



Idlib and Its Environs

Narrowing Prospects for a Rebel Holdout

By **Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi**

Greater Idlib and its immediate surroundings in northwest Syria—consisting of rural northern Latakia, northwestern Hama, and western Aleppo—stand out as the last segment of the country held by independent groups. These groups are primarily jihadist, Islamist, and Salafi in orientation. Other areas have returned to Syrian government control, are held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), or are held by insurgent groups that are entirely constrained by their foreign backers; that is, these backers effectively make decisions for the insurgents. As for insurgents in this third category, the two zones of particular interest are (1) the al-Tanf pocket, held by the U.S.-backed Jaish Maghaweer al-Thawra, and (2) the areas along the northern border with Turkey, from Afrin in the west to Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain in the east, controlled by “Syrian



National Army” (SNA) factions that are backed by Turkey and cannot act without its approval.

This paper considers the development of Idlib and its environs into Syria’s last independent center for insurgents, beginning with the province’s near-full takeover by the Jaish al-Fatah alliance in spring 2015 and concluding at the end of 2019, by which time Jaish al-Fatah had long ceased to exist and the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham had become the dominant actor. It also surveys the main military and civilian actors around Idlib over 2019, as well as the efforts of the Syrian regime and its allies to retake the area. Finally, this paper considers the near- and medium-term future of the region, one that entails bleak prospects not only for the insurgency’s survival but also for the overall humanitarian situation.

BACKGROUND

Much of Idlib province fell out of Syrian regime control between 2012 and 2014, although President Bashar al-Assad still retained control of the provincial capital, Idlib city, and some other key towns such as Jisr al-Shughour and Ariha. By the end of 2014, al-Qaeda’s official branch in Syria at the time, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the hardline Salafi group Ahrar al-Sham had established themselves as the strongest actors in the province; more nationalist insurgents had suffered heavy losses when Jabhat al-Nusra expelled the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) coalition from Idlib province during a brief period of fighting in October–November 2014.¹

Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra subsequently came to be the leading factions in the joint operations room called Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), which was officially formed in late March 2015 and also included the factions Jund al-Aqsa, Ajnad al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaish al-Sunna, and Failaq al-Sham. Of these other groups, Jund al-Aqsa was definitively jihadist, whereas the rest were considered Islamist and/or Salafi. Jaish al-Fatah’s opening statement contained the subtitle “The Idlib Expedition” and, in keeping with its name, declared the intention of capturing Idlib city from the Syrian regime while affirming the general goal of “tearing out the roots of idolatrous tyranny in order for its place to be filled with the rule of Islam and its mercy and justice.”²

Jaish al-Fatah had taken control of Idlib city by the end of March 2015, of Jisr al-Shughour by the end of April, and of Ariha by the end of May. The only places

in Idlib province that remained outside insurgent control were the isolated Shia villages of al-Fua and Kafarya, whose local fighters were bolstered by a small presence of Lebanese Hezbollah personnel serving in a training and advisory capacity.³

Charles Lister has pointed out that the insurgent successes in Idlib involved coordination among the various rebel factions in the northwest. This meant that U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army groups were also working with Jaish al-Fatah during the offensive. Further, the northwest insurgency’s foreign backers took a more permissive approach to coordination with the likes of Jabhat al-Nusra, having adopted a consensus view that increased military pressure on the Syrian regime could help spur a political transition in the country.⁴

In retrospect, however, these hopes were entirely misplaced. The insurgency’s northwest offensive essentially saw U.S.-backed groups as auxiliaries for Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, thereby *enabling* the more hardline elements of the insurgency, rather than allowing these groups to serve as a counterbalance to the influence of Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.⁵ In addition, the offensive did not lead to any progress toward a political transition. By summer 2015, the Syrian regime had adopted a more defensive posture to guard strategically vital areas but retained its political intransigence. Moreover, the developments had convinced Russia that a direct military intervention was necessary to turn the tide in the Syrian government’s favor; the insurgency’s backers (i.e., the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) were unwilling to counter with a direct military intervention of their own. Thus, the civil war has moved decisively in favor of the government as opposed to the insurgency.

For Jaish al-Fatah, whose apparent brand success saw similar groups spring up in areas such as Qalamoun and southern Syria, part of the idea behind the northwest coalition was to create a joint administration. This is what arose in Idlib city, which saw the creation of a Jaish al-Fatah administration that was promoted in videos released by the group’s media outlet in September and October 2015.⁶

Nonetheless, Jaish al-Fatah failed to create either a true unity among its component factions or a joint administration across the wider northwest. A notable crack emerged in October 2015 when Jund al-Aqsa withdrew from the coalition, citing support by some of the Jaish al-Fatah factions for “the projects that are

in conflict with the Islamic sharia.” Jund al-Aqsa also rejected pressure from Ahrar al-Sham to fight actively against the Islamic State, affirming that it would do so only in self-defense.⁷ More broadly, though, the two leading factions in Jaish al-Fatah, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, maintained their own areas of control and influence in much of the northwest rather than creating a joint Jaish al-Fatah administration throughout the entire province. The two groups even backed different judicial and service institutions.⁸ The success of Jaish al-Fatah in the long run depended on whether Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham could reach a true merger agreement. Otherwise, Jaish al-Fatah would never become anything more than another military operations room and thus would fail in its mission.

(See the appendix for a list of armed factions in and around Idlib.)

Discussions about mergers and pressure for unity among factions intensified in 2016 as the Syrian regime, with Russian support, worked to encircle the rebel-held parts of eastern Aleppo city and take them by storm, with the aim of inflicting a decisive political blow on the insurgency. A key impediment, however, was Jabhat al-Nusra’s allegiance to al-Qaeda. In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra decided to rebrand itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and declared that it had no connection with any “external entity.”⁹ Though this declaration was interpreted as an apparent severing of ties with al-Qaeda, the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham leadership had in fact agreed to maintain a secret connection with al-Qaeda—at least until broader factional unity was realized. Only once such unity was achieved would al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri supposedly permit Jabhat Fatah al-Sham to break its organizational ties.¹⁰

Jabhat al-Nusra’s rebranding as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham ultimately failed to achieve unity with Ahrar al-Sham, even after the fall of Aleppo city in December 2016. First, it was widely suspected that the rebranding was simply an al-Qaeda-devised ploy. Second, it was feared

Idlib Province



that Jabhat Fatah al-Sham was using unity talks and mergers to exert dominance over the other factions, which preferred to maintain ties with Turkey, their primary foreign backer.

By the end of the following month, January 2017, a round of infighting in the region had divided the northwest insurgency into two primary camps that persist today. On one side were Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and its allies, which had merged to form Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).¹¹ This constituted a true and complete break from al-Qaeda. On the other side were the nonjihadist elements of the insurgency, principally represented in Ahrar al-Sham, whose most hardline components had by now joined HTS. Despite these developments, Jaish al-Fatah continued to endure as an administrative entity in Idlib city, in contrast to competing administrations elsewhere in the province.

But it was only a matter of time before Jaish al-Fatah would definitively fall apart. Sam Heller has convincingly argued that the strategic logic of HTS has been driven by the idea of attaining factional hegemony over the northwest insurgency, at both the military and the administrative levels.¹² Though hegemony would not necessarily mean complete destruction of other factions,

it would at some point have required a move against rivals and obstacles.

Sure enough, multiple rounds of infighting occurred from the time of the formation of HTS until early 2019; the infighting ultimately cemented the organization's hegemony. In summer 2017, HTS seized key assets in Idlib: namely, the provincial capital—thus ending the Jaish al-Fatah arrangement—and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey. In late 2017, HTS established the Syrian Salvation Government (*Hukumat al-Inqadh al-Suriya*) as the civilian wing for enforcing HTS authority in the northwest. Finally, by January 2019, the group had routed the Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki movement, which had defected from HTS and maintained a grip on parts of the western Aleppo countryside in opposition to HTS. In that same round of infighting, HTS compelled its nonjihadist rivals to agree in theory to the Salvation Government's authority over the whole northwest region.¹³

Hence, by early 2019, HTS had secured its hegemony over the northwest, which continues today. The next section will outline the main actors in Idlib and its environs on all sides, with a particular focus on activities and developments over 2019.

HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham remains the most powerful actor in Idlib and its environs. It functions as the ruling authority in the majority of the region's remaining insurgent-held areas, with its grip particularly strong in the northern countryside near the Turkish border.¹⁴ HTS controls Idlib's key assets such as the provincial capital and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, and is active on all the main frontlines against the forces of the Syrian regime and its allies.

HTS has organized its forces into four main armies named for the first four Rashidun caliphs following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, though the group also has independent brigades outside those four armies. The two main brigades are the North Brigade, which operates in the western Aleppo countryside, and the West Brigade, which operates from the Jabal Shashabo area in the Sahel al-Ghab plain to the Jabal al-Turkmen area in the northeastern Latakia countryside.¹⁵ In addition, the group has its special Red Bands (*al-Asaib al-Hamra*) force, which primarily conducts operations behind enemy lines. HTS has conducted multiple social media campaigns to recruit for its forces, and allows

potential recruits to enlist via WhatsApp or Telegram.¹⁶ Reports of HTS fighters' monthly salaries vary. For example, one contact for the September 2019 recruitment campaign reported the monthly salary to be 45,000 Syrian pounds (about \$41–\$45, according to January 2020 exchange rates) for a married person and 38,000 Syrian pounds (about \$35–\$38) for a single person. In November 2019, a representative of the al-Zubair squadron reported reduced salaries: 36,000 Syrian pounds (about \$33–\$36) for a married person and 24,000 Syrian pounds (about \$22–\$24) for a single person, although these amounts were subject to increase. But conversely, a member of the Red Bands recently reported that salaries have increased in light of the depreciating Syrian pound. Though he did not give specific figures, he added that salaries vary according to sector, specific force affiliation, and the like.¹⁷

HTS's status as the main military force among the insurgents in the northwest is further illustrated by the many casualties the group has sustained during its recent engagements with the Syrian government and allied forces. According to Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali, an Egyptian official in HTS, the group lost 500 fighters in the summer campaign that saw the Syrian regime and its allies reclaim the northern Hama countryside and Khan Sheikhoun in southern Idlib.¹⁸

Despite its broader hegemonic approach to military and administrative control of the northwest, HTS has shown some flexibility in working with other nonjihadist factions in Idlib. The group is a participant in the al-Fatah al-Mubin (Clear Conquest) Operations Room, which includes the Turkish-backed nonjihadist factions of the National Front for Liberation (*al-Jabha al-Wataniya lil-Tahrir*) and the independent nonjihadist group Jaish al-Izza.¹⁹

Further, HTS has supported a military initiative ostensibly intended to enlist recruits at a popular, non-factional level. This initiative, which officially claims to be independent, is called Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya (Popular Resistance Brigades). Established during Ramadan 2019, Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya bolstered the frontline mujahedin by strengthening fortifications and providing other auxiliary support. The program has also used social media for recruitment and donation-gathering efforts: its "equip a raider" campaign encouraged donations via WhatsApp and listed the dollar amounts of various types of military equipment.²⁰ Another, more recent HTS-backed

initiative designed for mass appeal is the “mobilize” campaign launched at the beginning of 2020 amid regime and Russian advances and intensified bombing—even though it is purportedly aimed at recruiting for the interests of all factions in Idlib and its environs.²¹

OTHER JIHADIST GROUPS

Beyond HTS, a number of other jihadist groups of different orientations are active in and around Idlib. The most prominent include the Turkestan Islamic Party, Huras al-Din, Jamaat Ansar al-Islam, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Ansar al-Tawhid, and Katibat Imam al-Bukhari, though none of these groups can match HTS in terms of military power or administrative control. Indeed, they do not exercise any real control of territory but function only with HTS’s permission. Though such groups might sponsor nonmilitary projects on the ground such as *dawa* (i.e., Muslim proselytizing and religious outreach activities) and education programs, they neither have governance wings that compare to the HTS-sponsored Salvation Government nor exercise control over local councils that provide services in and around Idlib. Further, these jihadist groups lack the financial resources of HTS, which effectively controls the northwest’s most lucrative assets.

In terms of their orientations, these jihadist groups can be broadly divided into (1) allies of HTS and its project in northwest Syria and (2) critics of HTS that are more sympathetic to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri’s advice on the need to pursue guerrilla warfare rather than hold territory. Groups in the latter camp often criticize other HTS moves, including its break from al-Qaeda and its Salvation Government project. They further criticize HTS concessions to “nationalist” sentiments at the expense of transnational jihad, the group’s relations with Turkey, and the fact that HTS permitted Turkey to set up military monitoring points to enforce a supposed de-escalation. Those at the extreme end of the jihadist spectrum in the northwest argue that the Turkish presence needs to be actively confronted as an apostate occupation and removed by force.²²

Among the jihadist critics of HTS, the most prominent is undoubtedly Huras al-Din (Guardians of the Religion), whose original members were HTS defectors who rejected the break with al-Qaeda, arguing that it was carried out without appropriate permission from Zawahiri and thus constituted disobedience of the emir. Huras al-Din’s beginnings go back as far as July 2017 and

crystallized at the end of 2017, with the group formally announcing itself at the end of February 2018.²³ The group’s weakness relative to HTS was illustrated in an argument that emerged in early 2019 involving Huras al-Din’s claims to weapons possessed by HTS. Ultimately, the two sides came to an agreement in February 2019 when Huras al-Din dropped the dispute.²⁴ More recently, the group’s leadership reaffirmed its commitment to avoid disputes with HTS, calling on its own members and members of HTS to “keep away from the *fitnas* and resolve disputes through resorting to the arbitration of the law of God Almighty,” while reminding them to focus on “repelling the assault of the Nusayris [a derogatory term for Alawites, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s sect] and those behind them.”²⁵

Though Huras al-Din clearly cannot operate without HTS’s permission, there are conflicting claims as to the degree of HTS oversight of Huras al-Din operations. In a conversation with the author in July 2019, one foreigner in Syria who works in media and is sympathetic to HTS affirmed that the group provides ammunition and food for Huras al-Din at points of *ribat* (frontline manning). In another conversation that same month, however, a foreign fighter associated with Huras al-Din denied that HTS provides any support to Huras al-Din on the frontlines.

Regardless of its level of support from HTS, Huras al-Din rejects participating in the al-Fatah al-Mubin Operations Room, working instead in the Wa Harid al-Mouminin (And Rouse the Believers) Operations Room alongside Jamaat Ansar al-Islam and Jabhat Ansar al-Din. Wa Harid al-Mouminin set up a social media campaign called *Jahhizuna* (Equip Us) to raise money for fighting on the frontlines.²⁶ For further context, Jamaat Ansar al-Islam originated in Iraq and expanded into Syria as the civil war broke out. Jabhat Ansar al-Din was part of the original merger of HTS but broke off as an officially independent group in 2018. In an interview, the Jabhat Ansar al-Din media office avoided criticizing HTS by name, but stressed the importance of independent decisionmaking for the future of the revolution and criticized international talks and agreements involving the northwest, such as the Astana talks that began in 2017 and the Sochi agreement struck between Turkey and Russia in September 2018.²⁷

Huras al-Din has been marked by its own internal problems. In summer 2019, a dispute emerged over participation in fighting on the northern Hama front against the Syrian regime and its allies. Some sharia officials in

Huras al-Din apparently rejected the idea of working alongside the nonjihadist groups of the National Front for Liberation and were thus removed from the group by leadership.²⁸ Those removed and their supporters, including breakaway group Jamaat Ansar al-Haq, criticized the leadership of Huras al-Din for refusing to come to sharia judgment.²⁹

