

-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zinki in 2017

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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

Figure 1 -

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.⁴ 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.⁵

NDZ and other groups undergo

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

The rumors

