

# Jihadi ‘Counterterrorism’: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Versus the Islamic State

By Aaron Y. Zelin

Once allies in the same organization, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Islamic State have an interesting history that turned them into ‘frenemies’ from April 2013 to February 2014 and then outright enemies over the past nine years. This led to a broader global fight between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. Yet, HTS continued to tread its own path by breaking from al-Qa`ida in 2016. From the spring of 2014 to the summer of 2017, the main avenue by which HTS and its predecessor group, Jabhat al-Nusra, dealt with the Islamic State was insurgent infighting. Yet since the summer of 2017, as HTS consolidated control over areas in northwest Syria and developed a governance apparatus, HTS has favored a lawfare approach to dealing with Islamic State cells in the territory it controls. Surveying the data on its arrest campaign against the Islamic State over the past half decade suggests HTS has been successful in countering the Islamic State. Yet, even if its fight against the Islamic State is deemed a net positive, HTS’ continued support for terrorism abroad and the authoritarian nature of its governance make it difficult for the West to countenance removing the group from the list of designated terrorist groups or engage with it.

Since Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) broke from al-Qa`ida in the period July 2016-July 2017,<sup>1</sup> it has sought to build up different forms of legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> One way it has attempted to show its bona fides as a legitimate actor and local government has been to conduct a form of ‘counterterrorism’ against the Islamic State. This is distinguished from the overt military fighting between the two groups in 2014. Unlike battlefield fighting, this is in the context of a governance structure that ostensibly has monopoly on violence over a particular territory. This effort is mainly being conducted not by HTS’ military apparatus but by HTS’ General Security Service (GSS),<sup>3</sup> one of many administrative and security bodies set up in northwest Syria and portrayed as independent of HTS, but in reality closely

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connected with it. Essentially, the GSS is HTS’ version of the FBI, though existing in an authoritarian framework and with far less sophisticated means of forensic investigation.

While this article will only focus on the case of HTS, it is worth noting that this sort of ‘counterterrorism’ has also been happening in Afghanistan since the Taliban’s seizure of power in mid-August 2021. The Taliban’s General Directorate of Intelligence has also gone after various Islamic State cells.<sup>4</sup> Of course, in both cases, there are limitations to these so-called ‘counterterrorism’ efforts. In the case of the Taliban, for example, there is no effort against al-Qa`ida or other regional jihadi groups. Not much has changed on this front since the Taliban’s first state in the 1990s. The Taliban have been gaslighting the international community about al-Qa`ida by repeatedly denying its presence in Taliban-controlled territories. Following the U.S. killing of al-Qa`ida’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in late July 2022, for example, the Taliban put out a statement claiming “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has no information about Ayman al-Zawahiri’s arrival and stay in Kabul.”<sup>5</sup> They issued this denial despite the fact that it has been reported that al-Zawahiri was living at a home owned by a top aide of the Taliban’s interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, and that subsequently the Haqqanis<sup>6</sup> covered up evidence of the airstrike.<sup>7</sup>

This article will explore various checkpoints in the history of HTS’ relations with the Islamic State. First, it will provide background on the early relations between the two groups. Then it will explore the Islamic State’s former ‘Wilayat Idlib’ in 2013 to better highlight that the group’s interests in the area are not new. This will lead to showing how the Islamic State transitioned from attempted territorial control over the area to a terrorism campaign before looking into how HTS’ GSS then combated the Islamic State’s campaign. It will then assess what this all means in the context of HTS’ push for international legitimacy over the past few years.

## Early Relations Between HTS and the Islamic State

Abu Muhammad al-Julani originally led Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), a predecessor group of HTS, as a project of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), a predecessor group of the Islamic State.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the typical *modus operandi* of jihadis at the time, when JN built itself up in Syria over the course of 2012, it increasingly did so not as some isolated, clandestine organization, but rather in open collaboration with other insurgents fighting against the Assad regime. Through providing basic social services and not targeting ideological rivals in the early years of the civil war, JN was able to become more embedded within the social fabric of the population. The initial fruits of this labor were seen after the United States designated JN as a foreign terrorist organization and an extension of ISI in December 2012. In response, the Syrian opposition and rebels backed JN.<sup>9</sup>

While JN’s success grew, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi likely became concerned that JN would break off from him completely, as al-

Julani was reportedly ignoring al-Baghdadi's requests to begin liquidating opposition activists and rebel factions that were deemed 'un-Islamic' (meaning most, if not all, from ISI's perspective).<sup>10</sup> In all likelihood, al-Baghdadi had intended for the subsumption of JN under ISI and ISI's formal expansion into Syria anyway, but al-Julani seemed reluctant to go along with this move. Thus, without al-Julani's agreement, al-Baghdadi announced the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (also called the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) in April 2013, asserting that JN was a mere extension of ISI and the time had come for it to be formally subsumed under ISI to form ISIL.<sup>11</sup> It seems al-Baghdadi partly intended to force al-Julani to make a public decision on his relation with ISI: Either he would be cowed into the merger, or he would make clear his real agenda. Rather than accepting al-Baghdadi's authority, al-Julani pivoted and pledged *bay`a* (a religious oath of allegiance) to Ayman al-Zawahiri, moving JN outside the ISIL orbit.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, al-Julani had also likely intended to have al-Zawahiri intervene in the dispute in his favor. While al-Zawahiri did so in ordering ISIL to return to Iraq as ISI while nonetheless cooperating with JN, ISIL rejected this order, which constituted a de facto confirmation of ISIL's having left the al-Qa`ida network. A number of JN's foreign fighters and more hardline members accepted al-Baghdadi's side of the dispute and defected to ISIL. ISIL's attempts to expand its power in insurgent-held territories in Syria at the expense of other factions led to outright fighting between it and those other factions, with JN eventually siding actively with the latter in Syria by spring 2014, thus cementing the splintering of the jihadi movement.<sup>13</sup>

It took a while for the relationship between JN and ISIL to break down. Even when al-Julani rebuffed al-Baghdadi's announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in April 2013, al-Julani praised him for the help in providing essential resources when JN was created:<sup>14</sup> "that honorable Shaykh who gave the people of al-Sham their right ... he aided us ... despite the hard days that [ISI] was enduring."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the two groups continued to conduct joint operations together alongside other jihadi and more mainstream insurgent groups. The most notorious of these incidents was the 'A'isha Umm al-Mu'minin"<sup>16</sup> campaign against Alawi territories in rural Latakia in August 2013. While JN and other groups described it as the "Battle to Liberate the Coast in Rural Latakia," ISIL called it "Cleansing of the Coast Operations."<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch later concluded that "the killings, hostage taking, and other abuses committed [from this operation] ... rise to the level of crimes against humanity."<sup>18</sup>

Even in mid-December 2013, just before ISIL was ejected from many Syrian rebel enclaves in Idlib and Aleppo provinces in late December and early January 2014, al-Julani explained in an interview with Al Jazeera that the situation between JN and ISIL was "a conflict between individuals within the same house."<sup>19</sup> This illustrated the frame within which al-Julani at the time still viewed ISIL.

