

## Articles

### The Strategic Logic of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

by Sam Heller

#### Abstract

*This article lays out the key events leading up to, and the strategic thinking behind, the 2017 emergence of Syrian insurgent group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the Body for the Liberation of the Levant), the latest iteration of Syria's former al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusrah. To frame that strategic logic, it employs political scientist Peter Krause's Movement Structure Theory, which posits that national movements led by a single hegemonic group tend to be more successful. For definitional reasons, Krause's theory likely does not have predictive utility in the case of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which is to some extent transnational and thus governed by different motivations and rules. Still, Krause's theory nonetheless provides a useful lexicon to describe the insurgency in Syria's north-west and the rationale for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's hegemonic dominance of that insurgency as the group has itself articulated it. The article also briefly evaluates Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's apparent prospects, as of November 2017, and their implications for the broader applicability of Krause's theory.*

**Keywords:** Al-Qaida, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusrah, Syria, Idlib, Political Science

#### Introduction

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has, as of November 2017, consolidated its hold over the geographic core of the Syrian insurgency against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In July 2017, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – the latest iteration of former Syrian al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusrah – defeated its only serious rival, Ahrar al-Sham, for factional dominance in Syria's insurgent-held north-west, centered on Idlib province. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has since moved to solidify its military dominance in the north-west and to organise governance and economic life in the insurgent enclave under its tutelage.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is a semi-clandestine organisation, and the process that led to its formation is the product of intra-insurgent discussions and dynamics that are, for outsiders, not fully transparent or understandable. But public statements by the group's leadership, firsthand accounts of the closed-door negotiations that produced it, and other documentary evidence indicate that, as a project, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was more than a simple play for factional dominance and narrow, private gains. Rather, what is now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's leadership made a case for insurgent unification in terms of the survival and strategic success of Syria's revolutionary movement. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was justified in terms of rationalizing Syria's splintered north-western insurgency and strengthening its position politically *vis-à-vis* opposition state backers and foreign powers.

The apparent thinking behind Hayat Tahrir al-Sham actually has parallels in comparative political science. In fact, it closely tracks the findings of Boston College's Peter Krause in his 2017 book *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win*.<sup>[1]</sup> Krause posits what he terms "Movement Structure Theory," which categorizes national liberation movements in terms of the relative distribution of power among the movement's groups. He finds that "hegemonic" movements, with a single significant group, tend to be more successful. Group hegemony puts a stop to the inter-group jostling and dysfunction that bedevils more fragmented or multipolar movements, allowing the movement to more effectively pursue strategic goals and to link violence to politics in negotiations, including with outside backers.

This article posits that Krause's Movement Structure Theory is a useful framework for understanding the emergence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the thinking behind it. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's new hegemony in Syria's insurgent-held north-west also provides a useful test of the broader applicability of Krause's theory, which, for various definitional reasons, may not fully apply to Syria's north-western insurgency or predict its success. In other circumstances, the forced unification of Syria's north-western opposition under a single hegemonic

faction could be expected to improve the insurgency's effectiveness and bargaining position internationally. Yet the fact that this insurgent hegemon, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, is generally considered a transnational jihadist organisation means it sits outside Krause's theory, and suggests Syria's insurgency is unlikely to realize the expected gains of single-faction hegemony. Krause's theory is thus helpful in explaining Hayat Tahrir al-Sham but, in this instance, does not have obvious predictive application.

This article first relates the phased formation of a merged, Jabhat al-Nusra-led body and eventually Hayat Tahrir al-Sham over 2016 and 2017. It then provides a brief overview of Krause's Movement Structure Theory. It explores how Krause's theory explains the rationale for Jabhat al-Nusra/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's takeover of the north-western insurgency as that rationale was articulated by figures inside and close to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. It then evaluates the apparent prospects, as of November 2017, of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and their implications for the broader applicability of Krause's theory.

### ***The Origins of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham***

The origins of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the Body for the Liberation of the Levant), as a strategic idea, seem to date back to early to mid-2016. Jabhat al-Nusra (Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahidi al-Sham fi-Sahat al-Jihad, the Front to Support the People of Syria from Syria's Mujahideen on the Battlefields of Jihad) had already begun to eliminate problematic, threatening rivals in northern Syria as early as late 2014, when it concentrated its forces in the country's north-west and began what some termed "the Emirate Campaign." [2] But it was a series of internationally sponsored ceasefires ("cessations of hostilities") beginning in February 2016 [3] that seems to have really catalyzed Jabhat al-Nusra's effort to consolidate the northern insurgency.

From early on, Jabhat al-Nusra had embedded itself in the broader Syrian insurgency. Since 2014, however, it had pursued a consciously separate, hardline political project in Syria's north, [4] even as it continued to collaborate militarily with factions such as Ahrar al-Sham (Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah, the Islamic Movement of the Freeman of al-Sham), an Islamist faction with roots in transnational jihadism that had adopted a specifically Syrian focus. [5] Jabhat al-Nusra's unwillingness to compromise politically – in particular, its stubborn refusal to renounce its allegiance to al-Qaida – had scuttled talks over factional unification as late as January 2016. "[Other factions] didn't offer any justification other than breaking the link with al-Qaida, and [they] didn't lay down any [other] condition," said Hussam al-Atrash, deputy head of Aleppo insurgent faction Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki (the Nour al-Din al-Zinki Movement, or just Nour al-Din al-Zinki) and a participant in various rounds of merger negotiations. "It was as if Nusra had agreed to break the link that day, everyone would have agreed – the Free [Syrian Army] and Islamists among them." [6]

