HTS POPULISM: SURVIVAL AND EXPANSION

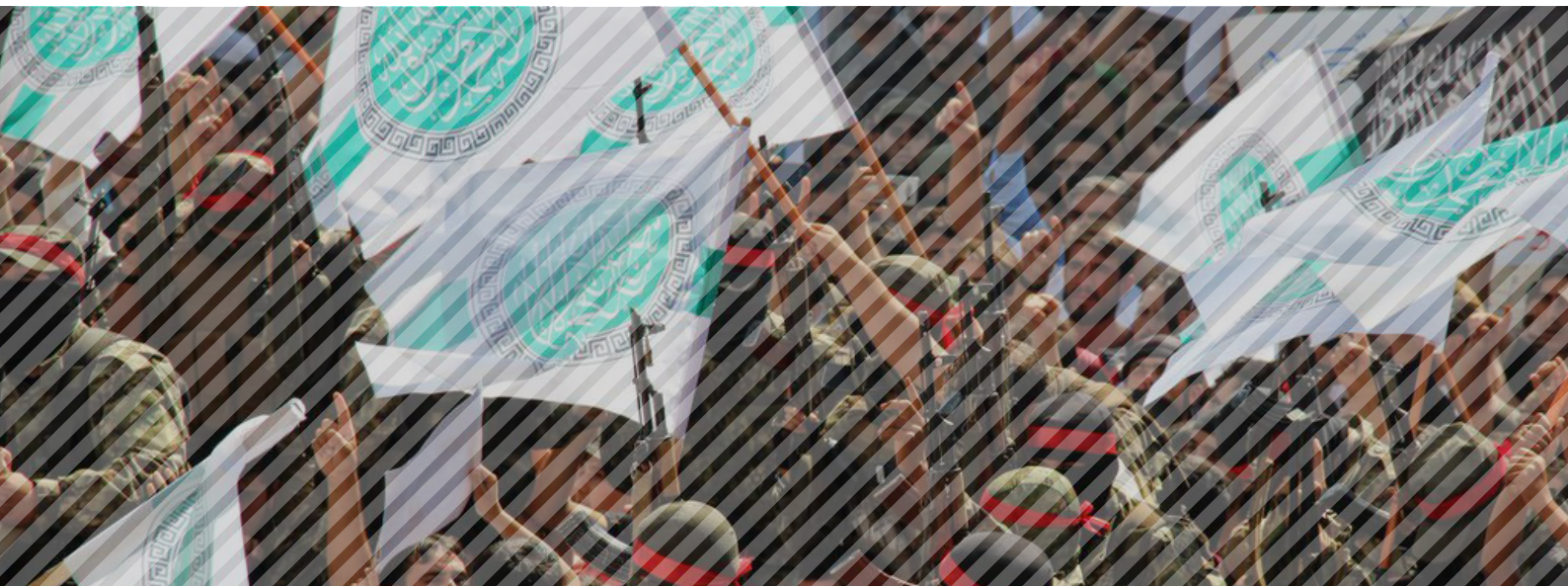**OSAMA ABO ZAYD**

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Abstract: Over the years, Hayaat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Sunni Islamist militant group involved in the Syrian Civil War, has developed methods and tools to preserve itself and its capabilities at a time when most of its competitors have collapsed or lost the bulk of their power and influence.

The HTS is one of the most complex examples of non-state armed groups. This armed group was announced under the name Al-Nusra Front in 2012 by Al Qaeda members who previously fought in Iraq under the commandership of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani. During the Syrian conflict, HTS witnessed many organizational transformations including shifts in political positioning and ideological stance, from a discourse of global jihad to a pragmatic local organization restrained within the Syrian borders. Indeed, in 2014 Al Nusra front first announced its allegiance to Al Qaeda to preserve its independence from ISIS, and then changed in 2017 renounced it and rebranded itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. HTS move was again motivated by its wish to preserve itself in attempt to convince the international community to accept it.

Populism as a strategy to gain and maintain influence was one of the main factors behind HTS's success in this. HTS implements a sophisticated model of populism and employs a unique approach in order to reconcile between its transborder and local dimensions.

HTS today, although it does not participate in any of the negotiations tracks, seeks to present itself as a strong and cohesive organization that enjoys local support and can control the security and military scene in Northwest of Syria , including controlling the radical organizations and managing the file of foreign fighters in return for granting it international recognition and normalization of relations.

