



Jihad Activity under the al-Sharaa Regime in Syria, a Potential Threat to Israel

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Overview¹

- ▶ **The overthrow of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the rise of the new government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Julani) changed the map of Salafi-jihadist terrorism in Syria.**
- ▶ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the strongest of the jihadist organizations which opposed the Assad regime) disbanded, along with its affiliated militias, which helped bring down the previous regime. Their operatives were integrated into the security forces of the new government, including foreign jihad fighters.
- ▶ A few jihad organizations which had cooperated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham opposed the pragmatic positions of the new government and refused to integrate into its ranks. The most prominent example is the Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, which attacked the security forces and Alawite civilians.
- ▶ The regime change in Syria and the absence of a governmental or security presence across large parts of the country provided ISIS with an opportunity to reorganize and establish itself in the Syrian desert in the east of the country and to expand its activity into populated areas near Damascus and the regions of Aleppo, Homs and southern Syria. However, Syria's joining the United States-led international coalition helped reduce the number of the organization's attacks during 2025.
- ▶ Despite the hostile positions of the Salafi-jihadist organizations still active in Syria toward Israel, they have not attacked IDF forces deployed in southern Syria or against Israeli territory. However, the detention of an ISIS operative in southern Syria indicated the potential threat.
- ▶ **In ITIC assessment, the growing cooperation between the Syrian regime and the international coalition will make the situation on the ground harder for ISIS, even though the organization will continue its efforts to establish itself in areas where the regime's**

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control remains weak, such as the Syrian desert, and to attack Syrian security forces and civilian localities. Other jihad organizations opposing the regime may also attempt to undermine the stability of the al-Sharaa government. Given that the extra-establishment jihadist elements are focused on the internal Syrian arena, their desire to harm IDF forces or Israeli territory is in all probability a lower priority, although they may try to build facilities in southern Syria that would enable them to threaten Israeli interests in the future.

The Jihad Organizations in Syria Prior to the Fall of the Assad Regime²

- The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, led to the rise of many rebel organizations that fought against the forces of the Assad regime. Salafi-jihadist groups stood out among them, and from 2013 onward they took the lead in the fighting against the regime and its allies.
- With the outbreak of the civil war, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq, sent a team of seven men to establish a local force to advance the interests of Iraqi jihad groups in Syria. The force was headed by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the nom de guerre of Ahmed al-Sharaa, and in January 2012 he announced the establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (Support Front for the People of the Levant) and declared war on the Assad regime. Within a short time, Jabhat al-Nusra became one of the most prominent organizations opposing the regime in Syria. The organization took control of extensive areas and inflicted significant damage on Syrian regime forces, forged alliances with local organizations and succeeded in recruiting many operatives.
- In April 2013, al-Baghdadi unilaterally announced the subordination of Jabhat al-Nusra to the Islamic State of Iraq and the establishment of a joint organization called the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Al-Julani viewed the move as detrimental to his efforts to promote ties with rebel organizations in Syria without highlighting his jihadist ideology. In response, he declared allegiance to al-Qaeda and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who out Jabhat al-Nusra al-Qaeda's local branch in Syria.

² For further information, see the November 2014 report ITIC report, [ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization](#), the July 2016 report, [ISIS: An Overview and Future Trends*](#), the November 2017 report, [The Collapse of the Islamic State: What Comes Next?](#), the March 2019 report, [Has ISIS Been Defeated? Overview and possible developments after the fall of ISIS's enclave in the lower Euphrates Valley](#), the October 2019 report, [The significance of the killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi \(Initial assessment\)](#), and the December 2024 report, [The Power Groups in Syria after the Fall of the Assad Regime](#).

► During 2013–2014, relations between the two organizations deteriorated amid disagreements over activity in Syria, until al-Qaeda withdrew its support from al-Baghdadi's organization and recognized Jabhat al-Nusra, under the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Julani, as its representative in the country. About a year later, in 2014, declared the establishment of a global caliphate called *the Islamic State* and proclaimed himself its caliph.