Then, in July 2016, reports emerged of a nascent U.S.-Russian agreement to jointly target Jabhat al-Nusra. [7] The targeting mechanism was an attempt to salvage Syria's faltering cessation of hostilities by solving for the Syrian opposition's "marbling" with Jabhat al-Nusra, something that had helped undermine previous ceasefires. [8]

Jabhat al-Nusra quickly responded. On 28 July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra chief Abu Muhammad al-Jolani – now the military head of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, but seen widely as the group's effective overall leader – announced the group was dissolving itself and forming "Jabhat Fateh al-Sham" (The Front for the Conquest of the Levant). Jabhat Fateh al-Sham was a new body "with no relation with any external party," Jolani said, thus implying the group had broken its formal organisational link with al-Qaida. [9] According to Jolani, the new group's prime objectives included "working on unification with the factions to unify the ranks of the mujahideen, and to enable us to liberate the land of Syria from the rule of tyrants and eliminate the regime and its allies." This suddenly urgent need to unify – facilitated now by the break with al-Qaida – was stressed by other Jabhat Fateh al-Sham figures [10] and found at least some takers, including prominent hardliners inside Ahrar al-Sham. [11]

Still, talks again stalled, initially because of disputes between Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham over preeminence and leadership within any merged body. [12] Both Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham were seen within the opposition as necessary for any meaningful unification. [13] Talks resumed after the fall of

Aleppo to the Assad regime in December 2016, which crystallized a sense within the Syrian opposition that the opposition was, in fact, losing and had to undertake some dramatic strategic shift.[14] Among jihadists, it also convinced them that the nationalist factions whose defenses inside Aleppo had collapsed were mostly worthless and, what's more, were willing to turn on their jihadist allies.[15] Meanwhile, the United States had stepped up airstrikes against Jabhat Fateh al-Sham targets,[16] and Turkey was both diverting rebel manpower from the north-west to its own "Operation Euphrates Shield" in the northern Aleppo countryside and pushing northern factions to attend peace talks in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, an initiative Jabhat Fateh al-Sham saw as a threat.[17]

Ultimately, Jolani reached an agreement with Ahrar al-Sham head Ali al-Omar (Abu Ammar Taftanaz), according to which Omar would assume overall leadership of the merged faction and Jolani would serve as military commander.[18] But Omar stalled after a key bloc within Ahrar al-Sham objected strenuously to joining with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, in public and private,[19] thanks in part to what critics said was pressure from foreign backers and fear of designation as a terrorist organization.[20] Smaller nationalist factions had separately agreed on a looser alliance-merger with Ahrar al-Sham.[21] When they appealed the merger with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, Jolani refused to zero out the already negotiated agreement and talks collapsed.[22] Despite public lobbying from hardline clerics,[23] Ahrar al-Sham backed out of the agreement.[24]

Matters then came to a head in January 2017. Protests across the north-west demanded the factions unify,[25] U.S. airstrikes against Jabhat Fateh al-Sham escalated to an unprecedented degree[26] and representatives of foreign-backed northern rebel factions went to Astana for talks on January 23 and 24.[27] Jabhat Fateh al-Sham responded by moving on those factions inside the north-west, sending convoys to surround one faction's base after another, forcing them to surrender and yield their weapons stocks.[28]

As its campaign against the "Astana factions" was ongoing, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham issued a statement making clear it was both attempting to frustrate Astana talks and railroad through a merger. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham rejected the Astana factions' ability to credibly speak on behalf of the opposition and complained about others' unwillingness to merge with it, when, the group claimed, it represented "two-thirds of the [opposition's] military power." Jabhat Fateh al-Sham demanded "practical, sincere measures" towards "establishing a Sunni entity that is unified, militarily and politically, based on a religious-legal foundation, possesses the decision-[making power] to make peace and war, and that protects our people and their religion and sanctities." [29]

On January 28, 2017, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham founded that "Sunni entity" when it joined with factions including Nour al-Din al-Zinki; a powerful defected section of Ahrar al-Sham that included former Ahrar al-Sham head Hashem al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber Maskanah); and other smaller groups. Together they announced the formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, under the nominal leadership of Sheikh. They called on others to join, "so this project might be a nucleus that brings together the revolution's capabilities, preserves its path, and realizes its hoped-for goals." [30] They disregarded a last-minute merger appeal by Ahrar al-Sham the day before, on January 27. [31]

Meanwhile, the "Astana factions" that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham had attacked joined Ahrar al-Sham for protection, [32] swelling Ahrar al-Sham's numbers [33] but not necessarily its real strength opposite Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. [34]

In an introductory video, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham said its establishment was "a step towards saving the battlefield from military and political tensions that had erupted between the factions." [35] Nonetheless, those tensions persisted amid a months-long standoff between Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. A "de-escalation" agreement reached in Astana mostly halted clashes between opposition rebels and the Assad regime, [36] and so Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham instead turned inwards and began competing for legitimacy and social control. Their rival service institutions wrestled for control of the north-west's electrical grid, going so far as to sabotage key electrical infrastructure. [37] Ahrar al-Sham also attempted to outbid Hayat Tahrir al-Sham for symbolic leadership of north-western Syria's revolutionary opposition, adopting the revolutionary tricolor flag alongside its own Islamic banner and even proposing unity and administrative projects from which Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's leadership would be excluded. [38]

After months of veiled and explicit warnings between Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and positioning by the latter to preempt a floated Turkish intervention into north-west Syria,[39] in July 2017 a local clash[40] escalated into a province-wide confrontation between the two factions. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham successfully isolated Ahrar al-Sham's strongest elements in southern Idlib and the neighboring Hama province and concentrated its most mobile, effective forces in an assault on Ahrar al-Sham's stronghold in northern Idlib.[41] In a matter of days, Ahrar al-Sham had collapsed, and its leadership agreed to a settlement that amounted to effective surrender.[42]

