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**Relations between Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zinki in 2017**

November 7, 2017

**Executive Summary**

The past year has seen dramatic shifts in relations between opposition factions, and a rise in infighting, particularly in the northwestern opposition-held “Idleb pocket.” These changes, caused in large part by the opposition’s loss of Eastern Aleppo city in late 2016, resulted in a rapid growth in power for Hai’yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra). HTS, however, appears to have overplayed its hand by taking increasingly aggressive action against rival factions, leading to a string of defections beginning in the summer of 2017. One of the main component groups of HTS to defect was Nour al-Din al-Zenki (NDZ). NDZ has been a major player in northern Syria, particularly in Aleppo, and is a prior recipient of significant international support.

The following report details the history of relations between HTS and NDZ in 2017, concluding that future clashes between the two are highly likely as NDZ continues to voice support for a unified opposition body under the command of an opposition Minister of Defense. Furthermore, NDZ’s control of key territory near the Turkish border, Aleppo city, and along the border with the Kurdish-held Afrin canton make it likely that NDZ will play a key role in renewed inter-opposition fighting, should it occur.

**Background of HTS and NDZ**

Hai’yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was formed in late January 2017 in a merger between Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, JaN) and four prominent opposition groups including Nour al-Din al-Zenki (NDZ) of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Several influential senior leaders and sub-units of Ahrar al-Sham (AaS) also defected to take senior positions in the newly formed HTS. Since its formation, HTS has fought AaS and FSA units in Idleb, Hama, and Aleppo. NDZ remained a part of HTS until announcing its defection in late July in opposition to what it saw as unacceptable and unsanctioned aggression against AaS forces.

HTS’ formation, although representing a significant consolidation of armed opposition forces in Idleb, is better understood as the failure of merger efforts between AaS, JFS, and NDZ, three principal players in northern Syria. While there were certainly other factors contributing to the failure of merger discussions, JFS’ designation as a terrorist organization by the international community was and is the single most divisive factor preventing AaS and other opposition groups from allowing such an integration project to move forward, fearing that they would be similarly designated or otherwise subjected to increased airstrikes through association.

