

The Southern Front

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: February 13, 2014.

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: October 5, 2014: The Southern Front and Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra) captured the town of Tel al-Haraa in the Daraa governorate from the Syrian army. The media portrayed this attack as a victory for moderate opposition forces despite Al-Nusra's role in the operation (unknown casualties).¹

Last Attack: March 26, 2016: The Southern Front captured the Tal Samin hill from the Islamic State (IS) in the Daraa governorate. This attack was part of a larger opposition campaign against IS in the Daraa governorate (unknown casualties).²

OVERVIEW

The Southern Front was established on February 13, 2014 to consolidate the command structure and military operations of 49 southern opposition brigades attempting to overthrow the Assad Regime. The Southern Front is a self-described moderate opposition group, and is active in the Quneitra, Daraa, Sweida, and Damascus governorates where it often uses guerilla tactics to combat the Syrian army. Throughout 2014, the Southern Front cooperated with former Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra), despite tense relations between the two groups. However, the group officially severed ties with Al-Nusra on April 14, 2015 in a statement criticizing Al-Nusra's ideology. In December 2015, the Southern Front attended a conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia where opposition groups agreed to negotiate with Assad. However, violence in Syria quickly escalated as the Assad Regime and its allies increased their bombing campaign and as the Southern Front pursued its March 2016 campaign against the Islamic State in Daraa. In April 2016, the High Negotiations Committee for the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, a group tasked with nominating representatives to negotiate with Assad after the Riyadh conference, suspended peace talks with the Assad over worsening conditions on the ground in Syria.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Southern Front was established on February 13, 2014 to consolidate the command structure and military operations of 49 southern opposition brigades attempting to overthrow the Assad Regime.³ The Southern Front is a self-described moderate opposition group that denounces sectarianism and extremism within Syria.⁴ It is active in the Quneitra, Daraa, Sweida, and Damascus governorates, and often uses guerilla tactics to combat the Syrian army.⁵ Though many of the Southern Front's brigades are associated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Southern Front does not take orders from the FSA or the FSA affiliated Supreme Military Council.⁶

In 2014, the Southern Front secured funding from the United States, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan to target the Assad Regime.⁷ Though some reports indicate earlier attacks, the Southern Front launched its first documented attack on October 5, 2014 when it cooperated with former Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra), to capture the town of Tel al-Haraa in the Daraa governorate.⁸

The Southern Front continued cooperating with Al-Nusra in 2014 despite increasingly tense relations between the two groups.⁹ From 2014 to early 2015, Al-Nusra regularly kidnapped and assassinated Southern Front commanders, and held more influence in Dar al-Adl fi al-Hawran, a court system run by both groups.¹⁰ On April 14, 2015, the Southern Front issued a statement condemning Al-Nusra's ideology and officially broke ties with the group.¹¹ However the Southern Front cooperated with Al-Nusra in later battles, such as the failed Southern Storm campaign to retake the city of Daraa in June 2015.¹²

In December 2015, the Southern Front participated in a conference with other opposition groups in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia to negotiate a framework for future opposition peace talks with the Assad Regime.¹³ On December 10, the opposition groups announced their intention to negotiate with Assad, but stated that they would not allow him to remain in power for a transitional period after the war.¹⁴ Participants also agreed to form the High Negotiations Committee for the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (HNC) and select representatives to negotiate with the Assad Regime.¹⁵ However, violence in Syria quickly escalated as the Assad Regime and its allies increased their bombing campaign and as the Southern Front pursued its March 2016 campaign against the Islamic State in the Daraa governorate.¹⁶ In April 2016, the HNC suspended peace talks with the Assad Regime over worsening conditions on the ground in Syria.¹⁷

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Bashar al-Zoubi (February 2014 to present): Zoubi is the leader of the Southern Front and is also the leader of the Yarmouk Army, a prominent Brigade within the Southern Front. Prior to the Syrian conflict, Zoubi was a wealthy businessman who worked in the tourism industry.¹⁸

Ziad Fahd (February 2014 to present): Fahd is the Southern Front's Deputy Chief of Staff. Aside from his role in the Southern Front, Fahd has attempted to support other southern moderate groups through outreach with Jordan.¹⁹

Majhid al-Sayid Ahmed (February 2014 to present): Ahmed is the head of the Southern Front's Operations Department. He also claims to be the head of the Damascus Military Council, which is an organization within the Free Syrian Army.²⁰

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2014: 30,000 (Carnegie Endowment For International Peace)²¹
- 2014: 38,000 (BBC)²²

D. RESOURCES

The United States funds the Southern Front through a military operations center in Jordan that is also run by the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.²³ Over the course of two meetings with the Southern Front that took place in Jordan in late 2013 and January 2014, the United States spent 3 million dollars on salaries for fighters who eventually joined the Southern Front.²⁴ Additionally, Jordan provides salaries and weapons for Southern Front fighters.²⁵

The Southern Front has a large arsenal that includes anti-aircraft systems, known as MANPADs, and anti-tank missiles from Saudi Arabia.²⁶ Many of the Southern Front's member brigades, such as the Yarmouk Army, also have U.S. made TOW missiles.²⁷

In 2015, the Southern Front received military training from Jordan.²⁸ Reportedly, Southern Front fighters also receive medical assistance from Israel.²⁹

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.

