

Articles

Al-Qaida's Complex Balancing Act in Syria

by Charles Lister

Abstract

Over the years, al-Qaida has become an increasingly decentralized movement in which its geographically dispersed affiliates have assumed increasing levels of autonomy over their tactical and strategic decision-making. At the outset of the Arab Spring, al-Qaida was also undergoing a process of strategic rethinking, in which more locally-sensitive and nationally grounded methods of operating were being encouraged as more effective paths towards durable jihadi projects. The Arab Spring itself also presented al-Qaida and its affiliates with opportunities to tie themselves more deeply into a collective sense of change across the Middle East. It was in Syria that this evolved level of thinking found itself most efficiently realized, as Jabhat al-Nusra sought to implement a modus operandi that was based on integrating and embedding itself into the Syrian revolutionary milieu through a combination of cooperation and [short-term] pragmatism. Jabhat al-Nusra's embrace of this new model of jihad brought it substantial benefits, but as time passed, it also posed new challenges. By embracing localism so wholeheartedly over al-Qaida's traditional internationalist agenda, Jabhat al-Nusra struggled to sustain the trust of its members who expected a truly fundamentalist face to eventually emerge. Moreover, despite its strong localist focus, too many Syrians still distrusted the group because of its continued links to a globalist jihadist movement. Jabhat al-Nusra therefore sought to differentiate itself from ISIS and was also forced to distance itself from al-Qaida, which set in motion a series of events that challenged the group's successors' - Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) - internal unity and external credibility. It therefore appears that although HTS in 2017 maintains a potentially protectable base in northwestern Syria, the challenges that its unique strategy presented forced it to act in ways that undermined much of the sustainability progress it had made in previous years. Whether the group's long game strategy of controlled pragmatism could be said to have been a success is therefore an open question.

Keywords: Al-Qaida; Jihad; Syria; Iraq; Afghanistan; Yemen; Pakistan; Terrorism

Introduction

Al-Qaida has been evolving and adapting to changing circumstances ever since its formation in the late-1980s. Initially an elite, cellular organisation that embedded itself within safe environments from which to plot spectacular terrorist attacks, al-Qaida transitioned into a global movement following the September 11, 2001 attacks, in part due to the loss of its Afghan safe-haven but also to take advantage of its growing name recognition. That strategy of affiliation – acquiring loyalist militant wings across the Islamic world – made up for al-Qaida's loss of power in South Asia after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, but it also presented what had been a centrally-led organisation with substantial challenges of command and control. In the years that followed, al-Qaida transitioned into a geographically dispersed movement whose central leadership sought to sustain overarching authority over its affiliates despite being under heavy pressure from U.S. drones along the Afghan-Pakistan border.

Throughout this transitional period, al-Qaida's affiliate model resulted in an extent of decentralization, whereby some affiliates embraced their own local leadership's styles and evolved into what their respective areas of operation demanded. In Iraq, for example, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his successors led Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and then the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) down a path of steady differentiation from al-Qaida's core model and into a strategically distinct jihadi movement. The especially brutal tactics employed by AQI and the ISI in order to spark a debilitating sectarian conflict that it hoped would pave a path towards a viable and durable Islamic State project was in marked differentiation from al-Qaida's strategic thinking. Similar, though less strategically impactful devolution and decentralization was visible in Somalia, with Al-Shabab's tendency towards factionalism and splits between its localist and internationalist wings; and in North Africa, where al-

Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) benefitted from its role in running criminal smuggling networks and later effectively broke up into several rival factions.

Although Osama Bin Laden clearly sought to exert his leadership over al-Qaida's various affiliates, the trend of decentralisation was clear. The unmitigated violence meted out in Iraq by AQI and the failure of its 2006 Islamic State project proved to have been a particularly damaging development for the al-Qaida brand. It was therefore natural that from 2010, al-Qaida's regional leaderships, especially those in the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, had begun to strategise about more effective methods of operating, so as to more effectively and sustainably further al-Qaida's jihadist project. AQIM leader Abu Musab Abdul Wadud (Abdulmalek Droukdel) for example, described the Malian people as babies in a letter to his commanders in 2012, in an attempt to justify a more gradualist and sensitive approach to winning hearts and minds:

