



# From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future

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***Abstract: This paper focuses on the history and evolution of the group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, beginning from its formation as the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and, finally, the present form of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Based on testimonies from high-ranking operatives, the article discusses the complex relationship of Jabhat al-Nusra, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to al-Qaeda during the transformation and rebranding process. In addition, the paper examines how Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham operates on the ground, including relations with other factions and the approach adopted towards governance. Finally, the paper sheds light on the current state and future of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in the Syrian insurgency. Despite Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's pre-eminent position in the remaining insurgent-held territories, the success and future viability of this project are highly questionable, particularly in light of its commitment to form a unified front for the insurgency and to push for a political revolution inside Syria.***

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## Introduction: The Current Dispersion of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham ('Organization for the Liberation of the Levant', subsequently HTS) is the most powerful single entity in the Syrian insurgency today. The group exerts control over most of the insurgency's epicenter in the northwestern province of Idlib, including the province's capital of Idlib City. Indeed, the province is the main area administered by the rebel group today.

However, given the fragmentation of Syria's insurgency today, HTS's level of influence in Idlib and its immediate surroundings is not replicated in other zones of the insurgency. For example, the north Aleppo countryside enclave extending from Afrin to Jarabulus has no meaningful HTS presence. This fact partly stems from a long-standing rejection of military cooperation with foreign states to fight the Islamic State, as the notion of a 'safe zone' in the north Aleppo countryside enforced by the Turkish military was partly intended to clear the Islamic State from the northern border with Turkey.

The concept of this zone, known as the 'Euphrates Shield' area, was rejected by HTS earliest predecessor, Jabhat al-Nusra, which largely withdrew from this region. Today, this zone is heavily influenced by Turkish-backed bodies, including local councils, judiciaries and security institutions. The zone has now been extended through a Turkish-backed rebel offensive between January and March 2018, integrating most of the Afrin enclave that was controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). For HTS to expand and establish a meaningful presence in those areas would

essentially mean subordinating itself to Turkish interests and demands - something unacceptable to the group.

Not negligible, but far less significant than its presence in Idlib, is HTS's existence in southern Syria. The two southern provinces of Deraa and Quneitra, which remain largely under insurgent control, broadly come under the 'Southern Front' coalition that has received backing from an operations room in Amman, Jordan, and is overseen by Western, Gulf and Jordanian intelligence<sup>1</sup>. In these areas, HTS does not generally offer the institutions of governance that it offers in Idlib, and there is little evidence of influence over the existing local councils and the Dar al-'Adl, which is the main court system in rebel-held parts of southern Syria. Instead, the group's most notable function in southern Syria has been taking a lead role in insurgent offensives that take place in certain areas on an occasional basis. For instance, HTS played the leading role in the 'Army of Muhammad' operations room, which attempted - unsuccessfully - to break through government-held lines in the Hadr area of Quneitra in a bid to reach the last insurgent-held enclaves of Beit Jann in southwest Damascus countryside (West Ghouta) in the vicinity of Mt. Hermon. In that isolated enclave of Beit Jann, which collapsed by the end of 2017 at the hands of a Syrian government offensive, HTS was an important faction among the remaining rebel groups, but negotiated for the departure of its fighters, there by rejecting a 'reconciliation' with the Syrian government.

The limitation of HTS's influence in Deraa and Quneitra is partly linked to the tight border control policies implemented by Jordan, aimed at preventing a free-for-all flooding of

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1.- As of the time of writing, the operations room - known as the MOC - appears to be closed, though the Southern Front continues to exist as a coalition and some Arab and Western countries support some factions of the coalition, see "Why didn't the 'Southern Front' mobilize to support Ghouta?", Al-Modon, April 10, 2018. Continued support for certain factions appears to be based on the condition of fighting the Islamic State affiliate Army of Khalid bin al-Waleed in southwest Deraa on the border with the Golan Heights.

weapons and foreign fighters into the south of Syria. Furthermore, the presence of HTS in the south had been weakened by their predecessors' military losses in the past. For example, Jabhat al-Nusra suffered high attrition rates in its fighting with the Islamic State-linked Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade in the southwest corner of the province, which has since evolved into the 'Army of Khalid bin al-Waleed' after merging with other Islamic State-linked groups in May 2016<sup>2</sup>.

While HTS is the most powerful single insurgent group today, fragmentation and re-localization have affected the group's functioning and power over time. In fact, its leading position within the insurgency today is more a result of the weaknesses of its rivals than its own strength or structural organization. For instance, HTS does not exert any control over the oil-rich areas of east Syria, in contrast to Jabhat al-Nusra's position in the province in 2013 and 2014 until the Islamic State's conquest of the area. Presently, with the decline of the Islamic State, the eastern region is divided between the Syrian government and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and it is highly unlikely that HTS will gain a foothold in the region in the foreseeable future, denying the group access to what would have been a lucrative source of revenue.

The history of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham from the original Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in July 2016 and, ultimately, to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017 does not reveal a continual ascendancy in absolute power and influence, but rather a story of significant challenges and internal ruptures. This history will be a key focus of this article.

## 1. Jabhat al-Nusra and its Relations with al-Qaeda (2012- 2016)

When Jabhat al-Nusra ("Support Front") first emerged in January 2012, it did not officially declare any formal ties to al-Qaeda out of a fear of losing local support. In not doing so, it acted similarly to other jihadist groups that had emerged in the region in the wake of the Arab Spring, such as the Ansar al-Shari'a movements in Tunisia, Libya and Yemen. The propaganda on jihadist forums, however, revealed that Jabhat al-Nusra was aligned with a broader transnational jihadist movement.

Despite some initial suspicions about the group on account of the mass casualty attacks it carried out, Jabhat al-Nusra emerged by the end of 2012 as an important military actor within the insurgency. Thus, when U.S. intelligence identified the group as originating from within the Islamic State of Iraq (then thought of as al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq) and labelled it a terrorist organization, there was widespread anger from within the opposition.

