



NEWS DESK

A BLACK FLAG IN RAQQA

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The young man stood several metres away from the front door he had just knocked on, his back turned to avoid seeing the lady of the house, should she open it.

The man, who was in his twenties, was a part of Jabhat al-Nusra, an ultraconservative armed Syrian Islamist group the United States considers a terrorist organization with links to Al Qaeda. Like many of its members in this city, he wore a black scarf wrapped around his head to conceal his identity; only his brown eyes were visible. He also wore a gray shalwar kameez—common in the subcontinent but not in Syria, though many young militia members have adopted it. The house was where I'd been staying in the city of Raqqa, in north-central Syria; he didn't know the family—he was there to see me.



In early March, Raqqa city, although relatively late to join the revolt against President Bashar al-Assad, became the first of Syria's fourteen provincial capitals to fall from his grip. Islamist rebels, spearheaded by Jabhat al-Nusra, the Salafi Ahrar al-Sham brigades, and the Jabhat al-Wahda al-Tahrir al-Islamiya (a grouping of some two dozen battalions), had won the battle for the city. These groups all operate outside the broad umbrella of the more secular, often more disorganized, and sometimes undisciplined rebel Free Syrian Army.

Two men in their twenties, called Abu Noor and Abu Abdullah, answered, then called me to the door to greet the man from Jabhat. They were both civilians, but supported the uprising. We stood in the stairwell of the apartment building chatting for a few minutes, and then Abu Abdullah went inside and came back with a flyer bearing Jabhat's name. It called for replacing the tri-starred flag used by Assad's opponents since the uprising's earliest days with a black one bearing the words of the Muslim shahada ("There is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger").

"What is this?" Abu Abdullah asked the young Jabhat member. "We were just talking about it, we don't like it."

... and what don't you like about
... rs the shahada?"









