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# Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) from an Insurgent Group to a Local Authority: Emergence, Development and Social Support Base

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## ABSTRACT

In 2011, the Middle East entered an era of turmoil. Syria has been the scene for evolution of many NSAGs. This study aims to analyze the factors helped one of the prominent violent organizations, HTS, to become one of the main NSAGs outside the Regime control areas, by applying qualitative methodology using two data sources: primarily, semi-structured field interviews, secondarily, related sources of newspapers/research centers' publications. Findings show that the decisive military factor and ability to build an interest-based relationship with local elites, impose order and security, and provide public services were critical in imposing hegemony and establishing governance.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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The majority of armed confrontations and acts of violence in our world take place within states, not between them. Since 1945, more than 75% of armed conflicts worldwide have been civil wars involving non-state armed organizations<sup>1</sup>. By early 2011, the Middle East had entered an era dubbed the Arab Spring or Uprisings. As a result, countries in this region have been subjected to violent activities and incidents orchestrated and carried out by non-state armed organizations. These were hostile activities directed at civilians and military objectives. Indeed, these armed groups can establish hierarchical intelligence networks and pose a significant security challenge to the Middle East's national security and intelligence apparatuses and an even more significant threat to the state entity, undermining its monopoly on the use of violence.

The years since the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings at the end of 2010 have witnessed an unprecedented increase in the Middle East in the number and form of NSAGs. In one way or another, this increase has been counterbalanced by its increasing relationship to political dynamics throughout this region of the world. As a classification, the category of "non-governmental body" includes a variety of groups, organizations, and movements. This classification includes civil society and the

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non-governmental sector, whose role has increased significantly in the Arab World since the 1990s. Besides, NSAGs include Islamist movements that use violence and organized terrorism, such as many violent jihadist movements active in more than a country in the Middle East<sup>2</sup>.

In the Syrian context, the armed conflict that erupted following the violent suppression of anti-Assad protests in 2011 swiftly developed into an insurgency spread throughout a large portion of the country. The battle between the Assad Regime and armed opposition led to hundreds of thousands of casualties and disabilities. It is estimated that approximately 13.4 million people in Syria require protection and humanitarian assistance, in addition to 6.7 million IDPs, the majority of whom lack access to necessities, besides 6.6 million refugees, of whom there are 5.6 million in neighboring countries of Syria<sup>3</sup>. Late in 2013, a coalition of Islamist militias formed the Islamic Front to drive ISIS out of territories they control in Syria. However, ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham Movement recruited 26,000 new members in 2014. At the time, ISIS held a sizable part of NE Syria and territory bordering Turkey and Iraq. In addition, the Islamic Front maintains less evident ties to Jabhat al-Nusra (or Al-Nusra Front), with whom it has collaborated in several violent clashes with other forces.

Throughout the rise and collapse of these NSAGs in various parts of the Syrian land, many attempts have been made to control and construct local administration that can either compete with the Assad Regime or serve as an alternative governance model. Indeed, current examples of insurgent government structures established by NSAGs have dominated recent studies of intra-state warfare or civil war<sup>4</sup>. These Groups organize their relations with the local political elites or civilian powers in several ways. Mampilly, and Stewart “identified four dimensions across which local rebel political institutional arrangements vary, specifically, the amount of power sharing, the depth of integration, the extent of innovation, and the degree of inclusivity”<sup>5</sup>.

The armed group, Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), with its core formerly Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) or Al-Nusra Front, constitutes a prominent case of establishing a local governance structure in a specific geographic area in the Middle East after the Arab Uprisings. This NSAG was created by Al-Qaeda (AQ) field commanders who defected from ISIS in 2013 by promising allegiance to AQ before asserting their independence from the organization itself, revealing their true identities, and declaring their severance of ties with it in July 2016<sup>6</sup>. Since 2019, when previous armed opposition groups were gradually disbanded, this NSAG has been forcibly controlling and steadfastly controlling broad geographical areas in NW Syria. However, unlike most Wahhabi-jihadist terrorist groups, which rule their subjects directly and rigidly, HTS established a kind of local governance in 2017, which continues to this day, a civilian technocratic administration to run the territory it controls. Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) is the name of this local government<sup>7</sup>.

Surprisingly, HTS’s approach is in stark contrast to other documented cases of direct rule by NSAGs, particularly jihadist groups, which are typically characterized by strict religious discourse, solid ideological commitments, and blunt and uncivil modes of governance<sup>8</sup>. Alternatively, in the case of HTS/SSG, we may notice a novel strategy and a concerted effort to establish legitimacy at several local, regional, and international levels. Studying this development and this specific case can aid in reading modern

NSAGs in the Middle East, comprehending the dynamics of the Syrian Conflict, and examining the NSAG's intriguing local government model.

Thus, the study examines the emergence of HTS; ideology, organization, military, and intelligence capabilities, and social support base, and its changing relationship with AQ and the impact on the context, all of which contributed to HTS dominance over Greater Idlib in NW Syria and the establishment of a local government, the SSG. This paper examines the complex connection between context dynamics and HTS' strategies for resource management, scene dominance in NW Syria, establishing a local government, and survival and seeking legitimacy on local, regional, and worldwide levels. Additionally, this study seeks to investigate how broader conflict dynamics affect HTS's choices for forming local government relationships with other armed and civilian groups, as well as regional powers, between 2012 and 2021.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Frame

Interest in insurgent (armed) groups has a long history and various roots in political science and international relations. However, when we examine contemporary armed conflicts in general, we realize that most of them occur within rather than between states. Moreover, since 1945, more than 75% of armed conflicts at the international level have been civil conflicts, in which NSAGs have played an undeniable role<sup>9</sup>. Besides, with the end of the Cold War, this newly observed shift constituted a new trend toward further study of NSAGs. Furthermore, the global trend toward more significant concern for human security and the maintenance of international peace, in addition to the -alleged- responsibility of Western governments, NGOs, as well as various UN to protect the persecuted and the most vulnerable, constituted an additional urgent need to study these actors and their impact on armed conflicts across the world<sup>10</sup>.

