

HTS and ISIS in Today's Syria: Coexistence or Conflict?

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Abstract: *The terrorist organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) with its leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani has become at the forefront of the current war in Syria. HTS advanced from their home base in the north-western province of Idlib into the big cities of Hama and Homs, finally taking control of the capital Damascus. The group is not the only one to take advantage of the fall of Bashar al Assad's regime. Other rebel factions are also active there as one of them is the Islamic State (ISIS) which has an opportunity to revive again. It is important to note that actually HTS originated from Jabhat al-Nusra which was formed in 2012 by ISIL (later ISIS). A year later it split from ISIL and pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda. In a similar way the new formation broke ranks with Al-Qaeda and started its own agenda. This paper looks at the current relations of Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria and analyzes if they can coexist together or shall engage in conflict thereafter. Eventually all enemies of Assad now have to choose between peaceful negotiations or throwing the country into chaos and civil war. The study is divided into two parts. The first one provides a historical overview of how HTS emerged from ISIS and then diverged from it. The second section carries out implications on what role they will play from now on.*

Keywords: Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), origin, terrorism

1. Introduction

This study gives a reflection on the current situation in Syria after the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad fled to Russia. One of the rebels called Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was the main force that defeated him. HTS is a Sunni jihadist group and was once part of other jihadists such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. Later on it boosted diverse goals like imposing its own power in Syria. This is exactly what happened very recently. However, there are other active adversaries such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), al-Qaeda, Syrian National Army (SNA), Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Southern Operations Room. The neighbouring countries involving Turkey, Israel, and others, as well as big powers like the US and Russia, also have certain interests. The paper compares two groups which are HTS and ISIS. Their development is included as well as how they differ from one another. In fact they have the same background but dissimilar aims and are even considered as enemies. Syria is in a transitional phase where everyone shall seek to gain dominance. There are a few sections below with the conclusion summarizing the main ideas.

2. Origins and development of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has its genesis from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Byman and Williams, 2015) and was led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Celso, 2015). The development of the group was to a great extent an outcome of personal relations between him and other detainees at Camp Bucca (McCoy, 2014). Al-Baghdadi and other terrorists there established close relations as the latter were remnants of Islamic and Baathist rebel networks. The union between these factions was the key for the creation of a future group which would expel the Westerners and the Shias from Iraq and the whole region. Al-Baghdadi himself was well educated and affirmed he was a descendant of the prophet Mohammad (Lister, 2014).

In 2014 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the new caliphate (Hashim, 2014) on a territory from Aleppo in Syria all the way to Diyala in Iraq (Ingram et al., 2020). At first, the group was welcomed by the local citizens as the organization was providing necessary items like order, protection, social services, and others. There were sanctions against violating the Sharia law (Termeer, 2022) so fear was witnessed but at the same the infrastructure was being repaired accompanied with the delivery of social services in the form of medical care, courts, police, and so on (Gerges, 2017).

The structure of ISIS revolved around numerous councils which led to a more flexible approach in governing. The Shura Council, for instance, was the consultant body of the group on top of which was caliph al-Baghdadi (Hamming, 2023). This same Council could fire him and replace him if needed. There were two deputies who were in charge of both countries, Iraq and Syria. There were also financial offices, military offices, court offices, all busy with maintaining the functioning of the organization and controlling the territory (Atwan, 2015). Basically ISIS was running as a state and the only thing lacking was international recognition. The diffuse structure allowed for replacement of people at the top positions in troublesome circumstances. This provided greater operational resilience and insulated it from external threats (Cronin, 2015).

Terrorists used violence as a monopoly over the geographical area to exploit it for resources and transferring local assets to themselves (Vittori, 2008). The civilian population was forced to provide support as the terrorist group levied various taxes on people and businesses and controlled the economy. As the market collapsed and unemployment and poverty were high, there was a ready pool of recruits who volunteered to join its ranks (Vittori, 2011).

Daesh was a new phenomenon on the international scene. Napoleoni (2014) offered a concise definition of what constitutes the Islamic State, which distinguished it from other groups such as al-Qaeda. It excelled previous armed organizations with regards to military power, media manipulation, social programs, and above all nation building (Bakkour, 2023). These improvements stemmed from its ability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment marked by multiple military conflicts. It had no advanced defense mechanisms, no navy, no air force, and no nuclear missiles. On the other hand, with the latest communication technologies along with media propaganda, it was trying to create a nation-state (Gomes and Michael, 2018) on the Salafi model of the four caliphs who succeeded the Prophet Muhammad in the late seventh century (Brown et al., 2020). Thus, IS gradually was going into the process of forming a state (Hove, 2018).

