

A Downward Scale Shift? The Case of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

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Abstract

This article seeks to explain how Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), al-Qa'ida's former affiliate in Syria, adopted an increasingly locally-focused strategy. Drawing on the social movement literature, HTS's trajectory is conceptualized as a process of "downward scale shift. This article sets out a series of mechanisms that give rise to this process. In doing so, it serves to illustrate that while ideology is a key element in shaping militant groups' political behavior, insofar as it informs their strategies and their definition of enemies, militants' choices are also influenced by their interaction with other actors and the environment, and their own understanding of emerging opportunities and threats.

Keywords: Jihadism, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, social movements, scale shift.

Introduction: The Political Preferences of Jihadi Groups

The decision to "go global" is not a default choice for jihadists.[1] Transnational political violence is not "born as such"[2] and scaling up attacks, geographically speaking, is not a "natural" and unavoidable outcome, but rather is the result of a process marked by political agency,[3] involving militants' interactions with other actors and the environment.[4]

Jihadists' debates on whether priority should be assigned to the near or the far enemy (*al-'aduw al-qarib* and *al-'aduw al-ba'id*, respectively) [5] date back to the 1970s–1980s. The distinction was introduced by 'Abd al-Salam al-Faraj, a key figure from the Egyptian militant group al-Jihad. In his influential treatise *al-jihad al-farida al-gha'iba* ("Jihad: The Neglected Duty"), he advocated prioritizing the near over the far enemy [6] - with the latter at the time signifying Israel rather than the United States or other Western countries. Such views broadly reflected the orientation of the wider militant Islamist panoply active in those years. During the mid-to-late 1990s,[7] a small segment of the global jihadi community, spearheaded by al-Qa'ida's Osama bin Laden and Tanzim al-Jihad's Ayman al-Zawahiri, would alter the traditional enemy hierarchy, as well as the very meaning of "far enemy". They deemed it necessary to strike the United States first, so that governments in the MENA region - regarded by jihadists as puppets of Western countries - would fall,[8] thereby giving rise to a greater emphasis on international targeting. Nonetheless, this move was met with criticism and opposition not only within the broader jihadi landscape, but even within the al-Qa'ida group itself: for strategic reasons, for doctrinal reasons, and because the Taliban leadership hosting al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan did not approve of such attacks and the resulting media exposure.[9] Within the jihadi community, debates persisted on which strategy should be pursued.[10] In particular, since the 2000s, we have witnessed a process of ideological hybridization within the jihadi landscape.[11] Groups have increasingly resorted to mixed, "glocal" strategies, combining local emphasis and international ambitions - blurring even further the theoretical and fuzzy distinction between the near and the far enemy.

So why do jihadi groups embrace local and/or global-focused strategies? And specifically, why may a particular jihadi group opt for an increasingly locally-focused strategy? Literature on the target selection of terrorist groups has often emphasized how ideology affects the choices of such organizations. As Drake argues, ideology is what shapes their worldview and value system, allowing them to discriminate between their in-group and out-group, i.e. friends and enemies, and to identify what/who constitutes a legitimate target. Ideology, then, informs the group's strategy, which in turn aims to achieve its political objectives. Nonetheless, ideology alone is not sufficient to explain militant groups' choices.[12] Groups subscribing to the same ideological family may opt for different choices in targeting. Within the left-wing ideological family in Italy, for example, the Red Brigades tended to target factories or political figures more frequently than the other smaller groups such as

Nuclei Armati Proletari or Reparti Comunisti d'Attacco, who had a far more limited geographic and functional scope – largely a reflection of the potential constituencies the groups were seeking to address.[13] With regards to right-wing political violence, groups operating in Italy, especially during the “Years of Lead”, differed from like-minded groups in other Western countries in their targeting choices, with the former tending to target leftist actors rather than members of ethnic minorities.[14] Similarly, within the jihadi ideological family, IS’ emphasis on sectarian targeting, prioritizing attacks against Shi’a Muslims, stands in contrast to al-Qa’ida,[15] as has the decision of IS to strike against Iran. For a fuller explanation we therefore must look beyond doctrine and permanent values, to also consider opportunistic dynamics and operational conditions.[16] Indeed, target selection “can best be regarded as a process by which the terrorist’s freedom of action is narrowed down by the influence of various factors”[17]: the group’s need to retain support and avoid alienating its base; its capabilities; and the security environment in which it operates.[18]

This article attempts to explain how Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) adopted an increasingly locally-focused strategy over time. HTS is worthy of attention in light of its peculiar trajectory within the jihadi landscape. While its genesis was rooted in al-Qa’ida, it subsequently relinquished its allegiance to the latter, progressively bringing about what seems a “third paradigm” of jihadism. The origins of the group can be traced back to July–August 2011. At that time, the Military Council of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) decided to dispatch a group of militants to Syria, to form a local branch: Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahl al-Sham (JAN), the “predecessor” of HTS. The establishment of JAN was formally announced in a video released in January 2012.[19]

It is important to recognize that JAN’s formation and evolution happened at a time when al-Qa’ida itself was leaning towards a more local-oriented strategy.[20] From the second half of the 2000s, in the wake of its setbacks in Iraq, it had started to recast its strategic thinking towards a more “population-centric” direction. The Arab Spring and the political environment that emerged from the revolts fed into this process [21] as they highlighted the need for militants to embed themselves within their local socio-political context,[22] and emphasized aspects such as the provision of services to the population and territorial governance. However, al-Qa’ida strategic refocusing, taken alone, does not fully explain the trajectory of HTS. In fact, other jihadi groups made different strategic choices. IS, for example, at some point accomplished an upward scale shift orchestrating attacks in far-away areas, while maintaining a “glocal identity”. Al-Qa’ida’s affiliate in Yemen (al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP), while embracing localism, has also not completely foregone its transnational ambitions, and claimed an attack on a naval base in Pensacola, US - perpetrated as recently as December 2019. HTS, on the other hand, has gradually adopted a strategy with a more explicitly local focus. This can be seen in the evolution of its rhetoric and behavior towards other actors over time. For instance, in its first video released in January 2012, while emphasizing the fight against the Assad regime, JAN did not shy away from calling out the US and Western countries, as well as Turkey and the Arab League - deemed “patrons” of the *taghut* (tyrant, i.e. the (Syrian) regime).[23] This stands in contrast with the discourse that HTS has embraced in more recent years,[24] as well as its present-day engagement with Turkey. This article examines why HTS followed this particular trajectory.

