

# The Transformation of a Salafi-Jihadi Group after 2011: From *Jabhat al-Nusra* to *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*

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## Introduction

Salafism has been profoundly transformed by the 2011 uprisings.<sup>1</sup> Salafis used to be broadly divided by their political preferences, with scholastic Salafis (*'ilmi*) focusing on education and preaching, *haraki* Salafis participating in political processes, and *jihadi* Salafis advocating violence.<sup>2</sup> A succession of popular uprisings that resulted in political openings or armed conflicts showed that these political preferences are largely contingent on Salafis' political environments. While former proponents of violence joined the political process in Egypt, scholastic Salafis embraced violence as a *modus operandi* in Libya and Syria.<sup>3</sup> The past decade hence illustrates how Salafis have re-shaped the trajectories of this ideological trend.

- 1 This research is based on a longer research paper. Drevon, Jerome, and Patrick Haenni. "How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads. The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria." *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. RSCAS 8* (2021).
- 2 This typology was initially presented by Wiktorowicz, Quintan. "Anatomy of the Salafi movement." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29:3 (2006): 207-239.
- 3 e.g. Drevon, Jerome. "The emergence of ex-Jihadi political parties in post-Mubarak Egypt." *The Middle East Journal* 69.4 (2015): 511-526; Collombier, Virginie. "Salafi politics: 'political' and 'quietist' Salafis in the struggle for the Libyan state". EUI-RSCAS/MEDirections/NUPI, 2020/15.

Existing research on Salafism has already analysed its roots and construction in different countries in detail,<sup>4</sup> yet *jihadi* Salafis are still mostly studied for their path of radicalism rather than themes of accommodation or pragmatism. The rise of Islamic State (IS) has reinforced this tendency as the group imposed new violent practices – including mass-slavery and slaughter – and became embroiled in episodes of cross-factional violence with al-Qaeda (AQ).<sup>5</sup> But not all *jihadi* Salafis have followed the same trajectory. Others have tried to conciliate their belief systems with forms of restraint too. This contribution intends to highlight this phenomenon based on field-research undertaken with the HTS leadership in Idlib.

## Salafi Jihadism on the Eve of the Syrian Uprising (1990-2011)

The past decade has been particularly transformative for *jihadi* Salafis. *Jihadi* Salafism was historically the outgrowth of Islamist mobilisation for the Afghan jihad combined with the strategic failure of other Islamist armed groups to topple domestic Muslim regimes in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> *Jihadi* Salafism developed a dual anti-American and anti-Muslim regime<sup>7</sup> agenda when its proponents assessed that domestic

- 4 e.g. Hegghammer, Thomas. *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge University Press, 2011; Wagemakers, Joas. *A quietist jihadi: the ideology and influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- 5 Lister, Charles R. *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic state and the evolution of an insurgency*. Oxford University Press, 2016; Hamming, Tore Refslund. "The Al Qaeda–Islamic State Rivalry: Competition Yes, but No Competitive Escalation." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32.1 (2020): 20-37.
- 6 Gerges, Fawaz A. *The far enemy: why Jihad went global* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Hegghammer, Thomas. "The rise of Muslim foreign fighters: Islam and the globalization of Jihad." *International Security* 35.3 (2010): 53-94.
- 7 By Muslim regimes, we mean political regimes of the Muslim world.

regimes would never change if they remained supported by the United States. The American militarised response to 9/11 only served to re-emphasise this paradigm, which swayed smaller non-affiliated *jihadi* groups into AQ's umbrella.<sup>8</sup> The year 2011 changed this paradigm. After a moment of indecision, Western countries no longer stood against domestic political change. They either supported some political opening in Muslim countries, which strengthened local Islamist groups as in Egypt, or helped to militarily topple other regimes such as in Libya.

In Syria, three key features shaped the trajectories of armed groups associated with *jihadi* Salafism during the armed conflict that started in 2011. First, the causes of the conflict were domestic. The war was not a reaction to foreign occupation as in neighbouring Iraq. Repression was both indiscriminate and incredibly far-reaching. Entire cities were assaulted and depopulated by the regime and its foreign allies (Russia and Iran). The regime hence never tried to isolate *jihadi* Salafis from the population, but effectively punished all the civilian population that sided with the opposition. Second, the position of Western countries changed. Western countries quickly sided in favour of regime change – at least on paper. They were willing to support, to some extent, the militarisation of the uprising including its Islamist components providing they did not affiliate with AQ. Lastly, IS quickly rose within the insurgency, started to fight other groups, and imposed a combination of harsh local governance and foreign attacks that antagonised virtually everybody. The combination of these three factors influenced other *jihadi* Salafis or those close to them, who had to develop their own alternative.

