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HTS Leader al-Julani's New Strategy in Northwestern Syria

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(source: al-monitor.com)

Abu Mohammed al-Julani's Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has recently escalated its crackdown on jihadist groups and figures in the Idlib province of northwestern Syria (Step News (<https://stepagency-sy.net/2020/10/05/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%83%D9%8A/>), October 5). The formation of HTS from al-Nusra Front in January 2017 was accompanied by a declaration that the group was severing its relationship to al-Qaeda and that it was no longer the Syrian branch of the global jihadist organization (Almodon (<https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2017/1/28/%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%B6%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86/>), January 27, 2017). Al-Nusra's repeated claims that it

was breaking with al-Qaeda did not convince many policymakers or analysts, and the group remained designated as a terrorist organization by both the United Nations and the international powers who have influence in Syria. [1]

Since the formation of Huras al-Deen group (HAD) as a new branch of al-Qaeda in Syria, HTS and its leader's claims began to hold some weight. After allowing HAD to operate with some margin of freedom in the area controlled by HTS, the latter made it clear to the former in June that its jihadist fighters could only operate under the full command of HTS. Al-Julani has also made unprecedented attempts in the last few months to appeal to the West by claiming that his group was a Syrian nationalist organization with no global jihadist agenda. [2] This statement was in stark contrast to convictions that he held, fought for, and preached for many years.

Al-Julani's new strategy is based on reinventing HTS, by changing the group from having a global jihadist outlook into a locally focused jihadist organization with an agenda that is entirely dedicated to Syria, and the Syrian local Sunni community in particular. He aims to secure a position in any future political arrangement and settlement. The new strategy comes in response to dramatic changes to the dynamics of the Syrian conflict that developed following the past two years of agreements between Russia, Iran, and Turkey to share influence and cease hostilities between each other (Turk Press (<https://www.turkpress.co/node/53164>), September 26, 2018).

Al-Julani's success will not come easily, as it will depend on convincing the major powers to make fundamental changes to their counterterrorism policies by accepting Syria's largest jihadist group and allowing it to have a role in the future of Syria.

Idlib Roads

In March, Russia—the main backer of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad—signed a crucial agreement with Turkey, which has genuine interests and influence in northern Syria (Al Jazeera (<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2020/3/5/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9>), March 5).

The agreement included a ceasefire in Idlib and the securing of transportation routes. The agreement came after the Syrian opposition, backed by Turkey, suffered a series of setbacks in Idlib following the advance of Assad's forces with significant aerial support from Russia. The Assad forces, which included the government's Syrian Arab Army (SAA), Lebanese Hezbollah, and other Iranian-backed Shia militias, took areas in southern and eastern Idlib and managed to seize control of the strategic M5 highway, which connects the capital Damascus in the south to the northern city of Aleppo (France 24 Arabic (<https://www.france24.com/ar/20200207-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%88%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D8%BA%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B0%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7>), February 7). More than 30 Turkish soldiers were killed in the fighting (Middle East Online (<https://middle-east-online.com/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-33-%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%A3-%D8%AD%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B0-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>), February 28).

In order to avoid being dragged into a larger regional military confrontation, Russia and Turkey signed the aforementioned Idlib agreement, which included operating joint patrols along the other vital highway in Idlib, the M4 (Sky News Arabia (<https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1328030-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9>), March 5).

<https://jamestown.org/program/hts-leader-al-julanis-new-strategy-in-northwestern-syr...> 08-12-2020

In addition to arresting key jihadist leaders, HTS also came into conflict with HAD while imposing its new rules. The outcome was a decisive HTS victory that consolidated its control over the other armed groups (Alaraby.co.uk (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%22%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%22-%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%87%D9%8A-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%22%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AB%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%22>), June 27).

Conclusion

Al-Julani's quest to reinvent his organization has come to its highest point. His fate will eventually depend on the calculations of world and regional powers. Thus far, his group has remained fairly united and loyal to him. This unity is due to the group's continued ability to govern Idlib and profit from controlling border crossings with Turkey in the north and west and the Syrian government areas in the south and east (Harmoon (<https://www.harmoon.org/reports/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%88%D9%82%D9%81-%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA/>), May 7). Al-Julani's power will always depend on holding absolute military superiority over the other armed groups of the opposition.

Cutting ties completely with the jihadists would mean depriving HTS from the ethos held by al-Nusra, which ensured its initial rise. Al-Nusra managed to keep the Islamic State out of most of Idlib under the banner of al-Qaeda's perceived legitimacy over IS in the global jihadist community. It also defeated other Syrian opposition groups in the province. In many occasions, HTS used the accusation that those groups were cooperating with Turkey as a reason to attack them. HTS is now cooperating with Turkey and has even committed to an implicit ceasefire with Russia. Al-Julani does not seem to be willing to allow those other groups to restore their strength. That would jeopardize his main claim to Turkey and the world that his group is the only one capable of fighting the regime, seizing and protecting territory, and governing.

Instead of its past use of jihadist justifications it used to monopolize power in Idlib, HTS has recently turned to soft power and direct appeals to the public. The organization has secured better access to foreign journalists and built a new media arm that is open to communicating with news organizations. HTS' spokespeople are taking part in discussions with those who hold opposing opinions. Al-Julani himself began to appear in public in Idlib in order to socialize with ordinary people in arranged tours of public places. In a recording of the tour, al-Julani was not seen with his usual security detail.

The staunch refusal of the United States to allow a humanitarian crisis to break out in Idlib has meant that the Russians would not have a freehand to support the Assad forces and the Iranian-backed militias in an invasion of Idlib from the south. Russia also, for now, seems to be committed to its accord with Turkey. If this dynamic changes and al-Julani loses Idlib, the HTS will most likely return to being a diehard jihadist group, whether under al-Julani or new leadership. But as long as Idlib is not invaded by Syrian government forces, al-Julani will be the most powerful local leader in the area. How to deal with him and his group will remain a large question for the West and Turkey.

Notes

[1] Counter Extremism Project, Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) Report, <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-nusra-front-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>

[2] See al-Julani's interview with International Crisis Group (ICG) earlier this year: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/jihadist-factor-syrias-idlib-conversation-abu-muhammad-al-jolani> (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/jihadist-factor-syrias-idlib-conversation-abu-muhammad-al-jolani>) the interview, which was a rare of its kind, marked the significant change in al-Julani and his HTS's discourse and strategy.



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