“The current baby is in its first days, crawling on its knees, and has not yet stood on its two legs... If we really want it to stand on its own two feet in this world full of enemies waiting to pounce, we must ease its burden, take it by the hand, help it and support it until it stands... One of the wrong policies that we think you carried out is the extreme speed with which you applied Sharia... our previous experience proved that applying Sharia this way... will lead to people rejecting our religion and engender hatred towards the mujahideen”.[1]

Thanks to documents captured from Abbottabad, it is now also known that Bin Laden himself was acutely aware and concerned with the ailing nature of al-Qaida's image and was considering renaming his movement in attempt to rebrand.[2] This marketing strategy that focused so centrally on image was an issue operationalised in Yemen by AQAP, which had rebranded itself as Ansar al-Sharia in 2011 in an attempt to soften its image to communities it sought to control and govern.[3]

As with al-Qaida's evolution from a centrally-led organisation in 2001 to a semi-decentralised movement through the 2000s, this new strategic thinking focused on self-presentation and the long-term sustainability of local jihad efforts was not in and of itself new – it was a response to the new and challenging circumstances that al-Qaida faced in the late-2000s. Throughout its now 30-year history, al-Qaida's fate has met with surges of growth and success and troughs of contraction and frailty – all resulting from, and dependent upon, external pressures and developments and al-Qaida's capacity to respond effectively to them.

After facing several years of intensive pressure, Bin Laden's death in May 2011 represented a potentially existential blow to al-Qaida's central leadership and to its ability to influence affiliate operations across the world. However, the onset of the Arab Spring presented the world's only global jihadist movement with a golden opportunity. The eruption of popular protest in search of political revolution and the resulting widespread sense of coming change promised instability and with that, the chance to introduce al-Qaida's vision for Islamic rule onto a greater audience. Moreover, an al-Qaida whose top-level strategic thinking was evolving and whose affiliates appeared to be becoming increasingly aware of their local dynamics was potentially well placed to exploit the opportunities presented to it.

This article focuses on how an element of strategic rethinking within some of al-Qaida's highest ranks saw itself realised in Syria from 2011 onwards, as its affiliate there sought to prioritise alliance-building, localism and controlled pragmatism in order to build a more durable base of operations embedded within a nationally-limited revolutionary movement. The following sections will assess five key aspects of this evolved modus operandi and how it brought with it substantial advantages but also considerable challenges.

Jabhat al-Nusra's Strategy in Syria

Al-Qaida's role within the Syrian crisis has displayed a constant and complex adaptation to changing dynamics and, like its global status, it too has experienced highs and lows over time. Whereas al-Qaida's attempts in Yemen and Mali between 2011-2012 to implement more locally-sensitive and sustainable jihadi projects failed for being too short-lived, efforts undertaken by Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria began to demonstrate success in late-2012. By focusing resources on harnessing local drivers and dynamics and by consciously seeking to embed itself into an explicitly *Syrian* revolutionary struggle against the Assad regime, Jabhat al-Nusra was attempting

to break al-Qaida's negative image associated with brutality and self-interest and to present itself instead as its name suggested: a support front.[4]

Although al-Qaida's performance amid the Syrian crisis could, on the whole, be said to have been a success, it has not all been smooth sailing and its status as the chief driver of that Syria-based success has blurred over time. By December 2017 in fact, al-Qaida itself appeared to have severed itself from its one-time Syrian affiliate altogether, after a prolonged and public falling out over the group's repeated rebrands and its breaking of allegiance. Nevertheless, five facets of Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy in Syria are worthy of highlighting for the apparent advantages they brought to al-Qaida's project in Syria, but also for the complications they introduced as the crisis protracted and evolved:

1. Localism:

On the whole, Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor factions – Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) and now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – have pursued local objectives within local dynamics and constraints. The avoidance of transnational goals or rhetoric, hyper violence, or ultra-strict penal codes all contributed towards deepening Jabhat al-Nusra's deep roots in the Syrian crisis and within its indigenous revolutionary movement. The predominance of *localism* within Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy gave al-Qaida a better chance to sustain a long-term and prominent role in Syria, by building trust and interdependent relationships with portions of Syria's local opposition.[5] However, the emphasis on localism and the embrace of self-restraint, or controlled pragmatism over a prolonged period of time also stirred tensions within Jabhat al-Nusra itself, as the group's most extremist wings questioned the legitimacy of what they perceived as the ceding of continuous concessions (including in terms of Sharia enforcement) to a largely nationalist cause. Moreover, even despite the intensive focus on localism, Jabhat al-Nusra did not succeed in winning over the Syrian masses to the extent that had been hoped, which further tested the sustainability of the long-game approach, both internally and externally.[6] As tensions grew at the group's highest levels, conflicting tactics began to emerge from within Jabhat al-Nusra cells at local levels, with some remaining "pragmatic" and others reverting to AQI-style ultra-fundamentalism.

