# Who is Katibat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad?





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*The Uzbek jihadi faction based in Idlib recently designated a terrorist organization by the US* 





#### Background

On 7 March 2022, the United States <u>declared</u> Idlib-based jihadi faction Katibat al-Tawhid wa-I-Jihad ('Tavhid va Jihod' or KTJ) a terrorist organization. In addition to the US's Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) list Katibat al-Tawhid wa-I-Jihad was placed on the United Nations Security Council's 'ISIL and al-Qaida Sanctions List,' meaning all UN member states are now required to implement an asset freeze, travel ban, and arms embargo on the organization and its membership. According to the U.S. Department of State this decision was due to the Katibat al-Tawhid wa-I-Jihad's alleged affiliation with al-Qa'idah, its cooperation with several other designated terrorist groups such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and it being linked to several attacks outside of Syria since 2017.

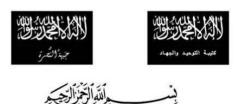


Image (1) – The logo of Katibat al-Tawhid wa-I-Jihad

Katibat al-Tawhid wa-I-Jihad, also known as "Jannat Oshiklari" ('Lovers of Heaven'), 'Tavhid va Jihod,' or KTJ, is a small jihadi organization primarily made up of ethnic Uzbeks and other foreign fighters from Central Asia. The group was created at some point in 2013 or 2014 out of a jama'at of Uzbeks affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra and its ally Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhari, the largest Uzbek-run jihadi faction in Syria. The reasoning behind Tavhid va Jihod's initial formation as an independent group is unclear, for it remained close with Jabhat al-Nusra ever since, formally <u>pledging bay'ah</u> to Nusra (and al-Qa'idah) in September 2015.







#### الحمدت رب العالمين، والصلاة والسلام على أشرف الأنبياء والمرسلين، نبينا محمد وعلى آله وصحبه أجمعين وبعد :

استجابة لقوله تعالى تعالى: (واغتصفوا بِحَبُل الله جَمِيعًا وَلا تَفْرَقُواً)، وقوله: (إنَّ اللَّه يُحِبُّ الَّذِينَ يُفَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِه صَفًا كَأَنَّهُم بُنَيَانٌ مُرَصُوصٌ)، واستجابة لمتطلبات المرحلة الحالية الحرجة في الجهاد الشامي، حيث اشتد أوار المعركة وازدادت ضراوتها في الشام، وتحالف الصفويون والأمريكان والروس على المسلمين سعيا لطمس نور الحق الذي أشرق في هذه الأرض المباركة، ولكسر عزيمة هذا الشعب المجاهد الذي ضحى بعشرات الألاف من فلذات أكباده، وصمد صمودا أسطوريا في مواجهة آلة الموت الأسدية الإجرامية، وواصل دربه المجيد في درب النصال والجهاد فما وهن وما لان، ولمواجهة هذه التحديات الجسيمة لأبد من توحد المجاهدين وتألفهم وتعاونهم فقد صار ضرورة حتمية ولمواجهة هذه التحديات الجسيمة لأبد من توحد المجاهدين وتألفهم وتعاونهم فقد صار ضرورة حتمية

ومن هذا المنطلق :

فاتنا نحن في (كتيبة التوحيد والجهاد) نعلن بيعتنا لجبهة النصرة - فرع تنظيم قاعدة الجهاد على أرض الشام، نبذا للفرقة، وتوحيدا للكلمة، وجمعا للجهود، ورصا للصفوف، وإغاظة للكافرين.

و إننا بهذه المناسبة ندعو إخواننا في كافة الفصانل المجاهدة الصادقة في الشام إلى التوحد حول كلمة التوحيد، فشدة الحرب تستوجب الوحدة، ولا تحتمل الفرقة والشتات، والمشروع الجهادي في الشام يهدده الطغاة والغلاة ولا نستطيع دفعهم متفرقين.

نسأل الله أن يوحد صف المجاهدين، ويؤلف بين قلوبهم، وينزع الضغينة بينهم، ويمكّن للمجاهدين الصادقين في هذه الأرض المباركة، إنه ولي ذلك والقادر عليه، وصلى الله وسلم على نبينا محمد.

