

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## AFGHANISTAN: THE NEED FOR NEW IDEAS

*Alexander Sehmer*

With the commitment of thousands more U.S. troops to Afghanistan, Kabul is also eager for a shift in Washington's attitude toward Pakistan. Meanwhile, plans for a new Afghan militia that can be deployed to troubled areas in support of the national army have come in for criticism.

Afghan media recently seized on an apparent admission by Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi that the perpetrators of a devastating truck bombing that hit Kabul in May had come from Pakistan ([Tolo](#), September 18; [Pajhwok](#), September 18). The blast hit Kabul's diplomatic district, killing at least 150 people, according to some reports ([al-Jazeera](#), June 6). In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Abbasi said it "seemed" that the bombers had crossed over the border from Pakistan ([Financial Times](#), September 17).

Such finger pointing between Afghanistan and Pakistan is not unusual, but it has taken on a renewed intensity in recent weeks after the U.S. administration changed tack to commit another 3,000 troops to Afghanistan and

hinted that it could take a stronger line on Pakistan's efforts to tackle militants.

That could explain a report in the Afghan government-run *Hewad* newspaper, which claimed Taliban officials have been fleeing safe havens in Pakistan amid a wave of "mysterious" assassinations ([Hewad](#), September 17). Possibly as it attempts to gauge the U.S. position, Pakistan is cracking down.

The report's other claim that fleeing Taliban leaders are making contact with the Afghan High Peace Council, the inefficient government body attempting to bring armed groups into the peace process, seems more fanciful. It seems more likely that Kabul will have a fight on its hands, one it appears intent on tackling with a planned new militia, despite criticism from rights groups and politicians who argue the funds would be better spent on support for the national army ([Weesa](#), September 17).

The force, which will fall under the control of the ministry of defense, is modeled on the Afghan Local Police (ALP), an initiative that began in 2009 and aimed to establish localized units in areas under threat from the Taliban. It is now an established part of the Afghanistan

security landscape. Supporters say a community-based force is naturally more effective at tackling local insurgents, but the picture is more mixed, with some units better than others and many accused of perpetrating abuses.

The proposed new militia could reportedly number 20,000 fighters ([Tolo](#), September 15). Human Rights Watch has urged Kabul to abandon the idea, warning an outsourced defense force will be hard to control and risks becoming a means to bolster local strongmen ([Tolo](#), September 18).

## MYANMAR: ROHINGYA CRISIS RISKS OPENING DOOR TO ISLAMISTS

*Alexander Sehmer*

A military crackdown on Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine state has created a refugee crisis for the country's neighbors and risks establishing a new jihadist rallying point in Southeast Asia.

The latest violence in Myanmar began in August, after fighters with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) staged a series of attacks on police and army positions. An ARSA spokesman claimed the attacks were retaliation for abuses by the security forces ([Asia Times](#), August 28). The military response has been severe and indiscriminate — including setting fire to peoples' homes — prompting more than 400,000 Rohingya to flee over the last two months ([al-Jazeera](#), September 17). Myanmar's elected leader, the Nobel peace prize winner Aung San Su Kyi, has failed to reign in the military — something she may not in fact be able to do — nor has she condemned the violence, something she certainly could.

In the meantime, jihadist networks are attempting to use the situation to their advantage, including al-Qaeda, which posted a call on Telegram for Islamists in South Asia and the Philippines to take up arms in support of their "Muslim brothers," according to the SITE intelligence group.

ARSA, formerly known as Harakah al-Yaqin, initially encouraged this kind of messaging, but appears to have watered down its Islamist rhetoric, aiming instead for greater international appeal ([The National](#), September 13). Abu Ammar Junoni, better known as Hafiz Tohar, the group's reported leader, has issued a statement denying ARSA has links to al-Qaeda or other international Islamist terror networks ([Dhaka Tribune](#), September 14). That is difficult to judge, but Tohar previously appeared in a YouTube video in which he called for a jihad on Myanmar (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), March 10).