At the other end of the spectrum, the most prominent HTS ally is the Turkestan Islamic Party's branch in Syria, which has its primary base in Jisr al-Shughour in northern Idlib province and focuses on military operations, though there are multiple allegations the group has engaged in theft and confiscation of property.³⁰ During the dispute with Huras al-Din in 2019, the party signed a statement from foreign fighter groupings, alongside others working formally inside HTS, declaring their support for HTS.³¹ But the Turkestan Islamic Party is not the sole Uyghur-led jihadist group in the field. Another, Katibat al-Ghuraba al-Turkestan (Turkestani Strangers Battalion), has its primary base in the Harem area of northern Idlib province. Indeed, a number of Uyghurs tied to Katibat al-Ghuraba al-Turkestan have taken up residence in what was originally the Druze village of Qalb Lawzah, which is currently controlled by HTS.³² Although obtaining precise information on Katibat al-Ghuraba al-Turkestan is somewhat difficult, evidence suggests that it is a more hardline breakaway from the Turkestan Islamic Party. Members of Katibat al-Ghuraba al-Turkestan see the Turkestan Islamic Party as too lax in advancing the implementation of Islamic law, a criticism that parallels al-Qaeda loyalist critiques of HTS and the Salvation Government.³³ Even so, Katibat al-Ghuraba al-Turkestan has claimed coordination with the nonjihadist Jaish al-Ahrar in a recent operation;³⁴ such coordination illustrates that, despite its pretense of ideological purity, Katibat al-Ghuraba al-Turkestan will nonetheless work with groups that differ from it ideologically.

THE ISLAMIC STATE

The Islamic State has not exerted meaningful control over territory in Idlib province since 2013, given that its forces withdrew eastward and concentrated in Raqqa after a round of infighting with Syrian rebels that began in early 2014. Nevertheless, arrests and operations by HTS security apparatus against Islamic State cells in and around Idlib are common. Reports of these crackdowns, which are featured on the HTS-linked Ebaa News outlet,

accuse the Islamic State cells of manufacturing improvised explosive devices and of placing them on roads to target vehicles belonging to the mujahedin.³⁵ The Islamic State's own media agency, however, has been silent on any recent activities by the group's cells in and around Idlib and on the group's general presence in the northwest. The most likely reason for this silence is operational security.

The need for operational security in Idlib is hardly surprising. The Barisha area in the region's northern countryside was a refuge for Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was killed in a U.S. raid in late October 2019. Some misconceptions have emerged about the raid and factional control in the area. First, Barisha is not controlled by Huras al-Din, but rather by HTS, as illustrated by the affiliation of Barisha's local council with the Salvation Government.³⁶ Second, there is no evidence that Baghdadi received protection from Huras al-Din or that he was in the area to negotiate some kind of understanding with the group. On the contrary, the Islamic State and Huras al-Din are enemies, with the former having declared *takfir* (i.e., a charge of being a "disbeliever") on the latter.³⁷

It is possible that the Islamic State has sympathizers or infiltrators in Huras al-Din, as demonstrated by an internal Huras al-Din memo from February 2019; the memo warned that contact or affiliation with the Islamic State would result in automatic expulsion from Huras al-Din.³⁸ For Huras al-Din, any organizational cooperation with the Islamic State would amount to no less than group suicide, providing a pretext for HTS to dismantle the al-Qaeda-loyalist outfit.

Theories behind Baghdadi's choice to take refuge in the Barisha area will inevitably be speculative in nature. Indeed, Baghdadi's presence in Idlib surprised analysts and observers, many of whom had thought he was in hiding in areas along the porous Syria-Iraq border. One likely reason for Baghdadi's choice of Idlib, and of the Barisha area in particular, is the region's airspace, which has generally been off-limits to the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition. Barisha is also a relatively quiet and unremarkable area where people tend to keep to themselves. Testimony gathered in October and November 2019 reveals no indication of awareness among locals of Baghdadi's presence in the area in the days, weeks, or months leading up to the Barisha raid. Had locals known of his presence, they would almost certainly have informed HTS, whose own leaders

expressed disappointment that they themselves were not the ones who found and killed Baghdadi.

Another possible explanation for Baghdadi's presence in the area is that he was trying to cross the border into Turkey either alone or with his family. Indeed, fleeing to the northwest of Syria or Turkey as the Islamic State's territorial empire collapsed had been a preferred means of escape for many Islamic State members and leaders, including those from rival ideologies inside the group who eventually came to oppose the Islamic State's leadership and ultimately defected. Thus, al-Nadhir al-Uryan (one of the few remaining active Telegram channels representing the more extreme trend that emerged within the Islamic State) wrote in November 2019 in disparaging reference to the "dissidents" who eventually turned against Baghdadi: "And what will make you realize what Idlib is? It includes all the worst scum of the Jahmites of [the Islamic State] who fled from al-Baghuz (students of its knowledge and its Shari'i officials, as they call themselves)."³⁹ But on the other side, Idlib and its environs have also been a refuge for extremists. In fact, al-Nadhir al-Uryan mentioned in July 2019 that the owner of the Wa Harid al-Mouminin channel ended up "in the prisons of Jabhat al-Nusra" and that the owners of similar "extreme" channels had been arrested.⁴⁰

THE SYRIAN SALVATION GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL COUNCILS

As noted earlier, HTS was able to compel its nonjihadist rivals to accept, in theory, the authority of the Syrian Salvation Government over the whole of Idlib and its environs, pointing to the importance that HTS attaches to the Salvation Government as part of its project in the northwest.

The Salvation Government is divided into multiple ministries (see box 1). These institutions can be viewed as more "civilian" outgrowths of previous institutions that existed under HTS and its predecessors, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. Thus, the Dawa and Awqaf Ministry developed from the Dawa and Guidance Office that existed under Jabhat al-Nusra, the Justice Ministry and its courts evolved from the *dar al-qada* ("judiciary abode" or, simply, "court") set up by Jabhat al-Nusra in 2014, and the Ministry of Local

Box 1. Ministries of the Syrian Salvation Government

- Ministry of Interior
- Ministry of Justice
- Ministry of Dawa and Awqaf
- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Local Administration and Services
- Ministry of Economy and Resources
- Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Matters
- Ministry of Higher Education
- Ministry of Agriculture

Source: Syrian Salvation Government website, https://syriansg.org/?page_id=28.

Administration and Services grew out of the Civil Administration for Services, previously called the General Administration for Services under Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴¹

The most important local councils in Idlib and its environs, including the Idlib city council, the city council of Jisr al-Shughour, and councils in important border localities such as Salqin and Harem, are openly affiliated with the Salvation Government.⁴² Members of the local councils that answer to the Salvation Government vary in their willingness to give statements to journalists. The head of the city council in Jisr al-Shughour made himself readily available for interviews. In contrast, requests for interviews were made with members of local councils from the villages of Keftin and Qalb Lawzah in the Jabal al-Summaq region of the northern Idlib countryside. The original inhabitants of Keftin and Qalb Lawzah were Druze and have been forced to convert to Islam.⁴³ The council members insisted on obtaining authorization from the Salvation Government and HTS authorities, and in both cases, the possibility of an interview was rejected.

Although no explicit reason was given for rejecting the interview requests, HTS clearly regards media coverage of the area as particularly sensitive in light of the original inhabitants' minority origins, in addition to the fact that foreigners have settled in the homes of

many departed original inhabitants.⁴⁴ A similar sensitivity seems to exist regarding the originally Shia villages of al-Fua and Kafarya, which were evacuated entirely of their original inhabitants in summer 2018 and are currently under the control of HTS, which has resettled the villages primarily with displaced (Sunni) Syrians. The local councils of both villages now answer to the Salvation Government. Though the head of the local council in al-Fua surprisingly agreed to an interview in summer 2019, the local council head in Kafarya rejected the idea, citing the sensitivity of the village's status.⁴⁵ Conversely, the current iteration of the local council in Kafarya agreed to an interview in January 2020, and spoke about how the village was initially divided into "sectors" consisting of various insurgent factions that settled the village with their own personnel.⁴⁶ Supposedly, though, these factions largely left, leaving in place the Salvation Government-affiliated local council and leaving the village largely resettled with displaced persons.⁴⁷

In theory, all local councils in Idlib and its environs answer to the Salvation Government per the agreement between HTS and the nonjihadist factions that followed a round of infighting in January 2019. Until recently, some councils have claimed an exception, but any claims of "independence" must be treated with caution. One example is the case of Taftanaz, whose head of the local council claimed in a September 2019 interview that the council was "independent." In a subsequent conversation that took place in January 2020, though, the council head said that there are "work relations" with the Salvation Government, including discussion of "organizational plans and technical studies" from its Technical Services Directorate. Another example is the town of Binnish, which has been outside Syrian government control since 2012. In an interview at the end of August 2019, the local council's media representative claimed the council was independent, describing the town's "revolutionary institutions" as "far removed from the Salvation Government."⁴⁸ This independence was attributed to the town's rejection of HTS, as Binnish was a stronghold of the Free Syrian Army and Ahrar al-Sham.