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8 Mendelsohn, Barak. *The al-Qaeda Franchise: the Expansion of al-Qaeda and its Consequences* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

## The Case of *Jabhat al-Nusra/Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham* in Syria (2011-2017)

The Syrian group *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) very much epitomises the changes that affected Salafism for the past decade, especially *jihadi* Salafism. While the group is important in itself as a case-study, its trajectory also raises important questions on existing understandings of the political strategies developed by *salafi jihadi* groups in light of substantial external changes. The case-study also interrogates Western political decisions regarding these groups, including the prospects and practicalities of engagement.

HTS was initially created as *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JaN), literally a "Front of Support" to the Syrian revolution.<sup>9</sup> JaN was the project of an Islamic State in Iraq's (ISI, the previous iteration of IS) commander, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, who wanted to support the 2011 Syrian popular uprising. Al-Jolani and his associates, thought that the non-violent uprising would be a dead-end. Like many other groups at the time, they believed that militarisation was ineluctable. They also viewed Syria differently from Iraq, where militarisation was a response to foreign occupation. The group therefore came to support an armed popular uprising without necessarily planning to impose a strong ideological project on the population at the beginning. The group was initially embedded in the early insurgency, to which it brought critical military expertise from Iraq.

JaN had an ambiguous connection to AQ and IS since its emergence.<sup>10</sup> Jolani and his associates obtained limited financial support and several men from ISI when they created the group. They nonetheless took their decisions independently

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9 See also Cafarella, Jennifer. "Jabhat al Nusra in Syria." *Institute for the Study of War*. <http://www.understanding-war.org/report/jabhat-al-nusra-syria> (2014); Lister, Charles. *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*. Brookings Institution, 2016.

10 This is based on several interviews with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani conducted in 2020 and 2021.

in Syria based on their own understanding of the situation. Jolani notably refused important orders from ISI, especially when ISI asked JaN to orchestrate high-level attacks against the mainstream Syrian opposition based in Turkey. The relative independence of JaN and its growing popularity underpinned ISI's reassertion from 2013 onwards. ISI became the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) as it tried to impose a re-integration of the two groups in the same organisational umbrella controlled by the Iraqi leadership. Jolani's refusal to reintegrate ISIS motivated his pledge of allegiance to AQ. Jolani thought that the new allegiance was necessary to maintain the loyalty of its prominent commanders and Syrian soldiers and prevent them from joining ISIS. However, JaN never lost its de facto independence since the connection to AQ remained symbolic. Apart from several exchanges of letters between AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and JaN, AQ did not impose its organisational control over the Syrian group, nor did it directly assist the group either militarily or financially.

In relative autonomy, JaN made decisions based on its own understanding of the changing Syrian and international reality. Two key issues started to define its behaviour henceforth. First, JaN gradually articulated a new approach to its regional and international environment. Second, JaN embedded itself locally and started to establish local structures of governance. Both issues would shape the group's actions on the ground for the next few years.

The first issue is international. Although JaN leaders insist that the group never orchestrated external operations against other countries, which it opposed, allegiance to AQ became poisonous for the insurgency after 2014. Even a purely symbolic connection to AQ was considered a real threat to Western countries and an impediment to the unification of the opposition within Syria.<sup>11</sup>

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11 This is the context in which the U.S. started to attack prominent Nusra commanders. See Lund, Aaron. "What Is the Khorasan Group and Why Is the US Bombing It in Syria." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2014).

The contradictions between AQ's official two objectives – the replacement of domestic Muslim regimes and the fight against Western countries – became particularly obvious during the Syrian conflict. Although AQ leader Zawahiri insisted that allegiance to the group could be severed for the greater good of the Syrian uprising, AQ's willingness to accept such a step was not evident in practice.

The second issue faced by JaN is territorial control. JaN lost substantial resources when it split from ISIS in 2013. The group therefore tried to embed itself locally in North West Syria in parallel to its organisational recovery following the split from ISIS.<sup>12</sup> For example, JaN joined local courts of justice alongside other insurgents before establishing its own courts in the summer of 2015. JaN's territorial anchoring increased its hegemonic tendencies, which led it to target many independent armed groups cohabiting in its territories. Unable to face all the Syrian opposition simultaneously, however, JaN initially only attacked some groups that it accused of being supported by Western countries before subjugating other Islamist groups when it transformed into HTS.