Al-Qaeda's transformation in Syria and the contradictions it fell into are usually referred to as pragmatism. This paper argues that the transformation the organization undertook, were aimed at gaining and maintaining power and making the organization the only de-facto authority in Idlib. The changes in modus operandi and discourse are a clear expression of HTS populist approach for their survival.

Introduction

Armed resistance to the Syrian regime started at the end of 2011, by Syrian officers who defected from the army. Similarly, after peaceful protests failed to bring change citizens joined in armed militancy. By mid 2012, armed resistance was no longer reserved to local groups, as the HTS —an affiliate of Al-Qaeda—came into existence.

Al-Qaeda's presence in Syria is a unique experience with significant contrasts to its evolution in other conflicts. In Syria, Al-Qaeda had abundant military equipment and financial resources, a vast geographic territory, and complex relationships with the local community. Indeed, HTS witnessed many changes in its methodology and policies, changing its name three times during the Syrian conflict.

The formation of the "Al-Nusra for the People of the Levant" was officially announced on January 24, 2012. From the beginning, HTS presented itself as an independent experience that is not related to and is distinct from moderate opposition groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). At the same time, it had not announced its affiliation with Al-Qaeda[1]. In April 2013, the establishment of the State of Iraq and the Levant was announced. According to this declaration, HTS was to be merged with ISIS, but Al-Jolani, HTS's leader rejected that declaration. Moreover, to protect himself and provide the necessary legitimacy to his organization, al-Jolani declared allegiance to the emir of the global al-Qaeda organization Ayman al-Zawahiri. This step was the first official announcement of the affiliation of HTS to Al-Qaeda.[2]

On July 28, 2016, Abu Muhammad Al-Jolani announced the end of his affiliation with Al-Qaeda and change the Nusra Front's name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. On January 28, 2017, after the start of the Astana negotiations between the Syrian regime and the opposition, with the participation of Russia, Turkey, and Iran, the establishment of HTS was announced, consisting of Fatah al-Sham and several armed factions such as Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haq, and Jaish al-Sunnah.[3]

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This paper explores whether it is possible to classify the HTS as a populist organization, analyzing the impact of its efforts against its opponents, during the last ten years of the Syrian uprising. Worldwide, populism has become one of the most prominent current crises and challenges facing democracy, and so is HTS's populism in opposition-controlled areas.

The study of populism often discusses populist political movements and their reflections on populists' standing and voting decisions during a period of stability with the assumption of an acceptable level of democracy. This phenomenon, however, has not been studied deeply during armed conflicts. Frequently, studies and research whose topic is nonstate armed actors (NSA) are limited to the sources of the actors' funding, the violations they commit and the extent of their commitment to international humanitarian law, their political goals, the moderation and radicalization of these groups, and the reasons for their classification as terrorist organizations.

This paper uses HTS to study the development of NSA political tools and attempts to answer the following questions: Did the development of political machines and methods of jihadist groups contribute to strengthening these organizations and their success in the mobilization and attracting of fighters or getting funding? Has populism become one of the means and strategies of these organizations? What are HTS's most populist characteristics? How has populism contributed to strengthening the organization?

HTS as a Populist Movement
During internal armed conflicts, populism is not a tool for political movements to influence voters during democratic polling operations. On the contrary, populism becomes a tool for armed groups to influence the local community and mobilize support for civilians in the area of control of those groups. Also, populism becomes a tool for armed groups to deploy their soldiers in battles that may not be part of the ideology on which these armed groups were founded.

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HTS has witnessed several transformations in its organizational form since its formation in 2012 until now. It should be noted that the transformations did not include any change in the organization's leadership, even though the transformations witnessed by the organization were the result of international pressure or conflicts with Al-Qaeda or within HTS itself when several leaders in the organization opposed Al-Jolani's policies. Such leaders were forced to defect from the organization and join other groups such as Hurras al-Din.

The shifts that Jabhat al-Nusra witnessed, or what has become known as the HTS led by Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, indicate that gaining control and gaining power takes precedence over ideology. Instead, the ideology has been harnessed for the sake of power. Indeed, HTS witnessed many organizational transformations with which HTS changed its name several times. These organizational transformations were accompanied by changes in the discourse of HTS in a way that preserves its position as the only voice for the oppressed on the one hand, and the best option for local and foreign fighters as it is the most reliable, loyal and effective armed group. The main aspects of HTS's populism can be expressed as follows.