Its actual affiliation to al-Qaeda ultimately became clear when Jabhat al-Nusra was forced to distance itself from the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham. In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi unilaterally declared that Jabhat al-Nusra should merge with his Islamic State of Iraq to form the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham. Seeking to defend his group's autonomy from Baghdadi, Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani declared a 'renewal' of the allegiance pledge (*bay'a*) to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, hoping that al-Zawahiri would rule in his favour in the dispute with Baghdadi. As a consequence, al-Zawahiri ordered the Islamic State to return to Iraq as the Islamic State of Iraq while urging the two sides to

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2.- See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Yarmouk Valley: The Formation of Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Waleed?", May 24, 2016.

cooperate. Al-Zawahiri's rulings, however, were unsuccessful, as Baghdadi insisted on his group's remaining in Syria, thus marking the true break between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

Despite internal speculations that Jabhat al-Nusra's now open affiliation with al-Qaeda would harm and isolate it, cooperation with other groups actually continued<sup>3</sup>. The group's popularity even increased among the wider insurgency as it joined the all-out war against the Islamic State in January 2014. There were local exceptions where Jabhat al-Nusra cooperated with the Islamic State for an extended period of time, such as in the west Qalamoun area on the border with Lebanon, but it had no impact on the general notion that Jabhat al-Nusra had proved itself an important force on the side of the revolution.

The military cooperation with other rebel factions, however, did not attract many other groups to actually merge with Jabhat al-Nusra. The concept of unity among factions had long been an expressed ideal for more effective military operations and ability to advance a political vision for the revolution. Yet, there was little to show for notions of unity on the ground. Typical impediments to unity have included problems such as localism and personal power disputes among leaders. In the case of Jabhat al-Nusra, a clear issue was its ties to al-Qaeda and a fear on the part of more 'mainstream' factions that they would be blacklisted in the event of a merger, entailing a number of risks such as loss of support from foreign patrons and legitimizing Damascus' narrative of fighting a war on terror.

Therefore, there had been a long-standing question of whether Jabhat al-Nusra would break its ties with al-Qaeda. In an audio message released in January 2014 amid the infighting between the insurgents and the Islamic State, al-Zawahiri himself touched upon the question of organizational ties, theoretically giving his blessing to a breaking of ties if it would achieve real unity on the ground. In a speech released in May 2016, a time when discussions about a possible rupture with al-Qaeda ran high, al-Zawahiri stated that "organizational ties will never be - by God's permission - an obstacle in the face of these hopes"; that is, the hopes of "the unity of the mujahideen in al-Sham and their coming together to establish the mujahid, rightly-guided Islamic government that spreads justice, makes consultation broad, restores rights, supports the oppressed and keeps the jihad alive so as to liberate the land, strive to liberate al-Aqsa, and revive the Caliphate on the prophetic methodology"<sup>4</sup>.

For al-Zawahiri, if the people of al-Sham and its mujahideen could establish this Islamic government and choose an imam to lead it, then al-Qaeda would support that choice, since it was not intent on ruling as an organizational authority, but rather envisioned the rule of Islamic law. What al-Zawahiri outlined reflected, in part, the optimistic hopes at the time that Syria represented the best opportunity for the global jihadist project. However, it is important to remember that this was only a scenario, not something that was on the verge of actually-taking place, despite persistent rumors over the years that Jabhat al-Nusra was nearing the point of effectively establishing an Islamic emirate in Syria.

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3.- At that time, the leadership of al-Qaeda had realized that the brand name had become toxic and might affect the success of the jihadist organization. As revealed by some of the Abbottabad documents whose authenticity current al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had confirmed, there had been consideration to change the name of al-Qaeda. This point was also raised in the testimonies regarding the HTS-al-Qaeda dispute.

4.- Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'Go forth to al-Sham,' as-Sahab Media, May 7, 2016 (here retrieved from jihadology.net). Please note that the speech was recorded in February-March 2016.

In fact, al-Zawahiri also displayed his skepticism that a breaking of ties between Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda would accomplish anything positive. That is, al-Zawahiri might have thought at some point that Jabhat al-Nusra's dissociation from al-Qaeda could erase the terrorist black listing and enable the group to merge with other jihadist groups, forming more powerful insurgent coalitions acceptable to foreign backers, especially at the regional level. However, he also voiced his concern that 'the great criminals' (i.e. the West and other foreign states) would not be content with Jabhat al-Nusra, and would rather force it into compromising its positions and principles, making it play the 'rotten game of democracy' and then doing away with it when convenient, as happened to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Al-Zawahiri, thus, was not inconsistent on this matter. For him, the idea of breaking ties would only make sense in the event of a real unity of forces that could bring about the ideal Islamic government. If these prospects were not imminent, he saw no benefit in a rupture of ties cutting the ties between Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda.

## 2. The Formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham

Rumors of a breaking of ties with al-Qaeda mounted as talks emerged of a joint U.S.-Russian campaign against Jabhat al-Nusra. Finally, on 28 July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra was rebranded as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in an attempt to signal that ties with al-Qaeda had been broken. This event marks a key point for consideration when it comes to assessing the history and evolution of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

On the basis of the material released by

Jabhat al-Nusra on 28 July 2016, the re-branding as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham looked like a move to break ties that had been coordinated with al-Qaeda's central leadership: that is, something that had the permission of al-Zawahiri. On the day prior to Jowlani's announcement of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, the media wing of Jabhat al-Nusra released an audio message by Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, al-Zawahiri's deputy in al-Qaeda. The fact that the message was released by Jabhat al-Nusra's media suggested (as later turned out to be correct) that he was in fact in Syria. In the message, al-Masri urged that the necessary steps should be taken to preserve the jihad in Syria and bring about unity among all the jihadist organizations. In order to reinforce al-Zawahiri's support for the change of name, the audio message included a sequence of al-Zawahiri's audio message from January 2014, in which he outlined that unity comes above organizational ties.

Jowlani's announcement of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham similarly gave the impression of something approved and guided by al-Qaeda's central leadership, including al-Zawahiri. Besides thanking the al-Qaeda leadership for their understanding of the circumstances and putting the interests of the Syrian people and the jihad above organizational ties, Jowlani said that they would continue to be an exemplar in "assessing the supreme interests of the Muslims over particular organizational interests"<sup>5</sup>. On the basis of "the general guidelines and directives" of the al-Qaeda leadership, it was decided to rebrand Jabhat al-Nusra as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, with no ties to any "external entity"<sup>6</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, the rebranding was widely interpreted not as the final dissociation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham from al-Qaida, but

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5.- Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani's speech broadcast by Orient News, July 28, 2016.