► ISIS exploited the chaos in Syria to expand rapidly, capturing vast areas in the northern and eastern parts of the country. In June 2014, by creating the caliphate, he split the Salafi-jihadist arena between ISIS and al-Qaeda. The city of Raqqa in northeastern Syria, which ISIS captured from Jabhat al-Nusra and a coalition of jihad organizations in January 2014, became the capital of the new caliphate, which also extended over large areas of northern Iraq.

► ISIS imposed a violent, extreme rule in the areas it controlled, including the systematic terrorism of civilians, ethnic cleansing, public executions and the destruction of heritage sites, while simultaneously fighting the Assad regime, other rebel organizations, including Jabhat al-Nusra, and Kurdish forces. However, in 2017, the organization suffered crushing military defeats at the hands of the United States-led international coalition and local forces, and lost its territorial control with the fall of Raqqa in October 2017 and the death of its leader al-Baghdadi two years later.³ Nevertheless, ISIS continued operating in Syria as a guerrilla organization, mainly in the desert area in the east of the country and through terrorist cells, carrying out attacks, assassinations and attempts to undermine security stability.⁴



³ See the July 2016 ITIC report, [ISIS: An Overview and Future Trends*](#), the November 2017 report, [The Collapse of the Islamic State: What Comes Next?](#), the March 2019 report, [Has ISIS Been Defeated? Overview and possible developments after the fall of ISIS's enclave in the lower Euphrates Valley](#), and the October 2019 report, [The significance of the killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi \(Initial assessment\)](#).

⁴ See the January 2021 ITIC report, [ISIS's current strategy: Relinquishing territorial control and focusing on intensifying local activity in the various provinces, mainly in Iraq](#), the January 2022 report, [Summary of ISIS Activity around the Globe in 2021](#), the February 2023 report, [Summary of ISIS Activity around the Globe in 2022](#), and the May 2024 report, [Summary of ISIS Activity around the Globe in 2023](#)

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, April 29, 2019)

► As ISIS-related developments continued, so did the activity of jihad organizations in Syria, with al-Julani consolidating his status as the leading figure. In July 2016, after receiving al-Zawahiri's blessing to break away from al-Qaeda to allow Jabhat al-Nusra to focus on the campaign in Syria and merge with local Islamic organizations, al-Sharaa appeared publicly for the first time and announced he was cutting ties with al-Qaeda and establishing Jabhat Fath al-Sham (Conquest of the Levant Front). In January 2017, he announced the establishment of a new organization, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a merger of Jabhat Fath al-Sham with four other prominent rebel organizations (the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din and Jaysh al-Sunna). The move led to al-Julani's final break with al-Qaeda, as some supporters of the hardline jihadist approach left the new unified organization and established the Hurras al-Din organization, which became al-Qaeda's branch in Syria.⁵



**Al-Julani (center) announces the establishment of Jabhat Fath al-Sham
(al-Jazeera, July 28, 2016)**

► Under al-Julani's leadership, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham became the dominant organization in the Turkish-backed enclave established in the Idlib area in northwestern Syria, part of efforts to end the civil war. The organization established civilian-administrative facilities under the supervision of the Syrian Salvation Government, and issued identity cards. Although al-Julani sought to impose the spirit of Islamic sharia, he did not enforce sharia law and even promised rights to minorities and women. He also presented his image as a moderate to the international arena, including wearing Western civilian dress and denying ties to al-Qaeda and global terrorism. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham also took action to improve its military capabilities,

⁵ See the March 2018 ITIC report, [Split among Al-Qaeda's supporters in Syria, in light of severe differences of opinion regarding the nature of the ties with Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri](#).

establishing a unified command and 12 brigades numbering thousands of fighters, and developing weapons systems, including UAVs, guided missiles and shells.⁶

► In 2019, the al-Fath al-Mubin operations room was opened in Idlib to manage and coordinate the rebels' military activity. Alongside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, factions operating with Turkish guidance and support participated in the operations room, as did the Ahrar al-Sham organization (Free Men of the Levant), which was established in 2011, when four Islamic organizations opposed to the Assad regime merged and worked to establish an Islamic state in Syria.