A. An outsider organization and an outsider leader
The HTS initially presented itself as the voice of the oppressed Syrians that the international community failed to protect, whether due to the Russian-Chinese veto in the Security Council or the reluctance of the Friends of the Syrian People Group to provide effective military support to the Free Syrian Army that would enable it to stop air attacks from the Syrian military. The HTS strengthened its position with massive suicide operations. To achieve maximum impact in the populist employment of suicide operations, the HTS referred to these operations as revenge for the victims of the sectarian massacres committed by the Assad forces. It was also documenting those operations to spread through via its social media accounts.[4]

Indeed, HTS has succeeded in winning significant local influence, making it difficult for the political opposition to publicly oppose it. Further, going against HTS would have pit the opposition against an influential and broad segment of Syrians. This denied political opposition leaders the ability to support the United States designating the HTS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)[5]. At the same time, the Chief of Staff of the Free Syrian Army praised the performance of the HTS Front during a press conference in the European Parliament.[6] Moreover, HTS was not only outsiders to the Syrians and local actors, but its leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani was also an outsider figure at the social and political level.

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Additionally, al-Jolani had previously not been a well-known jihadist figure. He, had no record of significant activity within Al-Qaeda, whether organizational or operational. He was just a young man who traveled from Syria to Iraq, where he was later arrested, in 2004 to join Al-Qaeda's ranks to fight the American invasion. After his release from prison, he convinced Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to support him in establishing an organization in Syria. The founding of HTS was the first appearance of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani on the Syrian scene. HTS nor any of its leaders had a role in the protests that erupted in March 2011, or even in the establishment of the Free Syrian Army, which was the only paramilitary force for those belonging to the anti-regime camp.

During the rift with ISIS, the group needed to show a clear difference from other Jihadi storganizations. Accordingly, al-Jolani heavily invested in portraying himself as a humble approachable leader by visiting IDP camps, listeneing directly to the people's requests and problems, giving media interviews, and regularly appearing in urban communities mingling with the local inhabitants without security.

The latest shift to date coincided with the change in public opinion towards armed Islamist organizations and foreign fighters after the Turkish military intervention in Idlib. Al-Jolani and his organization lost their military advantage to the Turkish army in his attempt to present himself as the voice of Syrians and the leader of an organization which is the best destination for all who want to continue the march of the struggle against injustice.

B. Anti-Mainstream and Traditional Opposition
In October of 2011, several countries recognized the Syrian National Council as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. It coincided with most European Union countries withdrawing their embassies from Damascus and imposing economic sanctions on the Syrian regime. In August 2012, the Free Syrian Army began obtaining conventional armament from several countries, including the United States.[7] In conjunction with the increase in arms to the FSA, opposition-controlled areas began to expand dramatically. Northern Syria, especially Idlib and Aleppo and their provinces, was the center of gravity and competition to control it intensified after the Syrian regime lost control of it.

The HTS presented itself as the defender of oppressed Sunnis and refused to associate itself with the moderate armed opposition supported by the West or the political opposition that has evolved outside Syria for decades. HTS projected the image of the sacrificial soldier for the people. They also insisted on describing the moderate opposition as Western puppets corrupt from the millions of dollars they received from their backers.

In 2014, the level of Syrian popular frustration from the lack of international commitment to oust Assad reached a new high. The HTS exploited this sentiment and increased its verbal attacks against the moderate opposition, accusing it of working for Western agendas at the expense of the blood of the Syrian people. HTS relied on accusing the political opposition and the Free Army of seeking to satisfy the international community through the secularism and democracy, while Iranian militias ran a sectarian and eradication war against Syrians Sunnis.

Through the harsh rhetoric against the moderate opposition, the HTS aspired to garner as much support as possible for its expected military operation to control the stronghold of the moderate opposition and its weapons depots, by highlighting the elimination of the moderate opposition as a forward step to toppling the Assad regime.

Using "anti-establishment" appeals, HTS managed to eliminate the most prominent moderate opposition groups[8]. Based on the same pillar, it managed to eliminate most moderate opposition groups from 2014 through the present day, when it became the only military actor in the Idlib province and its countryside[9].