While JN, on the whole, initially tried to stay out of the rebel infighting with ISIL, the situation became more irreconcilable once al-Qa`ida released a statement on February 2, 2014, disaffiliating itself with ISIL and after ISIL's assassination of key al-Qa`ida liaison and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah (HASI) senior leader Abu Khalid al-Suri on February 23, 2014.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the latter, al-Julani called ISIL out for hypocrisy stating that Abu Khalid's killers are just like the *sahawat* (Awakening Councils) in Iraq that turned away from ISI in favor of the United States: "Oh



Members of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra together during Eid al-Adha in mid-October 2013 (Photo provided by author)

you disgraced people, have you not known the meaning of 'Sahawat' and who they are? The *sahawat* in Iraq are those who abandoned fighting America and the *rafidhah* [derogatory term for Shi'a], and began fighting the mujahidin alongside the enemy. As for in al-Sham, who are those who have abandoned fighting the *nusayri* [derogatory word for Alawis], and started fighting those that the *nusayris* fought?"<sup>21</sup>

Al-Julani was willing to concede some validity to ISIL's stance on certain factions, saying: "We don't deny that among those fighting you are groups who have fallen into apostasy and disbelief, as is the case with the General Staff [of the Free Syrian Army (FSA)], the coalition [the political opposition in exile] and those who undertake the project of the 'National Army' through which they strive to establish a secular government and destroy the sound Islamic project." However, he then added that "it has not been proven that the majority of the groups that fight you have fallen into apostasy or disbelief," likely referring to the "Islamic Front" factions that had become involved in the infighting with ISIL.<sup>22</sup>

After Abu Khalid's assassination, JN took increasing steps to distinguish its approach and methodology from that of ISIL. JN released an essay clarifying its *manhaj* (methodology), partly in response to claims by ISIL that it had 'deviated' but also aimed at refuting claims that it (JN) was an "extremist takfiri group," clearly trying to distance itself from the idea that it was somehow indistinguishable from ISIL.<sup>23</sup> In April 2014, JN released a video explicitly condemning ISIL's *manhaj* by showcasing an ISIL assassination operation that targeted a JN official and also killed members of his family and relatives.<sup>24</sup>

### History of the Islamic State in Idlib Region

The Idlib region is where HTS controls much of its territory today, alongside small parts of western Aleppo province. However, at one time prior to its aforementioned ejection, ISIL exerted varying degrees of control in a number of cities and villages in 2013. It is worth understanding this history since it provides crucial backdrop to the fact that while the Islamic State no longer controls areas in the region that HTS governs now, it does have a history there, which is why it is not surprising that the Islamic State continues to have cells there, likely supported by historical networks that established their roots 10 years ago. When one triangulates data on the ISIL presence in 2013 with its attack claims in the region and HTS' campaigns against Islamic State

personnel and cells since HTS began to consolidate its control over the area in the 2016-2017 timeframe, one can gain a better picture on the hot spots of the Islamic State activity in the areas that HTS now controls. Before synthesizing the relevant data, it is helpful to look at ISIL's so-called Wilayat Idlib in 2013-2014.

### Wilayat Idlib

The case of Wilayat Idlib in Syria is an interesting one, insofar as ISIL never truly had full control over the entire area that was supposed to encompass the province. Furthermore, the events described below took place before the *fitna* (discord) between ISIL and the revolutionary, Islamist, and other jihadi forces in northern Syria in January 2014. As a result of that infighting, a thinly stretched ISIL decided to consolidate its presence around Raqqa, effectively giving up on the idea of territorial control of Idlib for the foreseeable future.

Figure 1 shows 25 cities and villages in ISIL's self-styled Wilayat Idlib where it can be determined with reasonable confidence that the group had been in full control (dark blue), had taken a dominant position vis-à-vis other insurgents (medium blue), and/or, at the very least, was one group among other insurgent factions (light blue) before being ejected in January 2014.<sup>a</sup>

In June or July 2013, around the time ISIL began to make its presence known by starting to take over pieces of territory in Idlib governorate, its relations with other insurgent factions were different and more complex than they are now. Since January 2014, clear lines have been drawn between the Islamic State and the other insurgent groups. Ultimately, given the Islamic State's conception of itself as the only true Islamic state in this day and age (something that was already very apparent in 2013), the group ultimately had a coercive agenda vis-à-vis other factions: Either those factions would need to willingly join it or be subjugated. Nonetheless, for various reasons, these other factions were willing to tolerate ISIL at the time. Among the rationales was that fighting the group would distract from fighting the Assad regime, the belief that ISIL was ultimately part of the same 'team' in the sense of the ultimate end goal of an 'Islamic' project and/or caliphate, and appreciation for some of ISIL's contributions on the fighting fronts. Effectively, there was some unwillingness to recognize ISIL's self-conception and agenda for what they were, which gave the group time to build its strength in a way that it likely could not have done if other groups had decisively militarily confronted it from the get-go.

Even before ISIL made its caliphate announcement, rallies calling for the caliphate to be restored were staged in cities under JN control, like Binnish, where the Islamic State would gain full control.<sup>25</sup> There are also numerous reports that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself went from Iraq into Syria (Aleppo and Idlib) in February-March 2013 to drum up support among foreign fighters in the lead-up to the ISIL announcement.<sup>26</sup> This gave ISIL a foothold in some of these areas, as well as elsewhere in northern Syria. It also facilitated the group's efforts to gather intelligence on its opponents, whom it would later attack and kill. A local source

