

The Future of al-Jawlani's Pragmatism in Idlib and Afrin

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Brief Analysis

Despite years of overhauling HTS's global reputation, al-Jawlani's strategy in northwest Syria has long been driven by opportunism instead of ideology.

Amid complex dynamics and transformations, the stances of most local, regional, and international forces towards Syria are often in flux, shifting the country's trajectory as alliances and animosities come and go. In fact, one of the only consistent features of the Syrian conflict is the likelihood that yesterday's enemy will be tomorrow's friend—or vice versa—as issues shift on the ground. A case in point is the recent power balance shift in Idlib and the north of Aleppo, as Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani—one of the most prominent and unpredictable figures holding power in Syria today—has effectively extended his control over most of the province with his group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), moving into northwest Syria.

The successes and longevity of Jawlani's career as the leader of HTS can ultimately be traced to his relative pragmatism and opportunism in a field more often characterized by ideological rigidity. His rapid and repeated changes in views have allowed him to shed his radically puritanical background when it suits him, first leaving the Islamic State when he distanced Jabhat [al-Nusra] from Baghdadi's rebranded ISIS, then adjusting his aims from a transnational project into a local faction, rebranded as HTS and severing its formal links with al-Qaeda. HTS subsequently consolidated power in Idlib and its countryside, similar to Hamas's role in Gaza.

Jawlani's discourse regarding the need to build a Sunni entity in the liberated areas of Syria clearly reflects the recent ideological and organizational **transformations** (<https://sydialogue.org/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525AA%2525D8%2525AD%2525D9%252584%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252584%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525AC%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%25258C-%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252586-%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525AD%2525D9%252585-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525B9%2525D8%2525B4/>) of HTS that have sought to focus the group's goals on tactical, political interests. Since coming to Syria, for example, Jawlani has worked to avoid military isolation despite a lack of popular approval, and prior to HTS's incursion into Afrin—an area originally controlled by the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), then taken and administered by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA)—Jawlani was able to consolidate his relations with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Islamist factions.

As the FSA evolved into the SNA in northwest Syria, Jawlani also developed relations with Islamist factions like al-Hamza and the Shah Brigade—ultimately leading to these groups allowing HTS into northern Aleppo earlier this month. Externally, Jawlani has engaged in a multi-year effort to soften his reputation in the West and build indirect relationships with foreign countries, most visible in his [interview \(https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/the-jihadist/\)](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/the-jihadist/) with *PBS Frontline* journalist Martin Smith.

Besides his growing security influence, Jawlani has worked to take control of the economy. In the past, HTS seized border crossings and took advantage of the trade of oil, fuel, wheat, and cotton, as well as the sale of land and opening of money exchanges. Socially, Jawlani focused on the role and importance of the media, establishing an official media agency—Ebaa News Agency—and building an auxiliary media army to mobilize for him and his policies through Telegram channels most used among the opposition and the “liberated” north. This media effort has paved the way for a public defense and justification of his projects.

One of the most notable efforts of Jawlani's attempt to present himself as open-minded, especially with regard to Syria's other religions and sects, has been his outreach to non-Muslim communities in Syria. For example, HTS allowed the reopening of a church in the town of al-Yaqoubiya in the Jisr al-Shughour area of Idlib province this August, and its **first mass** (<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/syrian-christians-reopen-church-hts-dominated-idlib>) since 2011, angering Islamists and hardliners. At the time, HTS issued a statement that they “consider the residents of west Idlib towns who embrace the Christian religion to be part of society with the right to live in their homes and go about their business and activities since the beginning of the revolution, and to be blessed with security.” The statement also said that the population of these towns have duties, most importantly “not to stand alongside and support the regime, and to adhere to the general policy in the liberated areas.”

Meanwhile, although Jawlani's quasi-civilian “Salvation Government” is now controlling Idlib province, the prisons—al-Zanbaqi, al-Eqab, and Harem—are teeming with Jawlani's former peers. Idlib's many prisoners include jihadists, al-Qaeda leaders and fighters, and muhajireen—non-Syrians accused of belonging to ISIS or who are described as Kharijites and leaders of sedition.