The analysis draws together research on political violence and social movement studies -adopting a relational and dynamic approach. I contend that such an approach is appropriate as jihadi movements are often multi-dimensional actors, rather than mere terrorist groups.[25] Drawing on social movement studies, I understand HTS’s adoption of an increasingly locally-focused strategy to constitute a form of “downward scale shift”. This article aims to identify relevant mechanisms that can explain how this process unfolded in the case of HTS. In doing so, the article seeks to both provide an empirical case study, and generate insight about an under-researched but potentially valuable concept within the study of social movements and political violence. The case study of HTS is analyzed through the method of process tracing. The analysis draws on both secondary literature and primary sources, i.e. documents and statements retrieved from the Internet and social media, especially Telegram and Aaron Y. Zelin’s portal “Jihadology”.

Scale Shift

Scale shift is a process that leads contentious action to “a higher or a lower level than its initiation” - respectively, an upward or downward scale shift.[26] Within social movement studies, describing scale shift as a process means understanding it as a sequence of mechanisms, where “mechanisms” are understood as a “delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations”, and “processes” are understood as sequences of mechanisms.[27] As a minimum it entails a target shift on the part of contentious actors, but it goes beyond that, also generating “new alliances [...] and changes in the foci of claims and perhaps even new identities”.[28] Indeed, targets shifts are often accompanied by other dynamics, encompassing, for instance, changes in the discourse of contentious actors.

The process of upward scale shift has received some scholarly attention, giving rise to descriptive models that identify its recurring mechanisms. For instance, in the model proposed by Tarrow (2005, cf. Figure below), upward scale shift is understood as a process made up of at least five mechanisms:

1. coordination, implying the collaboration of contentious actors in diverse geographical areas;
2. brokerage, i.e. the connection of two previously unrelated actors through a third party, an intermediary;
3. theorization, enabling the “abstraction of a core causal idea from a particular reality into a general frame that can be applied to other realities”;
4. a shift in the claims advocated by contentious actors, and a shift in object(s) (i.e. targets);
5. finally, in some cases, also a shift in the identity of such actors.[29]

One example Tarrow provides of this model in action is al-Qa’ida’s global direction during the 1990s. Here, he draws particular attention to the role of the Afghan conflict, as it allowed the brokerage of a range of militants from across the globe, and the effect of repression and selective cooptation on the part of various regimes, leading militants to embrace broader claims (with an object and claim shift).[30]

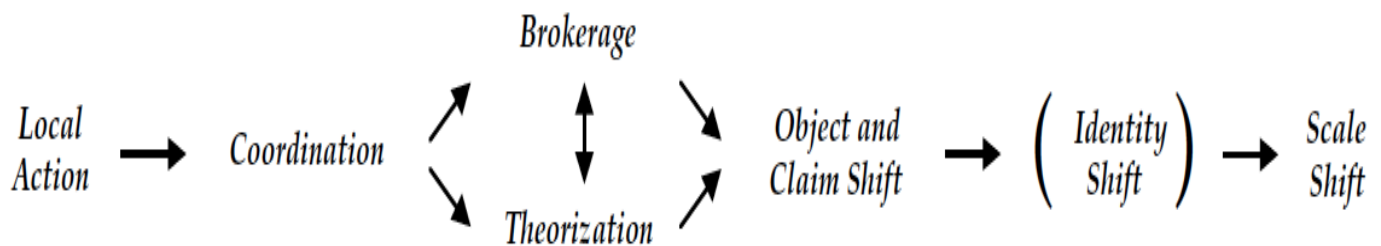


Figure 1: A Descriptive Model of Scale Shift, from S. Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (see note 3), p. 123.

The question then is, what a downward scale shift might look like. Unlike upward scale shift, downward scale shift is still under-researched within social movement studies.[31] Tarrow describes it as a “transfer of collective action from a higher to a lower level independent of the agencies of the higher-level coordination”. If upward scale shift moves claims and targets of contention to a higher level (e.g. from the sub-national to the national level; from the national to the transnational level), downward scale shift, in contrast, “allows lower-level activists to take on local targets and make local claims in new and different ways”.[32] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly suggest that this process is constituted by mechanisms akin to those seen in upward scale shift, but “in different concatenations”.[33] It has been proposed that a crucial mechanisms in downward scale shift might be “certification”, whereby the actor in question is validated by external authorities.[34] To date, however, there has not been a systematic investigation of how downward scale shift unfolds.

The analysis presented here can therefore be understood both as an exploration of the particular case of HTS, and as a preliminary exploration of how downward scale shift unfolds. Specifically, by reviewing the evolution of HTS, I seek to identify relevant mechanisms that could explain its trajectory - trying to ascertain if any of the mechanisms observed in upward scale shift can also be spotted in the reverse process, and to investigate the presence of other, specific mechanisms. Some of the mechanisms that shall be identified here have been observed across other case studies, involving not only militant groups, but also other kinds of contentious actors, including non-violent ones.[35] The discussion focuses primarily on the period from 2016-2018 as this is the period where it seems HTS's process of downward scale shift unfolded. Of course, such developments seldom happen out of the blue, and some of the roots of this process can be traced back further. However, it is held here that it is during the period under consideration that one can observe the critical junctures relevant to understanding this process. Of particular importance, 2016 was the moment when the "predecessor" of HTS, Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahl al-Sham (JAN), al-Qa'ida's affiliate in Syria, first rebranded itself and announced it was severing its ties with al-Qa'ida.

Uncomfortable Ties? The Rebranding of JAN, 2016

In an interview given to al-Jazeera in 2015, while accusing the West of supporting the regime, JAN's leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani explicitly declared that the group harbored no intention of targeting the so-called "far enemy" unless attacked - denying reports regarding the existence of an alleged "Khorasan group" [36] that was planning external attacks.[37] In July 2016, JAN leader al-Julani, along with prominent member Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shami, declared in a video message that JAN had been dissolved and replaced by Jabhat Fath al-Sham (JFS), and that the new group did not have "external ties", i.e. it was no longer affiliated to al-Qa'ida. At first, the announcement was presented as a move approved by the al-Qa'ida central leadership. Specifically, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, the then al-Qa'ida second-in-command, based in Syria at the time of the events, gave his conditional approval to al-Julani's decision, meaning he blessed the project as long as al-Zawahiri did not have objections. However, it later became clear that this was not the case: in the following months al-Zawahiri expressed his utter rejection of JFS (and apparently, al-Masri accordingly withdrew his endorsement).[38] In spite of al-Zawahiri's rebuttal, al-Julani did not reverse his decision, but rather continued pursuing the breakaway path. In January 2017, the group announced its second rebranding and reshuffle, becoming HTS.

Why did JAN morph into JFS, and why did it happen at that particular moment? From a social movement perspective, three mechanisms operating on two different levels seem to be especially relevant. The first mechanism is related to the relationship between the movement (in this case, the Syrian militant Islamist and jihadi [39] movement) and its political environment. The other two mechanisms, however, are related to relations within both the national and the transnational movement.

