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# PUBLICATION PAPER

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## Who is HTS ? The group behind the fall of Aleppo to the rebels

**Candra Ihsan**

*Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is an armed group in Syria that has its roots in the Al-Nusra Front, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda that later broke away. Formed in 2017 through the merger of several rebel groups, HTS focuses on resistance to the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the establishment of an Islamic-based government in Syria. Led by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, HTS controls the Idlib region and has complex relationships with regional actors such as Turkey. The structure of the HTS includes the Syria Council as well as key figures who control the economy and the military. The group's main income comes from border taxes, oil trade, and control over local resources. HTS is also known for its operation against ISIS and other extremist groups. Despite claiming to have only a local agenda, HTS is still categorized as a terrorist organization by some countries. The study analyzes the evolution of HTS, its operational strategy, and its influence on the dynamics of the conflict in Syria.*

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## حيات تحرير الشام

Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) means "Organization for the Liberation of the Levant" (the Levant is the territory that includes Syria and its surroundings). The name reflects the group's main goal, which is to liberate the Syrian people from the authoritarian rule of President Bashar al-Assad. HTS has its roots in the early Syrian civil war and is the successor to a group called Al-Nusra Front, which was once an affiliate of Al-Qaeda in Syria. However, unlike Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups, HTS focuses more on local destinations in Syria. They have no global ambitions, but rather seek to overthrow the Assad regime and create an Islamic-based government in the region.

## HTS Transformation

It was formed in 2017 through the merger of five other groups. After that, HTS received many fighters from other rebel groups, especially when there was a deal between the rebel group and the Russian-backed Assad regime. The deal allowed rebel groups to flee to HTS territory in northern Syria. [1]

Before becoming HTS, the group was the Al-Nusra Front, which was founded in 2011 as an affiliate of Al-Qaeda in the Syrian civil war. The Al-Nusra Front quickly became a well-organized organization and received funding from the Persian Gulf region. The group also collects revenue through taxes in the territories they control and attracts many new fighters.[2] ; [3]

At first, Al-Nusra Front remained in contact with Al-Qaeda even though Al-Qaeda severed ties with ! S! S openly. In fact, the leader! S! S, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, played an important role in the early formation of this group. However, Al-Nusra later severed ties with ! S! S and swore allegiance (Bay'at) to Al-Qaeda. [4]

In 2016, Al-Nusra rebranded to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) and officially severed ties with Al-Qaeda. This step makes JFS a more independent entity. However, this decision was deemed "illegitimate" by Al-Qaeda because there was no consultation with their central leadership. After the rebranding, HTS was formed in 2017 through the merger of various groups, becoming what we know today. [5] ; [6]

## The Leader

Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Born in 1982 in Syria, Jolani began to engage in armed resistance after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. He joined the Al-Qaeda-led insurgency against U.S. forces. Like many other jihadist leaders, Jolani was once held at Camp Bucca, a notorious detention facility in Iraq. After his release in 2008, Jolani continued his militant activities and teamed up with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who later became the leader of the ! S!S.

In 2011, Jolani was sent back to Syria, his home country, to join other Al-Qaeda members and establish their presence in the Syrian civil war. [2]

The peak of Jolani's career occurred in 2017, when she became the leader of the recently renamed HTS. HTS has local ambitions, and Jolani claims that his group is not a threat to Western countries. Despite this, the U.S. State Department designated Jolani as a highly wanted terrorist. The FBI is even offering a \$10 million reward for anyone who can provide information that leads to his arrest.



*Figure 1. Abu Ahmad Al-Jolani. Source : <https://5pillarsuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/ALJAWLANI-1.jpg>*

## Syria Council and Jolani Loyalists

It has the goal of forming an Islamic state in Syria, so this group is led by a Syria Council. The HTS government structure has similarities with the style of government! S! S in his heyday. HTS is driven by three main internal groups: [7]

- Groups close to Jolani: Those who align with Abu Mohammed al-Jolani's pragmatic approach.
- Groups with HTS dominance interests: Those who have an interest in maintaining HTS power in Syria.
- Ideological group: This group has largely remained silent and is controlled by Jolani and his loyalists.

