

THE STRATEGY OF JABHAT AL-NUSRA/ JABHAT FATH AL-SHAM IN REGARDING THE TRUCES IN SYRIA



Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's fighters shortly before an attempt to break the siege of Aleppo
© Propaganda picture of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, July 2016.

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Since the beginning of 2016, the international community has been striving to ensure that the local and national truces in Syria are respected.

Jabhat al-Nusra (today known as Fath al-Sham), through a mixture of pragmatism and revolutionary intransigence, has successfully taken advantage of the failure of the strategy of military de-escalation imposed from above.

While the truces were intended to break the link of military dependence between the armed opposition and jihadist groups, Jabhat al-Nusra has managed to further its integration within the Syrian revolutionary movement.

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In the absence of agreement on how to put an end to the Syrian crisis, the majority of the international community's diplomatic initiatives throughout 2016 have consisted of efforts to ensure that local or national truces between pro-government forces and the armed opposition are respected. The "International Syria Support Group" (ISSG), comprising 20 States and international organisations, meeting in Vienna in November 2015, called for the establishment of a truce and for the resumption of negotiations between the warring parties. By the 3rd February 2016, the negotiations known as Geneva III between the regime and the opposition under UN auspices had failed, and subsequent attempts to re-establish contact proved to be in vain. The only short-term room for manoeuvre was thus military de-escalation. On the 26th February 2016, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2268, which endorses the agreement between Russia and the United States on the "cessation of hostilities" between the regime and the non-jihadist rebels.¹ For the first time since the start of the conflict, the fighting and the air-strikes drastically lessened up to the end of April, when an offensive by the regime against the city of Aleppo put a de facto end to the agreement.² In September 2016, the United States and Russia agree on a new attempt to implement a truce on the national level. Once again, the truce failed and after only eight days, the regime offensive on Aleppo resumed.

These truces have several objectives. Beyond that of lowering the intensity of the conflict and thus the number of casualties and refugees, they firstly aim to demonstrate that diplomatic efforts are not in vain in spite of profound disagreement on the essential issue of a political transition. Next and above all, the truces aim to concentrate the entire war effort against those groups that the United Nations Security Council deems to be terrorists, namely, for the most part, Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra / Fath al-Sham.

Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, lead by Abu Mohamed al-Jolani, has established itself as a key actor in the Syrian rebellion. Capitalising on its military successes against the regime, the jihadist group has become an indispensable ally of the rebels, in spite of the profound ideological gulf that separates them. Contrary to Islamic State, against which the rebellion is at war, al-Qaeda in Syria does not have designs on taking power, but rather aims to radicalise the Syrian revolution, which, when victori-

1. Office of the Spokesperson Washington DC, "Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as Co-Chairs of the ISSG, on Cessation of Hostilities in Syria", <ur1.ca/pnnn1> and Security Council meeting coverage, "Security Council Endorses Syria Cessation of Hostilities Accord, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2268", 2016, <ur1.ca/pnnms>.

2. "What Ceasefire? Assad and Russia Are Gearing Up to Seize Syria's Second-Largest City", Vice, April 2016, <ur1.ca/pnnn1> and Bonsey, Noah, "Can high-stakes diplomacy save Syria's battered truce?", International Crisis Group, 4 May 2016, <ur1.ca/pnnnm>.

ous, would bring to power an authority similar to the Taliban in Afghanistan. Such a scenario would allow the group to establish a safe-haven in the heart of the Near East from whence it could pursue international jihad. As such, since the beginning of the war, Jabhat al-Nusra has taken care to maintain its alliances with the rebel factions by seeking to render them militarily dependent and to avoid conflict with the population with the aim of taking root in Syrian society in the long term and finding its place in the revolutionary movement. In July 2016, in keeping with this strategy of integration within the rebellion, Jabhat al-Nusra changed its name to Jabhat Fath al-Sham (“Front for the Conquest of the Levant”) and announced the severing of its hierarchical ties to al-Qaeda.³ This announcement did not in reality modify either the composition or the strategy of the organisation, which continues to be led by leading figures of the international jihad now based in Syria.