Spirals of Political Opportunity and Threat

The first mechanism that should be considered is known in social movement literature as *spirals of political opportunity and threat*. These relate to the political environment, entailing "sequences of environmental change, interpretation of that change, action, and counteraction, repeated as one action alters another actor's environment".[40] Such spirals involve all those developments that "alter the political conditions" in which the relevant actors are embedded, affecting their strategic positioning and, in turn, their strategies of contention. [41] They have been observed across a range of situations; inter alia, as one of the defining mechanisms explaining trajectories towards radicalization of militant groups of different kinds at a given point. Likewise, a "reverse" of these spirals might be able to explain a lack of radicalization/"non-radicalization" of some groups. [42] In the case of JAN and its successors, this robust mechanism can be observed throughout the period from 2016 onwards - as the group faced, and through interaction contributed to creating, several "windows" of opportunity/threat altering its positioning within the local environment. This author views these windows as central to understanding JAN's downward scale shift.

In 2015-16, JAN/JFS found itself under increasing external pressure, due to shifting dynamics in the Syrian

arena and at the international level. In those years, in fact, the Syrian insurgency in general was starting to see its position dwindle, as the regime was taking control of more territories - especially after the September 2015 Russian intervention - and, remarkably, engaging in an offensive to capture the rebel stronghold of Aleppo in 2016.[43] Moreover, just before the July 2016 announcement, there were rumors that the US and Russia were preparing an offensive to specifically target JAN.[44] Given that in 2014 IS had started to be targeted by an international coalition, for JAN this was grounds for concern. This is even more true considering the fact that, in those years, militants from JAN, such as its senior leader, Muhsin al-Fadhli, were targeted and killed by the US (as the US government alleged that it was targeting members of the purported “Khorasan group”).[45]

Brokerage and “Uncoupling”

Two other mechanisms also came into play at this time, emerging at the intra-movement level: brokerage (between JAN and locally embedded organizations belonging to the militant Islamist milieu in Syria), and “uncoupling” (between JAN and al-Qa’ida central). As previously mentioned in the paragraph on scale shift, brokerage is defined as the connection of two previously unconnected or less connected actors. While it plays an important role in processes of upward scale shift, it has been suggested that it could also foster the reverse process, i.e. downward scale shift.[46] On the other hand, what might tentatively be call “uncoupling” is what appears as the reverse mechanism of coordination (the latter being a typical feature of upward scale shift, cf. Figure 1). It is the mechanism by which organizations based in different geographical arenas which used to coordinate policies with each other, cease to do so.

A form of *brokerage* between JAN and other militant Islamist organizations seems to be one of the key dynamics that prompted the former to morph into JFS (and, later on, into HTS), and to remodulate its political preferences more decisively. JAN had been starting to form alliances with other insurgent groups since 2012. [47] A significant step was taken in 2015, when the Jaysh al-Fath coalition was set up, comprised of JAN along with other militant Islamist groups. However, under increased pressure at the time, what JAN intended to attain was a full-blown merger, most notably with Ahrar al-Sham, and negotiations were underway in 2016. In the view of HTS, building a unified Islamic-oriented front was the preliminary step in moving towards its supposed political objective: establishing an Islamic state in the Levant governed by *sharia*, as had been stated since its very foundation [48] and in the “creed and methodology” laid out by JAN’s then *shar’i* Sami al-‘Uraydi in 2013. [49] This unified body would have allowed them to overcome the fragmentation of the insurgent ecosphere - thus strengthening the overall positioning of the Syrian rebel milieu vis-à-vis enemies, primarily the regime, especially given the latter’s advances towards rebel-held territory.[50] In its pursuit of unity, the leadership of JAN “insisted on unified, hegemonic order and rejected a united but multipolar movement structure”, as “the[ir] objective was to create a unitary hegemonic leader, not another united alliance of peer groups”.[51] Finally, given reports of forthcoming US-Russian raids, embedding itself within the wider insurgency might have made it harder for those countries to target JAN.[52]

However, tighter forms of cooperation between militant organizations, especially mergers, can be jeopardized by ideological divergences.[53] One of the most prominent issues differentiating JAN from (most) local militant Islamist actors, and thus hindering closer cooperation and integration within the Syrian insurgent milieu, was the nexus between JAN and transnational jihadism, i.e. its ties to al-Qa’ida.[54] By associating themselves with an al-Qa’ida-affiliated actor, insurgent groups would have run several risks: ending up being blacklisted and seeing their financial support shrink; validating the regime’s narrative and discrediting the Syrian revolution.[55] Affiliation with al-Qa’ida was therefore becoming increasingly uncomfortable for both JAN and its potential allies. Hence the decision of JAN to rebrand itself and announce its split from al-Qa’ida (“*uncoupling*”). The statement circulated by Ahrar al-Sham following JFS’s announcement is illustrative: they celebrated the establishment of JFS and its separation from al-Qa’ida, welcoming the fact that the “brothers” from JAN accepted “their advice”, and hoping that this could prompt further rebel cohesion.[56]

The true nature of the July 2016 announcement is still debated: some analysts suggest that a more “pragmatic” wing within JAN had finally managed to convince al-Julani of the dangers posed by allegiance to al-Qa’ida; others contend that, from the very beginning, the decision was mostly conceived for media purposes, to keep

relations with al-Qa'ida away from the spotlight.[57] In either case, this step proved to be a critical juncture insofar as it brought about wide-ranging consequences and anticipated the future trajectory of the group.

HTS and Engagement with Turkey throughout 2017-2018

To understand the developments that unfolded from the end of 2016 onwards, after the opposition's loss of Aleppo, and how these events affected the trajectory of JFS/HTS, two further sets of mechanisms seem especially relevant. Firstly, similar to the 2015-16 period, new shifts in environmental conditions - i.e. new *opportunity/threat spirals* - impacted upon the relationship between HTS and other actors. Secondly, HTS opened a dialogue with an external actor, i.e. Turkey, possibly triggering a mechanism called *certification*.