By rebelling against the central authority, NSAGs are progressively threatening the state's monopoly on the use of force. This challenge increased, and its magnitude has risen considerably on the international level since the Cold War ended and globalization began locally in the Middle East following the so-called Arab Spring. Phil Williams<sup>11</sup> contended that the nation-dominance, state's lawful monopoly, and use of force were no longer unquestionable. For many years, NSAGs have existed in various forms. However, throughout the twentieth century, the overwhelming strength of major nation-states put a pall over these NSAGs. Nonetheless, with the shift in the international balance of power during the Cold War and the worldwide changes wrought by globalization, technological advancements, and communications advancements, NSAGs have emerged as a threat to international security. They have challenged the state's existence and legitimacy.

In today's world, it is a fact that NSAGs have risen to emergence; some have even taken control of civil wars and post-conflict societies, reshaping social dynamics and jeopardizing peace state-building processes. Thus, a very reasonable question is: to what extent are NSAGs capable of establishing relations, establishing de facto authority on the local level, and achieving political legitimacy on the local, regional, and international levels?

David Galula was a pioneer in the study of counterinsurgency warfare. In his text "Counterinsurgency Warfare", he examines armed groups' relationships with indigenous

people and their role in insurgency warfare through a population-centric lens that emphasizes the role of indigenous people in counterinsurgency tactics<sup>12</sup>. Another classic text on insurgency and counterinsurgency is "Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency" by Roger Trinquier. Like Galula, Trinquier studied armed groups and insurgency, emphasizing the importance of local people and theorizing about insurgents' and counterinsurgents' struggle to gain local people's support, a critical factor in the conflict<sup>13</sup>. By that, local peoples have been perceived by both Galula and Trinquier as a crucial factor when endeavoring to comprehend the dynamics of insurgencies and the involvement and role of NSAGs. However, they both avoid discussing the concept of legitimacy, whether local or international, and its application concerning state entities and NSAGs<sup>14</sup>.

Recently, insurgency and counterinsurgency studies have placed a greater emphasis on the concept of legitimacy. The revised U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine in 2018 is an excellent example of this, as it recognizes the role of legitimacy in any internal armed conflict, not just the NSAG legitimacy, but also the state itself as success in defeating insurgents is more dependent on the government's perceived and actual legitimacy. As a result, there has been an increased interest in determining the role of NSAG in internal conflict and insurgency movements and its efforts to achieve legitimacy. NSAGs seek legitimacy in various ways, from locally through community engagement and public services to regionally and internationally through coalition building and strategic partnerships with state and non-state actors. Nonetheless, despite the grown focus on legitimacy in studies on counterinsurgency, the legitimization processes that give legitimacy to non-state actors are still not studied enough, as Duyvesteyn debates<sup>15</sup>. As a result, there is a practical need to reconsider the legitimacy of non-state actors in insurgency movements, but outside the framework of the state. Moreover, NSAGs have increasingly sought local and international legitimacy as part of their strategies; we need to understand how these groups legitimize themselves by establishing de facto authorities and the role of the civilian population in this process.

In December 2013, the terrorist armed group ISIS gained international attention after conquering two critical cities in Iraq. Since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Iraq has been a country ruled by representatives of the Shiite majority, while practically the entire population of Anbar is Sunni. ISIS evolved from Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), founded in direct opposition to the U.S. invasion. Although this armed group maintained a presence in Anbar, it had lost much of its support by 2008 due to its excessive violence and direct targeting. AQ's influence in Iraq was essentially obliterated due to the reaction and the surge of U.S.-backed national forces. However, under the leadership of al-Baghdadi, the group entered the battle in Syria. Finally, after establishing authority over a broad territory in both nations, this NSAG made a significant step toward becoming a state actor, in its view, by declaring the Islamic caliphate and rebranding itself as the "Islamic State."

In the Syrian context, the armed conflict that erupted following the violent suppression of anti-Assad demonstrations in 2011 swiftly developed into an insurgency spread throughout many country areas. The battle between the Assad Regime and armed opposition organizations killed hundreds of thousands of lives and resulted in many injuries and disabilities. Additionally, it is estimated that approximately 13.4

million people in Syria require humanitarian assistance, 6.7 million IDPs, the majority of whom lack access to necessities, and 6.6 million refugees, of whom there are 5.6 million in neighboring countries<sup>16</sup>. Late in 2013, a coalition of Islamist militias formed the Islamic Front to drive ISIS out of territories they control in Syria. However, ISIS, JaN, and Ahrar al-Sham recruited 26,000 new members in 2014. Around 12,000 foreign fighters were also among them. At the time, ISIS controlled NE Syria and territory bordering Turkey and Iraq. In addition, the Islamic Front maintains less evident ties to JaN, with whom it has collaborated in many violent clashes with others.

During the rising and fall of these NSAGs, there have been many attempts to establish local governance, which can somehow compete with the Assad Regime or form an alternative example of governance. Indeed, contemporary examples of rebellious governance structures created by NSAGs are at the fore in recent studies of civil war<sup>17</sup>.

HTS is an exceptional case for developing a local governance system in a specific geographical area in the Middle East after the Arab Uprisings. This NSAG was initially created by AQ field commanders who defected from ISIS in 2013 by promising allegiance to AQ before asserting their independence from AQ itself, revealing their true identities, and declaring the severance of ties with it in 2016<sup>18</sup>. This group has controlled broad geographical areas in NW Syria and securely controlled them since 2019, following the progressive dismantling of other NSAGs. Unlike most Wahhabi-jihadi groups, which rule their subjects directly and strictly, HTS formed a type of local government in 2017, establishing civilian technocratic administration to manage the territories it controls. The Syrian Salvation Government is the name of this local government<sup>19</sup>.

However, this approach applied by HTS deserves closer observation as it has differed from other known cases of the direct rule by the Islamist NSAGs, or Wahhabi-jihadi groups, which has been usually characterized by strict religious discourse, high ideological commitments, and rude, uncivil ways of governing<sup>20</sup>. Rather than that, we may detect an apparent quest for legitimacy at the local, regional, and international levels in the HTS/SSG situation. Examining this development and this particular example can be beneficial for reading contemporary NSAGs in the Middle East, comprehending the conflict dynamics, and advancing our understanding of their model of local government.

