

Jabhat al-Nusra Tries to Look Like a Moderate Terrorist Group



An al-Nusra fighter holds his group flag as he stands in front of the governorate building in Idlib province, north Syria. Photo Twitter

“Our war is not one of vengeance.... Our faith is one of compassion. We are not murderers. We fight only those who fight against us.”

These are not words of a moderate freedom fighter. They were, in fact, spoken by Abu Muhammad al-Golani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate.

During an exclusive [interview](#) with Qatar-based Al-Jazeera TV on 27 May 2015, Golani claimed that al-Nusra had no intention of targeting the West or religious minorities, at least for the time being, and was interested only in overthrowing the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

The statement was in striking contrast with al-Qaeda’s ideology, which has long centred on targeting the West and on sectarian killings. Many observers have read Golani’s words as an attempt to present

al-Nusra as a more moderate group than the **Islamic State** (IS), which he described in the interview as “illegitimate,” denouncing its practices.

Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front), was established in January 2012. **Reportedly** supported by **Qatar**, Jabhat al-Nusra had about 15,000 fighters in mid-2014. Seventy percent of al-Nusra’s men are Syrians, according to Golani himself; he said that the rest came from all over the world, mainly from the Arab world, former Soviet states, and Australia. Today, the group has become part of an alliance of various armed **opposition factions** called Jaish al-Fateh (Army of Conquest). It is reported that **Saudi Arabia**, Qatar, and **Turkey** are the main supporters of Jaish al-Fateh, which, in April and May of 2015, made major advances in northern Syria.

“Golani was trying to reassure the international community,” says Ahmed Ban, an Egyptian expert on Islamic groups. “He sought to come up with a different discourse concerning the religious minorities and to convince the public that al-Nusra is different from IS.”

Several experts also believed that Golani’s statements were part of a broad-based public relations campaign begun earlier by al-Nusra. “This PR campaign is actually nothing new; it started a long time ago,” says Syrian political analyst Muhannad Fayyad. “al-Nusra entered the alliance of Jaish al-Fateh which brought it together with relatively moderate opposition groups, relaxed its ban on smoking and handed out food in the areas it controls; it also publicly punished its own fighters who harassed residents, and treated well Christian nuns whom it held until they were returned in a prisoner swap.”

On 10 June, shortly after that interview was aired, Nusra was involved in a terrible incident. The group’s fighters **shot dead** at least 20 civilians from the Druze minority in the northwestern village of Qalb al-Lawzeh. It was reported that one al-Nusra commander tried to confiscate a house belonging to a Druze man who was, he claimed, loyal to the Syrian government, and when the man’s relatives tried to stop the commander, he ordered their execution.

Tamkeen

The incident provoked much criticism against Jabhat al-Nusra and increased scepticism of its leadership. “Golani made it clear that Nusra is an affiliate of al-Qaeda, and we have seen the way al-Qaeda treated Christians and Yazidis in Iraq, before IS even existed,” Syrian columnist Eiad Sharbaji says. “Golani cannot be trusted. He is now applying a concept known in Jihadist Salafism as *tamkeen*, whereby jihadists temporarily tolerate their surroundings until they grow stronger and better able to enforce their views and show their real face.”

This opinion was shared by Syrian-Palestinian intellectual Salameh Keileh, who presumed Golani’s statements were a mere tactic. “Nusra might be trying to do what IS did in Iraq, fighting alongside other groups against the government until they gained ground. They then declared **a caliphate** in the areas in Western Iraq that, together, they had captured, displaced Christians, arrested Yazidis, and practised all kinds of killing.”

Over the past few months, observers have speculated that Washington might have provided support to Jaish al-Fateh, which includes Jabhat al-Nusra. They argue that the US might have swallowed the bait and is now considering cooperation with Nusra against IS. So far, however, the official US stance seems firmly in opposition to the group, which Washington **designated** in 2012 as a terrorist organization.

“We condemn the Nusra Front’s attack of June 10 against a Druze village in Idlib,” US State Department spokesperson Jeff Rathke told reporters, commenting on the Qalb al-Lawzeh incident. “Contrary to Nusra leader al-Golani’s recent claim that Nusra would not harm religious minorities, this

terrorist group has shown once again that it continues to commit a range of crimes against the Syrian people.”

But Sharbaji still thinks that the United States might extend a hand to Nusra if it felt the need to do so. “The United States negotiated with Taliban leaders at the same time it was fighting them,” he says. “Washington is known for being pragmatic. Examples include the [Iran-Contra scandal](#) and its intelligence cooperation with the regime of Bashar al-Assad while waging a diplomatic war against him. Therefore, I cannot exclude the possibility that the US might cooperate with Nusra, at least temporarily, in order to get rid of IS.”

On 13 June, al-Nusra said it would prosecute the members involved in the killings in Qalb al-Lawzeh. In an official statement published on Twitter, al-Nusra sought to allay fears of further attacks on minorities, saying that some of its members acted “in clear violation of the leadership’s views.”

Nevertheless, al-Nusra’s efforts to repair its image seemed late and poorly executed. “The late response could indicate that there is a crack within the al-Nusra leadership,” says Wael Sawah, executive director of the Istanbul-based [The Day After Association](#). “There might be a pragmatic current inside al-Nusra which is trying to distance the group from IS and terrorism. However, such a current is not clear and cannot be counted on.”

It has been argued on social media that Golani’s recent statements, in addition to other gestures by his group, may be a foundation for a later full rejection of terrorism and complete integration in the Syrian freedom revolution, but it remains to be seen whether such argument will prove correct. “al-Nusra and its partners will remain terrorist outsiders as long as they include foreign fighters and claim that religion, not citizenship, is what Syrians have in common,” says Sawah. “If al-Nusra, or any radical group, wants to be part of building a civil, national, democratic Syria, they need to exclude all foreign fighters and embrace a programme based on human rights and elections and view all Syrians as equal citizens before the law. Only then will they be widely welcomed.”