One of the expected results of the cessation of hostilities agreement since the beginning of 2016, and of the strategy of military de-escalation generally speaking, has been to bring about a fissure between the armed opposition willing to commit to seeking a political solution and Jabhat al-Nusra. The alliance between the rebels and Jabhat al-Nusra is chiefly based on a mutual military dependency rather than on any kind of ideological proximity. The underlying principle of the truces thus consists in betting on the fact that by alleviating the military pressure exerted by the regime, the rebels will be able to establish a greater degree of autonomy from the jihadists, or even attempt to eliminate their presence, as was the case with Islamic State in the northwest of Syria in January 2014.⁴ This objective is particularly clear in the September, 12th 2016 truce deal, which allows for direct involvement and coordination of Russia and the United States in fighting Jabhat al-Nusra / Fath al-Sham.

Yet, a close look at the effects of previous attempts of military de-escalation on Jabhat al-Nusra, shows the very inverse dynamic. While the establishment of the truces was supposed to

3. Announcement of the creation of Jabhat Fath al-Sham by Abu Mohamed al-Jolani, together with two members of the Majles al-Choura of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian Abu Abdallah al-Shami and the Egyptian Abu Fajr al-Shami <ur1.ca/pnnnt>

4. Before January 2014, Islamic State was one of the several rebel factions which maintained admittedly tense but peaceful relations with the other factions. Following several months of tension between the rebellion and Islamic State during 2013, the different factions of the Free Syrian Army in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo (in the northwest of Syria) formed a coalition and waged war against the organisation led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Given that Islamic State was only very rarely involved in combat against the regime, its break with the other rebel factions did not serve to weaken the rebellion. A similar scenario of the rebels turning against Jabhat al-Nusra is highly unlikely in light of its military contribution against the regime, which is indispensable for the rest of the rebellion.

help to weaken the most radical factions of the insurgency, Jabhat al-Nusra emerged indisputably strengthened from the failure of the agreement between the regime and the non-jihadist opposition. This article aims to take stock of the resilience displayed by Jabhat al-Nusra in the face of the multiplication of military de-escalation initiatives between the regime forces and the armed opposition over the course of 2016. By juggling a level of intransigence towards the regime that allowed the group to monopolise revolutionary radicalism and a degree of pragmatism at the local level that allowed it to avoid alienating its allies, Jabhat al-Nusra has emerged strengthened from a phase of the conflict that should have served to weaken it.

1. THE REVOLUTIONARY INTRANSIGENCE OF JABHAT AL-NUSRA / FATH AL-SHAM

In the face of the rallying of almost all of the opposition forces to the principle of a political solution to the conflict, Jabhat al-Nusra has developed a discourse of revolutionary intransigence, which situates it as the only force striving for the definitive fall of the Assad regime.⁵

Since the end of 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra’s propaganda has taken on an increasingly revolutionary note, putting references to jihad in the background. References to the uprisings in 2011 and to the “will of the people” to bring down dictators have replaced those of al-Qaeda’s past struggles. The idea is to present jihad as a mean of carrying out revolution, rather than using revolution as an opportunity for al-Qaeda to pursue its international jihad. The change of name and the outward cutting of ties with al-Qaeda in July 2016 are both symptomatic of this strategy.

According to al-Qaeda, the revolutionary efforts of 2011 were thwarted by the traps laid by the West and “counter-revolutionary” forces. In an audio recording released in May 2016, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda Central Command under whose authority Jabhat al-Nusra was formally situated up to July 2016, cautioned the Syrian rebels against the acceptance of compromise and the democratic game, which, according to him, were at the origin of the failure of the “Arab Spring”.⁶ This message

5. On the rallying of the political and military opposition to the principle of a political solution: Lund, Aron, “Syria’s Opposition Conferences: Results and Expectations”, Carnegie Endowment, 11 December 2015, <ur1.ca/pnnnz>.