6.- ibd.



more of a calculated move by al-Qaeda to subsume the wider insurgency under its leadership. One alternative interpretation, however, was advanced by Charles Lister<sup>7</sup>. He suggested that the rebranding was indeed a breaking of ties with al-Qaeda and the result of mounting internal pressure on Jowlani. This view partly relies on the testimony of Saleh al-Hamawi, who was a founding member of Jabhat al-Nusra and expelled from the group in the summer of 2015, but apparently retained a network of supporters inside the group. Along with the Iraqi, Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, Hamawi had been considered to represent a more 'pragmatic' fraction within Jabhat al-Nusra. According to this interpretation, once the talk of a joint U.S.-Russian campaign to target Jabhat al-Nusra arose, his lobbying attempts to dissociate Jabhat al-Nusra from al-Qaeda gained traction, effectively threatening Jowlani with the defection of one third of al-Nusra's base to form a new independent faction called the 'Syrian Islamic Movement'<sup>8</sup>. On this account, what evolved was a fierce disagreement within the top leadership of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham over its relationship with al-Qaeda, although Abu al-Khayr al-Masri - al-Zawahiri's deputy at that time - gave his blessing for the rebranding.

Attempting to assess the validity of the different interpretations has until recently been a difficult task on account of the lack of insider testimony on the matter. Many analysts, this author included, however, came to accept Charles Lister's account of the proceedings, even though Hamawi was not actually part of Jabhat al-Nusra at the time of the rebranding. He was not involved in the decision-making process, and he may well have been trying to take credit for what was not actually his doing.

## 2.1. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Al-Qaeda: The Secretive Alliance Revealed

Fortunately, beginning in October 2017, a range of detailed insider testimonies came to light that highlighted the dispute between al-Qaeda and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the decision-making process within HTS. Of particular interest are the testimonies of Sami al-Oraidi and Abd al-Rahim Atoun. Oraidi is a Jordanian al-Qaeda 'loyalist' and was previously Jabhat al-Nusra's chief cleric (*Shari'i*). He initially remained in Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, but publicly broke ranks after the group was, again, rebranded to the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, issuing thinly veiled criticisms that turned into a detailed and explicit testimony in October 2017<sup>9</sup>. Atoun (also known as Abu Abdullah al-Shami), on the other hand, is a figure in HTS and is considered to be very close to its leader, Jowlani. His writings can be considered the foremost intellectual defense of the HTS project in opposition to critics like Oraidi<sup>10</sup>.

Since Atoun and Oraidi were both directly involved in the decision-making processes, their testimonies are inherently more valuable than those of Hamawi or any other 'independent' figures that claim to have an understanding of internal processes. What makes their accounts even more authoritative is that they agree on certain crucial facts, even though the two sources represent opposing viewpoints.

These testimonies reveal that the theory of a severe quarrel within Jabhat al-Nusra, as put forward by Charles Lister, cannot be proven. In fact, there is no hint in these testimonies of a lobbying effort by Hamawi and internal threats to fracture Jabhat al-Nusra

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7.- See, for example, Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda's Turning Against Its Syrian Affiliate", Middle East Institute, May 18, 2017.

8.- See Charles Lister, "Under pressure, Syria's rebels face al-Nusra quandary", Huffington Post, July 18, 2016.

9.- For the translated testament see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (I)", December 6, 2017.

10.- See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (II)", December 10, 2017.

and isolate Jowlani; moreover, both Atoun and Oraidi do not indicate a fierce split within the top leadership over the decision to transition from Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. Both accounts, therefore, lend credence to the initially widespread views of skepticism about the supposed breaking of ties with al-Qaeda. That is, both agree that the rebranding of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham was not intended to be an actual breaking of ties with the organization. More specifically, Atoun states that the rebranding was planned as a media move, whereas the actual ties with al-Qaeda would be secretly maintained. In that way, Jabhat Fatah-al-Sham aimed at returning to the form of tacit alliance with al-Qaeda that its predecessor Jabhat al-Nusra had prior to the public dispute with Baghdadi in 2013. Oraidi does not dispute this point, noting that it was on this basis that "many of the brothers initially agreed with you [Atoun] on the project"<sup>11</sup>.

It is true that there was not a unanimous agreement within the leadership on forming Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, but the degree of dissent appears to have been exaggerated. In fact, Atoun offers the exact number of people that voted on the decision to rebrand as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. In his account, the nature of the decision required an enlargement of the consultation council (*shura*) to 65 members, including also the lower-level second and third ranks of the group. Atoun claims that 60 out of 65 voted in favour of the transition from Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

It is apparent from the testimonies that Abu al-Khayr al-Masri had initially approved the rebranding, because he expected that al-Zawahiri would support the decision once informed about it. However, both Sayf al-Adel and Abu Muhammad al-Masri, senior members of al-Qaeda's leadership based in

Iran and in contact with the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham leadership, rejected the rebranding. Their rejection of the rebranding led to early 'purist' dissents from Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, such as the Jordanian Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni, a one-time deputy of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of al-Qaeda's Iraq branch.

Thus, while initial interpretations were wrong in assuming that al-Zawahiri had approved the rebranding - a line that had also been promoted by some pro-Jabhat Fatah al-Sham social media outlets at the time, e.g. the jihadi outlet al-Fustaat on Telegram - they were essentially correct in identifying the rebranding as a media play. It is still necessary to explain why the rebranding took place. Here, it can be argued that it was a response to specific circumstances rather than a brilliant masterplan. The most evident reason for the rebranding was that Jowlani expected it to bring more success in the merger talks with other groups, who continued to reject an alliance with the openly al-Qaeda-affiliated group. Building a unified front became a more urgent matter over the course of 2016 when the Syrian government, with the support of its allies, tightened the siege of insurgent-held eastern Aleppo. It was clear at that time that the loss of Aleppo would be a decisive blow to the insurgency's political momentum.