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham exhibited some splits and internal dissent as it advanced on Ahrar al-Sham – including the collective defection of Nour al-Din al-Zinki – but it held together enough to successfully rout its rival.[43] In the aftermath, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham issued a statement optimistically titled “The Revolution Continues,” in which it justified its “bold steps to unify [the Syrian revolution's] internal ranks and its external vision” and called for a “civil administration” to manage insurgent-held areas.[44] Nour al-Din al-Zinki quickly voiced its public support for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's initiative.[45]

### ***Krause's Movement Structure Theory***

The evident rationale behind Hayat Tahrir al-Sham nicely corresponds to Peter Krause's Movement Structure Theory of national movements. Despite some definitional questions about the extent to which Krause's theory technically applies to Syria's north-western insurgency, and to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in particular, the theory is nonetheless extremely useful in explaining both Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its insurgent context.[46]

Krause conceptualises national liberation movements not in terms of the absolute number of component groups or factions, but rather the number of significant groups, where a significant group is “either the strongest group in the movement or another strong group that has the capability to realistically challenge the strongest group for leadership in the foreseeable future.”[47]

Krause distinguishes mainly “between movements with one significant group” – “hegemonic” movements – “and those with two or more, or, in other words, between movements that contain a competitive and those that contain a non-competitive internal environment.”[48] An internally competitive, bi- or multipolar movement can be either “fragmented” or “united,” wherein the former is more purely anarchic and the latter entails a non-hierarchical, less cohesive alliance that joins otherwise independent groups.[49] But in any internally competitive case, groups vie for leadership and dominance of the movement so they might accrue to themselves the private goods of movement victory.[50] They divert resources towards an intra-movement “war of position” and engage in infighting and other destructive behaviors.[51] Internally competitive movements can less credibly translate military force into useful political positioning.[52] Intra-movement competition also provides openings for outside state sponsors to turn groups to their own ends:

“The multiple significant groups in the movement also mean that there is a buyer's market for foreign influence because potential state sponsors have more outlets to insert themselves and can play one group off the others to get the best deal for themselves, but the worst one for the movement. The aim of these foreign sponsors is generally to manipulate groups to their own ends; they rarely prize movement independence. The multiple significant groups competing with each other and tying themselves to foreign entities makes it unlikely that the movement will have a cohesive strategy.”[53]

Krause finds that “united and fragmented movements are likely to have far fewer movement resources devoted to strategic success and so are less likely than hegemonic movements to emerge victorious.”[54]

Group hegemony solves such dysfunctions. In a hegemonic movement, not only is there a single leading group in the movement's group hierarchy, but there exist no significant challengers to that hegemonic leader.[55]

With single-group hegemony, it is unrealistic for weaker subordinate groups to wage intra-movement “wars of position” for movement dominance. Non-significant subordinate groups are less likely to engage in distracting, counterproductive competitive behaviors and instead will bandwagon with the hegemon.[56] Collectively, the movement is more likely to pursue a “war of movement” against the state in service of “strategic” goals – overall victory – instead of “club” or “private” goods.[57] Moreover, the movement is more likely to have an effective, coherent strategy that allows it to more clearly signal to external audiences and to be able to credibly link force to its bargaining position in any negotiations. Group hegemony also provides only a single viable outlet for would-be state sponsors to invest in the movement, and their support can be used more productively.[58]

Krause’s theory appears not to encompass, technically, Syria’s north-western insurgency and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. It is premised on “national movements,”[59] and Krause himself raises the question of how and whether it applies to non-national movements.[60] The national versus transnational character of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is debatable but, both in terms of the group’s transnational, pan-Islamist outlook and ambitions and its non-Syrian membership, it seems not to fit in Krause’s “national” frame. That also raises questions about the “national” character of a north-western insurgency that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has taken control and has seeming implications for the predictive utility of Krause’s theory for movement success (more on which below).

Nonetheless, Krause’s theory appears to have descriptive value in terms of understanding and explaining the north-western insurgency’s intra-movement dynamics and articulating Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s thinking on how to ensure the insurgency’s survival.

### ***The Strategic Logic of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham***

The leadership of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham viewed this sort of factional hegemony as necessary to win a strategic victory for the Syrian insurgency – or, at a minimum, to avert capitulation and strategic defeat.

Syria’s northern insurgency could have been described previously as either “fragmented” or “united,” per Krause’s frame. As a divided, internally competitive movement, it was failing – losing ground on the battlefield and being drawn into progressively more disadvantageous negotiations.

Within the north-west’s insurgent field, there were two significant actors that aspired to dominance and hegemony: Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. The relative power of each group was difficult to assess, in part because many of their most valuable resources and strengths – for example, Jabhat al-Nusra’s influence on other technically independent factions, or any secret oaths of allegiance – were invisible. In retrospect, it seems possible to dispute how significant Ahrar al-Sham really was, and whether it was a serious contender for dominance. There is a risk of tautology in this respect – there exist none of the absolute, independent measures of group power and significance on which Krause relied in his work,[61] so there is a danger of working backward from events and inferring group significance based on outcomes. Still, before and after January 2017, Ahrar al-Sham was at least widely perceived by Syrians and outsiders to be a genuinely significant, plausible counterweight to its jihadist rival.[62] And the two factions’ public competition for insurgent leadership and attempts at one-upmanship conform to Krause’s theorisation of a multipolar movement. The late possibility that Ahrar al-Sham may have been a vessel for Turkish intervention against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – whether that was a real possibility, or just a product of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s paranoia – was an extreme example of the sort of division and internal dysfunction characteristic of a non-hegemonic insurgent system, in which an interested outside power might support and partner with one movement faction against another.