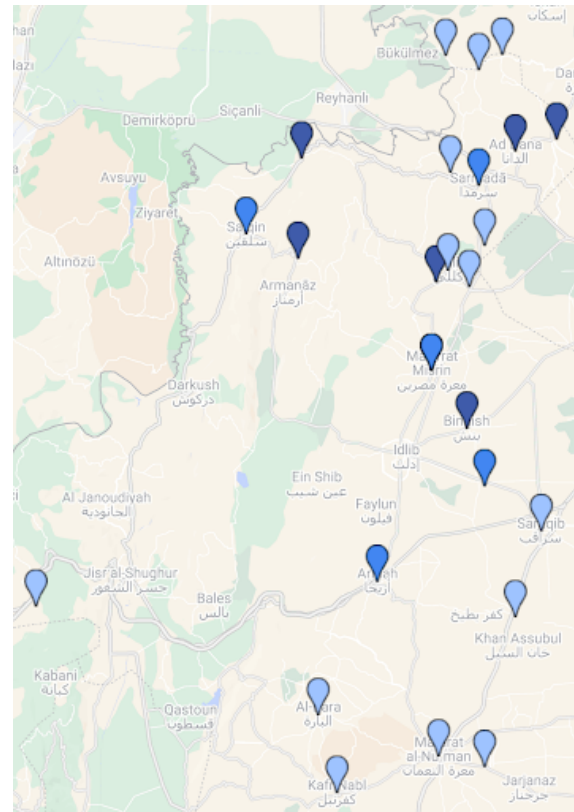


Figure 1: Pre-January 2014 ISIL presence in its Wilayat Idlib

at the time suggests ISIL created a network of informants to find weak targets.<sup>27</sup> Reports also surfaced at the time that ISIL was buying up land and property in the area to improve its foothold.<sup>28</sup> It also sought, as it did in other areas, repentances and pledges of *bay`a* from individuals and factions.<sup>29</sup> In one case, it publicized on November 20, 2013, a group of individuals giving an oath of allegiance to al-Baghdadi.<sup>30</sup>

One of ISIL's main strategies at the time for bending some of these cities and villages to its will was to gain control of key resources people needed for their day-to-day survival, while assassinating or kidnapping those it determined to be rivals. Thus, one tactic was to occupy grain silos and other agricultural facilities to dictate the terms in a particular area. In the town of Termanin, for example, ISIL fighters in pickup trucks took over the agricultural ministry building, with help and information provided by a local preacher.<sup>31</sup> In the meantime, the group beheaded a sniper from a rival group, putting his head on display in the main square.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in another city in Idlib governorate, ISIL killed, wounded, or imprisoned members of Itihad Shabab Idlib al-Ahrar.<sup>33</sup>

As it would elsewhere, ISIL began conducting *dawa* activities in the areas it entered in Syria, passing out literature, staging events, or starting basic religious courses. As early as July 17, 2013, it set up a Qur'anic memorization competition for individuals in Silwah, while a week later it opened up a sharia institute in al-Dana, one of its main strongholds in its self-styled Wilayat Idlib.<sup>34</sup> An example of the *dawa* literature the group passed out at the time was a booklet entitled, "On Rulings for Those Who Curse God."<sup>35</sup>

ISIL conducted *dawa* forums in several locations, such as al-Dana, al-Qah, Atme Refugee Camp, Kafr Takharim, Killi, Ma'arat Dabsi, and Ma'arat Nu'man, among others.<sup>36</sup> They were potent

a Dark blue: al-Dana, Binnish, Harim, Kafr Takharim, Kaftin, and Termanin; medium blue: Ariha, Ma'arat Misrin, Salqin, Sarmada, and Sarmin; and light blue: al-Bara, al-Najeya, Atme, Babisqa, Batabo, Hazano, Kafr Nabl, Killi, Ma'arat Dibsah, Ma'arat al-Nu'man, Qah, Salwah, Saraqib, and Talmenes. It is plausible there were other locations where ISIL was active, but this is what could be found based on open sources.



tools for promotion, as one observer explained: “I sat in the sermon when one of their sheikhs came to my village in Idlib. He blamed this war on the kafirs [sic], accusing Alawites and the West. But his speech was eloquent and powerful. When he came back the following week, a bigger crowd had come to the mosque, and by the next week, he had won followers.”<sup>37</sup> This illustrates how ISIL was able to ingratiate itself with the local population at the time, especially since it was not involved in the systematic moral policing (*hisba*) for which it would become notorious in parts of Syria where it would exert complete territorial control over the next few years.

The *hisba* efforts of ISIL at this point were not as fully developed as would be the case after the group’s consolidation of territory around Raqqa and the subsequent caliphate announcement in June 2014. No burning of cigarettes and the like took place, shops were not generally forced to close during prayer time, and food and medicine were not monitored to see if they had spoiled or were expired (although ISIL did warn in a September 19, 2013, statement in Talmenes that individuals selling cigarettes and tobacco had 15 days to close their shops if they wished to avoid confiscation).<sup>38</sup> The group would also distribute niqabs for women to wear in public in areas where it had control or influence.<sup>39</sup> There were also numerous reports of ISIL putting individuals on trial for corruption and executing people linked to the Assad regime.<sup>40</sup> A remnant cell of the group allegedly kidnapped a “sorcerer” on March 1, 2014; ISIL was not fully defeated from all areas of Idlib until mid-March 2014.<sup>41</sup>

When it came to governance, ISIL provided basic services, although evidence suggests they were less sophisticated in Idlib as compared to provinces such as Raqqa and Aleppo. Still, at the very least, ISIL controlled the bread factory in al-Dana and provided relief aid to people in Batabo.<sup>42</sup> ISIL also reportedly distributed 15,000 liters of diesel for the bread ovens in Saraqeb.<sup>43</sup> Similar efforts were likely made in other parts of Idlib governorate as well. During the time that ISIL was in control of areas in its Wilayah Idlib, it pushed to project an image of statehood by opening a number of offices. In many cases though, these offices were probably far less functional than the formalization of processes and structures put into place elsewhere in Syria following its caliphate announcement. The offices ISIL initially showed off were its sharia committee headquarters, municipal headquarters, and a court in al-Dana; a *dawa* office in al-Karama Refugee Camp; a police station and court in Atme; and a women’s *dawa* outreach office.<sup>44</sup> Similar administrative structures likely were established in other areas, too, though their presence was not publicly disclosed. In addition, custom entrances and road signs began to be adopted in the ISIL-held areas. For example, it erected a sign at the entrance to al-Dana on October 7, 2013, and one at the entrance of the town of al-Najiya on December 7, 2013.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, on December 8, 2013, ISIL highlighted its painting of Qur’anic verses on walls within its territory.<sup>b</sup> There were, however, no indications the group carried out public works projects or attempted to run local industries, as occurred elsewhere in Syria after the Islamic State’s caliphate announcement.