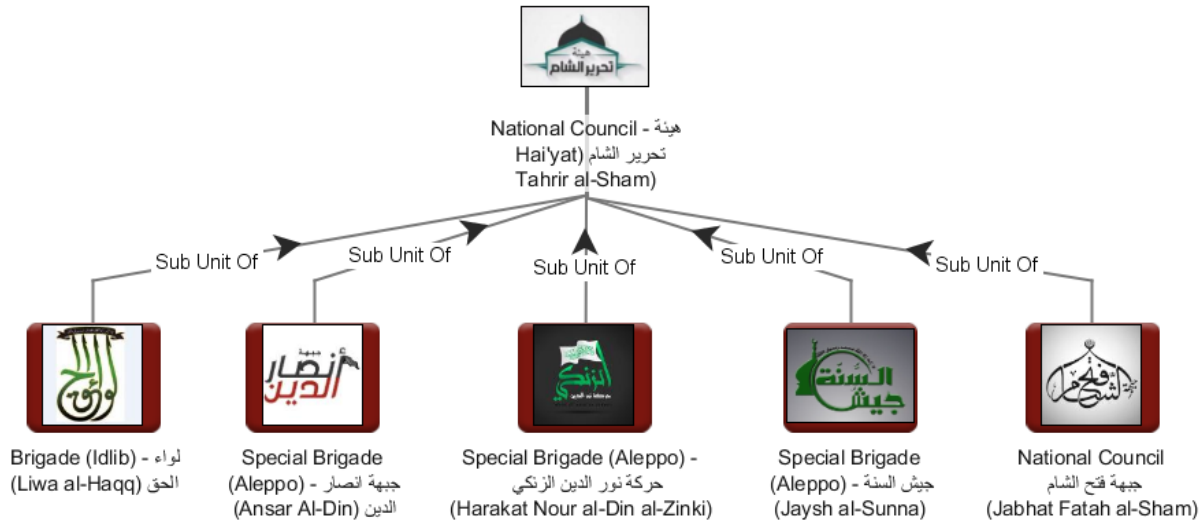


Figure 1 - Original structure of HTS in immediate aftermath of its formation

The Astana talks, initiated in December 2016 by Russia, Turkey, and Iran with representatives from the more moderate Syrian opposition, likely accelerated HTS' formation. This formation was orchestrated in part to derail perceived attempts by Astana participants to isolate and coordinate against JFS in northern Syria.<sup>1</sup> Opposition-controlled northern Syria thus found itself increasingly dividing into two camps. Clashes, often orchestrated by the JFS-core and other hardline elements within HTS (like Jund al-Aqsa) only solidified the divisions and increased tensions between HTS and much of the rest of the opposition in the area.

### Understanding NDZ's merger with HTS

The seeds of the NDZ and JFS merger were likely sown during their military coordination in eastern Aleppo city and the nearby countryside, formalized in September 2016 when NDZ joined the JFS and AaS-dominated Jaish al-Fateh operations room. Although it is not clear when merger discussions began, rumors of merger talks between major opposition groups including JFS, AaS, and NDZ began to spread as early as August 2016.<sup>2</sup> AaS and NDZ both valued JFS' military effectiveness and accepted to some degree JFS' renouncement of its ties to Al-Qaeda and its assumed identity as a Syria-focused movement. Although both AaS and NDZ fully opposed the isolation of JFS by the international community and other opposition groups, NDZ did not share AaS' core hesitancy about a merger with JFS. AaS's opposition to merging with JFS was championed internally by Labib Nahhas (former AaS head of Foreign Relations), who described a potential merger as a "costly and suicidal alliance." In contrast, a senior NDZ leader stated in late December 2016 that a merger with JFS was obligatory to "shield" the group with the "revolutionary banner" and to remove the divisions in the opposition according to "moderate" and Islamic or Salafi-jihadi lines, which he claimed had been heavily promoted by the Syrian government.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Collins, Dylan. "Idlib's rebel split: A crossroads for Syrian opposition." Al Jazeera. February 02, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/01/idlib-rebel-split-crossroads-syrian-opposition-170131134053716.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Hassan, Hassan. Twitter Post. August 16, 2016, 11:54 A.M. <https://twitter.com/hxhassan/status/767797197534617600>

<sup>3</sup> Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad. "Syrian Rebel Mergers: A Harakat Nour Al-Din Al-Zinki Perspective." Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi. January 7, 2017.

The eventual failure of these merger discussions by the end of December 2016 pushed NDZ along with JFS-sympathetic elements within AaS to embrace the HTS project.<sup>4</sup> Hossam Atrash, a senior leader and legal official within NDZ, also revealed that the group had embraced the HTS project only after multiple failed efforts to merge with first FSA and then other opposition groups. He cited “foreign intervention” and “refusal” by the Turkey-based MOM (Military Operations Center, a multi-national intelligence collective supporting the opposition) as reasons for that failure. According to Atrash, a merger between NDZ and AaS had also been rejected by AaS because AaS was “pursuing a comprehensive project” that could not or could not yet include NDZ.<sup>5</sup>

### **NDZ and other groups undergo “full merger” to form HTS**

In its formation statement, HTS described itself as a new entity with a single leader, as opposed to the more common ad hoc joint “operations room,” and that merging groups underwent a “full” merger. Soon after HTS was announced, NDZ stopped issuing statements or publishing on NDZ media channels which remained inactive from January 28 until their July split with HTS. Although details of HTS’ leadership structure and its members are scant, NDZ leadership was certainly integrated into the HTS Shura Council and other decision-making bodies and held significant influence.

HTS units composed of former NDZ fighters mobilized against positions held by Jaish al-Mujahideen (a former ally of NDZ) in the period immediately following HTS’ formation. However, because of the NDZ media blackout, later activities of its armed units during the period of merger with HTS is generally unknown.

