

Jaysh al-Islam

AT A GLANCE

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SUMMARY^[1]_[SEP]

Formed: September 29, 2013¹

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: July 2014: Jaysh al-Islam drove the Islamic State (IS) out of Eastern Ghouta in the province of Damascus (unknown casualties).²

Last Attack: April 7, 2016: Jaysh al-Islam allegedly used chemical weapons in an attack on the People’s Protection Units and other Kurdish forces in Aleppo. The group denied the allegations that it had employed chlorine chemical weapons and clarified that it had disciplined a commander for using “modified GRAD rockets” (160 killed or wounded).³

OVERVIEW

Jaysh al-Islam (The Islam Army, The Islam Brigade) is a Syrian opposition group that aims to depose the Assad Regime. The group was formed in 2013 through a merger of about fifty Damascus-based opposition groups and was initially led by former Liwa al-Islam commander Zahran Alloush. The group operates in the Homs, Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Daraa, and Quneitra governorates and was an active member of the Islamic Front umbrella organization until the Islamic Front dissolved in 2014. Jaysh al-Islam opposed the Islamic State (IS) and has battled the group since July 2014 when it first ousted IS from Eastern Ghouta in Damascus. Jaysh al-Islam has also had a tense relationship with former Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Fateh al-Sham), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, ever since Fateh al-Sham rejected the authority of Jaysh al-Islam’s Unified Judiciary Council court system. Through late 2015 and early 2016, Jaysh al-Islam’s deteriorating ties with Fateh al-Sham and a series of other controversies have fueled political unrest in Eastern Ghouta.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Jaysh al-Islam (The Islam Army, The Islam Brigade) is a Syrian opposition group that has targeted the Assad Regime, the Islamic State, and select Kurdish forces. It aims to overthrow Assad's Syrian government. The group was formed in 2013 through a merger of about fifty Damascus-based opposition groups, including Liwa al-Islam, which remains one of the best-armed organizations and most powerful brigades within Jaysh al-Islam in the Ghouta agricultural belt. After the merger, Liwa al-Islam's commander, Zahran Alloush, became Jaysh al-Islam's leader, and the group replaced the Free Syrian Army as the dominant opposition force in Damascus.⁴ The group also has expanded its operations to the Homs, Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Daraa, and Quneitra governorates. Additionally, it conducted an attack in Aarsal, Lebanon in 2015.⁵

In November 2013, shortly after Jaysh al-Islam was established, the group helped found the Islamic Front, an umbrella organization of 40,000-70,000 fighters that sought to replace the Assad Regime with an Islamic government.⁶ Jaysh al-Islam's leader, Zahran Alloush, became the Islamic Front's military commander.⁷ However, the Islamic Front fell apart in mid-2014 due to disagreements between Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham, another Islamist opposition group and a key member of the Islamic Front.⁸

Throughout 2014, Jaysh al-Islam successfully pursued its campaign against the Islamic State (IS) and its efforts to build a unified political structure in Damascus. Jaysh al-Islam has always opposed IS and considers the group to be "enemy number one of the Syrian revolution."⁹ In its first known attack, Jaysh al-Islam openly clashed with IS and drove the group out of Eastern Ghouta in Damascus in July 2014.¹⁰ In mid-2014, Jaysh al-Islam established the Unified Judiciary Council, a joint civilian governance body composed of scholars of Islamic law that controls the legal affairs (criminal law, family status, and civilian issues) of Damascus opposition groups. Jaysh al-Islam also founded the United Judiciary Council's military counterpart, the Unified Military Command. Analysts refer to the Council as one of the most successful governance projects among opposition forces due to its high degree of coordination among a variety of groups and its willingness to allow civilians to pursue legal cases against military commanders.¹¹