New Spirals of Opportunity/Threat

Alliance-building efforts involving militant Islamist groups did not fare well, with JFS and Ahrar al-Sham failing to reach a full merger. Fighting between those two "camps" erupted in January 2017. On the one hand, JFS merged with other minor factions (including Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaysh al-Sunna, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din) to form Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). On the other hand, other small non-jihadi groups joined Ahrar al-Sham (in response to the offensive JFS waged against them). HTS proceeded to consolidate its influence in the area of Idlib, confronting Ahrar al-Sham, which had by then become its main rival. The conflict between the two escalated to an unprecedented level in July 2017, when Ahrar al-Sham suffered a significant defeat at the hands of HTS. In subsequent months, HTS would focus on widening its governance capabilities, contributing to setting up the Syrian Salvation Government (*hukumat al-inqadh al-suriyya*).[58] HTS was thus assuming a preeminent position in the area.[59]

However, HTS's consolidation was coupled with several challenges. At the international level, talks were taking place within the framework of the Astana process, establishing four de-escalation zones including the area of Idlib. At the same time, reports of a potential Turkish offensive against HTS were becoming increasingly frequent.[60] Following inter-factional fighting, HTS was also becoming increasingly distrusted by other rebel groups, as they accused it of "dominating" (*taghallub*) them.[61] The internal problems were twofold. Besides the deteriorating relationship with the broader Syrian militant Islamist milieu - leading to the defection of factions such as Nur al-Din al-Zinki over the course of the year,[62] - there was the issue of defections by al-Qa'ida loyalists, who were dissatisfied with the path taken by HTS. Tensions escalated as the al-Qa'ida loyalist Sami al-'Uraydi and HTS's 'Atun engaged in a public dispute over the transformation of JAN/JFS/HTS;[63] and again in October 2017, when HTS engaged in talks with Turkey (see below). This was anathema to al-Qa'ida and its supporters. Moreover, in November 2017, HTS launched a wave of arrests against senior al-Qa'ida loyalists in Syria (only to release them at a later stage).[64] Their increasing dissatisfaction with the course HTS had embarked upon - seen as a betrayal of jihadi ideology - , would lead al-Qa'ida loyalists to announce in February 2018 the establishment of a new organization: Tanzim Hurras al-Din (HaD). Headed by overall leader Abu Hammam al-Shami with *shar'i* Sami al-'Uraydi as second-in-command, it presented itself as the al-Qa'ida branch in Syria (although at the time of writing it has not been recognized as a formal affiliate). Since then, the relationship between HTS and HaD has experienced ebbs and flows, swaying between episodes of tension and initiatives of reconciliation - at least, until very recently.[65]

Certification

As anticipated, in October 2017, HTS engaged in talks with Turkey to negotiate its military intervention in north western Syria. The deployment of Turkish troops and the establishment of observation posts in the region occurred in coordination with HTS - something which would have been inconceivable in previous years. Given the multiple challenges it was facing, the HTS leadership probably thought that avoiding clashing with Turkey was the most viable option. In fact, had HTS not found a *modus vivendi* with Turkey, its prospects vis-à-vis the regime and Russia would have been rather gloomy. This leads us to the second key dynamics sustaining the downward trajectory of the group: an ongoing, albeit for the time being incomplete,[66] mechanism of

certification of HTS vis-à-vis external actors.

Certification is the mechanism by which an actor, along with his performance and claims, is validated by one (or more) authoritative actors.[67] In the literature on contentious politics, it has been highlighted as one of the mechanisms enabling “downscaling” (not necessarily in the context of violent action),[68] and also as a potentially relevant mechanism for both radicalization and de-radicalization processes in the case of violent actors.[69] Certification has to do with the recognition of a certain actor as a potential interlocutor, hence with issues of legitimacy and/or rehabilitation. Therefore, actors aspiring to be certified might recalibrate their discourse and behavior to achieve a formal or informal “recognition”. In the case of HTS - a group that used to be part of a transnational network - decisions such as severing ties with al-Qa’ida and marginalizing pro-al-Qa’ida components, adopting an increasingly local-oriented stance, and lastly, negotiating with Turkey, seemed to signal an unfolding mechanism of certification vis-à-vis Turkey, and the international community at large. [70] For its part, Turkey’s approach to HTS has been a complex and nuanced one, mirroring a “divide and conquer” attitude: it sought to engage and empower the most pragmatic wing of HTS, and to marginalize the hardline, less prone-to-dialogue components.[71] This certainly had an effect on HTS’s trajectory too.

In parallel, there was a notable evolution in HTS’s rhetoric towards “external actors”, primarily Turkey. In a video aired in February 2017, the group had charted its founding principles, including the notion of “establishing balanced relations with relevant parties” (*iqamat ‘alaqat mutawazina ma’ al-jihat al-mu’aththira*). [72] This aspect would be echoed consistently in the future, offering an ideological foundation to engagement with third parties. Legitimizing a military intervention by external actors has been even more problematic from a jihadi perspective. Therefore, over time, several figures from HTS sought to do so.[73] In an interview with Khayr Umma Foundation, when questioned on issues such as the Turkish presence in northwest Syria, prominent cleric Abu Qatada al-Filastini (who is not formally affiliated to HTS, but can be regarded as an external authoritative reference for the group) mentioned the need to observe reality (*waqi’*), i.e. the current circumstances, and to take into consideration both the best interest of the community (*maslaha*) and the provisions of jurisprudence (*fiqh*).[74] The Telegram comments posted in May 2018 by prominent HTS *shar’i* Abu al-Fath al-Farghali were also especially relevant, stating that the Turkish observation posts were legitimate as long as certain conditions were respected: namely, HTS military superiority; Turkish non-interference in administration issues; and HTS’s monopoly on decisions regarding war and peace.[75]

The subsequent period was characterized by dynamics similar to those seen throughout 2017: a cycle of shifting operational conditions putting pressure on HTS (namely, the ceasefire framework falling through and the Syrian regime gaining ground); a new ceasefire agreement; HTS trying to adapt to circumstances and providing an ideological basis for its choices. Throughout February–July 2018, the regime made advances in Latakia, Hama, and Aleppo, and seemed to be on the point of launching a full-blown offensive in Idlib. In September 2018 a new deal was signed by Russia and Turkey in Sochi, reiterating the provisions of the Astana framework, including Turkey’s commitment to eradicate terrorist groups in the demilitarized area as well as joint Russian-Turkish patrols.[76]

In June 2018, the HTS General Shar’i Council released a statement on “Jihad and legitimate politics between the constants and variables”, referring to relations with third countries in general. It stated that while there were some fixed principles (such as relying on *jihad* and focusing on *shari’a* as a reference), some aspects, notably capabilities, could change over time; and thus specific rulings on what was permissible could be adapted accordingly. In particular, it reiterated that establishing relations with third countries could be a legitimate move as long as it advanced the interest of *jihad*, and was not clearly forbidden by law.[77] After the Sochi agreement, HTS released a statement condemning the role and the intentions of Russia, but also thanking those who protected the liberated areas and prevented an all-out offensive[78]. This was a clear reference to Turkey.

Recent Developments: towards a Completion of the Downward Scale Shift?