When one examines NSAGs in the Middle East, it becomes clear that the emergence of NSAGs in recent years can be related to the region's rising fragility. Indeed, totalitarian governments with low levels of legitimacy are ineffective at retaining the loyalty of their populations' many sociological divisions. When such nations employ repression, they frequently incite violent opposition. Similarly, when totalitarian regimes deliberately eliminate a minority or exclude critical elements of the population through neglect or other forms of discrimination, they can foster the emergence and development of NSAGs, which may eventually control vast territories and challenge the central government for the authority. Finally, when the state is unable or unwilling to provide public security and other essential public services, NSAGs advance to fill the void and provide alternative governance, collective goods, and public services to people who are suffering and in desperate need of the bare necessities of life, thereby enhancing their existence and legitimacy locally.

When we examine the literature on NSAGs' attempts at political adaptation, most of this literature has heavily focused on the structural changes within these armed groups and the adaptation at the level of leadership and discourse following a political settlement. However, when we examine the course of any internal conflict in which NSAGs play a significant role, we discover that the characteristics and indicators of pragmatic political adaptation to the political conflict's developments appear earlier<sup>21</sup>. Thus, understanding NSAGs' wartime behavior aids in the assimilation of, and possibly prediction of, the early development of various governance practices and primitive local governance structures for insurgents in civil wars and their reflection, in one way or another, on broader context developments.

The circumstances of the conflict require that insurgent organizations interact closely with local community networks under new governance standards. Within the context of internal armed conflicts, NSAGs in general and insurgent groups, in particular, are engaged in severe rivalry, either with one another or with states and other stakeholders, to gain the resources necessary for survival and control. These resources vary depending on circumstances but frequently focus on maintaining cash flow, tightening control over the local community, and utilizing natural and human resources. In addition, internal battles frequently result in the breakdown of the country's security and governmental systems, creating a multi-level vacuum. Typically, this vacuum is in the absence of public services, security, adjudication, and judicial systems, among others. This vacuum provides an opportunity for NSAGs to enter and create an alternate situation to replace it, jeopardizing present or future political and widespread victories. Also, conflict dynamics encourage NSAGs to pursue political objectives, including direct or indirect negotiations and/or bargaining with the local community, non-state actors, and occasionally with the relevant governments<sup>22</sup>.

The incentives that motivate NSAGs to participate in local government systems and procedures of negotiation and bargaining with conflicting parties are frequently effective for groups operating in protracted violent conflicts. Indeed, the study's case study, HTS, can be viewed as a superb illustration of how to operate within the complex and protracted Syrian setting. In contrast, NSAGs avoid taking direct control of the land and its inhabitants in their early phases of evolution. This approach, however, eventually shifts in response to the conflict's breadth and complexity, as direct participation with local governance systems becomes necessary for the sustained survival, if not justification, of these NSAGs forces. The explanation is straightforward: the incapacity of this NSAG to evolve and adapt to the changes brought about by a long-running violent conflict, to establish communicative roots, and to cooperate with the local community spells the group's demise. Nevertheless, with the evolution of the context and its extension over time, we find that these groups were able to develop and implement new mechanisms to adapt to the new environment, and game laws are attempting to strengthen their communication with local community networks and to justify their presence in order to establish presence, continuation, and survival. NSAGs accomplish this through various means, including providing public services to civilians, imposing their ideology directly or indirectly, and occasionally by the use of force and intimidation utilizing the external enemy's scarecrow<sup>23</sup>.

The dynamics of prolonged violent conflict give a compelling reason for NSAGs to build systems for local governance. Additionally, deconstructing and examining these

similar processes helps shape NSAGs' choices about how to govern and if and to what degree they should work with other entities. Indeed, NSAG's approach to local governance has evolved in lockstep with its position with other actors in the context and prospective competitors to provide such governance, as well as its prospects for advancement through alliances. In general, the governance options for the armed group must be analyzed rationally concerning the limited available options in most cases, as well as its relationship with other groups, both competing and cooperating, the state that has rebelled against it, neighboring countries, the international community, and, last but not least, the local community under its control or the community that could be a target for control, through the use of a variety of methods<sup>24</sup>. Looking at the Syrian context, we find that these governance choices were determined, in one way or another, by the balances, dynamics, and crucial relationships mentioned earlier.

These short or long-term interest-based relationships imposed by conflict dynamics change and vary according to the status quo, the balance of power, and the level of local community acceptance and cooperation with the new control and governance mechanisms. These interactions with states and non-state actors can range from tactical and operational coordination to phased and strategic cooperation, competition, and occasionally violent clashes or "through a mix of cooperation, coercion and international support"<sup>25</sup>. In the contexts of prolonged and complicated internal violent conflicts, some institutions of governance that arose during the conflict appear to be autonomous and, in some instances, even contest the actual de-facto authority wielding the power of arms. However, this is not the case in reality. When we examine the growing governance mechanisms in further detail, we discover that their relationship to the absolute de-facto authority, which possesses the power of arms, does not fit neatly into a simple explanation equation. Indeed, the relationships between the members of these entities are frequently intricate.

When comparing the local governance arrangements of NSAGs and other non-state actors who exhibit some degree of governance at the internal structure level or who provide some form of local governance or public services to civilians, such as local councils and NGOs in the Syrian example, it is possible to observe both unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral frameworks. It depends, however, on the context's setting and complexity, on whether the NSAG is sincere in its efforts to establish self-contained and autonomous institutions of governance, on whether it seeks joint arrangements with civilian proxies or with other insurgent factions, and, finally, on the degree to which the non-state armed group's leadership is sincere in establishing genuine participatory governance systems. In light of all of this, and besides the personal and self-interest motivations of NSAG leaders, insurgent organizations' responses to other armed groups engaging in the establishment of local governance systems might be competitive, cooperative, conciliatory, or even conflictual<sup>26,27</sup>.

Thus, emerging governance mechanisms and arrangements are a natural result of declared and undeclared understandings and agreements, interactions between conflict variables, and the de-facto interdependence relations imposed by the parties to the conflict, including states and non-state actors and previous and new, emergent local and national elites. As a result, new non-governmental or quasi-governmental systems for local governance frequently emerge. Indeed, even the most extremist non-state armed groups, which openly declare their desire to abolish the old regime in its

entirety, find it extremely difficult, but also logical, to engage and negotiate with the local community and establish effective governance mechanisms and institutions without communication with, and sometimes even dependence on, preexisting local societal and political elites<sup>28</sup>. In the current context of NW Syria, we find many examples when studying the SSG and its relationship to the de-facto authority and the local community.

