

HTS's Violations during The Raid on Ma'aret al Nu'man City

SNHR Renews Its Call on the
Opposition Factions that
Operate under HTS to
Urgently Detach themselves
from the Group

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights, founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, non-profit independent organization that is a primary source for the United Nations on all death toll-related statistics in Syria



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I. Introduction and Historical Context

In July 2016, al Nusra Front declared that it has separated from al Qaeda and changed its name. These developments were met with some optimism within the Syrian society, even though it was late and it was a step to adapt to the context created by the American-Russian agreement to target extremist groups, including al Nusra Front, contrary to what Abu Mohammad al Joulani, the group's leader, said in his audio recording. Separating from al Qaeda and changing the name do not erase the past's wrongs. On the contrary, al Qaeda branch might become more extreme and savage, as ISIS did also detach itself from al Qaeda.

A large group of the local Syrian society in al Nusra Front-held areas, which became Fateh al Sham Front, and in the areas out of the Syrian regime's control in general, were hoping that a parallel change towards moderation and plurality would accompany this symbolic change in appearance. However, the Front's attitude proved that the group is still true to its Salafi-Jihadist ideology. Consequently, the group has failed miserably to gain any support or legitimacy within the Syrian society, so it goes without saying that nothing had also changed with regard to it being targeted by the international community.



After the separation from al Qaeda, Fateh al Sham Front tried to merge with a number of local factions in order to cultivate a popular and international support base. However, these efforts have failed as well, and were followed with wide campaigns against factions from the armed opposition in Aleppo and Idlib governorates. After six months, on January 28, 2017, an alliance was struck between Fateh al Sham Front and Ansar al Din, which is also an extremist Islamic group, and a number of armed opposition factions (Kata'eb Nour al Din Zenki, Jaish al Sunna, and some groups that separated themselves from armed opposition factions and joined this alliance such as: Muajhedou Ashedaa', Katibat Soqour al Izz, Katibat Usoud al Rahman, and Lewa' Ahrar al Jabal). This alliance called itself "Hay'at Tahrir al Sham" (HTS). After seven days, SNHR released [a statement](#), in which it called on the armed opposition factions that compose HTS to urgently detach from this group, because anyone who joins al Nusra Front, al Qaeda, or any factions that are listed on the terror lists will be deemed a supporter of these groups, and will be targeted all the same. Unless al Nusra Front changed its ideologies, the group's emptied attempts to detach from al Qaeda will not come to fruition, even if other factions joined it, or it managed to take over some others. On the contrary, al Nusra Front will drag all of these factions to darkness, nihilism, and being targets. That what will and is happening.

Al Nusra Front's strategies are exactly identical to the Syrian regime's, who wishes to forge a reality of a Syrian regime-extremist group duality. On the other side, extremist groups, such as ISIS and al Nusra Front (The Islamic State of Iraq literally adopted the same ways) are also seeking this duality, so they can pose as the only force on the Syrian grounds, instead of sitting and negotiating with other forces.

II. Fateh al Sham Front's Attack on Ma'aret al Nu'man was not their First Attempt

Ma'aret al Nu'man city is located in southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, and it is mainly under the control of armed opposition factions (al Ferqa 13, Jaish Idlib al Hurr, and Failaq al Sham) in the present time. HTS has set a number of military checkpoints on the road leading to the city, and some small military bases on the city's outskirts.

On March 11 and 12, 2016, heated clashes took place inside Ma'aret al Nu'man city between al Ferqa 13 (Most of its fighters are Ma'aret al Nu'man locals) and Fateh al Sham Front (al Nusra Front at the time – the core component of HTS). The clashes were over accusations about the two groups storming each other's bases in Ma'aret al Nu'man. Also, one of Fateh al Sham leaders were killed in the raids. Al Ferqa 13 released two statements ([first](#), [second](#)) at the time on Fateh al Sham's attacks on its bases.



Also, Fateh al Sham Front (al Nusra Front) released [a statement](#) about these events

After exchanging accusations, civil demonstrations rose in the city holding the green Syrian flag (which the protestors adopted as the symbol of the popular uprising against the Syrian regime). Fateh al Sham didn't take that well, as it considers that flag as an "infidel's flag" which drove it to stir up its supporters to go out in opposing demonstration holding the group's black flags, in addition to attacking the civilians' demonstration and tearing their flags apart.