كتيبة التوحيد والجهاد ١٦ ذر الحجة ١٤٣٦ - ٢٩ سبتسير ٢٠١٥

Image (2) – Tavhid va Jihod's September 2017 announcement of bay'ah to Jabhat al-Nusra (source)

#### Operations

Since Tavhid va Jihod's formation in 2014 it has operated across opposition-controlled Northwest Syria. Its fighters have participated in <u>numerous battles</u> fought against the regime over the years, from Jisr al-Shughur and Latakia in the west, to various fronts across Idlib and northern Hama, to Aleppo in the east. Most recently Tavhid va Jihod fighters have been seen manning the frontlines in <u>Jebel al-Zawiyah</u>, around the <u>Aleppo-Idlib border</u> near al-Atarib, and in the mountains of <u>Latakia</u>.







Image (3) – A Tavhid va Jihod contingent participating in the November 2016 offensive attempting to break the siege of Aleppo city (<u>source</u>)

As with other small muhajirin factions, many Tavhid va Jihod fighters have combat experience outside of Syria and carry out various specialized tasks such as serving as inghimasi shock troops and or in sniper squadrons.



Image (4) - Tavhid va Jihod members undergo sniper instruction (source)



Like all armed factions in northwestern Syria, Tavhid va Jihod primarily operates Soviet-era Russian and Eastern European-produced weapons, either captured over the years from the Syrian army or bought on the Idlib black market. At times its fighters have been seen using <u>Turkish</u> and <u>American</u> made weaponry.



Image (5) - A member of Tavhid va Jihod with Turkish-made 120mm mortar shells (source)



Image (6) – Recent Tavhid va Jihod muhajirin learning how to operate a US-made TOW antitank guided missile system (<u>source</u>)





These most likely stem from stockpiles of other groups in Idlib that have since been sold to or seized by jihadi factions. Tavhid va Jihod's possession of such weaponry, including a plethora of <u>Anti-Tank Guided Missile</u> (ATGM) systems implies that it is relatively well funded, likely through clandestine donations by supporters over the internet. On at least one occasion Tavhid va Jihod has been seen <u>operating</u> a Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (SVBIED). This occurred on <u>1 March 2020</u> when a KTJ fighter blew himself up in a car bomb attack targeting a regime position during the defense of Jebel al-Zawiyah.



Image (7) – The driver of Tavhid va Jihod's March 2020 SVBIED attack in Jebel al-Zawiya (source)



Image (8) - the March 2020 SVBIED attack on a regime position in Jebel al-Zawiyah (source)





### Membership

According to a source of STJ's within an Idlib opposition faction, Tavhid va Jihod's members and largely reside in Jebel al-Summaq and in the Jisr al-Shughur countryside and maintain a distance from local civilian life. The source estimated that Tavhid va Jihod fields approximately 500 fighters, the majority of whom are ethnically Uzbek or Tajik, many from the Fergana valley. Ali al-Hamwi, an expert on Islamic groups in Syria placed the number higher, at 1,200, and told STJ that many of them gained fighting experience in Afghanistan, in support of the Taliban against the US military. One noteworthy aspect of Tavhid va Jihod's membership is the group's repeated claims to attract new recruits from abroad, a quite rare phenomenon since Turkey clamped down on cross border traffic in and out of Syria beginning in 2014. These claims correspond with <u>reports</u> of Tavhid va Jihod recruitment networks still active in Central Asia.

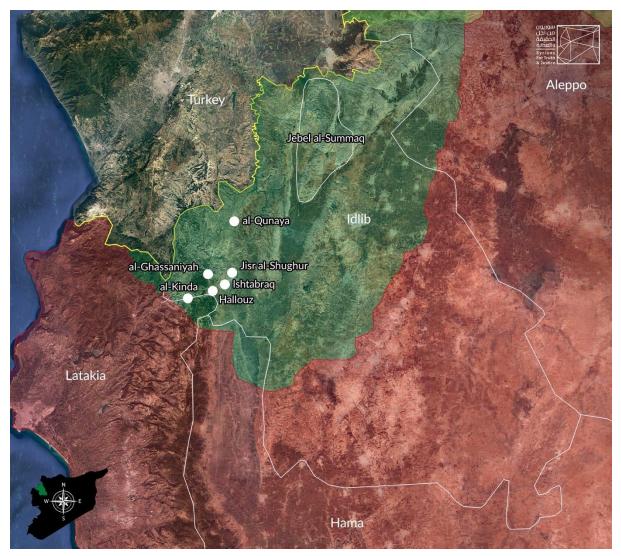


Image (9) – Jebel al-Summaq and villages in the Jisr al-Shughur area where Tavhid va Jihod fighters reside (STJ)