It is notable that a new local council was formed in early November 2019, with a new social media page clearly displaying the council's affiliation with the Salvation Government.⁴⁹ In a January 2020 conversation, a former media activist from Binnish further clarified the matter. According to him, a general distrust had

developed among the people of Binnish and the various factions—and, by extension, those civil institutions that are, in reality, controlled by whichever faction controls the land. The previous local council was ostensibly formed on the basis of being independent and representing the people of Binnish, but in truth HTS was directing the council "in a hidden sense." Multiple complaints about the quality of services were lodged against the previous local council, which dissolved at the end of October 2019.⁵⁰ This was followed by the establishment of a new council, which now openly declares its affiliation with the Salvation Government. In the view of the former media activist, though, the current council is better than the previous one because it provides better services—not because it is openly affiliated with the Salvation Government.

One question that naturally arises is what the Salvation Government means for local councils' daily operations. The ministries of the Salvation Government issue some general regulations that are to be circulated to the local councils, such as those that call for appropriate licensing for new well construction or ending the practice of watering crops with contaminated sewage water.⁵¹ Further evidence also exists of local council and Salvation Government collaboration on matters such as the monitoring of rent prices.⁵² Therefore, it cannot be argued that the Salvation Government is entirely *laissez-faire* in its approach to local councils.

Whether the Salvation Government has led to any meaningful improvement in the day-to-day functioning of local councils remains uncertain. Although the Salvation Government has announced plans for bigger projects, including housing units for displaced people, it does not seem to have the financial means to support projects initiated by local councils.⁵³ Thus, councils that are now formally affiliated with the Salvation Government still depend heavily on NGOs.⁵⁴

The Salvation Government is, in part, intended to resolve the dilemma that faces HTS in Syria's northwest. In comparison with Syria's east, where Jabhat al-Nusra had a strong presence until 2014, the northwest lacks natural resources and thus depends on outside aid. The region relies specifically on NGOs that enter through Turkey to sustain the population, which has substantially grown on account of internal displacement. HTS has long been aware of its reliance on outside aid, having called for NGOs to continue operating after its major gains in July 2017.⁵⁵ If HTS were to administer everything

in its own name as the Islamic State did in its areas of control, then Syria's northwest region would face much greater isolation on account of the group's designation as an international terrorist organization.

Nonetheless, some locals do not give credence to this apparent distancing. Discontent exists in certain areas whose local councils are affiliated with the Salvation Government, on the grounds that the local councils are seen as mere tools of HTS. An example of this can be found in the locality of Hazano in the northern Idlib countryside.⁵⁶ The local council's media representative, who was interviewed by this author in August 2019, subsequently left the council, affirming that "the whole locality is hostile to the council" because "it has been imposed for personal goals for the [HTS] and they have seized all the resources, and they have not had recourse to any of the locality's notables." Indeed, some locals in Hazano launched a social media campaign, "Down with the New Hazano Council," which claims that the council has been chosen illegitimately by HTS and does not represent the locality's groups, that its members are neither learned nor educated, and that the council has been imposed for personal goals.

A much tenser situation arose in the northern Idlib town of Kafr Takharim in November 2019 when local protestors refused to pay the *zakat* tax on their olive crops to *zakat* committees affiliated with the Salvation Government. The protestors saw such payment as theft of their wealth. They proceeded to expel personnel and members of HTS from the town in yet another display of locals perceiving the Salvation Government and HTS as a single entity.⁵⁷ In response, HTS worked to come to an agreement with the so-called Shura Council of Kafr Takharim—a body of senior locals—that stipulated, among other things, that checkpoints be returned to HTS control, and the police station and all government institutions to the Salvation Government.⁵⁸ It appears, however, that the agreement was not implemented: HTS proceeded to mobilize its forces and was reported to have besieged the town in preparation for an assault while blocking hundreds of demonstrators from Idlib city and other localities from entering Kafr Takharim in solidarity with the protestors.⁵⁹ In a January 2020 conversation, a former member of the local council in Kafr Takharim indicated that the situation eventually seemed to be defused in favor of HTS and the Salvation Government, with HTS's display of force effectively deterring continued opposition.⁶⁰

This particular episode shows how, despite local protests against its dominance in the northwest, HTS uses force to exert influence over the people of Idlib and its environs. The group's hegemony has crystallized over the years through local tolerance; support on the battlefield from other factions (particularly Ahrar al-Sham); outright assaults on rival factions; and, likely, assassinations of civilians.⁶¹

Another illustrative example is the town of Kafr Nabl, which became renowned in wider media over the years for its display of colorful and creative banners during protests. The town became a center of nonviolent civic activism and saw demonstrations against HTS. In November 2018, unidentified gunmen, likely members of HTS, assassinated Raed Fares, an activist from Kafr Nabl who had participated in the town's demonstrations from the outset and in 2013 founded the independent talk radio station Radio Fresh FM. Fares's colleague Hamoud Junaid was also killed by the gunmen. Eventually, Ahmad Jalal, who had been a designer of Kafr Nabl's protest banners, fled Syria.⁶² In 2019, repeated, indiscriminate bombings by the Syrian regime and Russia left Kafr Nabl virtually devoid of its original inhabitants, while some of the few civilians who remained were reportedly forced by HTS from their homes, which were converted into military bases.⁶³

In sum, the Salvation Government project should be viewed largely as a failure in terms of improving actual governance in Idlib and its environs. Its shortcomings and pariah status by virtue of its association with HTS are readily apparent, and if anything, it has served only to enrich and empower HTS.⁶⁴

THE SYRIAN REGIME AND ITS ALLIES

The Syrian regime undoubtedly intends to retake Idlib and its environs in their entirety. Such intentions not only are in keeping with the oft-stated goal of reasserting the sovereignty of the Syrian state over the entirety of Syrian territory, but also could have economic benefits for the Syrian regime. Such benefits could include regaining control of the important M5 highway that runs from Damascus to Aleppo, passing through insurgent-held areas of Idlib. Indeed, Idlib is seen as the main military priority at the present time. As Syrian president Bashar al-Assad said during an October 2019 visit to the Idlib

area, “The battle of Idlib is the basis for resolving chaos and terrorism in all other areas of Syria.”⁶⁵ Unlike other previously rebel-held areas of Syria and the areas of the northeast controlled by the Kurdish-led SDF, where the Syrian regime has struck agreements in bids to reassert its control, the northwest is seen by the regime as a bastion of jihadists and other irreconcilables who can be overcome only by sheer military force. After all, for years Idlib has been the area to which those who rejected reconciliation agreements in other parts of Syria have been sent in green buses.⁶⁶ The Syrian regime never intended to leave the Idlib area alone because of its status as a center for displacements; rather, the regime would deal with Idlib last—after retaking whatever other rebel-held areas it could.