► On November 27, 2024, the al-Fath al-Mubin operations room, the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army and the southern operations room (which included Druze tribes and local opposition forces in southern Syria) launched Operation Deterrence of Aggression against Syrian army forces of the Assad regime and their allies in northwestern Syria. Within a few days, they took control of Aleppo, Hama and Homs, and on the night of December 7, 2024, the rebels captured Damascus. The Syrian Ministry of Defense then announced that Assad's regime had fallen.⁷

Jihad Organizations in Syria in the al-Sharaa's Regime

► During Operation Deterrence of Aggression, and especially after the fall of the Assad regime, al-Julani positioned himself as the strongest leader in Syria, and to project an image of pragmatism, reverted to his original name, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and declared that there was no reason to fear the new government. He used the governance model of the Salvation Government from Idlib as the basis for a temporary Syrian government and established committees to deal with civilian matters in the various provinces, including garbage collection, electricity supply, and the provision of water and food to civilians.

► In the period following the fall of the regime, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and organizations operating alongside it integrated into the institutions of the new government, and senior figures from the rebel ranks were appointed to key positions, including prime minister, defense minister, foreign minister and provincial governors. The armed organizations in Syria which

⁶ See the ITIC report, [Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's New Leader: From Jihadist to Stateman?](#)

⁷ See the ITIC report, [Spotlight on Syria \(Following the Toppling of the Syrian Regime\) – December 2-9, 2024](#)

had worked with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to overthrow the Assad regime agreed to dissolve all armed organizations and unite them under the ministry of defense.

► On January 29, 2025, the Victory Conference of the Syrian Revolution was held, attended by figures from the new government and representatives of the armed factions which had participated in the campaigns leading to the fall of the Assad regime. Official changes to the Syrian governance structure were announced: the former regime's army and intelligence and security apparatuses would be dismantled and the Syrian army would be rebuilt on national foundations. All military factions and revolutionary, political and civilian bodies would be dismantled and integrated into state institutions. Approximately 18 armed militias led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, including Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Ahrar and militias within the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army, announced that they were disbanding. As part of the reorganization, senior figures from jihad organizations were appointed to key positions in the new security forces, and foreign jihad fighters were integrated into the military framework (Institute for the Study of War, November 14, 2025; Reuters, June 2, 2025).⁸

Non-State Jihad Organizations

► However, not all armed groups operating under the framework of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham disbanded and integrated into the mechanisms of the new regime. An organization called Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, led by Abu Aisha al-Shami, withdrew from the framework in January 2025 because it opposed al-Sharaa's conciliatory rhetoric to Shi'ites, Alawites and supporters of the former regime. The organization began issuing statements about assassinations it had carried out of figures affiliated with the Assad regime, as well as attacks on the inclusive policies of the new government.

► Beyond the online profile of Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, which presented the organization as Salafi-jihadist, very little information was revealed, and there was speculation as to whether or not it existed or was actually a virtual initiative of actors affiliated with ISIS. Nevertheless, despite its ideological proximity to ISIS, the organization denied that it maintained ties with the group, though it did not rule out such ties in the future (*al-Araby al-Jadeed*, February 14, 2025; Washington Institute, June 25, 2025).

► One of the senior figures in Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, Abu al-Fath al-Shami, stated that the organization, which had been founded covertly in Idlib prior to the regime change, had ended its secrecy to publicly distance itself from the government of al-Sharaa', whom al-Shami

⁸ See the monthly ITIC reports, "Spotlight on terrorist – Syria."

described as an "unreliable tyrant." He said there were operatives in the organization who had defected from al-Sharaa's regime, defectors from other militias and civilians who joined the group. He said the organization did not currently see a need to confront the military forces of the new regime, despite having declared them infidels, and was focusing on attacking Alawites, Druze, Shi'ites and Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria (*al-Nahar*, May 21, 2025).

► That manifested itself on June 22, 2025, when a suicide bomber opened fire inside the Mar Elias Church in Damascus before detonating his explosive belt, killing at least 25 and wounding dozens. The Syrian regime was quick to accuse ISIS of responsibility, but two days later Saraya Ansar al-Sunna published a statement on its Telegram channel claiming responsibility (Syrian Television, June 24, 2025; BBC Arabic, June 24, 2025).