From mid-2016 onwards, Jabhat al-Nusra/Fateh al-Sham’s leadership appears to have developed a fairly consistent critique of Syria’s fragmented northern insurgent scene, and a single prescriptive answer to how to resolve its incoherence. Discussing the northern insurgency’s factional dysfunction, an informed source within Hayat Tahrir al-Sham said:

“So the [rebellion’s] political position was divided, as was the economy, and the information that preserves

security was lost among the factions. Services were split up. Likewise, the religious-legal authority for each faction was different from the other's. So an administrative official turned into a religious-legal official, because of this factional spirit and this parity that prevailed. We saw, in that complicated state through which we were proceeding, that [we] weren't going to preserve the revolution's gains, much less bring down the regime. We were saying this before the fall of Aleppo. And the fall of Aleppo proved what we had been saying. These factions were fragile, just imaginary numbers taking wages in times of ease; the day of the battle, you couldn't find them. And what's more, they might be conspiring against you. So the fall of Aleppo was a pivotal date. What came after it couldn't be like what came before. There were meetings about mergers for more than six months, and the results were frustrating. What Fateh al-Sham did after that was because of its inability to fix the revolutionary reality peacefully. So it did it with pressure and force. Even though these options were bitter, difficult, and undesirable for Fateh al-Sham.”[63]

From Jabhat Fateh al-Sham/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's July 2016 break with al-Qaida until its July 2017 defeat of Ahrar al-Sham, the group's leadership insisted on unified, hegemonic order and rejected a united but multipolar movement structure. To the extent that it initially attempted to unite the insurgency's main factions consensually, the objective was to create a unitary hegemonic leader, not another united alliance of peer groups.

In Jolani's first (September 2016) interview after Jabhat al-Nusra's break with al-Qaida and the announcement of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, he argued, “Today the battlefield has huge energy – militarily, in human terms, arms, and so on. It needs to be organised and ordered, and these energies need to be joined in one vessel.” What's more, he identified a “political impetus” for factional unification, saying that Syrians needed a unified representative entity whose divided parts could not be used and manipulated by outside powers. “These projects that come from abroad come on the basis that [Syria's] interior is divided into a number of trends, factions, schools, approaches, and so on.”[64]

Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and then Hayat Tahrir al-Sham consistently advanced a similar argument, that this unifying step was necessary both to ensure the Syrian opposition's unitary and effective leadership and to give it the backbone to resist international pressures for concessions. The group's leadership made this case across audiences and fora. It did so in public addresses like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham head Hashem al-Sheikh's inaugural video address[65] and Jolani's first address as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's military commander.[66] Religious official Abdurrahim Attoun's (Abu Abdullah al-Shami) rebuttal to Issam al-Barqawi's (Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi) critiques made the same points, in a message aimed squarely at insiders of the international jihadist movement. [67] And Hayat Tahrir al-Sham hit the same notes when making the case for its project to other Syrians on the ground, inside the country. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is premised on “unifying political decision-making, and unifying military decision-making,” said veteran Syrian Islamist Rami al-Dallati in February 2017, after he met with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's leadership. “I mean, it's not reasonable for these factions to keep going to meetings as twenty different factions.”[68]

Fighting between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham in July 2017 only became clearly decisive – not just another round of limited skirmishes – after Hayat Tahrir al-Sham rejected an early mediation initiative by hardline clerics and declared it would not stop at anything less than hegemonic unification. It dismissed the clerics' initiative as “like those that preceded it,” which “can no longer stand, against the intensity of the challenge the battlefield is enduring today, which we cannot face so long as we are divided and fragmented.” “The real initiative,” Hayat Tahrir al-Sham said, was one that created a single, authoritative body with the power to make peace and war, that could spare the opposition from “international powers' manipulation on the one hand, and, on the other, from infighting and strife that only serves the interest of this criminal regime and its allies.”[69]

These themes were echoed in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's triumphal July 23 statement, “The Revolution Continues,” after its victory over Ahrar al-Sham.[70] What's more, in addition to the group's public statements, this is what Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's leaders were apparently saying in private before and after its liquidation of Ahrar al-Sham, including in purported radio chatter between its commanders[71] and in a Friday sermon by Sheikh.

[72] “The battlefield can no longer bear two groups, and it can no longer bear lots of heads,” senior Hayat Tahrir al-Sham figure Myassar al-Jubouri (Abu Mariya al-Qahtani) radioed to a local commander ahead of the campaign on Ahrar al-Sham.[73] By some accounts, this logic was actually part of how Hayat Tahrir al-Sham indoctrinated and mobilized its troops to fight Ahrar al-Sham. According to one Syrian news site, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham subjected its mobile strike force to months of training and preparation “in parallel with [an effort to] convince [the group’s] members of the necessity of taking [sole] possession of the battlefield, of the danger Ahrar posed to their project, and that Ahrar would take action against the Hayah.”[74]

Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s rivals and enemies accused it of “al-taghallub”[75] – the illegitimate seizure of power by force – a charge that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham vigorously denied.[76] Instead, it did what was necessary to safeguard the movement’s survival and further its strategic aims. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham had resolved that a united movement structure had decisively failed and that only hegemonic dominance could possibly promise success and victory. “Sometimes a patient is dear to you, and you love him, but at some point you’re forced to shock him so he comes back to life,” said the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham source.[77]

### ***Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s Hegemonic Prospects***

Whether Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s gamble pays off remains to be seen. In fact, it may be difficult to judge one way or another, as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s ultimate goals are currently unclear.