In 2019, it became clear that HTS had managed to impose its hegemony on the area, as it did not appear that there was any armed group capable of challenging its military capacity and thus opposing its authority. Through the military support HTS received from other groups<sup>29</sup> and the calm imposed by the Turkish-Russian agreement at the end of 2018, HTS was able to expel and end armed groups and impose their conditions on others. HTS followed the same tactic, targeting the competitive NSAGs with different pretexts each time through extensive counter-propaganda and neutralizing the rest of the armed groups, then launched a focused attack while leaving space for the faction's leadership to withdraw from the areas under the control of HTS, and to pardon the soldiers by giving them the option of handing over weapons or joining HTS. This tactic has proven successful every time. The most critical condition that HTS sought to impose on the remaining armed groups was the absolute acceptance of their dominance over the military arena in Idlib, which means the monopoly of the power to use weapons and launch military attacks against the Assad Regime. Besides, it meant accepting the nascent civilian authority<sup>30</sup>, which encountered difficulties that prevented it from imposing laws under the name of SSG.

Accounts of the unannounced negotiations that preceded the formation of HTS indicate that they were the product of discussions and interactions of dynamics within the armed groups. However, this process was not clear. However, statements by the group's leaders and accounts of closed negotiation sessions and other evidence indicate that the project of HTS was not merely a unification of armed groups within one operations room, one command. The formation of HTS was more than just theatrical domination of a particular armed group to achieve short-term, material interests. On the contrary, HTS leadership provided the necessary argument for the rebels against the Assad Regime to unite for survival and perhaps the strategic success of the armed rebellion against the Ba'ath Regime. At the same time, the process of forming HTS and its quest to dominate Idlib was justified<sup>31</sup>. HTS leaders were able, within a clear discourse, to use the division in the revolutionary arena in NW Syria with the real threat of the Assad Regime's invasion of the area as a logical justification for unifying NSAGs within one structure.

The attempts to explain the apparent process of formation and domination of HTS have something to say within comparative political science. In his study of power distribution in the national insurgent movements, Krause puts forward a theory to explain what is happening. Krause concludes through his "Movement Structure Theory" that the dominance of a single NSAG tends to be more successful in the insurgency as a whole. This is because the state of dominance imposed by one NSAG ends competition between armed groups and stops clashes between them toward pursuing goals with an actual strategic dimension. Moreover, this resulting state of hegemony allows the dominant group to politicize violence against a strategic enemy to use it in negotiations to achieve further and more significant gains<sup>32</sup>.

## Methods

This research has sought to understand the NSAG known as HTS, analyze its role in the Syrian Conflict, and explore the factors that helped it become one of the main non-state violent actors in the conflict and establish a local government, SSG, in NW Syria, after 2011. To collect qualitative data and attain a comprehensive understanding of HTS ideology, organization, social-base support, leadership, and approach to the local governance, diverse perspectives and opinions were sought about this interested armed group. Therefore, face-to-face and online semi-structured interviews had been conducted with 25 interviewees and experts in the Syrian context from diverse backgrounds (political, humanitarian, profit, nonprofit and civil).

For the questionnaire, 16 open questions were developed to be used in the semi-structured interviews. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, these questions have been designed as a guide during the interview with the flexibility to ask more questions if needed. Besides, a documents analysis was conducted as a secondary source of information about the context, HTS, and SSG. The sources were selected through the online research of the academic material, publications, journals, and analysis reports issued by academic and research centers that studied the Syrian context and focused on the HTS development and role in the conflict. The secondary sources were categorized to serve the discussion framework and enhance the discussion sequence of the factors that helped the HTS be the only NSAG in Idlib and enabled it to establish some shape of a local authority.

## *Scope of the Study*

This study focuses on the Syrian Context following 2011, with a particular emphasis on HTS. The study investigates HTS' discourse, organizational structure, military capabilities, social support base, and changing relationship with AQ and its impact on the context's development. Also, this study examines the intricate connection between context dynamics and HTS strategies for dominating Idlib in NW Syria and establishing local governance. Besides, the study seeks to understand how broader conflict trends with their regional and international dimensions have influenced HTS options for establishing local governance through partnerships with other armed and civilian entities and regional powers between 2012 and 2021. It is important to note that any comprehensive treatment of the era prior to 2011 and after December 2021 is outside the scope of this study.

## *Research Design*

This descriptive study depends on a qualitative methodology using two data sources, primary and secondary. Firstly, secondary data sources such as academic studies, articles, and books discussing NSAGs and their role in general insurgencies and the post uprisings era in the Middle East were reviewed. This methodology is aimed at establishing the theoretical framework of the study. Furthermore, for the in-depth study of the Syrian case, and besides analyzing secondary data of the Context, the backbone of the study was the primary data sources collected in the in-depth interviews with

experts and interviewees in the context living in NW Syria, Turkey, or in Europe. The interviews aimed at collecting data concerning the context in Syria, in general, and in the NW of Syria, in particular, and concerning HTS and its role in the conflict, its relationship with the local population in NW Syria, and finally concerning HTS' approach toward supporting the establishment and consolidation of a local governance structure. The interview questions were prepared according to the research objectives, the research problem, the research questions, and obtaining information not present in previous studies.

### ***Population and Sampling***

The study sought to get a variety of views on the HTS, and acquired qualitative data via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key interviewees and experts from various backgrounds in the context, both in-person and online. Data were triangulated throughout the study utilizing secondary sources to reduce subjective judgments, minimize bias, and increase participant reliability. The in-depth interviews' primary objective was to understand better the context, the emergence and development of HTS, the conflict dynamics, HTS role, and the current local governance structure. Thus, the sample of participants was designed to collect pertinent, authentic information while also ensuring the participants' credibility in terms of the subject. This required choosing sources that would ultimately maximize the validity and reliability of the collected data and the obtained results.