#### Leadership

For the first five years of its existence Tavhid va Jihod was led by Sirajuddin Mukhtarov/'Abu Salah al-Uzbeki,' an ethnic Uzbek from Osh province, Kyrgyzstan. Osh is located along the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border on the edge of the Fergana valley – a region that's become a hotspot for jihadist radicalization since the fall of the Soviet Union. According to various biographies of Abu Salah he received religious training in Syria in the 2000s, <u>allegedly</u> at al-Fatah al-Islami Institute in Damascus, before he returned to Kyrgyzstan. There he worked as an assistant Imam at the <u>Kariman mosque</u> in the Osh province town of Kara-Suu.



Image (10) – Tavhid va Jihod amir Abu Salah al-Uzbeki in Latakia, 2015 (source)

After the outbreak of the war, Abu Salah traveled back to Syria where he joined Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhari in 2012. Due to his Islamic education and speaking skills, Abu Salah became quite influential within transnational Central Asian jihadi circles. <u>By 2020</u> Abu Salah's influence had grown to a point in which one researcher wrote that his "...Telegram channel has the largest audience among other jihadist figures of post-Soviet countries."







Image (11) – Location of the Fergana valley, Osh and Kara-Suu, Kyrgyzstan (STJ)

Abu Salah remained the amir of Tavhid va Jihod until April 2019, when he <u>stepped down</u> from his leadership position in agreement with the group's Shura council. At the time, a <u>UN report</u> claimed that he "left the group's leadership to focus on recruitment and fundraising following an injury in a terrorist operation." He remained with Tavhid va Jihod until mid 2020. Replacing Abu Salah as amir in April 2019 was 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Uzbeki/Domla/Hafizahullah (referred to as 'Khikmatov' in the same UN report). 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Uzbeki shares the same background as Abu Salah: an ethnic Uzbek from the <u>Fergana valley</u>.







Image (12) – Tavhid va Jihod's current amir 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Uzbeki (source)

According to various reports, 'Abd al-'Aziz only entered Syria earlier that year. Prior to this, he was <u>a member</u> of the Islamic Jihad Union, an al-Qa'idah-linked Uzbek jihadist group active in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria, where "he served as deputy to the leader of IJG in Afghanistan." Soon after becoming KTJ's amir, 'Abd al-'Aziz appointed Ahluddin Navqotiy as the group's imam. Navqotiy, who reported arrived <u>from Turkey</u> to undertake the position, is active on Instagram and Telegram where he shares his sermons and KTJ media.



Image (13) - Tavhid va Jihod preacher Ahluddin Navqotiy (source)

After a series of events in spring 2020, it became apparent that HTS had in fact been behind Abu Salah's dismissal. Tavhid va Jihod had joined HTS, the Jabhat al-Nusra successor group in





February of 2017. On 16 June 2020, Abu Salah and two others <u>were arrested</u> by HTS's internal security forces in Idlib. While it was initially reported that this was <u>due to debts</u> he owed, later statements by the parties involved shed some light on Abu Salah's relationship with Tavhid va Jihod and HTS over the past year. According to a <u>statement published</u> by HTS a week after the arrest, the group's judiciary council had dismissed and replaced him in 2019 due to cases of robbery and kidnapping. It appears that in the spring of 2020 Abu Salah filed lawsuits against HTS, which then formed a committee to deal with the matter. Eventually, on 19 April 2020 (25 Sha'ban 1441 AH), he was found guilty and was transferred from Tavhid va Jihod to work in HTS's military office. Rather than comply, on <u>30 May 2020</u> Abu Salah and <u>30 of his followers</u> left HTS altogether and joined Jabhat Ansar al-Din, an al-Qa'idah-friendly jihadi faction with a mixed Russian-speak and Arab membership. Soon after this, Abu Salah was arrest, and would not be released by HTS <u>until 2021</u>.