The most important campaign launched by the Syrian regime in the past year began in May 2019 and culminated with the capture of Khan Sheikhoun and northern Hama towns such as Morek, which had served as an effective “border crossing” between government-held areas and insurgent-held areas in the northwest. The campaign was backed by intense Russian aerial bombardment and saw an important ground role played by Russian-backed formations such as Gen. Suhail al-Hassan’s “Tiger Forces,” which are currently branded as the 25th Division Special Assignments, and Liwa al-Quds.⁶⁷ Part of the rationale behind Russia’s support for the campaign was to put pressure on Turkey to fulfill its end of the bargain in the Sochi agreement struck in 2018. The agreement stipulated that the Idlib de-escalation zone be preserved through the fortification of Turkish observation points, but also called for the creation of a demilitarized buffer zone fifteen to twenty kilometers deep, from which “all radical terrorist groups” were to be removed by October 15, 2018.⁶⁸ This buffer zone was never in fact created. As for the course of the campaign, the most plausible explanation for the insurgent losses is that, ultimately, the Syrian regime has more intense firepower at its disposal with open-ended support from its allies, which will eventually lead to the regime’s gaining the upper hand in a war of attrition.

It has been claimed that the Iranians have somehow been excluded from the campaigns in Syria’s northwest region or that they have little or no interest in the region’s future, but these claims are not accurate. In fact, Iran has worked with the Syrian military to organize Syrian fighters in the region within the framework of the Local Defense Forces (LDF). Throughout Syria, the LDF has

been organized into regional or provincial sectors that are supervised by officers of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), such as the Idlib sector under a figure named al-Hajj Asghar and the coastal sector under al-Hajj Ayoub.⁶⁹ Though many LDF groups fight in places other than their designated provincial or regional sectors, the very existence of these sector designations reveals Iran’s interest in Syria’s northwest region—despite the lack of an obvious tangible benefit (e.g., the prospect of a land crossing such as that along the Iraq-Syria border). Iran is ultimately an ally of the Syrian regime and supports restoration of the regime’s control over the Idlib area and all Syrian territory. There is also the sectarian angle of the exiled Syrian Shia communities of al-Fua and Kafarya: because Iran portrays itself as the champion of Shia communities, it surely makes sense for Iran to support the eventual return of those communities to their original homes.

As far as operations go, evidence shows that some LDF groups functioned in a more backline role in Hama during the summer campaign.⁷⁰ More recently, though, some LDF formations such as the 313 Force, Fawj al-Nabi al-Akram, and Fawj Qamr Bani Hashim played a more active role in clashes in late 2019 on the mountainous Latakia front, losing a number of fighters in the process.⁷¹ A member of Fawj al-Nabi al-Akram, who had been fighting on the Latakia front and was then transferred to the Hama countryside, confirmed in a January 2020 conversation that Lebanese Hezbollah had participated in the Latakia fighting. That same source also confirmed the role on that front of al-Hajj Asghar, who died fighting in western Aleppo in early February 2020.⁷² Even more recently, LDF formations including the more well-known Liwa al-Baqir have mobilized in the western Aleppo countryside front as part of the greater campaign to eat away at the remaining insurgent-held areas. An LDF fighter on this front said that this is part of a “broad campaign, and the Republican Guard, Fourth Division, and Local Defense are [participating] in it.”⁷³

Finally, some evidence suggests that the Afghan Shia Hazara Liwa Fatemiyoun unit of the IRGC has been involved in the northwest campaign, as shown in leaked radio communications that were intercepted.⁷⁴ This point was partly corroborated by a Fatemiyoun media official, who stated in September 2019 that the group was operating in “Abu Kamal, Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, et cetera. In all of the areas, there is division [of the forces].”⁷⁵

OUTLOOK FOR THE REGION

In late 2019, the Syrian regime, with Russian support, intensely bombarded the rebel-held town of Maarat al-Numan, triggering a new wave of internal displacement in Syria's northwest.⁷⁶ The short-term objective of that round of fighting was to seize control of the town as part of the larger goal of reopening the M5 highway. In late January 2020, Maarat al-Numan was recaptured.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, the availability of services and the humanitarian situation in general in and around Idlib have declined significantly owing to the recent fall of the Syrian pound against the U.S. dollar. With higher prices on basics such as mazut (a heavy fuel), hours of electricity from private generators have been reduced and prices for delivery of water via tankers have increased.

While the entirety of the northwest region is unlikely to return to Syrian regime control in the near or medium term, this outcome would seem to match the long-term trend.⁷⁸ This will likely be the endgame unless Turkey takes unilateral steps to intervene more directly and extensively through, for example, larger troop deployments, such as can be seen in northern Aleppo countryside areas stretching from Afrin to Jarabulus, and a willingness to use airstrikes against advancing Syrian regime forces and their allies in the area. In the meantime, even if ceasefires are agreed to and ground fighting is halted temporarily, the Syrian regime and Russia can make life increasingly demoralizing for the people remaining in insurgent-held areas through indiscriminate bombing raids and targeting of civilian infrastructure such as hospitals.⁷⁹ Despite speculation about tradeoffs between Turkey and Russia for various regions of Syria (e.g., Turkey's allowance of Idlib's recapture in exchange for Russia's tolerance of the Turkish campaign against the SDF east of the Euphrates River), no evidence exists to support such claims. In the long run, both countries have an interest in effectively dismantling the SDF: Turkey because it sees the SDF as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party, and Russia because it views the SDF as

a U.S.-backed "separatist" project. In this regard, Russia has no concessions to make to Turkey.

In fact, Turkey's current hold in the northwest is rather weak. Any indirect Turkish interventions in the region, such as supplying more weaponry and vehicles to the insurgent groups, will not be sufficient to reverse the long-term trend. Even so, Turkey appears unwilling to intervene more extensively. This is because most of the original observation outposts were set up with the consent and cooperation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which has no wish to see an enlarged Turkish presence that interferes with the group's hegemony over the insurgent-held northwest and the Salvation Government's administration. After all, one of the conditions under which HTS agreed to Turkey's deployment of outposts was the principle of noninterference in administration of the northwest. Another condition was that HTS should maintain military superiority over the Turkish deployments.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the Turkish military's monitoring points by themselves have not proved an effective deterrent against military campaigns by the regime and its allies, given that they can work around these points to avoid inflicting casualties on Turkish forces. This became apparent in the summer campaign that saw the retaking of parts of the northern Hama countryside and south Idlib, as well as more recent advances that took parts of the southeastern Idlib countryside.⁸¹

No viable alternatives exist for challenging HTS's hegemony over Idlib and its environs beyond a foreign actor confronting the group directly. Anything short of this measure effectively means reaching a de facto understanding with HTS.⁸² Though local protests against the group and the Salvation Government continue, demonstrators are not equipped to coordinate a coherent movement that can drive HTS from various areas and significantly reduce its power.⁸³ The group maintains a monopoly on the use of force, which is what matters.

In short, Turkey's desire to avoid a confrontation with HTS is inhibiting a more extensive intervention that could prevent the larger trend in Syria from playing out in and around Idlib: takeover by the regime in Damascus.

Appendix: Main Armed Factions Involved in Idlib and Its Environs as of 2019–20

| JIHADIST INSURGENTS | NATIONALIST INSURGENTS* | SYRIAN REGIME AND ALLIES |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (known as Jabhat al-Nusra until July 2016, then Jabhat Fatah al-Sham from July 2016 to January 2017) ■ Turkestan Islamic Party (key ally of HTS) ■ Huras al-Din (al-Qaeda loyalist) ■ Jamaat Ansar al-Islam (ally of Huras al-Din: Wa Harid al-Mouminin Operations Room) ■ Jabhat Ansar al-Din (ally of Huras al-Din: Wa Harid al-Mouminin Operations Room) ■ Ansar al-Tawhid (ally of Huras al-Din) ■ Jamaat Ansar al-Haq (breakaway from Huras al-Din) ■ Jaish Khorasan (possible breakaway from Huras al-Din) ■ Katibat Imam al-Bukhari (Uzbek) ■ Junud al-Sham (faction led by Muslim Shishani) ■ Katibat Jabal al-Islam (Syrian Turkmen: Latakia front) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ahrar al-Sham (Salafi/Islamist) ■ Jaish al-Ahrar (Salafi/Islamist; broke off from HTS) ■ Suqur al-Sham (Salafi/Islamist) ■ Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki (Islamist; broke off in mid-2017 from HTS, and HTS destroyed it in early 2019) ■ Failaq al-Sham (Islamist) ■ Jaish al-Naser ■ 1st Coastal Division ■ 2nd Coastal Division ■ The Second Army ■ Jaish al-Izza (independent) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “Tiger Forces” (25th Division Special Assignments) ■ Syrian Army 1st Division ■ Syrian Army 4th Division and al-Bustan Association forces ■ Syrian Army 7th Division ■ Republican Guard (Division 30) ■ National Defense Forces (e.g., contingents of northern Hama countryside) ■ V Corps (Russian-backed) ■ Liwa al-Quds (Russian-backed; military intelligence-affiliated) ■ Saraya al-Areen (contingent affiliated with military intelligence’s 223 branch in Latakia) ■ Affiliates of the Local Defense Forces (tied to Iran’s IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah) ■ Lebanese Hezbollah ■ Liwa Fatemiyoun |

* Mostly gathered under the banner of the National Front for Liberation, with Jaish al-Izza the main exception.