To guarantee that the selected interviewees possessed the necessary expertise and information about the study's context and subject, experts and relevant interviewees on the conflict were reached to participate in the interviews. This sample included individuals from various backgrounds (political, humanitarian, profit, nonprofit, and civilian), Syrians and non-Syrians living in NW Syria, Turkey, and other countries, practitioners and academics with experience working in Syria and a firm grasp on the conflict. As a result, the interviewees were expected to critically assess the conflict's process and dynamics, the emergence and development of NSAGs, particularly in NW Syria, the establishment and development of HTS, and domination and promotion of a particular form of local government, the SSG. The interviews were conducted to get factual information regarding the context rather than personal perspectives. However, given how difficult it is to acquire good, unbiased facts about the conflict, it must be admitted that a few questions proved impossible to answer without providing one's perspective on the situation.

It should be mentioned that the researcher leaned heavily on the willingness of the selected people and experts to interview, as participation was entirely voluntary. Thus, this can be viewed as a possible selection bias. Additionally, this study interviewed a relatively small number of participants (25), explaining why the interviewees' voices significantly influenced the analysis. We should also mention that security concerns canceled interviewing persons from HTS or SSG. Besides, all interviewees were with good to high education, which some might consider an elite sample and cannot represent the perspective of the population in NW Syria. Nevertheless, to improve the analysis findings, increase reliability and minimize potential bias, the material obtained from the in-depth interviews has been cross-referenced to the extent possible with secondary sources.

## Findings and Discussion

Between June 2021 and November 2021, 25 persons were interviewed in this study using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. This methodology aimed to obtain qualitative data while allowing interviewees to clarify and add what they believe is necessary while avoiding questions that cause them embarrassment or discomfort or lack accurate information or adequate real-world experience to respond. The sample was drawn from context-related interviewees. In addition, there was a significant effort to diversify the sample in terms of gender, age, nationality, place of residence, occupation, and academic background, to diversify the answers, enrich the analysis, and avoid bias.

### *HTS and Factors of Success: Control and Hegemony*

Gradually, HTS imposed almost complete control over Idlib and areas in Aleppo. However, the control process was not easy and did not occur without clashes with the other NSAGs. In one way or another, HTS promoted the idea that hegemony is necessary to achieve a strategic victory for the Syrian Revolution against the Assad Regime and avoid defeat<sup>33</sup>. As a result, the factionalized Syrian insurgency has reached a tipping point. This stage was made evident by the Regime forces' quick advance in late 2019 and early 2020. This retreat of the Syrian insurgency occurred after a large-scale military escalation backed by Russia and was followed by extensive bombardment<sup>34</sup>. As a divided and internally competitive movement, the Syrian insurgency failed to end the Regime and lost most of its territory at the beginning of its rise. Hence, the Syrian insurgency gradually drifted into inappropriate, unequal, and futile negotiations.

Looking at the insurgency field in NW Syria, two major NSAGs were looking to dominate, Ahrar al-Sham Movement (Islamic Ahrar al-Sham Movement, in Arabic: *قِيَمَالَسَالَا مَاشَلَا رَارْحَا تَكْرَح*)<sup>35</sup> and Jabhat al-Nusra, JaN. It has been challenging to assess the relative strength of each NSAG due to many resources and strengths. Nonetheless, before 2017, many Syrians regarded the Movement as a necessary counterweight to its jihadist adversary, Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN)<sup>36</sup>. In addition, the possibility that the Movement would be a tool for Turkish intervention against HTS was an example of the importance of the factor of external interference in the Syrian insurgency. Division and internal dysfunction are characteristic of a non-dominant insurgency system, where an external power with interest in the context can support an NSAG against another group within a tactical or strategic action<sup>37</sup>.

After tug-of-war and several interactions and negotiations, the clash was inevitable, finally in July 2017. HTS announced that it would not retreat until forming one body and imposing hegemony over Idlib. It argued that the situation was dangerous and that there should be only one body to fight and negotiate. HTS' leadership prepared well for this battle. According to the Sham Network News, the leadership prepared all the conditions before delivering the fatal blow to the (Ahrar Al-Sham Movement). HTS used all capabilities in this battle. It was necessary to prepare the soldiers ideologically, penetrate the other side, and wait for the decisive moment<sup>38</sup>. With the HTS aware of the seriousness of the clash on its social-support base, it made a conclusive

decision. It was a crucial moment for the survival and existence of HTS as the leading NSAG in NW Syria.

According to the interviewees, the factors that helped HTS impose hegemony over Idlib were multiple. The participants mentioned the following factors: military capacity, which was mentioned repeatedly, then came the organizational capacity and the religious discourse of HTS. The less mentioned factors were the political status of the conflict, external support, ideology, and the financial capacity of HTS, respectively. The organizational capacity was another essential factor in HTS domination. The third most repeated factor, by the research participants, of HTS domination is the religious discourse.

### ***HTS and Local Community in North-West Syria***

The HTS's relationship with the population in NW Syria seems to be careful, interest-based, and submitted to more than a factor. Answering question number 6: Do you think HTS enjoys a social-support base in the areas under its control? 46% of the interviewees said it is relative, while only 13% said yes. On the other hand, many people believe that HTS should enjoy a social-support base in the areas under its control; otherwise, it would not be that powerful. Interviewee 11, surgeon and humanitarian activist in Euphrates Shield Area, links the social support that HTS has to the mutual interest of the elite there: "Yes. There is now a supporting elite to HTS in NWS. This elite has found itself has the same mutual interest HTS seeks. A good part of this elite is currently working in the SSG".

On the contrary, several interviewees think HTS never enjoyed a genuine social support base, and that the relationship is not equal when considering the population's vulnerability. Dr. Munzer Khalil, ex-head of Idlib Health Directorate, referred to the choice people have; he said: "No. People in this area of Syria need the basics, with high-security concerns. We need to remember that more than 60% of the population in Idlib are IDPs. Thus, people do not support the HTS; people accept its presence due to their vulnerability".