Once ISIL took control of certain villages and cities in Wilayah Idlib, it began seeking out its enemies and executing them. This was a key reason for the eventual backlash and uprising against the group. Unlike the failed tribal uprisings in eastern Syria (Sheitat), western Iraq (Nimr), and central Libya (Firjan), a coalition of revolutionary and Islamist actors would, in January 2014, band together to push ISIL out of Idlib governorate as well as western Aleppo governorate. This success demonstrated the degree of strength and firepower necessary to sustain a successful uprising against the group.

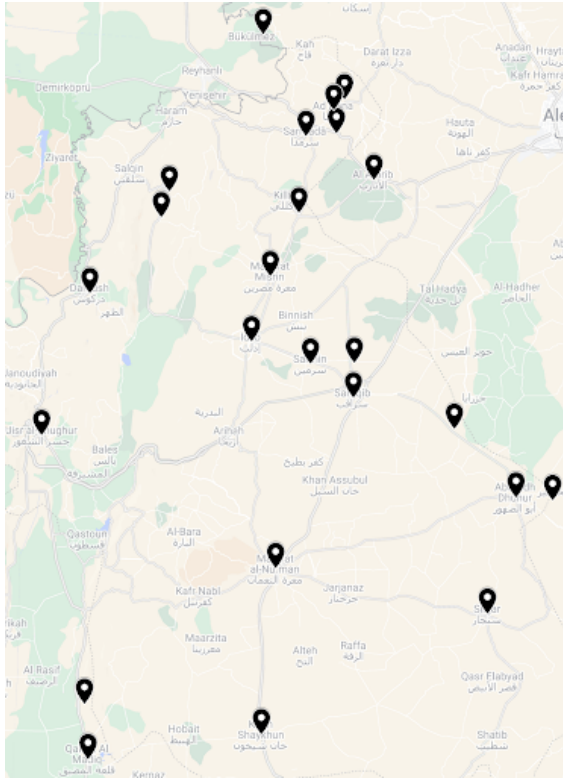
Yet, as has been noted, rather than being a coordinated plan from the beginning against ISIL, the rebels’ concerted action only came after multiple instances of transgression by ISIL against other factions. The first signs of ISIL’s coercive behavior became evident in June and July 2013, when it began taking over areas in Idlib, Aleppo, and other regions. The group’s coercive actions became more serious in September 2013 when it detonated a car bomb outside HASI’s headquarters in Sarmada and then a few days later killed Abu Ubaydah al-Binnishi, HASI’s chief of relief operations.<sup>46</sup> This led to major grumbles, but the issue was resolved internally. The last straw was when in early January 2014, ISIL kidnapped and tortured to death Hussein al-Suleiman (Abu Rayyan), a doctor and HASI commander who had criticized the group.<sup>47</sup> This act finally prompted a number of insurgent factions to decisively militarily confront ISIL, thus leading to the group’s removal from Idlib and western Aleppo, and even to HASI’s burning down of ISIL’s infamous sharia court in al-Dana.<sup>48</sup>

#### *From Limited Territorial Control to Terrorism*

Despite its loss of territory in Idlib, the Islamic State may never have formally ‘canceled’ its Wilayah Idlib. Yet, it did go for a more typical terrorist approach as it began trying to insert and/or activate sleeper cells inside the province and conduct attacks, besides securing allegiance from some local factions. The most notable defection to the (newly declared) caliphate of the Islamic State from the Idlib region came in early July 2014, when the group Liwa Dawud, which had been based in Idlib, pledged *bay`a* to al-Baghdadi and headed to Raqqa, taking with it a substantial number of fighters and vehicles.<sup>49</sup> Elements of the jihadi group Jund al-Aqsa also became aligned with the Islamic State, with those elements becoming known as “Liwa al-Aqsa” and eventually leaving the Idlib and Hama countryside for Raqqa in February 2017 after an agreement with HTS.<sup>50</sup>

Notable attempted terrorist attacks started to occur not long after the caliphate was announced. In September 2014, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, a nationalist rebel group, apprehended a pair of Islamic State suicide bombers before they could conduct their attack.<sup>51</sup> A month later came further reports of Islamic State re-infiltration into Idlib governorate, though not until June 2015 would a spate of attacks occur.<sup>52</sup> During July 2015, a number of HASI and JN leaders were targeted by the Islamic State in Idlib.<sup>53</sup> While some survived, HASI did arrest a few Islamic State cells.<sup>54</sup> In August 2015, the Islamic State was able to carry out bombings in both Harim and Kansafra; no other attacks happened for another eight months.<sup>55</sup> This suggests that JN and other rebel groups had at least deterred Islamic State activity for a period, until a late April 2016 suicide attack in Binnish at an HASI headquarters and nearby soccer match that killed an HASI military leader named Islam Abu Husayn.<sup>56</sup>

b For example, it painted parts of Qur’anic verse 4:84 (the parts that were painted are bolded): “**So fight, [Oh Muhammad], in the cause of God; you are not held responsible except for yourself. And encourage the believers [to join you]** that perhaps God will restrain the [military] might of those who disbelieve. And God is greater in might and stronger in [exemplary] punishment.”



*Figure 2: Locations of Islamic State officially claimed attacks in the greater Idlib region after the 2015 Jaysh al-Fatah takeover through the present*

This wave of suspected Islamic State activity came on the heels of the establishment of the Jaysh al-Fatah operations room in late March 2015 by JN, HASI, and allies. Jaysh al-Fatah, whose name translates as the “Army of Conquest,” quickly conquered almost all of Idlib governorate including the provincial capital from the Assad regime. One idea behind Jaysh al-Fatah was to create a unified military and political administration that would do away with factional differences. The Jaysh al-Fatah alliance, however, ultimately broke down after HTS was formed and the northwest arena became primarily split between HTS and HASI. Over a year period from July 2016 to July 2017, JN evolved into HTS,<sup>57</sup> broke ties with al-Qa`ida, and moved away from forming broader factional coalitions to a determination to impose its hegemony, effectively subjugating HASI into a junior position by July 2017.<sup>58</sup>

