

From Global Jihad to Local Regime: HTS Builds Different Forms of Legitimacy

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aug 6, 2021

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/mn-aljhad-alalmy-aly-alnzam-almhly-hyyt-thryr-alsham-tbny-ashkalaan-mkhtlft-mn\)](/ar/policy-analysis/mn-aljhad-alalmy-aly-alnzam-almhly-hyyt-thryr-alsham-tbny-ashkalaan-mkhtlft-mn)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Brief Analysis

Ironically, the Syrian jihadist group now acts much like a typical Middle Eastern regime, from the way it mobilizes local support to the abuses it commits against those who oppose its rule.

This week, the Syrian jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) passed a notable milestone: it has now been active for longer than its predecessor, the al-Qaeda branch Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). Although HTS remains an extremist organization, it attempts to derive legitimacy from different constituencies these days. As JN, the group based its legitimacy on where it stood within the global jihadist movement, but as HTS, it seeks to build its reputation within the local milieu of Syria's Idlib province. The latter form of legitimacy is more difficult to burnish, however, since it depends on how the group attempts to govern millions of residents with differing aspirations and worldviews. Ironically, HTS now acts much like the Arab regimes it claims to oppose throughout the Middle East—from the way it mobilizes local support, to the abuses it commits against activists opposed to its rule.

Jabhat al-Nusra's Forms of Legitimacy

In the first known JN video, released in January 2012, group leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani offered a litany of typical jihadist talking points. First, he noted that JN was established “in order to return God’s authority to Earth.” He then derided calls to “seek help from the Western enemy to get rid of the Baathist enemy.” Calling this idea “misguided” and a “great crime...not forgiven by God,” he rhetorically asked: “Is it reasonable to think that the criminals who have killed and aided in the killing of Muslims in the East and West of the Earth will be the noble knight who rides the *umma* (Islamic nation) of oppression from the [Assad] regime and its retinue?” In Jawlani’s view, “The sons of the *umma*, and I specify in particular the people of jihad, are the only ones capable of bringing about the

true change...from oppression to justice, and from falsehood to truth.”

The video also alludes to important Islamic eschatology and heritage sites such as the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Relatedly, it announces that the main JN media outlet will be called al-Manarah al-Bayda (The White Minaret), the name of the place where hadith literature notes that Jesus will descend to fight the Dajjal (false prophet). In addition, the video shows fighters from Idlib, Deraa, Ghouta, Deir al-Zour, Abu Kamal, Mayadin, and Hama pledging *baya* (religious allegiance) to Jawlani.

Another source of legitimacy for JN was its recruitment of foreign fighters. The deep combat experience of many JN cadres—including jihadists from Syria and elsewhere who had previously traveled to war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan—gave the group a leg up on the less experienced revolutionary elements that rose up against the Assad regime. JN and many of its fighters also had access to greater resources given their varying relationships with global jihadist organizations al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Such advantages enabled the group to embed itself in the homegrown rebellion, provide social services to local communities, and eventually become one of the strongest anti-regime factions.

How HTS Seeks Legitimacy

When JN broke away from the Islamic State (in April 2013) and al-Qaeda (in July 2016), it essentially left the global jihadist movement. Since making that move and recasting itself as HTS, it has had to find other avenues to build legitimacy and cement its power over all other entities in north Idlib and west Aleppo. To be sure, the group has not abandoned its extremist worldview—it just no longer relies as much on global jihadist narratives and networks.

As mentioned above, this predicament gradually led HTS to try building its legitimacy through methods similar to those employed by governments in other Arab countries. Doing so has proven tricky given that some locals still harbor misgivings about the heavy-handed HTS campaign to subdue or dismantle previously independent Islamist and revolutionary entities in the area (not to mention their preexisting suspicions about the group’s global jihadist origins). To overcome such skepticism, HTS often accuses these dismantled entities of having ties with the West—even though Jawlani himself now seeks legitimacy through similar ties these days, if his many interviews with Western researchers and journalists are any indicator.

After JN broke from al-Qaeda in 2016, one of its first tactics for showing local populations that it was rehabilitating itself from global jihadism was to coopt the language of revolution. JN/HTS members had nothing to do with the original Syrian uprising—in fact, they had vehement ideological differences with those who rose up against the Assad regime, viewing the rhetoric and aims of the revolution as an illegitimate nationalist substitute for their rightful jihad. Over the past five years, however, messaging related to the revolution has become a key part of the HTS lexicon.

In August 2017, HTS sharia official Anas al-Khattab wrote a treatise legitimizing the use of the term “revolution,” rebuffing global jihadist ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who had criticized group members for making this turn. The group has gone even further since then, attempting to frame itself as an intrinsic part of the revolution (though it stops short of more explicitly nationalistic language, e.g., it uses *umma* instead of *watan*, the word for nation-state). Likewise, although HTS still forgoes the green Syrian independence flag, it increasingly tolerates locals using this symbol for demonstrations and other situations.

The group is also using common repertoires of mobilization to build its local legitimacy. This year in particular has seen more cases of HTS tribal **engagement (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hanging-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-expanding-tribal-engagement>)** than ever. Jawlani and other officials have increased their meetings with local stakeholders, usually around Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, but under other circumstances as well.

At the most recent Eid holiday a couple weeks ago, a delegation led by Jawlani met with soldiers, notables from various parts of Idlib (including some from Jabal al-Zawiya, which was recently hit by Russian airstrikes), and individuals displaced from the Aleppo area. The latter contingent may be particularly significant due to rumors that HTS has been attempting to expand its clandestine and diplomatic reach into neighboring territory controlled by the Syrian National Army, a Turkish-backed rebel formation.

Another parallel between HTS and Arab authoritarians (including the Assad regime in the past) is the group's exploitation of issues such as defending the Prophet Muhammad and Palestine. Such issues are referenced not only to mobilize local support, but also to distract from the group's poor governance record. For instance, HTS has held community exhibitions to educate the population on these issues and mobilize demonstrations. To be clear, HTS and its supporters no doubt have genuine concerns about these issues. Yet they are now instrumentalizing these causes in a performative, political manner rather than just letting their support be taken as an ideological given.

Policy Implications

From a U.S. policy perspective, it is important to understand that today's HTS is not yesterday's JN. At the same time, it would be wrongheaded for Washington to eagerly embrace and engage HTS. The group presents problems similar to those raised by Hamas and Hezbollah, albeit without the Iranian state sponsorship angle. HTS control is a reality on the ground, but also a model that opposes American values and interests. The group continues to crack down on pro-democracy activists and has yet to show any remorse for past war crimes or current human rights abuses. Letting HTS off the hook for these transgressions would undermine the Biden administration's pledge to promote open, democratic governance, essentially falling back on the failed policy of supporting local authoritarian rule that benefits only those in power.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute and a visiting research scholar at Brandeis University. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)