Islamic State (IS) has had its eye on the Rohingya for a while. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announcing his group's so-called caliphate in 2014, included a reference to the situation in Myanmar as he enumerated the "crimes" being perpetrated on Muslims ([Middle East Eye](#), July 5, 2014).

As they shelter in poor conditions in camps in Bangladesh, it is possible some Rohingya will build links with IS militants in the country. India says there are those among its own Rohingya refugee population — estimated at 40,000 — who already have, though it also accuses them of having links to Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency ([Times of India](#), September 18). India says Rohingya militants are already organizing in New Delhi, Hyderabad, Mewar and Jammu, and is keen to resettle the refugees elsewhere, although it is unclear where they could realistically be sent.

The disorganized humanitarian situation needs to be addressed and the violence in Myanmar ended as a matter of principle, but it has other benefits — a weak international response will only allow the Rohingya’s plight to be coopted by violent Islamists.

## Is the Hasm Movement the Future of Militancy in Egypt?

*Michael Horton*

Egypt’s Hasm Movement has released a review of its activities over the course of the first year of its operations. From July 16, 2016 to July 16, 2017, Hasm claims to have killed 27 members of Egypt’s “interior military militias” and wounded 56 more. In a detailed press release, complete with info-graphics, Hasm claims to have employed a range of different tactics to target Egyptian police officers and members of its domestic security. [1] These tactics include brazen but well-planned point blank assassinations, and the use of vehicle born improvised explosive devices (VBIED) and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The numbers cited in what Hasm termed its year-end review — if accurate — are significant, given that the group’s membership is likely limited to less than a hundred individuals.

What is striking about the group is its disciplined use of violence and the specificity of its targets — to date there are no reports that the group has killed any civilians. It is consistently targeting members of the Egyptian police, the security services working under the aegis of the interior ministry and the judiciary. So far, the group has been careful not to target members of the Egyptian army.

This stands in marked contrast to the Egyptian government’s response to rising levels of militancy across the country. Egypt-based and international human rights organizations continue to accuse the Egyptian police and security services of illegally detaining suspected members of militant organizations and the banned Muslim Brotherhood, and of carrying out extra-judicial executions. [2] In August, the U.S. government denied Egypt \$95.7 million in aid, and delayed another \$195 million, citing Egypt’s failure to make progress on human rights and democratic reforms ([al-Jazeera](#), August 23).

The Egyptian government’s harsh and often less than well-calibrated response to militancy, combined with what are largely intractable demographic and economic pressures, have created an ideal operational space for insurgent organizations like the Hasm Movement.

In contrast with Islamic State (IS) in Egypt, the Hasm Movement’s propaganda de-prioritizes religion and em-

phasizes the group's nationalist aims. Its relatively moderate religious views and nationalistic focus, combined with a disciplined use of violence, may well represent the leading edge of a new kind of militancy in Egypt. Militancy that specifically targets what some see as a corrupt and unresponsive government may well flourish in post-Arab Spring Egypt.

### **Gaining Momentum**

The Hasm Movement's year-end review points to an organization that has not only survived for a year but has also grown. Given the fact that Egypt's domestic intelligence services are both efficient and effective, the Hasm Movement's ability not only to expand but also to continue to carry out relatively well-planned attacks — many of which have appeared in the Egyptian press — is notable.

In two of its most recent attacks, the Hasm Movement targeted and killed a senior police officer, Lt. Colonel Ahmed Hussein, and struck a police vehicle in the Cairo suburb of Maadi ([Daily News Egypt](#), June 12). Both attacks appear to have been well planned. The assassination on Lt. Colonel Hussein follows a pattern of attacks whereby senior officers are watched for days — sometimes weeks — by operatives who record their target's daily routines. The attack on the police truck in Maadi killed the officer in charge of the vehicle and injured another officer and three conscripts. The Hasm Movement claims that it used an IED that was triggered as the target vehicle went past. The Egyptian government maintains that militants shot at the gas tank of the vehicle.