During this struggle for supremacy in the area, the Islamic State once again tried to conduct a campaign against its various enemies in the Idlib region. Twice it hit the Atme border crossing, in mid-August and early October 2016. In the first attack, Islamic State member Abu al-Yaman al-Shami conducted a suicide attack against dozens of members of Faylaq al-Sham, HASI, and Harakat Nur al-Din Zinqi—all of whom had been a part of the JN successor group Jabhat Fatah al-Sham-led operations room.<sup>59</sup> The second operation saw Abu Qudamah al-Shami conduct a car bomb attack, which killed, among others, HASI commander Hisham Khalifa, Aleppo Supreme Judicial Council head Khalid al-Sayid, and Muhammad al-Faraj, who was the Attorney General of the Supreme Judicial Council.<sup>60</sup> Thirdly, in late May 2017, the Islamic State attacked and killed dozens of HASI members when an Islamic State suicide bomber wearing an explosive belt parked and detonated his bomb-rigged motorcycle in front of the HASI

headquarters in the town of Tal Tuqan.<sup>61</sup> This operation, it should be noted, was claimed in the group’s newsletter Al Naba under the moniker of “Wilayat Idlib,” whereas the previous two were only reported under the name of “Idlib.” Finally in this period, as HTS consolidated its monopolization of violence in Idlib governorate, an Islamic State suicide bomber attacked a Qur’anic school for orphans in Hafasarja in early July 2017, killing the headmaster and a number of students.<sup>62</sup>

As a consequence of this attack and HTS’ growing strength over the territory in Idlib, it began to create a lawfare response to the Islamic State beyond typical insurgent infighting. Thus, what was described originally at the time as a “security apparatus” of HTS would become more formalized into the GSS in early June 2020.<sup>63</sup> Between July 7-10, 2017, HTS rolled up a number of Islamic State cells in the towns and cities of Basnia, al-Dana, Harim, Htan, Idlib, Isqat, Nayrab, Salqin, Sarmin, and Qurqaniyah.<sup>64</sup> According to an HTS press release, HTS had monitored these cells for three months before arresting more than 130 individuals involved.<sup>65</sup> Overall, including these arrests, HTS has announced publicly that it has conducted 59 law enforcement operations against Islamic State cells as of this writing. The scope of these operations will be discussed further in a section below exploring the GSS more specifically.

Perhaps as a consequence of this large-scale crackdown, the period between July 2017 and June 2018 did not see any known or suspected Islamic State attacks in Idlib against HTS. However, on account of infighting between HTS and the Islamic State elsewhere in Syria in northwest Hama governorate in late 2017,<sup>66</sup> the Assad regime tried to take advantage and began an offensive against both, trying to push north. In so doing, the regime eventually took back the Abu al-Dhuhur Military Airbase from HTS.<sup>67</sup> The latter had taken it from the regime back in 2015 during the Jaysh al-Fatah campaign.<sup>68</sup> As a result of this regime offensive, a number of Islamic State elements were pushed into Idlib governorate, which HTS would have to contend with later on. During the fighting for the Abu al-Dhuhur Military Airbase, the Islamic State claimed six attacks between January 10-14, 2018, against Assad regime soldiers.<sup>69</sup> After being defeated there by the regime, the Islamic State became surrounded and in a last ditch effort conducted four attacks against the regime in Sinjar, a village 12 miles south of the airbase in Idlib governorate, between January 16 and February 5 of that year.<sup>70</sup> As a consequence of the regime’s offensive, new opportunities likely arose for remnant Islamic State members to undermine security in HTS territory and hinder the law enforcement efforts that HTS had attempted to build over the latter half of 2017 and early 2018.

The first sign that the Islamic State was able to push through HTS’ intelligence and law enforcement dragnet occurred in mid-June 2018 when seemingly unofficial Islamic State “Wilayat Idlib” content showed pictures of its fighters beheading a number of HTS fighters, reportedly carried out in retaliation for an HTS assault on a covert Islamic State base in the countryside town of Kafr Hind.<sup>71</sup>

Then the Islamic State launched an all-out blitz against HTS and other rebel factions with an assassination campaign from July 6-14, 2018.<sup>72</sup> Within those eight days, the Islamic State claimed 18 attacks, which is more than it had previously claimed since the Jaysh al-Fatah coalition took over the Idlib region three-plus years earlier. This wave was not concentrated in a specific part of Idlib, but was rather widespread throughout the area of Idlib and its immediate environs that HTS controlled or had influence in: Afis,

Armanaz, al-Atarib, al-Dana, Darkush, Hazanu, Hizrah, Idlib City, Jisr al-Shughur, Kafr Takharim, Khan Shaykhun, al-Kirkat, Ma'arat Misrin, Ma'arat Nu'man, al-Nayrab, Qala'at al-Madhiq, Saraqib, Sarmada, Sarmin, and Tal al-Karamah.

These attacks resulted in the killing of 19 HTS and other anti-Assad rebel group members and the injuring of 15 others.<sup>73</sup> The Islamic State named one of those it killed as Ahmad al-Dhafir,<sup>74</sup> the head of the security committee in Hama countryside on the Idlib border with Hama between Kirkat and Qala'at al-Madhiq.<sup>75</sup> More prominently, the Islamic State also attempted to kill HTS leader Anas Ayrut,<sup>76</sup> who was and remains part of the HTS-backed civilian-led Salvation Government's Supreme Fatwa Council and Ministry of Endowments, Dawa, and Guidance,<sup>77</sup> by detonating an IED on a vehicle carrying Ayrut. The attack failed to kill him, but it did lead to the death of one of the passengers and the loss of one of the driver's legs, while Ayrut and another were lightly wounded.<sup>78</sup>

These incidents in July 2018 were the last time the Islamic State officially claimed a successful attack in Idlib region. This is not to say that Islamic State activity has ceased over the past four and a half years; rather, HTS has been able to interdict Islamic State attack plotting.

It should be noted that in December 2022, HTS demonstrated that an independent group active in carrying out attacks in the period that followed called Sariyat Ansar Abu Bakr al-Sadiq had been in touch with the Islamic State,<sup>79</sup> though in a previous video from July 2022, HTS notes that it did not believe the group or its sister front organization Jama'at 'Abd Allah Bin Anis were Islamic State front groups.<sup>80</sup> From August 2020 to October 2021, Sariyat Ansar Abu Bakr al-Sadiq targeted the Turkish military checkpoints that divided HTS territory from the Assad regime 16 times, while Jama'at 'Abd Allah Bin Anis attacked HTS directly three times between January 2021 and March 2021.<sup>81</sup> Even though these two groups had been in contact with the Islamic State about the possibility of broader coordination, according to analyst Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "it did not quite reach that level in the end. Ideologically there was some sympathy for IS, but Khayal al-Manhaj stopped short of calling for *bay`a*."<sup>82c</sup>