### **Rumors of NDZ defection as tensions with other opposition groups increase**

Persistent rumors circulated through social media in late June 2017 that elements of NDZ were on the verge of splitting from HTS. Driving the rumors was HTS’ referral of NDZ’s legal official, Hossam Atrash, to an HTS court over a controversial series of posts he made on his Twitter account on May 31.<sup>6</sup> In his May 31 posts, Atrash presented an analysis of what he considered were the only options available to the opposition in northern Syria after ISIS was inevitably neutralized by the multiple forces arrayed against it. Atrash proposed that the only solution is that “the Interim Government governs the liberated areas, declares a Ministry of Defense and that the military factions dissolve themselves and enter the Ministry of Defense without banners”.<sup>7</sup>

HTS disavowed Atrash's tweets on its official telegram account and stated that the statement does not represent and contrasts with the views of HTS.<sup>8</sup> The tweets by Atrash and the HTS leadership’s relatively light response received significant criticism by HTS’ more hardline sheikhs, officials and supporters prompting multiple statements by HTS officials and members calling for Atrash's expulsion from HTS.<sup>9</sup>

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<http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/01/syrian-rebel-mergers-a-harakat-nour-al-din-al>.

4 NDZ’s northern unit, based in northern Aleppo, defected at this time to join Faylaq al Sham, adopting the name “Liwa Fursan al Thawra”.

5 Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad. "Syrian Rebel Mergers: A Harakat Nour Al-Din Al-Zinki Perspective." Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi. January 7, 2017.

<http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/01/syrian-rebel-mergers-a-harakat-nour-al-din-al>.

6 "تحريير الشام" تحيل حسام الأطرش إلى القضاء الداخلي. "عنب بلدي" June 05, 2017.

<https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/154277>.

7 Hossam Atrash. Twitter Post. May 31, 2017.

<https://twitter.com/hossamalatrash1/status/869911119846092802>

8 هيئة تحرير الشام. Telegram Post. June 1, 2017, 6:56 P.M.

<https://t.me/TahrerSham/193>

9 "Analysis: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's senior leadership is reaching a crossroad." Conflict News. June 7, 2017.

<https://www.conflict-news.com/articles/unrest-in-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-senior-leadership>.

The rumors about NDZ discontent within HTS increased following HTS' assault on Faylaq al Sham's Division 13 in Maarat al Nu'man. The attack, which resulted in the capture of Division 13 positions and headquarters and the death of the local head of the Free Syrian Police, were believed to be too extreme for NDZ to accept.<sup>10</sup> The resulting rumors of possible separation were persistent enough that Atrash publicly denied any split with HTS.<sup>11</sup> Despite Atrash's denial, the rumors were again bolstered when NDZ's then-HTS' political chief Mohammed al Said attended an FSA protest alongside an Ahrar al-Sham leader later that month.<sup>12</sup>