► On December 26, 2025, the organization, stating it had not acted alone, claimed responsibility for an attack on an Alawite mosque in Homs, where an explosive device was detonated, killing eight people and wounding 18. The organization stated that the attack had targeted members of the Alawite sect and threatened that its attacks "would continue to escalate and be directed against all infidels" (*al-Watan*, December 26, 2025; al-Arabiya, December 26, 2025; RT, December 26, 2025). Even now, about a year after declaring itself an independent organization, very little is known about Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, its organizational framework or the number of its operatives.



Right: The attack at Mar Elias Church in Damascus (al-Jazeera X account, June 23, 2025).

Left: The attack at the Alawite mosque in Homs (SANA, December 26, 2025)

► In October 2025, security forces of the new regime operated in a displaced persons camp near the town of Harem in the Idlib area against operatives of Firqat al-Ghurabaa' (Group of Strangers), an organization based on French-speaking jihadists led by Omar Diaby (the nom de guerre of Omar Omsen), a French criminal of Senegalese origin who became a preacher and had been in Syria since 2013. The regime took action against Diaby after he was accused of attempting to kidnap a girl, and when he refused to surrender a firefight broke out. However,

shortly thereafter a ceasefire agreement was reached, under which heavy weapons were removed from the camp, security forces were allowed to enter and legal proceedings against Diaby were agreed upon (France 24, October 23, 2025).

ISIS

► The capture of Damascus and the fall of the Assad regime raised concerns that ISIS would exploit the governmental and security vacuum created to recover and reorganize. As the rebels took control of Damascus, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) announced that air forces, including strategic bombers, had carried out precision strikes targeting more than 75 known ISIS camps and operatives in central Syria. CENTCOM said the actions were meant to ensure that ISIS could not exploit the situation in Syria and reorganize (CENTCOM X account, December 8, 2024).

► In the first weeks of its existence, the al-Sharaa regime focused on consolidating its power and control and directed its operations mainly against elements that had belonged to or remained loyal to the Assad regime. That gave ISIS the opportunity to strengthen itself and reorganize, particularly in the desert region in eastern Syria, where the regime's presence was sparse (al-Arabiya, December 19, 2024; Levant 24, February 19, 2025). However, the United States continued to take action against the organization, attacking from the air in the months following the fall of the Assad regime and inflicting heavy losses on the organization (CENTCOM X account, December 16, 2024; December 20, 2024; December 24, 2024; July 17, 2025; July 25, 2025; August 21, 2025; September 19, 2025).

► During 2025, ISIS continued to establish itself in the Syrian desert but also expanded its activity into populated areas near Damascus and the regions of Aleppo, Homs and southern Syria, operating small, mobile cells and strengthening smuggling networks to facilitate movement. In addition, the organization sought to incite sectarian tensions and conducted multilingual campaigns to discredit the al-Sharaa regime, while recruiting local and foreign operatives and former regime soldiers. According to UN data, from January to July 2025 ISIS attacked more than 90 times across the country, directing most of its attention to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria, where approximately 400 ISIS fighters remained active, while the organization continued efforts to target detention centers and critical infrastructure operated by Kurdish forces (UN Security Council, July 24, 2025).

► In November 2025, Syria officially joined the United States-led international coalition against ISIS, after the new government had already cooperated with the coalition unofficially

since the fall of the Assad regime (*New York Times*, November 12, 2025). The Syrian security forces intensified their activity against ISIS, both independently and in cooperation with CENTCOM. During December 2025, reports included the arrest of the organization's leader in Damascus, Taher al-Zoabi, the seizure of weapons shipments intended for ISIS cells, and the prevention of a plot to carry out suicide attacks during New Year's celebrations (Telegram channel of the Syrian Ministry of Interior and Syrian media, December 31–January 1, 2026).