Demonstrators and opposing demonstrations went on for days simultaneous with arrest campaigns against the protesters by Fateh al Sham Front, which intensified popular resentment. Also, Fateh al Sham Front attacked al Ferqa 13's bases in Hish, al Hamidiya, al Ghadfa, Jbala, and Khan Sheukhoun towns in Idlib suburbs, as Fateh al Sham brought reinforcements from Jund al Aqsa -an extremist group who is currently affiliated to ISIS- to support these attacks and raids against al Ferqa 13 bases in Ma'aret al Nu'man, resulting in heated clashes in the city that ended with Fateh al Sham Front taking over al Ferqa 13's bases in Ma'aret al Nu'man city.

During these clashes, Fateh al Sham font killed no less than 60 fighters from al Ferqa 13, which is affiliated to armed opposition factions, that drove hundreds of protesters to go out in demonstrations against Fateh al Sham Front, where the residents assaulted the group's bases in the city and drove them out of the city. This forced Fateh al Sham Front to withdraw from the city on March 13, 2016. The demonstration went on for months and called for holding Fateh al Sham accountable and having the group give back what it confiscated from al Ferqa 13 bases in the city. The demonstration reflected the city residents' unequivocal rejection of Fateh al Sham Front.

Because of all this, it seems that since then, Fateh al Sham Front has been planning an extensive attack that targets the city again, which is what we will be highlighting in this report.

We have talked to people who survived the attacks, as the report includes two accounts. We have explained the purpose of these interviews to the eyewitnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report without offering or giving any incentives. Also, SNHR tried to spare them the agony of remembering the violation as much as possible. We also gave guarantees to conceal the identities of any people who preferred to use an alias. The videos that were posted online regarding the events confirm, to a large extent, what the eyewitnesses talked about.



III. Raiding Ma'aret al Nu'man City and Shooting its Residents

Thursday, June 8, 2017, around 19:30, HTS carried out an armed attack on Ma'aret al Nu'man city in southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, which, seemingly, aims to end the existence of al Ferqa 13, an armed opposition faction, in the city and completely take over the city. The attack was under the pretext that an HTS security officer's father was killed in the city, where they accused al Ferqa 13 of killing him. This led to heated clashes between the two groups during which light and middle weapons were used. The clashes lasted until Friday morning, June 9, and were centered in al Shamaliya district and the farms of Kafr Rouma village, which is adjacent to Ma'aret al Nu'man city. The clashes also outspread to a number of neighborhoods in Ma'aret al Nu'man city. Subsequently, HTS advanced and started raiding al Ferqa 13's bases and pursuing its fighters while raiding any house that they believe it was for an "al Ferqa 13" fighter and opening fire inside. HTS managed to kill some of them -we have yet to confirm the final death toll- such as the colonel "Aqid" Taysir Smahi, a leader of al Ferqa 13, and the director of the police center in the city. In addition, HTS scattered its fighters in the city's mosques and streets.

All of this drove the city residents to go out in demonstrations demanding HTS to leave the city and end the clashes and raids, and let ambulances and civil defense teams to enter the city and save the wounded civilians, and to transfer 300 orphan children who were trapped inside an activity hall, where they were at the hall eating Iftar in Ramadan at the same time when clashes started. Subsequently, civil defense teams managed difficultly to get them out. HTS met the residents' protests with shooting in the air, before they threatened the protesters that they would kill and arrest them, as HTS brought military reinforcements to tighten its grip on the city.

[A video](#) showing HTS fighters shooting randomly between the civilians' houses and in the way of the protesters – Friday, June 9, 2017

[A video showing](#) HTS fighters shooting to break off the protesters – Friday, June 9, 2017



SNHR talked, via phone, with an activist who went out in the demonstration against HTS (we didn't make any references to his name for security concerns). He gave us his account of the events:

“At the time of Iftar, shooting started heavily in the streets of Ma'aret al Ny'man. Via a wireless communication device, I learned that a HTS military group entered the city to raid al Ferqa 13's bases. What followed was heated clashes for hours that resulted in HTS fighters spreading heavily in the city streets. Afterwards, HTS started taking over al Ferqa 13's bases and the police station, and set up military checkpoint at every entrance to the city. We learned that HTS killed the colonel Taysir Smahi, a brother of the colonel Ali Smahi, who was killed as well a month ago by HTS in an ambush in Khan al Sobol village in northern suburbs of Idlib governorate. After the news of the colonel Taysir Smahi's murder spread out, residents went out in demonstrations particularly in al Shamali neighborhood where a large demonstration was formed and tried to get into the city center, but the demonstration was met with fire. Accompanied by Akram al Turk, a security officer at HTS who is from Ma'aret al Nu'man. HTS fighters who are from al Sh'ietat tribe and formerly Jund al Aqsa started raiding several houses in the city under the pretext of looking for the people who kill Akram al Turk's father a day before the raid. This pretext was used by HTS to raid the city, even though Akram al Turk's father was killed in a brawl with a trafficker, and was immediately arrested by HTS. On the second day, raids and arrests continued and more protests went out which were shot at by HTS who set up military checkpoints all over the city. However, because people were determined to go out in demonstrations, HTS started contacting the city figures and met them and agreed to leave the city and remove the checkpoints. After they went out, the city residents went out in a big demonstration condemning the raid against the city by HTS and how they assaulted the civilians and their properties.”

A local media activist (we didn't make any references to his name for security concerns) told SNHR, via phone, of what he saw during the raid in Ma'aret al Nu'man city by HTS

“When I was sitting at my house, which is close to the house of the colonel Taysir Smahi, and as the time for Iftar was nearing, shooting started heavily. I went out to the street and saw what was happening. To my surprise, I saw a big military group that consists of cars and machine guns and fighters who were all masked at a nearby turn. I was afraid because they were shooting anyone they see in the street. One of the people there told me that they were HTS and they were coming



to arrest the colonel Taysir Smahi. As shooting intensified, we learned that colonel Taysir Smahi was killed after he was arrested with three civilians. Until this moment, the streets were completely empty because people were afraid of getting shot. However, with HTS continuing to raid al Ferqa 13's bases and civilians' houses, and with the dead bodies, who mostly were for al Ferqa 13 fighters, people started going out in demonstrations to stop HTS's attacks. That is when HTS started shooting and arrested four protestors, and injured two of them. This went on until the next day. HTS set up more than 22 military checkpoints in the city, and killed an al Ferqa 13 fighter in front of al Sena'a building. They also arrested four people from Qetaz family. After that, people gathered for al Juma'a Prayers and demonstrations and shouts started calling out HTS as Shabiha and demanding that they leave the city."

IV. Most Notable Civilian and Vital Facilities that were Attacked

Friday, June 9, 2017, HTS fighters raided the faculty of education – Free Aleppo University in Ma'aret al Nu'man city in southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, and trashed the furniture and tore apart the exam papers and the certificates, and wrote statements in support of HTS on the walls.

Friday, June 9, 2017, HTS fighters raided the educational complex in Ma'aret al Nu'man city and confiscated the properties (furniture, printers)

Friday, June 9, 2017, HTS fighters confiscated a power generator that was used to operate a water well in al Ard al Hamra area near al Gharbi neighborhood in Ma'aret al Nu'man

Friday, June 9, 2017, HTS fighters confiscated a vehicle belonging to the police center in Ma'aret al Nu'man city

Friday, June 9, 2017, HTS fighters confiscated two water hoses that were used to transfer water, and a civilian vehicle in Ma'aret al Nu'man

Friday, June 9, 2017, HTS fighters raided Samer Smahi, colonel Taysir Smahi's brother, and confiscated some of the house properties.



Friday, June 9, 2017, HTS and Jaish Idlib al Hur, an armed opposition faction, [a statement](#) to form a judiciary committee that would investigate the events that transpired in Ma'aret al Nu'man city, and that al Ferqa 13 would be dissolved conclusively completely and all of its bases will be handed to Jaish Idlib al Hur. Also, all military manifestations will be removed from the city. The agreement was signed by "Abu Omar al Falstini", on behalf of HTS, and Dummar Qnateri, on behalf of Jaish Idlib al Hur.

On Sunday, June 11, 2017, HTS withdrew from Ma'aret al Nu'man after a meeting with the city figures, and following the continued demonstration that demanded their withdrawal, and to prevent escalation in light of the demonstration that went out as well in the villages around Ma'aret al Nu'man city that demanded that HTS withdraw from Ma'aret al Nu'man.

V. Recommendations

The international community

Take action and not stand idly by with regard to the hundreds of thousands of crimes the Syrian regime perpetrated using all kinds of weapons, considering that many of these crimes exhibited a sectarian-cleansing nature, because this is one of the most important foundations for the rhetoric of the extremist groups that are claiming to protect the Syrian people and Syrian society from the Syrian regime.

