

Jihadi group rebranding is an opportunity for Syria

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In an extraordinary turnaround, the second largest Islamist extremist group fighting the Syrian regime appears to have changed its name – and maybe its tune. [Jabhat al-Nusra](#), which represented al-Qaeda in Syria, has been given permission from the parent organisation's chief Ayman al-Zawahiri to cut the links between the two and try to enter the mainstream of resistance to President Bashar al-Assad. It has changed its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, or the Conquest Front of Syria.

Last month, the Syrian group's leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, appeared in a video for the first time, saying the split was intended to remove any "pretext" for the US and Russia to continuing bombing Islamist rebels.

Some western experts have seen the move as nothing more than a [bid for power by the jihadist movement against Isis](#), although others have instead predicted a coming [merger between Isis and al-Qaeda](#). Still others say it is a ploy to deceive western and Russian policymakers. The US director of national intelligence, James Clapper, described the split as "a PR move ... [it] would like to create the image being more moderate". The US State Department has barely commented on the development.

The former al-Nusra has primarily offered a nationalist Islamist front – its new name includes the word Sham or Syria – rather than a global jihadist one. It has not taken part in global jihad and none of its militants have been held responsible for recent bombing campaigns in Europe.

Today, it is playing the lead organiser of the rebel resistance in Aleppo, Syria's biggest city and the rebels' last urban stronghold. Its new non-al-Qaeda status will make it easier for its covert allies, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to provide it with [funds and more powerful weapons](#).

Positioned between the two extremes of the murderous Assad regime on one side and the equally murderous Isis on the other, both of which the group detests, it has achieved relative popularity in northern Syria. [Syrian expert Charles Lister](#) of the Brookings Institute says it "has accepted more than 3,000 Syrians from Idlib and southern Aleppo into its ranks since February alone". In its nationalist focus, the group could be likened to the Taliban in Afghanistan – not a perfect answer but better than Isis, which recognises no borders.

Unlike the latter, which demands the subjugation of the inhabitants of any territory it conquers ('surrender or be executed'), Fatah al-Sham is co-operating with other anti-Assad groups, has adopted a slightly more relaxed form of Islamist law than Isis, has not supported female slavery and has indicated that it [does not intend to attack targets in the west](#). Moreover, its fighters are almost wholly Syrian.

Will the US and the UN refrain from labelling the renamed entity a terrorist group? The change of posture should be seen in a more positive light – could Fatah al-Sham bid to take part in the stalled UN-sponsored talks in Geneva from which as a terrorist group it was banned by Washington? So far the US appears to be avoiding such decisions.

The west has to appreciate that on the ground there are no significant secular democratic Syrian groups fighting either Isis or the Assad regime – apart from the Kurds who have limited aims and cannot really take their fight to the Syrian Arab heartlands, where they would not be accepted in a major political role.

The forces that the US and others supported with arms, training and money a few years ago have fragmented and disappeared. When many Syrians look at the choices within the opposition they see only the bad and the very bad – which is why Mr Assad still has some support.

Fatah al-Sham is the strongest force on the ground to take on Isis, and the west and Arab states – and the Russians, who would raise the biggest objections – must eventually realise that any cease fire, even a partial one, and future peace talks will have to include Islamist groups, even if it goes against the grain.

To moderate the Islamist extremists, undermine Isis and bring about a ceasefire, the UN negotiators should allow all the opposition groups except Isis to sit at the table if they accept certain conditions – a commitment to peace, political compromise, the protection of Muslim and non-Muslim minorities and some form of democratic government.

Fatah al-Sham has declared no such commitment yet, but it is the job of outside powers to persuade it to do so with the incentive that if it does it will earn a more sympathetic opinion from the west. Russia should be encouraged to include the group in [revived Geneva peace talks](#) – admittedly a challenge when its ally, Mr Assad, is bound to oppose such a move.

The former Jabhat al-Nusra has grown in Syria because of the uncompromising aims of Isis and Mr Assad at opposite ends of the spectrum and the lack of a moderate force in the middle of the turmoil. The five years of civil war, with 350,000 dead and millions displaced, can only end if imagination and risk-taking are allowed into the peace process.

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