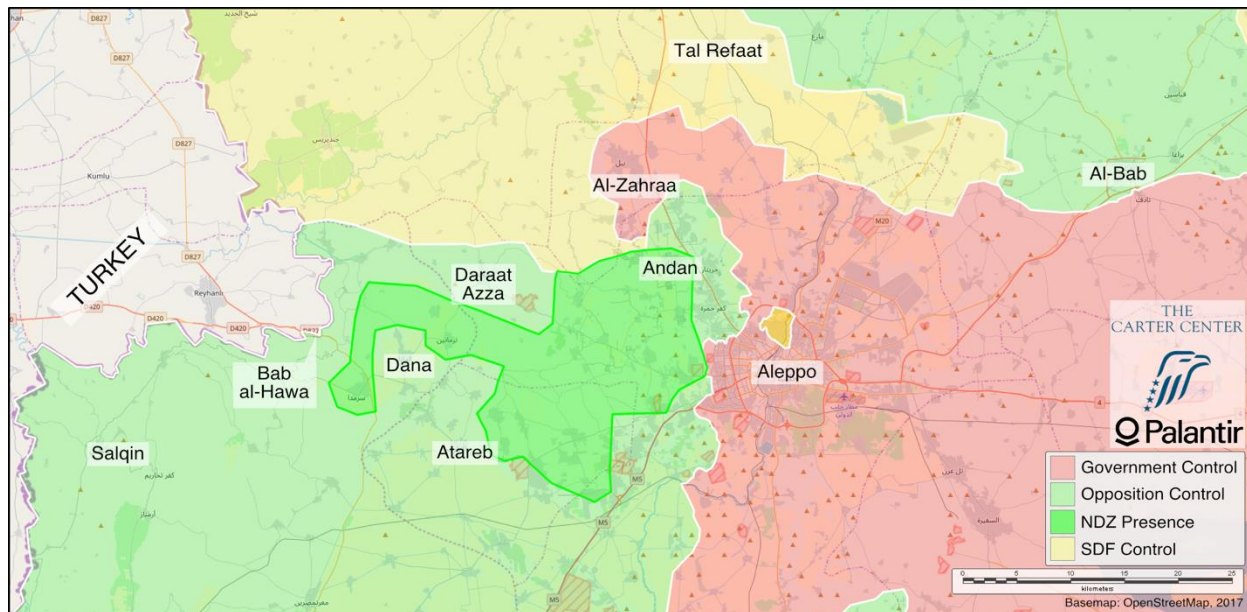


Figure 2 - Areas of NDZ activity in northern Idlib pocket, dated October 31

### HTS-AaS clashes and NDZ's departure from HTS

On July 20, NDZ leader Tawfiq Shihab al Din published a statement announcing NDZ's defection from HTS, protesting the latter's role in escalating clashes with AaS throughout Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo as well as its failure to follow the appropriate decision-making procedures.<sup>13</sup> The death of two HTS members in AaS territory earlier in July was suspected to have been exploited by Golani and other hardline elements within HTS as an excuse to instigate clashes with AaS, a suspicion later supported in leaked audio recordings of conversations between HTS commanders loyal to Golani.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that the spread and continuance of the clashes and HTS's assault on AaS positions in July was not sanctioned by

10 Al Ahmad, Shaheen . "كلنا شركاء في الوطن" . June 8, 2017. <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/417240>.

11 حقيقة انسحاب حركة "نور الدين الزنكي" من هيئة تحرير الشام. "الدر الشامية" June 12, 2017. <http://eldorar.com/node/112071>.

12 Lister, Charles. Twitter Post. June 23, 2017, 2:42 PM. [https://twitter.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/878367699692171265](https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/878367699692171265)

13 حركة نور الدين الزنكي. Telegram Post. July 20, 2017, 6:21 P.M. <https://t.me/zenky2/2>

14 TNT. Twitter Post. September 11, 2017, 4:39 P.M. <https://twitter.com/TNTranslations/status/907388260162338816>

the HTS Sharia Council and was decried by the lead Sharia Council member, Abdullah al-Moheisni. This was possibly an influence on NDZ's decision to defect.<sup>15</sup>

After NDZ's defection, NDZ and Faylaq al-Sham released a joint statement that they would act to intervene as a peacekeeping force between AaS and HTS. However, NDZ and Faylaq al-Sham stood down their forces the following day and adopted a neutral military stance. Despite standing down, they maintained their condemnation of HTS' aggressive actions.

### **NDZ-HTS tension and clashes in northern Idleb**

Despite the split, and the condemnations, NDZ and HTS relations were not immediately antagonistic. In the weeks following HTS' takeover of much of northern Syria from AaS, NDZ maintained its neutrality and even published a statement voicing support for an HTS initiative to transition administration of services and civilian affairs in northern Syria to a civilian administration.<sup>16</sup> Peace between the two groups was broken in mid-August after HTS stormed NDZ positions in the towns of Kafr Naha and Khan al-Asl, capturing a warehouse containing NDZ "TOW" anti-tank guided missiles and (possibly) launch platforms. Although a ceasefire was soon reached, the events as claimed by NDZ resembled HTS' past aggressions against AaS and its allies. Leaked audio recordings of communications between HTS commanders loyal to Golani bear out this perspective as the commanders were revealed discussing how to encircle and isolate NDZ forces and referred to these actions against NDZ as a "new project".<sup>17</sup>