As indicated above, another reason for rebranding might have been the talks of a joint U.S.-Russian campaign to target Jabhat al-Nusra. To be sure, it is unlikely that the leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra thought that a rebranding would ultimately convince the U.S. and Russia that the group no longer had any connection to al-Qaeda or was not a jihadist terrorist group anymore. However, an inability to merge could have been interpreted as a successful attempt by

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11.- Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (I)", December 6, 2017.

the U.S. and Russia to isolate the group from the wider insurgency. It was probably calculated that merging into a broader insurgency would have impeded the campaign to target it.

## 2.2. Al-Zawahiri's Rejection of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham

After the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, merger talks were renewed. However, the recent testimonies confirm that al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri rejected the rebranding and informed the leadership of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham about his position in a letter that arrived in Syria by early autumn of 2016. Al-Zawahiri considered the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham a violation of the allegiance to him. Atoun argues in his testimony that al-Zawahiri's picture of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham had been distorted by Sayf al-Adel and that al-Zawahiri's rejectionist message had reached Syria before the leadership of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham even had the chance to explain the rationale behind their branding project to him. As a consequence, it was decided to write letters to al-Zawahiri, emphasizing that the project did not actually mean a dissociation from al-Qaeda, but rather that the intention was to keep the allegiance to him in secret under a new name of the group. Atoun reports that Jowlani halted any merger-talks with other groups at that time in order for al-Zawahiri to get a clearer understanding of the situation.

Oraidi, however, argues that Atoun-conceals in his testimony that al-Zawahiri described the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham project as an act of rebellion and disobedience and made clear to Abu al-Khayr al-Masri that the issue of separating a branch from al-Qaeda requires broader consultation and was not within his range of competencies<sup>12</sup>. Accord-

ing to Oraidi, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri consequently retracted his blessings of the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham project.

Neither Oraidi nor Atoun make any reference to al-Zawahiri actually addressing the issue of secret allegiances in his initial message rejecting the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham project. It is likely, therefore, that he was not aware that the group's intention was to continue being an al-Qaeda affiliate and to keep a secret allegiance to him. Since the communication channels to al-Zawahiri were not constantly open, it might be that the letters from Jowlani had not reached him in time and he rejected Jabhat Fatah al-Sham right away, without having looked at the clarifying notes from Syria.

Eventually, al-Zawahiri sent a second message to Jowlani, in which he reaffirmed his rejection of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham while also making clear that he rejected the idea of secret allegiances. Al-Zawahiri cited his experience with the Islamic State, which was supposed to have maintained an allegiance to al-Qaeda but broke off with its expansion into Syria and attempt to subsume Jabhat al-Nusra in 2013. Al-Zawahiri outlined his rejection of the rebranding and the idea of a secret allegiance to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in his speech 'Let us fight them as a structured edifice' (recorded before Atoun made his testimonies public and released them at the end of November 2017), in which he affirms that "we did not accept that the allegiance of Jabhat al-Nusra (sic) should be secret"<sup>13</sup>.

Atoun claims that in the second message, al-Zawahiri affirmed that if a merger were to come about, the problem would be resolved. However, Atoun does not specify what exactly al-Zawahiri would define as a merg-

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12.- Ibid.

13.- Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (II)", December 10, 2017.

er, whereas Oraidi says that al-Zawahiri, in keeping with his public messages, had already made clear in his first letter the conditions under which a breaking of ties would be acceptable: either the establishment of a general union of the mujahideen or an Islamic government in *al-Sham* (that historically encompasses the Levant). A breaking of ties before meeting either of those conditions would be unacceptable.

### 3. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: The True Break from al-Qaeda

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham was declared as a merger between Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and some other factions, among them Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaysh al-Sunna, on 28 January 2017. The immediate context of its declaration was the merging of a number of smaller factions with Ahrar al-Sham in northwest Syria. These factions were seeking protection from Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, as the latter attacked them with a goal to sabotage the Astana process that attempted to incorporate some 'mainstream' insurgent groups. However, HTS's broader roots lay in a new round of merger-talks that had commenced in December 2016 after the fall of Aleppo city, which had created an acute sense of crisis in the Syrian insurgency and gave more life than ever to calls for unity. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham was particularly keen to reach a merger agreement with Ahrar al-Sham, and was supported in this effort by Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, an opportunistic Islamist group that controls a fiefdom in the western Aleppo countryside and had developed a close working relationship with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. Within Ahrar al-Sham, a bloc under the leadership of Ahrar's former leader Hashim al-Sheikh called Jaysh al-Ahrar, also pushed for a merger with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

In the end, however, the 'mainstream' leadership of Ahrar al-Sham retreated from negotiating with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. Some evident reasons for this rejection included (a) the fear of losing support from Turkey, Ahrar's main backer, (b) the fear of being blacklisted by the U.S. and, thus, becoming a direct target of their military campaign, and (c) concerns that Jabhat Fatah al-Sham would exploit the merger as a means to expand its own power without respecting the positions of Ahrar al-Sham (Arabic: *taghallub*).

Despite the rejection by Ahrar al-Sham's 'mainstream' leadership, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham proceeded to form Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham with its remaining partners in Ahrar al-Sham, appointing Hashim al-Sheikh, the former leader of Ahrar al-Sham, as the general leader of HTS and Jowlani as the group's military commander.

In their testimonies, both Oraidi and Atoun agree that the formation of HTS marks the definitive break from al-Qaeda. "With the formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the connection would have been truly broken," writes Atoun. Likewise, HTS official Abu Malek al-Shami says that from the outset, Jabhat al-Nusra was in allegiance with al-Qaeda, while the formation of HTS meant the breaking of ties with al-Qaeda<sup>14</sup>.

In a similar vein, Oraidi refers to the formation of HTS as the "wholesale breaking of ties"<sup>15</sup>. While Atoun and Abu Malek al-Shami regard the HTS project as legitimate and therefore support the dissociation, Oraidi thinks otherwise. Atoun and Abu Malek al-Shami argue that HTS was, at least in principle, unifying most of the jihadist fractions in Syria, thus fulfilling a condition that al-Zawahiri stipulated for the breaking of ties.

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14.- See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (VI)", December 15, 2017.

15.- Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (I)", December 6, 2017.