Another critical factor that plays a role in people's perception and relationship with HTS is control. Being under HTS control and in direct touch with its members may change the general perception. Not all of NW Syria is under the control of HTS, only the areas known as Greater Idlib. The rest is under different moderate NSAGs backed by the Turkish Government. Thus, when asked question number 7: Does the civilian population perceive HTS differently in different areas? The great majority of the research participants (92%) said Yes. The participants attributed this difference in perception to several factors. Karam Shaar, economist, policy analyst, research director of the Operations and Policy Center, and a nonresident scholar at the Middle East Institute, does not attribute this difference to HTS itself, but the nature of the relation between people and authority, from one perspective, and to the demonization of HTS in the propaganda of the other NSAGs. He said: "Yes, they are perceived differently in each area, but this is not particular to HTS; this is the case everywhere. When a group of people rules you, you perceive them differently from when you are not. You draw different parallels and different comparisons. For people living in Idlib, I think their perception of HTS tends to be slightly better. In areas outside HTS control, there is a level of demonization of HTS and its activities".

## **HTS and SSG**

The steps to consolidate control and progress with the hegemony project were distinctive and bold through supporting the establishment of local governance - regardless of its legitimacy or feasibility, which became evident after the armistice included in the ceasefire agreement in March 2020 after weeks of battles and bombardment<sup>39</sup>. The freezing of military operations was not a passing moment. In fact, since March 2020, the truce has restructured the political scene in areas controlled by the NSAGs in NW Syria<sup>40</sup>. Nevertheless, HTS has acknowledged that the facts alone will not be sufficient to ensure the project's survival. In either case, it has appeared as though aggressive political maneuvers are the only route forward for HTS and possibly other NSAGs. But, of course, even if the international community shuns them, HTS can still engage the local population and local political and social elites in negotiation processes for their rehabilitation and reintegration into the local scene in NW Syria. However, they must somehow engage the international world, particularly Western countries, and even establish a power-sharing deal with competing armed factions to get tacit recognition<sup>41</sup>. Since the end of 2017, it has appeared that HTS has begun to take concrete steps to achieve these purposes. As it has been made clear since March 2020, ceasefire policies - still stable at the time of writing these words - can reinforce the dynamics of change in NW Syria and maybe a political solution in the country as a whole.

These bold steps by HTS culminated in supporting the formation of a local civilian government body without any accreditation - or even recognition - of the governmental body of the Syrian opposition, which is almost recognized by several international bodies, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). As expected, HTS's military dominance over the military field in NW Syria and the termination or expulsion of the rest of NSAGs led to their dominance over the rest of civic life in Idlib. However, it seems that military control is one matter, and completing this control to include the rest of the aspects of civic life and investing that in the service of the same project is another matter, which may be no less challenging. In his answer to question 8 in this research: What do you think are the factors that helped HTS establish a local government in areas out of the Assad Regime's control in NW Syria? Orwa Ajjoub, the researcher in Jihadism, said: "I think that HTS leadership concluded that to stay and survive, they need to build a governance body that can deal with people's everyday life, and at the same time, show political maturity in HTS leadership. HTS needed a civil face; the SSG was that face".

Before 2017, the local elite launched many campaigns and initiatives to standardize governance. However, the military competition among NSAGs and the lack of one strong actor made these initiatives stillborn. Later, the HTS' victory gave them space to work with one central actor. The last initiative, known as the (Civil Administration Initiative) was initially one of them. The new military climate allowed it to see the light. In August 2017, the Initiative was led by a group of the local elite, forming the SSG. The elite was characterized by its diversity with a mixture of different characteristics, including academics, educated mid-class, centrist conservatives, Islamists, and individual activists known for their staunch anti-Assad Regime besides their support for revolutionary initiatives of a civilian nature. Most of these activists did not have a clear sectarian affiliation, but their political, social activism experience united them after 2011<sup>42</sup>.

The initiative to establish the SSG did not come from HTS, at least initially. Many researchers in the Syrian context's civil affairs believe that the formation of SSG in Idlib resulted from a confluence of interests between the local revolutionary elite and HTS at an appropriate moment in time. In that context, Haid Haid, a Syrian columnist and a consulting associate fellow with the Middle East and North Africa program at Chatham House, believes that the relationship between HTS and SSG is interest-based. In answering question 8, he said: "Based on the research I have done, the idea of establishing the SSG did not fully come from HTS. Instead, it looks that the SSG was a cross of interests for HTS with a particular elite, mostly academic, in Idlib. Thus, the relationship, as I perceive, between the SSG and HTS is based on mutual interest. There are things that HTS could not be done without SSG; however, that does not mean HTS has absolute control over the SSG".

Establishing and empowering the SSG has been through a gradual frame time. Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni believe that establishing the SSG was carried out gradually through three main mechanisms. Firstly, the centralization of the organs of government has been consolidated, secondly the gradual delegation of this central authority to the local educated urban elite in the Idlib area, and thirdly the process of reliance in some public services on impartial, external parties, outsourcing, and independent of the administrative structures<sup>43</sup>. Karam Shaar, an economist, policy analyst, research director of the Operations and Policy Center, and a nonresident scholar at the Middle East Institute, was a clever move by HTS: "I think that creating SSG was a very smart move from HTS. It is a typical scapegoating tactic. You put a group of technocrats in front, and you say they are the ones in charge, while in reality, you do run the show. So, for example, the economic affairs are not run by SSG, yet, SSG has a ministry that is supposed to be in charge of the economy. However, if you look at what they do, in practice, all they do is more like consumer protection; they have nothing to do, more or less, with the economy. Now, this is an excellent deflecting tactic, you know. So, if you criticize HTS, they will tell you: well, it is not us; it is just the government".

As for the economy, instead of focusing on the populace's needs, many of whom live in abject poverty, particularly IDPs, the SSG's efforts have monopolized vital economic sectors. Moreover, the transformation of HTS from a jihadist armed group to a de facto authority has also shifted its leadership's attention to cash generation. This change occurred with establishing SSG, which evolved as an administrative cover for HTS' aim of economic dominance<sup>44</sup>. Economic control began in June 2017 with the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey got controlled by HTS. However, a little glance back reveals that HTS's economic trend began early in 2015, following the Opposition Forces' seizure of Idlib City when JaN attempted to seize properties owned by individuals fleeing the conflict. The next step in economic hegemony was forming businesses, the most prominent of which was founding an agency for transferring money, Al Waseet. These measures formed the core of HTS' economic infrastructure. Within years, Al Waseet Company grew to become Al-Sham Bank. This step allowed HTS to control a large part of the financial services in this geographical area and later facilitated the transition from replacing Syrian Lira with Turkish Lira in summer 2020. The oil sector and its derivatives also captured the attention of HTS, as it is a vital sector and the process of controlling it has a strategic dimension. Through gradual

steps, Watad Company was granted, shortly after its establishment in 2018, the exclusive right to control all gas sales and purchases and the right to import gas and oil derivatives from Turkey<sup>45</sup>.