In 2015, Jaysh al-Islam began fighting the Islamic State in Lebanon. The group faced considerable unrest in Eastern Ghouta after a group of rival opposition brigades, known as the Ummah Army, tried to break away from the Council in early 2015.¹² Prominent opposition group and former Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Fatah al-Sham, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) opposed the Council as well.¹³ Jaysh al-Islam and Fatah al-Sham cooperated in a successful offensive to retake Jisr al-Shughur from government forces in April 2015; however, tensions reignited between the two groups in December 2015 after Jaysh al-Islam signed a statement with other opposition forces at a conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia that declared their intent to begin negotiating peace terms with the Assad Regime.¹⁴ Fatah al-Sham viewed the negotiations and the corresponding negotiation delegation as a security threat.¹⁵ Fatah al-Sham has repeatedly been critical of Jaysh al-Islam, particularly in regards to Jaysh al-Islam's participation in peace talks with the Assad regime. In response, Fatah al-Sham established the Fustat Army political alliance to challenge Jaysh al-Islam's political dominance in Eastern Ghouta.¹⁶

Throughout 2015 and 2016, Jaysh al-Islam was embroiled in a series of controversies. In November 2015, the group placed Syrian soldiers and their families in 100 cages in Eastern Ghouta to deter Assad Regime attacks on civilian areas, such as market and hospitals. In response, the group faced widespread criticism within Eastern Ghouta for using soldiers as human shields.¹⁷ Additionally, Jaysh al-Islam allegedly used chemical weapons in an attack on the People's Protection Units and other Kurdish forces in Aleppo in April 2016. However, the group denied the allegations that it had employed chlorine chemical weapons and clarified that it had disciplined a commander for using "modified GRAD rockets."¹⁸ The last major controversy began when Faylaq al-Rahman, an opposition group that included the former Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union and was supported by Fateh al-Sham, claimed that Jaysh al-Islam attempted to assassinate the former chief judge of the Unified Judiciary Council.¹⁹ In response, Jaysh al-Islam began to target Faylaq al-Rahman until the two groups reached a peace treaty in May 2016.²⁰

In January 2017, Mohammad Alloush announced that he would lead an opposition delegation in peace talks with the Assad Regime in Kazakhstan.²¹ Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Fatah al-Sham, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) was excluded from these peace talks due to its former affiliation with Al Qaeda. As a result, Fatah al-Sham began attacking militant groups that had sent representatives to the Kazakhstan peace talks. This led to a series of skirmishes in the Idlib governorate that drove smaller groups and some of Jaysh al-Islam's Idlib fighters to join with the more powerful Ahrar al-Sham, a former Al Qaeda (AQ) affiliate.²²

On April 28, 2017, clashes erupted between Jaysh al-Islam and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Tahrir al-Sham, formerly Fatah al-Sham) in Eastern Ghouta after Tahrir al-Sham kidnapped Jaysh al-Islam fighters who were en route to attack Assad Regime forces.²³ Separately, on May 1, 2017, Jaysh al-Islam also attacked Faylaq al-Rahman forces in an attempt to aid Tahrir al-Sham (a coalition of militant groups led by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham) and civilian protestors who called for an end to opposition infighting.²⁴

In July 2017, Egypt mediated ceasefire negotiations between Jaysh al-Islam and Russian forces. After three days of negotiations, Jaysh al-Islam and the Russian Defense Ministry signed an agreement to cease hostilities and establish Russian military checkpoints in Eastern Ghouta and the city of Homs.²⁵ Though Jaysh al-Islam suspended attacks against Russian entities, the group was still engaged in battle with a host of other actors operating in the Syrian conflict. In August 2017, a Syrian suicide bomber killed 23 rebel fighters at the Syrian border with Jordan. The bombing took place at the Jaysh al-Islam base near Nasib. Most of those killed were Jaysh al-Islam fighters. While no groups took responsibility, in the past Islamic State jihadists have attacked rebel groups in the area.²⁶

Jaysh al-Islam also faced pressures from government forces. In April and March 2018, Russian-backed government forces engaged in an offensive to retake control of Eastern Ghouta, a stronghold of Jaysh al-Islam.²⁷ Under pressure from pro-government forces, the group agreed to evacuate fighters from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham that were being held in Jaysh al-Islam's prisons in Eastern Ghouta. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam are competitors and have clashed numerous times.²⁸ On March 25, 2018, as part of the same month-long offensive operation, government forces reclaimed most of Eastern Ghouta. However, Jaysh al-Islam refused to officially withdraw to northern Syria for fear that the local population would be forced out.²⁹