2. Differentiation from ISIS:

A core foundation of Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy from mid-2012 onwards was a desire to differentiate itself from the jihadist movements it emanated from: particularly the ISI. Syrians were no strangers to the ISI's ultra-violence and desire for savage sectarian conflict and from its first days as an acknowledged actor, Jabhat al-Nusra kept its ISI affiliation secret in an attempt to avoid any negative reputational repercussions. The group's early predilection for spectacular urban suicide bombings, however, did little to hide the likelihood that its roots lay next-door in Iraq. Nevertheless, the emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra's long game strategy of localism and controlled pragmatism from mid-2012 onwards was a clear point of strategic differentiation from the ISI and was the key catalyst for the group's eventual break from the ISI in mid-2013. Although the strategic and tactical distinction made between the ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra benefitted the group's position in Syria to a certain extent, ISIS's subsequent violent expansion in Syria, its dramatic gains in Iraq, its proclamation of a Caliphate and then its growth into a transnational jihadi movement rivalling al-Qaida resulted in losses in the scale and durability of Jabhat al-Nusra's efforts in Syria. Although the rise of ISIS did present Jabhat al-Nusra with the opportunity to further differentiate itself, it heightened the suspicions of some within Syria's opposition who now had a reason to fear 'the jihadists within.' It also catalysed an intensification of international attention on the dangers of jihadist militancy emanating from Syria and the Levant region, which extended to al-Qaida's direct and indirect predominance in Syria's northwest.

3. Al-Qaida Relations:

Jabhat al-Nusra's relationship with al-Qaida and its central leadership has been consistently complex. From 2011 until April 2013, its affiliation to al-Qaida was blurred by the ISI's ambiguous affiliation and loyalty to al-Qaida. When Jabhat al-Nusra broke away from ISIS in April 2013, its leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani announced his re-pledging of allegiance to al-Qaida. Therein began a period of open affiliation with the global jihadist movement that lasted until July 2016, when the group claimed to have rebranded and cut *external ties*

to al-Qaida.

The emphasis on *external* ties was purposeful, as Jabhat al-Nusra's rebranding to JFS was intended explicitly for a Syrian audience, which needed to be convinced that foreign or international jihadist agendas would not interfere with their local revolution.[7] This did not necessarily mean and it was not intended to suggest that Jabhat al-Nusra (and JFS) was becoming any more moderate. Despite the claim to have cut ties to al-Qaida *outside* Syria, the jihadist movement had already established a de facto wing of its global central leadership *inside* Syria, headed up by global deputy leader Abu al-Khayr al-Masri.[8] Abu al-Khayr had given his blessing to the JFS rebrand, but al-Qaida's overall leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had not – because he could not be reached swiftly enough.[9] Moreover, some JFS members chose to maintain their individual oaths of allegiance to Al-Qaeda, while remaining members of JFS.

The relationship between this semi-independent wing of al-Qaida's core leadership in Syria and the Syrian dynamic was especially interesting, as the pull of local drivers and expectations did appear – on the whole – to influence and constrain the nature of what were otherwise committed transnational jihadists. That overall leader Zawahiri ended up taking a divergent position to his Syria-based deputy Abu al-Khayr al-Masri was significant in and of itself, as was the sheer communications gap between Zawahiri and those in Syria.

As it happened, what had been a locally-driven decision to rebrand and proclaim a breaking of ties to al-Qaida proved to be a deeply controversial move that sparked a very public series of critiques from core al-Qaida ideologues and Nusra figures who refused to go along with the changes. Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi in Jordan proved especially vocal in his condemnation through 2017, as did Nusra's former number two, Sami al-Oraydi. Both and others clearly understood the JFS rebrand to have been illegitimate and to have catalyzed a “break” from al-Qaida. Oraydi specified that once the news had reached him, Zawahiri himself sent a letter to Syria ordering for a reversal of the decision to break away, which he labelled “a sin” and an “act of disobedience.”[10] For his part, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri reversed his permission when he discovered that Zawahiri's other immediate deputies, Sayf al-Adel and Abu Mohammed al-Masri, were opposed to any breaking of ties.