JaN's transformation into HTS in January 2017 arguably represents one of the most salient turning point for *jihadi* Salafism in Syria and beyond. After severing ties with AQ in Summer 2016, the group tried to unite with the remaining insurgency under the umbrella of a new entity called HTS. Although many important actors refused to join the new umbrella, HTS marked a transformation of the former JaN's territorial project. According to group leaders, HTS was never supposed to be a new faction but was established to be the political and military umbrella of the entire opposition. In absence of broad understanding with the remaining insurgency, however, HTS would subjugate all other insurgents in the next two years, starting with former Islamist allies Ahrar al-Sham – which was the only other group able to unite the insurgency – before facing remaining AQ supporters that were previously in JaN.

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12 Lund, Aron. "Syria's al-Qaeda Wing Searches for a Strategy." *Carnegie Endowment for* (2014).

## The Transformation of *Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham* (2017-2021)

JaN started to effectively distance itself from *jihadi* Salafism with the establishment of HTS in January 2017. The disassociation from this ideological trend is particularly evident in the group's new approach to governance, religion, and foreign alliances. These three points are largely mutually constitutive since the necessity to nurture domestic and international support has constrained the type of local governance implemented by the group as well as its religious views.

HTS learned two main lessons in governance from the experiments of other *salafi jihadi* groups.<sup>13</sup> First, in the current international environment, the implementing of a harsh ideological programme of governance – like IS and its imposition of violent penal punishment such as public executions – is costly. Direct *salafi jihadi* ideological governance backfires internationally. It antagonises Western countries that could otherwise be willing to accept some self-governance by non-state armed groups. Second, ideological governance alienates local populations. Even a population that supports armed insurgency against a vilified regime does not necessarily acquiesce to the ideological agenda promoted by individual armed groups locally. This is also true for Islamist sympathisers.

In contrast with other *salafi jihadi* groups engaged in governance, HTS has decided not to directly rule the population. HTS has instead favoured the creation of a “technocratic” government, which it has imposed throughout the province of Idlib. The so-called Salvation Government is technically accountable to a consultative council (*majlis al-shura*) that is supposed to represent the province of Idlib. The Government has attempted to co-opt an alliance of local academics, businessmen, and tribes to supplant the revolutionary milieu. The Salvation Government relies on HTS support, especially in the field of security, but HTS does

not micro-manage the province. This is a major divergence from previous cases of *salafi jihadi* governance, which was characterised by direct judicial control over the population, especially through the court systems developed from Afghanistan to the Sahel and Somalia. HTS' local governance remains authoritarian – especially against political opponents – but it is qualitatively distinct from the governance previously enforced by *salafi jihadi* actors, as its authoritarian practices are nearly exclusively deployed to enforce political loyalty rather than ideological purity. Repression of civil society has thus primarily focused on public opposition to HTS and the Salvation Government in contrast with the violent imposition of religious norms by other *salafi jihadi* groups.<sup>14</sup>

The transformation of HTS's governance has been accompanied by HTS's own religious evolution. HTS has distanced itself from the relatively horizontal religious approach of *jihadi* Salafism, which emerged in opposition to Muslim regimes and the religious clergies that either support them or are instrumentalised by them. The *salafi jihadi* political opposition to the established order has thus structured its religious authority around non-institutionalised religious scholars sharing its views, who often participated in jihad abroad, especially in Afghanistan. The construction of this parallel clerical authority has historically eroded armed groups' control over *jihadi* Salafism at the benefit of self-proclaimed clerics. In reaction to this weakening religious control, HTS decided to institutionalise local religious authority and (re) turn to the historical schools of jurisprudence (*maddhahib*), especially the *shafi'i* school that is dominant in Idlib, in order to both re-localise itself by adopting the religious references of the population and to reacquire religious control over it. This move on religion entailed severing ties with foreign *salafi jihadi* intellectuals to limit their local influence. The institutionalisation of religious authority within the province and the group itself has marginalised the implementation of the most

<sup>13</sup> Lia, Brynjar. "Understanding jihadi proto-states." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9.4 (2015): 31-41.