It is possible that developments in 2019 and 2020 have marked new steps in HTS's unfolding process of downward scale shift. The offensives launched by the Syrian regime in April 2019 and December 2019 accelerated a shift in power dynamics in the region of Idlib, leading HTS to increasingly lose influence vis-à-vis Turkey. A ceasefire agreement was concluded by Turkey and Russia on 5 March 2020, creating a safe corridor along the M4 highway, to be jointly patrolled by Russian and Turkish troops.[79] While at first tensions erupted, with HTS launching initiatives to disrupt these patrols, the group leadership went on to display a more pragmatic stance at a later stage.[80] HTS's attitude towards the March deal was met with fierce opposition by the pro-al-Qa'ida constellation led by HaD. Their convoluted relationship seems to have reached a tipping point by the summer of 2020, as tensions between the two groups escalated. In June 2020, HaD set up checkpoints and established a new al-Qa'ida-aligned operations room (Fathbutu, "Be Steadfast", with groups Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Jama'at Ansar al-Islam, Tansiqiyat al-Jihad, and Liwa' al-Muqatilin al-Ansar).[81] In response, HTS cracked down on HaD and its military bases. Furthermore, prominent figures who had defected from HTS and joined Fathbutu were arrested – persons like Abu Malik al-Talli (founder of Liwa' al-Muqatilin), and Abu Salah al-Uzbeki.[82] In the following months, several senior members from HaD were detained by HTS, such as Fadl Allah al-Libi and 'Abd al-Karim al-Makki, as well as Abu Yahya al-Jaza'iri (once affiliated to HaD, but expelled in June 2019). [83]

HTS's crackdown might suggest that the group is increasingly aligning with Turkey's choices,[84] particularly in light of its increasing dependence on Ankara. It is still an open question whether HTS's readjustment of its political preferences is triggering or could trigger an *identity shift*, described as the final stage of scale shift - especially as it seems that HTS is advocating a "third model" of jihadism, an alternative to both IS and al-Qa'ida.[85] Related to this, an additional question is whether the "third model" embraced by HTS might be viable in the medium-to-long term or if it will inevitably be a temporary experiment. Should the group manage to further downscale, i.e. to continue pursuing the certification path (and possibly establish closer relations with countries such as Turkey), this might even challenge the jihadi nature *stricto sensu* of HTS's project, since the rejection of political processes is a key tenet of jihadi ideology. This potential completion of a process of downward scale shift is summarized in Figure 2 (below).

The future of the group is contingent upon several factors. For one thing, decisions at the leadership level might not receive the support of its base.[86] At the intra-group level, engagement with Turkey has always posed a challenge to the cohesion of the group. In past years, some figures - especially the more "purist" among HTS's ranks - had eventually decided to defect at some point (e.g. senior *shar'i* Abu Yaqzan al-Masri[87]), and recent developments have prompted further defections. Secondly, there is the issue of HTS's relationship with the local population, which over the years has become increasingly strained as the group has been accused of violations and of systematically detaining its detractors. Finally, there is the bigger conundrum relating to the future of northwest Syria and in particular, the role of Turkey.

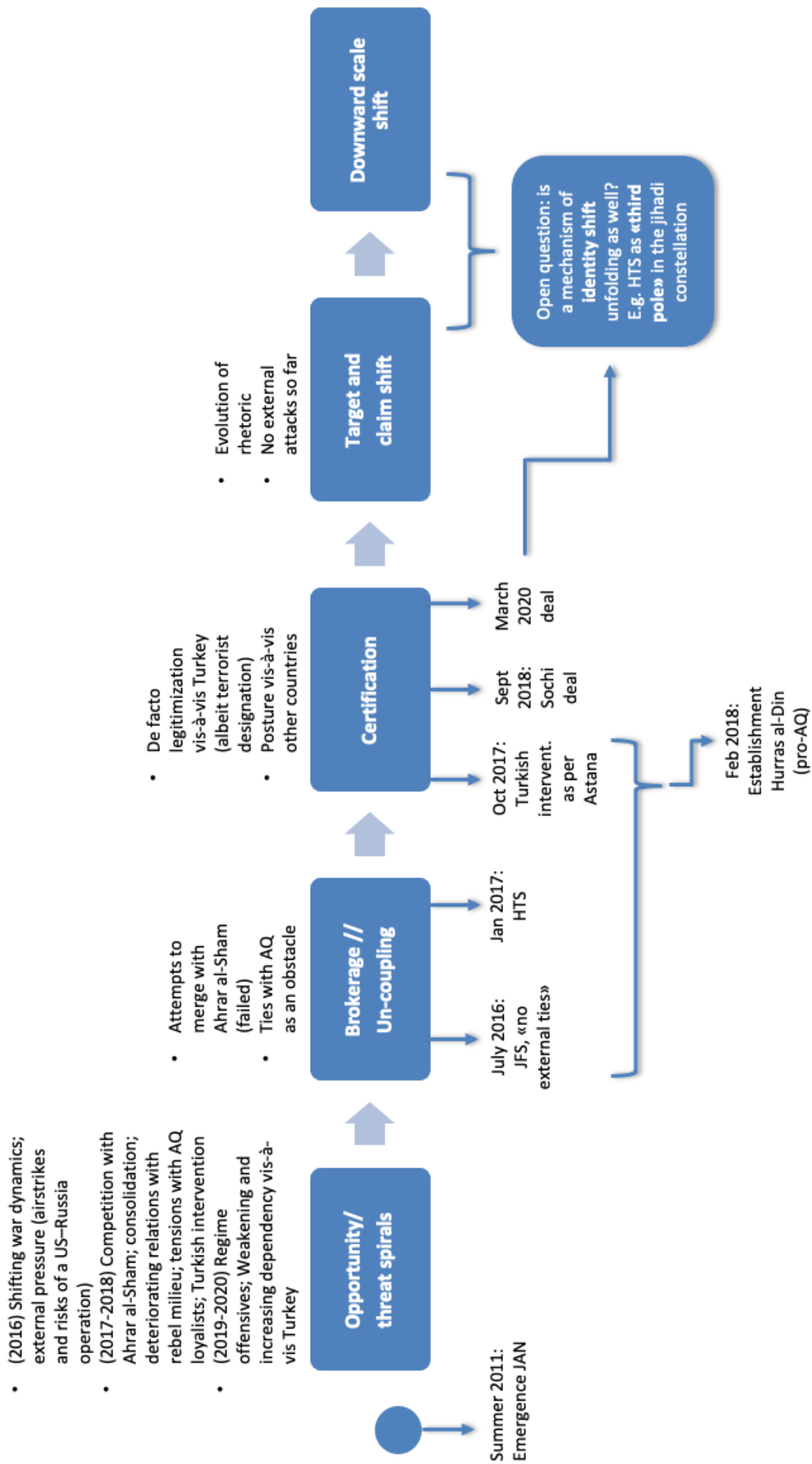


Figure 2: From JAN to HTS: A Tentative Model of Downward Scale Shift in the Case of HTS.