Jolani's decision to force the rebrand through a contentious vote within Jabhat al-Nusra's shura council was a gamble, as it was based entirely on the assumption that doing so would be perceived as a sufficiently significant concession to Syria's opposition movements for them to agree to a major Jabhat al-Nusra objective: a mass merger, or ‘uniting of the ranks’. That unity then failed to come about, in large part because al-Qaida's brand was negative enough that the persistent fear of its role in driving JFS actions negated the desire amongst armed opposition groups to combine forces.[11] Jolani's failed gamble and Zawahiri's anger at the rebrand itself stirred up further internal discontent, as committed al-Qaida loyalists who had opposed the JFS rebrand attempted to use it as further evidence of Jolani's failings and disloyalty.

Having evolved again in early-2017 into the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) umbrella, it is safe to say that al-Qaida no longer maintains a formal relationship of loyalty to an affiliate in Syria. HTS appears to have paved its own path in northwestern Syria, albeit not necessarily one any more moderate, but merely still locally-focused. Statements by Zawahiri in April and September 2017 calling upon jihadists in Syria to avoid pursuing nationalist agendas and divisive decisions underlined the extent to which al-Qaida's perception of HTS was in sharp contrast to its support to Nusra before mid-2016.[12] A further Zawahiri statement in late-November 2017 effectively sealed the break, with Al-Qaeda's leader declaring his total rejection of the initial JFS rebrand and accusing Jabhat al-Nusra of betraying its oath of allegiance to Al-Qaeda. Even the revelation by some former Nusra officials that the JFS rebrand was in fact intended to conceal a continued relationship with Al-Qaeda was rendered meaningless by the clear state of animosity between the global jihadist movement and its one-time Syrian affiliate.

4. Military vs. Politics:

Given its emphasis upon localism and embedding itself within local dynamics, Jabhat al-Nusra and its successors have utilised their military superiority on the battlefield as the principal source of influence, leverage and support within the *Syrian* opposition community. From mid-2012, Jabhat al-Nusra invested in building

alliances with opposition factions across the ideological and geographical spectrums and exploiting its military impact in order to build opposition dependence upon Jabhat al-Nusra's role within their operations. This was the implementation of *jihad al-tamkin* - the methodical acquisition and consolidation of territorial gains, through which one then wins hearts and minds and secures long-term presence.[13] As military affairs almost always played *the* driving role in the Syrian crisis, this placed Jabhat al-Nusra in a position of prime influence in determining the trajectory of conflict dynamics, in controlling or constraining the decisions of its opposition partners, and in undermining external efforts to negotiate ceasefires or other forms of stability.

Despite its virtually unmatched man-for-man military power within the anti-Assad movement, Jabhat al-Nusra's battlefield influence was not always a match for determined international efforts to strong-arm opposition actors into ceasing fire, attending peace negotiations, or even meeting with the enemy (Assad regime, Russia and Iran). When the tide definitively turned in the Assad regime's favour after the opposition's loss of Aleppo in late-2016, politics assumed a dramatically more significant status of importance within Syria's opposition. The Russian-Turkish-Iranian-led military talks in Astana; Turkey's geopolitical hedging and prioritisation of its struggle against the Kurdish PKK; and the U.S. pivot away from supporting an anti-Assad movement all contributed towards a dynamic in which Jabhat al-Nusra (by then named JFS, then HTS) was suddenly playing second fiddle in shaping opposition behaviour. With its position of prime influence under threat and with the prospect of international attention bearing down on 'al-Qaida in Syria' increasing, JFS lashed out pre-emptively to neutralise potential threats and to consolidate its territorial holdings. The subsequent formation of HTS and successive attacks on other rival opposition groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, underlined how externally-driven developments could force al-Qaida-linked groups like HTS and indeed, groups opposed to al-Qaida, to adapt their behaviours in ways that directly contradicted, and undermined their original *modus operandi*.