The group did what was necessary to keep alive the prospects of victory – but at this point, what is victory to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham? Jabhat al-Nusrah originally espoused Syria-centric goals of toppling the regime and instituting the rule of Islam.[78] By virtue of its allegiance to al-Qaida, however, the group necessarily situated those aims in a context of transnational jihad. In his first interview, Jolani himself said that Jabhat al-Nusrah was a product of global pan-Islamist militancy, even as he later denied plans to launch terror attacks outside Syria.[79] This internationalisation of the Syrian struggle was one of the key early distinctions between Jabhat al-Nusrah and Ahrar al-Sham, whose aims were explicitly limited to Syria.[80]

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham remains rhetorically committed to toppling the Assad regime and installing Islamic rule, but also, more realistically, to preserving the Syrian revolution’s gains to date and protecting Syria’s Sunnis. [81] Jabhat al-Nusrah/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s strategy over 2016 and 2017 appears to have been largely reactive, adjusting to external threats including possible joint U.S.-Russian targeting of the group, Astana talks, and a mooted Turkish intervention. Now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s current course seems mostly defensive, an attempt to defend the group and its north-west Syria domain. The group’s relationship to global jihad is unclear. It openly welcomes foreign militants in its ranks. Its apparent divorce from al-Qaida ostensibly decouples it from al-Qaida’s universal war, but strategic differences with al-Qaida’s leadership do not necessarily mean Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has revised or moderated its ideology, and the group’s real planning and intentions are unknowable.

To whatever end, the group appears to have fairly effectively subordinated other armed factions inside Syria’s insurgent north-west. They are now satellites of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – per Krause’s frame, nonsignificant. [82] Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has also seized the insurgent north’s key economic resources and revenue centers, including its electrical grid – it absorbed Ahrar al-Sham’s electrical services body[83] – and crossings for internal trade with regime and Kurdish areas.[84] It has taken hold of religious bodies and courts,[85] and it has proceeded with unifying the north-west’s civil governance and services bodies as part of its “civil administration” project, now a “Salvation Government” named by the “General Syrian Conference.”[86] Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s dominance should, in theory, allow it to more efficiently administer these areas, allocate resources, and avoid the sorts of power struggles and infighting that had diverted the insurgency from its fight against the Assad regime.

Hegemony may also give Jolani and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham a freer hand politically. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s critics on the jihadist right alleged after January 2017 that the group had been attempting to open channels to regional states,[87] a charge that its leadership appeared to confirm at the time.[88] As of November 2017,

those attempts at external outreach have had some evident success.

The U.S. government has repeatedly stressed that it views Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as an expansion of a designated terrorist organization that will be a continuing target of U.S. counter-terrorism operations.[89] The Turkish government, on the other hand, has effectively done an about-face. With its July 2017 power play, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham likely frustrated a Turkish or Turkish-backed intervention in the north-west that might have displaced it. In the immediate aftermath, Turkish officials said that extremist groups – that is, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – now controlled Syria's north-western interior and promised that border trade will be curtailed.[90] Over the next several months, expectations mounted that Turkey would back opposition rebels in a cross-border attack on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.[91] But when Turkish forces entered Syria's insurgent north-west in October 2017 to establish a “de-escalation zone,” they seemingly did so in coordination with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and under the group's auspices.[92] Since then, Turkey has restored full humanitarian and commercial access through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing.[93] Turkish official media have also emphasized the return of safe, normal life in the north-west and given favorable coverage to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-backed “Salvation Government.”[94] Turkey has apparently acceded to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's dominance in the north-west and is treating the group as a political reality, if only to avoid an uncontrolled collapse of the region and a new refugee influx into Turkey.[95]

It is at this point that some of the definitional questions related to Krause's thesis become particularly salient. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has blurred the line between its dual national and transnational characters. For example, in its first statement after defeating Ahrar al-Sham, the group stressed, “We were and are part of the Syrian revolution.”[96] Meanwhile, one of its founding principles was a refusal to bargain over the status of jihadist foreign fighters, whom it continues to harbor in its ranks.[97] The real orientation of the group seems impossible to know from the outside. In any case, however, what is likely more important in predictive terms than the group's objective character is the international community's continued insistence that it is an extension of a proscribed terrorist organisation.[98]

Krause's theory seems to successfully describe the internal group dynamics of Syria's north-western insurgency, even when the hegemonic group – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – is non-national, or at least perceived as such. Yet the theory may not usefully predict movement outcomes in a case where a national movement has been commandeered by a transnational jihadist organisation. The al-Qaida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham may be so distinct from other Syrian armed groups and so politically toxic that Krause's theory does not hold.

Krause poses a four-tiered ordinal scale for national movement success, in which:

“The achievement of a new state whose territory is controlled by the movement and recognized as such by the United Nations or League of Nations is coded as ‘total success.’ Gaining semi-sovereign control of territory for the future state with proto-state institutions that are recognized by the enemy state that previously controlled the territory is coded as ‘moderate success.’ Recognition as a legitimate national movement by the United Nations or League of Nations, or agreeing to increased power-sharing in joint institutions is coded as ‘limited success.’ A lack of such gains in territory, institutions, or recognition is coded as ‘failure.’”[99]

It is unclear what Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has achieved, by this metric. The group has obliged Turkey to deal with it and, at least implicitly, recognise it. But it is unlikely to ever earn the recognition of either the Assad regime or the broader international community. Nor is that something in which the group is presumably interested – as a jihadist group, it does not recognise the legitimacy of the international community's states and institutions. A political relationship with Turkey has clear practical utility in ensuring the group and the movement's survival, but it is unclear how much the group wants or needs some broader normalisation. Krause's progression of success and effectiveness may not hold in the case of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or jihadist-led movements generally.