### ***Comparing the Islamic State's Previous Territorial Control to its Subsequently Claimed Attacks***

There were 25 locales where the Islamic State had varying levels of control in the greater Idlib region in 2013 and 24 places where the Islamic State has claimed attacks in the greater Idlib region since 2015. Nine of those spots overlapped: al-Dana, Atme, Hazano, Kfar



*Figure 3: Areas in Idlib the Islamic State had prior territorial control in 2013 and where it also claimed attacks since 2015 in the greater Idlib region*

Takharim, Ma'arat Misrin, Ma'arat al-Nu'man, Saraqib, Sarmada, and Sarmin. (See Figure 3.) Yet, it does not appear that there is much correlation between the degree of prior control in a particular area and where attacks later occurred. The only villages that the Islamic State fully controlled in 2013 and then conducted an attack in since 2015 were al-Dana and Kfar Takharim. Sarmada and Sarmin were the only ones where the Islamic State was the strongest group among other insurgents, and in the rest of the five places the Islamic State was equal with or just one among multiple other insurgent actors: namely, in Atme, Hazano, Ma'arat Misrin, Ma'arat al-Nu'man, and Saraqib. This could suggest that the Islamic State's successful attacks from 2015-2018 were more based on clandestine networks than deep-rooted connections to local communities.

Broadening the aperture, when one compares HTS' operations against the Islamic State (36 locations) to where the Islamic State used to have a territorial presence in 2013, the overlap of villages begins to expand slightly to 11: al-Dana, Atme, Hazano, Kfar Takharim, Kaftin, Qah, Salqin, Sarmada, Sarmin, and Tal Manis. Again, it does not appear that there is much correlation between the level of the Islamic State's prior control in a particular area and where HTS operations against the Islamic State later occurred. There were HTS operations against the Islamic State in four villages that were previously controlled by the Islamic State (al-Dana, Harim, Kfar Takharim, and Kaftin), three locales where the Islamic State was the dominant insurgent actor (Salqin, Sarmada, and Sarmin), and four villages where the Islamic State was equal/one among multiple insurgent factions (Atme, Hazano, Qah, and Tal Manis).

c Khayal al-Manhaj (aka Wadah al-Hamawi/Abu Alqama), who is in HTS custody, was the key intellectual figure behind Sariyat Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq and Jama'at Abd Allah bin Unais, which were essentially two faces of one network focused on targeting the Turkish army, HTS, and other factions. While Khayal had claimed to be independent of these groups, he was in fact intimately connected with them—as illustrated, for example, by how these groups' statements used his particular turns of phrase, suggesting that he in fact wrote those statements. As for his relationship with the Islamic State, in the GSS documentary on Khayal and his network, a certain Abu Omar al-Masri said Khayal asked him to track four members of HTS and a farm in which he believed leaders of the group were staying, and then apparently the relevant data was referred to Islamic State. However, no other apparent coordinated work beyond this is mentioned. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, "The Extremists: The Poisoned Dagger," General Security Service, December 2022.



When one zeroes in on HTS' operations compared to where the Islamic State claimed attacks since 2015, the number of overlapping places increases again, this time to 12: al-Dana, al-Nayrab, Atarib, Atme, Darkush, Hazano, Idlib, Jisr al-Shughur, Kfar Takharmin, Khan Shaykhun, Sarmada, and Sarmin. This means half of the places where HTS has directed its operations have been locations where the Islamic State has claimed an attack, which is not all that surprising considering they would want to follow-up on or prevent something in the future from happening in a spot where the Islamic State might have a broader cell network. Thus, in many ways, HTS' campaign seems more linked to the specifics of the Islamic State's attack network than the Islamic State's prior territorial control in different parts of the greater Idlib region.

### HTS' Campaign Against the Islamic State

Even though the Islamic State has not claimed a successful attack in HTS areas since July 2018, the Islamic State threat has not vanished. Various factors have allowed the Islamic State to continue to operate and plot to attack HTS, its allies, and civilian populations in the past half-decade. Not least was the fact that in mid-March 2019, Russia conducted an airstrike on the outskirts of Idlib that hit a prison where HTS had been holding Islamic State and other prisoners.<sup>83</sup> Dozens of Islamic State militants reportedly escaped,<sup>84</sup> and to this day, it would seem that not all those individuals have been rearrested. Not long after the jail escape, there was also an influx of Islamic State operatives into HTS-controlled areas of northwest Syria caused by the final territorial defeat of the group. On March 23, 2019, the Islamic State lost its last territorial holding in Syria and Iraq with the liberation of the Syrian town of Baghuz on March 23, 2019. Although many Islamic State members were killed in that battle or arrested and placed in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) prisons in northeast Syria, others fled first through Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria nominally led by the Syrian Interim Government and its Syrian National Army (SNA) and then on to HTS-controlled territory in northwest Syria.<sup>85</sup>

The Islamic State has seen Idlib as not only a potential safe haven, but also a place to restart activity. Regarding the former, two of the Islamic State's so-called caliphs—Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi—were located in Idlib and died there during U.S. special forces operations against them in October 2019 and February 2022, respectively.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, it is important to remember that about two-thirds of the population in HTS-controlled areas are made up of internally displaced people (IDPs),<sup>87</sup> meaning they are not actually from the area originally. This makes it easier for individuals from the Islamic State to blend into the population. Further complicating matters is the transient nature of these IDP populations between HTS-controlled areas and SNA-controlled areas in northern Syria, which is in part why HTS' Salvation Government began a campaign in 2022 to provide ID cards for everyone in the areas it controls.<sup>88</sup> Thus, the continued movement of many people makes intelligence gathering more difficult. Nevertheless, if the lack of claimed attacks is judged as the metric of success, HTS' campaign against the Islamic State over the last four-and-a-half years can be seen as having been successful.

### Background on the General Security Service

Before delving into the data on HTS' campaign against the Islamic State, it is important to better understand HTS' General Security Service (GSS), which is its law enforcement/intelligence body that



*Figure 4: Locations where HTS conducted 'counterterrorism' raids against Islamic State cells in the greater Idlib region (July 2017-January 2023)*

has been involved in arresting Islamic State cells over the past few years. As noted above, the GSS was formalized in June 2020, yet a proto-version of it had been operating since HTS began its arrest campaigns against the Islamic State in July 2017. Therefore, HTS' security apparatus has actually been working against the Islamic State for more than five and a half years now.