NOTES

- Jabhat al-Nusra and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front had already clashed in July 2014 when the former waged a campaign against “sowers of corruption,” seizing SRF bases in northern Idlib along the border with Turkey. See “Jabhat al-Nusra Attacks the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and Seizes Towns in Idlib Countryside” (in Arabic), *Orient News*, July 21, 2014, <http://bit.ly/2NNLwTH>.
- “Announcement of the Formation of ‘Jaish al-Fatah’ to Liberate Idlib City” (in Arabic), *SyriaNoor*, March 24, 2015, <https://syrianoor.net/article/5247>; and Jaish al-Fatah, “Message to Our People in Idlib” (in Arabic), March 24, 2015, <https://justpaste.it/jayshalfatahopeningstatement>.
- “Jaish al-Fatah Announces Its Seizure of Idlib City Entirely” (in Arabic), *Al Araby TV*, March 28, 2015, available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYbyYQYWFUw>; “Jaish al-Fatah Enters Jisr al-Shughour,” *al-Modon*, April 25, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2TLEt9P>; “Jaish al-Fatah Liberates Ariha City Entirely,” *al-Aan TV*, May 29, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzEshmbICfk>; and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Exile from Kafariya: Interview,” *aymennjawad.org*, September 10, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/09/exile-from-kafariya-interview>.
- Charles Lister, “Why Assad Is Losing,” *Brookings Institution*, May 5, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/why-assad-is-losing/>. At the time, “vetted” insurgent factions received support from a Turkey-based operations room called the *Mushterek Operasyon Merkezi* (MOM; Joint Operations Center). The principal foreign actors involved in the operations room were the United States (specifically, the Central Intelligence Agency), Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Both Turkey and Qatar in particular, however, also provided support to factions such as *Ahrar al-Sham* that were outside the MOM framework. When the CIA program of support for vetted factions ended in 2017, the MOM was closed, although Turkey remains a key supporter of various nationalist factions under the Syrian National Army framework. For more information on the MOM, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The History of Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki: Interview,” January 8, 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/01/the-history-of-harakat-nour-al-din-al-zinki>.
- The imbalance of forces arose in significant part because the vetted factions, despite receiving support from the same operations room, had proved incapable of uniting on the ground and were much less organized than their jihadist counterparts. The main nationalist actor that had shown some organizational coherence and strength—the SRF—had already by this point been destroyed.
- Hayat al-Fatah al-Ilamiya, “Hayat al-Fatah al-Ilamiya: Video Report about the Administration of Idlib City in the Shadow of the Control of Jaish al-Fatah,” September 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDRiEyF2VKo&t=1s>; and Hayat al-Fatah al-Ilamiya, “Visual Report about the Judicial Council Formed in Idlib City,” October 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15uTUn432e0&t=1s>.
- Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Jund al-Aqsa Withdraws from Jaysh al-Fatah,” *Jihad-Intel*, October 24, 2015, <https://jihadintel.meforum.org/189/jund-al-aqsa-withdraws-from-jaysh-al-fatah>.
- For example, on the judicial level, Jabhat al-Nusra had the *Dar al-Qada* courts while *Ahrar al-Sham* backed the Islamic Judicial Commission (*al-Hayat al-Islamiya lil-Qada*).
- “New Video Message from Jabhat Fatah al-Sham’s Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani: Announcing Its Formation,” *Jihadology*, July 28, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2NQilWp>.
- This arrangement was noted by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s Abu Abdullah al-Shami (Abdul-Rahim Atoun), and Zawahiri implicitly noted it when he rejected the idea that Jabhat al-Nusra’s allegiance pledge to al-Qaeda should be kept secret. See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (II),” *Jihad-Intel*, December 10, 2017, <https://jihadintel.meforum.org/211/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary>.
- “Statement of the Formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham” (in Arabic), January 28, 2017, <https://justpaste.it/htsformationstatementjan2017>.
- Sam Heller, “The Strategic Logic of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 11 (2017), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/663>.
- “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Seizes Idlib City” (in Arabic), *Al Jazeera*, July 23, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2TM5mCo>; “Tahrir al-Sham’s Seizure of the Bab al-Hawa Crossing Pushes Turkey to Limit Crossing Movement and Restrict It to Humanitarian Aid” (in Arabic), *Shaam Network*, August 10, 2017, <http://bit.ly/36eNkLN>; and “Agreement Between Tahrir al-Sham and the National Front Ends the Fighting: All the Liberated Area Becomes Affiliated to the Salvation Government!” (in Arabic), *Shaam Network*, January 10, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2RilBhe>.
- It should be emphasized that reference to a particular faction’s control of a given area in the northwest does not necessarily imply that faction’s sole occupation of the area. Other groups might maintain bases, or members of other groups might reside in houses, in areas under the authority of a certain faction.
- Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “A New Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham Recruitment Campaign,” September 5, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/09/a-new-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-recruitment-campaign>; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi,