5. Elite to Mass Movement:

As part of Jabhat al-Nusra's long-game strategy in Syria, the group sought in its first phase to operate as an elite movement whose 'support' to the Syrian revolution was motivated by its need to be turned in the right, Islamic direction. Just as AQIM's leader had written of the need to treat the Malian people as infants, so too did Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership seek to befriend, raise, educate and then foster a population in Syria that would accommodate and then protect a new jihadist vanguard within their midst. This 'elite' phase of operations lasted until late-2015, when it had become clear that in certain strategic areas of Syria – in the northwest, in particular – Jabhat al-Nusra had become *the* dominant military actor and that its role within the revolutionary struggle was, theoretically, irreversible and sufficiently popular.

This spelled the need for Jabhat al-Nusra to transition into a mass movement [14] – hence the repeated efforts to negotiate a 'uniting of the ranks' through 2016 and to prove to Syrians that Jabhat al-Nusra was qualitatively different to the negatively perceived ISI and al-Qaida. As previously mentioned, that brand management took the form of changing names, proclaiming a cutting of external ties to al-Qaida, and taking smaller Islamist factions under its expanding umbrella. Just as playing around with its al-Qaida affiliation sparked internal tensions, a determined move to expand into a mass movement and to draw in a broader scope of members also proved to be a controversial goal for the group's most hardline wings. Moderating rhetoric and the integration of explicitly non-jihadist factions into JFS and HTS was perceived by some 'hawks' as a slippery slope of eroding, or diluting Jabhat al-Nusra's original purity yet further.[15] By mid-2017, that had consolidated the covert formation of a separate al-Qaida loyalist wing in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib, which although not hostile to HTS, was opposed to its present nature and image.[16] That wing was, according to multiple well-placed sources, given the name Ansar al-Furqan on October 9, 2017.

From Jabhat al-Nusra to HTS: Success or Failure?

Despite facing a series of challenges and obstacles along the way, Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor groups, JFS and HTS, appear to have ridden their various storms and emerged in a position of comparative advantage – at least when it comes to the intra-opposition dynamic. Ultimately however, no jihadi group will ever be capable of controlling or blocking changes and threats initiated by external actors outside of its immediate realm of

influence. Chiefly, terrorist and other asymmetric actors face the challenge of either constantly remaining one or more steps ahead of their adversaries, or being capable of rapidly adapting to changing circumstances quickly enough as to avoid damaging consequences. HTS appears thus far to have accomplished this.

Though they have also suffered a number of damaging losses, Jabhat al-Nusra, JFS and HTS have largely succeeded in establishing a base of operations potentially protectable from internal and external threats. Whether or not that amounts in its entirety to a victory remains to be seen. Beyond HTS though, the impact upon al-Qaida also remains to be seen, principally because HTS's relationship of allegiance to al-Qaida is ambiguous at best and the status of al-Qaida and its capacity to exert meaningful day-to-day influence over its geographically-dispersed affiliates is unclear. While the 66-year-old Zawahiri appears to be an ever-distant leader, whose statements and video addresses spark little in the way of motivation or twenty-first century zeal, Osama Bin Laden's son Hamza demonstrates an energy and ideological drive more suited to the al-Qaida of today, especially one operating amid a decline in the power of its sole rival, ISIS.

Notwithstanding these issues, the fact that changing conditions and a heightening sense of external threat forced JFS to lash out against its rivals and expand into HTS in early-2017 spelled the de facto ending of Jabhat al-Nusra's long-game strategy and the initiation of a new, more self-assertive project more akin to typical al-Qaida behaviour. It also shored up a more durable protective blanket around the truly committed al-Qaida operatives who had taken up position in Idlib province strictly to do al-Qaida's bidding, not that of Jabhat al-Nusra, JFS or HTS.

Although that appeared likely to have strengthened al-Qaida's hand and to have re-firmed up its relationship with HTS – particularly as HTS constituent group Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki defected as a result of HTS's attacks on Ahrar al-Sham, thereby empowering the truly jihadist elements within the HTS umbrella – the jihadi group's newfound position of dominance also introduced new, potentially more significant threats, including a continued decline in HTS's popular credibility. The prospect of Turkey's limited intervention into Idlib in October 2017, for example, prompted Jolani himself to seek out negotiations to prevent any threat to his group. That demonstrated weakness, not strength.