6. Audio press release by Ayman al-Zawahiri on Syria, May 2016 <ur1.ca/pnn01>.

clearly relates to the propaganda film *The Heirs of Glory II*, in which images of demonstrators across the Arab world calling for the fall of the regime in their country are immediately followed by illustrations of the “counter-revolution” at work in Tunisia and in Egypt. These images are put into perspective with those of Jabhat al-Nusra’s military operations in Syria. They are also interspersed with statements by leaders of the movement explaining the organisation’s choice, in 2011-2012, to support and accelerate the militarisation of the uprising, and in 2016, to continue armed struggle until the regime’s downfall has been assured, whereas the rebellion adopted the idea of a political solution. As such, the objective of the jihadist organisation’s propaganda is to portray itself as the only revolutionary group equal to the task at hand.

Jabhat al-Nusra’s discourse since the end of 2015 has been particularly well constructed and follows a logic that is a far cry from Islamic State’s millenarian propaganda. The target audience is Syrian rebels feeling betrayed both by the international community and by those armed groups that have agreed to make compromises. By betting on the fact that the leaders of the revolutionary groups that have accepted to take part in negotiations under pressure from their foreign sponsors will not be followed by their rank and file, Jabhat al-Nusra hopes to thereby win the backing of diehard revolutionaries who have not necessarily been won over to the jihadist cause, who may be seduced by the maximalist position of Jabhat al-Nusra against the regime. Abu Mohamad al-Jolani, in an interview given to Syrian journalists in December 2015, confirmed that the leaders of the armed groups that had just met in Riyadh to agree on the terms of the negotiation of a political transition had no control over their troops, who for their part wanted to continue the revolution.⁸

2. THE PRAGMATISM OF JABHAT AL-NUSRA / FATH AL-SHAM

While the intransigence demonstrated by Jabhat al-Nusra / Fath al-Sham leads it to refuse all forms of negotiation, dialogue or truce with the regime as a matter of principle, on the ground it can adopt a much more pragmatic strategy, defining its stance on a case-by-case basis. Several examples illustrate the flexibility of Jabhat al-Nusra / Fath al-Sham’s principles.

7. *The Heirs of Glory II*, (“warthat al-majd II”), al-Manara al-Bayda, an official production of Jabhat al-Nusra, March 2016, <ur1.ca/pnno6>.

8. Interview with Abu Mohamad al-Jolani, Decembre 2016, <ur1.ca/pnno6>.

Like all of the different factions, Jabhat al-Nusra has established channels of communication with the regime and its allies, which notably allow it to negotiate exchanges of prisoners and bodies of dead combatants. These channels seem particularly solid in the case of Jabhat al-Nusra / Fath al-Sham. The operations that are negotiated via these channels could not take place without the certainty of the parties’ intention to respect the agreements. On several occasions, Jabhat al-Nusra has negotiated with the regime regarding the transfer of al-Qaeda leaders from the south to the north of the country, which involved crossing several hundred kilometres of territory controlled by the regime. In exchange for releasing prisoners, truces lasting one night have allowed Jabhat al-Nusra’s top leaders to cross the country in total security, escorted by Hezbollah fighters. This was notably the case for Abu Maria al-Qahtani and his security detail, as well as for Sami al-Oreidi, the *qadi ‘am* (supreme judge), considered to be the organisation’s number two.⁹

This ambivalence is accepted and legitimised by the movement in the name of the primacy of the strategic imperative. In December 2015, Abu Mohamad al-Jolani was questioned by the Syrian journalist Hadi al-Abdallah on the inconsistency of these stances on the truces¹⁰: why was the truce in Ghouta (an eastern suburb of Damascus, under rebel control and under siege by the regime) deemed illicit (*haram*) while Jabhat al-Nusra had agreed to be party to a truce agreement including Zabadani, (a town under rebel control in the province of Damascus) and a large part of Idlib (a province under the rebellion’s control, situated in the northwest of the country), which was concluded two months earlier under Iranian auspices? Al-Jolani replied that he did not wish to enter into a debate on religious legality, but that from a strictly strategic point of view, continued fighting in Ghouta, on the doorstep of the capital, was necessary, whereas the retreat from Zabadani had no incidence on the course of the war.

