



Commentary

Published 20 February 2020

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The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani

As a humanitarian disaster unfolds in Idlib, the last bastion of Syria's Islamist rebels, the question is whether accommodation is possible between the militants and their foes. External actors should answer by gauging the insurgents' ability to maintain calm and their sincerity about aiding civilians.

Backed by Russian airpower, the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad is bearing down on Idlib, the last remaining rebel stronghold. Previous offensives elsewhere in the war-torn country have tripled Idlib's population, which now stands at roughly three million. Today, in the face of a nine-month-old offensive targeting the province, internal displacement is rising to levels unprecedented in this already extraordinarily brutal conflict. Over a million Syrians have fled, mostly toward makeshift shelters along the border with Turkey, to escape regime shelling and Russian aerial bombardment. Ankara has said it will take in no more refugees, having already accommodated over three million Syrians so far. Halting the offensive will depend on Ankara reaching a deal with Moscow (and, through Moscow, Damascus) a prospect that is increasingly uncertain. In the absence of a deal, Turkey could come to blows with both the Assad regime and Russia. In that case, Idlib's dire humanitarian situation would almost certainly become an even bigger calamity.

Idlib's fate appears to depend on how Moscow and Ankara calculate the value of their relationship. The two sides had designed

previous Idlib ceasefires purportedly to afford Ankara time to "solve" the problem presented by the jihadist rebel group controlling the area, Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (the Levant Liberation Organisation, or HTS), which Russia (but also the U.S.) considers a terrorist organisation. The idea was that Turkey would contain the group as an alternative to an outright Russian/regime effort to destroy HTS militarily. Verbally, however, Moscow made clear to Ankara that it was expecting more – that Turkey physically separate HTS from "moderates" as a precursor to military action against the former. Over time, once it became clear that Turkey was unable – and perhaps also unwilling – to deliver on this goal, Russia and the regime used Ankara's inaction to justify pushing at the edges of rebel-held areas. They employed a "salami-slicing" approach in wresting the province incrementally from HTS control and targeting Syrians irrespective of whether they belong to HTS or not, as part of an effort to help the regime retake control of the entirety of the country. In pursuit of this objective, Russia and the regime have repeatedly targeted population centres, including markets, schools and hospitals, with the effect of emptying these areas to ease the way for their recapture by regime ground forces.

Today, that strategy appears to be reaching a climax. The regime has retaken swathes of rebel-held territory in the past nine months. In response to regime bombardment of densely populated towns earlier in February, in which Turkish military observers deployed in Idlib were killed, Turkey sent in reinforcements and

has threatened to confront the Syrian army directly if it fails to pull back to its previous positions. Moscow's relationship with Ankara (and that of President Vladimir Putin with his counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in particular) now hangs in the balance. If the two leaders want to preserve that relationship, they will have to find an accommodation over Idlib.

In such a scenario, Ankara and Moscow would have to find a solution to the HTS question. The group boasts substantial military strength – it is thought to have tens of thousands of battle-hardened fighters – and it has all but monopolised security control over Idlib's population. It might not be able to withstand a concerted Russian/regime assault. Yet given how deeply entrenched HTS is in Idlib and the difficulty of the terrain, such an onslaught would almost certainly come at heavy military cost to the regime and trigger a massive humanitarian crisis, with even larger numbers of Syrians fleeing toward the Turkish border – a prospect that Ankara dreads. Anything less than a full assault and takeover of Idlib, however, would appear to extend HTS's existence in the area, even if its territory shrinks. The question is therefore whether any accommodation with HTS in Idlib is possible, which in turn raises the question of what, precisely, that organisation is today.

The group's leadership asserts that it is adjusting to the new realities on the ground. It says it has forsworn transnational jihadist ambitions and is readying itself to focus on governing territory under its control. At least, this is what a recent conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, HTS's leader, suggests.

Crisis Group (along with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva) spoke with Jolani in Idlib for four hours in late January, touching upon the group's ideology and evolution, its relations with other jihadist groups, and its objectives in the struggle against the regime in Damascus.

Following a series of rebranding efforts and internal transformations, Jolani told us, HTS presents itself today as a local group, independent of al-Qaeda's chain of command, with a

strictly Syrian, not a transnational, Islamist agenda. "I was influenced by a Salafi-jihadist milieu that emerged from a desire to resist the U.S. occupation of Iraq", he said, "but today the reality on the ground is our reference".

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Jolani travelled there from Syria. He joined a Salafi-jihadist group that later morphed into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). By 2011, when the U.S. pulled its troops out of Iraq and a popular uprising erupted in Syria, he had decided that it was time to "join the struggle" at home. Yet he soon fell out with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISI's successor organisation ISIS, and declared his and his group's allegiance to al-Qaeda instead. Jolani explained:

When we broke off from ISIS, we didn't have any good options. I had to take a quick decision, so I gathered my inner circle and told them I was considering pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda. They advised against it – some even described it as suicidal – but no one was able to provide me with an alternative. However, I conditioned my pledge on the notion that we would not use Syria as a launching pad for external operations. Nor would we allow others to use it for such a purpose. I made clear that we would focus exclusively on our struggle against the Syrian regime and its allies in Syria.

This decision led Jolani to rebrand his Jabhat al-Nusra as Jabhat Fath al-Sham and eventually to pursue a merger with a number of other local groups to create HTS. Idlib became their centre of operations. Whether and when Jolani's various groups in fact forswore transnational operations is a matter of intense debate, but, according to him, HTS's single goal is to fight the regime in Damascus – "a regime that has lost all legitimacy". HTS's ideology today, he said, is based on "Islamic jurisprudence, just like any other local Sunni group in Syria".