Resorting to the choice of force and killing in dismantling extremist groups as a semi-exclusive central option is not enough, and stop the indulgence of violations that are being committed against them and their popular support bases no matter how much they breached the international humanitarian law.

A social alternative must be founded to conduct the combat operations against extremist groups that would respect the principles and values of the law of war and the values of justice and democracy. This will greatly undermine the polarization of extremist Islamic groups to anyone who wants to exact vengeance on the Syrian regime.

Extremist groups thrive on wars and conflicts. Therefore, the political transition towards democracy must be accelerated, and the new Syrian state must be assisted in restoring security and stability.



Abandon the double standard policy in fighting extremist groups. Restrict the fight to Islamic group gives them a sense of grievance. All global groups, such as Iranian militias, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, and the Lebanese group Hezbollah, must be fought, and their funding must be drought out, and anyone who provides them with support must be held accountable.

Armed opposition factions

Fateh al Sham Front (al Nussra Front) is the core component of HTS and the actual director of its operations. The repeated attempts to raid Ma'aret al Nu'man city, and to end all other factions to reach a HTS-Syrian regime duality proves that its ideology is still unchanged. Therefore, all factions that operate under this group must urgently detach themselves and expose its practices.

Organize awareness campaigns on the ideology of extremist groups and how they infiltrate societies and recruit their youngsters in parallel with workshops on the importance of respecting principle human rights and how to defend them.

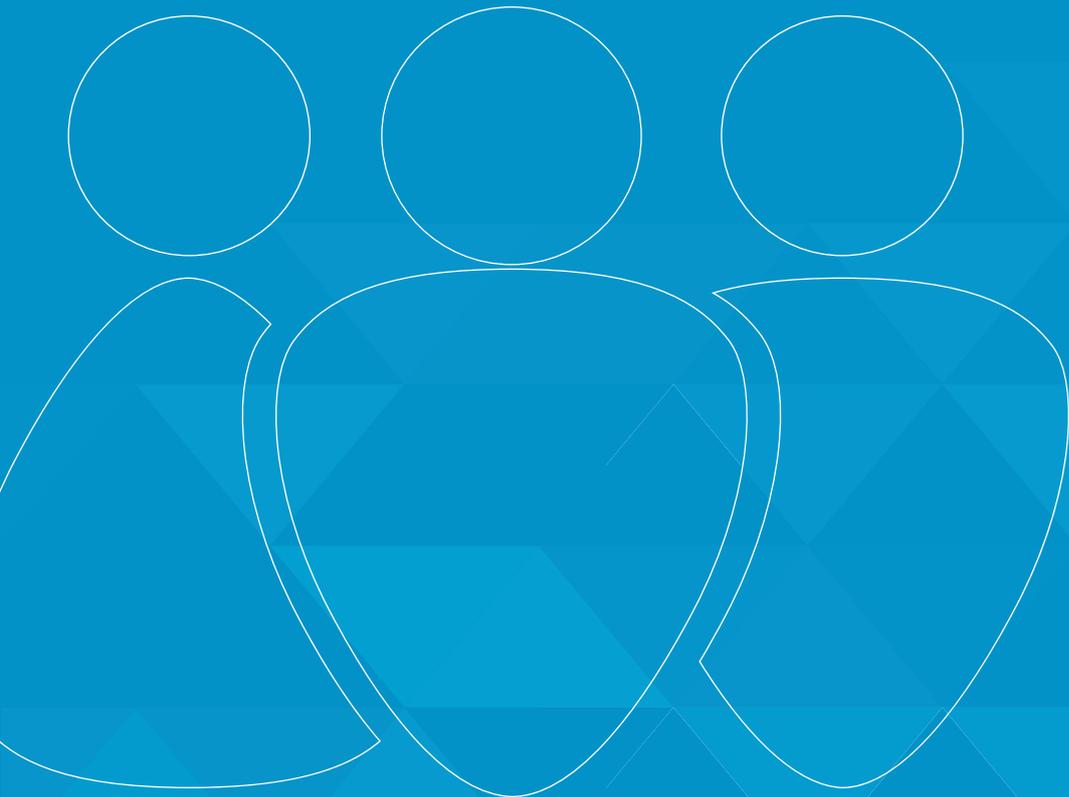
HTS

Immediately cease creating a state of anarchy, infighting, and popular resentment. Respect principle human rights in their areas of control.

Acknowledgment

We would like to sincerely thank the local activists and residents who effectively contributed to this report.





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