Concluding Remarks

In general, what the downward trajectory of HTS highlights is the fluidity of jihadi groups and, above all, their adaptiveness to operational conditions, especially local dynamics, which impact upon a group's adoption of local, global, or glocal-oriented strategies. Taken alone, doctrine cannot explain why jihadi groups resort to such strategies at a given point in time. In fact, considerations of opportunity might drive them to pursue strategically convenient, yet ideologically problematic choices and subsequently to resort to a reinterpretation of doctrine to legitimize them.[88] It seems that this is what happened in the case of HTS. As seen above, at various stages, the group found itself under pressure, facing potential challenges stemming from a number of factors - including shifting war dynamics, external pressure, and relations with other insurgent groups. Its moves towards an increasingly locally-focused strategy have been an attempt to come to terms with reality and adapt to operational circumstances. As an ideologue close to HTS, Abu Mahmud al-Filastini, put it, it was a matter of "jurisprudence of reality" (*fiqh al-waqi'*).[89] Embracing transnational ambitions would probably have jeopardized not only HTS's political objectives, but possibly its very survival too. As a consequence, prominent leaders and ideological authorities attempted to justify from a doctrinal perspective the group's potentially controversial choices, including its engagement with Turkey. They cited the need to act in the best interests of jihad and the revolution - mentioning how jihad entails both constant principles and adaptability to the strategic context.

The mechanisms observed in the case of HTS might hopefully provide relevant insights for other militant groups, especially - but not exclusively - jihadi actors. However, caution is required when generalizing, given the limits of a single case study design and the heterogeneity of the jihadi movement. Additional case studies within the jihadi movement, and ideally also a comparative analysis involving different kinds of militant actors, would be required to probe the explanatory power of the specific mechanisms identified here. Such a comparison would be of great importance - especially as there are signs that HTS could have set a precedent for other jihadi groups, such as al-Qa'ida in the Arabic Peninsula and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin. Such groups, perhaps, might take into consideration more "pragmatic" choices as well.[90]

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Notes

[1] Regarding the definition of "jihadism", there is a lack of consensus among scholars. Herein, I will rely on Stenersen's definition of jihadism as "a subcategory of militant Islamism, characterized by use of violence (framed as 'jihād') to achieve political aims; and rejection of the nation state and international order". - Anne Stenersen, "Jihadism After the 'Caliphate': Towards a New Typology," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2018, 3, DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2018.1552118. I will also take advantage of a social movement understanding of "jihadism": cf. footnote 25. The legitimacy and the validity of this term is sometimes contested. Occasionally, authors resort to other phrases, the meanings of which partially or greatly overlap with that of "jihadism": e.g. "violent Islamism", "militant Islamism", etc. Cf. Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study

of Militant Islamism,” in Roel Meijer, (Ed.) *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, 244-266, London: Hurst Publishers, 2009.

[2] Charles Tilly & Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 195.

[3] Cf. Rebecca Kolins Givan, Kenneth M. Roberts, & Sarah A. Soule, “Introduction: The Dimensions of Diffusion”; in: Rebecca Kolins Givan, Kenneth M. Roberts, & Sarah A. Soule (Eds.), *The Diffusion of Social Movements: Actors, Mechanisms, and Political Effects*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 3; cf. also: Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 138.

[4] See Eitan Y. Alimi, Lorenzo Bosi & Chares Demetriou, *The Dynamics of Radicalization. A Relational and Comparative Perspective*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

[5] The phrases “going global” and/or “attacking the far enemy” could be interpreted in various ways. Herein, I take such expressions to signify “external”, “out-of-area” attacks, i.e. perpetrated by a given group in areas where it normally does not operate (e.g. the 2001 World Trade Center attacks).

[6] Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam al-Faraj, *Jihad, the Absent Obligation*, Birmingham: Maktabah al-Ansaar Publications [English translation of Id., Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam al-Faraj, *jihad: al-fariḍa al-gha’iba*. Cairo: NP, 1981]. Faraj was influenced by the thought of Sayyid Qutb. Qutb was one of the key ideologues that shaped the underpinnings of contemporary jihadism, especially by introducing concepts like *hakimiyya* (sovereignty of God), *jahiliyya* (ignorance (of God’s authority)), and *jihad*. See Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh: Muslim Extremism in Egypt*, London: Saqi Books, 1985; Sayed Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah*, London: Routledge, 2006; John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

[7] The 2001 attacks were preceded by other attacks against US/US-linked targets in the 1990s. Moreover, in 1994-1995, the Algerian Group Islamique Armé (GIA) staged several operations in France.

[8] For an in-depth account of the dynamics that led al-Qa’ida to focus on the “far enemy” over the late 1990s, see Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. This process is generally linked to these aspects: the 1979 USSR invasion of Afghanistan and the dynamics it engendered (the ideological cross-breeding it fostered, as well as the massive transnational mobilization of foreign fighters); the deployment of US troops in Saudi Arabia in 1990, which nourished anti-Western sentiments and reinforced the jihadists’ frame of threat; the failure of the campaigns waged against local regimes by militant Islamist groups e.g. in Algeria and in Egypt during the 1990s. Moreover, struggles against local regimes might have been harder to organise, as noted in Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. See also Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 327.

[9] Tore R. Hamming, “Polemical and Fratricidal Jihadists: A Historical Examination of Debates, Contestation and Infighting Within the Sunni Jihadi Movement”, International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), 2019, pp. 34-36.

[10] Steven Brooke, “The Near and Far Enemy Debate,” in: Assaf Moghadam & Brian Fishman (Eds.), *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.

[11] Ibid.; Thomas Hegghammer, “The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups”, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 9(26), 2009.

[12] C. J. M. Drake, *Terrorists’ Target Selection*, London: Macmillan, 1998, chapters 3-4; Ranya Ahmed, “Terrorist Ideologies and Target Selection”, *Journal of Applied Security Research*, 13(3), pp. 376-390, 2018; Cato Hemmingby & Tore Bjørgo, *The Dynamics of a Terrorist Targeting Process: Anders B. Breivik and the 22 July Attacks in Norway*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016, 12-18. Other studies on target selection include: Victor Asal, Karl Rethemeyer, Ian Anderson, Allyson Stein, Jeffrey Rizzo & Matthew Rozea, “The Softest of Targets: A Study on Terrorist Target Selection”, *Journal of Applied Security Research*, 4(3), 2009; Brandt & Sandler, “What Do Transnational Terrorists Target? Has It Changed? Are We Safer?”, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 54(2), 2010; Sara M. T. Polo, “The Quality of Terrorist Violence: Explaining the Logic of Terrorist Target Choice”, *Journal of Peace Research*, 57(2), 2020.