This initial refusal did not persist. On April 8, 2018, Assad forces allegedly employed chemical weapons against the Jaysh al-Islam stronghold of Douma. Days later, Jaysh al-Islam reached an agreement with Russian authorities to withdraw from the area. Jaysh al-Islam promptly evacuated nearly 8,000 fighters and 40,000 of their relatives.³⁰ Shortly thereafter, the Syrian government announced that all anti-regime forces had left Eastern Ghouta and that the city had been reclaimed.³¹

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Zahran Alloush (2013- December 25, 2015): Alloush was imprisoned by the Assad Regime for his Salafi activism from 2009 to 2011 and immediately founded an Islamist opposition group, Liwa al-Islam, in his hometown of Douma after his release.³² Alloush became the commander of Jaysh al-Islam in 2013 after Liwa al-Islam merged with roughly fifty other Damascus-based Islamist opposition groups to form Jaysh al-Islam. In 2014, he was appointed as the military commander of the Islamic Front umbrella group, of which Jaysh al-Islam was a founding member.³³ Alloush was a controversial leader and was accused of using force to quell dissent in Damascus. He was killed on December 25, 2015 by a Russian airstrike in Damascus.³⁴

Abu Hammam Bouwaidani (December 25, 2015-present): Bouwaidani, also known as Essam al-Boydhani, succeeded Zahran Alloush as Jaysh al-Islam's leader.³⁵ Other than his background as a Saudi-educated Islamist, little is known about Bouwaidani.³⁶ As leader of Jaysh al-Islam, his decision to endorse and participate in the 2016 Geneva negotiations with the Assad Regime led to disputes with other opposition groups such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.³⁷

Mohammed Alloush (unknown-present): According to a Syrian news source, Mohammad Alloush was one of the founders of Jaysh al-Islam and has been with the group since it was formed.³⁸ From January 2016 to May 2016, Alloush also served as the chief negotiator for the Saudi-based High Negotiations Committee (HNC), which represented the opposition's interests in peace talks with the Assad Regime in Geneva. Alloush resigned from his HNC position on May 30, 2016. He claimed that the peace talks were a "waste of time" because the Assad Regime was not willing to pursue "serious negotiations."³⁹ In January 2017, Mohammad Alloush announced that he would lead an opposition delegation in peace talks with the Assad Regime in Kazakhstan.⁴⁰ While Alloush led peace talks in January, February and May 2017, he did not attend the July 2017 talks in Kazakhstan as part of the opposition delegation.⁴¹ On May 3, 2018, Mohammad Alloush resigned as political head of Jaysh al-Islam following a number of military defeats by pro-government forces in Eastern Ghouta. According to Syrian, Iranian and Russian news sources, Alloush also stepped down amid allegations that he stole \$47 million from Jaysh al-Islam's budget to buy restaurants and businesses in Turkey and Saudi Arabia.⁴² As of November 2018, the peace talks in Kazakhstan were ongoing.⁴³

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2013: 9,000 (BBC)⁴⁴
- 2013: 5,000-50,000 (The Guardian)⁴⁵
- 2013: “Several thousand” (Reuters)⁴⁶
- 2015: 20,000 (The Syria Institute)⁴⁷
- 2016: 17,000-30,000 (Institute for the Study of War)⁴⁸

D. RESOURCES

Jaysh al-Islam has received notable support from abroad. Since its inception in 2013, Jaysh al-Sham has received funding from Saudi Arabia. As of 2016, the group has also been funded by Qatar and Turkey.⁴⁹ It is unclear when Qatar and Turkey began funding Jaysh al-Islam. Additionally, an unconfirmed report indicates that Saudi Arabia convinced Pakistan to help train Jaysh al-Islam fighters.⁵⁰

In addition to its international funds, Jaysh al-Islam boasts a diverse arsenal that includes armored tanks and GRAD missiles. In 2013, the group had two fighter jets.⁵¹ Jaysh al-Islam has acquired weapons through attacks on Syrian bases, from defected Syrian technicians, and from foreign states.⁵² The group allegedly also has access to chemical weapons. This claim was widespread in April 2016 when Jaysh al-Islam issued a statement that one of its leaders had used “weapons not authorized for use in these types of confrontations.”⁵³ The Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova condemned the use of chlorine gas by Jaysh al-Islam in Aleppo for military purposes.⁵⁴ However, Jaysh al-Islam later clarified that the statement was issued in response to “Modified Grad rockets.”⁵⁵ According to an Iranian news outlet (not corroborated by other sources), in March 2018, Syrian government troops found a chemical weapons workshop run by Jaysh al-Islam. The Syrian government claimed the chemical weapons were of Saudi and Western origin.⁵⁶

E. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Jaysh al-Islam primarily operates in the Damascus governorate. Its largest brigade, Liwa al-Islam, is the most powerful opposition group in Damascus’ Ghouta agricultural belt.⁵⁷ The group is also active in the Homs governorate, and has carried out operations in Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Daraa, and Qunietra.⁵⁸ In addition to its presence in Syria, Jaysh al-Islam conducted an attack against the Islamic State in Aarsal, Lebanon in 2015.⁵⁹

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

Jaysh al-Islam has two primary goals: to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria and to create a Sunni theocracy.⁶⁰ On September 23, 2013, the group’s predecessor, Liwa al-Islam, joined the Islamic Coalition, a political group that called for the opposition to the Assad Regime to be run only by groups fighting inside Syria and opposed the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which was based in Turkey and largely comprised exiled

Syrians.⁶¹ The Coalition and Jaysh al-Islam seek to replace the Assad Regime with a government based on Shariah law. Alloush has stated that as part of Jaysh al-Islam's central mission is to "fight Assad and [refuse] ISIS's *takfiri* mentality."⁶²

Jaysh al-Islam is fundamentally a Salafist group. The former leader and main commander, Zahran Alloush, has called for a strict sharia-based Sunni theocracy and has publicly disapproved of secular democracies and the influence of Western governments. The group's main goals and ideology is not believed to have changed since Alloush's resignation in May 2018 from his leadership position. Where Jaysh al-Islam differs from groups like Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islam State (IS) is that Jaysh al-Islam does not call for driving Westerners from the Middle East and creating a single Islamic state.⁶³ Jaysh al-Islam believes that AQ and the IS represent deviations from Islam and pose a danger to the revolution.

Alloush has also stated that Assad's Alawite faith is directly at odds with the Islamic theocracy he hopes to create.⁶⁴ In an interview, Alloush expressed a desire to cleanse Damascus of all Shiites and Alawis.⁶⁵ Zahran Alloush later said that the Assad Regime should not be replaced by a sectarian or partisan government, but by a "technocratic body that represents the diversity of the Syrian people." He also stated that while the group is composed of Muslims, Jaysh al-Islam does not see itself as an Islamic group and tolerates criticism from residents in the area it controls.⁶⁶

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

In 2014, Jaysh al-Islam established the Unified Judiciary Council, a joint civilian governance body composed of scholars of Islamic law that controls the legal affairs of opposition groups in Damascus. The Council presides over matters concerning criminal law, family status, and civilian issues. It maintains several courts in Eastern Ghouta, an agricultural belt in the Damascus governorate. Seventeen different factions, including Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Fateh al-Sham) and Ahrar al-Sham, initially ceded their legal power to the Council; however, support from various groups has fluctuated over time. Fateh al-Sham, for example, withdrew its support shortly after the Council's founding. In early 2015, Jaysh al-Islam's leader Zahran Alloush launched a crackdown against the Ummah Army, an organization composed of rival opposition brigades that was attempting to break away from the Council. Despite these defections, analysts refer to the Council as one of the most successful governance projects among opposition forces due to its high degree of coordination among a variety of groups and its willingness to allow civilians to pursue legal cases against military commanders.⁶⁷

Though Jaysh al-Islam was initially hostile to Syrian peace negotiations, it eventually became active in peace talks with the Assad Regime. In December 2015, the group participated in a conference in Saudi Arabia and agreed to form the High Negotiations Committee for the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (HNC).⁶⁸ Jaysh al-Islam's political leader, Mohammed Alloush, was appointed as the HNC's chief negotiator. However, Alloush resigned from his position in May 2016 after the HNC suspended peace talks with the Assad Regime over worsening conditions on the ground in Syria.⁶⁹ In January 2017, Mohammad Alloush announced that he would lead an opposition delegation in peace talks with the Assad Regime in Kazakhstan.⁷⁰ While Alloush led peace talks in January, February and May 2017, he did not attend the July 2017 talks in Kazakhstan as part of the opposition delegation.⁷¹ In October 2017,

talks in Kazakhstan continued, including demarcating four de-escalation zones that house up to 800,000 citizens.⁷² However, Russian-backed government forces reclaimed three of the four zones, leaving only Idlib under rebel control.⁷³ Included in these talks were delegations from the Syrian government, as well as rebel groups including Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham.⁷⁴ The talks were to be led by Russian, Iranian and Turkish ministers. Talks in Astana continued through November 2018 but ended in no results. The next talks in Astana were scheduled for February 2019.⁷⁵