<sup>14</sup> The most stereotypical cases are the application of the Islamic legal punishments (*hudud*) by groups like IS, including public stoning for adultery.



divisive aspects of *jihadi* Salafism, such as the excommunication of other Muslims (*takfir*).

The third main change accompanying the creation of HTS concerns its ties to foreign states. *Jihadi* Salafism was precisely defined by its opposition to Muslim regimes that were considered non-Islamic and to Western States for supporting them. Since the first Gulf war in the early 1990s, *jihadi* Salafism promoted the theological concept of “loyalty and disavowal” (*al-wala’ wal-bara’*) to denounce any open collaboration with non-Islamic states.<sup>15</sup> Despite its own previous antagonism to Syrian insurgents receiving support from foreign states, HTS gradually acknowledged the necessity to nurture its own foreign relations with them. The group contends that the Syrian reality necessitates the development of new relations to foreign states, especially Turkey, for the survival of the province of Idlib under opposition control. Despite some tensions, HTS ultimately aligned with the Turkish intervention that started in 2017 and consolidated in 2020, and thus acquiesced to a patronage relationship with a secular state. It now seeks to reach out to Western countries as well.

Considering the group’s transformation in the fields of governance, religion, and international relations, does HTS remain *salafi jihadi*? HTS has not undertaken substantial ideological revisions. The group has primarily re-framed its new approach in terms of “*Shari’a* Politics” (*al-siyasa al-shari’ya*) to justify that it is confronted to a phase of subjugation (*marhalat al-istid’af*) where the full implementation of an Islamic order (*tamkin*) is limited. Its religious scholars still insist that they believe in the same key ideological tenets and, for instance, have not renounced their opposition to democracy. The group remains religiously *salafi*, but its current approach to jihad is virtually undistinguishable from the defensive jihad promoted by the remaining Syrian opposition

(including its more secular components).<sup>16</sup> The group now defines itself as a revolutionary Islamist group that does not have the means to change local religious practices and clergymen, and therefore suspends the implementation of its religious agenda – without renouncing it – in exchange for local compliance to its political authority. At the same time, the group strives to be more open in its relations to other countries against shared enemies – primarily the regime, Iran, IS, and to a lesser extent Russia. Accordingly, HTS is more politically than religiously driven. HTS has left the *salafi jihadi* sphere and has become much closer to the approach embraced by Islamist groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, despite remaining ideological differences.

## Conclusion and Policy Implications

This case study illustrates the impact of the constraints posed by the Syrian conflict on the strategy of a former IS and AQ affiliate. The exaggerated emphasis on IS and its expansion throughout the Muslim world should not suggest that (violent) radicalism – both ideological and behavioural – is the only way forward for these groups. *Salafi jihadi* groups can react very differently to internal and external constraints. In Syria, the prioritisation of political objectives by HTS has nurtured significant changes including theological re-localisation, management of internal radicalism, and transnational governance through non-affiliated technocrats. While the nature of HTS’s project remains difficult to define in the current circumstances, the group has undoubtedly left the transnational *salafi jihadi* matrix. HTS remains *Salafi* in creed but has arguably entered a post-*jihadi* phase.

What does the group’s evolution say about the future of this trend, and Western policies toward it? Western countries have conflated their counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism

15 Wagemakers, Joas. “Framing The “Threat to Islam”: Al-Wala’ Wa Al-Bara’ in Salafi Discourse.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* (2008): 1-22.

16 Virtually all the armed opposition still calls for the capture of Damascus while, in practice, only engaging in the defence of North West Syria.

approaches since 9/11. Many conflicts have been considered under the counter-terrorism paradigm, with a clear emphasis on the risks posed by potential “launch-pads” for foreign attacks. The main response has usually been the military eradication of these groups, either directly or through local partners. The question of engagement and political transformation was rarely ever posed. However, while armed groups were receptive to AQ’s sway in the 2000s, when they believed that joining AQ fitted their interests,<sup>17</sup> the structure of incentives can certainly change. Since 2011, the tensions – and potential contradictions – between AQ’s two key objectives against local Muslim regimes and Western states have appeared clearly. Many groups are still likely to remain within AQ’s orbit, especially when they remain embedded in the same international networks or continue to believe in the same paradigms. But other groups can certainly change course. Instead of deploying only military responses, Western countries should acknowledge that some of them can be engaged with politically and are, or can become, credibly distanced from AQ and IS.

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17 Bacon, Tricia. *Why terrorist groups form international alliances* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).