In this instance, the set of comparable cases may not include the Zionist movement and the Algerian national movement, which Krause examined. The relevant parallel may actually be with Algeria's 1991-2002 Islamist insurgency and Iraq's post-2003 insurgencies, in which Algeria's Islamic Fighting Group and, in Iraq, the various



iterations of Islamic State imposed hegemonic unipolarity over local insurgencies. It neither of these instances did hegemony lead to movement success.[100] This suggests the need for an expansion or a modification of Krause's theory that grapples with the outcomes of Islamist and transnational jihadist insurgencies and suggests how they can succeed, if at all.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Syria's north-western insurgency, then, might serve as a test case of the broader applicability of Krause's Movement Structure Theory and of what could be termed "jihadist exceptionalism." Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's hegemonic project appears to have been aimed not just at factional dominance and self-preservation, but at ensuring the strategic victory of Syria's revolutionary movement. What happens next will tell us how jihadist that hegemon can be and still achieve hegemonic success.

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## Notes

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- [11] For example, see Abu Salah Tahhan (@Abo\_Saleh\_4), *Twitter*, July 30, 2016; URL: [https://twitter.com/Abo\\_Saleh\\_4/status/759277867918295040](https://twitter.com/Abo_Saleh_4/status/759277867918295040).
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[49] *Ibid.*, pp.18-19.

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[51] Other negative behaviors Krause identifies include outbidding, chain-ganging, and spoiling. *Ibid.* 23-4, 29-30.

[52] *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[56] *Ibid.*, pp. 25-30.

[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 30.

[58] *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32.

[59] Krause defines national movements as "distinct in that their social solidarity is based on national identity and their common purpose is political autonomy. In other words, (1) all members of national movements perceive themselves as part of a collective nation that share a common history, language, culture, religion, and/ or ethnicity with ties to a particular piece of territory, and (2) national movements launch a sustained effort to achieve political autonomy to protect the nation and its people." *Ibid.*, 3.

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[62] See Sam Heller, "The Home of Syria's Only Real Rebels," *The Daily Beast*, June 17, 2016; URL: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/the-home-of-syrias-only-real-rebels>; Heller, "Keeping the Lights On in Rebel Idlib"; Ibrahim al-Assil, "Al-Qaeda Affiliate and Ahrar al-Sham Compete for Control in Idlib," Middle East Institute, June 29, 2017; URL: <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/al-qaeda-affiliate-and-ahrar-al-sham-compete-control-idlib>. In his account, Nour al-Din al-Zinki's Atrash says other factions deferred to both Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusrah/Fateh al-Sham during merger negotiations. "The factions were saying, 'Let Ahrar and Fateh al-Sham agree, and we'll follow,'" he writes. At another point, he says, "All the factions on the battlefield at that time stood behind Ahrar's decision, even the factions some thought Jolani had put under his thumb, like [Liwa] al-Haqq, Jeish al-Sunnah, and Ajnad al-Sham." Atrash, "The Mergers." Krause also raises the question of how well groups can themselves read their movement's hierarchy and groups' relative significance. Krause, *Rebel Power*, p. 192.

[63] Informed source inside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, August 2017.

[64] "Al-Jolani: Amrika wa-Russiya Mutawatiatan ma' Nizam al-Assad (Jolani: America and Russia Are Complicit with the Assad Regime)," Liqa Khass (Special Meeting), *Al Jazeera*, September 18, 2016; URL: <https://goo.gl/QjnH5w>.

[65] Sheikh said the group aimed "to unify the Syrian battlefield in a single entity and under a unified command that leads the military and political action of the Syrian revolution such that it realizes its goals of toppling this criminal regime," adding, "The page of al-Sham won't be turned in negotiation sessions or in conferences that crown this butcher [Assad]." "New video message from Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham's Hisham al-Shaykh: 'First Words,'" *Jihadology*, February 9, 2017; URL: <http://jihadology.net/2017/02/09/>

[new-video-mesaage-from-hayyat-ta%E1%B8%A5rir-al-shams-hisham-al-shaykh-first-words/](#).

[66] “May this action be a lesson to some of these defeatist politicians in Geneva, and before it Astana,” Jolani said, “a lesson that wipes away some of the shame that those reckless ones attached to the people of Sham. It’s time for those reckless ones to leave this war to those it belongs to, and to stand aside.” He said these political representatives were being manipulated by foreign powers. *Al-Dorar*, “Al-Jolani: Amaliyyat Homs Dars li-Ba’ad al-Siyassiyin al-Munhazamin fi Jineif wa-Asitana (Jolani: Homs Operation a Lesson to Some of These Defeatist Politicians in Geneva and Astana),” 28 February 2017; URL: <http://eldorar.com/node/109240>.

[67] Attoun said Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s founding principles included “the establishment of a balanced relationship with influential parties (governmental or otherwise), limited to the extent possible, and without being subordinate to those countries. Thus, we don’t provoke their aggression or appeal to them for assistance, and we have our totally independent personality, and our decision-making is independent and internal... without our jihad turning into the service of their interests.” Abdurrahim Attoun (Abu Abdullah al-Shami), *JustPaste.it*, February 10, 2017 ; URL: <https://justpaste.it/13ied>.