In reality, these diverging positions regarding these two attempted truces were the result of a pragmatic calculation of the consequences of a military de-escalation on the relationship between Jabhat al-Nusra and the other rebel factions. Issues of military strategy and ideological positioning are secondary, and serve above all to justify ex post decisions made on a case-by-case basis.

The Zabadani-Idlib agreement, reached between the rebellion (including Jabhat al-Nusra) and the regime, provided for the cessation of bombardments by the regime of almost the whole

9. “Safqa Jabhat al-Nusra: Kayfa intaqala Abu Mariyya al-Qahtani ila shamal suriyya”, Syrian Mirror, 25 January 2016, and al-Balaghi Amar, “Qiyada jadida li Jabhat al-Nusra fi-l-janub al-suri”, al-Modon, 25 December 2015.

10. Interview with Abu Mohamad al-Jolani, op. cit.

of Idlib province, and the evacuation of civilians from the town of Zabadani, surrounded by pro-regime forces. In exchange, the rebels committed to ceasing attacks on the Shiite villages of Fua and Kafraya. The refusal or sabotage of such an agreement by Jabhat al-Nusra would certainly have created serious tensions between the organisation and the other rebel factions in favour of the agreement. This truce was subsequently broken by the massive bombardment, by Russian aircraft, of areas included in the agreement.¹¹

Conversely, in eastern Ghouta, Jabhat al-Nusra expressed fierce opposition to the truce negotiated between Jaysh al-Islam, the main rebel faction in the region, and the regime in November 2015. In this situation, Jabhat al-Nusra had everything to lose. Weakly established, the jihadist organisation more or less survived in the besieged suburb as long as the other factions needed its support to repel the regime's attacks. In a situation of military de-escalation, Jabhat al-Nusra feared, doubtless rightly, that Jaysh al-Islam would decide to establish its hegemony by getting rid of its competitors.

Another example of Jabhat al-Nusra's pragmatism can be found in its reaction to the announcement by Turkey in August 2015 of its willingness to establish a "buffer zone" in the north of Syria, which was supposed to pass into rebel control and under the protection of the international anti-Islamic State coalition. This project, which was only implemented a year later with the Turkish intervention in Jarablous in August 2016, could only have been carried out on the condition that Jabhat al-Nusra was absent from the area in question. In a press release, Jabhat al-Nusra confirmed its unilateral withdrawal from the area, considering that Islamic law did not allow it to fight with the support of the coalition. One might have imagined that al-Qaeda would react more violently to such direct intervention, if not resisting it then at least strongly condemning it. By acting as if it was withdrawing of its own volition, Jabhat al-Nusra seemed to believe that the Turkish proposal did not endanger it and that it was necessary at all costs to avoid finding itself in a situation that might lead to conflict with the other rebel factions.¹²

11. Bassam, Laila, Miles, Tom, Sérisier, Pierre, "L'intervention russe en Syrie enterre un accord de trêve locale", Reuters, 9 octobre 2016, <ur1.ca/pnnok >.

