

# Jawlani's "State of the Union"

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Articles & Testimony

## The Syrian jihadist leader's growing efforts to garner legitimacy and build up local institutions can only go so far amid the group's continued terrorist sympathies and minority repression.

In recent years, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), has conducted and promoted a series of meetings with different actors in the areas that HTS controls. Those meetings that HTS promotes online usually happen in spurts. Of course, they can't tell us everything about what is going on in HTS-controlled territory or the group's plans for the future, but these meetings do provide some insights worth examining when viewing them over time.

Over an approximately two-week period in late July, HTS [released \(https://jihadology.net/2020/05/27/a-timeline-of-abu-muhammad-al-jawlanis-appearances/\)](https://jihadology.net/2020/05/27/a-timeline-of-abu-muhammad-al-jawlanis-appearances/) five addresses from Jawlani where he spoke with notables from the Hamah, Idlib, and Jisr al-Shughur regions, met with the Council of Ministers in the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), and spoke at the inauguration of a water pumping project from Ain al-Zarqa to Sahel al-Rouj. In line with HTS's gradual [push \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/age-political-jihadism-study-hayat-tahrir-al-sham) in recent years to open itself up to the outside world, the most noteworthy proposal that Jawlani has sought to achieve is to make domestic economic markets in HTS-controlled territory available to the outside world, thus linking HTS's system to the global economy and potentially providing in the long term a more [sustainable \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rhetoric-meets-reality-jawlanis-push-self-sufficiency\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rhetoric-meets-reality-jawlanis-push-self-sufficiency) arrangement for the future. In these addresses, Jawlani mixes themes that he previously spoke on, while adding new details about recent achievements from HTS's perspective and potential plans to better develop HTS-controlled territory.

# The State-Building Project

Jawlani continues to focus on the importance of state-building. He notes the many successes from his perspective in building institutions, but stresses that these efforts must continue: “We have to always think that we need to build more...and organize more.” Even though HTS does not believe in liberal democracy or popular sovereignty (<https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/02/a-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-perspective-on-democracy>), Jawlani tries to frame the state-building project as inherently a population-wide effort. As he puts it in his address to the Idlib notables: “We are all one institution, we all have authority, we are all the people.” This is why “the Salvation Government is a very important stage in the history of the Syrian revolution,” according to Jawlani in his address to the SSG ministers.

Jawlani focuses on the need for there to be a middle ground between total government assistance and constant cycles of chaos for people. He explains in his address to the notables of Jisr al-Shughur that “we are trying to build a society that can live by itself and can protect itself.” He likewise states in the inauguration of the project to deliver water to Sahl al-Rouj that he sees anything else as a “flawed condition”: “As for relying only on assistance or extorting people here for assistance or international negotiations that take place for the sake of some first aid baskets or some milk cartons to reach the liberated areas, this is frankly a kind of humiliation for the Syrian people.” Therefore, there is a need to build greater self-sufficiency. To do this, Jawlani outlines in his addresses what amounts to a three-pronged development plan concentrating on agriculture, industry, and public services.

## Agriculture

Jawlani discusses the need to further increase irrigation efforts, which he sees as the biggest barrier to increasing agricultural production. Thus, as Jawlani explains at the dedication of the Sahl al-Rouj water project, there should be a three-stage plan to improve agriculture. First, the “agricultural plan should be integrated between the almanac set by the Ministry of Agriculture and the farming brother.” In other words, farmers should more efficiently take advantage of the seasons to achieve food security. Second, an interconnected local agricultural industry should be developed. And third, there should be exporting to the outside world so that local farmers can take advantage of the global economy. In this way, according to Jawlani, the needs of local residents, the agricultural industry, and the outside market will be met.

## Industry

Jawlani notes in his address to the notables of Idlib that Idlib in general lacks an industrial sector compared to, for example, Aleppo. He stresses that there should be “uncomplicated laws” to allow for industrial development with support for local production. As Jawlani explains, creating a conducive environment for industry should be realized through development of technical services, electricity, real estate management, chambers of commerce, and the like. HTS has made such strides in this direction that now if someone wants to build an industrial site, said person only requires three or four days to acquire all the necessary permits. The end goal is that “we must get to the stage in the liberated areas where the rate of exports is greater than the rate of imports,” whereas right now these areas import more than they export by a proportion of around two-thirds. The goal should be first to achieve an export-import balance and then for exports to exceed imports.

