

# Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham & Jabhat al-Nusra



## Key Leaders/Members

### **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**

Emir (Leader) of ISIS

### **Maysar Abdallah al-Juburi**

Senior Commander in JN

### **Mohammad al-Jawlani**

Emir (Leader) of JN

### **Anas Hasan Khattab**

Senior Commander in JN

**Homebase:** Syria & Iraq

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## History

Both the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) have their origins in the former al-Qa'ida in Iraq led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (later the Islamic State of Iraq or ISI), which was founded in 2004 to fight US forces after the US invasion of Iraq.

In January 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra—or “the Nusra Front” - was first announced after claiming credit for a series of suicide car bombings targeting the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. JN’s ranks consist of both Syrian and foreign fighters, many of which sharpened their fighting and leadership skills on the battlefields of Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya. This, and their ties to wealthy Gulf State donors, have cemented JN as a top rebel group fighting the al-Assad regime.

In April 2012, Islamic State of Iraq leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi issued a statement declaring JN a wing of the ISI and renamed itself Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to reflect the merger. News of the merger reportedly came as a surprise to JN leader al-Jawlani and al-Qa'ida Core Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri. Days later, al-Jawlani affirmed his allegiance to al-Qa'ida Core and al-Zawahiri, not ISIS and Baghdadi, illustrating the division between the two groups. Months later, al-Zawahiri annulled the merger; regardless, al-Baghdadi moved his headquarters to Syria pulling many of the former ISI and foreign fighters from JN to his group. Currently, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and another Islamist group Ahrar ash-Sham are arguably the most powerful rebel units opposing Assad.

## Current Intent & Capability

Currently, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham do not pose a significant near-term threat to the United States; however, radicalized fighters returning to the U.S. homeland may attempt to carry out an attack. The current focus of the groups is on establishing Islamist emirates in Iraq and Syria. In the near-term, JN and ISIS will likely continue to focus fighting al-Assad’s forces and cementing areas of control inside Syria, particularly in Syria’s North and West.

Both groups have successfully carried out sophisticated attacks against secured targets regionally and both hold territory that could be used as a base for operations. To date, neither group has carried out, or directly supported, an attack in the West. Both organizations, have links to support networks in Europe, large contingents of experienced foreign fighters, and significant bomb making and small arms capabilities, so they may have the capability to carry out such an attack . Press reports suggest that JN has roughly 6,000-10,000 members and ISIS has approximately 5,000–6,000 members.

## Future Outlook

As the Syrian civil war rages on, these groups may continue to seize territory from other fractured rebel groups, gaining influence through battle and through social programs, as well as increasing their access to supplies, particularly weapons and explosives. In the long term, these al-Qa'ida affiliated groups may seek to carry out attacks in Europe and the United States. They may also inspire Western-based homegrown violent extremists (HVE) to carry out attacks as more propaganda is published on the Internet.