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From Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fateh a-Sham:

Can a Leopard Change its Spots?

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In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of the jihadist organization “the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” (ISIS), and in a unilateral decision, attempted – unsuccessfully – to subordinate Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, to his new organization. In June 2014, Baghdadi bet everything on one roll of the dice, and announced the establishment of the “Islamic State” and his appointment as caliph. Now it is the turn of al-Qaeda’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to place his bet: on July 28, 2016, Zawahiri’s deputy, Ahmed Abu al-Kheir, gave his blessing to al-Nusra’s name change, to Jabhat Fateh a-Sham (Front for the Conquest of Syria). With the name change, announced by organizational leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani, comes the severance of all affiliations with any external groups, and as such, the organization’s formal alliance with al-Qaeda.

It could be that Zawahiri had no other choice but to take this gamble. Kheir claimed that the move was prompted by an analysis of the situation in Syria and the desire to advance the jihad in Syria. However, it appears that the move addressed both organizational constraints within Jabhat al-Nusra, and external constraints – reports about the imminent joint intentions of the United States and Russia to eliminate the organization, and certainly prevent it from taking part in any future arrangement in Syria. Julani’s statements in this regard attest to the diverse approaches within his organization, which profess to protect Syria’s citizens but have failed to do so. They also signal his desire to test the international coalition, which bombs his organization from the air because of its Salafi jihadist association, and in the process causes many Syrians suffering and hardship. The tone of Julani’s remarks conveyed his doubts as to the likelihood of his new organization being recognized as a partner by the international coalition fighting in Syria within the framework of the broad Syrian-Islamic coalition.

The public blessing given by al-Qaeda’s leadership to the formal dissociation of al-Nusra from al-Qaeda’s network of alliances ostensibly bespeaks a waiver on its key access route to the Syrian theater and its influence in this arena, which constitutes, according to Zawahiri, the focal point of the campaign by the world community of Muslims against

“Western conspiracies.” Furthermore, this step is liable to set a dangerous precedent for al-Qaeda in its efforts to unify and stabilize the network of partnerships forged with its formal allies, which until now included al-Nusra: other organizations may follow suit, if they feel circumstances compel them to do so. Additional split-offs might hasten the downfall of al-Qaeda and strengthen the Islamic State in the competition over leadership of the global jihad.

Al-Nusra’s move was almost certainly coordinated with al-Qaeda in advance. Evidence lies in an audio message published by Zawahiri on May 7, 2016, in which he explicitly discusses such a possibility and indirectly already gives his blessing to the process. His statements suggest that the move occurred with mutual consent and understanding. Zawahiri announced that the split serves a common ultimate objective acceptable to al-Qaeda and all of its partners, including al-Nusra, and that at this critical phase of the campaign in the Levant, solidifying the ranks among the Muslim forces fighting in Syria to remove Assad is far more important than a “break” or suspension of the formal alliance between them. Zawahiri promised that his organization will serve as a “support front” for all Muslim fighters in Syria and that “organizational affiliation will never be an obstacle on the road to unity...al-Qaeda is part of the world community of Muslims and is not its ruler.” Zawahiri emphasized once again that the objective of al-Qaeda and its affiliates is to build an Islamic emirate in Syria based on *sharia*. At the same time, Zawahiri warned that a move such as the one taken by al-Nusra is liable to be exploited by the international coalition to divide Muslims, force them to surrender under humiliating and degrading conditions, and lead to the establishment of a democratic regime in Syria. He took this opportunity to reiterate his distance from Baghdadi, touting his unifying leadership as opposed to Baghdadi’s destructive, divisive tactics, while underscoring his consistent stance against *fitna* (civil strife), which is considered one of the worst sins in Islam and which justifies, inter alia, accepting the announcement of al-Nusra’s exit.