In reality, this argument is very weak, and it is quite clear why Oraidí and al-Zawahiri himself would reject it. As Oraidí justifiably highlights, HTS only partially unified factions in Idlib province under its command. For something resembling a united front in the Syrian insurgency, at the minimum the 'mainstream' circles of Ahrar al-Sham would have had to have been included as well. Moreover, by early 2018, HTS had largely been reduced to its original core that formed Jabhat Fatah al-Sham/Jabhat al-Nusra, as both Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki and Jaysh al-Ahrar had defected from HTS<sup>16</sup>. The group is, in fact, far from bringing about an actual overall union of mujahideen in Syria and being in the position of establishing an Islamic government in Syria.

At the present time, there appears to be little basis for a reconciliation between al-Qaeda and HTS, which could only come about if HTS were to become an al-Qaeda affiliate again. Whereas al-Zawahiri argues that the allegiance to him has been unlawfully broken, HTS's leadership considers the dissociation from al-Qaeda as legitimate and is not interested in restoring ties. One foreign official in HTS, the Egyptian jihadi veteran Abu al-Harith al-Masri, even elaborated that the idea of an allegiance to al-Zawahiri as a military emir has no validity, because he does not, on account of his isolation, fulfill any of the obligations of a military emir as laid down by traditional scholars and jurists<sup>17</sup>.

### 3.1. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Hegemonic Approach on the Ground

In trying to understand Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's approach to governance and relations with other factions, Sam Heller uses

the binary theory of the hegemony of a single group over an insurgent movement as opposed to a multipolar or fragmented movement (i.e. an insurgent environment that has no pre-eminent group leading the overall direction of the movement)<sup>18</sup>. As stated earlier, other insurgent groups were reluctant to merge with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, partly because they feared to be exploited and fully subordinated to the core group (*taghallub*). Jabhat Fatah al-Sham had publicly rejected *taghallub*, but since the transformation into HTS, its leaders evidently developed a coherent strategic logic postulating that the insurgent movement could not achieve its goals without a single hegemonic group presiding over it. In their rationale, the insurgency needed (a) a more effective political leadership, (b) a stricter military organization, (c) effective governance and, finally, (d) greater independence from foreign backers. This did not mean that the insurgent movement could not have relations with foreign countries, but rather that it should prevent those countries from directly interfering and dividing the insurgency, thereby forcing it to compromise on its fundamental goals and instrumentalising the groups for their own interests. In this regard, attending negotiations like the Astana talks and complying with any de-escalation agreements were anathema to HTS.

This thinking contrasts with the approach that Jabhat al-Nusra developed in the earlier years of the civil war when it was more willing to compromise with other factions at both the military and administrative level. To be sure, there had already been indications of a turn towards a more hardline approach in these matters well before Jabhat Fatah al-Sham was formed. For instance, Jabhat al-Nusra established its own judicial branch

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16.- See "Jaysh al-Ahrar defects from Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib and SDF advances in north Deiraz-Zor", SMART News, September 14, 2017.

17.- See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (IV)", December 13, 2017.

18.- See Sam Heller, "The Strategic Logic of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham", Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol 6, No 11 (2017).



called the Dar al-Qada ('Abode of the Judges') in 2014, as opposed to the prior norm of participating in joint Shari'i commissions with other factions<sup>19</sup>. In fact, the Dar al-Qada's existence was confined from the outset to parts of the northwest of the country, but its establishment did mark a notable change in how Jabhat al-Nusra approached judicial administration.

In addition, Jabhat al-Nusra sometimes took action to destroy those factions that it perceived as foreign proxies with an intention to target the group. The best known case is that of the 'Syrian Revolutionaries Front,' a coalition of 'Free Syrian Army' groups led by Jamal Ma'arouf that became known for taking on ISIS in northwest Syria when the infighting broke out. Ma'arouf was perceived as the archetype 'moderate' with Western and Saudi support, but Jabhat al-Nusra began to move against the group in the border areas in summer 2014, eventually expelling the group entirely from northern Syria by November 2014. Harakat Hazm, one of the most well-known recipients of TOW missiles from the CIA, met a similar fate at the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra in early 2015<sup>20</sup>.

Despite these incidents, Jabhat al-Nusra was still generally amenable to coalitions with other factions, entering into the Jaysh al-Fatah alliance alongside Ahrar al-Sham that drove the government and its forces almost entirely out of Idlib in the spring of 2015. This alliance even led to a joint Jaysh al-Fatah administration of places like Idlib city and Ariha, but it did not lead to actual mergers between its members<sup>21</sup>.

The *raison d'être* of HTS was to unify all the courts and administrative systems under its own command, putting an end to fractured governance in certain areas and agreements such as with Jaysh al-Fatah. One of the earlier signs of this shift on the ground was a campaign to subordinate local councils in areas under HTS control to its own services wing, the Civil Administration for Services. In general, the provision of services was hardly a new development, as an established services wing for the group had existed since the days of Jabhat al-Nusra (the Public Administration for Services)<sup>22</sup>. But contrary to HTS, Jabhat al-Nusra had, in many cases, allowed the local councils in its areas of control to operate independently of it, some even being tied to the Syrian Interim Government via the Free Idlib Provincial Council.

Among the insurgent groups, HTS's only main rival in the northwest by this point was Ahrar al-Sham, a Salafi group with roots in transnational jihadism, whose 'mainstream' leadership had, over time, adopted a more-nationalist agenda and developed a close relationship with Turkey, to an extent that HTS and its predecessors have never done. Many smaller, more 'moderate' groups that sought not to be annihilated by HTS came under Ahrar al-Sham's protection. By some accounts, Ahrar al-Sham, and not HTS, was thought to be the larger insurgent group<sup>23</sup>. Thus, it was assumed that each group could deter the other from trying to dismantle its power structure in the northwest by a doctrine of mutually assured destruction, as well as fear that major infighting would provide an opportunity for the Syrian government and its allies to advance into Idlib.

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19.- See Maxwell Martin, "Al-Qaeda's Syrian Judiciary- is it really what al-Jolani makes it out to be?", Syria Comment, November 9, 2014.

20.- See "Harakat Hazm dissolves itself and merges its soldiers in the Shami Front", Arabi 21, March 1, 2015.

21.- See, for example, "Al-Fatah Media Committee: Visual report about the administration of Idlib city under the protection of Jaysh al-Fatah's control" (Video), al-Fatah Media Committee, September 10, 2015.

