



## Jaish al-Fatah



The Army of Conquest or Jaish al-Fatah, abbreviated JaF, is a joint command center of Islamist Syrian rebel factions participating in the Syrian Civil War. The alliance was formed in March 2015 under the supervision and coordination of Saudi cleric Dr Abdullah al-Muhaysini. It consists of Islamist rebel factions mainly active in the Idlib Governorate, with some factions active in the Hama and Latakia Governorates. In the course of the following months, it seized most of Idlib province. It is actively supported by Saudi Arabia.

In an October 2015 publication, the Washington D.C.-based Institute for the Study of War considered Jaish al-Fatah as one of the "powerbrokers" in Idlib, Hama, Daraa and Quneitra provinces, though not in Damascus province, being primarily "anti-regime" and "anti-Hezbollah" but not necessarily "anti-ISIS".

At its founding, Jaish al-Fatah contained seven members, three of them - al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and Jund al-Aqsa - were directly connected to al-Qaeda or have a similar ideology. With Ahrar al-Sham being the largest group, al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham together were reported to represent 90 percent of the troops. Another prominent Islamist faction in the operations room was the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria-linked Sham Legion (Faylaq Al-Sham). Jaish al-Fatah collaborated with more moderate Free Syrian Army factions such as Knights of Justice Brigade.

The coalition's initial success has been attributed to its strong coherence, with the name of individual factions being forbidden when the group conducts joint operations.

Jaish al-Fatah declared its formation on 24 March 2015. On the same day, a pro-opposition source claimed that about fifty Syrian government soldiers defected to the new operations room. The Army of Conquest captured Idlib City on 28 March 2015. In the following months, they

spearheaded an offensive that drove out government forces from almost all of Idlib Governorate. Following this success, additional branches of the Army of Conquest were established in other parts of Syria.

The Army of Conquest coalition was partially modelled upon the success of the Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army, and in turn newer coalitions, like the Battle of Victory, were modelled on the Army of Conquest.

In early May 2015, the Army of Conquest formed a new branch in Western Qalamoun, called Jaish al-Fatah - al-Qalamoun. On 1 October 2015, after defeats by pro-Assad forces, Jaish al-Fatah al-Qalamoun was replaced by an independent faction called Saraya Ahl al-Sham, which aims to unite all rebel factions in Western Qalamoun.

Also in June, the al-Nusra Front issued a statement calling on the opposition in the Eastern Ghouta area of Damascus to form a similar coalition, but this call was rejected by the Unified Military Command of Eastern Ghouta, a grouping which includes the most prominent factions in the area.

In October 2015 Army of Conquest members al-Nusra Front and Ahrar ash-Sham (also a member of the Unified Military Command of Eastern Ghouta), along with other groups formed Jund al-Malahm, an operations room in the Eastern Ghouta area of Damascus, in direct competition with the Unified Military Command of Eastern Ghouta operations room. Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, which is another military council member also joined this new operations room.

On 20 June, the Army of Conquest in the southern region was established and immediately took part in the campaign in Quneitra, the coalition includes Ahrar al-Sham Movement, Jabhat al-Nusra, Fath al-Sham Coalition, Ihyaa al-Jihad Brigade, Mujhedi Nawa Gathering, Asoud al-Tahid Brigade, Ansar al-Haqa Brigade and the Islamic brigade of al-Omarein.

On July 2016, the Jaish Fateh al-Sham, formed from former Al-Nusra Front members, restructured the group further, and now starting to send propaganda to support their offensives across Aleppo.

## Restructuring

On 23 October 2015, Jund al-Aqsa announced a split from Jaysh al-Fatah, reportedly due to disagreements with Ahrar al-Sham over the application of Islamic law in areas under their control. Following this development, there were unconfirmed reports that al-Nusra Front, in an act of solidarity with Jund al-Aqsa, left the coalition, or that Jund al-Aqsa would be rejoining Jaysh al-Fateh. In January 2016, the Sham Legion announced it was leaving the group, ostensibly to redeploy its forces to Aleppo, but also due to tensions with Jund al-Aqsa.

In May 2016, the Army of Conquest announced it was restructuring, ending ties with Jund al-Aqsa while readmitting the Sham Legion. It was also joined by the Turkistan Islamic Party, a jihadist group composed of Uyghurs from western China.

On 24 September 2016, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki joined the group. Several days later Suqour al-Sham Brigade joined the group.

On 9 October, Jund al-Aqsa rejoined Al-Nusra Front, thus rejoining the Army of Conquest.

On 15 November, Liwa Ahrar Souriya left the Hamza Division having only joined in September, and joined Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, thus by extension, joining the Army of Conquest. Kata'ib Suyuf Al-Shahba & Jaysh al-Shamal also joined Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki.

## Campaign of violence

On 11 June 2016, the al-Nusra Front killed at least 20 Druze villagers in Qalb Lawzeh in Idlib province.

On 12 May 2016, rebels led by al-Nusra Front and Ahrar ash-Sham massacred 42 civilians and seven NDF militiamen while kidnapping up to 70 people after taking control of the Alawite village of Zara'a in Southern Hama.

On 30 October 2016, 38 people, including 14 children, were killed by rebel rocket fire on government-held district of Aleppo.

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