12. Press release by Jabhat al-Nusra justifying its withdrawal from northern Aleppo, in view of the creation of a "buffer zone" with Turkish military support, "Bayan hawla-l-ahdath al-akhira fi rif halab al-shamali", al-Manara al-bayda, 9 August 2015, <ur1.ca/pnnon>. Al-Khatieb Mohamed, "Is Nusra cooperating with Syrian opposition to support establishing safe zone on Syria-Turkey border?", al-Monitor, 25 August 2015, <ur1.ca/pnnoq>. This buffer zone was never established as planned, notably due to disagreement between Turkey and the United States on the terms of their respective involvement and on the identity of the rebel brigades that should be supported in these zones. The Turkish intervention in Northern Syria in August

3. JABHAT AL-NUSRA AND THE FEBRUARY 2016 CESSATION OF HOSTILITIES AGREEMENT

Since December 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra has reacted extremely violently to participation by its allies in diplomatic initiatives as well as to the establishment of a cessation of hostilities agreement in February 2016. This is no longer a matter of "strategic error" or of a "defeatist slide" on the part of its allies, but rather one of "treason", in the words of Abu Mohamad al-Jolani.¹³ This position can be explained firstly by the fact that Jabhat al-Nusra has fears over its own security in the extent to which the cessation of hostilities agreement formally excludes the group. Indeed, one of its stated objectives is the concentration of the war effort on the organisations designated as terrorists by the UN Security Council, as is the case for the former Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. Moreover, the current attempts at de-escalation fall within a direct context of preparation for a political solution to the conflict. The rallying of almost all of the armed factions, including groups that are usually close to Jabhat al-Nusra such as Ahrar al-Sham, to the idea of a negotiated political transition and the establishment of a "pluralistic" and "democratic" "civilian State" is perceived as a betrayal.¹⁴ Jabhat al-Nusra thus feared that the success of the truce would mean the failure of its strategy of military alliance with the rebels, from which no political victory would emerge.

Jabhat al-Nusra / Fath al-Sham has established itself within the Syrian rebellion by creating ties of dependency with the other factions; its military capabilities are indispensable to a rebellion that is constantly under pressure. Despite its ideological opposition and numerous abuses committed by the jihadist organisation, it is inconceivable for the rebels to do without such a militarily effective ally. However, in a period of détente, this military dependency evaporates, and the political and ideological differences and the conflicts regarding the management of liberated areas come back to the fore.

The truces are thus propitious for fratricidal struggles. In the south of the country, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) took advantage of the cessation of hostilities to attack rival factions, Liwa'

2016 might be interpreted as a unilateral move to establish the buffer-zone envisioned a year before.

13. Audio press release by Abu Mohamad al-Jolani regarding the cessation of hostilities agreement, February 2016, <ur1.ca/pnnou>.

14. Final press release of the Riyadh conference, 10 December 2015, <ur1.ca/pnnp1>.

Shuhada' al-Yarmouk and Harakat al-Mouthana, respectively accused of having sworn allegiance to and of supporting Islamic State.¹⁵ Despite the poor relationship between the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra in the south, the latter adroitly handled the situation by taking part in the fight against the two seditious factions. In the same way, in eastern Ghouta, Jabhat al-Nusra (through Jaysh al-Fustat) joined forces with Faylaq al-Rahman who in March and April, while the truce with the regime was relatively respected, confronted Jaysh al-Islam, the most powerful rebel faction in the region.¹⁶

The difficulties for Jabhat al-Nusra are even more clearly apparent in the province of Idlib. From the beginning of March 2016, taking advantage of the cessation of bombardments, numerous demonstrations broke out in rebel-held territories demanding the fall of the regime and the continuation of the revolution. In the province of Idlib, the demonstrations also hit out at Jabhat al-Nusra, who exert an almost hegemonic control in the area. The FSA fighters, freed from their missions on the front line against the regime, returned to their towns and villages in the hinterland and took part in demonstrations side by side with civilians against Jabhat al-Nusra. In Maarat al-Noman, fighting broke out between the 13th Division of the FSA and the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, with several fatalities on both sides. The two factions officially reached an agreement and put an end to the clashes. However, demonstrations, which at times have turned to riots, continue to call for Jabhat al-Nusra to leave the town.