To highlight the image of HTS as a local Syria-focused group with no international ambitions, Jolani formed a core leadership circle made up of Syrians. The two main figures in this circle are: [8]

- Abdel Rahman Atun: Head of the HTS Syria Council and a senior religious figure who is very close to Jolani. He also stressed that HTS is not a threat to the West. After the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021, Atun supported the idea of a Taliban-style insurgency in Syria. [9]
- Mustafa Qadid: High commander in HTS who previously worked as a banker. He is responsible for the group's financial tasks, including managing the border with Turkey. His closeness to Jolani is reflected in his high position in the organization. [10]

## Power in Idlib

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They do not directly rule the Idlib region and surrounding areas of Syria, but have a great influence over the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). Although the SSG claims to be an independent governing body that manages local government duties, many parties state that HTS controls the SSG. The SSG is considered to only provide legal legitimacy for HTS to take over the economy and resources in the region. [10]

In the social aspect, HTS does not impose harsh Syria laws as applied by ! S! S when they control a large area in Syria. HTS, for example, does enforce gender segregation in schools and universities, but they still allow women to continue their education until college. In fact, HTS mentions that many university graduates in their region are women. However, like ! S! S, HTS monitors social media usage in the territories they control. [11] [12]

In the midst of the worst drought in recent years, HTS and SSG have started pumping water from the Balaa Dam again to prevent hunger due to food shortages. Although they charge local farmers for irrigation, this move helps maintain the food supply in the region. [13]

However, HTS has also faced criticism from locals, especially regarding the way they collect taxes from olive oil producers. In 2019, citizen discontent peaked when a group of residents stormed the police station and expelled officials associated with HTS. In response, HTS retaliated by shelling the city, resulting in the deaths of five civilians. [14]

## **Economy Section**

It rules about 4 million people in its territory, of which 2 million are Syrian refugees from outside Idlib. To fund its government and operations, HTS relies on major revenues from taxes at the border. One of the biggest sources of revenue is the Bab al-Eve border crossing, which connects Syria with Turkey. It is reported that from these borders alone, HTS earns millions of dollars every month through tax collections. [15]

In addition, according to a 2021 UN report, HTS is also heavily involved in the import and distribution of gasoline. Through a monopoly managed by Watad Petroleum, HTS earns about \$1 million in revenue every month from the sector. [16]

## **Operation Strategy**

Like many organizations labeled terrorists in the Middle East, it uses a variety of tactics in its operations. However, because the goal is local and focuses on Syria and overthrowing the Assad regime, HTS attacks are rarely aimed at civilians.

In its fight against the Assad regime, HTS has used suicide bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). At its peak in 2018, the group had about 15,000 fighters in the Idlib region and its surroundings. Most of their operations are directed at resistance to the Syrian government and the ! S! S, in accordance with the values of anti-! S! S that they adhere. Of the 1,786 acts of violence committed by HTS in 2018, only 99 were recorded as attacks on civilians. [17]

Despite attempts by the Russian-backed Syrian regime in 2019 and 2020 to retake Idlib, HTS managed to maintain control over most of the region. In 2022, they released a number of propaganda videos through their media agency, Amjaad Media. The video shows HTS's readiness to fight on various fronts, including displaying the heavily armed vehicles they have. [18]

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## Weaponry

Most of the weapons owned by HTS fighters come from loot from Syrian forces. These weapons include, but are not limited to: [19]

- AK-47 Rifles.
- Machine Guns.
- RPG
- Anti-aircraft Guns.
- Artillery

HTS continues to use these looted weapons to defend the territory they control. One of the most notable moments was in 2019 and 2020, when they used anti-aircraft weapons and artillery to counter major attacks launched by Syrian and Russian forces. [20]

## Important operations before the siege of Aleppo

### Combat! S! S& Other terrorists

Currently, HTS has carried out more than 20 attacks on targets! One of the most recent operations occurred on August 24, 2022, where HTS arrested two members ! S! S from Uzbekistan in Idlib province. The operation was carried out by the General Security Service of HTS. Previously, on June 14, 2022, HTS announced that they were detaining six members ! S! S in an apartment in the city of Al-Dana. [21] ; [22]

In addition to fighting! S! S, HTS also carried out attacks against other terrorist organizations to strengthen its position in Syria. In July 2022, HTS arrested most of the members of the Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Ansar Brigade, a small terrorist group that emerged in late 2020. HTS accused the group of being responsible for the bombing of civilians and military personnel in Idlib province, as well as attacks on Turkish forces on the Bab al-Hawa border.

This HTS move shows their ability to fight the enemy while protecting their own interests. Cooperation with Turkey to capture groups attacking Turkish forces also helps HTS in gaining recognition and maintaining the security of Bab al-Hawa, which is one of their main sources of income. [23]

### Relations with Turkey

In 2018, Turkey officially recognized HTS as a terrorist organization. However, Turkey continues to cooperate with HTS to fight other terrorist organizations, such as ! S!S. For example, in April 2022, HTS handed over 50 foreign jihadists to Turkey. Most of them are members! S! S who came from various countries, including France, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia. [24]

Overall, Turkey views HTS as an effective fighting force to fight back! S! S and also the Assad regime. Although Turkey does not fully recognize HTS as a regional ally, Turkey sees the group as an unofficial partner that helps maintain stability against the United States! S! S in the area.



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