These attacks follow months of almost weekly operations conducted by Hasm-linked operatives that have targeted members of the police, security services and the judiciary. The attacks remain concentrated around greater Cairo, where the density of the urban environment facilitates the surveillance of targets and the exfiltration of Hasm operatives. The same dense urban environment allows the Hasm Movement an abundance of opportunities to vet and recruit new operatives with the specialized skills it requires.

Hasm's success at targeting ranking officials guarded by security details, and its ability to evade Egypt's pervasive active and passive human-based surveillance systems, indicate that Hasm operatives are themselves adept at surveillance and counter-surveillance.

The Hasm Movement also claims that it has targeted police with IEDs and VBIEDs. If true, this suggests the movement has recruited individuals with expertise in explosives. Thus far the group's use of explosives has been disciplined and well-thought out in terms of avoiding civilian casualties. Attacks using explosives, such as the recent one on a police truck in Maadi, are carried out late at night and seem to involve devices designed to minimize the danger to surrounding civilians ([Daily News Egypt](#), June 19).

The leadership of the Hasm Movement clearly recognizes that avoiding civilian casualties and limiting its operations to targeting the police and domestic security services are what sets it apart from other militant groups like IS in Egypt, which frequently targets civilians both Muslim and Christian.

Similarly, Egypt's police are notorious for their often arbitrary use of violence. In the aftermath of the unrest that led to the resignation of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, it was the police that were the subject of antipathy on the part of much of the Egyptian population. During the unrest, police stations and the police themselves were targeted by thousands of Egyptians across the country.

This antipathy has now subsided, but it is still very much a force within Egypt and one the Hasm Movement is keen to tap into; and while it is unlikely the group's methods will appeal to anything other than a minority of Egyptians, that number may be growing.

### **Stoking the Fire**

On August 24, the Egyptian police announced they had killed two supposedly high-ranking members of the Hasm Movement in a shootout near Wadi el-Natroun, 60 miles northwest of Cairo. ([Egypt Independent](#), August 24). Over recent months the Egyptian authorities claim to have killed dozens of Hasm operatives. If these claims are accurate, then the Hasm Movement has undergone a rapid expansion in the last 12 months and has become effectively self-healing. However, in one of its periodic communiqués, released on July 27, the group disputed the authorities' claims about the number of operatives killed. [3]

The truth likely lies somewhere between the two narratives. The Egyptian government has frequently exagger-

ated the number of IS-linked militants that it has killed. At the same time, it is not in the interest of the Hasm Movement to be viewed as an organization that is under increasing pressure from the Egyptian security services.

While the Egyptian government's claims about killing dozens of Hasm Movement members may be exaggerated, it is true that Egyptian security services have arrested and killed dozens if not hundreds of men who may or may not have ties to militant organizations. Human Rights Watch and other organizations have reported extensively on evidence of summary executions of Egyptians in the Sinai and the disappearance and torture of Egyptian citizens by state security in mainland Egypt ([al-Jazeera](#), April 23; [Human Rights Watch](#), April 25; [Human Rights Watch](#), September 5).

This kind of knee jerk response by the state indicates that it is under increased pressure and that it is finding it increasingly difficult to penetrate and disrupt militant organizations. This may be particularly so with the Hasm Movement, which draws on a much wider base of support than IS. The Egyptian government's harsh tactics may well guarantee that the Hasm Movement continues to grow its organization and broaden its support.

## Outlook

It is still too soon to tell whether or not the Hasm Movement will endure and grow in Egypt. If its year-end review is to be believed, then the organization has indeed expanded both its membership and capabilities over the last 12 months. Meanwhile, the government's claims of killing dozens of Hasm Movement operatives — even if the numbers are exaggerated — suggests that the group's network is now so extensive it has become self-healing.

Regardless of whether the Hasm Movement endures or not, the Egyptian government's less than well-disciplined response to rising levels of militancy in the country combined with ever-increasing demographic and economic pressures guarantees that there will be fertile ground for other organizations like the Hasm Movement to evolve and expand in the coming years.