At its height ISIS held a territory as big as the United Kingdom. It emerged from the remnants of al-Qaeda and the prolonged war in Iraq. Napoleoni (2014) compared it with the bird ‘phoenix’ which is some kind of a continuation from before and mutation of a previous form.

Nevertheless, in 2019 it was officially defeated with the last stronghold Baghuz (town in Syria) being overtaken by its enemies (Chulov, 2019).

3. Origins and development of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) appeared from the early phases of the Syrian civil war from 2011 by opposing the autocratic regime of the president Bashar al-Assad (Sharawi, 2024). It derived from the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda branch in Syria (Yashlavskii, 2022), and soon thereafter became famous for its warfare efficacy as well as for its jhadist ideology calling for a strict Islamic rule. Its leader is called Abu Mohammad al-Julani (real name Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa) who was fighting with the US forces in the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and was imprisoned at Camp Bucca for five years. He was also a close associate of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi who was later killed (Roggio, 2024).

Al-Julani was also coordinating with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in terms of extending the al-Qaeda's branch in Syria (Ingram et al., 2020). On April 8, 2013, Baghdadi announced in an audio statement that Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) was a part of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) and both organizations would therefore form the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). A few days later though Abu Mohammed al-Jolani disagreed on that and pledged allegiance to the al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri (The Guardian, 2024). This led to a disintegration between the Nusra Front and ISIS. Moreover, Al-Qaeda isolated itself from ISIS as well (Sly, 2014). A few months later ISIS invaded Mosul and established rule over most of Iraq and Syria.

Al-Jawlani was willing to avoid alienating Syrians but al-Qaeda did not help him much in that direction (Al-Lami, 2024). By the same token in 2016 the leader publicly declared breaking off the links with al-Qaeda (Barrington and Al-Khalidi, 2016) by embracing the new name Jabhat Fateh al-Sham meaning 'Front for the Conquest of the Levant (Syria)' (Boghani, 2016). In 2017 it united with other organizations in the Syrian civil war by finally adopting the name Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or the 'Organization for the Liberation of the Levant' (Wright et al., 2024). HTS is called by some a nationalist group as it focuses on Syrian internal problems encompassing local governance, economic issues, and humanitarian aid. Nonetheless, its core still remained within the spectre of jihadism being the overthrow of the Syrian government and declaring Islamist rule in the country (Harmouch, 2024).

In result, both JN and ISIS emerged from Al-Qaeda in Iraq-AQI (Levitt, 2024). Since 2014 ISIS was gaining prominence and did not acknowledge very much the new formation. Today we witness the opposite situation as basically ISIS has lost most if not all of its support in Syria but HTS has become valid. Thus, there is a prospect of future alliance between the two groups who at some point of time were together (Hoffman, 2024).

4. Differences between HTS and ISIS

Back in 2014 al-Julani released a statement saying that the Nusra Front would build a state founded on God's will in every aspect (Wright et al., 2024). The main goal was to topple the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and carry out a Salafi version of an Islamic state in Syria (BBC, 2013). Regarding territorial expansion Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in Syria (JFS) did not hold a large piece of territory. It rather tried forming alliances with other extremist groups dedicated to fighting Assad. JFS invested energy into converting Christians and Druze. Nevertheless, its rhetoric was less sectarian (Benotman & Blake, 2013). It pursues a soft approach by not

engaging in rivalries with other Muslim organizations as an Islamic state needs to be established in consensus with them.

The current group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has different interests from ISIS (Detrow, 2024). It is more moderate and emphasizes the domestic situation in Syria. The international agenda is not so strong as that of the Islamic state (Loft and Mills, 2024). Some describe it as a Syrian nationalist institution. Al-Jolani has distanced himself from global jihadism (Opanasenko, 2024) by focusing on politics and not so much on ideology. HTS originated from jihadist factions but presents itself as a political movement which differentiates it from others (Solomon, 2022). In some interviews he replies that his war was with Assad, not with the US. He concentrated on military targets in Syria and did not want to harm the civilians. He added that HTS is defending the people (Taddonio, 2024).

There are between 10 000-15 000 fighters at this moment (Cypel et al., 2024). HTS' security personnel were pursuing some Islamic State's groups in Idlib province, dwindling the affiliate of al-Qaeda named Hurras al-Din movement, and arresting some of its top officials (Soliman, 2021). Simultaneously it was ambushing minor Jihadi factions containing foreign fighters like Jund al-Sham (Hauer, 2021) by expelling them from the city. What do these actions indicate? HTS has been renewing itself and has not aspired to transnational Jihad but has been willing to achieve national liberation. This is similar to the Taliban model in Afghanistan which to an extent was accepted by major powers in the face of the US. This example inspired HTS leaders who desire to capitalize on the Taliban experience. Turkey has also put pressure on the group to adopt new reforms through the Astana Talks. This was an initiative by Turkey, Iran, and Russia for ending the conflict in Syria and the launch of a peaceful negotiation process (Mohamad, 2023). Al-Julani has been redirecting the focus of HTS and has worked for evicting jihadist networks in its areas. Probably the plan was to take the group off from the terrorist lists but this is still uncertain (Schaer, 2024).