On August 28, an NDZ commander was assassinated with an IED in the Hezreh-Tilaada area in northern Idleb sparking days of clashes and conflict, partly driven by a local family riven by its split loyalties to HTS and NDZ. Far from a local issue, however, NDZ released a strongly-worded statement accusing HTS of the assassination of its commander and further revealed that NDZ forces had arrested one HTS member and killed another, whom NDZ claimed were the previous assassins. The NDZ statement also claimed that the local HTS commander then instigated further clashes with NDZ in the town and that HTS members executed and desecrated the corpses of NDZ fighters that had surrendered.<sup>18</sup>

Within days, NDZ accused HTS of kidnapping another NDZ commander near the city of Deir Hassan. The NDZ statement referring to the incident warned HTS against continuing its "crimes against the Syrian people" which provides an indication of the degree to which relations had broken down between the two groups.<sup>19</sup>

Concurrent to rising tension with HTS, separate developments at the end of August saw Atrash claim on his Twitter account that Golani had urged the HTS Shura Council on multiple occasions to pursue political relations with Iran with the aim of neutralizing AaS, striking a personal blow to the HTS leader.<sup>20</sup> NDZ also appeared to throw its lot in with the mainstream opposition, giving open support along with 44 other opposition groups (including among them AaS, Jaish al-Islam, and Faylaq al-Sham) to a call by the Syrian Islamic Council (a major opposition religious authority) and the Syrian Interim Government to form a

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15 TNT. Twitter Post. September 11, 2017, 3:25 P.M.

<https://twitter.com/TNTtranslations/status/907369654913552384>

16 Atrash, Hossam. Twitter Post. July 24, 2017, 11:33 A.M.

<https://twitter.com/hossamalatrash2/status/889554074479341570>

17 TNT. Twitter Post. September 9, 2017, 5:41 A.M.

<https://twitter.com/TNTtranslations/status/906497820546433025>

18 TNT. Twitter Post. September 1, 2017, 12:31 P.M.

<https://twitter.com/TNTtranslations/status/903701960838307842>

19 "Nour al-Din al-Zanki movement warns (HTS)." Aldorar Alshamia. September, 2017.

<http://www.aldorars.com/en/news/1458>.

20 "Big Surprise by a Former Shura member of HTS: Julani proposed political ties with Iran." Aldorar Alshamia. September 6, 2017.

<http://www.aldorars.com/en/news/1461>.

united revolutionary army and a Ministry of Defense meant to manage all opposition territories and armed opposition groups in Syria, similar to what had been proposed by Hossam Atrash months before.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusions

NDZ, along with defectors from AaS, saw HTS as the second-best option for an opposition unity project. Leadership of member groups agreed to appoint Abu Jaber to lead HTS and to integrate other influential Syrian opposition figures into the HTS hierarchy and system of councils. This likely seemed sufficient to ensure that a successful unity project could move forward. However, a pattern of HTS escalation against AaS and the inability of non-JFS aligned HTS leadership and council members to restrain the JFS-core eventually convinced NDZ of the failure of this project. While it is unclear how much NDZ leadership was aware of Golani's plans, leaked audio recordings in September do reveal an ulterior project was underway at least as early as July when commanders loyal to Golani openly discuss the assassination of Sharia council members (including Abdullah al Moheisni) opposed to escalation with AaS.

Reconciliation between HTS and NDZ is very unlikely, and the potential for further clashes or even open conflict remains high. NDZ remains a significant rival to HTS in northern Idleb and Aleppo and has signaled its alignment with the interests of AaS and FSA groups by voicing its support for the formation of a single army under the command of an opposition Ministry of Defense. With NDZ controlling key territory near the Turkish border, Aleppo city, and along the border with SDF-held Afrin, it is likely that any future clash between HTS and rivals will take place in this region, and involve NDZ directly.

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<sup>21</sup> حركة نور الدين الزنكي. Telegram Post. September 1, 2017, 12:43 A.M.  
<https://t.me/zenky2/29>