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## NOTES

[1] See: SITE Intelligence Group (July 17, 2017)

[2] See: Amnesty International, "Egypt: 'Officially, You Do Not Exist' – Disappeared and Tortures in the Name of Counter-Terrorism," (July 13, 2016)

[3] See: SITE Intelligence group (July 28, 2017)

# Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia: The New al-Qaeda Threat in Pakistan

*Farhan Zahid*

Recent months have seen the sudden emergence in Pakistan of an organization calling itself Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia Pakistan. The new entity has been reported to be behind a series of five terror attacks in Karachi and Baluchistan province ([Geo News](#), July 22). Information about the group is only now beginning to surface.

Initially, Pakistani authorities speculated that the group had links to similarly named organizations in Libya and Tunisia, but there is so far no evidence to support that. However, it is clear from a statement by Abdullah Hashmi, Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia's spokesperson — he was arrested earlier this month — that the group is associated with al-Qaeda. Pakistani authorities also believe that the group is comprised of highly trained and battle-hardened Pakistani returnees from the conflict in Syria, where many fought for Islamic State (IS), the Nusrah Front or Ahrar al-Sham ([Samaa News](#), July 4).

Al-Qaeda may hope to take advantage of the weakening position of IS in the region. IS' Wilayat Khorasan chapter, which is based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, has been hammered by consecutive military and law enforcement operations, leaving the field open for a possible resurgence by al-Qaeda.

## **A New al-Qaeda Initiative**

Pakistan is an important stronghold for al-Qaeda. The group survived the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan by seeking refuge, aided by affiliated Pakistani Islamist terrorist groups, in tribal areas of Pakistan. Because of its close ties to Pakistani jihadist groups, the organization became a central terrorist organization for violent Pakistani Islamists of varying types, from local sectarian activists to Kashmiri militants.

Despite considerable damage done to its command structure and resource base during the U.S. drone campaign stepped up under President Barack Obama, which picked off high-value al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan's tribal areas, the organization has survived. In the last few

years, the group has been troubled by the surfacing of IS-Khorasan, which has attempted, unsuccessfully, to swallow al-Qaeda's affiliated groups in Pakistan.

Not only has al-Qaeda survived that attempt, but it adapted its tactics, endeavoring to become more locally relevant. Just months after IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had declared his so-called caliphate, al-Qaeda announced the establishment of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in September 2014. AQIS is led by Asim Umar, a veteran jihadist of Indian descent, but the group is largely ineffective and has failed to bring al-Qaeda back to prominence ([First Post](#), September 5, 2014).

With the establishment of Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia, al-Qaeda appears to be aiming to lure IS-Khorasan cells in Pakistan into its embrace, as well as taking back those who defected to IS between 2014 and 2017 ([Express Tribune](#), June 24). With IS weakened, having lost more than 60 percent of its territories in Iraq and Syria, the al-Qaeda move to re-establish itself in Pakistan appears calculated and timely.

## **Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia Pakistan**

In a leaflet announcing the establishment of Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia, the militants made it clear that they were taking on the "ideology and philosophy" of Osama bin Laden and praised al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. [1]

Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia appears set to revive al-Qaeda in Pakistan after three years in limbo, a result of drone strikes and Pakistani military operations Zarb-e-Azab and Rad-ul Fasad, which targeted al-Qaeda affiliated Islamist groups in the tribal and settled areas of Pakistan.

According to a senior police officer at the counter-terrorism department of the Karachi police, Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia is comprised of disgruntled IS returnees from Iraq and Syria and members of IS-inspired cells in urban centers, particularly Karachi. [2] It appears not to be exclusively Karachi based, however, as it has conducted a terrorist strike in the far-flung Mastung district of Baluchistan province ([Geo News](#), July 22).

The authorities believe that the group is led by Abdul Kareem Saroosh Siddiqui, a former student at the University of Karachi's applied physics department who

dropped out before graduating. He is said to have been the mastermind of a recent assassination attempt on Khawaja Izhaz Hasan, the opposition leader of the Sindh provincial assembly and a member of the overtly secular and anti-Islamist Muttahida Qaumi Movement ([Dawn](#), September 4). During the failed attack, one suspected Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia militant was killed, while a wounded Siddiqui escaped. Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia spokesman Hasmi was later arrested during the course of the ensuing investigation.