## Public Services

According to Jawlani, right now HTS and the SSG are focused on providing basic necessities such as street cleaning, electricity, water, and trash. On top of this, they are attempting to assist with things that the industrial and agricultural markets need to better thrive.

During his speeches, Jawlani touts some recent achievements. For example, in his address to the Idlib notables, he

claims that during the past year more than 110,000 homes, businesses, and industrial and agricultural sites have been supplied with electricity, which he proclaims to be a big and speedy accomplishment. Likewise, Jawlani admits that the Ministry of Agriculture lacks resources, yet says that because of “cooperation” between farmers, the SSG, and the Ministry, they were able to increase the volume of domestic consumption from 30% to 40%, which he considers to be a good level. From Jawlani’s perspective, the inauguration of the new water pumping system from Ain al-Zarqa to [Sahel al-Rouj \(https://aymennjawad.org/2021/02/agriculture-in-the-al-roj-plain-interview\)](https://aymennjawad.org/2021/02/agriculture-in-the-al-roj-plain-interview) will add new water that can increase productivity.

## Open Dialogue, but Not Free Speech

In his various addresses, Jawlani gives the impression of holding open meetings where everyone can discuss issues and raise problems so that they can be rectified. Thus, in the Jisr al-Shughur meeting, two individuals are featured complaining about the services in the area, such as roads and electricity. One of these goes so far as to say, “[we are] deprived of many services,” arguing that these problems must be rectified to make sure that the “sons [of this area] cling to its soil.” Yet despite this pretense of open criticism and debate, one should bear in mind the number of activists against HTS rule who are either dead or imprisoned because of their outspokenness regarding the failures or inadequacies of HTS’s regime. While HTS may be tolerant of individuals submitting complaints through proper channels to their local officials and the SSG about something not so political like provision of electricity, the same is not the case for people airing grievances openly on social media or to outside media (as opposed to HTS-friendly/approved media) on topics the group might deem more sensitive and potentially “disruptive to public security” (e.g., foreigners living in [confiscated \(https://levant24.com/articles/2022/08/idlib-governments-protection-of-minorities-put-to-the-test/\)](https://levant24.com/articles/2022/08/idlib-governments-protection-of-minorities-put-to-the-test/) homes (<https://aymennaltamimi.substack.com/p/a-message-to-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>) and causing issues (<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://aymennaltamimi.substack.com/p/interview-with-abu-kamil-saleh-hasan&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1661354803084801&usg=AOvVaw2Ic9-qzp6hbPUIjlL6UGq6>) for local inhabitants).

## A Ministry of Defense?

In his address to the notables of Idlib, Jawlani refers to the HTS-led military operations room that organizes the military efforts of most of the factions in Idlib. He also highlights the project of the “Military College” that is supervised by “the best of the defecting officers present in the liberated areas.” This college, according to Jawlani, could “perhaps” become the nucleus of a future “Ministry of Defense” with an organized structure that would allow for a departure from the faction model of military organization. Time will tell if this is an avenue whereby HTS as an entity (as well as other groups) subsumes its current infrastructure into such an entity. If this were to happen, from a policy perspective, it would further weaken the case for HTS being designated as a terrorist group, since it would no longer be a separate group but officially a part of the SSG.

## Expanding the HTS State?

Jawlani and other leaders in HTS continue to repeat the claim that their ultimate goal is to liberate Damascus, alongside all the other key cities like Aleppo and Hama. But what’s new this time is that Jawlani notes that their institutions would be ready to expand once HTS gains new territory. This is because in contrast to the regime, HTS wants people “who are liberated to feel that there is a big difference in their lives in terms of security, education, health, agriculture, economic and all parts of life.” While focused on the ultimate prize of Damascus, this could also be an indirect point about rumors that HTS wants to take over territory from its rival in the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army in northern Aleppo province (the area spanning Afrin to Jarabulus).

## Some Progress, but Continued Limitations

**B**ased on Jawlani's meetings, it is clear that HTS strives to make progress in and mature its state-building project capabilities. In particular, the group seeks to develop local industries, open up local markets to the global economy, and perhaps create a Ministry of Defense. Yet there are four issues that will likely continue to give pause to those in the U.S. government who may consider it worthwhile to engage with HTS: (1) HTS's treatment of minorities in its territory; (2) its top ideologues' eagerness to eulogize Ayman al-Zawahiri after his death; (3) its public displays of support for the terrorist group Palestinian Islamic Jihad during its recent rocket campaign against civilians in Israel; and (4) the continued presence in HTS territory of terrorist-designated foreign fighter-run organizations.