In addition to its peace efforts with the Syrian government, Jaysh al-Islam participated in ceasefire negotiations with Russian forces in July 2017. After three days of negotiations mediated by Egyptian officials, Jaysh al-Islam and the Russian Defense Ministry signed an agreement to cease hostilities and establish Russian military checkpoints in Eastern Ghouta and the city of Homs.⁷⁶

C. TARGETS & TACTICS

Jaysh al-Islam fights the Syrian army and its affiliated forces. The group also targets other non-state actors, including the Islamic State (IS) and select Kurdish forces, such as the Peoples Protection Units (YPG).⁷⁷ In addition, the group has a standing policy of launching retaliatory missiles at central Damascus in response to regular Assad Regime aerial strikes in Eastern Ghouta.⁷⁸ In November 2015, the group also placed Syrian soldiers and their families in 100 cages in Eastern Ghouta to deter Assad Regime attacks on civilian areas, such as market and hospitals.⁷⁹ Jaysh al-Islam has also retaliated against aggressive actions by the Islamic State, executing IS fighters in response to an IS execution of Jaysh al-Islam fighters in 2015.⁸⁰

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

July 2014: Jaysh al-Islam drove the Islamic State (IS) out of Eastern Ghouta in the province of Damascus (unknown casualties).⁸¹

February 5, 2015: Jaysh al-Islam attacked IS in Aarsal, Lebanon while IS was launching an offensive against Hezbollah and the Lebanese Army. The leader of Jaysh al-Islam, Zahran Alloush, claimed that the attack was in response to an IS assault against one of Jaysh al-Islam's headquarters. This is the first time the group launched an attack outside of Syria (1-3 killed, 1 wounded).⁸²

Early 2015: Jaysh al-Islam leader Zahran Alloush launched a crackdown against the Ummah Army. The Ummah Army, composed of rival opposition brigades, was attempting to break away from the Unified Judiciary Council, of which Jaysh al-Islam and several other opposition groups were members. Jaysh al-Islam arrested 1,300 members of the Ummah Army and killed many others (unknown casualties).⁸³

April 25, 2015: Jaysh al-Islam cooperated with other opposition groups, including Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham, to take over Jisr al-Shughur, a government stronghold in the province of Idlib (unknown casualties).⁸⁴

July 2015: Jaysh al-Islam attacked IS in the Qaboun, Jobar, Barzeh, and Tishrin districts in Damascus. Jaysh al-Islam captured two IS headquarters and took 20 prisoners (7 killed, unknown wounded).⁸⁵

July 2, 2015: Jaysh al-Islam executed 18 IS prisoners in retaliation for a previous IS execution of 3 Jaysh al-Islam militants (18 killed).⁸⁶

September 10, 2015: Jaysh al-Islam seized two buildings in the women's section of the Assad Regime's Adra prison near Damascus. The prison held 5,000 prisoners (unknown casualties).⁸⁷

February 11, 2016: Jaysh al-Islam attacked Syrian army soldiers between Adra and Douma in Eastern Ghouta (45+ killed, unknown wounded).⁸⁸

April 7, 2016: Jaysh al-Islam allegedly used chemical weapons in an attack on the People's Protection Units and other Kurdish forces in Aleppo. The group denied the allegations that it had employed chlorine chemical weapons. Instead, Jaysh al-Islam claimed to have disciplined a commander for using "modified GRAD rockets" (160 killed or wounded).⁸⁹