It is unclear what position AQIS would play in relation to Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia. Viewed strategically, however, it seems AQIS could serve as a regional satellite for terrorist operations in South Asia, while Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia could be used for al-Qaeda operations in Pakistan. Along similar lines, al-Qaeda has also recently established its India chapter, the Ansar Ghazwat ul Hind, appointing as its leader [Zakir Rashid Bhat](#), a former militant of Kashmiri Islamist terrorist group Hizb ul Mujahideen ([Indian Express](#), July 28).

The surfacing of Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia and its subsequent wave of terrorist attacks appear to have caught the police and counter terrorism units off guard. Despite numerous raids in the suburbs of Karachi, most of which have been associated with Islamist terrorist networks, the counter-terrorism department of the Sind police appears to have little idea as to the identity of the individuals involved in establishing the new terrorist outfit. Focused on IS, Pakistani authorities have perhaps failed to anticipate a resurgent al-Qaeda, its ranks bolstered by returnees from the conflict in Syria.

### **Implications and Response**

After years of drone strikes and military operations, al-Qaeda had been struggling to make a comeback in Pakistan and the recent activities of Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia heralds a possible resurgence for the group.

A boost in numbers gained from embracing the well-trained IS returnees arriving from Syria would likely allow al-Qaeda, which was in desperate need of a new cadre in Pakistan, to resume its activities.

It also benefits from constraints placed on its competition. IS has been unable to fully establish itself in Pakistan. The jihadist community of Pakistan has been cautious about the group — only a handful of Islamists

pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi following the proclamation of IS' so-called caliphate in June 2014 — in part because of the loss of three consecutive emirs of IS-Khorasan in drone strikes.

Moreover, while policymakers in Pakistan may have differing views when it comes to how to deal with the Afghan Taliban as opposed to the Tehreek-e-Taliban groups of the tribal areas, they appear to be on the same page as far as IS is concerned. Military operations are being conducted against the group in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province, as well as the tribal areas of Pakistan and Pakistan's Baluchistan province. Meanwhile, law enforcement organizations across Pakistan have launched a severe crackdown on IS-Khorasan in recent months, with cells busted in Karachi, Lahore, Sialkot and Islamabad. It seems likely such increased pressure on IS will be a further boon to al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda has always presented a threat to a varying degree, but the appearance of Ansar in the jihadist landscape of Pakistan shows its resilience to counter-terrorism operations and its resolve to stay put in Pakistan. Pakistan will need to devise a strategy to tackle this new group before the possibility of an al-Qaeda resurgence becomes a reality.

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### **NOTES**

[1] Pamphlet dropped by the terrorists at the spot in SITE area attack on June 22, in Karachi.

[2] Author interview with senior police officer of Karachi (August 20, 2017).

# After Raqqa: The Next Jihadist Stronghold in Syria

*Patrick Hoover and Omar Kebbe*

As the operations against Islamic State (IS) in al-Raqqa and Deir al-Zour remain the focus of attention in Syria, a group known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has quietly and quickly consolidated near-total dominance over Idlib — the last remaining opposition-held province in the country. Neglecting HTS' activities, however, risks allowing the group to establish a jihadist stronghold from which to launch attacks outside the country.

Many know HTS as the latest iteration of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), formed in August 2011 when al-Qaeda General Command (AQGC) and IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi authorized Abu Mohammad al-Jolani to set up a branch in Syria. Over the course of the six-year conflict, al-Jolani and his jihadist cadres transformed JN into one of the fiercest anti-Assad fighting forces by leveraging its influence within both the broader Syrian revolutionary factions and the global jihadist network. Straddling these two diametrically-opposed forces has remained HTS'/JN's most pressing challenge as it seeks to establish an Islamic emirate in Syria.

Despite its dominance in Idlib province, HTS currently faces both external and internal challenges to its rule. The three strategic pillars that it has relied on to date — co-optation of rival groups, strong internal harmony and manipulation of the civil space — appear to be crumbling under the pressure of the Turkish-Russian-Iranian-led Astana peace talks and escalating tensions with rival rebel groups and local residents.