During the first two months of the application of the cessation of hostilities agreement, particularly in March 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra seemed to be weakened. A political space re-emerged for the non-jihadist opposition with hopes of making progress on the diplomatic front and which manifested itself through new pro-FSA and anti-Jabhat-al-Nusra demonstrations. Anticipating popular pressure against it and fearing exposure to bombardments, Jabhat al-Nusra partially withdrew from its strongholds

15. On the fighting amongst the rebellion in the south of Syria and Liwa' Shuhada' al-Yarmouk and Harakat al-Mouthana; these two Islamist factions, present in the south of Syria in the provinces of Quneitra and Deraa, have become progressively more autonomous from the rest of the rebellion while secretly establishing contact with Islamic State. Al-Balakh, Amr, "Al-jaysh al-hur yatawa'adu bi-isti'sal da'esh fi-l-huran", *al-Modon*, 26 March 2016.

16. Jaysh al-Islam is one of the most powerful rebel factions in Syria, principally active in the eastern suburbs of Damascus, but also with less influential branches in other regions in the country. Faylaq al-Rahman is a coalition of local factions in the suburbs of Damascus that have refused to submit to Jaysh al-Islam. The relationship between the two factions in eastern Ghouta was peaceful before March 2016; they collaborated even within local governance structures. Jaysh al-Fustat is a coalition of Islamist factions present in the eastern Ghouta of Damascus, which includes the local branch of Jabhat al-Nusra. Lund, Aron, "Showdown in East Ghouta", Carnegie Endowment, 4 May 2016, <ur1.ca/pnnp2>.

of Salqin and Sarmada in the north of Syria.¹⁷ This was, in fact, no more than a superficial withdrawal: a provisional evacuation of the court, police offices and other institutions under the group's control, while the security apparatus of Jabhat al-Nusra maintained a discrete presence. The repression of demonstrations in the province of Idlib badly tarnished its reputation; the jihadist organisation attracted criticism from its allies such as Ahrar al-Sham and even from some of its own members, such as Abu Maria al-Qahtani.¹⁸ Over the course of the month of March, Jabhat al-Nusra, now almost alone on the front line, attempted to poach recruits from the rebel brigades to take part in the Southern Aleppo offensive, which the group eventually lost.¹⁹

Immediately after the implementation of the cessation of hostilities agreement at the end of February 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra increased its level of contact with the leaders of local rebel brigades and launched a hostile propaganda campaign in the mosques against diplomatic initiatives and détente with the regime. Conscious of the popularity of the truce agreements among the civilian population, which during the month of March experienced its first weeks without bombardments, Jabhat al-Nusra instead devoted itself to winning over the rebels. One member of Jabhat al-Nusra, whom the author asked about possible fears that his organisation might find itself isolated due to the popularity of the truce explained: "yes, the majority of the population support the truce, but we don't give a damn about what the majority thinks, we can't make political and military choices with long-term consequences by taking into account the opinion of the majority. The majority is by definition silent. What matters to us is the opinion of revolutionaries, they're the ones that we are worried about losing, but I'm convinced that most of them want to carry on the revolution".

17. On Jabhat al-Nusra's withdrawal from the north of the province of Idlib following the announcement of the cessation of hostilities agreement; "Jabhat al-Nusra tansahibu min mawaqif bi-rif idlib wa tuwaqqifu 'amal dar al-qada' bi-salqin", *Smart News Agency* 29 February 2016.

18. On the criticism directed against Jabhat al-Nusra concerning the repression of demonstrations in Idlib province: "Abu Mariyya al-Qahtani: law la mudhaharat ahl al-sham lama istata'na hamal al-silah... wa nahnu ma'a man yahtamu bi-isqat al-nizam wa iqamat al-'adal wa-l-shari'a", *Aks al-ser*, 20 March 2016. See also Ahrar al-Sham's press release concerning Jabhat al-Nusra's repression of the demonstrations in Idlib, 7 March 2016. On the reaction of Abdallah al-Mosheini, supreme judge of Jaysh al-Fath ("The Army of Conquest", a rebel Islamist coalition which includes Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham): "Qadiyat qama' mudhaharat idlib tatafa'alu... al-lajna al-amniyya tathamu al-Nusra wa-l muhseini yu'aqabu", *lebwindow.net*, 8 March 2016, <ur1.ca/pnnpv1>.