[68] Heller, “Syria’s Former al-Qaeda Affiliate Is Leading Rebels on a Suicide Mission.”

[69] Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Tarfud al-Muwafaqah ala ‘Mubadarat al-Mashayikh’ wa-Tutalib bi-‘Inha Halat al-Tasharzum’ (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Refuses to Agree to ‘the Sheikhs’ Initiative’ and Demands ‘the End of This State of Fragmentation’), *al-Dorar*, July 20, 2017; URL: <http://aldorars.com/news/734>.

[70] “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: La Budd min Taslim al-Manatiq al-Muharrarah li-Idarah Madaniyyah,” *al-Dorar*.

[71] The recording of radio chatter was presumably recorded and leaked by a hostile state actor, but its authenticity seems not to be in dispute. “Tasribat Kashf al-Haqiqah – al-Tasrib al-Thani – Abu Mariya al-Qahtani (Leaks to Reveal the Truth – the Second Leak – Abu Mariya al-Qahtani),” *YouTUBE*, August 12, 2017; URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC-o77m6CRI>.

[72] In amateur footage of his July 28, 2017, sermon, Sheikh said that the insurgency’s factions could no longer remain as fragmented pieces. “Abu Jaber al-Sheikh ‘Ummam al-Duniya Takalabet ala ‘Jama’at al-Dawla,’ wa-Ahrar al-Sham Man Badaat bil-F’tida al-Akhir (Abu Jaber al-Sheikh: The Nations of the World Pounced on ‘the State Group,’ Ahrar al-Sham Is the One That Started This Last Aggression),” *Shabakat Sham al-Ikhbariyyah*, July 29, 2017; URL: <https://goo.gl/s1zqm7>.

[73] “Tasribat Kashf al-Haqiqah – al-Tasrib al-Thani – Abu Mariya al-Qahtani,” *YouTUBE*.

[74] “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Khalaqat Jami’ al-Zurouf Qabl Tawjih al-Darbah al-Qadiyyah li-‘Ahrar al-Sham’. Fa-Maza Fa’let.?” (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Created All the Conditions Before Directing the Decisive Blow at Ahrar al-Sham... So What Did It Do?),” *Shabakat Sham al-Ikhbariyyah*, July 22, 2017; URL: <https://goo.gl/nBLzU5>.

[75] Labib al-Nahas (@LabibAlNahas), *Twitter*, December 31, 2016; URL: <https://twitter.com/LabibAlNahas/status/815210531330068480>; Saleh al-Hamawi, “Al-Taghallub al-Na’im (Soft al-Taghallub),” *Syria Noor*, February 20, 2017; URL: <http://syrianoor.net/revto/22144>; “Shubuhāt al-Taghallub wa-Tatbiq Shari’at al-Ghab (The Errors of al-Taghallub and the Implementation of the Law of the Jungle),” *Ahrar al-Sham*, January 28, 2017; URL: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3awjMQV6xnQUnp3SHRSY1BHsk0/view>. After the announcement of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, U.S. Special Envoy Michael Ratney issued a statement clarifying that the U.S. government considers Hayat Tahrir al-Sham an expansion of Jabhat al-Nusra and actually saying that the approach of Jolani and those around him is “al-taghallub.” U.S. Embassy Syria (@USEmbassySyria), *Twitter*, March 11, 2017; URL: <https://twitter.com/USEmbassySyria/status/840540398602858499>.

[76] See Attoun, *JustPaste.it*, 2017; Atrash, “The Mergers.”

[77] Informed source inside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham who spoke on condition of anonymity, author’s interview, *Telegram*, August 2017.

[78] “Jabhat al-Nusra – Manhajuna wa-‘Aqidatuna ma’ al-Duktour al-Sheikh Sami al-Oreidi (Jabhat al-Nusra – Our Program and Creed, with Doctor and Sheikh Sami al-Oreidi),” originally published October 21, 2013; URL: [https://archive.org/details/MNH\\_3KE\\_SAM](https://archive.org/details/MNH_3KE_SAM).

[79] “Abu Muhammad al-Jolani... Al-Nusra wa-Mustaqbal Souriyā (Abu Muhammad al-Jolani... Nusra and Syria’s Future),” Liqa al-Youm (Today’s Meeting), *Al Jazeera*, December 19, 2017 ; URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIr1HoHJlQA>; “Al-Jolani: Hizb Ullah Zail.. Wa-Ladeina Thaar ma al-Alawiyyin (Jolani: Hizbullah Is Transient... And We Have a Vendetta with Alawites),” Bila Hudoud (Without Boundaries), *Al Jazeera*, May 25, 2015; URL: <https://goo.gl/2vMRMo>.

[80] Aron Lund, “Major salafi faction criticizes Jabhat al-Nusra,” *Syria Comment*, May 4, 2013 ; URL: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/major-salafi-faction-criticizes-jabhat-al-nusra/>. Ahrar al-Sham also took a more generally inclusive, populist line than Jabhat al-Nusra. See Heller, “Ahrar al-Sham’s Revisionist Jihadism.”

[81] For example, see “New video message from Hayy’at Tahrir al-Sham’s Hisham al-Shaykh: ‘First Words,’” *Jihadology*.