The Southern Front is active in the Quneitra, Daraa, Sweida, and Damascus governorates.³⁰

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

The Southern Front is a self-described moderate opposition group that seeks to overthrow the Assad Regime. The Southern Front also denounced sectarianism and extremism in a statement released when the group was founded.³¹

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

In December 2015, representatives from the Southern Front attended a conference with other opposition groups in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia to negotiate a framework for future opposition peace talks with the Assad Regime.³² On December 10, the opposition groups announced their intention to negotiate with Assad, but stated that they would not allow him to remain in power for a transitional period after the war.³³ The groups also agreed to form the High Negotiations Committee for the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (HNC) and select representatives to negotiate with the Assad Regime.³⁴

C. TARGETS & TACTICS

The Southern Front targets the Syrian army and the Islamic State.³⁵ The Southern Front has used guerilla tactics to fight the Syrian army in Daraa governorate.³⁶

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.

October 5, 2014: The Southern Front and Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra) captured the town of Tel al-Haraa in the Daraa governorate from the Syrian army. The media portrayed this attack as a victory for moderate opposition forces despite Al-Nusra's role in the operation (unknown casualties).³⁷

July 25, 2015: The Southern Front cooperated with Al-Nusra to capture the Brigade 82 Syrian army base, which is located in the Daraa governorate next to the primary highway between Damascus and Jordan (unknown casualties).³⁸

March 25, 2015: The Southern Front captured the town of Bosra from the Syrian army. Bosra is in the Daraa governorate, and its ancient city is listed as a UNESCO world heritage site (21+ killed, unknown wounded).³⁹

April 1, 2015: The Southern Front cooperated with Al-Nusra to capture the Nassib border crossing, the last government controlled border crossing with Jordan (unknown casualties).⁴⁰

June 9, 2015: The Southern Front captured the Brigade 52 army base, the largest Syrian army base in the Daraa governorate (unknown casualties).⁴¹

June 17, 2015: The Southern Front launched an unsuccessful offensive to push the Syrian army out of the Quneitra governorate (200+ killed or wounded).⁴²

June 25, 2015: The Southern Front launched an offensive known as Southern Storm to capture the city of Daraa from the Assad Regime. The Syrian army repelled the attack and inflicted heavy casualties against the Southern Front (104 killed, unknown wounded).⁴³

March 26, 2016: The Southern Front captured the Tal Samin hill from the Islamic State (IS) in the Daraa governorate. This attack was part of a larger opposition campaign against IS in the Daraa governorate (unknown casualties).⁴⁴

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

The Southern Front is not designated as a terrorist organization.

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The Southern Front runs the Dar al-Adl fi al-Hawran with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.⁴⁵ The court covers military, criminal, and administrative law, and also settles disputes between civilians and militant groups.⁴⁶

In June 2015, civilians in Southern Front-controlled areas criticized the Southern Front's failed strategy recapture the city of Daraa during the Southern Storm offensive.⁴⁷

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

The Southern Front cooperated with former Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra), in 2014 despite tense relations between the two groups.⁴⁸ From 2014 to early 2015, Al-Nusra regularly kidnapped and assassinated Southern Front commanders, and held more influence in Dar al-Adl fi al-Hawran, a court system run by both groups.⁴⁹ The Southern Front began to break its ties with Al-Nusra in 2015.⁵⁰ On April 14, 2015, the Southern Front issued a statement condemning Al-Nusra's ideology and rejecting further cooperation with the group.⁵¹ This statement was released during a period of strained relations between both groups at the Nassib border crossing, which was captured after a joint operation between Al-Nusra and the Southern Front in April 2015, and after Al-Nusra attempted to arrest a Southern Front commander.⁵² However, the Southern Front still cooperated with Al-Nusra during later battles, such as the Southern Storm campaign to retake the city of Daraa.⁵³

The Southern Front opposes the Islamic State (IS) and has participated in larger opposition campaigns against IS in the Daraa governorate.⁵⁴ The Southern Front also opposes brigades affiliated with IS such as Liwa Shuhada Yarmouk.⁵⁵

Many of the Southern Front's brigades, such as the Omari Brigades, are associated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA).⁵⁶ However, the Southern Front does not take orders from the FSA or the FSA affiliated Supreme Military Council.

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

The Southern Front receives funding from the United States, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan, and receives its weapons via Jordanian and Turkish warehouses.⁵⁷ The military operations center in Jordan that coordinates Southern Front funding also played a role in founding the group by convincing southern moderate opposition forces to unite under a single command structure.⁵⁸

MAPS

- Syria

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