- “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s ‘North Brigade,’” September 16, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/09/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-north-brigade>; and author interview with representative of the al-Zubair squadron affiliated with the West Brigade, November 10, 2019.
16. Al-Tamimi, “A New Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham Recruitment Campaign”; and recruiting campaign for the Red Bands (in Arabic), September 6, 2019, accessed at <https://justpaste.it/asaibhamra6sep2019>. WhatsApp recruitment varies by location, but a particularly notable recruitment category targets “Atmeh and the Camps”—that is, camps for displaced people along the border with Turkey. Considering the unemployment and harsh living conditions for those living in the camps, it is unsurprising that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham would target them for recruitment. The Telegram campaign referenced targeted those already in the ranks of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and enabled potential recruits to establish contact through the Telegram app.
 17. Author interview with member of the Red Bands, January 2020.
 18. Post by Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali, September 17, 2019, <https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/1173969298144014337>.
 19. “Breaking: “‘Al-Fatah al-Mubin’ Operations Room Launches the Battle ‘Wa la Tahannu’ against the Positions of the Regime in the North” (in Arabic), Jesr Press, November 30, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2RilCoC>; The National Front for Liberation was officially formed on August 1, 2018. See “Military Factions Announce Their Merger in the ‘National Front for Liberation’” (in Arabic), Orient News, August 1, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2G8YDux>. It was then declared to be merged into the SNA in October 2019. See “The National Front for Liberation Merges with the ‘National Army’” (in Arabic), al-Modon, October 4, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2RgXVII>. Although the National Front for Liberation is officially part of the SNA, it continues to function as though it were independent of the SNA—that is, Turkey does not effectively make decisions for it. The National Front for Liberation is also not a real merger of the factions operating within it. Thus, constituent factions of the National Front for Liberation such as Failaq al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham retain their identities. Jaish al-Izza has long operated in the southern Idlib and northern Hama countryside and retained its independence. It was the main force supplying manpower on the frontlines alongside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham during the summer campaign of 2019. See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Muhajir War Correspondent: Interview,” July 23, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/07/the-muhajir-war-correspondent-interview>.
 20. “‘Tahrir al-Sham’ Forms the ‘Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya’ in Northern Syria” (in Arabic), Enab Baladi, May 12, 2019, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/300339>; and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Popular Resistance Brigades: Interview,” September 18, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/09/the-popular-resistance-brigades-interview>.
 21. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Go Forth: Lightly and Heavily Armed: New Recruitment Campaign in Idlib and Its Environs,” January 3, 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/01/go-forth-lightly-and-heavily-armed-new>.
 22. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Muhajireen in Syria: Interview with Sheikh Abu Anas al-Masri,” October 1, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/10/muhajireen-in-syria-interview-with-sheikh-abu>.
 23. Author interview with member of Huras al-Din, November 2019; and Aaron Zelin, “Huras al-Din: The Overlooked al-Qaeda Group in Syria,” PolicyWatch 3188, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 24, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/huras-al-din-the-overlooked-al-qaeda-group-in-syria>.
 24. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (XIII),” February 10, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/02/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-12>.
 25. “Call to Conciliation and Resolving the Dispute” (in Arabic), Huras al-Din, December 13, 2019, <https://justpaste.it/hurras13dec2019>.
 26. See statement issued by the Jahizuna campaign (in Arabic), recirculated most recently in October 2019, <https://justpaste.it/jahizuna2019>.
 27. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “A Complete History of Jamaat Ansar al-Islam,” December 15, 2015, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/12/a-complete-history-of-jamaat-ansar-al-islam>; “‘Ansar al-Din’ Defects from ‘Tahrir al-Sham’: Three Formations Have Remained” (in Arabic), Enab Baladi, February 9, 2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/205568>; and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Jabhat Ansar al-Din: Interview,” October 20, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/10/jabhat-ansar-al-din-interview>.
 28. Author interview with member of Huras al-Din, July 2019.
 29. For more on this matter, see Charles Lister, “The Syria Effect: al-Qaeda Fractures,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.hudson.org/research/15533-the-syria-effect-al-qaeda-fractures>; and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Jama’at Ansar al-Haq’s Separation from Hurras al-Din: Translation and Analysis,” October 30, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/10/jamaat-ansar-al-haq-separation-from-hurras-al-din>.
 30. “Syria: The Turkestan Islamic Party Engages in Operations of Plunder and Theft of Public Property in Hama Countryside” (in Arabic), Syrians for Truth and Justice, November 4, 2019, <http://bit.ly/3b1Ska9>.
 31. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (IX),” February 6, 2019,

- <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/02/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-9>.
32. Author interview with resident of Qalb Lawzah, 2019.
 33. Author interview with foreign fighter claiming affiliation with Turkestan Islamic Party, July 2019.
 34. Post by Katibat al-Ghuraba al-Turkestan, Telegram November 24, 2019.
 35. See, e.g., "The Khawarij Cells Receive a Painful Blow at the Hands of the Security Apparatus in Tahrir al-Sham" (in Arabic), Ebaa News, July 1, 2019, <https://ebaa.news/news/special/2019/07/46145/>.
 36. "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: What We know About U.S. Raid in Syria," BBC, October 31, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50200703>; also see statement (in Arabic) from Barisha local council bearing the Salvation Government's mark dated November 21, 2019, <https://justpaste.it/barishasalvationgovt>.
 37. "Until You Believe in God Alone," Islamic State's *al-Naba* newsletter, issue 129, April 26, 2018, https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2018/04/the-islamic-state-al-nabacc84_-newsletter-129.pdf.
 38. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The *New York Times* and Payments to Hurras al-Din: Clarification," October 31, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/10/the-new-york-times-and-alleged-payments-to-hurras>.
 39. Post by al-Nadhir al-Uryan, Telegram, November 17, 2019. The term Jahmites refers to followers of Jahm bin Safwan, an eighth-century Muslim theologian. In this context, al-Nadhir al-Uryan uses the term to deride the more "moderate" trend in the Islamic State that is seen as having corrupted the group's doctrine.
 40. Conversation, July 14, 2019. The Wa Harid al-Mouminin channel is not to be confused with the Wa Harid al-Mouminin Operations Room.
 41. See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of Jabhat al-Nusra/Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham Service Documents," August 10, 2015, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/08/archive-of-jabhat-al-nusra-service-documents>.
 42. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Jisr al-Shughur Town Council," December 22, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/12/the-jisr-al-shughur-town-council>.
 43. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Additional Notes on the Druze of Jabal al-Summaq," October 6, 2015, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/10/additional-notes-on-the-druze-of-jabal-al-summaq>.
 44. This experience contrasts with the case of Kukaniyeh, an originally Sunni Arab village in the northern Idlib countryside. The head of the local council there referred the author to a Salvation Government media official to obtain necessary approval to conduct an interview. The author informed the official of the intention to conduct an interview and provided a copy of the interview questions. Permission was readily granted for the interview on the condition that the author show the media official a copy of the interview before its publication. For the interview itself, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Local Council in Kukanaya: Interview," January 3, 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/01/the-local-council-in-kukanaya-interview>.
 45. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Resettlement of al-Fu'a: Interview," July 29, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/07/the-resettlement-of-al-fua-interview>; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Local Council of al-Fu'a: Interview," August 2, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/08/the-local-council-of-al-fua-interview>; and author conversation with then head of the Kafariya local council, July 2019.
 46. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Local Council of Kafariya: Interview," January 21, 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/01/the-local-council-of-kafariya-interview>.
 47. *Ibid.*
 48. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Local Council in Binnish: Interview," September 8, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/09/the-local-council-in-binnish-interview>. It should be noted that independent local councils in Idlib would not have received Turkish state backing. This is in contrast with the local councils in the Turkish-occupied "Euphrates Shield" and "Olive Branch" zones in the northern Aleppo countryside, which have seen direct Turkish investments in some of their projects. Instead, independent local councils—like many of their Salvation Government counterparts—would have had to rely on the support of NGOs. This is partly because Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham allowed Turkey to set up military points on the condition of its not interfering with the administration of the northwest. See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Relationship with Turkey: Primary Texts," June 3, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/06/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-relationship-with-turkey>.
 49. Interview conducted by Binnish local council media office with head of Binnish local council (in Arabic), December 13, 2019, <https://justpaste.it/binnishlocalcouncilinterview>; and post by Binnish local council (in Arabic), December 1, 2019, <https://justpaste.it/binnishlocalcouncil1>.
 50. "Resignation of the Local Council for the Town of Binnish in Idlib" (in Arabic), SMART News, October 29, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2Rh36Sf>.
 51. Note (in Arabic) dated March 24, 2019, from the Salvation Government's Ministry of Economy and Resources to the local administration ministry ordering for a circular to be distributed to local councils informing people that they must obtain appropriate licensing to dig water wells, available at <https://justpaste.it/wellregulationsalvgov>; and note (in Arabic) dated April 29, 2019, from the Salvation Government's Ministry of Local Administration and Services ordering for a circular to be distributed to local councils and other administrative units to suppress the use