[82] See the first video address of new Ahrar al-Sham Hassan Soufan (Abu al-Baraa), in which he cannot bring himself to blame Hayat Tahrir al-Sham for Ahrar al-Sham’s defeat and rally his faction against it. “Kalimah Mariyyah lil-Qaid al-Amm li-Harakat

- Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah ‘Hassan Soufan,” *YouTube*, user “Baladi-News Network,” August 7, 2017; URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40YZLfuBA-0>.
- [83] Sam Heller (@AbuJamajem), *Twitter*, July 29, 2017 ; URL: <https://twitter.com/AbuJamajem/status/891318577013411841>.
- [84] Manhal Barish, “Jabhat al-Nusrah’ al-Rabih al-Wahid min Waqf al-Da’am al-Insani wal-Askari (Jabhat al-Nusrah the Lone Winner from Halt in Humanitarian and Military Support),” *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 29, 2017; URL: <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=762301>.
- [85] Ussal-Sara’ fil-Sham (@asseraaalsham), *Twitter*, July 25, 2017; URL: <https://twitter.com/asseraaalsham/status/889817587651162112>; “Tahrir al-Sham Tuseitar ala Mahkamat Ma’arat al-Nu’man wa-Tujbir Raisaha alal-Istiqalah... wa-Ahali al-Madinah Yantafidun Rafdan li-Heimanat al-Heiah (Tahrir al-Sham Takes Over the Ma’arat al-Nu’man Court and Forces Its Head to Resign... City Residents Rise Up to Reject the Hayah’s Dominance),” *Shabakat Sham al-Ikhbariyyah*, July 31, 2017; URL: <https://goo.gl/LTakgi>.
- [86] “Al-Mutamar al-Souri al-Amm Yunhi A’maluh bi-Tashkil Majlis Tasisi wa-Yusta’idd li-I’lan Hukumah (General Syrian Conference Ends Its Work by Forming Constituent Council and Prepares to Announce Government),” *al-Dorar al-Shamiyyah*, July 17, 2017; URL: <http://aldorars.com/news/1669>; “Shahid .. Al-I’lan an Tashkil Hukoumat al-Inqaz fi Idlib bi-Riasat ‘Muhammad al-Sheikh’ (Watch... Announcement of Formation of Salvation Government in Idlib, Headed by Muhammad al-Sheikh),” *YouTube*, user “al-Dorar al-Shamiyyah,” November 2, 2017; URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5orACzyc\\_G8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5orACzyc_G8).
- [87] Bilal Khreissat (Abu Khadijah al-Muhajir), “Nasiha min al-Amaq (Advice from the Depths),” *JustPaste.it*, May 15, 2017; URL: <https://justpaste.it/16nqz>.
- [88] Attoun, *JustPaste.it*, 2017.
- [89] U.S. Embassy Syria, *Twitter*, March 11, 2017; U.S. Embassy Syria (@USEmbassySyria), *Twitter*, August 6, 2017; URL: <https://twitter.com/USEmbassySyria/status/892725901787619328>.
- [90] “Turkey takes extra measures on Syria border over Idlib,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 11, 2017; URL: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-takes-extra-measures-on-syria-border-over-idlib-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=116634&NewsCatID=341>.
- [91] These expectations held all the way up to Turkey’s intervention. For example, see Mehel Srivastava, “Turkey-backed Syrian rebels begin Idlib advance,” *Financial Times*, October 7, 2017; URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/b0fd7572-ab7f-11e7-aab9-abaa44b1e130>.
- [92] “Turkish army in Syria to support Idlib operation,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 9, 2017; URL: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-soldiers-have-crossed-border-into-syrias-idlib-military-120553>; “Al-Jeish al-Turki Yadhkhal Gharbi Halab bi-Rufqat ‘Tahrir al-Sham’ (Turkish Army Enters West Aleppo in Company of Tahrir al-Sham),” *Enab Baladi*, October 13, 2017; URL: <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/177824>; Sam Heller, “Tahrir al-Sham official on Turkey’s intervention to implement Astana: ‘That’s not the reality.’” *Abu al-Jamajem* (blog), October 15, 2017; URL: <https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2017/10/15/tahrir-al-sham-official-on-turkeys-intervention-to-implement-astana-thats-not-the-reality/>.
- [93] “Naib Mudir Ma’bar Bab al-Hawa Yuakkid li-‘al-Dorar al-Shamiyyah’ Isti’adat al-Ma’bar li-Kamil Harakatih al-Tujjariyyah (Deputy Director of Bab al-Hawa Crossing Confirms to al-Dorar al-Shamiyyah That Crossing Has Resume Full Commercial Movement),” *al-Dorar al-Shamiyyah*, October 18, 2017; URL: <http://aldorars.com/news/2200>.
- [94] “Strait Talk Exclusive: Inside Syria’s Idlib city,” *YouTube*, user “TRT World,” November 17, 2017; URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4R\\_IWTeSNY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4R_IWTeSNY).
- [95] For Turkey’s core interests in Idlib, see Kübra Chohan et al., “Turkish army’s multi-faceted security mission in Idlib,” *Anadolu Agency*, October 13, 2017; URL: <http://aa.com.tr/en/top-headline/turkish-army-s-multi-faceted-security-mission-in-idlib/934766>.
- [96] “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: La Budd min Taslim al-Manatiq al-Muharrarah li-Idarah Madaniyyah,” *al-Dorar*.
- [97] “New video message from Hayy’at Tahrir al-Sham: ‘Learn About Hayy’at Tahrir al-Sham,’” *Jihadology*.
- [98] For example, see U.S. Embassy Syria, *Twitter*, March 11, 2017.
- [99] Krause, *Rebel Power*, p.36.
- [100] This is a comparison that some have drawn explicitly, as with the U.S. Special Envoy Michael Ratney’s comparison of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to Iraq’s Mujahideen Shura Council, the predecessor to the Islamic State. See U.S. Embassy Syria, *Twitter*, March 11, 2017.