What HTS decides to do next will undoubtedly impact U.S. counter-terrorism planning in the region, but also the future of the Syrian state itself.

## **HTS Struggles to Fully Co-opt the Opposition**

Aside from its effective military prowess, HTS has exercised adept political control over the revolutionary landscape by employing a strategy of “controlled pragmatism” that started in 2012. This approach involved building interdependent alliances with the local opposition, gradually socializing — and at times, bullying — the opposition into accepting an Islamic emirate. Most notably,

on March 24, 2015, HTS (then known as JN) jointly founded and led the Jaysh al-Fateh (JF) coalition with Ahrar al-Sham (AAS), eventually sweeping Syrian government forces from Idlib in early April 2016 ([Shaam](#), March 24). HTS replicated these efforts during the siege of Aleppo in late 2016, and agreed to jointly manage the city of Idlib with AAS and various other Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups.

However, HTS' unifying efforts were largely limited to tactical and operational cooperation as the group failed on numerous occasions to convince its partners to declare loyalty under its banner. Opposition groups pointed to HTS' ties to al-Qaeda, arguing such links not only distorted the original aims of the revolution, but also justified external attacks on the moderate opposition under the pretext of fighting terrorism, further hindering the revolution. In response, al-Jolani rebranded JN as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) on July 28, 2016, and extricated the group from al-Qaeda, seeking to portray the newly-polished JFS as more locally Syrian and divorced from jihadist influence ([Halab Today TV](#), July 29).

Al-Jolani's initiative appeared to fail. The region's most independently powerful groups, Nur al-Din al-Zanki Movement (NDZM), AAS and Faylaq al-Sham, refused to join the merger, fearing its external backers — Turkey and Qatar — would disprove of links to al-Qaeda.

A secondary tactic in HTS' efforts to subsume its rivals under its banner included a campaign of intimidation and low-intensity attacks. Part of this campaign involved the frequent use of abductions, assassinations and attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), slowly eroding AAS and FSA command-and-control without completely destroying it.

Since it rebranded as JFS in July 2016, HTS/JFS has publicly claimed to have conducted at least 15 abduction events, including that of FSA Jaysh al-Tahrir commander Hussein al-Ghabi on July 3, 2016 ([Qasioun](#), July 3). Since May 2015, at least 30 assassinations or attempted assassinations, and at least 70 IED attacks, have occurred in Idlib. Due to its overwhelming military advantage, HTS was likely behind the majority of these, although the group rarely claims responsibility for them, so as to deter retaliatory attacks and avoid an all-out, intra-rebel conflict. Regardless, the effect of these tactics, which have become common-place in rebel-held Idlib, remains — although HTS has openly cooperated

with various non-jihadist groups, it uses a variety of low-intensity tactics to wear down any potential challenger to its rule.

By the end of 2016, however, HTS' struggle to fully co-opt its various partners and rivals took a complex turn. On-ground dynamics in Idlib had become increasingly subservient to external politics, and HTS felt the pressure. Turkey, the opposition's main backer, decided to rescind its unlimited support for rebels opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, instead focusing on combating the Kurds, isolating JFS and edging closer to Russia, a consequence of which involved marginalizing JFS.

As early as August 2017, Turkish intelligence was reaching out to AAS to discuss how to undermine and dismantle JFS' stranglehold. Turkey, Russia and Iran opened up the Astana talks in late January 2017 to negotiate a ceasefire as a first step for peace talks. Many opposition groups participated, but JFS was excluded due to international terrorist designations.

Facing the seemingly existential challenge to its project in northern Syria, on January 28, JFS rebranded once again as HTS and launched a series of unprecedented coordinated raids on AAS positions across Idlib province ([al-Modon](#), January 28). By July, it had captured the region's key assets: Idlib city, and the Bab al-Hawa, Khirbat al-Jouz and Atmeh border crossings. HTS had managed to induce the defection of over 1,000 AAS fighters, including leaders Hashem al-Sheikh and Abu Saleh Tahan, and gain the allegiance of NDZM and various other groups. It appeared that HTS — through sheer force of arms — had finally swallowed its competitors.