Image (14) - The HTS statement on the dismissal and eventual arrest of Abu Salah (source)

Some have <u>speculated</u> that the conflict between Abu Salah and HTS is not actually related to supposed abuses by the former, but rather stems from his continued allegiance to al-Qa'idah. Despite HTS's break with the organization, Abu Salah <u>reportedly</u> renewed his bay'ah to Aymen al-Zawahiri in January 2019 via a Telegram audio recording, just months before he was deposed from his leadership position. When he left the group in the spring of 2020 due to the HTS committee decision, Abu Salah joined Jabhat Ansar al-Din, a jihadi faction aligned with al-





Qa'idah affiliate Tanzim Hurras al-Din. Furthermore his arrest in June 2020 coincides with a broader <u>HTS crackdown</u> on al-Qa'idah linked figures across Idlib.

Since this episode and Abu Salah's departure from Tavhid va Jihod, the organization has had no reported issues with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

#### **Operations Abroad?**



Image (15) – The 2016 attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (source)

According to the March 2022 US State Department statement, Tavhid va Jihod was responsible for two terrorist attacks outside of Syria: an <u>August 2016 attack</u> on the <u>Chinese</u> <u>Embassy</u> in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and the March 2017 bombing of the <u>St. Petersburg metro</u> in Russia.







Image (16) - The aftermath of the 2017 attack on the St. Petersburg metro (source)

Tavhid va Jihod has been blamed for these attacks in the past by <u>Kyrgyzstani</u> and <u>Russian</u> authorities, however they never claimed responsibility for them, and little evidence of their involvement has been publicized by Kyrgyzstan or Russia. Jihadism experts Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi and Caleb Weiss <u>speculate</u> that the perpetrators of the Bishkek and St. Petersburg attacks weren't Tavhid va Jihod members but were in communication with Abu Salah al-Uzbeki, who likely encouraged them or possibly order the attacks himself. Since the group's founding in 2015, multiple raids by Kyrgyzstani and Russian security forces have taken place, leading to the arrest of alleged Tavhid va Jihod members who either fought in Syria before returning to Central Asia, or worked as local recruiters for the organization. The most recent of these operations was carried out by the Russian FSB on 25 August 2021 in various cities around Russia, <u>reportedly resulting</u> in the arrest of 31 individuals.







Image (17) – Individuals accused of being Tavhid va Jihod members arrested in an August 2021 FSB raid across Russia (<u>source</u>)

#### Conclusion

It is unclear why the U.S. decided to designate Tavhid va Jihod as a terrorist organization at this specific time. Given that KTJ pledged bay'ah to Jabhat al-Nusra and its later iteration Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, considered terrorist organizations by the US, one would assume the Uzbek group would've been designated by the U.S. earlier. While the American statement specifically accuses them of being "affiliated with al-Qa'idah," this is contradicted by Tavhid va Jihod's current membership within HTS and the fact that its former leader Abu Salah seems to left the group because of his continued support of al-Qa'idah, defecting from the group and HTS to Jabhat Ansar al-Din. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi has speculated that the continued affiliation of HTS with foreign fighters such as KTJ is the primary reason why HTS remains on terrorist lists, as

the international community is concerned that these foreign fighter blocs, which work with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, may serve as inspirers, facilitators and supporters for those who conduct attacks abroad, even if those blocs do not actually conduct those attacks and claim responsibility for them.

It's unlikely that this designation will have much of an effect on the Tavhid va Jihod inside Syria. While it means that its leadership will possibly be targeted as part of the broader U.S. drone assassination campaign in Idlib, the group's digital fundraising capabilities are unlikely to be hampered by international sanctions. As this listing will not affect Tavhid va Jihod's relationship with HTS, itself a designated terrorist organization, it likely will not change the military role the group plays on the frontlines of Idlib. Regardless of the U.S. designation, Russian and Central Asian security forces will likely continue to crack down on Tavhid va Jihod supporter networks across the former Soviet Union.







## About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.





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