Al-Nusra’s severance from al-Qaeda reflects the internal tension between its identity as an Islamic-Syrian resistance organization and its Salafi jihadist identity. The organization that from the outset, in coordination with its commanders outside of Syria, refrained from selecting a name that would associate it directly with the al-Qaeda brand was diligent about embedding itself among the fighting forces in Syria since 2012 when it was founded. It recruited mainly Syrians to its ranks and cooperated with other organizations in Syria, including secular forces; it focused most of its efforts on fighting Assad’s army and ISIS, and subsequently, the Islamic State. Against this background, perhaps a convergence of additional factors tipped the scales in favor of al-Nusra’s dissociation from al-Qaeda. On the one hand are the understandings reached between the United States and Russia with regard to cooperation against al-Nusra, concurrent with the battle

against the Islamic State. On the other hand are the pressures on the part of al-Nusra's supporters in the Gulf states and factions under its leadership demanding the removal of the obstacle that prevents al-Nusra from being accepted as a partner in proceedings towards military, economic, and political arrangements in Syria.

The announcement of al-Nusra's break from al-Qaeda triggered mixed responses from Islamic clerics among al-Qaeda supporters: there were calls for unity in the spirit of Islamic law, which serves as a common denominator that prevails over any formal separation; at the same time, there were calls warning of an American plot to take over Syria and gain an upper hand due to the factionalization of the forces. Dr. Hani al-Sibai, one of the chief Islamic clerics supporting al-Qaeda, even promised that no rivalries would develop between al-Qaeda and al-Nusra as had occurred between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, saying, "A believer will not be bitten twice by the same snake."

At this stage, it is difficult to assess if and how the rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra will inject new content into the organization's activities and mode of operations, or whether the move will lead the international coalition to accept the new organization as a partner in the political processes underway toward stabilizing a ceasefire in Syria and designing a solution for the country. Even if the international powers recognize Jabhat Fateh a-Sham as a partner, it is unclear how its leadership will contribute to the political process and what principles will be applied in the contacts with it. After all, al-Nusra considers mere contacts with the Western and Arab powers as heresy. Indeed, the severance from al-Qaeda, coupled with Julani's rhetoric, does not signal any willingness thus far on the part of the "rebranded al-Nusra" to adopt the rules or the spirit of the game to reach a political solution in Syria.

If the United States and Russia would eventually respond favorably to Jabhat Fateh a-Sham's organizational-managerial shift and suspend their military operations against it, it will be possible to challenge the new organization and demand that it institute additional measures that reflect its de facto departure from the policies that Jabhat al-Nusra implemented until now, as a precondition to the inclusion of Jabhat Fateh a-Sham among the partners to the political process in Syria. Such demands are liable to cause a rift in the new organization and spur al-Qaeda supporters to return to the Salafi-jihadist camp. And in any event, it is clear that al-Qaeda, under Zawahiri's leadership, does not truly intend to relinquish its influence in the Syrian arena. Notwithstanding the formal annulment of vows by Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda still has many loyalists among the ranks of the new organization and among the groups operating in its surroundings. These loyalists will continue to represent al-Qaeda, espouse its values, and try to fulfill the vision of the formation of the emirate – a vision that is also shared by Julani himself. Therefore, at this

stage, the Salafi-jihadist “leopard” inside Syria and elsewhere has likely not changed its spots.

The security and intelligence agencies in Israel understand that a-Nusra’s rebranding and the announcement of its severance from al-Qaeda are meaningless in light of the threats conveyed in the latest speeches of Zawahiri and Julani alike: in his last speech Zawahiri reiterated that he longs for the day when the mujahidin will stand at Israel’s borders, conquering it and converting it to Islam. Zawahiri thus affirms that he has not relinquished his well-advertised vision regarding the fate of Israel, and that he will continue to act to realize it through his forces and their partners in Syria. Many who share his vision are among the ranks of the new organization. The threat was also conveyed in Julani’s statements about the principles of the new organization, whereby he has not surrendered his vision for *sharia* in the future Syria. Julani’s intimated threat against Israel is clear. Only if the organization or pragmatic factions inside it change their ways and toe the line on the matter of the political process in Syria under the conditions of the coalition headed by the United States, might Israel perhaps find pragmatic elements among them who will detach themselves from this vision, and be prepared to reach understandings and arrangements regarding the future shared border.