### **Gradual Disintegration**

Despite its continued attempts to maintain and consolidate its power, HTS' dominance over AAS and its position vis-a-vis Astana has provoked significant internal discord. Between September 11 and 13, Abdullah al-Muhaysini, a prominent Saudi jihadist cleric, along with former AAS commander Moselh Alyani, left HTS likely because they felt the group needed to normalize relations with Turkey and participate in an international peace process to legitimize HTS' rule in Idlib province ([Ennabaladi](#), September 11).

Abu Saleh Tahan, head of the Uigher-majority Turkestan Islamic Party, also left HTS ([Twitter](#), September 13). The decision came after a call between al-Jolani and the HTS Idlib Chief Abu al-Walid (a.k.a. Abu Hamza Banash) was leaked throughout the province, revealing al-Walid's request to arrest Muhaysni and Alyani after Jolani expressed his displeasure with both of their ideological positions ([Ennabaladi](#), September 11).

The result has been an ongoing campaign to exterminate al-Jolani's dissenters. Unidentified assailants assassinated senior HTS Saudi cleric and former Jund al-Aqsa military commander Abu Mohamad al-Jazraoui (also known as al-Hijazi) in Saraqib on September 11, while others executed Saudi HTS cleric Saraqa al-Malki after concluding Friday prayers in an Idlib City mosque three days later ([Ennabaladi](#), September 13; [Raialyoum](#), September 15).

These internal differences over the strategic direction of HTS are not unprecedented. Since its inception back in 2011, HTS has consistently faced internal discontent over whether the group's ideological commitment to jihadist goals can incorporate making concessions to Syrian revolutionaries. In July 2016, al-Jolani faced the defections of various senior leaders — such as Sami al-Uraydi and Iyad Nazmi Salih Khalil (Abu Julaybib) — because they viewed JFS' extrication from al-Qaeda as an erosion of the group's jihadist purity.

Tensions over ideology and pragmatism are even spilling over into the conflict with one of HTS' strongest competitors, the Nur al-Din al-Zanki Movement (NDZM). On July 20, NDZM and its 4,000-7,000 fighters left HTS in protest at HTS' capture of Idlib city, as well as the Bab al-Hawa, Khirbat al-Jouz and Atmeh border crossings from AAS ([al-Arabi 21](#), July 20). Toufic Shahabedine, the head of NDZM, released a statement announcing the defection and stating that the "absence of sharia in HTS controlled territory and the decision to fight AAS" were the reasons for his defection ([Orient News](#), July 20).

Since then, HTS has captured the NDZM base in northwestern Aleppo province, assassinated five NDZM commanders (including well-known Nur al-Said Basha) and kidnapped NDZM commander Ashraf Raheem in Dayr Hassan. According to NDZM's Shahabedine, commenting on HTS' recent posturing in Idlib province, "the compass has lost its path and the rifle has strayed from its target" ([Orient News](#), July 20).

At the core of these recent events and the HTS-NDZM conflict is al-Jolani's rumored proposal to open relations with Iran as a means to avoid potential Turkish intervention. Many, including Hussam al-Atrash, the deputy head of NDZM, view Iran as a "historic enemy of Muslims," and cooperation with it equates to a complete betrayal of revolutionary values ([Twitter](#), September 14). These rumors — whether factual or not — indicate a pattern of deepening polarization between HTS and those who distrust its strategic direction.

### **Aggression in Local-Civilian Affairs**

A third cause of HTS' increasing lack of control is its attempt to dominate civilian space and access to humanitarian aid in order to portray an image of effective governance. As part of its strategy of "controlled pragmatism," HTS/JN set up various service-based arms (such as the General Services Administration) that actively competed with — but tolerated — local civilian-formed committees and NGO actors. This coordination allowed JN to ensure the flow of Turkey-based humanitarian assistance, while also dictating the distribution of resources among towns and its rivals. However, as part of its assertive shift post-January 2017, HTS consolidated its control over the region's local service-bodies and conduits for aid in order to legitimize itself as a credible governing authority and manipulate incoming flows of humanitarian aid from regional NGOs.