With the purported ideological shift came battles with both followers and rivals. In the course of his leadership, and over time, Jolani sidelined or expelled most hardline

and non-Syrian voices in HTS who opposed its apparent ideological transformation, thus rendering it more Syrian and less transnational jihadist in orientation. Still, HTS's relationship with hardline groups remains ambiguous. HTS has tried to eliminate ISIS cells active in Idlib. But it has shied away from confronting al-Qaeda offshoots such as Hurras al-Din, which is now the official Al-Qaeda branch in Idlib; to some extent, it even has coordinated with that group in resisting the Russian/regime offensive. Other foreign groups, such as the Turkistan Islamic Party, a mainly Uighur militant faction from China, also work in close cooperation with HTS. In Jolani's words,

We have been going systematically after ISIS cells in Idlib and this is why we haven't seen a single ISIS attack in Idlib in the past six months. We have also contained Hurras al-Din, with whom we have a convoluted relationship. We had them sign a commitment not to use Syria as a launching pad for external jihad and to recognise the Salvation Government [the local government set up in Idlib by HTS; see below] and its courts [in other words, not to create its own Sharia courts]. So far, they have observed these commitments. With regard to what you describe as hardline voices within HTS, we have shown time and again that whenever we reach a decision about something, everyone follows the chain of command. As for those who don't, they can easily part ways with us.

As for the Turkistan Islamic Party, things are a little different. These guys have been in Syria for seven years and have never constituted a threat to the outside world. They are committed solely to defending Idlib against regime aggression. As Uighurs, they face persecution in China – which we strongly

condemn – and they have nowhere else to go. Of course, I sympathise with them. But their struggle in China is not ours, so we tell them that they are welcome here as long as they abide by our rules – which they do.

During our conversation, we told Jolani that people criticise HTS for its record of using violence against opposition groups, silencing dissent, and detaining non-violent activists and opposition-affiliated civil servants in local government. Its domineering attitude toward U.S.- and Turkey-backed opposition formations has alienated both these groups and their regional and international sponsors. Jolani partially acknowledged such conduct but claimed that HTS has embarked on a new path:

We have used force in the past against factions that we deemed problematic. The U.S. mistakenly attempted to create and back groups that had no presence or support in Syria. We need to talk to the opposition. We are under no illusion that we can govern Idlib on our own. Yes, like most movements in time of war, we've made mistakes, but we are trying to fix them now.

Jolani claimed that HTS is also changing its policy toward international aid organisations in light of the growing humanitarian emergency, saying:

Our policy toward NGOs has changed. We are willing to facilitate the work of any organisation that would like to return to work in Idlib, and we pledge non-interference. We will reconcile with any organisation we've had problems with in the past if they are prepared to help the people here. We are stretched thin trying to cope with the flow of displaced people.

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HTS's position on a final settlement for the Syrian conflict remains unclear. In its rhetoric, the group has long called for the regime's overthrow and the departure of Iranian and Russian forces, even as such objectives have become increasingly unrealistic. Jolani offered a counter-argument:

If you ask me to be realistic and to accept that there is no international will to effect regime change, the world should also be realistic and accept that over half of Syria's population, some twelve million people, chose not to live under regime control. They voted with their feet. The least these people deserve is to live in safety. When you walk around here in Idlib, pick any civilian and ask them what it means to them to live under regime control. They will tell you that they prefer living in makeshift camps where their kids are dying in harsh weather conditions over returning to regime areas where they know they will be tortured and killed.

In 2017, HTS endorsed the establishment of the Salvation Government in Idlib to administer the province's day-to-day affairs. Jolani described his group's relationship with that local government as a division of roles: "You can't say we control it, and I can't say we have nothing to do with it. Yes, we have final say on security and military matters, because we are at war, but we don't have final say over civil administration". He disavowed an interest in one-party rule, and encouraged others to join the Salvation Government.

HTS is a project built from circumstance and won't last forever. We don't have a predetermined long-term plan. No one knows what will happen in the next three months, which areas will be under our control, how many displaced we will have to take care of, what Turkey will do or whether the Americans will even still be in Syria. But as I told you, our basic principles are clear, and our

mid-term plan is to stabilise the area under our control and administer it through an alliance of local Syrian revolutionary forces that are committed to protecting Idlib. We could develop a political manifesto that would clarify our identity.

While Jolani's rhetoric attempts to create the impression that the group has had a genuine change of heart about its objectives and behaviour, HTS would need to take far more concrete steps to demonstrate the sincerity of this reorientation, particularly to external actors. The apparent deadlock between Moscow and Ankara over Idlib and the area's humanitarian emergency both necessitate a renewed ceasefire that would provide more time to find a diplomatic solution. Once that is achieved, Russia can test whether HTS is true to its word – whether it really is reforming itself – by assessing how willing it is to abide by a ceasefire, halt attacks on Russia's Hmeimim air base and regime-controlled areas outside Idlib, and prevent attacks by smaller, harder-line jihadist factions, for which HTS has so far enjoyed convenient deniability. Russia, but also Western states, should determine whether HTS is demonstrating good-faith efforts to contain foreign and transnationally oriented jihadists beyond just ISIS; yielding more control of sectors of civilian governance inside Idlib and allowing for a degree of political pluralism, among other clear governance and political concessions; and refraining from interfering in the work of humanitarian organisations ready to help close to a million desperate people hunkered down in miserable conditions next to the Turkish border. A campaign to uproot and defeat HTS in its final redoubt will almost certainly lead to a humanitarian catastrophe of unprecedented proportions. Any avenue, however narrow, for preventing such an outcome should be explored.