April 28, 2017: Clashes erupted between Jaysh al-Islam and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Tahrir al-Sham) in Eastern Ghouta after Tahrir al-Sham kidnapped Jaysh al-Islam fighters who were en route to attack Assad Regime forces. Jaysh al-Islam also attacked Faylaq al-Rahman forces attempting to aid Tahrir al-Sham, as well as civilian protestors who called for an end to opposition infighting (95+ killed, 13+ wounded).⁹⁰

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

Jaysh al-Islam is not designated as a terrorist organization by any major national government or international body. As of May 2019, the United States Department of State has not classified Jaysh al-Islam as a foreign terrorist group.⁹¹

Since December 2015, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has been trying to assemble a list of terrorist groups in Syria. Russia, Lebanon, and Egypt support classifying Jaysh al-Islam as a terrorist group, but the UN Security Council has not been able to achieve a unanimous consensus.⁹²

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Jaysh al-Islam's track record with its constituents is mixed. In 2015, Jaysh al-Islam leader Zahran Alloush claimed that the group tolerates criticism from residents in the area it controls.⁹³ However, Alloush had previously expressed a desire to cleanse Damascus of all Shiites and Alawis and was accused of using force to quell dissent in Damascus in 2015.⁹⁴ Jaysh al-Islam commanders were also accused of operating private prisons for political detainees, including Islamic State sympathizers.⁹⁵ Despite these accusations, analysts refer to Jaysh al-Islam's Unified Judiciary Council as one of the most successful governance projects among opposition forces due in part to its willingness to allow civilians to pursue legal cases against military

commanders.⁹⁶ In the deal reached in April 2018 between Jaysh al-Islam and Russian forces, Jaysh al-Islam withdrew 40,000 families and locals to northern Syria.⁹⁷

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Jaysh al-Islam has a history of participating in umbrella organizations and alliances with other Syrian armed groups. After Liwa al-Islam merged with other groups to form Jaysh al-Islam, the group remained in the Islamic Coalition and was briefly part of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front until November 2013.⁹⁸ Shortly after Jaysh al-Islam was established, the group helped found the Islamic Front, an umbrella organization of 40,000-70,000 fighters that sought to replace the Assad Regime with an Islamic government.⁹⁹ Jaysh al-Islam's leader, Zahran Alloush, served as the Islamic Front's military commander.¹⁰⁰ The Islamic Front dissolved in mid-2014 due to disagreements between Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. Shortly afterwards, Jaysh al-Islam claimed to have absorbed Suqqour al-Sham, a prominent Islamic Front group that was based primarily in the Idlib province. However, Suqqour al-Sham remained an independent group until it was absorbed by Ahrar al-Sham in spring 2015.¹⁰¹ Despite past tensions, Jaysh al-Islam's Idlib fighters defected to Ahrar al-Sham in February 2017 after a series of skirmishes between Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and militant groups operating in the Idlib governorate.¹⁰²

Following Zahran Alloush's death in December 2015, tensions erupted between Jaysh al-Islam and other Damascus-based militant groups. In April 2016, Faylaq al-Rahman, a group that included the former Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union and was supported by Fateh al-Sham, claimed that Jaysh al-Islam attempted to assassinate the former chief judge of the Unified Judiciary Council. In response to this accusation, Jaysh al-Islam began targeting Faylaq al-Rahman.¹⁰³ In May 2016, the groups agreed to a peace treaty at a conference in Qatar.¹⁰⁴

Additionally, Jaysh al-Islam's relationship with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Tahrir al-Sham, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) has largely been characterized by discord. Tahrir al-Sham was originally founded as an Al Qaeda (AQ) affiliate in Syria. In response to growing AQ influence in the area, Saudi Arabia helped create Jaysh al-Islam to serve as a counterweight to AQ. Though the two groups managed to maintain some level of military cooperation against government forces in Idlib province, relations between the two organizations grew strained. In 2015, Tahrir al-Sham voiced opposition to the Jaysh al-Islam-linked Unified Judiciary Council.¹⁰⁵ Tensions reignited after Jaysh al-Islam's new leader, Abu Hammam Bouwaidani, agreed to negotiate with the Assad Regime in December 2015. Tahrir al-Sham viewed this decision as treason and as a security threat. In response, Tahrir al-Sham established the Fustat Army political alliance to challenge Jaysh al-Islam's political dominance in Eastern Ghouta.¹⁰⁶ Conflict between the two groups escalated to violence in January 2017 when Tahrir al-Sham began attacking militant groups that had sent representatives to the Kazakhstan peace talks, which were organized by the Assad Regime and Jaysh al-Islam's leader, Mohammad Alloush.¹⁰⁷ Relations between these two groups remain violent, as evidenced by a series of clashes that began in Eastern Ghouta on April 28, 2017 and left 95 militants and protestors dead.¹⁰⁸