22.- For documents of the Public Administration for Services, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of Jabhat al-Nusra Service Documents", August 10, 2015.

23.- See, for example, Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda is starting to swallow the Syrian opposition", Foreign Policy, March 15, 2017. Lister estimated that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham had 12,000-14,000 fighters, while Ahrar al-Sham had 18,000-20,000 fighters at the time.

In hindsight though, Ahrar al-Sham's strength appears to have been overestimated, partly because of a lack of access to the ground. From HTS's perspective it is clear that if Ahrar al-Sham could not be integrated into its own organizational framework, then action would have been required at some point to inflict a decisive blow against the group, which, most crucially, still exerted effective control over the Bab al-Hawa border crossing between Turkey and Idlib. In fact, as talks of a Turkish intervention against HTS increased in the course of 2017, the group moved decisively against Ahrar al-Sham, removing its control over Bab al-Hawa and expelling it from Idlib City by the end of July 2017. While HTS did not move to eliminate Ahrar al-Sham entirely, the battles underlined HTS's strength and its victory over Ahrar al-Sham. The military move was justified on the grounds of preventing the insurgency from being manipulated by foreign powers and ending problems created by factional disunity.

Along with the defeat of Ahrar al-Sham came the expansion of HTS's administrative capabilities and ambitions. For example, the latter's services wing absorbed the electricity sector of Ahrar al-Sham's Services Administration Commission, with competition over provision of electrical services having long been a point of contention between the two sides<sup>24</sup>. In fact, the defeat of Ahrar al-Sham appears to have crippled the Services Administration Commission in general. According to the official who was responsible for tracking matters in the Commission but has now ended up working in a small shop in Idlib, the Commission was not officially dissolved to his knowledge, but has

suspended its work indefinitely<sup>25</sup>. In other words, it has practically ceased to exist.

The Civil Administration for Services announced a range of new regulations and directorates from the period of August 2017 onwards, including a directorate for sports and youth, a directorate for museums and antiquities, and a committee to deal with mortgage liens. The regulations enacted partly aimed at ensuring that the Civil Administration for Services and its branches would be the sole regulator of various affairs in civil life, such as being the sole party to authorize establishment of new educational institutions, as well as contracts for Internet connections and mobile networks. Perhaps most importantly, on August 20, 2017, the Civil Administration for Services instructed local councils to hand over all offices affiliated with them to its institutions<sup>26</sup>. On the ground, the most notable outcome of that instruction was the Civil Administration for Services' takeover of the offices of the Idlib City Council, including its municipal office and water, electricity, transport and ovens directorates. The Idlib City Council, which had been elected by residents in January 2017 after the Jaysh al-Fatah administration had agreed to hand over administration to a local civilian council<sup>27</sup>, affirmed this fact in a note on November 10, 2017 in response to queries about real estate offices, while also noting that the municipal office's continued use of a stamp giving the impression of affiliation with the Idlib City Council was misleading.

The focus of HTS on consolidating and expanding governance capabilities runs contrary to the advice al-Zawahiri offered in

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24.- See the copy of a statement merging the "Electricity Foundation" of the Services Administration Commission into the "Public Foundation for Electricity" of the "Civil Administration for Services", July 29, 2017.

25.- Interview with the author on December 29, 2017. It should also be noted that he did not describe the Services Administration Commission as affiliated with Ahrar al-Sham, but referred to it as a body that received logistical support from the group.

26.- See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of Jabhat al-Nusra Service Documents", Specimen H, August 10, 2015.

27.- See "Syrians elect first civilian council to run Idlib city", Al-Monitor, January 17, 2017.

an audio message released in April 2017. In it, he urged the mujahideen not to focus on control and administration of territory, but rather guerrilla warfare, well aware that the balance of power had turned against the insurgency since the fall of Aleppo in December 2016.

There are, however, limits to the degree of control over civilian life that can be pursued. Idlib is not a province rich in natural resources compared to the eastern fiefdom that Jabhat al-Nusra held before the Islamic State takeover. There is heavy dependence on aid from NGOs coming into the province, and exerting too heavy control over them risks the pullout of NGOs, which fear being seen as a betting an organization that is largely considered to be a terrorist group linked to al-Qaeda. To this end, HTS issued a statement claiming that it would ensure that NGOs can operate independently within the province. Further, in at least some instances where HTS's services wing had compelled a local council to become affiliated with it or set up a new one to replace an existing local council, it had stipulated that some relations could be maintained with the Free Idlib Provincial Council<sup>28</sup>, likely in order to ensure that aid would keep coming in so the council could undertake its projects.

### 3.2. The Salvation Government

The most recent step in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's assertion of governance in its areas of control has been the establishment of the Salvation Government, whose name is in keeping with HTS's strategic logic of preserving and advancing the interests of the insurgency under its hegemony. The Sal-

vation Government was announced on November 2, 2017 under the leadership of one Dr. Muhammad al-Sheikh and consists of 11 ministries: interior, justice, *awqaf*, education, higher education, agriculture, economy, societal affairs and displaced persons, residence and building, local administration and health.

Conspicuously absent from this list is a defence ministry, as that portfolio is de facto filled by HTS. An alleged connection with HTS is the *awqaf* minister Anas Muhammad Bashir al-Mousa, who is said to be Bishr al-Shami<sup>29</sup>. A Bishr al-Shami also served as head of HTS's Shari'i council<sup>30</sup>. Further, as part of the Salvation Government project, non-military bodies of HTS are now supposed to have come under its ministries. In particular, the Civil Administration for Services is now part of the local administration ministry, while the Dar al-Qada courts are supposed to have been dissolved and reconstituted<sup>31</sup>, presumably functioning under its justice ministry.

A wider target of the Salvation Government has been the Syrian Interim Government (tied to the opposition-in-exile) and its offices in Idlib province. On December 12, 2017, the Salvation Government issued a warning to the Syrian Interim Government to close all its offices in the "liberated areas" within 72 hours<sup>32</sup>. Though the Salvation Government apparently suspended the decision, it reportedly proceeded to close Syrian Interim Government offices affiliated with its higher education and health ministries in Ma'arat al-Nu'man, as well as the foundation for seed production and multiplication in Saraqib<sup>33</sup>. In a subsequent state-

28.- See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of Jabhat al-Nusra Service Documents", Specimen P, August 10, 2015.