When the GSS was formalized in 2020, it released a video providing details on its writ within HTS-controlled areas as well as a breakdown of its structure. The purpose of the GSS, according to the video, is to protect the people of the "liberated" areas (how HTS describes its territory) and to prevent any type of crime.<sup>89</sup> To do this, the GSS asserted in the video that it will arrest any person who is "working to destroy life and sow chaos" and then use any intelligence garnered from that arrest to go after others in a broader criminal network.<sup>90</sup>

Five key components of the GSS are the regional information office, the internal security division, the organized crime portfolio, the regime portfolio, and the "Khawarij" ("Kharijites"/"extremists") portfolio.<sup>91</sup> With regard to the extremist portfolio, the Islamic State is not named specifically, but it is undoubtedly included under this portfolio. According to the GSS video, the process for the system starts with an investigations officer providing detailed reasons for why someone should be arrested.<sup>92</sup> Once the investigation

is completed, GSS security officials will arrest the individuals and then they will supposedly be brought in front of a public prosecutor to face a trial.<sup>93</sup> Details about the latter aspect within the judicial system have not been shared publicly by HTS. It seems to be a very opaque process. The GSS claims to be following HTS' interpretations of sharia in bringing the arrested to justice.<sup>94</sup>

Many residents in HTS territory have criticized the judicial processes for lacking transparency, failing to provide reasons for arrests, holding alleged “kangaroo” trials, and the bad treatment of prisoners.<sup>95</sup> According to a lawyer in Idlib, “death sentences are carried out in secret prisons without any trial ... Detainees don't get to have a public trial or to know the evidence on which the decision was made against them.”<sup>96</sup> While these details about the system are primarily about activists in HTS-controlled territory and not specially about Islamic State members, it still highlights an authoritarian approach in HTS-controlled territory that is starkly different to a modern liberal understanding of the rule of law.<sup>97</sup>

#### ***Statistics and Details on HTS' Arrest Campaign Against the Islamic State***

Over the past five and a half years, HTS has publicly claimed 59 discreet operations to arrest members of Islamic State cells in 36 towns and villages throughout the greater Idlib region.<sup>d</sup> Of the 59 discreet raids, five occurred in 2017, 22 in 2018, eight in 2019, eight in 2020, 10 in 2021, and six in 2022. It is important to remember that the data on 2017 is only for the second half of the year when the proto-GSS began to start operating. Therefore, seen together, 2018 is an outlier with a record number of HTS raids against the Islamic State. Assuming there is a correlation between the number of raids conducted against it and the degree to which the Islamic State poses a threat, the data suggests that in the years since 2018, the Islamic State threat in Idlib has remained at a low level, with a drop last year.

The most common places where HTS rolled up Islamic State cells were as follows: six in Sarmin, five in Idlib, five in al-Dana, five in Salqin, four in Harim, and four in Jisr al-Shughur. All of these locations are areas where the Islamic State conducted attacks between 2015 and 2018 or were spots where the Islamic State used to have a presence when it had its so-called Wilayat Idlib exerting territorial control in 2013. This suggests that in the places where HTS has most frequently gone after the Islamic State, it is likely the Islamic State has some small attack networks or residual roots within the local population, which has allowed it to continue to operate even after all of HTS' efforts against it.

HTS has arrested 279 individuals in the 59 counter-Islamic State operations. During these raids, another 40 individuals have been killed while HTS attempted to arrest them, either because HTS shot them or an Islamic State fighter blew himself up before he could be caught. Among those arrested, 20 were executed after going through HTS' court process. HTS has claimed that of the 279 Islamic State members it arrested, 51 were leaders in the Islamic State. HTS named and provided the alleged position within the Islamic State organization of 44 of those it arrested. Some of these individuals had high-level regional leadership positions within the Islamic State, according to HTS' investigations. (See Table 1.)

***Table 1: Prominent Islamic State leaders that HTS arrested<sup>98</sup>***

Date of Arrest	Name	Position in the Islamic State According to HTS	Location of Arrest
6/22/2018	Sa'ad al-Hunayti	Leader of the Islamic State in Idlib	al-Dana
7/14/2018	Abu al-Bara' al-Sahili	Islamic State General official for northern Syria	Harim
7/16/2018	Abu Ayham al-Himsi	Islamic State administrator for Homs, Hamah, and HTS-held territories	Sarmin
7/16/2018	Abu Yunis	Islamic State General administrator of Idlib and coordinator of foreign fighters	Sarmin
9/3/2018	Abu Muhammad al-Adari	Islamic State General administrator of the “liberated areas”	Sarmada
9/11/2018	Abu Hamzah al-Masri	Islamic State Wali [governor] of Wilayat Hamah	Not listed
8/11/2020	Muhammad Ahmad Jummah (aka Abu Yusuf Wasim)	Islamic State Wali of Wilayat Idlib	Not listed

There is no detail on these individuals' backgrounds beyond the position they held in the Islamic State's command and details that can be deduced from their *kunya* (*noms de guerre*). Yet, the data suggests that HTS is not only apprehending low-level foot soldiers, but also higher-level regional leaders for the Islamic State's broader operations. Another significant finding among the 44 names shared by HTS is that 25 percent of these Islamic State individuals are foreign fighters—assuming their *noms de guerre* reflect their actual origins, which may not always be the case.<sup>e</sup>

d Since some of these operations have involved multiple locations where cells were connected, the number of overall events by location add up to 70.

e For example, Abu 'Umar al-Masri, who was part of Khayal's network, was also known by another *nom de guerre* in his contact with the Islamic State: namely, Abu 'Umar al-Hindi—a name that would suggest he was Indian, whereas al-Masri suggests he is Egyptian.



**Table 2: Foreign fighter nationalities of identified Islamic State members that HTS arrested**

Nationality	Count
Egypt	2
Iraq	2
Uzbekistan	2
Chechnya	1
Dagestan	1
Russia	1
Turkey	1
Unidentified	1

Among this foreign fighter cohort, it does not appear there is any dominant cluster from any particular country. (See Table 2). The unidentified individual's *kunya* included the designation al-Muhajir (the emigrant), making it impossible to identify his country of origin. The highest ranked foreigner was an individual who went by the name of Abu Hamzah al-Masri, who is, as noted in Table 1, was the Islamic State *wali* of Wilayat Hamah.