- of contaminated sewage water for irrigation in cooperation with police stations of the Interior Ministry, available at <https://justpaste.it/agriculturecropssalgov>.
52. Letter (in Arabic) dated August 22, 2019, from the Azmarin council to the “Borders Branch” (which covers the areas of northern Idlib that border Turkey) of the Salvation Government’s Ministry of Local Administration and Services, informing the branch in response to its letter that “the requested committee” had been formed to track rent contracts, available at <https://justpaste.it/azmarinlettercouncil>.
 53. “The Ministry of Local Administration and Services Adopts the Plans of [the General Site—Architectural Projection] in the Project of Housing the Displaced (Housing 1),” Salvation Government, September 26, 2019, <https://syriansg.org/?p=3665>.
 54. These NGOs are both local and international: examples of the former include Shafak and Violet, both of which were established during the civil war. Some international NGOs that still operate in areas under the administration of Salvation Government–affiliated local councils include GOAL (an Irish aid organization) and Mercy-USA.
 55. “Commenting on the Statement Issued by Syrian Organizations and Committees Concerning the Recent Developments” (in Arabic), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, July 30, 2017 [article has since been removed from the JustPaste.it platform].
 56. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Local Council in Hazano: Interview,” August 23, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/08/the-local-council-in-hazano-interview>.
 57. “Kafr Takharim Rises Up Against ‘Tahrir al-Sham’: No Zakat by Force” (in Arabic) al-Modon, November 6, 2019, <http://bit.ly/38rhhK6>.
 58. A copy (in Arabic) of the agreement dated November 6, 2019, is available at <https://justpaste.it/kafrtakharim6nov2019>.
 59. “Tahrir al-Sham Mobilizes to Assault Kafr Takharim, Despite the Agreement with the Notables” (in Arabic) al-Modon, November 9, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2tEt4Gd>.
 60. In January 2020, Taqi al-Din Omar, a Hayat Tahrir al-Sham media official, provided the following account of the incident in Kafr Takharim: a “group of sowers of corruption” came out and attacked public property and tried to “split the rank” between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Failaq al-Sham (which is present in the area). Initially, in light of these events, the “notables” of Kafr Takharim met with delegations from both factions and came to an agreement in which Failaq al-Sham promised to “pursue the sowers of corruption and hold them to account” within the deadline of the agreement. The delegation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was then subject to an assassination attempt by the “sowers of corruption.” A further deal was struck between the “Shura Council of Kafr Takharim” and a delegation for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham that agreed, among other things, to the handover of the wanted individuals through the “council of seniors of the towns.” The “sowers of corruption” rejected this agreement and then attacked members of the council and their cars. The only way forward was “intervention to resolve this problem and it was confined to a small number of the sons of the town who tried to sow *fitna* and provocation after all the prior agreements, and during the attempt to take them to trial four of them were killed.”
 61. Examples of rival factions include Division 13 in Maarat al-Numan in 2016–17 and, more recently, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, whose defeat at the hands of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham at the beginning of 2019 was the prelude to the agreement by the National Front for Liberation for the Salvation Government’s authority to be imposed over the northwest.
 62. Oula Alrifai, “In Memoriam: Raed Fares and the Banners of Kafranbel,” *Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy*, December 12, 2018; <https://jmepp.hkspublications.org/2018/12/12/in-memoriam-raed-fares-and-the-banners-of-kafranbel/>; and “Ahmad Jalal: Kafr Nabl’s Banners Have Migrated after the Martyrdom of Raed” (in Arabic) al-Modon, April 21, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2GepVja>.
 63. “Idlib Countryside...Kafr Nabl Devoid of Its Inhabitants” (in Arabic), Enab Baladi, August 31, 2019, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/324197>. That Kafr Nabl is devoid of its original inhabitants was confirmed in a conversation with the Kafranbel Media Center in January 2020. See also “Tahrir al-Sham Empties out the Homes of Civilians in Kafr Nabl to Convert Them into Military Bases, and the Details!” (in Arabic), Step News, September 8, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2RdJcaH>.
 64. For a good overview of the Salvation Government, see Alaa Nassar, “After Two Years of Governing, HTS ‘Salvation Government’ Deepens Misery in Idlib,” Syria Direct, January 25, 2020, <http://bit.ly/2Uip58o>.
 65. “Idlib Front Is Main Battle to End Syria War: Assad,” AFP, October 22, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191022-idlib-front-is-main-battle-to-end-syria-war-assad>.
 66. In theory, the option for people to stay in their original localities was always offered as part of reconciliation agreements, but there were valid reasons for those associated with the opposition—at either a civil or a military level—to reject them, including justified fears of arbitrary arrest and disappearances as well as conscription under harsh terms in the regular Syrian army.
 67. “Division 25 Special Forces: A New Name for Suhail al-Hassan’s Forces” (in Arabic), Arabi 21, August 31, 2019, <http://bit.ly/3axb41e>; and author conversation with a military commander in Liwa al-Quds, July 2019. Note that Liwa al-Quds’s original forces were Syrian-Palestinians in the Aleppo area, but casualties and recruitment in a variety of areas mean that the group is no longer mostly

- Syrian-Palestinian. Similarly, the group's affiliations have shifted over time. Liwa al-Quds was initially part of the LDF but is now affiliated officially with Syrian military intelligence. However, that affiliation is symbolic in nature: the real change is that Russia, not Iran, now provides the group's training and financing, though a contingent of the group in Aleppo province still maintains links with Iran.
68. Joyce Karam, "Full Text of Turkey-Russia Memorandum on Idlib Revealed," *The National*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/full-text-of-turkey-russia-memorandum-on-idlib-revealed-1.771953>.
 69. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Saraya al-Ra'ad: Idlib Local Defence Forces Affiliate," December 26, 2017, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/12/saraya-al-raad-idlib-local-defence-forces>; and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Saraya al-Muqawama: Latakia Local Defence Forces Affiliate," April 5, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/04/saraya-al-muqawama-latakia-local-defence-forces>.
 70. Author interviews with two LDF fighters, summer 2019.
 71. See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Life of Rabi' Ziyad Albam of Saraya al-Ra'ad," November 17, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/the-life-of-rabi-ziyad-albam-of-saraya-al-raad>. This fighter was notably from Idlib province. Other fighters enlisted in the Local Defense Forces also originate from Idlib province.
 72. See, e.g., <https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/1224270897122631680>.
 73. Conversation, January 25, 2020.
 74. Josie Ensor, Hussein Akoush, and Ben Farmer, "Exclusive: Leaked Recordings Show How Qassim Soleimani's Soldiers Are on Frontlines of Syria's Last Rebel Stronghold," *Telegraph*, January 26, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/01/26/exclusive-leaked-recordings-show-qassim-soleimanis-soldiers/>.
 75. Conversation, September 2019.
 76. See, e.g., "Intense Displacement Movement Because of the Bombing: Regime Forces on the Outskirts of Maarat al-Numan in Idlib Countryside" (in Arabic), Al Jazeera, December 23, 2019, <http://bit.ly/37hMvTS>.
 77. "Syria War: Army 'Recaptured' Key Town from Opposition in Idlib," BBC, January 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-51293327>.
 78. That said, a reassertion of government control is unlikely to mean the end of a northwest insurgency against the Syrian regime. The scenario would certainly spell the end of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's administrative project and Salvation Government, but the group likely has resources to continue as a guerrilla insurgency. Such circumstances may provide the space for a rapprochement with al-Qaeda, whose leader, Zawahiri, has long urged a move away from controlling territory and toward guerrilla tactics.
 79. See, e.g., Christian Triebart and Evan Hill, "12 Hours, 4 Syrian Hospitals Bombed. One Culprit: Russia," *New York Times*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/middleeast/russia-bombing-syrian-hospitals.html>; and Bethan McKernan, "Syrian Airstrikes in Idlib Leave at Least 21 Dead Despite Ceasefire," *Guardian*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/16/syrian-airstrikes-in-idlib-leave-dead-despite-ceasefire>.
 80. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Relationship with Turkey: Primary Texts," June 3, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/06/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-relationship-with-turkey>.
 81. See, e.g., "Regime Forces Besiege Turkish Monitoring Points" (in Arabic), *Asharq al-Awsat*, December 23, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2RgCmBq>.
 82. Policymakers in the West and elsewhere should also not be under the impression that continued humanitarian aid and NGO operations will alter the insurgent dynamics in Syria's northwest. It is desirable to continue such aid and operations on purely humanitarian grounds, but not under the illusion that these measures undermine Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Salvation Government.
 83. See, e.g., "Demonstration Against Conduct of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Security Apparatus in Locality of Killi in North Idlib Countryside" (in Arabic), January 16, 2020, <https://justpaste.it/killinews16jan2020>.

THE AUTHOR



AYMENN JAWAD AL-TAMIMI is an independent analyst and a doctoral candidate at Swansea University in Wales, where he focuses on the role of historical narratives in Islamic State propaganda. His public media work primarily covers the Islamic State, Iraq, and Syria, and he has been cited in numerous outlets for his insights, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, Agence France-Presse, and the Associated Press. His website is www.aymennjawad.org.



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
1111 19TH STREET NW • WASHINGTON, DC 20036
WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG