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## Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

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*Published in:*  
Conflict in the Modern Middle East

2020

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Marei, F. G., & Hooda, S. S. (2020). Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In J. K. Zartman (Ed.), *Conflict in the Modern Middle East: An Encyclopedia of Civil War, Revolutions, and Regime Change* (pp. 120). ABC-CLIO.

*Total number of authors:*

2

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## Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

An extremist Salafist militant group that has been fighting in the Syrian Civil War since 2011. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS; Organization for the Liberation of the Levant) formed as an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Syria. It emerged from the January 28, 2017, merger of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS)—previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN; or Al-Nusra Front)—with some other militias. Abu Muhammad Al-Golani began the Al-Nusra Front as a franchise and later spinoff from al-Qaeda. It claims to provide support—*nusra*—for “oppressed Muslims in Syria.” The group conducts combat against the Syrian government and engages in noncombat activities in rebel-held areas. It appeals to a global community of zealous Salafi Islamists for additional fighters and financial support. They provide security and welfare services, deliver essential commodities, and administer food-basket programs in areas JAN controls. Its propaganda material mixes messages of commitment to combat with themes and vocabulary drawn from liberal humanitarianism, in an effort to evoke a global, militant, Islamist “duty of care” and “responsibility to protect.”

Jabhat Al-Nusra competed with the Islamic State (Daesh) in Syria, in spite of efforts by mediators to prevent armed confrontation. In 2013, al-Golani publicly rejected an overture by his Daesh counterpart, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Despite the operational and strategic divergence between JAN and Daesh, discerning the difference on the ground becomes difficult. However, JAN recruits foreign fighters and establishes institutions for a temporary purpose, in contrast to the efforts of Daesh to establish a durable caliphate.

While al-Qaeda’s influence persists, al-Golani recreated Jabhat al-Nusra as JFS to disavow links with external parties, al-Qaeda included. Until late 2016, JFS was close to Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (AS), which exercises similar military strength as JFS in northern Syria. Due to reports that talks between the two groups broke down, many AS members defected to JFS, and later to HTS. Abu Mohammad al-Golani, the first head of Jabhat al-Nusra, continues to lead HTS. The fighters of JAN/JFS hold the greatest operational capability of the groups in the alliance, and they now serve in the organization’s senior leadership. The U.S. government, along with other countries, has designated HTS a terrorist organization. Estimates say HTS has between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters, and the group has conducted operations primarily in northern Syria, from its headquarters in the Idlib Governorate.

*Fouad Gehad Marei and Samanvya Singh Hooda*

*See also:* Al-Assad, Bashar; Al-Qaeda Central; Islamic State (Daesh); Islamism; Syrian Arab Republic

### Further Reading

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### Citation:

Marei, Fouad Gehad, and Samanvya Singh Hooda. 2020. "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)." In: *Conflict in the Modern Middle East: An Encyclopedia of Civil War, Revolutions and Regime Change*, ed. by Jonathan K. Zartman, 120. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC - CLIO.