islamic caliphate in Syria.

Jabhat al-Nusra was established in mid-2011 by a small vanguard force sent to Syria by al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). JN accelerated the escalating violence in Syria by launching well-organized, successful attacks against Assad's forces before many armed opposition groups were fully established. While JN never hid its Salafi-Jihadist ideology, it kept its ties to al-Qaeda a secret, provided public services, and did not impose harsh governance measures known to provoke local backlash. Although the U.S. designated JN as an al-Qaeda affiliate in December 2012, JN did not acknowledge this fact until it was outed by ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi when he announced that ISI was morphing into ISIS, expanding into Syria, and subsuming JN back under its umbrella in April 2013. This announcement sparked a dispute between JN and ISIS, and after months of internal mediation, al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri announced that JN would remain as the sole al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria under Jolani, and ISI should stand down in Syria and continue to operate in Iraq under Baghdadi. Baghdadi refused this ruling, choosing instead to eschew its al-Qaeda ties and embark on an aggressive expansion campaign in both countries.

Jabhat al-Nusra has a relatively small fighting force, with [fewer than 10,000](#) men. Group membership is believed to be [majority Syrian](#), with a minority foreign fighter contingent. JN is funded and armed through support from al-Qaeda, donors from the Gulf, spoils of war, and control of local resources in Syria. Conflicting [streams of thought](#) within JN's senior leadership appear to be torn between their al-Qaeda roots and a pragmatic desire to be more moderate and integrate with the rest of the Syrian opposition. This tension has played out in the group's evolution since 2011.

Unlike its more aggressive progenitor, JN has [publicly downplayed](#) the more extreme parts of its ideology and played nice with most of Syria's other armed groups. In areas it is active JN has preferred to quietly integrate its operatives into local governance structures rather than impose complete control. It wins the hearts and minds of local populations by providing key services like electricity, water, and bread. These actions suggest a high degree of [discipline](#) and pragmatism in pursuit of long-term objectives. However, there have been deviations from this strategy: in late 2014 JN seized parts of Idlib province from U.S.-linked moderates and established the type of unilateral control that it has avoided elsewhere. Residents have [reported](#) JN carrying out harsh punishments in accordance with sharia law.

JN's relationships with other rebels range from close strategic cooperation to highly antagonistic, with most falling somewhere in between. Often JN and other groups fighting on the same fronts against the regime coordinate tactically through joint operations rooms. JN has presented a conundrum for the rest of the Syrian opposition, which desire its assistance in fighting Assad, but disagree with its ultimate political goals. In the short term, it appears that as long as JN continues to fight Assad and be civil with the Syrian populace, it will continue to be tolerated.

The only rebel groups JN has shown no tolerance for are those openly supported by the U.S., which it accuses of [supporting the Assad regime](#). When the first group of 56 anti-ISIS fighters trained by the U.S.'s flawed \$500 million train and equip program were sent into Syria in July 2015 they were quickly dismantled by JN, which killed or [kidnapped more than half](#) and scattered the remainder. The U.S. government has repeatedly pointed to rebel collaboration with JN as a justification for not doing more to support moderate opposition groups. As part of the U.S.-led Coalition air campaign started last year to combat ISIS, U.S. jets [launched several strikes](#) against JN, targeting an embedded group of high-level al-Qaeda operatives that the U.S. has dubbed the "[Khorasan Group](#)."

As JN rebounds from setbacks caused by ISIS's aggression and Coalition airstrikes, all signs indicate that JN is committed to the pursuit of its long-term objectives in Syria. Despite attempts by countries like Qatar to pressure JN to renounce its al-Qaeda affiliation in exchange for open support, JN's loyalties to al-Qaeda have remained firm, suggesting that in the future the group will abandon its more moderate inclinations and reveal the full extent of its ambitions for Syria and beyond.