29.- See, for example, the video message of Anas al-Mousa, posted by Salvation Government's Awqaf Ministry on January 11, 2018.

30.- See "And don't walk on the earth merrily", Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham Shari'i Council, July 23, 2017. The Awqaf Ministry denied however that Anas al-Mousa is Bishr al-Shami. Interview, April 26, 2018.

31.- Interview by the author with a media activist working with the court in Salqin (Idlib Governorate), December 2017.

32.- See the statement issued by the Syria Salvation Government Prime Minister's Office, December 10, 2017.

33.- See "After the decision to suspend the warning, the Salvation Government closes the Interim Government offices in Idlib", Shaam Network, December 19, 2017.



ment, the Free Idlib Provincial Council accused the Salvation Government of aiming to "close and confiscate the offices of the provincial council in Jisr al-Shughur, Ma'arat al-Nu'man, Idlib [city], and the main office for the council without prior warning, on the pretext of the provincial council's affiliation with the Syrian Interim Government"<sup>34</sup>.

The Salvation Government has also acted against civilian bodies at the more local level. For example, it issued a statement for the dissolution of the local council in Ariha; a decision that was rejected by the local council, which claims that it then met with the local administration minister, who had apparently been misinformed about the local council. On this basis, it was agreed that the local council could continue in its function as an independent body until the next elections for it<sup>35</sup>.

### Conclusion: A look into the future of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Overall, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham has achieved hegemony in Idlib, but its dominance over the province and the wider northwest is by no means complete. In some areas, local councils are continuing to operate without attempted interference from HTS and the Salvation Government, such as the local council in the Idlib locality of Hish that is tied to the Free Idlib Provincial Council. In this case, the lack of interference is likely explained by the lack of a HTS armed pres-

ence, as the main factions present in Hish are Faylaq al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham<sup>36</sup>. Out in the west Aleppo countryside, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, which split off from HTS in the wake of its move against Ahrar al-Sham, retains its fiefdom and was able to resist HTS's attacks in November 2017<sup>37</sup>.

Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki merged with Ahrar al-Sham on February 18, 2018 to form the Syria Liberation Front. Alongside Suqur al-Sham, the Syria Liberation Front took advantage of HTS's preoccupation with another attempt to crush the Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki in west Aleppo countryside by attacking the group in the southern regions of Idlib<sup>38</sup>. However, HTS, the Syria Liberation Front and Suqur al-Sham agreed to a ceasefire as of April 24, 2018<sup>40</sup>.

After the latest round of infighting, HTS lost control of certain towns, such as Darat Izza, which used to be a key bordertown with the SDF enclave of Afrin. However, its grip on Idlib city and key northern border areas in the province remain unchallenged, and so despite a military stalemate between HTS and the Syria Liberation Front, the former still retains the more important assets and its overall dominance in the northwest. In southern Idlib and northern Hama, HTS initially conducted strategic withdrawals from towns like Khan Sheikhoun and Morek<sup>41</sup>, only to return in a counter-offensive against the Syria Liberation Front in mid-April 2018<sup>42</sup>.

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34.- "Free Idlib Provincial Council: The Salvation Government advised Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to close our offices in Idlib", Shaam Network, December 24, 2017.

35.- See the statement issued by Ariha Local Council, December 12, 2017. Continued interference by the Salvation Government led to a statement from civil associations in Ariha (March 19, 2018) rejecting the Salvation Government as a HTS affiliate and declaring the formation of their own committee to work with aid organizations.

36.- Interview by the author with the head of local council of Hish (Idlib Governorate) on December 29, 2017.

37.- "Why did al-Zinki succeed in facting Tahrir al-Sham", Al-Modon, November 20, 2017.

38.- For the agreement, see the formation statement dated February 18, 2018.

39.- Cf. Abd al-Rahim Atoun's emphasis on the fight against Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, 20 February, 2018.

40.- See "Get to know the terms of the ceasefire in definitive form between the Syria Liberation Front and Suqur al-Sham with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham", Nedaa Souriya, April 24, 2018.

41.- See "Tahrir al-Sham withdraws from Morek locality in north Hama", SMART News, February 28, 2018.

42.- See "Tahrir al-Sham regains control of the Morek locality in Hama", SMART News, April 15, 2018.

While the dispute with al-Qaeda has proven extremely interesting in providing observers with first-hand testimonies containing immense details on the nature of al-Qaeda's top leadership, the methods of communication between al-Zawahiri and his former Syrian affiliate, as well as the decision-making processes behind Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and then HTS, there is a risk of exaggerating how the dispute plays out on the ground. Officially barring the formation of any new faction and irritated by continual criticisms of al-Qaeda loyalists, HTS arrested both Oraidid and Abu Julaybib in late November 2017, much to the anger of some members within its own ranks.

While both men were eventually released the following month, some of those who were angered by these arrests defected. One case was the group, Jaysh al-Badiya, which as a name was an identifiable military contingent of HTS's forces in the northern Badiya-area (i.e. north/east Hama countryside and south Aleppo countryside). In response to the arrests of al-Qaeda loyalists in late November 2017, Jaysh al-Badiya leaders and officials threatened to cease its relationship with HTS if their demands for the release of these men and fair adjudication were not met within 24 hours<sup>43</sup>. A Telegram channel in the name of Jaysh al-Badiya subsequently emerged in early December 2017, promoted by pro-al-Qaeda channels. The channel includes unique photos and video footage, including one photo with a tank featuring the words "Qa'idat al-Jihad Organization" inscribed on it<sup>44</sup>, thus clearly identifying itself as an al-Qaeda loyalist faction. A video promotion that includes

a history of its military engagements supports the conclusion that it was previously part of HTS and its predecessors.

Corroborating the existence of defections was a statement issued on December 29, 2017 by Jabhat al-Nusra's former military official al-Faruq al-Shami, a jihad veteran and al-Qaeda loyalist, in which he referred to those who have "suspended their organizational works with it [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham]" and to a dispute over the weapons in their use that had previously belonged to HTS<sup>45</sup>. Some members of the rank and file clearly became disillusioned by the dispute with al-Qaeda and the inability to resolve it. Subsequently, other al-Qaeda-aligned groups like the Sahel Army (based in the Latakia area) and Epic Battles Army emerged<sup>46</sup>. These entities have congregated under a new group called the Guardians of the Religion Organization (Tandhim Hurras al-Din)<sup>47</sup>, which announced its existence publicly on February 27, 2018. However, even amid the infighting between HTS and other rebel groups, Tandhim Hurras al-Din does not appear to have taken advantage of the situation to assert itself as a serious force in competition with HTS for zones of control.