Jaysh al-Islam has opposed the Islamic State (IS) since 2013. The group referred to IS as "enemy number one of the Syrian revolution" and has taken military action to drive IS from its territory.¹⁰⁹ By July 2014, Jaysh al-Islam had forced IS out of the eastern village of Ghouta.¹¹⁰ In response, IS assassinated key Jaysh al-Islam commander Abu Mohammad Haroun.¹¹¹ The two

groups continued to fight in Syria and in Lebanon throughout 2015. In July 2015, Jaysh al-Islam captured two IS headquarters in Damascus and executed 18 IS militants.¹¹² Jaysh al-Islam claimed that these actions were in retaliation for the beheading of three Jaysh al-Islam militants by IS earlier that year.¹¹³

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Saudi Arabia reportedly helped establish Jaysh al-Islam in an attempt to counter the influence of Al Qaeda and its affiliates in Damascus.¹¹⁴ Analysts also speculate that Saudi Arabia played a large role in establishing the Islamic Front umbrella group in late 2013.¹¹⁵ Additionally in 2013, Saudi Arabia tried unsuccessfully to convince the United States to supply Jaysh al-Islam with anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles. Similarly, Saudi Arabia failed to persuade Jordan to allow its territory to be used as a supply route for Jaysh al-Islam into Syria.¹¹⁶

In addition to its connections with Saudi Arabia, Jaysh al-Islam also has close ties with the Turkish government. In June 2015, Jaysh al-Islam's leader Zahran Alloush went to Turkey to meet with representatives of foreign governments and Syrian insurgent groups. Many suspect that Turkey, along with other international actors, was preparing for Alloush to play a prominent role in organizing Syrian opposition groups in a military structure that would replace the Free Syrian Army's Supreme Military Council.¹¹⁷ In late 2015, Jaysh al-Islam also released a statement that it was in "complete solidarity with the Turkish government and is sending sincere condolences to the families of the victims" after a terrorist attack killed 100 civilians in Ankara.¹¹⁸

Qatar also provided financial assistance to Jaysh al-Islam. In May 2016, Qatar hosted a peace conference between the Jaysh al-Islam and Faylaq al-Rahman, an Islamist group active in Damascus and supported by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.¹¹⁹

MAPS

- Syria

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² "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #4." The Carter Center. The Carter Center, 11 Sep. 2014. Web. 18 Jul. 2016.

³ Heller, Sam. "One Kurdish Neighborhood in the Crossfire." The Daily Beast. The Daily Beast, 15 Apr. 2016. Web. 14 Jul. 2016.

⁴ "Guide to the Syrian Rebels." BBC News. N.p., 13 Dec. 2013. Web. 05 Aug. 2014; Hassan, Hassan. "The Army of Islam Is Winning in Syria." Foreign Policy. N.p., 1 Oct. 2013. Web. 07 Aug. 2014.

⁵ "Syria direct: News Update 4-20-15." Syria: direct. Syria: direct, 20 Apr. 2015. Web. 14 Jul. 2016; Heller, Sam. "One Kurdish Neighborhood in the Crossfire." The Daily Beast. The Daily Beast, 15 Apr. 2016. Web. 14 Jul. 2016; "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report No. 5." The Carter Center. The Carter Center, Feb. 2015. Web. 14 Jul. 2016.

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⁷ Lund, Aron. "The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 1: Structure and Support." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. N.p., 14 Jan. 2014. Web. 07 Aug. 2014; Lund, Aron. "The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 3: Negotiations." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. N.p., 16 Jan. 2014. Web. 07 Aug. 2014.

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⁹ MacDonald, Alex. "Rise of Jaish al-Islam marks a turn in Syrian conflict." Middle East Eye. Middle East Eye, 7 May. 2015. Web. 18 Jul. 2016.

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