C. Anti-ISIS establishment

After its fighters took control of the eastern provinces of Syria bordering Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq announced the establishment of Iraq and the Levant on May 9, 2013 along with the end of the HTS. Attempting to pre-empt ISIS's announcement, HTS officially announced its affiliation with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.[10]

The leadership of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan did not support the establishment of ISIS. The approval or rejection of the traditional leadership was of no significance at the level of the organization, given that it has little power compared to that of the ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. But it was extremely important for the leadership of the HTS.

The leader of HTS refused to join ISIS. He tried to gain support from the communities that experienced the terror of ISIS through anti-ISIS rhetoric and accusing them of excessively brutal and aggressive methods. Additionally, the leader of the HTS attempted to invest his allegiance to Al Qaeda to keep fighters loyal and to prevent them from joining ISIS through anti-ISIS discourse accusing it of sabotaging jihad and committing acts antithetical to Islam's teachings.

ISIS did itself no favours with the Syrian public in its war against the moderate opposition and the HTS, and the brutality demonstrated by ISIS against the fighters and civilians that appeared in field executions and the slaughter of knives, widespread anger escalated against ISIS. That anger constituted an opportunity for the HTS's leader to take the lead in the anti-ISIS front, and indeed, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani threatened to destroy ISIS in Syria and push it back Iraq.[11] HTS succeeded in preserving itself from being engulfed by ISIS while maintaining popular support, and keeping its ideological identity necessary for preventing troop desertions.

D. Criminalize all opposition to it and Delegitimize the media

The HTS took aggressive and resolute stances towards any attempt to oppose it and compete with its influence. This was not confined to competitors from the armed groups. Instead, HTS Front took security measures against local councils and activists who opposed them and tried to highlight its violations. HTS has been involved in the killing and kidnapping of many peaceful activists opposed to it. It has launched numerous security campaigns against pro-democracy cities and chasing out radicals such as Maarat Al-Numan.[12]

HTS, since its inception, has taken hostile stances towards media activists and correspondents inside Syria. Media projects outside the control of HTS have been subjected to repeated attacks after campaigns of betrayal and incitement by HTS supporters. HTS has also targeted media activists and other prominent people with kidnappings and assassinations[13].

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The arrest campaigns included dignitaries and clerics who refused to promote the HTS Authority in their speeches, in addition to local activists who criticized some of the organization's practices through their accounts on social media, as well as a number of the organizers of the demonstrations, who organized the protests. The terrorism HTS practiced against the local media and media activists created a climate of terror that forced activists to flee Syria or quit covering any activity opposing the HTS and its movements and decisions.[14] Indeed, any media activity in the Idlib region which crosses HTS's red lines are subject to arrest or death, even when close to or loyal to the organization.[15]

E. Use of external threats

HTS's reliance on playing up external threats has been a prominent aspect of its populism. It has relied on this to attack its rivals from the local moderate armed groups. Moreover, the leadership of HTS has relied on this aspect of populism to justify the transformation of its rhetoric and its disassociation from al-Qaeda in order to avoid being lumped in with ISIS as an enemy of international coalitions acting in Syria. This came about as a result of international threats and of the Russian-Turkish agreement on a solution in Syria and cooperation between both countries in confronting the radical organizations in north of Syria, as stipulated in the Astana agreement.[16]

Moreover, this aspect of HTS 's populism was essential for full control over foreign fighters and ensuring their full involvement in the battles of influence and control against moderate opposition. HTS accused the moderate opposition of working with U.S., Turkish, and British intelligence to justify their destruction and seize their weapons. At the time, this aspect of populism was essential to support its endeavor to eliminate all of its opponents from civil society and to confiscate the property of humanitarian organizations that had received Western support.

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HTS and the Russian-Turkish arrangements

After the Russian military intervention in Syria, calls escalated to separate the moderate opposition from extremists. As a result, in his first public appearance, the HTS's leader announced on July 28th, 2016 the end of its affiliation with Al-Qaeda, and the change of the al-Nusra Front's name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. Abu Muhammad al-Jolani sought to confront the Russian calls by calling on the factions to merge, especially since the reason for the factions' refusal to integrate with HTS, represented in the association with Al-Qaeda, has ended[17].

In October 2016, HTS rejected a Russian truce offer to the Syrian opposition during negotiations in Ankara. Russia demanded, in exchange for a ceasefire, that all HTS fighters evacuate eastern Aleppo. Russian air forces responded by intensifying attacks on the city, and HTS proved that all negotiation that exclude them or ignore their demands would fail.