On August 28, HTS seized the offices of the Idlib City Council (ICC) by force after the ICC, an independently-administered civil institution for the entire province, refused to turn over its bakeries, water and transportation directorate offices to HTS' newly-minted Civil Administration of Services (CAS) ([Baladi News](#), August 20). Prior to the takeover, HTS issued various directives that signaled its intention to impose control over civilian affairs. It formed a "remittances and consumer protection association" to monitor all *hawala* (a traditional Muslim system of transferring money) transfers, which NGOs heavily depend on for aid provision; absorbed AAS' electrical administration, which had previously withheld electricity to HTS-held towns; prohibited new education projects that did not have HTS approval; and imposed oversight over all local councils, demanding they submit periodic reports ([al-Dorar](#), May 13; [Twitter](#), July 29; [Twitter](#), August 20). On March 25, HTS even undertook the bold move of confiscating two shipments of flour en route to a bakery operated by the Ihsan Foundation, an NGO in

Saraqib, which has been a hotbed of anti-HTS activism throughout the conflict ([Facebook](#), March 25)

HTS' assertive intervention into the civilian space suggests it is attempting to use its monopolization of humanitarian supply chains as a form of leverage over both Turkey and the opposition. However, this move appears to have backfired. After meeting with various members of the provisional government, the ICC rejected HTS' demand to place its offices under the group's authority ([Facebook](#), August 22). The eventual dissolution of the ICC on August 26 sparked protests even in the historically pro-HTS village of Binnish ([All4syria](#), August 26) Hotbeds of anti-HTS sentiment, such as Atarib and Maarat al-Numan, saw protests all throughout July and August ([Smart News Agency](#), July 23; [All4syria](#), August 12). On September 9, HTS opened fire on protesters in Darkoosh, further inflaming tensions ([Smart News Agency](#), September 9).

### **Turkey's Next Move**

On August 30, the Turkish-sponsored Syrian Islamic Council — a group of 128 religious clerics that aims to unite Syria's moderate religious authority — called on rebel forces to form a "national army" under the auspices of the provisional government, exiled in Gaziantep, Turkey ([Syrian Islamic Council](#), August 30).

In mid-September 2017, the provisional government heeded that call with the participation of dozens of FSA groups and key non-FSA, such as AAS and Jaysh al-Islam ([Orient News](#), September 13). The inclusion of AAS marks a shift away from the group's prior rejection of various rebel unity initiatives and has, in unprecedented fashion, created a unified front that opposes both al-Assad and HTS.

However, the extent to which this new force can tip the scales in their favor is questionable given HTS' military, political and economic presence in Idlib province. HTS boasts the most fighters, an increasingly interventionist civil administration and control over the region's border crossings and major towns. It is highly unlikely that HTS will moderate its opinion toward dealing with international actors, and even if it did, the international community would be hard pressed to treat HTS as a legitimate actor. Military intervention by Turkey could pose a threat to the group. However, that would face opposition from Russia and al-Assad as neither would

desire another Turkish-controlled enclave so close to its coastal stronghold in Latakia province.

### **Future Prospects and U.S. Policy**

Ongoing challenges such as dealing with NDZM, stemming internal discord and monopolizing civilian affairs will continue widening the cracks in HTS' armor, but these are unlikely to topple its deeply-entrenched authority. With the lack of a unified coalition strong enough to dislodge it and only the remotest prospect of Turkish intervention, HTS is likely to continue its dominance in Idlib province.

While the U.S. and Coalition have made aggressive strides in degrading IS in the east, HTS is taking advantage of being a lower priority to build its safe haven and shore up jihadist support.

Central to preventing this is identifying new local partners, which may require collaborating with Turkey politically and diplomatically. Doing so may include walking back on some commitments to the Kurds, but ultimately will align with the U.S. national security goal of preventing a jihadist stronghold in Syria.

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