19. Fadel, Leith, "Rebel offensive in southern Aleppo fails as the Syrian Army, Hezbollah recapture Al-Khalidiyah", *Al-Masdar News*, 10 May 2016, <ur1.ca/pnnp6>.

After the month of April 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra's problems/ seemed to be easing. The regime's offensive against Aleppo put a de facto end to the truce, and the diplomatic manoeuvring in Geneva did not come to a successful conclusion.²⁰ One of the towns most bombarded by the regime during the truce was Maarat al-Norman, a hub of the anti-Jabhat al-Nusra protests. As such, the tension between the 13th Division of the FSA and the jihadist organisation, which was on the verge of boiling over again and, above all, of spreading to Aleppo,²¹ was eased by the necessity of standing together against the regime's offensive. Politically, Jabhat al-Nusra also gained ground, having once again been seen to have made the correct forecast about the degree of trust that should be afforded to the regime and the international community with regard to the hopes of a negotiated solution.

Jabhat al-Nusra has also made progress on the military front. In May, the group reacted to the regime's offensive against Aleppo by attacking its only supply route, linking the country's former economic capital to the rest of the territory controlled by the regime. As such, while the other rebel factions were bound by their commitment not to take part in hostilities, Jabhat al-Nusra, backed by small jihadist organisations and local fighters, seized Khan Touman and al-Khalidiya, to the south of Aleppo, achieving a significant victory over the army and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.²²

At the beginning of August 2016, a rebel coalition from Idlib dominated by the group now known as Jabhat Fath al-Sham,

20. Lasserre, Isabelle, "Syrie: les négociations politiques en panne sèche", *lefigaro.fr*, 16 May 2016, <ur1.ca/pnnpg>.

21. "Makhawif min intiqaal al-tawattur bayn al-nusra wa-l-firqa 13 ila halab", *Al-Wasat News*, 4 April 2016, <ur1.ca/pnnpi>.

22. "Al-Nusra: maqtal 150 min al-milishiyat bi-khan tuman", *Al-Jazeera*, 14 May 2016.

halted the siege of Aleppo by breaking through the regime's lines. Jabhat al-Nusra / Fath al-Sham had previously hardly been present in Aleppo and the besieged rebels had not ceased to appeal to the international community for help since the regime seized their last remaining supply route in July 2016. Yet it was ultimately the jihadist organisation rather than the international community that answered the call and helped 300,000 inhabitants to avoid finding themselves besieged.

CONCLUSION

While it appears ever clearer that the diplomatic initiatives aiming to find a negotiated solution to the Syrian conflict will come to nothing, at least in the medium term, they have had real consequences on the ground. In spite of the fact that the détente between the regime and the non-jihadist armed opposition was supposed to weaken the groups designated as terrorists by the UN, these groups have instead emerged strengthened. Since the beginning of the revolution in Syria, the radical groups, and Jabhat al-Nusra in particular, have capitalised on the failure of the strategies of the most moderate groups: the pacifist mobilisation against an unreformable regime in 2011, the hopes of military support from the international community in 2012-13, and the expected results of the negotiations in 2016. The pressure exerted by those States that support the rebellion, in order to force their participation in negotiations doomed to failure and in truces that the regime failed to respect, only served to weaken the more moderate elements in the face of the most radical groups. Jabhat al-Nusra / Fath al-Sham has adroitly taken advantage of this situation, by appropriating the monopoly on what it considers to be the authentic revolutionary stance, namely that which advocates the total fall of the regime.