On December 29[th,] 2016, Russia, Iran and Turkey reached a de-escalation agreement in Syria and announced a conference in Astana to start political negotiations between the Syrian parties, except HTS. Despite announcing good intentions, Russia did not fulfill its commitments made to the opposition during Astana. Hezbollah and the regime kept attacking the opposition-held areas in Damascus, Daraa, and Homs. HTS, once again exploited the failure of the mainstream opposition to achieve a breakthrough on the negotiation table.

The Astana talks' failure to achieve a coherent ceasefire strengthened HTS and caused Syrians' confidence in Turkish diplomacy to decline. When the Turkish army first attempted to enter Idlib, HTS took a firm stand against it.[18] Ankara did not want to confront the group as this would have caused unnecessary losses and would have helped the regime to regain control of the area. Consequently, Ankara sought a third way, a tacit non-aggression arrangement with HTS in exchange of installing a deterrence to arial attacks on Idlib. This arrangement, though problematic for HTS, allowed it to finally interact with a foreign power and also brought much-needed stability it needed to consolidate its authority without the threat of attack against them.

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Indeed, HTS invested in the relative stability achieved by the Sochi and Astana agreements to strengthening its influence. It accomplished this through the elimination of its most prominent local competitors such as Ahrar Al-Sham and controlling of the Bab al-Hawa crossing, the gate between Turkey and northern Syria, imposing the Salvation Government of HTS as the only administrative and economic umbrella in Idlib.

The recent attack by the Assad regime and its allies in Idlib at the beginning of 2020 created new variables, perhaps the most prominent of which was massive Turkish army reinforcements. HTS lost its military superiority and decision making authority in northwest Syria due to the widespread deployment and increase in the number of Turkish military observation points.

Accordingly, HTS has been cautious in recent battles engaging less in front line confrontations. This caution has been based on several considerations:

1. HTS realizes that its dismantling is an option for Turkey, who seeks to establish the cease-fire in Idlib without resorting to this option in the foreseeable future, but still holds the option. Therefore, HTS seeks not to deplete a large amount of its strength in the recent battles.

2. Idlib's military escalation gave the Turkish army and the National Army factions coming from the northern countryside of Aleppo wide entry to Idlib. HTS feared that by exhausting its forces to block the Russian advance, it would lose its position as the most powerful local actor in Idlib and thus lose influence over the administration and security of the region.

These considerations prompted HTS not to waste its forces in open battles despite its own media propaganda pronouncing the active participation of HTS's "Red Flags", their equivalent of Special Forces. However, HTS preferred to withdraw from several locations in Aleppo's southern countryside without confrontation despite the large fortifications in those sites.

After Russia and Turkey reached a ceasefire agreement in Idlib, HTS took a different position on the Moscow agreement appended to the Sochi Agreement, as HTS criticized the agreement's lack of clarity despite the striking similarity between the text of the two agreements.[19] HTS's problem with the Moscow Agreement was not related to the texts as much as it was related to indications of a different Turkish stance towards the need to impose a ceasefire and return movement to the M4 and M5 international roads, which would lead to HTS losing trade lines with the Assad regime areas.

Once again, HTS rejected Turkey's policy to ignore and not to coordinate with it. HTS sought to direct the local community to pressure Ankara by demanding Turkey return the displaced to their homes and cities. HTS's calls hint that Turkey did not implement what the Turkish President had pledged by forcing the regime forces to retreat to the Sochi Agreement lines.[20] HTS prompted its supporters to stage a sit-in on the M4 road in front of the joint Russian-Turkish patrols. It called the sit-in "Dignity Sit-in" in a clear address to the feelings of civilians, especially those displaced by the recent Russian military campaign, which led to the displacement of more than half a million civilians.