In searching the factors that helped establish SSG, most participants (70%) mentioned that military domination played a key role. However, establishing an interest-based network with the local elite came second, while the political vacuum in NW Syria came third. Concerning the local population's perception of the SSG, the results were as follows: 52% of the interviewees said that the civilian population in the Idlib area perceived the SSG as a de facto authority. In comparison, 61% said that the population perceives it as affiliated with HTS. When asking about legitimacy, the research participants were divided. 54% of participants said that SSG does not enjoy any legitimacy, while 42% said it enjoys a de facto legitimacy. 2 participants avoided answering. "I do not see it is enjoying legitimacy. I have not elected anyone from SSG".

### ***HTS Role in the Syrian Conflict***

The participants in the study agreed that the role HTS played in the Syrian Conflict was significant; however, when asked to describe that role further, 20 participants (80%) answered that it had been a negative role, while five participants (20%) preferred not to answer the question, no one described HTS role as positive. In general, the participants who described the HTS role as (Negative) justified their response by HTS impact on the path of the Syrian Revolution and people's suffering.

The last two questions in the study focused on the participants' perspective of HTS and SSG's next role in the Syrian Conflict. Nevertheless, the participants were divided when asked if they believed SSG had a future in NW Syria. One participant avoided answering, nine participants (36%) replied it was not clear, seven participants (28%) said they believed the SSG has a future. In contrast, eight participants (32%) replied negatively, SSG has no future. However, these answers can be anticipated when studying a complex context like the Syrian, but at the same time, the answers can reflect the varied, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives this study participants have of HTS and SSG. Besides, the considerable percentage of participants who could not anticipate what may happen in the next phase of the conflict, and answered: Not clear, can tell us that even after ten years of the crisis, the outcome of the conflict is ambiguous.

Regarding the potential role HTS may play in the post-conflict phase, the division of the study participants continued. 6 participants (24%) said HTS has no role to play in the next phase of the conflict, and 6 participants (24%) said the opposite; HTS has a role to play. 5 participants (20%) avoided answering, and 8 participants (32%) put their positive answer under a condition: HTS must change to stay and play a role in the next phase. Karam Shaar, economist, policy analyst, research director of the Operations and Policy Center and a nonresident scholar at the Middle East Institute, believes that HTS still has a significant role to play in the future; he attributed that to the pragmatism that HTS leadership enjoy. On the other side, several participants expressed their doubts about the possibility for HTS to persist. Johannes Rothe acknowledged the political pragmatism HTS has; however, he mentioned the terrorism designation problem and the position of the Assad Regime as expected constraints and to the political equation that gave space to HTS to play such a critical role.

Other participants believe that HTS needs to make dramatic changes to proceed in its political role in the same context. Jumana Habra, a Syrian woman from Hama City who left Syria with her family in 1982 after the brutal attack; now a social, political activist participating in Geneva talks, stressed that HTS must change drastically; ideologically and structurally. However, Jumana thinks that this change has already started through the SSG. She said: "HTS cannot play a role in the future of Syria in its current shape and ideology. However, through the SSG, HTS has started changing much of its approach to the local people in NWS." Haid Haid agreed: " HTS does not have regional or international allies who ensure a seat on the political negotiation's table; this weakens its role in any solution for the conflict. However, HTS may change its discourse and structure toward becoming a political party that might join other political groups to form a coalition. Such a coalition might seek to play some political role, regardless of what it is. Otherwise, HTS, in its current shape, cannot play any political role in the future of Syria".

### ***HTS, Terrorism, and the Western World***

After ensuring domination over Idlib and consolidating the administrative system, HTS hegemonic project reached a critical point, clashing with the ideology brothers. Orwa Ajjoub, the researcher in Jihadism, believes that HTS' conflict with the remnants of AQ is different from his previous conflict with other NSAGs; besides, he senses compatibility in goals, and perhaps interests, between the HTS's direction to end AQ in Idlib and the Western line led by the U.S. in anti-terrorism: "In al-Jolani's attempts to neutralize the presence of AQ in northwest Syria, his goals are aligned with those of the international coalition"<sup>46</sup>. One way or another, HTS has reached a privileged position in the conflict that has made it the only actor capable of developing and implementing a coherent strategy in NWS to combat global terrorism. HTS's capacity to eliminate remnants of AQ networks on the ground is widely regarded as a significant advantage. Indeed, after two decades of the war on terrorism, Western countries, particularly the U.S., are still unable to develop long-term strategic mechanisms for combating terrorism other than the well-known model of long-range strikes, which has repeatedly demonstrated its failure and even resulted in widespread reactions that are opposed to the war on terrorism's stated objectives. At the same time, while the current reaction to the HTS crisis may be less than optimal, it may pose a minimal risk to the Western coalition, as HTS' hegemony in Idlib is unlikely to evolve into an extremist "Islamic Emirate" with a global terrorist objective<sup>47</sup>.

Looking at the recent moves of HTS, especially after its control over the joints of the military, economic and civil action, we find that HTS, while seeking to achieve its own goals and consolidate its project, was working per the Western interests in several respects. Initially, after the collapse of ISIS in the east, HTS was one of the most powerful armed groups that confronted the attempts of ISIS sleeper cells to revive the organization in the west after its annihilation in the east of Syria<sup>48</sup>. Subsequently, HTS dismantled AQ networks present in Idlib relentlessly, even though it was at the cost of clashing with groups that formed its supporting reservist and even internal conflict at the level of HTS itself<sup>49</sup>, HTS cooperated with Turkey to develop a safe sanctuary strategy to preserve areas outside the Assad Regime's control in NWS, which

directly helped stop a new wave of refugees to Turkey and Europe<sup>50</sup>. Silvia Carezzi, on the other hand, argues that HTS's adjustment toward a strategy centered on the local level to reconcile with the situation and adapt to operational realities resulted from compelling political developments rather than profound, genuine changes in its core. HTS has come under great strain, both inside and externally, following Russia's intervention and the changing dynamics of the battle<sup>51</sup>.