Since the Assad regime's capture of Aleppo in December 2016, the potential for the crosshairs turning to Idlib has gradually increased. The steady rise to pre-eminence of HTS has furthered that potential threat, as signaled by a statement issued by U.S. Special Envoy to Syria Michael Ratney in early-August 2017, in which it was stressed that HTS "hegemony" in northern Syria put the area "in big danger." In what was clearly a veiled threat and a reference to Russia, Ratney then proceeded to assert that "it would be difficult for the United States to convince the international parties not to take the necessary military measures." [17] Russia had long imposed a de facto veto over the Assad regime's designs and desire for an Idlib offensive, but the rise to dominance of HTS in much of the province had the potential to erode that veto's political considerations.

The nature of HTS's rise – through premeditated violence against long-time partners – also further undermined the group's reputation within remaining elements of the opposition. HTS thus found itself expanded and consolidated as an unrivalled armed actor operating within an environment of increasingly suspicious and potentially hostile communities and armed groups, many of which had become more existentially dependent on foreign government relations than ever before. Again, that dynamic of dominance through aggression but being surrounded by potential threats directly empowered the more extreme tendencies within the HTS-al-Qaida nexus, and weakened those whose advocacy for sustaining a softer approach now looked outdated.

Accordingly, the story of Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaida's evolution in Syria can be said to have been one of constant adaptation, in which committed jihadists sought to distinguish themselves from the negativity of their past, in order to set-up a durable project more capable of outlasting rivals and outplaying enemies. Adaptation and opportunism was not limited to the group's engagement with others, as the implementation of a more long-game approach that emphasized the local over the transnational; the mass over the elite; and the pragmatic over the fundamentalist; meant that managing and balancing internal group dynamics became just as important, if not more so. By no means should Jabhat al-Nusra be said to have 'succeeded' in this respect, but the group's mere survival and subsequent expansion into JFS and then HTS means it has until now outmaneuvered its

competition – both local and international. Terrorist groups do not necessarily have to win; they merely need to survive to be considered a continued threat and the threat posed by HTS in Syria is both significant and complex.

Policy Recommendations

From a policy perspective, one key lesson looking back at Jabhat al-Nusra's six years of operations in Syria is that the criteria for assessing threats posed by terrorist movements should not be so strictly limited to their intent to attack the West, or even to attack Western targets locally. Jabhat al-Nusra's implementation of a markedly different modus operandi on behalf of al-Qaida put into place a different and arguably just as significant threat: the potential transformation of elitist al-Qaida fundamentalism into a closer-to-populist, revolutionary mass movement. That Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor movements have been widely accused of receiving some level of government-coordinated financial and strategic support further underlines the threat that a new and more embedded mode of al-Qaida operation poses to U.S. and Western influence in the Middle East and Islamic world. Although the evolutionary path from Jabhat al-Nusra-to-JFS-to-HTS necessitated more aggressive and divisive measures in 2016-2017, which themselves eroded away some of the trust gained in previous years, the regional and international community's recent distancing from the opposition potentially threatens to leave HTS as the only remaining 'hope' for the anti-Assad movement. That ought to be a scenario avoided at all costs.

Notwithstanding that concerning scenario, changing power balances *inside* Syria and shifting geopolitical priorities *outside* Syria have seen the Assad regime and its two principal backers, Iran and Russia, assume a position of supremacy vis-à-vis the opposition. That state of affairs now appears to be irreversible and as such, it has become more important than ever to acknowledge the interrelation between the fate of al-Qaida's efforts in Syria and the fate of the anti-Assad armed movement. That the international community appears to be ceding victory to the pro-Assad coalition does not necessarily mean that the tens of thousands of armed men fighting the regime will embrace the changed positions of their external patrons. Though some, or even many, may consider abiding by externally-imposed ceasefires and de-escalation zones, some or even many will not, and that presents an opportunity that is now virtually exclusive to HTS.

While Western political leaders continue to insist that Bashar al-Assad has no place in Syria's future, their Syria strategies are pursuing nothing at all to further that policy statement. Instead of cutting off the anti-Assad opposition at the neck altogether, forcing it to submit to long-term ceasefires widely perceived as tantamount to a long-drawn out surrender or to redirect their resources to an exclusively anti-ISIS fight away from their home areas, the U.S. and partner states should, at a minimum, seek to protect, consolidate and support opposition areas, which they have had a stake in creating. Even if Syria policy is to be guided by counter-terrorism concerns, it must first be acknowledged that the terrorist threats emanating from, and festering within, Syria are *symptoms* of the crisis, and not the cause. Treating symptoms while leaving the prime root cause – Assad and his regime's brutality – to remain securely in place does nothing to secure a durable victory against terrorism or extremism.