► On December 13, 2025, two American soldiers and an American civilian interpreter were killed, and three American soldiers were wounded in an ambush near the city of Palmyra in central Syria (CENTCOM X account, December 13, 2025). ISIS did not claim responsibility and security officials in Syria claimed that the attacker belonged to Syrian security forces (Reuters, December 13, 2025). However, the American president attributed the attack to ISIS and stated that the American response would be "very fierce revenge" (Truth Social, December 13, 2025). On December 19, 2025, American forces, in cooperation with the Jordanian army, attacked more than 70 ISIS targets at several locations across Syria using fighter jets, attack helicopters, and artillery (CENTCOM X account, December 19, 2025). On December 30, 2025, CENTCOM reported that its forces and partner forces had killed or captured approximately 25 ISIS operatives since December 19, 2025, and destroyed four ISIS weapons depots (CENTCOM X account, December 30, 2025).

► On January 3, 2026, Britain and France carried out a joint strike on an underground ISIS facility in the Palmyra area in Syria using guided munitions to damage or destroy several tunnels providing access to the facility. Reportedly, the targeted facility had probably been used to store weapons and explosives (UK government website, January 3, 2026).



The attack in Palmyra (al-Jazeera, December 14, 2025)

► With the stabilization of the new regime and the increased effectiveness of its security forces, together with the activity of additional forces such as Kurds in northeastern Syria and

the American-led coalition, a decline was recorded in the number of ISIS attacks. Overall, ISIS was responsible for approximately 550–580 attacks and incidents in Syria in 2025, compared to 692 attacks and incidents in the previous year, most of which took place while the Assad regime was still in power (Syria Weekly, December 31, 2025).

The Jihad Threat Against Israel

► Immediately following the fall of the Assad regime, IDF forces took control of the buffer zone in the Golan Heights and seized control of the Syrian Hermon to demilitarize southern Syria of armed forces belonging to the new Syrian regime and other armed organizations. Since then, IDF forces have conducted routine activity in the buffer zone, as well as in the Quneitra and Daraa districts, to prevent potential terrorist activity against Israeli territory.

► Since the rise of the new regime, there have been several attempts to attack IDF forces and Israeli territory. However, the attempts were made primarily by elements affiliated with the "resistance axis,"⁹ led by the Islamic Resistance Front in Syria – the Men of Valor. The IDF also detained or eliminated terrorist operatives affiliated with the Qods Force, Hamas, or al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, close to Hamas).¹⁰

► Although no direct activity by Salafi-jihadist organizations against Israeli forces or Israeli territory has been identified, the potential threat still exists:

◆ On February 26, 2025, ISIS issued a video of Syrian operatives threatening to attack Israel following statements by Prime Minister Netanyahu regarding the demilitarization of parts of southern Syria. The video showed three masked, armed spokesmen wearing ISIS flags, who said, "My message is to the dog Netanyahu. Listen, son of the infidels. By Allah, your annihilation is near. We will not stop fighting until our armies reach Bayt al-Maqdis [Jerusalem]" (*Israel Hayom*, February 26, 2025).

◆ IDF forces operating in the buffer zone in southern Syria detained a suspect who, according to the IDF spokesperson, was handled by ISIS. During the detention weapons also located and seized (IDF spokesperson, December 20, 2025).

⁹ Iran, Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Houthis in Yemen and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, all of whose objective is the destruction and elimination of the State of Israel.

¹⁰ See the September 2025 ITIC report, [Is South Syria a Terrorist Threat to Israel? The Islamic Resistance Front in Syria, a Test Case](#), and the December 2025 report, [IDF Operation in Beit Jinn amid Efforts to Promote Terrorism Against Israel in Southern Syria](#), and the monthly ITIC summaries on terrorism against Israel.



**Weapons seized during an operation to detain an ISIS operative in southern Syria
(IDF spokesperson, December 20, 2025)**

◆ Syrian ministry of interior forces eliminated Muhammad Shahada, aka Abu Omar Shaddad, who was a senior ISIS figure in Syria and served as the governor of the Hauran region in southern Syria. The announcement stated that he posed a "direct threat" to the security of the region and to the safety of residents (Telegram channel of the Syrian ministry of interior, December 25, 2025).