In one way or another, the world needs to deal with HTS presence as *fait accompli*. While the world was with concern observing the refugee movement toward Europe and suffering the consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the world, HTS was consolidating its hegemony project in NWS. Now, this project is almost completed. However, despite all the previous steps and any other steps that may come in the future, given the ideological and organizational nature of HTS and the complexity of the terrorism file, there are no explicit guarantees so far to remove HTS from the list (Terrorist Designation) or to politically recognize the SSG as a representative of the Syrian people in Idlib.

## Conclusions

Through stages of structural development and a gradual softening of discourse, HTS eventually imposed control over Idlib. However, the process was not easy and did not occur without bloody clashes with other NSAGs. HTS has pursued a strategy that relies mainly on propaganda and military tactics, which is summarized in besieging the targeted armed group before hitting it and neutralizing the other groups. HTS promoted the idea that this hegemony is a necessary, crucial stage to achieve a strategic victory for the Syrian Revolution or avoid a defeat. HTS stated, more than once, that it will not stop until one body is formed. HTS argued that the situation was risky and that only one party should be fighting the Assad Regime and managing the negotiations. It seems that HTS has prepared well for the battle in advance. HTS leadership took a decisive decision, despite being aware of the danger of any clash with other NSAGs on the social support base that had previously been affected. It appears that HTS has found that the March 2020 agreement between Turkey and Russia is a crucial moment for the survival and existence as the leading armed actor in NWS. According to those interviewed, many factors contributed to HTS leadership of the military and political scene in Idlib, thus imposing hegemony. As for the most important reasons, the military capacity, the organizational capacity, and the religious discourse came first.

Since the end of 2017, HTS began to take tangible steps at the level of discourse and administration through an alliance with the local elite, which eventually led to the existence of SSG. The steps HTS took to consolidate control and progress in the hegemony project were distinguished and bold by supporting the establishment of local government, which became more firmly established and apparent after the March 2020 agreement. Freezing of military operations was not a passing moment in the conflict; the truce redefined the political scene in NWS. Since March 2020, ceasefire policies have reinforced the dynamics of change in that area. HTS seemed to acknowledge that military dominance alone would not be sufficient to ensure survival. Therefore, it was inevitable to involve local political and social elites.

The initiative to establish SSG did not come from HTS alone. Instead, SSG formation was believed to have resulted from a timely intersection of interests between a local socio-economic elite and HTS. HTS has effectively benefited from this confluence of interests and mobilized local expertise of the elites in Idlib, the host community and IDPs, who are not necessarily affiliated with HTS. The new military-political landscape in NWS eventually created this common interest with HTS. Hence, SSG was empowered through a gradual process. This process can be summarized as centralizing the governmental structure, gradually delegating central authority from HTS to the local urban elite, and finally outsourcing independent support to the administrative structures. In researching the factors that helped establish SSG, participants mentioned that military dominance comes first, establishing an interest-based network with the local elite, and finally, the political vacuum. In addition, it seems that the domination of the aspects of the local economy was another critical factor in completing hegemony, which was achieved by monopolizing vital economic sectors through a network of economic partners.

With the consolidation of its hegemonic project, HTS began to play an increasingly important role with regional and global dimensions. This increasingly vital role can be summarized in two levels. The first is to ensure control of the people's movement toward the border with Europe, and the second is to end the phenomenon of Wahhabi-jihadist terrorism in NWS. Regardless of the various analyses of the dramatic changes in HTS's discourse and strategy, it is time for the world to start dealing with HTS's existence as a *fait accompli*. In 2020 and 2021, as the world has watched the movement of refugees toward Europe and grappled with the global consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic, HTS was putting the final touches on its hegemony project. However, from a realistic point of view, despite all the previous steps and the steps that HTS might take in the future, given the ideological and organizational nature of HTS and the complexity of the terrorism file, there is no guarantee to remove HTS from the U.S. list of organizations classified as terrorist, or recognizing SSG as a political representative.

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## Appendix I Interview Questions<sup>52</sup>

### Introduction

1. Personal Information:  
Name (Optional):  
Professional Affiliation:  
Gender:  
Age:  
Nationality:  
If Syrian, from where?  
Occupation:
2. Could you briefly tell me about your general experience in the Syrian context?
3. What is your perception of the current situation in Syria?
4. What is your perception of HTS in Northwest Syria?

### Main Questions

5. What do you think are the factors that helped HTS become one of the main non-state actors in areas out of the Assad regime's control? Please explain and give examples, if possible.
6. Do you think HTS enjoy social support base in the areas under its control? Please explain and give examples, if possible.
7. Does the civilian population perceive the HTS differently in different areas?
  - a. How does the civilian population generally perceive HTS in areas controlled by HTS in NW Syria?
  - b. How does the civilian population generally perceive HTS in areas not controlled by HTS in NW Syria?
8. What do you think are the factors that helped HTS establish a local government in areas out of the Assad regime's control in northwest Syria? Please explain and give examples, if possible.
9. How do you think the civilian population perceives HTS as a local authority through the (Syrian Salvation Government) in Idleb, Northwest Syria, in areas controlled by HTS?
10. Do you think HTS local government (The Syrian Salvation Government) enjoy legitimacy? Why and how?
11. What are the main factors determining how the civilian population perceive HTS local government (The Syrian Salvation Government)?
12. Does HTS local government (The Syrian Salvation Government) provide public services to civilians?
  - a. If the answer is yes, what kind of public services does the HTS local government provide (Syrian Salvation Government) in its control areas?
  - b. Which other actors provide services to the civilian population, if any?
13. Do you think that providing public services by HTS, in its areas of control, played a role in establishing a local government in NW Syria? Please explain and give examples, if possible.
14. How do you perceive the role played by HTS in the Syrian conflict?
15. How do you perceive the future of the HTS local government in NW Syria?
16. What do you think the potential role HTS may play in the post-conflict/transitional phase and peacebuilding in Syria?

### Final Question

17. Is there anything else you would like to add or mention?