[13] Donatella Della Porta, “I Militanti delle Organizzazioni Terroriste di Sinistra in Italia,” *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica*, 17(1), 1987, pp. 33-36.

[14] Leonard Weinberg, “Italian Neo-Fascist Terrorism: A Comparative Perspective,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 7(1), 1995, pp. 221-238.

[15] Andrea Plebani & Paolo Maggiolini, “The Centrality of the Enemy in al-Baghdadi’s Caliphate”; in: Monica Maggioni, & Paolo Magri (Eds.), *Twitter and Jihad: the Communication Strategy of ISIS*, Novi Ligure: Epoké, 2015.

[16] See Anne Stenersen, “Jihadism after the ‘Caliphate’”, op. cit., pp. 5-7. See also Tore R. Hamming, “Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 11(6), p. 75.

[17] C. J. M. Drake, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 176-177.

[19] Hassan Abu Hanieh & Mohammad Abu-Rumman, *The 'Islamic State' Organization: the Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism*, Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015, pp. 107-108, p. 186. On the evolution of jihadism in Syria after 2011, see Charles Lister, *The Syrian jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, London: Hurst & Company, 2017.

[20] Tore R. Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences", *op. cit.*, 71; cf. also Anne Stenersen, "Thirty Years After its Foundation—Where Is al-Qaida Going?", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 11(6), 2017. In particular, since 2010, the near enemy has ranked highest in al-Qa'ida's enemy hierarchy. Indeed, while al-Qa'ida is commonly portrayed as a group essentially focused on international attacks, the reality is more nuanced. It is more accurate to say that, *in some periods of time*, the organization has prioritized external attacks. Following 2001, the group had established branches in various areas of the globe: see Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

[21] Anne Stenersen, "Thirty Years After its Foundation—Where Is al-Qaida Going", *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[22] Hassan Abu Hanieh & Mohammad Abu-Rumman, *op. cit.*, p.114; Jérôme Drevon, "The Jihadi Social Movement: Between Internal Hegemonic Drive, Local Realities, and Transnational Aspirations," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 11(6), 2017, p. 60.

[23] "Al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production presents: 'Declaration of the Support Front (Jabhat al-Nuṣrah): For the People of Syria from the Mujāhidīn of Syria in the Fields of Jihād,'" *Jihadology*, 24 January 2012; URL: <https://jihadology.net/2012/01/24/al-manarah-al-bayda-foundation-for-media-production-presents-for-the-people-of-syria-from-the-mujahidin-of-syria-in-the-fields-of-jihad-jabhah-al-nusrah-the-front-of-victory/>.

[24] See e.g. International Crisis Group, "The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani," February 20, 2020; URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/jihadist-factor-syrias-idlib-conversation-abu-muhammad-al-jolani>; Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Abu Abdullah al-Shami on Meeting Western Analysts," *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog*, March 10, 2020; URL: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-abu-abdullah-al-shami-on>.

[25] Tore R. Hamming, "The Al Qaeda - Islamic State Rivalry: Competition Yes, but No Competitive Escalation", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, in press, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2017.1342634. I am adopting a social movement understanding of the concept of (Sunni) jihadism, as suggested by Hamming, regarding it as "a social movement family with its general foundation in Sunni theology, more specifically in the concept and practice of Jihad, and to some extent in the specific doctrine of Salafism" (p. 3). With the concept of "social movement family", I am indicating "a set of coexisting movements" "that, regardless of their specific or individual goals, have similar basic demands and a common constituency". - Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis, of Italy and Germany*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1995], 3.

[26] Sidney Tarrow, "Dynamics of Diffusion: Mechanisms, Institutions, and Scale Shift"; in: Rebecca Kolins Givan, Kenneth M. Roberts, & Sarah A. Soule (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 214.

[27] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, & Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 24.

[28] Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 121-124.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 124-128.

[31] See e.g. Jiri Navratil, "Domesticating Social Justice Activism in the Global Era? The Process of Reconfiguring the Czech Social Justice Movement in Times of Crisis", *Studies in Social Justice*, 8(2), 2014, p. 186; Rose Spalding, "Transnational Networks and National Action: El Salvador's Antiminig Movement," in Eduardo Silva (Ed.), *Transnational Activism and National Movements in Latin America: Bridging the Divide*, New York & London: Routledge, 2013, footnote 4, p. 19.

[32] Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, p. 132.

[33] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, & Charles Tilly, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

[34] Conny Roggeband, "Transnational Networks and Institutions: How Diffusion Shaped the Politicization of Sexual Harassment in Europe"; in: Rebecca Kolins Givan, Kenneth M. Roberts, & Sarah A. Soule (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 20; see also Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, *op. cit.* The mechanism has been introduced in *Dynamics of Contention*: see Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, & Charles Tilly, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

[35] Cf. Charles Tilly & Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, p. 195.

[36] Although this name has often surfaced in statements from US officials, a number of researchers contend that no group of this

kind actually existed: Adam Taylor, “Hey, remember the Khorasan group? Its leader is dead,” *The Washington Post*, 22 July 2015; URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/07/22/hey-remember-the-khorasan-group-its-leader-is-dead/>.

[37] Al Jazeera, “*Bila hudud – Abu Muhammad al-Julani amir Jabhat al-Nusra*” [Without Borders (program) – Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra], YouTube, 27 May 2015, URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hwQT43vFZA>.

[38] On the dispute between JFS/HTS and al-Qa’ida/al-Qa’ida loyalists, see Aymenn al-Tamimi’s series “The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts”; URL: <https://www.aymennjawad.org/>.

[39] Cf. footnote 1.

[40] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, & Charles Tilly, op. cit., 243.

[41] Eitan Y. Alimi, Lorenzo Bosi & Chares Demetriou, “Relational Dynamics and Processes of Radicalization: A Comparative Framework,” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 17(1), 2012, p. 10.

[42] Eitan Y. Alimi, Lorenzo Bosi & Chares Demetriou, *The Dynamics of Radicalization*, op. cit. The authors define radicalization as a “process through which a social movement organization (SMO) shifts from predominantly nonviolent tactics of contention to tactics that include violent means, as well as the subsequent process of contention maintaining and possibly intensifying the newly introduced violence” (p. 11).

[43] Charles Lister, “How al-Qa’ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story,” *CTC Sentinel*, 11(2), 2018, p. 1.

[44] Aymenn Al-Tamimi, “From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future”, Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung/Al-Nahrain Center For Strategic Studies, 29 June 2018, pp. 10-11.

[45] Adam Taylor, op. cit.

[46] Mentioned in Conny Roggeband, op. cit., p. 20.

[47] Charles Lister, “The Syria Effect: Al-Qaeda Fractures, Hudson Institute,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 25, February 2020, pp. 52-53.