Earlier this year, Jawlani vowed to expand his influence in the region, and he has been ready to seize any opportunity that would enable him to realize this ambition. The assassination of activist Muhammad Abdul Latif—nicknamed Abu Ghannoum by members of the al-Hamza Division—in early October provided Jawlani with that opportunity. After the Third Corp arrested the assassins and broadcasted their confessions on social media, and with a subsequent attack by the Corp on the al-Hamza headquarters, Jawlani saw an opening to intervene, and made an agreement with the Third Corp.

During the past few weeks, events on the ground have developed rapidly, and HTS forces initially reached the borders of the city of Azaz, the most important city of the Euphrates Shield, while launching a social media **campaign** (<https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2022/10/tahrir-al-sham-the-dream-of-northern-syria-control/>) with the hashtag #oneadministration. Feasibly, the primary objective of Jawlani in taking control of the Afrin region and the areas of the “Olive Branch” is to control the entire north of Syria

through his “Salvation Government” without a declared military presence.

Reports of an [agreement \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%B1%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%AE-%D9%84%D9%80%22%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%22-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%85%D8%B9-%22%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%22-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%B1%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%AE-%D9%84%D9%80%22%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%22-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%85%D8%B9-%22%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%22-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9) that subsequently came about between HTS and the SNA Third Corp—in which the former resumed its control of the civil, economic, and security administration of the areas of the Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield—suggest that the interim government affiliated with the opposition coalition is marginalized, even as the SNA denies such an agreement exists. This is despite the fact that the interim government was supposed to be the key player in negotiations and agreements. Consequently, a partnership between the Third Corp and HTS would allow the security apparatus affiliated with Jawlani’s Salvation Government to exert its control over the region while eliminating the role of the coalition.

As it stands, HTS’s decision to enter into Afrin marks a new development in Jawlani’s plan. Prior to this moment, Turkey had maintained a barrier between HTS and the Turkish-backed SNA controlled areas of Azaz and Afrin. Now, however, it appears that Turkey has tacitly accepted Jawlani’s recent movements, albeit while pushing back against a situation where HTS has overt control.

Still, Jawlani’s future depends heavily on the decisions of larger regional actors. Case in point, Russian and Turkish entities have recently appeared to be discussing a detente. This will undoubtedly impact the balance of power within Syria, especially in the northwest. More specifically, if the Syrian regime and the Turkish government reach an advanced agreement via Russia, as Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu has [suggested \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%B1%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%AE-%D9%84%D9%80%22%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%22-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%85%D8%B9-%22%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%22-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%B1%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%AE-%D9%84%D9%80%22%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%22-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%85%D8%B9-%22%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%22-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9), one of its conditions could be to eliminate both Jawlani’s presence in Idlib and the SDF’s presence in the country’s northeast, removing the Syrian regime and Turkey’s respective ‘thorns’ in their sides.

As a result, Jawlani would have to recalibrate his focus and partners. On the one hand, Jawlani could ally with the SDF if the latter wanted to open a shared front against the regime, rejecting the Turkish-Syrian agreement and its likely threat to the SDF. Alternatively, and in light of Jawlani’s rejection of any reconciliation-based agreement between the regime and Turkey, Jawlani could return and ally with yesterday’s comrades—the ones who currently fill his prisons and, in some cases, live in areas under HTS control. These include Hurras al-Din, remnants of ISIS, and groups of extremist muhajireen, as well as other factions from the remnants of the FSA who refuse to reconcile with the regime.

Indeed, although Jawlani has made significant efforts to bring about ideological and organizational change within HTS—distancing it from globalized jihadist ideology and improving its external image—there should be no illusions about the true intentions of Jawlani and HTS. Clearly, the most recent HTS changes can be linked simply to Jawlani’s fluctuating, transitional interests. While current interests dictate that HTS should market itself as a modern entity, remove its international terrorism designation, and consolidate and strengthen its local foothold, the situation is likely to change at any moment, and Jawlani’s tactics will change with it. In the blink of an eye, HTS can and will pull back from the revisions and changes it has made if it means maintaining and expanding their control over northwest Syria, regardless of the needs of the Syrian people or the principles of their movement. ❖

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