Regardless of the strength of the al-Qaeda-aligned groups, the ideological differences between them and HTS should not be exaggerated, and one should not be complacent about potential security threats in the long term. The dispute over the allegiance pledge certainly had a serious impact, but it does not mean that HTS has abandoned transnational jihadism. At our unfuted the notion that HTS adheres to *qatariyya*

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43.- See "Significant fall-outs from the imprisonment of two Jordanians by Tahrir al-Sham, and Muheisseni comments", Arabi 21, November 29, 2017.

44.- Photo released by Jaysh al-Badiya on January 11, 2018.

45.- See the statement by al-Faruq al-Shami, December 29, 2017.

46.- See "Epic Battles Army announces its allegiance to the Guardians of the Religion Organization", AmanDostor, March 4, 2018.

47.- See, for example, the statement by Jaysh al-Badiya announcing its joining of the Guardians of the Religion Organization, March 4, 2018). As of the time of writing, the new group has not been officially recognized as an al-Qaeda's Syrian branch.

('regionalism'), meaning that they are not only committed to a specific area and not bound to a nationalist vision<sup>48</sup>. On the contrary, Atoun cited the presence of foreigners in HTS as evidence that the group incorporates transnational jihadists and does not therefore adhere to *qatariyya*. The Syrian front, Atoun argues, is only the current focus, while "the victory of al-Sham will spread over the Ummah." On the governance level, there is little to suggest that HTS has moderated its vision, as the Salvation Government called for Islamic law to be the sole source of legislation. Nor has the group abandoned the idea of eventually implementing harsh *hudud* punishments if that seems to be appropriate, such as the stoning to death of two persons in Idlib province for the charge of fornication<sup>49</sup>.

Although some figures may continue to split off from HTS, it does not mean that they become completely isolated from the wider insurgent milieu. Contact and meetings might still be held between al-Qaeda loyalists and HTS (as is evident in al-Farouq al-Shami's testimony), and ideas and teachings promoted by figures who have left HTS may still be influential on the ground. A case-in-point is the jihadist cleric Abd al-Razzaq al-Mahdi, who initially joined HTS but then left the group. Even so, his teachings on blasphemy are still circulated in areas and mosques controlled by HTS<sup>50</sup>.

The final question involves the wider future of HTS. The most likely eventual scenario is that the group will face a large-scale Syrian government offensive backed by its allies. Although much is made of the de-escalation agreement for Idlib between Turkey, Russia and Iran, as well as supposed Russian expressions of reluctance to

participate in an offensive, the premise of the de-escalation agreement for Idlib is that Turkey can actually enforce a de-escalation zone in the province. In this regard, there has been hope for an active Turkish intervention against HTS, similar to the intervention against the Islamic State and the establishment of the Euphrates Shield zone. Such an intervention, however, does not seem to be forthcoming. Instead, Turkey initially cooperated with HTS to set up monitors to the south of the Afrin enclave controlled by the SDF. While HTS might not have considered the entry of Turkish troops into the northwest to be ideal, the group likely believed that it was compelling Turkey to act within the conditions it set.

Potentially more problematic for HTS is a Turkish advance to frontline border areas with the Syrian government to enforce a de-escalation. Such an arrangement arguably invalidates a fundamental premise of HTS, which is that the 'revolution' continues despite the current challenges. As of the time of writing, Turkey has set up multiple observation posts near frontline areas facing the Syrian government and its allies in eastern Idlib countryside, western Aleppo countryside, north Latakia countryside and even north Hama<sup>51</sup>.

However, Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali, an Egyptian official in HTS, argues that the Turkish deployments have still not violated HTS' conditions. For, according to him, HTS still has the military advantage over the Turkish observation points as the observation points do not have a direct geographic connection with the original Turkish army, the Turks do not interfere in administration of the "liberated" areas, and the "decision to

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48.- Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (II)", December 10, 2017.

49.- See the news report in Al-Etihad Press, December 14, 2017.

50.- See, for example, the photo of a poster put up in a mosque in Kaftin in north Idlib countryside, in Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Additional Notes on the Druze of Jabal al-Summaq", October 6, 2015. See the update of November 10, 2017.

51.- See the map of observation posts set up as of April 7, 2018 published by Nedaa Suriya.

begin any new operation or halt operations for Shari'i interest is in the hands of the mujahideen entirely"<sup>52</sup>. In a similar vein, the head of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's political office argued in an interview with al-Jazeera that "these [observation] points will not be an obstacle for continuing to realize our aims to bring down al-Assad and his regime"<sup>53</sup>.

Indeed, when it comes to the infighting between HTS and other rebel groups, Turkey has refrained from directly interfering. Turkey has not used its offensive in Afrin and the linking up of 'Euphrates Shield' with the wider northwest to send rebel forces to confront HTS. Thus, it is questionable how far Turkey's relationship with HTS can be described as properly adversarial.

In the long run, if Turkey cannot enforce a de-escalation zone along the envisioned lines that takes firm action against HTS and other jihadist groups, then a military offensive of the Syrian regime pushing deeper into Idlib province is likely. The fight would by no means be easy for the Syrian government and its allies, but the area is widely considered as safe haven for international terrorists, making its indefinite and largely unchallenged persistence unlikely.

Therefore, the long-term viability of HTS's project is in doubt. On multiple levels, the project has failed to serve as a true merger and unifier of the insurgency. In the end, an offensive against the group may dismantle its administrative infrastructure and force HTS to operate more in the style of guerrilla warfare. This may again improve the prospect of reconciliation with al-Zawahiri, since guerilla tactics are al-Qaeda's preferred way of action in Syria in any case.

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52.- Response by Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali to query on the Turkish observation posts, Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali's Telegram channel, May 18, 2018.

53.- Interview with Yusuf al-Hajer on al-Jazeera, May 26, 2018.