[48] Charles Lister, “How al-Qa’ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate,” op. cit.

[49] In 2017, al-‘Uraydi would abandon HTS. The “creed and methodology”: al-Manārah al-Bayḍā’ Foundation for Media Production presents a new video message from Jabhah al-Nuṣrah: “Our Manhaj and Our ‘Aqidah: A Meeting with Dr. Sāmī al ‘Aridī?” *Jihadology*, 21 October 2013; URL: <https://jihadology.net/2013/10/21/al-manarah-al-bayda-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhah-al-nuṣrah-our-manhaj-and-our-aqidah-a-meeting-with-dr-sami-al-aridi/>.

[50] Cf. Aymenn Al-Tamimi, “From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham”, op. cit.; Charles Lister, “How al-Qaida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate”, op. cit.

[51] Sam Heller, “The Strategic Logic of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 6(11), 2017, p. 145.

[52] Aymenn Al-Tamimi, “From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham,” op. cit., pp. 10-11.

[53] Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 107-108.

[54] Back in 2012, although al-Julani renewed his *bay‘a* (“oath of allegiance”) to ISI’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, it was agreed that the Syrian offshoot would conceal its allegiance to al-Qa’ida. Nevertheless, the organization was designated as terrorist group by the US in December 2012. Finally, in spring 2013, those links were publicly acknowledged, following the dispute between ISIS on the one hand, and JAN and al-Qa’ida on the other hand. In February 2014, al-Qa’ida officially disowned ISIS. Cf. Hassan Abu Hanieh & Mohammad Abu-Rumman, op. cit., chapter 2.

[55] Aymenn Al-Tamimi, “From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham,” op. cit., p. 7.

[56] “New Statement from Ḥarakat Aḥrār al-Shām al-Islāmiyyah: ‘Welcoming the Disengagement from al-Qā’idah and the Declaration of Jabhat Fataḥ al-Shām,’” *Jihadology*, 29 July 2016; URL: <https://jihadology.net/2016/07/29/new-statement-from-ḥarakat-aḥrār-al-sham-al-islamiyyah-welcoming-the-disengagement-from-al-qaidah-and-the-declaration-of-jabhat-fataḥ-al-sham/>.

[57] Aymenn Al-Tamimi, “From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham,” op. cit., pp. 8-10.

[58] Ibid., pp. 12-16.

[59] As Drevon observes, “[o]nly by becoming a local hegemon that foreign states must recognize can HTS avoid a military confrontation with the Syrian regime and its allies.”: Jérôme Drevon, “Renouncing al-Qaeda and the prospects for engagement”, *The*

Reconciling the irreconcilable”, *The Middle East Institute*, 15 July 2020; URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hts-and-al-qaeda-syria-reconciling-irreconcilable>.

[81] Previously, HaD was part of the “And Rouse the Believers” (*Wa Harrid al-Mu’minin*) operations room, set up in October 2018 and comprising also Jabhat Ansar al-Din and Jama’at Ansar al-Islam. Cf. Aymenn Al-Tamimi, “New Jihadist Operations Room in Northwest Syria: ‘So Be Steadfast’”, Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s Blog, 12 June 2020; URL: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/06/new-jihadist-operations-room-in-nwsyria-so-be>.

[82] See Fehim Tastekin, op. cit. Cf. also Enab Baladi, *thalat ittifaqiyyat fi manatiq mukhtalifa bayna “hurras al-din” wa “tahrir al-sham”* [Three Agreements in Different Districts Between “Hurras al-Din” and “Tahrir al-Sham”], 27 June 2020; URL: <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/396566>.

[83] Jusoor For Studies, “The Security Dimension of Exerting Pressure on Hurras al-Din: Methods and Aims,” *In Focus*, 7 October 2020; URL: <https://jusoor.co/details/The%20security%20dimension%20of%20exerting%20pressure%20on%20Hurras%20al-Din.%20Methods%20and%20Aims/779/en>. Al-Jaza’iri belonged to the more radical wing of HaD, comprising other members who had been expelled from the group at some point—such as Abu al-Yaman al-Wazzani, Abu Mus’ab al-Libi, Abu ‘Amr al-Tunisi, and Abu Dhir al-Masri. Al-Tunisi was killed in a US airstrike at the end of June 2019. Until recently, it was believed that also al-Jaza’iri and al-Masri had been targeted in that raid. See these tweets by Lister and Ayyoub: Charles Lister, “@Charles_Lister”, [Twitter feed online], https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/1145695559682072578?s=20; Orwa Ajjoub, “@OAJjoub”, [Twitter feed online], <https://twitter.com/OAJjoub/status/1317168764132229124?s=20>.

[84] Fehim Tastekin, op. cit.

[85] Aaron Y. Zelin, “Living Long Enough To See Yourself Become The Villain: The Case of Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi,” *Jihadica*, 9 September, 2020; URL: <http://www.jihadica.com/living-long-enough/>.

[86] In a speech given to HTS’ fighters, al-Farghali lamented the weakening position of HTS vis-à-vis Turkey, and defined Turkish troops in Idlib as “apostates”- somehow in contrast with the tones of HTS’ public statements in previous years. A possible explanation is that he intended to “cater to a rank and file that has been acculturated” to a more rigid doctrine. See: Sam Heller, “Leak Reveals Jihadists’ Weakening Grip in Syria’s Idlib,” *War on the Rocks*, 10 April 2020; URL: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/leak-reveals-jihadists-weakening-grip-in-syrias-idlib/>.

[87] Enab Baladi, “Al-Julani starts getting rid of anti-pragmatism trend,” 4 February 2019; URL: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2019/02/al-julani-starts-getting-rid-of-anti-pragmatism-trend/>.

[88] Cf. Anne Stenersen, “Jihadism after the ‘Caliphate’”, p. 7.

[89] For instance, the concept is mentioned in: “New Release from Abu Maḥmud al-Filistīni: The Jihadi Movement Between the Jurisprudence of Balances and the Jurisprudence of Comparisons,” *Jihadology*, 28 July 2018; URL: <https://jihadology.net/2017/07/28/new-release-from-abu-maḥmud-al-filistīni-the-jihadi-movement-between-the-jurisprudence-of-balances-and-the-jurisprudence-of-comparisons/>. Another important concept addressed in this release is the notion of *fiqh al-muwazanat*— “jurisprudence of balances”, establishing a balance between the common good (*maslaha*) and what is harmful (*mafsada*) – which is based upon *fiqh al-waqi’*.

[90] Charles Lister, “Al-Qaeda’s Leaders Are Dying, But a Greater Challenge Looms”, *Jihadica*, 20 November 2020; URL: <https://www.jihadica.com/al-qaedas-leaders-are-dying-but-a-greater-challenge-looms/>.