As noted earlier, two other Islamic State foreign leaders (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi)<sup>99</sup> were based in Idlib before they blew themselves up when the United States conducted special operations forces raids against them in Barisha and Atme in October 2019 and February 2022, respectively. This fact, that two of the Islamic State's leaders were able to use HTS territory as a safe haven, illustrates that as good as HTS has been at thwarting attacks, it does not necessarily have the resources to completely identify and root out the Islamic State from its territory. There is also no evidence that there was some conspiracy related to HTS hiding Islamic State leaders; rather HTS just did not know they were there. If HTS had, they would almost certainly have arrested or killed them. It is interesting to note that the Islamic State's third so-called caliph, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, decided to use southern Syria as his base before being killed in Jasim in mid-October 2022 instead of basing himself in Idlib.<sup>100</sup> It is plausible that Abu al-Hasan and the Islamic State leadership figured that since he was embedded within Assad regime territory, the United States would not be able to reach him there in the same way it did Abu Bakr and Abu Ibrahim. Of course, in the end, Abu al-Hasan was killed, too, this time by former anti-Assad regime insurgents who had been forced to reconcile with the regime in 2018.<sup>101</sup>

It is important to stress that, unlike the Taliban who were discussed at the beginning of the article, HTS has actually gone after and dismantled al-Qa`ida's Syrian branch, Huras al-Din, which was created after HTS left al-Qa`ida between July 2016-January 2017.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, there are many foreign fighters currently sitting within HTS' prison system beyond those who are members of the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida.<sup>103</sup> HTS' apparent effectiveness in going after harder-line jihadis could lead some to wonder whether Abu Muhammad al-Julani's call for his group to be taken off the terrorism list merits consideration or even if HTS could be seen as a potential partner given the organization seems to be no longer interested in external operations against the West,<sup>104</sup> but rather seeks to focus its energies on its local struggle against the Assad regime.

### ***The Terrorism Designation Question in Light of HTS' 'Counterterrorism' Campaign***

The case for keeping HTS on the terrorism designation list is not as clear cut as when the group first was designated as Jabhat al-Nusra more than 10 years ago.<sup>105</sup> It is even plausible that had HTS been formed out of nothing when it was announced in 2017, it may never have been designated based on its actions over the subsequent six years. Yet, due to its historical baggage and its continued espousal of extremist beliefs that glamorize terrorism abroad, HTS still likely meets the legal threshold for designation.

For instance, HTS has recently backed the terrorism of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) against Israel as well as terrorism in the West against purported blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. In the Hamas-Israel hostilities in May 2021, senior HTS ideologue Abu Mariya al-Qahtani posted on Twitter a video of rockets launched by Hamas from Gaza and shot into civilian areas in Israel, attaching the following note: "These scenes delight the believers and make the hypocrites sad ... Today, the lions of Gaza are turning the night of the Zionists into day. May God bless the lions of Qassem in bombing them."<sup>106</sup> More recently in the hostilities between Israel and PIJ in August 2022, HTS' Manarat al-Huda Dawa Center posted moral support a number of times for PIJ's rocket campaign against Israeli civilian targets, in one case, putting out a graphic with the slogan, "We are all Gaza's arrows on the Jews."<sup>107</sup>

HTS' civilian governing body, the Salvation Government, released a statement "calling on everyone to shoulder their responsibilities in defending Muhammad" in relation to France and President Emmanuel Macron in the aftermath of the beheading of French school teacher Samuel Paty in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, France, on October 16, 2020.<sup>108</sup> Paty had shown the Charlie Hebdo issue with the cartoons of Muhammad in his moral and civic education class about freedom of speech, yet before showing them, he allowed any Muslim student to leave if they wanted to.<sup>109</sup> The last contact of the perpetrator of this attack, Abdoullakh Abouyedovich Anzorov, an 18-year-old Chechen immigrant, was allegedly Farouk al-Shami, a Tajik member of HTS based in Idlib. French investigators believe he may have influenced Anzorov to conduct the attack.<sup>110</sup> It is unlikely that HTS as an organization had anything to do with the attack, yet it illustrates that individuals living in its territory could entrepreneurially link up with those abroad and incite them to act.

This is another reason why the international community finds it problematic that HTS territory hosts other smaller designated foreign terrorist organizations and more broadly foreign fighters affiliated or allied with HTS. Among this cohort are Jama'at Ansar al-Islam, Katibat Imam al-Bukhari, and Katibat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, as well as other non-designated foreign fighter groups.<sup>111</sup>

In essence, it appears that HTS goes after al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State because it considers going after them to be in its interests, and does not do so as some sort of major concession to Western governments. While it has gone after the two big global jihadi groups, HTS is in principle committed to protecting the other foreign fighters in Idlib, and thus, it is unlikely for now that a *quid pro quo* arrangement can be struck that would amount to a concession from HTS and its removal from the terrorist designation list.

Moreover, if one looks at the history of U.S. terrorism designations related to jihadi groups, the only time jihadi groups have been removed has been when the organizations have become

defunct.<sup>112</sup> And even then, there was a large lag time between a group no longer being active and the United States' decision to take the organization off the list. So even if HTS ceased to meet the legal threshold for designation, delisting could take years. In addition, even if HTS were removed from the U.S. terrorism designation, it is likely to remain on the U.N. list for the foreseeable future, primarily because of Russia's position on the Security Council in support of its ally in Syria—the Assad regime—and its concerns about Caucasian jihadis in the northwest. As a consequence, the issue is moot in some ways, on account of factors that have more to do with the strategic, political, and institutional calculations of governments than with the actions of HTS itself.

## Conclusion

HTS' counterterrorism operations might be a welcome development from a Western counterterrorism perspective, but it does not appear HTS is going to be taken off the designation list anytime soon and there are strong reasons, including its recent support for other terrorist groups, it should not be. Furthermore, any Western

engagement with the group does not touch upon other problematic issues such as the authoritarian nature of HTS' rule. This is the group's conundrum. For until it demonstrates a pronounced shift away from sympathies with foreign fighter and Islamist militant causes inside and outside of Syria and a willingness to open up its political system, it will remain in its current predicament, unable to realize its lofty long-term plans to make its territory a sustainable and vibrant entity.

Nevertheless, based on the data marshaled in this study, it is clear, at least over the past four and a half years, that HTS' campaign against the Islamic State has been successful on the whole. Of course, this could change with the potential rapid fluctuations in the state of play within Syria itself. For example, a potential future normalization of relations between Turkey and the Assad regime or a U.S. withdrawal from Syria could alter the status quo the group has benefited from in recent years. But it is quite stunning that in a little more than a decade, HTS has changed from an Islamic State branch to an al-Qa`ida branch to a nascent polity that conducts 'counterterrorism' against the global jihadis. **CTC**

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