What is similar between ISIS and HTS is that both preach Salafi jihadism and belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. Another similarity is that they want to build a state with a functioning bureaucracy. HTS has embraced the idea of a Salvation Government characterized by a technocratic administration, independent of its army. In Idlib in particular it built hospitals and schools and reinvested taxes to develop the city. What differed from the Islamic State was that it did not pose taxes known as 'jizya' on religious minorities like the Christians (Demir, 2024). The main difference was that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was not so harsh and did not value so much ideological purity. It just wanted to protect the Syrian people.

5. Current situation in Syria between HTS and ISIS

What is ISIS' view of its success against the Syrian government? In its magazine Naba there was an open critique of HTS calling them "jihadists turned politicians" (Altuna and Cabus, 2024, p. 4). It considers HTS to be an intermediary who represents international interests and has its own agenda to control Syria and destabilize other Islamist rebels (Zelin, 2023). Its administration in Idlib serves as an example of a political entity which is acceptable to global powers. HTS has therefore abandoned jihadist values (Makooi, 2024) and has become pragmatic with its own interests. Just before the capture of the capital Damascus, the Islamic State praised the success and said this corresponded with Islamic eschatology. In contrast, it expressed concerns that HTS was acting in line with national and democratic initiatives. Terms like a 'national constitution' or a 'transitional council' were unacceptable and were in favor of Western powers which contradict the Islamic Sharia. What is more, HTS has been very

merciful towards ethnic and religious minorities (Nakhleh, 2024) and is not strongly opposed to other powers such as Russia and Iran. Al-Jolani has maintained peace with the enemies of Islam for that matter. The Western dresses of HTS' supporters make them un-Islamic (Kishore et al., 2024).

Can ISIS revive now with HTS being in power in Syria? The Islamic State lost its core territory in Iraq and Syria back in 2019 and just continued operating on a cell level in various parts of the world. It has been really trying to return to the stage (Zelin & Margolin, 2023). Here are a few examples. From January to June 2024 it took responsibility for 153 attacks in Iraq and Syria (US Central Command, 2024). This is a double of the attacks from the preceding year. It is important to note the influence from the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Israel. Israel was targeting Iranian forces in Syria causing them to withdraw. Russia could not support al-Assad anymore. This caused ISIS to take the opportunity and make violent attacks. In May and June 2024 ISIS launched three suicide bombing attacks for the first time in years (Hodge, 2024). There are still 50 000 ISIS prisoners in Syria which if freed can be of great help for the extremists to revitalise (Margolin, 2024). ISIS has other affiliates like the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) in Central Asia that can assist too. ISK killed 153 people in the concert hall in Moscow on March 22, 2024 (Drevon, 2024).

What role does the US play now in Syria? On December 8, 2024, the US carried out airstrikes on Islamic state operatives and camps to make sure the group does not advance from the current chaos in the country (Detsch et al., 2024). There are currently 900 US troops there and the president Trump called the situation 'a mess' stressing the US should not get involved (Al Jazeera Staff, 2024). Anthony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, urged all nations to support an inclusive political process in the country. Humanitarian aid and respect for minorities should be a priority for the future government (Le Monde, 2024). The current prime minister is Mohammed al-Bashir who was put in power by HTS (Al Jazeera, 2024). He is heading the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-led de facto government in Idlib province and has been negotiating with the members of al-Assad's former government. Al-Bashir shall lead the interim government till March 1, 2025. New institutions and reforms are currently taking place as time progresses.

6. Conclusion

Syria now is in a political turmoil with an uncertain future. What about the different rebel groups, each one having a desire to become influential? ISIS is a lethal terrorist group which wants to destabilize any regime. It is the most extreme of all and no one is willing to share power with it. In contrast, HTS says it cares for the Syrian people and is not necessarily against the West. Al Qaeda also had a stronghold in the region. One has to remember that other strong states such as Turkey, Russia, Iran, the US, and Saudi Arabia shall also observe the situation there. What is more, Israel is concerned with different terrorist groups existent in Syria and may also get involved. Will ISIS take advantage of the chaos there and strike or share some of its values with HTS? Whatever happens, remains to be seen.

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