

How Syria's 'Diversity-Friendly' Jihadists Plan on Building a State

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Articles & Testimony

As the group consolidates control in newly seized Aleppo, its leader is seeking to allay fears among minorities, pro-Assad residents, and skeptical Western officials alike.

In the chaos of Syria's war, it was a moment of bureaucratic ceremony. Three men in camouflage combat fatigues met a handful of suited civilians within the [captured city of Aleppo \(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/11/28/syrian-rebels-launch-surprise-attack-against-assad-regime/\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/11/28/syrian-rebels-launch-surprise-attack-against-assad-regime/). At the meeting on Monday, fighters of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) formally passed over responsibility for the city to the jihadist group's proto-government.

With the administration of [Bashar al-Assad \(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/11/29/syrian-rebels-capture-tanks-aleppo-assad-russia/\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/11/29/syrian-rebels-capture-tanks-aleppo-assad-russia/) ousted from Aleppo, HTS now has responsibility for a city of two million people. The symbolic ceremony, published on HTS's social media channels, was meant to assure the public that the group was ready to [govern as well as fight \(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/12/02/syrias-surprise-rebel-offensive/\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/12/02/syrias-surprise-rebel-offensive/).

In Western capitals, there is clear—and understandable—ambivalence about the jihadist group that has captured swathes of north-west Syria over the past week. Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, [the HTS leader \(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/12/02/the-west-may-have-to-negotiate-with-new-rulers-of-aleppo/\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/12/02/the-west-may-have-to-negotiate-with-new-rulers-of-aleppo/), has a \$10 million US bounty on his head. He joined both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), before splitting from both groups and rejecting their “extreme” tactics. Human rights groups have documented torture of political opponents in the region of Idlib, which HTS has controlled since the battle lines against the [Assad regime \(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2024/11/30/assads-humiliating-retreat-is-a-blow-to-iran/\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2024/11/30/assads-humiliating-retreat-is-a-blow-to-iran/) froze during

the Covid pandemic in 2020.

On Monday, the US, Britain, Germany, France and the UK released a non-committal statement calling on “all sides” to “de-escalate.” While the brutality of the Assad regime’s war on the opposition saw Syria’s president become a pariah in the West (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/12/02/us-talks-syria-sanctions-iran-uae-weapons-hezbollah-assad/>), some officials cite the maxim that the “enemy of my enemy can still be my enemy.”

Jolani has attempted to improve his reputation in the eyes of the West. In 2021, he gave an interview to PBS, the US state-funded broadcaster, calling the designation of HTS as a terrorist group “unfair” and “political.” He said that under the Salvation Government, the administrative arm of HTS, rule should be Islamic “but not according to the standards of IS or even Saudi Arabia.” In Idlib region, Jolani has allowed women not to wear the veil and smokers to keep up the habit, a looser regime than, for example, the Taliban in Afghanistan.

As his fighters advanced into Aleppo, Jolani put out a series of statements intended to allay fears among the population (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/11/29/moderate-jihadi-syria-10m-bounty-aleppo-jolani-assad-rebels/>), segments of which are aligned with the Assad regime (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/12/02/syria-iran-militias-enter-to-back-up-assad-israel/>). Fighters should not “scare children,” he said, while HTS channels eagerly broadcast clips of Christians in the city going about their business as normal. Afram Ma’lui, the Archbishop of Aleppo, promised that services would be unaffected by the takeover. On Tuesday, with regime forces fully ejected from the city (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/11/28/why-syrian-rebels-have-chosen-now-to-try-to-oust-assad/>), Jolani put out a second statement declaring “diversity is a strength,” a phrase more redolent of Western HR departments than jihadist warlords.

Even as the HTS leader armed and prepared his fighters in Idlib (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/12/01/russian-general-syria-sacked-bases-looted-troops-flee/>), he stressed the importance of state-building. In March this year, Jolani addressed a cohort of top students at Idlib University, saying that rebels would have to build governments in the middle of war—rather than after the conflict ends. “Every brick built in the liberated areas advances us hundreds of kilometres towards our fundamental goal, which is the liberation of Damascus—God willing,” he said.

He is now putting the principle into practice, with a host of blandly titled bureaucratic bodies springing to life in Aleppo. Garbage collection has already begun and electricity and water services have been reconnected. HTS has distributed phone numbers for local residents to enquire about administrative services. The General Zakat Commission, an Islamic tax collection agency that also deals with the poor, has started to distribute emergency baskets of bread, while HTS’s General Organization for Grain Trade and Processing has provided fuel to bakeries to make sure they can continue production. In total, the Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs claims it has delivered 65,000 loaves of bread to locals in a campaign they are dubbing “Together We Return.” In a sign that their proto-state has its eye on international legitimacy as well as local favour, HTS’s Political Affairs Department has provided phone numbers for foreigners and diplomats seeking to leave the city.

There is also the matter of how to handle the remnants of the Assad regime. On Tuesday, the Salvation Government said any soldiers, police or security forces who surrendered would be granted amnesty. There have been no confirmed reports of reprisal killings so far. Meanwhile, residents have been told to contact Salvation Government officials if they come across weapons depots, warning that anyone caught buying or selling ammunition will be punished.

Since 2020, large numbers of refugees from Assad-held areas of Syria have lived under HTS rule. As Jolani’s forces seize back more of the country, they have been keen to present themselves as facilitating the return of the displaced to their homes. The Idlib City Municipality has opened roads that were previously blocked off as they lead to Assad

military positions. E-Clean, an HTS-aligned company that clears up public spaces, oversaw an operation to clear a road between the towns of Sarmin and Saraqib, which had been blocked for several years. Social media has been filled with video clips of emotional family reunions in a boost to the group's efforts to win hearts and minds.

The treatment of minorities will be under particularly close watch, however. Jolani has issued a number of recommendations, statements, and notices to make sure that no one harasses or harms the Christian or Kurdish community.

They also make sure to highlight the diversity of Syrian culture and heritage, stating "Aleppo is a meeting place of civilisation with cultural and religious diversity for all Syrians." In the initial days after the takeover of Aleppo, they have largely abided by their word.

But questions remain on how integrated minorities can be in an HTS administration. In the past, Jolani has engaged with Christians and Druze in Idlib, and there is a Directorate of Minority Affairs within the Salvation Government. But they do not have representation within the government's General Consultative Council. Neither do women, though they are far more active and public in society in general.

It is not just minorities who might be fearful of coming under HTS rule. A majority of Sunnis disagree with the HTS government and its hardline Islamic principles. Several activists have been imprisoned and tortured. In early 2024, a protest movement against Jolani's rule in Idlib erupted, with the leader accused of amassing too much power and acting tyrannically. In response, HTS created a Complaints Committee for all the area it controls, issued a general amnesty for non-criminal prisoners, and cancelled residential building fees. It also formed a committee it claimed would help broaden the pool of people admitted to leadership positions.

Under Jolani, HTS has transformed itself dramatically, splitting away from its explicitly jihadist roots. This new stage might provide another platform for evolution. Certainly the group's institution-building over the past four years has positioned it well to consolidate battlefield victories into a much larger state-building project.

But while it may be far more liberal than IS or the Taliban, Jolani and his forces remain, at heart, an authoritarian armed group. If they are to win support among distrustful locals—and grudging acceptance from the watching West—they will have to make sure that the plethora of bureaucratic initiatives launched in recent days are more than just a PR operation.

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