One of the themes that Jawlani reiterates again in these meetings is that "we have borne the burdens of very long years, we have borne the burdens of 100 years of oppression, humiliation, regression, decline and the like." The Islamic ummah, he explains in the address to the notables of Idlib, has never faced oppression like the oppression it has faced in the past 100 years, facing threats to its identity besides mere division of political power. This is one of the reasons why, as Jawlani states in his address to the SSG ministers, "the project in the liberated areas is no longer merely a revolution against oppression and tyranny but rather it has transformed into building a Sunni entity, because Sunnis are facing an existential danger in Syria." There is no doubt that the Assad regime has run a sectarian regime for 50-plus years, which has harmed the majority Sunni population.

Yet in light of HTS's own sectarian Sunni identity, it is important to temper expectations when Jawlani meets with Christian or Druze notables. The latter were forced many years ago (when HTS was Jabhat al-Nusrah) to renounce their faith and declare conversion to Sunni Islam, and this policy of forced conversion has not changed. Moreover, the original Druze inhabitants still have many grievances over **confiscation of homes and inheritance rights** (<https://aymennaltamimi.substack.com/p/interview-with-abu-kamil-saleh-hasan>) and face the risk of being **targeted for harassment** (<https://aymennjawad.org/2022/08/a-message-to-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-and-abu>) and even killing at the hands of more hardline jihadis in northwest Syria who consider them "disbelievers," not accepting the idea of their conversion to Sunni Islam. While the Christians are not accorded the *dhimmi* status of second-class citizenship for Jews and Christians in a classical Islamic state and are instead given the status of *musta'min* (<https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/11/dar-al-qada-statement-in-jabal-al-summaq>) (i.e. treated as though they have temporary residence with **no obligation during that time to pay the poll tax levied on** <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2021/06/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-abu-al-fatah-al-farghali-on>) *dhimmi* (<https://www.aymennjawad.org/2021/06/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-abu-al-fatah-al-farghali-on>) **s** (<https://www.aymennjawad.org/2021/06/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-abu-al-fatah-al-farghali-on>)), their status is still very much subordinate and based on accepting Sunni Muslim rule and domination.

As for the latter two issues, top HTS leaders and ideologues like 'Abd al-Rahim 'Atun and Abu Mariya al-Qahtani put out messages of condolences following the U.S. drone strike that killed al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. 'Atun described Zawahiri as "a man who lived for his religion, fought, resisted, and struggled in its path for half a century or more," and expressed hope that he would be "grant[ed] the highest paradise with the prophets." This was more a case of these ideologues showing respect for a fellow jihadi in the trenches than a sign that HTS might be coming home to al-Qaida. Indeed, al-Qahtani recently **called** (<https://jihadology.net/2022/08/15/new-release-from-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5r-r-al-shams-abu-mariyah-al-qa%e1%b8%a5%e1%b9%adani-advice/>) on al-Qaida's branches to dissolve the organization, in particular urging al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula to "break their external tie," recalling how HTS came to break off from al-Qaida. Nevertheless, these statements highlight problematic aspects of HTS's political and ideological orientation, illustrating its sympathies with jihadism and Islamic militancy outside of Syria. This is especially noteworthy in light of HTS's claims to want to be taken off the U.S. terrorism lists. Likewise, HTS's Manarat al-Huda Da'wa Center posted moral support a number of times for Palestinian Islamic Jihad's rocket campaign against Israeli civilian targets, putting out a graphic with the slogan, "We are all Gaza's arrows on the

Jews.” Finally, the territory that HTS controls is one where other terrorist designated groups affiliated with HTS operate, such as Jama‘at Ansar al-Islam, Katibat Imam al-Bukhari, and Katibat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, as well as non-designated foreign fighter groups.

HTS continues to have what are certainly unpalatable characteristics from a Western perspective. This is likely why Jawlani, in one of his speeches, urged people in HTS-controlled territory to be strong in the face of the West, even if the West does not cooperate. Based on Jawlani’s and HTS’s continued actions, it is clear that he wants to garner legitimacy without having to actually give up on the hardest aspects of his group’s ideology. This is HTS’s conundrum. For until it demonstrates a pronounced shift away from sympathies with jihadi and Islamist militant causes inside and outside of Syria and a willingness to improve the lot of minorities in its territory, it will remain in its current predicament, unable to realize its lofty plans to make its territory a sustainable and vibrant entity.

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