While new political realities preclude taking direct action against the Assad regime, the international community retains a responsibility to ensure the protection of those it supported politically and militarily and to work towards guaranteeing at minimum, the devolution of Assad's authority, through decentralisation, for example. Closing a blind eye to any pro-Assad plans to conduct a brutal campaign on Idlib, or to methodically eat away at remaining strategic areas of opposition control, will not guarantee Western interests and will benefit HTS and al-Qaida more than any other actor. This is HTS's insurance blanket. Though any concerted operation on Idlib or another opposition area of Syria would be more likely to succeed than fail, the operation itself would nonetheless empower the narrative protected by the likes of HTS – so the group may suffer immediate-term losses, but the cause for its survival would be strengthened. That is precisely why HTS should continue to be assessed as a symptom of other dynamics, which themselves need treating first, or in tandem with HTS itself. At its core, undermining HTS is about out-competing it and its reason for being, rather than merely fighting it on the battlefield.

Al-Qaida's fate internationally and in affiliate zones like Syria has waxed and waned over time, but it remains unavoidably true that a group like HTS needs only to survive, to remain a relevant and potentially future

potent threat. That Jabhat al-Nusra set JFS and HTS on a path towards being larger movements embedded within a cause other than transnational jihadism makes HTS's survival that much harder to undermine. The only possible solution to countering HTS's apparent strong hand is rooted in the areas in which the jihadist group operates. HTS's self-interested actions and aggression against core components of Syrians' revolution has discernibly compromised the long-term durability of Jabhat al-Nusra's original project, but no comparable competitor with a more nationalistic agenda exists to balance or subvert HTS anytime soon. Fostering such a force appears to be the only option available that *might* promise a durable erosion of HTS's influence in Syria.

About the Author: Charles Lister is a Senior Fellow & Director of Counter-Extremism and Counter-Terrorism at the Middle East Institute

Notes

- [1] Rukmini Callimachi, "In Timbuktu, al-Qaida left behind a manifesto," Associated Press, February 14, 2013
- [2] "Bin Laden mulled al Qaeda name change," Associated Press, June 24, 2011; "Osama Bin Laden wanted to change al-Qaeda's name for marketing reasons," The Daily Telegraph, June 24, 2011
- [3] Aaron Zelin, "Know Your Ansar al-Sharia," Foreign Policy, September 21, 2012.
- [4] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.67
- [5] Charles Lister, "The Dawn of Mass Jihad: Success in Syria Fuels al-Qa'ida's Evolution," CTC Sentinel, September 7, 2016
- [6] Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda's Turning Against its Syrian Affiliate," Middle East Institute, May 18, 2017
- [7] Charles Lister, "The Dawn of Mass Jihad"
- [8] Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria," Foreign Policy, May 4, 2016
- [9] Lister, "Al-Qaeda's Turning Against its Syrian Affiliate"; Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," Jihadica, March 29, 2017; Cole Bunzel, "Abandoning al-Qaida: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Sami al-Uraydi," Jihadica, May 12, 2017 .
- [10] Tore Hamming, "What we learned from Sami al-Uraydi's testimony concerning Abu Abdullah al-Shami," Jihadica, October 24, 2017
- [11] Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda's Turning Against its Syrian Affiliate".
- [12] Thomas Joscelyn, "Ayman al Zawahiri warns against 'nationalist' agenda in Syria," Long War Journal, April 23, 2017; see also Aymenn al-Tamimi's article elsewhere in this Special Issue.
- [13] Charles Lister, "The Dawn of Mass Jihad", op.cit..
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] Cole Bunzel, "Abandoning al-Qaida: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Sami al-'Uraydi," Jihadica, May 12, 2017
- [16] Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda's Turning Against its Syrian Affiliate"
- [17] Suleiman al-Khalidi, "U.S. says 'grave' consequences if Syria's al Qaeda dominates Idlib province," Reuters, August 2, 2017.