Later, HTS ended the sit-in, which lasted for 40 days, following an agreement with Turkey to open a commercial crossing with the Assad regime in Idlib countryside, Maarat al-Naasan - Mirnaz[21]. The commercial crossing faced civilian rejection, demonstrations, and protests that tried to block commercial trucks. HTS did not use force to keep the road open. Instead, through its administrative arm, the Salvation Government, it resorted to holding meetings with merchants and businessmen in the Idlib region to discuss the economic losses that will result from the failure to open the crossing and its repercussions on the farmers who make up the largest proportion of civilians in Idlib Governorate and the implications of the inability to open the crossing on food commodities prices and medicines.[22]

From the Astana agreement to the recent Moscow agreement for a ceasefire in Idlib, HTS has not objected to these agreements as long as its economic and security interests are not targeted by Russian and Turkish understandings. Russian interests in Idlib were summarised by the Russian President in a statement concluding the Sochi Agreement in September 2018:

1. The terrorist groups deployed in the Idlib region.
2. Targeting the terrorist groups in Aleppo Governorate.
3. Targeting the military sites of the Russian forces in Tartus and the Hmeimim base[23].

From the Astana agreement to the recent Moscow agreement for a ceasefire in Idlib, HTS has not objected to these agreements as long as its economic and security interests are not targeted by Russian and Turkish understandings

HTS agreed to address Russian concerns after offering itself as the only option for the implementation of the Turkish-Russian agreement, as the bombing operations on the regime-held areas in Aleppo and drone attacks on the Russian bases have both stopped. HTS, through its leader's assertions of the organization's localism, moderation, and its differentiation from the radical groups and the role of HTS in controlling the radicals, has sought to be a party to these understandings.

The need for more
HTS has relied on populism to gain and maintain power during the various transformations it has undergone. According to those transformations, HTS has directed its populist speech in different directions, sometimes against the moderates and then later against the radicals in order to preserve the organization's identity despite repeated shifts and contradictions.

According to the changes in the maps of influence and the current international position towards Syria, HTS no longer has the same ability to shift the direction of its populist rhetoric and is almost obligated to move more towards localism and prove more moderate, which will require leaning more into populism.

HTS seeks to gain international acceptance by relying on its identification with the Russian-Turkish understandings, and on further attempts to demonstrate moderation and localization while managing the jihadist rank and file.

The position of the United States of America towards HTS does not pose a direct threat at present, especially in light of the current US administration, which does not wish to engage in the intricacies of Idlib and tends to defer to the Russian-Turkish understandings of the region while the EU rejects a military operation In Idlib.

Despite this, HTS pays significant attention to American and European attitudes because of their economic effects on the Idlib region by reducing the amount of funding for humanitarian projects in Idlib. Western positions have prompted HTS to confirm that they are recognising

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past mistakes and not opposing the work of any humanitarian organization, stressing that the Salvation Government is not subordinate to HTS, inviting others to participate in it, and while stressing the importance of the international community's support for civilians in Idlib.

Moreover, HTS leaders recently confirmed their desire for international security through their role in preventing jihadists from using Idlib as a springboard for attacks outside the Syrian borders. Due to international confusion in dealing with foreign fighters in ISIS and the problem of returning them to their countries or conducting trials for them in Syria, HTS can enhance its chances of achieving international acceptance by dealing with the foreign jihadist problem in Idlib. It appears that HTS has arrested the French fighter Omar Omsen, accused by the French authorities of recruiting French for ISIS in Syria, as part of HTS's attempts to enhance these opportunities in a way that hopefully convinces the international community to avoid an approach similar to that taken against ISIS.

HTS realizes that the option to dismantle it is still an option for Ankara. Therefore, HTS hopes to prevent Ankara from deciding to dismantle it through:

■ The absence of local and moderate competitors of the organization and the ability to control the security situation.

■ HTS's maintaining and controlling jihadist groups in a way that preserves the possibility of cooperating with them again against any Turkish military move.

■ Reinforcing the division between the position of the local community and the Turkish position by showing Turkish acceptance of HTS before the local community in a way that undermines public support for any popular uprising against HTS, which represents the only serious threat to HTS's survival.

> *HTS presents a sophisticated model of the populist armed group and its approach between the transboundary dimension and the local dimension. Moreover, HTS represents a unique approach between radicalism as an ideology and organizational ideology on the one hand and populism as a means of extending and maintaining influence on the other*

However, Turkish fears about the security repercussions of dismantling of HTS and fear of the regime's control over Idlib makes this option unlikely at the current stage.

HTS presents a sophisticated model of the populist armed group and its approach between the transboundary dimension and the local dimension. Moreover, HTS represents a unique approach between radicalism as an ideology and organizational ideology on the one hand and populism as a means of extending and maintaining influence on the other.

Indeed, the current international and local factors will push HTS to double its populist approach to preserve its existence and cohesion as the most effective local force in Idlib Governorate.

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